



(Not So) 
Famous
in **Paradisē:**

A Fake Dating
Sweet Romantic
Comedy 

BRITTANY LARSEN

(Not So)
Famous
in Paradise:
A Fake Dating
Sweet Romantic
Comedy

Also By

Love in Paradise Valley Series

Second Chance Spring in Paradise

The Grumpy Side of Paradise

Creekville Kisses Too Series

Dizzy in Love

Landin' in Trouble

Stand-alone Romantic Comedies

Just One Look

Her Last First I Love You

The Royal's Enemy

The Matchmaker's Match

Sense & Second Chances

Pride & Politics

Anthology Collections

Wedding Belles

Heart of the Frontier

(Not So)
Famous
in Paradise:
A Fake Dating
Sweet Romantic
Comedy

BRITTANY LARSEN

Copyright © 2023 by Brittany Larsen

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permission requests, contact [include publisher/author contact info].

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

Book Cover by Cover Ever After

This one is for **Mom & Dad**,
because it's about time, but mostly because I love you.
Also, maybe skip the kissing parts...

Contents

1. Chapter 1
2. Chapter 2
3. Chapter 3
4. Chapter 4
5. Chapter 5
6. Chapter 6
7. Chapter 7
8. Chapter 8
9. Chapter 9
10. Chapter 10
11. Chapter 11
12. Chapter 12
13. Chapter 13

14. Chapter 14
15. Chapter 15
16. Chapter 16
17. Chapter 17
18. Chapter 18
19. Chapter 19
20. Chapter 20
21. Chapter 21
22. Chapter 22
23. Chapter 23
24. Chapter 24
25. Chapter 25
26. Chapter 26
27. Chapter 27
28. Chapter 28
29. Chapter 29
30. Chapter 30
31. Chapter 31
32. Chapter 32
33. Chapter 33
34. Chapter 34

35. Chapter 35

36. Chapter 36

37. Chapter 37

38. Chapter 38

39. Chapter 39

Epilogue

About the Author

Chapter

Chapter 1

Georgia



I've been a lot of places, but I haven't found anywhere better to start the day than at Breakfast at Britta's in my hometown, little Paradise, Idaho. Maybe it's the special-order roasts from all over the world. Or maybe it's the selection of butter-rich pastries. Or possibly it's the ebelskiver—golf-ball shaped Danish pancakes filled and topped with all kinds of deliciousness.

But most likely it's the childhood memories served with them all.

I sit at the same table—far corner, next to the window—where I used to sit every day after school. Taylor Swift plays over the stereo. A palpable energy pulses from behind the counter where people I've known my entire life ring up orders and cook food I grew up eating.

That energy travels to the customers lined up to order and those already at tables, talking over steaming hot drinks and plates of ebelskiver. The sharp scent of coffee grounds mingles with the smell of sizzling butter to create a poignant reminder that, no matter how far I go, Paradise will always be home.

Zach waves to me from behind the counter, in his usual shirt and tie. The man loves to look sharp, but he looks out of place as he punches an order into the tablet. He isn't supposed to be working, so I'm guessing he saw a need and jumped into help. His sister, Britta, is in the back manning her ebelskiver pans. The Thomsens own some of the most popular businesses in town and are always filling in at one place or another.

Even if they weren't working twenty-four seven at the coffee shop, grocery store, and favorite local restaurant, the three brothers and their sister would be hard to miss. Tall, blonde, and beautiful, they could pass for supermodels, but to everyone here they're just the Adam, Zach, Bear, and Britta. Since my own

family moved away, the Thomsens are what makes Paradise still feel like home, even if I haven't called it that in half a dozen years.

The moment Zach has a break in customers, he carries a mug to my table and sets it in front of me. "I guessed latte today."

"You guessed right."

Nobody knows me as well as Zach Thomsen, except maybe his twin brother Adam. We've all been friends since...well, forever. Our grandparents were friends. Our parents are friends. We started kindergarten together and shared most of the same classes in middle and high school.

But that's not all that unusual in a small town like Paradise. When your high school has fewer than two hundred students total, you get to know people pretty well—for good or bad. The Thomsen Twins and me, though? I think we would have been friends no matter where we grew up. We're all still friends now, even if Adam and I haven't been as close since high school.

But Zach and me? We've stayed tight through my college years in Savannah and the last few in LA. It helps that he's stayed here in Paradise, so every time I come back, I can count on seeing him. But we can always rely on each other to be "there," no matter how far apart we are.

He's *that* friend.

I take a sip of my latte and savor the smooth creamy texture with a hint of lavender and honey but enough bite to still give me the caffeine kick I need.

"Perfect," I sigh.

"You say that like you're surprised."

I give my head a small shake. "Not at all. Britta makes great lattes." A smile tries to escape, but I pull it back.

"Psshh. You know I made it." Zach narrows his eyes.

I laugh, and even though his eyes grow smaller, he can't keep his mouth

from splitting into a perfect, pearly-white toothed grin. “I’ve got news.”

“Tell me.” I cup my hands around my mug to warm them. They’re still cold after my short walk from Grandma Rose’s to here.

Zach’s eyes dart to the entrance, where more customers are filing in, then back to me. “I think I’ve found the *one*.”

“The one what?” The cup handle is warm and smooth under my fingers as I drink again.

Zach puts both hands on my table and leans close enough for me to see the dark rim around his cornflower blue irises. “The *one*.” His mouth tugs to the side.

Panic rises in my chest so quickly I don’t have time to process where it comes from or why. I can only wait for him to tell me *who* the one is.

“The house where I could spend the rest of my life,” he continues. “You know, put down roots, start a family...*adult*.”

I loosen my grip on the coffee mug and breathe again, still unsure where my overreaction came from. I should have known he was talking about a house, not a woman.

Zach’s in real estate and I’m in home renovation, and we’re about to start a major project together. But even before the project, we talked about houses all the time. He’s been looking for his own place for years.

It’s the “start a family” that’s new.

“Great! Is it close to your Mom and Dad?” I take a careful sip of my drink.

He tips his head side to side. “Not really...” His excitement wanes, then picks right back up. “But you’ve got to see this place. There’s a huge tree in the backyard that will be perfect for a treehouse, just like the one Dad built in my backyard. Remember?”

I nod. “How could I forget?”

I spent half my childhood there, playing house. Zach was the dad; I was the mom/builder/decorator. Adam was the live-in chef. Bear was the baby and Britta was the dog.

My first kiss happened there.

“I’m telling you, Georgia, it’s perfect. I want you to come see it before I put in an offer. The house needs a little work, but the yard is amazing. It’s got a view of the lake, plenty of room for kids and dogs, maybe a few chickens.” The blue in Zach’s eyes deepens and he drums his fingers on the table.

I don’t want to rain on his parade or anything, but there do seem to be a few pieces missing. “Every kid needs a treehouse, but are you jumping the gun a little bit? Putting the treehouse before the kid? Or, you know, the kid before the mother of your child? You might need one of those first.” I laugh, but his face drops, so I soften my tone. “What does your dad think?”

His face sinks a little more.

I don’t have to say anything about his mom’s quickly declining health for him to know what I’m talking about. Zach lives in an apartment above their detached garage in order to be close enough to help.

“He wishes it were closer, but he’s on board now. He’s actually the one who encouraged me to start looking in the first place. He’s worried I’m putting my own life on hold to help with Mom.” Zach pulls the square napkin from under my mug and folds it into smaller and smaller triangles as he talks.

“Yeah?” I watch him, waiting, more than a little surprised by his answer. I thought Pete would want Zach to stay close.

He nods, slowly. “He’s right. It’s time to start my life. Settle down. Even though Mom’s memory is getting worse, I think that would bring her some comfort—knowing I’ve got some direction.”

“That makes sense.” I reach across the table to squeeze his hand. “Just

don't rush anything. I mean, maybe find the person you want to spend the rest of your life with first. She might want to be part of the decision about where to raise your family."

He shoots me a sad smile. Talking about his Mom always does this to him. Zach's optimism is as reliable as a spring blizzard in Paradise. But there's not enough optimism in the world to cure Heidi Thomsen's early onset Alzheimer's.

"Carly really likes the house. She's the one who found it... and I really like her," he says each sentence slowly, then tugs at his tie.

I look away from his forced smile to the view outside the window. Smuk (pronounced *smock*) Lake—arguably the most beautiful lake in America with the ugliest name—lies just across the parking lot. The water shimmers turquoise and blue against the white snow covering its sandy banks. Its color matches Zach's eyes, so looking at it does nothing to calm the unexpected emotions swirling somewhere between my chest and my gut.

I've sipped coffee at Britta's and listened to Zach talk about his latest girlfriend probably a hundred times. At least one day a week during all four years of my not-so-illustrious teen years at Paradise Valley High School was spent at this very table listening to Zach talk about girls. I was his sounding board during breakups, his shoulder to cry on through broken hearts, and his practice partner for his first "real" kiss.

It wasn't a bad way to spend my time. I was the funny-girl misfit. He was the guy every girl wanted. Somehow, we were a perfect match—platonically speaking, of course.

But for some reason, this feels different. There's an urgency in his voice I've never heard before. A desperation that doesn't have anything to do with love.

“Zaaaach!” Britta yells over the whirring sound of the coffee grinder. “A little help here, please!”

There’s a line in front of the register, and the teenage girl behind it looks ready to cry.

“Coming!” Zach yells back and hustles behind the counter, leaving me to wait a lifetime before I can ask him what the hell he’s thinking.

He’s not in love with Carly; he’s in love with the idea of love. Always has been. I’ve never had any doubt he’d get married someday. He’s wanted to find a soulmate since we played house in his backyard.

I don’t know Carly, but I know she’s not the one for him.

I just hope he knows that too.

Chapter 2

Zach



It's good to have Georgia home.

That's the only thing I can focus on as I take everyone's orders. Take them twice, most of the time. Like I said, Georgia's on my mind.

And Carly, obviously. I can't stop thinking about her and the possibility that she might be the woman for me. She's mentioned more than once that she could see us together long term. And she had some good ideas about how we could make the house I found nicer. She saw things I hadn't even noticed were problems.

Her fixes won't be cheap, but by this time next year, I might have some real money in the bank—thanks to Georgia. But the other side of that coin is that Georgia could lose everything. That thought makes my palms sweat, but when I look back at our table, her smile drives away my self-doubt.

Everything is going to be okay.

“Heeeey, Zach.” A familiar voice brings my attention back to the line in front of me—and the woman behind the voice. “I didn't know you still worked here.”

Her tone is friendly. Her words are not. I worked at Britta's when I was fifteen. I'm almost twice that age now, so there's a lot of subtext in her question. But Shaylee Sanders has hated me since I broke up with her in high school.

“Hi, Shaylee. What are you doing in town?” I say, as nicely as possible. Which isn't very nice at all.

“Just here for the weekend. Came to see the folks. I'm headed back to Salt Lake this morning. That's where I live now. Right downtown.” She nods while she talks, underscoring every word with a smug look that speaks louder than anything she's actually saying. *I'm living in a big city while you're*

working the same job you had when you thought you were too cool for me. Guess you're not so cool now, are you?

Or something like that. Probably. That's Shaylee for you.

"Right downtown? Wow. That must be...busy." I look behind her at the line of customers, trying to give her a hint. "What can I get for you today?"

"Ohhh, I don't know. I can't decide." She tosses her black hair over her shoulder and raises her gaze to the menu board above my head. "This place is so bougie now. I kind of miss how kitschy it was when your grandma ran it."

"Granny actually made most of the changes before she passed. Britta added a few touches when she took over, but not many." I don't know why I feel like I have to explain anything to Shaylee, but I can't stop. "I don't really work here; I just help out every once in a while. Georgia and I have a real estate project we're working on."

"Oh, yeah." Shaylee's eyes don't leave the menu. "I think I heard something about Georgia trying to save all the run-down cottages. How's that going?"

There's the nodding again. Like she doesn't know what a big deal our Little Copenhagen enterprise is. And I didn't miss the fact that she only said Georgia's name, not mine. As though Georgia's doing me a favor by letting me be part of *her* project.

"Really, really well," I answer, pushing aside the thought that she's right about me only being involved in the project because I'm Georgia's friend.

Ignoring Shaylee's smirk, I look over her shoulder. Jim Reyes is in line behind her, and I catch his eye to let him know I've got his order. It's the same every morning: black coffee, no frills, and the egg sandwich not on the menu that Britta makes just for him.

As Jim reaches around Shaylee to hand me a ten, I say to her. "We start

shooting today.”

“Order up!” Britta yells and sends a plate of ebelskiver across the stainless counter between the kitchen and front.

“Shooting? It’s not hunting season,” Shaylee says, playing dumb while ignoring my pointed glance at the order I should be carrying out.

My eyes roll up, and I shake my head. “A cable network is producing a show about Georgia renovating Little Copenhagen. We start filming today.”

We both know she’s heard about *At Home with Georgia Rose*. Everyone who lives in Paradise—and everyone who ever has—knows about it. Other than the time my brother, Bear, skated through Sugar City’s entire defensive zone to score the state championship-winning goal, this show is the biggest thing that’s ever happened in Paradise.

Shaylee’s mouth opens with fake surprise. “I had no idea. Who would have thought Ham would ever be popular enough for her own TV show?”

“I did. I always knew *Georgia* was too big for this town.” I zero in on Shaylee, holding her gaze until she has to look away with the emphasis I put on Georgia’s name. I know how much Georgia hates being called Ham.

“Well, *big* is certainly one way to describe Georgia.” Shaylee’s eyes come back to mine, and her lip twitches, wanting to smile so bad.

I glance to the back of the dining room where Georgia is waiting for me. Her phone is in front of her face, her thumbs going a million miles an hour replying to the nonstop texts and emails she gets. Sometimes her single-minded focus on work bugs me, but today I’m relieved that her texts and all the other customers stopping by her table to talk keep her from hearing Shaylee.

Also, no way am I going to point out to Shaylee that Georgia is only twenty feet away.

“I’ve got other customers, Shaylee. Do you know what you want yet?” I’ve reached the end of my politeness. I don’t care that she’s related to half this town and will tell anyone who’ll listen not to come into Britta’s or even think about buying one of Little Copenhagen’s renovated cottages.

Now Shaylee lets her smile out, obviously pleased that she’s pushed my buttons. “I’ll have a flat white with oat milk. Two shots of espresso and half a pump of caramel.”

“Nother order up. Let’s go, Zach!” Britta yells.

“I need a flat white up here, Chef.” I call back, staring at Shaylee.

Flat whites aren’t on the menu. Britta can make them. So can I—just not very well. They’re a pain in the ass, especially with non-dairy milks. The espresso-to-milk ratio has to be exactly right, and the microfoam has to be precise to keep the drink from being too bitter.

In short, it’s about the most *bougie* drink anyone can order.

“I’ve got orders to get out. Good seeing you.” I step away from the register and around Britta who’s at the espresso machine now.

“Britta will make your ebelskiver next, Lynette,” I call over the whirring noise to the customer behind Shaylee. “Plain?”

Lynette nods, and her ever-present tinfoil hat moves back and forth across the top of her head. Then I grab the waiting orders and walk to the dining room, putting Shaylee and her snarkiness behind me.

I’d never noticed her low-key passive aggressiveness when we were dating, but then Georgia pointed it out to me one day, and it was so obvious I couldn’t believe how blind I’d been. I broke up with Shaylee the next day.

I nod at Georgia, who smiles back before checking her watch and frowning.

We’ve got time. I know that. But Georgia hates to be late. Her leg bounces up and down. Even if it didn’t, I know how anxious she is to get started.

We've been talking about this project and the show for years, ever since she inherited the resort from her Grandma Rose a few years ago.

That's when she first asked me about what she should do with the old, run-down place. She thought about selling it, but even over the phone, I could sense the wheels turning in her head. By the end of our conversation, she'd come up with the idea to pitch a renovation show about the resort to a design channel.

A major cable network loved the concept but wanted to see what she could do with Little Copenhagen before they committed to the show. So, Georgia put her own money into renovating Grandma Rose's house. But since she was working on another project, her friend Evie managed all the renovations, along with the social media that got people interested in watching more.

Evie's viral Instagram reels proved that Georgia's show will be a hit. The producers are all-in now, excited to film us renovating the other eleven cottages, though the budget they gave us is super tight.

The next house up is my Granny Neilsen's. We've got twelve weeks to tear most of it down and build it again. Then everyone around here will be busy getting ready for the summer crowd. And after Memorial Day, this town will feel more like a crowded trip to Disneyland than a peaceful paradise. Shooting will start again after Labor Day.

As I pass by Georgia, carrying orders in both hands and balancing a couple more in my arms, I hear her describing the project to someone over the phone. Probably a reporter. She's had a few home renovation magazines—like the one by those Chip and Joanna people—interview her about the project.

They don't interview me. Even though Georgia insists I'm her partner, she's very much the face of it.

Soooo, maybe Shaylee wasn't being passive aggressive when she said she'd heard Georgia was renovating the Copenhagen. Maybe it's me being sensitive about the fact I'm way underqualified to be Georgia's partner.

I drop a couple of the orders at the table next to hers and overhear her explaining the history of Little Copenhagen. How it's a couple miles outside of town where the original Danish settlers lived. They wanted to be near the lake, which they named Smuk—Danish for beautiful.

Even though I know the story forwards and backwards, I love the way Georgia tells it, so I stop and listen.

“So, it took about a minute for the original settlers to figure out that farming next to the lake was a no-go.” Her voice bounces in rhythm with her hands, which she always moves when she talks. “They moved away from the lake—anywhere that was flat enough to farm—but they didn't tear down the rickety old shelters that were supposed to be temporary. They kept them to stay in when they fished the lake. Five miles isn't far now, by car, but it was back in the day, on foot or by horse.”

I walk away as she's talking about her Grandma Rose, who at nineteen years old noticed more and more people coming to Paradise for a week or two during the summer. She saw our town would only get more popular, so she talked a local bank into loaning her money. Once she convinced the families of the original settlers to sell her the land, she tore down the old shacks and created a summer resort called Little Copenhagen.

The rest of the story goes like this: the little summer homes, swimming pool, and cafes—including the original Britta's, owned by my Granny Neilsen's—were for locals, not vacationers. That's the deal Grandma Rose had made with the families who'd sold their land. Many of them had opened businesses in town to cater to the growing number of tourists.

Since the local families spent most of the summer in town, it made sense for them to have places where they could stay. So, Grandma Rose signed seventy-five-year leases with them. She owned the land and cottages, but they, their children, and their grandchildren had a guaranteed place to go every summer, with the stipulation that the cottages couldn't be rented out.

Was it a good business decision to bind herself to the very generous lease terms for that many years? Not really. But money wasn't the goal. The goal was to hold onto the sense of community the families shared in the face of Paradise becoming a popular destination spot. All of them—including Grandma Rose—could trade off looking after each other's kids because they were in closer proximity to each other. They could gather at night, talk over campfires on Little Copenhagen's private beach, play cards, or just look at the stars.

For a long time, she achieved her goal of community. According to my mom, Little Copenhagen was idyllic, and though she passed away a few years ago, Grandma Rose is still a legend around here.

But twenty years ago or so, tourism here really took off. Suddenly Paradise and Smuk Lake became the place to be, and the population swelled by thousands every summer. Which meant locals could make more money selling their farmland to people looking to build big vacation homes than they could working it.

The families who'd lived in Paradise and come to Little Copenhagen for generations moved away. Or they built their own big houses from the money they'd made selling their property.

Even when Georgia and I were kids, staying summers at the resort with our grandparents, fewer families were coming to Little Copenhagen, and Grandma Rose couldn't stay on top of the upkeep on the cottages. Rent for

the houses stayed the same, but the costs for maintaining them kept rising, which meant they looked more run down every year.

But Georgia and I had loved spending our summers together at the resort.

I pick up the last of the ready orders, then glance at her. She's still on the phone, but she raises her hands, palms up, in a question. I quickly drop off the orders, then swing by her table.

"Yours is on the way," I tell her. "Britta was slammed when I got here this morning." I gesture toward the long line in front of MeKylie's register, then head back to the counter.

This crowd isn't normal for mid-February. I suspect most people are here to get a look at the TV crew setting up before we get to work on the renovations. Everything is visible out the east-facing windows of Britta's. Granny Neilsen's cottage—a place as much a home to me as the one I grew up in—is the first house scheduled for on-air renovations.

I'm sorry to see the old place change, but Georgia and I are committed to keeping the feeling of hygge that Grandma Rose created when she built the resort. Even though, along with renovating all the cottages, we plan to build timeshare condos, we still want this place to feel like a big family.

The architecture of the new houses and the condos will keep the same simplicity and functionality as the old cottages. In most cases, we're keeping as much of the original construction as possible. Everything will have the same mid-century modern feel that's sleek and sophisticated, but also homey.

The new vision for the Little Copenhagen excites me as much now as it did when Georgia told me about it. A lot of people don't like it because they hate the idea of more people moving here or of Paradise getting bigger. They don't understand—or don't want to see—that what they fear is already

happening. The hills surrounding the original Paradise settlements are dotted with huge vacation homes that sit empty most of the year.

That's not what Georgia has in mind. She wants Little Copenhagen to be what it once was: a refuge from the outside world. A cozy, comfortable place where people gather instead of spreading out into separate rooms, staring at different screens, looking for contentment from technology and expensive toys like boats and ATVs.

When I get back to my spot at the register, Shaylee is walking out the door. She waves goodbye and pretends to smile. "Tell Georgia good luck with everything! I'll have to try to watch the show, if it works out."

I don't have time to say anything before she leaves. Her comment, and the other one implying Little Copenhagen is Georgia's project, not mine too, doesn't leave with her.

Its little claws burrow into my brain like a tick on a dog. The difference is, I know how to remove a tick from a dog.

What I don't know is how to get rid of the thought that I don't bring any real value to *Georgia's* project. She's just pretending I do because she knows I don't have any other options. Georgia's not the one who needs help.

I am.

Chapter 3

Georgia



I have to wait forever for Zach to finish taking and filling orders and chatting up customers. In the meantime, after I finish talking to a reporter from an online design magazine, I pull my purse onto the bench next to me and dig through it. I don't need anything out of it, I just need to look at something besides Zach.

My thumb grazes the monogrammed compact tool set Dad gave me years ago. I have a real tool kit, but I carry this one for emergencies. And there's always an emergency. I have a million other things in here too—it's a big purse—but the thing I take out of it is my folder of plans for the house Zach and I are renovating.

After an eternity, things finally slow down at the counter. Zach comes out from behind it with my ebelskiver, sets the plate in front of me, and slides into the seat across my table.

“Soooo, Cathy?” My latte is cold, but I still pick up the cup and sip from it, trying to play cool. I should ask about the house, but this woman he “really likes” is a bigger concern.

“Carly.” He stuffs half of an ebelskiver in his mouth. “She's amazing. Talking to her is like talking to you. She already has ideas about how to make the house better.” He glances at me. “I don't know. Maybe she's the one?”

I set down my mug and examine his face for the telltale signs of how in “love” he might be. Love is a word that has often crossed his lips, but never *the one*.

My questions should start there, but it's her ideas about the house that have me concerned. “Better how?”

“Basic stuff.” He cuts through an ebelskiver with his fork but doesn't put the bite in his mouth. He also doesn't look at me. “An in-home theater, new kitchen, outdoor pizza oven, shiplap.”

“Shiplap?” I raise an eyebrow.

“I know. We hate it, but she loves it.” He laughs.

“It’s the least expensive thing on her list. I’ll give it that.” I cut through my own ebelskiver. The sharp clink of the metal fork hitting the plate is strangely satisfying.

“Yeah, she’s got expensive tastes. Kind of like someone else I know.” He gazes pointedly at my designer purse/tool bag.

I don’t laugh. I bought that bag with my first big paycheck that didn’t have to go toward paying off student loans. Zach stands to make a lot of money off our Little Copenhagen project. I predict it’s just the start of really big things for him, and I don’t want anyone taking advantage.

“Sounds serious, Zach.” As much as I want to point out all the red flags, I have to play it cool. If he thinks I don’t like the idea of him and Carly, he won’t talk to me about it. Next thing I know, he could be married to her, and she could be draining his bank account faster than he can fill it.

“I know, right?” He exhales. “I’m as surprised as you are, but it just hit me the other day when I was showing properties that I’m ready to settle down. I’m ready for my own house, my own family...all the things I’ve always wanted, but the time never felt right. Until now.”

“Really? I mean, we’re still pretty young. Maybe you should take a little more time to get your career established before committing to anything, or anyone.” I fight back the panic clawing its way up my chest. There’s no reason for it. It’s not like there’s a ring or a date or anything official. “Are you sure you’re not getting swept up in Adam and Evie’s engagement?” I offer, carefully.

Zach has a tendency to get caught up in the excitement of other people’s lives and want some of it for himself. Like the time I got the lead role in the

summer production of *Hairspray* put on by Paradise's local theater company and he decided to be a part of it too.

He hated every minute.

"My brother is getting married?" The shock on his face puts my jump-on-the-bandwagon-theory to rest.

Also, oops.

I guess the fact Zach's twin brother is on his way to New York right now to propose to Evie on Valentine's Day is supposed to be a secret.

"I mean, they're just talking about it." I scramble to extract myself from the mess I've made. "Nothing official or anything. Let's talk about you and Kelsey."

"Carly."

"Carly." I jab my fork into my Nutella-filled ebelskiver. "Tell me about her."

I don't know why the words are so hard to get out. It's not like I'm in love with Zach, and he's definitely not in love with me. Obviously. Thanks to perfectly-straight-hair-and-teeth, freckle-free Carly.

That sounds bitter.

I'm not bitter.

I'm *not*.

It's just that Zach and I have gotten even closer over the past year as we've worked together on our Little Copenhagen project. Adam and I have always been buddies—still are, despite the months of silence on his end after I encouraged his ex-fiancée to ditch him on their wedding day, but that's another story.

Zach, on the other hand, is the one who tells me his secrets. I'm his confidant.

Maybe if I'd ever needed a confidant, Zach could have been mine. But I don't fall in and out of love the way he does. *Like?* Yes. *Love?* No.

Zach's mouth pulls into a sappy smile. "She's great. I've told her all about you. I can't wait for you to get to know her better..."

"Yeah...that'd be nice," I say.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Mayor Voglmeyer walking through the door. I groan and drop my head in my hand, but she's already seen me. Over the week I've been back in Paradise, I've been able to avoid her. My luck had to run out some time.

"Georgia Beck!" she says, much louder than necessary for a space no bigger than a good-sized living room. And the sing-songy tone is completely unnecessary.

Zach stops talking, and we both face her.

"Uh-oh," he says under his breath as he slides out of his chair. "She's got her clipboard."

He's not making a joke. When Darlene has her clipboard, there's always an agenda attached to it, and everyone better get on board with it or get out of town.

"I've got to get back to the register. I'm sorry to ditch you," Zach whispers to me as the mayor makes a beeline for me, her square heels clacking across the cement floor. Her lavender business suit is a little formal for someone whose city council consists of farmers and stay-at-home moms.

But Darlene Voglmeyer has all the self-importance of a real-life Leslie Knope from *Parks and Rec* without half the charm. And there's no escaping the determination building on her face. Her mouth pulls to the side like a pitcher getting ready to throw, and I'm the player she's aiming to strike out.

"Hi, Mayor." My smile is so forced it hurts. "Nice to see you again."

I'm not surprised she found me. I've been at Britta's every morning for the past week since I arrived in Paradise. I *am* surprised it's taken her this long to corner me here. Darlene's a woman who knows how to make things happen, and I have a sneaking suspicion she wants something from me.

I wouldn't be filming the first episode of *At Home with Georgia Rose* today without Mayor Voglmeyer. Not only did I need construction permits and zoning changes to renovate Little Copenhagen, but the production company also needed permits to film. Despite some pushback from locals, including other members of the city council, Darlene persuaded them my show would be good for Paradise.

I should be grateful. I know.

The thing with Darlene, though, is her motives are never altruistic. She saw an angle in my project that would allow her to make money too. I was sure of it the minute I found out her son, Lyle, is opening a new hamburger joint next month. According to Zach, she's dropped more than one hint that a mention on my show would give Kyle the kind of boost he'll need to compete against more established places.

But I suspect there's even more to it than that. Before my parents moved to Boise, my mom was one of the few people who wouldn't back down in the face of My-Way-or-the-Highway Darlene.

Darlene likes rules and regulations. Mom doesn't. That put them at odds more often than not. Especially when it came to Darlene trying to ban books Mom taught in her English classes at the high school. That was a big one, and somehow Mom won.

My guess is, more than anything, Darlene Voglmeyer wants something she can hang over my head. She wants me to "owe" her.

"Glad I caught you before filming starts," she says, pointing from me to her

clipboard. “I’m so excited about the show and what it’s going to do for *business* in Paradise, but we need to talk about requirements and restrictions.”

I hate those words: *requirements and restrictions*. They bring back all the memories I try not to think about. The bad parts of growing up in Paradise as someone whose family didn’t really fit in, feeling everyone pointing at me because Mom *refused* to be like everyone else.

“Your film people aren’t allowed to park in the street or block traffic.” Her voice is so sugary sweet that my tongue involuntarily pokes at the cavity I just had filled as she points out the window. “And, I’m afraid, they’re already in violation.”

I lean around her skeletal frame and follow the direction of her bony finger. The old Neilsen house—Zach’s granny on his mom’s side—is our first project and within my line of sight. I can also see that the crew’s van is parked on the gravel shoulder in front of the house. Not *on the street*, unless Darlene means the edge of the tires that may be on the asphalt.

But going to battle with someone who thrives on arguing is dumb. Especially when I know she’s going to find a million reasons to argue with me until she gets what she wants.

And I’m not saying one word about Lyle Voglmeyer’s hamburger stand on *my* show.

“I’m sorry. I’ll tell them to move right now,” I answer while pulling out my phone.

“I’ve already called Al to tow the van.” She makes a tsking sound. “I gave my word to my fellow council men and women that I would personally make sure all the permit conditions are followed to the letter.”

I glance at Zach, still at the counter. The look on his face tells me he’s heard everything.

Then Darlene leans in so close, I can see the gray roots of her dyed-black hair and the tiny smoker's-wrinkles around her lips. "Rules are rules, and as much as I'd like to bend them for you, I have to prioritize the people who *live* and work in Paradise."

Her emphasis on the word "live" needles me into a sharp breath. Her lip twitches, daring me to fight back, the way Mom would have. Tempting me to point out that, while there may not be any Becks left in Paradise, my family lived and died here for generations before Darlene married into the Voglmeyer family.

Paradise is as much my home as hers.

"If you'll let me out of my seat, *Darlene*," I say in an equally sickly-sweet voice. "I'll call my guys, tell them to move the van, and explain the problem so it won't happen again. And I'm sure you can call Al and tell him everything's fixed so that my crew can stay on schedule."

She takes a step back, and I slide off the bench seat, coming shoulder to shoulder with her when I stand. I've never realized just how short she is. When I was a kid, she loomed large over this town.

But I'm not a kid anymore.

"As thrilled as everyone is with the success of *Georgia Rose*"—she says my brand name like she's swallowed a mouthful of vinegar—"I'm sure you'll agree that the town as a whole should benefit from your show, not just you."

I open my mouth to reply, but then I catch the raised eyebrow of another customer. He looks familiar, but I don't remember his name. And I can't interpret if his pointed look means he agrees with Darlene. A quick scan of the room tells me, despite all the people who've said hello this morning, he's not the only one who might feel the same as Darlene.

"You understand why those of us who weren't happy about the changes

you have planned for Little Copenhagen, agreed to let you film in Paradise anyway?” Her smile dips. “Your fame outside of Paradise doesn’t mean as much as your loyalty *to Paradise*.”

With those words, she buries any illusions I have left about what people think about my being back in Paradise. They’re suspicious of me. I’m an outsider now.

Before I can think of anything to say, Zach returns and puts his arm around Darlene’s shoulders. “You know you’re always welcome at Britta’s, but it looks like you’ve parked over the blue line there.” He points out the window to her Cadillac’s front tire, which is millimeters over the line into a disabled parking spot. “I’d hate to have to call Al...”

He lets the threat hang in the air, drifting past her angry glare.

She glances to where Zach is pointing while resisting his efforts to guide her away from me. “I’m barely over that line.”

“True, but as you’ve already pointed out, rules are rules,” he says, still nudging her forward. “I’ll get you a cup of coffee on your way out, on the house. Americano? Or straight espresso?”

“Espresso.” She lets Zach lead her away, but before they reach the counter, she looks over her shoulder and says, “I hope we understand each other, Georgia.” Her lips pull into a humorless smile. “Every permit needs to be in order. I’d hate to shut anything down.”

Darlene wiggles her fingers at me in a wave before turning her attention to the other customers waiting in line. She chats them up in the same voice she used with me, though it somehow feels less saccharine than before.

I sit back down, feeling everyone else’s eyes on me too while I poke at my ebelskiver. I’m not going to give them the satisfaction of walking out of Britta’s before I finish my favorite breakfast, even if I have lost my appetite.

I force myself to take a bite anyway. Chewing takes so much effort that the pancake might as well be flavorless.

After a couple more bites, I give up and set down my fork.

Zach takes long enough to make Darlene's coffee that by the time he finishes I could have shiplapped an entire wall if I were Joanna Gaines. And if I actually liked shiplap. He hands Darlene her coffee, topping off the gesture with his irresistible smile. She takes off the lid and sips it before letting out a *hmmm*.

"Almost as good as Britta's," she says on her way out the door. If there's a thank you that follows, I don't hear it.

Darlene shoots me a final look as the glass door closes behind her, then smiles smugly at me through the window all the way to her car. When she finally pulls out of the parking lot, I breathe a sigh of relief, then chance a quick scan of the room.

No one makes eye contact. That's all the confirmation I need to know she's telling me the truth about what people think.

I turn all my attention to Zach. At least I have him and the rest of the Thomsens. I know they'll have my back.

He walks—no, *swaggers*—back to our table carrying his own cup of coffee. Watching him, I try to ignore the feelings of attraction that always come up if I let my eyes linger on his six-foot-two physique for too long.

They're not real feelings. Anyone who looks at Zach can't help getting a little hot. He's very handsome. Like, *very*. I'm talking movie-star good looks.

A lot of people think he and Adam look like Chris Hemsworth. They're not wrong—Adam is long-hair Thor, and Zach, after his recent haircut, is the short-hair version. Without the eye patch.

People aren't exactly right about the resemblance either.

Zach is better looking than Chris Hemsworth.

Not that I've ever said that out loud. I don't need anyone accusing me of having feelings for Zach. We're friends. Nothing more.

But that friendship means everything to me.

Suddenly I'm less worried about what Darlene Voglmeyer has said than I am about Zach's revelation.

Because what if Carly isn't the kind of woman who's going to be cool with Zach having me for a best friend? He may be way out of my league looks-wise, but one thing I've learned about fame is that people are weird about it. Fame fuels jealousy faster than gas on a fire.

"Thank you," I say as he slides into his seat.

He takes a gulp of coffee and waves away my gratitude. "Like I was going to let her do you like that. Darlene Voglmeyer is ridiculous." Zach shoots me a smile that should make everything all right but doesn't.

But I can pretend it does.

"It's fine. I'm actually surprised Darlene didn't corner me sooner. I've been expecting her to spring out from behind a bush or a snow drift since the minute I got here." I force a laugh, but I literally spent the first week here bracing myself for something like this. Today, I'd finally let my guard down.

Big mistake.

Fortunately, one thing about being a social media influencer is that I know how to put on a happy face, no matter what.

Actually, that's something I learned growing up in Paradise.

"Listen, I'll handle Darlene. There won't be any problems with permits or anything else, I swear." He holds up three fingers in that Scout's honor thing, then crosses his heart.

"Thanks, but just stay on top of the permits. I can handle Darlene on my

own.” I push away my unfinished breakfast, then glance at Zach.

There’s a crease in his brow, and he’s tearing pieces off his paper napkin.

But before I can ask him what’s wrong, someone puts her arm around my shoulders. The smell of too much flower-y perfume fills my nose, and I don’t have to look to know who it is.

“I’m glad you’re home,” Mrs. Christianson says in the same sweet voice she used when I was in her second-grade class.

“Thank you, Mrs. Christianson.” I lean into her hug, grateful for her timeliness.

“Hi, Mrs. C.” Zach sends her a slow smile, and I swear she blushes.

“I don’t do all that social media nonsense.” She sounds more than a little flustered, but Zach has that effect on women. Even old ones. “But I just burst with pride every time I hear something about you being famous,” she continues, squeezing me tight.

When she finally releases, she keeps a gentle hand on my shoulder. I pat her sun-spotted skin. Her nails are painted a soft pink, just like when she was my teacher.

“I wouldn’t say I’m famous, but at least part of my success, I owe to you. You taught me how to use a ruler and all about the metric system, and I do a lot of measuring. Where would I be without you?”

Mrs. C. chuckles. “For heck’s sake, I never taught you a thing! You were so smart, you could have skipped the second grade altogether.”

Not for the first time, I regret that Adam and I used to flick paper footballs at her every time she turned her back. “You should come see what we’re doing to the old places at Little Copenhagen. I’d love to get you on camera.”

“Really?” She straightens and puffs out her chest. “I’ve always dreamed of being on TV.”

“Come on down. You can spill all the tea about what a terror I was.”

That’s exactly the kind of stuff my producers will go crazy over. Who I was before I got “famous,” according to the people who knew me then.

What the producers don’t get is that I’m not-so famous in Paradise. They’d know that if they’d been here with Darlene Voglmeyer and seen people nodding in agreement with her. Even if they’re okay with what I’m doing with Little Copenhagen, it feels like people in Paradise still see me as the chubby, freckle-faced, red-haired girl everyone called Ham.

I wave Mrs. Christianson goodbye, feeling slightly better, then turn to Zach. I wish he wanted to be on camera, but every time I bring it up, he turns me down. I know he’d love it. He’s a natural performer. Even though he hated being in *Hairspray*, he stole the show.

But even though another invitation is on the tip of my tongue, I say, “We should probably get to work.”

The film crew isn’t expecting us for another half-hour, but maybe Zach won’t bring up Carly again if we’re not sitting at the same table where he’s confessed his feelings for a dozen other girls. We’ll go back to the topic eventually, but right now, I’m as interested in a conversation about Carly as I am in being called Ham.

Chapter 4

Zach



Unstuck.

That's the feeling I have looking across the table at Georgia right now. Even though she's itching to get to work, her wild red curls and the freckles that dot her face and shoulders scream fun and freedom. Just like they did when we were kids.

I stretch my legs long and flex my toes inside my shoes, remembering us as barefoot kids. I loved the way new blades of just-turned-green grass tickled my feet and how Smuk Lake's muddy sand squished between my toes as we ran along its banks. Those shoeless days correlated with the end of school and my daily struggle to force letters into the right order without giving away my secret. A secret only Georgia knew.

Every good memory I have has Georgia somewhere in it.

"Don't get too comfortable. We're leaving, remember?"

Her mouth pulls into a wide smile, and I'm anything but comfortable as I remember that I've kissed those lips. Not in a romantic way or anything. We were kids messing around. Nothing more. I don't even know why I'm thinking about it.

"We've got some time, don't we?" I ask her, taking a last sip of my coffee, a Vienna roast Britta special ordered.

Some people can taste the notes of dark chocolate and walnut, but to me it just tastes like a better-than-normal cup of joe. I leave the foodie stuff to Adam and Britta. They're the chefs in the family. I'm the guy who's scrambling to make a living in real estate.

In answer to my question, her watch buzzes with the millionth text she's received since she came in this morning.

"No. I should be there early to make sure everything's ready to go." She scrolls through the message while edging off the bench.

“But do you *need* to be there? We’ve barely had time to talk since you’ve been back.”

I’m not in as much of a hurry to get to work as she is. Mostly because I really want to get her advice about Carly. I trust Georgia to give it to me straight. They only met once for less than a minute, but Georgia is intuitive. I’ve never dated a girl who she hasn’t figured out is all wrong for me long before I do. Case in point: Shaylee Sanders.

But also, all I’ve done for years is work. At Adam’s restaurant when it was still Mom’s, here at Britta’s, at Dad’s store, and all over Paradise Valley selling real estate. I like to work, but right now, I just want to enjoy this moment of being with my best friend again.

“We can talk on the way there.” Georgia stands and picks up her purse. “I’ve got to make sure all my permits are in order,” she says in a perfect imitation of Darlene Voglmeyer’s weirdly high voice.

“Please never use that voice again.” I shudder, then push out of the seat.

“I make no promises, Zandwich.” Her eyes dance as she brushes by me.

“I hate that name.” I grab her coffee cup and plate, nudging her out of my way so I can get to the kitchen.

“It’s better than Ham,” she shoots back.

My back is to her, but I hear the laugh in her voice. I drop my head and shake it. “I knew you’d bring that up! You’ll never let me live down my shame, will you?”

Georgia is grinning wide when I glance over my shoulder at her. Then she waves her hand in the direction of the kitchen. “Go take care of those things. We’ve got work to do.”

“Fifteen years. You think I’d be done apologizing for something I did when we were in middle school.” Still shaking my head, I carry the dishes around

the counter to the back of the restaurant.

“Maybe in another fifteen, I’ll forgive you,” she calls after me.

I know she’s teasing.

Mostly.

I walk into the kitchen, past Britta.

“She’s never going to let you live that down, is she?” she says without taking her eyes off the multiple ebelskiver pans on the stove in front of her.

“Nope.”

“Good to have her back, though, isn’t it?”

“Yep.”

I scrape the dishes and drop them in the sink, then grab the sprayer to rinse them. As the hot water washes over the plates, I try to remember the first time I met Georgia.

I don’t even know. She’s always been a part of my life. There are pictures of us playing together as toddlers. When we went to school, we were in the same classes. And we spent every summer running back and forth between our grandparents’ houses at the Little Copenhagen Resort.

“You don’t have to wash dishes. It’s supposed to be your day off,” Britta says from the grill.

“I know. Good thing I like you.” I finish rinsing the last plate and stick it in the industrial dishwasher.

“That’s because I’m very likable,” she says, straight-faced, her eyes still on the grill.

“Debatable.” I bump her shoulder as I walk by. “Text me if you need any more help. I’ll be around.”

“Will do.” She quickly rolls the pancake balls, sending the hum and aroma of sizzling butter into the air.

That sound and smell is seared into my memory as firmly as the feel of Smuk Lake's muddy sand. I've bussed the tables at Britta's and eaten here more times than I can count. First when I was a kid and Granny opened this place, using the ebelskiver recipes her mom had given her. Then in the last few years to give my sister a hand as she took over the restaurant when Mom couldn't run it anymore.

"Ready?" I say to Georgia when I get back to the main seating area.

She nods and leads the way. Everything about being with her again, teasing her, telling her about Carly, sharing our ebelskiver, is as comfortable as the smells of coffee and butter that follow us out the door.

But when we step outside, we're hit with a blast of cold air that stops Georgia in her tracks. She yanks up the hood of her coat and tucks her chin inside of it.

"How do people live in this?"

"You are such a baby!" With my hand on the small of her back, I hustle her toward Granny Neilsen's old house. It's within walking distance since Britta's is in Little Copenhagen too. "You spent most of your life here. California's made you soft."

"Soft? Or smart for getting out of this weather?" She scurries carefully across the snow-dusted parking lot then veers toward my Bronco.

"Where are you going?" I change course and follow her.

"We're driving!"

"It's faster to walk." Not really, but it's a one-minute drive, which makes it more trouble than it's worth.

"Unlock the door!" Georgia stands next to my Bronco, shivering and stamping her feet.

"Tell the truth. You just don't want to walk in those boots." I unlock the

door with my key fob, and Georgia jumps into the front seat without answering. She knows it's the truth.

She's got on Western boots, but nothing like anyone in Paradise wears. For one, they've got a heel higher and skinnier than anything I've ever seen. And two...they're silver. A shade so bright, Georgia is better suited for going on stage with Dolly Parton than working on a construction site.

By the time I get in the driver's side, she's got her arms wrapped around herself and her teeth are chattering. As soon as I start the engine, she turns the heat on full blast, but in the sixty seconds it takes us to drive down the street, the Bronco doesn't have time to get warm. The film crew is still setting up, though, so we stay in the truck, out of the wind, and watch them unload their van.

"You know," I say to her. "I knew as soon as you started your design channel you'd end up here."

"Back in Paradise?" she says, incredulously. "When I left, I swore I'd never come back, so you knew more than I did."

"No, not necessarily Paradise. Your career, with your own TV show and a million followers on social media. I knew you'd be famous." I give her a soft bump on the shoulder.

"Ouch!" She rubs her arm and stares out the window at the crew. "But thanks. It's nice to know someone else believed in me besides my parents."

"Come on," I scoff. "You've never had trouble believing in yourself."

She gives me a look, then rolls her eyes. "That was all a façade. I'm surprised you didn't see through it."

"Stop lying. You've known you'd be famous since you were six years old."

I take Georgia's silence as proof of what I already know.

Five years ago, she started her own channel all about design and

renovation, from the bones of a house to the last throw pillow. Her career took off faster than a cat with a firecracker tied to its tail (which may or may not be a thing I know from personal experience). She's huge across social media, she gets recognized on the street in cities like Los Angeles and New York, not just Paradise, and she has to be making bank.

Or if she's not, she will be soon. With her as the star, *At Home with Georgia Rose* is going to be huge.

She reaches for her bag with one hand and the door handle with the other, but I wrap my hand around the one she has on her purse straps. "You sure you know what you're getting yourself into?"

"Probably not. But contracts are signed, so I can't get out now," she laughs, and her eyes dart from my face to our hands.

Her face flushes with excitement, which is understandable. This show is a huge deal.

But I also know that when Georgia throws herself into something, she is all in, to the point of complete exhaustion. Especially because she thinks she can do everything herself. She hates asking for help. Lone Wolf is a more fitting nickname for her than Ham, but I didn't think of that when I accidentally gave her the name that's stuck to her tighter than a mouse in a sticky trap.

"You've got people to help you, and no amount of money is enough to work yourself to death. Just remember that." I've been reading up on stories of other people who've had home reno shows. The consensus is, it's a lot of work for not very much money. The real money comes from linking to other products.

Georgia slides her hand out from under mine and pushes back into the seat. "I don't know any other way to work, Zach. But thanks for looking out for me."

“Sponsorship. That’s where the money is.” I stop myself from mansplaining anymore. She knows this. “Clothing, shoes, makeup—that’s what we need to get for you.”

So maybe I don’t totally shut down the mansplaining.

Her eyes glide down to her chest then over to me, eyebrows raised. “I am not the right size for a clothing brand sponsorship. But the others, yes. Starting with this one…” She yanks her purse onto her lap and digs through it.

With an “ah ha!” she takes out a lipstick thing and looks in the rearview mirror to paint her lips red. Then she puckers them at me, and I swallow hard to once again push back the memory of kissing her.

“Sexy Lips pays me every time someone clicks their link on my account,” she purrs and shakes her hair over her shoulders. “Stella is already working on styling me to attract other sponsors.”

Now it’s my turn to raise an eyebrow. “Will you be in high heels?”

“Always.” She lifts her leg to show me the boots I’ve already noticed. They’re impossible to miss.

I shake my head. “You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“I walked to Britta’s in them just fine.” She shrugs. “Plus, they’re part of my brand. Girlie girls can do it all.”

I scoff. “You couldn’t walk here in them.”

“That was because of the cold, not my footwear.”

“You weren’t a high heels-wearing girlie girl when we blew up that wedding cake in the eleventh grade, or when we graffitied the old Voglmeyer barn.” I let my mouth slide into a grin, which Georgia meets with a smile that was her trademark even before she got famous for being the red-lipsticked woman with a drill in her designer purse.

The high heels she always wears are another “girlie-girl” addition to the red

lipstick she's adopted since leaving Paradise. She was a tomboy through and through growing up. Maybe that's why I never thought of her as anything but a friend. Looking at her now, though, I realize she is objectively pretty. Maybe even gorgeous. Not in a conventional way—like Carly. Gorgeous in a unique way.

But Georgia's always been unique.

"First of all," Georgia's smile grows wider. "Chemistry teachers in small towns shouldn't teach their students formulas for explosives. Mr. Wallin is to blame for the unfortunate wedding cake explosion experiment."

I laugh. "I still can't believe it left a six-foot-deep hole in the Lovett's field."

"Secondly," she continues. "Do you think the graffiti thing is the reason Darlene hates me? I mean, does she know I did it? And does she think you weren't with me?"

