

A Sweet Romantic Comedy

Anything That You Need



Mary Carson

Anything That You Need

A Sweet Romantic Comedy

Mary Carson

Inconceivable Press

Copyright © 2023 by Mary Carson All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and certain locales such as Merit, NC, and Henryville Township, NC are products of the author's imagination. All other landmarks are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

The author acknowledges the trademark status and trademark owners of various products referenced within this fictional work, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Cover Design by Sarah Kil Creative Studio

Edited by Silvia Curry – Silvia's Reading Corner

Proofreading by Karen Marie

Also By Mary Carson

The Anything Series *on Amazon*

From Me To You – *prequel*

A Small Town, Second Chance, Sweet RomCom

Anything That You Want

An Opposites Attract Sweet RomCom

Anything I Can Do

A Small Town, Grumpy/Sunshine, Sweet RomCom

Anything That You Need

A Small Town, Age Gap, Fake Relationship, Sweet RomCom

New RomCom series coming in Spring 2024 –

An Anything Series Spin-off!

Pucks vs. Pigskins

A Second Chance, Sports, Sweet RomCom

For Leesi Mae

Because you never fail to show up with Romolo chocolate-covered strawberries – and that's just the beginning of what makes you the best.

**To My Sisters and Sister-in-Laws
(including the *other sister*)**

The inspiration for every scene between Gia and Lindsey –
how did we get so lucky?

To My Mom and Dad

When I read a sentence from a book I was reading out loud to Dad and said “I could never write like that” – and he said – “Why would you want to? Write like you write.” And mom just gave me that look... Who knew we’d end up with a whole series? Thank you for everything.

And to Mr. Carson

Who somehow manages to be better than all the book
boyfriends

Contents

Keep In Touch

Note From The Author

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Acknowledgments

Want To Find All My Books?

About The Author

Keep In Touch

I 'd love to hear from you!

Keep in touch through my newsletter, where we talk about all things books...and then even more things books!

I'll keep you up to date on new releases and share with you some of my favorite reads – including book giveaways from me and other author friends.

Get the newsletter right in your inbox – **click here to join the fun!** (or go to www.marycarsonbooks.com/about/) or scan the QR code.



Note From The Author

Dear Reader,

Though this book is sweet, funny, and heartwarming, there are some sensitive subjects involved. There is discussion of the loss of grandparents, as well as estranged and deserted family members.

Wishing you well,

-Mary

Chapter 1

- *Gia*

BACK THEN - *Gia is sixteen*

“So you really think this is what you want?”

My mom twisted the cap off the two-liter bottle of A&W Root Beer. My younger brother and sister were sitting at the table, eyes as big as dinner plates. I wasn't sure if it was because of the discussion or in anticipation of the root beer floats my mom and dad were in the process of making.

I sat on my hands, my knees bouncing up and down. I was trying to contain all the feelings racing through me. I wanted to grab my guitar—playing always calmed my mind—but figured my parents might think I was being dramatic. Then again, maybe not. I was more likely to have my guitar in hand than anything else. Well, that or a pen and notebook.

My dad scooped the ice cream into the tall glasses he had brought to the table. “Georgina, have you thought about how this decision isn't just about you?” *Uh oh*. He was using my full first name, not Gia. That usually didn't bode well. My stomach swooped. He pointed the ice cream scoop at Lindsey and Paul. “They may be young, but it's going to impact them, no matter what.”

Paul, who was eight, gave me a big grin. “The only impact I care about right now is the impact of that float on my stomach.”

I chuckled and stretched across the table, ruffling his hair. He bobbed out of reach, laughing.

“Georgina,” Dad said and stopped scooping.

“Yes, Dad. I’m taking this seriously. I know it’s not all about me.”

Under her breath, Lindsey muttered, “It’s literally all about you.”

I frowned. Lindsey was twelve, and going on twenty-eight, if you asked me. But I still loved her.

“Okay, that’s fair. Let me restate. If we do this, it’s because of me, but I’ve thought about how it will impact everyone. And I’m taking that seriously. I’ll do whatever I can to make it worthwhile.”

My mom poured the root beer into the first glass with the ice cream, and we all watched the soda bubble and froth to the top. Lindsey jumped up and took a big drink, sitting back with a root beer-froth mustache across her upper lip. “People always say I look like Mom, but I bet I look like Dad now.” She grinned.

Mom smiled and Paul laughed, but Dad didn’t budge.

“Lindsey. What do you think?” I asked. *Please say you want to do it, please say you want to do it.*

Lindsey grabbed a spoon from the middle of the table and dropped it into her drink, spinning it around a couple of times. “I don’t love it.” She sat back. “But you’re really good, G. If anyone in this family can make it, it’s you. I can see why it makes sense.”

Paul popped his head up. “Hey, when you’re a big country star, will you be able to get us tickets to all the good shows, like last night?” Before I answered, he went on. “Could you introduce me to Dolly?”

“I—”

“I mean, her show was great, but I’d like to get to know her better. You know, up close and personal.”

My mom’s eyebrows flew up, and together, both she and my dad exclaimed, “Paul!”

“Watch yourself, young man!” Dad added.

Lindsey shot me a look and we both bit back a grin.

Paul’s forehead scrunched up. “What? If I knew her really well, I bet she’d give me all the tickets I wanted to Dollywood, and I could bring any new friends I make. That would be epic!”

“Oh, right. Of course.” Mom pulled her float closer and sat back in her seat, meeting my dad’s grin with one of her own.

I didn’t think there would be a more congenial moment, so I took in a big breath, released it slowly, and took my chance.

“Mom, Dad. Y’all. I know this is a big deal. Being a big country star, like Dolly,” I gave Paul a tap on his shoulder, “is all I want. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. And I promise you, I’ll do everything I can. If you give me this chance, I will work harder than I’ve ever worked for anything in my life. It’ll be worth it. You won’t regret this.”

My parents exchanged a look while I held my breath.

“So, Paul. You vote yes?” Dad asked.

He nodded. “I vote yes. Gia’s already a great country singer. She should be on the radio now.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I wanted to squeeze the little guy’s guts out.

“Lindsey?”

“I mean, it would be pretty cool to go to all her concerts.” Lindsey shrugged. “And who knows, maybe she’ll need a backup singer.” She ducked her head when she said it, but the truth was, she had a beautiful voice, too. “I vote yes.”

I couldn’t keep the tears at bay. They spilled over, and I bit my lower lip to keep it from shaking. I loved those two so much.

“Honey?” Dad said.

Mom gave us a big smile. “Looks like we’re moving to Nashville!”



- Jackson

EVEN *FURTHER* BACK THEN - Jackson is sixteen

I stood in front of my full-length mirror and tied my bow tie.

I used to have Carla tie them.

But she decided she didn't want to manage the household anymore, and I couldn't blame her.

Her employers—my parents—only cared about two things: making money, and themselves. Note that I didn't say each other. My parents were two of the most uncaring people I knew, and that extended to everyone around them... unless you helped them make a buck.

So before Carla left me, I asked her to teach me a couple of things.

Three different ways to cook eggs—boiled, scrambled, and over-easy.

The best way to make grilled cheese—butter on *both* sides of the bread, two slices of Colby-Jack cheese, with the gas stove set to two, for the perfect golden finish.

And how to tie a bow tie.

Because there was no way I was going to ask my mother to do it.

Besides, it wasn't like I was a kid anymore. I'd do it on my own.

The tie was passable, so I grabbed my iPod and headed down the front curved staircase. It drove my mother crazy when I used the front stairs and not the back. She was more the 'children shouldn't be seen *or* heard' type of mom.

I walked into one of my favorite places in the house, the library. A curved, two-story room with bookshelves all around, reaching all the way to the ceiling. There was a balcony on the second floor to access the second-story books, and rolling ladders on both levels so you could reach everything. On one wall there was a set of two-story windows, tinted in such a way as to protect the books.

I loved this room almost as much as I had loved Carla.

Tonight, my parents were there, so that kind of ruined it.

My mother looked up from where she fiddled with a necklace. "Oh, Jack. You're here." She glanced down, then back up quickly before she waved her hand at me. "Where's the Tom Ford tux?"

"In my closet."

Her forehead would have crinkled if she hadn't had so much botox. As it was, she squinted. Barely.

“Fine. I am not going to fight with you. You can wear that next month when we have to go to that Smythe deal.” She stood and walked over to my father, who was at the window, drink in hand. “Get this. I can’t.”

My dad set his drink down and took the necklace.

“I’m not wearing it next month.” My voice was flat.

My mom let out a sigh. “Timothy.”

“Do what your mother says,” replied my dad.

It took everything in me not to roll my eyes.

“I’m going to be in North Carolina. With Grams and Gramps on the flower farm. They need me.”

“They don’t need you. Nobody needs you,” my mom scoffed. “And you’re wrong. You’re there for the last two weeks of June. And then you’re back for the two weeks in the Hamptons over the Fourth, just like every year.” She twisted her head. “Did you get it, Timothy?”

Dad stepped away. “Got it.”

Mom let her hair fall back into place and patted the yellow solitaire diamond hanging from her neck. It was so big, I swear it pulled her neck forward. Subtle, my mother was not.

“We need to get going.” Mom moved to the door, and Dad took a final swallow of his drink, setting the empty glass on a silver tray.

“I’m leaving for Merit to spend the summer with Grams and Gramps as soon as school is out.”

“No, you aren’t. There is no way we’re going to the Smythe’s to hear all about how their son Tad is going to Yale without having you there to talk about how you’ll be going to Princeton in two years, and there is no way we aren’t going to the Smythe’s. The business opportunities are too great. Ergo...”

“I leave on the twenty-eighth.” I could do this all night—I was leaving, no matter what. It was surprising there was any resistance at all. Figures it was only in regard to how they’d use me as a prized pony, the only time they remembered I was here.

“Timothy.”

“Listen to your mother,” my dad parroted.

My mother frowned. “No. Make sure the driver is here.”

“Right.” My dad stepped outside, then stepped back in and held the door. “He’s here.”

My mother snagged her purse off the side table and swept out the door. “Don’t just stand there,” Dad spat. “Let’s go.”

I walked out the door and smiled to myself. Summer would be here soon.

And this would be the last prized pony appearance I’d ever make.

Chapter 2

PRESENT DAY

- Jackson

I pulled my truck into the driveway of Quinn O’Connell’s family farm, or The Farm, as it was known these days. Quinn’s glamping cabins—a combination of glamour and camping—and event venue, The Barn, had taken off over the past year, and I couldn’t be happier for the family. They were some of the best people I knew.

I saw Quinn and Jasmine walking up to the house, and I jumped out of the truck, grabbing an armful of flowers from the front seat. “Are those for me?” Jasmine asked with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. She and Quinn had been together for about a year, and she was instrumental in how everything had turned around on the farm. She and her family were opening a health clinic down the road, so she was around a lot more these days.

Quinn reached for her hand, and she stepped closer to him. They were always connected, if they could be.

I gestured with the bouquet. “They’re for Quinn’s mom. She saved me last week when one of the florists ran out of mason jars. Just wanted to thank her.”

My grandparents’ flower farm was doing well, thanks in part to the bump in business due to Quinn’s venue. Whenever

flowers were needed, Quinn would direct the planners or florists to me. It was good for the business, but could be a curse when I ended up more involved than I wanted to be—like hunting down mason jars last weekend.

It didn't help that my grandparents had both passed away—my grams in the past year—so it was only me and a handful of seasonal workers now. I rubbed the center of my chest. *I missed those old folks.*

We were almost to the house when a woman with long blonde braids and a baseball hat came down the front porch steps. She had a cabin key in her hand, and as we got closer, she slipped a big pair of sunglasses on, ducked her head, and murmured hello before she swiftly walked past.

I slowed, then stopped and turned. I watched her step into a small gray car and pull down the lane toward the cabins.

“Was that...? Could that...?”

“What?” Jasmine asked, her forehead scrunched up in question.

I looked at the two of them and then quickly back at the car. I shook my head. “I could've sworn that was Gia Nyx.”

“Who's Gia Nyx?” asked Jasmine. “Someone I should know?”

“She's a country singer,” Quinn said.

“She's not a country singer,” I scoffed. “She's *the* country singer.”

Jasmine laughed. “That explains it, then. If she’s not Dolly Parton, I don’t know her.”

“Do you think...” I paused and looked back again. “Do you think she’s glamping here?”

Quinn shrugged as he and Jasmine started walking up the stairs. “She had a key, so she’s definitely glamping, but I don’t know if that was Gia Nyx. Mom handles all that stuff. And sorry, buddy, I couldn’t give you that information even if I knew. Private.”

“Right, right.” I nodded, still frozen to the spot I’d been in when she walked by. Was that her? It couldn’t be. Could it?

Quinn held the front door open, and Jasmine walked in. “You coming?” he called.

My head snapped up. “Right. Yep.” And I jogged up the steps into the house.

I heard the screen door slam behind me.

“Hey, Jasmine,” Quinn called. “Did you see how weird Jackson was acting just now?” Quinn laughed and I stifled a groan.

He was not going to let this go—things were about to get brutal. But if that was really Gia Nyx? Worth it.



- *Gia*

“I can’t wait for you to get here,” I said.

My sister Lindsey squealed so loudly over the phone, it could have woken the neighbors—if there were any neighbors. I didn’t actually know where the other glamping cabins were, and I was pretty far from The Big House.

“I know, it’s just two weeks and I can’t wait! Your tour took *forevvver*! It’s been like, six months since we’ve all gotten together, and even then, we got to see you for like, what? One night? It’s been entirely too long.” I saw her flop down onto her sofa in her new Nashville condo—the condo I’d only seen through video calls, and I hated that.

“It has. But you’ll be here for a couple of days, and we’ll catch up on everything. And I mean everything.” I pulled open a dresser drawer and dropped in a stack of T-shirts I’d folded. “You’ve been dodging all my questions about your latest job, and you’re going to come clean.”

Lindsey crossed her heart. “I will. As soon as I see you.”

I paused. “Did you have your fingers crossed when you just said that?” I put my face right up to the screen, as though I could rewind and see what she had done.

Her eyes went big. “No! I didn’t. I—e

“Um-hmm. You better start getting ready, Linds. You’re not going to be able to evade me once you’re here. Don’t forget, I

know all your tickle spots.”

Lindsey sat up straight. “No. Absolutely not. No tickling.” Lindsey’s eyes widened. “If you, if you—” Lindsey sputtered. “Georgina Elyse Nixon, I will tell on you!”

There was a beat, and then we both burst out laughing. I fell onto the bed, the clothes I was putting away forgotten. “Less than two weeks, and y’all will be here.”

“Hey, show me your place,” Lindsey said. “Is that a chandelier I see?”

“It is.” I jumped off my bed and flipped the phone screen so I could pan around the room, starting with the chandelier. “It’s got crystals that are both hanging and at the end of twisted wires, and it’s got bronzed leaves laced throughout.” I moved the camera toward the floor. “And then it’s got wide, rough-cut wood floors, like they’re made out of old barns, or something, but then it’s also got tufted velvet chairs.” I continued to move the phone around. “And then this tiny kitchen with the fabulous coffee maker.” I sat down on a stool and flipped the camera back toward me.

“It looks awesome. I can’t wait to see it.”

“Me, too.”

“And don’t forget,” Lindsey pulled a blanket over her lap, “we have to plan your big two-seven. You’re almost old, now, you know?”

“Ugh. Like you’d let me forget. Do we have to?”

“Yes, old lady, we do. I know you’ll have a big celebration when you’re back here in Nashville with your team and your friends, but it’s your actual birthday when we’re there. We’ve got to do something.”

“Wait. Did you just call me old lady? You’re the one under a blanket in the middle of summer.”

“What? It’s cold in here.” She straightened out the blanket. “Do you recognize this one?”

I nodded and swallowed hard. I’d know my grandma’s handiwork anywhere. “I love it.”

She gave me a small smile. “Me, too. You got yours?”

I walked over to my suitcase and unzipped the inside flap. I pulled out the small blanket with a flourish. “I don’t go anywhere without it.”

We both smiled.

“Alright.” I clapped my hands together. “Before we get all maudlin, I’m going to go. Finish unpacking. Check out the place. Fall onto the chair out back and just do nothing.”

“Ooh, nice use of *maudlin*. Good word. Have you used that in any of your songs yet?”

I laughed. “I’d throw something at you if you were here.”

“Two weeks, and I’ll let you.”

I pushed a pile of clothes over and sat on the edge of the bed. “Sounds good. We’ll talk soon?”

“Talk soon.”

“Love you, Linds.”

“Love you, G.”

We clicked off at the same time, and I fell back onto my bed. Maybe the unpacking could wait.

I jumped up and grabbed my notepad and pen, then sat up against the headboard. I placed the tip of my pen on the paper.

Hmm.

Maudlin, maudlin... What rhymed with *maudlin*?

Chapter 3

- *Gia*

The stream of cars pulling into this place was never going to end.

I took a sip of my coffee and wished for the eighth millionth time that I had paid closer attention to the details when I booked my cabin. Somehow, I missed the whole, *we also have an event venue that is seemingly booked 24/7, so that privacy you're hoping for...? Yeah, not so much*, part of the website.

I must've missed it because I was so excited to be at this perfect place in the even more perfect location. Just over an hour from a major airport in Merit, North Carolina, and less than a three hour drive to Charlotte.

Charlotte.

My stomach flipped, and I immediately placed my hand over it, trying to quell the feeling. I wasn't going to let my mind go there—I needed to focus on the visit from my family and all the things coming up on my schedule.

Easing lower into my Adirondack chair, I kicked my feet up on the deck rail. The sun had been up for a while, but the trees filtered the light, letting the soft, lemony yellow rays fall all around me. At least the beauty of this place was as expected—maybe better than I had expected. And sipping coffee on my back deck every morning was one of my favorite things so far.

Booking this glamping cabin was the right thing for me, even with the event venue on the property. If I was being fair, the venue itself—a big red barn—wasn't exactly nearby, and I just needed to stay out of the way so no one would see me. I was here to get away from my very public life in Nashville and on the road. I wanted to be out of the public's eye for a minute before I had to get back to the city and start it all over again.

I sank deeper in my seat, to the point I was practically lying down with my coffee cup balanced on my chest. If I moved my head *just so*, I could probably still sip...

Bang!

Clatter, clatter.

I shot up out of the chair and watched my coffee cup flip over itself, the contents pouring out like a slow-motion movie. But it was only *like* a slow-motion movie, because time did not slow down enough for me to move out of the way, and I found my top covered in lukewarm, creamy, java goodness. Thankfully, I didn't like coffee as much as I used it as a carrier for cream and sugar, so I didn't get burned, I got... *sticky*.

I guess that's what you get when you try to lie down and drink coffee at the same time.

I leaned against the deck rail and peered through the trees, trying to see what caused the big bang I heard. I could make out some type of four-wheel vehicle—a Gator, maybe?—and a whole bunch of boards on the ground behind it. A tall guy was picking up the boards and placing them onto the back of the

vehicle, and whoops! Now he was picking up his cowboy hat that had fallen off when he went for the boards. The way he jammed it back onto his head made me wince. He grabbed a toolbox and fiddled around a bit, then he finished up and pulled away. He didn't make it far before it all happened again, the same big *bang*, but this time, it was accompanied by the crash of the toolbox hitting the ground.

I couldn't hear the specific expletives he was using from where I was, but the man was definitely mumbling something.

So, I had a choice. Stand here and watch how this was going to play out, or go and help the man. I sighed as I pushed away from the rail, glancing down at my T-shirt and jean shorts. I could run in and change, but that would take too long. And the coffee spill wasn't *that* bad. From what I could tell, you might consider it... abstract art. Yeah, I was going with that. When I was in Nashville I had to care about how I looked all the time, and I couldn't bring myself to do it while I was purposefully trying to get away from all that on this little vacation. I did pull my baseball hat on, though, just in case.

I jogged down the stairs of my deck and cut through the trees. I was almost to the path he had been driving on when his head popped up at my approach, his deep blue eyes peering at me from under the brim of his cowboy hat. I practically froze in my spot.

This man was one of the most handsome cowboys I'd ever seen—and I'd seen my fair share.

He must not have been having the same thought about me,
though, because out of his mouth popped the words—

“Horse face!”



- *Jackson*

What did I just say?

“What did you say?”

I shook my head and briefly closed my eyes. Gia Nyx—*the Gia Nyx*—was standing in front of me. She had a baseball cap pulled low over her eyes, and all her curly blond hair was pulled back behind it, but I would know her anywhere. I *knew* it was her when I thought I saw her here last week.

“Sorry. You caught me off guard.” I motioned to her shirt. “I wasn’t expecting to see a horse walking out of the trees.” I cleared my throat. “Not that you’re a horse, but your shirt...”

Gia pulled the hem of her T-shirt out and away from her body, looked down at her shirt, then threw her head back and laughed. *That laugh*. For all that I knew about Gia Nyx, her laugh was not something I’d heard before. It was as musical as her singing. My smile took over my face in response. She chuckled and stepped onto the path. “It does look like a horse face!”

I was still smiling when I said, “You didn’t know you had on a horse T-shirt?”

She pulled at the hem again and glanced down. “It was just plain white when I started.” She motioned to the spilled toolbox and the boards on the ground. “The big bang made me jump, and my cup of coffee went tail-over-top. I thought it

looked more like abstract art, but I definitely see the horse now.” She smiled.

I swallowed hard because this situation was surreal. I stretched out my hand. “Hi. I’m Jackson.”

She hesitated and then replied, “Gia.”

I nodded. *I just shook hands with Gia Nyx. Did she hesitate because she was going to tell me a fake name?* “Sorry about your shirt.” I ran my hand around the back of my neck. “The coffee didn’t burn you, did it?”

Gia smiled. “Nah. Coffee is just my excuse to have cream and sugar. It was lukewarm and almost gone.” She wiped her hand down the shirt. “I could’ve changed, but you looked like you needed help, sooner rather than later. So, if you don’t mind the fact that I smell like a coffee shop, where do you want me to start?”

I did not, in fact, mind that she smelled like a coffee shop—I loved coffee. “Uh, that would be great. I’ll grab the boards if you could start with the hardware that spilled all over.”

“On it.” She crouched down and swiped up some screws and nails, dropping them into the toolbox. “I can’t tell if these go in any order.” Gia looked up and caught me staring at her, and a small smile appeared on her face before she resumed scooping up the metal.

I started from where I stood. *Great. She caught me staring at her like some kind of creeper.* “No. Nope. If you can get it all in there, I can organize it later. I need to get out to the lake.”

I moved to the bundle of boards that had fallen and picked them up, positioning them again on the back of the Gator, and then kneeled to help Gia. *Helping Gia*. This was the strangest day of my life.

Gia reached under the Gator and picked up a couple of screws. “What’s going on at the lake?” She dropped the screws into the toolbox. Washers, screws, nuts, and nails had scattered everywhere, along with a handful of tools, and everything needed to be picked up. My mess couldn’t be the cause of someone’s flat tire.

“Wedding. I thought the florist was going to lose it, so I said I’d put the foliage and greenery up around the arbor. Brace it, too, while I was out there.”

Gia peered up at me from under her hat brim. “You’re—” She coughed and cleared her throat. “You’re getting married today?”

I almost fell flat before I caught myself on the side of the Gator. “No! I’m not... no.” I shook my head. “Nope, not my wedding. If there is one thing I am not doing today, it’s getting married.” I shook my head again.

Gia chuckled and grabbed a couple more washers off the ground. “Okay. Got it. No wedding for you today.”

“No wedding for me, period.” It was true, I was never getting married—not after everything I’d witnessed—but I didn’t need to blurt it out like that. This woman had me off my game. I was reacting to her like I had never had a conversation

with a beautiful woman before, which wasn't the case... but I had definitely never spoken with Gia Nyx before.

She laughed and stood, brushing her hands over the back of her shorts. "Understood. So not your wedding, but...?"

I closed and latched the toolbox, then placed it on the footbed on the passenger's side. "I don't know."

Gia placed her hands on her hips and tilted her head to the side. "Okay. Now I'm just confused."

I smiled. "I own the flower farm next door. When there's an event here, the florists use me. When I met with her earlier, she had missed the fact that the lake wasn't right next to the venue. She looked overwhelmed already, so I said I'd take care of the arbor. We finished up all the other flowers earlier, so this is the last thing on my list."

"Ah. That makes sense, then." Gia rested her hand on the stack of wood. "So you think you can make it?" She paused for a moment and canted her head to the side. "Or are you going to have a three-peat?"

"I think I can make it."

She patted the lumber. "All right, then. Good luck with it." She took one step back, off of the path.

I started toward the front seat but stopped. I couldn't let this go without addressing it. "Hey, Gia."

"Yeah?"

“Um, so...” How should I say it? “You want to be known as... just Gia?”

She went still for one second before she gave me a small smile. “If it’s okay with you, then, yeah. Right now, I’m just Gia.”

I smiled and nodded. “Just Gia, it is.” I jumped into the Gator. “See you around, Just Gia.”

She smiled big and waved. “Not if I see you first.”

I burst out laughing and slowly moved the Gator out. I could tell my smile took up my whole face. And why wouldn’t it?

I had just hung out with my all-time favorite celebrity crush, *Just Gia Nyx*, and for the first time in forever, I felt like my old self.

Then I heard her call out, “Jackson!”

Chapter 4

- *Gia*

“Jackson! Hey, Jackson!” I didn’t know exactly why I was running after him, but there I was, running after him. Maybe it was because he was the first guy in forever that felt like he was talking to me, Gia, not Nashville star, Gia. *Just Gia*. I kind of liked that. I could feel the smile growing on my face.

Jackson came to a stop, and the boards on the back rocked precariously. I reached out my hand to stabilize them.

Jackson jumped out of the Gator. “What is it? Are you all right?” His gaze ran up and down me like he was looking for an injury or a snake bite or something.

I slowly raised a hand. “Whoa, there. Sorry, nothing’s wrong, really. I just, I thought...” I stammered. “I thought maybe you could use some help.” I smiled and shrugged, continuing to hold on to the boards.

Jackson’s forehead creased with confusion. “You want to help? You’re not hurt?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Nope, just wanted to help. If nothing else, I could hold on to these boards while you drive. You know, to make sure you actually make it to the lake. I’d hate to see another rendition of the *great bouncing boards debacle*.”

He cocked his eyebrow. “Is that what we’re calling it now? The great bouncing boards debacle?”

I grinned. “You have a better name for it?”

He shook his head and smiled, and a dimple popped in his right cheek. I almost had to take a step back, I was so surprised. How had I missed that? Must’ve been his overall good looks that kept me from seeing that detail. I swear, that dimple, combined with that little bit of silver at his hairline, made his blue eyes sparkle.

I cleared my throat. “So what do you say? You want an assistant, or...” He hadn’t responded yet, and I wondered if I had made a big mistake.

He reached out his hand and briefly touched my shoulder, and my stomach did another little dip. *What was up with that?* He waved to the passenger seat. “Yes. Yeah. Get in. Help would be great.”

We both jumped into the Gator, and I immediately turned around and grabbed onto the wood. “Ready when you are.”

“Then let’s go.”

Jackson pulled out slowly while I took a look around the rest of the Gator. “You’ve got a lot of leaves and greenery back here. How big is the arbor?”

“Big enough for the bride and groom to stand under, but not so big that it messes up the beauty of the lake.” He glanced over at me. “Have you been out to the lake?”

I nodded. “It’s beautiful. It was one of the first things Rose suggested I check out when I got here.” Rose O’Connell and her sons owned The Farm, where I was staying. It consisted of

a handful of glamping cabins, horse trails, the event barn, the lake, and a working organic strawberry farm. I had missed strawberry season, but I got a small taste every morning with Rose's homemade strawberry jam and biscuits. "Do you know Rose?"

Jackson smiled. "I do. Very well. No one is better than Rose."

I nodded in agreement. I'd had a handful of meals at The Big House, and Rose was a lovely woman. She reminded me of my mom. I reached my hand up, placing my palm over my upper chest, and pressed. I missed my mom—I missed my whole family. Thank goodness they were planning to visit.

We pulled up near the lake and Jackson grabbed the boards. "Could you gather up some of the greenery and carry it over?" He motioned with his head toward the arched wooden structure that was erected at the end of the dock.

I reached into the back to pick up some of the different leaves. "That wasn't there two days ago when I was out here."

Jackson dropped the boards onto the dock and made his way back to the Gator. He pulled his cowboy hat off and tossed it into the back, then ran his hand through his wavy, sun-kissed brown hair. It fell back into place... perfectly. "Right. Either Quinn or I set it up before a wedding. He hasn't decided yet if he wants it to be a permanent fixture." He picked up the toolbox and another bucket that had been behind the seat. "I set it up last night and didn't think it felt stable enough, so I

wanted to brace it.” We walked toward the dock, both of us with our hands full. “Have you met Quinn yet?”

“I met him on my first night here, both him and Jasmine.” Quinn was one of Rose’s sons, and she had gone all out for dinner that night. It had been a while since Jasmine, Quinn’s girlfriend, had been able to join them, so she made one of her favorite meals—chicken and gravy over biscuits. It was divine. “I liked them both. Jasmine is hilarious.”

I had envied Jasmine that night. It was obvious how head-over-heels Quinn was, and Rose positively doted on her. All the love and sharing reminded me of dinners at home with my family—minus the boyfriend part. And I was struck at how something seemingly so normal as a family dinner had overwhelmed me with longing. Longing for something I just didn’t have... couldn’t have, if the last few years were any indication.

I shook my head and tried to dislodge those thoughts. I wanted to be here, in this moment, right now. Doing something that seemed normal. Something far away from the trappings of a Nashville star. And with an incredibly handsome, incredibly tall, well-built man, who didn’t seem to want anything from me. I’d been the one to ask him if I could tag along, after all.

Jackson crouched next to his toolbox and rifled through it. “Jasmine is great, and so is Quinn. But I’ll deny it if you ever say so.” He smirked, and that dimple popped again. *That dimple!*

“Your secret is safe with me.” As soon as I said it, my stomach sank. I didn’t want to think about his secrets—that only made me think about my own.

“I’m going to brace the base of this. You want to grab the rest of the greenery? Then I can place it.”

I smiled and moved to the end of the dock. “On it.”

Right as I reached the Gator, a group of four or five people came walking up the path. They were all dressed nicely, and it was obvious they were here for the wedding. I quickly turned and tried to keep my back to them. I pulled my cap down further over my eyes and then held the foliage up high in my arms to help shield my face. I’d gotten pretty adept at hiding my face over the years.

I hadn’t expected anyone to show up here, which was not smart on my part. Someone always showed up. Or if I was breaking all my rules, like I was doing today, I was the one who showed up. Jackson would have never seen me if I hadn’t walked through the trees to help him out. Of course, that meant I wouldn’t have met him. And I was enjoying the normalcy of hanging out with Jackson, even if it did mean I was caught off guard by the wedding guests.

I placed the greenery on the deck. then brushed my hands off, making sure to keep my back to the land. “Some people just showed up.” I motioned over my shoulder. “Is it already time for the wedding pictures?”

Jackson dropped his hammer into the toolbox and pushed on the arbor, testing its stability. He must’ve been happy with it

because he didn't pick the hammer up again. He reached for the greenery and looked up at the shore, and I glanced over my shoulder. The people had moved closer, but not too close.

“Official pictures aren't for several more hours. They're probably just checking the place out.” He rummaged through the bucket and pulled out some thin wire and a wire cutter. “Hand me a couple of those stems—just grab a little of everything.”

I pulled together a small bunch and he twisted the wire around the stems. “Perfect. Just like that. Keep 'em coming.”

Over the next several minutes, I handed the leaves to Jackson while he strung them together. In no time, I was helping him wrap the arbor—I held the leaves in place while he wired them to the frame.

“This is like a game of Twister!” I laughed. Jackson reached above my head while I held the garland in place, and I liked how close we were a bit too much.

“Right hand, yellow,” he replied, and that dimple of his twinkled. *Gah!* That thing was going to be the death of me.

Within fifteen minutes, the work was done. I thought he was going to wrap the whole arbor, but instead, he created an asymmetrical design that wouldn't have occurred to me, and it was stunning.

“Jackson, it's beautiful. The happy couple is going to be so... happy.” I grinned at him. “Step back here with me and look—”

“Gia!”

And that was the last thing I heard before I grabbed Jackson’s hand, and we both hit the water.



- *Jackson*

We surfaced at the same time. Gia was laughing and sputtering, wiping her hands down her face. I was impressed she could laugh after falling into a lake.

“What are you doing in here?” She splashed water at me, then ducked back under and came up, her curly hair hanging smooth behind her. Her dark eyelashes were spiky points and her blue eyes looked bluer than ever, and in the bright sunlight and the reflection off the water, I saw a smattering of freckles across her nose and the tops of her cheeks.

I went under before she caught me staring at her. *What world am I in that I am fully clothed and in the middle of the O’Connell’s lake with Gia Nyx?* I pushed myself back to the surface. “Isn’t it obvious? I came in after you. What if you couldn’t swim?”

Gia flipped onto her back and started floating. “Thank goodness you were here to dive in and save me. You’re practically my hero.”

“It’s the least I could do... since you pulled me in.” I could not have stopped smiling right now if I tried. “What if I couldn’t swim?”

She laughed again. “Honestly, it didn’t go through my mind—grabbing you was just my first reaction.”

Please let grabbing me always be your first reaction. And then I wanted to kick myself for being a moron.

She glanced over and gave me a small smile. “I’m glad you can swim.” She continued to float. “I grew up in the country. Finding a new swimming hole to try out was the goal of every summer.”

I knew she grew up in the country. I’d listened to a lot of her interviews over the years, but swimming had never come up.

“Hey! My hat!” She floundered in the water, trying to grab her baseball cap that was floating by, and I dove and grabbed it.

“Got it!” I pushed my way through the water and placed the hat on her head.

She grinned at me from under the brim. “Thanks. You just keep saving me.”

We were both grinning at each other, and I was still in a state of disbelief when a noise from the land drew our attention.

“Oh, sugar!” Gia twisted in the water and made sure her back was toward the shore. “How’d I forget about those people?”

I knew why I forgot. My mind wasn’t on a thing but Gia. I needed to pull myself together—I was a grown man, after all. “Maybe we should get back?”

Gia ducked under the water and came back up. “Yeah.” She began a slow swim toward land, and it was obvious I was a lot taller than Gia—I was walking already. “Oh, my gosh, I didn’t

even think. I know I'm on vacation, but you've got work to do—you've got the wedding!"

"It's okay," I said. "The arbor was the last thing on my list today. Everything else was already done."

"Oh, good." She blew out a breath. "You know, this would be a whole different kind of photo bomb if we ended up in the happy couple's pictures."

I chuckled. "I'm pretty sure Quinn would fire me. Permanently." I glanced up at the people who were still hanging around. "Gia." I spoke quietly, making sure my voice wouldn't carry over the water. "What can I do to help?" I didn't know what was routine for her, but it was clear she was trying not to be noticed.

She bit the corner of her lower lip and huffed out a breath. "Can you bring the Gator down here and pick me up—maybe block me with it when you drive down here?"

"Can do."

I walked out of the lake, water sluicing down my legs. I knew she only asked me for a ride, but it felt a lot bigger than that.

I stepped onto the dock and grabbed my toolbox, then headed up to the Gator. I gave a small nod to the people—I didn't want to encourage them, but I also didn't want to be rude to Quinn's venue guests. I put on my hat and drove down to the water's edge, then I grabbed the rest of the things off the dock while Gia slipped into the Gator, head down.

I pulled out and purposely drove away from the guests so we wouldn't have to go past them.

Gia shot me a questioning look.

"I practically grew up on Quinn's farm. I know all the paths. I'll get you back to your place, and hopefully, we won't run into anyone else." I had to admit that having her to myself for a while was also motivating me to keep off the main paths.

For someone who was a big star with a bunch of money, she seemed down to earth. She always sounded that way in interviews, but that didn't mean it would translate in real life. It was unexpected. I had a lot of experience with wealthy people, and it didn't usually go that way.

Gia glanced over her shoulder while keeping her head down before she turned back to the front. "Maybe I got lucky, and they didn't figure out who I was."

I wasn't sure how that was possible—I would recognize this woman anywhere. I glanced back. "I hope so." And I did. I didn't want anything to distress her. And even though all I was doing was driving away, somehow it made me feel like I was her knight in shining armor.

It had been a long time since I'd felt this good—soaked clothes and all.

Chapter 5

- *Gia*

Though the day was getting warmer, the combination of the breeze created by the drive in the open-air Gator and my wet clothes caused goosebumps to break out all over me. I crossed my arms and briskly rubbed my hands up and down.

Jackson looked over at me. “You cold?”

I dropped my hands and ran them over the tops of my legs. “Just a little chill.”

“We’ll be out of this shade and in the sun in just a minute. That should help.”

“Oh, good.” I glanced around at the trees we had been driving through. “I had no idea this place was so big. I should have realized when I saw there was a lake on the property.” I glanced at Jackson. “You said you practically grew up here? That must’ve been fun.” I had loved kicking around Nanna’s old country place with my brother and sister.

Jackson didn’t reply right away. “Yeah. I spent a lot of summers here as a kid. And Quinn’s parents didn’t mind what we did as long as it didn’t get in the way of the strawberries.”

And I’d assumed he grew up here. “So where are you from?”

He shot me a grin. “Are we playing twenty questions?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.” *Maybe not.* I knew I was the one asking all the questions, but being in the public eye all the time made me wary of anyone who wanted to get too personal.

“How about this,” I offered. “Instead of twenty questions, we’ll make it one question. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“So where did you grow up?”

He laughed. “You just couldn’t help it, could you? You could have asked anything, but that question had already caught your curiosity, and nothing was going to change that.”

I reached up and grabbed the handle on the dash of the Gator. “You know me so well.” And funnily enough, it kind of felt like he did. *Weird*. I gave my head a small shake to clear my thoughts. Hopefully, it would clear my mind of everything I’d been thinking about Jackson. For example, that he was mighty handsome. But also, not a complication I needed in my life right now. Managing my dream for me and my family was complicated enough.

“Okay, then. Out with it. Where did you grow up?”

Without a bit of hesitation, Jackson replied, “New York.”

I tipped my head. “As in New York City? Or state?”

Jackson quirked an eyebrow. “I hate to even say it, but there’s only one New York. And that’s the city. Manhattan, to be specific.”

“Huh. I did not see that coming.”

Jackson laughed. “Was it my use of the word y’all? That usually throws people.”

It was my turn to laugh. “I can see how that might happen, but I didn’t hear you say that. You just seem like you fit here.”

He shot me a smile. “I agree.”

We came to a stop and Jackson jumped out of the Gator. “Give me a sec.” Jackson jogged up the path a bit and then veered into the woods. He was back in no time. “I wanted to check before I pulled out. The coast is clear.”

My hand flew up to the base of my throat. “You checked to see if there were any guests out there before we went that way?”

Jackson cocked his head. “Yeah. You said you didn’t want anyone to see you, but that’s also the best path for the sunlight. Don’t want you freezing to death.”

I couldn’t believe it occurred to him to check. It was incredibly thoughtful, and he would never know what that meant to me. Without thinking, I reached out and placed my hand on his leg. “Thank you, Jackson.”

I sat back in my seat and smiled.



- *Jackson*

Now I was the one with goosebumps, and it had nothing to do with my wet clothes.

Gia swiveled toward me. “So, what’s your question for me?”

I knew we didn’t have much time left. I made the ride back to her place as long as possible, just to stay with her a little longer. It’s not like I was ever going to have this chance again.

“Hmm. I already know a lot about you, because you’re...” I bit back my words—I almost said famous. “Just Gia.” There. I glanced over at her and she smiled. “I’ve read a lot of your interviews.”

She smirked. “I wouldn’t believe everything you read.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s intriguing.”

“Not really. Just the truth.”

I nodded. “Okay, I’m going to make this count.” What I really wanted to ask her was, *What are you doing for breakfast tomorrow?* But I’d bet good money that wasn’t the kind of question she was expecting.

“How about...” I paused, considering my options. “If you ever got a tattoo, what would you get and why?”

“How do you know I don’t already have a tattoo?”

“Lots of interviews.”

She laughed. “You’re right. I am not a tattoo girl. But that’s two questions.”

“Technically, it’s one. There was only one question mark.”

She pushed my shoulder and I swerved the Gator, just for effect. She laughed and grabbed the safety bar. I glanced over to see the big smile on Gia’s face, and I couldn’t wrap my head around how easy it was to be with her. A rich, famous star, who was acting like we had known each other for ages. It was confounding.

“Okay, I’ll answer your two questions, but I would like it noted for the record that I’m answering out of the goodness of my heart, not by the rules of the game.”

“Noted.”

Gia turned her face up to the sun. “I would get a tiny little sunshine. Because every beautiful sunny day reminds me of my nanna.”

Suddenly, I had a hard time swallowing. And that ache in my chest that had been a constant for the past year, but had subsided a bit while I was with Gia, came roaring back.

“Has she—” I coughed to clear my throat.

“She passed away about a year ago.”

I nodded. Somehow I had missed that piece of information about her life. I pulled up to the spot where our day had started and turned toward Gia. “Same with mine.”

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she quickly brushed them away. “I’m so sorry.” She wiped at a few more tears and chuckled. “And now I’m sorry for crying.”

I jumped out of the Gator, needing to do something to keep my emotions in check. I missed my grandparents every day, but especially my grandmother.

Gia stepped out on her side and braced her hand on the frame. “That took a turn I wasn’t expecting.” She looked down at the ground and then back up at me. “It still hurts, obviously.”

“I know what you mean.” I nodded.

I walked around the Gator to her side. I needed to do something to get us back to the fun conversation we’d been having.

I motioned to her shirt. “Your horse ran away.”

Her chin tucked in. “What?” She pulled out the hem of her shirt and looked down, then started laughing. “Oh my gosh, now it’s just a big brown blob.”

“No more horse face.” I shook my head.

“No more horse face,” she repeated with a smile. *That was more like it.* But it wasn’t quite good enough.

“How about this,” I said. “Before you go, I’ll give you one more question. Not because of the rules of the game, but out of the goodness of my heart.” I repeated her words from earlier.

Without taking a breath, she said, “Will I see you again?”

I must have looked as shocked as I felt because she immediately recanted. “Forget it, forget it. Forget I said anything.”

My hand shot out of its own accord and touched her arm. “No. Yes. I mean, no, I won’t forget it, and yes. You want to get breakfast tomorrow? Or lunch?”

Was I really standing here asking Gia Nyx out on a date? Was this a date? No, this was not a date. I didn’t date. At all. Besides, she was a rich country star and I was not that. *Slow your roll, Jackson, slow your roll.*

Gia bit her lip and glanced down at the ground, then back up at me. “I don’t know if that’s the best idea. You saw what we had to go through, and that was in a relatively private place.”

“Of course. I wasn’t thinking.” *Because all blood flow stopped going to my brain as soon as I realized I might get the chance to spend more time with you.* “Besides, you don’t want to miss one of Rose’s meals.”

Gia laughed. “I’m here for like, six weeks. I’ll have plenty of meals.”

Ah! Another question answered.

“We can do something else.”

Gia looked around the path, then back to me. “You know what? Let’s do it. Tomorrow is Sunday, and in the South, that usually means a lot of people will be going to church. That’s the safest time for me to be out in public, and I haven’t gone into town since I’ve been here. What do you say to breakfast?”

This was happening. “Okay, great. If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

“Shall I pick you up, or...”

She shook her head. “Nope. How about we just meet at the diner at nine.”

“Nine, it is.” I motioned over my shoulder. “I better head over to The Barn and make sure the florist knows everything is ready for the pictures. Don’t want to add to her stress.”

“Definitely not. I’ll get going, too. But I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I jumped into the Gator. “Yep. See you at nine, Just Gia.”

She gave me a two-finger salute, and I took off. *I was going to have breakfast with Gia Nyx.*

For the first time in months, even with that moment of thinking about my grandparents, I felt like myself. And I had Just Gia to thank for that.



I stood in the middle of my grams’—I meant, *my*—kitchen, and looked around.

It was time.

It hadn’t been quite a year since Grams had passed away, and her lawyer—who happened to be a good friend of mine—had given me my space, but he was getting more and more insistent that I read her will. In the beginning, he called about

once a month to check in and to see if I had any questions concerning the will. Over the past couple of months, he had called weekly—this past week he even called twice. I should put the man out of his misery and read the dang thing.

It wasn't like I was going to find any surprises inside. I was the only living relative my grandparents had, not counting my parents, and they did *not* count as far as I was concerned.

Something about the will was utterly final, but not reading it wouldn't bring my grandparents back. And since today was the best I'd felt in a long time, it was time.

I lifted the top of my grandma's rolltop desk. It stuck every single time I opened it, and I'd have to jiggle it around to get it all the way back. I could have fixed it ages ago, but I hadn't wanted to. The only time I heard my grams come close to saying a swear word was when she was trying to open the desk, and she would mutter "dagnabit" under her breath while she wrestled with the thing. It made me chuckle every time, so the stuck rolltop was going to stay.

I pulled the sealed legal document out of the mostly empty desk drawer. I may not have gone through the official will, but I'd gone through all the other paperwork in the house when I moved in. I'd been handling things on the farm for years, so none of that was a surprise. Finding a stack of love letters between my grandparents *was* a surprise, and when I read through them, I experienced all the emotions.

Ripping through the seal, I pulled out a small sheaf of papers. I was speed-reading through the document—now that

it was open, I just wanted to get to the end so I could call Colton and tell him it was done.

And that's when I saw it.

I held the final piece of paper in my hand as the rest of the pages fluttered to the floor.

What on earth had my grandmother done?

Dagnabit!

Chapter 6

- *Gia*

I was early.

I forgot that when you're in a town as small as Henryville Township, North Carolina, getting from one side of town to the other just wasn't going to take you that long.

After parking on the street, I walked into The Wrangler Diner, with sunglasses on and my baseball hat pulled down low. It was more crowded than I had expected. I hadn't taken into account that some people from yesterday's wedding might still be around town today.

A bell on the diner door rang as I walked in, and a woman in a black T-shirt that read "We *Wrangle* it so you don't have to" turned her head and smiled at me, waving her hand. "Welcome to the Wrangler. Sit wherever you'd like, and I'll be by in a sec."

All the booths were taken, which was unfortunate since it was usually easier for me to hide out in a corner booth. I took a table as far from the door as possible, facing away, figuring that fewer people would need to walk by me that way.

The waitress stopped at the side of my table and held up a coffee pot. "Good mornin'. Coffee?"

I flipped over the cup sitting in front of me and replied, "Yes, please. But just half a cup."

"Just a half?"

“Yep. And a lot of cream and sugar.”

She nodded and poured the coffee. “Will it just be you?”

“One more.”

She nodded again. “Let me grab that creamer for you, and I’ll be back with another menu.”

I smiled and pulled up the notes app on my phone to jot down the saying on her T-shirt. I had a feeling some part of *We Wrangle it so you don’t have to* might inspire a lyric or two in my future.

The waitress dropped off the menus and creamer, then stepped away to greet some new customers. I tried to keep myself distracted from the thought of seeing Jackson again by focusing on what I’d have for breakfast when the bells on the door rang, and I took a quick peek over my shoulder to see if it was him, even though it was still early. My shoulders dipped when it wasn’t. I turned back to my menu and noticed three guys in a booth, all with their heads together, looking my way. It might not have meant anything... or it might have meant they recognized me.

One of the guys scrolled through his phone and then held it up for the other two, and their heads swiveled back and forth between the phone and me before one of them grinned.

Oh yeah, they recognized me.

The three of them practically fell off their bench seats trying to slide out, and one caught himself and then kind of hung on

for a moment with his head down. Then there they were, standing at my table.

“Hey, we thought that was you,” said the slim, tall guy. He pulled off his trucker hat and ran his hand through his hair as he spoke. Manners? Maybe.

I’d been in this situation countless times, but seldom when I was all alone. And these guys smelled like stale alcohol. I scrunched my nose. This was going to take some finagling.

