



Worth a
CHANCE

SECOND CHANCE HARBOR



LEA COLL

WORTH A CHANCE

Copyright © 2022 by Lea Meyer

All Rights Reserved.

This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information and retrieval system without express written permission from the author.

All characters and storylines are the property of the author and your support and respect is greatly appreciated.

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

 Created with Vellum

Table of Contents

[Get the Free Novella](#)

[About the Book](#)

[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](#)

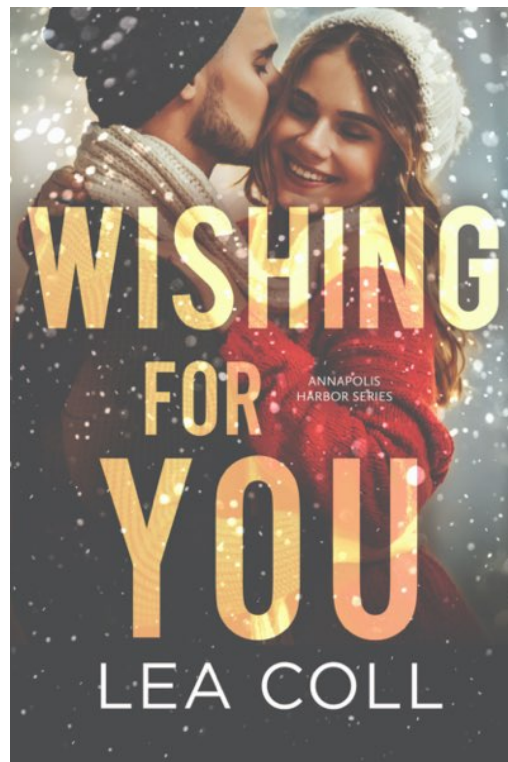
[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Books by Lea Coll](#)

[About the Author](#)

Get the Free Novella



To sign up for my newsletter, and get the free novella, *Wishing for You*, visit <https://landing.mailerlite.com/webforms/landing/v5z3m1>.

About the Book

From childhood nemeses to business rivals, can competition lead to attraction for this unlikely pair?

From lemonade stand wars as kids to competing coffee shops as adults, Ben always finds ways to get under my skin. But, no matter how he pushes my buttons, I refuse to let him ruin my business.

Of course, there is the matter of his adorable seven-year-old daughter he's now struggling to raise on his own. I want to keep him in the familiar enemy-zone, but his little girl is melting my heart.

Thanks to her, I'm beginning to think there's more to the single dad than meets the eye. Ben has many layers, and I find myself wanting to unravel them. Is it possible he has a kind heart under that cocky façade?

But what if it's all a trick? Bankrupting my coffee shop, while shattering my heart, would be the ultimate win for him. How can I trust that the attraction between us is real, and not another high-stakes competition?

Chapter One

BROOKE

I sipped champagne, content to spend time with my friends, even if it was at the grand opening of a garage. We stood in the open bay, enjoying the unseasonably warm fall weather while music played softly over the speakers. I'd drunk enough of the alcohol to have that floaty feeling, like nothing could bring me down.

I wanted to support the owners, especially since Ryan was the boyfriend of my best friend, Hailey.

Ryan was currently under the hood of a vehicle, demonstrating something to a guest, while Jake stood nearby with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I almost wish I was having car trouble right now." I wasn't interested in anything long-term, but a one-night stand wouldn't be out of the question. I needed to release some of the tension caught between my shoulder blades.

Hailey gave me a pointed look. "You cannot hit on my brother."

"I would never." The truth was that I'd never been attracted to Jake. As hot as mechanics were, I'd always gone for men in suits.

A sleek sports car pulled up, and Jake stepped toward the vehicle just as the driver's side door opened.

A man unfolded from the low seat, straightening to his full height. I loved tall men, and that one exuded power from his expensive shoes to the black button-down shirt that fell open at the neck.

I gulped the bubbly liquid, wanting but failing to soothe my suddenly dry throat.

“We're not open for repairs tonight,” Jake said by way of greeting.

My gaze swept over his face, admiring his neatly trimmed beard and the arch of his lips. But as I got to his eyes, I felt there was something familiar about them. They held a challenge as if he was used to getting his way.

It couldn't be Bentley Monroe. The boy who'd moved onto my street at age seven and challenged me at every turn. I hadn't seen my childhood nemesis in ten years. Not since we'd graduated from high school as co-valedictorians. Right before my speech, he'd leaned over to whisper in my ear that he was the real valedictorian, but the principal felt sorry for me. I hadn't believed him—not really—but the familiar anger burned in my gut as I watched him extend his hand to Jake.

I wanted him to get back in his car and leave, but a bigger part of me wanted to know what he was doing there. I moved closer to hear their conversation.

His gaze snagged on mine, and I sucked in a breath. *It was him.*

“Bentley Monroe?” There was a buzzing in my ears that grew louder by the second.

“I go by Ben now.” His eyes narrowed on mine. “Brooke Langley?”

I’d teased him for his pretentious name in school, so it wasn’t a surprise that he’d shortened it.

“What are you doing here?” Maybe he was just visiting his parents and would be gone in a couple of days. My heart beat slower as I waited for his response.

Bentley—no, Ben, now—looked from me to Jake. “I’m dropping my car off for service. I left a message earlier.”

Jake gestured behind him at the crowd of people. “Sorry, man. We had our grand opening party tonight. I haven’t been checking messages.”

Hailey grasped my elbow and hissed into my ear, “Wait, is this *the* Bentley? The lemonade stand kid?”

I nodded; my gaze locked on Ben.

But he wasn’t a kid anymore. He was polished and put together. He had a presence that had nothing to do with expensive clothes or his fancy car.

“I heard you do good work,” Bentley said to Jake.

Jake nodded. “What seems to be the problem?”

Ben stepped to the side of the vehicle, gesturing underneath. “I hit something on the drive here from Philadelphia.”

“There’s an issue with the undercarriage?” Jake asked.

Ben nodded. “I think so, but I’m not a mechanic.”

The guys chuckled as if sharing a secret, and my fingers curled into fists. Even though he hadn’t even said anything offensive, being around Ben never failed to set me off.

“We can squeeze you in tomorrow,” Ryan said from behind the counter, where he was looking at a pad of paper, probably the schedule.

Ben pulled a phone from his pocket. “That works. I’ll let you get back to your party.”

“Are you in town to visit your family?” Though he’d mentioned a move, I hoped he meant a temporary one.

Ben lifted his gaze. “I’m opening a store in town.”

My heart began beating so loudly that I could barely hear his next words.

“Bean Rush.”

I owned the only coffee shop in town. Which meant my childhood nemesis just became my competition. He’d been the perfect motivator to get good grades in school, but I didn’t want that same dynamic now.

“Why?” I finally bit out. Why was he ruining my dream? In high school, it seemed like he was always two steps ahead, taunting me. I could never measure up when all I wanted to do was beat him. My stomach rolled and dipped like I was on a roller coaster instead of standing on even ground.

Ben shrugged like he didn’t have a care in the world. “I wanted to open a business, and this seemed as good a place as any.”

“I own Java Coffee. We don’t need two coffee shops in town.” I crossed my arms over my chest, positive he knew this information and didn’t care. It was just like him to be cocky, to think he’d make it when no one else did.

He smirked. “It’ll be just like old times, then.”

My cheeks heated. I could feel my friends watching us, wondering how we knew each other and what the deal was. “So, you’re back, like, permanently?”

It came out sounding bitchier than I intended. I couldn’t let him get to me. If he saw a weakness, he’d hone in on it and take advantage any way he could. It was his superpower.

“Looks that way.” Ben’s attention returned to his phone as he moved away.

The fact that he could dismiss me so easily was even more infuriating. Nothing had changed. He was still the same cocky guy he was in high school. He didn’t think he had anything to worry about, but I’d show him he was wrong. I wouldn’t go down without a fight.

Hailey guided me to the hallway out of view of our friends. “Are you okay?”

Her voice was filled with concern.

“I’m sorry. I just wasn’t expecting that.” I gestured toward the garage. What I hadn’t expected was *him*.

“It will be okay.” What I hadn’t told my friends was that I’d always liked Ben. I was attracted to his sharp wit and intelligence. Though, I’d never admit it to him. Our relationship didn’t allow for weaknesses.

Ben was just the start of the boys, and later, men, who were intimidated by my intelligence and success. I’d thought my ex-husband was different. He was sweet and supportive until he got what he wanted, and it wasn’t me. When he said he wanted a divorce, it was a surprise. Ever since then, I’d surrounded myself with a tough outer shell that no one could penetrate.

I let the shock of seeing Ben walk back into my life wash over me. I wouldn't let him best me again. The logical part of me recognized it would be better not to let him get to me, but I wasn't strong enough for that today. Tomorrow I'd do better.

"You got this."

I'd focus on my business and on drawing customers away from him.

"He doesn't matter." My mind was still running through the reel of our childhood, one confrontation after another.

Hailey's brows furrowed.

I scrambled to make up for the revealing comment. "I mean—I won't let his business ruin mine."

"That's my girl," Hailey assured me as she hugged me. "It's going to be okay."

Except I wasn't sure that it was. Just like the first time Ben moved to town, nothing would be the same. I just had no way of knowing what the impact would be.



On Sunday night, I ate dinner with my family. It was hard for us to find time since my sister, Abby, and I both owned businesses, but every few months, we made it a priority.

"Did I hear from your mother that you went to the grand opening of the garage?" Dad asked as he passed the salad bowl to me.

"I went to support my Shops on Main friends." The group started as a way to network, but we'd become close and always showed up to support each other.

“The garage isn’t on Main,” Mom observed.

I hummed in agreement as I scooped the salad onto my plate before passing it to Abby. “We’ve expanded to include any shop owners in the historic district who want to join.”

“Gia asked me to stop by to take some photos to submit to the paper,” Abby said.

I tensed, wondering if she saw Ben. She’d always teased me about him when we were kids. She was convinced he was into me. “You were there?”

“I took pictures from the outside. The paper will want the renovation featured.” Abby plucked a piece of crusty garlic bread from her son, Hunter’s, plate. “That’s enough bread for you. Eat your dinner.”

Hunter screwed his face up in a scowl, but he picked up his fork and cut a tiny piece of pasta, popping it into his mouth.

The original garage had closed and sat empty for years. Jake and Ryan had done a good job renovating the place to protect the aesthetics while making it theirs.

“You only went to support your fellow Shops on Main friends?” Abby asked, her gaze carefully assessing me. It was Abby’s way of asking if I was seeing anyone.

“I wanted to support Hailey. She’s dating Ryan, one of the owners.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Abby said, and we ate quietly for a few seconds.

I hoped they’d move on to a different topic, one that wasn’t so centered on me.

“The other owner seemed attractive enough,” Abby finally said.

My face heated when I remembered what I'd said to Hailey last night. I'd been teasing. "He is, but I'm not interested."

"Why not? Don't you think it's time to start dating again?" Mom asked as she took a bite of lasagna.

"I haven't met anyone I'm interested in." My family worried about me, especially after how I was when I moved home after my divorce.

"You have to put yourself out there," Dad said gruffly as he exchanged a look with Mom.

My stomach dipped painfully at the idea of making myself vulnerable. I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't sure I'd ever be.

"If it's time for me to start dating again, then it's definitely time for Abby." Her ex left shortly after she had Hunter.

"Not cool," Abby mouthed across the table from me.

I grinned, not feeling bad in the least. I didn't want the spotlight on me.

Mom nodded at her grandson. "Hunter *is* seven now."

Abby winced. "I'm not talking about this in front of him."

Hunter was too busy hiding his peas under the placemat to pay attention to our conversation.

Mom shot us both a disappointed look. "I'm not getting any younger. I'd like to see you girls settled."

What did that even mean? Abby owned a home and had a child. We both owned businesses. We were adults. Why did we have to settle down with someone to ease our parents' minds? "Abby's not ready, and neither am I."

Abby didn't quite meet my gaze when I looked to her for support, and I wasn't sure what that meant.

"When was the last time you went out?" Mom asked.

After the grand opening of the garage, most of the shop owners celebrated the new addition to our Shops on Main group at Max's Bar & Grille, but I didn't join them.

Mom pointed her fork at me. "You can't even remember."

I opened my mouth to defend myself, intending to mention those dates I'd gone on from the online app Abby talked me into trying, but those were years ago. Whenever I thought a man was flirting with me, whether it was at the grocery store or the front counter of my coffee shop, I shut it down fast. It was a defense mechanism to protect myself.

Abby took pity on me and changed the subject. "Hunter's working on his science project for the fair."

"Oh, yeah?" Dad asked. "What's your project this year?"

Hunter immediately perked up and went into his plans for his project.

I couldn't shake off Mom's words. Many of the shop owners had begun pairing off recently. I still held myself slightly apart from them. I was a business owner and had every right to be there, but trust was hard for me. It wasn't easy to believe that a relationship was genuine. That I could trust anyone's motives. I only had my ex to blame for that.

It only takes one person to throw you off your axis, and I wasn't sure I'd ever regain my balance.

Chapter Two

BEN

Six Month Later

Moving to Annapolis was my chance to start over and be the dad I should have been all along. I'd hoped to move in the winter, but permits and supply issues held things up. Cade and Nolan from Morrison Brothers Construction did good work despite challenges that were out of their control.

Opening a second coffee shop in a small town was risky, but I knew the market. A tourist town like Annapolis had multiple ice cream and fudge shops, and it should be able to sustain two coffee shops. I'd scouted the competition—Java Coffee—not realizing Brooke owned it. Not that she'd believe me if I told her that. When we were kids, she'd always accused me of manipulation—the election for Class President, the captain of the debate team, and even our grades.

Before our run-in at the garage, I hadn't seen Brooke since our high school graduation. Back then, I'd been disappointed we wouldn't be attending the same college, but it had nothing to do with my attraction to her. We pushed each other to do better, to be the best versions of ourselves. We were both driven, and we thrived on achieving our goals. I respected the hell out of her.

I thought she'd go to law or med school, not open a small business in our hometown. Thinking back, it shouldn't have been unexpected. Our lemonade stand wars were legendary in our neighborhood. We'd change our prices and recipes, playing with amounts of sugar and other add-ons to compete. It was exhilarating. Nothing got my blood pumping more than Brooke Langley.

Things were less complicated when I only had to worry about myself. Now, I had my daughter. Being a newly single father was difficult, but I was doing my best. My corporate job was not conducive to being home in the evenings. A business wasn't either, necessarily, but I hoped it would give me freedom. Once the business took off, I'd hire more people so I could spend my free time with Cammie.

Success used to mean measuring my personal achievements. Now, it meant being there for my daughter and creating the best life possible for her.

As soon as I opened the front door of my parents' house, arriving home from work, Cammie skidded to a stop in front of me. The smell of marinara sauce and melted cheese permeated the air.

"Don't run in the house," Mom yelled after her, reminding me of Mom yelling at my sister and me the same way when we were kids.

Cammie looked at me from under her Phillies cap, her black baseball glove held tight to her chest. "Will you play catch with me?"

"Of course. Just let me change." Wearing business suits was a habit in the city. Hopefully, things in town would be lower key.

“Hurry, Daddy.”

“I will.” I chuckled as I headed up the steps, pulling the knot in my tie to loosen it. Contentment moved through my body as I closed the door to my childhood bedroom. As long as I got to spend more time with Cammie, quitting my job, opening a new business, and the move would be worth it.

I quickly shucked my work clothes and pulled on a T-shirt, shorts, and sneakers. Hopefully, I’d have time to run outside in the neighborhood instead of my usual early morning workouts on the treadmill.

I lifted my glove to my mom, who’d already settled on the couch to watch the baseball game. “Going outside to play catch.”

Mom smiled softly. “Dinner’s warming in the oven when you’re ready.”

“Lasagna?” I guessed.

“I had to make your favorite for your first official night home.”

I kissed her cheek, knowing she was pleased we’d be moving there. Especially since my sister, Elizabeth, had gone to college and gotten a job in her college town. She rarely visited home. “I appreciate it.”

“Are you going to get rid of that sports car when you move here?” Dad asked.

I paused by the glass sliding door, knowing Cammie would be getting impatient for me to join her. “I think I’ll keep it and get an SUV.”

Dad shook his head. “That car’s a money pit.”

“It is,” I acknowledged before stepping outside where Cammie was throwing her ball against the pitch back.

That sports car represented my first big promotion. It was evidence I’d made it. Of course, the best day was holding Cameron in my arms in the hospital. When I held her tiny weight in my arms, I knew everything had changed. She was it for me. I’d do anything to keep her safe and protected.

I just thought she’d have both of her parents. I couldn’t have anticipated Cammie losing her mother at seven.

Shaking the melancholy thoughts from my head, I asked Cammie, “You ready to play?”

Cammie scowled and put her hands on her hips. “I’ve been waiting forever.”

Thirty seconds was too long of a delay for this kid. Amused, I said, “I told you I had to change.”

She gestured toward home plate, which was in front of the patio. “Stand by home plate. I want to pitch to you.”

Cammie loved baseball, but there was nowhere to play in or near our apartment. The first thing I did when I decided to move back to Annapolis was order a pitch back net and bases to be delivered to my parents’ house.

I wanted her to feel at home. Like she was only gaining something by moving there, not losing anything. She’d be starting at a new school, and I hoped she’d adjust and make new friends quickly.

Cammie stood at the make-shift pitcher’s mound, her hand curled around a baseball behind her back, her glove against her chest. She must be mimicking the professional baseball players she watched on TV. Abruptly, she straightened and rolled her eyes. “You’re supposed to give me the hand single.”

I stood and stretched. “What hand signal?”

“You know, one means fastball, two means curveball, three is a sinker, four’s a change-up, and five is a knuckleball.” Her tone was exasperated.

“How did you learn all of this?” I sank into my catcher’s stance, singling one finger for a fastball.

Without answering, she moved into position, took an exaggerated deep breath, then lowered her shoulders, wound up, and threw the baseball.

I straightened to catch it. “A little high.”

We resumed our positions, and I signaled two for curveball. “Why aren’t we practicing with a softball?”

I’d researched the proper size for her age. The yellow and purple balls were in a bag somewhere in the garage. Maybe she couldn’t find them.

She shot me a disgusted look. “Why do I have to play softball?”

Her expression made me think I’d stepped into quicksand with my seemingly innocent question. I wasn’t sure where I went wrong. “Girls play softball, and boys play baseball.”

Her face pinched. “But why?”

“I don’t know, sweetie.” I didn’t know the history behind it, but she wouldn’t be satisfied until she had answers.

“And why is it called a softball when it’s harder than a baseball?”

“It is?” That was something else I didn’t know.

She sighed. “Yes, Daddy. It is.”

“Are you going to throw?” My knees were starting to ache from the crouched position, but I’d never tell her that.

“Fine.” She got back into position, and I could only hope she’d forgotten her line of questioning.

I used two fingers to remind her it was a curveball, and she wound up to throw a sidearm. The ball went wide and bounced off the siding of the house with a thud.

“Hey! Watch it out there,” Dad roared.

Cammie’s eyes widened. “Whoops.”

Jogging to recover the ball, I said, “I think we’ll need to find our own place sooner rather than later.”

Cammie nodded seriously. “When is my first practice?”

The one thing I’d promised Cammie was I’d register her for a team as soon as we moved. Thankfully, we’d arrived just in time for the spring season. Tossing the ball to her, I said, “Softball starts next week.”

Cammie’s whole face screwed up, and I knew I was in for a fight. “I want to play baseball. Not softball.”

“I don’t think girls can play baseball,” I said carefully. I wasn’t sure if there was a rule, but there must be something.

She placed her hand and glove on her hips. “Grandma helped me look it up. Girls can play baseball until eighth grade.”

“Why would you want to play it if you can only do it through eighth grade?” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew I’d made an error.

“*For now*. I can only play through eighth grade *now*.”

“Are you planning on changing that rule?” I asked, pride coursing through me.

Cammie shrugged.

She was so like me. Competitive and driven. I hoped it would always be a plus for her like it was for me. I wondered if Brooke was like that as a child.

“You promised to register me for baseball.”

I must have missed that or assumed she meant softball. “I’ll look into it.”

That seemed to appease her because she got back into her pitching stance. Crouching down again, I signaled a knuckleball. Cammie’s tongue darted out as she concentrated on her grip and the throw. That time, it was a strike.

“Strike one,” I called as I stood and approached her.

“Do you think they’ll let me pitch?” My heart ached for her because it was possible the boys wouldn’t want to play with a girl. They might even make fun of her, and I couldn’t protect her from everything.

“I don’t know. We’ll have to wait and see.” My stomach rolled at the thought of her not being welcomed.

She nodded seriously. “I want to be the best baseball player.”

I ruffled her hair. “You’ll be the best at whatever you do.”

I believed in her. I was driven, and she showed all the signs that she was similar to me. She loved competition, even if she wasn’t always the best at handling defeat. We were two peas in the same pod.

I'd make sure Bean Rush was successful so we could have the life she deserved. One where her father was present and involved, and her grandparents could help out. I had to be enough for her, even if it was a daunting prospect.



“What do you think about this, boss?” My manager, Christopher, asked as he stepped back from the framed photos of Annapolis on the wall.

We'd hired a local photographer to take pictures of local buildings and the harbor for the decor.

“A little more to the left,” I said, noticing the slightly crooked frame of Juliana's Bed & Breakfast. I wanted to welcome locals and tourists. When they stopped by to purchase their favorite drink, I wanted them to feel at home.

“I think it was a great idea to showcase Annapolis.”

“Me, too.” I'd run the numbers before I decided to open the coffee shop and looked into what Annapolis was missing. There wasn't much, but I'd noticed there were multiple businesses of most things except for coffee or juice. I had no interest in running a juice shop, but I was passionate about coffee beans. I'd become a connoisseur over the years and loved the idea of having a small, quaint shop that appealed to everyone.

“You're not worried about Java Coffee?” Christopher asked as he used a feather duster to clean off the frames.

I was more worried about how Cammie's first day at school was going.

Refocusing on Christopher's question, I said, "I'm not worried, even though they're our main competition." I never admitted weakness. Instead, I researched Brooke's business model. Her website was professional and up to date. She offered various book clubs, a battle of the books—whatever that was—trivia nights, and children's story times. I told myself it was business, and it had nothing to do with learning more about the owner.

I didn't know Brooke owned the competing coffee shop before I ran into her the other night at Harbor Garage, but knowing the truth didn't change my plans. I intended to pull customers away from her store. It would be just like old times. We'd researched the other's business models and made marketing plans accordingly.

When we were kids selling lemonade, Brooke tended to overprice her goods, eager for more profits. I still remember her ten-year-old self telling me she knew the worth of her lemonade. The day she said that burned me up. I took it to mean she thought she was better than me, which pissed me right off.

If she raised her prices to compete with me now, it would be a huge business mistake. I wondered if it was still her weakness and if her stakes were as high as mine. Did she have bills to pay or a child to raise?

I hadn't heard that she had a husband or children, but it didn't mean she didn't either. I ignored the disappointment that ripped through my chest at the thought. What kept me going with Brooke through the years was that I liked her. If I gave into those feelings and acted on them, we wouldn't compete anymore. Nothing would be the same. And I enjoyed our rivalry. It fueled me to be the best version of myself.

So, no, I wasn't worried about Java Coffee. I was excited to get to know my competition and to come out on top. My daughter's financial stability and my ability to spend more quality time with her depended on my business's success. I wouldn't let Brooke Langley stand in my way.

"Do you go to Java Coffee?"

"Not since you hired me on, boss."

I nodded, pleased at his loyalty. There was nothing I valued more in an employee than hard work and loyalty. Christopher had coordinated the construction while I was in Philadelphia, wrapping up my old job and getting ready for the move. His help was invaluable.

I wanted to give him more responsibilities, but that hinged on the success of Bean Rush. I knew the statistics. Most businesses failed within five years, but I wasn't your typical business owner. Just like my lemonade stand, I'd come out on top. I was positive Brooke thought her stand was the best, but she always thought that. The reality was something different.

I ignored the twinge in my heart telling me that Brooke came out on top as many times as I did. We were co-valedictorians. There was never a clear winner in our history, but I needed to be the last man standing in this one. My daughter's future happiness depended on it.

Chapter Three

BROOKE

“Will I be on the Orioles again this year?”
Hunter asked.

I glanced in the rearview mirror at my nephew. “I don’t know, buddy.”

When my sister, Abby, asked me to take my nephew to his first baseball practice of the season, I was thrilled. I loved spending time with him—and not just at family get-togethers. I enjoyed being part of his daily activities, whether baseball practice or just hanging out and watching a movie.

As a single mother with a photography business, she had difficulty juggling Hunter’s after-school activities, and sometimes, she needed my help.

“What position are you most excited about playing this year?” I relished my alone time with him. Sometimes it made me nostalgic for what I thought I’d have by then—a husband and a child or two.

“Pitcher,” he said without thinking about his answer.

I smiled. “I bet you’ll get a chance to try it.”

Hunter sighed. “You know I pitched last year.”

I'd attended every game I could the year before, but I couldn't for the life of me remember what position he'd played. "And you were great at it."

His chest puffed with pride as he looked out of his window. He looked so adorable in his Orioles baseball cap from last year. He'd been so excited for the season to start that he'd worn his full uniform from last year. I didn't have the heart to tell him that he didn't need to wear it.

I turned at the snack shack and pulled down the dirt road to the gravel lot. Dust flew in the air from the various trucks, minivans, and SUVs pulling in for practice. Parents grabbed chairs and gear while kids ran toward the fields.

I loved everything about baseball season. The playing of the national anthem at the beginning of every game, the crack of the bat, and the joy when a kid ran home for the first time.

When I parked, Hunter unbuckled, opened his door, and said impatiently, "Come on."

"Hold on." I hurried to the trunk, pulled out his baseball bag, and helped him put it on his shoulders. "You sure you need both of your bats?"

"Yes," he said, his tone irritated. Then he walked off without waiting for me.

I slung the camp chair over my shoulder and followed him to field eleven. There were twelve fields total, and we were on the very last one. "This is a trek, isn't it?"

But Hunter must have spotted a friend because he took off at a jog without responding.

"It certainly is. You ready for another baseball season?" One of the moms came up next to me, pulling one of those

collapsible wagons with a younger child riding in it and two more kids walking next to it. Both kids carried bags with bats.

“I love it.” I nodded at Hunter, who was talking to a friend animatedly as he hung his bag on the fence. “Hunter’s my nephew.”

“That’s nice of you to bring him.” At sporting events, there were moms and dads, sometimes girlfriends or boyfriends, and grandparents, but I rarely saw aunts and uncles. I worried that Abby felt like an outsider with the other intact families, but if it bothered her, she never said anything.

Like me, Abby married Seth young, but they’d wanted kids right away. My ex-husband wanted to wait, and being career minded, I hadn’t minded.

Abby and Seth couldn’t get pregnant on their own, so they’d undergone infertility treatments. When she’d finally gotten pregnant, Seth started to pull away from her, and by the time Hunter was born, he’d said he couldn’t do it anymore.

My parents and I stepped in, never wanting her to feel alone.

When we arrived at the field, the other woman veered to the left to set up her things. I stood awkwardly, not recognizing any of the parents I’d gotten to know last year. “Auntie Brooke,” Hunter raced over me. “There’s a *girl* playing on my team.”

His tone was full of shock.

I looked over his head, seeing a girl with a blonde ponytail poking out of her baseball cap. “I think I remember reading somewhere that girls can—”

But Hunter had darted off again before I could finish my statement. The coach introduced himself, and a few dads

volunteered to help with practice. The kids were grouped together to go through different stations: batting, fielding, pitching, and catching.

I opened my chair and took my seat off to the side when I noticed a man pacing the hill, his phone pressed against his ear. He stood out because he still wore pressed slacks and a button-down shirt. The other moms and dads were dressed casually in jeans and T-shirts.

I scanned the faces to try and figure out which kid was his. All the kids wore pants or shorts with T-shirts, and a few wore baseball hats. Other than the lone girl, no one stood out.

The man finally lowered his phone and turned back toward practice. With long strides, he ate up the distance between us. I couldn't look away. Brown hair, neatly trimmed beard. It was Ben. What was he doing there? Was he visiting a niece or nephew like I was?

He casually scanned the group of parents sitting in chairs or standing and young siblings running around the area before he spotted me. I sucked in a breath, wishing the sight of him didn't affect me so much. I told myself it was just a surprise seeing him after so much time.

He didn't stop until he stood at my side. "What are you doing here?"

I nodded toward the field. "Same thing I expect you're doing. Watching my nephew." I assumed it was a nephew since there were mainly boys. "Or is it your niece?"

His gaze met mine. "My daughter."

"*Your daughter?*" I croaked. How had I missed the fact that Ben had a kid? Was he married?

“Cameron. But she goes by Cammie.” He nodded toward the mound where she stood. One of the coaches was demonstrating how to grip the ball.

“She’s yours.” I was repeating myself because I was so shocked that Ben had a daughter. I couldn’t reconcile it with what I knew about him. We were both voted most likely to succeed. He had dreams of moving to a big city and becoming a CEO. Kids didn’t seem to fit with the picture I had of him in my head. I’d imagined him in some corporate office, kicking ass, not taking his daughter to practice.

He tipped his head to the side, considering me. “Why is that surprising?”

“I didn’t know you’d married.” Our mothers were friends when we were kids, but they weren’t close anymore.

“I didn’t.” His jaw tightened. “I moved here to be close to my parents. I need the help, and I hope living in a small town will be good for her.”

Something tightened inside me. “It was for us.”

I loved growing up in a small town and living close to my family. I couldn’t imagine not being able to help my sister out or attend most of my nephew’s games.

Ben shifted his weight, and I racked my brain for something to get him to stay. I was getting a glimpse into his life over the past ten years, and I wanted more. “You were living in Philadelphia before?”

That night at the garage, I remembered he’d told Jake he’d driven from Philadelphia.

He nodded. “That’s right.”

I wanted to ask where Cammie's mother was, but it wasn't my place, and I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Even if Ben was single, our shops were in direct competition with each other. Nothing could happen between us. There was too much history there.

Ben tipped his head toward the field in a confident move that had my tummy dipping. "Which one is your nephew?"

"Hunter, the one in the Orioles uniform. He takes baseball pretty seriously," I said jokingly.

Instead of smiling, he sighed. "Cammy does, too. She insisted on playing baseball with the boys. She couldn't understand why girls would play a different sport. You should have heard her. 'Why do girls play with a bigger ball?' 'Why is it called softball when the ball isn't soft?' 'Why can't girls play with the boys?' And on and on. I had to google the history of softball, and now I know more than I ever wanted to know."

I smiled at how he pitched his voice higher to sound like his daughter asking questions. "I don't see too many girls playing at this age. She's brave."

He nodded. "She's fearless."

I heard the affection in his voice. The love for his daughter. It did something to me, but I wasn't prepared to feel anything for him other than physical attraction. In high school, I disregarded it because he was my competition. A guy who pushed all your buttons shouldn't be someone you were attracted to.

I wondered what he'd be like in a relationship. A flash popped into my head of him hovering over me in bed with that familiar glint in his eyes, the one that challenged me. He'd

probably want to prove how good he was in bed. My core tightened at the thought.

“I didn’t think to bring a chair. I came straight from work,” he said as if he was worried I’d judge him.

Normally, I would’ve said something about his more formal attire at a kids’ baseball practice, but Ben having a daughter changed everything. I’d always seen him as a hard guy, driven and impenetrable, but he’d revealed something personal. He’d been vulnerable *with me*. It was unexpected, and I was still trying to wrap my mind around it.

He stood next to me as we watched Cammie throw a few pitches. Each time, the coach took the time to tweak her form.

“She’ll be okay.” *And you will be, too*. I wasn’t sure why I felt the need to soothe him when I never had before.

“I hope so. Hopefully, it’s not too late to put her in softball if she changes her mind.”

I laughed as Hunter ran up to me and breathlessly asked, “Coach said I need a cup.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I reached around for the water bottle I’d brought for him.

“Nooo,” Hunter said, drawing out the word. “If I want to play catcher, I need a cup.”

My brow furrowed in confusion, still not grasping what he was trying to tell me.

Ben crouched down to Hunter’s level and lowered his voice, “Boys wear cups to protect themselves while they’re playing. It could really hurt if you get hit.”

My face heated. Why hadn’t I thought of that? But I never had a brother, and I’d never dated a jock.

“I bet your dad could help you with that,” Ben told Hunter.

“Oh, he doesn’t—” What could I say in front of Hunter that didn’t put down his father but let him know he wasn’t in the picture?

“I’ll tell my mom,” Hunter said before racing off to the field, seemingly undisturbed by the mention of his absentee father.

“His father doesn’t come around much.” He certainly wasn’t involved in Hunter’s day-to-day needs. That was all Abby.

Ben grimaced. “Sorry, I didn’t realize.”

An awkward silence fell between us, mainly because my mind was still trying to catch up to the new and improved Ben. The one who had responsibilities and vulnerabilities. The one with a daughter. The one who’d just saved me from an uncomfortable conversation with my nephew.

“I’m going to take a seat.” He gestured to the small metal bleachers behind the backstop.

“I’ll see you around,” I mumbled. I would be seeing him around town and at my nephew’s baseball practices and games. I should have been irritated, so why did my skin tingle the entire time he stood next to me? Why did I care so much that he was a good dad?

None of it should have mattered because Ben was the same person at his core. Wasn’t he? No matter how much of a family man he had become, we had nothing in common. Except a love for kids, and that wasn’t enough to erase our history.

I’d seen his façade drop because he was around his daughter, but if I ran into him around town, he’d be back to his

usual competitive self. He couldn't help it.

The thought made me a little sad because I liked the guy I saw at practice. If he were any other single dad, I might have tried to get to know him better. But I could never go there with Ben.

At the end of practice, I folded my chair and slung it over my shoulder. I couldn't help but overhear Cammie when she said, "Daddy, Daddy, I told you they'd let me pitch."

"You did such a good job," Ben said, taking her bag from her.

"Did you see that ball I hit? And how I slid into first base?" she asked.

"You're supposed to run through first base, though," Ben said gently, taking her offered hand.

I smiled, having learned a little about baseball last year, and my heart skipped a beat at them holding hands. They were sweet together.

Cammie's nose scrunched. "That's what the coach said."

"You should listen to him. He knows what he's talking about," Ben continued as they passed me.

Hunter approached, asking me something.

I forced my gaze from Ben and Cammie to Hunter. "I'm sorry. What did you ask?"

"Can we get pizza?" he repeated with an eye roll.

I probably deserved that for not paying attention to him.

"Sure, let me text your mom and let her know." I wanted to ease Abby's burden, so whatever I could do to make evenings go smoother, I did. I didn't have anyone to go home to, which

had never bothered me until then. Seeing Ben with his daughter made my heart ache for that connection to a partner. As nice as it was helping Hunter and Abby, I wanted that unconditional love for myself.

I wasn't naïve. My ex had no problem walking away from me and our sham of a marriage. And Abby's ex-husband wanted nothing to do with her or Hunter, despite trying so hard to have him. Being in love didn't mean the person would stick around. But underneath, I still hoped for the impossible—someone to love me.

Chapter Four

BEN

After running into Brooke at Cammie's first practice, I was more determined than ever to visit her coffee shop. I just hoped she wasn't working. Her business had been open for long enough that she'd have staff handling the front counter. Hopefully, she'd either be in the back, running numbers, or at home, enjoying a day off.

The Brooke I used to know probably worked seven days a week, though, and had a hand in every aspect of her business. So there was the possibility I'd see her.

After my morning run, where I hoped to burn off any warm and fuzzy feelings about this adult version of Brooke, I ate breakfast with my daughter and saw her off for the day. She was cautiously optimistic about her new school. I loved spending mornings with her. She was sweet and happy, but the teen years were just around the corner, so I soaked up every minute with her.

I was cognizant that this was time her mother didn't get. I staved off the feelings of melancholy as I pulled open the heavy glass door to Java Coffee.

It was in a good location, drawing tourists from the harbor. My business was farther north, catching the people on State

Circle and St. John's College.

I wasn't sure what I hoped to learn other than what made her business successful so that I could compete.

The bell over the door rang, signaling my arrival. It was a little late for the morning rush, so only a few people stood at the counter. Brooke was at the counter taking orders, her blonde hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail; her lips were pink and inviting. Unlike her barista, who wore a black shirt and blue apron, Brooke wore a white blouse and black dress pants. I didn't have to look at her feet to know she was wearing heels. She'd want to look professional despite any discomfort. We were similar like that.

I wore business attire, though Christopher assured me no one expected the owner of a coffee shop to wear a suit. I wanted to look the part of a successful business owner, even if I wasn't one yet.

I took the time to observe Brooke in her element as I pursued the shelves of books for sale. She even had games available for patrons to play.

Brooke was quick with a smile, and I noticed she had a personal anecdote for each customer. *How's your granddaughter? Did you check out the new flower shop on Main?* She took the time to get to know her customers. She probably didn't spend much time in the office when the shop was open.

I'd wanted to taste test her coffee, but not with her at the counter. I also didn't want to alert her to my presence. Instead, I picked up a book and mindlessly thumbed through it. Could I leave without her noticing me?

Before I could come up with a viable solution, a familiar voice asked, “Can I help you?”

I shelved the book, not even looking where I stashed it, as I turned to face her.

Her expression was amused and maybe a tiny bit gleeful.

It reminded me so much of our high school interactions that my heart stuttered, and I muttered, “I’m fine.”

“Would you like to try the coffee?”

My words got caught in my throat because she was beautiful up close. At the baseball field, I’d carefully kept my gaze averted.

“Isn’t that what you’re here to do? Scope out the competition?” She smiled wider at my discomfort, clearly enjoying herself.

I rolled my shoulders back and straightened to my full height. “It’s what any good business owner would do.”

“I expected nothing less.” A teasing smile played on her lips.

Was she expecting me? Had she been hoping I’d show up? I had to remember she was my competition, not a potential love interest. I’d shot that idea down a long time ago. There was no way Brooke Langley would ever go for me. We were too similar. And I couldn’t forget I never measured up.

I suddenly realized we were very much alone, tucked between two stacks of shelves hidden from the front counter and seating area.

My jaw tightened. “I need my business to be successful.”

“Don’t we all,” she said dryly.

I fell back on my old standby, a well-placed challenge. She always reacted beautifully to those. “You should have known this would happen. You weren’t going to be the only coffee shop forever.”

Her cheeks turned pink as her eyes flashed with irritation. “And yet it had to be you.”

“I saw an opportunity, and I took it.” It was the truth, and I’d felt good about it until I stood before her.

She nodded, not confirming or denying my assertion. That burned in my gut. I wanted her to challenge me, to fight back. I needed her to be that feisty girl from high school. The one who taunted and teased me. The only thing was—it got my blood pumping for a different reason now.

“The offer for a coffee still stands.” She turned as if she were going to walk away.

I studied her expression, trying to figure out what she was thinking. Coming away stumped, I said, “I’ll take it.”

I’d prolong my time with her to figure out what she was thinking and what her plan was. Surely, she had one.

I followed her through the maze of bookshelves to the counter. Her round ass was perfectly encased in her black slacks. Her scent—maybe honeysuckle—reminded me of running through neighborhood backyards to sneak up on her lemonade stand. Everything about her pulled me in.

I shook off the feelings of desire as she rounded the counter. My visit was about assessing the competition, not sleeping with the owner.

I watched as she made my drink, grabbing the to-go cup and pouring from the bold brew. She knew exactly what I liked. Was it because of our history, or was she good at

assessing her customer? If so, she had a skill I hadn't acquired yet.

She got to know her customers and anticipated their wants and desires. Could I do the same? Or was that her strength?

She carefully placed the lid on the cup, checking to make sure it was sealed before setting it on the counter in front of me. I pulled out my wallet, but she covered my hand with hers.

I stilled with her smaller hand covering mine, the warmth sliding up my arm to my elbow. Her eyes widened at the contact before she quickly pulled back. "Your money's no good here."

"You won't survive giving away your coffee for free." The statement was harsher than I intended.

"It's a coffee for an old friend." Her voice was soft. Sweeter than I deserved.

Was that a flash of disappointment in her eyes? Was she hoping for a different guy, the one she saw on the baseball field when I was in my role as Dad? "Is that what we were—what we are?"

Her forehead wrinkled. "Honestly?"

I nodded as she searched my face for something.

"I have no idea."

"Fair enough." I swallowed thickly. I wasn't sure why I felt so out of sorts. I'd come to check out her store and taste her coffee. Nothing else. So, why did I feel like I'd failed some kind of test?

"Enjoy the rest of your day," she said before moving down the counter to greet the next customer.

My interactions with Brooke were rocking my control. I needed to avoid her. I needed to focus on my business, my product, my customers, and my plan for opening day, not the owner of the competition. It didn't matter how gorgeous she was or whether she had similar goals in life. There was no emotion in business. It was all spreadsheets and numbers. Black and white.

Being attracted to my competition would only hurt me.



“You get any inspiration at Java Coffee?” Christopher asked when I returned.

“I have a better feel for her business model.” She was a natural with people. I couldn't say the same.

Christopher tipped his head to the side. “Any way we can leverage it to our advantage?”

“I'm still thinking.” Visiting her store gave me a look at Brooke and how she ran her business. Not so much how to take her customers. I felt a twinge of guilt as I remembered how she'd taken her nephew to baseball practice and how sweet she was with her customers. She was a nice person. She didn't deserve what I would plan.

Christopher resumed wiping down the tables in the seating area. “I think we should hold a grand opening party.”

I leaned against the counter, crossing my legs at my ankles, watching him move around the room. “Parties aren't really my thing.”

Christopher straightened. “There's an event planning business in town—Happily Ever Afters.”

“That doesn’t sound like what I need.” It sounded more like a company that planned weddings.

“They plan all kinds of events. They just did the grand opening for Harbor Garage, and it was a success. Brought more awareness to the new business. The paper even ran a feature on it in the lifestyle section.

“I’ll think about it.” There was no question I needed to capitalize on the newness. Customers would come because they were curious. The challenge would be to keep them coming back.

Christopher met my gaze. “I’ve heard Brooke’s selling books now—local history and folklore, even guidebooks. It’s perfect for tourists and locals.”

“Hmm,” I hadn’t actually looked at the title of the book I picked up. My brain was too full of Brooke. For the first time, I’d let a woman distract me from my goal. I’d be an idiot to let it happen again.

“The website offers opportunities for groups wanting to be involved in book trivia and story times.” There was no question Brooke was trying hard to increase business. It was probably her way of countering my opening.

“But you’ll bring them in with your coffee beans,” Christopher said, gesturing at the large glass jars on the shelves. Each one was labeled with the origin and unique flavors. The seating area contained a historic coffee grinder. An antique my grandfather had collected at some point. It was the one thing that had given me the idea for the coffee shop.

“We’re part museum, part coffee shop. We can’t exactly form coffee interest groups.” But how else could I draw in customers?

Christopher nodded. “You’ll have good Wi-Fi, which will encourage people to work with their laptops.”

My stomach sank. “That’s what every good coffee shop offers.”

I wanted to do something different, and I thought offering unique coffee beans would be the answer. But now that I’d seen Brooke’s business model, I wasn’t so sure. How would I sell coffee beans to people when I wasn’t exactly a people person?

Resolved to continue with my original plan, I said, “I want to stick with the basics. We’ll be known for selling good quality coffee and procuring whatever bean the customer is interested in. Brooke is trying to do too much. She’s diluting her brand with books and trivia nights. I don’t want to confuse my customer.”

Christopher’s brow furrowed. He disagreed with my conclusion, but I was the one with an MBA. I’d stick to what I’d learned in school and ignore the doubt, the voice that said Brooke had more real-time experience running a business.

“What do you think about a grand opening?”

“Can you see how much they want for planning it?” I asked.

“Sure thing, boss.”

Pride filled me at his words. Being a boss was a dream of mine. It was everything I’d worked for since I was a kid running a lemonade stand. I just had to stick with my original plan. Open a successful business and be home more for Cammie.



“Daddy!” Cammie called when I entered the kitchen at six on the dot.

“Just in time for dinner,” Mom said.

“Good,” I said, relieved I’d met my goal of being home earlier. In Philadelphia, Cammy had a nanny who stayed with her after school, made sure she ate dinner, and got to bed on time. Between my parents’ help and my goal of being around more, I hoped to avoid that.

I washed my hands in the sink. “Can I help?”

“I got it,” Dad said, grabbing the casserole dish and setting it in the middle of the table.

Cammy sat on her knees at the table. “Daddy, Daddy. You’ll never believe what I did today.”

I kissed her cheek. “What’s that, baby?”

“We went to a splash pad,” Cammy said to me before gazing at my mom. “Can we show him the pictures?”

“It’s open this early in the season?” I asked.

“It’s brand new, and it was warm today,” Dad said, taking a seat at the head of the table.

It had been warm, which made me realize tourist season would arrive before I knew it. I needed to be prepared.

“I’m glad you had fun,” I said to Cammie as she took the phone from her grandma and scrolled through the pictures. In each one, she was smiling wide. “I’m sorry I missed it.”

Cammie smiled sadly, and I knew she was thinking about her mom, who’d missed it, too.

“Let’s put the phone away so we can eat,” Mom said, sensing what I had, too.

We gave Cammie the space to explore her feelings, but we didn’t want them to overwhelm her. I made a mental note to find a new therapist for her in town.

Moving was a big transition for anyone, and she’d had enough changes over the last year.

“Let’s say one thing we’re grateful for, and then we can eat,” Mom suggested.

The therapist had suggested we do that with Cammie a few times a day. It was a gentle reminder for her to look for the good, not to dwell on the bad and everything she’d lost.

“I’m grateful for splash pads,” Cammie said, and we burst into laughter.

