

Broussard Brothers: Book Three



**BOURBON
STREET
BACHELOR**

an enemies to lovers
steamy romance

MELISSA CHAMBERS

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BROUSSARD BROTHERS

BOOK THREE

MELISSA CHAMBERS

PERRY

EVANS

PRESS

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Perry Evans Press

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Edited by Somerwynd Services

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*For my dear friend Patrick Dizon, who inspires me more than
he'll ever know*

CHAPTER
ONE

If Quentin's family had any idea how ill-equipped he was to pick out an avocado, they wouldn't have sent him to the grocery store. He never cooked. Why would he when there were well-trained people making food in restaurants everywhere?

But this was the kind of thing he volunteered to do these days as he found himself trying to prove to his family that he wasn't the dickhead they all thought he was. He'd never be able to reveal the reason he'd left home eighteen years ago and only came back after his mother's passing. But now that she was gone, he was ready to have the rest of his family back in his life, which meant repenting for the sin of leaving and staying gone.

He was paying the piper one morsel at a time, including last minute fruit retrieval. Was an avocado a fruit? Maybe the woman looking at the tomatoes across from him knew.

She picked one up, inspected it, and then discarded it for another one. This went on for five or six tomatoes until she found a suitable one that she put in her cart.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" he said.

She looked up at him, then back down at the tomatoes, then did a double-take, focusing on him. Her cheeks went

pink. Looked like the Broussard charm was at it again. He hadn't even been trying that time.

“You wouldn't know how to pick out an avocado, would you?”

She crinkled her brow as she looked down, clearing her throat. “Are you using it today?”

“Well, I'm not using it at all. My sister-in-law is.”

The woman scratched her eyebrow and then said, “Pick one that's kind of brown-looking and a little soft.” She started to walk away, and then she turned back toward him. “But not too soft. Like, somewhere in between.” She nodded once like she was content with her answer and then walked away. He hadn't even decided if she was cute. He thought maybe she was.

He grabbed a few of the brown avocados and then went over to where she was by the apples. “What about this one?” he asked, holding out one of the avocados.

She frowned, looking at it and then up at him. “Mmm-hmm.”

“Would you mind testing it for me?” he asked, handing it to her.

She took it from him, squeezed it, and then handed it back. “That one's fine.” She walked away toward the oranges.

He followed her. “I promise I'm not a stalker. Just clueless.”

“Oh yes. I'm aware.”

So it wasn't that she was weirded out by a strange man hitting on her. She somehow knew him. “Do I know you?”

“Probably not,” she said and walked toward the nut section.

She was starting to look familiar—those big blue eyes rang a bell. He should definitely remember that rack she had underneath that V-neck T-shirt. He followed her. “I do know you, don’t I?” He had no idea from where, but she was definitely starting to look familiar.

She let out a sigh like she was giving in. “I dated your brother.”

“Garrett?”

“No, Braxton.”

That wasn’t a good sign. There weren’t two humans less alike than Quentin and his brother Braxton. Braxton was as square as a chess board, and Quentin was an *artsy-fartsy numbskull*, as he overheard his father so deftly put it two weeks prior to his eighteenth birthday. If Braxton was the type she went for, he was sunk.

“I didn’t know Braxton had ever dated anybody except for his current wife.”

She squinted. “Oh, yes you did.” She stared at him as if in challenge.

He searched his brain for this girl and then came up with a memory—her in an ugly Christmas sweater with her hair up in a ponytail. It was longer then, but it was down now, straight and blonde and framing her face in a chin-length cut. That’s what had thrown him off. She had looked different that first night he’d met her.

“I remember you now. I met you at Christmastime one year. Braxton was serious about you. I forgot all about that.”

She huffed, shaking her head. “Of course, you did.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. It means nothing. Just make sure you get a few of those avocados.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because they’re kind of brown and Peyton might need to cut around some of the bad parts.”

“So, you know Peyton.”

“And Savannah. And I know they’re making a summer salad. I don’t want to be responsible for bad or not enough avocados.”

“You must be pretty close with the two of them if you know what they’re making right now.”

“Peyton texted me for the recipe. She had it at my house a few weeks ago.”

He edged himself between her and the shelf she was looking at. “I feel a little bit at a disadvantage here. You seem to know me and my family, but I don’t know you. What’s your name?”

She dropped the tension in her shoulders, giving him a look like she couldn’t possibly trust him any less. “I’m Calliope.”

He opened up with a smile. “You’re Calliope? The girls talk about you all the time.”

She held out her hand as if to say, *There you go*, and then pushed her cart away from him.

He caught up to her. “Why don’t you come home with me, to my dad’s house? We’re having a little family get together.”

She squinted at him. “The last time I went to one of your family get-togethers, I ended up with my heart broken yet again. I think I’ll pass.”

“Braxton?”

“No, someone else.”

“Who broke your heart?”

“It’s a long story.” She moved on to the canned goods.

He followed her. “I’ve got time.”

“Aren’t you due back with those avocados?”

“Trust me, nobody expects me back anytime soon.”

“Why don’t you surprise them?”

“Because I’m more interested in this heartbreak you just experienced.”

She stopped and turned toward him. “Which heartbreak are you interested in? Would you like to hear about the one where I found out on my wedding day that my fiancé had been sleeping with my maid of honor? Or would you like to hear about the one where I was really starting to fall head over heels, but the guy’s ex came back into the picture, pregnant? Or do you want to hear about the one where I was dating this great guy who turned out was still hung up on his childhood crush? But wait, you know all about that one.” She walked away again.

Braxton had recently married Peyton, who he’d been in love with most of his life and vice versa. “You’re talking about Braxton now,” he said, following her.

“Look how smart you are.”

He moved around to the front of her cart so she couldn't push it any further. "I'm getting the distinct feeling you don't like me."

"Wow, really? That's weird." She pursed her lips at him and then perused a shelf.

"You don't even know me, and I don't know you, so I couldn't have done anything to you."

She huffed a laugh. "You're unbelievable."

He slid up the side of the cart to get closer to her until she looked at him. "What did I do, seriously?"

She let out a hard breath, looking down at the ground like she was deciding, then finally looked him in the eye. "You told Braxton to break up with me."

He backpedaled to that evening at the Boudreaux house when Braxton was there with the girl in that ugly Christmas sweater. What had he said? He couldn't remember, but she seemed to. "I did?"

Calliope tossed a box of granola bars into her cart and plowed forward.

He followed after her and touched her on the arm. "Hang on."

She stared at his hand like it was diseased and then slowly dragged her gaze to meet his.

He pulled his hand off her arm. "I'm just trying to remember."

"How about I refresh your memory?"

"Please," he said, crossing his arms over his chest, waiting.

“Your exact words were, ‘I get she’s cute and quirky and all, but she’s no Peyton.’”

It all came back to him then. Braxton and he had been standing by the Christmas tree. Everyone else was in the kitchen. Quentin had asked Braxton how serious he was about the girl in the ugly Christmas sweater. Braxton had said they were getting pretty serious. Quentin had told him he’d regret it if he never tried to patch things up with Peyton. He wondered if Calliope had overheard that part.

“Oh,” was all he could utter.

“Oh,” she repeated back to him and then moved on.

He also remembered talking to her for a brief moment, before all that. He’d felt something with her...an unusual connection. She was dating his brother, and he’d had enough bad blood with his family. He remembered excusing himself to break up whatever was drawing him to her.

He followed her. “You’ve got to admit, it all worked out in the end.”

“Yep,” she said, inspecting a box of crackers.

“So, what, you’re still hung up on my little brother? You know he’s married now, right?”

She swung around. “I’m not *quirky*. I was wearing that stupid sweater because I had come from work—a Christmas event.”

“I don’t judge.”

“Yes, you do. You did.”

“That conversation was about helping my brother get over his pride and light a fire under him to go make up with the

love of his life who he'd not spoken to in years. It really didn't have anything to do with you."

"Other than the fact that I was the girl he dumped that night."

"He dumped you that night?"

"Why am I telling him all this?" she said to herself, pushing her cart toward the raw meat section.

He went after her. "Look, I'm sorry you were collateral damage, but they belonged together. Look at them now. Wouldn't you agree?"

She closed her eyes. "It's fine. You're absolved of any wrongdoing. Can I do my grocery shopping now?"

"Sure."

"Thank you."

He didn't move. He was too interested in her. She had this round face with big blue eyes and rosy, pink cheeks that made him think of a young Cameron Diaz, like in that Farrelly Brothers movie, except she wasn't tall, and she was curvier... lusciously curvier...

"If you'll excuse me," she said.

"Come back to the house with me. I know the girls would love to see you."

"I thought you were going to let me shop."

"I am, but when you're done, you should come over."

She gave a laugh. "You're having a family gathering."

"I don't think it's that exclusive. I'm there after all."

"You're a family member."

“Yeah, but I guarantee they like you a whole lot more than they like me.”

She shook her head at him and then moved the cart forward.

“So, will you come?” he asked, following her again.

She widened her already big eyes. “You’re seriously hitting on me right now?”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “You call me *quirky*, convince my boyfriend to break up with me days before Christmas, then leave town, and now you’re back, and you want me to come with you to a family get-together where that ex-boyfriend of mine will no doubt be?”

He thought about it. “Sure.”

She narrowed her gaze at him. “Get help.” She pushed her cart forward.

He walked up to her and put his hand on the bar near hers. “Look, I understand that we started off on the wrong foot, but that’s been a while ago. Can we call it water under the bridge and move forward?”

She perused the aisle. “Fine.”

“So you’ll come over?”

“No.”

“Why don’t we start over?” he said.

“Start what over?”

“This conversation.”

She picked up a brick of cheddar cheese. “This conversation was about avocados.”

“Yeah, but avocados became secondary pretty quickly.”

She stopped, letting out a hard breath. “All right. Let’s pretend for a minute that I didn’t date your brother.”

“Cool.”

“Let’s also pretend you didn’t cause our breakup.”

He squinted one eye. “Technically, I probably didn’t cause ___”

“I just told you the disaster that my life is. Why would you want to be next in line for the freak show?”

“Because I was right about one thing I said to Braxton.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked, hand on her hip.

“You’re cute.”

Her cheeks turned candy-apple red. “I can’t with this.” She started to walk away again.

“All right, hang on. I’m gonna let you go this time, for real.”

She lifted her eyebrows in question.

“I just need to know one thing before I do.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Okay.”

“We’re past the whole *quirky* comment and me breaking you and my brother up, right?”

“If that ends this conversation, sure.”

“So now, you’re only pushing me away because you’ve been hurt a lot and you don’t want to go there again?”

She shrugged, tossing up her hand. “I don’t know. Whatever.”

“So you may or may not be the slightest bit attracted to me?”

She inhaled a deep breath while her eyes slowly went to the ceiling. She let the breath out and stared at him, head cocked to the side.

He grinned. “Say no more. Have a nice day, Calliope.”

He tossed the avocado up in the air, caught it, and then headed to the register. He should spend more time at the grocery store, and he definitely wanted more time with Calliope.

CHAPTER
TWO

Calliope's body was still at attention as she unpacked her grocery haul. After she put the last package in the fridge, she headed to the bathroom. She grabbed hold of the lip of the counter, staring at herself in the mirror. "You can and you will resist Quentin Broussard." She repeated this phrase numerous times—as many as it took to convince herself. Unfortunately, it didn't work.

How had this happened? She'd been shopping for tomatoes.

Of course he didn't remember her. When she met him at the Christmas party at the Boudreaux house that year, she'd worked late at the store. She was going to close early to go home and get freshened up. But there were only so many days in the Christmas season, and she and her mom needed every hours' worth of profit. Their store made more money in November and December than it did all the other months combined. So not only had she *not* cut out early, but she had kept the shop open an extra hour so anyone who was already inside could finish up their shopping.

That day had been Ugly Christmas Sweater Day, of course. She had not brought a change of clothes because she had convinced herself that she was going to be able to leave early.

So she had bopped over to the Boudreaux house in an oversized, ugly Christmas sweater, hair in a ponytail, with her makeup smudged because the sweater had been too hot on the unseasonably warm December day.

She thought nothing of seeing Braxton's brother Garrett. He was a Broussard, so he was hot, but Garrett reminded her too much of herself in her own high school days to be attracted to him. He was fun, the life of the party, and all the attention was always on him. There had been a day that people would have described Calliope in the same way. But that day had passed a long time ago.

When Quentin had walked into the room, Calliope's breath had caught in her throat. She'd heard about Quentin, the artistic Broussard brother. He'd left home when he was eighteen, while the other two brothers had stayed in town. What she knew about him was that he made furniture and kept to himself. She knew she would be meeting him that night, but what she hadn't counted on was the roaring attraction she'd had to him.

He was tall like Garrett, but bigger and broader, and he'd worked the room with quiet confidence, unlike the chatty guy she'd met a little while ago. He wore his dark hair short, which put the scar above his eyebrow on display. She had wondered where he'd gotten it from, but it hadn't been appropriate to ask. She'd only spent a moment with him before he'd been pulled away in another direction, but the way he'd bored those brown eyes into hers when they'd had their short conversation had given her the feels like she hadn't known since she was sixteen. And then she'd heard him describe her as *quirky*.

She picked up her phone and began to text Peyton.

Hey, I know I said I was coming this evening, but I may have caught a bug. Do you mind if I sit this one out?

A moment later, Peyton responded.

Oh no! Sorry you are feeling bad. We will miss you!

Calliope felt ridiculous canceling, but it was for the best. If Quentin would have simply said hello and moved along, or better, never said anything to begin with, she might have gone. But the fact that he seemed to be hell-bent on having interest in her was enough to give her pause, at least until she could regroup. Because the very last thing she needed at this point in her life was more drama at the hands of a hot guy, much less a Broussard brother.

CHAPTER
THREE

Quentin walked into the room juggling the three avocados he had just purchased.

“Look at you,” Savannah said. “Is that something they teach out in Colorado? Juggling?”

It took Savannah a minute, but she was warming up to him. Quentin was pretty sure she blamed him for Garrett’s *sabbatical*, so to speak. Quentin had convinced his brother to move to Colorado to learn the furniture business with him, which he’d done. It was also where Garrett had discovered he couldn’t live without Savannah, so he’d come home, and he’d brought Quentin with him.

It probably didn’t help that Savannah knew Quentin as the selfish Broussard brother, the one who left home at eighteen—the one who didn’t come back home when his mother was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s and was put in a facility by her husband. Garrett and Braxton had held down the fort, taking care of their mother, while it appeared Quentin selfishly stayed in Colorado. But Garrett and Braxton didn’t know what Quentin knew about their mother.

“You mean you can’t juggle?” Quentin asked. “Man, I don’t know how we’re going to be friends.”

Savannah gave him a smile that said he wasn't completely out of the doghouse, but he was getting there.

He set the avocados down in front of Peyton. "How did I do?"

