

A romantic couple in a close embrace against a sunset background. The man on the left has dark hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt. The woman on the right has long, dark hair and is smiling, wearing a light-colored, possibly white, dress. They are positioned in profile, facing each other, with their foreheads nearly touching. The background is a soft, golden sunset over a body of water, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a warm, hazy atmosphere.

TULSA TOWN
ROMANCE

Resurrection

AWARD WINNING AUTHOR

KRISTY WERNER

Resurrection

TULSA TOWN ROMANCE

Kristy Werner



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DEDICATION

To the LORD, my God, my strength, and my Redeemer.

For You have done great things for me.

Let the words of my mouth and the
meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight.

Psalm 19:14, NKJV

To my husband Lyn.

Thank you for understanding my need to embark on this
journey. Without your patience and support this book would
not be.

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“...because the tender
mercy of our God,
whereby the sunrise
shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who
sit in darkness and in the
shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the
way of peace.”

Luke 1:78–79

PROLOGUE

Quinn Alexander adjusted her grip on the paintbrush as she stood atop a ladder in her studio. The thrill of painting was a living, breathing entity inside her. Much like a storm. Could there be a better landscape to paint?

The ones that looked like they could kill you were her favorite. The more tempestuous the storm rolling over the valley below—the more it threatened to wash away with the torrents its darkness promised—the better.

Her current project spoke in dark tones of depth and power. The one ray of bright light escaping the churning clouds inspired hope with its promise the sun shone somewhere beyond.

Torrents and sun. Two promises which would each have their time. But when and for how long?

If she could inspire hope in one person, then her hours poured into each painting were worth it. She hadn't quite lost hope. Not yet. She wasn't a stranger to life's storms, and she'd come close to giving up, but Brendan—her ray of light—helped her hang on.

Her gaze laser-focused on her brushstrokes, she added fine details to the canvas covering most of the cinder block wall. One more day, maybe two, and her masterpiece would be complete.

The golden bell over the gallery's entrance offered its warning, breaking her concentration midstroke and sending a stream of delight trickling through her. Brendan was here with

her surprise. With a glance at the clock and brush between her teeth, she descended out of the clouds. Twelve-ten. His meeting with new clients must have run long.

But shuffling steps on the gallery's wooden floor announced two visitors.

Was her surprise a person? Ah, the intrigue.

She stepped off the ladder and nestled her brush in its cradle, expecting Brendan to bound through the hall from the gallery. But no one bounded, and the eerie quiet had her glancing at the clock again.

"I'll be right out." She wiped her hands on her paint-smearred overalls as she approached the viewing room. Holding her breath, she waited for Brendan to grab her and twirl her around the room.

Two police officers stood near the entrance. She exhaled, her delight pausing its flow. "Has there been another robbery?"

"No, ma'am." One officer held his hands at chest level, his voice hesitant. "That's not why we're here."

Her gaze flickered to his female partner.

"Are you Quinn Alexander?"

"Yes, that's—that's me." She swallowed hard, the stream of delight running dry. The police were here, and Brendan was late.

"My name is Officer Frank Mullins. This is Officer Brianna Davis." He gestured toward the sitting area. "May we

sit?”

Quinn’s feet ignored her prompt to move. With effort, she pried them off the floor and walked to one of the wingback chairs she and Brendan had picked up at the Tulsa flea market. “What is it? What’s happened?”

The officers sat on the avocado-green couch—same flea market. The green matched the chairs’ floral print. “There’s been an accident.” Officer Mullins hovered on the couch’s edge, his hands clasped and still. “A semi crossed the centerline and hit your husband’s car. He was transported to St. Francis.”

The storm was coming, its darkness snuffing out the light.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you—he sustained injuries that he was unable to survive.”

Her mouth fell open. Breathing became difficult. She replayed his words, then blinked. “A car. You said a car. My husband drives a big truck—a big F250. You’ve got the wrong person.”

Officer Davis listed her head. “The car had Alexander Homes on the side.”

Quinn’s gaze riveted onto the officer’s, and she sat up straight. “Brendan never takes the company car. He always drives his truck. *Always.*”

It couldn’t be him. How dare they make such a mistake!

Officer Mullins raised his hands to calm her as if that were possible. “Mrs. Alexander, your husband has already been identified. His ID was in his wallet. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“No, it can’t be him.” She pushed from the chair and marched back into her studio to retrieve her bag. She dug through it for her phone, refusing to look at her churning storm clouds. Her hands shook as she pressed speed dial one. Voice mail. With a furrowed brow, she disconnected and called again. “Answer. Please answer.”

God, please don't let this be happening.

It’s not him. She paced back and forth, willing him to pick up.

“Hi, you’ve reached Brendan Alexander with Alexander Homes. I’m sorry to have missed your call. Please leave your name and number along with a brief message, and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can. Thank you for calling and have a great day. And if this is the lovely Mrs. Alexander... I love you, baby.” She’d heard his message a thousand times—his declaration to the world that he loved her—and a thousand times, it had made her smile. This time, it sounded like goodbye.

She stared without seeing and flinched when Officer Mullins spoke beside her. “Ma’am, won’t you please sit down?” Hand on her elbow, he led her back to her chair. “Is there someone we can call for you?”

“My mom. Please call my mom.” Somehow, her words made it out, her voice foreign, far away. Her anger wasn’t subsiding, but panic was becoming its companion.

He took her phone and walked toward the back room, speaking quietly.

Don't. Cry. With her elbows on her knees and her hands over her mouth, she clenched her gut tight. This was not real, could never be real. They'd have to prove it was him. He was just late. Showing house plans to new clients.

Someone laid her coat across her shoulders. She jerked her head up. When had Mom come in? They went through the gallery door out into the cold March day. The wind blew against her skin.

Why couldn't she feel the chill? Her body felt heavy and light at the same time—like she was there, but not.

Around her, the world on Cherry Street carried on. Brendan would drive up any minute with a romantic lunch and stolen kisses and the surprise he'd promised.

But he didn't.

Brendan was always there. He made everything better. Every storm. How was he not here now?

Eyes red with tears, her mother took her bag and dug for her keys. Why was she crying? This wasn't real.

But as her mother sobbed, puddles formed in Quinn's eyes. Her mother's hands trembled as she fumbled to find the shop key. The hollow click of the lock sounded permanent.

Quinn shrank into her seat as they drove, seeing little of what passed by. A numbness took over her body, and her heartbeat echoed in her ears like thunder. The world's colors faded, leaving everything lackluster as a great chasm opened in her soul.

She teetered on the edge, the bleakness threatening to pull her down.

They entered through the emergency entrance where someone ushered them to trauma care. Her legs moved through muscle memory, her mind incapable of thought. The familiar sterile smell clogged her nostrils, something she'd never wanted to smell again. She choked back the rising bile.

Her dad stood next to a room with sliding glass doors, curtains pulled closed. Was this real? Pete Hawkins was a strong man she'd only seen cry one other time, in a nightmare not far in the past. Him crying now brought reality crashing into her like a hurricane-force wind.

“Daddy?” Her breath came in gasps, her tears in torrents. This *was* real. She stumbled to him, and he caught her in his arms. Then Mom was there, Dad's arms around them both.

“My precious girl.”

God, how can this be real?

A nurse's voice came from somewhere outside their circle. “You may go in when you're ready. Take all the time you need.”

Her feet wouldn't move. “I—I can't.”

This had to be a dream, a nightmare. Any minute she'd wake up, and Brendan would be there with lunch and her surprise.

He promised.

“We’re right here with you.” Strong and gentle, her father’s voice poured over her in a stream of strength. Mom brushed her hair from her face.

Quinn tried to swallow the lump threatening to choke her. She couldn’t breathe around it. Trembling, she took a step toward the door.

The nurse slid it open enough for them to pass through, then shut it, closing them inside the nightmare.

She waded through the remnants of discarded medical supply packaging, tossed to the floor without thought. The walk to her husband’s side, only seconds, stretched out like miles.

He looked so broken. Glass sprinkled his hair like sand and sparkled in the fluorescent lights. But the bruises, cuts, and gashes distorting his face couldn’t hide his beauty. Her finger passing through dried blood, she traced his cheek line to his chin. Cold hard skin made her retract her hands, but they hovered over him, wanting to touch him. She willed his eyes to open, but they wouldn’t.

His arms would never hold her. His lips would never kiss her. His voice would never whisper to her.

She was alone. In a new storm. A storm he wouldn’t be there to help her through.

She collapsed over him, her dad’s hands on her shoulders. Her cries probably rang through the entire trauma center, but she didn’t care. In that bed lay her heart, her whole life, and

both were being ripped away. She couldn't grasp them, couldn't hold on. They were just gone. Brendan was gone.

CHAPTER ONE

Storm clouds crawled across the Tulsa sky reflecting Quinn Alexander's life. It wouldn't rain. Rarely did in August. But the lightning display was a welcome distraction from what lay ahead.

She'd always loved storms. The kind where rain fell from the sky in blowing sheets, lightning flashed its jagged sword, and thunder rolled its host of kettledrums. But the storm she was living now had struck her life and left her drowning. It beat her down and left hail dents in her heart. Made recovery questionable.

In her husband's black F250, she waited in the parking lot at Whiteside Park Community Center until the last minute. Stepping foot inside was the last thing she wanted to do, but something she wouldn't be able to avoid.

As the thunderhead on the horizon lit up, her phone rang, making her jump. With her nerves frazzled enough, she came close to denying the call.

"Hi, Mom."

"Did you make it okay?"

"Yeah. I'm here. Just getting ready to go in."

Her thoughts of driving away left without her.

"Keep your chin up, sweetheart. Grief counseling will be good for you."

Brendan coming back would be better. But that wasn't going to happen. She swallowed the lump forming in her

throat. “I have to go. I don’t want to be late.”

Not truth. They said their goodbyes, and she disconnected. Not two seconds later, a text with the hug emoji came from her best friend, Claire. Quinn halfway smiled at the encouragement.

One last look at the clouds, and she closed her eyes, drawing her lips between her teeth. Storms always came, and the sun always rose. But the sun didn’t last long, and torrents were inescapable.

After a deep breath to summon courage, she grabbed her oversized purse and camel-colored sweater and slid out of Brendan’s truck, forcing her steps toward the glass doors.

She and Brendan had traveled all over the United States gathering photographs of the horizon. Then she set brush to canvas and created. Whether sunrise, sunset, or storm washing the world clean, to create was life.

But life was uncertain.

And she was dead inside.

So she entered the building and made her way to the meeting room where she would sit in a room full of people she didn’t want to know, listening to stories she didn’t want to hear. Drowning in a storm no one else could see.

As she dawdled down the hall toward the meeting room’s shut door, she juggled her bag while donning her sweater and imagined her paintings hidden away under drop clothes in the back of her studio. Some of them relentless storms rolling

across unfortunate landscapes. Others peaceful skies after a rain.

Her current project, meant to inspire hope, hung unfinished on her studio wall, draped with a white cloth. She pictured the single ray of bright light streaking across the canvas. Brendan—like the sun above the clouds—had always been there to help her through life's storms, but he'd been gone five months now. And she was left to live this storm alone, to live her life beneath the cloud cover. No ray of light, no hope.

Standing at the brown wood door, she extracted her phone from her bag to check the time. Three minutes after seven.

A moment of hesitation.

It wasn't too late to escape.

But could she let herself down? Yes. Her family and Claire?

She opened the door to a crowd sitting in a circle of chairs. Okay, maybe there were ten. But they seemed like a hundred, and they all gawked at her. Maybe being late hadn't been a grand idea.

As an older lady droned on, she glanced around the circle until she found the only open seat, her face burning.

Being careful not to let the heels of her flats clack on the white tile floor, she strode to the orange plastic chair and sat, sliding her bag to the floor and placing her phone on the chair beside her leg so she could see the time.

Five minutes after. Seven minutes.

A man coughed, startling her. She uncrossed her ankles and crossed them the opposite way, impatient for the night to be over. Her mind drifted.

She'd come so close to finishing her painting. Now the doors were locked, the gallery dark and empty, the golden bell above the door silent. Her booth at Mayfest vacant.

She'd never paint another storm. Never paint another peaceful sky. The storm was her life, and there'd never be peace.

Dr. Holiday's voice jerked her to attention. An older man, he looked the part of a psychologist in his gray suit. At least his eyes were kind over the rim of his readers. "We have a couple of new people here this evening." He gestured toward her, and a hand clenched her heart, pumping it faster. "Why don't you tell us your name and why you're here."

Of course, he wouldn't just let her sit there. She pushed her hair behind an ear and stumbled through. "I'm Quinn. And, uh, I'm here because"—she swallowed and forced the words out like a confession at an AA meeting—"I lost my husband."

"Welcome, Quinn." When she didn't speak, he moved on. "And you?" He looked toward the other unfortunate first-timer.

Quinn folded her shoulders in on herself, aching to melt into the floor. Thank God he hadn't pressed her for more.

Her gaze flicked to the man sitting to his left who looked away as her eyes met his. She hadn't meant to look anyone in the eye, but he'd been looking at her. No surprise, everyone

had been. But with him being the only other younger person in the room, not much older than her twenty-seven years, his friendly smile made her want to crawl under the chair and die.

After losing Brendan, she *had* wanted to die. To drift away into peace. She couldn't feel anything anyway. How much different could death be? The Zolofit in the medicine cabinet from her previous life-storm had called to her like crack to an addict. But she couldn't bring herself to take them, and after staring at the light-yellow pills for two weeks, she'd flushed them.

She'd pleaded with God to take her, but He hadn't granted that wish—He wasn't a genie in a bottle.

She chanced a glance around the room as stories were shared and tears shed. A small stage at one end, extra chairs stacked at the other. A nonintimidating environment if she didn't count the suffering people surrounding her. The other newcomer had lost his wife. Another normal person deemed unworthy of love. She shivered in the overzealous AC and tugged her sweater tighter, turning her gaze back to her lap.

If she wasn't going to die, then the only choice was to get through this, to somehow be okay again. Living in the abyss no longer an option and having no way to crawl out of this hole by herself, her parents had requested—insisted—she get help. So she'd stepped into her first group therapy session.

And was so ready to step out.

How much longer could she make it in this cloud of constant lightning? With every story too close to home, she breathed steady and waited.

When Dr. Holiday thanked everyone for coming and people began chatting with those around them, she thanked God it was over. She hopped up, grabbed her bag, and hurried to escape the room before she had to talk to anyone, not caring if her heels made noise or not. First session, ready to make it her last.

How did people do this? Bare their souls to strangers. She needed help, yes. But this nearly killed her, and she'd only given her name. Who needed Zoloft? Her hands in death grips on its straps, she tucked her boho bag under her arm, pressing it hard against her left side, the soft leather unable to fill the hollow aching there. *How will I ever share more?*

But wasn't that the purpose of being here? To talk to people who'd been through the hell she was living? To have people around that understood, who could help?

She paused at the door, listening to the voices behind her—the chitchat between acquaintances. A woman cried. A man laughed. No, sweet freedom was better. She stepped into the hallway, the glass entry doors calling to her.

She strolled down the hall in a nonattention-drawing manner. Her hair fell around her, a shield for her face as she fumbled in her bag for her keys. Footsteps echoed behind her, and she quickened her pace.

“Excuse me, Quinn?”

Oh, so close to fresh air! She cringed and twisted partway, hands hovering on the door's push lever, ready for escape. The young guy with the friendly smile had friendly eyes to match, blue like a clear sky. She'd club him if he made an advance.

Did she really just have that thought?

“You left your phone.”

She blinked. “Oh! Yes, thank you.” *Calm down.* Cringing against the guilt, she deposited the phone into her bag. “Well, have a good night.” She turned to hurry away, but she didn’t get the door open an inch.

“I’m Nick.” He offered his hand, those blue eyes shining, his close-cropped beard neat and professional. “Nick James.”

Resigning herself, she let the door close. His grip was firm. “Quinn Alexander.”

“This is your first time here.”

With him seeming as nervous as she felt, her internal radar started beeping out of control. “Yes, an order from my mother.”

His brow shot up. “Ah, the mom. I have one of those. Except, he’s a dad.”

She caught herself laughing—at least he had a sense of humor—and her muscles relaxed a bit. “Yeah. They can be quite compelling. But in her defense, I *could* use the help.”

“It’s good you’re here then. What did you think about it all?”

She moved out of the doorway so an older man could leave. As he passed, he whispered a good night, and she replied absently. “I’m not sure. I didn’t share anything.”

“I noticed you were quiet.”

“I noticed you talked a great deal.”

Rocking back on his heels, he slid his hands into his jeans pockets.

“Do you normally share so much?” Did she normally ask so many questions?

“Sometimes. I’ve been coming for about six months now.”

“Six months?” She slumped against the door. “That doesn’t give me much hope.”

“There’s no quick fix for grief.”

Jiggling the keys in her hand, she huffed. “You’re telling me.”

He leaned against the other door as if preparing for a long conversation. “Actually, the more I share, the more others open up and share their thoughts. I guess I found a purpose in it. So I keep coming and sharing. If I can use my grief to help others through theirs, that has to be a good thing, right?”

How am I supposed to know? But, surely, he wasn’t asking. Maybe it was a good thing for *him*. It could take her forever to get to that point. Her mouth came open—as if she had words to say—then she glanced toward the freedom that could have been hers. A good thing. She wouldn’t know a good thing if it walked up and introduced itself. She glanced sidelong into his blue eyes. This was getting awkward.

An older lady, whose name she couldn’t remember, shuffled down the hallway, her bright yellow blouse with its collar turned up in a style long gone and white dress pants were paired with a sixties-style purse dangling by short straps from her forearm.

“Mrs. LaRue.” The guy dipped his head to greet her and started to open the door.

But the woman didn’t budge. Well, great. Now it was a party.

A smile spread across the lady’s face taking the garish red lipstick that covered more than her lips with it. “Nick. It’s always a pleasure.”

Nick. Right.

Why did she care?

The woman’s tightly curled gray hair shimmered under the fluorescents as she tipped her head from Quinn and back to him. “My, don’t you two make a lovely couple.”

Stunned, Quinn pushed off the door. “Oh no. No. We’re not together.” She waved a finger between them. “He and I aren’t...”

Those atrocious lips fell. “Well, isn’t that too bad?”

Quinn raised her eyebrows, gaping at her audacity. How dare she? Did the woman not realize where they were? Why they were here?

Nick raised his hands, palms out. “Mrs. LaRue, this is Quinn’s first time here. Let’s not scare her away.”

Good. There was anger in his voice. Maybe they could team up and take her down in the parking lot.

The old woman waved her hand. “Oh, I’m hardly scary. But life is short.” Her smile returned as she extended her hand to Quinn. “I’m Mrs. LaRue.”

No kidding life was short. *We're at grief counseling, lady.* Somehow, Quinn remembered her manners, accepted the other woman's cold hand, but wanted to punch her in the face. Would have if she hadn't been an old lady. "Quinn. My pleasure, I'm sure."

"I hope you'll come back next week. You and I should get to know one another." She wrinkled up her already wrinkled nose. "Until then."

Nick opened the door on his side and ushered her out with his words. "Here you go. Have a good evening."

Quinn, with her lips pressed into a thin line, nodded as she passed, trying not to roll her eyes. So time to go home.

Her heart began to hurt. Here she'd been having a seminormal conversation with Mr. Muscles in a too-tight T-shirt when she should be going home. And this Mrs. LaRue character. What was that all about? She shouldn't have come. It was too soon.

Nick blew out a breath. His shoulders sagged. "I—have no words."

"I should get going." Perfect words, but ones she should've said before the conversation began.

"Of course. My apologies. If I hadn't kept you so long you wouldn't have had to deal with Mrs. LaRue."

"It's fine." It wasn't, but that was a conversation for a later time. Later? "Thank you for my phone."

"Sure. I hope we'll get to see you next week."

“We’ll see.”

Not waiting for him to respond and not caring if he thought her rude, she escaped into the warm evening, her sweater becoming too much. Not bothering to take it off, she hurried to Brenden’s truck. The sun hung bright and low in the sky, but she refrained from pulling out her sunglasses. She didn’t need them as much as a getaway.

On the road home, her eyes prickled, threatening a downpour. What a disaster. “I’m sorry, Brendan. I tried. I did. But this is not for me. I don’t know how to be around people. I don’t *want* to be around people.”

She adjusted the AC vent toward her and blinked the tears away so she could see to drive. If she cried all her tears now, she wouldn’t have any to cry herself to sleep.

Next week. A deep breath calmed her racing heart. She didn’t want to be here today. How could she consider next week? Maybe this Nick guy wouldn’t be there—sure, right. From the way he spoke, the probability of that was nil.

Maybe she wouldn’t go.

And maybe her mother would leave her alone. The probability of that? Nil.

And as for Mrs. LaRue and her insinuations... Quinn shuddered. She’d never give her heart away again. There wasn’t anything left to give.

CHAPTER TWO

Nick inhaled a long breath and let it out, squelching his anger as the door shut behind Quinn. The rattling glass echoed a lonesome tune in the near-empty hallway.

Mrs. LaRue *was* a sweet old lady, but that sweet lady made those comments when it was obvious he wasn't dating anyone. Why would he be here if he was? It was one thing for her to talk to him like that, and she had. Always saying, "I just know any day some sweet little thing is going to steal your heart away." But to speak that way to someone she didn't know was another thing—at a *grief* counseling session no less.

He backed away from the door and sat on one of the hall benches to give Quinn time to leave. Elbows on his knees, he consulted his phone to make his waiting less obvious. The last thing she needed was to think he'd followed her out. She'd been trying to escape, and he'd stopped her—the first attack on her strategy. Then Mrs. LaRue's display of brilliance—the second.

Come late. Leave early. Talk to no one. It'd been his goal at his first counseling session too. But it hadn't worked out so well for Quinn. Too many threats and not enough space.

It would be a miracle if she came back.

Did he want her to?

He hadn't wanted to return her phone. Had almost left it on her chair for someone else to find. But feeling Lauren's gentle prodding he so loved and missed, he'd given in.

Having gotten a good handle on himself lately, he'd been thinking about giving up therapy. But a minute after the door had closed tonight, it had opened again.

People naturally looked in the direction of a distraction, but he'd looked twice. A double take before jerking back to center. Pain had seized his heart, and Lauren's dying wish echoed off the canyon walls of his soul. Again.

His memory replayed the promise he hadn't wanted to make. How was he supposed to fulfill a promise like that?

Just be a friend. Everything in him halted at his wife's sweet voice. And everything in him fought to silence it.

But in her skinny jeans and white tank, camel-colored cable knit sweater hanging off one shoulder, Quinn had been a definite distraction. She hadn't needed the sweater for the August heat. But in here, it was chilly, and he was glad she'd had it.

And I'm thinking about this why?

Lauren had loved her comfy sweaters. She'd carried one wherever she went. Especially at the end when her body was too frail to hold heat.

He leaned back and crossed an ankle over his knee, still staring at his phone, Charles and Steve's nearby conversation a low drone.

Until the moment he'd seen Quinn, her wavy brown hair cascading down her back, he'd dreamed, even wished, he wouldn't have to make good on his promise. And maybe the

day was still far off, but he'd felt the flutter a beautiful woman gave a man upon first seeing her.

A flutter followed by a load of guilt.

It had to have been a fluke. He was just emotionally drained after suffering through his and Lauren's third anniversary alone the week before. There were a lot of beautiful women in the world. One flutter didn't mean anything. Besides, this place of grieving and pain was not a place to pick up women. Unless you were a vulture.

There was a tap on his knee. "Hey, see you next week."

He jerked his head up. Steve and Charles weren't close friends by any means, but being older, they'd become strong supports. They cried for him sometimes, although he didn't want them to. But sometimes, in the dark of his apartment, he cried for them too.

Nick stood and accepted Steve's hand. "Yes, sir. I'll be here." He'd have to be now. Then he shook Charles's hand, and they left him alone in the hallway.

With nothing better to do, he resumed his position on the bench.

The roof had fallen in on his entire life, and he'd been a mess. The bottle of wine some friends had gifted to him and Lauren on their second anniversary had been the starting point. Followed by nearly nightly visits to the liquor store on his way home from work. The poison didn't kill the pain or the nightmares, but he'd given it a good go.

Being left alone would've been ideal, but in his ideal world, he would've drank himself to death, floated away on a river of Kentucky bourbon. But Dad wasn't willing to lose him to the bottle. When Nick's work at their architectural firm began to suffer, Dad had used his position as senior partner to insist Nick get the help he needed—no alternatives.

Dad had saved his life. So Nick kept coming back each week.

What would bring Quinn back?

She'd lost her husband. And Mrs. LaRue was playing matchmaker.

No way would she come back.

Anger hit him. He scrubbed at his short beard and stood. He hadn't wanted to talk to her anyway, so why was he worried? He strode toward the door. If she didn't come back, then she didn't come back. Problem solved. At least she had her phone. His hand on the push lever, he stopped.

That line of thinking worked as well as a crooked plumb line. *His* problem solved, but she still needed help.

Oh, for Pete's sake, he *had* only returned her phone. It's not like he'd asked her out.

But Mrs. LaRue... He wanted to strangle that woman. How could she think her comments were anywhere near acceptable? Quinn needed to be here, and her shaky effort to get help may have just jumped out of a ten-story window.

He stormed into the parking lot. Even with the world aglow in the orange wash of the setting sun, the Oklahoma

heat still brought droplets of sweat to his brow. Not able to contain his scowl, he reached into his pocket for his key.

He jerked open the door of his red Ford truck, slipped the key into the ignition, and froze. His heart skipped and his scowl melted. He cared. Hadn't wanted to. Hadn't known he could. But he did. Arms crossed on the steering wheel, he stared out the windshield.

"You sure are tricky." He could imagine Lauren's giggle. That look that said gotcha when she managed to get a joke in on him. The way she bit her lip. Her hands on his chest. Her body melting into his embrace. Her sweet kiss.

His eyes closed as he let the memories return, the pain that never went away resurfacing. He could see her, wanted to reach for her, but he couldn't touch her.

That world had slipped into yesterday.

There were no jokes, no sweet kisses, no more memories to be made.

There was only today and each day God allowed him to have thereafter. What filled those days—or who—was the mystery.

Maybe Quinn wouldn't come back. Maybe she would. He fired the engine and drove from the lot. He couldn't solve the mystery tonight.

His keys clanked as they hit the beechwood bowl on his entry table. He didn't bother turning on the lamp. After the week he'd had and the way the night had gone, he wanted sleep. He longed for a drink to take the edge off, but he'd

cleaned out those cabinets and vowed never to fill them again. Drinking alone was a spiraling staircase that didn't lead up, and the bottom was a frightening place to be.

He squinted in the fridge light as it momentarily lit up the kitchen when he grabbed a water bottle. He chugged half, replaced the cap, and passed through his bedroom to the bathroom.

On the way, he cast a sideways glance at the frame on his bedside table that held Lauren's picture. "That... did not go well."

As always, there was no answer.

He brushed his teeth and left his clothes in a heap on the floor. He'd pick them up tomorrow. After all, Lauren wasn't there to roll her eyes or complain. Before he could leave the bathroom, he stopped. He wished she was there to complain, to roll her eyes in that beautiful face of hers, to display any expression, even disappointment.

He slunk back and threw his clothes into the hamper.

Leaning on the bathroom counter, he turned the water bottle around on the cabinet with his thumb and forefinger. In the mirror, he looked his age, but his eyes held too much life experience for twenty-seven years. Not enough years to have seen the tragedy he'd experienced. Lauren sure hadn't had enough. Abandoning the bottle, he pushed off the counter, flipped off the light, and went to bed.

Back against the headboard, he held the crystal picture frame in his lap, his arms heavy. Lauren, in Paris on their

honeymoon, stared back. The first destination on her bucket list, he was proud he could put a check in that box. He'd have spent his last dime checking that box.

They never made it to the second.

She was beautiful. Even in the end. Even in the long drawn-out end when her hair was gone and she weighed a whopping ninety pounds.

The cancer had come suddenly and taken her just as suddenly. They'd had two years, one month, twenty-four days, and no children. When he hadn't been able to come home to their four-bedroom, ghost-filled house any longer, he'd sold it and moved into this penthouse apartment on the river. The guilt of moving on without her followed. He couldn't sell that or give it away.

"This week's been hard." A tear slipped down his cheek and splattered on the glass. He wiped it away with the sheet, then laid his forehead on the frame. "I wish you were here."

I'll always be right here. He could still feel her hand over his heart, still see her sweet face as she pleaded. *Be happy, Nick. For me. Be happy.*

"You always had such grand wishes. I wanted to grant every one. But how do I love someone else?"

Just be a friend.

"Lauren," he pleaded. "I don't know that I can." He'd told her before when she'd been sick. He'd said it each time he remembered his promise to try. "I *can't* do that if she doesn't come back."

Maybe she wouldn't. Hopefully, she wouldn't.

He cringed at his selfishness. Quinn needed to be there as much as he did.

Setting the picture aside, he locked his hands behind his head and stared into the void. Bare walls with room-darkening curtains, a man didn't need much. He'd gotten rid of most of their things or put them into storage.

The dullness seemed lonely. And loneliness wasn't what Lauren wanted for him. He was beginning to not want it for himself—just beginning. But he didn't want anyone. He wanted Lauren.

And she wasn't coming back. So, she'd made him promise.

He hadn't wanted to—couldn't imagine ever being with anyone else. But when he'd given in to her pleading, she'd looked relieved, at peace with having to leave him. Death had taken her not long after.

Eyes closed, he blew out a breath.

“Next week, if Quinn comes back”—he scoffed and shook his head—“*if* she comes back, we'll see.”

He reached to click off his lamp and sank into the gray sheets. One week to dread the coming Monday. One more week to put off his promise.

CHAPTER THREE

Quinn had survived the first Monday night of counseling. If clutching Brendan's pillow, settling into a fitful sleep, and enduring nightmares in droves could be considered surviving. No warmth had greeted her under her white cotton sheets and light-blue duvet, no loving embrace.

She couldn't get through her workday without hearing Mrs. LaRue's voice in her head—or without wishing she'd decked the witch. Maybe witch was extreme. Perfect, didn't she think decking her was extreme? What was wrong with her?

The only person she'd ever hit was Katie Huffington in the eighth grade for making fun of Claire. It had been more of a gentle slap—sort of.

Maybe she should be worried about wanting to inflict pain on an eightysomething widow. Should she add psychiatric help to her grief counseling?

Group hadn't been terrible. Listening to everyone else's sob stories, she'd learned she wasn't alone. Suffering together wasn't much consolation, but it was a start.

She'd driven home thinking of one lady who'd lost her mother, who also happened to be her best friend. And another lady had lost her husband too. And Nick... Why was she thinking of Nick? Well, he'd been the only person—besides the witch—she'd talked to.

Quinn stowed herself away in her back office, resting her heavy head in her palms, elbows on the desk before her

keyboard. Her second cup of coffee wasn't helping her puffy, droopy eyes. The flower bobblehead on the shelf above her only annoyed. A gift from Claire, of course.

“Well, at least you're happy.”

The smiley white flower didn't respond. It never did, only nodded up and down, up and down. If she had the energy, she'd throw it in the trash. But why be angry with a plastic object incapable of feeling? The last of her hazelnut-cream flavored coffee went down in a gulp, and she slunk to the break room for a refill. The red Keurig sat like a shrine on the white Formica countertop.

While Quinn lounged against the counter waiting for the last drops of coffee to eke out, Claire came in, looking like she worked in the White House instead of this little no-name company in downtown Tulsa. Friends since middle school, they'd been in each other's weddings, in each other's lives. BFFs and a pinkie promise never to talk about what happened in the bathroom the night of senior prom.

“I've been wanting to ask all morning. How did it go last night?”

“Well, it went.”

Nudging Quinn aside, Claire reached into the cabinet above them for her oversized pink mug, its crown and good-to-be-queen comment so like her. She dumped in four caramel macchiato creamer cups, her swaying blond ponytail only serving to waft her overbearing perfume around. “That good, huh? You look like crap by the way.”

Quinn tucked her nose into her generic company mug and sipped her newly brewed coffee. “Mmm. Thanks.”

“Nothing a day at the spa couldn’t fix.” Claire slid her mug under the spout and changed out the pod. She pressed the button and folded her arms across her crisp blue button-up. “Tell me about it.”

With a sigh, Quinn let her head list to the side looking for sympathy. “Maybe grief counseling isn’t for me. I didn’t want to listen to all that pain. And I did *not* share mine.”

“It was your first session. You didn’t have to talk. And you don’t have to talk at the second or the third. It’s there for you when you’re ready.”

“I don’t know that I’ll ever be ready.”

Claire touched Quinn’s arm. “Someday you will be. And when you are, you’ll have those connections, those friends, and they’ll be ready to listen to you.”

“It was nice to see I’m not alone, but I just wanted out.” Quinn toed her sandal on a scuff mark on the linoleum, then rolled her eyes. “Then dummy me left my phone in the room. This guy, Nick somebody, brought it out to me. I was grateful, but...”

“A guy?”

She blinked, her head jerking up. Leave it to Claire. “Yes, Claire, a guy. A man in the same *grief counseling* room. Just a guy.”

“Was he nice?”

“I guess.” Quinn shrugged. “He gave me back my phone. Just because he’s pretty to look at and has movie-star hair doesn’t mean...”

Uh-oh. Claire’s eyebrows soared. Quinn was in for it. “So he’s good looking?”

Adrenaline and guilt pumped through her. “I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you did.”

Quinn opened her mouth and shut it again. Maybe she had. There were a lot of pretty guys in the world. It didn’t make her interested.

“Okay, okay.” Claire raised her hands and waved them in her defense, the charms on her Pandora bracelet rattling. “So he returned your phone.” She picked up her coffee mug and took a drink.

Quinn wanted to skip this part, but it was no good. She’d never forget Mrs. LaRue’s comment. It would always be in the back of her mind reminding her she was alone. “Then this old lady said we looked like a lovely couple.”

Claire almost spewed her more creamer than coffee. “What? Did you punch her?”

“No.” Quinn narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. “But I wanted to. She’s like eightysomething. I would’ve killed her.”

“Well, doesn’t sound like she’s far from that anyway.”

They shared one of those best-friend looks and laughed. It helped. That and the coffee starting to take effect.

“You going back next week?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not.” She rolled her eyes again. She seemed to be doing a lot of that lately. “And maybe my mother will leave me be for the rest of my life.”

“Fat chance. And neither will I.” Claire clunked her mug on the counter. “Quinn, you have to go back. Give it another try.”

“I know I need to be there, but I don’t want to be.” Quinn clenched her teeth. Even she couldn’t stand the whine in her voice.

“I doubt anyone *wanted* to be there. Maybe this Nick guy was just being nice and the crypt-keeper lady just needs a friend.” Claire held up a hand, palm forward. “Doesn’t have to be you.”

Despite her flare for the dramatic, Claire’d always been the sensible one. Quinn had been the one with her head in the clouds. Storm clouds, canvas, paintbrushes, Winsor blue, Indian yellow. Her fingers itched to create. She gripped her mug tighter to lose the feeling. She wouldn’t paint. But maybe... next week. Nick *was* only doing what nice people do, and Mrs. LaRue was reaching out for friends. Overreaching, but reaching.

Their heads jerked toward the door at the sound of their boss looking for Claire. “Gotta run. Love you.”

Quinn’s smile weary, she watched Claire spin around and exit the room, her high heels tapping out a rhythm.

Going back to work, she mulled Claire's words as the day crept by. When it finally ended, she said goodbye to her coworkers, but as she stepped outside, her smile faded. In the months since the funeral, keeping up her charade added to her exhaustion.

Brendan's insurance money offered enough for her to live comfortably for years. She didn't have to work. But she couldn't paint.

Painting required the ability to feel, and feeling loomed as far away as the horizon. But sitting at home staring at the same four walls had no longer been an option. At least she'd figured that out.

Well, Mom had.

At the three-month mark, she'd slammed into that horizon face-first and lost it. When Claire told her about a job at the small law firm where she worked, Mom insisted she apply.

The job was perfect. No one bothered her, and her tasks kept her mind from wandering. But it didn't help her fill the time after work.

She began running, working her way up to an hour and a half at a time. After a shower and dinner—no TV—bedtime couldn't come soon enough.

But at the end of the day, the memories always flooded in.

Brendan's excitement when building their new home. The rooms they'd fill with children. The many times they'd tried—all unsuccessful. His smile just for her. His warm hand around hers. His touch. As she lumbered down the street to the

parking lot, avoiding the gazes of the people she passed, she groaned under the weight of memory.

Within sight of Brendan's truck, she hit the autostart.

Today was Tuesday—the only day she didn't run, the day reserved for dinner at her parents' house. The mandatory check-in. She'd help Mom cook a big meal and take home enough leftovers for a few days. Maybe longer the way she picked at food.

They were excited she'd agreed to go to counseling, thought their baby girl was finally going to get help. What would they say if she decided not to go back?

Who was she kidding? They'd say "try a different group, try one-on-one, try fill-in-the-blank." They'd come up with something.

And she loved them for it.

Twenty minutes after taking on the five-o'clock traffic, she pulled into the familiar neighborhood where elm trees sheltered spacious yards, and Japanese maples waited for fall to turn their brilliant red. The smell of sprinkler systems and fresh-cut grass competed with the humidity.

Sitting in the driveway, she breathed in a deep breath and practiced her smile as she exhaled. It was forced, but what else could she do? She gave her head a gentle shake and tried again, this time showing her teeth. The lame grin didn't reach her eyes, but it would have to do.

As she climbed out of Brendan's truck, a neighbor who probably knew her entire story was standing out in her yard.

Quinn waved and practiced her smile one last time, then darted for the front door before she had to stay and chat. Two little girls played in a sprinkler across the street. She slowed, mourning the future that wouldn't be hers, before prying her gaze from them. Then, as if escaping a heavy rain, she sped away from the bombardment of unhappiness.

She blew through the door as all kids do when coming home. The smell of Mom's famous meatloaf permeated the house along with something sweet. Her stomach made it known that maybe she wasn't eating enough.

"Quinn!" Dad rose from the worn brown leather recliner he wouldn't let Mom replace, clicked off the TV, and wrapped his arms around her. His embrace a comfort, her mask almost slipped. "Come on. Help me set the table."

"Hi, baby." Mom stood at the stove in a pair of white capris, long chambray shirt, and squishy flip-flops stirring first the green beans, then the potatoes.

"Hi, Mom." Quinn hugged her, losing her smile while her face was hidden.

Dad reached into the cabinet for dinner plates, dessert plates, and salad bowls and took them to the table. "How was your day?"

Quinn dug in the silverware drawer, setting cutlery out on their red cloth napkins. "Same as yesterday—felt like Monday all over again."

"Gotta love Mondays."

Quinn met his gaze over the table, and they both shook their heads. “Nah,” they sang together.

Mom carried steamy bowls and platters to the table and placed them atop her hand-crocheted pot holders. Then they sat in the chairs they’d occupied for as long as Quinn could remember and held hands while Dad said the prayer.

“Lord, we thank You for this beautiful day and the time we have to come together. Thank You for this fine meal and the hands who prepared it. We pray for Your continued healing. In Jesus’s name, amen.”

Continued healing. Had it even begun? She didn’t want to die so much anymore. That was something. But healing would’ve been easier if God hadn’t ripped Brendan away from her. She shoved the thought away and took the bowl of mashed potatoes from Mom, displaying her practiced grin.

A little green beans, a little salad—she skipped the bread. Mom’s meatloaf was divine as always. Dad had two helpings. If Quinn hadn’t been suffering in silence, perhaps she’d have eaten more. Maybe not.

“Who’s ready for cherry pie?” Mom rose from her seat and retrieved the sticky sweet delicacy from the oven.

“Your mother’s been cooking all day.”

Great. How did one turn down food that’d been slaved over? One didn’t. Another smile.

Cherry sauce boiled through the latticework of the top crust, browned to perfection. If only she could devour a couple slices, but her stomach would make her pay for it later.

“Just a half piece for me.”

Mom cut a smaller piece and dished it out onto her dessert plate, giving Quinn “the look.” She’d be going home with leftover pie.

Dad placed a forkful in his mouth and closed his eyes, humming. “Evelyn, you’ve outdone yourself with this one. Quinn, you should eat more than half a sliver. You’re missing out. Hey, why’d the pie go to the dentist?” He glanced between them and delivered the punch line when they failed to answer. “To get a filling.”

Quinn smiled. Almost a true smile.

Mom laughed and laid her forehead on Dad’s shoulder. “Oh, Pete. That’s awful.”

Quinn’s almost smile became a true one. The first of its kind in a while. “But the pie is good. Thank you, Mom.”

Mom’s laughter and Dad’s deep chuckle were balm for her soul. The cherry pie helped a little too. Maybe being here every Tuesday was helping.

With pursed lips, Mom turned to Quinn. “So how was last night?”

And maybe not.

She told them about Dr. Holiday and some of the people who’d shared their stories, how sad they’d been. She didn’t mention Nick or Mrs. LaRue. They were details of insignificance. Her parents wanted to know she went and that she was going again. They wanted to know she was going to be all right.

She finished her story and took a bite of pie, the sweetness covering the bitterness of the day.

“Sounds like it’s going to be good for you. Maybe you’ll be painting again soon.”

Her gaze jerked back to her parents, the bitter seeping in again. “I can’t.” She schooled her tone. “It brings back too many memories.”

“Memories are good, Quinn. No one’s asking you to forget Brendan. He was here. He was real. And he loved you.” Mom swallowed at the crack in her voice.

Dad reached for her hand and squeezed it, laying his other arm over the back of her chair. They shared a tender smile. A look Quinn would never share with anyone again.

“We loved him,” Mom went on, not dropping Dad’s gaze. “But it’s time for you to move forward. It’s time to live life again.”

Life. It sounded like a foreign country and her without a passport. “I can’t feel anything. I’m so dead inside. I just don’t care.” She reached for her glass and sipped her tea, both to wash down the bite she’d taken and to stifle the tears welling up in the back of her throat. “I’m going to counseling. That can be enough for now.”

Well, that settled it. She was going back next week. Saying it out loud committed her to it and held her accountable. They’d ask, she’d have to tell, so she had to go.

Leftovers—and well over half a pie—packed, hugs and kisses given, and she was on her way home. Maybe they’d

have lunch soon. They hadn't done that since before the accident. Maybe it was time.

Maybe it was time for a lot of things. Quinn shook her head as she turned into her neighborhood. Maybe counseling was working already.

Twilight bloomed, but kids were still outside playing basketball or riding bikes. Being a school night, it wouldn't be long before their parents called them in. She reached her house as the outside lights blinked on, illuminating the flower beds and the perfectly manicured lawn. One of those extra amenities Brendan had added to make their home perfect. As she turned into her driveway, she clicked the garage door opener. Safe inside, she closed the door, shutting out the world she'd never be a part of.

She grabbed her purse and headed inside, tried not to cry as she passed their picture in the hall that connected the master bedroom to the kitchen. The smiles on their faces had her frowning. Happiness wasn't something she could think about right now. With it so far out on the horizon, she couldn't see it. Maybe it *was* time for a lot of things, but one thing at a time.

Right now, it was time to load the fridge with leftovers and go to bed.

She'd try another counseling session, maybe two, before making up her mind. Next Monday, she'd be sitting in her chair listening. At least when the others were sharing their grief, her mind was off her problems.

And Mrs. LaRue? The old bag—Quinn sighed away her ridiculous thoughts as she brushed her teeth—the nice old lady

probably didn't mean a thing by her comment. Quinn was just on edge, the perfect storm waiting for someone to devour.

And that Nick person. She wouldn't have to talk to him again. He *had* only been returning her phone. What a fool she was for thinking he was coming on to her. *It's grief counseling, Quinn. Don't be a Mrs. LaRue.*

She laughed at herself—well, not a real laugh, a choked, strangling sound—crawled into bed, and hugged Brendan's pillow against her. Talk to no one, and no one would talk to her. She could only hope the world worked that way.

CHAPTER FOUR

Being fashionably late worked great for not having to talk to anyone before counseling began, but not so well for getting a choice seat. When the door clicked shut, Quinn trained her eye on the chair where she'd sat the previous Monday, but someone else occupied it.

Of course. No one had assigned seats. This wasn't kindergarten.

The only empty seat? Right next to Nick, a blue blazer over his tight tee and seated to the left of Dr. Holiday. Could it get any worse?

She stifled a snort. Yes. She could've had to sit next to Mrs. LaRue.

Too late to walk out, she sank into the orange plastic chair and slid her purse to the floor. If she didn't look at them, they wouldn't see her there, at the front of the room. She crossed her legs at the ankle and shoved her hands between her thighs. With the heat tingling up her neck, her face had to be nine shades of red.