"Nah," I say slowly. "There's no question she knows it was you. Who else would spray paint a caricature of her as Hitler?"

"Anyone who knows her," Georgia snaps back, still grinning wildly. "But I obviously didn't write 'Voglmeyer for town *Nat-zi*.'" She emphasizes each syllable in the word, knowing she's the only person who can get away with teasing me about how badly I spell. "I won the sixth-grade spelling bee. I know there's no 't' in Nazi."

"I know that too...I just didn't then."

She sighs, shaking her head. "I don't know how you stay here when everyone in town knows what a troublemaker you were."

I laugh with her, but her words hit a little too close to home. I'm comfortable in Paradise. Until a few years ago, I never thought I'd want to leave, which is why I didn't go to college after high school. But to be honest,

for a while now, I've thought a lot about getting out of Paradise, as much I love it here. In fact, if Mom hadn't gotten sick a few years ago, I would have left.

But she did, so I stayed.

I don't regret my decision, but that doesn't mean I never wonder how my life would be different if I had moved somewhere else. And, now that I've found a house, I probably won't leave. Which is fine. I'm glad Carly loves it here and wants to stay. I'm sure, with all the recent growth, Paradise won't feel too small for much longer.

Sitting next to Georgia, though, reminiscing and watching her smile, everything about Paradise feels right again. The chatter and commotion outside my Bronco is background noise. There's only the two of us. I sink deeper into my seat and let my whole body unwind in a way I haven't in...I don't know how long.

"What do you think of Grandma Rose's house?" I ask her, wanting to stretch our time alone as long as I can.

Her mouth pulls to the side. "The house is beautiful. Evie did an amazing job. But is it weird that I miss the green shag carpet?"

I look down the street, past the houses with peeling paint and broken shutters to the only two-story house in the neighborhood, where Georgia's been staying since she came back. Grandma Rose's renovated cottage is the farthest from my granny's, but it stands out from the rest of the run-down cottages like a football player in a clean uniform at the end of a tough game.

"Nah." I shake my head. "We had some good times in that house. I'm sorry to see Granny's change too."

She stares out the window with me. "I wish the houses were in good enough condition to do more restoration instead of complete rehabs."

“Same, but it doesn’t make financial sense.” I brush my hand over her shoulder and tug one of her curls, like I used to when we were kids. “People think they want old houses until they realize they’ll have to go without ensuite bathrooms, open floor plans, or air conditioning. You wouldn’t have been able to compete with all the new houses going up if you restored instead of rebuilding.”

We’ve gone back and forth about this ever since she found out Grandma Rose left Little Copenhagen to her, and I helped her decide what to do with the old cottages. Because I’ve agreed to help with the real estate side of things, we’re not just friends—we’re business partners. That’s what she calls us, anyway. Partners.

Except the part where she puts up all the capital and takes all the risk.

My only job is to sell the cottages as we finish them and help her with the condo development.

That’s why the constant thought that she’s doing me a favor is hooked tight in my brain.

On top of that, I’m concerned adding a business component to our friendship will mess everything up between us. That worry gnaws at me even more than the *doing me a favor* thought. It’s the same biting feeling I get when I occasionally let myself wonder what it would be like if Georgia and I were more than friends.

But the risk of losing our friendship has always kept me from pursuing any real ideas about *us*.

Which is the right thing to do.

Someone like Georgia who has the whole world at her feet wouldn’t want to tie herself to a guy like me who’s never lived anywhere besides the small

town where he was born and raised. Georgia was always going places I wasn't.

I just hope I didn't do the wrong thing by agreeing to work with her. The last thing I want is for business, or anything else, to get in the way of what we have.

Chapter 5

Georgia



I jump at the knock on Zach's truck window, then yelp when I see giant brown eyes, a mashed nose, and a mouth with puffed-up chipmunk cheeks pressed against the glass. Bright orange mittens frame the face, and I let out a relieved laugh when I realize who it is: little Stella Sparks, all grown up.

Then I do the same thing back to her on my side of the window. I'm still laughing when I pull away and feel Zach lean over my shoulder.

"This is who you hire as an assistant?" he asks dryly.

"Stella is going to be awesome."

"Good luck keeping her in line." He shakes his head as I roll down the window.

"Hey, girl," Stella squeals then looks around me. "Hey, cuz!"

"Hiya, Sparky." Zach sends his cousin a jerk of his chin. "When did you get back?"

"Couple days ago. I'm going to finish the rest of the semester online so I can help Georgia." Stella turns back to me. "When are we getting started?"

I glance around her to where my director, Ike, and the rest of the crew are set up on the snow-covered front yard. We're on such a tight budget that there's only a five-man film crew. Besides Ike, there's Nick on camera, Amber on makeup, and Gracyn the mic girl, plus Teri who does all the writing—because reality TV isn't actually that real. It's all scripted.

"Whoa, check out those eyebrows," Zach says at the same time Ike gives me a mittened thumbs-up. He raises his very bushy eyebrow—there's only one, stretching from one temple to the other.

"Right?" I grin at Zach. "Eugene Levy's got nothing on Ike."

We both suck in our lips to keep from laughing. Despite the lack of eyebrow maintenance, Ike is a great guy, not above stepping in wherever he's

needed. With such a small crew, everyone is doing multiple jobs, so he's been helping Nick and Gracyn set up all the equipment.

"Looks like the crew is ready to go," I say to Stella.

"Cool." Stella pulls her shoulders in tight, but the more she tries to contain her excitement, the more she looks ready to explode.

From the depths of my magic purse, I pull out a phone and pass it to her through the window. "This is what you'll use for pics and video. Social media sites are all set up, along with apps for designing posts. Download whatever face-tuning and touch-up apps you want. Make me look good! Do what you do best and post the content directly onto my account."

Stella immediately begins scrolling through the phone, setting things up.

"We're doing a lot of outside shots this morning," I continue while she nods. "Make sure you get lots of good angles so we can do before and after posts. You'll want to mark the shots you take so you can be sure to retake them after the reno."

"Got it," Stella says absently, still scrolling, and I hope she does, because the before and after shots are everything.

"Georgia!" a voice calls, and I turn to see Amber, the purple-haired production assistant, charging toward me, carrying a toolbox. "Time to work some magic." She glances at Stella. "Are you the assistant? I need your help."

Stella darts a wary look my way, and I shrug, as confused as she is, before climbing out of the warm car to face the cold and Amber.

She leads me to the trailer where we can take food breaks during the day. Through the small windows, I see Teri pacing inside, clutching a pen close to her face and clicking it.

I assume Amber and I are going inside where it's warm, but instead she

orders me to sit on a barstool outside the trailer. Then she opens the toolbox to reveal every kind of makeup and applicator ever made.

“Wow. That’s a lot of makeup,” I mumble.

If Amber hears me, she doesn’t give any sign. She’s too busy examining my face, trying to figure out how to fix it, I guess. My eyes wander to Zach, who’s leaning against his Bronco, watching with a super annoying smirk.

I stick my tongue out at him. Before I see his response, Amber grabs my chin and turns my head to face her again.

“I’d rather do this inside.” She narrows her eyes, moves close, then steps back. “But the lighting is terrible in there. I need to get the right shade.”

Meanwhile, I have to pretend I’m not growing more insecure about my looks by the second.

Finally, she’s done eyeing me. She pulls four different tubes from the box and hands them to Stella. Then she chooses a variety of sponges and brushes.

“You need all that for my face?” I’m joking, but I already know the answer. I’ve been on stage before. I know what bright lights do to my pasty skin and freckles.

Amber answers by sponging my cheeks and nose with what I can only assume is some kind of contouring foundation. “It’s overcast today, so we won’t need as much out here. Once we’re ready to shoot inside, we’ll go a little heavier so you’re not washed out under the lights.”

“Not too heavy, please. I don’t want fans to expect me to look made-up all the time,” I say through pursed lips as Amber moves my head side to side, rubbing everything in.

In real life, I wear lipstick and that’s it. And I don’t know what it is about being made up, but suddenly everything feels real and pretend at the same time. My breath quickens as my nerves come alive. Maybe it’s because I

have to hold so still that my whole body wants to twitch, and the next few minutes are the longest of my life.

Finally, Amber steps back and assesses her work. “That will do for now.”

She gives Ike a thumbs up, and Nick, in the slow, fluid movement of a lanky basketball player, shoulders the camera and points it toward me. I look in Zach’s direction, and he gives me a smile and a nod.

For whatever reason, his nod holds enough confidence to slow the pounding in my chest. The air is still biting cold, but the only thing I shiver from is excitement. This is really happening. I’ve got my own show.

I’ve dreamed of this moment since the tenth grade, when I starred in Paradise’s production of *Hairspray*. I didn’t necessarily want to be an actress, but I liked performing. I wanted to be famous. But in a lowkey, I’m-still-a-regular-person kind of way. Like the female version of Keanu Reeves.

With the first house to be renovated behind me, the film crew in front of me, and Zach and Stella on either side, I feel like I’m on the cusp of realizing my dream. *I can do this.*

Then a truck pulls up, gravel crunching under its tires, music blasting. Even though I haven’t seen him since I’ve been back in Paradise, I know exactly who it is. My chest tightens with anticipation as the truck comes to a stop and the music goes quiet. I glance at the film crew, hoping they’re not rolling.

Unfortunately, Nick pans the camera toward the newest arrival, and Gracyn—almost as tall as Nick—swings her mic in the same direction as Sebastian steps out of his truck.

“Hey, Ham!” he calls.

I put on my practiced smile, ready to be hugged by him. I’ll hug him back, of course. That’s not the part I mind at all. I’ve always liked Seb, despite the fact he hasn’t called me by my real name in over a decade.

But before Seb reaches me, Zach intercepts him, grabbing him by the shoulders. “You don’t need to be here, and don’t call her that name.” He turns Seb around and, with a gentle push, sends him back toward his truck.

Seb tries to turn, but he’s no match against Zach. The whole scene is Newton’s first law of motion in action: an object will not change its path unless a force acts on it. Zach is that force. With little effort, he guides Seb toward his truck.

On his way, he calls over his shoulder to the film crew, “Strike that tape, or whatever it is you do, if you filmed that.”

I stare at him. Good thing it’s too cold for bugs to survive, otherwise I’d have a mouth full of gnats. Zach has never stopped anyone from calling me Ham.

“We weren’t rolling, but hold up!” Ike turns to me. “Who is that?”

“Sebastian Sparks, our electrician,” I answer. “Not sure why he showed up four weeks early.”

“An electrician with the last name Sparks?” Ike raises the Sam Elliot a la *Yellowstone* mustache that passes for his eyebrows. “He’s a friend of yours?”

I nod reluctantly.

“We need him, especially with that name.”

I open my mouth to protest, but it’s too late.

“Let’s do that again!” Ike yells before Zach can force Seb into his truck, then he turns back to me. “We need shots of you greeting hometown friends. If he’s going to be working on the house, all the better. Fewer consent and release forms to deal with.”

I’m about to remind Ike about the clause in my contract that prohibits any film of people calling me Ham, but Zach beats me to it.

“Call her Georgia this time,” he orders Seb, loud enough for everyone to

hear, then lets him go. “No one on set is allowed to call her by that name you used. And no one off-camera should.”

If my mouth was wide open before, it’s taken things to a whole new level now. My chin is somewhere near the ground. I don’t even remember telling Zach I asked for that clause.

After Seb slides back into his truck, Ike walks to Stella and hands her the clapper board. “Do you mind doing this part when I tell you?”

Her eyes go wide, and she snatches it from his hands. “OMG. I’ve always wanted one of these things.” Without waiting, she lifts the arm and claps it down. “ACTION!”

Ike sighs. “Wait for my cue, please. We need to actually have the camera ready to go.”

“Okay, sorry! I got excited.” Stella bounces from one foot to the other, waiting for Ike’s cue. “This is seriously already the best job ever,” she says to me.

I return her smile. Not just because I’m happy she’s excited, but also because, if he can keep Seb from calling me Ham, maybe Zach can keep everyone else from doing it too.

Ike gives Stella the cue, she calls out “Action” again, and the clap of the board is followed by the slam of Sebastian’s truck door.

“Georgia Rose!” he yells with his arms up. “Is that you?”

Then he runs to me, putting on a show like he’s been on camera a million times. He scoops me in his arms, lifting me off the ground and squeezing tight enough to cut off my circulation. “It’s good to have you home!”

This he says loud enough for the mic, but as he sets me down, he whispers in my ear, “Sorry about that first take. Can I still call you Ham off camera?”

I almost say yes. It’s still such a reflex to blow off my own hurt in order to

make other people happy. But I stop myself and shake my head. “Not anymore.”

He eyes me carefully, and I can almost see what he’s thinking: *fame has changed her*. But then his lips curve into a crooked smile.

“Got it,” he nods.

“Perfect!” Ike calls. “Hold tight while we set up the next shot.”

As soon as Nick puts the camera down, Zach saunters over. “What are you doing, Seb?” He asks with more than a little suspicion. “We won’t need any electrical for at least another month.”

Seb’s always been a sucker for the spotlight.

“Just came to say hi to Georgia and my little sister.” He moves sideways to throw his arm around Stella’s shoulders. “Has she caused any trouble yet?”

Stella rolls her eyes. “I’m not the one who just messed up the shoot.”

“Not yet, anyway. There’s still time.” He nudges his sister’s shoulder with his own. They have the same dark eyes and hair; their mom’s Italian genes have overpowered every bit of their dad’s Scandinavian DNA.

“We’re ready to roll,” Ike calls from the other side of the yard. “We need shots of Georgia looking around the outside of the house. Everyone else needs to get out of the way.”

“They’re just filming you walking around?” Seb asks. “That’s boring. You probably need me in those shots.”

Now it’s my turn for a Seb-induced roll of my eyes. “You’ll get your chance when we’re ready for electrical. And I have a script, so it’s not like I’m making things up off the top of my head.”

I glance at the teleprompter set up to remind me of my lines. An idea forms at the back of my brain, wrapped around the memory of what happened when Evie got Adam on camera. Her account exploded.

“You’re right, though,” I say. “I *do* need someone to talk to.”

But not Seb.

Someone in the real estate business. Someone who’ll be selling the properties eventually and understands their value. Someone who may say he doesn’t want to be on camera but will kill it when he is.

“Come on, Zach.” I grab his hand and tug him in Ike’s direction. “You’re the man for the job.”

“Whoa, what are you talking about? I don’t want to be on camera.”

“Sure you do. It’ll be great.” I stop us in front of Ike. “I’ve got a good idea. I need someone to banter with on camera, and Zach’s perfect because he’s already signed all the production company release forms and knows the property. Plus, who wouldn’t want to look at this beautiful face? Good idea, right?”

Ike assesses Zach like a prize steer at the fair, then asks me. “Is he going to wear a shirt and tie every day?”

“It’s what I always wear.” Zach smooths his tie.

Ike nods. “I like it. Very Jonathon Scott.” He considers the idea for a few more seconds, looks at Zach’s face, and nods again. “Good idea. I’ll tell Teri to add some lines for him in the script. And you take him to Amber. Even beautiful people need makeup on-camera. And hurry. We’re behind schedule already.”

He heads toward the trailer, where Teri is already at work on her laptop.

“You heard the man. Time for makeup!” I pull Zach toward the trailer too, even though I don’t see Amber or her stool there anymore.

Zach stops me after a few steps. “I can’t do this, Georgia.”

“Yes, you can. It’ll be fun!” I tug his hand, but that pesky Newton’s first law comes into play again. I am not force enough to move Zach.

He shakes his head, but not in the slow, casual way he has. This is tight and rapid. Afraid.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Nick re-shoulder his camera and test a few angles. I squeeze Zach's hand and step close enough that no one will hear us. "What are you nervous about? Just be yourself. People will love you on camera as much as they do in person."

His gaze drifts toward the teleprompter, and he lowers his voice. "I won't be able to read the words. I'll mess everything up."

I follow his eyes, and my stomach sinks. I'd forgotten about his dyslexia. He never read out loud in school if he could help it, and when he did, he could barely get through it. It's literally the only time I've ever seen his confidence waver.

And now I'm trying to force him to read in front of millions of strangers. Or a few hundred thousand, at least.

I squeeze his hand. "I'm so sorry. I wasn't thinking."

The tension eases out of his shoulders "It's okay. I'd help you out if I could. But I can't." There's disappointment in the slight curve of his mouth.

I want to reassure him and let him off the hook, but then I think about Heidi Thomsen, who never let Zach's dyslexia get in the way of him doing things he really wanted to do.

"You can do this, Zach." Not that I'm the cheerleader type or anything, but there's so much enthusiasm in my voice, I could be. "I can make it work. I'll have Teri print the script as soon as it's ready so you can read it beforehand."

He plants his feet more firmly on the sidewalk. "Have you forgotten *Hairspray*? How much you had to help me?"

I had forgotten. That memory had been lost behind the one of him singing his heart out and shining every time he got on stage.

But it had been a rough twelve weeks to get him there, rehearsing for hours every day, then spending hours every night helping him read and memorize lines.

And...I don't care.

Now that I've envisioned the two of us on camera together, bantering as we tour the house, I know it's just what the show needs. And I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make it happen.

"You were amazing on stage, Zach. That's what I remember." I'm still holding his hand, and I squeeze it even tighter as my excitement grows. "I loved helping you, and I can do it again. Except this time will be easier. I'll read the lines to you, you can memorize a little of it, and we'll ad lib the rest. It doesn't have to be word-for-word. What's important is you have the gist of what we're talking about."

He shakes his head, but there's uncertainty in his no.

"It'll just be the two of us," I add quickly. "Talking like we always do."

"With cameras."

"Well, yeah. That's the fun part." I smile.

Zach snorts a laugh, but he's not saying no.

"So what do you say? You'll try, at least, won't you? That's all I ask."

He blinks a few times and opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. And I remember that's the line his mom always used when he had to face something hard with his dyslexia. *Try, at least, Zach. That's all I ask.*

The moment is almost ruined when Ike comes out of the trailer and yells, "I said to get him in makeup!"

I look back at Zach. "Amber could give you eyebrows like Ike's," I murmur so only he can hear, then waggle my own eyebrows.

He laughs again, then dips his chin, which is close enough to a nod that I

don't give him time to back out.

“Zach needs a printed copy of the script so we can go over it together,” I yell back to Ike, ignoring the wrinkle in his brow. “And make sure the teleprompter font is Arial.” I remember this is a dyslexic-friendly font because it's sans-serif.

Amber appears from the trailer, and Ike points from her to Zach. “Makeup!”

Zach trudges to Amber, but he glares at me over his shoulder. “I'm still not happy about this.”

I might believe him if his mouth wasn't threatening to pull into a smile.

“The camera is going to love you, Zandwich.” I smile wide and flutter my eyelashes at him.

“I need a footstool here,” Amber yells. She only comes to Zach's chest.

Gracyn sets down the mic and runs to the van. Within seconds she's back with a stool, which she places between Amber and Zach.

Amber steps on it, bringing her almost eye-level with Zach. Gracyn holds the magic chest of makeup while Amber begins patting all kinds of foundation on Zach's face.

I look back at Seb, who is tugging on the handle of his tailgate. “I just cancelled the rest of my day.” The tailgate drops, and Seb hoists himself onto it. “I'm here for all of this.”

“I hate you, you know?” Zach yells without moving.

“Worth it!” Seb calls back as Stella hops up next to him.

Amber's got Zach's chin gripped between her fingers, studying his face with the same intensity she studied mine but without the same *how do I fix this* look of concern. And since he can't move, I figure it's safe to get closer.

“I think we need pics of this, don't you?” I call to Stella.

“On it.” She jumps down from the tailgate, her phone already in her hand, and gets close enough to film Amber at work on Zach.

“You’re both out of the family,” Zach says to Stella, loud enough for Seb to hear too.

“Worth it,” Stella answers before zooming in for a close-up.

“You’re going to pay for this...” Zach glares at me over Amber’s head.

“Worth it,” I say.

Chapter 6

Zach



Nine hours and a too-short lunch break later, the crew has barely cleared out, but Georgia and I lag behind. The day was both exhausting and exhilarating at the same time. My friend Rowdy says that about riding bucking broncs in rodeos. I never knew what he meant. Until today.

Georgia's looking out the sliding glass back door—probably coming up with more ideas about what to do with the house. I'm across the room in the kitchen, using my foot to push down a piece of the peeling linoleum floor. Unfortunately, all the furniture has been cleared out of Granny's house in preparation for the demo work Adam's going to do, so there's nowhere to sit.

"I guess I can add reality TV star to my resume now," I say to Georgia as I hoist myself onto the kitchen counter, like I've done a thousand times over the years I've spent in this house.

"You might want to wait until the show airs, and we see if it's actually going to make us stars." She unzips her silver boots and slips them off. "I'm so tired, I don't even care how dirty this carpet is, I'm standing on it."

"It'll be a hit. There's no question about that." I twist my torso while she presses her hands to her back and stretches.

"Because you're in it for one episode?" she teases, and I stop mid-twist.

"No. Because you are," I answer, completely serious.

She huffs a laugh, then stops when I don't laugh with her. "You really think so?"

"Of course I do."

Georgia goes still. "Thanks, Zach. That really means a lot to me."

"There's no way I would have been on camera if I thought this show wasn't going to launch your career into outer space." I joke with Georgia a lot, but not about this.

"Thanks for going with the flow on that." She waves her hand in the air like

it's no big deal she's thrown me into a TV career I never planned on or wanted. "I really do think the first episode is going to be so much better with you in it."

"I doubt that, but when I'm volun-told to do something, I do it. But maybe give me a little more warning next time." My phone buzzes, and I pull it from my back pocket.

"I've never sweated so much in my life," I say while opening my messages. "It's a lot of pressure to act natural when someone is telling you to do the same thing over and over until you get it 'right.' How does Ike know when I'm acting like myself? We just met today."

Georgia laughs. "You did so good. It's unbelievable how fast you memorized your lines."

"Thanks."

Georgia's words barely register. I'm focused on reading a series of texts from Carly, each one more annoyed that I haven't answered her.

I quickly voice-text an apology and explain that I had to be in the first episode of *At Home with Georgia Rose*. Somehow, saying it out loud, makes it seem even more unreal. *I'm going to be on TV*. That's not something I've ever thought about, but now that it's happened, I kind of wish I could be on more than one episode.

Georgia makes an ew sound, and I look up to see her delicately tiptoeing across the musty brown carpet. Then she stops in the middle of the room and gags.

"I can't do this." She sticks out her tongue like she might really puke. "The carpet is too gross. And I definitely don't want to walk barefoot on that thousand-year-old linoleum."

She bends down to slip her foot into a boot, but before she can put it all the

way on, I jump off the counter. “Allow me to assist you, milady,” I say in my best English accent—which isn’t good at all—while scooping her into my arms.

“Zach! What are you doing? I’m way too heavy for you.” Georgia kicks her legs, but I hold her tighter as I pick up her boots and hand them to her.

“You insult me, milady. You think I can’t lift a mere one hundred and thirty pounds?” I keep the accent and hope I’ve guessed way under on her weight.

I have no idea what Georgia weighs, and I don’t care. But I know she’s gone through times when, because of people’s comments, she’s cared too much. I don’t want the production of this TV show to become one of those times.

“A hundred and thirty?” She scoffs. “Maybe when I was twelve. Put me down before you hurt yourself.”

“Hold still before I drop you! We’re almost to the door.” I hold her tighter, because the carpet really is disgusting, and I want to help. And we’ve always played around like this. It doesn’t mean anything.

But it would to Carly, and that realization makes me walk faster, so I can set Georgia down before I feel any more guilty.

She still squirms and mutters things about me “being ridiculous” and “showing off,” but we make it all the way to the front door. I’m reaching for the knob when the door flies open. I pull Georgia tighter, so she doesn’t get hit, then Stella walks through.

“Whoa! Watch it, cuz.” I’ve still got Georgia pressed to my chest, and she’s gone still.

“I’ve been waiting in the trailer for Georgia forever.” Though her voice starts high with irritation, by the last word a grin tugs at her lips. “What have you two been doing?”

“Nothing!” Georgia and I say at the same time.

I start to lower her to the ground, but Stella stops me.

“No! Wait! This is a great shot!” Stella whips up her phone.

Without thinking, I straighten and pose, still holding Georgia.

“Put me down!” She tries to squirm out of my arms again, but after she basically threw me in front of the TV camera, there’s no way I’m letting her get away from Stella’s shots.

“Smile!” I tell her before I flex my muscles and my best grin.

“This is perfect!” Stella moves quickly, repositioning her phone at different angles, taking pics the whole time. “And I’ve got the best caption for it. ‘Sometimes even the girlie girl who can do it all needs someone to whisk her away at the end of a long day.’”

Georgia stops moving. “Okay, that *is* good.”

Then she drops her head against my chest and closes her eyes, like she’s completely exhausted. Which she has to be, if she feels anything like I do.

“Wait. You’re going to post these?” I hadn’t thought that through, but of course she is. That’s her job. “No way!”

Carly is not going to like this.

I try to set Georgia down, but she clings to my neck. “You started this! You’re not getting out of it now!”

I laugh, because she’s right. I’ll just have to explain to Carly that we were joking around and hope she understands. She knows Georgia is my best friend.

Stella snaps what feels like a thousand more pictures. When she finally lowers her phone, Georgia almost leaps out of my arms to look over Stella’s shoulder while they scroll through the shots. They talk about how to best use

some of the other pics Stella got today, and I watch Georgia's unstoppable energy come back.

She's literally vibrating. Like a power current. Clapping when she sees shots she loves, smiling wider than I've ever seen her. As curious as I am about the pictures, I'm enjoying watching her too much to look at anything else, amazed as always by what Georgia can do.

While she's bouncing with energy, I can barely stand upright. If I'd known how much work shooting was going to be, I might have pushed back harder today when Georgia pulled me on the show. I *thought* I knew, but I had no idea. The warning I gave her earlier about not working herself to death wasn't close to strong enough.

If Evie had been here, I'm sure Georgia would have used her instead of me. She could have been the one to repeat the same conversations over and over for different shots. Say one thing, try one angle, then say it again with a different angle or in a different room. For *nine* hours.

To be honest, I should have hated it more than I did. Half the shots we had to do again because Georgia and I started laughing over something stupid or one of us cracked a joke while the camera was off that Ike decided needed to be on film. I don't want to do this every day, and I feel bad that Georgia has to, but I did have a good time with her. It was just like the old days.

Finally, she steps away from Stella and stretches her arms overhead. "Good work today, Stella. I can't wait to see the response from my followers."

She bends to put on her boots, wobbling enough that I grab her elbow to steady her while she slips on the ridiculous things.

Before she gets the second one zipped, Stella has her phone in Georgia's face. "First comments are in!"

"Already?" Georgia takes the phone from Stella, and a smile slides across

her face. She scrolls, then clicks on another image, and her smile turns to open-mouthed surprise. “Whoa.”

“What?” I peek over her shoulder to see a picture of the two of us where I’m leaning against the wall, arms and legs crossed, looking at Georgia. Her eyes are turned up toward me, her lips pursed. I have no idea when Stella took the picture, but it perfectly captures the teasing relationship Georgia and I have.

“That’s kind of cute.” I elbow Georgia’s side.

“Cute?” She gives me another upturned look, similar to the one in the picture. “It has over a hundred thousand likes, and it’s only been up for a few hours.”

“Is that good?”

Georgia rolls her eyes and hands the phone back to Stella, and they exchange a *look*.

“It’s more than good, dummy,” Stella answers. “It’s amazing.” Then she turns back to Georgia. “Did you read the comments?”

Without waiting for an answer, she holds out her phone to Georgia again. As she scrolls, Georgia’s eyes grow wide while Stella nods and smiles, like she knows exactly what Georgia is thinking.

Then, totally in sync, they both look at me and smile.

“What?” I do not like the looks on their faces. I’ve seen that look on Georgia’s face every time she gets an idea that involves me doing something embarrassing, illegal, or stupid. Sometimes all three.

“The people...” Stella tells me with mock seriousness. “They love you. I don’t know why, but they do.”

“I know why,” Georgia says to Stella. They gaze intently at me, eyebrows lifted. “Look at him.”

“Hmm. Nobody ever accused him of being ugly,” Stella answers, still staring at me. “But since we’re cousins—and not the royal kind who marry each other—that’s all I’ve got to say about his looks. Don’t want things to get any more weird than they already are.”

“According to these comments, he’s a very handsome man.” Georgia lets her eyes wander over me in a way that Stella doesn’t. “Or, and I quote, a ‘gorgeous hunk of manhood.’”

Heat crawls up my neck. “Can you please stop objectifying me now? You’re making me very uncomfortable.”

Georgia shakes her head while I try to figure out what to do with my hands. I put them in my pockets, but that feels weird, and crossing my arms feels even weirder. Georgia just keeps staring—no, *leering*—and I have no idea why her looking me over like a prized bull is making me sweat.

Look, I’ve turned a few heads in my day. This isn’t the first time I’ve been ogled. But it is the first time I’ve been ogled by my best friend. Which hits different.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Stella says to Georgia.

“Yep.” Georgia blinks, but her eyes are still glued on me.

“What?” I glance between them, then at the door. If they weren’t blocking it, I’d make a run for it.

“My followers want more of you, Zach.” Georgia’s voice is back to her normal, non-objectifying tone. “If we have this many likes on the first day, once the show airs, we’ll already have a strong fan base. People will watch because you’re on it.”

“Uh-uh.” Stella shakes her head. “People will watch because you’re *both* on it. You make a great team. You’ve got chemistry. I saw it all day today. That’s what they’re seeing in these pictures, not just Zach’s pretty face.”

“Don’t call me pretty.” I glare at Stella, but I’m not saying no. I’ve never been able to say no to Georgia.

Stella grabs my jaw and squeezes my cheeks together. “But you *are* so pretty,” she says like I’m five years old instead of five years older than her.

I push her hand away then turn to Georgia, determined to say no for the first time. But then she juts out her bottom lip and fixes her pleading eyes on me.

“Please?”

How am I supposed to say no when she’s given me the chance of a lifetime to be the real estate agent for all the cottages? Her success is my success.

I just hope Carly doesn’t mind, because the picture of me holding Georgia could be read as more than friendly, if someone didn’t know any better.

Chapter 7

Georgia



As soon as I get back to Grandma Rose's, I get Ike and the producers on the phone. By the time I finish talking to them about making Zach a bigger part of the show, it's after seven o'clock.

I collapse on the couch, too tired to make anything to eat and too hungry not to. If I were in California right now, I'd drive through In-n-Out or DoorDash tacos from one of a million taco shops.

I miss LA.

Instead, I pick up the phone and tell Siri to dial the number for the Garden of Eatin'. They don't do take-out, but I'm hoping they will for me, even though Adam is in New York with Evie. His brother Bear will be manning the restaurant. He can cook, but he wasn't trained at one of the best culinary schools in the country the way Adam was.

Britta answers, which means she's working the hostess station after running her own restaurant all morning and afternoon.

"Hey, Britta. It's Georgia. You sound as tired as I feel." I kick off my boots and stretch out on the sofa.

"Yeah, it's been a day. What can I do for you?" The noise in the background explains why she's not as chatty as usual. The Garden must be busy.

"My fridge is empty, and I'm too tired to move." Hard as I try not to let it happen, a whine slips into my voice. "Is there any way I can order take-out without sounding like I'm pulling the *I'm famous* card?"

"There's literally no way to do that," Britta says sternly, and my heart drops. "So it's a good thing everyone here loves you and would do anything for you. What would you like?"

Britta's voice switches back to its usual lilting tone, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I should have known she was teasing, but I've been on edge ever since

my Darlene Voglmeyer encounter.

“Cheeseburger and fries. Tell Bear to make it as easy on himself as possible.” My stomach growls at the thought of food. Almost loud enough to drown out the thought that I’m being a diva. “And thank you so much.”

“Hold on one sec,” Britta says over the loud voices in the background, then puts me on hold.

I shouldn’t be making Britta, Bear, and the rest of the staff at the Garden cater to me. Especially since they’re probably feeding Ike and the crew, because that’s where I told them to go for the best food in town. But I can’t force myself back out the door. After the hectic day I’ve had, it feels too good to be home.

Except home doesn’t quite feel like home—aside from the empty fridge. It used to feel like home, when it was Grandma Rose’s, with green shag carpet and textured walls, but I’m not used to the changes Evie and I made. Don’t get me wrong, the house is beautiful inside and out in a way it never was when I spent summers here with my grandma. I guess I’m still not used to the idea of this house being mine instead of hers.

“Cheeseburger and fries. You got it,” Britta says when she comes back. “Rowdy’s here with Tessa. You want me to see if he’ll run it over to you? Looks like they’re about done.”

“That would be amazing.” I close my eyes and sink deeper into the couch.

I haven’t seen Rowdy in years, but if there’s anyone actually famous in Paradise, it’s him. He’s won enough buckles for bareback bronc-riding to cover an entire wall. I’ve never met his fiancée, Tessa, but I’ve heard she’s from LA too.

But for real from LA, not just living there now, like I do. For better or worse, I’ll always be *from* Paradise, Idaho. Which isn’t the worst place to be

from, especially considering I'm getting DoorDash service from a world-famous rodeo star for no extra charge.

Just like running into a celebrity in the grocery store can only happen in a place like LA or New York, only in a place like Paradise could you get food delivered for free by someone who has no reason to do it other than to be neighborly.

Paradise isn't unique in that way for a small town. What makes it unique is that it's a popular summer vacation spot. The population increases by tens of thousands between Memorial Day and Labor Day. College students from all over spend the season working here at restaurants, rental shops, the local grocery store, and every other business that makes most of its yearly profits during the summer months.

When the season ends, the students return to wherever they're going to college, and local kids go back to school. Help is hard to find, but business is slow anyway, so most people work multiple jobs. And locals—like Rowdy—are always willing to help in a pinch.

It's great, but it's also exhausting. That's why Dad sold his hardware store and he and Mom moved to Boise. Neither my brother nor I wanted to stay and run it, so he sold it to Zach's dad. Knowing Zach may take it over from his dad someday makes me feel like it's still in our family.

But it also means Zach will never leave Paradise. And sometimes I wonder if he'd like to. Occasionally when we talk and I tell him about the different places I'm traveling to or even the places around LA where I'm hanging out, I hear a longing in his voice. If wanderlust has a sound, that's what his voice sounds like.

Thinking about Zach, I pull out my phone to look through the videos and posts Stella put up today. I knew she would be great, but she's totally nailed

the aesthetic I was going for. Light, bright, minimal, and fun.

But she's also captured something else.

Me touching Zach.

A lot.

Sometimes it's our shoulders brushing. Other times it's me resting my hand on his arm while I talk to him. There's even one with our heads bent over together, looking at some of my drawings. And of course, there's the one where he's carrying me.

I don't need a picture to remind me of that. The memory is still fresher than a new coat of paint.

I know Zach has muscles. I've seen the evidence. But today, I felt it too. He picked me up like I'm a skinny little thing. And I am not that. I've never wanted to be, and I'm not ashamed of my weight. I'm healthy, curvy, and happy to be both.

But that doesn't mean I wasn't surprised that Zach could still carry me around like nothing. Or that I didn't enjoy feeling his biceps and forearms pressed around my thighs and back. In fact, that's what made me uncomfortable about the whole thing—how much I enjoyed it.

And that's written all over my face in the series of pics Stella took.

Obviously, it's been way too long since I've been in a relationship, if something Zach's done a million times before has me looking that hot and bothered. *Embarrassing.*

Which makes me think I need to take a closer look at the other pics Stella posted. So I scroll again and grow even more uncomfortable. Stella's not wrong about the interaction between Zach and me. She's captured more chemical reactions than Zach and I ever made happen in actual high school

chemistry. If I didn't know we were friends, I'd think we were more. We really do love each other, and it shows.

It's just weird that a picture makes it so hard to distinguish between *love* love and friend love.

I keep scrolling, trying to determine if I'm reading too much into them. That's entirely possible. Maybe no one else will see what I think I see.

A knock at the door startles me, and I toss my phone aside to answer it. Rowdy's there with my food in hand, a beautiful blonde at his side.

"There's the famous movie star!" he says.

"Definitely no movies in my future," I laugh.

"Never say never, but it's great to see your face in real life instead of on a screen." He hands me my bag full of food, then wags his head toward the blonde. "This is Tessa, my fiancée."

"So nice to meet you. I hear you're from Los Angeles. I live there now, too." The smell of the fries wafts out of the bag, and my stomach growls loud enough to embarrass us all. "Do you want to come in for a bit?" I ask to try to cover the growl that follows the first.

"No, but thanks," Rowdy says. "Eat your dinner and get some rest. I talked to Zach. Sounds like it was a pretty grueling day."

"That's one way to put it," I sigh.

"I'd love to get together some other time, when you're not starving." Tessa grins, and I like her already. "We can talk LA stuff."

"Sounds amazing!" I wave good-bye, then close the door and dig into the fries.

I should sit at the kitchen table, but I go back to the couch and turn on the TV. I tell myself I'm going to watch something that doesn't have anything to

do with home renovations or design, but after ten minutes of flipping through channels, I end up on HGTV.

Watching TV feels like a waste of time when there's so much to do. So I make it work. I can check out the competition and maybe get some ideas for my show.

Ten minutes into *The Property Brothers* and my dinner, my phone buzzes with a text. I open the message to see a picture of Evie with a ring on her finger. I scream, and before I can tell Siri to call her, my phone rings and Evie's picture pops up.

"You're engaged!" I yell into the phone.

"Yes!" She squeals back. "And also deaf now."

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!" I lower my voice but not my enthusiasm. "I'm so happy for you!"

Evie has been my best friend since we were roommates at Savannah College of Art and Design, and Adam has been one of my closest friends since...I don't know. Birth? I knew they'd be perfect for each other before they even met. Which is part of the reason I hired Evie to be in charge of the renovation of this house.

But mostly I hired her because I know how talented she is.

Thanks to Evie, Grandma Rose's turned out even better than I'd imagined, and I've got my own show. I couldn't be any more thrilled about that, but now that she and Adam are engaged? That's the icing on the cake—the wedding cake (cue rim shot).

"Tell me all about it." I set my tray of fries on the glass-topped coffee table with antlers for legs. Evie designed it, and it's my favorite thing in the house.

"It was perfect," she sighs. "He showed up at Pedro's Tacos, got down on one knee, and asked me to marry him. I didn't even know he was coming to

New York. Did you?”

“I did.” I laugh. “I also told him he had to smile when he asked you. Did he?”

Before she can answer, I hear Adam’s voice in the background. “Yes, I smiled!”

“He came close,” Evie amends. “But he definitely smiled after I said yes. In fact, he’s still smiling.”

“I might never stop!” Adam says.

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” I say.

Adam is a notorious grump.

Evie gives me more details about the proposal, and the more she tells me, the more I smile. *I may never stop.* They’re so cute together.

“We can talk more about wedding plans when I get back on Wednesday,” Evie says, and I feel a change in subject coming. “Right now, I want all the details about the first day of shooting. I saw all your posts. They’re soooo good!”

“Stella did a great job. I knew she would.” Just thinking about the pictures, I’m tempted to look at them again. “We worked hard, and a lot of it was repetitive stuff, but it was so fun.”

“Yeah, it *looks* like you had fun,” she says in a suggestive voice.

I cringe a little. I know what she’s implying, but I pretend not to.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” My voice is about as convincing as a bad used car salesman’s.

“If I didn’t know you were friends, I’d think you were together,” she says, echoing the exact thought I had not thirty minutes ago. “Even Adam is wondering if something’s going on.”

“Come on! You know nothing is going on.” Obviously, she doesn’t, but I

will fix all this tomorrow. I'm not letting anything happen that will lead to pictures like these again.

"Was it Shakespeare who said something about protesting too much? Because, yeah, that." Evie laughs. "But this is good, Georgy. Did you see all the comments? People love the two of you together!"

"That's what Stella said too." I put Evie on speaker and pull up my social media account again. There are even more likes and comments than there were the last time I checked.

"I'm going to tell you the same thing you told me when people went crazy over Adam on my posts," Evie says. "More Zach content, please." The humor in her voice doesn't soothe the worry knotting in my stomach.

"I agree, but we'll be playing up the only-friends angle. Zach's agreed to play a bigger role on the social media side of things, but tomorrow, we'll make it clear there's nothing going on between us." I talk business-y to put any ideas out of Evie's head that there's anything going on between Zach and me.

"Uh-huh." That's all she says, but there's enough subtext in the sound that it could be an entire literary novel.

"I'm just giving the people what they obviously want—which is Zach. And a single Zach is going to be a bigger sell than a Zach they think is attached to me." *Or Carly.*

I quickly push that thought aside—and the one about Zach thinking she might be the one—then continue. "And that's why we'll clear up that misconception with tomorrow's posts."

I don't know why I'm scrambling to explain myself to her. There's, literally, nothing to explain.

"Uh-huh," Evie says again, still unconvinced.

“He’s head-over-heels for Carly. He told me today he thinks she’s the one.” So maybe I haven’t completely banished those thoughts.

“Ha! Okay,” she laughs, then repeats what I’ve said to Adam, who also laughs. And Adam never laughs.

“Look, there is nothing going on between us. Period.” My armpits are damp, my palms sweaty. I don’t know why. This is all ridiculous. “And there’s not going to be anything going on between us. Even if we weren’t pretty much best friends, we’re working together. Falling for each other would make everything weird. Worse. If things didn’t work out the whole project could blow up.”

What I don’t say is that in a romance-gone-wrong with Zach, I might lose Evie and Adam too. Before Adam met Evie, he was engaged to Dakota, a friend of mine. I got Adam in their break-up, which I’m totally fine with, but it still sucks to lose a friend.

And even though Adam and Zach don’t always get along, blood is always thicker than water. An end to a relationship with Zach would mean an end to my friendship with Adam, and by default, once they’re married, my friendship with Evie.

Too risky.

“*Flip or Flop*,” Evie says.

“What?”

“The El Moussas. They got divorced and still worked together.”

I scoff. “Not anymore.”

“No,” Evie agrees. “Now they both have spinoff shows and bank accounts with millions of dollars.”

“That’s supposed to convince me? I’d rather have friends than money.” I close the app I’m staring at and take her off speaker.

Evie answers with a laugh. “That’s very noble. But, speaking from experience, I know how irresistible the Thomsen twins are.” She follows this statement with a giggle and other noises that have nothing to do with our conversation and everything to do with Adam.

“Gross. Can you two please not make out while we’re in the middle of a phone call?” I take my garbage to the kitchen, holding the phone away from my ear until the giggling stops. “Putting Zach on camera is good for business. That’s it.”

“I remember you saying the same thing about Adam, only to find out later you had more nefarious plans for us. Now look what’s happened.” Evie giggles again. “You and I can’t even get through a conversation without Adam trying to *distract* me.”

I can almost see her air quotes when she says distract.

“I’m hanging up now.” I hope she hears my eyeroll.

“Say hi to Zach for me,” Adam yells just before I end the call.

I go back to the sofa and TV, determined to forget everything Evie just said. But, of course, what’s on the TV?

Flip or Flop.

Chapter 8

Zach



The next couple days of shooting are just as exhausting as the first, especially since I still have my actual job. Luckily, February is a slow month for real estate, so I'm able to get done what I need to when I'm not on camera "being pretty," as Georgia says.

The most important lesson I've learned is that reality TV is more make-believe than a four-year-old's princess tea party. Which actually takes the pressure off me to get things exactly right. Even though reading through the lines with Georgia helps me memorize a lot of them, it's easier to improvise.

Not that there aren't plenty of tools in place to help me say what's written in the script. Before each shot, Ike gives us an overview of what he wants to see on camera, the teleprompter has my lines in a sans-serif font, making them easier to read, and Georgia mouths my lines to me whenever she can.

Then I say what I want.

I don't go totally off-script. I just ad lib a little. Or a lot.

But everyone laughs, and nobody stops me, so it must be working. The short videos of me that Stella has posted have received increasingly more likes and follows every day. And I'm a lot more at ease because I'm not worried about misreading words or lines.

By Wednesday, although I'm exhausted after the shoot, I don't go home and collapse like I have the past two nights. Instead, I head to the Garden of Eatin', where I know I'll find Britta and my baby brother, Bear.

Adam left Bear in charge of the restaurant while he's in New York. Usually I'd be offended, but after the days I've had, I'm fine not taking on one more thing, even though I'm just as qualified to cook as Bear is. But if Adam told Britta and Bear and not me—his twin brother, who he shares most of his DNA with—that he was getting engaged before he officially announced it yesterday, then I'm eating for free.

Scratch that.

No matter what, there's no way I'm paying for my dinner. Adam owes me at least a thousand free dinners for keeping me in the dark.

When I pull into the Garden's parking lot, the place is actually busy, especially for the off-season. So, despite being dead tired, for the next couple hours I work the kitchen with Bear instead of sitting at a quiet table eating baskets of fries. The only thing that makes the work worth it is that I get to make Georgia's to-go order. Her second of the week, according to Bear.

Don't think I'm going to let her live down that diva move—ordering food for delivery from a place that doesn't deliver.

Finally, things slow down enough for me to finish my plate of venison steak and frites that I've been working on for an hour. Then I help Bear, Britta, and the rest of the staff clean everything and close up.

As I'm getting in my Bronco to go home, I get a text from Georgia telling me to check my email for her agent's suggestions about what contract changes to ask for. I close my eyes and exhale. I gave my word I'd do the show, but I haven't signed the contract yet. Georgia's agent agreed to give the contract a look as a favor to her. But I'm way too tired, and it's too late to go through it tonight. The producers have given me a week to sign, so I'm going to take advantage.

By the time I get home, I'm ready to collapse into my bed. But I make the mistake of sitting on my couch and flipping on the TV. Hours later, I wake up with a nasty kink in my neck, still in clothes that smell like the Garden.

And the rest of the week isn't any better. I don't have to be on set since Adam is back from New York and working on demo. So even though he gets to be the pretty boy, I like the energy on set too much not to be there whenever possible. I'm having almost as much fun as Georgia is.

The problem is, with Adam doing double duty tearing out Granny's kitchen during the day and running the Garden at night, Dad needs help at the store and with taking care of Mom. Between showing clients a few properties and filling in wherever I'm needed, I don't have a lot of time to be on set. And I have no time to read the contract.

I plan on getting Dad to help me go over it on Sunday, but Mom's having a rare good day, and I completely forget to look at it. The entire day flies by with family dinner and an impromptu game night.

At the end of the night when I walk back to my apartment above the garage, Carly's car is parked in the driveway, which is a huge surprise. She lives an hour away in Florence, where she's going to the university. Usually, I'm the one who makes the drive to see her, but I didn't have time this week.

Surprise visits aren't like her, so the fact she's gone out of her way to come see me means a lot. Even though I wonder why she didn't come over to Mom and Dad's, a rush of adrenaline ripples under my skin. Sometimes I wonder if we're going to last. Then she does something like this and wipes away all my doubts.

Sure, this is the first time she's done anything this big, but it's got to be a good sign that our relationship is headed in a direction we both want.

Except, when I walk inside, she's sitting on the sofa with her arms crossed, and I know she's not here because she missed me. Clue number one, her mouth set in a firm line. Clue number two, she doesn't rush to kiss me, and three, when I bend down to kiss her, she gives me her cheek.

After a quick peck, I walk around the couch and sit next to her. "What are you doing here? I thought we weren't getting together until next weekend." I go to put my arm around her, but she puts distance between us.

"What am I doing here?" She uncrosses her arms and holds her phone to

my face. “This is what I’m doing here!”

I blink, then look around the phone at Carly. “Am I supposed to be looking at something besides your lock screen?”

She huffs and pulls the phone to her own face, presses an app, then juts it back at me. “This!”

I blink. “Instagram? You came here to show me Instagram?” I think I know where this is going, but honestly, I’m too tired.

She huffs again and scrolls until she finds what she’s looking for. Then the phone is back in my face, and I see the picture of me carrying Georgia.

I let out a long sigh and close my eyes. “It’s marketing. That’s it.”

Carly is great, but she’s got a jealous streak. Every once in a while, it peeks out of its hiding place and things go sideways for a minute. Usually, I can reassure her she’s the only girl I want to be with, but in the weeks since Georgia has been home, those reassurances haven’t worked as well.

“Is this what being on the show means? You with your arms around Georgia? I’m going to have to see posts like this every day and see it on TV too? Do you know how many people have texted me, asking if we broke up?” She pulls her phone back and tosses it on the coffee table.

“Did you answer *their* texts?”

It’s a low blow, one I wouldn’t have inflicted if I wasn’t so tired. But she’s answered one out of every ten texts I’ve sent this week. I tip my head back and rub the bridge of my nose where I feel the beginnings of a headache.