“It’s me, all right,” I said with a flat tone.

“I mean, it’s you. Gia Nyx, the country star.” The second guy wasn’t as tall as the first, and his hands were jammed in his pockets. He swayed a little where he stood.

The third guy pulled out a chair and sat, throwing his elbows on the table and leaning in. “I’m so hungover, I can’t keep standing,” he said. “But it’s super cool you’re here. Hey, Don, isn’t it cool? Get a picture. I can’t wait to blast this all over the place.”

I scooted my chair back and glanced over my shoulder for my waitress, who was nowhere to be seen. A couple of other people were looking our way, so I figured I could handle this if anything went south. *Please, don’t go south, please don’t go south.*

“I’m waiting for someone,” I said. “So how about we get that picture, and then you guys can be on your way. But if you’d do me a favor and not blast it all around, I’d appreciate it.” The picture was usually enough to make people happy, and

sometimes they actually liked “doing me a favor.” Made them feel special. I wasn’t sure that was going to work with these guys, though. I didn’t like the smirks I was seeing.

I knew it was a mistake to come here this morning. My picture was always showing up online, but it was my fault that my private vacation was going to be revealed before it had barely started.

I looked around for my waitress again when the first guy—Don, apparently—sat at the table, too. He threw his head back and slouched all the way down. “Can someone turn down these lights?” He squinted and covered his eyes with his hand. This was getting to be too much.

“Okay, guys. Come on. My friend—”

“We need autographs.” He leaned forward and pulled some napkins out of the holder. “You got a pen?”

I did have a pen, not that I was going to tell him.

“I—”

“Who you waitin’ on? Another country star?” the first guy who sat down asked. “Or that guy you were with yesterday that everybody at the wedding was talking about?”

Well, that explained that. Apparently, I’d been recognized yesterday.

“Yeah, is he your boyfriend? We didn’t think you had a boyfriend.”

Don laughed, but it didn't sound funny. "We could be your boyfriend."

Okay, that was enough. I had tried to be nice.

My stomach knotted as I stood and turned to the guy who had said my name. "Hey, can you get your friends to go now? I'd like to enjoy my breakfast."

"But we haven't even gotten the picture," the first guy whined and laid his head down on the table. He glanced up. "Not one with you, anyway."

I peered over at him. "Before we get that picture, you should know, there's something on your tooth." I tapped my front teeth, and wondered if I should also tell him I noticed his fly was down, or let him live with that when they surely posted these pictures? I was thinking I'd let it ride.

His head popped right back up and he winced, grabbing the front of his head with both hands. "No, ma'am. My tooth is just missin'." He bared his teeth at me, and sure enough, it was missing. I was also beginning to wonder if his brain was missing. This exchange was getting more ludicrous by the second, and I didn't like how this was feeling. Not at all.

"Hey! I've got a great idea," hungover, missing-tooth man exclaimed.

"I doubt that," I muttered. I glanced over at the door to see if Jackson was there yet. Having a guy around always helped in these situations. My pulse started to climb. *Where is he?* Even the waitress could be of help at this point.

The hungover guy pushed at the pile of napkins his friend Don had pulled out. “We don’t need napkins. She’s going to autograph my chest.”

Don jumped up from the table but had to catch himself on the back of the chair. “Dude, that’s killer. Me first.” He reached for his top button.

“Wait!” I held up my hands.

The waitress rushed up to our table. *Thank goodness.*

“Hey, what are you guys doing?” She turned to me. “Are you okay? Do you know these guys?”

I heard the bell ring and turned toward the door. *Jackson.*
Finally.



- Jackson

I was almost late.

It didn't take long to get from my farm to the diner, but my grandma's will distracted me. I was reading over the last point again, trying to figure out if what it said was what it meant, or if I was just misunderstanding.

I must be misunderstanding.

I was still distracted when I walked into the diner.

My gaze went to Gia immediately.

I didn't have time to evaluate the situation fully. I saw Kelly, the waitress, talking a million miles a minute to three guys who were definitely not from Henryville Township, all of whom were surrounding Gia.

She looked up, and I saw the look on her face change from... was it worry? Stress? Whatever it was, it had changed to instant relief when she saw me.

"Jackson!" she called out. I raised my hand in response and took one step before she ran from the table, straight at me.

She hit me with some force, her arms wrapping around my chest, and my arms instinctively wrapped around her back.

"Whoa," I said. "What's going on?" I glanced over her head at the people heatedly talking by the table she had come from.

"You know how you saved me twice yesterday?"

I frowned. “Yeah?” If saving her was going to get this kind of response, I was all in.

“Ready to save me again?”

I didn’t hesitate. “Of course.”

And then she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me.

Chapter 7

- Jackson

My mind blanked long enough to register the kiss before Gia pulled away, one arm coming down around my waist. “Thank you,” she said. “Those guys were getting ridiculous, and it’s easier if fans think I’m with someone.”

“Who are they? What did they do to you?” My heart raced.

She shook her head and grimaced. “Just jerks being jerks.”

I saw Kelly’s mouth snap closed—she looked about as surprised as I felt—and I saw two of the three guys pull out their phones, trying to get pictures.

“Kelly!” I motioned her over. She’d been a waitress here forever, and I knew her well. She slipped past the guys. “Wait here with her,” I said. “I’ll just be a second.”

I stormed over to the three guys who were now peering over each other’s shoulders, trying to see the pictures they took. Anger knotted in my gut, and my fists clenched. “Delete them. Right now,” I practically growled.

Their heads popped up like puppets. “Whatcha say?”

“Delete. Them.” I paused. “Now.”

The tallest of the group said, “Dude! You got to kiss Gia Nyx, and we got pictures. Are you her boyfriend? She never has a boyfriend. You’re like, famous now!”

His shorter friend replied, “Dude, we can *make* you famous. We’re going to—”

They had no idea how the thought of “being famous” was enough to make me blow a gasket. I’d had enough of that nonsense growing up. I clenched my fists and took a step closer, the tips of my boots almost touching the tips of his shoes. “No one is going to be famous. Except for you, when all these nice people take pictures of me throwing you out on your cans if you don’t delete those pictures. Now.”

The tall one must have been the brains of the group. He nudged his friend, his face a bit pale. “Uh... Maybe we should delete them.”

“Now you’re talking,” I replied, not taking one step back.

Their fingers flew over their phones, deleting pictures, and one guy dropped his, then scrambled to pick it up.

“Show me.” I held out my hand.

The tall guy handed over his phone, and I checked his photo app and his texts, making sure nothing had already been sent.

I handed it back and snatched the phones from the other two guys, checking for pictures, and deleting a couple they hadn’t gotten to. I tossed back their phones when I finished, and my pulse slowed.

“Let’s go, boys.” I grabbed the back of the taller guy’s shirt at the neckline—I was taller than him by inches—and reached for one of his buddies when that guy scrambled away.

“We’re going, we’re going,” he said, taking a couple of steps toward the door.

I glared at the third guy, who practically jogged past me and his friend. One of the patrons held the door open while I “helped” them all out onto the sidewalk.

The three guys hurried down the sidewalk when I called out, “I don’t want to see you back here.”

The shortest of the three glanced back at me and must’ve been feeling brave because he threw me an obscene gesture over his shoulder. I took two menacing steps their way before he pushed the guy in front of him and said, “Run!” And they took off down the street.

Maybe there was one brain between them, after all.



- *Gia*

The waitress, Kelly, and I practically had our faces pressed to the door, while several other people eating at the diner stood to watch out the windows.

When Jackson pulled the door open, Kelly and I jumped back, like we had been caught doing something we shouldn't have. We hadn't been doing anything wrong, but my face heated a bit just looking at Jackson. Those guys could have gotten out of control, and he'd been so protective of me. It left me with a deep feeling of warmth.

Jackson stepped into the diner and the place erupted with applause.

He put his hands on his hips and shook his head, looking down at the floor.

"Way to go, Jackson!" someone called out from the back, which was followed by a wolf whistle or two.

Throwing his hands up, he said, "Enough. Enough already." There was a lot of chatter while people went back to their seats.

"You okay?" He reached out and touched my shoulder.

"Yeah." I nodded. "But let's get out of here, okay?"

"Yep." He turned toward Kelly. "Kelly, what do I owe you?"

“Go, go. Coffee’s on the house.” She gave me a warm smile, and Jackson and I slipped out the door.

“My car’s this way,” I said and started walking down the sidewalk. I stopped at the most non-descript car I could rent from the rental agency. “This is me,” I said, and closed my hand over the handle, then looked at Jackson “Sorry about all that in there.”

“Hey, no problem.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “That happen a lot?”

I tried to shrug it off. I was more shaken than I wanted to admit, to him or myself. “Yes and no. I’m usually with someone, like a security guy or a friend. That’s what the kiss was all about.” I felt a blush starting to rise in my cheeks. The kiss was intended to make those guys back off, but two things happened that I wasn’t expecting. First, Jackson physically went after those guys. He handled them, and I was impressed. I’d felt it down to my toes. And second, the kiss was supposed to be purely for effect, but I had to admit, it affected me.

I pressed the car door handle and popped open the door. “Being with a guy stops the more aggressive fans.”

He nodded but didn’t say anything, and my stomach tightened. What was he thinking? “Sorry for ruining breakfast.” I opened the door fully.

“What are you going to do now?” he asked.

“For breakfast?”

“Yeah.”

I shrugged. "I'll figure out something."

"You want to stop by Rose's? I'm sure she has plenty, even if she's not expecting us."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I'm pretty sure the other cabins were rented out, so the dining room table will be full. I've seen enough of the public today. I'm just going to go back to my place."

He rubbed the back of his neck again. "Here." He held his hand out. "Give me your phone."

"O-kaay." I pulled my phone out, wondering what he was up to.

"I'm putting my number in." He tapped the phone. "Just in case you need to be saved again."

I returned his smile and the tightness in my stomach eased a bit. "Thanks, Jackson. I hope that won't happen again."

"Me, too," he said. "But just in case."

Jackson looked up the street, where a small group of people were standing outside of the diner, and he moved to put himself between me and them. *Sweet man.*

"You sure about breakfast?" he asked. "I don't have much at my place at the moment, but I can microwave a mean Jimmy Dean breakfast croissant."

I burst out laughing, and it felt good. "Thank you, Jackson. I will definitely keep that in mind."

"Okay, then."

I slipped into my seat, then looked back up at him, where he held the door. I'd wanted to spend more time with him, but perhaps this was for the best. It's not like anything would ever come of the two of us.

"I'll see you around, Just Gia."

I smiled. "Not if I see you first."

I drove away and my smile faltered.

He wouldn't have to save me again... would he?

Chapter 8

- *Jackson*

I stood on the street and watched Gia drive away.

I hated to admit to myself that her leaving—especially after not spending any time together—made me feel a little hollow inside.

I had given her my number, but it hadn't escaped me that she hadn't given me hers.

But I got it. She was a famous figure, so she couldn't be giving her number out to just anyone. There were unscrupulous people out there—I bet someone would pay good money for her number. Which made me think about my parents, and that was something I hated to do.

So I could stand here in the middle of the street and mope—*nope*. Wasn't going to finish that thought.

I fired off a text to Quinn to find out where he was, then jumped into my truck to track him down. One night of lost sleep was all I was willing to give over Grams' will. And with everything that had happened with Gia, my mind was churning.

I pulled up next to Quinn's truck at his cabin on his family's property. It was the first cabin he had renovated, but without any of the glamour elements he used in the glamping cabins. Quinn was sitting on his porch, a bunch of twinkle lights strewn all around him.

“What’s going on with that?” I asked, nodding at the pile of lights.

“They were flickering on and off like a disco ball last night. That works for some weddings, but I’d rather not have it happen out of the blue.” He was moving from bulb to bulb, testing the connection of each one. “What’s going on with you?”

I sat on the porch rail, though only for a second before I was walking the full length. I made about two passes before Quinn stuck out his boot, stopping me in my tracks.

“What’s going on?”

I glanced down at the porch, then back up.

“I know you already know, so it’s okay that I’m going to say it. That was Gia Nyx I saw here last week. That *is* Gia Nyx.”

Quinn gave a quick nod. “Yep.” He paused. “And that’s causing you to pace, because...?”

I threw my hand up in the air. “Because it’s Gia Nyx!” I said a lot louder than I expected. I fell back against the rail and rubbed my hands down my face.

Quinn chuckled and leaned back in his chair, pushing the string of lights to the side.

“I get that. And I knew something was up last week when you were acting so weird when you thought you saw her. So what—”

“She kissed me.”

“What?” Quinn sat straight up again.

“Who kissed you?” Jasmine came dashing up the cabin steps. “Tell me more, tell me more!” She fell onto Quinn’s lap, laughing. “But wait. First, I have to kiss Quinn.”

I rolled my eyes. “Make it quick. I’ve got things to do.”

Jasmine gave Quinn a loud smacking kiss, which made them both laugh, and then she leaned into his chest with one arm around his shoulders.

“So who’s kissing who, and where? Spill it!” Jasmine’s eyes were sparkling like this was the biggest news I’d ever shared. Heck, it probably was.

Quinn jumped in. “Jackson is kissing Gia.”

“No, it’s not really like that. Gia—”

“Ohh! Jackson and Gia sitting in a tree! K-I-S-S—”

I just shook my head, knowing this was exactly how this was going to go.

“—I-N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage—”

“Are you about done?” I interrupted. I didn’t have the patience to sit through the whole song.

Jasmine laughed. “Yeah, yeah I’m done. We all know what comes next.” She rolled off Quinn’s lap and into the chair next to him. “So, spit it out! What’s going on between you and Gia Nyx?”

“I was supposed to meet Gia for breakfast at the diner, but she was early. When I got there—”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. Back up, buddy. When did you meet Gia that you were already having a breakfast date? She’s only been here a couple of days.” Jasmine sat on the edge of her seat.

“It wasn’t a date.” It *wasn’t* a date. “I met her yesterday morning on my way to dress the arbor for the wedding. I dumped a bunch of stuff off the Gator, so she offered to help.”

“She just—”

“Yeah, she came through the woods to where I was on the trail. Then some wedding guests showed up and she wanted my help in keeping her cover, so after we got out of the lake —”

Jasmine stood, hands on her hips. “Jackson, your storytelling skills are sorely lacking. What do you mean, ‘When you got out of the lake?’”

Quinn tilted his head to the side. “Answer the woman.”

I sighed. “She took a step back on the dock and accidentally fell in, but before she fell in, she reached out and grabbed my arm, pulling me in with her.”

Jasmine narrowed her eyes and then sat back down. “I’ll buy that.” She waved her hand. “Continue.”

“When I brought her back to the path, breakfast came up. I’m not an idiot, so I said I’d meet her.”

“The idiot part is debatable,” Quinn muttered. I shot him a look, and he laughed.

“So you guys had such a great time at the lake and having breakfast, she kissed you goodbye?” Jasmine asked.

“No. That’s not it at all. I mean, we did have a great time. At least, I think so. But we didn’t have breakfast, we—” I stopped talking. This was ridiculous. “You know, this isn’t even the reason I came over here. I came over to—”

“You’re the one who brought it up,” Quinn said.

“Yeah,” Jasmine chimed in. “There’s no chance you’re getting away without telling us the end of the story.”

I huffed out a breath. “I’ll finish. When I got to the diner, she was already there. Some drunk or hungover guys were giving her a hard time, so when I walked in, she kissed me like I was her boyfriend.”

“Ooh,” Jasmine breathed. “That’s so romantic.”

I scowled. “It wasn’t. It was just... a ploy. She told me guy fans typically back off if they think she’s with someone. So she made them think she was with someone.”

Jasmine clasped her hands and held them up under her chin. “And that lucky someone was you.”

I nodded. “That lucky someone was me.”

Jasmine let out a big sigh and sat back in her seat. “That’s a great end to your story, Jackson, even if you are a bad storyteller.” She reached across the arm of the chair and picked up Quinn’s hand. “Ending with a kiss—always a classic.”

I had to refrain from rolling my eyes.

“So why did you come by, if it wasn’t to gloat about kissing Gia Nyx?” Quinn asked.

I practically growled and Jasmine laughed. Those two were killing me.

I paused for a moment, trying to decide how I wanted to start.

Jasmine stood. “Oh, do you want privacy? I don’t have to be here. I can go.”

I shook my head. “No, no, it’s fine. Just... just don’t tell anyone else, okay?” I paused. “Any of it. It’s all—”

Jasmine sat back down and nodded. “Of course.”

“There’s more than Gia going on here.” I pulled the folded up last page of the will out of my back pocket. “No one can know... any of it.”

I held out the page to Jasmine. “You guys read this. It’s from Grams.”

Jasmine reached for the page when I changed my mind.

“I take that back. I’m going to read it to you.” I took in a big breath. “Hold your comments and questions until the end.”

Jasmine and Quinn shot each other a look, then turned back to me.

“*Dear Jacks,*” I read.

“Your grandma called you Jacks?” Jasmine asked.

I gave a slight nod. I had hated how my mother called me Jack growing up—it always grated—and Grams always said

Jackson was too formal, so we landed on Grams for her, and Jacks for me. I think I was eight when that happened.

“Holding your comments until the end is going to be hard for you, isn’t it,” I remarked.

Jasmine shook her head. “Nope. No. Sorry. Go on.”

I took in a big breath, let it out slowly, and started reading.

Dear Jacks,

I already know it’s going to sound trite, but if you’re reading this, it means we’re gone.

Jasmine uttered a quiet “Oh,” and her hand came up to her mouth.

We were lucky to have as much time with you as we did. I don’t think that many grandparents have the joy of spending close to twenty years working with their grandson. A grandson who happens to be the best man they know.

I cleared my throat.

Your grandfather would have been so proud of all we’ve done since he passed. I’m proud of you, too.

You have loved the farm as much as we did, and of course, we want you to have it. But we want you to have something else, too.

Your grandfather and I had over fifty years together. Fifty years! Just imagine. And you got to witness a lot of it. At the same time, we got to witness you.

We want you to have what we had, Jacks. Or, at the very least, a chance to have what we had.

I looked up from where I was reading. Jasmine and Quinn were both on the edge of their seats, sitting ramrod straight.

“Here it comes,” I said, and continued reading.

We are leaving you the deed to the farm and all of the estate, on one condition.

That you give love a chance.

A chance. An honest effort. The old college try.

I started reading faster—I just wanted to get it out.

I would guess that this request is a bit shocking to you. I also think we know why you’ve made the choices you have.

So for me, and for the farm, I’d like you to try to make another choice.

You have a year from the date of my passing to make that other choice.

Just try, Jacks. For us. But mostly, for you.

You’ll know in your heart of hearts if you’ve made the effort. And all you have to do is let Colton, our lawyer and your friend, know when you’ve tried. That’s it.

We trust you, Jacks, like we always have.

If, for some reason, you can’t find it in yourself to give love a try, you can continue to live in the house and manage the property and business, but ownership will revert to your parents.

I know that may seem harsh and unfair, but that's how much we want this for you. Deep down, I think you want it, too.

We love you, Jacks.

Grams and Gramps.

I took a second to look up from the paper, not sure what I'd see on their faces.

At the exact same time, Jasmine said, "That is so sweet!" and Quinn said, "Can they do that?"

They both looked at each other and then back to me.

I shook my head. "My guess is yes. And it also explains why Colton keeps calling me."

"How long has it been since your grams passed?" Jasmine asked.

"About ten months. So, according to that, I have less than two months."

Jasmine nodded slowly.

"So we're all thinking the same thing," she said. "Right?"

Quinn nodded, and so did I.

Jasmine jumped up and clapped her hands together. "Okay! So are you going to tell Gia you're her new boyfriend or am I?"

Chapter 9

- Jackson

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold your horses, Jasmine. I’m not really going to be her boyfriend.”

Jasmine’s hands shot to her hips. “What do you mean? We literally all just agreed. Gia needs a boyfriend so people will leave her alone, and you need a girlfriend to satisfy the terms of the will and get your flower farm.” Her gaze jumped from me to Quinn, and back. “Where’s the confusion?”

Quinn stood and slid his arm around Jasmine’s waist. “Give the man a second, Jas. Let’s hear what he has to say.”

Jasmine narrowed her eyes. “Proceed.”

I snorted. “Okay, Judge Judy Jasmine. Here’s what I was agreeing to—I agree that both Gia and I need each other, and I agree that, per my grandma, I’ll try. And I will. So I guess you could call me a real boyfriend, it’s just... I know how this thing ends. And it’s exactly that. It ends.”

Jasmine continued her concentrated stare. She pulled away from Quinn and walked down the porch and back. She threw her hand up in the air. “You don’t know that. You can’t know that.” She reached for the letter. “Let me see this for a minute.”

I handed her the letter and leaned back against the porch rail.

Jasmine pointed at a line on the page. “What does she mean here, when she says, *‘I also think we know why you’ve made the choices you have,?’*”

Ah, shoot. I had almost skipped that sentence when I was reading the letter out loud—I knew it would be something that raised a question. I reached up and rubbed the back of my neck.

“She just means she knows me. It doesn’t mean anything more than that.” I hoped Jasmine would buy it, though I was pretty sure Quinn wouldn’t.

“Are you sure about that?” Quinn chuckled. *Yep, he didn’t buy it.* “You’ve been the most eligible bachelor around here for years. You’ve taken a couple of women out a couple of times, but I don’t think you’ve had a long-term girlfriend the whole time I’ve known you, and I’ve known you for over twenty years. You’re like some enigmatic, mystery man.” Quinn pointed at my chest. “Like your grandma said, you, my friend, have been making choices.”

Jasmine’s hands were back on her hips. “Enigmatic, mystery man? Spill it, Jackson.”

I shook my head. There was no way I was getting into any of that. I had my reasons for why I never had a long-term relationship, but it sure wasn’t something I was going to discuss. I had to move them off this topic.

“It’s nothing. It’s not a thing. Grams just always wanted me to date someone. Obviously, this was her last-ditch effort.” I raised my hands in front of me. “She says I have to try, so I will. If I can talk Gia into doing this thing, I’ll try. I just know how it ends. Among a million other reasons why it will end, it’ll end when she drives away to return to Nashville, and I

stay here, in the home I picked when I was sixteen, and I've picked every day since." Even Gia said it, in the short time we'd known each other, *I fit here*. I was staying. There was no future that had Gia and me together.

Jasmine stood her ground, then slid her hands off her hips. "Doesn't exactly answer my question, Jackson, but I'll let it go. *For now*." She leaned back against the porch rail. "Okay, then, what happens next?"

I shrugged. "Next, I hunt down Gia. I've got to talk to her about this whole thing, and see if she's willing to consider it. I'm jumping to a lot of conclusions here."

Quinn reached out and punched my shoulder. "That won't be a problem. There's not a better guy she could fake a relationship with."

"Now wait a second, Quinn," Jasmine said. "This is not fake. Jackson is legit going to try. Right, Jackson? Just like your grandma asked."

"Right," I said. "Just like Grams asked."

There was no reason to keep going in circles about this with these two. The words were only words at this point. I would "try," I just knew the trying wouldn't matter, as far as a relationship went. But it would matter where it mattered most—I'd have my flower farm, and my parents wouldn't.

Win-win.



- *Gia*

“It’s not the craziest thing in the world, right? Lots of celebrities do it.” I bit on the top of my pen. I had outlined my whole proposition to my sister over a video call, and she hadn’t spoken a word. “Linds?”

She leaned over and put her chin in her hand. “I guess I just don’t know why it has to be fake.”

I threw up my hand, gripping the pen. “Because I barely know the guy, isn’t that reason enough? I need to look like I’m in a committed relationship *now*, not in the amount of time it takes to actually form a committed relationship.” I put down the pen. “It can get bad. You remember that low-key stalker I had right before the last awards show?”

Lindsey grimaced. “I do. It was so creepy. Like, how did he figure out where all your promotional events would be, and at what time? And then, how did he get in the front row for all of the publicity pictures?”

I shuddered. “I don’t know how he did it. It was so weird. I mostly remember how freaked out we were when every magazine and online news outlet printed a photo of me that week, and there he was, right there, practically next to me, behind the velvet ropes, with that creepy smile.” I’d been *especially* spooked. I didn’t go anywhere without a bodyguard for the next three months. But I didn’t tell my family that.

Lindsey rubbed her chin. “I know it’s gotten worse the more famous you’ve gotten.”

I tried to act unconcerned. I had missed the mark when I didn’t do better research on The Farm. I honestly thought I was getting away from everything when I came here, including rabid fans.

I shrugged. “Having people think I’m with a boyfriend will make all the difference. A *fake* boyfriend. It’s impossible to do relationships, you know that.”

She nodded slowly. “I do know that. But maybe this time could be different...?”

I shook my head. “Linds, what aren’t you getting here? I just need a guy to fake a couple of pictures with me. That’s it. I don’t know why you’re making this bigger than it is.”

“Give me the reasons why not, one more time.”

I sighed, then sat up straight, and counted off. “I barely know him, and he barely knows me. I live in Nashville, and he lives here. He’s older than me—”

“And you’re younger than him?” Lindsey smiled.

I gave a laugh. “Yes!”

Lindsey furrowed her brow. “Does that bother you?”

I scoffed. “No! Sometimes I feel as old as the hills, his age is meaningless to me.”

“What do you mean, you feel as old as the hills?” Lindsey’s brow was still scrunched.

Oh, sugar. I didn't need to go down that road. I waved my hand. "Nothing, I didn't mean anything. His age doesn't bother me, that's all. But lastly, and probably most importantly, I'm a country singer, who tours and travels eighty percent of the year." And when you got right down to it, when it came to me, most people only saw the country star, and that was it. I didn't need a star chaser.

I slumped over. "Are those enough reasons? Come on, Linds, this is important. I need to know you have my back. When y'all are here, you're going to have to play a part, too."

Lindsey chewed on her lower lip. "Okay, okay. I'll give Mom and Dad and Paul a heads-up, but you're going to have to explain it to them when we get there. And you know none of them are going to be happy about it." She paused for a moment. "Except for maybe Paul.... He can be pretty kooky sometimes."

"Remember that time he collected all the turtles to the edge of the pond?"

"That boy is dedicated, you can say that."

I smiled at my sister. "Thanks, Linds. This is important to me. Having your support will make all the difference."

Lindsey laughed. "When haven't we had your back? You've got this."

I swallowed the ball of emotion that rose in my throat. She was right—they did always have my back. Which made what I was trying to do in Charlotte that much more difficult. I

couldn't disappoint them. I had promised. Fourteen years ago,
I had promised.

And I shouldn't be breaking that promise now.

Chapter 10

- Jackson

Unknown number: *Any chance you can come by the cabin tonight? There are a couple of things I'd like to talk to you about.*

I glanced at the text I just received.

Finally.

I'd been giving it some time before I approached Gia with the fake/real boyfriend plan, but her reaching out to me was even better. It had been three full days since I'd seen her at the diner, and after some internal arguments, the discussion with Jasmine and Quinn, and then more internal back and forth, I felt good about my plan. I'd also reached out to Colton, Grams' lawyer, so he would stop calling me every week.

Jackson: *Who is this?*

I grinned, waiting to see how she'd respond. The three little bubbles that indicated she was texting popped up and disappeared, popped up and disappeared. And then—

Unknown Number: *Um... Just Gia.*

Jackson: *I was kidding. I knew it was you. This is the only area code to contact me that wasn't familiar. What time?*

Unknown Number: *I wish you could see how hard I am squinting at you right now. You shouldn't play with a girl's heart like that. How about 7?*

I laughed at her squinting comment but raised my eyebrows at her playing with a girl's heart comment. *Interesting.*

Jackson: *You can show me tonight. See you then.*

Unknown Number: *See you.*

How alarmed should I be that I couldn't stop smiling about finally seeing Gia again? Or maybe I should be alarmed at how quickly I saved her phone number in my contacts.

I tossed my phone onto the bench seat of my old truck and put it into gear. I had a couple of hours to burn before meeting up with her. I needed to check on my team in the flower fields, get cleaned up, and grab something to eat—and be sure to grab the last page of the will.

I was so wrapped up in what I wanted to talk to Gia about, that it just hit me. What did *she* want to talk about?



I felt like I was going on my first high school date, but it was worse than that because I hadn't actually asked Gia out.

Gia answered the door and smiled. Her curly hair was piled on top of her head and a few blonde curls fell around her face. My first instinct was to reach out and tuck one of those curls behind her ear, but instead, I put my hand in my back pocket.

“Hey, there,” she said. “Come in.”

“Hey.” I stepped into the cabin. “How are you liking the place?” It had been a while since I’d spoken to someone staying in one of the glamping cabins. I’d helped out on occasion when Quinn was renovating, and I supplied the fresh flowers, but I didn’t often talk to the guests.

“I fell in love with the place as soon as I saw the photos online. It’s beautiful, and exactly what I was looking for when I booked it. I also liked how close it is to—” she cut herself off abruptly.

“You also liked...?”

She laughed and waved her hand. “Nothing. Can I get you a water? Or a coffee or cappuccino from my very fancy-schmancy coffee maker? I have all the cream and sugar you might need.”

“I’ll stick to water, thanks. But speaking of coffee, how’s the horse face T-shirt doing?”

Gia reached into the fridge and came out with two bottles of water. “Alas, once the lake washed the face away, that shirt became a stained mess. Nothing even remotely animal-like about it.” She tossed me a bottle and sat in the chair, leaving the sofa for me.

“Thanks for coming over,” she said.

“You bet.” I cracked the lid on my bottle.

“So, I have a big favor to ask.” She looked down at her bottle and fiddled with the top. “Like, a really big favor.”

Gia’s gaze met mine, and the look she gave me went straight through my ribs. She seemed... nervous. I hadn’t been expecting nervous.

“Yeah? Like what kind of big favor?”

She twisted the lid on the water bottle, off then back on. Off and then on. And then, she took in a big breath. “So, you remember how I kissed you at the diner the other day?”

I smiled. “Yes.” *I would never forget it, either, no matter how quickly it had ended.*

She took in another big breath, screwed the lid on the bottle, and set it down on the side table. She leaned down and placed her elbows on her knees, her hands clasped loosely in front of her. She sat back, and pulled her knees up to her chest, then dropped her feet back down to the floor. “I’m just going to say it,” she mumbled.

I nodded. “I think that sounds like a good idea.” I hadn’t moved a muscle since she began her nervous fidgeting.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” She slapped her hands on her knees and sat up straight. “I need a fake boyfriend, and I think you’re the perfect man for the job. What do you think?”



- *Gia*

His eyebrows flew up his forehead, and he leaned back like he was trying to get away from me.

I winced and sat back in my chair. My request hadn't exactly been smooth, and my stomach dropped at how I had already botched this. "You heard me say fake, right? Like..." My mind spun, looking for the words. "Like, not really my boyfriend, but you'll just look like you're my boyfriend. Like at the diner, how having you there shut—"

Jackson started to laugh, and I wanted to crawl under the chair until he left. What had I been thinking? I closed my eyes and wished the moment away.

"You're not going to believe this," he said, and I peeked my eyes open, "but I was going to ask you the same thing."

I flew up and out of my chair. "What? What do you mean?"

Still sitting on the sofa, he gave me a shrug. "Exactly that. I need a fake girlfriend." He coughed and cleared his throat. "I mean, I need a girl. To be a girlfriend. But it's not going to work out, so it's fake. I mean, it's real, but it's fake. You know?"

I slowly shook my head and sat back down on the chair, not able to keep my smile from crossing my face. "I don't know... but I can't wait to find out." I pulled my leg up under me and

reached for my bottle of water. “Why don’t you start at the beginning?” I took a big drink.

I couldn’t wait to hear this.

Chapter 11

- Jackson

“So there it is. In order for the farm to come to me, I have to try to have a relationship. And I know how this ends, so...”

“How does it end, exactly?” Gia had a small smile on her face, her head tilted slightly to the right.

“It just ends. You go back to your life, I go back to mine. So I can sit here all day and say I’m giving it a try, for my grams’ sake, but I think fake is more realistic since I know the ending. And fake is what you’re looking for.”

Gia nodded. “It is. I’ve given it a lot of thought, and there are a couple of ways a fake boyfriend could really help me out. The biggest one is the fact that it won’t be long until people figure out I’m here. So having a boyfriend around will discourage some of the more aggressive fans.”

“You think the guys from the diner are going to share pictures of you and where you were? I thought I deleted any pictures that were left on their phones.” Anger rose in my chest at the thought, and a wave of protectiveness crashed through me. I shook out my hands to keep them from clenching.

Gia bit her lower lip. “Oh, no. I guess that means you haven’t seen any of the social media posts?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t have social media. I hate all that publicity crap.” Hate it. My parents were all about that

stuff and I couldn't stand it.

“Then that should be a double ‘oh, no’. Jackson, what I need from you is literally all the social media stuff. That’s what will convince people of our relationship and help keep them away.” She grabbed her phone off the coffee table between us. “Here. You better see this before you agree to anything.”

I took the phone from her hand, not sure what I was going to see. I could feel my stomach tightening. *Shoot*. There were a couple of pictures of Gia in an Instagram post tagged with #GiaNyxSighting and #GiaNyxInTheWild. One shot was of Gia walking down the dock toward Quinn’s lake. I was in the background working on the arbor. The location wasn’t tagged in the picture, but like Gia said, it probably wouldn’t be long before someone figured it out.

“Wow. I didn’t even see those people from the wedding with a phone out. I was sure the pictures would have been from the diner.”

“People can get pretty creative when it comes to taking a picture. I just assume that if I’m outside of my home, it’s likely I’ll be photographed.” Gia grimaced.

I hated the thought of her having to live like that, and yet I was basically signing up for the same thing.

“So are you going to be okay with this?” she asked. “It’s just the beginning.”

I rubbed the back of my neck, then slid the phone back to Gia.

“I don’t like it, but I get it. And it works as ‘proof’ for me, too, when I talk to the lawyer about this nonsense.”

Gia narrowed her eyes. “But you won’t call it nonsense when you talk to him.”

I scoffed. “I won’t.”

Gia took in a big breath and blew it out. “Okay. Let’s get down to brass tacks. There are a couple of things I think will really sell it. My family is coming to town in ten days, so we’ll definitely need a picture or two with them. If you’re meeting the family, obviously we’re serious.”

I burst out laughing. “I’m meeting your family? How are they going to feel about this fake stuff?” I paused. “You are telling them, right?” Faking for the public was one thing, but faking in front of people we cared about was different. Yet another thing I refused to emulate in regard to my parents.

“Definitely. I’ve already talked to my sister, and she’s going to fill everyone else in before they get here.”

“And that’ll be enough?”

“My family is really supportive. They’ll do anything to help me out.”

Something crossed her face after she said that, almost like sadness, but it was gone before I caught it. And all I could think was my family experience couldn’t be further from hers.

I twisted the lid off my water bottle and took a drink. “They won’t care about the age thing?” It’s not like she was that young, but she was younger than me.

Gia gave me a little shrug. “I can’t imagine they would—it’s fake, after all. And fans are going to complain about my boyfriend, no matter what, so I think we’re good.”

“Okay, what else?”

“What we post to social media has to be spread over the next few weeks, so the relationship looks ongoing.”

“Makes sense. Still hate it, but—”

“Oh, and maybe we should get some staged pictures that I can use later, to really get the most out of this.” Gia jumped out of her chair. “Let me grab a notebook so we can jot this stuff down.”

Gia walked over to her bed where a guitar, some pens, and some notebooks were spread across it. She grabbed a notebook and a black pen, then jumped back into the chair.

After a moment of writing, she read off her page. “Okay. I’ve got a good start. The three things I need are two or three photos with my family, photos spread out over the time I am here, a minimum of one a week, and some staged photos to use in the future.” She tapped the page. “What about you? What do you need?”

My first thought was, *many things when it comes to you*. But before the thought went much further, she added, “Wait, wait. Speaking of age, I turn twenty-seven while I’m here, and that will have to be a thing. A documented thing.”

I closed my eyes and wondered if I was going to be able to handle the publicity. When I opened my eyes she was staring

right at me.

“I know it’s a big deal.” She twisted her hands in her lap.

“I’ll be okay.”

I could do this. Not just for me, but the more I got to know this woman... I could do this for the both of us.



- *Gia*

Jackson's hand went to the back of his neck. I'd noticed he did that earlier when we were discussing the social media angle. It seemed to be his go-to move when he was feeling uncomfortable. I only had a second to wonder about what that meant for our discussion before he spoke.

"I think what I'll need from this will all have to point to one specific thing."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And that thing is..." Apparently, he didn't like what he was about to say. "I'm not exactly known around town for dating anyone."

Interesting. "Yeah?"

He continued to rub his neck "Yeah. No."

I balanced my notebook on my knee. I really wanted to know what that was all about. Jackson was a very handsome man... make that very, very handsome, and easy to get along with. He'd be a catch. I was already prematurely mourning the loss of our fake relationship because he made it so easy. Not that I could have him even if it were real—I knew better.

"The only way I can think of to make people believe this—and I mean, the people in this town, not your public—is if we're seen together over the next couple of weeks. Like you making my flower deliveries with me. That way, when people

run into each other and the topic comes up, it'll be more than one person who has seen us together.”

“When the topic comes up? You dating will garner that kind of attention?” This man was becoming more intriguing by the minute.

“Yes,” he said, completely deadpan. “How long has it been since you’ve lived in a small town?”

“Point. I’ve been so far removed from small-town living that I forgot what that could mean. Everybody knows everything about everyone.” I chewed on the end of my pen. “With social media, it’s not that different, really. Are you sure you’re up for it?” *Please be up for it, please be up for it.* Having my fans and media focused on my new boyfriend would also help me out tremendously if I decided to go to Charlotte and do that whole thing. If I didn’t chicken out.

But now was not the time to think about that.

Jackson nodded once. “I’m up for it.”

“Good.” I jumped out of my seat and reached my hand across the table. “We’ve got ourselves a deal.”

Jackson took my hand and shook. “Deal.”

I leaned over and ripped the paper I was writing on out of the notebook. “Now, I’ll just sign here...” I signed on the signature line I’d created, and slid the paper to Jackson, “... and if you would sign,” I tapped the line, “there.”

Jackson picked up the paper and burst out laughing. He began to read out loud. “I hereby declare on this day and going

forward until a time accepted as mutually satisfying that the lovely Gia Nyx and the heralded—” His gaze shot up to mine. “Heralded? That was the best you got?”

I shrugged and gave him a little grin. I had a lot more, but this was fake, after all.

Jackson picked up the pen and handed it to me. “If you’re going to be ‘lovely’, at the least I should be... something. You’re the writer, give me something else.”

“How about... dashing?”

“Or powerful.”

“Maybe virile?”

He rolled his eyes. “Heroic.”

I laughed. “Rugged.”

He tilted his head. “Rugged. Rugged works.”

I bit back a grin. “Rugged it is.” I scratched out the word *heralded*, and wrote *rugged* in its place.

Jackson continued reading. “The lovely Gia Nyx and the rugged Jackson Reed agree to be in a fake relationship. The terms are as follows—” He chuckled, and reached for the pen.

Jackson signed his name, smiling as he did it.

I pulled the paper back and dashed out another line while Jackson took a drink of water. I folded the paper in half and handed it to him. “Here. For your files.”

“I think I’m clear on the terms, but thank you, anyway.” He folded the paper again and paired it with the page of the will

he had brought over. He slipped both pages into his back pocket.

“Your parents aren’t here for a while. How about we start on Monday with the deliveries?”

We both moved toward the door, and I held it open. “That sounds good.”

“Good.”

Jackson stepped onto the porch, and I leaned against the door frame. “Hey, Jackson?” He stopped and turned around. “Thanks a lot for doing this. A lot, a lot.”

He nodded. “You’re helping me out, too, don’t forget.”

“I won’t. Talk to you soon.”

“See ya’.” Jackson walked down the steps and turned toward me. “Oh, hey. Don’t forget to lock your door.” He gave me a look like he meant it, too.

“Will do.” I closed and locked the door, then listened for him to pull away. I scooped up the pen and notebook and fell onto my bed, lyrics rushing through my head.



- Jackson

When I got home, I opened up the top left-hand drawer of Grams' desk. I unfolded the papers and right before I slipped our agreement and the last page of the will into the drawer, I glanced down. I saw Gia had written an additional sentence, and I burst out laughing.

“'Til death do us part.”

Chapter 12

- Gia

Me: *So... there's been a development.*

I threw my phone down on the sofa like it had just burned me, then stomped into the kitchen area of the cabin and yanked open the fridge. I wasn't hungry, but I had to do something other than sit and stare at my phone until I got a response, which was exactly what I was tempted to do.

We had already made plans that we would do deliveries on Monday, so this text would take him by surprise. There was a real chance that once Jackson saw what I'd seen, it could ruin our whole fake relationship before it even got off the ground. I was used to the nonsense of showing up online, but he sure wasn't.

It had only been two days since we talked, and he might not think this was worth his trouble. And I really needed him—well, fake him. Because I was starting to think I was going to Charlotte, and having a diversionary “boyfriend” in Henryville for people to focus on would help with that.

I was reaching for a water bottle when I heard the phone ding. I ran to the sofa, leaving the water in the fridge and the door wide open.

Jackson: *Who is this?*

What? Surely he knew it was me—he said he knew last time I texted.

Me: *Jackson!*

Jackson: *And you are...*

I laughed and shook my head. This guy.

Me: *It's Just Gia! No one is going to believe us if you don't even have me in your phone!*

Jackson: *Just kidding, Just Gia. You're definitely in my phone. What's up?*

Me: *Funny man. Would you mind stopping by the cabin tonight? There's something you need to see.*

And I hoped it didn't derail this whole thing.

Jackson: *Sure. I'm slammed today. Does 8 work?*

Me: *Yep. Good luck with your day and see you then.*

Jackson: *See you then.*

It was too soon to scare off Jackson—I needed this thing to happen. I already had my sister on board, and she'd square

everything up with the rest of my family. Having the public think I was in a relationship bought me a lot of built-in protection. Fans tended to be a lot less forward when they thought a man was around, and it might buy me the freedom I was looking for.

I needed to come up with a good way to ease him into this. It was bad enough that a couple of pictures of us with the wedding arbor had hit social media, but now a small online gossip rag had gotten their hands on them, and they were definitely interested in who the ‘mystery man’ in the picture was.

Okay, they were more than interested, they were actively searching for him. Someone would figure it out. This was a small town—it wouldn’t take too many questions to identify the guy decorating a wedding arbor on The Farm venue’s lake dock.

So how could I frame this so he didn’t immediately back out?



- *Jackson*

It had been a long, hot day, which was not uncommon for the summer months, the busiest time of the year for the farm. We needed rain, but we also needed to get a bunch of work done, so I was glad the thunderstorms that were so common held off for today.

My team was out with the wholesale deliveries, most of which were to the florists in Merit, and I'd just jumped into my truck to head over to Gia's.

I had debated bringing her flowers. But then I second-guessed it when I realized it had been forever since I'd given someone flowers other than as a thank you. I wasn't sure what message it would send. *Thank you for being my fake girlfriend?* That didn't seem right.

In the end, it sounded like too much, so I decided against it.

I jogged up the steps and knocked on the door, wondering why my heart rate sped up. Surely not the short jog? It must be

—

Gia opened the door.

Yep, that's why my heart had raced. It was Gia. *Shoot.* This was not good.

She gave me a big smile and swept her arm in front of her. "Come in, come in."

“Thanks.” I took off my cowboy hat and stepped inside. I ran my hand through my hair and placed my hat on a side table.

Gia walked over to the counter. “Would you like something to drink?”

I shook my head. “I’m good, thanks.” I leaned against the counter. “So, your text...?”

Gia placed her hands on the counter and dropped her head. A moment later, she spun around and clapped her hands in front of her. “Do you want the good news, or the bad news first?”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t know how there could be bad news. Nothing’s happened.”

She nodded. “Well...” She dragged out the ‘el’ sound. “Something’s happened.”

“Okay. You pick. Hit me.”

“The good news, then. The good news is...” She pulled something up on her phone and handed it to me. “We look really good together in pictures.”

I looked at the photo on her phone. It was similar to the ones she had shown me the other day when she first made it clear that social media was a big aspect of this relationship. But in this photo, we were both working on the arbor, standing close together, laughing.

“I’d say you look great in this picture, and I don’t ruin it. I think this was about the time we were talking about Twister.”

“Yes! I agree.” But then her smile faded.

“So this is the good news. What’s the bad? Wait.” I put my hands on my hips. “Pictures from the diner.”

“Nope. Once you tossed those three guys out, I think you must’ve scared anyone else who took a picture from posting anything.” She grinned.

I snorted. “I hope they were scared.” And there was that protective feeling rushing over me again. “Alright, just give me the bad news, then.”

“The bad news is...” She tapped the counter. “That picture wasn’t posted by a random fan. It was posted by a celebrity gossip site.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’d expect that. Maybe not this soon, but that’s kind of what you’re aiming for, right? People to be talking. So that’s what’s happening.”

She took the phone from my hand, swiped a couple of times, and then handed it back. “I’m not sure you were expecting these headlines, though,” she said. “And yes, there are more than one. Swipe left.”

I looked at her before I swiped through the headlines.

Is Gia Nyx Involved? Gia Spotted on Intimate Vacation with New Beau

Gia Nyx Mystery Vacation Includes New, Older, Mystery Man

Is Gia Nyx and Her New Man Tying the Knot? Gia Spotted with Mystery Man Working on Bridal Arch

“You weren’t kidding when you said there were developments.” The muscles in the back of my neck tightened. I walked over to the fridge, trying to shake out the tension. “I think I’ll have that drink now. Do you want anything?”

Gia shook her head, so I grabbed a bottle of beer and found the opener to crack it. I took a big swallow before sitting on the sofa.

“So...” Gia sat on the chair across from me. “How bad is it?”

I shrugged. “You tell me. I don’t have any experience with this. How bad is it?”

She took in a big breath and let it out slowly. “Well, establishing us as a couple isn’t a bad thing.” She bit the corner of her lower lip. “But by that third headline, which was basically the same article posted three different times, they’re getting awfully close to figuring out this exact location. And any day now, they’ll figure out who you are, too.”

I leaned forward and peeled at the corner of the label on my bottle. “I didn’t expect it to happen this fast, but yeah, I figured they’d know where you are and what my name is, eventually.” I set the bottle down. I hated the publicity, but I didn’t see any way around it. “It doesn’t change the fact that I

have to have a relationship, and you need one, too. So, yep, I guess this is what I've signed up for."

"I was thinking," Gia said, "there might be an unexpected bonus in this. Once people figure out who you are, being connected to somebody famous could increase your flower farm visibility, which would expand your business. You could make more money than you ever have before, and that's never a bad thing."

Ah. Money. I'd say having more of it was almost always a bad thing. I had spent a lot of time with Gia, and money hadn't come up once, which surprised me. The rich people I knew loved talking about it... and I didn't love rich people.

I didn't want more money.

She was on a roll, so I didn't say anything. But for the first time since we met, the contrast between her life as a rich, famous celebrity and my life as a private, small-town guy was strikingly evident.

"Or..." She pulled her feet up on her chair, resting her chin on her knees. "You know, we could just let this play out as it is. Obviously, there are pictures floating around. Even if we don't add to them, this will last for a little while before it runs its course." She slipped her feet back to the ground and pulled at a string in the hole of her jeans. "I'd be willing to help you out with your thing, even if we didn't go any further with this. My birthday party without you could be the first step in our break-up."

I laughed, glad to get my mind off the money, and reached for my drink. “Breaking up before we even begin? What do you take me for, a quitter?” Even if it was crystal clear that we couldn’t be further apart in what we wanted. I spun the bottle in my hands. “Nah, I’m in if you are.” The truth was, this was Gia. There was no way I was backing out, not while she was here. She’d be gone soon enough.

She smiled. “I’m in.”

I reached for her phone. “Let me see those headlines again.” I swiped through until I found the one I was looking for, and then held it up for Gia to see. “Did they have to call me ‘old’?”

