



THAT
TIME I

Kissed

THE

GROOMSMAN

Grump



A *Sweet* Romantic Comedy

JULIE CHRISTIANSON

THAT TIME I *Kissed*
THE GROOMSMAN
Group

A Time of Your Life Rom Com

JULIE CHRISTIANSON

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*This one's for my three incredible bonus sisters
—Karen, Linda, and Kim—
who welcomed me with open arms when I married their brother.
I promised I'd love him forever, and I meant it.
(I love you all forever, too!)*

A Note From Julie

I simply cannot wait until the acknowledgments at the end of this book to thank all my wonderful readers, my super-amazing ARC team, my dear friends on Instagram and Facebook, and the incredible Bookstagram community.

Your enthusiasm, love, and support motivate me to keep stringing words together every single day. Without you, I couldn't be a romcom author. So from the bottom of my heart, thank you, thank you, thank you.

And in the immortal words of Bryan Adams in his Grammy-award-winning song from *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, "Everything I do, I do it for you."

(True but corny. Corny but true!)

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Chapter One



NATALIE

People who are scared to fly probably shouldn't book an aisle seat in the last row next to the lavatory. But a first class-ticket wasn't in my budget, and this is only the third flight I've ever taken, so what do I know about the best location for sitting?

Maybe everyone's super jealous of my toilet proximity.

Either way, I *do* know my phone battery is at three percent, and my charger is packed in my overstuffed carry-on. Too bad the flight attendant made everyone in the back half of the plane check their bags. If you ask me, I could've at least *tried* to shove my bag under the seat. But the lady in the navy-blue pantsuit didn't ask. She simply attached a baggage claim tag to my hot-pink Samsonite, then parked it with the other luggage on the boarding bridge.

The rest of my worldly belongings are packed up in my apartment back in Rochester, New York, and I just spent a whirlwind three days in Los Angeles, preparing for my big cross-country move. I'm on a flight back to Albany now, but instead of returning to Rochester, I'll be heading to my hometown for my brother's wedding.

As I slip into my seat, my insides leap into somersaults. This is partly from nerves, and partly from hunger. The LAX security line was so long, I didn't have time to grab even a bagel or donut before boarding. Hopefully, my growling stomach won't disturb the man sitting next to me. He's already snoring, his bald head propped against a neck pillow and the window.

On second thought, I wish he'd wake up so I could ask him to shut the shade. I don't want to see out the window. Not even a glimpse of cloud and sky. So I turn away—hey, look! A lavatory!—and beg my racing heart to

wind itself down.

Be rational, Natalie.

For the record, I've memorized plenty of statistics proving planes are safer than cars. My prefrontal cortex understands the numbers, but my lizard brain doesn't believe me. I even chose a college knowing I wouldn't have to fly to get there. The University of Rochester is a five-hour bus ride from my hometown. So during the past six years of undergraduate studies, nursing school, and internships, I never had to board a plane to get to from there to Abieville. Of course, this won't be the case once I move to Los Angeles, but I can't let my fear of flying stop me from living.

Well, I *could*, but I won't.

Slipping my phone from my purse, I see the battery's dropped to two percent, so I quickly scroll through the new messages that came in while I was in the security line. The first text is from Kasey, my brother's fiancée.

KASEY: I'll be at Buttons and Bows for the final fittings by the time you land. Sorry we can't wait, but I know you'll join us as soon as you can. Thanks so much for rushing home to be here for Beau and me. My maid of honor is a rockstar!

Yes, I'm the maid of honor for my future sister-in-law, but I'm trying not to think about that right now. Otherwise I'll start thinking about the best man. The one I haven't seen since Christmas. That was six months ago, but whenever I flash back to the last time we were together, my heart starts thrumming.

My autonomic nervous system really needs to cool it.

Pressing a hand to my chest, I tell myself that for the next week, I'll simply avoid Brady Graham as much as possible. Of course, he *is* Kasey's brother and Beau's best friend. And we're both in the wedding party. So I won't be able to steer clear of him completely. But at least when we *are* in the same place at the same time, a lot of other people will be around us. Never being alone with Brady means no risk of any more slipups.

No matter how much you might want to slip up.

All right. There goes my autonomic nervous system again. Blowing out a breath, I text Kasey back.

ME: Best bride ever! I love you!

Next, I check the unread message below Kasey's. It's from my mother, naturally.

MOM: Good morning! Everyone is so excited to see you, even if it's only for one week. I know you'll be busy with the wedding, but while you're in town, do try to see Grantly Bender. He's such a nice young man. Did you know he's a lawyer now? Anyway, safe travels, sweetheart. Don't be too nervous. LOL!

For the record, my mom isn't *laughing out loud* at the idea of me being safe or nervous. To her, LOL means *lots of love*. I discovered this a couple years ago when she texted that lightning from a winter storm had struck the tree in our front yard. Our old rope swing burned to a crisp. I was just starting nursing school then, not exactly using the swing anymore. Still, I couldn't figure out why she'd be LOL'ing about lightning.

ME: I'm all good. I love you, Mom!

I hit send, then fire off "I love you" texts to both my dad and my brother, Beau. Sending "I love you" texts to my family is my pre-flight ritual—something to comfort me before I hurtle through the clouds at five hundred miles per hour. And okay, yes, I've only done this once before, three days ago. But this *will be* my pre-flight ritual from now on, every time I have to travel thirty-six thousand feet above the earth. Which hopefully won't be often.

My battery drops to one percent just as a flight attendant with a British accent starts his safety spiel at the front of the plane. He points out the exits then shows everyone where to locate motion sickness bags in the seat pockets in front of them. I don't even look down. Getting airsick would make me never want to fly again.

After demonstrating how to use an oxygen mask—*secure yours first before helping others*—the flight attendant lifts a fake seatbelt in the air to mimic the fastening.

Who doesn't know how to fasten a seatbelt?

Still, I decide to tighten mine for good measure. But the closer we get to takeoff, the more my stomach churns. Squeezing my eyes shut, I suck in deep, cleansing breaths. You might think somebody terrified of flying would be riveted by these safety instructions, but I'm opting to swim in the river of denial.

It's okay. You're not on a jet, Natalie. You're back on a beach in Malibu, eating breakfast burritos with Sloane.

I don't open my eyes again until the flight attendants start their final check of the cabin. They're slamming the overhead compartments and making sure everyone's tray tables and seat backs are in place. As the engine grumbles beneath us, my body vibrates with it. No wait, that's my phone buzzing in my hand.

Sloane is texting.

Sloane is Kasey's roommate. At least she used to be. But I jumped at the chance to take over Kasey's old bedroom after she and Beau get married. Meeting Sloane is why I went to LA in the first place. Well, that and impressing my potential landlord, plus connecting with my new boss at St. Joseph's. If the landlord likes me, and my credit gets approved, I'll be one step closer to my future.

SLOANE: I'll let you know as soon as I get an answer from the landlord! I told you she was Miss Hard-to-Please! Hug Kasey and Beau for me! Wish I could be at the wedding with you all! I hate my job!

Poor Sloane is teaching summer school, so she couldn't get away for a cross-country wedding in July. But I happen to know she actually loves her job. And exclamation points, apparently. She follows up her text with a meme of Spongebob and Patrick line-dancing in super-tight thongs. This weekend, when she took me to the beach, Sloane and I discovered we're both *solidly* in the no-thong camp.

Next she sends a GIF of Leslie Knope scowling in a pair of nurse's scrubs. The caption reads TRYING TO CHART WHEN ALL YOUR FRIENDS ARE ON THE SAME SHIFT. I stifle a snort, glancing at the man beside me. Sloane's got no idea what being a nurse is really like, but at least she's got a sense of humor. And she's trying to relate to me. Yes, moving to LA will be the perfect fresh start. I'll *finally* be living near my brother and Kasey, in a rent-controlled apartment, with an awesome roommate who tries.

On that note, I'm running out of time, so I quickly text Sloane back.

ME: I love you!

The second I hit send, my cheeks and throat begin to heat up. Did I really just tell someone I met a few days ago I LOVE YOU?

Oh, Natalie.

My phone buzzes with a new text. It's probably Sloane saying we can't room together because I'm clearly an overemotional creeper who stalks strangers and buries them in her backyard. But the message is from my brother. At least Beau won't be thrown off by an "I love you" text from his weirdo sister. But before I can read what he sent, the flight attendant looms over my seat.

"Airplane mode, please."

Sorry, Beau. See you in a few hours. Swallowing my mortification at the misstep with Sloane, I fumble with my settings, just as the battery dies. "Oh! Look!" I hold up the screen to show the flight attendant. "Problem solved, see?"

"Brilliant." His smile is a wall of teeth, but I'm pretty sure he's unimpressed, so I paste on a grin, ignoring my blush. By now all my skin is flushing hot. As I shove the phone back into my purse, the man next to me begins to stir. I turn toward him, prepared to say hello. That's when he blows out a long breath of garlic and onions in the morning.

The good news? I'm not hungry anymore.

The bad news? I might need that barf bag after all.

Chapter Two



BRADY

The first time my phone buzzes, I'm at the clinic, kicked back on the couch, reading a dog-eared paperback and choking down a bologna and cheese. That's right. I'm a vet technician, and I said *dog-eared*. What? Bad puns aren't illegal.

On the table is a half-eaten bag of corn chips, an untouched apple, and a Dr. Pepper. There's also a couple copies of *Cat Fancy* and *Golf Digest*. Since nobody's around, I've got my writing notebook and a black ballpoint, too. I keep them handy when I'm reading alone because sometimes I get inspiration for my own books. But I don't want anyone to know that about me. At least not yet.

Maybe not ever.

Setting my sandwich down next to the magazines, I swipe at my mouth and check the text.

BEAU: My man. Don't wanna be a pain, but PLEASE tell me Doc Swanson let you off the hook already.

On a typical Tuesday, I'd still have hours of work before closing, but Beau knows the doctor only scheduled me to work a half day. Starting now—well, technically twenty minutes ago—I've got the rest of the week off for best man stuff. That's me.

I'm the best.

And for better or worse, Dr. Swanson and his wife, Wendy—she's also his office assistant—have known my sister Kasey and me our whole lives.

They want our entire family to have a great wedding week, which means plenty of free time to be together. Of course, the Swansons don't know the last thing I need is *extra* access to a certain maid of honor. Not after what happened six months ago. Not after we decided not to talk about it. Well.

She decided.

Why didn't you try harder to talk about it, man?

Over the past year or so, I've learned just how bad miscommunication is. At least that's what all the books have taught me. Not just the novels I've read, but the craft ones I've studied about how to write *my own* stories. So as much as I dread the conversation, I know I've got to hash things out with Natalie. Then we'll have clarity. Zero misconceptions. That's the only way the two of us can move on.

Funny thing is, Natalie and I helped her brother and my sister become a couple in the first place. Or maybe that's not funny. Maybe it's kind of tragic. Because working with Nat Slater to get Beau and Kasey together changed things between the two of us. A slow, subtle shift. After that, on the rare times she'd visit Abieville, I couldn't stop smiling, making jokes, and laughing with her.

I started to see Natalie for who she was—not just my best friend's little sister—but a woman who's hilarious. Gorgeous. Generous. Pretty much all the good *ous* words. Too bad the distance between LA and here is *tremendous*.

Three thousand miles of continental US.

So. She's determined to move even farther away, and I've promised to stay. And we both knew that the last time we saw each other. I'm already swallowing enough compromise to want something else I can't have. *Someone* else.

Bzzzz.

BEAU: Hope you're not stuck in a surgery. Call me when you're free.

Yeah, I was stuck in surgery earlier. A miniature chihuahua named LuLu got in a dog fight. But surgery is the part of my job I actually don't mind—assisting the doctor, administering anesthesia, monitoring the animals. I'm not some kind of masochist, I'm just better off when the patients are asleep. They're peaceful then. Not in pain.

Man, I hate when they're in pain.

When I took this job, I saw it as the first step toward my future as a veterinarian. Since then, I've been training with Doc Swanson. Saving up money. Preparing for vet school. They all cost an arm and a leg. Two arms, more realistically. And as much as I've scrimped for tuition, I'll still have to take out half those limbs in loans.

But the worst part is I'm not cut out for the suffering. For either the humans or their pets.

This morning was especially hard. During our first appointment, we had to help an old cat over the rainbow bridge. Then there was LuLu, the chihuahua. She's the reason I'm still here now, eating bologna and cheese.

Since I'll be out of the clinic the rest of the week, I wanted to let the doc and his wife enjoy a final break. They're having lunch next door at their place, and I'm here making sure LuLu is okay. But Beau must need me too, or he wouldn't have texted me at work. Twice.

So I place the call.

"Dude," he says. "Hold on." In the background I hear him say, "It's Brady," but his voice is muffled, like he's covering the phone. Then he gets back to me. "Where are you?"

"At the clinic."

"Still working?"

"Nah." I glance at my notebook and paperback. "Enjoying a bologna and cheese."

"That's disgusting."

"Sorry you hate bologna."

"It's not that. I mean because you're eating food with ... animals."

"They're not on my lap." I smirk. "And I sterilize the place all the time." In fact, the tile floors still smell like the antibacterial soap I used to mop up before lunch. "Anyway, I can't leave yet. I'm on post-surgical watch."

"Hmm." Beau takes a beat. "How long do you have to stay?"

I glance at the clock across the lobby. "Doc Swanson should be back any minute. What's going on?"

Beau lowers his voice to a whisper. "Your sister's freaking out."

I frown. *Freaking out* doesn't sound like the sibling I know. "Kasey?"

"You have another sister?"

"I do not. But I saw Kase last night over at my parents' place. She was on cloud nine. She's been waiting for this wedding forever." I guffaw. "What did you do to her, man?"

“It’s not me. It’s The Beachfront Inn. Apparently there’s a problem with the rooms we booked for the bachelor and bachelorette parties. Some flood or something, and Kasey can’t deal with it. She’s got an appointment for final fittings with the bridesmaids.”

“Right. Okay.” I straighten on the couch. “So ... what do you need *me* for?”

“I’ve gotta go to the inn to figure out a Plan B, but I’m also supposed to drive to the airport, and I can’t be at two places at the same time.”

“Yeah?” My stomach sinks. *Oh no. He isn’t going to ask this, is he?*

“You think you could pick Nat up for me?”

Yeah. He asked. And I almost lose my bologna on the July issue of *Cat Fancy*.

Sure, I’d planned to talk to Natalie at some point. I want to clear the air about the last time we were together. But an hour-long ride from Albany to Abieville? Just the two of us? I *definitely* don’t want that. But that isn’t what I say to Beau.

What I say is, “I’ll pick her up. Of course.” For the record, I don’t sound sure. I sound like I’m being strangled by Oscar Meyer cold cuts.

“Thanks, Brady. You’re the best, man.” Beau barks out a laugh. “Hey! You really *are the best man.*”

“Heh.” My chest is tight. “I guess I am.”

“Listen. I know this is a lot to ask. Taking time off work. Making airport runs.”

“Don’t forget the Hawaiian shirts you’re making us wear for the bachelor party.”

When Beau chuckles, the tightness in my chest begins to loosen. I like being the friend he counts on most. He’s been that for me since he moved to Abieville. I’d do anything for the guy. No matter how hard.

“Don’t blame me for those shirts,” he protests. “They were your sister’s idea. But I’ll return the favor someday when it’s your turn.”

“My turn?”

“To get hitched.”

And now my guts clench again. Between my day job at the clinic and nights spent trying to write, I don’t have time to date. Then there’s the part where I can’t stop thinking about Natalie. But I don’t tell Beau about any of this. I don’t tell anyone.

“You still there, man?” he asks.

Before I can respond, the door to the back of the clinic opens and shuts. The Swansons must be returning. Their place is a large, single-story duplex spread across a sprawling double lot. Half is set up as their business. The other half's their home. The shared space allows Doc Swanson to check in on the animals anytime, day or night. It's one of the reasons he's the most trusted vet in the Adirondacks. And he's counting on me to take over when he retires.

Big shoes to fill.

"Hey, I gotta go," I tell Beau. "Text me the flight info, so I can get Natalie." I choke out that last part. Her name. Three syllables never felt so hard.

"Great. I'll text Nat too, to let her know you're coming. And Brady? Thanks a lot, man."

"No problem." I clear my throat. "That's what friends are for."

"Brady?" Dr. Swanson calls out. As he enters the lobby, I shove my writing notebook under a copy of *Golf Digest*. The man's hair isn't much more than a few white wisps, but his blue eyes twinkle like he's still in high school. "Wendy thanks you for holding down the fort while we had lunch." He pats his not-insubstantial belly.

"LuLu's still resting comfortably," I say. "Willa and Gator too." Willa's a spaniel and Gator's a basset hound. We're boarding them while their families are on vacation.

"Thanks, Brady. I'll take it from here." As Doc Swanson heads to the office, I scroll through my texts until I find my last thread with Natalie. Our most recent messages are six months old.

ME: Hey.

I'll admit this wasn't my best opening ever.

NAT: I'm sorry ... Who is this?

ME: Ha ha ha. How's the internship going?

NAT: Besides plentiful bodily fluids and overnight shifts at the hospital?

Awesome. *Sarcasm font* I'm just glad this is my last semester. How's the clinic?

ME: Also awesome. Also plentiful bodily fluids. Also sarcasm.

NAT: On that note, I've got a rotation starting in fifteen. What's up?
ME: I think we should set up some ground rules before we see each other again.
NAT: Don't worry. You aren't that irresistible.
ME: I was the last time we were together ...
NAT: Thanks for the reminder.
ME: Shouldn't we talk about it?
NAT: I won't even be back in Abieville until July, and then I'm moving to LA.
ME: Yeah. I'm aware. Hope you invested in sunblock.
NAT: You sound like my mom.
ME: Ouch.
NAT: Let's just agree we made a mistake. And at the wedding, we'll keep the focus on Beau and Kasey. No stealing their thunder with our awkwardness. Okay?
ME: Fine, Nat. I can take a hint.
NAT: I'm not hinting. You're staying. I'm going. Those are the facts. You said so yourself.
ME: Right. I did.
NAT: So. I'll see you in July. No hard feelings?

I must've written and rewritten a dozen different replies, but I ended up deleting them all. I never told Natalie I had *plenty* of feelings. Instead, I sat there picturing her face, watching the bubbles ripple and disappear. Ripple. Disappear.

In the end, she had a point.

Discussing things further won't change the inevitable. Not then. Not now. She's got her big cross-country plans, and I've got people counting on me to stay in Abieville. Natalie and I were dead in the water before the tidal wave of our attraction hit. Hoping for more with her would be like strapping anchors to my feet and trying not to drown.

So this week, I'll keep my head down. No more smiling at Natalie. No more telling her jokes. Definitely no more laughing. Just one airport pickup. One rehearsal dinner. One wedding reception. I can get through that.

Shoving my phone in my pocket, I start packing up the rest of my food. Doc Swanson comes back into the lobby, hands stuffed in the pockets of his lab coat.

“Everything okay?” He raises one wild eyebrow.

“All good.” I rise from the couch. “Just a big week ahead. Lot on my mind.”

“Well, don’t worry about things here, Brady. You kids just have fun.”
When he grins at me, I square my shoulders.

No more smiles. No more jokes. Definitely no more laughing.

Chapter Three



NATALIE

After five hours of narrowly escaping the use of multiple barf bags, I stumble off the plane and glance at the sign pointing passengers toward baggage claim. But I *really* need to pee. I couldn't bring myself to use the lavatory that was three feet from where I was sitting because that would've meant unbuckling my seatbelt. And I don't trust turbulence. At all.

So now I have to make a quick pit stop in the bathroom. Unfortunately I can't avoid the mirror when washing my hands. *GAH!* I look like Sally Skellington from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* if Sally Skellington wore an oversized hoodie and old black leggings. I definitely chose comfort over style when I got dressed at the crack of dawn. Good thing my brother's the one picking me up. I'll just ask Beau to stop by our parents' house so I can change before meeting Kasey for the fitting.

I finger-comb my blonde curls in a last-ditch effort to feel less like a drowned rat and more like a human, then I stride out of the bathroom. Head held high, purse strap draped across my body, I make my way toward baggage claim. I'm almost to the luggage carousel when I spot him.

Not my brother.

Brady Graham.

He's twenty yards away and facing the other direction, but my heartbeat clocks him in an instant. His big shoulders are stiff and broad. Even the back of his head looks moody. You might not think the back of someone's head could have a mood, but you'd be wrong. In stark contrast to the stiff, broad shoulders, his hair is swirlier than usual.

He's a big, broad, moody swirl.

He didn't used to be like that. And I'm not talking about the swirl. I'm

talking about the mood. Brady Graham used to be fun. And *funny*, which is even better. Being funny is my favorite of all the things a person can be. You have to be smart to be genuinely funny, otherwise you're laughing at a person, not with them.

As if he can sense a disturbance in the force—him being the force, me being the disturbance—Brady slowly turns, and we lock eyes. My emotions immediately run the gamut. On the one hand, I'm confused. Why isn't my brother picking me up? I swallow a twinge of disappointment, wishing Beau prioritized me more. But at the same time, my insides go all fluttery over seeing Brady again after six months.

While I stand frozen in place, he starts trudging toward me. Considering one of my main goals was to spend as little time as possible with him this week, this could be a problem. A big, broad, swirly, moody problem.

Still, my job as maid of honor is to sprinkle sunshine all over Kasey's wedding, and I can't let Mr. Moody bring me down. If I have to start now—a little earlier than I'd planned—I can kill Brady Graham with kindness. I just wish the man looked a little more like *The Nightmare Before Christmas* too.

Instead, his jeans are slung low on his hips in a way that absolutely screams sexy. A clean, white T-shirt is stretched across his chest. His very well-muscled chest. In the airport lighting, his auburn hair is dark enough to be mistaken for brown. It's swooped off his forehead with bangs falling on either side like he just raked his fingers through it.

He furrows his brow, and his usually blue eyes are a clouded gray. An overcast sky at dusk. I take an involuntary step backward. All around us, the space buzzes with the hum of travelers.

"Well, this is unexpected," I chirp, trying *not* to sound confused, disappointed, *or* fluttery. Especially not fluttery. "Where's my brother?"

Brady's mouth tightens. "He said he was going to text you."

"He probably tried. My phone died."

"Right." Brady bobs his head, and my stomach twists.

Don't let him see that he gets to you. "So where did you say Beau is?" I paste on a smile.

"I didn't." He crosses his arms over his chest. "Kasey needed him, so he asked me to pick up the slack."

I smile even bigger. "Does that make me the slack?"

"That's not what I said." Brady's gaze sweeps downward, taking in my hoodie and leggings. When his roaming eyes land on mine again, my cheeks

flush. I wish the man didn't have that effect on me, but apparently my cheeks don't care about my wishes.

"Anyway, thanks for picking me up." I hoist my purse higher on my shoulder.

"You're welcome." He glances at his phone. "But we really should get going."

I nod at the luggage claim carousel. "I just need to wait for my bag."

"You checked a bag?" Brady furrows his brow. "I figured all you need in LA is a bikini and flip-flops."

My smile finally falters, but I haul it back up again. "First of all, a flight attendant forced me to check my carry-on. And California has more than beaches. There are mountains too. They say you can ski and surf in the same day."

He frowns. "You surf?"

"No," I say. "But I'm sure someone can teach me."

"Yeah." He drops his eyes. "I'll bet."

"Either way, I wear one-piece bathing suits." I shrug. "They leave more to the imagination."

Brady lifts his gaze. "Good to know."

Ugh. My face starts flaming. Why did I mention any kind of bathing suit? I feel practically naked in the middle of the airport now, so I tug my purse even higher on my shoulder like that might give me some kind of coverage.

Don't make this even more uncomfortable than it already is, Nat.

"Anyway," I say, just as the baggage claims carousel rumbles to life. "Hopefully my bag will be first."

"Fingers crossed," Brady says under his breath. He stuffs his hands in his pockets, and his jeans are slung even lower than before. But I'm not thinking about Brady's hips. Or the way his thighs fill out those pant legs. Or the curve of his mouth when he—

Stop it, Nat.

We're both quiet now, standing beside one another, shifting our weight. As more luggage comes down the chute, winding slowly around the crowded claims area like an endless snake of black suitcases, people crane their necks trying to figure out which bags are theirs.

Mine is nowhere in sight.

I turn to Brady and sigh. "So much for my bag being first, huh?"

His eyes shift over my head and beyond me. "That one must be yours." I

spin around in time to see my Samsonite drop onto the conveyor belt. It's hot pink, with an even hotter-pink ribbon tied to the handle.

"Yes!"

"I didn't know suitcases even came in that color." Brady shakes his head, and my cheeks flush brighter than my bag. I just wanted my bag to be easy to spot, but he probably thinks I'm looking for attention.

All you need in LA is a bikini.

I huff out a breath, stomping over to the conveyor belt to snag my embarrassing bag. Brady follows close behind, reaching around me to grab the case.

"I've got it," I say. To prove my point, I bend down and snatch the handle at the same time he does. When our fingers brush, a spark of heat whips up my arm, then to my toes. My brain. My heart. But I can't let my body parts get hot and sparky. So I yank the handle to get my hand away from his, because I can manage my own carry-on, thank you very much.

Unfortunately, I pull so hard, my fingers slide off the handle, and I topple backward, landing hard on my butt. The suitcase follows, smacking the tile next to me. And since I hate dealing with combinations, I didn't lock the dual clasps. That's why the case pops open, and the contents of my carry-on spill onto the floor.

Heels.

Hairdryer.

Cosmetics bag.

Underwear.

One barely-there turquoise-blue bikini and a lacy white negligee. Price tags still on. Brady stares for a couple of beats too long. "I thought you said one pieces leave more to the imagination?"

"They do." My throat scorches hot. The bathing suit and nightie are actually gifts for Kasey at her bachelorette party. The private bungalow Beau rented for their Bora Bora honeymoon is the perfect place for a new wife to wear a bikini and lingerie. But I'm not about to tell Brady that. He won't want to picture his little sister wearing these in Bora Bora.

Or anywhere.

He reaches out to help me up, but I ignore the gentlemanly gesture. I'm still tingly from our accidental touch, and my whole face already feels splotchy. So I scramble to my knees and start repacking everything myself. While Brady stands over me, I wedge my hairdryer into one side of the case.

Then I snatch a pair of panties off the floor. When I hazard a peek up at Brady, his eyes cut to the underwear. He shifts his jaw. “Need any help?”

“No thank you.” I spit a wedge of blonde hair out of my mouth. “Why is it always harder to get things back into a bag at the end of a trip?”

“Because you fold everything neatly when you first pack.”

I look up again, coughing out a laugh. “You’ve heard of rhetorical questions, haven’t you, Dr. Graham?”

He frowns. “I’m a technician. Not a vet.”

“Po-tay-to, po-tah-to.” Just then, a bulldog of a man rolls his suitcase right over my favorite pajamas. They’re baby-blue cotton with dogs printed all over them. The dogs are playing guitars. They’re completely adorable.

“Watch your suitcase,” Brady growls, but the guy rolls on without a backward glance. Brady reaches down and scoops up the pajamas. “Here.” He hands them to me.

“Thanks.” I lay the pajamas on my mound of clothes and resume stuffing things back into the case. Eventually I give up trying to balance the last pair of socks on the pile, and stick them in my purse with my dead phone. Then I glance up at Brady.

Big mistake.

“We don’t have to make this awkward,” he says. Then he clenches his teeth, which only makes him look even more handsome.

Why did I glance at him again?

“I’m not awkward,” I blurt. “Why would we be awkward?”

He raises an eyebrow, and I shrug. I *totally* know why we’d be awkward.

“Fine.” He runs a hand along the back of his neck. “If that’s how you want to play it.”

“What playing? I’m not playing.” When I try shutting my case, it’s still a few inches from being able to close. So I climb on top, forcing the two sides together. Then I snap the latches. *Clack. Clack.* The sound matches the crackling in my heart. But I bury the feeling, and start wheeling my way toward the exit. No looking back.

Yes, I’m an adult. But what happened with Brady is water under the bridge. It has to be. It’s also something I never think about.

Almost never.

Hardly ever, really.

Chapter Four



SIX MONTHS AGO: NATALIE

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. *How could you be so incredibly stupid?* I exhale a long, frosty breath which immediately turns to vapor. Burying my frozen chin in the swoop of my scarf, I give thanks that at least I'm dressed for the North Pole. Puffy jacket. Hat. Boots. Someday I won't have to leave the house looking like Mrs. Claus just because it's December.

But tonight is not that day.

I swipe at the window, clearing a circle to see out onto the road. Hopefully somebody will drive by soon. If I hadn't offered to give Shannon and Paige a ride home, I wouldn't be in this predicament. The pub at The Beachfront Inn is where everyone meets up when they're visiting for the holidays. But not everyone is okay to drive afterward.

Shannon and Paige definitely weren't.

So I took a chance that there was enough gas in the Blue Whale to get Paige across town to her family's farmhouse and Shannon up the mountain to her family's cabin. The Blue Whale is what my brother and I call my mom's old station wagon. The fuel gauge is broken. You're *supposed* to keep track of the mileage.

The good news? There was enough gas to get them both home. The bad news happened on the way back to my parents' place. That's when the sputtering started, then the engine shuddered. I shifted into neutral, and we rolled to a stop. Just me and the Blue Whale. Now, stuck between the mountain and town, I can't get a signal on my phone. So here I sit, seeing my breath, pounding the steering wheel.

Stupid.

The worst part? I'm actually pretty smart. I've got big goals for the

future. In six short months, I'll be leaving New York for good. And this move won't just be for four years of undergrad at Rochester, or for the two years of nursing school after that. No, I'm leaving this state forever. By the end of the summer, I'll be a transplant in the land of sunshine, living near Beau and Kasey. Hollywood movie stars in every Starbucks.

California, here I come.

For now, though, I just have to close my eyes and manifest getting out of this mess. And I must be great at this woo-woo stuff, because as soon as I picture a random tow truck showing up, I hear the rumble of an engine. A peek out the streaked window reveals a black Ford F-150. The truck pulls up past the Blue Whale slowly and parks in front of the station wagon.

It's Brady Graham.

My stomach lurches.

Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful somebody showed up, but Brady's the last person I want seeing me as some kind of damsel in distress. To be honest, something shifted the summer he and I decided my brother and his sister should be a couple. Working in secret with Brady made my insides flutter. And realizing he cared so much about Kasey and Beau's happiness tugged at my heartstrings. Hard.

As it turns out, the guy I'd only thought of as Beau's wise-cracking best friend is actually funny, clever, and kind. And ever since then, the air around us feels charged. Electric, even. When Brady's near me now—which isn't very often—I start to vibrate like a tuning fork. Still, even the most crackling chemistry can't shrink the literal country that's going to separate us soon. So yes, my brain knows nothing can happen with Brady.

But somebody needs to give a heads-up to my tuning fork.

I blow out another long breath, which unfortunately just fogs up the window again. Brady hops out of his truck, crunching along the snow bank on the side of the road. He's in a winter coat and a gray wool beanie. A multicolored scarf loops around his neck.

Climbing out of the station wagon, I stomp my feet and clap my hands, praying for warmth. When Brady reaches me, a crease forms in his forehead, just below the beanie. "What happened here?" His breath is a plume between us. I imagine his mouth tastes like hot chocolate. I scrunch my nose, trying not to sniff him and hoping he can't see me blush in the moonlight.

"I ran out of gas." *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

He bobs his head. "Happens." His voice is deep and gruff. I shiver,

glancing up at his truck. It sure looks warm in there. He raps a gloved fist on the hood of the station wagon. "Well. Come on, then."

I grab my purse and lock up the car. As we trudge toward his truck, he keeps a steadying hand at my lower back. When he opens the door to help me up, I find myself wishing he wasn't wearing gloves. I hate driving with mittens on, so I left mine on the passenger seat.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

After he goes around to the driver's side and climbs up next to me, he meets my gaze across the cab. His eyes are bright, and a sweep of hair pokes out from his beanie.

"The gas station's closed by now," he says, "but I keep a spare gallon at my place."

I tilt my head. "My dad does too."

"All right, then. Guess I'll just take you home." He starts up the engine. "But I guess your parents' place isn't really your home anymore, is it? Hasn't been for a while. And now I hear you're moving this summer. After the wedding. To LA."

"Ah." My stomach swirls. Brady's been talking to my brother about me. "Beau told you?"

"He did."

"Well, I heard through the grapevine you're going to be his best man."

"I am."

I drop my chin, staring down at my purse. "I was kind of hoping Kasey would ask me to be in the wedding too."

"I have no idea what my sister's planning," he says. "Sorry."

"It's not your fault she doesn't see me as bridesmaid material." I get quiet then, waiting for Brady to say something more. I want an excuse to tell him about Paige and Shannon. How they both just got engaged. How they're going to be each other's maids of honor. How they're planning to buy houses on the same block in the same subdivision and raise their kids together just like their moms did. I'm not even sure I'll be invited to their weddings. Probably I will. But it would be nice to know for sure.

When Brady doesn't say anything, the silence gets to me. "For the record, I ran out of gas because I was giving my friends a ride home from the pub. Shannon and Paige."

"Nice of you."

"I thought so." I shrug. "They were celebrating their engagements a little

too hard tonight, if you know what I mean. Seems like everybody and their brothers are getting married these days. Literally.” I try to chuckle, but there’s a hollowness inside me, and the sound isn’t as happy as it should be.

“I remember Paige and Shannon.” Brady squints. “You three were attached at the hip back in high school.”

“Nah. Those two were, though.” My teeth find my lower lip. “I moved here too late to get on that train. By third grade, every girl in this town was paired up for life. But they let me tag along. It’s mostly my fault we didn’t stay closer.”

Brady keeps his focus out the window, taking the next turn slowly. “Well, they’re lucky you drove them home.”

“I’m lucky *you* drove by.”

“Hmph.” He doesn’t say anything more until we pull up to my parents’ house. Then he throws the truck into park and hops out, jogging around to open the door for me. When I step on the curb and slip on the ice, he wraps an arm around my middle. Once I’m upright again, he slides his hand to the small of my back and leads me up to the porch.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say at the door.

“I’d expect Beau would do the same for my sister.”

“Yeah.” I puff out a laugh. “He should. He’s marrying her.”

The emptiness in my chest seems like it could swallow me whole. I just want to feel something other than empty. I’m not some gas tank sputtering on the side of the road. At least I don’t want to be. So I lunge forward, going up on my toes to plant a quick kiss on Brady’s mouth.

He just stands there, frozen. Unmovable as a glacier. This is not the reaction I was hoping for. And I’m not being filled up even a little bit. So I move in to kiss him again. Only this time, I’ll make sure he feels it.

My lips brush his, sweet and soft at first, warm breath mixing in the cold air. Our motions are slow, like we’re sleepwalkers. Like we’re both inside a waking dream. When I press against him, moving in close, he comes alive, finally shocked out of his stupor. He rips off his gloves, dropping them on the porch and gathering me in his arms. I’m kissing Brady, and he’s kissing me back.

Brady Graham and I are kissing.

I mirror his moves, my mouth pouring over his. When his bare hands slide up to my shoulders, they leave a trail of fire. I reach up to clasp his neck, and he pulls back, just an inch, before dipping his head down again. His

hands are in my hair now, tugging and tangled. As I surrender to a sigh, he loosens his grip. With a low growl, he tears himself away.

“Natalie.” He takes two steps backward, eyes in a squint. “We can’t do this.”

I draw my lower lip under my teeth. “Why not?”

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, scuffing his boots on the porch. “For one thing, you’re leaving.” His voice is all gravel, and my heart pounds hard.

“And?” I choke out.

“And ... I’m staying.”

“That’s nothing new.” I expel an icy breath. How can I be so cold after the heat between us? “I’ve been coming and going for school for almost six years now. I’m only ever here for vacations and breaks.”

“Yeah. And that’s why we *don’t* do this.” He motions from me to him. “And anyway, your moving to LA is different. It’s more ... permanent. You shouldn’t have kissed me, Nat.”

“You seemed to be enjoying it, Brady.”

“Yeah. Then I came to my senses. We need to think about Kasey and Beau. They’re getting married.”

“I know that.” I frown. I ran out of gas, I didn’t have a lobotomy. But either way, I wanted to feel *less* hollow in Brady’s arms. Now I feel emptier than ever.

“So you and I—our families—we’re going to be around each other forever, going forward. No matter where you live, right? And things could get awkward if ...” He waves a hand between us. “You know.”

All the emotions I’ve been feeling—since I ran into Paige and Shannon, since Beau got engaged, or better yet, since we first moved to this town—wells up inside me, threatening to escape in one big, wrenching sob. So I clamp it down, locking the sadness behind my ribs. I refuse to cry in front of Brady.

I can’t cry in front of him.

In three more days, tonight will be a distant memory. I’ll be out of here and back to Rochester for the next six months. Then in July, after the wedding, I’ll be in California, far away from Brady’s rejection. I can survive seventy-two more hours in Abieville. And half a year in New York. Easy peasy. Or at least easyish peasyish.

“Don’t worry.” I force my lips into a smile. “It won’t happen again.”

Without another word, I head inside.

Chapter Five



PRESENT: BRADY

Just past the familiar sign that indicates we're fifteen miles from Abieville, Natalie and I end up waiting for a couple of moose to cross the road. Slowly. That's what we have around here instead of chickens. Moose taking their own sweet time. Deer too.

Sometimes a whole family of them.

Natalie shifts in her seat, leaning toward the glass, her nose pressed against it. It's like she thinks getting closer to the outside might change the view inside.

Spoiler alert: the view doesn't change.

On either side of the road, rolling hills lead to pine-dotted mountains. The homes out here are still spread pretty far apart, with acres of land between them. Mostly farmhouses with a few colonials mixed in. The nearer we get to Abieville, the nearer the properties get to each other. And the places in town are mostly single-family homes in the Craftsman style. Or Craftsman houses that have been bought and turned into private businesses.

We're still waiting for the slower of the two moose when my phone rings, so I put it on speaker. "Hey."

Beau's voice booms. "Did you get Nat?"

"Hi, Beau!" When Natalie smiles and waves at the phone, my mouth tics up. Just a little.

"Hey there, sis," Beau says. "Thanks for picking her up, man."

"No problem." Well. There *is* a bit of a problem. But nothing I want to talk to him about.

"Sorry we're running a little late," Natalie says.

We?

“I had to pee, and my bag was the last one off the plane,” she says. “Now there’s these moose ...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Beau says.

“We’ll be there soon,” she says. “I’ve just got to run by Mom and Dad’s to change, and—”

“Actually,” Beau says, “if Brady doesn’t mind, could you two go straight to Buttons and Bows?”

“Uhhh.” I frown at the phone. “Sorry. What’s a ... Buttons and Bows?”

“It’s the bridal salon in Southampton,” Natalie says. “In that first stretch of shops with all the brick buildings.”

“Kasey’s there with the rest of the bridesmaids,” Beau says, “and I think she could really use her maid of honor.”

“Oh no.” Natalie’s face falls. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Amber.”

“Kasey’s friend from *The Chronicle*?”

“That’s the one,” he says. “Turns out she’s four months pregnant.”

“Oh!” Natalie grins. “But that’s great news.”

“It is,” Beau agrees. “But what’s *not* great is her dress doesn’t fit.”

“Oooh.” Natalie winces. “She probably got measured before she knew she was pregnant.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, so Amber can’t wear her dress.” She tips her chin and shrugs. “That’s not the end of the world.”

“I tried telling Kasey that, but apparently my future bride doesn’t want my opinion. And she won’t let me come to the salon. I’m hoping you can talk her off the cliff when you get there.”

“Hmmm.” Natalie chews at her lip. Then her eyes go wide. “I can do better than that. I’ve got an idea.”

“Hit me. I’d love to tell Kasey you can help.”

“Kasey let us design our own dresses,” she says, “and I chose a cut with an empire waist. It’s fitted around the bodice, but the rest is loose. So if Amber’s only four months along, my dress should probably fit her. She’s about my height, isn’t she?”

“She *is* about your height.” There’s a pause on Beau’s end. “But other parts of her are ... definitely bigger.”

Nat wrinkles her nose. “Like her stomach? Duh. She’s pregnant.”

“No.” Beau chuckles. “I was thinking a little north of there.”

Before I can help myself, my gaze flickers to Natalie's chest, then back up again. I flinch when she catches me looking.

"I'm sure Amber can squeeze into the bodice of my dress." Nat harrumphs. "*Inadequate* as it may be. It's not like she's some Victoria's Secret model."

"Yeah." Beau snorts. "You're both way too short."

"And you're way too hilarious." Nat shakes her head. "Go ahead and keep laughing about how small my *north* is, while I go rescue Kasey and Amber."

"Great, Nat," Beau says. "You're the best."

"What am I?" I scoff. "Chopped liver?" But Beau's already ended the call. Now it's just Nat and me again. Alone in my quiet truck. By now both the moose have made it a safe distance into the field, so I start the truck up, and focus on the road as we make our way to the turnoff toward Southampton.

Out of my peripheral vision, I see Natalie digging in her purse. When a pair of socks falls out, she laughs to herself. I like that sound. A little too much.

"Want a piece of gum?" she asks. "It's the least I can do, since you're stuck driving me all over the place."

"I don't mind." I slide my gaze over to her. "But if you've got extra ..."

She dives back into her purse and slips out a couple of foil-covered sticks. She unwraps the first stick and pops it in her mouth. Watching the gum disappear between her teeth makes me gulp. Then she unwraps the second stick. "Here." Before I know what's happening, she slips the whole thing into my mouth.

Whoa.

Her fingertips touch my lips, and a shockwave pulses through me. When the taste of cinnamon explodes across my tongue—along with the memory of her kiss—I almost swerve off the road and plow straight into a tree. If I'm not careful, I'll get us both killed. So I return my focus to the road and grip the wheel. After another minute of silence, Natalie turns toward me.

"Hopefully this dress switch with Amber will work," she says.

"Dress. Hmph. Nice." I'm so distracted by her closeness, I'm mumbling nonsense now. Maybe she won't notice.

She cocks her head. "What's nice?"

Yeah. She noticed.

“You.” I clear my throat. “Trading your umpire dress with Amber. It’s ... nice.” When Natalie laughs, I eye her sideways. “What’s so funny?”

“You said umpire.” She bites back a snort.

“Isn’t that what you called the dress thing?” I frown, thinking hard. “For the other bridesmaid? For ... the pregnant one? You said yours would fit her because it has an umpire waist.”

“It’s pronounced empire,” Natalie says. “Or you can say it like *ahhm-pier*.” Her voice goes low and sexy. “That’s the French way.”

“I took Spanish.” I study the sign coming up on the left, pretending to read the words even though they haven’t changed since I’ve been alive.

Welcome to Southampton.

The population of our neighboring town is supposedly three times that of Abieville, but just like us, their main street is a series of mostly mom-and-pop shops. One church. Two restaurants. Natalie points out the salon she’s supposed to go to in the bottom floor of a two-story brick building. The sidewalk out front is lined with potted plants. I pull up to the curb and cut the engine.

“Thanks for the ride,” Natalie says. “Again. Two in one day.”

“Hold on,” I tell her. “Let me get the door for you. My mom would murder me if she saw you climbing in and out of this truck on your own.”

“Well.” Nat’s lip twitches. “I can’t be responsible for sending Elaine Graham to prison.”

While I jog around the truck, Natalie pulls down the sun visor to check her reflection. But my truck doesn’t have extra stuff like mirrors. I haul open the door.

“You look fine,” I tell her.

“Are you sure? I feel like such a mess, showing up to a dress fitting wearing this.” She sweeps her hand down to indicate her leggings and sneakers.

“Bring the carry-on in with you.” I nod at the luggage at her feet. “They probably have changing rooms in”—I glance at the building, checking out the name on the sign—“Buttons and Bows.”

“They definitely do.” Nat’s mouth quirks. “Changing rooms take up almost half the salon.”

“Come on, then.” I take her hand to help her out, and the zing of her touch through my body is electric. When I reach for her bag, our hands brush again. Whoa. I *really* need to stop zinging.

“You don’t have to wait for me,” she says. “I’m sure someone else will have room in their car.”

“Maybe.” I nod at the building. “But Kasey’s had a tough day. Dresses that don’t fit. Floods in the rooms at The Beachfront. I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“In that case”—Natalie tips her chin—“welcome to a bridal salon, Brady.”

I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?

She opens the door, and we step into hell.

Chapter Six



NATALIE

Heaven is a bridal salon, and I'd totally swear to that in court. Just look at the pure beauty in this place. It's like a whole sky dotted with clouds. Row upon row of gowns and veils and slips in all shapes and sizes. Everything is billowy and clean and soft and ... yes, heavenly.

It's the best.

"This place is the worst," Brady says.

He's standing behind me, so close I can hear him groan. "You don't have to stay." I whirl around. "I already told you that."

He opens his mouth—probably to protest—at the same moment somebody shouts, "She's here!"

We both look across the salon for the source. Beyond several displays of shoes, in the back corner of the room, Amber is sitting in an armchair. Across from her, five of Kasey's cousins take up two white leather sofas. Lettie and Nella—the two cousins who still live in Abieville—are on the smaller loveseat. On the larger one are the triplets who grew up in Oregon: Tess, Darby, and Olivia.

"Natalie!" one of the triplets calls out. I *think* it's Olivia, but I sometimes mix them up. Between the couches and the armchair is a low circular stage where Kasey stands, facing a mirror. Her gown is ivory silk with scalloped, three-quarter sleeves. The Queen Anne neckline is lined with pearly beads. Below them is a fitted bodice and a full, flouncy skirt. She's a total princess, but in a good way. When she turns and sees us, she lifts her hem and climbs off the stage, floating across the salon like an angel. The dress is gorgeous. Kasey is gorgeous. Oh, my heart—here comes the bride. My future sister-in-law.

“Sorry I’m late!” I blurt, my throat clogged with emotion. “It was the carry-on. And the moose. And—”

“I don’t care!” she gushes. “I’m just so glad you made it.” Kasey comes at me with open arms, and I go in for a hug, but her skirt is too big, and her sleeves are too constricting, so she can’t get her arms all the way around. Instead we move in as close as we can get, grasping one another by the elbows. Then we hop up down a couple of times, squealing with delight.

“I’m getting married!” she sings out.

“You’re getting married!” I sing along with her, forgetting about everything else but this moment. Who cares that I just spent hours listening to the flush of an airplane toilet?

Or that I sent an “I love you” text to Sloane?

Or that my future landlord might reject me?

Or that Brady’s spicy cologne smells like pine and leather with a hint of ... cardamom?

Wait. *Why am I smelling Brady’s spicy cologne?*

My whole body heats up as I feel his arms wrap around me. Well, technically, he’s wrapping his arms around Kasey, but I’m so close to her, I get caught up in their embrace.

“Hold on!” Kasey jerks away from us, her eyes scanning the salon. “Beau isn’t here, is he? It’s bad luck for him to see the dress before the wedding. Brady! Tell me Beau isn’t here!”

Brady glances around. “Does it *look* like Beau is here?”

“I’m getting married in a few days,” Kasey says. “I don’t need your sarcasm right now, Broody.”

Ha! *Broody*? That’s hilarious. If I weren’t steering clear of the guy for the rest of this week, I’d plan to call him Broody myself. A lot.

“I’m not being sarcastic.” He takes a step back, staring at Kasey. “You’re just so beautiful.” He clears his throat, like he’s got a lump in there that’s too large for his body.

“Hey.” Kasey tilts her head. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” He drags a hand along the back of his neck. “Of course I am.” Another throat clearing. “It’s just that my baby sister is marrying my best friend, and I guess I haven’t actually processed that fact yet.” The words come out rumbled and jagged, a sentence full of big feelings.

Kasey blinks. “Well, don’t process *now*!” She swats his upper arm, right where his biceps strain at his sleeve. “You’re going to make me cry, and I’m

not wearing waterproof mascara!” When her eyes begin to shine, tears gather in mine too.

“Maybe you’d better go, Brady.” I swipe at my stinging nose. “Otherwise everyone in the salon will turn into a puddle.”

“Wait!” Kasey lifts a hand to stop him. “Can you actually stick around?” She looks over her shoulder at her cluster of bridesmaids. “We came in two cars, but one of them doesn’t have a backseat right now.”

Brady bobs his head. “Uncle Irv’s?”

Kasey nods. “There were already seven of us crammed into two cars before Nat got here. Now we’ve got eight.”

“Plus I’m sitting for two,” Amber calls out. She smiles and waves, then pats her slightly rounded stomach.

“Ugh. That reminds me.” Kasey groans. “We still have to figure out what to do about Amber’s dress.”

“Ah!” I splay my hands, thrilled to finally be of concrete use. “I thought Beau would’ve texted you by now, but I offered to trade dresses with her. I didn’t go for a tight fit, so I think mine might work.”

“Natalie!” Kasey gasps, throwing a hand up to her mouth. “That would be incredible! You are absolutely brilliant and the best sister-in-law-ever.”

“Ahem.” Brady shrugs. “You aren’t married to her brother yet. One of you could still back out.” When we both turn to gape at him, he smirks. “What? You told me not to make you cry. I’m just trying to help.”

Kasey guffaws. “There’s the Brady we all know and love.” When she says this, my heart skips a beat. Not because I love Brady. I just can’t shake the scent of his cologne. Or the sound of his voice. Or feel of his hands. Or the taste of his kiss.

I’m in trouble.

Kasey reaches for his hand. “So you’ll stick around while Amber and Nat work out any last-minute alterations with their dress switch?”

“Sure, Kase. Then I can bring you home in my truck.” He tilts his head to indicate the cousins across the room. “Natalie can hitch a ride in one of their cars.”

“Actually”—Kasey cringes—“I kind of need to peel myself out of this dress and get going.” She turns to me, regret in her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Nat, but the rest of us are already done with our fittings. We waited as long as we could.”

Brady shifts his jaw. “What’s the hurry, Kase?”

“I’ve got to get back to prep for tomorrow.”

I blink. “Tomorrow?” I must’ve missed that particular bridesmaid memo.

“It’s going to be so great!” Kasey grins. “First the whole wedding party is meeting at the docks to cruise the lake and take pictures. Then we’re all heading to The Beachfront Inn after.” She claps her hands. “We’re going to have a beach day!”

“Oh, wow. That sounds ...”

“Great, right?”

I gulp, and my stomach plunges. A lake cruise and pictures, followed by a day at the beach, means *a lot* more time with Brady. And here I thought, after today, I could avoid him until the rehearsal.

Kasey wrinkles her nose. “But I’m supposed to be at the docks with Beau by five to confirm plans for the party barge.”

Brady’s mouth tics at one corner. “You’re renting a whole *barge*?”

“A *party* barge. Yes.”

“It’s all right.” I lay my palm on Kasey’s shoulder. “You go ahead and change, then take care of the party barge. I’ll stay here and work out the dress switch. Brady will drive me home after. Everything will be just fine.”

“Just *fine*?” Kasey quirks an eyebrow.

“Did I say *fine*? I meant absolutely perfect. And Brady’s right.” I break into a smile. “You do look so beautiful. My brother is totally going to lose his mind when he sees you walking down the aisle.”

Kasey sighs. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Sorry to interrupt.” A bridal consultant with purple braids converges on us. “But is this the maid of honor?”

“Yes!” Kasey beams at me. “This is Natalie, my hero. She offered to trade dresses with Amber, the bridesmaid who’s pregnant.”

“Mine has an empire waist,” I tell the consultant. “So I’m hoping the shape can accommodate the baby bump.”

“Fantastic!” Purple-braid woman takes my hand and pumps it. “I’m Violet. And we have a tailor onsite who can make a few last-minute alterations *if* the fit is close enough.”

While Brady stays behind in the front of the salon, Violet leads me to a changing room in the back. The space is enormous and brightly lit. Benches and mirrors line the walls. Kasey’s clothes are folded on a chair. Green dresses and garment bags jockey for space on hooks. “I’ll help the bride out of her gown first,” Violet tells me. “Then we’ll have you try on Amber’s

dress, and I'll get the tailor in here if we need her."