When Nick spoke, her ears pricked. She had no inkling why, but what he said was familiar. He talked about the first month after loss, how bad the pain was, how, when the numbness began to wear off in the second month, it became worse. She'd gone through every emotion he described.

He understood. She could hear Claire's I told you so and envision her parents standing behind her, arms crossed and heads nodding.

But who had he lost? Why was he here? She twisted her clenched hands in her lap, the wedding ring glinting under the fluorescent lighting. Why did she care?

The dustcover over her heart wobbled. She squeezed her eyes shut. Why would she think that way? She wasn't uncaring. She was a nice person. If she could feel anything, she'd feel ashamed. She'd let her pain become her justification, and she hated that.

A man named Charles began to cry. He'd lost a young daughter, and it had driven his wife mad. In a way, he'd lost them both.

Brendan had kept her from going mad. Would the people in this room be the ones to keep her from going mad this time? Though she was becoming aware she wasn't alone, she still had no desire to speak to them, to open her heart, to cry in front of them. They didn't need to know how broken her heart was or how she'd lost herself to a deep abyss.

It would have to be enough for her to know she wasn't crazy, her ache to curl up around Brendan's pillow and cry didn't make her insane. It made her normal.

Dr. Holiday didn't call on her, a huge blessing. Mrs. LaRue smiled at her. Nick glanced in her direction at least once. But no one made her talk. As the session wrapped up, Quinn lifted her bag to her lap—made sure she had her phone—and prepared to make her exit. If she moved fast, she might escape before anyone said a word.

Dismissed. Time to go.

“Great to see you made it back.”

She hadn't even stood up all the way. She swung her purse over her shoulder, put on a polite face, and greeted Nick.

“Yeah, uh, it's not so bad.”

Until Dr. Holiday moved to Nick's side. “Quinn. Edward Holiday. I'm glad you've decided to join our group.”

With a polite smile, she accepted the firm grip of his outstretched hand. “It's nice to be here.” Lie! She hadn't met this many people since she'd started working. The pressure was like walls closing in, walls with spikes.

The doctor winked. “And one day you'll believe that.”

He had her pegged.

“I see you've met Nick. He's a good one to know around here.”

“I wouldn't listen to him.” Nick's cheeks colored.

“Don't be so modest. You two enjoy your evening. I'm going to make my rounds and get out of here.” The doctor moved on to the next group of people.

“He seems nice.”

“I'd be lost without him.”

She wouldn't have had time to ask him about his sincere comment if she'd wanted to.

“Quinn!” Mrs. LaRue scuttled over and rested her hand on Quinn's arm, her rings clattering as she squeezed.

Everything in Quinn deflated.

“I’m so glad you came back this week. I feared I’d scared you away. Won’t you forgive me for being so blunt?”

Caught off guard, eyes widening, Quinn opened her mouth in silence before stuttering, “U–um, of course.”

“Wonderful. Well, what do you two have planned for the evening?”

Planned? Hadn’t she just apologized for being blunt? Did this lady have split personalities or something?

“Actually…” Nick spoke low, seeming to be trying to find the right words. “I was just going to help Quinn with her truck.” He raised his brows at her. “Are you ready?”

“What?” She’d become part of a play—she just didn’t know which part.

“Oh, I’m so sorry you’re having car trouble.” Mrs. LaRue patted Nick’s arm. “You are so sweet to help her. A man who will help a woman in her distress is priceless.”

“Thank you, Mrs. LaRue. We’ll see you next week.” He motioned for Quinn to follow.

Clueing in, Quinn played her part. “Good night, Mrs. LaRue.” Somehow, she even managed to sound polite.

“All right now.” The woman waved them on and homed in on the next unlucky person.

As they broke through the door into the hall, Quinn had to laugh. “Thank you for lying for me.”

“I wouldn’t lie for just anyone, but after last week, you could use the rescue.” He winked. “I’m sure God forgives

good intentions.”

Cute wink. Ugh. She fiddled with her purse strap, uneasy as he walked with her to the outer door. He’d saved her from what could’ve been a long conversation, but now what? She didn’t want to get out of one just to endure another. She wanted to go home.

“Mrs. LaRue’s not bad. She’s nice once you get to know her. It’s just getting past all the preliminary fluff.” He held the door open. “Milady, your freedom.”

Laughing, she walked out into the clear September night. The air was still warm, but the slight breeze stirred the fragrance of the purple petunias blooming in the triangular beds to either side of the walk and made her wish for fall. Whiteside Park had grown quiet. The distant sound of traffic along Forty-first Street had her dreading driving home.

“Would you like to get some coffee?”

She drew up short, no longer dreading the traffic. As his eyes went wide, he seemed shocked he’d asked. She was shocked, but not altogether repulsed. Why?

Stepping out the door, he let it shut behind him and dug his hands into his pockets. With the breeze tousling his brown hair, he looked like a little boy expecting to get scolded. “That sounded a bit LaRue-ish. But I assure you that is not what I meant.”

“Well, at least we’ve coined a new term.” She pulled her lips in. “Maybe coffee isn’t such a great idea.”

“Look, I wasn’t asking you out. I just thought it would be nice to get to know each other. We can invite the whole group if you’d like.” He nodded toward the door where, inside, people were milling about and moved to pull it open. “Maybe Mrs. LaRue would like to join us.”

“Oh no.” Quinn grabbed his arm to stop him, then jerked her hand away. His muscles were rock hard. How many hours did the guy spend in the gym? Hmm. Like her on the track. Not so different. And of course, by the look on his face, he was joking. What a sense of humor this one had.

Head tipped to one side, blue eyes fixed on hers, he held up his hands. “No obligations. Just coffee.”

She hadn’t had to turn a man down in years. “I don’t know if I’m ready for... people yet.”

A pent-up breath whooshed from his lungs as his whole body relaxed. “I do understand.”

Of course he did. Still, she didn’t want to seem rude. Why again? “Rain check?”

“Absolutely.” He gestured toward the parking lot. “You good?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m good. Thanks again.” And she meant it.

“See you next week.” She was sure he meant that too.

Well, what was another week? She’d come back tonight and survived. She went one way, and he went another. She climbed into Brendan’s truck and paused to breathe, taking inventory.

Mrs. LaRue had apologized—sort of. Maybe Nick was right. Maybe she wasn't so bad. Maybe there was even a story behind all that lipstick. Smiling to herself, Quinn started the truck.

And Nick. He'd made her laugh. Not an easy feat. Maybe he wasn't so bad either. Except, coffee? Oh, what had she gotten into?

Maybe she wouldn't come back. Maybe she would. She had a whole week to think about it. As she headed home, the prospect wasn't so daunting. Nick and Mrs. LaRue she could deal with. Facing her parents and Claire if she didn't go back? *That* was terrifying.

A week to decide, but her decision was made. She'd go. She wouldn't speak, at least not during the session. But she'd speak to Nick, her built-in protection from Mrs. LaRue. And Monday by Monday, she'd crawl to the top of the pit.

CHAPTER FIVE

Quinn couldn't get Charles out of her head. A story too close to home. A nightmare she was having a hard time shaking even now at work in the boring waking world. She grabbed her stress ball and tossed it between her hands, staring at her computer monitor. Was this the way it was going to be? Would she now suffer with everyone's pain, not just her own?

Turnabout was fair play. Just wait until she unloaded on them. She caught the ball, tabled the thought, and began tossing the ball again.

Nick handled it well. On the outside. What ghosts haunted him on the inside? *Do I care?*

She slammed the ball on her desk. It wasn't that she didn't care, but she couldn't handle anyone else's feelings right now. Especially when she couldn't feel her own.

She braced her chin on her hand. Why did he ask her out for coffee?

"Quinn? Earth calling Quinn."

Claire's singsong voice had her blinking back to the present. "What?"

"You're spacey today."

Quinn closed the file she'd been trying to work on and shoved it aside, swiveling her chair to her left and resting her arms on the return desk between her and Claire. "You mean more so than normal?"

Claire plunked herself into one of the seldom-used blue tweed chairs in front of Quinn's desk and crossed her legs, swinging her black pump on bare toes. "You okay? How did it go last night? Did you have to throat punch that old bag?"

"Mrs. LaRue. No, I did not assault an eighty-year-old woman. She apologized. Not sure she meant it." Her shoulders twitched in a quick shrug. "It was okay. Seems I can go to these sessions without wanting to run screaming out the door."

"That's good, Quinn." Claire fiddled with her moonstone pendant on its silver chain. Smaller matching beads danced in her dangling earrings as she cocked her head to one side, waiting.

"Hearing people talk about their tragedies is hard, but encouraging." The bands that had been tight around her heart loosened a bit. Taking a deep breath, Quinn lifted her chin in a show of bravery. "It proves there's a way back from all this—at least for some."

Rolling forward in her chair, Claire reached for Quinn's hand across the particleboard desk. "For you too."

"We'll see."

As her best friend squeezed her hand, Quinn chewed her lip. Telling Claire could be a mistake. But she had to tell someone, and Claire was the closest thing to a sister one could get without sharing blood. Quinn started to sit back and pry her hand free.

Claire tightened her grip, holding fast. "There's something you want to tell me. I can see it."

Of course she could. No avoiding it now. Quinn leaned against her chairback, sighed, and let it all out. “Remember the guy I told you about, the one who returned my phone?”

“Nick.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You remember his name a little too easily.”

Claire raised both hands in feigned innocence, her shoulders inching high enough for the little moonstones to brush the ruffles of her white cap sleeves. “I pay attention?”

Yeah right. “You’re also a schemer.”

Not denying it, she flipped her blond highlights over her shoulder. “Maybe. But I only do it because I love you.”

“Lucky me.”

Claire’s shoulders relaxed, and she went all best friend. “Are you going to tell me or not? No. Wait. You *are* going to tell me.”

Quinn drew in a breath and prepared herself. This was going to be fun. “He asked me out for coffee.”

Claire didn’t bat an eyelash. “And you said yes.”

Just before Quinn rolled her eyes, she stopped herself and exhaled. “No. I said no.”

“What?” Claire jolted upright uncrossing her legs, her blond waves falling over her shoulders as she scooted to the edge of the seat. “Why? You should go out for coffee.”

“I don’t want to go out with him, Claire.” Quinn slapped her chair arm. “I want him to go away. I want to go to

counseling, get help, and go home. Besides, he wasn't asking me out, out. He just thought we could visit, get to know each other. You know, because we have this whole grieving thing in common."

"You should go out for coffee."

"Claire."

"Well, you do have this 'whole grieving thing' in common. Why not have a friend who can help you while you help him? Wasn't that the whole purpose of going to counseling?"

They'd been best friends since middle school, why wasn't the why obvious? "I don't want him to get the wrong idea."

"Maybe *you* have the wrong idea." Claire crossed her tanned arms on the desk and glared.

Quinn held her glare. Oh, what's the use? She slumped in her chair. Nick was only being nice to the new girl. They'd established that. But being so on guard against everyone had blinded her.

"Friends are nice, Quinn." Claire's words were soft, soothing. "Especially one that's been through the same thing you have."

With her foot, Quinn swiveled her chair back and forth. "You're beginning to sound like my mother."

"You're welcome." Claire grabbed at her moonstone again. "Look, I'm just saying, I'm glad I can be there for you—and I *always* will be. But having a friend who's been through the same pain could help you more than I can. I love you. I want you to find your way out."

“Thank you. But my concern’s how he wants to help me.”

Claire sat up straight. “Go for coffee. If he seems too creepy, tell him where to go and find a different group.”

She spoke truth. Which caused a tightening sensation in Quinn’s chest. “He did save me from Mrs. LaRue.”

“A knight in shining armor. He can’t be all bad.” Claire pushed up from her seat, then turned back to Quinn, moonstones jingling. “Oh, and, Quinn...”

“Yeah?”

“Go have coffee.”

Quinn grabbed her stress ball and threw it. With a giggle, Claire dodged out the door. The ball bounced down the hall behind her.

Quinn resumed with the file she’d discarded. She’d gone to counseling to gain a support group, friends who’d been through the same torture. But why couldn’t those friends be girls?

Well, there was Mrs. LaRue. She moaned, looking to the flower bobblehead still nodding its annoying encouragement. If she lived through the healing process, it would be a wonder.

If she could make it through the next week without thinking of Nick, it would be a miracle. If she survived the guilt of thinking about Nick, maybe there’d be a way out for her.

She sank back in her chair, absorbing the bare space she occupied eight hours a day. Not one picture, no memorabilia.

She'd left it all at home. Lonesome. But wasn't that the way she wanted it?

It was for the best. Nothing to cause pain. No one to hurt or be hurt.

She opened her file and tried to concentrate. The client's name: Nicholas. Wonderful.

Her fingers clacked on the keyboard. Would he ask again? Should she hang around and talk to him? Would that seem too forward? Would he get the wrong idea? She groaned. Apparently, no miracle would be occurring today.

Her computer dinged with a new email message from Claire. Quinn opened it to a picture of a steaming cup of coffee. This was going to be a long week.



Nick stared out the window of his fourth-story office at Seventh and Boston, a cup of coffee in one hand, his other hand stuffed into his pocket. A clear sky ruled over the downtown streets where people and cars went about their daily routines. Hot black coffee inches from his mouth, he paused and swallowed the dryness of his throat. What was he thinking? He shook his head and took a sip. He hadn't planned to ask her out, not that he was asking her *out*. They were laughing, and it just—happened.

The laughter felt good. The guilt did not.

And the feeling of being an idiot? That didn't feel good either. He breathed in the rich coffee scent, letting the aroma soothe him. But it only served as a reminder.

He'd been just as bad as Mrs. LaRue. Quinn probably thought he was some kind of stalker preying on unsuspecting widows. Maybe she thought he and Mrs. LaRue were in cahoots. *Dear God, please no.*

She'd seemed okay enough. Maybe she'd put it all behind her. And maybe all the world's problems would go away overnight. He gulped some coffee. Two sessions, two bad experiences. No way would she come back.

He started when Dad stepped beside him. "Dad. Good morning." Agitated, he took a sip. He'd need several more cups.

"Rough night?"

"No, everything's great." He maneuvered behind the wood-topped desk where plans were laid out, set his coffee down next to the computer on the desk to the right, and picked up a pencil. "I was hoping you could look at this with me."

Dad didn't move. "Nick."

"Yeah?" Nick braved looking up.

Hands in his pockets, Dad waited, the natural light shining in his light hair. "That was a pretty serious look. What's going on?"

The man, who knew him all too well, could go from senior partner to dad in an instant. Nick tossed the pencil on top of the plans and plopped into his mesh-backed chair. Dad wouldn't give up until he'd spilled his guts. So Nick planted his elbows on the blueprints and clasped his hands. "There's this girl at group."

When Dad's eyebrows shot up, Nick threw his hands out.
“A man says girl and everyone assumes.”

Dad raised a defensive hand. “Don't get excited.”

“It's not like that.”

“Okay.”

Nick reached for his coffee and took a sip to reset. He grimaced setting it aside—the liquid had gone cold. “She's come twice, and both times something someone said makes me think she won't come back. Mrs. LaRue got a hold of her the first night.”

“Mrs. LaRue.” Dad sank into one of the modern-style client chairs on the other side of the desk and smoothed his slacks.

Yep. No need for explanations. “She came back Monday night, but then...”

“Mrs. LaRue again?”

The plans before him blurred. “No. Me.”

Dad's posture went straight, his brow crinkled. “What in the world could you have said worse than Mrs. LaRue?”

The moment of truth. “I asked her out for coffee.”

The crinkles deepened to furrows. “I thought you said it wasn't like that.”

“It's not. It can't be. I mean it could be, but it's not.” Nick shut his mouth before all the stupidity fell out. He hadn't been so confused since—well, since a long time ago. “We were just

talking, laughing, and I thought we could get to know each other. You know?"

"Friends."

He knew. Nick met his dad's eyes, then brushed eraser dust aside. "Maybe." But hadn't he said it wasn't like that?

Dad locked his fingers over his lap, elbows resting on the chair arms. "You mean well, Nick, and you have a good heart. Lauren knew that. If this girl came back after Mrs. LaRue, she'll come next Monday."

Nick's hope soared at his father's wisdom, but his words didn't cure his dread. "I'd hate to think she didn't come back because of me."

Dad shifted in his chair and crossed his arms. "And?"

Frowning, Nick eyed him. "And what?"

"I know you. This is surface matter."

Right. Nick mimicked his father's pose, rubbing his scruffy chin. "I'd hate if she didn't come back."

A slow grin spread out Dad's lips, and his eyes sparkled. "I like this girl already. Come on." He stood, then braced both hands on the desk as he bent over the plans. "Let's get you through this week, so you can find out."

"Find out what?"

"Whether or not you have a coffee date."

"It wouldn't be a date."

Dad motioned with his chin toward the plans. “What are your plans for this wall?”

Not sure what was going on in his mind enough to explain anyway, Nick let his dad guide him back to business.

But it didn't keep Lauren from feeling the need to interject into his thoughts. *Just be a friend.*

Alone with her in his office again, he moved to the stool at his antique drafting table that completed his U-shaped desk and turned on the swing-arm lamp. Drawing would clear his mind.

“Talk to her. That was my plan, Lauren. Not inviting her out for coffee. So why did I?”

Quinn was a beautiful woman, sure. A beautiful woman who'd suffered loss and needed help finding her way back to a normal life. He wouldn't get in the way of that.

He'd let down his guard. Gotten too comfortable. Lost control. Lost his mind?

Nick scowled at what he'd drawn. What wasted ink. He flung his marker aside, wadded up the paper, and tossed it in the trash.

After Lauren died, he hadn't been able to find the energy to draw. Now he was drawing like a third grader. He buried his face in his palms.

He wasn't ready for this. But what was this? And why did “this” cause so much guilt?

The week crawled by. Meetings ran long. Plans needed redrawing. His mind failed. And Dad stayed patient, a lot more than Nick would've been in his place.

On Monday, he tried not to care whether Quinn came to group. Even made plans for this to be his last session. He'd talked it over with Lauren, which hadn't gone well. One-sided conversations were rarely beneficial.

Lauren wanted him to move on. But doing that with someone so fresh to the pain of losing—unthinkable!

And he so fresh to it as well.

Just be a friend.

He drove into the community center parking lot. Her truck wasn't there, which didn't mean a lot. He was early, and she was always late.

When he entered the building, Mrs. LaRue caught him right away. "Were you able to get Quinn's truck running last week?"

"Her truck is just fine, Mrs. LaRue. Thank you for asking." It wasn't a lie. Her truck was fine. Or so he guessed.

"She's such a sweet girl."

"Seems to be." Not wanting to talk about her or seem interested, he dragged his feet toward the meeting room. "How was your week?"

Mrs. LaRue followed along beside him. "Full of fun. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren everywhere."

"I'm glad you had a good time."

Mrs. LaRue tilted her head, those tight gray curls haloing her not-so-angelic face. “Don’t worry, Nick. Someday you’ll have lots of grandchildren as well.”

She’d never change. “I’m sure you’re right.”

Her lips spread out, the red overtaking her face as she smiled toward the front door. “I’m sure I’m right too.”

He followed her gaze behind him. Quinn strode in, shoulders squared, head down, purse hugged at her side, sweater tight around her slim form. She was gorgeous.

Heart clenching, he swiveled back before she saw him gawking. She’d come back. And she was early.

He glared at Mrs. LaRue. If she as much as said a word sideways...

“Don’t worry. I’ll be on my best behavior. But that girl needs a friend.” She patted his arm. “And so do you.”

Great. God, Lauren, and Mrs. LaRue. Between them, he’d have grandchildren next week.

But Mrs. LaRue was right. Quinn needed a friend. And he did too. And she *had* come back—again.

Promises, promises.

All right, Lauren. You win.

CHAPTER SIX

The week passed slower than oil paints dry and faster than a storm all at the same time. Today was the day. Quinn didn't want to go, but she *needed* to go.

If for nothing else, to not catch it on the back end from her parents and Claire.

She could have started over with another group, but who's to say that would've gone any better? Best just to stick it out.

Maybe just get through today.

During their workdays, Claire managed small visits, miming drinking coffee, exclaiming how great coffee tasted, or just outright saying Quinn looked like she could use some coffee. A day at the spa would be great, but coffee would do just as well.

Claire was a pain. But Quinn wouldn't give her up for the world. She'd been there through the rough days, crying with her, holding her, making her eat. And now she was making her think she did need some coffee. What could having another friend hurt? Especially one who could relate.

Thwarted by Claire. Just like high school all over again.

Quinn paused before the community center doors, her deep breath not relaxing at all. Her feet poised to turn and run, but she planted them firmly. Running would take her back to the bottom of the abyss she'd been trying to climb out of.

So she grasped the door handle and flung it open. Cold air rushed out, cooling her hot skin, and soft voices from those visiting in the corridor enveloped her. Just her luck, Nick and

Mrs. LaRue stood halfway down the hall. She in bright-red everything—at least it matched her lipstick—and he in a short-sleeve white Henley that left nothing to be desired.

This time *he* looked in need of a rescue.

He'd saved her from a run-in with her least favorite person. Perhaps she should do the same. Nope. He knew Mrs. LaRue. He could handle her.

She ducked her head and quickened her pace to sneak past them. Next time she'd be conveniently late again.

As she tried to pass, Mrs. LaRue stepped into her personal space. “Quinn, I’m so glad you decided to join us again.”

Quinn shook the woman’s cold hand—her fingernails should be blue—then smiled at Nick. “Thank you again for helping me with my truck last week.” Speaking in code. Maybe they *were* destined to be friends.

He smiled back. “Anytime.”

Shimmying past the smiling LaRue, who spread out those red-painted lips too wide and looked at her like a kitty on catnip, Quinn slid into the room and took the seat she'd occupied during the first week’s session. Her heart thundered in her chest. How was she going to get him to ask her for coffee again? She wrung her hands in her lap and resisted rolling her eyes. Seriously, why worry about it? It would be fine if he didn’t. She’d tell Claire he didn’t ask, and that’d be the end of it.

Except with Claire, there was no end to it.

When the others filed in, Quinn busied herself by checking her email—all three of them. She'd already cleared the day's mail. She'd know better next Monday.

Wait. *Next Monday?* That thought came easily. First, she'd become a regular. Next, she'd be spilling her guts. She pressed a hand to her stomach and drew in slow, steady breaths until the ill sensation that thought caused passed.

Like last session, she didn't speak. Barbara spoke about her husband. Beth cried, and no one could understand what she was saying. But concentrating on their hardships made it easier not to crumble over her own.

Until Charles spoke about his daughter. A tear rolled unchecked down her cheek. Quinn wiped it away before anyone saw, blinked back the rest, and hugged her sweater tighter around her, needing Brendan's arms to hold her.

Nick spoke some. He was quite good at getting others to share, but all she could think of was coffee. Not the hot black liquid or all the creamer she could pour into it, but the conversation to be had over it. What would he want to talk about? How much did he want to get to know her?

When the session ended, she clutched her purse, eager to run out of the room and never stop running. But the vision of Claire with a cup of coffee had Quinn pretending to dig for her keys until she could figure out what to do.

What if he didn't ask again? What if she left before he could? What would Claire say when she found out?

Ugh! Was it such a big deal?

Disgusted, she threw her bag over her shoulder.

Before she could make it from her chair, Nick sat beside her. “Hey, Quinn.”

“Oh, hey, Nick.” Her guts turned flips.

“You okay?”

“Sure, why?” Wit always worked for an icebreaker. “Oh, you noticed I was coming to grief counseling.”

She grinned as he chuckled. “You could say I noticed.” He lowered his voice. “I saw the tear, and I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Awkward, but all right. “You didn’t feel the need to make sure everyone else was okay?”

“I know these people.” He waved a hand around the room. “They cry every week. You? Not so much.”

“I don’t cry, or you don’t know me?” Was that enough of a hint?

“Both actually.”

But that was all he said, so she filled the space between them. “I’m fine.”

“Well, I did notice you were at grief counseling, so I wanted to ask. I’m glad you decided to come back.”

He was sincere—and about to leave. “Yeah, it, um...” Good. Mrs. LaRue was occupied with Beth, rubbing the girl’s back and giving her tissues, so Quinn had a minute or two. “It took some haggling back and forth in my mind—and with my mom—and with Claire.”

“A friend?” He eased back into the chair beside her.

“Maybe not now.” She broke out in a grin at his expression. “Yes, a friend.”

“Go easy on her. It’s good to have supportive friends.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without her.” He wasn’t going to ask. “So... friends are good.”

“Friends are great.”

“I was thinking—maybe—I could, um...” *Oh, just say it.* “Cash in that rain check.”

A wrinkle appeared between his brows. “You want to get coffee?”

“Are you asking?”

“I thought you just did.”

“No.” She shook her head. “But yes.”

Something softened the hard lines of his face, and his blue eyes shone. “You don’t have to, Quinn.”

“No, but yes. I need coffee—apparently. You know, ‘no obligations, just coffee’?”

He nodded. “Just coffee.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Dr. Holiday crossing the room.

As she cringed, Nick stood. “How about Cafe Cubana down on Sheridan, say twenty minutes?”

“Twenty minutes.”

She clued in quicker this time and snuck behind him as he stepped away to meet the doctor. He became Superman once again, flying in to save the day.

She should buy him a T-shirt with a big *S* on the front. A huge T-shirt so it wasn't too tight over those rippling muscles. She choked on the thought as she stormed through the door.

In the hall, her racing heart thudded in her ears. She'd agreed to get coffee with Nick. Asked even. Or did he? Guilt crawled under her skin. This couldn't be the right thing to do. She should run. End this now. In twenty minutes, she could be home.

A normal walk grew impossible. She jogged to the truck. The headlights came on as the engine roared to life. A fine mist glazed the windshield. She hadn't even noticed the moisture in her hair.

The steering wheel tight in her hands, she breathed in and out several times. The last breath in she held as she looked in the rearview mirror. Dusk was settling, and Nick was in the lit-up hall, shaking hands with the older men in the group. All smiles. Was he faking it like her?

What would it do to him if she skipped out?

Her shoulders slumped as she exhaled. No amount of running was going to make any of this go away. Leaving now, after she'd lured him in, wouldn't be fair to her new kind-of-sort-of-friend.

Her last deep breath sealed the deal. "It's just coffee, Quinn." A new friendship. Brendan would be happy she was

getting along better. Not angry she was moving on without him. This was okay.

A continuation of life didn't mean she had to love again. She wouldn't. Ever.

This was just friends. No obligations, just coffee.

She blotted her eyes with a tissue, pulled out of the parking lot, and turned toward Cafe Cubana.

CHAPTER SEVEN

With fall coming on, more people came out to enjoy a hot beverage and a warm pastry. Their happy conversations underplayed the coffee shop's soft music, blending nicely with the perky comfort of coffee and cinnamon. Being with Nick, Quinn was glad for the crowd. An oddity, since she'd usually avoided them.

She strode past clusters of round tables, still clutching her purse and sweater like life preservers, Nick a step behind her on the way to the counter. He'd rushed past her to open the red-trimmed glass door. Impressive, not that she cared. This was *not* a date. His words rang in her ears—*No obligations, just coffee*. Her mother's words followed—*You need to get out more*.

Then there was Claire. With so many words, Quinn couldn't think of them.

Thank God for their words. If it weren't for them, she'd do nothing.

Cradling her chai latte—and quickly stirring in the heart-shaped cinnamon with her finger—she led Nick to a table in the middle of the room. Not too close to the back where she'd feel trapped, but not too close to the door where she could make a quick exit.

She settled her cup on the small black table, her purse in her lap, her shoulders back. “So, I hope I'm not being rude, but tell me what you're hoping to gain from this. Why did you invite me here?”

He took a sip of his café Americano and set his cup on the table. “Actually, you invited me.”

She pursed her lips, stifling a grin. “Turning the tables is not fair play.”

His jaw flexed with his grin, spreading out his carefully trimmed beard. He was enjoying this too much. “I’ll go first.” But he wagged a warning finger, the grin spreading wider. “Then it’s your turn.”

“And you’re going to make me talk.”

He threw that hand up, palm forward. “You only have to say what you want.”

“All right. You first.”

He ducked his head and stared into his dark brew, his slight smile fading and blue eyes dimming. He spoke so freely in group. He couldn’t be afraid of opening up now.

A deep breath raised his chest. Words came with the following exhale. “When we first spoke, you had the weariness in your eyes I had when I lost Lauren. I saw a reflection of myself.”

He’d lost his wife. Her sorrow for him grew heavy. How, in three sessions, did she not figure *that* out? Selfish, callous, head in the clouds. How many more words could describe her right now?

“Sometimes I think I’ve come a long way in overcoming my grief. Then something like our third anniversary comes up, and my life shatters all over again.” He closed his grip around

his cup. “I thought it would be nice to be able to tell you things, and you’d get it. And not think I was unstable.”

He raised his cup and eyed her over the brim as he took a sip. “Your turn.”

Right. She’d have to give account. But what to say after that? She’d accused him of coming on to her when all he wanted was an ear. *Way to go, Quinn.*

Her lower lip found its way between her teeth as she stared into her latte. She didn’t have a good answer. Why *was* she here? “Claire said I looked like I needed a cup of coffee.”

His grin returned. “Maybe we both did.”

A genuine smile. How did he do that?

Silence came between them. She sipped and watched the folks around them. Some laughed loud. Some whispered in the corner. The barista was busy concocting her magic brews behind the counter. With their reasons out, what more could they say?

Resting his arms on the table, he laced his fingers in front of his cup. “So where do you work?”

“A little office downtown.” She wasn’t about to tell him where. Wasn’t that like telling the wolf where Grandma lives?

“What do you do?”

“Head peon.”

As Nick chuckled, she offered a small smile and tried to relax. “Just office work. Small office, not many people. I go in

at eight, get off at five. Nobody bothers me. I get my work done, and I go home. It's perfect."

Two young girls walked by them, giggling on their way out. Her jealousy spiked at their carefree spirit.

"Sounds lonely."

"Suits me." She took a sip of her latte. Alone was how she wanted to be. The folk music playing in the background, melodies with no lyrics, suited her too. "What do you do?"

"I'm an architect."

"An architect?" A light ignited in her heart, then snuffed out. The familiar became uneasy. "Like house plans?"

"Commercial buildings mostly, but my firm works with a lot of different companies."

"*Your* firm?"

"I'm partners with my father."

"Wait. Nick James. James and James Architects."

"You've heard of us."

"I've heard of you." Her finger made its way around the circumference of her cup. "So what buildings in town have you designed?"

"Do you know the Griffin Building on Cameron in the Arts District?"

"Very well." Old memories stirred. "You designed the remodel?"

He gave her a sheepish half grin.

“Wow, I’m impressed. The design is beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

She twisted her cup on the table, swirling the creamy liquid. Their conversation was turning into a normalcy she hadn’t felt in a long time. Still, how much did she want him to know? But he’d stepped out, so maybe she should step out too. “I guess then you’ve been inside the building.”

“Of course.” Both hands around his cup, he leaned his elbows on the table.

She pushed her hair behind her ear and took the leap. “Do you know the painting inside the entry?”

“Do I know it? I took my inspiration from it. I designed the windows to be its frame. It’s an amazing piece.”

Her words caught in her throat. What did one say to that? “Thank you. It’s mine.”

As realization crossed his face, his eyes grew big. “Of course. It’s signed QA—Quinn Alexander.” One fine brow rising, he sat back with his arms crossed. “I can’t believe I’m sitting across from the great Madam Q herself.”

“Madam Q?” She giggled despite herself. “Is that what people call me?”

“Well, it’s what I call you. I’m just glad you’re a woman. *Mister Q* doesn’t have quite the same ring. You’re a talented artist.”

Her smile faded. Her world had been robbed of its color. “*Was* an artist.”

“You don’t paint anymore?”

Something inside her itched to do so, but the emptiness was an aching void that wouldn’t allow it. She shook her head, her vision blurring past her cup as she picked at her purse straps. “I still have the studio, but it’s locked up tight. I never go there.”

He dipped his chin in silent acknowledgment. “Life has a way of stealing your inspiration, doesn’t it?”

“I haven’t picked up a brush since Brendan died.”

He laid his crossed arms on the table, braced on them, lowered his head, and caught her eye. “Maybe someday.”

She shrugged, wanted to look away, but couldn’t. Relief spread through her when he spoke.

“When Lauren died, it took a while to design again. A lot of projects went to junior architects. Dad tried to pick up the slack. I had to make a decision. While I’m at work, I have to think about work, and when work’s over, it’s Lauren’s turn.” He glanced sidelong at a couple seated at the next table as they gathered their trash. “That worked pretty well for all of about two days.”

Quinn gaped at him over her half-finished latte. “*Two* days?”

“I didn’t say it was a perfect plan. Then Dad played the mom card and insisted I get help, told me not to come back to work until I did.” He sniffed. “Somehow putting whiskey in my coffee didn’t sit well with him.”

He’d drank. She’d wished herself dead. “I guess not.”

“So I started going to grief therapy. Met Mrs. LaRue.”

“Ha! Mrs. LaRue.”

“She is quite the character.”

Anger, although not as fierce, resurfaced. She tipped her cup in Nick’s direction. “That’s putting it mildly.”

“She’s just lonely. She doesn’t need grief counseling; she needs company. But people come and go there, and most of them are older. So when you walked in, I thought... I thought coffee.”

She leveled her gaze. “So you did invite me.”

A grin twitched at his mouth. Pink stained his cheeks when he drained his Americano and set the cup aside.

Maybe coffee was a nice thought. It wasn’t perfect. She had a strong desire to go home. But it was tolerable. And it *was* misting outside.

And talking to Nick wasn’t so bad.

Great. Claire was going to love this.



Heat tingled on Nick’s face. He took a drink to cover his embarrassment, draining his cup and setting it to the side. *I thought coffee?* What an ignorant thing to say.

She *had* taken a rain check and cashed it in, but what was he supposed to tell her? “My wife said get to know someone, be a friend, love again? I’ve accomplished one and two. Let’s get on to three?” It was a little too soon for that.

But she was here. And trying to have a normal conversation, for the most part, wasn't hard. Even with those stiff shoulders and that standoffish attitude he recognized so well, she was easy to get along with.

Maybe being friends wouldn't be so difficult. Awkward maybe. A man and a woman both having suffered loss becoming friends—could be a lot awkward.

“It seems coffee was a nice thought.” She raised her chin and relaxed those shoulders, shaking her wavy brown hair over them and sounding glad she came.

He shrugged. “Well, I figured if I asked you to have dinner you'd duck and run.”

“Uh, possibly.”

He clasped his hands, rubbing his thumbs together. “Seriously though, I do want to apologize for jumping on you so quickly. After what Mrs. LaRue said, I'm sure it wasn't pleasant for you. I just thought it'd be nice to have a friend I could call up and say ‘hey, I'm having issues’ and that person would understand. Someone who knew they could call me and do the same.”

“Have you been talking to my mother?”

“That depends. Is she the owner of an accounting firm in need of a new building?”

She laughed.

It thrilled his soul.

“No, not Evelyn Hawkins. She hates math.”

“Good to know. Never discuss trig with Evelyn.”

Laughing with her felt good, and she seemed to be enjoying herself. Maybe she'd overlooked the fact that he could be some sick stalker guy preying on the recently widowed.

“Excuse me, sir.” The young barista approached their table and tucked a hunk of pink hair behind her ear. “We're getting ready to close.”

He twisted his wrist to see his watch. He accounted for every minute of the day to make sure he stayed busy, didn't go crazy, and yet... “I didn't realize we'd been here so long.”

“Actually, I didn't either.”

At some point, they'd turned off the music and cleared out the pastries in the display case. The whir of machines and blenders had fallen silent, and the other tables emptied. “It seems coffee was indeed a nice thought.”

Sliding from her chair, her smile brilliant, Quinn swept her hair back and swung her purse over her shoulder. “Indeed.”

He hurried around her to open the door, then followed her out beneath the shop's awning. The mist had become a light rain that formed puddles on the dark pavement, the neon sign casting a pinkish glow. “I have an umbrella in the truck.”

“No thank you. It's fine. I'm just going home.”

Nick dug his keys from his pocket as she dug in her bag for hers. Night after night, he just wanted to end the day so he could go home. Tonight, he would've stayed and talked for

hours. Whether it was good or not, he enjoyed being with her and didn't want the evening to end.

The thought of not being able to speak to her for a week was surprisingly unpleasant. With the risk of being assertive—and it was a great risk, but why ruin his streak—he swallowed hard. “Quinn, I...” *Great job, buddy.* He huffed and closed his mouth. It was a crazy stalker-guy question, and there was no good way to ask it.

Her keys jingled, and a small paint palette key chain gleamed as she retrieved them from the bottom of her bag. “Strange to see you at a loss for words.”

Her amber eyes reflected the parking lot lights. “I hope you won't take this the wrong way. I blame it on my dad. I'd like to make sure you get home all right. Do you mind if I get your number?” His throat grew tight. “As well as for those moments we might need a...”

“A friend?”

“Yeah. I promise I won't flood your phone with tears.”

He held his breath waiting for her to run panicking into the street.

“Sure.” She reached toward him. “Let me see your phone. I'll type it in.”

Shocked, he gaped before sliding his phone from his front pocket and getting through the lock screen. He accessed his contacts, typed in her name, and handed it over.

One glance at his phone had her smiling a quirky grin he found himself wanting to see again. “Madam Q?”

“Hey, you’re famous. What can I say?”

Her laugh full and bright, she typed in her number. Taking his phone back, he typed in the smiley-face emoji and hit send.

“Now you’ll have my number. And, please, whatever you do, don’t blow up my phone.” He winked when she flashed that quirky smile again.

“Somehow, I don’t think I’m the one we have to worry about here.”

“Are you sure? You’re the one who invited me out for coffee.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s up for debate.”

Depositing his phone back in his pocket, he motioned her out into the rain. “Come on. I’ll see you to your truck.”

Raindrops dotted them as they hurried to her black F250. A short goodbye, and he jogged away, then watched through his rearview mirror until she backed out. Once she was gone, he blew out the breath he’d held all night and sank against his seat. That had gone much better than he’d thought it would.

Surprising it’d *gone* at all.

Taking out his phone, he unlocked it, and her contact page came to life in the dark cab of his truck. The number looked valid. Why had she been so quick to give it to him? Why had he been so quick to ask for it?

The great Madam Q. He’d admired the Griffin painting for more than two years. A fascinating mixture of dark and light with intriguing detail, it beckoned like a doorway to another

world. His windows didn't do it justice, but everyone driving down Cameron Street was able to see it.

Eventually, people would see new paintings by QA. He'd gone back to work. She would too. These things took time. But for now, coffee was nice.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Quinn pushed the unlock button on her fob. As the locks clicked, a wave of panic jolted through her. She'd given him her number? Was she insane? She opened the door to Brendan's truck. Inside was her life as it should be. Alone. She climbed up and shut the world out.

Gripping the steering wheel, she worked at pushing the panic away. She hadn't wanted to give him the wrong idea. Well, that was a surefire way to give him the wrong idea. *Just type your number into his phone, Madam Q.*

"Mrs. LaRue will think we're together." She slumped against the wheel. "And who knows what Claire will think."

But what about her? The last hour and a half hadn't been terrible. However now, she might have to talk to him every day, not just Mondays.

She checked her rearview mirror. His red truck wasn't moving. Being a gentleman, he was probably waiting for her to go first. No problem there. She threw it in reverse and wasted no time getting on the road.

She wanted to escape the storm. Leave it behind her. But the black clouds followed. There was no escape.

She wanted there to be. *Please, God, let there be.*

She'd wanted to go to therapy for help, not more problems. Now she had everyone else's pain to contend with and a guy wanting to spend time with her for purely platonic reasons.

A guy who now had her number.

In the rearview, she caught a glimpse of Nick heading in the opposite direction. Good. They weren't to be travel buddies. She pulled in a deep breath. Her wiper blades cleared the rain from her windshield as her eyelids blinked back a tear.

She was being ridiculous, of course. Nick wasn't the storm. Nick was a good guy who needed the same shelter she needed. But he was more than she wanted to deal with. And although their conversation had been nice, she wanted her nights at home alone.

Exhaustion slumped her shoulders at the thought of dinner with her parents tomorrow night. Could she cancel?

Yeah. Sure. She could hear her mother now. "Quinn, are you all right? Are you sure? Are you sure you're sure?"

Nope, skipping dinner wasn't an option.

Just like staying home the rest of her life wasn't an option.

She parked in the garage and went through the laundry room to the kitchen. She flicked on the pendant lights, set the mail on the island, and plopped her bag down beside it. Her elbows on the cold granite, her chin cradled in one hand, she picked up the first envelope and tossed it away. Junk. She tossed the rest aside as well. Junk, junk, and more junk.

The last envelope was a bill from Dr. Holiday.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sending that one to my mother."

At the bottom of the stack, the glossy cover of *Builder* magazine reflected the pendant lights. When would those stop coming? She both looked forward to and dreaded the day they did. Pushing away from the cabinet, she lugged down the hall.

In their closet, eyes downcast from everything Brendan, she donned a tank top and flannel pants, then went to the black-framed mirror to wash her face.

Nick liked her painting. Framed it with the windows he'd designed. She'd driven by the building a hundred times to see how her painting looked tucked within the facade's beautiful angles.

He'd created art with her art. She'd have to send him one of her thank-you cards with that painting on the front.

She paused midscrub, meeting her puffy amber eyes in the mirror. She'd wait. Too much too soon. His invitation for coffee had been too much too soon. He was lucky she hadn't slapped his face. What would Mrs. LaRue think of that?

Then she'd taken him up on that invitation. Too much too soon?

She rinsed the cleanser off and grabbed her toothbrush, cringing over the thought. A whole new world was opening up to her—a new life, new people, new friends.

What was wrong with life as it was? No new people, no new friends.

But *that* was not the way to outrun the storm. And she wanted to outrun it. Even if she burned with the exertion of it. Had even taken up running in some twisted effort to do so.

Her nerves still rattled from thinking of how to cash in that rain check. If it hadn't been for Claire's persistence, Quinn never would've asked. He'd have asked again, eventually.

Maybe. Best to get it out of the way and get on with this healing thing.

The evening had gone better than expected, even been halfway pleasant. She shouldn't be concerned with giving him her number either. He was Superman after all.

The dark clouds fomenting in her soul began to dissipate. She spit in the sink and shrugged at her reflection. Maybe Claire was right. Maybe friends could be nice. Maybe he could understand. And maybe the guilt wouldn't torture her. What a lot of maybes.

Could she be a friend in return? It was only fair, but could she handle him calling her, leaning on her for moral support? She couldn't even hold *herself* up right now. What about Beth, Barbara, and Charles? This support group was supposed to support *her*.

Maybe that would change. *God, please let that change.*

Toes buried in the fluffy white area rug, she pulled the downy duvet back and sighed. The room was decorated like an airy spring day. Blues and whites, like a sky strewn with clouds. Accents of yellow and orange, the colors of a sunset. A picture of her and Brendan at Pensacola Beach hung above the bed.

She dragged her gaze from their smiling faces and plopped down on the edge of her bed.

The day had beaten her down, given her too much to think about, and she coveted sleep. She checked the time on her phone—eleven thirty-eight. Morning would come all too soon.



Nick didn't arrive at his apartment at eight-thirty. It was ten forty-five. Off schedule, but he didn't have to figure out how to waste the evening. He whistled a tune as he waved his fob over the lock, then halted all forward motion. Guilt traveled through him like a wrecking ball.

He'd been happy, if only for a moment. But it hadn't been Lauren who'd made him feel that way.

He pushed open the door, discarded his keys, and hung his blazer in the entry hall closet. Then collapsed on the deep cream-colored couch as rain streaked the glass windows fronting the south wall of his apartment.

He shouldn't feel guilt. If he'd learned one thing in six months of counseling, he'd learned people can be happy again.

But the guilt remained. Partly for finding a glimpse of joy outside of Lauren and partly for pushing Quinn.

Why ask her out when he didn't want a relationship? He could know her from group, be a friend *there*, help her *there*. He'd still be doing what Lauren wanted. Sort of.

Then Quinn would be no different from anyone else in group. And that was not Lauren's intention.

Now... it seemed that wasn't his intention either.

He ran a hand through his side-swept hair, then riffled through a stack of architectural magazines on the glass coffee table. He hadn't thought she'd spend the evening with him, especially since he'd pounced on her. What a surprise she'd asked.

He clenched a rolled-up magazine in his fist.

He was lucky he hadn't ended up with a slap in the face.

He was lucky he hadn't pushed her into never seeking help again.

He was lucky she saw him as any kind of friend at all.

His head fell against the magazine. "But you said jump. And I jumped." He whispered his blame on Lauren as he peeled himself off the couch, dropped the magazine to the table, and headed to the kitchen, raising a finger in the air as he went. "With both feet. That's how I like to do things."

He pulled a water bottle from the stainless-steel fridge and leaned against the marbled quartz countertop, crossed his ankles, and rubbed his temples.