She burst out laughing. “Old-*er*, not old. You’re my old-*er* mystery man.” She tilted her head to the side. “How old are you, anyway?”

Now it was my time to laugh. “Older than you. Thirty-five. Will that be a problem for your image?”

She shook her head. “Not for me, it won’t. How tall are you?”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Sounds like we’re playing another game of Not Twenty Questions.” I smirked. “Six-five. Will *that* be a problem for your image?”

“Nope!” She popped the ‘p’ at the end. “Definitely not. Now, let’s see how long we can keep my *older* mystery man an actual mystery.”

I raised my bottle in a toast. “To your Mystery Man.”

“To my Mystery Man.” She got up and walked toward the fridge. “Do you want another?”

I finished the drink in my hand. “Nah, it’s been a long day. I’m going to zone out, watch some bad TV, and hit the hay. Tomorrow will be another long one.”

Gia’s phone rang, and she glanced down to see who was calling. “One sec,” she said. “Let me tell my sister I’ll call her back.” She picked up the phone and took a couple of steps away.

“Hey, Linds, let me give you a quick call back,” she said.

There was a pause, and then she continued the conversation. I wasn’t trying to listen in, but the place was small.

“No, ten thousand is nothing. It’s less than nothing.” She laughed. “I easily drop that after a show. But let me call you back.”

I felt my stomach fall. So there it was. The perfect reminder for me that Gia had money, and a lot of it, and she had no problem dropping ten grand after a show and partying. Which was one hundred and eighty degrees away from anything I wanted.

I set my bottle on the counter.

“Sorry about that,” Gia said.

I shook my head. “No problem. I’m going to get out of here.” And remember that we lived in two separate worlds, and I didn’t want to live in hers.

“Enjoy your night,” she said. “I’ll see you when we do the deliveries, and then you’ll meet my family.”

I frowned. “I know it’s fake, but ‘meeting the family’ still sounds loaded.”

She gave a small shrug. “Not with my family. They’re great.”

I nodded and put my hat on. “That’s what I like to hear.” I opened the door. “Good night, Just Gia.”

She gave me a little wave. “Good night, Mystery Man. See you.”

I nodded and stepped outside, closing the door behind me. Then I moved closer to the door and said, “Don’t forget to lock this.” Apparently, my protective nature wasn’t going anywhere soon.

I heard Gia call out, “On it,” and heard the lock click.

My steps were heavy going down to my truck. I rubbed my chest. I guess I wanted Gia to be different somehow, but it turned out she was like so many of the rich people I knew—throwing her money around like it didn’t mean anything, doing whatever it took to make herself look good.

I put my hand on my truck handle. Maybe this was a good thing. Maybe it would help me keep this whole fake relationship thing in check.

I could do this. I could handle being Mystery Man to keep my farm.

Now how long could we keep it a mystery? Not just from Gia's fans, but from my parents, too.

I pulled open my truck door and slid inside. Just how long did I have?

Chapter 13

- Jackson

“So do you want a T-shirt or a button-up with a collar?” I held up both shirts for Gia to see.

She canted her head to the side. “You really want me to wear that?”

“Yep. Company policy. Anytime you’re in public, you need to wear the uniform.”

“Okay, then. I’ll take both, thank you.” Gia grinned and took the shirts. She moved her hand in a spinning motion. “Turn around so I can put this on.”

I turned my back and heard some rustling, and then Gia said, “Okay, I’m ready.”

I spun around to see her, and I put my index finger up to my mouth to keep my jaw from dropping. I’d never seen a Reed Family Flower Farm shirt look quite like that.

She had put on the tan button-up shirt, but she wasn’t wearing it any way that I’d seen before. The shirt was unbuttoned and tied at her waist, over a white tank top. She paired it with cut-off shorts and her red cowboy boots.

But it was seeing my name on the logo on her chest that made it impossible for me to look away.

She looked really good in that shirt.

Gia walked by and brushed her shoulder against mine. “Let’s go, cowboy. We’ve got some flowers to deliver.” She giggled and walked out of the cabin.

I pulled myself together enough to lock the door behind me and join her in my truck.

Whoever thought it was a good idea for us to spend the days together, up close and personal in the cab of my truck, wasn’t thinking at all. *Oh, right, that was me.*

I reminded myself not to be an idiot. I didn’t want the kind of life she lived. I didn’t like that kind of person. No matter what, I chose the farm to get away from people like that. And I was going to keep choosing the farm.

Gia lowered her window. “Sorry about cutting our conversation short last night. My sister is having some custom shelves installed in her library, and she was nervous about the price.”

I held back the sarcastic comment I wanted to make. “Ten thousand dollars. That’s a lot.”

“You overheard that?”

I nodded.

“It is a lot. Later, we talked about whether her home could recoup that money if she sold in the future, and we agreed it could. So, it’s a good investment.”

“And a good amount to spend out partying, too, it sounded like.” The words popped out of my mouth before I could hold them back.

“Partying? What are you talking about?” She genuinely looked puzzled, which I wasn’t sure I was buying.

My stomach clenched. I didn’t want to talk about this. I liked it better when I didn’t think about Gia the same way I thought about my parents. “That’s what you said to your sister last night. Ten grand was no big deal, and you dropped that after every show.”

Gia sat up and turned her body toward me, her mouth in a straight line and her eyes narrowed. “That’s not what I said. First off, it’s not after every show. Only shows where we don’t have to leave first thing the next morning. And second, I guess you could call it a party, but I call it a thank you. I take out my road and sound crew, and opening act, whenever I can. Those guys do back-breaking work and make me look better than I am, and I want them to know how much I appreciate them. I care about them.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. I guess I got that wrong. Really wrong. “Gia.” I shook my head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have jumped to that conclusion when I overheard you.”

Gia blew out a big breath. “You know, it’s not just for the crew, either. I don’t talk about this, and everyone has to sign a non-disclosure so it would be pretty hard to hear about, but anything I spend on the crew, I match at the local foodbank.” She shifted in her seat.

I reached out my hand and it fell on the seat between us. “I apologize.”

Gia leaned back. “I forgot for a minute that you don’t really know me.”

My stomach twisted. And I thought I couldn’t feel worse than I already did.

After a moment, Gia clapped her hands. “Okay. Let’s get on with this day. What’s up first?”

I took in a gulp of air. I wanted to get on with this day too, and put my inaccurate assessment behind me—behind us. “First stop, Mrs. Williams. I deliver to her home every Monday, and every Thursday, Mr. Williams stops by the house to pick up flowers for the weekend.”

“What’s the story behind that?”

I put the truck into reverse and threw my arm over the back of the bench seat, backing up the truck and watching where it was headed. Hopefully, this topic would move us far away from my moronic statements. “He told me that he made a promise to himself that his wife would never be without fresh flowers, so all through the summer, he makes sure she’s got them. In the colder months, he’s always trying to come up with creative ways to get her local flowers.”

When I turned back toward the front of the truck, I caught Gia’s eye. She blinked and turned her head, and I swear, she blushed.

I let it go for about a minute before I said, “So...?”

She looked at me, her eyes wide. “What?”

“I’m the one asking you.”

“Nothing. It’s nothing.” She fidgeted in her seat. “That’s just really sweet of him.”

“That’s it?” I paused. “Then why are you blushing?”

“Oh my gosh.” She leaned over and placed her head in her hands, completely covering her face. “This is stupidly embarrassing.”

“As embarrassing as me jumping to conclusions? Now you’ve got to tell me.”

She sat up straight, throwing her head back and flipping her hair as she went. The truck was instantly filled with the scent of citrus, and I breathed it in. Much better than the old dusty smell that usually filled the cab.

Gia gave me a little smile. “Okay, I’ll tell you. But I’ll be looking out the window while I do.”

I had no idea what this woman was going to say, but I couldn’t wait to hear it.

“When you turned around to reverse the truck, it was just very...” Gia paused. “Masculine. Capable. Strong.” She cleared her throat. “You know.”

My eyebrows were raised so far up my forehead they might be meeting my hairline. “That?” I said. “That was masculine?”

Gia finally turned her face toward me, her cheeks still holding on to that little bit of pink. “Indeed. Something singularly masculine about it. Have you ever seen a woman back up her truck that way?”

“Not that I’ve ever thought about it, but no, I have not.”

Gia nodded her head once. “Masculine.”

I couldn’t keep the grin from taking over my whole face, and then the laugh that followed. Gia smacked my leg, and I laughed again. “You have to admit, that’s a pretty funny thought.”

Gia shook her head and smiled. “That’s where you’re wrong. I bet there are women swooning all across America right now, watching their big, muscular men backing up the truck.”

I burst out laughing so hard, I had to pull over, and Gia was laughing, too. After we both caught our breath, Gia grabbed her phone and started typing furiously.

She glanced up at me. “I just wanted to get some thoughts down. I’m pretty sure there’s a hit single in there somewhere.” She winked and turned back to her phone.

And I just sat there, smiling.



- *Gia*

Well, that was a rocky start to the morning.

I was shocked when Jackson basically accused me of—I'm not even sure what—acting cavalier with money? Being wasteful? What he didn't know was how much his specific comment cut me to the bone. What I was considering would hurt these people, and truly, I didn't know if I had it in me.

Before I could wrap my head around that, the next thing I knew, he was calling me out for ogling him. *So. Embarrassing.*

But that reverse move of his was incredibly masculine. And strong. And capable. And the words I didn't have the guts to utter—a complete turn-on. Even after what had just happened with him! Could the man get any hotter?

We did several deliveries to people in the community, and at every stop, both Jackson and I got out of the truck and walked to the door. He introduced me as his girlfriend, and the people were so dumbfounded—either because Jackson had a girlfriend or because they recognized me—they had absolutely nothing to say. And that lasted until about the fifth delivery.

Jackson pulled two matching bouquets out of one of the flower coolers.

“Do these old coolers you're using even work?” I opened and closed the lid, and listened to it screech.

“They’re beat, I know,” Jackson said. “We only have the one refrigerated truck, and that’s used for making the big deliveries to Merit. Besides, it costs an arm and a leg to run it. These work okay.”

I bit back a response since we’d had that whole talk about money. I wasn’t so sure these were working okay, since the lid on the one practically came off in my hands and the lid on the other didn’t seem to close at all. But this was Jackson’s business, and he knew what he was doing.

Before we made it to the house, an older woman—Mrs. Marsden, Jackson had said—opened up the door.

“Jackson,” she said. She wiped under her eyes with a tissue. “You remembered.”

Jackson gave a little nod. “Of course.” He handed the flowers to Mrs. Marsden, who cradled the bouquets in her arm.

“Thank you, Jacks—” She choked on her words and covered her face with her hand.

I could feel my eyes go round with wonder. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but whatever it was, it seemed too personal for me to be there. I stepped back as Jackson stepped forward and placed his hand on her shoulder. She dropped her hand from her face and held on to Jackson’s hand for a moment, then nodded and let it go.

She wiped under her eyes again and then gave me a shaky smile. “Hold on to him. He’s one of the good ones.” And she moved back into the house.

We got into the truck and I turned toward Jackson as we pulled out. “I’m sure Mrs. Marsden is right, Jackson. You’re one of the good ones. But why, specifically, would she say that?” I motioned to her house. “What was that about?”

Jackson pulled in a big breath. “Her husband died two years ago. They were married for forty-two years.” He shrugged. “Today is his birthday. I know she visits the cemetery a lot. So, last year on his birthday, I brought flowers for her, and flowers for her to take to him. Just something I could do.”

I looked at him with awe. “And so you did it again.”

“It seemed to mean a lot to her.” His jaw tightened.

I smiled at him and leaned back in the seat. “From what I just saw, I would agree.”

And, somehow, I knew I’d be witnessing Jackson do a lot of those thoughtful things.

After several more deliveries, we wrapped up the morning. Jackson pulled up in front of my cabin, and I scooted to the edge of the seat, opening the door.

“I wouldn’t be—”

Jackson was already out of his seat, walking to my door and holding it open.

“Thank you.”

He held out his hand and I took it, hopping down from the truck.

“I was just saying, after today, I wouldn’t be surprised if something gets out, and we hit another gossip mag.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” Jackson walked back around the front of his truck. “I’ll need to mentally prepare.”

I grinned and walked up the steps to my cabin. “I have faith in you, Jackson. You’re... unflappable!”

He stopped at his truck door. “Indomitable?”

“How about tenacious? Or invincible!”

Jackson laughed. “Let’s go with fearless.”

“Fearless it is.” I opened my cabin door. “And just wait ‘til they see us at the farmer’s market on Wednesday.”

Chapter 14

- Jackson

Gia was off finding us some breakfast while I set up the tables for the flower stand and got the flower buckets prepared with water. People were already milling about, even though the market wasn't open for several more minutes.

The sky was a vivid Carolina blue, with enormous, puffy white clouds that occasionally crossed the sun, allowing the temperature to dip for a minute. Which was good, because I could already tell it was going to be a scorcher.

"I found blueberry iced tea and raspberry scones." Gia glanced at the drinks she carried and the white bag in her hand. "Didn't realize I was making it a berry kind of morning."

I filled a bucket and popped it on the table. "No problem. I like berries." I opened up the bag and pulled out a scone. Across the way, I saw Grace Myers from Happy Springs Bar and Grill getting a cup of coffee. Grace was a little younger than me, and she and her siblings ran the bar. Seeing her reminded me that I wanted to ask Gia about—

"Hey, Jackson."

I whipped around to see Colton, as in Colton Morgan, my friend, but more importantly, my grandparents' attorney.

"Colton. Hey. Um..." So much for unflappable and fearless. I couldn't get a word out.

"So this is..." he trailed off.

“I’m Gia. Nice to meet you.” Gia held out her hand.

“Colton.” He motioned between the two of us. “So you two...?”

Gia laughed. “Man, word travels fast.” She stepped next to me. I still hadn’t said a word and was frozen where I stood. Gia gave me a quizzical look, and then wrapped her arms around me and laid her head on my chest. “Yep. I’m his girlfriend.”

That snapped me out of it.

I wrapped one arm around her and chuckled. “Yep, she’s my girlfriend.” I hoped I didn’t sound as awkward as I thought I did.

Colton smiled. “So you’re making progress. Good.” He double-tapped the table. “Nice to meet you, Gia. See you around.” And then he walked away.

Gia’s arms dropped and she turned to face me. “What on earth was that all about? I’ve never seen you so uncomfortable. And making progress on what?”

“That was Colton.”

“Right. Got that. And?”

“He’s the lawyer who will decide if ‘I tried.’”

Gia’s eyes rounded. “Oh! Oh, my gosh. Oh, my gosh. Well, he sounded good, right? You’re making progress? That sounds good, right?” Gia picked up the iced tea and handed it to me. “Here. Drink this.”

“What?”

She threw her hands up. “I don’t know! It felt like I should be doing *something!*”

Seeing how much Gia cared made my chest fill with warmth. I set down the tea and pulled her close with one arm—I couldn’t help myself.

“Thank you, Gia. You already did everything you could. You didn’t know what was going on, and you still did just what I needed. Thank you.”

I looked into her eyes and thought I never wanted to look away.

She squeezed me tight for a moment. “You’re welcome. I hope we’re good.”

I smiled. “I think we’re good.”

“I think we can change our status from ‘rumored encounter’ to ‘confirmed sighting.’”

I dropped my head down and gave it a small shake. Gia’s eyes were big and round again, and I had a feeling it was just going to be that kind of day. I hadn’t even placed the flowers yet.

I took in a big breath and turned toward the men who had approached the stand.

“Gentlemen,” I said and nodded to the group of four men standing in front of my booth.

“Jackson. Nice to see you.” Denny Budd nodded to Gia.
“And your lady friend, too.”

Gia’s eyes lit up like he had told her she won a million dollars, not called her some antiquated term for girlfriend.

Gia slid up next to me and used the same move she had before. She put her arms around me and said, “Hi. I’m Gia.” She glanced up at me, a huge grin on her face. “I’m Jackson’s girlfriend.”

And before another word was said, Jasmine and Quinn walked up.

It wasn’t even seven a.m. yet.

“Denny! Johnny! You’re all here!” She greeted the ‘ole timers’ like they were all old friends. Come to think of it, I think Quinn said they were.

Denny shook Quinn’s hand, and then reached for Jasmine’s, patting the back of hers. Greetings were exchanged all around, and then Johnny—or Mr. Baumgartner, as I knew him—said, “Quinn, when are you going to make an honest woman out of this one?”

“Yes, son,” Dale Del Vecchio added. “Haven’t you been lollygagging long enough?”

Jasmine’s eyes sparkled to rival Gia’s. “Yes, Quinn. Just exactly when are you going to do that?” She looped her arm through Quinn’s and fluttered her eyelashes.

Quinn sputtered, and I handed him my iced tea. “Here. I’ve been told this helps.”

He took a big swallow, and Gia turned her face into my chest to keep from laughing out loud.

I can't say I minded.

Johnny, or Mr. Baumgartner, shook his head. "You better make a move soon, Quinn. You know this one won't hang around waiting on you forever."

Jasmine continued to grin up at Quinn, and Quinn finished off my tea with a loud slurp. "Gentlemen, good to see you. Jasmine, we better get... We better go— Tha—" he tripped on his words. "That thing for Mom." He pulled her away. "See you all later." He rushed off like he couldn't get away fast enough.

Dale leaned in and pointed at me. "You and Quinn are tight. What's the status on those two? Is he going to make a move soon, or what?"

I held up my hands in front of me, palms out. "Sorry, gentlemen, I don't know anything about Quinn's plans." That wasn't entirely true, I knew plenty about Quinn's next moves, but I was sticking to my story.

Dale squinted at me and then stood up straight. "Gentlemen, let's move on. Nice to meet you, Gia."

Gia waved, and as they walked away, I heard Vance Little say, "Whatta we got on Reynolds? Is it time to change that status to 'rode hard and put up wet'?"

Gia twisted toward me and pointed at the backs of the men. "What. Was. That?"

I shook my head and tossed the empty drink that Quinn had finished into our trash bin. “That was the group of retired farmers, commonly known as the ‘ole timers.’ You can find them in the diner at lunchtime, and anywhere else something is happening.” I watched them stop at Jackie Bristol’s booth three stands away. *Good luck, Jackie.*

“I usually call them the ‘gossip mongers’. They spread tales faster than wildfire.”

Gia was giggling and couldn’t seem to stop.

I smiled back and watched her beautiful, lit-up face. I marveled at being with her, here, at the Henryville Township Farmer’s Market, at my Reed’s Family Flower Farm booth.

This day was extraordinary, and it had barely started.



- *Gia*

I was still giggling while I helped Jackson get the flowers into the buckets. Those men! The gossip mongers. Another giggle slipped out.

“Jackson. Did one of them really just say, ‘rode hard and put up wet’? Because that is hilarious.”

Jackson filled the final bucket with flowers and closed up the old cooler. “They have some kind of code, some kind of status report.” He placed a large roll of brown craft paper at the end of the table. “They take their gossip very seriously.”

“They called us a ‘confirmed sighting.’”

“So they’re gossip mongers with integrity—they have to see for themselves.”

“Apparently.” Another giggle slipped out.

The aisles of the market were filling up with people quickly, and the smell of fresh roasted coffee from the booth across the way made me reconsider my iced tea. *Maybe I should go for some cream and sugar?*

The thought startled me. I was in a public place, acting like anyone else, no one special at all, not some big star. And it seemed okay.

Was it okay?

Jackson placed a canvas chair behind me and I took a seat. “You know, we didn’t really talk about what we would do if anyone recognized me today.”

Jackson sat in the chair next to me. “I gave it some thought. Someone might, but you’re in the booth, and I’m right here. And we want people to know.”

I nodded and reached for my scone. “You’re right. We do.” I broke off a bite and popped it into my mouth. “It’s hard for me to shut it off, so I did bring a pen for signing, just in case.”

“There’ll be people here I know, but we get a lot from Merit, too. How everyone acts is going to be interesting.”

“So far, so good. I just hope the rest of the morning will be as fun as the beginning.”

Jackson smiled. “I’m counting on it.”



I was hot and happy by the time we were packing up the flower booth. The day had been so normal.

Jackson dumped the last of the water into the grass behind the booth. “You got off pretty easy today, I thought. Only a couple of autographs, and not one single picture.”

“Not any requested.” I folded up our two chairs. “Plenty of sneaky shots, though.”

Jackson stood up straight. “Really? I didn’t see anyone taking any pictures.” He looked around like someone might be

taking a picture right now.

“It wasn’t bad. No one blatantly held up a camera, but plenty of people were holding their phones *just so*. I can guarantee we’ll be on someone’s social media today, but we’ll only find out if they tag me.”

Jackson’s jaw dropped. “I never suspected—I didn’t see anything.”

I smirked. “I have a lot more practice at this than you do.”

We got the last of the things into the back of Jackson’s truck and headed to The Farm. The windows were down, and the air was rushing through the truck. A large field was being cut, and the smell of fresh hay filled the cab.

“This is summer at its best.”

Jackson smiled. “It’s pretty close to paradise.”

I had to agree.

We pulled up to my cabin, and as he had done earlier in the week, Jackson was out in a flash, opening my door.

I slid out of the seat, my hand in Jackson’s as he helped me down. And I had a fleeting glimpse of a different life. *Could it always be like this?* And then I shook my head to clear the thought. “What will you do for the rest of the day?”

Jackson threw his thumb over his shoulder. “Work. There’s a lot of fieldwork to be done. The crew has been keeping up with things, but they could use my help. What about you?”

“I think I’ll have lunch with Rose in a little while, and then come back here and hang. Maybe do some writing.”

Jackson tapped the hood of his truck. “Sounds good. We’ll do another round of deliveries Friday morning?”

“Yep. I’ll be there with bells on.”

Jackson opened his truck door. “That, I’d like to see.”

I grinned and watched him drive away, wishing Friday was already here.

Chapter 15

- *Gia*

“You made it!” I ran down the porch steps and threw my arms around my sister. My mom and dad were right behind her, while Paul was climbing out of the backseat.

“Girl! It’s been too long,” Lindsey said, then stepped aside for my parents.

“Gia! Finally!” My mom hugged me, and then Dad wrapped his arms around the both of us.

“My girl,” Dad said with an extra squeeze.

I almost choked on the tears I was trying to hold back. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Just that fast, with hugs from my family and being surrounded by the people I loved, I was back to the real me.

“We are, too, honey.” Mom wiped under her eyes, and Dad wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

Paul picked me up and spun me around. “GG! Long time, no see, sister!”

We were both laughing by the time he set me down.

Paul glanced around. “How is this place fixed for grub?”

Lindsey and I burst out laughing.

“Fixed for grub? Is that a new way of saying you’re hungry?” I pushed his shoulder, and Paul staggered sideways.

“There’s a decided lack of panache in the phrase ‘I’m hungry.’” He straightened his shirt. “I’m trying out something new.”

Lindsey pushed his other shoulder, and Paul bounced back toward me. “Keep trying, little brother, keep trying.”

I laughed. Paul had always been the family entertainer—he’d say or do almost anything to get a laugh. “Come on. We can walk over to the Big House to check you guys into your cabins and then have dinner. Wait until you meet Rose—she’s the best.” We started walking. “Her food is, too.”

Lindsey caught up to me and pulled me close to her side. “I didn’t think this weekend would ever get here.”

“Same, sister, same.”

We rounded on the house, and I called out to my family, “Be careful of the chickens. There’s a big red one that is particularly ornery.”

Just as I was speaking, Quinn’s girlfriend, Jasmine, stepped out onto the porch. “Welcome, everyone. And Gia’s right. Beyonce does not back down, so choose your path wisely.”

Paul came scooting up close to Lindsey and me, then barreled his way forward. “Never fear,” he said, using an operatic voice, “Paul is here! I’ll save you, damsels, from the dastardly Beyonce.” He stopped and looked over the chickens. “Wait. Is she even here?”

Jasmine pointed at the yard to the left of Paul. “I think you’re good. She’s minding her business today.”

Paul let out a big breath and let his head fall for a second. “Thank goodness. I was actually afraid of what a charging chicken might do to my manly-man bits.”

Jasmine laughed, and Dad lightly smacked Paul on the back of the head as he walked up. “Enough with the manly bits, son. Some of us don’t want our dinner ruined.”

“Better that than the ruination of me.” Paul grinned and rubbed the back of his head.

I smiled back. Dad had been trying to keep Paul in line his whole life. Half the time, I thought Paul was purposely trying to get a rise out of Dad—and it worked. Especially when his jokes were more like that of a middle school boy than a recent college freshman.

We clambered our way up the steps, making as much noise as you’d expect a family of five who hadn’t seen each other in a while to make.

Rose met us in the front of the house. I made introductions all around, and Jasmine let everyone know that Quinn wouldn’t be in until later. After Rose got everyone checked in, we made our way into the dining room, where the table was loaded for dinner. I was excited for everyone to be here, and equally excited for them to experience Rose’s cooking.

We were all sitting down when Paul reached for a piece of fried chicken. Mom’s hand shot out and smacked his fingers.

“Hey! That’s two smacks in ten minutes. I’m a growing boy—I need to eat!”

Mom just smiled. “You’ll eat when we say you’ll eat.”

“And watch how you speak to your mother,” Dad chimed in. “You don’t want to make it three smacks.”

Lindsey tried not to laugh, but I couldn’t hold it in. I leaned into Paul. “I missed you, you knucklehead.” He’d always been able to make me laugh, and the sillier, the better.

Paul leaned into me. “Right back at you, GG.”

Rose and Jasmine came into the room carrying pitchers of tea and water. Once everyone had their drinks, Rose passed the platters around the table.

“Now, dear, you can have your chicken,” Mom said.

“Yes!” Paul did a fist pump and placed two pieces on his plate. He glanced at Mom as he reached for a third, but when she raised her eyebrow, he pulled his hand back and passed the platter to me. I snickered.

Rose passed the biscuits to Mom. “It’s nice to have a whole family at the table.” She looked around, taking us all in. “It’s been great getting to know Gia during her stay. She’s a lovely woman.”

“She must not know you that well,” Lindsey whispered, and I knocked my knee with hers under the table. She stifled a giggle.

Mom smiled. “Thank you. We’re very proud of her. We’re proud of all of them.”

Paul stopped eating long enough to pop his head up. “They’re especially proud of me. Just ask them.” He motioned with his chicken leg. “Go ahead. Ask. Delicious meal, by the way, Mrs. O’Connell.”

Rose smiled, and I could tell she was charmed. Paul was goofy and adorable, and I was glad she thought so, too.

“Thank you, Paul.” She looked at my parents, playing along. “So, you’re very proud of Paul?”

Paul set down his chicken leg. “Yes, they are. You’re looking at the newest intern at USA Records.” He put his hands up. “No need to applaud, I know. I know. I’m remarkable.”

“More like it’s remarkable!” I hugged him around the shoulders. “That’s fantastic, Paul. I bet Mom and Dad are proud.”

Mom smiled. “We are. He’s worked very hard to get this job.”

“We’re also proud that he’s moving out.” Dad sat back and grinned.

Paul chuckled and went back to eating. “Dad, say what you will. You’re going to miss me when I’m gone.”

Lindsey’s head popped up. “Uh oh... You know what that means.”

Paul shook his head. “No, no. You guys are the singers, not me.”

Jasmine turned to Lindsey. “You sing, too?”

Lindsey blushed. “I do. For fun.”

“Right, which is why you guys singing will be fun. Not me. That’s not fun for anyone.”

Jasmine tilted her head in question.

“From the movie, *Pitch Perfect*,” I said. “It was a rule around our house. If someone said the words, ‘You’re going to miss me,’ or a variation on that, then they’d have to sing the song from the movie.”

Jasmine laughed. “There couldn’t be that many times, could there?”

I shrugged, and my stomach dipped. “There are a lot of goodbyes when you’re on tour, leaving your family behind.” I still wasn’t used to it.

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.” Jasmine gave me a small smile. “I know! You can sing it tonight, at the bonfire. There’s always singing.”

“Yes!” Paul said. “You guys can sing it. Thank you, Jasmine, for saving my bu—” Paul glanced at our dad. “My *biscuits*. Thank you for saving my biscuits.”

Jasmine laughed. “Anytime.”

Quinn stuck his head into the room and put his hand up in a wave. “Howdy, folks. Nice to have you here.”

Jasmine turned in her seat. “Hey, Quinn. Glad you’re here.” Jasmine made introductions and then said, “We were just

talking about the bonfire tonight. I wanted to make sure you had everything for s'mores."

"I do." He nodded and pulled off his cowboy hat. "Wouldn't be the same without them."

"Oh, good. Plus, EB might never recover if there was a campfire without s'mores." Jasmine turned back to the table. "My best friend, Ellie, and her niece—well, daughter, now—EB, will be there tonight. You'll meet both of them and her fiancé, James." Jasmine shot me a smirk. "Speaking of meeting people..." she trailed off, and I could feel heat rising to my cheeks. I guess Jackson had told her and Quinn our plans.

I cleared my throat. "Right. Yes. Everyone," I glanced around the table. "Everyone, you'll be meeting Jackson tonight at the bonfire."

"*Ooohh.*" Paul rubbed his hands together, then, in a sing-song voice, he said, "We're going to get to meet the mysterious—"

"Paul," Dad interrupted. "You don't want that third smack, young man."

Paul sat up straight. "Yes, sir. No, sir."

I chuckled, thankful for the reprieve. "It's not a big deal. Y'all just, you know, meet him. That's all."

Paul nodded. "Right, right."

Rose left the table and stepped back into the room with a dessert tray of sugar cookies and lemon bars, which she passed

around the table.

Quinn saved me from having to explain about Jackson any further. “It’s going to be more like a firepit, and less like a bonfire.” Quinn looked over at me. “We’re keeping this one more low-key. I didn’t think you’d want a bunch of our other friends out there tonight... with everything.”

I smiled. “Thanks, Quinn. I appreciate that.” He had no idea how much.

“No problem. I’m going to clean up,” he said, “and then I’ll see you all tonight. We’ll talk then.”

A chorus of ‘Bye, Quinn,’ and ‘See you tonight,’ went up around the table.

Paul turned to Jasmine. “I like that guy.”

Jasmine laughed. “I like him, too.”

“Do you think he could teach me how to be a cowboy?”

“I think he could.” She tilted her head to the side. “The man is very skilled. He made me fall in love with riding the first time I came to The Farm.”

Paul sat back in his chair, and nodded slowly, a far-off look in his eye. “Cool,” he said. “Cool, cool, cool.”

Lindsey shot me a look, like, *what’s that all about?* I only shrugged in response.

I pushed back from the table. “Excuse me, for a moment. I’ll be right back.” I left the dining room and hoped the topic of Jackson didn’t come back around. I was oddly nervous about

him meeting my family. *Fake*, I reminded myself. *Fake*. *No need to be nervous*.

I walked into the hallway, took a quick look around to make sure no one was watching, and stepped into the large pantry I'd seen Rose use. I flipped on the light and closed the door behind me. I loved a good lemon bar, but I was just going to take a quick peek and see if—

The pantry door opened and closed behind me, and I heard a low voice say, “What are you doing in here, Just Gia?”

I whirled around to find Jackson, of all people, in the pantry with me.

“What are you doing in here?” I breathed, hands going immediately to my hips.

Jackson cocked his head. “You first.”

“Did anyone see you come in here?” I whispered, my eyes round.

“No one even knows I'm in the house.” He motioned to me. “So what's your excuse? What are you doing?”

I sighed and dropped my arms to my side. “Rose makes a lovely dessert, but, well...”

“Well?”

“I'm really a chocolate girl. And I didn't want to insult her by asking if there was anything chocolate in the house.”

He grinned. “So you thought you'd pilfer the pantry?”

I nodded. “Pilfer the pantry. That’s beautiful alliteration, Jackson.”

“Don’t try to dodge the question, Gia.”

“Okay, fine. That’s exactly what I was doing. There’s no way she doesn’t have chocolate in here.”

Jackson smiled and leaned into my space. I caught my breath as he leaned closer, his eyes locked on mine, and he reached up on a shelf that was right next to my cheek. He pulled down a large container and popped off the top.

“Oh,” I gasped. I reached in and pulled out a handful of peanut M&Ms. “How’d you know?” I popped an M&M in my mouth.

“Quinn and I spent a lot of time pilfering this pantry.”

I grinned. “I bet you did. Hey. What are you doing here, anyway? I just told my family they’d meet you tonight. How did we not see you come in?”

Jackson leaned against the door. “I came in through the kitchen. Someone kept me from getting all my work done this week. I wanted to let Rose know the fresh flowers were in all the glamping cabins, even though I’m later than normal.”

“My beautiful flowers are from you?”

Jackson chuckled. “In a manner of speaking, yes. In the cabins for your family, too.”

“Somehow it didn’t occur to me.”

Jackson placed a hand over his heart. "I'm glad, after all this time, I can still surprise you."

I burst out laughing and had to cover my mouth. "Shh, no one can know we're in here."

Jackson cocked his head. "Where does everyone think you are?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, bathroom maybe?"

"Hmm. Okay, how about I open the door and walk out, like I've been doing my whole life. If the coast is clear, I'll let you know. If not, we're just going to have to roll with it."

"I should've thought this through." I raised my hands and shrugged. "But chocolate can make you do crazy things."

Jackson snorted. "If you say so. You ready?"

"Ready."

Jackson listened at the door for a moment, then opened it and stepped out. In a second, he was motioning me out.

"See you tonight," I whispered as I moved past him.

Right before I stepped back into the dining room, I turned back and saw Jackson standing where I left him, a small smile on his face.

I grinned and bit my lip, then slid back into my chair at the table, where my dad and brother were talking about the upcoming football season at Brophy University, where Paul was going to be a sophomore.

“My son is in the running to be the starting quarterback this year,” Rose said, her smile big.

“What?” Paul’s eyes went comically wide. “At Brophy? Who’s your son?”

“Liam O’Connell.”

Paul smacked his forehead. “Of course! Liam! I’ve met him a time or two. He’s a great guy.” He motioned over his shoulder. “So Quinn’s his older brother?”

“Yes.”

Lindsey laughed. “Brilliant, Einstein.”

“Hey, I’m just connecting all the dots, here,” Paul said. “What a small world!” He turned toward Rose. “He’s the reason we might finally have a good season.”

“We’ve got high hopes,” she said. “Special teams are killing us.”

Paul nodded. “For sure.”

“That is so cool,” I said. “I hope that happens for him.” I pushed back from the table. I figured this was as good a time as any to wrap up the dinner and get out of the house before Jackson was discovered. I had it in my head that we’d all meet at the firepit, and that’s the way I wanted it.

“Rose showed me where y’all are staying,” I said. “Why don’t I take you there, so you can get settled? And then we’ll meet up again for the firepit.”

Everyone stood from the table, thanking Rose for the delicious meal. We made our way to the front door.

“Looking forward to spending more time with you,” Rose said, holding open the door.

“And I’ll see you guys in a little while,” Jasmine said.

“Not if I see you first!” called Paul.

And that third little smack Dad had threatened? He delivered. And we all burst out laughing.

“Come on, Paul,” I said, linking my arm with his. “Let’s get you to your cabin.”

Paul grinned and winked. I just loved him. And I was finding that I liked Jackson a whole lot, too.

My stomach did a little flip. I may have just seen the man, but I wanted to be at the firepit now, so I could see him again.

I pulled on Paul’s arm and picked up the pace.

Chapter 16

- *Gia*

“Paul, get your biscuits out here! Let’s go already!” Lindsey hollered at the cabin door. She was already in the Gator, and my parents were in a Gator of their own behind me.

“Yeah, enough with the messing around,” I called. “We’ve got places to—” Paul stepped onto the porch and pulled the door closed behind him. “Oh. You’re here. Great. Let’s go.”

He jumped into the back and I took off.

“Man, it’s been a while since I’ve been in one of these things,” Paul said, stretching his long legs across the back seat. “Maybe since the last time we were all together at Nanna and Grampa’s place. That had to be, what, at least five years ago?”

Lindsey twisted around to look at Paul. “I think you might be right.”

“It was eight years,” I said. “I remember because I turned nineteen that summer, and moved into my first condo in Nashville.” And it was the last time we were all together as a family at our grandparents’ place.

I swallowed hard. These two had sacrificed so much for me—the whole family had. I hated finding out specific details of those sacrifices. It made me feel worse about it than I already did. It made me question everything about going to Charlotte.

Paul sat up and leaned between Lindsey and me. “That’s right. I would’ve been eleven. I loved that condo. Remember

how it had that cool spinning thing in the middle of the table? And you could spin it around and find the food you were looking for, and just put it on your plate?" He sat back. "It was like magic."

I laughed out loud, thankful for Paul and his funny ways. "To you, it was like magic. I'm guessing you didn't wonder where the food that was on that lazy Susan came from. You know Mom had to make it."

"Of course, I knew she made it. Better her than you. That was part of the reason it was magical."

"Hey, I can cook!" I laughed, turning to take in Paul, who arched an eyebrow in response.

"I can! Tell him, Linds."

Lindsey looked at Paul, then turned to me. "I'm just going to say I'm glad the only thing you'll be cooking tonight is s'mores. Pretty hard to mess up."

We were all laughing when I pulled up to the bonfire site, my parents right behind us. I was happy for the laughter—I was trying to distract myself from the inevitable Jackson introduction. I knew this was fake and all, but it was still a pretty big deal. It was important to both of us to pull this off.

Dad grabbed my guitar out of the back, and we made our way to the chairs set up around a fire ring.

"Hey, everyone," Jasmine called out. "We've got cold drinks here for anyone who wants one, and all the fixings for s'mores

when you're ready." She was pulling a cooler to the back of a truck that was parked on the other side of the fire pit.

Paul strode over to the truck. "Hey, Jasmine, let me help you with that." He reached over the side of the truck and helped her position the cooler in the back.

Quinn came walking out of the woods and dropped a load of firewood next to the ring. "Hey, everyone. Good timing. Looks like you found it okay."

Paul tossed our dad a drink. "We did," Dad said. "And it was fun to drive a 4-wheel vehicle again. It's been a while."

"Is it okay to sit anywhere?" Lindsey asked.

Jasmine hopped down from the truck. "Anywhere is good. Thanks for your help, Paul."

Mom wrapped her arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. "So glad to be with you, honey."

"Same, Mom, same." I turned my head and kissed her cheek.

"Ohh, Geeee-ah, are we going to see you kiss Jackson tonight?" Paul made exaggerated kissing lips and smacked like a fish. I laughed.

Jackson stepped into the circle, and all the hair on my arms stood on end. Had he heard?

He gave me a smile. "How about it, Gia? Do we need to practice our fake kiss for our fake relationship?"

Paul threw his head back and laughed. "I like him already, G, I like him already!"

Jasmine got a big grin on her face and practically squealed.
“Jackson’s here!”



- Jackson

I was meeting Gia's family.

It seemed like it was just yesterday that Gia was a Nashville star with the world at her feet and I was a small-town flower guy with a celebrity crush.

Now she was my fake girlfriend, and I was about to meet her family.

It was a good thing we agreed we would tell them. There was no way I was going to fake something like that in front of people we cared about. My parents would say anything and do anything to get what they wanted, and I refused to be like them. They were the best examples of who not to be.

Hopefully, her family thought the comment I just made was funny. I knew her brother did.

Gia jumped out of her chair. "Jackson! Um, Jackson..." She swiveled her head back and forth between me and her family. She looked like she needed to be saved.

I stepped next to her and it took everything in me not to put my arm around her shoulders. It felt more right than keeping my hands jammed in my back pockets, which is what I was currently doing.

I lifted my hand and pulled my hat off, then waved with my other. "Nice to meet y'all. I'm Jackson."

Gia broke out of whatever spell she was trapped in and gave me a big smile, then turned to her parents, who had also stood up. “Mom and Dad, this is Jackson Reed. Jackson, these are my parents, Deb and Randy.”

I stepped forward and stretched out my hand to shake with Gia’s mom.

“Oh, don’t be silly,” Deb said. “Any fake boyfriend of Gia’s is a fake boyfriend of ours.” And she wrapped her arms around me and hugged me.

I was momentarily stunned.

The last woman I’d hugged was Quinn’s mom, Rose, at Grams’ funeral.

Gia said her family would be supportive, but I didn’t expect this. I got my bearings and returned the hug. She stepped back, and I said, “It’s very nice to meet you, Deb.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Jackson.” She turned toward her husband. “Randy?”

Gia’s dad stuck out his hand. “Randy Nixon. Nice to meet you, Jackson.” We shook, and then he cleared his throat and hitched up his jeans. “Now, what are your intentions with our daughter?”

My mouth fell open, Gia exclaimed, “Dad!” and Paul burst out laughing.

“Randy, be nice,” said Deb.

Randy gave me a big grin and then squeezed my shoulder. “I’m just messing with you, son. We know exactly what your intentions are. I’m great with fake, fake is how we like it.” He held up his drink. “Can I get you a beer?”

I nodded slowly, still dazed by what had transpired when Gia took my hand. I glanced down where her small hand was now wrapped in mine, and that snapped me out of my trance.

We had touched a time or two before, but this was intentional. Purposeful. I was acutely aware of how rough my hands were, and how she had callouses of her own. Working hands of a different sort—guitar versus farm.

Gia pulled me over to a lawn chair. “You better sit next to me, Jackson.” She looked around at her family. “I’m not sure you’d be safe with this bunch of hooligans.”

I decided not to argue with the lady, and we both took a seat.

Randy handed me a beer and sat down, and Quinn and Paul worked on getting the fire started. The night was warm, but not humid, and the fire would help keep the bugs away.

I tried to focus on Gia’s family, but I couldn’t shut my brain off. My head was spinning with all things Gia.

I wanted to pick up her hands and trace over those calluses, then find the spots that were still soft. And I wanted to hear her stories—the stories those hands could tell.

It struck me that I’d heard a lot of stories about Gia Nyx, the country star. But having spent just ten minutes with her and her family, it felt like I didn’t know this woman at all.

But I wanted to. And I didn't want to stop at hand-holding, either. Practicing that fake kiss sounded exactly like something we should be doing.

Now, how could I make that happen?

Chapter 17

- *Gia*

I heard a car pull up behind me, and I twisted in my seat to see who had arrived. I needed to do something after that crack about kissing, and then holding Jackson's hand like it was an everyday occurrence.

What if it were an everyday occurrence?

I could not be distracted by thoughts like that. Thoughts of Jackson... thoughts of more, with Jackson.

It was too easy for my thoughts to go there. He was incredibly handsome—downright hot, if I was being honest—so easy to get along with, and completely laid back... and had been since the moment we met. Like he knew who I was, but wasn't intimidated by me. And he didn't want anything from me.

I mean, I pulled the guy into a lake fully clothed, and all he did was smile. And then he totally protected me at the diner from those obnoxious fans, and then agreed to the whole fake dating thing.

I was being ridiculous. Do you know what didn't matter? It didn't matter how much chemistry I had with a guy when my life was on the road and the rest of it was in Nashville. I'd made a commitment to my family years ago, and they had sacrificed. A lot. That was what I needed to focus on.

“You made it!” Jasmine jumped up from her chair and ran over to the car that had pulled up. A handsome man got out of the driver’s side, and Jasmine threw her arms around the beautiful, tall brunette who got out of the passenger seat. These were obviously her friends she said would be joining us.

The back door opened and a little girl came bounding out. Maybe eight or nine, like Paul’s age when we moved to Nashville? She threw her arms around Jasmine’s waist.

“EB! I’m so glad you’re here!” Jasmine wrapped her arms around the little girl. “I thought I was going to have to eat s’mores without you.”

EB looked up at Jasmine without dropping her arms. “Aunt Jasmine? No. Just no.”

Jasmine burst out laughing, and then took EB’s hand, hugging the handsome fiancé as they walked by.

“Let me introduce everyone, and then we can break out the s’mores for EB.” Jasmine motioned to her friends. “Everyone, these are my best friends, Ellie and her fiancé James, and Ellie’s niece EB. You all know Jackson, so it’s just a matter of meeting Gia’s family. Let me start with Gia.”

I stood in front of my chair and brushed off my pants. Jasmine introduced both Ellie and James and then EB put out her hand for me to shake. I crouched down and shook her hand. “Nice to meet you,” I said. “I’m Gia.”

“I’m EB,” she replied. “So you’re a country music star?”

I laughed and nodded. “Yes, yes, I am.”

“Aunt Ellie told me. That’s neat. I want to be a doctor someday. Aunt Ellie’s a doctor. Or maybe I’ll be a nurse. Aunt Jasmine’s a nurse.” She rubbed her chin. “I haven’t thought about being a country music star. Do you like it?”

Oh, from the mouths of babes.

I wasn’t expecting the question from a child. And no adult would ever ask such a thing. Because they already knew the answer... or so they thought. Who wouldn’t love being a star—the fame, the fortune, the glory—isn’t that how the saying went?

I fought to hold back the tears that sprang to my eyes. I did like it, I did. I just... liked something else more.

“I—” Before I answered, Paul jumped in, “It’s all she’s ever wanted. I’m her brother, Paul, so I know. It’s a good thing she’s a good singer, too, or she would’ve driven us crazy when we were kids. It’s all she did.”

I smiled at EB, grateful I didn’t have to answer her—grateful I didn’t have to lie.

EB dipped her chin. “I’ll get Aunt Ellie to play some of your songs. If I like it, maybe I’ll be a country star when I grow up. But only maybe.” She shook my hand again. “It was nice to meet you.”

“You too, young lady.”

She turned and walked over to Paul. “I’m EB. What else did you do when you were kids?”

My sister Lindsey joined the conversation, and so did my parents, and I was grateful to have the attention off me. I was still kneeling where I had been talking to EB, and I discreetly wiped under my eyes before I eased back in my seat.

But I must not have been discreet enough, because while everyone else was talking with EB, Jackson was looking straight at me.

And by the look on his face, he had questions.



- Jackson

Were those tears?

Did I see Gia wipe tears from under her eyes?

I looked over where everyone was standing and talking with EB, and Paul was doing some kind of dance, holding his ankle behind him while his other arm was cocked behind his head.

“It’s like this, EB. Then you just—”

As Paul continued explaining to EB, I leaned over into Gia’s space. “Hey, are you okay?”

Her gaze shot up to mine, and this time, I was sure. There were tears in her eyes. *Shoot*. What had happened?

I glanced back to make sure everyone was still engaged in conversation, then turned back to Gia.

She wiped her eye again. “It’s nothing. Really, it’s nothing.” She swallowed. “She’s just such a cute kid, and she... she caught me off guard, you know?” She gave me a thin smile.

I nodded. “Yeah. She’s a great kid. Okay.” I leaned back in my seat, then sat back up, before I thought about what I was saying. “But for a fake boyfriend, and for real, I’m a good listener.”

Gia smiled, warmly this time, and reached out and squeezed my leg. I looked into her eyes, right when Paul interrupted.

“Gia! What are you doing?” He was staring at us. Did he see Gia tearing up? “EB wants to hear a song! Get it together, girl!”

Gia jumped up from her seat. “Right. Right!” She clapped her hands in front of her. “Where’s my guitar?”

“Here you go, honey.” Gia’s dad pulled her guitar out from where it had been sitting between his and his wife’s chair.

“Thanks, Dad.” She opened up the case, took out her guitar, and sat on the edge of her seat. “Does anyone have any requests?”

“Oh, I do!” Jasmine said. “You said at dinner you guys had to sing the “Miss me” song.”

Paul groaned, Lindsey laughed, and Jasmine explained to Ellie, James, and EB what she was talking about.

“Don’t be such a baby, Paul,” Deb said. “We know you love to sing.”

“Really?” Jasmine said. “But he was so adamant at dinner.”

Gia laughed. “No one knows what that’s all about. We think he does it for the shock value. He’s got a lovely voice.”

Paul scoffed. “Just what every man is looking for as a descriptor—*lovely*.”

Lindsey laughed and pushed his shoulder. “Come on, lovely, let’s do it.”

He grimaced, and Gia played the opening chords. Lindsey started singing first, and it wasn’t too many lines in before

both Paul and Gia were harmonizing, working through the song.