"Sounds good." I wheel my carry-on into a corner. As much as I would love to put on something fresh, I should probably wait until after we've dealt with the dress switch. No need to change more than once. Violet gets to work undoing the buttons on Kasey's gown, while the rest of the bridesmaids—who already had their fits approved—collect their dresses and garment bags.

Each cousin in Kasey's family—male and female—has hair somewhere on the red spectrum, and everyone's eyes are some shade of green, hazel, or blue. If you ask me, Brady got the best combination of them all.

I imagine him in the salon now, wearing out the floor, hands stuffed in his pockets. His jaw is probably clenched, and he's definitely handsome. Meanwhile, I'm standing here in old leggings with sweat trickling down the back of my hoodie.

"Hey, Nat!" Lettie, the oldest of the girls, calls my name. "What do you think of my dress?" Her question interrupts my daydream, which is a good thing. I need to stop dreaming about Brady Graham. Especially when I'm sweaty.

"Do you like it?" She holds the deep green silk up against her body. There's a halter neckline and a slit up one side.

I widen my eyes and pretend to fan myself. "It's ... wow. So stunning!"

Lettie grins. "I know, right?"

"This one's mine," Nella says. She's the quietest of the cousins, and she lives in Abieville like Lettie. Her dress has a scoop neck with a flowing skirt.

"It's absolutely perfect, Nella."

A dimple presses into her cheek. "Thank you."

The triplets show me their dresses next, forcing me to identify which one of them is which. After I successfully place the right names to the right faces, all three of them applaud. "There *will* be a quiz tomorrow," Tess teases. "Just to be sure you didn't get lucky today."

"Yes!" Darby cheers. "Bring on all the tests!"

Olivia snorts. "You aren't even kidding, are you, Darbs? No wonder you like med school so much."

"For the record," I say, "I can totally tell your personalities apart. But you do all kind of ..."

"Please do *not* say we look alike." Olivia fluffs her hair. "I'm *obviously* the prettiest."

Darby lays a palm on her chest. "Well, I'm *obviously* the smartest."

“Hey!” Tess squawks. “What does that make me?”

We’re all quiet for two seconds, until Amber clears her throat. “Umm ... Natalie?” She’s a pretty brunette with a chin-length bob. She’s about my build—except for a slightly bigger *north*. “Thanks so much for trading dresses with me.” She nods at an unopened garment bag with my name on it. That one must be mine.

“No problem,” I say. “It’s loose at the waist, so hopefully that will work.”

“I’m sure it will, and I don’t really have another option.” Her brown eyes go soft. Almost apologetic. “I should warn you my dress is ... form-fitting. I was trying to impress James. He’s my husband, but ever since our twins were born, he’s been calling me Mommy. And, well. I wanted to remind him I’m more than that.”

Olivia waves at Amber’s belly. “Mission accomplished, Mommy.”

“Anyway.” Amber passes me the garment bag with her name on it. “Here you go.”

When I unzip the bag, I see what she’s talking about. Amber’s dress makes Lettie’s bare-shouldered design look like Laura Ingalls on the prairie. Not only is the silhouette narrow, but the neckline is—in a word—exposed. Apparently, Mommy’s been hiding a secret slinky side. Even before putting the dress on, I can tell I’m going to look like an emerald sausage, except with less coverage. Forget an empire waist. I’d be better off with what Brady called an *umpire* cut.

At least that would probably come with a giant pad across my chest.

“Moment of truth,” Amber says. “Go ahead. Try it on.”

Violet, who’s finished helping Kasey out of her gown, comes over to us. Her eyes dart between me and Amber’s dress. “I’d better get the tailor.”

I feel naked already.

Chapter Seven



BRADY

Kasey and the rest of the bridesmaids just left in a cloud of perfume and cackles, but Natalie's still in the back room doing ... I'm not exactly sure what. The only people milling around the front of the shop now are me and the lady with the purple hair. I don't remember her name, but she's been hovering for a while, asking if I need anything.

I say no to a bottle of water.

No to a can of soda.

"How about a glass of champagne?" Purple-hair offers.

Champagne? Seriously? I thought this was a place for veils and stuff.

"I'm driving," I tell her. Then I drop onto the chair closest to the door. It's a long lounge with white leather upholstery like the rest of the furniture in this place. And while the seat is uncomfortable for a guy who'd rather sit up straight, it's also the farthest from the changing room. This choice is not a coincidence.

Because what I need even less than a reclining lounge or a glass of champagne is a picture in my head of Natalie Slater in a state of ... undress. I'm not exactly sure what the tailor is doing back there, but the proceedings are taking longer than I expected. When Natalie finally emerges, she's wearing a sleeveless romper-type thing and dragging the pink carry-on behind her. She spots me up front and smiles. This woman is luminous.

Which is dangerous.

"Ready to go?" I ask. The question comes out gruffer than I intended. *Control yourself, but don't be a jerk, Brady.*

Natalie nods, her smile faltering before she hooks it back up. "Sorry that took so long. The dress won't be ready until Thursday, so I'll have to come

back. But I can borrow a car from my parents then, so you won't be stuck driving me again."

"It's no big deal. Really." When I reach for the handle of her carry-on, she waves me off.

"I got it," she says, pushing past me toward the door. I follow her, and we head out to my truck in silence. Man, I'm really blowing this.

I haven't landed on the right way to behave around Nat yet. I'm either too hot or too cold. Never moderate. When it comes to her, it's all extremes.

But not for much longer. For better or worse.

As she slides the carry-on into the truck, I stand behind her, waiting to shut the door. I may be blowing this, but I'm still a gentleman. Holding doors, carrying bags, helping people in and out of cars—it's in my nature. And some things never change.

For better or worse.

Once she's settled in the truck, I jog around to the driver's side and climb in next to her. "Your phone should be charged by now," I say. When we both reach to unplug it at the same time, our hands brush again. Another lightning strike.

She turns on her phone, and the notifications start pinging, a sharp reminder that Natalie has a whole big life that doesn't include me. "Ha!" Laughter bubbles up in her throat, and her cheeks go pink.

"What?"

"Just something that happened before my flight." She snickers. "I accidentally texted someone 'I love you' waaaaay too soon."

"Hmph." A wrench cranks in my guts at the thought of Nat loving any man, even if she admits it's way too soon.

"I was beyond mortified." She shakes her head. "Until I saw the reply." Natalie grins and holds up her screen. There's a gif of some football player being tackled from behind with the words I LOVE YOU BACK across the top.

"Cute," I grunt, barely concealing a frown. Also, *who's* loving Natalie back?

She returns to checking her texts, her lips rounding into an *O*. "Oh, wow." She exhales.

Against my better judgment, I ask again. "What?"

"I guess I made a good impression in LA, because Sloane just told me Wyatt loves me too." Natalie's shoulders hike up in a quick bolt of happiness.

“Who?”

“Sloane? I thought you knew her. She’s Kasey’s roommate. Well, her *former* roommate,” Nat adds. “But I’m taking over Kasey’s room after the wedding.”

“Yeah. I know who Sloane is.” A muscle in my jaw tics. “I meant the other one. Wyatt.”

“Ahhh. Wyatt’s the landlord at Sloane’s apartment building. She wanted to meet me before she agreed to let me move in. The only hurdle left is a credit check. Apparently there’s stiff competition for the place since it’s fully furnished and beach-adjacent.” Nat puts *beach-adjacent* in air quotes. “I’m mostly interested in the fact that it’s rent-controlled, and close to a bus stop that gets me to St. Joseph’s.”

Okay. So Wyatt is a woman. I hate that my torso relaxes a little with this knowledge. Natalie scrolls some more, her brow closing in on itself.

“Everything all right?” I ask.

“Mmhmm,” she says without looking up. So maybe she’s just concentrating. “Aaron Winchester—that’s the nurse supervisor at St. Joe’s—wants to confirm my start date. The next orientation is in two weeks. So as long as my credit is approved, I should be good to go.” Natalie draws in a breath, and I clench my teeth. This all sounds like good news. I want to be happy for her. I should be happy for her. And I am happy.

Mostly.

“Well, she’s really smart to lock you in,” I say, starting up the truck. The growl of the engine feels like my insides.

“Who’s smart?” Natalie scrunches her nose. “Wyatt? Sloane?”

“No. Erin Winchester.” I eye her sideways. “You should probably remember the woman’s name if she’s going to be your boss.”

“Yep, I should.” Natalie sticks her phone in her purse. “Except the supervisor’s not Erin. It’s Aaron.”

I frown. “What did *I* say?”

“Erin with an *E*.” She shrugs. “I’m talking about Aaron with a double *A*. Aaron’s a he. Not a she.”

Great. Nat’s new boss is a man. *Aaron with a double A*. A vise clamps down in my guts. I’ve got to get away from these feelings. So I ease my truck back onto the road, flip a U-turn, and start heading toward Abieville. My home—still and always—is a world away from California. From Sloane and Wyatt. From rent-controlled, beach-adjacent apartments.

When we pull up to the first red light on the way out of Southampton, I hazard a glance at Natalie. Her smile is small. Cheeks pink. “Congratulations,” I manage to say. “You should be really proud of yourself.”

“Thanks. I am proud.” She meets my gaze, her eyes wide and expectant. What is she waiting for? Is there something else I should be saying to her? Natalie’s got me so off-balance, I don’t know right from left anymore.

My jaw shifts. “What?”

“The light,” she says, nodding at the intersection. “It turned green.”

For most of the rest of the drive to Abieville, my throat is tight with regret. My head’s running a reel of all the stuff I’d do differently if I could rewind time. Stuff like the way I treated my sister when we were kids. Or the last time Nat and I were together. Or convincing Doc Swanson I was the guy he should take a chance on. But what’s done is done, and I have to make the best of it. I can’t change the past.

As if reading my mind, Natalie finally speaks. “Everything looks exactly the same, you know.”

I glance her way, and find her staring out the window. “Hmph.” I return my focus to the road. Ahead, on the right, an old liquor store sits abandoned. The windows are all boarded up. It’s been like that for years.

“I mean, seriously.” Her voice is soft. Reflective. “Nothing ever changes around here.”

“That’s not a bad thing.” I grip the steering wheel. I’m defending the town. Defending myself. “I like knowing what to expect. Being a part of something that will outlast me.” I take a beat. “I’m cool with wanting to leave a legacy that will live on after we’re gone.”

“Huh.” It’s not a question, and I don’t think Natalie’s teasing me. Maybe she’s just genuinely puzzled.

She shifts in her seat. “Don’t you think that’s kind of ... morbid?”

“It’s reality,” I say. “I see death all the time. Like this morning.” My jaw goes tight. “I had to help Mrs. Jenkins say goodbye to her old cat, Sampson. They’ve been coming to the clinic as long as I have. I hated every moment, but it had to be done. Sampson was suffering. So was Mrs. Jenkins.”

Nat clears her throat. “I’m so sorry, Brady.”

Yeah. So am I. Especially since the mark I actually want to leave in this world has nothing to do with the clinic. That’s Doc Swanson’s purpose, not mine. But after all the time and effort he’s invested in me—not to mention his

trust—I owe the man. And I always honor my commitments.

“Anyway.” I blow out a breath. “Feel free to talk about a subject you find more upbeat.”

A small burst of laughter escapes her. “More upbeat than our inevitable and impending mortality?”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Sure.”

“Ah. Good. So pretty much anything, then.” When Natalie chuckles, the knot in my chest unravels, and I start to laugh too, then I shut it down fast. Man, it’s hard not to feel good around her. But if I enjoy being with her too much this week, I’ll only feel worse when she leaves again.

She readjusts her body, crossing one lean leg over the other. I drag my eyes away, looking out over the hood of my truck. A vein in my forehead throbs. Good thing Abie Bridge is one mile up. I won’t have to work this hard at not staring at her much longer.

“You know what?” Natalie asks, breaking the silence.

“That’s a rhetorical question, right?” *Keep your eyes on the road.*

“I was wrong when I said everything’s the same around here.” She waits a moment before continuing. “*You’ve changed.*”

I screw up my face. “No, I haven’t.”

“You have,” she says. “You’re different than you were two years ago, back when we were trying to get Kasey and Beau together.” Despite the fact that she’s challenging me, her voice is calm and even. And when I glance at her again, her eyes meet mine. They’re so clear and pure, I have to look away. I’m afraid she’ll see too much.

“I’ll try not to take that as an insult,” I mumble.

“I never said different’s bad.”

Loosening my grip on the steering wheel, I make a right at Abie Bridge. That’s when the lake comes into view. And the docks. Beyond that is The Beachfront Inn. Hopefully Beau was able to work out the flooding issue they were having earlier.

You just have to get through the wedding without letting Nat get to you. Then let her go.

Just let her go. Right.

Once we’re over the bridge, I continue past Griffin’s Five and Dime. It’s on the corner of Bridge and Main, and one of the oldest of its kind in the country. Next to The Dime is a Wrinkle in Time. They sell a rotating collection of antiques. The rest of the block is mostly taken up by my mom’s

favorite general store, The Shop.

Opposite The Shop is Murphy's Jewelers. Then Secondhand Rose. That's a thrift store, in case it wasn't obvious. Across town, we've got an auto shop, a gym, and a two-screen movie theater. Sadie's Salon has a pretty good reputation. And our town's barbershop has an actual pole out front. I know every inch of this town by heart. Everything a man—or a woman—needs is right here in our backyard. *Why would I want to live anywhere else?*

I don't. That's the answer. I just want more while I'm here.

For the next few blocks, my truck might as well be on autopilot. I could probably make this drive fully blindfolded. Two more turns, and we reach the Slaters'. A flag outside says Home Sweet Home.

Parking at the curb, I hop out, then run around to help Natalie. But she's already out of the truck, dragging her carry-on over the sidewalk. The house is all green shutters and white wood siding. Red petunias fill the flower boxes. No wonder Natalie's a smiler.

The Slaters are human sunshine.

"You should probably come in and say hi," she calls out. I'm still on the sidewalk, shuffling my feet, but she's climbing the stairs to the porch.

The porch.

In a flash, it's December again, and I'm holding Natalie in my arms, tasting the cinnamon on her lips, feeling the warmth of her mouth. In my memory, her breath accelerates, and her eyes flash a welcome. She's on the same mat now. I gulp.

"Yeah, maybe not."

"Come on." She waves me up. "My mom will be sad if she finds out I let you leave after you drove me around all day. She's probably making soup."

"Soup?" I run a hand over my hair. "It's July."

She tips her chin. "What's your point?"

"Fine," I say through my teeth. Trudging up the stairs, I cross the porch while Natalie opens the front door. The scent of something delicious fills the air, and my mouth waters. Maybe it's soup. Maybe I'm just remembering our kiss.

Before I can decide, an enormous crash comes from inside the house. My instincts kick in, and I push past Natalie, charging through the doorway.

And in the middle of the room, right above me, Mrs. Slater is dangling from a hole in the ceiling.

Chapter Eight



NATALIE

“Mom!” I shriek. I’m in the doorway frozen with shock, but Brady springs into action, dashing toward the stairs and taking them two at a time. Hopefully he’s going to help her from the top floor. Meanwhile, I stay downstairs to deal with my mother’s ... bottom.

“Natalie!” she calls out. “Is that you?” At least that’s what I think she says, but her body is clogging the ceiling hole, so it’s hard to hear her exact words. Of course I can *see* her well enough, but only the half that looks like she’s riding an invisible bicycle.

As my mom flails between the two floors, her mint-green sweats start to slip down. At the same time, her matching green sweatshirt rides up. I sent her the set after she admired the pair I wore last time I was home. When she got the package, she texted me “WE’RE TWINS—LOL.” She probably put these sweats on because I was coming home. As freaked out as I am, my heart still swells at the gesture.

“Don’t move!” I yell up to her. Then I park my carry-on in the entryway and rush to the spot below her. Grabbing her sneakers, I try to stop her frantic kicking before she loses her sweats completely. When I look up, pieces of ceiling rain down from the hole, littering me with chalky debris.

“Hold still, Mom!” I shout. “Brady’s coming to get you.”

“Brady’s here?” The question is a muffled squeak. She wiggles her legs again trying to haul her body up, but instead of gaining traction, she only showers me with more dust. I sputter and spit just as Brady reaches her. The rumble of his voice comes through the ceiling. I can’t tell what he’s saying, but my mom’s body finally stops jerking. Then, out of nowhere, she’s swallowed backward through the hole, flying up like a circus acrobat.

Whoa. Brady's been making use of the Abieville gym.

"I've got you, Mrs. Slater." His voice is deep with concern. "Are you all right?" She sways above the hole, but he reaches out to steady her, his large hands splayed over her shoulders.

"I'm just a little dizzy." Her usually neat blonde bob is frazzled, but she doesn't appear to be injured. "Nothing's hurt but my pride," she says. "And I always avoid being prideful. Sometimes I even succeed."

"I'm just glad you're okay," Brady says, towering over her small frame. Picturing our floor plan, I figure they're in the walk-in closet in my parents' bedroom.

"Welcome home, Natalie!" she calls out. "LOL!"

"What even happened, Mom?"

She squints down at me through the hole. "I kept telling your father to fix the old floorboards in here, but this is *not* how I imagined forcing the issue." Her voice is matter-of-fact. "I was in the attic getting our old wedding cake topper," she says. "To top Beau and Kasey's wedding cake."

"That's generally what a cake topper does, Mom."

"And when I came down the ladder, that last step was a doozy."

Oh, it was a doozy, all right.

"Anyway, I'm just glad you two showed up," she says. "Did you see I've got broccoli cheddar soup on the stove? There's a ham in the slow cooker too. And a loaf of sourdough in the oven." She straightens, peering up at Brady. "You still like broccoli cheddar, don't you?"

Did Brady *ever* like broccoli cheddar? Then again, if anyone would know this random soup fact, it would be my mother.

Behind me, someone gasps, and I spin around. My brother's standing there, blue eyes bulging. The front door's still wide open, which explains how he slipped inside without anyone hearing. He takes in the rubble on the floor. "What happened here?"

"Is that you, Beau?" Our mother pokes her head through the hole. Then she quickly disappears again.

"Mom almost fell through the ceiling," I tell my brother.

"That sounds about right." Beau drags a hand through his hair. "Never a dull moment around here."

"Brady's up there now." I nod at the stairs. "He rescued her." Even as I say this, my pulse picks up. Probably because Beau startled me, and because I'm worried for my mother. But definitely *not* because the thought of Brady

being Mom's knight in shining armor works me up.

Probably definitely.

"She's okay, though," I add.

"Hey, man," Brady calls out from the top of the stairs.

Beau splays his hands as he trots down. "You were in the right place at the right time, huh?"

"He sure was," my mother says, coming down after him. She's swiping at her sweats with one hand and swatting her hair with the other. "I don't know what I would've done if he hadn't been here to save me."

And there goes my pulse again, throbbing hard enough for me to practically taste it. Not to mention the heat in my throat. My whole upper body is reacting to Brady Graham hauling my mom to safety.

"You're my hero," she gushes.

He ducks his head. "No big deal."

"It is a big deal," she insists. "I can't wait to tell Mr. Slater what he missed." She waves a hand in front of her face like she's scolding herself. "I mean *Dale*. I keep forgetting you're all grown up now."

Beau strides over to meet Brady, clapping him on the back. "This might be the strangest favor any best man has ever done." He shifts his focus to me. "And speaking of strange favors, your idea to switch dresses with Amber really saved the day. Thanks, Nat." He puts a hand on his heart. "You're really killing it with this maid of honor gig."

"I'm happy to help." I break into a grin at his unexpected praise. Between my brother's travel schedule and my nursing internships—not to mention my healthy fear of flying—we've barely seen each other since he moved to LA. Once I'm living there too, though, all that will change. I can't wait to get closer to Beau and Kasey. Both literally and figuratively.

"Just be prepared." My shoulders creep up. "Even with the alterations, the dress might show more cleavage than I usually—"

"Ahem." Brady clears his throat, eyes trained on Beau. "You get everything straightened out at The Beachfront?"

"Well, *everything's* a big word." Beau's mouth goes crooked. "Since the suites for the bachelor and bachelorette parties flooded, we have to move the celebration to the main pub. That means the bridesmaids and groomsmen will be together, and the event will be open to the public instead of private." He shrugs. "But they offered to comp our drinks for the inconvenience. I just hope the rest of the place doesn't fall apart before the reception."

“How about the lake cruise tomorrow?” I ask. “Did you and Kasey get the party barge all set?”

“Yep.” Beau grins. “We’re good to go for the lake cruise *and* the beach day. My future bride is very excited.”

“Wonderful.” My mother beams at the three of us. “I’m so happy to have you all home,” she says. “For now, at least.” Beau and I glance at each other. If she starts sniffing about both her babies leaving again, I’ll get a pit in my stomach. Instead she turns to Brady. “Can you stay to eat with us? We have plenty of food.”

Brady’s eyes snap to me then back to my mom. “Thanks for the invite, Mrs. Slater, but I think I’m gonna head over to my folks’ place.”

“I just dropped Kasey off there,” Beau says.

“Oh.” My mom nods. “Then I’m sure Elaine will want both her kids home. I know the feeling.” She glances at the ceiling debris, then back at Brady. “I’ll be sure and save you some soup. Speaking of which, I’d better check on dinner.” She bustles off toward the kitchen, wiping at her eyes. If I’m not mistaken, I hear her snuffle.

Brady shifts his weight, then aims a thumb at the door. “Anyway, I’d better get going. I want to spend as much time with Kasey as I can.”

“See you tomorrow,” Beau says. “Gonna be a great day.”

“Sure thing.” Brady furrows his brow. Then he makes a break for it so quickly, I’m surprised he doesn’t catch the floor on fire. I know his leaving now is the right answer.

I just wish it didn’t feel so wrong.

Chapter Nine



NATALIE

I'm lying in bed the next morning, head buried under pillows, when my phone starts buzzing. I ignore it the first two times, then drag myself up to check who's calling for the third time. It's Sloane.

"I LOVE YOU!" she blurts when I answer.

"Heh, heh. Yeah. Sorry about that text," I manage to croak.

"Don't be sorry. I LOVED it!"

"I'm glad." I brush the hair out of my face and blink like a mole coming out of his hole. "Isn't it like ... really early there?" The sunlight leaking through the shutters hurts my brain.

"Summer school starts at seven," she chirps. "I'm always up at five thirty. I figured you'd be awake by now since you're three hours ahead. Early to bed, early to rise, right?"

Right. Make a note of this, Natalie. Sloane equals morning person. Me equals groggy.

"I guess I'm just jet-lagged," I mumble, clearing my throat.

"You got my text about Wyatt, right?"

"I did." I prop myself up, leaning back against the pillows. "Thanks so much for the good news!" I probably should've called or texted her back, but yesterday got busier than I expected. After Brady left, I had to do laundry—the stuff in my carry-on is all I have—then Beau and I hung out with my parents for the rest of the night. They love when we're in town at the same time, so I was really trying to be present for them while it lasts.

"You are SOOOOO WELCOME!" Sloane gushes, and I can't help smiling at her enthusiasm. I usually think of myself as high energy, but Sloane leaves me in the dust. "As long as your credit check goes through,"

she says, “your application should be approved sometime tomorrow!”

“That really is fantastic,” I say. “Thanks so much for letting me know.”

“Wyatt would’ve called you herself last night, but we figured it might be too late with the time change. Or that you’d be doing stuff for the wedding.”

Oof. I feel bad that Sloane is missing out on this weekend. She was one of the few non-family members Kasey really wanted to be here. “I’m so sorry you weren’t able to come.”

“Me too.” She groans. “Ugh! Boo! Hiss! Prioritizing work is the absolute worst! But you gotta do it, right?”

“Right.” A smile creeps across my face. Sloane even makes her disappointment sound perky. “And since the summer session only lasts six weeks, they frown on teachers missing even a couple days. Sets a bad example for the kids. You know how it is, right?”

Actually I have no idea what being a teacher is like. But before I can answer, Sloane forges on. “Anyway, Wyatt emailed you the rental agreement.”

I wipe at my sleep-crusting eyes. “You’re *all* a bunch of early risers out there, huh?”

Sloane bursts into laughter, even though I wasn’t trying to be funny. “Not this morning,” she says. “Last night! All you have to do is read over the document, then print, sign, scan.” Sloane cuts herself off. “Listen to me, talking to you like you’re one of my students. I’m sure you know how to handle a document.”

“Read, print, sign, scan?”

“Yes! Or you can docu-sign if you’re into that!”

I puff out a laugh. “Right now, I’m only into a pot of coffee.”

Sloane laughs again. A lot. “I’m so glad Kasey hooked us up, Natalie. I’m going to miss living with her, but I’m sooooo excited for you to move in.”

“Me too.” I glance at the clock. “On that note, Kasey has a bunch of stuff planned for us today, but I should be able to look over the rental agreement later. Is that okay?”

“Yes! Just don’t wait too long. Wyatt wants Kasey’s replacement locked in, and she’s got a wait list. In the meantime, have so much fun! Give Kasey hugs and kisses from me!”

“Will do,” I chirp, hoping Sloane remembers I can be cheerful too. But when we end the call, I slip back under the comforter for five more minutes of peace before I have to get ready to face Brady again.

He's the reason I tossed and turned all night. I wish I could blame an uncomfortable bed, but my mom's got my old room decked out about as cozy as it's ever been. There are new linens and fluffy pillows on the bed, and a vase of fresh flowers on the dresser. A scented candle—in lavender—sits next to my old desktop computer and printer. I wonder if they even work now. Either way, Mom went all out to make me feel at home. She's probably afraid that once I have to fly to visit, I won't want to come back.

Don't think about that, right now.

Instead, I dash off a text to the bridesmaids' group thread.

ME: What's everyone wearing today? Lake cruise and beach day ...???

Kasey's the first to respond, then more texts start pouring in.

KASEY: I've got a pair of blinged-out flip-flops, and my bathing suit under a sundress. I'm bringing a bag with a cover-up to throw on at the beach after.

OLIVIA: Can I just wear a bathing suit all day, or is a cover-up required?

DARBY: We're taking pictures on the lake, Liv.

OLIVIA: And ...

DARBY: And I wouldn't want to wear a bathing suit to a photo shoot. But knock yourself out.

OLIVIA: When do we finally get to meet the famous Drake Hawkins?

Drake Hawkins is a big-shot photographer who's worked alongside Beau for years. And as the only groomsman who isn't family, he's like Amber, except on Beau's side. As for Olivia, her sole requirements for flirting are that a man be single and reasonably attractive. I've only met Drake once, but he ticks those boxes. And Beau obviously likes him or he wouldn't be in the wedding.

KASEY: He'll be on the party barge with us. He's going to take pics of everyone under the bridge.

DARBY: Didn't you and Ian JUST break up, Liv?

TESS: You know her, Darbs. Any port in a storm ...

OLIVIA: Says the girl who's never had a serious boyfriend. Seriously, Tess. You should just go ahead and date that scrawny librarian guy you're always

yammering about.

TESS: Spencer is not scrawny. And we're not even friends. We have nothing in common. So I don't yammer about him. Who even yammers?

DARBY: Methinks the triplet protests too much.

OLIVIA: Whatever, Darbs. Just because YOUR boyfriend couldn't come to the wedding doesn't mean I can't appreciate the single groomsmen.

DARBY: Most of the groomsmen are our cousins.

OLIVIA: Which is why I call dibs on Drake Hawkins.

LETTIE: You three have real issues ...

NELLA: Don't be mean, Lettie.

AMBER: Hey, Natalie. Can we trade bathing suits?

Ha! Before I can respond, Amber texts again.

AMBER: That was a joke. Sorry. I blame my warped sense of humor on pregnancy brain.

ME: Now I know why Kasey likes you so much. We can definitely be friends.

KASEY: Everyone stop texting now. Have you checked the time?

NELLA: I'm already dressed.

LETTIE: Same. Got my beach bag packed up too.

KASEY: EEK! I'm so excited for a day with my girls!

OLIVIA: And guys!

I send my favorite GIF of a cheering baby because I want Kasey to believe I'm excited too. And I *am* excited. At least for her and Beau. I just don't want to be around Brady for another whole day. I guess I came into this week steeped in denial about how much time we'd have to spend in close proximity. Still, I'm the maid of honor, so I'd better get in gear. At least I showered and shaved my legs last night. That should save me a half hour.

Pulling up my email, I check out the rental agreement Wyatt sent. It's a pretty long document, and I'm not even dressed yet.

Read. Print. Sign. Scan.

I don't have time for all that now, so I print out the rental agreement and stuff it in my beach bag. I can deal with that later. Meanwhile, I have to decide what to wear from the limited options I've got.

First, I slip on a black one-piece bathing suit, then a soft yellow wrap dress over it. For a final layer, I grab a white cardigan, just in case it's chilly on the water. For my feet, I choose a pair of gold sandals to showcase my LA pedicure. I don't put much on my face besides sunblock—just a slick of pink lip gloss and a few swipes of mascara. My hair goes up, clipped in a loose twist.

Ready.

Set.

Bzzz.

That's my phone vibrating across the room. When I check it, there's a new text from Beau. The guy is staying here at our parents' house with me until the wedding, and he can't come down the hall or up the stairs? Heh. I guess gearing up for being a bridegroom has made him lazy.

BEAU: Kasey wants to head to the docks early, and your door was shut, so I didn't want to bother you. I asked Brady to pucker you up.

Pucker me up?

My insides catapult like I'm back on the airplane next to the lavatory. I'm pretty sure Beau meant PICK me up, but still. *More* alone time with Brady than I've already spent is not on my agenda. So I compose a response with lots of exclamation points—Sloane style. Before I hit send, though, a new text comes in.

BEAU: Sorry. Voice to text is a jerk. I meant pick you up.

ME: I'll be right down!! Just give me five minutes!! I can go early with you!!

BEAU: I already left.

What?

BEAU: Brady should be there in ten.

I drop my phone.

Nine. Eight. Seven. Six.

Ready.

Set.
Go.

Chapter Ten



BRADY

“Hey, Mom.” I set my fork down, careful to avoid the pool of butter and syrup. I never should’ve agreed to come over for breakfast. “If you don’t stop staring, I’ll take this plate back to my place to finish these waffles in peace.”

She blinks at me from across the table. “Who’s staring?”

I meet her gaze, holding it steady for five seconds. “You.”

My dad reaches for the platter of bacon. “Don’t mind your mother. She’s just a hen living the dream of feeding both her chicks in one nest at the same time again.”

I smirk. “I live two blocks away, and Kasey’s not even eating with us. Shouldn’t *she* be the victim of Mom’s mush-face?”

My mother clucks, proving my dad’s point. Sounding like a chicken is kind of her thing. She’s a real pro. “I can’t stare at Kasey. She’s upstairs getting dressed. And how dare you say my face is *mushy*.”

“I didn’t say your face is mushy.” I huff out a laugh. “I said you have a mush-face. Admit it, Mom. You’ve been gooey-eyed all week.”

“Oh, hush.” She brushes off my comment like it’s a speck of lint on her bathrobe. “I’m just a proud mama, that’s all. My only daughter is about to be a blushing bride, and she’s marrying the love of her life. Like your father said. It’s my dream come true.”

I cock an eyebrow. “And what does that have to do with me? I’m not exactly a blushing bride.”

“Maybe not.” She reaches out to pat my hand. “But my only son is on the road to becoming a veterinarian.” She lays her other hand over her heart, like she’s prepping for the pledge of allegiance. “You’re a dream come true too, Dr. Graham. You’re just taking a little longer.”

Here we go again. The waffles in my gut might as well be stones. “I’m still a long way from being able to afford vet school.” I shove the last bite in my mouth to mask the lump clogging my throat.

“I have faith in you, dear.” My mother beams. “Your father and I both do.”

“It’s just a lot of mon—”

My mother waves a fork at me. “Finish chewing, or you’ll choke.”

I nod and force the waffles down. I was mumbling with my mouth full to make the words less disappointing. But even when I speak clearly, my parents don’t really hear me. It’s not that they don’t listen. They just don’t like what I’m saying.

So I try again. “It’s just a lot of money.” I look down at my plate. This is the part where they usually cut me off. “And I can’t help wondering if the tuition will be worth it. No matter how much I’m able to save, I’ll still have to take out loans.” I lift my gaze, and my dad’s munching bacon. My mom’s sipping coffee. They’re both nodding, with glazed-over eyes. “Don’t you think starting a career in debt is less than ideal?”

“Bah.” My dad scoffs, reaching for his orange juice. “Once you’re a doctor, you’ll be able to pay back what you owe, and then some.” He drains his glass in three big swallows. “What matters is having a solid, stable career that can stand the test of time. Wayne Swanson’s been building that practice for years. And he’s just going to turn it over to you. Instant business! You’re one lucky man, Brady.”

My chest feels like someone wrapped a roll of duct tape around my torso. “Is that what everyone thinks? That I’m being handed a job I didn’t work for?”

My dad chuckles. “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, son.” The man loves making animal jokes around me. He thinks he’s hilarious. “Taking over Wayne’s practice is a total no-brainer. Why are we even discussing this again?”

Because I’ve tried to discuss it before and failed every time.

Between my mom’s mush-faced pride over me becoming a doctor—not to mention my dad’s insistence that the most important thing in life is a steady, reliable income—I can’t possibly admit to everyone what I really want to do. I’m only guessing, but I would assume an author’s paychecks are the opposite of steady. And even Stephen King isn’t *Dr. Stephen King*.

Then there’s the fact that Doc Swanson is counting on me to take over for

him. With the way he runs his business, and the hours he puts in, I'll never have time for—

“Something sure smells amazing,” Kasey says, floating into the kitchen. Even with a bag slung over her shoulder and a stack of beach towels in her arms, she looks like she's walking on air. Pushing aside the knots in my stomach, I smile at my little sister. The most important thing this week is that she and Beau are happy.

She sets the towels and bag down on the counter, then collapses into the same chair she's used for all the meals our family has shared here. For as long as I can remember, we've had our unspoken, assigned spots. Even now that Kasey and I don't live in this house, we still return to our old habits whenever she visits. But as much as I love the nostalgia and routine, Kasey's always been restless for a change of pace. Beau too. And now Nat will be with them out in LA.

I feel a little like they're stealing her.

My mom hops up, adjusting her apron. “Let me get you some waffles, Kasey. They're still warm.”

“No time.” She shrugs. “Beau will be here any minute.”

“At least have some bacon.” My dad points at the platter. “I saved the extra-crispy pieces for you.”

“Thanks! I'll just take these to go, then.” She plucks the last two strips from the platter and wraps them in a napkin.

“We have plenty more bacon,” my mom says. “And waffles.” She picks up the empty platter and heads to the stove. “If you want to stay a little while, Beau's welcome to have breakfast too.”

“Thanks, but we need to get to the docks to make sure everything's set for today. And there's going to be food on the barge.” Kasey inclines her head, like she's listening for the sound of Beau pulling up. Then she looks at me. “He did call you, right? You can take Nat to the lake for us?”

“Yeah,” I mumble.

She wrinkles her nose. “What?”

“I didn't realize the role of best man meant being a glorified chauffeur.”

Kasey stands, her napkin-wrapped bacon strips in hand. “Consider this payback for all the years you tortured me as a kid.”

“Hmph.”

“Anyway.” She arches a brow. “Nat's going to be related to us forever now, so you'd better get used to her being around.”

Like I need a reminder of how tangled the web of relationships is in this town. My best friend is marrying my sister. My cousins—Ford and Three—are the closest friends I have in Abieville. Everyone else has moved on. Moved away. That’s what happens here. People either can’t wait to get out, or they stay here for life. There’s really not much in-between.

“Then again, I guess you won’t be seeing Nat much anymore. Unless you come visit us in California.”

“Stop!” my mother blurts, coming back to the table with more bacon and waffles. “No more talk of that, please. Just allow me to enjoy the last few days of having both my children in the same state.” She sets down the platter. “Please change the subject.”

“Okay,” Kasey says. “Did I tell you Molly’s going to be at the wedding?”

“Well, isn’t that wonderful! I haven’t seen her in ages!” My mother glances my way, before quickly averting her eyes. Kasey’s friend, Molly Fitzgerald, had a pretty big crush on me back in high school. She was so ready to wife up back then, she’s probably married with a couple kids by now.

“Neither have I,” Kasey says. “But she’s moving back to town, so you’ll probably run into her a lot more now.”

“She is?” My mother’s brows shoot up. “I can’t believe I haven’t heard that.”

Yeah. I can’t believe it either. My mom’s usually the best source of news in this town. *News* with a capital G and ending in OSSIP.

“Well, it just happened,” Kasey says. “And I didn’t say anything, because I was a little worried you’d make me feel guilty for ... well. I’m supposed to be changing the subject. So.”

“ME?” My mom presses a hand to her chest. “Make you feel guilty?”

“Ha!” Kasey gives her a smile. “Anyway, Molly’s going to be teaching at Abieville Elementary in the fall.”

My mom sighs. “Well, I’m not surprised she’s back. That girl is as loyal as they come.”

She and Kasey both shift their focus to me. Meanwhile, my dad refills his coffee mug from the carafe and takes another slice of bacon. Clueless.

“Don’t get any ideas,” I say under my breath.

“Don’t worry.” Kasey waves away my comment. “I wouldn’t dream of setting you and Molly up. In fact, please stay as far away from all of my friends as possible, *Broody*.”

Before I can argue that I'm not broody—I just have a lot on my mind—the rumble of the Slaters' pickup sounds outside.

"There's my gorgeous fiancé." Kasey grins. "Right on time. Thanks for the bacon, Mom. I love you, Daddy."

I toss her a crooked smile. "Since when do you call him *Daddy*?"

Kasey smirks. "Since when do you care what I call him?"

"I don't."

"Could've fooled me."

"Ahem." My father clears his throat. "I feel like a time machine just sent me back to when you two were in middle school."

"No way." Kasey puffs out a laugh. "*Some* of us have grown up and moved on," she says. "So, I'll see you and Nat at the dock?"

"Hmph." I should get going soon too, but I keep delaying the inevitable. Meanwhile, Kasey collects the towels and her beach bag, then she breezes out the door.

"You cooked, Mom." I pick up my plate. "I'll do the dishes."

"See what I mean? You really *are* a dream, Brady."

"Don't be too sure," I say. "I might disappoint you yet."

Chapter Eleven



NATALIE

If someone had told me I'd end up in Brady Graham's truck three times in twenty-four hours, I might've pretended to break both my legs and claimed I couldn't come to the wedding. But then I wouldn't have made it to LA to spend time with Sloane, the only person on the planet perkier than I am. And I wouldn't have met my future supervisor, Aaron Winchester. Or my potential landlord, Wyatt. And if I hadn't flown to California, I wouldn't have a rental agreement in my bag or a fresh start on the horizon. I just wish the beach-adjacent apartment and new nursing position didn't feel so far away.

I'm probably just tired. Plus my bathing suit is wedged where I can't get sunburned. Not to mention the person responsible for my terrible sleep is staring out the window, jaw clenched, *not* talking to me. But that's probably a good thing. I'm better off keeping conversations with Brady to a minimum. After what he said yesterday about Abieville, it's clear this town is his forever home, but it never felt like that for me.

I wouldn't *let it* be that.

Our family moved here when Beau and I were kids, after my mom inherited her childhood home. Within days, Beau easily made friends. He and Brady became inseparable. Meanwhile, I faked smiles and *acted* happy. I was good at playing the role of a friendly girl. But even with Shannon and Paige, I always felt like an outsider, pushing my way into their inner circle. So I promised myself I'd leave town as soon as I could. Once I graduated, I kept that promise. And I can't let Brady's love for Abieville make me question my choices now.

I just wish we weren't sitting so close to one another that I can smell his

deliciousness without trying. He's wearing board shorts today, the nicer kind with pockets, and his Henley matches his eyes. Every time he moves the steering wheel, his muscles flex. I focus on my beach bag and hope I don't drool.

At least the drive will be quick.

I can already see the lake through gaps in the pines. To distract myself, I try counting the trees, like I could even keep track of the number. We're almost to the bridge when the engine starts sputtering. Sputter. Sputter. Die.

"No, no, no." Brady groans as we coast to a stop on the side of the road. We're two miles from the docks and out of gas. So close and yet so far. "Kasey's gonna kill me." He grips the wheel, his knuckles turning white. "And Beau will never let me live this down."

"It happens," I say softly. That's what he said when he rescued me from this exact situation six months ago. Blowing out a long breath, he slides his phone from his pocket to call my brother.

"Hey, man. You won't believe this, but I just ran out of gas. We were almost to the lake, and ... Yeah. Nat's with me."

He pauses, listening to Beau. That's when I realize Brady probably only ran out of gas because he spent all day yesterday driving me around. And then today, Beau asked him to pick me up again. When would he have had time to fill up?

"I've got a spare can at my place," he says. "I'll run there and back, but I'm guessing we'll be about a half hour late." He swallows and his Adam's apple travels the length of his throat. "Okay ... yeah. Sure. If that's what you want. I'll tell her."

I can only hear one side of the conversation, but when Brady ends the call, his frown is so deep, it could be the Grand Canyon. "What's wrong? I ask.

"Beau's sending Drake Hawkins to get you."

* * *

I'm standing in the dirt on the side of the road when a red sports car roars up and parks behind Brady's truck. It's got Pennsylvania plates, so it must be a rental. No one in Abieville drives a car like that. I head to the passenger side with my beach bag, but Drake unfolds himself from the driver's seat and

comes around the front instead.

“Greetings, Natalie!” He dips into a gentlemanly bow, then pushes a wedge of jet-black hair off his forehead.

“Hey, Drake.” I smile at him. “Thanks so much for coming to get me.”

“My pleasure. But my friends call me Hawk.” A toothy grin lights up his face. “You’re looking awfully lovely today.”

“Ha!” I hitch my shoulders. “For a second I thought you were going to say I look *awful*.”

“In that dress?” His brow lifts. “Never.” He raises a hand to his forehead, glancing around like he’s looking for someone else. “Brady didn’t stay with you? I thought he might want a ride as well.”

“No, he said waiting for you would just hold the two of us up.” At least that’s what Brady claimed. The alternative is that he wanted to get away from me as soon as possible. But I get it. The last time we were in an out-of-gas situation, it was my car, and he drove me home. Then I kissed him. Then he kissed me back. But these are things we don’t talk about.

Hawk opens the passenger door for me, and I settle into the front, the beach bag at my feet. The car is a two-seater, which isn’t very practical, but it sure does make a statement. After climbing in on the other side, Hawk fires up the engine and pulls onto the bridge.

“So, any significant other for Ms. Natalie these days?” His question holds a slight trace of an accent, but I can’t identify the origin. It’s almost like Hawk is from ... everywhere. Or nowhere. Then again, I’m not a world-traveling photographer. Maybe I’d pick up a vague accent if I were.

“Not right now.” I scrunch my nose. “Or ever, really.”

Hawk rubs his chin like he’s legitimately baffled. “How is that possible? I assumed a woman as beautiful as you are must be spoken for.”

The wind from his open window blows hair across my face, and I tuck it back behind my ear. “In school I was too busy to date. And now I’m moving out of state, so it didn’t make sense to get involved with anyone.”

“Ah yes.” Hawk nods. “Beau mentioned you were finishing up an internship. Nursing, isn’t it? And then it’s on to LA?”

“Exactly.” My heart does a little happy dance realizing Beau told Hawk about my plans. I’m not sure why this comes as a surprise. I guess I’ve felt more superfluous in my brother’s life than I realized. “Beau talks about me?”

“Indeed he does.” Hawk displays his grin again, brighter than a camera flash. “Although he mainly sticks to subjects like your generosity and your

wicked sense of humor. I had to learn for myself how gorgeous you are.” Hawk’s got one arm out the window now, and his other hand rests on the steering wheel. It’s a casual pose, but the spark in his eye seems to have purpose. I feel a blush coming on, and I wonder how Brady would react to Hawk calling me gorgeous. I shouldn’t care. I don’t care. Okay, I *do* care.

But I *can’t*.

By the time we arrive at the docks, the party barge is already humming, puffs of exhaust chugging out the back. The scent of gas fills the air, and a small slick of oil shines across the water. Ford is at the wheel. He’s a firefighter in Abieville, and one of Kasey and Brady’s cousins. He’s also Lettie’s brother, and one of Beau’s groomsmen.

There’s a lot of overlap in this town.

Ford waves. “Climb aboard, folks!” He honks the horn, drawing the attention of the rest of the wedding party, who all cheer and clap for us. Kasey is in a cluster with her bridesmaids at one end of the barge. Beau is standing on the other side with Nella’s brother, Three. Three is another one of the Abieville cousins, and also a groomsman.

This wedding party should come with a spreadsheet.

“Thanks for waiting for us,” I say, as Ford helps me aboard the barge.

A smile breaks across his face. “We wouldn’t have left without you, Natalie.”

I glance over my shoulder at the parking lot, hoping to see Brady’s truck. “Should we wait a few more minutes for Brady?”

“Ahem.” Hawk clears his throat. “Kasey told me earlier she wants pictures taken before the sun gets too high.” He winces like he’s been stung. “I’m afraid if we don’t get out on the water soon, we’ll miss the best light. But what do I know?” He shrugs. “I’m only a professional photographer.” He laughs heartily at his own self-deprecation.

Ford checks his watch. “I hate to leave a man behind, especially the *best* man.”

“And what about Mac?” I ask. At this point, Mac McCoy is the only other cousin missing. Mac is Tess, Darby, and Olivia’s brother. He and his wife and daughter live in Oregon.

“Mac couldn’t fly in until tomorrow,” Ford says. “So I guess we’re actually *two* men down. But we can always get Lettie to photoshop their faces into the pictures. She’s great at photo manipulation.” He chuckles. “Just check out her Instagram.”

“Agreed.” Hawk nods, like this wasn’t just a joke. “Regretfully, I think we ought to get going.”

That settles it, I guess. For better or worse, we’re leaving without Brady.

As Ford eases us off the dock, and we start cruising toward the bridge, I survey the setup on the barge. In the center, there’s a folding table heaped with brunch-type foods: bagels and salmon, cheese and crackers, oysters and shrimp. There are also trays of fresh fruits, vegetables, and dips. Flanking the table are two blue coolers overflowing with iced-down beverages. Brady is going to miss this. And it’s all my fault. Not directly, but still.

My insides hopscotch from guilt and hunger as I join the triplets over by the table. They’re serving themselves drinks, but nobody has plates yet. “Look at all this food,” Amber says, as she approaches. She rubs her stomach. “Mama’s going to be living like a queen today. Which is good because I’m so hungry, I could eat a—”

“Nat!” Kasey comes up from behind, throwing her arms around me in a backward hug. “I was worried you wouldn’t make it!”

“Well, I’m here,” I say, spinning around to face her.

“Thanks again for switching dresses with Amber,” she gushes. “I don’t know what we would’ve done without you. You’re the absolute best!” She nods at the food display. “And just so you know, I got the brie and shrimp because they’re your favorites.”

“Now who’s the absolute best?” I lob a grin at her.

“I am, aren’t I?” Kasey laughs, smoothing her hands down the front of her tank dress. “Now, everyone, eat!”

With Kasey’s permission, Amber and I start piling food on our plates. I take two halves of a bagel with cream cheese, one wedge of brie, some clusters of grapes, and a large ladle of shrimp. Lastly, I fill a ramekin with cocktail sauce. Extra horseradish.

By the time I step away from the table, I’m carrying a full plate of food with the ramekin of sauce balanced in the middle. I’ve only managed to eat one shrimp when—out of nowhere—

HONK! HONK! HONK!

The three loud blares from a nearby boat are so startling, I fumble my plate. A mess of shrimp rains down. Cheese and grapes thud to the floor. Worst of all, a splatter of cocktail sauce lands on my yellow wrap dress.

HOOOONK!

A speedboat, kicking up water, pulls alongside the barge, leaving a small

wake behind it. In the driver's seat is Cubby Lansing, waving and grinning at us. Cubby is Ford and Lettie's father. He's also Kasey and Brady's uncle. Brady's with him now, with a JanSport backpack on one shoulder. His windswept hair flops over his sunglasses like he's a celebrity on a movie set.

Why does Brady have to look so good while I'm standing here smelling like shrimp?

"I got the best man to you as soon as I could," Cubby calls out from his speedboat. Ford cuts the engine of the barge—not that we were cruising at a furious pace—but we'll need to stop completely so Brady can climb aboard.

"The best man, hmm?" Hawk squares his shoulders. "That must be Brady Graham, then."

"It is." My voice sounds wobbly, so I clear my throat. "You two haven't met yet?"

"No, but I've heard a lot about him." Hawk winks at me, and I feel my skin flush. I am not prepared for ... winking. What I *am* is a mess, and probably blotchy now. So I bend down to scoop the cheese and shrimp back onto my plate. I'm not exactly hiding from Brady, but I'm also not dying for him to see me covered in cocktail sauce. Meanwhile, Hawk hovers over me, so close his cologne makes me choke.

"May I be of any assistance?" he says into my ear.

"No, I'm good, thanks!"

"You *really* should address that stain before it sets."

I flinch. "So it's noticeable?"

"Very."

When I glance up, Hawk is already collecting napkins from the table. He wets the stack with water from the pitcher. Okay, so he's a conscientious guy. One who possibly wears too much cologne.

"Allow me," he offers, and I reluctantly stand. Then he starts wiping the sauce off of my dress. And by *my dress*, I mean the FRONT OF MY DRESS. Like where the wrap overlaps.

Like my cleavage.

"I've got this!" I snatch the napkins from him and hand over my plate. And now I can't help glancing at the back of the barge, where Ford and Three are helping Brady onboard. He grasps the ladder with one hand, then leaps onto the deck like some kind of muscle-bound gazelle. I dab at the stretchy material, but it's too late.

I look like a murder victim.

Kasey and Beau cross the barge, and my brother claps Brady on the back. My stomach lurches, torn between relief that Brady actually made it, and regret that we're once again in close proximity. As if reading my mind, Brady turns, and his eyes lock on mine. Heat crests in my throat.

Probably from the horseradish.

Brady looks away and gives Kasey a hug, then he says something to her I can't make out. She points at the food table. Or maybe she's pointing at Hawk and me. Either way, Ford gets the barge cruising toward the bridge again, and Brady ambles our way. His gaze slowly scrapes from me over to Hawk. I drop the pile of napkins on the plate Hawk's still holding. When Brady reaches us, Hawk sticks out his free hand to pump Brady's.

"Drake Hawkins." His smile flashes like a neon sign. "But my friends call me Hawk."

"Brady Graham."

"Yes. Natalie was just telling me that." Hawk aims a bright grin in my direction, then sweeps it back over to Brady. "Of course, Beau has already spoken a lot about you. It's a pleasure to finally meet the best man."

Brady nods. "Same."

"But I'm not the best man now, am I?" Hawk splays his hands. "So it isn't *quite* the same, is it?"

Brady takes a beat, a vein at his temple pulsing. "I guess I'll choose my words more carefully next time."

"Oh, no need for all that." Laughter ripples out of Hawk, extra loud. "What matters is *you're* the one who's been such a good friend to Beau for so many years." He leans in close, a glint in his eye. "Although, I suppose I've had to take over some of the heavy lifting lately."

Brady hoists the backpack higher. "I suppose."

"But I'm sure you're *quite* happy to have Beau back in town, even if it's only for a week."

"Well." Brady clears his throat. "He's marrying my sister. So yes. I'm quite happy ... Drake."

Drake. Not Hawk.

The three of us stand there, shifting our weight, with Hawk still grinning and holding my plate. Then he says, "Anyhoo!"

Anyhoo?

A strong breeze blows overhead, and a shred of napkin breaks free from the pile. It floats up and lands on Brady, sticking to a spot just above the

swell of his pectorals. Without thinking, I reach out, but it's pretty well stuck to his shirt, so I have to work to pluck it free. Brady looks down at my hand, and a rumble sounds in the back of his throat.

Oh, no! I'm touching Brady's chest like Hawk was touching me. "I'm. So. So. Sorry!"

Brady shifts his jaw. "For what?"