She hadn't wanted to be there. He hadn't wanted to be there either. So how had they ended up there?

God worked in mysterious ways. Did He always have to work that way?

Bleary-eyed, he put the unopened water back in the fridge and went to brush his teeth, too tired to be angry with himself or Lauren.

Quinn needed a friend.

He wanted to be that for her.

Maybe she'd let him. Maybe she'd even find it within herself to be a friend. He wouldn't hold his breath. And he wouldn't hold it against her. In the beginning, he hadn't been

able to be a friend either. Everyone was different, yet there were many similarities.

As he was brushing his teeth, he kicked off his shoes. When he'd told her he was an architect, something hid in her response, surprise, familiarity? Who had her husband been? Alexander. He didn't recognize the name.

What terrible tragedy had she suffered?

Did he want to get into that? Was he ready to be *that* friend? He spit in the sink, rinsed his mouth, and faced himself in the mirror. He'd asked her to be a friend. It would be unfair of him to be unwilling to be a friend himself.

All right then. When she was ready to tell him, he'd be there to listen. He left his shirt and jeans in a pile on the floor and clicked off the light.

At eleven thirty-eight, he sat on his bed, his phone a bright light in the dark room. Madam Q stared him in the face. He should have checked on her a while ago. It was too late to send a text now.

He typed in the words anyway, then kept his gaze trained on the screen, his heart pounding.

He rubbed a hand down his face. "I can't promise anything more than friends."

Lauren in his peripheral vision, he hit send.

Phone back on the charger, he swung his legs up and pulled the covers to his waist. She wouldn't answer, was probably asleep. It was a fool thing to have sent anyway.

She'd find it in the morning and cringe. It might ruin her morning. He glanced at his phone's dark screen wishing he could take it back. But his parents always taught him to be a gentleman, and what was done was done.

He crossed his arms over his chest and closed his eyes.



Quinn's phone lit up with a new message before she could set it on the nightstand.

"That was fast." She hadn't created a contact for him, but his emoji smiled at her above his new message.

"Thank you for coffee. Home okay?"

Well, he was quite the gentleman. She debated how to reply. Why was she so nervous? Then she blew out a breath. *It's not rocket science, Quinn.* Still, she read it over several times before hitting send. "Home fine. Coffee was nice. Thank you."

The conversation over, she put her phone on the table and pulled the covers up to her chin. Her screen lit up again. This could be bad. She rolled to pick up her phone and squinted at the bright light.

"Good. Now go to bed."

Her tight lips relaxed, and her thumbs flew over the keyboard. "I would if a certain someone would stop blowing up my phone."

Then silence. She stared at her phone, waiting for another cocky comeback. Her grin faded. Disgusted with herself for

anticipating another text, she set her phone facedown. What did she care if he replied or not?

Her world slammed to a halt. She'd let someone into the dark pit of her life. She couldn't climb out by herself, but wasn't the *group* supposed to be helping her? Not an individual and certainly not a guy.

She turned over and touched Brendan's pillow. Guilt welled up as heat in her face as she whispered into the dark. "He's just a friend. I swear he is."

Maybe he would be, but nothing else would come of it. Ever. She didn't have it in her to love again. Not when everything she'd ever loved had died. Not when the pain of losing was so great.

She could go on, heal even. She could be okay. But love was not for her. That's not what Nick wanted anyway. Hadn't he said as much?

She grasped Brendan's pillow, holding it tighter than she ever had, trying her hardest to feel his arms around her. When she drifted off, the nightmares resumed, but they didn't last the night.

Maybe there was hope for her yet.

Within her abyss, a bright light had met her in the dark. Now, she just had to let it lead her.



Nick started awake when his phone vibrated against the bedside table. He scrambled to get it not realizing he'd been asleep. She was home. A sarcastic reply and one back from

her. He started typing another remark. Then his thumbs froze over the keyboard.

That was enough. He'd better leave her alone.

She was home and safe, and that's all he'd wanted to know. If he bothered her too much, she'd regret giving him her number. Probably already did. This wasn't high school, but a real-life serious situation. He discarded his phone, locked his hands behind his head, and stared at the ceiling.

The night was quiet. His mind was not, and sleep was intermittent.

At six-thirty the next morning, he dragged himself out of bed and stumbled to the coffeepot by the light of his phone. The sun hadn't quite begun to light the sky, but the rain had stopped. Beads of leftover raindrops clung to the glass.

He stood there, letting them blur his view of the river, as he sucked down his first cup of brain juice. He stopped to refill his cup on his way to the shower.

Once the coffee kicked in, it was a better day. Better than he'd had in a while. He met Josh for a game of racquetball after work and made plans to spend his Sunday with friends watching the game at a local sports bar.

Somehow, no guilt accompanied spending time with the guys like it did just thinking of Quinn. His intention was to be a friend, and he could do that. But Lauren's intention was for friendship to develop into something more. *That* he wasn't quite sure he could do.

One simple act of kindness, which he tried and failed to regret, had opened his world to someone new. And even in all her turmoil, he liked Quinn.

But if being a friend was all he could do—if it was all he was allowed—he could accept that. No stress, no upsets. Be her friend. See her on Mondays.

And swallow the guilt of enjoying it.

CHAPTER NINE

Waiting to see Quinn—waiting to see if he *would* see her—made Nick’s week crawl by. He’d refrained from texting her, filled his time with work, the gym, dinner out with Dad one night, and going to bed as early as possible.

He didn’t sleep, just stared at the ceiling. Guilt sucked. Lauren’s picture on the nightstand, Quinn’s face in his thoughts.

Lauren wasn’t here anymore, and she was right. The time had come for him to move on. Quinn wasn’t ready, though. And he’d never push her.

Not to mention he’d only known her for three weeks and only seen her three times. He was buying supplies before designing the building.

Maybe he wasn’t ready either. But something about her...

Nick glanced in the rearview as he parked in front of the community center. His gut churned when Quinn pulled in and took a spot across the lot.

He waited for her behind his truck, lounging on his bumper and twirling his key on its ring. The rhythmic sound of a tennis game and the happy squeals of children at the splash pad played in the background.

She’d returned yet again—early.

She came around the back of her truck, tan arms crossed with a sweater draped over them, her clunky brown purse thrown over her shoulder. He caught her apprehensive look

before she smiled it away. Maybe he shouldn't have waited, but that would've been rude. Still, he needed to be careful.

“Hey, you're early.”

She laughed a “hey, there” back and began a slow stroll to the building, her peach-colored spaghetti-strapped top matched the sandals flipping on her feet. “So I guess you had a pretty good week. You didn't flood my phone with tears.”

He stuffed his key in his pocket, then lounged his hands in his back pockets as he joined her. How could talking to her be so easy? At least on his end. “If me asking for your number didn't scare you away, texting you every day would have.”

Her ponytail brushed her shoulders as she shook her head. “I can't believe I gave it to you.”

“Didn't your mother ever teach you not to give your number to strangers?”

“You like my painting.” She adjusted her purse straps on her shoulder. “You can't be all bad. Besides, she was thrilled I'd given you my number.”

His head jerked in her direction. “You told her?”

She looked at him sideways, pausing on the sidewalk between the flower beds. “I can't believe I did that either.” She rolled her eyes. “And Claire. Don't get me started on her.”

He waved to Stan, who entered the building ahead of them. For Quinn's sake, he hoped others didn't misconstrue their time together. “I'm glad you have a great support group.”

“They’ve been incredible through this whole mess. They just... weren’t enough, you know?”

“I *do* know.”

A breeze teased loose tendrils of hair across her cheeks, and he fought the urge to brush them away.

“So your week?”

He dismissed the thought. “Yeah, my week was good. We’ve been busy, so I took plans home a few nights. Didn’t give me much time to think.” *Liar*. He’d thought about *her* quite a bit. “And, of course, you didn’t blow up *my* phone.”

She sniffed as she moved toward the door. “Give me time.”

He winked as he opened it for her. “I’ll be waiting.”

He *would* wait. If they were friends for years to come, somehow that would be a relief. If moving on didn’t include Quinn... Somehow, he couldn’t get his thoughts to go there.

They entered the counseling room, and others filed in after them. Charles—daughter. Beth—mother. Steve—wife. Nick knew them by their losses, but he wanted to *know* Quinn.

She took a seat on the far side of the room from Doc where she sat during her first session, her comfort zone, and slid her arms into her sweater. He took his seat next to Doc.

Doc started, let the conversation roll, interceded when professional advice was necessary, but let the group support one another.

A new woman sat next to Quinn and introduced herself.
“I’m not sure this is for me.”

“I thought the same thing.” Nick perked up when Quinn angled her body toward the newcomer. “This is only my fourth session, but I can see the benefit of being here. I’m sure you will too.”

Her chin tucked down, Cheryl nodded and focused on her fidgeting hands. Nick caught Quinn’s eye, winked, and smiled. She smiled back, her face glowing a sweet shade of pink.

After the session, Cheryl ducked out like Quinn had on her first night. Purse thrown over her shoulder, Quinn watched her go.

He joined her as she meandered toward the door, her amber gaze flicking to his, stirring something in him. This time, her apprehension was absent, a part of the wall she’d built had crumbled. “Talking’s not so bad, is it?”

“It was a smidge scary.” She tucked wisps of hair behind her ears. “I saw myself in her. Do you think she’ll come back?”

He held open the counseling room door. “You did. Even after Mrs. LaRue.”

“And you.”

He followed her out, pressing his lips together. “Ouch.” Her giggle was amazing. “Speaking of which, do you want to hit the coffee shop?”

Quinn scrunched up her face and stopped. “Mmm, no.”

He halted beside her. Idiot! When would he learn?

“I was hoping we could visit over a plate of nachos at Ricardos. I had to work late, and I’m starving. You know, just as friends. No obligations, just... food?”

He stared open-mouthed. He hadn’t expected her to come back. Now she was cashing in rain checks and asking him to dinner.

She fiddled with her wedding ring, pulling her lower lip between her teeth the way she did when she got emotional in group. “Don’t duck and run.”

He smiled at the reference. “Not a chance. I’ve already eaten, but I’ll sit with you while you eat.”

Her eyes gleamed. “Great. I’ll eat. You’ll talk.”

“*That* is not the way this works.”

“But you’re so much better at it.”

“Practice makes perfect, Q. And let’s be clear.” They continued down the hall. “You’re the one who invited me.”

She glanced at him sideways through a wisp of hair with that quirky smile, and he had to laugh.

“Oh, there’s that lovely couple again.”

Nick cringed. When would Mrs. LaRue learn? They let her catch up, sharing a silent here-we-go-again look.

After bustling over, the woman patted his hand, then snagged Quinn’s, and greeted them. Shaking her hand, Quinn sang her greeting back, then added, “Nick and I were just going for a bite to eat. Would you care to join us?”

Surprised by Quinn's gentle acceptance, Nick let his shoulders relax, his frustration easing. She'd come a long way.

"I wouldn't dream of imposing on you two lovebirds."

"Mrs. LaRue." Taking a deep breath, he tried to be gentle as well. "It's not like that. We're just friends, and you're more than welcome to come."

Elbowing Quinn, Mrs. LaRue winked. "That's what I told Harold. You two enjoy." She shuffled out the door, leaving them both slack-jawed.

He dragged his gaze back to Quinn. "You know you're wasting your breath on her, right?"

She shrugged. "A girl's gotta try. Come on. I'll drive."

Wow. An invitation to dinner, *and* she was going to let him in her truck.

The changes in her were nothing short of miraculous. The true miracle being her accepting his friendship—and maybe not laying Mrs. LaRue out on the cold tile floor.

CHAPTER TEN

Everyone was bound to think they were a couple. A man and a woman entering a restaurant together. Oh well. If Quinn could handle Mrs. LaRue, she could handle all of Tulsa.

The heat in her cheeks told her that wasn't quite true.

As Nick opened the door, the smell of fresh Mexican food hit her like an ocean wave. She stepped in on the red terra cotta floor, her hand clutching her stomach as it rumbled, and gathered her sweater tighter against the cool of the AC. Nick followed her in, finger combing his Hollywood hair, his heather-red tee looking nice against his broad chest.

She could still look, couldn't she?

A young man greeted them at the hostess stand and led them to a booth near the back of the restaurant. No longer looking to escape, it didn't bother her. A strange concept after hiding out for so long. Strange for what she'd been through just since starting group.

She slid into the wooden high-backed booth with its blue cushioned seats, setting her purse beside her. Nick sat on the other side, waved away the menu. After the host left, he said, "You picked one swanky place."

"It may not be as upscale as you're used to, but the food's good."

He crossed his arms on the table, and his silver Longines watch reminded her this "swanky place" closed in an hour. Not having much time might be okay.

Right now, she didn't feel the need to avoid him, but guys were guys. A handsome man like him never wanted to stay single for long.

This guy though... Perhaps, like her, he didn't ever intend to remarry. They could be friends without the hurt.

Chips, salsa, and waters were set on their table. She dove in, not looking to impress.

He had good friend qualities. Her parents would be happy, Claire would be ecstatic—and get the wrong idea—and Quinn might even be relieved to have a friend who understood. Call it a triple crown of wins.

“At least share the chips and salsa. I shouldn't eat them all myself.”

He pulled a chip from the basket. “You're stepping out on a limb here. Letting me join you for dinner.”

“It *is* just dinner.” Then the confession. “And my mom threatened to come over every night if I didn't start getting out more.”

He paused midchew. “I feel so used.”

“Sorry, but you *did* say you wanted to be friends.”

He wagged a chip. “I see how this game's played. It's all right. Paybacks are coming.”

Lord, help me. She huffed. “Okay. Serves me right.” If she was going to use him as a friend, then she'd have to let him do the same. “I'm going to have to run an extra hour to work this off.”

“Another hour? How long do you run?” He popped the chip in his mouth.

“About an hour and a half every day. Well, except for Tuesdays. That’s dinner night with my parents. And now Mondays.”

“That’s a lot of running.”

“Seems to be what I do best.” A miracle she hadn’t run out on him. She looked him up and down and selected another chip from the basket. “How often do you work out?”

“Who says I work out?”

“Your muscles say you work out.”

“My muscles don’t talk.”

“Your muscles scream.”

He flexed, and they both laughed. Maybe he wouldn’t see her blush. “Every day, but Mondays. It started as a way to vent my anger. Now it’s something to do.”

“You’re not angry anymore?” She dipped a chip in the salsa.

He took a breath like he was going to say something, then folded his arms back on the table. “I’d be lying if I said no. But I *do* try to see the good in all of it, try to find the purpose.”

Mirroring his posture, Quinn braced on her elbows, their conversation going the way of a therapy session. “You think there’s a purpose, a reason we’ve had to go through something so horrible?”

As his brows furrowed, he seemed to be choosing his words. “Lauren was going to die. I had to endure something horrible, but she had a husband who loved her, who was able to be strong for her. Not having that would’ve been the tragedy.”

“So death isn’t the tragedy?”

He shook his head. “I’m not saying that, but the worse tragedy would be not fulfilling the role God gave you.” He sniffed. “Purpose is a difficult thing to wrap your brain around.”

Trying to make sense of his words, Quinn stared at the tall seatback behind him, her vision blurring, the low chatter of the other patrons dimming. She didn’t want to ask about the terrible thing he’d suffered or the role he thought God needed him to play in it. If there was anything good about Brendan’s death, it would be a long while before she’d see it. And she wasn’t ready to believe that forever hadn’t been their purpose.

“Quinn?”

Her gaze shot back to him.

“I’m not discounting the pain or the suffering or the anger or...” He cleared his throat. “But finding the good things helped me out of a tough situation.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.”

The waitress came a tad too late. How could she eat now? “Chips and salsa will be enough, thank you.”

“No.” He glanced down at her menu. “She’ll have a half order of the supreme nachos.” He gave her the you’re-going-

to-eat-it-and-like-it look.

She tilted her head to the side, his cockiness reviving her. “Fine.” She smiled at the waitress. “I’ll have a half order of the *regular* nachos, please.”

The young girl’s messy bun threatened to topple as her gaze switched between them. “Cute. I’ll have that right out.”

Nick leaned forward. “You just have to be difficult.”

Quinn bent forward as well. “It’s what I do.”

Their faces close, she swallowed hard and scooted back against her seat. How did that get weird so fast?

Nick settled back as well, creating a friendlier atmosphere, and laced his fingers in his lap, the moment not seeming to bother him at all. “So do you listen to music?”

“Not really, not anymore. Just relaxing music when I’m trying to get rid of my day. You know, nothing with lyrics.”

He dug his phone out of his pocket and opened his music app. “You mean like this?”

A familiar tune of soft piano music, curled around an accompaniment of cello, drowned out the mariachi guitar playing through the restaurant.

“You listen to piano music?”

“Well, I, like you, had a hard time relaxing, so yeah. I’m not so different from you, Madam Q.”

The name he’d given her warmed her cheeks. “I don’t guess you are.”

His cheeks seemed to color as well as he stopped the music and set his phone aside, a sheepish look coming over his face. “So... paybacks.”

She pushed her hands under her thighs and sucked in a breath. “Here we go.”

“Ready?”

“Bring it on.”

“Our firm designed the renovations of the Performing Arts Center and received multiple tickets to Saturday night’s performance of the Tulsa Symphony. My dad and I are going, my sister and her husband. I thought you might want to go with us.”

“Oh!” A night out with his family. What could be better? With her breath held and her heart hanging on a cliff, she could only stare.

His blue eyes gleamed, his wide smile crinkling up their corners. “I was just kidding about the paybacks. If you don’t want to go, it’s fine. It *would* get you out of the house, though. Satisfy the mom.”

She exhaled and her shoulders drooped. “There is that. Um... sure. We’ve had coffee, dinner, why not a symphony?”

Why not a symphony? Because maybe wearing a little black dress to a fancy affair was going too far. This no-obligation thing was turning out to be a little obligatory. Her mind stopped.

Really, Quinn? You could have said no.

Her cheeks had to be red by now. “Just a symphony... no obligations.”

He winked his cute wink. “Now you’re starting to get the hang of this.”

Her nachos came, which Nick helped her eat, and they relaxed like old friends.

After digging into her soul, she couldn’t find a reason to say no. Nick was turning out to be a great friend. And it couldn’t hurt to have a shoulder to blubber on. She’d need one before too long.

Her parents would be thrilled. Claire would want to be a fly on the wall. And Quinn? She was going to the symphony with her new friend and his family.

A reentering of society. Ready or not.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A little black dress full of memories. Quinn fought back the tears when she shook it out of the dry cleaners bag. She'd worn the sheath at a Christmas party she'd attended with Brendan. Had it been nine months ago?

She let the satin run through her hands as the memory of him at the black-tie event slinked through her mind, then almost slid it back into the bag. But she couldn't buy a new dress, not when she couldn't bring herself to go shopping. Claire, uber excited about the symphony, had volunteered to shop with her, of course. But Quinn would never buy another dress for anyone. This one would have to do.

She dove into the dress, wiggling it into place, then checked herself in the mirror. It fit a pinch looser than before, but still looked nice. Sleeveless, strapless, the midi skimmed her hips and cascaded to her ankle with a slit to her knee. Maybe it could be a little more... less.

What nonsense. She rolled her eyes. It wasn't like she was trying to impress anyone. It was just a symphony.

With his family.

This was starting to sound like a date.

She threaded a freshwater pearl choker around her neck and fumbled with the clasp, nearly dropping them when the doorbell made her heart jump. Great. *Grow up, Quinn.*

She managed the clasp while striding to the door, her glittery Badgley Mischka's tapping out a rhythm on the

hardwood floor. Head still down as she double-checked the clasp, she opened the door, then straightened.

Whoa. Nick looked different with his fresh-trimmed hair, his thick locks styled in a sweep over. Not better, not worse. Just... different. Like a guy on a date. He shifted, tugging at one sleeve of his fitted dark-gray suit. A suit that did little to hide his muscles.

Stop staring, Quinn. “Wow. You clean up nice.”

“Thank you.” He blinked out of his own stare. “You look beautiful.”

She cleared her throat. “I’ll get my sweater.” The light in his blue eyes dimmed. Maybe she should’ve just accepted the compliment. They *were* just friends.

Why couldn’t he be the ugly friend?

She grimaced as she removed her sweater from the entry closet. Seriously, what had she been thinking accepting his invitation? She wasn’t ready. But it wasn’t a date. Just two people getting back out in the world.

Together.

She grabbed her matching clutch on the way out. Without offering a hand, he escorted her down the lit sidewalk to the passenger side of his truck. She shouldn’t have, but she imagined Brendan, with his hand at the small of her back, walking with her. “Caroline asked if we’d like to grab a bite to eat with them afterward. Is that okay with you?”

“Yeah. Sounds great.” Did it?

He opened her door, and she climbed in. As he made his way around to the driver's side, she exhaled the breath she'd been holding. Being with him was one thing, they had their grief, but others? What would she talk about?

Before he put the key in the ignition, he rested his elbow on the console that was conveniently pulled down between them. It didn't, however, keep his cologne from filling her senses. "Hey, this is just two friends going to the symphony."

She nodded. "No obligations."

He didn't seem to think she believed him. "Did you ever have any guy friends in high school?"

"One or two."

"Think of me as one of them."

"I dated one of them."

"Think of me as the other one."

Laughter burst free, loosening the tension in every muscle. How did he always know how to make her laugh? He smiled that comforting smile.

They'd be nothing more than friends. And this was fine.

As he backed out of the driveway, she was breathing easier, the fear that prickled her skin buried deeper. Maybe she wouldn't have to slap his face after all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

As they drove toward downtown, Quinn settled in while Nick used his talent for filling the quiet with conversation, making the ride more comfortable. Soft music played on the radio, and his sense of humor had her smiling. She hadn't smiled this much since... Well, she shouldn't think about that now.

She dragged her gaze away from him as an oncoming truck veered into their lane. Its massive grill was all she could see. She screamed. Nick swerved. Tears gushed.

One hand over her mouth, the other in a death grip on the door, she couldn't catch her breath.

Nick swerved into a strip mall entrance and threw it in park. His hand was warm on her arm as he eased her to face him. "Quinn, honey, look at me. It's okay. We're okay."

She fought to take some deep breaths—and pretend he hadn't called her honey—glad she'd brushed her teeth three times. And embarrassed she'd made such a spectacle of herself.

"I'll take you home."

"No. I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm trying to be fine." She wiped her tears from her face, careful not to disturb her makeup.

"All right." Calm and gentle, his voice soothed her. "Let's get out of the way." He checked around him before driving into the parking lot. "That guy didn't even stop."

No. He hadn't. The guy hadn't stopped, and Brendan was dead.

When Nick pulled into a parking spot and shut off the engine, she took a few deep breaths blowing each one out. “I can’t quit shaking.”

He grasped her hands and began rubbing them. His hands were strong, and their warmth helped. “We don’t have to go tonight.”

“No, I’m fine.” If she repeated it enough, maybe she’d believe it. “They’ll be expecting you. You can’t miss this.”

“*You* are much more important. I’ll call Dad. Let him know he’s on his own. And we’ll find somewhere quiet where we can talk.” He took his phone from his breast pocket.

Quinn clenched her fists and released them, deep breaths in her lungs, still attempting to sit ladylike in the black dress that now held even more memories. Maybe she should put her head between her knees.

“Hey, can you go it alone tonight? Something’s come up, and we aren’t going to make it. No, everything’s good... just a change of plans.” He winked at her. “Yeah, absolutely. You guys have a good time. Talk to you tomorrow.” He disconnected and dropped his phone back in his pocket. “You sure you don’t want to go home?”

She shivered. “Yes.”

He clicked the AC down a notch. “Home too quiet for now?”

He totally got her. If she went home, she wouldn’t get out of bed for days. She needed her new friend to talk her off the ledge.

“How about we go to Riverside, find a quiet spot, and make an evening of it?”

“I’m so sorry.” She blinked back her tears. Her first evening out, and she’d ruined it. The stupid guy in the stupid truck had ruined it.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. This night is for two friends to spend time together. It doesn’t matter what we do.”

How could he be so understanding? Oh yeah. He’d been there, done that. She leaned her head against the headrest and closed her eyes, but her nausea wouldn’t let her relax.

He drove them to the Forty-first Street Plaza, parked, and they began walking the trail. As they strolled by the playground, Nick grinned at the children running and screaming. She lifted her gaze to the evening sky to avoid them and the happy faces of their parents.

She stopped to slip her feet free from her heels. “Won’t be needing these.”

“Keep a grip on them. We’ll try this again sometime.”

Scary thought. Was it though?

They made it to a lone sage-green park bench overlooking the muddy waters of the Arkansas River and sat in silence, watching the sun dip below the horizon, its rays casting sparkles across the water. He shucked his jacket and laid it over his knee, rolling his sleeves to his elbows. Poor guy wasn’t dressed for the low seventies of September. He was dressed for a symphony.

When the automatic lamps came on, he broke the silence. “When you’re ready to talk about what happened, I’ll be here. It doesn’t have to be tonight—it doesn’t have to be ever.” He glanced at her sidelong. “Just know I’m here.”

Of course, it was that obvious. And it was time.

She drew in a shaky breath and clenched her jaw, trying not to cry. Elbows on his knees, her friend sat angled toward her, picking through the brown grass he’d plucked from between his feet. After several tries, she managed to speak. “When Brendan left that morning, he kissed me goodbye.”

Nick’s whole body stilled with his apparent surprise she was talking. Made sense. *She* was surprised she was talking.

“He said he’d have a surprise for me when he came for lunch. All morning, I wondered what it would be. It was almost our fifth anniversary, and he was planning something big.” She closed her eyes and tipped her face toward the breeze. “He took a company car out to deliver some house plans. A semi crossed the centerline and hit him. They let me see him. He... was... *so* broken.”

“I’m so sorry.”

With a breath, she got herself back together again. “Shortly after the funeral, I got a call from a travel agent. Brendan had booked us a cruise. My mom gave the tickets to a couple we go to church with. She didn’t tell them they were from me. Months later, I was going through some of his things and found an anniversary ring. He was always so thoughtful and sweet.” She looked over at Nick, laughed it off. “The truck? It hit me all over again. Like it happened yesterday.”

“I can understand why.”

She took in a cleansing breath and blew it out, sagging unladylike in her eveningwear. She’d never shared her experience with anyone. And sharing it now, here with Nick, was right.

The evening sky glowed in beautiful hues of red and orange. Its majesty washed over her, making her feel... *something*. For an instant, she thought of her unused paints drying out. “Thank you.”

He plucked more blades of grass. “For what?”

“For asking me out for coffee. For saving me from Mrs. LaRue. For *trying* to get me to the symphony. For being here.”

“You’re welcome.” He swung his knee into hers. “Thank you.”

Me? “For what?”

“For asking me out for coffee.”

She let out a weak chuckle. “I kinda did, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you kinda did.”

Her heart lighter, she took a second to look at him—really looked. What did she know about this new and dear friend? The one who’d also been through hell and back. “May I ask about Lauren?”

“Yes.” His shoulders loosened, and his head ducked. He dropped his clump of grass, brushed off his hands as if brushing away his burden, and scooted back against the bench.

“I used to not like to talk about her much. It put a damper on a lot of parties. But now I’m glad to. Lauren died of cancer.”

Quinn’s heart sank. She pivoted her whole body toward him and rested her elbow on the back of the bench.

“I watched her waste away for six months. She just kept getting smaller and smaller, and she was tiny to begin with.” He bent forward, hands clasped between his knees. “We hadn’t been married long, just over two years. We’d bought a big four-bedroom house with a pool out back and a basketball court in the front. We were going to fill that house. Lauren loved kids.”

Kids. Had he and Lauren ever tried? She and Brendan had. But perhaps that wasn’t her purpose. Squelching her anger, she concentrated on his story.

“Then we got her diagnosis and plunged into the shortest six months of my life. She just slipped from my hands. These eleven months without her have been an eternity.”

“I’m sorry.” Heat welled up in her eyes again. Brendan had gone quickly, but Lauren had suffered much, Nick suffering right alongside her. He’d seemed so put together, but he was still hurting as much as she was.

“Hey, don’t cry.” He wiped a tear from her eye with his thumb.

At the urge to lean into his hand, the muscles tensed in her neck. She moved her face away and glanced toward the sky in time to see the first of the evening’s stars begin to twinkle.

“Life is cruel.”

Like her, he hooked his elbow on the back of the bench, his hand hanging next to hers. “Life is also beautiful.”

“I try to see the beauty, I really do, but I haven’t seen any in a long time.”

“I see beauty.”

Their eyes met, and she ducked her head, wishing she’d worn her hair down so she could hide behind it.

He grabbed her fingers, rubbed them between his. “In our friendship.”

Her heart unclenched. Of course, that’s what he meant. That’s what she hoped he meant. Wasn’t it?

Sliding her hand free, she wrapped her arms around herself as a shiver went through her. With the sun setting, she shouldn’t have left her sweater in the truck.

“Where are my manners?”

Head still down, she thanked him as he laid his jacket across her shoulders and let it cocoon her in warmth and spicy cologne. Shouldn’t that make her sad?

“And I’ll bet you need to eat something.”

“You’d win that bet.”

“Let me buy you dinner?”

She opened her mouth to protest, but she was too tired. “Fine. Zio’s?”

“Sounds great.” They stood, and he swung his elbow out. “Shall we?”

She threaded her arm through his, and they walked from one dusky light-pool to the next back toward his truck, her swinging her shoes at her side.

“You might have to run three hours tomorrow.”

“I’ll make you go with me.”

“Deal.”

Their friends’ night out hadn’t started so great. But the way it ended, the two of them opening up and becoming friends, was a relief. Her mother would be pleased, and Claire would turn flips.

Quinn sneaked a peek at the sunset. For the first time in a long while, she felt something. But what was that something?

Well, she wasn’t going to question it tonight. Tonight, she was going to dinner with a friend. Maybe, just maybe, she’d even color on the white butcher paper tablecloth with every color crayon they’d let her have.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There had been times when Quinn had stepped back from an unfinished painting and wanted to rip the canvas from the frame and burn it. That's how the first group sessions had been. But determination won out, and she kept adding brush strokes until she had something she could call art. She hadn't thrown it away, hadn't given up.

Hadn't let the abyss take her.

Maybe it was Nick lifting her out. Maybe it was Brendan's lingering voice prodding her to smile, whispering life would get better. Either way, the sky was within view, and she wanted to reach the top.

So she attended counseling group week after week and never found a reason to skip. Not even Mrs. LaRue's matchmaking ways could keep her away.

She and Nick had attempted the symphony again with great success, so next on the list of healing adventures was dinner out with him, Claire, and her husband, Dillon. Dinner with Mrs. LaRue might be less embarrassing than letting Claire meet Nick. But Claire had waited long enough. A couple weeks early, but it was time for a thanksgiving.

Miracle upon miracle, Claire had behaved herself in the restaurant. But when Nick went to get the truck, the real Claire Quinn knew and loved exploded. "Oh... my. Quinn! He is a looker! You were so right about his hair."

Dillon, his sandy-blond hair shining in the restaurant's lights, raised both hands, taking on a look of offense. "I'm

right here.”

“And I’m so glad you are.” Her flamboyant orange skirt and bleach-blond hair twirled around Claire as she planted a kiss on his lips, leaving him smiling again.

Quinn watched his arms go around Claire. His hands gripped her multicolored fall sweater, and they shared a look that could’ve melted a glacier. Yep. Third wheel.

She hurried to meet Nick as he pulled up, reached across the console, and opened the front passenger door for her. She climbed in while Claire and Dillon piled in the back seats, Claire feigning perfect behavior again as Nick drove them to Quinn’s place for dessert without the restaurant chatter.

Inside, she let Nick take her brown leather jacket and hang it next to his blazer in the entry closet—right next to Brendan’s. He pushed the sleeves up on his dark-blue sweater, gave her a wink, and led Dillon to the dining room, both boys holding their guts like they couldn’t eat anymore. They’d think twice when she served them Mom’s famous strawberry cheesecake.

Quinn padded off to the kitchen, Claire at her heels. “He opens your doors, hangs up your jacket.”

Quinn bristled. Here was the real Claire again. The one she was used to. And... the one life wouldn’t be the same without. She dumped her purse on a barstool and kicked off her cream heels. “His parents raised him to be polite. What’s wrong with that?”

As Claire started the coffeepot Quinn had prepped earlier, Claire didn't speak, but her eyes said enough.

"You know it's not like that." It couldn't be like that. *Wouldn't* be like that. Quinn ducked her head in the fridge for their homemade cheesecake, letting the chill air cool her heated cheeks.

"Well, he winked at you at least a dozen times through dinner."

Quinn backed out of the fridge and nudged the stainless-steel door closed with her hip. "He winks, Claire. It's just who he is." She nodded toward the cabinet as she set their dessert on the granite island. "Grab the plates and silverware, will you?"

After plating a good-sized helping for the guys, Quinn started to slice two smaller pieces for her and Claire.

"Oh, I want a big piece."

Quinn stilled her knife. "You? Miss I Can't Eat That?"

"Well, it *is* Thanksgiving."

"Sounds like a good excuse to me." Quinn sliced two more large slices, the strawberries oozing down the sides. Dad would be proud.

The guys laughed at something, and Claire's brow quirked. "Dillon likes him. I like him. And he definitely likes you."

"Claire."

Claire wilted with a groan, her blond curls falling around her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I get carried away sometimes."

“Sometimes?”

“Okay, most times.”

Quinn twitched her mouth to the side. “Sorry too. I guess I’m still...”

“Skittish?”

“I was going to say mourning.” Quinn sighed. “But skittish works too.”

They giggled and shared a hug. Skittish didn’t work. Skittish would suggest she was open to a relationship, which she wasn’t.

Obstinate. That was the word. With a capital *O*.

“C’mon.” Claire began loading the desserts on a tray. “If we leave them alone too long, we’ll never get the conversation away from sports.”

Refocused on playing hostess for the first time in forever, Quinn grabbed mugs out of the cabinet, filled them with steamy fresh brew, and added them to the tray. Then they headed to the dining room.

They were met with huge eyes and comments on how gigantic the slices were.

“Hey,” Quinn said as she passed around plates of yummy goodness. “This cheesecake won first place at the Tulsa State Fair. You can’t eat a small slice.”

“All right.” Nick glanced at Dillon and sighed heavily. “You with me, man?”

Dillon rubbed his gut. “Let’s do this.”

After everyone settled in and the conversation waned away from the upcoming Cowboys vs. Steelers game, with Dillon receiving an invitation to join Nick and Josh in front of the big screen, Claire clinked her fork on her water glass. She smiled at Dillon, and he beamed as she took his hand. “We have some news we didn’t want to share at the restaurant.”

Quinn’s good mood melted. She swallowed hard but held her grin. Claire dipped her head and tucked a curl behind her ear. Only a few things could make the drama queen nervous. Fixing her up with Nick wasn’t one of them, but this... Her heart aching with what she suspected was coming, Quinn reached across the table to take Claire’s other hand.

Claire’s smile stretched out, and she hardly contained her bounce. “We’re pregnant.”

No wonder she wanted a big slice of cheesecake. Quinn’s insides came apart, but no way would she douse Claire’s excitement. Quinn circled the table to embrace her dearest friend, her tears a mixture of happy, sad, and in-between. “That’s so great. I’m so excited for you.”

Claire’s arms slid around her, pulling Quinn in and smothering her with Ralph Lauren perfume. “Quinn, you’re my best friend, my sister. I want you to be a part of this baby’s life.”

When she pulled away, a tear sat on Claire’s cheek. Somehow, Quinn knew that one tear bore all the worry Claire locked inside since Brendan’s death. She’d been strong for Quinn—held the rope she dangled from. That one tear begged her best friend to come back. And that tear somehow gave

Quinn the strength to pull herself over the edge of her pit. It was time to stop being supported and support. “Of course I will be.” She winked at Nick. “*She* can call me Auntie Q.”

Claire squeezed her eyes shut, letting all the tears fall, and held Quinn tight. Nick offered Dillon his congratulations, shaking his hand across the table, and Dillon served another round of cheesecake to celebrate.

Once they reached their maximum fill, Quinn and Claire sent the boys out to the back porch while they loaded dishes into the dishwasher.

“May will be here in no time.” Claire handed her a plate. “You’ll help me shop, won’t you?”

“Absolutely, I will.” Quinn took the dish and nested it in the lower rack. “We’ll need lots of pink for that baby girl.”

“Or blue.”

Claire hip-bumped Quinn, and Quinn hip-bumped her back.

“Are you going to find out?”

“Oh yeah. You know I don’t like gender-neutral green.”

The dishes done, they leaned back against the sink and watched the guys through the window. They were getting along well. Nick fit right in with her friends. Scary, but wonderful at the same time. What *did* all his winks mean?

“So...” Claire nudged Quinn with her shoulder.

“What?” Quinn rolled her eyes. “Don’t go there, Claire.”

“I was just going to say he’s nice.”

“Yes, he is nice. He always knows what I need to hear—what I can handle, what I can’t.”

“I’m glad you have a friend like him.”

Quinn latched on to Claire’s arm. “You’ve been a good friend too, a great friend, and I’ve shut you out a bit—a lot. I appreciate you never giving up on me.”

“Giving up was never an option.”

They leaned their heads together and giggled. Like high school all over again. Maybe it was time for a sleepover—hair, nails, the works. “I *am* happy for you and Dillon.”

“Thank you.” Claire took a breath. “Okay, I’m only going to say this once. Then I’ll leave it alone.”

“We’re going there, aren’t we?”

“Just this once. And only because I love you.” Claire nodded toward the back porch. “Would it be so bad?”

Quinn’s heart shuddered at the thought of another man in her life. “Probably not. Nick’s pretty great. But I…” Quinn moved over to the island, her back against it so her face wasn’t visible from the back porch. Or maybe so she couldn’t see Nick. “I can’t, Claire.”

“Making you happy was Brendan’s greatest joy. He lived to see a smile on your face.”

“He died trying to put a smile on my face.” Her shoulders slumped as all the guilt resurfaced. “Is it my fault? Did he die because of me?”

“No. Quinn, no.” Claire took hold of her hands, her eyes glistening. “If Brendan had known he only had minutes left, he’d still have spent those last minutes trying to make you smile. One would’ve thought it was his one purpose in life.”

Purpose.

A ragged breath shuddered through Quinn, releasing the thought she hadn’t dared think. “You think... Brendan would be happy if I dated Nick.”

“Brendan would be happy... if you let go and took that step forward.”

“But everyone just dies.”

“Not everyone.”

Quinn searched Claire’s eyes wanting to believe her, her mouth wanting to frown.

Claire rubbed Quinn’s arms. “Brendan would want you to be happy, to live whatever life you have left to its fullest, even if it’s only a few minutes.”

She knew that. Still... She bit her bottom lip. “I just can’t.”

Claire nodded, sniffed, and blinked her tears dry. “Okay. That was my once. I’ll be here no matter what you decide.” She lifted her chin toward the porch. “But he is *so* cute.”

“Claire.”

With a smirk, she threw up her hands. “I’m gathering my husband. I’m going home.”

Quinn loved Claire for trying. She loved Claire for knowing Brendan so well. But Claire didn’t understand. And

hopefully, she never would. Hopefully, they'd never feel the pain that haunted Quinn.

She'd promised herself she'd never love again. But Claire was pregnant. She couldn't keep from loving her best friend's—her sister's—child.

She couldn't fear the consequences. She had to be the supportive friend Claire had been to her. Love or loss.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Quinn wanted to drop into bed and forget the whole night. Well, not all. The evening was fun. The news that would never be hers again hurt all the way down to the places she'd closed off from pain.

They waved their goodbyes from the front porch as Claire and Dillon drove off leaving her and Nick alone. Part of her wanted him to leave too, but another part—the part that needed a shoulder to blubber on—wanted him to stay.

Stepping back into the house, Nick shut the door behind them and leaned on it, looking at her. “I should go too. But I want to make sure you’re good before I do.”

She sunk against the door next to him. Possibly a little closer to “the looker” than she should’ve been. She tried to think of some smart, off-the-wall comment. Something funny to send him on his way not worrying about her. But nothing came except a tear. “That hurt.”

He gathered her tear on his finger before pulling her to him.

She could only whisper. “I want to be happy for her.”

“I know you do.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and moved her hands around his back, just holding on for the support she needed. It was time for him to know—she *needed* him to know—the full truth behind her fear.

Before she found his embrace too comforting, she pulled away and wiped her tears. “I want to show you something.”

She flipped on the hall light and led him to a closed door. Wiping her sweaty hands on her jeans, she paused, took a deep breath, and blew it out.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I haven’t been in this room in almost a year and a half. Claire keeps it clean, but I haven’t been able to go in.”

“You don’t have to show me.”

But he was wrong. “It’s time. I *have* to open this door.”

“Then we’ll open it together.” He took her hand and squeezed. “I’m right here.”

She squeezed back, drew in another deep breath, and turned the handle. She stared into the darkness—another pit—before she flipped on the light.

The room was exactly how she’d left it. Rocking chair in the corner, pink shag rug on the floor, crib against the far wall complete with a moon-and-stars mobile, waiting for life to fill it. She swallowed hard, crept to the crib, and gripped the rail.

Inside the crib, on the pink sheets, three teddy bears nestled against a blanket folded to show a name embroidered in white.

Nick eased up beside her. “Hope.”

Her name spoken aloud was a sound Quinn hadn’t heard in a long time. The sad sound made her daughter real again. She had been—she *had* lived.

Lying on the blanket was a picture—the only family picture they had.

He gestured at the photograph. “May I?”

At her nod, he lifted the photo to look closer. Quinn tilted her head, taking in the beauty of the tiny face. Her arms longed to reach out and touch her, to hold her, the ache in her heart unbearable. Why had it been so long since she’d looked at her daughter’s face? “She was perfect, wasn’t she?”

“She’s beautiful.” His voice cracked as he snuggled the picture back into its place and rested his arms on the crib.

“When I got pregnant the first time, I got excited, bought the rug. I miscarried at eight weeks. No big deal. It happens to a lot of women, right? The second time, I told everyone. Then I miscarried at fourteen weeks.”

She started at Nick’s hand on her shoulder, his thumb massaging her arm. Without thinking about it, she listed toward him.

“It was hard. When I got pregnant the third time, we named her right away. This time would be different. If we named her, she’d stay—she’d be ours. I went into labor at thirty weeks.” She couldn’t keep the anger from her voice. “She lived a day. She got *one* day.”

Nick’s arms went around her. Her grip loosened from the crib as he angled her into his embrace. His chest shuddered as he released the tears she couldn’t. She melted against his soft sweater, his musky cologne a comfort.

“I just wish she could’ve stayed, a small part of him. You know?”

“I know.” He buried his face in her hair. “I know.”

She eased back from him. “You do, don’t you?” He may not have lost a child, but he didn’t have anyone to remind him of Lauren. She understood his pain, his loneliness, his heartbreak.

He pushed her hair behind her ears, wiped away his tears, and folded her in his arms. “I do.”

Snuggled against him, she breathed a stuttering sigh. “I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

“Now aren’t you glad you gave me your phone number?”

She stepped away laughing and play-punched his arm. “There’s one more thing.” She unearthed a painting from behind the crib and propped it against the headboard.

Nick’s red-rimmed eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. She’d take that as a compliment.

“Quinn, it’s beautiful.” He sat cross-legged on the shag, inspecting the canvas.

“To the moon and back, right?” She sat beside him and shifted to brace her back against his shoulder. “I started painting it when I found out I was pregnant with Hope.”

The silence between them was calming. They just sat, staring at the moon, Nick brushing his fingers across the rug.

“I wanted to paint so people could feel what I felt—the electricity in a storm, the newness of a brilliant sunrise, the way the colors of an evening sky could make you glad to be alive. I wanted everyone to see what I saw. But anymore... I can’t.”

“You will again. It takes time.”

“Time. The healer of all wounds. Where is he when I need him?” Her laugh sounded strangled, no energy behind it.

“Wait. Are you Father Time?”

“Ah.” He snapped his fingers. “Foiled again.”

With her eyes dry and puffy, with him bracing her, she could’ve fallen asleep. If not for one thought. “My third pregnancy was like you and Lauren, I suppose.”

His shoulder nudged her when she fell silent. “How so?”

She sighed herself back awake. “When I found out I was pregnant, I began saying my goodbyes. I tried not to think that way, even gave her the moon, but somehow, I knew she’d be gone too. My mind was preparing me, I guess. But I don’t think it’s possible to be prepared.”

Nick angled his leg behind her and embraced her. Sinking into his comfort, she tried to ignore the kiss in her hair. Tried to ignore each heartbeat that seemed more alive than the one before.

“I cannot ever love again.” She commanded herself more than spoke to him. “Everyone just dies.”

His long exhale moved through her hair.

Was that disappointment or empathy?