They finished with a big flourish, all three of them laughing. Then there was a distinct moment of silence, because everyone must have been as stunned as me. Gia was great, but witnessing it live? And with her brother and sister, too? One second later, everyone burst into applause, Jasmine jumped up clapping, and EB and Ellie jumped up, too. Then Paul was in front of everyone, doing the dance he had been trying to teach EB, the two of them jigging around the fire.

When I looked at Gia, there were no tears in her eyes. None at all.

And that's the way I wanted it to be.

I sat back in my chair and clapped for Paul and EB. I didn't know what was going on with Gia, but I wished I could reach out and hold her hand again.

I wanted more than a wish, though.

The question was, did she?

Chapter 18

- *Gia*

“Holy *frijoles*, you guys are excellent!” Jasmine was still standing. “I’m thinking about joining Paul and EB in that dance, that was so good.”

“Thank you.” I looked over at Lindsey, who was grinning from ear to ear. “We always have a lot of fun.”

Jasmine sat and picked up her drink. “Paul, your voice was great. You totally snowed us.”

Paul grinned. “A man has got to have some secrets, right?”

My stomach tumbled at the mention of secrets. This was the second time I was caught off guard tonight—my own secret about Charlotte was never far from my mind, and keeping it was slowly eating away at me.

“And what a secret.” Jasmine turned toward my sister. “Lindsey, your voice is as pretty as Gia’s. Did you ever consider singing professionally?”

Lindsey tilted her head to the side. “You know, I did for a little while. But then I had to stop with my singing coach and eventually, I got interested in other things.”

I sat up in my seat. That didn’t sound right. “What? What did you say? You had to stop with your singing coach?”

Lindsey shot a look at my parents that I couldn’t decipher, and Paul stopped dancing around, gazing at Lindsey.

“Just, you know...” She ran her hand through her long blonde hair. “I stopped singing. It wasn’t a big deal, it was just a couple of years after that when I went to college. I wouldn’t have kept it up.”

My mouth went dry, and I swung my head toward my parents, then back to Lindsey. I saw Jackson move up on the edge of his seat.

I gave my head a small shake. “I didn’t know you stopped. I thought you stopped when you went to college because you weren’t interested anymore.” My heart was pounding. “That’s not what happened?”

Lindsey moved her head slowly back and forth. “No, um... I stopped a couple of years after we moved.” She ran her hand through her hair. “But you’re right. By the time I was in college, I was on to something else.”

I looked at Lindsey, then back to my parents. Everyone else had fallen silent. I wasn’t positive what was going on, but I could guess. And that made my stomach swoop again.

I stood up. “Jasmine. EB’s probably ready for those s’mores. Is everything in the truck?”

“Yeah. Yes.” Jasmine nodded. “On the front seat.”

“I’ll grab it.”

“Yay!” EB called out.

“I’ll help.” Jackson jumped up from his seat and followed me out of the firepit circle. I wasn’t sure if I was happy he followed me—I needed a minute.

I grabbed the bags of supplies off the front seat, then slammed the door and leaned back against it, letting out a deep breath. Paul or Lindsey must've picked up my guitar because singing was going on again. Which was perfect—it would give me a second to pull myself together.

“Hey.” Jackson leaned up against the side of the truck. “I don't mean to sound like a broken record, but are you okay?”

I let out a chuckle. “If only I'd stop doing things that made you ask the question.”

He gave me a small smile and waited. Maybe he meant it when he said fake boyfriend or not, he could listen.

“Um, Lindsey surprised me,” I said. “I never knew she had to stop taking singing lessons.”

“Is that a big deal? It sounds like she moved on to something else.”

I turned to my side, leaning against the door, and faced Jackson. “It's a big deal because we talked, and still talk, all the time. All of us. Not only did I not know she ‘had to stop,’ I didn't know she stopped at all.” I rolled to my back again. “That's why it's a big deal.” I wasn't ready to tell him the rest of it—that I knew she stopped because of me. I knew because nobody told me... which meant it was on purpose.

Which was exactly why Charlotte shouldn't happen. For that reason, and so many other reasons—so many other *people*, really. Rather than my stomach flipping over, it sank. It felt like my world didn't have room for anyone else's dreams.

I pushed off the truck. “We better get this stuff to EB. She seems pretty excited.”

“If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure.”

Jackson reached out his right hand and then hesitated, pulling it back and dropping it to his side. Which immediately made me think of the kiss. The fake practice kiss that didn’t happen. He gave me a nod, and we walked back into the fire ring.

Lindsey was on guitar, EB was singing about living in a submarine, and Paul was holding court, standing in front of Ellie, James, Jasmine, and Quinn, hands flying. He stopped when we entered, said something fast, and then walked over to us.

What on earth had he been going on about?

“Let’s get this party started!” Paul snagged the bags out of my hand. “EB! It’s time!”

“Yes! Uncle Quinn, where are the sticks for roasting? I’ll pass them out.”

Quinn got EB going on her task, which she handled very seriously. Paul showed her how to roast, and I stepped up next to him, with my stick and marshmallow.

“You were awfully animated. What were y’all talking about?”

Paul narrowed his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“When I just walked back in. Your hands were flailing and everything.”

He gave his head a little shake. “Nothing. Just talking. You know me, I’m always doing something.” He grinned and wagged his eyebrows.

I laughed. Paul always lightened my mood. And whatever he was talking about probably was nothing—I wasn’t going to dwell on it. I’d had enough of surprises and upsets tonight. I was determined to have fun for the rest of the night.

I scooted over next to EB. “So EB, have you ever had an inside-out s’more?”

She gazed up at me with big brown eyes. “Inside out?”

“Yep. And if you can believe it, they’re better than the regular ones.” I looked over at Ellie. “Let’s finish roasting these marshmallows and then we’ll check with your aunt. Things are about to get messy.”



- Jackson

I watched Gia and EB talk to Ellie, and then construct a s'more. They used two pieces of chocolate for the outside, with one square of graham cracker and the marshmallow on the inside.

EB took a bite, and her grin was bigger than ever. She had melted marshmallow on her chin and chocolate on her fingers. She was one happy kid, and Gia was great with her. Maybe because Lindsey and Paul were both so much younger than Gia, and it was clear they were all close.

I couldn't conceive of going on a getaway like Gia was doing and inviting my parents to join me there. I laughed under my breath. I didn't invite them to my day-to-day life—I sure wouldn't invite them to my vacation.

“Gia, we still need to plan something to do while we're here for your birthday. We've only got a couple of days.” Lindsey placed another marshmallow on her stick and leaned closer to the fire.

“It's your birthday?” Jasmine asked. She was helping EB and Ellie break up squares of graham crackers and chocolate.

“It is. On Monday.”

Ellie helped EB place her stick for roasting. “What are you thinking about doing?”

Gia shrugged and glanced at me, a blush rising on her cheeks. And it momentarily took my breath.

“It’s got to be somewhere public,” she said. “We need an appearance so that someone posts pictures. You guys know about the fake thing, right?”

Ellie shook her head. “What fake thing?”

Jasmine cleared her throat. “I didn’t say anything, Gia. I wasn’t sure if I should.”

Gia dropped her head down and leaned over on her knees. “Oh, sugar.”

Oh sugar, was right. I sat up in my seat and placed my hand on her back. I leaned down and spoke into her ear. “It’ll be okay. You can trust them.”

I sat up. “Gia and I are in a relationship.”

Ellie chuckled. “Well, yes. That’s clear. So what fake thing?”

Gia looked at me, eyes big. Then she turned to Ellie. “This.” She motioned between us. “This is the fake thing. The relationship.”

Ellie put her hands on her hips. “Why is it fake?”

Lindsey threw her hands up in the air. “That’s exactly what I said!”

“It’s a long story,” I answered.

Ellie looked around at everyone. “I’ve got time. Just—hey, EB, can you go to the car and get my jacket from the back?”

“Sure,” EB said. “Here, hold my marshmallow.”

As soon as EB was out of earshot, we told Ellie and James about the situation.

“Well, you’ll obviously be able to pull it off,” Ellie said. “You already had me convinced.”

Gia and I looked at each other, and I couldn’t stop the thought.

What if we could be real?

Chapter 19

- *Gia*

In a lifetime filled with strange and awesome events, the thought that Ellie had planted—that *Jackson and I could be real*—ranked right up there as one of the strangest.

Could we?

“I know what you can do for your birthday!” Jasmine’s hand popped up. “You could go to Chef Mike’s. It’s always crowded, and it’s the best Baja Mexican food. You’ll love it.”

I laughed. “I do love Mexican. That sounds great.”

“We should definitely let Chef Mike know ahead of time. He’d want to take extra good care of you.”

I nodded. “Ah. Because he likes famous people?” I bit my lower lip. Other than the incident at the diner, I’d done a great job of not feeling famous. But that never lasted for long.

Jasmine laughed. “Not at all. Because he cares. He’d want friends of ours to be friends of his.” Ellie and James both nodded, and a warmth spread through my stomach. I liked these people—I really liked them.

“Okay, then. Linds, what do you think?”

“I think that sounds good,” Lindsey said. “Let’s do Monday, your actual birthday. It would be good to have one day with you before it’s confirmed you’re in the area.”

“I agree,” said Mom.

“Oh, shoot.” Jasmine’s hand slapped her thigh. “He’s closed on Mondays. That’s the only day you’ve got?”

“We leave on Tuesday,” Lindsey said.

“Let me talk to him.” Ellie’s fiancé, James, stood and put his arm around her. “He often hosts private events on Monday night. Let me see what he has planned, and I’ll let you know first thing tomorrow.”

He leaned in and planted a tender kiss on Ellie’s cheek, and the little spark of jealousy that flew up my spine took me by surprise. The kiss was so natural and so... *real*.

I pushed the feeling down. “I love the thought of the private event—I mean really love it—but that cuts down on the opportunity for our picture to be taken.”

Ellie’s eyes lit up. “Oh, you could start at McGuire’s Pub! It’s just a couple of doors down, and equally popular.”

I sat back in my seat and smiled. “Being seen in public, and then having a private evening? That sounds perfect.”

Lindsey clapped her hands. “Yay! Big two-seven, here you come!”

“Hey, is it a restaurant, too?” Paul asked. “I’m only nineteen.”

Ellie nodded. “It is. That won’t be a problem.”

“Excellent!” Paul jumped out of his chair, pointing from person to person as he spoke. “Okay, James and Ellie will follow up and get back with Lindsey. We’ll assume it’s going

to work. Jasmine and Quinn, you're in charge of making sure people know that Gia is there with her new boyfriend and that they should take pics. Mom and Dad, you're in charge of making it look like we're all just one big happy family. EB, you're in charge of finishing the s'mores. And Jackson, as the boyfriend—" he used air quotes when he said it, and I rolled my eyes again, "you're in charge of getting the perfect birthday gift for your new shiny girlfriend. And I'm, well..." he rubbed his knuckles on his chest, "I'm in charge of being in charge." He plopped down into his chair with a huge grin on his face, and we all burst out laughing.

I glanced over at Jackson. "Don't worry about a birthday present," I said. "He was just talking."

Jackson smiled. "I think it's a good idea. Nothing says relationship like hanging out with the family during a special occasion and gift-giving, right?" He nodded. "I'll think of something."

I bit my lower lip and tried to hide my grin. Jackson's gaze was drawn right to my mouth. Unexpectedly, my stomach dipped, like I'd just dropped down the side of a hill while driving. I had to hold on to my chair more firmly. It made me unreasonably happy to think of Jackson trying to come up with a gift idea for me. *Unreasonably.*

"Okay, then," I said with a smile. I sat back in my seat and reached for my guitar. "Does anyone have any requests?"



- *Jackson*

Ellie called out a song name, and Gia started to play, and people joined in to sing.

I sat back and watched.

I had a request.

But nothing even close to appropriate for our fake relationship or this setting. This *family* setting. Gia Nyx's family was sitting here, acting like hanging out with a bunch of people at a firepit was something they did every day.

But not just any firepit. One in a quiet, no-name small town in North Carolina. And they seemed perfectly content.

I'd been to my fair share of firepits when I was young. But those were on the Hampton shores and usually coupled with the words, *lobster rolls* or *oyster roast* and *ultra brut champagne*. Nothing like s'mores and Yuengling beer.

My childhood hadn't prepared me for this kind of get-together. One where the people genuinely cared for each other and the pleasure was found in sharing time together. No one here was trying to get something from someone else, to take advantage of them, or one-up them.

It wasn't until I spent full summers here with my grandparents that I saw that things could be different. The way they treated each other. The way the neighbors treated them.

Quinn's family right next door. They made it clear there was more to life than having all the money.

It was a difference I'd decided to choose when I was sixteen, and I'd been choosing it ever since.

Yet I was sitting next to a country star who would someday rival my parents when it came to wealth and fame. I didn't want to be a part of that monied world. I'd had enough.

Gia finished playing and there was a round of applause. Jasmine said, "Hey, Jackson, why don't you give Gia a break? She's supposed to be on vacation. We don't want her to feel like she's at work."

Gia turned and looked at me, eyebrows raised. "You play?"

I nodded. "My gramps taught me."

She handed me her guitar. "Play, play! I'd love that." She smiled so big, for a moment I was lost. But then I pulled myself together and took the guitar.

I strummed a few chords.

"How about a James Taylor song?" Ellie said. "Any true Carolinian will know the words. I bet everyone here will."

"That's perfect," said Gia.

I started the first song I ever learned. *Going to Carolina in my mind* was something I did often when I was still in New York. And Ellie was right—everyone knew the words.

I wrapped up the song to applause, and then just played. Nothing to sing to, just music to accompany the fire and

friendship.

It wasn't long before James was gathering up EB from where she had fallen asleep in her chair, marshmallow stick still clenched in her hand.

"We're going to call it," Ellie said.

Gia stood. "We should, too. These guys had a big day, and they're probably exhausted."

Paul stood and yawned. "Yep, I need sleep. The beauty that is me needs a full nine hours."

As he stretched his arms up, Lindsey smacked her arm across his stomach.

"Oof," he let out, doubling over.

"More like a *doof*, you knucklehead."

He chuckled and rubbed his stomach. I put away Gia's guitar, and then we all helped Jasmine and Quinn pack up.

Everyone said their goodbyes, and I walked with Gia and her family over to the Gators. I was very aware of her family... and me.

"So let me know what you find out about Monday night," I said, hanging back a bit while letting everyone climb in.

"Will do. You'll be the first to know." She smiled. "Mystery man."

I couldn't help but return her smile. "Sounds good, Just Gia." I gave a wave and stepped back. "Good night, everyone. See you soon."

Gia's parents called out their goodbyes and took off down the path. Gia started the motor, and I stepped back up. I tapped the roof twice, then moved back. "Thanks for the night."

Gia smiled. "Thanks to you, too."

"Yeah, Jackson," Paul said. "Now don't forget about that gift."

Gia shook her head and pulled out, with a chorus of goodbyes echoing behind them.

I stood there and smiled.

I'd already thought about that gift—and it was going to be a good one.

Chapter 20

- *Gia*

Everything was arranged for my birthday, and Jackson was on his way to pick me up, which meant the butterflies in my stomach were in full flight. Apparently, they didn't get the memo that this whole thing was a charade.

We had agreed that for the sake of “optics”—oh, how I hated that phrase, it turned everything I did into a performance, and I was so tired of performing—my family would arrive in one car, and I would ride with my new fake boyfriend.

We hadn't seen each other yesterday. I spent the day with my family, enjoying quality time together.

The day began on my deck for a breakfast that my mom made, and we all reveled in the coffee from the incredible bistro-style coffee and cappuccino maker. Paul had way too much fun using the milk steamer.

We had lunch with Rose, and it was just the family again since we were the only glampers. Then we did a trail ride that was arranged for us, where I found out that Jackson had two horses that were stabled by Quinn. So I rode Sunflower, and Lindsey rode Firefly.

We were back in time to clean up for dinner and then ended the day like we had started, on my deck, drinking and talking. It was perfect.

Today was spent much the same, but we traded out the horse ride for driving the Gators around the property, checking out the gorgeous big barn wedding venue, and the different fields that were farmed. We even drove over to where Jasmine and her family were building a community medical clinic and got to say hi. The undertaking was impressive.

Which brought me to now.

Applying and reapplying lipstick in the mirror, pacing away, and doing it all over again. I had energy coursing through me like I was about to take the stage—a familiar feeling, but at the same time, different. Like I knew how things ended after a show... but how were things going to end tonight?

Butterflies—carry on.

I heard footsteps up the porch stairs. I threw my lipstick in my purse, grabbed my bag, and whipped open the door.

“Whoa!” Jackson stopped in his tracks. “Are you okay?”

I burst out laughing. “When will I stop doing things that make you ask that question?”

Jackson smiled. “I’ll try a different one. Are you ready to go?”

“Yep. Ready.” We walked down the steps, and Jackson put his hand on the passenger side door handle.

“Gia,” he said.

I turned toward him. “Yes?”

“You look beautiful,” he said, his voice low.

I looked down at my button-front, short jean skirt and red cowboy boots, paired with my favorite white V-neck T-shirt. Simple, and exactly me. And now I felt beautiful, all the way to the tips of my toes.

“Thank you, Jackson.”

He opened the truck door and I tilted my head down, grinning from ear to ear. I slid onto the bench seat, and that’s when I saw the flowers sitting in the middle. I couldn’t keep the grin to myself this time.

“Jackson, they’re gorgeous,” I said, looking at the arrangement.

“Then I’d say you’re perfect for each other.”

He closed the car door, and my cheeks hurt from smiling.



- Jackson

Perfect for each other.

The words kept bouncing around my head.

I slid into the truck and pulled out, turning the radio on to take a minute. I needed to get my head together. We had a big night in front of us, and thoughts like ‘perfect together’ weren’t going to get me anywhere.

Gia giggled.

I glanced over and her head was turned down toward the flowers, but I saw her smile.

“Yes?” I said, and I could feel my mood lighten.

“You’re humming.”

“Oh.” I chuckled. “Yeah, I do that.”

She giggled again.

I raised an eyebrow. “It’s that funny?”

“I mean, kind of. I don’t think you noticed.”

“Noticed what?”

She grinned. “You’re humming my song.” She reached out and turned the volume up, and her rich voice filled the cab.

I’m leaving behind what I’ve always known

Taking a leap into the great unknown

You'll see me sparkle, watch me shine

Taking a chance on a life that's mine.

So I sang along aloud with the last line, and Gia applauded, then turned the song down.

“You were right,” I said. “I didn’t notice. That was one of your first hits, right?”

“It was.” She fiddled with one of the flowers. “It set everything in motion. Wait, wait, this is the best part.” She turned up the volume, pointed her finger at me, and belted out, “*Don’t let them take you down!*” And then she laughed, falling back against the seat.

I grinned. “That part’s your favorite?”

She nodded. “Yep. I always have a favorite.”

“I’m glad to know. I didn’t discover you until your third album, but I’m a fan, and like any good fan, I know all your songs.”

“I thought you must be. You recognized me from the very first.” She twisted toward me on the bench seat. “I don’t think I properly thanked you for letting me be... Just Gia.” I heard her take in a big breath, and I glanced over. Her eyes were down, her fingers still toying with the flowers. “It’s a big deal to get to just be me, Gia Nixon, and not Gia Nyx. Everything I do feels like a performance, and it can be... exhausting.”

“Well, you’re welcome.” That was all I could think to say.

She chuckled. “And you nailed it with naming me Just Gia. It’s like you know me or something. I thought I was being so smart, picking The Farm for my glamping, but I overlooked the public events at The Barn.” She sighed and leaned her head against the window. “I forgot the small-town aspect, too. In a big city, there are a bunch of people in sunglasses and baseball hats. Sometimes you’re left alone. In a small town, out-of-towners are noticed. And if there happens to be a fan around...”

I wanted to reach out and take her hand in mine, help soothe her nervousness and fidgeting. But that was outside the parameters of our fake relationship, right? Or would I do that for a friend? We were friends. I wouldn’t do it for Quinn, though I might do it for Jasmine—but, then Quinn would punch me, so probably not.

Also, Gia was a million miles away. When did this bench seat get so big?

“I got a feel for that at the diner,” I said.

“Yeah, it doesn’t always go like that, but it happens.” She sat up straight and turned back toward me. “Enough about that. What can you tell me about tonight? I’m actually looking forward to celebrating with everyone. The past three years I was on tour and didn’t have any family around.”

“McGuire’s Pub is great. Exactly what you think an Irish pub should be. Wood floors, dark, Guinness on tap, always crowded, and a good rotation of music.” I glanced her way. “No country music, though.”

Gia laughed. “Not a problem. I like it all. And what about Chef Mike’s place?”

“There’s no such thing as a bad meal when it comes to Chef Mike. His restaurant is cool, with exposed brick walls and stainless-steel tabletops. And the man is funny.” I paused. “Plus, it’ll just be his couple of friends and your group.”

“That sounds even better than the pub.”

I nodded. “We’re almost there. Are you ready?”

She shifted around, eyes straight ahead, and slapped her hands on the seat. “I’m ready.”

“I’m going to drive by the restaurant and bar, just so you can see them. They’re coming up on the left.”

She sat up in her seat, leaning forward a bit to look around me. It was a beautiful evening, though there weren’t a ton of people on the street. It wasn’t unusual for a Monday night, close to seven, with people already home from their jobs, maybe not even coming back out.

“Alright,” she said. “Lindsey just texted, they’re already inside.”

I pulled a U-turn and parked in a spot on the road about two spots down from MGuire’s.

“You ready?”

She nodded. “I’m ready.”

“Okay, wait there.” I hopped out of the truck and walked around to Gia’s door. I opened it up to the most beautiful smile

on the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I was momentarily stunned.

I found myself leaning in—leaning in to do exactly what, my brain hadn't caught up with—when she said, “Oh, are we doing this?”

I blinked. And blinked again.

“I guess we should have talked about the details more. I mean, it seems like a serious boyfriend would definitely kiss me when he opened my door, especially when we're eye to eye like this.” She took a quick glance around while I tried to catch up. “But there aren't too many people around, so I think we're good.” She smiled and held out her hand for me to help her down.

I took it in mine and helped her to the sidewalk, still not caught up to the situation. But one thing was clear...

I did *not* just kiss Gia Nyx, and that was the way she wanted it.

How did I get that so wrong?

Chapter 21

- *Gia*

Adrenaline was racing through me, and it wasn't the thought of walking into a bar and being recognized, or even the thought of my picture hitting social media.

It was Jackson, and whatever that was that had just happened... some kind of... moment between us. Did he almost kiss me? Like, for real? *No*. No, it had to have been for show and the potential that someone might see us. At least, he sure didn't argue when I brought that up, so that must've been what it was.

I held the flowers he had given me in a death grip, happy to have something to do with my hands. Right before we got to the door, he put his hand on my arm. I looked up into his deep blue eyes and for a second, I saw excitement and confusion—exactly what I was feeling, too—but it immediately cleared.

“How about we nail down those details on the drive home tonight?”

My stomach plummeted. *Right. Got it. Message received, loud and clear.*

“Definitely,” I said, and hoped my face hadn't turned red from embarrassment. *Way to misconstrue the situation, Gia.* “And sorry I didn't think about it before. We've got a bunch of being out together in public coming up, so that would be good.”

I turned to the door and let Jackson pull it open for me. I hoped that stepping into a new environment would change the awkward feeling that had replaced the adrenaline.

I shouldn't have been feeling any of these feelings at all. What would falling for Jackson even do, other than add another complication to my life—a life I was struggling to maintain as it was?

“Gia!”

Paul waved from a table in the middle of the pub. There were gold and silver balloons tied to the back of one of the chairs, including a big two and a big seven, and everyone from the firepit—except for EB—was already there. A smile broke over my face.

“Hi!” I gave a wave and walked over, a kind of peace settling over me at all those people being here for me.

“Happy birthday, sweet girl.” My dad picked me up off the ground when he hugged me, and then Paul picked me up and twirled me twice.

“Happy birthday, G! Now let's get this party started!”

Mom leaned in for a hug and said, “We're so happy to be with you, honey.”

Then Lindsey almost crushed me with her hug. “Happiest of happy birthdays, big sister. Hope it's your best year yet.”

Tears surfaced in my eyes. I hoped it would be my best year yet, too. But could it be? I got the tears under control fast. It

wasn't going to be that kind of night. Like Paul said, it was time to party.

“Happy birthday, Gia,” Ellie said and gave me a warm hug. “Thanks so much for letting us celebrate with you.”

“No, thank you. I can't wait to meet Chef Mike. And we couldn't have done that without y'all.”

She smiled and Jasmine practically squealed. “Gia! Happy birthday!” She embraced me in a big hug, rocking me back and forth. There was a distinct personality difference between Jasmine and her best friend Ellie—and I liked them both.

Jackson pulled up a second table and a couple of chairs so we all had a seat.

“Where are those drinks?” Paul stood and looked at the bar. “*Garcon*. Oh, *garcon*.” Paul snapped his fingers.

Quinn and James walked up with a tray of drinks.

“Were you just *garcon-ing* me, Paul?” Quinn said.

Paul held his hands up and sat down. “I don't know what I was thinking. If I was going to call you anything, it should be Cowboy Quinn.”

“Quinn will do.” He smirked and set the drinks down on the table.

“Why don't you call me a cowboy?” Jackson asked.

Paul flipped up his hands. “I've never even seen you in a cowboy hat, which is the first part of the definition.”

Jackson shrugged. “Fair enough. What else is part of your definition?”

Paul responded like he’d been waiting for someone to ask the question. “A cowboy is adventurous, and tough, and skilled, and honorable, and has a horse, obvs.”

“I happen to have two horses.”

“Jackson, refer to part one.” Paul scoffed. “Where’s your hat?”

Jackson grinned. Paul could make anyone smile.

“Gia, your sister said you were good with Guinness,” Ellie’s fiancé, James, said.

I nodded. “She’s right. Thank you.” He placed a drink in front of me, and everyone else grabbed theirs. I noticed they got a Guinness for Jackson, too.

Paul picked up his soda and stood. Then he placed his hand on the table and leaned in, making sure only we could hear him. “How public do you want this toast to be, G?”

Apparently, I hadn’t thought through any of the details!

I looked over at Jackson, who somehow had ended up sitting next to Quinn, and not anywhere near me. I knew one thing, that wasn’t going to do at all.

So I walked over to where they were sitting, squished myself in between them, and sat right down on Jackson’s lap. I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and grinned up at Paul. “Make it public, Paul. I need those pictures!”

I glanced at Jackson, and there was that dimple. Just what I wanted to see.

Paul laughed and held his soda up. “A toast!”

Everyone scrambled to their feet, except for me and Jackson—I wasn’t budging.

“To the best older sister in the world.”

“Hey!” Lindsey picked up a cardboard coaster and flipped it at him.

He laughed. “I’ll start over. To one of the best older sisters in the world. It’s great you’re home from being on tour so we could all be here together. May your next year be even better than your last, filled with happiness, joy, and love.”

I saw my mom wipe under her eye, which made me get choked up, and then Paul said, “To Gia Nyx! Cheers!”

Everyone raised their glasses in cheers, and I smiled at Jackson and said, “There’s no doubt now, right?”

He grinned. “There’s definitely no doubt.”

And he leaned in and kissed me.



- Jackson

“I know we said we’d talk about it later, but it seemed like that was the right time to kiss you.” It wasn’t much of a kiss at all, but I still took her by surprise. “I mean, there are people here, Paul just announced your name, you’re on my lap and your arms are around me. It seemed right.”

Gia laughed. “Agreed. It seemed right.”

I let out a breath. “Good. Like at the diner. It seemed right.”

Gia tensed the slightest bit before she wrapped both arms around me in a hug. “Someone is taking a picture,” she whispered in my ear.

I held her close. I knew this was all for show, but nothing changed the fact that I had Gia Nyx in my arms. I would treasure this chance before all my chances left—when she did.

After a moment, she slid off my lap, gave me a wink, and walked back to her seat.

Conversation was animated at the table, with everyone talking with everyone, and Paul was making his way around, talking not only to our group, but meeting a couple of people nearby.

Eventually, he made his way to Quinn and James, and the conversation seemed serious, but I was too far away and it was too loud to determine what he was saying.

It wasn't long before he said, "Alright. There's a big birthday dinner waiting for us down at SoBo. Everyone finish up, and we'll head that way."

He was taking Gia's request to let everyone know she was here seriously.

We pushed back from the table, and Ellie and James led the way to the exit. I walked up to Gia and held out my arm. "Shall we?"

"We shall." She looped her arm through mine, and we headed toward the door. I leaned down to speak to her. "I saw two people take a picture."

She smiled up at me. "Ah. Better than what you clocked at the farmer's market. I saw at least five phones pointed our way."

My eyebrows flew up. "Well, then, I think *Operation: Social Media* was a success."

She tilted her head back and laughed, and I didn't care if it was for the cameras. I'd take it.

"Indeed," she said.

We walked out the door to go to Chef Mike's while I tried to come up with more ways to make Gia laugh.

Chapter 22

- *Gia*

There weren't a lot of people on the street, but those that were there watched our entourage move from McGuire's Pub to SoBo—short for Southbound, I learned. Chef Mike had another restaurant at the other end of town called Northbound, or NoBo.

The massive bouquet of balloons and the flowers I carried would have made anyone look twice, even if they didn't recognize me. I wasn't doing anything to hide who I was tonight, so my guess was that anyone who posted about me being at McGuire's would draw fans to this part of town.

Right before we stepped into SoBo, I pulled Jackson aside. "I think there's a good chance your name will be discovered and connected to me tonight. I just wanted to give you a heads-up."

He gave me a nod. "Yep. I know what I signed up for."

I smiled. "Good. Let's head in, then."

We slipped into SoBo, and I spun to take in its beauty. It was open and airy, with an incredible mix of rustic and industrial materials. The walls were brick and the floor was stained concrete, coupled with stainless steel table tops and the occasional crystal chandelier.

I smoothed my hand over a stainless top right as Lindsey and Paul stepped in, their heads together like they were plotting

something. Or Paul was. What were those two up to?

“Welcome to SoBo!” A big voice boomed from the center of the restaurant. “Where the drinks are cold, and the cooking is spicy and hot!”

“You’ve mixed that up again, dear.” A woman walked by the extremely large man and patted his chest. “The drinks are cold, the food is spicy, and the cook’s *wife* is hot.”

I grinned when the man—Chef Mike, I presumed—threw his head back and unleashed a belly laugh that practically rocked the room. I liked him already, and his sassy wife.

“Come on in, you guys, and make yourselves at home,” he said. “My friends will be here any minute.”

“Chef Mike and Lily,” James said. “I’d like you to meet our new friends. This is Gia Nyx and her family.”

Chef Mike clasped my small hand in his massive grip and shook. He looked to be around Jackson’s age, and he was a giant of a man compared to me. “Glad you could be here for your big day, Gia. James and Ellie only had good things to say.”

“Same, Chef Mike. I really appreciate you letting us crash your party.”

“Of course. And it’s just a get-together with an old football friend of mine and his brothers, so don’t think of it as crashing. You guys make it a party, and I love a party.” He turned to his wife. “Don’t I, Lily?”

Lily smiled and took my hand in hers. “He does. I’ve got money on the fact that before the night is over, the tables will all be pushed to the side, and he’ll have everyone up and out on his makeshift dance floor.”

I beamed. “For real?” I looked at the large man. “That’s a great visual, even if it doesn’t happen. Thanks for that.”

“Hey, what are you betting on?” Paul walked over and introduced himself, then Chef Mike stepped away.

“Lily was just saying that she bets that Chef Mike has us all dancing before the night is over.”

Paul looked over the restaurant, then back at our group, and said, “What’s the pot?”

I smacked his shoulder. “Paul, she didn’t really mean she was collecting money. It was a figure of speech.”

Paul’s eyes got round, and he shook his head. “Oh, yeah. Right, of course.”

“Funny boy.” I shook my head. “Lily, I want you to meet the rest of my family.” We walked over to where Jackson was introducing my parents and Lindsey to Chef Mike.

I brought my hand up to my collarbone as a warm feeling spread throughout my chest. Jackson was doing a great job at the fake boyfriend thing, making sure my parents were taken care of and included.

As soon as introductions were made, the door opened, and Chef Mike let out an ear-piercing, “Yee-haw!”

I turned to the door and watched three men walk in, each one bigger than the one before. They were definitely brothers.

“Long time, no see, Wyatt,” Chef Mike exclaimed and wrapped his arms around the first man in a big bear hug. He even lifted him off his feet. The man was grinning from ear to ear.

“Let’s see if you can do that with Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum.” He motioned over his shoulder with his thumb.

The second guy braced himself. “I don’t think you’ve got the stones, Big Mike.”

Big Mike? The nickname fit.

Chef Mike snorted. “Worry about your own stones, Rafe.” Then he wrapped his arms around Rafe and did the same, laughing as he did it.

Rafe wiped his hands down the front of his shirt. “Okay, I admit defeat. But there’s no way you’re getting Tiny.”

Chef Mike sized up the man and took one step forward. Then he stepped back and threw his hands in the air. “Nope. I never take a bet I can’t win.” He put out his hand to shake, and when Tiny reached out for it, Chef Mike grabbed it and pulled him in, then picked him up and spun him around. Chef Mike grinned from ear to ear, and Tiny burst out laughing.

“I haven’t been spun that good since the last time I accidentally found myself on a buckin’ bull,” Tiny said.

Chef Mike’s eyebrow quirked. “How’d you end up on a bull accidentally?”

“Well...” Tiny rubbed his chin, “there was this kitty-cat.”

“Isn’t there always,” muttered his brother, Rafe.

Tiny pushed Rafe in the shoulder. “Rafe and Wyatt were running the buckin’ bulls through the chutes, getting them used to what it’s like for the rodeos. So the bulls had on their halters and flank straps, but luckily, the strap wasn’t pulled tight to make him buck.”

“Yeah,” Wyatt interjected, “all that bull needed was Tiny on his back to make him buck.”

“Where does the kitty come into things?” Chef Mike asked. The rest of us had all moved in closer, caught up in the story.

“The kitty got into the corral. I didn’t want him to get trampled by the bull, and I thought I had plenty of time. So I scooped up the cat and went to climb over the fence, but lost my footing. Suddenly, the bull was right there. It was either land on the ground and get trampled by the bull, or swing my leg over and go for a ride.”

Rafe snickered. “It was a ride, alright.”

“No thanks to you. Rafe was on the ground laughing, and about a second later, I was thrown clear off the bull. Wyatt distracted him while I got away.”

“The irony is, the bull’s name was Tiny.”

Chef Mike raised a brow. “So it was Tiny on Tiny?”

Tiny grinned. “It was.” Then he held his arms up in victory. “But I saved the cat!”

Everyone laughed and applauded, and Tiny slapped Chef Mike on the back in that man-hug kind of way. Chef Mike turned to the room.

“Everyone.” He put his arm around the first man. “This is my good friend Wyatt Wilson. We played pro ball together out in Arizona back in the day.” He motioned to the other two men. “And these are his younger brothers. Rafe,” he then pointed to Tiny, “and this is Leo, but we call him Tiny. They run a horse and stock farm in Idaho, and they’re passing through to check on a livestock sale.”

The three men all raised their hands in greeting. I glanced over at my sister and watched my mom reach out and place two fingers under Lindsey’s chin, physically shutting her mouth. I bit back a giggle. I don’t think her look of shock was about the story Tiny had told. These men were very fine specimens, indeed. I couldn’t wait to tease her about the dumbfounded look on her face as soon as I got a chance.

“The gang’s all here,” Chef Mike said. “You can grab drinks at the bar, and I’ll have starters out in just a sec.”

I felt a hand on my back and looked up to see Jackson smiling down at me. “How are you doing?”

“Well, will wonders never cease? You didn’t have to say, ‘are you okay?’” I smiled up at him, and he chuckled.

“You definitely look okay.” He grinned. “Better than okay, in fact.” He motioned to the bar. “I thought I’d get you a drink, and then realized other than that Guinness, which you barely

touched, I don't know what you like. It seemed pretty shabby for a serious boyfriend.”

I patted his arm. “I barely drink, since it's not good for my voice. But this is a special occasion...” I paused. “I'll take a whiskey, neat.”

“My kind of girl.”

“You think?” I said with a smile. And that little voice inside me that kept trying to be heard said, *Please, let me be your kind of girl. Please, let me be your kind of girl.*



- Jackson

I pulled Paul aside on my way to the bar.

“I’m going to grab Gia a whiskey,” I said, “and I’m not sure what her favorite is.”

“Oh, that’s easy. Wild Turkey.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? She seems more like a McCallan, or at least a Woodford Reserve kind of girl.”

Paul shook his head. “You might not know her that well. She’d stick to a Kentucky tried and true. She’s really a small-town girl—fame and fortune haven’t changed her a bit.” Paul cocked his head. “Maybe she’s a bit quieter than she used to be.” He glanced over at Gia, where she was sitting with their mom. “She’s all Wild Turkey.”

“Got it.” I glanced at Gia as I stepped up to the bartender. Paul was right—I thought I knew who Gia Nyx was, but with every passing moment, I was discovering I was wrong. Strike that. I did know who Gia Nyx was, but I was finding out that I didn’t know Gia Nixon, the woman behind the star... and I was more intrigued than ever.

What would I find out next?

Chapter 23

- *Gia*

“A toast.” Chef Mike stood from the long table where our party of fifteen gathered. The platters of sizzling meats and vegetables had long since cooled and been emptied, and the remnants of a well-enjoyed meal were spread between us.

“First, a very happy birthday to Gia. As the saying goes, may you live long and prosper.” He grinned my way. “Happy birthday, Gia!” he said, and everyone cheered and raised their glasses with a chorus of birthday greetings. I smiled from ear to ear and bowed my head in thanks.

“But even more importantly,” Chef Mike continued, “to the real reason for the evening.” He raised his glass again. “To good friends and good food. May we never be in short supply of either.”

“Hear, hear!” Cheers and applause went up around the table, and I took a sip of my drink. I couldn’t have planned a better night.

Paul called out from farther down the table. “Jackson! Where’s your fantastic gift? I forgot to have you give it to her at the bar, where everyone could’ve seen it.” He shook his head. “That was a wasted opportunity.”

I saw confusion flit across Chef Mike’s face. “What opportunity was wasted?”

I dropped my head. “Oh, sugar.”

Jackson chuckled and put his arm around me. He leaned in and whispered, “We’re sure doing a poor job of keeping this fake relationship thing a secret.”

“I know, I know.”

Paul shrugged his shoulder. “Sorry, sis. I’m gonna let you take this one.”

“Let me,” Jackson said, and he stood and looked around the table.



- Jackson

“Some of you already know what I’m going to say. The rest of you, I’m going to assume we can trust you to keep what I say in confidence.”

The brothers looked at each other and then at Chef Mike and Lily.

“Of course, Jackson,” said Chef Mike. “I trust everyone at this table. You have our word.”

I nodded. “Gia and I met the other week at Quinn’s, where she’s vacationing, and we’re in a relationship.”

Tiny sat up and leaned his elbows on the table. “Oh, and you’re keeping it a secret.” He nodded. “I think I saw this on one of those reality TV shows. Don’t worry, bud. We got you.” He leaned back with a smile on his face.

Rafe pushed Tiny’s shoulder. “You know that reality TV is fake TV, don’t you? It’s practically scripted, and reactions are pulled out of context. Plus, that doesn’t explain the missed opportunity.” He looked at me. “Go on.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Gia was discovered by some wedding guests at Quinn’s, and she ended up getting hassled. And then I had some stuff going on, which we don’t need to get into. Suffice it to say, our relationship is fake. That’s the secret.”

Lily cocked her head. “What?” She pointed between Gia and me, her forehead scrunched. “You two are fake?”

I glanced at Gia, and then back at the table. “Yeah. We’re fake. But we need Gia’s public to think that we’re real so they leave her alone. And this has got to be the last group of people who find out, otherwise, it’s really going to mess things up for me, too.”

“Huh.” Lily shook her head. “That is... something.” Her head was still cocked, her eyes slightly narrowed.

“That is much cooler than a secret relationship,” said Tiny. “I’m pretty sure I saw a fake one on a TV show, too. You guys’ve gotta be careful, though. Those fake things always end up being real.” He nodded knowingly like he was some kind of giant baby Yoda.

Rafe pushed him again. “That was the movie *The Proposal*, you dummy.”

“Oh, yeah.” Tiny smiled. “I liked that one.”

“Well, none of that matters.” I cleared my throat. “This is fake. And we missed an opportunity at McGuire’s Pub for people to get pictures of me giving Gia a gift.”

I had a gift for Gia, but it was kind of bulky, so I’d left it in the back of the truck. I thought Paul had mostly been giving me a hard time about the gift thing, but turned out, he wasn’t.

Gia chimed in, “Jackson said it to me earlier. Nothing says relationship like spending time with family and gift-giving.”

Several people around the table nodded in agreement. This might have been the time to point out that it depended on the family. Definitely Gia's, and definitely not mine. Spending time with a new girlfriend and my family would be torture. *Not that Gia is my girlfriend.*

I sat down and pulled up my chair. Gia slid her hand in mine and gave it a squeeze, and I squeezed back.

"It's important that the public knows we're dating," I said. "And it's especially important that no one finds out the secret. So there you have it."

"Alright," said Chef Mike. "You've got it. We won't tell a soul."

There were murmurs of assent around the table. Lily still had her head to the side, scrutinizing. She sat up and then leaned into Mike, who put his arm around her as she whispered in his ear. He chuckled and kissed her temple, and she smiled, eyes clear.

Chef Mike lifted his chin to me. "Remind me to tell you a story sometime." He stood from the table and motioned to the waiter who had been helping him out. "It's time for dessert. I've got a cayenne-infused chocolate flan, or plain flan, which is never plain when I make it. I've also got churros, and of course, we have this."

His waiter came out of the kitchen with a big chocolate frosted cake, and a bunch of candles that were more like sparklers than candles flickering over it.

“Happy birthday—” We all sang happy birthday to Gia, who, in no time flat, had tears falling down her face.

I leaned in. “Happy tears, right?”

She nodded and smiled. “Definitely, happy tears.”



- *Gia*

I knew my birthday was going to be good as soon as I realized I'd be spending it with my family, but I had no idea that sharing it with what, just a week ago, were complete strangers would actually make it better.

I couldn't remember the last celebration I had that was as good as this.

Mom and Lindsey hugged me again, and the cake was placed in front of me.

"Cake, cake, cake," Paul chanted.

I waved my hands. "Just a sec. I've gotta make a wish." I closed my eyes, and all I saw was Jackson. *Could I... Could he be my wish?* Right now, he felt more like a wish than my hope of going to Charlotte. But I was sure that even if I figured out a way to be with Jackson, it would never happen if I made that trip.

He wouldn't look at me the way he had been looking at me tonight, and neither would my family.

I squeezed my eyes closed tighter. It was my birthday, I could do this the way I wanted. I was going to take this one moment and not think about what everyone else wanted or expected, just me. Just Gia. And dang it, I wanted both things—Jackson and Charlotte.

So I opened my eyes and blew.

Chapter 24

- Jackson

I held Gia's balloons in one hand and her leftover chocolate cake in the other. We were at the door, getting ready to leave SoBo, and she was giving out last hugs.

"So I'll see you in the morning before you head to the airport, right?" Gia hugged her mom again.

"Yes, honey. We'll stop at your cabin before we pull out. Around seven."

Gia nodded and swiped under her eyes. "Okay, okay." She hugged her dad one more time, then looked back to Chef Mike and Lily. "Thank you both, from the bottom of my heart. This night was perfect."

I couldn't have agreed more.

"Any time," replied Chef Mike. "Hopefully, we'll see you back in these parts again someday."

My stomach dropped. I'd forgotten for a moment that she didn't live here, and she was going to leave. Maybe the night had been too perfect.

"Gentlemen." She nodded at the Wilson brothers.

"Okay, everyone." She looped her arm through mine and held her flowers in her other hand. "When we walk out there, just walk to your car, quickly, head down, and don't make eye contact. You don't need to be smiling, but don't frown, either. Relaxed faces. Oh, and don't answer any questions."

“We’ve been through this before, Gia. We’ve got it,” Paul said.

“I know, but Jackson hasn’t.” She motioned to the window. “There are more people out there than on a normal Monday night, I’d gather, which means someone posted that I’m here. So we just need to get to our cars, allow for a couple of people to get pictures, and go.”

“I’m good,” I said. “I’ll open your door to let you in, and you immediately lock it behind you.”

Gia beamed. “Exactly.”

Wyatt moved toward us. “Do you want us running interference?” He motioned to Chef Mike and his brothers. “We’ve all done a bit of protecting in our day.”

“I’m sure we don’t need it, but why not? How about two of you walk with my family, and two of you walk with me and Jackson?”

Wyatt nodded.

Chef Mike gave Lily a kiss on the cheek. “Lock the door when we go.”

“Okay, let’s do this,” Gia said.

Lily unlocked the door, and Gia’s family, escorted by Rafe and Tiny, walked one way, and Chef Mike, Wyatt, Gia, and I walked the other.

People had their phones up, and someone had Gia’s music playing from their car radio. Gia held on to my arm tightly,

and I wasn't mad about it.

A couple of people called out happy birthday greetings, and Gia waved her flowers in response. Some fans applauded when we walked by, but we made it to the truck without any incident. I opened the door for Gia while Wyatt stood behind me and Chef Mike stood at my door. After she slid in, I clapped Wyatt on the shoulder, then did the same to Chef Mike before I jumped in the truck. We were pulling out and driving in less than thirty seconds.

I glanced at Gia, not sure what to expect. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

She smiled. "It wasn't. Not bad at all."

I exhaled slowly. "Does it ever seem weird to you that people just start clapping when you're around?"

Gia threw her head back and laughed. "Jackson, that is the least of the weird things that can happen."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"The weirdest thing, or maybe I should say, the thing I didn't know, is that people just give you stuff. For free. Comping your meals at restaurants, hotel rooms. I mean, finally, after a lot of struggling, I have money, and practically no one wants to take it." She sat up in her seat. "Even tonight, Chef Mike wouldn't let me pay."

I nodded. "He would have done that for any of us. To him, that was like having us over to his house for dinner." I paused. "What else?"

“Complete vacation packages—not that I have any time for that. Products, in hopes that I’ll use them and talk about them.”

“Like what you suggested about my flower farm.” Again, not that I wanted or needed that.

She nodded. “Exactly. I can’t tell you how many pillows I’ve received with the lyrics of my songs stitched on them. Paintings. Artwork. All kinds of stuff.”

I chuckled. “What do you do with it all?”

She let out a big sigh. “It’s hard, you know? Especially with the things made by hand. The amount of time that must go into those things... I dedicated part of a room to it. My PA, Stella, opens everything and brings it to my house. She places the item, takes a photo, and sends the photo and a thank you note from me to their social media. Every week I review the photos, and if something is particularly thoughtful, I’ll send a handwritten note.”

“And this is happening all the time?”

“I was as surprised as you are.”

“I can’t tell if this is the perfect time or the worst time to tell you, but... I got you a present.”

Gia sat up in her seat and turned toward me, pushing one of the balloons out of the way. “You didn’t have to do that.” She brushed her hair back. “I know Paul made a big deal about it, but that was just Paul being Paul. Half of what he does and says is just a big joke.”

“So, you don’t want the present?”

“Well, I didn’t say that...”

I shot her a smile. “Good. Because I didn’t get it for you because of Paul.” I rubbed my hand down my jeans. “I thought you’d like it, and it’s your birthday, and what can I say? I’m trying to be the best fake boyfriend I can be.”

Gia laughed and leaned her head back on the seat. “And I was pretty happy with the flowers.”

We drove in comfortable silence for a bit. I always liked driving between Merit and Henryville Township, leaving the lights of the city and driving into the purple-blue country night. The further we got from Merit, the more you could see the lightning bugs over the fields. I’d take those flickering lights over the city lights any day. I’d fallen for them back when I was sixteen, and they still brought me peace.