That is why I moved there. For family dinners, time with her grandparents, and a fresh start. One where we weren’t haunted with reminders of our past.

Cammie’s carefree smile said I’d made the right decision. Sure, it was a transition, but we had more support, and eventually, I’d have more freedom from work. At least I hoped so. Remembering how Brooke was with her customers, I wondered if I’d been premature in thinking Bean Rush would be an instant success.

“I enjoyed spending the day with my granddaughter,” Mom said.

“Here, here,” Dad added.

Cammie looked at me. “What are you grateful for, Daddy?”

I leaned over to tickle her in the ribs. “I’m grateful we’re here with your grandparents, and I got to eat breakfast and dinner with my favorite girl.”

“Daddy!” Cammie squealed when my fingers found a particularly ticklish spot.

“Enough of that. Let’s eat,” Mom said, but her voice was filled with affection.

They were just as happy as I was that we’d moved back. Mom wanted us to do it for years, but she increased the pressure when Cammie’s mother died unexpectedly. We’d still been reeling. I held on for a little longer, thinking I could do everything myself. But eventually, I realized I needed to slow down and be there for Cammie. Maria’s parents lived in California and didn’t often visit, so they weren’t close to Cammie.

Cammie kept up a steady stream of chatter about whatever shows she’d watched that afternoon while we ate.

After we’d eaten, I helped clean up.

“How are things at work?” Mom asked as she washed the pots and dishes while I dried them.

“We’re planning on opening in two weeks. Maybe even having a grand opening party.”

She nodded. “That’s a good idea.”

“It’s not my style, but it’ll bring awareness to the business. I’ve already placed several advertisements in the paper, flyers in the mail, and some ads on social media.

“Sounds like you thought of everything,” she said absentmindedly.

“I visited Java Coffee today to check out the competition.” I wasn’t sure how Mom would take my admission. She’d always thought Brooke’s and my competitive spirits were a little over the top. She thought it was cute when we were kids, but I wasn’t sure what she would think of it now.

Mom gave me a concerned look. “You know Brooke owns it, right?”

“I do now. She’s great with her customers.”

“Her mother said she remembers everything you tell her like her mind is a Rolodex of information.

“She didn’t know I had a daughter,” I said, remembering her reaction to that fact at baseball practice.

“I don’t go to Java Coffee. I drink tea here, so I haven’t seen her other than bumping into her at the store, which isn’t enough time to get into grandkids. I haven’t spent time with Nancy in a long time. We just grew apart.”

“Makes sense.”

“You think you can compete with her store?”

“The town has historically supported multiple stores selling the same products. I don’t think a second coffee shop will be any different.”

“At least you’re both local. I can’t imagine what would happen if a box store showed up,” Dad said, joining the conversation as he leaned his elbows on the island counter.

I shuddered internally at the thought. “Hopefully, that doesn’t happen, and the box stores stick to the bigger towns and cities.”

When we were finished with the dishes, Dad said, “I’m just happy to have you and that little girl home.”

“Me too, Dad. Me too.”

I couldn't take Cammie away from her grandparents. The store had to stick. Otherwise, I'd be moving back to Philadelphia or commuting to Baltimore or D.C. None of those options was conducive to more time with Cammie.

Chapter Five

BROOKE

After Ben left, I hid in my office, needing a minute to relax. Having Ben in my space rattled me, even though I'd kept my cool. Something about his head bowed over a book had my heart racing and my skin tingling, but the rational part of my brain knew he was there to scope out my weaknesses. I hoped he didn't find any, but that was a foolish conclusion.

Ben had worked in the city. According to the customers talking about the new coffee store in town, he had a fancy MBA to back him up. He'd gotten an advanced degree while raising a daughter. It was impressive.

I'd worked at a coffee shop near my college campus, soaking up everything I could so I could open a store at home. Near my sister and Hunter.

I had dreams of an advanced degree, too, but the embarrassment of my divorce and my desire to help my sister trumped any more time spent away from home. I didn't regret it, but I worried it would give Ben an advantage.

I tried to imagine what he'd seen. A coffee shop that sold books. An owner who wasn't afraid to work the counter and

socialize with the customers. Would he find my business model trite?

We challenged each other, but for the most part, we were respectful. Then there were moments when I actually thought he cared about me. There was that one time in high school when I was sick and missed a big test. Ben stopped by to see if I was okay.

We never spoke about it, and as far as I knew, he didn't realize Mom told me he'd come by. That was when I got it into my head that something else was there, and I allowed myself to dream about him asking me out, but he never did.

I'd made so many assumptions over the years—that Abby's husband would stay and raise Hunter with her, that my marriage to Levi was real. I wouldn't make the same mistakes again.

I looked up when I heard a quiet knock on the door. "What are you doing hiding in here?" Hailey asked.

She was my best friend. She'd sold her grandmother's business, the Spice & Tea Shoppe, a few months ago and now worked as my assistant manager while writing fantasy novels in her spare time.

My heart thumped in my chest. "Ben stopped by."

Hailey's eyes widened as she plopped into the chair across from my desk. "Why?"

I shrugged. "To scope out the competition, I guess. He took a coffee to go."

A part of me was dying to know what he thought of the brew.

"Do you know when he's officially opening?"

“The sign out front just says coming soon.” I’d never admit that I walked or drove by his store once a day to check it.

“Everyone’s talking about it.” Hailey winced when she caught my expression. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s a small town. People are bound to talk about a new business.” I just hoped they weren’t predicting my demise.

Hailey tipped her head to the side. “What are we going to do to counter his opening? A trivia night?”

“Should we do a monthly trivia night? I just worry it won’t be as popular as the ones held in bars. We don’t have a liquor license.” Not that I wanted to serve beer on top of coffee.

Hailey pointed a finger at me, her gaze filling with excitement. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea.”

“Serving alcohol?” I asked skeptically.

“Branching out into other options in case he takes business away from you.”

I’d toyed with a different business model over the years, but the coffee shop was doing so well that there was no need to explore it further. “I’ve thought about selling specialty items: spices and popcorn from Ocean City and local items like crab soup.

“It’s a nice idea, but not enough to counter a potential loss in customers, though.”

I held up a hand. “I’m not saying we do it yet. But I’ll investigate how much it would cost, what we’d need to do to add a small kitchen. I could serve wine and appetizers.”

Surprisingly, Hailey didn't scoff at my ideas. "Let me call in a couple of contractors, get some quotes, and you can run the numbers on your end."

I loved having options. For the first time since seeing Ben in my store, my chest felt lighter. There was a store by the harbor front that sold liquor and wine, but it was more of a liquor store. It didn't serve food. There was nothing similar.

"Would you miss Java Coffee, though?" Hailey asked.

"I don't know. I want my business to be successful, but I'm not sure I want the hours that come with servicing wine. Plus, I want to be present for Abby and Hunter. She needs help in the evenings."

Some things are just dreams. They don't ever see the light of day.

Hailey chewed her lip. "It's perfect for me. I could write in the daytime and work here in the evenings."

"You'd be okay with that?" I asked. "What about your writing?"

I didn't want to detract from her dream. Not when she'd already spent so many years living someone else's—specifically her grandparents' Spice & Tea Shoppe.

Her nose wrinkled. "That won't pay the bills for a while. It's something I enjoy, but I don't know I'd want the pressure of making a full-time income from it."

"It's too soon to know." She'd finished her manuscript but was going through lengthy edits and getting discouraged. She was overwhelmed with the self-publishing process.

"Ryan works late nights anyway. And if the idea takes off, you could hire more people. You could still work a few nights

a week. Especially when Hunter doesn't have practice or games."

"Maybe."

Hailey snapped her fingers. "I got it. You can serve coffee in the morning and wine in the afternoons and evenings. It could be a dual business."

"You just got out of a business you weren't crazy about. I don't want to pull you into another one." As much as I appreciated her help, I refused to let her waste any more time on something she wasn't passionate about. She'd just sold her grandparents' shop because she wanted to focus on her writing.

"Let me worry about what I want," Hailey said pointedly.

"Let's do the groundwork, then. I like having the option if we need it." I made a note on my daily to-do list. I had several Post-it pads on my desk. One for my daily to-dos, one for my long-term to-dos, and one for my employees. If it wasn't on the list, I'd forget. I preferred writing them down so I could cross them off when I completed them, but I had notes on my phone for when I thought of something outside the store.

Hailey clasped her hands together. "I'm so excited to get started. I know you're worried about the competition, but I think this will be an amazing opportunity for you."

I'd always thought Ben brought out the best in me. Maybe I'd gotten complacent as the only coffee shop, but I wasn't ready to credit Ben for motivating me to step things up.

"We make a good team," Hailey added.

"We do." I think it was because she wasn't emotionally invested in my business. She could see the bigger picture, the possibilities and risks, that I couldn't.

Hailey's expression turned serious. "Can we talk about something personal?"

I leaned forward in my chair. She and Ryan recently got together, and he had an eleven-year-old son, Corey. I couldn't help but wonder if she was pregnant. "Of course."

"I saw how you reacted to Ben showing up at the garage," Hailey spoke carefully.

It took me a moment to respond. I wasn't even sure how I felt when I saw him. "I was just surprised to see him after all this time," I finally said.

Her brow furrowed. "Was that it? It seemed like you were attracted to him."

I scoffed, hoping she didn't see under my bluff. Heat coursed through my body at the fluid way he'd unfolded from his sports car, my brain sparking with possibilities until I recognized his face. "Trust me. I'm *not* attracted to Ben Monroe."

"Why not?" Hailey tipped her head to the side as if she were merely curious.

I searched for the right words to phrase what he was to me. "He's my competition."

He was the one person who could destroy everything I'd worked so hard to build.

"For now. When you expand into a wine market, he won't be." Hailey smiled triumphantly.

I shook my head. "I don't even know if it's a possibility."

Hailey smiled. "The more I think about it, the more I love the idea."

I shook my head, resisting her excitement. “Things like that take time. I need to make sure we have the funds required, that the business can run during construction, that customers would like the change, and the big one, that the coffee shop can thrive in the meantime. If Bean Rush takes all our business, I won’t have the cash flow for an expansion.”

I had to depersonalize what was happening with Ben as much as possible. I needed to focus on his business as a storefront, not as a single dad with an adorable seven-year-old girl. That rabbit hole was fraught with obstacles.

Hailey tipped her head slightly. “You’re so practical all the time. For a business owner, you’re afraid to take risks.”

The observation hit me square in the chest. “I opened a business. I’m not risk averse.”

Was she right, though? Ever since Levi walked out, I’d been scared to make any moves. I didn’t trust my judgment anymore when I’d always been so decisive.

“Aren’t you? You won’t consider Ben as anything more when you’re obviously attracted to him. I haven’t seen you interested in anyone since I’ve known you.”

“You know why.” My jaw ached with the pressure of grinding my teeth. Hailey was one of the few people I’d confided in about that situation, and I disliked talking about it. I wanted it to settle on the bottom of the ocean of my brain and never let it come to the surface.

“Just because one guy is bad doesn’t mean they all are.”

“Hmph,” I grunted, placing my disagreement in that one sound.

“You can’t blame everyone for what Levi did.”

“That’s not what’s happening.” But I shifted on my chair. I was pretty serious about not getting involved with anyone, much less with someone like Ben. He wasn’t a safe bet.

She gave me a look.

She wouldn’t let me get away with it. “I might be a little risk averse.”

Sympathy filled her face. “I get that, and I’m not going to push you, but please run the numbers on the expansion. I think this could be good for the store.”

I breathed a sigh of relief that she was letting the subject of dating go. Just the thought of trusting someone again gave me chills.

Hailey had been the force I needed lately, encouraging me to sell books in addition to coffee and pastries. I’d lost some of the initial excitement about opening a business. As a result, my ideas had shriveled up. I’d been stagnant, doing the same thing every day.

“The question is, what are we going to do to maintain and increase customers now?” Hailey asked.

I’d been a little resistant to following through with plans on trivia nights and a battle of the books, but people had been talking about forming teams at the front counter and asking when the programs would start. “Let’s look at the calendar and set some dates. A monthly trivia night, just to get a feel for interest.”

“We can tell them we’re planning on pursuing a liquor license.”

I shook my head. “You’re getting a little ahead of yourself.”

“What do you think about an official battle of the books at the end of summer?”

We’d gotten the idea for an adult battle of the books after seeing signs on our bulletin board for the local schools that held battles. Teams read the curated list of books and there was a competition where judges asked trivia questions.

“That sounds doable. Want help finding titles?”

“Yes, I have one in mind already. *City Spies* by James Ponti. I think that’ll appeal to girls and guys alike. It was on the school list, too, so some parents may have already read it.”

Hailey pulled it up on her phone and showed it to me. “It does look good. We just need four more.”

“Libraries pull from award-winning lists, so we can start there,” I said as I opened my laptop to do a quick search.

I pulled up several lists and printed them so we could look at them together. Grabbing the papers from the printer, I set one in front of Hailey.

She quickly scanned through the list. “I’m going to have fun checking these out.”

“If we switch over to a wine market, where will the books fit in?”

Hailey lifted her head from the list. “You can still sell the books if we stick to the local history and guidebooks. It will fit in nicely with the tourist items.”

I pointed at her excitement with the idea that just popped into my head. “And we can pair wine with a monthly book club or battle.”

Her nose wrinkled. “We’ll have to let go of the children’s story times.”

“That’s okay. I think my customers are looking for an escape by coming here.”

Hailey nodded. “And there’s always the library for story times.”

“Exactly. That need is already being met.” We fell silent for a few minutes, each of us reviewing the book list and looking up summaries online.

We crossed off some and starred others. Then we switched lists.

“Let’s check out the ones we both starred,” I suggested.

Hailey leaned back in her chair. “I think we’re off to a good start.”

“I’m excited about the ideas.” As long as I focused on what we *could* do, I wouldn’t be focused on all the bad things that could happen.

“Will you consider giving dating another try? It doesn’t have to be Ben. It’s just—I’ve never seen you react to anyone. It was like there was this thing between you. Chemistry, I guess,” Hailey added with a soft smile.

Ever since her brother’s best friend, Ryan, moved back to town and Hailey connected with him, she’d been happy. She wanted the same for me. I didn’t blame her for wanting me to be happy, but I wasn’t the same person. My track record wasn’t the best. I couldn’t help my history any more than she could change who her mother was. Her mother had left her and her brother, Jake, to live with her grandmother when she was six and he was twelve.

“Please?” she pleaded.

“I promise I’ll keep an open mind.” I probably wouldn’t, but I’d think about doing it...someday.

Hailey sighed. “You’re impossible.”

I smiled. “But you love me anyway.”

She nodded. “We’re going to get through the opening of the new coffee shop and your childhood nemesis being back in town.”

“I’m so glad I’m not going through this alone,” I said as she hugged me. I was grateful that Hailey had her grandmother sell their family’s Spice & Tea Shoppe so she could pursue her love of writing because it had prompted her to offer her help in my store. And with Ben back in town, I needed her more than ever.

The question was, did I have the guts to go for the expansion? To even explore the idea? Or was I stuck in a rut? I had to admit taking the risk in my business sounded more appealing than attempting to date again.

All I had to do was remember the gleeful satisfaction on Levi’s face when he announced he’d gotten his green card and wanted a divorce. He pursued me because he’d thought I’d fall for him, and I did. I never suspected it was fake.

He’d used me, and I had no idea. How could I ever think about dating again after that? I couldn’t trust my instincts or my judgment. It was safer to avoid it altogether.

Chapter Six

BEN

I tried to forget my run-in with Brooke at her store by focusing on mine. Brooke's coffee was perfect, not too hot, and the brew was a rich, bold flavor, just how I liked it. The only thing that set our stores apart was that I featured beans from around the world in large glass jars on shelves behind the counters.

All coffee shops smelled like coffee, but when you walked into mine, I liked to think it was a richer, more enticing scent that drew customers inside. A sign on the wall boasted my ability to find whatever bean the customer desired. The beans combined with my historic grinder gave it a classy feel. I hoped customers would want to come inside for an experience.

At the last minute, I decided to add a shelf to sell varying mugs and to-go cups, along with several options for coffee makers with a bean grinder. I was happy to grind customers' beans, but I wanted customers to fall in love with the superior flavor of freshly ground beans, which they could do by grinding their beans in their own homes.

I was anxious to open the store, but we had to plan the perfect grand opening celebration and get the word out that we were opening next week. I'd changed the sign out front to reflect our plans and was frequently stopped with questions. I

hoped it was more than small-town curiosity and that customers would sample my coffee and return for more.

I'd been so confident when I looked at the projected numbers in my office in Philadelphia. But now that it was a reality, I worried I'd invested my life savings in something more likely to fail.

On Saturday, I drove Cammie to baseball practice. It was early, so she was uncharacteristically quiet in the back seat. When I arrived at the baseball fields, the lot was just starting to fill up.

"Do you think we'll get our uniforms this morning?" Cammie asked, her excitement picking up.

I cleared my throat, parking my sports car next to the larger SUVs and trucks. I needed to buy a more family-friendly vehicle. "The coach didn't say."

"I hope so." I helped Cammie out, grabbing her bag from the trunk.

"Good morning," another dad sleepily said as we fell in step beside him and his son.

"Morning," I lifted my to-go mug. "I haven't even had a chance to drink my first cup of coffee yet."

"Yeah, what's up with the early morning practices?" he asked.

"I have no idea." I was an early riser and had long since been awake. If I hadn't been, Cammie would have made sure to wake me."

"I'm Chad, by the way," he said, reaching out a hand to shake.

I took it and gave him my name, and we continued chatting once we got to the field, exchanging details about our children. His son played for the last two years. I tried to ignore the niggling worry that Cammie wasn't ready to play with kids with so much experience, but there had to be others in the same position. And Cammie had determination. She would learn quickly.

The coaches placed them in groups, with a few of the dads helping out.

A few minutes into practice, Hunter came flying down the hill, his bag bouncing on his back. "I'm here. I'm here."

The coach told him to put his bag on the fence and grab his bat.

I wondered if Hunter's mother would be present today or if it would be Brooke again. I tried not to get my hopes up. I shouldn't want her to be there.

Within a minute, Brooke came over the hill with a chair slung over her shoulder and a kids' water bottle in her hand. Her hair was thrown up in a messy bun, and she wore a long-sleeve shirt over leggings. She looked soft and inviting, so different from how she'd looked at her store the other day.

"Everything okay?" I asked as she passed Chad and me.

She gave me a sheepish look. "Yeah, just running a little late. Abby had a last-minute event this morning she needed to cover." She raised her hand with the water bottle. "I need to give this to Hunter."

"No problem."

After tucking the bottle into the side pocket of Hunter's bag, Brooke brushed a strand of hair out of her face, scanned the crowd of parents present, and made her way back to me.

I tried not to feel pleased she'd sought me out. I was probably the only person she knew, but I couldn't be certain. If she was frequently helping out her sister with Hunter, she probably knew the other parents. I tried not to think about other single dads hitting on her. It wasn't my place to care.

Brooke grimaced. "Hunter was so upset we were running late."

"I think it's okay. The coach seemed cool about it."

Brooke smiled. "Well, Hunter is the opposite of chill. He takes baseball very seriously."

"So does Cammie."

"She didn't want to play softball?" Chad asked.

I shook my head. "She had all sorts of opinions when I suggested softball."

"Kids. They've got minds of their own, don't they?" He laughed, shaking his head.

"Cammie sure does." I looked out over the field, trying to spot her. She was the only one with a blonde ponytail showing from the back of her cap. She was on the mound, pitching to the kids lined up for batting practice.

"She wants to be a pitcher?" Brooke asked.

"She wants to learn everything," I said.

"Hmm," Brooke hummed.

"You drink your coffee yet?" I figured a fellow coffee store owner would be on their third or fourth cup by then, but I didn't see anything.

"Not yet. I woke up to my sister's call, and I've been running ever since."

I handed her my mug. “Try this. I want to know what you think of it.”

At her raised brow, I added, “I haven’t even tasted it yet. It’s fresh.”

The thought of her lips on the same lid as mine had my blood pumping harder.

“I’d love to.” Brooke set her chair on the ground and brought the mug to her lips. I waited, hoping she’d love trying new brews as much as I did.

She licked her lips, drawing my attention to them. “Oh, wow. This is rich and bold. I love it.”

She started to hand it back to me, but as much as I wanted my lips where hers had just been, I said, “You keep it. You need it more than me.”

Wrapping her hands around the cup, she breathed in the smell.

She looked beautiful in the early morning light, even if she wasn’t as put together as at work. I liked her like this. She was a girl I could see myself waking up next to. Brewing her coffee just to see her eyes light up with pleasure. I nearly groaned out loud, wondering where those thoughts were coming from.

I didn’t want to wake up next to Brooke Langley. She was my competition, not my friend.

“Thanks for this,” she said when Chad wandered off to help his son tie his cleats that had come undone.

“You’re welcome.” We stood in silence, watching the practice and listening to the crack of the bat and thump of a ball hitting a glove.

The coaches occasionally yelled at the kids to pay attention, but otherwise, it was quiet. The parents were only half-awake and not socializing much. That early in the morning on a weekend, there weren't any younger siblings playing on the grass.

"How are things coming with your store?" Brooke asked.

I gave her a side look. "Do you really want to know?"

"As the owner of your biggest competition? Yes. Yes. I do," she said, smiling.

It reminded me so much of our banter in high school. We were always trying to one-up each other. One time, after she triumphantly stated she received a higher grade than me, I felt the urge to kiss her for the first time. The feeling never left after that.

I wanted to shut her up, but I wanted to feel her against me more. All of those teenage feelings came rushing back and pushed to the surface. I liked Brooke. I always had. I was a nerdy kid who enjoyed succeeding in school and, well, everything. I had no idea how to interact with a beautiful, intelligent girl, so I did the only that came naturally. I teased her. I taunted her. I goaded her into engaging with me.

I wasn't stupid. I knew it annoyed her, but I fell into that way of interacting with her over the years, and it was impossible to change. Even when my feelings for her only grew stronger. I wasn't competing with her. I was trying to talk to her, to get her to notice me. She did, just not in the way I'd hoped. It was too late to go back and change our history.

And now, our livelihoods were at stake. I was destined to have this attraction to her and never act on it.

"You were struck out by a girl!" a kid yelled.

I looked up, trying to figure out what was going on. The kids waiting to bat were taunting the one who was just at bat. Cammie was the pitcher. Another kid repeated the taunt. And another. I watched in shock as Cammie marched from the pitcher's mound to the bench. "What did you say?"

I should have stepped in, but I was rooted to the spot.

The kid squared his shoulders and faced her. "I said he," he pointed at the batter, "was struck out by a girl."

I expected Cammie to put her hands on her hips like she always did with me. Instead, she curled her fingers into a fist, reared back, and punched the kid in the face.

"Oh, shit," I said, running toward them, unsure how to handle the situation. I pulled Cammie away from the kid. My heart was pounding in my ear. "We don't hit. You need to apologize."

"I won't," she said stubbornly.

"You will." I was locked in a battle of wills in front of everyone watching. I wondered if I'd handled it correctly or if there was some other thing I should be doing right now.

"She hit my boy," a mother said as she ran up to the kid to examine his face.

"I'm sorry about that." I could have pointed out that her kid wasn't being nice either, but *Cammie had punched him*. That negated almost anything else the kid had done to deserve it. Inwardly, I was a little pleased that she'd clocked him. I knew what that kid was insinuating.

"He acted like it was bad to be struck out *by a girl*."

"It sucks to be struck out at any time, but he could have handled it better, and I know you could have, too. Now

apologize.”

Cammie took a deep breath and moved closer to the injured boy. “I’m sorry I punched you.”

The boy didn’t say anything. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he looked stubbornly away from her.

I touched Cammie’s shoulder and steered her to her bag. “Come on. You’re done for the day.”

“What did you say?” Cammie asked, her lips set in a stubborn frown.

“You need a time-out.” I gathered her stuff while she stomped along behind me.

“Why?”

“You acted inappropriately, and you need time to cool down.” I sounded like my parents. When did I start saying things like, “*You acted inappropriately?*”

I tried not to think about how the other parents were probably judging my parenting abilities and finding me lacking. My daughter just punched a kid.

I wanted her to stick up for herself, but she’d gone overboard.

She followed behind me as I stalked toward the parking lot. I wanted her to know I wasn’t happy with her behavior. I wouldn’t tolerate hitting other kids. If someone hit her first, I’d make an exception.

When we got to the car, Cammie said, “He was embarrassed to be struck out by a girl.”

“He was.” I hated that for her. I didn’t want her to hear boys say it was bad to throw like a girl. I wanted to protect her

from society's biases, but I couldn't. She wanted to play with the boys, and the kids were just repeating things they'd heard.

“Why?”

I groaned inwardly at the question. How did I explain it to her?

“He feels inadequate. It's not on you,” a familiar voice said. I looked up in surprise, not expecting Brooke to be there.

“It's not?” Cammie asked as she turned to face Brooke.

I tugged on her ponytail. “No, baby girl.”

“Okay,” Cammie said as she finally climbed into the back of the car. I closed the door, wondering why Brooke had followed us.

She gave me a sheepish look. “Sorry, I overheard and couldn't help but chime in.”

I shook my head. “I wasn't sure what to say.”

“Parenting is hard.”

“So hard. Sometimes I feel like I'm screwing everything up.” It felt good to be honest with her.

“That's natural. Abby feels the same, especially because she's single parenting it most of the time. Her ex spends some time with Hunter, but he doesn't handle any of the daily decisions. He's not shaping him into a man. It's a huge responsibility.”

I wanted to confide in Brooke. Tell her it was all on my shoulders, too. “Cammie's mom died a few months ago.”

Brooke sucked in a breath.

I avoided her gaze, knowing I'd see sympathy swimming in her eyes.

“She was mugged walking home from work.” It still felt strange saying the words. It didn’t seem real.

Brooke moved closer, resting her hand on my arm. “I’m so sorry.”

I gazed at the dirt at my feet. “We weren’t together at the time, but Cammie lost her mother.”

“It’s unthinkable,” Brooke murmured, the warmth of her hand a brand on my arm.

“I’m trying to be everything for her.”

She moved even closer, enough that I could smell the honeysuckle scent in her hair, and squeezed my bicep. “Not everything. You’re doing your best to be her dad. She sees that.”

“Does she?” I promised her I’d work fewer hours when we moved here, but that hasn’t been the case. I leaned on my parents, taking the free babysitting services they were all too happy to provide.

“All you can do is your best.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do.”

Then Brooke laughed. She covered her mouth with her hand. “Sorry, it was just—it was pretty funny when she socked him in the mouth.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” Relief flooded me. That kid was being a jerk. Whether the mom thought so was another matter.

Brooke let go and erupted into giggles. “He deserved it.”

I smiled, enjoying her relaxed stance, her face filled with happiness. “Just don’t tell Cammie that.”

Brooke finally recovered. “No. Definitely not. But I’m sure you’re secretly proud of her for shutting him up.”

I smiled. “A little bit, yeah.”

“They just kept saying it over and over. If she didn’t punch one of them, the kid who struck out would have.”

“Yeah?” That made me feel better.

“I think so.”

“Thanks for following us, for making me feel better.” That had never been our relationship before.

She squeezed my bicep again, and my brain short-circuited. “That’s what friends are for.”

Were we friends? I never thought of her as anything more than a rival. Then there was her hand on my bicep, warm and comforting. I wanted to pull her closer, to feel her body against mine, but it was inappropriate in more ways than one.

Instead, I stepped back from her, and Brooke seemed to realize how close she was standing. “I’ll let you get on with your day. See you later,” she said.

“Yeah, see you later.” But I felt bereft when I slid into my car.

“What was so funny?” Cammie asked.

I couldn’t tell her the truth, so I finally settled on, “Brooke told a joke to make me feel better.”

“What was it?” Cammie asked innocently.

“Uh.” I tried to wrack my brain for one of the jokes Cammie had me search for online. “Where do you find an elephant?”

Cammie thought about it for a few seconds, then said, “I have no idea.”

“Where you lost it.”

“That’s not very funny, Daddy.”

“I thought it was,” I said, looking in the rearview mirror at Cammie’s face, which was screwed up in disgust.

I turned my attention back to the road.

Cammie was quiet for a few seconds before she asked, “Can I go to the next practice?”

I met her eyes in the rearview mirror. “Yes, but no more punching kids.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, her chin lifted. “Even if they’re mean?”

Being a parent was tough sometimes. I wanted to tell her she was justified, but hitting wasn’t a good choice. “Even then. It’s wrong. You’d get in big trouble at school for that.”

“Umph.”

I hoped I’d gotten through to her. It wouldn’t be the last time she was teased for being the lone girl playing on a boys’ baseball team. She’d need to toughen up.

She was quiet the rest of the way home, so I replayed the moment when I realized Brooke had followed us. My heart warmed, remembering how she’d stepped in to talk to Cammie. She worried she’d overstepped, but I thought it was perfect. It was better coming from a girl than me, anyway.

Then there was the moment when she squeezed my bicep, making it difficult for me to breathe. Being close to Brooke

was infinitely more dangerous than when we were kids. The stakes were higher, the feelings more difficult to ignore.

I could easily imagine dipping my head and touching my lips to hers, running my hands down her back until I pulled her against me, feeling her warmth against mine. I wanted her, and if I kept running into her, it would be very difficult to ignore my attraction.

Chapter Seven

BROOKE

When I returned to the field, I saw the practice had continued despite the interruption. I hoped Cammie would be okay. I felt for her. It was tough being the only girl, and some boys didn't like playing with girls.

Thankfully, Hunter didn't seem to mind and wasn't involved with the kids making fun of the boy who'd struck out.

Sitting in my chair, I realized I still had Ben's coffee mug. Maybe I'd use it as an excuse to visit his shop.

My fingers still tingled from the brief contact with Ben's impressive bicep. It was obvious he took care of his body, and his passion for coffee was sexy as hell.

Though, now that I'd witnessed his passion, I knew I wasn't that into it. Ever since I operated a lemonade stand, then went on to sell cookies for the scouts, I knew I wanted to own a business. When I saw an opportunity, I took it. I enjoyed socializing with the community and tourists, but the product wasn't as important.

Hailey's suggestion to rebrand the shop as a wine market was appealing, but I never did anything until I researched all

the angles. I'd avoided looking at the numbers all week, but I promised myself I'd do it tomorrow.

Today, Abby was covering a wedding for a photographer who'd gotten sick. Between the ceremony and the reception, she'd be working most of the day, so I volunteered to take Hunter to practice and to keep him until she was done.

It was a great opportunity to spend more time with him. I know he wondered about his father's disinterest, but I hoped between my sister, my parents, and me, he had enough family to show him he was loved.

As soon as practice was done, Hunter ran up to me. "Can we practice some more?"

"What? Baseball?"

He nodded.

"You just got finished. Aren't you hungry?" I asked, assessing his sweaty brow.

His brow furrowed. "A little bit, but I want to practice batting."

"You want to go to the batting cages?" I asked, knowing it was his favorite thing to do.

He nodded eagerly and ran back to the bench to gather his things. I made sure he had everything packed in his bag, then walked with him to the car.

"Cammie punched Connor," Hunter said once we were in the car.

"It wasn't the right choice to make, so her father took her home."

Hunter nodded, not asking any follow-up questions. After parking at the local batting cages, we walked inside, paid for tokens, and fed them into the machine by the only open cage.

I punched the button for baseball, and Hunter pulled on his batting gloves. “Sixty miles per hour.”

“What?” There was no way the coaches were pitching that fast to seven-year-olds.

I pushed the button for the lowest option. “Let’s start with forty miles per hour.”

“Fine.” Hunter pulled his batting helmet on and opened the door to go inside.

I stepped back, pushing the down or up button based on how the balls were coming out of the machine. He was missing everything. I wondered if it was too fast for him when someone came up to me.

“His stance isn’t quite right, and he’s swinging late.”

I turned to him. “Ben? What are you doing here?”

He gestured at his daughter, who stood slightly behind him. “Cammie wanted to practice.” He lowered his voice and continued, “I should probably have banned her from baseball all day for what she did, but we both know it was slightly justified.”

I smiled at him like we shared a secret.

“What are you talking about?” Cammie asked, pushing between us and making Ben step back.

“Just giving pointers on Hunter’s hitting.”

Hunter came out, and I could tell from how his shoulders drooped he was frustrated. “How am I going to try out for

travel baseball?”

“I didn’t even know you wanted to do that,” I said, or that Abby could handle something that was such a huge time commitment.

“It’s an easy fix.” Ben held his hand out for Hunter’s bat.

Hunter gave it to him, and Ben demonstrated a proper stance and what he’d seen Hunter do. “Elbow up, knees soft, swing a few seconds earlier than you are right now, and I think you’ll be golden.”

“Really?” Hunter stood up straighter at Ben’s advice.

Ben patted him on the top of his helmet. “Yeah, and keep practicing.”

It was such a fatherly thing to do that it had my heart stuttering. My dad would often step in, but it wasn’t the same.

“You want to go next?” I asked Ben, trying to cover my reaction.

Ben nodded. “We can take turns.”

I stepped back with Hunter, giving Ben room to operate the machine. While he was pressing buttons, he reminded Cammie of the same tips he’d given Hunter.

Cammie was so lucky to have a dad who was involved.

I wasn’t sure why seeing Ben with his daughter had me questioning everything I thought I knew about him. I was around dads all the time, but most weren’t single and desirable. Ben had always gotten to me in ways other men hadn’t.

I sat at a nearby picnic table with Hunter while observing Ben with Cammie. He helped her put on her helmet and

gloves, then stepped back when she went inside.

He stood, his feet shoulder-width apart and his arms crossed over his chest while he shouted tips as the balls whizzed by her. “Step closer to the plate. There. That’s the spot. Swing a little sooner.”

Finally, Cammie made contact.

“Foul ball,” Hunter shouted.

“That’s it,” Ben said, taking a step closer to the fence separating him from Cammie.

When the light went out, indicating no more balls, Cammie came out with her face lit up with excitement. “Did you see that?”

“That was amazing.” Instead of tapping the top of her helmet, he pulled her into his side and patted her shoulder. Cammie looked up at him with so much love and admiration.

The sweet scene melted my heart.

“You’re up,” Ben said to me, and I couldn’t for the life of me remember what he was referring to.

“Aunt Brooke, it’s my turn.”

“Oh, right.” I stood, digging in my pocket for the tokens.

Cammie asked for a drink from the vending machine, and Ben handed her a dollar.

I expected Ben to stand off to the side or sit at the picnic table with Cammie while Hunter batted. Instead, he stood beside me in a similar position to the one he took while watching his daughter. He offered tips as Hunter swung. With Ben’s advice, he made contact with a ball a few pitches in.

“That’s it. You’ve got it,” Ben said.

Hunter tightened his grip on the bat, his jaw set in a determined line, as he waited for the next pitch. This time he hit it straight on.

Ben clapped. “Good hit. Now get ready for the next one.”

Hunter reset in the batter’s box, and I tried to calm my racing heart. Being so close to Ben, seeing him in a different light, did funny things to my body. I felt warm and tingly yet amped at the same time.

The rest of the pitches passed in a blur, and when Hunter came out with a triumphant smile on his face, I told him he did a great job.

Ben slapped Hunter’s shoulder. “See, you just needed a few minor tweaks to see improvement.”

My heart ached at the look on Hunter’s face. He looked up to Ben, which wasn’t a good idea because Ben wasn’t part of our family.

His business would be directly competing with mine. If my customers changed course and went to his store each morning, I’d be sunk. I depended on a steady influx of customers to pay the lease on the space and to fix equipment that broke often.

“One more round?” Ben asked Cammie, who was already opening the door to enter the cage. “Remember what I told you. Step closer to the plate, tighten your grip, and swing a few seconds sooner.”

Cammie swung and hit the first ball.

“Thatta girl,” Ben said, pumping his fist in the air.

Hunter let out a whoop, and Ben moved closer, lifting his arms over his head, and curling his fingers around the links.

The motion made his shoulders look impressively broad, and the shirt pulled taut on his back, outlining sleek muscles.

I licked my suddenly dry lips. He was fit and great with kids and all the other things I valued in a man, driven and hardworking. It was too bad my perfect guy meter was broken.

When you lived with someone for two years, believing your marriage was the real deal, and you find out it wasn't, you realize nothing is as it seems. Anyone could be hiding a secret or have a hidden agenda.

Cammie hit several more balls, then came out, asking if we'd seen it.

"You did great. I'm so proud of you," Ben said.

My heart thumped hard under my rib cage. I needed separation. I needed to remove myself from Cammie and Ben's sphere. If I didn't, I'd be sucked into their orbit. I'd start to think that Ben was someone special. That I could overlook our past, our current situation, that something could happen between us.

He wasn't for me. We had too much history and too much at stake. My business meant too much to me to let it go for a man who might not be who he seemed. I wasn't ready to take that risk, no matter what Hailey thought.

I started packing up. "Come on, Hunter. We'd better grab lunch. It's getting late."

"Oh, man," Hunter grumbled.

"Want to grab lunch together? There's a sandwich shop next door."

"That's probably not a good idea." My words were in line with my thoughts, but Ben had no idea what I'd been thinking.

“You’re hungry?” Ben asked.

Hunter nodded. “I’m starving.”

“Me, too,” said Cammie.

“No harm in grabbing a meal together.” Ben raised his brow in a silent challenge.

Oh, there was harm. Each interaction with Ben brought us closer when I should have been pushing him away. “Fine.”

Great. Now I sounded like my seven-year-old nephew, who said fine whenever he gave in to something he didn’t want to do.

“Perfect,” Ben said.

Didn’t he realize what we were doing was a bad idea? We should be spending less time together, not more. I resolved to part ways with Cammie and Ben after we ate.

Relaxed after deciding on a doable plan, I followed them outside, where we stowed our baseball bags in our respective cars, then headed inside a nearby sandwich shop. The kids went ahead of us, ordering what they wanted.

“You don’t want to spend time with me?” Ben stood close, his head lowered so he could talk only to me.

I chewed my lower lip. “It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” His stance was relaxed, and his expression was genuinely curious.

I gave him a pointed look. “You know this is a bad idea.”

He tipped his head toward Cammie and Hunter. “They’re spending time together.”

Why did I get the impression he was using the kids as a buffer, a way to get close without me noticing? “Hunter’s not

mine, but—”

“You’re overthinking this,” Ben said gently.

It would be so easy to relax and let myself enjoy standing close to Ben. “Our coffee shops aren’t competitors, then?”

He looked down at me, his jaw tight. “That’s business.”

“And what’s this?” I tipped my head to the side, wishing I knew what he was thinking and where he was going with it.

“You know what you want?” a teenager behind the counter asked.

Ben stepped forward, and the moment was over. Whatever he’d been getting at, it was too late to return to the conversation. Not with Cammie and Hunter talking about their hitting prowess in the batting cages. If Cammie were anything like Hunter, she’d get annoyed if we tried to talk about something else.

We sat across from each other, but the kids dominated the conversation. I counted the seconds until I could safely escape to my car. I’d let Hunter pick our afternoon movie so I could decipher everything that happened. I just needed time to analyze it, make sense of it, and put whatever was happening between us back in the box it needed to be in.

We rolled up our wrappers and threw out our trash. We walked together across the parking lot. “What are you doing for the rest of the day?” Ben asked.

“Oh, we have big plans to watch a movie.” I felt positive we’d be able to escape. That I’d get some breathing room.

“We’re seeing a movie, too,” Cammie said excitedly.

Don’t suggest we watch it together, I thought as I walked toward my vehicle. Almost there.

“We should go together,” Cammie said as if she’d just thought of the best idea.

“Go where?” I stupidly asked.

“We’re going to the movie theater.” Ben pointed at the cinema at the end of the strip mall.

“Can we go, too?” Hunter asked.

He knew I couldn’t say no to him. I wasn’t his mother. I was his aunt who gave him whatever he wanted, and he knew it. “But your mother could be home at any time, and she’ll be worried if she doesn’t know where we are.”

“So text her,” Ben said, like the solution was obvious.

“I don’t know how much longer Abby will be, and she’ll want to see you when she’s done.” Abby liked to spend any time she could with Hunter.

“Mom won’t care,” Hunter said.

Abby would be jealous she missed out on a movie, but she wouldn’t care. She always said I could do whatever we wanted. It was our time.

“I don’t know.” I held my phone, debating whether I should ask Abby first.

“Come on. It will be fun.” Ben gripped my elbow lightly, guiding me toward the cinema.

Two more hours in a dark space together, but I’d keep the kids between us.

I texted Abby our plans while Ben ordered a large tub of buttered popcorn and four drinks before we made our way to the theater. Determined that we’d sit on either side of the kids to maintain distance, I wasn’t prepared when Hunter begged

me if he could sit next to Ben and Cammie. Cammie was next to the aisle, leaving me next to Ben.

“Have a seat,” Ben said when I stood in the aisle, unsure of what just happened. If I didn’t know better, I’d think the kids were pushing us together. But they were only seven. There was no way they’d picked up on the tension between us.

I sat stiffly beside Ben, placing the popcorn in my lap. Too late, I realized my mistake. As the holder of the popcorn, Ben had to reach over and refill the kids’ containers routinely. Each time, his arm brushed mine, sometimes even my chest. My breathing was erratic, my heart racing. I wouldn’t survive this movie.

“Aren’t you going to put up the recliner?” Ben nodded toward my feet, which were curled underneath me.

A recliner, the dark. All of it felt intimate. Instead of waiting for my response, Ben pushed the button so my chair reclined next to his.

“And we don’t need this arm rest in the way. This way, I have easier access to the popcorn.” He winked.

“Maybe you should hold it.” I lamely tried to hand it to him, but he held his hands up. “Oh, no. I always let my date hold the popcorn. That way, you can have as much as you want.”

I’d say I hated popcorn, but I’d been stuffing it into my mouth in my effort not to blurt out how his touches affected me.

I held myself stiff, not wanting to let go. Eventually, I focused on the movie, enjoying the banter of the animated characters.

“I haven’t been to a movie in ages,” Ben whispered in my ear.

“Me either.” Being there with the kids made it feel very domestic. Like we were together.

“I’m glad you came,” he said, grabbing another handful of popcorn before moving back to his seat.

I missed his closeness, and I wanted him to whisper more things in my ear. What was wrong with me?

When I married young, I thought I’d have kids by my mid-twenties. When Levi said he wanted a divorce, I mourned the life I thought I had and the future with him I’d planned in my head. Then when I couldn’t seem to move past the betrayal, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be close enough to anyone to have kids. So, I pushed that dream away and focused on my business and my friends.

If I were going to take a chance on dating, Ben would be the worst choice. I’d need someone safe. Someone who didn’t have a child and who I wasn’t competing against.

By the end of the movie, I’d relaxed into the seat, only occasionally jolting when Ben reached over for more popcorn. Once or twice, his hand lazily moved over my knee. I thought it was an accident, but I wasn’t sure.

Outside in the bright sunlight, I felt lethargic.

“That was fun. We should do it again sometime,” Ben said.

He was vibrating with happiness, and I realized he didn’t get much time with Cammie. It wasn’t about me. It was about making a memory and spending the day with his daughter. Pleased it wasn’t anything more, I said, “Definitely.”

Checking my phone, I saw that Abby had finished and asked that I bring Hunter over when we were done with the movie. “Your mom is home,” I told Hunter.

“Thanks for inviting us,” Hunter said to Ben.

“Sure thing,” Ben said.

Hunter waved bye to Cammie, and we parted ways. I’d survived the day, and I could justify it by saying that Ben just wanted to spend time with his daughter. He wasn’t angling for more time with me. I could put him back where he belonged, as the owner of the new coffee shop. Tomorrow, I’d focus on business and push out any thoughts of Ben as anything more than a competitor.

Chapter Eight

BEN

Monday morning, Christopher was practicing making the various espresso drinks on the menu with the new hires, explaining how the machine worked and where the ingredients were kept.

After making sure it was going smoothly, I moved to my office.

I should have been looking at projections for the opening, but I was distracted by the day I spent with Cammie, starting with baseball practice, then the batting cages, and ending with lunch and a movie with Brooke and Hunter.

Brooke was so comfortable with her nephew that sometimes I forgot he wasn't her son.

After Brooke talked to us in the parking lot and we ran into her at the cages, I wanted to spend more time with her. That was why I suggested lunch and then the movie. I wasn't ready for the day to end. I knew I'd have fun with just Cammie, but it would be better to include Brooke and Hunter. Though, she'd seemed uneasy. Even though our coffee shops were competing against each other, we were having fun. I wanted to let everything go for the evening.

On Sunday, the whole day was spent doing whatever Cammie wanted—practicing baseball, playing board and card games, and watching movies. It was the perfect weekend before the store opened and I started working more hours.

I wished I could have more quality time with her, but the store would be open late and on weekends—when Cammie was home from school. Once the store was up and running, I could pull back a little. Or at least I hoped I could.

I heard a sputtering from the espresso machine and then yelling.

I rushed to the front. “What’s going on?”

“The machine! It exploded or something.” The front of Christopher’s shirt was soaked, his eyes wide with surprise.

“It’s a new machine.” I couldn’t afford for anything to be down. Not with the grand opening a few days away.

Christopher was fiddling with it. I’d hired him because he’d previously worked as a manager for a coffee shop. I hoped he could fix it.

I grabbed a cloth and tried to mop up the liquid as best I could.

After a few minutes, he said, “I think we need to call someone to look at it.”

I hated to waste the day. We’d brought the new employees in to train them, but there wasn’t much to show them if the espresso machine was down.

I gestured for him to come to my office to talk. “Show them the different beans and give them the book with the information they’ll need to study to talk to the customers.”

“And then?”

“Then we’ll have to send them home.” I hated to do it, but I doubted I’d be able to get the machine up and running today. I’d need to hire someone, and I had no idea if anyone did that kind of work in the area. I wasn’t mechanically inclined either.