She inspected them. "They're a little brown, but I can work with them."

"Yeah, Calliope told me you could cut around the brown parts," Quentin said, testing his sister-in-law.

She looked up at him. "Calliope? Our Calliope?" she asked, pointing between herself and Savannah.

"I didn't know she belonged to you, but she did say you were friends."

"You talked to her at the grocery store?" Savannah asked.

"Why is that so shocking?"

"Did she recognize you?"

"Yeah, but I actually approached her before I realized who she was. I really just wanted help picking out these avocados. I've never done that before."

"How does a hippie from Colorado not know how to pick out an avocado?" Peyton asked.

"I'm not from Colorado. I'm from here. I just lived there for eighteen years. Any chance I can get her number from you?"

"She didn't give it to you at the grocery store?" Peyton asked.

"No. Or maybe I failed to ask. Anyway, may I have it, please?"

“She’ll be over here in a little while,” Savannah said. “You can ask her for it yourself.”

“She’s coming over?” Quentin asked. What was up with that? He had invited her and she had said no. She hadn’t mentioned anything about having already been invited and that she had been planning on coming.

“Actually, she canceled,” Peyton said, getting a knife out of the block.

“Why?” Savannah asked.

“She said she was coming down with a bug. Did she look sick when you saw her at the store?” Peyton asked Quentin.

She didn’t look sick. She hadn’t been wearing any makeup or whatever, but he thought she looked just fine, in fact, much more than fine. He’d known they were arguing, but it had felt more like...foreplay to him. Had he read her that wrong? Did she really dislike him that much?

Shula, Peyton’s surrogate mother of sorts, walked into the room. “Did who look sick?”

“Calliope,” Peyton said.

“Poor baby girl. She’s in luck though, because I just made a big pot of my chicken noodle soup day before yesterday. I’ll see if Trevor can run that over to her.”

“I’ll do it,” Quentin said.

All three women turned to look at him at the same time.

“What? I’m just trying to be helpful.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Shula uttered. Shula had been with the Boudreaux family since Peyton and her sister were little. She’d practically raised them and the Broussard brothers as

well. Quentin was the oldest of all the siblings in both families, and he always thought, for that reason, he had a special relationship with Shula. But as they all got older, he understood that each one of them had a unique relationship with her. She made everyone in her orbit feel like they were the special one.

“Did I not volunteer to pick up avocados earlier?” he asked.

Shula pulled a container out of the refrigerator and handed it to him. “Remember, stay six feet away.” That felt like more than a health warning.

So, Shula didn’t want him to mess with Calliope. He guessed that was understandable. From what Calliope had said at the supermarket, she’d had a rough go of it with men. But he wasn’t planning on sleeping with her best friend or having an ex show up with his baby...or falling in love with some nonexistent childhood crush. He was just sniffing things out with her.

He took the container. “Of course. Text me the address,” he said in Peyton’s direction as he hustled out of the kitchen before anyone could change their minds.



HIS GPS TOOK him to a small, aqua house in the Marigny with pink and yellow trim around the windows and the door. He found a spot a few houses up and then got out of the car and headed that way. Walking up to the door, he realized he had no idea what he planned on saying. He never had a hard time coming up with something to say to a woman. Why was this any different?

He rang the doorbell, wondering if anyone had warned her that he was coming. A moment later, the door opened, and she appeared, wearing the same shorts and T-shirt she had on at the store, but she had covered herself in a long, open sweater that hung down to her thighs. She looked bohemian and sexy as hell.

He proffered the container. "I heard you were sick."

She took the soup. "Thank you, but you didn't have to bring this all the way over here."

"Somebody had to. If it wasn't me, Shula would have asked Trevor, who is Eleanor Boudreaux's driver. You wouldn't have wanted some strange guy knocking on your door."

"Oh, no. We couldn't have that."

That made him smile.

She looked down at the container. "I can't say I'm sorry you brought it. It looks good."

"Do you want me to come in and heat some up for you?"

She held up a hand. "No. I'm all set."

"I've got to say, for a sick person, you look damn good."

She closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead. "It was a miraculous recovery."

"Seriously, why didn't you tell me you'd already been invited and were planning on coming?"

"I don't know," she said, avoiding his gaze.

He waited her out, hoping his lack of chatter would force her to talk.

"It seemed like...a lot."

“What, my family? A lot? You’re joking.”

She hinted at a smile.

“I know you were planning on coming prior to meeting me, and then you canceled. Are you really still pissed at me about the whole Peyton and Braxton thing?”

She waved him off with her free hand. “It’s fine. I just can’t do this whole flirty thing with you.”

“I thought you were doing it pretty well back at the store... at least once you got over that whole *quirky* thing.”

She pointed at him. “I’m not over that.”

“Did you really cancel so you wouldn’t have to be around me?”

She let out a sigh. “I’d been thinking about canceling anyway. I’m not used to big family crowds like that. It’s just me and my mom.”

“I’m not used to big family crowds either. It’s been just me since I was eighteen.”

She considered him. “You really left home the day you turned eighteen?”

“I did.”

“And you went all the way across the country to a place where you knew nobody?”

“Didn’t you do the same when you went off to college?”

She narrowed her gaze. “How did you know I went to a college where I didn’t know anybody?”

“I didn’t. I just assumed you went off to college as opposed to staying around here.”

“Why would you assume that?”

“Because you seem like the brave, adventurous type to me.”

She gave him a skeptical look. “And you surmised this from one exchange at the grocery store?”

“And your choice of sweater that first time I met you.”

Her face broke open in a smile that made his heartbeat erratic.

“Why don’t you invite me in and we can practice *not* flirting with each other?” he said.

“We need to practice that?”

“Yeah, we do. I’m gonna be around more. If you’re going to be with my family, then you’ll have to deal with me. Might as well work that out now.”

She stared at him, considering.

He tried again. “You seem to be someone who’s important to people in my family. I want to clear the air between us so it’s not weird moving forward.”

She looked down at the soup and then back up at him. “Okay, but just for a minute. You need to get back there anyway.”

“Agreed. Just a minute.”

She opened the door further and he followed her inside, glancing around her living room. It was full of eclectic furniture and decorations. A wooden giraffe sat in the corner so tall it almost reached the ceiling. A chandelier with turquoise tassels hung from her dining room ceiling. Twinkly

lights were draped around windows. It was like her apartment represented a different person than she exposed to the world.

She put the soup in the refrigerator. “Can I assume you’re a beer drinker like your brothers?”

“Decent assumption. But I like wine, too.”

She gave him a curious look. “Really?”

“Yeah. Why? Do real men not drink wine?”

“No, not at all. I’m just used to men asking for beer.”

“If you had one, I wouldn’t turn it down.”

“I have two bottles of IPA.”

“Sold.”

She popped the tops off the bottles with a bottle opener and then walked over to where he was standing just outside the kitchen. She handed him a bottle. “We can sit at the dining room table.”

“You don’t trust me enough to sit with me on your couch?”

“Not at all.”

He followed her over to the dining room table and they sat, her at the head and him on the side next to her. “I really am sorry if I was the catalyst for the breakup between you and my brother.”

She studied him. “You might have been, but that doesn’t necessarily mean we shouldn’t have broken up.”

“Oh yeah?”

“That night when we got home, he told me the backstory about why he and Peyton weren’t speaking. Just watching him talk about her, I knew I’d never measure up.”

Quentin had known Peyton her whole life. She was a cute girl, full of spunk. But the idea that this nuanced, complex, beautiful woman in front of him wouldn't measure up to Peyton or any other woman was absurd.

"That must have been hard," he said, wondering just how in love with his brother she was.

"I got over it. I wasn't the one for Braxton, and he wasn't the one for me. If that had been the case, we'd still be together."

"Do you think everyone who is supposed to be together ends up together?" He gave her a skeptical look.

"I didn't say that. I'm not a believer in fate or anything like that."

"Yeah, me neither," he said, but he had to admit that it was unusual for him to feel a pull toward a woman like this one. For sex, sure. But this connection didn't feel like it usually did with one of his typical hookups. He cleared his throat, remembering this was his brother's ex. "So, you and Braxton are cool now?"

"Oh yeah, totally. I mean, there were the typical breakup feelings to process through and all, but it's hard to stay mad at Braxton."

Quentin chuckled. "Not according to Peyton. She was mad at him for like ten years."

"I guess that's true," Calliope said on a laugh.

"Sometimes the ones who we love the most are the ones we stay mad at the longest," he said. Thoughts of his mother and her betrayal flooded his brain. He looked down at the table, messing with an imperfection in the wood.

“That’s a good point. It’s the passion that drives us. Otherwise, we don’t care as much, and the feelings sort of fade away.”

He considered her. “You sure stayed mad at me a long time for calling you quirky.”

She shifted in her seat, folding her open sweater over her chest. “Yes, Quentin, you put it all together. I’ve been madly in love with you since I overheard you berate me to your brother. I’m a masochist. You’re perfect for me.”

There was something about her saying his name that made him feel vulnerable. She’d known who he was earlier at the store, before he remembered her. She’d not only recognized him as her ex’s older brother, but she’d known him by name. It made him wonder what else she knew about him.

“I do remember you from that night,” he said.

“Took you long enough.”

He smiled. “I didn’t recognize you right off because your hair’s different.”

She touched it. “I got it cut recently.” She picked up a short piece and pulled it around to her face. “I’m not sure about all these layers.”

“I like it.”

She squinted at him. “Don’t guys usually prefer long, luxurious locks on women?”

“I like the way it looks on you. It’s youthful.”

She rolled her eyes, flipping her hair away. “I guess I could use some of that these days.”

He thought of all she'd disclosed to him at the store. "I'm sorry about the string of bad luck you've had."

"That's a good way to put it. *Bad luck.*"

"Your maid of honor was really sleeping with your fiancé?"

She closed her eyes, picking at a placemat on the table. "Unfortunately."

"Was she a longtime friend?"

"We'd been best friends since high school."

"That's a long time."

She shrugged. "About fifteen years."

"Have you reconciled with her?"

"No. She tried, but I can't."

"Is she still with him?"

"I honestly don't know," she said.

"I take it you're not Facebook friends."

"I'm not on social media."

This took him aback. "You're not on any social media at all?"

"Not personally. I have a profile for my business, but I'm not on there sharing photos and reading people's stories."

"That's kind of...I don't know..."

"I know. I'm a weirdo."

"No, not at all. I just don't know any women who aren't on there."

She shrugged, and he could tell there was more to that story.

“None of your mutual friends have kept you updated on her and your ex?” he asked.

She shifted in her seat, touching her forehead. “I don’t really stay in touch with many people. I’m super busy with work and all.”

He nodded, feeling like he was looking at the lid of a giant pot, and within that pot, there was a whole stew of information steaming and bubbling toward the surface.

“Enough about my drama,” she said. “What about you? How have you fared in relationships?”

Now he was the one shifting in his seat. “Define relationship?”

She squinted at him. “Don’t tell me you’ve never been in a relationship.”

He scratched his eyebrow. “Maybe I have. What do you consider a relationship?”

She cocked her head to the side. “You’d know if you’d been in one.”

“Then I’ve probably not been in one.”

She stared at him.

“What?” he asked.

“I’m trying to calculate your age.”

“You could just ask,” he said.

“That seems rude.”

“Okay then, how’s your math?”

“Well, Braxton is my age, and Garrett is two school years older than him, and you’re two school years older than Garrett, so you’re...thirty-six?”

“You’re good at math.”

She did this cute little thing with her lips, sort of bunching them over to the side. “I don’t buy that you’ve never been in any kind of relationship.”

He shrugged.

“There has to have been someone special.”

“I’ve had repeat customers, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

She rolled her eyes. “You mean...buddies.”

He squinted one eye. “I’d say they were more than buddies.”

She pushed back from the table. “All right. It’s time to get you back home.”

He took her wrist. “Wait, let me stay a little longer.”

She gave him the side-eye for a moment and then scooted back up to the table. “I’d prefer not to hear about your sexcapades.”

He wagged his eyebrows. “Are you getting jealous?”

“I just met you today.”

“Actually, you met me, what, a few years ago?”

She picked up the placemat corner and then dropped it. “Whatever.”

He narrowed his gaze. “I remember something from that night we first met.”

She gave him a look like she was warning him not to go there, but there was also something in her eyes that told him to proceed forward.

“We had a connection.”

She gave him half a smile through pursed lips. “Oh, okay. Sure. Is this the same connection you have with those repeat customers you were talking about before?”

“I think you felt it, too,” he said, taking a risk.

“I was dating your brother at the time.”

“I know. That’s why I excused myself from our conversation.”

She furrowed her brow.

“I’m not making this up. I felt something.”

She rolled her eyes, and then gave him a look, trying to hold back a smile.

“Didn’t you feel it, too?” he asked.

“You’re calling me a cheater?”

“It’s not cheating to feel a spark with someone else.”

“With your boyfriend’s brother? I’d say it is,” she said.

“Then would you say you cheated on Braxton?”

She huffed a laugh. “You’re insane.”

“I might be a little bit.”

She shook her head at him. “I don’t know why you’re trying so hard here. I told you I’m a mess.”

“Maybe that’s what I like about you,” he said.

“Is that your thing? Fixing the wings of little broken birds?”

He considered her. “I’m not aware that I have a thing. I just know I was really disappointed when you didn’t show up over there today.”

She stared at him a bit longer and then stood up. “I think you should go.”

He stayed seated, looking up at her, trying to stop himself from saying the next words that were begging to come out of his mouth, because he never did this, but he actually wanted to this time. “Let me take you on a date.”

She motioned toward the door. “Go back to your party.”

“I’m having way more fun here.”

She rubbed her forehead. “Seriously, Quentin. Nothing ends well where I’m involved. Now’s your chance to run.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Mull this over. Think about it for a month. If after a month, you’re still interested, give me a call.” She held out her hand. “I’ll give you my number.” He pulled his phone out of his back pocket and handed it to her. She typed into it and then handed the phone back to him. “Now will you leave?”

He looked down at the table like there were options for him sitting there. “What if I wanna call you tomorrow?”

“One month. You can call me in one month and not a day before.”

That actually worked out perfectly for him. He was getting ready to head back to Colorado for a few weeks to close up his business with his partner, Steve, and get the rest of his stuff

moved back to New Orleans. This would give him something to look forward to when he got back to town.

He stood up. "I guess I'll take the deal."

She walked to the front door and opened it, standing with her hands behind her back, messing with the doorknob, looking both confident and vulnerable all at the same time. He'd never wanted to kiss a woman more in his life, and he wasn't about to wait a month to do it.

He walked over to her, slid his hand around the back of her neck, and then planted one on her. She made a noise like she was taken by surprise, but then she settled in, sliding both of her hands into his hair. She pulled him to her as she settled against the door, perking up his midsection. He was about to sport wood right there on the streets of New Orleans. He pulled away while he still had control.