When she doesn’t say anything, I open my eyes to see her glaring at me. “Zach, what’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on. I’ve told you, Georgia and I are friends. Those pictures don’t mean anything except that we had a few moments of fun

during a long, mostly boring week. I promise.” I pat the space next to me. “Come on. Let me hold you.”

Her shoulders sag, but she stays on her side of the sofa. “Really? Because the way she’s looking at you doesn’t look like you’re just friends. And why would she post all these pictures that make you look like a couple?”

“She didn’t post them. My cousin Stella did. Georgia hired her as her assistant, and part of her job it to handle social media accounts.” I close my eyes again because I can’t keep them open any longer.

I feel the cushions dip and open one eye to see Carly moving closer. She still looks upset, but her bottom lip pokes out in a pout rather than a scowl. When she’s close enough to touch, I slowly put my arm around her.

“I promise you don’t have anything to worry about. There’s no one else but you.” I tug her closer, and she nestles into me.

“When you told me you’re going to be a bigger part of the show, I was excited for us. The publicity will be so good for your real estate business.” Carly nuzzles closer and kisses my neck.

“I was even thinking, I could be your manager, if you want. We can totally leverage this opportunity by getting you on more shows.” Her lips move up my neck to my earlobe, pushing away questions about whether she likes me or likes what I can offer her.

“But I don’t like her pretending you’re her boyfriend, not mine,” she whispers softly before tugging my ear with her teeth.

“First of all, I’m not interested in any other shows. This one is hard enough.” The tugging on my ear turns to an uncomfortable biting, and I yelp.

“Secondly,” I say, rubbing my ear. “Georgia’s not pretending anything, especially being my girlfriend.” That thought is ridiculous. Why would Georgia ever want me for a boyfriend when she can have anyone? “She’s just

being Georgia. We've known each other our whole lives." I move in to kiss Carly, but she sits up.

"Why are you always defending her?"

"I'm not defending her. I'm telling you that we're friends and that's it."

"Well, which would you rather have? Me for your girlfriend or Georgia for a friend?" Carly tosses her hair back and crosses her arms.

Now it's my turn to put distance between us. Her words feel less like a question and more like an order, and my whole body tenses in response. There's a reason I'm not in the military. Orders are not my thing.

"Both. Why would I have to choose between you? That's ridiculous." I squeeze my temples, but my headache is only getting worse.

"Ridiculous? That's what you think I am?" Carly glares, but her eyes pool with tears that threaten to rip out my heart.

"That's not what I meant," I say gently, and she lets me pull her into my arms. "I've committed to be on the show, and you said it yourself, the publicity will be good for both of us. But even if that weren't true, choosing between you two isn't an option. I can care about her as a friend and love you at the same time."

"You love me?" She tips her head up.

I nod and kiss her forehead. I've always used the word *love* easily, but I know not everyone does.

"I love you too." Carly kisses me hard, then pulls away, smiling. "I've got an idea. Maybe the best way for people to see you and Georgia aren't together is for me to go on the show, or at least be in some of her posts."

Her smile grows expectantly, and I don't know how to tell her no. One of Georgia's biggest fears about the show is that people will put pressure on her to be on it, marketing their own businesses and products. She doesn't want to

put anything on the show that she can't honestly endorse, otherwise she'll only devalue her own brand. Not only that, but if she lets someone she doesn't know make an appearance, other people will pressure her to let them be on it too.

"It's a good idea," I say hesitantly. "But Georgia has to okay everything with the producers, and I doubt they'll say yes. They're very protective of her brand."

Carly pushes away from me. There are no tears in her eyes anymore, just anger. "If you really love me, then you'll get me on the show so people know I'm your girlfriend, not Georgia."

"Come on, Carly. You know I can't do that, but you know how I feel about you." I try to move in again, but she stands.

"I thought I did, but now I'm not so sure." She grabs her phone and tucks it in her back pocket, then sets her mouth in the same firm line she greeted me with. "If she keeps posting pictures like this to her account, Zach, I'm done. I'm not going to be the girlfriend on the side while Georgia gets all your attention and makes the world think you two are a thing."

"I told you it wasn't her who posted the pictures." I rise, but that prompts Carly to head for the door. "Carly, wait..."

She keeps walking, and I follow, but I had no idea she could move this fast.

"I'm serious, Zach. I can be your girlfriend in real life, or Georgia can be your on-screen girlfriend or friend, or whatever, but you can't have both." She doesn't even look back to say it. Her blonde hair bounces up and down as she rushes to the door.

All I can do is watch her retreat. I'm too shocked to do anything else.

"Carly, can we just talk about this for a minute?" I say as she reaches the door.

She pauses only long enough to glance over her shoulder at me. “I’ve already said everything I need to say. It’s your move next.”

Then she opens the door and is half-way to her car before I make it to the doorway. There’s no stopping her as she climbs into her car and slams the door shut. All I can do is watch as her taillights disappear down the road and wonder what to do next.

The cold air forces me back inside. I return to the couch and drop my head in my hands. Because what am I supposed to do here? How am I supposed to tell Georgia I can’t be on her Instagram because my girlfriend won’t let me? And if I don’t say anything to Georgia, how am I supposed to give up the woman I’m falling in love with for my best friend? What kind of choice is that?

I rub my temples between my middle finger and thumb. The headache has spread from the bridge of my nose and across my brows.

If Mom still had her memory, I’d talk to her. She always had the best advice before the early onset of an aggressive form of Alzheimer’s. Now sometimes she doesn’t even remember who I am. Even with my short hair, I have to remind her I’m Zach, not Adam.

Georgia would be my other option, but obviously I can’t talk to her.

Which means I have to work out this problem on my own. I don’t know how, but I’ve got to, because I’m not giving up Carly or letting Georgia down.

Chapter 9

Georgia



After my follower response last week, Ike and Teri blocked out different conversations for Zach and me to have today, starting with the one where I hand Zach coffee in the early morning light outside the house. The crew is already set up, I picked up the coffee from Britta on my way here, and the light is perfect.

The only thing missing?

Zach.

The rest of us are hanging out in the trailer. It's warmer in here than it is in the house. Ike paces the small space, checking his watch every thirty-five seconds. Nick leans against the door, camera at the ready while he chews his thumbnail. Teri keeps opening her laptop and making changes to today's script, and if Amber touches my makeup one more time, I'm going to lose it.

The only person who's not stressed about our late start is Gracyn, who's telling Stella about her horse. We all know we've got a long day ahead of us, but we can't start without Zach. So, we wait.

By the time he pulls into the driveway, his coffee is cold, the golden light is gone, and we're all on edge. But he's here. That's all that matters. He hasn't signed the contract yet, so he's under no obligation to show up today, or any other day. Which is why I push away my annoyance and go outside to meet him.

"You're late, Zandwich!" I tease after he shuts his car door. When he doesn't laugh, or even smile, I know something's wrong.

He keeps his head down and his hands stuffed in his jacket pockets as he walks slowly across the driveway to the walkway where I'm standing.

"Hey, Georgia. Sorry." The smile he flashes is as forced as the light tone he uses. A cloud passes the sun and casts a shadow over us both, just to make the mood even darker.

I shiver in the sudden cold, and for the first time, Zach meets my eye. I recognize the look on his face. I've been through too many break-ups not to.

I'm about to get dumped.

I think I know why: The pictures. Anyone, including Carly, would have to be blind not to think there's something more than friendship between Zach and me. Even though there's not.

My chest tightens like a blood pressure cuff, squeezing my heart and restricting my breath. Maybe it's because I've never been dumped by a friend before, but this approaching break-up feels different from the times I've had boyfriends end things. Probably because I've never had a relationship end that I wasn't ready to be over.

Zach reaches for my arm but drops his hand before touching me. "Can we talk?" he asks softly.

I nod, then hold up my index finger to Ike as he steps out of the trailer door. Then I follow Zach around the side of the house. His steps are slow, and his head hangs. Meanwhile, my pulse is racing, and I just want to get this over with.

"Carly's mad, isn't she?" I blurt as soon as we're in the backyard, away from everyone else.

Zach exhales. "She thinks the pictures make us look like a couple." With the admission, his shoulders relax, but an awkward tension still hangs thick between us.

I tip my head to the side. "She's not wrong. Evie said something like that too."

"We both know we're just friends." He waves his hand between us. "I don't know why people want to make something more of those posts. We're comfortable with each other, that's all."

“I know!” I nod too enthusiastically. “People get so weird about a man and woman being friends. I mean, we’re practically family, we’ve known each other so long.”

“Right?” Zach agrees too readily. “Anyway, I tried to explain all that to Carly, but she doesn’t get it either.”

“Oh?” I try to keep my voice as casual as his. “So...what do you want to do?” I brace myself for his answer, even though I already know what it’s going to be. He’s done. Our collaboration is over—at least on camera.

And that thought hollows out my chest, leaving a gaping, Zach-sized hole.

“Obviously I don’t want to back out on you,” he says with a sureness that makes my head jolt up. “But Carly’s threatening to end things if Stella posts any other photos that make you and me look like more than friends.” Zach’s questioning eyes search mine for the answer.

I don’t have one. I understand why he’s upset. I even understand why Carly’s upset, and I respect their relationship.

But the social media posts with the both of us are going viral. The more excitement that builds before the show airs, the better we’ll do. If Zach wants me to let him out of being on camera, I can’t. I’ve got to do what’s best for my show, my business, and *our* project.

“Soooo...” I drag out the word to give him time to offer his own solution. When he doesn’t, I give him a gentle nudge. “What do *you* want to do?”

He sucks his teeth. “Can we just pull back on shots of us together? Or at least ask Stella not to put anything up that makes you and me look like we’re a thing.” He offers a conciliatory smile. “Even if I weren’t with Carly, we wouldn’t want to give people the wrong idea, right?”

“Of course not,” I answer too quickly, trying not to think of all the comments from people wanting to see more of us together or calling us *the*

cutest couple ever. “We can definitely be more careful with how we interact and what we post. For sure. No problem.” I return his smile, then add, with a laugh, “I’ll tell everyone to quit ‘shipping’ us.”

Zach shoots me a grin, his first real one of the day, and with it, I believe everything will be okay. We can make this new arrangement work. Because, if Carly is threatening to break up with him, Zach’s making a huge concession by not bailing on my social media posts all together. He’s figured out a way to keep his promise, and I can’t ask for more than that.

Besides, if Carly really is the one, I’m going to have to get used to sharing him.

Not a problem. I’ve done it lots of times, with every girlfriend he’s ever had.

So why does that thought of sharing him bother me so much now?

“Thanks, Georgia.” Zach pulls me into a hug, and I press my cheek into his chest. He gives great hugs. “I knew you’d understand. You’ve always got my back. That’s why I really didn’t want to let you down.”

“Right back at ya, buddy.” I’ve never called him buddy in my life, but it takes so much effort to keep my voice normal, I can’t control the words that come out of my mouth.

I pull away before he does, because the longer I stay in his arms, the more I’ll miss his hugs when I can’t have them anymore. Which, I think, starts now.

“We’d better get to work,” I say. “We’re already late, and I’m freezing out here.” I shiver, despite the layers of clothing I have on and the fact that I wasn’t cold until I stepped out of Zach’s arms.

“But we’ll need you to sign the contract before we start. Ike is adamant about that this morning.” I walk toward the sliding glass door, shifting all my

focus back to my business. Right where it should be. “Did you get a chance to read over Jeannie’s suggestions and ask for those changes?”

Zach’s hesitation nudges me to turn around. Worry lines cross his forehead and he rubs the back of his neck. “Not yet.”

“Right,” I say, understanding. Reading a contract isn’t easy for anyone, and it’s especially difficult for Zach with his dyslexia. “Do you want me to read it aloud to you? I can tell Ike to give us another hour.”

He looks at me, his brow smoothing. “Is it the same as yours, do you think?”

“Probably,” I say tentatively. “It’s basically about not disclosing what happens on the shoots until after the show is released, except for what is approved to be shown on social media sites. Your pay will be different than mine. I think that’s it, but let’s go through it to be sure.”

I motion for him to hand me his phone. He opens the email and contract from Jeannie, then turns over his phone.

I skim through the legal language, reading the most important parts to Zach, but he only lasts five minutes before he’s fidgeting so much, I know he’s not listening.

I go quiet until he looks at me again. “Do you want me to ask the producers for more time to read it? If I tell them about your dyslexia, they’ll agree, if only to prevent them from being accused of taking advantage of your disability.”

Zach winces, and I know I’ve said the wrong thing. Disability has such a negative connotation, even though everyone has things they can’t do as well as someone else. I hate that I said it, but there’s no good word that’s going to make him feel less self-conscious about his dyslexia.

“I’ve held us up enough already.” He snatches the phone from my hands so

fast, I barely know what's happened. After a few scrolls and taps, he tucks it into his back pocket. "There. Done. Thank you, DocuSign." With a smile, he nods toward the back door. "Indoors today?"

"Yep." My answer is slow and forced, the opposite of his rushed decision. I blink, unsure whether I should be happy that he's signed.

Did I pressure him into committing to something he's not sure about? I don't think so, but there's an itch under my skin that could be guilt.

At the same time, the contract has been signed and sent. There's nothing I can do about that.

I walk to the door, anxious to get inside not only for the warmth, but also so I'm not alone with Zach anymore. Best to keep things professional while we're working together.

"We've got to go over some of the design layouts again, now that Adam's done demoing the kitchen. We need to decide what he tears down next." I continue. "You saw he proposed to Evie, right? She posted about it."

"He actually texted me before she made it public," Zach answers as we step inside and join the rest of the crew.

'That's great! Progress!' I can't explain why my words sound false to me. For the first time ever, being with Zach feels awkward. And I hate that a part of me hoped I was giving him the news about his brother.

That would have hurt Zach. His relationship with Adam has been pretty rocky for the last nine months. I should be genuinely happy they're repairing it. The only explanation for my jealousy is that hurt people hurt.

And I'm hurting right now.

But, like finding a bruise you can't remember how you got, I don't know why I feel an ache in the middle of my chest.

When we go through the back door, the air inside is tight. Ike gives me a

stern look. “Are we all ready now?”

“We’re ready.” I feel like I’m back in school, in the principal’s office. Then I remember this is my show. “Don’t worry. We’ll make up the time.” I match Ike’s sternness, then turn to Zach. “Right?”

“Right.”

“Good.” Ike smiles. “Let’s start with the discussion about how to make this area a more open floor plan. Give us some of the same back and forth from yesterday.”

On Ike’s cue, Zach and I walk into the family room from the kitchen, me in front, him keeping his distance. Even though the cameras are rolling, neither of us talks. The windowless room is dark. When I flip the light switch, the last working bulb in the light fixture blinks, then pops, and the room goes dark again.

“Fix number one, new lightbulbs,” I say.

“Scratch that. New light fixture,” Zach answers. “Grandma always hated that one.”

I stop and look up at the boring plastic ceiling light replacing the beautiful glass fixture that had once been there. “Your grandpa probably bought this one at Dad’s hardware store. It’s the only style Dad ever carried.”

Zach moves closer. The ceilings are only nine feet, and his arm brushes mine as he stretches on tiptoe to wipe some dust from the bottom of the light. His touch is light but sends shockwaves down my arm, as though it’s been years instead of minutes since the last time we touched.

“Remember how we broke the original?” He huffs a laugh, still standing close enough to touch. “We were playing keep away with Britta’s doll.”

“You threw it too high, right into that light. Glass shattered everywhere, not to mention what it did to the doll’s face.”

“I threw it too high?” Zach shoots me a teasing smile. “Me? The boy who went on to be Paradise Valley’s record-breaking quarterback? I think you’d better check your memory.”

“So, your aim improved. But you were the one who broke that light.” I give him a little push, and things almost feel normal again.

Zach stumbles back with a laugh, opens his mouth to say something else, and our eyes meet. Without saying a word, we realize what we’re doing and both go quiet. Each of us takes a step to put space between us. Then our eyes return to the burned-out light.

“You’re right,” he says, without any of the humor that was in his voice seconds ago. “I’m probably the one who broke it.”

“We should definitely replace it.” I point my gaze toward the bedroom and walk purposefully toward it, all business. Because that has to be our normal now.

“Cut!” Ike yells, and I stop. “What was that?”

“What was what?” I ask, turning.

Zach drops his eyes to the ugly brown carpet.

“You had great energy. It was perfect. Why’d you pull the plug on the banter?” He points to the spot where Zach and I had been standing. “Go back and do it again. Tell the story but make it better. More laughing. More teasing.”

I glance at Zach, then we both move back under the light, leaving at least a foot between us. We do the scene three times before Ike gives up and has us move onto another one.

And another. And another.

The “magic,” as Ike keeps calling it, never returns. We try, but the minute we get too close or one of us touches the other, we pull away. All day long,

we keep an unnatural space between us. Every time we fall back into a comfortable place, we whiplash back to being weirdly distant, then become even more awkward with each other.

No one laughs. No one is having fun. We're all just trying to get through the longest day ever.

By the time Ike calls "cut" for the last time, I'm certain most of the footage will be cut. Ten hours of our precious time has been wasted. Ike must have said, "Let's get back some of that chemistry from yesterday," at least a dozen times. Every time, things only got more uncomfortable between Zach and me.

Ike's not happy. The crew's not happy. And I don't know who's more miserable: me or Zach.

While the crew packs up, Ike pulls Zach and me into a back bedroom and shuts the door. "What was that today?"

My eyes dart to Zach, but I don't wait to see if he looks back. Heat creeps up my neck, and my cheeks burn. The awkwardness is as palpable as the humidity in Savannah on a summer day.

The success of this show depends on me. The jobs of everyone working on this show depend on *me*. There is so much competition in home-reno shows—mine has to stand out from the rest. I thought the concept of rehabbing an entire resort would be that hook, but it may not be enough.

"Yesterday," Ike continues, one decibel away from yelling. "I was sure we had the next big thing. You could be the new Chip and Joanna, the way you were collaborating but also joking around with each other. You had the same natural, unforced energy they do. What happened?"

Zach and I glance quickly at each other. I think it's the first time all day I've really looked him in the eye, and the worry I see there sends a

shockwave of emotion through me. In general, Zach's dark blue eyes are magnetic. This isn't the first time I've been pulled into them and not been able to look away. It is the first time I've lost my breath and been tempted to dive deep into their Adriatic-blue color.

The feeling pulsing through my veins isn't friendship.

Far from it.

"It's my fault, Ike," Zach says, pulling his gaze from mine. "People were getting the wrong idea, that Georgia and I are a couple. My girlfriend didn't like it."

Ike opens his mouth, then closes it. The muscle in his jaw twitches as he tucks the folders he's holding under his arm and jams his hands into his pockets.

"Look, man. I get how your girlfriend's feelings are a concern, but with reality TV, the viewers drive the content." Ike spreads his feet wide and looks up at Zach. He only comes to Zach's chest, but he's doing his best to take up as much space as possible in this face-off.

Zach narrows his eyes and crosses his arms. "What are you saying?"

Ike pushes out his chest. "I'm saying the content on Georgia's accounts exploded this week, and it's because people like the two of you together. You don't have to pretend you're a couple, but if this thing is going to work, you can't act like a couple on the verge of divorce the second week in."

"Dude." Zach says. "It wasn't that bad."

Ike goes still, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Not that bad?" He steps closer and without taking his eyes off Zach, yells, "Nick! Bring your camera back here!"

"I thought we were done for the day," I protest when I see Zach's chest sink.

“Oh, we’re definitely done shooting,” Ike growls as Nick walks through the door. “Show them what we got today,” he says to Nick and waves his head toward Zach and me.

Nick stands between the two of us, and we lean in closer to see what’s on the viewing screen.

It’s...

Not good.

In fact, painful is the best word to describe what we watch. We’re so stiff and awkward with each other, you’d think we’d just met. It’s worse than that romantic comedy with Reese Witherspoon and Mark Ruffalo that no one remembers. It’s a low budget romcom without the rom or the com.

Zach looks from Ike to me and back again, then uncrosses his arms. “All right. Things will be different tomorrow.”

He turns on his heel and, with long strides, heads toward the front door.

“Can you make sure of that?” Ike asks me.

I peel my eyes from Zach’s retreating form and turn to Ike. “Yeah. I think so.” I’m not even sure what he asked. All I know is that I need to talk to Zach.

“We can’t have any more days like today. Our schedule is too tight to waste time.” Ike’s voice feels far away even though he’s standing right next to me.

“I’ve got to go,” I say, then I slip off my heels, grab my purse, and chase after Zach.

Paradise had just enough sun today to melt what little snow was left from the last big snowfall, but the ground is frozen solid. My feet burn with cold as I cross the grass with my four-inch heels dangling from my fingers. I’m regretting the day I decided being a high heel-wearing girlie-girl with a drill and hammer was a good idea.

I finally catch up to Zach as he climbs into his Bronco. I jump into the passenger side and slam the door shut.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “This is all my fault. I don’t want things to be weird between us, and I don’t want things to be weird between you and Carly. I’ll do whatever you want to keep that from happening.”

He shakes his head. “Not your fault. I don’t want things to be weird either, but don’t worry, I know how to fix it.”

His confidence fills me with relief.

“How?”

Zach turns to me with a bright smile that takes my breath. “By proving she can be completely secure about my love for her.” His smile grows in the pause that follows. “I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

Everything goes still as the words sink in. Heat surges through my entire body, burning me with a sudden realization.

I’m in love with Zach.

Chapter 10

Georgia



“Propose?” I run my hands down my thighs while my brain tries to process what Zach has said. My palms feel clammy and cold, and my armpits are uncomfortably warm. “You’re sure you’re ready for that?”

I suck in my breath, waiting for his answer.

“Yeah,” he nods. “I think so.”

“Okay.” I force my mouth into something that might be a smile but definitely doesn’t feel like it inside. “That’s great. I’m so excited for you. She’s a lucky girl. Do you know how you’re going to do it? Do you have a ring?”

Words keep spilling out of my mouth, forming sentences that are only tangentially related and questions I don’t hear the answers to. I look at Zach’s face, nodding as he responds, but I keep my eyes focused below his. Because the only thing I can think about is what I should have known all along.

I don’t just love Zach. I’m *in* love with him.

Why has this never dawned on me before? It’s so obvious. In high school, I always found ways to be around him, whether he had a girlfriend or not (and he always had a girlfriend). And when I moved to Savannah for college, I texted him more than any of my other friends from Paradise. Even now, whether I’m in LA or just down the street from him, when Zach’s name pops up on my phone, my heart gives an eager little leap.

Whenever I think of spending my life with someone, I always think I want someone like him. I’ve just never allowed myself to think about that person actually *being* him. As soon as the idea wanders into my head, I chase it away before hope has time to settle in.

The fear that Zach wouldn’t return my feelings or that our friendship couldn’t survive if one of us wanted more has been enough to keep my feelings hidden, even from myself. But now that I’m experiencing the pain of

losing him, I wish I'd at least taken a chance. His rejection couldn't have been more painful than what I'm feeling now—like a piece of my soul is being torn away.

“I'll have to go to Florence to find a ring,” he says, but the blood rushing through my ears makes him sound very far away. “Do you think I should take her with me? Or surprise her?”

I shake my head to clear the fog and focus on what Zach is saying. “Do you know what kind of ring she wants? Have you talked about it?”

“She's shown me some that she likes. They're more than I can afford, but with the extra I'm making from the show, I could pick out something nice.” Zach's leg shakes and his voice gathers excitement.

Or is it nervousness?

“You're sure about this?” I ask.

His leg goes still, but when he looks at me, he doesn't answer right away. “Yeah. It's not like it's going to happen tomorrow. I've got time to think about it.”

“Okay.” I nod. “Just remember, you don't have to rush into anything.”

“I do if I want Mom to be there.” His voice has an edge of defensiveness, so I don't push him more. I play along.

“I've always loved the idea of a surprise proposal with a ring I've never seen before.” I push away thoughts of what kind of ring Zach would pick out for me. “If you know someone well enough to ask them to marry you, you should know what they like, right?”

“Yeah,” Zach answers thoughtfully. “That's true. And it's more romantic if she doesn't know it's coming.”

“Totally.” I rub my arms to generate some heat. The car isn't on, and I left my coat inside.

Zach glances at me then starts the engine. “Sorry. I forgot *hot oven* is your PFZ.” He turns up the heat to my self-proclaimed Preferred Temperature Zone. “Thanks for talking this through with me, Georgia. I think if Carly knows I’m committed to her, she’ll believe that you and I are just friends, no matter what it looks like on TV or social media.”

“Of course. You know I’m always here for you.” I lean close to the vent and let my hair curtain my face and the emotions that might be revealed.

I massage the knot forming between my neck and shoulder, then feel Zach roll his thumb over it. Like I used to make him do when we were in high school.

But a second later he pulls away, dropping his hand to his lap. “I’m really sorry about today. I promise no weirdness tomorrow.”

I tip my head lower and rub harder at the knot. “You weren’t the only one who was weird.”

“So, we’re cool then?”

I nod again, breathing through the charge of electricity coursing from every spot Zach touches, all the way to my toes.

“And you’ll help me plan my proposal?”

My head pops up, but before I can straighten, Zach has both hands on my shoulders, working on all the knots. “I’ll trade you for a massage.”

“I’ll think about it.” I close my eyes, knowing I’ll say yes.

“Come on, you know I can’t do this without you.” He deepens his massage, his hands pleading as much as his voice.

I relax under his touch, sinking into the knowledge that times like this could be coming to an end. As hard as it may be, I’ve got to enjoy every second I can with Zach.

“Of course. Whatever you need.”

The heat from the vent still blowing in my face heightens his scent, mingled with the smell of the Bronco's leather seats. I don't know if it's a cologne or body wash, but Zach smells the same way he did when we were kids—in the years after middle school when he started using deodorant regularly. It's a scent so subtle, I'd forgotten it until this moment. It's the smell of an early-spring hike when the soil, still wet from melted snow, hints of moss and sage.

"I need ideas. What's the most romantic proposal you can think of?" His hands drop from my back, and I sit up.

Because I guess we're doing this. I'm going to help the man I'm in love with plan his proposal to another woman. Not exactly the most romantic moment of *my* life, but it's not like I've never thought about what kind of proposal I'd like.

"Lots and lots of flowers. And candles." I stare out the front window, imagining how I'd want Zach to propose to me. Since there's no chance of it ever happening, I can entertain the idea because it's pure fantasy. It's no different than imagining a Hollywood Chris (Evans, Hemsworth, Pine, or Pratt) proposing to me.

"Somewhere outside, near water," I continue. "And trees with twinkle lights."

"Candles and twinkle lights?" Zach's lip twitches with a grin. "So at night?"

"Yes. With a picnic. But not sandwiches, something fancy." I lean into my fantasy. As long as I'm pretending and Zach is entertained by it, why not?

"Caviar and expensive champagne?"

"Champagne, yes. Caviar, no. Fish eggs are gross. I want really good cheese and bread."

"What kind of chocolate? I know you'll want chocolate." Zach waves to the

crew as they walk out of the house with their cameras and gear packed up.

Ike sends us a strange look as he passes, maybe because the windows are starting to fog up. He walks by my side and sends me a thumbs up with a raised eyebrow. I return the gesture to let him know things are good.

“See you tomorrow,” he says loud enough for me to hear through the window.

I wave, then answer Zach’s question. “Adam’s seven-layer cake.”

“Good choice.” Zach nods. “I thought you’d go with cheesecake, but the cake is my first choice.”

“Oh! The cheesecake! Let’s have both!” I wipe away the condensation on the passenger window with the side of my fist.

“You got it. Anything you want. It’s your proposal.” Zach reaches across me to draw a smiley face on the windshield in front of me.

He’s close enough to touch, his scent filling my nose, reminding me that this fantasy is *my* proposal. Not ours.

I press into my seat to put space between us, but Zach brushes my shoulder as he leans back into his own seat. He’s still smiling, but I can’t play the game anymore.

“But what does Carly like?” I force myself to say. “This is for her, not me.” Disappointment leaks into my voice, but if Zach notices, his smile doesn’t falter.

“I think she’d like that. Who wouldn’t?” Zach moves to his side of the window, doodling in the steam, then he shoots me a grin. “I just have to find the right spot. Maybe the lake? I could write in the sand.”

When I don’t say anything, Zach looks back at me. “You okay?”

I’m staring at what he’s written on the window: *marry me*. “Yeah, fine. Everything’s fine. I’m just tired.” That’s all I can take. I grab the door handle

and pull. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Zach looks at me, his eyes turning deep and intense like he wants to ask me something. But his face breaks into a smile instead. “Yeah. Thanks again.”

My eyes burn on my walk to Grandma Rose’s, but I make it inside without any tears falling. Three deep breaths push back the lump in my throat, and by the time I slip off my shoes, I have my emotions under control.

Zach is getting married, and tears won’t change that.

Chapter 11

Zach



The three days that follow are as exhausting as the week before, but less satisfying. Probably because, even though I apologized to Carly and she said she forgives me, we've barely had time to talk since Sunday. My one consolation is every night that I collapse into bed, I'm more sure Carly is the woman for me.

We're good together. She's smart. She's beautiful. We have fun.

I don't laugh with her as much as I laugh with Georgia, but no one can make me laugh the way Georgia does.

And Georgia's been amazing about helping me plan my proposal. I don't know exactly when yet, but I'm ready when the time is right. A surprise proposal worked for Adam. It'll work for me. I hope.

The relentless churning in my stomach, I'm sure, has nothing to do with Carly and everything to do with everyone on set being disappointed with how shooting went.

On Thursday night, I walk in my house, toss the keys on the table next to my door, and head to the kitchen. Everything is too quiet after weeks of constant motion and noise. I grab a beer and some leftovers from the fridge.

After popping open the bottle, I sip on it while I warm up my leftovers. While they reheat, I call Carly. Usually, she texts me throughout the day, but I haven't heard anything from her.

Carly might be angry, but I don't want to think about that. Better to stay positive and focus on what I have planned for my proposal.

She doesn't answer my call, so I leave a message. "Hey. I miss you. And I'm so sorry, but I don't know if I can make it to Florence this weekend." I pause at the flicker of worry. I want to see her, but I don't have to be on set Saturday, and I've got a ton of work to catch up on. But if I don't go see her this weekend, she'll have another excuse to be mad at me.

“I love you,” I finish. “Call me when you can.”

I hang up and carry my dinner to the table. Instead of turning on the TV, like I’d planned, I click an app and scroll through the *At Home with Georgia Rose* posts. I’m relieved when I see there’s no Georgia and Zach content this week. But I didn’t give Stella any photo opportunities of Georgia and me together.

Then I go to the pics from last week. I smile as I scroll through the images. But my relief slowly ebbs into guilt when I notice the difference in the likes. There are twice as many for last week’s posts as there are for this week’s—and a lot more comments.

I close my phone and pull off my tie. Georgia has invested everything into this show. She’s put up the capital to rehab all the cottages, and she’s counting on the publicity from—and the popularity of—the show to help sell them fast. Of course, she already has a huge following on social media, but with the show, she’s casting a wider net to catch potential buyers.

And I’m supposed to help her with that. Because that’s what we’ve always done for each other—help. But when it comes to Georgia, I’ve been on the receiving end of that help more often than I’ve given it.

Even if I threw away my phone and never looked at her social media accounts again, I’d still be surrounded by reminders of Georgia. When I decided to build this apartment above Dad’s garage, I called her for advice about how to do it. She came up with the layout and helped me pick out cabinets, fixtures, and lighting.

The décor is her too. She didn’t pick it all out, but I got ideas from her posts. We have the same taste.

Carly, on the other hand, moves around the throw pillows every time she’s in this room, but I always put them back where I know Georgia would think

they look good. Same with the decorations I have. Especially the framed photo of Georgia, me, and Adam at Grandma Rose's funeral. That one always ends up behind a vase or other photos when Carly is here.

I take a few bites of my dinner, then send Carly a text. **Call me. I miss you.**

Even though I check my phone every thirty seconds, Carly doesn't answer. The longer it takes her to reply, the more anxious I get. Finally, I move to my couch and flip on the TV, hoping basketball will distract me. The Jazz are playing, which usually does the trick of erasing everything else from my brain, but tonight I keep glancing at my phone.

When a message finally comes in, I'm so anxious that I fumble it. It lands upright on the carpet. My font is set to a large size to make it easier for me to track and read the letters. The giant text also makes it easy for me to see Carly's message from my vantage point on the couch.

Out with friends. Talk later.

She signs off with a heart emoji, which seems kind of impersonal. She ends her texts to everyone that way. No question, she hasn't completely forgiven me. So I guess I'll take whatever sign of affection I can get.

I half-watch the rest of the game—which is a first. Usually, I'm totally invested in every play.

But I guess I love Carly more than the Jazz, because every time my phone dings, I swoop it up faster than their most eager rookie. It's never her, though. Most are in my family group chat with everyone asking Adam about wedding plans and for pictures of the proposal. I send a jab or two about hearing the proposal was going to happen from Georgia instead of my own brother. Adam answers with pictures of him and Evie in NYC, looking so in love it makes me a little sick.

Sick with envy, if I'm honest.

I want that for me and Carly.

But I'm not sure if I've ever seen her look at me the way Evie is looking at Adam in their pictures. I pull up the few pictures I have of the two of us to ease my worry. In every photo, Carly is looking at the camera. Which, duh, is what people do when their picture is being taken. It doesn't mean anything.

Then, even though I warn myself not to, I pull up *Georgia Rose* again. I pause on a post Stella put up an hour ago that already has as many comments as last week's posts. It looks especially intimate: Georgia in her heels, but up on tiptoe, hand cupped around her mouth and my ear, whispering to me. There are as many comments on that one as there were on last week's posts, most of them about how cute and in love we seem to be.

There aren't any other pictures like that in this week's posts, and I feel their lack as much as the commenters do, who ask for more shots of Georgia and me. Stella did her best with the opportunities for photos I gave her, but other than this post, this week's pictures don't make me smile. They're kind of boring.

Last week was fun.

This week was work.

The reality of what's happening in that picture is that Georgia was reading me what was on the teleprompter. I got nervous and froze, which made all the words get mixed up. I don't know how she knew what was going on, but before Ike had to stop filming, she said to the camera, "Quick sidebar!"

Then she reached up, tugged me down, and whispered what I needed to say. All with a smile on her face that didn't give away the fact I couldn't read the words.

That's the best thing about being friends with Georgia. She has this sixth sense for what's happening in my brain. Sometimes she knows more about

what I'm thinking and feeling than I do. She's always one step ahead of me, coming up with an idea that's just beginning to form in my head.

I wish Carly could see that. I love her, but I *need* Georgia's friendship. That's what's happening in that photo, no matter what Carly thinks she sees. Maybe Carly is still pouting, but I have a sneaking suspicion the reason she's not returning my call is because she's seen this post.

I take a little longer to scroll through all the posts, then I go back to the game. I turn up the volume, then grab another beer and a bag of popcorn. For the next hour, I pretend this night is like any other night where I root for the Jazz while Carly does her own thing.

But it's not.

We've never gone this long without talking to each other a few times a day. Of course, we've never really had a fight before. So it's probably a good thing we figure out how to work through disagreements now, before I propose. My real hope, though, is that showing her I'm ready to commit will make her feel secure in our relationship.

Because I really want things to be the way they were last week with Georgia.

By the time the game ends, Carly still hasn't called, and I'm too tired to wait any longer. We always talk before going to bed, and it feels weird not to tonight. I've made it such a habit to call her before I turn in that I almost dial her number a hundred times before climbing into bed. Despite my exhaustion, I wake up a few times throughout the night and check my phone for messages.

There aren't any.

The last time I wake up, it's just before six. As much as I'd like to go back to sleep, it's pointless. I'd need to get out of bed in an hour anyway. So I get

on the treadmill and run until my legs ache. Then I lift weights. Anything to take my mind off Carly.

By the time I stop by Britta's to pick up coffee for Georgia, me, and the rest of the crew, I feel like I can put on a good face. I smile and chat with Britta for a few minutes, and she doesn't say a word about me looking tired or like something's wrong.

I run into Bear on my way out the door. "Dude," he says, in the slow way he has. "You look like hell. Out too late last night?"

I shake my head and take a sip of my coffee. "Watched the Jazz game."

He doesn't ask me why I didn't invite him over or at least text him like I usually do. He doesn't ask if everything is okay. Instead, we talk about the highlights of the game.

Then I'm on my way.

It's a short walk to the job site, which is a mess because Adam did some demo yesterday, so I leave my Bronco parked near Britta's. I don't want my baby getting dirty, and I still have a lot of nervous energy to work out before we start shooting.

When I walk through the front door of Granny's old house, the whole crew is setting up, and Stella is taking pictures. There are only five of them, plus Georgia, but there's enough commotion to make it feel like we're on the set of a big-budget movie.

Ike and Nick walk around the house, marking different spots for filming. Teri is at a makeshift desk, her fingers running across her laptop keys like a concert pianist while the printer accompanies the tapping sound with a soft, swishing rhythm. In the corner of the main room, Amber's got her chair set up, working on Georgia's makeup while Gracyn attaches her mic.

I pass out the coffees to everyone, trying to forget Carly by soaking in the

energy pulsing through the crew. The last thing this group needs is caffeine, but it's too late now. Britta remembered their orders from yesterday and sent the same thing today, just to be nice. (And, I suspect, to get her branded coffee cups on camera). Except, I told her to make a cappuccino instead of a latte for Georgia. I know Georgia likes to mix things up. She says it keeps her from getting in a rut.

“Cappuccino today.” I hand her the cup as Amber steps back and examines her work.

“She looks good,” I say to Amber and pass her a cup.

“You're next,” she says, then takes a delighted sip of her coffee. “Mmm, so good. Have a seat. I'll be back in a sec.”

“I can hardly wait.” My voice is laced with sarcasm, which elicits a wicked grin from Amber before she walks away.

I let out as much of a laugh as I can muster, which isn't much. Carly blowing me off is still at the forefront of all my thoughts. I flatten the drink holder and throw it with such force at the garbage can ten feet away that it sails more than a foot past it.

With a frustrated sigh, I walk to where it landed and toss it in the trash.

“You okay?” Georgia asks, sliding out of the chair.

“I'm fine.” At least she noticed I'm off my game today, but that doesn't mean I'm going to tell her anything.

Her head tilts to the side like she might say more, but instead, she closes her eyes and breathes in the steam spiraling out of the cup. “Mmm, perfect. How'd you know what I'd want?”

I smile and shrug. “Lucky guess?”

She pulls the lid off her drink and presses her red lips to the cup, then raises her eyes to me, gazing through her lashes. I've never noticed how long they

are before. And, somehow, her eyes look even more green today.

After a tiny sip, she stops. “Tell me what’s wrong. I can tell you’re not okay.” She puts the lid back on her coffee and raises her eyebrow. “Problems with Carly?”

I take a deep breath. As much as I don’t want to make today about me when it should be about her and the show, I’m grateful I have someone to talk to. “She didn’t answer my call last night. She said we’d talk later, but she hasn’t called or texted.”

Georgia nods thoughtfully, staring at the top of her cup. “Is she still mad?”

“I guess so.”

“She left a heart in the comments on yesterday’s posts. I thought you two had figured things out.” Georgia pulls off the coffee lid again and sips from her cup with both hands wrapped around it.

“You’d think so, right? Except for one picture, our posts aren’t even close to being romantic-looking anymore.” I rake my hand through my hair, my frustration growing. “What more does she want me to do? Stop working with you altogether?”

Georgia’s head bolts up, and the worry in her eyes is impossible to miss.

“She’s not that demanding,” I say quickly. “And I would never do that to you. Plus it would be a stupid career move.”

Georgia’s shoulders relax, and a tiny smile flits across her face. “Good. I’m sure you’ll get things smoothed out with her.”

I nod, because of course she’s right. “You’ve given me the chance of a lifetime,” I go on, changing the subject and hoping for a real smile. “If I want to grow my real estate business, I can’t get better publicity than being on your show.”

“That’s true,” she answers brightly. “People from all over could be calling

you to find them a place in Paradise.”

“Maybe even outside of Paradise.” That thought hadn’t occurred to me until right now. “I could sell all over Idaho and Utah.”

“Depending on what happens with this show, there could be bigger opportunities than that. More shows, more partnerships.” She raises her cup to her mouth but stops before taking a drink. “But it might mean leaving Paradise. Would you be willing to do that?”

It only takes me a few seconds to think about the question before I answer, “Yeah, if I had the chance I would.”

“I didn’t think you ever wanted to leave.” She steps closer. A soft line forms between her brows.

“I used to think about it, before Mom got sick.” Georgia is the one person I can look in the face when I talk about Mom. There’s no pity in her eyes, just understanding. I could cry in front of her without being embarrassed about it. Which makes the lump that always forms in my throat when I talk about Mom disappear. If I know I can cry, I don’t need to.

Then the reality of what has to happen before I’d leave Paradise hits me: Mom’s passing. My eyes prick with the threat of tears, and I look away from Georgia.

But she reaches for my hand and squeezes it. “It sucks, Zach. Don’t hold in what you don’t have to.”

I swallow hard and shake my head. It’s enough to know, without my having to say it, that someone else understands how hard long goodbyes are.

Chapter 12

Georgia



The room is suddenly quiet, as though by some miracle everyone disappeared at the exact moment Zach needed to be vulnerable. He presses his hand to his mouth, then runs it across his jaw to the back of his neck. I don't know how the conversation turned to his mom, but the pain on his face is too much.

Heidi Thomsen was a second mom to me while I was growing up. Now she has a progressive form of Alzheimer's that will eventually take her life long before it *should* end. She's not even sixty.

I haven't seen her since Adam's almost-wedding, last June—when he got left at the altar. It broke my heart, seeing her confused and forgetful. I had to remind her who I was. I've avoided seeing her since I got back because I know she might not remember me at all by now, even with reminders.

"I wish there was something I could do for your mom." I lift my hand to touch him again before, in the corner of my eye, I see Stella walk in the room. She has her phone at the ready to take pictures, so I lower my hand to my side.

Teri follows, waving a stack of papers at me. I motion her to bring over what must be today's script.

As I scan the pages, an idea forms—an idea forms that could actually help. Not with Heidi, but with Carly. Which sucks, because I'd much rather find a way to make Heidi better than fix Zach's relationship with Carly.

"Look." I take a deep breath. "I think I know what we can do to make Carly see we're just friends."

Zach's gaze drifts back to mine. "Really?"

I nod. "If this show is as successful as I think it might be, our partnership may last longer than it or the Little Copenhagen project. If you're serious about marrying Carly, everyone has to believe we're friends, not just her."

His eyes move side to side as he nods, taking in what I've said. Hopefully the thing he's really thinking through is his relationship with Carly. I don't think he understands that if our fan base keeps growing, he may have to keep his relationship with her a secret. People want to see *us* together.

"Remember our handshake?" I ask.

He squints, then nods.

"We do that and bring up some other memories of hanging out as friends—like you telling me all your girl problems. Then..." I push back the sick feeling climbing up my throat. "We tell the story of how you gave me my nickname."

"No way." Zach shakes his head. "I'm not calling you Ham or bringing up that story."

Ike catches my eye and taps his watch. The lights and mics are set up, and Nick is fidgeting with his camera like he's itching to roll.

"Give us fifteen to go through the script," I call to Ike, then I pull Zach into one of the three small bedrooms.

The wood-paneling installed in the seventies was painted white at some point, but the walls are a dull gray now from years of dirt and neglect. All the furniture has been hauled away except for a dirty old mattress that Ike brought in for effect. It was never actually part of the house's furnishings.

This is a TV show. If I can pretend the mattress is part of this house's story, I can pretend that I don't have romantic feelings for Zach. Even if it means telling the most humiliating story of my life.

"I'm not doing it, Georgia. There are better ways to make Carly understand."

"We don't have time to debate it. We've got to go over these lines."

"Fine, but I don't like it."

I'm disappointed he gave in so easily but push the feeling away. I hand him his copy of the script. "We need to figure out where to put the nickname story, and then everyone will know we're...just friends."

Zach's brow furrows, his gaze on the mattress, not the script. "That thing is disgusting."

I feel the same way about the words *just friends*. "It's a prop. This is television."

"Right." He frowns down at the page.

I watch his face as he runs his finger under the words and mouths each one. He did the same thing when we were in school, marking each word to keep it in place. The way he explained it to me was that when he reads, the words and letters don't always stay where they should.

"Do you want me to see if anyone has highlighters?" I ask. "Would that help?" He used to use plastic-colored filters to put over paragraphs when he read. The technique made it easier for him to distinguish black font on a white page.

"No," he says, not looking up. "But thanks." Then he points to a word in his script. "Is this started or stared?"

"Started."

He nods. "Good, then I read it right but wanted to double-check."

I lean in closer to read the whole line. "You're talking about Adam starting the demo today." I know in his first read-through, he's only sounding out words to get them right. He'll read through a second time for understanding.

"That's what I thought." His eyes pinch in the corners, and his voice is tight with tension. "But he's already started it."

"Ike is probably planning on going back to edit in shots of Adam doing some of the demo so he can play up the twin thing. Like the Property

Brothers, you know?” I rub his back to try to slow his breathing. “You’ve got this, Zach, and I’ve got you. Just be yourself, listen to my cues, and everything will be fine.”

He takes a deep breath, then nods.

“Should we read the script aloud? Would that help?” I ask. This always worked when we were in high school English together. I’d read the assigned pages from our textbook or a novel out loud to him, or we’d listen to the audio together.

“Yeah, let’s do that.” Zach sends me an uncertain smile, but any smile from him when he’s doing something that makes him this nervous is a good sign. “Thanks, Georgia.”

Then he wraps me in a tight hug. I bury my head in his chest and breathe him in. He smells of cedar, sage, and a thousand memories of running barefoot along the wet, sandy shores of Smuk Lake. Even though his arms are locked around me, all I can feel is him slipping away.

I circle my arms around his waist to squeeze him back while I still can. His sides are solid as a stone pillar. His biceps weigh heavy on my shoulders. I press my soft belly against his rock-hard stomach and am reminded that I’m not the kind of girl Zach has ever fallen for. The tall, skinny kind, with just the right amount of boobs to buy a bra in-store instead of by special order from a specialty plus-sized website.

Pulling back, I avoid looking him in the eye. “Probably better keep the hugs to a minimum if we’re trying to convince Carly we’re just friends.”

Zach lets out a frustrated sound somewhere between a grunt and a sigh, pulling my gaze toward his. For a second, I think I see a hurt look there, but then he’s smiling again.

‘True.’ He clears his throat and holds up his script. “So, where should we

put the nickname story?”

I skim my pages and point to a place. “Here, where we’re reminiscing about the house while we’re working. We’ll be talking about the past—the conversation will feel organic.”

He reads the lines carefully, then nods. “I agree.”

And even though I’m the one who made the suggestion, I flinch at his quick answer.

Chapter 13

Zach



I don't think I've ever said no to Georgia. She doesn't understand the meaning of the word. Which is why I don't say no to her lame Ham plan.

But that doesn't mean I'm going along with it.

My earliest memories of Georgia are of teasing her mercilessly. I didn't think she minded much. That was the nature of our friendship—lots of teasing and tormenting.

Until the day I gave her the nickname Ham in front of the whole school.

Paradise is small enough that there's one school, kindergarten through twelfth grade. One year, right before Christmas break, the school brought in a giant movie screen and showed *The Sandlot*. When the kid with short, curly red hair, freckles, and green eyes came on screen, I noticed he bore a striking resemblance to Georgia, who was suffering from a terrible home haircut and a growth spurt that went out instead of up.

Like an idiot, I yelled out, "Hey, that's Georgia!" Seconds later the kid on screen was called Ham. Seconds after that, Georgia was too.

By the end of the day, even the kids who weren't in the auditorium when I accidentally christened Georgia with the nickname were calling her Ham.

I spent the next six and half years until we graduated believing her when she said she didn't mind the name. She laughed off everyone's teasing and leaned into it, coming back with, "You're killing me, Smalls."

But in her valedictorian speech, she made a joke about how much she hated the name. People laughed, but I could tell she was serious. I haven't called her Ham since then, and I won't call her that now.

I wish I could say the same for the rest of our former classmates.

Obviously I'm not going to take the stupidest thing I've ever done and make it worse. So, I pretend to go along with Georgia's idea, but once the cameras are rolling, I keep veering the conversation another way. Georgia

looks confused, then annoyed, and I can tell Ike is frustrated with me. But I need time to come up with a better plan.

