



*Thankful
for us*

HEART
of
HOPE

AJME WILLIAMS

A SECRET PREGNANCY HOLIDAY ROMANCE

THANKFUL FOR US

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AJME WILLIAMS

CONTENTS

Also by Ajme Williams

Description

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue Two](#)

[The Vegas Bluff \(Sneak Peek\)](#)

[Ready to Read ALL books in The Heart of Hope Series?](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Want more Ajme Williams?](#)

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All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

ALSO BY AJME WILLIAMS

Ajme Williams writes emotional, angsty contemporary romance. All her books can be enjoyed as full length, standalone romances and are FREE to read in Kindle Unlimited.

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DESCRIPTION

When I say that he broke my heart, what I really mean is that he did something I wouldn't do to my worst enemy.

I hate Sam Wheatly.

I hate him for leaving me, and now for trying to come back into my life.

Yes, he left me for another woman.

A woman he thought was pregnant with his baby.

He didn't just leave me. He also decided to marry that liar.

Well, his life is ruined . . . and I won't let him do the same to mine.

Being born into a wealthy family doesn't give him the green light to come and go as he pleases.

I've built a new life for myself since our breakup.

I cannot allow him to waltz back into my reality and screw everything up . . . especially as my competitor in business.

Holiday season is the best time to show Sam that I've moved on.

And I'll prove to myself that I don't love him anymore.

I don't . . . right?

PROLOGUE

Kate—Five Years Ago

Beer pong being played by a pirate and a cowboy. Drunken roughhousing between a zombie and a lumberjack. Uncoordinated dancing by a sexy nurse and a gangster. The living room was the very definition of chaos. The family room was quieter, but that was only because the people in there were either stoned or making out.

I'd given up a night of studying for this? I was in a 1980s teen movie, except the party house was filled with college students, not high schoolers. Oh, and it was Halloween.

"Oh, there's Tyler." Janell tossed her hair back and sashayed over to her crush. I had to admit, she made a good Morticia Addams.

When she suggested that we come to this party, I told her I wasn't interested, especially since she'd abandon me.

She promised me she wouldn't, and yet we weren't in the house two seconds before I was trapped between Halloween versions of *Sixteen Candles* and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.

It wasn't that I didn't like parties. I did. In fact, until last year, I'd have been enthusiastic about attending an off-campus party open to anyone and everyone. I enjoyed meeting new people and having fun.

But as a college senior, it was time for me to buckle down and set myself up for success once I graduated.

My goal was to get hired in the family business, but my grandfather wasn't going to hand over a position to me simply because I was his granddaughter. He didn't hand over jobs to my older brother Ethan or our cousin, both of whom were in competition to take over the company someday.

My brother Ethan got a job with MacLeod Capital Investment, which I knew would give him the experience needed to defeat our cousin. While my brother and cousin were getting experience elsewhere, I wanted a job within the family company.

I had no illusions about ascending to the top spot.

The truth was, my grandfather, at best, was distant with me, and at worst, disdainful. Still, we were family, and I believed with hard work and smarts, I could earn a position.

To do that, I had to study hard and rock my internship. A drunken off-campus Halloween party was the opposite of working toward my goal.

Still, I was here, so I made my way through the house to the back yard where there were more drunken antics in the pool and yard. But at least it didn't smell like beer or pot.

I found a spot where I wasn't worried that I'd become collateral damage in a drinking game and inhaled a deep breath.

"You look like you've fallen through the looking glass."

I turned, prepared to give my intruder a back-off glare. Unfortunately, it never manifested as I gawked at the blond-haired, green-eyed Captain America. *Holy smokes, he was hot.*

He smirked like he knew I was momentarily stunned by his good looks. "Alice in Wonderland, right?"

Annoyed at my reaction, I schooled my expression back to normal. "Right. I'm surprised you could tell."

I hadn't planned to come to the party, so when Janell pressured me, I didn't have a costume. The best I could manage was a powder blue dress, white stockings, and a black headband to hold back my long blonde hair.

He shrugged. "It's a classic." He held out a red cup. "Beer?"

I made a face. "I'm not really a beer fan."

He tilted his head to the side. "Then why are you here?"

"So my roommate can seduce the guy she's been crushing on since we were freshmen."

He laughed. "I had a roommate like that once."

"What happened?"

"They live together now."

"I guess it turned out for them."

"I guess it did." His green eyes studied me. Once again, I felt bewitched. "So, what is your drink of choice?"

"I'm more of a cocktail gal. But I like wine. Both drinks that aren't served at places like this."

"I saw a bar off the family room. We'd have to brave the stoners and lovers, but I'm willing if you are."

I really should call it a night and go home. Yes, this guy was cute and nice, but I'd promised myself that this year I would solely focus on academics and my internship. I didn't have time for guys.

But . . . I was here, and if I went home now, chances were good that I'd binge watch Netflix instead of studying.

"Sure."

He smiled, and once again, it made my breath catch. It really should have been illegal to look the way he did. "I'm Sam. Sam Clarke."

"Kate Wheatly."

"As in *the* Wheatly family?"

Uh-oh. It took me a while to figure out that it wasn't my radiant personality that lured friends and potential boyfriends to me. It was my family's money.

Of course, my grandfather was stingy with it, so I didn't live as lavishly as people might think. I couldn't wait until I got my trust and could finally be in control of my finances.

“Yes.”

He studied me again. “Why the glare?”

“Are you offering me a drink because of my family ties?”

He shook his head. “I don't need your family ties. My uncle is Daniel Clarke. In New York.”

Both Daniel and Clarke were common names, but everyone knew Daniel Clarke from New York like everyone knew Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg, although instead of tech, the Clarke family was in real estate.

“That makes your aunt Briana Clarke.” I had a list of successful businesswomen that I studied. She was one. I admired her.

Maybe someday, I'd open my own club.

She owned a few now, but I knew the story about how she struggled to find her footing in her family's business, so she said F-it and started her own.

He nodded. “It does. Say, are you accepting my drink offer because of my family ties?”

“Maybe.”

He laughed. “Good to know.”

“It doesn't bother you that your good looks and money make you a magnet for fake friends?”

He shrugged. “It is what it is. Are you fake?”

“No.”

“Well then, how about that drink?”

We managed to get through the crowd and into the family room. The noise and activity were much less than in the living room and back yard, as a few stoned partiers discussed the meaning of life.

“What's your poison?” Sam asked from behind the bar.

“You look like you know what you’re doing back there. What’s your specialty?”

“I make a killer martini. In fact, my aunt Bri taught me.” He pulled out the gin and vermouth and set to work. He found two martini glasses and poured us each one.

He held his drink up. “To *Alice in Wonderland*.”

I clicked my glass against his. “And *Captain America*.”

His cheeks blushed. “I forgot I was wearing tights. Sort of ruins the manly illusion.”

I scanned my gaze down his body. He was all manly muscle. “Looks manly to me.”

“Come on, let’s find somewhere we can breathe and hear each other talk.” He grabbed the gin bottle and led me out the front door, where a swing sat on the porch.

We sat and drank and talked. I learned he was studying business at USC. I told him I also studied business but went to his rival college, UCLA. We talked about our brothers, both of whom we were close to. He also had a younger sister who was still in high school.

We both were seniors and were focused on studies this year. He said he’d recently broken up with his girlfriend of a year, and this year, he wanted to have a good time.

In my mind, that meant he wanted to play the field. I was okay with that. I didn’t want a relationship either.

On and on, we talked about anything and everything until he leaned closer to me.

“Can I kiss you?”

Yes, please. “Why?”

He gave me his sexy smile as his gaze drifted to my lips. “Because I want to. Don’t you want to?”

“Maybe. What about your goal to sow your oats?”

“You said you weren’t looking for a relationship either.”

I reached up and grabbed the Lycra of his Captain America top and pulled him closer. “Okay.”

Our lips met. The sizzle of electricity radiated through me. His lips were soft, sweet, and very thorough.

He tugged me closer. “How do you feel about hookups?”

“Are you saying you want to hook up with me?”

“More than I want my next breath.”

His words filled me with a gooey warmth. What woman didn’t want to be wanted like that? “On this swing?”

“I’ll call for a ride and we can go to my place. I don’t have a roommate anymore, remember?”

I wasn’t a virgin, but neither was I a hookup kind of girl. And yet, if I wasn’t going to have a relationship, a hookup would be the only way to get my womanly needs met, at least by a person instead of a vibrator.

“Okay.”

We left the glasses and gin on the porch as he called for a car. We kissed all the way to his condo. By the time the front door shut, I was so hot and needy I was afraid I might spontaneously combust.

He grabbed my hand and dragged me to his bedroom. Costumes flew off. He pushed me onto the bed while he opened the drawer of his bedside table to get a condom.

Then he looked at me, his gaze roaming over my body. “Why, Alice, you are a wonderland.”

“Come explore.” I reached up for him. He did exactly that. His hands were everywhere. Followed by his lips. I was a writhing, weeping mess when he finally filled me.

“Fuck . . . so good.”

I had to agree. I tingled as his cock touched every millimeter of my inner walls. The friction was sublime. Sam’s former girlfriend was an idiot to let this guy go.

He moved in and out, each time picking up the pace. He pushed me up and up until I dangled on the edge.

“Sam . . . oh, God . . . now.”

He levered up onto his hands and let loose. He thrust and withdrew, fast and hard, stealing my breath and then launching me over the edge.

He let out a feral growl. “Fuck . . . yes . . . Kate . . .”

When it was done, we lay breathless. I’d had a few good orgasms in the past, but nothing like that. Too bad this was only a one-time thing.

“Will you stay the night, Barley?” he asked.

“Barley?” Did he really forget my name?

“Wheatly, Barley.”

I rolled my eyes. It wasn’t the first time people had used grain puns on me. “I won’t stay if you’re going to call me Barley.”

“Kate. Will you stay?”

I liked the way my name rolled off his tongue too much. “I thought this was a hookup.”

“I don’t know about you, but one time isn’t enough. No ties. No commitment.”

I turned my head to look at him. “Just a night of sex?”

He nodded. God, his green eyes were gorgeous.

“Okay.”

One night turned into the entire weekend. By the time Sunday evening rolled around, I didn’t want to leave. It wasn’t just the sex that had me wanting to stay, though.

Sam was funny and sweet and smart. He was from a prominent rich family, but he didn’t put on the airs that so many rich people did. When the weekend ended, I was head over heels in love with him.

Luckily for me, he was too.

By Thanksgiving, I'd moved in with him, which turned out good for Janell as Tyler moved in with her. When May rolled around, my plans to find a job with my family's company had changed. I was going to New York with Sam.

His graduation happened first, and then a week later, I had mine. After my graduation, he took me to the beach where he got down on one knee and proposed.

There weren't many times in my life where I felt incandescently happy. Not just in the moment, but like I'd feel like it forever.

When Sam proposed, I knew my life was set on a course for a lifetime of bliss.

The week before we were to move to New York, we were packing up the condo when there was a knock on the door.

"I'll get it." I went to the door and opened it. A woman about my age stood on the other side. I knew from photos that Sam had that she was his ex, Sandra.

She bit her lip in nervousness. "Is Sam here?"

I opened the door. I suppose it was cattiness that had me wanting to slam the door in her face. No woman liked to have the ex show up. It created self-doubt.

Especially since Sam's stories about her were always positive. They didn't fight. She wasn't a bitch. Their relationship ended simply because it petered out.

"Sam," I called. Then to her, I said, "I'm Kate. Nice to meet you." I reached out my right hand to shake hers. At the same time, I pressed my left hand over my heart, making sure she saw the engagement ring. Catty, I know.

Sam entered and stopped short when he saw her. "Sandra."

"I need to talk to you."

He looked at me like maybe I'd know why she was there. I didn't.

"Sure. Come in." He motioned to the living room that was filled with boxes, but the couch was still sittable.

“I’ll give you some privacy.” I went to the kitchen, debating on whether I wanted to eavesdrop. I wanted to, but I knew it showed a lack of trust.

They were there a long, long time. If I were a nail biter, I’d have had no nails left.

Finally, I heard the front door shut, and Sam entered the kitchen. He looked completely gutted.

“What’s wrong?” I rose and went to him.

He closed his eyes, tilting his head upward. Whatever it was, he didn’t want to tell me.

Finally, he looked at me. “She had a baby last month.”

I swallowed. “Okay.” My mind was taking this to a bad place. I forced myself to wait to react until I had all the details.

“It’s mine.”

My world wobbled. “Are you sure? You haven’t been together—”

“The timing is right. She and I broke up just before school started, but we’d . . . well . . .”

“Had sex around that time?”

He nodded.

I didn’t like this, but it wasn’t the end of the world. “Okay. So I guess we need to stay in California so you can have visitations. I don’t know much about babies, but we can learn together. I promise I won’t be an evil stepmom.”

I expected relief in his expression. I thought he was worried I’d dump him for having a child with another woman. But I was a realist.

Things like this happened. But I loved him. I knew my future happiness was wrapped up in him.

He looked at me with such pain and regret. “I have to do right by them.”

I nodded. “Child support.”

He closed his eyes again, and I realized I was missing what he was trying to tell me.

My world tilted a bit more. “What’s going on, Sam?”

His hands brushed up and down my arms. “I have to call off our engagement.”

I pulled away from him. “What? Why?”

“Because I have to do right by Sandra and the baby.”

The meaning of his words finally sank in. “You’re leaving me to marry her?”

He shrugged.

“What the fuck, Sam? This isn’t the old days.”

“I’m sorry.”

Two days later, when I went to my grandfather to tell him I wanted a job with the company, he informed me that I had no trust money and no job. Not only that, but he’d also talked all his cronies into not letting me work for them, either. I knew he didn’t like me. I hadn’t realized he hated and resented me.

I yelled and begged for him to change his mind. Why was he doing this to me?

Finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a quarter that he tossed to me. “This is your last handout. Don’t spend it all in one place.”

I went from incandescently happy to the deepest despair. I lost my love. I lost my money. For a time, I lost myself. Luckily, Ethan was there for me.

When I finally rose from the ashes, I was stronger and smarter. I learned two things. One, trust no one. Two, never be financially indebted to anyone. I carried my engagement ring and my grandfather’s quarter to make sure I never forgot.

CHAPTER ONE

Sam—Five Years Later

It was strange being back in Southern California. There was a time I'd found ultimate happiness here.

Kate.

Fuck. I couldn't think of her without my heart ripping apart. Even after five years, I felt that loss acutely. How I wished I could go back and redo everything. By the time I realized my mistake, it was too late to win Kate back. All my calls, texts, and emails went unanswered. I'd even flown out to find her, but she'd dropped off the radar. Not even her brother would tell me how to reach her.

It was all my fault. That I knew. I'd live with this regret for the rest of my days. It sucked.

I turned to the one thing that could give me some semblance of gratification: work. I threw myself into opening a high-tech club in Manhattan with my twin brother, Max.

That second business major in the business of innovation paid off. In the last five years, we'd opened three clubs, all on the East Coast. We decided to turn our eyes and ambition to the West Coast. Immediately, I thought of Los Angeles.

I knew there was no hope for me and Kate, and yet, my heart couldn't let her go.

Max's choice was Las Vegas. That was probably a better location, but I fought him on it. Finally, we decided we could

do both. I'd head the operation in Los Angeles, and he'd take the lead in Las Vegas.

Last month, I moved to Southern California, buying a secluded beach home. Turns out the former owner was Bran Erickson's sister, whom I knew of because he and my dad and uncle had crossed paths at real estate functions. She'd moved next door when she married her neighbor, Noel St. Martin. I knew of him because my dad and uncle had hired his firm a few times when they needed extra security or deeper background checks. Small world, eh?

The first thing I did after moving in was to connect with my Uncle Zach and Aunt Eleni. Growing up, I always thought Zach was the coolest dude because he wore a blue fauxhawk.

Today, the fauxhawk and blue hair were gone, but his edgy vibe remained. He didn't have to work because of Clarke money, but he'd spent his career working with his friend Troy Manion in construction. This was good for me and Max, as I knew I could trust Zach to help us find a suitable location for the club, and his and Troy's business would do a great job at any renovation needs we had.

Aunt Eleni scolded us for too much work talk, insisting that I needed to get out to meet people. I'd spent the last five years avoiding meeting people, but I couldn't tell her that when she was so helpful in my relocation. So, when she invited me to go with her to a party for a friend of a friend of a friend, or something, I agreed to go just to appease her.

I met them at the club hosting the party. Parking in the lot, I studied the Sea Siren. It sat along the beach and gave off a classy vibe. I'd been thinking of opening a beach location, so tonight would serve double duty.

I could get out like Eleni wanted me too, but also scope out the local beach club scene. Of course, I wouldn't tell her that.

Inside, I saw Zach and Eleni at a back table. I started there but was stopped by a perky redhead.

She smiled appreciatively, but then her stare turned serious. "This is a private party."

“He’s with us.”

I turned to see Zach’s partner, Troy, step up to us. “Sam, how are you?”

“Good.” I shook his hand.

“I hear you’re expanding your empire.”

“Something like that.”

“This is Dane MacLeod and my daughter, Bridget.”

I said hello, a little confused. Dane had to be Troy’s age, while Bridget looked to be my age, maybe a little younger. But who was to say about love, right?

“Dane is retiring to spend more time with the family,” Troy said.

“So, this is a retirement party?” I thought it was a party for someone getting promoted.

“It’s more a celebration for my successor,” Dane said. “Ethan Wheatly.”

Everything stopped. My brain. My heart. Everything. The last time I’d seen Ethan, I was sure he wanted to kick my ass, or worse. Maybe I should go.

Is Kate here?

I scanned the club but didn’t see her.

“I need to say hi to Zach and Eleni.” Once Ethan knew I was there, I’d probably be kicked out.

I made my way to the back and sat down with Zach while Eleni rose to talk with a friend. I ordered a beer from the redhead.

Zach spoke to me, but I was only half-aware of what they were saying as I watched for Ethan.

The door opened, and a couple walked in. My neighbors. I was surprised they were here, considering she looked like she was going to have their baby at any moment.

A woman approached them, and for the second time that night, the world skidded to a halt.

Kate.

Good Christ, she was even more beautiful than I remembered. She wore dark slacks and a pale blue shirt that took me back to the night I met her dressed like Alice. This time, her hair was up in a loose ponytail.

I swallowed as emotion rocked through me. Could this be destiny? A second chance?

Kate motioned to a man next to her, Ethan and another woman I suspected was his wife. She introduced Noel and Harper to Dane and another man I didn't know.

Kate then looped her arm through Harper's as if they were old friends. This could be another good sign that the universe was giving me another chance. I mean, what were the odds that I'd move in next door to Kate's friend?

She led Harper and Noel through the club, introducing them to guests. Then she led them toward us. This was it. I was finally about to talk to her again. My mouth went dry.

"This is Troy's friend, Zach Clarke and . . ." Kate didn't finish.

"Hey, isn't he our new neighbor?" Noel asked Harper.

"He is." Harper glanced at Kate, who looked at me in shock.

"This is my nephew, Sam Clarke. I hope you don't mind that Eleni and I dragged him along," Zach said.

Noel reached over to shake Zach's hand. "I think we met at Dane's once or twice."

"Right."

"And Sam is our new neighbor."

I finally dragged my eyes away from Kate to shake Noel's hand.

Kate rushed off. Harper whispered something to Noel and then followed Kate.

Okay, so not the meeting that I might have hoped for, but we both needed to get through the shock first. Now I needed to get my shit together so I could talk to her.

“She owns this place,” Zach said. “During the day, it does a great lunch service.”

She owned this place. Pride filled me, although that was stupid. Her success had nothing to do with me.

Several minutes later, Kate rushed up to Noel. “Harper’s water broke.” Then she grabbed Ethan. “Can you get a ride for them to the hospital?”

Then they were all gone again.

“I’ll drive.” I stood up.

Ethan looked at me and then did a double-take.

“Noel and Harper are my neighbors,” I said.

His expression suggested he didn’t like that idea, but he nodded and headed back to the hall that Kate, Harper, and now Noel had disappeared to.

I made my goodbyes to Zach and Eleni. I thought about going down the hall to find them but decided it would be better to wait at the door. Now wasn’t the time to talk to Kate.

Harper and Noel finally appeared. The room erupted in cheers and claps as I escorted them out of the club and to my car. I opened the car door for Harper.

“I hope I don’t ruin your car,” she said.

“No worries. It’s my uncle’s car, but I’m sure it will be fine.” Zach had loaned it to me until I bought one for myself. Living in New York, I had no need for a car.

“No chatting. We’ve got to go.” Noel looked crazed as he hooked the seatbelt around Harper.

I smirked but put the car in gear. My dad had the same look the night my sister was born. Max and I were seven years old and laughed at how Dad looked was running around like a chicken with its head cut off.

As I drove, I wanted to ask about Kate, but their focus was clearly on something more important. Fifteen minutes later, we pulled into the hospital. I helped them out and then left, planning to go home. Instead, I ended up at another bar, trying to process seeing Kate and figure out what to do. I had to see her again. That was what I needed.

I returned to her club and waited until the party ended.

When I was sure everyone was gone, I took a deep breath and entered. The only people in the place were the bartender and the redheaded hostess.

“I’m sorry, we’re closed,” the bartender said.

“Is Kate still here?”

“Who wants to know?” The hostess stepped up to me. Her tone suggested that she meant business. I wondered if she was the bouncer too.

“I’m an old friend.” I smiled, hoping to disarm her. I usually worked on women. “She’s back here, right? I want to surprise her.”

I stepped around the hostess, half expecting her to toss me out.

“If she wants you out, you’re out,” she said.

I headed down the hall to an office. Sucking in another breath, I stepped into the doorway and leaned on the frame. “Kate Barley.”

She scowled. “Sam. Of all the gin joints . . .”

I grinned even though I was shitting my pants. I stepped into her office. “Are you going to ask me to play it again, Sam?”

“I’m busy. What can I do for you?”

I frowned. “You’re pissed.” I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised. The last time I saw her, I’d broken her heart . . . and mine.

“I’m busy.”

I decided to focus on the here and now. “This is a great place you have.”

“Thank you.” She wouldn’t look at me.

“Are you going to ask about me?”

She sighed. “How’s life with Sandra and the baby?”

Her words hit me in the gut. She looked up from her computer.

“There is no life with Sandra,” I said.

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Her tone suggested she wasn’t sorry at all.

“That was a mistake.” I blurted it, feeling desperate. She was slipping from my fingers, even though I never really had a grip on her.

She was back looking at her computer, ignoring me.

“This is how you’re going to be?” I asked.

She launched from her chair, her eyes hot with fury. “How would you like me to be, Sam? Happy to see you? Do you want me to beg you to stay?”

I knew I deserved her anger, and I would take it. All I wanted was a chance to explain. “I want to tell you what really happened.”

“Forget it. We all know what happened.” She moved to go past me, but I stepped into her path.

“I tried to call and—”

“The fact that I didn’t answer means I don’t care.” Her body shuddered, and I wondered if she was as immune to me as she was trying to act.

“Won’t you hear me out?”

“Why? What difference does it make now?” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a ring, thrusting it at me. “Here. Take it back.”

Jesus. She still had the ring. “You’re still wearing the engagement ring?”

“No.”

“You’ve been carrying it around?” That had to be a good sign, right?

“Only because I might run into you, and I can throw it back in your face. Here, take it!” She pushed it into my chest and walked around me.

In the hall, I caught her arm, stopping her from running away. I stepped in front of her. The anger in her eyes made me believe she wanted to kick my ass. I’d deserve it.

“The fact that you still have this means something.” I held up the ring. I remembered it like I bought it yesterday. How nervous I was when I proposed, and then the exalted elation I felt when she said yes.

“It means nothing.” Her words were like knives in my heart.

I reached up, touching a loose strand of her hair. “It means everything, Kate.”

“Everything okay, Boss?” The hostess’s eyes narrowed on me. She was small, but I had the feeling she could hurt me if she really wanted to.

“Sam was just leaving.” She pushed me back.

“Do you want me to call someone?” the hostess asked as Kate passed her.

She stopped. “You’re not referring to one of your old friends, are you?”

“No. I meant the police, or maybe one of the SEALs who were here earlier.” The hostess glanced at me, presumably to scare me. I wasn’t eager to have my ass kicked by a SEAL, but I’d endure it if that was what it took to spend time with Kate.

“It’s fine. He’s leaving.”

I studied Kate for a long moment. “I’m leaving. But I live out here now, and I like your place.” That was my way of saying I wasn’t leaving for good.

“I’ll put him on the do-not-serve list,” the hostess said.

“Go clock out,” Kate told her.

I worked to put on all the charm I could muster and sauntered over to her. “I’m going to change your mind about me, Kate. You’ll see.”

“When pigs fly.”

I smiled, even though it wasn’t working on her. “You know I love a challenge.” I left the club.

I sat in the car decompressing. Holy shit. Kate. Seeing her . . . being near her . . . all the emotions came flooding back. Or not back. They were always there. I’d only pushed them into the dark recesses of my heart because they were too painful.

Now I had a second chance, and I wasn’t going to fuck it up. I knew I needed to get past her anger and hurt, but I felt confident that I could. The love we had was too perfect, too pure to have died. I was patient and persistent and confident. Kate would be mine again.

CHAPTER TWO

Kate

Sam exited my restaurant and I let out a frustrated growl. God, he could be so infuriating.

“He’s hot,” Samantha said from behind the bar. “He’s probably the type that knows it though, right?”

I nodded. Sam had always been confident, and I suppose his looks helped. So he had a good upbringing with parents who loved him. In fact, it was probably his parents’ influence that had him leaving me. After all, he had to do right by Sandra.

I went back to my office and shut the door while my staff finished cleaning up. I used the time to sort through my thoughts. My thoughts were easy enough to manage. I was beyond annoyed. It was my emotions that were haywire, and I couldn’t get them to settle. How dare he walk into my establishment and act like nothing happened?

He said he lived out here now. Why? Where were Sandra and the baby? Had he left them? That seemed unlikely, considering how important family was to him. Maybe she left him. A part of me hoped she had. He deserved a taste of his own medicine.

What did it matter? Who cared? Not me.

When Samantha and Dana finished their closing duties, I walked out of the building with them, locking the door behind us.

Their glances at me told me they were curious about Sam, but they were smart enough not to ask. They knew me well enough to know that my answer would be an irritated comment telling them to let it go. I wasn't one of those women who whined about her private life. At least not out loud to my staff or my friends.

It was nearly three in the morning when I arrived at my condo, but I was too agitated to go to bed. I poured myself a glass of wine and pulled out a box that had been hidden away in the depths of my closet, bringing it to my couch.

With the box sitting next to me, I lifted the lid and pulled out the top item. It was a mockup of the engagement announcement Sam and I intended to send out. I didn't care about announcing our engagement, but Sam had been so eager to tell the world.

Even Ethan thought it was a good idea. He said that even if Grandfather wasn't impressed that I was marrying someone from the Clarke family, all his cronies would be.

I crumpled up the paper and tossed it across the room. The next item was a stack of photographs. The first few were of my graduation from UCLA. It was only five years ago, and yet it felt like an eternity.

I brushed my fingers over the youthful face in the picture, remembering how happy I was. And naïve. I thought I had my life all figured out then.

As it turned out, I didn't know anything. Within a few weeks of this picture being taken, my heart had been squashed and my financial future destroyed. I learned then that I couldn't trust anyone. Well, anyone except my brother Ethan and Lucy, although it wasn't that long ago that my trust in them had been challenged when I discovered they were having a secret relationship.

The next photographs were of me and Sam on a trip to the beach. Behind that were pictures of me and Sam on Valentine's Day. God. I looked so happy. I wished I could go back and tell that woman to build a wall around her heart.

I worked my way through the photographs, going through my and Sam's history in reverse, until I reached the first picture we'd ever taken together. It had been shot a week after Halloween when he'd arranged to take me out on his uncle's boat. It was romantic and fun, and while I'd already fallen for him, on that trip I knew I wanted to spend my life with him. How dumb was that?

I grabbed the stack of photos and threw them across the room. Digging through the box, I found a dried rose, the first flower that Sam had ever given me.

There was the Christmas card, which was the first time he ever wrote "I love you" to me. So much happiness was stored in this box, and it was all a lie.

I picked up the entire box, throwing it across the room, and then wept like a sap. I couldn't believe how raw and fresh the pain still felt after all these years.

It pissed me off that he was still under my skin. It couldn't have helped that I kept the engagement ring and all these mementos. Maybe I should've burned it all the day he left.

At the time, I kept them because I never wanted to forget how brutal love could be. I didn't want to forget that trust was an idiotic thing to give to somebody. If I ever felt an inkling to trust or love again, these would pull me back to reality.

I gulped the rest of my wine, setting the glass on the coffee table and leaving the entire mess. I went to my bedroom and changed into my pajamas. I was climbing into bed when I changed my mind about leaving the memories of Sam strewn throughout my living room. I didn't want to wake up to them. All this emotion I was feeling now would end tonight. In order to achieve that, I had to get rid of all memories.

I trudged back out to the living room and gathered all the mementos, shoving them into the box. I took the box to the kitchen and pressed my foot on the lever of the garbage can, intending to throw it all away. The box wouldn't fit into the can. I started to pull the lid off to dump the contents but stopped.

“Damn him.” Unable to throw away that part of my life, I carried the box back to my room, hiding it away in the depths of my closet where it had lived since moving into the condo last year when I got my trust fund back.

As I lay in bed, I had to hope that Sam didn’t mean what he said about taking on a challenge of having me change my mind about him. If he did try, hopefully, he’d give up when he realized my attitude toward him wouldn’t change.

It was true what they said about being once bitten, twice shy. I was never going to be bitten by the love bug again, and especially not by the person who broke my heart.

The next day, I arrived at the Sea Siren early, hiding myself away in my office to finish up the work I hadn’t been able to complete the night before. By the time I finished, I could hear the sounds of the cook and other staff arriving to get ready for the lunch crowd.

I exited my office to say hello and to check in on things. I had a good crew, so I knew everything would be running smoothly.

“Hey, Boss, are we planning on a Halloween party like last year? My parents are downsizing, and they have some really cool Halloween decorations they’re trying to get rid of. They’d be really fun in the restaurant,” Carlo, the head cook, asked as he pulled out vegetables from the refrigerator. He liked to get all the chopping out of the way first thing. The rest of the kitchen staff were busy with other prep work, including cleaning fresh fish Carlo always managed to get first thing in the morning.

I nodded. “Of course, we’re having a Halloween party.” The image of Sam and his *Captain America* costume flashed in my head. Inwardly, I growled and forced myself to remember the party we hosted at the Sea Siren last year. I hadn’t been open very long. The party was a marketing effort to get people through the door. It was a great success, and since then, the Sea Siren did well.

“Cool. If you want, I can bring the stuff by and you can decide what you want to buy. I’ll take the rest to a charity shop or maybe donate to a school or something.” His knife started rat-a-tatting on the chopping block. I was amazed but also terrified that he’d cut off a finger.

“That sounds good. I’ll let you get to work.”

With everything running smoothly, I went back to my office. I needed to go through inventory and determine what I needed to order. After Ethan’s party last night, I was sure I needed to do a booze order. Probably corn chips, too. The guests scarfed down a lot of chips and salsa last night.

At a knock on my door, I braced myself thinking Sam was making good on his promise. The door opened, and Ethan popped his head in. Disappointment rushed through me before I could stop it. *Goddammit, Sam.*

I put on a smile. “Ethan. I figured you’d be at home nursing a hangover after last night.”

“I didn’t get that drunk, not that you noticed.” He sauntered into my office, taking a seat in the chair in front of my desk.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means the minute Sam Clarke walked into this place, you were MIA. Not just hiding in your office, but emotionally as well.” He shook his head. “Maybe I should’ve tossed him the minute I realized the guy with Zach Clarke was Sam. Then again, he didn’t come back after he took Harper and Noel to the hospital. By the way, have you heard what they had?”

I felt guilty that in my pity party, I hadn’t thought about Harper and Noel. I shook my head. “I haven’t heard yet.”

“They’re going to have their hands full with two little ones.”

“I’m surprised you and Lucy haven’t been working on giving Kira a brother or sister.”

Ethan grinned like a lunatic. “Who says we’re not?”

I was happy for him and Lucy, but good gracious, sometimes, he acted like such a sap.

His expression turned serious. “Tell me the truth. How are you feeling about Sam’s return?”

I shrugged like I didn’t care because I didn’t, right? “It’s a free country. He can go wherever he wants.”

Ethan laced his fingers together and looked down for a moment. My gut clenched knowing he was going to say something that I probably wouldn’t like.

He looked at me. “I know Sam did a number on your heart. But maybe his being back could be your second chance.”

“No.”

He studied me for a moment. I glared at him, hoping he’d get the clue that Sam wasn’t a topic of discussion.

He huffed out a breath. “I get it. I’d like to kick his ass for what he did to you—”

“Then why are you suggesting I give him another chance? Why do you think he even wants another chance?”

Sam had said he wanted to explain things to me and that he wanted me to change my mind about him, but that didn’t mean he wanted to reconcile. So it was strange that Ethan would suggest it . . . unless he knew something I didn’t.

I tilted my head to the side. “Did he say something to you?”

He looked down again, and I got an unsettling feeling in my stomach. “What did he say?”

“Nothing last night. But five years ago, he came back to Los Angeles looking for you.”

“What?” Why was this the first time I was hearing of this? Not that it would have mattered. I was a fast learner. Sam taught me that love ever after was a myth. Oh, sure, my brother and Lucy seemed to have it, and even my friends Lane, Anne, and Harper were living happily with their husbands. But Sam taught me that love wasn’t for me.

“It was a few months after he left. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t think it would matter. At the time, you were struggling after Sam left and then with what Grandfather did. You’d been spiraling downward. When he showed up, you were just starting to get your footing again. I didn’t want anything to mess that up. Was I wrong? Should I have told him where you were?”

I shook my head. “No. You did the right thing.” But even as I said it, thoughts about how things might have been different swirled in my head. Once again, I shook those thoughts away. “What did he want?”

“He said he’d made a mistake. He knew it was probably unlikely that you’d forgive him, but he wanted to try. He seemed sincere, but I sent him away.”

“Presumably back to Sandra and his child.”

“I don’t know.”

I sucked in a breath. “Well, it doesn’t matter. You were right to send him away. Just like he was right that I wouldn’t forgive him. That hasn’t changed. I learned my lesson.”

Ethan studied me again.

I made a face. “Stop trying to analyze me. It’s done and over with. It was five years ago. I’ve moved on.”

“But have you? You haven’t dated anyone—”

“You know why I haven’t dated. I was essentially cast out of my social group after Grandfather disowned me. My only options for a relationship were with the low-class jerks who came into the bar. Do you really think I wanted to date someone who would grab my ass when I was waiting their table?”

Ethan shook his head. “No. Sometimes, I think I should’ve helped you move somewhere else where Grandfather’s reach wasn’t so wide or oppressive.”

“I couldn’t leave you. I may be hard and closed off from my experience, but I need one person in my life. In case you’re wondering, that’s you. And also Lucy and Kira.”

He nodded, but his expression still suggested he wished he'd done more to help me. "The point is that despite what he did, I'm not so sure you're over him. I saw your reaction to seeing him—"

"Being shocked and annoyed doesn't mean I'm not over him."

He paused. "Remember before I met Lucy?"

"You mean before I sent Lucy to you for a job and you married her as a business deal?"

He showed me an annoyed expression. "Yes, before then. You used to push me to give up on Grandfather and hoping he'd name me as his successor. You urged me to pursue my own path. All work and no play made Ethan a dull boy."

"I just was tired of seeing Grandfather toy with you like a cat does with a mouse. If he couldn't see that you were the better candidate, then he's an idiot. He's a sadist. What sort of man enjoys watching his grandchildren fight and suffer?"

"You were right. I stood up to the old man and I walked away. I took back what was ours." For a long time, he'd thought of the company as his right because our father would have taken over had he lived. Now Ethan's definition of what was ours was only what our parents left us—our trusts and stock in the company.

"Finally, you used those balls Lucy kept telling me about."

He blanched. "She doesn't talk to you about my balls."

I made a noncommittal face. Lucy would tell me about the man in her life, but in this case it was my brother, and I didn't want to know about his balls or his prowess in bed. That would just be weird.

"No. She doesn't because I don't want to know about your balls."

He shook his head.

"Thank you for getting back what was ours." If not for Ethan, I wouldn't own the Sea Siren. Instead, I'd be scraping by schlepping beers to assholes.

Getting my trust back allowed me to invest in the Sea Siren. A cherry on the top was that my success put the bar that Lucy and I had worked at out of business. Today, it sat vacant up the street. I don't know where all those patrons got their beer now, but they weren't allowed into my establishment. We had a strict no groping the staff policy.

“You proved yourself, Kate. You can put your shields down. You don't have to go through life acting like everyone you meet is going to destroy you.”

I stared at Ethan, not comprehending why he was saying this. “Why would I put my shield down for someone who did destroy me?”

He sighed and stood up. “I understand the fear, but the man I saw five years ago was in love with you.”

“That was five years ago.”

“When he saw you, he was shocked and couldn't take his eyes off you. I'm not a mind reader, but I'd bet my left nut that what I saw in his face was hope.”

“Why are we talking about your balls again?”

“He knew he'd made a mistake. A gargantuan one. If you really loved him like you say you did, maybe this is your chance to make everything right.”

I mustered a smile when what I wanted to do was punch him. “I appreciate how you look after me, Ethan. But I am perfectly content running my business and being an aunt to Kira. I even like being your sister, although that might change if you don't stop talking about Sam.”

He held his hands up in surrender and gave me a lopsided smile. “Okay. Message received. I just want you to be happy, Kate.”

“I am.” Mostly.

“I don't think you are. But it's your life. You have to lead it.” He checked his watch. “I've got to get to work. I'm the CEO of MacLeod Capital Investment.” He grinned, looking so ridiculously happy.

“Have you told Grandfather?”

“I did. He’s now mad at me for abandoning him. He says I could still take over—”

“God, don’t let him lure you in.”

“I won’t. I’m happy. Jesus, who knew such happiness existed? That’s all I want for you, and despite what you say, I don’t think you’re as happy as you could be.”

“I’m a hell of a lot happier than I have been in the last five years.”

He shrugged in concession and then left.

The best way to push Sam out of my head was to bury myself in work, and luckily, business was busy today. The lunch crowd was filled with regulars and tourists.

I left work around seven in the evening, leaving Samantha in charge. I poured a glass of wine and sat at the dining table to plan a Halloween event at the Sea Siren. My phone rang, and looking at the caller ID, I saw it was Lucy.

“Lucy. Everything okay?”

“You tell me. Ethan is concerned about you. Apparently, that man who drove Noel and Harper to the hospital isn’t just their neighbor. He’s your ex.” There was an edge to her tone that told me she was hurt that I hadn’t told her all this before. Then again, she knew me well enough to know I didn’t like spouting all my deep, dark secrets.

“Ethan’s a worrywart. All that is ancient history.”

She was quiet on the other end for a moment. “I’m here for you if you want to talk. You know that, right?”

“I do know that. But there’s nothing to talk about.”

“Well, I still think we should get together for lunch. We don’t have to talk about this old boyfriend of yours, who apparently, you were going to marry.”

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe we should invite Lane and Anne.” Speaking of lunch with the girls made me think of Harper, and again, guilt filled me that I hadn’t reached out to find out about the baby. “I haven’t heard from Harper. Have you?”

“They had a girl. Her name is Noelle.”

“Ah, that’s sweet. After Noel, I presume?”

She laughed. “Yes, Harper was very insistent on that. She and Noel went home today. I heard Mo was very sweet to his new little sister.”

It still shocked me sometimes how Harper was a free spirit like me and in less than a year, she married, adopted Mo, and now had given birth to a little girl. It all sounded sweet and perfect. A twinge of envy hit me. But like always, I pushed it away.

We made a date to have lunch and then hung up. I blew out a breath, annoyed but not surprised that Ethan told Lucy about my history with Sam. I hoped they both got the message that Sam was not a topic I wanted to talk about. In some ways, Ethan was right. Sam wasn’t completely out of my system. I was committed to remedying that by purging him from my life. That couldn’t happen if Ethan and Lucy pushed me to talk about him. No, the best way to get Sam out of my system was to avoid him, not talk about him, and never think of him.

CHAPTER THREE

Sam

Seeing Kate the other night caused a seismic shift in my priorities. I still had the goal of finding a location to build our next club, but now it supported a bigger priority to win Kate's heart again. The club gave me a reason to stay in town.

I suspected my odds of winning the lottery were better than winning Kate back. She'd made it clear that she didn't want me around.

I couldn't blame her. I'd hurt her. No. I betrayed her. Not that I cheated, because I didn't. But I had chosen Sandra and the baby, a little girl named Chelsea, over Kate. I didn't want to.

But what choice did I have?

I had to do what was right, not what I wanted. I had to think of Chelsea, not of myself or Kate or even Sandra. The problem was that doing right by Chelsea meant leaving Kate.

My father had done the same when he discovered that Max and I were his children. He married my mother, and they were married still. Very happily.

I couldn't imagine developing that kind of relationship with Sandra because I couldn't envision ever not being in love with Kate and wanting to be with her. My parents had proved that proximity, devotion to their children, and time could build a loving family. They'd even had another child, my sister, Vivie. For a short time, I thought that might happen with me and Sandra. But it didn't.

Running into Kate was fate giving me a second chance. It wouldn't be easy. If leaving her was the hardest thing I'd ever done so far in my life, I suspected that winning her back would be even harder.

While I wanted to go to Kate's club and park myself there until she gave me another chance, I knew I couldn't do that. While being with her was my new priority, my purpose in coming to Los Angeles was in finding a location for Max's and my new business. So that's what I had to do.

My uncle Zach said he and his partner, Troy, would help us in building or restoring a building when we found one. So today, I was meeting with Zach at McLeod Capital Investment to discuss finding a location.

I blame my brain's continuous looping thoughts about Kate for preventing me from realizing who Zach and I were meeting with. It wasn't until we were allowed into the CEO's office that I realized we were meeting Ethan Wheatley, Kate's brother.

He stood from behind his desk, buttoning his coat as he came around to greet us. He extended his hand and a warm smile toward Zach as they shook hands. When he turned his gaze to me, his eyes went cold. His grip was hard, painful. He wanted to kick my ass, and if he ever tried, I'd have to let him because I deserved it.

Why he hadn't kicked my ass already, especially five years ago when I showed up trying to find her, was beyond me. If someone did to my sister Vivie what I did to Kate, I would definitely kick their ass. Max would too. Then again, nothing could have hurt me more than preventing me from seeing Kate, which was exactly what Ethan had done.

"We don't need financing," I said, wanting an excuse to leave. The fact that I didn't want to face Ethan made me feel like a pussy. That's what guilt did to a man. It made him a coward.

"MacLeod Capital investment also has real estate companies, and Ethan said he'd make sure we had just the

right person looking for commercial properties or lots,” Zach said.

Ethan motioned for us to sit in the chairs in front of his desk. “Not unlike your family in New York, the MacLeod family has a dominant presence in California real estate.”

I nodded. “The Wheatley family does too, though, doesn’t it?” It only just then occurred to me that Ethan was working as the CEO of another family’s company. Why wasn’t he working for his family? Had he been kicked out?

Ethan’s eyes narrowed, but then he put on a fake smile, leaning back in his chair looking relaxed. “Does the fact that you’re opening a club out here mean you’re planning to stay?”

The initial plan had been for me to be out here long enough to get the club up and running and train someone to manage it. I’d be here a year or so, and then I’d return to New York. At that point, Max would come out to Las Vegas and do the same there. Seeing Kate had changed all that.

“Yes. I bought a house and have settled in.” I thanked my lucky stars that I’d decided to buy a home instead of renting one for the next year. It made me look settled. Surely, Ethan would see that as a sign of commitment.

“I don’t normally mix business and my personal life—”

Zach let out a laugh. “From what I heard, Ethan, that isn’t true.”

Ethan grinned. “Okay, so one time I did. It ended well, considering I’m happily married.” He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his desk. “Since it turned out so well, I have to think that there is a benefit to mixing business with personal, so I have to ask you, Sam, what are your intentions with my sister?”

Zach’s head swiveled toward me, his eyes wide in surprise.

I shifted in my chair and hated that it gave away my discomfort.

“Is that why you’re here? Because of Kate?” Ethan asked.

Zach turned his attention back to Ethan. “What’s going on here, Ethan? Sam and his brother have legitimate plans to expand their club franchise.”

Ethan sat back again. “I have no doubt about that. But why here? Is it because of Kate?”

I looked down for a moment, trying to decide which was the best answer. My purpose in coming to Los Angeles hadn’t been to find Kate, but that didn’t mean there hadn’t been a part of me wondering whether I would see her again and perhaps be able to fix what I had broken.

I lifted my head, looking directly at Ethan. “We chose Los Angeles because it’s a major city with a vibrant club scene. The demographic for our clubs is here. But I won’t deny that there was a part of me wondering, even hoping, that I might see Kate again. With that said, I had no idea that I would see her at your party the other night. It was completely unexpected, and yet . . .” I didn’t finish my thought because the scowl on Ethan’s face told me he didn’t want to hear about my plan to win her back.