“The moon, although a lesser light, is sometimes bright enough you can almost see like it’s day. It guides you through the night, which may seem forever long, to the sunrise on the other side. Even though the moon gets dim, we’re never fully

in the dark. God won't let us be. I have to believe, Quinn, that someday, the sun will rise again. For both of us."

"Did you take Philosophy along with Architecture?"

"Part of my general studies." He chuckled. "My mom told me that before she died. I'm just glad you had this beautiful visual to go with the thought."

As her heart twisted, she turned toward him. "You lost your mom too?" Slumping back against him, she closed her eyes. His arms tightened around her again. "You've had so much pain."

"Maybe that's why we make such good friends."

The edges of her mouth twitched back up. "So we're to be moons for each other?"

"Maybe so."

She swallowed the smile. "Until the sun rises."

"I guess."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Of what?"

She picked at the pink shag. "The sunrise."

He jostled her. "I'm afraid. Every day, I'm afraid. But I'm more afraid of facing the rest of my life alone."

Alone. She became aware of him so close to her. Arms still around her. His heart beating against her. "But alone, you don't have the pain."

"Don't you? Isn't loneliness painful?"

She had her parents, Claire, her job. They kept her busy, but at the end of the day, when she was alone and haunted by memories, the loneliness *was* painful.

Contemplating his words, she started when he spoke again. “It is a beautiful painting. If you’d like, I could hang it for you.” He tilted the canvas toward him.

Quinn held out her hand to stop him. “No.” Her hand landed on his. They both froze. It wasn’t like they’d never touched before. His arms were around her now. But something transferred between her hand and his.

“I should put it back.” She stood and slipped the painting back behind the crib. Hid it away. Like the kiss in her hair and the flutter of her heart as he held her. Hid away the realization she wanted him to leave, but didn’t want him to go. Hid away the moon that would lead to the sun.

Nick stood to face her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

“You didn’t. I just... I’m not ready for *Hope’s Moon* to be on display.”

In his embarrassment, he pointed a thumb toward the door. “I should go. Are you going to be okay?”

She touched the empty crib, rocking the mobile that never played for her Hope. “I will be now.”

She followed him out, and as they left the nursery, she flipped off the light but left the door open. It was no longer a place to avoid, but a void to heal.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She'd never love again. Her words replayed over and over in Nick's head. He hadn't thought it possible to feel emptier.

He flipped a kitchen chair around to face the window, the grating of its wooden legs across the floor disturbing the quiet. He sat staring across his balcony into the dark neighborhoods nestled in ancient trees that stretched south along Riverside Drive, his elbows on his knees, bare feet cold on the cherrywood floor. Already quarter after one, and though his eyelids were droopy, no way could he sleep.

He'd had no idea what lay beyond that closed door. The room was a stopped clock, hands frozen in place, unable to move forward.

The photograph of baby Hope, so tiny and beautiful, was burned into his memory, so, too, the image of her father. Quinn's house was full of pictures of her and Brendan, but this photo, the anguish plain on his face, was not like the others. It was a snapshot of extreme happiness and extreme pain all in the same instant of time.

A familiar feeling. A familiar goodbye.

And he'd been there, in Brendan's place, to comfort his wife.

Had she dreamed of him as Nick held her? Wouldn't that be her right?

His head hung over his clasped hands, the feeling of her still warm in his arms, the grapefruity smell of her hair still in

his nose. He rubbed his eyes with a thumb and finger. Did he cross the line?

She'd made her feelings clear. And why should she love again when all she'd loved had been stripped away? In that light, his desire for her seemed so much worse. She needed a friend, not a love she feared losing.

But the longer he'd held her, her warm body taking comfort in his arms, the closer he'd wanted to become. And then those fateful words. Closing his eyes, he fell back against the chair, his emotions a building with no damper, swaying out of control.

This couldn't be right. Why were his feelings so strong for this woman in such pain? If he got too close and pushed her, he'd lose her. That wasn't an option. His only choice was to back off.

He replaced the chair and gripped the backrest, flexing against it. He didn't have any weekend plans, but he wouldn't see Quinn. He'd text her in the morning and make sure she was all right, then distance himself. Give her space, be a friend—not a crazy stalker guy.

He'd hit the gym, maybe call Dad for lunch, hang out with Josh and Dillon on Sunday, watch the game. On Monday, he'd be back to work and... out with Quinn.

Unless he could find an excuse not to go out with her. Maybe he'd bring home the Schaeffer plans, work on them.

He wouldn't though. He'd sit like he'd been the last hour, staring out the window and thinking of her.

Jamming the chair into the floor, he went to the kitchen bar and sat sideways on a stool. Elbow on the quartz counter, he held his weary head up with a hand in his hair. He wanted to be with her, but she did *not* want to be with him. She still expected her friend though. So he needed to temper his feelings and be just that.

“What do I do now, Lauren?”

Just be a friend.

She was a song stuck on repeat. But that short phrase was always the right answer. Being a friend was the right thing to do. It was the first step, the next step, and the last step. And he'd take all those steps.

He couldn't be less. But he couldn't be more either—and that hurt. He got up and started toward the bedroom. If she never loved him in return...

Wait. He stopped short and braced a hand against the wall.

Did he love her? His heart pumped hard, but panic impinged the blood flow.

Lauren's smiling face glared at him as he entered his room. “Don't look at me like that. You're the one who did this. You wanted me to return her phone, to ask her for coffee.” With closed eyes and hands on his hips, he tilted his head back. “You wanted me to love again.”

Sitting on the opposite side of the bed from her photo, he half turned to her. She only smiled.

“You wanted me to love *her*. To love *Quinn*. What good does that do? What difference does it make?”

Lauren lying in their bed came to mind, pale, skin hanging like cloth on her bones, but she was beautiful. Her green eyes glistened. “The rest will come, Nick. And I’ll be right here in your heart, always.”

He lifted his hand as if to touch her, but she was gone, his hand falling on an empty bed. The room was silent. His mind was silent. Those were the only words Lauren would give.

Perhaps they were the only ones needed.

He loved Quinn. God grant that love gave him the strength to be only what she needed.



Quinn woke for what must’ve been the tenth time, the gray light of dawn peeking in around her blinds. The memory of her hand on Nick’s still fresh. He was only trying to do something nice for her, and she’d shut him down.

He’d comforted her, cried for her... held her. How could something feel right and so wrong at the same time?

She lifted her head to glare at the clock. It was high time she was out of bed and out for a jog. Today should be perfect for a trip down Riverside.

If her body would cooperate. With a groan, she jerked the duvet over her head and snuggled into its warmth. Her phone buzzed and jolted her awake thirty minutes later. Who would be texting her on Saturday morning?

Her heart jumped as she tapped into Nick’s text. “A bit of a rough night. How’s today?”

Catching herself smiling, she texted back. “Sunny and sixty. Sleeping was harsh. Off for a run as soon as I get my lazy butt out of bed.”

“Sorry if I woke you.”

“I needed it. Thank you for always being there.”

The pause, a lull in the conversation, grated her nerves. Was he multitasking? Had she hurt his feelings with her stilted goodbye?

“I’ll always be there.”

Her tension drained. *Always* was a brave word. Exhaling long and deep, she crawled out of bed. A shower to knock off the sleep, brushing to cure her morning breath, jogging clothes to get her in the mood, and she was out the door.

The temperature perfect, clouds drifting across the azure blue, the river running beside her. She jogged down the sidewalk past the plaza to their bench and stopped. Breathing heavy, she tipped her face to the fluffy whites. Something was different.

The clouds were beautiful. Her heart was light. The cool morning air grace upon her skin. Her breath caught. She... *felt*. And more than just the bit she had when she’d been here with Nick. Opening Hope’s door must’ve done some good. Or maybe... Hands on her hips, she walked behind the bench and gripped its back.

She rubbed her fingers together remembering Nick’s fingers on hers, his musky cologne on his coat. Last night,

he'd cradled her against his chest, held her in his arms, kissed her hair. And she'd wanted him to.

Fear zapped like lightning through her chest. *Quinn, you cannot feel this way.*

If she did, something terrible would happen. She squatted with her hands still on the back of their bench. The one time she needed to breathe, and she was out of breath.

Nick only wanted to be friends. But hadn't he said he didn't want to be alone for the rest of his life?

She dropped to the ground, arms behind her for support. She would *not* care. She couldn't. Grass stuck to her hands as she touched her temples, shaking her head. She would feel, she would heal, but she would go on alone. It'd be better that way, safer.

She ground her teeth, fighting the prickly heat behind her eyelids.

“Hon, are you okay?”

She started, jerking backward as a shadow fell over her. How had she not heard the woman crunch through the dry grass? Quinn relaxed her shoulders, forced a smile. “Yeah, I was just stretching and decided to rest. Could've sat on the bench to do that.”

Oh, for heaven's sake.

The woman went on her way, and Quinn went around to sit on the bench. She must've looked ridiculous on the ground behind it. She couldn't help but laugh.

For all of it.

The clouds continued their stroll, and the air cooled when they covered the sun. Several honking geese flew over and disappeared behind the river birches.

Life moved on. She and Nick would continue the way they'd been. She'd be a friend to her friend. And he'd understand. He was Nick. And she was Madam Q—she swallowed at the endearment. Two friends who needed each other.

And what was wrong with being friends? She slid her phone from her armband and sent a quick text. “If you get a chance today, look up. The clouds are beautiful.”

Instead of a return text, her phone rang, the picture she'd taken of him lit up her screen and places within her that it shouldn't.

“Hey.”

He was out of breath. Of course, he was at the gym. “I knew you'd see it again one day. Where are you?”

“At our bench on the river. The day's perfect.” She cringed at her use of *our*. *Careful, Quinn, no wrong ideas.*

“I bet it's nicer than this hot gym.”

“Me too. Do you want to meet for lunch later?”

Radio silence. No worries. He *was* in the middle of a workout.

“Yeah, sure. A perfect day deserves lunch. I'll finish my workout and meet you at Jason's Deli on Fifteenth. Noon?”

That give you enough time?”

“Plenty. See you then.”

Just lunch, no obligations. Those words hadn't been spoken between them in a while. Because there were obligations—friend obligations.

And she was glad to have them.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nick was done for the day, and he'd ceased to care. Lounging at his computer, his white dress shirt rolled to the elbow and his shoes kicked off, he scrolled through his emails one last time and shut it down.

Elbows braced on his already cleared desk, he checked the weather out the window. The rain had stopped, but it still looked cold.

Three months had passed since Quinn shared the tragic loss of her daughter. Since he'd tucked her against his chest, held her in his arms.

He'd intended to put some distance between them, to protect her from himself. But the next day, at "our" bench, she'd seen the beauty in the clouds, and friends needed friends to celebrate those milestones on the healing journey.

And he was hers.

In more ways than one. In ways he couldn't tell her.

But he'd rather be friends with Quinn for the rest of his days than not be with her at all.

Sure.

God, give me strength to believe that.

With his fingertips, he rubbed his tired eyes.

They'd spent the holidays apart, not attending each other's events. Quinn went to visit Brendan's parents, he to Lauren's—two occasions resulting in many calls and texts between them.

Despite enjoying time with her parents, in a house where her pictures still smiled on the walls, he'd just wanted to be home with Quinn.

Home and Quinn. Would the two ever be brought together?

His gaze flicked to the three boxes of chocolates that clients had brought in lying on the corner of his desk.

Don't even think about it, Nick.

There'd been some near misses—a brush of hands when his instinct was to reach for hers, glances that could've had deeper meaning if he'd looked longer. Once, he'd wanted to kiss her. Well, maybe more than once.

And of course, Mrs. LaRue was always trying to pin them together. Quinn handled her so well. One could almost say they were becoming friends. Almost.

He and Quinn had gone out with friends, he'd spent time at her house, she at his. They'd gone out together, spent days apart, but always stayed connected.

But today was not the day to see her.

Red and pink hearts were everywhere, the paper, flyers, TV, the downtown shop windows, and especially Dave's floral shop, who'd provided flowers for his wedding, Lauren's funeral, and everything in between.

Nick had already suffered through his first without Lauren, but this was Quinn's first without Brendan. She'd feel it. She'd hate it. He hated it for her.

He'd sent texts and called her at lunch to check in. She seemed to be okay, but he'd always seemed okay too.

"Night, Nick." His colleague's call from the front office startled him.

"Yeah, see ya." He began unrolling his sleeves and buttoning the cuffs while he slid his shoes back on.

"Hey. You're supposed to get dressed before you come to work." Dad propped himself on the doorframe, his collar loose after the long day.

"I see you've lost *your* tie."

"Got plans for this evening?"

Dad was good at changing the subject. Never lingering on himself.

Nick sniffed. "I'm headed home. This day's had all of me I care to give."

Dad nodded toward the boxes of chocolates. "Don't eat all those at once. They'll sour your stomach or ruin your dinner or some such your mother used to say. You should share them. With a *friend*."

Well, that was subtle. Nick glanced sideways at him while securing the last button. "You mean Quinn."

"She's the one I'd pick." Dad winked, his hairline receding at the temples doing nothing to make him look less distinguished. So what was he doing alone on Valentine's Day?

Nick grabbed his suit coat off the rack and shrugged it on. As he adjusted his sleeves, he took a breath to speak, but then shunted his question away and reached for his overcoat.

“What is it?”

He threw his coat over his arm and his hand in his pocket. “Why did you never remarry?”

A sadness glazed Dad’s eyes before he blinked it away. “You were nine when your mother died. I threw all my effort into raising you and your sister.”

“We’ve been out of the house for ten years. You’re going to have to come up with a better excuse.”

The sadness returning, his head hung for a moment before he spoke. “I haven’t met a woman who compares with your mother. But when I find her, I’m going to marry her. I haven’t given up yet.” He eyed the chocolate boxes, then raised a brow. “Quinn?”

Nick shook his head.

“Not ready?”

“Not even close.”

Dad clapped him on the arm. “Take her some chocolates. Haven’t seen a woman yet that can turn them down.” He backed out into the hall, pointing a finger at Nick. “Don’t stay out too late though. Tomorrow’s another busy day.”

Nick raised his chin with a smirk. He watched his dad disappear down the hall. Then he dragged his gaze to the chocolates. Not a good idea. But neither was leaving her alone.

He picked up the rectangular box—leaving the heart-shaped box behind—and escaped the office. Quinn was going to her parents’ house for dinner, but she’d mentioned she wouldn’t stay long. He’d go for a short workout, grab a bite to eat, and head over to her place.

God, let this be the right decision.

Donning his overcoat, he headed to the elevators. Valentine’s Day had to be the worst day of the entire year.



It was Tuesday. And it was Valentine’s Day. Quinn went to her parents for a quick bite to eat, but she didn’t stay long. There were none of her mother’s heart-shaped cookies, no flowers sent from her doting father to the woman he loved. At least, none on display.

The day didn’t exist this year. Not in their house and not in hers.

She’d just gotten home, opened the mail, and was about to open her bottle of sparkling cider to celebrate the insignificance of the day when someone knocked on her door. Lifting the gray pocket curtain, Quinn peeped through the side window. Nick waved at her with his half grin. Her stress melted into a smile.

He was here, and she didn’t have to pretend to the world anymore.

She unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door. “Something told me you wouldn’t be able to stay away from my door tonight.”

His smile said he was guilty. “I got these chocolates from a client. I was hoping you might rescue me from eating the whole box myself.”

She couldn’t lie. She hadn’t had one piece of chocolate all day, and the way she felt, he would have to rescue *her* from eating the entire box. “Oh, what are friends for? Come in.”

“I was hoping I wouldn’t find you sitting at home alone.”

Once he crossed the threshold, she shut the door against the cold night air. “Where else would I be sitting alone?”

“Fair point.” He shrugged out of his coat and draped it over his arm. “I just wanted to come by and make sure you were okay. I figured the chocolates would give me an in.”

“Oh, the chocolates definitely got you in.” His form-fitting jeans and Winsor blue sweater over finely tuned muscles helped a smidge.

As she slid his coat from his hands, he winked the wink he always winked. “Good thing I brought them along then.”

A flush warmed her cheeks as she pivoted to hang his coat in the entry closet. Was it the wink, her thoughts, or hanging his coat next to Brendan’s? Maybe it was time to move Brendan’s coats to the bedroom closet. Not a thought to have when trying to get through the most romantic day of the year.

“If you’d rather be alone, I can go.”

“No.” She closed the door on the two men’s coats. “I was just going to drink my whole bottle of sparkling cider by myself, go to bed in tears, and hate myself in the morning.” She waved a hand. “Nothing important. I’d rather spend the

night with you... the evening... the evening with you. I'd rather spend the *evening* with you."

He raised well-trimmed brows that matched his well-trimmed beard. "Are you done?"

She gave a definitive nod. "Quite."

Before she could say anything else stupid, she snatched the box and headed to the kitchen. She rounded the island and leaned against the long side of the granite. Nick pushed his sleeves up and joined her on the short side.

"Let's see what we have here." She flipped the box over to view its contents.

"No, no, no." He grabbed it from her and set it on the counter. "That's cheating. It's the luck of the draw. You eat what you get."

Her want to snatch the chocolates back ended in a pool of blue eyes. "You're living on the edge."

Smiling, he opened the box. "You're first, Madam Q."

Quinn picked out her favorite first. She popped the whole thing in her mouth, closed her eyes, and hummed with delight. "Toffee. That's my favorite one in the whole box. They should put more of those in here."

She looked up to find him glaring at her.

"What? Pick what you know. It's a safe bet."

"You are *not* living on the edge. C'mon, pick another one."

"Oh no. It's your turn." Challenging him, she pushed the box toward him, already feeling better about her faux pas. He

was good at getting them past the all-too-often uncomfortable moments.

“All right.” He bit the corner of his chosen piece.

“Caramel. How lucky can I get?”

Her turn to glare. “That was a small bite. If you hadn’t liked it, I’d have made you eat the whole thing.”

“I believe you would.”

“I would.”

“Your turn.” He ate the rest of his piece while sliding the box back over to her.

Without taking her gaze from him, she reached in and drew out the first chocolate she touched. With a bit of attitude, she took a bite, then spit the atrocity out into her other hand.

“No spitting it out. You have to eat it.”

“We should’ve discussed the rules first.”

“What is it?”

With a screwed-up face, she turned the chocolate so he could see the inside. “Raspberry.”

“Hey, don’t dis the raspberry chocolates.”

She held it up to him. “Well, here. You eat it.”

He grasped her wrist and nipped the candy with his mouth. His lips, warm and soft, grazed her fingers, sending a shiver through her. She swallowed as their eyes met, both their smiles fading. After what seemed an eternity, he looked away first, and she blinked the visions from her mind. He let go of her

wrist, and she slunk to the sink to throw away the other half of her candy.

“I’m sorry. I promise awkward was not on the agenda for this evening. Maybe the chocolates weren’t such a great idea.”

She returned to the island and touched his arm as he replaced the lid on the box. Glad he dared look at her, she offered a smile. “I’ve been faking it all day. But with you, I don’t have to. Life can be what life is. The chocolates *were* a great idea. And so was coffee and the symphony—once we got to go—giving you my phone number, the bench at the river. All of it. I wouldn’t give it back to save myself from a few awkward moments.”

He clasped her hand with his. “I would never hurt you, Quinn.”

Saving them from more awkwardness, she slid her hand from his and sauntered to the fridge. “How about a drink? I *did* buy that bottle of sparkling cider. I saved you from your chocolates. You can save me from my bubbly.”

He laughed to himself. “Seems fair.”

Thrilled to see him smiling again, she extracted the bottle from the fridge and collected two flutes from the cabinet. But she’d have to be careful. Another uncomfy moment, and she might kiss those soft lips. She almost spilled the cider. She did *not* just think that, did she? More surprising than the thought—she didn’t want to duck and run.

She wanted to be right here. With Nick. Not alone, which was scary.

Quinn poured the fizzy liquid as Nick propped a hip on the island and crossed his arms. “This bubbly won’t make me want to finish off the chocolates and defeat the purpose of coming here, will it?”

She lifted the bottle and underlined the label’s words with her finger. “Nonalcoholic.”

“Well...” He twirled the Russell Stovers around on the granite. “*That* doesn’t give me an excuse for eating every piece.”

Laughing again, she let the weirdness of the evening wash away, leaving only two friends taking comfort in each other’s company.

Eventually, they flipped off the lights and made it to the bluish-gray couch with their flutes of bubbly and one more chocolate. With shoes kicked off and feet up on the metal-legged coffee table, they flipped through TV channels, watched the news awhile, and skimmed past the old black-and-white shows from the fifties. But Valentine’s Day specials were airing on almost every channel.

They settled on cop show reruns and let them play as they talked and laughed through two glasses of nonbubbly bubbly.

Setting her glass aside, she burrowed deep into the overstuffed cushions. Nick lounged beside her, head on the back of the couch, his well-defined arms crossed over his chest. Eyelids slowly blinking, complete relaxation softened her edges. Not like she’d been when she first met him. She’d been a bristly porcupine. What had changed?

Knocking his shoulder with hers, she couldn't recover her position, and they remained close. She lolled her head to look up at him. "Thanks for coming over."

He glanced at her, his lips almost meeting her nose. "I wouldn't have missed..." Turning back to center, he waved a hand at the TV. "Three back-to-back episodes of *NYPD Blues*."

Awkward moment stifled. Snickering, she didn't bother to straighten away from him. She was comfortable, warm. "The fizz and confections weren't so bad either."

"They were perfect."

Perfect. The night kind of was.

She'd dreaded spending the evening alone. Hadn't been looking forward to the tears. But her friend had come through.

Their conversation waned, and the TV continued to flash its light into the dark room. It was getting late, but she didn't care, not even when her eyes closed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Nick jerked awake. It didn't take long to remember where he was. The crick in his back a dead giveaway. Quinn stirred next to him but didn't open her eyes. Her head was on his shoulder, the TV casting shadows on the soft angles of her face. He rolled his wrist to see his watch, careful not to wake her, and grimaced—two-fourteen. Two pots of coffee were in his future.

He cranked the volume down and slid out from under her. Muscles tight from lounging on the couch too long, he stretched them limber again, pushed his feet into his shoes, then lifted Quinn's warm body into his arms.

She breathed in and moaned, but didn't protest, just wrapped her arms around his neck, her soft perfume filling his senses. "What time is it?"

"You don't want to know."

Her breath heaven on his neck, he prayed for strength. If there was ever a time he wanted to kiss her, it was now. He laid her on her bed and pulled the covers over her from the other side. Brushing her hair from her face, he moved in to kiss her cheek and stopped. He wanted to, but it wouldn't be right. Not for her. He angled away and turned to leave.

"Nick?"

"Yeah?" If she asked him to stay, he would. His heart paused, waiting for the words. Waiting for the strength he didn't have.

"Please be careful going home."

Heartfelt words. She cared for him, but not the way he cared for her. His heart twisted. “Good night, Quinn.”

He slid his sleeves down, preparing to go out into the cold world, and clicked off the TV. By the light of his phone, he hesitated as he retrieved his coat from beside Brendan’s. Then he locked the front door with the key from under the mat and drove home. Sitting in his truck in the parking garage, he took a deep breath, remembering the feel of her soft fingers against his lips, her warm body next to his, her head on his shoulder, her face so very close.

The way she’d looked at him when he’d eaten the chocolate from her hand, he’d come so close to kissing her. Thank God for the chocolate in his mouth, or he might have. Of course, if she’d kissed him, he’d have swallowed it whole. It was the worst awkward moment they’d had. Or was it the best?

He’d warned himself not to go. Valentine’s Day was for lovers, and that was something they were not. Couldn’t be. It wasn’t the weak moment he’d feared, but near enough.

Heart pounding, he opened the door for fresh air. The chocolate, cider, and a few hours’ sleep on a couch worked a number on his guts. The guilt wasn’t helping.

He’d held her in his arms, dreaming of what could be, living a fantasy.

How was he going to stay just friends? What would he do if she never wanted him in return?

Just be a friend. The rest will come.

“And if it doesn’t?”

Of course, there was no answer.

He slid out of his truck and dragged his weary butt to his apartment. He undressed at his bedside, not bothering to pick up his clothes—or look at Lauren—and flopped down, barely covering himself. After a fitful sleep, his eyes didn’t want to open. Still, he hauled himself up and ran through the shower.

Then, almost dropping his second cup of coffee, he scrambled over a half-used tube of toothpaste and a towel when his phone dinged, anxious to see if the text was Quinn.

“Thank you for the chocolates and saving me from my bubbly.”

“Thank you for the bubbly and saving me from my chocolates.”

“LOL. Call me later.”

He sent the thumbs-up emoji. Their episode hadn’t deterred her. Thank God. Losing her trust would be his end.

Their banter eased his worry, but it left him confused. Would she waver? There was no way to tell, and he wouldn’t push. Being with her made him happy, and their friendship had made a change in her. So he’d work harder at being a friend.

He shook his head at his reflection. He couldn’t have those thoughts rattling around in his head during today’s client meetings. He’d need some breakfast, lots of coffee, and—he picked up his phone when it dinged again—lunch with Quinn.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

For the first time in a while, life was good. No nightmares, no panic attacks. Quinn even enjoyed going out with Claire and Dillon again. And time spent with Nick? A ray of light in her storm.

He'd almost kissed her on Valentine's Day. Or had she almost kissed him? That was a shady line. Before he'd left, he'd gotten close to kissing her again. She'd never told him she knew.

She'd stayed awake for another hour thinking of his arms around her as he carried her to her bed. She hadn't wanted him to leave, but she couldn't ask him to stay. With her heart so damaged, it wouldn't have been fair to him.

When Monday night rolled around again, she asked him to meet her before group. She hadn't revealed why, just said it was a surprise. Anticipation drew her day out long, but the time had come. If she could make her heart stop trying to escape her throat, she might be able to get through it.

She drove into the community center parking lot forty-five minutes before seven. Nick's truck wasn't there yet, but Mrs. LaRue's silver sedan was parked near the front. It seemed early even for her, so Quinn went to check on her. She found her in a pink pantsuit sitting by herself halfway down the hall, a matching jacket lying beside her.

"Mrs. LaRue?"

Her red-lipped grin slashed a line from ear to ear. "Oh, Quinn. Hello."

“You’re here early.”

“I thought I’d sit awhile before everyone arrived.”

Quinn gestured toward the space beside her. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Not at all. I’d enjoy the company. At my age, life can get pretty lonely.”

Quinn slid her purse from her shoulder and sank onto the cool bench, rubbing her chilly hands together. “Even with all those grandkids and great-grandkids?”

Those drawn-on lips pressed into the thinnest line Quinn had seen them in yet. “They only come every once in a while. What about you? You’re early. What’s the occasion?”

She opened the bag of worms. “I’m meeting Nick. I have something for him.”

“Oh, Mr. James.” Mrs. LaRue said it as if she were admiring a movie star. “How are you two coming along?”

“Mrs. LaRue, Nick and I are just friends.”

“Don’t worry, dear.” The woman patted Quinn’s hand. “That will change.”

Skipping over that worm. “So how long have you been coming here?”

“Five years.”

Quinn tried to keep her jaw from dropping to the floor. “Five years?”

“On and off. Don’t let it discourage you. My husband has been deceased for twenty-four years. I don’t come here for the grief counseling. I come here for the eye candy.”

Quinn tried—and failed—to hold in her laugh, eliciting a giggle from her red-lipped friend. “Mrs. LaRue. Somehow, I believe that.”

“My first husband—oh, he was a looker.”

Quinn’s breath caught in her throat. “First husband? You’ve been married twice?”

“Yes. My first husband, Norman, was whisked away to Korea right after we were married. He never came home. I was devastated.”

Of course, she had been. They all had been. And they were all here to support one another. Quinn touched the flamboyant woman’s arm. “I’m so sorry.”

The woman waved her consolation away. “Five years later, I met Harold. We shared a lovely forty years together before he died.”

Two husbands, buried. She’d earned the right to be brassy. Heat tingled up Quinn’s neck. Why hadn’t she known this before? Because she hadn’t been able to see past her own hurt, that’s why. She and Mrs. LaRue were much the same. “May I ask you a question?”

Mrs. LaRue shifted in her seat, turning her whole body toward Quinn. The counseling session beginning. “Sure, sweetheart. What is it?”

Not sure she wanted to know the answer or why she was asking, Quinn opened her mouth before she could stop herself. “How did you do it? How did you find the strength to move on... to remarry?”

Brown eyes blinked, and Mrs. LaRue’s hands snatched up Quinn’s. “We never know how much time we have upon this earth. Death comes for us all. What’s the old saying? It’s not *if*, but *when*.” Those cold hands were oddly comforting. “Isn’t it far better to share the time we have with someone else than to be alone year after year? I could have married five times and lost every one, but I’d have shared in their lives and been happy all those times.”

Five times? Quinn pried her hands free and wrapped them around her purse straps. She was having a hard enough time letting go of her heart a second time. Of course, the plan was not to let go. “I’m not sure I could ever go through this again.”

“I thought that too when Norman died. We were going to have a wonderful life together, but God had other plans. I think God knew Norman would need me even for the little time he was on this earth. Maybe, while he was in the throes of war, he needed to know someone at home loved him dearly.” Her lips wobbled, her cheeks sagged, and those brown eyes dimmed, then brightened. “Then Howard needed me. Oh, that man needed me.”

“I needed Brendan.” Was that just past tense? And not a single tear shed. She imagined Brendan smiling.

Mrs. LaRue hooked her arm around Quinn’s and squeezed. “Of course you did. And he needed you. I knew when you

finally talked about him that you two had something special. And just like my Norman, Brendan's memory will always be with you. As well it should. He's a part of you and always will be. But, Quinn"—Mrs. LaRue gave her arm a jiggle, leaning in so close her perfume would stick on Quinn for hours—"when love comes calling at your door again, open it."

Her gaze caught on something past Quinn, and her lips spread in a wide grin. "And here it comes now."

Quinn shifted toward Nick hurrying through the door. She tried to hide her smile, tried not to feel that happy skip of her heart. "Mrs. LaRue, Nick and I are just—"

"Yes, and isn't that a lovely way to begin?"

Mrs. LaRue unleashed Quinn's arm and winked. She waved at Nick, sprang to her feet with surprising agility, and scuttled down the hall to the ladies' room.

Nick dropped onto the bench beside her. "Meaningful conversation with Mrs. LaRue?"

Quinn ducked her head, still trying to process *A lovely way to begin*. "Quite meaningful actually." They had begun. Months ago. And only now could she see it, awkward moment by awkward moment.

"Sorry I'm late. My meeting ran long, then traffic..."

His lips were moving, but she could only hear Mrs. LaRue. Norman, then Howard. And she would've married again. Quinn had already given her heart away twice. Once to Brendan. Once to Hope. The pain of giving them up was too much. Would she survive a third?

Surely, love wasn't the only thing that could mend a broken heart.

Nick braced his elbow on the back of the bench. "Quinn, what is it? Did she say something to you?"

Her head snapped up. "No. I mean, yes, but no. Not like that." She eyed his hand and fit hers inside it. "Come on. I have something for you."

As she led him down the hall, she didn't let go. She should have. He only wanted to be friends.

But didn't he almost kiss her? Wasn't he afraid of living the rest of his life alone? Had it only been the moment?

Was she seriously thinking about this?

He cared for her. She cared for him. It was only natural for friends to do so. She couldn't—wouldn't—care more.

With his warm hand still in hers, she compressed the push bar and led him outside. As they stepped out into the cool evening air, she wanted to lace her fingers through his, to lean on his broad shoulder, to fit perfectly into his embrace again.

Maybe it was too late. Maybe she did care more.

And the fear that thought produced had her tottering on the edge of the abyss.



When Quinn took his hand, Nick's heart began thudding against his ribs. Though it was a short walk to the door, she'd never held his hand so long before. Hadn't ever really held his

hand. Why would she? They were only friends. Tonight though, something felt different.

What *did* Mrs. LaRue say to her?

Outside, she let go, and he felt the absence of her touch. She seemed nervous as she pulled one strap of her purse away from her shoulder and dug for her keys. The sun had gone down, and the parking lot lights shone in the highlights of her hair.

She looked amazing in her cable sweater, designer jeans, and white tennis shoes. And with each step, he fought the desire to take her hand again. He wouldn't dare. He wouldn't read anything into her actions. She had a surprise for him and was excited. That's all.

But he did have to break the silence. "So, what's this surprise?"

"It's a thank you."

"For what?"

"You'll see."

She paused with her hand on the back door handle of her truck. "Are you ready?"

"Are *you* ready?"

That quirky smile from the coffee shop greeted him as she opened the door. On the seat, a large frame lay face down. With a great sigh, she lifted it and turned it to him. "For you."

Nick's smile fell as he took the watercolor painting and angled it so he could get a better view in the truck's cargo

light. At the bottom right was her QA and a date—February 17. Three days ago.

She stood beside him wringing her hands together and studying his face, her lip between her teeth. “Do you like it? I’m a bit out of practice.”

“Is this our bench at the river?”

Her bright smile somehow resurrected the sunset. “Thank goodness you can tell what it is.” She laid her hand on his arm, sending lightning over his skin. “That night has meant the world to me, and I wanted to let you know.” She hesitated, rose on her toes, and kissed him on the cheek—more than a peck.

The whole world stopped—his breathing, his heart, time itself.

“Thank you.” Her gaze lingered on his with a flash to his lips he wasn’t sure happened. Then she looked back to the painting, her hand still on his arm. “So, you like it then?”

He blinked out of his trance, his breathing and heart rate picking up again, the moment passing. “It’s beautiful. Truly beautiful. That night meant a lot to me too. And this, this is perfect. Thank you. I’m glad you feel like painting again.”

“That’s just it. I’m *feeling*. I can *see* color. The world is becoming beautiful again.”

Yes, it was beautiful. And that kiss, what did it mean? He let the painting hang loose at his side and hugged her to him with his free arm. As her arms went around his waist, he squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to kiss her grapefruit-

scented hair. Her head resting against his chest, he wanted to stay there forever.

He wanted forever with Quinn.

But the first move, if there ever was one, would have to be hers. Had she just made it?

“It’s all because of you.”

“Well, I can’t take all the credit. You are the one who invited me out for coffee.”

She pulled only her upper body away and smiled that quirky smile. “Oh, we’re back there, are we?”

She was so close. Before the moment became *a moment*, before temptation grew, he checked his watch. “We’d better get in there.”

“Yeah.” She slipped her arms away from him, her hands leaving tingling trails around his middle. “Before Mrs. LaRue starts any rumors.”

Quinn followed him to his truck to stow his treasure as he stomped down whatever this was rising in him. He had to suppress it.

After group, they went to Cafe Cubana, got coffee to go, and headed out to the river. It was late and cold, but they walked and talked until the chill forced them to call it a night.

The city glistened as Nick sat on his bed and stared out the window. He loved his time with Quinn—he loved Quinn. Which was making being with her, but not being *with* her, harder.

“How can I be just a friend?”

His words, spoken out loud, stopped him. Being “just a friend” was not the same as “just *be* a friend.”

His breath came out in a rush.

Being “*just* a friend” hadn’t been the purpose of returning her phone. Being “*just* a friend” was not Lauren’s final wish.

He drew in a breath as he reached over to the bedside table and pulled Lauren’s picture into his lap. Her words still rang in his head, but it was no longer her voice.

Quinn’s voice beckoned to him. *Just be a friend. And the rest will come.*

Amazing what his mind had done. But it was the trickle of faith he needed.

He traced a finger over Lauren’s face, committing the gleam in her eye and curve of her cheeks to memory. “I love you, Lauren. And part of me always will. But now I understand.”

He held the frame to his forehead before opening the drawer and placing the frame facedown inside. With a deep sigh, he slid the drawer shut. The night deafeningly quiet.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

March 11. One year since Quinn's life with Brendan ended. There was no sleeping. She gave up around five-thirty, went to the couch, and drawing her legs underneath her on the soft cushions and pulling the crocheted blanket around her, stared out the window into the dark. She drifted in and out of consciousness, but started awake when the coffeepot's autostart clicked on at six-thirty. The trickle of water streaming into the pot and the smell of the fresh brew woke her senses.

After pouring a cup, she returned to the couch and snuggled into her accent pillows to watch the sunrise. She caught herself smiling and thinking about the brushstrokes involved in painting the scene, what colors she would mix—the brushes she'd have to replace to do so.

The sunset over their bench at the river hadn't been easy to paint. She'd thrown away several attempts trying to remaster the process. The end result made her feel good. Giving the painting to Nick made her heart soar.

After that night, she'd been uneasy around him. Her conversation with Mrs. LaRue hadn't been easy to suppress. The memory of her lips on his stubbly beard was hard to suppress as well. *Had* she done that? He never seemed to mind, but things like kisses could get friends off track.

Especially the long kiss she'd given him.

Another tick marked on their chart of awkward moments, and they'd moved on.

But that chart was getting full—and hard to ignore.

Mom showed up first. Dad dropped her off, her hands full with a warm breakfast casserole. Claire pulled in behind them with a bowl of grapes and strawberries. Quinn opened the door, and they filed in.

“Quinn, get plates. Claire, get forks. Let’s eat this while it’s hot.” Mom set the dish on the island and peeled back the lid. The smell of eggs and sausage permeated the kitchen.

“Oh, hold me back.” Claire bent over the cheesy concoction and, with eyes closed, inhaled deep. “I might eat the whole thing. On second thought, don’t hold me back. This baby is starving.”

Claire was growing—her belly pooching out with her baby girl. The thought of being an aunt was growing on Quinn, but today, sadness overshadowed her excitement.

Mom gave Claire a side hug. “I made it extra cheesy just for you.”

“You’re a saint.”

Extra cheesy? Quinn tried not to gag. Her nervous stomach did not need food, especially not greasy cheese. But she served it up, cutting a small piece for herself, and ate to be polite.

They stood around the kitchen island reminiscing over old times. Mom, daughter, and Claire—the second daughter Mom had never had, the sister Quinn always wanted. But something was missing.

Their plates empty, the fruit nearly gone, a silence grew between them. There was nowhere else to go but forward, but

no one seemed to want to move first.

Claire twirled the end of her ponytail. “Wow, the elephant in the room is huge.”

Mom hugged Quinn. “We’re here for you, baby.”

The first tear lined her eye. Not for the dread of the day, but for the love from these two beautiful women. They’d both walked this dark pit with her, led her to a way out. They’d held her hand, pushed, and supported her. She extended an arm to Claire and brought her in for a group hug. “Thank you, for everything.”

Mom sniffed. “If at any point you want to stop—”

“We’ll keep you going.” Claire was not going to let her quit.

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.”

“It’s what we need to do.”

Quinn squeezed their shoulders to stop them. “This happens today. It’s time. It’s past time.” And so, she eased forward with the final steps she had to take to move on. This step would be the hardest. It would involve the most tears and more sleepless nights. She prayed the day’s task wouldn’t cause the nightmares to resume. “There’s a box on my bed for pictures to be sent to Brendan’s family. We’ll start in the closet.”

Brendan’s business clothes weren’t the hard things to get rid of.

“What about this?” Claire held up the red Hawaiian shirt with yellow suns and palm tree silhouettes Brendan had insisted on wearing on their honeymoon. Without a word, Quinn eased it from Claire’s hands, blinked through a few tears, folded it, and laid it in the donation bag.

His box of keepsakes would be sent to his parents. She couldn’t bring herself to throw them away. They were his memories and memories of him.

By noon, they had seven bags of clothes and shoes ready to go. Dad came with sub sandwiches and his truck to take the donations to Goodwill. In an hour, he was back to drive Mom home, leaving Quinn and Claire to remove the pictures from the wall.

When Quinn reached for the last picture in the hall and glanced toward the open door of Hope’s room, Claire laid a hand on her arm. “That room’s fine. You don’t have to let go of Hope.”

Quinn stared into the room aglow in the natural light from the windows. Then, with tremendous peace, she turned to Claire. “When your nursery is ready... I want you to have it all.”

“Oh, Quinn.” Her hands traveled down Quinn’s arms to grasp her hands. Her look, one Quinn had seen after every breakup or disappointment Claire had coached her through. One she’d hoped—no matter how much she loved Claire—never to see again. “You don’t have to do that. The memories would be too hard.”

“It’s just stuff. And none of it, no matter how long I keep it, will bring either of them back. And this baby girl...” Quinn touched Claire’s belly. “She’s going to *love* the pink shag.”

Claire hugged her, and they giggled together, but not like old times. This was like new times.

“Hold that thought.” Claire disappeared into the living room and came back with a five-by-seven black frame. She removed the picture and handed it to Quinn. “This is for Brendan’s family.” Then she led Quinn to Hope’s room. From the crib, Claire took the family photo and slipped it under the glass. “And this is for you.”

They stood on the pink shag rug looking at the family whose happiness only lasted a day.

“It belongs in the living room, Quinn.”

“I believe you’re right.”

Quinn set the picture on the mantel over the fireplace. Her beautiful baby girl was still hers, if only in memory, and deserved a place in her life. “It should’ve been here all along.” Her eyes misted over as she touched a finger to the glass. “I’m sorry, Hope. I didn’t mean to hide you away. I just didn’t have the strength to deal with everything. But Mommy’s stronger now, much stronger.”

Claire, with tears on her cheeks, slid her arm around her shoulders and laid her head against Quinn’s.

Never again would she shut Hope away.

They tucked the last pictures into the box to load in Claire’s car. If left to Quinn to mail them off, she’d find a

reason not to, so she addressed the package, added a note, and entrusted the treasure to her dear friend.

Claire paused at her car door. “You want to come over for dinner?”

“I’ll just scrounge for leftovers and turn in early.”

Claire blew a kiss over her red Escape. “Call Nick. He’ll be wondering.”

He would be. And, of course, Claire couldn’t let the day go without mentioning it. But Quinn didn’t mind anymore. Didn’t even mind the heart flutter at the sound of his name.

She wanted to call him, needed him to be there.

The sun was falling toward the horizon, casting an orange glow over the neighborhood as Claire drove away. Quinn glanced over her shoulder at her house. Her empty house now far emptier.

She stepped inside and paused, still holding the door handle, unable to enter the quiet house. The hall loomed before her, an enormous cave. If she yelled, it might echo. Swinging the door closed, she entered the maw and rubbed shivers from her arms, then moved to the living room, her bare feet silent on the hardwood floors. Claire had reorganized the decor to fill the blank spots, but her family picture looked lonely on the dark-wood mantel.

Brendan had been wiped away from everything except her heart. It would be his only place in her life except beside her as Hope’s father in the one photo she’d keep.

She walked through the bedroom—Mom had even purchased new bedding—to the closet. Claire had tried to spread her things throughout the huge room, but empty hangers failed to fill the space.

Maybe it was time to go shopping. Or maybe it was time for a smaller space. Without Brendan here, this house they built was just sticks and stones anyway. She'd put off thinking about it before, unable to accept reality.

But now, with Brendan's things gone, it wasn't *their* home anymore. She'd have to make it on her own, and she couldn't allow the past to hold her down. She couldn't let it drag her back into the pit. But the pit fell further behind her every day. Even the guilt of carrying on alone receded.

Yet, somehow, the emptiness remained.

Her body ached. She stepped to the other side of the built-in dresser, sank onto the cream carpet, and leaned against the drawers. When she was a girl, she hid in her closet all the time. It was where she kept her sketch pad and pencils, the perfect oasis.

Today, her closet wasn't an oasis, just a hiding place. With depression fomenting a thick cloud over her heart, she didn't want to move, just wanted to stare off into the nothing where memories lurked.

In the back of her mind, that nagging feeling of something missing annoyed. She rolled her head against the dresser, her hair catching on a crystal drawer pull. "Of course something's missing. A whole life is missing."

But it wasn't the life she expected. Nick was missing. Her beautiful friend she wouldn't have made it this far without wasn't there to make sure she was okay.

She slid her phone out of her back pocket, her thumb hovering over speed dial five before she remembered Brendan was speed dial one... still. If she was going to move on, she'd have to be all in. It took her a minute and a pain rending through her heart, but with the simple press of a button, Brendan's contact file was gone. A deep breath, and she migrated to Nick's file, making him speed dial one.

Press and hold. His phone was ringing.

"Hey." His voice—a comforting, uplifting spring breeze—whisked the dark clouds away. "You okay?"

"Uh, yeah, okay. You sound like you're in the truck."

"I'm meeting a friend."

"Oh. Well, I won't keep you. I just wanted to..." *To hear your voice.* "To say hi. I'll talk to you soon."

"I'll talk to you soon."

Quinn held the line not wanting to hang up.

"Quinn?"

"Yeah?"

"You're the friend."

"I'm what? Oh." Relief brought on a silly laugh.

He chuckled. "I'm pulling into your driveway. Claire let me know when she left."

Of course she had. “The door’s unlocked.”

They hung up as Nick walked in. His shoes squeaked on the wood floors, his footfall different from Brendan’s, unique to Nick. “Quinn?”