And one finally comes to me. It'll mean some real acting on my part, but that's fine. I'm already doing a lot more acting than I ever thought I would on a *reality* TV show.

When we break for lunch, everyone rushes to the trailer for the sandwiches we've ordered in from the Garden. I make an excuse and head home for the box I found at Granny's when we cleaned everything out.

Twenty minutes later, I park back at Britta's and sneak into the house to get everything ready. Because humiliating Georgia is not the way to show Carly we're just friends.

Once everyone returns to set, we get in place for the big nickname scene Georgia thinks *I* need. But I'm ready for the scene she really wants.

As it is in the script, Georgia and I are supposed to knock down a wall. Not for real. We'll take a couple swings at it after Ike gets a shot of Georgia wearing her red heels, pulling a hammer from her purse.

The whole thing is ridiculous, especially since Georgia didn't wear anything but Converse until she started her YouTube channel. The heels and fancy purse full of tools are all part of the persona she's created.

But she's still the same Georgia.

In addition to learning, over the past two weeks how fake reality TV is, I've also been reminded how Georgia looks out for other people, making them feel comfortable. From asking Amber about her girlfriend, to telling Nick she loves what she's seen him film already, to helping me with my lines, all of us on set get some Georgia love.

I've never been able to pinpoint what makes Georgia so special, but I've finally figured it out. She's just very *aware* of everyone around her.

Which makes me very aware of her. I haven't been able to stop watching her all day.

Like right now. I'm in the hallway while she's on the other side of the bedroom, leaning against the wall. She's reading her script, but her gaze drifts up to mine. Her eyes narrow, and her full lips slide into a smile. "What?" she mouths.

"Nothing," I mouth back and return her smile.

"Quiet!" Ike calls, and the buzzing of the crew drops to a low hum. "Zach, you walk in and ask Georgia what she's thinking. Georgia, you're looking at the closet. Work in the backstory about it being added and now you want to take back the space to make an ensuite bath. Zach you ask how, then she'll pull the hammer out of her bag."

"Purse," I correct Ike, which draws a glare from him. "Got it." I drop my eyes but not before I see Georgia trying not to laugh.

"Get some banter going while you're putting holes in the wall," Ike continues, still glaring at me.

"One second, Ike!" Georgia holds up a finger but doesn't wait for an okay before jogging to me. "This is the Ham scene," she says under her breath.

"I know. I'll work the nickname in." I give her a confident nod, but I don't miss the disappointment on her face. She expected me to argue with her.

"Action!" Stella—still on clapboard—shouts.

I walk into the bedroom. It used to be my grandparents', and sometimes Georgia and I would sneak in here so she could look at Grandma's costume jewelry. My granny loved bling, and Georgia loved Jennifer Lopez. She would clip on Granny's sparkly earrings—the more they dangled, the better—and pretend to be J.Lo on stage. I'd forgotten that until right now when I

see her standing in front of the closet with her hands on her hips. That was her J.Lo pose.

“I know that look,” I say, sticking to the script. For now, anyway. “What are you thinking about? Knocking down or tearing out?”

Georgia tilts her head to the side and grins. “This closet’s gotta go. We need an ensuite bath for this room, and we can turn this closet and the one on the other side of the wall into a bathroom.”

I nod, then say my line. “Grandpa added both closets back in the eighties.”

Georgia faces the camera for her lines. “Originally none of these houses had closets. My grandparents developed the property back in the fifties and wanted to stay true to a Danish aesthetic, which meant movable storage units—like armoires—instead of built-in closets.”

“People had fewer clothes back then too, so they didn’t need big, walk-in closets like newer homes have now,” I add while opening and shutting the bifold doors.

Suddenly, the one on the left comes off the top track and falls in the direction of Georgia’s head. Fortunately, I’m still holding the knob. My grip slows the fall long enough for me to grab the door with my other hand. Georgia ducks and covers her head, but I stop the door from hitting her.

She peeks over her shoulder at me holding the door, and we both bust up laughing.

“This door definitely has to go.” I toss it into the middle of the empty room.

None of this was scripted, but I have sneaking suspicion Ike may have had the crew loosen some screws so something like that would happen. It’ll make for good TV, for sure.

And the whole mishap has set up my plan perfectly. Without the door, a far corner of the closet is more easily visible—and the old box I just put there.

“What’s that back there?” I ask pointing at the floral-patterned cardboard box, slightly bigger and flatter than a shoebox.

“What?” Georgia leans close to me and goes on tiptoe. I’ve tucked it too far back for her to easily see. Sometimes I forget she’s a foot shorter than me.

“This.”

I reach way back until my fingertips reach the top of the box, then I slide it forward far enough that I can take it off the shelf. I blow on the top and brush at pretend dust. Then I turn to Georgia—and the camera—and lift the lid, but not wide enough for her to see, despite all her tiptoeing and angling to get a good look.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I moan, then quickly shut the lid.

“What?” Georgia reaches for the box, but I lift it above her head. “Let me see!”

“No way!” I shake my head and glance at the crew. Ike circles his pointer finger in a rolling motion and Nick moves in closer with the camera.

That’s all good, but Stella’s the one I want to make sure has a good angle to record. This moment is going on all the *Georgia Rose* accounts. Stella agreed to that as soon as I texted her about my plan. She gives me a thumbs up, so I let Georgia pull down my arms and take the box from me.

You’d think Georgia was in on the plan too, the way she turns so the crew and Stella can get good shots when she tears the lid off the box and tosses it to the floor. Of course, she has no idea what’s inside, she just has incredible instincts when it comes to being on camera.

But I do know what’s inside, so I go back to putting on an act and grab for the picture she’s pulling out of the box. She shoves the box into my chest, so I have no choice but to take it before she drops it. The picture, however, she keeps a tight grip on.

“Do not show that picture to anyone!” I set the box on the floor, then reach for the picture again, but she holds me back with one hand on my chest.

“Oh my gosh!” she squeals with exactly the delight I’d hoped for. “Look what it says on the back!”

“Don’t say it!” I could easily take it from her, but I only make a half-hearted attempt.

“My little Zandwich!” She reads off the back, then holds up the picture while Nick zooms in for a close-up. “Zach Thomsen was not always the glorious model of manhood you see before you now. Even he, like all of us mortals, went through an awkward phase. A *Zandwich* phase, if you will.”

I drop my head and shake it, mostly to hide my smile. Everything is going like I’d hoped. And what do I care if millions of people see a picture of me as a buck-toothed, pre-orthodontia, nine-year-old reading a picture book and eating a sandwich? That’s a lot less embarrassing than if the whole world knew Georgia’s nickname used to be Ham.

Georgia elbows me. “Do you want to tell them the story, or should I?”

“No way am I letting you tell it.” I look directly into the camera Nick is holding. “I spent every summer in this house with my grandparents, from the time I was born until I was old enough to help my parents at their businesses.”

Georgia nods in agreement. “I was the same—I lived with my grandma all summer while my parents worked. Things are crazy in Paradise from Memorial Day to Labor Day with all the vacationers. Anyone who has a business that caters to tourists basically works non-stop.”

“Am I telling this story, or are you?”

“I was just giving a little background info. It’s all yours now,” she protests, hands up, before moving not quite off-camera.

Hand to my mouth, I lean in like I'm sharing a secret with the viewers. "She hates to not be in the spotlight."

Her eyes narrow. "Well, the show is called *At Home with Georgia Rose*."

A grin spreads across my face. Not a forced one. I never have to force a smile when I'm with Georgia.

"Can I tell my story now?"

With pursed lips, she cocks her head to the side. "Nope. You lost your chance. I'm telling it." Then she steps in front of me, and before I can say anything, she's talking a million miles an hour.

"When Zach was a kid, he loved two things: the book he's reading in this picture." She holds up the picture again.

"And sandwiches," She darts around me, pulls the actual book out of the box, and holds it up for the camera. "Because he loved the horse in this book, *The Horse Who Liked Sandwiches*."

Too late, I realize the book is more appropriate for preschoolers than third graders, like I am in the picture. I hope no one else notices.

"Except, unlike...what was the horse's name?" Georgia continues while flipping through the pages.

"Mario," I answer too quickly.

She closes the book, and her lips curve into a smile. "Unlike Mario, the only sandwich Zach would eat—the only thing he would eat, period—was peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And only grape jelly—which is gross."

"No, it's not. At least, it wasn't when I was nine." With my hands on her waist, I try to move her, but she is planted solid. And she doesn't stop talking.

"His mom decided it was time for him to 'expand his palette'." She does air quotes here. But she's right. Those were Mom's exact words.

"All that means is she wanted to get me to eat foods I didn't want to eat." I

keep my hands on her waist, but not to move her. I like the way they feel there. Plus, Georgia doesn't even come to my chin, so it's not like she's blocking me from the camera.

"Which was all the foods that included anything but bread, peanut butter, and jelly." She glances over her shoulder at me. The camera lights surrounding us catch her eyes, making them sparkle.

My breath hitches. Seconds pass before I shake loose the hold her eyes have on me. I can't remember what I was going to say.

"Anyway." I let my hands fall. "Granny tried to do what Mom asked by feeding me the prepared meals Mom sent over. I'd take a bite, wait for Granny to turn her back—she never could sit still—then feed it to her shih-tzu, who was the worst dog ever and definitely did not deserve Mom's cooking."

"True." Georgia nods emphatically. "Then he would come over to my Grandma Rose's and ask for a 'zandwich.'"

"I had a little bit of a speech impediment. My s's always sounded like z's," I say to the camera.

"It was adorable."

My eyes dart to her, and I smile before looking back at the camera. "After a week, Grandma Rose happened to mention to my mom that I must be going through a growth spurt because I was eating so many sandwiches at her house every day."

"He got busted."

"Soooo busted. But she let me eat sandwiches again, as long as I tried three bites of whatever she'd made." I'm not sure what to do with my hands while I talk, but I resist touching Georgia again. Instead, I do things like hold up

three fingers when I say the number and weirdly wave them around. “And each day I was here, Granny watched me chew and swallow every single bite.

“And she and Grandma Rose called him Zandwich for the rest of their lives.” Georgia grins wide. “The end.”

I scoff. “I wish that was the end. This one still calls me Zandwich.” I point my thumb in her direction with mock annoyance.

“You’ll always be my little Zandwich,” she says in a voice that should only be used for babies.

I roll my eyes. Which must activate whatever magnetic force makes my hands go to her waist again. Heat surges through my fingertips, searing them to the soft curve of her hips until I’ve walked her off camera.

“Cut!” Ike yells.

Nick lowers his camera, and then the entire crew claps.

My hands are still at Georgia’s waist, and neither of us moves.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Ike says—no, yells—as he closes the ten feet between us. “That kind of banter is exactly what will make this show a hit. You two are a dream team.”

Georgia beams, and I can’t help but feel as happy as she does. I don’t need to rewatch the video to know we just filmed a great scene. We were totally in sync. Funny. Engaging. Interesting. All the things that people will want to see on *At Home with Georgia Rose*.

For the rest of the day, Georgia and I both float on the adrenaline left over from the shoot. That energy only increases when Adam and Evie show up on set. Demo is Adam’s department, but Ike wants shots of us working together, so I take a few sledgehammer swings at the closets that are coming out.

Then I take a few more because it feels so good to being doing something with my brother again. With his engagement to Evie, the tension that’s been

between us for nearly a year has disappeared. One more reason to spend the day with my feet barely touching the ground.

It's not until I watch the Stella-edited videos on the *Georgia Rose* accounts that I come back to earth. And that return is like a sky jumper's whose parachute doesn't open: a hard crash.

The one thing Georgia and I didn't get right was the thing we meant to do: make Carly see we're just friends.

Chapter 14

Zach



Carly doesn't answer my calls or texts again Friday night or Saturday morning. All the confidence I had about our relationship working disappears faster than bean dip during a Super Bowl party.

Finally around noon, she sends me a message.

Carly: I really thought you meant it when you said you loved me. But you can't even make time to come see me. I have to watch another video of you and Georgia acting like you're together. She's the only person you really care about.

My chest plummets as I read. I even have Siri read it to me, hoping I've misread. But nope. Even in Siri's robot voice I hear the hurt in Carly's. And I'm the cause of it.

I have to go to her. I can't apologize over text. The only way to prove how much I care and how sorry I am for hurting her is by telling her in person.

Luckily, Ike doesn't have any shots planned with me in them today. Everyone else—including Adam and Evie—has to work, despite it being Saturday, because we're already behind on our shooting schedule. There's a demo to be done, which means it's Adam's turn to be ogled. Thank goodness. I'm in no mood to be funny, engaging, or interesting.

I'm packing an overnight bag, considering if today is the day to propose—it feels like it could be—when I get a text from Georgia. No words, just a picture of Adam in a flannel with the sleeves cut off, the seams frayed to sexy perfection. He could be on the cover of one of those romance novels he thinks no one knows he reads.

It's February and freezing, but even if it weren't, Adam only likes his flannels with sleeves. He definitely wasn't in charge of his wardrobe today.

Three dots appear under the picture, then words pop up.

Georgia: Adam's biceps are getting lots of close-ups today.

I smile and quickly message back.

Me: They like the spotlight even more than you do.

The next picture is just of Adam's arm captioned with *I'm ready for my close-up*. I laugh, even though I'm torn apart by what I've done to Carly.

Then another pic appears of him scowling hard enough to punch someone, and I have to laugh again.

Georgia: Do you think he knows his grumpy face only makes him sexier? To other women. Obvs. I think he's ugly.

Me: Same. Can barely look at him.

We go back and forth a little longer before she asks if everything is okay. I'm not sure how she can tell over text that it isn't, but she can, so there's no way I can lie to her. She'd see right through it.

Me: I hurt Carly. I've got to go to Florence.

After a long pause, I see her response.

Georgia: Wanna meet at Britta's for a minute first? Talk it over? I have a break in fifteen.

Me: See you then.

I've got an idea of what to do, and Georgia is just the person to give me advice. She's always been my wing-woman. I know she won't let me down this time.

On my way out the door, I grab the ring I've been saving for the right girl. It's not the one I was going to propose to Carly with, but I haven't had a chance to find one that's more like what Carly wants.

I stuff it inside my jacket. With all the padding of my coat, I can't feel it in the pocket there, but knowing it's safe is enough. I've waited too long to give it away to let anything happen to it now.

I get to Britta's before Georgia and order for us. I guess she'll want a chai

latte today and get one for myself too.

“Why are you so amped up?” my sister asks as she makes the drinks. Things are slow this late in the afternoon, so she’s the only one here.

“Nothing.” I shake my head, but I can’t shake the nervous energy coursing through my body.

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes. “Go ahead and tell Georgia whatever it is instead of your own favorite sister.”

“What makes you think you’re my favorite?” The best thing about having a little sister is that I always have someone to tease.

“Very funny.” She pulls back my drink as I reach for it. “You know I have two other brothers I could choose as my favorite. I’m the only sister you have to choose from, not to mention your only source of free caffeine. Don’t make me cut you off.”

Just then, Georgia walks in. Britta waves to her, then leans over the counter to hand me our drinks. “She’d better be the woman who put that smile on your face,” she says too quietly for Georgia to hear over the Taylor Swift song blasting from the speakers.

I draw back in surprise. Britta’s eyebrows shoot up, and she nods toward Georgia, like she knows something about the two of us that I should know. Before I can reply, Georgia comes to the counter.

“Hey, Britta. Are the pans shut down, or can I beg you to make me ebelskiver?” Georgia takes the drink I hand her, but I’m still staring at Britta and the stupid smile on her face. “What’s going on with you two?” Georgia asks, looking between us.

“Nothing.” Britta smiles wider. “Lemon curd? Or Nutella?” She knows those are Georgia’s favorites.

Georgia takes a sip of her drink, then tips it toward me. “Chai latte?”

I nod.

“Perfect. Thank you.” She turns to Britta. “Lemon curd to go with my chai.”

“You got it!” Britta goes through the swinging door to the kitchen, but she can still see us from the stove. “You saw you two are blowing up again, right? Your nickname reel is all over Instagram.”

“Uh, yeah, I saw. Stella is on fire with her posts.” Georgia leans her hip against the stainless counter and asks me, “Did you see it?”

I stare into my cup. “Last night.”

“We’re getting tons of shares. Like close-to-viral numbers of shares.” Her eyes bore into me, trying to draw out the appropriate response. “This is good for us, Zach.”

“I know.” I push away from the counter and head to our table. Georgia follows. “It’s not so good for me and Carly. That video is the reason she isn’t talking to me, and it was supposed to do the exact opposite.”

We slide into the wood and metal chairs, their legs scraping across the cement floor. I expect Georgia to launch into problem-solving mode once we’re seated, but that’s not the look on her face when I glance across the table. Her lips pinch together, and there’s nothing of the sparkle I saw in her eyes yesterday. In its place is something closer to...

Hurt.

Great. I guess she can join the club of people I’ve hurt. Carly’s the president.

“You kind of changed the plan on me yesterday,” she says in a tight voice before sipping from her cup. “So I don’t know what to tell you about yours not working.”

“Are you mad I didn’t tell the world your nickname?”

Her face goes soft, and she shakes her head. “No, not at all. That was really sweet.” There’s no edge to her voice now, and tension eases out of my shoulders. “I’m just saying, I don’t have any other ideas for making Carly believe there’s nothing going on between us.”

Britta chooses that moment to set Georgia’s ebelskiver between us. “Dude,” she says in a long, exasperated breath. “If Carly was secure about who she is, she wouldn’t be so insecure about you and Georgia.” She hands us each a fork, because, of course, Georgia is going to share. That’s how it works between us. We always share.

“She’s not insecure.” I sink the side of my fork into one of the round pancakes and slice off a piece without looking at Britta. My eyes might give away my worry she might be right.

“Jealous girls are always insecure,” she retorts.

“Nobody asked you, Britta.” I shove the bite into my mouth. The lemon curd snaps with tartness.

“That doesn’t make me wrong.” She walks away, hip-checking me on the way.

Georgia’s lip twitches as I rub the arm Britta bumped. Then her eyes drop, and she uses the back of her fork to push an ebelskiver across the plate. “I’ve only met Carly one time, but I think Britta may be right.”

I don’t have a rebuttal. I hadn’t really thought about it before, but Carly’s jealousy isn’t a good look. On her or me. I mean, the first few times she got upset when other women noticed me, I was flattered that she liked me enough to be protective. But being jealous about Georgia isn’t cool.

“Do you think if I propose it will make her feel more secure?” I blurt. Because the ring in my pocket isn’t increasing my confidence the way I thought it would.

Georgia's brow creases, and she leans into her seat, drawing her arms across her chest. "You have a ring already?"

I reach inside my jacket and pull out the ring to show her. Georgia gasps.

"It was my granny's. She gave it to me before she died."

"I know. I remember it." She takes it from me and holds it close to the window, examining it in the light. "I always loved this ring," she whispers more to the ring than to me.

"Do you think she'll be okay with the stone not being a diamond?"

Georgia shrugs and hands it back to me. "If she's smart, she will be. The aquamarine is beautiful, especially in that setting. White and yellow gold together is really unique, and the filigree on the band adds even more dimension."

"You know a lot more about it than I do. I just like the rectangle shape of the stone." I turn the ring in different angles, trying to see it through Carly's eyes. She likes big, solitaire diamonds, but I think she'll like this too. It's a family heirloom, after all, and I can get her a solitaire later.

"It's called an emerald cut. Very art deco. Your granny let me try it on once, before I left for college. Said she'd seen me admire it over the years..." Georgia's voice trails off in a sad sigh, and I wonder if there's something more to that sigh than thinking about Granny.

For a second I wonder if it has to do with me. The thought that she might be sad at the idea of me proposing to Carly makes me nervous in a different way. A less shaky, more goosebump way.

But then Georgia reaches for her phone, and I'm reminded that she's made it clear so many times that we're just friends. She knows a thousand successful guys in LA and New York. Why would she ever settle for a guy like me, someone who's never going anywhere?

I tuck the ring back in my pocket and put away silly thoughts about Georgia and me. Carly is the one for me.

“If it feels like the right time when I get there, I’m going to propose today,” I say, and Georgia looks up. “I’ll take her to that little park up the canyon from Florence and pop the question.” It’s not what I’d originally wanted, but the fact new ideas are coming to me so quickly has to be a good sign that the time is right. “It won’t be the big production you and I planned, but I think proposing will finally make Carly feel secure in how much I love her.”

Georgia uses both hands to pull her hair back, then rubs her neck. “I don’t know, Zach. I think confidence in yourself—or in a relationship—has to come from the inside. If she doesn’t have that, I’m not the only woman she’s going to be jealous of.”

I wince.

“Carly has confidence,” I bite back. “I don’t know why you and Britta think she doesn’t.”

Georgia puts up her hands. “Okay. I believe you.” Her voice is flat, emotionless, and unconvincing. “What do you want me to do?”

Her eyes are as empty as her words. I came to her for help, and all she can do is criticize and judge my girlfriend.

“Nothing.” I push away from the table. “I wanted your advice, but I don’t need it anymore. I’m in love with Carly, and she’s in love with me. We’ll be happy together, no matter what you and Britta think.”

“I never said you wouldn’t, I just think you’re rushing things for the wrong reasons.” Georgia glares at me from across the table.

From the counter area, Britta yells, “She’s not the one, bro!”

I shake my head and turn toward the door. “I’ve got to go.”

I’m being too sensitive, but my flight-or-fight instinct is on auto-pilot, and

there's no turning it off. That force drives me out the door, straight to my Bronco.

Today is the day. No matter what warnings my sister, my best friend, or my brain try to give me.

Chapter 15

Georgia



Zach will be in Florence in an hour. If I'd told him I thought it was a great idea to propose to Carly, he probably would have thought twice about it. Instead, I made certain he'd be engaged by tonight.

I stare out the window until his Bronco turns onto the main road. Then I take a sip of my chai, but I get no comfort from it. My appetite is gone, and I've barely touched my ebelskiver. I move the pancakes around on the plate, trying to make it look like I've eaten them. The endeavor is as successful as patching a giant hole in a wall with a little bit of spackle.

I'm deep in thought—or is it regret?—when Britta slides into the chair Zach vacated a few minutes ago.

“Can I make a suggestion?” She picks up Zach's unused fork and digs into the ebelskiver.

“Can I say no?” I slide the plate to her side of the table.

Britta shakes her head and chews her pancake too carefully and slowly. After she swallows, she stares me dead in the eye. “Just tell him how you feel.”

I'm so surprised that *what* and *how* are out of my mouth before I can think to tell her she doesn't know what she's talking about. By the time I stumble over the words “I don't have feelings for Zach,” my cheeks are burning, and I have to look away from her unblinking gaze.

“Georgia, how long have I known you?” Her eyes burrow into my soul, and not in a good way. More like the gopher in Mom's garden she couldn't bear to kill but who outsmarted all of her “rehoming” efforts.

“Your whole life,” I answer. The question could have been rhetorical. She knows the answer.

“Exactly. And I have never seen you look at anyone the way you just looked at my brother.” Now there's a gentleness in her voice that feels less

gopher-y and more Grandma Rose-y. And all I want to do is let someone carry the weight of the loss I feel right now.

“Do you think he knows?” I ask softly.

Britta raises an eyebrow. “I doubt it.”

“At least I’ve got that going for me.” I pick at the chipped polish on my thumbnail. One of the hazards of the job, but I have a standing appointment every three weeks with my nail tech in LA. It’s a regular reminder I’m not the tomboy I was growing up.

But I don’t have a nail tech in Paradise. Or an eyelash girl. No aesthetician either. I don’t have any of the things that make me the Georgia I am today. The Georgia who will always be more curvy than willowy but who finally feels pretty now.

“He looks at you the same way,” Britta says, as though she’s talking about the weather and not delivering potentially earth-shattering news. “He’s just too clueless to know he’s crazy about you.”

“As a friend. He’s crazy about me as a friend. That’s it.” I’m not going to get my hopes up that she knows something even Zach doesn’t, no matter how hard she shakes her head.

“Only because he thinks he doesn’t have a chance with you.” Britta rolls her eyes. “He’s said more than once you’re way out of his league.”

I shake my head. “I know he thinks my financial success makes me somehow better than him, but that’s not true.”

“I don’t mean just in business, Georgia.” Britta pulls off her hat and hairnet, then loosens her curls. “I mean, in general, he thinks you’re too much of a catch to settle for a guy like him.”

“What? He said that?”

“Not in so many words, but I know my brother. If he thought he had a

chance with you, he'd forget all about Carly." She helps herself to my untouched ebelskiver. "You need to just tell him. That's all it would take for him to figure out he feels the same."

"Okay," I scoff. "I'll let him know as soon as he gets back from proposing to his girlfriend."

"That's exactly why you *should* do it. He'll marry Carly if you don't tell him, or else he'll get dumped at the altar like Adam did."

A gust of cold air rushes through the front door, and we both turn to see Evie walking in. Britta jumps up and runs to her, enveloping her in a big hug.

"I can't wait for you to be my sister!" Britta squeals.

"You don't have to greet me like this *every* time you see me, you know." Evie hugs her back but smiles at me over Britta's shoulder.

"I've wanted a sister my whole life, so I probably won't ever stop hugging you like this." Britta lets her go, and they both walk to my table.

"I thought you might need a hug." Evie opens her arms.

"How did you know?" I stand and sink into her hug.

Britta wraps her arms around both of us. "I texted her as soon as Zach started talking his crazy proposal stuff."

"Adam wanted to come too, but Ike wouldn't let him leave."

At Evie's mention of Adam, my chest pinches tight. I should be congratulating Evie and making bridal shower plans, but instead all I can think about is what I'm about to lose while she's getting everything I want.

Envy is such an ugly emotion, rearing up when you least expect it, right when someone is handing over a piece of their joy to share with you. Why can't the piece be enough? Why do I suddenly want what Evie has?

Not Adam, obviously. But to be loved like he loves Evie. To be adored. To hold the promise of happily ever after with my own hands.

“Speaking of Adam,” I say as I pull away. “Have I told you how happy I am for you two?”

“Only about as many times as Britta has hugged me.” Evie starts to sit, but I grab her left hand.

“Let me look at it again.” I examine her ring and let out a long whistle. “I hope you wanted a big diamond, because you got one.”

“I know.” She pulls in her lips, embarrassed, but she can’t hide how giddy she is. And every bit of my envy is blinded into submission with the brightness of her eyes.

We slide across the table from each other, and Britta takes the seat next to her. They both gaze at me, like I’m in the interrogation seat and they’re ready to play nice cop and nicer cop.

“The video last night was sooooo good!” Evie says, but I know from the way her eyes dance that she’s talking about more than my *Georgia Rose* accounts. “You and Zach are amazing together.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve been telling her,” Britta says with enough enthusiasm to outsparkle Evie.

“I don’t think Evie means what you mean.” I look at Evie for confirmation, but she’s looking at Britta.

“You see it too, don’t you?” Evie asks with a conspiratorial smile.

Britta nods. “She just needs to tell him she’s in love with him, right? It’s so obvious they’re meant to be together.”

Evie nods even more emphatically than Britta, but neither can match my headshake.

“It’s been years since we’ve spent any real time with each other. We’re happy to be hanging out again, that’s it.” I will *not* be infected by their excitement. “That’s all you’re seeing between us, probably all I’m feeling,

and *definitely* all Zach is feeling.” I lower my gaze from their pitying looks. “You can doubt me all you want. I know Zach doesn’t have feelings for me. He’s on his way to propose to Carly right now.”

I reach for my purse so I can extricate myself from this very uncomfortable conversation. I’ve only had twenty-four hours to sit with the realization that I’m in love with Zach. I’m not ready to hash it out with anyone else, even my best friend.

“Zach is in love with you.” Evie grabs my hand and tucks her chin to meet my eye. “He just doesn’t know it yet.”

She is so sincere that for a second, I let myself believe she could be right. Then I catch my reflection in the window. It’s not a bad reflection. In fact, it’s one I’ve grown to really like. Maybe even love.

But it’s not the reflection of somebody who Zach would love. It never has been. And the only thing I *need* to do is accept that. So I hitch my purse over my shoulder and slide out of the bench seat.

“Zach loves me, but he isn’t *in* love with me. So let’s just let it go. Okay?” I put on a smile, but it hurts to admit I’m not the kind of woman Zach is attracted to. “I’ve got to get back to the set, but I’ll meet you at the Garden tonight?”

“See you then,” Evie says, followed quickly by Britta’s, “I’ll be there. No rest for the weary.”

I walk back to Granny Neilsen’s thinking about how Britta is stretched so thin, consciously ignoring her suggestion I should tell Zach what I’m feeling. I’d rather think about how I can help the Thomsen family than entertain ideas of being part of it someday. Ever since their mom got sick, all four siblings have been filling in all the places she and their dad used to. Heidi Thomsen

filled a lot of spaces, and now that Pete is her primary caregiver, there are even more holes to fill.

And it's not even the summer season yet.

I'm not all the way to the house before I hear music, loud voices, and the sounds of demolition. Adam and his crew are hard at work.

Ike rushes out of the open doorway before I get to the driveway. His face is bright and his step so light that I slow down. Excited Ike means he's got an idea that usually involves me doing something I don't really want to do.

"Hey! I've been waiting for you. Is Zach around?" He meets me on the walkway to the house, looking over my shoulder like I might be hiding Zach somewhere in the open street behind me.

"No you told him he didn't have to be here today. Why?" I grow even more suspicious when Ike loops his arm around mine and walks me toward the house.

"I just got off the phone with the producers." The giddiness in his voice should be more of a comfort than a worry. "They're thrilled with what's happening on your social media. People love you and Zach together."

"So I've been told," I say drily.

"The producers want to see more of you two." The closer we get to the house, the more Ike's already loud voice rises to be heard over the commotion inside.

I stop outside the doorway, wondering if he's in cahoots with Evie and Britta. Logically, that makes no sense, but this conversation seems to be headed in a similar direction to the one I just had with them. "What are you saying, Ike? You know Zach and I aren't together, right? We're just friends."

"I know that, and you know that." Ike points to his own chest, then mine. "But your followers don't. And they're the ones we want to keep happy so

when the show releases in August, they'll watch."

"What are you asking, Ike?" We step inside where Adam and his crew are swinging sledgehammers and using electric saws to tear out the kitchen. Stella is taking pictures from a safe distance while Nick films.

"The producers want you to play up the idea that you and Zach are together," he yells as the saws and hammers go still so everyone within a three-mile radius hears Ike say *you and Zach are together*.

"You are?" Adam lowers his saw and smiles. Actually smiles. "That's great! I was wondering when it would happen."

"We're not together. Not even close." I step away from Ike, putting distance between me and whatever crazy plan he's got cooked up.

"Well, you're doing a good job of making everyone *wonder* if you are, so why not take it one step further and make them *believe* you are?" Ike looks to Adam's crew and his own like he thinks they may back him up.

I shoot a glare toward Stella who, I swear, is trying not to smile. But all this is her fault. She's the one putting the pictures up. She's the one framing the story for my social media accounts.

"This is not a conversation I want to be a part of." Adam digs airPods out of his pocket and puts them in. "But it's a great idea." He smirks, then yells, "Back to work, boys!"

Nick's camera goes back up, and I point Ike to the back of the house away from the noise and the cold air streaming through the open doors keeping us all from being swallowed up in dust.

"Listen," Ike says when we're in the bedroom. "Here's the idea: you create the illusion of a romance building between you and Zach. You're not only revitalizing Little Copenhagen, you're falling in love as you do it."

His face splits into a grin, like he's just solved the problem of world

hunger.

I do *not* return his smile, even though the idea isn't a terrible one. It's actually pretty good. Romance and home reno combined? Who wouldn't want to watch that? It's like the first time someone thought to dip strawberries into chocolate to create the perfect dessert combination.

"Shouldn't you be directing what's going on in front of the camera right now instead of trying to direct my life?" That's as close as I can get to saying no.

Ike laughs. "Nick can handle getting demo shots without me for a few minutes." Then he moves to the door. "But you're on board, right? I'll talk to Zach about it tomorrow."

At Zach's name, I realize I have to say no, but all I can do is shake my head.

"Are you saying no?" Ike's hand drops from the doorknob. "Why?"

I bite my lip before answering. "Zach's on his way to propose to his girlfriend right now."

Ike slowly closes his eyes, then pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "Why in the world would he do that, right now, when we're about to strike gold?"

"I don't know," I answer slowly. "I guess he's in love."

The disappointment in Ike's face mimics what's happening in the pit of my stomach. Except it's not just the lost opportunity of high ratings that I'm mourning.

Nothing will be the same after today.

Chapter 16

Zach



Usually, I love driving from Paradise to the “big city” of Florence. The highway rises out of Paradise Valley into the Black Mountains that keep our valley both protected and isolated. Then the road winds through trees and a canyon of rock and granite, following the Cobalt River to the larger Antelope Valley where Florence has had room to spread and fill with people.

But today, my stomach swirls, like I might be carsick. Instead of enjoying the

view when I have to slow down for a cattle crossing, I drum my fingers on the steering wheel, mumbling threats if they don’t pick up their hooves and get a move on. As though driving faster would make it possible to outrun the doubts in my head.

Doubts put there by Britta and Georgia, even though neither one of them knows Carly. Not really, anyway. Especially Georgia. She’s only met Carly one time. She can’t even remember her name most days.

I’ve always trusted Georgia. She’s never steered me wrong when it comes to girls. Or most other things, for that matter. Which makes it so hard to dismiss what she said about moving too fast.

But she’s wrong. I need to trust myself on this. I don’t want to lose Carly.

I don’t want to lose Georgia either. That’s the problem. I feel caught between the two of them, but it’s Georgia who I know will stand by my side, no matter what. We’ll get over this disagreement today. She’ll see Carly is good for me, and everything will go back to the way it’s always been. Georgia and I will always be friends.

At least that’s what I have to convince myself of. If I don’t, I’ll never propose to Carly, because I may hate the thought of losing Georgia even more than I hate the thought of losing Carly.

Which is crazy because it’s Carly I’m in love with...

Isn't it?

I turn up the volume on my stereo to drown out the stupid questions spinning through my head. Carly loves Marshmello and I'm trying to for her, but after five minutes of listening, I'm even more agitated than before. So, I turn on Haim. Georgia introduced me to them in high school, and I go back to their first album any time I need to clear my head.

It almost works, but not quite. My legs bounce uncontrollably when I park in front of Carly's apartment. I run my hands down them, but every nerve in my body is pinging with excitement. With a deep breath, I open my car door, then pat my jacket pocket. The ring is still there. Just in case this is the right time.

I'm still a ball of nerves when I knock on her door, and it doesn't help that she takes so long to answer that I have to knock again. We share our location with each other, so I know she's home. Plus, I hear voices inside.

Finally, she opens the door, looking more surprised than excited to see me there.

"Zach," she says loudly with a quick glance over her shoulder. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to apologize, because you're right. I should have made time to see you this week." I step closer to her, and she moves toward me, shutting the door behind her.

"You should have told me you were coming." She doesn't sound mad. More nervous than anything. And even though she moves nearer to me, she feels very far away. When I reach my arm around her waist, she pulls back.

"Everything okay?" I let my hand fall to my side. Alarm bells are going off, and Georgia and Britta's voice are ringing in my head. "I mean, I know

you're upset with me—you haven't answered any of my calls. But that's why I'm here. To explain.”

Even as the words spill out, I wish I could call them back. The more I say, the more her eyes fill with something that isn't forgiveness, and definitely not love. More like pity.

She glances over her shoulder, then grabs my arm and pulls me further down the hallway. “Why don't we go somewhere else to talk?”

I stop. I've heard that tone she used when she said, “to talk.” I've used that same tone, that same phrase, at least a dozen times. “Are you breaking up with me?”

Carly looks toward her apartment again, then back at me. “Please, let's just go somewhere else to do this.”

“You are, aren't you?” The low hum of the hallway lights buzzes in my ears. The walls are a dingy gray and smell of cigarette smoke and Lysol; the industrial grade carpet can't hide the stains accumulated over years of college student abuse.

This is where I'm getting dumped.

“Is this because of the reel with me and Georgia? We worked so hard this week to make sure Georgia's followers know we're just friends. That's what the video was supposed to be about, but it went wrong.” My voice rises, and I hate the undertone of panic in it.

“Please, Zach. Let's go talk in your truck.” She pulls on my arm as a door clicks behind us. I turn my head at the same time a punk kid with a Lebron jersey and a stupid hat steps out of Carly's apartment.

“Everything okay out here, Car?” The question is for her, but he narrows his eyes at me.

He narrows his eyes. At. ME.

I take one step toward him, and he backs into the apartment.

“Everything’s fine, Brad.” Carly pulls on my arm again, and while I’m tempted to shake her off, the guy already looks scared enough to run. That’s all I want. Him to regret threatening me, even if it was only a look.

I turn my back on him, but not all the way. He needs to know I can still pivot and charge without warning.

“Brad?” I say to Carly. “Really? You’re dumping me for someone named *Brad* who likes the *Lakers*?”

“I’m not dumping you.” Her hand drops from my arm, and she looks past me to Brad. With a nod, he goes back inside, letting the metal door swing shut with a loud clang that reverberates through the hallway.

“Then what is this?” With Brad out of sight, my adrenaline slows, and the reality of what’s happening hits me. My chest rises and falls as shame blankets me with an uncomfortable itching that reaches all the way under my skin.

“It’s just a…” Carly’s gaze meets mine then quickly drops. “A break.”

I lower my chin and force her eyes to meet mine. “I don’t do breaks, Carly. I do break-ups. That’s it.”

Her eyes dart to mine, and there’s a fire there that hits me right in the heart. That fire is part of the reason I fell in love with her.

“You don’t have time for me, Zach. You only have time for Georgia. That’s why we’re breaking up.” She glares at me, daring me to prove her wrong.

Which I can’t do, but I try anyway. “I don’t have time for you? What do you think I’m doing here right now? And every weekend before this? Who’s always making the trip to see who?”

“I’m in school, Zach. I can’t just take off whenever I want like you can.”

She knows as well as I do that’s not true, but her jaw is set in a way that

leaves no room for reason or argument. And I don't want to argue anyway. I've made a fool of myself. There's no saving face now.

There's also no denying that I should have listened to Britta and Georgia. It's like a spell or something has been lifted, and I see Carly for who she really is. Jealous and manipulative, a cheater.

Most of all, she's not the *one*.

"I can't believe I came here to propose." I don't know why I say it, but when her mouth drops open, I'm glad I did. "Go be with your college boy."

I step around her and go back to my truck. I wait until I've revved up the engine and pulled on to the road to say the one thing that can't be left unsaid.

"LAKERS SUCK!" I yell, even though Brad won't hear it, and I know it's childish. But it feels good anyway.

Chapter 17

Georgia



After I told Ike about Zach's plans to get engaged, he was in a terrible mood for the rest of the day. But he didn't give up on the home reno romance idea, mentioning more than once that we'll have to find a way to make that angle work. Finally, I called my agent, Jeannie, to see if she could make it stop. Not for my sake. For Zach's.

Ike didn't like that either. Things were tense all afternoon. I don't think I've ever felt as relieved as I did an hour ago when we finally wrapped.

But as I'm driving to meet Evie and Britta for dinner, my phone rings, and Jeannie's name pops up. I groan, knowing if she's calling this soon, the news isn't good. Especially for Zach, whose contract I should have given more than a quick skim. I'm worried he may have signed his life away.

I've been in the reality TV business less than a month, but I already get the gist of how it works. The producers decide what's actually real, not the people whose lives are being filmed. And they'll make sure they have the legal power to do it.

I brace myself, tap the speaker button, and say, "Hi, Jeannie."

"Geooooorrrrrrgia." Jeannie draws out my name like we've been friends for as many decades as the seconds she stretches the syllables across. We've met in person once. "Are you ready for the news?"

"Of course," I answer in an equally BFF voice.

I didn't need an agent until my show got picked up, and I'm not quite sure how this relationship is supposed to work. Are we friends or business associates? Am I in charge of her or is she in charge of me?

"I went to the top, all the way to the executive producer." There's a tapping sound in the background, like Jeannie is pacing while she's got me on speaker. "They said they already knew about Jack's engagement. Is it a done deal?"

“Zach. And, yeah, I told Ike about it. I don’t know if he’s already proposed. I only know that, even if it didn’t happen today, it’s going to happen.” I pull into the parking lot of the Garden and wave to Evie, who parks next to me. When I motion to her that I’m on the phone, she goes inside.

“And you think she’ll say yes?” Jeannie presses.

“I don’t know, but I’m assuming she will.” I don’t know why anyone would say no to Zach. And I won’t get my hopes up that Carly is the one dummy who would.

“Have you checked to see if anything’s public yet?”

“Uh, I don’t know. Let me look.” I pull up Zach’s Insta account, which is no help at all because the last time he posted anything was on the day we had an open house to show off the renovation we did on Grandma Rose’s.

So, I do the next best thing. I stalk Carly’s account. Which, of course, is public. Because she’s the kind of girl whose personal account would be available for anyone to look at.

But there’s nothing there about her and Zach. Only a picture of what she ordered for dinner at a local Indian restaurant. Zach’s nowhere to be seen, which wouldn’t usually make me think he wasn’t there, except that he’s allergic to curry. He never eats Indian food.

“Nothing posted yet,” I tell Jeannie before scrolling through a few more of Carly’s pictures. There’s a guy who keeps showing up in a lot of her posts. Usually they’re in a group together, but always right by each other.

“Good! That’s great news! Let’s make sure to keep it that way.” Now there’s a whirring sound in the background, and the tapping sound is faster. Also, Jeannie’s breathing is heavier. “If Zach... *breath, breath, breath*, makes public any relationship besides the one he has with you... *breath, breath, breath* he may be in breach of his... *gasping breath* contract.”

“What? He’s contractually obligated to only be in a relationship with *me*?” Once the words are out, I’m breathless myself. Maybe from listening to Jeannie on the treadmill (I’m assuming that’s where she is), but probably from the idea of Zach being forced to be my boyfriend.

Neither one is a good image, but I especially hate the second one. I only want Zach if I’m his first choice, not his *only* choice for stupid legal reasons.

And I hate the idea of Zach being forced to keep his engagement secret. If he loves Carly enough to marry her, he should be shouting that to anyone who will listen. There’s no way I’m going to let Zach pretend to not be engaged to Carly, even if she was willing. Which, she won’t be. I don’t have to know her well to know that much.

“Not exactly ‘contractually obligated,’ but I’ve got to go back through both your contracts to see if there’s any wiggle room in the wording.” The whirring stops, and Jeannie’s voice gets louder. “That doesn’t mean he can’t make wedding plans; he just has to keep quiet about it. In fact, the exec offered up their event planner to help them with the wedding, and it’ll come out of their pocket.”

“The wedding?”

“Oh, hell no.” Jeannie laughs. “The wedding *planner*.”

“It will take more than that to convince Zach and his fiancée not to go public. That’s *if* I can convince them.” My own voice rises to meet Jeannie’s decibel level. “I mean, you know how crazy it sounds, right? Asking his fiancée to stay silent about their engagement so he and I can pretend we’re falling in love?”

My phone beeps with a second call, and Zach’s name appears. Usually, I jump at the chance to talk to him, but not now. This news, I don’t want to hear.

Jeannie, oblivious to the tornado happening in my chest, continues. “You think it’s crazy to give your followers what they want? To make your show a hit before it even debuts? That’s what you’ve got here, Georgia—a hit! The producers are only trying to ensure that.”

Zach’s beeping ends, probably going to voicemail.

“Georgia? Are you there?”

“Um...I’m here.”

“I want to be clear about this.” Jeannie’s voice is firm. Solid and cold as ice.

Zach’s beeping starts up again. He can’t wait to share his good news.

“The producers are convinced the romance between you and Zach will make this show a hit, and they’re not going to budge on that. I don’t care what you have to fake to make it happen. Do it. Get Zach on board. Keep his engagement a secret. Because starting Monday, the two of you falling in love is part of the script.”

And there’s the answer to my question about who’s in charge of whom.

“All right. Thanks, Jeannie.”

“You don’t have the star power yet to break a contract without serious consequences.” Her voice is only marginally softer, both in tone and volume. “But this show will get you to that place. And it’s my job to make sure of that. That’s why you hired me.”

“I know.” But it sucks. Because I don’t want to be famous more than I want Zach to be happy.

“We’ll talk soon.”

The treadmill whirring starts again, and the line goes dead.

Zach’s second call disappears.

And that’s that. I don’t have a choice. Not only that, but I’m the one who

will have to break the news to Zach that he has to keep his engagement secret. Which means, I'll have to call him right now before anyone posts anything anywhere.

I climb out of my car and head for the front door of the Garden of Eatin', ready to dial Zach's number. Before I can, Zach is calling me again.

Probably to tell me how happy is, which I don't want to hear. But I can hear it now and get the pain over with right away, or I can put it off and let the pain build. Like a dull toothache that only gets worse the longer you wait to go to the dentist.

I choose now and step inside the too-warm restaurant. When I answer the phone, I do with the brightest voice I can muster. "Hey, Zach."

"Georgia." My name floats across the line on what sounds like a sigh of relief. "I'm driving into the canyon, so I'll probably lose you, but can I come over when I get back?"

Zach's words pour out in a wild rush of air that's hard to decipher. It doesn't sound like excitement, but between the fuzzy connection and noise inside the Garden, I can't be sure. He almost sounds...sad. Or am I fooling myself into hearing what I want to hear? Not that I *want* Zach to be sad.

I don't.

Unless, of course, it means he changed his mind about marrying Carly.

"Sure, come on by." I sound normal, right? Even though I'm ninety-nine percent on the verge of heartbreak and one percent hopeful Zach's the one with the broken heart? "I'll be up, but tell me how it went? You did propose, right?" There's no way I'm waiting another hour to at least confirm that much.

"Yeah. Kind of. I told her that's why I was there." His voice sounds heavy, not happy. "She said..."

Silence.

Because, of course, he'd hit a dead spot at the most inconvenient moment ever.

Then he's back. "And I can't believe..."

Silence again.

"What? What can't you believe?" I yell into the phone, like maybe the louder I am, the stronger the cell phone signal will be. "Zach? Can you hear me? What did you say?"

He doesn't respond. And he won't be able to for at least another hour until he crests Eagle Peak and descends into Paradise.

I growl, glaring at my phone, wanting to throw it into the depths of Hell. I could literally travel the entire state of California without signal interruption. But put one little mountain range between me and Zach, and he might as well be on another planet.

"Stupid Idaho," I mutter, glaring at my phone.

"Careful how loud you say that," Britta says from the hostess stand. I'd barely noticed her there. "You'd better have a good reason for disparaging your home state."

I shake my head. Not in answer to her. Mostly to clear my head. "Is Evie here?"

"Right in front of the stage." Britta smiles at the people who walk in behind me and grabs a handful of menus.

"They're playing tonight?" I grab a menu for myself. I know everything on it, but I'll need something to look at. If Evie gets a hint of what's going on in my head, she'll get it out of me.

"It's Saturday." She moves aside so I can go in front of her while she leads the other customers to a table.

“That’s right. I forgot.”

Adam and his band usually play on Saturdays, after he closes the kitchen. Any other night, I’d plan on staying that long. But tonight, I’ve got to be home in time to hear what happened between Zach and Carly. Good or bad.

Please bad.

I sit across from Evie and spread the menu open on the table. “What’s good tonight?”

“Adam came up with a new dish. It’s a play on the traditional open-faced sandwich. He tried it out on me, and I gave it the thumbs-up.” She looks behind me at the kitchen, a smile sliding across her face before she puts her curled fingers together to make a heart.

The diamond in her engagement ring catches the light, sparkling almost as much as Evie is. But it reminds me of the ring in Zach’s pocket. Or, more likely, on Carly’s finger.

I have to look away, so I glance over my shoulder to see Adam do the same heart motion. All I can do is roll my eyes. I’d hate them, but they’re too cute.

“I think I liked it better when he was a grump. Now tell me all about New York and the proposal.” I take a long sip of my water and buckle in to be as excited and happy as I should be for my best friend.

So, for the next hour, I keep my worry tucked away in the corner of my heart. Thoughts of Zach and what he might tell—what he’ll probably tell me—are banished to the back of my brain.

For the most part it works. I nod, smile, and squeal at all the right times until my watch buzzes with a text.

Almost to your place.

“Uh...sorry, Evie, but I’ve got to go. Something has come up. Something with...the show.” Which is technically correct; Zach’s engagement is now on

the executive producer's hot list of concerns.

I manage to keep a smile on my face until I've left the Garden. Then, the smile disappears, because a future without Zach being a major part of it isn't something I can smile about.