“What is going on here?” Zach looked from Ethan back to me.

“Sam hasn’t told you about my sister? About how he seduced her, swept off her feet, proposed, and then left her for another woman?”

Zach’s expression started with confusion, but then slowly, realization dawned, which told me my father had said something about what happened between me and Kate.

“Sandra and Chelsea?” he asked.

I nodded, closing my eyes, knowing that speaking the names out loud would only do more to enrage Ethan.

“So you have a daughter. How nice. I have a daughter too,” Ethan said.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Zach reached out and put his hand on my forearm to stop me. “It’s not like you, Ethan, to do business like this. From my understanding, this happened a long time ago.”

Ethan's eyes narrowed. "Do you think there's a statute of limitations on hating the man who broke my sister's heart?"

Inside, my gut roiled at that. Not because of Ethan but because he was right. I'd done a terrible thing, and I had no right to want Kate back.

"If this is going to be a problem, we can go somewhere else." Zach stood up.

Ethan shrugged nonchalantly. "I don't have a nefarious plan to ruin Sam and his brother's venture out here. My only goal for today was to find out whether I needed to protect my sister."

Both men stared at me intently.

"I know that you want to hear that I will stay away from Kate. But seeing her again the other night, I . . ." Again, I wasn't sure how to articulate my feelings.

Ethan's jaw tightened. "I saw you the other night. I saw a man filled with regret and yearning."

My gaze shot to Ethan, shocked that he saw that in me. Or that he would acknowledge it.

I nodded.

"I know what it's like to fuck up and lose the woman you love, although I was smart enough to fix it faster."

Irritation shot through me. "I did try to fix it. Five years ago. You wouldn't let me."

He nodded. "That's why I'm not going to fuck you up right now. Kate doesn't need any protection from me. And I'll be honest, I think hell will freeze over before she gives you the time of day. Even so, if you hurt her again, I will find a way to ruin you."

I nodded again. "If I hurt her again, I'll deserve it."

Ethan studied me for another long moment, like he wanted to make sure I understood. Finally, he picked up a business card on his desk. "Here's the information for Kirsten Smothers. She's our top commercial real estate agent in the

company. She's already pulling things together based on the parameters you sent over, Zach. She's expecting your call."

I stood and took the card from Ethan. "Thank you."

Zach and I left Ethan's office, heading toward the elevator. Neither of us said anything until the elevator car was descending to the garage level.

"Ethan has a reputation of being a nice and even-keeled guy. I've never seen him like that." Zach watched me. He and my dad had different mothers, but looking Zach in the eye was like looking into my father's eyes. "At the party the other night, Eleni said she thought she saw something between you and Kate. Ethan was right, regret and yearning. But I'd be careful."

I glared at him in annoyance. "Not everybody can have a love that comes so easily, Uncle Zach." Growing up, Zach and Eleni, along with their kids, would come out to the Hamptons for a summer family reunion. Zach and Eleni were outwardly affectionate. Then again, so were my parents and Uncle Daniel and Aunt Briana. It sounded like Ethan had a solid marriage too. Why was it that everyone else got their happily ever after? *Because you made a dumb decision five years ago.*

He let out a laugh. "Love doesn't come easily to anyone, Sam."

"It had been easy for us," I murmured. From the moment we met at the Halloween party in college, our love had been easy. Like running downhill.

Zach gave me a look of pity. "Maybe that was the problem. True love, the kind that lasts forever, only comes after really earning it. If you're not willing to fight for it, you're better off staying away from her."

I drove home, changed out of my suit, and put on shorts and a T-shirt. I headed down to the beach, not sure whether I'd run or simply sit and watch the waves. I decided on a walk, finally giving free rein to the swirl of emotions going through me.

Ethan didn't tell me to stay away from Kate, but it was clear that he wanted me to. Maybe Zach was right and I should stay away from Kate. She wasn't likely to forgive me. I had no doubt that seeing me caused her pain. A better man, a stronger man, would leave her alone. But deep in my heart, in my very soul, I knew she was the one. The only one.

Feeling exhausted but knowing I needed to check in with Max, I pulled out my phone and called him. I relayed to him that I had the name of an agent and that we would be looking at a property soon.

"Are you okay? You sound weird." My instinct was to deny it, but Max was my brother. My best friend. My confidant. "I saw Kate."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "And?"

"And I want her back."

"Do you think she'll take you back?"

"No." Her feelings about me were the only thing I was sure of.

"So that's it? Because the odds are against you, you're going to give up?"

I must've expected him to say something along the same vein as Ethan and Zach because I was surprised by his response.

"No." I wouldn't give up, although I didn't know how I would get past her defenses enough to begin the process of winning her over again.

"Good. You deserve another chance."

Max's words stayed with me throughout the day. Did I really deserve another chance with Kate after what I did to her?

Especially after how everything ended up with Sandra?

That night, I lay in bed, my thoughts still rattling around and making it difficult to sleep. But as exhaustion finally won

over and my body succumbed to sleep, my brain continued to think of Kate.

She appeared in the same dream she often did. It started out as my plan to win her back five years ago. Months after I'd left Kate and brought Sandra and Chelsea home with me instead, everything had changed except for the regret and devastation at having left Kate.

I did what I could for Sandra and Chelsea, finding them a place to live and getting Sandra a job with Briana's brother, Devin Roarke's, business. My parents helped her as well, sometimes taking care of Chelsea.

With the two of them settled, I returned to California to find Kate and bring her home with me. My goal had been to resume the plan we'd initially made—get married and live in New York. At first, she'd been understanding about the situation with Sandra, suggesting that she could be Chelsea's stepmom. I hoped she still felt that way.

As I made the cross-country flight, I fantasized about how it would play out when I saw Kate again. It never happened, of course, but that fantasy continued to haunt me, showing up in my dreams.

In it, I'd find Kate at the condo. She was sitting on the bed as I rushed in, eager to take my life back. She was crying, which wasn't a completely accurate depiction of her. She cried a little bit when everything went down, but when it was clear that I was leaving, the waterworks stopped, replaced by a hard shell and complete disdain for me.

But this was a dream, so she was crying. When she looked up and saw me, hope filled her expression. I rushed to her, dropping to my knees and declaring how much I loved her. I kissed her then. All over her face. I pulled her close, laying us on the bed and holding her, promising that I'd never let her go. She held me back, asking me to never leave again. Okay, so the Kate of my dream wasn't exactly like Kate in reality, but I suppose my dreams were hopes and wishes.

Soon, my hands were roaming her body, rediscovering the woman I'd nearly lost. I kissed her sweet lips and then tasted

every inch of her body until she was gasping and chanting my name. Only then did I think about my needs, sliding inside her body. Home. Finally, I was home.

I moved in and out of her, her name on my lips over and over. I was in fucking heaven.

I shot up in bed. I ran my hand over my face as the dream faded. “Fuck.”

Like always, I woke before release came. It was like the universe was tormenting me. I could experience Kate only for so long, but then I’d be punished by waking before orgasm.

I deserved it and so I never did anything about it. But as I looked at the tent my dick made in the sheets, I decided this time would be different.

I whipped the sheet off, shoved my boxer briefs down, and wrapped my hand around my dick. I conjured Kate back into my mind, but not the fantasy of what I wanted five years ago. No, now I was in Kate’s club. Her sharp eyes were on me as I walked toward her.

“It’s our time,” I said to her.

“It’s about damn time.”

My chest filled with relief and love. I tugged her close and kissed her again as I stroked myself. I pushed her to a table, lifting her onto it. The need to be inside her, to claim her, was insane.

Then, as happens in dreams, we’re naked, and I was fucking her hard and fast, fueled by her cries of pleasure. Her tits bounced, the pink nipples tempting me. I bent forward and sucked one into my mouth as I thrust.

“Fuck!” My hips bucked up, cum spraying onto my belly and chest. I got out of bed to go to the bathroom to clean up. I looked in the mirror at the man I was today.

Was he good enough for Kate?

Probably not, considering what I did. But I could be a better man. I could be whatever fucking thing Kate wanted or needed me to be.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kate

For the next week, I was on edge. Every time the door to the Sea Siren opened, I expected Sam to walk through. But he didn't. Good, I told myself. I didn't want to see him ever again. Too bad that deep down, I was disappointed that he hadn't made an effort to make good on his promise that he'd change my mind about him. That feeling made me angrier at him and at myself. At him for stirring up all the old feelings, and at myself for letting him.

By the time Halloween arrived, I realized he'd gotten my I'm-not-interested message and wouldn't be back. Now I was free to focus on my business and forget about him again.

We closed the Sea Siren right after the lunch service so that we could prepare for the Halloween party. I had bought several of Carlo's mother's decorations, as well as a few others from a local craft store. I also had a stash of decorations stored away from last year.

By the time the evening shift arrived, we had the place pretty well done up. Spiderwebs, pumpkins, purple lights, cackling witches, gravestones, we had it all. We even set up the hallway to the restroom like a haunted house. I hoped that didn't result in people having accidents on the way to use the bathroom.

We were finishing up the last details when Dana, who was in charge of all the servers tonight, approached me. "Samantha isn't here."

I looked over at the bar. Jared, the new hire, was there looking a little lost as he worked to prep the bar. He wasn't just new here, he was new to bartending as well.

I probably shouldn't have scheduled him for tonight because he was so new. But he needed the money, and I figured with Samantha with him, he'd get a crash course in bartending. But if Samantha wasn't here, that could be a problem. I didn't think he was ready to take on the extra chaos tonight was going to be.

"I have to go change anyway, so I'll call and see if any of the others are available," I told her.

"I hope you can find someone because having extra waitresses doesn't do you much good if the drinks aren't being made fast enough."

I nodded. She didn't need to tell me something I already knew to be true.

Back in my office, I opened the contact list on my phone and began calling the other bartenders on my payroll. There weren't very many. Just three.

Anna was already mostly drunk when I reached her at whatever Halloween party she was at.

Dominic didn't answer his phone, and knowing him, he probably wouldn't. He was a good worker when he was here, but I never had any success finding him when I needed him in an emergency. I suspected he turned his phone off or ignored my call.

My last resort was Carl who was seventy-five years old. Normally, he worked day shifts when the bar wasn't in too much demand. Plus, he didn't drive at night. I'd have to go pick him up. Then there was my concern about whether he could manage the crowd we were going to have tonight. So that left me.

I wasn't a trained bartender, but I had worked in clubs long enough that I could do the easy drinks like serving beer and wine and straightforward cocktails such as rum and Coke or scotch and water.

I considered not putting on my Halloween costume because it was a little tight and might inhibit me behind the bar. Ultimately, I decided it wouldn't look right for the owner of the establishment to be the only person not dressed up.

Dana had shown up dressed like a wench, one of the other girls looked like a manga cartoon, another dressed like Daisy Duke, and the last one was dressed like a witch or maybe a succubus. One thing was for sure, they all came dressed in a way that was sure to earn them a lot of tips, at least from the men.

I slipped on the skintight dress, aptly called a mermaid style since that's what I was dressing up as. I would be a sea siren.

The dress was a green shiny fabric that flared out near the bottom, which made walking slightly easier. The bodice was the same fabric as the rest of the dress but cut in a way that it looked like waves except where it dipped low between my breasts.

Normally, when I worked, I wore my hair up, but mermaids normally wore theirs down. It was part of their allure. It was like the DNA in the man was coded to be attracted to women with long hair.

I pulled the tie out of my hair, combing through the long strands and then clipping one side up with a flower barrette. I touched up my makeup and then slipped on silvery heels. My feet would probably hate me by the end of the night, but there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for success in my business.

I left my office, heading back to the main part of the club. Looking over to the corner, I saw that the DJ was setting up. We normally had music on the weekends and karaoke on Wednesdays, but this was Halloween so I'd arranged for the DJ to come tonight.

I walked over to Dana. "No go with a backup bartender, so I'll—"

Dana nodded toward the bar. "We have a fill-in."

I turned to the bar. "Uh . . . no."

Sam stood behind the bar dressed as a pirate, showing Jared how to mix a drink. By the look of it, it was a martini.

“I’m sorry, Boss. It’s my fault. I told him that unless he knew how to bartend and was willing to work for free, he had to get out. I really thought that would get rid of him.”

I knew Sam could make a martini, but did he know how to bartend? “How do you know he can do the job?”

“Well, if he can’t, he’s a really good faker. He did this thing where he threw the bottle up from behind him and caught it in front of him. I know we’re supposed to hate him, but he’s hot and the ladies will love it.”

My jaw tightened. I didn’t want ladies loving him. And of course, they would.

He wore his black pirate shirt unbuttoned enough to show off smooth skin and a hint of the line between his pecs hinting at his sculpted muscles. He had a black bandana wrapped around his head and an eye patch that was flipped up, presumably so he could see out of both eyes.

“I figured it would be good business.” Dana looked at me with concern.

I shook my head.

“I’m sorry. I messed up.”

“It’s all right. You were trying to help. I appreciate it.” I left Dana, heading straight to the bar. Jared saw me approaching. He straightened like an Army private standing at attention. Then his eyes went wide, a sure sign that I was glaring.

Sam looked at him and then toward where Jared was staring. He saw me and smiled. His gaze drifted down my body and back up again, his smile growing wider. A shiver ran through my body, and I cursed my hormones for responding.

I reached the bar, pressing my palms against the edge of it as I leaned toward Sam. “You need to go.”

“But you need a bartender.” He gave me his affable smile that in the past worked on me and everybody else to get what

he wanted.

“I don’t need *you* as a bartender.”

He put his arm around Jared. “Oh, come on, Kate. Let me help you out. You don’t want to be stuck behind the bar. You want to be out mingling with your customers.” His gaze dipped to my breasts, and I wanted to poke his eyes out.

“Your customers will want you mingling with them as well.”

Ugh! “What do you know about bartending?”

“A great deal, actually. My brother and I own a couple of clubs, and before that I worked in my aunt Bri’s club.”

Behind me, the door opened, and customers dressed in a variety of costumes filtered in.

“You’re going to be so busy you won’t even know I’m here,” Sam said. “And when the work is done, I’ll leave. I promise. In the meantime, I’ll help Jared get his bearings behind the bar.”

I didn’t have much choice. “Fine.” I whirled around, wanting to storm away, but my too tight dress made it difficult to take the long strides that I would’ve liked to have taken.

As the night wore on, we were extremely busy, but that didn’t mean the temptation to look Sam’s way didn’t get the best of me.

Every time I glanced his way, he was sporting a sexy grin as he did stunts with the liquor bottles like he was Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*. The women crowded around his side of the bar were enchanted, giggling and flirting with him. He was eating it up. He looked into their eyes, giving them winks as he served their drinks. I was sure several of them had orgasms as he set their drinks in front of them.

At one point, he glanced my way and caught me watching him. He winked at me then too. I flipped him the finger and turned away, going to check on my customers.

Why did he still affect me the way that he did?

Yes, he had the looks and the swagger, but now I knew the type of man he was. Surely, that would have dulled the shine I'd once seen in him.

His dumping me for Sandra had ripped the rose-colored glasses off, and I could see him for the man he really was, a man who could tell me he wanted to marry me one minute and after a thirty-minute visit with his ex, leave me without looking back. Clearly, my hormones hadn't gotten the message because every time I looked toward him, they started vibrating, humming with desire.

I walked over to a table, not realizing until I reached it that I knew them. Dax Shepard had been Harper's, and later, Anne's, bodyguard at various times over the last year. He sat in the booth with a man and a woman I recognized as working with him at Saint Security. They occasionally came in for drinks, so I knew them on sight, although except for Dax, I'd never talked to them much.

Dax was dressed as a mobster, while the other man wore a toga. The woman wore a ninja costume. Or I assumed it was a costume. For all I knew, it was her work uniform.

Feeling petty, I put on my best smile and posed in a manner I knew accentuated all my best assets. The men at the table took notice as their gazes took the same tour as Sam's had.

"Are you all having a good time tonight?"

"We are." Dax shifted over, pushing his buddy beside him into the woman on the other side of him. "Why don't you join us? You're the boss, after all, right? You can take a break."

Normally, I didn't sit with the guests unless it was one of my girlfriends and they were over for lunch.

But once again, the petty part of me rose up. "Sure." I slid into the booth next to Dax. "Are you guys taking a break from a case?"

"We just finished up with a bigwig on a trip to Japan. This is our first night out in a couple of weeks," Dax said.

“I see you have two new bartenders.” The woman’s gaze latched on the bar, or more accurately, Sam.

“Jared is new. Sam is just filling in for tonight.”

She waggled her brows. “Is Sam the pirate? He definitely has some moves.”

I had the urge to pick up Dax’s drink and toss it on her. I tamped it down because the last thing I wanted was to be jealous.

“Have you taken advantage of the music?” I asked.

“Not yet. But I wouldn’t mind a twirl around the floor with the Sea Siren herself,” Dax said.

I smiled and nodded. “Well, let’s go, then. I’ll try not to drown you.”

He laughed and put his hand on my lower back as we walked toward the floor. That petty part of me had me glancing up at the bar, and I was pleased to see Sam’s affable smile drop into a glare. Eat your heart out, Sam Clarke.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sam

Oh, hell no. My gaze fixated on Kate as a gangster put his hand on her back, leading her to the dance floor.

They moved to the music, and watching Kate's sublime body was like watching art in motion. My dick stirred in my pirate pants, making me shift. Thank God I was behind the bar as I didn't need the ladies flaunting themselves at me to think I was responding to them.

As Kate and mob-guy moved in a circle, I could see his face, his gaze on Kate's body. I had no doubt that his dick was stirring too.

The urge to jump over the bar and kick his ass was almost more than I could resist. By the look of him, I'd probably lose the fight. It wasn't the gangster suit that made him look dangerous. The man had a dark edge to him that made me think of a mercenary or a hired goon.

Dammit. And the night had been going so well. I had stayed away from Kate for the last week, hoping that my absence might affect her in a way that she wouldn't automatically put her walls up the next time she saw me.

Not that I thought she'd come running into my arms like in my dream, but maybe like me, the sweet memories of the past and what we had would soften her up enough to give me an opening to begin winning her back.

When I saw the sign announcing a Halloween party outside the Sea Siren, I decided I would attend. I saw it as a

sign from the universe since I'd met her on Halloween.

I considered showing up in a *Captain America* costume, but I didn't have it anymore and I didn't want to be wearing tights on the off chance that my dick got a mind of its own, sort of like now as I watched her dance with some asshole.

I arrived early thinking I could help out in some way. After all, Max and I had thrown a few Halloween parties at our clubs.

The hard-edged server I learned was named Dana, stopped me before I could reach Kate's office and told me that unless I knew how to bartend and was willing to work for free, I had to leave. I suspect she thought that would make leave.

Luckily for me, I knew how to bartend. I was really good at it. And as it turned out, it was a good thing I showed up because while the kid behind the bar knew the basics, there was no way he was going to be able to keep up on a busy night like Halloween.

I suppose I wasn't surprised that Kate ordered me to leave, but luckily, people started arriving and she had no choice but to let me stay. I got busy doing my thing, flair bartending, and before long, a group of women had crowded around the bar watching me as I created drinks.

They flirted with me and I flirted back because that would keep them ordering booze. It's exactly how I did when I worked in my aunt's club. Only then, Max was usually with me, and we put on quite a show—flair bartending twins.

It did my ego good to catch Kate looking my way every now and then. She would then turn her attention to the women and scowl, and my spirits rose.

If she didn't like the attention I was getting, that could only mean one thing—she was jealous.

Jealousy meant she still felt something for me. Yup, I was feeling really good about tonight. At least until I saw that asshole put his hand on her.

Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to me that Kate could be seeing someone. For all I knew, she could be married

with kids, except Ethan would have told me that when he was feeling out my intentions toward Kate. So she had to be single, but that didn't mean she wasn't in a relationship.

I stepped back toward Jared. "Who is that with Kate?"

Jared looked up from where he was pouring a Guinness. "I don't know."

I reached over to turn off the spout as he was about to overflow the glass. For most beers, it wouldn't matter, but Guinness had a very special pour sequence. I remembered getting an entire spiel on Guinness pouring from my aunt Bri's brother, Devin Roarke.

Like my family, the Roarkes were well known in New York, and in fact, many places around the world, for their exclusive restaurants and clubs. I'd learned a lot from the both of them, and they were supportive of my and Max's venture into establishing clubs, although I suspect they didn't think we'd do as well as we have done.

Still, New York was a big city. There were plenty of patrons to go around, so our success didn't put a dent into theirs.

One of the waitresses dressed like a manga character approached the bar. I leaned over the bar toward her so she could hear me over the crowd. "Who is that dancing with Kate?"

The woman turned toward the dance floor and then back to me. "I don't know his name. He and his friends are sort of regulars."

"That's Dax Shepard, and he could kick your ass with his pinky finger," Dana said, coming up to stand next to Manga Girl.

"So that mobster suit isn't a costume?"

Dana smirked at me. "He's in security, but he and his former boss took down part of a cartel not that long ago."

"Former boss?" If the guy had been part of taking down the cartel, why was he fired?

“His boss is retired. He owns Saint Security,” manga girl said.

That was a name I recognized. “Noel St. Martin.”

She nodded. So, the man who was dancing with my woman had once worked for my neighbor. I wondered how I could use that to my advantage. Maybe I could ask Noel to arrange for him to be sent to South America to hunt down some other cartel.

“I don’t know what you did, but whatever it was, Kate is not going to forgive you.” Dana was protective of Kate, which was nice to know, even as she got on my nerves.

I stepped back from the bar to go back to work. “We’ll see about that.”

I heard a gaggle of women calling my name. Putting on my signature grin, I turned to them and resumed pouring drinks and charming the pants off them, figuratively, not literally, of course, although it was possible one of them might hand over their panties with their phone number scrawled on them. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Eventually, Kate and her dance partner separated. He went back to his table, but not before leaning in and giving her a kiss on the cheek.

“Fucker,” I seethed under my breath.

The end of the night finally came. I was exhausted and at the same time hitting my second wind since I knew my time to talk to Kate would be coming soon. When things quieted down, especially when the staff left, I would make an attempt to apologize.

The DJ packed up, but Dana turned on loud music as the clean-up began. Jared and I took care of the bar while the rest of the staff dealt with the tables and the floor of the club area. Back in the kitchen, I could hear the clanging of pots and pans as they cleaned up as well.

“You did good, kid,” I told Jared as we tossed our rags into the laundry bin. “Why don’t you clock out and head home? I’ll make sure everything’s okay with Kate.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Oh, and here.” I dug into the pocket of my pirate pants, pulling out a wad of cash. “Take this. You’ve earned it.”

His eyes widened. “But those are your tips. You definitely earned them. I hope I can learn to serve like you do.”

“I can teach you.” Flair bartending was a real deal. It had its own association and even contests. But a bartender didn’t need to juggle to put on a show that impressed drinkers. I could teach him a few things. “But first, you need to settle into pouring and serving. Then you can up your style.” I pushed the money to him again. “I don’t need this. You take it.”

He looked at me like I was Santa Claus as he took the money. I wondered if I was like him when I first started.

As he headed toward the door, I pulled another wad of cash out of my other pocket and divided it up between the serving staff and cooks. The amount of tips I earned tonight was a validation that I hadn’t lost my skills as a bartender.

I whistled at the waitstaff across the club. “I have some tips here for you.”

Dana yelled back, “Did you whistle like we’re dogs?”

I rolled my eyes. “I whistled because you’re playing the music so loud I don’t think you would hear me.”

All four ladies sauntered up to the bar. “All you have to say is the word money and we will hear you.” Dana didn’t like me, but she didn’t hate me so much that she would refuse taking the tip I offered.

“Oh, my God, you earned all this from bartending?” the woman dressed like a slutty witch said.

“Yep.”

Kate entered the area from the back hallway.

“Why are you giving it to us?” Dana asked, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “It’s not like we’re Kate’s children and if you’re nice to us you’ll endear yourself to her.”

Kate's brow furrowed, and she put her hands on her hips as she watched me talking with her staff.

"You worked harder than I did. And I have no illusions that anything I do will endear me to Kate. Do you want the money or not? I can divvy it up between everyone else if you don't want it."

Dana shoved the money into her cleavage.

"What's going on here?" Kate asked, approaching the bar.

"Taking care of tips." I took the last wad of money and headed back into the kitchen to share it with the kitchen staff.

From my view, which I felt was an expert view, the night went very well. A night like this didn't pull in the kind of money I was sure Kate pulled in tonight without everyone on the staff doing their part.

They all deserved a reward.

Maybe later, I would get a reward, too.

An image of Kate writhing under me slid through my brain. I pushed it away. My reward tonight wouldn't be holding her in my arms. I'd be lucky if she talked to me.

When I came back from the kitchen, Kate and Dana were at the end of the bar talking. I continued to dawdle, looking busy behind the bar even though all the work to get ready for tomorrow was done. Finally, the chef and kitchen crew appeared, and along with Dana, they left the club.

Kate looked up at me from the other side of the bar with tired and wary eyes. "You can go now."

I leaned toward her, putting my forearms on the bar. "You could say thank you. You can't tell me that you haven't tallied up your receipts and seen what a successful night you had."

She arched a brow. "I see your ego hasn't shrunk. You don't think we would have had a successful night without you seducing the women."

I flashed her grin. "You would've had a successful night, but face it, those women bought a shit ton of alcohol tonight."

You're welcome."

"If you hurry, you might catch up with one of them. Or maybe two or three."

I feigned thinking about it. Then I looked her directly in the eyes. "No. I'm a one-woman man."

Her eyes rounded, clearly not expecting me to be so direct. Kate wasn't a woman to play games. She liked direct and honest, and that's what I wanted to be.

"I saw you checking me out. I know you didn't like how those women threw themselves at me. You can tell me the truth." I leaned closer to her, close enough that I could smell the scent of her exotic perfume. She really was like a siren, ensnaring me. "You were jealous."

"I was not jealous."

The saying *she doth protest too much* came to mind. I thought about repeating it but decided it would probably make her retreat even more.

I switched tactics. "I'll tell you the truth. I didn't much like seeing the gangster guy with you on the dance floor. You know that guy is probably at home jerking off to an image of you shimmying out of that dress."

"You're vulgar." But the expression on her face didn't quite match her words. She liked me talking in a suggestive manner. I had to only hope that she wasn't also liking the idea that it was gangster guy imagining her.

"I'll probably end up doing the same thing tonight."

She gaped at me, and I grinned. For a moment, I thought maybe I'd broken through. "You look beautiful, Kate."

The steel wall closed up again. She backed away from the bar. "You can go now."

I shook my head as I walked around the bar toward her. "I can stay and walk you to your car."

She laughed. "I don't need you to do that. I've been running this bar for a long time without needing you or anyone

else.”

“That may be, but I’m staying. You can put me to work, or I’ll just follow you around.”

She let out an exasperated breath. “Why are you doing this?”

I hated the pain I heard in her voice. I stepped closer, lifting my hand to push a stray hair out of her face. She jerked back, and I felt the move like a stab in the gut.

I sighed. “I have a lot I want to tell you about what happened after I left.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

She turned, hurrying back up the hall to her office, leaving me standing alone, unsure whether I should follow her or leave her alone for good.

CHAPTER SIX

Kate

Why wouldn't he just leave me alone?

Seeing him was too aggravating and painful.

So much pain.

When I looked at him, all I could see was the man who five years ago walked into the kitchen to tell me our engagement was off and that he was going to be with Sandra instead.

I made it to my office, and relief ran through me that he took the hint and left. But by the time I got to the middle of the room, he'd reached the doorway. "Kate."

I stopped in the middle of the room but didn't turn to look at him. "What do you want, Sam?"

"You."

Anger flowed through me. But behind it was anguish and yearning, and that made me even more angry.

I whirled around on him. "You had me, and then you tossed me aside for another woman."

He shook his head. He'd taken his patch and bandana off and run his fingers through his blond hair. "Not for her. For Chelsea."

It took me a moment to realize who Chelsea was. The baby. It was a girl. A girl he'd spoken the name of, making her

real. She was probably in kindergarten now. I wondered where she and Sandra were, although not enough to ask him.

He took a step toward me. “Let me explain. I want to tell you everything.”

“No.” I held my hand up to stop him from moving any closer. “I don’t want to hear it. It won’t make any difference. You did what you did, Sam, and nothing that you say can change that. You made your choice, and now we’re both living with it.”

His expression was pained. “I’m sorry.” He took another step toward me, but I countered by stepping back. He let out a frustrated breath. “I’m sorry.”

“Is that why you’re here? You want forgiveness? You want to alleviate the guilt?”

He shook his head. “What I did is unforgivable. Nothing I do will ever alleviate the guilt. That will always be there.” His green eyes implored me to listen to him. “I still love you. I’ve always loved you. That never stopped.”

I stepped back again, hitting the edge of my desk. Pain and yearning threatened to swallow me whole. I didn’t want him to see me cry as the anguish from the day he left rose up as fresh and intense as the moment it happened. “You can’t walk in here and say that to me. “

“Why not? It’s the truth.”

“Because it’s cruel, Sam.”

He flinched, and I saw regret and shame in his expression. He pressed the palms of his hands into his eye sockets as he let out a frustrated growl. His hands dropped to his sides. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then go.”

He stared at me for a long moment, looking sad. For a moment, I had the instinct to comfort him, but then I remembered that his sadness was a result of his actions five years ago.

“You brought this on yourself.”

He nodded. “I know. I am desperate to make this right between us.” He held up his hand to stop me from responding to that. I’m sure he knew I was going to tell him there was no fixing what he did.

“I know you’re adamant that there’s nothing I can do that will have you forgiving me and giving me another chance. I was twenty-one years old, Kate. I was faced with an impossible decision.”

I shook my head because I didn’t want to feel sorry for him. It wasn’t that I didn’t know he was put in a tough position. I knew that Sandra’s showing up with his child would complicate things. But he had other choices.

“If I had more time to think things through, I would’ve made a different choice. You and I would be together. Would you please let me tell you what happened?”

“Like I said, it won’t change anything.”

He stepped closer to me, but with my desk butted up against my thighs. I couldn’t retreat any further.

“Let’s start over. A brand-new slate. I’ll go out to the bar and make you Martini.”

The earnestness in his eyes touched me, but I couldn’t allow that. “Not this time.” I should have stayed home and done my homework instead of attending the college party five years ago.

Sure, I wouldn’t have known the joy of love, but then I wouldn’t have learned it was all a sham and experienced the pain.

He stepped closer, and I could feel frustration vibrating off him. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Even if we could start over, it wouldn’t work. I’m not the woman I was back when we first met.”

“I’m not the man I was when we first met. I’m better. I promise.”

“In trying to recreate what we had—”

His finger pressed over my lips, and I swallowed back the groan his touch elicited.

He brought his finger away, putting his hands on my shoulders. “We’re older and wiser. We’ve grown and changed, but the connection between us is still there. The fact that for the last five years, I’ve lived in agony over losing you is proof. Please, Kate. Give me a chance to show you.”

Being this close to him sent my emotions and my hormones into a tizzy. I couldn’t think straight. The only thing I knew for sure was that I wanted what he was offering. I wanted to feel cherished and desired again.

“Don’t tell me you don’t feel it.” His gaze drifted to my lips, and I longed for him to kiss me. “The connection is still there. Here.” He took my hand and pressed it over his heart. This close to him, I was helpless to fight the yearning.

I gripped his shirt and tugged him to me, pressing my lips over his.

He groaned, his hands sliding around me. “Kate.”

“Don’t talk.” My hands slid through the opening of his shirt, touching his warm, hard chest. A flood of desire rushed to my belly and below. All I could think was, “touch me.” Just for a moment, I wanted to be loved.

He unzipped my dress, pushing it down until it pooled on the floor. “I’ve missed you so fucking much.” He licked my nipple.

My fingers laced through his hair, pulling him closer until he sucked on my nipple, making me cry out. I fumbled at his pants, desperate to feel him. He pushed my hands away and set me on the desk.

He looked at me.

“Don’t stop.” If he hesitated, I’d be forced to confront what I was doing.

He kissed me, his lips trailing down my neck and lower, until he sank down on his knees and pushed my thighs open.

He made an *mmm* sound as he inhaled. “You always had the sweetest, hottest pussy.”

I gripped his head and pulled. What part of “don’t talk” did he not get?

His tongue slid through my folds, and I moaned as pleasure radiated through me.

“More. More.”

There had been times when I’d tried to tell myself that I wasn’t remembering my time with Sam accurately. He couldn’t have been as sweet as I thought. He definitely couldn’t have been as good at sex.

But as his tongue and mouth did amazing things to me, I was forced to admit that yes, Sam excelled at sex.

“Come, Kate. I want to drink you up.”

His finger slid inside me as he wrapped his lips around my clit and sucked. Fireworks blasted. My orgasm slammed into me, careened through me. I hadn’t come so hard since . . . well, since the last time Sam made love to me.

But this wasn’t lovemaking. This was giving in to the lust. Nothing more. There would never be more between me and Sam.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sam

It was like my dream come true. We weren't on a table in the club, but Kate's desk was close enough to the fantasy I'd carried for so many years.

I didn't know why she was letting me touch her. I knew I hadn't earned her forgiveness or trust. As I kissed and caressed her, I wanted to tell her how much she meant to me, but she didn't want to hear it. We were intimate, and yet, I didn't feel connected to her.

I shook the doubt and concerns out of my head and focused on the here and now. My words hadn't worked to convey my feelings for her, but maybe my touch could. Maybe with my body, I could show her how much I still loved her, how I'd never stopped loving her.

When her orgasm hit, I lapped up her juices, wanting her to feel all the pleasure I could give her. Then I rose up and pushed my pants and boxer briefs down.

I took a moment to look at her in case she didn't want me to continue. Like before, she grabbed at me, pulling me until my cock hit her pussy. Lust coursed through my body, and I thrust in, sinking as deep into her as I possibly could. I stilled, buried inside her, as emotion filled my chest. Home.

Her legs wrapped around my hips and she rocked against me. "Don't stop."

I wanted to take my time, but she didn't want that, and my dick didn't either. It throbbed with need. I gave in to our

desire, gripping her hips and driving in and out of her, hard and fast. With each thrust, our bodies slapped together. My grunts and her moans echoed through the room. I'd wanted to make love to her, and instead, we were rutting like two feral beasts.

"Yes . . . oh, God." Her body arched, and her pussy clamped around my dick like it would never let go. If only that were true.

"Fuck!" I yelled out as my own orgasm rocked my body. I continued to drive into her until I wrung every last bit of pleasure from the both of us. Then I collapsed over her.

My heart continued to thunder in my chest, but it wasn't from the exertion. It was hope that having sex was a sign that Kate was giving me a second chance.

In retrospect, I wished I could have shown more tenderness, but she wanted fast and furious, so that was what I gave her.

But now that it was done, I could show her everything I was feeling. I leaned down, kissing her neck, my hands continuing to caress her as my dick, while deflated, remained inside her. I was still a part of her.

But something wasn't right. I kissed the other side of her neck, noting that she was still, unmoving underneath me. Her legs had gone limp, no longer wrapped around my hips. Her hands weren't touching me.

I lifted my head to look at her. Her forearm was slung over her eyes. Something was wrong.

"Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

She removed her arm and glared up at me with the expression that told me I was an idiot.

My heart sank. "I mean just now. Did I hurt you just now?"

She pressed her hand against my chest, pushing me back. She was slipping away from me again. Or more likely, I never really had her. The sex hadn't meant anything.

I reached out my hand to help her up, but she ignored me, sitting up on her own and sliding off the desk. She found her panties and then walked around her desk, lifting a bag onto the desk and pulling out street clothes—a pair of jeans and a knit shirt.

Feeling vulnerable standing before her with my pirate pants by my ankles and my shrunken dick hanging out for her to see, I pulled up my boxer briefs and pants. “What’s going on here?”

She didn’t say anything until she was fully dressed. She looked at me, and her eyes were dull. “That should’ve never happened.”

“Why not?”

She looked at me again with the expression that told me I was an idiot. It said I knew why it shouldn’t have happened. It was because of what I did five years ago.

I put my hands on my hips and looked down, taking a breath as I worked to figure out what I could say or what I could do.

I lifted my head to look at her. “How do I win back your love?”

She sank down into her chair as if all the energy had left her. “It’s not the love that has to be earned. It’s the trust. And there’s nothing you can do. I look at you, and all the pain and anger is right there, like it happened yesterday.”

I knew this was my fault, and yet I couldn’t stop myself from being frustrated that she wouldn’t give me a chance to prove I was a better man now. I was smarter. I knew what I wanted, and I wouldn’t ever let anything get in the way of that again. I wanted to tell her that but felt certain that my words would fall on deaf ears. “So what was this that just happened on your desk?”

“It was a mistake.”

Clearly, I was a glutton for punishment the way I continued this conversation while everything coming out of her mouth crushed me.

“Please leave, Sam.” Her voice sounded defeated. For a moment, I took it as a sign that I was wearing down and maybe if I pushed, I could change her mind.

She closed her eyes, rubbing two fingers against her temple, and I knew that pushing would only hurt my chances. She was in pain and clearly regretting what happened. Sticking around would only reinforce her feelings.

“All right. I’m going.” Once again, I wanted to tell her how I was feeling, how much I wanted to try again. Instead, I turned and left her office and the club. I sat in my car until she came out and got into her car and drove away so I could know she was safely on her way home. Then I started my car and headed to my house.

There was no doubt that I wanted Kate in my life. If I continued on, surely, I would be able to wear her down. The fact that we had sex proved she still felt the connection between us even if she didn’t want to.

But another part of me, I suppose it was my pride, felt if she couldn’t see my sincerity, the truth of my words, then the heck with her.

Yes, I fucked up, but couldn’t she forgive me?

She wouldn’t even let me explain what happened. We might’ve had sex, but she didn’t hold back her anger and resentment toward me. She was clear that there was nothing I could do that would change her mind.

By the next morning, I’d decided that maybe it was time to give up.

It didn’t matter that I still loved her or that the connection between us continued to exist. She wasn’t going to allow herself to trust me again.

Would it have been different had I been able to find her five years ago?

It was hard to know. Pondering the would’ve, should’ve, could’ve question didn’t matter, anyway. Kate gave me her answer. It wasn’t what I wanted, but what else could I do?

I turned my energies back into finding a suitable club location for Max and me. Over the next week, the agent Ethan referred me to showed me several lots and vacant building locations along the coast of California, even as far north as Santa Barbara. The best one was located closer to Santa Monica. At one point, the place had been a dive bar, but when Max and I were done with it, it would be the new hot place for hip people to go for drinks along the beach.

I sent the information to Max, and within a few days, he flew out to tour the location with me.

“This place is a shit hole,” Max said as we looked around the building. “No offense,” he said to the realtor.

She shrugged. “None taken.”

“The location is great, and the bones of the building are good. I’ve already asked Zach to take a look. Most of the work is cosmetic, and besides, considering all the tech stuff we’ll be putting in, any place we bought would require an overhaul.”

Max’s gaze scanned the open room that smelled like urine and stale beer. “Well, if we can get the smell out, I agree with you.”

“Shall I draw up the papers?” the agent asked.

I nodded. We arranged to meet with her later that afternoon to make an offer on the place.

“I’m hungry, how about you?” I asked Zach when she left.

“I wouldn’t mind something to eat.”

We left the building and got into the car I bought recently so I didn’t have to borrow Zach’s anymore.

“I’m surprised you didn’t buy a Lambo or something,” Max said when he first saw the car.

“Maybe later. California is a leader in green tech, so I figured I’d go all electric.”

The car wasn’t flashy, but it was comfortable. Pulling out of the parking lot, I turned right instead of left toward home. I figured it would be nice for Max to see the surrounding area. I

hoped it would help him see that while the building was a shithole, the location couldn't be beat.

Just about a mile up the road, we approached the Sea Siren. Shit. I hadn't realized our new building was so close to Kate's place. For a moment, I began to rethink the location of our new club. Our place was going to be different than hers, but still, there would be some competition.

But then I remembered she had effectively cut me out of her life. Not that I didn't deserve it, but because of it, I didn't need to consider her thoughts or feelings when making my business decisions.

I turned my blinker on and turned into the parking lot.

"What is this place?" Max asked as I pulled into a parking space.

"This is Kate's place."

Max glanced at me with a *what are we doing here* look. "I thought you said she wasn't going to give you another chance."

I shrugged. "I heard she does a good lunch. Besides, this place will give us some competition. We should check it out."

Max's brow furrowed. "You want to compete with her? Is this some sort of payback for her not taking you back?"

I shook my head. "I'm not an asshole, Max. Our place will be different. It will cater to a different crowd. Most of Kate's crowd are locals, regulars. We'll have some of that, but we'll also be a draw to tourists or people living in the greater Southern California area."

We exited the car, and as we approached the door, I did wonder why the hell I was bringing Max here. The only explanation was that Kate was like a flame and I was the fucking moth that kept flying into it and getting burned.

A hostess stepped up to us as we entered. I was glad it wasn't Dana.

"Two?" she asked.

I nodded. “Do you have a place outside?”

“Maybe. Follow me.”

We followed her through the club and out the side door around to the back, where there was outdoor seating. I couldn't decide whether I was relieved or disappointed that I didn't see Kate. I was such an idiot, a glutton for punishment by coming here.

There was one table available. We sat down and each ordered a beer.

“Kate has done well for herself.” Max looked around the outdoor patio with a view of the beach.

I nodded. Speak of the devil. Kate walked around the corner of the building, stopping by each table and checking in with her customers. My heart squeezed tight. Yearning filled my chest. Why couldn't I make her see that I would be steadfast in my love for her?

I sucked in a breath as she moved closer to Max and me.

Across from me, Max frowned. “What's wrong?” He turned to look in the direction my eyes were fixated on. He turned back. “Is that her?”

I nodded. He hadn't ever met her. Neither had my parents. It was another thing I'd done wrong in my relationship with Kate.

“Jesus, she's gorgeous. Not that Sandra wasn't pretty, but Christ, she could be a model.”

I scowled at him.

He held his hands up in surrender. “I'm just saying.”

Kate's gaze swung our way, and almost immediately, she scowled. Her attention turned to Max, and she let out a breath and then continued her way to us. Had I been there alone, she probably would've given me the finger and walked off. But since I had a guest, she was going to be polite.

She stepped up to our table. “How is everything this afternoon, gentlemen?”

“Good,” I said. Max was right. She was stunning.

Max thrust out his hand. “I’m Max, Sam’s brother.”

She nodded. “I can see the resemblance.”

Sam grinned. “It’s that identical twin thing.”

“Does that mean you’re the same in every way?” She glanced at me with a cool, aloof expression.

“He’s smarter,” Max said, “but I’m better looking.”

She shifted her body so that it faced Max and then leaned over, putting her finger on the menu as if she was pointing out an item. Max’s gaze went straight to the gap that opened in her blouse.

“This is the specialty of the house. The fish is fresh daily.” Still leaning over, she gave Max a flirty smile.

I kicked Max under the table. He flinched, his eyes going to the menu.

Kate straightened, turning her head slightly toward me and smirking.

Anger boiled up. “I get it, Kate. You hate me, but you don’t have to seduce my brother.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You brought this on yourself. You’re the one who killed our relationship.”

“If you didn’t feel anything for me anymore, then why did you let me fuck you on your desk the other night?” I was out of line, but I couldn’t rein in the frustration any longer.

Max’s hands went up in surrender. “Whoa! I don’t think I need to be here for this.”

“It was a mistake,” Kate hissed, glancing around us, presumably to make sure the other customers didn’t hear the conversation.

I wanted to reach out and tug her close and make her see that she was wrong about me, about use. “We aren’t a mistake. Can’t you feel it?” God, I was pathetic. My desperation was out there for all to see.

“It doesn’t matter what I feel. I don’t trust you.” She said the same thing to me the other night. In fact, she said that the problem wasn’t in loving me again. It was in trusting me again. Did that mean she still loved me?

Hope swirled inside my chest. I had to make her understand. “I felt I had to do the right thing by Sandra and Chelsea. My father did the same thing when he discovered Max and I were his kids. He married our mother. I thought that’s what I had to do.”

“And so you did. I’m not angry at your choice, or maybe I am. The problem now is that the choice was made.”

“Dad didn’t marry Mom just because of us,” Max said, looking at me quizzically. “They loved each other. In fact, they would have married even if we weren’t his kids.”

I glared at him. He wasn’t helping.

Kate’s expression filled with even more hate.

“The truth is when Sandra showed up, you took her back because she was the one you really wanted. I had been the consolation prize until she came back. I imagine things between you didn’t work out and she left. Is that why you’re here now?”

I shook my head. “That’s not true.”

“The truth is, Sam has been a miserable fuck since he left you. And I know he hurt you, but maybe he could get a little credit for being honorable, at least.”

Finally, a little support from my brother.

Kate turned her glare on Max.

“You know, if you two got out of your own way, you might have another chance,” he said.

“I’m not the one in the way.” I was the one begging for another chance.

Kate took a step back, adjusting her expression into indifference. “I don’t want to get out of the way.” Then she turned and left our table.

Max blew out a breath.

Our beers arrived, and I took a long gulp of mine.