She put her hand over her mouth, touching her fingertips to her lips like she was checking that they were still there. So it wasn't just him who had felt chemistry like an erupting volcano.

He leaned in. "How about you think about that for the next month?" He backed away, giving her one last glance before heading to his truck. How he was going to make it thirty days was beyond him.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Calliope walked to work Monday morning practically whistling. She was not getting hung up on Quentin Broussard by any means, but the kiss had done a number on her.

Just before she got to the shop, her text alert sounded from down in her purse. She set the coffees she was carrying down on the bench outside the store and pulled her phone out with the ridiculous hope that Quentin had decided to forgo her stupid rule and reach out. Her hopes were dashed when she found a text from Nancy.

Calliope, is this still your phone number?

“For Christ’s sake,” Calliope said aloud, dropping her phone down to her side. She changed her number one time a decade ago, and now her stepmother asked if she had the right number every single time she texted. To be fair, she texted her once about every three years, and only for something specific, but still.

Yep, this is me. Hi, Nancy! What’s up?

Hi there, Calliope. It’s Nancy.

Calliope rolled her eyes. It was always like that. Everything had to be on Nancy’s terms, including

acknowledgements. She kept reading.

We took the girls to the zoo and saw the zebras, which made them think of your store. They're asking if they can see you. We'd be happy to pay for a plane ticket for you come out and visit if you can make it work before school starts back in September.

She scratched her forehead, squinting. This wasn't the text she was hoping to get. This was always how the invitations went. *The girls* wanted to see her. Never did Nancy or her father say that *they* wanted to see her. Oh, how the tides had turned.

Calliope thought back to when she was little, sitting on her dad's shoulders, dressed as a princess, watching the Mardi Gras parade. Somewhere along the way she'd been discarded for two younger and cuter models.

She loved her half-sisters, but she didn't love visiting her dad and Nancy. She'd need to think about that. Or really, she'd need to think of an excuse to get out of that.

Let me check. We've got a lot going on with the store, trade shows, etc. I'll see what I can make work. And thanks for the offer of the flight, but that's not necessary.

Calliope would never take a dime from that woman again, not after the passive-aggressive comments she made after she'd found out Calliope's father helped her buy her house. It was the least he could do after leaving her and her mother when Calliope was eighteen. All those years of doting on the two of them, calling them *his beautiful girls*, and then out of nowhere, boom...gone.

She tossed the phone back into her purse. She'd deal with the response later. And she'd order those velveteen zebra

blankets she'd been considering carrying in the store and send one to each of them. They probably only liked her because of all the stuff she sent them all the time. She guessed she was no better than her dad in that regard. *When you can't be there in person, send money to make it all better.* That was his motto, and she'd gone right ahead and adopted it herself.

She shook off the text and the thoughts of her dad and her own inadequacies and headed inside, trying to regain her happy mood from a few minutes ago. She set a coffee down for her mother, who was behind the counter, counting down the register.

Her mother eyed her. "Everything okay?"

That was the rub—she couldn't even talk to her mother about Nancy, the girls, or her dad, because it was all so painful to her. Her mother had been as blindsided as Calliope. The week before he'd left, Deborah had been telling Calliope about all the fun things they were doing together since they'd become empty nesters. They'd been walking regularly in City Park, trying the latest restaurants, and had taken salsa lessons. Her mother had even confided in her that their sex life had taken a turn for the better, which had been a bit weird, but with as happy as it had been making her mother, Calliope hadn't minded.

She set her purse down on the counter. "All good."

"I've got some news that might elevate your mood."

"Oh yeah?"

"Our neighbors next-door are moving."

Calliope stood up straight, setting her coffee down. "The paint store?"

"Yep."

“When?”

“They gave their thirty-day notice yesterday.”

Calliope’s heartbeat kicked into gear. “You’re kidding?”

“I’m not kidding,” her mother said, giving her a knowing smile.

“Are we going to do this?”

“If not now, when?”

They grinned at one another, and Calliope held up both of her hands. Her mother grabbed them and they each squeezed, doing a little dance.

With the space opening next door, Calliope would finally be able to realize her dream of a boutique to sit alongside their gift shop. Clothes had been her thing in high school. She’d been a trendsetter. She’d lost a piece of herself during college, and she’d never regained it. This was her chance to finally find the old Calliope. The *it* girl. The high school princess. The girl who wasn’t mired in shame and humiliation.

The bell on the door sounded, getting their attention. Terry, one of their landlords, walked in, as if on cue.

“I asked him to stop by once I heard the news,” her mother said under her breath.

He beamed. “Hey Calliope.” He bumped into the corner of a table, grabbing it to steady himself before heading up to the front counter.

She gave him a smile. “Terry,” she said tilting her head to the side, covering her heart. “Is it true? They’re moving out?”

“Yep,” he said, looking proud of himself. “They gave their thirty-day notice today.”

“We’ll take it,” Calliope said.

Her mother put her hand on Calliope’s forearm. “Let’s hear what the price is first.”

“I’ve got to talk it over with my brother, but I’m thinking we can let it go for the same price you’re getting this space for.”

Calliope tipped her head. “No way we can get a deal since we’d be renting both spaces?”

“I don’t think Patrick will go for that.”

“I had to try,” Calliope said.

“Of course,” Terry said, grinning at Calliope. They had gone to high school together. Calliope had been head cheerleader, homecoming queen, and prom queen. Terry had been secretary of the D&D club. Terry looked at Calliope like she was still the *it* girl from high school. Nobody else in her life looked at her that way anymore.

“So, do you want to talk lease agreements?” he asked.

“Give us a day or two to run the numbers,” her mother said.

Calliope gave her a look, and her mother gave one right back to her. Calliope wanted to act right then, but she knew her mother had the better idea. They needed to make sure they could afford the extra rent. Expanding was a gamble, one they’d wanted to take for years. This was their shot. Nonetheless, they needed to make sure this wasn’t going to bankrupt them.

“Mom’s right. We’ll discuss it and get back with you very soon.”

He smiled. “Sounds great.”

She turned to her mom. “Can you hold down the fort here while I run some numbers?”

“I’ve been planning on it.”

She squeezed her mom’s arm. “My laptop’s at home. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Take your time.”

When Calliope got home, she pulled out her computer and brought up her business plan. She had mapped out every detail from a supplier for the racks down to the tissue paper she’d wrap the clothes in upon purchase. Her mother had started the gift shop on her own when Calliope was in high school. Calliope had worked there and eventually bought into the business, courtesy of her dad’s guilt money. But it was Deborah’s baby.

This boutique would be Calliope’s vision. Her mother seemed to want it for Calliope as much as she wanted it for herself. She’d even offered to scale back on her own merchandise to make room for some clothing racks, but their merchandise didn’t really lend itself to partner with the kinds of clothing Calliope wanted to carry. She hadn’t wanted to leave her mother high and dry at the shop. The space opening next to them was what they’d been waiting for.

Calliope had been in a dark hole for a long time. She’d gone from being a high school princess on top of the world to being the pea that smothered underneath a stack of mattresses. Everything had been stolen from her in college—her dignity, self-respect, and most of all, her ability to pick the right guy to fall in love with.

When she met her fiancé, Parker, a couple of years ago, she thought she’d pulled out of it. But then he left her for her

best friend, and she fell into a hole she thought she'd never crawl out of.

When she met Malcolm a few months ago, she felt like she was being pulled out of that hole. But then his ex had come to town with a five-month-pregnant belly, and Calliope had fallen right back down into the hole. Now, though, the space opening up next to their shop was like sunlight shining into a cave.

She went online to peruse some of the B2B sites she had earmarked for when or if this day ever came. She hadn't looked at them in probably six months. With it being summer now, the fall lines had been picked over, but she would make do. If she worked hard, she could launch the shop in a couple of months. She could be open by the fourth quarter and launch at the start of the Christmas shopping season.

She spent the whole day tweaking the plan, figuring out a way to make the rent work. Her heart started to flutter. This was the part where she typically backed off, away from the fear. But there was something pulling her into the fold, no matter how scary it was.

She was tired of losing. It was time for her to win.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Quentin walked through the streets of the Marigny for the second time in as many days. This place was starting to have a really good vibe for him—not only because this was where Calliope lived and where he’d kissed her yesterday, but in general, the vibrant feel of the place spoke to him.

He found Garrett standing in front of the space they were coming to see, briefcase slung over his shoulder, talking with a guy Quentin didn’t recognize. Where did Calliope live in relation to this place? He craned his neck around like he could find her house from this very spot. He wondered what she was up to today. He had her number and her address. He’d thought a dozen times about calling her, but he had to play by her rules, as tough as it was going to be.

“Hey,” Garrett said, catching sight of Quentin. “You remember Patrick?”

Garrett and Quentin had spoken about this earlier. Quentin was to say he remembered Patrick, whether he did or not. The name hadn’t rung a bell. But the guy’s face was vaguely familiar. “Yeah, you played baseball, right?” Garrett had broken out his yearbook to confirm such a detail.

“I did. And you played lacrosse,” he said to Quentin.

“Yeah. I’ve got this scar to remind me of that.” He pointed to where he knew his scar to be, above his eyebrow.

The guy looked between Garrett and Quentin with wide eyes. “Man, the Broussard brothers. You guys are kind of legendary around here. Is your brother Braxton coming?”

“No, he’s the black sheep of the family.” Garrett put his hand to his mouth like he was telling a dirty secret. “Corporate drone.” He gave a visible shudder.

“Ah,” Patrick said, and then slid a key into the lock. “The shop owners are out of town for a couple of days. They’re moving to Shreveport, where they’re from.” He let them into the shop, and Garrett and Quentin perused the place, Quentin trying to envision his furniture in there.

After a minute of walking around and having Patrick spout facts about the structure and plumbing, Garrett sidled up to Quentin. “What do you think?”

“Is it too small?” Quentin asked.

“It’s small, but I think it works for a starter place. We can upsize in a couple of years if things go well.”

“True.” Quentin turned to Patrick. “What’s next door to us here?”

“Gift shop. Eclectic.”

“Do they sell furniture?” Garrett asked.

“Not primarily. They’ve got some animal-painted coffee tables and things like that. No kind of competition.”

Quentin thought of the giraffe in Calliope’s apartment and smiled. Maybe she’d shopped there. It was in her

neighborhood.

“Could you do a year lease?” Garrett asked.

“We usually start with three.”

“How about we settle on two, and if we decide to upsize in a couple of years, we’ll come to you to see what else you can show us first? You handle other properties, right?” Garrett said.

Patrick shrugged. “Sure. I guess that would work. You’d let me paper that? A first right of refusal kind of thing?”

“Sure,” Garrett said. “Give me a sec to talk to my big brother.”

“Cool. I’ll be waiting outside.”

Once Patrick was out the door, Garrett turned to Quentin. “Well, do you want to do this?”

“You know I want to do this.”

“Do you want to do it here?” Garrett asked.

“It looks pretty perfect. Do we need to do some research on the area?”

“I’ve been researching the shit out of this town since you first brought this up.”

“I know,” Quentin conceded. He felt guilty because it was his shop, but he hadn’t put in half the work that Garrett had to date...at least not on the logistics. He’d put in plenty of work on the actual furniture, which in fairness, was what they were selling.

“This location is a steal for what they’re asking,” Garrett said.

Quentin couldn't help but have a good vibe from the place and the area. He wasn't sure how much of that was the excellent day he'd had yesterday in this area and the girl he knew was somewhere around one of the street corners, but he felt good about the space, and he felt good in general.

"Kind of seems like it, right here next to the quarter and all," Quentin said.

"I'm ready to sign today if you are. I'm afraid if we don't, it'll slip away from us. It's tough to get the jump on a place like this for this price."

"Shouldn't we look over the contract first?"

"I emailed it to you with my notes redlined. Did you not get that email?"

Quentin vaguely remembered an email from Garrett with an attachment that he hadn't opened. "Maybe. Probably."

Garrett started to walk away. "I don't want to pressure you."

Quentin grabbed him. "No, man, you're not. I'm in. I'm all in. I just want to make sure you're ready to put your faith in me."

"I've already done quite a bit of that lately." Garrett raised his eyebrows at his brother.

Quentin's heartbeat ratcheted up. Garrett *had* put a lot of faith in him. Quentin had talked Garrett into opening a business with him. It had been Quentin's dream for years to sell the furniture that he made in his own retail store rather than wholesale to buyers. It hadn't been that hard to convince his younger brother to put his faith in him.

Garrett had idolized Quentin their whole lives. Quentin almost felt guilty, like he was taking advantage of Garrett's adoration. He'd done nothing to earn that admiration other than be born first. He was leading the two of them on this venture. He felt in his heart it was the right thing to do, but Quentin wasn't a businessman. He was an artist. What the hell did he know about opening a store?

Quentin was putting his faith right back into his little brother. Garrett was an attorney, and he was smart—way smarter than Quentin was. Quentin had to bring everything to this endeavor that he was capable of. And he would do that. He would show Garrett and everyone else in his family that this *artsy-fartsy numbskull* could open a successful business and be an asset, not a liability.

He'd been hiding out in Colorado for eighteen years. But he was back now, and he was ready to show his family who he was, and who he was capable of being.

"Let's do it," he said, projecting all the confidence he could muster, so he could make Garrett feel good about co-signing his name on the dotted line.

Garrett gripped Quentin's shoulder. "Let's not regret this leap, no matter what happens."

"Deal," Quentin said, and they headed out to find Patrick.

CHAPTER
SIX

Calliope got to work an hour early Tuesday morning. She and her mother were meeting Terry to peruse the space. Her mother walked up holding two coffees. She handed one to Calliope. “Are you ready for this?”

Calliope took the coffee with a nod of thanks. “I spent the whole day yesterday tweaking the plan. Do you think he’s going to let us take the space without proof of a loan?”

“I don’t know.” Her mother sipped her coffee, glancing around. “I think the better question is do we *need* to take the space without a loan?”

“I will figure this out, Mom. This has got to work.”

“Honey, listen, I know this seems perfect. But it’s okay if it doesn’t work out. We’ll figure something else out. There’re other spaces.”

“I’m not leaving the shop.”

“Maybe we’ll find a bigger space somewhere to put both shops.”

“No way. We’re not giving up this location. If you hadn’t rented this space almost two decades ago, we’d never be able to have a spot like this.”

Her mother smiled at her and then glanced in the window. “Do you think he’ll let us take this wall down?”

“I think Terry won’t be the problem. It’s his brother we’ve got to worry about.” Patrick was Terry’s older brother, and Calliope had been a middle school pipsqueak when Patrick was in high school. He’d had zero interest in her at that non-fabulous stage in her life.

Her mother sighed. “No doubt.”

A car honked, and they both looked over to find Terry holding up a hand in apology as he scurried across the street. “I’m sorry, ladies. I was trying to find the key.”