"For touching you ... for touching your ... for ..." I stop stammering long enough to look down, which only draws more attention to my hand, which is still on Brady's chest. So I yank it away. "What I meant to say is I'm sorry you ran out of gas."

He blinks. "That's not your fault."

"But you were so busy driving me around all day yesterday, you couldn't fill up your tank so ... Yeah. Hi. I'm the problem ... it's me. Taylor Swift ... right? Anyone?" My voice finally trails off. Too bad my hand didn't fall off first.

"No big deal, Nat. Really." Brady's voice is low, and his gaze is on mine. Full eye contact.

Hawk's focus skips from me to Brady and back to me again. "Did you say he drove you around *all day yesterday*?" He tips his chin. "I didn't realize you two were so close."

"*Quite*," Brady says. It's a perfect imitation of Hawk's vague accent. "I picked Natalie up from the airport. Took her to a dress fitting. Back home again."

Hawk flashes his grin again. "How lovely."

Brady squares his shoulders. "Just what the best man does."

"Lucky you," Hawk says.

After another stretch of awkward silence, Brady swings the backpack off his shoulder, unzipping the largest compartment. He slides out the white cardigan I brought with me this morning. "You left this in the truck. I figured you might get cold on the boat. Or on the beach after." He cuts his eyes to Hawk. "She's always getting cold." He looks back at me. "But you could put it on now if you want." He nods to indicate the splotch of sauce on my dress. "Cover that up for the pictures."

"Ah. You noticed that, huh?"

A smile breaks free across his face, and I can't help smiling back. I slip the sweater on just as the barge pulls up to the bridge. It's the perfect backdrop for a photo shoot. I glance at Brady, and something flickers behind

his eyes—a moment passing between us. The breeze makes my whole body shiver even with the sweater on.

Hawk takes a step toward me. “Is that cashmere?” He reaches out and runs a finger along my sleeve. “Hmmm. Definitely soft.”

“Hey, Drake.” Brady’s voice is gruff. “Keep your hands to yourself.”

Hawk turns, his mouth slipping sideways. “Pardon me?”

“I chose my words pretty carefully this time.” Brady widens his stance, looming over Hawk by a good two inches. But I step between them, shutting this down.

“It’s not cashmere,” I say to Hawk. Then I turn to Brady. “And I can take care of myself.”

That’s when Beau whistles through his teeth to get everyone’s attention.

Kasey calls out, “PICTURE TIME!”

Chapter Twelve



BRADY

If I thought Buttons and Bows was hell, I underestimated this photoshoot, which is definitely worse. My sister has a long list of shots she wants to be sure we get *just right*, and the whole process takes longer than forever. It wouldn't be half as bad if Beau could run the show. The guy's an award-winning photographer and insanely talented. But he's also the groom, and in almost all the pictures. So he lets Hawk take charge. Unfortunately, Hawk not only takes charge of the pictures, he takes every opportunity possible to touch Natalie.

Each time, he uses "photo composition" as his excuse.

He keeps changing the positions of the women in the pictures of *just the bridesmaids*, moving them around, testing where they're standing. He claims he wants to make sure their heights and hair colors are in harmony.

Yeah right.

There are seven women in Kasey's wedding party, but somehow Nat's the only one he keeps laying hands on. *Or maybe she's just the only one you're staring at.* It's possible I'm seeing everything filtered through a Natalie lens now. An unreliable judge of Hawk's character.

Still, each time he reaches for her elbow or readjusts her shoulder angle, I want to storm over and pull him off her. All my baser instincts are kicking in. It gets bad up in my brain. Really, really bad. But I swear, the guy's hands linger longer than necessary.

Every single time.

So okay, this could all be in my imagination. Just an overreaction because I'm jealous. But I'm pretty sure he's interested in her. And the truth is I can't even blame him for feeling that way. Natalie's smart. Funny. Kind. And she

looks more beautiful than ever. The sunlight's in her hair. Her blue eyes are sparkling. Then there's her smile. Those lips curling up. I'd be tempted to touch her too if ... Well. I *am* tempted.

But I won't.

Instead. I watch her whisper something in Kasey's ear, then laughter bubbles up between them. The sound is like music. My sister's happy. Natalie's glowing. And Hawk is clearly noticing.

During a picture of *just the Slaters and the Grahams*, he strides up to smooth a strand of hair behind her ear. "That's better," he announces, before stepping back to take the shot.

Seriously? I clench my fists to keep from doing some serious damage to the guy. Then Hawk drops his camera, cocks his head, and says, "Relax your shoulders, Brady."

Man. I really want to toss him overboard.

But this is Kasey's wedding to my best friend. And sure, I don't like Drake Hawkins, but Beau does. There must be some redeeming qualities in the guy I'm too fogged up to see right now. And either way, Hawk and Beau still have to work together after this weekend. I can't wreck their relationship and risk the future success of Beau's career just because Hawk rubs me the wrong way.

By the time we move on to the shots of *just the groomsmen*, we've already suffered through eleven million pictures, give or take. I'm pretty sure a photo shoot has never lasted so long. Kasey takes over behind the camera since Hawk is a groomsman. She's no photographer, but she's been on enough photo shoots with Beau to get the gist. While she prepares, I make sure to position myself as far from Hawk as I can get.

So I end up on one side of Beau, while Ford, Three, and Hawk take the other. I think it's cool that Beau asked all our cousins to be his groomsmen. He's just that kind of man. Family means everything to him. Plus, his job has him traveling so much, he doesn't have the opportunity to get close with too many people.

Besides Kasey, Hawk's the person Beau spends the bulk of his time with now. I'd like to think that's mostly due to their work partnership and proximity, but Beau claims Hawk's a good guy once you get to know him. And I've got to believe Beau wouldn't accept anything less than that in a friend.

Still, the couple of inside jokes I catch between them make me edgy. And

even though I'm positive Beau's not trying to leave me out, I can't help feeling ... left.

That is until Kasey consults her list of must-have shots and says, "We still need one more of just the groom and the best man shaking hands."

Yeah, Hawk. Just Beau and me.

When we set up for the pose, Beau looks me in the eye. "For the record, you're my number one."

"Me too, man. Me too."

"Always have been." He grips my hand. "Always will be."

I won't lie. I get a little misty in the moment. Dust in my eyes. Lump in my throat. Bottom line: Beau's my best friend, and I'd do anything for him. Including not killing his work partner.

So I manage to steer clear of Drake Hawkins for the rest of the pictures and the cruise, hoping things will get better once we hit the beach. On the sand, there should be enough room to spread out, so I won't be stuck watching Hawk hover over Natalie. Not that it's any of my business. Not that I blame the guy. But if something's going to happen between those two, I don't need the evidence right under my nose.

As the barge approaches the docks, my sister gathers all the bridesmaids together. "Ladies," she says, "I have something to give you for the beach." She holds up a giant shopping bag. "Just a little thank-you for being my bridesmaids!" From inside the bag, she pulls out a towel for each of the women, monogrammed with their initials. I have to say, this might be the most Kasey Graham thing I've ever seen.

"Gentlemen!" Beau announces, and we all cock our heads. "I've got nothing to give you as a little thank you for being my groomsmen." He splays his hands, and we all start to chuckle. Then he adds, "Yet."

"What's the holdup, man?" Three teases.

Kasey laughs. "The *holdup* is he hasn't bought you anything."

"Yet," Beau repeats with a shrug. "I'm waiting for Mac. He had a work conflict, so he's flying in Thursday. It wouldn't be the same to acknowledge all the groomsmen without him."

"Fair enough," Ford says, but my gut twists at the mention of work conflicts. Our oldest cousin, Mac, is not only the CEO of his own construction company, he also designs and builds one-of-a-kind furniture. Woodwork is his passion. Well, woodwork and his wife and daughter. I don't begrudge him any of his happiness, not to mention the fortune he's amassing.

Mac's definitely paid his dues. I just wish—like him—I could find a balance between my career and what I really want to do.

While Kasey and the bridesmaids head off toward the beach with their towels and bags, the rest of us stay behind to help unload the barge, moving everything onto carts. The food. The coolers. A bucket of water balloons. Some rope. And ... a limbo stick.

I frown. "A limbo stick?"

Beau comes up behind me, snickering. "This is all stuff for Kasey's beach games. And you are so not getting out of it, my friend."

I grunt. "Who says I want to get out of it?"

"The look on your face."

I smirk. "You can't even see my face."

"Yeah, but I remember the one you've been wearing for the past two days. All this wedding stuff makes you nuts. And you're smirking now, aren't you?"

I turn toward him, lifting my hands like I've been caught. "Okay, I guess you know me."

Beau cocks his head. "I realize Nat can be a lot, and I've stuck her with you too much already, but try not to let her drive you too crazy." His mouth goes crooked. "Let's be honest: Both our sisters drive us crazy sometimes, but I happen to love mine. *And* I love yours. Which is a good thing, since I'm marrying her."

"Better not back out now." I force out a laugh, like we're just kidding around, but Beau has no idea just how crazy Nat actually makes me. And not in a bad way. In a good way. In the very best way.

Out of nowhere, he suddenly pulls a face. But there's no way he can read my mind, right? This is more like the cringe of someone who feels guilty. "I've got one more favor to ask," he says, "and then you're off the hook."

I glance at Hawk, who's ahead of us, struggling to push a cart with a wayward wheel. He and the rest of the men are almost to the end of the dock. I'll be honest. I'm glad Beau's asking me for help and not Hawk. "Whatever you need, I'm your guy," I say to really hammer that point home.

"You think you could look out for Amber this week? Not all the time. Just when we're doing wedding stuff. Out of all my guys, I trust you to take care of her the most."

I shrug, acting nonchalant, but my chest swells a little hearing this. Beau trusts me. So of course I'll do this for him. Whatever he needs. Whatever it

takes. And truth be told, I've got a soft spot for anybody in a vulnerable position. Multiply that by a lot for a woman who's carrying a kid. "Of course I will."

"Thanks, man," Beau says. "Her husband, James, couldn't be here, and I'd want someone looking out for Kasey if the situation were reversed and she was alone."

"Yeah," I say. "Me too. Why didn't James come?"

"He stayed home with their twins. They're two years old, so *not* great travelers."

"Ahh. Right. In that case, I'll do my best to keep an eye out for her." Especially since looking out for Amber gives me a good excuse to focus on something other than Natalie. More specifically, *someone* other than her.

Beau grins at me. "You're the best ... man."

I fake a scowl. "Are we really doing that joke again?"

"Last time. Promise." He punches my shoulder. "Love you, brother."

"Yeah." I nod. "Me too."

Chapter Thirteen



NATALIE

“Can you do me a favor?” Kasey asks. The rest of the bridesmaids have already put on their cover-ups, reapplied layers of sunblock, and headed out to set up folding chairs, so Kasey and I are the last two in the changing cabana at The Beachfront Inn.

“Of course. What do you need?”

She pulls a square of stationery from her purse. The paper is pastel pink and monogrammed KEG. *Kasey Elizabeth Graham*. I grin at her. “You know you’re going have to get all new initials on your stuff.”

“Already ordered.” She folds the stationery into a tight square. “In the meantime, I need you to hold on to this and keep it safe. Please?”

“What is it?”

“My wedding vows.” She flashes me a wicked smile. “Beau keeps trying to sneak a peek of what I wrote for inspiration. I told him no way. He’s on his own. But *he* claims I have an unfair edge since I’m a journalist.”

I shake my head, laughing. “That does sound like my brother.”

“Doesn’t it?” She folds her dress and slides it into her beach bag. “I told *him* to suck it up, buttercup. The guy better get busy pouring out all his love for me on the page. And they better be original.”

I slip the pink stationery with Kasey’s vows into my own bag. “In Beau’s defense, he *is* pretty good at big romantic gestures.” I nod to indicate her charm bracelet he gave her two years ago. It’s one of the sweetest gifts I’ve ever seen anyone come up with for another person. “Just trust him. I’m sure my brother’s vows will be original. And wonderful.”

Kasey snorts. “Let’s hope so, for his sake.” When I don’t laugh along with her this time, she meets my gaze, holding it for a moment. “Wow. I

don't think I could defend my brother the way you just defended Beau. That's pretty impressive, Nat."

"Well." I swallow hard, hoping to deflect the subject off of Brady. "Beau's pretty great."

"I think so too." Her face lights up. "That's why I'm marrying him." She takes a beat and lifts a brow. Just one, but it's higher than the McDonald's arches. "You know, I thought something might be happening with you and Brady the last time you were in town."

I make a noise that's half scoff, half laugh, and one hundred percent awkward.

"But when I mentioned my suspicions to Beau, he said you'd never mess with Brady's head, knowing you were moving away. And he's totally right. I can't believe I thought you might hurt anyone like that."

"Heh heh heh." I force a chuckle. "Well." *Good one, Nat. You really nailed that response.*

"Speaking of which." Kasey wrinkles her nose. "I'm sorry you've been stuck with my brother so much since you got here. Beau and I would be taking you everywhere ourselves, but ..."

"It's your wedding week. I get it." I cinch up my beach bag. "Really. It's no problem."

That is what I say, when, in truth, the past two days have been problematic in more than one way. Not only do I want to spend *more* time with Beau before he's married, I also want to spend *less* time with Brady before I move. Still, I can't tell Kasey that. She may be my friend, but she's too close to Beau *and* Brady. The entire situation is messy and tangled.

A giant web, minus the spider.

"Anyway, it's only temporary," Kasey says. "This wedding week and our honeymoon will be over way too quickly. Then it's on to real life." She releases a long sigh.

"But then we'll all be in LA together." I hook the bag strap over my shoulder. "Well. Not *all* of us. You. Me. Beau. Amber. Sloane. Living the dream, right?"

"Yep." Kasey checks her reflection once more, wiping a smudge of sunblock on her neck. "And you'll be happy to know my brother will probably be out of your hair soon."

"Oh?" I bend down to fiddle with the strap on my sandal. "Are you kicking him out of the wedding?"

“Ha! No.” She turns to me. “My friend Molly’s coming in for the wedding tomorrow. You remember Molly Fitzgerald. I’m sure she’ll dominate Brady’s attention quickly enough.”

My stomach rolls over. Twice. I probably had too much shrimp and brie. “Good for Molly,” I say, straightening.

“Are you kidding? Good for *me*. And my poor mom. We both want to see Brady settled down with someone nice. He’s barely dated for the past two years.”

“Really? Huh.” I hike my bag higher while my insides sink at the idea of Brady settled down with anyone.

“And since Molly just accepted a job here as the new kindergarten teacher, she’s perfect for Brady. He’s basically Mr. Abieville. So, hey. Hometown couple for the win!”

“Yay!” I pump my hands in the air like I’m celebrating, when I’m really just making a fist.

Kasey eyes me sideways. “Don’t get *that* excited.”

“I’m not,” I protest. “I’m just really ready to hit the beach.”

“Me too!” Kasey loops her arm through mine. “Let’s do this, maid of honor!”

Just outside the cabana, stairs made from old railway ties take us down to the sand. Together we trudge to the spot where Lettie and Nella have just finished setting up our chairs. They’ve arranged the seats in a semicircle with the main buildings of the inn behind us. Since it’s a weekday, the place is less crowded than it would be on the weekend. But a few other groups of beachgoers are scattered about, under umbrellas or in the water.

In July, the entire lake is relatively warm, but it’s even warmer near the shore. The depth is ankle-deep for at least twenty yards before dipping to shoulder height, then deeper. There are no big swells here, just tiny waves lapping gently. Sunlight glints off of ripples on the water. This lakefront beach is different from the ocean, but still beautiful in its own way.

Since Kasey and I are the last to arrive, I plop my bag on the chair at the end, next to Darby. I’m kicking off my sandals when a server approaches in a tank top that reads Beachfront Bar. He looks to be in his mid-twenties, a surfer type with a swoop of brown hair over his eyes.

“Hey, ladies, I’m Hudson.” He holds out a menu glued to a piece of wood, and slips a notepad from a pocket in his board shorts. “Can I get anyone a beverage?”

Olivia saunters over and takes the menu from him. “Excellent shoreline service. I must say, I’m impressed.”

Hudson nods. “Thanks.”

“I’m a resort concierge in Breckenridge.” She bats her lashes while Hudson just stares at her. He’s either mesmerized by Olivia’s beauty, or wondering why she’s telling him this. “Well, that’s my official title, but I think of myself as more of an ambassador, because I promote a lot of places in the town. Kind of like an influencer.”

Another quick nod from Hudson. “Good to know.”

“Breckenridge is in Colorado,” she adds.

“I’ve heard of it.”

“Oh, well, my main job is at The Blue Bell. Have you heard of The Blue Bell?”

“I don’t think so.” Hudson shifts his weight. “So Can I get you a beverage?”

“Oh, yes, please!” Olivia grins, undeterred by the server’s lack of interest. I’ve got to give her credit. That kind of confidence is more impressive than the service at The Beachfront. She peruses the menu, then addresses the group. “Since I’m a professional who gets paid to make sure people are having fun at a resort, please allow me to handle this.” We all shrug as Olivia orders a round of fancy-sounding drinks.

“Virgin for me, though,” Amber calls out.

“Me too, please,” I chime in. This maid of honor needs to keep an eye on her bride, and also keep her wits clear around Brady. Once Hudson leaves, I wrestle with my folding chair, adjusting the seat back. Olivia peels off her cover-up. She’s got a nice base tan, probably from all that time spent as an ambassador in Breckenridge.

“I just texted Beau,” Kasey says, dropping into the chair at the other end of our semicircle. “They’re almost done.”

Olivia gathers her hair, securing it into a bun with a couple of bobby pins. “So the guys will be down soon then?”

Kasey snorts. “You just want to flirt with Hawk, don’t you?”

“Personally,” Darby says, “I think Hawk is into Natalie.”

The back of my folding chair collapses. “Whoa!” I flop backward onto the sand.

“*Personally*”—Olivia glares at Darby—“I think you should keep your opinions to yourself.”

“There’s nothing going on with Hawk and me,” I blurt, hauling myself upright. Now there’s sand in my hair, on my neck, and down my cover-up.

“Either way.” Kasey pushes her sunglasses up her nose.

“There is no *either way* when it comes to me and Hawk,” I quip. “There’s no way at all. No me. No Hawk.”

“It’s all good, Nat.” Olivia sprays something from a can on her skin that makes it shine. “I actually think Hudson’s kind of cute now. And as far as I’m concerned, all’s fair in love and war.”

“But to be clear, Liv, there is no war. And no love.”

“Well, that’s even better.” Her smile is sly. “Because I’d definitely win.”

A few minutes later, Hudson returns with a tray of drinks in neon-yellow plastic tumblers. Curly straws and skewers of fruit and umbrellas stick out from the top. “The two with the cherries are virgin,” he says. While Olivia hands over her credit card, the rest of us take long sips, nodding our approval. Mine is perfectly sweet, all coconut and pineapple.

“Delicious,” I say.

Kasey sighs. “Perfection.”

“FYI,” Amber says, holding her drink up to block the sun, “I don’t think I can do the chicken fights today.” With her free hand, she pats her rounded belly. “Baby on board and all.”

I nestle my tumbler into the sand next to my chair. “Chicken fights?”

Kasey lowers her sunglasses. “Didn’t you see the agenda I texted for the beach party?”

Darby passes her phone over to me. “Here. Check it out.” There’s a text from Kasey open on her screen.

BEACH DAY AT THE BEACHFRONT

- Tug O’War
- Chicken fights
- Balloon toss
- Sandcastle building
- Limbo contest

Kasey waits for me to look up from Darby's phone. "You don't like chicken fights?" Her lips droop in a pout. As maid of honor, I need to be a good sport. Not to mention these games will be a good distraction from thoughts of Molly dominating Brady's time.

"Chicken fights are my favorite," I say, a smile glued to my face.

Nella clears her throat. "But the rest of us don't *have* to fight, do we? Like chickens or anything else?"

"Yes, we do." Kasey takes another long sip of her drink, her cheeks caving in as she sucks on her curly straw. "Everyone but Amber, obviously."

Amber pulls a sunhat out of her bag. "Honestly, I'll probably tap out of everything but building the sandcastles."

Darby takes her phone back. "Did you see the last item on the agenda?" She aims a pointed look at me.

"Yep." I force a smile. "Who doesn't want to do a limbo competition? In the sand. In a bathing suit."

"So much fun, right?" Kasey beams at us. "I'm having the best time today!"

Okay, Nat. Remember that. This is all you need to hear.

"New rule," Kasey says, pointing her straw at Amber. "If you're currently with child, you get a hall pass. Otherwise, you're in for every competition. Now let's soak up some sun!"

She slips off her cover-up to reveal an adorable polka dot bikini underneath. I'm glad to see she likes two pieces, in light of the turquoise suit I'm planning to give her for Bora Bora. On the other end of the spectrum, there's my black one-piece. I thought the color would be slimming, but it mostly accentuates how pale I am. I look like a Cullen vampire with blonde hair and pink lip gloss.

Still, I love the feel of sunshine on my skin, so I grab a can of sunblock and lay my cover-up over my drink to protect it from oncoming mist. Then I squeeze my eyes shut to spray one more layer over my face and body. I'm sitting in a cloud of sticky coconut—SPF 100—when a deep voice rumbles above me.

"Where's the blue one?"

"Huh?" I try to look up, but my lids are stiff with sunblock. A few loose strands of hair are caught in my lip gloss, so I splutter and spit, swiping the curls away. Then I force my crusty eyes open.

Uh-oh.

I really should have kept them shut.

In front of me are two thickly-muscled legs and a bare torso glistening in the sunlight. Brady's board shorts are slung low under his abs. So many abs. Rows of them split down the middle, rippling and—

"The other suit," he says. His shadow looms over my thighs. My super-pale vampire thighs. I feel a flush coming on, but I don't want Brady to think I'm self-conscious because of him, because I'm not. So I square my shoulders.

"What are you talking about?"

He drags his fingers around the back of his neck. "From the floor of the airport. The little blue bikini?"

"Ahhh. Right. That one." I scrunch up my nose. "But it's not blue. It's turquoise. There's a difference."

"Turquoise. Not blue. Difference. Got it. I'll try not to forget." His mouth quirks, and a wave of warmth soaks through me. I love making Brady's lips twitch like that. It's way more satisfying than getting a person who is *always* grinning to smile.

"So, where's my brother?" I ask.

"Still in the gift shop," Brady says. "And if you're looking for Hawk, he stopped at the bar."

"I wasn't looking for Hawk," I blurt too quickly, and a blush floods my cheeks. I'm not interested in Hawk, but I don't want Brady to think I'm interested in him either. "It's just that he didn't have to go to the bar. Nobody does. Hudson's been getting us whatever we want."

Brady squints up at the inn. "Hudson's working? Huh. I thought he quit last month."

"I guess not. But I don't recognize him."

"He moved here last summer, and you haven't been around. Figures you wouldn't know him. But Hud's a good man."

"Why did you think he quit?"

"Let's just say things around here have been ... difficult." Brady's face melts into a grimace. "The pub's doing all right, but the inn itself is a little run-down. Some employees feel like they're overworked and underpaid. But I'm sure the Johnsons are doing their best."

My heart sinks. "I know Beau and Kasey planned their wedding here because they wanted to throw business their way."

"Yeah. That was generous, but I think this place might've already taken a

financial hit they can't come back from. I hope not, but hope isn't always enough." His jaw tics. "Anyway, I'm glad Hudson stuck around. This town is lacking in loyalty these days."

A shadow passes over his face, and it only gets worse when Hawk comes across the beach, shuffling toward us with an umbrella drink in his hand. Then he keeps on coming, close enough to kick sand over my feet.

"Watch it," Brady says.

"Sorry." Hawk winces. "Haven't been on a beach in a while. My etiquette is rusty."

Brady smirks. "All that time on exotic photo shoots taking its toll?"

"Exactly. So you understand." Hawk raises his neon-yellow tumbler in a toast. "Cheers, mate!" When neither Brady nor I lift a glass, Hawk looks down at my empty hands. "No one's offered to get you a drink yet?"

"Oh, no! I already have one." I pull my cover-up off my tumbler to show him.

"How about a snack, then?"

"I'm good, thanks. I've had enough shrimp and cocktail sauce." I don't want Hawk to take on the role of caring for me, especially in front of Brady. And either way, I don't have time to request food or beverages, because Beau has finally returned from the gift shop. He comes up to our semicircle of chairs, hooting for everybody's attention.

"Good people in our wedding!" He moves in front of the group. "My lovely bride has informed me it's time to kick this party up a notch." He pulls two gaudy trophies from behind his back. On each is a bronze statue of a man on a boat reeling in a giant fish. "We'll be partnering up in teams of two, and these bits of gorgeousness will go to the winners."

"Ahhh." I chuckle. "So *that's* what Beau was buying at the gift shop."

Brady gawks. "Those are the ugliest things I've ever seen."

"Perhaps." Hawk sets his drink down next to my chair. "But there's room for one of them on my trophy shelf."

"I'll bet," Brady grumbles. Then he crosses the sand to Amber. "I'd like to be your partner, if you're cool with that." He lays a hand over his heart and tips his chin. "Please don't reject me."

"Me?" Amber presses a palm to her own chest like she's surprised someone voluntarily picked her. "Of course I'll be your partner!" A smile skips across her face, and my whole stomach somersaults. Seeing Brady choose the pregnant woman over everybody else tugs at my heart strings.

Hard.

Hawk reaches out to me. "Shall we pair up, Natalie?"

As much as I'd rather be partnered with Brady, Hawk is the far safer option. There will be no feelings involved and absolutely no danger of attraction. "Sure." I take his hand, and he hauls me up, throwing an arm around my shoulder.

"Those ugly trophies are as good as ours," Hawk says.

Beau claps his hands. "Let the games begin!"

Chapter Fourteen



BRADY

The promise I made to myself not to do bodily harm to Drake Hawkins is skating on thin ice. In fact, I'd like to bring him here when Abie Lake is frozen over and drop him into the nearest fishing hole.

But I won't. Because that's wrong. And also, I'm mostly joking. Still, the guy is glommed onto Natalie like her body's made of Velcro. And sure, I've got no claim staked to her, plus I asked Amber to be my partner instead of Natalie, but that's not my point. My point is this:

If I can't kill Drake Hawkins, I'll just have to beat him.

"Brady?" Amber peers up at me from under her sunhat, fanning her face with a magazine. "Before we start, could you possibly get me some water?" Her cheeks are red, and beads of sweat dribble down her neck.

"Sure thing." I splay my hands. "Hydration coming up. And please don't be shy about asking me for anything this week." Even without Beau asking me to look out for Amber, I'd never leave a pregnant lady hot and thirsty. So I head off toward the inn in search of water, while Ford and Three get the beach ready for our games.

By the time I return, there's a Tug O'War rope stretched across the sand and a baby pool of ice water in the center. I'd assumed we'd be splitting into two big groups for this particular game—like bridesmaids against groomsmen—but according to Kasey, we're going against each other, with our partners, in teams of two. The losers take an ice-water bath, and the winners take on the next pair.

Beau and Kasey go first, losing almost immediately to Ford and Lettie. Then Ford and Lettie beat Three and Nella. Next up are the triplets.

Hawk steps forward, hand in the air. "Excuse me," he says. "Three

against two isn't quite fair, is it? The girls will have an advantage."

Beau smirks. "You worried they'll eventually beat you and Nat?"

"No." Hawk waves the comment away like it's absurd. Then he glances at Natalie. "We aren't worried, are we?"

Nat shrugs. "I'm not."

Ford and Lettie beat the triplets anyway.

Next, Hawk and Nat step up to the rope, ready to take on the champs. When Beau drops his arm, signaling the start of their round, Hawk gets down to business. Fast. He grits his teeth, grunting and gasping. Man, this guy really wants to win. Meanwhile, in front of him, Natalie's got her hands on the rope, but she's cheering the other team on.

"You're doing great, Lettie!" she calls out. "Don't give up now!" So I decide to forget about the fact that Hawk has his sweaty body pressed against hers, and focus on the kind of woman Natalie is. The type who roots for others, even when they're competing against her.

I'm sort of awestruck by her kindness.

But when the rope slips away from both couples at the same time, they have to start the whole round over again. Nat blows into her hands, rubbing them on her legs, like they might be chafed. She looks hurt. I come toward the rope, brow furrowed. "You all right, Nat?"

"I'm okay," she says. "Thanks."

Hawk hops up and down, shadow-boxing. "Come on, Natalie. You've got this. Quitters don't win trophies, do they?"

For the rest of the matchup, I sit beside Amber, my guts knotted up like the ends of the Tug O'War rope. This guy cares more about an ugly trophy than the comfort of the woman he *chose* to pair up with. When they eventually *do* beat Ford and Lettie, he crows, "Winning!"

I leap up, ready to go. I can't wait to take Hawk on.

"NEXT!" Kasey shouts.

"That's us," Amber says, from her folding chair. "But I don't think I can participate." She shoots me an apologetic look. "I'm so sorry, Brady."

"Don't be sorry. It's more important that you're safe. You take care of that baby. I'll take this on for the both of us."

I step up to the rope by myself, meeting Natalie's gaze across the kiddie pool.

"On your marks," Kasey calls out. "Get set!" she yells.

When she takes too long of a pause, Hawk shouts, "Go!" In an instant,

my whole body engages, muscles taut, core clenched. My arms are ready for battle. But on the other side, Nat locks eyes with me. Then she wags her brows.

What's going on?

She peeks down at the rope and widens her eyes. Cocks her head. Behind her, Hawk can't see that she's mouthing *One ... Two ...* One quick nod, and she lets go of the rope, jumping out of Hawk's path. That's when I yank him straight into the pool.

Victory. It's very sweet.

While Hawk is sprawled in the pool—red-faced and sputtering, blowing ice water out of his mouth—Natalie casts a gleeful look my way. I arch a brow to acknowledge our secret teamwork, and a strange emotion crawls across my stomach. Partnering with Natalie feels way too good.

"We absolutely had him, Natalie," Hawk spits. But he'd better not be spitting *at* her, or we're going to have a problem. "There's no way Brady beat us by himself! What happened?"

"I have no idea." Her shoulders creep up. "One minute we were good, then ..." She wrinkles her nose. "I guess he's just that much stronger than we are."

"Than both of us?" Hawk frowns. "Hmm."

Watching him clamber out of the pool, soaked and shivering, is a pretty glorious sight. Kasey walks over, drapes an arm over his wet shoulders. "Way to lose graciously, Hawk."

He turns to Natalie. "Don't worry, darling. We'll win the chicken fights." *Darling?*

Spoiler alert: Hawk and Natalie don't win the chicken fights. Nella and Three do.

Then the triplets win the water balloon toss—after which Hawk points out they had two people on one side to catch the throws, so it wasn't *quite* fair.

Kasey overrules him.

Amber and I win the sandcastle-building contest next. As a mom who brings her kids to the beach and the park all the time, Amber definitely had the edge. When it's time for limbo, almost everyone unanimously votes to skip it. Except for Kasey. She's the sole holdout who wants to prove how low she can go, but Natalie steps in.

"Let's call it a day and give the trophy to Amber for being the best sport," she says.

Hawk brushes sand off his shoulders. "Sympathy vote, eh?"

"More like pregnancy vote," Natalie says.

"Fair enough." Hawk turns to Kasey. "What about the other trophy?"

"Exactly!" Kasey grins. "That's why we still need to limbo."

"Hawk can take the other trophy for traveling the farthest," Natalie suggests.

"Fair enough," Hawk says.

"Anyway," Natalie adds, "we don't want everyone's skin peeling on the day of the wedding, right, Kase? That won't be good for pictures."

Ah. Appealing to Kasey's image of a perfect wedding album. Smart.

"I think it might be too late for Beau already," Tess says. We all turn to check out the groom, and sure enough, his shoulders are already pinking up.

"That color will increase for several hours," Darby points out.

Olivia cringes. "He'll probably be fried by tonight."

Kasey throws a towel over Beau. "You are not allowed to peel, Beau Slater!"

"Hey." Beau appraises the wedding party. "You're *all* getting burned. We should probably get going soon."

At Beau's direction, the wedding party disperses to their chairs and towels, preparing to leave the beach. My gaze follows Natalie as she digs around in her bag, pulling out a gauzy cover-up. After brushing leftover sand from her body, she slips the cover-up over her perfect curves. I've been trying not to watch her, but she's some kind of magnet for my eyes.

Wherever Natalie is, I'm aware. At all times.

I glance at Hawk just as Olivia approaches him, looping an arm through his. She says something in his ear, then tosses her head back. Within seconds, they're heading in the direction of the bar. So I grab my towel, shake it out, then trudge across the sand toward Natalie.

Coming up behind her, I stand close enough to smell her tropical suntan lotion, but not close enough to touch her. I may want to wrap my arms around her, but I'll maintain my boundaries. As a gentleman.

"For the record," I say, my voice low, just between us, "I like the black suit better."

These are the words that come out of my mouth. But what I'm actually thinking is, *You're the most gorgeous woman on this beach no matter what you're wearing.*

Nat spins around to face me, her cheeks glowing pink. This could be from

the sun or a reaction to my compliment. Either way, a dusting of freckles emerges on her nose. It's a perfect constellation. She looks down, smoothing her hands along the cover-up. The outline of the black suit is visible through the sheer fabric.

"Thanks." She lifts her chin. "But it's no turquoise bikini."

That's when a vision of what she'd look like in that tiny two-piece sears my brain, and all the air blasts from my lungs. It's a good thing she's fully dressed now, otherwise I'd be asphyxiating. I grunt out something that sounds like, "Hrrrgh." *Real smooth, man.*

"What's wrong?" Natalie chews her full, pink lip.

I'm desperate for an answer. "You've got freckles," I mumble. "But that's a good thing."

She wrinkles her nose. "I'll take your word for it."

I want to reassure her freckles aren't a flaw. That they make her even *more* beautiful. But we're supposed to be keeping our distance from each other, and telling Natalie she's beautiful crosses another kind of boundary. Either way, my phone's buzzing in my board shorts, so I'm saved by the call. Slipping the phone from my pocket, I check the screen.

Dr. Swanson.

Why is he calling? He gave me the week off for the wedding, so my pulse speeds up. "I've got to take this," I say.

Natalie puts a finger to her lips and mouths, *Of course*, before turning back around to collect her things. While I head off to answer the call, the sound of everyone else packing up hums in the background.

"Hey, Dr. Swanson. Everything okay?"

"Hello, son. Sorry to bother you." There's an edge to his voice, so my instincts must be right. Something's definitely wrong.

"What's up?"

"It's Wendy," he says. "She was feeling a little out of sorts at the clinic today. Dizzy spells and such. Then she collapsed. She was out cold for a couple minutes. So I called an ambulance and threw the CLOSED sign up. We're on the way to the hospital now."

A siren wails on his end, and my heart starts really rattling. "What do you need from me?"

"I'm sure you're busy with the wedding, so I hate to ask—" Another shriek of the siren.

"You're not asking. I'm telling you, I'm on my way to the clinic."

“Thank you, son. You’re a lifesaver.” Under the circumstances, I don’t feel worthy of the title. “We’re still boarding a few dogs right now,” he says.

“Yeah. I know. Willa and Gator.”

“They should be low maintenance, but I’m worried about LuLu. She’s so fragile. When Wendy collapsed, I was about to change her dressing and do some follow-up bloodwork.”

“I’m on it, Doc.”

“If you can, examine her right away, and check her chart afterward. Compare her earlier stats. See if she’s improving. Or at least, hopefully, stable.”

“No problem. I’ve got this.”

“And would you call to let me know how she’s doing? Otherwise I’ll be worried all night.”

“Of course.”

“I’m not sure when I’ll be able to leave Wendy. Or even *if* I’ll be able to leave her. And we’re totally booked up tomorrow.”

“I’ll call everyone to reschedule. You just take care of your wife.” My throat goes tight. “Mrs. Swanson’s a strong one. Tell her I said so, and that I’ll see her soon.”

Before we end the call, I’m already shoving on my flip-flops. My towel’s slung over my shoulders, and I’m prepared to sprint to the parking lot. Then Natalie grabs my forearm.

“Where’s the fire?” Her mouth spreads into a crooked smile. “Shouldn’t Ford be the one rushing off?” The thrill of her touch is jarring, and my whole body floods with guilt. “You know.” Her lips twitch. “Because he’s a firefighter. Get it?”

“Yeah.” She’s got no idea this situation is serious, or that I’ve already gone into fight-or-flight mode. Sure, I can handle the animals by myself. Even LuLu. But I’m worried about Mrs. Swanson. “I don’t have time to talk,” I say. “Doc Swanson’s on the way to the hospital with Mrs. Swanson.”

Nat sucks in a breath. “That doesn’t sound good.” A cloud of concern descends on her face.

“I’ve got to get to the clinic and take care of the boarded pets. Reschedule all the appointments for tomorrow.” I start to pull away, but Natalie increases her grip.

“I’ll go with you,” she blurts, hoisting her beach bag on her shoulder.

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I know.” Her eyes are big and round. “But it sounds like you could use the help. Please, Brady. Let me help.”

I’m in too much of a rush to worry if this is a good idea or a bad one. So I nod at her sandals. “Can you run in those things?”

“Yes.”

Her hand slides into mine, and we jog toward the parking lot.

Chapter Fifteen



NATALIE

I spend the first hour at the clinic contacting everyone with an appointment for tomorrow. Out of respect for Mrs. Swanson's privacy, I leave the details vague. Whatever's going on with her health is her news to share. Or not share. Besides, in a town like Abieville, word will spread quickly enough as it is.

As I work through the list, all the clients are more than willing to reschedule. That is until I call Glenda Morgan. When I tell her the doctor won't be able to see her long-haired guinea pig until next week, she groans. "But Oscar is an intact male, *if you know what I mean.*"

After a quick beat of imagining what may or may not be *intact* on a male, I wince. "Yes, I think I do."

"*Very intact.*"

My first instinct is to ask if there's such a thing as *mildly* intact, but making jokes won't be helpful to Brady. He's worried about Mrs. Swanson, and I'm here to help him, not laugh at their clients.

"Oscar's long hair absolutely *must* be trimmed," Mrs. Morgan insists, emphasis on must. "Otherwise, the situation with his backside gets ... regrettable, *if you know what I mean.*"

"Yes, I think I do." Now I'm fighting the urge to throw up in my mouth, but getting sick would be even less helpful than making jokes. Still, Oscar's regrettable backside is the last thing I want to picture on an empty stomach. I may never want to eat again.

"Could you maybe take him to a groomer, just this once?" I suggest.

"I've tried that." Mrs. Morgan harrumphs. "They clipped my poor Oscar in three different places, *if you know what I mean.*"

And just like that, Mrs. Morgan managed to come up with an even less appealing visual. “I do believe you,” I say. “And I’m truly sorry about Oscar’s ... situation. But the doctor simply isn’t able to handle his ... trim tomorrow. How about if I put Oscar down for first thing Monday morning?”

Mrs. Morgan lets out a long, thin whine. “Fine. But I’m not happy about this.”

“Thanks so much for your understanding,” I say in the most cheerful voice I can muster. “And please accept my apologies.”

“Don’t apologize to me.” Her sniff is so sharp, it’s almost like her nose has teeth. “Apologize to Oscar.”

“The next time I see him”—I bite back a laugh—“I certainly will, Mrs. Morgan.”

Ending the call, I stand and stretch, looking out from the office over the half wall into the lobby. The space is furnished with one long couch and two matching chairs. The coffee table in between is covered with magazines. I’m about to find Brady to see what else I can do when my phone buzzes. It’s inside my beach bag, which is hanging on the back of the chair. I dig in and see a new text from my mother.

MOM: Will you be home for dinner tonight?

ME: Not sure. I’m at the clinic with Brady. The Swansons had an emergency and he needs my help. Unclear how long we’ll be here.

MOM: No rush. We’ll be seeing you a lot this week. And maybe by the time the wedding is over, you’ll decide not to move to California. LOL!

ME: Thanks for understanding.

MOM: Of course. Helping Brady is a lovely thing to do. You’re a good friend, Natalie.

Friends. Right. As far as my parents and the Grahams are concerned, that’s all Brady and I are to each other, which must mean nobody knows about what really happened between us back in December. Yes, I kissed Brady on the porch. And yes, he told me it wasn’t a good idea. But then he kissed me in his parents’ kitchen three days later. And Kasey almost caught us.

Okay, Nat. Let’s be real. You were full-on kissing when she walked in.

Still, I shoved Brady away, and he totally played along, acting like there was nothing going on. Then, apparently, Beau convinced Kasey I’d never

risk hurting Brady by kissing him before my big move. So it's pretty clear where everybody else stands on Brady and me getting together.

Squarely in the *no* category.

I sink back into the swivel chair and close my eyes, letting myself relive those kisses like I have a thousand times before. I'm right at the part where the press of Brady's lips nearly launches me into space when he calls out from an exam room in the back.

"How's it going in there?"

My cheeks flame up like we've been caught again. "I just finished rescheduling the last appointment," I squeak out. *And I definitely wasn't imagining myself in your arms, if that's what you're thinking.*

"When you're done, could you please bring back the records for LuLu Jacobs?"

"Sure thing," I chirp extra brightly. Not only do I want to keep Brady's spirits up, but I'm also hoping he won't figure out how affected I am by his proximity.

So I glance around the workspace, wondering where I might locate the clinic's records. One wall of the office is lined with filing cabinets where they must keep all the animals' records. Next to the desk is a scale, I assume for weighing pets on intake. There's also a counter with a sink and bowls of treats for cats and dogs.

"By the way, LuLu is the mini chihuahua," Brady calls out again. "Don't mix her up with their bulldog, Luther."

Mini chihuahua? I thought all chihuahuas were miniature. Rifling through the file cabinet—under the letter *J*—I find LuLu Jacobs, a teacup chihuahua. With her file in hand, I head to the back of the clinic. There's a wall of kennels, most of which are empty, except for a sleeping cocker spaniel with long, luscious ears, and a basset hound whose forehead is so droopy, I can't tell if he's awake.

To the right of the kennels is an exam room, and Brady emerges from the open door. He's changed into a pair of dark blue scrubs the exact color of his eyes. The V-shaped neckline shows just a hint of his pecs, and the short sleeves reveal an impressive swell of biceps. The bottoms of the scrubs are cinched just below his waist.

Gulp.

In Brady's arms is a tiny dog that can't weigh more than three or four pounds. Her fur is mostly white, with big black patches. Two brown eyes

take up most of her face. Brady lifts her, and her ears twitch. “Natalie, meet LuLu.”

“Hello, LuLu,” I coo. Her eyebrows arch, two tiny wedges above her eyes.

“LuLu, this is Natalie,” Brady says to the dog. “She’s *almost* as pretty as you are. But don’t worry. You’ll always be my best girl.” As he cradles LuLu to his chest, my insides somersault. He’s so gentle. I’ve never seen him like this before.

“What happened to her?”

Brady turns her body to show me a jagged wound with fresh stitches along her side. “She and Luther got into it over the weekend.”

“Oh, no.” I cringe. “The bulldog? The one from the same household?”

“Yeah.” Brady exhales, and his shoulders sink. “LuLu and Luther have been coming here for years.”

“And he attacked her? That’s horrible!”

“It’s complicated.” Brady’s mouth is grim. “The Jacobs are out of town, and the dog sitter tried feeding them his leftover hamburger. He’s a good kid, he just didn’t know any better. LuLu and Luther both went after the burger at the same time. Got in a scuffle.” Brady frowns. “Happens sometimes with food.” He lifts LuLu to his chin and speaks to her in a soft voice. “Apparently Miss LuLu here thinks she’s a whole lot bigger than she is. Don’t you, Lu?” My insides were already leaping, but Brady’s sweetness might catapult me into orbit. He turns, and his gaze drops to the file I’m holding. “Thanks for bringing that to me.”

“Of course.” I hand the file over, hoping my hands don’t start trembling. “Whatever I can do to help.”

With LuLu still cradled in one arm, Brady takes the cream-colored folder with his free hand. Setting the file on the counter, he flips to a chart. His brow furrows as he studies the numbers.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“I hope so,” he says without making eye contact. “She’s on multiple meds for pain and infection, and with her size and age, she really should have her heart rate, pulse, and oxygen levels checked every few hours.” Slipping his phone from his pocket, he taps at the screen with just his thumb. His moves are quick and dexterous, and my heart skips a beat. As he switches to speaker mode, the call goes straight to voicemail.

“Hey, Dr. Swanson.” He glances at me, then back at LuLu. “I don’t want

to disturb you, but you asked me to check in. I examined LuLu, and she seems stable for now. I'll re-bandage the wound and do some bloodwork, but don't worry. She's getting the care she needs. The other dogs too. We're all good here."

We're all good.

"No need to reply," he continues. "I'll update you in the morning. But if you have any questions before then, you know how to reach me." Brady ends the call and shoves the phone in the back pocket of his scrubs. When his eyes dart to the clock above us, he frowns.

"What's wrong?"

"My place isn't that far from here, but going back and forth in between checking the animals won't be worth the trip. Plus LuLu's so fragile. Hmm." He closes his eyes, pressing his lips together while he thinks. "If Doc Swanson weren't at the hospital ..." He takes another beat, then opens his eyes. "I'm going to stay here."

"Okay." I look at LuLu nestled in Brady's arms. "For how long?"

"Overnight."

Whoa. I draw in a breath, glancing at the other dogs in their kennels. "Does Dr. Swanson usually stay here when he's boarding pets?"

"He doesn't have to," Brady says. "The clinic takes up one side of the duplex, and their house is on the other, so he can come and go right through there." Brady indicates a door at the end of the hallway. "He even keeps baby monitors on to listen when he's at home. The man is dedicated in the extreme." Brady pauses to adjust LuLu, and the muscles of his forearm flex. It's an image of strength and tenderness, simultaneously. A knot tightens around my heart.

"You're dedicated too."

"I'm not, though." His eyes cloud over. "Not in the same way. I'll never be as invested as Doc Swanson is."

"But that's not really a fair comparison." I tilt my head. "You haven't even gone to vet school yet."

His jaw clenches. "Exactly."

I examine Brady's face, not quite sure what he's getting at. "All I can say is watching you with LuLu ... I've never seen you like this before."

"Like what?"

"So ... emotional."

Brady squares his shoulders. "Well, I care about her. A lot." His voice is

deep and gravelly. “I care about them all.”

“Of course you do.” I swallow. “Caring is what makes people good at a job like this.”

“Yeah.” He pauses for a moment. “Caring can also make things harder.” When he lowers his eyes, the space behind my ribs begins to ache. Brady must be consumed with worry right now, for Mrs. Swanson and for LuLu. I can’t leave him alone at a time like this. I won’t.

“I’m staying too,” I announce.

His eyes flick up to mine. “What?”

“I’m going to stay here overnight with you.” I reach out and stroke LuLu’s ear. “I mean, with you and *LuLu*.”

Brady shakes his head. “I can’t ask you to do that, Nat.”

“You didn’t ask. I offered.”

He furrows his brow. “Aren’t you doing something with the bridesmaids tonight?”

“Kasey doesn’t have anything else scheduled for us before the hair and makeup trials tomorrow.” I lower my arm. “I think the groomsmen are getting haircuts and shaves at the same time. But until then, I’m totally free.”

“Won’t your parents be expecting you home?”

“My mom already knows I’m here,” I say. “I hope that’s okay. I didn’t think telling her was a problem. And she didn’t ask for specifics.” *She just told me I’m a good friend.*

Brady expels a long breath, and LuLu gazes up at him. *I feel you, girl. I kind of want to stare at him too.*

“Are you sure?” His eyes sweep over my face like he’s looking for clues, wondering if my offer is sincere. He sure is trying hard to let me off the hook, but I’m just as determined not to be swayed.

“I won’t take no for an answer,” I say. “I *want* to stay with you.” Maybe more than I should. No, definitely more. But this isn’t about me. It’s about offering Brady support. So I flash him a smile to seal the deal. “I’m a nurse, remember? That’s why I’m going to LA.”

“Yeah.” He shuts LuLu’s folder. “How could I forget?”

Chapter Sixteen



BRADY

Just when I start to feel safe opening up to Natalie, she reminds me she's already got one foot out the door. Scratch that. One foot out of the state. I can still feel the warmth of her hand in mine as we raced to the clinic, but I need to bury that memory. I need to bury all my memories of her.

"So, first things first," she says, probably unaware of the knife she just stuck in my gut. "If we're going to pull an all-nighter, we'll need food. That's probably the most important thing I learned in college." She quirks her brow. "I'm thinking pizza. So I'll run over to Antonio's and grab us a jumbo sausage and pepperoni."

"Sure," I say under my breath.

"No good?" She scrunches her nose. "Antonio's pepperoni and sausage used to be your favorite."

It still *is* my favorite, and the fact that Natalie knows this makes the knife's edge that much sharper. "No. That sounds great." I dig in my back pocket, then remember my wallet's not in my scrubs. "Hold on. I have cash."

"No, I've got this." She waves me away. "I'm a working woman with a new job on the horizon. I can afford pizza." She cuts her eyes to LuLu. "I'll be right back, beautiful. You take care of Brady when I'm gone, all right?"

When I'm gone.

She spins on a heel and breezes down the hall. The bell at the exit jingles as she leaves. It's an all-too-cheerful reminder that she'll be leaving for good. Soon. With a throat full of stones, I dress LuLu's stitches, and settle her back in her kennel. Then I head to the lockers to grab my notebook.

From experience, I know highly charged moments make for effective drafting sessions. So while my emotions are running this close to the surface,

I want to get some of these words out. Pulling a chair up to the counter beside the kennels, I start to write.

There's something special about sentences crafted by hand. A visceral connection to the words that's better than what I produce directly on my laptop. Before I know it, I've got ten new pages.

My ideas are flowing so fast, I feel like I could go on for hours. But writing's just a hobby, not my real job. I have actual responsibilities.

So I return the notebook to my locker, sterilize my hands, and pull on a pair of gloves to do LuLu's bloodwork. I take her to the exam room and position her on the table. As I prepare the needle and syringe, she looks back at me over her shoulder. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart," I murmur. Her big brown eyes are almost the size of her head. "I don't like this either, but I'll try to make it quick."

By now, I've performed so many of these procedures, I could probably finish blindfolded. But I stay focused. Precise. Efficient. LuLu deserves my best efforts.

"And see?" I lift her quaking body. "We're already done. No hard feelings, right?" I press her to my chest hoping my heartbeat can calm her, and she licks my neck in frantic slurps. "Aww. Hey there, girl. No hickeys now."

"How's she doing?" a voice says behind me. My stomach plummets like I'm being tossed off a cliff. I turn and Natalie's in the doorway. She heard me talking to a dog. About hickeys.

"When did you get back?"

"I just walked in, but I think the entire town had the same idea we did. Antonio's dining room is packed, and their takeout station's all backed up. The guy at the counter said it's going to be at least an hour for a specialty pizza. I didn't want to wait, so he's going to send someone over as soon as our order's ready. Free delivery."

"Patrick."

"Who?"

"The guy from Antonio's. His name is Patrick."

"Ah. Okay. Well, Patrick said to say hi to you. So." She grins and waves at me. "Hi."

"Thanks for the pizza," I manage. My gut's still on the floor, and my throat feels hot.

"I was happy to do it." Natalie dips her head. "We've got a long night

ahead of us, and I'm pretty hungry after the beach." When she comes toward me, I smell sunblock and sunshine.

"How are you doing, little lady?" she murmurs to LuLu.

"She's still stable." I look down at the dog, trying to focus on something other than Natalie's scent. But it's a losing battle, so instead I exhale. Keep the air going that direction. "Can you take her to the kennel for me while I get this sample ready to send out?"

"I'd love to." Natalie gathers LuLu into her arms, snuggling her under her chin. LuLu wiggles up and starts kissing Natalie all over her face.

Yeah. I'm with you there, LuLu.

I'd give just about anything to see if Natalie's lips taste as good as I remember. But that's not in my job description, so while Natalie's got LuLu, I process her bloodwork, then update the chart. Afterward, I find them out by the kennels.