“Did you really leave her because of Dad?”

I nodded. “He did the right thing by her and us.”

He looked at me like I was nuts. “Maybe, but he didn’t do it to do the right thing. They’ve always loved each other. In fact, their story isn’t that different from yours and Kate’s.”

I laughed derisively. “It’s entirely different. Mom gave Dad another chance.”

“Not right away. Maybe you just need time.”

I had time, but I wasn’t sure my ego could endure Kate’s constant disdain and rejection.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kate

It was petty of me to flirt with Max in front of Sam. If anything, it contradicted my statement that I didn't care about Sam.

Why try to make him jealous if I didn't care?

The truth was, I wanted what we'd had before. As much as I couldn't believe that I'd let Sam fuck me on my desk, it happened because of the overwhelming need to be close to him again. There was no way I could let him in emotionally, but I could physically.

Hell, if I was completely honest with myself, he was a part of me emotionally, and not just from anger.

Part of me still loved him.

Each time he made his plea for me to give him a chance, my heart wanted to burst wide open and take him back. Luckily, my brain was smarter and stronger. I didn't know what happened between him and Sandra, but I wasn't going to risk her coming back and taking him away from me again.

I left Sam and Max to their lunch, not returning to the patio area until I knew they were gone. When was Sam going to get the clue that I didn't want to try again? I was becoming terrified that my resolve would start to wane and my heart would win over my brain. I couldn't afford for that to happen.

The next day, the Sea Siren was closed, so I drove out to Harper and Noel's house to meet their new baby, Noelle.

Noel opened the door carrying the nearly two-year-old Guillermo whom they called Mo.

“Harper’s on the couch nursing Noelle. Please don’t mind the mess. Mo likes to scatter his toys all over the house. I really wish someone would create a vacuum cleaner-like thing that picked up kids’ toys.”

I laughed. “I think that’s called parents.”

He flashed a grin. Despite the chaos two young children had brought them, he beamed with blissful happiness.

As I entered the living room, I saw Harper smiling sweetly down on her nursing baby. That same happiness Noel had, Harper exuded as well. *I could’ve had that*, I thought, but then pushed it away.

My chance had come and gone with Sam, and while he was back saying all the right things, I wasn’t brave enough to open myself to him again.

Maybe there was hope for me with somebody else in the future. Looking at Harper living life so fully was proof that strong, independent women, who were sometimes called “difficult”, could find true love and happiness.

I looked down at the baby. “She’s beautiful, Harper.”

Harper looked up at me. “She is, isn’t she?”

“I’ll get you two something to drink,” Noel said, heading to the kitchen.

I set the present I brought on the coffee table and then sat in the chair across from her. “Are you getting any sleep? When Ethan and Lucy had Kira, I don’t think they slept for a month.”

She laughed. “Sleep? What’s that?”

Noel returned carrying a glass of wine, which he handed to me, and a glass of water he set on the side table next to Harper. “I’m going to get Mo down for his nap, and I might crash out a little bit myself.”

Harper nodded. “I’m going to put Noelle down in a minute. I was thinking Kate and I could walk down on the beach. Will you be okay by yourself with the kids?”

Noel gave her a goofy grin. “I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?”

When Harper finished nursing Noelle, I followed her upstairs to lay the baby down. She pulled a folded blanket from the hall closet, and then we quietly walked downstairs, got our drinks, and headed down to the beach.

“I’ve heard a rumor that you know our neighbor,” she said.

I frowned. “I do?” I looked up toward the house sitting next to Harper and Noel’s.

“Sam Clarke. He bought my house.”

God. Was there no escape from Sam Clarke? “I knew Sam. Past tense.”

Harper flung out the beach blanket, and we sat down. “Sounds like there’s a story there.”

I crossed my arms over my knees, resting my chin on my forearms as I looked out over the water. “It’s the usual. Boy meets girl, girl falls hard, boy leaves girl for another woman.”

“Ouch. So have you talked to him now that he’s here?”

“Mostly, I tell him to leave me alone.”

Harper poked her finger in the sand, making circles. “He came over asking about Dax. Apparently, he didn’t like that you were dancing with him.”

The woman in me got a little thrill out of knowing Sam was jealous. But of course, he told me that on Halloween. “It’s not Sam’s business who I dance with.”

She sighed. “Well, I don’t blame you for being upset. There’s no rebuilding of trust after cheating, is there?”

Technically, Sam didn’t cheat. But I didn’t correct her because in the end, trust was the issue.

“Trust was a big problem for me and Noel at first, too.” She laughed, although I imagine it wasn’t funny at the time it was happening. “I thought my brother had me move in next door to him so he could keep an eye on me. You know how protective my brother Bran can be. Noel thought I moved next door to help Bran secure a business deal.”

I turned my head to look at her. “How did you resolve all that?”

“For a long time, we didn’t, although it didn’t stop us from having some pretty spectacular sex.”

The image of Sam fucking me on my desk flashed in my head. I turned my gaze out to the ocean again. Harper was astute, and I didn’t need her seeing that I had succumbed to my physical desire for Sam.

“If someone had told me that we needed to talk things out, I would’ve said we were, but we weren’t very good at it. It wasn’t until we truly opened up, not just about our misconceptions but about our feelings, that we were able to truly come together and have what we have today. I thank God all the time that we did. I saw my brother’s marriage, and Lane and Lucy’s to their husbands, and I was envious even though I accepted that it wasn’t for me.”

I knew that feeling.

“But it turns out it was for me. I just had to get out of my own way.”

Max’s similar words came back to me. I got the feeling that Harper didn’t realize she was in her own way, whereas I was in my way on purpose. I had to protect myself.

“Well, you and Noel worked things out. In the middle of your happily ever after, he didn’t have his ex show up with a child and leave you for her and the baby.”

She looked at me. “He did have an ex show up with a baby. There was a time when I thought he’d left me to reconcile with her. But I was wrong. That’s my point. Do you really know what happened with Sam and this woman?”

My jaw tightened because I hated that Harper seemed to be taking Sam's side. "I know that I was engaged to Sam, and we were getting ready to move to New York when his ex showed up with their baby, and right then and there, he had to do the quote unquote 'right thing'. He took her and the baby to New York, leaving me behind."

She winced. Good, I thought. She was finally getting it.

"And yet he's back in California by himself. The only family that's come to visit him is his brother. Maybe something's changed."

"Our history hasn't changed. I can't trust him."

"You know what happened between him and his ex?"

I shook my head.

"Well, maybe there's something there that could change things for you."

"Nothing can change the fact that he told me he loved me and wanted to marry me and then in the span of thirty minutes of talking with his ex, he left me."

She nodded, and I hoped that she was accepting my reasoning.

"She's right. Maybe if you knew what happened, that might change things."

My head whipped around to see Sam standing on the beach a few feet away from us.

"You're like a bad penny," I muttered.

"Find a penny, pick it up, then all day, you'll have good luck." He gave me a wan smile.

I turned away because he looked too handsome in his tight across the chest T-shirt and khaki shorts. Secretly, I wished for a tsunami to take me, or better yet, Sam, away.

CHAPTER NINE

Sam

I can't believe I let Max talk me into coming down to the beach to talk to Kate.

I'd been enjoying a perfectly nice day sitting on my terrace, reviewing plans for the club, while Max was inside talking to our managers back in New York, making sure everything was running smoothly.

Movement on the beach had me looking up from the blueprints to see Harper on the beach, and with her was Kate. As usual, the sight of her made my heart stutter in my chest. Longing and frustration mixed. Why wouldn't she let me prove to her that I could be the man she'd fallen in love with five years ago?

I watched as Harper unfurled a blanket and they sat.

"Maybe you should go down and say hello."

I rolled my eyes at Max as he sat in the chaise lounge next to me. "Maybe because I don't like hitting my head against a brick wall."

"If you're going to use Mom and Dad as your model, Dad would do it."

I ignored him, sipping from my beer bottle.

"I was surprised at your memory of Mom and Dad when we were little. You remember things differently than I do. Their second chance didn't come easily. Remember, Mom was very resistant to letting Dad back into her life. Hell, if you do

the math, you'd realize it took her a long time to tell him we were his even though he was coming around a lot."

We were only five or six years old at the time, so I wasn't sure how it was that Max remembered all of this so clearly. Mostly, I remembered my dad, who we knew as Drew at the time, coming around a lot and really liking him. And then one day, we learned he was our dad, so I suppose Max was right.

"They came together because of us. There was a reason for the two of them to spend time together. Kate has no reason to spend time with me, and she's made it clear that she doesn't want to." Next to me, Max shook his head, and I hated how it made me feel. Like he thought I was a wimp, or maybe he was disappointed.

"It's not easy to have your heart stamped on every time you speak to the woman you love." Why couldn't he see this from my point of view?

"I'm sure it isn't. But if she's the one, isn't she worth enduring it to win her back? The problem with you, Sam, is that your life has always come so easily to you. You haven't had to work at anything, so you don't know how to. You come up against one little obstacle, and you just give up."

I glared at him. "That's not true."

Max looked at me in sympathy. Maybe it was pity. "It is true, Sam. School, sports, business, women, when have you ever really had to work for any of it?"

"It's not like you had to work."

He arched a brow. Oh, yeah, I forgot about his dyslexia, a challenge he had to deal with every day.

Annoyed, I stood and headed through the back yard and out the gate to the beach. I wasn't looking forward to Kate skewering my heart again, but I didn't want to look like a fucking wimp, either.

As I approached Harper and Kate on the beach, I could hear them talking. If I wasn't mistaken, they were talking about me.

“Well, maybe there’s something there that could change things for you,” Harper said.

“Nothing can change the fact that he told me he loved me and wanted to marry me and, then in the span of thirty minutes of talking with his ex, he left me.”

God, I hated myself for how I’d handled things. But Harper had a point. “She’s right. Maybe if you knew what happened, that might change things.”

Kate’s head whipped around toward me.

“You’re like a bad penny,” she muttered.

“Find a penny, pick it up, then all day, you’ll have good luck.” I smiled, wishing I could disarm her, even just a little bit.

She looked away.

It was clear this discussion was going nowhere, just as I knew it wouldn’t, so I decided to let it go. I turned my attention to Harper. “How is the new baby?”

She smiled serenely. “She’s perfect. She and Mo and Noel are taking a nap. I really should be napping now too, but I wanted to catch up with Kate. How is the house?”

“It’s great. I love it.” A thought came to me. “I’ve made a few changes. Would you like to come up and see them?”

Harper glanced at Kate and then turned her attention back to me. “I would.” She rose from the blanket.

“What?” Kate’s brow furrowed as she watched Harper start up the beach toward my house.

I looked down at Kate, knowing she was obstinate enough just to sit there and wait. “You’re welcome to come up as well. Or not.” I started walking toward the back of my house.

Behind me, Kate let out a frustrated growl, but I could hear her coming up behind me and I couldn’t help but smile.

When we reached the terrace, Max wasn’t there. We entered the house, and I saw Max at the kitchen table, going over the plans for the new club.

“I’m not sure you’ve met my brother. Max, this is Harper St. Martin. She owned this place until she got married and moved next door.”

Max smiled and extended his hand to her. “Nice to meet you. I never met your husband, but we have used his services in New York.”

Harper laughed. “Was that when he was a mercenary or in security?”

Max looked at me, his brows rising. I knew his surprise. I’d only just learned that Noel was once a successful mercenary.

“Security,” Max said. Then he turned to Kate and smiled again. “Good to see you, Kate.”

She gave a curt nod.

Harper arched a brow at her. “Don’t be rude, Kate.”

Kate scowled, then forced a smile. “It’s good to see you too, Max.”

“I’m giving Harper a tour of the changes I made to the place.”

Harper’s gaze scanned the kitchen. “I see you made some changes here. I had the kitchen redone when I bought it too.”

“I just switched out the appliances. I wanted something more commercial grade.” I led them out of the kitchen through the living room and up the hallway to my office.

“Oh, wow. This is really nice,” Harper said as she looked at the floor to ceiling shelves and cabinets I had installed in the office. Technically, it was a bedroom, but I took the doors off the closet and put built-in shelves there as well.

I led them to the master suite, and I couldn’t help but watch Kate’s reaction as she entered my bedroom. It was stupid because even though I’d fucked her on her desk, it wasn’t like she’d be imagining herself in my bed.

“I didn’t change anything in the bedroom, but I made some updates in the bathroom.” I led them into the spacious room

where I'd had the shower completely retiled and new rain faucets installed. The garden tub was replaced with a larger one with jets. It was now big enough for my tall frame . . . and a friend, if I wanted.

"You had a window installed in here. Why didn't I think of that?"

"I thought it would be nice if I was taking a soak in the tub to see the ocean," I said.

Kate nodded. "With a glass of wine, it would be perfect." She glanced at Kate again before looking back out the window. "It could be quite romantic if you had a guest."

Kate gave Harper the evil eye. I felt confident that Kate wasn't going to budge on her opinion of me, but it was nice that her friend seemed to be on my side.

I led them back out to the terrace where Max was sitting, soaking up the sun. "I thought I'd get out of your way."

"Would you like to stay for a drink?" I hoped that Harper's support of me meant that she would stay so that Kate would stay as well.

Harper pulled out her phone, looking at the screen. "The baby monitor says everyone is resting. I'd love to have something to drink. Water or juice, though. No alcohol while I'm nursing."

I turned to Kate. "I have some wine. Maybe you can come help me so I don't have to make two trips."

She rolled her eyes but followed me back into the house. As I made my way to the kitchen, my mind was swirling trying to find something to say that could penetrate the wall of armor she had around her heart.

When we reached the kitchen, I took out a water glass and then three wine glasses. I got the bottle wine from the fridge and pulled out the corkscrew from the drawer. I slid the water glass toward Kate. "There's a water dispenser on the fridge."

She took the glass, putting in ice and then filling it with water. She set it on the counter next to the wine glasses as I

popped the cork.

She was close to me now, so I set the bottle and corkscrew aside, turning to her.

“I can’t stop thinking about you, Kate.”

She smirked. “All pissed off thoughts?”

I inched closer to her. “Not pissed. Frustrated. I made a mistake five years ago.” I reached my hand out, pushing a tendril of hair away from her face and over her ear. The last time I tried to do that, she jerked away. Was it progress that she didn’t shy away this time?

I looked down into her soulful brown eyes. I searched them, trying to decipher what was going through her mind. I could still see reluctance, but also something more. Was it yearning?

With hope rising again, I continued to plead my case. “Max was right. The last five years have been misery without you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “No marital bliss for you and Sandra?”

As much as I wanted to explain everything that happened, right now wasn’t the time to have Sandra and Chelsea in the conversation. “Right here, right now, it’s just you and me, Kate.”

“And what is it when we’re not here, when it’s not now?”

I stepped closer, feeling like I was on the edge of breaking through to her. “It’s still just you and me. It’s always been you and me. Always.” I leaned forward, pressing my lips over hers, half expecting her to slap me. Instead, her mouth softened under mine, and a small moan escaped from her. Feeling like I’d won the fucking lottery, I slipped my arm around her and pulled her close, slanting my head to take the kiss deeper.

I didn’t want the kiss to end, so I continued on and on, wishing Harper and Max weren’t here so I could take Kate to my bed and show her everything I felt for her. Make her mine

again. Not like on her desk in some frenzied sexual exploit. I wanted to make love to her.

My hand slid up her waist to the outside of her tit. I rubbed my thumb over the nipple, which was hard and distended, making my mouth water to suck it. At any time, she was going to knee me in the groin or at the very least push me away, but she didn't. She leaned into me, pressing against me until my hand was filled with her tit. She purposely rubbed against my hard cock, making my eyes cross with the shot of electricity her touch sent through me.

I slid my hand down between her thighs, rubbing her pussy through her shorts. It was risky to touch her like this with Harper and Max right out on the terrace, but I couldn't help myself. I undid the button and zipper of her shorts, slipping my hand inside and under her panties until my fingers found her clit.

She gasped against my mouth as I rubbed her wet, hard, swollen nub. She gyrated against me, and her breath quickened. I wanted to watch her face as she made the ascent to pleasure, but I couldn't stop kissing her for fear that she might pull away from me.

She moaned and her fingers gripped my shoulders hard. She was nearing the edge.

I trailed my lips along her jaw to her ear. "You and me, Kate. It's always only been you and me." I crushed my mouth over hers again as her orgasm hit. She cried against my mouth, and her body shuddered in my arms.

As she came down, she leaned away from the kiss, her hands gripping my forearms as if she might collapse.

"Hey, you guys. We're thirsty out here," Max's voice echoed from the terrace into the kitchen.

Kate jerked away, turning and zipping up her pants.

"Take a minute if you need. I'll take these out." I washed my hands and picked up the water and a glass of wine.

Her hands gripped the counter, and I tensed, not sure what she was thinking or feeling. Did she regret this?

Now that she was closer, I couldn't let her slip away. "This isn't done, Kate."

CHAPTER TEN

Kate

Dammit. How did I lose control? I'd been doing so well using anger and resentment as a wall between me and Sam.

Sure, I came off as a bitch, but I couldn't risk giving even an inch or I risked my heart giving a mile.

But then Sam said he couldn't stop thinking about me. He said it had always been me and him. It wasn't just the words that weakened my resolve. I might have been able to withstand the words if that was all there was. It was the expression on his face that burst through the wall I'd erected. His face showed more than earnestness. It glowed with truth.

At that moment, I couldn't hold on to the anger and resentment. My heart filled my chest. It remembered what it had been like for us five years ago, and it wanted it again. So, when his lips touched mine, there wasn't a single moment of resistance. I sank into him, giving in to my heart.

I didn't know what he was thinking to put his hands down my shorts, but I couldn't deny that I liked it as he brought me to a glorious release.

But then Max's voice brought me back to reality. This was dangerous. Not getting caught. No, the danger was to my heart. It was becoming increasingly difficult to resist what Sam was offering.

He left the kitchen to deliver Harper her water and Max a glass of wine. I straightened my shorts and took some deep breaths, trying to get my wits back under control. I walked

over to the window looking out over the ocean, hoping the view of the waves would cool me off and settle me down.

Still feeling a little weak-kneed, I walked over to his table and sat down. Plans and sketches and notes covered the table. I studied them as I realized they were renovations for a club. I was intrigued by all the technical features they planned. It looked like they were going to have a section of the dance floor where a special light would temporarily imprint the shadows of dancers on the wall.

I imagined the club would be very popular. I looked down at the bottom of the plans to find its location. As I read the address, my entire body went cold. Sam and Max had bought the abandoned club less than a mile from the Sea Siren.

I sat back as anger grew inside me. But the anger wasn't as difficult to bear as the humiliation. All those lines he just fed me were bullshit. If he loved me, if it was really just me and him, he wouldn't be building a club so close to mine.

So, what was his game? The only thing I could think of was that he was spying on me. His volunteering to bartend on Halloween and his showing up with Max for lunch must have been attempts to learn how I did business so he could best compete against me.

"God, Kate, you're so stupid." How could I have forgotten that he was the type of person who could betray someone on a dime?

I stood and started to exit the kitchen thinking I'd leave without a goodbye, knowing it would be rude not to tell Harper.

Sam walked in, smiling. "You okay?"

I shoved him hard in the chest, watching as his brow furrowed in shock. "You nearly had me, Sam, with all that *I can't stop thinking of you, and it's only you and me.*"

His hands reached out to touch me, but I slapped them away.

"That's all true."

“You’re a liar. Everything you’ve done from the time you got back, starting at Ethan’s party at my place, has all been some sort of club espionage. You’re planning to compete with me. Planning to put me out of business.”

He shook his head. “That’s not true. Our customer base is diff—”

“Shut up. I don’t want to hear it. Just go away. Don’t ever talk to me again.” I started toward his front door, ignoring the looks from Harper and Max as they stood in the doorway from the terrace into the house watching my tirade.

“Kate, wait.” Harper caught up to me when I reached my car at her house. “Come inside for a minute. I’ll get you a glass of wine and you can tell me what happened.”

I was so agitated that I probably shouldn’t be driving, so I nodded and followed her into her house.

We sat at her kitchen table. I drank most of the wine she set in front of me. I wished it were something stronger, but I still had to drive home.

“What happened back there? When Sam came out with our drinks, he was decidedly different. He looked as if maybe you and he were about to reconcile.”

I shook my head of the memory of him touching me in his kitchen. I was revolted at myself for succumbing so easily to him. “Remember the bar that Lucy and I used to work at?”

Her brow furrowed in thought. “I didn’t really know you then. But I heard the stories.”

“It went out of business. Max and Sam have bought it.”

Harper studied me, confusion still on her face.

“It’s less than a mile from the Sea Siren. He’s going to put me out of business.”

“Southern California’s filled with clubs. Why would you think he would put you out of business?”

“All this time, he’s been spending time around me at the club. I think he’s been spying to learn how I do business.”

Harper sat back, her head tilted to the side. “I don’t know. He seems genuine. The guy is pining for you. You can’t deny that your chemistry with him is off the charts.”

My jaw tightened in frustration that Harper wouldn’t be on my side in this. “He was at the club with his Uncle Zach at Ethan’s party. How much do you want to bet Zach will be doing the renovations? Then he showed up on Halloween to bartend.”

After Halloween, Samantha had called to tell me that she’d been in an accident and that was why she hadn’t shown up. But now I wouldn’t have put it past Sam to have paid her to stay home so he could take her place.

“And he and Max came in for lunch the other day. Don’t you see? They’re scoping out the competition.”

“Or Sam is trying to get back with you. You spend most of your time at the club. Where else is he going to be able to see you?”

I finished my wine. “He promised to love me forever, and thirty minutes after his ex showed up, he told me it was over. A man who could do that could pretend to love me just so he could see what he was up against in business.” I rose from the table and started toward the front door.

“Hold on, Kate. I’m sorry if I’m not being sympathetic here. I’m just . . . I had been so sure that Noel had nefarious plans and I was wrong. I’m just saying, maybe you’re reading this wrong as well.”

“So you think I should give him a chance?”

She shrugged. “Love is worth fighting for.”

“And what happens if I’m right? What happens if I let myself love him, and it turns out it’s all a big scam?”

She gave me a sympathetic stare. “That’s the thing about love, isn’t it? It goes beyond trust. It involves openly risking your heart.”

“I did that once. I won’t do it again.” I left her house, getting in my car and heading home. During the drive, I

worked to remember details of Sam and Max's club plans, wishing I'd studied them closer. If Sam planned to compete with me, I would give him a run for his money.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sam

“Fuck!” I shoved all the blueprints and paperwork for the club onto the floor. “God damn her.”

“Don’t you think you should go after her?” Max leaned against the doorway to the kitchen with his arms crossed over his chest.

“Why?”

He arched a brow. “Because you’re in love with her.”

I glared at him. “Maybe you haven’t noticed, but it doesn’t matter what I feel about her. She doesn’t give a shit about me. There’s nothing I can do to change that.” It’s not like I hadn’t realized that before. I was just that my stupid heart would fill with hope every now and then, and off I’d go to get stomped on again.

“So you’re just going to give up. The only woman you’ve ever truly loved, and you’re going to give up.”

I jammed my hands onto my hips as I scowled at my brother, wondering why he was rubbing salt into my wound. “Did you not hear what she said? Have you not been paying attention this whole time about how she feels about me? She doesn’t care about me anymore. I killed that five years ago. She hates me.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

I gave him a look that said, *So why are you busting my balls about this?*

“But isn’t there a saying about there being a fine line between love and hate? Her reaction to you is pretty strong, which could suggest that she still does love you. She just doesn’t want to.”

I gaped at him. “She doesn’t want to. You just said it yourself.” I threw my hands in the air and strode out of the kitchen, heading to my booze cabinet and grabbing the first bottle I could reach.

I took it to the terrace and planted myself in a chaise chair. “To hell with it. I’m done.”

Max showed up a minute later with two glasses. He took the bottle that I’d been drinking directly from. “I don’t want to drink your backwash.” He poured us each a glass and then set the bottle on the other side of him, out of my reach.

I downed my drink, which turned out to be scotch, and held the glass out for him to refill.

He eyed me for a moment but then refilled my glass. “Heartbreak’s a bitch, eh?”

“What would you know about it?” I snapped.

He shrugged. “I know what I see in you.” He was quiet for a moment. “Maybe she just needs time.”

I glanced at him with a *you’re an idiot* expression but didn’t comment.

I turned my attention out to the ocean. I had a really great house here, but as I sat and stewed, my anger and my agitation only rose.

I downed my drink, setting the glass down on the table between the two chaise lounges. “I’ve got to get out of here.” But where the hell would I go? I suppose I could go home, but that didn’t hold any appeal. I turned to look at Max. “Let’s go to Vegas. We can start getting the lay of the land.”

He arched a brow. “That’s not in the plans for at least a year.”

“So? We move up the date. Maybe we’ll just go gambling, get drunk, and get laid.” I rose from the chaise, striding back

into my house to my room to pack.

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” Max said, leaning against the door jamb of my bedroom.

I began tossing clothing items into a bag. “Are you coming or not?”

He shrugged and left my room. By the time I was packed and calling to arrange a charter plane to Las Vegas, Max had joined me in the living room carrying his bag. “I’m only going to try to keep you out of trouble.”

I glared at him. “Don’t get in my way, Max.”

His expression was filled with pity, and I wanted to punch him. Instead, I grabbed my bag and headed out the door.

“Why don’t you let me drive?”

“I’m not drunk.”

“No, but you’re pissed.”

Reluctantly, I handed the keys over to him and then climbed into the front seat. Thankfully, Max was quiet the first fifteen minutes of the trip.

But then he said, “Maybe we could try that trading places thing. I could go see her pretending to be you.”

I looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “What good would that do?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I probably couldn’t change your mind, but maybe I could get a better sense of what she needed in order to give you another chance.”

I shook my head. “I know what she needs. She needs to trust me. And she needs to love me. Neither of those things are ever going to happen again.”

He let the conversation about Kate drop. Instead, he talked about his thoughts on the club we should build in Las Vegas. I didn’t really listen to him because my mind was mired in regret at what had happened five years ago and anger that Kate wouldn’t give me a chance.

When we arrived at the private charter section of the airport, we boarded the plane and then were off to Las Vegas. When we landed, a car was waiting to take us to the hotel where I'd already booked a two-room suite for Max and me.

Once in our room, I took a shower and then put on a pair of dark slacks and a crisp charcoal-colored shirt. I looked at myself in the mirror, but I had to turn away because I couldn't face the man who was about to go out and find a woman to fuck.

I was sure there wasn't enough booze in the world to dull the pain or erase the memory of Kate. The next best option was to drown myself in the body of another woman. I was fucking pathetic.

When I came out of my room, Max was standing at the window with a drink in one hand and his phone in the other. He'd showered and changed as well, putting out a pair of dark slacks, but in his case, a white shirt.

I suppose it was a metaphor. I wore black because my life had turned dark and bleak. Max wore white because he was always the eternal optimist.

He turned to me, slipping his phone into his pocket. "I looked up some clubs in the area, if we want to scout out the competition."

I shrugged. "Anywhere that has booze and women is fine by me."

Again, he looked at me with pity. I pushed away any guilt I felt and strode to the door.

Ten minutes later, we walked into an Art Deco-themed club.

"I like this," Max said as his eyes scanned the club. I was scanning too, but I was looking for the bar and a willing woman.

"Sort of reminds me of Aunt Bri's place. Although hers has more of a nineteen-thirties literary vibe. This sort of makes me think of American literary expats in Paris."

I shrugged. “That was all the same era, wasn’t it?” I didn’t hide the disinterest in my tone. Instead, I sat at the table and waved to a waitress. I ordered a vodka tonic while Max ordered a beer.

“We could do a prohibition-type thing,” Max said. “Although I’m not sure we’d want to do Art Deco, and I’m not sure how we’d incorporate the modern tech aspect.”

I shrugged. “How about a noirish, Sam Spade type of thing?” I said. Noir was dark. It fit my mood.

Max cocked his head. “Maybe. Although Sam Spade probably went to a dive bar, don’t you think?”

I shrugged because I really didn’t care. A woman who carried the vibe of interest sauntered toward us. Everything about her screamed sex, from her long blonde hair hanging loose to her undoubtedly enhanced tits.

I gave her my signature smile. “You’re not here alone, are you?”

“My girlfriends are on the dance floor. You looked lonely, so I decided to come over.”

I reached over and pulled a chair out. “I am lonely.”

Across from me, Max rolled his eyes.

Ten minutes into our visit, there was no doubt that she was up for a long night of fucking. The only problem was that each time I glanced at her, I saw Kate. I didn’t want a Kate surrogate. I wanted someone who’d make me forget her. So with reluctance, I had to toss the big-busted blonde back into the singles’ pool.

Max took the opportunity to get me out of the bar and headed back to the hotel. He was probably trying to save me from myself.

“Let’s just call it a night,” he said as we wove through the casino part of the hotel.

I wasn’t going to bed by myself. “I’m going to the bar.”

Max followed me, sitting down in the booth as I scanned the area for a woman who wouldn't make me think of Kate.

"I don't need a babysitter," I snapped at Max.

"I'm not babysitting."

I glared at him. "You aren't being a wingman, either."

He shrugged. "I know what you're trying to do, Sam. And while I can't blame you, I can't help but think that if you fuck someone else tonight, it could go spectacularly wrong for you."

The waitress arrived, and I ordered a shot of tequila and a scotch on the rocks.

When she left, I turned to him. "How's that?"

His expression was serious. "Before Kate found the club blueprints—"

"No more talk about Kate. Tonight's about forgetting her."

"Just let me say this, and then I won't say any more. Before she found those blueprints, you seemed to think that you were making headway with her. When you came out to bring us our drinks, I could see in your expression that you were happy and hopeful."

"Yeah, well, now I'm miserable and pessimistic. Kate's gone for me. I've accepted that, and I wish you would too."

"What if she changes her mind?"

I scoffed.

"If she didn't feel anything for you, do you really think she would've let you fuck her? Would she really have given you an indication that she was open to you in our kitchen the other day?"

The memory of kissing her and bringing her to orgasm in my kitchen came back to me. Inwardly, I kicked myself, pushing the image away. It was time to forget her.

"The point is, she's being stubborn and resistant, but on a couple of occasions, she's let you get close. Maybe if you're

willing to work at it, you could win her back. But if she finds out that you are here in Vegas fucking another woman, I doubt that she would take you back.”

I growled at Max. “She’s not taking me back no matter what. Sure, she let me give her a couple of orgasms, but that was just sex to her.”

He shrugged. “In my experience, sex is rarely just sex for women.”

I rolled my eyes. “You need to get out in the world more, Max. First of all, what you’re saying is sexist. Women have sexual freedom. Many of them like sex and don’t want an entanglement. Maybe if you sowed your oats, you’d know that.”

The concerned expression on his face was immediately replaced by anger. “You’re a real asshole sometimes, you know that?” He reached into his pocket, pulling out a wad of cash and throwing a few bills on the table.

Then he exited from the booth. “I’m going up to the room. You can have your pity party and fuck up your life if you want.”

“I will. Thank you.”

He started to walk away, but then he turned, pointing his finger at me. “Sam, you’re a pussy and weak. If you do this, all you’ll do is prove that you don’t deserve her. Clearly, she’s made the right choice to keep you away.” He turned and stalked away.

Anger erupted. I wanted to go after him and punch him for saying that. His words felt like daggers into my soul, spot on. I downed my drink to burn away his words and my conscience.

I got out of the booth, walking over to the bar where a sexy redheaded woman sat by herself.

She gave me her name, but it completely left my mind. We talked and flirted, and before long, she invited me up to her room.

I followed her to the elevator focused on my goal of fucking this woman to get Kate out of my system. When the elevator doors closed, she pressed her body up against mine. Her nipples had already gone rock hard, showing through the thin silk of her dress. She ground her hips against mine, and then she slithered down my body, her hands sliding over my cock as she moaned.

“I can’t wait to suck this.”

Fuck. I took her wrists, tugging until she stood. Then I stepped away from her.

She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do this.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Are you married? Because you know what they say? What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” She sauntered closer to me.

I held my hands out to keep her back. “I’m sorry.”

The elevator reached her floor, and the doors opened. I put my hand out to keep them open. “I can walk you to your room if you’d like.”

Her sultry demeanor dropped. “If you’re not going to come in and fuck me, don’t bother.” She strode out of the elevator and down the hall.

I removed my hand from the open door and pressed the button for my floor. The door shut, and the car continued its way up to my suite.

I looked down at my dick and cursed it. “How many times have you gotten hard at the most inopportune times? And now with the ready, willing, and able woman, you’re gonna play dead?”

I could swear my dick was taunting me. It was saying that all the times it had gotten aroused, it had been from either seeing or thinking or fantasizing about Kate. The redheaded woman with the sublime body did nothing for me.

I leaned against the wall, scraping my hands over my face. My life was doomed to unhappiness, and clearly, no sex unless

it involved jerking off to thoughts of Kate. In some ways, I suppose that made sense. I'd known from the start that Kate was the one for me. Almost immediately, she'd become tethered to my heart, to my soul. Tonight was a reminder of what I'd learned over the last five years each time I made an attempt to start a relationship with a woman and couldn't do it. Kate was it for me. Oh, sure, I'd had success in the past fucking other women, but now that I thought about it, most of them were long-haired blondes. Surrogates for Kate.

"Fuck." I could hear the despair in my voice.

The elevator reached my floor and the doors opened. I headed to the suite, opening the door, finding it dark. Max was probably hiding in his room, not wanting to see the woman he thought I was bringing back.

I headed to the minibar, grabbing as many of the tiny bottles as I could hold. I dragged a chair over to the window and sat.

The door to Max's room opened. "Are you done already?" He didn't hide his disgust for me.

I lifted my hand, giving him the finger.

He walked over to me, grabbing one of the bottles and sitting on the arm of the chair. "So, what are you going to do now?"

What I *could* do was the question. Kate was out of reach, and no matter how much I wanted to get her out of my system, she was there forever. "Maybe I'll become a monk."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kate

The entire rest of the day after the incident at Sam's, I seethed with anger at myself for dropping my guard with him. But by the following day, I was proud of myself for pushing him away again.

Yes, I had a moment of weakness, but now I was strong again. My focus now was making sure that Sam and his brother didn't put me out of business by building their fancy techno club so close to me.

I went to the club early so I could start planning my strategy. I called Ethan and asked if he could come by and help me. He agreed, and now he sat with me at the back of the Sea Siren discussing business. It was after the lunch rush and before the arrival of the late afternoon crowd who liked to get drinks before heading home.

I looked down at my paper scrawled with notes, but none of them gave me confidence that I would succeed in competing with Sam.

"You know a lot of important people, Ethan. Maybe you could talk to some of them, and they could lose a building permit or something."

He arched a brow at me. "You really want to resort to cheating?"

"Says the man who talked his secretary, my best friend, into marrying him to cheat his way into Grandfather's favor."

“I didn’t win his favor or the company.”

No. He got happily ever after.

“You sure you don’t want to beat him on your merit? Your success will be all the more sweeter knowing you beat him at his game.”

Dammit. “I do want to beat him on my merit, but I don’t know how I’m going to compete with them.” I explained to Ethan what I’d seen in the plans.

“I don’t know that the people who come here are necessarily going to want to go there, at least not on a regular basis like they come here,” he said.

“You think our markets are different?”

He nodded. “From what you explained about his club, it sounds like it’s going to be loud and full of gimmicks and games. The Sea Siren is a community place. People come here to hang out and talk. His place is probably going to be a bunch of single people looking to get laid, where people here might be single, but many of them are couples coming out to have a drink with a nice view of the beach.”

I understood what he was saying, but until Sam’s club opened, I couldn’t know for sure that what Ethan said would be the case. A new and shiny venue was a powerful lure. I also couldn’t sit around and wait to find out how his bar would impact mine without a plan.

“Their clubs in New York and New Jersey do really well.” I sighed. I knew I was a competent and capable woman who’d built a successful business, but I felt out of my element when I learned just how successful Sam and Max were.

“Did any clubs around them go out of business once they appeared?” Ethan asked.

I shrugged. “There’s one or two that are closed out in the Hamptons, but I guess I can’t really know if it was because of Sam or something else.” One thing I knew for sure was that restaurants and clubs weren’t the best businesses to go into. Many of them went out of business all the time because of a bad location or poor management. Or competition.

“I still need to be prepared for it to have an impact.”

Ethan sat back, studying me. “It could draw new people to the area who then discover you.”

I smirked. “How can that happen over the noise and shiny objects?”

He laughed. “First, don’t underestimate yourself and what you have here. The answer is that you focus your marketing efforts on the community element of your place. Customer loyalty. Another idea might be to bring in live music. It doesn’t sound like Sam’s club is going to have that. From what you’re saying, it sounds like a modern-day disco or techno club.”

I nodded again. I looked down at my notes. “A live band is a good idea.” Not only would a live band attract my regular customers, but bands had their own fans and street teams. They would bring in people as well.

“So, what’s going on with you and Sam?”

I gaped at Ethan. “What do you mean, what’s going on? He’s building a club up the street from me that could put me out of business. He spent the last couple of weeks casing the Sea Siren, pretending to be helpful, when in fact, he’s been scoping out his competition.”

“Are you sure he hasn’t been hanging out here because of you?”

What was it about my friends and my brother that they kept taking Sam’s side of things?

“You know that quote about once bitten, twice shy, right? Aren’t we supposed to take people as they present themselves to us? Sam told me he loved me and then left.”

Ethan stared at me for a moment. It made me uncomfortable.

I hated pity. “What?”

He shrugged. “I told you how he showed up a few months after he’d left, desperate to find you. In my office the other week—”

“He was in your office?” What the hell?

He looked down for a moment as if feeling guilty.

“Zach contacted me wanting a referral for a commercial real estate agent. I accepted the meeting knowing he was talking about Sam’s venture. I wanted a chance to feel Sam out, learn what his intentions were with you.”

I shook my head. “This isn’t the eighteenth century. I don’t need your help in my life.”

He ignored my comment. “I’m telling you, Kate, he seemed sincere.”

“I thought he was sincere when he told me he loved me and wanted to spend his life with me, but look how that turned out.”

He nodded. “I guess I can see it from your side. Well, if you still want to use dirty tactics, I did tell him that if he hurt you, I’d put him out of business.”

My lips twitched upward, liking the idea of doing nefarious deeds to make sure Sam and Max failed. At the same time, I knew Ethan was right and that cheating would sour my victory. The best way to get my revenge on Sam was to do it through my own success.

Ethan looked at his watch. “I’ve gotta run. I have a meeting with Dane and his old man.” He stood, and I rose with him.

“I thought you were in charge of the place now.”

“I am, but Mr. MacLeod the Elder likes to have updates. I don’t get the feeling that he’s worried that I’m going to run the business into the ground. I think he likes to have something to gloat about when he goes to his weekly bridge game.”

I laughed. “Does Grandfather still go to those? God, I hope so. I wish I could be there to see his face when Mr. MacLeod starts bragging about how you’re making him money hand over fist.”

He flashed a grin. “Well, since it’s a men’s only club, that might be hard.” He arched a brow. “But I could go. You’re

right. It would be fun to see that.”

He pulled me in for a hug, holding me for a long moment. “I’m proud of you, Kate, for all you’ve done.”

I leaned back, looking up at him. “Why do I feel there’s a but in this comment?”

He reached out, cupping my face sweetly. “I just worry that the wall you’ve built up will keep out happiness. You deserve happiness.”

I put my hand over his on my face. “You and Lucy and the kids are inside my wall. And I *am* happy.” Content, anyway.

He leaned forward, giving me a kiss on the cheek. “You are stubborn, Sis.”

I grinned up at him. “And you love that about me.”

He laughed. “Only sometimes.” He reached over, picking up his suit coat and slipping it on. “Lucy keeps talking about getting together with you and the other girls. Sometimes, she loses track of things chasing after the kids, so maybe you could give her a call.”

I nodded. “I will.” Then I watched as he left the club.

I gathered up all my notes and took them back to my office. I pressed the spacebar on my computer to wake it up and began searching for local bands that I could hire to play at the club.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sam

I had come to Las Vegas to get drunk and laid, and I hadn't succeeded at either. Why was the universe against me?

Yes, I'd fucked up five years ago, but I wasn't a bad person. I didn't deserve to live the rest of my life living with regret, did I? Oh, who was I kidding? Of course I was going to live with regret. Even if Kate did take me back, the regret would remain.

When I woke up the next morning, I immediately took a shower, throwing on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. I didn't plan on sticking around, and I had no one to impress, so I dressed in what was most comfortable.

When I came out of my room into the main area of the suite, Max was up. He'd already ordered coffee and breakfast. He was sitting at the table reading his phone.

His head looked up. His green eyes, exactly like mine, shrewdly inventoried me. "You don't look like shit."

I strode toward the table, desperately needing coffee. "I don't feel like shit." That wasn't true. I did feel like shit. But it wasn't because I drank too much last night.

If only I had. I'd welcome a hangover over the constant guilt and frustration that plagued me with Kate.

I poured coffee and then sat down, taking the cover off the plate. Eggs, bacon, and hash browns. "No pancakes?"

He rolled his eyes. "What are you, twelve?"

“Hey. Pancakes are great at any age.” I dug my fork into the eggs, taking a bite and washing it down with the coffee. “Remember yesterday when you brought up the Art Deco club?”

He arched a brow and laid his phone on the table. “Yes.”

“I was thinking, what if we did some sort of 1920s prohibition and noir type theme?”

“How would all the fancy technology fit in?”

I shrugged. “Noir films always had something lurking in the shadows, so the shadowbox might fit that. I don’t know. I haven’t really thought it through.” All that I knew for sure was that if my only saving grace in life was to convince Kate to take me back, I’d have to start by not building a club so close to her place.

He tilted his head to the side. “Does the fact that you’re talking about a new club idea mean you want to forget the one by the beach, and therefore, try to get Kate back?”

I took a bite of bacon, chewing and swallowing before answering. “I don’t have much choice, really.”

“That’s not very romantic.”

“I’m not trying to be romantic. I’m being realistic. My dick doesn’t want to perform with anyone but her.”

I was vulgar, an asshole thing to say. Just because I knew I needed to win Kate back, didn’t mean I wasn’t resentful knowing the continued rejection I’d likely have to experience.

Max looked at me with disappointment. “I hope you’re not going to lead with that when you go see Kate.”

I set my utensil down and scraped my hands over my face. “That’s my frustration talking.” I looked at him, feeling completely defeated. “It’s a fool’s journey.”

“You don’t know that. The question is, how long are you willing to keep pursuing her?”

“I guess until she puts a restraining order on me for stalking.”

He pursed his lips. “She still has feelings for you. It’s clear as day. You just need to be patient and persistent. You need to build her trust in you again.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Have you told her about Sandra and Chelsea?”

I shook my head. “Every time I try to talk to her about what happened, she cuts me off. She says it doesn’t matter. What’s done is done.”

“So, you haven’t told her about the situation now?”

I glared at him. “No. The topic of Sandra and Chelsea is off-limits.”

“It’s going to be hard to build her trust if you can’t talk about the one thing that made her lose it.”

I rolled my eyes. “You think?”

“So, what are your plans for today?”

I shoved another piece of bacon into my mouth. I chewed and swallowed. “I’m heading home, as soon as the plane is ready.”

Max picked up his napkin and wiped his mouth. “In that case, I think I’ll head home from here. You don’t need me to hunt down another location. We do have a contract on that one by the beach. What are you thinking we’ll do with that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe we could raze it to the ground.”

Any other businessman would probably talk me out of it or discuss what could be built next. But Max was my brother first. He would put our brotherhood above business and money.

“What’s to prevent somebody from building something else there?” he asked.

I thought about that for a minute. “Maybe we could put in a park or a workout station like they have in Venice Beach.”

He nodded. “Your brain’s sharp this morning.”

I picked up my napkin and threw it at him. “My brain is always sharp.” Of course, I wasn’t sure how we would

monetize this idea, but Max wasn't worried about it, and it wasn't like we couldn't afford to have a piece of property that wasn't generating income.

It didn't make good business sense, but maybe it would provide goodwill toward my new hometown. If I were lucky, it would soften Kate's attitude toward me.

Max and I rode to the airport together, but he hopped on a plane heading to New York while I returned to Los Angeles. On the flight, I sketched out ideas for a new club, deciding that the Hollywood area might be the best place for it.

By the time I landed, my thoughts were all on Kate. I had to concede that Max was right that I'd have to work at earning Kate's trust, something I hadn't had to do before.

Coming from a wealthy, loving family, Max and I wanted for nothing. We had good looks and we weren't assholes, so generally, we could get what we wanted.

Max, of course, understood what it meant to doggedly work at something and overcome a challenge because he did it everyday dealing with his dyslexia.

Despite being twins, I didn't have that. For me, school had been a breeze. Even when I'd met Kate the first time, everything had been easy. We were supposed to have a one-night stand, but by the end of the weekend, I'd fallen for her.

After that, everything we did was easy. We were always on the same page with whatever it was we were deciding to do, whether it was ordering pizza and studying, or heading up the coast and renting an Airbnb and spending the weekend studying, and of course, making love.