“Did you find it?” her mother asked.

He pulled it out of his pocket and held it up. “Got it.” It dropped to the sidewalk and they all three reached down to grab it, but Terry came up with it.

“Here we go,” he said, sliding the key into the lock and letting them in.

“They’re okay if we check out the place?” Calliope asked.

“Yeah, they understand. We told them we’d have folks in and out of here while they’re gone for a few days.”

“Folks? You’ve already got other people asking about the space?” Calliope asked.

“It’s a popular area. But of course, we’re partial to you ladies. You’ve been tenants for eighteen years and seven months. You pay your rent on time, mostly.”

Deborah slid Calliope a look.

Terry opened the door for them and they walked through, viewing the paint store they’d been in a number of times with

new eyes. Calliope mentally erased the shelves of paint brushes and accessories and replaced them with racks of clothes. They'd strategically place some of the more upscale gift shop items in the boutique and some of the more funky boutique items in the gift store to entice customers to shop both sides. They'd have their bags rebranded with logos from both stores. Calliope had already started the design and would get her mom's opinion when they got back to the office.

"How would you feel about us knocking down this wall?" her mother asked.

He frowned. "Um..."

"It wouldn't have to be the whole wall," Calliope said. "Maybe just a nice big open walk-through?"

"I'd need to have Patrick's approval."

"Of course. Either way, we're definitely interested," Calliope said.

Terry frowned into his phone.

Calliope and her mom raised their eyebrows at each other, and then her mother said, "So, I believe we're ready to go ahead with the paperwork."

"Yes, of course," Terry said, but he was seriously focused on his phone.

"Do you have a contract we can look over?" Calliope asked.

"Give me a moment, okay?" he asked, shooting them a forced smile and then putting the phone to his ear.

He walked away, leaving the two of them there. "What's that about?" Deborah asked.

“Who knows. I really hope he’ll let us do a walkway here. It’d be nice to be able to help each other out when one of us needs to go grab food or whatever.”

“We need to be strategic, make our case.”

“Yeah, a smile and a wink doesn’t work with Patrick,” Calliope said.

Terry headed their way, his face flushed. He scratched his forehead. “I’ve got some bad news.”

Calliope’s heart sank. “Don’t tell me the space is rented.”

“I didn’t know Patrick was showing it already. I didn’t even know Patrick knew it was up for grabs. The Hendersons had given their notice to me both verbally and via email. He hadn’t been copied.”

Calliope’s shoulders sank. She could feel the dream drifting away.

“Is there anything we can do?” Deborah asked. “Has that paperwork already been signed?”

“Unfortunately, it has.”

Calliope tossed up her hands. “This is unbelievable. The space has only been available for what, a day or two?”

“I’m so sorry,” Terry said. “Truly. But the contract has been signed.”

Calliope closed her eyes as the disappointment washed over her.

Her mother squeezed her shoulder. “It’s okay, honey. We’ll figure something else out.”

“Is there any way we can talk to the people? Try to change their minds?” Calliope was fruitlessly entering the bargaining

stage of this loss.

“I can’t give up their information. That would be a violation.”

“Of course it would,” Calliope’s mom said, lifting her eyebrows at her daughter.

“Is there any hope at all that the contract will fall through?” Calliope asked him, grasping at straws.

“I doubt it. An attorney’s involved.”

“Great.” Calliope glanced around the store, watching her beautiful clothes fall off the hangers and disappear down invisible drains in the floors.

“Thank you, Terry,” her mother said. “We appreciate you trying.”

Calliope nodded her agreement, having trouble forming words.

They all headed outside, and Terry locked up the shop. They said their goodbyes, and then Calliope’s mom opened their store. “I can’t believe somebody already grabbed that space.”

Calliope followed her mom into the store. “I should’ve known. I don’t know what part of me thought this would turn out well with my track record.”

Her mother set her purse down on the countertop. “We’ll figure something else out. We just need to keep an open mind.”

Calliope shoved her purse under the counter. “Whoever this is doesn’t want that space as much as we do. They have a clean slate. They don’t have to move next-door to us. They can move anywhere in town.”

“That might be the case, but the point is the space is now theirs. They don’t have to want it more than us.”

“I know. I’ll get over it.”

Her mother squeezed her arm and then walked toward the back office.

Calliope pulled up the logo designs she had saved on her phone. They were good designs. Her favorite one went along with their gift store logo perfectly. She would have to wait to debut it.

If she could just find out who had rented that space, maybe she could talk some sense into them. Her mother was right. She needed to give it up. But maybe they could be reasoned with.

They would show up over there at some point to look at the space, measure, something. When they did, she would be ready for them. Maybe she would offer them something. Her firstborn? Her right arm? She would figure it out. Because if she didn’t have the dream of the store to latch onto right now, she was going to fall into a hole that would be hard to pull herself out of.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

The Hendersons had moved out of their space a week early, so it was sitting there, empty, taunting Calliope. Another thing taunting her was the calendar. She'd given that damn waiting period to Quentin, which was really for herself. She thought a month's time would be plenty to rid her thoughts of the Rocky Mountain muscle man, but here she was, three weeks later, still daydreaming of that kiss.

This was her life now—splitting her time thinking about Quentin Broussard and waiting for the new neighbors to show their smug faces.

She stared at the wall adjoining the two stores. “I swear, I don't think they're moving in.”

“And why would they not be moving in?” her mother asked.

“I don't know. Maybe their contract fell through.”

“Maybe you're indulging in some wishful thinking,” her mother said.

Calliope let out a sigh. “I just think it's weird that we've not seen them. Not even a glimpse.”

“Something tells me it won’t be long now.” Her mother’s phone buzzed, and she picked it up with a smile. She’d met a man three weeks ago. He’d come into the shop to buy a gift for his adult daughter. She’d seen a pair of alligator earrings that she wanted for her birthday and had sent him to their shop to get them for her. Deborah and he had been hot and heavy ever since with no sign of slowing down.

Calliope was sincerely happy for her mother. There wasn’t anyone who deserved love more than Deborah. But all the giddiness in the air just made Calliope wish Quentin hadn’t forgotten about her now that the thirty days were almost up.

The bell on the door chimed, getting Calliope’s attention. She stood up straight. “Ms. Boudreaux. How are you?”

Peyton’s mother stepped into the store, glancing around like she was bored. Calliope liked Peyton’s mother, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t intimidated by her.

“Hello, ladies,” Eleanor said, as she made her way toward the counter, examining their peculiar merchandise. Eleanor Boudreaux was classic New Orleans. The Boudreauxes weren’t old money, but they smelt of it. For all intents and purposes, Eleanor behaved like a woman who was born into riches and wanted to make sure everyone knew it. But on the other hand, Eleanor had been in New Orleans long enough to know even old New Orleans money was dazzled with the eccentric. Calliope wasn’t ashamed of their store. But she did wonder if Eleanor found it to be the appropriate type of quirky.

“I keep missing Peyton,” Calliope said. “Mom said she was here a few days ago, dropping off chocolate, but I was out running errands.”

Eleanor waved off Calliope. “If you ever need her, you know where to find her—that cursed chocolate shop.”

“Not your favorite place?” Deborah asked.

“I like the shop just fine. I don’t like that it has swallowed my daughter whole.” She tossed up a hand. “Would lunch with her mother once in a blue moon be so much to ask?”

Calliope’s mom smiled. “What brings you in today, Eleanor?”

“Birthday gift.”

“For a friend?” her mother asked.

“Lucendia Waverly.”

All three women gave each other knowing glances. If New Orleans had a queen, it would be Lucendia Waverly.

Calliope leaned in. “Are you sure you want to find her gift in here?”

“The woman has everything she’d ever want. And she always turns her nose up at the wine I bring her. I thought I’d go a different route this time. A gag gift, possibly?”

Calliope nodded. Eleanor’s presence in the store made sense now. “I’ll see what I can put together for you.” Calliope walked over to a shelf behind Eleanor to a section of peacock merchandise. “What’s been going on with Savannah?”

“She’s been in Colorado for the past week.”

Calliope fumbled a figurine. “Colorado?” Calliope knew that Quentin made furniture in Colorado. Savannah had mentioned that he had been considering a move back to New Orleans, and he’d said he was going to be around more. She’d hoped that had meant he was moving back permanently, but she hadn’t confirmed that.

“Is she visiting the oldest Broussard boy?” Calliope’s mother asked. Calliope slid her mother a look. Nothing got by that woman. Calliope had mentioned him to her a couple of weeks ago. She must have internally logged the remark. Calliope couldn’t be upset with her though. She was thrilled that her mother did the asking so she didn’t have to.

“He’s in the process of moving here. He’s bringing all his furniture.” Eleanor made eye contact with Calliope. “He’s a brilliant artisan,” she said in a way that left no room for argument.

“I’ll bet Garrett and Braxton will be glad to have him back,” Calliope’s mom said.

“We’ll see once he gets here,” Eleanor said. “Those three boys are as different as oil, water, and turpentine.”

Calliope wondered which one of those liquids represented Quentin.

“Everyone will be home on Saturday. Shula and I are hosting Sunday lunch. The two of you should be there.” With Eleanor’s expressionless stare, it seemed more like a directive than a friendly invite. But that was just Eleanor. Calliope wasn’t sure if she had ever seen her smile.

“I have to watch the shop,” her mother said, “but Calliope, you should go.”

Calliope was embarrassed to think about how much Quentin Broussard had been on her mind the past few weeks. One kiss was all it took, and she was like a sixteen-year-old with a crush.

They were still a week or so out from that one-month waiting period she’d assigned to them. It sounded like he

might be at the gathering. As much as she wanted to go, she couldn't show up there. It would look too desperate.

"I'd love to, but we have that big event on Sunday." She widened her eyes at her mom, hoping she'd catch the hint.

Her mom waved her off. "Oh, don't worry about that. I've got Peggy and Elizabeth already on the schedule. You're off the hook."

Oh, she was good. Calliope must have been more transparent than she realized if her mother had caught on so quickly to her attraction to a Broussard boy. Now that Deborah was falling in love, she probably wanted the same for Calliope.

"Bring that summer salad," Eleanor said. "Peyton attempted it a few weeks ago, but the avocados were brown and mushy."

Calliope winced. As Eleanor and Deborah chatted, Calliope put together the gift for Lucendia Waverly, taking a figurine of a peacock in a bathtub and surrounding it with bath bombs, soaps, bubble bath and other bathing essentials.

Was she really going to show up at this place where she knew Quentin would be? It was neutral ground, being at the Boudreaux house, but Quentin was like family to the Boudreauxes. Still, Eleanor seemed to want her there. She knew Calliope was available, thanks to Deborah. Calliope wasn't sure how she could get out of it, other than faking another illness, which would look pretty suspicious at this point.

She presented the gift to Eleanor, who hinted at a smile, looking Calliope in the eye. "It's perfect."

Calliope beamed with pride and rang it up, putting it in a gift bag full of tissue and tying it up with ribbon. She passed it to Eleanor. “Have fun with Lucendia.”

“I don’t know if *fun* is the right word. but we’ll have a time.” She took the bag. “I’ll see you at eleven o’clock on Sunday.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Goodbye, Deborah,” Eleanor said to Calliope’s mom. Her mother gave her a smile and a wave. Eleanor got almost to the front door before turning and saying, “By the way, I heard Quentin yammering on about having met you at the grocery store a few weeks back, in case Broussard boys are your thing. They certainly have been for the girls in my family.” She gave another one of those partial smiles, and then pushed the door open.

When she was safely down the street, Calliope turned to her mom, her heartbeat racing.

“Quentin Broussard, huh?” her mother said.

“Oh, quit playing dumb. What’s this about you having Peggy and Elizabeth on the schedule for Sunday?”

“What’s this about some event we’re having?”

She squinted at her mother. “I’m not sure I want to go.”

“Why not? You’ve been rattling on about him.”

“I’m sure I mentioned him like one time.”

“One time was all it took.” Her mother grinned at her. “I saw the look on your face.”

“What look?”

She pointed at her. “That same look. Pink cheeks, uncontrollable smile begging to break through.”

Calliope folded a piece of tissue. “He’s a huge player, Mom.”

“He probably just needs the right woman to settle him down.”

“What is up with you? You never push me off on boys.”

“This particular boy is brothers with the two guys your closest friends are dating and/or married to.”

It was sad that her mother considered Savannah and Peyton to be Calliope’s closest friends, but she wasn’t wrong. Calliope had pushed most of her other friends away when she’d learned they knew about her maid of honor’s betrayal and were going to let Calliope marry Parker anyway, even knowing he’d been sleeping with Tiffany for months. They all covered for Tiffany, because their friendships with her had been more important than letting Calliope marry a philandering asshole. Peyton and Savannah hadn’t been a part of any of that because they were newer friends. Even so, Calliope had trust issues now.

“There are worse things than marrying into a big family that already has people you love in it,” her mother said.

Calliope put her hands on her hips. “Now I’m getting married to him?”

Her mother tossed up both hands as she walked around to the other side of the counter. “I’m just saying. I wouldn’t mind seeing you married off to a family we actually like.”

“Since when are you so worried about marrying me off? Are you trying to get rid of me so you and Donald can run away and live happily ever after?”

Deborah's cheeks pinkened, and Calliope wondered if there was a part of Deborah that had been mulling over that exact scenario. "Of course not. This just seems like a nice fit."

Calliope thought about Easter when she and her mother went to the Boudreaux house for lunch. They'd sat around with Eleanor and Shula, who had been Peyton and Marcelle's caregiver their whole lives, but had become Eleanor's roommate and best friend these days. After everyone had cleared out, the four of them had sat around for another hour or two chatting, the older women swapping stories. It'd been one of Calliope's favorite afternoons in a while.

"I think more than you want me happy with Quentin, you want to be in the Boudreaux/Broussard family circle."

Deborah shrugged. "I'll cop to that. I've always thought it was so neat how those two families sort of merged into one. And I like Eleanor."

Eleanor wasn't Quentin's mom. Charlotte had passed away a few months back. But Eleanor and Shula were both like mothers to the Broussard boys. For all intents and purposes, Eleanor would be Calliope's mother-in-law if she were to marry into the Broussard family.

Calliope knocked herself upside the head. She could not seriously be thinking about marrying Quentin Broussard after one kiss. That was the stupidest thought that had come into her head in a long time, and Calliope's head was full of stupid thoughts.

"Just don't get your hopes up, okay?" she said to her mother.

"I don't have my hopes up. I'm an opportunist. How often does a mother get to see her daughter date a boy from a family

she knows and trusts? It's usually some stranger and we both have to start from scratch getting to know the family. We know these people. We like these people."

Calliope squinted at her mother. "In case you haven't noticed, Quentin Broussard isn't knocking down my door."

"It sounds like he's been busy. He's moving here. He's not even in town right now." Her mother pointed at her. "But he will be."