“Back here.”

He was coming through the bathroom, his steps hesitant. Thankfully, she’d cleaned. “Quinn?”

Lifting her hand, she waved her fingers just above the top of the dresser.

He came around the side, one hand on the dresser top and the other on his hip. “So, come here often?”

“Only when I need to get away. But the bar service sucks.”

One side of his mouth quirked. “Rough day.”

“You would know.”

He slunk down beside her. Elbows resting on his knees, he surveyed the half-empty closet. “Yeah, I would.”

“Are *you* okay?”

His brow shot up. “Me?”

“You had to go through all this too. Are you doing okay?”

“I’m doing well. Thank you for asking.” He nudged her with his elbow. “But today’s *your* day. How are you?”

“It’s always my day. It’s your turn.”

“Careful, when we take turns, you end up with the raspberry chocolate.”

Always amusing. The confines of the closet muted their laughter. She let her head fall against his shoulder, but she resisted taking hold of his arm. “Half of me is exhausted. And the other half feels like a huge weight has been lifted off. Is that the way it was for you?”

He rested his head against the dresser. “Lauren had only been gone for three months when I sold our house. I wasn’t sure if it was the right thing to do, but looking back, it was a good thing.”

“Did you feel bad?”

“Like I was running away from the one thing I needed most in my life. Except she wasn’t there to run from. I was confused, angry, lost. Dad tried to talk me out of it, but I couldn’t stay.”

“Lost.” She sat up. “That’s a good word for it.”

“Do you feel lost?”

“Not lost, but not exactly found.” She listed her head to look at him. “Are you still lost?”

His brow furrowed as he thought. “Wandering maybe, but not lost.”

He stared at his hands, flexing them as if he wanted to crack his knuckles. In an instant, that something missing wasn’t missing anymore.

And with him there, she found the courage to take the next step.

“I’m putting the house on the market Monday.”

His head snapped up, his legs extended as much as they could in the little space. Surprise? Maybe panic. “It’ll sell fast. Could you live with your mom and dad for a while?”

She raised her hands. “Let’s not go there. I love my parents, and I’d like to keep loving them.”

“What about Claire?”

“She’s about to have a baby. I’d never ask.”

His brows went high. “Well, don’t look at me. Mrs. LaRue would have a heyday with that one.”

“She so would.” That thought made all kinds of things flutter within her. “Actually, my parents have a rent house that’s been vacant for months. I think they were anticipating my need for it. I’ll stay there until I can figure things out.”

“Good.”

“Which leaves only one thing left to do.” The gold band of her two-carat diamond ring wiggled beneath her fingers in its place of honor. When she held her hand out, the stone sparkled in the incandescents. Breaking the direct link to her heart, she removed it and handed it to Nick. “There’s a box on the dresser. Will you please?”

His look said he was unsure whether he should be a part of this step, but he took the ring and stood to find the box. “This is a lot for one day.” With it closed away, he reached out his hand. “Come on. It’s time to get you out of the closet.”

She put her hand in his, and the day melted away as he raised her from the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY

What a perfect Saturday afternoon in April—warm, but cool beneath the shade trees in the little rental’s yard. Birds sang in their branches, bouncing fresh-budded leaves as they flittered about. The world was coming to life again, healing from the death of winter. And Quinn was helping by planting pansies in the small flower beds split by the porch steps. Kneeling on her cushion, pulling weeds, and prepping the earth, she enjoyed the peace and waited for her plumber.

Monday nights came and went. Group was group with all the new friends she cared about—Nick, beautiful Nick, and Mrs. LaRue... Well, Mrs. LaRue would always be the same red-lipped lady she’d come to love. All this love being thrown about was nerve-racking. The more to love, the more to lose.

Once she had a section cleared, Quinn dug a hole and shook a purple pansy from its plastic starter tray. The smell of fresh-turned dirt awakened her senses, and the color brought out a desire to use the new pencil set and sketchbook she’d purchased from the local hobby store. She needed new brushes—she remembered which ones, but couldn’t bring herself to buy them. Although she couldn’t go back to her studio, sketching seemed to be good therapy. More doodles really, nothing serious.

With white and yellow pansies intermixed with her purple ones, she moved down a couple feet, scratched her nose with the back of her pink garden glove, and began clearing another section. The momentary flux of inspiration to create a thank

you for Nick had ebbed away with Brendan's things, and she'd tucked her watercolors away in a corner of her closet.

But these flowers would look great on a thick sheet of watercolor paper.

With more holes dug and more flowers planted, she moved down to the last section before she reached the steps. As Nick predicted, her house had sold within days, and the buyers even took most of the furniture. Their two precious boys, towheaded the both of them, loved the huge backyard and their walk-in closets that made perfect hideouts.

Their house's purpose would be fulfilled. She wouldn't dwell on the fact that it wouldn't be her family fulfilling said purpose.

That was forever in her past.

She rocked back and sat on her heels, surveying her handiwork. The plants would grow, fill in the space, but even as they were, they brought new life to her new home. Little by little, the small rent house became hers—the flowers, red chairs for the front porch, new furniture mixed with the old, and the beloved family picture, slightly enlarged and in a new frame, on the living room wall.

It was all she had left of her life with Brendan, and with each passing day, it became more okay. Coming home to this house was easier. No memories, no shadows, nothing missing. Just a new place to begin again. A life alone. A safe life. One with more room to breathe.

Nick's truck pulled into the driveway.

Prying her knees off the gardening cushion, she stood and curled her toes in the cool lawn. Her heart fluttered in a way it shouldn't. In a way she didn't want it to, but couldn't stop, a way that sluiced along her veins. Her room to breathe slammed its door in her face.

Why was she always nervous when he came around? He only wanted to be friends and was holding up his end of the bargain. She could hold up hers. She *would* hold up hers. No reason she couldn't control her heart flutters at the sight of a pretty face.

There. She'd admitted he was good looking.

Claire would gloat.

Quinn rolled her eyes and stepped onto the sidewalk. He smiled the famous Nick smile as he stepped out of the truck and went to the back for his tools and a sack from the builders' supply. "Hey, the place is looking great."

"Thanks for volunteering to fix the sink."

"Not a problem. No reason your dad should hire it done when I can fix it."

"I wouldn't make it a habit." She peeled her gloves off her sweaty hands. "He'll have you fixing everything."

When he met her at the foot of the steps, she took the sack. His tanned muscles bulged under the weight of his tool bag, his tight gray tee stretched over them. He leaned in close, forcing her gaze to twitch to his. "I don't mind."

Her insides danced as she nodded toward the door. "Come on in. I'll get you a glass of tea."

The ice in the glass rattled as she delivered it to the guest bathroom. He took a healthy drink, then crawled half under the sink with a towel cushioning his back. She sat cross-legged on the brown marbled tile, handing him tools and holding the light while he tinkered on the old pipes. They settled into familiar conversation, and soon the job was done.

He turned the sink on, checked underneath for leaks, then shut it off. "I should've been a plumber."

"You don't show enough crack."

His head jerked in her direction. "You were looking?"

She sucked in a breath and frogged him on the arm. He feigned pain.

"Don't worry. I won't tell anyone."

Laughing, but hiding her eyes from his, she prodded him toward the bathroom door. He grabbed his tool bag and chuckled.

She had looked. Several times. And not just today. How could she not? He was pretty to look at.

She followed him back to his truck. Him stopping every few steps, and her running into him, shoving to keep him going, keeping her gaze on anything other than his backside. It was nice to have him to laugh with.

Tools hefted into the truck bed, he kicked a heel up onto the tire, a glimmer in his eye, his thumbs hooked in his pockets. "Let's go for ice cream."

“Again? If you’re not careful, you will develop a plumber’s crack.”

“Come on. You owe me. I just fixed your sink.”

“Wait. I’m paying for this? You’re the one who invited me.”

“Are you sure? We seem a bit iffy on that subject.”

She got up in his face with a finger on his chest, his knee by her hip. “I remember who invited who. But, yes, I’ll pay.”

“Then it’s a date.”

Her breath caught. The smiles faded from both their lips, but her heart continued to beam. She stepped back into her comfort zone. There was no way. No way on God’s green earth he’d just asked her out.

The sunlight emitting from the cracks on her heart’s surface wanted to be free. Could she fight it? Did she want to?

Nick deflated, his glimmer fading out. He dropped his foot down to the concrete. “And we were having such a great time. I didn’t mean to make things weird. I shouldn’t have said it like that.”

She poked her hands into her back pockets in an effort not to reach out to him and sighed a laugh. “Things are always weird between us.” And she was having a hard time discerning what to do. “But maybe we should take a rain check.”

His eyes full of regret, he backed toward his door. “Cash it in, Quinn.”

She shrugged, not letting her smile dissipate. “Maybe I will.”

And maybe she would. But not tonight.

A glimmer of hope returned to his expression. He nodded with a half-hearted wink and opened his truck door. Her chest tightened as he climbed inside. She didn’t want him to go, but couldn’t get her numb arms to stop him from leaving.

Her heart broke a little. Could it still do that?

He drove away. She went back into the house, leaving her plants and garden tools where they lay.

She worried about him all evening, not being able to sit long but tired of pacing. Wanted to text, but didn’t know what to say. Silly girl. She should’ve laughed it off and gone to get ice cream. How many uncomfortable moments had they been through? Couldn’t she get through one more?

But that word.

Shortly after nine, her ever-faithful friend sent a text to apologize again and make sure she was all right. She should’ve known he would.

With a slight grin and the tension leaving her, she propped herself on the couch and replied with a winking emoji, a promise all was well, and she’d see him Monday night.

She glanced at her sketchbook and Prismacolors set on the coffee table, reached over, and pulled them to the couch. Lying on her stomach, she chose the lilac pencil and opened the book to a blank page.

On Monday, they'd spend time together like they always did. She prayed the evening wouldn't be one big ball of awkward. Their chart didn't have much more room for tick marks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nick's eyes burned as sweat dripped from his brow. The hollow rubber ball echoed through the racquetball court in a rhythmic pattern. His racquet slapped the ball harder each time, striking out in anger over using the word *date*.

He'd promised himself he'd be careful, be the friend she needed him to be, not move too quickly. Worse, he'd told her he'd never hurt her.

But she'd kissed his cheek, and the look in her eye was... Well, he wasn't sure what. She'd started painting again, cleaned out Brendan's things, sold the house—and he'd gotten cocky.

He hit the ball extra hard. On the return, it grazed Josh on the back of the leg, and he yelped. "Dude, what is up with you tonight? You're a monster."

That's one way of putting it. "Sorry, man. You okay?"

Josh bent over, hands on his knees, the tattoo on his right arm exposed, his short-cropped dark hair dripping sweat. "I'm fine. But what's up with you?"

Nick stood with his hands on his hips, trying to catch his breath. "I kind of asked Quinn out on a date last night."

Josh jerked up, slapped Nick's shoulder. "It's about time." He held his fist out for a bump.

When Nick shook his head, his friend's grin disappeared, his arm dropping to his side.

"She didn't go for it, huh?"

With another headshake, Nick started for the door. “No, she didn’t.”

“Well, I don’t know why. You guys have been pretty close for a while—what, almost a year now?”

Over eight months. Nick opened the court door, and they headed down the hall for the locker room. “Yeah, but we’re just friends.” *Just friends* grated on his tongue.

“I don’t know what it is you are, but you two are *not* just friends. And that kiss you told me about...”

Nick flexed his grip on the handle, then twirled the racquet in his palm. “It didn’t mean anything. She was just thanking me. That’s all.”

“You don’t believe that. I don’t care if she kissed your elbow. That kiss meant something. You know it. I know it. She knows it. Friends don’t kiss.” He blew through the locker room door.

Josh had left himself wide open. “What? You mean you don’t want to kiss me?”

Josh jerked around with wide eyes as Nick puckered his lips and reached out for him. Josh threw his hands up, laughing. “Back off, bud. That is entirely too much. Save it for Quinn.”

Nick sank in on himself. The thought of never holding her, of losing her for good, doused his playfulness. “I don’t think we’re going to get there. It’s been over a year since Brendan died.” His face burned. Saying it out loud, he could hear the

unfairness in his words. He bit off the rest of what he was going to say, swung open his locker, and grabbed his towel.

“Yeah? Well, it took you over a year, didn’t it? Maybe she needs more time.” Josh shrugged as he opened his locker. “Or convincing.”

Nick stopped mid-dab with his towel. “What are you suggesting?”

“Talk to her. You guys have been using this friendship as a wall between you.” Josh threw his sweaty shirt into his gym bag. “I’ve seen the way she looks at you. She doesn’t want to be behind that wall any more than you do. Break it down, man. Tell her how you feel.”

“That’s surprising coming from you.”

Josh raised his eyebrows as he looked away. “God knows, if I’d taken my own advice, I wouldn’t be here spending my evening with you.”

Josh hadn’t lost anyone to death, but he still mourned. Nick pulled his shirt over his head and propped his shoulder against the locker. The chilly metal cooled his skin. “What if she never wants to see me again?”

“She’s not dumb enough to let you go.” Josh punched him in the shoulder and headed for the showers. “Or smart enough.”

Nick puckered up, and Josh dodged out of the way.

Exhaling the weight of his thoughts, Nick turned on the shower faucet and let the cool water wash over him. Maybe Quinn did feel the same, and maybe she didn’t. Maybe there’d

been something in her kiss, and maybe there hadn't. Maybe the look she'd given him had been genuine, but maybe he just wanted to see those things. What if they weren't there? Could he tell her he loved her and risk losing her forever?

Josh called from the next shower stall. "You want to grab something to eat?"

"I'm going to head home. I've got an early start in the morning."

"Yeah, okay. But think about what I said." Josh paused, and Nick felt his pain. "At least you'll know."

That was the truth of it. Not knowing was driving him crazy.

He'd been just friends, but he didn't want to be just friends anymore. He wanted to care for her and support her, wrap his arms around her and protect her, be there for her and hold her up when she couldn't stand on her own.

He wanted to love her.

He wanted to be loved by her.

Pressing her wouldn't be fair, but he had to come clean. Let her know he was forever hers if she'd have him. If she wouldn't, well, Josh was right. At least he'd know.

But in knowing, he risked everything. And no amount of being good friends was enough to save them once the line was crossed. But he had to trust that Lauren's idea had worked. He had to trust that God knew what He was doing.

He had to trust that, tomorrow night when he told Quinn the truth, she wouldn't duck and run.



Monday morning rolled around too soon. Quinn pulled her covers up around her face and mourned the passing of the night.

She'd dreamed of the night the truck almost hit her and Nick on the way to the symphony. She'd dreamed of his arms around her—as more than friends. She'd dreamed of Mrs. LaRue getting married for the fifth time, on the arm of a much younger man, laughing through her red lips and exclaiming to the world how wonderful love was.

Mrs. LaRue faded from the picture, and Quinn found herself staring into her own eyes. That jolted her awake.

When her alarm wouldn't shut up, she crawled away from the arms that seemed to be pulling her back down and went to the shower.

Her sleep washed away, she took a sip of coffee, imagined herself with bright-red lipstick laughing, and almost spit her coffee across the vanity.

Allowing herself the laugh, she glanced out the bathroom window. This gorgeous day would be better spent at home than in a windowless office doing meaningless work. At least when she painted, she felt she was making a difference in the world.

She opened the window and breathed in the fresh air. She didn't have to go to work. She could stay home. The job

wasn't necessary.

She could quit.

She nearly dropped her coffee mug.

As she drove to work, she fidgeted in her seat, unable to shake the thought. Once there, she hurried into the building as if she could leave the thought behind.

No good. Now she sat at her desk, looking beyond her monitor, beyond the gray wall. The air conditioner kicked on, and the smell of recycled air made her want to hold her breath. Did it always smell this bad?

It would be nice to see sunshine and breathe fresh air more than an hour a day. It would also be nice not to do the mundane every day.

But the job filled her time. She couldn't *jog* all day. The urge to draw something opened in her like a blooming flower.

Curiosity got the best of her, and she opened Facebook on her phone. Her gallery's page was like a familiar friend she hadn't seen in a great while. Claire had done an excellent job as the administrator, answering all the condolences and well wishes, all the inquiries about her work. She scrolled through and read a few messages. Most were fans and clients, but some were friends she'd apparently written nice thank-you responses to via her sweet friend Claire.

On the morning Brendan died, she'd entered her last post. Longing gripped her soul as she stared at the paintings she'd planned to take to Mayfest.

"You're thinking way too hard."

Quinn started as Claire walked into her office. She turned her phone around, heaving a sigh.

Claire let her head fall to the side. “Your gallery page.”

“Thank you.”

Claire shrugged and lowered her big-bellied self into a chair. “You’d have done the same for me.”

“Let’s hope we never have to find out.” Quinn, disregarding her phone, reached across the desk and laid her hands on Claire’s swollen belly. Two more weeks and Quinn would be an aunt. “How are you, baby girl?”

“She’s starving. Let’s go to the deli and get lunch. We could call Nick and see if he wants to join us.”

Quinn sat back, shaking her head. “Mmm... I don’t think so.”

Claire straightened, her eyes growing wide. “Why? What happened?”

“He was just being his playful self, but he kind of asked me out.”

Claire gawked. “You’re going on a date?” Then she gave a hoot and the desk a drumroll. “*Finally.*”

“Well, no.”

“What?” She slouched forward, and her hands went to her lap, her charms jingling. “Quinn, going on a date with Nick isn’t much different from what you’ve already been doing.”

What? Were they really doing this again? Quinn breathed in a long breath to keep from yelling. “There’s a *huge*

difference between dating and being friends.”

“Yeah, if you were just friends.”

“We *are* just friends.”

“You are *not* just friends. I see the way he looks at you. And you look at him the same way. You guys are using this *friend* thing as an excuse.”

“An excuse? The whole purpose of going to grief counseling was to find a friend. That’s what I did.” She slouched and rested her forehead on her fingertips, her elbows on the desk. “That’s what I thought I did.”

“Well, maybe you found more.”

Quinn went through the moments in her mind, all the uncomfortable weird ones she cherished. Cherished? Yes, cherished. With a sigh, she raised her head until her mouth rested on her hands, muffling her voice. “What am I going to do?”

Claire leaned forward as much as her belly let her and grasped Quinn’s arms. “Love. Nick.”

Quinn listed her head, silently begging Claire to stop. She didn’t.

“It shouldn’t be that hard for you. Seeing how you already do.”

Quinn let her hands drop to her desk. “Claire, I’m not in love—I’m not...”

“Uh-huh.”

Quinn sucked in a breath, opening her mouth to chide her, but the words didn't come. She wanted to deny it. But she couldn't. She wanted to admit it, but she couldn't do that either.

Defeated, she grabbed her purse from under the desk and swung it over her shoulder. "I'm buying."

Claire beamed.

"And..." Rooting her feet to the flecked blue carpet before she reached the door, Quinn stopped, lower lip between her teeth. "I'm giving my two-week notice."

Claire's fists punched the space above her head. "Yes!" She put an arm around Quinn's shoulder and led her to the front entry. "We're getting dessert too."

She'd expected no other response from Claire. Quitting her job meant she was healing. And Claire desired that for her. Quinn desired it for herself.

Sunlight warm around them, they walked arm in arm down the busy sidewalk with all the other lunch goers, her mind still reeling. What if she did love Nick? A rising panic made her heart race, her gut clench, and her extremities numb. But what if something happened?

What if it didn't? She stopped short.

Claire stopped beside her. "Did you forget something?"

"Nope. But we should eat dessert first."

"I'm all over that."

They giggled like high school girls over their chocolate cheesecake. Maybe it was the laughter, maybe the sugar rush, but Quinn found herself wanting to give up, give in, be as normal as the next girl.

She didn't know what normal looked like anymore, but maybe it was time to find out.

Quite possibly, *date* wasn't such a bad word.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The door opened yet again, and again, it wasn't Quinn. Having arrived at the center at his usual time, Nick was finding the small talk difficult. It was like getting behind someone doing forty-five in a sixty-five no-passing zone.

Mrs. LaRue had a new couple cornered, and he was stuck listening to Gerald's sad story for the fifth time. Well, maybe it was the second time, and he should be more compassionate. But he had too much on his mind, like telling the woman who refused to love, he loved her.

Maybe he'd give up counseling.

He hid his twitch by turning to see the next person walking through the door. Not Quinn. Gerald continued his story. Nick continued trying to listen.

Not coming here every Monday night was a foreign concept. He didn't need counseling anymore. Now he was here to see Quinn. Helping her felt good. Being needed by her felt better.

And he needed her.

But if she didn't come back or she wanted him gone...

Dr. Holiday unlocked the meeting room door. They all filed in and took their seats.

Nick tried not to look too disconcerted as the door clicked shut. He hadn't spoken to Quinn since Saturday. Maybe she'd had enough awkward.

The door shut, and he placed his attention on the group, gritting his teeth. He'd done it this time. Not Mrs. LaRue, him.

Then the door opened. Quinn rushed in with a shrug and a smile in his direction, whispered an apology, and took her seat. Both relieved and lightheaded, he blew out his pent-up breath. Unclenching his fists and crossing his ankle over his knee, he acted nonchalant, but his stomach turned flips like he might lose his dinner.

He caught her eye and winked. Maybe he shouldn't have. He winked at her all the time, but after he'd asked her out, she might take it wrong.

But it was right.

Great. Something else to worry about.

The session's end couldn't have come quick enough. Before he could make his way to Quinn, Doc caught him up in a discussion.

He divided his attention, keeping one eye on her and half his brain in the conversation. She had to walk by him to get to the door, so he positioned himself in her way. As she walked by, he put his hand on her arm while he finished talking to Doc. Thank God she didn't pull away.

When Doc was on to his next client, Nick accompanied her out of the room. "I wanted to apologize again."

Outside the room, she stopped as people passed. "Nick, it's fine. I'm fine. It's no big deal."

"It is a big deal. It was out of line. I didn't mean it." He did. But if a lie meant they could stay friends, he'd tell several.

God forgave good intentions, right?

She opened her mouth and focused beyond him. Then seemed to change her mind about what she was going to say. “Of course, you didn’t. I’m sure you just wanted ice cream.”

That was not all he wanted. But her deflated look... Relief or disappointment? “We don’t have to do anything tonight if you don’t want to.”

She sucked her purse in tight like a lifeline, ducked her head, and tucked her hair behind her ear. And there it was—the wall. The thick space between them securing it in place. “Maybe we could just meet up next week. I need to help Claire with some things at her house.”

Next week. Not tomorrow, but seven days. “Of course. The baby’ll be here soon.”

Her smile took his breath. “I’m not going to lie—I’m kind of excited.” They began a slow trek to the glass doors, his hands stuck firm in his pockets, hers secured around her purse straps.

“I’m excited for you. And for Claire.”

“Thanks. And I gave my two-week notice today.”

“You quit your job?” He couldn’t help the disappointment that crawled under his skin. She hadn’t discussed it with him—not that she needed to—but they were friends. Weren’t they?

“Yeah. I’ll hang out at the house, help Claire with the baby. Not too much. I don’t want her to think I’m stalking her child.”

“I’m sure Claire wouldn’t think that.” He tried to meet her gaze, but she wouldn’t look at him. “Are you going to start painting again?”

“I don’t know. We’ll just have to see how things go.”

Not “I,” but “we.” A glimmer of hope skimmed across his heart. “I guess we will.”

They paused at the door, Quinn reaching for the push bar. It was their shortest and worst awkward moment. “So, I’ll see you next week.”

“I’ll be here.” Guess he wouldn’t quit just yet. He tried to sound as normal as possible. “Let me know if anything happens with Claire before then.”

She drew in a breath to speak, then exhaled the thought away, pushed the door open, and called behind her as she went. “Absolutely. I’ll call.”

All he could do was watch her go, his words of truth hanging by his heartstrings. Her leaving felt real, permanent. Like she’d disconnected from him.

“You should tell her.”

Nick’s hands jerked, and his shoulders twitched. Mrs. LaRue stood beside him, her bright poppy-print blouse matching her lipstick. “Tell her what, Mrs. LaRue?”

“You love her.”

Nick sighed and began to tell the truth he never wanted to believe. “Mrs. LaRue...”

She waved a hand. “Oh, I know. You’re *just* friends. Only... you’re not.”

LaRue the Wise with the blood-red lipstick sounded like someone else he knew. Crossing his arms, he turned from the door. “We’re not?”

“If only you could see what I see.”

“And what do you see?” Maybe that sounded rude, but he *did* want to know.

“I see me and Howard dancing the same dance.” Pleading brown eyes blinked up at him beneath that tight cap of curls, her head cocked like a red-breasted—or lip-sticked—robin. “Tell her, Nick.”

There was no denying it. He blew out a breath and focused beyond her. “Josh said the same thing.”

“A friend of yours?”

Maybe not now. Nick laughed to himself, remembering Quinn’s comment about Claire.

“He sounds like a smart man. You should take his advice if you won’t take mine.”

He peered out the glass door. “What good would it do?”

Mrs. LaRue put her hands on his crossed arms, her rings ice against his skin. “It took me a while to say yes to Howard. She wants to say yes, and you want her to say yes. *That* is what I see. Tell her.”

She patted his arm and shuffled out the door as he held it open for her.

Maybe he should, but wouldn't that be like renovating a building and then tearing it down? It didn't make sense.

No. He'd give her space. He wouldn't call or text. Claire's baby was coming, and she was important to Quinn. Dealing with relationship issues in a nonrelationship would only overshadow that happiness.

He pushed open the heavy glass door, perhaps shoving too hard, stepped out into the cool May air, and contemplated how he'd spend his free evening.

It will all work out. Lauren's voice, Quinn's face.

Good thing the gym was open twenty-four seven. With a play on Lauren's words, he could do at least one thing she wanted him to. He jerked open his truck door and climbed inside. Throwing it in gear, he headed home to change clothes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

She didn't look back for fear he'd see her about to cry. To keep from it, she bit her lip, climbed into her truck, and got out of there. The darkening road reflected her mood as she turned onto Forty-first Street and headed home.

She'd intended to cash in the rain check, to discover what normal felt like. But if he hadn't meant to use the word *date*, she was glad she didn't. Maybe he really did just want to be friends.

Stopped at the light at Harvard Avenue, she tugged her hair over one shoulder. That's the way they should stay. Friends. It made more sense anyway.

The baby's room was ready—bibs, blankets, bottles, clothes, diapers, furniture, and pacifiers all in place. The pink shag rug awaited bare toes. There was nothing left to do, but welcome her home.

She'd lied to Nick.

The worst lie, though, was the one she kept telling herself. She couldn't love. Ever. Again.

What—just what—was she so afraid of?

The pain of losing those she loved threatened to resurface.

That's what.

She couldn't go through that again. If she chose to love Nick, she would lose him too. Believing the lie had been the only way to go. But it tired her and wore away at her like waves on a beach.

Why did she suddenly want to paint seascapes?

She drummed her fingers on the truck console. A honk from behind alerted her the light had turned green.

The lie had to go.

They couldn't be friends forever, and it wasn't fair to ask that of him. He wanted to move on, to love again. Someday he would. If not with her, with someone else. And his new wife wouldn't like him having weekly dinners with Quinn or random phone calls and texts, especially not late at night. There'd be no more crying on his shoulder, no more long talks, no more laughing at his sense of humor, no more lunches, dinners, kisses in her hair, kisses...

She sucked in a breath. She'd miss it all, but could she give him her whole heart?

She pulled into the driveway of her new home and traipsed to the porch. The trees shuffled in the slight breeze, and her porch light cast a ring through the descending darkness. Quinn sat on the top step. Alone was a feeling she hadn't felt in a while. Now, it clung to her like a sweaty shirt—uncomfortable.

A lone cricket silenced at her phone buzzing. Her heart wanting it to be Nick, she fought her purse straps and dug for her phone. Her shoulders slumped—just Dillon.

Still, she smiled as she answered. “So, what's she craving now? I can go get whatever...”

“The baby's coming! We're at the hospital. You'd better hurry.”

The smile slid from her face at the realization of what he'd said. She jumped up not knowing whether to run into the house or not. "Okay. Okay, I'm coming. I'll be there!"

She hung up and ran back to her truck, threw her purse into the passenger seat, and screamed out of the driveway. As excitement poured over her like a heavy rain, she wanted to call Nick. He'd want to be there. It wouldn't be right not to call him.

But she couldn't reach for her phone.

She arrived at the hospital, surprised she didn't get pulled over for speeding. The smell of its corridors tickled long-ago memories, but didn't bother her. What a victory.

At the nurses' station, she was directed to Claire's room where she found her and Dillon talking like nothing was happening. Out of breath from running—and her surging panic—she braced herself on the doorframe.

Claire reached for her like they were meeting for lunch. "Quinn!"

"I thought I'd be too late." She went to her bedside, knuckle punched Dillon, and wrapped her arms around Claire.

Dillon rubbed his arm. "Hey, I got you here, didn't I?"

Claire groaned, letting go of Quinn, and her hands massaged her belly. "I'm only at a four, but the contractions seem to be coming faster."

"Hello, baby girl." Quinn put her hands on Claire's. "Come out, come out. I know you're in there."

Quick on the draw, Claire scanned the room behind Quinn.
“Where’s Nick?”

Quinn pressed her lips into a thin line. “We decided not to do anything tonight.”

“Why?”

Quinn couldn’t answer before another contraction came.

“Oh, oh, they’re getting harder.” Claire squeezed her eyes shut.

Dillon breathed with her, coaching her through the pain. Quinn backed out from between them.

“Call him,” Claire said between the hee-hees and the hoo-hoos of her Lamaze breathing.

“Okay.”

In less than a minute the contraction had passed, leaving Claire breathing hard. Dillon dabbed her forehead with a cool cloth. “Are you okay?”

“That one... *hurt*.”

Dillon licked his lips and mopped his face with the same cloth. “Do you want me to call the nurse?”

“No. I’m sure it will be a while yet.” Claire looked unsure but scowled at Quinn. “What are you waiting for?”

“Like you said, it could be a while yet and—”

Another contraction racked Claire’s body. She drew her legs up. “Now! This baby’s coming now. Call him now!”

Dillon gave her a pained warning glance as Claire dug her nails into his arm. “I’d do what she says.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “Right.” Claire was conspiring, even in the throes of labor. Quinn wrangled her phone from her purse again and stepped into the hall. Calling Nick shouldn’t make her nervous, but even in the cool of the maternity ward, she began to perspire.

“Hey.” An unspoken “what’s wrong” lurked behind his surprise.

Then Claire wailed, Quinn panicked, and Nick cursed.

“What’s happening?”

“We’re having a baby. I got the call as I got home. I’m at the hospital. I thought we’d have all night, but... Nick, she’s coming.” The amount of joy flooding her couldn’t be measured. It was right up there with the amount of guilt for not calling him sooner.

“I’m leaving now. I won’t be long.” She could hear him scrambling around, grabbing keys from the table near his door. “Quinn?”

“Yeah?”

“Are *you* okay?”

The baby was coming. Nick was coming. She glanced in at Claire, holding her hand over her mouth as she spoke. “I’m better than okay.”



A reed diffuser did its best to calm the waiting room's inhabitants with clove and vetiver. Family and baby magazines, with their pictures of happy parents and laughing children, littered the modern-style tables surrounded by beige padded chairs.

Quinn's knee bounced.

Claire's, Dillon's, and Quinn's moms sat in one corner talking softly. The dads sat to one side trying to be macho. But a definite nervousness vied for airspace with the essential oils.

When Claire had told the nurse she felt like pushing, Quinn had been ushered out. *Two hours ago.*

Nick put his hand on Quinn's leg. "You're going to run a marathon before this is over."

Her brain didn't let her process the warmth of his hand. It was too busy playing what-if. She whispered toward him. "It's taking too long. Something's wrong."

"I'm sure everything's fine."

"No." Her anxiety did its best to compress her lungs. "Something's wrong."

As if summoned, a nurse entered the room. Everyone sprang to their feet, facing her. Except Quinn, who shrank further into her chair. When Nick took her hand, she accepted it.

Claire's mom spoke first. "Do we have a baby?"

The nurse raised her hands to ward them off. "Not yet. The baby's been fully engaged for some time now and isn't coming

on her own. Mom and Baby are fine, but they're prepping now for a C-section. You're welcome to wait here, and I'll let you know as soon as she's born."

Nerves won out over the essential oils. Parents paired up, and silence filled the space between them. A C-section wasn't bad news, just unexpected.

Quinn's nerves met with nausea. She hated unexpected.

Nick, still holding her hand, gave it a tight squeeze.
"C'mon. Let's get some fresh air. Maybe coffee?"

She couldn't agree more and beat him to her feet, thankful Claire had barked at her to call him. Thankful they were such good friends they could overlook the uncomfortable nature of their prior conversation.

Her mom reached out as she passed by.

"I'm okay." She squeezed Mom's hand. "We're just going for a walk."

Mom understood, remnants of pain lingered in her eyes from the day Hope was born. The day she'd passed away like a ray of sunlight between passing clouds. Quinn smiled her reassurance, and they cast grateful glances at Nick.

The hallway was quiet, eerily so. The coffeepot in the alcove at its end was full and steaming. Prepared for the late-nighters awaiting new life. Nick poured them each a cup, and they took up a spot against the counter side by side.

Quinn wasn't sure what to say. In sweats and a hoodie, he'd probably been on his way to the gym. She'd abandoned him, then almost not called. She'd let fear lead her down a

path she hadn't wanted to step foot on again. The normal-life path, that's the one she wanted. But the first step was the hardest to take.

Nick was here now though—his company a comfort. She let herself fall toward him and rested her head on his arm, which slipped around her shoulders. They stood before the coffeepot in the quiet hospital corridor, not speaking.

She felt the familiar kiss in her hair, a long kiss, as he drew her close. With closed eyes, she sank more into his side. Tears hovered in the back of her throat, but she refused to cry. Only happy tears. From now on, there'd only be happy tears.

He held her. She let herself be held. Like always, he knew what she needed.

Two and a half cups of coffee later, they were sitting on the bench just outside the alcove. The clock above the coffeepot showed straight-up midnight. The nurse who'd given them the first bit of news rounded the corner to the nurses' station. Quinn touched Nick's arm.

The nurse, in her baby-pink scrubs, visited with the lady behind the counter, then headed their way, her New Balances soundless on the tile floor. Quinn jumped up, dropping her coffee cup in the trash next to her. Nick did the same, and they met her in the middle. But Quinn couldn't bring herself to ask the question.

Then the nurse beamed. "She's beautiful. Healthy and strong. Mom is in recovery and doing well."

Exhaling her relief, Quinn couldn't stem the tears. Thank God they were happy tears. She nodded at the nurse for lack of words, swiveled to face Nick, no words necessary. She slid her arms around his waist while he took her in, his hands rubbing her back in calm reassurance. His breath in her hair said he was relieved as well—probably relieved he didn't have to clean her off the floor or have her admitted to an insane asylum.

Quinn couldn't imagine him not being there. His were the only arms she wanted around her. She put aside her worries for Claire and the baby and relaxed against his chest, her fears melting away. His comforting heat ebbing through his sweatshirt, his arms around her, one hand underneath her hair, thumb stroking her cheekbone, calmed her and at the same time drew her into him. Her arms tightened around him.

Cheering and cries of joy erupted through the quiet halls. She giggled, then tipped her head up at Nick, his arms still around her, the moment far from weird and bordering on comfortable.

He winked his famous wink, his smile broad. "See? Everything's fine." He tucked stray hairs behind her ear. When had his eyes become so blue? Something sparked inside her, something both amazing and terrifying.

Before she could explore it, she slid away. His hand in hers, she led him back into the waiting room.

Her heart soaring, her cheeks still warm with Nick's hug, she danced over to Claire's mom who joined her in celebration, wrapping her arms around her.

The atmosphere had altered, but soon laughter and chatter changed to men snoring and giddy women, high on caffeine, snickering in the corner. Around two, they were notified Claire was back in her room, and they could visit her and the baby before mandatory sleep for the new mommy.

They all padded into Claire's room. Quinn followed Nick, who went to Dillon, shook his hand, and embraced him. "Congratulations, man."

"Thanks." He glanced at Quinn and back. "Glad you could make it."

Quinn rolled her eyes, deserving the sarcasm, and hugged him.

She wanted to elbow her way through the others—to see this new beautiful life, but letting the grandparents have first peek was the smarter move. She sneaked her way over to where Nick lounged against the wall, his eyes slowly blinking, and edged in close, her arm against his.

Claire's mom rocked the new bundle back and forth. "I can't stand the suspense. What's her name?"

Everyone agreed at once.

Claire craned to see past them all, her eyes only half open. "Quinn?" She held out her hand, beckoning her to come over.

Surprised to be called to the front of the line, Quinn crossed the room and took her hand.

"I know you've never liked your first name, but I've always loved it." Claire glanced at Dillon on the bed next to her. "We'd like to name our daughter Kaitlyn, after you."

The whole room sighed a huge “Aww.”

“Thank you.” Quinn threw her arms around Claire. This unexpected thing, Quinn loved.

“Would you like to hold her?”

Quinn swung around to Claire’s mom. “Is that even a question?” Not having held a baby since Hope, she’d forgotten how small a newborn was. She hugged Kaitlyn to her, kissing her forehead. “Hello, Kaitlyn. It’s me, Auntie Q.” Nick came up beside her. “And look. This is your uncle Nick.”

He brushed Kaitlyn’s cheek with his knuckle, his other hand warm against Quinn’s back.

Fully aware of the sudden silence, she could almost see the looks passing between the others, but she didn’t care. Let them think what they wanted about her and Nick. Tonight, it just didn’t matter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“So... Madam *Kaitlyn Q.*” Nick held the door for Quinn, and they skirted the landscaping around the drive of the main entrance, the hospital lights providing a bright canopy of stars against a black backdrop. The night was cool, but not cold. Quinn wore a long-sleeved sweater, so she hadn’t needed the jacket he’d left in the truck.

She hadn’t called him immediately. That was his fault. He was lucky she’d shared the moment with him at all. And the moment, the entire evening, had been wonderful. The room had gotten quiet when she’d called him “Uncle Nick.” Not sure what to make of it, he’d played along. Quinn was happy. That’s all that mattered.

“What?” She shrugged. “I always liked the shape of the *Q* better than the *K.*”

“Knowing you, that makes sense.”

Her relief was evident in her light steps, the droop to her shoulders, the curve of her lips. His eyes lingered too long, but he also saw she was exhausted, running on fumes and caffeine. He glanced both ways before he led her across the street into the half-empty parking garage.

“Would you like me to drive you home?”

“I’ll be okay. As much coffee as I’ve had, I won’t be sleeping anytime soon. My alarm will go off before I make it to bed anyway.”

“You should take the day off.”

She dropped her head back with a sigh and closed her eyes. “Oh, that sounds so good. But I gave my notice today—yesterday—and with Claire not there, they’ll need the help. What about you?”

“Well...” They stopped at her tailgate, and he faced her, hands going in his pockets. “I *was* going to go in at noon, but you’re making me feel guilty.”

“Glad I could help.” She dipped a mock curtsy, her smile like Heaven opening, and propped her hip on the truck. “Must be nice owning your own business.”

“There are perks.” He draped his elbow on the tailgate. Perhaps too close, but she didn’t move away. “You know, you could own your own business again.”

“Mmm... maybe.”

“I went back to my AutoCAD. You could go back to your canvas.”

She cocked an eyebrow.

She was beautiful, even in the parking garage’s yellow lights. “You should paint again, Quinn. The world needs its Madam Q.”

She rolled her amber eyes.

He needed *his* Madam Q. Before he put that out there, he ended the evening. “First one home calls the other?”

Her smile fading, she nodded, lifted on her toes, and put her arms around his neck. “Thank you, Nick.”

His breath caught in his throat, her words warm breath on his skin. Afraid she'd let go, he slid his arms around her—not too tight, not too loose, a hug from a good friend.

Fruity perfume filled his senses as she lingered in his embrace. He schooled his breathing so it wouldn't match his heart rate, pursed his lips so he wouldn't kiss her temple. All too soon, she stepped back and went to her door while digging her keys out of her purse.

What an idiot. He could've stood there and talked, but he'd dismissed her. Although, if he stayed much longer... He waited until the locks clicked. "Have a good night, *KQ*."

She giggled, which made him smile, and paused with her hand on the door handle. Then she slumped against the truck, breath rushing out in a contented sigh. "Isn't she perfect?"

So she wasn't ready to end the night either. He joined her against her door. "She is that."

"I'm excited for Claire. Being a mom is incredible."

"I'm glad you had the experience, even if it was for a short time."

"Me too." With her next breath, she emptied all her sadness into the air. "Sorry. I should let you go. I just don't want to go home."

"Well..." He poked her with his elbow. "Miss Lover of Landscapes, I happen to know a guy who lives in an upscale apartment building with an open balcony. We could watch the sun come up over this beautiful town of ours. A sunrise might be what you need."

Something flickered to life behind her tired eyes, and her smile brought him his own sunrise to the dim parking garage. “*That* would be spectacular.”

“Let’s go.” He opened her door and made sure she was settled before heading to his truck.

Quinn was changing, healing. Her happiness, even laced with the sadness she still carried, amazed him. And something had changed in the way she looked at him. Maybe it was only the excitement of the evening. But could it be more?



Quinn followed Nick down the highway and up Riverside Drive to his apartment building, the streets dark and quiet with red and green traffic lights fighting for their time to shine. The town slept, but at four o’clock in the morning, she was wide-awake.

The vision of her and Nick alone on a romantic balcony was making her heart dance. Sure, he probably just wanted to be friends. But something in the way he gazed at her outside the waiting room...

A quake went through her, not from the cold, but she bumped up the heat. Being up for almost twenty-four hours straight was not helping her decision-making skills. But she couldn’t make herself want to go home. And if she wanted to share her excitement or four o’clock in the morning or a bright beautiful sunrise from the seventeenth floor with anyone, it was Nick.

How did he become that person? She drove into the parking garage beneath the building and twisted her grip on the steering wheel. How did she *let* him become that person? She hadn't intended to get this close to anyone. Ever again.

But "ever again" was becoming a longer and longer time to be alone.

She parked and stared at the cinder block wall. First coffee, then the symphony, then Monday nights. She'd met his family. He'd met hers. He'd become a part of her group of friends, and she a part of his. It was as if they *were* dating.

Going on a date with Nick isn't much different from what you've already been doing.

The night silenced as she killed the engine.

A tap on the glass made her jump. She opened the window a crack. "Do I know you?"

"Nope. You coming?"

She bugged her eyes as she rolled the window up. Then broke into a smile, grabbed her keys and purse, and opened the door.

She was going to watch the sunrise seventeen floors up with Nick. The man who'd stepped into her dark—his pain still a shadow around him—lifted her out of the abyss, stood by her, and put up with her. The man she cared for.

And maybe, if their conversation went that way—and she could strangle her fear before it could strangle her—she'd cash in her rain check.

Because Claire was right. So very right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Glass walls in the center of the parking garage encased the well-lit elevator lobby. Although void of decoration, it always felt like Quinn was walking into a five-star hotel.

“Are you ready?” He held the door for her.

“Why are we whispering?”

He shrugged. “It’s four in the morning. It seems like we should whisper.”

They pressed the buttons for both elevators and stood back to wait. When the two doors opened at the same time, she went one way, he the other. Laughing at herself, she pivoted and tiptoe-jogged back to him, his arm holding the door open.

“Why are you tiptoeing?”

“It’s four in the morning. It seems like we should tiptoe. I feel like a teenager sneaking back in before my parents realize I’m gone.”

He punched the seventeen button and leaned against the mirrored back wall. “You snuck out?”

“Only once.” She wilted. “Dad caught me. Broke his heart.”

“You terrible child.”

She listed her head to one side and eyed him through her lashes. “What? You never snuck out?”

“Oh, all the time.”

She gawked. “And I’m a terrible child?”

“You’re the one who broke your dad’s heart.”

Arms crossed, she slumped against the wall next to him.

“You’re telling me you never got caught?”

Nick held her gaze as the carriage stopped. When the door opened, she raised her eyebrows demanding an answer, and he pushed off the wall. “Not once.”

“Liar.”

Grinning, he dug his keys from his pocket and waved his fob over the lock. “I’ll get us some blankets. It might be mid-May on the ground, but up here it can get chilly.”

He shut the door, cutting off the hallway’s fluorescent lighting. Before he clicked on the entry hall lamp, his apartment was alive with the city’s beautiful glow.

Quinn left her purse in the entry and wandered to the windows, the night asparkle beyond the glass. She thanked Nick when he handed her a water and went to the bedroom. She’d seen the busy nightlife lights from his window many times. Now, the calm hours before sunrise, as the world anticipated the next day, relaxed her.