Not that I'd never hit any obstacles or resistance in my life, because I had. But with a little effort, I generally overcame them. Kate was the first time I was failing over and over.

The trip to Las Vegas taught me that my future happiness was built around Kate, so I had to commit to experiencing

failure over and over again until hopefully, she would trust me again.

From the airport, I drove my car over to the Sea Siren. There was no time like the present to forge my future. I arrived late in the afternoon thinking that was a good time since the lunch crowd should be gone, but the after-work crowd wouldn't have arrived yet.

I opened the door, stepping in, scanning the open area. She was way over in the opposite corner, sitting with a man. I could see her face, but his back was to me. They both stood, and he pulled her into his arms, holding her, whispering something to her. They were too far away for me to make out who he was or even whether I knew him. That didn't matter. I didn't like what I was seeing.

He cupped her face, and they spoke for a moment before he leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

My heart sank. I was too late. It was one thing to try to win her back if she was single, but clearly, she wasn't. Or at the very least, she was entertaining a relationship with this man. I went back outside, shoving my sunglasses on as I strode to my car.

I headed home and immediately went to my liquor cabinet, pulling out the first bottle I could grab, then heading out to the terrace to drink. Getting drunk every time I experienced heartbreak wasn't a good habit to get into, but I wasn't going to stop myself now.

I lost all sense of time as I watched the sunset and drank what turned out to be whiskey. At first, all I could feel were pain and dejection. As my mind numbed and floated, memories of Kate came back to me. We'd been so happy. We could be again. I was so sure of it. I had to make her see that.

Whoever that man was today, he didn't love her like I did. If it took me the rest of my life, I would make her see how much I loved her. How I'd always loved her.

"I have to see her."

I moved to get up, intending to go to her, but instead of standing, I rolled out of the chaise chair, landing on my hands and knees. My bottle had tipped over, but luckily, I'd drunk enough that there wasn't very much left to spill out. I righted the bottle, seeing only a small bit left at the bottom.

That probably explained my inability to stand up. I sat on my ass, working to get my phone out of my pocket, which was no easy feat considering my hand couldn't find my pocket. Finally, I got it out and managed to open a ridesharing app and ordered a car.

See? I was responsible.

The app said he'd be here in fifteen minutes, which was probably what it would take me to get my ass off the ground, through the house, and out the front door. I had to take a break in the living room for a minute, but finally, I made it out the front door just as the car arrived.

I walked over to the back door and opened it.

"Hey, buddy. You can't bring that with you."

It took me a minute to process his words. Realizing he meant the whiskey bottle, I set it down in the driveway and got into the car.

The driver glanced at me through the rearview mirror. "Do you live here?"

"Yep." My world skewed a little sideways.

"Maybe you should go back home. You don't look fit to go anywhere."

I tried to wave his comment away. My hand felt heavy. "No, I'm all right."

"You can't even sit up straight."

No wonder the world felt like it was tilting. I righted myself. "I'm all right. I really need to see Kate."

The guy seemed uncertain, so I did everything I could to look sober. Finally, he started driving, and thirty minutes later, he pulled into Kate's condo community. I'd never been here

before, and for a moment, I worried I might not be able to find her unit.

Not wanting to be hassled by the driver, I found every bit of wit I could muster to get out of the car and stand without swaying or stumbling. I smiled and waved at him, letting him know everything was okay. He watched me for a moment and then drove off.

I took two steps and then had to use both hands on a car to keep from falling over. Thank God it didn't have a car alarm. As I studied the unit numbers, it became clear that Kate's place was upstairs. Just great.

It took me a while, but I made it up the steps to her unit. I leaned against the wall as I knocked on her door. I waited for what I thought was enough time and knocked again.

What if she wasn't home? Was she still at work? I lifted my hand to look at my watch, but I couldn't read the time. Maybe she was with that man. Maybe he was fucking her right now. I reached over and rapped on the door harder.

On the last knock, the door opened. "What the hell, Sam? It's nearly midnight."

She was wearing soft looking pink shorts with a white tank top. Her hair hung loose. I smiled as love filled my chest.

"You're so beautiful." I reached out my hand to touch her face, but I lost my balance, staggering into her.

"You're drunk." Her arm came around me as she kept me from falling. She pushed me up against the wall as she shut the door. "What's going on?"

"Do you remember the night we met?"

She kept her hand on my chest, and I was glad for it because I was pretty sure it was the only thing keeping me from sliding to the floor.

Her eyes narrowed. "Yes."

"I was getting ready to leave the party because I thought it was so lame. And then I saw you come out into the back yard. You were like a fucking angel. I know that we had only agreed

to have a hookup that night, but I swear to God, Kate, I fell for you the moment I saw you.”

“Did you drive here?”

“No. Joe drove me. Or was it Jack?” I shrugged. “I used an app.”

“Good. You could have killed yourself.”

I grinned like a loon. “Would you miss me if I died?”

“I’m gonna let that morbid question go because you’re drunk. Come on, let me put you to bed and you can sleep it off.” She hooked my arm around her shoulder and her other arm around my waist.

I was in heaven. She was close to me. I could inhale her scent, which was even more intoxicating than the whiskey. “I never wanted you to leave.”

“I’m not the one who left.”

“After that first weekend. I never wanted you to leave. I knew you were mine forever. That hasn’t changed, you know.” I rammed my shin into the coffee table. Deep down, I thought that it would probably hurt tomorrow. But right now, I wasn’t feeling anything but love for Kate.

“Well, then things changed.”

I shook my head, and the movement upended my balance. I staggered to the right.

“Sam.” She grabbed onto me, righting me. Finally, she got me into her bedroom, pushing me until I crashed on the bed like a tree falling in the forest.

“Nothing changed. You’re still mine for forever.”

She undid the laces of my tennis shoes and tugged them off. “If you feel that way, then why are you trying to put me out of business?”

I shook my head again, but this time, my stomach felt like it was in the middle of the ocean during a storm. My hands gripped the sheets to keep me from falling overboard, or worse, throwing up.

“I’m not going to do that. I’m going to Hollywood.”

“I suppose you have the looks to be a movie star.” She left the room.

Panic welled up in me. We needed to resolve this. I needed her to see that we belonged together. “Kate!”

She returned with a glass of water. “Here, take these and drink this.”

I couldn’t sit up on my own, so she helped me up, and I managed to get the pills in my mouth and the water down before collapsing back.

Darkness hovered around the edges of my mind. I fought it, but I was losing. “Tell me, Kate, what do I need to do for you to give me a second chance?” I never heard her answer because the darkness won.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kate

It was disconcerting to wake up to banging on the door in the middle of the night. When I looked through the peephole and saw it was Sam, I got angry. Why wouldn't he leave me alone? I wished I'd stayed at the club until closing instead of having to deal with him.

I nearly didn't answer the door, but I couldn't resist giving him a piece of my mind. But then he got this goofy smile and told me I was beautiful before falling into my arms. He was drunk. He was beyond drunk. It should've made me even more angry, but for some reason, it didn't.

Normally, I might have sent him on his way, but he was too drunk for me to trust that he could get back to his house safely, so I had no choice but to put him to bed and let him sleep it off. Unfortunately, the closest bed was mine.

I watched him for a moment as he slept. Or maybe he blacked out.

I reached out and pushed his blond hair off his forehead. "What are you doing, Sam?"

As we made the tumbling trip from my front door to the bedroom, he'd recounted the night we met, and my defenses weren't strong enough to keep the emotions away.

He told me before that it had always been him and me, but for some reason, tonight, drunk and earnest and desperate, I believed him. Or at least I wanted to. His words resonated with me. I felt the same. I yearned for what we'd had. I had loved

him from the beginning as well. At the end of that first weekend, I hadn't wanted to leave either.

But how could I get past the fact that he left me? The way he left me? In a matter of minutes, everything that we had planned was gone. How could I know he wouldn't do that again? Especially since I had no idea what happened between him and Sandra. Maybe I should have let him tell me, but I didn't want to know.

I remembered what Ethan told me about how Sam had been back months after he left, looking for me. Had things ended with Sandra back then? Or had his inability to find me meant that he'd gone back and created a life with her and her child?

Had he found me back then, would things be different now?

Would I have forgiven him then?

I looked down at him in misery. "Why are you making this so hard?"

I was tired and needed sleep. For a minute, I considered lying next to him. No. That wouldn't be smart. Not if I wanted to keep my heart safe.

Leaving him to sleep, I exited my bedroom and went to the living room. I grabbed a blanket from the back of the couch and then lay down, covering myself.

One thing was certain. If he kept this up, he'd eventually wear me down. Deep down, that was what I wanted, and yet the idea of it terrified me. Confused and uncertain about what to do, I fell asleep.

A clanking sound came from my kitchen. I startled awake in a panic. Someone was in my kitchen.

Then I remembered Sam showing up too drunk to walk. I looked over the back of the couch toward my bedroom. It was dark, but the moon shining through the bedroom window cast

enough light that I could see he wasn't in bed. I checked my watch. It was four in the morning.

I rose from the couch and went into the kitchen. Sam stood at the sink drinking a large glass of water as he looked out the kitchen window toward the ocean.

He must've heard me or sensed me, as his head turned. He gave me a sheepish smile. "I'm sorry about tonight."

I crossed my arms over my chest, hoping that it would steel my guard against the sexy man with a sheepish smile from breaking through. Even after a drinking night, he was delectable. He wore faded jeans that showed off his assets, both his ass and his dick. His T-shirt pulled across his broad chest.

"What happened?"

He leaned back against the counter. "I drank too much."

I laughed despite my desire to keep this serious. "No shit, Sherlock. Why? Did you and Max go out on a bender?" It occurred to me that I should've asked about Max.

"Max headed back to New York today."

"So, you celebrated by drinking yourself into a stupor?"

He sighed. "I just had a lot weighing on me." He looked so tired and sad. I wanted to go to him and comfort him.

That would be dangerous, so I put the wall back up. "You mean like building a bar to compete with me?"

"No. We're not doing that."

I arched a brow. "So, what are you doing?"

"I don't know."

I unhooked my arms without even knowing it. It was a sign that my resolve was waning. "You were pretty drunk when you showed up."

"Yeah, again, I'm sorry about that. "

It was shocking how sober he seemed considering how out of it he'd been just four hours ago. "Do you remember what

you said to me?”

His green eyes that had been glazed over when he arrived were clear, direct. “Every word. I meant all of them, Kate. But either I blacked out or you never answered that last question.”

On the off chance that he really didn’t remember what he’d said, I pretended not to know. “What question?”

“What do I have to do to get another chance?”

“What are you willing to do?” The words were out of my mouth before I could think better of them.

He straightened, leaning forward slightly, telling me my words had the impact I was afraid they had. They gave him hope.

“Anything. You name it, I’ll do it.”

“Will you roll around in honey and then go sit on a hill of fire ants?”

His lips twitched upward. “Do fire ants like honey?”

I didn’t know.

He stepped toward me, and while instinct had me wanting to step back, I didn’t move.

“Would you give all your money away to your mortal enemy?”

His smile widened, clearly amused by my comments. “In an instant.”

“Who is your mortal enemy, anyway?”

His smile faltered some. “Whoever the man was who had his hands on you today at the Sea Siren.”

My mouth dropped open. “You came by the club today?”

He nodded. “I wanted to see you. I got an eyeful.”

My laugh started as a snicker, but soon, I was laughing hard.

He arched a brow. “You find it funny when all of Sam’s hopes and dreams are crushed like a bug.” He said it with

humor, and yet I could hear an undercurrent of hurt.

“I was with Ethan. My brother.”

It took him a moment, but then realization dawned and he laughed too. “Well, maybe he isn’t my mortal enemy then.”

He stepped up to me, so close I could feel his warmth and also smell the stench of whiskey. “I mean it, Kate, whatever I have to do to prove myself. I will do it, and I will take as much time as you need. I won’t fail. I never fail.”

I rolled my eyes. “Your arrogance is showing.”

“There’s only one thing I’ve ever failed, Kate, and that’s you.”

There he went again. Using words that made my heart pump hard in my chest. Made me yearn for what we once had.

“You can trust me again. I will do anything, starting with promising that I will never, ever leave you again.”

His words wrapped around my heart and then seeped inside. It was too much.

I pressed my hand to his chest and gently nudged him back, needing space to think. “You smell like a distillery.”

He took my hand. “Let me take a shower, and then we can talk.”

I nodded, but it was less of an agreement to his plan and more needing a moment to catch my breath, to clean my brain of the fog he caused when he used his words and his nearness on me.

He left the kitchen, and a few moments later, I heard the shower running. I could picture him in there, the water sluicing over his broad chest and lower.

Desire rushed through me, crashing through all my defenses. It propelled me to the bathroom. Behind the glass, he stood, his hands running over his chest as he washed away the alcohol. Surrendering to my deepest desires, I tugged off my shorts and tank top and opened the glass door of the shower.

His head swiveled toward me, his eyes startled. He stepped back as I entered the shower.

“Are you okay?” I asked, his reaction making me second-guess what I was doing.

“Yes. I’m wondering whether I’m sleeping or maybe dead.”

I smiled as I wrapped my hand around his dick. “Does this feel like you’re sleeping or dead?”

He let out a growl as his arm banded around me. He tugged me close, his lips fusing to mine just like they had in his kitchen the other day. He maneuvered me until I was against the tiled wall, his body pressing into mine.

Yes. This was what I wanted. Erotic sensation over sensation. No emotions. Just lust.

His hands slid down my sides, stopping at my breasts. He kneaded them and then pinched my nipples. I whimpered when he stopped, but then his mouth replaced his hands. He licked and sucked my nipples until my pussy was quivering.

“Sam.” I lifted my leg to wrap it around his hip and pull him to me, needing to feel him inside me.

Instead, he drew his lips lower over my belly until he was on his knees, pushing my thighs open. “Give me your sweet pussy, Kate.” His tongue flicked over my clit. Electricity shot through me. My head fell back, hitting the hard tiled wall. My fingers threaded through his hair, holding him to my pussy.

God, he was incredibly talented with his mouth. My entire body lit up from the inside out. My hips rocked. My body hummed.

“Sam . . . oh, God . . .”

His tongue slid inside my pussy, lapping at the sensitive walls. I hit the limit, crying out as my orgasm blasted through me.

He rose, pressing me against the wall and kissing me hard. “Don’t you taste sweet?”

Once again, I sought his dick. Even though I'd just come, I wouldn't be done until he was inside me.

He stopped me. "Not here."

I looked up at him, not sure what he meant.

"I want you in a bed, Kate." He turned off the shower. Opening the door, he grabbed a towel, handing it to me before exiting to get another one.

I watched as he dragged the towel over his body. His dick was hard, bobbing in front of him. My mouth watered to suck it. I dropped to my knees and did just that.

"Holy fuck." He growled, his hand going to my head.

I sucked him hard and then soft. I lapped my tongue round the tip and then down the shaft.

He groaned. "Good Christ, you're good at that." He gripped my wrists and pulled me up.

"I'm not done . . . or actually, you're not done." I was nearly pouting. I wanted to rock his world.

He gave me a wicked grin. "You can do whatever you want to me, just in bed."

An unsettling feeling sat at the bottom of my stomach. I couldn't quite decide why except that he was demanding that we be in bed. My bed. There was an intimacy to that that I wasn't sure was wise.

Still grinning wolfishly, he walked backward out of the bathroom then falling back onto my bed. His dick stuck straight up.

"I'd like you to join me, but I can do this myself if necessary." He stroked his dick, and erotic electricity shot through me at the sight.

I came out of the bathroom and straddled his thighs. He brought his hands to my thighs.

"Don't stop because of me."

“You like watching me jerk off?” His hand wrapped around his dick again.

I nodded.

“You’re a dirty girl.” He continued to stroke. “You need to decide soon whether or not you want my cock inside you because he doesn’t have a lot of time left.”

I wanted to see Sam come, and yet I also wanted to feel him sliding inside me. My pussy won the battle. I pushed his hands away and rose over him. Our gazes held as I lowered down over him.

“Yes . . . fuck, so good, Kate.” His hands caressed my thighs.

It was good. As good as it had been before. Better than with any other man. It didn’t seem fair that the man who was my perfect mate physically would be one I couldn’t trust with my heart. I pushed all thoughts about our past away. I didn’t consider the future. I focused on now.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sam

I still wasn't sure whether I was dreaming. Or maybe I'd died and was in heaven. Whatever was happening, I wasn't going to question it or stop it. In fact, I planned to get my fill, which was why I brought her to bed. It hadn't been easy to resist holding her up against the shower's tiled wall and burying my cock deep inside her. But I wanted all night.

She was straddled over me, my cock completely swallowed by her pussy. She rocked over me, closing her eyes and letting her head drop back as she gave in to the sensations. She was like a wet dream come to life.

"You're so fucking sexy." I levered up, my hands sliding up her back and pulling her to me as I sucked her nipples.

She cried out, and her pussy quivered around my cock, making my eyes roll back in my head.

"Fuck, baby . . . I'm going to come." Not wanting to blast off without her, I slid my hand between our bodies and rubbed her clit.

Her body went taut, her pussy clenched hard around my dick, and I was gone. She took me soaring with her. Pleasure shot through my body. I fell back, my hands holding her hips as I bucked beneath, pumping every bit of my essence into her.

She collapsed over me, and even still, my cock continued to pulse. Wetness dripped onto my balls, and I realized that I hadn't worn a condom. Not this time, nor the time in her

office. She had gone on the pill not long after our relationship started five years ago. She must still be on it.

For a moment, I imagined her belly full with our child.

It wasn't a scary or unpleasant thought.

Of course, considering how she'd been feeling about me, it was unlikely that she'd be fucking me if there were a chance she'd get pregnant. I pushed the disappointment away. Winning her back would be a process. It appeared I was making headway as I'd been shocked when she entered the shower and grabbed my dick.

I was physically and emotionally spent, yet the happiest I'd been in a long time. Not since the last time Kate and I were together did I feel such contentment. Finally, she was mine again. I pulled her close, her head resting on my shoulder. I leaned down, kissing the top of her head. And just like that, I fell asleep.

I woke up dying of thirst and with a pounding headache. But then the night before with Kate in my arms came back to me, and I realized I'd never felt better.

I turned to reach for her, but her side of the bed was empty. The sun was up, so she must've gotten up to start the day. I sat up slowly as my stomach joined in the discomfort. I stretched my arms overhead and stood, taking in a deep breath. I headed to the bathroom to take care of business and then strode out of her bedroom, heading toward the kitchen, expecting to find her there. Maybe she'd made a pot of coffee.

As I walked past her couch, I saw her lying on it, still sleeping.

What the fuck? Why is she sleeping there? Had she been there all night?

She stirred, her eyes fluttering open. She flinched when she saw me, as if she'd forgotten I'd come over last night.

She sat up, arching a brow at me. "Is your brain so pickled that you forgot to put your clothes on?"

I frowned. “Was I snoring?”

Her head slightly tilted to the side as her brow furrowed. “No, I don’t think so. Why?”

“Then why are you sleeping on the couch?”

She let out a sigh and her expression turned wary. “I’m not ready for this. I don’t want this.”

She could’ve hit me in the chest with a sledgehammer and it still wouldn’t have blown my heart to bits as much as those words had. “Why?” What had last night been about?

She turned, setting her feet on the floor and running her fingers through her hair. “Can you go get dressed?”

“No. Why are you shutting me out?”

“I’m not going to talk to you until you get dressed.”

“Why? It’s not like you didn’t see all the good stuff last night.” I was trying really hard not to be an asshole, but my frustration and anger were starting to get the best of me.

She shot up from the couch and glared at me. “Because it’s distracting.”

I thought about shaking my hips to wag my dick at her, but that was the immature part of me thinking. If seeing me naked was distracting to her, I needed to use it to my advantage, not as a way to piss her off more.

I dropped my hands from my hips and took a few steps toward her. She held her hands up to block me and stepped away.

Irritation flared. “I asked you last night what I had to do to win you back.”

Her expression suggested that I was an idiot. “You think that fucking me is all I needed to change my mind and give you another chance?”

“What the hell, Kate? You’re the one who came into the shower and grabbed my dick after I told you I was willing to do anything. What the fuck was I supposed to think?”

She had the good grace to look chagrined. “That aspect of our relationship hasn’t changed.”

I gaped at her. “So all you want from me is to fuck?” I shook my head, not understanding this woman.

She let out a breath and then busied herself folding up the blanket she had slept with on the couch. “The sexual chemistry is still there, but in every other way, we are different. We’re not like we used to be.”

I nodded. “Yeah, so?” I realized too late that by agreeing with her, she was going to use it to keep me away. “Maybe we’ve grown up a little bit, but the emotions are still there. You can deny them all you want, Kate, but I don’t believe for a minute that you want me to fuck you just because you needed a good orgasm. You still feel something for me.”

“Yes!” Her hands fisted by her side. “I still feel hurt and betrayed by you.”

I felt her words like a slap. A slap I deserved for having hurt her five years ago. I needed to change tactics. “I’ll go get dressed, and then I’ll take you out to breakfast. We can start over.”

She shook her head, looking both sad and annoyed. “I don’t trust you.”

“So I’ll earn your trust.”

Her eyes were determined as she looked directly at me. “I don’t want to trust you ever again.”

“I asked you what I could do.”

“There isn’t anything.”

“Not even cover myself in honey and sit on a fire ant hill?” I tried for levity.

She didn’t find my words humorous. She just shook her head.

Maybe I was dense, but finally, it was sinking into my brain that my cause was hopeless. Just as I had thought before. A fool’s journey, I had said to Max.

“So, what was last night all about? You can’t ever trust me, but it’s okay if we have sex?” It didn’t make any sense. And I’d be a liar if I said it didn’t hurt like hell. I felt like she’d been toying with my emotions, making believe that we could recapture what we once had and then jerking it away from me. “Are you trying to punish me? Is that what last night was about?”

Her expression fell. She looked down. “No. Like I said, the physical attraction is still there, but the trust isn’t.”

“And I can’t earn that back?”

She shook her head, but there was something in her eyes that told me there was still something inside her that loved me, or at least was connected to me.

Maybe if I stopped asking for her heart and just agreed to give her what she was willing to take from me, even if it was only my body, I could build on that.

It wasn’t about wearing her resistance down, though. I genuinely wanted her to fall in love with me again. She was right that we were different.

We couldn’t go back and get what we had because I had blown it to smithereens. But maybe if I could prove to her that I wasn’t the same man I’d been then, she would fall in love with the man I was now. We could have a whole new relationship. I just had to figure out a way to stay in her orbit long enough for her to trust me and fall for me again.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kate

Sam wasn't making this easy. When I'd left his side last night, I had been determined that I wouldn't let myself fall for him again. I'd anticipated backlash this morning, and I even felt guilty because I knew that when I went to him and had sex with him, he'd read more into it.

To be honest, a part of me had been giving in to him. I wanted everything that we'd had before. But when the orgasms were over and reality returned, pushing through the fog of lust and desire, I was back to the fact that I had once loved this man with everything I had and he had walked away without looking back.

Oh, sure, he'd apparently come looking for me five years ago, but he'd given up easily. Between Sam's abandonment and my grandfather's disowning me, I'd become a new woman. A woman who wouldn't be duped ever again.

"Like I said. I'm not the woman I used to be. I don't need a man."

"It didn't seem that way last night when you rode me."

He was angry, and he had a right to be. I shouldn't have gone to him. I needed to work harder to keep my hormones under control.

"That was just sex."

He flinched. "So is that how all the men in your life are to you? It's only about sex? You don't actually feel anything for

any of them?”

“There are no men in my life, Sam, but even if there were, having a no strings attached sexual affair is common among men, isn’t it? Why can’t women have the same thing?”

His jaw tightened. “They can. But just like some women want more, some men do too.”

I really wished he’d stop pushing the fact that he wanted me back because it was so hard to resist the yearning to grab hold of him. *This was the guy who demolished your heart*, I kept chanting so that I wouldn’t give in.

“Does that mean you’ve never sowed your oats? Have you gone from Sandra back to me—”

His eyes hardened. “Sandra and me —”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Jesus, fuck, Kate.”

“Just answer the question, Sam. You only have relationships with women?”

His green eyes bore into me. “I haven’t been in a relationship since you. I’ve told you that. It’s always been you.”

His tone was angry in stark contrast to his words. I was glad for it because his words were very difficult to ignore. What woman could resist hearing they’re the one and only?

But it didn’t matter. What mattered was doing right by Sandra and Chelsea.

To keep my wall fully intact, I said, “Does that mean you’ve only had hookups since me? Does Sandra know she was just a hookup?”

He looked away for a moment. “If you’d hear me out about Sandra.”

“What for? It doesn’t change anything. And you’re avoiding the question.”

He glared at me. “Yes, I’ve fucked other women since you. But this thing between us, you and me, is not a hookup. Why can’t you see that?”

“I don’t trust you.” How many times did I have to tell him that? “I don’t trust anyone. Not anymore.”

His brow furrowed, his head jerking back. “You don’t trust anyone? What about your brother?”

I let out a ragged breath. “I trust him and Lucy. But even they have tested that.”

When I learned that Ethan and Lucy’s marriage wasn’t just on paper and that they were having a relationship, I was hurt. It was weird that my brother and best friend were fucking, but that wasn’t what bothered me. It was that they kept it from me. “But I’ve since forgiven them.”

“But you can’t forgive me?”

I gaped at him, wondering how he could be so dense. “You promised to love me forever and then walked out on me to marry Sandra and to be a happy family with her and your child.”

His hands went to his hips again as he looked down and shook his head. “That’s not what happened.”

Rage filled me. I wanted to pummel him, and I might have if he weren’t still naked. There was no way I was going to touch his bare chest, even if it was to punch him.

“You’re telling me that the day Sandra showed up and told you that you were a father, you didn’t tell me that you had to do the right thing and left me?”

His shoulders sank and his head dropped. “Yes, I did do that. It was the biggest mistake of my life. But what happened between me and Sandra—”

“What part of *I don’t want to know* don’t you understand? I don’t care what you did when you walked out on me. And while I’ll admit the sex is good, there won’t ever be any more than that between us.”

“So, that’s what you want? Fine. I’ll take it.”

I looked at him quizzically, not sure what he meant.

“Just sex. No strings. I get that you won’t ever trust me again. But let’s face it, the sex is good. So, let’s do that.”

I studied him, not believing that he was willing to settle for that. “That’s not what you want.”

He shrugged. “I want whatever you’ll give me. It’s not like it’s a hardship, having sex with you.”

I suppose his words were a compliment, but they didn’t feel like it. What I needed to say was no, but I couldn’t form the word. “Let me think about it.”

He nodded and headed to the bedroom. His absence made the room feel cold and lonely. I walked over to the bedroom doorway, watching as he got dressed.

His dark boxer briefs slid up his legs, hugging his ass and strong thighs. He pulled on his old, worn jeans that hugged his ass and didn’t hide how well-endowed he was. I watched the muscles of his shoulders and upper back as he slipped his arms through the sleeves of the shirt and tugged it down.

He was the epitome of a sexy man. My nipples puckered and my pussy clenched. I wanted to go to him, strip him, and have my way with him. But I didn’t. See, I could be strong.

He ran his fingers through his hair and then turned, stopping as he saw me.

Since his return, I’d seen Sam’s cocky expression, his annoyance and anger, and even his regret, but this was the first time I’ve seen pain so raw and real in his face.

I hated seeing him look so unhappy. I hated that I was the reason for it. *He hurt you first*, I reminded myself, even though it sounded like something an eight-year-old would say. Even so, it was true. I didn’t want to hurt him, but neither did I want to be in a position where he could hurt me again.

“I guess I’ll run. I’m sorry for showing up wasted last night.”

“It’s all right.” I gave him a small smile. “It turned out alright.” Inwardly, I rolled my eyes at the lameness of my

words.

He nodded and strode toward the bedroom door. I stepped back, giving him room to exit. I watched as he made his way to my front door.

I had the weirdest urge to stop him. “What about breakfast? Didn’t you say something about getting something to eat?”

He stopped and turned toward me. “I thought you said you didn’t want to date.”

I shrugged. “You’ve got to eat, I’ve gotta eat.”

His expression was uncertain, but finally, he nodded. “You have to drive, unless you want me to get a rideshare and we can go separately.”

At first, I thought he was being snarky, but upon studying his face, I saw he was trying to give me the space I needed.

“I’ll give you a ride.”

I quickly showered, trying not to remember Sam’s mouth on my pussy the last time I was in there, and then I dressed in long shorts and a sleeveless blouse so I could go from breakfast straight to work at the Sea Siren.

We got into my little all-electric car, Sam impressing me with his ability to fit his long, lean body into it. Then I drove us out of the condo complex and toward a nice little diner I knew of not far from work.

“How long have you lived here?” he asked as we drove.

“About a year, I guess. I opened the Sea Siren and bought the condo all around the same time.”

“What did you do before that?”

I glanced over at him, wondering whether he was just making small talk or if he was genuinely interested in knowing what had happened to me after he’d left me broken-hearted. It didn’t matter, because I didn’t want to tell him my sob story about how he had left and my grandfather had disowned me, leaving me destitute. Fortunately, I was a scrapper, and while I

had Ethan as backup, I did my damndest to make it on my own without anyone's help. That was what Sam and my grandfather had taught me. The only one I could truly trust was myself.

"Not much," I answered.

I pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant. The conversation ceased until we were seated and had ordered breakfast.

When I first met Sam, conversation was easy. Everything with Sam had been easy back then. Today, that wasn't the case. The sex was easy, but sitting across from him in the restaurant, I didn't know what to say that wasn't snarky, reminding him of how much he had hurt me. I wasn't going to forgive him, but that didn't mean I had to harp on it all the time.

"So, you and your brother opened some clubs?" I asked lamely.

He nodded. "Yes, we have three now. We have plans for one here and one in Las Vegas."

I nodded. "That had been your plan in college. I remember you had this really obscure major in techno business or something."

He laughed. "Arts, Technology, and the Business of Innovation. Plus, a regular business degree, and don't forget I got a food industry certificate." His humor lightened the atmosphere, and I was glad for it.

"Oh, yes, we can't forget the certificate. Where would you be today without it?"

"I'd probably still be bartending at my Aunt Bri's club." He poured cream into his coffee and then took a sip.

"So is that where you learned to flair bartend?"

"Max and I used it there, but we learned it at our aunt's brother's club. Devin Roarke."

My brow furrowed. "You're related to Devin Roarke? That's the Roarke family that owns the restaurants and clubs

all around the world, right?”

He nodded. “Yes, my uncle Daniel, my dad’s brother, married Devin’s sister.”

I sat back and studied him. “Is that a situation in which a rich family arranges a marriage between two prominent families?”

He laughed. “I suppose it looks that way, but no. The way my dad tells it, my Uncle Daniel and Devin had been best friends, but then my Aunt Bri needed help to open her own club because her father wasn’t supportive of her like he was to Devin. While working together, one thing led to another.”

“So, your uncle got together with his best friend’s sister?”

He grinned. “I know it sounds like a romance novel, doesn’t it?”

I shrugged. After all, my brother got together with my best friend. “And what about your Uncle Devin? Was he angry?”

“I think he was miffed at first, but he got over it. His wife, Serena, has also been a big help to me and Max. She got her start in event planning.” He looked down and laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Well, this is going to sound like a soap opera, but apparently, Devin and Serena’s story is sort of like my dad and my mom’s story. They had this epic love affair that tragically ended. In both their cases, a parent didn’t want them together. That was all about a prominent snobby family. Anyway, years later, they were thrust back together—”

“Let me guess. They lived happily ever after.” I shifted in my seat, feeling uncomfortable with the story. Was he telling it as a way to show that we could fix things between us and have our happily ever after? We couldn’t. What broke us apart wasn’t a snobby family member. Sam had made his choice.

He shrugged. “Well, yeah, but they both had kids when they reunited. Devin and my dad had no clue that they were fathers. I met my dad when I was five.”

I remembered hearing that about his family not long after we had gotten together. He'd recently shared the memory again the other day when he tried to explain why he had to leave with Sandra. In his father's scenario, Sam and Sandra should be having a happily ever after. I wondered why they weren't. No, I didn't. I didn't want to know anything about them.

He looked down, giving his head a quick shake, making me think he was thinking about what he did by leaving five years ago. He lifted his gaze to me, and for a minute, I thought he was going to try to tell me about Sandra again.

Luckily, our food came. The waitress set a large stack of pancakes, along with eggs and bacon, in front of Sam. I ordered an omelet with hash browns.

When our waitress left, Sam looked at me with such earnestness. "Do you think I'm too old for pancakes?"

The unexpectedness of it had me laughing. "I don't think anyone's ever too old for pancakes."

He grinned. "Right?"

As we ate our breakfast, we talked about starting our respective clubs. It wasn't just a safe topic of discussion. It was one we were both enthusiastic about.

By the time our breakfast finished, and we each paid for our own meal because it wasn't a date, I began to think that while Sam and I could never have what we had before, maybe we could be civil. Maybe even friends. Friends with benefits.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sam

I wasn't sure I had done the right thing by suggesting that Kate and I have a sexual affair. For one, she might've been offended, which thankfully, she hadn't been.

But also, by agreeing to a friends with benefits situation, I was setting myself up for constant heartache. I loved this woman. To be around her and know that she felt such disdain toward me even as she was attracted to me wasn't easy.

Unrequited love truly was a bitch. A stronger man might've walked away, but I wanted whatever she would give me, no matter how pathetic that sounded.

And deep down, I supposed I hoped that over time, if I didn't fuck things up, she'd forgive me.

Breakfast had turned out better than I thought it would, but we each stayed away from hot topics. Instead, we talked about mutual experiences and interests, which was mostly around running a club.

After breakfast, she headed to work while I ordered a rideshare to take me home. She hadn't given me an answer about whether or not she was interested in a sexual affair, and I didn't push it.

When I arrived home, I went to my office and contacted the realtor about checking new commercial listings in the Hollywood area. Then I changed into shorts and a different T-shirt and headed down to the beach. My brain still hadn't reattached to my skull after my bender last night, so a run was

out of the question. But fresh air and a walk were definitely called for.

When I hit the beach, I turned, walking north until I reached the end where a large rock cliff loomed. I turned around and headed back. As I got close to my house, I saw Harper sitting on the beach holding the baby while Noel was in the water with their toddler son.

Harper waved at me. “Hey, neighbor. Why don’t you come join us?”

“I don’t want to intrude on your family fun.”

“Nonsense. Come keep me company. I want to know if you’ve used that tub with the view of the ocean yet.”

I arched a brow, thinking that was a personal question. It’s the type of thing Kate might ask. But then again, Harper and Kate had a lot of similar qualities.

Not wanting to seem unneighborly, I went over and sat my ass in the sand next to her.

“Not yet.”

She slanted her gaze to me. “Not even with Kate?”

“No.” I shook my head and laughed. “Kate is probably the last person who’ll get into that tub with me.”

Harper sighed as she turned her gaze to the ocean. “Kate is a pretty tough nut to crack, although I can hardly blame her.”

“I know. I fucked up—” I pursed my lips together, realizing that I was swearing in front of a baby. “I know that I messed up. I don’t need to be reminded of it.”

“Yeah, you did. But you’re not the only one. Kate has had some challenges in life. Being so tough is how she got through them.”

My brow furrowed as I looked at Harper in question. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I shouldn’t really be telling you her business.”

I nodded. I knew women, especially someone like Kate, wouldn't like people talking about them. But if something else had happened, something else I needed to consider in my effort to win her back, I needed to know.

The fact that Harper mentioned it suggested that she wanted me to know, but her hesitation in sharing probably meant she wasn't sure whether I was worthy.

"I'm not building a club near her," I said, hoping that Harper would see that I didn't want to hurt Kate.

"That's a good thing if you want to have any chance with her." She hesitated again. "I don't really know the details because I didn't know Kate back then. Of course, I knew about her family, as all rich families know about other rich families."

I nodded because that was true.

"She and I didn't become friends until a year or two ago, so most of this, I heard from Lucy, Ethan's wife. It goes without saying that Kate can't know that I'm telling you this. It probably shouldn't get back that Lucy told me."

"I won't say a word."

She turned her attention back to the ocean, and when she didn't speak, I thought she was changing her mind.

The baby stretched and then settled back into sleep. Harper smiled at her child, and I had a moment to envy her. If I had played my cards right, maybe Kate and I would have had a kid or two by now.

Harper looked at me. "After you left, or maybe around the time you left, I'm not sure of the timing, but sometime not long after she graduated from college, her grandfather cut her out of the family."

"Cut her out?" I tried to think back to what Kate had told me about her family when we'd been together. She'd always been close to her brother, but she had shared that her grandfather wasn't warm or loving.

Before I had asked her to come back to New York and marry me, she had hoped that she would get a job in the family

company, so the relationship couldn't have been completely bad, could it?

“He was somehow able to gain control of her trust fund. So, when he disowned her, she had nothing.”

What the fuck? “What about Ethan?”

“Ethan was in line to take over the company, but his grandfather pitted him and a cousin against each other to earn it.”

“But Ethan still had money. He could help her.” *Jesus fuck, tell me someone helped her.* Not that she wasn't capable of taking care of herself, but she had to feel abandoned and alone.

Harper rolled her eyes. “Do you think Kate would accept handouts, even from her brother?”

She had a point. Kate was fiercely proud and independent. Even more so now. I suppose this explained why.

“Not that Ethan didn't funnel money her way. Lucy said he opened an account for her and would put money into it, but Kate very rarely used it.”

“So how did she make her living?” She'd told me she opened the Sea Siren last year. What did she do before that?

“She worked at the bar that you just bought, schlepping beers. That's where she and Lucy met.”

My jaw dropped. “She was a server in that shithole?”

Harper smirked at me. “That's your shithole, now. And I hope you're not passing judgment on her for working there? She had to live, after all.”

I shook my head. “I'm not passing judgment.” At least not on her.

I was pissed at Kate's grandfather for being so heartless. But I knew that I was equally to blame for her circumstances and her mistrust of anyone other than her brother and his wife.

In fact, I was more to blame. Had I stayed with her, brought her to New York, and married her like we planned, none of what her grandfather had done would have mattered.

Although I'd always known that Kate's resistance to me had to do with the terrible choice I made five years ago, her grandfather's actions compounded it. I had my work cut out for me if she were ever going to trust me again.

I'd had bouts of doubt in the past about whether I could win her back, but this time, that doubt was even bigger. I had much more working against me than I'd known.

"I can see why she doesn't trust anyone," I said.

"She trusts Ethan and Lucy even though they lied about their relationship. I think she sort of trusts her friends—me, Anne, Lane, and Bridget—but she's still a bit guarded with us."

She had forgiven Ethan and Lucy for lying, so maybe there was hope for me. Granted, my infraction was so much larger and I wasn't related to her like Ethan was. Still, she was capable of forgiveness.

"You know, it would be nice if there were someone who could break through Kate's tough exterior and help her learn to trust again. It would take a very special person to do that."

"I'm special." I suppose it was a dumb thing to say, considering what I had done to Kate, but I knew I could be that man. I had to be that man.

"Are you?" Harper slanted her gaze at me again, pursing her lips, suggesting she didn't think I was. "So far, I see a rich, entitled man who's whining because the woman he wants won't take him back despite the fact that he left her for another woman."

My teeth ground. "It wasn't like that. I didn't love Sandra." I didn't want to go into details about the choice I'd made.

"But the result is the same, isn't it? You promised to love her forever and then left her to go make a life with someone else. I can see that you want to win her back. I imagine the first time around, your relationship was easy. This time, you're going to have to earn it."

I looked down at the sand. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t know. I need to earn her trust back. I just don’t know how to do it.”

I was heartened by the fact that Kate and I had a nice breakfast. We chatted like friends. But her being friendly to me didn’t mean she was growing to trust me.

Hell, even if she said she was open to a sexual relationship, that didn’t mean she was opening herself up to the possibility of a future with me. Her heart was locked up tight like Fort Knox. How was I going to break through that?

Harper shrugged. “Unfortunately, I don’t have any suggestions for you.”

I wondered if Ethan might be willing to give me a few tips. The fact that he hadn’t kicked my ass, and in fact, didn’t dissuade me from pursuing Kate, must mean that he wanted her to find love too. Would he help me?

I dismissed that idea as soon as it formulated. Maybe he wasn’t going to stand in my way, but I doubted that he’d help.

Later that night, I was pondering the situation as I lay in bed. It was interesting to me that both Harper and my brother suggested that my life had come easily to me, so easily that I expected everything to fall into my lap. I had to concede that it was partly true, but not because I was entitled. At least, I didn’t think I was.

Max was right. For most of my life, things did come easily. Even the first time with Kate, a relationship had come together easily. Did that mean I didn’t know how to work through a challenge?

No. I didn’t believe that. I was ready, willing, and able to work for Kate.

The problem was I didn’t know what to do. It wasn’t like running across an issue with a club project. When something went wrong there, we determined what happened and then fixed it. Mold in the drywall? We hired a professional to remove it and then made sure there was no mold anywhere else. If the mold was from water, we hired another

professional to make sure the area would stay dry. Short of a couples' therapist, I didn't know who I could hire to help me fix what I had broken with Kate.

Sleep washed over me before an answer arrived. Instead, I was transported back five years ago as Kate and I were packing up the condo and getting ready to head back to New York. I was so fucking excited because my life was all planned out.

Max and I would finally pursue our dream of becoming club owners. I was going to marry the woman of my dreams. And we were going to be back in New York where I could be close to my family.

"Do you suppose I will still need these? There's no beach in Manhattan, and I understand the winters are really cold." Kate held up a cherry red bikini bathing suit. Like always, my dick immediately went full tilt.

When we had first gotten together, I had wondered how long she would have that effect on me. Surely, the novelty of her sexy body would wear off. But it hadn't. The more I'd fallen in love with her, the more my body responded to her.

"You don't need a beach to wear that as long as you only wear it for me."

She gave me a sexy smile. "That's why I have lingerie. That's for you."

In an instant, the need to pack dissipated, replaced with the need to hold and touch her, to bury myself inside her. I reached over, tugging her close.

My hands slid under her T-shirt. "Speaking of lingerie. What do you have on under here?"

She lifted her arms overhead, allowing me to pull the T-shirt off. Underneath, she wore a pretty blush-colored lacy bra. Already, her nipples were poking at the delicate fabric. I bent over, sucking one into my mouth and running my tongue over the lace-covered nipple.

"Are you nervous?"

Her words stopped me. I straightened and looked into her soulful dark eyes. “Nervous about what?”

She shrugged and looked away. I put my finger under her chin to bring her attention back to me. “What are you nervous about? Are you having second thoughts about me?”

“No.” She threw her arms around me. “No. I know you’re the one for me.” Her words wrapped around my heart, filling my chest with love.

“It’s just that I haven’t met your family, and here you are bringing me home as your fiancée. What if they don’t like me?”

I lifted her up and laid her on the bed and covered my body over hers, lifting her arms over her head, my hands holding hers. “My family’s going to love you like I do. My parents are the sweetest, kindest, most generous people you’ll probably ever meet. They’re able to see good in everyone, and their hearts are huge. They forgive anyone for anything.”

I startled awake as the memory of those words drifted through my dream. How true those words would become only a week later when I’d come home, not with the woman I wanted to spend my life with, but with another woman who told me I’d fathered her child.

That choice was the origin of my discontentment in life. It was why I couldn’t have the woman I loved.

If only there were a way to go back in time and make a different choice, my life would be so different. But no one had yet invented a time machine, so I was stuck living with my regret.

Still, with the fact that Ethan wasn’t standing in my way, and Harper was seemingly encouraging me, I had to believe that they were hoping I could get through to Kate. That maybe, through my love, I could unseal the lock she kept on her heart, and we could find our happily ever after at last.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kate

After the night and having breakfast with Sam, I was distracted most the day at work as I contemplated whether or not to take him up on his offer of having a sexual relationship. There was no doubt that I wanted to. I missed physical intimacy, and no one was better at it than Sam.

By the end of the day, I ached with wanting him. When I got home from work, I contemplated calling him, but I still wasn't sure whether agreeing to his terms was a good idea. Just like I had said to him, I believed women could be like men and have a no strings attached affair.

But the reality was that with Sam, it wouldn't be without strings.

No matter how hard I tried to snip them, there was at least one thread that still tethered my heart to his. It was so frustrating to have feelings for a man who'd hurt me so deeply.

I wished I could hate him. I was angry and hurt but had never been able to come to hate him for what he did. I suppose it was because I understood the difficult situation that he'd been put in.

His brother Max wanted me to give him brownie points for making an honorable choice for the child.

I wasn't going to give him any awards for choosing to leave me, but I suppose knowing that it wasn't the choice he wanted to make was enough to keep me from hating him.

And by not hating him, a part of me was able to still love him. If I agreed to a sexual affair, how would I prevent my heart from opening up to him?

With all that swirling around in my brain, I decided not to call him. I couldn't trust myself not to throw myself at him.

The next day, I went through my routine as usual, getting up, showering, dressing, and then heading down to the Sea Siren.

On the drive to work, I passed the old seedy bar I'd once served at. Normally, when I drove past, I was filled with the feeling of pride that I'd gotten out of there and that I had a better place. I liked to think I was the one who put them out of business.