Calliope was trying to hold back her smile. "You need to quit all of this. It's dangerous."

"How is it dangerous?"

"We're both getting our hopes up, that's how," Calliope said.

"So, I'm not the only one?"

Calliope sighed, the reality of the situation blanketing her. "I've had a tough time of it, Mom."

Her mother's hopeful expression faded. "I know, sweetie."

"I can't put myself out there again. Not yet."

Her mother nodded. "I know."

The two women exchanged knowing looks, and then the bell on the door dinged. Her mother reached across the counter, squeezing Calliope's arm, and then went to greet the customer.

As Calliope tidied the counter, she put herself in check. Quentin may have been asking about her. That shouldn't surprise her. He was intrigued, probably because he knew he couldn't contact her for a month. Nothing like telling a guy he can't have something to make him want it more. But once she

opened that door for him, that'd be the end of the chase, and he'd lose interest.

Quentin Broussard was not the marrying type. He was thirty-six years old and still single. That was Calliope's first hint. Peyton and Savannah had both talked about Quentin and how he dated around but never settled down. How was Calliope seriously thinking that she was going to change him? She couldn't even get her college boyfriend to have sex with her face-to-face.

Flashbacks ascended of Evan watching porn on his laptop and then rolling over and sticking her from behind. She'd try to turn toward him so they could have some sort of intimacy, but he would just move her back to where she wasn't facing him. He couldn't stand to look at her.

And those were the better nights. There were the nights when she could hear him getting himself off. She would lay there, eyes closed, waiting for it to be over. When she tried to talk to him about it, he told her if she would lay off the fast food once in a while, he might be able to stand to be with her from the front.

She shuddered as she tried to shake off the memories. The customer her mother had just spoken to walked by with a smile. Calliope smiled back, heat filling her chest. "Excuse me," she said, and then headed to the bathroom.

She sat down on the closed toilet seat, dropping her head into her hands. How had her self-esteem gotten so far away from her? How had she gone from sitting on top of the world in high school to feeling like a worthless excuse for a human just a couple of years later in college?

She stood up and walked over to the mirror, looking at herself. It was her own form of punishment—stare in the

mirror and face what she'd become. Think about the girl from the high school parade float waving like some kind of damned queen bee.

“Who did you think you were?” she asked herself, her voice not sounding like her own.

That girl her college boyfriend couldn't stand to look at, that was who she was. Her body hadn't changed since college. How was anything different now?

She wasn't marrying Quentin Broussard or anyone of the sort. She was going to be single for the rest of her life and that was just fine. She had her shop. She had her mother. She didn't need anyone else. And when that feeling of hope ascended, she needed to bat it away like a line drive.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Calliope was on the fourth outfit she was considering wearing to the Boudreaux house for lunch when her phone rang. She didn't recognize the number, but she went ahead and picked it up, fully expecting it to be a telemarketer but too curious not to answer.

"Hello?"

"Calliope, it's Eleanor Boudreaux. There's been a change of venue."

Calliope's heartbeat skittered. Why did this woman make her so nervous? She was perfectly kind. "Okay," Calliope said, trying to sound chipper.

"Shula and I will pick you up. What's your address, my dear?"

My dear? That was a first from Eleanor. Calliope gave her the address.

"We'll be there in around forty-five minutes."

"Okay," Calliope said, realizing she was talking into a dead phone. The call had ended.

She went back to her closet. Why hadn't she taken some time to buy a new outfit? Because it was simply lunch at the

Boudreaux house, that was why. Or somewhere else, as it turned out. Eleanor hadn't mentioned where.

Calliope settled on a turquoise sundress that she wasn't wild about. It was comfortable and didn't cling to any of her extra pounds, but it also wasn't hugely flattering. Maybe this would be a test. If Quentin liked her in this dress, then he wasn't only out for sex. She rolled her eyes at herself and pulled the dress over her head.

Like clockwork, forty-five minutes later, she got a text from the same number as earlier.

We're here.

She double-checked that she had her lip gloss, grabbed the summer salad, and then headed out the front door. A black Town Car sat in front of her home with a man in a suit beside it, standing in an at-ease military position. "Ms. Koch?"

"Yes," she said, feeling like someone special for the first time in a long time.

He opened the car door, and inside sat Eleanor Boudreaux in the middle of the backseat and Shula on the other side. Eleanor patted the seat next to her. "Join us, won't you, dear?"

Calliope got in the car, feeling like she was in a black and white movie. "Hello Ms. Boudreaux." She craned her neck around Eleanor. "Ms. Thomas." She had texted Peyton to get Shula's last name.

"While I appreciate the gesture of respect, I prefer Eleanor."

"Yes, ma'am," Calliope said, feeling like she was nine years old.

“You can call me Oprah Winfrey,” Shula said, making Eleanor laugh. These two had a unique chemistry that was charming the pants off Calliope. Shula had worked for Eleanor for decades, but now they acted like lifelong friends—giddy ones at that.

“Oprah it is,” Calliope said.

The driver got in the front seat, and they were off.

“So, there was a change of venue?” Calliope asked as a conversation starter.

“Yes, I should’ve known better,” Eleanor said. “It wasn’t this way when Charlotte was still alive. Neither one of us was keeping score of which one hosted the last event. It was whoever got the whim to gather the crew.”

“She wants to pull her weight,” Shula said. “No harm in that.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “She wants to do a lot more than that.”

Calliope caught on that they were talking about Crystal, Radford Broussard’s second wife. Calliope had heard all about her when she was dating Braxton. He’d had more than a little trouble adjusting to the fact that his father had divorced his mother while she was sick but alive in a facility. She had met Crystal at the Boudreaux house the same night she had met Quentin—the ugly Christmas sweater night.

Eleanor leaned in. “Crystal. Radford’s new wife.”

“Not so new anymore,” Shula said.

“Do you want me to refer to her as his old wife?”

“You’ll have to ask her what she wants to be called,” Shula said.

“Seeing that Calliope is Braxton’s age, that means she’s slightly older than Crystal. She will not be referring to her as Mrs. anything,” Eleanor said.

Calliope was starting to get a little nervous. “Is the change of venue to the Broussard home?”

“It is,” Eleanor said.

Calliope winced. She’d been on the fence about coming when it was on neutral ground, but now the event was at Quentin’s family home. How was that supposed to look? She issued this waiting period and then was showing up to his home before it was over? What a disaster. “Are you sure it’s okay that I join?”

Eleanor placed her perfectly manicured fingertips on Calliope’s knee. “It is more than okay. You are welcome anywhere Shula and I go. Isn’t that right, Shula?”

“More the merrier,” Shula said, her hands holding a pie plate in her lap. If Calliope had to guess, Shula was five to ten years younger than Eleanor. Yet Eleanor’s hands looked like a teenager’s compared to Shula’s.

Calliope looked out the window, gathering her senses.

“I do wish your mother could’ve joined us,” Eleanor said. “I really like Deborah. You remember Deborah, don’t you, Shula?”

“Of course, I remember Deborah. Easter Sunday.”

“That’s right. I find her to be down-to-earth,” Eleanor said.

Shula snickered.

“What?” Eleanor asked.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You think I’m not down-to-earth, don’t you?” Eleanor asked.

Shula gave Eleanor a look. Eleanor glanced over at Calliope with a hint of a smile.

The two women continued with their unlikely banter, which in another situation, Calliope would love to enjoy. But she couldn’t focus. She was too stressed out.

Calliope wasn’t ready for this. She had planned for neutral ground at the Boudreaux house while she helped Shula and Eleanor cook. She hadn’t planned on infiltrating Quentin’s family home and forcing him to host her as his guest. But this train was already on the track and rolling full-steam-ahead. She considered opening the car door at the next red light and making a run for it.

CHAPTER
NINE

Calliope was settling into the dynamic in the car when they pulled up a driveway in the Garden District. She took stock of the cars that were parked, wondering which one was Quentin's. There was a big, baby blue truck that looked like it had come from the previous millennium. She wondered if that was his. If he was someone who transported furniture, he'd need a truck.

She didn't notice Peyton's car or Savannah's, but they were each riding around with Braxton and Garrett these days. She did see Braxton's car. She didn't know what Garrett drove.

They exited the Town Car, and Calliope straightened out her dress with one hand while holding the summer salad in the other. She followed behind Eleanor with Shula trailing her.

Crystal Broussard opened the front door with a toothy grin. "Well, look at you ladies. Don't the three of you look as beautiful as three debs at a Mardi Gras ball."

Calliope had to wonder if Crystal had ever been to a Mardi Gras ball. Men wore tuxes with tails and women wore elaborate ballgowns. Others wore costumes for the show. Shula, Eleanor, and Calliope, while each holding their own, didn't look anything like they'd come in from a Mardi Gras

ball. Crystal wasn't from New Orleans, so Calliope suspected this was her way of trying to show that she could fit in.

“Thank you, Crystal,” Eleanor said, losing the giddiness from earlier in the car.

Crystal held the door open. “Come on in, y'all.”

As Calliope passed through the doorway, Crystal pointed at her. “It's Calliope, right? We talked at Easter.”

“That's right. It's good to see you again.” Calliope glanced around the gaudy living room adorned in reds and golds. “You have a beautiful home.” She was okay telling a white lie every once in a while.

“Thank you. I feel like it's always a work in progress, but I'm happy, for the moment.” Crystal put her hands on her thighs, bending down to Shula's level. “Hello, Miss Shula,” she shouted as if Shula was an elderly woman, when in fact she was likely younger than Eleanor.

“Hello, Crystal,” Shula said, handing her the pie. Leave it to Shula to let Crystal roll right off her shoulder.

“Everyone's in the Florida room in the back,” Crystal said. “We've got the AC cranked up because of all the windows. My cocktail of the day is a pinearita. It's a margarita but with pineapple juice. Y'all head on in there and I'll have the caterers bring each of you one.”

“Just water for me, please, child,” Shula said.

Crystal's cheeks pinkened, and she headed off, leaving Calliope holding her summer salad. Possibly the food was set up in the Florida room where Crystal had directed them.

As they headed that way, Calliope's stomach soured. There was a time in high school where she would've walked into a

room full of strangers, and her only thought would have been of all the new friends she was about to make. But those days had passed. Now, the anxiety rose in her chest, and her armpits were starting to get sticky.

As they entered the room, she scanned it for a familiar face but came up with none. There were a few women chatting by the bar table and a scattering of men spilling out onto the patio. Savannah and Peyton were nowhere to be found.

Calliope had made the grave mistake of not checking with either one of them to see if they were going to be there today. She assumed since the party was originally going to be at Peyton's family home, that Peyton would be there. Eleanor had said as much when she was in the shop earlier in the week, hadn't she? But these weren't people Calliope recognized.

Eleanor became absorbed in a conversation with some men Calliope didn't know, except for Radford, Quentin's father. She had seen him at the Boudreaux house on Easter, but they hadn't spoken. She wasn't sure if he would remember her as Braxton's former girlfriend or if he would remember her at all.

She leaned down to say something to Shula, but a woman Calliope didn't recognize said Shula's name and then swept her up into a hug. Calliope stood there holding her summer salad, feeling lost.

She backed out of the room and walked toward the kitchen, which is where she would've gone to begin with if she would've been thinking straight. She bumped into Crystal, who was on her way out. "I should have brought this in here earlier," Calliope said.

Crystal took it, inspecting it with a frown. "That's no problem whatsoever." She had mentioned caterers. Calliope supposed a summer salad was not on the catering menu. Who

brought a salad to a catered lunch? But Calliope didn't know it was a catered lunch, and Eleanor had requested it specifically. Everything was wrong. It was taking all that was within her not to run out the front door and call a rideshare.

"I'll just see if the caterers can work this into their menu," Crystal said.

As Crystal headed to the kitchen, Calliope inhaled a deep breath, hoping to get a handle on herself before she went to that place of darkness and flight. She closed her eyes, her world spinning. What had happened? How had she gotten there, and how could she leave as soon as possible?

"Calliope?"

Quentin Broussard's voice permeated Calliope's ears and slid down her chest like ice-water on an August day.

She turned to face him. "Hi," she said, taking him in. She was convinced that she had exaggerated his good looks over the past few weeks, but she hadn't given him enough credit. He was the most handsome creature she'd laid her eyes on, with that strong chin of his giving him capabilities he probably didn't even possess. That little scar above his eye was full of mystery and a story she wanted to hear.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

She swallowed, wanting to make herself small. "I came with Eleanor and Shula."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry. That was rude." He opened his eyes. "What I meant was, welcome."

"Eleanor invited me when it was going to be at her house. She just called a little while ago and told me about the venue change. I'm sorry if I'm intruding."

“No, not at all.”

A woman in a black catering uniform approached the two of them. “Cocktail du jour?”

Calliope took it. It didn’t matter what it was. She needed the alcohol to calm her nerves. “Thank you.” She took a sip. It wasn’t bad—not as sugary sweet as she expected.

“I was going to call, but—”

She held up a hand. “Please. There’s no need to explain yourself.”

“What I was going to say, if you would’ve let me finish, was that it’s not been a month yet.”

She gave him a look. “Close enough. Look, there’s no need to—”

It was his turn to interrupt. “You said a month, and not a day before, didn’t you?”

She couldn’t remember if she’d said that exact phrase or not, but he seemed to have conviction. She let her shoulders sag. “Maybe so. I don’t know.”

“Well, I do know. By my calculation, it’s been exactly four weeks, which is twenty-eight days. Technically, I guess you could call that a month if it were February, but seeing that it’s August, I thought I better wait at least thirty days, if not thirty-one.”

She couldn’t help a little smile. “You really put that much thought into it?”

“Yes, I did.”

She rolled her eyes and glanced around, trying not to buy whatever he was selling.

He took her by the arm, sending a jolt through her core with that one touch. “I’m not kidding. I was planning to call you this week.”

She let her head fall to the side. “I have a hard time believing that.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t seem like that kind of guy.”

“What kind of guy do I seem like?”

“You seem like the kind of guy who takes what he wants when he wants it.”

He grinned. “You mean like with that kiss?”

Heat rose up through her chest. “You’re telling me you always follow a woman’s protocol, even when it goes against what you want?”

“When they’re setting boundaries, yes, every single time.”

Why was he going and saying things that were making her fall a little bit further for him? She shifted her weight to the side. “So, if you would have called, what would you have said?”

“Why don’t you let the week play out and find out.”

She let out a hard breath, considering him. He couldn’t be for real. For one thing, he was entirely too good-looking for her. And he was respectful of her boundaries on top of that? If her track record of falling for guys who seemed too good to be true told her anything, it was that she needed to shut down this conversation ASAP.

“I hear you’re moving back here,” she said, her masochistic side furthering the conversation.

“That’s right. Garrett and I have been in Colorado, closing things down.”

“You’re here now, permanently?”

He opened up his arms and cocked his head to the side. “I’m all yours.”