She meandered through a living room devoid of trinkets, the only decorative elements the cherrywood flooring and the black-trimmed windows. A few architectural magazines waited on a glass coffee table, and his drafting table overlooked the city, his current project spread over its top. A bouquet of pens and perfectly sharpened pencils blossomed from a glass jar on its corner. His oasis.

She clicked on the swing-arm lamp and ran her fingers along one of his drawings. The angular rendering popped off the paper, bright and elegant, perfect.

“We have a little while before sunrise. Do you need a blank sheet?”

An electrical pulse shot through her. She swiveled to him, blankets under his arm, watching her from where he’d perched against the couch. “No. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“I don’t mind. But now that you’ve seen mine, you’ll have to show me yours.”

With a wry grin, she strolled to the brown cord couch. “Oh, but you see, I did show you mine.” She gestured around the room. “And I don’t see it here.”

She could barely see his cheeks flush under his scruffy beard. His head bowed, and he scratched the back of his neck, then let his hand fall to his side. He dropped the fuzzy gray blankets on the couch and lumbered over to her. Without a word, he snagged her hand and pulled her along behind him down the dark hall to his room. His thumb stroked her hand. Maybe it was a nervous tick, but her heart picked up its pace.

Reaching in, he flipped on the light and pointed above his gray-clad bed. Then crossed his arms and ducked his head as though embarrassed by where he’d hung her painting.

Oh. “The space above the bed is the most coveted space in all the house.”

His head cocked. A brow rose. “It is?”

“Sure.” Yeah. That sounded convincing.

“It’s not.”

“No.” She suppressed a giggle. “But it does look nice there.”

He shrugged. “It fit and added some cheerfulness to an otherwise dull palette.”

With gray walls, gray carpet, and achromatic bedspread, it *was* a dull palette. Her painting the only color in the room and the only thing on the walls except the TV hanging opposite the bed.

“And it was too small for the big wall.” He knocked on the Sheetrock beside them, a massive void of blankness—no marks, no nail holes. Just a blank canvas awaiting a masterpiece. “I guess we’re even now.”

“Maybe.” This time she couldn’t contain her giggle.

Nick laughed with her. “Let’s go see if this sunrise is paint-worthy.”

They gathered their things and headed out. The balcony door opened onto a textured concrete patio running the length of the apartment with a couple wrought iron chairs, glass table, and two fake potted plants. Its own room with one wall open to the night.

Quinn’s hair blew back as she approached the black metal railing and looked out over the neighborhoods and the Arkansas River. The water shimmered, the city lights dancing on its surface. “This is amazing.” Her voice was a whisper. Anything more would have disturbed the peaceful world.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. The fresh air went to her head like a glass of red wine. When she opened her eyes, Nick was standing beside her, shaking out a blanket. Their hands touched while he draped it over her shoulders. Even without a storm, the electricity between them zapped through her like lightning.

As she took the blanket, he retracted his hands and lounged against the rail. “Why are you whispering?”

She bumped him with her shoulder. “Careful, or someone might just tell your dad about all your escapades as a kid.”

“He already knows.”

Her eyes grew wide. “So, you did get caught.”

“More than once.” He crossed his arms. “To which I received multiple lectures about how nothing good happens in the city after ten o’clock and a confession that he did the same thing when he was a kid. That’s about the time Dad and I got close.”

Before she could stop herself, she put her hand on his arm. And before she could pull away, he covered hers with his. He smiled a sweet happy smile without looking at her, sending her heart into her throat.

Just as suddenly, it was over. He dropped his hand and stepped away from the rail, looking at his watch. “We still have an hour before the show.” He positioned the two high-backed chairs to face each other and sat, motioning her over. Heart still in overdrive, she followed.

He kicked his feet up on the edge of her chair.

Her legs crossed at the ankles beside him, she swatted at his shoe. “Don’t fall asleep. You have to keep me awake.”

He slid his phone from his pocket and set an alarm, his eyes already drooping.

Mumbling through light conversation, Quinn steered clear of the chat she’d wanted to have. Now was not the time to talk dating anyway. Maybe after they’d both had a good night’s sleep.

Soon his phone was beeping. She opened her eyes to see him looking at her, his hand on her calf warm in the cool morning.

“Good morning.” He curled his fingers under her leg.

She swallowed hard, heat rising in her cheeks. “Good morning.”

Almost scooting her out of her chair, he used her leg to haul himself up, eliciting a gasp from her, then a relieved exhale. Funny guy.

Arms over his head, he stretched, then extended his hand. “It’s time.”

She stared at his open palm before placing her hand in his. He didn’t let go until they were at the rail. She tightened her blanket around her as they stood with their shoulders brushing, watching the eastern sky to their left.

Gray tones seamlessly turned blue. Down below, darkness still shrouded the street. One had to fight to see the sunrise from the city streets, but up here, it was nothing but sky. A canvas awash in the sun’s burning embers.

A reverent whisper, his voice broke the silence. “Here it comes.”

The rising sun reflected off the sparse clouds, coloring them bright yellow and orange.

Then the first arc of fire lit the horizon.

Her mouth dropped open. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yes, she is.”

Shocked, she spun to find Nick turned toward her, his blue eyes locked on hers, reflecting the coming day. The calmness in his smile kept her heart from pounding. In the orange cast of the rising sun, he leaned in and kissed her.

A short nip, but it jolted through her from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. When she didn’t move away, he fully engaged her, his mouth covering hers. She let her eyes fall shut and responded with an awakened passion, turning into his embrace, her blanket falling to the ground. His kiss was warm, his lips soft. One of his hands gripped the back of her neck, fingers entwined in her hair. The other cradled the small of her back, drawing her body against his. Her hands on his chest, his muscles firm beneath her touch, suppressed feelings rose like an ocean wave and met the same rolling from him.

The tinkling of the golden bell. The vision of officers. The news of Brendan’s death. Her calm destroyed.

She recoiled, sucking in a shuddering breath.

“I’m sorry.” His hands drifted to hers that still lingered on his chest. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

Yes, you should have. But... She exhaled and tried to smile, tried to fight this dread, ached to wrap back up in his arms. But the air began to feel thin. “I should go.”

“Quinn, wait.” He reached to hold onto her as she backed out of his arms. He grabbed her wrist. “Don’t leave. Please.”

She didn’t look at him. If she did, she’d stay. “I can’t do this.”

“Stay. Talk to me.” His voice rasped, hoarse with the lack of sleep—or desperation?

She tried to take slow breaths, to get herself under control. “I *can’t*.”

She didn’t want to say those words—words that escaped her as if someone else were saying them. His hurt expression crushed her, but the need to escape pressed her toward the balcony door.

She twisted her wrist from his grip and rushed inside, her clacking flats echoing through the apartment. Without stopping, she grabbed her purse and ran out into the hallway of the seventeenth floor. She rounded the corner into the elevator bank and hit the down button several times, half-hoping Nick would follow, fully knowing he wouldn’t. When the door dinged open, she crushed into the furthest corner with her hand over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. The doors closed, and as the floor seemed to drop out from under her, it was all she could do to stay on her feet.

She gulped air the entire ride down to the parking garage. She’d fought to keep her heart hidden away only to give it

away. Fought love so she wouldn't lose and lost anyway.

She was running from what she wanted. And she couldn't figure out why.



All Nick could do was close the balcony door behind her. He couldn't follow, wanted to, but wouldn't—no matter how much it killed him. He'd fooled himself into thinking she was ready, hurt her when he'd said he wouldn't. He stood at the rail, twisted his hands around the black metal not caring that it rubbed his skin raw.

When the beauty of the sunrise disappeared, leaving behind a cold morning, he went inside, tired and spent.

The front door hung open. He trudged through the living room to the entry hall, his body numb, but his feet heavy on the floor. Shutting the world out, he slumped against the wall. What made him think kissing Quinn would be right? He replayed the last eight hours—the way she'd looked at him, let him support her, began to trust him again. He'd wanted her to love him so much he'd taken advantage of her high, her good mood—her beautiful trust.

All the anger he'd pent up began to rise. Anger at Lauren for leaving him. Anger at God for taking her. Anger at himself. No one else had done this—he had.

When his anger reached the maximum he could hold inside, he ground his teeth, released a growl from the deepest part of him, and punched the wall. The drywall caved, and he cursed as pain exploded through his hand. He'd hit the edge of

a stud and bloodied his first knuckle. He deserved it—all the pain and hurt.

“I told you I didn’t know how to move on. Now I’ve done it all wrong. I did what you said, Lauren.” He slid down the wall to his knees. “I did what you said.”

A familiar pain racked his body as what was left of his heart ripped in two. He put his face in his hands, crying like he hadn’t since Lauren’s death, and asked God to do what he could not. “Please help her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Quinn's boss gave her the whole day off. A relief because her body wouldn't drag her any farther than her bed. For the first time in ages, she cried herself to sleep.

Around two o'clock she awoke, her body dense and heavy. Her head swam with the morning's events. The beautiful sunrise. The exceptional kiss. The cowardly escape.

Had she truly left with no other explanation than "I can't?"

She'd made him believe being together possible. Led him on, invited him in—and stabbed him in the back. What kind of friend did that?

One who needed to be admitted.

His lips were as soft as they looked. She touched her fingers to her mouth, still not believing he'd kissed her.

But she'd kissed him back, and a big part of her wanted to kiss him again. With all their near misses, it had been only a matter of time before it happened. But this wasn't a near miss. This happened because two people cared for each other. And didn't she want that?

Sighing, she sat up on the edge of her bed. She had to let go of the lie.

She glared at her phone through half-open eyes. No texts, no missed calls. Where was he?

With a grimace, she headed for the bathroom. A shower and some clean clothes would do her good.

Maybe after a day or two to think things over, they could go on like normal. She stopped brushing her hair midstroke. She and Nick couldn't be friends. Too much filled the space between them now. And no matter how hard she'd tried, maybe it always had.

Her exhausted face looked back at her from the mirror. She was tired of running, tired of lying, tired of holding back. She didn't want to be scared. So how did she overcome fear?

She snorted a laugh. She'd go see her bestie and cuddle her new baby—that's how. She peeled off the clothes she'd worn for a day and a half, showered, and donned clean jeans and a loose tee. Sweater in hand, she headed to the hospital.

She found Claire and Kaitlyn lying in bed, Claire cooing at her newborn daughter. There had been a day, forever ago, when Quinn and Brendan stared into the face of their own daughter, afraid to look away. Afraid any minute she'd be gone.

And then she was.

Nick had that same look when she'd left. Her guts twisted.

“Look who it is—Auntie Q.”

The stab to her heart pulled her from her thoughts.

“Where's Dillon?”

“He went to get us some extra things.” Claire nuzzled Kaitlyn. “We weren't planning on staying this long, were we?”

Stealing the angel, Quinn swept the baby into her arms. She brushed her fingers over Kaitlyn's tiny features, held her

hand, and kissed her fingers. She sniffed as a tear wobbled on the edge of her eye.

Claire laid her hand on Quinn's arm. "Quinn, is this too much?"

"Kaitlyn? No. She's perfect."

"If not Hope, then it must be Nick."

Love and babies. How did Claire know? "I'm okay."

"I've known you for forever. You are *not* okay."

Quinn pursed her lips and breathed in the sweet baby scent.

Claire adjusted her position, struggling to come closer. "Quinn?"

Oh, just get it over with. She'd find out sooner or later. "Nick kissed me."

Claire sucked in an excited breath and let it out as fast, her smile dropping. "And?"

Her lip snagged between her teeth, Quinn rocked Kaitlyn back and forth. "And I kissed him back."

Claire started to smile, but Quinn's dejection must've deterred her glee. "Then what?"

"I left." She rolled her eyes. "I *ran*."

She surrendered the angel to her mother's side, plopped into the chair next to the bed, and propped her arms next to Kaitlyn, playing with her little feet sticking out from under the pink blanket. "I wanted to stay."

“Oh, Quinn, honey. Why didn’t you?”

“I’m so scared.”

“Of losing him?”

Her head bobbed as if she couldn’t bring herself to nod.
“It’s silly, really. Without him, I’ve lost already.”

Claire brushed a wisp of Quinn’s hair away from her hot, damp cheek. “And I didn’t have to say a word.”

Quinn barked a laugh. “Nope. I figured this one out all by myself.”

“Have you called him?”

The thought made Quinn’s stomach burn. Was there anything she could say to him to make it better? “He wouldn’t want to talk to me. Oh, Claire, if you’d seen the hurt in his face.”

Claire clasped her hand and shook it until Quinn raised her head. “All the more reason to call him.”

“Maybe I should give him a couple of days.”

“And maybe you should call him.”

Quinn dragged her gaze to the window. Puffy white clouds still hung in the blue. The memory of red and orange still hung in her mind. She could still feel his warmth, his lips on hers. She glanced back down at the sleeping bundle. “He hasn’t called me either.”

“You’re the one who ran. He’s giving you space.”

Quinn tilted her head at her dearest friend in the world.
“How is it you always know what I need?”

“It’s easy to see when you’re on the outside looking in. Remember Alex Vaughan?” She pretended to gag.

Quinn wrinkled her nose. “Ugh. How could I forget?”

“I couldn’t see what a jerk he was. But you could. You saved me from a bad mistake.” Claire pushed Quinn’s hair off her shoulder. “Let me save you from a bad mistake. Call him.”

Where would she be without Claire? “I owe you so much.”

“Well, you could offer free babysitting.”

“You’ve got it.”

She stayed and visited until Dillon returned with a bag of necessities. Then she left them to enjoy their new little family. Her stomach grumbled. She hadn’t eaten since the night before, so she went in search of food, grateful Mom had begged off their Tuesday dinner after the exhaustion of last night.

The white bread, ham, and cheese from the hospital cafeteria sat on her stomach like a boulder as she made her way back to her truck. Even with her body lethargic, she didn’t want to go home. All these feelings needed somewhere to go.

Feelings. They’d started coming back that night at the river with Nick. The sunset had been the most colorful she’d seen since watching them with Brendan. Because of Nick. He’d been so good to her, even while mourning his loss. She stopped at her truck door and pressed her forehead against the driver’s side window.

Her day began with the sunrise from his apartment building. He'd started something beautiful between them. And she'd ruined it—possibly ruined everything. Ending the day with the sunset over the river might help her think things through. She'd call him tomorrow. Of course, the big-girl thing would be to knock on his door tonight.

She climbed into her truck. Her rolling stomach reminded her again of the awful sandwich she'd shoved down her throat. Hair held back with one hand, she rested her elbows on the steering wheel. The big-girl thing would have to wait until tomorrow. If she faced him now, she'd puke on his shoes. And his shoes were the expensive kind you didn't want to puke on.

She was making excuses. Facing him was inevitable. But perhaps they both needed rest and time to think. She'd go to the river tonight. He had a lot to forgive. Maybe he'd be gracious enough to forgive her for waiting one more day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

After punching a hole in the wall and staring at Quinn's painting, Nick collapsed on his made-up bed with clothes and shoes still on. He wanted to close his eyes and sleep for years. He was tired, and his heart hurt.

After a few hours of fitful sleep, he couldn't take staring at the ceiling and stewing any longer. Besides, there was a wall to fix.

He lingered in the shower, letting the cool water run over him, doing nothing to quell his anger. He banged his fist on the tile, remembered the hole in the wall, and took a breath to calm down. After toweling off and bandaging his knuckle, he threw on some old clothes and made a trip to the hardware store for supplies.

Had he misread her that badly? Couldn't have. She'd seemed eager for his touch, even kissed him back for a beautiful, brief moment. But how much of that was a longing for the past?

He'd made the first move when he'd told himself he wouldn't. And that moment had shattered the glass house they'd been building. She'd never want to be friends now. There'd been mess-ups, "awkward moments" as they liked to call them, but this, this was far beyond awkward. And far beyond repair.

The mesh patch barely fit over the dent in the wall. Pain shouted through his knuckle as he worked the putty in. He should've called, made sure she'd made it home okay. She

wouldn't have answered, but at least she wouldn't have thought he was mad.

He ignored the knock at his door. Dad had a key and would use it. Nick hadn't called in sick since Lauren, and at halfway through the lunch hour, he expected his dad to check in.

The lock clicked, and the door opened. Nick cast a glance sideways as Dad came in.

Dad cocked a brow. "You don't look sick. Not physically." He shut the door, set the take-out bag on the entry table, and stood beside Nick, eyeing his work. "What happened?"

"I hit the wall."

Dad huffed. "Let me rephrase that. What happened to make you want to hit the wall?"

Typical of his dad to press for answers. Nick continued with the putty. "I kissed her."

Dad jerked his thumb toward the wall. "By the looks of your wall, it didn't go well."

Not looking at him, Nick paused, then kept pressing the spackle out over the mesh.

Crossing his arms, Dad leaned against the wall next to the hole. "Then what?"

"She ran. Literally." Nick blew out his exasperation, scooping more putty out of the container and forcing it in the hole. "She couldn't get away fast enough."

Dad laid a hand on his arm, stopping him. "Don't let her go."

“She made it clear she only wanted to be friends. I crossed that line.”

“That line would’ve been crossed eventually.”

An argument sprang to his lips, but one couldn’t argue with the truth. “Maybe. But it wasn’t my place to cross it. It *never* should’ve happened.”

“You punching the wall should never have happened.”

Nick cringed at his dad’s disappointment.

“At least you’ve learned to clean up your messes.” Dad focused behind Nick, then clamped a hand on his shoulder, and gave it a firm squeeze. “Kissing Quinn wouldn’t have happened if she wasn’t more ready than you think. Go to her.”

It was the only thing he wanted to do. And the one thing he couldn’t. His tense shoulders gave way. “I’m the last person she wants to see right now.”

“You’re the exact person she needs to see right now.” Dad shoved his hands into his pockets. “Your mother and I, we had our arguments. Some big ones. But we always came back together. What I wouldn’t give to be together now. Go after her, son.” He clapped him on the shoulder, pushed off the wall, and opened the door. “And I’ll see you in the morning. Bright and early.”

The door clicked shut. Dad still mourned Mom. No wonder he’d never remarried. But he was wrong. Quinn would never see him again. They couldn’t be “just friends,” and they couldn’t be more.

Finished with the hole, Nick scraped the extra spackle back into the container and abandoned it on the kitchen cabinet. He'd paint another day. For now, he wanted sleep. If he were unconscious, he couldn't think, and he wouldn't feel.

Quinn's painting loomed over his bed. What a dumb place to hang it. But no matter how dumb, he couldn't bring himself to take it down.

She'd painted again. For him.

And what'd he done? He'd helped her through the worst of recovery, then slammed her backward. He plopped onto the side of the bed and ran a hand through his hair. She'd be okay, right? She had Claire, her parents. Although, what kind of friend wouldn't at least check on her? Even if she never wanted to see him again, she deserved at least that.

He slid his phone from his pocket and navigated to his favorites screen, his thumb hovered over her icon. His head became hot, and he blinked his eyes away from the screen, abandoning the idea. He tossed his phone onto the bedside table. She was probably asleep, and she needed time. His jackhammering heart told him he needed time as well.

The pressure off, he grabbed a pillow, laid his head on the foot end of the bed, and lost himself in the beautiful colors of her painting, breathing deep even breaths. Before long, his body seemed to meld into the bedspread, and his eyes succumbed to their heaviness.

His eyelids fluttered open. He sat up, threw his pillow against the headboard, and grabbed his phone, then laid back

down. It said he'd slept four hours, his mind and body said he hadn't slept at all, and his stomach said he needed to eat.

Rolling away from the windows, he tried to go back to sleep, but his eyes fixed on the large wall of his room—empty, like his heart.

His head swam as he jerked himself off the bed. When the world stopped spinning, he grabbed his gym bag, stuffed it with clean workout clothes, and headed out the door. A trip to the gym would clear his head and give him something to do.

Only it didn't.

Nothing could make him stop thinking of how he'd hurt Quinn. Or the way her lips pressed against his or the way she'd felt in his embrace. The memory lingered like her perfume. But the hurt on her face left him more unable to breathe than the intense workout.

Out of control, his self-blame tore him apart. He coveted a quiet place to think. After a quick shower, he headed out to their spot on the river—the place of peace his soul was thirsty for.



The last of the sun's rays sparkled on the water's surface. A couple jogged by as Nick pulled into the plaza's parking area. It would be dark soon, and most people had cleared out. He swung into a spot and was surprised to find he'd parked next to Quinn's black F250.

Adrenaline washed through his veins, and his muscles tensed as he scanned the area. On their sage-green park bench

overlooking the river, the small figure he'd come to love sat alone, her legs drawn up under her arms, chin resting on her knees. The setting sun a glistening halo in her hair.

His heart shot electricity through his limbs, and his head grew hot despite the air-conditioning. What was she doing here? Perhaps she needed the same peace. Because of him. She wouldn't want to see him. And he wasn't sure he was ready to see her. He threw his truck into reverse.

His foot never made it off the brake.

What are the chances they'd both be here, drawn to this spot at this time?

He glanced at the back seat where he kept a jacket, back to Quinn, and shifted his truck into park. Stepping out, he pushed his door closed with a quiet click, made sure to push the lock button on his fob only once so the horn wouldn't honk, and deposited his keys in his pocket. Jacket hung over his arm, he stood by the back bumper and worked up his courage. What would he say?

He'd start with "hello" and see where that led. One foot first, then the other, he made his way down the sidewalk, his tennis shoes silent.

He considered turning back twice, not remembering the path being so long. But he couldn't make his feet go any direction but forward. He couldn't duck and run. She meant too much, and he was going to talk to her.

Not wanting to scare her—he'd done enough of that already—he stopped several paces back. "Quinn?"

Her feet slammed to the ground as she jerked around. Her lips parted, and she jumped up, rubbing her hands across her red cheeks and drying them on her jeans, then shoving them in her pockets. “What are you doing here?”

Of course, she was crying. Jerk. “I needed a place to think.”

“Oh.” She glanced out across the water. “It’s a great place for that.”

Silent seconds passed. He’d worked hard to diminish the sadness in her eyes. Then he’d put it back. *Moron.*

He pointed his thumb back to the truck. “If I’m disturbing you, I can go.”

She raised a hand. “No. It seems Someone thinks we should talk.”

One corner of his mouth went up in a half smile. “God doesn’t like to be called Someone.”

“No, He does not.” Her tiny smile faded as she noticed the bandage on his right hand. “You hurt your hand.”

He popped off before he could stop himself. “You should see the wall.”

Just great. Way to make it worse. He cringed at her guilt-ridden look.

“You hit the wall.”

He shrugged. “It’s okay. I know a guy who can fix it.”

She almost smiled, then gestured to the bench. “Maybe I can invite him to sit with me?”

Sit? At least she hadn't thrown rocks, but he hadn't expected this. He swallowed hard and joined her, his nerves like sparking wires. Scared of what she might say. Scared of what he might say.



Quinn stepped aside so Nick could sit beside her. Stiff and unsure, he sat with his hands clasped in his lap, his focus across the water. She perched on the edge of the bench, leaving an empty space between them. Somehow, she needed to say something to fill it.

Her teeth were chattering, only half from the evening's chill. The extra jacket he kept in his truck lay across his knee. Even after what she'd done, he was still thinking of her. It was a good sign.

"I'd give you five bucks for that jacket right about now."

He exhaled a laugh, looking at the jacket as if he'd forgotten it was there. "You're in luck. There's a sale on jackets today. It's free."

Instead of wrapping it around her, as he often did, he handed it over. A bad sign. She'd opened a gulf between them. Feeling its depth, she suspected he was as afraid to jump across it as she was. She slipped her arms into the sleeves and allowed it to engulf her. Then slid back in her seat and watched the sunset develop.

The sun burned the sky with beautiful hues, carrying on its duty of ending the day. She prayed the fading light was indicative of nothing.

“I went to see Kaitlyn this afternoon.”

“How is she?”

“She’s doing well.”

“And Claire?”

“On top of the world.” Brutal small talk, nothing intimate. Quinn swallowed. “I know you’re mad at me for leaving.”

His shoulders slumped. “I’m not mad.” He shifted to her, resting his hand on the back of the bench. “Not at you. I misread you, saw what I wanted to see. I only want what’s best for you, and what I did—I betrayed you.” His gaze dropped. “You made the boundary clear, and I didn’t honor it. I’m sorry.”

His words twisted her insides. The guilt was hers, and he thought the fault was his.

He stared at his fidgeting hand in his lap. “I understand if you don’t want to be around me anymore.”

“Stop.”

His head jerked up, his brow pinched.

“You didn’t misread me. Everything you did was right.” She faced the sunset, seeking bravery. “Last night, I was going to ask if you were up for that date. But I couldn’t. I have this fear that, if I dare to care...” Tears thickened her voice and obstructed her vision. She swiveled toward him and laid her hand over his. “I wanted to be on that balcony with you. But when we... All I could see was pain and loss.”

He frowned at their hands with—what? Longing? Confusion? Then he slipped his out from under hers and eyed the parking lot like he wished he could run.

Fear struck her heart. Not the same fear that had debilitated her since Brendan's death. But a fear like falling and having no one there to catch her.

“We're all broken, Quinn. We just have to find a way to pick up the pieces.”

“I want to.”

“That's good.” He closed his eyes and drew in a breath. “But do you want to pick up your pieces and put them together with mine?”

She wanted to reach out to him, to put her hands on his shoulders and make him look at her, to tell him she was sure. Because she was—she really was.

But she hesitated.

His eyes, wet with unshed tears, found hers again before he ducked his head with a quick smile. “Maybe we just need time to think.” His hand went to her cheek, and he pulled her to him and kissed her forehead. She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. Then he was gone, leaving her gasping for air.

She watched until he was in his truck and driving away, not believing this was happening. He didn't look back. He'd left her alone. The world that had grown warm was cold. The familiar numbness of loss spread across her skin like frost crawling across glass.

She shivered despite his warm jacket as the final color drained from the sky and turned to ash.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Quinn didn't mention seeing Nick at the river. Claire didn't need her stress on the glorious day she brought her daughter home. She was there to help, not to get a psychiatric evaluation.

But her happy facade only worked for a few minutes. Not surprising since Claire was, well, Claire.

The proud mama sat against her mahogany headboard. Quinn sat cross-legged, facing her, and cradling Kaitlyn on a pillow across her lap. Claire extended a hand. "Thank you for all the freezer meals and for cleaning my house."

Quinn took her hand and squeezed. "You have other things to concentrate on. I just wanted to make it easier."

Without letting go, Claire widened her eyes. "And what do *you* need to concentrate on?"

"Me?"

"Spill the beans, sister."

"What beans?"

"It's been three days since 'the kiss.'" She made air quotes with her fingers. "You didn't call him, did you?"

Quinn huffed. Could she have no secrets? She took Kaitlyn's hand in hers and stroked her soft skin. "We're just taking time to think things over. Making sure this is what we both want."

"Well, we know it's what he wants." Claire ran a finger around Kaitlyn's earlobe. "And I thought we were clear on

what you wanted.”

Quinn watched the steady rise and fall of the baby’s chest. Being unsure was exhausting. She longed for the peaceful rest Kaitlyn was getting. “I thought I was clear on that too.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You mean *persuade*?”

Claire raised one shoulder. “I can do that too.”

Kaitlyn cooed and stretched, the moment filling Quinn with joy. And giving her two seconds to avoid the question. “I know what I want. But maybe it’s not what God wants.”

Claire rested her hand on Quinn’s, demanding her attention. “And maybe it is.”

Dare she believe it? Had God ripped everything she cared about away from her only to replace it? What was the point in that?

“ ‘Trust in the Lord with all your heart.’ ”

Church camp. Tenth grade. It was the only thing Claire had brought home from camp that year. Smiling, Quinn finished the verse. “ ‘And lean not on your own understanding.’ ”

“You’ll make the right choice. When you’re ready to make it.”

The conversation turned to grandma schedules for the next couple of weeks. Then Quinn, not staying as late as she normally would have, dragged herself home and fell into bed early, still exhausted from her late-night bolt from the balcony.

Summer hadn't quite hit, and after her hour-long run through the neighborhood the next morning, the shade in her yard promised to be just chilly enough for a light sweater and a steamy cup of coffee on the porch. She stepped out, breathing in the sweet smell of fresh-cut grass from next door, and settled into one of her red chairs. The birds chirped, the leaves rattled, and she thought—and prayed. Especially prayed.

Help me trust in You, Lord.

Tucking her legs up beside her, she rested her coffee mug on one upraised knee, letting the long week seep from her as hazelnut cream and nature's presence soothed her. For the last few days, she'd worked in her tiny windowless office and come home to an empty house, no calls and no texts. Well, not from Nick. There were plenty from Claire and Mom.

She savored a slow sip, wishing it was a chai latte from Cafe Cubana, her fingers warm around her mug. The electric company had called. An automated reminder she'd forgotten to pay the bill for the gallery. Now, she couldn't stop thinking about all her paintings lying under dust covers, hidden away from the world. Like she'd hidden herself away. Under cover after cover after cover.

Another sip. Another deep breath. She hugged her sweater across her chest and tipped her face toward the caressing breeze.

But one ray of light had found her, uncovered her layer by layer, and led her out of the darkness. Given her the desire to

put one foot in front of the other and move forward. Nick. His presence burned away the storm clouds.

Of course, it hadn't kept her from searing him with her lightning.

She eyed the chair across from her. The one Nick sat in so many times. Black coffee, no cream, no sugar. He should be sitting there now.

Her feet slammed to the wood decking, the birds with their carefree songs irritating. The chair legs scraped a grating sound as she rose too fast. Letting out a growl, she stomped over to perch on the porch rail above her pansies. The colorful flowers swayed in the gentle morning breeze—bending with the wind, but not breaking. For an eternity, she'd swayed, but hadn't broken.

There were times when she'd thought she would—a time when she thought she had. Then she'd had coffee with Nick, and even though she hadn't been able to see it, her heart had begun to heal.

She poured out the too-sweet dregs of her coffee, sprinkling a few yellow blooms. Brown dribbled from the dainty petals, the breeze helping them shake it off.

Grief took more than a simple shaking off.

Grief counseling helped. But the sessions from seven to eight hadn't helped as much as the sessions after eight—the phone calls, the texts, the coffees, the dinners, the nights out with friends, the time with his family and hers, the normalcy of a life built around each other.

They'd been building up to that moment on the balcony since he'd returned her phone.

A robin swooped into the yard, bobbed along the grass, seeking worms, then startled as the neighbor next door started his weed eater. As the bird took flight, Quinn smiled. Like the skittish creature, she'd been so eager to leave that place, to fly away. Only she had flown. And broken the heart of the one she didn't want to be without.

With a sigh, she set her empty mug on the rail. Nick had been there through everything.

And she didn't want to be just friends.

She closed her eyes, crossing her arms so her sweater wouldn't drift open again, and lifted her chin skyward, taking a long deep breath, resting her head against the post. Warm shards of sunlight fought through the elm tree boughs to speckle her face.

Fear—a black void that was nothing but a hole to get lost in—had tried to engulf her. But she'd been in that hole once and would *never* go there again.

Her flowers weren't unlike the ones in the colorful meadow she'd painted under wispy clouds or the ones under a clear blue sky with the storm building on the horizon. But those paintings still sat alone in her gallery, waiting to provide the happiness for which they were intended. And here she sat alone, just like them.

Nick had been prompting her to paint again. *He* believed she would.

“Okay.” She let the word out on a deep breath, loosened her tight hold on herself, and her sweater. “You wanted me to think. I’ve thought.”

Coffee mug in hand, she went inside to do what she should’ve done long ago.



Saturday morning coffee, watching the day awaken from his couch was Nick’s norm. But this Saturday, he sat at his drawing desk piled high with plans from the extra clients he’d taken on this week to avoid Dad. Ignoring them, he stared out through the sky, one hand rubbing his scruffy beard, coffee growing cold in the other. The day beyond his floor-to-ceiling windows looked perfect, but he refused to go out on the balcony to enjoy it.

He’d made the worst decision of his life on that balcony. Or had it been the best? After taking time to think, which direction would she go?

He sighed, set his coffee aside, and scrounged through some drawings. Then resumed staring out the window. His skin warmed as he sank into remembering tasting her lips, running her hair between his fingers.

For the seconds their kiss lasted, living again seemed possible, but people did things in the moment they wouldn’t normally do. Her painting, her kiss, the looks they’d shared, all the moments when they could’ve kissed but hadn’t... He’d made himself believe they were growing together.

And maybe they were.

Nick rubbed his hand down his face. Only time would tell, if the waiting didn't kill him.

He shouldn't have left her at the river alone. But more than the waiting, her going back and forth would end him. If they spent some time apart, the truth would make itself known. But what was the truth?

The need to talk to her had him picking up his phone, just to set it down again... and again. No. He'd done enough pressuring. If she wanted him around, she'd have to let him know.

Neither the plans on his desk nor the endless sky had the ability to hold his attention. Restless, he dumped his cold coffee down the sink, threw some clean clothes in his gym bag, and headed out.

Squats, push-ups, chest presses, dead lifts, pull-ups, dips. When it was time for curls, he loaded more weight than normal onto the bar. More of a punishment than a workout, it was familiar, something to waste time and clear his head. The curls became increasingly harder, but he kept pressing for one more. Pressing—something he was good at.

When his muscles stopped cooperating, he set the bar down. As he stood, his phone buzzed. He did a double take at the caller—Madam Q. The extra surge of adrenaline made his muscles clench. He rushed to his phone and scrambled to answer before it quit ringing. Not knowing what to say, he struggled for something witty. “Hey.” Not witty at all.

“Are you okay?”

He swallowed to control his heavy breathing. “Yeah, I’m just finishing up at the gym. You okay?” He winced and dropped onto the weight bench. What a dumb thing to ask. She wasn’t the one breathing hard into the phone.

“I’m good.”

The warmth in her voice relaxed him. “Great. Uh, what’s up?”

Her hesitation made his shoulders tense back up. “Um, well, I was just wondering if you’re busy this afternoon?”

This was it. She wanted to meet with him to let him down easy. Thanks, but no thanks. He worked to sound upbeat. “Well, I have a date with my dust mop, but I bet I can stand her up... you know, in the corner.”

He took comfort in her laugh. “Oh, Nick.” He could almost see her head shaking. “That was so bad.”

“Yeah.” He chuckled. The normal Nick-Quinn banter had his shoulders relaxing again. “It was. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t quit your day job.”

“I tried that for a while. Didn’t work out so well.”

“It’s not working out so well for me either.” She sucked in a breath. “I was hoping you might meet me at the gallery.”

He lost the ability to breathe. When his lungs began to burn, he sucked in air and exhaled words. “I can be there in an hour.”

“Perfect.” Then her voice took on a serious note. “I look forward to seeing you.”

The corners of his mouth tugged upward. “You’ll be a better sight than my dust mop.”

She giggled and hung up, her laughter like a familiar song. The favorite song. The one you wanted to sing along with, listen to again and again.

He grabbed his towel and strode to the locker room. The quickest cool shower he’d ever taken later, and he was in his truck on his way to Cherry Street. He had no idea what was getting ready to happen, but he *had* to find out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

When Quinn pulled into the parking lot in front of the glass-front building, Nick was already there, lounging on his dropped tailgate. Freshly showered and dressed in jeans and a nice tee that showed off his newly worked-out muscles, he made her heart thump against her ribs. *Deep breaths, girl.*

She grabbed her keys, pocketed her phone, and went to meet him. He hopped off the tailgate and shut it. Hands in his pockets, he took a few steps toward her as he watched her approach. The circles under his eyes were new, but his crooked grin and bright forgiving baby blues looked hopeful and broke through her nervous shell to the center of her heart. She smiled her own crooked grin.

Seconds ticked by. Then he nodded toward the gallery. “So, what’s the first order of business, Madam Q?”

Her chest warmed. She held up her gallery key between her thumb and forefinger, the rest dangling against her palm. “Unlocking the door.”

Leaving his hands in his pockets, an odd distant gesture for him, he moved toward the gallery. “Let’s get to it.”

Her nerves were like live wires sparking electricity in the air as they trekked the short distance to the door. He wouldn’t just forget what she’d done no matter how badly she wished it. She’d hurt him, so a certain amount of healing would have to happen first. She stepped up on the sidewalk in front of the gallery door.

“What brought this on?” Hands still tucked into his pockets, he stepped up to meet her.

“Well, last August, this guy asked me out for coffee. I guess it’s been coming on since then.”

“Sounds like a great guy.”

“Yeah, he even asked me for my phone number.”

“Bold.”

Laughter and smiles. It was good to see a spark return to his eyes.

She ran her hand down his forearm, then pulled his hand free, and gripped it with both of hers. “He *is* a great guy. Thank you for coming. I was afraid you wouldn’t.”

“Quinn.” He squeezed her hand, wrapping his other one around them, stroking her knuckles with his thumb. “I will always be here for you.”

She hadn’t lost him. Thank God.

Still holding hands, the moment quite awkward—but a nice awkward—he motioned with his head toward the door. “Go for it.”

She dropped his hands to get the key in the lock, then stood there, fingers on the key unready to turn. She took a deep breath.

His hand touched her back, and those live wires ran over her skin. “I’m right here. You’re ready for this.”

“Actually…” She dropped her hand, leaving her keys hanging from the door.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

His sincerity tugged at her. After everything, he still cared for her and was willing to show it. She stared through the dirty window at the empty gallery. “I have to do something before I unlock this part of my life. I want everything to be perfect when I open this door.” She tipped her head up at him, aching at the tightness furrowing his brow. “And everything is not perfect.”

He shifted his feet and peered down at the hands they’d somehow clasped together. “We don’t have to do this now. I don’t want this to be a shadow on your big day.”

“This isn’t *my* big day because I’m opening *this* door. It’s *our* big day because I’m opening this one.”

Using his hands as leverage, she raised up, brought her face close, and let her mouth hover near his for the span of a breath. In that span, his breath caught, and his body tensed. When she was sure he wouldn’t turn away, she brushed her lips against his. Then the world fell away as he closed his eyes and joined his lips to hers. While his hands went around the small of her back cradling her against him, she slid her arms around his neck, her fingers rustling his short hair.

He breathed a whisper against her lips. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Forehead crinkling, he pulled back and cupped her face in his hands. “You have nothing to be sorry for. It was me. I did this.”

She clasped her hands around his. “No. I ran away. I hurt you.”

“Only because I hurt you.”

All this time, she thought she’d ruined everything, and he’d thought the same. Their silliness had them both laughing.

His image blurred beyond her tear-lined lashes. “I’ll forgive you if you forgive me.”

“It’s already done.” Relief smoothed out his face as he kissed her again. Then he brushed his nose against hers. “Is everything perfect now, Q?”

She responded without opening her eyes. “Perfectly peaceful.”

“Then let’s unlock this door.”

Right. The door. That’s what they were here for. Partly. She dragged herself away from her prime reason, his hand warm on her back as she turned the key. The golden bell tinkling above the gallery door, no longer a haunted memory, welcomed her in. She stepped inside, and the wooden floor creaked its hello. With closed eyes, she breathed in the familiar old-building smell. “I’m home.”

Then she took his hand, and they began rebuilding more than the gallery.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Her one-eighty had been unexpected. With her kiss, she'd made her choice. Nick loved her choice, wanted to help her make it again and again.

But he couldn't deny the fear she'd take it all back.

Since meeting her, he'd looked forward to Mondays, but today, eagerness gripped him. He grabbed his keys from the entry table, the smell of fresh paint still lingered in the air from his painting party with Dad. He brushed his hand over his invisible patch job, remembering the pain, not from his hand, but from Quinn's expression when he'd kissed her on the balcony. *Take it slow, buddy. Day by day.*

He'd spent the weekend in a daze. Any moment he'd wake up from this dream, and Quinn would be gone. But each time they'd kissed, held hands, or were close enough for him to smell the grapefruit fragrance in her hair, they—this dream of *them*—became more real.

And the more real they became, the more scared he was of losing her.

Life was too unpredictable, and Quinn was fragile. She'd lost so much. They both had. And neither wanted to feel pain again.

The parking garage was cool as he climbed into his truck. One trip to the job site, lunch with clients, and he'd be with her again. Maybe he'd take the rest of the day off. Now to convince his boss.

A bounce to his step, Nick entered the office and greeted his receptionist with more enthusiasm than normal. “Good morning, Delores.”

She lowered the papers she held, clearly surprised by his good mood. “Good morning, Mr. James.”

He stopped and leaned his elbow against the high desk. “Delores.”

She tilted her head to eye him over her readers. “Yes, Nick.”

“That’s better.” He winked. “Mr. James is my father.”

“Who’s in the break room by the way.”

With a nod, he went to meet his dad at the coffeepot. “Good morning, Mr. James.”

““Mr. James, is it now?” Arching a brow, Dad gave him a curious look. “You seem chipper this morning. You must’ve taken your old man’s advice.”

Nick’s neck heated as he replaced the carafe on the hot plate. They *had* talked, but his thoughts were of her soft hands, her kisses. “Yes.”

“And?”

He brought the mug to his mouth, inhaling the invigorating scent that couldn’t compare to his excitement. “*And.*”

Chuckling, Dad slapped him on the back, his eyes lighting up under the fluorescents.

“She’s reopening the gallery.”

Dad gripped his shoulder and jostled him. “Nick, that’s great.”

“Yeah, it is. If nothing’s going on this afternoon, I was thinking about heading out early.”

“After this meeting, you can have the rest of the day. Give her my love.” He winked and squeezed Nick’s shoulder, turning to leave. “We’ll head out at eleven.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nick’s excitement carried him through the morning. He clung to it, masking the nagging ache that something was about to go horribly wrong. Quinn had come a long way. Opened her gallery, smiled, laughed, painted. Overcome her fears—hopefully for good.

She was a loving person who deserved love in return. He was a loving person and wanted to love. Wanted to love Quinn. He prayed she’d let him.



As drills screeched, hammers pounded, and workers yelled, Nick and his father met with the foreman and building owner poring over plans on a makeshift table. After a financial blow, the owner couldn’t budget something as elaborate as the facade they’d planned for his office building.

Listening to their concerns, Nick began drawing pictures in his head. “I can make some adjustments that’ll still be nice and fit your revised budget. Let’s move out front and take a look.”

Current renderings in hand, they walked through the nonexistent wall to the front of the building and over the future

landscaping. Leaving the others behind to talk, Nick moved to get a better view.

The scaffolding rose to the third floor and arched over the opening for the front entrance. He scribbled quick notes in a field notebook, then stilled. With the white clouds, his thoughts drifted to Quinn. He'd stop by Dave's for flowers before heading to the gallery. His heart skipped at the image forming. It'd skipped a million times before, but today was different.

His body jolted like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar when Dad yelled his name. Cringing, Nick spun Dad's way. The foreman jerked Dad back, holding him so he couldn't move. Following Dad's horrified gaze, Nick's head snapped up to see the world come crashing down. A world that went black.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Coffee in hand, hair braided, and paint-stained coveralls donned, Quinn stepped into the wide-open room with honey-colored wood floors and eggshell walls. They'd spent Saturday removing the drop cloths from rows of paintings, setting them back on their easels, and hanging them on the empty hooks in the walls—and sneezing from all the dust. Now, her life's work hung where it was supposed to, and she breathed in deeply, savoring a feeling she'd have a hard time explaining—exhilarating, nerve-racking, euphoric, otherworldly, and oh-so-familiar, like she'd never left.

Like old friends, her paintings had waited, allowing her to heal. Now it seemed they glowed at her return. She strolled through, reacquainting herself with each one. When she reached the front of the building, she picked up the Open sign and hung it in the window.

*Open. Yes, I am. Open for business, to love, to the world.
To new possibilities.*

She spun on her heel, her braid bouncing against her neck, and happy danced to her studio.

Her boss, after hearing she was reopening the gallery, had let her go a week early. Now, she was self-employed again, posting on her social media pages, and receiving welcome-back responses. A grand reopening took shape on the drawing board of her mind. It would take time for clients to start coming back in, but things would get back to normal.

She hesitated at the studio door. Was she really planning a party? It didn't seem possible. It was Nick. It was all him. Her

guiding moon had shone in the dark to lead her to the rising sun. And the sun had risen—for both of them.

That moment in Hope's nursery she'd grappled with fear at the touch of his hand, the brush of his lips on her hair. But no more. She'd have to dig *Hope's Moon* out of storage and hang it.

The large canvas on her studio wall remained hidden behind a drop cloth, a silent monument awaiting its unveiling. She hadn't allowed Nick to uncover it. She'd finish it before letting him see it. They'd replaced her old paints with new ones, and her new brushes waited, bristles up, in an old mason jar.

"It's your turn." Her stomach gave a tug. After a deep breath, she slid the cloth from one corner, pulled as she moved to the other end, and let it slither to the floor.

She backed away and took it all in, the power of its depiction making her shiver. A formidable storm she'd never want to encounter interrupted by a single ray of light attempting to free the dark-enslaved village. The top right-hand corner contained an incomplete patch.