Natalie's still holding LuLu, cupped in her hands. "Your girl's been waiting for you," she says. *Your girl.* My pulse kicks up, even though I know she's referring to the dog.

"Yeah. Well. LuLu needs to rest now." I take her from Natalie, and our hands brush, a flare straight to my heart. I return LuLu to her kennel, arranging her in a nest of soft blankets. Then I refill all the dog bowls with fresh water.

"And who are these little charmers?" Natalie asks.

"The spaniel is Willa. The basset's Gator."

"Ha! A dog named Gator. I love it." She brings her nose close to the kennel. "I just feel bad that they have to be stuck in cages."

"I used to think the same thing, but crate-trained dogs usually feel safe inside their kennels. Especially familiar ones. Gator and Willa stay with us a few times a year, so they're fine in here."

"Oh, no." Nat's face crumples. "Do they get sick that often?"

"No, we board them when their owners are out of town. For work or vacation or whatever. They want Willa and Gator to be in comfortable surroundings with people they recognize and trust." Even as I say this, I realize I sound a whole lot like one of these dogs—more comfortable in familiar surroundings with people I recognize and trust. Who knew I'd have more in common with a cocker spaniel than an actual human?

"So what do we need to do next?"

"I fed Gator and Willa earlier while you were rescheduling appointments,

so now is probably a good time for me to walk them.”

“I’ll go too, if that’s okay.”

“Sure.” I shift my jaw. “I keep a spare sweatshirt in my locker. It’s only going to get cooler as the sun goes down. I don’t think you’ll be warm enough ... in that.” She’s still in her bathing suit with only a sheer cover-up. Her dress and cardigan might be in her beach bag, but they won’t provide much more coverage than what she’s already got on.

“You know me well.” She laughs. “I guess if you’re going to be stuck with someone overnight, it pays to have history with them.”

History. Right.

I flash back to six months ago, remembering how Natalie felt in my arms. The curve of her mouth. Her breath warm in my ear. Anything I say now will come out garbled, so I duck my head and move to my locker to grab a couple sweatshirts. Then I collect Gator and Willa’s leads from their hooks. By the time I get back to Natalie, she’s having a full-on conversation with the dogs.

I pause for a moment, watching her. Mesmerized.

“Well, look at you, Gator. Aren’t you the jowliest thing? You ready for some fresh air, buddy?” He’s got his snout pressed to the mesh, snuffling. Can’t say I blame him. Nat smells incredible. Next, she steps over to Willa. “Hey, pretty lady. I’ll bet you could use some pizza. I ordered plenty. And don’t worry. I won’t tell Brady, if you don’t.”

“No, that’s not a good idea,” I say.

“Gah!” She whirls around, and her face flushes pink. “You heard that?”

I arrange my face into a mask of sternness. “I did.”

“I’m sorry,” she blurts. “I wouldn’t actually feed the dog pizza.”

“That’s not the problem.” My voice is gruff. “The real problem is ... Willa’s more of a Hawaiian pizza girl.”

Natalie takes a beat, then she snorts. “Wait. You’re messing with me?” She swats at my arm. “You’re so mean! I really thought I’d done something wrong.”

“Nope. You’re good,” I tell her.

Too good. Way too good.

Together we get the dogs hooked onto their leads, then we head out the back door. The air is cool, and the sky is growing dark. As we wander side by side, we’re both quiet, and our pace is slow. I’ve got Gator. She’s walking Willa. When we left, Lulu was sleeping soundly. I fill my lungs with the brisk, clean air. It feels good not to be rushing. So we let the dogs stop as

often as they need to sniff a bush or lift their legs. Two blocks out, Natalie breaks the silence.

“After seeing you with LuLu, I’m kind of surprised you don’t have a dog.”

“I would, but there’s a no-pets stipulation in my lease agreement.” I let out more slack in Gator’s leash. “When I get my own place someday, I’ll probably have a dog or two. Definitely a cat.”

“A cat? Really?”

“Yeah. I love my parents’ cat.”

“Sprinkles?”

“You sound surprised.”

She shrugs. “I guess I just didn’t peg you for a cat guy.”

“You got a problem with cat guys?” My mouth goes crooked.

“Absolutely not,” she says with a small laugh. “I think it’s kind of cute.”

“Ah. Only *kind of* cute, though.”

“On second thought, I’d say you’re pulling off the cat-guy thing very well.”

“Good to know,” I say. “Good to know.”

I hadn’t intended to flirt with Natalie, but we seem to be balancing on the edge of it. The fact that I don’t want to stop is probably dangerous.

“I think Willa’s getting tired,” I tell her. “We should head back after the next block.”

“Sure.” Natalie nods, but she doesn’t say anything more. I already miss the sound of her laughter. Maybe she doesn’t want this to end either. As we come up to the end of the street, rounding the corner to return to the clinic, there’s a spot where the concrete juts up.

“Careful.” I put a hand at the small of her back to guide her around the crack.

“Thanks.” Her voice is soft. We continue in silence for another half a block. Then she points at the moon rising just above the tree line. “That’s my favorite, you know.”

“The moon? Really?” My mouth quirks. “I didn’t peg you for a moon girl.”

“Not just *any* moon,” she says. “The crescent moon.” She pauses for a beat. “Don’t make fun of me, okay?”

“Promise.”

“When I was a kid and grown-ups would talk about a crescent moon, I

always pictured Pillsbury dough. Like they were saying the moon was a big roll, fresh from the oven.” She chuckles to herself. “So, that’s why a crescent moon is my favorite. And I can’t believe I just admitted that to you.”

“No, I’m glad you did. I like it.” I glance at her sideways. “And I’ve got one that’s more embarrassing.”

“Worse than a moon made of Pillsbury dough?” She pretends to scoff. “Prove it.”

“I can and I will,” I say. “When *I* was a kid, my mom used to say the stars were winking on when it got dark. So I thought the sky was full of creatures. With eyes. But not scary ones like monsters. More like ... friendly elves. And in my little-kid mind, the elves in the sky slept all day, then woke up at night to watch over us. When they *winked on*, I thought everything would be okay. That we were always safe.”

“Wait.” Natalie stops in her tracks, and I stop too. We face one another, and even in the dim light, I can see the twitch of her mouth. “You’re telling me you thought the stars were the eyes of some kind of sky elves?”

“Yes, I *am*, in fact, telling you that.”

“Wow.” Her lips make an oval. “That’s really ... umm.” She taps her chin. “What’s the word I’m looking for?”

“Incredibly imaginative? Insanely embarrassing? Totally stupid? Weird? Ridiculous?”

“No.” She resumes walking. “I was going to say adorable.”

I fall in step beside her. “I *am* pretty adorable, aren’t I?”

“You are.” The whole side of her body bumps against mine, and a smile stretches across my face. I think something’s happening here—a connection growing between us. It’s like invisible strings pulling her closer. Like maybe the two of us together isn’t so wrong.

Is it so crazy to imagine Natalie might be feeling something too?

When we’ve almost reached the clinic, she lets out a long sigh. A happy sigh, I hope. I nudge her shoulder. “What?”

“I was thinking whoever you end up with will be one lucky woman.”

And just like that, my lungs deflate.

Chapter Seventeen



NATALIE

As soon as we're back inside, Brady takes Willa's leash from me. When he returns the dogs to their kennels, Willa spins at least a dozen times, scooping her blankets into a pile. Gator plops down the minute Brady shuts his door. As for LuLu, she's sleeping, her tiny snores like little wheezes. While Brady moves to the sink to wash and dry his hands, he's still completely silent.

"You got awfully quiet," I say to the back of him.

Brady turns and leans against the basin. "Moons made out of Pillsbury dough and sky elves are hard stories to top. Not much else to say."

"I guess." I reach up to unzip his hoodie. "Thanks for this." The sweatshirt is warm and soft and smells like him—the perfect combination of spice and cotton. The bottom hangs down past my hips, halfway to my knees. I don't want to take it off, but—

"Keep it," he says. "It's always cold in this place."

Note to self: Offer to take a piece of clothing off, and Brady might actually speak.

"Now that you mention it, I am kind of chilly." A shiver runs up my spine, and Brady's eyes dip to my bare legs.

"Then you can't spend all night wearing ... that." His gaze returns to my face, and my cheeks heat up. "We've got extra scrubs in the cabinet. I'll try to find a pair that'll fit you."

"That would be great," I say. "And I should probably see if Patrick called. He said he'd let me know when the pizza's on the way, but it's been a while now, and they were pretty overwhelmed."

"Okay." Brady makes a move to stuff his hands in his pockets, but there aren't any on the front of his scrubs. His arms drop to his sides. "So, I'll be

right back then. With scrubs. For you.”

“I’ll check my phone.”

On my way to the office, my mind is racing. I liked walking the dogs tonight with Brady. And watching this big, serious man take care of animals is adorable. Not to mention the sky elves. That story just about blew the top off the cuteness scale. I mean, come *on*. Sky elves whose eyes wink open, but they’re *actually* the stars? I just about melted into a puddle on the sidewalk.

For a while there, I thought I was catching a glimpse of the old Brady. The guy who used to be the most talkative, animated, magnetic one in the room. Then he just ... disappeared again. To get to the bottom of this shift in his mood, I’ll have to dig deeper.

But first? Pizza.

I find my bag where I left it, on the chair next to the desk. But there are no missed calls or messages from Antonio’s. Shoving my phone back in my bag, I spin around, and run smack-dab into a wall of Brady. “Still no word from the pizza guy,” I blurt.

“That’s okay. I’m not that hungry.” He shoves a pair of scrubs at me. “Here. These were the smallest we have.”

“Thanks.” I hazard a smile, but he diverts his gaze. The scrubs look awfully big, but I’m more than ready to get out of my bathing suit, so I head to the bathroom to change. As I suspected, the scrubs swim on me, but at least I’ve got Brady’s sweatshirt to pull on over them. When I’m done, I find him in the lobby clearing the magazines off of the coffee table. He glances up, and I hold out my arms. The sleeves of his sweatshirt droop past my hands.

“I look pretty silly, right?”

He blinks. “No.”

I wait for him to expand on the answer, but he just stares me down. “No? That’s all you have to say?”

He folds his arms across his chest. “No.”

More staring. More silence.

“Uh uh, Brady.” I shake my head. “I deserve way better communication than this if I’m going to stay here with you all night.” I point at the couch. “Sit,” I command. “Now.”

Brady stands his ground, but his lips quirk. “You’re kinda bossy.”

“And you’re finally catching on.”

Something flashes behind his eyes—a spark of amusement—but he

moves to the couch and takes a seat. I drop down beside him. “We’re going to talk to each other whether you like it or not.”

He shifts sideways to face me, and lifts one of his eyebrows. High. His expression is almost like a challenge. Like I can’t *force* him to speak.

“To make this easier, I’ll go first,” I say. “I’m going to tell you something I haven’t shared with anyone—not so much a secret as a story—then you go next after I’ve broken the ice.”

His jaw tips and the other eyebrow arches, like he doesn’t believe this will work. And he might be right, since I’m laying my cards out, explaining my exact strategy.

But this is a technique I learned in nursing school—a way of disarming stubborn patients who think they have nothing to share about their symptoms when they’ve actually got important details stored in their brains.

“My first time on an airplane,” I begin, “the *only* time on an airplane before last week, was when my family moved to Abieville. The flight was ... awful. It was so awful, in fact, I swore I’d never fly again. There was a storm, and the turbulence was terrible. I threw up more than once.”

Brady’s jaw shifts. “That does sound bad.”

“And the worst part is I’d just left the only home I’d ever known. My friends, my school, my teacher. I was eight, and way too young to know how to keep in touch with people. So I got really, really sad.” I take a breath as the memory bubbles up. “I felt like a stranger who didn’t belong. I was convinced everyone else had lived here forever.”

“Yeah.” Brady nods. “We pretty much had.”

“And all the girls my age already had their best friends. Like Paige and Shannon. But at least I had Beau,” I say. “The two of us had each other.” I meet Brady’s gaze. “Then Beau found you, and I was alone again.” Brady leans toward me, only half an inch, but I feel the distance between us shrinking. “My parents said kids move all the time for reasons way worse than inheriting their grandparents’ house. They told me I was lucky to live in a beautiful home in a town with deep family roots. But I didn’t feel the roots. I felt ... rootless.” I swallow now, remembering the hollowness inside me, not to mention the slivers of guilt for being ungrateful. “Anyway, most of the people in Abieville ended up being nice. *You* were nice.”

Brady’s mouth tilts. “I was?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.” I puff out a small laugh. “But I’d already decided to leave town as soon as I graduated high school. Once I saw things

as temporary, I felt better. I liked the idea of moving on and not looking back. Ten years was my timeline. I even calculated the total days, and I'd lie awake at night doing a mental countdown." A small laugh slips out of me. "I think that's why I'm so good at math now."

"Heh." Brady's eyes crinkle.

"That's the good news. The bad news is my mom. I love her, but she keeps trying to set me up with the single men in Abieville, hoping I'll stay."

Brady frowns. "She does?"

"Ohhhh, yes." I smirk. "She is excellent at ambushing." I force out another laugh. "But I'm not here much anymore, so she has limited opportunities."

He squares his shoulders. "Maybe Kasey and Beau were onto something when they thought our moms were pushing them together."

"I don't think so," I say. "My mom's so proud of Beau's success. She loves that his job takes him all over the world. Meanwhile, she knows how much I hate to fly. I'm sure she's afraid once I move to LA, I won't exactly be dying to hop on a plane to come back. And she's not wrong. Hopefully, she and my dad will be up for visiting me."

The crease on Brady's forehead deepens. "Why go so far then?"

"Honestly? So I'd be closer to Beau and Kasey." I pause for a moment, a little breathless over how much I'm sharing. "I hate airplanes, but I love my brother," I say. "At least when I was in school, the distance was temporary. But lately, it feels more like ... forever." I take a beat, remembering I started this conversation to draw Brady out. Instead, I ended up revealing too much of myself. "Anyway." I nod, waiting for him to say something.

He folds his arms across his chest. "So none of the guys your mom ambushed you with worked out, huh?"

Hmm.

That's not the pivot into deeper conversation I was hoping for, and we're still discussing me. But at least Brady's talking, and that was the original goal.

"Definitely not." My mouth slides into a half smirk. "My dad's great and all, but my mom and I have *very* different taste in men."

I expect Brady to chuckle along with me, but he doesn't. "What about in Rochester? Anyone special there?"

"Nobody that stuck." I draw in another breath now. Admitting I've never had a serious boyfriend makes me a little queasy. "Whenever I thought a man

might have potential, I'd find out there wasn't a real spark. And I've always been so focused on what's next, I probably kept them all at arm's length anyway."

"*Them all?*" Brady arches a brow. "How many men is *them all*? Are we talking *droves* of men?"

I reach across the couch and poke his chest. "Ha ha. Very funny."

"I'm not kidding," he says. "I'm sure more guys are attracted to you than you think." He shrugs, acting casual, but there's a new charge in the air between us. "I'll bet you've left behind legions of brokenhearted men who confessed their love for you only to be rejected."

"Heh. Heh. Heh." This comes out less like a laugh now, and more like a protest. As much as I appreciate the playful side of Brady, he is way, way off. "The truth is," I say, "no one's ever been in love with me." I put a hand over my heart. "I've always had plans to move on—first from here, then from school—so it was easier not to make attachments. I never let anyone get too close." I drop my gaze, talking to my lap now. "For a while I worried there might be something wrong with me. Like I wasn't meant for deep connections." Heat crawls up my neck. "I think that's why I ended up in nursing. I like feeling needed. I want to be wanted."

Brady makes a strangled sound in the back of his throat, and I lift my chin. "I probably sound crazy."

"No, I get it," he says, the door to his feelings opening a crack. I lay a hand on his knee, and it's like a flint strike.

"Okay, Brady. It's your turn."

Chapter Eighteen



BRADY

“My turn for what?” I tack a frown on to my face, and Natalie pulls her hand away.

“Tell me something I don’t know about you,” she says.

“Nothing to tell.”

“Come on. It’s only fair.” She cocks her head. “I just told you I’m a black hole where relationships go to die, so please. Don’t be shy. Share something about you.” She quirks a brow. “Extra points if the confession is juicy.”

It’s probably a coincidence, but the moment Nat says *juicy*, she also licks her lips. And now I’m dying to kiss her. Because, apparently, that’s what I do. Natalie Slater starts talking about things I don’t want to discuss, and I put my mouth on hers to make it stop.

This is probably not healthy behavior.

We stare at each other for a moment, and I push aside the urge to take her in my arms and ... not talk. But that isn’t the kind of man I am, or the kind I want to be. So I’d better try sharing instead. “Fine,” I say. “Something you don’t already know about me?”

“Yes.” Her eyes flicker. “Preferably.”

“Okay.” I take a couple beats, scrambling for an idea. Nat just opened up to me, so I want to tell her something real, but I don’t want to let her too far in. I glance over at the stack of magazines I moved off the coffee table, and an idea comes to me.

“All right,” I begin. “Almost nobody knows this, but ... occasionally ... every once in a while ... I ...”

“You what?” She blinks.

“I ... read romance novels.” As soon as the words are out, my insides

twist like a gym towel. Of all the things I could've told her, why did I decide to pick this?

Natalie's mouth falls open. "You like romance novels?"

"Oh, man." I groan. "Pretend I didn't say anything."

"Umm, no. I don't think I can do that." She bites back a smile, and I'm assaulted by the need to explain.

"Mrs. Swanson started it," I say. "She was always leaving her books lying around the office, and this one time—when a couple of back-to-back surgeries canceled—I got bored and picked one up. It happened to be a romance. And I liked seeing how the author kept coming up with stuff to keep the couple apart. Until ... well ... until she *didn't* keep them apart anymore."

Natalie nods. "I like those parts too."

"After she found me reading that first book, Mrs. Swanson started leaving other ones out for me on purpose. Romcoms. Westerns. Historicals. Even some classics. I got hooked." I shrug. "The thing is, a lot of people don't realize how hard it is to write a good story from start to finish, but—" I cut myself off before revealing too much. "Anyway. It's just ..." Man. Why did I go down this road, and how can I get off it?

"You're a secret romantic," Natalie says. "I think that's kind of awesome."

"I don't know about romantic," I say. "I just like a good ending. Especially one with a happily ever after." I clear my throat. "Anyway. That's enough of that."

"No way, Brady Graham. You're just getting started."

"I am not."

"Are too." She glances around the lobby, as if something's just occurring to her. "But wait. If you're all about happily ever afters, how do you work in a place like this?"

I let my gaze follow the trail hers took. "Like what?"

"A place with sick, injured animals. Not to mention all the vulnerable owners. No matter how hard you work, you can't always control the outcomes. Or the way things ... end."

"You're right." I gulp. "But I didn't know that when I first took this job. I only thought about the healing part. Then, after a while, the reality started to get to me." I force out a chuckle. "I've become well acquainted with ..." My voice trails off.

“The *not* healing part?”

“Yeah.” I try to laugh again, but it comes out more like a frustrated grunt. “The *not healing* can be rough.”

“That must be incredibly hard.” Her eyes are warm as they sweep across my face. “And for the record, I’ve seen the change in you since you started working here. And I’m barely even home. So that’s saying something.”

I press my lips together. “Hmph.”

“See? That’s what you do these days. Instead of making jokes, you grunt, or you get quiet, or you just leave the room completely. But that makes sense now. You’re not mad. You’re just ... protecting yourself.”

“Hmm.” I shift on the couch.

“I rest my case,” Natalie says. “You’ve made a job out of not dealing with any real emotions.”

I run a hand over the back of my neck. “New subject, please.”

“All right.” Her smile is wry. “You want to go back to talking about how no man has ever loved me?”

My eyes flash. “You’re so wrong about that.”

“Ha! My dad and Beau don’t count,” she says.

My stomach lurches. How can Natalie not realize how tempting she is? “You’re going to find someone,” I say, and the truth of this statement is a knife in my gut. Still, I manage a half smile to match hers. “Trust me. Once you’re in LA, legions of men will be falling at your feet.”

She taps her chin. “I think I like *droves* better.”

“Then *droves* it is,” I say. But my ribs feel too tight now. I prefer *no* men falling at Natalie’s feet. Not even one. Not if it can’t be me.

In the silence that follows, her stomach rumbles. It’s just a tiny growl, but her face turns bright red.

“That’s it,” I say. “We need to get you fed.” I haul myself off of the couch, pulling my phone from my pocket. “I’ll call Patrick for an ETA. They’re taking way too long with that pizza.”

“They were so busy,” she says. “Let me check my phone again first.” When she makes a move to stand, I offer her my hand. My only goal is to help her up, but our fingers entwine, and heat shoots through my body.

Natalie gazes at me, then she takes a step closer. “Brady.” She says my name softly—on an exhale—and I’m flooded with desire. I wanted to kiss her six months ago. I want to kiss her now. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. But if she’s waiting for me to make the first move, we’ll be here

all night. Anything that happens has to be on her terms.

“What do you want?” My question sounds like it’s been dragged over sandpaper.

“I don’t know,” she says. “But I trust you.” As soon as the words are out, I reach for her, placing my hands on her waist. Then I tug her toward me, widening my stance. I leave just enough room for her to get even nearer to me if she wants to.

Apparently, she wants to.

Moving into the space I made for her, Natalie tips her head up, parting her lips. I feel like I could stare at her all day. Like I could kiss her senseless. Like I need to make her mine. But I wait. I brought us to this point. The rest is up to her now.

She lifts both her hands and lays one palm on my cheek, feathering the other along my jaw. I haven’t shaved in days, and her fingertips scrape the roughness. I reach up and drag my thumb over her knuckles, slowly, one finger at a time. Then I move my thumb over to her lower lip, drawing it along the base of her mouth. She’s so soft. Sweet and ready. I’m on fire for this woman. Nothing but bones and blood and desire. It’s going to take every ounce of strength to hold back. To control myself.

Only for her.

“Is this a mistake?” she whispers.

“Probably,” I admit. I’ve never hated three syllables more.

She moves half an inch closer, and our eyes lock.

“I don’t mess around, Nat. I’m not that kind of guy.”

“I believe you.” Her sentence ends on the softest of sighs, and she stretches her neck until her lips fall just short of brushing mine. In this moment, I’d do anything for her. In all the moments. Whatever she needs.

“Natalie.” I murmur her name. My heart is a mallet, pounding me to dust. Except it’s not actually my heart that’s pounding.

Someone’s knocking on the door.

Chapter Nineteen



NATALIE

As Brady pulls away, I gather his scrubs in my fists and cling to him. “Nooooo,” I moan, burying my face in his chest.

“Yeah, Patrick’s timing is subpar,” he growls. Then he stiffens. “Except ... that’s not Patrick.”

“Huh?” I look over my shoulder, trying to see. I can’t make out much in the dark. Plus the closed sign blocks the man’s face from us. But it also blocks us from his view. Whoever is knocking has no clue they’re interrupting anything.

Interrupting *everything*.

But that’s probably for the best. The way my pulse is racing, if Brady had actually kissed me, I might’ve stayed in his arms straight through the weekend. That would’ve gotten awkward, which is exactly what Brady and I are trying to avoid.

Sorry I missed your wedding, Kasey. I was in a permanent lip lock with your brother.

I release Brady, and he moves toward the door. I hate letting him go, but if this is someone with an injured pet, we need to help. So I turn away, pressing a hand to my face, willing my hot cheeks to stop blushing.

Brady opens the door, and the bell above the entrance chimes. “Hey, there,” he says. “What a surprise.” The scent of pepperoni wafts over me. But if Patrick’s not the one at the door with the pizza ... then who is?

I turn and see blond hair, thick eyebrows, and a cleft chin.

“Grantly?” I gasp. It’s my old middle-school crush, Grantly Bender. And he’s in the doorway, holding our jumbo pizza.

You have got to be kidding me ...

He peers into the lobby and when his eyes land on mine, they light up. “Natalie!” He bobs his head. “I ran into your mom at Antonio’s, and she told me you were in town. Patrick overheard and said he was about to deliver this to you here.” Grantly holds up the pizza box like we might not know what he’s talking about. “Your mom suggested I bring this to you instead.”

Oh, Mom. Why am I not surprised?

Grantly pushes his way inside. “So, how’ve you been, Brady?”

“I’m fantastic, Grantly. Thanks for asking.” Brady looms over him by a good two inches.

“Please. Call me Grant. I stopped going by Grantly back in college.”

“Ah,” Brady says. “Too many other Grantlys?”

“Not exactly.” Grant guffaws, eyeing me over the pizza box. “But I’m not in a hurry, so I’d love to stick around for a bit, if you all want to catch up. That is, if you’re not too busy.”

“Ooooh.” I grimace as I reach out to take the box from him. “Actually, we are. Very busy. Right, Brady?”

“Yes.” Brady nods solemnly. “Busy. Very.”

“In that case, consider me gone.” Grant splays his hands. “And I’ll just have to look forward to dancing with you at the wedding.”

My stomach plummets eleven stories in a ten-story building. “The wedding?”

“Your mother extended an invitation,” he says. “She told me Beau and Kasey would love to have more friendly faces there.” He grins. “I’m a friendly face. And your mother is so nice.”

“Oh, she’s something all right.”

“She also mentioned you’re the maid of honor. And that you’re currently single.”

“Oh, wow!” I almost drop the pizza box. “She told you all that, did she? Right there in line at Antonio’s. And then she made you deliver this to me? I am so, so sorry, Grant. My mom can be ... a lot.” I hold up the pizza, kind of wishing I could bury myself in mozzarella and marinara sauce.

“No need for apologies. It was my pleasure,” he says. “Your mother’s a delightful woman.”

“Totally. A delight.”

“So is it true?” He tilts his head. “No boyfriend for you currently?”

A part of me wishes Brady would speak up and stake a claim to me. But of course he won’t do that. He isn’t my boyfriend, and he doesn’t plan to be.

When I cut my gaze to him, he's studying his shoes.

"That's right," I say, looking back at Grant. "No boyfriend for me. Currently." I force a smile, which probably looks more like a wince.

"Well, who knows what the future has in store," he says. "No one can ever tell for sure." He beams at me, then glances at Brady. "For instance, I had no plans for this weekend, and now I'll be attending a wedding."

"Quite the turn of events," Brady says.

"Yes, quite the turn," I say. "So, it was great to see you, Grant. Too bad we can't chat more." I set the pizza box on the coffee table and grab one of his elbows to gently urge him across the lobby.

"So we'll catch up on Saturday?" he asks. "Maybe have a dance or two?"

I move him toward the open door. "Well, somebody once told me no one can ever tell for sure what the future has in store."

"I said that!" he points out gleefully.

"And it was an excellent, excellent thought." I walk him all the way out onto the sidewalk. Then I step backward into the clinic. "Thanks so much for delivering the pizza!"

"You're very wel—"

The bell jingles as Brady shuts the door.

For a moment, Grantly stands there frozen, staring at us through the glass. Then he waves, turns, and walks away. After a beat of silence, Brady blows out a breath.

"What was that?"

"*That* was Betty Slater." I cross the lobby, shaking my head. "I told you she's a master at ambushing. Now poor Grantly's going to be at the wedding, possibly thinking he has a chance with me."

Brady smirks. "And here I thought I had my hands full keeping Drake Hawkins off of you. Now I've gotta worry about Bender too?"

"You do *not* have to worry about Grantly."

"He prefers Grant," Brady says. "And he *definitely* wants to be in your legions of men."

"I think you mean *droves*," I say. "And I'm not taking on any new members."

Brady swallows, and as I trace the rise and fall of his Adam's apple, my insides heat up again. I chew my lip, and his eyes dip to my mouth. "Natalie."

"Brady." I draw in a breath and exhale. "We shouldn't do this."

"We shouldn't do what?" He takes a small step toward me.

I wave a hand between us. “This.”

He takes another small step. “Okay.”

“We need to focus on the wedding,” I say.

“Right.” Step.

“This week is all about Beau and Kasey.”

“Of course.” Step.

“And then I’ll be leaving anyway.”

“I know.” Step.

“And if we keep doing this”—I motion between the two of us again—“things could get really uncomfortable for both our families.”

Step. He tips his chin. “You’ve really given this a lot of thought.”

“Not *that* much thought.”

He lowers his head until his mouth is just above mine. “Whatever you say.”

I gulp. “I say the pizza’s getting cold.”

That’s when LuLu starts to howl.

Chapter Twenty



NATALIE

As it turns out, poor LuLu just needed to use the little chihuahuas' room. So Brady and I take her out to the side of the clinic in the patch of grass there to do her business. By the time he gets her resettled in her kennel, we both ignore the fact that we'd been about to kiss again. This is probably for the best. Our attraction to one another is real, but we both know it can't go anywhere. Brady and I are adults. We can be grown-ups about this.

Also, being a grown-up kind of sucks.

So we finish all the pizza, shoving food in our faces to avoid doing other things with our mouths. When the last slice is gone, I get my phone to let my mom know I won't be home for dinner.

"Wow!" I call to Brady over the half wall. "Apparently, I missed thirty-six messages while we were eating." I return to the lobby, scrolling through texts on three different threads.

"Popular," Brady says. "Are these messages from your legions or your droves?"

"Neither. Some are from my brother, some are from the other bridesmaids, and some are from my mother, the matchmaker."

When I look up, Brady's face crinkles with amusement. "That's slightly less impressive than droves of men."

"Hey. Be nice, or I'll text Grantly."

"I dare you to," he says. Then his phone pings too. So while he checks his own texts, I tackle the bridesmaids' thread first. Kasey sent the initial message a half hour ago while Brady and I were outside with LuLu.

KASEY: My ladies! I had sooooo much fun with you all today. Thanks for

being the most awesome bridesmaids ever. I hope nobody got too sunburned!

TESS: I barely took off my hat or cover-up.

DARBY: I wore so much sunblock I might as well have been inside.

OLIVIA: I came with a base tan from Breckenridge, so I'm good.

LETTIE: I'm a little pink, but I'll just match the flowers in our bouquets.

KASEY: Beau looks like a lobster. He's going to ruin the wedding pics.

NELLA: Call me Sebastian too. You know, from *The Little Mermaid*? At least I'll match Beau. (Sorry, Kasey!)

AMBER: Love you ladies, but I'm silencing the thread. This pregnant lady needs her sleep.

DARBY: In my OBGYN rotation, we learned exhaustion lasts well into the second trimester.

OLIVIA: Thanks for reminding us you're a med student, Darbs. Also, this is why I'm never getting pregnant. No offense, Amber. I'm sure being a mom is cool.

TESS: Really, Liv? She's trying to sleep.

OLIVIA: I'm just being honest, and Darby was low-key bragging. Also, I'm going to Sadie's early tomorrow and getting my hair dyed blonde. I'm thinking platinum.

TESS: Wow. Big step. Have you thought that through?

OLIVIA: I'm tired of no one being able to tell us apart. #loveyoutho

KASEY: I love the idea! The wedding party pictures will be more balanced with another blonde in the lineup. Did you hear that, Nat? Olivia's coming at you with some competition.

OLIVIA: #bestideaever #blondeshavemorefun #platinumhairdontcare

DARBY: Hey, Liv. 2015 called and wants its hashtags back.

OLIVIA: #hashtagsforever #nevergonnagiveyouup

KASEY: Natalie? Where are you? Why aren't you responding? Did your battery die again? We need to sew a charger to you.

TESS: I could get her one of those chains the librarians wear to keep their glasses around their necks.

OLIVIA: Because THAT would be cool.

DARBY: Don't listen to her, Tess. Your library-chic style is way cooler than Liv's hashtags.

OLIVIA: She doesn't even work at the library, Darbs.

DARBY: Duh. But she spends enough time there with her librarian crush.

TESS: I do NOT have a crush on Spencer.

LETTIE: This thread is making me dumber by the minute.

NELLA: And you're not even blonde! Sorry, Natalie. I couldn't resist the blonde joke. (I'm going to bed now too.)

KASEY: Sweet dreams, beauties!

The time stamp indicates the last text from Kasey came in just two minutes ago, so I quickly compose a message, one that hopefully won't lead to anyone asking questions about what I'm doing right now. Not because I have anything to hide, but I also don't have clear answers either. Not even for myself.

ME: I had a blast at the beach today too! My phone is charged, I just don't check it that often. See you all at Sadie's tomorrow!

There. Even if anyone does text me back, this message ought to keep them from expecting a response. I decide to tackle Beau's texts next. They came in quickly, rapid-fire questions.

BEAU: Mom said you're at the vet clinic. What's up?

BEAU: Are you with Brady?

BEAU: Don't do anything I wouldn't do.

BEAU: Kidding.

BEAU: But would it kill either one of you to text me back?

Before I can reply, Beau sends me a selfie. He's definitely lobster-fied.

BEAU: Just got a text from Brady who obviously cares about me more than you do. (Kidding again.) But seriously, I'm glad you're there to help him out tonight. See also: Send aloe vera.

ME: In case the redness doesn't fade by Saturday, you should come to the salon for a makeup trial tomorrow.

BEAU: Hilarious.

ME: Don't worry. Your future wife loves you for better or worse. Believe me. I've seen her wedding vows. I have them here with me now.

BEAU: What are the chances you'll let me see them, or at least tell me what she said?

ME: Zero. Write your own vows, lover boy!

Last but not least, I read my mother's texts. There are three of them.

MOM: I hope you enjoyed my surprise!

MOM: Grantly Bender is such a nice young man, isn't he?

MOM: Try not to stay out too late. LOL!

If she has any clue that Grantly Bender interrupted what could've been the best kiss of my life, she doesn't let on. I text her back, short and sweet. No specifics or room for discussion.

ME: I did. He is. I'm being good. Love you!

I feel a twinge of guilt not being with my family at the house tonight, but I'll have the rest of the week to see my parents and the rest of my life to be near Beau. Besides, Brady actually needs me, and I like feeling needed. So I put my phone on *do not disturb*, then set an alarm for the morning. I'm planning to stay awake all night, but if I *do* happen to fall asleep, I should still have plenty of time to get to Sadie's for our hair and makeup trial.

To be sure I don't miss the alarm, I shove my phone in the pocket of Brady's hoodie. Then I join him in the lobby. He's back on the couch, so I plop down beside him and bounce a couple of times. "Comfy."

"It does the job," he says. "But you really don't have to stay."

"I told you, I want to stay. What if LuLu goes into distress? You could use my help. And even if everything goes smoothly, you shouldn't be alone. I want to keep you company."

"Fine." He stands, moving over to one of the chairs. "I'll let you take the couch, then. In case you want to get some sleep."

"I don't need sleep. What I need is to hear more about sky elves and romance novels." I pat the cushion next to me. "Come back," I say. "Please?" He blows out a breath but does what I ask, sliding onto the opposite side of the couch. "You know, I pulled plenty of all-nighters in college," I tell him. "And during the first year of my nursing internship, I worked the overnight shifts from seven p.m. to seven a.m."

"Oof." Brady pulls a face. "That sounds like twelve hours of torture."

“Actually, it was kind of peaceful. Quiet. Maybe even a little boring.”

He leans back against the couch like he’s getting comfortable. “Tell me. I’d like to hear.” His voice is a low grumble I can practically feel in my own chest.

“Tell you what?”

“About your job. Your life. You.” He meets my gaze. “I want to picture how things will be when you’re in LA. To imagine you in action. Doing your thing. Nurse Natalie being a lady boss.”

I arch a brow. “Can I just be a boss?”

“You?” He smiles. “Absolutely.”

“I guess I do have some pretty good stories from my last rotation. I can start with the funniest. Then I’ll do the saddest. And I’ll end with the happiest because you like the happily ever afters.”

He nods. His eyes are laser beams drawing me in. “That sounds good.”

“Okay,” I begin. “This one night ...”

Chapter Twenty-One



BRADY

Natalie fell asleep with her head on my shoulder about five minutes ago. Until then, we'd been taking turns trading our best work stories. But she'd also been yawning for a good half hour. Her blinks kept getting longer. Longer. Longer. And she kept inching closer. Closer. Closer. Then, with a soft sigh, she finally drifted off. I've been sitting here since then, watching her chest rise and fall in slow, soft breaths. I'm a fan of the closeness. Of Natalie's warmth. Her quiet snores. Maybe even a bit of drool.

I shift my weight, only slightly, to see if she might stir, but Natalie doesn't move. Not even a twitch. She really must be out cold. So I take a chance and start sharing a little more than I would if she were awake.

"I don't want to work at the clinic anymore," I say into the silence. The words echo off the tile, and my heart flops like a trout on a line. "At least not forever," I add. "Don't get me wrong, I love Doc Swanson. And Mrs. Swanson is great. I know their work is important. But this ... job ... It isn't *my* passion. I don't wake up excited for what the day will bring. I'm already burned out, and I haven't started vet school. That doesn't bode well for the next forty years of employment ..."

I pause, and my pulse ticks up a notch. I've seen plenty of movies and TV shows where a character confesses something in the dark, convinced the person they're with is asleep. Then the camera pans around to the opposite side of the bed, and the person's eyes are wide open—facing away so nobody else knows they're awake.

No one except the entire viewing audience.

I glance down at Natalie. When she fell asleep, her hands were folded on her stomach, but they've slipped off now. She isn't pretending. And anyway,

I don't think faking sleep is something she'd do. If there's one thing I appreciate about Natalie, it's her honesty. She's relentless in speaking the truth, even when it hurts. I am not always that way. Which doesn't mean I walk around lying all the time. I just clam up. Fewer words means less truth. Less pain. Maybe that isn't the perfect solution. But it's better than wrecking someone's feelings, or exposing myself. Vulnerability isn't my thing.

"I tried telling my dad I wasn't fulfilled working at the clinic," I say out loud. I'm half expecting to feel silly talking to myself, but it's actually a relief to process the memory. "He just shook his head and laughed. I'm sure he didn't mean to make me feel bad. But I did. Then he said, 'Son, you can't possibly think everyone is fulfilled by their careers.' He put air quotes around fulfilled, and I felt even worse. Then he said, 'Think about it, Brady. Some jobs are pretty darn terrible. But they're also necessary for society to function. So people just put their heads down and do the hard work. And they don't worry about fulfillment.'"

I pause for a moment. "He was right. People all over the world are in jobs that don't make them happy. But they need to pay the bills and put food on the table. Support their loved ones. I'd like to provide for a family too. Make a stable living. But what I dream of doing has more highs and lows. Peaks and valleys. Climbs and falls. That rollercoaster might even be part of the thrill for me. But it's not exactly conducive to a steady income, so ..."

I let the sentence trail off.

"My point is, I know what I want, and it's not going to vet school and taking over this clinic. But people I care about are counting on me to stay the course. Shifting gears would only let them down. And even if everyone *wanted* to support me ... I can't forget the sound of my dad laughing."

An alarm vibrates on my phone, reminding me it's time to check LuLu again. I don't want to disturb Natalie, but I know she wouldn't want me to skip taking care of LuLu because she fell asleep. So I slip a hand under her and ease my shoulder out, leaning her back against the couch. Her neck tips, and her head rolls to one side, propped only by her shoulder.

If I leave her like that for long, she's going to wake up sore. So I head to the linen cabinet and grab a stack of blankets. Returning to the lobby, I pile some of them on one end of the couch. Then I gently lower Natalie onto the makeshift pillow. She sighs and nestles into the blankets. When I cover her and tuck one last blanket around her, Natalie still doesn't open her eyes.

Man, she must be exhausted.

Creeping out of the lobby, I check on Gator and Willa first. Then I do another set of tests on LuLu to be sure her stats are where they should be. The whole time, she keeps blinking up at me with her big brown eyes. She's so trusting. So pure.

Once I've got LuLu settled back in her kennel, I make some notes on her chart, then head to the office to update her digital records. Natalie's beach bag is on the chair, and the schedule of appointments is still pulled up on the computer. Thanks to her, every appointment has been pushed to next week.

I've known for years that Natalie was generous, but I never realized how much she's willing to give of herself until this week. The woman's afraid of airplanes, but she flew across the country twice within a matter of days. Why? Because that's what worked for other peoples' schedules. She traded bridesmaid dresses with Amber. Hung out with her parents and Beau all night. Supported everybody else at those ridiculous beach games. Then she dropped everything to help me and the Swansons.

And even though she's wiped out from all the travel and wedding activities, she insisted on staying here. For me.

It's kind of remarkable, really. She's remarkable. And I'm not surprised she's committed to a nursing career. I just wish she weren't committed to moving three thousand miles away.

Or that I weren't so solidly stuck here.

Shoving the chair back from the desk, I accidentally knock Natalie's bag off. She's been in and out of it all night, so the drawstring isn't cinched. When the bag lands upside down, the contents spill out. Lip gloss. Sunblock. Extra bands for her hair. A folded-up note on pink stationery.

Whoa. What's this?

My throat goes tight. I absolutely should not read this note, right? As curious as I am, I can't invade Natalie's privacy. Glancing at her again over the half wall, I see she's still asleep. Peaceful. Trusting. Blonde hair draped over her face. Something swells in my chest. The desire to protect her. To keep her safe. Which means I can't take advantage of her when she's vulnerable.

Yeah, man. Don't do it.

So I pick up the bag to repack it, and more loose stuff clatters to the floor. Her wallet. A pen. Her hair brush. I can't help smiling at these breadcrumbs of her life. I start to repack the bag, but there's still stuff inside that didn't fall out. Her new monogrammed towel from Kasey, her sundress, and ... some

papers. The words “Rental Agreement” are printed across the top.

Oh.

OH.

I’m not being nosy—at least not on purpose—but this is obviously a contract for her new apartment. For all I know, it’s a copy of a document Natalie already signed. Either way, drumbeats of guilt start banging around my torso. I almost kissed her tonight. I still want to kiss her. But this rental agreement is a concrete reminder of Natalie’s plans to leave.

If I truly cared about her, I’d let her go, right? That’s what they say. If you care about something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it was yours. If it doesn’t ... blah blah blah.

It’s in all Mrs. Swanson’s romance novels. But this isn’t a novel. This is real life. And I don’t want to be the reason Natalie starts doubting her plan.

But I want her to start doubting her plan.

Across the lobby, as if she’s channeling my thoughts, Natalie sighs. Even thinking about that kind of conversation feels like a stone in my chest. Sinking. Weighing me down. Then that sinking sensation turns into the buzzing of my phone. An incoming call from Doc Swanson.

At this hour?

Fearing the worst, I hurry to the back of the clinic, where my talking won’t disturb Natalie. “Hey, Doc,” I answer.

“Brady?” He sounds surprised. “I thought you’d be sleeping. I was just going to leave you a message with an update.”

“How’s Mrs. Swanson?”

He lets out an audible breath. “They’ve given her fluids and run a bunch of tests, but it appears she was just dangerously dehydrated. She’s stable now, and they want to keep her a few more days for observation. Just to be sure.”

“Overall, that’s good news, right?”

He clears his throat. “Yes, it is.”

“Thank God.” The knots in my gut begin to unravel. I can only imagine how scared he’s been. How scared they both were. As much as Doc Swanson can’t imagine losing his wife, I’m sure she’s equally determined not to leave him.

“My mind went to some pretty dark places,” he says. “And as a doctor, I feel responsible. I blame myself for not making sure Wendy was taking care of herself. For not taking care of her.”

My chest constricts. Of course he wants to protect the woman he loves.

That's a feeling I hope to have myself someday. "But you *did* take care of her," I say. "No one does that better than you."

"I'd be lost without her, son."

"Then you stay there with her as long as you need." The words come out thick. Molasses in my mouth. "And don't worry about us. I'm at the clinic, and my friend Natalie came to help. She pushed all your appointments until after the wedding. And I can stay here straight through the weekend if you want me to ..." My voice trails off. I don't have the words. I owe him so much.

"That's a kind offer, son," he says. "But Wendy seems to be out of the woods. So I'll stick around here the rest of the night, then check in at the clinic myself tomorrow. Probably mid-morning."

I glance at Willa, then Gator, and finally LuLu. All three are curled up, sleeping calmly. Their ribs slowly swell and deflate as they breathe. They trust us. They trust me. And I may not want to be a vet anymore, but I do want them to be safe.

"I'll be here."

"We're not holding you back from any wedding plans yet, are we? Wendy would want you to be with your family, son."

"No, I'm good, Doc." Every time he calls me son, my determination to help the man increases.

"You know, I told Wendy hiring you was the right choice," he says. "There's no one I'd trust more to take over the practice when I retire."

And there go the knots again. My guts might as well be a bucket of ropes by now. "Thank you, sir."

"By the way, your friend, Natalie—the one who pitched in today—are you talking about Natalie Slater?"

"I am."

"Well, please thank her for Wendy and me. She's leaving soon, isn't she? For California, if I recall."

"She is."

"Ah." His voice is wistful. "Lovely state. Lucky girl."

Lovely girl. Lucky state.

After ending the call, I head to my locker. My insides are one big hollow pit. So I collect my notebook and head to the exam room. The space is brightly lit, quiet, and solitary. Rolling the swivel stool up to a table, I grab a pen. Flipping through the pages, I find the bookmark where I left off

yesterday.

Time to write again.

Chapter Twenty-Two



NATALIE

I can't tell which of my senses kicks in first, but if I'm dreaming I don't want to wake up. There's the scent of pine, leather, and sea salt. A rough palm moves over my hair. A deep voice murmurs, "Morning." When I swallow, my mouth tastes like cotton. Like the cotton scrubs pressed against my cheek. I crack an eyelid and see the half wall between the office and the lobby. The view is horizontal, not vertical. At some point, I must have fallen asleep. No, I *definitely* fell asleep.

In fact, I remember closing my eyes midway through Brady's story about ... What was it? Maybe a bird he was treating that scratched his face last year? And he's got a little scar above his eyebrow now? Or maybe I dreamed all that. I'm going to have to check.

But I'm definitely not sitting up anymore.

A blanket appears in one corner of my peripheral vision, tucked around my shoulders. Soft and warm. In the other corner are navy scrubs. That's right. I know what's happening now. I'm lying on Brady's lap.

I REPEAT: YOU ARE LYING ON BRADY'S LAP!

I bolt upright, my face flaming hot. "I'm awake," I blurt, pulling a blanket up around me. More blankets are piled on the other side of the couch, and Brady sits between the pile and me. His scrubs are rumpled. His hair is wild, sticking up like he's been in a wind tunnel.

"Hey, sleepyhead," he says. His eyes are soft. No frown lines in attendance.

"How long was I ..." My voice trails off.

"Hours," he says. "You slept like a log."

"A log?" *How attractive.* "I was ... was I ... have I been ... on you all

night?”

He shakes his head. “I left you for a while. Checked on LuLu. Updated some files. Did a little”—he takes a beat—“work. And Doc Swanson called. Looks like Mrs. Swanson’s going to be all right. Once I heard that, I got tired too. I would’ve slept on one of those chairs”—he darts his eyes at the seats across from the couch—“but it was cold in here.” He nods down at me. “And you had all the blankets.”

I rub my sleep-crusted eyes. “Where did they come from?”

“Me. I put them on you,” he says. “And under your head. I didn’t let any sky elves in, in case you’re wondering.”

I let out a small chuckle. “At least I didn’t slobber all over you.”

“You did.” He shrugs. “At first. But only a little. By the time you started snoring, you’d pretty much stopped drooling.”

“Ugh.” I groan, swiping at my mouth. “I’m so sorry. I promised to keep you company, then I passed out cold while you were talking. And I drooled on you. I’m the worst.”

“Far from it,” he says. “You were just tired.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I got more sleep on this couch with you last night than I did in my bed the night before.”

“I’m glad.” He runs a hand over his face, and I glance down the hall.

“How’s LuLu doing?”

“Resting comfortably, last I checked. And her stats are stable. Doc Swanson’s coming in to relieve me at some point.”

“I’ll stay with you until then,” I tell him before he can suggest sending me away.

“When are you supposed to meet Kasey and the bridesmaids at the salon?”

“Same time you’re going to the barbers.” His eyes sweep over me, and I feel a blush coming on. “It’s going to take a miracle for the ladies at Sadie’s to make me look good today.”

“You’re already beautiful.” He says this plainly, like it’s a fact not worth debating. My flush only increases. Being beautiful in Brady’s eyes makes me happy. Probably too happy, considering there’s an expiration date hanging over us. Still, I lean toward him, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. Closer. Closer.

Until he grits his teeth. “Hold on.”

“Oh no.” I gasp. “My breath is probably terrible.”

“It’s not that.” He shakes his head. “It’s just ... we need to talk.”

My stomach lurches, like I’m driving past a car crash. I don’t want to see, but I have to look. “About what?” I ask.

He takes a beat and clears his throat. “Last night, while you were sleeping ...”

“What?”

“I saw your rental agreement.”

My stomach flip-flops. “You went through my bag?”

“I’d never do that,” he says. “But I knocked the bag over, and everything spilled out. And now I can’t stop thinking about the fact that you’re leaving for real. And I’m staying.”

“Oh.” An ache spreads through me. I haven’t even read the contract yet, but Sloane is still expecting me to take over Kasey’s room. And I researched positions all over Los Angeles. St. Joe’s is a great fit. Then there’s Kasey and Beau. It was their idea for me to move to LA in the first place. I can’t let them down. And anyway, I don’t *want* to give up on my hopes of living closer to my brother either. My future on the West Coast is wide open, and I have to follow through.

“I’ll visit,” I say softly, but my pulse begins to race, thinking about having to fly. Of course, I’d always expected to come home for the holidays, but I was also hoping my parents would visit me. Half the travel means half the airplanes.

“Sure,” he says. “Maybe a couple times a year. And I’d visit you out there too. But that’s no way to build a relationship.”

My heart jumps into my chest. “You want to build a relationship?”

“I told you I don’t mess around, Nat.” He locks eyes with me. “And I meant it.”

“I believe you.” I lean toward him again, knowing what I’m about to say is risky. But the best things usually are, and I’ve already put plenty on the line with Brady, so why stop now? “Maybe you could move.” I shrug, trying to keep my tone casual, even though this subject is so not casual. “You know. To be closer to your sister. Like I’m moving to be nearer to Beau.” Brady draws in a breath but doesn’t respond. “I’m sure there’s a vet school out there,” I continue. “And plenty of opportunities to work as a vet technician in the meantime.”

His face slides into shadow. Worse than any cloud. “I can’t.”

“You’re right. I get it,” I choke out. My throat flames hot. “It was too big

an ask. You love Abieville. This is your home. Forget I said anything.”

“That’s not the issue. Well. At least not all of it,” he says. “Yes, I always thought this place was my future. And I *do* love this town. I love the people. My family. But that’s not what’s keeping me here.”

My eyes widen. “So ... why can’t you just try California, then? As an experiment. See how it goes.”

He rakes a hand through his hair. “I have to stay here because Doc Swanson’s expecting me to take over for him. That’s been the plan since he hired me. There were other candidates, and I talked him into choosing me. He took a chance on someone who hadn’t even gone to vet school. He’s been training me. The man trusts me. He calls me *son*. I couldn’t walk away from him—from this practice—even if I wanted to.”

My nose begins to sting. “Are you saying you’d *want* to walk away if you could, though?”

“I’m saying it doesn’t matter.” A shadow whispers across Brady’s face. “Doc Swanson’s given me a lot, and I won’t let him down.”

As if Brady’s words magically summoned the man, a door at the side of the clinic opens. It’s right across from the kennels, and Dr. Swanson calls out, “Anybody home?” Before we can respond, he starts talking to the dogs. He addresses them one at a time, asking how they’re holding up. He acts like they’re talking back to him. Maybe they do talk back in their own way. Then he apologizes to the dogs for leaving in such a rush yesterday, adding that he knows he left them in good hands.

Brady’s eyes slide to mine. He tilts his head as if to say *See?*

I nod. *Yes, I do.*

It’s clear Dr. Swanson loves being a veterinarian. But if Brady doesn’t feel the same anymore, he shouldn’t be tethered to this job. Not while he’s still got options. I want to tell him he’s not being fair to himself—or to the clinic—by forcing himself to stay, but I can’t do that here. Not now.