Christopher’s forehead wrinkled. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Things like that happened. I knew it. I planned for it as much as I could, but I still hated it.

Christopher nodded and walked out.

I dropped into my office chair and rested my head in my hands. I’d spent the weekend relaxing when I should have been focused on the store and the grand opening.

When the business was successful, I could take breaks. My stomach tightened painfully. I’d come here to create a new life for Cammie. But to be more present in her life, I needed to make sure her future was secure. That started and ended with the success of this coffee shop that I’d sunk my savings into.

I couldn’t afford to be distracted by my childhood crush. I might have lusted after Brooke as a teenager, but things were different. I had Cammie to worry about.

Lifting my head, I knew I had to pull myself together because Gia from Happily Ever Afters would arrive soon to discuss the grand opening.

I researched repairmen in the area for the coffee machine. There weren’t many, and the one I found couldn’t come until the next day. It would have to do.

Christopher leaned on the door jamb. “Ben, Miss Giovanni is here to see you.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “You can bring her back.”

Christopher returned to the front to get Gia, and I could hear them talking as they walked down the hall toward my office. “Is that Giovanni name related to the pizza parlor, Giovanni’s?”

“That’s my family’s place.”

I hadn’t realized it was her family who ran Giovanni’s. It was the most popular pizza place in town, which was saying something since there were about eight others.

When Christopher walked in behind Gia, I said, “You can stay.”

I stood up and shook Gia’s hand before motioning for her to take a seat on the couch. “Thank you so much for coming in today. I could really use your help.”

I knew nothing about throwing a party to draw in customers, so I was relieved to have someone to lean on. It was even better that she had a business background with her family’s pizza shop.

Gia removed a file from her bag and sat next to Christopher. “That’s what I’m here for. What are your goals with the grand opening?”

“I want to make people aware that we’re opening the store, give people an opportunity to sample the coffee, and get a feel for the place.”

Gia nodded. “The opening really sets the tone for your store. You’re inviting your customers to get to know you and your brand.”

“My brand is selling quality coffee beans. I’d love to draw people away from their convenient K-cups to consider grinding their own, whether I do it here for them or they buy a coffee grinder for their home. They’ll get one taste of a

perfectly roasted coffee and never brew one of those one-cup things again.” I was a bit of a coffee snob, and I was ready for the quick brew trend to be done.

“A quality cup of coffee, one you can brew at home with the right equipment,” Gia observed, taking notes.

“That’s right.” I still offered popular lattes and Frappuccinos, but I wanted to be known for serving quality beans.

She looked up at me and smiled. “I can work with that.”

She finished writing and had me walk her through the photographs on the wall and the antique grinder I’d borrowed from my grandfather. “I think your customers would love to hear your backstory, so feel free to tell them where you got your passion for beans from.”

“You think they’ll be interested in it?” I wasn’t sure I could be as sociable as Brooke, but I could talk about my love for beans and my affection for my grandfather.

“They’ll love it.” Gia was so confident that I made a mental note to bring it up at the grand opening as much as possible.

“I don’t want to make any promises, but I can submit your history to the paper and have my photographer, Abby, take some pictures. There’s no guarantee they’ll publish the story, but—”

“Do we need a photographer?” I knew the store needed attention, but I wasn’t prepared for my face to be shown outside the store.

Gia tapped her pen against her chin. “A new coffee shop is a big deal in a small town, and we want to capitalize on every avenue of exposure we can.”

“Whatever you think will help.” I felt a little out of my element, but that was why I’d hired her. To fill in the spaces that I couldn’t.

Gia resumed her seat at one of the tables and said, “Let’s talk about the party. I was thinking you could serve samples of some of your best coffee beans. Train your employees on the origin and flavor so they can tell your guests, maybe even have a little card with the highlights for your customers. Feel free to tell them you grew up here and why you came back to town.”

“Isn’t that too personal?” Speaking about my inspiration for the store was one thing, but my daughter felt like too much.

“You grew up here and had a great childhood, and you want your daughter to have the experience of growing up in a small town. Give them a taste, but not anything too revealing. You don’t have to be completely transparent with your customers. You just have to give them something to grab on to. You can practice some of your answers, so you have a ready response.”

“That sounds doable,” I said as I wiped my sweaty hands on my pants. If I wanted to be successful, I’d need to step out of my comfort zone.

“I can help, too,” Christopher added.

“I think I have everything I need. I usually work with Sophie from Sophie’s Sweets for baked goods, Lily from Petals for a flower arrangement, and you can obviously provide the drinks. Abby will handle the photographs.”

“Do we need any decorations?” I’d dropped in during Harbor Garage’s grand opening, and they’d had balloons and

ribbons.

“I don’t think we need it. Your decor is simple and classy.”

I’d kept the exposed brick walls and gone with dark wood for shelving and countertops. The framed photos were black and white.

“I love your brand. It’s hometown kid returns to his roots to open a business to raise the next generation.”

I hadn’t thought about it like that. That people would be pleased I’d returned home. That my story would draw in customers and keep them coming back.

Christopher crossed his arms over his chest. “Locals will want to support you.”

I tipped my head to the side. “I was in Philadelphia for years, and Java Coffee is local, too.”

Gia wandered around the room before stopping in front of the jars of beans. “Yeah, but you offer something extra. As soon as you open the door, you can smell the beans. It’s stronger. It has more of a presence. Then there are the photos of your grandfather with the antique grinder and pictures of beans. People will love it.”

The more she talked, the more convinced I was that I’d made the right decision to return home. Cammie could grow up in my town, near my parents, and I was opening a store that meant something to my family and me. I was continuing my grandfather’s legacy. If he were still alive, he’d be proud of me.

“I’ll be here on Friday after closing to set up,” Gia said.

While she packed up her things, I asked, “Is there a reason you call your business Happily Ever Afters when you handle

other events?”

“We started with weddings and then realized that many different businesses needed our services. Weddings are our bread and butter, so it’s the best name for brides to find us. We do these other events on the side. If we get too big at some point, maybe we’ll separate the businesses.” Gia smiled, seemingly not offended by my question.

“That makes sense.”

“I never intended to do anything besides weddings, but businesses call us to handle other parties, and why not, you know? It’s another stream of income, especially when it’s not wedding season.”

“Is it ever not wedding season?” I asked, remembering seeing the wedding planners in the city.

“Winters are slower, although a fair number of brides want a holiday wedding: Christmas, New Year’s, and Valentine’s.”

“Your work is never done.” I’d heard about her through word of mouth, so her business was growing, and she was willing to do whatever it took to be successful, even if it didn’t fit with her original business model.

Gia smiled. “I like it that way.”

She finished explaining everything and was quick to say she’d handle all the details, which I appreciated. “I’m happy to send people your way.”

I walked her to the front door. “You have any advice for me since you and your family own businesses?”

Gia thought for a moment before saying, “It’s a long game. You’re going to have setbacks and perceived failures, but you have to keep going. I’m sure you know the statistics.”

I nodded. “Most businesses fail in the first five years.”

“And I’m sure you’ve read all the business books, but it’s really about your mindset. Are you doing what you’re passionate about? And if so, there’s no room for failure.”

“I like that.” That was a motto I could get behind. An image of Brooke popped into my head, but I pushed it back.

“I’m not saying work yourself around the clock. Not that I take my own advice, but you have to find your balance. Whatever that is.”

“I’m passionate about good coffee, and I’m excited to be my own boss.” *And have more time with Cammie.*

I remembered the freedom I felt when I opened my lemonade stand. Anything was possible. I was in control of my prices and my recipe. At least until Brooke showed up a few houses down with the same product.

My coffee shop was no different. I wouldn’t accept anything less than success. I didn’t have time to waste hanging out with my competition. I needed to be completely focused on the opening and making the business succeed so I could give Cammie what she needed. A stable home, a present dad, and money to secure her future.

Chapter Nine

BROOKE

“*T*he grand opening is on Saturday,” Hailey said from her chair across from my desk.

The sign on Bean Rush’s store window had been changed from *Opening Soon* to *Grand Opening this Saturday*. Everyone was buzzing about the news.

Every time a customer mentioned it to me, I smiled at their excitement, even if it felt fake. I was worried about what it meant for my shop and me, but worse, it was hard to reconcile my fear with the man I spent last Saturday with.

He’d been warm and approachable with Cammie and Hunter—nothing like the guy I exchanged barbs with in high school. Or maybe he’d been that guy all along, but I’d never seen below the surface. It wasn’t like we’d had deep conversations.

“What are you going to do about it?” Hailey asked, breaking through my thoughts.

“What do you mean? There’s nothing I can do. I assume most people will be there, taking whatever samples he’s offering.”

“So, you’re admitting defeat?” Hailey asked.

My nose scrunched at her characterization. I'd never been a quitter. "I'm not giving up. But everyone wants to see the new shiny thing."

"There's nothing we can offer here that will divert attention from the grand opening?" Hailey tipped her head to the side.

I was interested in the idea, but at the same time, I didn't want to take away from Ben's big day. Since when was I worried about his feelings? Probably when I found out that he was a single dad with an adorable little girl.

"I'm sure there's something, but is it a good idea?" I was thinking about the newfound friendship we'd seemed to develop because of Cammie and Hunter.

"This is business. You're competing for the same customers. You need to draw them away from the grand opening and give your customers a better option."

I threw my hands up. "So, what are you suggesting? Free coffee for everyone?"

Hailey was quiet for a few seconds, considering my outburst. "It's not a bad idea."

"You can't be serious." I'd said it as a joke, not meaning for her to consider it.

"He's already drawing your customers away that morning, so you won't be losing any money. You'll be reminding your customers why they come here."

"For free coffee?"

"Your shop is comfortable and familiar. They already stop here as part of their daily routine. It's important for them not to

change things up, not to realize it's just as easy to change their routine to Bean Rush."

"You don't think it's a little shady?" It's something I would have done back when we were competing against each other as kids. One time, I lowered my prices, and he did, too, then it continued until I'd finally made mine free. I got just as much satisfaction from the long line at my table as I did counting my change. There were many ways to come out on top.

That thought had my mind careening toward other fantasies of me on top, riding his cock while he cupped my breasts and tweaked my nipples. Except in this fantasy, he wasn't saying he wanted to win; he was saying how irresistible I was.

"It's good business. You can't just roll over and give up that day. Everyone will be looking at you to see how you react."

When Hailey said *roll over*, that fantasy popped into my head again, except Ben was on top, hovering over me while thrusting inside me. I just knew he'd feel amazing. Fanning myself with a nearby pad of paper, I wondered when the office had gotten so hot.

"Will they?" I sipped my water, trying to soothe my suddenly very dry throat.

I'd noticed the gleam in my customers' eyes when they asked about Bean Rush. Like I was the center of some new drama they couldn't wait to witness. If I did nothing, I'd lose my customers' respect.

"You know I'm right," Hailey said with no bite behind her words. Instead, her tone sounded resigned and a little worried.

I sighed. It was a good idea, and Hailey was right. I shouldn't just roll over and do nothing. I owed it to myself to fight for my business. "We can post it online, and I'll ask Abby if she can stop by to take photographs."

Assuming our ploy worked, I should have a line before the doors opened on Saturday. A shot of anticipation burned in my gut. What would Ben think when he found out? Would he see it as a cheap gimmick or the move of a savvy businesswoman? I never wanted to lose his respect by fighting dirty.

I texted Abby to see if she was available, and she responded immediately. "Abby's working the grand opening."

"She won't have any time to stop by here first?" Hailey asked.

"She said the grand opening is at nine."

"We could offer free coffee starting at eight-thirty. Early enough that they can't just run from your place to his, and you can get a picture before his event starts," Hailey said thoughtfully.

Something about it didn't feel quite right.

Hailey's eyes narrowed on me. "You aren't growing a conscience all of a sudden, are you? You need to protect your business."

"It's not that." It was exactly that. I felt guilty, like I was sabotaging his grand opening. Shouldn't I be supporting him, not looking for ways to undermine his success?

"You said yourself Abby will be there taking pictures, and Gia's handling the party. There's zero chance they won't submit it to the paper, hoping they'll publish the story on Sunday."

Opening a new store was big news.

Hailey leaned forward in her chair. “The paper might want a comment from you. Won’t it be great to give it to them? Show the picture of your line and say you have nothing to be worried about. People are loyal to you.”

I could picture it. The image of the grand opening sign matched by one with my customers lined out the door for free drinks. It was a little gimmicky, but it was stronger than my vision of an empty store come Saturday. “I like it.”

My body was humming with excitement and the thrill of competition. Ben was back, and so was I. I’d been complacent the last few years, most likely because I didn’t have any real competition.

The opening of Bean Rush was good for me. It prompted me to assess my current business model and explore other possibilities.

And if I was being honest with myself, being around Ben had always been good for me. He pushed me to work harder, to be a better version of myself. Our current situation was no different.

“I’m happy that’s settled. I got a few quotes for contractors to convert this to a wine market slash coffee shop.” Hailey pulled out papers from a folder lining them up in front of me. “Morrison Brothers Construction was the middle-of-the-road quote. They have a great reputation. I’d call them in and talk about it more.

I owed it to myself to at least consider the option. “Isn’t Morrison Brothers Construction the one that handled Bean Rush’s renovation?”

“I think Cade said something about that.”

I remembered hearing somewhere that Morrison Brothers Construction was run by two brothers. Cade must have been one of the owners. “Schedule an appointment.”

I couldn't do nothing. I had to consider every angle. The familiar thrum of a challenge burned through me, energizing me.



I posted the advertisement on social media and put flyers around town, *Free Coffee, this Saturday*. I avoided Bean Rush, positive that Ben wouldn't appreciate the flyer showing up on his bulletin board. Though, it would've been satisfying to pin one there without him knowing.

There were a few customers who'd seen it and asked if I was worried about the competition. I smiled confidently and said no. The energy I brought to the situation was telling. If I acted like it was no big deal, then my customers would feel the same.

I woke up early on Saturday morning, energized to start the day. As soon as I rounded the street for Java Coffee, there was a line. Feeling pleased, I picked up my pace, calling out greetings to the familiar faces. I'd made the right decision to call in every employee, even the ones who usually only worked part time, holidays, and summers.

I'd carefully avoided Ben. Abby hadn't needed me to take Hunter to baseball practice all week. If I saw him, I might feel bad and back out, and there was no room for that energy.

I wasn't supporting Ben. I was actively challenging him. It was like old times, except things had changed in some discernible way. He'd shown me a different side, one I

sympathized with. I tried to tell myself he was just a dad on my nephew's baseball team as I pushed him and his daughter out of my head so I could do what I needed to do for my business. I needed to show up and give it my best effort. Whether that was selling coffee or something else.

As soon as I opened the doors at eight-thirty, I smiled wide, welcoming back old customers and carefully brushing off any comments about free coffee coming on the same day as Ben's grand opening. I told them I just wanted to thank my loyal customers.

It was the truth. We wanted to thank them and remind them why they came to Java Coffee for their caffeine addiction each morning. It was the ambiance and my smiling face.

It barely registered when Abby showed up to take photographs and then murmured she had to get to Bean Rush before they opened. I tried not to think about how Ben was doing.

I just smiled at one customer after another, asking about their day and their families. It was the same as any other Saturday, except the stakes were much higher.

At the back of my mind, worry set in. What if a large swath of customers defected to Bean Rush? What if Ben's place offered them more of what they wanted? I could switch things up, but I had no idea if I could afford to renovate the space and rebrand my business. It was a huge risk.

That had my heart racing because the last time I'd taken a leap—getting married when my parents said I was too young—it had backfired.

The line eased closed to lunchtime, and I took the brief respite to wipe off the counters.

A woman came up to me. “Are you Brooke Langley?”

I smiled at her, my cheeks sore from the morning. “I am.”

“I’m Alisha Roberts, a reporter for the *Annapolis Times*.” She held her hand out for me to shake.

Shaking hers, I said, “It’s nice to meet you.”

Outside, I was cool and collected. Inside, my stomach churned with anxiety.

“I wanted to talk to you about the new coffee shop in town. Bean Rush.”

Except for my opening, which received a brief mention in the lifestyle section, I’d never been asked my opinion by a reporter. Nerves had me straightening my clothes and running a tongue over my teeth, hoping there wasn’t anything stuck in them.

“I just interviewed Ben Monroe, the owner of Bean Rush, and I had no idea your rivalry goes back to childhood.” She scrolled through her phone, lifting it to show me the screen. It was a picture of Ben’s lemonade stand.

My heart thudded in my ears. “Ben gave you that picture?”

“He had it on the wall of his store.”

He did? I wasn’t sure what to think of that.

“Here’s yours.” She scrolled to the next picture on her reel. It was a picture of me at my stand. My hair was in a ponytail, and I had a bright smile. I was in my element, but I didn’t want that picture shared with the paper.

“My picture is on the wall at Bean Rush?” I wanted to be sure I’d heard her correctly.

Alisha nodded. “I think it’s so cute that you had competing lemonade stands as kids growing up on the same street.”

I grimaced. “I don’t know about cute.”

“It makes for a great backstory.” She looked up from her phone. “And here you are as adults. Still competing.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Ben left for years and only just now came back. I haven’t seen or spoken to him since high school.” I tried to create distance between Ben and me. Show her there was nothing there to dissect or to learn.

Her eyes lit up when I said *high school*. “When you were co-valedictorians?”

I cleared my throat, very uncomfortable with this conversation. “That’s right.”

“Ben said you jockeyed for grades, a position on the debate team, and to be top of your graduating class.”

I wasn’t sure how much to admit to this woman. I didn’t know what Ben had said to her. Now that I was confronted with our history, I was overwhelmed with the need to keep it private. What happened between us didn’t need to be the story in tomorrow’s paper.

I took her offered phone and scrolled from Ben’s picture to mine. We both looked like sweet kids running a lemonade stand. It couldn’t be of interest to her readers.

“I’m not sure I see an interesting story here unless you’re saying we were destined to be business owners.” I kept my voice professional.

I wished Ben had warned me somehow or that we’d discussed it before the reporter showed up. I wasn’t sure how he felt about them running a story on us. I just knew I didn’t

like it, and I wasn't ready to explore why with a reporter standing in front of me.

“Some of the customers mentioned how you used to compete against each other with price wars and different marketing tactics. One woman said you used to give out stickers and sometimes toys, in addition to the lemonade to entice customers.”

Ben and I had actually kept a running tally of our sales and would meet up at the end of the day to compare. It was what kept us sharp, coming up with new and better ideas to market to our customers. It wasn't about the money. It was about beating the kid down the street.

Finally, I said, “We were thinking about marketing strategies even back then.”

The reporter studied my face. “Were you and Ben friends?”

I sucked in a breath. The question represented a minefield. We weren't friends, but he'd stopped by that one time when I was sick. I'd always thought if I needed him, he'd be there. I didn't know for sure, though, because that belief was never tested.

“We went to school together. We were classmates and neighbors. I'd say acquaintances.” I hoped she hadn't figured out my nephew and Ben's daughter were on the same baseball team. I didn't want a reporter showing up at a practice or game, hoping to sniff out a story. I could only hope the lack of details made the story boring, and she wouldn't pursue it further.

“I think your history is so interesting. Everyone's eyes will be on you two in the coming weeks. Which shop will come out

on top?” She smiled to herself as she scribbled something in a small notebook.

An image of that headline popped into my head. Hailey would say it was good publicity, but I didn’t like it. I didn’t want anyone dissecting our past or pitting us against each other.

“Would you say you two are enemies?”

I winced at her characterization. “I wouldn’t say that. We’ve always respected each other.”

That much was true. We thought of each other as worthy adversaries. Our barbs never resorted to name calling or disrespect. Only healthy competition. Even when Ben said he’d really come out on top of our graduating class, I knew he was teasing me.

It was moments like that when I thought something else was simmering beneath his façade. Something more than mutual respect. Something more like attraction.

Thankfully, I’d never given into that thought. I shuddered to think what would have happened if I’d even suggested such a thing and he didn’t feel the same way. It would be one more thing for him to tease me about.

“I think I have enough.”

Enough? I hadn’t given her anything. I hoped I hadn’t revealed anything with my facial expressions.

“It was great meeting you,” Alisha said before walking outside.

Hailey came up to me. “What was that about?”

“Nothing good.” For the first time, I wondered if it was worse not to give her any details. A savvy reporter would fill

in the empty blanks with her version of the story. I didn't even want to know what that was.

Chapter Ten

BEN

Bean Rush was packed all morning. Thankfully, we'd gotten the espresso machine up and running the day before. I had the repairman's number in my phone in case something happened.

The photographer had stopped by, as Gia promised, and even a reporter who wanted to interview me. I hadn't expected that. Alisha had been particularly interested in the photos of the lemonade stands I'd put up on a whim last night when Cammie stopped by with Mom and Dad to see the store.

I'd had them framed, not sure what I'd do with them. Maybe hang them in the hallway to my office, but Cammie insisted they belonged in the dining area.

Every time I looked at the one of Brooke, it brought everything back. Our ongoing feud, but also the chemistry between us. I'd never acted on it, but I'd wondered if she felt it, too.

Cammie had really latched on to Brooke. I couldn't blame her. I'd always been drawn to Brooke myself, even though it had never been a good idea. With the town, and now the reporter, pitting us against each other, nothing would change anytime soon.

The rush didn't stop until closing. The pastries had long since been eaten; the grand opening banner hung askew out front. The most popular beans were already running low, and I'd need to place an order if I didn't want to run out.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I locked the front door and flipped the sign from *Open* to *Closed*. I'd sent Christopher home at dinner time, so I was alone. Finally.

With my feet aching, I moved through the space, picking up any trash I'd missed on my way to the office. Throughout the day, customers had mentioned that Java Coffee was offering free coffee. I wanted nothing more than to confront Brooke about it. My gut burned with the need to walk over there and ask her what the hell she'd been thinking. But we weren't friends. We were and always would be competitors. There was no world where we could shrug that off and be anything different. That was our storyline, and there would be no plot twist.

I thought I'd let her in this past weekend. I'd given her a glimpse into who I was, but it hadn't changed her perspective. The logical part of my brain got it, but my lizard brain was itching for an argument.

Before I could think better of it, I was shutting down my computer and grabbing my keys. I knew I should go home and work off my energy, but there was one thing I needed to do first.

I needed to see Brooke Langley. My chest was tight with anger and frustration. I needed to know what she was thinking. The entire walk to her store, all I could think about was the moment I'd see her. Her eyes would widen as I approached, and I'd tug her hair back so she could see me. I should demand she tell me why, but I knew if I were that close to her, I'd lose

it. With no barrier between us, no kids or employees, I'd finally find out what her lips felt like.

I was disappointed she wasn't standing outside her store as she'd been in my imaginings. Stopping outside her store window, I saw her standing by the counter, her expression downcast, but I could see the bright pink of her lipstick and her hair slicked back into a shiny ponytail. She was put together, but her shoulders had drooped. She was as exhausted as I was.

It hit me that she hadn't held the sale to ruin my grand opening. She'd been trying to save her business. I tugged on the door, expecting it to be locked, but it easily opened.

She looked up, her eyes widened in surprise, and her mouth fell open when she saw me.

I should ask why her door was unlocked, why she'd given out free coffees on my day, but I couldn't. The words stuck in my throat. I didn't stop until I stood in front of her.

There was a counter between us. A physical boundary I'd be smart to respect. Instead, all rational thought flew out of my head. I was rounding the counter before I could process what the hell I was doing.

"Ben?" she squeaked.

I ate up the distance between us, stopping with mere inches separating us.

It forced her to lift her head slowly to meet my gaze. "What are you doing here?"

"I needed to see you."

Her cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry—"

I growled. "Never say you're sorry."

My hand reached out to cradle the back of her head.

Her eyes widened more.

“It was badass, and you’re hot as hell.” It wasn’t my best prelude to a kiss, but I was incapable of reason or even caution at that point. The blood was pumping in my body like the beat to a good song, urging me on.

Her body gravitated toward mine.

I had to kiss her.

Shock and uncertainty gave way to liquid desire. She wanted it as much as I did. That was all I registered before my mouth slammed down on hers. I turned her, moving her until her ass was pressed against the counter.

I had her exactly where I wanted her.

She trembled against me before she lifted her hand to my face. Her touch was tentative, as if she couldn’t believe I was there, kissing her.

I pressed against her so she felt every dip and angle of my planes against her softer curves. I wanted her to remember the moment.

Still cradling her head, I angled her so I could delve deeper, her lips parting on a gasp. I took advantage, diving my tongue into her mouth. Dipping, tasting, and exploring.

I needed it. I needed her. The reality of her in my arms was heaven. Better than any teenage fantasy I’d ever had. *She was worth the chance. She was worth the wait.*

The familiar scent of coffee surrounded us, but something lighter was just underneath, flowery and sweet. It was her. All her.

My free hand gripped her hip, holding her against me as I pressed my burgeoning erection into her stomach.

She pulled back slightly, her cheeks flushed and her breathing ragged. “What are we doing?”

More was all I could think.

I easily lifted her onto the counter, stepping between her jean-clad legs before she could react, and kissed her again. I’d never get enough. She was my addiction.

Her fingers tugged on my hair at the base of my neck. She was warm and soft, and her pleas were my undoing.

My hands drifted to her thighs, squeezing. Needing more.

Every muscle in my body was pulled taut with the effort to hold myself back. None of it had been planned or thought out. I was acting on instinct.

Finally, Brooke pulled back, cupping my cheek with her hand. “Ben, what are we doing?”

Something in her expression had me stepping back. Had she not wanted it? Had I overstepped?

I took a second step back and turned my body slightly from hers. Running a hand through my hair, I said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have. This was—” I gestured at her helplessly, unable to put it into words.

Amazing. Mind-blowing. The best thing that had ever happened to me. But I couldn’t say what I was thinking, not knowing if she was on the same page. The quiet between us stretched until she sighed.

“The paper is doing a story on us.” Her tone pleaded with me to understand, but most of my brain cells had traveled south to my dick and were not operating.

“I’m sorry?” I turned to face her. I’d expected her to tell me the kiss was a mistake, that I was an idiot, but not whatever it was she’d said.

“I said, the paper is doing a story on us.” She hopped down from the counter, straightening her clothes.

She brushed imaginary lint off her jeans, making me feel like she was erasing any evidence of what we’d just done.

Refocusing on her words, I asked, “On the coffee shops?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to be kissing where anyone could see us.” Past dusk, it was dark out, and with the lights on inside, it would be easy for passersby to see us.

“Fuck. You’re right. This was—” A mistake, wrong? None of that sounded right.

It had been perfect. She said we couldn’t kiss where anyone could see us, so was she okay with us kissing in private? I was surprisingly on board for that. Just the thought had my cock stirring again.

Brooke shook her head. “We can’t do this.”

I nodded before registering the meaning of her words. Then they washed over me like a cold shower. I needed to get out of there. Away from her alluring lips, the temptation of a woman I could never have.

Brooke’s expression was serious. “We need to talk about what we’re going to do about the reporter.”

How was she so calm after what we’d just shared? Unless she didn’t feel the same thing I did.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I don’t think I can talk about anything intelligent right now.”

“The reporter asked questions about us when we were kids, high school. How we interact.” Brooke continued without acknowledging my statement.

“So?” I rolled my shoulders back, desperately trying to regain my footing. It was unsettling that Brooke had reacted to my kiss and then shut down her feelings so hard.

She threw her arms up in the air in exasperation. “So, I didn’t know what to say.”

“Tell her the truth.”

Brooke crossed her arms over her chest. “You honestly think that’s a good idea?”

“What’s she going to say? We grew up on the same street. We ran lemonade stands. We were named co-valedictorians.” None of it was damning. It was how I felt about Brooke that was devastating. I was attracted to her, but I was starting to think it was only about business for her.

“She’s looking for a story, trying to dig up something that isn’t there. She wants to pit us against each other.”

“We’re doing a good enough job of that on our own.” Not only what had just happened between us, but Brooke offering free coffee on the same day my store opened.

Brooke shot me a pointed look. “You’re not taking this seriously.”

“Isn’t any publicity good publicity?”

“It can be. But I thought you’d want to keep things relatively private because of Cammie.”

I hadn’t thought about that. “I’m still not seeing a downside. You’re going to have to help me out here.”

“The reporter asking questions about us felt icky.”

“We competed against each other. We weren’t always nice to each other. Same thing seems to be still happening. So, if she concluded that we’re rivals, she wouldn’t be wrong,” I said carefully.

“She’s going to sensationalize it. Make it something it’s not.”

I took a step closer to her.

Brooke looked at me warily. “What are you doing?”

“What are you so worried about? That the reporter will see that there’s something between us or that you feel this?” I gestured between us.

Brooke’s breath hitched, giving me hope that she wasn’t immune to me.

She stepped back, and that time I didn’t follow. “No. Yes. I don’t know. I just don’t want things to get ugly. This is different than high school. It’s not just our peers who see us. It’s how we’re perceived in the community.”

“And what? You can’t let it get out that we kissed?” Was she embarrassed?

“You’re being ridiculous.” But she couldn’t meet my eyes.

“Am I?” Something was going on with Brooke, and I had no idea what it was. Did she not want a relationship or a one-night stand, or was it that she didn’t want *me*? The last part hurt.

“Why did you come here tonight? Was it just to kiss me?” Her cheeks were flushed with anger.

She was deflecting, and she wasn't letting me close enough to figure out what was really going on in her head. "I wanted to talk to you about that stunt you pulled today."

"Well, why didn't you just say that?" Some of the tension left her body.

"I had every intention of confronting you, but then I saw you, and I lost it." That was the understatement of the year. My baser instincts had taken over. The ones that I didn't have the balls to act on in high school.

"Did you expect me to be okay with you opening a similar store across town? Did you think I was just going to take it lying down?"

"No." My voice sounded strangled.

Fuck. Everything she did and said had me thinking of laying her down on a bed where I could take my time with her. Where I could figure out what made her soften with desire. I wanted her screaming my name for a different reason. Not out of anger, but desire.

"I had to do something." Her expression was so torn that I deflated.

I ran my fingers through my hair. "I would have done something similar."

She raised her brow. "Yeah?"

"I'm still pissed." But I respected her for coming at me right out of the gate. It was the reason I'd respected her so much when we were younger. She never backed down from a challenge. She was fierce. And now I was wondering how that would translate into a bed partner.

Her lips twitched.

“You like that.”

I couldn't underestimate her. She'd be on top of her game, coming up with ways to draw her customers back in.

“I like that I get to you,” she said softly.

What did she mean by that? In business or personally?

Then she grimaced. “It's not that I don't find you attractive, but nothing can happen between us.”

“And why is that?” I hadn't even worked out if I wanted that either, but it stung that she dismissed the possibility so quickly.

“Everyone in town is watching us. A reporter is digging into our history. Our businesses are in direct competition with each other. Hooking up is not the answer.”

“That's not the reason, and you know it. There's something else going on with you. Something you're worried about.” I wanted to know more about her. What her dating history was like. Why she felt the need to throw up barriers between us.

“We're not a good idea.”

I'd had enough. It was similar enough to what Cammie's mother, Maria, told me when she found out she was pregnant. *I don't think it's a good idea for us to be together. I'll co-parent with you, but I don't want to be in a relationship with you.*

Even before we found out she was pregnant, I'd been prepared to take our relationship to the next level. So, to hear I'd been so wrong was devastating.

I was good enough for something casual, but when it came to a relationship, I wasn't the right guy. And fuck if I could figure out what was missing.

“Message received.” I moved toward the door.

“Ben. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“I know what you meant.” I opened the door, resisting the urge to slam it behind me. She couldn’t help it. She was just telling the truth. I wasn’t the right guy for her.

I’d have to ignore this pesky attraction between us.

Chapter Eleven

BROOKE

The door clicked shut behind him. My lips still vibrated with the pressure of his lips on mine. I pressed a finger to them, wishing I could recreate that moment when I was lost in him. It was everything I dreamed about on lonely nights when I didn't think I'd get a second shot at love.

The moment I lifted my gaze to find Ben stalking toward me, it was like everything stopped. Everything was quiet except for the rushing of the blood in my veins.

There was pure intention and desire in his eyes—like he saw me and had to have me. I'd reacted instinctually, lifting my head to meet his lips. When he lifted me so effortlessly onto the counter and stepped between my legs, my panties got wet. I thought I'd detonate right there in my store when he ground his erection against my core.

It was erotic and decadent and everything I hadn't allowed myself to feel or experience since my screw-up with Levi. I couldn't trust my desires or my judgment. But with Ben, I'd pushed everything out of my head, wanting to enjoy it. He felt so good. The grip on my hip, the way he cradled my head. He was forceful yet gentle, passionate, and careful. I wanted to let go of everything—my worries, my hesitations, and my past.

But the conversation with the reporter was fresh in my mind. I didn't want any reason for people to talk about us. Kissing Ben at night, with the lights on when anyone could see us, wasn't professional. It was reckless.

I'd attempted to date after my divorce only at Abby's insistence. But it had been a disaster. How could I trust someone when the last guy used me to get his green card? I couldn't trust anything or anyone.

Especially not Ben. He wanted his business to be a success, and I knew how he was in high school. He'd stop at nothing to get what he wanted. I was just collateral damage, and what better way to distract me than to kiss me? To pretend he was into me. I'd take a step back, not pushing as hard with my business. He'd get everything he wanted, and I'd be left hurting and alone.

I thought I was so smart, but with Levi, I was just another stupid girl who fell for the first guy who showed her attention.

I forced my feet toward the door Ben had just walked through, engaging the lock. Wanting to erase the last few minutes, I turned off the overhead light.

The street was quiet, the sidewalk empty. Ben was gone, and so was the moment we'd shared. I could almost imagine it had never happened. I'd clearly been daydreaming because I was so exhausted from the day.

There was no way it was real, no matter how hard my lips were vibrating or the blood was pumping through my veins. Because there was no way I would have lost control like that. Not with him.

Why Ben? Why now? Why couldn't I have met a nice guy who worked in an office, who had no ambitions of opening

their own business, much less a coffee shop?

I went through the motions of closing everything down. I'd stayed later than usual, sending my other employees home early.

When everything was off, I grabbed my purse and walked out the front door, making sure to lock it behind me. I lived close enough to walk home, and it was a warm spring evening.

A lingering roaring in my ears made it difficult to enjoy the night air and the occasional person who walked by with their dog or hand in hand with their significant other. It was like I was watching someone else walk over the uneven brick sidewalks and cross the streets.

Like it wasn't my life. I didn't go around kissing men. Especially not ones who threatened my livelihood. I'd really fucked up, and it wasn't like I'd gone looking for trouble. It always seemed to find me.

It was like I had a sign on my head that read *sucker*. I shook my head. No. I was stronger than that. Ben came into my store with a purpose. I knew what he wanted, and I'd gone along with it. Enjoyed it even. I was a strong woman who took what she wanted when she wanted.

Of course, if that were the case, I wouldn't have pulled back and said we couldn't do this. I wouldn't have brought up the reporter. I would have gripped his neck and pulled him down for more. That would have been the pleasurable thing to do.

My body tingled from the very real memory of Ben pressed against me. I was overly warm. I walked down a side street of historic residential homes and unlocked the door to my rental. The one I kept despite the small space because I

loved living downtown. I loved knowing the residents and being in the pulse of small-town living.

Normally, I'd take a leisurely bath after a day like today. But I needed a shower to erase the memory, the scent of Ben from my skin.

Only when I was under the steady warm stream, my head tipped back to remove the shampoo from my hair, did I realize that I'd never erase that moment. I'd think about it for a long time, wishing I'd done something different. But my past dictated my future. I needed to be smart and careful. I couldn't fall into a guy or participate in a one-night stand. Not when I'd been deceived before. I wasn't sure of Ben's motives, especially not today.

I prided myself on being a smart girl, and smart girls didn't fall for hot kisses or hotter men. Nope. They carefully vetted any potential dates, only engaging when it was safe. Ben was the opposite of safe. He was every risk I'd avoided the last few years.

There was no way I could talk to a friend about it either. I couldn't trust their judgment. Hailey was so desperate for me to have what she did that she'd see something with Ben that wasn't there. And Remi was all about falling headfirst without a second thought. There was no one who'd understand, except maybe Abby. She'd been screwed over as colossally as me and would definitely commiserate.

I messaged her, asking if she had time to stop by the shop in the morning to discuss the photos. I fully intended to talk to her about what happened. I had to share it with someone. Pulling on the silky lingerie for evenings when I wanted more, I slid between the cool sheets. My mind instantly replayed the moment Ben walked inside, intent on me.

My hand drifted down my stomach and under the waistband of my shorts. With a few firm strokes, circles of my clit, and a dip of my fingers, I was falling over the edge. The rush of pleasure washed over me. It had been a long time since I'd allowed myself to feel a release. I was usually too tired, too focused on other things.

Only after I'd come down and relaxed on my pillow did I realize that I'd said Ben's name in the middle of my orgasm. My eyes popped wide open, and my heart raced. I was so fucked.



After a fitful sleep, I woke up earlier than usual for my morning run. I ran through some stretches while watching the news, then quickly showered, trying to forget last night.

I was a professional. I didn't go around kissing the competition. Walking inside Java Coffee, my morning barista, Angelina, was already behind the counter, and the register person, Caitlyn, was smiling at the first person in line.

I tried not to panic when I noticed the line was half the size of normal. On a weekday, we were crazy busy from opening until around nine in the morning, and then we got the rush of people who didn't stop by until they'd clocked in for work. Then it was sporadic until the afternoon caffeine pick-me-ups. In the evenings, the crowd was younger than the college students who came in for a study jolt or to socialize. On Sundays, we were busy from open to close. Normally, I'd hop behind the counter, offering a smile to my usual customers, but my staff didn't really need the help.

I didn't want to acknowledge that things were different, so I smiled and waved on my way to the office. Sitting at my desk, I rested my head on the seat back.

So the morning crowd wanted to try the selection of beans at Ben's shop. I tried not to fall into the trap of self-pity. I needed to dust myself off and decide on a plan.

Firing up my computer screen, I knew it wasn't just opening day we needed to play for. It was every day thereafter. How were we going to successfully counter Bean Rush's opening? Draw customers back and keep them returning for more.

Hailey walked in, throwing a newspaper on my desk. With a flutter, it settled in front of me, already open to the front page of the Life & Style section with the headline, "*Childhood Rivals Back in Action with Competing Coffee Shops.*" It had a smaller italicized headline that read, *Which one will come out on top?* The article started with, "Competitors since they were kids..." And then I stopped reading. The top picture was Bean Rush. Then there were two small pictures, one of me behind my lemonade stand and the one with Ben.

I swallowed hard. "This is bad."

"Is it?" Hailey asked, her head tilted.

I looked up at her. "Yes."

Though I hadn't read the rest of the article, I could only imagine what nonsense the reporter was going on about. Rivals. Competitors. Childhood Nemeses. Kissing on the counter after closing. Competitors by day, lovers by night. I'd given her all the material she needed last night.

"What's with you? I thought yesterday went well. You had a ton of customers pick up free coffee, and you're in the

Sunday paper.”

I shook my head, lowering it to skim over the article. It wasn't anything new exactly, and I breathed a sigh of relief that she didn't bring up the chemistry between Ben and me or the kiss. Hopefully, no one had seen it.

I let out a breath. “It's not as bad as I feared.”

Hailey smiled encouragingly. “It's great publicity. It might even bring in new people who haven't tried your store yet.”

There was a summary of each of our stores, which was nice. But I didn't like that small headline asking which one would come out on top. That implied there'd be a loser. And a loser in business meant failure, giving up, and closing shop.

I'd been luckier than most businesses, enjoying little to no competition. Some customers got their coffee from one of the bakeries or the numerous hotels and bed-and-breakfasts, but it wasn't as good as my coffee. But Ben using a large selection of quality whole beans had created a niche for himself. Something different and new. He might draw in the suits from the courthouse and surrounding businesses and the plentiful snobby college kids at St. John's College, which was a short walk north of his shop.

Caitlyn popped in with my usual drink. “I thought you might like this since we were slow.”

That statement pierced my heart. “Thank you.”

Hailey waited for Caitlyn to leave before asking, “What's with you this morning?”

I sipped my coffee, wishing I could inject it directly into my veins. I was exhausted and wracked by guilt for my behavior last evening. “I didn't sleep well.”

Her expression morphed into sympathy as she nodded toward the newspaper. “You’re stressed about this.”

“How can I not be? You heard Caitlyn. It’s slow on a Sunday.”

“It’s like you said, Bean Rush is the new, shiny thing. People will try it out and come back to you.”

“How can you be so sure?” A rare bout of uncertainty had latched on to me, and it was reluctant to let go. Instead, it only tightened like a band around my chest.

Disbelief flitted over her face. “I can’t be, but I like to think you’ve built a strong business here. You connect with the customers. Will Ben?”

If he connected with his customers as he had with me last night... “I’m not sure.”

“Sure, he’ll draw some away, but I think you’d keep a fair amount. Especially if we increase our offerings to entice them back.”

A part of me wanted to give into self-pity and fall down the rabbit hole of despair. But I refused to do that. Failure wasn’t in my DNA. I’d keep going. No matter what. “You’re right. We’ll be fine.”

“Exactly.”

I wondered if I should tell her everything. This pesky attraction to Ben could affect my business, and Hailey was my manager. “Last night, I did something stupid.”

Hailey snorted, pulling her water bottle out of her bag. “I doubt that.”

I thought through what happened, wondering how much to tell her. “Ben stopped by after closing.”

Hailey's eyes widened as she focused on me. "What? Why?"

I shook my head slowly. "He said he wanted to confront me about me handing out free coffees on his opening day."

"He wanted to?" Hailey asked, confusion lacing her tone.

"He kissed me instead."

Her mouth dropped open. "What did you say?"

"I said Ben Monroe kissed me." My cheeks heated.

Hailey leaned in closer. "How was it?"

I winced. "What do you mean, how was it? I shouldn't be kissing him at all."

Hailey waved me off in her excitement for details. "But was it good?"

My gaze unfocused as I remembered the expression on his face right before his lips met mine. Determined and hot. That look zinged directly to my clit. "It was earth-shattering."

"Oh, do tell me more." Hailey shifted forward in her seat, her hands clasped in her lap.

"There's not much to tell." Not much I would share, even if I wanted to.

"Was there tongue?"

"What is this, high school?"

She pouted at my lack of response, so I offered her some detail. "He kind of crossed the room and put his hand on the back of my head, angling me until I was right where he wanted me." I was getting warm thinking about it. "Then he picked me up and put me on the counter."

Hailey picked up a folder waving it at her face. “Oh, this is getting good.”

“That’s where it stopped.”

Her face fell. “Seriously? I had such high hopes.”

“It was the best kiss I’ve had in forever, really.” I’d gone on a few blind dates and one online dating disaster. A few attempted to kiss me, but nothing had been more than *nice*.

“I’m so excited for you.”

I sighed. “Don’t be. It can’t be anything.”

Hailey’s shoulders slumped. “Don’t say that.”

I pushed the paper toward her. “You’ve seen this. Do you honestly think it’s a good idea for us to get involved?”

She rolled her eyes. “That will blow over.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Let me get this straight. Ben Monroe kissed you like a boss, and you don’t want a repeat.”

“It’s a bad idea.”

“It can’t just be because of one newspaper article.”

I sighed. Should I tell her everything? I needed to talk to someone, and she was the best bet besides Abby. “I can’t trust his motives. Is he trying to distract me, throw me off my game so I won’t market my business?”

Hailey just looked at me. “Are you listening to yourself? Is this about Levi?”

“You know my history.” Even if I wanted to trust someone new, Ben wasn’t the safe choice.

“You can’t just not try with anyone ever again because of one asshole. Just make sure you confirm citizenship before you move forward.”

“It’s not just that. I can’t trust anyone, especially not Ben.”

“What are you worried about?”

“He’s not a friend. I’ve always viewed him as an enemy. It’s different.”

“I get that, but trust is taking a leap sometimes. It’s doing something that feels good and hoping the other person is on the same page as you. You won’t know if you don’t try. If you keep yourself closed off.”

“Yeah, maybe.” The thought of trying something with Ben was attractive, especially after that kiss, but I just couldn’t go there. It was too scary. What if it blew up in my face? It wouldn’t just be me that was hurt. It would be my business and my reputation in the community. It would be embarrassing. I couldn’t handle that again.

“I know you’re ashamed of what happened with Levi, but it wasn’t your fault. You should be able to trust your boyfriend, the guy who asks you to marry him. You were planning a future together. You had no reason to think he wasn’t genuine.”

“Sometimes, I wonder.”

“You’re too hard on yourself.”

I looked out the window, wishing I could take the rest of the day off. “I should talk to Abby about it.”

Hailey shook her head. “I know she’s your sister, but that’s not a good idea. She’s been hurt just as badly as you have.”

“She’s pretty cynical,” I admitted.

“Your parents have been married for a long time; you have friends in good relationships.”

“Will I ever be whole again? Or will I always be the girl afraid to move on?”

Hailey was quiet for so long that I worried she wouldn't answer. “I hope you will. I'm here for you, no matter what.”

“Thanks, you're a good friend.” I hugged her, and then we launched into our plans for the week for the coffee shop and the possibility of the wine market. I needed to focus on anything else besides Ben Monroe. Maybe the kiss was a fluke, a one-time thing, and nothing would come of it. One could only hope.

Chapter Twelve

BEN

A few patrons were working on their laptops in the seating area, but the rush had subsided.

Christopher gestured at the rolled-up newspaper on the counter. “I read about you and Brooke. It was cute,” he said. I glared at him, but he just smiled, adding, “Two kids with competing lemonade stands grow up to open coffee shops in the same small town. It’s a great story.”

“For someone else, maybe. Not for me.”

Christopher’s eyes narrowed. “What’s with you two, anyway?”

“Nothing,” I said, even as my mind and body flashed back to the kiss last night.