Arms hugged across her chest, she stared at the painting, familiarizing herself with the colors and visualizing her plan to finish. While trying not to think about the day, over a year ago, when she'd added her last brushstrokes.

With a curt nod, she went to work and lost herself for hours.

She used to get caught up in the process, whole days passing without realization. But this time, her stomach alerted her when it was time for lunch. She stepped off the ladder and laid her palette and brush on the worktable. Her hands at the small of her back, she stretched out the kinks and plodded over to the mini fridge.

Nick's ringtone tickled her ear and vibrated her backside. He'd better not be canceling on her. Fingers fumbling, heart rate surging, she laughed at her giddiness and sang out her hello.

The other end of the line was quiet.

"Nick?"

"Quinn, this is Cale." Nick's dad's voice wavered, carrying an urgency.

She pulled her phone away to check the screen. He was calling from Nick's phone. "Cale? Is everything all right?"

Surrounded by memories, she fought her rising fear.

"Nick's being transported to Saint Francis. Will you meet us there?"

Her phone dropped to the floor. She sank to her knees beside it and scooped it up, barely registering the crack in the screen. She could hear Cale moving around, voices in the background. But they were drowned out by the tinkling of the golden bell above the gallery door, flashbacks of two officers entering her gallery. She squeezed her eyes shut, willing the assault away. "The trauma center." They'd taken Brendan

there. Acidic bile rose in her throat. “He’s okay, right? Is he okay?”

“The scaffolding collapsed. He was trapped underneath. We’ll know more when we get him to the hospital. Meet us there, Quinn.”

Flashes of Brendan lying on the table with the carnage of trying to save his life surrounding him manifested in her vision. Cale’s voice made her blink them away.

“Quinn, I have to go. Meet us there. Please. He’s asking for you.”

Asking for her. He could speak. He was alive. “Yes, yes. I’ll be there. I’m leaving right now.”

Her lungs wouldn’t expand. Her shaking hands could hardly disconnect the call. “God, please. Please don’t do this. Please don’t take him too.”

She pushed herself from the hardwood floor, forced air into her lungs, grabbed her purse, and rushed out. She prayed the whole way, broke the speed limit, cursed, screamed. Struggled to breathe.

She’d registered little on the first trip from Cherry Street to Sixty-first and Yale. But today, the road stretched out before her, and the traffic lights refused to turn green. It seemed forever before she could see the cross atop the Pepto-pink building.

Hours short of a week earlier, they’d welcomed life to this hospital. A happy occasion to break the cycle of hell. Now

here she was again, hell taunting her, threatening her. Was God really that cruel?

What's wrong with letting her be happy? What's wrong with Nick getting to be happy? And Cale.

The poor man had lost his wife, had to watch his son lose his, and now... no. *God, please no.* Grinding her teeth, fighting the burning sensation behind her eyes, she assumed the worst. How could she not when the worst was all that ever happened?

She blinked the searing heat from her eyes and blew out a deep breath. For now, Nick was alive, and God willing, he'd stay that way.

Please be willing.

She rounded the corner into the hospital parking lot and jolted to a stop in the first spot she found. The ambulance arrived just before her, cutting off its siren as it entered the unloading area, its lights still flashing red and white. How could this be happening? What great sin had she committed to warrant God taking everyone she loved?

"No, he's not dead. He's *not dead.*" She pushed away the voice who'd warned her about giving her heart away.

Then she jumped out of her truck before the voice convinced her to leave. She half jogged to the building she'd come to hate. Just short of the back of the ambulance, her feet stopped as the doors opened wide.

She wasn't sure what to expect. Brendan had been cut up and bloody. She was not prepared to see that again.

It was like watching a movie—on the outside looking in. The paramedics rolled the gurney out and lowered the wheels to the ground, one of them holding an IV bag. Nick’s light-blue dress shirt was laid open, his strong body somehow frail.

His fingers dug into the black mattress, and his breathing came in struggles beneath the oxygen mask, the silver tank laid beside him. Cuts crisscrossed his face, blood smeared his neck, and bruising spread across his chest.

Cale jumped out beside him, the lines on his face etched deep, keeping one hand on Nick’s leg—an indication to his son he was there. If he’d had a suit jacket on, it was gone, his white dress shirt open at the collar, the sleeves rolled up.

More strength had been required of him than a parent should ever have to give. And here it was being demanded again. But he gave it.

She steeled herself. She’d give it too.

She’d opened her heart to Nick and couldn’t close it. Wouldn’t. No matter what her fear was shouting at her. Leaving now would crush him deeper than any scaffolding. And she wasn’t willing to do that.

She called out to Cale, but her voice caught in her throat. She swallowed, then reached out, and touched his shoulder. “Cale.”

Weary reddened eyes met hers. Then he bent and whispered “She’s here” to Nick as they whisked him into the trauma center, Quinn trying to keep up. Nick’s hand let go of the bed and searched.

She raced to put hers in his. He grasped it hard to either ease his pain or keep her from running—or both.

“I’m here.” Her voice sounded as weak as he looked.

A commanding female voice greeted them at the automatic doors. “Take him to room six. The CT is being prepped.” The nurse lowered her tones into practiced compassion as she nodded to Cale. “Sir, if you’ll come with me, I need to ask you a few questions.”

He eyed her, then Nick, his separation anxiety plain.

The familiar disinfectant smell wasn’t quite enough to cover the sickness. With it so thick, Quinn could taste it. She almost heaved, grasped Nick’s hand even tighter, needing his hand as much as he needed hers.

When the paramedics wheeled him through the glass doors of his room, she had to let go. The warmth from his hand absorbed into her skin as if she still held on.

She stood by as Cale answered questions, but her attention wouldn’t leave Nick or the room full of machines, carts with monitors and cords, shelves with supplies. White and sterile.

They transferred Nick from the gurney to the bed as the paramedic relayed his vitals to a nurse who wrote them down. Another nurse hooked him up to wires and oxygen, injected something into his IV. Hospital staff surrounded him as the paramedics headed out. The glass doors were shut and a curtain pulled over so only a narrow gap remained.

A man, who could only be the doctor, blew by her, his white coat flapping. Her gaze followed him as he shut the

curtain, closing off her view of Nick, closing off her world from her grasp.

Her hands shook, and teeth chattered beneath an assault of helplessness. She pushed thoughts of Brendan away. She'd left him there that day, never to see him again. If she left now, would this be the last time she saw Nick? She clenched her fists and chewed her lip to hold in her sobs.

Cale stepped to her side, embracing her.

She pressed her face into his chest and shuddered.

“He’s going to be okay.” The growl of his voice started in his chest beneath her ear. “He’s going to be okay.”

He was being strong. It’s what parents did.

And Quinn tried not to believe he was lying.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A nurse ushered them to the waiting room. Afternoon light seeped through the windows lining one wall, teasing Quinn with an unobtainable escape. A TV flashed in the corner, silent captions scrolling. The two other families in the room were a mirror of the life she'd already lived, of the life she prayed she'd never live again.

Cale went outside to call Caroline. Quinn sat in a chair as far from everyone as she could and folded her legs up under her chin. She laid her cheek on her knees, her braid snaking around her neck, and waited. The minutes ticked by like hours, and she wished she hadn't left her phone in the truck.

Claire, Dad, Mom. She needed somebody.

"Coffee?" His voice soft, Cale held out a paper cup, steam rising from the black liquid.

Coffee. She needed coffee.

Her heart smiling at the gesture, she accepted the cup and braved a sip. She hadn't realized how cold she was until the coffee warmed her from the inside out. "Thank you."

He sat in the chair beside her, his thumb tapping the rim of his cup. "I'd give you my coat, but I seem to have left it somewhere."

Somehow, the tight grip she held on herself loosened. "I know you would." Nick always gave her his coat, caring more for her comfort than his. A good father raises a good son.

Cale blew out a breath before setting his cup on the table. Elbows on his knees, he clasped his hands so tight his

knuckles whitened and his fingertips reddened.

He was anguished. And she was being selfish. He was doing his best to comfort her when it was *his* son behind those glass doors, *him* helpless in saving the life of *his* child. She knew what that felt like, how it hurt to the core of human existence. She laid her hand on his shoulder. “He’s going to be okay.”

Her words were forced and unconvincing, but he grinned sideways at her, picked up his coffee, and slumped in his chair. “When Julia died, I had trouble sleeping. I’d sit up until two, three o’clock in the morning, staring at the walls.”

Quinn could relate.

“It made the days difficult, especially with two young kids. I got up to two pots a day of this stuff.” He seemed to contemplate taking a drink, then with a deep sigh, set his cup back on the table. “I’m sorry. I appreciate you coming. I know it can’t be easy for you to be here again.”

No words could express how this place made her feel. She wanted to run—run so far away she couldn’t remember how to get back. Her throat closed, making her fight to speak. “I don’t want to be here.” She laid her hand on his arm and imparted Claire’s wisdom. “But my guess is, neither do you.”

His hand was warm on top of hers. “When I was in the ambulance with Nick, he wanted me to call you. He didn’t care what was happening to him—he just wanted me to make sure you were okay.” He sniffed and blinked away his tears, squeezing her hand. “Maybe he knew we’d need each other.”

A tear dropped onto her paint-smearred denim overalls. How like Nick to be crushed under a pile of pipe and wood planks and worry more for them than himself.

Guilt drowned her like floodwaters. Terrible thoughts of leaving had gone through her mind, were still going through her mind. She wiped away another tear, gulped her coffee, and sneaked a peek at the window.

Soon Caroline came sweeping in. Quinn said enough to be polite, but let Caroline and Cale visit.

Their coffee long gone, it seemed like hours before the door back to the rooms opened and a nurse in teal scrubs, hair in a bun, emerged. “Mr. James?”

They jumped up as she approached.

“Nick is stable.”

Quinn fought to keep her knees from failing.

Caroline watched her dad but put her hand on Quinn’s arm. “When can we see him?”

“They’re getting ready to move him to ICU. You’re welcome to go to the waiting room there.” The nurse slid her hands into her scrub pockets and made eye contact with Cale. “But the doctor would like to speak with you before he goes.”

Caroline hugged her dad. “I’ll wait for you upstairs.” Then she hugged Quinn and whispered in her ear. “Go to him. He needs you.”

A sister only wanting what was good for her brother, but did she know what she was asking? Quinn pursed her lips and

followed Cale.

At Nick's room, the doctor was coming out. He raised both hands as if acknowledging help from above. "He's a lucky guy. With the force he took to the chest, he shouldn't have been so lucky. Someone's looking out for him."

God doesn't like to be called Someone. Quinn and Cale both exhaled at the same time.

The doctor continued like he was putting together a grocery list. "Two broken ribs, a fractured ulna in his right arm, and a collapsed lung. We've inserted a chest tube, and he's breathing much better now. The CT will show if there's damage to his heart, but the results won't be back until tomorrow."

"His heart?" Quinn covered her mouth as Cale tucked her under his arm.

"We'll know more tomorrow. He'll be in ICU for close observation for a couple of days. Then we'll move him to a regular room, but for now, he's stable and doing well. He's been given pain medication that will make him drowsy, so he'll be loopy." He pursed his lips. "I'm bending the rules, but he's been asking for both of you." He pointed his thumb toward Nick's room with a wink, shook Cale's hand, and strode to the nurses' station.

The horrific scene from her past haunted her. Quinn tried to let Cale go in first, afraid of what she'd see, but he held the curtain back for her and motioned her in. Just like a James. Did they have to be so polite?

Nick was so still, his eyes closed. Unlike Brendan, they'd cleaned up the blood. His skin still held color, and she imagined its warmth if she touched it. The laceration on his right temple had been glued, the scratches on his left cheek treated. She moved closer and matched her breathing to the steady rise and fall of his chest.

Alive.

Nothing else mattered. Not his right arm stabilized with a splint wrapped in cotton and Ace bandages against his stomach, not the tube sticking out beneath his elbow, not the IV in his other arm or the heart monitor wires seeming to sprout from everywhere.

He was alive. And though her bruises were unseen, she was alive too.

When she'd last seen so many tubes and wires, the machines had been silent. Now, they were all in motion, doing what they were meant to do, gently humming and beeping.

The doctor had said he was lucky, but they were still awaiting tests. With her track record, it couldn't be good.

Cale went to his son's side, and Nick's eyes flickered open as Cale took hold of his hand and laid his other on his forehead. "Hey, son."

"Dad." Cale bent to hear Nick's intoxicated whispers. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry about it. You're going to be fine. Soon, we'll be taking you home. You have plans to finish for the church. Don't think I'm letting you out of that."

Nick smiled on one side at his dad's jest, and his eyes closed again.

"I love you." Cale kissed his son's forehead, bringing a fresh sting to her eyes. "Someone's here to see you."

A tear migrated down her cheek when Cale touched her shoulder, nudging her along.

"I'll leave you two alone."

She sucked in a breath. "You shouldn't leave."

He patted her shoulder, then seeming to change his mind, pulled her in close instead, and whispered a thank you into her hair. Louder, he said, "He's going to be okay."

As Cale released her and exited the room, Nick looked at her through half-closed eyes. Those eyes, always so bright, were now dark and listless. She moved closer, wanting to touch him, but unsure where. Everything had to hurt.

With some difficulty, he lifted his splinted arm. She took his hand and kissed his scabbed-over knuckle where he'd hit the wall.

"I was"—low and raspy, his voice cut into the room—"afraid you wouldn't come."

I'll always be here for you. Could she say the words he'd spoken to her? She put her cheek against his and whispered, "I thought I'd lost you."

"Q. I'm sorry." His cheek moved against hers with wonderful life, his warm breath mingled with hers.

She'd wanted him to be with her, to share her life. She'd thought she could do it, but she was beginning to question her decision. "You should rest."

"St-ay..." His voice faded out, and his eyes wouldn't stay open. He slipped off to sleep, saving her from having to give an answer.

There was an answer fear had convinced her she should give and an answer she wanted to give.



As Quinn left the room, Cale stood from the chair beside the glass door. He looked tired, beaten down, haggard. It was like looking in a mirror.

"He's asleep."

As she spoke, two men in light-green scrubs entered the room and began prepping Nick to be moved. The nurse who'd spoken to Cale approached again. "Why don't I show you the way to the ICU lounge. You'll be more comfortable there."

They followed her through the waiting room and down a long hallway to the elevators at the front entrance. Beyond the hospital's all-window frontage, the shadows suggested evening's approach. Quinn couldn't consult her phone since she'd left it in the truck. Not smart in the big city, but at this point, it was the least of her worries.

Cale had his and Nick's, but she didn't want to ask.

As they passed by the welcome desk, Quinn did a double take at the painting high up on the wall. She hadn't noticed it when she'd come to see Kaitlyn. The sun was just coming up

over the Grand Canyon, washing the sky in a golden glow, the valley below just coming into view. In the bottom right-hand corner, her signature leaped from the canvas.

She'd donated the piece to the hospital foundation years ago to remind people the sun does rise. Now it mocked her. The sun didn't always rise. It may hang in the sky every day, but it didn't always cast its light on everybody. Especially not her.

"All right." The nurse pivoted to face them, a little too chipper as she rubbed her hands together. "If you'll take the elevator to the third floor, there's a nurse's station just to the left. They'll point you in the right direction, and someone will come get you when he arrives and gets settled."

Cale pushed the button as the nurse receded back down the hallway, her bun bouncing.

A restlessness crept over Quinn before the elevator doors could open. It was hard to breathe, and she wouldn't find fresh air in the elevator. "I-I left my purse in the truck. I should get it."

Cale, looking like Nick with his hands in his pockets, turned to her with glazed eyes. "Go home, Quinn. Get some rest. You've had enough of this place. I wanted him to know you were here. You've done that."

Guilt crushed her shoulders. Quinn was ready to shed its burden. She wrapped her arms around him. It must've caught him off guard because he took a few seconds to return the embrace. Then she pulled away, searching his eyes. "He's going to be okay, right?"

“Of course he is.”

“Don’t. Don’t do that.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Do what?”

“Sugarcoat it. Is he going to be okay?” She cringed at her whine.

He hesitated, closed his eyes, and rubbed between them. With his head dipped down, he said, “I don’t know.” The day’s tension released with his heavy breath. “But we’ll know more tomorrow. So, we’ll hang on until then.”

As his eyes asked her to agree with him, she nodded, her mind creeping to the unknown test results. Knots twisted in her gut, tied around her heart and lungs.

With his thumb, he wiped a tear from her cheek, one she hadn’t known she’d let escape. He rested both hands on her shoulders, each one adding more weight to the guilt. “Will you come back tomorrow?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out.

He held up his hand. “Don’t answer now. Sleep on it.”

The elevator door opened, and he disappeared as the door closed. She glanced at the button panel, but couldn’t press the up arrow. One step back, then another. She tried not to hurry away, but outside, she broke into a run and didn’t stop until she reached her truck.

Hands flat against the door, she gulped air. Her gulps turned into gasps, and she cried out, her wail echoing through the parking garage. She slapped a hand over her mouth so no

passersby would hear. With her heart ripping, the ground shifted beneath her feet. Afraid the pavement would rise up to meet her, she grabbed her key fob from her pocket. With shaky fingers, she pressed the unlock button and climbed in, then slammed the door behind her.

That's when she let go. And screamed. The shriek burned her lungs. She screamed again and again. She screamed for Brendan and Hope, for Cale and Julia, for Nick and Lauren. For all the people throughout history who'd suffered meaningless loss.

No, she would not be back tomorrow. No, she would not suffer another loss. She wouldn't be there to see it. Ever again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Ceiling tile after ceiling tile passed through Nick's vision, interrupted by patches of darkness when his eyes closed. Someone said where they were going. But he couldn't form his thoughts enough to remember, and he was too hazy to care. The lights blended, blinding and fuzzy at their edges. Two blurred faces accompanied him, floating on light-green smears.

Voices spoke above him, far away and muffled. Other voices were in and out. But the voice he heard clearly over and over was Quinn's. She wasn't there, her soft voice only in his head. *I thought I'd lost you.*

Her words were a stabbing pain the meds couldn't take away, her agony familiar, but now, *he'd* caused her pain. He never wanted to. He wanted to be her safe place, to show her bad things didn't always happen. People could come back from the misery of loss.

And now this. He'd been the unlucky soul at the bottom of a heap of scaffolding, but Quinn was the one who'd been crushed.

He jolted awake when his bed came to a stop. Then closed his eyes to block out the flurry as machines were hooked up, his vitals taken. When he reopened them, more floating heads came and went. A pat jostled his arm, and a voice told him he was in ICU and they'd informed his dad. After the floating heads left, he closed his eyes and listened to the soft beeping, felt the oxygen blowing up his nostrils. His body was light, and he yearned for sleep.

He let his body float away and the quiet claim him. Was this what death felt like? Drift away and never wake up? It seemed only two seconds before the weight of a hand warmed his arm. Quinn?

He must've spoken her name.

Dad's voice entered the void. "I sent her home, son."

Nick opened weighted lids and strained to focus.

"She was exhausted. But she'll be back tomorrow. Rest for now. Just rest."

Even with Dad a blur, Nick could still see the worry he'd caused lining his face. "What'd the doctor say?"

At least those were the words he attempted. The meds had his mind all messed up, and his lips and tongue wouldn't work together.

"He said we'd know more tomorrow. Are you in pain? Do you hurt?"

"Jus' presss—sure." He groaned when his whisper slurred.

"They'll give you more pain meds here in a bit."

"No." It was the plainest word he'd spoken yet—at least it sounded plain to him. "No m—more. I need... wake up." His arms were heavy as he moved them, like swimming through tar.

"You *need* rest." His dad's hands were on his good arm and shoulder, holding him down. The tightness in his chest told Nick he'd moved more than he should, so he relaxed.

"The pain meds are so you can breathe deeper."

Why couldn't he breathe? It seemed like he should know.

Dad pointed to his own rib cage just under his right arm.
“Broken ribs.”

The scaffolding. Nick shut his eyes. They almost didn't come back open. “Where... Quinn?” Dad had said, but Nick couldn't remember, could only visualize her standing over him crying.

“She'll be here tomorrow.” Nick had heard that tone before, shortly after his mother had died. A scared little boy being comforted by his father. A father who'd had little energy left to do so, but did it anyway.

Not wanting to cause any more grief, Nick took as deep a breath as he could, and his body seemed to meld into the bedsheets. A vision of Quinn reaching out to him as he fell into a deep dark hole crossed his eyelids. He reached out, but she was too far. The tunnel grew longer. Her face contorted. Her mouth opened in a silent scream.

His body tensed, and his eyelids fluttered open, his breaths coming in gasps. Pain seared across his chest. Good thing the hand holding his belonged to Dad. He'd have crushed Quinn's bones. Dad gripped him back, steadying him, the weight of his other hand on his shoulder relaxing him. His heart slowed again, and the pain dulled. Thank God it had only been a dream.

But was it?

He wanted to see Quinn. Needed to see her. But she didn't need to see him. Not like this. She'd seen too much of the

inside of this hospital. The thought slammed him harder than scaffolding could ever hit. What was he thinking having her come here?

What a purely selfish thing to do.

Another voice was speaking to Dad. Visiting hours were almost over. More meds. Something to help him sleep. Nick fought to open his eyes, to object, but by the time he got them open, Dad was standing over him. “They’re making me go home now, son. I’ll call Quinn and let her know what time she can come in the morning.”

The room seemed to spin as Nick shook his head. He squeezed his eyes shut and waited for his eyes to stop going around in his head like in some cartoon. Then he pried them open to slits. “Tell her not to come.”

“I thought you wanted her here?”

“Too much... for her.”

Dad put his hand on his arm. “Maybe you’re right. I’ll be back tomorrow. I love you, son.”

A voice came from near his head. “This will help him sleep, and we’ll take good care of him through the night.”

A heavy sigh came from his dad’s direction as the light snuffed out, and the day, for Nick, was over.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Quinn drove to her parents' house, shoulders hunched, grip clenched, teeth grinding. She drove by houses where friends used to live and down streets where they used to play. If only life could be that happy again, when your only worry was coming in past curfew and getting the stink eye from your dad.

Now she lived in a world of crumbling dreams and aching hearts.

She needed Mom. She couldn't call Claire. She'd get an earful she didn't want. Would it be any better going to Mom? No. Of course it wouldn't. But she *needed* her.

Mom must've seen her out the kitchen window because she met her at the door. Quinn didn't try to mask her bloodshot eyes. Mom's smile disappeared. "Are you all right? Come inside."

Hands on her shoulders, Mom ushered her to the couch. Trying not to have a mental breakdown, Quinn let her words tumble out. The call from Cale, the trauma room, the fear that wouldn't let her go, the decision not to go back.

Mom sat still and quiet, rubbing her hand in small circles across Quinn's back the whole time. Until the last. Her hand stopped, and the tension began to mount.

"Kaitlyn Quinn Hawkins!"

Quinn recoiled at the name she hadn't heard since she was a girl. Her breath caught and almost didn't start up again. Then her cheeks heated, and her chin rose. "My name is Quinn Alexander."

“Then start acting like it.” Mom stood and faced Quinn. “That man has been there for you. Stood by and let you heal. He’s waited, even denied his love for you until *you* were ready. And now you would abandon him when he needs you? You *are* going back. Life is tough sometimes. Get over it. Oh!” She slapped a hand to her mouth. But she couldn’t take it back.

Dad came in through the garage entrance, his brows crinkling up toward the glasses perched on his head. “What’s all the yelling about?”

Quinn stormed into her childhood bedroom. Mom called after her, but Quinn didn’t turn around. She slammed the door and fell face-first onto her bed, balled her floral comforter into her fists, and pressed her face into her pillow to smother a scream. Not such a good idea. Her throat hurt from all the screaming she’d already done.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she regretted acting like a high school girl. Dad had removed her door once because she’d slammed it. She’d never done it again for fear of not having a place to herself.

She pounded her bed with her fist. She *was* acting like little Kaitlyn Hawkins. The girl who used to kick and scream if she didn’t get her way. She’d grown out of that. Hadn’t she?

How long would they keep soothing her and getting her through the moments? Wouldn’t they get tired of it? There’d be a time when they broke, and for her mother, it was today.

Getting herself under control, Quinn rolled over and stared at the ceiling, the glow-in-the-dark stars grungy in this light.

Her mother's words were a slap in the face—a well-deserved one.

God, what am I doing?

Numb and tired, she feared slipping back into the abyss. The one place she didn't ever want to go again. She'd wanted a normal life. Well, this was pretty normal. Bad things happened.

But so did good things. Nick was a good thing.

Since Cafe Cubana when he'd asked for her number for those I'm-having-issues moments, he'd always been a friend. Now, she was being a crappy friend in return.

This behavior wasn't Quinn Alexander. This had never been her—and she'd had enough. Enough pain, enough letting her fears control her, enough focusing on herself. By running away, she wasn't just hurting herself. She was hurting Nick.

He was a part of her whether she'd planned it or not. He had her heart. And she didn't want it back.

She bolted upright to the side of her bed.

She didn't want it back.

Nick was lying in a hospital bed, waiting for the doctor to tell him whether he'd be okay, and she didn't want it back.

What she did want was to call him, talk to him. To make sure he was okay, that he knew he wasn't alone.

Mom was right. Life happened, had been happening to everyone all over the world since the dawn of time. She wasn't the first to lose a child, the first to lose a husband.

People like Mrs. LaRue and countless others had found it within themselves to give their love to someone else, to accept love. Quinn wanted to heal, even though she could without ever loving again. But life was empty without love, a lonely and dark place—an abyss.

She drew in a deep breath and let it out, gaining control. Then stood, smoothed stray wisps back into her braid, and squared her shoulders. Life *was* tough. But she was still alive. And so was Nick.

She twisted the doorknob to the room she'd grown up in. In the sixth grade, she'd changed her name to Quinn. As she opened the door, she left Kaitlyn behind and went to apologize to her mother.

Dad was sitting at the kitchen table with her, his massive hand covering hers. His hands had always been healing hands—they could fix anything. But this was something only Quinn could heal. “Mom?”

Mom stood to face her. “Oh, Quinn, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

Her parents had been living through a hidden storm, one sweeping their daughter to a different death.

As Quinn took her mother’s shoulders in her hands, a gasping breath escaped her lungs. She pulled her into an embrace. “Yes, you should have.”

Mom let out a pent-up breath. Quinn reached out for Dad’s hand and squeezed it tight. He stood and put his arms around

them both, and they stood there, holding one another up, taking comfort from each other.

There in that kitchen—the kitchen where she'd lost her first tooth, where Mom had sewn up the teddy bear the dog ripped to shreds, where they'd met countless boyfriends and ate ice cream after each breakup, where she'd introduced them to Brendan and later told them she was pregnant with Hope—she told them, “Because you're right. You've always been right. I love Nick, and I won't let fear win.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Sunlight cast a red glow on the backs of Quinn's eyelids. She'd forgotten to pull the blinds closed. She pried her sticky eyelids open and groaned. Apparently, she'd forgotten to go home as well. She and her mom had stayed up talking long into the night, and she'd fallen asleep still fully clothed atop her floral bedspread, covered only with the afghan from the living room couch.

The smell of fresh-brewed coffee and homemade pancakes had her stomach doing its own groaning. She hadn't eaten since breakfast the day before. No wonder she was making poor decisions. So many poor decisions.

She pushed back the afghan and scooted to the side of the bed, propping her feet on the bedframe, then stretched and caught her reflection in her dresser mirror. Dark circles ringed her eyes, and her hair stuck out every which way from her braid.

Not as bad as before. After Brendan died, she wasn't eating much and was running every chance she got. She'd grown gaunt and unhealthy. Now, she just looked tired.

Nick had been good for her. Because of him, they both had the friend they needed. " 'And isn't that a lovely way to begin?' "

She warmed as she repeated Mrs. LaRue's wisdom. They'd missed Monday night. She'd better call Dr. Holiday so he wouldn't worry about Nick.

Her phone, sitting on her nightstand, displayed a few minutes past eight. She breathed deep and blew out her breath. Today, she'd deal with life. She'd be the friend she'd promised to be and continue in the relationship she'd started—or he'd started. Who knew anymore?

With her braid yanked out and a ponytail taking its place, she slid her phone into her back pocket and dragged her feet to the kitchen.

Mom flipped pancakes on the griddle. “I thought you might be hungry. They're chocolate chip.”

“Starving actually. Mmm, my favorite.” She edged closer and drew Mom into a side hug, resting her head against Mom's shoulder. Her stomach growled again as she breathed in the warm sweet scent. “You know I only eat these here? I won't eat them anywhere else.”

Mom tipped her head against the top of Quinn's, then flipped another bubbly pancake. “I haven't made them in a long time.”

“Not even for Dad?”

“Just for you, baby.”

Quinn snickered, released her mom, and moved to grab a stack of plates.

“Good morning, precious girl.” From his place at the table, Dad crinkled the paper as he lowered it, brown eyes big behind his reading glasses.

Heart bursting, she scooted across the room and put the plates on the table before wrapping an arm around his sturdy

shoulders. “Why aren’t you at work?”

He patted the arm she’d put around him. “I wanted to make sure you were okay before I left.”

He glared at her over his reading glasses as she sank sideways into the chair next to his.

“So how about it?” He rested his hand on her knee, and she wrapped hers around it. “Are you okay?”

She nodded as Mom set a plate of steaming pancakes on the table and sat across from them. When Quinn had gotten her chance to be normal, to be okay, she’d balked. Time to grow up. She couldn’t always be a source of worry for them. “I’m sorry about last night.”

“Quinn.” Dad slid off his glasses and laid them atop his folded paper, then rested his arm on his chairback and gave her big daddy eyes. “You’ve been through hell and back. And it wasn’t a short trip. Yesterday couldn’t have been easy for you.”

Her heart clenched at the memory. “It wasn’t. Not one single bit. But it’s no excuse to not be there for Nick.”

“And we will always be here for you. You’ll never be alone.” Mom reached across the table to take their hands. “Pete, please bless these sweet treats we’re calling breakfast.”

They bowed their heads as Dad prayed. “Oh, Lord, Our God, we thank you for this day. We praise you for sparing Nick and ask that you heal his body. And please, Lord, continue to heal these young hearts of the grief they suffer. Thank you for providing all we need. In Jesus’s name, amen.”

Quinn squeezed Dad's hand. "Thanks, Daddy."

Dad winked at her. "Now, eat your pancakes."

Quinn, smiling and at ease, hauled two pancakes to her plate. Then her phone buzzed.

Ignoring the no-phones-at-the-table rule, she answered and pent-up questions burst free. "Cale, how's Nick? Have you talked to him this morning? What did the doctor say?"

"He's doing well." Strong and steady as his son's, Cale's voice soothed. "The nurse said he's been talking to her, making her laugh."

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Sounds like Nick."

"They still have him hyped up on pain meds, not as much as last night, but he's still drowsy and speaking incoherently."

Apparently, Nick had taken the brunt of the hit to his right side, his heart escaping injury. Despite his strength, Cale's voice shook as he shared the doctor's news. She softened her grip on the phone, on herself, wanting to reach out and touch the man's hand. "And how are you?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll get through this just fine. What about you, kiddo?"

She cast a guilty smile to her parents. "Since the initial shock's worn off, I'm a lot better. What time can I go up there? Does he need me to bring him anything?"

"Quinn..."

Her muscles tensed at his tone.

“Maybe you should give him a couple of days, wait until he’s in a regular room before you go see him again.”

She sprang from her seat, screeching the chair across the tile and earning worried glances. “What? Why?” Her fingers pinched tight around the slim phone as she stepped a few feet away. “He’s okay, right?”

“He’s going to be just fine. No sugarcoat.” His chuckle eased her worry. “He’s worried about you. It’s not that he doesn’t want to see you. He does.”

Nick was protecting her. Or maybe protecting himself, which she didn’t blame him. Well, not this time. “Cale, what time do visiting hours start?”

A deep breath whistled through the speakers. “I was hoping you’d ask.”



Quinn finished her pancakes, hugged and kissed her parents, and went home to shower. Visiting hours began at eleven, and she didn’t want to be late.

The familiar hospital smell didn’t bother her this time, the elevator wasn’t confining, and her painting wasn’t so daunting. She’d greeted it with a smile. Today, the sun was rising.

She stepped out of the elevator and approached the ICU. They buzzed her in even though she was early, then directed her to his room.

She edged past the same style sliding glass door with its curtain waiting to be pulled over for privacy. Fewer big machines loomed over Nick here, but the small ones with

tubes and wires still had their claws in his body. He slept, his chest rising and falling, his heart monitor tracking a steady beat.

With her heart beating out of her chest, she swallowed hard and padded to his left side, determined to get through this for him. She almost groaned at the selfish thought. After all, *he* was the one who had something to get through.

Planting her feet firmly, she slipped her hand into his. His fingers jerked at her touch. With her other hand, she touched his forearm. His shoulders twitched, and his eyebrows rose as if he were trying to open his eyes.

A grimace contorted his face with his deep breath, but a hoarse groan cut it short. His lips parted, and he fought his heavy eyelids open as if to determine if she was there.

“Quinn?”

“It’s me. I’m here.” She slid her hand up his arm to his biceps.

He narrowed his glazed eyes. “You aren’t supposed to be here. Didn’t Dad tell you?”

“He may have mentioned it. I’m fine, Nick. I want to be here.”

“No.” The word stabbed her heart. His hand worked to rid itself of hers. “I don’t want you here. Go home.”

The line on the monitor flicked faster.

“Nick, I’m okay. I want to be here for you.”

“Get out. You’ll just leave again.” He wouldn’t look at her. Beneath the bandages, his skin mottled red, and his face twisted into hard lines. “I want you to leave.”

Fear shot through her veins, paralyzing her. “I—I don’t understand.”

“Get.” He tried to sit up. “*Out.*”

A tremor of shock jolted through her, freeing her muscles to move.

“What is going on in here?” A nurse burst into the room. She crossed to him and gripped his shoulders, pushing him back down on the bed.

Palms out, Quinn backed toward the door. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m leaving.”

“I knew you would.” Low and gravelly, the growl chased her.

She flinched at his words, hugged her purse to her, and fled the unit. She burst through the ICU door and collided with Cale.

“Quinn? What—Oh, honey...” He grasped her shoulders, steadying her, bending to make eye contact. “What happened?”

“I shouldn’t have come.” His hands on her arms added to the weight pressing on her. She couldn’t stop shaking. “He doesn’t want me here.”

His tense body physically relaxed. The poor man. Perhaps he thought something had gone wrong with Nick. “It’s the pain

meds. He wants you here. I know he does.”

She slid away from the weight of his hands, ducked her head from the pressure of his eyes. “Whatever he wants, it’s not good for him for me to be here right now.”

“I’m sorry, Quinn.” Cale cleared his throat. “I thought it would be good for both of you.”

“It’s not your fault.” Her body ached from being tense. “I’m going home.”

“I’ll keep you informed of his progress and call when he’s out of ICU. They’ll have him off the harsh meds, and he’ll be back to normal.” He touched her shoulder. “He’ll want to see you.”

If she spoke, no words would come out, so she hurried to the elevators. Too numb to notice if they made her feel claustrophobic, she pressed herself against the back wall, thankful she was alone. He didn’t want her. Lie! He didn’t want her *here*. That was all. Or maybe he didn’t want her. How much was the meds and how much was him?

Better to be without, than to live with the pain. Wasn’t that how she’d been all this time? Maybe he was realizing the same.

She fought the urge to sink to the floor, relieved when the doors opened and released her into the world.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The only sound in Nick's room was the gentle whirring of the machine with a direct line to his lungs. Even the TV hanging in the corner played its soap operas on mute.

His room was too quiet, and his thoughts too loud.

Out of ICU, he sat almost erect against his pillows, glaring at the late morning light probing the room in slatted planes through the vertical blinds. The silent TV went black with the punch of a button. The silence of his private room pressed in on him. He considered the patient call light, his only communication with the world. But they couldn't give him what he needed.

He flexed his left hand, his cast keeping his right hand immobile, those fingers and thumb sticking out from the plaster like turtle legs, and his elbow stationary. Drawing was out for a while. He'd been cognizant enough to refuse the next dose of make-you-an-angry-lunatic pain meds. They'd started him on ibuprofen instead. Like toffee, it was the safe bet. He curled his free hand into a tight fist, his nails biting into his skin.

She'd been there. And he'd said some pretty bad things to her. He had no memory of what, reality lost to a white blur of bright lights and faraway voices, a warm hand in his. When she came back, he'd grovel for forgiveness—*if* she came back.

Poor Quinn. If the outcome had been worse... Well, he couldn't think about what it would've done to his father or Quinn.

The latch clicked as the door opened. Another nurse checking in. The breath rushed from his lungs, leaving him struggling to refill them. Quinn, uncertain and fearful, peeked around the door. *He'd* done that. Said things that made her look like that.

She hung back in the doorway. “Your dad said you were doing better, but if you want me to go...”

“No. Please.” He rose too far and racked himself with pain. He stifled a groan and clenched his teeth, almost wanting the stronger meds. “Please stay.”

She rushed to his side, throwing her purse into the chair next to the bed, fear now a ghost on her face. “Don’t move. What can I do? Can I call someone?”

Closing his eyes, he could only lean against his pillows and try to breathe. When the pain passed, he reopened them and reached for her hand. “You’re the only one I need.”

She perched on the bed and wrapped his hand in hers. She focused on their hands. He gazed at her. The pain in her eyes ran deep and hurt him worse than the broken ribs and bruised chest. He ached to take her in his arms and hold her against him, would have if not for his injuries and the thick tube hanging out of him.

“Quinn, I am so sorry.” Wouldn’t she look at him? “I said some things. Some awful things. It doesn’t make it better, but I don’t remember any of it.”

Soft amber eyes met his. Gentle fingers squeezed. “It wasn’t you. I’m glad you’re yourself again.”

Pain or no, he wanted her close. “Come here.”

When he drew her to him, she braced an elbow on his pillows and tucked her other arm under her, laying her head on his shoulder. He stiffened against the pain as he stretched his right arm over his chest to hold her.

Her body tensed, and she tried to pull away.

“Stay, stay, stay. It’s worth it.” He gasped in small breaths around his smile.

She traced his jawline with her fingers, making his skin tingle.

He brushed his fingers through her hair and lifted her chin with his turtle hand to catch her lips with his. He hadn’t forgotten the way her lips tasted, but he’d missed them. He’d missed her. He may not remember the last couple of days, but they’d seemed like an eternity of darkness. He rested his forehead against hers. “Stay with me. Please don’t let this change your mind. I don’t want to lose you.”

She pressed her lips to his again, not the gentle kiss from the balcony, but a hard longing kiss he wanted to get lost in, never come back from. Her hand slid up and around his neck, barely brushing the edge of his bruises.

He tensed but held her to him. Ignoring all pain, he held her closer.

He wanted to sweep her away and protect her. To guard her from the world. It was impossible, but he’d die trying.

When they pulled away, he touched her warm cheek with his fingertips. “I’m sorry I’ve put you through this.”

Her smile was a painting all its own. “Yeah, well, the next time you want to *bury* yourself in your work, can we at least talk about it?”

A sharp pain in his ribs cut his laugh short. “Oh. Don’t make me laugh.”

Her hand went to his face. Her lips followed. “I’m sorry.”

“I hope I’m interrupting something.” Dad came in the door and shook a large bag. The Boston Deli’s pink pig on the side of the brown paper.

She eased back from him, her smile feeding his. He dragged his gaze from hers. “If you brought a Reuben on rye, I’ll forgive you.”

“Not only a Reuben on rye.” He handed the brown-paper-wrapped sandwich to him. Then passed another to Quinn, who wiped a tear from the corner of her eye before taking it. “A turkey and Swiss for the lady.”

As they ate, the warmth Quinn brought to the room soothed the pain in his chest, and Nick’s body relaxed. He watched her talk to Dad. They’d grown closer while he was in the land of the lost. At least one good thing had come of this. Would there be more?

She hadn’t answered him. Hadn’t said she’d stay. Her kiss was convincing, but he needed words. But she’d come back—as she always had.

He’d lost three days with her, days he hadn’t been there to help her through.

God willing, he’d never be away from her again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Quinn stepped into the elevator and punched the button for the seventeenth floor. Nick's doctor had declared him well enough to go home and released him after only one day out of ICU. When Cale let her know they'd be home by early afternoon, she'd offered to cook. She shifted her bag of groceries as the elevator transported her into the sky of the city she'd always called home. Being in this elevator again, she couldn't help but think of their balcony kiss—or her fearful descent afterward.

Her shoulders hunched up. Having given in to her flight side instead of staying to fight still bothered her.

Worse, it still bothered Nick.

The chrome doors opened into the elevator bank, and she stepped into the black-and-white tiled hallway and headed to the door with 17A gleaming under the interior lights. She knocked and waited.

At the faint sound of shoes on the hardwood entryway, she took a step back. The gold ochre door swung wide, and Caroline burst through with a squeal. “Quinn!” She jostled Quinn, bag and all, into a tight hug, rocking her as she whispered in her ear. “I'm so glad you're here. Nick's been looking forward to seeing you.”

“He said that?”

“Mmm... He's been fidgety and mentions you quite often.”

Good. She couldn't keep her thoughts from him either.

“Come on in, Quinn.” Cale came to the door, drying his hands on a dishtowel. “Here, let me take that.” Grocery bag in hand, he went back into the apartment.

Caroline stayed at the door not following them in. “Well, I have to go.”

“You’re coming back for dinner, right?”

“Uh, I have a... a thing tonight.”

A thing? Quinn tilted her head.

“A my-brother-needs-to-be-alone-with-his-girlfriend thing.” Caroline winked, then shouted her goodbye to the guys and waltzed down the hall to the elevator.

Girlfriend. Hearing it verbalized was a dose of reality. Quinn rubbed her arms with mixed feelings—relief Caroline wasn’t returning and dread Cale would make a similar excuse. Alone time might be nice. *The* conversation wouldn’t be.

She hadn’t answered when he’d asked her to stay. She’d kissed him, which was great in the moment but wasn’t an answer. Not the words she needed to say.

She closed the door, dropped her purse on the entry table, and walked into the apartment. Cale was in the kitchen unloading groceries. “He’s in his room if you want to go back.”

Not being in high school anymore, she shouldn’t have felt weird going to Nick’s bedroom with his dad there, but she did. With an inaudible thanks, she slipped down the hall, through his door, and met him coming from his bathroom. His movements slow, tiredness seemed to reach his bones while he

tried to pull a light-blue tee over his cast, without much success. She sucked in a sharp breath at the entirety of his bruising. Dark purple and black patches marbled his right arm tucking into his cast and wrapped from his back around his right side and across his chest, ending just short of going around his left side, making his defined muscles look like storm clouds.

Seeing her, he set to getting his shirt over his head as quickly as possible and thrusting his good arm through the other armhole.

Staring would not help. “Should you be up?”

“I can finally go to the bathroom by myself.” A strained chuckle cut into his normal sarcasm. “Yes, I should be up.”

“Here, let me.” With tender hands, she smoothed his tangled-up shirt down to his waist, the color setting off the blue in his half-closed eyes. Not wanting to move away, she looped her fingers into the waistband of his gym shorts. “You know you don’t have to cover up for me. Bruises make you look tough.”

He held up his fists like a boxer. “I could take you out.”

She giggled. “I wouldn’t bet on it.”

His fingers gentle, he pushed her hair behind her ear with his casted hand, his other warm on her arm. “I’m sorry I scared you, sorry I said mean things.”

“You’ve already apologized. I’ve already forgiven.” When he opened his mouth, she held her finger to his lips, lifted her

chin, and kissed him. The electricity zapping through her called out for more, but she couldn't risk hurting him.

His casted fingers brushed through her hair as his lips worked with hers. His other hand trailed down her arm to take hold of her hand. He eased back, and for the second he looked at her, she could see the ghost of self-loathing still haunted him.

He dropped his gaze. "We should help Dad."

She leaned in to look him in the eye. "I'll help Dad. You'll rest."

She accompanied him back to the living room. He stopped twice to breathe before making it to the couch. Despite trying not to react to his pain, she cringed every time he cringed.

Aftercare papers from the hospital, a bottle of ibuprofen, a blister pack of antibiotics, and a bottle of water now covered the architecture magazines on the glass coffee table. He grimaced, the glue on his right temple wrinkling as he pulled his legs up and grimaced again while he took a semi-deep breath. He was supposed to be taking deep breaths to prevent pneumonia, but it had to be hard without the stronger pain pills and only four ibuprofen every four hours.

She appreciated his gallant reasons and bravery.

Cale came out of the kitchen and tossed his towel on the counter. "Well, I've cleaned up everything that needed cleaning. I started a load of laundry. Quinn, would you mind putting them in the dryer here in a bit?"

Nick narrowed his eyes. "Where are you going?"

And here it was. His excuse.