Chapter 18

Zach



By the time I turn into Little Copenhagen, I'm a wreck. I'm man enough to admit there were tears on my drive. But not just over Carly. I'm grateful I have Georgia to talk to, but I wish I could go to Mom too. A hug from her would be nice right now. I'd take a chance she'd give it to me, even if she doesn't remember me today, but I'm afraid I'd only upset her if I show up this much of a mess.

Georgia's car is already in the driveway, and she's walking toward the door. My headlights bounce over her as I pull in, and she waves. I park, then check my face in the rearview mirror for any signs of tears. My eyes are red, but I slide out of the car anyway.

When I meet Georgia at her front steps, I attempt a smile. She's not fooled. One look at me, and her eyebrows draw together. I try to look away, but she holds my gaze.

"What happened?" She almost whispers, her voice is so soft with concern.

"It's over." I swallow hard, but I can't stop the slight quiver in my lip.

Georgia blinks, and for half a second, I swear her eyes light up. But it's only the reflection of the porch light in them.

"Get in here." She pushes the door open with her hip and grabs my arm. "You need a drink, some ice cream, and a good cry."

"I think I'll skip the cry. I've had enough humiliation for one day." I let her lead me to the couch where I sink into the overstuffed cushions. It's not quite a hug, but it will do.

"The cry is the best part," Georgia says. "You need it, so you can either do it voluntarily, or I can show you TikTok's of dads returning home from military service and surprising their kids." Her voice rises and falls as she walks to the kitchen and opens the freezer.

"No need," I laugh. "I cried on the way here."

“Okay, good. Step one, done. Now what flavor ice cream?”

“What flavors do you have?” I turn enough to see her.

She’s standing in front of the freezer, eyebrow up. “All of them,” she states matter-of-factly. Georgia loves ice cream.

“Surprise me. As long as it’s not mint chip.” I love ice cream too.

“Never.” She grabs a pint of what looks like Ben & Jerry’s. Perfect.

I stretch out my legs and lean back to stare at the ceiling until Georgia returns holding ice cream, two spoons, and a bottle of wine. No glasses. Which actually makes it better. If I’m going to cry into my wine, it feels more manly to drink it right out of the bottle.

Georgia hands me the ice cream—Cherry Garcia—and the spoons, then sets the wine on her antler-leg table. “If we’re doing a break-up ice cream binge, I need to get out of these clothes into stretchy pants. I’ll be right back.”

I start in on the ice cream without her, but she’s back within two minutes wearing fuzzy PJ bottoms and a big sweatshirt.

“Now I’m ready to listen.” She uncorks the wine and plops down next to me.

“I’m glad one of us is comfortable, because I’ve had the most embarrassing night of my life.” I stick a spoon in the ice cream and hand it to her.

Without a word, she passes the wine, and I take a long swig. Normally I prefer beer or something stronger, but this is good.

I check out the label and the year. 1992. “Whoa. How much did this cost you?”

She shrugs. “Producers sent it to me the day we started filming.” She trades me the ice cream for the wine. “Okay. You ready to talk about it?”

I shake my head. “Not yet.” I scoop a huge bite of ice cream out of the carton and into my mouth. Too big. The cold hurts, and I clench my eyes

shut.

“Brain freeze?” Georgia touches me, and I nod. “Press your tongue to the roof of your mouth.”

I do what she says, and within seconds I’m back to normal. Or as normal as I can be right now. The momentary discomfort was actually nice. It made me forget about the pain.

“Better?” she asks.

“Yeah. Thanks.” I lift my eyes to hers and see the concern there. “You always know how to make things better.”

Her lip tugs into a sad smile. “I’m always here for you. You know that.”

Georgia’s said that to me before. We’ve said it to each other, and I know it’s true.

But there’s something different in the way she says it this time. Something deeper.

“I know, but thanks for the reminder.” Looking into Georgia’s face—a face as familiar to me as my own—it hits me that Carly never would have let Georgia and me stay friends like we are. I would have had to choose. She made that clear on the first day of filming.

I just didn’t listen.

“She’s been seeing someone else,” I blurt out.

“What? You’re kidding!” She hands me the wine and takes the ice cream.

“Nope.” I take a long drink. Then another. “His name is Brad, and he’s a Lakers fan.”

Georgia gasps with the appropriate amount of shock and dismay. “It’s like she was trying to hurt you in the worst ways possible.”

“Exactly.”

We trade again. I dig into the ice cream and dump the whole embarrassing

story on her. Carly obviously not being happy about my showing up out of the blue. The even more obvious signs I missed that she had someone in her apartment. Making us stand in the cold. Telling me I spend too much time with Georgia.

That one really gets her. “What! That jealous...twit!”

I choke on my ice cream. “Twit? Are you ninety?”

“I have to stop cursing so I don’t slip up while shooting. Less editing for Ike and the crew.” Georgia takes a long drink now. “But I have a lot of choice names for her in my head.”

“Same.” My turn for a drink.

“I’m not going to say I told you so, but she’s not good enough for you,” Georgia says around the ice cream in her mouth, then swallows. “Also...I told you so.”

I give her a gentle push, and she tips too easily into the cushy throw pillows, holding the ice cream high to keep from spilling. When she tries to sit up again, I press my hand against her shoulder. She tries to push herself up, but she’s laughing too hard to fight me.

“Zach! Let me up!”

“Not until you say sorry for the ‘I told you so.’” Without moving my hand from her shoulder, I take another drink before setting the wine on the coffee table. Then, one-handed, I wrangle the ice cream from her. “I’m waiting.”

But I made a tactical error. Without the ice cream in her hands, she’s able to roll off the couch onto the floor and crawl away. I don’t bother setting the ice cream down before I go after her. She’s still on her knees, so it doesn’t take long to catch her.

I swing my arm under her belly and scoop her up, holding her around the waist with one hand and the ice cream in the other. Her feet dangle half a foot

off the ground, and her belly shakes with laughter under my arm.

“Put me down!” she squeals while kicking her legs. But she’s barefoot, so when she does make contact, her kicks are barely taps against my shins.

“You are no match for my brute strength,” I growl. “Now, apologize.”

“Never!” She squirms some more, then goes still. “You know your arm is on my boobs, right?”

I realize my forearm is touching bare flesh. Her shirt has come up, and there’s skin under my arm. And over it. *Breast* skin.

I quickly drop her, and then I’m the one apologizing. Not just because I feel like I’ve violated her personal space, but also because if she knew how many times I’ve thought about her...body, I would feel even worse.

Because, the fact of the matter is, Georgia has a rocking body. Doesn’t matter that she’s my best friend, I’d have to be blind not to notice her curves.

“Georgia, I didn’t mean...I’m so sorry. I would never...” I sputter a million apologies, but I can’t stop.

“Zach, it’s fine. Totally worth it to see the look on your face right now.” Tears of laughter run down her cheeks, and she gasps for air as she goes to the table and picks up the wine. Her lips go around the tip of the half-empty bottle.

I’m not drunk, or even buzzed, but there’s something intoxicating about seeing Georgia’s lips somewhere mine have just been.

She sets the bottle down, but my eyes don’t leave her mouth.

“Do you feel better now?” She asks.

All I can do is nod.

“Good. Then I have a proposition for you.” She lowers herself to the couch, obviously a little tipsy. “Something that will for sure make Carly jealous. She’ll be sorry she ever dumped you for Laker Brad.” A small burp slips out,

and, too late, she covers her mouth. “It’s petty, I’m warning you, so if you’d rather be the bigger man, I won’t say another—”

“Petty sounds great.” I sit next to her and pick up the wine. “Give me all the details.”

And I don’t know if it’s the wine or the ice cream talking, or the fact I have a chance to redeem a small piece of my dignity, but Georgia has never looked more beautiful than she does right now.

Chapter 19

Georgia



Warning bells are going off in my head, but they're drowned out by the subtle smell of cedar and Zach's arm brushing mine. His touch tickles my flesh which responds with pinpricks of pleasure. My head floats above my shoulders, thoughts bumping against each other like bubbles. They pop before I can grab hold of any of them, including those flashing red with danger signals.

The one thing that is clear is Zach is free. For now. But if we fake a relationship, maybe it could become real.

"The producers want us to fall in love." The words come out in a rush before I can lose my nerve.

Zach's lips are inches from the wine bottle, which he slowly lowers while turning his head toward me. "What's that again?"

"Not for real." I force a laugh. "Obviously." Another laugh. "It would all be for the show. My followers love the posts and reels with us together. They're already convinced we're in love." The laugh is harder to force this time, especially with Zach's eyes glued to mine, narrowing in a way I can't interpret.

I swallow hard and continue, taking the wine bottle out of his hands. "The producers think if we play that up, the show could be a big hit." I grip the neck of the bottle tightly and take a sip. "Like *Fixer Upper* big."

Zach stays silent, barely blinking, so I go on.

"I wasn't even going to tell you about it, because I knew Carly would never go for a fake relationship between me and you. I wouldn't even be telling you now, except that she..." I'm not quite buzzed enough to make the mistake of finishing that sentence.

"Broke up with me?" Zach does the dirty work for me.

"Yeah," I sigh, then hand him the bottle. "It's a stupid idea. Forget I said

anything about it. Carly will come to her senses, but if we're pretending to be together, you'll lose any chance you may have with her."

His only response is to stare ahead and nod. This goes on for so long that I reach for the bottle since he still hasn't taken a drink, and I really, really need one right about now.

But he pulls the bottle out of my reach, and his lip twitches. "Or...it might make her jealous. At the very least, she'll be annoyed I got over her so fast if Stella starts putting stuff up right away implying you and I are together."

Zach looks up, past me, past everything in this room, deep in thought. He alternates drumming his pinkie and ring fingers against the glass bottle. The soft tap is the only sound around us. I don't breathe.

"That's what you were thinking, right? We make her jealous?" He meets my gaze, and now he is smiling.

"I mean, only if you want to." My heart thuds, replacing the sound of his drumming. "I don't want to do anything that could ruin any chance you have of getting Carly back."

It's mostly true.

Okay, it's not at all true. I'm a terrible person. The end.

But, in my defense, Carly is totally wrong for Zach.

"You know what?" He runs his hand down his chest, stopping momentarily over the pocket he took the engagement ring out of this morning. "I don't want her back. It's bad enough she's cheating on me, but she also tried to break up my friendship with you." His eyes burrow into mine, nesting in my heart.

But I don't believe him. "You're really over her? Already?"

He scoffs and shakes his head. "I'm not that cold-hearted. I'm mad as hell, and I hate her." Now he takes a drink, finishing off the bottle before looking

at me with red-rimmed eyes again. “But I’m not over her. This really stings.” He glances down and runs the back of his hand under his nose. “This morning I thought I wanted to marry her. But you and Britta were right. I should have listened to you.”

I ignore the tightening in my chest and reach for my phone. My hands are shaking as I hold it up and push record. “Could you say that again? Britta will want to hear it, and I’d like a record for posterity.”

Making a joke is the only way I can cover my conflicting emotions. Just because Zach is free doesn’t mean I have a chance with him.

“No way.” Zach grabs my phone, his fingers wrapping around mine. “And the only way I’ll agree to go along with this fake dating idea is if you make a solemn promise never to tell my little sister I said she was right.”

“Really? Are you sure?” I lower my arm, and he lets go of my hand. “Because there’s no endgame in sight. I don’t know what the producers will want after this first season. If this works, we may have to keep fake dating. Anyone you get involved with will have to know that, and your relationship will have to stay secret. Including Carly...if you do get back together.”

My gaze travels to Zach when I say Carly’s name. He doesn’t react, just chews his lip. That’s his thinking face, and I prepare myself for him to change his mind.

“But it will help you, right? The producers think it will work?” He drags a hand over his short-cropped beard.

I nod slowly, cautiously.

“And what happens if I say no?”

That’s the question I’ve been dreading.

I shrug. “No big deal. We keep things the way they are. Let people think what they want. I think the show will be a hit whether we pretend to be more

than friends or not.”

I’ve never lied to Zach before, even when it comes to sharing a brutal truth. For example, telling him the woman he wants to marry kinda sucks.

A few hours ago, I was willing to face the consequences of telling Jeannie no. If Zach’s on board, I don’t have to, but I don’t want him forced into any decision to protect me. I know he’d do it—even if he and Carly hadn’t broken up—if he thought the show was at risk.

His lip pulls at the corner. “I disagree.”

The words don’t compute. Is he telling me he disagrees with the fake dating plan? He doesn’t want to do it anymore?

“You disagree with what?”

He turns his palms face-up. “That the show will be as big a hit without a romance between us.” A smile spreads across his face. “People love romance. We can blow the whole home reno show industry out of the water while we’re creating open floor plans and putting in kitchen islands.”

I laugh at his poking fun at the “open floor plan” trope that’s as standard to home reno shows as meet-cutes are to romance. “Really? You’re on board.”

“Of course I am.”

I throw my arms around him. He squeezes me tight, and this feels like more than just a friend hug. Zach is doing this show for *me*. Not because he thinks the producers aren’t giving me a choice, but because he wants the show to be successful. *For me*.

I’m reveling in this knowledge when he whispers into my hair. “We’re going to make Carly so jealous.”

Chapter 20

Zach



My phone buzzes long before I'm ready to wake up on Saturday morning. The pounding in my head is due to the second bottle of wine Georgia and I opened to celebrate our "relationship," and it's not my own bed I'm waking up in. It's Georgia's couch.

I reach for my phone on the coffee table and open one eye long enough to find the accept button. My eyes are closed again before my head hits the pillow Georgia must have stuck under my head last night.

"Hello," I mumble, hoping I sound more coherent to someone else than I do to myself.

"Georgia?" the shrill voice on the other end pierces my brain, and I jerk the phone away from my ear. "You sound terrible."

I open my eyes and see I'm holding Georgia's phone, not mine. But before I can explain anything to the very loud lady, she's talking again. "I got your text. Glad you got Zach on board because the producers were threatening legal action if you didn't. Both your contracts explicitly state you'll follow what's scripted. My assistant pored over them to see if there was any way to refuse, but like I said yesterday, this show is your ticket. You want to cooperate."

My head clears enough for me to realize the voice is Georgia's agent—Jennifer? Joannie? Jeannie. The other thought that is clear is Georgia lied to me about it not being a big deal if I said no to all of this. We both could have been sued.

Worse than that, she didn't tell me I was contractually obligated. Not that I can blame her for that. I'm the one who didn't take time to read the contract. But I trusted her and Jeannie to tell me if there was anything I should be aware of.

"Hmm." That's all I dare say, and I'm not proud that I do it in a voice

higher than usual. But I'm hoping Jeannie will say more so I know why Georgia wasn't up-front with me.

"Gotta run. We'll talk later!" Jeannie says and ends the call without giving me any more information.

I stare at Georgia's lock screen. I'm tempted to try to unlock it. I could probably figure out her passcode, then see if there are any texts from Jeannie or Ike about getting me to sign the contract.

But I think better of it. I'm upset Georgia didn't tell me the entire truth about our legal obligations to pretend we're in love, but knowing her the way I do, the reasons are clear. She was willing to sacrifice the show so I could be with Carly. Which makes Carly's betrayal cut even deeper.

Of course, Carly didn't know the stakes when she demanded I keep things purely professional on screen with Georgia. And it wasn't an unreasonable demand, but she also backed it up with a suggestion she could be on the show too.

She did know the stakes when she started seeing Laker Brad behind my back. She knew it would end our relationship if I found out. There'd be no going back. I told her when we first started dating that I don't cheat, and I don't forgive cheaters. Love is built on trust.

But what she felt for me wasn't love. With a little distance, I realize what Britta and Georgia knew all along.

The only thing Carly saw in me was an opportunity. First because of the potential windfall that may come my way because of the show, and then as a way for her to get on the show too. Who knows? Maybe all along she was cheating on Laker Brad with me, not the other way around.

Stacking what Georgia was ready to give up for me against the few concessions Carly was willing to make for our relationship makes Georgia's

sacrifices look even bigger. I sit up, my head spinning from the hangover and the emotion washing over me. I'm overwhelmed by Georgia's generosity and friendship. At the same time, I'm pounded with waves of shame and regret.

How could I have misjudged Carly so badly? More importantly, how could I think I was in love with her? And how long will those feelings of love linger, prodding me to check my phone to see if she's called? Or stalk her Instagram for pictures of her and Laker Brad?

Maybe Georgia was right all along, and I mistook my longing for what Adam and Evie have as real feelings for Carly. Or worse, I thought she could fill the empty space that grows bigger with each day Mom slips further away.

That doesn't feel quite right. Definitely part of it, but apart from being a much-needed distraction from what's happening with Mom, Carly and I had a lot of fun together. She's a good listener, and her encouragement made me feel like I could do anything. And there's no denying she's stunningly beautiful. But...

Those are all things I can say about Georgia, too. In fact, they *are* things I've said about Georgia.

Her bedroom door opens, and I toss her phone back on the table and grab mine. I didn't charge it last night, so it's at one percent, but there's a text from Carly. Before I can open the message, though, my phone dies.

"Hey," Georgia mumbles, rubbing her head as she walks past the sofa toward the kitchen. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please. Do you have a charger I can borrow? My phone died." I lean my elbows on my knees and rub my eyes to keep from staring at Georgia. Her hair is piled on top of her head, a few curls hanging down. They frame her face, making her eyes look bigger and brighter, even though she looks even more hung over than I feel.

And I hate that I'm anxious to charge my phone so I can see what Carly wrote.

"Yep. In the bedroom. Will you plug my phone in too?" She sticks a pod into her Keurig and shuts it but doesn't turn it on. "I need something better than this. Do you think Britta would deliver? There's no way I can drag myself there."

"Maybe. But then we'd have to explain why I'm here this early in the morning."

"It's almost ten."

"Really?" I glance at my wrist, like a watch might magically appear there. "I'm wearing the same clothes I did yesterday. So there's that."

I pick up our phones and walk toward Georgia's bedroom. I've been here a few times since the renovation, and every time I forget for a few minutes that this used to be Grandma Rose's house. Then I see the needlepoint thing Grandma Rose always had hanging in the same place it hangs now. I stop in front of it, studying it, even though I've seen and read it a thousand times before.

It's round, still in the hoop it's always been in. The brown fabric is faded, as is the colorful thread used to make a top border of a fireplace, lamp, basket of yarn, and a cat. If that weren't Scandinavian enough, underneath the border is the word *hygge* in big block letters. Below that, *Danish* with some other designs, and then the definition of the word *hygge*. (*HOO-gah*) *a quality of coziness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment and well-being.*

I've always loved this thing—embroidery, or whatever it's called. *Hygge* has been a part of my vocabulary for as long as I can remember. Long before it started getting popular in the last few years.

But for the first time, I realize hygge doesn't just happen in a place. It happens with people too. I felt it with my grandparents, my mom—before she got sick—and Grandma Rose. They're all gone—Mom in her mind—but the feeling of hygge isn't.

I have it whenever I'm with Georgia.

That's the place I'm most comfortable and content. With Georgia.

The realization stuns me as much as the realization Carly was cheating on me. It shouldn't feel like a betrayal the way that did.

But it does.

Except this time, it's my heart doing the betraying, telling me I have feelings more than friendship for Georgia,
who will only ever want me for a friend.

Chapter 21

Georgia



Zach stops at the end of the hall, outside the door to my bedroom. He tilts his head to the side, like he's examining something. I suspect what it is, but I ask anyway.

"Watcha looking at?" I lean against the kitchen counter that separates this room from the eating area and family room, resting my chin in my upturned hands.

The view is great from here, so I'm not disappointed when Zach answers me without turning around.

"This hygge picture your grandma made."

"The cross-stitch?"

It's a rhetorical question. I know that's what he's looking at. One, because it's the only thing to look at on that wall. And two, he did the same thing when we were kids. When we were six, he must have asked me a dozen times to read it to him, until he had it memorized. I think that's when he started developing his memorization skills. If the words wouldn't hold still for him, he'd keep them in place in his head.

"Yeah. That. I'm glad you put it back up. It belongs here, no matter what the rest of the house looks like." He looks over his shoulder and gives me a sad smile that hits me right in the gut.

I hoped he'd stay in the break-up-anger stage a little longer. Maybe skip the other stages all together. But it looks like he's moved to depression. Which, I guess, is good. As long as he moves quickly along to acceptance. That's possible. Maybe.

But Zach's not a quitter. He has more determination than anyone I know, so I doubt he'll let Carly go without a fight. Not when they were close enough for him to seriously consider proposing.

"You okay?" I ask.

He starts to nod, then shrugs instead.

I force myself to stay where I am, even though my arms ache to wrap around his waist. I could lay my head on his back, my cheek on his shoulder blade, holding him until he didn't hurt anymore.

How long would that be?

I hope forever. Because if I hold him right now, I won't ever want to let go.

Luckily—or unluckily, depending on how you look at it—a phone stops me with a ding.

Zach flicks his wrist to see the screen. “It’s a text from Ike,” he says, crossing the room to hand it to me.

I open my phone and read the text.

Teri will have scripts by end-of-day, so you’re prepared for Monday.

I read through the text again, making sure I understand it.

“It sounds like we’ll have some of each other’s lines in our scripts, but not all of them. He says we’ll have cues for when we need them, but not for everything. We’re not supposed to share our scripts with each other. He wants our responses to be totally natural and spontaneous, as long as it’s obvious we’re in love.” I look up here, even though I feel my cheeks growing red. “Love is in quotation marks.”

“Be natural and spontaneous while we *act* like we’re in love?” His voice is laced with sarcasm as he nods. “Got it.”

I huff a laugh. “He suggests we do things like reach for a hand or look longingly at the other.”

“So something like this?” Zach clasps his hands over his chest, tilts his chin up and leans toward me as believably as any Disney prince in training.

“Close, but I think it’s a little closer to this.” I tuck my phone into my waistband—no pockets in these pj’s—then stretch out my arms theatrically

and take two ballerina-like steps in his direction. Before I reach him, I stop and let out a heavy sigh.

His face cracks into a grin, and he slides his phone into his back pocket. “Ah, got it. Excellent instructions on how to be spontaneous.”

We both laugh. It’s natural and actually spontaneous, and everything feels right again.

“So, a reach for the hand would look something like this...” Zach juts his hand toward mine, then pulls it back and looks away. Everything is exaggerated, and I’m reminded of the miming exercises the theater director made us do when we were in *Hairspray* together.

“Yes! Exactly! Then I do this...” I walk slowly toward him, toes pointed and shoulders thrust forward with each step. When I’m within touching distance, I hold up my hand, then curl my fingers into my palm and drop my arm to my side. My chin drops to my opposite shoulder, away from Zach.

“Georgia,” he says longingly.

“Yes?” I swing my head to look at him.

He steps so close, our chests are almost touching. “I need to ask you something.” The words come out in one breath, then he looks away with a deep sigh.

“Yes?” I reach for him, my fingers barely grazing his shoulder.

He turns his eyes back to me. “Could you possibly...” His eyes dart down and back up. “What I mean to say is...do you think you could...” He swivels his head away dramatically, then says to the floor. “Hand me that hammer. I see something that needs to be...nailed.” He draws out the last words so seductively that I choke on the laugh I’m trying to hold back.

“Of course!” I hold out an imaginary hammer. “We wouldn’t want to leave anything...*unnailed*.”

I take a deep breath so my chest rises as Zach reaches past the invisible hammer. He runs his fingertips from the inside of my elbow, all the way to my fingers, which he gently uncurls before pretending to take the hammer from me.

And I know it's all a game, but my pulse doesn't. It skips so many beats, my heart may stop, while every spot of skin Zach touches rises in temperature.

Zach holds my gaze. We don't blink. We don't move. Maybe we're not playing anymore. I wonder if he felt the same flicker of heat that I did. The heat that's still radiating from me, slowing my breath, and stopping time.

Then his eyes drop, and he clears his throat. "I think we've got it."

"Totally." I take a step back to give him the distance he obviously wants. And I smile as I do it, even though it's killing me to put space between us. "Did you notice my heaving? I think that's how it's done in romance novels. Chests heave and pulses quicken."

Zach laughs. It almost sounds genuine. "Adam would know better than me. He's the one who reads that stuff."

I force my own laugh. But then his words register, and I stop. "Wait... what? *Adam* reads romance books?"

His mouth drops, then slowly slips into a wide grin. "Oh, no. It's supposed to be a secret." And now he is laughing. We both are. "I'm not supposed to know, but I figured he'd probably told you."

I pull in my lips and shake my head.

"You can't tell him I told you." He's still smiling but also pleading.

"Oh, I can't?" I lift an eyebrow.

"Georr-gia," he warns and moves closer.

"Zaa-cha-ry." I take a step back.

“I’m not joking. You can’t tell him.” He looms over me, as intimidating as a big teddy bear, with the grin he can’t hold back.

“Or what are you going to do?” I look up at him through my eyelashes. Maybe a little bit like the women in Adam’s romances. I don’t know.

“You know I know how to torture you.” His mouth quirks to the side.

I take a step back. I’m not smiling anymore. “Do *not* tickle me, Zach.”

He moves closer, and I turn to run but trip over something behind me. My ankle twists, and I don’t even have time to put my hands up before my body meets the floor chest first.

Pain shoots from my ankle up through my calf. I roll over into a sitting position, knees up, and wrap my hands around my ankle.

“Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?” Zach squats down. The pain isn’t bad enough for me not to notice he’s within kissing distance. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” I draw my eyes away from his lips and stretch out my leg. When I roll my ankle in a circle, pain shoots up the side of my calf. “I’m the klutz who tripped...” I open my eyes to see what I stepped on. “Your shoe! That’s what I fell over? Your giant shoe! It *is* your fault!”

Zach follows my gaze to the tennis shoes he kicked off last night, and his mouth pulls into a guilty frown. “I really am sorry.”

“I’m kidding. I’m sure my ankle is fine, just help me up.” I hold out my hands. Zach takes them both and pulls me up, but as soon as I put weight on my right foot, a sharpness sears from it, through my ankle. I yelp and hop toward the closest kitchen chair.

Before I get there, Zach scoops me up.

“No way. You need to lie down.” He carries me to the sofa and carefully sets me on it, positioning pillows under my head and foot. “Don’t move. I’m getting ice.”

He goes back to the kitchen, stopping only long enough to move his shoes.

“It’s a little late for that,” I say over the sound of the freezer opening.

“Why don’t you have any ice packs in here?” he calls across the room. “Or any food, for that matter?”

“I’ve only been here a little while.”

“It’s been more than two weeks. What have you been eating?”

“Ebelskiver, mostly.” I tip my head back, listening to ice cubes crashing into a bag.

A few minutes later, Zach comes back, sits down, and puts my feet on his lap. He gently presses on my ankle, then moves it back and forth.

“Ouch,” I moan.

“You’ve definitely twisted it pretty bad, if not sprained it.” He presses the ice to my ankle but rests his other hand on my shin. “We should call Dr. Page.”

“He’s still practicing? Isn’t he, like, a million years old?”

“Not old. Experienced.”

“Let’s just do this for a little while.” I tip my head back and close my eyes.

The ice soothes the pain but doesn’t cool the heat generated by Zach’s touch when he rolls the hem of my pjs past my calf, almost to my knee. Zach rolls his thumb up and down my shin bone, massaging me into a happy stupor.

My ankle hurts, and I know I’m headed for more pain when Zach and I are done pretending to be in love. This moment can’t last forever, but I’m determined to enjoy it while I can.

Chapter 22

Zach



Georgia falls asleep with her feet in my lap. Her head falls to the side, and there's a little bit of drool at the corner of her mouth. If my phone weren't dead, I'd take a picture so I could tease her later. Even with the drool, though, she's still beautiful. I've always thought that, but she never believed me when I told her she looked pretty. She always accused me of being nice because we were friends.

So I quit telling her. And maybe I forgot how beautiful she is, because I don't remember ever feeling this breathless looking at her.

Which means it's time for me to go.

I scoot out from under her feet, then gently set them on the couch. After I rearrange the ice pack so it's covering the swelling on her ankle, I find a blanket to cover her. When I brush the hair away from her face, Georgia lets out a sigh that makes me want to crawl under the blanket and curl up with her.

And with that thought, it's *really* time to go.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, I was ready to propose to another woman, so I'm not sure I can trust these feelings bubbling up for Georgia. What if they're as misguided as my feelings for Carly? Rooted in trying to fix what's missing in my life instead of actual love.

Even if I could trust them, Georgia has never given me any hint she feels more than friendship for me. The only way to find out if she thinks of me as more than a friend is to put that friendship on the line. There's no way I'm doing that without a sign from her.

A big sign. Like Las Vegas hotel neon sign.

She's too important to me to risk losing everything we have.

I drive home with all those thoughts running through my brain. I tell myself I'm transferring my feelings for Carly to Georgia to keep from facing them.

To keep from hurting.

But something about that doesn't feel right. Because I am hurting from Carly. Every time I think about her and Laker Brad and how long it took me to put the pieces together, my stomach clenches. I have to force back the bile that creeps up my throat. My whole body feels like the time, on a dare from Georgia, I ate three fried bean burritos that had been in my car for a few days, and I spent the next twenty-four hours barfing.

What I can't figure out is if I want to puke because my heart hurts or because my ego does.

Maybe it's both.

I charge my phone on the way home, so by the time I pull into the driveway, I have just enough bars to finally read the text from Carly. I'd forgotten about it while Georgia and I were joking around, and then with the whole ankle-twisting thing, I couldn't exactly prioritize charging my phone over taking care of Georgia. And as I read Carly's message, I'm glad I couldn't read it right away.

In fact, I have to read it a few times to make sure I understand what she's saying.

I'm sorry. I should have told you about Brad. It just feels like we've been drifting apart since Georgia came back. Maybe a break while you're filming the show will be good for both of us.

A break?

What is that supposed to mean? She wants to get back together in a few months?

I let that thought roll around. Do I still have a chance with Carly? Do I still *want* a chance with her?

I don't know.

When I get inside, I head straight for the shower. That's where I do my best thinking, and no doubt I need to clean up. But not even a twenty-minute shower is long enough for me to sort out all my conflicting emotions.

I throw on some sweats, but I'm too heated for a shirt. Then I head for the kitchen and start pulling ingredients out of fridge and cabinets. I'm not a chef by any means—that's all Adam. But you don't grow up in a family that owns two restaurants without learning how to cook. Putting foods together, combining flavors, experimenting with different tastes...it all calms me down and helps me think. I never follow a recipe. I just try things out.

Today I fry up some bacon, then sauté some mushrooms and asparagus in the grease. Everything tastes better cooked in a little bacon grease. Mom taught me that. Next, I whip together some eggs and cream for a frittata. Beating the eggs helps me sort through all the questions flooding my brain. I separate the questions and examine each, one by one, searching for answers.

What is it I'm feeling for Georgia? And if those feelings are real, what is this tugging toward Carly? She lied to me. We're not getting back together.

But the fact I'm still thinking about Carly sort of makes sense. It hasn't been twenty-four hours since we broke up. Or, I guess, since *I* thought we'd broken up for good. It would be abnormal if I didn't feel anything for her anymore.

But Georgia?

I don't know what these feelings are.

I think over the last few weeks since Georgia's been back. We picked up right where we left off before she went away for college. Which isn't unusual. That's what we always do when we see each other, no matter how much time has passed.

But this time should have been different. I had a girlfriend I was seeing

seriously enough to consider marrying. Yet, Georgia was still the person I wanted to be with most of the time.

Suddenly, everything falls into place. Carly wasn't wrong when she complained about my wanting to spend more time with Georgia than with her. I did.

Because it's Georgia who fills the space I thought Carly could. The space longing for love and partnership. The space empty of contentment and well-being—the hygge-sized space—when Georgia isn't around.

Carly was a distraction—a placeholder. But she's not the missing piece that can fill my soul.

What I'm feeling for Georgia is still friendship but illuminated. Bigger and brighter. Like all I've ever done is snorkel above the surface and suddenly I'm scuba diving. There's a whole new world to explore that I never realized was there before.

That's not true.

I always knew it was there. I was just afraid to dive in.

But am I ready to now?

No way.

But...I have a perfect excuse to test the waters.

Pretending to date means I can get an idea of whether we'd work as a couple without the risk of losing our friendship. I can act like I'm acting but show Georgia what we'd be like together. And, maybe, if I'm lucky, she'll develop feelings for me too.

I'm not sure how I'll know if she's falling for me if we're both acting, but that's something I can figure out later. Georgia is good at hiding her emotions, but we've been friends long enough that I recognize her tells.

There's a shift in her smile—it grows bigger but not warmer when she's holding something back.

I pour the eggs over my veggies and add the bacon back in to the pan, along with some Swiss cheese. By the time the eggs have cooked through, I know what I need to do.

With my plated frittata in one hand and my phone in the other, I voice text Carly.

Yesterday was a break-up, not a break. I hope you and Brad are happy together.

For half a second before I send the text, I wonder if I should try to sound less snarky. Obviously, I don't care if Carly and Brad are happy. In fact, I hope they're miserable. I hope guilt is eating them up like a goat at a garbage dump. At least for a little while.

But I don't want Carly to think I care what happens to her and Brad at all. So I erase everything after *not a break*, then hit send.

I don't want to waste time finding the perfect response for Carly when there's another person I'd rather talk to right now.

My second voice text is for Georgia.

Call me when you're awake so I know if you're okay.

Chapter 23

Georgia



I wake up to my phone pinging with a text and no idea where I've set it down. Zach is missing too, but I don't hear him anywhere, so he must have gone home. I sit up, but as soon as I start to stand, my ankle reminds me that it's still angry.

My phone pings again. The sound comes from my kitchen, so I hop-limp my way there, wincing every time I put too much pressure on my foot. When I get to the counter, my phone is plugged in next to the coffee maker, which is all set to brew me a fresh cup with the push of a button. There's a mug already in place under the spout.

Zach must have done it all. Plugged in my phone, programmed the Keurig, and let me sleep off a nasty hangover. With a glance at my phone, I see he's already texted to check up on me too.

I fill my coffee mug and hobble my way to the kitchen table, then call Zach. "Hey," he answers on the first ring. "How's the ankle?"

"Not great." I take a sip of my coffee and wish I'd put some cream and sugar in it. But there's no way I'm getting up for any now.

"Still swollen?"

I stretch out my leg and rest my foot on the chair closest to me. "Oh, yeah." I stare at the baseball-sized lump that just a few hours ago was my ankle joint.

"Can you walk?" He sounds worried.

Or maybe that's me projecting, because my being immobile could slow down our shooting schedule.

"I'll be able to by tomorrow, I'm sure." If I tell myself that, I'll make it happen.

"Georgia..." There's a warning in Zach's voice.

I flex my foot to prove I'll be back to normal within the next eighteen-or-so

hours, but I don't get far before I have to suck in my breath to keep from yelping. "I'll be fine, Zach." I push the words past my gritted teeth.

"Maybe. I doubt it. But you're not wearing heels, that's for sure." The matter-of-fact way he says it makes me want to prove him wrong.

"I'm not going on camera without heels on. They're my trademark." No matter how much I regret that fact at the moment.

"No one will care if you go a few days without them. You're going to really hurt yourself if you try wearing them before your ankle is better." The concern in his voice only strengthens my resolve.

"They will care. More importantly, I'll care. That's like asking me not to wear lipstick. I feel as naked without heels as I do without lipstick." I know how weird that must sound to Zach when I never wore either before moving to LA. I was as far from being a girlie-girl as he ever was from being single.

"Naked? You don't look naked without them. You just look like Georgia." The genuine way he says those words pricks my conscience with an awareness I'd rather not unbury.

"And you know what I look like naked?" I make my voice husky and seductive. If I turn this conversation into a joke, I don't have to wrestle with the idea that I might be turning into more of a persona than a person.

"I know you're as pretty without lipstick and heels as you are with them." His seriousness catches me off-guard. I expected him to joke back, not pay me a compliment.

"You think I'm pretty?" The words come out before I can stop them. He's told me that before, but the compliment never rang true. But something in his voice makes me want to believe him this time.

"I mean, yeah. I've always thought that." His voice staggers with hesitation, and I can't tell if it's because he's embarrassed for saying what he said or

because he's sorry he exaggerated the truth.

"Zach, come on," I say with a laugh. Because if I believe him, I'll never be able to hide how I feel. "My mom did me no favors giving into my demands to cut my hair short and let me wear only sweatpants and soccer jerseys."

"I'm not saying you didn't have some awkward years." He returns my laugh, and disappointment slides into my belly where it sits, heavy and cold. I wanted him to argue a little more that I've always been pretty, even if it's not true.

"Only about eighteen or so." My voice is too high, too light. Like a balloon clinging to the wall with static electricity as it loses its helium. I take a long sip of my coffee to wet my throat.

Zach chuckles, then grows serious again. "People calling you Ham probably didn't help either."

I want to protect his feelings and tell him it wasn't that bad, but he'll see right through my lie. "No. I didn't love that. But it wasn't as bad as people making fun of me because my mom petitioned to change Smuk Lake's name to a Native American one or because she wanted the school to serve more vegetarian meals or because she advocated for more comprehensive sex education."

Zach laughs. "Your mom never met a liberal cause she wasn't willing to fight for." Then there's a long pause, and I hear Zach take a deep breath before he speaks again.

"Clothes and makeup aren't what made you pretty then, and they're not what make you pretty now. It's always been who you are that makes you pretty. The way you laugh. The way you care about people. Your loyalty. Your determination. Your enthusiasm for everything you do and the way you

get everyone involved. You make everything fun.” He pauses, and I hold my breath. “Those are the things that make you pretty. Not your high heels.”

I let his words wash over me, like a hot bath on a cold day. They should warm me, buoy me with belief in myself. But then I catch my reflection in the mirror opposite my kitchen table. What I see isn’t Georgia Rose, but Georgia from Paradise: a fleshy, freckled, red-haired girl with a bad haircut.

I look away and press the phone to my ear. “But it’s the lipstick and heels that make *me* feel pretty.”

The words come out in a whisper. I spent too many years pretending I didn’t care that I wasn’t one of the skinny, blonde cheerleaders Zach and all the other boys took to the high school dances and kissed on doorsteps after dates. I was the non-threatening friend. Other girls knew their boyfriends wouldn’t cheat on them with *Georgia Beck*.

Zach sighs. “You’ll still be able to wear lipstick, but I saw your ankle today. Heels are going to be out of the question tomorrow—probably for the rest of the week.”

Maybe it’s the empathy in his voice, but I’m finally ready to concede that he’s right. “I know. Honestly, I don’t know if I’ll even be able to walk by tomorrow. Which means the whole shooting schedule will get thrown off, and we’ve got to be done by Memorial Day.”

“I know. But we’ll make it work,” he says with the self-assurance I’ve always loved about him.

But that doesn’t mean I believe him. “How?”

“You’ll lean on me. That’s how. We’re supposed to be acting like we’re in love, anyway.” He says this with enough firmness that I can’t find a way around his argument.

And I hate that.

Zach knows I don't ask for help. I hate it. I like doing things on my own. Capable and independent is how every teacher described me on every report card. Those two traits are as much my trademark as my heels and red lipstick.

But if I've got to lean on anybody for a little while, Zach is definitely my first choice.

At this point, he's my only choice. My ankle is throbbing. The only heels I'll be able to wear are my Timberland boots. I wanted to wear something less construction-y tomorrow since our shots include a lot of design discussions and what Ike calls "shipping shots" that focus on mine and Zach's "relationship."

I've got to look my best in every shot with him. I'm already dreading the comments from trolls wondering why someone who looks like Zach would choose someone like me.

But we also have some "taking down walls" shots, which I would usually do in heels because I do very little actual hammer-swinging—Ike just makes sure it looks like I do. Those shots would definitely be more eye-catching if I had on a great pair of shoes.

The Timberlands will give me the ankle support I'm going to need for a little while. And so will Zach. I can do that for a few days.

"Okay," I agree with a resigned sigh. "But you're going to have to slouch a lot so I don't look so short."

"I don't know if it's physically possible for me to slouch that much," he teases.

"Shut up," I reply, but I'm sure he can hear the smile in my voice.

I guess it's my turn to rely on someone. And there's no one I'm more sure I can rely on than Zach Thomsen.

Chapter 24

Zach



After I finish my call with Georgia, I text Dad and tell him I'm coming over to sit with Mom so he can go to church. Usually I spend Saturday afternoons with her so that Dad can take care of the store. Bear helps him there, and Britta helps Adam with the Saturday night rush at the Garden. But, obviously, I wasn't at either place yesterday, which only adds to my growing regret over almost proposing to Carly.

Spending time with Mom today won't make up for abandoning my family yesterday, but I'm hoping she'll have a Sunday today like she did last week. I'm aching for her to tell me what to do about Carly and Georgia. Carly hasn't texted me back, and I want to be relieved about that, but I'm just sad.

My conversation with Georgia only made me sadder. I knew the nickname I pegged her with hurt, but until today, I never knew how much. I always thought Georgia saw in herself what everyone else did. Big green eyes, a beautiful smile, and a huge heart.

I hate that she thinks she needs the right lipstick and shoes to look pretty. I hate that I'm a big reason why. And I hate that her followers and fans probably *do* expect her to always be the Georgia they see on their screens.

Most of all, I hate that Mom can't tell me what to do about it. I want to fix the harm I've done and help Georgia see what I see. Mom would know what to do. She always knew the right thing to say to Georgia. She never fought for Carolyn Beck's causes, but she always encouraged Georgia to recognize how brave her mom was. She always knew what to say to make Georgia see how amazing both of them are.

I tried today. I don't know if it worked. I should have said all those words years ago, but I kept them in. I kept everything in, afraid Georgia would think I wanted to be more than friends.

I pull into my parents' driveway at the same time Dad comes out of the

front door wearing dress pants, his best plaid shirt, and a bolo tie. A slight variation on the same thing he's worn to church for as long as I can remember.

He smiles and waves. The worry lines in his forehead are smooth, and there's no tightness around his eyes. Maybe Mom is having a good day.

Before he reaches his truck, he waits for me to jog up the walkway for a hug. Dad's a hugger. You wouldn't think so to look at him. He's a big guy with a bald head and a handlebar mustache. Sometimes the first time they see him, people are scared of him, but his smile sets everyone at ease. Within minutes of meeting him, he'll be your best friend.

I'm barely within reach when he wraps me in a tight squeeze. "She had a rough morning, but she's watching *The Sound of Music* now."

Mom has always loved that musical, but now it's the one thing that soothes her when she gets confused or upset. Which means the rest of us can quote it word for word and sing all the songs. "I Am Sixteen" has been on a running loop in my brain for about three months.

Dad must know how much I need a hug because he holds me longer than usual. I'm okay with that. A hug from him is almost as good as a talk with Mom. He's put his hugs to extra work over the past few months as Mom's Alzheimer's has progressed even faster than her doctors predicted.

The first year after she was diagnosed, she was aware that her memory was slipping, and she talked less and less. She hated the idea of repeating herself or saying something that didn't make sense. We could tell when she was struggling to remember things like names and faces because she'd go really quiet. She'd never been a quiet person before.

As the disease has taken more of her memory, she's started talking more, but not about the present. Sometimes she thinks I'm her older brother who

died when she was a kid or that Britta is her sister. The worst is when she can't remember Dad. A few weeks ago, she woke up in the middle of the night and started screaming because she thought someone had broken into her room and climbed into bed with her.

It was Dad, and we all laughed about it the next day, but he had tears in his eyes. Mom told us right after she was diagnosed that we could laugh or we could cry, but she hoped we'd laugh. So that's what we attempt to do. Sometimes, though, we have to cry. When that happens, we try to laugh at the same time.

Dad lets me go, and I hurry to the front door. Usually, Mom will sit through the whole movie without getting up, but once she went to the kitchen and turned on the gas burners. Dad found her pulling pans out of the pantry like she wanted to cook something, but the burners hadn't lit, so the whole kitchen smelled like gas.

Before I open the door, I'm greeted by Julie Andrews belting "The Hills Are Alive" loud enough to blow the windows open.

I plug my ears and run for the TV room, where I find Mom standing in front of the big screen with her hands over her ears. I find the remote on the coffee table and punch the volume button until Julie is singing at a reasonable volume.

Mom lets her hands fall to her side and faces me. Her brow wrinkles as she looks at me, and I know she's trying to remember who I am. The confusion on her face as she searches her memory for something she knows is there hurts to see every single time.

"Hi, Mom," I say, hopefully. Like this time my voice might loosen dementia's stranglehold.

She blinks. Her eyes are blank and unseeing. But then she blinks again, and

it's like a cloud is lifted. Her mouth slips into a smile of recognition, and she holds open her arms. "Hello, Zachary."

Unlike Dad, Mom's never been a big hugger. A talker, yeah. I never doubted she loved me, even though physical affection was never her thing, and still isn't. Not even with dementia.

So even though she's a foot shorter than me, I fold myself into the hug she offers. I bury my head on her shoulder and hold her like I'm a nine-year-old boy again. The little boy who'd been teased at school for not being able to read and had to go to Special Ed classes for part of the day. In a town as small as Paradise, there aren't a lot of specialists. Kids who need extra help get lumped into one group, no matter how different their needs are.

"What's wrong? Did you have a bad day at school again?" She pats my back, like I'm still small enough that her hand and long, graceful fingers could cover most of it.

"Something like that," I say as she lets me go before I'm ready.

"How about you tell me everything over some milk and cookies?" She turns in a small circle. "I just...I'm not sure where I put them."

"I don't need any, Mom." I hurry to get the words out before I lose her to the fog again. "Let's just sit and talk."

Her eyes find mine. She searches my face, like she's seeing all the way into my soul. I hope she is. Because that's the only way for her to understand what I'm going through right now.

"Did something happen with your friends?" She asks. Even though I shake my head, she interrogates me with a stare. "Not with the one with the red hair...oh, what's her name? I can see her face."

Her gaze wanders, and I see the fog creeping into the corners there. "Georgia. That's her name. She's good." I lick my lips, then tip my head to

catch her eye again. “I think I may like her as more than a friend.”

A flicker of confusion crosses her face, but then she smiles and turns toward the couch. “I know that. I’ve always known that.”

“You have?” I follow her, but I’m not fast enough.

By the time she sits, she’s gone again. She stares blankly at me before turning her gaze back to the TV.

She doesn’t say another word. We sit through the whole movie in silence. When it ends, her eyes stay glued to the screen. The rest of the house is filling with the noises of my brothers preparing our weekly family dinner, but Mom stays still.

I move from the chair I’ve been sitting in to a spot next to her and push play. The last thing I want to do is watch the same three-hour musical again. Within seconds of the movie starting, I’m texting Georgia to see how she’s doing.

But I don’t leave Mom’s side, just in case she comes back again.

She doesn’t.

But when I leave for the night, I know she’s said everything I needed to hear.

Chapter 25

Georgia



For most of Sunday, I stay off my foot to make sure my ankle will be better by Monday (a girl can dream right?). So, it's basically the longest day ever.

Studying Monday's script keeps me distracted for a little while, but reading Ike's comments only makes me restless. He's made about a million notes in the script about where I can "let my feelings really show." He's written it so many times that I wonder if he knows how I really feel about Zach. Is that what he expects to see from me? My real feelings?

Because he's not getting that.

Somehow, I've got to hide the fact that I think I'm in love with Zach while also pretending to be falling in love with him. Is that even possible?

In about twelve hours, I'll be putting that query to the test.

I know one thing: Zach's texts throughout the day are not making it easier to *not* fall in love with him. He offers to come by when he leaves his parents' house to bring me food or help me with anything else. I turn him down. Not because I'm not dying to see him again, but because he doesn't need to add me to the list of people he takes care of.

Plus, he's probably just looking for a way to keep his mind off Carly. And I don't think I can listen to him talk about her right now. My ankle hurts enough. I don't need my heart hurting too.

Still, when my doorbell rings close to eight o'clock, I can't help but hope Zach ignored my insistence that I didn't need him to come by. When Evie pops her head in the door, I have a moment of disappointment. But it quickly passes.

"Hey, Georgy!" She walks in, and I'm relieved she's alone.

I love Adam, but the last thing I need right now is Zach's identical twin sitting across from me when I'm trying not to think about Zach.

"I'm in here!" I raise my arm so she can see where I am from the front

door. "Please tell me you brought tacos."

Evie comes around the sofa and stands in front of me. "Was I supposed to? Zach said you turned him down when he offered."

I close my eyes and groan. Sometimes my independent-woman mentality really gets in my way. It's especially annoying now when it has come between me and good tacos. Zach said he'd bring me some of the carnitas Adam was cooking up for the family dinner. You'd think it was my brain I hurt instead of my ankle, because I told him no thanks.