“You grew up on the same street, and you went to the same school. You’re saying you never even spoke to one another?”

“I wouldn’t say that. It was more taunts and barbs, trash talk if you will. We weren’t friends. We didn’t care about each other.” Except for that one time, when Brooke was noticeably absent from an important test at school. My mind went to the worst-case scenario—was she in a car accident on the way to school, had someone close to her died? I couldn’t relax until I knew what had happened. I stopped by her house after school

to find out she had the flu. It eased my worries, but I didn't see or talk to her.

Christopher raised his brow. "Are you sure about that?"

I needed to talk to someone about it, and having just returned to town with a child in tow, I hadn't had time to reconnect with any high school buddies. Christopher and I had become closer while working together so much, but I couldn't talk about it in front of customers. "Lacey," I called to the barista. "You okay by yourself for a minute?"

"I've got it," Lacey said with a smile.

I threw a thumb over my shoulder, looking at Christopher. "Let's go to my office."

"Oh, this should be good," he mumbled as he followed me to my office.

I let him precede me inside, closed the door, then sat across from him. "What I'm about to tell you doesn't leave this room."

He leaned forward in his chair and made a zipping motion over his lips with his fingers. "My lips are sealed."

I didn't know Christopher well, but he seemed to have my back. "I went to see her last night."

He tipped his head. "Who? Brooke?"

"I meant to confront her about the free coffee. I was pissed."

"Were you still angry when you got there?" he asked, a smile playing on his lips.

I sighed as I gathered my thoughts. "I was, but when I saw her, I lost my head. I kissed her."

“Nice.” He looked pleased.

I shook my head. “I fucked up. I crossed a line I shouldn’t have.”

He sobered quickly, his smile dropping. “The only line is the one you drew yourself.”

I couldn’t argue with that. “It’s necessary. You read the paper. Brooke is concerned the reporter’s not done with us yet. That she’ll jump all over it if she gets wind of a relationship.”

Christopher’s expression was skeptical.

“I can’t have anything interfering with the business. I need it to be successful. I promised Cammie I’d have more time with her if we moved here.”

Christopher tilted his head to the side and asked, “How does Brooke stop that?”

“She’s my direct competition.”

“I get that, but you said yourself there’re plenty of stores that sell the same thing in town.”

“That’s ice cream and fudge, which are in higher demand than coffee.”

He raised a brow because I’d always said that wouldn’t be an issue.

“Trust me. It’s a bad idea.” I couldn’t say the words out loud. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see where things could go with Brooke. I crushed on her in high school, but I had no idea how she felt about me.

His eyes widened. “She’s the one who put a stop to it, didn’t she?”

How had he guessed?

He smiled slowly. "I'm right, aren't I?"

"She said it was a bad idea, but she's not wrong."

"What would have happened if she hadn't turned you down?" He leaned his elbows on the desk.

I wasn't sure I would have stopped wherever we were heading. After finally having my chance with Brooke, I wouldn't have backed away so easily. I should have been grateful that she put a stop to the madness, not hurt that she found me lacking.

"That's what I thought. It's not black and white."

I shook my head. "She was pretty clear where she stood."

"Uh-huh."

"She's not wrong."

"If you've liked this woman for a while, and I have a feeling you have, then it sucks you're going to ignore it."

"Maybe when the business is profitable."

His eyes widened. "That could take months, hell, even years."

"I need to focus on what's important. Bean Rush and Cammie," I said, ticking my points off on my fingers.

Christopher just shook his head in dismay and got up to leave. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Hey, there's something else I wanted to discuss with you."

He sat back down. "What is it?"

"When I stopped by Brooke's store the other day, I noticed families at her shop. I don't see them here."

Christopher nodded. “She has games and some toys for the kids. So, moms and families like to go there. Keeps kids occupied while they sit and chat. But you can’t do that here. Your vibe is different.”

“I’m getting the attorneys after court and the work-from-home crowd that needs a change of scenery.”

“It’s not bad. It just sets you apart from her business, which is slightly more casual.”

“Her store is warm and inviting, and mine is—”

“You have pictures of kids running lemonade stands. You have photos depicting Annapolis and the history of coffee beans. I think you’re warm and inviting.”

I was quiet for a few seconds, wondering what else I could do to make the business successful.

“You created a brand for yourself. I’d stick with it before you make any changes.”

I considered his statement for a minute. I’d hired him because he had experience, but I wasn’t naïve enough to think he wouldn’t move on eventually. “That’s good advice. You ever have thoughts about going into business yourself?”

He shook his head. “Hell, no. I couldn’t handle the responsibility.”

“You do a pretty good job as manager.” I wondered where the trepidation was coming from.

“That’s different. I’m not shouldering any of the financial risks.”

“I can respect that.” Not everyone was cut out for the inherent risk being a business owner entailed.

“If that’s all you have for me, I should check on the front.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate the work you’ve done getting the store ready for opening. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m happy to be part of it.” Christopher left, and I wondered if I’d made a mistake in acquiescing to Brooke’s demand that we back off. Had I been too hasty?

I’d taken her words as a rejection, but in hindsight, I could see I’d compared her to my ex, which probably wasn’t fair.



I cut out of work a couple of hours early, wanting to be at Cammie’s practice. I’d been so busy leading up to the grand opening that I’d neglected our time together. Since I’d opened every morning, I’d missed our breakfasts. I worried things would fall apart at the shop if I weren’t there, even though I knew Christopher could handle it. Letting go of the control was hard.

On the drive to the fields, Cammie filled me in on everything I’d missed. Paperwork for a field trip had come home, and she wished I could chaperone. I told her maybe next year and immediately felt guilty. Was that how working parents always felt? The guilt never went away, even if you were doing something to ensure their future. She’d only be young for so long.

I couldn’t take a full day off work to chaperone, but I could cut a couple of hours early to attend practice.

“We get our uniforms today,” Cammie said as we pulled into the dirt lot.

“That’s exciting.” I drove past the families with kids already heading toward the field and parked.

I wanted to attend her after-school activities and weekend games as much as possible. I leaned on my parents, but I wanted to do these things. Plus, the drives to and from places were a great time to talk to Cammie and discover what was going on in her life. At home, she was too distracted to tell me much.

I pulled Cammie’s bag out of the trunk at the same time she exclaimed, “Oh, look! There’s Hunter.”

I shut the trunk, following after her more slowly. I wondered who had brought Hunter. If it was his mother or Brooke. I shouldn’t have been anticipating seeing her again, but my body betrayed me. My heart beat faster once I caught sight of Brooke.

“Hunter. I have your water bottle,” Brooke said as she tucked a bottle into the side pocket of his bag.

She slowed her pace and sighed. Then, looking to the side, she saw me. “Ben.”

“Brooke.” I wanted to take a cue from her on how to handle it. The last time we’d seen each other, we’d kissed. We’d crossed that line, and we couldn’t go back. No matter how much both of us wanted to.

If I could forget how her lips felt under mine or her breathy moans and sighs when I kissed her, it might’ve been easier.

“How are you?” Brooke asked, her expression neutral, as if we were acquaintances, which I supposed we were. As we chatted and slowly walked toward the field, Hunter and

Cammie ran ahead together to the baseball diamond, where the other kids and coaches had begun to gather.

“Good.”

“How’s the opening?”

“Busy. I’m happy I was able to cut out early to be here.”

Brooke’s expression softened. “Opening a new business with a child must be tough. I can’t even imagine.”

“Dad guilt is a thing. You always hear about mom guilt, but now that I’m the only parent, it’s definitely set in.”

Brooke raised a brow, and I remembered she knew Maria had died, but not the details of our co-parenting.

“I shared custody with my ex. She had her mostly during the week, and I took her three weekends out of the month. It was more stable for Cammie and allowed me to focus on work.”

We set our chairs next to each other on top of the hill overlooking the field. A nearby tree provided shade. Most of the other parents set up closer to the diamond with their younger children playing on blankets.

I was irrationally pleased that she’d sat next to me. Being there together like that was safe. There wouldn’t be any temptation to kiss her with other parents around. “Is your sister working?”

“Yeah, Abby’s editing some photos, and I might have begged her to let me take him. I didn’t see him much last weekend with the opening.” She gestured at me, her cheeks slightly flushed.

“I’m sorry the opening of my store is affecting you.” It was never my intention, but it was the unfortunate result.

“Does your sister work for herself?”

“She works with Gia at Happily Ever Afters and has clients on the side.”

I knew who she was. “She’s the one who took photos for the paper, then.”

“Yeah, she submitted them.”

“She has a different last name than you.” I remembered the byline of the photo. I would have remembered if it said Abby Langley.

“She was married. Her ex left when she had Hunter. She kept her married name so she and Hunter would match.”

“That’s understandable.” Something about her comment had me thinking. “What do you mean by her ex leaving?”

It sounded like something permanent.

“They wanted to have kids, but when she got pregnant, he started pulling away. When she had Hunter and came home from the hospital, he said he couldn’t handle it. He wasn’t ready to be a dad.”

“It’s a little too late then.” I couldn’t imagine walking away from my child.

She laughed without humor. “Tell me about it. Especially when they went through fertility treatments to have him.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I wish I were. That’s what made his reaction so shocking. She wasn’t expecting it.”

“She never planned on being a single parent, but then, who does?”

“Abby has my parents and me helping out. It’s something, but not the same as Hunter’s father being there. He comes around from time to time, but he has nothing to do with the day-to-day stuff. He gave her sole custody when he left.”

“That’s a blessing, at least. She doesn’t have to deal with him if she doesn’t want to.”

“He defers to her when he wants to spend time with Hunter. He’s very respectful. I think he’s afraid she’s going to ask him to do more, and he’s not capable of that.”

I was beginning to get a picture of Brooke. She was an amazing sister, supportive aunt, and she’d do anything for her family. She had to have a negative impression of men after seeing her sister left with a newborn.

“Not all guys are like that.” I wasn’t sure why I felt the need to remind her of that. It wasn’t like she was interested in pursuing anything with me.

Brooke’s gaze was on the team throwing balls back and forth to warm up.

“Is Abby dating anyone?” I was curious about Brooke’s family life, but I really wanted to know more about Brooke and why she pushed me away so hard when our chemistry was undeniable.

Brooke let out a breath. “She’s not really feeling that. She’s busy with her business and Hunter. Honestly, I think she’s afraid to let anyone in.”

“That’s understandable.” I wondered if that was why Brooke was so gun shy about us.

“Both of us are a little jaded.” Then her lips pressed together in a tight line like she’d revealed more than she should have.

Hunter ran up to us and looked at Brooke as he asked, “Where are my batting gloves?”

“They’re not in your bag?” She looked grateful to have the reprieve.

He shook his head.

“We might have left them in the car.”

I watched as they trekked down the hill to the parking lot. A few minutes later, Brooke returned to her seat next to me while Hunter took off toward the diamond, a pair of gloves flapping in his hand.

Brooke shook her head as she sat down. “I don’t know how Abby remembers everything.”

Silence fell between us as the team continued with the practice.

If Maria were alive, she’d be the one attending practice. I’d be working. I felt incredibly guilty to be having those thoughts. It took her death for me to change my job, to make a life where I could be more present in Cammie’s life.

“Is everything okay?”

“I’m just grateful to be here. Normally, I’d be working long hours, and Cammie’s mother would have taken her to activities. I might have made it to the game.” I felt worse admitting that. I didn’t realize how important it was to Cammie to be at everything or how much I’d enjoy it.

Brooke smiled at me. “Hunter’s not mine, but I enjoy being here as much as possible, too.”

“He is yours. He’s your nephew, and I’m sure he’s incredibly grateful to have you in his life.” I meant every word.

She smiled softly. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“You want kids of your own?” I was intensely curious.

“I love kids, but I’m okay being the aunt. The one who can give them back at the end of the night.”

“You’d be okay just being the aunt?” How she was with Hunter, that statement didn’t jive.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Marriage. Kids. That life isn’t for me.”

“I can’t believe you don’t want a family.” Something was holding her back.

“Yeah, I just can’t do that level of commitment.”

She didn’t want a relationship, but why? Had she had a bad experience, a cheating ex, or was she one of those people who truly didn’t want an attachment? That didn’t make sense because she was so close to her family. Wouldn’t she want the same for herself?

“There’s no deep meaning behind it. Some people just aren’t meant for kids and family.” Brooke’s tone was slightly defensive.

“If anyone is the poster child for kids and family, it’s you.” I watched her, gauging her reaction.

Her face pinched. “That just shows how much you don’t know me.”

I shifted in my chair and lowered my voice. “I’d like to get to know you.”

She looked at me then, her expression open and vulnerable.

It gutted me because she was the most deserving person I'd met. She was amazing with her customers, her family, and even me. Her sworn enemy.

"Can we stay and practice more? Please?" I looked up, surprised to see Hunter standing in front of Brooke.

"Is practice over?" I asked, scanning the field where kids were hanging around the bench, some talking to parents and others packing their bags.

"That was quick."

"What are you talking about? It was so long," Cammie said as she walked up.

I was so lost in our conversation that I didn't pay attention to most of the practice or even notice the kids were already packing up to leave. "Sorry about that, kiddo."

"I don't know. Let me see if your mom is ready for you to be home," Brooke said to Hunter as she stood and pulled out her phone.

I tucked my camp chair into its bag and did the same with Brooke's while she texted her sister.

"She said we have more time." Brooke tucked her phone into her back pocket.

"Can I stay, too, Daddy?" Cammie asked.

She and Hunter stood side by side with equally cute, pleading expressions.

"I don't know how we can say no," I said to Brooke.

Her lips quirked. "I guess it's fine."

She moved to pull her chair out of the bag, and Hunter said, "You can play, too."

“Yeah?” Brooke asked, looking at me. “Are you?”

“I’ve got some extra gloves in the trunk. Let me grab them.” I jogged toward the parking lot, past the other parents who were leaving. I wanted to spend more time with Brooke. Between that kiss and the glimpse she showed me of her tonight, I wanted to get to know her.

We might be wrong for each other, and it might be the worst timing in the world, but she intrigued me.

Chapter Thirteen

BROOKE

Watching Ben jog away, I wondered what the hell I was thinking, wanting to spend more time with him and his adorable little girl. My chest still ached from our conversation. He'd been too close to the truth. He was asking questions I never wanted to answer.

Why couldn't he take my answers at face value? Didn't most men prefer women who were anti-commitment and didn't want a relationship? Of course, I didn't exactly want a one-night stand either. I wanted to avoid men for as long as I could. I wasn't ready to jump back in or take that leap. I wasn't sure I'd ever be ready.

Cammie and Hunter tossed a ball back and forth. Hunter tried to throw it as hard as he could, sacrificing accuracy, while Cammie ran to chase it.

All too soon, Ben was running toward me.

He wasn't even out of breath. I wanted him to be the typical businessman with a slight paunch, winded and out of breath. Instead, he looked perfectly in shape after jogging. He pulled to a stop in front of me with a huge smile. "You ready to play?"

"I don't have a glove."

“I figured. I grabbed one for you, too.” He handed me a leather glove, and I tried it on.

“Good enough for now,” he said once he saw it fit, then he turned toward the kids on the field.

“You want to bat first or field grounders?”

“Bat,” they both yelled at the same time.

“You want to stand on first?” Ben asked me. His stance was relaxed, and his expression eager. He looked so different than when he was discussing business.

I scanned the field. “I think first base.”

“Have you ever played?”

“No, but I watch a lot with Hunter. He’s obsessed.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy.” Ben winked at me, making my stomach do a little flip-flop.

His statement warmed my chest. I didn’t have to imagine how he’d be as a dad because I already knew he was great. If I dated him, he’d be one more person in Hunter’s life who was a positive influence. A male role model was something Hunter desperately needed.

Why was I even considering the possibility of dating Ben?

Ben walked with me to first base. He demonstrated his foot on the base with his gloved hand stretched out. “You stand here. When I field the ball, put your foot on the bag and lean toward me like this to catch it.”

Standing so close, I caught the twinkle in his eye. He was enjoying it. “Yeah, okay.”

With a nod, Ben lightly slapped his glove against my shoulder and jogged to the mound. “Who’s up first?”

Warmth spread through my chest as I watched him.

“Me,” Cammie said, coming forward with her bat.

“Oh, a leftie. This is going to be a tough one.” Ben had fallen into his role as pitcher.

“Daddy!” Cammie said, giggling.

The warmth in my chest spread from my sternum to my stomach. It was filling me everywhere, making me feel a little lightheaded.

Cammie eased into her batting stance, and Hunter crouched down behind her as the catcher.

Ben adjusted his baseball cap, his gaze on Hunter and his glove against his chest. He shook his head once, then nodded with a smile.

Glancing at Hunter, I saw he had one finger pointed down between his legs. Was it some kind of secret sign? He moved to hold his glove sideways, giving Ben a target.

Ben stood straighter, mimicking the pose I’d seen the professional ball players execute during the games Hunter always had playing on the TV. He wound up and let loose. Since it was Cammie, his pitch was more of a lob than a fastball.

Cammie swung and missed.

Hunter called out, “Strike one.”

“You got this, Cammie,” I cheered.

“Knees soft, elbow up,” Ben told her before focusing on Hunter again. They went through some silent argument about what pitch they were going to do, with Ben shaking his head and Hunter offering a different option with his fingers. Finally,

they agreed on the pitch, and Ben straightened his glove by his stomach. He wound up and threw another lob at Cammie. I was starting to think the secret signal business and exaggerated windup were just for fun.

Hunter seemed to be enjoying the show, and I was, too. Standing on first with Ben facing away from me, I could easily observe his ass on display as he went through his windup. I fanned myself with my glove. I should probably have been paying more attention to the batter.

The crack of the bat sounded, and the ball rolled toward Ben. I panicked, trying to remember what I was supposed to be doing. Oh, right. Covering first. I stood with one foot on the bag and stretched toward Ben just as he threw it.

All I had to do was catch it. Thankfully, Ben went easy on me and threw a soft but accurate ball into my glove a second after I felt Cammie cross the bag.

“Safe,” Hunter called out.

I high-fived Cammie. “Nice hit.”

“Who’s up next?” Ben asked, as if it weren’t obvious.

“Me.” Hunter indicated himself with a hand on his chest.

Ben looked around. “But who’s going to be the catcher? Cammie?”

“I want to run the bases,” Cammie said stubbornly.

Ben’s gaze moved to me.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing,” I said reluctantly as I walked toward home plate.

“It’s easy. Five fingers is a slider, four is a knuckleball, three is a screwball, two is a curveball, and one is a fastball.”

Hunter demonstrated the signs as he went through them.

I crouched down. “Are you sure about that? All the pitches looked the same.”

“Hey, no trash talk from the catcher,” Ben called from the mound.

It was light and fun, and I found myself enjoying the moment, even though I’d never played baseball and had no idea what I was doing.

I signaled for a fastball, and with one nod from Ben, he went through his windup. It was sexy from my angle. His cap curved just so over his forehead, the muscles of his arms bulging and flexing as he went through the motions. I was so distracted by what his body was doing that I barely registered the ball coming toward me much faster than it had seemed when I stood on first base.

Hunter swung, hitting the ball between first and second. I stood, watching Ben chase after the ball, but Hunter made it to first before Ben snagged it.

“Nice hit, buddy.” Ben walked over to first, fist-bumping him.

Then Ben moved to stand in front of me. “I think we need a new pitcher. Two batters, two hits.”

My whole body heated at his flirtatious expression. I looked around at the empty field. “But there’s no one else.”

Ben handed me the ball with a smile. “Pitch to me?”

I slowly shook my head. “Oh, you don’t want me doing that.”

“Come on. It will be fun. I’ll show you what to do.” Ben took off for the mound, and I followed at a slower pace. My

heartbeat gradually picked up as I neared. Just how was Ben going to show me what to do?

“Stand here like this.” Ben demonstrated his stance.

I moved to stand in front of him, trying to mimic the pose as best I could. His heat was to my back, and his presence made it difficult to concentrate on my form.

“Like this.” Ben’s arms came around me, and he put my hands where he wanted them. I sucked in a breath, getting a lung full of Ben’s scent: coffee beans, leather, and a hint of masculine spice.

My back to his front, his hands were gentle over mine as he helped me move through the motions. Then he took a step back. “Now, you try.”

I looked at him over my shoulder, wondering if he was as affected as I was, but he merely winked and took another step back.

I drew in a breath, straightened, and threw the ball, hoping it was close to what Ben had done. When Hunter caught the ball, I let out a breath.

“A little outside, but not bad.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. “A little outside?”

“You have to throw it over the plate between the batter’s shoulders and knees to be a strike.”

“Gotcha.” I swallowed. I could do it.

“Now, you need a batter,” Ben said as he jogged to the batter’s box.

He must have grabbed his bat when he retrieved the gloves from his truck because his was bigger than the kids’. He got

into his stance, looking so confident and sexy. I licked my suddenly dry lips.

“Aunt Brooke! I’m trying to give you the signal.”

I moved my gaze from Ben’s perfect form to Hunter.
“Right.”

I couldn’t remember what the hand signals meant. It didn’t matter since I was hoping just to get the ball across the plate. I bit my lip as I wound up and threw it.

Ben watched it go over the plate.

“Strike one,” Hunter said with enthusiasm.

“Yes!” I pumped my hand, feeling a little ridiculous, but the kids seemed to enjoy my silliness.

Ben narrowed his eyes at me, deepening his stance. He was taking it seriously.

I wound up a second time and threw the ball. Ben swung and hit it hard. Cammie took off running, and all I could do was watch it fly over my head and land just inside the fence.

“Home run,” Hunter whooped.

Ben jogged leisurely around the bases, pumping his hand as he went.

“Sorry, bud,” I said, moving toward home to wait for Ben’s arrival.

Hunter shrugged, completely unconcerned. “No big deal. But you’re up next.”

“I’m sorry. What now?” I asked as Ben crossed the plate.

“You’re the only one who hasn’t batted,” Ben said.

“Oh, I don’t need to—this is for you guys to practice.” I started to back away from the plate. “I’ll just stay out of the way.”

“It’s your turn.” Ben stood by the batter’s box, holding his bat out to me.

“I should probably use Cammie’s bat.” I picked up her purple and white bat from where it leaned against the fence. It felt light and very short.

Ben looked at it with amusement. “That’s way too small for you.

“I don’t know about that,” I hedged.

Ben took it from me and replaced it with his heavier one.

“Are you scared?” he challenged, sparking a fire in my chest.

My nose scrunched in disgust. “Of course not.”

When I got into the batting position I’d observed Ben using, I realized he’d played me. He knew what would make me engage. He always knew.

Ben walked around me, making me suddenly feel very self-aware. He touched my elbow, nudging it higher. His hands settled on my hips for no apparent reason as he said, “Looks good.”

He jogged to the mound, and I wondered what I’d done to get myself in that position. What happened to the kids practicing? Somehow, we were involved in a full-fledged game.

“You want to take a few practice swings?”

I swung once, then twice, feeling a little ridiculous.

“You ready for this?” Ben asked.

We were in front of two kids, but I took his words completely differently from how he meant them. Our kiss flashed in my mind, and I nodded before thinking it through.

His expression was serious as he wound up and threw a fast one at me. I swung hard when it got near me, hoping to make contact. When I heard the crack of the bat, I watched it fly over Ben’s head. He lifted his glove, but it was too late. The ball bounced near second base and kept rolling.

“Run!” Hunter cried from behind me, startling me. Realizing what I was supposed to do, I dropped the bat and took off.

“Go for second,” Hunter yelled.

I rounded first base. Ben seemed to be taking his time getting the ball, or so it seemed. I should have enough time to get there. I took off faster, my heart racing. I wanted to beat Ben.

Turning, he saw me headed for second and ran toward me. Cammie was still at first, so Ben needed to tag me out. I remembered that much from watching games with Hunter. At the last second, I went for it. I dove headfirst toward the bag, hoping I had enough time. Ben’s glove brushed over my fingers, but I wasn’t sure whether he’d gotten me before I touched the bag.

“Safe,” Hunter yelled.

My fingers still touched the bag as Ben crouched over me. “Nice slide. You played ball before?”

“Never.”

He held out his hand, helping me to my feet. “Impressive, Langley.”

I brushed the dirt off my legs, wishing I’d worn pants.

“Let me help you.” Ben turned me so my back was to him and wiped the dirt off my bare legs and ass.

“What are you doing?” I asked him over my shoulder.

I expected him to be smirking or teasing, but his eyelids were hooded. I turned so I was facing him. Ben’s fingers moved to rest lightly on my hips, and I wanted him to pull me closer. I wanted to feel the press of his body against mine. Everything inside me had sparked to life since that kiss, and I wanted more.

“That was so amazing,” Hunter said, running up to us.

I’d almost forgotten the kids were there. We stepped apart, the moment lost.

Hunter high-fived me. “Nice hit.”

“I woulda had her if I’d had an outfielder,” Ben said, his voice laced with irritation.

Cammie crossed her arms over her chest, her hip jutting out. “Daddy, don’t be a sore loser.”

“Yeah, Daddy, don’t be a sore loser,” I mimicked.

Ben looked at me; his gaze on me was hot with desire and holding a promise of more to come. I wanted to say yes to whatever he was thinking in that head of his.

My body was betraying me. My limbs felt warm and weak and my skin tingly.

Ben looked away first, breaking the connection. “Let’s try some pitching.”

Ben worked with Cammie, then Hunter, on their pitching. I loved that he included both of them.

Cammie's pitches tended to be lobs that rarely made it over the base. Hunter went second. As we watched, his pitches became harder and more accurate.

After the last one, Ben whistled. "You've got an arm on you. It's pretty impressive."

Ben shot me a look like I'd been hiding something from him.

I shrugged. I'd never seen him pitch like that before, but it was only his second season playing ball.

"I can throw harder, but when I do, it goes a little wild."

"I can work with that. We can fix accuracy, not speed."

I took that to mean that Hunter had potential. Hunter stood straighter, his expression serious, as he threw again.

Afterward, the kids gathered their things, and Ben moved over to me. "He's a good pitcher."

"He looked great out there."

"Most of his fastballs are strikes, and he even threw a few perfect curve balls."

"What are you saying?"

"He's got real potential. You should work with him every night. Warm up and have him throw some pitches."

"I'm not with him every night."

"You want to come over and play with us? Cammie loves it, and it's more fun with more people." Ben's expression was earnest.

“Please?” Cammie asked, her hands clasped in front of her chest.

“How can I say no?” I asked.

“Yes!” Hunter added.

A slow smile spread over Ben’s face, and for the first time, I wondered if I’d just walked into a trap. “It’ll be fun.”

I watched as Ben walked around the infield, picking up the balls strewn around the dirt. Hunter followed, picked up one, then threw it into the air over and over again.

Cammie sat on the bench, swinging her legs while drinking water.

I’d had fun with them. Even when I didn’t know what I was doing, even though my relationship with Ben had always been adversarial. The one thing that held me back from acting on my attraction in high school was the idea that we’d never get along. But we’d proven it was possible.

He’d pushed me to do better, but he hadn’t put me down. He’d only been encouraging. Ben Monroe was showing me a different side to him, and I wasn’t sure I was ready for it.

“You ready to go?” Ben asked.

I’d just been standing there, watching him without seeing him. “Sorry, yeah.”

“What were you thinking about?” he asked, moving closer.

“What a good day it was.” For a couple of hours, I wasn’t worried about the coffee shop. I didn’t feel pressured to call and check in on my employees. I wasn’t worried that Ben was trying to distract me from my goals. I was present, and it had been great.

“For me, too. I cherish these moments with Cammie.” His expression softened.

“And me with Hunter.”

He raised his brow, and I knew he was thinking about my declaration about not wanting kids for myself. But he didn’t know my history. That I couldn’t trust my judgment when it came to men. I’d already taken that leap. I trusted Levi when he said he loved me and wanted a family. When I said it was too soon, he convinced me there was no need to wait when you knew you were right for each other. But I’d been so wrong.

I sighed, knowing he was waiting on me to say something. “My past is complicated.”

He ran a finger along my shoulder. “And I look forward to hearing about it when you’re ready.”

“Daddy, can we get a snowball?” Cammie asked.

“I don’t see why not.”

Cammie’s eyes widened almost comically. “But it’s before dinner.”

“Live a little, kid.” He patted her cap, and she smiled wide, revealing a missing tooth, making it even more adorable.

Hunter slung his pack over his shoulders. “Can we go, too?”

I shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

We walked toward the parking lot together. The kids ran ahead, throwing a ball back and forth, occasionally diving for one and missing, squealing and laughing.

“They get along great,” I said.

Ben lowered his voice. “I was worried Cammie wouldn’t make new friends here. Thank you for sticking around.”

“You’re welcome. It’s good for Hunter, too. He tends to only play with boys.” My heart, which had been holding out hope that he was waiting for me to be ready to take a chance on him, stuttered, then started beating again more slowly. I had to remind myself it was about his daughter fitting in at a new school. It wasn’t about me or that kiss.

“Ah. That starts already?”

“Abby said he’s only ever wanted to play with boys. So, hopefully, Cammie shows him girls aren’t much different.”

“Not at this age.”

“Not at any age, really.”

“Some girls go through that boy-crazy makeup stage, but you didn’t.”

I looked at him in surprise. I hadn’t realized he’d noticed what stages I’d been in. “I cared more about school and my activities to worry about how I looked.”

“You didn’t need to.” His comeback was quick.

I stopped walking to look at him. “What are you saying?”

His lips twitched. “I’m saying I thought you were pretty in high school.”

“You did not.” Warmth cascaded over me. Was my childhood crush really admitting to having a thing for me?

We stopped by the cars, and the kids climbed into Ben’s sports car. I waited for Ben to admonish them or tell them to get their cleats off the leather, but he didn’t. He seemed perfectly content to stand with me.

“If I’d thought you would have said yes back then, I would’ve asked you out.”

“No.” I felt like my eyes were opened comically wide, like Cammie’s were a few minutes ago.

“Yes,” he insisted stubbornly.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I don’t believe you.”

“You’re one of those people who needs to see it before you believe it.” It wasn’t a question. It was an observation.

“I guess so.” But it was worse than that. I was never sure what I was seeing was real.

Ben smiled. “Challenge accepted.”

My nose scrunched. “I don’t remember issuing a challenge.”

He smirked. “Oh, you so did.”

“Are you two arguing?” Cammie asked, opening the door so she could lean out.

“No,” I said.

Ben clapped his hands together. “Okay, you two. Let’s get to the snowball shack before it closes.”

Hunter scrambled out. “Your car is so cool.”

“I’d give you a ride, but I don’t have a second car seat.”

My heart was still beating rapidly at his admission. “I can move the booster over. It’s no big deal.”

Ben smiled. “In that case, what do ya say, Hunter? Want to ride in my car?”

“Yeah,” Hunter said like the answer should have been obvious.

I opened the back seat of my car to retrieve the booster seat, but Ben moved past me to grab it. "I'll get it."

"Thanks," I said as he moved it to his car and made sure Hunter was securely fastened. With the door to the back seat closed, Ben turned to me. "Meet you there."

"Yeah." My throat was dry, and my heart was working overtime.

Ben smiled again, that irresistible smile. The one that said he went after what he wanted, and he always won.

A tingle ran through my body at the prospect. I was in so much trouble.

Chapter Fourteen

BEN

I drove to the snowball stand with Cammie and Hunter talking in the back seat and tried not to think about how good Brooke looked on the baseball field. She was clearly out of her element, which made her even hotter.

I tried to focus on the kids' conversation.

"You have a toad?" Cammie asked. I looked in the rearview mirror to see her eyes wide in delight.

"I have three," Hunter said proudly.

"Did you name them?" Cammie leaned closer to him.

"Well, there's Trevor one, Trevor two, and the new one, Trevor three." Hunter ticked them off on his fingers.

Cammie's nose scrunched, and I knew she'd have something to say about that. "You named all of them Trevor?"

"Well, yeah. It's the best name," Hunter said stubbornly.

Cammie thought about that for a few seconds. "Can I come see them?"

"We'll have to ask Hunter's mom, sweetie," I interjected.

Cammie turned her attention to me. "Can I ask her when we get to the snowball stand?"

“Brooke’s my aunt. Not my mom.”

“Oh.” Cammie’s forehead wrinkled.

Hopefully, she’d see that not all families were conventional. And that not everyone had both a mother and a father. Maybe that would be another way they would bond.

“My mom’s a photographer, so she works a lot of events at night and on the weekends,” Hunter said matter-of-factly.

Cammie’s face fell, and I knew she was thinking about how her mom was dead and she never got to see her.

Thankfully, we soon arrived at the snowball stand. I parked, and Brooke pulled up next to me. I got out of the car and opened the back door for the kids to pile out.

Cammie seemed to have forgotten all about the conversation as they rushed to the stand to read the menu.

“Everything okay?” Brooke asked.

“Yeah, Hunter mentioned that you’re not his mother and that she works a lot. I was worried there for a second that Cammie would get upset.”

“Oh, no. I’m sorry.” Brooke’s expression was sympathetic.

“The therapist in Philadelphia said she needed to feel the emotions, not bottle them up. I just hate seeing her upset.”

Brooke licked her lips, drawing my attention to the pink lipstick she always wore. “I get that.”

Brooke’s sympathy was a warm cloak that I used to ward off the bad feelings and memories. I wanted to wrap myself up in her and forget about everything.

“Looks like they’re ordering without us,” Brooke said as she tugged me toward the snowball stand window where the

kids stood talking to the attendant.

“Did you want one?” I asked Brooke.

“Can I get a cherry, please?” Brooke asked the woman.

When everyone had their snowballs, I pulled out a few bills and paid.

“You didn’t need to do that,” Brooke said as we moved to the side.

I shrugged. “It’s a snowball.”

Although I acted like it was no big deal, it was. Everything about that day felt like it could be real. That Brooke and I could spend our days together with Cammie, and sometimes Hunter, and it would feel like a family. It was a ridiculous line of thought because all we’d done was kiss, and Brooke had shut it down. She hadn’t left an inch for me to maneuver.

We sat at a nearby picnic table with the kids across from us.

Brooke ate a bite, and a bit of ice remained on her upper lip. I reached over without thinking and brushed it away with my thumb. If the kids hadn’t been present, I probably would have licked it off. The idea had my entire body heating.

Brooke’s gaze met mine, and I wondered if she’d guessed what I’d been thinking.

“Is it good?” My voice was guttural.

“So good,” Brooke said huskily, and I wondered if she was trying to turn me on.

Her tongue darted out to clean her lips, and I struggled to control my baser instincts. If we’d been alone, I would have kissed her. I’d revel in the contrast between the ice and her

warm mouth. My brain quickly shot to thoughts of my cock wrapped in her hot pussy.

“Did you want to try it?” Brooke held her snowball out to me.

“Let me grab a spoon.” I hopped up to grab a red spoon from the attendant and dipped it into the ice.

The ice melted in my mouth, the cherry flavor hitting the spot. “That tastes good after being so hot on the field.”

Hot and dusty. I needed a shower. I just wished I could see Brooke, that we were in a place where we could shower together. My mind raced, running away with possibilities that weren't even feasible. I needed to check myself.

Whatever was between us was friendship, at best. She wanted nothing to do with me or a relationship. If I understood the history behind that decision, I wondered if I might have a chance. I wanted to try because I hadn't been this intrigued by a woman in forever.

She was caring and kind, yet driven and successful. She was the complete package, plus she helped her sister and was close to her nephew.

We took turns tasting each other's snowballs. Then the kids were done and threw their cups in the trash.

“My hands are sticky.” Cammie held them out to me.

“I have wipes,” Brooke said, digging around in her purse. She pulled out a small package. “Here you go.”

“Thanks for being prepared.” I should have carried something like that in my car. I usually just offered sanitizer, hoping it would help.

Brooke grimaced. “Yeah, I learned the hard way.”

“I dropped an ice cream cone in the back seat,” Hunter said with a smile.

“Of my car. Now I carry wipes, paper towels, and plastic bags.”

That she was prepared shouldn't have surprised me. She'd always been responsible and studious. But every detail gave me more knowledge about her personality and what made her tick.

The kids pulled wipes from the package, cleaning their hands.

“You're cautious.”

She gave me a warning look.

I heeded it because it wasn't the time or place to delve any deeper, but I needed to spend more time with her to get to know the Brooke she'd become, not the girl from high school. Something must have happened to make her so jaded about relationships. But what?

“We'd better get going,” Brooke said as she stood.

“Oh, man. Can Cammie come over to play video games sometime?” Hunter asked.

“I don't see why not.” I wondered if it would be a drop-off playdate or if I'd be able to stay and talk to Brooke. Although, I'd probably be dropping Hunter off with Abby. “Although I should probably meet Hunter's mom first.”

“That can be arranged,” Brooke said with a smile.

Was Brooke's reticence a result of her sister's experience with her ex, or was it something more personal to her? Not knowing was driving me crazy. I liked to know what I was dealing with so I could plan and prepare.

We said our goodbyes at the cars, and I knew I needed to create more time for us to spend together, whether it was a playdate or a baseball practice like we'd talked about. I said, "See you soon," before getting into my car with Cammie.

I wanted Brooke to know I wasn't giving up.



After dinner and a board game, I told Cammie it was time for her to get ready for bed. I loved being present for her bedtime routine as much as I enjoyed breakfast. For once, she showered, brushed her teeth, and climbed into bed without a fuss.

I grabbed the library book I picked up on the way home. I'd researched the history of women in baseball and found a few books at the local library.

Sitting next to her on the narrow bed, I asked, "You want to hear about the woman who struck out Babe Ruth?"

Her eyes widened. "That player from *The Sandlot*?"

"*The Sandlot* is a fictional movie, so the characters aren't real, but Babe Ruth was a real baseball player."

She took the book to get a closer look.

"Jackie Mitchell struck out some major players back in the day," I said while she flipped through the pictures.

"Can you read it to me?" Her were eyes still round as she handed it back to me.

I read the story of the seventeen-year-old girl who pitched during The Great Depression. She struck out Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. She walked the third batter and was replaced by a

different pitcher, and she was named organized baseball's first female pitcher and was known for her sinking curveball known as "the drop."

"I love that," Cammie said when I read about Jackie's famous sinker.

When I got to the end, the book mentioned how the baseball commissioner at the time voided Jackie's contract, saying baseball was too strenuous for women.

"Did she play after that?" Cammie asked, eager for more information.

"Let's look it up." I pulled out my phone to research her name. I read aloud what I found, including her training by a neighbor, who was a minor league pitcher, and her career in the minors. One article dove into the women who played in the 1940s who were later featured in a movie.

"Can we see it?" Cammie asked as she read over my shoulder.

"Sure." I just needed to make sure it was rated for young kids.

I wanted to encourage her, to show her anyone could play baseball. It was a little discouraging that Jackie was prevented from playing in the majors, but Cammie still seemed moved by her story.

I skimmed ahead to where the article said the current commissioner was encouraging girls to play baseball.

"That's so cool," Cammie exclaimed.

"It is." I closed the book and put it on the nightstand.

"Can I look at the pictures after I go to bed?"

“Sure.” I leaned over her to make sure her book light was charged, then kissed her forehead.

“Do you think I could play in the majors one day?” Cammie asked after I’d turned off her lamp.

“You can do anything you put your mind to. Women play professional basketball.” Over the years, I’d overheard people say no one wanted to watch women play professional sports, but it hadn’t registered for me until I had a daughter. I didn’t want her exposed to that attitude or tell her that some people didn’t want women to play, even if it was reality. Despite my best efforts and wishes, I couldn’t shelter her from everything.

“I remember seeing that.”

At a restaurant we went to recently, I noticed a women’s basketball game on TV and made sure to point it out to Cammie. I wanted to show her what she could accomplish. While I didn’t want to give her unrealistic expectations, more doors were opening up every day for women in sports. “Maybe we should donate money to an organization that promotes girls in sports. What do you think?”

I liked supporting worthy causes, and that would be a good one.

“I’d love that.” Cammie snuggled deeper into her blankets.

I kissed her forehead one more time. “Sweet dreams.”

“Night, Dad.”

Dad, not Daddy. That was happening more and more lately. Cammie was growing up, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. All I could do was be there to guide her in the right direction and encourage her to be strong and independent. I hoped I was up for the task.

Chapter Fifteen

BROOKE

Ben: Want to come over for baseball practice?

When I didn't answer right away, he sent a second message.

Ben: Cammie's been asking to see Hunter all week.

He wasn't giving up. Did Ben want to see me, or was it purely a kid's playdate? One was fraught with danger, the other deceptively safe. Instead of responding, I shared Abby's contact information with him. She'd said it was okay.

As I waited for a response, I got out of bed and wrapped my hair in a bun on top of my head. I was looking forward to another Saturday with nothing to do but work. Normally, I'd feel motivated and excited, but after spending time with Ben and Cammie, I felt lonely. Like something was missing from my life.

My phone buzzed on the bathroom counter. Ben's name popped up on the screen.

Ben: I was hoping you'd come.

Brooke: I'm watching Hunter tonight. Abby has another wedding.

Ben: Perfect. Baseball or video games?

Why couldn't it be both?

My phone buzzed with a video call. I hadn't even washed my face or put on a bra, but my fingers hit accept without hesitation.

"It's a tough call, isn't it?"

"What is?" I asked, making sure my image in the corner was okay.

"Deciding between video games or baseball." Ben's voice was full of amusement. "Why? What were you thinking about?"

"I was thinking about brushing my teeth." Having just gotten out of bed, I wasn't firing on all cylinders yet.

"Is that Hunter?" Cammie's voice came over the speaker.

Her blonde head popped into the picture. "Miss Brooke, are you with Hunter?"

I moved to my bedroom, showing her my bedroom, the rumpled blankets, and the dresses. "Nope. Not unless he's hiding from me."

Cammie giggled and said, "Boo. I want to see Hunter."

"Cammie, don't be rude," Ben chided.

Cammie's lower lip came out in an adorable pout.

"I want to see you, too, sweet girl. Want to get together later today?" It was easier to say yes to her than to her father. Not that it was easy to say no to him, but I knew it was the right thing to do. Spending more time with Ben wouldn't lead to anything but heartbreak.

Cammie's face lit up. "You'll bring Hunter?"

“Of course.” I smiled at Ben, who was shaking his head behind her.

“Now, go finish your breakfast,” Ben said, putting her on her feet.

Cammie ran out of the range of the camera.

Ben’s eyes met mine. His were filled with affection. “She’s incorrigible.”

I smiled so wide my cheeks hurt. “She’s cute.”

“So, I’ll see you later?” His expression was so earnest, so sweet, that my heart flip-flopped under my rib cage.

“Looks like it.” Even though I knew it was all sorts of wrong to get involved with him, it felt good to flirt.

Ben tilted his head slightly, the way I loved when we were in class together. “Did we decide what we’re doing?”

My cheeks heated at the reminder that I’d admired him from afar since we were kids. “I don’t think so.”

“Why don’t you come over? We can play in the backyard or play video games. Whatever the kids want.”

“Sounds good.” It sounded perfect. I wondered if he’d bought a place when he moved back or if he was renting.

We said goodbye and hung up. After allowing myself a moment to savor that sweet interaction with Ben and Cammie, I hurried to get ready for work.

Unfortunately, it was a slower than usual Saturday. We’d started with our first trivia night that week, and I hoped it made a difference. I wasn’t sure if the dip in business would continue once the newness of Bean Rush wore off or if it

would be permanent. The thought put a pit in the bottom of my stomach.

On my way to Abby's, I wondered what I was doing, mixing business with pleasure. It couldn't be a good idea to spend more time with Ben. Not when he was the reason my business was slow.

I walked into Abby's townhouse without knocking and ruffled Hunter's hair when I passed him reading on the couch. He'd recently gotten into graphic novels, and Abby couldn't get new ones from the library fast enough.

I found Abby in the bathroom, swiping a mascara wand over her eyelashes.

"Another wedding?"

"Yeah, they're good money." She grimaced. "I just hate working when Hunter's home. Although this one might be done early, and then I can join you."

I stayed silent because I wasn't sure if I wanted Abby to be home early. I wanted to spend time with Ben, and if Hunter wasn't with me, what would be my excuse?

"What are your plans for tonight?" Abby asked, setting her mascara wand into the bottle.

"Hunter wants to play with Cammie again." I hoped Abby didn't see right through that flimsy excuse. Sure, the kids wanted to play together, but so did the adults.

Abby fluffed her hair, then smoothed her dress as she moved this way and that in the mirror. "That little girl is all I hear about. She's the one on his baseball team?"

"That's right."

"What's her last name?"

I swallowed hard. “Monroe.”

“Monroe. Where do I know that name?” Her eyes widened as she looked at me. “She’s not Ben Monroe’s daughter, is she?”

“She is.”

She crossed her arms across her chest. “You’ve been spending time with Ben and haven’t told me.”

“Nothing’s going on between us.” Except for that one kiss. I licked my suddenly dry lips, hoping she wouldn’t see right through me.

She shot me an incredulous look. “Just that you’re spending Saturday night with him.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “I’d hardly describe it like that. Cammie and Hunter have a playdate.”

She huffed a laugh. “Well, that’s convenient. You’re using the kids to see each other.”

I shook my head. “That’s not what’s happening.”

Abby sighed and was quiet for a few seconds, examining me. “You know, there’s nothing wrong with liking a guy.”

Shame washed over me. “That’s not what’s going on.”

“Isn’t it? You liked Ben even in high school, but neither of you acted on it.”

“We didn’t, and even if we did, we couldn’t.”

Abby rolled her eyes, turning her attention to the mirror again. “You were too busy one-upping each other. The longest form of foreplay ever.”

Was it foreplay? Had we competed against each other as a weird form of flirting? “I don’t think so.”

She swiped her cheeks with blush. “You like him?”

“I don’t have to like every attractive guy I meet.”

Abby rolled her eyes again. “Well, of course not. You’ve written off all men because of Levi.”