Brady stands and sticks out his hand to help me up. His touch raises goosebumps on my arm. “I’m guessing you need to go soon,” he says. “So you can shower and change before your makeup thing.” He nods toward the street out front. “Take my truck. I’ll call Three or Ford or Beau or someone to pick me up and take me to the barber shop. Or Doc can drop me off. Either way.”

“You have options,” I say. “That’s important, Brady. Options. Don’t forget that.” It’s a pointed statement, but he doesn’t even blink.

“My keys are in the locker.” He looks down at me. “You can keep the sweatshirt.”

I wrap my arms around my middle, like I’m hugging Brady instead of his hoodie. “So I’ll see you later, then.” This isn’t a question. It’s a certainty. Kasey’s bachelorette party and Beau’s bachelor party are both happening at The Beachfront Inn tonight. Clearly our current conversation is over, but hopefully Brady and I can talk more later. I’ll make *sure* we have a chance.

“Yeah.” His arms drop to his sides. “I guess you will.”

Collecting my bag from the office, I head toward the back to get Brady’s keys. On the way, I cross paths with Dr. Swanson, who’s on his way up. “Natalie!” He reaches for my hands and gives them a squeeze. “Brady told me you’re the one who rearranged all of our appointments.”

“Happy to help,” I say. “And I’m even happier to hear Mrs. Swanson is on the mend.”

“She is. And we can’t thank you enough.” His face lights up when he smiles. I can see why Brady feels like he can’t say no to the man. “You’re a very good friend,” he says.

So I’ve been told.

“Welcome back, Doc,” Brady says, coming up behind me. His closeness sends a shiver up my spine. I can still feel the warmth of his body when I woke up in his lap. “You want to take a look at the new schedule?” he asks. “Make sure there isn’t anything we need to change?”

Dr. Swanson nods. “I probably should. Thanks again, Natalie,” he says as he moves past me.

“You’re so welcome,” I call out as the two men head back to the office.

To say my heart isn’t in a hair and makeup trial right now would be an understatement. Still, I’ve got maid of honor responsibilities, and no matter how confused Brady’s got me, I can’t let Kasey down.

Passing the kennels, I wave to all three dogs. Then I go to Brady’s locker. I find his flip-flops inside along with his board shorts. The day at the beach seems like it was a light-year ago, not just yesterday. I fish around in the pockets, but I can’t find his keys. There’s a spiral notebook propped against the top shelf of the locker. Maybe the keys are behind that.

As I move the notebook to check, a bookmark slips loose. If this notebook is for a class, or if Brady keeps records of the animals, I don’t want to be the one to lose his place. So I ruffle the pages to see if I can find where the bookmark might belong.

What I see is a scrawl of words, like the sentences were dashed down quickly. My heart skips a beat. Is this some kind of private journal? If so, what are all the quotation marks for? And the rapid paragraphing? These don't look like notes you'd take for a class, or records you'd keep on animals. No, Brady's writing dialogue.

What on earth am I holding?

Chapter Twenty-Three



BRADY

“For a minute there, I thought you’d failed me yesterday,” Beau says. We’re sitting next to each other in matching barber’s chairs inside Powell and Sons Barbers. They’ve only got two chairs in here, so the rest of the guys are out front waiting their turns. Ford and Three are slouched against the brick building, kicking stones across the street, while Hawk gets his shoes shined next to the red-and-white striped barber’s pole.

Pete Powell’s oldest son, Otto, is taking scissors to Beau’s hair. Quentin, Pete’s younger son, is handling my shave. So I can’t really respond with a straight razor scraping up my throat. “Hmm?” is all I can manage.

“You were supposed to watch out for Amber.” Beau pauses to spit some stray hair trimmings away. “And you did a great job at the beach, but then you just disappeared on everyone.” Beau splays his hands. “Poof!”

“Hmph.”

“It’s okay,” he says, like my *hmph* was an apology. And maybe it was. “Now I know you had a reason. And I’m really glad Wendy Swanson’s going to be all right.”

“Umm hmm.”

“But beyond helping them,” Beau says, “it turns out you actually did me a favor by taking my sister with you to the clinic last night.”

“Hmm?”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but Hawk had been digging his claws into Nat—no pun intended.”

“Mmph?”

“Exactly.” Beau nods like he knows exactly what *mmph* means. Too bad I don’t even know. But I’m thinking something along the lines of, *Yeah, I*

noticed. And also, *Hawk better keep his hands off Natalie.*

“So while you and Nat were MIA yesterday,” Beau continues, “the rest of us went to dinner at The Merry Cow, and that gave your cousin just enough time to swoop in on Hawk. No pun intended.”

“Hmm hmm?”

“Which cousin?”

Huh. That is actually what I meant. “Umm hmm.”

“Olivia,” Beau says. “And let me tell you, that girl can really turn on the charm when she wants to. She and Hawk split one of those Big Corral dinners, and he definitely seems focused on *her* now. Which is perfect. I like Liv. And if something were to happen with her and Hawk, that would be great. Hawk’s a good guy and he’s fantastic to work with. I just don’t think he’s the right man for my sister, you know?”

“Umm hmm.” *I absolutely do.*

“Nat’s not a big traveler, you know,” Beau continues, having his own one-way conversation with me. “She’s the main reason our family only ever took road trips for vacations. You think she barely visits Abieville now?” He scratches at his nose. “Just wait until she has to board a plane to get here. If she weren’t moving to LA, I’d probably *never* see my sister.” He guffaws, but I squirm a little. Not because warm water’s dripping off the towel into my ears, but because just last night, a part of me was hoping to tempt Natalie *not* to move.

The thing is, she wants to go to LA, and Beau wants his sister there too. I can only assume Kasey feels the same way. It’s *almost* unanimous. So I can’t mess with that.

Quentin Powell tips my head back and wraps a warm towel around my face. My mouth and nose are mostly free now, so I attempt to talk. “I’m glad you’ll all be together out there,” I say. “In California.” The words come out like a strangled mumble because of the sharp angle of my neck. And maybe from a touch of jealousy.

“Yeah, Sloane’s apartment will be ideal for Nat,” Beau says. “And the job at St. Joe’s is even better.”

“She deserves the best.” I shift in my chair enough to catch Beau’s head bobbing.

“Nat’s been talking about a big move like this ever since she left for college,” he says.

Yeah. And she planned it years before that.

I shut my eyes, but I can still picture her expression when she told me she never felt like she belonged here. And I could've argued that she didn't *let* herself make connections in the first place, but what's the point? She's moving on. I need to let her go.

And that's what I'll tell her tonight at the inn.

"Oh wow." Beau chuckles. "Would you get a load of those two?"

I slip the towel off my face, and see Beau's dad standing outside the shop with my dad. Dale Slater and Phil Graham make quite the pair. Their pants are a tartan plaid, and they're wearing matching hats, except Mr. Slater's says Father of the Groom, and my dad's reads Father of the Bride.

Studs.

I watch as they take turns high-fiving the rest of the groomsmen, sharing grins and back slaps all around. They're a couple of happy guys who are thrilled their kids are marrying one another. My mouth curves into a half smile. This is a good week, after all. And I need to remember that.

None of this is about me. Or Natalie. It can't be.

As our dads come into the shop, they hoot compliments at us, telling Beau and me we look great.

"What are you men up to?" Beau asks, nodding at their outfits.

"Golf!" they both crow at the same time.

"And we wanted to see if you two cared to join us," my dad says.

Mr. Slater splays his hands. "We had a tee time reserved for a foursome, but our lovely wives backed out. They're going to Sadie's instead. Betty says she wants a mani-pedi."

My dad shrugs. "Elaine said something about getting waxed."

Mr. Slater cocks his head. "Does she do the Brazilian?" he asks. "I've heard about it, but I'm not sure what that is. Something with the eyebrows, I think."

Oh, man. I think I've permanently lost my appetite.

"So how 'bout it, boys?" Dale cocks his head.

"You're done," Otto tells Beau, dusting his neck off with a brush. I glance at Quentin, who's busy sweeping the floor around my chair. "I'm done too, I guess." Otto did my hair first while Beau got his shave, then they switched.

Beau looks at me, one brow raised. "What do you say, my friend? Should we play a little golf with the old men?"

I glance at my dad and Mr. Slater. They're all geared up and grinning.

“We’ve got two sets of clubs,” my dad says. “You can borrow one of ours. Dale and I don’t mind sharing, do we, Dale?”

“I’ll share anything but my woman, Phil,” Mr. Slater jokes. They both bust up, slapping at their knees. I haven’t hit a golf ball in a while—and I can’t remember the last time I was at the driving range—but I’m supposed to be off work for the rest of the week, and I need to fill my extra time. Supporting Beau is my goal as best man anyway, so I’d be a fool to turn this opportunity down. If I don’t go, I’ll just be thinking about Natalie all day. And worrying about the Swansons. Not to mention LuLu. “Sounds good to me,” I say.

Better than obsessing over things I can’t control.

My dad turns to Mr. Slater. “Maybe we should ask the boys outside if they’d like to play with us.”

Mr. Slater looks at Beau. “Are they still waiting for haircuts or shaves?”

Beau shrugs. “They can skip those if they want, as far as I’m concerned. Their facial hair is their business.”

My dad nudges Mr. Slater. “I’m sure we can sweet-talk Lorraine at the clubhouse to let another threesome tag along.”

“Lorraine?” Mr. Slater winks. “She’ll be putty in our hands. You and I have still got it, Phil.”

I cough out a laugh, trying not to think too hard about what kind of *it* our dads think they still have. While they head outside to see if Ford, Three, or Hawk want to come with us, I slip my phone from my pocket. “I just need to check in real quick to be sure I haven’t missed any messages from Doc Swanson,” I tell Beau.

I’m relieved to see nothing new has come in from the doctor. But there is a new text from my sister.

KASEY: Look who I found at Sadie’s!!!

Along with the text, is a picture of her in a tall swivel chair. Sadie’s Salon is basically the female version of Powell and Sons. It’s brightly lit. Pink. Sparkly. Kasey looks like she’s got on one of those powdered wigs the founding fathers used to wear, except her curls are red. She’s got her arm slung around a brunette who’s squatting down to her level, but I spend zero time looking at them. I’m way too focused on the background. Natalie is in a chair behind Kasey. I can only see her face in the mirror, but her hair’s up in

curlers and a hunched-over lady is blotting something on the side of her face.

Beau sticks his chin over my shoulder. “Oh boy,” he says, when he sees the picture. “I forgot to give you a heads-up.” He takes a step back, and I turn to face him.

“About what?”

“You mean *who*.” He grins, nodding down at my phone. “That’s Molly Fitzpatrick there with Kasey. She’s in town for the wedding.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“What you *don’t* know is your sister’s thinking you might connect.” Beau wags his eyebrows at the word *connect*. “But I’m not supposed to tell you that.”

“Huh. She said the exact opposite to me yesterday. Something more along the lines of: *Stay away from Molly*.”

“Yeah.” He guffaws. “She’s using reverse psychology. Kind of like what you and Nat threw at us two years ago. And it worked, so Kasey’s probably hoping for a similar result.”

I furrow my brow—less of a frown and more of a *no way that’s gonna happen*. “Kasey can hope all she wants, but—”

“Hold on.” Beau throws his hands up. “You can’t tell Kasey I said anything to you. She’s already afraid I’ll open my big mouth and ruin everything.”

“Don’t worry. Your big mouth is safe with me.” I’m not planning on saying a thing to Kasey, mostly because I’ve got no interest in being hooked up with anyone. Molly’s nice enough, as I recall. She’s definitely pretty. Plus Kasey said she’s moving back to Abieville, so she’d actually be location appropriate. But I’m not the kind of guy who kisses one woman then moves on to the next. Especially if the next one might get hurt. And Molly would absolutely get hurt if she’s entertaining any ideas about me being interested in her. I can’t shift gears that quickly, and I don’t even want to.

Beau clears his throat and cocks an eyebrow. “If something *were* to happen with you and Molly, let’s just say Kasey would approve. She likes the idea of her brother being with one of her friends, especially since she’s marrying *her* brother’s best friend.”

“Ha.” My mouth slips sideways, all the way to Smirkville. “Like that evens the score, or something?”

Beau shakes his head, chuckling. “I’d like to think it’s because she’s so desperately in love with me, she wants the same thing for you. But what do I

know? Either way, you might as well *consider* dating Molly. It's not like there's a ton of options for you in this town. You're related to half the population." Beau busts out laughing like my lack of options is the funniest he's ever heard. Hahahaha. Hilarious. Almost as funny as my mom getting a Brazilian wax.

"Yeah, I don't think so," I grumble.

"Come on, man. At least dance with her at the wedding. Have a little fun."

"You already put me on Amber duty, remember?" Beau's request for me to look out for Amber is actually a relief to me now. If I'm busy getting punch for a pregnant lady, there will be no danger of Molly getting the wrong idea.

As if he can read my mind, Beau splay his hands. "I have faith in your abilities to juggle both responsibilities, my man. I'm sure you can be nice to Amber, while also giving Molly half a chance. It'll make your sister happy, which you know is my main goal in life."

"*Your* main goal, not mine." I arch an eyebrow. "And what about Molly? When nothing works out with us, and we keep running into each other ..." I run a hand through my freshly trimmed hair. "I don't need that kind of awkward. And I wouldn't want to put her through that."

"Ha!" Beau smirks. "Don't flatter yourself. You're not *that* big of a heartbreaker. And maybe something *will* work out. Stranger things have happened than two singles in their twenties finding each other attractive and falling in love."

Yeah. Like two singles in their twenties bonding over sky elves and crescent moons.

Beau glances out the shop window at the guys talking to our dads by the barber pole. "Either way, don't tell Kasey I said anything. Your sister's under the impression you won't even consider dating Molly if you know *she* thinks it's a good idea. And judging by the look on your face, I probably should've kept my big mouth shut, just like Kasey said."

"Nah." I pat Beau's shoulder. "I appreciate the warning, man."

"Ouch." He flinches under my hand. "The word *warning* makes this whole situation with Molly sound terrible."

Before I can confirm I *do* think it's a bad idea, my dad and Mr. Slater reenter the shop with Hawk following close behind. "Well, gentlemen," my dad says, "it looks like Ford and Three are still committed to their haircuts

and shaves, so they're not going to the course with us."

"What about you?" Beau asks Hawk.

"I think I'll let you spend the day with Brady and your dads," he says. "I get to see a lot more of you these days than they do."

Honestly, Hawk's insight comes as a surprise. I might've spent the past two days expecting the worst from him because I thought he was replacing me in Beau's life. Not to mention going after Natalie. But I've never been the jealous type before, and it's not a look I like on myself. So I'll try to give him the benefit of the doubt, going forward.

"Thanks, Hawk," I say. "Seriously."

My phone buzzes in my back pocket. Another selfie from my sister. By now she's got an entire beauty shop's worth of cosmetics on her face. Molly's next to her, taking up most of the rest of the shot. Natalie's at the edge of the picture, forcing a smile. Her hair is big. So are her eyelashes. She's got a lot more makeup on than usual. And yes, she's still beautiful. But she'd be just as gorgeous—probably even more so—fresh from the shower.

Whoa, man. Take it easy. That's a line of thinking that will only get you in trouble.

"Is that Kasey?" Beau asks, craning his neck. "At the salon?"

"Yeah." I hold the phone up out of his view. "But I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to see the bride."

Hawk takes the opportunity to lean over and check out the picture. "Lovely. HmMMM." The hum on his lips is a little too appreciative for him to be talking about Kasey in front of Brady. He *could* be saying Molly is lovely. But the truth is I only have eyes for Nat. I can't imagine anyone seeing anybody but her.

"While you men are playing golf," Hawk says, "I think I'll explore the town. Take some pictures of my own. I could always do a photo series about the beauty in the Adirondacks." He winks. "And not *just* the women."

The beauty in the Adirondacks. My jaw goes tight, and a fresh sliver of possessiveness slices through me. The only beauty I care about is leaving the Adirondacks. Soon.

And there's nothing I can do about it.

"So I guess it's just our foursome then," my dad says. "You boys ready to attack some balls?"

"Yes, sir," Beau says. "Just let me text Kasey so she knows what we're up to."

Mr. Slater puts a hand on my shoulder and grins. “Brady, I’ve got a bucketful of Titleists with your name on it.”

Perfect. I’ll just work out my frustrations by knocking those Titleists all the way to LA.

Chapter Twenty-Four



NATALIE

I'm at Sadie's Salon with a headful of hot rollers and a face caked in foundation when Sloane's text comes in.

SLOANE: Wyatt says she hasn't gotten the rental agreement from you yet. Just checking that you'll take care of that at some point today. Print, sign, scan, send. (Smile!)

Oof. My shoulders sink, and a tiny pit opens up in my stomach. I haven't actually gotten around to reading the rental agreement yet, let alone filling out the paperwork. But I don't want Sloane or Wyatt to think I'm irresponsible, or that I'm not committed to Kasey's old room. Because of course I am. I mean committed, not irresponsible.

ME: So sorry! Been super busy here, but I'll take care of that as soon as I can.

Subtext: I was super busy sleeping on a couch with a smoking-hot veterinary technician.

But I wasn't ignoring the rental agreement, and I didn't forget about it either. Brady even reminded me I had it with me this morning. But then I had to escape the clinic before he discovered I saw his mystery notebook. And then I had to get to the salon on time for our hair and makeup appointments.

For the record, I didn't read whatever it was Brady's been writing. I simply slipped the bookmark back inside and shoved the whole thing in the

locker. Then I remembered I'd left the keys in Brady's truck overnight. This is something everyone does here in Abieville. In fact, it's one of the things I'll miss most when I'm in LA. Besides my parents and the lake and the sound of snow crunching under my boots. Not that I've spent a bunch of time thinking about what I'll miss after I move. But here, nobody worries too much—or at all—about locking things up. Not their cars or their houses or their lockers inside vet clinics.

Oof.

My stomach churns again, at how close I came to violating Brady's privacy. That's the last thing I'd ever want to do. Make that the second-to-last thing. The *first* last thing I want to do is sit here listening to Molly Fitzpatrick gush about Brady.

She showed up at the salon fifteen minutes ago, right after she saw Kasey's check-in on Instagram. Molly insisted on taking a selfie to send to Brady. The tiny part of me that isn't nice hopes the picture isn't flattering.

Sorry, Molly.

Right now, she's directly behind me, standing next to Kasey's chair. I've got a clear view of both of them in the mirror. To the right of me, Tess is having her makeup done. Darby's on the left having her hair styled. Amber and Olivia are in back, getting facials. True to her word, Liv came in early to have her hair dyed blonde and blown out.

Across the salon, my mom and Mrs. Graham have their feet in tubs of hot water. They're both getting mani-pedis.

"What did Brady say about the pictures?" Molly asks Kasey. "Do you think he remembers me?"

Kasey huffs out a laugh. "Of course he remembers you. He just hasn't replied yet."

"So ... maybe he just hasn't seen the pictures." Molly's eyes go wide. "Text him again."

"Slow down." Kasey flashes a crooked smile. "We can't let my brother think I'm pushing you two together. That *never* works. Trust me."

"I can't believe he's been saving for vet school all these years." Molly sighs, hand over her heart. "That's beyond impressive. Don't you think it's beyond impressive?"

"It is." Kasey nods. "My mom always hoped one of us would become a doctor, and I faint at the sight of blood, so..."

The owner of the salon brings Kasey's veil over to try on with her hair

done. Kasey's practice updo is—in a word—interesting. I get the feeling the ladies at Sadie's aren't up-to-date on the latest trends in *InStyle* Magazine. But Kasey's beautiful no matter what. And with the veil on, she'll probably look more like a modern bride than a colonial statesman.

The girl doing my makeup moves between me and the mirror. Her name is Felicia. The tips of her hair are deep-fried and extra-crispy. I guess some people don't know when to quit with a straightening iron.

"Close your eyes," Felicia commands. "I need to put shadow on your lids."

And this is why I can't see Molly's reaction when Kasey says, "You know what, Mol? You should totally ask Nat about Brady."

"Natalie?" The uptick in Molly's voice makes her sound puzzled. "Why?"

"She's been stuck with him a lot the past couple days."

Oof.

"Not really stuck-stuck," I'm quick to protest. "Well, maybe a little stuck." And now they both know I've been listening to their conversation. But that's better than Kasey finding out what's really been going on with Brady and me.

The last thing she needs just days before her wedding is to be worried about what might be going on between her brother and her future sister-in-law. Brady and I already agreed this week needs to be about Beau and Kasey. Not us.

"But really, barely stuck," I add. When my cheeks start to warm, I'm grateful for the layers of foundation caked on my face.

Within seconds, Molly's breath is warm in my ear. "But you *have* been with Brady, though?" I'm overwhelmed by the smell of her perfume. Molly's a big fan of Chanel No 5.

"Yes. But I wouldn't say *a lot*."

"What would you say?"

"I'd say he's been ... very helpful. He's the best man. So you know." I shrug. "He's just doing his job."

"That's true," Kasey says. "And he was super-sweet with Amber at the beach yesterday. Looking out for her. Being attentive. Wasn't he sweet, Nat?"

"Yep." I bob my head, eyes still pressed shut.

"Hold still," Felicia tells me.

“I haven’t met Amber yet,” Molly says. Her voice sounds low and droopy. For the first time, I realize she might be sad she’s not a bridesmaid, and a wave of sympathy rises in me. “So,” Molly says. “Do you think Brady likes Amber?”

“No!” Kasey squawks. “Amber’s married and pregnant with her third kid. He was just being nice to her since her husband’s not here. He stayed back in LA with their twins.”

Molly sighs. “Ah. That is so sweet.”

“That her husband didn’t come to the wedding?” Kasey asks.

“No. That Brady was looking out for Amber.”

“Ah. Right,” Kasey says. “But then the vet Brady works for had an emergency, and he had to take off to help. Mrs. Swanson’s okay, though, isn’t she, Nat?”

“Umm hmm,” I say, trying to stay as frozen as possible. “We just had to take care of this one dog there. Her name is LuLu, and she was in a fight over the weekend. She’s still pretty fragile, which is why I offered to stick around in case Brady needed help. That’s what I’m trained to do. To assist doctors, I mean. And I know Brady isn’t officially a doctor yet, but he’s really good with the animals. In fact he likes them all so much, I think it’s hard for him to watch them suffering.”

“Done!” Felicia announces. “I’ll get Becky to take out your curlers now.”

When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is Kasey staring at me in the mirror. She’s surrounded by a waterfall of a veil now, and her eyes are big beneath a cloud of white tulle.

“Wow, Natalie,” she says, and my throat goes up in flames. The way I was just babbling about Brady probably sounded like I’m in love with him.

“I mean, I don’t *really* know how Brady feels about his job,” I rush to add. “I was just assuming that’s how he’d feel, because that’s how I’d be if I worked around pets all day. But it’s not like Brady and I had super-long conversations, or bared our souls to each other last night.” Except we totally did, and now I know things about him he hasn’t shared with anyone else. Like the sky elves. And his reading preferences. And the fact that he’s not sure he wants to be a vet.

Then there’s the notebook ...

“Your makeup is gorgeous, Nat.” Kasey grins at me, a swoop of petal-pink lipstick. “I can’t wait to see you when your curlers come out.”

Ahhh. So that’s why Kasey said wow. She wasn’t cluing in to anything

happening with Brady and me. She's excited about my maid of honor look for the wedding.

Molly coughs, and when I look up at her, my relief flies out the window. Her face crumples, like something's wrong. I hope she's just figuring out she might be wearing too much perfume.

"Umm ... So, Natalie." She bites her lip. "Are you ... into Brady?"

I raise a hand to my throat. "*Me?*"

Kasey waves Molly's question away. "Of course she's not. Nat's moving to LA right after the wedding. She's known that for months."

Oof. Kasey's still convinced I'd never hurt Brady by getting involved with him before leaving. And as her future sister-in-law, maid of honor, and friend, I want to be worthy of her trust.

"You're moving?" Molly asks, keeping her gaze trained on me.

"I am." I flash her a very convincing smile, because at least the moving part is true.

"Nat's taking over my room and living with Sloane," Kasey adds. "Meanwhile, you'll be here in Abieville, where my homebody brother will be ripe for the picking."

"Is he really a homebody, though?" I ask, because apparently I haven't learned to quit while I'm ahead.

"Have you met Brady?" Kasey's mouth quirks. "He's lived his entire life within a thirty-mile radius. The farthest he ever strays is to the airport."

"I guess you're right." The truth of this sits like a weight in the center of my stomach.

"Which reminds me—" Kasey glances at the giant pink wall clock. "Someone's got to pick up Mac, Brooke, and Daisy later."

From one chair over, Darby scoffs. "Can't Mac rent his own car? I love my brother, but he's basically the Bill Gates of the Pacific Northwest. He could probably splurge for a limo and use it as a write off for McCoy Construction."

I glance at Darby, grateful for the change in subject. That's when Elaine Graham comes shuffling toward us from across the salon. She's blowing on her freshly painted fingernails, and she's got tissue paper stuffed between her toes.

"Mac is a very humble man," Mrs. Graham says when she reaches us. "A lot like his father and grandfather. He and Brooke are just trying to raise Daisy right."

On the other side of me, Tess pipes up. “I can text Mac.” She lives in Oregon near Mac and his family, so she’s the closest to him. This is exactly what I hope will happen for Beau and me. “He’ll totally arrange his own ride in from Albany.”

My mom shuffles up next to Mrs. Graham with the same tissues between her toes. “Or the boys could pick up the McCoys after golf,” she suggests. “The course is on the way to the airport.”

“No need,” Tess says. “I’m already messaging Mac.”

I tip my head and a curler falls off. “Which boys?”

“Beau and Brady,” Kasey says, reaching up to fluff her veil. “My dad and Mr. Slater talked them into playing golf when Mom and Mrs. Slater backed out.”

“We didn’t back out, dear,” Mrs. Graham says. “We just opted to come here instead.”

“Which is kind of backing out. But it’s also not a problem.” Kasey shrugs. “I was actually thinking of heading over to the golf course after we’re done here. I want to buy some gifts for the groomsmen at the pro shop. Beau hasn’t gotten around to getting anything for them yet.” She arches an eyebrow. “As it turns out, shopping is *not* my fiancé’s strength.”

Molly’s eyes go wide. “Ooohhh. Can I go with you? We could catch up on the drive over, and then ...” Her voice trails off.

“And then ...” Kasey bobs her head, getting the drift. “You could accidentally run into Brady at the course.” She throws air quotes up around *accidentally*. “Brilliant!”

Molly looks at me. “It is brilliant, right?”

I nod, but my stomach sinks. “Totally.”

Kasey grins. “You should come with us, Nat. You can talk Molly up to Brady without me doing anything.”

“Totally brilliant!” Molly gushes.

“Brilliant,” I choke out.

Chapter Twenty-Five



BRADY

“So I know you’re all about living in Abieville,” Beau says, rapping on the wheel of the golf cart like his index fingers are drumsticks, “but between Chicago, Boston, or Atlanta, which would you choose?”

We’re on the cart path that runs alongside the fairway on our way to the next green. The pro shop and clubhouse are in the distance, out of the range of any bad drives. My dad and Mr. Slater are in the cart behind us. They stop so Mr. Slater can chip his ball out of a sand trap. My dad has already hit at least two balls into the pond across the fairway.

They’re going to be a while.

“Between Chicago, Boston, or Atlanta?” I reach up to rub my shoulder, then rotate my arm to loosen the joint. As it turns out, *not* playing golf is the condition my body prefers. I’m already stiff. Or maybe I’m sore from sitting on a couch overnight, snuggled up with Natalie.

Don’t think about Nat, man. Be here and present with Beau.

“I mean, they’re all big cities,” I say, pointing out the obvious. “But that’s about the only thing they’ve got in common. You’re talking about the Midwest, versus New England, versus the South. Pretty different places.”

“But they’re all great options, right?”

I twist my upper body to crack my back. “Sure. Yeah. Options for what?”

“Kase and I have been debating the next city for us to land.”

My chest goes tighter than my shoulder. “I thought you two were looking for a place near Kasey’s old apartment.” *Near Natalie*. “You’re planning to leave Los Angeles?”

“Not immediately.” Tap, tap, tap. Now his drumbeats hurt my head. “But within a year—yeah. Probably. Almost definitely.” He pulls the cart up to his

ball in the rough just off the path. My lie is closer to the green, thanks to a monster swing off the tee that felt like I was punishing the sport of golf.

I shift in my seat, palms on my knees. Uncomfortable in the extreme. Beau must not realize just how excited Nat is to live close to him and Kasey. He couldn't, or else he wouldn't be so casual about leaving her.

"Why?" I manage to ask.

Beau hops out of the cart, then circles around the back to pick out a club. "You know Kasey's been doing travel pieces for a while now, and taking on freelance articles too." He slides a fairway wood from the bag. "Her boss at *The Chronicle* loves the diversity for her byline. But Kasey's already got a ton of contacts in LA. And the managing editor's been hinting around that an eventual change of scenery might be good for her resume. Beef up her bio, you know? Give her more street cred, without the actual street."

"Ah." I join him at the back of the cart with a heavy heart. Like, lead-balloon-level heavy. Natalie's making this huge move and took on a new job to live near her brother. His bailing on California would be a total blindside. And not in ten years. Or even five. I need to be sure she knows about this. Not for selfish reasons.

For her.

"So." I pull out a pitching wedge. "Which city did Nat pick when you brought the subject up?" I clear my throat. "I'd put money on her saying you should move to Atlanta."

"I didn't ask her." Beau walks over to his ball. "Maybe Kasey asked, though."

"Hmm." I squint over at the green.

Beau looks back at me over his shoulder. "What makes you think she'd say Atlanta?"

"Just a guess. Maybe for the sunshine." I shrug and avert my eyes. "I don't really know her *that* well."

"Sure you do." Beau scoffs. "You've known her as long as you've known me."

"You have a point. But you're saying Nat has no idea you're thinking about a move?"

"Not yet." Beau turns to address the ball, easing into his stance, adjusting his grip. "Kase and I only just started talking about it," he says. "Nothing specific is in the works yet." He gets quiet, and I let him concentrate. Golf etiquette takes precedence in the moment. But hopefully I've already planted

the seed that Beau needs to fill Natalie in on his plan.

He takes a swing, and the ball's arc is perfect, landing squarely on the green. "Here comes a birdie." Beau pumps his fist.

"That'll be a one-putt for sure."

We walk to my ball, and I line up my shot, acting nonchalant. Shifting my weight, I take the chip and fall short of the flat of the green. My ball rolls back down the rise and to the left.

Beau lets out a groan. "Sorry, man."

That's what distraction gets me. I've got to bring the conversation back around to Beau leaving Natalie in the lurch. A bird soars overhead, its shadow swooping over the fairway. The smell of freshly cut grass stirs my resolve.

"Nat *would* want to know you're not going to stick around long-term, wouldn't she?"

"I guess." Beau meets my gaze. "But she understands Kasey and I are adventurous. She can't expect us to be stuck in one place forever, right? And Sloane is great. The apartment's in a prime location. Nat's job at St. Joe's is solid. She's gonna love LA, with or without us."

"Yeah. Sure. Of course she will." *But she lined all that up because of you.* "I just think—"

"Yoo-hoo!" a voice calls out. High-pitched and female. Definitely loud for a golf course. Beau and I jerk our focus over to the cart path and see Kasey and Natalie headed our way. They're shushing the tall brunette between them.

Molly Fitzpatrick.

"Well, well, well." Beau chuckles. "Look who the cat dragged in."

I grunt. "Which one's supposed to be the cat in this scenario?"

He splays his hands. "All of them."

Kasey and Natalie have traded out their trial makeup and hair from earlier. Now they're sporting casual ponytails and their skin is scrubbed clean. Nat is just as beautiful as always in a dress the same color of her lips. My heart stirs, remembering the taste of them. It's been half a year, but I never want to forget.

Kasey waves at us. She's lugging a large plastic bag with the golf course insignia stamped across the front. "Ah," Beau says. "My bride's been to the pro shop."

I squint at the bag. "Maybe she bought you a wedding gift."

“I think maybe she’s bringing *you* a gift.”

I glance at Beau, and he’s eyeing me sideways. “If you’re talking about Molly ...”

“Who else would I mean?” He smirks. Yeah. Well, if Kasey thinks she’s going to make a match with me and Molly, she’s going to be sorely disappointed.

As the women approach, Natalie lets her gaze drop to the grass. Molly, on the other hand, is staring straight at me. Her mouth is a crescent of teeth. And suddenly, I’m thinking about Natalie’s crescent-roll moon again. Everything seems to circle back to Nat these days.

“Hey there, men!” Kasey grins. “You remember Molly, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Beau answers for both of us. “Great to see you, Molly.”

“Likewise,” she says. “How’s it going out here?”

“I’m excellent,” Beau says, “but poor Brady isn’t exactly on his game today.” He nods at my ball at the edge of the green, and his eyes twinkle. He’s only kidding around, but he’s got no idea how off my game I actually am right now.

Or why.

“Well, I hope you don’t mind,” Kasey says, “but I took the liberty of making a few purchases at the pro shop. I was pretty sure you hadn’t gotten around to buying anything for your groomsmen yet, so I got some stuff for you. I thought you could give these out at the rehearsal dinner later.”

Beau peers into the bag, and a laugh bursts out of him. “Oh, wow. Excellent!”

“Don’t show Brady,” Kasey says. “Let’s let it be a surprise.”

Beau looks at me and hooks a thumb in Kasey’s direction. “My future wife is practically perfect.”

“Practically?” Kasey scoffs, but she’s still beaming at Beau with pure love in her eyes. “We didn’t mean to interrupt you two. We just thought we’d come out and say hi.”

Molly lets loose a string of nervous laughter, and my heart goes out to her. I don’t want to hurt the woman’s feelings, but I also don’t want to give her the wrong idea.

“Anyway.” Kasey clears her throat. Loudly. So loud it must be some kind of signal. Nat takes a small step forward and confirms my suspicions. The force of Kasey’s throat-clearing actually moved Natalie’s body.

“Molly’s going to be teaching kindergarten this year,” Nat says. “In

Abieville.”

“Well, hopefully more than just this school year.” Molly tucks a dark, springy curl behind her ear. “I’m in a tenure-track position.”

Natalie nods, shifts her weight. “Right. Tenure. I almost forgot.”

“If all goes well,” Molly says, “I’ll be offered a permanent spot on the elementary team. It could take two years, but the job security will be worth it.”

“Two years, huh?” I cast a pointed look at Kasey. “A lot can change in two years. Like where people are working. Or where they’re living. Or their jobs. Their neighbors. Et cetera.”

“I guess so.” Molly blinks, and I understand her confusion. I’m not referring to her tenure. I’m *hoping* my words might spark a conversation about Kasey and Beau’s move. But my sister’s got a one-track mind, and apparently it’s set on matchmaking.

“Our Uncle Irv is the principal of the Abieville school system,” Kasey says, “so Brady and I would be happy to put in a good word for you, Mol.” She nudges me. “Wouldn’t we, Brady?”

“Sure,” I say under my breath. “Good words. Happy to.”

“Ahem.” Kasey peers around me and makes eye contact with Natalie.

“Don’t worry, Molly.” Natalie nods. Emphatic. “The principal and the other teachers are going to love you.”

Molly puts a hand to her chest. “You really think so?”

“I’m positive.” Natalie smiles, but she’s got her arms folded across her middle, like she’s trying to hug herself. All I want is to take her in my arms. My protective instincts are kicking in, even without any danger around. Not physical danger, anyway. Maybe just emotional.

“Your future kids will love you too,” Kasey pipes up. “Those students are so lucky you’re loyal enough to come back to Abieville to teach when you could have moved anywhere.”

“Yes. Loyalty is good,” Beau chimes in, tossing a not-so-subtle wink in my direction.

Kasey nudges me again. “Beau is right. Loyalty *is* good. So is knowing what you want in life and going after it. That’s what you’re doing, isn’t it, Molly?”

“It sure is,” Molly blurts, and the five of us stand there for another moment, shuffling our feet. This is exactly what I was afraid of. Things are already awkward with Molly, and we haven’t even had a single private

conversation, let alone gone on a date.

Kasey shifts her bag from one hand to the next, like what's in it is heavy. "So, Natalie, since we're so close to Southampton, you should just borrow my car and head over to Buttons and Bows. You still need to pick up your dress at the salon today, don't you?"

Nat nods. "I do."

"But wait," Molly says. "If Natalie borrows your car, how will we get back to Abieville?" She furrows her brow in a show of concern, but I'd be willing to bet they came here with this plan already in place.

"Hmm." Kasey purses her lips, taking a beat, like she's considering options. "Beau and Brady could always give us a ride to town in Beau's car."

I cut my focus to Natalie, and she meets my gaze for just an instant, before looking away. "Then it's all settled," Nat says quickly. "I'll go to the salon. You two can get a ride home with the guys."

Kasey digs in her purse and hands Natalie her keys. "Good luck with the dress."

"Thanks." Nat blinks, darting her eyes between the rest of us. "Good luck ... here."

"We still have a couple holes left to play," I say.

"Oh, that's okay." Kasey shrugs. "Molly and I will ride along in the cart with you. We can keep them company, can't we, Molly?"

I frown. "The cart only has the one bench seat."

"Then we'll sit on your laps," Kasey says.

"I call dibs on Kasey," Beau says.

"I'm sure we can all fit," Molly says. "I'm not that big."

Before I can opt out and head straight to the clubhouse, my dad's golf cart chugs by. Mr. Slater is hanging off the side, waving at us. "I fished out my balls!" my dad hollers.

"Bah!" Molly squawks.

"It's not what you think," I mumble.

"We'd better get going," Beau says. "Can't let the old men beat us to the green."

"Hey, Nat," Kasey chirps. "Will you put this in my car?" She hands Natalie the bag from the pro shop. "We won't need these until the rehearsal dinner, and they'll just take up space on the cart."

"Of course." Natalie presses on a grin. "I'll see you all at the inn later."

As she spins on a heel and heads toward the parking lot, she drags my

heart along behind her.

Chapter Twenty-Six



A TEXT THREAD WITH THE BRIDESMAIDS: NO BRIDES ALLOWED!

NATALIE: Maid of Honor checking in. It's one hour until go-time. Where is everyone? You all ready for tonight?

NELLA: YES! Lettie and I are heading over to the inn to decorate soon.

LETTIE: Bring on the bachelorette party!

AMBER: I'm down at the beach. Going up to my room to get ready in five.

TESS: I'm at Big Mama's. So is Darby. Mac, Brooke, and Daisy just arrived!
YAY!

LETTIE: We have balloons and streamers. And instead of Pin the Tail on the Donkey, I had a Pin the Heart on Nicolas Cage made.

OLIVIA: I'm having scones at Spill the Tea with Hawk, but we're leaving soon. Who's got the feather boas and tiaras?

NATALIE: I do. Plus a satin *Bride-to-Be* sash. I'm also bringing a roll of white butcher paper and multicolored Sharpies so everyone can write a message to the bride and groom. I know that's a cheesy, low-budget keepsake, but I couldn't help myself.

AMBER: I think it's perfect! Kasey crushes on her Sharpies almost as much as Nic Cage.

DARBY: Anything else need to be done beforehand?

NELLA: Just be prepared to have all the fun!

LETTIE: For sure. There's no way Ford and Three will have Pin the Tail on anything.

TESS: I kind of hope not!

DARBY: Where is Kasey now?

NATALIE: She's with her friend, Molly. They were at the golf course with Beau and Brady when I left to pick up my dress.

AMBER: Does the dress fit? (Fingers crossed.)

NATALIE: Like a glove, thanks.

AMBER: No. Thank YOU!

NELLA: Molly Fitzpatrick?

NATALIE: That's the one. I forgot you and Lettie had afternoon appointments at the salon, so you didn't see her earlier.

LETTIE: Ho boy. Has she branded Brady with a big letter *M* on his forehead yet?

NELLA: Come on, Lettie. Molly is nice.

LETTIE: I didn't say she wasn't nice.

NATALIE: Maybe we shouldn't discuss this in a text thread.

TESS: Or at all. Anywhere. Ever.

OLIVIA: Works for me. #didanyonenoticeiamnotusinghashtags

DARBY: #irony

DARBY: BTW, what does Hawk think about your new hair color?

OLIVIA: I didn't ask.

DARBY: You've been together for hours. It never came up?

OLIVIA: Maybe we're not as superficial as you think.

AMBER: ACK!! A bird just pooped on me!!!

NELLA: Oh no! But that is supposed to be good luck.

AMBER: Tell that to my hair.

NATALIE: On that note, I'd better get ready. See you all at six.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



NATALIE

For the record, Amber's dress only fits like a glove because the fit on most people's gloves is ... snug. But after the tailor took in the bodice, there was only so much material to stretch over the rest of my curves, and the wedding is in two days. Even a miracle-working seamstress would be out of time.

So I let the ladies at Buttons and Bows gush about how the dress looks perfectly gorgeous on me. Now I'm trying it on again at home to get a dose of reality from my mother.

"Natalie!" she calls out. "Are you ready? Can I see the dress now?"

"Sure!" I yell back to her. "I'm up in my room!"

"I have to keep an eye on the brownies. Can you come to the kitchen, please?"

"Fine!" I tug up the neckline, and lift the hem of my skirt. The last thing I need is to trip on the stairs and end up in the ER. Crossing the living room, I glance up at the ceiling, and I can't help chuckling at the hole. A major life-event like a wedding wouldn't be complete in our family without a home improvement project.

Rounding the corner, I almost trip and fall anyway, because Grantly Bender is at our kitchen table, and my mother is halfway in the oven, sticking a toothpick into a pan of brownies to test for doneness.

I drop my hem. "What's going on?"

Grantly throws his hands up like he's beating me to the apology. "Your mother insisted I stay for a taste."

"Don't they smell delicious?" she asks, as if anyone might say no. The scent of Ghirardelli fills the air. "They'll be done any minute." She shuts the oven door and spins around. "Natalie!" She gasps. "You look incredible!"

She comes toward me, setting her toothpick on the counter. “We shouldn’t have been worried, dear. Your bodice isn’t *inadequate* at all!”

“Mom,” I groan, swinging my focus over to Grant. To the man’s credit, he keeps his gaze stuck to my forehead like there’s an electric fence below my neck.

“I thought that would be *good* news.” My mom splays her hands. “You’re putting out just the right amount of sizzle without being a—”

“MOM!”

She waves her hands like she’s trying to shoo me away, even though she’s the one who made me come down here in the first place. It’s clear she just wanted Grant to see me in this dress.

Little ambusher. Meddler. Menace.

“Now, don’t look at me like that, Natalie.” She frowns. “I know what you’re thinking, and you’re just plain wrong.”

“Ha.” She probably *does* know. And I’m probably not wrong.

“When I saw Grantly at Antonio’s, I happened to mention that your father and I need to revisit our wills.”

Now it’s my turn to frown. “You do?”

“Yes.” She wipes her hands down the front of her apron. “We’d like to update the terms of the trust to include Kasey and any future grandchildren we might be blessed with.”

“So I offered to stop by today for a preliminary chat about the changes,” Grantly says. He motions to my bridesmaid dress. “But I didn’t realize you all would be this deep into wedding events already.”

My mother scoffs. “We’ve been this deep since December. That’s what happens when your son waits forever to pick a date, then wants to get married six months later.”

I shake my head, biting back a sigh. “Grant is an actual lawyer with a real practice, Mom. He shouldn’t have to make house calls.”

“I don’t mind,” he hurries to say. “I meet clients in their homes all the time. Some of them even offer me fresh-baked brownies.” He sweeps his gaze back to my mom. “That’s just the beauty of a small town. And if you don’t mind my mentioning it, my brother’s a pretty good handyman, Mrs. Slater. I’m sure he’d be happy to fix that hole in your ceiling.”

“Did you hear that, Natalie?” My mother points at Grant like she’s giving my ears directions. “*This* is the kind of service you get here in Abieville,” she says. “Now, I ask you, Grantly: Can you imagine any big-time lawyer in Los

Angeles offering door-to-door service? Or having a brother who can fix ceiling holes?”

“No, I cannot.” Grant guffaws at the very idea. “Then again, my imagination isn’t that great.” When he crosses his legs, his knee bumps the underside of the table.

“Oh, Mom.” I sigh. “You’re so transparent, I can almost see your skeleton.”

“Ooh!” She throws a finger in the air. “That reminds me.” She scurries to check the calendar thumb-tacked to her pantry door. “I need to confirm the appointment for my bone density exam next week.”

“Ah.” A smirk takes over my face. “Maybe the doctor can come here to administer the test. Another house call could save you the trip. Your orthopedist might like brownies too.”

My mom glances over her shoulder. “Sue me for wanting to point out the advantages of a small town to my only daughter.”

“Maybe I *will* sue you.” I arch a brow. “Grantly, do you make house calls to California?”

“Hardy har har.” My mom reaches around to tighten the knot on her apron.

“I’m just kidding, Mom. But can I go upstairs and get changed now? Or do you need me to stick around and discuss the updated wills with you and Grantly?”

“Of course you can change. And for your information, I already told Grantly I’d call to schedule an official appointment.” She turns to face him. “But since you’re here, Grantly, and the brownies aren’t quite done, maybe you could stay and give Natalie a ride over to The Beachfront when she’s ready.” She throws her hands up to cover her mouth. “Or is that too much to ask? I’m sorry if it’s too much to ask!”

“It’s not too much,” he says. “Happy to do it. If it’s okay with—”

“That’s so nice of you to offer,” I interrupt. “But I thought I’d just borrow a car.”

“I’m sorry, Natalie.” My mother crosses the kitchen to retrieve her hot pads in the shape of jackrabbits. “But your father is over with Phil Graham setting up tents for the post-wedding brunch on Sunday.”

“What about the station wagon?”

“I’ve got Bunco with the girls on Thursdays,” she says. “That’s why I’m making my famous fudge brownies. I bring a dessert like this with me every

week.” Her mouth curves down—a slope of sadness—and my stomach sinks.

I almost wish she would’ve added something like, “You would know this if you were home more often, Natalie. Or if you called more often. Or if you were basically more in touch.” In that case, I could get defensive, which—apparently—comes easier to me. Instead, she stands there quietly, both arms dangling at her sides. My heart hurts for her. And is a little mad at me.

“The brownies smell delicious,” I say softly. “And Bunko sounds like fun.”

“It really is,” she says. “I can only hope the brownies are delicious.”

“So.” The last thing I want to do is get a ride to the inn from Grant, but I’m out of options that don’t make me even more of a self-centered princess. “If it’s all right with you, Grantly, I’d very much appreciate a ride.”

“More than all right.” He uncrosses his legs and winks. “And remember. It’s Grant now.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



A TEXT THREAD WITH THE GROOMSMEN: NO GROOMS ALLOWED!

BRADY: Hello, men. T-minus thirty minutes and counting. The bachelor party is coming at us in a half hour. You all good to go?

MAC: Can't wait. I've got some catching up to do.

FORD: MAC! You made it!

MAC: Indeed we did.

THREE: How's the fam?

MAC: Brooke's getting all dolled up for the bachelorette party. Daisy's staying here with my mom and Big Mama. They're watching *Father of the Bride*, which is funny since Daisy's never getting married. Ever.

FORD: Isn't she a little young for you to be worried about that?

MAC: I'm preparing for the inevitable.

HAWK: Hello, Mac. I'm really looking forward to meeting you.

MAC: Me too, whoever you are.

HAWK: Your sister has told me a lot about you.

MAC: I have three sisters, so ...

HAWK: Olivia. We've been spending quite a bit of time together.

MAC: I still don't know who this is, but Liv would've been my first guess. Has she gotten you to propose to her yet?

HAWK: Sorry. This is Drake Hawkins. And I am currently not engaged to any of your three sisters.

MAC: Oh, hey, Drake. You work with Beau, right? Congrats on making the groomsman cut with all the cousins.

HAWK: Yes. I feel tremendously special. And please, call me Hawk.

MAC: I can't tell if you're being sarcastic, but I like it either way.

THREE: Back on topic—I'm bringing poker chips and cards for later. I've

also got a dart board and darts. I'm looking for suggestions of faces to put on the bullseye. Any ex-boyfriends of Kasey's?

BRADY: Kasey's only ever been in love with Beau.

THREE: Tough crowd for sarcasm.

MAC: Are we definitely wearing those Hawaiian shirts?

BRADY: If you'd feel better in construction-worker chic, we can make an exception for you, Mac.

MAC: Ha ha. No. I'm in for the tropical look. I even packed shorts and flip-flops.

FORD: Our cousin. Getting nutty.

THREE: I got hibiscus leis for all the men. Had to order them special.

MAC: Flower necklaces? Extra tropical.

HAWK: A surprising number of men around the world wear flowers and jewelry in their rituals and ceremonies.

FORD: Thanks, Dora the Explorer!

HAWK: I was just saying. In case anyone is uncomfortable wearing a lei.

FORD: I was being sarcastic. Thought that was the vibe.

BRADY: Anyway, boys, I'm sure we'll all be plenty comfortable tonight. This is about Beau and having fun.

THREE: And flower necklaces.

MAC: Daisy will be jealous.

BRADY: See you all at six.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



NATALIE

As Grant eases his beige sedan into the parking lot at The Beachfront Inn, I complete a mental checklist to be sure I've got everything I need for the night. In my lap is the bag I brought to the beach which still has everything in it from before—extra lip gloss, spare hair brush and ties, phone charger—although I did take out the monogrammed towel and sundress. Oh, and the rental agreement is sitting on top now.

The document is so long and detailed, I still haven't had time to read it yet, and a twinge of guilt nags at me.

You'll get to it, Nat. Soon.

In the large duffle bag at my feet, I have the tiaras and boas for the bridesmaids, plus butcher paper, Sharpies, two packs of mints, and gum. The breath-freshening items are *not* because I'm expecting to somehow end up in a dark corner enjoying a lip lock with Brady Graham. But have I mentioned lately that I sometimes sabotage myself? Yeah. Self-sabotage. It's a whole thing, and I'm super good at it.

"Well, here we are." Grant puts his car in park, quickly returning both hands to the steering wheel in their spots at ten and two.

"Thanks so much for the ride." I glance at the Tupperware full of brownies in his backseat. "Sorry for the inconvenience, but at least you got some brownies out of it."

"It was my pleasure," he says. When he starts to lean toward me, my stomach lurches. The last thing I need is Grantly Bender going in for a kiss. So I suck in a breath, preparing to reject him as kindly as I can, but his face comes nowhere near mine. Apparently, he's just trying to get a view of the pub from the passenger side window.

“Looks pretty crowded for a Thursday,” he says.

I exhale in relief, then follow his gaze, noting a blur of movement behind the pub’s tinted glass. “Is this place mostly empty on Thursdays?”

“Hard to tell at this hour.” Grant straightens, and his shoulders keep going right up to his ears. “But believe me, by tomorrow night—eight o’clock—the pub will be hoppin’.”

I flash back to last weekend in LA, at a much later hour than eight, waiting in line to get into a club Sloane kept raving about. My bare legs were covered in goosebumps, and not in a good way. We got in eventually, but I barely had enough cash for the cover charge. So right now, a place that’s already hoppin’ at this time on the weekend—and a lot less expensive—sounds pretty nice to me.

“Anyway ...” Grant drags out the word. His smile is small and shy. I hope *he’s* not hoping something might be happening between us. That would *actually* be the last thing I need. But Grant’s a nice guy, and he did me a favor. Plus I know the sinking sensation of feeling left out. “So I can’t invite you to the bachelor party,” I say, “because I’m not in charge of the groomsmen.” I nod at my duffle bag. “And I don’t think I have enough tiaras and boas for you to wear to the bachelorette party, but ...”

“It’s all right. I understand.” He leans back in his seat. “And please don’t worry about letting me down easy, Nat. I already figured out you’re not interested.”

“What?” A hand flies to my throat. “Me? Worried?”

“Yeah.” He puffs out a laugh, glances at the brownies. “Your mom got this crazy idea in her head that I might be able to convince you to stick around town, but you are clearly not on the same page. You’re not even in the same *book*, and trying to win someone over who doesn’t want to be won isn’t exactly my idea of a good case to take on.” He shrugs. “I do enough arguing of lost causes in court.”