But on this morning, a couple of trucks with *Manion-Clarke* printed on their sides were parked in front.

I slowed down to see what was going on. Sam's uncle Zach was standing outside the building, along with his partner, Troy. The two of them were studying the building, with Zach pointing up toward something along the roof.

"You've got to be kidding me." I slammed my hand on the steering wheel as I continued past the building toward the Sea Siren.

Sam lied to me. I shook my head in disgust with myself. I should have known he wasn't being honest when he said he didn't know what he planned to do with the property. How could I have let him get to me like that? He told me he wasn't building a club there, yet the fact that his uncle's construction company was parked in front looking like they were plotting their project was proof that Sam was lying.

Maybe he was lying about it all. Maybe he was just softening me up so I wouldn't stand in his way. Or maybe he wanted to fuck me and then leave me again.

I was seething by the time I arrived at work, so I hid myself away in my office until the lunch crowd arrived and my girls showed up, Lucy, Lane, Anne, Bridget, and even

Harper, who was the only one who'd brought her baby with her.

"I know these are supposed to be kid-free lunches, but I'm still nursing and . . ."

All my friends shook their heads.

"We've been there and done that. Besides, we want to see little Noelle," Bridget said.

I escorted them out to their usual table, dragging over an extra umbrella to make sure Harper and Noelle would stay in the shade.

"Let me go tell my staff you're here, and then I'll join you." Making sure everything was going smoothly in the kitchen, as well as at the bar and with my servers, I returned to my friends.

When I arrived at the table and took a seat, whatever conversation they were having ceased. In my experience, that was a sure sign that they'd been talking about me.

I arched a brow. "What are you guys saying about me?"

They all shrugged and looked away, either at their menus, out at the beach, or in Harper's case, down at the baby.

"Dane and I are planning to have a friendsgiving party next week," Bridget finally said.

Friendsgiving? Were we that close to Thanksgiving already? I guess we were since it was about two weeks away. God, had it only been two weeks since Halloween? It was about a month since Sam had walked back into my life. It seemed like forever

"Of course, I want you to come, but Zach is going to invite his nephew, and I wasn't sure whether you would come," Bridget finished.

I shook my head "No. I won't come." I cursed Sam for getting in the way of my social life.

Most of the ladies gave me a sympathetic look, except for Harper. Her eyes narrowed sharply. It reminded me that she

had been sympathetic to Sam's cause the day he had given us a tour of his house.

"Sam Clarke is a liar."

"What did he lie about?" Lucy asked as she squeezed the lemon into her glass of water Dana brought out.

"He told me he wasn't going to build a club up the street from me after all. But today, when I drove by it, his uncle and Troy were in front, looking at it like they were getting ready to start the renovation."

Bridget tilted her head. "If you want, I can call my dad and ask him."

I'd forgotten for a moment that Troy was Bridget's father. I was glad I didn't say anything disparaging about him. "What other reason would they be there except to start work on the club?"

Harper fiddled with her silverware. "I saw Sam yesterday. He's got it bad for you."

I looked at her and gaped. "I thought you were my friend."

She turned her sharp stare on me again. "I am your friend. That's why I'm telling you this. I know that he hurt you in the past. And I know that it makes you resistant to him. But it also means that you interpret everything he does through the lens of *he's an asshole*. And I don't think he is."

"Then you have a relationship with him." I looked around the table, hoping one of my other friends would come to my aid. But all of them had found the loves of their lives, so they couldn't help but view the world through the lens of romance and love.

"It's like that movie, *You've Got Mail*. You know, where Tom Hanks's character puts Meg Ryan's bookstore out of business," Anne said.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not going out of business and then falling for him."

Anne shook her head. "No, of course not. I didn't mean that."

“You know what? It doesn’t matter. I know what I’ve got here at the Sea Siren. He’ll be sorry that he decided to put his club up near me.”

“I have no doubt that you can beat him at his game, but you make your life harder by getting all pissed off and ranting instead of just going and asking him,” Harper said, shifting baby Noelle from one side to the other in her arms.

All of the other women continued to look at me in sympathy as they nodded in agreement.

“So he can lie to me again?”

“You don’t know that he lied. Maybe you’ll find out what’s really going on.”

Lucy reached out and put her hand on my forearm. “I feel like I’ve been a terrible friend, not realizing how much Sam’s return was impacting you.”

I rolled my shoulders. “It’s no big deal.”

“You can talk to us.” Lucy squeezed my arm. I knew it was supposed to be comforting, but it was annoying.

I glared at all of them. “So you can tell me that I’m overreacting?”

“It’s not that you’re overreacting,” Harper said. “It’s that with everything he does, you’re assuming the worst. You’re not the type of woman who stew. I don’t know why you just don’t go and ask him.”

“Ask me what?”

My gaze shot to the side where Sam strolled up to our table.

“Oh, my, he is handsome.” I heard Anne say.

I shot her a look and then turned back to Sam. “What are you doing here?”

“I came by because I had something to talk to you about. I see that I’m interrupting your lunch, though, so I can come back later.”

I was going to agree, but then Harper's elbow jammed me in the ribs.

Reluctantly, I stood. "Good, because I have something I need to talk to you about too."

He flashed me a sexy grin. "I wonder if it's about the same thing?"

I scowled at him, determining that he'd come by to ask for my decision about having a sexual affair. "I doubt it."

I led him back into the Sea Siren and to my office.

When the door behind us shut, I whirled on him.

He held his hands up in surrender. "Maybe you should go first since clearly, you're pissed."

I hated that he was making light of the situation. "You told me you weren't building a club up the street, and yet I drove by this morning and your uncle was out front looking like he was preparing to start renovations."

He laughed, and I wanted to slap him.

"It's not funny. Sam, you lied to me. That's all you do is lie to me. God, you were probably lying to me five years ago too."

The affable expression dropped from his face, turning it dark and hard. "Don't you ever question my love for you, back then or now."

I jerked back, not at the vehemence of his words but in his saying that he loved me now. How was that possible? And why did my heart do a loop in my chest at the idea?

He looked away for a moment, his jaw tightening. He took in a breath before looking back at me. "I called them this morning about demolishing the place. But you don't just go in and knock a building down. They have to figure out what could be in there that's dangerous. What needs to be removed first. They need to study the structure to figure out the best way to bring it down safely. And before you accuse me of planning to build something in its place, you're damn right

something is going to go in there, but it's not going to be a club. Next question."

Crap. I hated that Harper was right. I hated that I looked like such a bitch. I scraped my hands over my face and leaned back against my desk.

A long moment later, he stepped closer to me, and I could feel that the tension in him had dissipated. "I wish there were a way that you didn't have to always think the worst of me." His tone was soft and sincere.

"I can't help it," I admitted.

He filled the gap between us, his hands going to my arms and rubbing gently. "I know." His hands slid up to my shoulders and gently rubbed. "You're tense."

"Yeah, well." It felt like the story of my life. I suppose I'd always been an intense person, even as a kid. But I became more so over the last five years.

He leaned forward, his lips brushing along my ear. "You know, I could help with that."

I closed my eyes as a rush of erotic sensation sped straight to the area between my thighs. I should push him away, but I didn't have the strength. I'd gone from a thousand on the pissed off scale to below zero.

"You think an orgasm is going to cure what ails me?" I asked.

He moved his head, bringing his face right in front of mine. "I hear it's really helpful in easing tension. Couldn't hurt."

I arched a brow at him. "Here? Now?"

He gave me a sexy smile. "Why not? You're tense here and now." His hands slid up my sides, stopping just outside my breasts. His thumbs brushed over my nipples, which were already hard and aching.

"I haven't decided whether I want to do this."

Immediately, his hands stopped. He pulled them away and took a small step back. "Sorry."

I looked at him, and for the first time since he'd come back into my life, I saw the man I knew five years ago. I don't know why that at that moment that I could look at him that way. Was it the immediate respect he showed me by stopping touching me the minute I said I wasn't sure I wanted it? Was it the way he kept coming around even though I kept pushing him away?

No. It was his eyes. His sage green eyes watched me intently. When I looked into them, really looked deep into them without my immediate bias against him, I could see the truth of everything he'd been telling me.

You saw this five years ago, and he still walked away.

It was true. It was the reason I couldn't fully forgive him. But at this moment, I wanted to feel the way I had felt with him five years ago. I wanted to feel his love, his touch.

It wouldn't change anything, I promised myself as I reached forward, gripping his shirt and tugging him to me.

"Does this mean you've decided?" he asked as his lips hovered a whisper away from mine.

"Kiss me before I change my mind."

His lips fused against mine, sending me spiraling. I gave myself completely over to him. I'd regret it later, but right now, I wanted this. Him.

His mouth devoured mine as his hands went to my shorts, unbuttoning them. In seconds, my shorts and panties were on the floor, and so was Sam, with his lips now doing the most marvelous things to my pussy.

"Oh, God, Sam." I gripped his head, holding him to me. "Don't stop. Don't ever stop." I tried to tell myself that the hold Sam had on me was physical. That it was his expertise with his mouth and tongue, the size of his dick and how well he used it. Deep in the recesses of my mind, though, I knew I was losing the battle at keeping him out of my heart.

“Yes, oh, God . . . right there.” I could barely breathe as I hovered on the edge of orgasm. My hips rocked against his mouth. He flicked his tongue through my pussy as his thumb pressed on my clit, shooting me to the stratosphere. I cried out. Later, I’d have to figure out whether the entire place had heard me.

He lapped at my pussy a few more times as I came down. Then he rose, and I had to grip his forearms as I worked to catch my breath.

“All better?” he asked.

My hands went to his belt, tugging to undo it. He gripped my wrists and pulled them up to his chest. “How are you feeling now?”

I gazed up at him, not understanding why he wasn’t shoving his pants down and taking care of the erection tenting his slacks.

“Is something wrong?”

He smiled. “Only if you’re not okay.”

“Don’t you want to take care of that?”

He shook his head. “No. It’s not actually why I came here.”

He lifted my hands to his lips, kissing one and then the other, and my heart completely betrayed me by swooning.

Annoyed by that, I snapped at him. “Then why are you here?”

He sighed but didn’t move away. “I was invited to a Thanksgiving party by a friend of my Uncle. I wanted to see if you would go with me.”

That had to be the Friendsgiving party.

“I know you said no dating, but I thought we could go as friends. You could be my plus one.”

“Why do you need a plus one?” I wasn’t planning on bringing a date, although I’d already said I wouldn’t go if Sam

went. Then again, the reason for my not going wasn't a factor anymore.

He gave me a lopsided smile. "In my experience, showing up single to a party filled with couples usually ends in my being set up on blind dates. Sometimes, the blind dates show up at the party."

I wondered how often that had happened to him. *What did Sandra think of that?* God. I shook my head, not wanting to think of Sandra.

"And you don't want that?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"I'm sure there's plenty of other women who would be happy to be your plus one." Although the idea of his being with another woman did not sit well with me. Ugh! Jealousy didn't bode well for my plans to keep him emotionally away from me.

He released my hands, stepping away and adjusting his dick.

I was about to offer to take care of it for him when he said, "I know you don't want to hear this, Kate, but I don't want another plus one. I don't want another woman." He watched me for a moment as I stared at him, not sure what to say but doing all I could do to keep from launching off my desk and throwing myself into his arms.

Finally, he said, "Let me know." Then he turned and left my office.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sam

I think I was able to escape the Sea Siren without anyone noticing that my dick was so hard the tip was nearly sticking out of the waistband of my slacks. Except for Kate, of course. I hadn't gone there to give her an orgasm, but I couldn't deny that I was pleased with the way things had gone. I was making headway. Of course, I had thought this before, so I tempered my enthusiasm.

I hadn't gotten an answer to whether she'd go to the Thanksgiving party, but even if she said no to being my plus one, I figured she'd go because she was friends with so many of the people who would be there.

"Teeny, tiny step forward, Sam," I said to myself as I shifted in the front seat of my car, waiting for my erection to go down so I could put my seatbelt on.

I replayed our encounter in my mind. I had figured she'd be wary at seeing me, but she had been pissed. When she accused me of lying to her about the property up the street, my initial instinct was to give up. It was clear that everything I did, or that she thought I did, was viewed with suspicion.

But then I remembered what Harper had told me about what happened to Kate after I left. She had good reason to be skeptical of me based solely on the way I had abandoned her five years ago.

But with what her grandfather did was added on top of that, it made sense why she was so hard and closed off. I

needed to be patient and to continue to show her that I wasn't the man she thought I was.

One thing was for sure. She might not be ready to let me in again, but she did enjoy having me touch her. I wanted so much more, but for now, that would do.

Thinking about the way she had grabbed my shirt and tugged me to her had my slowly deflating dick rising again. I considered going back inside and asking her to take care of it, but I didn't.

I had given her something she needed without taking anything in return. It was a small thing, but maybe it would be the start of her recognizing that I wanted more than sex from her.

She knew that, of course, because I told her so. But she needed more than my words. She needed to see and experience my feelings for her.

When I was able to put my seatbelt on without strangling my dick, I left the Sea Siren and headed over to the Hollywood area, where the realtor was going to show me a possible property for our new club.

Later that night, I was doing my usual ruminating over Kate while I lay in bed. After the dream last night and having talked to Harper, I realized that while Kate and I had fallen in love five years ago, we hadn't spent any time with each other's family, nor did we know of each other's past.

As often happens when you're twenty-one years old, we lived life in the moment, not considering the past. If she and I were going to reconnect for forever this time, we needed to know everything about each other.

That meant I needed to tell her about Sandra and Chelsea, which could be a problem since she didn't want to know.

So many times, I'd nearly blurted it all out because she needed to know. But she was always so quick to stop me. So maybe starting with the topic of Sandra and Chelsea was a bad idea. I needed to start with benign topics and then work my way to the harder one about Sandra and Chelsea.

“No time like the present.” I reached over to the bedside table and picked up my phone. Only after I dialed and the phone rang did I realize how late it was and wonder if maybe she was asleep. Or maybe she was still working at the Sea Siren.

“Hello?” The hollowed out sound around her told me she was in her car.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to catch you in your car.”

“It’s okay. I’m hands-free. Is something wrong?”

It said something about a relationship, or the lack thereof, that she assumed my calling meant something was wrong.

“Nothing’s wrong. I just thought I’d call.”

She was quiet on the other end for a moment. I could picture her sighing, maybe even rolling her eyes. At the very least, she’d have a wary expression. This was why we needed to get to know each other better.

“I saw a building in Hollywood that might work for our club. I’m just not sure. I have questions about the parking and . . . I don’t know . . . the location might be too hoity-toity for us.”

She let out a laugh. “Too hoity-toity for the Clarke Brothers? Is that area reserved for royalty or something?”

My lips twitched upward, glad that she was joining in the conversation.

“Maybe hoity-toity isn’t the right description. We’ve decided we want to create something with a noir and prohibition vibe. I just don’t think it would fit right there.”

She asked me about the location, and while she didn’t necessarily agree with my opinion, she accepted my thoughts about it. She told me about other areas in and around Hollywood and Beverly Hills that might work.

It reminded me of our morning at breakfast. Clearly, talking about business was safe, but we needed to go deeper.

“I’ll ask the realtor about it.”

“Your brother doesn’t need to be here to see the locations with you?” she asked.

“He trusts me. Ever since I took his fourth grade English exam, he’s been mostly deferential to me.”

“You did what?”

“I took his English exam. I’m not sure if you noticed, but we’re twins. Back then, we looked more alike than we do now. Most people couldn’t tell us apart.” I slipped my arm under my head and settled in. This was good. Kate and I were talking like regular people.

“You would trade places?”

“Sometimes. Usually, we did it because we thought it was hilarious to confuse people.”

“But you took his test?”

“Max has dyslexia, so that made reading and English really hard for him. He worked hard in school, but sometimes, he was stressed. In this case, he was afraid if he failed, he wouldn’t be allowed to go to the fifth grade.”

“Poor guy. So you took the test for him.”

“Yep.” I’d never told anyone that story. I doubted Max had, either. I hoped he didn’t mind my telling Kate.

“If you’re twins, how come you don’t have dyslexia as well?”

“I don’t know.”

“The teachers had no idea?” I heard amusement in her voice. Yes, this was going well.

“By that time, my parents had started dressing us in certain colors to help our teachers keep us apart. I wore blue and Max wore red. His English test was after lunch, so at lunch time, we went to the bathroom and switched shirts, and when the bell rang, I went to his class and he went to mine. I had art after lunch, so it wasn’t like it was going to be a letter filled afternoon for him. After the test, I told his teacher I had to go

to the bathroom, and I met him there. We switched shirts and went back to our own classes.”

“It was really sweet of you.”

I couldn't explain why, but those words filled me with so much hope. Would she now begin to see me as a person who could be kind and loyal?

“What about you? Did you and Ethan ever pull any crazy stunts?”

“No.”

And just like that, her voice turned distant and aloof.

Fuck.

“Ethan fake married Lucy, though. That's a stunt, right?”

“Wow. Really?”

“He was still trying to win our grandfather's favor. My asshole grandfather told him he was losing out on a deal because he wasn't married, so he asked Lucy, whom I'd sent to work for him, to marry him. He promised her a shitload of money.”

Huh. “So their marriage—”

“Oh, it's real now.”

I remembered hearing something about Kate not being happy about it and nearly losing faith in Ethan and her friend. “Was it your brother's proposition that bothered you?”

“No, although it bugged me. What bothered me was they didn't tell me they were sleeping together. They purposefully hid it. The only two people in the world I trusted, and they were lying to me.”

I hated that she only had two people in her life. “But you forgave them?”

“Yes. He's my brother and she's my best friend, after all.”

God, how I wished she'd forgive me.

“I always got the feeling that you had a very loving and supportive family,” she said.

“I do.” I kicked myself for not having her meet my parents. Another of many regrets.

“Mine wasn’t like that.”

I waited for her to say more, but she didn’t. Not wanting to lose the positive connection we’d had up until now, I decided to change the subject.

“So, did your day go better after I left?”

“Yes.”

I smiled because I swore that I could hear the satisfaction, and possibly, a hint of a blush in her tone.

“I still can’t believe you left like you did,” she said.

“Had to sit in my car for fifteen minutes before I could put my seatbelt on.”

She laughed, and I realized it was the first time I’d heard her laugh like that, so free and full of humor, since we’d been together five years ago. “You poor thing.”

My dick started to swell from the memory. “It wasn’t easy. It was quite painful, to be honest.” I was joking. Well, it *was* frustrating, but I wanted to elicit her sympathy.

“And is it better now?”

I lifted my sheet to look down at my dick that had started to tent my boxer briefs. “Well, talking about it brings back the memory, which makes my dick hopeful.”

“Is there a reason you didn’t want to take care of it in my office?”

Oh, shit. Did she think I didn’t want to have sex with her?

“As I said, that wasn’t why I stopped by. I just thought it might help relax you. Plus, I like going down on you.”

I heard the slight hitch in her breath at my words. My dick swelled even more.

“I get as much pleasure turning you on and making you come as having an orgasm myself,” I explained.

“Did you ever consider that I might like doing the same to you?”

No. No, I hadn't. “It sounds like I need to apologize for denying you the opportunity to service me.”

“You absolutely do.”

I lay still for a moment as I processed her words. The woman who was so resistant and guarded was telling me that I should have fucked her. Except I really think she was talking about sucking my dick. By now, my dick was at full staff and extremely uncomfortable in my boxer briefs.

Of course, sexual words didn't mean she was growing to like me, but I told myself I would be patient and take what she was willing to give me.

“You've done it now. My dick is at full mast and wondering where the hell you are.” The minute the words left my mouth, I was afraid I'd gone too far.

That worry grew as the silence on the other end of the phone drew out.

I was just about to apologize when she said, “I could be there in twenty minutes.”

I nearly swallowed my tongue. “I'll be here.”

She ended the call, leaving me lying in bed wondering what the hell just happened. Her words fogged my brain. I shook it to gain clarity. Holy fuck. She was coming here to have sex.

I got out of bed, straightening the covers, and then was stuck on what to do. Should I have some wine waiting? Did I just take her to bed?

You do you, Sam. Right. What would I do? I shucked my boxers off, planning to meet her at the door, showing her exactly what she had done to me.

It seemed like a hell of a lot longer than twenty minutes, but the time didn't deflate my dick. The truth was, as each minute passed, the anticipation grew, and so did my dick until it was painfully hard.

Finally, her knock came on the door. I checked through the peephole first to make sure it was her. I flung the door open, standing in all my naked glory.

She looked down, raising a brow. “Oh, my.”

I reached out and pulled her inside, intending to kiss her. But once my door shut, she immediately sank to her knees and wrapped her lips around my dick.

Pleasure shot through me, making my knees weak. I staggered back, hitting the back of the door. My fingers threaded through her hair as she sucked my dick until I couldn't even see straight.

“Jesus fuck, Kate.” I was already primed and ready to shoot my load before she arrived, so it wasn't long before my orgasm rocketed through me. My hips bucked forward as I emptied into her hot mouth. She continued to suck and slurp and swallow until my legs were a quivering mess. I wasn't sure how I was still standing.

When she finished, she stood, giving me a smug smile as she wiped my cum from her lips. I placed my hand on the back of her neck and pulled her to me, kissing her hard, tasting myself in her mouth.

As I kissed her, it occurred to me that she had come and done what she intended to do. That meant she'd probably leave. I couldn't let that happen. Not yet.

My strength returned, so I scooped her up into my arms and made my way with her to my bedroom.

“What are you doing?” Luckily, she said it with humor in her voice.

“One good turn deserves another.”

“But I was paying you back for this afternoon.”

I laid her on my bed and spread out over. “Let's thank each other again, then. What do you say?” To support my cause, I bent my head down, wrapping my lips around her blouse covered nipple and sucking hard.

She gasped and arched into me. “Well, if you insist.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Kate

The day had gone better after Sam had taken care of my tension. That and discovering the truth about what was going on at the property up the street had changed my attitude. By the time I returned to my friends, they were halfway through lunch.

I was sure they could tell the change in me, and Harper, in particular, made a few comments about what might've happened in my office. But I only told them that Sam and I had talked just like she suggested that we do. I didn't want to go into details because I was still uncertain and confused, and if I were completely honest with myself, terrified because my resistance was waning.

I was driving home from the club late at night when Sam's call came in. When I saw his name on the call screen in my car, I immediately tensed. It was a gut reaction to guard myself from him.

But soon, he was telling me a sweet story about how he helped his dyslexic brother, and I was helpless to guard against the warm feelings it brought. During our relationship five years ago, Sam had done so many sweet things for me just like he'd done for his brother, Max. Was I being unreasonable to hold one mistake against him after we'd had so many happy times together?

He didn't forget to take out the trash, Kate. He left you after he proposed to you.

His mistake hadn't been a little thing. It had completely changed the trajectory of my life.

I made another attempt to build the wall around my heart, which became easier when he asked about my and Ethan's childhood. Thinking of that was a reminder of why I couldn't trust anyone.

But then the conversation morphed into my day. I remembered wondering how he could go on with his day with an erection. I asked how he could leave my office with a hard on before I could think better of it. As we talked about it, and I imagined his erect dick, my nipples grew hard and my panties wet. Before I knew it, I was at his house and on my knees, taking care of him.

I wasn't lying that giving pleasure could be as satisfying as getting it. Especially with someone like Sam, who had the most amazing dick. Long and straight, with silky soft flesh over iron hardness. Between that and hearing him moan as I sucked and licked, knowing that his pleasure was in my hands, knowing that he had surrendered it to me, was heady and exciting.

But now I was in his bed, and his magnificent mouth was doing wondrous things to my breasts and my nipples. The cautious part of me was trying to warn me that my defenses were already low. More accurately, they were gone because I was naked, and Sam was looking down on me with his feral, wolfish, sexy smile.

"Tell me the truth. This is what you missed today, right?" His dick rubbed through my pussy lips.

I arched, needing more. "Yes." I'd agree to anything in this state of desperate desire.

He pressed, but only the head of his dick. "More?"

I arched a brow. "No, that's enough."

He growled. "Not nearly." He thrust in, forcing my breath from my lungs. "Jesus fuck, your pussy is perfect."

So was his dick.

He pushed me until I was semi-reclined on my pillows. He levered up, sitting on his heels as he pulled my thighs over his legs. He gripped his headboard and again gave me his wicked smile.

“Hold on, Kate.”

I wrapped my legs around his waist. He moved, slowly at first, but he picked up speed. He was strong and fast, and in that position, on his knees and holding the headboard, he could drive in deep.

“Oh, my God, Sam.” My pussy quivered as the friction of his dick drove me wild. “Yes . . . yes . . .”

He’d never had sex with me this way before. I had a flash in my head of him like this with Sandra. Had he discovered it with her? I shook the image from my head.

“Look at me, Kate . . .”

I opened my eyes, which was work because it was hard to focus with so much stimulation radiating in my pussy.

“Watch me as I fuck you.”

I gripped the sheets feeling like I might fly away into oblivion if I didn’t.

His gaze held mine. It wasn’t just the combination of torment and pleasure I saw on his face. There was an intensity. Maybe even emotion. Unable to manage it, I closed my eyes and arched as he drove in. My pussy convulsed, stealing my breath, and then came the explosion of pleasure.

“Fuck yes!” he yelled, plunging in again as his own release overtook him. He collapsed on me. “Good Christ, has sex ever been so good?”

No. No, it hadn’t. I couldn’t respond vocally because my entire body was like jelly.

He held himself up on one elbow as his other hand gently caressed my cheek. “Are you okay? Tell me you’re suffering the effects of my having rocked your world.”

I was glad that he was going for levity. It made me wonder whether I was mistaken about the emotion I thought I saw in his eyes.

“You’re full of yourself, Sam. I think I rocked your world.”

His grin was happy and sexy, and my heart thumped hard in my chest. “That you did, baby. That you did.”

He shifted off me and pulled me to him. It was as natural as breathing to snuggle up against him. We lay like that for a few moments as we finished catching our breath.

“Stay the night, Kate.”

I tensed.

He looked down on me, his expression serious as he clearly had to have noticed my reaction. “Just the night. That’s all I’m asking.”

That’s all he asked five years ago, and I never left. He did, nine months later.

“We can’t go back and start over. We can’t recreate our past.”

Hurt shone in his eyes, but also determination. “I know that. That’s not what I’m trying to do here. You said it yourself—we’re not the same people. So I want to get to know you now. I want you to know me now.”

Dammit. It was so hard to refuse him when he talked like that, when he looked at me with longing.

“What if you discover you don’t like the new me?” I asked.

He ran his finger along my jaw and then over my lips. “Since our lives have come back together, I’ve had plenty of opportunities to discover that I don’t like the new you, and that hasn’t happened.”

I smirked. “Is that your kind way of telling me I’ve been a bitch?”

He grinned. “No.”

“I have been a bitch to you.” Even I knew that. It had been on purpose. “The question is, why are you still here?”

“Because there’s something between us.”

“How do you know it’s not an echo of times past? A memory of the heart that isn’t real?”

He arched a brow. “Because if it was that, your attitude toward me would have killed it.” He sighed. “I’m just asking for one night.”

I should get up, get dressed, and leave, but it sure seemed like a lot of work to get out of this warm, comfortable bed next to this hot, sexy man.

“One night?”

He nodded.

I tilted my head to the side. “Can we use that tub in your bathroom?”

His wolfish grin was back. “Absolutely.”

We used the tub in the darkness of the bathroom so that we could see the moonshine over the ocean. That is, until I straddled his hips and took us both for a very satisfying ride.

When I woke the next morning, I was warm and comfortable at Sam’s side. His arm was draped over my middle like he wanted to make sure I didn’t run away in the middle of the night.

I turned to look at him. His green eyes were watching me. “Are you watching me in my sleep?”

“Is it creepy?”

I laughed. “A little bit.”

He leaned over to kiss me, and as his lips slid over mine, a little warning bell went off in my head reminding me that this thing between us needed to stay sexual. The bell encouraged me to get out of bed and leave before I fell for him any further.

“Spend the day with me, Kate. The Sea Siren’s closed today.”

Ding, ding, ding. Warning. “Last night, you said just one night.”

“And I meant it. But now this morning, I’m not ready to let you go.”

I wanted to pull away, but I found that I couldn’t.

His fingers stroked my arm. “I know where I stand. I’m not using some secret ploy here. I’m being brutally honest. I wanted you to stay last night, so I asked. Now, this morning, I want you to spend the day. So I’m asking.”

The question was when would the asking end? Everything he’d asked me in the past, I’d said yes to wholeheartedly. The desire to do that now was so great, it was terrifying.

“Let me make us some coffee and breakfast, and we’ll take it from there, okay?”

I nodded in agreement, but only because he was moving to get out of bed and I needed space between us to think clearly.

I had coffee and some killer pancakes, and then when that was done, he suggested that we go for a walk on the beach. That seemed harmless, so I agreed.

Back at the house, I went to take a shower, and he made the point that taking it together would save time and water. That was true in theory, although I’m not sure it held up in practice when he fucked me from behind.

It wasn’t until lunchtime that I realized I’d made the decision to stay for the day. With that, I leaned into it, taking as much from him physically as I could. And in between the rounds of sex, we talked about his plans for the new club, and I shared with him my plans to put him out of business by having a live band.

He laughed. “Thank God we’re not building in our original spot. We’d have probably been out of business before we even opened.”

“That was the plan.”

When I left Sam's that evening, it was a little bit like leaving fantasyland. Because of that, I figured it would be easy to rebuild my guard against him. We had a moment in time involving carnal pleasures and some small talk, but now I was back in the real world.

Two days later, Sam called and asked if I would be willing to look at a property with him in one of the areas that I'd suggested might be good for his prohibition-themed club. By this time, I had decided that maybe Sam and I could be friends even though it could never be anything more. So I agreed as one friend and business owner to another.

But when it was time for me to leave the Sea Siren to meet him, Samantha called in saying she wouldn't be able to make it for her shift this evening. While we weren't expecting an enormous crowd like we had on Halloween, I still had the same challenge in finding somebody to take the night shift. I called Sam to let him know that I would need to stay.

Ninety minutes later, Sam walked to the door, rolling up his sleeves as he stepped behind the bar.

"What about your showing?" I asked.

"I saw it. I'd still like you to take a look sometime." He reacquainted himself with where everything was and got ready for the evening club crowd.

"I didn't ask you to do this." I stood on the other side of the bar, internally fighting off the warm fuzzies I was feeling at his actions. I remembered the story about his helping his brother. Then there was Halloween, when he'd stepped in to help me.

"No, you didn't. It sort of irks me that you didn't." There was an edge to his tone that suggested he wasn't completely kidding.

"I should just hire you. You're a pretty good bartender, and then I wouldn't have to worry about your club competing with mine."

He grinned at me from the other side of the bar. “I’m building my club far away from yours because I don’t want to have to compete with you. You’d kick my ass.”

That wasn’t true, but it was nice of him to say it.

As the evening wore on, I occasionally looked over at him at the bar putting on his flair show. Bottles spun and flew in the air. As usual, the women flocked to him, but this time, while he might’ve smiled at them, he didn’t give them the one that made them swoon. Whenever he caught me looking at him, he would wink.

At the end of the night, he stuck around until everything was cleaned up and the rest of the staff had left.

“You hungry?” he asked as we got ready to leave.

I shook my head. “You didn’t get anything from the kitchen during your shift?”

“I was too busy impressing the crowd. There’s a 24-hour diner not far from here.”

I was tired and wanted to go home. “I tell you what. You can stop by my place, and I’ll make you something to eat as payment for tonight.”

He grinned. “Even better.”

Once at my house, I made him a grilled cheese sandwich. I wasn’t hungry, but I wouldn’t mind dessert, so I got a bowl of ice cream.

We sat on the couch, and Sam found the remote, turning on the TV and flipping through the channels, landing in the middle of a movie. It reminded me of the Christmas movie about the man who wished he were never born and is shown what the world would be like had he not been born.

This one, however, was about a man full of regrets and discovering how his life might’ve been different had he made different choices.

“It would really suck to live with the kind of regret he’s having to endure,” I said, scooping the last bit of ice cream from my bowl and then setting it on the coffee table.

“It’s not easy, that’s for sure.” Sam had long since put his plate on the table and had been sitting quietly next to me.

“It sounds like you’re talking from experience?”

He slanted his gaze at me, his brows lifted. Only then did I realize what I’d said.

“I live with the regret of walking away from you every fucking day.”

We had achieved a friendship, a camaraderie, and I didn’t want to ruin it by bringing our past between us again. I turned, looking forward, watching as the movie credits rolled.

He reached over, picking up the remote and flipping off the TV. Then he turned his body to face me. “I should’ve handled everything differently. You’d even given me the solution, but I was too stupid and afraid. And because of that, guilt and regret are my constant companions.”

I sat looking straight forward, my body rigid and tense, not wanting to let go of the last little bit of protection I had against this man. “Guilt and regret don’t change anything.”

“No. I guess they don’t. But if I had a chance to do it again, Kate, I would’ve followed through on our plans. I would’ve taken you to New York and married you. I could have done that and still done the right thing by Sandra.”

I closed my eyes and shrugged, trying to make it seem like it was no big deal anymore. “Well, it’s too late for that now.”

His finger hooked under my chin and turned my face toward him. I kept my eyes closed because I knew if I looked into his green eyes, I would be lost to him.

“Kate.”

My eyes fluttered open.

“As long as I have breath, it will never be too late.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sam

The way I behaved around Kate was like being on a tightrope. It was a delicate balance between letting her know she could trust me without freaking her out by pushing for too much, too fast.

After all, she'd only agreed to a sexual affair. But ever since the day we spent together, and especially since the night we watched the movie together, there'd been a subtle shift in her. Her resistance was still there, but not strong as it had been before. I truly believed she was slowly letting me in. I just couldn't fuck it up by doing something to make her close up.

There were still topics we hadn't broached, which was basically anything in the past. That meant I still hadn't told her everything about Sandra and Chelsea.

Not that I hadn't tried.

A couple of times, I started to lead the conversation in that direction, but the minute we got close to talking about the past, Kate would close up. I wished I understood why the topic was so scary for her. Was it because it was so painful? It was a reminder of how much I'd hurt her. I had hurt myself, but it had to have been worse for her.

By the time the friends' Thanksgiving dinner came up, Kate was allowing me to act like we were dating, which meant I could pick her up instead of her insisting on meeting me.

When she opened the door, my heart and my dick were hit with twin blasts of my beautiful, sexy woman. She wore a dark

purple dress fit for royalty. It clung around her curves as if Michelangelo had painted it on himself. Her hair was up in a loose style that left a few tendrils hanging loose. My fingers itched to pull out the pins and bury themselves in her hair.

“I feel sorry for all the other women who will be there tonight,” I said as I slipped my arm around her and tugged her close for a kiss.

“And why’s that?” she asked as we ended the kiss.

“Because no man alive can be around you looking like this and not have his eyes glued to you.”

She smiled, and the radiance of it hit me straight in the heart. “That’s sweet to say, but all the women at this party have men who only have eyes for them. But I will say you look very handsome too. Thank goodness the women there are in love with their husbands or I might have some competition.”

She had no idea how much her words meant to me. Essentially, she was saying I was hers. Or that was how I chose to interpret her statement. I kissed her again as a thank you because I knew I couldn’t say the words that I really wanted to say, which were, “I’m all yours, Kate. Now and forever.”

Fortunately, the traffic wasn’t too bad from the Coast, where I picked Kate up at her condo, out to Anaheim Hills to Dane MacLeod’s house. On the way, Kate explained how Dane and his wife, Bridget, held parties like this all the time. She also explained to me who was bound to be there, which included people who were at Ethan’s, along with a few others including shipping magnet Claude Monroe, whom I was aware of because my aunt Eleni, Zach’s wife, was his right-hand woman. I would also meet the mayor of one of the cities around here and her husband, who also worked for Claude.

“It really is a small world, isn’t it?” I said as I pulled into the large expansive driveway of Dane MacLeod’s home. “I mean, what are the odds that all these people from all over the world, much less from a large populace like Southern California, would all be interconnected like this?”

Next to me, Kate shrugged.” I guess it’s that six degrees thing.”

I parked the car.

“I hope I won’t be quizzed. This sounds like a big gathering.”

She smirked at me. “The thing that might overwhelm you are the kids. There’s a lot of them at these things. Your uncle Zack’s partner, Troy, has a brood. There’s like four or five more after Bridget. Most of the kids who come are around ten and twelve, but now with Ethan and Lucy, Lane and Archer, and Harper and Noel, there are toddlers and babies too.”

I looked over at her. “You say that like you don’t want children.” I hoped that wasn’t the case. Five years ago, when we were planning a life together, children were included, but maybe she changed her mind.

“It’s not that I don’t like kids because I do. It’s just when there’s a huge number of them together, it’s loud and chaotic. There’s a lot of shouting, and half the time, it’s the adults telling the kids to settle down or stop doing whatever. I much prefer them in groups of one or two.”

When we walked into the house, I was immediately hit with what she meant. It wasn’t just the noise, it was the activity. Kids were running, and in several cases, they were followed by an adult telling them not to run.

I took Kate’s hand, squeezing it. “I see what you mean.”

Ethan stepped into our path. His gaze fixated on my hand holding Kate’s. When his gaze drifted up, I held my breath, hoping he wasn’t going to say or do anything to disapprove.

He leaned forward, giving Kate a kiss on the cheek. It reminded me of when I had mistaken him for a suitor not that long ago.

“Welcome to the chaos.” He extended his hand toward me. I was surprised and at the same time hopeful. I clasped his hand, giving him a firm shake, hoping it conveyed my intentions toward Kate.

“Everyone’s here. Although good luck hunting down anyone specific.”

“Is there a table large enough for everyone?” I asked. Thanksgiving at our house was a pretty big deal involving lots of family, but not like this. There certainly weren’t this many children. Or maybe I should say grandchildren, because all the children like me were grown up, or at least nearly grown, like my sister Vivian and my cousins. They were in college. I had a vision of having the first real grandchild in our family.

Don’t get too ahead of yourself, Sam.

“Let’s go out on the back terrace. If the kids aren’t swimming, that is usually the least rowdy place at these things,” Kate said.

Making our way through the house, I said hello to a few people I had met before and was introduced to others I hadn’t yet met. As I watched the group of people who were mingling and laughing, it struck me that while it was loud and a bit chaotic, it wasn’t intense. There was a sense that everyone liked everyone else.

There wasn’t an air of pretense or snobbery despite the fact that the room was filled with a shitload of some of the wealthiest people in Southern California, or in the case of Claude Monroe, richest in the world. It was exactly how my family was when we were together.

When Kate and I stepped outside, the noise immediately dropped at least by half. I glanced over at her, my lovely enigma. She was surrounded by all these people who were clearly kind and generous. Where had they been when her life had gone to shit five years ago? As far as I knew from what Harper told me, Kate only had Ethan.

“How long have these parties been going on?” I asked as we walked to the far side of the yard where there was a view to the west overlooking the lights of the valley below.

“I don’t know all the history. I’ve only been coming in the last year or so. I started getting invited because of Lucy, who came with Ethan, who was invited by Dane. But I get the

sense that Bridget's dad, Troy, and his group of buddies including Claude Monroe and Ryder Williams, all started having these types of parties back when Bridget was a kid."

"It's kinda nice, isn't it? Close family and friends."

She tilted her head up to look at me. The narrowing of her brows told me she was suspicious about what I was asking. Anything too mushy always had her going on guard. "I guess so. Why?"

"There's often so much fakery and snobbery with people who have more money than they know what to do with. I remember being surprised by it when I got out into the world and mingled with those in my family's social class."

"I guess there is. One thing's for sure. When your fortune changes, you really find out who your friends are."

This was a rare comment about her past, and I knew I needed to respond to it carefully.

"Where were all these people when you needed them?" That probably wasn't the right question.

She stiffened next to me. "I didn't know most of these people back then. Ethan and Lucy were there for me. But I didn't need anyone. The only person anyone can really count on is themselves."

Guilt filled my gut as I realized my and her grandfather's actions had taught her that the only person that she could really count on was herself. But more than that, she'd learned she couldn't trust anyone else.

I turned toward her, my fingers brushing a wisp of her blonde hair away from her face. There were so many things I wanted to tell her, like how she could trust me and that I would never, ever let her down again. But I knew she wouldn't hear it, or if she did, she would dismiss it. She didn't need words. She needed action. She needed to feel supported and loved.

"Come home with me for Thanksgiving." Okay, so maybe blurting that out wasn't the right choice. Too much, too soon. But what better way to show her that she was valued and loved

than by immersing her in my family, who I had no doubt would love her just like Ethan did? Just like I did.

She gasped as she looked up at me. “What?”

There was no way to backpedal on this, so I just charged forward. “Come back to New York with me. We can leave Sunday and stay through Friday, or to Saturday or the following Sunday, however long.

We can spend Thanksgiving with my family. Max will be there, and my sister Vivian, and my parents. Zach and Eleni and their kids might be there too.” Zach sometimes came home for holidays, but not always. After being around him in California, I could see that he had a surrogate family in the group of people who were here tonight.

“Sam, I can’t.”

She didn’t say no, which was the response I had expected. It didn’t mean that she wasn’t coming because she was trying to not love me. “Why not?”

“Because of the Sea Siren. And . . . I just don’t think I can.”

I cupped her face in my hands, wanting her to look in my eyes and see all the love I felt for her even though I knew saying the words would scare her off. “You have really good people around you at the Sea Siren. And as for the other part, you can have your own room or stay in a hotel if that would make you more comfortable. I really want you to meet my family.”

“You do?”

I nodded. “More than that. I want my family to meet you.”

I could see in her eyes that she wanted to say yes, but she turned away, looking out over the vastness of the night.

“You should go, Kate. I can help at the club. I know how to serve drinks.”

We both turned around quickly, not realizing Lucy was there. She gave us a sheepish smile. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I was coming out to say hello.” She looked at Kate.

“You should go. You haven’t had a break since you opened the place. And Sam’s right that you have good people—”

“Samantha hasn’t been so reliable lately,” Kate interrupted.

“We’ll make sure that we have coverage if she’s unreliable. I can help Dana.”

Kate shook her head. “I can’t ask you to do that. You’ve got Ethan and two kids.”

“We’re just talking about a few days. It’ll be fun. I’ll like getting out of the house for a bit.”

I looked at Kate, not wanting to push my luck and at the same time wanting to say something to tip her over to my side.

“I’ll think about it.” Her tone said she was done talking about it.

She hadn’t said no. But I also didn’t think she was really going to think about it. I was pretty sure her answer was no, but she felt put on the spot.

A call for dinner echoed through the yard, so we couldn’t talk about it anymore, anyway.

For the rest of the evening, I didn’t say any more about it. I focused on making new friends and making sure Kate had a good time.

After the dinner, I drove her home. I kept the conversation light and on a topic I knew was safe for us—sex.

By the time we arrived at her condo, both of us were so hot that we were stripping each other’s clothes off as the door shut. Our clothes dropped in our wake as we made our way toward her bedroom.

I was like a maniac trying to get to her soft body until she lay spread out on the bed. Then I put on the brakes, slowing the pace so I could savor her.

I worked her body until she was whimpering. She pushed me over, straddling my hips, but I stopped her from taking what she wanted.

“Up here, babe. I want dessert.” I pulled her hips up until her pretty pussy was over my mouth. I drank her in, getting drunk on her sweet juices.

“Oh, God, Sam . . .” Her hips rocked faster.

I held her hips, lifting her until my mouth wasn't on her anymore.

“Don't stop.”

I kissed her inner thigh. “Tell me you'll come to New York with me for Thanksgiving.”

“What?”

I rubbed my nose through her wet curls.

“Oh!” She tried to get closer.

I lifted my head, swirling my tongue around her clit.

“More . . . please, Sam.”

I pulled away. “Will you come to New York?”

“Dammit.” She reached her hand down, pressing her fingers to her pussy.

In an instant, I had her on her back, my body over hers. “Don't take my job from me.”

“Then do your job.”

I grinned at her until I slid inside her, and then I couldn't do anything but sigh at the monumental pleasure. I moved in and out, in and out, until she hovered on the edge.

Leaning down, I kissed her neck. “Come to New York.” I nibbled on her ear.

“Fine. I'll go. Just make me come.”

I sank into her again and levered up on my hands. Then I moved, driving into her hard and fast, giving her exactly what she wanted

Her fingers gripped my back. “Don't stop.”

There was no stopping now. My baser instincts were in control as I sought the ultimate bliss that could be had between

two people.

“Fuck . . . I’m coming, Kate.”

“Yes!” She arched up, her body going taut, her pussy tightening around my cock. I drove in again, and my world blew apart in the best way possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Kate

I had planned to renege on my agreement to go to New York once my orgasm dissipated. I'd only said I'd go because he was holding my orgasm hostage. I really wanted to come—sexually, that is.

Sam shifted to the side, resting his weight on one elbow while his other hand caressed my face. “You don't have to come to New York.”

I looked up at him, wondering why he was taking back his invitation.

“It was unfair of me to try and coerce you like that. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay.”

He shook his head. “No, it's not right. I want you to come, Kate, really badly. But I want you to want to come as well. I want you to do it of your own free will because you want to come with me. Not because I forced you into it.”