Oh, the things that man’s charm did to her core. “Welcome back home.”

“Thanks.”

As they stood there in silence, he stared at her like he was trying to figure something out. She looked down at her drink and then glanced around the room. When she met his gaze again, he blinked, seeming to wake up.

She cleared her throat. “How did the avocados work out for you?”

“I think they were fine. Peyton didn’t complain.”

“That’s a good sign. She’s a professional chef.”

“And a damn good one.”

“Speaking of Peyton, is she here?” Calliope glanced around.

“No, she and Savannah are at the shop today. Savannah’s going to fill in while Peyton goes out of town this upcoming week. I guess they’re training today.”

“Oh,” Calliope said. She couldn’t believe she didn’t ask either one of them if they would be here today. Calliope was terrible about keeping up with friends, likely stemming from her trust issues.

She loved both Savannah and Peyton, but they had each other. They were blood relatives—cousins. Calliope

sometimes felt like she was in the way, so she often found herself backing all the way out of the picture.

“There’re some women in the Florida room I’ll introduce you to,” he said. “They went to our high school.”

“Oh?” Calliope asked. She hadn’t recognized them, which probably meant they were his age. She had to wonder exactly what they were doing there.

“Yeah, they’re some friends I hadn’t seen in a while. Garrett and I bumped into them in the CBD the other night. He invited them here today.”

“Ah,” she said, wishing she could crawl under a table and hold herself in the fetal position for the next two hours. If Calliope wasn’t such a freak about friendships, she would’ve known that Peyton and Savannah wouldn’t be there, and she would’ve found an excuse to back out. The last thing she wanted was for Quentin to feel like he had to babysit her at a family party. He was already trying to pawn her off on the other women who were there.

“I’ll say hello myself. I’ll be fine.”

“I know that,” he said, glancing her up and down with that sideways grin.

She rolled her eyes, holding back her smile, feeling like she was back at her house with him that day she met him at that grocery store, where it was only the two of them and not a bunch of beautiful women who he probably dated and took to prom and danced with at Mardi Gras balls.

The doorbell rang and Crystal scurried out of the kitchen toward the front door.

“This is quite the gathering,” Calliope said. “I have to admit, I didn’t realize what I was getting myself into.”

Quentin craned his neck to see into the Florida room. “I’m guessing Shula didn’t either. I’m told it’s hard enough to get her out of the house. I was kind of surprised to see her.”

“From what Savannah and Peyton tell me, she’s been sort of coming out of her shell the past several months. I think she’s dating.”

A smile widened his handsome face. “All right, Shula.”

Crystal came barreling toward them with a tall, leggy blonde in tow. “Quentin, I’ve got another friend of yours here.”

“Holy shit,” Quentin said under his breath.

The gorgeous girl put her hand over her mouth and then the two of them moved toward one another in a quiet embrace, as if no words were necessary.

Crystal gave Calliope a look, raising her eyebrows, and then she slid away toward the kitchen, leaving Calliope alone with these two people who obviously had an intimate connection.

“Excuse me,” Calliope said quietly and started to walk away.

“Wait,” he said, but Calliope just smiled with a polite wave and scooted toward the Florida room, the pit in her stomach growing.

CHAPTER
TEN

Quentin's worlds were colliding. He'd been dutifully waiting a month's time before calling Calliope. He hadn't been expecting her to show up at his dad's house, especially with Savannah and Peyton tied up. He damned sure wouldn't have let Garrett invite their high school friends. They were harmless, of course, but Calliope didn't know that.

Angela pulled away from him. "Quentin Broussard. I know it's been at least a decade, but it feels like yesterday."

And Angela of all people. What was she doing there? She hadn't been one of the ones they'd run into earlier in the week. Angela was the last person who needed to show up there. Quentin had fibbed to his brothers that she was renting the Bourbon Street apartment to him for a steal. He'd gotten the idea after having seen her picture on some real estate signs. He'd had to come up with some reason as to why he was able to afford such a luxury. They had no idea how he'd gotten it, and it needed to stay that way.

"It's been almost two decades," he said.

She glanced him up and down. "Look at you. I thought men were supposed to get fat and bald once they reached thirty-five. What are you doing here after all this time?"

He glanced into the Florida room to see what Calliope was doing. He found her talking to the women he said he would introduce her to. She wasn't kidding when she said she'd do it herself. He liked a woman who could hold her own at a party.

"Quentin?" Angela asked.

He turned to her. "I'm home...to live."

"That's what I heard. I'm just curious what got you here."

"Listen, can I ask a huge favor of you?"

She looked surprised and pleased with herself. "You leave me with no warning to move across the country just as we're entering the summer after our senior year, and now you want something from me?" She was smiling but getting in her jabs, nonetheless.

He moved her to the side so he could speak quieter. "Listen, this is going to sound strange, but if Garrett or Braxton say something to you about me renting a Bourbon Street apartment from you for really cheap, will you just go with it?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Do I get to see this fantastic apartment I'm renting you?"

"Of course," he said, hoping he'd never have to follow through.

"Do I get any more info on how I got pulled into this tall tale?"

He let out a sigh, resigning himself. "My grandma left me an apartment on Bourbon Street. I've never had the heart to tell them she left it to me and not them, so I said I'd reconnected with you after all these years, and you set me

up...as a favor.” He winked, breaking out the Broussard charm, hoping it would work.

“Don’t they know the apartment was your grandma’s?”

He glanced around, making sure one of them wasn’t lurking. “I don’t think so. She bought it a few years before she died because it’d always been a dream of hers to have a balcony overlooking Bourbon. She told me she kept it a secret from the family so they wouldn’t declare her mentally ill and take over as power of attorney.”

She giggled. “Was she serious? Would they do that?”

Quentin thought of his mother and what he knew her to be capable of and shrugged.

“Oh,” she said, straightening up.

“So can I count on you?”

She put her hand on his arm. “Of course, Quentin. Always.” She gave him a significant look.

He stood up straight, clearing his throat, not wanting to engage in any flirting with her, especially with Calliope steps away. “Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

She pointed at him. “As long as you’ll let me list it if you ever decide to move.”

“Sure.” He looked down at her hands. “You need a drink, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t turn one down.”

His brother Garrett walked past, and Quentin grabbed him. “Garrett, you remember Angela, don’t you?”

“I certainly do,” Garrett said, going in for a hug.

“And I remember you—the cuter Broussard brother,” she said, winking at Quentin.

Garrett played with a nonexistent beard on his face. “Ah, yes. It’s a tough role to play, but someone’s gotta do it.”

“Are you still single like your big brother?”

“No, I’m not. My girl, Savannah, isn’t here, but she’s definitely *here*.” He covered his heart with his right hand.

“Aww, how sweet,” she said, and then turned to Quentin. “With Braxton married off, I guess it’s your turn next.”

Quentin glanced at Calliope, who was still talking with his high school friends. He turned back to Angela. “I’m going to grab you that drink. Do you still like margaritas?”

Her eyes got wide. “Look at you, remembering my favorite.”

“Great,” he said. He had no clue if she liked margaritas or not, but he figured it was a safe bet. Most people would drink a margarita if given one.

Garrett said something about letting him get the drink so Angela and Quentin could catch up, but Quentin had already broken away, and he wasn’t turning back now.

He approached Calliope, reaching out for her arm. “Hey, do you have a sec?”

“Quentin,” Britney, from high school said. The two of them had made out for two hours at Andy Blessing’s house on his parents’ king-sized bed. She’d stalked him the rest of his junior year. She slid her arm around his waist. “Long time no see, stranger.”

Calliope’s cheeks turned pink. Normally, he’d bask in the satisfaction of a girl seeming jealous, but there was nothing

satisfying about the look on Calliope's face. She didn't seem like the type to rise to the challenge of jealousy. Instead, he could see her tossing up her hands and moving on, quickly. That was the last thing he wanted.

"Did I keep you up too late last night?" Britney asked with a wicked grin.

A couple of the other girls oohed and aahed. Calliope bit her lip, looking around.

"Not at all. I got home at a decent hour, actually. I took a rideshare...from the bar," he said, watching Calliope for a reaction. She didn't give him one.

"Good, because the last thing I would want to do is make you lose sleep," she said, tapping him on the nose.

Calliope appeared to be looking for an exit.

"You met Calliope?" Quentin said, getting her attention.

"Yes," Britney said, sliding away from him. "She was just telling us she and her mother have a store in the Marigny. Weren't you telling us last night that's where your new store is going to be?"

Calliope looked confused, which was exactly how he felt. She had a store in the Marigny, too?

"You're opening a store in the Marigny?" she asked.

"Yeah. You have one there already?"

"Yes, across from Hurricane Henry's. Where's your shop?" Calliope asked, looking highly suspicious.

"Across from Hurricane Henry's," he said, trying to digest that it sounded like she had a shop very close to the one he'd just signed a two-year lease for.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Next door to The Pretentious Zebra?”

He smiled. “Yeah. That’s your store?”

She glanced around, tossing up her hands. “I can’t believe this,” she said, almost under her breath.

“That’s nice,” Lesley, from his tenth grade English class said. She’d let him go up her shirt one night while they were studying for a test on *All Quiet on the Western Front*. “You guys can do co-marketing efforts.”

Britney pointed at her. “That’s a good idea. Like a sidewalk sale or something, right?”

Lesley shrugged. “Sure, or even some social media initiatives. *Visit our shops on the corner*. I don’t know.”

Lesley and Britney both looked at Calliope and Quentin as if they wanted feedback on their ideas.

Quentin shrugged and looked at Calliope. She glanced around at the women, who were waiting for her to speak. She shoved her glass at Quentin. “I’m gonna head out. It was nice to meet all you ladies.”

“We’ll stop by the shop,” Lesley said.

“Yeah, I’m dying to see that pink elephant coffee table,” Britney said.

Calliope nodded with a smile. “Yes, please. Come in anytime. I’ll give you our friends and family discount.” She backed away with a wave, heading toward the front door.

Britney bumped Quentin with her hip. “What did you do to her?”

Quentin handed the drink to Britney. "Excuse me." He went after Calliope, following her to the front door. "Calliope, wait," he said as she was passing through the doorway. She closed the door behind her, but he opened it back up and followed her out onto the driveway. "Hey," he said, but she kept walking toward the street. A guy got out of a black Town Car and gave them both a concerned look.

"Calliope," Quentin said, louder.

When she didn't turn around, he took her by the arm and she jerked it away from him, turning around to meet his gaze. "What?"

He took a step back, considering her. "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure what I've done wrong here."

"Nothing. You've done nothing wrong." She turned around to walk off again, but he took her by the arm again. "Please," she said, looking down at her arm.

He let go. "You just got here. Why are you leaving?"

"I think the better question is why did I come?"

"Maybe that's the question you should answer then." He crossed his arms over his chest.

"I'll tell you why I came. Eleanor Boudreaux. I thought I was going to her house. I didn't know I was coming to this house until I got in the car with her. Had I known I was coming here, I probably would've made up an excuse."

"What's wrong with this house?"

"Nothing's wrong with the house."

"Just the people in it, meaning me," he said.

Her shoulders sagged as the pissed-off expression seemed to drain from her face. “I don’t know how I got swept up into this. But I just want to go home.”

“I don’t know if this is what you’re concerned about or not, but I was out with Garrett last night, and we ran into those women. I went to high school with them. We drank too much. That was it.”

She held up a hand. “You have no obligation to fill me in on the events of your evening. I’m just a party guest.”

“If you’re not jealous, then what is it?”

She huffed a laugh. “I’m definitely not jealous.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

Her neck went red. “When are you moving in?”

“Into the shop?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“We’re already moved in.”

She looked confused. “That’s not possible. I was there till six o’clock last night. The space was empty when I left.”

“I think we pulled up around seven. Got both trucks unloaded after that.”

“You moved into that space last night?”

“Yeah. We’ve been there all morning long. I just took a break to come here and do this thing.”

She rubbed her forehead like she was having a hard time digesting the information.

“Look,” he said, “you made it clear you’re not my biggest fan, but I’m not such an asshole that you need to be worried

about me being your neighbor. And it's not like we have conflicting merchandise or anything. I know you've got some furniture in there but it's not the same—”

“I wanted that space.”

“My space?”

She pointed at her chest. “It should've been my space.”

“Why didn't you take it then?”

“Because you took it first.”

He peered down at her. “This is why you're so pissed off. I took your space out from under you.”

“Exactly.”

“Except it never was your space to begin with,” he said.

“It would've been if you hadn't swept in. How did you even find out about it so quickly? The Hendersons put their notice in one day and the next day you had the space rented.”

“Garrett knows the guy who rents it.”

“I know the guy who rents it, too, and I guarantee you I know him better than Garrett does,” she said, getting louder.

“Apparently not, because he gave Garrett the space over you, didn't he?” He didn't mean to come off sounding like such an asshole, but she was pushing his buttons.

She gave him a look like she was capable of murder, and then she headed toward the street.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Away.”

“Let me take you home,” he said, following her.

“I'll get a rideshare.”

That same black Town Car he had seen in the driveway pulled up on the street, and the guy got out of it. “Ma’am, do you need a ride?”

Calliope looked back at Quentin, and then she turned around. “Yes, that would be great, if you don’t mind.”

“It’s my job,” the man said, letting her into the car. She sat down in the backseat and then gave Quentin one last glance before turning away like she was too disgusted to look at him.

As the car went off into the distance, Quentin wondered how that had gotten away from him so quickly. He was trying to expunge his reputation for being an asshole, not build upon it. But what was he supposed to do, give her the space? They were already moved in. They’d signed a lease. Garrett was all in. There was no turning back, especially to make some girl happy who he wasn’t even dating.

That was his space. His rightful space. Who was she to think she deserved it over him?

He headed toward the house, the idea of moving into conversation with Britney or Lesley or Angela giving him a stomachache. Why was this so hard? A month ago, he would have made his choice and then taken one of these women to bed, making his intentions clear, of course. But he didn’t want any of these women. For some reason he couldn’t compute, he wanted the one woman in New Orleans who made him crazy in the best way possible.

And now that woman would be in the shop right beside his every day. If that were any other woman in the world, it’d give him the hives. But for some reason, the idea of having Calliope right next to him all day filled him with an excitement he hadn’t known in years.

He went back inside. As he was searching for Garrett, Braxton found him instead. “Hey, did I see you talking with Calliope Koch earlier?”

“Yeah,” Quentin said, glancing around for Garrett.

“You know her?”

Quentin shrugged. “Yeah, I’ve talked to her a few times.”

“Like on the phone, or…”

Quentin met his brother’s concerned gaze. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t. I just didn’t know you knew her.”

“I’m getting to know her.”

“Romantically?”

Garrett walked out from the kitchen. “Hey,” Quentin said, grabbing him, and then he turned back to Braxton. “Excuse me.” Braxton frowned in disapproval, but then got swept away by an older man Quentin didn’t recognize.