“That’s not true.” But my words were weak. I had. It was the easiest form of protection. If I wasn’t with a guy, he couldn’t lie to me, and I wouldn’t look like a fool.

“Ben was always a good guy. Even when you two were sparring with each other. Verbally sparring,” she corrected.

“That’s true.” He was an even better man now. Taking care of his daughter full time, moving to town to make a better life for her. Quitting his stable corporate job for a chance at a better life.

“And he’s a dad now. Where’s the mom?”

“She was killed during a robbery.”

Abby sucked in a breath. “That’s awful.”

“That’s why he wanted to move here. To get her out of the city.”

“That’s understandable. I can’t even imagine. That poor girl.”

I know what Abby was thinking. At least Hunter still had a dad in his life, even if it wasn’t full time. “Ben wasn’t seeing her when she died. From what it sounds like, they weren’t together when she found out she was pregnant.”

Thinking back, I thought there might be more to that story. His expression had been slightly pained when he’d recited it.

“They co-parented?”

“Sounds like it. He had Cammie most weekends. She had her during the week.”

“Now he’s single parenting full time. That must be an adjustment.” Abby pulled out a tube of lip stick.

“He seems to be handling it well.” Cammie seemed like she was handling her mother’s death and the move as well as she could. Although, I didn’t see her at home. Maybe she was just good at covering it.

Abby moved over to me. “Promise me you’ll keep an open mind. That you’ll let go of your fear and let Ben in a little?”

My jaw ached from grinding my teeth. “I don’t know if I can promise that.”

Abby’s expression softened. “One of us should be happy.”

“You are happy. You have Hunter.” Panic slid down my spine. If Abby wanted more, then where did that leave me? I’d always held on to the fact that we were both in the same position, reluctant to trust again.

Abby shot me an exasperated look. “It’s not the same, and you know it. I want to take a chance on someone again.”

“You would?” Our conversation was throwing me for a loop.

“Hunter could use a father figure, and as I said, I’m lonely. I’ve been doing this on my own since the beginning.” Longing filled her tone.

Abby *was* lonely. How had I not seen it?

Abby turned to face me, resting a hip against the counter. “I didn’t tell you so you’d feel guilty. I just want you to take an opportunity if one arises.”

“And you think Ben is that opportunity?” I asked carefully.

“I always thought you guys had something for each other in high school. The way you constantly taunted each other in your businesses. It’s like pulling a girl’s pigtails in kindergarten, except Ben pushed all your buttons.”

“He’s good at that.” Except he didn’t do that so much anymore. The last time he came to talk to me about work, he’d kissed me. Had we reached our boiling point, and the only way to release the tension was physical? It was an intriguing idea. One that had my body humming with possibilities.

“Do you get the impression he’d be a good boyfriend, maybe even make a good husband one day?”

I shook my head vehemently. “I’ll never get married again.”

“You can’t let one guy ruin your future.” Abby watched me carefully.

“That’s not what I’m doing.” My heart pounded louder in my chest.

“Isn’t it?”

My skin felt itchy all over. “I’m being careful.”

“By never having a boyfriend or getting married again? Plenty of people go on to marry someone else.” She shook her head in exasperation.

“I can’t.” I couldn’t explain to her how humiliated I was when I discovered Levi’s deceit. I’d thought I was so smart, and I wasn’t. Ben would think I was an idiot for believing him, too.

“What about a one-night stand? Something to get you out there again. Use Ben to get you over this hump.”

A sharp pain shot through my chest at the thought of using Ben. The idea of kissing him again had all my nerves firing full cylinders.

Abby smirked. “I’m sure he won’t have a problem helping you.”

“I’m sure he’d be all too happy to step in.” I relaxed slightly. The thought of exploring more than one kiss with Ben was enticing. But could I keep emotions out of it?

I was a strong woman. I could sleep with a guy with no expectation of more. The only thing was, he didn’t seem like the anti-commitment type. What if he wanted more?

“You’re overthinking this. If you’re attracted to him, and you find yourself in a situation where tongues and teeth are involved, go with it.”

I burst out laughing. “Teeth?”

She smiled. “Sometimes it can be nice.”

I pretended to cover my ears so I couldn’t hear her talking about her sex life. “I don’t want to know.”

We were back in our familiar sibling banter. We griped about her ex’s exit from her life and his continued absence, but we avoided the sadder parts of life when we talked. We kept things light, easily falling back into our relationship from when we were kids. She was the one I went to for advice since she was slightly older. She was the only one—besides Hailey—who knew everything there was to know about my marriage to Levi.

When Abby finished with her makeup, she looked at me, her expression turning serious. “Fuck Levi.”

“Fuck Levi.” Abby had been my support system when he left. She’d commiserated with me over the years, and I needed her to be on the same page.

“I might get out early tonight. If I do, I’m picking up Hunter from Ben’s. You’ll have time to be alone with him.

“I’m not sure that’s what I want.”

She gave me a pointed look. “I think you do.”

Then she walked out of the bathroom.

Was I ready to move on? It wasn’t like I hadn’t had brief flings with guys, but I never found them satisfying. I wasn’t cut out for one-night stands. When I did something, I went all-in. That was probably why I’d gotten burned so badly in the past.

Chapter Sixteen

BEN

*M*y parents were out of town for their anniversary, so I had the house to myself. As convenient as it was to stay with my parents so they could help with Cammie, I needed my own space.

Of course, it had nothing to do with Brooke Langley stopping by with Hunter. I wanted to impress her. Even if it wasn't a date.

I'd cooked spaghetti and meatballs, hoping Hunter liked it as much as Cammie did. The house smelled like marinara sauce by the time Hunter rang the doorbell repeatedly.

He was standing on the doorstep with a mischievous grin and his finger still poised over the button as I opened the door.

"Not one more time," Brooke warned.

I smiled easily. "It's okay. We're awake now."

Brooke rolled her eyes. "The whole neighborhood knows we're here."

She slid past me, and Hunter reluctantly followed. I didn't think he was ready to be done with the doorbell.

Brooke wore a top that wrapped around her cleavage and dark wash jeans that clung to every curve. I wondered if I

untied the bow on her side, if it would fall away, revealing everything.

My fingers itched to discover the truth, even as Cammie skidded to a halt in her socks in front of Hunter.

“You want to see my room?” Cammie asked.

I winced slightly at her question, my mind flying forward to her being sixteen and asking the same thing.

“Definitely.” Hunter ran up the stairs behind her, the doorbell hopefully forgotten.

Brooke leaned in close, and I almost thought she would kiss my cheek. Instead, she touched my bicep and murmured into my ear, “Relax. They’re only seven.”

“Hmmp. Who knows what boys are thinking of at that age?”

“Not where your mind just went, trust me. He’s fascinated by video games and baseball, and I’m pretty sure he said how he doesn’t like girls just like a week ago.”

“Whew. That’s good to hear. When does that change?” I tilted my head to the side.

“I have no idea.” Brooke smiled, and I couldn’t help but smile back.

She moved from the foyer into the large kitchen. “I wondered if you’d gotten your own place or were renting.”

“It was easier to stay here until we got our bearings.”

“Your parents help out a lot?” Brooke asked as she moved around the island, her fingers trailing over the cool surface of the quartz.

“Yeah. I couldn’t do this without them.” I didn’t want to leave Cammie with a nanny or a sitter. At least I could comfort myself when I was working by saying she was with her grandparents.

Brooke lifted the lid of the large pot on the stove, breathing in the aroma before asking, “Where are they?”

“They went to a B & B for their anniversary.” I gripped my neck, wondering if they’d do that if we weren’t staying there. Either way, I was grateful to have time alone with Brooke.

“Oh, that’s nice.” Brooke looked at me uncertainly.

Maybe she didn’t trust herself there without my parents as a buffer. I almost didn’t trust myself with the kids upstairs. I wondered how long they’d be occupied and if I’d have time for a repeat of that kiss in Java Coffee.

The island countertop was sturdy and large enough for what I wanted to do to Brooke. Spread her legs and lay her out like the feast she represented. But I definitely couldn’t explore that scenario with two seven-year-olds upstairs.

“Spaghetti and meatballs?” Brooke asked as she crossed the short distance to stand in front of me.

I shook my head to clear the image of a naked Brooke. “I figured I couldn’t go wrong.”

Brooke nodded. “Hunter loves both.”

“Good.” I let go of some of the tension I’d been holding in my neck.

A silence fell between us as I pulled out a bottle of wine and left it uncorked on the island.

Brooke looked from the bottle to me. “This feels like a date.”

I didn't correct her. "The kids are here."

The room was warm from the stove, and Brooke's cheeks were flushed, her eyes bright. "Good thing."

Was she saying that she wanted something to happen?

Pounding sounded on the steps as someone ran down the steps. Hunter rounded the corner, causing Brooke to step back. "Is there anything to eat? I'm starving."

"It's ready. I just need to know if you want spaghetti and meatballs or a meatball sub with all the fixings."

"Both," he said easily.

I already knew what Cammie ate, the spaghetti, so I got two plates ready and set them up at the counter. I cut the garlic bread and added it to a serving platter in the middle of the island.

I was busy for a few minutes, getting the kids drinks and extra meatballs. As the kids dug in, I said to Brooke, "I figured we'd let them eat first."

And then maybe we could have a quiet dinner together.

Brooke nodded, her eyes a little uneasy.

Was it possible she both wanted and feared being alone with me? If so, why?

When they finished, Cammie asked, "Can we play outside?"

"Sure," I said, eager to get Brooke alone.

They both scrambled off the chairs and raced outside.

Brooke took their plates, and I cleaned the countertop from the shredded cheese and pieces of meatballs they'd left behind.

“Did you want spaghetti?” I asked.

“That sounds great.” She took Hunter’s place at the island.

I plated our food and uncorked the wine. Pouring hers, I said, “We can have a few sips, at least.”

“Pretend we’re adults,” Brooke joked.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d relaxed, much less shared a meal with a woman. Ever since Maria died, all I could think about was being there for Cammie. Making all the necessary decisions to ensure she was okay.

I was content to eat a meal with Brooke. We ate in silence for a few minutes before I got the courage to ask what I wanted to know. “Are you dating anyone?”

Brooke swirled her spaghetti around her fork like she was seven, her lips twitching. “If I were, I think he’d have a problem with me doing this.”

Sharing a meal was intimate, even with kids playing nearby. It was exactly what I’d hoped for.

“What about you?” she asked before snapping her mouth shut like she hadn’t wanted to ask but couldn’t help it.

“I’ve been pretty focused on Cammie. I have a new business, and I need to find us a place to live.” It was a tall order, and I had no business even asking Brooke who she was dating when I didn’t have time to be the man for her.

Brooke’s expression fell slightly. “That’s understandable. You’ve had a rough year.”

“You could say that, but at the same time, it’s nice to be back in my hometown. Everything’s familiar yet different.”

I was talking about her, but I wasn't sure if she'd get the hint. She was the same girl I used to know with hidden depths—depths I was desperate to explore.

“This is nice,” she said, taking a sip of her wine, and I wanted to taste it from her lips rather than my glass.

I smiled conspiratorially. “We should enjoy this. We only have a few more seconds before Cammie asks us to play.”

Brooke laughed. Whatever stress she was holding on to when she arrived melted away in front of me. Her shoulders relaxed, and her eyes crinkled with mirth.

She crossed one leg over the other, and I was entranced with her long legs, the ease with which she slid a strand of hair out of her face.

I wanted to touch her. I wanted to taste her.

“You'd better eat, then,” Brooke chided softly, gesturing her fork toward my plate.

“It's hard to eat when I'm in such good company with a beautiful woman.”

Her cheeks flushed even more. “You don't mean that.”

“I have no business wanting you, not when our shops are in direct competition, not with our history, but I do.”

Her eyes widened just as the sliding glass door opened.

“What's taking you so long?” Cammie asked.

I cleared my throat. “Give us a few minutes. We're still eating.”

Cammie rolled her eyes. “You take forever.”

“You know it,” I said, but she was already gone.

I needed to clean up and put the leftovers away, but I didn't mention that. Cammie was always impatient to have my undivided attention when I was home.

"You heard her. We'd better hurry," Brooke said softly, staring at her plate.

The moment was gone, but I hoped we'd get another. Instead, we ate, and I didn't attempt conversation. I was content just being with her, listening to the kids playing and laughing outside.

"Thanks for inviting us over," Brooke said as I stood to grab the empty plates.

"I think Hunter did that on his own."

Brooke smiled at that, and my gaze was drawn to her lips in their signature pink. Had she gone through the effort of dressing up and putting on makeup? If so, it would show that I wasn't in it alone.

"Are you going to be able to play baseball in that?" I asked Brooke as I rinsed the dishes in the sink.

She pinched the fabric of her shirt, pulling it away from her stomach. "I wasn't thinking about that."

I wanted to know what she'd been thinking. Had she prepared for the evening like it was a date? Did she want a second chance at that kiss?

The slider opened, and Hunter popped his head in. "We need a catcher."

"I'll be right there," Brooke said to him, and then to me, "Will you be okay?"

"Go ahead. I've got this."

I cleaned the dishes, put away the leftovers, and wiped the counter. Our wine glasses were mostly full. So much for a date night with kids. We were constantly interrupted, and now we'd need to play baseball with them.

I wasn't sure I'd get another moment alone with Brooke. Sighing, I headed outside to find Brooke crouched behind home plate, her fingers dangling between her legs as she went through the hand signals with a serious Hunter.

She was seriously hot.

Cammie swung and hit the next pitch, dropping the bat and running to first. Brooke straightened. "This is quite the field you have."

I'd mowed the yard into a diamond and placed bases on the necessary spots. "Anything for Cammie."

"It's nice," Brooke said.

She'd used that word a lot. It was trite, but I could see something working behind her eyes as if she were struggling to place the guy she used to know with the man I'd become. I hoped she liked what she saw.

I headed to the outfield to help with fielding, and we played a few innings before Brooke pulled out her phone. "Your mom's coming to pick you up. She must have finished early."

Hunter's face fell. "Seriously?"

Tucking her phone into her back pocket, Brooke said, "Your mom wants to spend time with you."

"I'm having fun." Hunter scuffed the tip of his shoe in the dirt with a sour expression on his face.

"Let's play until she gets here," I said.

We continued to play until Brooke said, “My sister’s here. I’ll let her in.”

Hunter and Cammie continued to play, only stopping to grumble that they’d lost a catcher when Brooke went inside.

A few minutes later, Abby and Brooke came out. Both were blonde, but Brooke was slightly taller. “Come on, buddy. It’s time to go,” Abby called.

I moved closer and held my hand out to her. “Ben Monroe. It’s good to see you again.”

“You have quite the setup here,” she said, shaking my hand.

Her eyes sparkled, and I wondered if Brooke had said something to her about our kiss.

“Cammie loves baseball,” I said with a shrug.

Abby smiled. “Hunter does, too.”

“Mom, do we have to go?” Hunter asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Can I come with you?” Cammie asked Hunter.

“Cammie, you can’t just invite yourself to someone’s house,” I chided.

Abby frowned. “I don’t see why not. Unless you have an issue with it.”

Cammie turned the full force of her pleading eyes on me. “Can I sleep over? Pretty please.”

“You’re too young for that, don’t you think?” I wanted her to be too young for that.

Abby shrugged. “We can give it a try. Hunter’s been wanting to sleep outside in a tent. If she wants to come home, I’ll call you. I’m not far from here. All I’ve heard for weeks is Cammie this and Cammie that.”

“Yeah, okay.” I wasn’t ready for Cammie to do a sleepover, but she seemed willing to try. Plus, I wanted time alone with Brooke. Suddenly, the evening was looking better and better. Although Brooke looked a little panicked.

“If you’re sure.” Was her sister setting us up? If so, I wouldn’t turn the offer down.

Abby smiled. “It can’t hurt. Besides, I think the kids will love it.”

I’d wanted Cammie to make friends and fit in. It was the perfect opportunity.

Brooke gave her sister a look. They seemed to be communicating something without any words. I didn’t have a sibling to compare it to.

It only took a few minutes to gather what Cammie needed. She seemed anxious to leave, like I’d change my mind at any second. I helped her buckle herself into the spare booster seat in Abby’s car and said goodbye. “Tell Ms. Abby to call me if you want to come home.”

Cammie rolled her eyes. “That’s not going to happen.”

I backed away from the car. “Yeah, okay.”

She was only seven. I wasn’t ready for overnights and her not wanting to spend time with me.

“She’ll be fine,” Abby said. “It’s the least I can do. You two have been watching Hunter a lot for me.”

“I don’t mind,” I said to Abby, but my gaze was on Brooke, who stood behind the car looking like she didn’t know what to do with herself.

“I bet you don’t,” Abby murmured before she got into the driver’s side and pulled out of the driveway.

“I’d better get going, too,” Brooke said, turning to go inside.

I grabbed her hand, tugging her to a stop. “We could drink some of that wine I opened.”

Brooke looked unsure.

“We’re alone. We should take advantage of it.” The more I thought about it, the more I thought Abby had done this on purpose. She gave us an opportunity, and I wanted to take advantage of it.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea?” Her tone implied she didn’t.

“It’s either the worst or the best idea I’ve ever had.” I smiled at her, stepping closer to brush a strand of hair off her forehead.

Her breath hitched at either the contact or our proximity, and blood thumped harder through my veins. *There* was my chance, and I was going to take it.

“Yeah, okay,” she said, looking up at me.

“Perfect.” I tugged her into the house, not wanting to let her go for a second. A part of me thought she’d bolt if I did.

Heading for the island, I handed her the glass I’d left after dinner.

“It’s weird being here alone,” I said.

Brooke leaned against the counter. “It is.”

“I want to pick up where we left off.” I wasn’t sure if I meant our kiss in the coffee shop or our dinner conversation. I wanted to get to know her better, but I also wanted to explore the crackling tension between us.

I stepped closer, unable to resist the pull, caging her against the hard surface of the counter.

She licked her lips, and my mind went blank. I couldn’t remember my options. With my hands on the island behind her, my lips lowered to hers. I wanted to taste the wine on her lips.

“I want you. I want this,” I said, barely a breath between our lips.

She whimpered, and it was all the answer I needed. She was into me, too.

Her lips opened, welcoming me inside. Her hands went to my neck, pulling me tighter against her. She arched into me, and I groaned.

“Tell me you want this, too.” I pulled back, wanting—no, needing—to see her face when she answered.

“Ben. Please.”

I lifted her onto the counter, helpless to resist her. We should talk about whatever held her back last time, but my body rushed ahead of my brain. It had seen a clear opening, and it was going for it, not stopping to make sure her head was on board, too.

She leaned back slightly, her hair around her face and her cheeks flushed with desire.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful.” And all mine for the night.

Whatever had been holding her back was unleashed. She moved to press her tits against my chest, her hands suddenly everywhere, ghosting over my pecs and abs, pulling my shirt out of my waistband. She was wild and uninhibited. I hoped I brought that out in her. I wanted to be the one who pushed her buttons. Always.

I shivered at the implication that I was right. Brooke was mine.

I helped her by pulling my shirt over my head, wanting her fingers on my bare skin.

She leaned closer, kissing me. With her hands on my ribs, and her mouth pressing soft kisses over my chest, my muscles tightened and contracted. I wanted more.

“Fuck, Brooke. You’re killing me.”

She looked up, and she no longer looked uncertain. She looked like a woman on a mission. A mission to destroy me.

I dove in for another kiss, needing her lips on mine, and I devoured her like she was the meal I’d been missing all along. Making quick work of her clothes, I barely broke my lips from hers.

She leaned back on her hands and spread her legs wider, offering herself to me. I finally had her where I wanted her, spread out on the counter.

I pulled her to the edge, separating her folds with my fingers before licking her. Her breath hitched as she watched, and my briefs got tighter.

I alternated the pressure of my fingers with my tongue before finally sliding a finger inside her slick heat. Brooke fell back on the counter and threw a hand over her eyes. I loved

her gaze on me, but I loved her being overwhelmed with passion even more.

I was the reason she'd lost control, and I loved it. My fingers faltered on the word *love*, but I quickly recovered.

I couldn't love her, not yet. I loved being with her. Every sharp barb in our past had led to that moment, and I wouldn't cloud it with feelings and emotions. It was heat and desire. Need and pleasure. I wanted to make it good for her.

Her hips moved in time with the thrust of my fingers, the sound of her moans increasing. I added a second finger and sealed my lips over her clit, sucking hard. Her back arched off the counter as her walls spasmed around my fingers.

Watching her come was the most satisfying experience of my life. I wanted to ease inside her, but I didn't want it to end so soon. I wanted to take my time with her. Especially if it was a one-time thing. I knew Brooke, and as soon as she regained her senses, she would be saying how it was a mistake.

Chapter Seventeen

BROOKE

The combination of the cool countertop against my overheated body, Ben's firm fingers, and the lighter touch of his tongue had me barreling toward an orgasm.

My pussy spasmed around his fingers as he withdrew, his hand flat on my thigh. I didn't want to open my eyes and face reality. I'd let Ben go down on me in his parents' kitchen.

What had I been thinking?

"Brooke. Look at me." His voice was low and insistent.

I couldn't resist him. My eyes fluttered open.

He held his hand out to me, and I took it. Sitting up, I felt light-headed and dizzy. He kissed me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

Then he was lifting me and moving through the house with a single-minded purpose. I should stop him. Tell him we'd made a huge mistake. That I'd clearly lost all sense of reason, but I didn't. Because his mouth on mine was everything, and I loved how he held me.

He lowered me gently to a bed and swiped a strand of hair out of my face. "Are you okay?"

“I think so.” All thought had left my brain. It was just him and me. And the one perfect moment.

Pleased with my answer, he kissed me. Easing back, he said, “I want more.”

I knew what he was asking. Was I in it with him? “Yes.”

Something seemed to snap in place in his brain because he kissed the corner of my mouth, my collar bone, one nipple, then the second. He didn’t ease up until both tips were hard and aching for more. I didn’t even think it was possible to be driven up again so soon.

But I ached for more. My hands reached for his waist, fumbling with the belt and zipper before pushing his pants down over his hips. I needed his cock nestled against me. With one hand braced next to my head, he helped me push them the rest of the way off until he was naked before me.

He was all tan skin and hard muscle, and my pussy contracted at the sight of his cock. *I want this. I want him.*

“Ben,” I practically whimpered when I saw the answering desire in his eyes.

He kissed me and dropped down until his cock slid through my folds. Something exploded in my head then. All thought and reason slipped away until there was nothing but touch and taste.

I wanted him inside me. I was just about to ask for a condom when the tip of his cock slipped inside, and we both froze. Unable to move, all I could think about was how amazing it felt. With a flick of my hips, he’d be filling me up. My toes curled at the thought.

With his hands braced on either side of my head, Ben said, “We need a condom.”

“Uh-huh.”

At his pained expression, my stomach dropped. “Do you have one?”

“I don’t. I wasn’t expecting this. I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Then it’s a good thing Abby dropped condoms in my wallet before I came over tonight.” I’d noticed when I went to grab my keys. She was always looking out for me.

“It’s like she knew this would happen,” Ben said with a sly smile. With a quick kiss on my lips, he stepped away from me and out of the room.

The blood pounded through my veins. Despite my recent orgasm, I needed more.

He came back with a string of condoms dangling from his fingers. “She was feeling positive.”

I smiled. “I’m glad she thought of it.”

He ripped one off, sheathing himself. “Me, too.”

Then he was back in position, hovering over me, his expression serious. “Are you sure?”

I nodded, then said the words, “Yes.” And when he still didn’t respond, I added, “Please.”

With a groan, he was inside me, filling me. I ran my hands over the rippling muscles in his back. My hips lifted to meet his, the muscles in his arms bulging. He quickened his pace, and I held onto his arms for the ride.

We were quickly spiraling toward that white heat I wanted to feel with him. A blinding orgasm. Oblivion. I wanted to forget everything. My past. All the reasons Ben was a terrible idea and why we couldn’t be together.

There was nothing but his cock inside me, filling me up, making me whole, even if it was only for a few short minutes. He kissed my lips, my neck, my breasts. It was like he needed that touch to reassure himself.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured over my skin.

I didn’t need the words, but the reverent expression on his face was everything. It was real for him. He wanted me.

I didn’t doubt that revelation. The certainty washed over me like dew on a warm spring morning. Ben Monroe wanted me, and I wasn’t going to question it.

“I want you to come with me.” Ben’s tone was determined.

I whimpered underneath him. I was right there, suspended over the precipice, needing something to send me over. Sensing my desperation, Ben pressed his finger to my clit, and I detonated, bucking underneath him. A white light blinded me as he thrust one more time to the hilt. His forehead pressed against mine; he groaned his release.

I’d never experienced anything like that, not even with Levi. It was explosive, mind-altering. And I knew it would only get better.

There was a chemistry between us that made everything more enhanced.

“Let me take care of this.” He kissed my lips and lifted himself off me.

The cool air quickly chilled my heated skin, leaving me feeling bereft. I was coming down fast. Alone in his bedroom, I couldn’t help but panic, wondering what I’d been thinking to fuck him in his parents’ house. Ben Monroe, the guy who pushed all my buttons. The one who held my future in his hands.

I blinked when he came back in, his face soft, his eyes filled with affection. He slid into the bed, pulling me against him. The touch of his skin against mine felt real and solid. It made me question whether I was overreacting. Did he hold my future in his hands, or was that giving him too much power?

Could we keep our businesses separate from our personal lives? It was a pipe dream for sure. There was almost zero chance that any of what happened was a good idea. No matter how good it felt.

He kissed my forehead, his lips hovering there. “You’re freaking out.”

There was no point in denying it. “Yep.”

“Can you relax and let go? Just for a few minutes? I want to enjoy this.”

“I’m sorry.” Old insecurities rose to the surface. I’d questioned everything after my divorce. What had I missed?

I moved to get out of his arms, but he tightened them around me. “Don’t go.”

I didn’t want to, but I needed to. “This isn’t a good idea.”

He loosened his arms, and I moved to stand next to the bed. “Why not?”

“I don’t do this.” I didn’t stand naked in front of guys, leaving myself vulnerable. I grabbed the first thing I saw—Ben’s shirt—and pulled it over my head. It felt marginally better to be covered, but my heart still felt exposed.

Ben propped one hand behind his head, examining me. “What? Relationships? Sex?”

I grimaced. “Any of it. I’ve tried, but it hasn’t gone well.”

“Why didn’t it?” he asked gently.

It was a valid question. One I believed I owed him, but I wasn’t ready.

Ben sighed, long and hard, like he was weary of the conversation. “Do me a favor and stop overthinking this. We had sex, and it was amazing.”

It so was.

“But it doesn’t have to be anything else,” he continued. “We can fuck and still run our businesses.”

It sounded almost too good to be true. “So, what? A friends-with-benefits kind of situation?”

“Sure, if that’s what you want.” His voice sounded calm and reasonable.

I could spend time with him and Cammie and enjoy our physical connection without fear of being vulnerable or losing myself to someone else. It sounded doable. “*Are we friends?*”

“I thought so.”

Spending the last few weeks with him and Cammie had changed my perspective on him.

He grabbed my hand, holding it in his larger one. “I only want to do this if you’re all-in.”

I tested the idea out in my brain, turning it over and examining each face before I finally said, “It sounds good.”

More fuzzy feelings, amazing sex, and more time with Ben and Cammie? I couldn’t say no, even if the alarm bells were going off in my head. I’d have to stay detached. I didn’t have a choice.

He nodded, satisfied. “Stay with me.”

I complied, sliding back into the bed and resting my cheek against his chest. I lifted one leg over his, and his arm banded around me, making me feel secure. He absently stroked my back and my hair. It was sweet.

Looking back, Levi wasn't one for affection outside of the physical act of sex. There hadn't been hand-holding or cuddling. Maybe that should have been a sign.

I tried not to drown myself in my feelings because I was never sure things were as they seemed. I bit my lip against the ache in my chest. A piece of me wanted to let go. It would be like stepping off a cliff and free-falling into the water, but a larger piece held me back. The voice of reason. The one that had obviously been dormant when I was with Levi.



I woke to an empty bed and rubbed my eyes against the light streaming through the window.

I'd slept over. I hadn't meant to. I'd agreed to cuddle after we'd had sex. That was it. I had every intention of leaving once I'd had my fill of his arms around me. But that feeling of being secure and safe had wound around my heart, and I hadn't wanted to move. I must have drifted off at some point, content and secure in his arms.

It was a slippery slope. Friends with benefits. Overnights with cuddling. I was on shaky ground. I needed to regroup, retreat to my space, and pull myself together. Refortify the walls and create space between us.

"You're up," Ben said, coming into the room. His hair was slightly damp, like he'd already showered.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” I asked, sitting up.

“You looked like you could use the sleep.”

I’d slept better than I had in ages. Most nights, I was plagued with nightmares where I was naked and someone was laughing at me. I ran and ran, but I could never escape the sound. I shivered at the memory.

Ben sat at my hip, pulling the blankets more securely around me. “Cold?”

I bit my lip. The memory of my nightmare made me feel exposed. “Not exactly.”

“I have to get Cammie soon. Do you want to go together?”

“That’s probably not a good idea. I don’t want the kids to get the wrong impression.”

“You don’t want the *kids* to get the wrong impression or your sister?”

“Both.” I wouldn’t back down on my principles. We weren’t in a relationship or anything close to it. I needed to protect myself. Especially with my business at stake.

“I can respect that. You feeling okay after last night?”

Memories of him hovering over me, the affection in his eyes, and the care he took with my body made me feel warm all over again. I was very aware I only wore his T-shirt under the blankets.

He tipped his head to the side, and I remembered he was waiting for an answer.

“I feel good.” It was the truth. I felt warm and cozy. Content and safe. It was obviously a false feeling because I

couldn't feel safe with a guy. Not when they could lie to you about their feelings for years.

He patted my knee before standing. "You have time for breakfast? I'll make my world-famous omelets."

I smiled despite my misgivings. "World famous?"

He raised a brow. "Cammie says so."

"Oh, well, then, it must be true."

He gestured to the bathroom door. "Feel free to hop in the shower. I'll have food and coffee waiting for you when you come out."

It felt like he was taking care of me. I wasn't sure if it was because he was used to the role of caregiver or if he was a sweet guy to all his girlfriends.

Ben walked toward the door, and I said, "Thanks."

He looked over his shoulder at me and winked. "You're welcome."

As I watched him leave, I knew I was in deep. My heart was pitter-pattering, my stomach was flip-flopping, and I felt warm and tingly all over. I let myself enjoy the feeling for a few seconds before moving toward the bathroom.

I reminded myself that nothing was ever as it seemed. We'd set the ground rules last night. Friends with benefits. No feelings. No emotion. No attachment.

He hadn't said the last few phrases, but it was implied. The arrangement was meant to protect me, and I couldn't forget that.

In the shower, I let the warm water sluice over me as I reminded myself of my new mantra. Friends with benefits. No

attachment.

If I didn't fall for him, he couldn't hold any power over me. I wouldn't fall prey to any lies or deceit. A small part of me thought Ben could be genuine. But how could I ever fall for that again? It was better to be safe than sorry—even if the thought chilled the warm, floaty feeling I'd had since I woke up. The memory of last night lingered in my consciousness.

I got dressed in my clothes from last night and carefully folded the shirt I'd worn, placing it on his dresser. I wouldn't take one of his shirts home to sleep in it. No space would be made for me in his drawer. I wouldn't leave a toothbrush for next time.

Satisfied that I'd set appropriate ground rules, I headed downstairs to the smell of onions and eggs. "It smells great," I said, sliding onto a stool at the island.

"You're just in time." Ben turned to me with two plates in his hands. He sat one in front of me and the other next to me.

Moving around to my side of the island and close enough that his thigh rested against mine, I knew I needed to create some space between us, both figuratively and literally. I subtly moved my leg from his. "When do your parents come home?"

"Not until this afternoon." He cut his omelet and ate a bite.

Turning my attention to my plate, I knew he'd pick up Cammie from Abby's. He'd be busy. There'd be no more nights alone with him since he lived with his parents and Cammie. I'd be safe from any temptation.

We ate in silence for a few minutes before Ben said, "I was thinking of calling a realtor this afternoon. Maybe going to look at some places."

“That’s great.” I stiffened until I reminded myself that the process of buying a house could take months.

“Would you want to come with us?”

“Us? You mean Cammie and you?”

“Yeah. I have a feeling she’s going to be so excited. You’d be helping me with her and letting me know the good neighborhoods. I’ve been gone a long time.”

“I don’t think I’m the right person to help you with that. I’ve never bought a place.”

“It was just a thought.”

But friends with benefits didn’t help watch children or give advice on purchasing a house. We could hook up when he had a spare moment.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought there wouldn’t be much time for our arrangement, which was even better.

When I met Levi, it had been a whirlwind. He’d pursued me hard. Made me feel special. It all happened so fast, but he’d said that was normal when you fell in love. When you met the right person. Now I knew he’d chosen me because I was a sucker.

I needed slow and steady, rules and limits.

“No problem. I’m sure you’re busy with the shop.”

Glancing at the clock over the stove, I should have already been on my way to work. I ate a few more bites and put my plate in the dishwasher. When I turned, Ben was right behind me, crowding me.

He set his plate on the counter behind me. “Why do I get the feeling I’m missing something?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re with me, but you’re not. I feel like I make some progress, but then you retreat.”

“That’s not true.” He saw me, which was even more dangerous. If he knew what made me tick, he could manipulate me for his own benefit.

“It is, though.” He stepped back, seemingly letting it go for the time being.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I’d take the out. There was no way he’d respect me after he found out. What happened with Levi was so embarrassing. I’d always thought of myself as a strong, intelligent woman, but with him, I’d been blind.

Ben walked me outside to my car.

I stood awkwardly by the driver’s side door. I wasn’t sure what would happen. It wasn’t the typical morning after sex. Would he kiss me?

Ben stood close, but not touching me. “I had a great time last night.”

“Me, too.” The words were out before I could censor them. I was supposed to be putting space between us, not drawing us closer.

He smiled softly before stepping back. “I’ll call you later.”

I opened the door, knowing I should tell him a call wasn’t necessary. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it because I was already looking forward to it.

He waited, his hands in his pockets, until I reversed onto the street and drove away. I liked Ben Monroe. Last night had been amazing, and I felt relaxed and refreshed despite my trepidation about what I was getting myself into.

Chapter Eighteen

BEN

I rocked back on my heels as I watched her drive away. Brooke was holding something back. I'd offered the friends with benefits arrangement because she'd freaked out after we'd had sex. If she was worried about her business, I figured it was a way to take the pressure off.

I wouldn't let our relationship affect our businesses. I couldn't control everything, but I wanted to.

I was used to knowing everything I could about my rival before engaging, but Brooke wasn't my opponent anymore. She was the woman I was interested in. The rules of business engagement didn't apply.

I shook my head, knowing I needed to pick up Cammie. As nice as it had been to let go with Brooke, my dad guilt still crept in. I was worried about her and was surprised that Abby hadn't called in the middle of the night to tell me she wanted to come home. I'd expected it, though it was a nice surprise to have Brooke in my arms.

Ben: Everything okay?

Abby sent an image of Cammie laughing at Hunter. A stack of pancakes sat between them with whipped cream and strawberries. The tension from my shoulders eased.

Abby: They're eating breakfast. They want to play baseball.

Ben: I'm getting ready to come get her.

Abby: They're fine. Come over whenever you want.

It was nice of her to offer, but she was a single mother, and I didn't want to take advantage of her any more than I already had. Besides, it was Cammie's first overnight, and I needed to see that she was fine.

Grabbing my keys, I headed to Abby's. I'd overloaded Brooke last night and wanted to take things easy with her in the morning. I could be patient when it was something I really wanted, and I wanted Brooke, despite her reservations.

Pulling up to Abby's townhome, I knocked on the door, hearing laughing from around back as Abby pulled open the door. "They're out back. Come on."

I followed her down the hall, through the living room, and out the back slider. The yard was long and narrow. A nice size for a townhouse. The kids were using rocks for each of the plates.

"Daddy!" Cammie said, running up to me. I caught and lifted her into my arms.

Putting her down, I asked, "Did you have fun?"

"It was so much fun. We had s'mores and slept in the tent."

"You stayed in a tent all night?" I asked.

"They made it until about midnight before they came inside," Abby said.

"Can we sleep in a tent tonight?" Cammie asked. When she latched on to an idea, it was hard to get her off it.

“We’ll see.”

She looked up at me with pleading eyes. “We could invite Hunter over.”

“We can, but probably not tonight,” I said to her. And then to Abby, I said, “Thanks for keeping Cammie. I hope it wasn’t too much trouble.”

Abby smiled. “It was a lot of fun.”

“You ready to go?” I asked Cammie.

Her face fell. “Do we have to?”

“I’m sure Ms. Abby has things to do, and your grandparents will be home soon.” That got her moving. She loved my parents.

Hunter and Cammie headed inside, hopefully to gather her things and not get lost in another game.

“Seriously, thanks for watching her. You went above and beyond,” I said to Abby, suddenly very aware that I was talking to Brooke’s sister, and she’d seemingly set us up.

“I hope it was worth it.” Abby gave me a knowing smile.

She was matchmaking. I wondered if her desire to see us together meant she’d give some insight into Brooke’s history. “It was good to get to know Brooke better.”

“It was worth it, then.”

“Do you know why Brooke would be reluctant to be in a relationship?” I should have been asking Brooke, but I knew she wasn’t ready to talk about it yet.

Abby’s lips pressed into a straight line. “It’s not my place to say.”

“I can respect that, but I don’t want to inadvertently hurt her or push her into something she doesn’t want.”

Abby examined me closely, then finally said, “She’s been burned and doesn’t trust easily.”

“It’s more than just the business?”

Abby seemed to consider her words before continuing, “That’s part of it. She’s scared to put her trust in the wrong person and have everything come crashing down.”

I was even more intrigued. Had someone screwed her over in business? If so, it made sense why she wouldn’t want to mix business with pleasure.

Abby shook her head like she knew what I’d been thinking. “I won’t tell you any more. You have to earn that information from her.”

It was a challenge I was willing to accept. Satisfied I was more prepared than when I came, I said, “I appreciate you telling me what you did.”

I turned to head inside, but Abby stopped me with a hand on my arm. “Please be careful with her. If you’re not planning something serious, leave her alone.”

Whatever happened to Brooke wasn’t good. Was it more personal, like an ex cheating? “I’d never cheat on someone.”

Abby cringed. “It’s not that.”

What could be worse than cheating?

Abby shook her head. “Let’s just say that Brooke’s more vulnerable than she lets on. I won’t betray her by telling you.”

“You’re a good sister.” I was glad they had each other.

“We’ve always been close. Especially since Hunter’s dad,” it looked like she wanted to say more but settled for, “left.”

“Raising a child as a single parent is hard. I’m glad you have your family to support you. It’s why I moved here—to be closer to my parents.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without them.”

“Anytime you want to get the kids together, let me know.”

“I will.”

Driving home with Cammie, chatting away in the backseat, I couldn’t get Abby’s words out of my head. *Brooke’s more vulnerable than she lets on.* She’d always been so strong. Now I knew there was more to her. Layers I wanted to remove. I just hoped she’d let me.

When we arrived home, my parents were just unpacking the car. I rushed to help, telling them to go inside and take a break. Cammie followed them inside, relaying the details about her night with Hunter.

When my parents’ luggage was in their room, Cammie asked to play video games, and I agreed.

“You let Cammie stay overnight at someone’s house?” Mom asked.

It wasn’t something I’d even considered before. “It was Brooke’s sister. I trusted her.”

I couldn’t admit to my parents that I had an ulterior motive for being alone. And I could never look at the island counter without remembering Brooke laid out on it like a feast.

“It sounded like it went well,” Dad said.

“Hunter’s a good kid. His mother, Abby, is doing it on her own, too.”

“Grandpa, come on,” Cammie called from the basement.

“Duty calls,” Dad said, heading downstairs.

“Is there something going on with Hunter’s mom?” Mom asked when Dad left.

I huffed out a laugh. “Definitely not.”

“Why not? You said she’s single, and so are you.” Mom knew I struggled with guilt for working so much. Something that hadn’t bothered me as much when Cammie was with her mother. I knew she wasn’t missing out on anything, but everything was different.

I didn’t want to lie to my mom, though. “Brooke was here. We spent some time together.”

Mom’s eyes widened. “Brooke, Liz’s daughter?”

“Yeah, the one who owns Java Coffee.”

“I haven’t talked to Liz in a long time. What’s going on between you and Brooke?” Mom turned to the stove, where she had a kettle of water boiling to make tea.

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I like her, but she has reservations.”

“I can see why she’d be reluctant—with your stores.”

I rested my hand on the counter. “Is it stupid to pursue something?”

“That depends. Do you like her? Do you see yourself with her long-term, or is it just for fun?” There was no disapproval in Mom’s voice.

“I think it could be more.” Whether Brooke allowed anything to develop was another matter.

“Then the other stuff doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does to her.”

“That girl always took life so seriously.” There was no censure in my mom’s voice, only admiration. “Maybe you could make her see things a different way.”

“I’m the same.”

“You moved here to give Cammie a better life. I’d say you understand what’s important.”

Maria’s dying put everything into perspective. The hours I’d been working. How much I’d already missed of Cammie’s life.

“And who says you have to compete? Can’t you find a way to coexist?”

That sounded great. I’d love for both of us to be successful. But was that realistic?

“Think about it.”

My phone buzzed with an incoming call. Seeing it was Christopher calling, I answered, “Hey.”

“Sorry to call you on your morning off, but we have a problem.”

I frowned, moving out of the kitchen into the living room. “What’s going on?”

“The espresso machine is acting up, and I can’t take a look at it because of the line.”

I gripped my neck in frustration. “Were you able to call the repairman?”

“I called you first. Thought you should know.”

“No problem. I’ll call him on my way.” I wasn’t upset with Christopher. He’d made the right call.

“I have to get back.” Christopher hung up.

Moving back into the kitchen, I asked, “Do you mind watching Cammie for a few hours? I need to take care of something at the store.”

“We missed her. It’s no trouble.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, kissing her cheek. My heart swelled with the love for my parents. They’d stepped up since I’d moved back, and I couldn’t be more grateful.

I jogged down the steps to tell Cammie the news. She was so absorbed in her video games and trash-talking my dad that she didn’t seem to mind that I was leaving.

Things had to slow down soon. I headed to the coffee shop, calling the repairman on the way. It was Sunday, so I didn’t expect him to pick up, but I left a message. I wasn’t sure of the trouble, but just said it wasn’t working and asked if he could return my call as soon as possible. Things didn’t work quite as quickly in a small town as in a big city.

It was Sunday, one of the store’s busiest days, and it was only my second weekend in business. I didn’t want to get the reputation of having broken machines. We needed espresso for most of our drinks.

My mom’s prediction that two coffee shops could coexist wouldn’t matter if mine didn’t get off the ground. The closer to the shop I got, the more my stress increased. I needed it to work. I didn’t want to get a corporate job in the city away from my parents, where I wouldn’t have any help.

Getting out of the car, I hurried to pull open the door and saw the line was small. Christopher was talking to the person at the counter, apologizing for the espresso machine. I moved behind him to take a look at the machine. Unfortunately, I wasn't good at fixing things, but I did a quick search online to see if there were any suggestions.

Christopher moved to look over my shoulder. "I can try a few things if you handle the customers."

"You have a better shot at figuring it out than I do." I moved to the counter. My shoulders felt tighter each time I had to tell the customers we didn't have the specialty coffees. But we still had basic coffee, which was the bread and butter of the store. So, I spun my magic, talking up the whole beans and encouraging people to try them.

I gave them the drinks for free. It hurt, but I wanted customers to feel good when they left Bean Rush, not frustrated.

"You figure anything out?" I asked Christopher when there was a lull.

His shoulders slumped. "Nothing. I'm sorry."

I rested a hand on his shoulder. "It's not your fault."

"If it keeps breaking down, maybe we should consider getting a new one. There are a lot of complaints about this brand online." He tilted the screen toward me.

"I researched this." The problem was the reviews were a mixed bag.

"Maybe the repairman will have some suggestions."

"Speaking of," I checked my phone, "he hasn't called yet."

"He probably doesn't work weekends."

“That’s convenient. It’s just our two busiest days.” I ran my fingers through my hair, beyond frustrated.

“I’m sorry I called you in.”

“You had to. This is my problem.”

“You hired me to handle things like this.”

“I need to know if the machine is broken. You needed the help. Where’s Heather?” We’d hired a few people to handle the counter during the week so that Christopher could take more of a manager roll.

“She called out.”

My jaw tightened. I’d expected that at some point. It was hard to find good help, but I was so pleased with Christopher that I figured the good luck would continue. I’d obviously been wrong.

“We can sell teas and regular coffee. Just not anything with espresso. We can get through this,” Christopher encouraged.

“You’re right.” It wasn’t ideal. And I hated that some customers would go to a different coffee shop to get what they wanted. I tried to soothe myself with the idea that Brooke would get them, but it wasn’t the best timing, and it would give customers a negative impression of my business. None of it was good.

I could only hope that the repairman would arrive soon.

As I dealt with disgruntled customers, I couldn’t help but think that I was distracted yesterday and that morning when I should have been solely focused on the store. I needed to be focused on making sure things ran smoothly.

It felt like a weight had been placed on my chest, making it increasingly difficult to draw a deep breath. If I focused on the

store and getting it off the ground, things would ease up. They had to.

Chapter Nineteen

BROOKE

I should be focused on work and not on the way Ben's fingers and tongue felt on my body. My body heated again as I thought about it, but I shook off the thought and brought my attention back to my shop and the paperwork in front of me.

No matter how much work was waiting for me in my office, I liked to be on the floor, greeting customers. That morning, we'd gotten a fair number complaining that they couldn't get their favorite lattes at Bean Rush.