“I do want to come.” Saying the words surprised me because I didn't want to admit that I did want to go. Saying it out loud scared me witless. That's why my first response was to decline. I wanted everything that he seemed to want, but I was still too afraid to reach out and grab it.

His green eyes filled with hope. “You do?”

I let out a long sigh. “Yes, I do.” I pressed my hand on his chest. “But don't read too much into it.”

He flinched, and I hated that my words hurt him. But I couldn't have him thinking that everything between us was copacetic.

He nodded. "Okay. I understand."

Feeling like I was falling too hard, too fast for Sam, I made arrangements to go see Ethan and Lucy for dinner the next night. It gave me an excuse not to see him.

Besides, I had to tell them I was going to New York for Thanksgiving with Sam's family. I was nervous about meeting them, and it was a reminder that despite how much Sam and I had loved each other five years ago, we hadn't known each other as well as we should have.

For example, I'd never met his parents or his brother or sister. Five years ago, as we packed up to move, I remember being worried about his bringing me home as his fiancée and meeting them for the first time. What would happen if they didn't like me?

Of course, that never happened. I wondered what they thought of Sandra. Where was she now? What was Sam's relationship with her? Maybe it was time I let Sam explain to me whatever it was he wanted to tell me about her.

I shook the thought away. I didn't want to know. What good would come from knowing? All it would do was reopen the wound of his leaving five years ago. I wanted to keep moving in the direction that would bring me to Sam, not away from him, no matter how scary and risky it was.

During that morning, I felt a little queasy. Either I was coming down with something or I was stressed about agreeing to go to New York with Sam. It was my body's way of physically manifesting my fear.

Just to be sure I wasn't sick, I took my temperature, but it was normal. So, it must just be nerves. It also meant that I could still visit Ethan and Lucy and see the babies.

I had just a few minutes with my niece and nephew before Ethan put them to bed. I went with Lucy to the kitchen to help finish dinner.

“I hope you don’t mind. We’re having stir-fry. It’s fast and easy, which is a necessity when you have two young kids.”

“I love stir-fry.” I inhaled the aromas of sesame oil and soy sauce. My stomach rolled over.

I stepped back and covered my mouth, a little worried that my lunch might come up. Maybe I did have a bug even though I didn’t have a temperature.

“Can I get the drinks or something?” I didn’t want to look rude or unhelpful by leaving the kitchen to get away from the smell.

“That would be great. I have a pitcher of cold water in the fridge, as well as some wine.”

I got wine and water glasses from the cupboard, putting them on the table in the dining room. Then I brought the pitcher of water and the bottle of wine out as well. Every time I entered the kitchen, I held my breath. Why did the scent make me nauseous? I loved Chinese food.

By the time Ethan came downstairs, Lucy was ready to serve dinner. Ethan opened the wine and poured the wine glasses while I filled the water glasses with water.

I sat down as Lucy brought me my plate, and again, the scent of food made my stomach turn over. I picked up my fork and poked at the chicken and broccoli, trying to decide whether I could force myself to eat it, or did I risk it coming back up?

“You sure you’re okay?” Lucy asked. “You’re looking a little pale.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come. I’m feeling a little queasy.” Then, worried they would think I came over knowing I was sick, risking their children’s health, I quickly added, “I took my temperature earlier, and it was fine. When I came over, I felt fine. I just . . .” I didn’t want to finish the sentence

by telling Lucy that the scent of her cooking was making me feel sick.

Lucy studied me for a moment. “Maybe I should’ve made spaghetti instead of stir-fry.”

Worried that I offended her, I waved her comment away. “No. I love stir-fry . . . usually.”

Lucy turned her attention back toward her dish.

“If you’re not feeling well, do you want to lie down?” Ethan asked me. I shook my head, thinking maybe it was best if I just went home.

“You know, during this last pregnancy, I couldn’t stand the scent of cooked steak. It was so weird because I love beef. My doctor said it had something to do with hormones.”

I jerked my attention to her, blinking.

“I doubt Kate is pregnant. Maybe you just ate something that didn’t sit with you,” Ethan said, putting more soy sauce on his food.

“That must be it.” But on the inside, I was doing some quick math to figure out when I was supposed to have my period. Except I was on the pill, so it couldn’t be that.

“Why not?” Lucy responded to Ethan’s comment as she poked a piece of chicken with her fork and popped it into her mouth.

“I’m not pregnant.” I said it to her definitively, and then I looked at Ethan to reassure him.

“You know the pill isn’t a hundred percent effective. It’s not even 99% effective like it says on the package. At least, not in normal usage.”

Ethan glared at her. “Why are you saying all this?”

Lucy shrugged. “I’m just saying, queasiness and not liking certain smells could be signs of pregnancy.”

Ethan looked at me with an expectant stare.

I would admit that Lucy's comment about the effectiveness or lack thereof of the pill did give me a different sort of unsettling feeling in my stomach. But I quickly pushed it away.

More likely, I was under stress because I'd agreed to go to Thanksgiving with Sam and his family. Or it could be that my relationship with Sam in general was stressing me out because despite all my best attempts, I was falling for him again.

"It's not that. Ethan's probably right. It's something I ate that didn't sit well." It didn't explain why I'd felt a little queasy before I even ate this morning, but I liked Ethan's answer best, so I was going to stick with that.

"It would be nice if you were pregnant. The cousins would be close in age."

I gaped at Lucy. Why was she harping on this?

"I certainly hope she isn't pregnant."

My head swiveled to Ethan, gaping at him. "What is that supposed to mean?" I didn't know why I was feeling defensive since I agreed with his sentiment.

"I don't know what's going on between you and Sam, but it's clear that you're not going to love him again. I almost feel sorry for him, the way he's mooning over you like a clueless puppy."

"Ethan!" Lucy stared at him in shock.

I had to agree that it was a surprising comment coming from Ethan.

"What?" He turned to look at me. "I'm still pissed at him for what he did to you. Say the word and I'll kick his ass."

"I don't need you to kick anyone's ass for me."

He gave a curt nod and went back to scooping up chicken and broccoli. "That's why you shouldn't be pregnant."

Lucy's eyebrows rose to her hairline, even more shocked by that comment.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I was shocked too. He wasn’t wrong, but still, I didn’t like the feeling that he thought I couldn’t be a mother.

He picked up his wine, taking a sip. As he set it down, he fixed his gaze on me. “Because you don’t trust people anymore, Kate. You’re definitely not going to trust him. Raising a kid is hard enough with two parents. I can’t imagine doing it alone. Plus, you own a business that you work at ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day.”

“She’s not alone, though.” Lucy glared at Ethan before turning her attention to me. “You have me. And despite what Ethan is saying here, you have him too.”

“What does that mean?” Ethan asked.

“It means you’re not being very supportive.”

He looked at me, reaching out to put his hand on my forearm. “Of course, I’m here for you no matter what. I’m just saying that I agree with you. I mean, you don’t want to be pregnant, do you?”

I shook my head, even though a part of me wasn’t against the idea. Five years ago, I’d wanted everything that Ethan and Lucy had. But that dream was gone, I reminded myself.

Pulling together my feminist outrage, I glared at him. “But that doesn’t mean I couldn’t do it. You’re sounding very old-fashioned, Ethan.”

He sighed as he took his hand back. “I think you’re plenty capable, Kate. I just don’t think you’re emotionally ready.”

“Ethan. Let’s have a nice meal.” Lucy pursed her lips at him.

He sat back, looking from Lucy to me and back to her. “Fine. Since she’s probably not pregnant, we don’t need to talk about this. But let’s say she was pregnant. You would still be refusing to talk about this. That’s your M.O., Kate. Don’t talk about anything unpleasant. For the life of me, I can’t understand why you’re even spending time with Sam after what he did to you and the way you still resent him. The only thing I can think of is that you don’t talk about anything in

your past. You probably haven't asked him what the hell is going on with the woman he left you for. Has he even mentioned his daughter?"

The answer to that was no. And the reason for that was exactly as Ethan was speculating. I didn't want to know about it. "What good does it do to hash out the past? It doesn't change what he did."

"The past impacts your present." He had a tone that suggested I was being an idiot. "You've always been careful and guarded because of the way Grandfather treated you. After Sam left and then Grandfather disowned you, you completely cut yourself off emotionally. That's the past impacting the present. Now, maybe you and Sam are just having some sort of fling, but if that's the case, you should end it, Kate, because he's still in love with you. And despite what he did to you, it isn't right to fuck with his heart."

"You don't know how she's feeling." Lucy came to my defense. She looked at me. "Yes, you're being careful, but I saw the two of you the other night up at Dane and Bridget's house. You have an affection for him."

"Then that's all the more reason to clear up everything in the past and the present. Are you ready to be a stepmother to his daughter? And again, we haven't heard anything about this kid. What does that say about the kind of father he is? Where's the other woman in all this? Did he leave her high and dry too?"

Ethan was right. I had no idea what was going on with Sandra and Chelsea. Was Sam playing me? If he was, he was a really good actor.

"Which is it, Ethan?" Lucy demanded. "He's in love with her or he's a man who loves 'em and leaves 'em? He can't be both."

He held his hands up in surrender. "All I'm saying is that Kate and Sam need to put everything out on the table."

"He knows where I stand." I picked up my water, drinking it, hoping the cool freshness would settle my stomach and my

irritated nerves.

“Does that mean you’re not going with him to see his family for Thanksgiving?”

Ethan’s brows rose. “What?”

Lucy nodded. “Sam asked her to go to New York for Thanksgiving. I think she should go.”

Ethan looked at me. “Is that true? Are you going?”

I had told Sam I would go, but as expected, I was having second thoughts about it.

“It will be the perfect opportunity to do exactly what you want her to do. They can resolve any issues from the past. It could alleviate any doubt that she’s having—”

“That is if there’s nothing to doubt him for,” Ethan quipped.

That was the million-dollar question.

“So, are you going?” Ethan asked.

“I told him I would.”

“Ethan.” Lucy interrupted whatever he might say, which was probably going to be something like *do you think that’s wise?* “Kate is capable of running her own life.”

“I just don’t want to see you get hurt. I don’t want to see you withdrawing more into yourself than you already have.”

I mustered a smile. “I’ll be fine.” I poked my fork at the chicken and put the piece in my mouth, praying that it didn’t come back up. “Now, can we talk about something more pleasant? Maybe you can tell me if our cousin has run the Wheatly business into the ground.”

As I headed home from dinner, the conversation about Sam ran through my mind in an endless loop. I was losing the battle protecting my heart, and yet Ethan was right. There was a lot I didn’t know about Sam and what happened with Sandra and his daughter.

I woke up the next morning after a fitful sleep. The first thing I did was rush to my toilet and dry heave. Lucy's pregnancy talk immediately came to mind. I sat on the bathroom floor, telling myself it couldn't be possible . . . and yet, redoing the math, my period was late.

Surely, that was stress, right?

Knowing I couldn't sit on the floor of my bathroom all day, I got myself up, showered, dressed, and out the door to work. On the way, I stopped by a pharmacy and picked up a pregnancy test. *You're being ridiculous, Kate.* Still, it was better to know for sure. I needed confirmation that I wasn't pregnant.

When I arrived at the Sea Siren, I went back to my office planning to use the pregnancy kit once I got settled in for the day. But once I started working, I left the kit in my purse. The truth was, I didn't want to know the answer if it meant I was pregnant.

Midmorning, Lucy came into my office. "I'm reporting for duty."

I looked up at her, not knowing what she was talking about.

"You said you were going to New York. So I am here to learn what I need to do to help keep the Sea Siren profitable while you're gone."

"Where are the kids?"

"They're with Harper and Noel. Kira and Mo get along really well."

"But now they have two tiny babies."

"I have every confidence that they can handle it. Besides, Harper agrees that your going to New York with Sam is a good idea. So, she's willing to help out too."

I put my elbows on my desk and scraped my hands over my face.

"What's wrong?" She sat down in the chair in front of my desk. "Have you changed your mind?"

“I don’t know. Ethan was right. I don’t know what happened with Sandra. To be honest, I don’t want to know.”

She nodded. “Ignorance is bliss. But not a very good way to start a new relationship.”

“I don’t want a relationship.”

She arched a brow, clearly not believing me.

I sat back in my chair, blowing out a breath. “Okay, so I would love to have everything that Sam and I had five years ago, but we can’t do that. Knowing that he could walk out on me at any moment, I’d be an idiot to fall for him again.”

Her head tilted to the side and her expression turned sympathetic. “Sounds like maybe you’ve already fallen again. In which case, maybe it’s time you ask him about Sandra and his child. Knowing you, you’re thinking the worst.”

She wasn’t wrong. Still, I didn’t like her calling me out on it. “It’s not like he hasn’t given me a reason not to trust him.”

“Do you know what Ethan did when I told him I was pregnant? Mind you, I was already head over heels with him. I was having to deal with the fact that I was in love with my husband, who only married me to win his grandfather’s favor. Within a year, he was planning to divorce me.”

I had known that Lucy and Ethan had some troubles early in their relationship, but I didn’t know the details. Lucy and I generally shared everything, but I think she withheld some information because Ethan was my brother. She would be the type of woman who didn’t want to sour my opinion of him, particularly, knowing he was the only person in the world I had, except for her.

“He told me that a baby wasn’t in our plan. Of course, I felt like the biggest idiot in the world.”

“You’re not being an idiot to fall for your husband. Or for Ethan. He was a man focused on one thing at that time. But he came around, didn’t he?” I wasn’t sure why she was sharing this story.

She nodded. “But considering his reaction, I would’ve been well within my rights to not take him back. And in some ways, Ethan was like you, closed off to the possibility of love. But then he let all that go, and he and I have a really good life now. You and Sam could have the same.”

“You don’t know that. The situation isn’t the same.”

“God, Kate. Sam loved you. He didn’t want to leave you. He was in a tough position, and clearly, he made the wrong choice. It’s written all over his face that he knows it. I didn’t have that when I told Ethan about the baby. I told the man I was in love with that I was having his baby, and his response was that it wasn’t our plan. You’re right, it’s not the same. When Ethan came to me, I had no reason to believe that he loved me. Hell, even after I had taken him back, your grandfather called, and Ethan left me thinking that he had put that stupid goal above me again.” She sighed. “Love requires forgiveness and trust and faith. You have to want it and be willing to work for it. I know that what Ethan said to you last night has probably put doubt in your mind. But you have to remember that he says these things because he loves you and he doesn’t want you to be hurt. He doesn’t want you to become more closed off than you already are.”

I arched a brow. “You don’t mind if I get hurt?”

She pursed her lips at me. “Of course, I don’t want you to get hurt. But I’d rather you live life fully and experience hurt than to live like you are now and not experience love and happiness. I’m telling you, Kate, love is worth the risk. The universe has given you and Sam a second chance, and in the spirit of Thanksgiving, you should be thankful for that.”

What I wanted was to go back to living my old life, building my business and living on my own terms. Maybe I wasn’t blissfully happy like Lucy, but I wasn’t unhappy. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do here, but I need to find my way through all this on my own.”

“You see, that’s the point, Kate. You are not alone. Yes, ultimately, you need to make your own decision, but you don’t have to do it alone. You have me. You have Ethan. You have

Harper and Anne and Lane. You don't think all of us didn't go through some bullshit in trying to make a life with the men we love?"

I hated that my eyes started to water. Lucy was calling me out on my cowardice.

She blew out a breath. "You know I say all this because I love you."

I nodded. We sat in silence for a moment, and then she reached down to pick up her purse. "I brought you something." She fished a box out and tossed it on my desk.

I arched a brow at her. "A pregnancy test?"

She shrugged. "Humor me. Besides, in this battle between your mind and your heart, it seems like knowing whether or not you're pregnant will be a factor."

"You know this is ridiculous, don't you?" I didn't bother telling her that I had already stopped to buy a pregnancy test

She only shrugged again. "I'll wait here."

"You want me to take it now?"

"Yes. And then once we know the answer, we can move on to your telling me what you need me to do while you're gone."

Reluctantly, I picked up the test, shoving it in my shorts pocket as I made my way to the restroom. I grumbled at how crazy this was as I opened the package and followed the directions. I didn't get pregnant the first time around with Sam when I was on the pill, so why would I now?

During the five-minute wait, I took a minute to clean up the bathroom even though it had already been cleaned. There was no such thing as a bathroom's being too clean in a public establishment that served food and drinks.

When the five minutes were up, I closed my eyes as I turned my head toward the test. I opened my eyes, looking down at the stick's screen.

Pregnant.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sam

I hadn't been as diligent about finding a club location and getting started on our plans as I should've been. Max called me on it during the video conference we had the other day. I wanted to spend all my free time, and even my work time, with Kate, especially since I felt like I was making headway with her.

But I could also sense that she needed a little space from me. Since I didn't want her to start retreating from me and change her mind about going to New York with me, I gave her the time. During our trip, we would be together twenty-four, seven. I would have the opportunity to hopefully convince her that she could take a chance on me again.

Max informed me that he planned to come to California right after Thanksgiving, which meant I only had a couple of days to get everything together before Kate and I left.

I had wanted to leave as early as possible so I could get as much exclusive dedicated time with Kate, but if Max was coming after Thanksgiving, I had a shit-ton of work to get done. As a result, I made arrangements via text with Kate for us to fly out on Tuesday night, which would give us all day Wednesday alone before Thanksgiving on Thursday.

I had waited with bated breath for her response, worried that she was going to message back telling me she'd changed her mind. Luckily, she had okayed the Tuesday night flight, but she did ask that we return on Friday. I wanted to push back

on that, but I reminded myself that she was giving me a whole hell of a lot of herself even though she was still afraid of me, so I let her know that it was fine.

For the next couple of days, I worked my ass off lining up a couple of properties that I felt could work that Max could tour with me when he came out. I obtained floor plans for each of the potential locations and sketched out possible ideas on how we could set them up and renovations they would need to fit our vision.

I contacted Zach, sending him the plans and ideas, and made arrangements for him to tour the locations with me and Max. I also did preliminary research on obtaining the needed permits.

On Tuesday afternoon, I called Max to let him know what I had lined up when we returned from Thanksgiving. Once we got all the business logistics out of the way, Max said, “Mom is pretty excited to finally meet Kate. She’s going overboard to make sure everything is just right.”

I smiled. That sounded like my mother.

“We’re all guessing that since she’s coming, you two have reconciled.”

I stepped away from my bedroom, where I was packing for the flight tonight, and headed out to the terrace to sit and look at the ocean. It was going to be quite a change going from seventy-degree weather here to the bitter cold in New York where the high was probably somewhere around thirty, maybe forty.

“I can’t say we’re fully reconciled. But I’m feeling really good that we’re getting there. In fact, I’m hoping by the time Thanksgiving is over, we will be well on our way to being Mr. and Mrs., just like we planned.” I grinned like a loon that the dream was finally going to come true. “The only thing I have to decide is do I give her back the ring that I gave her before, or would that be too much of a reminder of our past? Maybe I need to get a new ring representing our new start.”

“Marriage? Wow. Don’t you think it’s a little too soon? It’s only been, what, two months, maybe?”

“Too soon? I’ve been waiting five years.” I hadn’t decided for sure whether I was going to ask her to marry me on this trip. After all, I still wasn’t sure we were completely together as a couple. I hoped that with all the time we would be spending together, her resistance to me would finally fall away. She would love and trust me again. But I’d settle for making progress toward that goal as well. Either way, I saw clear skies ahead for this trip and our future.

I had a driver take me to Kate’s condo to pick her up and take us both to the airport where I had a charter flight waiting. We would be making the six-hour flight overnight, and with the time change, we’d arrive in New York Wednesday morning at around six.

Once the flight was off the ground, I undid my seatbelt and went back to a small kitchen area. “How about some bubbly?” I opened the small fridge, seeing the bottle of champagne that I arranged to have put there.

“If you mean seltzer water, then yes.”

I frowned. “Actually, I was talking about champagne.” I looked in the small bar section of the kitchen and saw a bottle of seltzer water. Taking out two glasses, I put in some ice and poured the water.

“Is everything okay?” I asked as I handed her the glass of water.

She smiled, but it was a bit lackluster. “Yes. I’m just tired, and since we’re going to have to sleep on the flight, I think it would be better to have water.”

I studied her for a minute. Since picking her up tonight, she’d seemed more subdued than her usual self. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Just a little nervous about meeting the parents.”

Aha. That made sense. I took her hand, bringing it to my lips and kissing it. “I’m telling you, my parents are going to

love you. In fact, they already do. It's going to be fine. I promise." I leaned toward her and was happy when she met me half the distance for a kiss.

We drank water and discussed what we'd been doing since we'd last seen each other. Seeing her again after a couple of days made my heart sing. I felt so good about this trip and what it was going to mean for our future.

As she finished her water, she yawned, covering her mouth. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry." I took our glasses and put them back in the kitchen. I returned to her, holding out my hand. "There's a bed in the back. Why don't we go get some rest? We'll lose three hours, so we might as well take advantage of sleep while we can. Of course, being a hot-blooded man, I'd hoped we might join the Mile-High Club together, but she looked tired and so if she needed sleep, sleep was what she would have.

I took off the jeans and a T-shirt I'd worn for the flight, leaving my boxer briefs on. Harper pulled out a tank top and a pair of knit shorts from her bag. She left the room, disappearing into the bathroom. Was she embarrassed to change in front of me? Doubt crept into my mind about how this trip might go.

When she returned, her hair was out of the ponytail hanging around her shoulders. She was braless and her shorts exposed her long, sexy legs. Of course, my dick rose to the occasion. Inwardly, I told it to calm down.

She got under the covers, and I sidled up next to her, pulling her to me until I was spooned around her. I kissed the back of her neck. "Thank you for making this trip with me."

She turned her head back to look at me. "You're welcome." She arched a brow. "Do you have something in your pants or are you just happy to be here with me?"

I grinned. "I told you he has a mind of his own. If we ignore him, he'll go away." I kissed her again and pulled the sheet up to better cover her. I'd hoped that she might offer to

take care of my dick, but she turned forward, settling into her pillow and closing her eyes.

I woke up lying on my back, feeling like I was being watched. I turned my head toward Kate. She lay on her side, her dark eyes watching me.

“Are you okay?” I glanced at my watch. It automatically adapted to the time zone change. It was near five in the morning Eastern time. In another hour, we’d be landing.

She nodded. “I’m fine. How about you?”

I arched a brow at the nervousness I thought I heard in her voice. “I’m great.” I gathered her close. “Waking up next to you is always great.” I watched for the reaction on her face. Would she be scared off by my talking about spending nights with her and waking with her in the morning?

Her gaze drifted down to where her hand pressed on my chest. For a moment, I couldn’t decide whether it was there to put distance between us or it was an affectionate gesture. Remembering that she told me she was nervous about meeting my parents yesterday and also how she’d been nervous five years ago when we planned to come to New York, I took her hand, kissing the inside of her wrist. “Are you still nervous?”

Her eyes lifted to mine again, and she nodded.

I leaned forward, kissing her lips. “You know, the same remedy for tension works on nervousness too.”

Her smile was sweet, and the blush that came to her cheeks was adorable.

I pushed her back on the bed and rose over her. “You just relax and let me take care of you, baby.”

I kissed her tenderly, almost gingerly. My goal was to soothe her as well as make her feel good. I ran my hands over her body, sliding them under her tank top, molding them to her tits.

Pushing the shirt over her head, I dipped down, laving one nipple and then the other. Her sighs and moans guided me as I

loved her tits and then slowly moved down her body. I kissed her belly as I tugged her shorts and panties down. I bypassed her pussy, kissing her thighs and down her legs as I finished pulling her shorts and panties off. Kneeling at her feet, I took in her soft, supple body.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.”

She smiled sweetly. “You’re not done, are you?”

“Not by a mile.” I kissed my way back up her legs, stopping when I reached her pussy. I pushed her thighs open and used my fingers to open up her pussy lips and ran my tongue through her wet, pink folds.

“Yes,” she said on a long sigh.

“You like that, baby?” I flicked my tongue over her clit.

“Mmm, yes.”

I settled in, devouring her pussy until she arched up and cried out as her orgasm swept through her.

As she came down, I moved up her body, sliding inside her as I took her hands, lifting them over her head. I lay over her and looked down on her lovely, flushed face.

Her eyes fluttered open, her gaze capturing mine. God, how I wanted to tell her that I loved her. That I’d always loved her. That I always would love her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kate

I was a coward. Ever since I read the positive response on the pregnancy test, not just on the one Lucy brought me or the one I'd had in my purse, but also, the confirmation from the doctor I'd quickly arranged to see, I'd been trying to figure out how to tell Sam.

At first, I couldn't figure out why I was hesitant. While he hadn't said it in so many words, the words he had said made it sound like he wanted me to give him another chance. But even if he wanted a relationship beyond sex, that didn't mean he was thinking of us in the long term.

Ultimately, I determined there were two reasons for my resistance, and to a certain extent, they contradicted each other. The first had to do with the fact that despite having fallen for him all over again, or perhaps I'd always loved him, the walls and roadblocks I'd erected to keep my heart safe were gone.

Those guards had been put up for a reason, and that reason still made me nervous.

He left me before. He could leave me again.

But if I told him I was pregnant, he would do the right thing, just like he'd done for Sandra. But I didn't want Sam simply because he was doing the right thing. I needed to know he wanted to be with me because he wanted me, not out of an obligation to our baby.

Then there was the fact that while he had done the right thing for Sandra, she seemed to be out of the picture now. Had he left her? If he had, that meant even if he did the right thing now, he could still leave later, which was the root of all my fear. I didn't want to give him all of me again, only for him to leave me.

When I refused the champagne, I worried he might catch on that I was pregnant. I suppose that would have been a good thing since I was having a hard time telling him. He believed the way I was acting was due to nerves, which were definitely there.

But my nervousness at meeting his parents was second to being confused about how to deal with telling him about the baby.

Going to bed gave me an excuse to put it off. I slept a few hours and then woke up watching Sam sleep next to me. My heart ached to have everything back that we had lost five years ago. Having his baby could make that happen. But again, how would I ever be sure that we had what we had before if the reason we were together was for a child and not for us?

When he woke, his eyes stared at me with worry. He could tell something was up. He still seemed to think it was nerves about meeting his parents. I should have told him about the baby then, but then he was touching me, trying to settle my nerves, and instead of doing the right thing, I surrendered my body to him.

He'd given me a satisfying orgasm and was now inside me, looking down on me intently. I had a sense of déjà vu. Five years ago, he used to look at me the same way during sex. He usually told me he loved me, but this time, he only held my gaze.

I brought my hand up, pressing it to his cheek. I loved this man. There was no protecting myself anymore. I was in too deep.

"Fuck me," I said.

He smiled. "I thought that was what I was doing." He withdrew and slid in again.

I wrapped my legs around his hips. "More."

He kissed me, moving his hips slow and steady at first, but soon, we were rocking together, reaching for pleasure together.

"Yes . . . Fuck, Kate . . . come, baby, come. I want to feel you come on my cock."

His words supercharged the sensation, sending me flying over the edge into ultimate pleasure. He cried out, driving in and out of me as his orgasm washed through him.

We lay entwined, his body seeped in mine for several long minutes.

"Kate?"

"Hmm?"

He lifted his head, looking down on me again. Emotion filled his eyes. Was he going to tell me he loved me? My heart raced, both wanting and dreading hearing the words. Despite not being able to keep from falling, I still wanted to keep my heart safe.

"Thank you for coming home with me."

How was it possible to feel both relieved and disappointed?

"Thank you for inviting me." I should have said, "I'm pregnant," but the words eluded me.

He kissed me again. "We'll be arriving soon. You have time for a quick shower, though."

I rose from bed, grabbing my clothes and going to the bathroom to take the world's fastest shower. As I cleaned up, I felt guilty that I still hadn't told him about the baby. I knew that made me a terrible person, but it wouldn't be a surprise to anyone that I'd lived my life trying to avoid rejection. This wasn't the first time I'd been self-centered.

Maybe it was an excuse, but I didn't think I should tell him while we were with his family, so I'd have to wait until we

returned home.

Once we landed, we were picked up by a car Sam had arranged and wove through Manhattan to his parents' house. He told me he had an apartment in the city, but he had sublet it when he moved to California.

That meant we were staying at his folks' house. He said if I felt better about it, I could have my own room. I hadn't told him that I wanted a separate room, but I'd be a liar if I said I hadn't been thinking about it. I suppose it was my defenses trying to give me space.

We arrived at their home, and Sam helped me out of the car. Then he got our bags out of the trunk. He was just bringing them up to the stoop when the door flung open and a young woman flew out of the house.

"You're here." She launched herself into Sam's arms, knocking him back with an *oomph*.

Just as quickly, she let go and turned to me. Her eyes were bright and excited. She thrust out her hand. "I'm Vivie, Sam's baby sister." I'd remembered from my time with Sam in the past that she was around six or seven years younger than him, but she was no baby. She had to be twenty-one or twenty-two.

I shook her hand. "Kate."

"It's so great to finally meet you." She put heavy emphasis on the word finally. It made me wonder how much they knew of me five years ago, and of course, what they knew of me now.

"You too."

"Let's go inside. My ass is freezing," Sam said.

Vivie rolled her eyes. "California has made you soft."

He grinned. "I was on the beach in shorts and a T-shirt yesterday. Don't tell me that doesn't appeal to you, little sister."

She laughed. "I guess it does. Maybe sometime, you'll invite me out for a visit."

“Anytime. Anytime.”

When we entered the house, Sam’s brother Max was waiting in the foyer. He gave Sam a hug and then he hugged me as well, surprising me, considering I’d been rude to him the last time I saw him.

“Mom and Dad didn’t want to overwhelm you by being obnoxious like Vivie and me, waiting impatiently for your arrival. They’re in the sunroom where there’s coffee and breakfast.”

The mention of food seemed to remind the baby that it was time to feel queasy. I blanched but tried to hide it.

“That gives you another two minutes to calm your nerves,” Sam said, rubbing my back. I was glad he thought my reaction was nerves.

A middle-aged gentleman entered the foyer. “Shall I take the bags up to your room, Mr. Clarke?”

“That would be great, Mr. Gabriel. Thank you very much.” Sam handed our bags over to Mr. Gabriel. I was used to being around families with butlers, but it was the first time I was around Sam’s family’s wealth. Not that he didn’t have signs of money, but I’d never seen him with staff.

Max and Vivie led the way to the sunroom.

Sam leaned over to me and said in a low voice, “There is a room for you if you’d like. Although I’d much prefer it if you stayed with me. My parents won’t mind, and their room is on the other side of the house.”

“You shouldn’t be talking to me about these things right before I’m about to meet your parents.” It was sweet how he was trying to make sure I was comfortable.

He grinned. “Are you afraid they’ll see how much you want to jump me?”

I slanted a glare at him.

“You’re going to be fine. They’re gonna love you. You’ll see.”

We entered a large window-filled room where the November sun shone through, giving it an accurate name of sunroom. A man and woman were embracing.

“Oh, God. When are you guys ever going to learn to get a room?” Vivie moaned.

The man and woman turned to look at us. I’d met a lot of rich families growing up in the wealthy Wheatly family. Most had an air of snobbery to them, just like Sam had talked about when meeting the very unsnobbish people at Dane’s party. As his parents came toward us, I could see they didn’t have that air of superiority.

“Welcome to our home,” his mother said, giving me a hug. Sam and his siblings took after their mom, at least in their hair coloring. She was a blonde while his father’s hair was dark, peppered with gray along the sides. But Sam and Max had their father’s green eyes.

“How was the trip?” his father asked.

I felt my cheeks heat as the image of Sam making love to me came to mind. I cleared my throat. “It was fine. It’s very nice of you to have me for Thanksgiving, Mr. and Mrs. Clarke.”

His mother waved her hand. “Please call me Juliana.”

“And I’m Drew.”

“You’re probably exhausted, but we have coffee, juice, and breakfast if you’d like,” Juliana said. Max and Vivie were already seated at the table with food.

“Pancakes?” Sam asked.

Both of his parents rolled their eyes. “Of course, there are pancakes.”

His mother looked at me. “As if I wouldn’t have pancakes for Sam. I swear, if he could get away with it, it’s all he’d eat.”

I grinned at him. I remembered his asking me if he was too old to be having pancakes the day we had breakfast in the diner.

“We have breakfast set up as a buffet, so please help yourself to whatever you want,” Juliana finished saying.

The nausea returned, and I worried I might embarrass myself by getting sick. I turned to Sam. “Is there a restroom where I could freshen up?”

“How rude of me. I should’ve thought of that. Here, let me show you where it is.” Juliana led me out of the sunroom and to a bathroom off the kitchen.

As I entered the room, Juliana said, “We really are glad that you’re here, Kate.”

I could see in her eyes that her words were sincere, and it helped alleviate some of my nervousness. They were friendly and kind, and I got the impression that they knew of my past with Sam. I wondered what they thought when he came home with Sandra instead of me?

After freshening up, I managed to eat a piece of toast and drink herbal tea. Afterward, Sam took me up to his room.

“That went fine, didn’t it?” he asked.

“Your parents are very nice, and I can see that you’re a close family.”

“We are.” He clapped his hands together like he was scheming. “I have so many plans for us today, but I know that with jet lag, maybe you’re tired and want to rest.”

“What sort of plans?” I asked as I sat on the large bed in the spacious room decorated in dove gray and crisp white.

“Well, I’d like to take you over to my Aunt Bri’s club. I think you’ll really like her. You and she are a lot alike. For dinner, I thought I’d take you to the Rourke, which is one of the top restaurants in the city, and it’s owned by my Aunt Bri’s family. And then afterward, I can show you the first club Max and I built not far from my Aunt Bri’s in the East Village. In between those plans, we can check out tourist sites or whatever you want to see.”

I felt fatigued just thinking about everything he had lined up, but his face shone with excitement at wanting to share all

these things with me. It was an expression that made me feel Sam was safe now.

But of course, the cautious voice reminded me that I had thought he was safe five years ago. Sandra had shown up and ruined all of that. Where was Sandra now? I really needed to find that out, but just like I was too much of a coward to tell him about the baby at the moment, I also didn't want to know what happened to Sandra and Chelsea. I didn't want reminders of the past.

“It sounds busy, but I'd like to see all that, like to see the Sam I never got to know.”

His head cocked to the side, and he came over to me, kneeling on the floor and taking my hands. “That was another mistake I made five years ago, not having you meet my family and know all about me. I'm an open book, now Kate. I want to show you my world and answer any questions you might have of me.”

I imagined he was referring to Sandra and Chelsea and whatever it was he'd been trying to share with me from the start. If we were to have a future, I needed to ask the questions or at least let him say his piece.

Instead, I said, “Show me New York.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sam

It was ridiculous how much I wanted Kate to see my world. I was like a kid at a show and tell as I took her to my Aunt Bri's club and introduced her.

"It is so nice to meet you," Bri said, giving Kate a hug. I probably should've warned Kate. We were a family of huggers.

Aunt Bri looked at me, her gaze scanning me and then smiling. "I don't think I've ever seen you so happy. At least, not in a while."

I looked at Kate. "I haven't been this happy in a while."

She blinked and shifted. How much longer would it be before I could truly speak my heart and it wouldn't make her uncomfortable?

"I understand that you and I have a similar history, a patriarchal family who didn't support our business vision," Bri said to Kate.

Kate nodded, and the tension in her face and shoulders relaxed. "Yes. My brother was supportive, but I wanted to build the Sea Siren on my own."

"Good for you. My brother was supportive of me too, but his hands were tied. That meant I had to go it alone. I ended up asking his best friend to help me, and then I married the guy." Bri laughed. She looked at me. "Are you taking her to the Roarke?"

I nodded. “For dinner.”

“Excellent. I’m glad you came here. What can I get you two to drink?”

“What do you think, Kate? Should we order a bottle of wine?”

She looked down, and again, I had an unsettling feeling.

“Actually, some seltzer water with lemon would be perfect.”

Had she given up booze? “I guess I’ll have the same.”

“Two seltzers with lemon coming up.” Bri went off to get our drinks.

I guided Kate to a table at the corner of the room. “Are you sure you’re okay?” I held the chair out for her as she sat.

“Yes. But it’s still early in the day, and I don’t want to be drinking while I’m around your family. I need to keep all my wits about me.”

I sat across from her, taking her hand. “I don’t know why you’re still nervous. They were gushing over you.”

She shrugged. “I just feel more comfortable if my brain isn’t fogged by alcohol. Is that a problem?” There was a slight edge to her tone that sounded like the Kate I knew.

“Not at all. I just wish you could relax about my parents.”

There was something about all this that I didn’t quite believe. Like she was hiding something or didn’t want to express her true feelings. But she was here with me in New York, meeting my family and letting me show her my home city. For now, that was enough.

After having a drink at Bri’s place, I walked Kate down to the first club Max and I had ever opened. Unlike Bri and Kate, our club wasn’t open during the day, at least not this one, so it wasn’t open yet. I’d planned to bring her here after dinner, but if she was going to abstain from booze, it didn’t make sense to have her come when it was open.

I opened the door and let her in, feeling nervous for the first time in a long time. It was crazy how important it was to me that she liked my club. I showed her all the cool technological features we had going on, and she oohed and ahed, although she might have been humoring me.

“Is this how your club is going to be in Los Angeles?” she asked.

“Some of the technology features will be the same, but the theme is prohibition. Something noir-like.” I led her through a hallway and up a set of stairs onto the roof, where we had an additional bar and seating. There were heaters as well, but this time of the year, the evenings were too cold, so everything was covered and not in use until spring when things warmed up again.

I removed the covers from two chairs and a table near a heater. I turned the heater on and then sat with Kate.

“Not California, is it?” I asked.

“Not Los Angeles,” she said, rubbing her hands together. I should have grabbed a pair of my sister’s or mother’s gloves for her.

“Are you ready for lunch yet? We can order takeout and have it delivered here, if you want.”

She shook her head. “We just had breakfast?”

I grinned. “The cook makes kickass pancakes, doesn’t she?”

She nodded, but then it occurred to me that she hadn’t had any. In fact, she wasn’t eating much at all on this trip.

“I know a really great diner that has spectacular pancakes. Maybe we can go there for lunch when you’re hungry again.”

She smiled, and while she looked content, something was still off. She was normally outspoken and gregarious, and assertive when she needed to be. But since picking her up at her house yesterday, she’d been more subdued.

I reached for her, tugging her to me and pulling her onto my lap.

“What are you doing?” She laughed as she said it, so I knew it was okay.

“I’m having a hard time remembering the last time I kissed you.”

She settled her arms around my neck. “That’s not good.”

“No, it isn’t.” I pressed my hand to the back of her neck and gently pulled her until our lips met. At first my kiss was soft, but then I turned up the heat. I wanted to kiss away whatever was weighing on her mind or her soul.

She pulled away. “There’s that thing in your pants again.”

I laughed. “He’s the eternal optimist. One look at you, and he’s hopeful that he’ll be able to get close to you.”

Max and I had an apartment in the club where one of us would stay during the club’s rehab the first few months after it opened. I’d considered bringing Kate there to stay instead of at my parents’ house, but it was cramped and the bed was only a double. Besides, it was important to me that she got to know my family and my family got to know her because I planned to bring her into the fold, finally.

But with an ever-expanding dick, maybe I could take her to the small apartment for a little afternoon delight.

“So what’s next?” she asked, getting off my lap. I guess that answered that question.

I gave Kate a tour of the city, but by four in the afternoon, she was looking tired.

“How about we get an early dinner at the Roarke?” I asked, thinking jet lag might be getting the best of her.

I had set a reservation for seven that evening, but I felt confident that I’d be able to negotiate a table this early in the evening. It was one of the perks of being a Clarke, and also being related to the sister of the CEO of the company.

“It’s not too early?”

I shook my head. “No. We can have a nice dinner and then retire early. Or maybe we can watch a movie. Chances are

good that Vivie has taken over the home theater and will be watching a rom-com. If you don't mind that, we can join her."

"That sounds perfect."

By arriving at the Rourke early, I was able to introduce her to Devin Roarke, my Aunt Bri's brother. The restaurant was at the tip of a skyscraper with spectacular views of the city. Devin made sure we had a seat that allowed us to watch the sun setting.

After dinner, I brought Kate back to the house, and we chatted with my parents for a few minutes, but then Kate excused herself saying she had jet lag and wanted to rest.

I went up with her. Maybe now, I could find out why she was acting so differently.

"You don't have to be with me all the time, Sam. Go spend some time with your family." She pulled her tank top and short pajamas from her bag and went into the bathroom.

When she came out, I lay on the bed with her, pulling her body so that it was touching mine. I lay on my side, resting my head on my hand as I made gentle swirls over her belly with my other hand. She pressed her hand over mine like she didn't like it.

"There's something going on with you. Is there a reason you won't tell me what it is?" I asked.

She stared at me for a long moment, and I swore I could see a tug of war in her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, but my phone pinged and interrupted her.

"Talk to me." I ignored it.

"Maybe you should check that," she said.

"Finding out what's going on with you is more important."

"You don't know that unless you check it."

I frowned. "I know that there's nothing more important than you." Frustration lanced through me, but I reminded myself that I needed to be patient.

“You should check it. I’m fine. I just need to rest,” she insisted.

I studied her, not believing her. But whatever it was, she wasn’t going to tell me.

“I had a lovely time today, Sam. I really did.”

I began to wonder if maybe taking her on a tour of my life was a bad idea. Had she been thinking the whole time that this could have been her city and her life if only I hadn’t fucked up five years ago?

I took her hand, clasping it with mine to my heart. “At some point, we really need to talk, Kate.”

The tension in her face was immediate, as was the resistance showing in her eyes.

“I don’t want to scare you, and now isn’t the right time. But it should be soon.” At some point, I’d need to insist on it. We couldn’t have a future until we fully dealt with the past.

She swallowed, and relief showed in her eyes that I wasn’t going to push her now. I tried not to be hurt by the fact that she didn’t want to talk to me.

I leaned over and kissed her. “I have a lot to be thankful for this year, but the biggest one is that you’re here with me now.”

I gave her another quick kiss and moved to get off the bed.

“Sam?”

I turned, waiting to hear what she wanted to say.

She shook her head. “Never mind. It can wait. Go spend some time with your family.”

I wanted to press her, but she turned over, settling into her pillow, so I let her sleep. What the hell was going on with her? Was this a good sign? Did it mean her defenses were down? I didn’t think so. There was something going on with her. Tomorrow wouldn’t be a good day to ferret it out since it was Thanksgiving, but I’d use the plane ride home on Friday to get it out of her.

I headed downstairs to the basement theater. Sure enough, Vivie was there watching a rom-com. Max was with her. They were sharing a large bowl of popcorn.

“Where’s Kate?” Vivie asked.

“She is jetlagged, so she’s gone to bed early.”

“She seems different,” Max said, handing the bowl of popcorn to me.

“She’s just nervous about being around the family.”

“She’s nervous around us? We’re a family of cream puffs.” Vivie laughed.

“I know. But she’s had some experiences in the past that make her wary of people.” I was a part of it, which was why I needed to be patient and understanding.

“Well, she’s here. That’s a good sign,” Max said.

I nodded as I popped a handful of popcorn into my mouth and hoped that he was right.

The next day, I woke up around eight thirty, which was five thirty back in California. I looked over at Kate who was still sound asleep in the bed. Her fatigue and subdued behavior concerned me.

Was she sick? Whatever it was, I wouldn’t get the answer now, so I let her sleep in as I showered, dressed, and headed downstairs.

In the kitchen, my mom and dad, Max, and Vivie were all scurrying around getting ready for Thanksgiving. My parents always gave the household staff Thanksgiving all the way through to Sunday off, so it was a family tradition to make Thanksgiving meals together.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Vivie said, giving me a light punch on the shoulder.

“Remember, my internal clock is different. It’s barely six A.M. in California.

“Like I said, California has made you soft,” she joked.

“Where’s Kate?” my mother asked.

“She’s still resting. Like I said, it’s early in California.” I felt the need to defend her.

“I bet this is the first time she’s had any time off since she opened her place,” Max said. I was grateful for his comment. It showed his support for her.

“I imagine so. I think she puts in at least ten, sometimes even twelve or fourteen hours in her day there.”

“Well then, let her rest,” my mom said.

“Max? Want to come with me and we can get the leaves for the table and get it put together?” my dad said.

“I’ll go get the tablecloth, table runner, and napkins,” Vivie said.

When they left the kitchen, I went over to my mother. “So, what am I in charge of today?”

“Since you’re the last one up, you got put in charge of making the mashed potatoes, including peeling all the potatoes.”

Dammit. I’d forgotten that my siblings and I always wanted to be up and helping early so we could avoid potato peeling. Maybe when Kate got up, she would help me because I was going to be here for a while if the three bags of potatoes were any indication.

“Is an army coming too?” I asked.

My mom shook her head as she went through her Thanksgiving Day checklist. “No. The five of us, plus now we have Kate, and then Sandra and Chelsea.”

“What?” My heart dropped to my stomach. “They moved to Boston.” I had helped them make the move, including packing here and unpacking in Boston. I even helped with the paperwork to enroll Chelsea in school.

Mother slanted a look at me. “They’re still family.”