Gia sat up and turned the radio volume up. “Oh, wait, here comes the best part.” She held up one finger and moved her head to the beat of the music. And then, in perfect harmony with the song on the radio, she sang one word, “*Yeah.*”

She sat back with a big smile on her face.

“That was the best part?”

She nodded. “The best.”

And funnily enough, Gia sitting next to me in my truck, singing, was the best part for me, too.



- *Gia*

We pulled up in front of my cabin, and Jackson got out to open my door. He helped me inside with the balloons, flowers, and leftover cake, and then he said, “Be back in a sec.”

I tied the balloons to the back of one of the barstools and found a vase for the flowers. Jackson walked in holding a long white flower box with a big red bow tied to it.

“More flowers?” I laughed. “I’m so glad I said that the flowers you already brought me made me happy. More flowers,” I reached for the box, “more happy.”

Jackson shot his hand out and placed it on top of the box. “Um, it’s not flowers.”

“Oh!” I shook my head. “Well, that’s fine, too. I just recognized the box as a flower box.”

Jackson rubbed the back of his neck. *Hmm, he was nervous about this.* And now I was beyond curious.

“I’m going to have to explain it, no matter what, so just go ahead and open it.”

I reached for the box, sliding it closer to me. “Heavy.”

“Yep.”

I slid the bow off the box and popped off the top. I folded back the tissue paper and reached inside.

I lifted up the heavy, long, metal rod and turned it to see its end. My gaze shot to Jackson. “A branding iron?”

He nodded. “A branding iron.”

“It’s very cool, I—” I looked at the brand and my head shot up again. “It’s JG, not GN. Just Gia.” I could feel the smile taking over my face.

He smiled and nodded. “Yeah. I thought you’d like that.”

“I do, I really do. Whatever made you think of this?”

“Oh! Right,” he said. “It’s not nearly as out of the blue as you might think. I thought of it the other day at the farmer’s market when I saw my friend Grace. She and her sisters and brother run a little bar that’s about halfway between here and Merit. They’ve added an outdoor space, and there’s a new wood wall. They’re having a branding night where everyone is invited to burn their brand into the wall.”

“That’s the coolest thing.” I couldn’t stop smiling.

He let out a big breath. “Good. It’d be good for me since there’ll be a ton of local people there. The perfect place to prove I’m trying.” He put air quotes around the words *I’m trying*, and my smile faltered.

Right. The fake thing. My birthday wish was already not coming true.

“It’s a great idea,” I said. “What a neat way to get everyone to come out.” I rolled the brand through my fingers. “It’ll be between you and me, that JG stands for Just Gia. I’ll have to make something up, in case someone were to notice and ask

about it.” I snapped my fingers. “Jean! My grandmother’s name is Jean. All my fans know how much she meant to me. It would be like a commemorative thing for her.” I felt a tear well up. “Oh, sugar, now it’s even more perfect.”

I placed the brand on the counter and reached my arms around Jackson’s neck. He may be my fake boyfriend, but he had quickly become a good friend, and I hugged my good friends. “Thank you.”

Jackson hesitated for a moment before he returned the hug.

I stepped back and broke away.

“So,” he motioned over his shoulder with his thumb, “I’m going to get out of here.”

I nodded. “Thanks for the night, Jackson.” I placed my hand on the branding iron. “And for all of this.”

“Yep.” He walked to the door. “Say goodbye to your family again for me.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll see you, Just Gia.”

I gave a little wave. “Bye, Mystery man.”

He chuckled. “Probably not for much longer.”

“Probably not.”

He held up his hand in goodbye and slipped out the door. And before he could say it, I called out, “I’ll lock the door.”

And my heart was full as I watched him go.



- Jackson

Keep walking, keep walking. Just get in your truck and go.

We made a deal. We had a deal. And I wasn't going to be like all the other random guys who showed up in her life, trying to get something. Maybe try to take something that wasn't mine to take. She needed to trust me—I promised her that trust and I wasn't going to break it, no matter how much I wanted to.

Man, did I want to.

So I got into my truck and went.

I pulled my boots off inside my door and leaned against the antique desk with my phone in hand. I had downloaded two social media apps before I picked up Gia. I wanted to know as soon as possible what pictures were posted, and when I got identified. It would be less than twenty-four hours between my name getting posted and my parents contacting me, and I was going to be ready.

Nothing new yet.

I sighed and tossed my phone onto the sofa.

I'd be as ready as I could be.

Chapter 25

- *Gia*

Jackson was coming over.

I mean, that's not the strangest thing in the world, but my birthday night ended kind of awkwardly, and all we had done for the past several days was text. He hadn't even asked me to do more of his flower deliveries with him, which had been part of the deal.

Stick to the deal, Gia, stick to the deal.

And all the awkwardness had been on my part. My birthday wish fogged up my mind enough to think that because I suddenly wanted something to happen between Jackson and me, he'd want that, too.

Newsflash: he did not.

At least it made one thing clear—I was going to Charlotte. I had to see if it could work—I needed to know. I spoke with my friend Alice—well, acquaintance, really, since it was hard to make good friends when you're always on the road or in the studio. We spoke a couple of times, and she was excited about the opportunity. And I trusted her, which was the most important part. I planned to leave in a little while.

I had my headphones on, listening to a new track I'd laid, trying to finalize a line of lyrics. My backpack was already at the door, my suitcase was open on my bed, and I was tossing in the things I might need.

I pushed the suitcase over and grabbed my guitar. I was singing and playing along, stopping and starting, just trying to get that line right, when I saw a denim-clad leg and boot slide into my peripheral.

I jumped, and almost lost my guitar before I realized it was Jackson.

He had his hands up in front of him, the international gesture for “Nothing to worry about here” and I jerked my headphones off.

“Holy cow, Jackson, you scared me!” I threw my hand to my chest, trying to calm my racing heart.

I was catching my breath when I noticed Jackson was frowning. At me.

His hands were on his hips, and there was a look on his face I hadn’t seen before.

“What?”

“Really? What?”

I shook my head.

He threw his arm in the direction of the door. “Gia. I just opened your door and walked in here, and you didn’t even notice. That’s what’s what.”

“Oh.” I laid my guitar across my suitcase and stood. “I knew you were coming over, so I unlocked the door.”

He shook his head, hands still on his hips. “I’m over here to discuss how the whole world has basically figured out where

you are right now, and you leave your door unlocked?”

Now my hands were in front of me, similar to Jackson’s earlier pose.

“Okay, maybe not my smartest move.” I walked toward the door.

“I locked it behind me,” he said.

I nodded and turned back. “I knew you were coming, so... You’re right, though—it sounds stupid when I say it out loud. I should’ve kept the door locked until you knocked.” I lifted my shoulder. “I’ve gotten really comfortable here.”

His hands slid off his hips and his face relaxed. There was the Jackson I knew.

“Okay, but you have to be careful.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “You don’t want someone walking in on you like I just did.”

I nodded. “You’re right. It won’t happen again.” I glanced at the door. “This place seems pretty safe, though, right?”

“Yeah, it is, I just—don’t—” Jackson took in a big breath and let it out slowly. *Oh, sugar.* This had really gotten to him.

I walked over and placed my hand on his arm. “Jackson, I won’t do it again.”

“Okay.” Jackson looked over my shoulder, then took a step closer to my bed and motioned. “What are you doing?”

I glanced at my bed and my stomach sank. This was not going to make him happy, either.

“It’s not what it looks like.”

“So you’re not packing your bag to go somewhere overnight?”

“Okay, so maybe it is what it looks like, it’s just not what you think.”

He nodded. “Maybe it is what I think. You’re packing your bag to go somewhere, and wherever that is, someone from your security team is meeting you there.”

“Um...”

“Paul is meeting you there.”

“Well...”

“Your dad is meeting you there.”

“Not... exactly...”

“Four of your closest friends, all of whom are much, much bigger than you, are meeting you there.”

“Well, one of my friends...”

Jackson shook his head. “The next thing you say better be that she’s a bodybuilder also trained in jiu-jitsu.”

I tilted my head to the side and winced. “More like a vegan trained on acoustic guitar.”

He rolled his lips into a tight line. “Gia.”

“Okay, I can see this looks bad, but I’m going to Charlotte, just for the night, where no one thinks I am right now, so no one will be looking for me. Just a quick overnight trip and I’ll

be right back.” I slapped my hands and swiped them together, like *easy-peasy*.

His eyes narrowed. “It seems weird that I’m the one who has to say this, but no one knew you were here, either, and then someone found out, and now everyone knows.”

“Yeah, but those were wedding guests, and I didn’t have my sunglasses on.”

He put his fist on his hip. ”I’m not sure you’re thinking this through.”

I stood up straight and crossed my arms, not sure I liked where this was going. “I am thinking this through. I think about it all the time!”

“Then help me out here. Explain what’s happening, because I don’t like this one bit... for you.”

“Hmph. It’s a good thing you threw that ‘for you’ bit on the end. Because I was going to say it doesn’t matter if you don’t like it.”

He dropped his head and his hands. Slowly, he lifted his gaze. “Why don’t you start from the beginning.”

So I took in a big breath and started.



- Jackson

My head was going to spin around. What was this woman thinking?

Gia placed her guitar in its case and latched it. She slid it onto the floor and then sat on the edge of the bed. “Do you want a seat?”

I just shook my head.

“Okay. Here’s the thing.” Gia paused. “I’m going to Charlotte today. My friend Alice has a gig tonight in a club that is known for having a good audience. You know, the kind of place where they’ll give you a chance, but you also have to deliver. The kind of place the industry pays attention to.”

I waved my hand. “And it’s important you be there, because...?”

“Well, she’s my friend, and...” Gia trailed off, and I waited. “Okay, it’s more than that.”

“I gathered.”

“She’s playing three of my songs tonight.”

I tilted my head to the side. “She’s covering your songs?”

Gia stood and carried her guitar to the door, then she went to the fridge and started pulling out water bottles.

“What’s going on, Gia? What’s so hard to tell me?” It was like pulling teeth with this one.

She leaned against the refrigerator. “They’re not exactly cover songs.”

“What, exactly, are they, then?”

“I wrote three songs for Alice to sing to see if she’ll get the kind of reception I get when I sing my own songs. I need to know if it’s my songs and my singing, or if this thing can work if I’m not the one singing.” She rushed the words out so fast, I wasn’t sure I got it all.

“Wait. If what can work?” I shook my head. “Like, can you write songs for someone else?”

She slowly nodded.

“I don’t get it. Why would you do that when you can sing your own songs?”

She walked over to the sofa and flopped down. I followed her and sat on the chair.

Gia looked at me and threw her hands up in the air. “Because I don’t want to sing anymore!” She jumped up from the sofa, arms swinging. “There, are you happy now?”

What? She didn’t want to sing anymore?

I jumped up. “No, I’m not happy.”

“Exactly! And nobody else will be, either!” And then she burst into tears.

What in the heck was going on?

“Gia.” I rushed around the table and took her in my arms. Because that’s what you do when someone you care about—a

friend—was crying. “Gia.”

She grabbed onto the front of my T-shirt and cried, sobs wracking her body. I held her close around her shoulders with one arm, and rubbed her back with the other, stroking up and down her spine.

When her crying began to slow, I sat on the sofa, holding her on my lap. It wasn't so different than when she sat on my lap at her party, and that was just for show. This seemed... necessary.

I reached over to the side table and grabbed a box of tissues, pulling one out and handing it to her. She wiped her face and fell off my lap onto the sofa, her legs still crossed over mine.

She grabbed another tissue and wiped under her eyes. She let her head fall back and then released a big breath. Her face was all pink, and somehow, she looked... prettier? Was that possible? I shook my head. It must've been how her tears made her eyes brighter than ever.

“Sorry about that,” she said.

“It's okay, really.” I rubbed her leg where it crossed mine. “What did I say?”

She burst out with a laugh, but it didn't sound the slightest bit happy.

“Oh, just my greatest fear,” she said.

“I don't know what you mean, Gia.”

“Yeah, I know you don't.”

She pulled her legs off mine and stood, and I felt her leaving like I was losing my own limb.

“I’m going to get some water. You want some?”

“Sure.” Anything if that was going to get us to the real conversation.

She grabbed the waters where she had left them on the counter and then sat next to me, but not nearly as close as she had been.

“I’ve asked Alice to play some of my songs.” She turned toward me and placed her hand on my leg. It wasn’t as good as when she was in my lap, but I’d take whatever closeness she was offering right now.

“I’ve never written for anyone else, and I need to find out if I can. If it works. If my songs could be sung by someone else and still be a hit.”

“Because you have so many songs in your head, you couldn’t possibly sing them all? Like that?”

“Only kind of...” She placed the water bottle on the side table. “I’m thinking of trying something new.” She shook her head. “I want to try something new. And my greatest fear is that it won’t work, or maybe even worse, if it does work, that when I tell my family, they’re going to react like you did. You, my family, my fans... my team. And I don’t know if I can take that.”

“Wait a minute. My reaction?”

She chuckled. “Yeah. When you said you wouldn’t be happy when I said I didn’t want to sing anymore.”

I shook my head. “You surprised the heck out of me, that’s all, and it was more the delivery than anything. I was worried about you with your door being unlocked, and then going to Charlotte on your own. My not being happy was more of an ‘I don’t get what’s going on’ than an actual ‘what you just said makes me unhappy.’ So tell me again.”

She held up a hand. “Wait. We haven’t even talked about why you wanted to come by today. I mean, I know the person behind the handle @AllThingsGia put your name to your face, and they aren’t calling you mystery man anymore. Did something happen because of that?” She peeled the label on her water bottle. “I hadn’t seen any ‘Everything You Need to Know about Gia’s New Man’ posts or anything like that.”

Now it was my turn to blow out a big breath. “Yeah, something happened.” I shook my head. “Look. When are you leaving for Charlotte?”

Gia glanced at her phone. “I wanted to be on the road by four.”

“Okay.” I stood. “I’ve got a bunch of stuff I have to take care of to make sure everything is covered, but I’ll be back at four to pick you up.”

Gia’s head tilted up to look at me. “Pick me up for what?”

“For Charlotte.” I snagged my water bottle and walked to the door. “I’m going with you.”

I walked out the door before she could say a word, calling out, “And don’t forget to lock this!”

Chapter 26

- *Gia*

Jackson looked at all my bags and my guitar sitting by the door.

“This is it?” he asked, though he had a big smile on his face.

I shoved his shoulder. “I couldn’t decide what I might need. I’m used to being on tour, which is basically a house on wheels. Packing for one night was hard.”

He chuckled. “Are you going to change before we go to the bar?”

I looked down at what I had on. “Why would I need to change?” Cut-off shorts, boots, and a sleeveless, close-fitting, white, button-up vest. It was perfect for a hot Charlotte night in what was basically a honky-tonk. I needed to blend in with everyone else who would be there. And I had my cowboy hat and sunglasses, too, which I would wear to the bar.

“Exactly. You don’t. You need your guitar, your toothbrush, and something to wear home tomorrow.” He picked up all the miscellaneous bags I had, the guitar, and the suitcase. Everything, all at once. “But no problem, there’s room.” He smiled and walked out the door.

I gave my head a shake. *This guy.*

Jackson positioned everything behind the seat, and I climbed into the truck. My stomach was doing acrobatics, and mostly it

was because of the risk I was taking with Alice, but no small part of it was due to spending the rest of the day with Jackson.

We pulled out of Quinn's farm and passed Jackson's place. There were three people in the field, and small, wheeled trundle carts were being filled with cut flowers.

I bit my lower lip. "Sorry about pulling you away from work."

Jackson glanced over at me. "It turned out okay. The wedding tomorrow is small, and it's being done by a florist who's worked with both Quinn and me several times. She knows what to do. And I have a good team." He paused. "Hopefully the storms will hold off. It helps that the wedding isn't until six. We'll be back well before that if I'm needed for anything."

"Good. That's good."

We drove out of town, the radio playing low. I settled into the seat, and leaned my head back, watching the fields flow past.

I turned my head toward Jackson. "So, we've got some things to talk about. You said something happened."

Jackson ran his hand down his pants leg. "Yeah." Then he shot me a look. "But I'm not going to forget that you have some explaining to do, too."

"Of course, I know," I answered quickly.

"Okay, so..."

“Is it bad?” I asked. “I mean worse than what we talked about? How you didn’t love the whole social media aspect of this?” Oh, how he hated that.

“There’s something else I need to tell you.” He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. *Uh oh*. He was rubbing the back of his neck—this could definitely be bad.

“You can tell me. You can tell me anything.” He glanced over at me, and I smiled. “Besides, anything we say automatically falls under the Road Trip Rule. It’s more confidential than even lawyer-client privilege. I mean, this stuff goes to the grave.”

He smirked. *That was better*. “And the Road Trip Rule is...?”

“Anything that gets said in the car, stays in the car.”

He nodded. “It’s a good rule.”

“Practically sacred.”

He took in a big breath. “Okay.” He let it out slowly. “It’s about my parents.”

I laughed. “I was not expecting that. What about them?”

He was rubbing his neck again. “They’ve got a bunch of money.”

I chuckled. “Another thing I wasn’t expecting you to say. And?”

He continued to rub his neck. This really bothered him. I stretched my seatbelt over and slid a bit closer to him, then

reached up and took his hand from his neck and placed it on the seat, holding it in mine.

He glanced down at our hands and then at me. “It’s going to be okay,” I said. “Just tell me.”

“My mother is basically a New York City wannabe socialite, and my father is a real estate developer. She drums up business, and then the two of them pounce.”

“Did you say pounce?” I tilted my head. “That’s an interesting choice of words.”

“Yeah. Because they’re ruthless. And they will do anything, say anything, take advantage of anyone, lie, steal, cheat, whatever it takes to close the next deal. And they always close the deal.”

“Oh.” The word dropped out of my mouth before I could stop it. “I can’t... I mean—” I searched for the words. “That surprises me. You don’t seem anything like that.”

He shot me a look. “*I am nothing like them.*”

“Right, of course. I can see that.” I ran my hand over his fingers. This was definitely a bad subject. “And...?”

“I got a text from my mother last night. She said they’ll be in town in a couple of weeks, and she can’t wait to meet you.” He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. “The last time I saw them was when they were in Merit for some money-making something or other, about four months before Gramps died—my mother’s dad. They came out to the farm for about thirty minutes.”

“Wait. So they weren’t here for his funeral? Or for your grandma’s funeral?” Tears surfaced at the thought. They weren’t here for Jackson at all?

Jackson scoffed. “The only thing that motivates those two is the prospect of money.”

“But why?” I looked down and realized I’d twisted so far in my seat to look at Jackson that I had one leg pulled up and his hand in both of mine, balanced on my leg. I squeezed his hand. “So they think that I... what?”

Jackson glanced at me. “Did you see that two more online gossip sites are talking about us, and that I’m well beyond the Mystery Man?”

I nodded.

“They’ve got everything. My name and where I’m from.” He raised his eyebrows. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it was my parents who leaked it. No publicity is bad publicity for those two.”

My eyes widened. “Would they really have done that? Just so they could tie their names to yours?”

“Let’s be clear. It’s so they can tie their names to *yours*, not mine.”

My face fell.

Jackson’s hand wrapped around the back of his neck. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. But nothing riles me up like they do. And I know I had to do this,” he waved his hand between

the two of us, “to get the flower farm, but it doesn’t mean I have to be happy about it.”

I felt my face pale.

“Not—no, let me rephrase that.” Jackson glanced my way again. “I’ve been happy doing,” he waved between the two of us again, “this. It’s all the baggage that has come with it.”

I bit my lip and gazed down at my lap. “Look, people might start showing up now that you’re discovered. Maybe it’s time to start the breakup. Try to slow down anyone who tries to bother you.”

My stomach clenched, and Jackson blurted out, “This is ending already?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want it to, but like you said, it’s a lot.”

“My parents are a lot, and that’s my problem, not yours.” He took in a big breath. “Here’s the thing—you’re famous and have money. And you know other people who are famous and have money. And they’re less the New York ‘society pages’ and more ‘Page Six’. They think any publicity is good publicity, and boy, do they see publicity in you. And now they’re plotting and scheming to see how they can use that to their benefit. They’re so sure you’ll be valuable to them that they’re coming all the way to little Henryville Township to secure the deal.”

My mouth fell open. “That’s just... that’s...”

“Despicable, I know,” he practically spat and shook his head. “I knew there was a chance they’d find out, I just hoped they wouldn’t. Wishful thinking.”

I squeezed his hand. I didn’t know what else to do—I was dumbstruck.

“Do you think they have your name on Google Alerts or something like that? So they’d get notified if your name popped up in the news?”

“No way. They don’t care at all for me and the life I’ve chosen.”

My hand went up to my mouth. “Are they really so horrible?” I could not begin to imagine. I had the most incredibly supportive family who’d do anything for me—they *did* do everything for me.

I took in a breath and closed my eyes. There was a reason this trip to Charlotte was such a big deal and why I’d been flip-flopping back and forth on it. And now with this... once again it was wrong. All wrong.

“I changed my name when I was twenty-two,” Jackson said. “I’m sure they know, though they didn’t find out from me. Either they saw it or someone who used to know me—and is a fan of yours—must’ve seen a picture of me and recognized me.”

I sat up straighter. “Wait. You changed your name? Which name? Your first? Your last?” *What had to go on in Jackson’s*

life that he needed to change his name? The muscles in my back tensed.

He gave me a sheepish look. “My last. It’s ironic because I got the idea from them. I was around eight when I found out their last name—my last name at the time—was made up. They wanted to sound richer, so when they got married, they changed it.”

I shook my head. “This story is incredible, Jackson. What’s their last name?”

“St. Germaine.”

“Huh,” I said, then cocked an eyebrow and smirked. “Sounds rich.”

He chuckled and I squeezed his hand.

“I don’t remember how I found out, but by the time I was sixteen and knew my life was going to be with my grandparents, I also knew I wasn’t going to stay a St. Germaine.” He glanced over at me. “Reed is my grandparents’ last name and my mom’s maiden name. Not that she claims that, either.”

“I’m surprised she ever let you visit your grandparents.”

He scoffed. “Oh, that’s just another part of the story. They’d ditch me as often as they could. Having a kid was for the photo ops and to look like a ‘family,’ which was important to their long cons.”

“This whole story is mindboggling.” My heart pounded. Who were these people? “Were they really pulling a long

con?”

He shook his head. “Probably. But it was more like, they’d do anything to look a certain way, and that certain way included a kid. Once the pictures were taken and the Christmas card was sent, they didn’t need me until the summer vacation to the Hamptons. And that was only because of the other kids that were there. Couldn’t be outdone.” He chuckled. “Man, they were pissed when I didn’t go to Princeton. SUNY Binghamton doesn’t have the same sort of ring to it. I can only guess the stories they’ve been telling about me since I left, and that was almost twenty years ago.”

“Never been back?”

“Never been back.”

My blood pounded in my temples. I could not get my head around this story.

Jackson let out a whoosh of air. “Maybe you’re right, Gia. If you want to call the whole thing off, we can,” he said. “We can right now. I already told them they’re not welcome, but that won’t stop them.” He glanced over at me and pulled his hand free, running it through his hair. “I’ll just make sure you’re good through tonight, and we can end it. The social media posts should be enough for my lawyer, and I bet the posts have bought you enough time to get you through the rest of your stay.”

“Jackson. There’s no way.” I snatched his hand back and gripped it, hard. “There is no way we are leaving this thing up to chance. Your lawyer has to *believe*, and the only thing

you've got right now is a bunch of media posts, mostly with people who one hundred percent know our story. What if your lawyer were to ask Jasmine or Quinn? We can't put them in that position. We need more proof! We need to do the wall branding event you talked about, and we need to come up with even more things!" I was breathing hard.

"Whoa, whoa." Jackson squeezed my hand. "Okay? It's okay."

"It is not okay! Didn't you tell me that if you don't meet your grandma's request, then the farm is going to go to your parents?"

"Well, yeah."

"Over my dead body will those people get your farm!"

Jackson's eyes got big before understanding swept across his face. "Thanks, Gia."

I slipped my leg off the seat and leaned my head back, but I didn't let go of Jackson's hand.

And somehow, with the calming of my racing heart, I fell asleep.



- Jackson

This girl.

I'd only snuck a glance or two since she'd fallen asleep, and I should've won an award for that. She was beautiful, and even more so when she was trying to be my champion.

I hadn't gone into detail when I told Gia about my parents, but she'd be able to read between the lines. Like, how when I was a kid, every Christmas, I believed. I believed, but not in Santa, nothing as pure and innocent as looking out the window, hoping to see Santa fly by. No, every year I believed that would be the year my parents saw *me*.

I fell for their cons, too. Their big holiday celebration, the perfect setting, the perfect decorations, the perfect food, the perfect clothes. So many people around spreading good cheer. And my mom would gather me close, show me off to all her friends, with my dad standing nearby, acting all proud. All while the photographers snapped away, proving it to everyone. Sometimes I'd believe all the way until I fell asleep.

Sometimes I'd believe we were a family.

That they loved me.

The years when that happened were both the best and the worst. The best, because for one night, I was the son they wanted. And then the worst, when I woke up the next morning

and found out it had been a bigger deception than even Santa Claus.

I would've rather been heartbroken over Santa.

I glanced at Gia again.

Her curly hair was pulled back low, at the base of her neck, and she didn't have on any makeup. I could see the freckles across her nose, and her long eyelashes rested on her cheeks, which were tinged pink with sleep.

She was perfect. Even more perfect, the more I got to know her. Before I met Gia, she was a Nashville star, on a pedestal, on a stage, behind the velvet ropes, far away and unreachable. But the real woman was right here—within touching distance—and so much better than I had ever imagined.

Her head rocked to the side, and I made sure my eyes were on the road. She stretched her arms up and behind her head, then dropped them on her lap.

“Wow.” She rubbed her eyes. “How long have I been asleep?”

I glanced over. “About thirty minutes. It won't be too long before we're there.”

“Oh, sugar.” She dove down into the bag at her feet. “I told Alice I'd let her know when I got into town.”

Her fingers flew across her phone and then she dropped it into her lap. “I thought it would be best if we went straight to the bar and got a table in the back. It shouldn't be crowded yet, since the live music doesn't start until eight. That way I can

get in under the radar, and we won't have to walk through a bunch of people. And Alice said the staff was cool. If anyone were to recognize me, they'd keep it to themselves."

"Alright, Just Gia. You're the boss." She had dropped my hand while she was sleeping, and I hadn't figured out a way to take it back. It didn't make me happy. "But don't think I've forgotten that you still have a story of your own to tell me."

"I know. I'll tell you, I promise." And she crossed her hand over her heart.

That heart of hers...

I was finding out that it wasn't just sweet and kind, but it was fierce and loyal, too. And I liked that—I liked that a lot.

I'd shared more with her on our drive together than anyone in my recent past. So what, exactly, was she holding back?

Chapter 27

- Jackson

Gia was right. This place was basically a neighborhood bar right in the heart of the city. Buildings had grown up around it, and here it sat, one story tall. We walked through the glass and brass front door into a big open room with hardwood floors that had seen better days. There was a bar to the right with mirrors behind it, but not a single neon beer sign. There was cowhide on the barstools, though, so the ‘country’ vibe came through. Windows made up the front of the bar, and there was a big outdoor deck through the open doors to the back.

We found a table to the side where Gia could sit with her back to the door, but still be able to see people as the place filled up. She wanted to gauge reactions—to see how they responded to Alice in general, but to Gia’s songs in particular.

“Well, I think this is as good a time as any.” I held up my beer for a toast, and Gia raised hers. “Here’s to the night turning out exactly the way you want it, even though you haven’t told me exactly what that is.”

“Like a dog with a bone.” Gia chuckled and we both drank.

She glanced around the bar. There were only a handful of people in the place, and when we walked in, we got a couple of looks, but nothing that lingered. Gia looked amazing, of course, so people were going to notice her, but no one acted like they recognized her.

Which helped my pounding heart slow down. How much I worried about her had snuck up on me. I knew she had been in these situations tons of times before, but I hadn't known her then. Being with her changed things, and it seemed to be changing me. The thought of something or someone taking her away—taking her away from me—had my stomach in knots.

She leaned in and put her elbows on the table. “Okay, it’s time for me to tell you the whole story.” She took in a breath and held it. “I want to write.” Slowly, she exhaled. “If it were up to me, I’d write music and I wouldn’t tour anymore. At least, not like someone who has a singing career.” She shook her head, leaned back in her chair, and glanced around again. Then her elbows went back on the table. “If it was perfect, if it was exactly like I wanted, I’d write, I’d produce, I’d help up-and-coming artists, and I’d put out an album every once in a while. Heck, I’d even perform sometimes, but not like what I’m doing. Not like...” She flopped back and sighed. “Not like a country music star, always performing, always being on, the constant go, go, go. It’s exhausting. I’m exhausted.”

She reached for her beer and then pushed it back, looking me straight in the eye. “And that’s the whole story.” Her gaze dropped, but then she looked back up. “So, what do you think?”

“That... is quite a story. And unexpected.”

She nodded. “Imagine how my family would feel, and my fans.” She shook her head. “I don’t know if I can do it, but I

had to at least see. Like, if it's possible at all. Which is why we're here."

"Tell me how it happened."

"You know that saying, you only know what you know? When I decided I wanted to be a country singer, I only knew what you see. You see a big-name country singer, with their songs on the radio, and they make albums and go on tour, singing. So that's what you think it is, like Dolly Parton. What you think when you see Dolly Parton."

I smiled. "My grandma and I saw Dolly Parton together. It was the only concert she'd ever been to, and she loved it."

Gia's face lit up. "Me, too! My whole family went together. That was a big night. That was the night before we all agreed to move to Nashville. It was May, about... gosh, eleven years ago, now."

I frowned. "Where was the show?"

"Detroit."

"Detroit, eleven years ago, in May."

She turned her head to the side. "Yeah. Why do you say it like that?"

"Because that's where we were, Grams and me. Detroit, in May, eleven years ago."

Gia's jaw dropped. "You're kidding me."

"I'm not." I couldn't stop smiling.

Gia shook her head. “That’s crazy. That makes me think... I feel like...” She threw her hands up. “I just feel so connected now.”

I laughed. “I know what you mean.” I’d already felt connected, and every moment with her made that connection stronger. What was this woman doing to me?

Gia shook her head and chuckled. “That is quite a coincidence, us at the same place, in a different state than where we lived, at the same concert. Like, fate or something.”

I grinned. “Just like that.”

Gia took a drink of her water. “So the country star life that I saw, that’s what I went after. But I was young enough not to know what it meant to be on the road all the time. Or at least how it would feel to me.” She spun her bottle.

“But Gia.” I placed my hand on the table. “What about singing? How would you... I mean, you don’t want to sing anymore?” I tapped the table and pulled back. “I’m having a hard time with that.” Not having new music from Gia? It was unimaginable.

She scoffed. “And you won’t be the only one.”

Our waitress appeared and dropped off a ton of hot wings, celery, carrots, and blue cheese. We ordered steak fries with cheddar cheese and bacon, too, because, as Gia said, ‘We could.’

We ate in silence for a moment, and I watched the place slowly fill up.

“But it’s about more than just disappointing my family.” Gia spun her drink on the table. “And my fans, and everyone I work with.” She let out a big breath. “I’m under contract with my manager and record label. And I’ll do whatever I’ve already committed to, but the contract with my manager still has two years on it.”

My eyes widened. “Based on everything you’ve told me, two years sounds like a long time. It sounds like you want to do this now.”

Gia nodded. “It is a long time. I could maybe buy out my contract... but I’d never back out on something I already promised to do, you know? I’d never disappoint someone like that.”

“What about you?”

“What do you mean, what about me?” Gia frowned.

“How long is it okay to disappoint yourself?”

Gia closed her eyes for a moment, then looked at me. “It’s just... I mean, it’s why I’m here. Why we’re here. I’ve got to see what could happen.” She wiped her hands on a wet-nap. “You know, it’s not like I never want to sing again. I love to sing, but singing was just a way to get my songs sung. Does that make sense?”

“Not really?”

“It’s the songs. The songs are always in my head. The lyrics come first—sometimes fully formed—and I grab them when I can. Other times, a feeling is there, just out of reach. I have to

work on those. But then the music... If I don't have the basics of the sound down within thirty minutes, if I don't know how it's going to go in my head, there's a good chance I never will."

I shook my head. "That's fascinating."

Gia looked up at me with a soft smile. "Thank you. And I love it. When I was younger, those songs had to go somewhere, so I sang them. I thought that's what you do. That's all I knew." She shrugged. "I know different now."

"I'm starting to get it, I think. So what about your family?"

Gia leaned back in her seat and let her head roll back. After a moment, she sat back up. "That's the problem. Well, one of the biggest ones, anyway." She reached for the fries. "Jackson, you don't even know how bad that is going to be."

"I think I might be able to guess. I hate to say it, but I'm feeling pretty gutted over here, and I'm just your b—" I cut off my word before it came out, "fan."

Boyfriend. I wanted to say boyfriend.

"It's not like I'm never going to sing or do an album again. I just don't want it to be the driver of my career anymore. And when I release a new album, if that means I tour around a bit, that would be great. But it's the writing and working with someone to develop it for them that I want. I have so much experience now, and I think I could make a difference in someone else's singing career. It's a male-dominated industry, and I would have loved to have a woman as a mentor and

producer when I was making music.” She threw her fry down on her plate. “It’s getting kind of crowded in here. We can… let’s just… We’ll do this later.”

“Yeah, of course.”

But my head was still spinning.

Gia Nyx, *not* being the country music star?



- *Gia*

Well, that went about as good as I thought it would. And by that, I meant, not good at all.

I pulled my cowboy hat off and rubbed my temples. I needed to be in a different headspace before Alice sang—I didn't need to be all wrapped up in my worries.

The bar had filled up, and all the tables and seats were taken. A steady stream of customers had come through and gone out to the back deck where there was a smaller bar set up, along with a sound system for the live music. People continued to come in, and soon, it was standing room only.

I placed my hat back on my head as I watched my friend take the stage. "I asked Alice not to stop by the table. I didn't want anyone paying attention to her paying attention to us."

"Good plan." Jackson looked around the room. "Is now the time to say you were crazy to think about coming here by yourself?"

I smiled. "If I can figure out how to write, that might not be a problem in five years."

Jackson scowled. "You'll still be Gia Nyx."

"Will I, though?" I had definitely thought about it. Would I still be Gia Nyx if I wasn't performing? If I wasn't the person on the stage?

Jackson continued to scowl, and Alice started her first song. Her voice was lovely, and it had a unique lilt to it. The crowd was interested, but they hadn't turned their full attention to her yet. My stomach turned, waiting to see how this played out.

After playing for a while, Alice spoke into the microphone. "Thanks again for coming out tonight. I see some familiar faces." There was some light applause and a wolf whistle, and Alice laughed. "Thanks for that. I'm going to end with a couple of new songs tonight. This next one is called *Shattered Love*."

Alice strummed the first chord and began to sing. About a third of the way into the song, the crowd seemed to get quieter. Did it? I twisted my fingers in my lap.

When she finished the song, there was definitely applause.

"Thank you. This next one is *Gold Mine*."

Jackson scooted his chair around closer to me to see the stage and the audience, too.

About halfway through the song, there was a shift in the crowd, and it was noticeable. You could still hear talking and laughter coming from the back deck, but the people inside? Things had quieted down, and everyone was watching the stage.

I sat on the edge of my seat, trying not to obviously look around the bar at all the patrons. *Gold Mine* was one of my favorites, but it was a little outside of what I normally wrote. If I were to sing it, I wasn't sure how my fans would receive it.

There was a burst of applause at the end of the song, much louder than earlier, and I didn't think it was just because people were further into their drinks. I think they liked it.

I grinned at Jackson, who smiled in return, and then we both turned back to Alice. I could barely stay seated with the adrenaline racing through me.

“Thank you. I think you liked that one.” Alice smiled big. “I've got one more for you tonight. This one is *Land of Alone*.”

Jackson's brows pulled down and he shot me a look. I shrugged. Maybe that title revealed a bit too much?

This time, when Alice started singing, all eyes were on her. And when she sang the bridge line,

*Where every sunset paints a painful reminder
your love is nothing but a fading ember...*

I swear I saw people physically react.

She ended the song by fading out the last line, *We're just echoes of love*.

There was a pause, just a moment's pause. And then the room exploded with applause and shoutouts, more than there had been all night.

I clapped along with everyone else and stomped my feet under the table.

“Thanks, everyone,” Alice said when the applause finally slowed. “I'm at The Den tomorrow night, hope I'll see you

there. Goodnight.”

Giddiness surged through me, and with a wildly beating heart, I jumped from my seat and spun toward Jackson. His smile mirrored everything I was feeling.

Excitement raced through me and I couldn't help myself.

I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him.

Chapter 28

- *Jackson*

Gia Nyx was kissing me.

She was kissing me like she meant it—nothing like those other kisses.

No one knew she was here, so it wasn't for show.

Everything came into sharp focus.

Her arms were around my neck, and I felt the softness of her skin against my nape. My arms went around her small waist, and her hat fell off, hitting my hand on its way to the floor. She smelled faintly of citrus and something sweet, the same scent that had been driving me crazy when we were in the truck.

She felt both strong and delicate in my arms, and I had time to think, *exactly*, before her kiss took over my senses. Her mouth pressed fully to mine, and her lips were soft and warm, and I held on tight, wanting this kiss to last forever.

And like she had just realized what she had done, it ended. Gia pulled back and put her hand up to her mouth. “Oh,” she said. “Oh.”

I reached for her hand. “Gia, I—” She pulled back, then picked her hat up off the floor.

She glanced around. “We’ve settled up, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” My hands fell to my sides. “We’re good.”

Someone turned the sound system on, a country song blasted over the speakers, and the whole bar got louder.

“Okay, let’s go.” Gia moved to the door, skirting around tables and squeezing between people, her head down the whole way. I tried to catch up, but her little body was darting between people faster than my big body could push through. She was almost to the front when it happened.

“Hey, isn’t that Gia Nyx?”

Everything slowed down.

The crowd moved and then surged all at once. Gia was being pushed and shuffled around. Her hat fell off, and she tried to reach for it, but she got jostled again. She twisted around to look for me, and I saw panic in her eyes.

Shoot!

My heart raced and I couldn’t get to her fast enough. It was like I was moving through water, and she was out of reach. How did she get so far ahead of me so quickly? It was like the amount of tables and people in the place had doubled. I was still two steps behind, trying to get through.

“Jackson!” Her voice sounded panicked.

I was right there when a big guy got between us. “Are you Gia Nyx?”

She looked around him, her eyes as big as saucers. The guy wasn’t any bigger than me, so I shouldered past him and scooped up Gia’s hat, then I was next to her.

“*Jackson.*”

She was being turned again, and my heart pounded, but I got my arm around her waist, and I pulled her back to me, tight to my chest. My other arm wrapped around her shoulders as I wedged our way to the door.

“I’ve got you, baby,” I whispered in her ear, both for her sake and mine. I needed to know I had her. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

My adrenaline was high, but once she was in my arms I was good. She would be okay. We were okay.

With my arms around her, we slipped out the front door. The flow of people coming in helped block anyone trying to get out, and I heard a couple of people shouting, but the crush didn’t come outside.

I grabbed her hand and we rushed down the sidewalk toward my truck. We got a couple of interested stares, but it was dark and we were moving fast. Miraculously, no one was behind us.

I got her into the truck and we took off. I didn’t even know where we were going, just *away*. That’s all I could think. *Get her away from here.*

I reached across the seat and took her hand, my heart rate finally slowing. “Just tell me the hotel, and we’ll go straight there.”

“It’s The Kipton on Third and Church,” she said. I pulled it up on maps and then I glanced over. Her head was back and her eyes were closed.

I squeezed her hand. “Hey. You’re okay. No one followed us, no one knows where you are.”

She rolled her head toward me, then raked her hands down her face. “I just feel so stupid. We were at a bar that is known for having country musicians there. Why did I think I could just show up?”

I huffed out a breath. “So you made a mistake —so did I. I should have been right by your side.”

She shook her head. “No, Jackson, it wasn’t you. I wasn’t thinking.” She closed her eyes. “You were great. Really. Thank you.”

I glanced her way. She was definitely still shaken. “You were only kind of recognized, right?” I said. “If the place hadn’t been so crowded, that would have gone down much differently. I would’ve been right there, and both of us could have denied it was you and got out the door.”

“Yeah, maybe.” She sighed and drummed her fingers on the seat, then gazed out the window. “I hate it for Alice. Kind of a crummy way for her night to end.”

“Nah,” I said, trying to make light of the matter. “She was already off stage, and I bet once you were out of the building, it was like you were never there.”

She chuckled. “You know exactly what to say to make a girl feel special.”

I grinned. “You can always count on me.”

My chest loosened and my heartbeat returned to normal—or as normal as it got these days around Gia.

We parked in the underground parking, and I grabbed the bags and the guitar.

Gia stepped up to the desk. “Check-in for Taylor. It should be under Indigo Blue, Limited.” She slid her credit card across the desk and glanced at me. “And if I could have an additional room.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, we don’t have any additional rooms tonight,” the attendant said.

At that moment, a bunch of people came in from the street, laughing and joking. They headed for the elevators. “There are two pro games going on tonight and a NASCAR event. The whole town is booked.”

Before Gia could reply, he said, “Your room does have a king-sized bed and a sofa.” He smiled like that was going to be good enough.

“You don’t have anything else?” I asked. “Nothing?”

The attendant typed away. “We can get you two rooms, right across from each other, but they’re part of our honeymoon suites.” He glanced up. “There will be a significant upcharge.”

Another group of people walked in, and I saw a few of them headed our way. Gia looked from them, to me, and looped her arm through mine.

“That’s fine,” she said. “It’ll be fine. We’ll take those.” She snagged the keycards off the desk and pulled me toward the

elevators. “I couldn’t stand there another minute, with all those people coming in. I should have arranged for us to come in the back.”

We slipped into the elevator, and like it was something we had previously discussed, she moved to one corner, and I moved to the other. I’m not sure what her reasoning was, but I’d been in a tight space with Gia in the past, and that was before I’d known her like I knew her now. Staying away was good. No reason to continue to tempt fate. This was all fake, right?

“Why didn’t you come in the back?” I asked.

“Because I booked the room, not my manager. And I was trying to not draw any attention to myself by requesting something like that. I didn’t want my manager to know I was coming here—she’d never have gone for it.”

I raised my brows. “Sounds like there’s a reason for that.”

She gave me a rueful smile. “Yeah. This whole thing I’m thinking about, she’s going to...” Gia didn’t finish. After everything she’d just gone through, I decided this wasn’t the time to push.

We exited the elevator and walked down the dimly lit hall, following signs to the honeymoon suites. It was clear they were the only two rooms on this side of the hotel. The doors were right across from each other, like the attendant said, and I placed her bags and guitar down by the door.

Gia handed me my keycard and leaned back against the door.
“I guess this is goodnight.”

“Yep.” I hitched my backpack up on my shoulder.

“Thank you again, Jackson. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

I nodded.

We were both slow to turn to our rooms.

“Hey,” I said. “Need help getting your bags in?”

“I got it.”

“Okay.”

We both keyed open our doors.

“Night, Jackson.” Gia gathered her bags and started to step inside.

“Hey, Gia?”

She spun her body toward me. “Yes?”

“There’s still one topic we need to cover.”

She sighed. “I know, I know. I promise I’ll tell you in the car.”

I shook my head slowly. “Not that.”

She furrowed her brow. “What, then?”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about that kiss.” I waited just long enough to see the look of surprise on her face before I said, “Good night, Gia.” And I walked into my room, letting the door close behind me.

I smiled.

I wasn't going to be the only one thinking about that kiss.



- *Gia*

That kiss!

As though I had thought about anything else since. The way his arms had wrapped around me and pulled me so close, like he never wanted to let me go. His soft, warm lips pressed to mine. All the love songs I'd ever heard—even the ones I'd written—finally made sense.

It had to be the setting. I was just carried away by the atmosphere, right? I'd been so excited hearing Alice play my songs and witnessing the audience's response. Jumping into Jackson's arms felt natural. It felt right.

I dropped my head down. Maybe it was natural and right, but it was also wrong. In a matter of a couple of weeks, I'd be back in Nashville, and he'd be tending to his flower farm. And not just any flower farm, his *legacy*. He'd chosen this life when he was sixteen and changed his name to claim it—that was no small thing. He was home, and he meant to stay there.

I felt a quick twist in my stomach. It was a good reminder that Jackson was here, and he wasn't planning on leaving.

Even if he had saved me—again—and called me baby.

Gah. Why did that feel so bittersweet?

I stepped inside the room and had just set down my guitar when I saw the sunken, heart-shaped hot tub. I shook my head and chuckled.

My mind was like sludge, but my heart was beating fast. I was exhausted from the events at the bar, but adrenaline was rushing through me knowing Jackson was right across the hall.

I brushed my teeth and jumped into the shower. I raced through washing and conditioning my hair, and then rinsed off, making sure to get rid of anything that lingered from the bar. Then I patted my hair dry with a towel and piled it on top of my head with a scrunchy.

I pulled the pink, fluffy robe out of the closet, and wrapped myself up. I was going to indulge in every honeymoon suite luxury available—I planned on taking full advantage of that upcharge the desk clerk mentioned.

I was eyeing the little chocolates that were on the row of pillows across the ginormous bed when there was a knock on the door.

My heart leaped.

Was that Jackson? Of course, it was Jackson.

I smoothed the front of my robe down and glanced into the full-length mirror. Well, there wasn't anything to be done about my freshly showered look, and I was perfectly okay with that. It was a luxury, really. "Being ready" was a constant in my life, so having a moment without it felt good down to my toes.

I looked out the peephole and didn't see anyone, but there was a cart...

Pulling open my door, I leaned out to see a rolling cart of food, not only at my door but one in front of Jackson's door, too.

Jackson's door opened and he stepped out wrapped in a white fluffy robe, his hair wet and tousled, those waves of his falling all over.

I burst out laughing. "Never in a million years would I have pictured you in a white fluffy robe."

Jackson leaned against his doorframe and smirked. "Been picturing me in various states of dress, have you?"

I could feel the heat of a blush start to climb up my neck. Not that I'd ever admit to that. "Let's just say that the flower farmer Jackson I know does not evoke..." I motioned to his robe, "this."

He gave a little shrug. "Sometimes even I miss the luxuries."

Before I thought of a response, he lifted the lid off one of the dishes on his tray. He dipped his finger into a big bowl of whipped cream and licked it off. "I should have expected something like this."

I reached for the lid on the tray next to the whipped cream on my cart and revealed a bowl full of fresh strawberries, as well as a half dozen large strawberries dipped in chocolate. "Ohh!" I exclaimed. "I love chocolate-covered strawberries." I reached for the tray. "One of my favorite virtual assistants surprises me with them every time we meet in person. From a little place called Romolo's in Erie, of all places." I started to

take a bite and paused. I motioned toward the carts. “What do you mean, you should have expected something like this?”

“I traveled a lot with my parents when I was young, so I know luxury stays always have added amenities—you’ve probably noticed that in the places you’ve stayed. Checking into the honeymoon suite would trigger something in the kitchen.”

I raised my eyebrows. “For a second there I thought you were going to say you had experience staying in the honeymoon suite.”

Jackson glanced away, then brought his gaze back to mine. “Never getting married, remember?”

A pang hit my chest, and I reached up and rubbed my sternum. “Right. One of the first things I ever learned about you.”

Jackson bit his lower lip and reached for another covered dish, revealing a platter of beautiful fruit. “In our case, we have two suites, so we get two carts.”

I leaned in closer, and the smell of his shower gel lingered when he moved. I had to refrain from standing on my tiptoes and breathing in the scent of his hair. Those waves of his were perfectly tousled and my fingers wanted to tousle them some more.

Gia! Get a grip, woman.

I gave myself an internal shake. I seriously needed to get my mind off Jackson and his seriously touchable hair. “What all is

that? Pineapple, kiwi, mango, and..." I pointed to the last fruit.
"Is that—"

At the same time, we both said, "Passion fruit."