“Oh.” I wrinkle my nose. “You know, my mom’s not *totally* crazy. I used to have a pretty big crush on you in middle school.” *Great, Nat. Telling a guy you liked him more than a decade ago isn’t awkward at all.*

He chuckles. “I might’ve gotten that memo. But people change, Natalie. All the time. Over time. I totally get it.”

“You’re right.”

Some people do change.

“My point is you’re off the hook.” He smiles at me. “I won’t hold you to

feelings you had when you were a kid.”

He meets my gaze, and his eyes go soft. This sweet guy isn't going to try to kiss me, or date me, or anything, which is—of course—a massive relief. So why do I feel a wave of sadness and a tug behind my ribs? Maybe because a small part of me—a very small, sneaky part—doesn't want my mom to be the only one fighting to keep me in Abieville. Still, Grantly Bender isn't the man I wish were fighting for me. I left *that* one back at the golf course with Molly Fitzgerald on his lap.

“Thanks for being so great, Grant.” I reach for my duffle bag. “And for the record, our group doesn't have this place reserved tonight. It's completely open to the public, and this is *your* town. Your local pub. So if you want to come in, please do.”

I eke out a laugh, wondering what Brady would think if I walked in with Grantly Bender tonight. Not that I'd ever use someone to make someone else jealous. I wouldn't do that to Grant or to Brady. Those kinds of games just risk more drama, which Brady and I already agreed is the last thing we want to bring to this wedding week. Our situation is complicated enough as it is without—

Rap rap rap.

Outside the car, someone taps on the driver's side window. All I can see is a torso in a Hawaiian shirt. Moments later, Drake Hawkins bends down, flashing his toothpaste-commercial grin at us.

“Hello!” he calls out. From behind him, Olivia appears. Her new platinum hair spills over his shoulder. She smiles and waves, just as Brady's truck pulls into the spot on my side of Grantly's car. He meets my gaze through two layers of glass, then Molly Fitzgerald pokes her head into view.

And this, as it turns out, is the *VERY LAST* thing I need.

Chapter Thirty



BRADY

So, Natalie showed up with Grantly Bender. And Hawk's here with Olivia. Interesting. At least Hawk's probably not planning to swoop in on Nat anymore. The thing is, I can't blame *any* man for being interested in her. Not Grantly. Not Hawk. Not after I've been simmering on the idea for the past two years.

What's weird is the wrench in my guts isn't from jealousy. I'm more worried about what Nat's going to think about Molly being in my truck.

I'll give you one guess how that happened. Or *who* that happened.

After we finished up our round of golf—with Molly more or less sitting on top of me in the cart—Kasey asked me to give Molly a ride to the party tonight because she and Beau needed to stop by Murphy's Jewelers on the way to pick up their wedding bands.

I offered to help them out by going to Murphy's instead so they could head straight to The Beachfront with Molly. I pointed out they could spend more time with Molly this way. Keep catching up and all that. Kasey told me I was being silly.

I told her I didn't mind.

Then Kasey shut things down by saying she wanted to personally ensure the rings were perfect, which I clearly couldn't do. In the end, my sister wouldn't take *yes* for an answer. And that's how I ended up being Molly Fitzgerald's chauffeur.

"I'm so excited for the party," Molly gushes. She smells like perfume and hairspray. I clench my teeth.

"Yeah."

"Are you okay?" she asks, her smile faltering.

“I’m fine. I just—”

“I get it,” she interrupts. “Here I’m going on and on about being excited, and you’re probably a little bit sad your little sister’s getting married. Then she’ll be leaving with Beau again. First for the honeymoon. Then for the rest of their lives. End of an era and all that, huh?”

Molly blinks, and a heaviness shifts in my chest. It’s a lump I’ve been trying to ignore, but she’s not completely wrong. I *am* sad about the end of something ... it’s just not with Kasey or Beau. They’re only at the starting line. I’m thrilled for them. And I want to be at the beginning too. Instead I have to wrap my brain around letting go of that possibility with Natalie. That’s the end I’m sad about.

“Hmph.”

Molly shrugs. “Things change. Life goes on. We just have to make the best of it.”

“Yep. The best.” *That’s me.* Except right now, I wish I weren’t the best man. I wish I could be the worst—a man who’d selfishly go after exactly what he wants without worrying about hurting anyone else.

“So.” Molly folds her hands in her lap. When she doesn’t make any moves to get out of the truck, I snap back to attention. She’s probably waiting for me. Just because I have zero interest in anything beyond delivering her safely to this party, doesn’t mean I should forget my manners. I make a move to get out of my truck, but at the same time, Natalie opens the passenger side of Grantly’s car. When our doors almost collide, she pulls hers shut again, so I can hop out. Meanwhile, Grantly, Hawk, and Olivia are busy talking on the other side of the sedan.

Once out of my truck, I shut the door and open Natalie’s for her. I’m standing right here, so it just makes sense, right?

Can’t forget my manners.

The seats in Grant’s car are low, so I reach down to help Natalie up. This time I think I’m prepared for the shock of her touch, but the strength is still surprising. And I don’t mind the surprise. Not a bit.

“Nice shirt,” she says.

I glance at the bright Hawaiian print in fuchsia and green. Pointed collar. Short sleeves. Buttons all the way down. “Not my usual getup.”

“Change looks good on you,” she says. When she turns to retrieve her bags, I can’t help appreciating her curves. Her dress reminds me of champagne. Bright. Sparkly. Intoxicating. The memory of holding her makes

my pulse skitter. I'm still staring as she straightens with her bags. "I see you have a passenger." She peers around me into my truck.

My skittering pulse grinds to a halt. I've left Molly in there. Man, I must look like a jerk to both of them now. "I didn't—"

"It's okay." Natalie cuts me off. "I'll see you two inside."

By now, Hawk and Olivia have started across the parking lot, and Grantly moves around the car to post up on the other side of Natalie. When I finally let Molly out of the truck, my throat feels hotter than sheets fresh from the dryer.

As we follow them to the pub, Molly jerks her chin up ahead of us. "Looks like Natalie and Olivia have admirers tonight." Her heels click on the asphalt. "Perks of being in the wedding party." She sighs. "Guys always want to hook up with the bridesmaids. Especially the maid of honor. It's like a universal fantasy or something."

My chest constricts, and one word pounds along with my heart: *no, no, no, no, no, no.*

"At least that's what always happens in the movies," Molly says.

"Yeah," I grunt.

Movies. Books. Not real life.

"Can I tell you a secret?" she asks.

Please don't, I think. But Molly plows forward. "I'm kind of disappointed Kasey didn't ask me to be in her wedding party."

"Hmm."

"I mean, I get it. She's already got five cousins. And of course she's going to include her best friend from LA." Molly sighs so loud, it's more like a groan. A pool of sympathy sloshes between my lungs.

"Kasey likes you," I say. *She likes you so much she's throwing you at me.*

"Oh, I know." Molly shrugs. "We've been friends for most of our lives now, and Kasey's loyal like that. She won't forget me. But compared to Amber, I'm old news. And now Natalie's going to be living out there too. She and Kasey and Beau will have their own fabulous little life in LA. They're the restless ones, always looking for something new. Something different."

"Hmph." That spark between my lungs is becoming a knife stabbing my heart.

"As for me, I don't want anything besides what we've already got here in Abieville, which is why I'm so happy to be coming home." She sweeps her

hand out along the horizon—the docks, the lake, the trees. “I won’t apologize for having simple needs,” she adds. “I think that just makes life easier, you know? And I want someone who wants that too.” She drops her arm at her side. “For people like us, this town is more than enough. We’re the lucky ones, don’t you think?”

We. Us. Enough. Lucky.

I try to agree with her, but my mouth is full of stones. As we climb the steps up to the inn, I dig around, wishing I felt something for Molly—even a flicker—but my brain is as empty as my heart. And that inner voice is back now:

No, no, no, no, no.

When we reach the door to the pub, I hold it wide so Molly doesn’t brush up against me. Inside, the space holds the faint scent of beer. The hum of voices mixes with the DJ’s music. The dance floor is already half full of people I recognize. Some of them aren’t even my relatives. In the middle, two of the McCoy triplets are teaching Amber the electric slide.

“I love this song!” Molly chirps.

“Good,” I say.

She eyes me for a long moment, then something scuttles across her irises. An understanding of my limitations. Maybe. Hopefully. Finally. “So, thanks for the ride,” she says.

I duck my head. “Good.”

She pats me on the shoulder. “Try to have fun tonight, okay?”

“Good,” I say.

Good? Why do I keep saying good?

She offers me one last shrug before skipping over to join the women on the dance floor. Across the pub, Olivia, Hawk, and Grant have descended upon the bar. Ford and Three are throwing darts in the back. Up front, Lettie and Nella drape themselves in feathers and crowns. The space is one big throb of excitement. But as I scan the room, all I see is Natalie.

Natalie.

Natalie.

Chapter Thirty-One



NATALIE

It wasn't hard to lose Olivia, Hawk, and Grant. All I had to do was point out that Hudson was bartending, and the three of them took off for drinks. Hudson's the one Brady said was a good guy. The one employee he thought might've quit. So he'll probably be glad to see him when he gets inside. That is unless he's planning to stay out in the parking lot with Molly.

I square my shoulders and claim an empty table to set my bags down. Then I adjust my tiara so the combs won't dig any deeper into my skull. A loose bun seemed like a good choice when I was getting ready. Now I'm not sure my hair will hold up for the rest of the night.

"Hey," someone says behind me. I'm facing away, but I already know it's Brady. I can tell from the timbre of his voice. From the way my whole body erupts in goosebumps. Before turning around, I slip Kasey's bride-to-be sash from the duffle bag. I hold it to me like it's a shield or a buffer. As if a strip of satin could stop my heart from pounding.

"Hey, yourself." I swallow hard.

Brady's eyes dart down to the sash. "Kasey and Beau should be here any minute."

"She just texted me." I bob my head. All normal. Everything's good. Nothing to see here. "She said they love their rings."

"Good," he mumbles. Or maybe it only seems like a mumble because the music makes it hard to hear.

"I know we're sharing space tonight." I raise the volume of my voice. "So we should probably divide the room up. Bridesmaids on one side, groomsmen on the other."

He stuffs his hands in his pockets. "Good."

I glance down at my beach bag and the duffle on the table. “I guess I already picked our side.” I lift my chin and try on a half smile, while Brady stands there shuffling his feet. Ugh. This is awkward. He’s probably feeling bad about Molly. I’m definitely feeling bad about Grant. And neither of us needs to feel bad. I just want to let us both off the hook.

“It’s okay that you came here with Molly,” I begin. “And as for Grant, I —”

“Bringing Molly wasn’t my idea.” He frowns. “It was all Kasey.”

“I realize that.” My mouth goes crooked. “But the fact that your sister is dying for you to be with someone other than me doesn’t feel ... awesome.”

“Yeah.” His mouth slips sideways too. “Neither does the fact that your mom keeps setting you up with every other guy in town.”

A laugh puffs out of me. “They both mean well.”

“Yeah, they do.”

“I’ve already told my mom she’s wasting her time.”

He hikes up one of his brows. “You did?”

“A lot.” I chuckle under my breath. “But that doesn’t seem to stop her. She’ll still be trying when I’m on the plane to LAX.” My breath hitches at the thought of flying across the country again. I reach out to steady myself on the table. This is the part of my move I’ve managed to bury. One of the parts. The other is leaving the man in front of me.

Brady’s brow furrows. “You okay?”

I nod, gathering my bottom lip between my teeth. “It’s just ... flying.”

“Yeah.” His eyes dip to my mouth. “I remember.”

Out of nowhere, Olivia converges on us, draping an arm over both our shoulders. “I came over so I could get my tiara and boa.” She’s out of breath, and her eyes twinkle. “But now that I’m here, I think you two need to go somewhere to make out. Just get it over with already.”

Brady ducks out from under Olivia’s arm, while I glance around to see if anybody else heard her. “What are you talking about?” I sputter, possibly the lamest protest in the history of protests.

“Come on!” Olivia squawks. “Everyone else in this town might be totally blind, but I see right through you two. I have from the minute you showed up at Buttons and Bows together. The chemistry was ... palpable.”

When Brady scoffs, Olivia rounds on him, laying her palms on either side of his face. “Oh, my dear, smooshy cousin. Your feelings for Natalie are so obvious!” She squeezes his cheeks until he frowns. When he just stays

frozen, not saying anything, I decide to step in.

“This week is about Kasey and Beau,” I say. This is not a denial or an admission. I just want to be sure the focus stays where it should be tonight. Squarely on the bride and groom.

“I know.” Olivia drops her arms and turns to me. “But that doesn’t mean you two don’t deserve a little fun too. Look at me and Hawk. We’ve been having a great time together, and it’s not hurting Kasey or Beau.”

“Liv.” Brady runs a hand along the back of his neck. “You do realize you can’t expect a future with that guy, right?”

“And that’s why he’s the perfect choice!” Olivia beams at us. “Drake Hawkins is a globetrotting photographer. I’m an ambassador in Breckenridge. But right *now*, we’re both in Abieville, so we might as well have a good time while we can. It’s just a little harmless flirtation. You two remember flirting, don’t you?” A crease forms in the middle of her forehead. “On second thought, maybe neither one of you is big on flirting. But either way, Hawk has some entertaining stories to tell. So do I, if I can say that about myself. Hawk knows nothing can actually happen between us in the long run, so there’s no risk of hurt feelings. No commitment. And since those are pretty much my two life goals, it’s a win-win for me.” She pauses for a breath. Then she shrugs. “Anyway, whether you two decide to kiss or not, this princess needs her crown.”

She spins around to dig in the duffle bag, and I slowly turn toward Brady. The music overhead shifts from country line dancing to seventies disco. When his gaze meets mine, his eyes roam my face. It’s like he’s finding answers to all the world’s mysteries. I suck in a breath, and the muscles along his neck tic, then—

“All right!” Olivia turns back to us, feathers flying. “I’m going to set up Pin the Heart on Nicolas Cage.” She places her tiara on, askew. “Once Kasey gets here, we can gather the bridesmaids and *really* get this party started.” Olivia wags her eyebrows. “Until then, good luck, you two.”

As the ambassador of Breckenridge floats away, the feather boa trailing behind her, Brady’s eyes lock on mine again. My pulse picks up, and his lips part.

“We should talk,” we both say at the same time.

Brady squints, his jaw shifting. “Ladies first.”

“Hold on.” I check the bar and see Hudson handing over drinks to Hawk and Grant. Molly joins them, leaning in close. So many people around. Too

many people. “Not here.” I grab Brady’s hand. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Something glimmers behind his eyes, and he allows me to drag him away. I lead him past the entrance to the pub, down the hallway toward the other side of The Beachfront. At the end of the hall is a door to the main lobby. If we go through there, we run the risk of being spotted by the concierge at the front desk, or by guests staying at the inn, or anyone entering the pub from the lobby side. But standing in the hallway right next to the pub’s bathrooms isn’t much better.

I glance at the unmarked door across from the bathrooms. It might as well be screaming my name. I have no idea what’s on the other side, but it’s worth a shot, so I reach for the knob.

“Unlocked,” I whisper. When I glance over my shoulder, Brady gives me one quick nod. So I push the door open—just a crack—and the sliver of space is dark. We slip inside, and he shuts the door behind us.

“It’s a storage room,” I say, taking in the cold, dusty space. Three small windows near the ceiling look more like portholes. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I see spare furniture takes up half the room. The rest is mostly folding chairs and tables. Along the walls are racks of hotel accessories. Lamps. Pictures. Artificial plants. When I turn to feel for a light switch on the wall, my palm finds Brady’s chest instead.

“Oh. Sorry.” His body is large and solid and warm.

“Don’t be.” He lays his hand over mine, and a feeling of safety washes over me. “I’ve been doing some thinking since this morning.” His voice is deep and gravelly, like he’s just swallowed a handful of rocks.

“I have too,” I say. “And this is still a bad idea, right? *We’re* a bad idea.”

A low rumble sounds in the back of his throat. Half grunt. Half growl. “Define bad.”

“Bad is wanting to get to know someone better when you live three thousand miles apart,” I say. “Bad is thinking about a long-distance relationship when you don’t have a relationship in the first place. Bad is nursing shifts on nights, weekends, and holidays. Bad is no time to travel across the country.” My shoulders deflate. “Not even if we wanted to.”

Brady takes a beat. “You mean even if you weren’t scared?”

“Yes. I am scared.” My heart rattles like loose change in a jar. “And I really, really hate flying. But I *would* get on a plane if it meant being able to see you. Still, how often could we manage that? I’m just trying to be realistic here.”

He reaches for my hands. “Kasey and Beau did it.”

“Kasey and Beau were already in love.” My voice catches. “We aren’t in love, Brady.” My insides ache with the realization that I *could* love this man if we had more time. If I hadn’t committed to Sloane and Wyatt or found a job at St. Joe’s. If it weren’t for my brother and Kasey expecting me to move. My breath hitches. “You know how much it means to me to finally live near Beau again.”

“Yeah.” Brady sucks in air, holds it for a moment, then exhales. “I know.”

My pulse starts to race with what I’m about to admit, but leaving thoughts unspoken—the doubts and regret afterward—would be worse than rejection. “Things would be different if ... if you’d come to California.”

Brady drops my hands.

Okay. I take it back. Rejection is way worse than doubt. Why didn’t you keep your mouth shut, Natalie?

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up again.” My heart is clamping down, and I scramble over my words. “Everybody knows you don’t want to leave this town.” I blink back tears, grateful the room is dark.

“I can’t leave,” Brady grumbles. “There’s a difference.”

We’re both quiet for a moment, and I hear his breaths coming fast. I’ve not only embarrassed myself, I’ve upset him. I’m creating a worst-case scenario as I stand here. And I’ve got to make up for it. Now.

“This isn’t your fault,” I say. “And I shouldn’t have kissed you way back when.”

“It wasn’t *way back when*. It was only six months ago. And I *wanted* you to kiss me.”

“But I was being stupid. And short-sighted. I’m moving, and you’re staying here. You’ll find someone incredible. Molly is—”

“No.” He cuts me off. “I don’t want Molly.”

“Okay. Someone incredible who *isn’t* Molly.”

“No other women,” he rasps. “Not for the past two years. I haven’t been with anyone else. I only thought about you. Just you.” He shakes his head. “Always you.”

My chin is trembling, and I bite back a sob. “You never told me that.”

“I’m telling you now.” He lets out a long, low groan, then his hands are at my waist. And as he gathers me in his arms, I go to him willingly. Together, we stumble backward until he’s pressed against the wall, and I’m pressed

against him. Then with an aching slowness, he bends his neck, bringing his mouth within inches of mine.

“I want to kiss you now,” he says. “I’ve never wanted anything more.” His voice is an earthquake. A landslide. A shifting of the ground. I nod at his unspoken question.

“Yes,” I whisper. “Yes.”

Chapter Thirty-Two



BRADY

She said yes.

Natalie *wants* me to kiss her. This is my chance, and I'm going to take it. No matter the risk if she walks away. Despite the pain when it ends. At least I'll have this moment. In the darkness, my hands find the nape of her neck, and I slide my fingers up to thread through her hair. Tipping her face, I lower mine, stopping just short of brushing her mouth. When Natalie trembles, I taste her breath, coming now in quick, cinnamon bursts. I'm feeling everything at once. Warmth. Desire. Tenderness. A flood of emotions I've only ever imagined.

Until our lips meet.

The touch is soft at first and almost unbearably sweet. Then Natalie leans against me, increasing the pressure, matching my need. My heart is thrashing in my chest now, a wild animal in a cage, but I stay in control. This is all for Natalie. *I* am all for her. Surrendering to this woman is a gift.

We pause for air—just a sip—then our mouths meet again. This isn't like our first kiss months ago when she was saying goodbye. Or three days later when I was desperate for her to stay. This is a moment I've dreamed about for years. A closeness I've wanted my whole life. This week with Natalie has been the stuff of all the best love stories. She's shown me a side of her I didn't know to look for. A connection I've never felt before.

And I don't want to let her go.

Don't think about being without her.

Dropping one arm, I find her waist, drawing her even closer to me. And that's when I hear the voices on the other side of the door. Only a thin wall between us. My sister is out there, talking to Beau.

“Nat’s not in the restroom,” she says.

“Brady’s not either.”

Great. They’re looking for us. Natalie freezes, hearing them too. As I tear my lips from hers, it feels like I’m ripping off a limb. Like I may never be whole again. An amputation way sooner than necessary.

“Liv told me she talked to them,” Kasey says. “So I know they’re both around here somewhere, but they’re not in the pub.”

“Mac and Brooke came in from the lobby,” Beau says. “But they didn’t see either of them.”

Wonderful. My cousin finally makes an appearance only to cut off half the search options. *Thanks, Mac. Can’t wait to see you once I escape this room.*

“Come on,” a third person says, and my jaw snaps shut. Bear-trap tight. “We don’t need them. Let’s just go back to the party.” It’s Molly. *Oh, man.* I just wish everyone would go away, so Natalie and I can slip out of here unnoticed. To be clear, I’m not ashamed of kissing Natalie. But this week is supposed to be about the wedding. Plus Kasey wants me with Molly. Not to mention Beau has no idea I’m falling for his sister.

That I’ve *already* fallen.

I’m dying to tell Nat what Beau shared with me today—that he and Kasey aren’t expecting to stay in LA. But he asked me not to say anything before he and Kasey have a solid plan. And he’d have no reason to think I’d want to tell Nat anyway. Beau assumes I only think of her as my best friend’s little sister.

And what if I did tell Natalie—against Beau’s wishes—and she decided *not* to go to California? She’d be leaving Kasey’s roommate hanging. Not to mention the hospital. Aaron whatever-his-name-is met her already. I respect Natalie to my core, and I can’t risk derailing her good intentions, or mess with the people who are counting on her.

Would she really abandon her plans if living near Beau was only going to be temporary? If I could just have a conversation about it with her, I’d be able to find out. But I don’t want her to think I’m trying to convince her not to go. And I don’t want her to stay here if it’s her second choice.

Natalie should choose where she wants to be on her own. Yes, she deserves all the facts. But I can’t be her consolation prize. And I don’t want her to resent me. To avoid being the cause of any conflict between her, Beau, and Kasey, I need to convince one of them to tell her the truth.

Right after I get out of this room.

Natalie takes a step back, and in the darkness, I hear a rustling. “Don’t move,” I say as quietly as I can. “They’ll go away eventually.”

“I don’t want to wait for eventually,” she whispers. “Just trust me.” As she heads to the door, I see she’s pulled a large white sheet off of the love seat. Without another word, she steps out into the hallway.

“Kasey! Oh no!” she blurts, pulling the door shut behind her. “You weren’t supposed to see this yet!”

“Why can’t I see a sheet?” Kasey asks.

“I wanted it to be a surprise!”

“How is a sheet a surprise?” Molly asks.

Yeah, Molly. I’m kind of wondering that too.

“I was going to cut it into strips, and ask the bridesmaids to take turns making a wedding dress out of the parts. Then afterward, everyone can vote on whose was the best.”

“Oh!” Kasey crows. “Like the toilet paper competition.”

Beau squawks. “Toilet paper?”

“People do this kind of thing at wedding showers,” Kasey explains. “But a sheet’s even better. It’s way sturdier.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” Nat says. “Molly. You should play with us too.”

“She should,” Kasey says. “But first, have you seen Brady?”

“I think he had to take a call from Dr. Swanson,” Nat says. “So he probably went somewhere quiet. I’m sure he’ll be back soon. Come on. Let’s go find Olivia. She’s going to love this the most!”

As the four of them walk away down the hall, I’m left on the opposite side of the wall, standing in the dark. Alone. Stunned by Natalie’s performance.

What a study in contrasts. Here’s a woman who’s afraid to fly, but willing to move thousands of miles away to make a dream come true. She was scared to be caught kissing me, but brave enough to come up with a plan for escape. I could take a lesson from someone like Natalie, who’s honest about her fears then pushes through them anyway.

What if you told everyone the truth about what you really want out of life?

I consider this for a moment, emotions shuddering in my chest. I’d love nothing more than to admit I don’t want to go to vet school. And that it’s not about the enormous amount of time and money I’d save. It’s about wanting to

be a writer. Not at night after work or on breaks. I want to make a real go of it. As crazy as it sounds. As unrealistic. Impractical. Impossible. But actually telling my family and friends and asking for their support would be a big leap. Like Natalie moving to California.

But what Natalie wants doesn't hurt anybody else.

My gut twists, predicting the consequences.

Forget my family not understanding. I can handle their disappointment. But I can't hurt Dr. Swanson. He's counting on me to take over when he retires. There's the deal-breaking difference. I won't let someone down who took a chance on me. It's one thing to take a leap of faith and make a big change in your life. It's another to break a commitment. With a heavy heart, and an ache behind my ribs, I wait another full minute, then slip out the door.

Once I'm back in the pub, Mac's the first one to spot me. "Brady!" He strides across the room to grip my hand. "Great to see you!" His broad grin snaps me out of my funk. "Ford was just telling me about what happened at the clinic. How you had to stay there overnight. Man. That's a lot. You must be exhausted."

"Yeah." I nod. If he only knew. "I'm just doing my best to hold down the fort. But Natalie helped out so ..." My voice trails off.

"Uh-huh." Mac cocks his head. "I heard about that part too."

Why did I say anything about Natalie? Just her name in my mouth gets my pulse skipping. It's probably written all over my face now.

Mac shifts his weight, ducking his head. "I sure hope Mrs. Swanson's going to be okay. She's the best."

"She is." Both the Swansons are. "I need to check in with Doc Swanson again later, but he sounded hopeful. We've got a couple of pets staying at the clinic."

"Big responsibility," Mac says.

"Yeah." My jaw shifts, and I can't help feeling like Mac's studying my face a little too closely. The guy's always been smart and wise beyond his years. He's had a lot on his plate recently. Not just raising Daisy after his ex-wife left them, but supporting Tess, Olivia, and Darby. And I don't mean financially. Thanks to their massively successful construction company, the McCoy's are all set for life. No, I'm talking about emotional support. Since their dad died and their mom—my Aunt Remy—moved back here, Mac's been holding down a big fort of his own. At least he's got Brooke now. And Daisy.

Family is everything.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” Mac says. “And maybe now’s not the best time, but it’s not like I get a lot of chances to see you, living on the West Coast.”

“True.” I frown. *Please. Don’t remind me how far the other coast is.*

“But I’ve been thinking about you going to vet school,” Mac says. “And how expensive that’s going to be.”

Especially since I don’t even want to be a vet. “Yeah.” The cords along my neck tighten. “Very expensive. What I’ve saved so far will only make a dent. I’ll still have to take out some pretty big loans to make it happen.”

“I get it.” Mac nods. “It’s like going to med school, just working with animals at the end of it.”

“Exactly. Not a lot of people realize that. I didn’t really know myself when I first committed to the idea.”

“I remember when you made the announcement.” Mac nods. “Your mom was pretty proud to have a future doctor in the family. Extremely proud. *Repeatedly* proud.” His mouth slips sideways, but my stomach twists.

“She still is.”

“Anyway, the news might not have made it to Abieville, but McCoy Construction has been doing a fair bit of investing lately.”

“Yeah, Aunt Remy’s said a thing or two.”

“Of course she has.” Mac chuckles, running a hand across his chin. “Those sisters sure can talk. Especially when they’re extremely proud of their kids.”

“And even when they’re *not*.”

“Good point.” He grins, shaking his head. “Anyway, our company partnered with Homes 4 Humans a while ago, and more recently, we started working with Dodd Shipping. We’re trying to use my dad’s legacy to really make a difference. The whole family agrees. But so far, we’ve mostly been helping out strangers.”

Mac takes a beat, and my heart starts pounding. Where is he going with this?

“So if you’re up for it,” he says, “I’d like to cover the cost of your vet school.”

What? My chest constricts, and I choke out a laugh. “Come on, man.”

“I’m serious, Brady.”

My whole body goes numb, and I feel like I’m hovering outside myself,

looking down on this conversation. If becoming a vet was my real passion, this would be a dream come true. Mac's generosity would relieve me of the entire financial burden. But the truth is, he'd be spending all that money to fund something I don't even want.

"Absolutely not." I shake my head. "That's way too big an offer. I can't accept something like that."

"You can." Mac arches an eyebrow. "In case you've forgotten, I'm pretty rich."

"But—"

"Don't say yes or no," he interrupts. "Not yet. You've got a lot going on right now, and I wouldn't have even brought it up, except I wanted to talk to you about this in person, and give you a few days to think about it while I'm still in town." He lays a hand on my shoulder. "Brooke, Daisy, and I won't be leaving until Tuesday. And I'd be happy to make financial arrangements while we're in Abieville, but there's no deadline. No rush. Take your time." He drops his arm. "But, Brady ..."

I wait for him to finish his sentence.

"Take me up on the offer," he says.

I'm still gaping at him when Three barrels toward us holding an armful of flowers. "Time to get lei'd," he crows, tossing a couple of flower necklaces at Mac and me. "You've got to wear these while we play pool. Winners of each round take the losers' leis until one guy's got them all."

Mac guffaws. "What if I *want* to lose?"

And what if *I* need to get out of here?

As if the universe can hear my inner thoughts, my phone buzzes in my pocket. Slipping it out, I see I'm about to be saved by back-to-back messages from Doc Swanson. Then I quickly remember this might be bad news.

This isn't about you, Brady.

"Sorry, men." I hold up the screen. "It's the doc. Gotta find a quiet place to deal with this."

Mac's brow furrows. "Of course."

"We'll be at the pool table when you're ready," Three says, but I'm already angling for the parking lot.

On my way, I spot the bridesmaids in a semicircle in the back corner. True to her word, Natalie's got them taking turns draping Kasey in strips of that white sheet. They're all wearing the crowns and boas Nat brought, and her face is bright with laughter.

My heart stretches across the pub, like I've got tentacles reaching out for her. I just want to be wrapped in that woman's joy. When she glances up and we lock eyes, she cocks her head. An unspoken question.

I hold my phone up, and mouth, "Doc Swanson."

Then I turn and head outside.

Chapter Thirty-Three



NATALIE

How long should I wait before checking on Brady? He's been gone awhile now, and I'm worried.

Amber just won the impromptu build-a-wedding-dress competition, and Olivia's rallying us for Pin the Heart on Nicolas Cage. The groomsmen are all playing pool in a side room off the pub. This is probably the best opportunity for me to slip outside unnoticed.

But since I'm an idiot, I stand up and announce, "I'm going to get a drink."

"Oh!" Kasey's eyes light up. Her crown is dangling by a few strands of hair, so she pulls it off and sets it on the table. Then she adjusts her bride-to-be sash. "I'll come with you!" she gushes.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

"No, no, no." I throw my hands up like a blockade. "The bride should stay here. Just tell me what you want."

This won't actually help me sneak off to Brady. I'll still have to make a trip to and from the bar. But at least I won't end up in a conversation with Kasey about how Molly and Brady are perfect for each other.

Kasey taps her chin. "How about another one of those things Olivia got for us on the beach?"

"Hey!" Liv's ears perk up. "I heard my name."

"Kasey wants one of the cocktails you ordered from Hudson," I tell her.

"Yay!" Olivia pumps her fists in the air. "I'll get a round for everyone. Virgin for Amber of course."

"In the meantime"—I pull the roll of butcher paper from my duffle bag—"the rest of us should tape a big strip of this along the wall so everyone can

sign it.”

“I’ll handle that,” Darby says, taking the roll from me like I suspected she would. She loves to take charge of things. And since Tess doesn’t like to be left out, she pipes up.

“I’ll help too! Where are the Sharpies?”

“Here,” I say, handing her the package. “You’ve got this!”

Come to think of it, maybe I’m better at being sneaky than I thought. With the rest of the bridesmaids and the bride occupied by the butcher paper project, I take a few steps backward. Then a few more.

Next thing you know, I’m slipping out the door.

Outside, with the doors shut behind me, the throb of music mellows to a pulse. The clean smell of pine trees is a relief from the stuffiness of the pub. When I look up, the air is cool on my cheeks. The stars are winking on. *Sky elves*, I think, smiling. *Next to the crescent moon.*

“Hey,” a voice rumbles ahead of me on the right. It’s Brady. He’s leaning against the white wood railing that runs alongside the inn. He’s got his phone in his hand, but he’s not talking or texting.

“Hey yourself.” As I come toward him, I nod to indicate the phone. “Everything okay?”

He stands, squaring his shoulders, like he’s bracing himself. I just don’t know for what. “Yeah.” He stuffs his phone back in his pocket. “Doc Swanson says LuLu’s good, and he got in touch with Willa and Gator’s owners. They’re going to pick up their dogs on Saturday. And since the Jacobs are coming back to get LuLu on Sunday, he’ll only have to deal with being in two places at the same time for a couple more days. I offered to relieve him, but he turned me down. He’s at the clinic tonight while Mrs. Swanson’s still at the hospital. She’s stable and doing well, so he said at this point, he can go back and forth no problem. Half his time at the clinic. Half his time with her.”

Brady pauses to run a hand along the back of his neck. He does this when something’s on his mind. The fact that I recognize the habit makes my insides flutter in both good and bad ways. I’m getting to know Brady better. But that doesn’t change the fact that our futures are apart.

“I feel like there’s more to this story,” I say.

Brady tilts his head. “What makes you think that?”

“That hand-on-your-neck maneuver. You do that when you’re wrestling with something.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.” He puffs out a laugh. “You don’t miss much, huh?”

“Oh, I miss plenty.” My mouth tics. “All the time. So what’s on your mind?”

He takes a step forward, kicking a rock toward the beach. I hold my breath ... waiting for what he’s been thinking about. Or who. He screws up his face. “Mac.”

“Your cousin?” Hmm. That was *not* the answer I expected. I was kind of hoping Brady had been thinking about me. That *maybe* he was trying to figure out some way to make something work between us despite all the obstacles. But instead of continuing to ask questions, I wait for him to be ready to say more. After another moment of quiet, Brady glances up at the doors to the pub.

“Mac offered to pay for my vet school,” Brady says, swinging his focus back to me. “All of it. No strings attached.”

“Ha!” My eyes pop wide. *Winking open*. “All of it?!”

“Yeah. I know.” Brady drops his arms. “It’s big.”

“I’ll say.” I shake my head, processing the actual *bigness* of the offer. “So if you accept ... that means you wouldn’t have to wait around to save more money or deal with any student loans. You could just apply to vet schools during the next admission period, and you’d never owe a dime.”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s incredible, Brady!”

“Yeah.” He swallows so deeply, I can see his throat ripple. “What’s even more incredible is—” He pauses for air, an audible inhale. “I think I want to turn him down.”

“What? Why?” My brain immediately takes a different track than Brady’s. How could he even consider rejecting this opportunity? “I know you feel obligated to take over the clinic someday, and I appreciate your loyalty. I do. It’s one of the things I admire most about you.”

I want to say it’s one of the things I *love* most, but love is probably too strong a word. I don’t want to scare Brady off when he’s clearly feeling skittish. But someday—if we find a way to spend more time together—I can see myself falling for Brady. No. That’s not true.

I’m already falling. Hard.

“Don’t admire me,” he mutters. “I haven’t earned that.”

“Yes, you have,” I insist. “Look at all you’ve done for the Swansons just this week, let alone the past couple of years. They’d have to understand if

you took a break to go to school full time.” I shuffle another step closer, hoping Brady’s brain can picture what’s in mine. “You could apply to a program near Los Angeles. You’d be near Kasey and Beau for a few years.” I blink. “And near me.”

“Nat.” He drops his chin, and my heart sinks right along with it. Clearly he’s not feeling the same potential I am. Not for us. Not even in the future. I square my shoulders, trying to muster up strength from hidden corners of my insides. As much as it hurts, I need to pull myself together. Salvage whatever shreds of dignity I have left.

Anyway, I shouldn’t be surprised he’s not willing to shift gears. For most of my life, I’ve been the default choice. I was Shannon and Paige’s third-wheel friend. Now I’m a replacement roommate with a waitlist if things don’t work out. Kasey only asked me to be her maid of honor because she couldn’t pick between her cousins.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I understand.” My voice is so soft now, I can barely hear myself. “I put you in an awkward position. Again. And I’m so, so sorry.” I tip my chin. “Kasey’s your sister, and Beau’s your best friend. You’ll always be connected, so of course you don’t have to move to California to get closer to them. You’ll go to vet school here in New York, take over the Swanson’s practice, and make a life in Abieville.”

Brady’s eyes flash. “That’s not it.” His voice is gruff, and he glances up at the pub again. The music has shifted to more of a dance club vibe. Like Grant predicted, things start hoppin’ at eight. Still, the upbeat pulse inside the pub is the exact opposite of the feeling inside me.

“I need to tell you something.” Brady takes my elbow, leading me around the back side of the inn. We leave the paved walkway, taking the dirt path that eventually transitions to sand. Beyond that is the lake. Lights from boats reflect off the water. Waves gently lap against the shore.

Brady’s probably worried someone might come out and see us together in front of the pub. We’ve both agreed we don’t want to bring any drama to the wedding, and Brady’s an honorable guy. He doesn’t want any rumors about us floating around, especially since he sees no future with me. And the fact that he cares about my reputation is another thing I admire about him.

Love about him.

He stops at a bench under a tree between the inn and a detached boat house. There’s no light here, besides the moon. He nods for me to sit, then takes the spot next to me. When he reaches out to take my hands—both of

mine in his—my heart starts banging again.

“What’s going on?” My breath hitches.

“If I take Mac’s money and go to vet school, I know myself. I know my family. I’ll feel locked into that trajectory for the rest of my working life. Full time at the clinic during the week. Overnights. Weekends. Emergencies. That job will be all-consuming if I do it right. And I wouldn’t do anything less. So by then, I won’t be able to be honest. With anyone else. Especially myself.”

“Honest?” My mouth is dry. When I lick my lips, his eyes flicker down, then back again. “What do you need to be honest about?”

He squeezes my hands. “You’ve inspired me, Natalie. Your willingness to pick up and move. To try new adventures. It’s brave. And impressive. And I want to take a leap too.”

I swallow hard. “What kind of leap?”

He exhales in one long shuddering breath. Then he looks down at our hands. “I want to be an author.”

“Ahhh ...” I suck in air as an image of Brady’s notebook flashes behind my eyelids. The paragraphing I saw on the pages inside. The varying sentence length, quotation marks, and dialogue. “You’re writing a book,” I breathe out. This isn’t a question. I know the answer. Everything Brady has told me the past few days falls into place. He’s been dropping hints like puzzle pieces. His nod is slow, eyes wide.

“Wait.” I take a beat, reading into his gaze. “You’ve already written one, haven’t you?”

He nods again.

“I saw your notebook,” I admit. “At the clinic, when I was looking for the keys to the truck. I could tell it wasn’t just a journal or a budget tracker or some kind of ledger. It was a story.”

“I’ve got dozens of notebooks. They’re all full of stories.”

“Romance?”

“No.” He pulls one hand free to drag over his face. “But I sure learned a lot from the ones I read.” His chuckle sounds relieved, like finally telling someone about this takes a weight off his shoulders. “Don’t laugh, okay?”

“I would never.”

“I believe you.” He meets my gaze again, filling his lungs. Then he lets it all out. “I’ve been writing a series of mysteries about a veterinarian who solves murders in his small town.” The jag of his laughter makes my heart expand. It’s pure joy, not the broody Brady from the last couple of years.

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Awhile now.” He arches one brow, moonlight gleaming in his eye. “I write while I’m at work on breaks. And at night, I transfer the handwritten stuff onto my laptop. It’s cathartic, really. And I can edit as I go. I’ve also taken a lot of craft courses online. Read stacks of books about writing novels. I’m kind of obsessed with the process, but I’ve never tried to act on it. And I’ve never told anyone. Not a single person.”

I grip the one hand still holding mine and lock eyes with him. “Thank you for trusting me with this.”

He clears his throat. “I trust you with everything.”

My nose begins to sting. “Me too.” I choke out a laugh. “I mean, I trust you. Not myself. Although I do trust myself about some things. Sometimes. Not always. I’m pretty bad about filling my gas tank.”

“I’m not mad about that,” he says. “It’s how we ended up kissing for the first time, so ... bring on the empty gas tanks.” Now we’re both laughing, and my chin quivers with nervous energy. I’m still processing this new information.

“So, you don’t think you could be a vet and an author at the same time?” I ask. “People work other jobs and write on the side, don’t they?”

“Sure they do.” He bobs his head. “But vet school will take years, and that would be a lot to balance with work and writing. Not to mention a family someday.” He pauses for a moment. “I don’t think I could do everything justice. Not the way I’d expect to.”

“Ah. Right.” My stomach pretzels in on itself. Of course Brady wants a family, here in Abieville, with some good woman like Molly. *Ugh*. The fact that he’s already considering how to prioritize a wife and kids makes me want him even more. But he just told me my willingness to move across the country and take on a new job—a new future—inspires *him*.

What would he think if I just up and abandoned all my commitments in California to stay here?

“If I could do anything in the world,” he says, “I’d use the money I’ve already saved to take a shot at launching a full-time writing career.” He pulls his other hand free. “But that’s just a pipe dream. Millions of would-be authors want to do that. I’m not any different. Or any more special.”

“You are to me.” My voice cracks. “And I totally support you. I’ll even help you tell people if having me on your side will make things easier.” I nod, trying to encourage him, as tears prick the corners of my eyes.

“Yeah. I’m not going to drop a bomb like that right before Kasey’s wedding. The focus needs to be on them.”

I lower my volume to an almost-whisper. “It doesn’t have to be a bomb.”

“Doesn’t it?” His question sounds like sharp needles line his throat. “My mom’s been dying to call me Dr. Graham for as long as I can remember. She’s not going to let those bragging rights go without a fight. And Doc Swanson? Mrs. Swanson? They deserve to leave their business to the one they trusted in the first place.” He clenches his teeth. “Then there’s my dad. He’d never understand. The man spent his entire adult life working a job he doesn’t love because he loves his family. It’s just what people do, Nat.”

“Here in Abieville?”

“Everywhere.” He shakes his head. “We all have choices to make. And sacrifices. I’d feel pretty selfish, throwing away a solid future everyone is willing to support—financially and emotionally—for a fantasy that might fail.”

“Hmm.” I press my lips together. “So you go through years of vet school, then you become a vet, and you eventually take over the clinic from Doc Swanson because that plan guarantees the success everyone expects from you?”

“Pretty much.”

“Oh, Brady.” I lay a hand on his knee. It’s warm and solid beneath my fingers. “Maybe it’s time to change your definition of success.”

He grunts, looking down at my hand. When he lifts his gaze, his eyes bore right into mine. “What do you suggest?”

“How about instead of taking the safe path that doesn’t light you up, you go all in on the dream that does. You could even put a time limit on it if that makes you feel better. Like one year as a full-time author.” I shrug. “Maybe two. And if the writing life isn’t all you thought it could be, you can always go back to Plan A: Dr. Brady Graham, veterinarian.”

“I don’t know, Nat.” He groans.

I purse my lips. “If you’re not quite ready to think this through right now, we can table the subject until after the wedding.” I say this to let Brady off the hook, because the planes of his face have tensed up, and a vein’s throbbing at his temple. “Then I’ll be happy to stand by your side and remind everyone it’s normal for a man to want more out of life than an idea he came up with when he was twenty.” I nod to encourage him. “Just a few more days, and we can reveal your future as Brady Graham, mystery novelist.

We'll do it together. You and me. I'll be with you the whole time. Sound good?"

"Hmm." His jaw shifts, which I think means I'm convincing him.

"And don't worry about upsetting anybody." My shoulders creep up. "Both our mothers are already plenty disappointed that Beau, Kasey, and I are settling in Los Angeles instead of here, so we've totally blazed that trail for you. You're welcome for that."

Brady lets out a long, low groan. If I'd been hoping to lift his spirits, what I just said did the exact opposite. His crestfallen face is in a full-on grimace.

"About you moving," he says. "There's something you should know, but I'm not supposed to—"

The sound of laughter interrupts him. A man and a woman stumble around the corner of the inn. "Shhhh!" The woman giggles.

"You're being louder than I am." The man cackles. "And I like it!"

"No one can see us, right?" she asks.

"No way."

"We're all alone?"

"I like that even more!" He cracks up, and they throw their arms around each other, moving backward against the wall. And as they embrace in a circle of moonlight, I figure out who it is.

Molly Fitzgerald and Grantly Bender.

Chapter Thirty-Four



BRADY

“Is that Gr—”

Natalie throws a hand over my mouth, her palm soft and warm against my lips. Then her eyes widen, and she nods slowly. It is Grant and Molly. Whoa.

Talk about people changing ...

“Come on,” Grant says, halting their make-out session just long enough to lead Molly around the back side of the building. “Over here where it’s darker!”

“Shhhh!” Molly follows, shushing him again. Guess I don’t have to feel guilty about my disinterest in Molly Fitzgerald any more. She’s got a new goal.

And it isn’t Brady Graham: mystery novelist.

Natalie’s eyes are still locked on mine, and I raise my hand slowly, entwining my fingers with hers. I don’t want to pull her hand away from my mouth just yet, so I let mine rest there as the friction vibrates up my arm. The truth is, my heart’s been hammering for the past five minutes. Ever since I opened up and spilled my most private thoughts to her.

The fact that Natalie believes in my dream of being an author means everything. But she’s also clearly still imagining a future living near Beau and Kasey. And I haven’t told her what I know. Which leaves me sitting here, whirling, like a rug’s been ripped out from under me. I feel a little like I’ll never be anything but head over heels again. Still, making sense of what comes next with Nat has to be pushed to the back burner.

For now, we need to get out of here.

I stand, still grasping Natalie’s small, smooth hand in mine. “We should

go,” I say softly. She rises from the bench willingly, moving in extra-close. She’s still clutching my hand so tightly I can practically feel her pulse. Then she goes up on her toes, her honeyed lips skating along the edge of my ear.

“Not yet,” she whispers, her words searing heat straight into my soul. When she draws back and meets my gaze—an unspoken signal—I scoop my mouth down to capture hers, and she melts into my body.

My lips feather along her jawline, then down to her silken neck, before skimming back to her mouth. We’re tender at first, then more insistent. Desire claws up from deep inside me. What can I give this woman who just offered me new hope? All of myself.

All for her.

But I don’t just want Natalie’s hope. I want her whole heart. If I could, I’d offer her mine right here. Under the stars. On the shores of Abie Beach.

But I shouldn’t even be kissing her in this moment. As hard as it is to stop, Molly and Grant are still somewhere nearby, and I don’t want them to see us or to discover we saw them.

Too many questions. Too much explaining.

So I pull away from her warm lips, and Natalie sucks in a quick, soft breath.

Oh, man. Sometimes I really hate my self-control.

“This way.” I jerk my chin to indicate the opposite direction Grantly and Molly took around the building. Then, without another word, still holding hands, Nat and I hustle toward the other side of the inn. We choose the long way to the front entrance of the pub. Bursting back through the doors, we automatically drop hands. I swipe at my forehead to erase the sweat.

My nerves are already buzzing when my sister calls out, “There you are!”

Great. Kasey’s making a beeline for Nat and me.

“Here I am,” I say, half expecting her to bust me right now, saying something like, *I know you and Natalie were hiding in that storage room when Beau and I were looking for you. And I know you went out behind the inn afterward and bared your soul to her instead of to your best friend or your little sister. And I know you can’t stop kissing my maid of honor.*

Yeah. Sorry on all counts, Kasey. Guilty. As. Charged.

But Kasey totally ignores me, focusing on Natalie instead. “Sloane just called. She said you haven’t signed the rental agreement yet.”

Natalie cringes and opens her mouth to respond, but Kasey keeps going before she can. “I mean, it’s no big deal if you changed your mind, Nat. If

you don't want to take my room anymore, just tell me. When Beau and I first pitched the idea of you moving in with Sloane, we didn't want you to feel obligated. We never wanted that. You don't feel obligated, do you?"

"Whoa." I throw a hand up. "Take a breath, Kase."

"YOU take a breath." Kasey smirks. "This is between Nat and me."

I glance around, wondering who else can hear us. Luckily, Beau is nowhere in sight. "I just don't think anyone should ever feel *obligated* to do anything," I say. "Not to move if they want to stay. Or to stay if they want to move. Or to come or to go or to rethink their options even after they made a decision. Where a person lives is a very personal choice." I narrow my eyes, trying to send Kasey a pointed message. "Everyone has reasons for what they do. Sometimes good. Sometimes not so good. But either way. Reasons."

Kasey frowns. "What on earth are you babbling about?"

Funny you should ask.

I'm actually thinking you should admit you and Beau aren't planning to stay in LA forever. That you're already looking for apartments with month-to-month leases so you can pick up and transfer somewhere else at a moment's notice.

Chicago. Atlanta. Boston. Not Los Angeles.

It killed me not to say anything to Natalie out on that bench. I came close to telling the truth. But then we got interrupted, and all I can think now is that Beau shared the news with me in confidence. Kasey might not even know he told me. So I can't say anything directly. Not until I know it's okay to talk about this without betraying anyone's trust.

Come on, Kasey. Say it for me.

My sister studies my face for another moment before turning to Natalie again. "Here's the thing." She cocks her head. "Beau and I ... you see—" *Oh, yeah. Here we go.* "We just want you to be happy, Nat." Kasey leans in close, like she's trying to figure out what Natalie's really thinking. "So if you don't want to move in with Sloane, we will totally understand."

Wait. That's not what I wanted Kasey to say. *Tell her the rest. Tell her you probably won't be living in LA much longer.*

"I'm so sorry," Natalie says, darting her gaze between Kasey and me, back and forth, like a pair of blue ping-pong balls. "I should've taken care of the rental agreement already. I'm absolutely terrible."

"You are not." Kasey waves away the comment.

"You are *not*," I agree, emphasizing the *not*. "So what if you changed

your mind about moving? That kind of thing happens all the time. Kasey and Beau will understand. Somebody else can take Kasey's old room in a heartbeat, right, Kasey?"

"That's true." Kasey nods. "Amber told me her sister's been talking about moving closer to help with the kids. She lives in Austin now. Maybe she'd like to rent my room."

"No, it's not that." Natalie blinks at me, just a flicker, before addressing Kasey. "I've just been so busy with the wedding, I didn't make the time to read the fine print. And honestly, I might've been a little bit scared. It's a big step, you know?" Natalie shoots me a look, like a quick, private apology. "But having you both here right now—knowing I've got your support—makes me feel strong. And brave. And I happen to have the contract in my bag. I was planning to sign, scan, and send tonight."

I bite back a groan, clenching my teeth. I guess, in the end, Natalie is someone who honors her word too. Like I've been doing with the Swansons. She's going to follow through with her commitment to Kasey. To Sloane. To Double-A Aaron whatever-his-name-is. And here's the irony: I love her commitment. Her sense of adventure. Her willingness to take big leaps. That's right. I love all these things about Natalie.

I just hate that they're keeping us apart.

"Excellent!" Kasey grins. "As long as you're not ambivalent, Nat. You promise you're not ambivalent?"

Instead of answering, Natalie strides over to her beach bag and collects the rental agreement. She comes back over to us. "Anyone have a pen?"

"Ha!" Kasey hoots. "Thanks to you, I've got about a dozen Sharpies. What color do you want?"

"You didn't read the fine print yet," I grunt.

Natalie keeps her focus on Kasey. "Is there anything weird in there I should know about?"

"Nah. All standard stuff."

Nat swallows. Hard. "I trust you," she says. "I think I'll use the blue to sign. Unless black would be more professional."

While she and my sister debate the best shade of pen to use, I take off to find the rest of the groomsmen. I can't watch Natalie do this. More accurately, I don't want to watch. Out on that bench, I was starting to picture a different future for us both. But maybe what she really wants is a fresh start, without anything from her past holding her back. Either way, like Natalie

said, we need to get through the wedding first. After that, we can face the obstacles between us.