Jesus fuck. I hadn't planned on this. If anything would snap Kate out of her mood, this would likely be it, but it wouldn't be in a good way.

My mother gave me a disapproving frown. "Kate does know about Sandra and Chelsea, doesn't she?"

I rolled my eyes. "Of course, she does. I left her for them. Remember?"

My mom jabbed her fist on her hip and looked at me. "What I meant was, you told her that she and Chelsea were family to us."

"I thought she'd be in Boston."

"Sam. How do you expect to win back her trust if you're not being honest with her?"

"I do want to be honest with her," I snapped. "She doesn't want to hear it. Each time I tried to tell her, she'd shut me up. She'd tell me it doesn't matter. What's done is done."

"Well, I think you'd better warn her because they'll be here anytime."

It was as if the universe was out to get me as the doorbell chimed.

My mother's brows rose. "It's probably them."

Fuck.

"Come with me to let them in. At least greet them, and then you can go up and prepare Kate."

"Does Sandra know that Kate is here?"

My mom pursed her lips disapprovingly at me again. "Only because I told her."

Then why the fuck was she here? Did she want to mess this up for me?

I followed my mom to the foyer and she opened the door.

"Hey!" Chelsea's face and eyes lit up when she saw me. She zoomed to me.

I squatted down, opening my arms, scooping her up and standing. “Hey, you little munchkin. Actually, you look like you’ve grown.”

“I have. I’m the tallest girl in my class.”

“Good for you, kiddo.”

Sandra approached me, putting an arm around me to give me a hug. “It’s good to see you, Sam.”

“You too, Sandra.”

When she leaned back, she gave me a concerned expression. “I hope it’s okay that we came. I’d already made all the arrangements when I learned you were bringing a guest.”

I shrugged. “It’s fine.” Even though deep down, I felt pretty sure that it wasn’t.

Chelsea wriggled out of my arms, so I set her down.

“Grandma, can I help make the pies?”

My mom smiled. “Absolutely. I’ve been waiting for you to show up so we can get started.” My mom took Chelsea’s hand, leading her back to the kitchen. I needed to go talk to Kate, but I couldn’t leave Sandra in the foyer.

As if she knew my concern, Sandra said, “I told your mom I’d help her stuff the turkey.” She took my hand and gave it a squeeze. “You look good, Sam. You look happy.”

I nodded. “I am happy.” The question was . . . how long would it last?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Kate

My heart stalled and my breath whooshed out of my body as I watched a little girl run into Sam's arms, and then Sandra hugged him.

There they were a family.

Anger rose in me, but I worked to tamp it down. After all, Sam had wanted to tell me something about Sandra and Chelsea. I had to accept that inasmuch as I wanted to pretend otherwise, Sam would always be attached to Sandra through their daughter.

I had believed that they weren't together anymore, but her showing up on Thanksgiving seemed to suggest otherwise. In fact, when the little girl ran off to make pies with Juliana, it sounded like Thanksgiving was a regular occurrence. Did exes really spend the holidays together?

No. There was something wrong here. The way she looked at him suggested things between them weren't done. The way she entered the house was like someone who'd been there before. Sam and Sandra's interaction went beyond sharing custody of a child. What an idiot I was.

During the last few days with Sam, I was torn between wanting to reach out to him and afraid that it was all an illusion. After our day yesterday, I decided I would tell him about the baby today.

What better day than Thanksgiving to share such news? If he was thankful I was here, surely, he'd be thankful a baby

was coming, right?

But everything I thought about him wasn't real. I didn't know what Sam was playing at, but I knew I didn't want to be a part of it anymore.

I rushed back to our room and began packing up my clothes. I stopped only to use my phone to order a car to the airport. I'd worry about getting a plane ticket home when I got there.

Several minutes later, the door opened and Sam walked in. I didn't look at him as I waited to hear the words I'd heard five years ago. Sandra was back.

I continued to stuff clothes into my bag.

"I guess you know Sandra is here." He stood in the room watching me.

"Yeah. Thanks for the warning."

"I didn't know she'd be here."

I turned and glared at him. "Look, I know that your world is still in orbit with hers because of your daughter, but I saw more than that between you two."

"That's bullshit." Anger flared in his eyes.

"I know what I saw, Sam."

"What you saw isn't the problem. How you interpret what you saw is. There is nothing between Sandra and me. There hasn't been anything between us since before I met you."

His words cut me to pieces. "Why are you lying to me?"

He shook his head. "I've never lied to you. From the day our lives came back together, I have been trying to explain—"

"And like I told you, it doesn't matter."

"Then why are you here?" He stared at me like I'd grown a third eye.

I turned back to my packing. "That doesn't matter anymore either."

“The hell it doesn’t.” His voice was so loud I was sure his family could hear it.

“You should keep your voice down. You don’t want everybody knowing your business.”

“I don’t give a fuck what they know or don’t know about my business.” He glared at me for several minutes, but I ignored him as I went to the bathroom to grab my toiletries.

He came to the doorway, blocking me in. “I fucked up five years ago, Kate. This between us now, what we could have, you’re the one fucking it up now.”

I whirled around on him. “I’m not the one who has been lying.”

He gritted his teeth. “I’ve never lied to you. If anyone is lying, it’s you to yourself. You’re so jaded that you can’t see the truth.” His eyes narrowed. “Or maybe you don’t want to see the truth. The way you’ve been acting during this trip is now making sense. I thought maybe it was a sign that you’re letting your guard down, when in fact, it was actually a sign that your guard was up a hundred and ten percent. You don’t want to be here. You don’t want me. Now Sandra gives you the perfect excuse to get away. Everything that you’re thinking and telling yourself is a lie.” He let out a derisive laugh. “Here I was thinking we would get married. But now I see that there’s no getting through to you.”

Married? For a moment, my heart yearned for that. But then I remembered five years ago and ten minutes ago when Sandra put her arm around him.

I pushed him out of the doorway, taking my toiletry bag to my suitcase. “Think what you want. I don’t care. “

“That’s just it, Kate. You don’t care. You don’t care about anyone else but you. Yes, you had some shitty cards dealt to you, but Jesus fucking Christ, isn’t it time to get over it? You don’t think I haven’t had crap cards dealt to me? The difference is I can forgive. You’re incapable of forgiveness.”

I hated every word coming out of his mouth. I hated more that he was right.

I zipped up my bag. “Just go have Thanksgiving with your family. I’m sure your daughter misses you.”

“Goddammit, Kate. Chelsea is not my daughter.”

Those words stopped my forward momentum to the door.

“If you’d let me explain.”

I shook his words out of my head because they didn’t fit with what I saw. The child called his mother Grandma.

“Explain what? I saw you greet them at the door, Sam. You don’t think I’m stupid enough to now believe you’re not that child’s father.”

“If you would let me explain . . . if you would know the truth. But I can see now, even if I tell you the truth, it’s not going to change anything. I am so fucking in love with you, Kate, but it means nothing to you.”

He reached over and grabbed my bag. “Here, let me help you. Have you ordered a car yet? Do you want me to arrange your flight home?”

His change in direction threw me for a loop. And I couldn’t deny that it hurt that he was giving up. God, I was a mess.

He walked out of the bedroom carrying my bag. I followed Sam down to the foyer, feeling confused. My plan was to leave, and that’s what I was doing. I was right all along, and now I was getting what I wanted. So why was Sam’s behavior pushing me back on my heels? I wasn’t the bad guy here, was I?

“Have you ordered a car, or do you need me to do that?” he asked again.

“I’ve ordered it.”

Two minutes ago, I couldn’t get out of the house fast enough, but all of a sudden, I was feeling like I wanted to stay and talk this out. But one look at Sam’s angry face and I knew that wasn’t an option. How could the tables have turned so quickly?

Vivie entered the foyer. “Hey, Sam, Mom wants me to tell you that these potatoes won’t peel themselves.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Her brows furrowed as she looked from me to Sam. “What’s going on?”

“You have one less person for dinner. Kate has decided to leave.”

I gaped at him. “You’re the one who left.” There was no way I was going to let him pin this on me. This all started five years ago when he walked out.

“That was five years ago, Kate. I’ve been busting my balls to make that up to you, to prove to you that I’m a better man now, but it doesn’t matter. Tell me the truth. I never had a chance, did I?”

I had the urge to plead for understanding. Why wasn’t I pissed at him? Instead, I had a strange sense of desperation and panic.

He stared at me, and then his eyes widened and his darkness deepened. “Motherfucker.”

“Sam!” Vivie said.

His green eyes were fierce as they bore into me. “This is payback, isn’t it?”

He shook his head and paced in a circle for a moment. Vivie turned and rushed out of the room.

When Sam came around to face me again, I still saw anger, but also pain. “This has all been some sort of scam to get me to fall in love with you again so you could punish me, right?”

Huh?

“Jesus, you even involved my family. Was that part of your plan too? To embarrass and humiliate me in front of my family by doing to me what I did to you?”

I shook my head, not completely comprehending how he had formulated that idea.

“There’s a big difference, though, Kate. What I did five years ago was a big mistake, but I didn’t do it to hurt you.” He held up his hand when I might have said that the end result was the same. “I know that I did hurt you, and I’ve lived with that regret ever since. Not a day hasn’t gone by when I didn’t want to kick myself or go back and change things. When I didn’t wonder what our lives might’ve been like had I not made that choice. But as you so often tell me, what’s done is done. I can’t go back. But you . . . what you’ve done here is fucking cruel. I knew you were more guarded and less trusting, but I never imagined you would do something like this.”

“I didn’t.” I couldn’t wrap my brain around what he was saying.

Juliana and Drew entered the foyer.

“Is everything all right?” Juliana asked, her concerned gaze going from me to Sam.

“Everything is fine, Mom. I’ll be in to take care of those potatoes in a minute. First, I want to get Kate into her car.”

Drew’s brow furrowed as he looked at me. “You’re leaving? Did something come up?”

“Is this about Sandra?” Juliana asked.

“Bingo.” Sam glared at me.

“I’m sorry if her arrival shocked you. Sam didn’t know that she would be coming,” Juliana said. The kernel of guilt and doubt grew.

“It doesn’t matter, Mom. Does it, Kate?”

I jerked back at the sharpness of his tone. It took me a moment to realize he was tossing my words back at me. How many times had I said “it doesn’t matter” to him when he tried to talk to me about the past?

But what happened in the past was important. It changed the trajectory of my life. It put me into a grief that I’d never recovered from. How could he think that talking about it would simply make all that go away?

“Sam.” Drew’s voice was stern, as a father talking to his son might be. “Back off.”

Sam lifted his hands in surrender and backed away.

At the knock on the door, he walked over to it. “This is probably your ride.” He picked up the bag he’d dropped during the course of our discussion, if that’s what it could be called, and headed to the door.

He jerked it open. “Are you here for Kate Wheatly?”

The man nodded. “To the airport, right?”

“That’s right.” Sam thrust my bag at him. Then he turned to look at me.

“You can now make your grand exit. Go ahead and walk out of here with all your righteous indignation and know that you have succeeded in crushing me.”

He turned and started for the stairs. “Give me a minute, and I’ll take care of those potatoes,” he said to his mom. Then he took the stairs two by two until he disappeared.

I stood in the foyer like a deer caught in the headlights.

I looked over at Juliana and Drew who gaped. At least I wasn’t the only one who felt discombobulated.

Finally, Juliana stepped toward me. “Is what he said true? Are you here because you want to hurt him?”

I suppose it made sense that his mom would be on his side.

“He never stopped loving you, Kate. Not ever. Yesterday was the happiest I’d seen him in over five years.” Her expression was kind, yet sad. It heightened my guilt.

But this wasn’t my fault. I mustered all that indignation that Sam accused me of having. “I was the happiest I’d ever been five years ago, too.”

“He’s regretted that.” She tilted her head to the side. “There’s no room in your heart to forgive him?”

“I can’t trust him.”

“Because Sandra came here today?” she asked.

“He gave me the impression that they weren’t together.”

“First of all, they’re not together. They haven’t been since the summer before their senior year in college.” Drew’s eyes narrowed quizzically like he was trying to figure me out.

Juliana’s expression was gentle. “Sam says you wouldn’t let him explain to you what happened. Everything might make more sense to you, especially after today, if you would listen to him.”

I looked down, knowing what I was about to say was immature. “It doesn’t change the choice he made. “

“No, but you might want to consider the choice you’re making today. You have a second chance here. I know that it can be hard to trust again. Drew and I have a similar story to you and Sam, only in my case, I had twin boys when Drew and I reconnected. It wasn’t easy. It was scary. But through talking and forgiveness, we have a beautiful life. You can’t forgive him?”

I shook my head.

“Forgiveness is hard,” Drew said. “I know it took a long while before Sam forgave Sandra.”

My head snapped up, wondering what he meant.

“Because he was able to do that, we are a bigger and happier family now. What Sam learned, and I hope you will learn soon, is that holding on to your anger and refusing to forgive is like drinking poison and hoping it will hurt the other person. In the end, it only hurts you.”

“I don’t know about that. It’s definitely hurting Sam.” Drew looked toward the stairs.

I refused to feel guilty about that. I refused to let their words seep in. I took a breath and straightened, pulling all my strength inward. “Thank you very much, Mr. and Mrs. Clarke, for having me. I’m sorry I have ruined your Thanksgiving.”

For a moment, I thought she might try to encourage me to stay, but then Sam appeared at the top of the stairs and of course, her loyalty had to be with him. They both stepped

back, and I hurried to the door. It wasn't until I was in the car and we'd driven half a block that the tears began to flow.

It took a while, but I was eventually able to book a flight back to California. Who knew so many people flew on Thanksgiving? It was close to nine when we landed at LAX, and by the time I got home, it was late. I dropped my bag at the door and made a beeline to my room. I climbed into bed and pulled the covers over me. I wanted to stay there forever.

Unfortunately, I had a business to run. I wasn't expected at the Sea Siren today, so I considered just hiding in my bed, but that made it too easy for the thoughts about Sam to drive me crazy. Thoughts like *had I made a mistake?*

To make them stop, I decided to go to work. Because yesterday was Thanksgiving, the lunch crowd would be low, although our evening crowd would probably be back to normal. The busyness of it all would distract me.

When I arrived, everything was running smoothly. I couldn't decide if it was a good or a bad thing. It was good that all was well, but it proved that I was unnecessary in making that happen.

"Hey? We weren't expecting you back until tomorrow." Lucy came up and gave me a hug. But then, her smile turned to concern. "What happened? Oh, God, did he not take the baby news very well?"

God. One more thing to add to the growing pile of guilt. "I didn't tell him. I was planning to do it on Thanksgiving, but then everything went sideways."

I went back to my office, sitting in my chair as all the thoughts swirled in chaos again.

"What happened?" Lucy closed my office door and sat in the chair by my desk.

I looked up at her. "Sandra and Chelsea showed up on Thanksgiving."

She looked surprised, and then her face had an expression that suggested she understood. “Well, Chelsea is his daughter. His parents are the grandparents. I guess that makes sense.”

I remembered how Sam told me he wasn't Chelsea's father. Why would he say that? “The girl called her Grandmother, and then Sam had the nerve to tell me he wasn't Chelsea's father. It was like déjà vu all over again. A punch to the gut.”

She nodded. “I'm so sorry. I'm sure you confronted him about that. What did he say?”

This was where things got really confusing. “He turned it all around. He accused me of going to New York with him as a way to get back at him, to make him love me and then dump him like he did to me.”

“Really?” Her expression showed the same amount of confusion I was feeling. “Did he say that? Did he say that he loved you?”

“It doesn't matter. You're missing the point. He lied to me.”

“Did he really?” She arched a brow. “If I remember correctly, you weren't very interested in hearing what he had to say about five years ago.”

God, was she going to take his side too? “All his coming around and talking about second chances and how it was only me and always me, what else was I supposed to think?”

“Exactly that. That he loved you and wanted a second chance.” She leaned forward, giving me a pointed stare. “But you have a tendency to make judgments around things that you don't have the information about and yet refuse to hear the information. It's not fair to him, and all it does is make you unhappy.”

“It doesn't matter now.” Inwardly, I cursed as I realized I was saying the words that Sam mockingly cast back at me. “I need to work.”

She stood. “I know that in any other situation, you would completely close off to him, but you're having his child, Kate.

You can't keep that from him."

"I know. I just want to think about it right now."

A sense of relief washed over me. When she left my office, I turned my focus on what I came to do—work hard and forget Sam, even if it was just for a few hours.

Of course, when I got home, all the thoughts came rushing back. All of them were telling me one thing—that I had messed up. I should have stayed and talked with Sam. Fear and pride had shut me down and driven me away.

I was about to get ready for bed when a knock came on my door. My heart stuttered and hope filled it. I rushed to the door, flinging it open.

"Ethan?"

"I'm sorry to just drop in like this, but I tried calling and sending a few texts, but I didn't hear from you. Lucy says you came back early. She also told me about the baby."

I wanted to be mad at her for that, but they were married, and he was my brother. I let him in. "I don't know what I have to drink." I'd only been gone a couple of days, but it felt like a year.

"How about I make us some tea?" He went straight for my kitchen.

I followed him in and sat at the table.

"It sounds like maybe Sam didn't take the news well."

I wondered why she told him about the baby but not that I hadn't told Sam yet. More likely, she'd told him the day I took the tests.

"It's all right, Ethan. I'll handle it."

He set a mug of water in the microwave, programming it, and then turned around, leaning against the counter as it heated the water. "He has responsibilities, Kate. If I remember correctly, the reason he left five years ago was because of those responsibilities. Why would he not do that now?"

Good question. In fact, when Sandra showed up with Chelsea, he didn't seem mad that she hadn't told him about her. Why was he acting differently with me? Doubt about his feelings for me grew, as did my conviction that leaving was the right thing to do.

But I didn't want to go into all this with Ethan. "I told you it's not a problem. Let me and Sam deal with it on our own."

When the microwave beeped, he pulled out the glass and put a teabag in it. He brought it over to the table and set it in front of me as he pulled out the chair and sat down next to me.

He took my hand. "I know what I said last week at dinner about your life being incompatible with raising a child. But I want you to know that I know you're capable. And I know that deep down, you're filled with love. Even if you don't want to give it to anybody else, I know you will give it to this child."

Tears filled my eyes even as a little bit of anger simmered in my gut. What did he mean that I didn't want to give love to anyone else?

"Lucy and I are here for you. Whatever you need, whenever you need it, okay?"

I nodded. "Thank you. I'm glad I won't be alone."

He inhaled a breath and sat back. His eyes narrowed, telling me he was about to impart something I didn't want to hear. "You're not alone, Kate. And if you ever feel like you are, I think you need to look in the mirror to see why. I know it's scary to let people in, especially after what happened with Sam and with Grandfather. But life is so much sweeter and more colorful when you let others in."

He stood, leaning over to give me a kiss on the head. "You get some rest."

I was irked, yet too tired to protest. "Thank you, Ethan."

"Of course." When the door shut behind him. I left my tea on the table and went back to my room, climbing into bed and pulling the covers over my head. I suppose it was a metaphor for how I'd lived my life over the last five years. Keeping the

world out. But I had started to let Sam in, and look how that ended.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sam

I went into the kitchen, grabbing the potatoes and taking them to the sink, scrubbing them. When that was done, I brought everything I needed out onto the sun porch to peel them.

“Sam.” My mom’s gentle voice came from the entry to the sunroom.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Mom. Just let me take care of these potatoes.”

When I didn’t hear an answer, I slanted my gaze toward the door and saw that she left. Hopefully she’d let everyone else know that I was in no mood to talk.

“Well played, Kate,” I murmured. It was hard to believe that she would do something so cruel as to set me up to break my heart to punish me. Didn’t she know that leaving her five years ago was painful for me too? My heart split into two, just like hers had. Whether she did or didn’t, she decided it needed to be broken again.

As much as I hated peeling potatoes, I had to admit it was a good solitary activity, allowing me to take out my frustration. Of course, it would take more than peeling potatoes to fix what Kate just broke in me.

When I finished peeling, I brought the potatoes to the kitchen. I put a large pot of water on the stove to heat, then I pulled out a knife and cut the potatoes into large chunks.

Max entered the kitchen. “You want some help?”

I shook my head, still too angry to speak. Thankfully, he left me alone.

When I got the potatoes into the water, my mom came up to me, resting her hand on my arm. “Want to go upstairs and take some time? I’ll finish the potatoes and call you when it’s time for dinner.”

I looked at her, feeling gratitude. For a moment, I was a little boy wanting to break down and cry while my mom soothed me and made everything better. But this wasn’t some little scrape or bruise. Kate eviscerated me.

I looked at her. “Why won’t she listen to me? Why wouldn’t she forgive me?”

She pulled me, in holding me. “I don’t know, honey.” She pulled back, pressing her palms against my cheeks. “But don’t lose hope.”

I scoffed. “I have no hope to lose, Mom.”

I left the kitchen and went up to my room. Kate’s scent lingered in the air, so with a curse, I left and headed down to one of the guest rooms. I dragged a chair by the window and sat staring out of it, though not seeing anything.

A few moments later, there was a knock on my door. “I’m not in the mood.”

“I’ve got a bottle of scotch.” Max’s voice came through the door. There wasn’t enough scotch in the world to drown out my pain, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t try.

“Door’s open.”

He came in and handed me the bottle. In his other hand, he had a glass. “I wasn’t sure you would want to use this, but I brought it.”

He was right about not needing the glass. I pulled the lid off the bottle and took a long swig, savoring the burn as it went down my gullet.

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk?”

“Nope.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.”

I was feeling a pretty good buzz when my mom knocked on the door.

She opened the door. “Sandra offered to leave, but I told her to stay. I hope that’s okay.”

I shrugged. “This isn’t her fault, at least not this time.”

“Dinner is ready.”

“I think I’ll just stay here. I’m not in the mood to talk, and I don’t want to ruin dinner for the rest of you.”

She walked over and looked down on me. “It’s Thanksgiving, Sam.”

I shook my head. “I don’t feel very thankful, Mom.”

I was right about the scotch. I woke up the next morning with a dry mouth and a headache, along with the excruciating pain and raging anger from the day before. But I decided I wasn’t going to wallow in my misery anymore. It was time to get back to doing what I did best, and that was building clubs with my brother.

After showering and dressing, I went downstairs for coffee. When I entered the dining room, everyone, including Sandra and Chelsea, was at the breakfast table, looking up at me with eager eyes.

“We missed you at Thanksgiving, Sam,” Chelsea said around a mouthful of pancake.

I went over and gave her a kiss on the head. “I’m sorry about that, kiddo. I wasn’t feeling very well.”

“Are you done being sick?”

No. I figured I’d have this sickness forever, but Chelsea wouldn’t understand that. At least not until she was older.

“I’m feeling better today. Thank you.” I poured myself a cup of coffee and snagged a pancake. Around the table, people were glancing back and forth at each other as if they expected

me to act differently. “Max, I have a flight scheduled back to California this afternoon. Why don’t you join me, and we can get started on all the club details today?”

He looked at our parents as if he thought they might have input on my plan. My parents shrugged, clearly, not sure what to do for me.

“Yeah, okay.”

I scarfed down my pancake, took my plate into the kitchen, and then carried my coffee upstairs to pack.

Max came into my room a few minutes later. “What if I went back and started working on things, and you stayed here for a little while?”

I looked at him, arching my brow. “Pulling the twin switch isn’t going to change anything.”

“I wasn’t talking about switching. Well, maybe I was, but not me being you and you being me. I was thinking I could take over the Los Angeles project and you could do the Las Vegas one.”

I knew what he was doing, and a part of me appreciated it. But I needed to immerse myself in work, and there was no way I would let Kate run me out of town.

“I’m good. Once we get back to work, it’s all gonna be okay.”

He looked at me skeptically but then shrugged and went off to pack his bag.

We arrived in California late Friday night, heading straight back to my house and going to bed. The next morning, I woke up and took a walk on the beach, hoping to clear my head. When I arrived back, Max was in the kitchen brewing coffee. I grabbed a cup and my tablet, heading out onto the terrace to reorient myself to our club project.

I was sorting through a to-do list when there was a knock at the front door.

“I’ll get it,” Max called.

I opened up an email about projected prices for each club renovation. It would be part of the consideration when we decided which building to go with.

I heard an angry voice and a crash. I jumped up, dropping my tablet onto the chaise as I rushed into the house.

Ethan had Max pinned up against the wall, yelling at him. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Sam?”

I rushed over, grabbing Ethan and pulling him off Max. I shoved him hard. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Ethan? You come into my house and attack my brother?”

He blinked, looking between me and Max. He must have mistaken Max for me.

“If you have a beef with me, talk to me, not my brother. Second, I don’t know why you think you have a beef with me. Your sister is the one who left.” The anger burned hotter, fueling me into aggression. I pushed Ethan again. “Were you part of the plan too?”

“What are you talking about?” Ethan said, pushing my hands away.

“The let’s-get-back-at-Sam plan. Didn’t Kate tell you? It worked like a charm. Now if you don’t mind, get the fuck out of my house before I call the cops and have you arrested for assaulting my brother and trespassing.”

Ethan’s eyes narrowed. He stepped forward, getting into my face. “I’m here to find out why you’re not doing right by my sister. You broke her heart five years ago to do the right thing, but now she’s the one that’s pregnant, and you want nothing to do with it?”

“I said get the fuck out of my house.” I was ready to grab him and toss him out on his ass.

“Wait, what?” Max stepped into the mix. “Are you saying Kate is pregnant?”

It took a minute for Max’s question to sink in. I looked from him to Ethan.

Ethan smirked. “Like you don’t know. I really wanted to kick your ass when you came back to town, but I’d hoped you would be the one person who could reach her, to help her open her heart up. But all you did was abandon her again.”

“I did no such thing. I don’t know what she’s telling you. She’s the one who left.”

He gave me a shove and then headed to my door. “It’s probably better if you don’t come around. You’re clearly not in your daughter’s life, so why would we expect you to be in this baby’s too?”

When the door slammed behind him, I turned to Max. “What the hell was he saying?”

Max looked confused as well. “I’m pretty sure he just said that Kate is pregnant.”

Emotions swirled in a torment in my chest. I was going to be a dad for real. She didn’t tell me. For all her talk about honesty, she didn’t say a word. Was that also part of her plan? Did she want to punish me for leaving her by breaking my heart and taking my child?

I went over to the bowl by the door and grabbed my keys.

“Where are you going, Sam?”

“I’m going to talk to Kate.”

“I’ll come with you. I’ll drive.”

“I don’t need a chauffeur or a chaperone.”

“You do need a chauffeur. You’re pissed. Let me drive you.”

The drive to the Sea Siren took forever. “You drive like an old lady, do you know that?”

Max slanted his gaze at me. “I’m ten miles over the speed limit. If I get a ticket, it will only slow us down.”

The Sea Siren wasn’t open, but when we arrived, there were a couple of cars in the parking lot indicating that staff was there. Kate’s car was there as well. Good. I didn’t want to drive out to her condo.

When I tried to open the door, it was locked. I pounded on the door. “Open up, Kate.”

Max got out of the car and leaned against it. “Maybe don’t go barging in like her brother did. We don’t want her calling the cops.”

I was so unbelievably angry. I hadn’t been this angry in five years. Not since I learned the truth about Sandra and Chelsea. But I had been able to do what Kate was incapable of, and that was listen, understand and sympathize, and eventually, forgive.

The door opened, and an irritated looking Dana poked her head out. “We’re not open—”

I pushed the door open and strode in.

“Hey. We’re not open.”

“I’m not here for a drink. Where is she?” I scanned the bar and restaurant area.

Kate stepped out of her office into the hallway, her eyes wide as she saw me.

“I’m going to call the cops.” Dana pulled out her cell phone.

“That gives Kate about five minutes to explain why she wasn’t going to tell me I’m going to be a father.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Kate

I had been both dreading and hoping for Sam to walk into my club or come to my home ever since I arrived home late Thursday night. I had figured if he had stuck to our travel plans, he wouldn't have gotten home until late last night. So today would be the first day he could show up, and here he was.

I had expected him to be angry, but the fury I saw on his face made my breath catch. But then I realized it wasn't because I had left. It was because I hadn't told him about the baby. How did he find out? It had to be Lucy or Ethan. Probably Ethan.

Pulling myself together, I lifted my chin, letting him know he wouldn't intimidate me. "Let's go out back to talk."

"Why? You want to continue to have your staff believe I'm an asshole, when you were the one who lied, the one who was going to keep my child from me?"

I glared at him. "If you really think I would do that, then you don't know me at all."

His eyes flared with wild heat. "As it turns out, I don't know you. You were right all along, Kate. You're not the same person you were back then. My heart saw you through the lens of what we once had, but I see clearly now."

Each word felt like a stab in my heart. I didn't want this. I didn't want him angry and believing the worst in me. How ironic that for the last couple of months, he'd been trying to

have me change how I saw him. And he had. I'd just been too afraid to tell him. Now it was probably too late, assuming I ever had the guts to tell him the truth.

I brushed past him, heading toward the back of the restaurant, planning to exit and go to the beach. "I'll be outside if you actually want to talk."

"That's really rich, Kate. All I've wanted to do since I saw you was talk." He followed me out.

I walked through the outdoor patio and onto the beach. The day was clear and the morning air cool but not cold. It was rarely cold in southern California.

"Was that part of your plan, as well? Break my heart and steal my child? That last one is a pretty heavy penalty, don't you think?"

I whirled around on him. "I was going to tell you. I was going to tell you on Thanksgiving."

He arched a brow, his expression telling me didn't believe me. "So you ran off instead?"

I huffed out a breath. "You know why I left."

"I do know why. It's because you only believe whatever stupid story you tell yourself about me instead of asking for the truth. Fucking A, Kate. You wouldn't even let me tell you the truth."

I understood that this was my part of the problem. Ethan had been right. My fear, my need to keep my heart and soul locked up tight, had failed to keep me safe. Instead, it was causing me more pain. For the last few days, I'd tried to tell myself I'd done the right thing, but my guilt and yearning for him contradicted that.

Sam was here, and if I could muster the courage to tell him how I was really feeling, maybe there'd be a chance for us. But as I looked into his green eyes, I could see that whatever we had was gone.

"So, tell me then," I said, taking a tiny step out into the area of vulnerability. If he rejected me here, I'd likely retreat.

He jammed his hands on his hips and smirked at me. “Why? It won’t change anything.” He tossed my words back at me.

I crossed my arms in front of me and turned toward the water, needing protection from his anger even though I deserved it.

“I was going to tell you. I will admit that at first, I wasn’t sure, for all the reasons I think you already know. But then I planned to tell you on Thanksgiving, thinking it would be something to be thankful for.” I slanted a glance toward him to see if my words were making an impact.

His jaw tightened, and he turned his head to look out over the ocean. Finally, he turned back. “And because you saw Sandra and Chelsea, you used it against me. Because of them, I didn’t deserve to know?”

I closed my eyes, understanding now that he was lost to me.

“I wasn’t thinking about the baby at that time.”

“Of course not, because the only thing you care about is yourself, Kate. Congratulations. You’ve achieved your goal. I know I hurt you five years ago, and I regret that, but you’ve locked your heart up so tight, you won’t let any love in. I feel sorry for you. But now you can go on and live your life exactly as you set out to live it. Without love. I just hope that you can find a little bit for our child.”

I whirled around to him, gaping. Did he really think I was incapable of loving my baby?

“Where will you be?” I lashed out. “I don’t see you acting like a father of the year with your other child.”

It occurred to me that when Sandra had shown up with Chelsea, Sam had dropped everything, including me, to do the right thing. To make a family with her. He wasn’t doing that with me. Sandra hadn’t told him about Chelsea until after she was born, yet I don’t remember seeing this anger in him toward her. It made me question everything he had been trying

to make me believe over the last few months. It made it easier, lessened my guilt that I'd ended things.

He laughed derisively. "Chelsea is not my daughter. Jesus, even when I tell you the truth, you don't want to believe it. With all your harping on me about lies, you were the one who was lying. But let me tell you something, Kate. I'm going to be in our child's life, and I don't mean one of those every other weekend father-type things. I want to be at every doctor's appointment. I want to be there when it's born. I will have equal time raising it."

I might've yelled back, except my emotions were so wrought that I didn't think I could without bursting out into tears. So, I just did my best to hold it together and glared at him.

He shook his head. "If you would have told me on Thanksgiving that you are having a baby, I would've been over the moon. I would have thought that you had finally forgiven me, that finally, we could have a future together. But it was all in my head, wasn't it?"

I shook my head, but it was so imperceptible that he probably didn't notice. He turned away, stalking back to the restaurant before I could find the courage to tell him he was wrong.

Once he disappeared into the Sea Siren, my knees buckled and I sank to the sand. Bending my knees, I rested my forearms on them. I bent my head, laying my forehead on my arms, and started to cry.

A hand rubbed my back, making me jerk.

Lucy gave me a wan smile. "I came as soon as Ethan told me what he did. I take it Sam got here before I did."

I nodded, turning to look over at the water, resting my chin on my forearms. "He thinks everything I did was to punish him for five years ago, including not telling him about the baby."

"You told him that wasn't true, didn't you?"

I turned to look at her. “Sure, but why should he believe me?” I let out a humorless laugh. “It’s true what they say. Karma is a bitch. All this time, he’d been trying to tell me the truth, and I didn’t want to listen. I called him a liar back in New York. Even then, he tried to tell me, and I didn’t listen. I can’t really blame him for not wanting to listen to me.”

Lucy continued to rub my back. “Emotions are raw right now. Give it time.”

I shook my head. “You should’ve seen him, Lucy. Whatever he felt for me is dead and gone.”

“There was a time that Ethan thought that about me. And yet, here we are. But honey, if there’s a chance that you and Sam can have a future, you’ll have to open up to him. You have to share what’s inside you and accept what he says is inside him.”

“I know.” I turned my head to look at her. “How do you do that?”

“Do you want to do that? Because in my mind, that has been the first hurdle. It hasn’t seemed like you wanted to.”

“I do want to. I have for a while, but I’m just too afraid. I don’t ever want to feel like I felt the day he left me.”

“And how do you feel now?”

I didn’t say anything because she knew the answer.

“So, as it turns out, keeping your heart closed off doesn’t help you avoid the very thing you’ve been hoping to avoid. And I’m going to guess that your happiest moments over the last few months have been the ones where you’ve let Sam in, even just a tiny bit.”

I didn’t respond to that, either, because there was no need to.

“With the baby, you two are now joined forever. That means you have time.”

The rest of the day, my staff walked around me like they were on eggshells. I wasn't grumpy or snapping at them. I think they were uncomfortable because of the scene that played out with Sam earlier. My staff and I were all friendly, but there were still some things I didn't want the people who work for me to know about my private life.

Luckily, it was the weekend, and even after a holiday, our regular crowd was back, along with tourists in the area. Our Sunday lunch crowd was bigger than usual, probably from people down visiting family for the holiday who were having one last meal before heading home.

Thankfully, Monday, we were closed, and I was able to once again hide in my bed. I was irritated at myself that I continued to draw away from the world. Normally, I was the type of person to take action. Reactionary is what Ethan used to call it. It was what got me into the position I was in now. Reacting but not listening.

Midmorning, my phone rang. First, I was going to ignore it, but then I didn't want to be the pathetic person who hid in their bed anymore, so I answered it.

"Hey." Harper's voice came over the line. "I know you're closed today, so I want to invite you over for lunch. I feel like I haven't seen you in a while, but with these two kids, it's hard for me to get out."

I couldn't imagine that the news about me and Sam hadn't reached her even though she wasn't openly saying it.

"I don't know. Not feeling very well."

"If it's because you're tired and you need to relax, you can do that here. We have a beautiful beach. If it's because you're hiding, that's not like you, Kate. So, get your ass out of bed and over to my house."

I grumbled, but since she was right, I got my ass out of bed and over to her house.

As I pulled up to her driveway, I passed Sam's house, and my heart pinched tight in my chest. Would it do that every time I came to see Harper now?

When she opened the door for me, her expression was sympathetic, but then she put on a smile and welcomed me in.

“I know you must know what’s been going on. You don’t have to pretend like you don’t.” I figured I’d make it easy for her.

She let out a breath. “I do know, but I want to hear from you. More than that, I want to know how you’re doing. Physically and emotionally. I’m not sure if you remember, but I was sort of in your position at one point.”

I didn’t know all the details, but I knew that she hadn’t told Noel right away when she was pregnant. She did something even crazier than me. She went to Mexico to confront a woman who was the head of a cartel.

Noel came in from their terrace. He gave Harper a nod and then turned and smiled at me. “Hello, Kate. How are you?”

Married people told each other everything, so he had to know about me and Sam, as well. “Hanging in there, Noel.”

“I’m going to go up and check on the kids. I’m not sure Mo will be down for very much longer, and I don’t want him waking up Noelle.”

“Thank you, baby.” Harper gave him a flirty smile. “I owe you.”

“You know I’ll make you pay.”

Outwardly, I rolled my eyes at this sappiness, but on the inside, it felt like my heart was breaking all over again. That could’ve been me and Sam.

“Come on. Let’s go for a walk on the beach. It’ll clear your mind and senses.”

Couldn’t imagine there was anything in the world that would help me feel better. But it couldn’t make me feel worse, could it? I followed her through their yard and out the back gate to the beach.

We strolled southward. In the distance, I could see two people down at the farthest end of the beach. They had just reached the cliff and were turning around, heading back

toward us. Although I couldn't make out their features, I knew one of them was Sam. There was something about the way he walked and carried himself.

I stopped. "Maybe we should walk the other direction first."

"I know that you are not too much of a coward to face Sam, are you?"

I looked at her. The pain lanced through me that she would goad me.

Her features softened. "I'm sorry. But you can't run from this. And the longer you try to hide, the harder it's going to be to fix it."

I looked up the beach where Sam and Max came closer. I turned back to her. "Lucy said because of the baby, I have time."

"You've had five years, Kate. In that time, your hurt and resentment and anger festered. How many more chances do you think you're going to have?"

I knew the moment Sam realized I was on the beach. He stopped, his entire body tensing. He said something, and Max turned to him in response. Was Sam getting the same pep talk I was getting?

I remained rooted where I was, not wanting to face him but not wanting to run away, either.

Eventually, they started walking toward us again. As they drew closer, Sam's eyes were hard as they watched me.

They finally reached us.

"Hello, Harper. Kate," Max said jovially.

Harper smiled. "Hello, Max. I see you're enjoying the lovely weather, as we are."

"We are."

"This is bullshit. The two of you set this up." Sam glared at his brother.

Max patted him on the shoulder. “You guys are going to sit on the beach until you work everything out. Hopefully, it’ll end with a bunch of I love yous and you will go forward in bliss. But if not, you at least need to find a way to get along for the baby’s sake.” Max looked at Harper. “Shall we?”

I gave Harper a pleading look, asking her not to leave me.

She smiled. “Open heart, Kate.” She looked at Max. “I have some wine, if you’d like to join Noel and me. Mo might be up, but he’s always good for a laugh.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Harper walked away, leaving me alone with Sam. For a minute, I thought he was going to walk away, but then he turned toward the water, shoving his hands into his pockets.

My mind scrambled for something to say that might make him be less angry with me.

“The baby’s due around July.” I watched his profile. His jaw tightened.

When his head turned to look at me, I searched his eyes, hoping that somewhere in there was the man who not so long ago told me I was his one and only.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sam

What the fuck was Max doing? The minute I saw Kate on the beach ahead of us, pain and anger mixed in a deadly combination.

And it wasn't like I was feeling peachy keen at the time. I was fairly certain that the hole in my heart would be there for the rest of my life.

Just like Kate, Cupid wanted to punish me by leaving me with this gaping emptiness that only Kate could fill.

When she left on Thanksgiving, my heart had broken, but learning about the baby that she never told me about had blown it to smithereens. I knew Max had arranged for me to see her, and it was like putting salt on an open wound. Yes, all the metaphors for pain were happening inside my chest this minute.

I wished I were strong enough to walk away right now, not from my child, but from Kate and this conversation we were supposed to have. If I were lucky, she'd behave the way she always did when a heavy, deep, and real conversation was at hand. She deflected and dismissed anything involving emotion. At any time, she would say, "It doesn't matter now."

"The baby's due in July."

My head jerked to her. I hadn't expected that. Even more unexpected was the rush of emotion that filled my chest at the realization that in July, I'd be a father.

I was having a child with the woman I had loved nonstop since the day I met her on Halloween five years ago.

As angry and hurt as I was, her coolness and betrayal hadn't killed it. For the last few nights, I'd wished for my love for her to die. I'd begged for Cupid to release me from her.

And yet, here I was, too hurt and angry to reach out to her, and yet still too much in love with her to not hope there was a future.

She bit her lower lip nervously, something I couldn't remember ever seeing in her. "I know you don't believe me, and I don't blame you. The truth is that nothing I did was to punish you. I went with you to New York because I wanted to, because despite my best efforts, you had wormed your way into my heart."

A week ago, I would have been on my knees thanking the Lord for hearing those words. Even now, my heart wanted to burst open with love for her. But I fought against it.

"And I was going to tell you about the baby. On Thanksgiving."

"You're right, I don't believe you." I lied, and I realized I'd just become the man she accused me of. A liar. The truth was, I did believe her. Kate wasn't the vengeful, scheming type. If she was angry, she let you know right then and there. But it didn't change the fact that she still didn't believe in me. She didn't trust me. Not with her heart, and not with our child.

She nodded and continued to stare out over the ocean. After a moment, she said, "Do you still want to tell me about Sandra and Chelsea?"

I almost laughed. "Why? It won't change anything."

Her face jerked to me, her eyes flaring with anger. "At least I'm trying here, Sam."

That time, I did let out a derisive laugh. "What the hell do you think I've been doing for the last couple of months? But you were right, what good does it do? It hasn't changed anything." I emphasized each word, letting her know that despite all my efforts, she had continued to keep me out. Oh,

sure, she might have said that I wormed my way into her heart, but even that suggested I had forced my way in like an infestation. She hadn't opened her heart to me.

She turned away, but not before I saw the tears pooling in her eyes. They tugged at my heart, but I quickly snipped the strands of sympathy and guilt. We were here because of her.

Finally, she let out a shuddering breath. "I will text you the information about the next doctor's appointment."

I gave a curt nod. "Good." I told myself that this was a good time to end the conversation, so I turned and headed back up toward my house. I held on tight to my righteous indignation even as with every step I took away from her, I had a growing sense of doing the wrong thing.

I didn't heed the doubt and instead entered my back yard and marched up to my house. I went straight to my liquor cabinet and poured two fingers of scotch, hoping to burn away the guilt and doubt.

"Where's Kate?" Max entered the room.

"Don't ever play matchmaker again," I growled.

"She didn't respond well?"

She hadn't been defensive like usual, but that didn't mean anything. "I'm done." I downed the scotch, the burn doing very little to dull the pain.

"Listen, Kate did wrong by running off and not listening and trusting you, and by not telling you about the baby, but all this started five years ago when you walked out on her for Sandra."

"What else was I supposed to do? I did exactly what our dad did. I did the right thing by her." I poured more scotch.

"How come you weren't angry at her?"

"Who? Sandra? I was. I was pissed." I took the bottle and my glass to the couch, settling in for a long binge.

Max shook his head. "Not when she showed up with the baby. When she told you about the baby, you weren't pissed

like you are now at Kate. Instead, you insisted that you and her and the baby would be a family.”

An unsettling feeling grew in my gut.

“Not only are you pissed at Kate for not telling you she’s pregnant, but I don’t think you have once offered to do the right thing, have you?”

I swallowed the scotch, feeling the burn, but the truth of Max’s words remained. “I told her that I was going to be a part of this baby’s life. All of it. I’m not going to be an every-other-weekend dad.”

“That’s not what you told Sandra. If I were Kate and I was analyzing this, I’d think you never really loved me. At least not as much as Sandra.”

“She’d be wrong.” I growled it out.

“I know, but from her point of view, you dropped everyone and everything to be with Sandra, who waited until Chelsea was born to tell you, but you didn’t act like you are now with Kate.”

I glared at him. “It’s not the same. You know that.”

“All the more reason to wonder why you won’t step up for Kate. As far as I can tell, right now, you’re doing the thing that she’s been doing for the last few months. You’re trying to kill your feelings for her. How is that working?”

Not very well.

“The way I see it, Sam, this is your tipping point. Right now, Kate is right there, ready for you to take hold of your future together. But if you miss it, you’re going to lose her for good.”

“That’s assuming Kate even wants me.” Why did he continue to push me to her? She was the one who didn’t want me. Yes, she said that I had wormed my way into her heart, but that was hardly a declaration of love and commitment.

“Sam, what do you really want?”

“I want her!” I turned away, hating that I couldn’t have held that declaration in.

“Then you have to try again because if you don’t, you will look back at this moment and regret it, probably even worse regret than having left five years ago. You know as well as I do that this is the make-or-break moment for you and Kate.”

He was right, but my pride and anger didn’t care. I set my glass and scotch bottle on the coffee table and stalked toward the front door.

“Are you going to see Kate?”

I shook my head. “Kate is the last person I plan to see.”