I laughed. "Of course, it is. I've seen pictures, but I've never eaten it."

Jackson reached for the platter, then pulled back. "Just a sec," he said and went back into his room. I reached for the bottle of champagne to check out the label. For some reason, champagne sounded good right about now.

Jackson came back out into the hallway with two upholstered, dining room-style chairs. "Here," he said, setting the two chairs between the identical carts of food. "Let's enjoy this comfortably."

I glanced over my shoulder and down the hall we had walked earlier. "We have these big suites..."

"Sure, but they're..."

"Awfully honeymoon-ey?"

He nodded. "Yeah, that. And since we're just fake, anyway..." He rubbed the back of his neck.

Hmm.

"I'm pretty sure we're the only rooms on this end of the hall," he said. "Two other suites had signs going the opposite way off the elevator."

I eased into the seat, feeling better that no one would be walking down the hall seeing us.

I motioned to the cart. “We have a bowl of grapes and fresh strawberries, and a tray of cheese and crackers, too.”

Jackson reached for a small plate. “How’s the champagne?”

“It’s a Moet, but it’s not Dom.”

Jackson chuckled. “Dom is overrated.” He loaded up his plate, then motioned to the champagne. “You want?”

I slowly nodded. “For some crazy reason, I do.”

Jackson reached for the bottle and then popped off the cork. “Maybe to celebrate your good night?”

I smiled. “Exactly.”

He poured for the two of us, and then we clinked our glasses. “To a good night.”

“A very good night,” I added, and we both drank.

I set my champagne down and loaded up a plate. “I thought the chocolates on the pillows were going to be my highlight of the hotel, but I’m not mad at these carts of treats.”

Jackson bit into some cheese. “I thought the pillow chocolates were a nice touch.” He ran his hand through his still damp hair, and the waves fell in a curly mess. He looked scrumptious.

Then he cleared his throat.

“Um, did you see that hot tub?”

Chapter 29

- *Gia*

“I’d have to have been blind not to see that hot tub, heart shape and all. And then there were the fake rose petals spread all around it.”

His eyes widened. “I know. What’s that about? Wouldn’t they stick all over you after getting out of the tub?”

“Maybe if you rolled around in them?”

“Ha!” Jackson exclaimed. “That’s a great visual.”

I spread some passion fruit on a cracker, then raised it up. “Here goes nothing!” I took a bite and practically choked at the tart taste. I took a big swallow of champagne, then wiped off my tongue with a linen napkin.

“Did you just Tom Hanks your tongue like in the movie *Big*?” Jackson laughed.

I nodded, drinking more champagne. “I actually like caviar.” I side-eyed the passion fruit. “But my curiosity has been slaked. I never need to try passion fruit again.”

Jackson leaned forward and took the half cracker and passion fruit that was left on my plate. “Now I’ve got to try it.” He popped it into his mouth and chewed. And chewed, his face remaining blank.

I tilted my head. “Well?”

He lunged for his champagne and drank the whole glass down, then wiped across his mouth with the back of his hand. “That was horrible!”

I laughed. “I told you it was horrible.” I popped a grape into my mouth. “Hey, you’re one of those people!”

Jackson quirked a brow. “What people?”

“When someone says, ‘This is so gross, you should taste it,’ and you actually taste it!”

Jackson laughed. “Guilty. I’ve gotta know! They could be wrong.”

I shook my head. “I was not wrong.”

He laughed again. “You were definitely not wrong.”

It wasn’t long until all the adrenaline from the day had finally slipped from my body.

“I’m fading fast,” I said. “I’m going to eat one more strawberry and call it a night.” I stood, placing my plate under the cart, and reaching for one last berry.

Jackson took a swallow of champagne. “Let me get these.” He picked up the two chairs and moved them back into his room. When he stepped back out, he pushed the two carts over to the wall.

I slipped my hands into my pockets. “I guess this is goodnight, again.”

He glanced up from where he was positioning the carts, his hands going into his pockets. “I think you’re right.”

I motioned over my shoulder. “I’ll just—”

“You’ve got a little something.” He motioned to the side of his mouth.

My hand went up. “What?”

He motioned again. “Just there.”

I rubbed at the spot. “There?”

“No, Just—”

I tried again.

“Let me.” He stepped closer, and his right hand went up to my face, cradling my cheek. His thumb went to the corner of my mouth and swiped once, paused as his gaze fell on mine, and then dropped to my mouth, where his thumb swept under my lower lip. My eyes closed of their own accord, and I forced them open. I didn’t want my eyes closed—I didn’t want to miss a thing that was Jackson Reed.

He didn’t rush, he didn’t hurry. His thumb stroked lazily, and then he was moving closer. And closer still.

“You know that kiss?” His eyelids were heavy, and his thumb ran over my cheek.

“What kiss?”

He let out a low chuckle. “Exactly. It’s time for a proper kiss, Just Gia. Not one for the cameras, not one on impulse. Just you and me. With intent.”

I nodded, mesmerized by his touch, by his words.

His left hand went to the back of my head, cradling it as he came closer, and my eyelids fell shut as his lips touched mine.

Barely, barely, just a whisper. Just a touch.

My hands went up to his shoulders, needing something to hold on to. And then his lips sealed to mine, full and hot. My knees went weak, and I struggled to remain standing.

Jackson dropped one arm around my waist and pulled me close, one hand still cradling my face, soothing across my cheek.

He took the kiss deeper, his pace slow and sweet, causing warmth to fill me from the inside out. Kissing him was like being wrapped in a warm summer breeze, where I drifted away to a place with just the two of us.

Too soon, he eased back, making sure I was stable to stand on my own. With one little nip to my bottom lip, he pulled away.

I looked up at him, my eyes half closed. “Now *that* was a kiss.”

He nodded slowly and took a step toward his room. “It was. And I meant it.”

“I could tell.” I touched the key to the keypad and opened the door. “Goodnight, Jackson.”

“Sweet dreams, Just Gia.”

“I think you can count on it.” I moved inside the room and slipped straight into the bed with a smile on my face.

And I wished for sleep to take me under fast.

So I could get right to those sweet dreams of Jackson.



- Jackson

My lips were still tingling when I walked into my room, and I wouldn't mind having that kiss for all time.

I changed out of the hotel robe and pulled on a pair of sweats and an old T-shirt, then stood in the middle of the room, not knowing what to do with myself.

That kiss was something.

Gia was something.

I glanced at the bed and saw the chocolates on the pillows. I moved to the edge and thought I'd pick up the chocolates for *Gia*, since she had a thing for chocolate.

I pulled back the comforter from the turndown service and jumped back onto the bed to reach for the chocolates—right as I noticed the sheets peeking out underneath the comforter were satin—and I slipped right off and landed in a heap on the floor.

I stared up at the ceiling with the air knocked out of me, thinking that satin sheets were overrated, anyway—I'd stick to cotton—when I saw the small water carafe teeter on the edge of the nightstand.

“No!”

I shot my hands up and caught the carafe, right as the water poured all over my head.

This was how I'd felt since meeting Gia, like my legs had been taken out from under me, and I was in a constant state of falling—just usually not with the added bonus of water.

Nope, that wasn't right. The first fall was literally into the lake with Gia.

I burst out laughing.

I grabbed a towel from the bathroom to clean everything up and then carefully slid into the bed. I piled the chocolates off to the side, determined to get them to Gia.

I chuckled and thought about how hard she would laugh when I told her about what happened.

Then I closed my eyes with a smile on my face, sure I was going to have sweet dreams, too.

Chapter 30

- Jackson

She was asleep.

There was no way with the long day and the long night we'd had that she'd be anything but asleep. But we needed to hit the road, so I knocked more firmly.

“Hey, Gia. Rise and shine. We've gotta get going.”

Finally, I heard some rustling from inside the room, and Gia cracked the door open. Her toothbrush was in hand and she was still wrapped up in her robe, but her hair was down, blonde curls turning every which way.

Was it possible she got more beautiful overnight?

She opened the door wider. “Good morning. Sorry, I'll just be a minute.”

I stepped into her room. “Are you good with grabbing something to eat on the road?”

She nodded. “Yep, just gotta get dressed.”

“Great.”

She grabbed one of her bags and got ready in the bathroom, and we were out the door in less than ten minutes.

This time, Gia carried her guitar. I guessed she didn't have much fear of being recognized at eight-thirty in the morning. She should've, though. She was a tough one to miss.

We stopped at the first Bojangles we came to, and both ordered southern spicy chicken biscuits.

“I would’ve thought you were more of a country ham and egg girl,” I said, biting into my biscuit.

“You’d be right. But there’s not a thing I won’t eat at Bo’s.” She took a bite of her sandwich and a drink of her sweet tea. “I almost cried when they took cinnamon pecan twists off the menu.”

“Yeah, those were good.” I nodded. “Oh, hey, I’ve got something for you. Check the front pocket of my backpack.”

Gia unhooked her seatbelt and leaned over the seat to get into my bag.

“Chocolates?” She got back into her seat. “You brought me your chocolates?”

I chuckled. “I did. I’ve seen the lengths you’ll go to for chocolate.”

“Thanks, Jackson.” She unwrapped one of the chocolates and popped it into her mouth. “You want one?”

“No thanks, I’m good.” And I was. I was enjoying how much she was enjoying it.

“Here.” She reached across the seat and brushed at the corner of my mouth. My eyes flashed to hers, our goodnight kiss racing to the forefront of my mind.

“You had a bit of biscuit...”

I glanced over at her, and she bit her bottom lip. Was she thinking about that kiss, too?

“Thanks,” I said.

She nodded, and we finished our breakfast in silence.

After putting all the trash into one bag, she placed it at her feet and turned toward me, lifting one leg up onto the seat. “Road Trip Rules still apply, right?”

I nodded. “Yep. What gets said in the car, stays in the car.”

She took a big breath. “Okay. So, the rest of the story.” She paused for a moment. “You know how I said I wanted to be a big country star, and I did it the only way I knew how?”

“Yeah, you did it the way you had seen it done.”

“My whole family sees it that way. I’m a country star, and they made that happen. They all sacrificed... a lot.” She looked down and pulled at a thread on her shorts. “You were at the firepit the other night.”

I glanced over at her. “Yeah?”

“You heard what Lindsey said. She stopped singing lessons. She *had* to stop singing lessons. I know she had to stop because of me. Because every extra penny was going to me. For coaching, and mentors, and producers, and studio time, and promotions, and on and on and on.” Gia ripped the string off her shorts. “I can only guess what Paul had to give up. I don’t know who would have had it worse—Lindsey, because she knew her dreams were being taken away, or Paul, because he never had the chance to have them at all.”

“Gia, are you sure—”

“First, it was the move. Dad found a job right away, but everyone agreed I shouldn’t be navigating the industry by myself, so Mom never got a job. That was a whole salary down. Then, by the time I was nineteen, it just made more sense that I live in Nashville, not on the outskirts where we had moved, so that was another big hit to the finances. I could go on and on, but the point will always be the same. They sacrificed everything. For me. If I stopped making music... well, it would be another thing I took away from them.”

I wracked my brain, trying to remember how the conversation between Gia and her sister had gone. “Didn’t Lindsey say that by the time she got to college, she would have been interested in other things, anyway?”

Gia shot me a look. “Like there was anything else she could possibly say?”

I raised one shoulder. “I could think of a lot of things she could have said, instead.”

Gia threw her hands up. “Exactly! But she didn’t! Because my amazing family isn’t going to do anything to keep me from being a star. Their country singing star.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Maybe the part you should be focusing on is that they *are* amazing.” I dropped my hand to my lap. “They’ll support you. On whatever it is you want. I only spent two evenings with them, and I already know that.”

It was crystal clear. Gia's family was incredibly close. I was impressed that they managed to do that, even with all the money she made.

In my experience, money did nothing but tear families apart.

Every time.



- *Gia*

I was shaking my head. “No. No. I’ve already taken their own dreams away from them—I can’t take the dream of me being a country star away from them, too.” I pulled another string off my shorts. “The guilt is overwhelming. The pressure to be the biggest and the best, because of everything they gave up. If I stop singing—if I stop being the country star—that would be like a slap in the face. What was all of their sacrifice for if I’m just going to throw it all away?”

Jackson didn’t answer right away, but then he said, “I know you’ve done things to help out your family—I’ve read it in interviews. Didn’t you get your parents a home in Nashville a couple of years ago?”

“Of course I did.” I tossed up my hand. “Everyone does that. But it was a little late—Lindsey was already in college and Paul only had a couple of years there.”

Jackson shot me a look. “So... you didn’t pay for their college?”

My head whipped toward him. “Yes, I did. It was the least I could do.”

“Um-hmm. And Lindsey’s place in Nashville?”

“I helped her out with that.”

“And by helped her out, you mean...”

I moved around in my seat. “I put down the down payment, you know, so she could get started.”

“So, ten percent? Twenty percent?”

I pulled on my seatbelt and moved around some more. I couldn’t get comfortable. “Like, forty percent... or maybe fifty.”

“And Paul?”

I burst out with a laugh. “Paul will be living with three other guys, living the college dream.”

“Because that’s what he wants to do?”

“Well, yeah. I would’ve gotten him a place in an instant.”

“Um-hmm.” Jackson kept his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road.

“I know what you’re trying to do, Jackson,” I huffed.

“Yeah, and what’s that?”

“You’re trying to say that I’ve given them things in return for what they gave up for me.”

He nodded. “That’s precisely what I’m trying to say.”

“Well, it’s not enough. It’s just money. I put together a trust for Lindsey and Paul, but what does that really change? It’s not like either of them got to pursue their dreams. That was only me.”

He gave a nod, but he wasn’t actually agreeing with me—more like he didn’t want to keep pushing me.

“I appreciate it, Jackson.” I sighed and let my head fall back. “But I don’t think I’m wrong here. If I give up what I’m doing to pursue songwriting and producing, it’s going to break their hearts. And I just don’t know if I have it in me.” I leaned down and placed my head in my hands. “Ugh!” I exclaimed and sat back up. “And what about my manager and my contract?”

Jackson shot me a look.

“The bigger my career has grown, the fewer clients Sabine has taken on. I think she’s down to three of us. What’s she going to do if I suddenly drop her? And can I even afford to do that?” I shook my head and tried to quell my racing thoughts.

“What’s your biggest concern?”

“What?”

“When you think about changing your career, what’s your biggest concern?”

I huffed. “Disappointing everyone.”

Jackson smiled. “And since you know you can’t make everyone happy, what’s next?”

I bit my lip. “Leaving them in the lurch. My road crew, my manager, my publicist, my whole team... my family.”

“And when you say ‘lurch’, you mean financially?”

“Yeah.” I slapped the truck seat. “This is a big risk. Can I just stop making the money I make? Can I buy out my contract? It isn’t all personal, there are big business decisions involved, too. I know my potential earnings doing what I’m

doing—I know what kind of money my team makes. What I’m talking about is a complete unknown.”

We rode in silence for a little while, and then Jackson cleared his throat. “You know, there are other country singers out there. There are other people your team can work with. I bet you even know some.” He shot me a smile. “And once you start producing, you might know a few more, ”

Jackson reached across the seat and squeezed my hand. Which was exactly what I wanted. Or was it more like, *Jackson*.

Jackson was what I wanted.

And it felt like another item on a list of things I could never have.

Chapter 31

- Jackson

Gia might think it was ‘only money,’ but I had grown up around people with a lot of money, and I barely found a good thing to say about any of them.

They picked money over people, every time. Especially if that meant over a family member. Family was tossed away on a whim.

Gia was nothing like that.

I wasn’t going to try to talk her out of this now—she was set in her thinking—but, maybe, over time, I’d be able to help her see otherwise.

I pulled in front of Gia’s cabin and got out to get her bags. She grabbed her guitar and backpack, then unlocked her door, holding it open for me.

I squeezed past, making a show of how many bags I carried. “Just let me... I think I can... I just need to get—” She smacked my shoulder as I went by, and I placed all her bags down on the floor next to her bed.

“So what did we learn about overnight trips?” I put my hands on my hips and tried to look stern, though I had to bite my bottom lip to keep from grinning.

Gia tilted her head to the side. “That four bags are just as good as one?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Not the lesson I was going for here.”

Gia patted my chest. “So many lessons, so little time.” She walked over to the fridge. “Do you want a water for the road? I know you’ve got to get to the farm.”

“Nah, I’ll grab something at home when I change. But I’ll see you in a couple of hours for the branding.”

“Yep. I’ll be ready.”

“Plus, there’s still that thing to talk about.”

Gia’s eyes got big. “We’ve still got to talk about it? I thought after last night...”

I pulled open the door and said, “I think that’s all the more reason.”

She tilted her head. “Is it, though?”

“Alright, Gia. We can let it go. For now.” I chuckled and walked out, happy, again, to not be the only one thinking about our kiss.



- *Gia*

That man was crazy if he thought anything had been on my mind but our kiss.

Even on the car ride home, when we were discussing how guilty I felt about everything with my family, that kiss wasn't far from my thoughts. I kept wanting to take off my seatbelt and scoot up next to him, maybe lay my head on his shoulder, and see if there was some kind of solution I hadn't considered about my career.

When had Jackson Reed turned into the man I wanted to confide in the most?

I grabbed my guitar and sat on the edge of the bed. I pulled a notebook and pen off the bedside table and dropped it down next to me. My head was filled with songs, snippets of lyrics and chords. The previous night had inspired a rush of ideas.

But most of all, it was the kisses.

It was a stolen moment

Never meant to be

I was caught in a whirlwind

Something, something, something...

emotions running wild, losing myself

I shouldn't be falling

It's a reckless game

I strummed and jotted down notes, the lyrics coming to me practically fully formed, and the music coming together fast.

I chuckled.

Of course the song was coming together fast. Everything about Jackson was happening fast.

Oh, sugar. Our time together was flying by fast, too. I only had two more weeks here, and then I'd be gone. Jackson would be gone.

My stomach tightened, and I didn't like it one bit.

I was working through a chord progression when I got a notification for a video call. I grabbed my phone, my guitar still on my lap.

"Hey, you!" Lindsey's beautiful face filled my screen.

"Hey, you, back!"

Lindsey tilted her head. "What's going on? You're all..." she waved her hand in front of her face, "flushed." She moved her face closer to her screen to get a better look. "Like, your cheeks are all rosy."

"Oh." I shook my head. "It's nothing. I'm just," I held my guitar up so she could see it, "jotting down some lyrics and chords." I smiled, and thought, *nothing to look at here, ma'am! Move along!*

Lindsey squinted. "Then why are they getting even pinker?"

"What?" I raised a hand to my cheek. *Sugar.* My cheek did feel warm! Dang fair skin. "I don't know, it's probably

nothing. I guess I just really got into the music.”

Lindsey placed her chin in her hand and smiled. “Do you know how awesome it is to have a country singing star for a sister? It’s the best.”

My stomach dropped. And I swear, all my inspiration drifted away.

I set down my guitar. We needed to move on from this topic. “So what are you doing at,” I looked at the time on my phone, “twelve-thirty on a lovely Saturday? It is lovely there, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is. But eleven-thirty, my time. You know, time change, here in Nashville.”

“Right. Of course. So what are you up to?”

I got up from my bed and opened the fridge. It was pretty barren. I held my phone up to the contents. “Hey, Linds, what would you make for lunch with what I’ve got here?”

“You’ve got... water, Greek yogurt, blueberries, beer... What’s behind the water?”

I reached in and pushed aside the water. “The last of the cake from my birthday party!”

“Then I guess you’ve only got one option,” Lindsey said.

“Yep.”

And at the exact same time, I said, “Cake!” and Lindsey said, “Yogurt and blueberries.”

We both burst out laughing. I pulled out the cake and grabbed a fork. “Cake it is!”

Lindsey laughed. “Gosh, it was great to visit you.”

“It was. You should come back. It already feels like forever ago.” Throw in a kiss that should have never happened, with a man who absolutely never should have happened, along with a trip to Charlotte that also never should have happened, and it was like a small eternity had passed.

“It does.” Lindsey cleared her throat. “So, I have to ask you something.”

“Go for it.” I scooped up a bite of cake, pushing it onto my fork with my finger. I popped my finger into my mouth.

“Would you mind if I go out with Ewan?”

My finger popped out of my mouth. “Ewan? Who’s Ewan?”

Lindsey chuckled. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

I shrugged. “What do you mean? This is a guy I know?”

Lindsey rolled her lips together, trying to hold back a smile. “You could say that...”

I put my fork down. “Lindsey, who is it?”

“You went out with him.”

I pulled my head back. “What? I went out with a guy named Ewan?” I laughed. “Not that there’s anything wrong with the name Ewan, but you’d think I’d remember.” I shook my head. “Also, since when have I dated? I haven’t been out with a guy

on a date, other than for an awards show or something since —” I stood up straight. “Wait. Ewan from Edinburgh?”

She grinned. “That’s the one.”

I burst out laughing. “His Scottish accent was sooo dreamy!”

Lindsey couldn’t keep her smile to herself. “Let me just say, it still is.”

“That was like, ten years ago. I remember he was interning with a producer I worked with. We went on, like, *a* date.”

“Two, according to Ewan.”

I nodded. “Two, then. But I’d just signed with Wildfire Productions, and everything was coming at me so fast. I remember he was nice.”

“He’s that, too. And I’m glad you’re good with it... especially since I already said yes.”

“Of course, I’m good with it. How did you guys meet?”

“At a work get-together on Thursday night. His office and our offices were at the same bar. He’s nice, and there’s the accent—”

“Indeed.”

“And I don’t know... After your big birthday party, I came back here feeling kind of lonely. You know?”

I sat down on one of the bar stools. “Yeah. I know.”

Lindsey nodded. “I love hanging out with our family, but those friends you’ve made down there, in such a short time...

those guys were awesome. It made me think about how much I've let friendships slip away from me. Relationships, too."

I bit my lip. I knew *all* about that.

"Good for you, Linds. I hope you have a blast."

She stood and walked into her bathroom. "Me, too. Even if it doesn't turn into anything, I think we'll have fun."

"Yeah, of course. Say hi for me."

"I will." Lindsey fluffed her hair around her shoulders. "But if this is just a ploy to re-meet you, you know I'll never speak to him again."

I laughed. "That is not happening."

"You'd be surprised," she muttered.

"Lindsey!"

"It's only happened a couple of times, and it's always really obvious. Don't worry. I think he might be a good one." She shut off the light and flopped on her sofa. "But not as good as those three Idaho boys. They were *fine*."

I laughed. "I'd have to agree."

"And Jackson? How's your fine man?"

"Can we call him my man? I don't think so." *No matter how much I hoped.*

Lindsey flipped her fingers. "Whatever, semantics. How is he?"

“Good, really good. The next phase of *Operation: Fake Relationship* is tonight at a local bar, and then more flower deliveries on Monday.”

Lindsey grinned. “I can’t wait to hear all about it.”

“You’ll be the first.”

“What time are you going out tonight?”

I glanced up at the clock. “Not until eight. I’m just going to hang around, maybe write.”

“Alright, sis, gotta go. Hi to Jackson!”

“Hi to Ewan!”

Lindsey waved, and she was gone. And I was left thinking about relationships that have slipped away and relationships that never were, yet somehow, you felt the loss all the same,

I picked up my guitar.

Maybe this conversation hadn’t ruined my inspiration, because suddenly, it seemed like I had more to write about after all.

I wondered how Jackson would feel about being the star of a song.

Chapter 32

- *Gia*

My stomach was filled with butterflies, and all I wanted to do was talk to my sister again and tell her how bad I had it for Jackson. I wanted to flop down on the bed and describe every swoon-worthy moment with the man, from his obvious care of his community to his protectiveness over me.

And his kiss...

Oh, that kiss.

I had it bad.

And nothing good could come of it.

Two weeks from now I'd be going back to Nashville and touring, and Jackson would remain here, living the life he chose for himself years ago. At this rate, I'd be heartbroken, and he'd be... what? Would he be heartbroken, too?

I collapsed on my bed, but it wasn't to call my sister. Jackson would be here in less than an hour, which was the perfect amount of time to work on some new music. I grabbed my notebook, but then there was a knock on the door.

That couldn't be Jackson already.

I forced myself to remember for a moment that I wasn't normal, that I was, in fact, a country star, so I didn't swing open the door. I peeked out a side window, and...

I flung open the door. "What the heck?"

“Surprise!” Lindsey launched herself into my arms, and I stumbled back for a second, and then squeezed her as hard as she was squeezing me.

“What are you doing here? What is even happening right now?” I was smiling so big, it hurt my cheeks.

“I missed you! Like, so much. And you never have time off, and it’s crazy ‘cause I’ve only got twenty-four hours, but I just didn’t want to miss this chance. When I talked to you this morning, my ride to the airport was already on their way to pick me up. I knew you’d be here. Where else would you be?” She flashed me a grin and pulled her suitcase inside.

My stomach flipped over. A day earlier... *Oh, sugar*, just twelve hours earlier, and I wouldn’t have been here.

“And now I’m here, too.”

Lindsey threw her arm up. “So, what should I wea—” Her arm fell. “What’s wrong.”

“What?” I twisted and closed the door. “Nothing. I’m just surprised! And happy you’re here.”

“If that’s your happy face...”

I forced a laugh. “Really. This is awesome.” I grabbed her bag and rolled it over toward the closet. “And it’s perfect timing. The wall branding at the bar tonight will be super fun.”

Lindsey raised an eyebrow. “Alright. I’m going to act like you’re thrilled I’m here, whether you really are or not. How much time have I got?”

I glanced at the clock. “Jackson should be here any time now, so let’s get you ready.”

“I see you’re wearing your standard.”

I looked down at my jeans, red boots, and white T-shirt. “But it’s the *nice* T-shirt,” I said with a grin.

Lindsey nodded. “Oh, and I can tell.” She flipped open her suitcase. “Shorts or jeans? It’s still hot out there.” She pulled out a couple of items. “Jeans it is. I want to be just like my older sister.”

I laughed. “You said older on purpose.”

Lindsey changed out of her yoga pants and pulled on her jeans. “I did. Just trying to keep you humble. Don’t want your stardom getting to your head.”

I turned before Lindsey saw my face. “You want a water or anything before we go?” Any butterflies I’d had were lying in the pit of my stomach. How could I be thinking about Jackson when Lindsey was here, making it more clear by the minute how important it was to continue singing and touring?

I heard Jackson’s truck pull up and went to the door. I looked out the window, just in case.

Jackson walked up the steps, and I pulled open the door when he got to the top. He stopped and gazed at me from head to toe.

He shook his head. “How can you make a T-shirt and jeans look so good?”

Heat rose in my chest, and I bit my lip. And that's when Lindsey walked up behind me.

“Surprise!” She did a quick turn on the heel of her boot. “I’m rocking the T-shirt and jeans tonight, too.”

Jackson did a double-take. “Lindsey. Hi.” He looked at me and back at Lindsey.

“Surprise,” I said.

“Hi. Hi!” He stepped in and gave Lindsey a quick hug. “When did you...? When did—”

“I just got in a minute ago. I totally surprised Gia.” She slung her arm around me and gave me a one-sided hug. “I just didn’t have enough time with her when we were all here, you know?”

Jackson’s eyes were big. “Yeah, yeah. I get that, not enough time.” He glanced at me and back at Lindsey.

Did he just say what I thought he said? Was he thinking about how little time I had left here, too? How little time we had left together?

Lindsey clapped her hands. “Alright. I’m ready if you guys are.”

“Yes! Let me get my bag. And my brand!” I grabbed my things, and we headed out the door with Jackson locking it behind us.



- *Jackson*

I shut the truck door and walked around the front.

I got why Lindsey was here—I felt like I didn't have enough time with Gia, either—but I struggled with her encroaching on my time with Gia. The only good thing I found was that Gia was scooted over in the seat all the way up next to me, with Lindsey in the seat by the door.

I figured I should take my good fortune where I could get it.

We pulled into the parking lot of Happy Springs Bar and Grill and waited for someone to pull out so we could get a space. The parking lot was sizable, but the place was packed. It was located about halfway between Henryville and Merit, and had been around for years since it was the only thing out here. But Merit was creeping toward it, year after year.

Lindsey and Gia piled out of the truck, singing the last verse of the song on the radio. It broke my heart a little to think of Gia never singing again. *Wait*. That's not right. She'd sing again, just not all day, every day. It's what she wanted, and I'd stand behind her on that.

I scoffed under my breath. *Like she needed me for that*. Her whole family would be there for her—she wasn't going to need me. I gave my head a hard shake. I didn't want those thoughts creeping in—I wanted to enjoy our night.

Gia pulled open the front door and spun around to me. “Coming?” She gave me that bright smile of hers, and I felt it in my chest. The Beatles song “Here Comes The Sun” sounded from the bar. This place played everything from country to classic rock. The line about it being a long, cold, lonely winter, but finally, the sun was here, rang out. I immediately thought of Gia—*she* was like the sun. I smiled. What didn’t make me think of Gia?

Lindsey stepped inside and smiled back at me. “Yeah, coming?”

“Yep, I’m coming.” I picked up my pace and reached for the door to hold it for Gia when out walked Denny Budd and Pete Hill, two of the ole timers/gossip mongers. I looked at Gia and she immediately covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

“Gia. Jackson,” Pete said. “Nice to see you young folks out.”

I nodded and Gia waved, and as they walked out, I heard Pete say, “We’ve got ourselves another confirmed sighting.”

Denny responded, “Be sure that hits the books.”

Gia’s eyes were huge. “What are they even talking about?”

“I told you they were intense. I think they write this stuff down somewhere.”

Gia laughed and I held the door so she could slip inside, where Lindsey was waiting. We made our way through all the people, greeting those that I knew, then out to the new back deck.

It was definitely a party.

There was a three-piece country band playing in the far corner, and all the tables were full. There were a couple of long, skinny, tall tabletops that had stools underneath, but people just stood around them.

But the biggest crowd was at the branding wall.

Gia grabbed my hand. "Let's check it out."

I didn't care if Gia was holding my hand for show or not, I was simply happy to have hers in mine.

The wall was taped off in a grid pattern of four-by-four-inch squares, with brands already burned into several of the squares. A guy I didn't know picked up a brand that had been heating up in a low, small trough filled with hot charcoal.

He pressed the brand into one of the squares, and when the wood sizzled, a roar went up from the crowd. The guy removed the brand from the wall and stuck it into another small water trough to cool it down. There were brands lined up against the wall, including some electric brands plugged into a giant outlet.

The whole thing was cool.

Gia looked up at me, her eyes sparkling, and I swear, I could feel myself falling again. There was no doubt, I was falling hard for Gia Nixon.

"Should I heat up my brand?" Her eyes lit up her whole face.

"Do it!" Lindsey bounced on her toes. "Put it in the coals, now."

With a big grin, Gia tugged on my hand and we made our way to the wall.

“Hey, Grace,” I said. Grace Myers, one of the siblings who ran the bar, was standing by the trough, cheering people on and inviting people to bring up their brands. “Looks like you got a great turnout tonight.”

“Jackson! Hi! I hope you brought your brand,” Grace said and motioned to the wall.

I smiled and slipped my arm around Gia’s shoulder. “I brought something better. Grace, this is my girlfriend, Gia Nyx, and her sister, Lindsey.” Saying Gia was my girlfriend was easier to do every time I said it.

The women shook hands, and then Grace lightly smacked my arm. “I’d heard the rumors and wondered if they were true. Look at you, here with a real country legend.” She leaned closer to Gia and Lindsey and said, “I’m a big fan. Of you, and of Jackson. He’s a great guy.”

She smiled warmly, and I could feel heat rising to my face. I hadn’t been expecting that.

Gia looked up at me and then at Grace. “I agree with you, he is. And I’m a fan of your bar. This branding wall is the best.”

“I love it, too,” Lindsey said. “I’m getting my own brand next time I come, I love it so much.”

My stomach did a little dip. *Would there be a next time?* Would Gia and Lindsey be back?

“Thank you. We’ll save a spot for you on the wall. This was all my sister Maddy’s idea.” Grace scanned the crowd. “She’s around here somewhere. Sophia and Ethan, too.” She laughed. “This place is packed. But if you stick around, I’m sure you’ll see them before the night is over.” She motioned to the trough of coals. “Come on, come on. Get that thing in there.”

With a big grin, Gia placed the face of the brand into the hot coals, then stood back. She grabbed Lindsey’s hand, and they both squealed.

Someone called out Grace’s name, and she said, “Gotta see what that’s about. But Linus, here, can help with your brand. I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

“It was great meeting you, and congratulations on your big night,” Gia said, and Grace waved and ducked into the crowd.

Lindsey let out another little squeal. “I love how you’re using Grandma’s initials in your brand, Gia. She would love that.”

Gia brushed under her eye. “She would. And I didn’t want my initials up there like I was trying to be some big something.” Gia gave me a secretive smile.

Lindsey laughed. “You are a big something. But it’s still pretty neat.”

I watched them both, my heart full, trying not to think that this might be our last night like this.

Chapter 33

- Jackson

“That went pretty well.” Lindsey got to the door first and held it open so we could exit Happy Springs bar.

“It did,” Gia said. “What, like, ten pictures with fans, and a couple of autographs?”

I pulled open the truck door. “Not bad for a night out.” Gia scooted in and Lindsey followed.

“I never get a night out like this. It was all so... normal. That’s the only word for it.”

Lindsey laughed. “Sorry, sister, but that is not normal. Strangers were asking to take their picture with you.”

“No, I mean it. Those fans barely interrupted the night, and we got to just sit there and talk. Over beers. At a table. Meeting Jackson’s friends and just hanging out, like normal people do.” Gia smacked her hands on her legs. “Normal. I loved it.”

“A small town can be that way.” I pulled out of the parking lot. “You’ll have your gossip mongers who have to know everything about everyone, and you think they’ll drive you crazy, but then they turn around and protect their own. Like tonight.”

I wanted to reach for Gia but kept my hands firmly on the steering wheel.

“That’s exactly what was happening,” she said. “It’s like everyone decided they’d get their pictures in, but then they’d let us enjoy our night. It was awesome.”

I smiled. “There’s a reason I like this town.”

An old Dolly Parton song came on the radio, and Gia leaned over and turned it up. “Wait, wait, here comes the best part!”

Lindsey started singing along with Gia, and when it got to the line about *here I go*, they both belted it out in perfect harmony.

I got chills. I would miss her singing, that was for sure.

I chuckled and leaned into Gia. “So that was the best part?”

“Definitely!” she said, and she and Lindsey both laughed.

We pulled in front of the cabin, and Lindsey jumped out. “Thanks for the night, Jackson, I’ve gotta go to the restroom—you guys take your time!” And she raced up the steps before I’d even moved.

I turned toward Gia and smiled. “Is she always like that?”

“If you mean like the best sister ever, then yes. Yes, she is.”

I helped Gia out of the truck and walked her up to the front door. She leaned her back against the door, and I leaned my shoulder on the frame.

Close. We were close.

“Are we ever going to discuss that thing?” I couldn’t keep my hands to myself any longer. I reached up and tucked a curl behind her ear.

“You mean, that thing in Charlotte?”

My mind raced with all the things in Charlotte. My mind raced with all things Gia.

I took in a slow breath. “There were a couple of things in Charlotte. Let’s start with the first one. How are you feeling now that Alice sang your songs? Still thinking you’d rather write than sing?”

Gia bit her lip. “I think I have to try, Jackson. Don’t I? Even though having Lindsey here has underscored how important it is that I’m a country star, it’s come up so many times. It will crush her.” She took a step away from the door and then fell back on it. “It will crush my family.”

She threw her hands up. “But the audience was so receptive to Alice singing my songs. Imagine if I wrote for her and produced her work. I could stop touring! And then there was tonight. If I could live a life like tonight—where some people know me, but I’m not such a big deal—that sounds heavenly.”

“I get it. This place has been my paradise since I was a boy.”

“I don’t know if I can do it.” Gia took in a big breath. “I want to do it.”

“We both made big decisions about what we wanted our life to look like when we were young. But just because you made a decision once, doesn’t mean you can’t change your mind now. I’ve met your family, Gia—no one is going to turn their back on you.” And I believed that to the bottom of my soul.

Gia paused for a moment and then looked into my eyes. “Is this still the life you want?”

“I got lucky. This is still the life I want.” I rubbed my chest. *Except for the part where you’re no longer going to be in it.* That part I didn’t want.

I had to get out of my head. This woman was here, with me now, and that’s all I should be thinking about.

“About that other thing,” Gia said.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“You don—”

And Gia pulled me down by the collar of my shirt and kissed me.



- *Gia*

I definitely took him by surprise, like the way everything about my trip to North Carolina had taken me by surprise, so it was only fair.

Jackson’s arms immediately came around me as I wrapped my arms behind his neck. My hands ran through his thick, wavy hair, and I gave it a little tug, for good measure.

I felt him smile against my lips, which delighted me to no end, and then he pulled me tight in a crushing embrace. Now I was the one smiling. Our kiss was sweet, and tender, yet we

were both breathing hard between kisses, our lungs inflating in rapid movements.

He took the kiss deeper, then trailed a row of kisses down my jaw before retreating. It was too soon! He was leaving too soon. One step, and then two, a fingertip tracing down my arm. With a quick squeeze to my hand, he moved back.

My heart spun in my chest.

Much like my head.

I was more than gone for Jackson Reed.

I didn't need more time with Jackson to convince me I wasn't ready to let him go. All that we had shared, everything I'd learned about this man, who he was at his heart...The clock was ticking. Nine days until I left for Nashville.

Nine days.

Falling for Jackson had never been part of the plan. *How did I get here?*

I leaned my head toward the door. "We've been out here for a while. I better get inside... Lindsey's probably starting to wonder."

Jackson ran his thumb down my cheek. "She's not wondering." He chuckled. "She knows."

I stood on my toes and gave him a quick kiss, then I eased open the door while he quietly jogged down the steps.

I slipped inside with the biggest smile on my face and turned into the room.

Lindsey was standing there, her hands on her hips.

“I don’t think I do know, Gia... You don’t want to sing anymore?”

And my stomach plummeted to the floor.

Chapter 34

- *Gia*

“Lindsey!” My hands flew up to my chest. “You scared the heck out of me!”

“Gia, what’s going on? What do you mean, you don’t want to sing anymore?”

I glanced at the door. “How did you... What?”

Lindsey threw a hand up and let it fall and slap her leg. “I thought I was being funny! I thought I was being the bratty little sister listening at the door and spying on her big sister and her new boyfriend—”

“Not my boyfriend.”

Lindsey stood up straight, exasperation written on her face. “Really, Gia? You think I care about whether your stupid boyfriend is fake or not? I’m not that delusional. Apparently, only you are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She threw her hands up again. “Oh, my gosh! That’s not even important! What is going on with you? And why, why—” She choked. “Why haven’t you told me?”

A tear rolled down Lindsey’s face, and I thought I was going to be sick.

I rushed to her side. “Lindsey, I’m sorry, I’m just... I’m—”

“Tell me.” Lindsey sank down onto the sofa. “Just tell me what’s going on. Start with whatever happened in Charlotte.”

And so, I told her everything.

“You’ve all sacrificed so much for me to be this big country star.” I grabbed a tissue. “But I’m unhappy. I’m just so unhappy.”

“And you didn’t think you could tell us?”

“When I’ve taken away all your dreams so I could have mine?”

Lindsey shook her head. “Taken away all my dreams? What are you even talking about? I’m a little insulted that you think you’re the only one going after what you want... and a little hurt. We’re as close as we are, yet the most important thing that has happened to you in years you’ve kept to yourself.”

“You’re... not mad?” I shook my head. “You’re not mad at me?”

“I’m mad that you didn’t tell me! This is your life, Gia, and no one wants you doing something you don’t want to do. I’m sure of it. We were behind you because it was your dream. It took about seventeen seconds for me to see the life you were living and know that it was nothing I would ever want.”

“Really? Even though you’re a great singer, too?”

“Really, and for all the reasons you don’t want to do it anymore. To never feel at home. To never feel rooted. To constantly be going. For not having a moment of privacy. For

always having to be on. That's for someone, but that is not for me. I'm a homebody at heart."

"I think I might be, too."

"You just might be."

We sat on the sofa in silence for a moment before Lindsey said, "What are you going to do about your team? Sabine is going to die." She bit the corner of her fingernail. "So is Bob. You know how much he loves ordering his roadies around."

"Ugh. It's so hard!" I grabbed a pillow and put it over my face. After a couple of seconds, Lindsey knocked it away.

"So, what are you thinking?"

I breathed in and let it out slowly. "I think I need to talk to my accountant. I'll stay through any live events that are already booked, of course, and then I'll do what I can to help out the road crew," I glanced at Lindsey, "especially Bob. But I'm going to look into buying out or renegotiating my contract with Sabine. I think we have a year beyond my tour dates." I rubbed my temples. "I'll still need a manager, just not as much as I need her now, and probably... differently, too."

Lindsey placed her hand on my leg, and I reached down and took it in mine. "Will you help me tell Mom and Dad and Paul?"

"Of course, you big dork. And you won't even need help."

"You don't think they'll be crushed?"

Lindsey raised an eyebrow. “Feeling a bit big in the britches, are you?”

I pushed her shoulder. “Linds!”

“Crushed isn’t the right word. They’ll be shocked because it’s shocking. *I’m* shocked. We think of you as a singer. That’s what you are. And you’re so good at it! It’s going to take a minute, is all. But that’s all. This is your life. Everyone will get that, and whatever you want to do next, we’ll support it. Just like we all support Paul. Just like you all support me.”

I rubbed my chest. “It’s hard for me to think of it like that. It feels like everyone had to give up so much for me. I feel like I’m letting you all down.”

“Maybe we did give things up, but we made the decisions we needed to make at the time. And we’d feel a lot worse if, in ten years, we found out you were miserable doing something out of misplaced guilt. That’s just—*yuck*.”

I laughed. “When did you get so smart?”

Lindsey shrugged. “I’ve always been smart, but it helped to have an older sister chasing her dreams to show me the way. Not just the way I wanted to do things, but why I wanted to do them, and the impact they’d have on me, too. You showed me that.” Lindsey leaned into my shoulder. “So thanks.”

I leaned back. “You’re welcome.”

Lindsey was quiet for a moment. “I think there’s something else we need to talk about, too, don’t you?” She canted her head to the side.

I let out a big sigh. “Ugh. Do we have to talk about all the big things tonight?”

She spread out her hands. “I’m here.”

I rubbed my forehead and took in a big breath. “Fine. Jackson’s not a fake boyfriend. I mean he is, but I don’t want him to be.”

Lindsey’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline.

“I think I might be in love with him.” I collapsed back into the cushions.

Lindsey turned her body fully toward me and pulled her leg up onto the sofa. “I think that’s amazing, Gia. Because I really like him, too. But, um... I was talking about the trust fund you set up for Paul and me.”

I flew to my feet, my hands on my hips. “What? How do you know about that? You’re not supposed to find out until you’re thirty!”

Lindsey lifted her shoulders. “Your lawyer sent the info to Mom and Dad. It was on Mom’s desk when I was there the other week. I wasn’t snooping or anything, I went in there to get a pad of paper and it was just sitting there.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Just like you weren’t snooping tonight?”

“Oh no, I fully claim that—I was totally snooping. I thought it was going to lead to me teasing you about kisses, not finding out all your deepest secrets.” She tilted her head to the side. “That is all the secrets, right?”

I nodded vigorously. “All of them. Every last one.”

Lindsey pulled me back onto the sofa. “Okay, so more about Jackson. I like him, Gia, I really do. Since the beginning.”

I bit my lip. “Me, too. He’s just been so easy, from the very beginning. Easy to talk to, easy to get along with. He was a fan, but he let me be me.” I took in a big breath. “He wasn’t intimidated, he didn’t act like I was someone famous, he just acted like I was... *someone*. Just me. Just Gia.”

“That sounds so good. I’m so happy for you.” Lindsey reached for her water. “But how would it even work, with you in Nashville and him here?”

I closed my eyes for a moment. “I’ve barely thought about that. There’s so much potential change going on for me in the near future. But you know...” I glanced down at my lap, then back at Lindsey. “Him letting me just be... well, *me*, helped me decide to have Alice sing my songs. And I think it’s the right thing for me.”

Lindsey clapped her hands. “Okay, then. It sounds good. It’s going to take a minute, but I’ll get there. We all will. I think that’s enough big talk for tonight. Why don’t we get to bed so we can do it all again tomorrow. I’ve got to leave here by five.”

I hugged Lindsey like the best sister she was, and then she went to clean up and get ready for bed.

It took everything in me not to text Jackson, but it was late, and for everything that had developed between us over the

past month, we hadn't turned into texters.

Just what, exactly, was it, we had turned into?

I bit my lip.

I'd have to figure that out. And fast.

Chapter 35

- *Jackson*

“Hey, y’all,” I said, jumping out of my truck. Gia and Lindsey were walking down the steps. It was after lunch, and I’d stopped at Gia’s to pick them up. I hadn’t joined them earlier because I had some things I wanted to take care of. Gia was in her cutoffs and boots—one of my favorite looks on her, but did that woman ever not look good?—and Lindsey was in jeans and boots.

“Hey, Jackson,” Lindsey said. “I just wanted to come out and say goodbye. I’ve gotta hit the road in a couple of hours, and even though I’d love to see your flower farm, I’m being selfish. Because the truth is, I’d love to go on a horseback ride more.” She gave me a big grin.

“No problem. You can see the flower farm any time.” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized how unlikely it was that Lindsey would be back here. That *Gia* would be back here. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. I wasn’t going to think about it today, not when everything was going so right.

“I might just take you up on that someday,” Lindsey said. “Especially if this ride goes as well as it could. Let me get your number.”

She handed me her phone and I added my number. “You’re the best, Jackson.”

“The very best,” Gia said.

“Like, superior?” I added.

“How about, top-notch?” Lindsey tilted her head.

“I’ve got it!” Gia said. “Superb.”

I laughed. “I’ll take superb.”

Lindsey gave me a quick hug, and then right before she let me go, she whispered, “Good luck! I hope you can do it!” And she stepped away. Before I had a second to figure out what that was about, she was hugging Gia and not letting her go.

Believe me, I understood the sentiment.

After more hugs and some tears, the two broke apart.

“I don’t have to go to the farm right now, you know. We could come riding with you,” Gia said.

“We can. Y’all rode my horses the other day. We could all go.”

Lindsey waved her hand. “Nah. It’s only cutting our visit short by two hours, and besides,” Lindsey fluttered her eyelashes, “I have a gentlemen caller joining me.”

Gia’s eyes popped wide. “What?” She smacked her sister’s shoulder. “Who is it? Why am I just hearing about this?”

Lindsey laughed and turned away, running up the steps. “That’s for me to know and for you to find out! Bye, you guys. Have fun!” She gave a big wave and bolted into the cabin, closing the door behind her.

Gia swung toward me, her hands on her hips. “What on earth? Who could it be?”

I pulled my head back. “I have no idea.”

Gia linked her arm in mine. “Well, there’s you, but you’re mine, so...”

I reveled in her words. *What if I was hers?*

Gia gave my arm a smack. “I bet it’s one of the Idaho cowboys!”

I opened up the truck door and she slid inside. Before I closed the door, she said, “Or maybe someone from the bar? We’re going to have to go over everyone we met.”

“Aye, aye, captain.”

Gia grinned and I closed her door, trying not to think about how little time we had left.

I jumped in the truck and we pulled out.

“It’s kind of crazy that I haven’t been out to your flower farm, yet.” She glanced over at me. “You moved your whole life here for it. It’s important.”

That was mostly right. “I moved here to not be in New York. I moved here to be with my grandparents, but I always loved working on the farm, so then it became home. I got lucky.”

“You did.”

“Did I tell you what my grams used to say to me when I was acting like the moody, bratty teenager I was?”

Gia laughed. “You were moody and bratty? I can’t imagine! You’re always so calm and together.”

I chuckled. “I was definitely moody and bratty, but less so once I moved here after college.”