“I can’t stay. I’m meeting someone for dinner.” He gave Quinn an apologetic look. “Sorry, Quinn. Maybe another time.”

“Oh, got a hot date?” She meant it as a “thanks a lot,” but as he averted his eyes and cleared his throat, her jest morphed. “Oh my goodness, you do.”

“Dad?”

Cale shrugged, palms up. “We met at a contractor’s meeting last week. *She* called me. I figured why not?” At their blank stares, he backed toward the door. “I’ve got to run. You kids have a great time. Call me if you need anything.”

“Hey!” Nick’s initial shock must have worn off. Here’d come some snarky remark. “Don’t forget to ask her dad what time you should have her home.”

Cale rolled his eyes, his mouth turning up at the corners as he backed into the entry hall.

“Be on your best behavior. Remember your curfew.” Nick stared toward the door as it clicked shut. “He hasn’t dated anyone since Mom. At least, not that I know of.”

Quinn sank onto the edge of the couch, facing him and bracing an elbow on his drawn-up knees. “Think he’ll be okay?”

Nick took her hand in his, twining their fingers and rubbing his thumb along her skin. “Do you think we’ll be okay?”

And here was *the* conversation. “If I can wrap you in Bubble Wrap.”

The crooked grin he gave her quickly faded. As she let her smile go as well and chewed her lip, he studied her fingers entwined in his. “I can’t promise nothing bad is ever going to happen. Life doesn’t work that way. But this...” He motioned between them with his casted arm. “What’s happening between us, I believe, is worth the risk.”

Of course, he couldn’t promise, and she’d never make him deliver such an empty oath. Here they were standing on the brink of starting over, one simple conversation away, her heart pounding an excited rhythm, and her lips sealed.

“Our friendship is beautiful, but I can’t go back to what we were.” He took as deep a breath as he could, then raised his casted hand, and stroked her cheekbone with his fingertips. “I want you with me. I need to know if you’re *with* me.”

The way he looked at her, uncertain of where they stood, melted her heart. Running away had hurt the deep places of his soul. Never again would she cause him such torture. She squeezed his hand and pried her mouth open. “Bad things always happen. It’s just a matter of time. But I can’t imagine not having you beside me when they do.”

The corners of his mouth dared to turn up.

Now that her mouth was moving, she couldn’t stop. “For the longest time, you’ve been trying to convince me I can love again. Now let me convince you.” She touched the side of his face, bringing his forehead to lay against hers. “I’m *with* you. Always.”

She exhaled a breath, which had possibly been pent up since Brendan's death, and fear fled as her body relaxed. She could indeed say the words.

He leaned into her hand and kissed her palm. The crease in his brow faded away. He drew her to him, and she rested her forearms on his shoulders, careful not to touch his bruises even though her body screamed to be close to his. His hands caressed her back, sending warm chills through her, if that was even possible.

Their lips met in a gentle, but hungry kiss. With the millimeters between them excruciating, she fought her desire to crush into his chest.

Then he pushed away, gasping small breaths. "I would kiss you all night, but breathing's important."

Laughing, she sat back, wrapped her arm around his legs, clutching the hem of his shirt in her other hand, and rested her chin on his knees. "There'll be time."

"Yes." He brushed his fingers through her hair. "There will be."

But what did that time frame look like? If God spared him through this tragic episode, surely He meant for Nick to stay a good long while.

Her gaze flicked to his cast. "Oh, I brought something." She retrieved her purse from the entry hall and came back to the couch. The item she dug for had fallen to the bottom. When she plucked it out, she held it up, balancing it between her thumb and forefinger.

“A Sharpie?”

“Oh, not just any Sharpie. A *red* Sharpie.”

“And a red Sharpie is different because?”

“It’s perfect for making hearts.” She uncapped the pen, wedged the cap onto the other end, and reached for his cast. Her lower lip between her teeth, she drew a heart with a curlicue at the bottom, colored it in, and signed it QA. With a flourish, she capped the pen. “My finest work.” She rested against his knees and bore her gaze into his. “Now you have my heart.”

He cupped his hand to her cheek. “It’s what I’ve always wanted.”

“And it’s what you shall have.” She meant it. With every fiber of her being, she meant it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

She'd slept beside him all evening. Nick had found a comfortable position not quite fully on his left side, and she'd just fit into the hollow his body created, her face in the crook of his neck. His good arm cradled her against the unbruised parts of him—which didn't feel like much. His fingers made tracks up and down the soft skin of her arm. Her legs intertwined with his, her breath kissing his skin, her hand warming his stomach. Her presence reassuring. She was here with him. Thank God, she was here. *With* him.

At least, he wanted what she'd said to be true. Thoughts of losing her still lurked. If she left him now, he'd be the one to stave off love forever.

They'd lain in the dim living room lamplight, whispering to each other, the small talk of the day. Quinn had drifted off first. He'd tried to stay awake, not wanting to miss a single moment, but after everything, the void of sleep promised relief.

When he woke, the world outside his apartment windows had turned dark, the city lights obscuring the stars, and though he hated to wake Quinn and let her out of his arms, his body was calling for more of the little brown pills that turned the pain to a ghost—there, but hazy.

“Quinn.”

She stirred, her fingers curling around his T-shirt, her legs trying to stretch through his, her touch jolting electricity through him. She took in an enviable deep breath, and her mouth quirked into a sleepy smile. With their faces close, he

couldn't help pressing his lips to hers. He kissed her again and again, longer each time, her kissing him back, her heart coming alive, beating against him.

Then he murmured against her lips. "I wish you could stay right where you are and still reach the ibuprofen."

With a gasp, she disengaged from the tangle that was their bodies and dropped to her knees on the wood floor in front of the couch, clattering the meds on the table's glass top. "We're supposed to be staying on top of the pain."

"Hey, I'm okay." He eased into sitting up. "Just make sure you get the right one, sleepyhead. The last thing I need is a drug overdose."

She glared at him through heavy lashes—her sleepy, disheveled look making his heart beat faster—and popped the lid off a bottle. He stretched as much as he was able and scooped the pills from her hand. With the water she offered, he swigged them down, then slumped on the couch.

She sat on her heels, her arms on his knees. "The pain's not too much, is it?"

He rolled his head to look at her and stroked the back of her arm with his thumb. "Well, for nearly becoming a pancake, I'm great." His eyes narrowed. "Although, thinking about pancakes makes me hungry."

Quinn consulted her phone on the coffee table. "Nine-thirty's a little late for the chicken cacciatore I'd planned. I'll go see what you have."

As she stood, he let her arm slide through his hand until he caught her fingers, their gazes lingering on each other.

When she pulled away with a smile and went to the kitchen, he drew his thumb over the red heart on his cast. *I'm with you. Always.* It wasn't just a drawing. He had her heart fully and completely. The heart that had been crushed like his. The one that'd seemed to take forever to heal.

The one that suffered yet another blow. It must've taken everything she had to stick by his side. But she was still here. Did that mean she'd stay?

Nick slogged to the dining table, the floor cold on his bare feet, while Quinn rummaged through the fridge. He sat with his elbows on the table, his back straight, his left hand pushed through his hair holding his head up, and stifled a painful yawn. She brought out meats, cheeses, and grapes, and cut up an apple, then opened a box of crackers from the pantry. After arranging it artistically on a plate, she joined him with a couple bottles of water.

"It's not a five-course meal, but it'll do." She set the plate on the table and sat sideways in the wooden chair beside him, tucking her heels on the crossbar, her hands under her thighs.

He sat back, scratched at the stitches in his side, then thought better of it, and laid his arm across her knees.

"Are you okay?"

"Perfect." At her disbelieving look, he did his best to hide his discomfort. "This is a meal fit for a king. Thank you."

She raised a shoulder. “Hey, it’s your food. I just threw it on a plate.”

“You arranged it like we’re having a garden party.” With his good hand, he piled ham on a cracker and popped it into his mouth.

“Presentation is everything.” She picked up a water bottle and twisted the lid off. “Hmm.”

“What is it?”

“A garden party. That’s a great idea for my gallery’s grand reopening.”

“Glad I could help.” Glad she still felt like reopening.

She raised her eyebrows and wagged a finger at him. “Oh, you’re going to help.”

His pain didn’t seem to deter her in the slightest. Maybe it didn’t. But maybe it did. Maybe, like him with his pain, she was doing her best to hide hers.

But the nagging questions wouldn’t leave. How long would she stay? How long before she decided she’d made a mistake?



The last five days had been a horror movie Quinn couldn’t escape. The bungee cord connecting her to her jumping-off point had threatened to snap her back to the cliff of never loving again. But her heart had made its choice long ago. Just never told her brain.

It was time to cut that cord.

Life was about love. Yes, it was going to hurt sometimes, but people were created to love. It was their purpose.

She imagined herself with a pair of sharp scissors poised to cut a red and black striped cord tying her to the top of that cliff.

“It must be nice.” His voice brought her out of her reverie. He turned himself to bracket her with his legs, an elbow on the back of his chair and his cast on the table. His fingers barely touched her hand that was wrapped around her water bottle.

“What?”

“That dream you’re having.”

She must’ve been smiling. “I guess it’s just getting late. I’m starting to zone out.”

He gripped her thigh with his good arm and tucked his fingers underneath, sending a zing through her. “Why don’t you go? Get some rest. We can catch up tomorrow.”

“No.” It came out a tad too forceful. She couldn’t imagine being apart from him right now. “I mean, you might need help through the night. I don’t mind staying. I could sleep on the couch.”

He pinched a strand of her hair between his casted fingers. “I didn’t want you to go anyway.” He tugged on that strand. “But no couch. I have a big bed. You can take half, and I’ll take the other.” He looked down as if embarrassed to have suggested such a thing. “If you want.”

Oh, she wanted, but she couldn’t possibly say so.

He fixed his gaze on hers. “No obligations.”

“Yeah.” Her heart flipped. “We’ve seen how well that works out for us.”

Nick lifted his gaze to the ceiling and listed his head. “I can see where you might get that.”

While she bit her lip to keep from making him laugh, he pushed her hair behind her ear. “I hope you know you can trust me, Quinn.”

“I know. It would be better actually.” Her heart rate kicked up as he leaned into her. “To be closer to you.” She found herself mumbling against his lips. “In case you need...”

His mouth covered hers. Trust him? Easily, but what about herself?

His hands cupped her face. The soft cotton wrap sticking out from his cast brushed against her cheek, the fragrance of his soap lingered on his skin. Her hands, longing to touch him, found the hem of his shirt, and her fingers grazed the soft skin just above his waistband. He sucked in a quick gasp, then moaned.

“Oh! Sorry.” She retracted her hands, but he caught her wrists and brought their hands to rest on her knees, leaning his head against hers.

“Do *not* be sorry. Your touch is magical. It’ll probably heal me twice as fast.” He kissed her cheek.

She hummed with the buzz moving through her. “Oh, really?” Breathing deep to calm herself, she sat up straight. “Maybe we should take it easy for a few days.”

“Not my first choice of things to do.”

She gripped his arms, the cast rough against her fingertips. “But maybe the best choice.” She attempted to kiss away the uncertainty in his eyes. “Come on. I’ll clean this up, and we can get some sleep.”

While she cleaned up their dinner mess, he headed to the bedroom. When she met him there, the lights were off, and he’d flipped on the TV to an old black-and-white movie, laid an extra blanket at the foot of the bed, and set out a T-shirt and some gym shorts for her. Brendan’s shirt she loved to wear flashed through her mind before she blinked it away. Not a longing, more a memory floating by.

Her painting above Nick’s bed was a canvas of new precious memories she and Nick were making. She helped him swing his legs up on the bed and ease onto his stack of pillows.

A deep breath, and he shuddered, his cast pressed to his side. She sucked air through her teeth as his effort to smile through the pain broke her heart.

Then she slid the sheets over him, and taking the shorts and shirt, she went around the other side of his bed and closed herself into his bathroom. Everything in its place, but like the bedroom, this room offered no decoration. And why would it when one had no reason to decorate and no one to decorate for them?

She forced her palms flat on the counter, the swirled quartz cold beneath them. Nick had had no one. She’d had no one.

Now they had each other, but they could be alone again in a blink.

She shook free from the ugly thoughts, turned on the sink, and splashed cold water over her face. One day with Nick would be better than turning away from him. Just like one day with Hope was worth all the pain of losing her. Quinn could have miscarried long before and never known that beautiful little girl. But they'd been blessed with twenty-four and a half glorious hours. The moment she'd slipped away had been the most painful moment of Quinn's existence, but she wouldn't trade that one day for the world.

After several deep breaths, she changed into Nick's clothes, leaving hers folded on the vanity. Holding his shirt to her nose, she inhaled the fresh laundry scent. They could just as easily be together for years to come. She'd hang on to that.

When she emerged from the bathroom, he beamed. His shirt engulfed her, and with how she'd had to tighten the drawstring on the shorts, the ends hung to midhigh. He opened his mouth, but she put a stop to it with a raised finger. "No wisecracks."

"I wasn't going to say a word."

"I don't believe you."

"You shouldn't."

He couldn't hide his smile, and their gazes remained locked as she crawled onto the bed and edged over to his unbruised side. He may have been in tremendous pain, but he was happy. She could tell that much.

But something dark lingered beyond the blue of his irises. She'd have to convince him there was no need for fear anymore.

She sat with her leg cocked up against him, her body balanced on her hand.

When he touched her face, his thumb caressing her cheekbone, a desire awoke in her she'd been sure would never return. Her want to hold him rose to painful levels. But surely, her pain was more tolerable than his. So, she stroked his arm.

When her hand reached his, he caught hold of her fingers. "Babe, you are freezing. Here." He lifted the covers. "Get under. That extra blanket down there's for you."

Did he just call her babe? It had rolled off his tongue as comforting as ocean waves. To hide the twitch of her lips, she slid her legs under the sheet and thin blanket. She grabbed the extra blanket, unfolded it over the other covers, and burrowed into his side, resting her head on his left shoulder. "*You're* like an extra blanket."

"I can feel your cold hands through my shirt."

She slid her hands down his side and lifted the hem, resting her fingers on his warm skin. The muscles in his arm flexed as he held her to him, his hand as warm as the summer sun. She resisted the urge to wrap herself around him, feeling his muscles under taut skin.

After so long, she was where she belonged, the abyss far away in another world. His kiss to the top of her head told her he was far from his abyss as well.

She raised her chin to kiss those soft lips she didn't mind dreaming about anymore. Then they settled in, staring at the TV blinking into the dark. It wasn't long until his breathing became more rhythmic, less strained. She closed her eyes and let peace wash over her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Nick checked his phone at a quarter to four, the TV casting a faint glow on Quinn lying on her back beside him. He rolled toward her, and she moaned in her sleep. He wanted to draw her close, but he didn't dare wake her.

He breathed in her fruity perfume, glad it didn't smell like Lauren's. It was a guilty thought, but Quinn was the first woman to share his bed other than his wife. With his knuckles, he stroked her arm, savoring her soft skin and the shallow breathing of her sleep.

When he woke next, the sun was peeking through his room-darkening curtains, the TV off, the extra blanket folded neatly at the end of the bed—Quinn was gone. Terror shivered through him. He rolled up on his good arm, his casted hand going to his ribs as they threatened to take him down again.

“Quinn?”

No answer.

When he looked toward the bathroom, his name scrolled over a note neatly folded into a tent on her bedside table caught his attention. With a grunt at the pain, he moved to her side of the bed and reached for the note. Lying flat on the bed off his pillows felt good, and he used it as an excuse to prolong opening the note. So stupid. If it was bad, she wouldn't have taken the time to write his name in the artistic script she loved to use.

He held the note up in the air and unfolded it.

Nick,

Your dad has his key and will be here soon, and he doesn't need to find me here. Drill him about his date. Fill me in later. Give him my love and make him fix you breakfast. Caroline said she'd be here for lunch. Dinner is on me. I'll be at the gallery if you need me. Call, text, but rest. I need you to get better.

I need you...

She'd signed it with a curly *Q* and a heart in red Sharpie. He held her note to his chest. She needed him. And if she needed him, she wasn't going anywhere. And he wasn't either.

Propped on his elbow, he pushed himself up with his left hand to sit on the edge of the bed. He folded her note back to its tent shape and set it on his bedside table where she'd left a bottle of water, four ibuprofen, and the antibiotic. His heart warmed, and he wanted to sigh deeply. But he'd better take the pills first.

He swallowed them down, then swiped his phone off the table. His fingers typed out a text message to Madam Q. "Good morning, beautiful. Thank you for the sweet note."

"Good timing! You caught me on the way up the ladder. I mean it! Rest!"

He smiled as he texted back. "Working on the big one today?"

"It's time for her to be finished."

"Be careful up there in the clouds. Don't forget us little people down below."

“Never!”

He attempted a deep sigh and achieved success. “Hitting the shower. I’ll call later.”

“I’ll keep my phone in my bib pocket. Close to my heart.” She followed up with a heart emoji, the one that looks like it’s beating, pulsing.

His heart was definitely pulsing. “Enjoy your day, Q.”

Sitting there, he tipped his head to the painting above his bed and imagined her—paintbrush in hand, paint under her nails and smudged on her tan face. She was in her happy place, and that brought him joy.

It seemed a long, hard road. Everything in life had been for a while. Though the road was far from being easy, because life wasn’t that way, they were traveling it together. Their bench at the river had been their beginning. Where life had seemed to kick-start all over again for both of them. Where they’d connected.

Relief, calm, happy, content—all the feel-good emotions crowded his heart. It had been a long time since they’d all been there together.

His gaze went to his nightstand drawer. A presence there beckoned to him. He hooked the oil-rubbed bronze drawer pull with the little finger of his casted hand and edged the drawer open, exposing the facedown framed picture of Lauren on their honeymoon. His hand hovered over it. He hadn’t seen the picture, or any picture of her, in months.

He flipped the crystal frame in his hands. Heat burned his eyes, but they were happy tears. She'd been there for him in life and in death. She'd seen him through the dark times and given him the courage to be a friend to Quinn, the strength to carry on, to start over.

“Hey, Lauren.” The name tasted foreign on his tongue. He didn't call her “baby” or “beautiful.” Those words were reserved for someone else now. He traced the line of her face with a finger. “I didn't think I could do it, but you were right.” His hand went to his ribs when he sighed without thinking about it. “I'm going to be all right. And you know something else? Quinn's going to be all right too. You saved us both.”

He touched the red heart on his cast and wished he was holding Quinn. Dinner couldn't come around soon enough. The memory of her was still on his body, the feel of her wrapped up in his arms on the couch, curled up next to him on his bed, her breath on his skin, her scent, her kiss.

He crept to the window and swept back the dark-gray curtain. The morning light wasn't quite harsh yet, but he still blinked. Seventeen stories below, the world was coming to life, and he was still part of it. He gripped the memory tighter in his hand. “Thank you. For everything.”

Then he flipped the frame over and opened the back. With his good hand, he removed the picture. Lauren's parents would love to have it, and he needed to send it away. He hated to think of her as just a memory, but that's what she'd become. She'd left no children behind for him to keep her memory alive for. And ghosts had no place with the living.

Nick smiled as the sound of his dad's key in the front door lock echoed in the entry hall.

First breakfast, then lunch, then Quinn. There'd be a lot of empty space in between now and then, but she'd be here. Quinn would always be here.

CHAPTER FORTY

Quinn stood back from her monstrous painting and brushed a stray hair out of her face with the back of her hand. The warm colors astonished even her. They stirred her soul, sending a shiver down her spine. Paints alone were just pretty goop, but mixed together and brushed onto a canvas, they brought new worlds to life.

Some people read books or watched movies to escape.

She painted.

Satisfied the piece was complete, she reached over, flipped her paintbrush into the mason jar, and wiped her hands on her overalls. This project had taken longer to finish than any other. Of course, her others didn't have a fifteen-month hiatus built into the process, but even without that, it had taken a while.

Painting always brought her peace and purpose, and she hadn't basked in either of those for way too long. She was herself again—the person she was intended to be. And the reason was obvious.

Nick fluttered through her mind in whirls of beautiful color. Then she pulled her phone from her bib pocket. Almost five. How did it get so late? Speed dial one and his phone was ringing.

He picked up his phone on the second ring. "I was beginning to wonder about you."

She winced. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Josh is here. He brought over *Halo*, and how can anyone sleep through that?"

“Hey, Quinn! Don’t let him fool you. He’s been all over this game.”

“Hi, Josh! So, dinner for three?”

“Nope. Josh has to leave. Right, Josh?” His voice took on the snarky sarcasm that was Nick. He sounded like himself again, making her heart leap. “You have... *somewhere* you need to be.”

“What?” Josh protested. “We’re in the middle of a game.”

“Pause it, save it, whatever you need to do, but don’t be late for your... whatever.”

“Nick, don’t be rude. He can stay.” She laughed, but she didn’t want him to stay either. Josh had become her friend too, and she’d never want Nick to be without him. Tonight, though, she needed to be alone with Nick.

“No, he can’t.”

“Fine. I know when I’m not welcome. I’m chopped liver, Quinn. Nobody likes chopped liver.”

“Not tonight, buddy.”

She giggled at their boyish banter. The guys had been friends almost as long as she and Claire had been. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

“An hour?” Then to Josh. “All right, man, you have an hour.”



Almost an hour later, Quinn drove into the parking garage and checked in her rearview mirror to make sure she’d washed all

the paint off her face. She'd cleaned up as best she could in the small bathroom in her studio, changed clothes, released her hair from its braid, then gone by to grab the takeout she'd called in.

Her feet couldn't carry her—nor could the elevators run—fast enough to Nick's door. Not too long ago she was running the other way, and the elevator couldn't carry her quickly enough back to ground level. Now, she was soaring to the sky.

She knocked and spooked when the door swung wide. Then she broke out in an equally wide grin as Josh met her.

“Quinn!” He twisted his New York Yankees ball cap around backward and grabbed her up and spun her around, setting her down in front of Nick, who was a little slower getting to the door. He held onto her as he spoke, and she tried not to drop their dinner. “So glad you guys are out of denial.”

She closed her eyes in a silent laugh. “You know, you don't have to go.”

“No, I do. I do have somewhat of a date tonight.” He looked past her to his best friend. “You get this guy up and running, and we'll all go out and celebrate.” Then he grabbed the door handle, wiggled his eyebrows at them, and closed the door.

“Huh, he did have a whatever.”

Quinn turned on her heel to see Nick's head cocked to the side and his brow furrowed. Her gaze brushed over him. Bare feet and jeans looked oh-so-good, but the bruising on his right arm glared from between his T-shirt sleeve and his cast. She

ignored the twinge at the sight. “Nick, a date is not a ‘whatever.’ ”

“With the eternal bachelor? It just might be. That guy’ll never settle. I worry about the boy.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you sometime. Chinese?” He took the brown paper bag and set it on the entry hall table. “You didn’t have to bring more food, but I sure hope there’s fortune cookies in here.”

“There’d better be, or I’m going to be upset. They’re my favorite part.” She unrolled the top of the bag to peep inside. “There just might be extra.”

“Extra good fortune. I like that.” His left arm slid around her, his right with a stationary elbow, doing its best to follow, only pulling her tight at the hip. “You, Madam Q, are the most beautiful thing I’ve seen all day.”

Quinn looped her thumbs through his belt loops. “Well, we won’t tell Caroline.”

He lowered his head toward hers, laid his warm palm against her neck, his fingers twining in her hair. “She might beat me up.”

“She might.” Their lips met in a kiss that made Quinn want to forget about dinner. Even though she’d lost herself in her own world for much of the day, her thoughts were always of him. Her body and soul cried with how much she’d missed him, how much she wanted to be near him. Now, the world

melted away. There were no walls, no clouds above, no earth below, no pain, no fear.

A tear formed in the corner of her eye.

His thumb found it as it spilled over and down her cheek. He stepped back, a crease in his brow. “Quinn? Honey, what’s wrong?”

Honey. She smiled a lazy smile. “Absolutely nothing.” She couldn’t think of one thing. She wanted to lay her head on his chest, to have him hold her against him, feel his warmth, smell his skin. But he satisfied her by laying his forehead against hers.

Rubbing her forehead to his, she chewed her lower lip. “What would you say to dinner on the balcony? You could get some fresh air, and we could cover up bad balcony memories with good ones.”

He brushed her hair behind her shoulder. “I’d say my good fortune is already beginning.”

A cool breeze kept them comfortable while they ate their Chinese takeout and laughed at the cheesy fortunes wrapped up in crispy cookies, their legs entangled under the glass-topped table. With time eaten away as they lost themselves in each other, the sun hovered just above the horizon.

The patio chair screeched on the concrete as Nick pushed it back and stood. He reached out to her. “Come on.”

She slid her hand in his. His hands, always strong, made her feel protected and safe. These hands would always be there to catch her, to hold her, to lift her up.

The river was silver glass in the setting sun as Nick led her to the rail. He tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and covered it with his casted hand, working small circles on her skin with his fingers as she leaned beside him on the warm metal. He was happy. She could see it. His shining brilliance filled her with energy and warmth.

Her other hand curled around his good forearm, she held onto him. With his arm strong under her temple, she squeezed him close as the sun dipped lower. “The city is truly beautiful from up here.”

Nick rested his chin atop her head, then rubbed his cheek on her hair. “Yes, she is.”

Her heart filled. He’d said the same thing before he’d kissed her the first time. That kiss rocked her foundation, opened a piece of her heart she’d thought she’d closed off forever.

And she’d run.

But now, she’d stay. Right here, right now, on this balcony above this city with this man who loved her enough to wait.

When she tipped her head to meet his gaze, he shifted to take her in his arms.

Fingers tentative, she lifted her hand to touch his chest and hovered there, aching to touch him, have him hold her and not hurt. As she was about to drop her hand, he grabbed it and pressed it to his chest, pulling her body into his with his casted arm around her back. She gasped as he winced.

“It’s okay.” He held her fast, his cheek against her forehead. “It’s okay.”

She stood stiff in his arms, not wanting to press against his bruises.

Then, as if reading her mind, he spoke hot words into her hair. “The only way you could hurt me is by leaving me without the brilliant sunlight your life brings to mine.”

Their arms going around each other, she relaxed into his embrace, basking in his warmth and sandalwood scent. “I’m never doing that again. Where would I go when my world is right here in these arms?” A sigh released all her fear and doubt as she eased back to look into his eyes. “I love you, Nick James.”

They were words she thought she’d never say again, but hearing them out loud, her heart soared at how right they were.

He stared at her, searching her eyes. Then he took a breath and held it as if he might say something. Then let it out. “Those are precious words.”

“I wouldn’t say them if they weren’t true.”

“I know.” Another labored breath filled his chest as his gaze stayed riveted on her. “I love you so much.” The look in his eyes mirrored her release of fear. He dipped his head and their kiss reflected the intensity of the setting sun. Then he held her to him, her head safe on his chest, tucked under his chin while his musky cologne anchored her senses to him.

As the sun hit the horizon and the world was aglow with orange fire—bright, colorful, *alive*—she imagined those sharp

scissors again cutting a red and black striped cord and it retracting back to the top of the cliff. But she wasn't standing in a valley far beneath the world. She was standing on a summit, and the sun was rising.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Six weeks and thousands of deep breaths later, Nick threw on a tighter-fitting tee than he'd been wearing—his chest and arm had regained a broader range of motion, and the lingering bruising had faded to shades of yellow. He grabbed his keys on the way out the door. On the way to the elevator, he exercised his now-free right hand. It wasn't the only part of him feeling free. With his heart so light, he could almost fly.

The last counseling session. He was ready. This goodbye was a long time coming and so welcome. He had to admit, though, he was ready to see Mrs. LaRue again. His chest rumbled as he chuckled, imagining what she'd say when they walked in hand in hand. Surely, a red-lipped smile would spread wide and a glow gloss those brown eyes, but nothing she could say would surprise him any longer.

He climbed into his truck and rubbed his damp hands on his jeans. Then he took a deep breath and started the engine, a little black felt box burning a hole in his pocket.



A light sweater was all Quinn would need for the cold counseling room. She grabbed the camel-colored one, Nick's favorite, out of her closet and threw it over her arm. They'd decided to go to one last counseling session to offer encouragement and say goodbye.

Nick, of course, was already there waiting when she arrived. She shut her truck door and sauntered over to where he leaned on the quarter panel, making her heart skip beats. He'd had his cast removed that afternoon, and he motioned her

forward with his now-free hand and a desire in his eyes to make a woman blush.

She flung her hair behind her and threw her purse over her shoulder, her sweater dangling from the straps. “You know, now your dad’s going to expect some work out of you.”

“I’ll do all the work he wants to be able to touch you again with both hands.”

As she stepped closer, he tugged her against him and pressed his lips to hers. She ran her hands from his elbows up his arms to rest on the back of his neck, her heart thumping in her chest.

His hands explored the entirety of her back, then her shoulders and arms. When he reached her elbows, he stopped kissing her and flexed his freed hand. “Still works pretty good.”

Giggling, she rolled her eyes, her body still afire from his touch, and laced her fingers through his wiggling ones, their other hands joining together the same. “You silly boy. Come on. Let’s go in.”

He took a deep breath, frowning at the center, tightening his grip. “Yeah, all right.”

“Are you okay?” An edginess trickled through her veins. This was the place where they’d woven their lives together, and now they were leaving it forever. He should be glad but seemed a little off, nervous. Surely, he wasn’t that nervous to face Mrs. LaRue.

“Absolutely. Let’s do this.”

Hand in hand, Quinn holding on to his arm, they approached the building. How nice not to have the cast inhibit their grip on each other.

At the sidewalk flanked by triangular flower beds with their shrubs browning and flowers drooping in the July heat, Nick stopped and pulled her back to stand in front of him.

“Nick, what is it?” Her edginess morphed to concern. He looked as though he wanted to say something, but couldn’t form the words. Was he hiding something? Had the doctor said more than he’d revealed? “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I, uh...” He wet his lips. “I wanted to tell you thank you. For letting me take you out for coffee.”

A smirk relaxed her face, and the tension rolled from her shoulders. She wagged a finger. “So, you finally admit *you* invited *me*.”

He laughed as he enveloped her finger in his hand. “Of course I did.”

“After all this time.”

He took her other hand and held them in front of him, his playful smile fading. “The first night you walked into my life, I didn’t want you there.”

“Well, it’s no secret I didn’t want you in my life either.”

“Looks like God had other plans.”

“Yes, He did.” It sure had taken her a long time to see it.

“Thank you for sharing your life with me, Quinn. I won’t ever be the same.”

She gripped the hands of this amazing man. This amazing, nervous man.

Nick blew out a breath. “Maybe this is all too soon.”

Her heart fell. Her stomach clenched. Was he running?

“But sometimes, as we’ve both found out, people don’t get as much time as they’d like.” He twisted his grip on their hands, seeming to contemplate. “This isn’t a romantic spot. The building’s kind of old, crumbly. The landscaping could use some help. But it is where we first met.”

Her heart threatened to stop as her breath halted. “What are you saying?”

His shoulders inched up. His thumbs worked her hands in gentle circles. “I don’t want to spend any more time apart.”

Quinn froze as he let go of her left hand to dig in his pocket. He wasn’t running. She swallowed, her body going numb when he pulled out a small black felt box.

“Kaitlyn Quinn Alexander, please be the one I come home to every evening, sleep beside every night, and wake up next to every morning. The one I weather every storm with and build my life around. Let me travel the world with you so you can capture every landscape with your talented hands. Let me share in that life with you, whatever life may bring.”

The box snapped open as he knelt on one knee. A diamond sparkled in the evening sun. She gasped even though she could guess what was coming next.

“Will you do me the extreme honor of becoming my wife?”

As she remembered to breathe, air in and out of her lungs came in short gasps. Her throat went dry as a bristle brush, her brain a blank canvas.

His blue eyes shone as he waited. Just as he'd waited for her to overcome her fear and realize she'd loved him all along.

Her breathing calmed, and she took a deep breath.

“Yes.” She gasped out a laugh, relieved she could finally speak. “Yes, Nick James, I’ll marry you. Yes, yes, a thousand times, yes.”

The box snapped closed, and he swept her up and twirled her around. She laid her head back and let the sun warm her face, dry the tears streaming down her cheeks. White and puffy, the clouds spun above them.

Then he set her down and pressed his forehead to hers.

They held each other, crying together, letting go of the painful past and grasping a bright new future.

“Here.” He held the box between them, then placed the ring on her finger. It was a perfect fit. *They* were a perfect fit.

“It’s beautiful.”

“It could never compare to you.”

Quinn tilted her head and kissed him. A long kiss. A kiss of holding on and never letting go.

“Oh! I knew it.” Her voice was one they’d never forget.

Sharing a look, they laughed at Mrs. LaRue’s red-lipped grin. She scuttled up—if she’d been younger, she would’ve been running—and threw her arms around them. They each

put an arm around their friend. The moment would never have been complete without her.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

The full autumn palette joined them on the most beautiful day of the year. Rich and inviting, alive and brilliant, an oil painting come to life. Quinn hovered on the edge of the limo seat as it pulled up near their spot at the river.

Claire sat beside her, their hands clasped together. “It’s almost time.”

Quinn acknowledged Claire’s words but continued watching Nick through the dark-tinted window. Josh elbowed him in the side, and Nick, standing at the flower laden arbor that arched over their bench, laughed with a beaming smile, then returned his attention to the limo. He couldn’t see her, but their gazes seemed to connect, causing her a small gasp.

“Oh, look at Kaitlyn.” Claire pointed. “She’s trying to eat the rose petals.”

Dad’s knuckles rapped on the glass, and Quinn’s heart leaped into her throat.

A squeal came from beside her. “That’s us. Now, don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not.”

“Quinn?”

Quinn blinked and turned to Claire. With her blond curls swept up, she was the picture of beauty in her rusty-red gown.

“I’m so happy for you.”

Taking her beautiful friend, her confidant, her sister in her arms, Quinn whispered an I love you, her bottom lip

quivering.

“No, no, no.” Claire jerked back. “You will not cry until after the ceremony. Don’t you dare ruin your perfect makeup.”

Another rap on the window.

Claire’s shoulders inched up. “Are you ready?”

Quinn peered at the guests, swiveled in their white wooden chairs, waiting in anticipation. Their excitement added to hers until her heart wanted to burst. “I never thought I would be. But I am.”

Claire’s shoulders relaxed as she reached over her and knocked on the glass. The door opened to the sound of chatter and soft music from the piano they’d had carted in. Sharing one last smile, Claire stepped around Quinn into the crisp November day. The background voices faded to silence.

The door shut behind Claire, and the procession began. Dillon carried Kaitlyn, helping her throw white petals from her basket. Well, Dillon threw petals. Six-month-old Kaitlyn, still trying to eat them, looked at him like he was crazy.

Quinn gripped her bouquet as Claire started down the aisle. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as her turn approached. Soon the limo door opened again, and Dad was there offering his arm. One deep breath, and she reached for her rock.



Nick was getting antsy. The cool autumn breeze doing little to keep him cool. The only thing keeping him from coming apart was knowing Quinn was in that limo.

He grinned at Dad sitting in the front row. He'd brought his girlfriend who'd been joining them for dinners in the last few months. Perhaps there'd be another wedding in the near future.

Mrs. LaRue wasn't hard to spot. And it wasn't because she was sitting next to Doc. The red lips, they gave her away. She'd earned the right to wear her I-told-you-so smirk.

When the pianist took her seat at the baby grand, Josh whispered, "This is it."

The soft music began, and Nick stood straighter as Claire stepped out. This was happening.

Keeping one eye on the limo, he chuckled at the rose-eating toddler with blond curls. She was shoving them in faster than her dad could throw them. When they reached the aisle's end, they set off to their left and took their seats.

Smiling wide at her daughter, Claire sashayed down next. Nick winked at her while she inclined her head and took her place.

Then his heart clenched. The limo door opened again, and Quinn stepped out of the black stretch. Admiration exploded from the crowd as they stood from their white folding chairs. Nick clasped his hands to keep from fidgeting, straining to see her through the crowd.

His beautiful bride stepped to the end of the aisle and hovered there on the arm of her proud father. She looked like royalty in a simple ivory gown and fur-lined cape to protect her against the chill.

“Dude, you are one blessed man.”

Nick responded, still mesmerized. “Yes, I am.”

But what had he done to deserve her love? Why had God blessed him so much? Whatever the reason, he vowed to live up to that blessing.



Quinn, draped on Dad’s arm, his eyes glistening, moved to the end of the leaf-strewn aisle beneath the trees at the river. More leaves swirled from above, pulled from the lofty branches by the crisp breeze. Nick, looking dapper in a royal-blue three-piece suit and stealing away what breath she had left, waited for her at the arbor that arched over their bench.

She inhaled the fresh November air to still her sprinting heart, reminding herself not to chew her lip and thus mess up the burgundy-wine lipstick matching the mums in her bouquet. But when her gaze met Nick’s, all the nerves relaxed, and warmth crowded out the adrenaline.

Now, the day was perfect.

The pianist began playing the “Bridal Chorus,” and she followed in step with Dad, each one taking her closer to her life with Nick.

It seemed a long trek. How many rows of chairs? Then she reached the front row where Mom was holding back tears. Quinn let go of Dad’s arm, crossed to her, and embraced her. “Thank you, Mom.”

Mom stepped back. “Now, don’t ruin your makeup. You know how Claire gets.”

Giggling, Quinn returned to Dad's side and handed her bouquet to a beaming Claire.

The preacher from Mom and Dad's church stepped forward. "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

Dad cleared his throat. "Her mother and I do."

Then he focused his gaze on her. In his eyes, Quinn could see relief intermingled with his pride. Her parents no longer had to watch their daughter dangle off the edge of a cliff, not knowing if they'd be able to save her should she fall. Their baby girl was going to be all right.

Dad took her hand from the crook of his arm and placed it in Nick's and, holding them together, nodded to the man who would now be her protector. Nick nodded back, an unspoken agreement between them.

Quinn hid the precious moment in her mind's treasure box.



Nick wanted to draw her into his embrace, but he satisfied himself with wrapping her hands in his and gazing into her eyes. Dave had done a great job with the flowers, but her amber irises were the richest fall hue. He couldn't look away, didn't want to as the preacher welcomed the guests, read from the Bible, and rambled about responsibilities and sanctity. It was nothing new to them, and yet, every moment was a new discovery.

When the preacher called on him to offer his vows, Nick dropped his gaze to her hands, so tiny in his, her nails perfect.

He swallowed, wet his lips, and returned his gaze to her. “My Madam Q.”

The blush on her cheeks deepened.

“You are breathtaking. Mrs. LaRue over here will attest to the fact that I loved you before I knew it. But I did know it. From the first time you walked into my life, I knew it.”

She laid her hand on his lapel. Probably against the wedding rules, but he didn’t care.

He covered her hand with his and held it there, his heart thumping against it. “Quinn, my love, I promise to always let you have the toffee chocolates.”

Her giggle warmed the day, and somewhere on the edge of his focus, he could hear their guests laughing.

They returned their hands to center, and he schooled his laughter. “I promise to protect you, to be there for you, to hold you, to console you. I promise to laugh with you and celebrate with you. I promise every sunset and every sunrise from this moment forward. I promise to love you and lift you up. And I will cherish you as my everything.”

He caught her tear with his thumb before it had a chance to leave a streak.



Quinn squeezed his hands, a warm envelope around hers. In only a matter of minutes, she could tuck herself into his arms. The thought made her ache for his touch.

She sniffed and blinked, glancing up to the partly cloudy sky. “This no-obligation thing isn’t working out so well.”

His chuckle was heaven. A breeze filled her senses with his scent as another round of snickers traveled through their guests.

Now, for the serious. “Loving you, Nick James, is not hard. Not loving you, that’s the difficult task.”

Tightening his grip, he let his thumbs massage the backs of her hands.

“When I paint, I feel the world around me. You have become that world. I have felt your love in every moment, every word, every thoughtful gesture. You are my today, my tomorrow, and every day that will come after. I promise I will stand firm with you against whatever this world throws at us. I will love you, support you, and be yours.”

His eyes wet, he drew her in and wrapped his arms around her. Not traditional, but who would complain?

The preacher cleared his throat. “Nick, do you take...”

“Yes, I do.” He eased from her grasp and took her hands. “As my wife and friend. I do. No matter what.”

With a chuckle, the officiant continued. “Quinn...”

“Yes, I do. As my husband and my friend. I do.” She juggled his hands. “No matter what.”

The preacher sniffed. “Rings, please. Before you turn me into a fountain.”

More laughs as Claire and Josh produced the rings, wiping away their own tears. Quinn and Nick, in turn, repeated the preacher's words as they slid the bands into the place of honor.

“By the power vested in me by the great state of Oklahoma, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may...”

Nick stepped forward to kiss her before the preacher could finish. His kiss, her husband's kiss, longing and beautiful, sent waves of emotion through her, every sense enhancing. Time drifted on the breeze.

The crowd's applause quieted to whispers. He eased his lips away and rested his forehead against hers. Then their gazes met. Smiling and giggling, they turned to face their family and friends who'd come to share this glorious day.

The preacher made his announcement. “I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Nick James.”

The applause resumed, the pianist played “The Wedding March,” and Quinn, grasping Nick's arm, waltzed down the aisle to the waiting limo.

The storm of tragedy had almost killed her—her ability to hope and love, her creativity, *her*. She was still frightened of losing. Who wasn't? Losing was a part of living.

But love had proved more powerful than fear.

EPILOGUE

As his dream world began to fade, Nick reached over cold sheets. He raised his head and opened his eyes. Quinn stood at the window in her white silk robe, holding back the curtains, the morning sun's dull light bathing her. He relaxed back into his pillow, watching her in the growing light of the day, raindrops streaking the glass, their meandering streams flowing to the streets below.

This beautiful angel had survived all the uneasy moments of their so-called friendship, survived *him*, and married him. In the seven months since the wedding, he still couldn't believe she'd said yes.

Now, his room had become theirs. Her things meshed with his, though he didn't have much, but she brought life in and made his apartment their home. With their jobs spilling over after hours, the apartment dwindled in size. Soon though, they'd move into the three-bedroom starter home they'd signed a contract on.

He kept his gaze on her as she turned partway from the window and smiled into the gray light, the light behind her casting a halo through her hair. Yes, this beautiful angel had married him. And they'd spend the rest of their days together—whether one, two, or countless.



Normal. It was foreign and familiar. And welcome.

It was what Quinn had wanted and what she'd fought against. What she'd given in to and been taken over by.

Nick slid out of bed and wrapped his arms around her, massaging her swollen middle. When she shifted into his arms, he rubbed her nose with his, laid his scruffy cheek on hers, and whispered into her ear. “I love you, Mrs. James.”

She pulled back, her lips brushing his. “I love you too.”

He knelt before her and kissed her belly. “I love you too, my little Faith.” As he looked up, Quinn lost herself in the beautiful future in his eyes.

But whatever came, she’d face it with him beside her. She needed him. Like Howard and Norman had needed Margaret LaRue.

“What is it?”

She brushed a tuft of hair off his forehead. “I will love you every day I’m given. But if I’m only given today, I will still love you.”

He stood to meet her, wrapping his strong arms around her. Then he tucked her head under his chin, nestling her in, warm and safe and home.

The sun continued to brighten the city. Behind them, her finished storm clouds filled the once-empty wall in a reminder that, although the terror of dark storms may rule the night, the sun is always there somewhere above, waiting to resurrect the day and bring new life into the world.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I appreciate your taking a chance and picking up my book. I have thoroughly enjoyed sharing Nick and Quinn's story with you. If you loved reading *Resurrection*, I'd really appreciate a short review. It really does make a difference.

Please, if you are suffering from depression or grief from loss, seek help. You're not alone. God loves you, even when you don't feel like He does. And He's waiting to resurrect new life in you.

COMING SOON!

Redemption

TULSA TOWN ROMANCE

BOOK TWO

One haunting mistake.

There's only one woman for Tulsa builder Josh Harrington. And letting her go was the biggest mistake of his life. Considering the lies he told to make her leave, neither God nor the woman he loves will ever forgive him. But it's nothing short of what he deserves.

One unforgiveable secret.

For commercial designer Heather McClure, alone and pregnant, The Big Apple was to be a new start. Six and a half years later, she returns to Oklahoma, fleeing a crazy ex-boyfriend stalker. And knowing it's time to reveal her secret whether Josh forgives her or not.

One way to reclaim their future.

When their guilty hearts bring Josh and Heather back together, the spark of their old love threatens to reignite. But can they let go of the past to find the family each of them desires?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristy Werner is an award-winning author from the great state of Oklahoma. She grew up in Tulsa, the setting of her Tulsa Town Romance series, where she spent most of her time tucked away in her room writing, drawing, and reading. She then earned her Zoology degree at Oklahoma State University. After staying home to raise two children, she discovered her desire to write clean fiction in a world that desperately needs it.



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