"You of all people should have known that was a lie." I lift my feet to let Evie sit, then rest them on her lap.

"Let me see what you've done to yourself." She lifts the blanket off my feet and examines my ankle. "Explain to me why you haven't let a doctor look at this?"

I toss the blanket back over my feet. "Because he'd just tell me to stay off it, and that's what I've been doing. I don't need to pay money for that."

"Or he might tell you that you need to be in a brace or a cast. Or that you've torn some tendons or something really serious. He'd definitely tell you not to wear any shoes someone over eighty wouldn't wear." Evie ends by raising her eyebrow, like she needed to emphasize her points any more.

"Unless you come bearing tacos, I don't have to listen to your lectures." I raise my own eyebrow, hoping it conveys how guilty she should feel for not feeding me.

"Georgy, if you want something, you've got to be honest about it. I would have brought you all the tacos if you hadn't told Zach you didn't need anything." Now her other eyebrow joins the first, and I'm the one feeling guilty. Which is not how this is supposed to work.

"Or, you could have texted me that you were a big liar and you really did

want some of Adam's famous carnitas tacos because you know they are the most delicious tacos ever," she continues.

That's when I have to close my eyes, because I know she's right. "You're my best friend. You should just know these things."

Evie laughs. "Maybe I do, and I'm just trying to teach you a lesson about letting people help you."

"Zach has too much on his plate already. He doesn't need to be my caretaker along with everyone else's." I squeeze my eyes tighter to keep from thinking about how much I would like Zach to take care of me.

But I can't stop the images of him pressing the cold pack against my ankle or me waking up covered by a blanket, my phone charging and my coffee maker ready to go.

"Even if he wants to?"

I open my eyes and shake my head. "He only offered to be nice. He thinks this is his fault because I tripped over his shoes."

I leave out the part about him using me to forget Carly. That's too painful to say out loud, but I'm sure it's true. I also don't want to say anything about him and Carly that he hasn't already told his family. For all I know, he's making plans to get back together with her and doesn't want his family to be mad at her for cheating on him.

"Pretty sure he offered because he cares about you." Evie takes a throw pillow from under her arm and lifts my feet to place it under them. "He checked his phone about a million times during dinner to see if you'd texted."

I scoff. "I doubt that very much." Once again, I don't mention Carly, but I'd put money on the fact he was hoping to get a text from her.

"I'm only telling you what he said when his dad reminded him they'd all agreed no cell phones at the table. He wanted to make sure you didn't need

anything.” She twists the toes on my good foot and declares. “Girl, you need a pedicure.”

“I know! I haven’t had one since I’ve been here because Kelly’s not coming back until Memorial Day.” I’m more than happy to change the subject from Zach to the impossibility of getting a good pedicure in a town where the one-woman nail salon closes as soon as the first snow falls and doesn’t open again until flip-flop weather returns.

“If I paint your toenails, do you promise not to wear any open-toed shoes until your ankle is completely back to normal?” She squeezes my big toe. Not hard, just enough so I understand she isn’t taking no for an answer.

“Deal,” I say.

All my open-toed shoes have heels. Evie knows this. But my Timberlands aren’t open toe.

“And no heels.” She still has my toe in a tight grip.

“Fine.” I glare at her, but I really want my toenails painted.

“Promise?” She squeezes harder.

My hand is hidden under the blanket, so I cross my fingers. “Promise.”

If she’s going to use torture to make me agree to her unreasonable terms, fingers-crossed is fair game for breaking a promise.

She scoots out from under my feet and walks to my bedroom, which since the renovation includes an ensuite bathroom. As hard as it was not to feel like I was erasing Grandma Rose from the house when we renovated it, I love having a bath attached to my bedroom now. I’m determined to make sure every house in Little Copenhagen will have the same when we’re done with all the renovations.

Evie returns a minute later with my plastic bin full of nail polish, evidence of my obsession. She holds it toward me, and I pick out a bright yellow. I

need some sunshine in my life, and this is the most I'm going to get in Paradise for the next few months until it really starts to warm up.

After putting down an old towel on the antler-legged coffee table she designed, Evie goes to work on my toes. Which is something only a true friend would do, because toes are kind of gross. Especially my little sausage toes. That's why I love having them painted. Maybe it's a lipstick on a pig sort of situation, but I think they look pretty when they're decorated.

While she paints, we talk through some of the design ideas she thinks we should use in the Thomsen place. Little touches that incorporate memories the Thomsens have of the house. Black and white pictures. A favorite cookbook. An old plate brought from Denmark that's been handed down in their family for three generations. It's the one thing that survived the journey from the old country, the trip across the plains, and a lot of little hands.

Then, out of the blue, she blurts, "I think Hope wants to stay with me this summer."

"Your stepsister Hope?" That's the only Hope I've ever heard her talk about, but their relationship is complicated, and Evie is at least six years older than her.

Evie closes my yellow polish, then nods.

"With the baby?"

"She's almost three now." Evie waves her hands over my toes to dry them. "But no, she'd leave Charity with my dad and stepmom."

"Do you want her to come here? You're going to be in the middle of planning a wedding."

Her silence and the worry on her face are all the answer I need. Evie needs a distraction from hard questions as badly as I do. But I can't keep my foot

elevated and paint her nails. So I stick out my hands to show her my fingernails. “These look pretty bad too, don’t you think?”

Evie laughs, then opens the yellow polish again. She has the first layer on my left hand done before she answers my question.

“I think she wants a fresh start in a place where no one knows she had a baby at nineteen.” She covers my thumbnail in a second layer. “Where else could she go but here?”

“I don’t know,” I answer.

I suspect Evie has already made her decision, so all she needs from me is to listen.

“She could help with the wedding,” she says softly.

“She could help with a lot of things. The Thomsens are going to need it with Heidi as sick as she is.” I match her gentle tone, and she nods, like she’s already thought of the same thing.

And that’s all she says before changing the subject back to our renovation projects.

We don’t talk about Zach again, but I don’t forget what she said about him wanting to check on me. I’d like to think she’s not reading more into his comments than what he meant, but I think that’s what she’s done. Of course he’s going to be concerned about me, as a friend. And if he hasn’t told his family what happened with him and Carly, then of course he’d tell them he’s checking for a text from me, not her.

But I can’t tamp down the hope that maybe he did want me to ask him for help. I can’t stop the thought that he cares about me as more than a friend.

I can’t stop hoping Zach will love me like I love him.

Chapter 26

Zach



Monday morning, I arrive on set to find Granny's house is hardly her house anymore. While I was getting dumped, my brother and his crew tore up the carpet and linoleum floors and took down a few walls. Nothing is left of the ugly wood paneling, old light fixtures, and dated cabinets. Cold radiates off the cement subfloor. Exposed two-by-fours and empty doorways make the space feel even more barren.

I wish Adam had left a wall or two for me. I'd love to have something to tear down. Maybe that would help me work through my frustration about the whole Carly thing and the confusion over what I'm feeling for Georgia.

The house may be empty of things, but it's full of people. The crew mills around, setting up equipment and getting ready for the day. Everyone is helping out somehow, except for Ike, who's on the other side of the room talking to...

Darlene Voglmeyer?

She has him cornered, but as soon as he sees me, he points her in my direction. Within seconds, she and her clipboard have me trapped. Ike gives me a thumbs up as he slips past us and out the door.

"I'm so glad I caught you," Darlene says. Which makes one of us. "I was hoping to talk to Georgia, but the gentleman I spoke to said you might know about the permits since she's not here yet." She pauses long enough to scan the room with disapproval, like Georgia's left a roomful of toddlers alone with power tools so she could dip out for a drink.

"Yep. I told her I'd take care of the permits, so any concerns you've got, bring them to me." I put on a smile and turn the jauntiness in my voice all the way up to eleven. Whatever it takes to keep Darlene away from Georgia, I'll do it.

"Well, then." Darlene flips up papers on her clipboard and points to a

sentence in the middle of one of the pages. “You should read this.”

My stomach ties itself into knots like it does any time someone asks me to read something. I squint at the tiny words surrounded by a million other tiny words, all with letters I can’t make sense of.

“You see the problem, right? I thought you must be aware of this regulation, but when I checked for your permit, I couldn’t find it.” Her tone is gentle in the worst kind of way, laced with condescension instead of kindness. The words she’s not saying burrow into my brain. I’m stupid. I’ve screwed up.

“Why don’t you just tell me instead of playing games?” I snap.

Darlene flinches like I’ve slapped her. Then her pupils go dark, and her eyes narrow. “You can’t park that trailer here without a permit. There’s a restriction on portable vehicles over thirty feet in this part of Paradise.” She points to the sentence again, but I don’t look away from her face. “The trailer out there is thirty-three feet.”

“You measured it?”

Her face colors. “Rules are rules. I’m just making sure you’re following them. It’s my job as mayor.”

I sigh. “I’ll fill out the paperwork today and take it to the city offices.” Which, ironically, are housed in portable buildings.

“Perfect.” She offers me a tight-lipped smile that makes me even more nervous than trying to read her papers. “You’ll need to shut down filming until the permit is issued.”

“What? We can’t do that!” The desperation in my voice puts a real smile on Darlene’s face.

“I want to help you, Zach, but if the rest of the city council finds out you’re in violation of local ordinances, they’ll want me to shut you down for good. I

don't know what else to do." She shakes her head slowly, then stops suddenly and lifts her pointer finger. "I've got an idea that could help us both."

I'm not falling for her fake concern, but I am going to give her what she wants. I already know that. We can't get any further behind with our shooting schedule.

"What is it?"

"As it so happens, my son Lyle is in charge of permits for this area of Paradise," she says this with a straight face. As though whatever she's about to tell me next isn't exactly what she came for in the first place. "I'll bet he'd be willing to turn a blind eye for a few days if his restaurant were a little busier. For example, if the crew here ate somewhere besides the Garden of Eatin' and Britta's."

And there it is. The thing she's been angling for from day one. Free advertising for her son's brand-new hamburger joint.

Georgia's already made it clear she doesn't want to promote Lyle's hamburger joint. Not just because she doesn't like Darlene, but also because she doesn't want to play favorites—other than with my family. And, I suspect, because Lyle's called her Ham one too many times.

"Are you asking me to bribe Lyle, Darlene?"

"No." Darlene's face goes dark. "I'm asking you to allow his business to get the same benefits of having this crew here as your family's businesses."

"I don't tell them where to eat." I match Darlene's smooth tone with the same threatening undercurrents. "They just like good food."

The wrinkles around Darlene's upper lip grow close and tight. "People are starting to talk. It seems the rest of the city is supposed to bear the burden of Georgia's project while the Thomsens reap all the rewards."

I search for a stinging retort but come up empty. Because she's right. It

doesn't look good for my family to be the only ones benefitting financially from *At Home With Georgia Rose*.

“Okay, Darlene, you’ve got a point. Georgia doesn’t want anyone in Paradise to think she doesn’t appreciate our hospitality.” I hate giving into her, but fair is fair, even if her manipulations aren’t. “How about I bring in lunch for the whole crew from Lyle’s tomorrow? And I’ll take care of the paperwork right away.”

She smiles, and it’s almost genuine. “I knew we could come to an agreement. Thank you, Zachary.” She wiggles her fingers and walks away, calling over her shoulder, “You’re going to love Lyle’s food!”

She passes Georgia in the open doorway and says, “Hello, dear.”

“What’s this about food?” Georgia replies, suspicious.

“Zach will give you all the details,” Darlene answers and gives her the same wave she gave me.

“What’s that all about?” Georgia asks as she limps toward me in her construction boots, her giant purse weighing her down.

“Nothing. I’ll explain later.” I take her purse from her, my hand brushing hers as I do. My pulse quickens, and not because I don’t want to tell her what Darlene just conned me into.

“Okay, but you don’t need to protect me from Darlene. I can handle whatever it is.” She walks past me, still limping, toward the kitchen. “You ready for this today?”

We’re starting with the actual renovation part of our project. Everything until now has been shooting the pilot and planning for what we’re going to do to the house. Now it’s go-time.

Not just with the house, but with Georgia and me too. Today is the day our “relationship” begins. Maybe that, more than anything, is the cause for the

excitement swirling in my chest.

My eyes graze over her as she takes off her coat. They hover where her sweater has slipped, exposing her bare shoulder and black bra strap. The juxtaposition of the dark fabric against her fair skin dotted with freckles makes my breath hitch. Somehow seeing a peek of skin is more intoxicating than seeing more.

Georgia turns, and I quickly drop my gaze to her feet. That's when I see what her construction boots are: Heels. At least three inches high.

They're thick rubber, with plenty of tread, but still. I stare Georgia down and shake my head. She responds with her big smile made bigger by bright red lipstick.

"I should have known you'd find a way to wear your stupid high heels," I say, still shaking my head. "Now let's see you walk in them."

"Not a problem." She takes three steps, proving me right when she winces with each one.

The folding table filled with our coffee orders from Britta's is four feet away, and that's as far as she makes it. She pretends not to need help as she grabs her cup, but when she turns back to me, she still leans against the table for support.

"They're the only high-topped shoes I own." She takes a sip of the Americano I ordered for her, gazing at me through thick lashes. "So I had to wear them. They cover my ankle and keep it stable. I'm totally protected." She sticks out her foot to show me the proof, clutching the table while she turns her foot side to side.

"Is it still swollen?" I can tell it is. The laces are stretched tighter over her injured foot than they are on the other boot.

"A little." Her eyes dart to the side. "But these boots are so sturdy, there's

no way I can twist my ankle again.”

“Uh-huh. So I guess you don’t need this, then.” I jut out my arm, elbow bent, for her to hold onto. Because I know she needs it. She can only limp for so long.

“No.” She pulls back her shoulders, then puts her arm through mine and wraps her fingers around my bicep. “But I’ll take it anyway.”

I help her to the chair Amber has set up in the corner for makeup. Mine is already done. The trailer would have been a warmer place to do it, but Amber wanted to get the shade right for the lights set up in the house.

Georgia sits in the bright light, and Amber goes to work on her, covering the freckles that are so much a part of who she is that I can barely stand to watch them disappear.

“Your followers know you have freckles. Why are you covering them up for TV?” I lean against the wall while Georgia lifts her chin for Amber to get under her jaw.

Georgia shrugs. “I don’t know. I guess I didn’t think about it, but when I saw the pictures Stella posted, I liked how I looked without them.”

“What’s that?” Stella saunters over from the demoed kitchen, scrolling through her phone.

Georgia repeats my question and her answer for Stella, and I regret ever asking it.

“I wasn’t trying to make a big deal about it,” I say. “I just like your freckles.”

“I touched up the photos a little to make them disappear. I thought you didn’t want them to show, because Amber covered them.” Stella tips her head and examines Georgia’s face. “I can untouch them, if you want. I can even make your freckles more visible.”

Amber steps back like she's reconsidering what she's done to Georgia. "I assumed you wouldn't want them to show. Most people ask me to cover them, but I like the way they look. They add more character to your face."

"Really? You think I should let them show?" Georgia glances from Amber to me.

"Freckles are totally in," Amber says.

"I already told you I like them." I lean against the one wall still standing, hoping the nonchalant look I'm trying for works.

I shouldn't be this invested in Georgia's freckles. But the truth is, I like her better with them. I don't say this, and it's not something I've ever thought about before, but they do make her face interesting. Even more beautiful, in a really unique way. I mean, how many people have enough freckles to completely cover their faces? Not many.

Georgia motions for Amber to give her a mirror, then examines herself in it. "All right, then, let's pull back on the makeup." She turns her head side to side as though she's still unsure. "Plus, it's making me break out." She rubs her jawline where there's a small bump.

I watch Amber remove a layer of the stuff covering Georgia's face. The more she rubs, the more I see the Georgia I know.

"What are you smiling at?" Georgia asks, and I realize I'm staring.

"The girl I remember." I push myself away from the wall and walk to the folding table for my second cup of coffee.

My phone dings with a text as I drink. When I check the screen, the message is from Carly. I glance back at Georgia before opening it.

I know you're mad, but I miss you. Brad was a huge mistake. I was jealous of you and Georgia. Please forgive me.

I read the text again, questioning if I've skipped over words or misread

them because this message is not what I expected from Carly. I glance at Georgia again, and the look on my face must tell her how confused I am, because she tips her head to the side and mouths *what*.

I shake my head and put on a smile so she knows it's nothing.

Because it is.

I'll answer Carly later and tell her I hope we can be friends, nothing more. But I can't get back together with her. I *do* still care about her. Not like I did, but I can't wipe my feelings away all at once. And a part of me is tempted to tell her everything is forgotten. Except that would be a lie. I don't trust her anymore, and it would take a lot more than an apology to change that.

Mom used to always say I'm like that *Pride and Prejudice* guy. Once my good opinion is lost, it's lost forever. Or something like that.

I guess she's not wrong. I have a hard time forgiving anyone who does something to lose my trust. That's why when I found out Adam's first fiancée, Dakota, cheated on him, I told her she should leave. I promised her I wouldn't tell him what she'd done, and I kept my word, even though she didn't deserve it, and Adam blamed me for their breakup.

I didn't like that, but I understood why he was so mad. He thought I was the one who'd broken his trust.

"Why are you walking like that?" Ike shouts from the other side of the room, and I turn to see Georgia behind me.

Her eyes drop to my phone and the message there, the text big enough to easily read from where she is. I quickly tuck it into my back pocket.

"Everything okay?" Georgia asks, ignoring Ike's question and his determined stride toward us.

I nod just before Ike steps between Georgia and me. "And the boots? Why are you wearing those instead of real shoes? We have the drill and purse

scene today. You need to be in heels. That's your whole brand."

He's not yelling, but I still don't like the tone he's using with Georgia.

I step next to her, cross my arms, and stare down Ike. He stops midsentence and looks up at me. Fear flickers across his face, which, I'll admit, is very good for my ego. I doubt Laker Brad has that effect on people.

"She hurt her ankle." I hover over him, and he takes a step back. "She shouldn't even be wearing those stupid boots, let alone heels. She probably shouldn't even be here, but she didn't want to mess up the schedule."

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry!" Ike puts up his hands at the same time Georgia pushes me out of the way.

"It's fine. I'm fine." She shoots me a glare, then turns back to Ike. "I'll be fine in another day or two. Let's just do waist-up shots until the swelling has gone down enough for me to get heels on."

I scoff. "Or wear construction site-appropriate shoes before you kill yourself."

Then both she and Ike are glaring at me. I know Georgia's not going to be reasonable about her safety, so I appeal to Ike. "Why can't she just be herself? She's going to get hurt wearing heels."

"It's her brand." Ike looks at me like I'm crazy, and Georgia moves between us.

"I've got this Zach," she says through gritted teeth. "I don't need your help."

I put up my hands and back away. "Got it. I'll keep my mouth shut. You can just use me as a crutch."

Her face softens. "Zach, come on..."

I walk away, through the doorway and down the sidewalk. I don't go far. I'm not running away or anything. I just need some air. I need to think.

Georgia's message is loud and clear. She can take care of herself. She doesn't need me. And I can't even be mad about it. I'm the one who gushed about how her independence makes her pretty.

And it does.

The only problem is what I've learned over the past couple years from helping with Mom. I like taking care of people. I'm good at it.

But Georgia doesn't want it.

At least not from me.

Chapter 27

Georgia



I only meant to keep Zach at arm's length, not chase him away. Now he's outside, probably texting Carly, while I try to pretend I don't want to run after him and tell him thank you for wanting to take care of me. He's got this protective streak that I've always loved, but I don't want it directed my way.

I can't stop imagining what it would be like if Zach really had feelings for me. If he loved me the way he does Carly. The impractical, dreamer part of my brain keeps trying to convince me it might be a possibility. But my rational brain knows the truth.

If I could go back to seeing Zach as just a friend, he could protect me all he wants. But I want more. And I know I can't have it. It's only a matter of time until he finds someone new. Or, worse, gets back together with Carly.

I saw the text she sent him. But even before I saw her name, the look on his face said everything. His mouth turned down with hurt, but his eyes held a flicker of hope. The message had to be from Carly.

That didn't stop me from crossing the room to peek over his shoulder and confirm my suspicions. I didn't see the whole text, just her name and *forgive me*.

Carly may not be the brightest bulb in the box, but there's no way she's dumb enough not to try to get Zach back. He's the whole package. Sweet, smart, and smoking hot.

And so much more than that.

Which is why I can't let him be my protector. That's a boyfriend's job, not a best friend's. He's got to save those instincts for the screen. And for my own sanity, I need a clear demarcation line between Friend Zach and Pretending-to-be-Falling-for-Me Zach.

Forget my sanity—clearly, I'm already crazy for letting myself fall in love with Zach. Nope. Too late to safeguard anything but my heart.

All while “pretending” to be falling in love with Zach.

When Zach comes back inside, he still looks upset. Maybe I really hurt his feelings. More likely, the text from Carly said more than just *forgive me*. Something less conciliatory.

Ike directs us to stand close but then walks away to check the camera angles and lighting. Just in case I’m the one he’s most upset with, I lean close to whisper, “I’m sorry.”

I can’t stop myself from resting my fingers his bare arm. “I didn’t mean to snap. I appreciate you sticking up for me, trying to keep me safe.”

The tension in his jaw melts away, and he smiles down at me. “Somebody has to, if you’re not going to take care of yourself.”

For a second, my brain tries to convince me there’s more than friendship in his eyes or in the way he rests his hand over the one I have on his arm, but I quickly shake off the thought.

“I just think...” I pull my hand from under his while I consider how to say what I have to. “We have to be careful about crossing any boundaries when we’re not on camera. Things could get blurry with us pretending to be in...” I swallow hard, pushing back the word *love*. “What I mean is, acting like we’re more than friends could lead to one of us thinking the other thinks it’s real.”

His brow creases, and he opens his mouth to say something but then runs his hand over his chin instead.

“You know what I’m trying to say, don’t you?” I hurriedly add, to keep any more awkwardness from settling between us. “I don’t want to do anything that could hurt our friendship.”

Zach licks his lower lip. Then he shoots me a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Totally agree. Friendship off screen. Relationship *strictly* on.”

“Exactly. Keep things professional on camera. We’re acting. That’s it.” I

hate that I can't stop myself from searching his face for some sign that he doesn't want that any more than I do.

But his smile only grows, and he holds out his fist for me to bump. "Yep."

"Yep." I tap his knuckles lightly with my own.

"We're ready to roll," Ike calls, and Zach and I both take a step away from each other. "Quiet on the set!"

The green light on the camera goes on, and Ike motions for us to move closer together. I glance at Zach, then go into character.

That's how I have to think about this. I'm playing a character. The Georgia who gets the guy of her dreams. The Georgia who's just his type and doesn't have any twenty-two-year-old, supermodel-esque competition. The Georgia whose heart isn't about to get demoed into a million little pieces. The problem is, Zach gets into character too, and he's really, really good at playing the part of a friend who wants to be more.

If our hands are close, he finds a way to brush his fingertips over mine, like he knows even the thought of his touch sends shivers across my whole body. When he stands near me, he finds a reason to rest his hand on my lower back. As low as he can go without making my show more PG than G rated.

At one point he's so close that our foreheads are millimeters apart. If either of us turned at the same time, our lips would touch. We'd be kissing.

That thought takes center stage for most of the day. And I swear, Zach knows it because he keeps doing the same thing. Getting close enough to kiss me. Leaning in like he's going to. Leaving behind his scent and the warmth of his touch when he doesn't.

By the end of the day, I'm all keyed up. I don't know if I can walk the short distance to my house. I've played down how much my ankle is bothering me, but now my legs are shaky. That's Zach's fault too, except not because I

tripped over his shoes. And despite the temperature outside being in the low thirties, I'm hot enough that I could have a fever. Except my head doesn't hurt.

In fact, I feel amazing. I've been on my feet all day, but so much energy still courses through my body, I could run a marathon. Not literally, because I hate running. And definitely not in these shoes. But in theory, I'm revved up enough to do it.

All because Zach is a pro at acting like he's falling in love with me. I'm talking Oscar-worthy. So good he almost has me fooled.

I know he's not.

I *know* it.

But my heart is a hopeless romantic. It doesn't care about logic. It only cares about Zach. It goes into overdrive whenever he glances my way. It ignores the voice in my head that says Zach will never see me as more than a friend.

Chapter 28

Zach



I don't know how Georgia turns off her "feelings" for me as soon as the camera goes off, but she does. Despite Monday's very clear talk about boundaries, every day since I've found myself thinking that maybe she does feel what I do for her. Maybe when she touches me, she feels the same sparks I do. Maybe, like me, she thinks close is never close enough.

It feels that way when she leans into me, when her hand grazes mine, or she's so close that her breath leaves a warm trail down my neck.

Then Ike calls it a day, and Georgia goes back to being my fist-bumping, mercilessly teasing best friend. And I remember that all of this is an act. Even worse than that, we're both so tired at the end of our ten-to-twelve-hour days that we don't have the time or energy to spend time together as friends.

By Friday, I'm so emotionally wrung out from five full days of acting like I'm pretending to fall in love with her that all I want to do is spend the weekend in front of the TV watching as much ESPN as possible. Doesn't matter which sport it is—golf, bowling, whatever—I just need to care about something besides Georgia.

Unfortunately, Adam needs my help at the Garden tonight. The truth is, he's needed my help for a long time but refused to ask for it. Now that he has, I won't turn him down, even though I'm exhausted. Our relationship is finally getting back to normal, and I want to speed the process along.

I go straight from the set to the Garden, which, honestly, I would have done no matter what because I'm starving, and Adam usually tries out new recipes on Fridays. Whatever he's making, I'm sampling. Especially because as soon as I walk into the restaurant, I'm hit by the smell of bacon.

"Hey, Sis," I say to Britta as I pass by the hostess station and go straight for the kitchen.

Bear and Seb are setting up mics and amps in the corner where they'll be

practicing tonight. There are only a couple of customers, Carson Stevens and Steve Carson. Lifelong friends, for obvious reasons.

They're regulars; here every Friday and Saturday night without fail until Memorial Day weekend when the summer season starts. That's when Paradise grows from a couple thousand people to fifteen to twenty thousand, depending on the week, and locals are either too busy working to come in or don't want to deal with the tourists.

Adam is in the kitchen whistling. *Whistling*. This is new...and has everything to do with Evie. The only thing not weird about him whistling instead of scowling is that the song he's whistling sounds like "Ain't No Sunshine," which isn't exactly a happy song.

"Ain't no sunshine when she's gone," I sing loudly as I walk into the kitchen. "Only darkness every day."

"Dude, no." Adam shakes his head and flips the bacon sizzling on the grill. Smoke rises, and my stomach rumbles.

"What do you mean, no?" I reach around him for a piece of cooked bacon from the plate next to the grill, but he slaps my hand away with his tongs. "Ouch! What the hell, bruh?"

"No singing and no snacking." His eyes narrow with a stern warning.

"Since when can't I sing?" I dodge his tongs and grab one of his homemade rolls. Before he can grab it, I tear off a piece and shove it in my mouth. "If you're not going to feed me, I've got to eat somewhere else. I'm starving."

"You've never been able to sing, and you can eat when I've got everything plated." Without looking at me, he lifts the lid off a pot and checks whatever's boiling inside. My guess is potatoes.

"Never been able to sing?" With Adam's back turned, I grab another roll and scoop a spoonful of fresh butter to slather over it. "Are you trying to hurt

me?”

“Just telling you the truth.” He slams the butter container shut before I can take any more.

“I call bull. Why’d you let me in the band if I couldn’t sing?” I shove half the roll in my mouth, just in case he’s thinking about taking it from me.

Granny gave him the bread recipe, and biting into one brings back memories of family breakfasts and dinners at her place in Little Copenhagen. She always had homemade bread for my siblings and me, even though cooking it every day heated up her entire un-air-conditioned house. But she knew how much we all loved it, and the extra love made the long summer days when our parents worked nonstop go a little faster.

Adam faces me and raises both eyebrows. “I let you in the band because you’re my brother and you begged.”

I scoff. “That didn’t keep you from kicking me out of the band.”

“The only bright side to you getting Dakota to leave me is that it gave me a reason to kick you out of the band.” His mouth quirks to the side, but not exactly in a teasing way. “Obviously, I’m grateful now, but that doesn’t mean I can let you back in the band.”

Then it hits me. “Wait. You’re not joking? You really don’t think I can sing?”

“It’s not that you *can’t*.” He cushions his words with an uncharacteristically soft tone. “More that it doesn’t sound very good when you do,” he says slowly, as though that will soften the blow.

“Kick a man while he’s down, why don’t you?” I mumble and toss the rest of the roll in the garbage.

I turn to walk out of the kitchen, but Adam grabs my shoulder. “I’m sorry, man. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I thought you knew that’s why we

kept turning off your mic.”

I stop, all the pieces finally coming together. Like Mom’s pained smile when I played and sang solos for her. It wasn’t the music she didn’t like. It was *my* music, specifically.

“I thought my voice carried enough that I didn’t need it.” I’m not ready to admit he’s right, so I try to shrug off his hand and the feeling of shame sinking over me. But Adam forces me to turn around.

“You’re good at a lot of other things. Pretty much everything, really. You’re just not *as good* at singing.” He squeezes my shoulder, but his forced smile is the death knell for my dream of being a rock star. “Now tell me what’s got you down.”

He lets his hand drop, and the bacon grease snaps behind him.

“You’d better get that.” I wag my head toward the grill.

“I will. But first tell me what’s wrong.”

“That bacon is going to burn.” My resolve to stay mad is melting fast, and he knows it. And maybe it’s not the worst thing to know the truth. I never loved band practice enough to actually be good, let alone famous.

Adam shrugs. “It’s not as important as what’s got you looking like sad Charlie Brown.”

“I’m not sad.” I look around him at the bacon, as much because I don’t want it to burn as because I don’t want to tell him what’s wrong. I’m not sure I can even put it into words.

“You’re not happy, that’s obvious.” He rushes to the grill and pulls off the bacon with only seconds to spare.

I knew he wouldn’t be able to let it burn. Every penny counts with this restaurant. He can’t afford to throw away food.

“I’m tired. That’s all.” I’m about to walk away again when he holds out a

piece of bacon to me.

I reach for it, but he pulls it away.

“Tell me,” he orders.

“Fine.” I glare at him, but he holds out the bacon long enough for me to grab it. I take a bite not caring that it burns the top of my mouth. “It’s hard to pretend to be a couple with Georgia, that’s all. It’s...” I take another bite. “Confusing.”

Seconds pass while Adam examines me. “Why don’t you tell her you’re in love with her?”

“What?... How—we’re just friends.” I’m so surprised by the question, I come *this* close to dropping my hard-earned bacon.

Adam’s left eyebrow slowly creeps up. His eyes don’t leave my face, and a droplet of sweat trickles down my back.

“Don’t you have a fan or something back here? It’s boiling hot.” I loosen my tie and unbutton my collar before moving farther from the grill. But I’m still burning up.

“If you want to be more than friends, you have to tell her.” He turns off all the stove burners and carries the pot of potatoes to the sink.

“Who says I want to be more than friends with her?”

“Your face every time you look at her. Even if I hadn’t known you both my entire life, I’ve been on set with you, remember?” He points to something behind me. “Bring me that colander.”

I pull the metal colander off its hook and set it in the sink so Adam can drain the potatoes. His face disappears behind the steam that pours from the pot, and the potatoes drop into the colander with heavy thuds.

“I can’t tell her. If she doesn’t feel the same, then things will be weird between us. Our friendship will never recover.” By the time I get all the

words out, the steam has cleared, and Adam is looking at me.

“What if she *does* feel the same?” He holds my gaze. This isn’t an offhand question I can blow off. “How will you know if you never say anything?”

My only option is to tell him the truth. “I don’t know if I’m ready to take that risk. I’ve got to make sure this attraction is more than a rebound emotion from Carly and me breaking up, and I need a sign from Georgia that she feels something for me. I can’t risk losing her too.”

Adam pulls the colander from the sink and dumps the potatoes in a giant mixer. “I’ve seen both of you look at each other all goofy-eyed long before you started shooting this show. I’ve just never seen you do it at the same time. Evie’s seen it too. But if you don’t think you can tell Georgia, then maybe you need to show her.”

My brother doesn’t give me a chance to respond or ask for more details, just points to a sauté pan on the stove. “Heat up some of the bacon grease and start braising the meatballs in it while I get these potatoes started, then you can take over the mashing. You’re sous tonight.”

Which means he’s both reached his limit of heart-to-heart talk for the day and “promoted” me to his assistant. He hasn’t had me on sous chef since our falling out over the Dakota stuff. I’m capable of everything the position requires—all of us Thomsens are, thanks to Mom’s training and our years spent working in this kitchen when it was hers. So asking me—or telling, depending on perspective—is the same as saying I’ve earned back his trust. He wants me by his side again.

Not on stage, apparently. But that’s less important to Adam than his kitchen. *This* is where his heart really is, and he only lets a few people in.

Like Bear, who walks in at the same time I put on the blue apron that indicates I’m playing sous tonight. Usually Bear is that person, even before

Adam got mad at me. But Bear, being Bear, just smiles and nods when he sees me tying the apron, then slips on the standard black one everyone else wears.

By that point, things pick up in the dining room, and our focus shifts to the dish Adam's tweaking tonight: Meatballs served over mashed potatoes with lingonberries. It's a Scandinavian staple that we were raised on but with a twist. Mom and Granny never cooked the meatballs in bacon grease or made them with a mix of ground pork and venison.

But while Adam's attention is occupied by food and running his restaurant, mine is still on Georgia. There's not enough commotion in this kitchen—or the entire world, for that matter—to keep my mind off Georgia or the possibility that she might be thinking about me right now too.

I want to think she is. Adam has given me hope that she could be. If so, then all I have to do is figure out how to show her I want us to be more than friends while I'm acting like we already are. I've got to convince her that I'm not pretending.

That thought makes me go as cold as I used to when a teacher asked me to read out loud. The task in front of me seems just as impossible as making sense of letters and words used to. But the reward if I do is as important as learning to read was.

It took me until I fell in love with the *Captain Underpants* books to realize how much richer my life was with books and stories.

I don't know what my life will look like if Georgia returns my feelings, but I know it's already richer knowing that I'm falling in love with her.

Chapter 29

Georgia



Sunday afternoon, I go to church with Adam and Evie. Adam's delivering a message, and the rest of his family is there to hear it. Except for Zach. That doesn't mean I don't look over my shoulder for him every time I hear the door to the worship room open.

I want to ask where he is, but I've already got a pretty good idea. The Garden of Eatin' and grocery store are both closed, but Britta's isn't. He's likely minding the shop so everyone else can listen to Adam. The Thomsens are rarely in the same place together. Between the six family members and three businesses to run, at least one of them always has to be manning the grocery store, restaurant, or coffee shop.

I just wish it weren't Zach today. Pretending to be in love is really getting in the way of our friendship. As much as I enjoy playing out my fantasy on set, I miss my friend when the cameras go off. Things are weird between us, and I've barely talked to him off-set since Monday.

Aside from pretending I'm not in love with him while *acting* like I'm falling in love, shooting has been exhausting. Fun and exciting, but I am tired to my core and can barely keep my eyes open during Adam's short ten-minute message. I don't even remember what he spoke about thirty seconds after he finishes. And I don't try to keep my eyes open during Pastor Ruth's sermon.

When it's over, Evie invites me to go to the Thomsen's house with the family. I'm tempted because I'd love to see Heidi, but as tired as I am, I'd just cry. And that won't be good for her or anybody else.

Still, I ask Evie, as subtly as possible, "Will the whole family be there, or is Zach working all day?"

Her eyes dart from mine to the ground. "He said he had to go to Florence for something after he closes Britta's. I'm not sure what time he'll be back."

“Florence?” I try to keep my face blank, even though the “something” he had to go for is probably Carly. What else would it be?

“He didn’t say it had to do with Carly. There could be a million reasons why,” Evie is quick to add, like maybe she’s read my mind. Or my face isn’t as blank as I think it is.

“Maybe.” I lift my shoulder to my ear. There’s no use pretending I’m not worried he’ll get back together with Carly. Evie and I both know the odds are high, even if neither one of us is saying it out loud.

“Thanks for the invite to dinner.” I pull her into a quick hug. “Next time for sure, but I want to rest my ankle for a couple hours. I’ve got some work to get done today before we’re back on set tomorrow.”

Neither is a complete lie. My ankle does still hurt a little, and I always have work I can do, so I only feel a little guilty as I drive the few miles from the old church at the center of town to Little Copenhagen on the outskirts.

I have orders to put in for tile and carpet, and I’m on the search for a unique mirror or piece of art to hang above the mantle of Granny Neilson’s once the house is done. I’ve got plenty of time to do both since I know the flooring I need is in stock, and I’ve got another month to find something for the mantle.

But doing simple orders and scrolling through local marketplace listings are the kind of mindless stuff I need right now. My brain is already obsessing about what Zach’s doing in Florence. Time to redirect those worries to a more productive place.

I already know I won’t be able to keep my mind from wandering back to Zach, but at least I won’t be in his childhood home where every square inch holds some memory of him. The best thing I can do is keep my distance when we’re off set, so that my feelings for him don’t grow stronger. Once we’re done shooting, I’ll work on restoring our friendship to what it’s been. I

have to believe our relationship will go back to being fun and easy when we're not under pressure to act like we're in love.

Of course, when we start shooting again in September, who knows what the producers will want? If our fake relationship keeps playing well online, we'll have to keep it up. And even though we're not shooting during the summer, I suspect Zach and I will have to keep up appearances for social media.

That thought makes me a little sick. I like our fake relationship too much. When we're shooting, I don't have to hide my feelings for Zach. Everything is easier between us. We laugh. We joke. We touch without it being awkward. We're like we've always been when we're together.

Then the cameras go off, and the acting starts. Everything gets complicated. I don't know what to say. I don't know how to be me. The past three days, I've pled exhaustion and run home before he could try to have a real conversation with me.

And now here I am again. Running home instead of spending time with people I love. All because I'm afraid Zach will figure out I'm not pretending to fall for him. He won't even be at the Thomsens, and that fear kept me from sharing a meal with them.

I walk inside my house with one thought running through my head. Zach and I have never hidden anything from each other. But now I feel like I'm keeping a secret from him. A secret he'll discover as soon as I look him in the eye at the end of the day when we're done "acting." He'll see that my feelings aren't pretend, and then he'll run. Or, worse, be racked with guilt for not feeling the same way. That would be just like him to feel sorry for not loving me back.

We're only one week in, and this fake dating thing is a disaster. At least an emotional one. Financially, it's paying off big. I'm gaining hundreds of new

followers every day. By next week, the producers are predicting the increase will be in the thousands. There is so much excitement surrounding the show that Jeannie's already booking appearances on talk shows and fielding calls from companies wanting to do collab projects.

All of it is a dream come true.

Except the part that's suddenly become my actual dream: a real relationship with Zach. And the fact that all this potential success is built on something that's not real makes it seem as within reach as Zach loving me back. And that's so far from reachable, the possibility might as well be locked away in another galaxy.

With a sigh, I scoop my laptop from the kitchen counter and carry it to the couch. I turn on the TV, because this is work I can do while watching a movie. I don't know which one, as long as it's not a romance. Maybe a good thrasher movie. I've never watched one of those, but it seems like the kind of thing that could keep my mind off Zach, so I play the first one I find.

Twenty minutes later, I have to turn it off. "Good thrasher movie" is, apparently, an oxymoron. If they're all as bloody, gory, and masochistic as this one, I'm out. I'll never watch another one.

I scroll through movie options. Anything artsy is out because I don't want to think. A comedy would be perfect if I thought anything could make me laugh in my current brain state. And, since romance is still not an option, I turn on my trusty standby: a home reno show.

I don't know how much time passes before I hear knocking at my door. I blink and sit up, realizing I fell asleep. There's a slobber spot on my shoulder where my sweater has slipped off. Gross. I wipe it away, along with the drool under my chin, just as the door opens.

"Georgia?" Zach calls from the entry.

I quickly check for any more wet spots or signs of sleep. Zach breezes in and sets something on the kitchen table. I hook my arm over the back of the couch, trying to look casual. Like my heart isn't about to jump out of my chest.

“Hey, what are you doing here? I thought you went to Florence.” A curl falls over my eye. I tuck it behind my ear and wish I'd had time to put on lipstick.

“I did.” He walks around the sofa and stands in front of me, all smiles. Then his eyes drop to my chest and his jaw goes slack.

I follow his gaze to my wide-necked sweater which swoops low enough across my chest to show a fair amount of cleavage. My eyes go back to Zach's almost as fast as the heat that rushes to my cheeks. I tug on the sweater to straighten it, but the look on Zach's face stops me.

Because, unless I'm mistaken—and I think I know guys' brains well enough to know I'm not—Zach likes what he sees.

And even though I'm not sure how I feel about that, I leave my sweater as it is, showing more skin than I typically do.

Usually, I'm very self-conscious about the size of my boobs. Most of the time I keep the girls under wraps because I don't want them to be the only thing a guy sees when we first meet.

But I've known Zach a long time. Forever, even. And I like it that, for the first time, he's looking at me like I'm someone besides the girl next door. I'm a woman with curves who can stop a man in his tracks. Including the man I want to notice me more than any other man does.

“You're back already?” I sit up straighter and pull my shoulders back because now I do know how I feel about Zach looking at me like he is.

I like it.

I like it a lot.

He swallows hard and nods. “It was a quick trip.”

“To see Carly?” I probe.

His answer will determine whether I readjust my sweater to keep everything under wraps.

“No,” he answers, his head jerking back. “Why would I do that? We broke up.”

“Oh...I thought, I mean...” I drop my shoulder and let the sweater slip a little farther. “Good.” I smile. My first real one for him in days. “So, why did you go?”

The smile he returns warms my whole body. “To pick up something I think you’ll like.”

“What is it?” Gifts are my love language. And Zach has one for me.

“Come see.” Zach holds out his hand and pulls me up.

We walk to the kitchen table, my hand still in his. It’s a short distance and not the first time we’ve held hands, but it is the first time his palm in mine sends shock waves through my whole body.

“What is it?” I ask again, bouncing on the balls of my feet.

“Open it.” He squeezes my hand.

“You do it. I’m too excited.” I don’t want to let go of him. Ever.

But someone has to open my gift, so I drop his hand.

Zach laughs, digs his car keys from his front pocket and slides them through the tape. With the excitement of a kid on Christmas, he opens the box flaps. Then he moves aside tissue paper to reveal a beautiful abstract painting.

I step closer for a better look. My breath catches with the clearer view.

“That color is incredible. It’s a thousand different blues.”

I lift my hand to touch it, then pull it back.

Zach nods. “Yep.” He opens the flaps wider, so I can see the entire piece. “But look at the shades of white and pink and orange.”

He traces his fingers over the waves of color floating in and out of an ocean of blue.

“It reminds me of the sun rising over the lake.” I lean closer, wanting to pick it up and examine it more closely. But it’s at least two feet long, and despite the frame being thin wood, the painting looks heavy.

“That’s exactly what it is! I knew you’d see it!” His hand rests on the small of my back, and he moves so close, the light scent of his soap fills my nostrils. “The artist has painted a bunch of these while sitting right here on Little Copenhagen’s beach. When I saw this one, I knew it was the one you’d want. It’ll be perfect for that spot over the mantle in Granny’s house.”

I hear his words, but they take a few seconds to register. I have to blink back my surprise. “It is absolutely perfect,” I say softly.

I shouldn’t be as shocked as I am that he listened to me when I talked about my ideas for over the mantle. Zach is an excellent listener, and I told him at least a dozen times what I imagined for that spot. It was one of the scenes we had to shoot over and over to get right.

What surprises me is that he really *heard* me. Like what I said wasn’t just for TV. Which it wasn’t, but it’s easy to forget that when my ideas have been crafted into scripts by a writer. Sometimes I get confused about what I’ve really thought and said and what Teri and Ike are telling me to think and say. I wouldn’t blame Zach at all if he felt the same way.

“I didn’t overstep, did I? Picking it out without you?” His eyes bore into me, waiting for my approval. Anxious for it in a way I’ve never felt before.

“You’ve had so much on your mind with the show and everything that I thought it would be a nice surprise.”

“It’s the best surprise. I love it. And I love that it’s for your granny’s old house. Everything about it is perfect.” I squeeze my arms around his waist and lay my head on his chest. “We can pick paint colors and accessories that will make this piece the focal point of the whole house.”

His fingers curl around my hip. He slides his thumb under the hem of my sweater and traces the waistline of my jeans, sending waves of pleasure to crash over me.

The moment is perfect, and I’m so happy to have someone like Zach by my side. Even if I wish it were as more than a friend.

“You’re the best teammate I could have ever picked.” There’s so much more I want to say. Like that we should see if we’d make a good forever team. And that Dad always calls Mom his teammate, and that’s what I’ve always wanted. Someone who knows me so well, he can anticipate my next move.

Instead, I squeeze Zach tighter. “Thank you so much.”

Rather than squeezing back, he pulls away. His hand drops from my hip, and though the distance is only inches, it feels like a chasm has opened between us.

“That’s what friends are for,” he mutters, confirming what I already know he feels about me.

Chapter 30

Zach



It kills me to pull away from Georgia. Finding Carly with Laker Brad doesn't come close to this level of disappointment. I still feel her soft skin on the tips of my fingers.

She'd looked so happy to see me when I walked through the door. Her whole body vibrated in the way it does when she's excited. Like she has electricity running through her veins.

For a few minutes, I let myself believe I was the source of that electric current. But showing her how I feel has only made things more awkward.

My bad.

"Mom and Dad are expecting me to swing by, so I'd better go," I tell Georgia. *My friend.*

Or, how did she put it? *My teammate.*

She barely says goodbye. She definitely doesn't ask me to stay a little longer, so I don't invite her to come with me.

The word *teammate* and the way she said it ring in my ears for the entire ten-minute drive home. No matter how loud I blast my music, I can't drown out the sound of Georgia's voice.

When I get to the house, I follow the smell of cake wafting from the kitchen to find Adam there. He's doing the dishes, including the ones with the telltale signs that he's made his famous seven-layer chocolate cake. And I'm relieved he's alone.

"Where is everyone?" I ask, taking the just rinsed, spotless plate from him and sticking it in the dishwasher. Growing up in restaurants made us all very thorough dishwashers.

"Watching *The Sound of Music* with Mom." He rinses another plate, and I rack it behind the others.

"You'd rather do dishes than watch it again?" The first notes of "Do-Re-

Mi” drift in from the TV room down the hall.

“You wouldn’t?” His eyebrow shoots up as he hands me the next plate.

“I’m more than happy to stay right here.” I grab a dishtowel from the drawer next to the dishwasher and wipe my soapy hands on it.

“How’d it go with Georgia? Did she like the picture?” he asks.

“Yeah. Tell Evie thanks. I couldn’t have found it alone.” Disappointment hangs heavy on every word, as though I’m delivering bad news instead of the update he’d hoped to hear.

“It was your idea. Did it work?” Adam won’t let me drop my gaze from his as he hands me a pan to dry.

“Showing her I want to be more than friends?” By the tone of my voice alone, he should know I crashed and burned.

But he nods once, then pulls a drying mat from under the sink. All nonchalant, like he’s unaware he’s probing me about my biggest failure ever.

I answer him anyway. I’ve already got the shame of almost proposing to Carly messing with my head. I can’t let my rejection from Georgia get in there too.

“She called me the best *teammate* ever.” I grip the wine glass he hands me so tightly, I’m surprised it doesn’t crack. “So...not great.”

“What’s wrong with being a teammate?” Adam pulls the plug from the sink, and the water drains with a loud gulping sound. Then he leans against the counter, tosses his dishtowel over his shoulder, and stares at me.

I answer him by raising both my eyebrows. Because, look, I’ve been on a lot of teams. Baseball. Football. Soccer. Badminton. Pickleball...

You name it, I’ve played it. I love all sports. And not to brag or anything, but I’m usually the best one on any team I ever join. I may not have been able

to read in school, but I was always picked first when it came to dividing into teams. That is, when I wasn't the captain.

I know what it means to be a teammate. Adam does too, so he answers by raising his own eyebrows, and I know I'm not getting out of this conversation without some explanation.

"Whoever said there's no I in team only got it half right." I lean against the table across from him and return his stare. If anyone walked in, they'd think we were playing our old "reflection" game. The one where we'd anticipate the other's move and copy it like we were standing in front of a mirror.

"Okay. Do you want to explain that?" He crosses his arms and leans farther into the counter, settling in. His question is rhetorical. It's also accompanied by the sounds of my parents singing along to "Something Good."