“Oh, right. That was thoughtless of me.” Gia reached out and placed her hand over mine on the seat. “Teenage years are tough, no matter what, but to not want to be at home...”

“Another way to say that is to not be *wanted* at home.”
Shoot. Why did I have to say it like that?

I pulled into the farm, and Gia took off her seatbelt and slid over next to me, holding my hand in her lap. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I can’t even imagine.”

I chuckled. “I bet you can’t. Your family is amazing.” I tugged her hand. “Come on. That was a long time ago. Let me show you the farm.”

I slid out of the truck and got Gia’s door, and she immediately took my hand in hers, and it was perfect.

We walked around and past the garage, when Gia stopped walking. She motioned to the side. “I love what you’ve done with this old truck and the flower landscaping around it.” She took a couple of steps away and looked out to the road and back to the truck. “But nobody can even see it. Why do you have it back here?”

I placed my hand on the rusted round hood. “This is the truck I used to ride around the fields in with my gramps. It was old even then. He called her Bessie, and he was always talking

to her, and it worked. This thing lasted forever, until it didn't. And this is where it ended up." I ran my hand over the front grill. "I couldn't get rid of it."

Gia stood up on her toes and kissed my cheek. "I love it. And I think that's an incredible way to honor your gramps."

She slid her arm around my waist and as we walked out to the fields, I thought about how lucky I was.

"The lilies are done, but the amaryllis should be blossoming soon. They're a good grower and dramatic, too, so we get a lot of calls for them."

We walked into the first field and pointed out the different varieties and the different ways they needed to be cared for. And when we moved on to the second field, Gia said, "Hey wait. You never told me what your grams said when you were being moody."

I smiled. "She'd say, 'Jacks! I don't know what your problem is, but you need to grab a shovel, and you need to go dig something up. I don't care what it is, and I don't care how long it takes, but don't come back until your hands are sore, your muscles ache, and your head is clear.' And it worked. Every time."

Gia gazed at me, a small smile on her lips. "She sounds great. She called you Jacks?"

"Yep. She and Gramps started calling me that when I was around eight—right about the time we decided on Grams and Gramps for them."

“That’s sweet. I like it. It totally fits you.”

“Eventually, she came up with a shortcut for when I was being a pain in the butt. It turned into, ‘Jacks, grab a shovel.’ And I would say ‘Yes, ma’am.’ And I’d walk out the door. Gramps was usually standing there giving me a look, so that motivated me, too.”

“They sound wonderful.”

I nodded and tried not to think about how much I missed them, or how much Gia had helped me not miss them as much. And soon I’d have to contend with missing her, too. I clenched my fists at my side and tried to shake off the feeling.

I glanced up at the sky as we walked over to the blossoming shrubs and bushes, and thunder sounded in the distance. “Clouds are rolling in. We could get an afternoon downpour. Maybe we should head back?”

Gia glanced up. “I know there are a couple more fields. Just show me this bit, and we’ll go back.”

There was one field in particular I wanted her to see, but it could wait.

“We’ve got everything in this field from camellias and gardenias to different types of jasmine. Hollyhocks over there—those were my gramps’s favorites. Also, peonies, hydrangeas, and lilacs, though we can’t count on the lilacs, no matter how hard I try.”

“You just listed all my favorites! But peonies are the best.” Gia knelt next to the bushes to get a closer look, even

though the peonies were past. “And lilacs and irises are a close second—they smell so good I just want to eat them. Lilacs were my grandmother’s favorite, too.”

I smiled. “My grandmother’s, too, which is why I will never stop trying to grow them.”

“Why won’t they grow?” She stood and brushed off her pants.

“Summers are too hot and humid, and winters don’t get cold enough. But sometimes I get lucky.”

I stepped closer to Gia. One of my favorite people in one of my favorite places? I was definitely lucky.

“You have a little dirt...” I moved my thumb next to her mouth and gently rubbed at the corner. I rubbed again, and Gia’s hand came up to cover mine.

And then I leaned in to kiss her.

My mouth was on hers, and Gia’s hands went to my shoulders, gripping tightly. The thunder unfurled overhead, sounding closer.

I deepened the kiss, my hands running down the smooth skin of her arms, when the sky split open. Rain poured down on the two of us. We both looked up, my hands still cradling her face, and we grinned. I leaned in and kissed her again, playfully nipping at her lower lip.

“Come on, let’s get back to the house.”

Holding hands, we ran, laughing while we stomped in the puddles that popped up. The rain hitting the dirt was one of my favorite smells of living in the country, and the green of the landscape would shine when the storm moved past.

We stopped on the porch and shook off.

“Well, if you didn’t get the dirt off my face,” Gia laughed, “the rain definitely washed it clean.”

“I have a confession...” I pulled off my hat and shook it. “There wasn’t any dirt on your face, and there wasn’t any whipped cream on your face in Charlotte, either. It was just an excuse.”

Gia’s eyes glittered. “Pretty sneaky, Mr. Reed. I might have to try that sometime.”

I pulled her close again. “You don’t need an excuse.” And I gave her a quick kiss while the rain continued to fall.

“I’ve got something else to tell you, too...” She wiped a raindrop off my cheek, and I continued in a whisper, “After that kiss in Charlotte, I walked into my room, pulled the covers back, and jumped onto the bed to grab the chocolates for you.”

Gia’s hand came back up to my cheek. “That was really sweet of you.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t count on the satin sheets, and as soon as I hit the bed, I went flying, feet overhead, and landed in a heap on the floor. And then the carafe fell off the nightstand, and I got totally drenched.”

She burst into a fit of giggles and covered her mouth. “I hope it was worth it. Those chocolates were worth it to me.”

I grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Definitely. Come on. Let’s get in the house and get dried off.”

I pulled her inside, the both of us laughing, and then stopped in my tracks.

My grandmother’s roll-top desk was open.

Gia whipped her head toward me, her eyes huge.

“Hello, Jack.”

My parents were sitting on my sofa. With my copy of the will in my father’s hand, and the notebook copy of our fake relationship in my mother’s.

My stomach flipped over and crashed to the floor.

“We were excited to meet your girlfriend,” said my mother. “But now that we know she’s fake, we’re even more excited to develop our soon-to-be new property.”

Chapter 36

- *Gia*

Nothing about this looked good.

Jackson held my hand tighter and pulled me right up to his side, with his shoulder in front of me like he needed to protect me.

I didn't know his parents, so maybe he did need to protect me.

"What are you doing here?" Jackson's voice was low and flat. I'd never heard him sound like that before.

His mother's legs were crossed, and she kicked her heel up and back, the red sole on her high heel flashing. "We thought we were coming to meet your famous girlfriend. But after getting our hands on this," she waved the notebook paper I recognized as the relationship notes I'd taken when Jackson and I were making our plans, "we decided to discuss how to develop these forty acres instead."

I wanted to cringe further behind Jackson. Why had I written up those notes? I was just trying to be funny!

"You won't be developing anything." Jackson spoke through gritted teeth.

"Now, now, Jack, we taught you better than that. It's all in the negotiation, isn't it?" She waved the paper again. "And we have a lot to negotiate with."

A chill raced up my spine.

Jackson scoffed. “You don’t want these acres. They’re worth nothing.”

“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong. The big city of Merit has inched its way out here to Henryville since the last time we were here.” She waved her hand at Jackson’s father. “Timothy.”

He cleared his throat. “The research will show that even places like this have people with money. A few luxury estates would be welcome.”

Jackson pulled his cowboy hat off and flipped it onto a hook. “You cannot be serious.”

Jackson’s mother smacked her foot down onto the floor. “We’re always serious about money. And between what we’re holding in our hands and whatever the two of you,” she pointed her red-tipped finger at us, “are up to, I’m certain we can find plenty to use. It’s just a matter of how we do that.” She leaned back on the sofa and crossed her legs.

Jackson turned the two of us, putting his back to his parents. “Call your sister. See if she can pick you up. If she can’t, try Quinn or his mom. And go out on the porch. Now.” He pushed me toward the door, and I went, glancing over my shoulder as I did. My mind raced, trying to comprehend everything that was happening.

“Don’t worry, Gia,” Jackson’s mother called, “we’ll be seeing you again soon, I’m sure.”

My hands shook and I kept mistyping the keys on my phone. My sister would have already left, and I didn't have Quinn's number. I didn't have anyone's number! I...

Rose. I could call The Farm.

Rose picked up after two rings. "Thank you for calling The Farm. How can I help you?"

Relief flooded through me. "Rose, it's Gia."

"Oh, hello, dear. What can I do for you?"

I took in a big breath and let it out. *Don't cry, Gia, don't cry. Not here, not now.* "This is going to sound weird, and I'm fine, but I'm over at Jackson's. Could you possibly come pick me up?" I heard the shakiness in my voice.

There was a slight pause, and then Rose replied, "Of course. I'll be right there."

"Thank you. Thanks. See you in a minute."

I hung up my phone and stepped off the porch. My knees buckled, but I caught myself. If Jackson didn't want me near his parents, then I wanted to be as far away as possible.

I raked my hands down my face. What had I done? Why had I written everything down? Jackson's worst nightmare was coming true, and it was happening because of me!

In minutes, Quinn's truck pulled up and Jasmine popped open her door. "Climb in."

She scooted over next to Quinn, and I got in the truck, slamming the door behind me and pulling on my seatbelt. My

hands were still shaking.

“I hope it’s okay that it’s us,” Jasmine said. “We were with Rose when you called.”

“It’s fine. It’s good. I—” I didn’t know what to say.

The truck was quiet on the way back to Quinn’s while my mind continued to race.

“Do you want to go to your cabin, or to The Big House, or...” Quinn trailed off.

“My cabin, thanks.” The back of my throat stung and I tried to swallow it away.

“Got it.”

We drove around to my cabin, and I practically jumped out of the truck before it had stopped. “Thanks, y’all. I—” I bit my lip and averted my face, trying to keep the tears that had pressed forward from falling. “Jackson’s parents showed up, and—”

“Jackson’s parents?” Quinn’s forehead creased. “They’re never here. Ever.”

“I don’t know, but it... it’s not good. I guess all that social media I wanted worked too well, and they found out about us. Jackson wanted me to leave, and that’s why I called you.” My stomach was in knots. Jackson never wanted the notoriety, and now I had brought his worst-case scenario right to his door. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe, while the feelings of guilt I knew so well rushed through me. It was like a physical weight on me.

“Hey,” Jasmine said. She took Quinn’s hand and then turned back to me. “Why don’t we hang out on your porch for a while. Then we’ll be here if you need us. You don’t even have to hang with us if you don’t want to.” She gave me a soft smile. “I just don’t like the thought of you being alone right now.”

I wiped the tear that fell from my eye. “Thank you. That would be good. That would be great, actually.”

I walked up to the porch with Jasmine and Quinn right behind me. Jasmine leaned against the rail and Quinn took a seat in one of the rockers. “I’m just going to step inside...”

Jasmine waved her hand. “Of course. We’re good.”

I unlocked my door then went into the cabin and stood there, not sure what to do with myself. Jackson. Jackson was who I wanted to talk to.

I stripped off my wet clothes and pulled on a pair of yoga pants and a long-sleeved shirt, and then I heard it.

A truck pulled up.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs right as I heard Quinn say, “What in the heck is going on?”

I rushed for the door to see Jackson raise his hand to knock. He let out a whoosh of breath. “*Gia*,” he said as he wrapped me in his arms.

Jackson.

Jackson was here.



- Jackson

I hugged Gia to me and then pulled back to look into her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded and blinked. “I’m okay. Are you okay?”

I nodded and slid my hand into hers, and we walked out onto the porch where Jasmine sat on Quinn’s lap, waiting for us.

Gia and I leaned against the porch rail, and I wrapped my arm around Gia, pulling her close. I wanted her this close, always.

“You know our fake relationship,” I said.

Jasmine stared at Gia pulled up as close to me as possible, my arm wrapped tightly around her. Then she looked me in the eye. “If that’s what you’re calling it.”

I shook my head. “Unfortunately, we called it that in writing, and now it’s in my parents’ hands, and they’re going to use it against us. Against me.”

Quinn’s brows pulled together. “What are your parents even doing here? And how can they use it against you?”

“It’s my fault.” Gia turned her face into my chest for a moment and took in a big breath. “I wanted Jackson and me to be out in public, but he never wanted that. And—”

“Hey, hey. It’s not your fault. I knew exactly what I was getting into with you. I knew the risks.” I held Gia tight and

kissed her temple. “And it was totally worth it,” I whispered.

That was all it took, and I felt Gia relax against me.

She squeezed me back and wiped under her eyes. “And then I thought I was being funny. When Jackson agreed to be my fake boyfriend, we barely knew each other. It just seemed like a good idea to write down what it was we were both going to get out of our deal. I don’t think either one of us thought—”

Gia turned her face into me again, and I held her tight. “That maybe it wouldn’t be so fake after all.”

Gia looked me in the eye and smiled. “Yeah. That.”

I gave her another little hug and Jasmine said, “Yeah. That.” She jumped off Quinn’s lap. “Finally! I’ve been waiting for you guys to get it! Okay.” She clapped her hands in front of her. “What do we have to do? What happens now?”

I shook my head. “My parents have already talked to Colton, my grandparents’ lawyer, and have a meeting set up for tomorrow. All his info was on the will. They took pictures of the will and pictures of our agreement, and said they could go after the land, or they could go after Gia’s fame, but one way or the other, they were going to walk away with something.”

Gia was pale. “Jackson, this is all my fault. I shouldn’t have asked you to do something so deceitful, and I shouldn’t have written it down.” She took a couple of steps away from me, and all I wanted was for her to come right back to my side.

She stopped and ran her hands down her face. “How do they want to use my fame? Tell me what they said.”

I shook my head and stepped away from the rail, crossing my arms in front of me. “Never. Never in a million years will I allow that to happen. I will publicly come out and say I am estranged from them before I would ever let them use you in any way.”

“Jackson. They’re trying to take your farm. They *will* take your farm.” She threw her hands up. “They can use me any way they want if it means they don’t take your farm away.”

“No. Absolutely not.” They were not going to get to Gia, not for any reason.

“You guys.” Jasmine held up her hands. “I’ve got an idea.”

Quinn stood and pulled Jasmine’s hand into his. “What is it?”

“All you’ve got to do,” Jasmine raised her eyebrow, “is prove it wasn’t fake. And I know just where to start.”

Chapter 37

- Jackson

My hand went around the back of my neck. “Prove it’s not fake?” I nodded. “That might work.”

Gia wrapped her arms around my waist. “It hasn’t been fake for me for a while, Jackson.” She ducked her head but then brought her gaze right back to mine. “What about you?”

Jasmine cleared her throat and reached for Quinn’s hand. “Come on, Quinn. I need... something.” And she pulled Quinn into the cabin.

Gia’s smile was soft, and she looked like the girl next door, not like a famous country star who could have anyone or anything that she wanted. And when I looked at her, I saw everything I would ever want.

“Me neither,” I said. “Not for quite a while. Maybe...” I leaned in closer, then closer still, “not ever.” And I briefly touched my lips to hers.

I felt the smile she gifted me down to my soul, and I knew it was all I would ever want.

“It’s going to be tricky,” she said, “making this thing work... especially with you being here, and me being there.”

“It will. But we’ll figure it out. I’ll do anything. Anything that you need.”

Gia took in a big breath. “Okay. First things first, the lawyer.”

I nodded toward the cabin. “Should I get them?”

“Yeah. We’re going to need all the help we can get.”

I knocked on the door, and we joined Jasmine and Quinn in the cabin.

“You guys good?” Quinn asked.

Gia nodded and took my hand. “Yeah, we’re good. And thanks for being here for us.”

“Of course. We love Jackson,” Jasmine said. “And now we love you, too.”

Gia laughed, and it was the best sound I’d ever heard. How did I get this lucky? My head spun for a minute. My parents were trying to take away my farm, and I was standing here with the woman of my dreams...

Yep. Lucky.

“Let’s talk about how you can prove to your lawyer you’re in a real relationship.” Jasmine motioned to the counter stools, and we sat down while she paced. “I think we should start with the pictures. Remember when your brother Paul was giving us all assignments at the firepit?”

Gia nodded. “I do.”

“I think I have the first bit of proof you’ll need.” Jasmine grabbed her phone and started scrolling. “My job was to take pictures and to get other people to take pictures so that you guys would get posted on social media.” She placed the phone

in front of us, and I leaned in to get a closer look. “I’ve always been serious about my work. Just look.”

Gia scrolled through the pictures, starting way back at the night I met Gia’s family. There were a lot of candid shots, including a couple of Gia and me talking at the truck. We looked... intimate, like we cared.

“I can see what you mean, Jasmine,” I said. “But I think Colton will say this was all just for show.”

She nodded. “Okay, keep scrolling.”

As we got to the pictures of Gia’s birthday party, a couple of things stood out. There were pictures of me helping Gia in and out of the truck. Me standing close, the two of us talking. Pictures taken at her cabin, when there was no public or crowd around to see us. Setting up the farmer’s market booth, the two of us always close, even when there was no one around but us.

Gia sucked in a breath and pointed at a picture of us leaving Gia’s cabin, hand in hand. “Jasmine, how did you even—”

Jasmine shrugged. “I was going to drop by one day, but then the two of you walked out of the cabin, and I snapped a picture. When Paul said I was in charge of photos, I took it to heart.”

Gia’s eyes lit up. “These are great, Jasmine. I think this will really help. They look like they could be more than ‘just for show.’” Gia kept scrolling and then she stopped. She picked up the phone and held it close, and then she shared it with me.

It was a photo of the two of us getting out of my truck, carrying bags from our secret trip to Charlotte.

“What picture are you looking at?”

Gia turned the phone toward Jasmine, and Jasmine’s hand flew up to her mouth. “Oh! I meant to delete that. Shoot! Sorry, let me—”

“It’s okay, Jasmine.” Gia chuckled. “We can explain.”

Jasmine shook her head. “You don’t have to, really. It was just another one of those things. Rose was wondering if your cabin needed fresh flowers, so I said I’d stop by and ask. When I snapped the picture I didn’t think anything of it until I got closer...” Jasmine blinked. “I should have deleted it.”

“It’s okay,” Gia said. “We took a little road trip.”

“It could be a good thing, though, right?” Jasmine said. “Because nothing says relationship like a road trip.”

“You might be right, Jasmine,” I said. “Don’t delete it. Why don’t you pick out the photos you think say relationship best. That’ll be a good start.”

Jasmine nodded. “I’ll get them all into a folder for you.”

I leaned against the counter. “Okay. What else can we do? What else could prove it’s real?”

Gia cleared her throat. “Well, there is that little conversation I had with my sister...” She cleared her throat. “And then, there’s that other thing.”



- *Gia*

I couldn't believe I was admitting it, but if it could help, I had to.

“I swear, right now, with you three staring at me, I'm more nervous than I ever have been on stage.” I took in a big breath and let it out slowly. “Hold on.”

I walked over to the bed and pulled a notebook off the side table. I flipped through a couple of pages and then handed the notebook to Jasmine. Both Quinn and Jackson looked over her shoulder as she read the lyrics.

It was a stolen moment

Never meant to be

I was caught in a whirlwind

Something, something, something...

emotions running wild, losing myself

I shouldn't be falling

It's a reckless game

Jackson's head popped up. “You wrote this since you've been here?”

I nodded and bit my lower lip.

“You wrote this about us?” he said.

I nodded again. “That’s not everything. Jasmine, turn the page and look at the title I picked for the song. It’s circled a couple of times.”

Jasmine read out loud, her finger moving down the page. “*Reckless Love*, then some scratched-out ideas. *A Love Not Meant to Be*.” Jasmine’s eyes lifted, and she gave me a soft smile. “Oh my gosh.” Her hand flew up to her chest. “You named it *This Love Is Real*.”

I nodded. “I did. It seemed fitting.” I chuckled. “And obvious.”

Jackson reached for my hand and pulled me close. “I can’t wait to hear it.” And then he whispered in my ear, “Whether it’s you singing it or someone else.” He stepped back and moved toward the door. “Come on. I’ve gotta show you something. Jasmine and Quinn, thanks. Thanks for everything. I’ve gotta take Gia—” He motioned over his shoulder. “We gotta go. I’ll text you when we get back.”

“Okay! We’ll keep brainstorming!” Jasmine called as Jackson closed the door behind us.

“Where are we headed?”

I slid into the truck and Jackson hopped in and started it up. “It’s not quite as great as that song you wrote for us, but I think it’ll help, too.”

Jackson reached for my hand.

“What the heck,” I said. “We’re not faking.” And I slid over next to Jackson and put on the middle seatbelt. Jackson

grinned and pulled out—we were definitely not faking.

Jackson drove into the Happy Springs Bar and Grill parking lot and stopped the truck.

“This is a surprise.” I motioned to the bar. “What are we doing back here?”

Jackson ducked his head. “You’re not even going to believe it.”

Chapter 38

- Jackson

There weren't many people at the bar on a Sunday evening, but when I came by earlier this morning, there were none at all.

"I can't believe I have to admit this." My stomach was tight. "I swear, I'd blush if I was the type."

There was a twinkle in Gia's eye. "Oh, this is going to be good, isn't it?"

I ducked my head and led Gia over to the outside wall, where we had done the branding the night before.

"What could you possibly be showing me today that you didn't show me last night?"

I cleared my throat. "It wasn't here last night." I pointed to Gia's brand. "There."

"What—" She moved closer and ran her hand over the 'plus' sign that she saw between the J and the G. Gia stood up straight.

"A plus sign? How did that get there? How did—"

"It was me." I rubbed the back of my neck. "I saw that J and G up there last night, and it was like I was back in junior high, scratching initials and plus signs and hearts."

"Oh my gosh, you did this?"

“Yeah.” I rubbed the back of my neck again. “I didn’t think anyone would even notice—there are so many brands on the wall.”

Gia shrugged. “Maybe no one ever would have, but I think it’s really sweet, and I love that I know.” She wrapped her arms around my waist. “I think it’ll make your lawyer happy, too.”

I held her close. “Who would have thought that acting like a lovesick teenager would be to my benefit?”

Gia grinned. “Lovesick, huh? I like how that sounds.” She pulled out her phone and opened the notes app. “I don’t want to forget to use ‘lovesick’ next time I’m writing.” She stood on her tiptoes and brushed her lips against mine. “Let me get a picture. Between my song, your plus sign, and all of Jasmine’s photos, surely, there will be enough proof.”

Gia snapped the photo, and as we were walking back to my truck, I got a text from Quinn.

Quinn: *We’re back at Mom’s. Come by the Big House when you’re done.*

Jackson: *On our way. Be there in thirty.*

I helped Gia into the truck and we headed to Quinn’s.



“Jasmine had another one of her great ideas.” Quinn was grinning from ear to ear.

“What can I say?” Jasmine shrugged. “They just come to me.” She smiled and placed a bowl of grapes and a plate of cheese and crackers on the coffee table.

“What are y’all talking about?” Gia asked. “What great idea?”

“In five, four, three, two—”

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it.” Quinn’s mom, Rose, went to the front door while Quinn and Jasmine stood there, smiling.

Gia glanced at me and I shook my head. I had no idea what was going on.

We heard a couple of different voices at the door, and in came Rose with both Denny Budd and Mr. Baumgartner.

Gia whipped around toward me and whispered, “The gossip mongers? What are they doing here?”



- Gia

Mr. Baumgartner tipped his trucker cap to Jasmine. “Jasmine.”

“Hi, Johnny. Thanks so much for coming.” Jasmine leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, and I swear, the old man blushed.

“We heard you were having some trouble verifying the legitimacy of your relationship,” stated Mr. Baumgartner. “This should help.”

Jackson gave me a look and reached for the file folder that Mr. Baumgartner handed him.

On the cover of the file was written:

Relationship Verification Case #1321 Reed vs Nyx

“What on earth...” I whispered and trailed my index finger down the page.

First Sighting: Social Media Post. Anecdotal - fake news

Second Sighting: Flower deliveries. Anecdotal – secondhand news

Third sighting: Farmer’s market. First visual.

Subjects appeared genuinely interested in each other. Touching. Laughing. Lingered looks.

Status: Relationship confirmed.

Fourth Sighting: Stop and Go. Reed's truck getting gas.

Appears to have returned from a road trip. Nyx riding up close and personal. Destination unconfirmed.

Status: Relationship ramping up.

Fifth Sighting: Branding wall event at Happy Springs Bar and Grill

Subjects appear closer than ever. Also seen with sibling of Nyx. Stakes higher when family is involved. Stolen kiss caught at side of bar. Can't fake this stuff.

Status: Hot and heavy.

Denny cleared his throat. "It's not like it's a legal document, but we think young Colton will find it compelling."

Jackson stared at Mr. Baumgartner and held up the papers. "I'd heard stories of such a thing, but I never—"

"We'd appreciate it if you keep it to yourselves." Denny looked at everyone in the room. "This isn't something we want to get around. And we know you'll have client/lawyer privilege with young Colton, so we're covered there."

My eyes teared up. "This is incredible. Look at this, Jackson. We're hot and heavy!" My smile was taking over my whole face, and I giggled. "It's also kind of crazy, but still incredible. Thank you, y'all. Thank you so much." I raised up on my tiptoes and kissed both Denny and Mr. Baumgartner on the cheek, and this time both old men blushed.

“We better head out of here. Don’t want to be late for Mrs. Baumgartner. That woman does not like to wait.”

“Thank you both for coming over,” Jasmine said. “I knew I could count on you.” She walked them to the door with Rose and said goodbye.

When they came back to the room, I threw my arms around Jasmine and then Jackson did the same.

“What even made you think of such a thing?” I asked.

Jasmine shrugged. “Those ole timers are always up to something, and they’ve been good to me since Quinn and I started dating. I knew they’d help if they could.”

Quinn huffed out a laugh. “Let’s be clear. Jasmine had them wrapped around her finger the first time she met them. They even invited her to sit at their lunch table at the diner with them!”

“Don’t forget that Johnny gave me a trucker hat.” Jasmine grinned.

I raised my eyebrows. “And that’s a big deal?”

Jackson scoffed. “The biggest.” He reached out and snagged Jasmine’s hand. “It’s like she infiltrated the group!”

Jasmine continued to smile.

“What’s next?” Rose asked. “Quinn and Jasmine got me up to speed. I wish there was something I could do to help.”

“Thanks, Rose.” Jackson wrapped his arm around Rose’s shoulder. “You’ve been a help to me since the first time I

visited this farm.”

My heart melted just a bit at the two of them.

Rose pinched Jackson’s cheek. “And you know how happy we’ve been to have you.”

My heart felt full, maybe even full to overflowing.

Jackson cleared his throat. “Next, I think it’s time to meet with Colton.”

I nodded. “I think that’s right.”

Jackson pulled out his phone. “Good thing we’re friends. I don’t think he’ll make us wait until tomorrow.”

Jackson stepped out of the room to make his call while I collapsed onto the sofa.

“I can’t believe this, Jasmine.” I laughed and picked up the file. “These guys are something else.”

“They really are something.”

Before we continued, Jackson returned to the room.

“Colton’s going to see us now. We’re going to meet him at his office.”

The room fell silent, and everyone stood up at once. “Thank you, y’all. Thank you for everything.” I grabbed Jackson’s hand in mine. “This is going to work out, I just know it.” I looked up at Jackson. “Let’s get over there. I don’t want him to think we’re not real for even one minute longer than he has to.”

“Let’s go, then.”

“Keep us posted!” Jasmine called out.

“We will!” I replied.

And we jumped into Jackson’s truck, the legacy of his farm on the line.

My stomach pitched.

This was all going to work out, wasn’t it?

And louder than I’d ever heard it before, that little voice of mine said, *Please, let this work out. Please, let this work out.*

Chapter 39

- *Gia*

Jackson couldn't sit still.

We were driving to Colton's office and he couldn't stop moving.

He opened the windows, then closed them. He turned on the AC, then he turned off the AC. I switched out of one seatbelt and moved closer, clicking on another. Then I pulled his hand from the wheel and into mine.

And he released a big breath and settled.

I understood. I felt better, too.

"You doing okay?" I asked.

Jackson chuckled. "How the tables have turned. It's usually me asking that question. I'm..." he paused, "I'm okay."

"Okay?"

"Maybe on guard."

"Apprehensive?"

"Hesitant."

"Wary!"

"Definitely that." He pulled our hands onto his lap.

I breathed in deeply. "I get that. What do you think you'll say first?"

“I’ll remind him that he saw us himself at the farmer’s market. I think that will go far.”

I nodded. “I think so, too. And no matter how crazy that file is from the ole timers, that’s worth something, too. They don’t have anything to gain by writing that up.”

“I knew they kept tabs on people,” Jackson glanced over at me, “but I wasn’t expecting documentation. Those guys are a riot.”

“Agreed. Now, hopefully, this will be enough for Colton.” I squeezed Jackson’s hand and the cab of the truck fell silent, both of us lost in our own thoughts.

We pulled up in front of an old gray farmhouse with an attorney-at-law sign in the front yard next to the sidewalk leading up to the porch.

Jackson jumped out of the truck and opened my door. We walked up to the office, hand in hand. There were large ferns at each side of the door, and a set of wicker furniture with big cushions off to the left. I suddenly wanted to sit on the furniture, not go in and see Colton. What if he didn’t believe us?

Jackson looked me in the eye, a soft smile on his face. “You ready?”

“My stomach might be turning as much as it does before I go on stage, but somehow, this feels more important than any performance.”

Jackson cupped my face with his hand and rubbed his thumb down my cheek. “But it’s not a performance... that’s the whole point.”

And it had been the point since I met him. No one made me feel more like myself than Jackson, and I was his Just Gia.

“It’s definitely not a performance.” I took in a big breath. “Let’s do this.”

Jackson pulled open the door and we walked in.



- Jackson

“Jackson, Gia, so glad you called.” Colton welcomed us into his office, and we took seats in front of his desk. We were in the room that probably used to be the living room. There was blue, pin-striped wallpaper on the walls, and a gray plush carpet under our feet. Colton’s desk was lit with a glass globe lamp. Fading sunlight filtered in through the big windows. And even though it was summer, I felt cold. I scooted my chair closer to Gia’s.

“So, you know my girlfriend’s name,” I said. “I guess that’s a good start.”

“How could I forget? I enjoyed meeting her at the farmer’s market.” He smiled at Gia, and didn’t say anything about knowing her name because she was famous—I had to respect that. “So tell me, where do you want to begin?”

I swallowed the urge to start ranting about my manipulative parents—I was smart enough to know that wouldn’t get me anywhere. “The most important thing. My grandparents’ will.”

“Of course. You said on your call you had some things you wanted to show me?”

Gia gave me a little nod. If she could get up on a stage day after day doing something she didn’t love, but doing it for those she did love, then I could do this for the grandparents I loved and the woman I was coming to love.

“The addendum to the will by my grams. Her wish for me to try to have a relationship.”

Gia reached over and placed her hand on my knee.

Colton nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, I did it. I tried. I tried to have a relationship, just like she wanted, and I’m coming in before the deadline—a full week ahead of time.”

“Of course. And now that you’re here—”

“I know when my parents set up their meeting with you, they told you it was all fake and they have proof, but we have proof it isn’t.” I nodded at Gia, and she stood and handed her phone to Colton.

“These are all pictures from the beginning of our relationship that different people captured on social media. And these are just the beginning.”

Colton flipped through the pictures and even smiled at a couple of them. “Okay, but—”

“We’ve got a few more things than that,” I said.

Gia pulled a notebook out of her bag. “This is one of my writing journals.” She flipped it open to a page that was marked with a paperclip. “You can see by the date that I wrote this song about four weeks after meeting Jackson.” Gia looked down for a moment and a touch of pink rose in her cheeks. She couldn’t have been more beautiful in that moment had she tried.

“If you turn the page, you’ll see the title of the song I chose on that same day.”

Colton read over the lyrics and then turned the page. His eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. He smiled at the two of us. “Thank you. There’s one thing that—”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Just a couple more.” I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to ease the creeping tension. “This is juvenile, but...” Gia pulled up her photos again and flipped to the picture of her brand on the wall at Happy Springs. “After we branded the wall last night, I drove back to the bar and added a plus sign.”

Colton’s forehead furrowed. “A plus sign?”

Gia jumped in. “Jackson gave me a branding iron for my birthday that I could use for the branding event at the bar. He knew I wouldn’t want to steal the show at the bar or even on the wall, so instead of gifting me a brand about Gia Nyx, the brand was for the nickname he gave me, Just Gia.”

Colton interrupted, “He gave you a nickname?”

“Well, yeah.” Gia ducked her head and gave a shy smile. “It was easy to explain the initials because my grandmother’s name was Jean, and she played a big part in my life. So the J and the G made sense.”

I lowered my hand to my side. “I turned into a kid again when I saw those initials up on that wood wall. Our initials, J for Jackson and G for Gia. It was like all I could see was a big old oak tree with carved initials in it. I drove over there this

morning and added a plus sign.” Heat rose to my face. I shook my head. “It’ll be clear when you see it.”

Gia gave me a soft smile and I handed her phone to Colton.

Colton coughed and raised his hand to his mouth when he saw the picture, and it was clear he was covering up his laughter. I appreciated the attempt.

His eyes were practically sparkling when he handed the phone back to me. “You’re right. Now that I see it, I get it. I wanted to say—”

“Let me get this all out. Here’s the last thing.” I slid the file from the ole timers/gossip mongers across his desk.

“Ah!” he said. “You’ve got an official file from the ole timers. This bodes well.”

“You’ve seen one of these before?” Gia’s voice raised in question.

“I have. But I can’t share with you in what manner.”

“Son of a gun,” I muttered. Quinn and Jasmine were going to love hearing that.

Colton opened the file and read through the document, and this time he couldn’t cover his laugh.

“Let me guess,” I said, deadpan, “you just got to the status of hot and heavy.”

“You nailed it.” Colton was grinning from ear to ear. “So, is that everything you wanted to share?”

I sat back in my seat and took Gia's hand in mine. "It is. That's everything. Surely, that's all you need."

"Colton, I know you don't know me, but you know Jackson," Gia said. "He would never lie to you." She glanced away, then back. "From the beginning, he said he would try. I was the one who suggested it be fake, and I was the one who wrote the stupid thing down. But he always wanted to try."

Colton canted his head to the side. "Thank you, Gia, that means a lot." He opened up a file sitting on his desk and pulled out an envelope. Immediately, I recognized my grandmother's handwriting

I leaned forward. "Is that another note from my grandmother?"

Colton nodded. "I was trying to tell you, but you were insistent."

"Tell me what?"

"Your grandmother left instructions for me to contact you at the one-year mark of her passing, or when you came in to see me, if the timing was close." Colton placed the envelope in front of me on the desk. "Why don't you read that over? I'm going to step out to give you a minute. Would either of you like anything to drink?"

I shook my head distractedly while I ripped open the envelope. My gaze raced down the page, and I was laughing before I got to the end. I shook my head while tears gathered behind my eyes.

“What is it?” Gia stood. “I’ll take it as a good sign that you’re laughing?”

“Here. Read this.” I gathered Gia into my arms and sat back with her in my lap.

“Dear Jacks,” she read...

Well, here we are again.

And because I know you, I know you tried. And that was all we really wanted, for you to give love a chance.

I am so sorry we got all high-handed on you and forced you into something you hadn’t chosen for yourself, but we had to take the chance. And if you found love, then you will think so, too.

If for some reason you didn’t find love, I am glad you tried. But I also think if you tried, then surely, you found it—no one could resist you, Jacks, of that, I am sure.

Regardless, the farm is yours. Whether you found love or not, tried to find love or not, no matter what you did or didn’t do, the farm is yours—it always has been yours.

I knew that nothing would motivate you like the threat of the farm going to your parents, but it will never happen. It can never happen. The farm is yours. All yours.

Forgive us, Jacks. We only wanted you to have the love we were lucky enough to have. We hope you found her. She’ll be so lucky.

Thank you for being who you are, and for being what you were to us.

We love you.

Grams and Gramps

Gia threw her arms around me and buried her face in the crook of my neck. “I *am* so lucky,” she choked out.

I gently pulled her away from me so I could look her in the eyes. “I’m the lucky one, Gia. Me.”

I brushed my lips against hers as Colton walked into the room. Gia hopped off my lap and shot into her seat, wiping under her eyes as she did so.

Colton chuckled. “I have no doubt in my mind that what the two of you have going on is real.” He motioned to the note in my hand. “Your grandparents would be so happy. And as you see, the farm is yours.”

I stood and shook his hand. “Thanks, man. Really, thanks.”

“Of course.”

“So, we can just go?”

He nodded. “Yep.”

Gia and I both stood. “Thank you, Colton,” Gia said. “Thank you for this.”

We were almost at the door when it occurred to me. “Wait. What will you tell my parents?”

Colton frowned. “I can’t discuss clients with you...” He cleared his throat. “But I can say that anyone who is trying to

lay claim to your land won't have a chance.”

I chuckled. “That'll be something to see.” I turned to Gia.
“You good?”

“I'm great. Let's go.”

Gia gave a little wave to Colton, and I closed the door behind us. I hadn't taken two steps when she launched herself at me, jumping up into my arms and wrapping her legs around my waist. The kiss she laid on me almost made me stumble, but I caught myself.

And I swear I heard Colton laugh through the door.

Chapter 40

- *Gia*

As soon as I'd gotten into the truck, Jackson pulled me close, making sure I was sitting right next to him, my hand clasped securely in his. We were quiet the whole ride back to Quinn's farm, neither of us talking, but my hand felt right in his and the silence was comfortable.

Jackson put the truck into park and turned to me. "We've got some things to figure out, yeah?"

I smiled. "Yeah, we do. But we will."

He nodded. "Yeah, we will. Let's go inside and give them the news."

I reached out before he pulled away. "Jackson?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you've got your farm. I'm glad you've got—" I wanted to say *me*, but it would be more honest to say I was glad I got *him*. "I'm just glad."

That dimple of his twinkled, and he leaned down and gave me a quick kiss. "Me, too."

We slipped out of the truck and inside the house where Quinn, Jasmine, and Rose were waiting. We filled them in on everything, and they were as shocked as we were that the will request to try to find love was just a ploy and that the farm was never in danger.

“That was so devious!” Jasmine exclaimed with a twinkle in her deep brown eyes. “And ingenious. Without it, Jackson would never have tried.”

I lifted my shoulder and let it fall. “Would it be wrong to say I’m glad he waited?”

Jackson chuckled and pulled me close to his side. He leaned down and brushed his lips against my ear and whispered, “Who knew that all along, I was waiting for you?”

Goosebumps broke out over my arms and raced down my spine, and I wrapped my arm around his waist, holding him closer.

“It’s late, and I’m sure you missed dinner,” Rose said. “Let me get something together for you two.”

Jackson looked at me. “I’m in if you are.”

I nodded. “That would be great. I’m starving. Thanks, Rose.”

“Of course. I’ll get that together.”

We followed Rose back into the kitchen, and Jackson and I took seats at the counter. Quinn pulled out the water pitcher while Jasmine grabbed glasses.

“I knew Jasmine was on to something when she wanted to get the ole timers involved.” Quinn poured water into the glasses. “Those guys are sneaky buzzards.”

“I had no idea they’d have official reports!” Jasmine leaned against the counter. “What do you think, they have a secret

room where they meet and gather their intel? I honestly thought they just hung out at the diner.”

“Quinn and I had heard rumors over the years that they do more than gossip, but I don’t think either of us expected this level of detail and organization.” Jackson reached for a water glass and pulled it in front of me, then did the same for himself. “There were case numbers. We were something like thirteen hundred. That’s a serious amount of intel.”

Rose laughed. “They were gossips all the way back in high school, but even I didn’t know how serious they’d gotten.” She slipped plates in front of both Jackson and me.

“Thank you, Rose. This looks incredible.” I eyed the chicken and dumplings on my plate and reached for the pepper shaker.

“Eat up. You both need it.”

I took a big bite and moaned. “This is incredible. Tastes like home.”

And the thought of this place as home raced through my mind.

Could it be?



- Jackson

I bit my lip to keep my smile from taking over my face. Rose's cooking always tasted like home to me, too. Could I convince Gia that she could make this place—this town—a home for her, too?

We finished eating and then helped clean up.

“Gia looks like she's about dead on her feet,” Jasmine said, and she leaned into Quinn.

Gia gave me a small smile. “I am. I really am.”

“Let me get you back to your cabin.”

We hugged everyone good night, and my chest filled with warmth watching Gia love the people I loved.

Gia slipped into her seat, and I had barely pulled out before she said, “So, about us...”

I raised my brows. “About us...”

I was holding my breath. A lot had happened in such a short time, but I wanted Gia in my life. In my future.

“How do you think this is going to work?” Gia pulled her hair over her shoulder. “You're here. I'm in Nashville...”

I pulled up in front of her cabin. “What you are is exhausted. How about you get some sleep. We can pick this up tomorrow.”

Gia gave me a small smile. “You’re right. We’ve got tomorrow.”

I jumped out of the truck and helped Gia down, then walked her up her steps. She fell against the door and closed her eyes in a slow blink. I slipped the key out of her fingers and opened the door for her, then helped her inside. Gia collapsed onto the sofa in a heap.

“You going to bed soon?” I glanced around the room, suddenly not sure what to do with myself. “Is there anything I can do before I go?” Because I didn’t want to go.

Gia pulled herself up and wrapped her arms around my waist, leaning her head against my chest. I leaned down and pressed my lips to the top of her head and held them there. After a moment, she pulled away.

“We’ll figure this out. All of it. You and me, your parents, *my* parents.” She looked up into my eyes. “Now you go get yourself some sleep, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I dropped a kiss on her lips and stepped toward the door. “I’ve got a couple of things I need to take care of with my team tomorrow, but I could come over for lunch if that would work?”

“I’ll ask Rose for lunch here, then.”

I nodded, hating every moment of leaving. “Goodnight, Just Gia.”

“Good night, no longer Mystery Man.”

I smiled and closed the door behind me.

I knew we had a lot in front of us to figure out, and none of it was going to be easy, but even so, tomorrow couldn't get here soon enough.

Chapter 41

- Jackson

“Let me get the door for you,” I said to Rose as she approached, and I jogged up the steps. I knocked on Gia’s door and within moments, I heard her flip the lock. She opened the door wide, and I stepped back to let Rose pass.

“Hi, you two. Thank you for bringing lunch, Rose,” Gia said. “It’s been so nice to hide away in this cabin when I need to, and I still get your great cooking.”

Rose pulled out a handful of covered dishes and placed them on the counter. “Everything is cold today, so you can eat it now or refrigerate it for later, whatever you need.”

I kissed Rose on the cheek. “Thanks, Rose.”

“You kids have fun.” She gave a little wave and closed the door behind her.

“Do you want to eat now, or...” Gia’s words disappeared, and her cheeks flushed.

“Were you thinking of something else?” I grinned and stepped closer.

“I was.” She hooked her arms around my waist, and I leaned down to kiss her, just the barest of touches.

“I was too,” I whispered before taking the kiss deeper.

We broke apart, both of us a bit breathless, and I leaned my forehead against hers. “Time for that talk?”

“Yep.”

Gia slid her hand down my arm and laced her fingers with mine. We sat on the sofa and Gia turned toward me, lifting her knee onto the cushion to get closer. “The next year is still going to be crazy, even if I get up the guts to transition from touring. I have so many commitments and obligations, and as soon as I really start thinking about everything...” She tapered off, then squared her shoulders. “I want to do this, Jackson. Like your grandmother said, I want to try. But you’re here, and I’m there...” Gia threw her hands up. “It seems pointless.”

My stomach hollowed. “Don’t give up on me now, Gia. It won’t be pointless. It won’t. I think you’re a woman who can do anything she puts her mind to. So, please. Just...” I took in a big breath. “Just put your mind to me.”

Gia smiled. “As though I’ve done anything else since the day we met.”

I reached out and took her hand. “Okay. But before we get to us, let’s not gloss over another important thing you said. That whole whatever you put your mind to bit applies here as well. Did you just say, getting up the guts to transition from touring?”

My stomach clenched when I asked her the question. I’d put something into motion that I would have to back out of fast if Gia wasn’t going to go through with her plans.

Gia slumped against the back of the sofa. “Lindsey overheard us the other night. She overheard us talking about me giving up singing.”

“It didn’t go well?” That couldn’t be the case.

“I never meant for her to overhear, so that wasn’t great. But after she got over the shock, and much like you, she only wanted me to be happy. She was pretty miffed that I hadn’t shared any of it with her as it was going on.”

I relaxed. “That’s what I’d expect from what I know of your family.”

She bit her lip. “I was so scared. I’m still so afraid to disappoint them.”

I reached out and traced my thumb down her cheek. “They’ll only be disappointed at the thought of missing your beautiful voice, but that’s it. They’ll get used to it after a little time. They’ll want you to be happy, too.”

She reached up and held my hand in hers, then turned and kissed my palm.

“Okay.” She nodded once. “I’ve just got to figure out when to tell them. I guess I could when I get back to Nashville, but I’m only there for like, two days before I leave again. I don’t even know how I could fit it in.” She shook her head. “Enough about that. How about us?”

I reached around the back of my neck. “It’ll probably be a little sooner than that.”

“What will?”

“When you talk to your family... Lindsey called me this morning.”

Gia's head pulled back. "She did? Whatever for?"

"She was worried about you—that you'd been carrying around this big decision on your own. She thought getting the talk over with would be the best thing for you. She wanted to know what I thought, and I agreed. She was going to call you today and see if you'd do a group video chat with your family, so you could get it over with."

Gia shook her head. "You mean I can't put this thing off for forever?"

I chuckled. "Not if you mean it."

"I mean it. And she's right." She sighed. "Better to rip off the band-aid. I'll call her when you leave. Now." She slapped her hands down on her legs. "Are you trying to avoid the conversation of us?"



- *Gia*

My stomach tensed. Surely, he wasn't trying to avoid us.

"I'm not. I'm more than happy to talk about us."

My breath left me in a whoosh. "Good. That's good. I have an eight-week leg of touring as soon as I get back, so I'm not sure what we could even plan."

"And I'm in the thick of wedding season, so these next couple of months are big for me, too."

I gave him a soft smile. "Maybe it'll be good that we'll both be busy. Time flies, right? When do things slow down for you?" I ran my hands through my hair. "Because it's pretty much busy for me the whole next year."

"I guess I'll have to figure out a way to come to you, then."

"I love the sound of that. But how?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I might be able to figure something out."

"Something that allows you to leave the place you just fought for, tooth and nail, for extended visits? You've basically been fighting for this place your whole life. And now you're going to walk away from it?" I felt my face pale and I jumped off the sofa. "Jackson, this is crazy. I've ruined a lot of people's dreams, and I'm not going to ruin your dream, too!"

He stood and took my face in his hands. “You didn’t ruin anyone’s dreams—we’ve been over this—and I’m sure your sister agreed.”

I gave a little nod.

“You won’t be ruining mine.” He chuckled. “Gia, if I have you... don’t you know I’ll never need another dream again?”

I shook my head. “But the farm... it’s all you’ve ever wanted.”

“Yes,” he said, “until you. Now I want you. We can make this work.”

My eyes filled with tears, and he leaned down and met his lips with mine.

“Now, stop thinking of yourself as some kind of big, bad, dream killer. That’s not what you are. And do I seem like the kind of guy who gives up on what he wants? I want you, and I want the flower farm. I’ll figure out a way to have them both.”

He brought me back down to the sofa, pulling my legs over his.

Jackson ran his hand up my leg. “I think there are a couple of months that I could be in Nashville, like in January and February. Maybe more. I could work something out with my team. And you don’t have to always be in Nashville when you go in this new direction, right? You could split time between the two places.” He chuckled. “I know I’m running away with the idea of us when we’ve barely had any time together, but

I'd like to know there's a possibility. A hope. Maybe even a plan."

I cocked my head to the side. "Your flower farm does a big enough business that you can just disappear for long stretches of time, and your paid team can cover it? That's some business."

Jackson paused. "That's not exactly how it would work."