Or not.

Crossing the room, I pass a group of Kasey's bridesmaids. They've got Amber blindfolded with a strip from the sheet they used to make mock wedding dresses. Amber's holding out a donkey tail as the rest of them spin her around. Then they release her, and she staggers forward, trying to pin a heart on a giant poster of Nicolas Cage.

As much as my insides are churning, this is pretty perfect for my sister.

Tonight's about her and Beau. You'll be okay. You just need to get your mind off yourself.

I watch as Amber takes three more steps toward the wall, trips over the leg of a stool, and stumbles right into a high-topped table. While everyone else laughs—including Amber—I rush straight to her side.

"Are you all right?" I ask, looking for signs she's in distress. "Are you dizzy? Did you hit your stomach?" My technician training clicks in, and I automatically start a surface assessment.

But Amber pulls the blindfold off, laughing and shaking her head.

"I'm fine, Brady. Just clumsy. I guess my center of gravity's already shifting, and I'm only in my second trimester. I can't imagine what will happen when I'm nine months pregnant."

"Are you sure you're okay?" I ask. *Because I could really use a distraction.*

"Yes. Completely sure. But thanks so much for looking out for me." She squeezes my arm. "Kasey and Beau always said you were a good man, but I've seen it for myself this week. More than once."

"Of course." My shoulders slump. I'm relieved Amber is okay, but I've actually fallen short of the promise I made to take care of her this week. In fact, these days, I'm falling short all over the place. I need to remember my word. Remember who I am.

Remember who's counting on me.

"You should get back to the groomsmen now." Amber smiles. "They're all over in the alcove, playing pool." She nods across the room. "Speaking of which."

I look up and see Mac coming toward me, a cue stick in his hand. "Ford and Three are just finishing up a game," he says. "You and I go next." He rubs the tip of the cue with a cube of chalk.

I nod. “Sounds good.” My mouth’s in a tight line.

“You look awfully serious.” He cocks a brow. “You’re not spinning out about that offer, are you? I didn’t mean to kill your fun by giving you something you feel like you have to mull over tonight.”

I glance at Natalie and—at the exact same time—she looks up from the papers on the table. She meets my gaze and tips her head, like we’ve got a mental connection stretching across the pub. Too bad that connection probably can’t withstand a stretch of three thousand miles. When Kasey uncaps a Sharpie and hands it to Nat, my insides start to corkscrew. I’m all torqued up with what I want to do and what I need to do.

Two different things.

“Yeah, I *have* been thinking about the offer,” I tell Mac. “And we should definitely talk. But I’d like to wait until after the wedding if that’s all right with you.” I pause, shift my jaw. “There are a lot of logistics to consider, and I don’t want to take any focus off Beau and Kasey.”

See also: I have to think about Natalie. There’s so much for us to discuss, and maybe things to decide. Or maybe she’s on a totally different page than I am. Either way, now’s not the time.

Mac grins at me. “Say no more.” He hands over the pool stick. “I’m more than happy to wait until next week to totally change your life.”

Chapter Thirty-Five



NATALIE

“So we’re really not going to practice the whole ceremony tonight?” I ask Beau. We’re out in front of our parents’ house, loading boxes of hurricane lamps and candles into the back of the Blue Whale. The lamps are the main component for tomorrow’s centerpieces, so we’re bringing them over to the inn now. “Isn’t that kind of the point of a wedding rehearsal?”

“Yeah.” Beau chuckles. “But you’ve met the Grahams. Are you really *that* surprised?”

“You have a point.” My own laugh matches the clinking of the glass inside the boxes. “They do things their own way, that’s for sure.”

“We’ll still do a run-through to be sure everyone knows their positions. Where you’re supposed to walk and stand and stuff. We just decided to skip the songs and Big Mama’s poem and the vows.” Beau nestles the final box in the back row and shuts the door gently. It’s dusk, but the air is still warm and a little humid. I love this time of day.

“You know what I think?” I ask, and my brother turns to face me. “I think hearing everything tomorrow for the first time during the wedding will make everything more special.”

“Absolutely.” He leans against the back of the station wagon. “Very special.”

“Hold on.” I narrow my eyes. “You aren’t skipping that part of the rehearsal because you haven’t written your vows yet, are you?”

“Of course not.” He lifts his hands, palms up in a show of innocence.

“Okay.” I cast him a crooked grin. “Just checking on behalf of the bride.”

“I’m not offended.” He shrugs. “That’s basic maid of honor duty.” He glances up at the sky. The setting sun is partially blocked by clouds. “We’re

making things quick because no one wants to keep Kasey's grandmother outside for too long. She started complaining about her hip this morning, and asking a ninety-year-old to stand around on the beach for an hour unnecessarily didn't seem like a good idea."

"Oof." I cringe. "I hope she's all right."

"Big Mama's a pretty tough lady. I'm sure she'll be just fine."

He's right, and the irony of her being called Big Mama isn't lost on me. Kasey and Brady's grandmother is basically the size of LuLu, except in human form.

"By tomorrow," Beau adds, "all the folding chairs will be set out on the beach, and Big Mama can just sit until it's time for her to read her poem."

"Sounds like you've got everything under control."

"I sure hope so." He bobs his head. "I'm just really glad Kasey chose you to be her maid of honor."

"Well." I scrunch up my nose. "It's not like she had much of a choice. They've got too many cousins on their side of the family. Kasey didn't want to hurt their feelings by picking one of them. I was just the path of least resistance."

"Not true." Beau shakes his head. "Kasey could've picked Amber. Molly. Sloane." He counts on his fingers, like he's emphasizing how many options I beat out.

I frown. "Sloane couldn't even come because of summer school."

Beau guffaws. "Are you kidding? If Kasey had asked Sloane to be in the wedding party, that girl would've figured out some way to get here. As it is, she didn't even make it as a guest."

"Yeah, I guess."

Beau straightens, dropping his arms. "Sloane's great and all, but believe me. You were definitely Kasey's first choice. She loves you. So do I." He arches a brow. "Roommates are temporary. Sisters are forever." He punches my shoulder, probably to take the edge off all the sappiness.

"Then I'm happy Kasey chose me too." My heart swells, and I meet my brother's gaze, tossing him a smile. Before long, Beau and I will have more time for conversations like this. A part of me just wishes we didn't have to go so far to become closer. Still, this is exactly why Brady and I made the right decision not to talk about us or job changes or any other subject that might complicate things until after the wedding.

"You know, I think it's pretty sweet of you and Kasey to include Big

Mama in the ceremony,” I say, nudging his elbow as we climb the porch. “She’s quite a wildcard to throw into the mix.”

“Are you kidding?” Beau puffs out a laugh. “I’m guessing her poem’s going to be the best part of the wedding.”

“Have you heard it yet?”

“Nah.” He shakes his head. “But I’m sure it’ll be ... unique.”

We’re both laughing as we head inside and find our parents standing under the hole in the ceiling. Kissing.

Right on cue, Beau and I both groan, “Ewwwww!” It’s the same kind of exaggerated protest we’d throw out when we were kids and our mom would tell our dad he had a cute butt, or my dad would sweep my mom into a romantic dip. We always pretended to hate it, but we really loved that our mom and dad loved each other.

I still do.

A warm feeling crests in my heart, the certainty that I want nothing less than this for myself. And I think my best shot at this kind of future is with the best man who’s right here in this town. I want to tell him this too. Sometime before I leave. I need Brady Graham to know I might be moving, but that doesn’t mean I’m letting go.

My mom points up at the hole. “Your father and I were just saying we might go ahead and leave the ceiling like this as a permanent memory of this time.”

“What?” I gape at her. “You’re seriously going to leave a hole between your closet and your living room?”

She shrugs. “We want to commemorate the week our only son got married, and our only daughter abandoned us for the West Coast.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I say.

Beau scoffs. “Of course they’re kidding.” He looks at my dad. “You *are* kidding, right?”

My dad’s mouth twitches. “I’m sorry, Betty. I can’t do it.”

She slaps his backside. “You always were the worst liar, Dale.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He glances at the hole. “The truth is, Grant Bender talked to his brother about patching the ceiling for us. Apparently Preston is quite the handyman.”

Beau squints. “Preston Bender? Isn’t he the sheriff now?”

My mother puts a hand to her chest. “Yes. Preston’s a man of many talents. We have several of them in Abieville.”

My dad guffaws. “I didn’t know you kept up to date on our news, son.”

“Kasey and I live in California, Dad. We’re not in Siberia.”

My mother frowns. “We sometimes feel that far out of touch.” She sighs. “And now you’re dragging Natalie away with you.”

“Beau’s not dragging me,” I say gently. “I *want* to be near him and Kasey. And I promise to call you so often you’ll get sick of me.”

“Not possible,” she says.

“Awww.” I sling an arm around her shoulder. “But seriously. A lawyer who makes house calls and a sheriff who patches ceilings?” I grin. “I’m really going to miss this place.”

As the four of us head back out to the Blue Whale, Beau lingers behind, checking his phone. I slow down, letting my parents get ahead of us.

“Everything okay?” I ask, waiting for him.

“Yeah.” He nods, still scrolling. “I just got a notification of some new apartment listings, but it looks like these all require a two-year lease.”

I tip my chin. “Is two years a problem?”

He stops in the middle of the walkway and meets my gaze. His brows lift when he sees the question in my eyes. “Awww, Nat. I’m sorry. I thought Kasey told you. But I should’ve checked with her and made sure you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“It’s just that we’re really hoping to find some place that rents month to month this time. That way, if an opportunity comes up at some point, somewhere else ...we ...well ...” His voice trails off.

“Oh.” I blink, blink, blink, finishing the sentence in my head. “So you’re not planning to stay in LA long-term?”

He grimaces, like he can’t believe I don’t already understand this. “That’s not a surprise to you, is it? Kind of like the Grahams doing wedding rehearsals different. You know Kasey and me. We’re rolling stones. Gathering no moss. The world is our oyster and all that.”

“Oyster.” I surrender to a laugh even as my stomach twists. “Isn’t that what Big Mama called you the first time you met?”

His eyes crinkle into a smile. “You’ve got a good memory.”

I nod slowly. “I do.”

And yet, somehow, I forgot my brother always wanted a life roaming the world. That Kasey signed on for that life with him—a husband-and-wife team globetrotting together. I’ve been so focused on our geography—as if a bond is all about location—I hooked my future to that goal.

I let our closeness be defined by mileage.

“So,” Beau says. “Between Chicago, Boston, and Atlanta, which city would you pick for us?”

Now my stomach splats on the sidewalk. *Chicago. Boston. Atlanta.* Those places are all so far from Los Angeles. So far from Abieville. So far from everyone.

Including me.

“Where do *I* think you and Kasey should move?” I swallow hard. “I don’t know. They’re all so different. But ... Atlanta, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Beau chuckles and nods. “That’s what Brady predicted you’d say.”

Chapter Thirty-Six



BRADY

“We need to talk,” Natalie says under her breath, “and I don’t think it can wait until after the wedding. So maybe tonight. After the rehearsal.” She nods at the stone walkway I’m leading her down. The path continues across the sand and stretches all the way to the wedding gazebo. We started at the top, just below the steps to the inn. Beau and the rest of the groomsmen are standing at the end on one side of the white archway. My mother’s behind us, holding a clipboard and barking out orders.

As per her very specific instructions, when Natalie and I reach the rest of the groomsmen, the maid of honor is supposed to break off and go to the opposite side where Kasey will eventually stand. Then, after Nat is situated, Daisy, the flower girl, and the bridesmaids will come down to join us one at a time. Finally, Kasey and my dad will take the long walk across the stones and sand to Beau.

I’ve got to say, I don’t think this is the normal process. But our family rarely approaches normal on a good day. And not-normal is what you get when Elaine Graham is your wedding coordinator.

“You’re walking too fast,” my mom crows from behind us. “Slow down, Brady! Pretend you’re waltzing. One step. Two steps. Breathe ... and waltz.”

I don’t know how to waltz, and I don’t think my mother does either. But that doesn’t matter, because I’m in no hurry to reach the gazebo anyway. Not while Natalie and I are arm in arm, her body tucked into my side. This is the first moment all evening we haven’t been surrounded by members of the wedding party. Or by Mrs. Slater, all teary-eyed and sniffing. Or by my mom clucking orders at us.

“I agree,” I say under my breath.

“That we need to slow down? Or that we need to talk later?”

“Both. But mostly the talking. There’s a lot of ground to cover.”

“So much ground,” she says. I peer at her sideways, but she’s got her gaze locked on the gazebo. Then the side of her jaw tics. “Like Chicago,” she says. “Or Atlanta. Or Boston.”

“Kasey told you?” I let out a long breath of relief. “Finally!”

“Shhh.” Natalie squeezes my arm.

“Sorry,” I say through clenched teeth.

“That’s the perfect pace, kids!” my mother squawks at us from the steps of the inn. “One step. Two steps. Breathe ... and waltz.”

“Beau spilled the beans before we came here,” Natalie continues in a low voice. “And I know that you’ve known for days.”

I groan. “I wanted to tell you. So, so much.”

“Yeah, I figured that out.” From the corner of my eye, I can tell Natalie is nodding. “I thought back and remembered a few moments. A hint here or there. But I’ll admit, at first, I was sick to my stomach, wondering why you hadn’t told me. My mind was all jumbled up, thinking the worst.”

“The worst?” I whisper. “Like what?”

“Like you knew one of the reasons I planned to move was to be closer to Beau and Kasey. And maybe you thought I’d change my mind if I knew they weren’t staying in LA. And maybe you didn’t *want* me to change my mind.”

I suck in air. A great big gulp. “Opposite of true.”

“I realized that pretty quickly. Those kisses were too real.” Her lips quirk on one side. “And you don’t mess around.” Suddenly she stumbles on a stone, so I pull my arm tighter around hers, drawing her closer. I want her to feel my strength. I want her to feel safe. I want Natalie to know I’d never let her fall.

“I kept hoping Beau or Kasey would bring it up,” I say. “But I couldn’t be the one.”

She nods again. “You’re a loyal friend. A loyal brother. Those aren’t flaws.”

“Thanks,” I manage to choke. The fact that Natalie sees the best in me—that she understands my intentions instead of jumping to conclusions—means everything.

She glances up, her blue eyes finding mine. “And you didn’t want to influence me, either, right?” Her cheeks are flushed in the humid air. “You thought I should make my own decision.”

“Definitely true.” My pulse is racing now, sped up by all the potential ahead of us. Natalie knows being near Beau and Kasey will be temporary at best. Maybe this will change things. Maybe this will change everything. So much ground to cover.

“One step. Two steps. Breathe ... and waltz!” my mother shrieks.

“But I still have to go to California,” Natalie says softly, and my gut twists. “I signed a contract.”

We’re almost to the gazebo now, and definitely within earshot of the rest of the groomsmen.

“Let Natalie go!” my mother hollers.

“See you soon,” Nat whispers as I release her. She flashes me a half smile, but my chest is a vise, constricting slowly. *I don’t want to let you go.* As I take my spot next to Beau, he cocks his head, eyeing me up and down.

“You okay, man?”

“You’re the groom,” I say. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“Yeah. Well. Maybe. But you look ... weird. Queasy. Like you might keel over or—”

“I’m just not used to being on display like this.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Sensitive.” Beau smirks. “This will all be over soon.”

Mac leans over to us, chuckling. “I like secrets too.” It’s an homage to Buddy from *Elf*, one of the cousins’ favorite movies. Meanwhile, the rest of the wedding party is making their way down the aisle—one stepping, two stepping, breathing ... and waltzing. Except for Daisy, who stops every few yards to hop. Slung over her arm, she’s got a basket decorated with pink ribbons, and she’s tossing handfuls of popcorn out of it.

Beau cocks his head. “Popcorn?”

Mac sighs. “My dear daughter didn’t want to waste rose petals on a rehearsal that wasn’t even a ‘real rehearsal.’ She says the birds will eat the popcorn.” He shrugs. “Brooke and I decided not to argue with an elementary schooler.”

“Good call,” I say. When I steal another glance across the gazebo at Natalie, she’s already looking at me. My stomach clenches. This could be the beginning of something. Or the end of us. Depends on how well I plead my case later.

“Ahem!” My mom and Mrs. Slater clear their throats to get everyone’s attention, then they nod at the direction of the inn and start humming the wedding march. Very loudly. Very off-key. That’s because Kasey and my

dad are coming down the aisle now. One step. Two steps. Breathe ... waltz. This is my baby sister and my father. They're practicing the moment he'll give her away, and the moment she'll give herself to Beau. Forever.

My best friend and my little sister.

Beyond distance, beyond career changes, that's another roadblock for Natalie and me to overcome. It's not insurmountable, but it *is* something we'd have to face. In twenty-four hours, Beau and Kasey will be married. And if Natalie and I tried to make a go of it and we failed ... it could be so public. More painful.

My guts are in knots.

Failure is something I've been afraid of for as long as I can remember. Failing with relationships. Failing in my career. Failing to make my parents proud. Failing at promises I've made. So I stayed paralyzed here in Abieville. No changing jobs. No stepping outside my comfort zone. No compromises at all. This meant no failure. But for once, something besides failing is even more frightening.

A future with no Natalie.

"All right everyone," my mother pipes up when the bridesmaids are finally lined up alongside Kasey. Olivia's making eyes at Hawk. Tess and Darby jockey for space. Amber meets my gaze, and I cock my head.

You okay? I mouth.

She nods, flashing me a thumbs-up.

"This is when Nella will sing tomorrow," my mother announces, and Nella begins to step forward out of line. My mother shoos her back. "Tonight we're going to skip that for the sake of time and Big Mama's hips."

"What about my hips?" Big Mama hoots. We all turn to look at my grandmother. She's a puff of white hair on a scarecrow body, sitting in a folding chair someone must've dragged down from the inn. She's wearing one of her Sunday dresses and clutching a piece of paper in her knobby fingers.

"You said they were aching," my mother yells.

"Oh, yes." Big Mama wiggles in her seat. "But only the right one. That means a storm is coming. And my hips don't lie."

When Ford and Three nudge each other, snickering, my mother glares at them. "Control yourselves, boys. This is a rehearsal."

"Actually, it's barely a rehearsal," Mac says. "Just ask Daisy and her popcorn."

“After Nella’s song,” my mother powers on, “Lettie will come forward.” She cuts her eyes to Lettie. “But you stay put now. *Tomorrow*, you’ll be handing out roses to the mother of the bride and the mother of the groom.” My mother turns to Mrs. Slater. “That’s you and me, Betty. Our babies are getting married!” Her voice creaks like a record scratch. Mrs. Slater lets a sob escape her. Oh, man. These two and their motherly emotions. Nat and I could be in trouble if things go the way I hope they’ll go.

Big trouble.

“Big Mama!” My mother shouts at our grandmother like she’s stone-cold deaf and not just ninety. “This is when Mac will come help you up to the gazebo tomorrow so you can read your poem! But you don’t have to read your poem now!”

“Mac!” Big Mama yelps, struggling to get up out of the chair on her own. “Come help me get up to that gazebo, so I can read my poem now!”

My mother hurries over, flapping her hands in protest. “I said you *don’t* have to read your poem now, Big Mama!”

“I heard you just fine, Elaine!” Big Mama rolls her eyes. “I have to read my poem now!”

Okay. Maybe my grandmother *is* a little deaf. But with Mac’s help, she hobbles over to the spot in front of Kasey and Beau. After squinting down at her paper, she lifts her gaze, slowly scanning the entire wedding party.

“Ahem.” The clearing of her throat is surprisingly dainty. “I’d like to say a few words in honor of my granddaughter and her very tall oyster on the occasion of their wedding.” She presses the paper to her chest and closes her eyes like she’s going to recite the poem from memory.

We all hold our breath.

“There once was a girl with red hair,” she warbles, “who worried that life wasn’t fair. While she held a grudge, her poor heart couldn’t budge, and my favorite fruit is a pear.”

Huh.

Around the gazebo, my cousins shift their weight, biting back laughter.

“The boy was an oyster, it’s true,” Big Mama continues. “He told the girl ‘Hey, I love you!’ But she wasn’t sure that his feelings were pure, and my favorite color is blue.”

Okay. So Big Mama’s poem is basically a limerick featuring Kasey and Beau’s history and her favorite things. *Interesting*. After a moment of silence, she continues, except she’s not rhyming anymore. She’s ... singing.

“I didn’t think love could feel like this,” she croons, “and my world has changed now after just one kiss.” Big Mama’s lids suddenly pop open, and she cuts her gaze from the groom’s side over to the bride’s side. Then she lasers her eyes on me.

Me?

“How can it be ... that Natalie is right here with me ... and also Brady,” she sings. “They are a secret I couldn’t keep ... and we know that it’s true ... God must have spent a little more time on—”

“Hold on, Big Mama,” Kasey interrupts, coughing into her hand. “Have you been listening to *NSYNC or something?”

Big Mama slams her mouth shut. “I sure do like that Justin Timberlake. The boy’s got great hair.”

“Yeah, I guess he does.” Beau puffs out a laugh. “But I think maybe you accidentally started singing the lyrics to ‘God Must Have Spent a Little More Time on You.’”

“Well, it’s a wonderful song,” Big Mama says.

“That explains it,” Kasey says to Beau under her breath. Then she turns to our grandmother, raising her voice. “But Natalie and Brady are standing right here in front of you because she’s the maid of honor and he’s the best man!”

“I’m aware of that, dear.” Big Mama covers the ear closest to Kasey with one wrinkled hand. “I’m old, not feeble-minded. Or hard of hearing. And for the record, I have a different poem I wrote to share at your wedding, but I agree with my great-granddaughter, Daisy. I’m not going to waste a real poem on a rehearsal that isn’t a real rehearsal.”

“Woo-hoo!” Daisy tosses a handful of popcorn in the air and starts to giggle. The rest of us laugh too. Probably a release of tension, not to mention awkwardness.

Kasey reaches for Beau’s hand, nodding at Big Mama. “So why were you singing about Nat and Brady then?”

“Oh, it’s quite simple, really.” Big Mama’s eyes twinkle. “Your brother and Beau’s sister are a little bit in love with each other.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven



NATALIE

While the beach fills with a flurry of gasps and cackles from everyone in earshot, my face bursts into flames. Brady throws his arms up, dragging both hands through his rumpled hair. “Oh, Big Mama,” he mumbles.

Hawk trumpets, “I KNEW IT!”

“Come on, man.” Beau frowns at Hawk. “There’s no way you knew.”

“Are you kidding?” Hawk’s tone is wry, his smile lopsided. “I could tell the minute Natalie wasn’t interested in me.”

Olivia smooths a hand over her blonde tresses. “Luckily *I* was interested.”

“Indeed.” Hawk crosses the aisle, tossing an arm over Liv’s shoulder. “*Quite* lucky.”

“Brady!” Mrs. Graham hurries up to him, whispering something in his ear. When he nods, she glances at me, her mouth falling open. Then she lays a hand on her heart, but I can’t tell what that means.

Is she happy? Angry? Confused?

My mom rushes to my side, her eyes wide. She actually looks kind of hopeful, which—under the circumstances—is a relief. “Is this true, Natalie? Are you and Brady ...” She pauses to wag her eyebrows at me. A lot.

I glance around. Everyone is listening in. “I can assure you, Brady and I are not ...” I wag my brows back at her. A lot.

“Not at *all*?” My mother’s face falls.

“Well, we have kissed,” I say. “Once or twice.”

“Three times,” Brady says under his breath. “Maybe four or five.”

“Ha!” Darby passes a twenty-dollar bill over to Olivia. Tess does the same. Meanwhile, Kasey reaches out to slug her brother on the shoulder.

“Ouch.” Brady winces, averting his eyes.

Beau grimaces along with him. “Sorry, man. Looks like you got my bride all riled up.”

“I’m not mad,” Kasey says. “In fact, I think it’s kind of cool.” She cuts her eyes to me, her brow furrowed. “I just wish one of you would’ve told me.”

“We didn’t even know at first,” I blurt. “At least we weren’t sure, so we were really hoping to avoid”—I sweep my arm around the gazebo—“all this.”

“Yeah,” Brady says. “We didn’t want to make your wedding about us.”

Beau splays his hands, to indicate the entire wedding party. “You did an excellent job with that, guys.” He snickers. “Really stellar.”

I chew my lip. “We *tried* not to.”

“We *really* tried,” Brady says.

Ford chuckles. “Three times. Maybe four or five.”

“Oh, no.” Kasey sucks air in through her teeth, like something just occurred to her. “Poor Molly. What am I going to tell her?”

“Don’t worry about Molly,” Lettie chimes in. “She likes Grant now.”

“And Grant likes Molly,” Nella adds.

“Uh-huh.” Lettie and Nella high-five each other. “We saw them making out in the lobby last night.”

In the lobby too?

Wow. Abieville gets busy.

“But Molly has a crush on Brady,” Mrs. Graham squawks.

“And Natalie has a crush on Grant,” my mother tuts.

“That was years ago,” I pipe up. “People are allowed to change. Things we thought we wanted when we were kids can ... just change ...” I let my voice trail off.

My mother loops her arm through my elbow. Then she looks over at my father. He and Mr. Graham shuffle their feet, hands stuffed in their pockets. “Dale? Are you listening to all this?”

“Yes, dear.” He bobs his head. “I’m just waiting for your instructions.”

“Me too,” Mr. Graham says.

Mrs. Graham clucks. “As if we ever tell you men what to do.”

This elicits more snickering from the group. At some point, Daisy has moved over to one side of Big Mama. Brooke is on her other side. The three of them are sharing what’s left of the popcorn.

Brady clears his throat and looks from person to person. “Natalie and I ...

we would've said something sooner, but ..."

My dad's mouth goes crooked. "You didn't want to take any attention away from Beau and Kasey. So we heard."

"That's exactly right, Mr. Slater."

"Call us Betty and Dale," my mother gushes.

"Or you could call us Mom and Dad," Mrs. Graham suggests. When everyone gapes at her, she shrugs. "What? Just an idea."

My mother looks at me, her eyes wet and beaming. "Does this mean you're not moving after all, Natalie?"

My stomach does a full revolution, and my mouth goes dry. "See. These are the kinds of conversations Brady and I wanted to avoid until after the wedding."

"But you can't very well go to California now, can you?"

"Unless Brady goes with you," Kasey says. "Then we could all be in LA together."

"Yes!" Amber says, finally adding in her two cents. "That would be amazing!" She lays a hand on her stomach. "And if I can get my sister there from Austin, we'll all be one big happy family."

I tilt my head at Kasey. "For a little while at least. Right, Kasey?"

Kasey shifts her focus to Beau, then back to me. "I guess you heard."

"Heard what?" Amber asks.

"We don't have any concrete plans yet," Kasey says, "but Beau and I will most likely be moving at some point. Not immediately. Sometime in the next year or so. We just want to keep our options open."

"Speaking of not saying something sooner," Brady says under his breath.

"Cheers to the nomad life!" Hawk crows, beaming a grin of satisfaction at Beau and Kasey.

Mac claps Brady on the back. "Well, at least my cousin's planning to stick around here. He's got his future to think about. And the clinic, right, Brady?" Mac tries to make eye contact with him, but Brady ducks his head.

"You're right," Brady says, raising his volume. "Nat and I do have a lot we need to discuss. But we probably won't do that right now. Not with you all as an audience. If you don't mind. I mean, we love you people, but ..."

"Okay, folks!" Beau hoots to get the group's attention. "Everyone knows where we need to stand tomorrow, right? And we know who's singing when? And who's handing out roses to the mothers? And who's helping out with Kasey's grandmother?"

“My hips are fine!” Big Mama yelps.

“In that case,” Beau concludes, “I propose this not-quite-a-rehearsal has come to an end.”

“Wait just a minute.” Mrs. Graham clutches her clipboard to her chest. “I’m the wedding coordinator. I say when we’re done.” She glances around, blinking at everyone. “All right, then.” She presses her lips together primly. “We’re done.”

“Thanks so much for your help, Mom,” Kasey says. “We couldn’t manage any of this without you.”

Mrs. Graham’s chest puffs up, and she pats at her cloud of red hair. “Thank you for noticing, dear.”

“So.” Beau splays his hands. “Should we all head over to The Merry Cow?”

“FINALLY!” Daisy whoops. She skips a full circle around Brooke and Big Mama. “Dinner! Dinner! Dinner!”

While the rest of the wedding party collects their things and heads out to the parking lot, Brady and I lag behind under the gazebo. He comes in close to me, standing over my body like a big, protective shadow. He smells like pine and cotton and ... home. This whole place smells like home.

Still, I can’t forget I have a new job waiting for me on the other side of the country. And a new apartment. A new roommate. I’ll only be an airplane ride away from all this, which isn’t too bad if you don’t mind flying. And if you don’t mind being separated from the one person you want to be with all the time. But if you do ...

My stomach swoops.

“So that didn’t go quite the way we expected,” Brady says. By now, everyone else is out of earshot.

“Not exactly.” I cast a glance at our loved ones chattering and laughing as they climb into their cars. “Then again, does *anything* go exactly as planned around here?”

“Good point.” A dimple presses into his cheek. “But some things turned out better than I hoped tonight.”

“Me too.” I can’t help smiling. “Our families even seemed to like the idea. The idea of us, I mean.”

“We should’ve known they would.” Brady tips his chin. “If there are people out there in the world who wouldn’t think twice about one brother and sister marrying the other brother and sister, it would be the Grahams and the

Slaters.”

A small laugh puffs out of me. Yes, family approval is one major obstacle we’ve overcome. But that doesn’t change the distance we’re about to face, or the fact that Brady’s unhappy with his current career track. Still, he hasn’t said anything about being willing to make a change on either of these fronts. And Mac seems committed to his offer of paying for Brady’s vet school. How could Brady even consider turning him down? He wouldn’t. He can’t.

I swallow. “I think we should wait and talk more about this after the wedding.”

Brady’s eyes shutter into a half squint. “If that’s what you want.”

“I’m just a little afraid there won’t be any easy answers for us.”

“They won’t get any easier in forty-eight hours,” he says.

“True, but I don’t want to be anything but happy for my brother and Kasey right now. Does that make sense?”

He reaches out and brushes a hand along my cheek, the tips of his fingers grazing my jawline. Then he bends down and places the softest kiss of my life on my lips. Heat flares through me, warming my insides. The air around us vibrates with possibility. “Of course that makes sense. And I’d expect nothing less.”

“Nothing less than what?”

“You. Putting others first.” His eyes lock with mine. “I can always count on you for that.”

“No.” I shake my head, my throat flushing. “You’re the reliable one. You’re so stable and secure.” I draw in a breath, exhale. “You’re like ... a lighthouse.”

He tilts his head. “Uh ... what?”

I plant both hands on his chest, the muscles taut beneath my palms. He’s so big and tall and steady. Unmovable. Safe. “Because I can totally picture you standing out on the shore. Like guiding the boats. Keeping them off the rocks. You know. Saving the day.” I press my hands a little harder against him. “You may not see it in yourself, but I think you’ve got real hero potential.”

“Huh.” His mouth slips sideways. “Listen to you, busting out metaphors.”

“Hey.” I drop my arms and shrug. “I’m just trying to keep up with the writer in our midst. You’re the writer.” I grin. “I’m the midst.”

“*Like a lighthouse*, huh?” He rubs at his chin. “I’m pretty sure that’s actually a simile. Either way, stop showing off, Slater.” His eyes sparkle

down at me.

“I’m not showing off, Graham.”

“Maybe not, but you’ve got a point. About the lighthouse thing.” He smirks. “I’m just stuck on the shore. Predictable and boring.”

My lips form an *O* of protest. “I didn’t say that!”

“No, I said it. Because the truth is, I *have* been stuck. That’s why I stayed at the clinic all these years, even after I knew I wanted to do something else. Then you come along—all hopeful and sunny—and you show me I might be able to do something else with my life. I feel like I can do anything when I’m around you. That’s kind of magical, Nat.”

“So *you’re* the house, and *I’m* the light?”

“Exactly.” A slow smile breaks across his face.

“Together we make a lighthouse.” I nod. “That’s pretty great,” I say. “Or, at least, it’s a head start toward greatness.”

“I agree. And you know what else?”

“What?”

“I know you always felt like you don’t belong here in Abieville—or anywhere—for too long. But I actually think that sounds more like Beau and Kasey. They’re the restless ones, never staying in one place. You and I? We’re the anchors. But in a good way. Not in a drag anyone down kind of way.”

“So.” I lift my chin and lower my voice. “What if my anchor is three thousand miles away from yours?”

He dips his head. “Then we’ve still got that lighthouse thing going for us. With or without a storm.” He lifts a finger. “Our beacons can always help us find our way home, right?”

“Okay.” A fresh laugh bubbles up in me. “Now we might be getting a little too carried away with all the symbolism.” I take a beat. “Wait. *Is* this symbolism?”

“How should I know?” His shoulders hitch. “I write mysteries. Not literature.” He chuckles. “What I *do* know is I could really use a steak right now. Rare. With barbecue sauce.”

“Me too.” I grin. “And a loaded baked potato.”

Brady holds out his arm, inviting me to slip mine in his. “Can I escort you to The Merry Cow, beautiful? I’d really like to feed you.”

“Yes, please. I’d like to be fed.”

“Perfect.” He meets my gaze. “The rest can wait until Sunday.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight



BRADY

It's two hours before the ceremony, and the groomsmen are on the beach finishing up our pre-wedding photo shoot. Kasey and the bridesmaids went first, after they got their hair and makeup done. Now they're all up at the inn in the bridal suite, hiding out so Beau doesn't accidentally run across the bride. Bad luck. While he and my sister are doing what they can not to see each other, I'm coming out of my skin, waiting to catch even a single glimpse of Natalie.

Last night, in the party room of The Merry Cow, our feet kept bumping under the table. There was an occasional brush of hands. The whole dinner was the most fun I've had in a while. Especially after Beau handed out the gifts Kasey bought us at the pro shop.

As a thank-you for being in their wedding party, they gave each of the groomsmen a Big Mouth Billy Bass. They're these mechanical fish you mount on the wall, and the thing gets triggered when someone walks by. Then the fish turns and pokes its head out to sing "Rolling on the River." Beau and I both had one when we were kids. They're ridiculous and nostalgic, and I couldn't stop smiling the rest of the night. Of course, that had more to do with Natalie than with the Big Mouth Billy Bass.

Her touch feels new and exciting now. Each stolen glance lights a fire under me. We know we want to be something more to each other after Beau and Kasey get married.

But first I have to survive these wedding pictures.

As we did on the party barge, the men pose for shots in every possible combo, except this time, Mac is here. And we're in tuxedos now. My father and Mr. Slater are both cracking dad jokes and grinning their faces off,

looking proud and fatherly.

I hope my dad can still feel this proud of me when and *if* I finally come clean about wanting to be a writer. Making my family proud is all I've ever wanted. Not that they've ever given me reason to doubt they would be. Still. In a small town where even a base amount of athleticism makes you the captain of the basketball team—not to mention the quarterback, pitcher, and probably homecoming king—it's hard to get a good gauge on what's an actual achievement and what amounts to default success.

Kasey, Beau, Natalie, and most of my cousins have found their places in this world, doing things that are wholly authentic to them. I'd like to do the same, but going out on a limb to be an author? That's one way to spiral. In public. For everyone to see.

But enough about me. Today is all about the bride and groom, and I need to check in on Beau. The guy's been wearing a stiff smile all morning. When I clap him on the shoulder, I can tell his body's as stiff as his mouth.

"How you doing, man?" I duck my head to make eye contact with him. "Really. You can be honest."

"Holding up," he says. "I'm excited. Nervous. Worried. I can't wait to marry Kasey, but I keep feeling like something's going to go wrong. Ever since the flood in the rooms for the bachelor parties. Not to mention your grandmother's hips."

Beau huffs out a laugh, and I chuckle too. "Yeah. I've heard enough about Big Mama's hips to last a lifetime."

"My point is"—Beau screws up his face—"I can't seem to shake these nerves."

I nod. "I think pre-wedding jitters are normal. But trust me. Today's going to be perfect. Nat's been doing everything she can to make sure the bridesmaids are taking care of Kasey." I arch a brow. "Just don't run out on my sister."

"Not a chance." Beau glances over his shoulder to check who's in listening distance. But the rest of the men are all standing around, talking amongst themselves. "In fact, I just want to run off with her and do this alone. Together."

"Yeah, I wouldn't do that if I were you." I flash him a smile. "Remember when Mac eloped with Brooke? He's still on the apology tour for that. And her mom made them throw a whole other wedding anyway." I shrug. "Just another couple hours, and you'll be tying the knot for real. One time only."

Then you've got the rest of your lives to be alone together with my sister." My smile turns into a grimace. "And I'd probably like to hear even less about that than Big Mama's hips."

Beau guffaws, casting his eyes up at the inn. "Hey. Can you do me a favor?"

"Besides being your best man? And taking care of Amber? And steering clear of your sister until after the wedding?" I smirk, but he shifts his jaw like he's not joking, so I quickly backtrack. "Of course, man. Anything. What do you need?"

"Would you take this up to Kasey?" He hands me a small, white envelope.

"What's this?"

"My wedding vows."

"Hmm." My mouth goes crooked. "I'm no expert, but I think you're supposed to say those to her. Out loud. During the ceremony."

Beau expels a nervous laugh. "I'm planning on doing that. And I've got them memorized pretty well." He shakes his shoulders, like he's trying to loosen them up. "But I'm also pretty sure I'm going to forget half of the things I want to say."

I crack another smile. "Or start bawling?"

"Heh heh heh. Maybe that too." He reaches up to run a hand through his hair, then remembers it's been slicked into submission. "Anyway." He drops his arm. "I wrote them out one last time to be sure I've got everything committed to memory, and I want her to have this copy of the words as I intended them to be. Pure and accurate. When I could think clearly, as opposed to the garbled mess I'll probably choke out in front of everyone." He cocks his head. "Performance anxiety is a real thing."

"Yeah, okay." I give a half laugh and slip the envelope into my pocket. "I'll head up and give this to Kasey now. I wanted to see her before the wedding anyway."

Beau's mouth goes crooked. "A little brother-sister heart-to-heart?"

"Yeah. I need to tell her she'd better not break your heart, or I'll have to hunt her down and kick her butt."

Beau takes a beat, then starts cracking up at absurdity of the idea that A) Kasey would ever hurt him and B) I'd ever hurt Kasey. The truth is, Beau and Kasey are made for each other. Two sides of the same coin. Perfect complements, each half making up a whole. This makes me think about

Natalie, not that I ever stopped. But now I have a legitimate excuse to see her too.

And I'm not mad about it.

When I reach the lobby, Hudson's at the front desk, and he salutes me as I pass. "Looking good, Graham."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Are the women up in their room?"

"They are. Suite 201." He nods at the stairs. "What, are you crashing the bridesmaid's party?"

"Nah. Just need to get a message to my sister."

"Good luck with that," Hudson calls out, but I'm already taking the stairs two at a time. Once I find the room, I knock on the door, three quick raps.

"Everyone decent?" I holler through the wall. "It's Brady."

Inside the suite, there's a flurry of activity. Women's voices. Laughter. Protests. "Define decent?" Kasey calls out.

I roll my eyes at the door even though she can't see me. "I meant is everyone dressed. The wedding's not for two more hours. I thought some of you might change into sweatpants or whatever to be more comfortable until then. I'm tempted to change myself. So do you all have clothes on?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Kasey jokes.

I let out a long, loud groan. "Since most of you are related to me ... not really."

"What are you doing out there anyway?" she asks.

"I've got something from the groom. For you."

"Hold on!"

"Holding," I say. I lean my head against the door, bumping it with my forehead. Not that I'm impatient. But yeah. I'm impatient. I hear a second door open and shut on the other side of the wall. Then suddenly, the door to the hallway flies open. I stumble forward, and Natalie's standing there.

She is poured into an emerald dress like the very best sand in the very best hourglass. I can barely breathe this close to her curves. Her hair is up in a twist so soft and lush I want to bury my face in it. Several loose strands sweep along her neck. The pink of her skin tells me her nape is warm. I want to trace her pulse with my mouth and breathe in all her sweetness. I've already felt her heartbeat against my chest. But now I want to feel all of her forever.

Natalie's gaze moves up and down, from my dress shoes to the swoop of my hair. With each inch of her appraisal, she's bringing me to life. Then her

eyes flick to my mouth and stop there.

Oh, man.

I'd do just about anything to back this woman up against the wall and kiss her senseless.

While we're both just standing there, staring at one another, everything else disappears. *Everyone* else. Then she parts her lips. "Hi." Her voice is low and throaty.

"Hello." Under the circumstances, I'm surprised I can manage any speech at all.

Her head tips just an inch. "Did you say you have something for Kasey?"

I nod, otherwise silent and motionless. Natalie Slater is the world's most beautiful Medusa turning me to stone. Kasey moves across the room, her eyes shining beneath the arch of a veil. In the background, other women take up space. But I'm too dazzled by Natalie to see anything but her.

Nat takes a step backward, inviting me into the room, and I lumber toward her like we're attached by wires. Like I'm sucked into her wake. Like wherever she goes, I'll be dragged along behind her. Forget the lighthouse and the light. Natalie's the siren, and I'm the sailor.

"So?" Kasey cocks her head, and her smile takes on a slant too. "I know I look good, but come on, Brady. You act like you've never seen me with makeup on before."

"Yeah. No." I shake my head. "You're gorgeous, Kase. Really. Very lovely."

Natalie's eyes lock on mine, but my heart's already banging in my chest. I don't think I've got any more adrenaline to give. So I splay my hands, sweeping both arms around the room to indicate the rest of the bridesmaids. I can't seem to come up with a single woman's name. All my cousins. And the pregnant one.

What's-her-face.

"Everybody looks ... so ... pretty," I manage to grumble.

The ambassador to Breckenridge—you know, the triplet who dyed her hair blonde—cranes her neck, looking over my shoulder. "Is Hawk with you?"

"No. Uh. Sorry, Liv," I stammer. Olivia. Right. I totally knew that. "I'm actually here on a best man mission to give this to Kasey." I pull Beau's envelope out of my pocket. "From the groom."

My sister reaches out and takes the envelope from me. "What is this?"

“Beau’s wedding vows.” I square my shoulders and keep my focus off Nat or else I won’t be able to talk. “In case he forgets what he’s saying in the middle of the ceremony. Or if he messes up. He just wants you to have one perfect version of his words. I guess he worked pretty hard on them. He has everything memorized.”

The women in the room all take turns sighing and ooh-ing and ahh-ing.

“That’s so sweet,” Amber gushes. “You’ve got the second-best man in the world, Kasey.” She shrugs. “I’ve gotta give the top spot to James. Any man stuck home alone with twins gets first place.”

Kasey stares down at the envelope, her lips moving just a little. Then her eyes slowly begin to widen. “Oh, no,” she groans.

“What?” Natalie asks.

“I can’t remember *my* vows.” Kasey jerks her chin up to me. “Not a single word. I had them memorized, Brady. I swear I did.” She glances at Nat, her expression growing wild. “I knew them by heart, remember?”

“Of course you know them.”

Kasey comes toward me, grasping the lapels of my tuxedo. “Why did you let me forget my vows?” she shrieks.

“Umm. I didn’t?”

“It’s okay,” Natalie chirps. Her smile is warm. Bright. Steady. Man. I’m getting burned by her light all over again. “You’re going to be fine.” She rests a hand on Kasey’s shoulder. “I’ll bet your vows are still in your head, you’re just freaking out a little right now.”

“Performance anxiety,” I mumble. “Beau’s got it too.”

“What?” Kasey shakes her head. “No, no, no, no, no!” The tulle of her veil swishes around her face. “My mind’s a total blank. All of it’s gone. Every single word. I can’t remember any of them.”

“Just breathe.” Natalie rubs gentle circles along Kasey’s back. “It’s going to be all right. And either way, I still have that copy of the vows you gave me at the beach. You can tuck them in your bouquet in case you need them during the ceremony. Believe me. No one will care if you have to read off some squares of pink stationery. They’ll be like cue cards!”

“You’re right!” Kasey’s hands fly to her cheeks. “I forgot I gave you the only copy so Beau couldn’t sneak a peek.” She drops a hand to her chest, pressing the spot over her heart. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“It’s okay.” Nat swings her eyes over to me. “We’d do anything for you, Kasey.”

Yeah. Sure we would. Like put all our feelings on hold until after your wedding.

“On that note—” I back away slowly toward the door to the suite. “I guess my work here is done.” I look at Natalie one last time. “See you on the sand.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine



NATALIE

As the door to the suite shuts, the scene is already rolling in my head. A vision of Brady waiting at the altar, his broad shoulders filling out a black tuxedo. Or maybe he'd choose a white dinner jacket just to be different. Either way, the man is gorgeous. Yes. I said it. After getting an eyeful of Brady Graham in his tux, I'll be lucky to think of anything or anyone else.

Ever.

As for me, in this particular fantasy, I'm at the double doors of the church on Church Street in a long, creamy gown with a lacy train. Between us is a long, narrow aisle with a blush-pink runner that hopefully won't make me trip. I grip my dad's arm as he walks me down the aisle, whispering, "It's okay. I've got you, sweetheart."

Everyone I love is in this one room, on both sides of the aisle, filling the pews. The entire town of Abieville. My home. Where I belong. As a string quartet plays our song, "God Must Have Spent A Little More Time On—"

"Can I get my vows now, please?" Kasey asks, blinking at me.

"Huh?" I shake my head, yanking myself out of the dream. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"The vows." Kasey tips her head.

"Oh, right, the vows! I stuck them in my beach bag and kept the bag with me all week just to be sure Beau wouldn't have access. I brought that stupid bag everywhere." I laugh, moving over to the couch where I piled all my things this morning before getting dressed. Digging around inside the bag, I come up with a lip gloss, sunblock, a hairbrush, extra headbands. The box of Sharpies from two nights ago. My phone charger. Brady's sweatshirt. A wave of his scent washes over me, making my head spin. But the vows aren't in

here.

Where are the vows?

I glance at Kasey. “You saw me pull the rental agreement out of this same bag last night, right? You were there when I signed, scanned, sent.”

“Yes,” she says. Her jaw is tense. I tip the bag upside down and shake, like something might miraculously fall out from the bottom. And that’s when I remember. *Oh no.* My stomach sinks as I think back to the other night at the clinic. Brady said my beach bag got knocked over and everything tumbled out.

Kasey wrinkles her nose. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll be right back.”

“Why? Where are you going?” Her face goes white as a sheet under her makeup. I can’t let her down. She picked me to be her maid of honor. She trusted me with her vows. I was her first choice for this, and I won’t fail her now.

“Everything is going to be fine,” I tell her, already striding toward the door. I grab the knob and turn to meet her gaze one more time. “Trust me. I’ve got this.” I grin at her with more confidence than I feel. “Do NOT worry!”

Lifting the hem of my dress, I kick off my heels just outside the suite and take off down the hall. Hopefully I can catch Brady and send him over to the clinic. Then he can grab the vows for me and get back here before the ceremony. We’ve still got plenty of time. Except Brady’s not in the hall. Or on the stairs. When I reach the lobby, the place is empty except for Hudson. The tile is cold on my bare feet. *Fantastic.*

I approach Hudson at the front desk. “You’re not working at the pub today?”

“Nah. I do check-in and check-out duty on weekends. But I’ll be coordinating food service later at the wedding.”

“Ah. Good.” I glance out the window. The front of the inn is deserted too. “Did Brady Graham just come through here?”

“Yeah. Ford and Three grabbed him. They had cans of shaving cream and string. I think they were headed to the Slaters’ house to decorate the getaway truck.”

“In their tuxedos?”

Hudson shrugs.

“Fine. When you see Brady again, will you tell him I’m missing some

pink stationery? They're Kasey's vows. I think they fell out of my bag the other night, and maybe he knows where they are." Hudson wrinkles his nose, and I change tactics. "You know what? It's a long story."

Hudson bobs his head. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's great!" I force a smile. Outside in the parking lot, the gravel digs into my bare feet, but I can't waste time going back up to the bridal suite to get my shoes. As far as Kasey knows, I've got this situation under control. And I don't want to worry her.

We still have plenty of time.

My mom's station wagon is right where my dad left it after driving us here this morning. Her keys are exactly where I knew they'd be, in the front cup holder. Full tank of gas? Awesome! Man, I love my parents and their reliability.

I take the fastest route over the bridge and across town because I know every street here by heart. Still, it feels like forever until I get to the clinic. When I finally arrive, pulling up to the curb, I take the space right out front. No other cars are nearby.

The CLOSED sign is still showing. Dr. Swanson's probably at the hospital. But thanks to my walk with Gator and Willa the other night, I know where they keep a spare key to the side door. It's in the mouth of a ceramic bullfrog next to the welcome mat.

Anyone with half a brain would think to look in the frog after checking the mat. But nobody in Abieville would break in anywhere, not even with Preston Bender as sheriff. The people here might not be perfect, but they have big hearts and generous souls. Besides. You'd be stealing from your own cousin. Or your principal. Your little league coach.

Your high school crush.

As I head around the side to let myself in, gray clouds roll across the sun. A strong gust of wind blows a few extra strands of my hair loose. I spit them out of my mouth, ruining my lipstick. I'll have to fix myself up back at the bridal suite.

You still have time.

The side door opens right across from the wall of kennels, and I prop the door open with the bullfrog. I just want to be sure I don't accidentally lock myself in somehow. My track record with stuff like that isn't great, and I can't afford to make a mistake right now. I find LuLu curled up in a tight ball. Willa and Gator are on their feet, ears perked. They're probably

surprised by someone coming in the door. Least of all me.

“Hey, there, sweetie pies.” I approach them, and they wag their tails, snuffling at the doors of their kennels. Then I check on LuLu, watching for the gentle rise and fall of her tiny chest. There it is. Breathing in. Breathing out. This is good. The next time I see Brady, I can tell him LuLu was sleeping peacefully. I glance up at the clock above the exam room.

You still have time.

Heading down the hall to the office, I pass Brady’s locker and pause for the briefest of moments. His current notebook with the bookmark must still be inside. He says he’s got more than a dozen of them. I wonder where he keeps them all. Maybe there are more in his locker. Or in his car. At his house. Maybe on his nightstand next to his bed.

I definitely should NOT be thinking about Brady Graham’s bedroom.

Still, I’m dying to read his book. Even just a line or two. And he did say he wants to share his writing with me. But the truth is, I want to be *with* him when I read his words. And I have another important goal right now. *Don’t be selfish, Natalie.* So even though my pulse is racing with the chance to peek at Brady’s work—with his semi-permission, even—I continue up to the front of the clinic.

I need to find those vows. Maybe Brady or Dr. Swanson discovered the folded-up stationery and stuck the note on the desk. They wouldn’t even know what they were looking at. Surely they wouldn’t have read something that wasn’t theirs. But in the office, there is nothing new on the desk. There’s nothing at all on there, besides the computer and LuLu’s file. *Sigh.*

Crouching down to peer around the floor, I immediately spot the pink square of stationery. *EUREKA!* It’s wedged behind the wheel of the rolling chair. “There you are!” My cheer of triumph is so loud, I probably woke up LuLu.

You still have time.

But Kasey’s probably worried by now. So with my stupid bare feet and my messy hair and my smeared lipstick, I hurry back down the hall, clutching her vows. I make a quick stop at the kennels to say goodbye to the dogs —“See you later, sweethearts! Miss you already!”—and that’s when I smell it. Barely a whiff. Just a hint. But there’s definitely *something* in the air. Willa drops to a sit, one paw raised. Gator whimpers at me.

Smoke.

I head down the hallway to investigate, but nothing seems amiss. I test the

door between the clinic and the house with my palms. It's not hot. A good sign. So I try the knob and find it unlocked. Opening the door to the Swansons' house is my *second* mistake. The first was when I arrived and propped the door to the outside wide open with that frog.

A great gust of wind blows straight down the hall, mixing with the drafts from the Swanson's kitchen. Across the house, in a dim corner of the living room, sparks flicker around a power strip. Within seconds, flames begin to lick up the side of their couch. As black smoke curls toward the ceiling, I spot a fire extinguisher between the pantry and the stove.