As much as I wanted to draw customers to my store, I didn't want it to happen at Ben's expense. I wasn't sure when that shift happened. Business was separate from our relationship. He wouldn't hesitate to take advantage of one of my weaknesses.

I'd texted him to ask if everything was okay, but he hadn't responded. If one of his machines wasn't working properly, he'd be stressed and dealing with the fallout.

Whenever I competed with Ben in the past, I liked us to be on even ground. A win wasn't a win if I got it due to circumstances beyond our control, like a broken machine. It was similar to winning a baseball game on a bad call. I wanted

to win because we'd both done everything right, and I came out on top.

For the first time, coming out on top didn't feel quite the same. Not if it came at the expense of someone who'd become a friend, maybe even something more. Not that I'd ever admit that to him. I wouldn't give him that power over me.

Plus, if my business did well at his expense, it affected Cammie. Instead of spending the day with her father, he was probably working. I didn't have that issue, given my lack of children or significant other. For the first time, that realization made me feel empty.

Ben was working for a better life. I just wanted money to pay my bills and employees. I enjoyed feeling successful when things went well, but what did that really mean in the grand scheme of things?

What did success mean if you had no one to share it with? A sharp pain pierced my sternum.

"What do you think of the customers coming in this morning to complain about Bean Rush?" Hailey plopped into the chair across from me.

"Hopefully, it's nothing, and he gets that machine fixed quickly," I answered without thinking.

Hailey blinked at me. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

I scrambled to come up with an explanation that didn't let on that I'd fucked the competition last night. "I want to win because we're the better store, not because of a technicality."

Hailey's eyes narrowed on me. "I get that, but a faulty machine goes back to the choices the business owner made when he purchased it. Did he get a good one, or did he skimp, and now he's experiencing the repercussions of that decision?"

“You’re right.”

Hailey stilled to examine me. “Why the sudden sympathy for Ben Monroe?”

“We’ve become friends because of Cammie and Hunter. I just want to be successful for the right reasons.” I kind of wanted both of us to succeed, but that was impossible when we were literally splitting our customers.

“Ah,” Hailey said, but thankfully, she didn’t say anything else.

“How did trivia night go on Thursday?”

Hailey wanted to handle it since we had it in the evening.

She grimaced. “Not great. We only had one team show.”

I sucked in a breath. “That’s not good.”

She scrunched her nose and pointed her finger in the air. “Then they asked if we served alcohol.”

The estimates for the renovation still sat on my desk. I tended to make business decisions quickly—sometimes too quickly. I forced myself to take a few days to see if I’d change my mind, but I hadn’t. “I want to go forward with the renovation. I have the money, and we’ve been playing it safe. It’s time to go for it.”

Hailey clapped her hands together. “Yay! I’m so excited to get started.”

Using all of my savings to change my business model was unbelievably risky. I could lose everything. But it felt right.

“Who are you going to hire to do the work?”

“Morrison Brothers Construction. I called around. They’re reliable and do good work.”

Hailey smiled knowingly. “It’ll be nice to have some man candy around here, too.”

I threw a pencil at her. I was positive she was thinking about Cade and his brother, Nolan, who ran the company. Both were hot but very much taken. So was she.

Hailey shielded her face, even though the pencil flew wide. “Hey, I can still look.”

“I’m the single one. I’m the only one who can look.” Was I single, though? I’d slept with Ben. The way I felt, there should have been some cosmic shift in the universe, but that didn’t happen. Life went on as normal.

A knowing smile curved over her lips. “So, nothing else happened between you and Ben?”

I didn’t want to talk about it. It felt like something I should keep to myself, but I had to tell her something. I couldn’t keep it a secret. “Cammie and Hunter stayed with Abby last night.”

Hailey leaned in closer. “How did that happen? Did she set you up?”

I shook my head. “It looks like it. I haven’t had a chance to talk to her about it yet.” I held my hand up as Hailey opened her mouth to speak. “But it’s just a friends-with-benefits kind of thing.”

Hailey’s eyes grew wide. “Did he say that?”

I tried to remember who said the initial phrase, but I couldn’t. “I think so. I don’t remember. The fact is I’m not ready for more, and this is perfect.”

I could put him in a box labeled fun and sexy. I could go into it without any expectations or pesky emotions.

“And you think that’s going to work?” She tipped her head to the side.

“It has to. That’s all I can handle.”

Hailey’s expression fell. “It doesn’t sound very healthy.”

“I want to have fun. Don’t I deserve that after everything I’ve been through?”

Hailey’s expression was pained. “You do.”

“And this is what I want. What I need to protect myself.”
And my heart.

Hailey sighed. “I just want more for you.”

“I know you do.” My eyes prickled with tears.

Sometimes I wanted more for myself, too, but then I remembered what it had felt like to find out my marriage wasn’t real. I couldn’t go through that again. I’d rather be alone than be made a fool.



Morrison Construction sent a small crew to get started. Cade said they had a new contractor, Sam, a cousin of his who recently came to work with them.

There would be shelves in the back to carry specialty items like local history and guidebooks, everyone’s favorite popcorn from the beach, some snacks, and Hailey’s grandparents’ spices. Hailey sold the store, but the recipes for her grandfather’s specialty spices had remained with her family.

The front would have a small area with high-top tables and stools. An area by the front window would be for relaxing in couches and armchairs, and there was even room for small

two-person tables outside. We'd serve wine and some beers with the hopes of expanding into appetizers.

We'd still serve coffee in the morning, but the specialty store would be open all day, and in the afternoon, we'd add wine, beer, and appetizers. The plan was to hold book clubs and trivia nights. Hopefully, customers would be more willing to hang out if we offered alcohol and food.

I hoped it wasn't a huge mistake to add a commercial kitchen.

As close as I felt to Ben the night we hooked up, I couldn't tell him about my plans. He was still my stiffest competition. It would be awhile before the renovations were complete. Plus, I wasn't positive he wasn't using me for his gain. I hated feeling like that, and he'd given me no reason to believe it. But then, Levi hadn't given me a reason to think he was lying either.

I needed to be smarter.

I was no longer out of control. I had a plan. It eased my anxiety and gave me hope for the future of my business. The wine market had to work. It was my only option.

Ben had responded to my text on Monday, saying the machine had been fixed and everything was good. He didn't offer anything more, and we were only friends with benefits, so it wasn't my place to delve any deeper.

He was busy with his business, and I was engrossed in renovations that he knew nothing about. It was already difficult to keep it a secret with half of the store cordoned off. It was obviously under construction, and I told customers it was a face-lift, not an entire remodel. No one questioned it. I'd

probably have to shut down for a period of time to do the front area, but it would be worth it in the end.

I was staring at the blueprints, wondering if it was the best or the worst decision I'd ever made, when Hailey popped her head into my office. "Everything okay?"

I chewed my lip. "We need to change the name."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, sitting across from me.

"Java Coffee doesn't make sense with this." I gestured at the blueprints laid out on my desk.

"Hmm. You're right, but it's what you're already known for."

"It sounds like a coffee shop, not a wine market. I've never been to a place that offers what we're planning." That made the change even scarier.

Hailey leaned a hip against the door jamb. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking we need a complete rebranding. Inside and out. You don't think it's a good idea?"

"You'd be throwing out the last few years. You're no longer Java Coffee. You're something new.

Instead of scaring me, I was excited about the prospect. "That's what I want. Remember when you said you weren't passionate about selling spices?"

"Uh-huh."

"I feel the same about Java Coffee. It was good for me, but now I want to try something new, and I want the name to reflect that change."

“You want everything to be new?”

“Exactly.” I didn’t want to be in direct competition with Ben, and it had nothing to do with winning or losing. It was a good business decision. I could see that clearly. “I don’t want to share my customers with Ben. I want an entirely new market. Drawing on our old customers and adding to it.”

“I can see college kids hanging out in the afternoon and evening. Even families stopping by for a light dinner.” The more I talked about it, the more excited I became. I wanted to share it with someone other than Hailey, but we’d agreed to keep things quiet. We didn’t want the town buzzing about it until it was done. Until I was sure that it was right.

“Tourists stopping by for a quick bite and a drink before moving on to their next destination.”

“Romantic, yet fun.” The ideas were pouring through me. I hadn’t felt that inspired since I opened Java Coffee. I loved that feeling where anything was possible.

She moved into the room. “What were you thinking for possible names?”

“I don’t have anything concrete yet.” I grabbed a pen and a sheet of paper. “Wine. Market. Main Street. Tavern.”

Hailey frowned. “I don’t know about Tavern. It has a dark feel, and this place will be light and airy.”

I scribbled words as they popped into my head. “Main Street Market.”

Hailey nodded thoughtfully. “That’s a possibility, but then people might confuse it with the Marketplace.

“I think we’re getting stuck. We’ll have to come back to it later.”

“When are you thinking the construction will be done?”

“Hopefully by summer.”

“You want to have a grand opening party?”

“I don’t think I want to call it a grand opening. Maybe a party for our friends.”

“Speaking of shop friends. You have a Shops on Main meeting tonight.”

“I completely forgot with everything going on.” I should invite Ben. I wanted to see him, even if I couldn’t share what was happening at my store.

“I’m going to check on the front counter.”

“Okay.” But I’d already pulled out my phone and sent a message to Ben. It was the perfect excuse to see him.

Brooke: There’s a Shops on Main meeting tonight. Not sure if you’ve heard of it, but it’s a group of shop owners who get together once a month to talk business and town events.

Ben: My shop isn’t on Main.

Brooke: Everyone’s welcome. It’s just a catchy name. It’s a great way to network. The meetings are held at Max’s Bar & Grill at eight.

Ben: I can come after I tuck Cammie into bed.

My heart flip-flopped in my rib cage. I loved that he’d head home to spend time with his daughter before heading out again.

Brooke: I’ll see you there.

He’d said we were friends with benefits, and it was past time I took advantage of that arrangement. I hadn’t had good

sex in a long time, and I had the opportunity to do it again. I wanted to take it.

I left the store in an employees' hands and headed to Max's, excited to see Ben. The meeting room was an empty room on the second floor of Max's restaurant with a bar and a small dance floor. Most of our meetings took place at the long table. Tonight, there wasn't a speaker. Sophie, the owner of Sophie's Sweets, took the lead, talking about the upcoming tourist season and festivals.

Ben walked in about thirty minutes into the meeting. "Sorry I'm late. I'm Ben Monroe."

"The owner of Bean Rush. Welcome," Sophie said.

Ben slipped into the seat next to mine.

"How are the coffee wars going?" Remi, the owner of Remi's Juice Shop, asked.

"We're not at war," I said as Ben raised a brow.

Remi smiled wide. "It's still early yet."

"Customers are trying out Ben's place, so the end result remains to be seen." Not that I was waiting around to find out what would happen. I felt better because I was taking a proactive approach.

"Let us know if there's anything we could do to help," Sophie offered.

"I appreciate that," Ben said.

"What's going on at Java Coffee? I heard you have tarps up," Easton asked.

"Just a little face-lift," I said, hoping he wouldn't ask any follow-up questions.

“Makes sense with new competition,” Sophie said.

Ben leaned over to whisper in my ear, “I didn’t know you were renovating your store.”

“It was a spur-of-the-moment decision. I wanted to spruce things up. I haven’t done anything major since we opened.”

“It’s because of me.”

“Bean Rush’s opening forced me to do something different. It’s not a bad thing.” I hoped he wouldn’t ask for additional details. I didn’t want to lie to him.

Ben leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face.

I hoped he wouldn’t get too hung up on the details because I wanted to forget about our competition for the night. I wanted to feel like I had when I woke up in his bed. I wanted to feel alive, not worry about numbers, retaining customers, and attracting new ones. I just wanted to feel good, and I hoped he was on the same page.

Chapter Twenty

BEN

“*I* like how supportive business owners are of each other here,” I said as we went downstairs to have a beer with the rest of the group.

“The historic area is small, and we all support one another. Even if we’re competing against each other for customers.”

“I like that.”

We found a place by the bar to stand. Max was behind the bar. Ethan, Savannah, Zoe, Sophie, Remi, Lily, and Gia were there. Lily was a new addition, having recently opened the flower shop, Petals.

Brooke sat on a stool next to some of the other women, and I stood behind her. I placed a hand on the bar next to her, leaning in close to order a drink from Max.

I tried to focus on Easton as he asked me a question, but my attention was on Brooke when she not-so-subtly sighed. She was affected by me.

“So, you and Ben are friends now?” I overheard Remi ask Brooke.

I’m sure she meant to be quiet, but I’d noticed that her personality was naturally outgoing, and she tended to be loud

and exuberant.

“I guess you could say that.” Brooke’s cheeks heated, and I wondered if she was worried her friends would guess what happened between us.

“Friends and rivals,” I said with a wink meant for Brooke.

Remi beamed. “Friendly rivals. I like that.”

When we were kids, we didn’t get along. Each time I saw Brooke, my heart rate rose with irritation. Now it rose for a different reason. Heat, desire, and attraction. I wanted to get out of there and take advantage of the time I had with her.

The last week made it clear that if we wanted to pursue our friends-with-benefits arrangement, we needed to take advantage of every spare second I wasn’t working or spending time with Cammie.

Remi asked Gia how her event planning company was going. I’d learned at the meeting that Gia brought a lot of business to the related stores. She used Abby for photography, Max’s extra room for rehearsal dinners, Easton’s store for groom gifts, Lily for flower arrangements, and Sophie for cakes. That discussion didn’t really affect Brooke and me, so we were in our own little bubble.

“Are you having a good time?” Brooke turned on the stool to face me.

I’d never thought I’d describe spending any time with Brooke as good, but it was. “Yeah. I am.”

“You need to head home soon?” Brooke asked, her head tilted slightly.

“My parents have Cammie. She’s sleeping, but I can’t stay out too late. I like to get up early for a run and make her

breakfast. Then I walk her to school.”

“I love that.” Emotion simmered in Brooke’s eyes, and I had the overwhelming desire to cup the back of her head and kiss her, but we were surrounded by people.

I raised a brow, wanting to know what she was thinking.

“Who knew single dads could be so sexy?” Brooke said in a low voice so no one around us could hear.

“You want to get out of here?” My voice was low and guttural. She’d said the word sexy, and something had misfired in my brain. I wanted her to myself.

“Yeah,” she said, her eyes round.

She grabbed her purse, which hung on a hook under the bar.

“I’ll walk you out,” I said to Brooke, acting like I was planning on walking her to her car and not taking her home.

Her friends got the hint and said their goodbyes. I shook Easton’s and Max’s hands, promising to stop by again soon. Apparently, the guys hung out on their own without the women sometimes. Not staying in touch with my high school friends, I was interested in making new ones. And the fact that they were business owners made it even better.

I followed Brooke out the door.

“You don’t think they guessed, do you?” Brooke asked when we were outside on the sidewalk.

“No.” I fell into step next to her.

“Good.”

I bumped shoulders with her. “Are you embarrassed by me, Langley?”

Her brow furrowed. “Of course not. I just don’t want everyone to know our business.”

“Same here.” I wanted to keep her to myself for as long as I could.

“Do you live close by?” It struck me then that I had no idea where she lived.

“I walked.”

“Let’s drive so I’ll have my car.”

I led her to my car and got inside. “Where to?”

“Take Dock Street to Greene.”

I was familiar with the area, so I easily followed her directions. It was close by. Just a few streets over from Main Street.

“You own this place?” I asked, pulling into a spot on the street.

“I’m renting. It’s so convenient for the shop. I’d hate to move, even though owning is a better investment.”

I met her on the sidewalk. “You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

I wanted to give her an out if she wanted it. I’d suggested this arrangement to get closer to her without setting off her alarms. But if she didn’t want this, I’d have to be okay with it.

She looked up at me with so much heat in her eyes, making me want to kiss her right there on the street where anyone could see. “Definitely not.”

“Show me your place, then.”

I followed her onto the porch and waited while she unlocked the door. Inside, she turned to face me, walking

backward as I kicked the door shut behind me.

“I’ve missed you,” I said as I stalked toward her.

She stopped when her back hit the wall behind her and looked up at me. “I’ve missed you, too.”

I braced my hands over her head, leaning down to kiss her. All the worry and stress faded away until it was just my lips on hers.

I pulled back slightly. “One night wasn’t enough.”

I needed her to know that I was in it with her.

She shook her head. “Not nearly.”

“Where’s your room?” I asked, my voice gruff.

She pointed at the stairs behind us.

I grabbed her hand, pulling her along behind me.

“It’s the second door on the right.”

Ducking inside the room, I didn’t bother turning on the light or taking in my surroundings. I just wanted Brooke. I moved her to stand in front of her bed, kissing her deeply. My hands roved over her body, committing every dip and valley to memory. I wanted to imprint myself on her soul.

“Ben,” she moaned when I came up for air.

“I want this. I want you.” It was important that she knew how I felt.

It was way more than friends with benefits. We had a connection that transcended sex. Whether it was because we knew each other as kids or the tension we generated between us over the years, I wasn’t sure.

I moved her hair out of her face, stepping into her space. “I’ll take care of you.”

If she gave her heart to me, I’d take care of it. I’d take care of her. I knew we were bigger than anything I’d ever experienced before. She could be everything if she’d just give us a chance.

Her gaze traveled over my face as if searching for something. Seemingly satisfied, she said, “Yeah, okay.”

I slipped her shirt over her head, reaching around to unhook her purple bra. The move was bold and beautiful, just like her. She sucked in a breath when I ran my fingers over the sides of her breasts.

I wanted her, but I’d take my time. I’d show her that she deserved to be cherished.

I leaned down to kiss one nipple, then the other. She touched the back of my head, holding me to her. I kissed down her naval, dropping to my knees. She looked down at me, with her hands in the hair at the base of my head. She looked so vulnerable.

Whatever she hid from me was why she was reluctant to take us further than the physical, but I’d break down her barriers without her even noticing. Sweet and gentle, we’d get to know each other, and I’d blow through her walls, one by one.

I’d show her that she could trust me. Maybe even love me, but I was getting ahead of myself.

I unhooked her jean shorts, pulling them over her hips and off. She kicked them to the side, leaving her in a purple scrap of lace covering her sweet pussy.

I breathed in her scent, musky and sweet, before gently kissing her inner thigh.

“What are you doing to me?” Her voice was breathless.

Loving you. “Showing you how good you make me feel.”

That must have been the right thing to say, because her fingers tightened in my hair. I hooked my fingers in the strings on the side of her panties and slowly pulled them down. When they were off, she widened her stance, sensing where I was going.

Her hips tipped toward me.

“You want my tongue on you, baby?”

“Uh-huh.” Her head tipped back slightly as I blew over her folds.

“My mouth?”

“Yes, please.” Goose bumps erupted on her skin.

“So polite and needy.”

“Yessss.” She drew the word out as I flattened my tongue and licked her from her entrance to her clit.

I cupped her ass, tipping her so I could feast on her. “I’ve been thinking about this all week.”

“So good,” was all she managed as her hips moved involuntarily in time with my fingers pumping inside her.

“You’re so beautiful when you let go. When you let me pleasure you.”

Each word seemed to send sparks through her body. She was electric. Pulling my hair, rolling her hips with her muscles trembling.

Pumping my fingers, circling her clit, I knew it wouldn't take long. With one long moan, she let go completely, her walls clamping down on my fingers. Her legs gave out, and I caught her. I'd always catch her.

Before she came down, I picked her up and moved her to the bed, spreading her out in front of me. I quickly shucked my shoes and clothes, wanting to be naked, then pulled a condom out of the pocket of my jeans, ripping it with my teeth. Her eyes flared as she watched me.

She reached for me, smoothing the condom down my length. "I want to be on top."

Laying down on the bed, I rolled onto my back as she straddled me. She positioned me at her entrance, looking at me before sinking down. Her eyes fluttered closed, and her head dropped back in pleasure. Watching her take me inside her had me ready to blow.

I clutched her hips, trying to think about something else so I could last. When I cupped her breasts, my thumbs brushing over her nipples, she moaned. Her eyes opened. They were unfocused, but filled with desire.

We were in it together. The label didn't matter. There was no way she didn't feel our connection. It was soul deep. A living, breathing thing. She fell forward, kissing me as I thrust from beneath.

Her rhythm faltered. She was close. I gripped her hips tight as I took over from below. With a moan, she spasmed around me and finally collapsed onto my chest.

I carefully rolled her so I was on top and hitched her leg onto my shoulder so I could drive into her. She looked up at me through hooded eyes.

I searched for that spot, the one that would take her over again. Her eyes widened. “Ben.”

“Hold on tight.”

I snapped my hips, thrusting harder, needing her to feel the same thing I did. Needing her to know I was in it with her. She couldn't numb herself or protect herself when we were like that. We'd be vulnerable together.

She bit her lip hard as if she were holding herself back.

“Let go, baby.” I rubbed her clit, needing her to crest with me.

I thrust one more time, emptying myself inside her. Shuddering, I leaned down to kiss her shoulder. “Fuck, that was good.”

“Mmmm,” was all she said.

I withdrew, moving to take care of the condom. When I returned, she was asleep. Her eyes were closed, her hands tucked under her cheek. She was relaxed and peaceful. There were no worries or anxiety, no walls to fortify.

I slid in behind her, pulling her back against me. I could stay for a couple more hours, then I really needed to head home in case Cammie needed me. I didn't want her to wake up and notice me gone.

When Cammie's mother first died, she'd wake up in the middle of the night, petrified that she'd lost me, too. It had taken a while to get her to understand that I wasn't going anywhere. It wasn't something I could promise, but the therapist said it was okay to reassure her.

I couldn't let her down. For the first time since she was born, there was someone else I didn't want to let down—

Brooke. She needed me, too, even if she'd probably never admit it.

I'd get her to open up to me, to trust me. I didn't have a choice. Because I'd already let her in. I'd opened myself up to the possibility of more with her.

The one thing I couldn't control was her feelings. If she was wrapped up in the past or reluctant because of an ex, I couldn't fix that for her. All I could do was be there. I just hoped that was enough.

Chapter Twenty-One

BROOKE

The warmth I'd felt against my back all night was gone. I reached out to find the sheets cool, the pillow beside mine empty. I opened my eyes to find an indentation. I hadn't imagined Ben sleeping with me last night.

I snuggled deeper in the blankets. The rain beat down on the roof in a comforting rhythm. The light coming through my windows was dim. I loved staying in bed when it was raining.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand. I thought I'd left it downstairs in my purse last night. I wondered how it had gotten there.

I checked the clock before putting in the security code on my phone. It was still early.

Ben: Sorry, I had to leave. I needed to be here when Cammie woke.

It was sweet that he'd sent a message and not just left without a word. Although, our arrangement didn't call for overnights or reaching out the morning after.

Brooke: No worries.

Ben: I wish I could wake up with you.

Me, too. A pang in my heart told me I'd taken on more than I'd bargained for. I resisted the urge to text him back. It wasn't fair to him to lead him somewhere we could never go.

The next buzz was a picture of breakfast. A stack of pancakes. My stomach grumbled.

I loved that he'd included me in his morning routine. He loved that time with his daughter, and he'd taken a few seconds to talk to me. It told me there might be a space for me with him. Which was dangerous. It was easier to think that I didn't belong, that I couldn't be part of his family, than to think there was a possibility.

Brooke: Tease.

Ben: It's a promise.

My heart fluttered in my chest. A promise for what? Something beyond friends with benefits, or was he just talking about food?

Those three words settled over my heart, imbedding in my chest. Deep down, I wanted it to mean something. I wanted to fall into promises of forever, of love and togetherness. But I couldn't trust it. Even if Ben seemed like a better man than Levi.

I wouldn't survive making the wrong choice again. Especially since I already felt something that transcended the feelings I'd had at the beginning of my relationship with Levi.

Ben flitted around the edges of my consciousness. He wasn't calling all the time or insisting on spending every spare moment together. But then, he had a business to run and a daughter to raise. We weren't in our early twenties. We had responsibilities.

Young love was naïve. Easy to trust. Easier To fall. I wasn't that young girl anymore. I had baggage and experience. I knew what could happen.

Reluctantly, I slipped out of bed, showered, and grabbed something for breakfast.

Dread filled me as I walked in the steady rain to work, and water soaked my shoes and the bottom of my pants. I was still keeping a secret from Ben—the makeover of my business. I kept it from everyone except the construction crew and Hailey.

It wasn't supposed to feel like that. There weren't supposed to be any feelings at all. Why couldn't I have kept things purely physical with Ben?

Mid-morning, I received a delivery of coffee beans. The note on the brown bag read: *My favorite. I hope you enjoy them, too.*

I ground the beans, my stomach feeling fluttery. I was falling deeper into his orbit.

As I sipped the rich brew at my desk, I snapped a picture of me drinking it, hitting send on the image with *thank you* as the caption before I could second-guess myself.

My stomach shouldn't feel like there were a bunch of butterflies in it. My hands shouldn't be trembling in anticipation of his response. It wasn't a crush or even a relationship. It was sex.

But it felt like so much more. My phone buzzed, and I couldn't resist opening it right away.

Ben: You're welcome, beautiful.

I opened the image again to see what he saw. A strong, confident woman with a challenge in her eyes. Yeah, that

hadn't been my best move. I should have been pushing him away, not pulling him in closer.

A throat cleared, pulling me away from the screen.

Sam stood in front of me in his blue Morrison Brothers Construction shirt that was tucked into well-worn jeans and covered in a thin layer of sawdust. If my heart weren't already with Ben, I would have considered him attractive.

"I just wanted to give you an update."

I tried to refocus on the man in front of me and not the one who'd sent me his favorite coffee beans. "Of course."

"We're ahead of schedule. You'll need to close the store for a few days." He pulled out a small paper calendar, one he probably kept for conversations like ours. He pointed to the first week of June. "I'm looking at this week to complete the front-end renovations."

"Perfect. Thank you, Sam."

He tucked the calendar into his back pocket and said, "Want to see the progress we've made so far?"

"I'd love to." I followed behind him as he held the tarp open for me, eager to see what he'd accomplished.

The open shelves were inviting as I breathed in the smell of freshly cut wood. I could already see customers browsing the filled shelves with a coffee or a glass of wine.

"It looks great." The renovation was expensive. If the re-branding didn't work, I didn't want to think about what it meant for me. I didn't want to be a statistic. One of the millions of businesses that failed each year.

I wanted to be known as a savvy businesswoman who knew when it was time to dig in or when it was time to pivot

and try something new. The wine market was one of the times when it felt right, and I needed to follow my intuition. I was starting to sound like Remi with her talk of positivity and trusting your gut.

“I’ll let you get back to work,” I told Sam before heading back to my office. Being with Ben felt as right as this renovation. I just hoped I wasn’t projecting my good feelings about the construction onto my relationship with him.

It felt good to go after what I wanted, whether that was business or sex. Last night, I’d felt the tiniest of cracks in my heart. I couldn’t let it break open any wider. I couldn’t let him in. It was too risky. Especially with the changes in my business.

A part of me couldn’t trust him. What if he was using me to get what he wanted out of his business? It sounded nuts, but it was the same thing Levi did. He’d taken advantage of my trusting nature. I couldn’t make that same mistake again, no matter how good it felt at the moment.

Good sex was just that. Sure, Ben was an attentive lover, but it didn’t have to mean anything else. Except when I was alone in my office, all I could think about was the look in his eyes when I was riding his dick. He’d been in awe of me. The touch of his hands on my body felt reverent, like he couldn’t believe I was there. He couldn’t fake those feelings, could he?

Levi had. So, doubt was the new story of my life. I was capable of trusting a little bit, then pulling back, remembering why I couldn’t rely on my judgment. Why I couldn’t trust anyone with my heart?

Ben was no different. I’d need to keep him at arm’s length until our businesses took off. And even then, how would I ever know if he was being genuine?

A dull ache started at the base of my skull and spread until it was throbbing. My eyes hurt. My head hurt, and I wanted to crawl into bed and never come out. Remi would blame it on the weather, the barometric pressure, but I wondered if it was my intuition warning me away from Ben.

I'd need to be stronger, more cautious. When I was in bed with him, it was easy to let go. To be the person I was before. I couldn't let myself fall into that trap.



For the next couple of weeks, I focused on work. I crunched numbers, comparing recent revenue to the year-ago numbers. I tried to project how things might change with the new offerings, but I couldn't. The not knowing was driving me crazy.

I was impatient, anxious to see what the changes would do for my business, how the customers would react. It was getting harder to keep the news inside. I wanted to tell everyone about it, especially my friends. They were curious about the details, but I'd refused to give them any.

Ben sent flowers, a box of Sophie's Sweets pastries, and a book on entrepreneurship, which I adored. That was my favorite gift of all. I loved reading nonfiction books about mindset and business. I wasn't sure if he'd seen the books on my nightstand, but I liked to think he did. Each time, I snapped a picture of myself with the gift and a thank you note.

Each time I got a delivery, my traitorous heart flipped in my chest. I didn't think he understood that friends with benefits didn't get each other gifts or check in via text at

breakfast. But I loved that he continued to include me in Cammie's breakfast routine.

One morning, he'd sent a picture of him eating a bite of pancake with whipped cream on his cheek. I'd wanted to wipe it off with my tongue, but I was in bed alone while he was with his daughter.

He sent me pictures of the houses he'd toured. He hadn't asked me to join him in house hunting again. And I was glad because I probably wouldn't say no even if it wasn't my place to help him find a home. That was crossing a line.

One afternoon, Hailey came into my office. "You have a large package."

"I do?" I hadn't ordered anything. I was waiting for the construction to finish before I ordered any new décor items.

It was addressed to me, not Java Coffee.

"What is it?" Hailey hovered nearby.

"I have no idea." But my traitorous heart sped up like a little girl presented with an early birthday gift, and I ripped open the box to find a sleeping bag and a pillow.

"Planning on going camping?" Hailey asked.

"It must be a mistake." I tucked everything back into the box and set it in the corner. I'd need to return it at some point.

When I was alone in bed that night, my phone buzzed on the nightstand. I put down my book and picked it up.

Ben: Did you get my gift?

Brooke: What gift?

The phone buzzed with an incoming call. I quickly smoothed my hair and pulled the blanket up to hide my braless

state.

“The one I sent to your shop,” he said by way of greeting.

He couldn’t be talking about... “You mean the sleeping bag?”

“It came with a pillow, didn’t it?”

“That was *you*?”

“I wanted to invite you and Hunter camping this weekend. I know Hunter has a sleeping bag, but I wasn’t sure if you did.”

“Camping, as in, the wilderness?”

He smiled boyishly. “If you count my backyard as the wilderness.”

That didn’t sound too bad. “So, it will be you, me, Cammie, and Hunter?”

“If you don’t want to do it, that’s okay. I just thought it would be fun, and we can give Abby a night off.”

“First of all, I love that you want to do that.” It was such a nice gesture, and I couldn’t for the life of me come up with a reason to say no.

“I bought a blow-up screen and a projector so we can watch a movie, and I got the makings for s’mores.”

I chewed on my lip, wondering if it was a good idea. “That sounds fun. Hunter will love it.”

His brow furrowed. “Will you come, too?”

It was a terrible idea. Yeah, we started out doing activities with the kids, but things had changed. We were intimate. It could only be construed as getting in deeper with each other.

“I’ll behave. The kids will be there.” His tone and expression were teasing, making him look more boyish, younger somehow.

“So, we’re going to sleep in a tent?” I asked carefully, trying to come up with a reason to back out gracefully.

“You’re not an outdoorsy girl?” Ben asked, his tone amused.

I shook my head. “Not so much.”

“Hmm. I learn new things about you each day. The girl I used to know never backed down from a challenge.”

“Is that what this is? A challenge?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

He smirked. “You don’t think you can handle it?”

I sighed. “You know exactly what you’re doing.”

“I know you can’t resist.”

I couldn’t resist him, not when he was being so genuine, so sweet. His challenges used to fire me up, and they still got me going, but there was an entirely different response in my body to him now. My skin tingled, and my heart flip-flopped in my chest.

“I doubt the kids will make it all night outside,” Ben said thoughtfully.

“Then where will we sleep?” It was sounding worse and worse.

Ben winked. “Don’t worry. There’s plenty of room in my bed.”

That’s what I was worried about. “In your childhood bedroom? With your parents sleeping down the hall?”

Ben frowned. "It's been renovated since I was a kid, but yes, I guess so. That reminds me, I need to get a new house sooner rather than later."

"It'll be good to have your own space." Not so good for me.

"It's nice to have my parents' help with Cammie. Although, I can't go for runs if I live by myself. At least not while Cammie's home. She's too young to stay by herself."

"You'll work out a new schedule," I said, confident I wouldn't be involved in any of those arrangements. Friends with benefits didn't stay overnight or babysit kids.

"Having my own space will be worth it."

"For when your girlfriends come over?" I'd gotten caught up in our banter and didn't catch the minefield before I stepped into it. Why had I brought up the G-word? It sounded like I was fishing for a label, and I definitely wasn't. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked that."

He looked thoughtful. "I've never brought women over when Cammie's been home. But then, she was usually at her mother's."

He'd brought me by, but then, it was under the guise of a children's playdate. He hadn't introduced me to his daughter as anything else, and I didn't expect him to.

"Have you found anything yet?" I asked, hoping for a safer conversation.

"There were a few houses I liked, but they go quickly. The market is hot right now," he said. "What about you? Planning on living in town for the long-term?"

I felt a pang of guilt. I'd spent all my savings on the renovation, so I wouldn't be buying a home anytime soon. "I have no plans to leave unless the owners decide to sell. I like the walk to work, the shops, and restaurants."

"It is convenient to walk to work, but my commute is still better here than in the city."

"I bet." We carefully avoided any talk of business. There was an unspoken rule about mentioning profit margins and losses. When we were kids, we were quick to compare, but now, we both seemed to realize it was a slippery slope neither of us wanted to go down.

"Will you sleep over on Saturday night?" Ben asked.

I sighed. "I guess I never answered, huh?"

"I promise it will be fun."

"How could sleeping in a tent and watching a movie not be fun?" I was being sarcastic, but his face lit up at my response.

"You'll love it."

"Do you need me to ask Abby if Hunter can come?" I was excited about that conversation. Abby was more likely to push me toward him than away.

Ben smiled. "I'll take care of it. I'll tell her you'll be there so she won't worry."

He was good to do that because she definitely would.

I should be more worried about spending time together, even if it was purely about the kids. The more time I spent with him and Cammie, the more we felt like a real couple.

I would remind myself that friends with benefits didn't have sleepovers with kids, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

Chapter Twenty-Two

BEN

The key to Brooke was coming at her from all angles. We were obviously compatible in bed, and I needed to remind her that we were friends outside of it, too. We initially connected through Cammie and Hunter. But if I wanted her to see that we could be together and have a real relationship, there was no better way than to show her a regular night at home.

I didn't usually let Cammie watch movies outside or sleep in a tent, but it was the only excuse I could find to invite Brooke. A movie night would have been okay, but I wanted something more.

Plus, Cammie had been so excited when I mentioned the possibility, and she'd wanted to invite Hunter. She'd said it was only fair to return the favor, and I couldn't agree more. I knew Abby would be more comfortable if her sister were there, too.

I took Cammie to the grocery store to get everything she thought we needed for a good time—candy, marshmallows, chocolate, ice cream, and all the fixings. I was able to distract her long enough to get some things for dinner, too. Homemade pizzas would hopefully hit the spot.

As the time neared for Brooke to come over with Hunter, my nerves picked up. I wanted it to go well. I needed Brooke to give me a chance, though it was probably too much to hope that she'd tell me why she was so gun shy with men.

I wanted to make her so comfortable that she let go with me.

“Is it time yet?” Cammie asked as I prepared the dough for the pizzas. Glancing at the clock above the stove, I said, “Any minute now.”

“Yes!” She ran to the front window to look out, and a few seconds later, she called, “They're here!”

She ran to pull open the door, and I didn't reprimand her because I could see Brooke's car in the driveway. I wiped my sweaty hands on my jeans and went to stand behind Cammie.

“You want to see the tent?” Cammie asked as Hunter got out.

That was all he needed to take off past us, Cammie racing after him.

Brooke got out more slowly.

“Do you need help with your things?” I asked, already moving to the back of her car.

“Yeah, that would be great.” Brooke popped her trunk. She wore leggings and a T-shirt, which was deceptively casual yet sexy in the way it clung to her curves. Discreetly adjusting myself, I grabbed the sleeping bags, and Brooke took the pillows.

“Thanks for inviting Hunter. He's so excited.”

“I have to enjoy these years when my daughter will play with a boy, and I don't have to worry.”

“An overnight even,” Brooke said with a mischievous smile.

“Yeah, those are even more dangerous.” I winked at her. We may have been talking about the kids, but I was thinking about her.

I followed her inside, setting her things by the slider to the outside. “Hopefully, the tent will keep them busy for a few minutes.”

We could see the tent rocking, so they must have been running around inside.

“This is quite the setup with the tent, blow-up screen, and projector.”

“Don’t forget the pizza.” I pointed to the island where the two pies were waiting.

“I didn’t realize you were cooking.” Brooke’s expression was unreadable.

I gave her an affable smile. “My parents are eating out then going to a movie. And it’s just pizza. Something I can’t screw up.”

I’d wanted to impress her with my ability to cook but not go overboard because it wasn’t a date. Not exactly. I was wooing her in the most subtle way possible.

I poured the sauce on the two pies, smoothing it with the back of a spoon, then sprinkled shredded mozzarella over them.

Brooke ran her hands through her hair. “Do you think we should call them in to help with the toppings?”

I wondered if she was nervous being alone with me. “I think they would like that.”

I looked outside, where they were running in circles around the tent. “You want to do the honors?”

Brooke sighed. “In a minute. We should probably enjoy the quiet.”

“We could make our pizza while we wait for them.” I poured two glasses of white wine, setting one in front of her.

She took a sip. “We’ll need this if we’re going to be sharing a tent with two seven-year-olds.”

I winked at her. “We’ll limit ourselves to one.”

She flushed.

“Now, tell me. What are your favorite toppings?” I’d gotten everything I could think of and set them in small serving bowls so that it would be easy and fun for the kids to help.

“Hmmm. Mushrooms, black olives, green peppers. Everything looks good.”

“Everything but pepperoni. I got that one for the kids.”

“Should we each do one half?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Brooke came around to my side of the island. I reached for the olives at the same moment she did, our hips bumped, and her hand brushed mine.

“Sorry about that,” she said, moving slightly away from me.

“No worries.” I liked her in my space.

I let her get what she needed first, watching as her tongue popped out slightly as she concentrated on decorating her side.

“It’s just pizza,” I finally said, when it seemed like she was having a hard time choosing between mushrooms and green peppers.

She smiled at me. “I’ll throw on both.”

I helped her rearrange the toppings until the pizza was evenly covered.

Brooke examined the results. “Your side looks empty next to mine.”

I’d chosen fresh mozzarella, tomatoes, and basil. I tapped her nose. “If you’re good, I’ll let you try a bite.”

The kids chose that moment to open the door and run inside.

“Can we get a puppy?” Cammie asked.

That was one question I’d been dodging since we moved. My excuse in the city was that we didn’t have a yard, but now we did. “Let’s find a house first.”

“Then we can get a puppy?” Cammie’s voice rose with each word.

“That’s not exactly what I said—” I exchanged a look with Brooke, and she covered her smile with her hand.

Cammie looked at Hunter with barely contained excitement. “I told you we were getting one.”

I held up my hands. “Cammie, that’s not what I said. I’m not making any promises. We’ll find a house first, get settled in, and then we’ll see.”

Cammie must have taken that for a yes, because she was practically bouncing on her toes.

“You two want to make your pizzas?” Brooke asked as I put ours in the oven.

She helped them onto the stools so they could reach the bowls. They were excited about the options, but we couldn’t get them to try more than the cheese and pepperoni.

“All these toppings and you choose pepperoni,” I sighed.

While we waited for the pizzas to cook, the kids pulled us out to the tent, where they’d set up several board games. We got out *Sorry*, which was perfect for playing with four people.

When the pizza was done, I cut both and brought them to the tent, where we ate. I wasn’t sure how Brooke felt about it, but the kids loved it. Making their own food and eating on the floor. The only thing better was—

“Can we do s’mores now?” Hunter asked.

I stood up as much as I could in the five-person tent and brushed off my pants. “Let me clean this up, and I’ll get it started.”

It was dark, and the temperature had dropped slightly.

“Why don’t you start the movie, and I’ll get things cleaned up,” Brooke offered, taking the plates from me.

“Good idea.” The lightning bugs were already visible and had drawn the kids out to the yard. Cammie had several mason jars on the porch to catch them. I rarely let her stay up that late, so it was a nice treat.

While they ran around the yard, attempting to trap the bugs in the jars, I got the projector set up. The camp chairs were already set up in front of the screen.

Brooke returned with plates, chocolate bars, graham crackers, and a bag of marshmallows. “What are we

watching?”

Everything about the night felt comfortable. Almost like we were family. “I thought we’d go with a classic—*The Sandlot*.”

Brooke tipped her head to the side. “I haven’t seen that one, and I don’t think Hunter’s watched it yet.”

“Cammie either. Plus, it’s about baseball. They should like it.”

Brooke arranged the food and skewers by the fire pit I’d brought out earlier. Then I started the fire and called the kids over. It took a few moments to get them set up with marshmallows on their skewers, and there was a little squabbling over the best way to cook a marshmallow—slightly brown, charred, or not at all.

Turned out that Hunter liked it charred, and Cammie preferred hers slightly brown. Brooke helped them put the s’mores together and sit in front of the screen while I pushed play.

“I thought we were watching *Toy Story*,” Cammie said with a frown.

“Trust me. You’re going to love this.”

“If you say so,” Cammie said.

I’d thought about starting with *The Sandlot*, but *The Sandlot 2* had softball players, which I thought Cammie would appreciate.

The kids sat on the camp chairs in front of the screen, and I sat next to Brooke on a blanket I’d brought out.

Predictably, there was trash talk during the scene where the girl pitcher struck out the boy.

“You rethinking playing baseball?” I asked Cammie.

Her nose scrunched. “No way. I don’t like the way the girls pitch underhanded.”

It was great that baseball was an option for her age, but when she got older, she’d probably have to move over to softball. Ever since I read her the story about the female baseball pitcher, Jackie Mitchell, Cammie had asked me to find more on the history of women in baseball.

“Thank you for doing this. Hunter’s having fun.” Brooke leaned back on her hands, her hair falling behind her.

“It is fun.”

“What are you thinking about?”

I looked over to find Brooke studying me. “How happy I am we moved here. We have my parents. I get to spend more time with Cammie. We’ve found good friends.”

She arched a brow and swiped a hand at me. “Friends?”

“Hey, the kids are here,” I teased, gesturing toward them. I wondered if she was teasing me or testing out the bounds of our arrangement.

They were staring at the screen, entranced. I didn’t think they’d stop to listen to us.

“I’m going to make popcorn. Anyone want some?” I asked, already anticipating the resounding cheer.

“I’ll help.” Brooke stood and followed me inside.

I got out the popcorn maker and the kernels. “You still okay with how things are between us?”

“That’s a loaded question.”

I held out my hands. “If you’re having second thoughts—”

“It’s not that. It’s just you don’t know everything, and I didn’t think it mattered because we had boundaries and rules.”

“Ah, yes, boundaries.” I fed the kernels into the machine. I knew how important they were to her.

“I should tell you something. I don’t talk about this—almost ever.” She picked at the bottom of her shirt in a nervous gesture.

I stayed nonchalant, adding more butter. “I’d like to hear about it.”

She nodded. “I think you should know.”

I gestured for her to continue, knowing she was worried about my response. Whatever it was, I knew I’d be nothing but supportive. If a guy hurt her, as I suspected one did, I was one-hundred percent on her side.

Her cheeks colored. “I’m divorced.”

My hand fell away from the machine. That was not what I expected her to say. “You were married?”

How had I not heard that before? Our families weren’t close, but it was a small town.

“It happened when I was away at college. We got married when we were juniors.” Brooke wiped her hands on her jean shorts.

“But you’re divorced now.” I knew how those things worked, and I didn’t want to mess with a woman who was still separated.

“For six years now.”

“Okay.” My attention was solely on her. I got the impression she wasn’t done talking.

“His name was Levi. He was an exchange student from Holland.”

I stayed quiet, not wanting to interrupt when it was obviously important to her to get it out.

“It was intense. We fell in love—or I thought we did. He proposed, and I said yes.”

I was a little surprised. She didn’t seem like someone who was spontaneous. “So, you were twenty or twenty-one?”

“Twenty. I wanted to wait until we graduated.”

That sounded more like the woman I knew.

“But he didn’t think we should. He said, ‘*When you know, you know.*’ It was a whirlwind.”

“What happened?” Brooke didn’t seem like a quitter to me, so something had to have happened for her to be divorced so young.

She laughed, but there was no humor in it.

My heart dropped. Whatever it was—it was bad. “Did he cheat?”

I promised myself I wouldn’t interrupt, but I couldn’t stop the words from escaping my mouth.

Her eyes widened as she looked at me for the first time in the entire conversation. “What? Not that I know of.”

I forced myself to relax and wait until she was ready to speak.

“After two years, he got his green card. I thought everything was great, but one night, he came home and said he wanted a divorce. I was shocked.”

“Understandably.” My jaw tightened.

“He laughed at my reaction.” She ducked her head like she was embarrassed at the admission.

My heart dipped as I moved around the counter, no longer okay with there being any distance between us. I rested a hip against the counter and took her hands in mine.

“I thought it was real.” She finally looked up at me with tears shining in her eyes.

That gutted me because I’d never seen Brooke cry. “You had every reason to believe that.”

She straightened her shoulders as if drawing strength from my words. “He said he’d used me to get his green card, and now that he had it, he didn’t need me anymore. I couldn’t even process what he was saying. I’ve rewound our relationship, gone back to the beginning, and replayed it so many times. I didn’t see any clues. No indication that he wasn’t genuine.”