"She can't remember our names, but she still remembers that song." I shake my head slowly, and Adam sends me a sad smile.

"They've always made a good *team*."

I roll my eyes, and he lets out a soft laugh. But it works. I'm ready to talk.

With a sigh, I rake my hand through my hair. "Every team member has to work together, but there's always a Kobe or a Michael or a LeBron." (Okay, so maybe I have a favorite sport). "You know this."

"Yeah. So what's the point?"

I consider Adam's question. If there's anyone besides Georgia who I can be completely open with, it should be my twin brother. But that doesn't mean it's easy.

He stays quiet until I finally raise my eyes to meet his. "The point is, there's always a star. One person the rest of the team revolves around."

"And you're that person?" Adam's eyes narrow with confusion. "Too good for Georgia?"

I scoff. "Please. We all know Georgia is the star."

"And you think that's what she was saying when she called you a teammate?"

Adam's still not getting it. I shake my head trying to jostle my thoughts into an order that will make sense.

"Not consciously." I take the dishtowel from my shoulder and twist it around my hand. The pressure around my fingers shifts my focus away from the hurt that comes with putting words to my feelings. "But Georgia *is* the star. Not just any star. She's the sun. She's the one we're all working for. She's the one with all the talent and all the ideas."

Adam cocks his head to the side, but he doesn't say anything.

"I'm a *teammate*. The guy there to help her shine." I unwind the dishtowel and throw it on the counter. "Which is fine. I want to be that guy. I want her to be successful."

"But?" Adam interrogates me with just the one word.

I escape his stare by walking to the breakfast nook, where I sink into the window seat. "But we're not equal. I'm the friend working for her. The teammate there for support and backup." I don't know if I'm making any sense to him, but talking about why the word teammate bugged me when Georgia said it is helping me work out why.

"And you want to be a partner?" Adam says, and everything falls into place.

"Yes." I exhale with relief. "That's it."

Adam takes so long to answer that I start to think we're done talking. He understands and agrees with me.

Then he scratches his head and says, "Can't teammate mean partner? Is it possible Georgia meant it that way?"

I draw my brow so tightly together, the skin around my eyes pulls. “Why would she think of me as a *partner*? She’s doing all the work. She’s just bringing me along for the ride to be nice.”

The oven buzzer dings, and Adam pushes away from the table, laughing. “Sounds to me like you’re transferring all your self-esteem issues to her as the source instead of recognizing they’re all in your head.”

“Gee, thanks Dr. Adam.” My voice drips with sarcasm, but his words roll around in my head. I grasp at them, looking for any truth. If there is, I can’t find it. But it would be nice if I could.

“I’m serious, Zach.” He pulls the cake from the oven, and the whole room fills with the smell of warm chocolate. “You don’t give yourself enough credit for how talented you are.”

I scoff. “At sports, sure.”

“Yeah, for sure. But also at a lot of other stuff.” He sets the cake on a ceramic trivet decorated with blue and red Scandinavian designs.

“Like what?” I ask tentatively. Because he seems sincere but complimenting each other isn’t something we do.

“I don’t know. Lots of stuff.” Adam waves his oven-mitted hand over his cake to cool it, but I don’t think the heat billowing off it is what’s making his ears pink.

“Yeah. You said that. But could you give me some specifics?” It’s enough that he thinks I’m good at *stuff*, but I’d like to see his face turn as red as his ears.

“Dude.”

“Duuude. How am I supposed to believe you when you can’t give me one example?” I suck in my lips to keep from grinning.

“Fine.” He pulls off the oven mitt and stuffs it in a drawer. “You’re good at

taking care of people. You know what they want, and you care about it too. Like with Mom. I can't sit through *The Sound of Music*, but you do it all the time."

"I'm not doing it now." A smile almost slips out, but Adam is too busy concentrating on a spot on the counter to notice.

"You would be if I wasn't in here for you to harass." He glares over his shoulder at me, and my smile busts out. Adam returns it with a reluctant one of his own. "You're loyal, too. You saved me from Dakota, but you also kept your promise to her not to tell me she'd cheated."

My head jerks up. "You know about that?"

He nods. "I got it out of Georgia a while ago, once she knew I was over Dakota."

"I'm sorry, bro. I—"

Adam puts up a hand to stop me. "I'm the one who's sorry. I should have known you were protecting me."

I open my mouth to say something, but he doesn't give me time.

"The things you've done for Georgia are nice too." The words barrel out of his mouth, and I know we're done talking about the rift between us. It's fixed and over.

"Going on the show with her, finding that picture," he continues. "Knowing that she'd love it as soon as you saw it. You're good at being thoughtful, especially to the people you love."

At the mention of Georgia and the painting, my chest falls. "I wish it had worked better. I wish she could see me as something more than a friend."

"Then maybe you should try telling her that."

I shake my head. "I already told you, I can't."

Adam shrugs, then opens the freezer and takes out a carton of vanilla ice

cream. He slices a piece of the still steaming cake and tops it with the ice cream. When he carries it to the table, I expect him to sit down and dig in. Instead, he slides it across to me.

“Then I guess you’ll have to keep trying to show her,” he says before handing me a fork.

“How? Everything I do while we’re shooting, she thinks is acting. Between the hours I spend with Georgia on-camera, then helping you and Britta, and trying to sell houses, I don’t have any extra time to spend with her off-camera.” I shove a bite of cake in my mouth. The heat of it mingled with the cold ice cream combines to a soothing warmth that travels all the way down my throat, somehow taking my growing frustration with it.

Adam sits down across from me with his own piece of cake and takes a small bite. He chews it slowly before swallowing. “So, you’ve got to convince her you’re actually in love with her while you’re pretending to be?”

“Love may be too strong a word.” I lift my hands to slow his roll.

He answers with a laugh. “Dude. No, it’s not. Quit trying to fool yourself. You think you and Carly didn’t work out because of her, but you were never going to work out because she’s not the one you were ever in love with.”

I have no answer to that except for the unanswered text I got from Carly hours ago. She’s been texting me every day, begging for a second chance, telling me how depressed she is. I text her back, but never right away, and only to check on her. Not once have I considered getting back together with her.

“Fine. There may be some truth in that.” I poke at my cake. My gut is swirling too much to take another bite.

Adam spoons a piece of cake with a dab of ice cream but stops before putting it in his mouth. “Wait! I think I’ve got it.”

I glance at my brother. The excited glow in his eyes brings the grinding in my stomach to a slow halt.

“Everything is scripted, right?”

I nod.

“But Georgia doesn’t know exactly what your script says?”

I nod again, trying—and failing—not to get as excited as Adam is.

“So you tell the writer to put in a kissing scene.” He sits back and crosses his arms, smirking like he’s just discovered how to create the world peace every beauty queen wishes for.

“A kissing scene?” To be honest, it’s not the stupidest idea he’s ever had.

“A kissing scene.” He nods then wags his eyebrows. “There’s no faking how you feel with a kiss.”

“A kissing scene.” I nod slowly, not quite agreeing, but definitely not *not* agreeing.

“That’s how you show her you *looooooove* her.” Adam closes his eyes and kisses the air.

I grab a pillow from behind me and throw it at him, but he opens his eyes in time to duck. It bounces on the floor and lands at my sister’s feet just as she walks in.

“You’ve finally figured out you’re in love with Georgia?” The tight-lipped, know-it-all grin she sends me makes me want to throw something harder than a pillow at her.

But I reach for my phone instead and start typing. When I finish my message, I raise my face to Britta.

“If you’re going to be part of this conversation, you have to swear on your firstborn like Adam did that you won’t say anything to Georgia.” I use my

sternest voice. Britta thinks she can get away with anything. Not this time. “If anyone is going to tell her how I feel, it’s me. Only me.”

Britta smiles, then nods.

And I send my message to Teri.

Write us a kissing scene, please.

Chapter 31

Georgia



I look at the painting Zach got for his granny's house at least a thousand times after he leaves. Obviously, it's for the house. But I can't help feeling like it's for me too. I'm not trying to read too much into what he said when he showed it to me, but he did say he knew I'd love it. And that he'd found it for me. And remembered I wanted something for over the mantle.

All night, I cover the picture with the packing paper and fold the flaps closed, only to open them a few minutes later. Then I stand over it and stare, seeing Zach's face instead of the abstract sunrise.

Finally, I retape it and tuck it away in a closet. We won't need it for another four weeks, once the inside renovations are done. Then Evie will step in and do the decorating. Until then, I won't be able to have the artwork anywhere I might be tempted to look at it. Otherwise, that's all I'll do.

I go to bed early, determined to be well-rested and ready to act like I'm acting. But I toss and turn all night. Around seven a.m., I give up and roll out of bed. I get to the set early, thinking I'll get everyone's coffee order then run over to Britta's.

Zach's car is already parked in front of the house when I pull up. When I walk inside, he's standing over Teri, who's sitting in a folding chair bent over her laptop. They look like they're working on something together, and I see he's already beat me to the coffee run. The whole crew is sipping out of cups with Britta's logo on them, and there's one untouched cup on the folding table.

I set my purse down next to the table and pick up the one cup left. It's got my name on it. One sip tells me Zach guessed exactly what I was in the mood for today. Britta's original raspberry chocolate mocha topped with whipped cream. I need something sweet to wash away the resentment that creeps up every time I think about Zach not returning my feelings.

But when I lift my gaze to his, he's smiling at me like he's seeing someone besides his old friend Ham. I raise my cup, and mouth thank you while Teri continues to talk to him. He nods like he's listening, but his eyes stay on me.

They simmer with the same energy they did yesterday when he came over. Except I don't have any cleavage or shoulder showing today. But his eyes travel over me in the same way I've seen Adam devour a perfectly plated meal without touching it. Evie is the first woman I've ever seen Adam look at with the same hunger.

Is it possible Zach is looking at me in the same way?

I glance over my shoulder to see if anyone is behind me, but nope. It's just me and the folding table covered with crumpled napkins and empty cardboard drink holders. When I look back, Zach's gaze is still pointed in my direction. At *me*. Because I don't think inanimate objects are Zach's type—Carly being the exception.

Teri says something, and Zach drags his eyes from me. For half a second, I think maybe he's not acting. Maybe it's as hard for him to keep his eyes off me as it is for me to keep mine off him.

Then I shake my head and, with a long breath, pull myself back into reality. A reality where only one of us has to fake fall in love with the other. If I think too hard about that, I might cry, and I'd so much rather laugh. Especially if Zach and I are laughing together.

I don't know what he's playing out, turning my insides to goo by acting like he's into me off camera, but it's time to turn the tables. He wants to start work pretending we're a couple before shooting starts? Fine. I'll match his gaga-for-you eyes and go even heavier on the whole girlfriend thing. In fact, I'll give him something to really look at.

That will get him to laugh, which will be a nice start to the day.

And I love his laugh. It's a deep, low rumbling of thunder, rolling over every other sound, before exploding with a clap of joy. The vibrations of it stay long after he's done laughing. No matter where I am, if there's a happy sound, I hear Zach's laugh in it.

If I can get him to laugh, maybe things will go back to normal between us.

So Operation Sexy Georgia is a go.

I toss my hair back, check my nails, and channel all the Lizzo energy the Universe has to spare. I turn around, put one hand on my hip, and reach for an imaginary something all the way across the table. My jeans pull tight, hugging my curves. I stretch my arm so far that my butt—one of my best features—sticks back. My shirt lifts, giving Zach a peek of skin.

Then, as temptress-y as possible, I look over my shoulder.

Teri is still talking, but I'm the only one who has Zach's attention. His lip quirks to one side. His chest rises and falls in quick, heavy breaths. His gaze is laser-focused on me and nothing else.

His reaction is so much more than I'd hoped for, I forget about making him laugh. I'm more interested in seeing how far I can test his physical attraction. Because he's very obviously enjoying his view of my best feature—my greatest *ass-et*, if you will.

I roll my body to a stand then saunter toward Zach. Slowly. Seductively.

Teri gives me a weird look, then turns her chair so her back is to me.

Zach's eyes darken, pupils wide. Red washes over his cheeks, and he swallows hard. This isn't the first time my sexy saunter has elicited a jaw drop, but it is the first time Zach has had that reaction. And it's not from surprise. He's seen this walk. He helped me perfect it in high school.

But he's not the only one having a reaction. My knees are Jell-O, and my pulse is threatening to throb right out of my skin. It's all too much. I snap

under the tension crackling between us.

One step away from Zach, I stumble over an extension cord. My weak ankle gives out under me, but Zach grabs my elbow before I fall.

I take his arm to steady myself, then mumble, “Thanks.” The word comes out on a staggered breath that matches the rhythm of Teri’s typing.

“You okay?” His free hand wraps around my hip.

“Yeah.”

Neither of us laughs. Except for our chests lifting and falling together, we barely move.

My palm is on his chest while the other hand still grips his biceps. Even under a long-sleeved shirt, there’s no hiding Zach’s muscles. My fingers cover only a part of his biceps. There’s a lot of ceps left over. Bi and tri.

And I’m tempted to wrap my other hand around his arm to measure the size of his muscles. Would my fingers even be able to touch?

I’m considering these deep thoughts as Zach’s gaze drops to my feet. When he looks up again, it’s with deep, deep disappointment drenched in judgment.

I let my hands fall to my side, but he lifts his fingers from my hip and hooks them through my belt loop.

“Heels?” His Disappointed Judge face includes raised eyebrows and a heavy dose of condescension.

I shrug off his Dad-vibe and turn just enough for him to keep his hand where it is while I lift my foot and show off my new favorite shoes. They’re black satin sandals with a gold cut out, sculpted heel. That would be enough to make them interesting, but then they also have wide, wraparound straps made from gold zippers. The black toe strap has the same gold zipper.

“Very fancy,” he says with a shocking lack of admiration.

“I know.” To dress them down, I’m wearing rolled boyfriend jeans and a

white button up, sleeves rolled and one side untucked.

“Tell me these aren’t absolutely to die for.” I turn my unswollen ankle back and forth so Zach can get the full effect of the one-of-a-kind shoes. He’s a man with good taste and an appreciation for nice clothes, as evidenced by his love for button-ups and coordinating ties.

“Absolutely.” He nods. “You’re definitely going to get yourself killed wearing them in a construction zone.”

I drop my leg and hold back my laugh. Which reminds me that my whole point in coming over here was to get Zach to laugh, not to give him a chance to laugh at me.

Ike has given both of us directions to use “terms of endearment” with each other. We’ve been too uncomfortable to do it, but I think I’m ready to give it a try. Operation Sexy Georgia is back on track.

“But did you see the heel on these, *sweetie*? Isn’t it cute, *babe*?” I smile and flutter my eyelashes.

He responds with a confused look before glancing at my shoes, then back at me. His eyes stay on my face. “Actually...those are...cute.”

Cute is not the word he looked like he wanted to say.

I drop my foot and fall out of character. “Right?” His eyes still hold mine, and I swallow back the desire to move closer. To have more contact than just his fingers tugging at my belt loop.

His almost-touch has lit a fire under my skin. If he actually touches me right now, we may have a scorched-earth situation. So I stay where I am, pretending I’m not about to spontaneously combust.

“The shoe company sent them to me to promote. If *you* think they’re cute, imagine what women will do when they see them. I’ll get paid for every

click.” Talking business almost distracts me from my original goal. But then I remember and put on my sultry voice. “Isn’t that amazing, *lover?*”

At this, Zach’s cheeks go red again. “What? Why? Did you call me... lover?”

I nod excitedly. “Do you prefer something like *bae* or *boo*...maybe *bunny* instead?”

“I prefer them all to Zandwich, but what are you doing?” His mouth tugs at the corner, but still no laugh.

“Just testing out some terms of endearment to use on camera. How do you like them, *dreamboat?*” I flutter my eyelashes again, and this time I get a chuckle.

Or maybe it’s a guffaw. There’s a touch of snort to it.

It’s definitely not the rumble of thunder I’m in search of.

“*Darling*, they’re all better than Zandwich,” Zach says with a straight face that threatens to pull a giggle from me.

“Even sugarplum? Or babycake? Hotcakes? Cupcake?” I rattle off as many cakes as I can think of, then move on to other high-carb white-flour foods. “Muffin? Studmuffin? Honeycake?”

Zach shakes his head, his smile growing with each ridiculous name. But still no laugh.

Except from Teri, forgotten until now, though she’s still in the chair close to us. She pipes up with, “Love them all, but hotcakes is my favorite.”

Zach shakes his head. “It’s not quite right.” Then he moves closer, puffing out his chest. “How about hottie boyfriend?”

I shake my head hard. “That’s not it.”

“Well, keep going, curly. You’ll find the right one.”

He hovers over me. Not in a threatening way. More like we’re in a game of

truth or dare, and he's daring me to resist the urge to touch him. Testing how long I can battle the temptation to run my fingers over the contours of his chest visible under his shirt.

The answer is about two seconds. Then my palm is resting over his heart, feeling the slow, steady beat of it.

"How about *my everything*?" I say to his chest, meaning to make it a joke, but my voice doesn't get the message.

"That's nice." Zach wraps his hand mine.

He's not laughing. I'm not either. I'm not even breathing. Only staring up, trying to make sense of the emotion in Zach's eyes.

Then Teri clears her throat and stands. She comes to Zach's shoulder so that what I have in my field of vision is my hand in Zach's, pressed to his chest, and Teri's head.

Which kind of ruins the moment.

"Is that the one I should write into the script, then? Along with the kissing scene?" Her eyes dart to Zach, and he gives her a weird look I can't make sense of.

"Sure. Whatever you want to do." He lets go of my hand, putting space between us and dropping his eyes to the ground.

Is he surprised Teri suggested it? Or does he hate the idea of kissing me?

He answers my questions by shoving his hands in his pockets, indicating just how *uninterested* he is in kissing me.

"What kissing scene?" I ask Teri, forcing myself not to look at Zach. "I don't remember seeing it in my script for this week." And I don't want to make Zach do anything he doesn't want to do.

"Oh." Teri glances at Zach, who's still got a weird, almost-panicked look on his face, then clutches her laptop to her chest. "I think it's only in Zach's

script. Ike doesn't want you to know when it's happening. You know...so your response will be more natural."

"Natural? While I'm kissing my best friend?" I look at Zach for backup, but he only shrugs.

Maybe he's thinking of Carly and whether she'll be hurt by our pretend affection. Or maybe he can tell how excited I am by the idea of kissing him—my face feels like it's on fire—and doesn't want me to think he feels the same. That's why he's acting so bored.

"If people are supposed to think we're in love, then they'll be expecting some kissing," he says in a voice that sounds more sad than anything. Which is weird.

"Including me." I force a laugh. "Every time you get close, I'll think you're trying to kiss me. I'll be so jumpy, it will be awkward when you finally spring it on me."

I'm trying to put Zach at ease and make him believe I don't want to kiss any more than he does. But my eyes are glued to his lips. His very kissable lips. The lips that I would very much like to kiss.

But only if he wants to.

There's too much intimacy in sharing a kiss to keep things from getting awkward between friends. We both know this. We practiced our first kisses with each other when we were twelve, then barely talked for a month afterward.

"I could give you a signal if that makes it easier." His tone is flat, and he's looking at me, but also past me at the same time.

"Sure." I nod, even though the last thing I want is for Zach to tell me he's about to kiss me.

I don't want it to be a scripted event. I want him to look so deeply in my

eyes that he doesn't even realize he's pulling me into his arms. And after he has his arms wrapped around me, I want him to take his time. To tease me. Bring his lips close but nuzzle his nose against mine instead. Run his thumb over my cheekbone before tucking his fingers under my jaw and drawing me close.

Then his lips can touch mine. Softly at first. Then deeper, with a hunger that threatens to consume us both.

"Georgia?" Zach's voice pulls me out of my daydream, and I force myself to meet his gaze. "What do you want the signal to be?"

I rub my fingers across my clammy palms and swallow hard. "Tuck my hair behind my ear. I like that."

Zach bobs his head once. His back is slightly turned to Teri, who's standing perpendicular to us. His hands are still in his pockets. He's nowhere near laughing.

"But..." I offer.

His head darts up.

"We need a lot of teasers. Moments where we get close to kissing, then don't." I'm breathless at the thought of being in his arms, near enough to kiss him without warning. No signals. Just while we're both lost in the moment.

"People love that stuff in movies and books." My words pick up speed to keep up with my pulse. "Ask Adam. I bet he's read that kind of scene a million times in his romance books."

"Your brother reads romances?" Teri's surprise forces Zach to face her again. "Please tell me he likes the steamy ones." She waves her closed laptop back and forth, like she's not even aware she's fanning herself.

"None of your business." Now Zach does laugh, just the slow rumble I'd been hoping for. It comes like a heat-relieving rainstorm on a sweltering

summer day. It reverberates through my body, sending pulses of electricity to every nerve ending.

Zach turns his attention to me, almost smiling. Almost hopeful. Then he closes the distance between us. “Lots of teasers, and tuck hair behind the ear.” He lifts his hand. “Like this?” The tips of his fingers brush my cheek as he tucks a curl behind my ear.

I nod. Breathless. Speechless. Maybe even weightless.

Because I’m definitely floating on air.

Chapter 32

Zach



I don't want to kiss Georgia unless she feels for me what I feel for her. I thought maybe she did when she called me "my everything." She was joking, but her voice was very convincing. There was no laugh in it like with the other nicknames. Her hand quivered on my chest. Everything about the moment felt real.

Then she called me her best friend.

That used to be enough. Now it stings worse than *teammate*.

But I swear I saw something when she looked at me. Something that said more than friend or teammate. Something closer to *kiss me, now!*

So I'm not ready to give up yet. I'll keep showing her how I feel, both on camera and off. I may be setting myself up for rejection, but if I get a sense she wants more than friendship as much as I do, I'll tell her how crazy I am about her.

And, if she calls me a friend again—or teammate, buddy, or any other strictly platonic word—then I'll pull back. I'll save my acting for when the camera is off.

I decide all of this when I practice tucking a loose curl behind her ear. It's the same rebel curl that always falls in her face, across her right eye. Sometimes she tosses it out of the way. Sometimes she tucks it back. My favorite is when she pokes out her bottom lip and sends up a breath to blow the lock away.

That's what I'm picturing when, after tucking back the curl, I trace my fingers along her jaw. Her breath catches and her eyes go wide. But it's her flushing cheeks that convince me I may still have a chance with her.

"How's that?" I ask.

"Perfect," she whispers.

Our eyes lock, and I want to practice so much more than curl-tucking. I

move closer, and Georgia follows my lead. I can't remember if Nick is filming, and I don't care. I'm going to kiss Georgia Rose Beck like I've never kissed anyone before.

I'm going in when a head pops up.

"You guys are adorable," Teri says, still standing next to us. "So in sync."

Georgia and I step away from each other at the same time.

"Yeah, well, we've been friends for a long time," Georgia says.

"Uh huh," I agree through pressed lips, then I clench my mouth tighter to keep from screaming, *Quit calling me your friend!*

"Did anyone see where I put my purse?" Georgia looks around, very determined not to look me in the eye. "I can't remember where I set it down."

"I think it's over there." I wave toward the folding table, where her giant purse is right where she left it.

Georgia thanks me, then heads toward her purse. Her gait is still off, which means her ankle is bothering her. She won't admit it, though, and there she is, still wearing her stupid high heels. At least the pair today are wide at the bottom instead of the kind that look like they're made from toothpicks.

Ike and Nick walk through the still-open entry way. Today is the day the new door goes on. Last week Georgia and I went to a local carpenter to pick out reclaimed wood and a design for a custom door. Nick shot all of it and will shoot again when the door gets delivered in a few hours.

"Everybody ready to go?" Ike asks without looking up from his iPad. It's a rhetorical question.

I glance at Georgia, and her eyes dart to mine. There's a nervousness behind them that I see so rarely from her that my immediate instinct is to make it better. I mimic tucking hair behind my ear, then raise my eyebrows and nod slowly, purposely. Maybe suggestively.

Georgia's face splits into her wide, red-lipped smile, and my stomach leaps into my chest. I'm for sure not done trying to win her over.

For the rest of the day, I take every opportunity to show her how much I want her.

Sometimes I brush against her, letting our arms or hands or legs touch, but only for a moment. Other times, I watch her, knowing she feels my eyes on her. I don't want to come on too strong, but I'm also not blind. I see what my grazing fingertips and lingering looks do to her. She's on the verge of melting, and my temperature rises just thinking about what I'm doing to her.

But I don't stop there. I find moments to compliment her ideas, to point out where I think she's done something especially creative, and to tell her how much Granny Neilson would love what Georgia's doing to this house she loved.

Those moments aren't hard to find, and my praise isn't empty flattery. I mean it all. I hope she knows that. I think she does. Every time I say something, her mouth slides into a soft grin.

That grin is as rewarding as seeing her flush with excitement with my touch. I want her to want *all* of me, not just my face or body. Every girl I've ever dated has been attracted to me physically long before anything else came into play.

Physical attraction is important, obviously. But with Georgia, I'd never have to wonder if my looks are what she likes most about me. She's known me too long and too well for that to be the case. Until the last week or so, I've never seen any sign that she likes the way I look. I've always just been Zandwich to her.

But the same is true of my feelings for her. She's the first woman I've ever fallen for because she's smart and funny first, and second because she's

pretty. Her looks aren't the driver for my attraction. I like—*love?*—and want all of her.

Even the stubborn part who refuses to wear sensible shoes to work.

Which actually works in my favor. As the day goes on, Georgia's ankle swells and starts to ache. She has to hold my arm or hand if we walk, and I'm forced to put a supportive arm around her waist if we stand too long.

"Let's wrap it up!" Ike finally calls at seven o'clock.

The sun is on its way down, painting the sky orange, purple, and pink as it goes. Nick gets one last shot of Georgia and me in front of the newly installed entry door, admiring the sky's show. The air is crisp, but not too cold, hinting of spring.

As soon as the camera goes off, Georgia sinks against me like she might collapse. With some effort, she slips off her shoes and shrinks half a foot. The top of her head comes to my shoulder, and she rests against it.

"I could go to sleep right here if I weren't so hungry," she yawns.

"Then how about I carry you home and make you something to eat?" I sweep my arm under her back and knees and scoop her against my chest.

"Zach!" she protests, but I'm already carrying her across the walkway toward her house. "You can't carry me all the way home!"

To be honest, her house does look a lot farther away than it ever has. Suddenly I'm more exhausted than I realized, so I set her down. "Okay, you can walk, but only if you let me cook dinner for us."

"Is this a date type of situation? Is that what's happening here?"

I blink and words fail me. Because, *is* this a date kind of thing? Did I just ask Georgia out for the first time ever? And is she as excited about that possibility as I am?

Before I can say anything, Georgia staggers back to the step and grabs her

shoes. She bends over to slip them on. With her back to me I have the courage to say what I'm wondering.

“Do you want to be a date?” I leave no space between my words. I have to say them all at once or I won't say them at all.

Georgia stands. Turns. Bites her lip. “Do you?”

I stare at her mouth. Her teeth tugging her lip. I lick my own lip and nod.

Georgia's face stretches into a smile. “Okay, then. Let's do dinner.”

“Let's do dinner.” My eyes don't leave hers.

A stillness settles in the air between us. It's a comfortable stillness, but not relaxing. It's too heavy with anticipation. Like the few seconds at the top of a roller coaster ride before the brake releases.

Georgia moves closer, and I hold out my hand. She slips her smaller one into mine. Her skin is soft and warm, and I lace my fingers through hers.

“Do you have any food in your house?” I ask as we walk side by side toward Grandma Rose's.

“I have cereal and bread but no milk.”

I shake my head at the same time my phone blasts the chorus to “Look What You Made Me Do.” Which is the only Taylor Swift song I know because Britta chose it as her ringtone on my phone. Then she called me once an hour for an entire day until I couldn't get the song out of my head. (Don't ask why I didn't change it. Maybe I liked it).

“It's Britta.” I stop and take my phone from my jacket pocket. “She's been with Mom this afternoon.” That's all I have to say to Georgia. She understands why I have to take the call.

“Britta? Everything okay?”

“Hello to you too,” my sister says, and I exhale. Loud voices and music in the background tell me she's at the Garden. Dad must be with Mom now.

“We’re slammed here, and one of our dishwashers didn’t show up. Can you come help?”

I glance at Georgia. She rubs her arms, shivering. “What’s up?”

I cover my phone, but not my frustration. “Adam needs help. Raincheck?”

“Of course!”

“Come to the Garden for dinner?”

She nods. “Yeah. Maybe...probably. After I change out of these shoes.”

I uncover my phone, but my gaze stays on Georgia. “I’ll be there in ten.”

Georgia shoots me a disappointed grin and wrinkles her nose. The brake is staying firmly in place for this roller coaster ride. We’re climbing off and taking the stairs down to the exit.

But then, Georgia rises on tiptoe and kisses my cheek. It’s quick, and she’s stepping away before I realize what’s happened. But our fingers are still laced together. With each step she takes, our arms stretch long until only our fingertips touch. We let them drop at the same time.

She takes two unsteady steps, and while I’d like to think she’s weak in the knees because of me, I know her shoes and bum ankle are bothering her. I can’t watch her walk home like that, so I scoop her up again.

“You’ll never make it home in those shoes,” I say, expecting her to protest.

Instead she wraps her arms around my neck. “I was hoping you’d notice that.” She runs her fingernails through the short hair at the nape of my neck, sending charges of electricity down my spine.

When I reach her porch and lower her feet to the ground, all I want to do is press her against the door and kiss her. But Taylor blares from my phone, and I know my sister is wondering why I’m not there.

I don’t answer it, but I take a step back from Georgia. My chest pounds with the words I have to say. I wanted a sign. I may have been blind to all the

red flags Carly flew, but Georgia is definitely giving me the green light I've been hoping for.

"If I don't leave now, I'm going to kiss you. And if I kiss you, I'll never leave," I say in one breath.

Her mouth pulls into a smile that only makes me want to kiss her more. "Then let's make that happen when you get back."

I return her smile, then jog back down the street to my car. I hate that I can't stay, but I think Georgia finally understands, I don't want to be anywhere else but with her.

Chapter 33

Georgia



When did I realize Zach might *actually* be falling for me, not just pretending?

This is the question I turn inside out as I walk into my house. And I have plenty of time to consider the answer because my ankle hurts so bad all I can do is collapse on the couch and think.

For sure I didn't think his feelings were real all the times he leaned close enough that I was flooded with the scent of soap and cedar. It wasn't the million times today he got close enough to kiss me but never once touched the curl that needed to be tucked behind my ear. And definitely not the one time when he did reach for it, then booped my nose instead.

Everything he did today to make it look like he's in love with me, I easily wrote off for what it was. An act. No one could have convinced me otherwise.

But five minutes ago when he said he wanted dinner to be a date and his face turned maroon? That's the first time I've ever thought he might think of me as more than a friend. The moment he couldn't tell I was joking about the "date situation" and then stumbled all over himself like I've seen him do a dozen or more times when he likes a woman.

And as much as I want to go to the Garden to see him, I have to process what's happening. I feel like those people who play the lottery for years, then win and have no idea what they're going to do with the money.

What I don't want is to be one of those winners who goes crazy, spending all their winnings and is broke within a few years. Zach and I have to be more than just attracted to each other. We have to want a relationship that's potentially forever.

Because there's so much more than money on the line here. Friendship is priceless. Especially mine and Zach's. We can't stoke whatever this is

between us into something that burns fast and hot then leaves behind a pile of ashes and nothing else.

I prop my aching foot on a throw pillow and consider my options. The smart thing to do would be to put the brakes on now. Forget the physical and emotional chemistry between us to protect the friendship.

But there's no way I can forget the feel of his hand in mine. The scruff of his cheek against my lips. The desire in his eyes after I kissed that cheek, or the red in his face when I said "yes" to a dinner date.

And I definitely don't want to miss out on an actual kiss from him. I don't have the kind of willpower it would take to resist that opportunity. No one does who's ever seen Zach's lips. I need to talk this over with someone, so I pick up my phone and dial Evie.

The rings are cut short, and a text comes in: **Helping Adam. Call ya later.**

She's not even officially a Thomsen yet, but she's been sucked into their everyone-pitches-in vortex. Probably waiting tables at the Garden.

My next best choice is our old roommate Izzy. But she's all the way in Virginia and probably asleep already.

And, obviously, Zach is out of the question. If he were available, I wouldn't need to talk this over with anyone. I could have the conversation with him.

I'm starving, which is the only thing that motivates me to get off the couch. I hobble to the kitchen, still thinking about who I can talk to about Zach and what's just happened.

The next person on my list is Cassie Lee, my roommate back in LA. We've texted since I've been in Paradise, but we've both been so busy we haven't had a chance to talk. Tonight, she answers on the first ring.

"Georgia! How are you?" Cassie squeals.

"I'm good. It's so great to hear your voice. When are you coming to visit?"

I put my phone on speaker and pull a box of Cheerios from my pantry.

“As soon as it’s not winter there anymore,” she answers.

“It was almost fifty degrees today. That’s practically spring.”

We go back and forth for a minute about what temperature constitutes spring while I pour Cheerios into a bowl. I know I told Zach I’d go to the Garden, but I just can’t when it’s full of people. I don’t know how to act around him, and we won’t be able to talk about what’s happening between us. He’ll be way too busy.

There’s also the problem of my very sore ankle and overall exhaustion.

“Tell me what’s happening in L.A.” I open my fridge and remember I have no milk.

So while Cassie tells me about our mutual friends, the job she love-hates, and a new restaurant we have to try, I melt butter in a pan and pour in the Cheerios.

“Mediterranean food sounds so good right now. I’m eating hot buttered Cheerios.” I stir them in the pan, and the smell of fried whole grains fills my kitchen.

“You know I love your hot-buttereds,” she moans. “Are you ever coming back? Or are you living a Hallmark movie now?”

“What are you talking about?” I laugh and throw some hot Cheerios in my mouth. Delicious.

“Small town girl makes it big in the city, but when she goes back home, her best friend wants to be more than friends.” Cassie lowers her voice like she’s narrating a commercial. “Will she leave the man she’s always loved for the job she’s always wanted, or will a small-town life be big enough for her with the man of her dreams?”

“Okay, how did you know?” I’m only half-joking. She’s nailed the romance

trope that might be my life now.

I know the answer as soon as I ask the question, and we both say, “Instagram” at the same time.

“You two are obviously in love,” she says. “The whole world knows it.”

“Except for me.” I take my Cheerios to the couch, sink back into the cushions, and prop up my foot.

“What are you talking about?” Cassie emphasizes each word. “Every video I’ve seen over the past few days is him basically saying how much he loves you. How do *you* not see he’s in love with you?”

“It’s all scripted.” I tip my head back and stare at the ceiling. It’s just occurred to me that I don’t actually know what’s written in Zach’s script, just the basic outline.

“Real love isn’t scripted, Georgia. And that’s all I see in your reels when he looks at you.” Cassie is a detective. Interpreting body language is a requirement for her job, so her assessment isn’t easy to dismiss.

“You see love? Or attraction?” I ask her. “They’re not the same thing.”

“Both, then?”

I don’t like the lack of confidence in her voice.

“But which one do you see more of?”

Cassie laughs. “I don’t know. I’d need more details about Zach and everything happening on set to decide.”

“What do you want to know?” I know she’s joking, but I could really use some certainty. Love has a much better chance of lasting than attraction does.

Cassie laughs again, but I stay silent. After a few seconds she goes quiet too. “Wait. You’re serious?”

“I can’t risk losing him as a friend.” I shove a handful of Cheerios in my mouth to chew and swallow with the lump forming in my throat.

“Okay, but you know I’m a detective, not a mind reader, right? And I’ve never met or seen Zach in person, so everything I tell you is complete conjecture.” Cassie is in full blown cop mode now with her commanding voice.

I nod even though she can’t see me. I’ve never been intimidated by policemen. But a policewoman? Scary.

“Not a mind reader. Got it. Only the best detective I know.” Feeling intimidated doesn’t stop me from buttering her up greasier than a bowl of fried Cheerios.

“I’m the only detective you know.” Her tone leaves no room for delicious butter. She’s on the job now. “First questions: Does Zach have any acting experience? Is he a professional actor?”

Easy question. “We were in Paradise’s production of *Hairspray* when we were fifteen. Does that count?” I sit up straighter, ready to spill everything I know.

“What role did he play?”

“Mr. Pinky.”

“Hmmm.” Whatever clue this is for Cassie, she keeps it to herself. “Was he any good?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation, then quickly add, “except when he had to sing.”

He had a hard time learning lines, but Zach had the same charisma on stage as he does off. That’s why my fans love him in even the shortest clips Stella posts.

“And did this role lead to bigger roles?” She asks. “Has he starred on Broadway? Anything on TV?” Cassie sounds like she’s actually working a case and I’m a witness, but I sense some sarcasm in her tone.

“No. He’s never done any acting since then, except on my show.” I set aside my cereal bowl, but my stomach still rumbles with hunger.

“Okay. Got it.” A pen clicks in the background, and I hear another sound I can only assume is Cassie flipping her notebook closed. “I think I’ve cracked this case wide open.”

Yeah, definitely some sarcasm there. But I bite anyway. “And? What’s the verdict?”

“Guilty!” she cries. A loud tap follows, which I decide is a cup hitting a table like a judge’s gavel.

“Guilty of what?” I know she’s not taking any of this seriously. That doesn’t mean I don’t want her opinion.

Cassie lets out an exasperated sigh. “Of being in love with you, Georgia.”

The world stops as I let those words sink in. It takes a while. I don’t know why. I guess because for so long, I’ve convinced myself Zach couldn’t love me. But if Cassie is right, then I still have to convince myself of something else.

“But do you think he’s in love with me enough for it to last forever?” I clutch the phone to my ear, not sure I want the answer.

“Georgia, I’m not a psychic.” Officer Cassie is gone. Her tone is soft and gentle now. “Even if I were, I couldn’t predict whether you’ll last forever. No one can.”

I blow air out of my cheeks in one long breath. “That’s not exactly the answer I was looking for, Cass. I need to know if my friendship with Zach can survive a romance with him.”

“Only you and Zach can answer that question. You two are the renovation experts, but in my opinion, friendship is the best foundation for a lasting love.”

My mouth opens, but I have to blink a few times before I find words. “Dammmmmn, girl. With advice like that, you should be a therapist. Or write Hallmark movies.”

“I know, right? Those words just came to me without even trying.”

“They were very good words.” I’m joking with her, but I’m also one-hundred-percent serious. “You’re very wise, and if you ever get tired of sleuthing, you really should take up writing.”

Now Cassie laughs. “The closest I’d ever want to get to writing is owning my own bookstore.”

“In a small town?” I rush to ask. “Because there’s an old auto shop here that I’ve wanted to turn into something pretty, and a bookstore would be perfect! You could live your own Hallmark movie!”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Cassie sounds serious again, and I can’t tell if she’s messing with me or really thinking through my idea. “But I’d need a love interest. Does Zach have any brothers who aren’t taken?”

“He does, in fact. Bear is five or six years younger than you.” I carry my empty bowl back to the kitchen and search the cupboards for something else to eat.

“Oh, a younger man. I like the idea of a cougar era for me. But is he blonde? I prefer men tall, dark, and handsome,” Cassie purrs.

“He’s definitely tall—bigger than both his brothers. And handsome, in a rugged, lumberjack kinda way. But very blonde.” I know Cassie too well to think she’d ever really leave LA, let alone fall for a small-town guy like Bear.

“A blondie named Bear?” Cassie hums. “I guess I could live with that. Tell me more.”

“His name’s actually Bjorn, but I’ve never heard anyone call him that since he was three years old and almost as big as Zach and Adam but still carrying

around his blankie.” I snort at the memory of baby-giant Bear sucking his thumb and cuddling with his blanket. “Everyone calls him Bear as much for his size as for his teddy bear disposition. He’s a big softie.”

“You had me at Bjorn,” Cassie says dramatically, and we both laugh.

Because, obviously, she’d never be crazy enough to move to Paradise and open a bookstore.

We talk for a few more minutes while I search my pantry for something to eat. By the time we end the call, I still haven’t found anything to satisfy my growling stomach. Not for the first time, I curse Paradise for not having grocery delivery. I hate shopping for food anywhere but online. In LA, I have all my groceries delivered.

In Paradise, I survive on Britta’s and the Garden.

But even after Cassie’s pep talk—or maybe because of it—I don’t want to see Zach in a big crowd without knowing what’s happening between us. I need to talk to him alone before there’s any more off-camera affection.

I’d love for him to come over tonight, but after the day we’ve both had, we’ll both be ready for a good night’s rest long before he’s done at the Garden.

So I send him a text.

A really stupid text, because I don’t know how to tell him why I need to be alone with him. I don’t know how to tell him everything I’m worried about but also that I can’t stop thinking about him and today might be the happiest, scariest day of my life.

Not going to make it tonight but can’t wait to see you tomorrow.

Then I drive through Lyle’s for a cheeseburger and fries and eat a mediocre meal, by myself, in front of the TV, which makes the night unsatisfactory on so many levels.

But tomorrow is a new day—and a new start.

Chapter 34

Zach



I'm on dishes for the night, which is gross. I hate scraping food off the plates and putting my hands in greasy water. But the worst part is, I can't see the dining room from the back of the kitchen the way I can when I'm sous chef. So I find excuses to go to the front of the kitchen and check if Georgia's come in.

By excuse number one thousand and one, Adam loses his patience.

"Zach!" he yells as a server walks past me with an armful of dirty dishes. "Get back to the sink. We're already behind!"

"Yes, Chef!" I respond, but I don't move.

From my position at the kitchen door, I see Britta pick up a menu, but I can't see who she's about to show to a seat.

Phil Stein, that's who. Not Georgia.

"Zach! Let's go!" Adam yells loud enough for the whole restaurant to hear.

Including Darlene Voglmeyer, whose head darts up. Her eyes zero in on me, and her mouth pulls into a smile that screams, Gotcha!

I slowly back into the kitchen, letting the swinging door close behind me. Not that it will stop Darlene, but maybe I'll be able to get a few dishes done before she springs. In fact, fighting baked-on food and soap scum is suddenly very, very appealing.

As long as it keeps me out of the fight with Darlene that I know is coming. Because even though I remembered to treat the whole crew to Lyle's average burgers and soggy fries, I forgot to get the permit paperwork done. And it's been a week now since Darlene and I made our "deal."

I doubt she'll actually shut us down. Even if the other council members want to, she won't let them. Not when I've given her something to hold over my head. By not getting the permit, I've basically given her the power to ask for anything she wants.

I scrub dishes harder and faster than I ever have while thinking about how I can get Georgia and the show out of the mess I've created. Georgia will want to know about the problem. She *should* know about it, and I'm the one who has to tell her.

But the timing couldn't be worse. We were so close today. The cameras were off, but I didn't have to hide my feelings. And she didn't hide hers.

For a few minutes—maybe the best few minutes of my life—Georgia and I were more than friends. I saw in her eyes a reflection of what I feel for her. She wanted to be with me as much as I want to be with her.

I was almost her *everything*.

I have to tell her about Darlene, but I've got to do it in a way that doesn't make me look like the idiot I feel like right now.

And I need to do it before she gets here. Otherwise, it's Darlene who will be breaking the news to her, making me look like a screw-up who was too afraid to tell her what I'd done.

I wipe my hands on my apron and pull my phone from my pocket, but Georgia's already texted me. So has Carly, but I skip past her messages, straight to Georgia's. When I open it, my emotions pinball all over the place. As much as I wanted to see her tonight, I'm more relieved than disappointed when I read her message.

Normally I'd obsess about why she couldn't make it, but I choose to focus on the fact she's excited to see me tomorrow. She's not avoiding me. And she wouldn't be excited about anything to do with me if she had a Darlene encounter tonight.

I'm about to put my phone away when I realize there's something I have to do first. Something I should have done days ago.

I fire a message to Carly.

We're done. Stop texting me.

Then, I delete her from my contacts. A lightness fills my whole body. The Carly chapter of my life is officially over.

My phone is barely back in my pocket, and I'm ready to tackle the rest of the dishes when I hear Bear say, "You can't be back here, Mayor."

My head jerks up, and Darlene's eyes lock on mine like a hunter's scope on its prey.

"There's the Thomsen I'm looking for," she says without breaking eye contact. "I'll just be a minute."

She clacks her way to me as Adam comes out of the walk-in cooler holding a head of romaine. His jaw drops as she passes by him and says, "I need a quick word with Zach. I promise not to reveal any of your chef secrets."

Adam turns his head to me, and I shrug. Then Darlene stops in front of me, blocking my view of my brother.

"Why don't we talk in Adam's office?" I wipe greasy water off my hands, then lead her past my brother and his glare to the office.

"Where's my permit, Zachary?" she asks before I close the door.

"I'll have it to you this week, I swear. It's just been crazy on set, and I didn't have a chance to pick up the paperwork from the city offices. Did you know you can't get the forms online? That might be a good campaign platform for you. Automating all the outdated systems in Paradise." I smile and cross my arms, maybe flexing my biceps a little. Or a lot.

Darlene doesn't blink. She's impervious to my charm. Her only response is to cross her arms and stare me down. "It's going to take more than paperwork and bad campaign ideas to fix this."

I nod. "I'll pick up lunch from Lyle's tomorrow."

Darlene answers by raising one eyebrow.

“And the next day.”

She blinks once. A long, slow, blink that confirms my current status as biggest screw-up ever.

“The whole week?” I’m already sweating buckets, but then Adam looks through the window in the door. He’s mad enough to shoot flames from his eyes and breathe fire.

“That’s a start. But what happens when Georgia’s crew leaves? How are people outside of Paradise going to know how good Lyle’s food is?” She cocks her head and uncrosses her arms, lacing her hands together at her waist.

I want to answer her question by telling her no one will know how good Lyle’s food is unless he starts making good food. But I stop myself. I may be a screw-up, but I’m not a dummy.

Instead, I say, “I’ll make sure Stella posts pics of the crew eating Lyle’s food.”

Darlene offers a tight nod, and I exhale. But when I reach to open the door, she steps in front of me. “A video of you eating, and a good shot of the Lyle’s logo on the cup as you drink a huckleberry shake. Make sure you say something about how delicious it is.”

The thought of drinking one of Lyle’s shakes makes me gag. I love huckleberry shakes, but the berries aren’t in season until June. Lyle uses frozen berries, which make his shakes watery and tasteless.

“Fine,” I say through clenched teeth. “And you’ll have the permit tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Zachary. I knew we could come to an agreement.” She steps away from the door, and I pull it open.

“It’s Zach,” I mumble as I walk past her back to the sink stacked high with dishes.

By the end of the night, I'm so exhausted that when Adam says he'll finish the dishes, the only thanks I offer is a grunt. He sends me home with a giant piece of chocolate cake that I'm too tired to eat until morning.

I down it for breakfast with a glass of milk, then send Georgia a text that I'm going to be late. I don't say why. But Evie has scenes today, so hopefully they can shoot those first.

I drive straight to the city offices so I can be there when they open at nine. This is why I didn't take care of the permit. I had to be on set every day by seven a.m. for makeup and to go through the script. I've had no time to come down here during the day, and they close at five, long before we finish up for the day.

The whole way to the city offices, I tap my fingers on the steering wheel. When I get there, I have to wait for Sheryl Tuttle to show up—ten minutes late, no less—and open for the day. Then it takes her another twenty minutes to find the paperwork I need while telling me about her grandkids and asking about Mom.

Meanwhile, all I want to do is get to Georgia. I don't know yet if today is the day Ike will want us to kiss. No matter what, though, I'll get to put my arm around her, feel her hand in mine, see the desire in her eyes.

I fill out the paperwork as quickly as possible, which isn't very fast considering how long it takes me to read through it. Then Sheryl makes hard copies and places one in each councilmember's mailbox, while I seriously think about running for city council myself on a Make Paradise Efficient Again campaign.

Finally, when I'm positive everything is squared away with the permit, I run to my Bronco and speed all the way to Little Copenhagen and Granny

Neilsen's. I'm hours late, but that's not why I risk an encounter with Officer Tuttle—Sheryl's ancient husband and Paradise's only traffic cop.

Nope. My reasons for wanting to get to the set are easy.

Today I get to stop pretending that my feelings for Georgia are just for the camera. I don't have to turn them off when Ike yells cut. Best of all, if I have the chance to kiss her, I'm going to take it. Whether or not it's in the script.

Chapter 35

Georgia



Zach is late this morning, a fact that tests my patience for two reasons: one, we're behind schedule; two, I'm dying to see him. Not just see him but talk to him. I need him to tell me this is real. I'm not his rebound from Carly or a placeholder for the next blonde he meets.