Hopefully I've gotten here in time.

"Hello!" I yell, diving for the extinguisher. "Dr. Swanson? Are you here? Is anybody home?" While I take aim, the flames do a strange dance of orange and blue. "Anybody? NO ONE?" No response.

For better or worse, I'm in this alone. My heart is exploding in my chest. A voice throbs in my head: *You've got this, Natalie.*

You've got this. You've got this. You've got this.

Chapter Forty



BRADY

I swipe at a small squirt of shaving cream on my pants, and smack Ford's shoulder. Not real hard or anything. Just enough to let him know I'm annoyed. We're in the parking lot of The Beachfront Inn on our way back from decorating Beau's truck. Ford is walking on one side of me. Three's on the other. "I told you we should've changed first," I grumble.

Ford chuckles. "We didn't have time to change. And where's your sense of adventure, man?"

I eye him sideways. "It's covered in Gillette for sensitive skin."

Three splays his hands, bumping me with one of them. "If you, me, and Ford had taken the time to change into different clothes, Aunt Elaine would've definitely found us and roped everyone into some pre-wedding chore. As it is, Beau and Mac were so busy setting up hurricane lamps, they probably didn't even notice we were gone."

"Hmph." I frown.

"Anyway, you barely got any on you." Ford points at the tiny splotch. "And the two minutes it'll take for you to wet a rag and wipe that one spot on your pants will be totally worth it once Beau and Kasey see what they have to drive out of town in."

"More importantly, it's a tradition," Three says. "Every wedding in Abieville has to end with an embarrassing exit vehicle."

"Fine." I harrumph. "But when and if either of you two knuckleheads ever gets married, you'd better know I'm coming for your cars. And I'm gonna do worse."

"Good luck with that." Ford nudges me as we climb the stairs to the lobby. Once inside the lobby, I immediately flag Hudson down.

“Need any more help with the wedding setup?” I ask after sending one last frown to Ford and Three. “Sorry we took off like that, but we’re back now. Ready, willing, and able.”

“I think everything’s done,” Hudson says. “They got all the flowers for the gazebo out on the beach. The cake’s set up in the banquet hall. The caterers will be here to start prepping in the kitchen soon, so I think we’re good to go.”

“You know where Beau is now?”

“I think he and Mac went to get tarps for the gazebo. Just in case.” Hudson looks across the lobby, out the wall of windows. “Been watching those clouds roll in for a while now. Hope we don’t have to move the ceremony indoors.”

“Nah. We won’t.” Ford smirks. “Unless you believe Big Mama’s hips.”

Three snickers. “They don’t lie, Ford. They don’t lie.”

“Huh?” Hudson furrows his brow.

“Don’t listen to them,” I mutter.

“Oh, hey. Almost forgot.” Hudson cocks his head. “Did Natalie find you?”

I glance at the stairs, flash on the way she looked in her dress. “I saw her a while ago. Up in the bridal suite.”

“Yeah, no,” Hudson says. “She’s been looking for you since then. She came down right after you did, but you guys were already gone.”

Something prickles at the back of my neck. I’m sure everything’s fine. But there’s a shifting behind my ribs that says I’d better find out for sure. “Do you know what she needed?”

“Umm, Kasey’s vows, I think. She said maybe you’d know where they were? Like, they’re on some pink stationery or something? Any of this ringing a bell?”

I scratch at the back of my neck. “Yeah, I did see something like that. They were in her beach bag the other night. I must not have put them back in when all her stuff fell out. They’re probably back at the clinic.” I look at my watch. I’d still have time to run there and get them.

Hudson nods. “Well, anyway, she told me to tell you.”

I slip my phone from my pocket and try to reach her, but the call goes straight to voicemail. I dash off a quick text.

ME: I think Kasey’s vows are at the clinic. Need me to get them for you?

Happy to do it. LMK.

Striding over to the window, I make a quick check of the parking lot. Sure enough, the Slaters' station wagon is missing. I wonder if Nat headed over to the clinic to try to find the vows herself. No. She wouldn't leave Kasey this close to the wedding. I run a hand over my forehead. No sweat yet, but I do feel bad. If Nat and my sister are stressed about those vows right now, it would be at least partially my fault. I should've been more careful with Natalie's things.

In the meantime, Ford's moved over to the entrance to the pub. He's on his phone, with a hand covering his other ear. It can't be easy for him to hear with Three yammering away over at the front desk. He's been telling Hudson all about some new dating app he's trying. I'm about to head over to the front desk to tell him to quiet down when Ford ends his call. He strides over to Three and me, worry etched across his brow.

"Hey." His mouth thins to a grim line. "I gotta go."

"Now?" I frown. "You've got today off. The wedding's in an hour."

"Doesn't matter." He nods at his phone. "Chief's calling everyone in for this one, even the volunteers. It's a structure fire. People inside."

"Oh, man." Three groans.

Ford grabs my wrist. "Brady." I startle, my pulse shifting to high alert. "It's the Swansons' place."

My insides heave, a tidal wave of nausea. I yank my wrist free and slam my mouth shut to keep from vomiting. "Is it the house?" I manage to rasp. "Or the clinic?"

Neither answer is good.

"Both," Ford growls.

Within seconds we're charging toward the parking lot. A blanket of smoke plumes across the sky on the other side of the lake. Climbing into Ford's truck, I slip my phone from my pocket. I try calling Natalie. But the phone just rings and rings and rings before going to voicemail.

"Call me." It's a grunt. An order. A command. I hate being so blunt with her, but I'm too terrified to be gentle. I'm scared for the animals. For the Swansons. Natalie.

People inside.

"She's with the bridesmaids," I mutter. "Has to be." I'm sure the station wagon was only gone because Beau took it to get those tarps. Or Mrs.

Slater's running an errand. Or ...

"Who're you talking about?" Ford eyes me as he speeds across the bridge. We're going too fast, but my cousin's red truck might as well be a vehicle of the fire department. Everyone knows Ford. They trust his business. No one's going to try to slow him down, let alone stop us.

"Nat," I blurt. "I think she might be at the clinic."

"Nah. She's gotta be with Kasey," he grumbles. "Nat wouldn't leave Kase right before the wedding."

"Yeah." I heave a breath in and out. "I'm sure you're right."

"Anyway, the crew's already left the station. They'll get this under control quick."

I try calling Nat again. Ring. Ring. Ring. This time someone answers. "Hey, Brady."

"NAT!" I blurt.

"Noooo ... This is Olivia. Nat's phone kept ringing, so I answered it."

"I need her," I bark. "NOW!"

"Wow. Hold your horses." In the background, I hear Olivia call out, "Is Nat in the bathroom?" There's mumbling on the other end. "Well ... does anyone know where she went?" After another stretch of muted voices, Liv comes back to me. "Kasey says she left a while ago. She said she'd be right back. She isn't back though. Sorry."

My heart's in my throat, and I'm gasping for breath, in danger of hyperventilating. What good is it being the stable, steady lighthouse if everything you truly care about is nowhere near the water?

"Brady?" Liv's voice has gotten quiet, like she's trying not to let anyone else hear her. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," I rush to say. "Tell Kasey I'll take care of it."

"Take care of what?"

"Everything ..."

Chapter Forty-One



NATALIE

Spoiler alert: I didn't have this. Not even a little bit. I've never even held a fire extinguisher before. So when I couldn't get the stupid thing to work, I ran back into the hall, slamming the door shut behind me. I figured at least that way, there'd be a barrier between the animals and the fire while I called 911. And that's when I realized my third mistake:

I left my phone back at the inn.

So I rushed back up to the front office and grabbed the landline. I told the dispatcher I was inside Doc Swanson's clinic and there was a fire in their house. I said I didn't think the Swansons were home. But I couldn't be sure about that. Actually, I screamed all this at her.

And that's when the smoke detectors inside the Swansons' house began to wail. An earsplitting pulse that made my teeth ache. So I dropped the receiver, leaving it dangling off the desk from a cord. I couldn't take the thing with me, and I had to get the dogs out.

You have to get the dogs out.

That's my only goal now. Are the kennels locked? I can't remember if Brady had to unlock the kennels the other night. Praying I won't need to find a key, I run back to the dogs, still in my bare feet. I try LuLu's cage first. She's the most fragile. My stomach's in knots, and my throat is throbbing. What if I can't rescue any of the dogs?

As it turns out, all I have to do to release the latch is depress the buttons at the top and the bottom at the same time. The door to LuLu's cage pops open, and I suck in a breath of relief. Then I immediately choke it out. Smoke is leaking under the door now. The smoke detectors on the clinic side start to scream.

I'm running out of time.

As I scoop LuLu from her kennel, along with the blankets underneath her, her whole body trembles and quakes. Poor thing. "I'm shaking too, baby." I rush out to the street and settle LuLu into the passenger seat of the Blue Whale. "It's okay, sweet thing. You're going to be okay."

Then I shut her inside so she won't spook and injure herself trying to run away.

As I turn back toward the clinic, the sky fills with thunderclouds. They're rolling in fast and thick. I look up, expecting to see lightning. And that's when the windows along the house shatter.

Smoke pours through the broken glass, black monstrous flumes, stretching up to meet the storm clouds. I know the fire's being fed by the furniture. Overstuffed couches. Throw pillows. Afghans. Love seats. It's all pure fuel. But as bad as that is, there are probably oxygen tanks in the exam room. Which is right by the kennels.

Which is worse.

Going back inside will be a risk. If I survive, my mom's going to kill me. But I can't leave Willa and Gator in there. If I don't at least attempt to save them, I could never live with myself.

By the time I return to the side door, Gator and Willa are full-on howling. Between their cries and the smoke detectors, my eardrums are practically bursting.

Make a plan, Natalie. Think.

I can only afford to go back in one more time, so I'll have to try to rescue them together. I should've done that in the first place. The extra leashes were hanging by the lockers the other night, but I can't see anything past the hallway. The air's too thick with smoke.

I could just open their kennels and chase them out of the clinic to run free. That would be safer than them suffocating. Or worse. But what if they run into the woods? Or into the street and a car comes by?

WHY AREN'T ANY CARS COMING BY?

The blood in my veins feels like hot lava and dry ice. I'm shivering and sweating at the same time. My bare feet are freezing. My insides are boiling. What is wrong with me?

Stop it, Nat. Get a hold of yourself. Willa and Gator are counting on you.

That's when I hear sirens in the distance. Firetrucks. My knees want to buckle with relief. I'm ready to fall to the ground and surrender to those

better equipped for emergencies. But there's no time to waste. I can't wait for help to arrive. So I close my eyes, cover my mouth, and plunge back inside toward the kennels. I've got one more chance. I have to get Willa and Gator out.

Now.

Chapter Forty-Two



BRADY

When Ford's truck flies around the last corner to the clinic, my heart feels like it's about to combust. If I didn't know better, I'd think it already had. Up ahead, I spy a rectangle of blue halfway down the block. The Slaters' station wagon.

Natalie's here.

The rest of the street is blocked by firetrucks, so Ford slows up, and I leap out before he comes to a stop. Then I take off at a sprint. Firefighters surround the property, yellow figures working in the smoke. Hoses. Ladders. Water arching in great streams. Half the building is engulfed in flames.

The house half.

Please let her be safe.

"NATALIE!" I scream. All the breath empties from my lungs. I'm running directly at the structure, pure adrenaline pumping through me.

"Hey!" a man shouts. "Get back!" He's in uniform, and I don't slow down to see who it is. Ignoring his order, I charge past him. The side door to the clinic is wide open. A gaping mouth. Black like death.

Dark clouds clog the sky now. Great towers of gray mixing with the smoke. "NAT!" I yell again. But there's too much noise. Shouts. Water. Flames. Fire is loud.

Louder than my fear.

Craning my neck, I try to see something through the haze. My torso is nothing but a cave and a sledgehammer. I'm about to charge inside, when someone grabs my forearm.

Ford.

I try to yank my arm away, but he clamps down tight. "Let me go!"

He throws both his arms around my body. “No.” My cousin’s a big guy, and he’s doing his best to hold me back, so I have to thrash hard to free myself. Once I escape his grip, I round on him, sweat pouring down my face.

So what if I die? I can’t live without Natalie. I don’t want to live without her. “I’ve got to find Nat!”

“Brady.” A vein throbs on his forehead. “You can’t go in there, man.”

“Watch me.” I spin around to sprint into the building—desperate and half blinded by sweat or tears or both—when I spot a flash of green at the back of the ambulance. Blonde hair turned gray with smoke.

“NATALIE!”

She’s soaked and covered in soot. There’s a blanket across her shoulders and an oxygen mask over her mouth. When I reach her side, she pulls off the mask and collapses into my arms.

“Oh, Brady.”

She shudders against me, her whole body wracked with sobs. Her hands claw their way up my coat, gripping my lapels in her fists, and I gather her to me. She’s so close I feel like she could crawl right into my chest. “I tried so hard,” she chokes. “I went in twice. But I couldn’t—”

“You’re safe.” I stroke her wet, smoky hair. “You’re safe. You’re safe.”

Thank God she’s safe. I feel like I need to repeat this a thousand times. Once for each beat of my heart since Ford took that call from the chief.

“I wanted to go in a third time,” she sputters. “They wouldn’t let me.”

So there must’ve been something—or someone—that still needed to be saved. But I can’t even let myself think about anything but her. Not the Swansons or their house or the clinic or the dogs—oh, God, LuLu.

I suck in a breath, then quickly shake off the despair. My heart can ache for other losses later. Right now, all that matters is Natalie is alive. I just need her to be okay.

“Of course you couldn’t go in a third time,” I murmur. “You shouldn’t have tried.”

Never mind the fact that I was about to charge inside the burning building to save *her*. And that I know this wouldn’t have been brave. My running into the clinic would’ve just made things harder on the firefighters. I know this.

How many times have I heard Ford talk about civilians who want to help and only make their jobs riskier? But I wasn’t thinking, and I couldn’t stop myself. Love made me an idiot. Single-minded, all-consuming, beyond-reason love.

“I love you,” I whisper into Natalie’s smoky hair. “I love you. I love you. I love you.” I’m cradling her to my chest now, hoping she can hear the rumble of my words through her tears. Slowly, gently, she arcs her chin up, blinking at me. Lashes wet and thick. Eyes bluer than the lake. I’d dash my boat against the shore if I stared at her too long.

“I love you too,” she says. “So much.”

My eyes sting. Smoke. Tears. Fear. Relief. An entire spectrum of emotions. And Natalie’s an anchor tethering me to the earth. Otherwise I might take off like a rocket into space. With her, I’m grounded. Here. Right where I’m supposed to be.

Suddenly, off to the side, I hear a commotion. Dogs barking. More than one, from the sound of it. Natalie said she went in twice. Hopefully this means she was able save at least two of them. I almost can’t bear to look. But I slowly turn, and there’s Doc Swanson standing across the street.

He’s crouched down with Willa and Gator, one on either side of him. He waves at me with a trembling hand. His face is pale. Eyes sunken. He looks understandably shaken, and I want to go to him, but I can’t leave Natalie.

“Dr. Swanson showed up right after the first firetruck arrived,” she snuffles. “He was planning to meet the owners here.” She shakes her head, then presses her face against my chest again. “I’d just gotten Willa and Gator out. Crazy timing.”

I’m flooded with equal parts gratitude and agony, and my vision swims. Nat couldn’t go in a third time. She was able to save Willa and Gator, but not

—
“LuLu,” I moan.

Natalie straightens, releasing my coat. Then she points behind me. “The paramedic already checked her.” I turn and see LuLu curled up in a blanket in the middle of an orange stretcher. Both her ears perk, hair sticking up every which way. Her tiny body makes the ambulance look like a cavern. LuLu is safe too. I heave out a breath.

“But you said you couldn’t go in a third time.”

She nods. “I got LuLu to my car first, then I took Gator and Willa together.”

I fumble for my words, doing the math. The dogs got out. Doc Swanson was safe. Mrs. Swanson’s in the hospital.

“Why did you want to go back in?”

Her gaze skips away from mine, and she bites her lip. Her voice hitches.

“I wanted to get your notebook,” she says.

“What? No!” My eyes are slits of disbelief. “Natalie!”

“I know.” Her voice hitches and cracks. She’s still looking at her feet. “I shouldn’t have ... it was dumb ... I was being ...” she stutters. “But you said you transfer your notes at night, so I knew there was stuff you didn’t have saved yet. And I just thought if your parents could see your work ...”

“Nat.” I shake my head, overwhelmed by how much this woman would risk for me. I need to be twice as willing to take a chance on my dream. “I have other notebooks at home. Lots of them.” She lifts her gaze, eyes skittering to mine, and my pulse accelerates. “I’ve got complete drafts of books,” I say. “There’s an entire series on my laptop already. What I haven’t had is the guts to do anything about it.” I slide my hand into Natalie’s. “Until now.”

Even as the words pass my lips, I feel the first drops of rain land on my head. Natalie looks up and I count the raindrops sprinkling her face.

One. Two. Four. Ten.

They dribble down her cheekbones and run along my jaw. A jagged flash of lightning splits the sky. Five seconds later, there’s a sharp crack of thunder. And as we stand there, gaping and grateful, the sky opens up in a summer rainstorm.

Chapter Forty-Three



NATALIE

Sloane's FaceChat call comes in at nine on Monday morning, which is only six o'clock her time. This woman really *is* an early riser. Then again, she's got summer school today. That's why she's not here for the wedding in the first place. I'm in bed, still at my parents' house for the next two days. So I lean back against the pillows and take the call.

"NATALIE!" she shrieks, her dark eyes wide, mouth even wider. She's perched on the mustard-colored couch I was sitting on last week. So much has changed since then. Everything's changed. "I JUST TALKED TO KASEY!" She shakes her head, and her black curls bounce. "THEY'RE ON THEIR WAY TO BORA BORA!"

"Yes. I know."

"ARE YOU OKAY?"

I nod, and a smile tugs my lips. "I'm fine," I say. "Just fine." I'm keeping my voice down—almost a whisper—not only so the rest of the household can't hear me, but also to encourage Sloane to be a little quieter. She's a teacher. I feel like she should recognize someone setting a good example.

"WERE YOU SO, SO SCARED? I HAD NO IDEA YOU WERE SO, SO BRAVE." So much for Sloane taking the hint to lower her volume.

So, so much.

"WHAT HAPPENED? TELL ME EVERYTHING!"

I tilt my head. "I thought Kasey already told you."

She wrinkles her nose. "WHY ARE YOU TALKING SO QUIETLY?"

"It's just that I think my parents might still be sleeping. It was a reeeeeeally long weekend."

"Ohhhhh." Sloane grimaces. "I can only imagine. I feel so bad I couldn't

be there to help.”

“We worked it out,” I say.

Sloane nods, chewing her lip. “The important thing is Kasey and Beau are married now.”

“Exactly. And all things considered, the wedding was still beautiful.”

“Kasey said you had to move the ceremony inside?”

I nod. “The storm soaked everything. Even some parts of the inn flooded. But it was a blessing, really. In the end, the rain helped put the fire out.”

“Kasey told me.” A crease takes over her forehead. “That doctor and his wife. Their place is in bad shape, right?”

“Yeah.” My shoulders sag. “The fire chief said it’s going to take months to rebuild. If not a full year. Especially since they’ll be dealing with their insurance company through the entire process.”

“But you saved those dogs’ LIVES!” Sloane gushes. “It’s incredible.”

I wave her comment away. Instead of feeling proud, guilt claws up my throat. “I should’ve saved the whole place,” I say. “Who knew you had to pull the pin out of a fire extinguisher to make it work?”

“Uhhh ... everybody knows that,” Sloane says. When I flinch, she bursts into laughter. “I’m only kidding! *I* had no idea. But your face looked so serious. I felt like maybe a joke was in order.”

“Ahh. Yes. Good one.” I force out a low chuckle. I hope Sloane’s still laughing after she hears what I’m about to tell her. “Anyway.” I draw in a deep breath. “There’s something else—”

“Kasey told me!”

I scrunch up my face. “She did?”

“About you and her brother!”

Warmth seeps through me, despite the strangeness of the past week. There was a lot of loss, sure. But so much was gained too. *So, so much*. And in about an hour, Brady will be having his own important conversations. And I’ll be with him all the way.

Sloane arches an eyebrow. “That man is gorgeous with a capital G. I don’t blame you for going after him.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly *go after him*. But yes, we’re interested in seeing where the thing between us might go ...”

“Kasey told me!”

What didn’t Kasey tell Sloane?

“I guess I’ll be seeing a lot more of that big, beautiful hunk of a man

when he visits. But don't worry." Sloane moves her face closer to the screen. "I promise to keep my hands out of the cookie jar."

Cookie jar? Huh. That's a metaphor I haven't thought of for Brady.

"You're right. Brady will be visiting," I say. "But he really loves living in Abieville, though. This town is home for him."

Sloane purses her lips. "Kasey told me."

"So if you were open to it, I have an idea."

"Okayyyyyy." Sloane draws the word out, and her head tips on an angle.

"You know Kasey's friend, Amber."

She squares her shoulders. "Of course I do. She's at the apartment all the time. Or she used to be, when Kasey lived here. I like Amber. She's nice. And funny. Although I was a little jealous *she* was able to make it to the wedding. Even though she's pregnant. And her husband had to stay behind with their twins. But not *everyone* can just pick up and leave their jobs, right?"

My stomach twists. That's for sure. Hopefully some people can, though. "We all really wished you could've been here too. *Especially* Amber."

"Yeah. Amber's nice."

"And funny," I add. "Like you said. I enjoyed meeting her *almost* as much as I enjoyed meeting you."

Sloane's mouth curls up, sneaking into a smile. "We did have fun together, right?"

"We did." I nod. "But here's the thing: Amber's sister wants to be closer to her when the baby comes."

"Kasey told me! And I totally get that. I love babies! So, so much!"

"So." I swallow hard. "So." This is it. I'll only get one shot to present my idea. "Amber's due in about five months, and I was wondering ... if maybe her sister could come out to visit us between now and then. And if you two get along—and Wyatt meets her—maybe Amber's sister could be a good fit to take over my room. The one that used to be Kasey's, I mean. Not right away. But later. After the baby comes."

"Wait." Sloane blinks. "What?"

I hike my mouth into a smile. "I'll absolutely honor my whole lease if this is a bad idea. But." My shoulders inch toward my ears. "You like babies. You also said you like Amber. She's nice. She's funny. And if Amber's sister is living with you, you'd probably get to see Amber's kids, and Amber, and the baby, and—"

“Ohhhhh. I get it now.” Sloane bobs her head. More curls bouncing. “This is so you can end up in Abieville, right? To be with Brady?”

I clear my throat. My mouth is so dry, I can barely speak. But I have to be honest with her. With myself. “That’s a possibility.”

“Kasey did *not* tell me this.”

And that makes sense. Since I was a kid, I had my heart set on getting out of this town for good, but after less than a week home, I’m already missing this place, and I haven’t even left yet.

As it turns out, being with my parents has been kind of amazing. And I don’t mind my mom fawning over me nearly as much as I expected. Then there was the fire.

After Three told everyone at the inn what was going on, the entire wedding entourage raced to the scene. The rest of the town poured in slowly. So many people, and so much support, the fire department had to put up blockades.

But the love was overwhelming. My heart’s still overflowing with the goodness of this town. Then there’s the fact that Kasey and Beau will probably be moving. I just want to be flexible about where I land going forward. Where Brady and I land together.

Sloane leans back against the couch. “What about *your* job?”

“Yeah.” I nod, mustering as much optimism as I can. “I’m planning to call the supervisor at St. Joe’s later today. I was just one of the new nurses he’d hired, and he told us they get new applicants all the time. So I’m hoping five or six months is plenty of notice for him to find someone to replace me. *If* he needs to replace me. Which we’re not even sure about yet.”

“Hmm.” Sloane slouches closer to the screen again, eyes in a serious squint as she studies me. “No. I can tell. It’s written all over your face. You’re already sure about all of this. Mr. Gorgeous Graham has got you so, so gone.”

So, so much.

“You’re probably right.” No, Sloane is *definitely* right. But being so, so gone for Brady isn’t a bad thing. In fact, it’s kind of the best thing ever. “He’s pretty great.” I shrug, and my skin flushes pink. I can feel the heat from my toes to my cheeks.

“You do look super happy,” Sloane says, still examining my face. “So are you planning to fly into LAX on Wednesday? We can talk more about all this then, if that’s cool with you. Right now, I’ve got some lesson planning to do.

Then I'm meeting friends at the beach. This skin's not gonna tan itself."

My stomach does another flip-flop thinking about that flight. "Yes. I'm still flying in on Wednesday."

"I can pick you up from the airport if you want."

"Thanks, Sloane." I smile at her. "That would be wonderful."

"I'm pretty wonderful."

"You are," I say. "Thank you so, so much."

Chapter Forty-Four



BRADY

As we cross The Beachfront's lobby, I reach for Natalie's hand. This is a thing I look forward to doing a whole lot more of in the future. Everyone else I asked to join us is already seated inside the pub.

Doc Swanson's at one end of a big corner table. Mac's taking up the other end. My mom and dad are in the high-backed chairs nearest the window.

"Hey, everyone," I say. "Thanks so much for coming." Oh, man. My heart's already dancing in my chest. I steal a glance at Natalie, and she nods to reassure me. Then she sets a basket of fresh-baked muffins in front of Doc Swanson.

"For me?" he asks. His smile is tired. But still. He smiles.

"For you and Mrs. Swanson," she says. "Just a little something from my mother."

"Well, please tell her thanks from us. And help yourselves, everybody," he says. "Wendy and I couldn't eat all these if we tried."

I pull out a chair for Natalie, then slide into the seat next to her. Looking around the table, imagining what's about to happen, I'm gonna need more access to her hand.

"How are you holding up?" I ask Doc Swanson.

"We're counting our blessings for sure." He bobs his head. "Dr. Tinsdale—he's got that practice over in Southampton—he kindly agreed to take care of our clients for now."

"He's a good man."

"Yes, he is. And Wendy's coming home later today." Dr. Swanson shakes his head, mouth on an angle. "I mean she's coming *here*. They've got a real nice suite set up for us until we figure out our next steps." He turns to

Natalie, nodding at her. “But things could’ve been so much worse if it weren’t for this little lady here. We all owe you a debt of gratitude. Wendy and I. Willa. Gator. LuLu. All of their people.” His eyes wrinkle at the corners. “Everyone sure is grateful for what you did. Getting them out safe.”

Natalie presses a hand to her cheek. “You’ve already thanked me more than I deserve.”

Doc Swanson slides his gaze over to me. “And Wendy loves the flowers you sent her, son. They’re almost as beautiful as my wife. I’m not sure I had a chance to tell you that yet. Been kinda busy.” He chuckles, running a hand over his balding scalp. I’m kind of shocked the man can laugh at a time like this. “I brought them up to our room so they’ll be here when Wendy’s released. A little bright spot in her day. Anyway, she sends her thanks to you.”

“Least I could do.” *And please don’t thank me until you’ve listened to everything I’ve got to say.* “So I asked you all to come here for a reason,” I begin, but Doc Swanson interrupts.

“Ahem.” He clears his throat, steepling his fingers in front of him. “Before you start, son, I’ve got some news that might be a little hard to hear. Or a lot hard. My stomach’s been sick about it for the past forty-eight hours, and I just want to get this over with. Ripping off the Band-Aid, so to speak.”

The cords in my neck start to throb. *What’s going on?*

“The clinic’s in pretty bad shape now, as you all know.” His fingers tremble, and he pulls his hands into his lap. “The fire started in the house, but it spread so quickly. Thanks to the fire department—and the storm—the structure survived. But the smoke and the water ... well ... the damage is ...” His voice trails off. I wait a beat. When he doesn’t continue, I jump in.

“That’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about today.” I cut my eyes to Mac. When he nods for me to continue, I shift my focus back to Doc Swanson. “Everyone here knows I’ve been socking away money for vet school for a few years now. And I’ve got a decent amount saved. About a third, maybe. I was going to take out loans for the rest, but a couple days ago, Mac offered to pay the tuition.” I take a beat. “All of it.”

“ACK!” My mother clutches her chest and sucks in so much air, I’m surprised a tornado doesn’t kick up in the middle of the pub.

Mac cocks his head. “You all right, Aunt Elaine?”

“Here.” Doc Swanson shoves the basket of baked goods over to her. “Have a muffin.”

My father rubs at his chin. “That’s an awful lot of money, Mac.”

“A lot is relative, Uncle Phil,” Mac says. “Terrible pun unintended. But McCoy Construction is more successful now than I think my dad ever imagined. And I’m just trying to find ways to give back. To put his legacy to good use.” Mac’s voice is thick with emotion. “My dad would’ve wanted that too.”

“Mac’s right.” I plant my hands on the table. “Uncle Ted always funded projects he believed in. Like that big library in Apple Valley.”

“Exactly,” Mac says.

“Which is why the two of us talked”—I turn to Doc Swanson—“and we want to redirect the money he offered me to you.”

“ACK!” Another gasp from my mother. She reaches for a muffin.

“Mac and I want to make sure the clinic—and your house—gets rebuilt bigger and better than ever.”

“Oh, no.” Doc Swanson’s shoulders slump. “I can’t let you do that, son.”

“Please,” I say. “You absolutely can. I know you’ve got insurance, but all the red tape will take a lot of time to process. And even then, the funds will probably be limited. You and Mrs. Swanson deserve the best of everything. And we can give that to you. Well, Mac can, anyway.”

Mac leans across the table. “I offered you the money first, Brady. You’re the one being generous.”

“Oh, dear.” Doc Swanson shakes his head. “You’re both so kind. And this makes what I’ve got to say even harder.”

“Here!” my mother garbles, over a mouthful of muffin. She shoves the basket of baked goods back to him.

“I can’t eat.” He drops his eyes. “Not until I tell you all, Wendy and I decided we aren’t going to reopen the clinic.” He shifts in his seat, voice thick. “Of course, we’ll make sure the place is rebuilt. Both sides of it. We wouldn’t dream of leaving a burned-out shell in our neighborhood. But then, after the repairs are finished, we’re going to sell it. As a home.” He lifts his gaze to mine, slowly. “We know you’ve been counting on working there, son ...”

“Actually I—”

“And then taking over after you finish school.”

“But that’s the thing, I—”

“Please.” Doc Swanson throws up a hand. “Let me finish, son.” He gulps. “This latest blip with Wendy—her ending up in the hospital and all—well, it

got us thinking. We only have a certain amount of time left on this earth, and we don't want to waste another minute of it."

"What are you going to do?" my dad asks before I can.

"We think it's time to start living our dream." Doc Swanson's shoulders hitch up. "To retire and move to Florida."

"Fluff-iff-uh?" my mother coughs over her muffin. She holds up a hand and gulps. "Does this mean Brady gets to keep the money?"

Doc Swanson's mouth sweeps up on one side. "It was his in the first place."

Mac cocks his head. "Whatever Brady wants works for me."

"Hmph." My mother shoves another piece of muffin in her mouth.

Natalie reaches for my hand, entwines her fingers with mine.

"Thanks for the offer, Mac." I square my shoulders. "But I think you're going to need to find another place to invest." I pause for a beat, shifting my jaw. It's springy as a mousetrap. Man. I'm so tired of being tense. "I'll be happy to give some advice about where to put it. But I'm not going to take your money."

"I respect that." Mac nods, like he's not surprised. But the arch to his eyebrow says he's curious.

"Mom." I flick my gaze to my father. "Dad." I look at Doc Swanson last. He's probably the easiest and the hardest one in the room for me to face right now. "I have something to tell you all too." I take a beat, digging around in my chest. I expect to feel a heaviness there. Even some dread. But instead, I feel a loosening. This is a weight that needs to be lifted. I should've gotten this out a long time ago. "Idon'twanttobeavet," I say in a rush. A wave of relief floods through me. I've finally spoken the words. But then I glance around the table.

"Huh?" my dad asks.

"Wuff?" my mother chokes.

Doc Swanson pushes his glasses up his nose. "What did you say, son?"

Great. They didn't understand me. And now I've got to say it again. So I draw in a long breath and repeat myself. Slow and steady this time. "I. Don't. Want. To. Be. A. Vet."

"ACK!" My mother drops the rest of her muffin on the floor.

"Easy, Elaine." My dad tosses another one at her.

"Brady." Doc Swanson's eyes are wide and kind. "I had no idea."

"That's because I never told you," I say. "You were all so supportive

from the beginning, I felt like I couldn't be honest. Mom, I think you always liked the idea more than I did. But sometimes we end up wanting something completely different." Another squeeze of my hand from Natalie. She always knows what I need. And when.

My dad's got his head cocked, studying my face. "So if you don't want to go to vet school anymore, what *do* you want?"

"Actually, Dad, I want to write. Not as a hobby. But as a career." *This is it.* My pulse picks up, racing now. "In fact, I already have been writing. A whole lot. For a while now. In all my spare time."

My dad cocks his head. "What do you mean, you've been writing?" His forehead collapses into wrinkles. "Newspaper articles? Recipes? Obituaries?"

"Books." I glance at my mom, who's looking a little lost without a muffin in her face. Of course this is hard for my parents to understand. I've never been fully honest with them before. But no more beating around the bush. It's not fair to them or to me.

"I know this is a lot to take in. But for the past two years, I've practiced outlining, plotting, setting a scene. Creating dialogue. I've drafted more than one book along the way. I've got a whole series, actually."

"Hoo, boy." My father huffs out a breath, shaking his head. "How in the world did you even learn to do that?"

"I took online classes. Read a ton of craft books. I've listened to more podcasts than I can count. I worked at it, Dad. Hard."

My mom puts a hand to her throat like she's strangling herself. Yeah, I figured she'd be disappointed. But it's too late now. I'm all in. I turn to Dr. Swanson next. "I always thought you were counting on me to take over for you. And I wasn't gonna let you down, sir. But now that the clinic is closing, I think ..." I cut myself off. "No, I *know*. I want to take the money I've saved for vet school and fund my publishing expenses."

"Ahhh." My mother drops her arms. "Kind of like ... being ... an author?"

"Yes, Mom. Exactly like being an author."

My dad snorts and wheezes and guffaws all at once. It's a soup of disbelief. "You're telling me my son wants to be the next Dan Brown?"

"Oh, no, dear." My mother waves his comment away like she's got a better idea. "How about the next James Patterson?"

"I don't think so." I drag a hand across the back of my neck, feeling the truth of it. "I want to be the first B. R. Graham. And for the record, he writes

mysteries.”

“Mysteries. Hmmm.” My mother blows out a breath, and a speck of muffin sticks to her chin. “Can I ask you something?” I open my mouth to answer, but she’s already moved on to her question. “How come you never said anything to us?”

A smile tugs the edge of my lips. “Probably because of the look on your face right now.”

“What look?” She squawks. “This is just my face!”

“Admit it.” I frown. “You’re disappointed. And I never wanted that.”

She shakes her head. “I’m only disappointed you didn’t trust your father and me enough to tell us the truth before.”

Now the heaviness is back, a giant boulder in my gut. She’s absolutely right. I didn’t trust them. Instead of being real with my parents, I always kept things on the surface. I kept them at a distance. And I did the same with Natalie. With Beau. And Kasey. I’ve been going through the motions, afraid of other people’s reactions. I became Broody Brady, a guy who made *nobody* happy.

“You’re right. I should’ve told you sooner.” I clear my throat, scrubbing a hand over my mouth. “And I’m sorry. To all of you.”

“Don’t apologize to me,” Doc Swanson says. “You were just trying to be loyal.” He splays his hands. “If Wendy and I had been honest about what we wanted earlier ...”

“Don’t do that, either,” Natalie says to everyone at the table. “You’re all good people doing your best.”

“Yes!” My mother pipes up. “It’s like I always say.” She lifts a finger. “When you know better, you do better!”

“Ha!” My dad barks out a laugh. “I think someone else might’ve coined that phrase first, Elaine.”

“Oh, no, no.” She frowns. “That was *definitely* me, Phil.”

“Fine, dear. Whatever you say.” He scoots his chair back and stands, coming around the table to my side. “Brady?” He nods, indicating I should stand too. I glance around, wondering what’s going on.

“Okay.” I slowly rise from the table. When I straighten to my full height, I’m almost a half-foot taller than he is. And yet, I still feel like a kid wanting to please my father. He reaches for my hand and gives it a firm shake.

“It takes a real man to do what you just did.”

“Dad.” My throat constricts. An esophagus of emotion.

“No. Really.” He meets my gaze. “That couldn’t have been easy for you to admit. And I know I’ve made things harder on you than they had to be. I probably said plenty of stuff that made you think you couldn’t tell us you wanted to be Dan Brown.”

“Or James Patterson,” my mother chimes in.

My dad jerks his chin in my mom’s direction. “Then there’s this one.” A smile skims across his face. “I love your mother, but she’s a real piece of work. With all her talk about having a doctor for a son. That couldn’t have been easy.”

I bite back the lump in my throat. “I just want to make you both proud.”

He claps me on the back. “I am proud,” he says. “Your mother is too. Right, Elaine?”

“Of course I am!” she pipes up. “Maybe you could write a series of medical mysteries! Dr. Graham Solves The Case.”

“Don’t listen to her,” my dad says. “I think a series of murders on the golf course is the way to go.”

“Thanks, Dad. I’ll have to give it some thought.”

“Good.” His face swoops into a grin. “Now let’s talk royalties ...”

Chapter Forty-Five



NATALIE

“You okay?” Brady asks. His window is down, so the air is blowing his hair straight off his face. “Or are you nervous?” He reaches for my hand. Gives it a squeeze. I nod, wiping my other sweaty palm on my skirt.

Yes, I’m okay. And yes, I’m nervous. I’m also afraid my voice will crack if I say that out loud, so I keep my focus on the road, and try not to think about the next twelve hours. Two layovers, three planes, a one-way ticket. Zero Brady. We’re only a few minutes from the airport. Only a few minutes from goodbye.

My stomach twists, and my nose starts to sting. “I’m going to miss you so much,” I say.

His jaw flexes at the edge. “Yeah. Me too.”

We’ve been together almost constantly since the fire. Five whole days. But five days wasn’t nearly enough. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough time with Brady. There’s no such thing when you want all the moments. All the hours, days, weeks, months, years. We were just getting started, and soon I’ll be boarding a plane—make that three separate planes—and flying thousands of miles away.

Be grateful, Nat. Be happy you’re here with him right now. In this truck. With his hand in yours. Your sweaty, sweaty hand.

“I’m surprised your mom didn’t sneak into your bag.” He snorts, trying to cheer me up. “Then again, did you actually check to be sure Betty Slater’s not hiding in that pink carry-on?”

“Oof.” I grimace. “No.”

“Well, after you’re settled in,” he says, “let me know if there’s anything you need that you didn’t pack. I’ll send it to you.”

Send it to me. I swallow the lump in my throat. If he's trying to keep up a steady stream of conversation to make me less nervous, this isn't helping.

"Oh, hey." He tries again. "Did you see Kasey's Instagram?"

"Umm-hmm."

"She was wearing that bikini." He tilts his head. "That blue one of yours."

"Turquoise," I say, and my mouth finally curls up. He got me to smile, even with more sand in my throat than there is on the shore at The Beachfront. He just keeps trying until he hits on a subject I can't resist.

"Turquoise. That's right." A slow grin sneaks across his face. "So that suit was for her all along, huh?"

"Umm-hmm."

"Now I kind of wish I could've seen it on you." He lets go of my hand and slowly feathers two fingers up my arm, skating over to my collarbone. I'm wearing a tank top, and a flush blooms across my skin. My breath quickens.

Two can play at that game.

Taking his hand from my collarbone, I lift it to my lips, dusting a kiss on each of his fingertips. One, two, three, four. When I plant my mouth on his thumb, he groans like I'm torturing him.

"I have to drive, Natalie."

"You started it." I laugh. As messed up as my emotions are right now, I can't believe I'm actually laughing. And this is exactly why I need Brady Graham around me, always.

"There's the airport, up ahead." He points like I can't see it.

"I'm not ready," I say.

"Yes, you are." He nods. "You can do anything, Natalie. Whatever you set your mind to. I've seen it."

"Oh, yeah? Then how come I'm such a wimp when it comes to planes? Even children fly. Little babies fly!" My breath hitches. "And how come I'm so pathetic when it comes to leaving you?"

"Well." He lets out a long, loud sigh. "Nobody's perfect." He flashes me a smile, then takes the turnoff that leads to the area for departures. A sign reads PASSENGER UNLOADING.

Unloading. Ugh.

More than anything, I wish Brady could come to California with me. And I know he *wants* to come. We talked about it. A lot. But he's got responsibilities right now. He's going to help Doc Swanson and Mrs.

Swanson with the restoration of their home. It's a huge salvage effort and will take a lot of hands. Brady needs to stay. At least for now. His big, generous heart is part of why I love him so much. And I can't ask him to change it. I don't want to ask. So if we're meant to be together forever, then forever will have to come in its own good time. This is what my brain knows. I'm still working on the translation into heart-speak.

As we approach the drop-off zone, Brady jerks his chin at a pack of people taking up half the curb. They're all holding signs and banners and balloons. There's no space for anyone else to unload.

"Wait. Is that—" My voice trails off. I'm absolutely speechless.

Ford and Lettie are right up front next to Nella and Three. Tess, Darby, and Olivia are behind them with Aunt Remy and Big Mama. Brady's Aunt Ann and Uncle Irv are here too, plus his Auntie Mae and Uncle Cubby. Even Grant and Molly showed up. And Shannon and Paige? Oh, wow. I didn't even have time to see them this week, and they're here. My heart swells as I see my parents and Brady's parents and—

"Is that Hudson and Patrick?" My eyes pop wide. "Ha! They barely know me!"

"What can I say?" Brady chuckles. "You make a great first impression."

"How did all these people get off work?"

"Come on." Brady arches a brow. "We're from Abieville. We run the town."

Blinking back tears, I read all their signs, mostly variations of *Good luck, Natalie* and *We'll miss you, Nat!* and *Come back soon!* and *Spread your wings!* Except for Olivia's. Her sign says *Don't forget sunblock!*

I cough out a laugh, and turn to Brady. "So you knew about this?"

"You could say that." A muscle at his forehead tics like he's trying not to laugh. "I thought for sure you'd figure it out." He surrenders to a grin. "Especially when your mom wasn't there when I picked you up this morning. Almost everyone else got to see you at the wedding. But you know your parents. They wouldn't let you leave without saying goodbye."

"You're right." I sniffle and nod, my voice breaking. "I did think that was kind of weird."

"Go on." He nods at the crowd. "Your fans are waiting."

I climb out of the truck, heading toward my family and friends, moving from person to person, one at a time. I'm hugging and sniffing and swiping at my nose. As each person tells me goodbye, more tears stream down my

face. Brady hangs back, waiting until I'm done. Then, while Ford gets my carry-on out of the truck, Brady leads me away, out of earshot. For one more moment, it's just the two of us. "So. You have your phone?" he asks.

"Yes."

"And a charger?"

"Yes."

"See? You've got this, Natalie. You can do it, right?"

I let out a long, shuddering breath. "Umm-hmm."

"I'd rather hear you say it out loud."

I gulp. "I can do this," I squeak.

"Good." He presses a tender kiss on top of my head. I nod, chewing my lip, and choking back hiccupy sobs. "And this isn't goodbye," he says.

"Okay." *Hic. Hic.*

He puts a finger under my chin, gently tipping my face to his. "No, I mean it *really* isn't goodbye."

"Okay." *Hic. Hic.* I blink up at him.

"Because I'm going to fly with you."

I shake my head, bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

He locks eyes with me. "You and I both know you're strong enough to do this on your own, but you don't have to. Not this time. Not anymore. Not if you don't want to."

"Brady," I breathe out. My heart careens around my body, doing backflips on the inside. I'm basically a circus performer on an internal trapeze.

"I'm going to hold your hand through all three flights and not let go until we land in LA. Then I'll have to come back here, but only for a little while. Because I can't be away from you for too long, Nat. I don't want to be away from you. So I'm going to keep going back and forth until we figure out where we want to land forever."

"Are you serious?"

"Totally, completely serious."

While half of Abieville stands there cheering us on, I leap into Brady's arms, and he spins me around until I'm as dizzy as a bridesmaid playing Pin the Heart on Nicolas Cage.

The whole next hour is a blur of checking luggage, buying snacks, and stealing kisses behind airport pillars. As it turns out, I'm excellent at stealing kisses behind airport pillars. When we finally board and settle into our seats,

Brady takes my hand. Just like he promised.

“Hold on,” I say. “I need to message my family before we take off.”
Digging in my purse, I slip out my phone, and that’s when I see it.

They all beat me to the punch.

MOM: I love you!

DAD: I love you!

BEAU: I love you!

KASEY: I love you!

The last text is from just two minutes ago.

BRADY: I love you, Natalie Slater!

“Ha!” I suck in a breath. “When did you do that?”

He tilts his head. “I’m a man of many talents.”

My eyes dip to his lips. “Well, you *are* an excellent kisser. If this author thing doesn’t work out—”

“Hey.” He stops my talking with his mouth.

Epilogue

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with two symmetrical, curved, scroll-like elements extending downwards from the center.

BRADY

I'm standing on the right side of the altar in the Abieville Church. On Church Street. Instead of a monochromatic tuxedo, I went with black pants and a white dinner jacket. You know. Just to be different. Up here next to me are some of the absolute best men on the planet. They're not just family. Or friends. They're both. You know who they are.

A lot has changed since the last wedding I attended. For one thing, I don't smell as smokey. For another, I'm a full-blown author. After releasing my first three books within three months, the series is selling pretty well. Nella and Lettie are helping out with my social media. People seem invested in B.R. Graham's mysteries. Who knew a small-town vet solving murders would be a big draw? Lucky me.

"How are you holding up?" Beau asks under his breath. "You're not gonna run out on my sister, are you?"

"Not on your life," I say.

"Good. I don't want you to have to solve your own murder in your next book."

I smirk. "And you don't want to go to jail before Kasey has the baby."

Not long after they got back from Bora Bora, Kasey and Beau moved to Chicago, which—besides being a cool city—is also a regular layover between LA and Albany. While making that connection, I saw them a few times. But I'll be cutting back now that Nat's moving home. And by home, I mean here. To Abieville.

Speaking of things that haven't changed.

The love I have for this place is stronger than ever, as is my love for the woman behind those double doors back there. I can't wait to see her. But we

need to get these bridesmaids down the aisle first. They're not just friends. Or family. They're both.

You know who they are.

While they come down the aisle, one at a time, the organist really gives it her all. And let me tell you, if you've never heard *NSYNC played on an organ, you're really missing out. But it had to be done. "God Must Have Spent a Little More Time on You" was never more appropriate than it is for my bride.

Down the row of groomsmen, Ford and Three start twittering above the music. "One step ... two steps ... breathe and waltz." I bite back a laugh at their imitation of my mother. They're the comic relief I didn't know I needed.

That's when my mother starts waving a hanky at me. She's up front with Aunt Remy and Big Mama. Mrs. Slater and my dad are in the front pew too. Unlike Beau and Kasey, we let Olivia be the wedding coordinator (much to my mother's dismay). But Liv is so good at events, and also not shy about promoting herself.

Speaking of which, Drake Hawkins is here too.

No one was more surprised than I was when Hawk volunteered to take the reins as our wedding photographer. He said Beau should be able to relax and enjoy himself as my best man and the brother of the bride. As it turns out, Hawk's not such a bad guy after all. Or maybe he *was*, and he just got better. We're all allowed to change, right? Either way, Olivia's interest in him must have run its course.

She's actually been hanging around Mac and Hudson a lot this week. But I've been too preoccupied by the marital proceedings to ask them why. The only thing I want to hear in this moment are the words, "I now pronounce you husband and wife."

Natalie Slater's about to become Natalie Graham. I sure do like the sound of that.

When a baby starts wailing in the back of the church, Mac leans around Beau and cringes. "Hey. Sorry, man."

"Don't apologize," I say, grinning at him. "I plan to have a bunch of those myself someday."

Beau shoots me a mock frown. "Please keep those plans and bunches to yourself."

It's worth mentioning that the church is packed. And I'm not surprised, but I can't help smiling at the fact that not all that long ago, I was listening to

Natalie tell me she felt like she never belonged here. Oh, she belongs here all right. And then some. That night at the clinic changed my life.

She changed my life.

We're both glad she gave LA a shot, but she kept saying her heart was here. I'm a huge part of her heart, I guess. And I'm not mad about it. When I suggested I could move to LA myself, she flat-out turned me down. Apparently she felt called to be back in Abieville.

I couldn't be happier about that.

Her supervisor understood. Aaron with the double A was sorry to see her go, but he gave her a great recommendation that helped her secure a job at the newly expanded hospital in Southampton. Instead of being one tiny fish in a giant pool at St. Joe's, she's a big fish in the pond of Southampton Grace. Not that she's a fish. But we still love our metaphors.

We might even get lighthouse tattoos on our honeymoon.

Once Daisy makes it down the blush-pink runner—only carrying flowers this time, no popcorn—she lines up next to the bridesmaids, and my pulse begins to race. This is it. The moment of both our dreams. Except this time, it's real.

The organ transitions to the wedding march, and everybody stands, faces glowing, eyes bright. The double doors at the back of the church open slowly, and there she is on the arm of her father. The absolute love of my life in a long, creamy gown with a lacy train.

Natalie meets my gaze, and I'm too stunned by her beauty to blink. When she takes her first step, I hold my breath. The organ thrums, but all I can hear is the pounding of my heart.

If you ask me, I'll never need to close my eyes or breathe or listen to music again. As Natalie floats down the aisle, I'm about as full of joy as a man could be. Until she bites her lip and smiles at me.

There it is. More joy.

Man, I can't wait to kiss her.

THE END

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A Complete Sweet Romantic Comedy Series

Acknowledgments

Here's where I admit this book might've been the most challenging for me to write. I absolutely LOVE Natalie and Brady, but letting go of the Apple Valley Love Stories series sure wasn't easy, and I needed a minute before I could jump whole-heartedly into a new set of books.

Still, I ended up falling super-hard for Abieville, New York. These characters may live on the other side of the country from Apple Valley, Oregon, but their humor, heart, and hijinks are equally as special to me.

It's no coincidence that my husband's family, whom I deeply adore, are from the Adirondacks—more specifically a village on the Great Sacandaga Lake. Bill's parents and all three of his sisters currently own homes on the same street. Most of his aunts, uncles, and cousins also live nearby.

So the fictional town of Abieville is (*very* loosely) inspired by their hometown. (Only the good stuff. Everything else I made up for the sake of entertainment!) And my sincerest gratitude goes out to everyone on both sides of the family. Thank you for welcoming me so warmly. You all live in my heart now too.

Big thanks also to my own incredible family—a bunch of hilarious, hopeful people, who have supported me from the beginning: my parents, Jim and Diane; my sister Nancy and her husband Keith; my nephews and nieces; my Aunt Karen and Uncle Kurt, Aunt Phyllis and Uncle Bob, Aunt Judy and Uncle Fred, Aunt LeAnn and Uncle Bobby, and the best set of first, second, and third cousins ever. You are all awesome, and I'm the luckiest!

Finally, I'd never put a book into the world without acknowledging Bill, Jack, and Karly.

I could list a million of our inside jokes here (until my stomach hurt from laughing) but that wouldn't crack the surface of the fun we have.

You are my favorites.

I love you the most.

About the Author

Julie Christianson writes sweet romantic comedies—but only when she’s not reading them. Born and raised in the suburbs of Los Angeles, she loves her hilarious family, her three crazy rescue dogs, and laughing at her own jokes.

Julie dreamed of being an author the first time she held a crayon, and after the library where she worked closed in 2020, she decided to try her hand at penning her own small-town romcoms.

She’s a former high school English teacher and lapsed marathon runner, the mother of two great kids, and the wife of one very funny man. Her goal is to write books that make you laugh out loud, fall in love, and live happily ever after.