Quentin turned back to Garrett. “Did you know our shop is right next to Calliope’s shop?”

Garrett lowered his chin, looking guilty.

“When did you find out?” Quentin asked.

“I was telling Savannah about the store. She said Calliope had a shop in the area, and she told me the name.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because you were on the fence as it was. I was worried you’d flake out or something.”

“What are you talking about?”

Garrett sighed. "I just wanted us to get in there, then I was going to tell you."

"We're in there now, but you still didn't tell me."

"We just got in there last night. There's been a shitload going on."

Quentin frowned at him.

"Look, you mentioned meeting her a few weeks ago, and that you thought she was cute, but you haven't said anything about her since. I figured it was just a passing attraction."

"Which is why you thought you'd keep this important information from me?" Quentin asked.

"What's the big deal, anyway? You're not seeing her, are you?" Garrett asked.

"The big deal is she wanted that space."

"Oh," Garrett said, looking contrite. "I didn't know that."

"I know you didn't."

"She's upset with us?"

"Yeah. She's upset with me, at least."

"Then we'll try to smooth things over. We'll go in there and see if we can take her and her mom out to dinner sometime."

"That ought to do it. We'll trade a dinner out for a store expansion. Even Steven."

"What do you want to do, move out?" Garrett asked.

"Is that an option?"

"Not according to the contract we signed."

"Then why did you mention it?"

Garrett pursed his lips at Quentin. “What do you want to do here?”

Quentin rolled his eyes. “Take them out to dinner, if they’ll go.”

“They’ll go.” Garrett clasped him on the shoulder. “We’ve got the Broussard charm times two. How can they resist?”

“Easily.”

They headed into the Florida room where Quentin was surrounded by his past, but all he could think about was seeing Calliope again and getting back into her good graces, whatever it took.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Calliope had to see for herself. She was convinced it was all a dream. Quentin Broussard had taken the space next to her shop. How was this possible?

She'd known he made furniture, but she didn't know he sold it retail. From what she understood, he sold it wholesale and direct-to-consumer on a website. And that had been for the Colorado area. She remembered checking out his website back when she was dating Braxton. When she'd seen him again at the grocery store, she'd tried to look it up again, but the website was temporarily unavailable. She guessed that made sense if he was moving away from the area that website served.

She hadn't heard anything about him opening a retail shop in New Orleans. She guessed he had the right, but did he have to move in right next-door to her? In *her* space?

She found a parking spot and then headed to the building, peering in the window. Sure enough, there sat all kinds of furniture—beautiful, boutique furniture at that. Credenzas and entertainment centers made of rich, expensive-looking wood. Chairs and sofas that looked like they belonged in the lobbies of four-star hotels in rich leather and chenille. Tasteful beiges

and grays were interspersed with pops of color in reds and blues. Heck, she wanted to go in as a customer herself.

“Gorgeous furniture, isn’t it?”

She jumped at the sound of a stranger’s voice. She turned to find a woman peering in alongside her. “Mmm-hmm,” was all she could utter in return.

“I wonder when they’re opening?”

That was a good question. When was he opening? Calliope remembered helping her mother open their shop years ago. It had taken them weeks to get all that merchandise on the shelves. But he looked like he already had all his furniture in place. She guessed that was the positive side of selling large merchandise. What did his stuff go for, anyway? It had to be crazy expensive.

“I’ll be back here for sure,” the woman said with a smile and then headed down the sidewalk, peering into Calliope’s shop and then dismissing it as she moved on past.

She frowned at the woman’s back and then headed into her store. Her mother had a customer and one lady waiting, so Calliope got behind the counter and asked if she could ring the other lady up. After the customers were gone, Calliope’s mom turned to her. “I take it the party was a bust?”

“I don’t know about these people. Eleanor Boudreaux texted me to let me know the party wasn’t even going to be at her house but didn’t say where it was going to be. Then she came and picked me up and took me to the Broussard family home.”

“You’re kidding. What was that like?”

“Gaudy.”

“Poor Crystal. She’s trying to fit in,” her mom said.

“I don’t believe I feel sorry for a woman who married a man who had a wife sitting in a facility, losing her mind.”

“Be careful throwing stones from glass houses.”

“Do you think that was okay?” Calliope asked.

“I think I don’t want to judge anyone until I’ve walked a day in their shoes.”

Calliope rolled her eyes, but she knew her mother was right. Would there ever come a day that her mother would stop parenting her with all her eternal wisdom and good advice? And if Calliope were to have a child of her own someday, would she be able to step up to the plate with similar wisdom? She certainly didn’t feel capable of that right now. She just felt capable of murder in the form of strangling Quentin Broussard.

She gauged her mother. “Did you see anybody moving in over there when you were here this morning?”

“No. I rolled in right at noon and came in through the back. Did someone move in?”

Calliope let out a huff of air. “I can’t talk about it. I’m too pissed.”

“Okay.”

“Quentin Broussard, that’s who moved in,” she said, talking about it.

“Quentin Broussard? What do you mean, he moved in?”

“Go take a look for yourself. He’s got a furniture store right next door to us now.”

Her mother blinked and then walked that way. Calliope followed her out the door. Her mother peered in, holding her hand above her brow. “Oh my.”

“I know, right? Can you believe this?”

“He’s definitely classing the place up. Did he happen to notice our shop? This isn’t exactly Rodeo Drive over here.”

“I know. He’s totally out of place here. We’re kitschy and funky. He’s all chic.”

“What’s his personality like? Does he seem...snooty?”

Calliope frowned. “No. Not at all.”

“He’s got impeccable taste. Look at his stuff. I can’t imagine what his house looks like.”

“Stuffy if it’s got all this in it.”

Her mother gave her a doubtful look. “Yeah, I’m sure you’d hate it.”

Her mom knew Calliope would give her eye teeth to have any one piece of the furniture in that store.

“I can’t with all this,” Calliope said. “He’s going to be our neighbor. He’ll be shoving his store in my face every five minutes.”

Her mother peered at her. “You’re getting a little competitive over this space.”

“I’m not being competitive,” Calliope said.

“Then what bee has gotten in your bonnet over this guy?”

Calliope thought of all the girls who were fighting over him back at that party—*it* girls who had come before her in high school but had maintained their pizzazz. Calliope had let hers fade into oblivion.

“Nothing. There were just a ton of girls there fighting over him like he was God’s gift. It was annoying.”

“Were these friends of his or people Savannah and Peyton knew?”

“That’s the thing. Savannah and Peyton weren’t even there.”

“They weren’t? Did they let you know they weren’t coming?”

Calliope headed back toward their store. “I haven’t really talked to them lately.”

“Why not? I thought you were becoming close with them.”

Heat rushed through Calliope’s neck. “Let’s just get back to work.”

“You’re off, remember?”

She opened the door to the shop, letting her mother in. “Yeah, I remember.”



RIGHT AROUND CLOSING TIME, Calliope was behind the counter on her laptop, looking at a vendor’s website when the bell on the door dinged. Her mother, who was next to her tagging some jewelry, cleared her throat.

Calliope looked up to find Quentin and Garrett Broussard at the front of their store, pointing at an elephant rug and making commentary.

Her body vibrated with sensations she couldn’t recognize. While anger bit her in the chest, her core lit up with that irritating need that overcame her when she was around this

man. How was it that she could feel absolutely nothing when she looked at all the other men in town, but she wanted to purr like a kitten when this one entered the room?

Garrett was the first to speak. "Hello, ladies."

"Hello, Garrett," her mother said.

"It's Deborah, right?" he asked. "We met at Easter at Eleanor Boudreaux's house."

She walked out from behind the counter. "That's right. But I don't believe I've met your brother yet." She held out her hand. "Deborah Koch."

Quentin shook her hand. "Quentin Broussard. You're Calliope's mother?" He slid Calliope a glance that made her core sizzle.

"That's right. I hear you're our new neighbor. When do you open?"

"We'll do a soft opening here this week with a grand opening coming soon," Garrett said. "Just putting together some of the marketing for that first. My girlfriend's in the business, but she's been so tied up with her own clients that I've barely been able to talk to her about our gig."

"Well, welcome to the neighborhood," Deborah said.

"I'd love a tour of your shop," Garrett said to Deborah.

"Right this way," she said, leading Garrett to the back of the store.

Quentin trained his gaze on Calliope as she clicked through a website like it was way more interesting than anything he'd have to say.

“What’s done is done,” he said. “I’m here now. You’re going to have to deal with me.”

She pointed at the wall. “Last I checked we had a physical separator. I never have to see you again as long as you don’t walk through that front door.”

“Just because you don’t have to see me doesn’t mean you don’t want to see me,” he said.

She looked up from her computer. “What’s it like to walk around with that kind of confidence?”

“I think you know.”

She had known at one point in her life. But those days had completely escaped her. She held up both hands. “Whatever. You go about your life, and I’ll go about mine.”

He took a step closer to her. “I was going to call you this week.”

“I’m sure,” she said, eyes back on her computer.

“You know, you were the one with the rules, not me.”

She rested her weight against the counter. “So how would this have gone if there weren’t any rules?”

He looked stumped. “I don’t know. I would’ve taken you out.”

“From Colorado?”

“Maybe I would’ve had time to take you out before I left.”

She harrumphed, looking down at her laptop.

“You really are jealous, aren’t you?”

She put her hands on her hips. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I’ve been shooting you down since the grocery store.”

“I know. But you’ve got a little bit of extra fire in you today. You didn’t like all those women back at the party.”

“I liked them all just fine. I like them better than I like you.”

“All right then. You liked the women. You just didn’t like that they were there for me.”

“My God.” She looked him up and down. “Get over yourself. You’re not nearly as cute as you like to think you are.”

“Cute? Is that how you describe me?”

“You don’t want to hear how I describe you.”

“If I’m so off-putting, then why were you so receptive to that kiss I gave you?”

She glanced in the direction of Garrett and her mother, who seemed lost in conversation. “I didn’t have much of a choice. You had me backed against the wall.”

“It was a door.”

She glared at him.

He touched her arm, which brought her body to life. “Tell me you haven’t been thinking about that kiss.”

She swallowed hard and then looked him in the eye. “I haven’t been thinking about that kiss,” she said in a low voice so her mom wouldn’t hear.

The side of his mouth quirked up in a little grin. “When you lie, your nose twitches.”

She put her fingertips to it. “It does not.”

“Yeah, it does. Tell me again that you haven’t been thinking of me.”

“I haven’t.”

Now he was grinning with his whole mouth. “Look at that nose go.” He tried to wiggle his nose, but it was just his mouth moving instead. It was all she could do to keep from climbing him like a tree.

She turned her back on him, going to the jewelry her mom had been tagging. “Don’t you have a store to open?”

“Go out with me tonight.”

She huffed, rolling her eyes. “Don’t you have a date with one of those women you had over there today?”

“I’ve only asked one girl out on a date today.”

She gave him a reluctant glance, wondering if she could see what his lying tell was. No biting his lip, no shifting his weight, no casting away of his eyes. It was possible he was telling the truth.

Garrett and Deborah approached. Deborah clasped her hands together in front of her chest. “Let’s close up. These boys are taking us to dinner.”

“Perfect,” Quentin said, looking triumphant.

Calliope glanced at all three of them staring back at her, waiting. She was being salty with Quentin, but she couldn’t be a jerk to the whole group. She forced a smile. “I’ll grab my purse.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

After their server brought them their drinks, and they placed their orders for food, Deborah pointed to the back of the bar. “How are you at pool?” she asked Garrett.

“Mediocre at best, so you’re guaranteed to win.”

“Perfect,” Deborah said, and the two of them got up and walked away.

“How rude of them,” Quentin said. “They didn’t even ask us to join them.”

“I’m sure that was on purpose, so we could work out our issues.”

“Do we have issues to work out?”

She put her drink up to her mouth. “No issues.”

He narrowed his gaze at her. “Are you really mad at me for taking your space?”

“I’m not mad. I’m just getting over it.” She gave him half a glare. “Of all the spaces in New Orleans, why did you have to take that one?”

“I had no idea it was next-door to you. I would say it was a coincidence, but I don’t think it was. Garrett knew Patrick

from high school, and you knew his brother, Terry. So, we both had a connection.”

“My mom and I have been in that space for almost two decades. Garrett had to have known that.”

“He didn’t...at first.”

“But eventually he did.”

“Yeah. He didn’t tell me though. I swear, I just found out today.”

“But why...? Never mind.”

“Why what?”

“Nothing.”

“It was something a second ago,” he said.

“I was going to ask why it wouldn’t have come up, but of course it wouldn’t have. He doesn’t know that you know me.”

Quentin messed with his beverage napkin. “He does know that I know you, actually.”

“You mentioned me to him?” She lifted her eyebrows.

“Maybe once or twice.”

“Oh.” They sat in silence for a second, and then she said, “If he knew that you knew me, then why wouldn’t he have told you?”

His chest sizzled. “Because he knew I was on the fence about the space to begin with and he didn’t want me to backslide.”

Her cheeks went rosy red. “Had you known, would you have wanted to move in next to me?”

“If I’d have known you wanted the space, I wouldn’t have, but not for any other reason.”

She gave him a small smile. “Thanks for saying that.”

“What were you going to do with the space?”

“It’s silly. It’s not gonna happen anyway, so why talk about it?”

“I want to hear what your dreams are,” he said.

She considered him, and then said. “If you must know, I was going to open a boutique.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding more surprised than he meant to.

“What?”

“Nothing. A boutique sounds nice.”

“I used to have style, you know.”

“You still have style. I like that dress you’re wearing.”

She gave him a doubtful look. “No, you don’t.”

“Why would I say that if I didn’t mean it?”

“Because you had to.”

“I don’t ever have to say anything.”

She looked off into the distance, tapping her fork against the table. “I used to be different.”

“How did you used to be?”

She considered him and then shifted in her seat. “Never mind. How long has it been since we ordered? I skipped lunch.”

“Calliope?” A girl touched Calliope’s shoulder and she turned around.

“Vanessa?” Calliope’s eyes got wide like she had seen a ghost.

“Oh my God. I can’t believe I found you.”

Calliope stood up, looking confused. The girl brought her in for a hug and held her there for a long time. When she pulled away, Calliope said, “You were looking for me?”

“Yes.” She gave an awkward laugh, touching Calliope on the arm. “That wasn’t the whole purpose for my trip. I’m here with some girlfriends, but I wanted to come and see you. I remembered the shop from when we visited here back in college.”

“Right,” Calliope said.

“I saw that it was closed and then I saw this place across the street. I thought, *I wonder if she ever has a drink there after work?* I poked my head in and here you are.”

“Yes,” Calliope said on a nervous laugh.

The girl glanced at Quentin and then back at Calliope.

“Sorry,” Calliope said. “This is Quentin.” She offered no further explanation.

“Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking her hand. “Vanessa?”