“Some people are just jerks. This isn’t on you.” I wanted to be harsher because there were no words for that Levi character.

She huffed out a breath. “I’d like to believe that, but it’s hard. I keep wondering what I missed, how stupid I was; why didn’t I see him for what he was?”

I could see why she was struggling. She saw herself as a strong person, and she’d been betrayed, lied to in the worst way imaginable. “You’re not stupid. He’s the asshole.”

She didn’t even flinch at my characterization.

“I’m glad you told me.” It told me a lot. Everything I’d been missing. What she’d been hiding, what was holding her back. I wanted to tell her everything would be okay, but she had to see it for herself.

“I don’t trust myself anymore. Definitely not my judgment. Hailey told me I don’t take risks. I’m just not the same person.” She looked at me as if waiting for me to agree with her, to tell her she wasn’t a good choice.

“You’re the same person I’ve always known. Yeah, sure, you seemed a little reluctant to be in a relationship, but who wouldn’t be after that.”

Her eyes widened. “I thought I knew him, but I was wrong. So wrong about everything. I never planned on getting married so young, but I let him convince me it was a good idea.”

“He had an agenda that had nothing to do with you. He chose you because you’re loyal, kind, and driven. Once you make your mind up about something, you don’t change it. Those are good qualities in someone you need to stay married to for two years.”

“I never thought about it like that.” Her tears had disappeared. They’d never even spilled over.

I was so proud of her for being strong. Moving back around the counter, I asked, “You ready to make some popcorn?”

She looked at me in confusion. “That’s it?”

“What did you expect me to say?” I suspected what was going through her head, but I wanted to hear it from her.

She looked away, her voice softer, as her shoulders rolled inward. “That I’m not a good bet. That I’m not good enough for you.”

“I already said that none of that was true. I’d like to do something else to soothe you, but we have two kids sitting outside waiting for their popcorn.” I made my voice lighter.

Brooke looked outside where it was fully dark outside now, the screen's light illuminating the kids' faces. "Yeah, you're right."

I hit the power button on the popcorn machine, and the motor started whirring. It took a few moments for the kernels to start popping.

"Thank you for telling me." It said everything about where her head was, and she'd given me the tools to meet her where she was. It wasn't me she didn't trust; it was herself.

She licked her lips, still looking uncertain.

"You wanted me to understand where you were coming from, and now I do. What Levi did was unforgivable, but you need to move on. You need to trust yourself again."

Her lips tipped into a small smile. "That's similar to what Hailey said."

"Clearly, Hailey's a smart girl and a good friend."

"She is." She smiled at me, and for the first time, I saw the woman she would have been if she'd never met Levi. She was strong and confident. She was happy.

Tenderness swept through me. "I know you want to protect yourself, but you don't need to with me. I've got you."

Brooke looked at me with a mixture of awe and surprise.

I handed her the bowl of popcorn and grabbed a few smaller ones to take outside.

"What took you so long?" Cammie asked when I handed her a bowl.

"We were just chatting." Brooke smiled at me as I sat next to her.

It wasn't my imagination that she was lighter for having told me her secret. It might have been my reaction, too. She'd worked it up in her head and probably concluded I'd want nothing to do with her. But I didn't see her as weak. I saw her as the strong person she'd always been. Trusting didn't make you weak. Holding yourself back did.

Chapter Twenty-Three

BROOKE

*K*eeping my secret locked inside made it bigger somehow. After confessing everything to Ben, I felt like I could breathe for the first time.

I was more open to whatever was happening with him. I realized I'd been holding myself back before, creating unnecessary boundaries. I hoped I wasn't wrong in trusting that Ben was genuine.

What tilted things in his favor was his reaction to my past. I was so hard on myself that I expected others to be, too. Especially Ben. His standards were as high as mine, so I was shocked when he didn't blame me for what happened.

He'd blamed Levi. And I wonder if that was where it should have been all along.

Over the next few weeks, we texted and video-called during breakfast and at night before bed. We went to the kids' baseball games. It was nice, but I wished we had more time alone together. Work was busy because I was coordinating the renovations and anticipating the change from coffee shop to wine market, and I needed to order supplies and plan the party.

I still hadn't shared any of my plans with Ben. It seemed wrong when he was my direct competitor, and I justified that

by changing my business model. But something told me he wouldn't be happy when he found out I wasn't just giving the place a face-lift.

Ben had been too busy to stop in. Instead of working less once his business opened, he was working even more. He'd mentioned that Cammie was acting up because he wasn't home as much, and he was conflicted between work and her.

I didn't want to make things worse for him. He didn't need me demanding time with him, too, but I missed spending time together, just the two of us, and the times spent with Cammie and Hunter. That night in his yard had felt like we were a family. I liked it. I could so easily fall for them. Maybe I already had because my chest ached when I thought of Ben and Cammie.

On top of work, Ben was still trying to find a house to buy. When he had any spare time, he went to showings and researched listings online. I didn't complain because he'd said it was so we could have more time alone together. Although, how he'd manage with his parents not living in the same house, I wasn't sure.

It was time to close the store so Sam could finish the front counter area. It would raise some questions, especially with Ben. Ones I wasn't prepared to answer, but I couldn't keep my plans a secret much longer. My stomach twisted. I wasn't prepared for the fallout.

I looked up in time to see Ben opening the door and walking inside. His gaze scanned the tarps at the back of the store, and when he saw me behind the counter, he smiled. "Are you going to tell me what you're changing around here?"

He'd eschewed his suits a while back for a new uniform of white button-downs and dress slacks. Except today, he'd rolled

his cuffs, exposing his forearms. It was sexy.

I tapped my chin like I was thinking of a good reason to tell him and flashed him a flirty smile. “It’s a secret.”

“I would think we’re past keeping secrets at this point.” His words were heavy, but he kept his tone light.

Sobering, I tipped my head to the side. “You’re my competition.”

He gave me a pointed look. “I’m also your boyfriend.”

A customer came to the counter for a refill, and I nodded at my barista to handle it.

Moving from behind the counter, I motioned for him to follow me to the back. I was a little surprised by the use of the label. I leaned against the wall in the hallway and crossed my arms over my chest. My heart was pounding under my hand. “Are you my boyfriend?”

“After everything we shared, I’d say I am.”

I flushed at the memory of everything I’d shared with him.

He raised a brow. “Are you okay with that?”

I scanned my body for any sign that we were moving too fast, but there was surprisingly nothing. No knot in my stomach or tension in my neck. “I am.”

He moved closer in the dark hallway, a hand resting on my hip. “So, as your boyfriend, do I get to know what’s going on in your store?”

The part of me that hadn’t trusted anyone in years wondered if he’d mentioned that label in order for me to tell him. I bit my lip, worried I’d walked right into a trap. When we were kids, Ben wouldn’t hesitate to use any weaknesses

against me. Was it the same, or were things different now that we were in a relationship? Then I had a horrible thought—one that made me feel light-headed. Was he using me to gain an advantage? Was our entire relationship a sham?

With a concerned expression, Ben said, “Maybe we should work together. Find a way so that both of our businesses can thrive.”

Was that really what he was asking? I couldn’t figure out the truth. My head throbbed with the beginning of a headache that promised to be a doozy.

Rubbing my temples, I said, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“We’re together now. We aren’t competing against each other.”

“We kind of are. You’re taking my customers.” The numbers had been down since his grand opening, and they hadn’t returned.

He let out a disgusted breath. “There has to be a way for both of us to exist in this town.”

I bit my lip because I had a plan; I just wasn’t sure it was smart to share.

He searched my face and then sighed. “I’d like to show you something. Can you take a couple of hours off work?”

Business had been slow. “I can get away.”

A slow smile curved over his face. “Now?”

“Yeah, let me just tell Hailey I’m leaving.” She could keep an eye on the place for a couple of hours.

I popped my head into my office, where she'd been working on some ideas for the reopening. "Ben wants to take me somewhere for a couple of hours. Can you keep an eye on things?"

Hailey smiled. "That's not a problem."

I grabbed my purse from my drawer.

"Are you going to tell him about your plans?" Hailey asked softly.

I met her concerned gaze. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that."

"The longer you wait, the more he might be upset. You didn't like it when Levi kept things from you." She kept her voice quiet.

"That was different. He lied about his feelings for me. He tricked me into marrying him."

Hailey nodded. "I agree it's different. I just thought you'd be more sensitive about keeping secrets."

A pit formed in my stomach. "I'll tell him."

"Good."

Soon. I'd tell him. But first, I'd let him show me whatever he needed to show me. I wasn't ready to disrupt our relationship. I knew what I felt was nothing like what Levi had done. He never had second thoughts about deceiving me. He'd laughed when he saw how upset I was. It was a fun game for him. He got what he wanted, and he didn't care who got in the way. I was nothing like him. But even with those thoughts, my stomach twisted.

When I met Ben at the front, he carefully scanned my face. "Everything okay?"

Uneasy, I said, “Yeah. What did you want to show me?”

I was desperate to think about anything else. Hailey comparing me to Levi was unsettling and a little too close to the truth. Ben had just told me he was my boyfriend. I wasn’t ready to tarnish that declaration with one of my own. Not yet.

Ben’s face lit up as he interlaced his fingers with mine. “We’re going for a drive.”

“What is it?” I asked playfully, trying to dispel my unease.

He smiled down at me as we walked outside. “It’s a surprise.”

“I’m not big on surprises,” I said lightly. I thought I might have liked them before Levi.

“You’ll like this one. At least, I hope you will.” Ben’s expression was so open, and I squeezed his hand to reassure him.

He opened his passenger side door for me, and I slid inside, watching with affection as he rounded the hood. He wanted to share this with me, and my heart contracted in response.

“I missed you.” I wasn’t normally so willing to be open with him, but I felt like he deserved to know.

“Me, too. I hoped things would slow down, but you know how it is with a new business.”

My heart sank because I did know, and I was essentially starting over with the wine market. My time would be limited, just like his. How would we work?

Sneaking in a few hours here and there with stolen moments and texts. I wanted more. I never admitted it to anyone, but I liked being married. Not necessarily to Levi, but

the idea of it. The safety and security. The notion that I didn't need to look for anything. I was coming home to my other half. My present and my future.

I kind of hoped that my future included Ben, but I wasn't sure our lives were compatible. Two business owners would always be busy. We'd never be able to let it go and go on vacation together. Sure, we had trusted managers, but it was a lot to ask of them. The owners were the only ones who took the business as seriously.

“What are you thinking about over there?”

Should I explain my worries to him? I gestured between us with our joined hands. “We've been so busy lately. I'm just wondering how this is going to work.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” His jaw tightened, and then he looked over at me. “We'll make it work.”

I didn't have time to contemplate his words because we'd pulled up to a house. “What's this?”

“A house Juliana found for me.”

We'd discussed neighborhoods and school districts, but Ben had been undecided on what he wanted, a house with acreage or one in a neighborhood. There were trade-offs to both. The most important thing was that any house be close to his parents.

“How far is this from your parents' house?” I asked, admiring the large colonial with mature trees in the front and woods behind it.

“Ten minutes.” He let go of my hand, eagerly getting out of the car.

I met him at the hood. “You like it.”

His expression was one of barely contained anticipation. “I do. I’d love to know what you think, though.”

Juliana met us at the porch, where a swing hung on one end. “You ready to see it a second time?”

“Absolutely. I have someone important to share it with.”

I smiled, my face heating at Ben’s insinuation that I was that person.

Juliana smiled at both of us. “Let’s head inside, then.”

I admired the porch’s wood railings, knowing there was potential to hang garland and lights at Christmas time. Why I was even thinking about holiday decorations, I had no idea. It was Ben’s house, not mine. The one he’d share with his daughter.

“It has so much potential,” I said as we walked inside.

Ben nodded. “I can’t wait for you to see the backyard.”

The first floor had a living room, family room, a study, and an open kitchen with a bump-out for a large dining room table.

“You won’t miss a dining room with this space,” Juliana observed.

There were four bedrooms and three bathrooms upstairs. The perfect amount for Cammie and Ben, with room to grow. Not that I should have even been thinking about that.

“I saved the best for last,” Juliana said, leading us through the house to the backyard deck. There was a nice flat yard that gave way to woods.

“It’s certainly private,” I said.

Ben led me over to one of the large trees in the backyard. “The best part is the treehouse.”

I looked up, taking in the small wooden structure perched in the branches. “Cammie will love this.”

A smile played over his face. “I hope so. I haven’t shown her yet.”

I turned to face him. “What are you waiting for? This place is perfect.”

He looked from the treehouse to me. “I don’t know. Buying a place is so permanent, you know?”

“I feel the same.” Maybe, deep down, I still held hope that I’d buy a place with someone, but if Ben bought the house, it wouldn’t be mine.

It shouldn’t bother me, but it did. Loneliness was a hollow cavern in my chest. It intensified the sense that something was missing.

Ben looked down at me with a concerned expression on his face. “You don’t like it.”

I looked away from his gaze. “It’s not that. It just makes me remember how much I’d like a place of my own.”

He looked down at me in surprise. “I didn’t think you wanted to buy.”

My eyes fixated on the back of the house. I could see Cammie playing baseball in the yard, climbing the ladder to the treehouse with Hunter. “I didn’t, but seeing this place makes me want more for myself.”

“Having a kid makes purchasing a home a priority.”

Juliana had disappeared, probably to give us a few minutes alone to consider.

“I’ve always wanted stability,” I said softly.

A home. A husband. It wasn't so much physical stability I wanted, but emotional. When I faced the possibility of moving on, I'd always expected to feel the same soul-crushing pain I had when I found out my first marriage was fake, but I didn't. In its place was hope. It made me think I could have it all.

Ben stepped close, his hands moving to either side of my neck, his thumbs outlining a comfortable pattern on the delicate skin there. "I want you to have that. I want you to have whatever you want because you deserve it."

I smiled, but it felt weak. Brittle. "I love the house. You should put in an offer."

I stepped back, letting his hands fall from my body. I wanted to give in to the acceptance I saw in his eyes, but I was lying to him about the renovation. I wasn't the person he thought I was.

I didn't want to betray someone like Levi had, and that was exactly what I was doing.

"I just needed to confirm that you liked it, too."

Why would it matter if I loved his future house? Unless he wanted more than what we had. He wanted a future with me, too. My heart fluttered, then beat strong inside my chest. He wanted me, but I was holding something back he wouldn't appreciate.

With a smile, he called for Juliana and started to walk around the side of the house. After a few steps, he looked over his shoulder at me. He held his hand out and asked, "Are you coming?"

"Of course." I took his outstretched hand, feeling like I was a part of something bigger than me. I felt hope and love.

I love Ben Monroe.

I probably had since the first time he set up his card table at the end of his driveway and propped his cardboard sign against it, proclaiming lemonade for twenty-five cents.

My heart contracted. What did that mean for me? For us? I knew I had to tell him the truth, but how would he feel when he found out? Would he feel betrayed? Lied to? Whatever he felt, he would have a right to it. I just wasn't sure I'd be able to handle it.

He could walk away. He might never trust me again. I'd let my past dictate my future, and I made a mistake. A big one. I'd miscalculated my feelings for Ben and Cammie and underestimated myself.

I stood next to Ben, not really listening to Juliana explain the process of buying a home. My mind was on how I should break the news to him.

"I'll draft the contract according to your terms and email it to you for your signature," Juliana said with a smile.

Ben shook her hand. "I appreciate it."

My phone buzzed. I checked to make sure it wasn't the coffee shop, but it was. I held up a finger. "It's the store. I have to take this."

Ben nodded. He understood the business came first.

Watching Ben talk to Juliana, I let that newfound love for him stream through my body, warming the dark spots inside until I felt buoyed by hope, love, and desire for him.

"Brooke? It's Hailey." Her voice brought me back to the present.

"I'm getting ready to leave the shop, but the security system won't set."

“Did you call to see when they can come look at it?”

“Not until Monday.”

“Okay. That’s not too bad.” There was nothing I could do about it.

“You’re not worried?” Hailey asked.

“It sucks, but what can we do? Besides, the store is closed for a few days to complete the renovations.” Sam’s crew would be there during the day. It should be fine.

“I just wanted to make sure you were aware.”

Ben raised a brow, and his expression asked without words, *everything okay?*

I nodded. “Listen, I have to go. Ben’s waiting for me.”

“Hmm. You’re letting a man come before business?”

I looked down at the ground, my toe rubbing a spot in the dirt. “That’s not how this is.”

“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. It’s about time you took care of yourself. We have a few more days until things get crazy.”

The opening of the new shop. The one I hadn’t told Ben about. “I have a few things to take care of before then.”

I needed to tell him. Just not tonight. Tonight, we’d celebrate signing an offer for Ben’s new house. Then tomorrow, I’d tell him everything. What he meant to me, the renovation, and that it changed things. It would allow us to be in a relationship without our businesses being in direct competition.

“You do that.”

I clicked off, closing the distance between Ben and me. Juliana had already gotten into her van and was backing out.

“Everything okay?” Ben asked as I approached.

“Hailey was just checking in.”

He placed his arm around me. “You don’t need to get back to the shop this afternoon?”

It felt good. Like I belonged.

“Hailey’s got it.”

He kissed me short and chaste. “You ready to get out of here? Mom and Dad took Cammie to a movie and dinner. They won’t be home until later.”

“Sounds perfect.” I had one more night before I revealed the truth, and I planned on enjoying every moment, showing Ben how much I cared for him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

BEN

After showing Brooke the house I was interested in, we got much-needed alone time, but she seemed off. Maybe she was worried about the business. She'd mentioned that sales had been down.

I hadn't lied when I said we should work on a way to coexist in the same town. I didn't want to compete with her anymore. I wanted to support her and her store. The question was how.

Her store was closed for a few days to complete the face-lift. I hated that she needed to spend money on renovations because of me. Her business had been doing fine until mine opened. I was the reason she was stressed and possibly stretched financially. It didn't sit right with me.

Her store being closed meant she could come to Cammie's game, though. Having her by my side felt good.

After the last inning and the teams slapped hands, Cammie came over to me, her face screwed up. "I wasn't picked for the all-star team."

"I'm sorry, sweetie." I kind of expected it, but I didn't realize how upset she'd be. "It's only your first year."

Hunter ran up to Abby. "I'm an all-star!"

“That’s amazing, buddy,” Abby said.

Cammie’s shoulders slumped.

Brooke ruffled Hunter’s hair. “Congratulations.”

“Why wasn’t I picked?” Cammie asked.

I crouched down to her level. “It’s only your first year. You’re just learning.”

Cammie’s shoulders squared. “I’m good at baseball.”

She was determined, but she wasn’t the best by any stretch of the imagination.

“Hunter’s a really good pitcher.” He’d improved over the season, and coaches were commenting on his pitching and ability to throw strikes. Most kids’ tosses were still kind of wild, or they lobbed the ball.

Cammie’s eyes flashed with anger. “If you were home, we could practice more.”

I didn’t think it would have made a difference, but the familiar guilt grabbed on and squeezed.

“You promised when we moved here that you’d have more time to spend with me.” Her tone had reverted to a whine.

I had promised that. My heart contracted painfully.

“But you work even more than you did before.”

My jaw tightened, sending a sharp pain through my face. “You know that’s not true. Mornings are our special time.”

She placed her hands on her hips. “Other parents are home at night.”

“I have to work evenings and weekends. I don’t like it, but I make other time to spend with Hunter,” Abby said.

That was the exception. Most parents worked a nine-to-five or even worked from home so that they were more available to their kids.

“I’m doing my best. I’m sorry you feel this way.” What could I say? That I was looking at the bigger picture when the business was profitable, and I could hire managers and employees to run it so I could be home more often? I wanted ease, but it took hard work to get to that place. She was seven. She only understood that I wasn’t there now.

Cammie gave me one more disgusted look before stomping to the bench to gather her things.

“I’m sorry,” Brooke said, moving closer.

“She’s right.” My expression was grim.

Brooke shook her head. “It’s tough. I’ve been working for five years, and I still work crazy hours.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have a kid at home.” Brooke didn’t have a reason to come home earlier. I did.

Brooke winced.

I should have said I didn’t mean anything by my comment, but I couldn’t. The guilt from Cammie’s comments permeated everything.

I’d said I wanted to find a way for our coffee shops to exist in the market side-by-side, but was that possible if I wanted the business to be a success sooner rather than later? I needed to do what was right for Cammie and me, not necessarily Brooke. That thought settled uneasily in my stomach.

Brooke inched closer to Abby.

I should have apologized, but I couldn’t. The damage was done, and maybe it was for the best. I’d been fighting the idea

that we were in competition from the beginning. I'd naively thought we could have a relationship and leave business out of it. I was wrong.

Cammie returned with her things, and I took off for the car. She listed all the reasons why she should have been chosen for the all-star team, and I needed to focus so that I could handle the moment with the necessary care. I needed to lift her up without creating unrealistic expectations. It was a delicate balance, and I hoped I wasn't fucking everything up.

By the time we'd reached the car, tension had tightened the muscles between my shoulder blades.

Cammie settled in the back seat, and I moved the rearview mirror to see her while I was backing out. "There's always next year. Don't let this deter you. Work harder to get what you want."

She chewed her lip as she looked out the side window. "I can practice with Hunter."

"It can only help. The more you practice, the better you'll get."

"Okay."

I breathed a sigh of relief as I pulled onto the street and headed home. Hopefully, I'd averted a crisis. It was important to instill confidence but, at the same time, not inflate her ego unrealistically. Cammie could accomplish anything she wanted, but it wouldn't come without hard work.

"Can we go to the all-star game to watch Hunter?" Cammie asked.

"I think that's a great idea." Pride filled my chest. That was where I was needed. Making the business the best it could be and being present with my daughter.

Brooke didn't have the same worries or concerns. I didn't like it, but we should pull back. Take things slower. At least until I could figure out what would happen with our stores.

I pushed away the idea that Brooke fit seamlessly into our lives from the breakfast video calls that Cammie had come to enjoy as much as me to our nighttime calls, baseball games and practices, and even me stopping by her shop on occasion.

I needed to focus on Cammie, but I hated pushing Brooke away. That was why so many single parents didn't date. It was too hard. It came with complications, and ours were more than most people.

At home, Cammie hopped out of the car and went inside the house. I followed more slowly, my mind on Brooke's face when I told her she couldn't possibly understand since she didn't have a child. She'd been married. She probably wanted kids, too. I'd probably hurt her.

The slider was open, and Cammie was throwing balls against the pitch back by the time I came inside.

Mom looked up from her baking. "Cammie said she wasn't picked for the all-star team."

I placed her bag on the bench by the front door, feeling exhausted. "Yeah, but I think she's okay with it now."

"She said she needed to practice for next year," Mom said with a smile.

"That's my girl. She was so disappointed."

Mom touched my shoulder as she moved past me to close the slider. "You're doing a great job. She knows you believe in her."

“I want her to grow into a confident young woman, but one who has drive and works hard.”

Mom moved into the kitchen, where flour, sugar, and chocolate chips were on the island. “And she will, with you guiding her.”

I sat on the stool to watch my mom bake.

“How are things at the store?”

“They’re good. I suspect I’ve pulled some customers from Java Coffee.”

Mom measured the flour and dumped it into a large mixing bowl. “How is Brooke? I heard she was renovating her shop.”

I kept an eye on Cammie while engaging with Mom. “She hasn’t said much about it other than it needed a face-lift.”

Mom tipped her head to the side, looking at a recipe she had up on her table. “I thought it looked fine. It’s only five years old or so.”

“I guess my opening prompted it.” Although she’d never discussed it with me.

Mom glanced at me. “You don’t talk business when you’re together, do you?”

Mom knew we were dating. Cammie talked about the times Brooke had been over, and Mom had walked in on several of our morning video calls. “We don’t.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

It was self-preservation, but now I wondered why I thought it was possible to separate our personal relationship from our businesses. “I’m starting to think it isn’t. Cammie mentioned how I’m not home as much as I promised.”

“We knew it would be busy at first, and you know how seven-year-olds are. They have no concept of time.”

“I feel horrible. I want to be here more. It’s why I moved here.”

“You’re working hard to provide for her. She’ll understand that.”

“Just not now.” Maybe when she was older.

Mom’s lips pursed. “I think it’s great you’re dating Brooke and taking some time for yourself. Before Maria died, you were all about work. Then it was all about Cammie.” She held up a hand when I wanted to interrupt. “I know that was necessary, but when do you take time for yourself? You’re not just a dad.”

“But that’s the biggest part of me. Dad and business owner.”

“You’re a man. You deserve to be happy, too. I know you hoped you’d make a life with Maria.”

“She was never interested in us being a family.” She was right not to push us into something that would never have worked. I could see that now.

“How does Brooke feel about things?”

“We haven’t discussed the future.” We started as friends with benefits, and I wanted to convince her we could be more, but I hadn’t anticipated it would be me who would pull back.

Mom’s lips pursed. “That’s too bad.”

Mom’s disapproval got to me more than anyone else’s.

“Maybe we can try again in a few months when the shop is doing better.”

Mom set the bowl to the side. “What if it’s too late then?”

I sighed. “I messed things up today. I told her she couldn’t possibly understand what I was going through with the business because I had a child and she didn’t.”

Mom sucked in a breath. “That wasn’t very nice.”

That was an understatement.

“You apologized.”

It wasn’t a question. She had so much faith in me that she assumed I did the right thing.

I grimaced. “Not yet.”

“But you’re going to as soon as possible.” Mom’s voice raised with each word.

“Maybe it’s better if I leave it as it is. I don’t have time for a relationship and Cammie.”

Mom shook her head with disapproval. “You have time for what you make time for.”

That was an interesting concept.

“If you want to make it work, then you will.”

“You make it sound so simple.” And I knew it wasn’t.

“You’re complicating things. The question is, how do you feel?” She leaned on the counter, studying me.

It had been a long time since I’d bothered to feel anything other than surviving Maria’s death, the move, and the opening of the business. I felt bad about what I’d said to Brooke, but there was a lightness there, too—hope? “I feel hopeful.”

“Hold on to that feeling.”

I hesitated, wondering if I should tell her more. “Brooke’s been through a lot. She doesn’t trust easily.”

She pointed the spatula at me. “But she trusts you.”

I thought back to how she was after she told me the truth when we were camping. “I think she does.”

“Then you can’t betray her trust. It would be like reliving what she already went through.”

Would it be?

“I raised you to be a good man. I raised you to be in touch with your feelings.”

I didn’t like to think about it like that, but she’d raised me to consider how my actions affected others.

She tipped her head to the side. “What’s your heart telling you to do?”

It was telling me not to sever my connection to Brooke. “To not let her go.”

“There you have it.” She resumed mixing the dough, leaving me to my thoughts.

A buzz came from my phone, and I looked at the screen to see a message from Juliana. The sellers had accepted my offer on the house. “Looks like I bought a house.”

Mom’s face lit up and then fell. “I’m happy for you, but I’ll miss you around here.”

“Cammie will still be here most days,” I reminded her.

Her forehead wrinkled. “It won’t be the same.”

Watching Cammie play outside, I said, “We need our own space.”

“I know you do. I still want to see her all the time, and I want to cook for you.”

“Things won’t change when we move out. I promise.” That seemed to satisfy her. The thing was, though, when I imagined living in that house, I saw Brooke there—gently chiding Cammie to come down from the treehouse, pitching to her in the backyard, and even helping me cook in the kitchen.

Mom formed a round ball with the dough and carefully placed each one on a cookie sheet.

I spent more time with Cammie that night, being extra attentive. I wanted her to feel loved and important. We watched a movie, and then I tucked her into bed, reading a chapter book about dragons.

A successful business allowed me the freedom to spend more time with my family, but I couldn’t help but think we were incomplete without Brooke. I needed to apologize for my careless words, and I needed to make things right. I just hoped it wasn’t too late.

Chapter Twenty-Five

BROOKE

I didn't have a child. I wasn't a mother. What he said wasn't wrong, but it hurt in ways I could barely understand. Pain pierced my chest, exploding like a bomb, reaching every part of my body. My body ached. I was exhausted.

When I'd married Levi, I'd wanted it all, a husband, children, a home. I didn't get those, and when it all fell apart, I thought it wasn't in the cards for me.

The worst part was that Ben didn't take back his words. He hadn't apologized or even contacted me since.

It was like he'd used those words to put a wall between us. He wanted to pull back from our relationship, and if I'd learned anything with Levi, it was to take people at face value. Ben was telling me he didn't want to be involved, and I needed to heed that if I didn't want to get hurt even more.

While the shop was closed for renovations, Hailey came to my house each day to plan the reopening. People expected us to do something since we were renovating the store.

I was losing customers to Ben during the closure, but hopefully, I'd gain new ones when people found out what we planned to offer in the future.

We hired Gia from Happily Ever Afters to handle the party. She'd managed a few of the other shops' grand opening parties, and everyone raved about her.

She'd suggested an evening cocktail party. We'd serve wine and appetizers to showcase the new drink and food menu. It was perfect, and it would set us apart from Bean Rush.

The security system company had postponed their scheduled maintenance to next week, saying they couldn't work on the system with the construction crew there.

I hadn't invited Ben personally because I wasn't sure where we stood. I'd invited all the Shops on Main owners, though, and he was included with them.

I understood that Ben was stressed with his store, the move, and Cammie, but I deserved more than comments about how I didn't get it. I understood having a business and juggling a personal life along with it. Maybe not to the extent he did, but I could be there for him if he let me.

The renovations finished on Wednesday night, and I'd done a walk-through with Sam on Thursday, thanking him for his work. As an added bonus, his crew had cleaned before they left. Hailey helped me stock the new shelves with our gourmet food and wine behind our new bar. We'd even hired a chef to handle the appetizers and small plates we'd serve in the evenings. Originally, I'd wanted to wait to add food, but I changed my mind. I didn't want to be cautious anymore. I wanted to go all out.

On the night of the party, I dressed in a gold dress that shimmered when I twirled. I felt beautiful, even if it felt like something was missing.

I unlocked the door before anyone else arrived and ran a hand over the new bar top. The coffee machines stayed, but we'd added wine and champagne glasses and bottles of wine on the shelf. When a customer walked in, it would be clear we weren't just a coffee shop. I hoped the rebranding was what the shop needed.

I'd boldly decided to make a change, and I hoped it worked out. If it didn't, I didn't have the finances to tide me over until I figured out something else. It had to work.

Gia arrived shortly thereafter, and I helped her with the displays and decorations. It was classy and elegant. It would be a nice evening out for the shop owners and anyone else curious about my renovations.

When the first customer walked in, there was a gasp. "You're not a coffee shop anymore?"

I smiled reassuringly. "We still serve coffee, but we also serve wine."

She clasped her hands together. "That's just perfect."

I'd left the new sign out front covered. I wanted everyone to be surprised when they walked in. The full reveal was planned for later in the evening.

I was pleased that so many people came. I thought it might just be our shop friends, but there were plenty of curious people who'd shown, and I hoped it translated into a steady customer base.

A couple of hours into the party, my cheeks hurt from smiling, and my chest felt hollow because I didn't have anyone to share my joy with.

"Are you ready for the big reveal?" Gia asked.

“I am.”

We moved everyone outside, and Gia handed me the string that would remove the tarp.

“One, two, three,” Hailey prompted.

I pulled the string, and the tarp slipped off the new wooden sign that read Market Tavern. There were vines intertwined in the letters with purple grapes.

Zoe had designed the logo for me, and it was perfect.

“You should be so proud,” Hailey said as cheers erupted over the crowd.

I took a moment to bask in the moment. I’d done it. I’d pivoted when it was necessary to try something new. I was innovative and creative.

“What’s this?” I heard a man say behind me. I turned around to see Ben, his gaze fixated on the sign.

“What are you doing here?” It came out sounding more accusatory than I’d meant it to.

He stood next to me with his arms crossed over his chest, his feet shoulder-width apart. He didn’t look like my boyfriend right then. He looked pissed and maybe even a little bit hurt. “I thought I’d see what all the rumors were about. I thought you were just getting a ‘face-lift.’”

He raised a brow at the sign I’d been so proud of a minute ago.

I swallowed hard. “I decided to rebrand. I needed to save the business.”

“Things were that bad?” His words were deceptively calm.

“Sales were down. I didn’t see how we could coexist, fighting over the same customers. It wasn’t good for us.”

“And when I suggested we work together, why didn’t you tell me about this?” He uncurled his arms and raised a hand toward the store where customers were filing in to enjoy the food and drink.

“I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Even from me?” The hurt in his tone was unmistakable.

“I wanted to tell you. I planned to, but then you said what you did the other day, and I didn’t hear from you. I thought we were over.” I might have been wrong to assume that, but I thought he’d contact me to apologize.

“I regret what I said to you.”

“You didn’t tell me that.” I took a step back, needing distance from him.

“I was going to; I’ve just been busy with the shop, the new house, and Cammie.”

“You got the house?” It didn’t escape my notice that he hadn’t called me with the news.

“Yeah.” His shoulders slumped.

“Congratulations. I’m taking myself out of the coffee market, not entirely, but my focus will be on the gourmet store in the back and wine and appetizers in the afternoon and evening. It will complement my book club and trivia offerings.” It was what I should have told him weeks ago. If I had, he might be standing by my side and not faced off against me.

He met my gaze without flinching. “I just wished you’d told me.”

“Would it have made a difference?” He’d said the comment that set us apart from each other. He had a kid, and I didn’t. He didn’t think I’d understand where he was coming from. That his priorities were different.

“This is about so much more than one ill-timed comment. I thought you’d grown to trust me, but you didn’t, because you didn’t trust me with the most important thing going on in your life.”

“You were the most important thing going on in my life. Not this. This is just business. We agreed to keep business separate from our relationship, and this is just an extension from that.”

He was quiet for a few seconds. “We never had that discussion. You just assumed.”

I racked my brain for the conversation, but couldn’t find one. “This will be good for us.”

“Congratulations on your new store.” Ben stepped back, and I knew I’d lost him.

I’d been too scared to take a chance and tell him the truth. To let him in fully. We were talking about my present and my future, and Ben deserved to know.

Before I could call Ben back, he was gone.

“Everything okay?” Hailey asked.

I offered a weak smile, dread swirling in my gut. “Yeah, he was just surprised.”

Hailey’s mouth dropped open. “You never told him.”

My jaw set in a stubborn line, and I said, “He said something last week that made me think he didn’t want to be with me anymore. He pulled away first.”

“A guy like Ben wouldn’t like to be kept in the dark.”

He’d wanted to help me and be part of the decision-making process, but I’d treated him like a competitor, when he hadn’t been that in a long time.

When I didn’t respond, Hailey said with a disapproving look, “I’d better go inside in case anyone needs anything.”

Hailey headed inside, smiling and greeting my customers, doing what I should have been doing, but I was incapable of moving from my spot on the sidewalk.

The joy of the reveal and the party gave way to exhaustion. I’d worked so hard to come up with a solution to my problems that I’d messed things up with Ben. Probably irreparably.

I was still trying to protect myself. I’d acted like Ben was Levi. Like I needed to protect myself from him instead of trusting him with my plan. Maybe he could have helped, too.

Standing in front of the store, I felt small and alone. Ben could have been by my side, but I’d ruined everything. I hadn’t trusted him as I should have.

I could apologize, but would it change anything? I didn’t trust him, and I wasn’t sure I’d decide differently in the future. Maybe I was irrevocably broken.

With a sigh, I moved inside, greeting the customers and accepting their praise and good wishes. A part of me felt like I didn’t deserve the good that came from it because I’d lied to everyone about it. I hadn’t even trusted my Shops on Main friends with my plans. I still set myself apart from everyone. I didn’t rely on many people other than Hailey and Abby.

At the end of the night, most of the customers had filed out, leaving just Zoe, Remi, Hailey, and Sophie. Savannah went home because her son, Miles, had been waking up in the

middle of the night with bad dreams, and she wanted to be there in case it happened again. She had someone to go home to. All my friends did. I was the only one, besides Sophie, who didn't have a significant other. And I had no one to blame but myself.

Hailey handed me a glass of champagne.

We lifted our glasses.

“To new beginnings,” I said, because it was expected, even though the sentiment felt hollow.

“To new beginnings,” everyone parroted.

Then Hailey added, “To worthy chances.”

“To finding happiness,” Sophie added softly.

She sounded just as melancholy as I did. “Is everything okay?”

“Mark is moving back home.”

I remembered Sophie saying something about an ex that had gotten away when Remi and Colton had some bumps in their relationship. But I couldn't remember the details. “Your ex, who's in the military?”

Sophie nodded. “He wants to raise his daughter here.”

“What happened between you two?” Maybe I shouldn't pry, but I was curious about other's relationship problems.

Sophie sat on one of the bar stools. “He wanted me to marry him and move wherever he was stationed. I couldn't leave my family.”

I remembered her mother died when she was young, and she'd helped her father take care of her four younger sisters.

“I held out hope that he’d reach out and suggest we try long distance, but he moved on to someone else. She got pregnant.”

“You still like him?” I asked.

Sophie nodded miserably. “I think I’ll always wonder if he’s the one who got away, you know?”

“I’ve never dated anyone that I’d want to even be friends with again.” To be fair, my only serious boyfriend ended up being fake.

“Sounds like the timing was off,” Zoe said softly.

Zoe knew all about timing. She was dating her best friend from childhood. She’d worried making a move would ruin their friendship, and it almost had until Max had gotten his act together.

“And sometimes our memories are enhanced, making us think things were better than they actually were,” Zoe continued.

Right after Levi said he wanted a divorce, I could only remember our relationship in a positive light. After time to reflect, I saw him for who he was—a man desperate to lock me down to get what he wanted. Since I unloaded my baggage on Ben, I hadn’t felt ashamed about the situation. I could see now that Levi was in the wrong.

“You won’t know unless you see him again,” Hailey said reasonably.

“I think my dad always held out hope we’d get back together.”

It was so much easier to see the issues in other people's relationships. It was harder when it was your life.

"Is everything okay with you and Ben?" Sophie asked me.

I held my hands out to reference the store renovation. "I didn't tell him about this."

"I could see why he'd be upset," she said.

"The thing was, I was going to tell him. But then he said something about me not understanding what he was going through because I didn't have kids. We didn't talk for almost a week. I wasn't sure we were even still together."

"Did you reach out to him?" Zoe asked.

"No." It was hard to admit when I was wrong in a relationship. The urge to protect myself was so strong. I held everything inside. Opening up and apologizing were new levels of intimacy I wasn't ready for before.

"It seems to me you're both a little bit at fault," Zoe said.

"You think I should talk to him? Apologize again?" I asked the women.

"It can't hurt," Zoe said.

"Especially if he means something to you," Sophie added.

I thought about his unexpected support the night I told him about Levi and how it made me feel. My chest filled with hope. "I love him."

Hailey placed a hand over mine. "Then you have to try."

I drew myself up to my full height. "This time, I'm not going to sit around and let someone else tell me how my life will go. I'm going after what I want."

"That's right," Sophie said with a smile.

I pointed a finger at her. “But promise me you’ll see Mark when he gets home. You can say it’s to make sure he’s okay, but explore whether he’s the one who got away. Otherwise, you’ll always wonder.”

Sophie sighed. “I’ll think about it.”

I smiled. “You sound like Ben’s daughter, Cammie, when she finally agrees to do something she doesn’t want to do.”

“You love her, too.” It wasn’t a question. Sophie’s expression was one of sympathy and understanding.

I sobered. “I do.”

“Is Ben different from your ex?” Zoe asked.

“In every way. I think the biggest difference is that Ben’s in this with me. He got upset when I omitted my plans for the store. He was upset when his daughter complained about him not being home with her enough. He’s real. He’s not in my life to use me or to bide his time until he gets what he wants.” Remembering how he’d shown me the house he wanted to buy, maybe he’d intended for me to be his future. He was just afraid to push me too hard. And who could blame him? I didn’t have the best track record.

“Your ex used you?” Zoe asked.

I flushed, knowing it was time to correct that error. These women had become my friends, and it was time to rely on them for support. They deserved the truth, too. “I forget I haven’t told everyone. I thought our relationship—our marriage—was real, but as soon as he got his green card, he said he wanted a divorce.”

Zoe’s mouth dropped open. “You were blindsided. I can’t believe he did that to you.”

“It took me a while to wrap my mind around it. But now, I see our relationship didn’t even compare to what I have with Ben.”

“Group hug,” Remi said, her arms going wide. We all huddled in one big circle, our arms around each other. We started out as business owners looking for advice but had become so much more.

Remi looked at us with tears in her eyes. “You guys are my best friends. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You don’t have to find out because we’ll always be there for you,” I said, knowing how important those relationships were in my life. I’d thought I was protecting myself, but I was actually holding myself back from real connections. I wasn’t willing to let Levi run my life anymore. I was taking back control.

“Who needs more champagne?” Sophie asked, holding up the bottle.

She refilled our glasses while I took a break to go to the bathroom.

As nice as it was to have my friends there, I wanted to share the moment—my victory—with Ben.

I should have agreed when he wanted to work together. I should have told him then. It was my fault. I opened our text chain and asked if we could talk when he’d calmed down.

I’d be patient. He was worth it. Ben and Cammie were worth everything. He needed time, and I could give him that.

It felt good to let go with my friends. We drank the bubbly liquid until the room blurred, and we were tipsy.

Max showed up at midnight to give Zoe a ride home and congratulated me. “I think your wine market will do well. It’s a great addition to the town.”

The others quickly murmured their agreement.

My heart filled with hope. “Thank you. I’m so happy to be here and still in business. When I heard that Bean Rush was opening, I was worried.”

Zoe patted my hand. “I think you’ve created the perfect niche for yourself.”

Sophie shook her finger at me in admonishment. “Don’t forget you can come to us if you’re struggling.”

“I will.”

“I think it’s time to close up shop for the night,” Max said.

I just wanted to make it across town and go to sleep. Thankfully, Max offered to drive all of us home. It was a short walk, but I wasn’t up for it. I didn’t want to be alone in my thoughts.

When Max dropped me off, everyone wished me a good night, and I walked to the porch by myself. Max’s lights stayed bright until I unlocked the door and shut it behind me. I watched as he backed out, and the lights faded away.

I toed off my shoes in the doorway, not worried about anyone tripping on them because I lived alone.

My home had always been a sanctuary, but it suddenly seemed barren. The walls weren’t lined with pictures of a life well-lived. The coffee table wasn’t crowded with mementos and knick-knacks like Hailey’s grandmother’s was. It wasn’t filled with the love and laughter of a boyfriend or a child.

It was mine, which used to be enough, but it wasn't anymore. I rubbed the pain under my sternum.

Ben was hurt by something I did. If we'd talked earlier, we would have come out stronger on the other side. We were intelligent entrepreneurs, and together, we'd have been unstoppable. Instead, I shut him out and hurt him in more ways than one.

Entering my bedroom, I slipped my shirt over my head, flinging it to the nearby armchair. There was no one to complain that I was messy, so I left it. I pushed down my jeans and plopped face-first onto the bed in just my bra and panties.

Thankfully, the room was warm because I didn't have the energy to pull a blanket over me. The room was spinning anyway. I closed my eyes, hoping for oblivion.

I'd deal with the fallout tomorrow when things weren't so raw.

Chapter Twenty-Six

BEN

Last night, I'd driven home in a fog where nothing seemed quite real. I hadn't felt competitive with Brooke in a long time. Sure, we hadn't talked business, but I never thought she'd go behind my back and create something entirely new.

If I wasn't so hurt by her betrayal, I could acknowledge that it was brilliant. She'd created a new market for herself.

I just wished she'd thought enough of me to let me in. She'd been badly hurt, but I thought she was past it. That she trusted me. I was wrong.

It was no different than when I thought Maria would want to mend our relationship when she became pregnant. But she'd moved on to bigger and better things. I was never the end game. I was just the pit stop along the way to better things.

Fuck, that hurt. I had tonight to feel sorry for myself, and then I needed to suck it up. Cammie needed me. Bean Rush needed me. I needed to buy new furniture, orchestrate yet another move, and ensure that Cammie felt loved and cared for. It was a tall order that required all my strength and focus.

At home, the light over the stove was still lit. My mother's doing. It felt good to have someone thinking about me.

In the living room, the TV screen flickered over my mom's sleeping form. I went to cover her with a blanket, and she startled awake. Blinking against the light, she said, "Oh, how was the party?"

I'd told Mom I was going to Brooke's reopening. I'd expected a fresh coat of paint, maybe even new shelves, but not an entirely different store that sold primarily wine rather than coffee.

"It wasn't what I expected." I plopped into the armchair next to her.

She slowly sat up and clicked off the TV. "I can't believe I fell asleep so early."

"You were tired." She'd been waiting up on me. Some habits were hard to break.

She rubbed her eyes, then focused on me. "Why do you say that?"

My jaw tightened. "Brooke rebranded her store. It's a wine market now. She's going to serve wine and appetizers and probably host book clubs and trivia nights."

"And that's a bad thing?" Mom asked.

I leaned my elbows on my thighs. "It is when your girlfriend doesn't tell you about it."

"You're upset that she kept it a secret?" Mom asked carefully.

"Well, yeah." What didn't she understand? It was so clear in my head. Brooke had lied.

"You're her direct competitor. Maybe she thought it wouldn't be good to tell you her plans. Can you honestly say

that you wouldn't have done something similar in the same situation?

I couldn't help it. My mind was already whirring with possible marketing ideas. Grudgingly, I said, "Probably not."

"Does it hurt your store? If she's selling wine and you're selling coffee, that seems like two different markets." Mom had listened to me enough over the years to pick up the entrepreneurial language.

"She still has her coffee machines." I could see that through the window, but everything else was new and shiny. I could see the locals' excitement for another business in the area.

"It seems to me like she intends to serve food and alcohol but doesn't want to leave her loyal customers completely in the lurch by not serving coffee."

"Maybe."

"You know it's true, so what's the problem?"