The one advantage to his being late is that he's not here to get the script Teri's left for him on the table. I glance around the room. Amber is working on Evie's makeup. Nick and Gracyn are setting up lights and cameras. Stella, Ike, and Teri are still in the trailer.

With everyone busy, no one notices me pick up Zach's script. I only want a peek. Just to see if we finally get our kissing scene. I want to be prepared for it.

I scan each page, reading as carefully but quickly as I can. My ears are attuned to the noise around me so I can drop the script if anyone walks my way. As soon as I'm done, I put it right back where it was and school my emotions. Namely the excitement that has to be written all over my face. Today is the day.

At least on camera.

But I kind of hate that our first kiss (okay, second first kiss) will be for the public and not because it's what we both want in the moment. After yesterday, though, the possibility exists for us to kiss off camera.

Zach looked ready to kiss me then, before Britta called. There's no reason why I can't recreate that moment before we shoot. All I have to do is get Zach alone, make sure he feels what I do, and—if he does—kiss him like he's never been kissed before. I've had fifteen years of practice since that first kiss. He liked it then, and I've only gotten better since.

And with all the sexual tension that's been building between us the last few days, it's better that we release some of it before our on-camera kiss. *At*

Home with Georgia Rose is supposed to be G-rated. My thoughts about Zach and what kissing him will be like are definitely not G-rated.

Wherever Zach is, I wonder if he's thinking about kissing me too. That thought sends shivers from the top of my head all the way to my toes. Thinking about Zach thinking about kissing me—anticipating it, getting excited about it—is hot. So hot, my shiver is followed by a flash of heat that sets my flesh on fire.

There's no insulation left in this house, so the cold from outside seeps into every corner. I should be freezing. But I'm fanning myself with my script when Evie walks to the table to pick up the coffee I brought.

"What's got you all hot and bothered?" Evie takes the lid off her coffee and blows on it. Steam billows past her face, as if to emphasize her point.

"Nothing." I fan myself harder.

If this is what *thinking* about Zach's lips on mine does to me, I may actually burst into flames when he kisses me for real.

"Uh-huh." Evie smiles as she sips.

Then Ike walks through the door, and I put away any more thoughts of Zach for the next two hours as Evie and I shoot our scenes. We talk through our ideas and compare paint and fabric swatches. All of this will end up being about five minutes of actual footage used. Same with the trip we're taking to Florence tomorrow to pick out furniture at a local store that also does custom orders.

Despite the scenes we're shooting, we're nowhere near ready to start decorating. The house still doesn't have walls—Adam's crew will work on those tomorrow while my crew is off-site. But our shooting schedule has to stay ahead of the actual renovation schedule. Evie and I will finish all the

decorating and final touches this summer after we officially wrap up shooting. We'll also get plans in place for the next cottage.

When the crew returns in September, Evie and I will be ready to go with the next cottage, and Nick will shoot the final reveal for this cottage. That footage will be in the last episode of season one. Ike and the producers will have time to cut it in while the other episodes run. Then season two will air shortly after because they'll have all the footage from our renovation of the third cottage.

And we'll move onto the next. And the next. And the next. Until all twelve cottages are done within three to four years.

I'm tired just thinking about what my life will look like for the next few years until this entire project is done. But also excited by what it's going to do for Paradise. Adam has already hired more guys for his construction crew in anticipation of the work, including a project manager, so he won't have to be onsite all the time.

In a way, it's comfortable having the certainty of my life planned out like it is. The one big unknown is Zach and me.

As excited as I am about the possibility of us, I'm also scared to death.

I don't see him until lunch, after Evie and I are done shooting. When I get to the trailer, he's already there, wearing dark jeans, a patterned button-up, and coordinating tie that bring out the blue in his eyes.

He's brought food from Lyle's, again, for everyone. The crew spreads out across the bench seats and chairs in the trailer, while he passes out the orders. I stay standing by the door, my fingers curled around the latch in case I need to make a run for it. I'm that nervous.

In between handing people their food, Zach's eyes travel to mine. My heart doesn't know what to do: race or flutter.

It settles on leap around wildly. Like a cat chasing a moth flying in and out of the predator's range of sight. It's cute when a cat does it. Not so much when it's happening in your chest. If my stomach joins the leaping there, I'm definitely going to throw up.

Then Zach sends me a shy, unsure smile that I've never seen on him before, and my heart goes still. He's nervous too.

I just need five minutes alone with him. Five minutes to make sure we're on the same page. The page where we're both scared we'll mess up our friendship and, possibly, our business relationship. Then we can make a plan to keep from ruining either one.

While everyone else gulps down their food, I linger over mine. First of all, because it's not good. Secondly, my stomach is too unsettled to eat. And even though the rest of the crew finishes eating super-fast, they don't leave. They talk and talk. Then talk some more.

So. Much. Talking.

In reality, it's probably not any more than usual, but Zach's not saying anything, and neither am I. We steal furtive glances at each other, grinning softly when our eyes meet. The trailer is small, but he's still too far away. And, at the same time, close enough to make my stomach dip up and down in waves of excitement.

Finally, I can't take it anymore. This is my show. These people all work for me. So I pull a diva, girlboss move.

I haven't left my spot by the door—even eating while standing—so I throw it open. “Okay! Everyone out! Zach and I need a minute.”

The room goes silent. All eyes are on me, obviously looking for an explanation.

“To go over our scripts,” I add quickly.

My eyes dart to Zach, whose lip pulls to the side in a pleased half-grin. Somehow, this makes me even more nervous.

“Please.” I punctuate my final ask with enough pleading that everyone stands and files out one by one.

Evie is the last one out. She leaves me with an eyebrow wag and a know-it-all smile that makes my whole face heat up. I shut the door behind her, then turn slowly to Zach.

He’s sitting at the small table, his legs stretched long under it, his hands clasped in his lap. And I have no idea what to say now.

So I go with, “Hi.”

“Hi, yourself.” He dips his head toward the seat across from him. “You want to sit?”

I nod and slide into it. Zach sits up tall and swivels toward me. Space is tight in here, and our knees are so close, they almost touch.

Zach rests his elbows on his knees and leans close enough to let his fingers graze my knee. And I’m so glad I wore a skirt today, but I really wish it were warm enough that I didn’t have to wear tights with it.

“I’m sorry about dinner last night. Adam needs my help again tonight, but how about tomorrow?” He circles my knee with the tip of his index finger, goosebumps prickling the flesh up and down my legs.

“Evie and I are shooting in Florence tomorrow. We won’t be back until late.” My hand slides down my leg, like metal being pulled toward a magnet, until two fingers are hooked lightly around his.

“The day after?” he asks.

I smile. “What are we doing here, Zach?”

He shrugs. “Trying to figure out a time to go on a date?”

I huff a laugh. “You know what I mean. Are we caught up in a moment ? Is

the line between acting and real life blurring?”

His brow creases, and he drops his head. “I’m not sure I know what you mean. The only moment I feel caught up in is a moment I feel like I’ve been moving toward my whole life. I just didn’t know it until now.” He traces his thumb across my fingernails, then looks at me with eyes full of hope.

“But what if this doesn’t work? What if *we* don’t work? What then? How do we go back to being friends?” I can’t pull my gaze away from his, but I also can’t be taken in by the hopefulness there. I operate on sureness and certainty, not blind faith.

“Do you want this to work?” Zach leans closer, cupping my hand with both of his.

“I don’t even know what *this* is.” I’m trying to hold my ground, but my whole body is flooded with the nearness of Zach.

He smiles like he’s figured out something I should I already know. “I think it could be love. At least, I hope so.”

My breath catches. When I let it go, I let go of all my worries and the need to know our future. “Me too.”

I lace my fingers through his, and his smile grows wider. Softer. “Then we don’t leave anything to chance. We make this work.”

That’s when I kiss him. There’s no other way to answer him. With a few simple words, he’s wiped away my worries, but not my disbelief.

Could Zach Thomsen really be in love with me? Or is this a dream? His gentle kisses are the only thing that convinces me this is real. His lips traveling over mine, kissing each corner of my mouth and everything in between, are better than anything I’ve ever imagined.

With each soft kiss, our urgency grows. I’ve been waiting a long time for this. More than the few days since Teri mentioned she writing a kissing scene

for us. Longer than I've ever let myself admit.

I've watched Zach date girl after girl, listened as he told me they'd finally kissed, always believing I would never be that girl. His friend, yes. His shoulder to lean on, of course. His first practice kiss? Didn't think twice about it. But now, I'm not just the girl kissing him. I'm the woman he's falling in love with.

With that thought, I sink deeper into our next kiss. Zach follows my lead and pulls me from my chair onto his lap. My skirt hitches up, but there's nowhere for my legs to go. So he stands, lifting me with him.

I wrap my legs around his waist. He swipes all the empty food wrappers off the table, then sets me there. We pause for half a second and laugh, both in disbelief. Maybe because we're each kissing our best friend. Or maybe, *hopefully*, because we are very good at kissing each other.

We've been in sync emotionally for most of our lives. So I guess it makes sense that physically we would be too. Zach and I know each other well enough to guess what the other is thinking. But what I didn't realize until right now is that connection spills over into the physical. Zach knows exactly how to kiss me, like he's had years of practice.

And judging by his moans, I'm doing the same for him.

I forget everything else except the soft hair at the nape of his neck as I run my fingers through it, the strength of his hands cupped around my ribs, and the gentleness of his lips when they nip at mine.

Nothing else. Just the two of us...

And Stella, who's pounding at the door.

Chapter 36

Zach



Stella is not my favorite cousin right now. She probably never will be, because I don't think I'll ever forgive her for interrupting this moment.

"Zach! Georgia! I need you out here!" Her rapid knocks don't stop.

In fact, she moves to the window. Georgia and I see her peering in at the same time, Stella's face wide with surprise. Georgia unwraps her legs from around my waist. I step back, smooth my shirt, and straighten my tie while she slides off the table. We both try not to make eye contact.

Not that we have anything to be ashamed of. I've never felt better in my life, or more sure that I've just kissed the last woman I will ever kiss. From now on, it's just Georgia. Because no one will ever be able to kiss me the way she just did.

When our eyes finally meet, we both smile.

"We should do that again," I say. "Soon."

"Mmhm." Georgia rises onto her toes and rubs her thumb across my lips. "You've got a little lipstick here."

I kiss her thumb before she moves onto my cheek.

"And here." She rubs my cheek, then moves to my neck. "A little here too. This shirt will probably have to go to the cleaners."

"Guys!" Stella knocks again. "Please open the door." Her voice is muffled like she only wants us to hear her.

I sigh, then pull Georgia in for one more kiss.

I open the door just as Stella's about to knock.

"What do you want?" I snap then look past her to see the last person in the world I want to see right now.

Georgia peeks over my shoulder. "What's going on?" Her voice tapers off, and she sinks back to her heels. The hand she had on my shoulder drops.

"Mayor Voglmeyer is here," Stella says softly at the same time Darlene

comes up behind her.

“There you are, Zachary!” she says. “I’ve been looking all over for you. We’ve got a problem.”

Chapter 37

Georgia



I step around Zach, blocking him from Darlene. “What’s the problem?”

Darlene smiles at me with a satisfaction that makes my stomach drop. “You need a permit for this trailer. It’s over thirty feet. I explained all this to Zachary, but he never applied for the permit. Which means you’ll need to cease operations until the permit is approved.”

“What?” I look from Darlene over my shoulder to Zach. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“Because I didn’t want to worry you. I told you I’d handle permits, and I did. That’s what I was doing this morning.” Zach’s voice pitches higher than usual, and my panic rises with it. We can’t shut down.

“I haven’t seen any applications,” Darlene says.

“What’s going on here?” Ike steps through the house’s still doorless entryway and beelines for Darlene. “Who are you, and why are you on my set?”

“I was just explaining to Zach and Georgia…” Darlene starts at the same time I say, “We need another permit. She’s shutting us down.”

“What are you talking about?” Ike asks Darlene, raising his voice over both of ours.

“I filled it out this morning, first thing,” Zach adds his voice to the cacophony. “I watched Sheryl make copies and put them in everyone’s mail slots. Ask her.”

“I came straight from the city offices. There was no application in my mailbox or anyone else’s.” Darlene is taking too much pleasure in this, and it has to stop.

“Okay, be quiet!” I yell, and everyone goes silent. I take a deep breath and look down at Darlene from my perch in the trailer doorway. “Tell me what we can do to make this right.”

“You don’t need to do anything, Georgia. I took care of it. I—” Zach stops when I put up my hand.

“Obviously not. I’ll handle it,” I snap, and immediately feel terrible. But the worst words pop out of my mouth before I can stop them. “I don’t need your help.”

A silence falls over everything. Even Darlene goes quiet under the weight of the tension between Zach and me.

“Fine.” His jaw fastens tight around the word before he squeezes by me and out the door.

I want to go after him, to tell him I’m not mad at him, just frustrated. But, first, I have to solve the problem he was supposed to take care of. “What do you want, Darlene?”

“Well, I certainly don’t want to shut you down. I think we all know I’ve been your biggest supporter.” She offers a quick, close-lipped smile, then continues. “I want this project to be mutually beneficial for you and Paradise,” she says, and Ike lets out a loud scoff that only stops Darlene long enough for her to shoot him a glare.

“If we discuss this permit issue on camera—over lunch at a local business, for example—and we both talk up Paradise, the other members of the city council will be too afraid of bad publicity if they try to shut you down.” Darlene clasps her hands together, her clipboard between them, and shrugs her shoulders. “We can even get the application signed and approved right then and there if we eat at Lyle’s. He’s the one in charge of permit approval for this area. What do you think?”

What I think is that Lyle’s position must be through appointment, and that the honor was probably bestowed on him very recently.

But what I say is, “I think we don’t have much of a choice, do we?” I cross

my arms and lean against the doorframe.

“You always have a choice, Georgia. It’s the consequences you don’t get to choose.” Darlene’s mouth ticks into a Sunday-school-teacher smile. “How about noon tomorrow? That gives you time for the paperwork and for your director to scope out Lyle’s and set up the cameras and lights.”

“I’m right here,” Ike says.

Darlene stares him down until Ike squirms. “And is that plan amenable to you?”

Ike nods and walks away.

“I knew we could come to an agreement,” Darlene says, then tucks her clipboard under her arm and hitches her purse over her shoulder. “I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

She’s halfway to her car when I remember the permit and chase after her.

I catch her as she’s sliding behind the wheel. “Where can I get the application? Is it on the city website or something?”

Her mouth pinches with amusement, even though I haven’t said anything funny. “Pick it up at the city offices,” She glances at her watch. “But you’ll have to hurry. We close early on Tuesdays.”

“Early?”

“Around two o’clock, give or take.” She slides into her car, lips still pressed together, holding back her villainous cackle of victory...probably.

Okay, maybe I’m being overly dramatic, but there’s no denying Darlene Voglmeyer is pure evil.

Or, at the very least, super annoying.

I check the time on my phone and realize what Darlene thinks is funny. It’s one-fifteen.

She pulls out of the driveway, so I can’t see her cackle, but I swear I hear it.

As soon as she's out of sight, I fast walk-limp to the house. I've got to tell Ike that shooting will have to pause while I get the permit thing figured out. Hopefully, it won't take long.

I almost laugh out loud at that thought. Nothing in government moves fast, but in Paradise it barely moves at all. By the time this stupid permit goes through, Darlene will have snaked her way into a starring role on *At Home with Georgia Rose*.

When I get to the open doorway, I hear everyone else is in the kitchen and main living area, talking, laughing, getting ready for our next shots. I don't hear Zach's voice, but Ike gives him directions, so I know he's there.

Despite the urgency I feel, I stop before going inside. The words I said to Zach run on repeat in my head, their sharpness pricking me with regret.

The only reason Zach is even here—on this set, by my side—is to help me. That's what he does. He helps people. It's probably his best trait, but also his biggest weakness when it turns into a need to rescue. He should have been a fireman or policeman or EMT. Any profession that requires rescuing. Then he wouldn't have to make it a hobby.

Instead of talking to me about the permit problems, he tried to rescue me. But what happens when I don't need his help anymore? Is his attraction for me now, after all these years, based partly on the fact I needed him for this show?

That might work for someone else, but not me. My best quality is my independence. I've honed that trait, using it to build a successful business and a happy life as a single woman. Being an outsider in Paradise with a mom who always had her own stuff going on taught me to take care of myself.

I don't need rescuing. Ever.

So how long will it take Zach to figure out I don't *need* him in the way he

needs to be needed? What happens with us when he does?

“Where’s Georgia?” Ike yells from the other room.

I take a deep breath and push away from the door frame. “Coming!” I call back and walk into the other room.

Ike takes one look at me and frowns. “What happened to your makeup?”

“Nothing. That’s not important right now.” My eyes dart to Zach, and my whole face is on fire. Zach’s mouth twitches, and my heart skips with the thought that he’s not mad at me. But that hope gets drowned by the questions whirlpooling in my brain.

“We’re going to have to shut down for the day,” I say to Ike, and the half-smile on Zach’s face disappears. “City offices close at two. I’ve got to get the permit taken care of.”

Ike stares at me like I’m speaking gibberish. “Are you crazy? We can’t shut down for the day. Let the network’s lawyers handle all of this…” he waves his hand in front of his face like he’s swatting away a bug. “We’ve got shooting that has to happen today. The light coming in through the windows is perfect. I don’t want to lose it.”

Ike turns his back to me, circling like he’s looking for someone. “Amber, fix Georgia’s face, will you?” He yells and circles again. “Amber?”

My eyes dart to Zach. Of course letting the network’s lawyers handle everything is the obvious solution. I should have thought of it to begin with.

The problem is, Paradise won’t like it. I’ll look like the bad guy—a local girl who’s gone big city, bringing in lawyers to handle a problem that could be taken care of over a cup of coffee at Britta’s.

Zach’s brow creases and tiny wrinkles pop out at the corners of his eyes. He doesn’t like Ike’s solution any more than I do.

Don’t worry he mouths.

He smiles softly, but with a confidence I decide to trust. With an exhale, I let go of my worry.

Amber appears out of a back room with her toolbox and leads me to the corner with her chair under a bright light. While she “fixes” me, Ike preps everyone else. “Nick, close up shots. Stella, make sure you get video to post later today.”

Even if I hadn’t seen Zach’s script, Ike’s directions would have given away that this is the kiss scene. With Amber patting down my entire face with sponges and brushes, I can’t turn my head. But I feel Zach’s eyes on me.

He has to be thinking about what we just shared. I know I am, but I wish I wasn’t. Our on-camera kiss won’t be anything like what happened in the trailer, but I need to process everything that’s happened since then. I’m not ready to be vulnerable like that again.

Amber finishes my makeup and hands me a mirror. I turn my head side to side. My freckles show—she’s gone lighter on the foundation. She’s also added just enough eye shadow and contouring to make my eyes look greener than usual. My red lipstick makes my whole face pop. Zach’s right—I don’t need all the other makeup to be Georgia.

I hand the mirror back to Amber and push myself out of the chair. Zach is in his spot behind the newly installed kitchen counter looking at paint swatches and fabric. He looks at me then lets his gaze travel to my feet. As soon as he sees the heels I’m wearing, he shakes his head. But there’s a laugh behind it.

A laugh like I didn’t just say some really thoughtless things fifteen minutes ago.

“Action!” Ike calls and Stella snaps the clapboard.

Then I do my part and walk toward Zach. “What have you got there?” I ask,

then lean in for a closer look. This is where we're supposed to kiss.

His arm brushes mine, but I shift away. It's not a conscious move. It just happens. I can let go of my worry about permits, but I can't let go of all my fears around any future with Zach.

"Cut!" Ike calls. "Try it again, but stay close."

We do what Ike asks. This time I don't move but Zach does. He's picked up on my hesitation. Ike cuts again. Nick reshoots, but this time Zach and I are both stiff and awkward, unsure of ourselves.

After half a dozen tries, Ike doesn't call cut before Zach is supposed to move in for our kiss. We get all the way to Zach tucking a curl behind my ear—he remembered!—but then we both stop short of actual lip contact.

"Cut!" Ike yells, followed by a loud sigh. "Why'd you stop? We had it." He doesn't wait for an answer, just rolls his finger in the air to signal Nick to start recording.

We try again, but Zach doesn't do the hair tuck. He doesn't need to, now that I "know" the kiss is coming. But I miss his fingers brushing my face.

"Cut!" Ike calls, this time when we're within millimeters of following through. "What happened to the hair tuck? Do that again. And try to make it look natural. Make us think you want to kiss each other."

I can't even look at Zach after Ike says that. *All* I want to do is kiss Zach. *All* I can think about is the make-out session we had today and how much I'd like a repeat of that.

But on the next shot, when we actually do kiss, it's nothing like before. We're both too careful, too quick. Too passionless.

I don't know Zach's reasons for holding back—I can guess—but my own reasons have nothing to do with desire and everything to do with fear. If I let

myself enjoy him too much, I'll never recover from losing him. And that's the only way this can end.

I can't pretend we're perfect for each other. I'm not a woman who needs to be taken care of. I'm strong and independent, but also stubborn. I don't ask for help, and I don't like to receive it. It makes me feel weak and way too vulnerable.

But being needed is what makes Zach tick. That's why he's attracted to the Carly's of the world.

Whoever the next "Carly" is, she'll let him take care of her. That's what makes him happy.

We try the kiss a few more times, but each failed attempt only makes Ike more irritated and me sadder. Finally, he tells us to take five and walks outside. Nick puts down his camera and stretches, and Gracyn sets down the mic and scrolls through her phone. Amber searches through her makeup box for something, and Teri is probably back in the trailer writing a new kissing scene. This one obviously isn't working.

"Georgia." Zach pushes up from the leaning-on-the-counter position we've been in way too long.

"What?" I try not to look him directly in the eye, but he tucks his chin and forces me to meet his gaze.

"I can fix this permit thing." His hand slips around my waist. "Quit worrying." He nudges me closer, and a smile slips across his lips. "And I really want to kiss you again."

I inch closer. Our chests press together, and he leans close. I'm so ready for the warmth of his mouth on mine, and I want to give in.

But I don't.

I put space between us—a safe distance from his beautiful, full lips. "But I

don't need you to fix it. I'm not the kind of woman who needs to be rescued. I'm too independent to be taken care of."

"I know. I love that about you." Zach moves closer, but with my hand on his chest I stop him.

And, dammit. Why do his pecs have to be so defined? I can feel them through his shirt.

"No, what you love is taking care of people." I let my hand slip from his chest, "accidentally" grazing his abs on the way down. "What happens when the independence you think you love becomes the thing you hate? Because you *need* to feel needed, Zach. And I'm not good at needing people."

Zach lets out a long breath and shakes his head. "Everybody needs people, Georgia, so you're just going to have to get better at it," he says, his annoyance obvious with each word he emphasizes.

With a huff, he stops. "And I'm going to get better at not being a hero." His lip curves into a smile. "But not today."

"Turn the camera on, Nick!" He yells without breaking eye contact with me.

Then Zach pulls me so close my chest is pressed into his. Heat spreads from his hand holding my waist over my entire back, and his smile threatens to melt me.

But it's the kiss that follows that does it. My fears evaporate in his arms and on his lips.

Chapter 38

Zach



When I'm sure Nick has the shot he needs, I use superhuman strength to pull away from Georgia. I want to keep kissing her, but there's one thing I want even more: to fix this dumb permit problem.

Not because I want to rescue her (I do, but I'm trying to keep my ego in check here), but because I want to fix my mistake. Especially because she's the one who's going to pay for it.

"I've gotta go." My hands are still on her hips, unwilling to let go, so I pry them away. "Tell Ike we're not using lawyers for this."

I grab my jacket from the table, then jog outside to my Bronco. Dark clouds hang overhead, ready to dump a spring snowstorm on Paradise. Tiny flakes are already falling and a dusting of snow covers my windshield.

I'm almost to my truck when I stop short. Carly is parked behind the trailer, just getting out of her car.

"Zach! I'm so glad you're here!" she says, rushing toward me. "I need your help."

In my surprise, I don't move. But when she reaches me, I realize I don't care what she needs. I have more important things to do. I brush her aside with a "not now," and jump in my truck. Then I tear out of the driveway and speed back to the city offices.

I get as far as Huckleberry and Main before lights flash in my rearview mirror. I'm only a quarter mile away, but I worry a high-speed chase may give Ted Tuttle a heart attack. So I pull over and wait close to a millennium for Ted to push every siren button until he finds the one that silences it but leaves the lights spinning.

Then there's a second millennium while Ted gets out of his squad car, takes a few steps, turns around, gets his hat, puts it on. Takes a few more steps,

turns back around, opens the door again. The top half of his body disappears behind the door, leaving only his very rotund bottom visible.

During the third millennium, Ted extracts himself from his car, ticket book in hand, shuts the door, adjusts the waistband of his pants, takes a step, and stops again. He's turning back to his car when I jump out of mine.

"Ted!" I yell.

He swings around faster than a man half his age and half his size, gun in hand, finger on the trigger. Pointed at me.

I throw my hands into the air. "Ted! Officer Tuttle! It's me, Zach Thomsen."

He squints at me, then slowly lowers his gun. "You're not supposed to get out of your car, Zach. You've been pulled over enough for speeding to know that."

"I know. I'm sorry." I start to lower my arms, but he stops mid-way to holstering his revolver, and I raise them even higher. "I deserve the ticket. But I really need to get to the city offices and talk to Sheryl. Is there any way we could finish this there?"

Ted holsters his gun, checks his watch, then shakes his head. "She's closing up right now."

I check the time on my own watch, which is above my head with the hands I still have in the air. "It's not five yet."

"She likes to close up early on Tuesdays." Ted meanders my way. "You can put your hands down, son. I just wanted to scare some sense into you. Gun's not even loaded."

When he reaches me, he hooks his thumbs over the top of his belt. "Now what do you need from Sheryl?"

I explain to him about the permit and Darlene, which makes him scoff with

disgust and shake his head. And since I've obviously got his support, I go on to tell him how Georgia is so stubborn when it comes to getting help, and he nods his head in agreement. He's her first cousin once removed, so he should know.

When I finish, he scratches his head, making his hat bob up and down. "Well, let me get that ticket written, and we'll see if we can catch Sheryl before she leaves."

He starts back to the squad car, then turns around. "I'm joshing you, son. Pull your vehicle all the way off the road and you can ride with me."

I do what he tells me, then jog to the passenger side of his car. I get one leg in before he stops me. "Back seat."

I laugh.

Ted doesn't.

So I get in the back and shut the door. That's when I see there's no handle, and I realize I'm not getting out until Ted—Officer Tuttle—lets me out.

He flips on the siren, then peels onto the road, tires squealing, pinning me to the backseat. We reach the city offices in just under a minute, pulling in just as Sheryl is backing out.

She inches her Corolla back into the parking spot, then climbs out of the car and strolls to Ted. He rolls down the window, she leans in, and I don't think it's an accident that her breasts spill over the top of her blouse.

"What's shakin', bacon?" she says in a voice that makes me *very* uncomfortable.

Then she sees me in the back seat. She pops up straight almost as fast as Ted pulled his gun on me. "Hello, Zach. I didn't see you back there. Are you in trouble, dear?"

"I need a copy of that permit application," I blurt at the same time Ted

grumbles, “He’s nothin’ but trouble.”

Sheryl laughs and swats him, like they’re still high school sweethearts flirting at the local malt shop. “Don’t listen to this old crank.” She swats him again, but he catches her hand, and I’m legitimately worried I’m going to be here all day.

But she pulls her hand away and says to me, “Get in here, and let me see what I can do to help you out.”

I slide to the other side of the seat and reach for the handle, which, of course, isn’t there. Ted’s already out of the car, shutting his door on my pleas to let me out. He and Sheryl hold hands and walk halfway to the city office doors before they notice I’m not with them.

Ted jounces back to the car and opens the door. “Sorry about that!”

Another few thousand years pass while Sheryl digs her keys out of her purse, finds which of the hundred opens the door, shuffles behind the counter, and discovers the application copies she made and put in the mailboxes are all illegible.

“Oh dear,” she says, pulling her glasses from the top of her head, where they’d remained this morning too, and examining the page of smeared ink. “I wonder what happened here.”

From behind me, where’s he’s leaning against the wall, Ted cranes his neck to investigate the problem. “Looks like something’s wrong with the copier.”

Continents drift apart in the time it takes Sheryl to figure out the copier is low on ink and that she’s left my original application on the glass instead of filing it.

She holds up the paper, then asks, “What’s this for anyway? That’s more paperwork than I usually see for a permit.”

“The TV crew’s trailer parked in front of the house is too long,” I say in

one breath, forcing myself not to snatch the paper and run out the door.

“Too long for what?” she asks, squinting hard through her glasses at the application.

“Little Copenhagen. There’s a rule against parking anything over thirty feet.”

“Who told you that? The resort is closed. Those restrictions don’t apply anymore.” Her orthopedic shoes squeak across the linoleum floor at the same slow pace it takes her to tell me the thing she could have told me this morning if she’d asked me what the application was for then.

I blink. Then blink again. Because, of course, I’m grateful. But I’m also careful. “Are you sure about that, Sheryl?”

“Of course, I am.” She pulls a pencil from her hair and uses the tip to scratch her back. “Article twelve point three in the city covenants. ‘Resort restrictions are only applicable while the resort is in full operation.’ You can look it up.”

I stare at Sheryl with disbelief. “You have the city covenants memorized?”

Ted chuckles. “That’s my lady. Smart as a whip.”

She shrugs and sticks the pencil back in her fluffy, white hair. “What else am I going to do around here? It’s boring as heck.”

In two giant strides, I’m at the counter. I lean over it and peck Sheryl right on the cheek. “Thank you, Sheryl!”

“Hey now!” Ted straightens but doesn’t actually move away from the wall.

I take the application out of her hand. Luckily, she’s remembered to sign and timestamp the application so I can show Georgia and Darlene that I turned it in, even if we don’t technically need it.

I’m halfway through the door, when I remember what I do need and turn back to Sheryl. “Can you get me a copy of that covenant article? Darlene will

want proof that I don't need the application."

"Of course!" Sheryl says.

"Darlene Voglmeyer is a menace," Ted says, shaking his head as we both watch Sheryl shuffle to a metal bookcase lined—in no particular order—with binders emblazoned on the spine with the words City Covenants.

Once she's found the right binder with the right covenants—a task that takes at least twenty minutes—all she has to do is make a copy.

Easier said than done. Sheryl has to find the copier ink first.

Miraculously, this only takes five minutes (it's stored on a shelf inside the copier itself), but I can't let another century pass before I get back to Georgia. I rush behind the counter and nearly tackle Sheryl.

"I'll do it!" I cry when I've stripped the ink box out of her hands.

"But..." she protests.

"You don't want to get ink all over your hands." I shush any further protests from her and open the copier door.

Then I stare at its innards.

Turns out, I don't know how to change the ink in a copier. So I hand the box back to Sheryl, who, it turns out, is very proficient at changing ink cartridges.

With evidence in hand, I run out the door into the snow that's now coming down hard, threatening to turn into a full-blown blizzard. Ted drives me—carefully, and oh so slowly—back to my truck covered in snow, where he issues me a ticket. Then I drive back to Granny's, following the speed limit to the exact number.

When I pull into the driveway, the crew is packing up for the day. Early, which could be my fault, or the storm's. But I hope what I have to show Georgia will fix everything.

Even though she's going to hate being rescued.

Chapter 39

Georgia



Zach's been gone for hours, and while we were able to shoot a few more scenes without him, there's not much more we can do. While everyone else packs up and goes back to the trailer, I stay in the house. I sit in Amber's makeup chair, staring at the ceiling as the gray daylight filtering in from the windows shrinks into the darkness of the storm.

Carly was here. Stella told me, but that's all she saw. Who knows if Zach went somewhere with her? Who knows if he's coming back here? He left me with a kiss that almost gave me all the confidence about our relationship that I need.

Then Carly showed up, and Zach's not answering his phone, so I'm left here to wonder what's going on. And all my fears are starting to resurface.

Maybe Zach's with Carly. I basically pushed him into her arms, telling him I don't *need* people. How ridiculous is that? Of course I do.

I didn't think Zach was mad when he left today, but maybe he was. He had every right to be. I was rude and did everything to prove I didn't need him.

Not intentionally. Saying no is my immediate instinct when someone offers to help. Especially when it comes to solving problems. It's easier to fix something by myself than to figure out how to do it with another person.

Which, it occurs to me, may be the reason I'll die alone in a house full of cats.

I vow right then and there, first, to never own a cat. And second, to be better at letting others help.

I don't know why it's so hard to let other people care for me. Maybe it's the years of layering on protection every time someone called me Ham or criticized my mom for her politics. Maybe it's the big age gap between my older brother and me. Or maybe because my parents were in their forties when they had me and were too tired to give me anything but free rein.

It could be all those reasons.

It doesn't really matter. What matters is that if my independence is the reason I'm alone, then it's become a weakness, not my greatest strength. No shade on people who want to be alone, but that's not me. I want the fairy tale. The happily ever after.

And I think Zach is the person I could find it with.

Wait...no. That's not right.

He's the person I could *create* it with. That's basically what he said. If a happily ever after with Zach is what I want, I can't leave it to chance. I have to make it work.

I grab my purse and burrow through it, pulling and pushing its contents aside while walking toward the door. But it's darker in the front room. Because of the storm, Adam came by and put the old door back up to keep out the snow. The windows are taped and covered to get ready for painting, so there's no light in here. I kneel down to dig through my purse again, then remember I set my phone on the kitchen counter.

I make my way back there, carefully since I can barely see what's in front of me, and I'm in heels. I pat the counter until I find my phone. As soon as it's in my hands, I don't waste any more time. I tell Siri to call Zach.

My phone rings followed too close by a second, echoing ring.

"Hello?" Zach says, and I realize his voice isn't coming from my phone. It's coming from the front room.

"Zach!" I rush into the other room. Or, at least try to. It's dark, I'm in heels, and my ankle still hurts.

His phone gives off just enough light for me to see his face break into a smile, as he holds out his arms.

I kick off my shoes and I run toward his arms.

I run for *him*.

There's nothing I want more than to feel his arms around me and hear him say everything's okay.

And I'm within inches of launching myself into his outstretched arms when something else sends me flying instead. It hooks my foot, and before I can catch myself, I'm skidding over the object and onto the floor. Whatever I've tripped over crashes to the floor too. I don't know where it lands, but I end up at Zach's feet.

Within seconds he's on the floor with me gently turning me over into his lap. "Are you okay? Does anything hurt? Did you break anything?"

I hear his questions, but in my daze they're just words. I can't make sense of them or anything else. "What happened?"

"You tripped," he says, and I look around for the culprit.

But there's something hard and uncomfortable under my back. I twist my arm underneath my hips and feel what it is. One touch and I know. I pull it out from under me and hold up the screwdriver from my purse.

"Whoa," Zach says. "I think I know what you tripped over."

"Me too." I look down to my feet and see the perpetrator: my purse. With a groan, I push myself up.

"Careful." Zach lifts my shoulders and scoots under me for support. His legs stretch on either side of mine. My head is spinning, so I lean back into his chest.

Everything from my neck down hurts. My hands and knees where I hit the cement subfloor, my back where I was laying on the screwdriver, my ego. But the sharpest pain comes from my ankle.

"I think I hurt my ankle again," I mumble, my head growing light again.

Zach shifts slightly, but he can't go far with me leaning into him. And I

can't sit up without passing out.

"Can you lift your foot?"

I raise it a few inches, but when I move it in any direction, pain sears through my entire leg. "Ow, ow, ow," I cry.

"You're okay." Zach holds me tighter and kisses the top of my head. "I've got you."

The gentleness in his words brings tears to my eyes. "I'm so sorry, Zach. I yelled at you, I treated you like an employee instead of a business partner, or even a friend."

My emotions roll out in giant waves, rivaling the waves of pain in my ankle.

"Shh. Shh." Zach kisses my crown again. "It's okay. I should have told you what was happening with the permits instead of trying to make it some kind of gesture."

I laugh-cry and it echoes through the empty room. "I really wish I could kiss you right now."

"What makes you think you can't?" Zach attempts to slide around me, but I bump my ankle trying to make room for him and yelp in pain.

"I'm sorry! Are you okay? What should I do?" He goes still, afraid to move.

"I think I need you to take me to the doctor," I whisper. I hate doctors. I've spent my life avoiding contact sports to make sure I never ended up with broken body parts.

"I can do that. Do you think you can walk to my car? Or should I carry you?"

I don't care how strong and independent a woman you are, if a supremely hot, muscular man asks if you need to be carried? You. Need. To be. Carried.

So that's what I choose, and holding my leg up so nothing hits my foot, he carefully gets on his knees. Then to a squatting position. And from there, he lifts me, like he's one of those fake-tanned body builder guys in a deadlifting competition.

And he's not even breathless.

I am. But he's breathing as easily as a sleeping baby.

I wrap my arms around his neck. His muscles are taut under my fingers. I lay my cheek to his chest, and he tightens his hold around my back and under my legs.

And I've never felt more safe and secure.

"Zach?" I whisper as he carries me toward the door.

"Yeah?"

"I take back what I said about not needing you to rescue me. I've decided I like it just fine."

"Just fine?"

I let out a happy sigh. "More than fine."

He stops in the doorway and moves the arm around my back just enough that he can reach a curl hanging at the side of my face. It takes some effort and maybe some awkward twisting, but he tucks it behind my ear.

Then I lift my face to the gentle brush of his lips. Soft kisses follow. Obviously, we're in no position for a repeat of this afternoon, but the certainty in these kisses warms me in a way I know will last forever.

When we break apart, it's with a satisfied sigh and I can't tell if it came from me or Zach.

I nuzzle my cheek against him, breathing in his familiar scent and close my eyes as he carries me through the doorway.

"Zach?" I say before he steps off the front porch.

“Yeah?”

“Can you get my purse? I can’t go anywhere without it.”

The End

Epilogue

Three Months Later...

Zach hangs a eucalyptus leaf wreath on the door we picked out together months ago, then steps back and slides his arm around my waist.

“Perfect,” I say, and do the same to him, tucking my arm under his.

“We did good here, don’t you think?”

“No. We did great,” I say.

At that, Zach takes me in both of his arms and pulls me closer. “We make an awesome team.”

Then gently, but too quickly, he kisses me. When we break apart, we stand with our arms around each other, admiring the wreath, the door, and all the work we’ve done on Granny Neilson’s.

We stay there for an unreasonably long time until finally Ike yells “That’s a wrap!”

“You sure we don’t need to do another take on the kiss?” Zach calls over his shoulder. “Happy to try it a few more times.”

Ike doesn't hear him. There are too many people cheering. We've invited half the town to Little Copenhagen's beach to celebrate the completion of Granny Neilson's renovation and the first season of *At Home With Georgia Rose*. Zach's parents are here, and so are mine, plus Britta, Bear, and Seb. And of course Adam and Evie.

But so many others too. Rowdy and Tessa, Mrs. Christianson, Ted and Sheryl Tuttle, and a hundred other people. Even my roommate, Cassie, is here. So is Evie's stepsister, Hope.

"Looks like anymore kissing will have to be off camera," I say to Zach and wave to everyone while Stella takes pictures to post later.

"How long will that be? I think I had some stage fright with that last one. I'd like a few more chances to get it right." Zach drops his hand from my waist and laces his fingers through mine.

"We should probably go mingle first." I squeeze his hand, and he squeezes back.

Zach holds my hand all the time, but every time he takes my smaller fingers into his much larger, stronger ones, my heart hitches. I have to remind myself I'm not dreaming. Our palms really are pressed together, mine swallowed in his.

Even though, more often than not, our lips are pressed together too, holding Zach's hand is my favorite. I mean, the kissing is very, very nice. I like it a lot. But there's something comforting and secure in knowing I can slip my hand into his whenever I want. We can link ourselves together anytime, anywhere.

Zach leans close and says in a low voice, "Why don't we stay here for a little longer? No one seems to mind we're not mingling."

"Good plan."

We sit on the hanging swing we've added to the porch, still holding hands. Zach kicks back and the swing does its thing. My bare arm is pressed against his. The weather has finally turned warm, and we're both in short sleeves. A soft breeze follows us as we swing back and forth.

Our guests mill around on the front lawn and the beach across from it. Some find seats where they sip drinks and eat the appetizer's Adam provided. And, of course, Britta has provided coffee and ebelskiver. All in all, it's a very satisfying way to wrap the first season. Although, technically, we still have to the finishing touches inside to put together, and shooting the final reveal when that's done. But that will happen in September.

And, the truth is, I'd be just as happy celebrating alone with Zach right here in this swing. I lay my head on his shoulder and nestle closer to him.

"Uh oh," Zach says, and points to Bear handing a wad of napkins to Cassie, who's using them to wipe something off her white shirt. "What do you think happened there?"

"I don't know, but Cassie doesn't look happy."

Before I can say more, Cassie is walking toward us, tugging her wet shirt away from her skin. Bear stays behind, clutching the napkins, his face flushed red.

"What happened?" I ask Cassie when she reaches the porch.

"That kid ran into me and spilled iced coffee all over me." She waves her head in Bear's direction while wiping at her shirt. "I don't know if this will come out."

"Do you mean Bear?" Zach asks.

"If that's the big guy, then yeah," she answers, not looking up.

"That's Zach's brother. Remember I told you about him?"

A flash of confusion crosses Cassie's face when she looks at me.

“Vaguely.”

“He’s twenty-three. That’s not really a kid.” Zach has a touch of defensiveness in his voice. He’s very protective of his baby brother.

Cassie gives her shirt one more swipe, then sighs. “I’m going to have to change.” She takes a couple steps, then turns back to Zach. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to offend. Everyone seems like a kid now that I’m the ripe, old age of thirty.”

“No worries,” Zach laughs. “Bear’s the baby of the family, so he’s still a kid in a lot of ways.”

“Not in size, that’s for sure.” Cassie’s eyes wander to Bear who’s bending over to pick up the empty cup whose contents are on Cassie. She may not appreciate his coffee-holding skills, but judging by the admiring grin on her face, she’s found something about him to appreciate.

Once Bear stands, Cassie turns back to Zach. “Georgia mentioned an auto shop around here that might be for sale. You’re a real estate agent, aren’t you? Could you show it to me?”

I’m as surprised as Zach by the question. Cassie hasn’t said anything about the shop since I mentioned it months ago. But I don’t know why Zach is surprised, I only see it in his hesitation to answer.

“Uh, sure. I can do that,” he says finally.

“Great. Tomorrow?”

Zach nods, and Cassie points to my house, where she’s staying with me. “I’m going to change. Be back in a minute.”

“Bear isn’t going to like that,” Zach mumbles when Cassie is out of hearing range.

“Why?”

“He and Dad were hoping to buy it so they have a place to restore their old

cars instead of in the garage.” Zach stops pushing the swing and watches his brother. “Do you think she’s serious about buying?”

I shake my head. “I doubt it. I can’t see her actually leaving the police force, and what would she do with an old auto shop if she didn’t move her? It’s not really an investment property.”

“Okay. I hope you’re right.” He starts the swing again, but just as I’m about to lay my head back on his shoulder, I see something dangerous about to happen on the beach.

“Uh oh.” I plant my feet on the porch and stop the swing, then dig my phone out of my purse. “Evie’s not going to like this.”

“What?”

I point to a woman sitting alone on the beach, her knees pulled up to her chest, and her arms wrapped around them. Her blonde hair spills down her back in waves. “That’s Hope, her sister.”

“Yeah? So what’s the problem?” Zach leans forward, not seeing the danger that’s right in front of his face.

I move my finger slightly to the right, to the man making his way toward Hope. “That’s Seb.”

Zach laughs. “Do we need to intervene?”

“I’m texting Evie right now.” My thumbs fly across my keyboard, but not fast enough. By the time I push send, Sebastian Sparks has planted himself next to Hope and turned on his charm full blast.

I push myself up, just in case, but before I stand all the way Evie is fast walking toward the beach.

With his hand on my thigh, Zach gently presses me back into the swing. “Evie can handle it.”

But before Evie reaches the beach, Hope smiles at Seb, and I know it’s too

late. He's already cast his spell over her. Her heart will be broken by the end of the summer when she goes back to Kansas, but maybe she'll have some fun along the way.

"Hey, you know what?" Zach's hand is still on my thigh, his thumb circling the outside of my knee.

"What?" I know where this is going. He knows what that thumb-circling does to me.

"No one seems to notice we're not mingling." His hand drifts further up my thigh.

"They don't do they." I run my fingers along the top of his hand and curl them through his fingers.

"Now might be a good time to re-do that kissing scene," he says, already tugging me off the swing toward the front door.

"Excellent idea."

I follow him inside where we barely get the door closed before I'm pressed against it and his lips are on mine. It doesn't take much practice at all before Zach's "stage fright" is gone, and we're ready for our next kissing scene.

But from now on, we'll keep all the good ones for when we're off camera.

The End



Who will be next to fall in love in Paradise Valley? Find out soon in *Christmas in Paradise*, coming in November! Pre-order now!

Before You Go...

If you loved reading *(Not So) Famous in Paradise* (or even liked it a whole lot), please consider leaving a gushing review (or even just click those five stars) on Amazon, Bookbub, and/or Goodreads

Want even more Paradise? Go to brittanylarsenbooks.com and get Rowdy and Tessa's story in my novella, *Second Chance Spring in Paradise*.

You can also find me on Instagram and in my Facebook Reader's Group

About the Author



Brittany Larsen is an Idaho girl living the California dream. If that dream includes wearing sweatpants all day and gorging herself on chocolate-covered gummi bears (Don't judge. They're delicious). She's written nine sweet romantic comedies and a couple of historical romance novellas set in the Old West. When not writing, she teaches yoga and takes naps. Her sweater-sporting, mini Aussi-doodle Bo, is her favorite writing companion, but her favorite people are her husband and three daughters.

Acknowledgements

This is the part where I acknowledge the dumb things I do and the people who continue to love and support me, despite my poor decision making.

First and foremost, Emily Poole at Midnight Owl Editors who squeezed me into her schedule, because sometimes I'm a terrible planner (unless it's a vacation. I'm very good at planning those). Thanks for pointing out all my dumb writing mistakes and plot decisions! This book is so much better because of you.

Emily's sister, Jenny Proctor, also deserves a big shoutout for telling me where my plot was dumb and talking me through how to fix it in the three days I had left before my deadline, two of which I would be spending vacationing and driving rather than working. And another big shoutout for talking me down when I did the dumbest thing of all and forgot Amazon deadlines for uploading are based on a stupid time zone and not the correct one, which is always PST. You're the best, and we should always go to Taylor Swift concerts together.

And then there's the incomparable Becca Wilhite, proofreader and friend extraordinaire, who went behind me as I revised, doing a final clean up of Zach and Georgia's story while cheering me on. Even moms who have moms sometimes need a second mom. Becca is always at the ready, asking "can I do anything?" and "what do you need?" I need a nap, Becca. I need a nap.

And then there is my critique group. Melanie, Tiffany, Aubrey, Jen, and Teri, thank you for all your insight and help in making this story better. Teri went the extra mile by reading the first half of the book and giving me fantastic notes, including the lines she rewrote, then read weeks later in critique group and said, "that's really good. I like that," thinking I had written them. I really appreciate your belief that I can craft words as well as you.

Shantell, Kelly, & Nancy, thank you for being willing to read this and give

me feedback on dyslexia. I'm sorry I never actually sent it to you. I hope Zach's struggle with dyslexia is accurate and sensitive based on the research I've done.

I hope I've also portrayed Georgia's feelings about having a curvy figure with sensitivity. In researching for her character and for my own benefit, I've learned so much about the prejudice people in larger bodies face and how steeped in diet culture America and other developed nations are. The most enlightening resource I found was the book, *What's Eating Us* by Cole Kazdin. It's chock full of profanity but also important insights about where we can do better in loving ourselves and our bodies.

To my readers, Bookstagrammers, & Launch Team, I do this job because of you, but I also could not do it without you. Beyond reading my books, your support and encouragement mean the world to me. This is especially true of my PA, Cathy Jeppson, who reminds me of ALL THE THINGS. Please, Cathy, remind me not to set dumb deadlines anymore.

Lastly, there is my husband, Shawn and my daughters Emma, Tess, and Jane. My girls don't live at home anymore (insert crying emoji), but I make this promise to you all: I will never again set a writing deadline for myself that comes days after dropping someone off for their Freshman year at college. In addition, Shawn, I will start helping out with the cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, etc. again, now that this book is finished. Right after I take a nap.