For the next week, I did two things—I worked my ass off during the day and then drank the night away. I drank to numb the pain, but also to quiet Max’s words that ran on an endless loop in my head. He’d returned to New York two days ago, so I was able to get away from the looks of disappointment, but his words stayed.

I’m the one who’s right, I defended myself.

Would you rather be right or happy? I could hear Max replying.

I’d just poured my first drink of the night when there was a knock at the door.

I opened the door. “Kate.”

She stood on my stoop looking uncertain. “I have a doctor’s appointment Thursday at nine in the morning.”

“You could have texted me that information. You didn’t have to drive all the way out here to tell me.” Why was she here?

“Right.” I could see her retreat into herself. She took a step back.

Fuck. I was being an asshole to my child’s mother. I opened the door. “Come in.”

She hesitated. Her behavior reminded me of when we were in New York, hesitant and subdued. Was she about to deliver a new blow to me?

I studied her as she stepped through the door. More than anything, she looked nervous. What the hell did she think I was going to do to her?

“Can I get you something to drink? I have some tea, I think.”

“Tea would be nice.”

Okay, so that meant she was willing to stay and talk. I led her to the kitchen. She sat at the small table as I prepared a mug of hot water and scrounged my cupboards for a teabag.

The kitchen filled with an awkward silence as I waited for the water to heat in the microwave. Finally, the microwave beeped. I pulled the mug out and plopped the teabag in, bringing it to Kate. I considered finding my bottle of scotch but decided that it might look bad, so I sat at the table across from her.

“You’re not going to have any?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not much of a tea drinker.”

She looked down at her tea and then sat back as if she wasn’t going to drink it. She finally looked up at me and then stood. “I just wanted to let you know about the doctor’s appointment.”

I rose from my chair. A feeling of panic grew in my gut. She was leaving. It was then that I was willing to acknowledge that I wanted her to stay, that I had hoped her coming here had meant something.

“You came all the way out here just for that?”

Again, her expression and actions made me think she was nervous. The way she looked away or bit her lip . . . it was very un-Kate-like.

It drew me to her with a deep urge to comfort her. I stepped closer to her. “What’s going on, Kate?”

When she finally looked up at me, her eyes were filled with regret and sorrow. It made my heart crack.

“I didn’t set out to hurt you, Sam. I know that I did, and I’m sorry for that.”

I arched a brow. “I’ve heard those lines before. I’m pretty sure I said them to you.”

“I guess that’s why I understand why you don’t believe me. When you left five years ago, it destroyed my belief in love, my ability to trust.”

I stiffened. I felt the guilt that I always did, but also annoyance that she would be throwing it in my face.

“It’s been no secret that since you’ve come back, I’ve been trying to keep a wall between us,” she finished.

“No. That’s been obvious.”

“But the more time we spent together, the harder it has been to keep that wall up.”

“I think you said something about worming my way into you.”

She nodded. “That’s why I went to New York. I couldn’t keep you out any longer, and of course, I planned to tell you about the baby.”

I swore I could see hope in her eyes. But I didn’t like feeling that she was here only because she couldn’t any longer keep me out. I wanted us to be together because she wanted me.

“Why are you here, Kate?”

She looked up at me, and I could see a tug-of-war going on in her eyes. But I couldn’t be sure which side was winning.

“It’s always been you too, Sam.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Kate

My stomach was in knots, and it wasn't because of the baby. I was scared to death that Sam wasn't going to care about anything I told him.

Over the last few days, after seeing him on the beach, I told myself that I had achieved my goal. I had protected my heart. But I was only lying to myself.

Everyone had been right. Happiness had been right in front of me, if only I'd reached out and grabbed it. For a time, I felt like I had or was starting to, but then upon seeing Sandra, I was immediately transported back five years when Sam broke my heart and shattered my dreams.

There was no guarantee that it wouldn't happen again, but Lucy had been right that the happiest I'd been in a long time had been with Sam over the last couple of months. I also had to admit that the problems now were of my own making because of my fear. Because even after five years, reliving the day he left was painful.

When I showed up at his home to tell him about the appointment, I hoped I would have the courage to tell him everything. But now he was the one with the wall, and I wasn't confident I could stand up to it the way he'd tried to stand up to mine.

His green eyes studied my face after making my declaration that he was the only one for me too. I had hoped that my words would have broken through, but they hadn't.

“Because I wormed my way inside?” he asked.

My brow furrowed, not understanding what he was asking.

“Despite your best efforts, you couldn’t keep me out?” he clarified.

I didn’t want to affirm that because clearly, it irked him.

“I don’t want you here, Kate.”

The words slashed my heart in two. I stepped back on unsteady legs, wishing I could run out the door but not sure I would make it before my knees buckled.

“I don’t want somebody who’s here only because despite their best efforts, they couldn’t keep me out. I know I hurt you, Kate, but I don’t think I gave up my right to be loved fully, without any hang-ups or conditions.”

It took a moment, but the meaning of his words finally clicked into place.

“I did try to keep you out because I didn’t want to feel that pain again, Sam. But I wasn’t able to keep you out, not because I failed at it but because I love you. I’m still scared to death, and if that’s going to be a problem, then I’ll just go.”

I waited for a beat, and when he didn’t say or do anything, I turned and headed toward his door. His hand came around my forearm, turning me to him.

“Did you just say you loved me?”

I nodded.

His eyes softened, and his hand came up to cradle my face. “You’re a lot braver than I was, because I’ve been feeling it but have been too scared to say it.”

This seemed like a good thing, but I held my guard up just in case.

“All I wanted for the last five years, Kate, is to have you back in my life. If given the chance, I won’t fuck it up again. The only question is, are you willing to take a chance on me? Can you trust in my words? Can you trust me enough that if

you hear or see something that makes you want to lash out or run, you will come to me, and we can talk it out?”

The tension in my body began to settle. “Why do you think I’m here?”

His face lit up with the widest smile I’d ever seen. “Because you love me?”

I nodded.

“Tell me again.”

“You first.” I still hadn’t heard the words from him.

He tugged me close, his eyes staring into mine, and in them, I saw love. “I love you, Kate. I always have. I always will.”

I opened my mouth to say the words back to him, but his lips fused against mine in a searing kiss. Before, it was disappointment and rejection that made my legs wobble, but now it was his kiss. It liquefied my bones, and I melted against him. My fingers gripped his shirt to keep from falling away.

When he pulled away, his hands came up to my face again. “I want to make love to you, but I still think there’s more that we need to talk about.”

My immediate reaction was to tense up, not wanting to go back to rehash our past, but I knew that we had to. Even if I didn’t want to hear it, he wanted to tell me, so I needed to listen.

He took my hand, and with his other hand, he picked up my tea and then he led me to his living room. He sat me down on the couch, handing me my tea. Then he sat next to me, turning his body so he was facing me.

He rested his left arm on the cushion behind me, his fingers softly touching my hair. “I need to tell you what happened with Sandra and Chelsea.”

I nodded and took a sip of my tea.

“When Sandra told me about Chelsea, my entire world crashed around me. Maybe if I were older and had given it

more time, I would've made a better choice. I would've figured out a way to do the right thing and yet hold onto the love of my life."

I couldn't look at him yet, but those last words made my lips twitch upward. I was the love of his life.

"But I did what I did and set out to accept that choice. I took her and the baby back to New York. Kate?"

He put the crook of his finger under my chin and turned me to him. "Nothing ever happened between Sandra and me. Nothing."

I saw the truth of his words in his eyes.

"Ask anyone in my family, and you will be told that I was in misery. I was driving them all crazy because I hated being away from you. You were the one I wanted."

I nodded and took a sip of my tea.

"About two months later, Sandra came to me. She told me that she hated seeing me so brokenhearted. And then she asked me to forgive her."

I looked up at him. My brow furrowed in question.

"She told me that I wasn't Chelsea's father. She said that she had told me that because her parents had kicked her out when they learned she was pregnant, and the baby's father didn't want anything to do with her. She hadn't been able to finish school and had nowhere else to turn."

I reached up and touched his face. "So, of course, she went to the one person she knew who was good and kind."

He turned his head, kissing my palm. "I'll admit, I wondered if she said that just to spare me. Despite what she did, she is a good person, and I wondered if maybe she was only saying that so that I would go back to you. I needed to know for sure whether I was or wasn't Chelsea's father. For that reason, I arranged a DNA test."

I nodded because that made perfect sense.

“What I told you is the truth. I’m not Chelsea’s father. There’s nothing going on between Sandra and me. Nothing has since the day we broke up, before I even met you. But I had brought her to New York, and like I said, she was alone. So, my family sort of adopted her. That’s why Chelsea calls my parents Grandma and Grandpa. And for years, she came for holidays, but earlier this summer, she moved to Boston, so I hadn’t expected her to be there for Thanksgiving. I’m sorry that you had to experience the shock of her showing up. I had only found out she was coming that morning, and I hadn’t been able to get upstairs to warn you before she arrived.”

I felt so foolish for reacting the way I had. “I’m sorry, Sam.”

He pulled me close, and I turned into his warm body. “I understand that you were afraid to love and trust me again, Kate. I still want to make a life with you, but in order for it to work, you’re going to have to learn to trust me. Or at least talk to me if you’re feeling vulnerable.”

I nodded, tilting my head to look up at him. “I’ll try. I just . . .” I brought my head back down, resting it against his shoulder.

“You just what?”

“After you left, I was brokenhearted.”

He kissed the top of my head and whispered that he was sorry.

“But that wasn’t the only thing that happened to me. My grandfather stole my trust fund, but at the time, I didn’t realize he wasn’t allowed to have it. He essentially disowned me, tossed me out with nothing. Not only that, but he’d also bad-mouthed me to all his cronies, so I wasn’t able to find a good job.”

I shook my head because I don’t think that was totally true.

“Actually, I think I just gave up. I lost you. I lost my money, and I just lost my will to fight. So I got a job as a waitress in the club that you and your brother bought up the street from me. A woman in a seedy club has to learn to be

tough to fight off all the hands and the catcalls. Up until last year, that was my life.”

He squeezed me tighter. “I’m so sorry, Kate. Where were Ethan and all your friends?”

“Ethan was there. But I was so angry with the world that I didn’t want to rely on him.”

I tilted my head to look up at him again. “I decided that anyone could hurt me, and I didn’t want to let that happen again. So, I kept everyone out. To a certain extent, Ethan as well.”

“And now? Will you at least let me in?”

I smiled, reaching up to trace his lips with my finger. “The truth is that you were always in. I fought it because it scared me. It still scares me, if you want to know the truth.”

He bent down and kissed my nose. “I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that you are never scared of me again.”

“Does that include making love?”

He grinned. “Absolutely.” He pulled me into his lap and then stood, carrying me back to his room.

“Sam?” I asked as he lay me on the bed.

“Kate?” He tugged his shirt off and then stretched out over me.

“You never asked how I got pregnant.”

He arched a brow. “I think I know. I plan to do it now.”

I laughed. “I meant you didn’t ask about birth control. I was on it.” It was important to me that he knew that.

“We were having sex. Pregnancy is always a risk when having sex.”

“Are you happy about the baby?”

His smile was brilliant. “Very.” He bent down and kissed my belly and then returned to me, kissing me. “I finally have everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Me too. Now kiss me more.”

He laughed and did just that. Our mouths fused together. Our hands explored. We rolled and clung. We laughed, even. I’d forgotten that sex could be like playing, a joyous coming together.

He sat back on his heels, pulling me up to straddle his thighs. “Take me, Kate.”

I settled over him, sliding down. We both sighed as pleasure washed through us. Sam’s arm banded around me, holding me in place, his body pulsing with life inside mine. He kissed me again and then trailed his lips along my jaw to my ear.

“Ride me. Take me to heaven,” he whispered.

With my hands on his shoulders, I rocked over him, slowly moving while our gazes held. We were joined in every possible way, our bodies, our hearts, our souls.

Soon, the need to come clawed at me. My head fell back as I sought release. Sam’s lips wrapped around my nipple and sucked, sending me to the edge and over.

“Yes, Sam!” Pleasure whipped through me, fast and fierce and oh, so delicious.

He pushed me back, hooking my legs around his hips, and took his pleasure too. He pumped in and out, drawing out my pleasure as he bucked and emptied inside me.

“You’re mine.” He rolled off me, tugging me close.

“And you’re mine.” I rested my head on his chest.

“It’s about fucking time, isn’t it?”

He wasn’t wrong.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sam

I had been precariously close to letting my hurt and pride cost me the most important thing in my life. Thank fuck I wized up, or Kate wouldn't be here with me now.

Three weeks after we finally talked and confessed our truths, she was truly mine. There was no more second-guessing or hoping. Okay, so maybe every now and then, I worried I was pushing too hard, too fast.

A week after she showed up at my house, I asked her to move in with me. For an instant, I saw that quick Pavlovian response of her guard going up, but just as quickly, a smile spread on her face and she said yes. Someday, hopefully not very long from now, that trigger response will be gone.

Today's Christmas Eve, and I couldn't be any more thankful for the life I was given. It was like Santa had shown up early.

Kate and I had a doctor's appointment this morning. Today, we were going to hear the baby's heartbeat. I couldn't fucking believe it. Her doctor had tried to push the appointment till after Christmas, but Kate had been able to finagle an appointment this morning because what better Christmas present than to hear the heartbeat of your child?

Afterward, we would go shopping and then we were having dinner at Dane and Bridget's who once again were hosting a holiday party.

But Christmas morning would just be the two of us. Later, we'd go over to Ethan and Lucy's for dinner. It would be my first Christmas without my parents, but they understood, and I'd made arrangements for us to go visit them in the new year.

"Come on, baby, we need to go. We're going to be late."

Kate glanced at me through the bathroom mirror. She was tugging her long blonde hair up into a ponytail. "Beauty cannot be rushed."

I grinned as I stepped behind her, sliding my hands over her belly and kissing her neck. "You're beautiful all the time, even when you're puking over the toilet."

She gave me a soft jab in the belly with her elbow.

"Come on. Let's go meet our baby."

She twirled in my arms, wrapping her arms around me and holding me tight. These unexpected displays of affection still took me off guard. I knew that she loved me, but I had a sense that these moments were about reminding herself of what she had and what she'd almost lost. At least that's how I felt when they happened. So I wrapped my arms around her, holding her tight, letting her know I wouldn't ever let her go again.

Forty-five minutes later, Kate was lying on an examination table as the obstetrician pushed up her shirt and tugged the waistband of her pants lower and squirted a gel on her belly. Kate's abdomen was still flat, so it was hard to believe that life was growing in there. Today, we were going to see it and hear it.

The obstetrician looked up at each of us. "Are you ready, Mom and Dad?"

Kate reached out and took my hand, and I squeezed it. "Ready."

She put a wand over Kate's belly and began moving around. After a moment, she stopped and poked some buttons on the screen. She moved a little bit more and then stopped.

"Here's your baby."

Kate and I both studied the screen. I felt a little bit like an idiot that I couldn't make out a baby. A flash of panic ran through me. If I couldn't discern my baby, how was I going to be a good father?

The doctor pointed to the screen. "Here's the head. Here's the body. This fluttering thing here is the heart."

And just like that, I saw my child. I looked at Kate as awe filled my chest, bringing tears to my eyes. Kate laughed and cried at the same time.

"Would you like to hear the heartbeat?" the doctor asked.

We both nodded, unable to speak from the magnitude of what was happening.

The doctor poked another button on her machine, and the room filled with a fast paced, fluttery sound.

I looked down at Kate, marveling that she was growing a person inside her. "You're fucking amazing, Kate."

She laughed. "You had something to do with this."

My contribution felt entirely inadequate.

She squeezed my hand, and I looked at her. "You loved me. I loved you. From that, we made this baby."

How my heart hadn't exploded out of my chest, I didn't know. It was filled with such love it was beyond anything I'd ever felt before. As far as I was concerned, Christmas had come a day early.

Of course, we showed off the sonogram picture to everyone at Dane and Bridget's party that evening. Most of them already had kids, so I was pretty sure they were indulging us.

But in my mind, what Kate and I had done was a fucking miracle. And it wasn't just the baby that was a miracle. It was a miracle that she and I were here together, having found our way back after I'd made the worst decision of my life.

When we arrived home, I took Kate's hand and walked her over to the Christmas tree that we had gone out together to

find and decorate. I might have settled for buying a fake tree, but then Kate had told me that she had never decorated a tree.

Growing up, it was something that the servants of the house always did. It was a reminder that Kate didn't have a loving childhood like I had. Sure, she had her brother, and I knew Ethan did all he could, but she'd still missed a lot, and it was now my job to give her everything, including traditional Christmas rituals.

I turned on the lights of the tree, leaving the living room lights off. The lights sparkled and danced along the window and in the room. I tugged Kate down on the couch, reclining back slightly and pulling so her back was lying on my chest as we looked at the tree.

"This is our first real Christmas together," I said, bending down and kissing the top of her head.

"I guess it is. In our senior year in college, you went back home with your family." She tilted her head and looked up at me. "What did you get me for Christmas?"

I gave her a Cheshire grin. "You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

She turned in my lap until she was lying over me. "I've heard that lots of families open one present on Christmas Eve. Maybe we can have that tradition."

I thought about it and decided why the hell not? "Santa hasn't come yet."

She arched a brow, and I laughed, leaning forward and kissing her brow. "Let me up, and I will go get your present. I'll meet you back by the tree."

Her face lit up, and it was like a gift. I was going to make it my mission to have her smile like that every day.

I went to our bedroom and dug in the back of my sock drawer, pulling out the small box and shoving it in my pocket. As I walked back to the living room, I rolled my shoulders and worked to keep tension away from my neck. I blew out a breath to ease the nerves.

When I found her, she was sitting on the floor by the tree, staring up at it like she'd never seen one before. I went over and sat down next to her, pulling her until she was sitting in the V of my legs.

“When I went to the party to celebrate Ethan’s promotion and I saw you, it was like my heart started beating again. I knew at that time that my chances of your forgiving me were less than nothing, and yet hope filled me that I could have the love and happiness that I’d had five years ago. I wanted to give you everything that I had promised and stupidly taken away.”

She gave me a sweet smile, leaning forward and giving me a soft kiss. “And you are.”

I swallowed. “I want to do it today and tomorrow and for all the days, Kate. Forever.” I handed her the box. She gasped and looked at me and then at the box. I flipped the lid open, exposing the ring inside.

“Oh, my God, Sam.”

“I’m taking back our life, Kate. Tell me you’re going to take it with me. Tell me you’ll marry me.”

She looked at me with stunned eyes, and I had a moment to wonder again whether I was pushing too fast, too soon, but then her arms came around me and I was flat on my back as she scattered kisses all over my face, in between each one saying, “Yes!”

I held her for a minute, then I managed to get the ring out of the box to slip it on her finger. “I had a tough time deciding whether I should give you a brand-new ring or the old ring. Finally, I decided that I would give you both. I took it to a jeweler and merged them. I know I hurt you five years ago, but also, we were happy before that, and I wanted to capture that. The new ring represents everything we have going forward.”

She looked at the ring on her finger and then to me. Her eyes filled with tears. “I love you.”

I wrapped my arms around her as her words wrapped around my heart.

“I love you too, baby.” We kissed, and I rolled her under me, intending to consummate this engagement beneath this beautiful tree we decorated together. It felt like a symbol for our life going forward. Bright and happy.

She pressed her hand to my chest. “I don’t want a long engagement. I want to get married fast.”

I grinned, totally on board with that idea. “How fast?”

“As fast as we can.”

Perfect. I didn’t want to wait either. “How about New Year’s Eve? It could be symbolic. We’ve gotten past the past and are now starting anew.”

Her eyes watered again. “You’re so romantic, Sam.”

“It’s because of you, babe.”

She pressed her hand to my cheek. “At Thanksgiving, before I let my fears get the best of me, I remember thinking that I was thankful that you were back in my life and how thankful I thought you would be about the baby.”

I shook my head. “I’m thankful for more than that, Kate. I’m thankful for us.”

EPILOGUE

Kate

My knees were shaking, but it wasn't from nerves or doubt. It was from excitement. In a few minutes, I was going to finally, after five painful years, marry the man of my dreams. Sam's decision five years ago had stolen that dream, and later, when it was back within my reach, I'd nearly let it slip away because of fear and resentment.

I was so glad that I got out of my own way and reached out for happiness. My life the last couple of weeks had been better than I could've ever imagined. And while Ethan and Lucy thought getting married only a couple of weeks after reconciling was crazy, I knew without a doubt that it was the right decision. We had everything we'd had five years ago, plus maturity and the knowledge of how much life sucked without each other.

Had Sam wanted a longer engagement and a larger wedding, I probably would have gone along, but from the moment he asked me to marry him underneath the beautiful tree he and I had decorated, I wanted to be Mrs. Clarke. I didn't need a fancy wedding. All I needed was to be with Sam and build the life we had once planned.

Luckily, he wanted a quick wedding too. In the course of the week, Sam and I threw together wedding plans. Only family and a few close friends were invited. That did include Sandra and Chelsea, but she declined to attend. Sam felt it was because of all the problems she had caused for us, and she didn't want to be a reminder of that.

We rented a ballroom with mostly glass walls from a hotel in Las Vegas and arranged for a minister to officiate. Initially, Ethan was going to walk me down the aisle, but ultimately, I decided that I wasn't being given away to Sam. I was eagerly, openly giving myself to him. It was a good decision because when I finally stepped into the doorway of the ballroom and looked up the aisle to where Sam stood in his dark suit, his green eyes locked on mine, and I made a mad rush for him. I would've left Ethan in the dust.

Sam laughed and stepped into the aisle, his arms open as I rushed into them, grabbing on to him and holding him.

I was vaguely aware of our guests laughing or making aww sounds.

“What do you say about getting married?” Sam said to me.

“I'd say it's about damn time.”

We all laughed, and then Sam took my hand, and we turned to the officiant. It seemed forever to get through the I do's and the ring exchanges, but then finally, the minister introduced us as husband and wife.

Sam tugged me close and fused his lips to mine. To everyone in the room, the kiss probably looked hot and heavy, but in reality, it was a kiss of love and joy and relief that we had finally, finally made it. On the last day of the year, Sam and I were joined together forever. When we woke up tomorrow, it wouldn't just be the first day of the year. It would be the first day of our happily ever after.

The reception couldn't have been more perfect. By keeping the wedding small, the only guests in attendance were people we cared the most about and who cared about us. Sam and I made sure to thank each of them for coming. All of them, from Dane and Bridget, and Archer and Lane, Noel and Harper, Bran and Anne, and of course, Ethan and Lucy. Sam's Uncle Zach and his wife, Eleni, were in attendance, along with his parents and brother and sister, although Max seemed distracted. I wondered if he was worried like Ethan and Lucy were that Sam and I were moving too fast.

Once we'd made sure to say hello to everyone, Sam pulled me onto the dance floor.

"I'm dying to hold you and kiss you, and it seems like dancing is the best way I can do that without raising an eyebrow."

"As the wedding couple, I think we can do anything we want, can't we?"

His arms came around me, and he led me around the dance floor. "I don't think they want to see all the things I plan to do to you. Which begs the question, how long do we have to stay here before we can consummate this marriage?"

My entire body went red-hot in anticipation of making love to my husband. Husband. I couldn't get over that.

"I think we have to stay until the cake."

Sam's head scanned the room. "I see a cake on the table. Is it too early for us to cut it?"

I laughed. "Maybe just a little."

He looked down at me, his green eyes filled with happiness. He bent down, capturing my lips with his, kissing me until I was intoxicated.

He continued to guide me around the room in our first dance as husband and wife. "Who's that with Max?"

Sam twirled me around so I could see what he was talking about. Max was in the corner talking to a very pretty looking woman. They were in deep conversation.

"I don't know. Maybe he brought her as a plus one."

"I don't remember seeing her during the ceremony," Sam said.

I lifted my hand and brought Sam's face to me. "I'm sure that whoever she is, Sam, Max can deal with it. You have more important things to focus on, Mr. Clarke."

His grin was filled both with promise and wickedness. "I do?"

“You do.”

He released me, taking my hand and dragging me toward the cake. “Let’s cut the cake so we can get the hell out of here and I can really focus on my wife.”

Hearing him call me *wife* sent another thrill through me. I couldn’t believe it. My dream came true.

“Looks like someone’s eager to get started on the honeymoon,” Vivie said as we cut the cake.

“That’s my sister you’re talking about. I don’t like to hear sexy stuff like that about my sister,” Ethan said jokingly.

“Well, it’s a good thing it’s not in the olden days where you would’ve had to go and watch to make sure the marriage was consummated,” Vivie said.

Ethan shuddered at the idea. I did too, actually.

Sam and I did the traditional cake offering to each other. We didn’t smash it into each other’s faces as some brides and grooms do. Actually, it was very sensual the way Sam licked the frosting off my thumb. I sucked it off his finger. I’m pretty sure I heard Ethan groan.

Sam took my hand again and got everyone’s attention. “Kate and I want to thank all of you for being here and celebrating this day with us.” He looked down at me, bringing my hand up to his lips and kissing the back of it. “Five years ago, I made the worst decision of my life, but Kate has given me a second chance. I will never, ever let you down again. Every day, I will commit to making sure you know that you are loved.”

Tears dripped down my face, which was embarrassing in front of people. The emotion and maybe the baby hormones made it impossible for me to not be overwhelmed.

“We have this room available for as long as you want to stay and party, so please enjoy.” Then Sam swooped me up into his arms. “Kate and I have to go.”

Our family and friends laughed and clapped as Sam walked out of the room carrying me. He set me down when we

reached the elevator. When it finally arrived, the doors opened and a redheaded woman walked out.

She did a double-take. “Sam?”

Sam flinched. He stared at the woman, and I could see recognition in his eyes, but he didn’t seem to know her name. Instead, he said hello and then ushered me into the elevator. The woman cocked her head, looking at him and then at me. Then with a shrug, she turned and walked away just as the doors were closing.

“Who is that?” I asked. I couldn’t deny there was a twinge of jealousy, but I reminded myself that he was mine now.

His cheeks turned a bright red as he gave me a sheepish smile. “Max and I came to Vegas a while ago. At the time, you wanted nothing to do with me, and my bruised and battered ego and heart hoped that a trip to Vegas would rid me of it.”

That had to have meant that he’d slept with her. I liked that we had this newfound honesty, even though sometimes, I didn’t want to hear it, like now.

He reached for me, tugging me close. “I didn’t have sex with her or with anyone on that trip. The only person I’ve had sex with since you came back into my life is you. And that’s because you’re in my heart and my soul. You’re the only person I want to love and make love to.” His words made my insides go to mush. I melted into him.

“And how about you?” he asked.

I looked up at him and decided to play coy. “Me, what?”

He dragged his finger from my jaw down my neck into my cleavage. “Have you been with anyone since we came back into each other’s lives?”

I tilted my head and tapped my finger to my chin like I was trying to remember.

He let out a frustrated growl, hoisting me up into his arms again. “Well, if you did, I’m going to make you forget him.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “There hasn’t been anybody else. You’re the only one.”

His smile was beautifully radiant. He kissed me and only stopped when the doors of the elevator opened. He carried me to the penthouse suite.

As the door shut behind us, he said, "I arranged for sparkling cider to celebrate, since you can't have champagne." He sat me down, rubbing his hand over my belly.

"I'm not thirsty."

He arched a brow. "So, what does my beautiful wife want?"

I took ahold of his tie and led him to the bedroom. "I want you to make me yours."

We undressed in record time. I pushed him back on the bed, straddling him, running my hand along his hard cock.

"I thought I was supposed to make you mine," he said, his eyes glowing with love and happiness.

"I changed my mind. I'm going to make you mine." I sank down over him.

He sat up, wrapping his arms around me. "I'm yours. I've always been yours."

We kissed, and it made me wonder how I hadn't been able to see his love for me sooner. I supposed that anger and resentment filtered the truth. I was glad I finally was able to see Sam for who he was and forgive him.

He rolled me under him. "And now you're mine."

"Always."

"Forever." He took my hands, pushing them over my head as he held them, palm to palm. His fingers flexed and then gripped my hands tighter as he began to move, sliding in and out of me.

"Sam." I gasped as pleasure gathered, coiling tighter and tighter in my center.

"I'm here, baby."

Our bodies moved together, completely in sync as desire increased, hotter, faster, edging closer to the edge.

He leaned down, kissing me. “Come, Kate. I want to feel you come around me.” His hips pistoned faster. My breath caught as I hit the pinnacle.

“Yes, Sam!” Pleasure rocked through me.

He grunted and drove into me, his own release overtaking him. We rocked and bucked until exhaustion won over.

I lay in Sam’s arms, our breaths still ragged but returning to normal. A wave of emotion welled up inside me again as I realized this was my life now. The life that I had planned on five years ago had finally come true.

“Hey? Did I hurt you?” Sam’s gentle fingers caressed the tears away.

“No. I’m just feeling so lucky to be here. Sometimes, the emotions overwhelm me. I think it’s the hormones.”

He smiled and pulled me closer. “Well, if it’s hormones, I must have a few of them too because sometimes, I have a hard time believing that I’m here with you. It’s like a dream come true. I’m afraid I’m going to wake up, and all of it will have been a dream.”

I nodded, understanding completely. I reached out and pinched his nipple.

“Ouch. Hey. “

I grinned up at him. “Not a dream.”

He laughed and rolled us until I was underneath him again. He still had happiness in his eyes, but the humor was replaced with an emotional intensity. “Thank you for forgiving me, Kate. I know I don’t deserve it—”

I pressed my fingers over his lips. “We both deserve this happiness, Sam. Let’s savor today and all the days we have to look forward to.”

His green eyes welled with tears. “You’re fucking amazing, did you know that? I am so thankful for you.”

I tugged him down, preparing to kiss him. “I’m thankful for us.”

EPILOGUE TWO

Max

Sam and Kate's wedding was a long time coming. There were times I didn't think they'd ever get here. Kate resisted falling for him again. Sam nearly gave up trying. But today, on the eve of the New Year, a week after proposing, Sam married the woman he'd fallen in love with over five years ago.

I was happy for him even as I was jealous. The emotion was foreign to me for two reasons. The first was that while I loved Sam and recognized his life was a smoother one than mine had been, I was never envious of him. We were Yin and Yang. He was outgoing where I was more reserved. He wore his emotions on his sleeve, where I preferred to keep mine tucked away.

The second was that I had no interest in falling in love and getting married. I'd never been a man to have long-term relationships. I had a girlfriend in high school, but that ended when she had sex with the star football player.

I had another one in college, but that ended when I overheard her making fun of my dyslexia and calling me stupid.

Perhaps it was silly of me to cast relationships aside based on the deceit of one woman and the cruel mockery of another one, but to be honest, I didn't feel I was losing out. Sam looked blissfully happy, but I hadn't had any sense that having a woman in my life would do the same for me . . . until a few months ago.

I stood at the back of Sam and Kate's reception, checking my smartwatch to see if I had any messages. Just as I was about to put my hand down, a message came through.

I'm here.

I scanned the room, making sure Sam and the rest of my family were occupied so I could sneak out unnoticed. I slipped out of the ballroom my brother rented for the wedding. I looked around, and when I saw her, like always, my heart stuttered in my chest. Good Christ, she was beautiful. But that first wave of desire and longing was quickly followed by anger and hurt. I used it as armor as I stepped up to her.

"Amelia."

"Max." She studied me, but I looked away. I couldn't afford to have her see what was inside me. Like a card player with a bad hand, I had to keep a poker face and bluff my way through this.

"I need to get back to my brother's wedding."

She nodded. "I can follow you."

It didn't seem wise to take care of this business at my brother's wedding. Not only could I be found out, but I didn't want to jinx my brother's marriage. Still, if I was gone too long, my family would get suspicious.

I held my hand out, indicating that she should precede me. I followed her into the ballroom, my traitorous eyes taking in her sexy female form, my dick remembering how it felt to be inside her. How had I been so completely wrong about her?

I took her arm and led her to a corner. If I was lucky, we could get this done and she'd be gone before anyone noticed.

I tried to block the view of anyone seeing her. "Do you have the papers?"

Again, she looked at me, and for a moment I thought maybe she didn't want this. But then the memory of her a week ago came back to me.

Finally, she nodded. She reached into her purse and pulled out an envelope. I took it, opening it and pulling out the

papers. My gut churned.

I looked over at Sam and Kate dancing, staring at each other like they were the only two people in the world. I'd been an idiot to think I could have that.

I sighed and turned my attention to the task at hand. I signed the papers, irked that I didn't feel the sense of relief I'd hoped for.

Amelia's hands trembled as I handed the papers back to her. I didn't care to assess what that could mean. I just wanted this done.

"Your brother looks happy," she said.

I was going to ask her how she knew my brother, but then I remembered she knew he was the groom and he and I were twins.

"He is." At least someone was.

She put the papers in the envelope and looked up at me. "I'll deal with these on Monday."

I nodded. "The sooner, the better."

She flinched, and for a moment, I felt guilty for being an asshole. But then I remembered, she was the one who'd ruined everything.

"Bye, Max."

"Bye, Amelia." I watched as she made her way out of the ballroom, a growing sense of wrongness spreading in me.

"Hey, who was that?" my sister, Vivie, bounced over to me, clearly having imbibed a little too much champagne.

"No one. You should probably cut down on the booze, Sis. You might end up accidentally married."

She snorted. "Oh, my God, like that really happens. Who'd be stupid enough to not know they were getting married?"

I laughed on the outside. On the inside, I wondered how today, my brother had gotten everything he wanted by

marrying the woman he loved, while I'd just signed my annulment papers ending my month-long Las Vegas marriage.

TO BE CONTINUED

[Click here to start reading Max's story now.](#)

It's true when they say that Las Vegas should be burned to the ground.

I'd burn it myself after ending up married to a woman and having no memory of it.

Was Amelia playing me?



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THE VEGAS BLUFF (SNEAK PEEK)



DESCRIPTION

I was right all along...

Amelia was just like *all* the other women I never wanted to see again after spending one night together.

In fact, she turned out to be worse than them.

Let me backup...

It's true when they say that Las Vegas should be burned to the ground.

I'd burn it myself after ending up married to a woman and having no memory of it.

Was Amelia playing me?

Judging by the way she was sweating and yelling in shock, I didn't think so.

My heart lied to me and begged me to believe in her authenticity.

You know, maybe she wasn't after my money or prestige, after all.

Maybe her gorgeous body contained a heart that I could actually love.

Boy was I wrong.

Instead of finding an honest heart, I discovered a nasty secret that made me want to rewind time and undo the moments I'd spent with her inside the bedroom.

She was a devil in human form.

A devil that was now wearing a wedding ring... *and* carrying
my baby.

Could this Christmas bring me any more surprises?

PROLOGUE

Amelia

Slowly, I awoke from a heavy sleep. The fog in my brain was thick, making it difficult to fully come awake. At first, I was disoriented, not sure where I was. But then a heavy arm draped over my hip and a warm body spooned around me, bringing a memory and a smile back to my face.

Max.

Max with the large hands and an amazing expertise around a woman's body. Enough of the fog lifted that I was able to open my eyes. I frowned as I realized I was still dressed. Why was I sleeping in my clothes?

I scanned through my brain, trying to recall last night. Max had asked me out again, surprising me because I thought the night before had been a one-night thing. And while I wasn't interested in a relationship, I had to admit that I was happy to have another opportunity to spend the night with him. There was no danger of an entanglement because he was from New York and would leave today to return home.

I could recall a lovely dinner, and then a driver taking us through the city as we drank champagne. Had we drunk so much that when we got back to the hotel, we crashed out?

Max's large hand slid down my hip, over my thigh, and up again. His lips pressed to the back of my neck, nibbling, sending a delicious shiver through me.

"I think I drank too much last night," he murmured against my neck.

“Oh?”

“It’s the only thing that can explain why we’re in bed and still dressed. If I’d had my wits about me last night, we would be waking up naked.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“Were you now?” His lips continued to trail kisses along my neck. “How do you feel about sleepy, slow sex in the morning?”

“I feel pretty good about it.” Already, my body was flushed in anticipation. My nipples were hard and my pussy quivered, knowing the pleasure Max could bring.

He tugged the zipper of my dress down and pushed it from my shoulders. With him still spooned behind me, I shimmied out of my dress. He unclasped my bra, and I tossed that aside. Last, I divested myself of my panties.

He tugged me to him, his slacks-covered dick pressing against my ass as his hand slid over my belly and then down into my nest of curls.

“You’re not going to join me?” I sighed against him.

His lips were on my neck again. “I will. But first, you.” His fingers found my clit, gently rubbing it. I closed my eyes and sank into his touch, into the warmth of his firm body.

It didn’t take long for my orgasm to wash over me. Only then did he undress. Naked, he spooned around me again, lifting my leg to make room for him. He slid inside me, and even though I’d just come, my body responded, my blood heating again.

Like he’d promised, he moved slowly and languidly. His lips kissed my neck and shoulder as he rocked in and out of me. It was sweet and lovely, and a part of me would miss him when he left. I’d never met a man like him. Oh, sure, there were plenty of good-looking, rich guys in Las Vegas. But Max was more than that. There was a down-to-earth feel about him that made me think he grew up in a good family, unlike mine. He wasn’t necessarily open about his feelings, but that

reservedness gave him a shy factor that was sweet. He was smart and interesting. And he knew how to have a good time.

He groaned against me. "I'm close." His whisper tickled along my neck. He reached over my body, pinching my nipple as he picked up the pace.

"Oh!" I cried out as my orgasm flowed through me, just like he'd described, sleepy and slow.

He thrust again, emptied, and then held me spooned against him as the last waves of pleasure flowed through us.

When our heart rates settled, he gave me one last kiss on the neck and rolled onto his back. I turned onto my back as well.

He slid his hands over his face as if he was still feeling foggy from last night. A flash of light from his hand caught my eye. A ring on his left hand.

In an instant, the languid warmth of my orgasm was gone, replaced by shock and anger. I scrambled out of the bed, grabbing the sheet and tugging it to cover my body as I stood next to the bed.

He brought his hands away from his face and looked at me with concern.

"You're married."

His expression morphed into confusion. "No, I'm not."

"You're wearing a wedding ring." How was it that I didn't notice that before? I wasn't against an occasional hookup with somebody from out of town, but I drew the line at married men.

He frowned and looked at his hand, the confusion remaining on his face. He looked over at me, his eyes squinting, hovering near where I clutched the sheet around my breasts.

I was about to take offense at his ogling me when his gaze returned to my eyes. "So are you."

"What?"

“You’ve got a ring too.”

My head jerked down, looking at my left hand, and sure enough, there was a gold band around my finger. My brain ceased to function. It didn’t make any sense. And then it did.

“Oh, my God.” I turned and sank onto the bed. How did this happen?

“Care to fill me in?” Max’s tone had gone from confused to suspicious.

I shook my head, still not believing I could’ve done something so stupid. “I’ve become a Las Vegas cliché.”

The bed shifted, and I glanced back to see Max getting out of bed, finding his boxers and his pants and slipping them on. “What does that mean?”

“We must have gotten drunk-married last night.”

His hands on his belt buckle stilled as his gaze jerked to me. “What?”

“It’s the only thing that explains this.”

He shook his head, finishing with his belt. “That doesn’t explain this. First of all, no one in their right mind would marry two people who were incoherently drunk.”

I arched a brow. “We’re in Las Vegas, Max.”

“Even so, there would have to be paperwork, right? A marriage license. Marriage certificate.”

He pulled the ring from his finger and tossed it onto the pillow. I had no illusions that Max and I were going to have some great love affair. Still, it hurt a little bit the way he yanked the ring off and tossed it away.

Even so, he was right. I pulled the ring from my finger and leaned over to set it on the side table. That’s when I saw the papers. I scooted closer to the side table and picked them up, studying them. “Oh, God.”

“What?” Max rounded the bed, buttoning his shirt.

I held the papers up. “Marriage license and certificate.”

He snatched the papers out of my hand, and again the force of it and the look on his face made me flinch.

His gaze moved from the paper to me. “Is this some sort of joke?” He tossed the papers on the bed, much like he had done with the ring.

Incensed, I stood up, gripping the sheet around me even tighter. It was hard to believe that just a few minutes ago, I was wrapped up in this man. “You think I did this?”

“The proof is in the papers, sweetheart.”

I was shocked at his derision. I wished I were fully dressed because I felt vulnerable in just the sheet. But maybe it was just as well because if my hands were free, I might’ve slapped him. “Your signature is on there as well, slick.”

He reached over, picking up the papers again, looking at the signature line. For a moment, he stood, looking utterly confused. The anger and accusation dissipated as he sank down onto the bed. “We’ll be able to get this annulled.”

“Being drunk doesn’t constitute being incapacitated to get an annulment in Las Vegas.”

“Sounds like you have experience with this.” A hint of his derision returned.

“This is Vegas, Max. I know about gambling and showgirls, but that doesn’t mean I gamble and dance.”

He set the paper on the bed and scraped his hand over his face again. “Not being able to read or understand what I was signing would be a reason to grant an annulment, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose, but I don’t remember reading or signing it either, and I’m not so sure that being too drunk to read and sign will work.”

He turned to look at me, and for the first time, I saw vulnerability in him. Like he was going to confess something he wanted to keep a secret. “I have dyslexia. It’s often hard enough to read legal papers when I’m sober. I can’t imagine I could do it drunk.”

I was no lawyer, but his reasoning made sense to me. I sat on the bed next to him.

He looked at his watch. “Fuck.” He turned to look at me. “I don’t have a lot of time before I need to catch my flight.” He shook his head. “I guess I could take a later flight. I can move my schedule around.”

“I’m not sure how to go about this in the first place. Why don’t you let me research and get whatever paperwork we need, and once it’s together, I can let you know? Maybe we can do this long distance and you don’t need to return to Las Vegas.”

He nodded. “But if I do need to be here, I can come.”

I hadn’t thought much about being married since I left the romanticism of fairy tales behind me when I was a teenager. But I never could have imagined that on my wedding day, my husband would be eager to divorce me.

Keep Reading *THE VEGAS BLUFF*

It all started with Juliana and Drew (Sam and Max’s parents).

My ex doesn’t know that he’s got twin sons... and I’m about to meet him... *oops!*

(Yep, the twins are Sam and Max)



Drew was everything I'd wanted in my life.

And in my bed.

But my dream job waited for me in London.

A huge fight later, I packed my bags and left.

But the two pink lines changed everything.

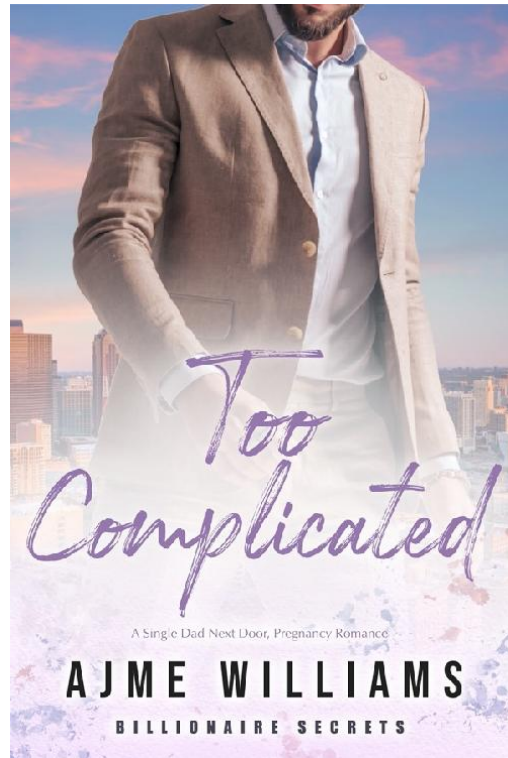
I took a deep breath and built from scratch.

And now...

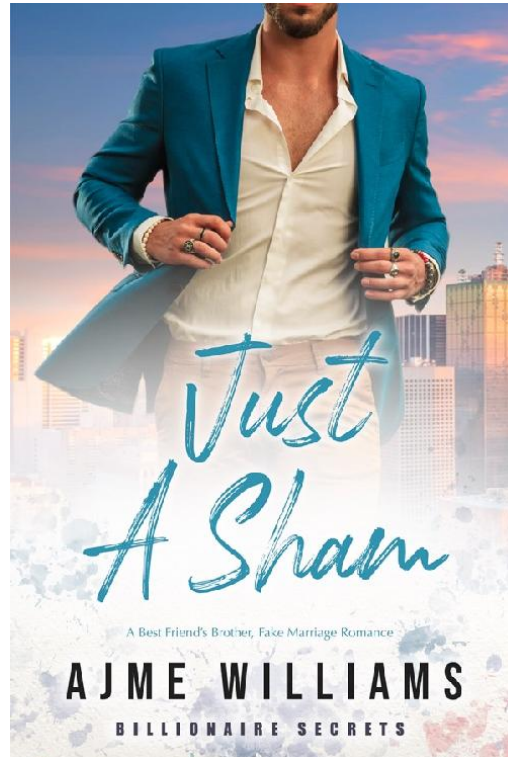
I'm watching Drew talk to his sons without knowing they are his.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ajme Williams writes emotional, angsty contemporary romance. All her books can be enjoyed as full length, standalone romances and are FREE to read in Kindle Unlimited.

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