"She didn't include me in her plans. I thought we were close, that we were moving toward a future together. Not going down different paths." I felt unbelievably low because that's what Maria had said when she turned down exploring a relationship as more than coparents.

Mom gave me a pointed look. "Have you talked to Brooke about it?"

"Briefly."

"Maybe you need to talk about it some more. I think there's a solution here if you're willing to listen."

I didn't want to acknowledge that she was probably right. Brooke and I were adults. We needed to have a conversation. I

just wasn't ready for it yet.

"I'm going to bed," Mom said, disapproval evident in her tone.

"Night, Mom." I kissed her cheek when she bent down, touching my shoulder.

"Don't stay up too late."

I smiled; some things never changed. When she was gone, I checked my phone. There was a message from Brooke. She wanted to talk.

I was pleased she'd come to the same conclusion, but I couldn't tonight. Not when things were so fresh.

Maybe I'd feel up for it tomorrow. I scrubbed a hand over my face. Tomorrow I'd need to answer my customers' questions about the new developments at Java Coffee, now known as Market Tavern.

Would that reporter be sniffing around again? Looking for a deeper story? I wasn't ready for any of it.

I leaned back on the couch. I wanted to go through life with a partner, not someone who didn't trust me with what was going on in her life. I hadn't treated her like competition in a long time, but maybe she didn't know that. Maybe she thought we were still in the thick of it, and she felt like she couldn't come to me.

I wanted to wallow in my pain, but Mom's words were penetrating my brain and making me doubt walking out on Brooke.



I went to work the next day with less enthusiasm than usual. I wasn't ready for the questions I knew would be waiting for me, so I headed straight to my office, hoping to hide out for most of the day.

Christopher popped his head into my office. "You see the news?"

I gestured for him to sit across from me. "I assume you're talking about Java Coffee's transformation?"

"That's the one. It's called Wine Market or something now, isn't it?"

"Market Tavern." Those two words were imprinted on my brain. I'd never forget that sight.

His eyes widened. "From your expression, I assume you didn't know."

I laughed without any humor. "I didn't."

"Aren't you and Brooke dating?"

At my raised brow, he added, "I've overheard a few phone conversations."

"I haven't exactly been discreet." Not around Christopher. We'd discussed my feelings for her previously.

"I kind of assumed you'd kept it from me, and rightfully so."

"The only other person I've talked to about it is my mother."

Christopher leaned closer. "You need advice?"

"I think I know what I need to do, but I'm not sure I'm ready."

“I’m here for you.” Although Christopher was my manager, he’d quickly become a trusted friend.

I sighed, trying to collect my thoughts. “I don’t think she trusted me enough to tell me what was going on.”

Christopher winced. “That’s tough. I’m sorry.”

“She has a good reason not to trust people. Her ex. But I thought she still trusted me enough to include me.”

“I get that you wanted her to come to you.”

“I’d offered to do this together. To come up with a marketing plan that both of us could thrive from.”

Christopher considered me for a few seconds before saying, “She means something to you.”

“I love her. But I haven’t told her. I don’t think I even realized it until last night.” When I thought of what it would be like to move on without her, it was inconceivable.

“Can you work it out?”

“I think I can. I’m just not sure I’m ready.”

“You want some time to get over the shock?”

And the hurt. “I think so.”

“What do you need from me?” Christopher asked, linking his hands behind his head.

“Tell me I’m on the right track.” I was desperate for someone to tell me what to do.

“No one can tell you that. What do you want to do?”

“I want to talk to her. To figure out where her head was at. I have some ideas, but I need to know she can grow to trust me.”

He nodded. “That’s reasonable.”

“She wants to talk.”

“Why don’t you set a time in a day or two? That gives you some breathing room, and she’s not left hanging.”

“I can do that.”

He dropped his hands to his thighs before standing with a groan. “Now that you’ve heard my stellar relationship advice, I have to get back to work.”

“Thanks, man. Not just for today, but for everything. I couldn’t have done this without you.” He’d helped me manage the renovations when I was still in Philadelphia.

“You’re welcome. Now get back to work.”

I laughed, shaking my head at his teasing. Then I shot off a text to Brooke, asking if we could talk in a couple of days.

I wanted to see her shop. I hadn’t even gotten past the front door, and I was curious about what she’d planned.

I stayed in my office the rest of the day to avoid customers’ questions. I wasn’t ready for them or questions about our relationship. Especially when I didn’t even know where we stood.

When Brooke finally returned my message, it was dark out, and I was just packing up to go home.

Brooke: Sorry I didn’t get back to you earlier. Do you think we can hold off on a meeting? I’m just not sure when I’ll be free.

I sucked in a breath. Had she changed her mind? Was she rethinking our relationship? I wasn’t even sure what to say to

that. It felt like a brush-off. I wanted to talk like adults, but she was retreating into her shell.

I locked up and said goodbye to Christopher. While I meant to head toward my car, at the last second, I kept going. I wanted to see her. I needed to know what she was thinking. So, I decided to just walk past her shop, and if she were alone, maybe I'd go in. Maybe I wouldn't. I didn't know what I was doing, just that I needed to see her.

I was deep into an internal debate over how smart it was to walk down the street by Java Coffee—Market Tavern.

I paused at the front of her store. The window was covered with a tarp, and it was dark inside. I asked a few people who stood nearby. "Do you know what happened here?"

"I heard there was a break-in."

"Do you know when it happened?" My chest tightened. Was Brooke present when someone broke in? Was she alone? Hurt? My mind was racing with the possibilities.

"Sorry. I don't." The man returned his attention to his phone.

I got out my phone, attempting to text Brooke, but my fingers felt clumsy. Instead, I called her. I needed to hear her voice. It rang, then went to voicemail.

I needed to be home with Cammie for dinner. I'd promised her I'd spend more time with her. I couldn't cancel, but I needed to see Brooke. I racked my brain for our mutual friends, wondering which one would take pity on me and give me more information. I walked quickly to my car, dialing Max as I went.

He answered, and I heard the din of the bar crowd in the background.

“Can you tell me what happened at Java Coffee? Is Brooke okay?” My pulse was racing.

“You don’t know?”

“I haven’t talked to Brooke. We had a disagreement and...” I wasn’t sure how else to explain it.

“I was there last night. The girls were celebrating the reopening, and the alarm hadn’t been working. The company couldn’t come until next week, but someone broke in after we left.”

I squeezed my phone tightly. “She wasn’t hurt.”

“She’s physically okay. There’s been a string of break-ins. Nothing in a little while, but we’ve had our share of issues the past year. Colton Castle is the officer handling the case if you want to check with him. I’m not sure they’re any closer to figuring out who did it than when they broke into Remi’s shop or mine.”

The relief I felt that Brooke was okay didn’t dim my worry because I needed to see her and reassure myself in person.

“How bad is the damage to the store?” My heart stuttered a breath while I waited for his answer.

“It’s bad. A total loss,” Max muttered.

“Fuck.” I hated that for her.

I had to see her. She had to be hurting.

“She has insurance for things like this,” Max said reasonably.

“It’s devastating when she was already closed for a week for renovations, and now she has to start over.”

“She’s waiting to hear back from the contractor if they have room to fit her in again.”

“I appreciate you telling me.” I was already in my car and on my way to Cammie.

“I don’t know what’s going on between you two...”

We weren’t close, but I hoped to build relationships with the other shop owners. Not everything had to be a competition. “Things are messed up, but I hope I can fix it.”

The noise seemed to lessen. Maybe he’d walked into his office. “We all screw things up at some point. It’s how we approach fixing it that says something about our character.”

Brooke hadn’t trusted me, but I hadn’t had faith in her either. I’d walked away.

“I hope I’m not too late.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks, man.” We hung up, and I pulled into my mom’s driveway. I wanted to be with two special people tonight.

When I walked inside, Cammie ran up to me. “You’re home!”

“I said I would be.” Then I crouched down. “But our friend, Brooke, isn’t feeling so great tonight. I was kind of hoping we could bring her dinner.”

Her eyes lit up. “Pizza?”

I smiled. “Sure. Why not?”

I straightened and asked Mom, “You mind if we eat dinner with Brooke?”

“I heard what happened at her store. It’s a shame.”

“What happened?” Cammie asked.

“There was some damage that she needs to fix.”

“We can help her. Right, Daddy?”

I smiled, proud that she was so sweet and earnest. “That’s why we’re going to see her. She needs us.”

Cammie nodded solemnly.

I just hoped she’d want to see us. That I didn’t ruin everything the other night.

“Take her some cookies. I baked them today.” Mom bustled around the kitchen, grabbed a container, and placed the cookies inside.

“She’ll definitely want cookies,” Cammie said.

For kids, you could solve anything with treats. For adults, it was different. I’d had no time to plan anything. I needed to see that she was okay, and I hoped she’d be happy to see us. Beyond that, I didn’t have a plan.

Before I headed outside, Mom said, “Please tell her that we want to help, too.”

My heart was heavy, thinking about what Brooke was going through. She’d taken a risk in renovating her store, and someone destroyed it. “I’ll tell her.”

Mom patted my cheek. “I’m glad you’re going to see her.”

I nodded, not able to tell her what I was thinking. That I was scared that it was too little, too late. I got into the car and headed toward Brooke’s house. Cammie was uncharacteristically quiet. It was almost like she sensed that I was worried.

I was concerned about what Brooke would say about me showing up, but at the same time, I had to make sure she was okay. And I needed Cammie to be with me. Something told me bringing her was the right thing to do.

I parked, helping Cammie out of the car. She insisted on carrying the container of cookies and skipped on the sidewalk ahead of me. There was no way Brooke could resist her.

Cammie knocked on the door before I could get there. I tensed on the porch, my hands in my pockets. What would she think when she saw us on her doorstep?

My heart was literally in my throat as we waited.

Cammie looked over her shoulder at me. “Is she home?”

“I don’t know.” She might be with friends. I hadn’t even thought about that. I’d been so determined to see her, to make sure she was okay.

Cammie rolled her eyes. “You didn’t tell her we were coming?”

I cleared my throat. “Not exactly.”

“Daddy,” she said, exasperated.

The door finally creaked open. Brooke stood there in a soft-looking T-shirt that read, *Read and Drink Coffee*, and black sweats. “What are you—”

Cammie pressed the container into her hands. “We brought you cookies.”

Brooke stood there, her gaze flitting from Cammie to me.

I knew I should say something, but the words were stuck in my throat.

Cammie placed her hands on her hips. “Can I have one?”

I cleared my throat. “Cammie, don’t be rude.”

Brooke shook her head. “I’m sorry. Of course, you can come in. Do you like milk with your cookies?” Brooke asked as we followed her into the kitchen.

I’d been there before, but tonight, I looked at it with fresh eyes. It was clean and simple.

Brooke placed a couple of cookies and a glass of milk in front of Cammie. “I’m assuming this is okay?”

“We were supposed to eat dinner first, but sure.” I could barely think straight, much less remember what we were supposed to be doing there.

Cammie slapped her forehead. “We were supposed to pick up a pizza on the way, Daddy.”

“We can order in.” That was true whether it was at Brooke’s or at my parent’s. Maybe I’d even take Cammie out to eat.

“I’m sorry we showed up unannounced, but we were worried about you.”

Brooke grabbed a long cardigan from a nearby stool and wrapped it around her body like she was holding herself together. “I’m fine.”

“We heard what happened at your shop.” I let my voice trail off, hoping she’d give me more information.

“It happened sometime last night. The alarm wasn’t working—” She stopped abruptly with a glance at Cammie.

What could I even say? It was unfortunate, or it sucked? All of that was true, but nothing solved her reality.

“Can I watch TV, Daddy?” Cammie spun on the stool and slid off. Her plate was empty, and her milk was mostly drunk.

“If that’s okay with Brooke.”

“The remote is on the coffee table,” Brooke said.

Cammie ran and jumped onto the couch. Normally, I would have admonished her, but my attention was on Brooke.

I stepped closer and then stopped, not sure how she’d receive me. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes welled with tears. “I took a huge risk, and it didn’t pay off.”

“It’s not over yet.”

Her shoulders tensed. “Isn’t it? I’ll lose weeks redoing the renovation. I’m not sure I’ll survive. The renovation sucked up all my savings.”

I wanted to move closer, to touch her and draw on the connection we’d formed over the last few weeks. “Is there somewhere we can go that’s a bit more private, but I can still keep an eye on Cammie?”

Brooke nodded and moved through the living room. “The deck.”

She opened the slider, gesturing for me to go first. It was a small deck only a few feet off the ground. The yard was neatly trimmed, and flowers lined the perimeter.

She sat in one of the two chairs, and I sat next to her.

“I’m sorry for last night. I overreacted.”

She looked at me hesitantly. “Did you?”

“I was upset when you didn’t tell me your plans. Not because of Bean Rush, but because I thought we were in a

relationship, and you tell each other things when you're in one."

Her shoulders slumped. "You're right. I screwed up. I wanted to tell you, but then there was so much distance between us this week."

"Again, my fault. I pulled away. I'm used to it just being Cammie and me. Even when Maria was alive, she wasn't with us. We parented separately. We didn't do things together. We had different rules for Cammie in each of our houses, but it worked for us.

"I get that. I'm not trying to come between you and Cammie."

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm sorry, I'm not expressing myself very well." I took her hand in mine, thankful she didn't immediately pull away. "I want you to trust me, and I guess when I saw your sign, I felt betrayed in a way."

I cringed at that because it was nothing like what her ex had done to her.

She covered my hand with her free one. "I screwed up, too. I shouldn't have kept it from you. Heck, you probably could have helped. Hailey kept pushing me to do it, but you're right; trusting anyone is hard for me."

We'd both screwed up. "Do you think you could grow to trust me with time?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it again. Finally, she said, "I fell into old patterns, assuming you wouldn't have my back. You told me you were interested in working together, and it didn't compute. I couldn't stop thinking that you might have alternate motives."

“I can’t imagine what you went through, finding out your marriage was fraudulent. That has to be the worst kind of betrayal.”

Brooke shook her head. “I don’t feel embarrassed anymore, and that’s because of you.”

We were better people because of what we’d gone through in the past. It didn’t make us automatically better people; we still had to work on it each day. Occasionally, we’d fall into old patterns, and we’d have to remind each other of who we were. We weren’t those people who were afraid to get hurt or trust each other. We believed in each other.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

BROOKE

“*Y*ou shouldn’t feel ashamed. You didn’t do anything wrong.” He moved his chair forward so that his spread legs bracketed mine, and he took my hands in his.

“Maybe not then, but it’s affected how I treated you.”

Ben looked down at my hands and sighed. “We can’t go back and change it. All we can do is forgive each other and move forward.”

I gave him a skeptical look. “Is it that simple?”

His thumb traced a light pattern on the back of my hand. “When you love someone, it is.”

I sucked in a breath, unsure I’d heard him correctly. “You love me?”

“I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw your lemonade stand. I wanted your attention, so I opened my own. Remember how you marched over to me with your hands on your hips? You asked what I was doing.” Ben smiled at the memory.

I remembered the moment I saw him sitting behind his table with that smirk on his face. “You said, *‘Selling*

lemonade. ' I thought my head would explode; I was so angry."

"I liked when you talked to me. I didn't care what it was about as long as you were engaging with me."

I couldn't stop the smile that spread over my face. "Are you saying you taunted me in school so I'd talk to you?"

"I probably didn't understand when we were younger, but in high school, I knew exactly what I was doing. But it was too late to turn things around. Our interactions were forged when we were eight. I didn't see any other way to be with you. Anytime I said anything, you'd get so mad. Your cheeks were flushed, your eyes flashing. You were beautiful."

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" I'd always wondered about his feelings, especially after he stopped by when I was sick.

"I think a part of me was afraid of rejection. The thought of talking to a girl in high school was tough, but I easily got your attention. I was worried if I told you how I really felt, you wouldn't talk to me anymore."

I licked my lips. "I'm not sure what I would have done if you'd told me the truth back then."

"The thing is, I wouldn't change anything because I have Cammie."

I rested a hand over his. "Of course, you wouldn't."

"Everything happens at the right time, and I think our time is now."

I smiled. "Abby was right. She said our childhood interactions were foreplay."

Ben chuckled and, when he sobered, said, "I don't regret anything. I'm here with you now, and I'm willing to earn your

trust. To do whatever it takes to keep you in Cammie's and my life. If that's what you want, of course."

My heart was pounding hard in my chest. It was hard for me to admit. "The thing is, I do trust you. I let my issues with Levi affect my decisions. I was afraid I would make another mistake and trust the wrong person. But you're not Levi."

"I'm not."

"And you don't want anything from me."

Ben cupped my cheek. "Just your love."

My eyes pricked with tears at his sweet words, and I closed them. "And you have it."

"Do I?" His voice was gentle.

I slowly opened my eyes, soaking him in. "I love you, Ben Monroe. We can't know what the future holds, but I want to take that leap with you."

My hands were trembling in his. It was the most vulnerable I'd been with anyone.

"I'll always treat your love with the care it deserves."

I nestled my cheek deeper in the palm of his hand. "Me, too."

"We're in this together. If something's wrong, we work on it together. Even when it relates to business."

"I can do that." Warmth was spreading from where our hands were joined, up my arms and to my chest, where my heart was stuttering.

He tipped his head to the side. "Yeah?"

I turned my mouth to kiss his palm, then took his face in my hands. "I love you and want to be with you. I trust you."

I'd already said it, but it was important that I say it again.

For a moment, we sat in silence, taking in each other's closeness and our love. Finally, Ben stood, holding out a hand to help me up.

Walking back inside, Cammie looked from the TV to us. "Are you okay, Miss Brooke?"

It took me a second to realize she was talking about the damage to my store and not what had transpired between Ben and me.

I sat next to her; Ben sat on the other side. "It will be."

"There's something we'd like to talk to you about," Ben said seriously.

"Yeah?" Cammie asked, focusing her attention on Ben.

"If I wanted to date Brooke, what would you say?" His voice shook a little.

Was he worried about what would happen if she wasn't okay with it?

Cammie shrugged. "Isn't that what you're doing?"

Ben chuckled. "We weren't sure if you'd be okay with it if we made it official."

Cammie turned to me. "Are you going to be my mom?"

Ben and I exchanged a look. We hadn't anticipated that question. Not yet. "I'll never replace your mom."

Cammie rolled her eyes. "Well, duh."

I smiled. "But I'd like to be another mother to you. The one on earth. Because your mom is in heaven, looking down on you. She wants you to be happy."

Cammie smiled. “I’d like to have two moms.”

Then she turned her attention back to the TV, and I breathed a sigh of relief. That went better than I’d hoped, even though I hadn’t anticipated her bringing up her mother.

Ben winked at me over her head, and we settled onto the couch with her between us.

Eventually, we ordered pizza from Giovanni’s and watched *A League of Their Own*. At some point, Cammie nestled between us and fell asleep with her head in my lap and her feet in his. It reminded me of that night we’d camped outside, except it was just the three of us, and we felt like a unit. A family.

My heart was full because everything I’d ever wanted was in my living room.



I walked with Ben while he carried Cammie, who was still asleep, out to his car. She looked so serene nestled against his chest.

Once he’d buckled her into her car seat, he gently closed the door. “I wish we had more time together.”

It wasn’t how I wanted the night to end, either. “You have to get her home.”

Ben brushed a strand of hair out of my face. “I want to go to sleep with you at the end of the night and wake up with you in the morning. I want you to be at our morning breakfasts.”

My heart contracted because I knew how special those were to him. “I’d love that, too.”

“We close on the house in a month.”

“I’m so happy for you.”

“Will you move in with us?”

“You think Cammie would be okay with that?”

“I’ll talk to her, but I have a feeling she’ll want you there, too. She loves you. She just might want Hunter to live there, too.”

I laughed. “I think Abby would have something to say about that.”

“I want to share my life with you. I know you like living here because it’s close to work, but I don’t want to have to leave you at the end of the night. I want you to be part of my life in every way.”

For the last few weeks, I’d questioned everything. My house was a haven after my divorce, but now it felt empty. Nothing was holding me back. “I’d love that.”

“You would?”

“Were you expecting a fight?” I asked, swaying a little toward him.

“Honestly? Yeah, I was. You’re strong and independent. But I was prepared to convince you.”

“Hmm. Maybe I should have held out for that.”

“You like to keep me on my toes,” he said.

“Someone has to. You’ve always been cocky.”

“I like to think of it as healthy confidence.” We laughed softly.

Staring at his face, I said, “I’m ready for the next stage of my life. The one I share with you.”

He lowered his head, kissing me under the streetlight. It was soft and sweet. A promise of a life together. I pressed myself against him, wanting that with every fiber of my being.

He pulled back slightly, resting his forehead against mine. “I want that, too.”

We were on the same page. We wanted the same things. I would never have thought that the boy who drove me crazy would end up being my future.



I was nervous to see Brooke’s parents at the all-star game. I knew them when we lived down the street, but we weren’t close. Brooke and I tended to be wrapped up in each other when we ran into each other on the street.

I saw Abby and Brooke sitting together by the long fence on the field. Today we were playing on Field #1, which had dugouts and a fence surrounding it. Cammie ran ahead of me to meet Brooke.

I followed more slowly, smiling when Brooke turned to see me. “You made it.”

“I told you we were coming.” I was a little worried Cammie would get upset and change her mind, but she wanted to support her friend, Hunter.

“Can I get something from the snack shack?” Cammie asked.

I handed her a couple of dollars and watched as she ran to the building and got in line.

“She’s handling it okay,” Brooke said while I set up my chair next to hers.

“She wanted to support Hunter.”

“It’s so sweet they’re friends,” Abby said.

“I think so, too.”

“Ben, these are my parents, Joel and Louisa Langley.”

I leaned over to shake their hands. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Joel waved a hand at me. “Walk with me to the snack shack. I need some sugar.”

I shot Brooke an uneasy look, but she just smiled. “Sure.”

When I fell into step with him, Joel said, “When Brooke told us you two were dating, I almost didn’t believe it.”

“Oh, yeah. Why’s that?” I wanted to wipe my sweaty hands on my shorts but didn’t want him to know he made me nervous.

“You two were at each other’s throats all the way through high school. I thought I’d have to step in a couple of times.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.” I think my heart stopped at the thought of Brooke’s dad confronting me in high school.

“Oh, I had my suspicions about what was going on.”

“You did?” I didn’t think anyone saw through me.

“You liked her even back then.” Joel paused behind the backstop where the pitcher was warming up.

I shoved my hands in my pockets. “I did. Maybe not when things first started up, but later. I didn’t know how to talk to her unless it was challenging her.”

“Brooke and her mother didn’t believe me, but I said, ‘That boy likes you.’ Brooke would roll her eyes and say what a jerk you were. She couldn’t see it then, but I’m glad she sees it now.”

“Are you saying you approve of me dating your daughter, sir?” It didn’t matter, but since he’d brought it up, I wouldn’t mind the clarification.

“Honesty is really important to Brooke.”

I sobered quickly at the mention of her history. “I know that. I’ll never lie to her.”

“See that you don’t. She’s been through enough. She has a trusting nature. I know it probably didn’t seem like it now, but that boy took advantage of her in the worst way. I was worried she’d never give anyone a chance again.”

“She’s stubborn, but I’m not going to give up on her.” If she pushed me away again, I was fully prepared to fight for her.

Joel scrutinized my face before finally saying, “Good. She needs someone like that in her corner.”

Cammie ran up to us with a brightly colored bag of candy and a snow cone. “The game’s about to start, Daddy.”

“Go sit by Brooke. I’ll be there in a minute.”

She nodded and ran to our chairs.

“If you need anything. Someone to watch Cammie, or help at your new house, just let us know.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate you welcoming me like this.”

“I think you know that Brooke won’t want to get married again.”

“I was worried about that.”

“Stick with it. I think you’ll get her to come around.” Then Joel turned away and walked toward the line at the snack shack.

It sounded like Joel had faith in me and had just given me permission to ask his daughter to marry me. I knew I had my work cut out for me. We hadn’t discussed marriage, but I suspected she’d be wary of taking that step again. Though she seemed perfectly content to move in with me when I settled on the house, saying we were her family.

I headed back over to our spot. Cammie was popping candy in her mouth, one after the other, while standing by the fence watching warm-ups.

Brooke smiled at me when I sat next to her. “What did he want to talk about?”

“He wanted to give me his blessing.” That’s what it felt like, anyway.

Her mouth dropped open. “You asked him for it?”

I shook my head. “No, but he said I had it.”

“Wow. I don’t even know what to say.” Her eyes were round and a little unfocused as she looked out on the field.

I took her hand. “I’m not going anywhere, and I’m not in any rush. We can take our time and move at our own pace.”

“What if I’m never ready?” Brooke asked, her voice trembling.

“That’s okay, too. I want you in my life, but I don’t need a piece of paper to make it official.”

“You’re too good to be true.”

“I’m willing to meet you where you are. I understand where you’re coming from, and I have faith that we’re going to have the best life together, whether we get married or not.”

I’d never been married, and I definitely wanted to be, but I understood Brooke’s hesitation.

The boys lined up on the first and third baselines, and the notes of the national anthem played over the loudspeakers. Everyone stood and removed their hats.

When we sat, the game started. I didn’t get a chance to talk to Brooke any more about my discussion with her father, but I’d said what I’d needed to. I was willing to wait for her to be ready. As long as she was with me when I woke up and went to bed at night, I’d be happy. I had a feeling she’d be happier if we married, but I could wait for her to figure that out.

Hunter sat out the first inning, and I could tell from where I was sitting that he was frustrated. In the next inning, he played second.

“What’s going on? He never plays second,” Brooke asked.

“It’s different playing on an all-star team. There are different coaches.”

“I hope he gets a chance to pitch. That’s all he talked about this week,” Abby said.

“I’m sure he will,” I said. I certainly hoped he would. He was one of the better pitchers in the league.

The game was slow but entertaining. A kid slid into second in an attempt to steal a base, but the teen umpires said the kids

weren't allowed to slide headfirst for safety reasons, so he was called out. The call prompted the coaches to discuss with the umpires, and the kids were visibly upset by the ruling.

"The rules are a little different than they were during the regular season," I said.

"It's confusing for the kids," Abby said.

Hunter played left field and third base and had two singles. Finally, in the last inning, he was picked to pitch.

"He's pitching closer," I said to no one in particular.

"That's good, right?"

"It means the coach thinks he can limit runs, and we can hold out for a win," I said.

"Hunter will like that," Brooke said.

Hunter liked to contribute to the game and help his teammates. That was why sitting on the bench during the first inning was so frustrating for him.

"Want to get closer to watch him pitch?" I asked Brooke.

This field had a fence, and there were more spectators than usual, so we were pretty far away from the action.

"Sure," Brooke agreed, standing and walking with me toward home plate. We stood behind the backstop, where we had the perfect view.

Brooke pulled out her phone and started filming.

It was nerve-wracking watching a kid pitch, and he wasn't even mine. He warmed up with five perfect fastballs.

"Take it easy, Hunter," the coach called, standing from his crouched position as a catcher. He moved out of the way of the team's catcher and headed toward the dugout.

“You got this, Hunter,” Cammie encouraged. She’d followed us and was leaning against the fence to watch.

Hunter nodded at her before turning his attention to the batter.

He pitched two strikes and then a ball.

“Take a breath,” I called to him.

Hunter held the ball in his glove, looking off to right field as he took an exaggerated breath. Then he refocused on the catcher, wound up, and let a fastball go into the glove.

“Strike three,” the umpire said, and I heard Hunter say, “Yes.”

The second batter stepped into the batter’s box.

Brooke’s hand curled around my bicep. “Are you doing okay?”

“This is hard to watch.”

“He’ll be okay. He’s done this in the last few games.”

Hunter usually pitched the first inning and sometimes the last inning. The coach allowed other players the opportunity to pitch, but Hunter usually struck out two to three batters each game. He’d become so consistent that he’d get annoyed with himself if he only struck out two.

The only sign he was nervous was that he tended to pitch one ball after the other without taking a minute to breathe. When he rushed, his pitches fell short of the plate.

Abby stood off to the side of us, taking pictures with her professional camera. She was the picture of calm and ease. You wouldn’t even know she was his mother the way she held the camera steadily.

The batter swung and missed the next one, which was the sinker Hunter had been working on all week. It was slower than his fastballs, which seemed to throw off the batter's timing.

"Way to make him chase it," I called.

I wasn't sure he even heard me; he was so focused on the batter. His expression was determined as he took a breath, wound up, and threw another fastball.

The batter stood there, looking.

"Strike three," the umpire called.

The other coach approached the batter on deck. "This kid is throwing strikes. You need to swing at them."

The batter nodded, and I felt a little sorry for him. There was no one on base and two outs. It wasn't the best position to be in.

"He's got this," Brooke murmured.

"Are you going to videotape it? You know he's going to want to see this later."

"You're right." She removed her hand from my arm and stepped closer to the fence to videotape it.

The kid swung at each pitch, fouling two down the first base side before striking out.

Hunter ran off the mound on the last one and toward his team. They clapped him on his back and told him that he did great pitching.

"He's going to be impossible after this," Brooke said, watching the kids congratulate him.

"He has potential."

Abby came over to us. “You better not encourage him to try out for travel baseball.”

“Why not?” Hunter was obsessed with baseball, and his pitching was great for his age.

“It’s a huge commitment. It’s year-round games and practices, and it’s expensive,” Abby said.

“We’ll help you out if that’s what Hunter wants to do,” Brooke said.

“We’ve got you,” I said.

“Thank you. Sometimes it’s hard to balance what’s best for him and for us. Is it too much, or is it just what he needs?”

“Let him try out and see if he makes it. If he isn’t picked, then you don’t have to decide on anything,” I said.

Abby let out a breath. “That’s true.”

Hunter ran out to greet us. “Did you see me pitch?”

“We were right here the whole time. You were amazing. I’m so proud of you,” Abby said as she hugged him.

“We’re all proud of you,” Brooke added.

“You looked great out there.”

“Hunter, you better get back out there. They’re handing out the trophies.” Cammie pointed to the field.

Hunter’s eyes got round, and he rushed back. It was another forty-five minutes of handing out trophies and taking pictures.

“Thanks for coming,” Brooke said to me while we were waiting.

“I wouldn’t have missed it for anything.” I was relying on Christopher more to manage the business so I could spend time with my family, and Brooke and her family had become part of that.

Epilogue

BROOKE

Business at Bean Rush was good. It allowed Ben to leave the store in his manager's hands and spend much-needed time with his family and me. He'd created a nice niche for himself in the community. The local paper wrote an article on Ben's passion for beans and his grandfather's interest in coffee, drawing coffee aficionados from other areas, too. He was making a name for himself, and I couldn't be prouder.

Ben had already moved into his new house, and I was supposed to join him this weekend.

My business was more up in the air. Sam was able to squeeze me into his schedule by pushing back another project. Insurance paid for the repairs and some of the business interruption, but I didn't have income from the coffee shop while the construction was being completed. Too much damage had been done to the front of the store.

Ben stopped by each day to check on the progress and support me. It was nice to have him to talk to about my worries. I didn't worry that he'd use the information against me. I knew we were a team, and for once in my life, I had someone in my corner, cheering me on, which made the entire situation more bearable.

I hoped my rebrand was successful when I was finally able to reopen. Especially since so many people stopped me on the street and in the grocery store to ask about the opening and to tell me how excited they were. Market Tavern would be a nice addition to the town.

Gia even offered to throw a grand reopening party free of charge because she felt bad about the setback, and all the shop owners had come together to offer their help with getting the word out. I no longer relied only on myself because I had my family, Ben and his family, and the entire Shops on Main group assisting me. It wasn't weak to let everyone in—it was smart.

I dressed in a cocktail dress the night of the party, knowing Ben would be waiting for me when I came out. His parents were watching Cammie for the evening, so we had the entire night to ourselves. I was excited to spend the evening with him, but nervous about how the business would be seen.

Would people support my new idea? Or was it a huge mistake? My hands shook when I swiped the mascara wand under my lashes. I blotted at the blob of mascara that landed on my eyelid, cursing myself for thinking I could handle it myself.

I checked myself one last time in the mirror, hoping I didn't look as nervous as I felt. And as I walked out of the bathroom, I knew it was probably one of the last times I'd get ready at my rental.

I spent most evenings with Ben and Cammie now that they had their own place. Being with them felt right.

Ben lifted his head from his phone as I entered the bedroom. "Gorgeous."

I moved toward him, feeling more beautiful than I'd ever felt in my life, and it was all because of the expression on his face, which was a mix of awe and affection.

He stood in front of me, looking handsome in his black suit. I leaned into him, my hands on his chest, flitting over the starch of his pressed white button-down. "You look handsome yourself."

His hands drifted over my bare back. "I think I need to see the whole picture."

I pulled back slightly so I could do a spin. When I stopped to face him again, his expression was dark with desire.

He stepped forward, his hands on my hips. "I'm not sure it's wise to let you out of the house in this dress."

"And why's that?" I tipped my head to the side and smiled at the familiar glint in his eyes.

"You're irresistible."

I smiled, high on the effect I had on him. "Are you going to keep me here all night?"

Regret lined his face. "I want to, but this is your night."

With those words, my shoulders tensed. "I'm not sure I'm ready for it."

His hand cupped my face. "You were born ready for this. You have an amazing vision, and people will love it."

"You think so?" I asked, even as my nerves dissipated. It was great to have Ben at my back.

"That reporter is here to do an article on the rebrand, and she wants to feature us."

"Our relationship?" I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

“She loves the story of our competing lemonade stands, coffee shops, and how we got together.”

“I don’t think that story is exactly PG.”

“The version we’ll tell her is. I can see the framed article on our store wall, right next to the lemonade stand pictures.”

“It’ll be a great story to tell our kids one day.” I hadn’t meant to say that out loud. Each day with Ben made me see the future more clearly. And I saw us together, having more children, maybe even getting married. Instead of filling me with dread, the prospect excited me.

“Our kids?” Ben pulled me against him so that we touched from chest to hip.

I swallowed. “I think of Cammie as ours.”

He tipped his head lower, his gaze locked on mine. “You’d consider having kids with me one day?”

“I’ve always wanted kids.” And I could see myself having kids with him. A little girl or boy with perhaps his brown hair or my blonde, but our combined determination.

He smiled so big and wide that it took my breath away. “I love you.”

I smiled, feeling giddy. “I love you, too.”

He kissed me like he had all the time in the world to savor me.

After a few moments, he pulled back, breaking the kiss. “We’d better head to your store before Gia shows up, wanting to know where we are.”

I smiled. “She’s a shark when she’s planning something.”

He stepped back, but interlaced his fingers with mine. “She’s good at her job.”

“Let’s do this.” I felt stronger than I had coming out of the bathroom. I was confident that my vision for Market Tavern would be successful.

Ben smiled at me, pride in his gaze. “Tonight’s going to be amazing.”

“I think so, too.” We’d planned for a huge crowd. At first, I wasn’t so sure, but then the paper and the local TV station said they were stopping by, and Gia wanted to go all out.

I knew some of the attention was because someone had been breaking into local shops. They’d been out of the spotlight for a while but had returned with my break-in. Combined with Ben’s and my backstory, it made for a tantalizing story.

I was smart enough to see the publicity as good for business, and Ben did, too.

Although, he’d made sure my security alarm was top-of-the-line and working shortly after the incident.

We walked to the opening, wanting to enjoy the evening and the town we loved. Rounding the corner, I was surprised to see a crowd outside already waiting to go in. “They’re here early.”

He squeezed my hand. “They can’t wait to see what you’ve done with the place.”

Since I’d shut down the store for the renovation, I updated everything inside. The floors were redone, the paint fresh, and the shelves brand new. I purchased nicer plush furniture for the seating area by the storefront and more seating outside. I had a

feeling the Tavern would attract college kids, families, and business workers, and I wanted to meet the needs of everyone.

As we approached, people mentioned how beautiful I looked and how they couldn't wait to see the place, so I held up my hand. "Let me get inside and see if we can get the party started early."

A cheer erupted through the crowd.

"What are you doing?" Ben whispered into my ear as I unlocked the door and slipped inside.

"Trust me. Gia's ready for this."

Gia must have let my family and friends inside because they were already gathered. Max was behind the bar with a few of my trainees. He'd volunteered to man the event to get them ready, and I was beyond grateful for his support. Lily provided the flower arrangements, which were on the tables and hanging from the ceiling. The place was adorned with twinkling white lights, giving it the perfect ambiance.

I'd hired waiters and staff for the event, hoping it would exceed my expectations, and it already looked like it would.

Gia nodded toward the crowd outside. "I think the break-in and delay in opening only enhanced people's interest."

"All good things," Ben said, his arm around my shoulders.

"Let's do a toast before we let everyone else inside." Max poured champagne into a line of glasses on the bar.

I was so happy to be there not only with Ben but with all my friends and family.

When the champagne was in our hands, we cheered, clinking glasses. "To friendship and business. To being there for each other in our times of need and in celebration."

“Here, here,” Easton said.

We clicked glasses and drank. The bubbly liquid felt good going down, but I set my glass aside after a sip, not wanting to be tipsy.

“You ready to open early?” Gia elbowed me lightly in the ribs.

Ben stood to my back, a warm, comforting presence.

“Let’s do this.”

Ben leaned down to kiss my temple as Gia made her way to the door. “I’m so proud of you,” he murmured in my ear.

I kissed him lightly on the lips as the first guests came in. Then I moved to the front door so I could greet everyone. I smiled until it hurt, happy to be in a position where I could start over. Excited at the prospect of a new challenge. I was grateful that Ben moved back home, not only because it brought us together, but because he made me realize I was stagnant with the coffee shop. As he had in the past, he pushed me out of my comfort zone.

I eventually moved away from the door and moved from one group to the next, answering questions and chatting. I was in my element, back with my customers, who I loved. Everyone seemed excited about the changes.

Sophie provided the desserts and arranged them on one of the tables. A man moved through the room, his gaze fixed on Sophie like he was on a mission. His hair was trimmed short in a military cut and his T-shirt was fitted to his muscular body. I wondered if it was her ex-boyfriend. I think she said he’d enlisted after high school.

Without looking up, Sophie asked if he wanted a dessert and moved to hand him a plate.

The man cleared his throat. “I’m actually here to see you.”

The hand that held the plate shook as she looked up at him. “Mark? What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you, and Mom said you’d be here, catering the event.”

She placed the dessert back on the table, seemingly at a loss for words. Finally, she said, “It’s good to see you.”

I couldn’t hear his response because his broad back was to me.

Sophie moved around the table so that she stood in front of him, a foot of space between them.

Sophie swayed toward him as if there was a gravitational pull between them.

“Is now a good time to talk?” Startled, I turned to see the reporter I spoke to all those months ago.

I reluctantly switched my attention from Sophie and the mysterious man to Alisha Roberts. I chatted with Alisha and a news anchor from the local station, speaking briefly on camera about the break-in and the plans for Market Tavern.

By the end of the night, my feet hurt, and I was ready to be alone with Ben.

Gia pushed us out the door with promises to handle cleanup, and I left without a fuss because I had my own plans for the evening.

Ben drove me home and unlocked the door to his house. “I thought that went well.”

I slipped off my shoes and set my wristlet on the counter. “It was more than I hoped for. It seemed like everyone came

out.”

Ben nodded, moving toward me. “Even one of my high school teachers.”

“Yeah, it was nice to catch up with everyone. I missed talking to my customers each morning.” A few still promised to come by in the mornings for coffee, but more were excited about stopping by for dinner or drinks.

He leaned a hip against the counter, his hand on my shoulder. “I think you’re going to have to hire more staff soon.”

I smiled, exhaustion threatening to pull me under in the car, but now that we were home, I was eager to put my plan into motion. “That’s a good position to be in.”

“You amaze me, Brooke. You could have stayed with the coffee shop, and we could have split our customers. But what you did was so brave.”

It was the perfect segue. “I realized I was afraid to take risks. The coffee shop was safe. I hadn’t done anything new or innovative since I opened. I was stuck.”

He brushed a strand of hair out of my face. “You had a solid business plan. You didn’t need to take risks.”

“Not until you showed up.”

He raised his brow but didn’t interrupt.

“You’ve always pushed me to be a better person. To challenge myself when it was necessary.”

“I like to think we challenge each other.”

“We do. I know you said you’d wait for me to be ready. That you’d be happy with just living together with Cammie,

but I want more.”

His hand stilled where it was poised to sift through my hair. “What are you saying?”

“I want to marry you.” My heart was beating fast; my palms were sweaty, but if I didn’t get it out, I’d go crazy.

It was like I’d released something inside him. His lips crashed down on mine, and his hand tangled in my hair. Then he pulled back just as abruptly, searching my face. “You want to get married?”

I nodded, tears stinging my eyes.

He interlaced his fingers with mine and tugged me down the hall.

I lifted my skirt so I could follow him without tripping. “Where are we going?”

“I have something I want to show you.”

I was a little irritated because I’d expected him to lift me into his arms and take me against the wall, or even to bed, but I wasn’t sure why he was taking me to his office.

He dropped my hand to flip on the lamp on his desk, then unlocked the bottom drawer.

I stepped into the room. “Ben, what are you—”

Then I saw the black velvet box cradled in his hand. He strode toward me, his face overcome with emotion. He took my hand in his and sank to his knee. “I wasn’t expecting you to be ready this soon.”

“But you were,” I breathed. I shouldn’t have been surprised, but I was.

“I bought this when I realized I loved you, hoping you’d change your mind about getting married. I wasn’t exactly planning on proposing in my office.” His expression was sheepish, and I rushed to reassure him.

“This is perfect.” I wouldn’t change anything about our history, or even that moment.

I resisted the urge to pull him up and tell him yes. I wanted to hear what he had to say.

“You captivated me from the moment I first saw you behind that lemonade stand, and then when you confronted me at mine. You pushed me. You challenged me. You make me a better person.”

Tears pricked behind my eyelids. “You make me a better person.”

If he hadn’t come back into my life, I don’t know if I’d ever have taken a risk in my business or in my personal life.

“We’re good for each other.”

I nodded, and a tear slid down my cheek.

He reached up to wipe it away with his thumb. “You’re loving and kind. You’re amazing with Cammie, and I can’t wait until you’re officially part of my family, and Cammie is yours as much as she is mine.”

“I want that so much,” I said as a sob escaped me.

It was too much. I needed him close to me. I dropped to my knees in front of him, cupping his face. “I love you so much.”

He raised a brow. “You’re hijacking my proposal.”

“It was taking too long. Ask me to marry you.”

He smiled. “I should have known you’d take control of the biggest moment of my life.”

“You wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I dropped my hands to his thigh, waiting for his next move.

He cupped my cheek with one hand. “Brooke Langley, will you marry me?” His voice shook a little, even though he had to know what my answer would be.

My heart filled with tenderness. “Yes, I will.”

He kissed me like he couldn’t believe I’d said yes. I’d done that. I’d made him doubt my desire to marry him, and I never wanted him to feel that way again. I pulled away, feeling slightly breathless.

“Thank you for waiting for me. For believing in me.”

“Always,” he said simply.

We’d gone through so much to get to that place, but I wouldn’t have done it any other way. Our journey was perfect.

“I love you exactly how you are.”

“I love you.”

We took each other as we were, with all the baggage and trauma that life gave us, but in the future, we’d go through it together.

He tugged me to stand, kissing me as he lifted me in his arms, bridal style.

“Is this a preview of things to come?”

“Definitely.” He moved swiftly to his room, gently resting me on the bed and coming to one elbow next to me.

“I can’t believe you’re here. That you said yes. That you’re going to be my wife.” His tone was filled with awe.

“I can’t wait.”

He kissed me softly, his hands drifting over the neckline of my dress. His touch was feather light. He kissed me until my hips lifted off the bed, until I was dying for his touch.

“Ben, please.”

He shifted to his knees, tugging his shirt from his slacks and unbuttoning it with fumbling hands. I moved to kneel before him, brushing his hands away.

We had the night together and the rest of our lives. I couldn’t wait to get started on our happily ever after. I never thought I’d get one, so it made the moment so much sweeter.

I pushed the stiff shirt off his shoulders, kissing his bare chest, right above his heart.

His head dipped to mine, and he kissed the top of my head. Then he pulled my dress over my head, leaving me with just a scrap of black lace between my legs. He gently pushed me onto my back while making quick work of removing his pants.

He slipped my thong over my hips and down my legs before settling between my legs. I expected his mouth, but instead, he moved higher, lining up his cock with my opening. It felt so good, better than before somehow. Because we both knew it was forever.

I hope you loved Brooke and Ben’s story! Read about their proposal in their [bonus epilogue](#).

Sophie and Mark’s story is next in [*A Chance at Forever!*](#)

Enlisting was one of my life goals, so was marrying my high school sweetheart, Sophie and escaping our small town.

Nothing has ever hurt me more than when she turned down my proposal.

For the last few years I've focused on being the best father and soldier I could be.

I might not have made the right decisions all those years ago, but this time I'm going to prove to Sophie that I'm the right man for her.

Books by Lea Coll

Annapolis Harbor Series

Only with You

Lost without You

Perfect for You

Crazy for You

Falling for You

Waiting for You

Hooked on You

Second Chance Harbor Series

Fighting Chance

One More Chance

Lucky Chance

My Best Chance

Worth the Chance

A Chance at Forever

All I Want Series

Choose Me

Be with Me

Burn for Me

Trust in Me

Stay with Me

Take a Chance on Me

Mountain Haven Standalone

Impulsive Love

Download a free novella, when you sign up for her [newsletter](#).

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

About the Author

Lea Coll worked as a trial attorney for over ten years. Now she stays home with her three children, plotting stories while fetching snacks and running them back and forth to activities. She enjoys the freedom of writing romance after years of legal writing.

She currently resides in Maryland with her family.

Get a free novella when you sign up for Lea's [newsletter](#).

Check out Lea's books on her [website](#).