"How would it work, then?"

"The farm is self-sustaining. But you're right, for me to travel to see you or to travel with you sometimes, missing out on a lot of the work here is going to take something else. That's going to take... that's going to take..." He couldn't choke it out.

"It's going to take what?"

He threw his hands up. "My trust fund."

I was not expecting that. "You have a trust fund?"

"Don't you know?" His tone was dripping in sarcasm. "All the rich kids have trust funds. And if my parents wanted to be in with the rich crowd, then their kid would have to have one, too." He massaged the back of his neck. "You should have heard them sitting around, talking about it, making sure they were keeping up with all their 'we're rich like you' friends."

"Are you telling me you're rich, Jackson Reed?"

"No! I mean, I'm not. They were rich. I've never touched it, not one penny. I'm not rich."

“But it’s yours.”

“Yes.”

“And they can’t use it?”

“No. Apparently, the real wealthy people make that a stipulation to prove they’re so rich, they’ll never need it.” He rolled his eyes.

I took in a big breath. This was about to get interesting.
“Jackson, I think you might be rich.”

“I’m not,” he scoffed. “I’m nothing like them. They’re horrible, manipulative, untrustworthy people.”

I threw my hands up. “I’m rich! Is that why you were so weird about my ten-thousand-dollar comment about taking out my crew after shows?” It made so much sense! “Is that what you think of me?”

“What? No!” He was shocked. “Never! You’re the complete opposite. You’re nothing like them—not how you act, not how you talk, not how you treat your family, nothing.”

“It’s the same for you! *You* are nothing like them! Not in how you act, not in how you talk, and not in how you treat your friends you have turned into your family.”

He narrowed his eyes, not convinced in the slightest.

“You are literally rich, whether you have touched that money or not. The fact that you haven’t is even more proof that you won’t be anything like them.” I placed my hand over his. “Money doesn’t make you bad, Jackson—money makes you

more of what you already are. You're a good, honest, loyal man, and more money will only highlight that."

He bit the corner of his lower lip. "But all that money... It could—"

"This is starting to get funny. You already have all that money. And look at you. Just take a good look at yourself. There is no way you could be a part of these people and this community if you weren't a good man. They wouldn't have it." I grinned. "Imagine the file the gossip mongers would have on you if you were a big jerk. And I'm positive they don't have that file."

He chuckled. "If they did, I'd sure like to see it."

I squeezed his hand. "You're nothing like them, Jackson. That's the last thing you need to worry about."

He shook his head. "Breaking into that trust fund is going to be hard to do. Not using it has been a point of pride and I've thrown that fact in their faces over the years. I knew how much it would bug them that the money was piling up, and they couldn't get to it."

"They won't have to know anything has changed."

He nodded. "You're right. It's not like I share anything with them. If it helps me keep the farm and keep you..."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Worth it. Totally worth it."

I leaned in. "We're going to do this, aren't we?"

“Yeah, we are.”

I twisted my hands in my lap and then used the words he had just used. “So, I’m going to run away with the idea of us for a minute, too.” I inhaled and let it out slowly. “I know how you feel about marriage—”

His hand came up to my cheek. “Gia. I don’t think anything I used to think or feel will be the same now that I’m with you.”

My heart settled, and Jackson’s lips met mine. “You good?” he asked.

“I’m good.” I smiled.

“So, you’ve got to talk to your parents, and I’ve got to talk to mine. I’ll be very clear on how this whole famous thing is going to work for us and for them. And how I’ll publicly state we’re estranged if they don’t adhere to our wishes.”

“I know how private you are, Jackson. I’m sorry about all of that.”

He lifted my fingers and kissed the back of my hand. Looking deep into my eyes, he murmured, “Worth it.”

Chapter 42

- *Gia*

“So your parents were really okay?” Jasmine placed a piece of corn on the cob on her plate and passed the platter to Quinn. After the previous big night of conversation with my family, I was finally relaxed enough to finish sharing the rest of the story.

“They were. They were so good.” I had to swallow down the lump of emotion that formed in my throat. “I don’t know how I got it so wrong in my head. They were just... great.”

“My parents were great about the clinic, too, remember, Quinn?” Jasmine reached for the butter. “Sometimes we don’t give them enough credit.”

Rose cleared her throat. “I feel like as the representative parent in the room, and on behalf of all parents everywhere, I will heartily agree with that sentiment.”

Under his breath, Jackson said, “All *good* parents.” And I leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Gia, tell them the best part,” Jackson said. “About Paul.”

“Y’all...” I laughed, “that brother of mine. As soon as I told them Jackson and I were doing this whole relationship for real, he started jumping up and down like a crazy person. He was running around the room, waving his arms over his head like he was Kevin McCallister in *Home Alone*.” I pointed my fork at both Jasmine and Quinn. “But y’all would know this

because you were in on it. So was everyone at my birthday party!”

Jasmine tried to keep the smile off her face but couldn't. She blinked several times, attempting to portray innocence. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“You do, too! The bet! The bet that Paul set up, that our relationship wouldn't end up fake. That Jackson and I would fall in—” I cut myself off and reached for my water glass. I took a big gulp. Everyone at the table had their eyebrows raised.

Jackson chuckled. “Want to finish that sentence, Just Gia?”

I shook my head. “Nope. No, I do not.” I took another drink and felt the heat rising to my face. “He bet everyone we would be real before it was all said and done. And I think he made a pretty penny, mostly from the Idaho newcomers. They couldn't figure out how we'd manage the whole long-distance thing, except for reality-TV-watching Tiny. He had us pegged from the start.”

“And Paul said he's going to take a trip to Idaho someday to hang out with his new friends with his winnings,” Jackson said. “Apparently, he's serious about becoming a cowboy.”

I laughed. “Lindsey and I were just talking about that! He brought it up so many times when he was here.”

“Chef Mike didn't bet against you, did he?” Jasmine asked. “He's practically a matchmaker himself, with his cooking classes. That's how Ellie and James met. They have such a

great story, with Ellie taking in EB, and James being there to help make it happen. You'll have to ask them about it next time you see them."

I smiled. "I'll definitely do that."

"Did anyone else bet against you?" Quinn asked.

"Dad did." I chuckled. "But not for any real reason. He just said no one was good enough for his daughter."

Jackson nodded. "I have to agree with him, but I'm going to try my hardest."

I gave Jackson a big smile. "Don't worry, Jackson. You're not going to have to work that hard."

And he wouldn't.

I already knew the man was plenty good enough for me.



- *Jackson*

“The conversation with my parents went... differently.”

Gia reached over and pulled my hand into hers.

“I told them Gia’s fame was not up for manipulation. That we’d allow them one afternoon to spend time with us, whenever we figure out when that might be. And they can talk about that day and post pictures and whatever else they want to do, in relation to *that day*. But if, in the future, they say anything else, imply anything else, do anything that uses Gia in any way that we don’t approve of, we’ll publicly state that we’re estranged from them and to not believe anything they say about the two of us.”

I released a long breath. “Funnily enough, it might be the best adult conversation I’ve ever had with them. They think Gia is valuable, and they don’t want to lose that opportunity.” I shrugged. “I don’t care, as long as it keeps them in line.”

“Holy cow, Jackson.” Quinn set down his fork. “Those two are real characters, aren’t they?”

“That’s one way to put it,” I muttered. I snagged a biscuit off the platter in the middle of the table. “I spoke their language—nothing makes them happier than a negotiation. So everything was in terms they would understand, with Gia and me holding all the cards.”

Gia leaned against my shoulder. “Tell them about the grandkids.”

Jasmine’s eyes popped open wide, Quinn choked on a drink of water, and Rose smiled.

I grinned. “Gia had the great idea of holding the thought of any future grandkids as ransom. Like, if we were to have kids one day, we’d cut them out completely if my parents did anything we didn’t approve of. And that sealed the deal.”

Jasmine’s forehead scrunched. “I have to say, I’m surprised they care.”

“Oh, they don’t care.” I waved my hand. “They only care about how it looks, and the last thing they want is for Gia and me to be talking about what bad grandparents they are... not good for their image, you know.” I couldn’t help it, I grinned. “It was a stroke of genius.”

Rose cleared her throat. “Even if it’s all a ploy, again, as the representative parent, I like the discussion of grandkids, even in the hypothetical.”

Jasmine grinned, Quinn took a quick bite of corn, and I smiled at Gia.

I had to admit, when it came to Gia, it didn’t sound so bad to me, either.

Chapter 43

- Gia - Two Days Later

“You don’t find it kind of suspect that the ole timers want to see the two of us?”

Jasmine and I walked up to the Wrangler Diner at seven in the morning. The ole timers said there was no chance any paparazzi would be up at that hour to harass me, and I had to agree with them.

“Not exactly suspect, but I’m curious, for sure,” Jasmine replied. She straightened the trucker cap on her head. “Nothing else would have me up and out this early. I’m not a farmer, thank goodness—they have crazy hours.” She pulled open the door. “We’re just going to have to hear what they have to say.”

There were a couple of people leaving the diner, and a few were enjoying breakfast at tables. Definitely no paparazzi. The ole timers were at a table to the left, and Jasmine led me right to them.

“Ladies.” Mr. Baumgartner stood and pulled out chairs for the two of us.

“Gentlemen,” Jasmine said, and sat down.

“Hello, everyone.” I pulled my chair close and looked around the table. I didn’t know everyone by name, but I’d seen them all at least once over the time I’d been in Henryville Township.

“Let’s get right to the point, shall we?” Denny Budd pulled out a small notebook.

Mr. Baumgartner placed his elbows on the table. “We’d like to informally invite the two of you to be part of our group.”

My eyes widened and I glanced at Jasmine. She looked as shocked as I felt.

Jasmine flipped her coffee cup over and reached for the coffee carafe at the end of the table. “And what do you mean, by that.” She paused. “Exactly.”

Mr. Baumgartner leaned back in his chair. “I’m sure Gia here,” he nodded toward me, “told you about the file we had on her and Jackson.”

Jasmine nodded slowly. “She did.”

“Then it’s no surprise that our little group here likes to keep up on what’s going on in the community. We’d like to ask the two of you, if a situation arises, to throw a little information our way. Jasmine, we know you’ve never met a stranger, which can come in handy when we’re trying to drill down on the facts of a situation.”

Denny cleared his throat. “And Ms. Nyx, here... Gia, she’s got access to a whole world outside our little town. You never know when that info might be needed.”

“We may have to open a whole ‘nother division,” Mr. Del Vechhio said.

“That’s a great idea, Dale. I’ll be sure that’s a discussion point on our next agenda.” Denny wrote in his notebook.

I was a bit dumbstruck, so I looked at Jasmine for guidance.

Jasmine coughed and then patted her chest. “So you want us to help you gather... intel? Like spies?” Jasmine began to grin, and I could see she was taking a liking to the whole spy idea.

“If it helps to think of it as spying, then sure.” Mr. Baumgartner shrugged. “We like to think of it as *community enrichment*.”

I hadn't said a word since we sat down, but I couldn't let that remark go by. “In what way?”

“We're here to help, Gia. Like we helped you and Jackson.”

“What?” I leaned forward in my seat. “That's why you do all this? The status reports and the case files?”

“Exactly. You'd be surprised how often our detailed reports have been put to good use.” He gave me a grin. “You didn't think we were just a bunch of old gossips, now, did you?” He winked at me. The man actually winked at me.

And Jasmine and I burst out laughing.



Jasmine and I waved out the window to the ole timers as we pulled away from the diner.

Jasmine turned the radio down a bit. “Never in a million years did I expect that to happen.”

“Me, neither. And what about how kindly Mr. Baumgartner put me in my place. ‘We're not just gossips, you know.’”

Jasmine laughed. “Oh my gosh, we’ve been giving them such a bad rap.”

“When Jackson and I were with the lawyer, he didn’t blink twice when we handed him our file from them. He totally said he’d seen their reports before.”

Jasmine shook her head. “And here they are, actually doing people in the community some good. Who would’ve thought? I—”

I interrupted Jasmine, “Hey, isn’t that Grace from Happy Springs Bar and Grill?” Grace and her sisters and brother had made an impression on me the night we branded the wall at their bar, and I was excited to see her. “Pull over. I’d love to say hi.”

Jasmine pulled her car into a small parking lot where a farmer was selling produce out of his truck. He was helping Grace place some bags into the trunk of her car.

Grace glanced up when we parked, and then did a double take. She put her hand up on the trunk as if to close it when the farmer said, “Just a second. I’ve got a couple more.”

We popped out of Jasmine’s car, and she hurried toward us.

“Hey, y’all,” she said and glanced over her shoulder. “What all are you doing?”

“Hi,” I said. “We were just leaving The Wrangler and wanted to stop and say hello. We had so much fun at your bar branding the other night I wanted to thank you again.”

“Quinn and I were sorry to have missed it,” Jasmine added.

The farmer closed the trunk of Grace's car, and she glanced back over her shoulder. He waved his hand. "That's all of 'em. I hope to have some even hotter ones in a couple of days, so check back with me."

Grace nodded and waved, then turned back toward us with a big smile on her face. A big, *fake* smile, it looked to me. *Interesting.*

Jasmine tilted her head. "Getting something for the bar?"

"Yeah, yep... the bar." Grace nodded and clapped her hands.

"So, it's hot?" Jasmine asked.

Grace's eyes got big. "What's hot?"

Jasmine motioned to Grace's car. "The farmer said he'd have even hotter ones in a couple of days."

"Oh, right, yeah. Just this thing we're doing."

"For the bar." Jasmine nodded.

Grace gave us a tight smile. "Yep, for the bar." She clapped her hands again. "I hate to dash, but I've gotta..."

"Get back to the bar?" I said, a smile playing on my face.

Grace let out a small sigh. "Yeah." She reached out and gave me a quick hug. "It was great to see you again, Gia. I hope we see more of you around here." She gave Jasmine a brief hug, too, then jumped in her car and pulled out.

I looked at Jasmine. "That was totally weird, right?"

Jasmine laughed. "Totally." She pulled open her car door. "Come on, let's get you back to The Farm."

We hopped into the car, and Jasmine said, “What do you th
—”

“Just a sec, Jasmine.” I reached for the radio and turned it up. “I think I heard my name.”

“...will be opening for country singer royalty, Harper Black, for the last two months of her American tour this winter. This will be the hottest ticket in the country, folks. Hard enough to get to see Harper, but throw Gia Nyx into the mix, this show will be on fire! Don’t forget you heard it here first, on Today’s Country!” My song, “Wildflower Sisters” began to play. I turned down the radio and faced Jasmine.

“Where do you think Jackson is, right this minute?”

Jasmine shot me a look. “My guess, in one of his flower fields.”

“Can you take me there?”

She nodded once. “Should I ask?”

I closed my eyes and leaned back in my seat. “It sounds worse than it is, and I’d like to tell Jackson first, if that’s okay.”

“Of course.” She glanced my way and then back to the road. “Whatever it is, it’ll be okay.”

I nodded.

I sure hoped so.



- *Jackson*

I had to get to my truck.

I could call her, but I had to see her face. I had to—

Jasmine pulled into my driveway, and Gia flew out of the car. I watched Jasmine slowly pull away.

“Jackson! Thank goodness, you’re right here.”

I stopped, my hand on the truck handle. I wanted to run to her, but after what I just heard... My mind raced over our weeks together, the times she said I saved her, the deeply personal conversations, the fun, the ease we had just being together. And she was adding more tour dates? Like what we had just discussed didn’t matter? Like she didn’t need me at all?

She threw her arms around my waist, and my arms went around her back like they were on autopilot. *How could they not?* This was Gia.

She looked up at me. “You heard, didn’t you?”

I nodded. I couldn’t do anything else.

“It’s not at all what you think... and it was never supposed to be announced so soon.”

“So, you’re not adding more touring to your schedule?”
Tension crept up my neck and I felt tight all over.

She dropped her arms and took a step back. “No, I am. But not because I want to do more touring.”

My eyes narrowed. “And yet, it sounds exactly like what you’re doing.”

Gia shook her head. “No, the timing is wrong. You’re getting the timing wrong. I’d agreed to this months ago, but it’s been top secret. The lead singer of Harper’s opening band is pregnant, so they won’t be able to finish the tour—but they also weren’t ready to talk about the pregnancy yet—so I agreed to take her place. If you look at my personal calendar, you’ll see it’s already in there. It’s been there all along. It’s one of the reasons I keep saying my schedule is going to be so crazy.”

Relief rushed through me. This was Gia, after all—she had given me no reason not to trust her. I shook out my hands. It might take me some time, but I could get there—I could learn to trust. The fact that she came right to me was proof enough. I took off my hat and ran my hand through my hair. “We really need to sync up our schedules. That announcement threw me.” I placed my hat back on my head.

Gia smiled and wrapped her arms around me again. “Couldn’t bear for me to be away for another eight weeks?”

I pulled her close. “You’re not even gone yet, and already, I can’t bear for you to be away.”

Gia twined her fingers with mine. “Come on, Mystery Man, I want to tell you all about it.” She pulled me toward my grandparents’ house—*my* house. “Then we can look over our

calendars and get our first visits down. One little tour isn't going to be the end of us."

I stopped and pulled Gia to me. Her gaze snapped to mine. "I don't want anything to be the end of us, Gia. I want to figure this out, beyond the tours, beyond the next year. Whatever it takes." My heart was pounding so hard, it might burst from my chest. "I'm pretty sure you stopped yourself from saying it the other night at dinner, so I'll say it now. I'm falling in love with you, and I don't want to stop."

Gia gave me that beautiful smile of hers. "I won't if you won't."

"Deal." And then, I kissed her.

We walked into my house, and I looked around it with a new perspective. This was my home. But I had a funny feeling that home would be wherever Gia was, and that was just where I wanted to be.

Epilogue - One Day Later

- *Grace*

When Chef Mike said this was an opportunity of a lifetime, I took him at his word, but it was feeling a little like a slow death. There was so much to do at the bar, I couldn't believe I'd taken this on. I could only hope it wasn't going to be a big, costly mistake.

I pulled on my rubber gloves and carefully placed the ghost peppers into a brown paper bag. All I had done was move the peppers from the plastic sack that Luis Ramirez had given me to the paper bag so they would keep until the weekend, and I already felt the spiciness in my eyes and at the back of my throat. How did someone eat these things?

I rolled down the top of the bag, slipped it into the industrial refrigerator, and then collapsed against the door. In a couple of days, I should be able to pick up the hotter peppers, the Carolina Reaper.

Luis had told me about the Reapers when I called him. I wanted to apologize for basically ditching him in the parking lot yesterday when Gia and Jasmine showed up. It was so awkward. They knew I was lying to them—not *lying* necessarily, but avoiding their questions. I'd never been a very good liar.

It's not like I could come out and tell them about the secret charity event Chef Mike hosted every year. I had to sign a non-disclosure, for goodness' sake, just to have the conversation.

I pushed off the refrigerator and moved into the bar, grabbing a soda from the tap. People knew about the event, but they didn't really know about it. Apparently, the non-disclosure did its job.

Every year, Chef Mike hosted a charity golf tournament weekend between the Carolina pro hockey and pro football teams. Where and when it was held was strictly confidential. The rumor was it raised tons of money, purely off a bunch of super competitive guys who had a bunch of money and spent the whole weekend one-upping each other, all for a good cause. At least there was the good cause part. I just wanted our bar to get in on the bunch of money part.

“Hey, sister, what's going on?” My sister Maddy walked into the bar and pulled up a chair. “You finish up with the peppers?”

I pushed away my glass. “For now. Just don't touch the brown bag in the fridge. Those things are deadly.”

“Not a chance. Red Hots candies are too hot for me, I can't even imagine those peppers.” She pulled my glass toward her and took a sip. “But Ethan agrees with Chef Mike—he said that whoever can eat the most hot peppers without taking a drink is exactly the kind of thing a bunch of hyper-competitive guys would bet on.”

I shook my head. “I know. I YouTubed it. Having our food truck there is one thing, but having other things the guys can bet on is doing me in. I’d never waste my money on a stupid bet, so I’m having a hard time coming up with other ideas.”

Maddy tapped the table and stood. “Sophia and Ethan should be here soon—we’ll come up with something.”

I pushed back from the table and kicked my feet up. “Mind if I just sit here ‘til they do?”

“Nope. I’ve got a couple of things to check on in the office. Come and get me when they’re here.”

I nodded and closed my eyes.

“Oh, hey.”

My eyes popped open. “Yeah?”

“Pretty cool meeting Gia and her sister the other night.”

“It was,” I said. “They seemed nice, and Jackson seemed happy.”

“Think of all the other famous people we’ll meet at the tournament.”

“Yeah, just think...” I muttered and grabbed the glass of soda off the table. There was no way I would be able to rest now. I’d been doing so good *not* thinking about one specific famous person in particular.

If the hot peppers or this event didn’t kill me, then seeing him just might.

Three months later

- Jackson

She wasn't even on stage yet, and the place was already going wild.

My heart pounded in my chest, and I couldn't wipe the smile from my face. My cheeks actually hurt, I was grinning so big.

Being offstage at one of the biggest country music concerts in the nation was everything it was cracked up to be. I peered around the side curtains to get a glimpse of the stadium. There wasn't an empty seat in the place, and every single person was on their feet.

The stomping of the feet had started about ninety seconds ago, and I was beginning to think the stadium wouldn't be able to handle the force of it. The floor I was standing on began to rock, and the percussion from the fans screaming and stomping reverberated through my whole body.

According to Gia, it had been like this every night of her eight-week gig with Harper Black.

I could blame the fans for what I was feeling, but it was the thought of seeing Gia perform live that was really making my pulse race.

She had asked me once why I'd never seen her perform, since I'd been such a fan, and I didn't have a good answer for her.

But now that I knew her, now that I knew the real Gia Nixon, I'd found my answer.

Deep down, on some level I wasn't sure I could admit existed, she was always mine. If I'd been a fan in the crowd, just one of the thousands... even my hardened, stone heart that knew I would never fall in love or get married wouldn't have been able to handle that. To know the woman who was meant for me was going to wave to the crowd and walk away, walk away from *me*... I placed my hand over my heart and rubbed. The thought of it hurt.

The laser lights started to race around the stadium, and then a booming voice announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, the country music sensation that needs no introduction!" Gia lowered to the stage from above, her costume sparkling like a diamond, guitar in hand, and when the chords to her latest hit single rang out, the crowd got impossibly louder.

And I couldn't swallow down the emotion that rose in my throat.

She didn't tell me...

Though I should have guessed. She didn't tell me when she wrote it, she didn't tell me when she recorded it, and she didn't tell me when she released it, and it was an instant number-one hit.

She didn't tell me she was opening the show with the song she wrote based on my grandparents' love letters.

I closed my eyes and let the music, the lyrics, and her love wash over me.

After everything we had been through with the will, I thought the best way she could get to know my grandparents was through the memories I shared and through their letters.

She was enthralled with their story, and I often caught her tearing up while reading through the pages. Their words spoke to her soft and bold, generous heart.

I opened my eyes to see the woman I loved sing the final lines to the song "Love Letters," a song that felt as personal as the ones she wrote about the two of us.

Pages filled with whispered dreams of love

Gia turned and sang directly to me.

Ink-kissed promises, true love never ends.

Then she gave me that Gia smile before she faced the crowd.

And I wasn't sure if my heart would ever be the same again.

Ten Months Later

- *Gia*

I had a couple of days before my next commitment, and I was back at one of my favorite places on earth, Jackson's flower farm.

It had been almost a year since we met, and time was both flying and standing still. I still had months to go for my touring obligations, but we were making the best of it.

Wedding season was in full swing, and I was hoping Jackson would be back at the house soon. I couldn't wait, because I had a big surprise for him. He had done so much for me, been all about me, really, and it was important that he knew I was all about him, too.

I heard his boots hit the steps, and I jumped up off the sofa, not sure what to do with myself.

He opened the door and stepped inside, catching me not quite standing, not quite sitting.

"Hey, you," he said, then blinked once. "So, are you going to just stand there, or..."

"Oh! Right, right." I quickly made my way over to him—what had I been thinking!—and threw my arms around his waist.

He gave me a quick kiss and I felt it down to my toes. “That’s more like it.”

He motioned to the door and reached for his boots. “I saw my truck was in the driveway and not in the garage. Did you need to go somewhere?”

He glanced up at me from where he was struggling with his boot, one hand on the heel, the other on the doorframe. With a final jerk, he pulled the boot off.

My stomach flipped over. “Um, maybe you should put your boots back on... ‘cause I’ve got something to show you.”

He cocked his head. “What’s going on?”

I clapped my hands. “Just get your boots back on, old man, and let’s go.”

“Old man? Whatever happened to Mystery Man? For that, I’m going to walk out in my socks.”

I laughed and he pulled me into a hug, then opened the door—and walked out in his socks.

“So, what do you have to show me?”

My stomach tightened. I didn’t know why I was so nervous. Maybe because this place was so Jackson, and here I was, making a change he didn’t ask for.

I opened the garage door and held it open for him to walk in front of me. “Why don’t you take a look inside?”

“What is—” Jackson glanced at me and back at the red, vintage 1951 Chevy truck sitting in the garage. A smile was

slowly taking over his face. “You bought me a truck? Like the one I used to drive around in with Gramps?”

He liked it. I let out the breath I’d been holding and grinned. I tossed Jackson the keys. “Why don’t you check it out?”

He walked around the front of the truck, his hand running over the rounded edges and the big metal grill. He opened the door and slid in, his smile bigger than ever. He started it up and revved the engine, looking from the dashboard to me and back.

“It’s incredible, Gia. I love it. But why?”

“Because it’s more than just a truck... Check out the back.”

Jackson’s eyes practically twinkled, and he jumped out of the truck, grabbing my hand as he went by, pulling me around to the back. He hopped into the bed and froze, then he reached down and opened one of the refrigerated flower coolers.

“You got me another delivery truck...” He couldn’t have been more shocked.

I grinned. “I did. Your truck did the job, but I loved the thought of this. How cool it would be for your local deliveries. A classic truck for your grandparents’ classy business. And Tommy from the graphics place is lined up to put the Reed Family Flower Farm logo on the doors... but only if you want to,” I rushed out. “It could just be a cool old truck.”

He jumped down from the bed and grabbed me in his arms. And that Jackson Reed dimple of his *popped*. Butterflies still took flight every time I saw it.

“I want the logo. And I love it.”

“You do?”

“Immensely.”

“Enormously?”

“Massively.”

“Maybe... tremendously?”

“How about profoundly,” he said and kissed me. And that kiss made my head spin.

Profound was the perfect word.

Eighteen Months Later

- *Jackson*

Only three months.

Only three months until Gia's touring obligations were complete, but I couldn't wait another day. I needed to make this woman mine.

It was cold outside, and damper than I wanted, but you never knew what kind of springtime weather you'd get in Henryville Township. Still, I wasn't going to let it stop me.

I walked up to Gia's recording studio and made sure the "recording in progress" light wasn't on. For her birthday last year, I had one of my outbuildings completely redone as a studio. It was clear we'd be spending just as much time here in the future as Nashville, so I didn't see any reason to wait. Plus, it was the best reason I had to break into that trust fund of mine. Every cent that went into the studio was pure joy to spend.

But this next gift was coming straight from the flower farm, straight from the heart. Grams and Gramps would have loved it this way.

The recording light was off, the shades were up, and I could see Gia sitting on the floor, her guitar in her lap, a pen in a

knot of hair on top of her head, and a pen in her hand. Multiple notebooks were scattered about the floor.

I hoped she wanted a break.

I softly knocked on the door, then opened it slowly.

Her head came up and she gave me that beautiful smile of hers. “Hi.”

“Hi.” I cleared my throat. “Looking for a little break?” My heart rate increased—I needed this to happen, now.

She tossed down her pen. “I would love that.” She brought herself up to stand and brushed her hands off on her jeans. “What did you have in mind?” She grabbed her cowboy boots and pulled them on, hopping on one foot as she did.

I couldn’t help myself—I circled my arm around her waist and pulled her off balance, her back landing against my chest. I buried my face in her neck and breathed in deeply, her citrus and sugar scent going right to my head. I kissed her neck, letting my lips linger until I found her pulse, and then I gave it a little bite.

She giggled and twisted, then held up her arm. “Goosebumps, Jackson. Goosebumps.”

“That’s what I’m going for, Just Gia.” I held her close until her boots were securely on, then led her out the door.

“Where are we headed?” She glanced up at the sky, where the dark clouds couldn’t decide if they were coming or going.

“Over to the far field. I’ve got something for you.”

Gia clapped her hands. “Oh, you give the best gifts. I can’t wait to see what it is.”

“I do alright.” I smiled. Learning how to be generous and give from the heart was easy when I had Gia leading by example.

“You do better than alright,” she said. “And it all started with the branding iron.”

I entwined her hand in mine. “Who would’ve thought?”

“My grandma, maybe?” She swiped under her eye. “She would’ve loved you.”

“Same with mine.” I squeezed her hand, and she squeezed mine back.

We walked into the far field, and Gia immediately saw it.

“We have a sunflower! And it’s so early!” She dropped my hand and ran over to the flower, putting her face right into it. “Have you been out here checking for it?”

I nodded and walked closer, my hands in my front pockets. This was the moment.

“I have.” I planted seeds early, hoping I’d get at least one—that’s all I needed. I dropped down on one knee beside her, not caring I was getting my jeans wet and dirty. “I know we would both do anything to have our grandmothers with us, so I tried to come up with the next best thing.” I took in a breath and surprised myself when the exhale came out shaky. Gia had her hands steepled over her mouth, her beautiful eyes round in wonder. “I know the sun always reminds you of her, but I

couldn't get it to cooperate today." I glanced up at the sky, where the sun was barely peeking out from behind a cloud. "But this sunflower is close. And I want you to know I will never stop trying to make your dreams come true."

Two tears rolled down from Gia's eyes, and I reached up and brushed them away. She leaned down and took my face in her hands, and whispered, "You sweet man," and kissed me.

My heart immediately calmed. This was right... this was exactly right.

When she straightened, I pulled out my grandmother's wedding band—a thin, simple, band of gold. "This was Grams', and she would have loved to know she was going to be a part of our future." I swallowed the emotion rising in my throat. "Gia Nyx." I cleared my throat. "Just Gia Nixon, I love you, and want to spend the rest of my life with you, no matter where life takes us. Please make me the happiest man on earth and say yes. Will you marry me?"

Gia clapped her hands. "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!" She dropped down next to me, and this time, it was me who cradled her face, kissing her long, slow, and deep.

When we came up for air, we both reached for each other, brushing the tears from our faces.

I slipped the gold band on her finger, and she twirled it around, her brilliant smile outshining both the sun that had peaked out and the sunflower.

“Our grandparents would be so proud and happy for us,” she said.

“They would.”

After a moment, she jumped up, grabbed my hands, and pulled. “Come on, we’ve got to call my parents! And Lindsey! And Paul! They’ll be so excited!”

I laughed and let her pull me along because I knew something she didn’t—her family was already in town. Her parents were here, Lindsey was here with her new boyfriend, and Paul would arrive soon.

As it turned out, I was an alright gift-giver.

And for Gia?

Worth it. Absolutely worth it.

*Not ready to say goodbye to **Gia and Jackson**? I wasn’t either! You can jump ahead seven years into their future and see what they’re up to – and I think you might be surprised!*

Get their exclusive bonus scene here! (Or go to <https://marycarsonbooks.com/subscribe-anything-that-you-need/>) Or scan the QR code below with your phone camera.



*And remember Jackson's friend Grace from the branding wall at Happy Springs Bar and Grill? **Want to see what happens when she runs into her old crush at Chef Mike's top-secret charity event?***

*Find out exactly what happens in **Pucks vs. Pigskins**, a second-chance, sweet romcom available for **pre-order (click here) on Amazon now!** (or visit www.tinyurl.com/pucks-vs-pigskins)*

*Want more from these characters? See where it all began with Ellie and James in **Anything That You Want!** James had no idea what he was getting into when he ran into Ellie! **Click here to get their story.** (or visit tinyurl.com/anything-that-you-want) now on Amazon in ebook, paperback, and in Kindle Unlimited... or keep turning the page to get a sneak peek!*

*And find out how Jasmine and Quinn came to be in **Anything I Can Do!** You'll love their happy ending! **Click here to get their story.** (or visit www.tinyurl.com/anything-I-can-do) now on Amazon in ebook, paperback, and in Kindle Unlimited.*

Anything That You Want – A Sweet,
Opposites Attract RomCom

Chapter 1

-Ellie

My eyes darted around the ballroom, searching for something, *anything*, that might save me. The room, filled with rich people dripping in diamonds and pearls, had turned into my own, personal, *escape room* hell. I was trapped. Here. At the annual Merit Memorial Hospital Charity Ball, where the charity was an afterthought, and being seen was the real reason for the evening.

I did another scan around, and almost sighed aloud when I spotted my one true friend, Jasmine, approaching with two tall glasses of champagne.

“Here. Take this.” Jasmine pressed a drink into my hand. “You look like you need it.”

“Oh, I most definitely do, but I can’t. I’m on-call tonight. Quick, say something to make me laugh.”

“You mean something like—when I got dressed tonight my goal was to out-sparkle the crystal chandeliers.” Handing me both drinks, she did a little spin, so I could see she had come admirably close to her goal.

“You’re like a teeny, tiny disco ball in all that bling. I think the chandeliers are jealous.”

“Thank you, my dear, mission accomplished. My mother always said ‘don’t hide your light under a bushel.’ I took those words seriously.”

“And it is clear you do.”

Jasmine looked incredible in a crystal-studded bustier pantsuit, which she finished off with strappy sky-high stilettos. She was the only person I knew who could get away with pants at a black-tie affair. She had so much confidence.

Handing the drinks back, I glanced around the room. “I’m actually hoping to get called in. Anything to get away from these rich snobs, and get away from Marks.” I looked over at my colleague, the never-not-butt-kissing Dr. John Marks, currently in the throes of Department Head adulation. I wanted to kick him in the shins.

Jasmine smirked, “Marks. Such a D.”

“He is.” I tried to take a big breath, then fought the urge to squirm. “Jas, I’ve got to get out of this dress. My strapless bra is so tight, I might need oxygen before the night is over.” My dress felt like a straight jacket, testing both my lungs and my sanity.

Jasmine laughed her fabulous laugh, then proceeded to take a big drink of champagne. Unlike me, she could see the humor in almost any situation. I had no idea how to do that.

“One, I’ll go ahead and drink both of these, thank you very much. Two, that strapless bra is doing wonders for your girls, so work it while you can. Maybe your wish to get out of that

dress will come true. If you know what I mean.” She raised her eyebrows up and down at that, and I rolled my eyes.

“And three, how many times do we have to talk about this, Ellie? There is nothing that Dr. Marks can say or do to negate the fact that you are the front-runner for the hospital’s Tate Award. Can’t you just enjoy him for his looks? There are definitely less attractive and more annoying men you could’ve ended up hanging with here tonight.”

I shook my head in disagreement. “Enjoy him for his looks? I can’t see past all the puckering he’s doing to even get to his looks. Know what he said earlier tonight? That I’ll never win the Tate with my ‘lone wolf’ attitude. That I need to be more of a ‘team player.’ As if. He even used air quotes when he said it.”

Jasmine started to reply when raised voices drew our attention.

Other than hospital staff, I didn’t know anyone there. Who had time for socializing, especially with that type of crowd, the upper crust crowd of charity event attendees? Merit wasn’t the biggest city in North Carolina, but it was big enough, and everyone there thought they were sooo important. Just ask them. But then I saw the guy causing the commotion. I had a fleeting wish I’d expanded my social circle if it meant it was going to include him.

He was tall, much taller than my 5’ 10”, even in my heels, and that didn’t happen very often. Broad in the shoulders, too, and it was clear his tux was made just for him. He had sun-

streaked brown hair that was falling in his eyes, and a tan complexion, like he did a lot of work outdoors—or played a lot of golf.

I snorted to myself. Of course he played a lot of golf. Rich jerk.

Jasmine arched her left eyebrow and gave me a look like—get a load of these two.

The man patted himself down, obviously searching for something. His wallet? His phone? The beautiful woman next to him frowned and shook her head, frustration written all over her pretty face.

“James. It’s the first night we’ve been out in weeks and you promised you would leave work behind. Don’t answer that phone,” said the brunette beauty.

I shot a look at Jasmine. James shouldn’t make promises to his girlfriend he’s not willing to keep.

James found his phone, glanced at it, and cursed under his breath. “I’ve got to go.” He came dashing by and bumped right into Jasmine. And those two drinks in her hands? Now they were all over me. My dress. And my cleavage. Lovely.

The guy raced past and barely glanced in our direction. “Sorry,” he called and ran straight out of the ballroom. The room practically went silent, and all eyes followed him.

Jasmine and I were in shock. Maybe in even more shock than his girlfriend, who stood there with her mouth open. Jilted.

The noise of the crowd grew. People burst into animated conversation, speculating over what had happened.

Jasmine reacted before I did, and placed the now empty champagne flutes onto a nearby table. “Ladies’ room. STAT.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the front of the room. The two of us created our own little scene, pushing through the guests.

“I’ll get you another drink,” I heard behind me. The ever-helpful Dr. Marks. Like that was going to make everything better. I’m on-call, remember? I didn’t even have a drink.

Wait. Let me restate. I did have a drink.

All over me.

“Holy frijoles, girl, I can’t believe that guy ran into us and didn’t even stop.” Jasmine slammed our way into the ladies’ room and made a beeline for the paper towel dispenser. I positioned myself at the sink, and she fast-fired the towels to me. I dabbed at my gown and attempted to lessen the damage. We were good in a crisis—even a dress crisis.

“I thought tonight’s entertainment was going to be that rich jerk James and his girlfriend having an argument.” I continued to wipe at my dress, hoping for a miracle. “I didn’t suspect for a second that I was going to become the show.”

“Well, I told you your girls looked good in that bra. You were going to become a show somehow tonight.” She grinned and threw me another paper towel.

I grinned back and lobbed a soaking wet, scrunched-up towel right past her head.

Jasmine laughed, reached down, picked up the wet mess, and threw it in the trash. She gave me a curious glance. “You looked at him more than once, you know. A lot more.”

“Nope,” I was quick to reply. Maybe a little too quick? “Just the once was plenty. I need a rude, rich dude like I need a hole in the head. You know the Tate Award is all that I care about.” James might have been attractive—okay, really attractive—but now he was the guy without manners who spilled drinks all over without remorse, and ditched his girl without a goodbye. Figures.

“All right.” Jasmine walked over to where I stood. “Let’s see what we’re working with.”

We both stood in front of the mirror, side by side, and took in the disaster.

“Good news,” I said.

Jasmine cocked her head. “Is there, though?”

“Yep. I’ve got scrubs in the car. And I can use this as an excuse to leave this stupid party. And Dr. Marks.”

At that moment, my hospital on-call ringtone went off.

Chapter 2

- Ellie

“Duty calls!” I grinned from ear to ear at Jasmine, then replied to the page that I was on my way.

“You lucky dog. You did it—you’re getting out of here. With a legit excuse, no less.”

“I’m not so sure about the ‘lucky’ part—I am covered in booze. I’ll just change at the hospital. Thanks so much for your help, Jas. I’ll catch you later.” I leaned in and gave Jas a quick hug.

“Go, go,” she said. “Be safe on your drive.”

I raced towards the hotel lobby, thoughts of good-looking men who were beyond rude pushed to the back of my mind. I had less than fifteen minutes to get to the hospital, get changed, and assess the situation. The main reason the charity ball was held at this hotel was because it was so close to the hospital, specifically in case some member of the staff needed to get there fast.

I bypassed the elevators and dashed down the gilded sweeping staircase from the Ballroom to the Lobby. Because I was on-call, I’d asked the valet to park my car in the nearby VIP section—for just this situation. Sometimes being a doctor had its perks.

I rushed up to the valet.

His eyes went wide, startled.

No, it wasn't due to the speed of my approach, rather, it was the state of my dress. Shoot. I'd already forgotten.

"Hurry—I'm on-call at the hospital. I need my car right away. It's VIP #3." I snagged the valet stub from my tiny evening bag and handed it to the young man.

"Yes, ma'am. Right away ma'am." He nodded his head and turned to the valet stand of keys and halted. He turned back to me, then turned back to the stand.

"What is it?" My words were rushed.

He turned and held his hands up.

"Um, ma'am. Your car keys are not here."

"What?" I asked. Or maybe shrieked. And when did I become a "ma'am"? Surely I'm still a "miss"? No—I'm a doctor! "That makes no sense whatsoever. Maybe it's just on the wrong hook. It has a large blue and white Merit Memorial Hospital medallion on it."

I darted around the valet stand and searched through the keys. Well, shoot. There were a ton of Merit Hospital keychains since it was our charity event being hosted. But still, it was clear to me within seconds. My keys weren't there. For the second time tonight, I froze.

I shook myself out of it and took a few quick steps toward the entrance. I looked out the floor-to-ceiling glass windows,

and there was my proof. The #3 spot in VIP parking was empty. *What. The. What?*

My mind spun. It wasn't as if I had gone into the night thinking the charity event would turn into some kind of fairy tale ball, complete with a Prince Charming and a fairy godmother. But when I put on my beautiful dress and tried not to put too much hope into the possibility of the night, not once did I think the evening would end with me covered in champagne and my car stolen. Not. Once.

I turned back toward the valet. "It's gone. My car is just gone. Where is my car?"

The valet's eyes were bigger than ever. He'd probably never been in this position before, but I didn't have a lot of empathy at the moment. His gaze went everywhere, but the rest of his body stood there, doing nothing.

"I've got to get to the hospital. Now!"

It was my very loud exclamation that got what appeared to be the hotel manager striding over to the valet stand.

"Ma'am. Is there something I can help you with?"

Again with the "ma'am"? Nobody has time for this, especially me. I inhaled slowly, then proceeded calmly and patiently, like I would in any emergency.

I moved to the front doors and thanked God for the proximity of the hotel to the hospital.

"I'm Dr. Dumont and I was just called into the hospital. My silver Lexus is missing. Find my car."

The manager's eyebrows reached for her hairline. It was almost comical. "*Wait*. There must be—"

I kind of wished I could stick around to see what happened next, but I was already power walking out the door and into the cool night air. I didn't have on the best shoes for this trek to the hospital, but I'd make it.

Getting an emergency page was exciting. When I set up my fertility clinic in partnership with the hospital, part of the deal was that I would take on-call shifts. That was fine by me—I loved my work.

I dialed the charge nurse's station.

"Shannon. It's Dr. Dumont. I'm four minutes out. I need you to open my locker and pull out my tennis shoes and a set of scrubs. And just leave the locker open. What's the status of the patient?"

Shannon filled me in. The patient was a 32-year-old woman, laboring for the first time. She was one week early and had gestational diabetes. Her OB doctor would typically handle the delivery, but she was too far along for her doctor to get in. Because of her diabetes, they wanted someone now, and I was the OB doc on service. I was always glad when they called me in. It was better for everyone if, for some reason, the quick delivery took a turn that no one was expecting.

I rushed into the ER and Shannon called out from the nursing station.

“Dr. Dumont! You’re in room 2. Your shoes and scrubs are waiting.”

I gave Shannon a wave and pushed my way into the locker room. I discarded my heels and dress and pulled on my scrubs and running shoes. Sweet relief. Not just because I was out of the liquor-soaked dress, but because this was home to me. In my uniform. In my hospital. I fit here.

I took in a deep breath, slowly blew it out, then stepped into the patient’s room. Glancing at her chart, I grabbed some gloves and sat down on a rolling stool. I slid over to my patient, who panted and breathed heavily. I blocked out everyone in the room, focused solely on my patient, and gave her a reassuring smile.

“Elizabeth, I’m Dr. Dumont. I’m here in place of your doctor because things are happening fast. Hang on while I just take a look.” I did a quick cervical check and saw that she was fully dilated and ready to push.

“Looks like you’re ready, Elizabeth. We’re way past the time for an epidural, so let’s get you onto your hands and knees. It’ll be more comfortable for you.”

I glanced at Nurse Judy. “Call L and D and let them know we’re delivering here.”

Soon the baby crowned, and in no time the labor was complete. I was relieved to see that despite diabetes, the baby was a perfect size.

“Congratulations,” I said, “You have a beautiful baby boy.”

Nurse Judy settled the baby on Elizabeth's chest, then gently wiped him down.

Tears ran down Elizabeth's cheeks. She glanced at me, then back to the baby, and laughed. "Why does he smell so good?"

I smiled, then pushed away from Elizabeth to dispose of my gloves and wash my hands. I heard Elizabeth and her husband *ooh* and *ah*, making soft exclams of delight. I turned from the sink to address the happy couple.

"So have you picked out any names yet?"

Whoever said 'the third time is the charm' had no idea what they were talking about. Because for the third time that night, I froze. Standing next to Elizabeth, looking down lovingly at his brand new baby boy, was *James*.

Click here to read their story now on Amazon in ebook, paperback, and in Kindle Unlimited.

Acknowledgments

Somehow I managed to write another favorite of my husband's. Of course, anyone who knows my 6' 5", bright blue-eyed, dimpled husband knows that every sweet attribute of Jackson's is outdone by Mr. Carson.

I can't believe I'm at the end of this series! But I couldn't really let it go—so you're getting a spin-off!

I'm so grateful for all of the help I received in making this book – and series – happen. My greatest of thanks goes to:

Susan Kostelecky. Another one? Dude. Another one!

NancyMcG, NancyVT, Wes, CindyT, Karen, Cindy BW. Your feedback is invaluable—every time it makes the story better. Wes, just imagine if this book had started where I originally started it!

Lindsey Jesionowski. The first sweet romcom author I “met.” I knew I would be able to count on you—a West

Virginia girl will always have your back! Thank you for inspiring Gia's sister with your kind phone calls.

Gia Stevens. Thank you for being the name behind the name Gia Nyx. So glad to have met you! (And for those of you who know my mad love for all things Fleetwood Mac, the last name was inevitable.)

Emma L. For delivering the best “Oh, sugar!” I’ve ever heard.

Dilip Chandron. For “showing up” in not one, but two of my books. Plus, Jasmine Chandran is just the *prettiest* name!

Brad Keller. Because I couldn't stop laughing the first time I heard about “Special Teams are killing us.” Who knew such a simple phrase would be so effective?

Melanie Harlow. For being the best mentor out there.

Loren Beeson, Eliza Peake, Kassi, and Richelle. For every emergency brainstorming session I needed—I love how I can count on you!

My Pro Team. Sarah Kil, Silvia Curry, and Karen Marie – I couldn't do it without you!!

My ARC readers, Launch Team, Bookstagrammers, and friends near and far. You've been here since book one, and I couldn't be luckier to have you! (And thank you for finding the corrections and typos that slipped past editing—you make things better for everyone!)

And if you're still with me...thank you **to you**. For spending your precious time reading this. I hope this one made you

smile as much as the first two. Never in a million years would I have thought we'd be here... Thank you. Just, thank you.

And lastly, to

Mr. Carson. For being sweeter than even Jackson.

Want To Find All My Books?

I'd love for you to join me on my Amazon Author Page! Follow me to get updates on all my new releases.

<https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B0B138V1RF>



*Visit my Amazon Author
Page*

And if you love my stories, please consider leaving a great review – it will help the next reader find a new favorite!

XOX

About The Author

Mary Carson likes her chocolate salted and her romance sweet.

She writes sweet romance with a kiss, and you won't be embarrassed to gift her books to your mom.

Mary is the author of *From Me To You*, the prequel to her Anything Series, *Anything That You Want*, *Anything I Can Do*, and *Anything That You Need*.

When Mary isn't reading or writing, she's enjoying the lake in North Carolina with her very big family and even bigger group of friends. *You never know just how many friends you have until you have a lake house.*

Keep in touch with Mary through social media or through her newsletter with the links below- she promises to only send the good stuff.

www.MaryCarsonBooks.com

Connect on Instagram @MaryCarsonBooks, on Facebook at
Mary Carson Author and on Amazon at Mary Carson