“Yes. Vanessa.” She looked between Calliope and Quentin like she was pleased.

“Would you like to join us?” Quentin asked.

Calliope closed her eyes, shaking her head. “Of course. Please. Join us.”

The girl glanced at the window. “I need to go catch up with my girlfriends, but I do want to talk to you for a quick second if that’s okay?”

“I can go see how badly my brother is sucking at pool,” Quentin said.

“No, you’re absolutely fine,” Vanessa said. “I’ll just be a minute.” She sat and then faced Calliope. “I wanted to tell you that we’re all meeting for a reunion.”

“Oh,” Calliope said, fidgeting with her hands in her lap.

“It’ll be at Brown’s Lake.” She turned to Quentin. “Near where we went to college in Mississippi.”

He nodded acknowledgment.

Calliope frowned, looking down at the table. “Um, it’s kind of tough, getting away from the shop.”

Her friend looked crestfallen.

“But I’ll see.” Calliope gave what looked like a forced smile. “Is everyone coming?”

“Yes, if you can believe it. Allyson and Dustin will be there with their boys, Lindsey’s bringing her fiancé, Jared is bringing a date, Seth is coming with his wife and five-year-old stepdaughter,” she cleared her throat before saying, “and Evan will be there.”

Calliope shifted in her seat. “That’s...great.”

“He’s, um, married now and has two kids, but I don’t think they’re coming.”

Calliope’s mouth was open, but words weren’t coming out. Her hand trembled in her lap.

“We’d love to have you there. You’re the only one who I never see on Facebook. I think we might’ve lost our connection on there.”

“I’m not on there anymore.”

Vanessa nodded like she already knew. “Anyway, I’d text you the details, but I don’t have your number. I guess it changed at some point?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that.”

“No, it’s fine. I just tried you a couple of times at the shop, way back... Never mind.” She took a card out of her purse and set it in front of Calliope. “Here’s my card. It’s got my cell on it. I really hope you’ll come. Call or text me. I’ll give you all the details.”

Calliope took the card. “Thanks.”

She looked out onto the street where a gaggle of women appeared lost. “Those are my people. I better get back to them. If you can’t come to the weekend, I’m here tomorrow. If you’d like to have lunch or a drink, I’ll make myself available.”

Calliope smiled. “That’s great. I’ll check.”

“That’d be so wonderful.” She turned to Quentin. “And maybe I’ll see you at the lake.”

“Maybe you will,” Quentin said.

Calliope looked down at the table, chewing on her thumbnail.

“Well, I better go round up the crew outside. They’re all directionally challenged, especially after those cocktails we just had down the road.”

Calliope gave a nervous laugh. Quentin said, “That’ll do it.”

Vanessa stood, and Calliope and Quentin followed suit. “So good to see you,” Vanessa said giving Calliope another hug. “And it was nice to meet you, Quentin.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“See y’all.” She headed out the door. Once she was out of sight, Calliope visibly exhaled.

“She seemed...nice?” Quentin wasn’t sure how to proceed. The woman had seemed nice, but Calliope had seemed terrified of her.

“She is nice. So very nice.”

He squinted. “I’m still getting to know you. Are you being sarcastic?”

“No. Not at all.” She scratched her forehead. “She used to be my closest friend...at college.”

“Oh. Well, that happens. People lose touch.”

“Yeah. Right.” She nodded like she was trying to convince herself that’s what it was.

“Are you thinking of going on the trip?”

“No way,” she said on a shaky laugh.

“That’s too bad. Your friend seemed to really want to see you.”

“It’s not her.”

“Someone else?” He didn’t need to ask who. She seemed scared enough of Vanessa, but when she mentioned that last name, Evan, Calliope had looked visibly shaken.

“Yeah, someone else.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

The server showed up and passed out their plates, which also brought Garrett and Deborah over, signaling the close of that topic.



AFTER THEY FINISHED EATING, they all walked out to the sidewalk. “Thank you, boys,” Deborah said.

“We intended for it to be better than this,” Garrett said.

“Nobody likes chicken wings more than me,” Deborah said.

“Next time you’ll have to get the ones with the fire sauce,” Quentin said.

“Maybe twenty years ago,” Deborah said. “Enjoy those now while you still can.” She pressed her fist against her chest.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Garrett said. The two of them went in for a hug like they were old friends.

“Thank you,” Calliope said, holding her hand out to Garrett.

He shook it. “You’re welcome, and I’m sorry. I didn’t know you wanted the space.”

“You couldn’t possibly have known.”

She turned to Quentin, but before she could say anything, her mother said, “Honey, I’ve got to get going, straight to book club. I’m already twenty minutes late.” She turned to Quentin. “I usually drop her off at nighttime when she has walked to work.” She turned back to Calliope. “Can you get yourself home okay?” She then looked at Quentin, eyebrows raised.

“Mom,” Calliope said, under her breath.

“Of course I can get her home,” he said. “Have fun at book club. Sorry we kept you.”

“I enjoyed it.” Deborah held her arms out for a hug from Quentin, so he gave her one.

Garrett and Deborah left Quentin and Calliope on the sidewalk by themselves.

He glanced around. “I know where you live, but I don’t really know in relation to where we are now.”

“How do you not know your way around New Orleans?”

“I guess I didn’t come over here much when I was in high school.”

She pointed. “I’m that way a couple of blocks.”

“All right. Let’s go,” Quentin said, thankful for book clubs, especially the one that got him a chance to change Calliope’s mind about him.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

They managed to make small talk all the way to Calliope's house. But the whole time, all she could think about was the bomb that had been dropped in her lap earlier in the night.

She'd tried to erase those years by getting off of Facebook and changing her number, but that whole group had been home with her, and they'd been to the shop. She always knew there was a chance one of them could walk in one day, but she hadn't counted on one of them walking into Hurricane Henry's when she was sitting there with Quentin.

She stopped in front of her house. "This is me."

"I remember well. The houses in this neighborhood have a lot of personality, don't they?"

"They do. It's probably not for everyone."

"But it's for you, huh?"

She glanced around the neighborhood she'd called home since she'd been back from college. "I get a good vibe from the area."

"How long have you been here?"

"I guess I'm going on ten years now."

“You must have gotten this place when you were young.”

“I did.” She averted her gaze, feeling ashamed of the guilt money she’d gotten from her dad. “I had help, in case you were wondering how a retail clerk could afford to buy a house at twenty-three years old.”

“That’s none of my business.”

“I know, but I could tell you were wondering.”

His neck turned pink. “I had help...in Colorado.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked, trying to sound casual. But she wanted to know more about him, anything personal he was willing to share.

A group of rowdy twentysomethings came down the sidewalk, so she pulled him onto her walkway. He glanced at the swing on her porch.

“Do you want to sit a minute?” she asked.

“Yeah, okay.” They walked up her steps and sat together on the swing.

“So, you were saying...about Colorado,” she said.

He huffed a laugh. “You aren’t going to let that go, are you?”

She gave a little shrug and a smile.

“I had help when I left home. My mom. She gave me money. She kept giving me money, in fact, until I was about twenty-one, I think. That’s when I could stand on my own.”

“That’s not anything to be ashamed of. Standing on your own at twenty-one is a huge accomplishment.”

He fiddled with the chain on the swing. “When you have seed money.”

“Hey,” she said, making him look at her. “I peeked through the window and saw your furniture. It’s amazing. That’s because of talent. Are you sure you didn’t go to school for that?”

“In a way. I apprenticed under a guy for a while. He showed me a lot.”

“Oh yeah? Who was the guy?”

“Rudy Albernelli. He was kind of a prick, but he damn sure knew how to woodwork.”

“Then I’m glad you found your way to him. Are you still in touch with him?”

“No, he died a few years ago. He was a salty old bastard.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks.”

He frowned. “You’re the first person I’ve ever told that to, about my mom helping me.”

A tingling moved through her chest. “Thanks for sharing that with me. Garrett and Braxton don’t know?”

“No, and I’d like to keep it that way.” He gave her a hopeful look.

“Of course. I won’t say anything. I’m sure that wouldn’t go over well, knowing she gave you money and not them.”

He frowned. “Right.”

Something about the expression on his face made her believe there was more to the story. “That’s it? You don’t want them to be jealous?”

He sat in silence for a moment, staring at the wooden planks of her porch. “Yeah, that’s it.”

She reached for his hand and took it in hers. “Are you sure that’s it?”

He looked down at their clasped hands, a story playing out on his face.

“I didn’t really leave home because I wanted to.”

Calliope blinked, trying to understand what he was saying.

“I was asked to leave.”

She swallowed down a frog in her throat. “By your parents?”

“By one of my parents.”

Since his mom had been the one helping him, she had to assume it was his father. “Your dad asked you to leave home?”

He gave a humorless smile. “Not my dad.”

Chills covered her body. “Your mom?”

He set their clasped hands down on his knee. “Yeah, my mom.”

“What happened? Did you guys have a fight?”

“I found something out that she didn’t want me to know.”

“What was it?” she asked, worried she was being intrusive, but she was curious. All she’d ever known about Charlotte was that she adored her kids. Braxton had said that when Quentin left, his mom was a wreck. Braxton had resented Quentin for leaving her and making her so sad. That was Braxton’s narrative. Clearly, Quentin’s take was quite different.

“She was terrified of me exposing her, so she asked me to leave,” he continued, opting not to share what it was. “She knew I wanted to get started in woodworking for a career. She asked me to do it somewhere other than New Orleans.” He

squeezed her hand and then let go of it, gripping his thighs and moving his hands up and down on them like a coping strategy.

Her heart broke for him as she tried to imagine what it would be like to have your mother send you away, even as a legal adult. Calliope's father had done his own disappearing act when she was in her freshman year at college, so she knew what it was like to be dismissed. But he'd been the one to do the leaving. He'd not made her leave her own home.

She put her hand on his knee. "I'm so sorry. I had no idea she was capable of something like that."

"Of course you didn't. Everybody loved her. Nobody would suspect it." He gave a humorless laugh. "Part of me has always known if I said anything, people may not believe me."

The injustice of it all had her heartbeat kicking up. "Who are you worried about not believing you?"

He met her gaze. "You dated Braxton. You know how he feels about her. Can you imagine me telling him that she wasn't a saint after all? Forget him believing me, it would crush his whole memory of her. I can't do that to him."

She nodded. "Of course. I understand." She thought about a young Quentin, about to graduate high school with dreams of his own. "Had you been planning on going to college in the fall?"

"No, I'd made some contacts in New Orleans, and I was going to start a full-time apprenticeship as soon as I graduated. I was planning to live at home until I got on my feet. She couldn't have that—this bomb waiting to drop. Or maybe she just couldn't stand to face me."

"I can't imagine. It's just so unfair." Her voice broke. The last thing he needed was to have to take care of her in his time

of need, so she swallowed down the emotion and sat up straight.

He smiled, holding her gaze. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For listening. For believing me.”

“Of course I believe you.”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t. You don’t know me. You know Braxton a whole lot better. I’m contradicting everything he’s ever told you about her.”

“That’s just Braxton’s perception. He has his perception and you have yours. And perception is reality. What’s real to him may not be real to you.”

He smiled again. “That’s some enlightened wisdom you’re bestowing there.”

She chuckled. “I’m far from enlightened.”

He studied her. “I can’t believe I just told you all that. I don’t know why I did that.”

“I hope you did it because you feel like you can trust me,” she said, feeling their dynamic evolve. She supposed that was what happened when you let yourself be vulnerable with someone else.

“Maybe that’s it. Or maybe I told you so that you would consider confiding in me about that woman who showed up at the restaurant tonight.”

She inhaled a sharp breath, processing through her emotions. Her first instinct was to feel duped by his deception, but then she understood that he had sacrificed by telling her something that was painful for him. There weren’t too many

people willing to do that with her. She wasn't comfortable opening up, but she wasn't sure if she could walk away, leaving him hanging.

She gave him a look. "You're good."

He smiled. "Seriously, don't say anything you don't want to. But know that you can trust me just like I trusted you."

"Fair enough." Calliope let out a heavy breath as she prepared to unburden herself onto him. "I can't believe she just showed up here after all these years. I know she was being kind, but it feels like a violation or something."

"She did say she tracked you down. I'd say it was creepy if she didn't seem so nice."

Calliope nodded. "She's being sweet. That's who she is. She wants to include me."

"But you don't want to be included?"

"Not really."

"Do you want to tell me what happened with her...or whoever?"

It was the *whoever* that she didn't want to talk about. "It's not nearly as dramatic as what you're thinking, probably."

"I'm not really thinking anything. I don't know much at this point."

She shifted in her seat, settling in. "I had these friends in college. There was a group of us. We met first semester freshman year, and we were inseparable."

"How did you meet?"

"I lived on the same floor as the girls. Vanessa was my roommate. I won the lottery with her. And then we just kind of

connected with Allyson and Lindsey, who were also roommates.”

“How did the guys come into the picture?”

“Allyson had this boy she liked, which was Dustin. The other three guys lived on his floor, and they were all friends, and it just sort of morphed from there.”

“So, there were eight of you. Nice even number.”

“Yeah. I think that’s probably one of the reasons why it worked so well. There was a good symmetry there. Vanessa and I were sort of a duo and Allyson and Lindsey were a pair. And the boys were the same way. Jared and Seth were tight and Dustin and Evan were tight. It was like best friend duos within the larger group dynamic.”

“Sounds like it worked.”

“It did, for a long time. We stuck together all through college. We had apartments in the same complex. We had this one where we were two doors down from one another, so we sort of meandered between the two apartments like it was one big house.”

“But there was someone in between you all?”

She chuckled, remembering. “Yeah. Poor bastards. They got tired of the noise and opening and closing doors. When they moved out, the boys moved into that apartment.”

“And you guys were all just friends?”

“It started out that way, even with Allyson and Dustin, but everyone in the group was straight, so you can probably guess how that went.”

“Probably so. Which one did you date?”

She closed her eyes, willing herself to just tell the story and not get weird. “I think *date* is a pretty heavy word for college.”

“Which one did you...extend your friendship with?”

She smiled down at her lap. “That’s a nice way to put it. His name was Evan.”

“Have you stayed in touch with him?”

“No, definitely not.”

“Did something bad go down between the two of you?”

She chewed on her lip, trying to figure out how she was going to convey the single most life-changing relationship she’d ever been in. How did she explain that she was alive inside when she met him and dead inside when she left him four years later?

“It’s not that it ended poorly, it’s that the whole relationship went badly.”

“For all four years of college?”

“We were just together the last two years,” she said.

“Two years is a long time to be in a bad relationship.”

“Definitely.”

“It was probably tough to end it with the four of you being so intertwined with one another.”

She nodded, trying to hold back her tears. She hadn’t talked about it in so long, it felt almost surreal. In fact, she hadn’t ever talked about it with anyone, except Vanessa.

“Did he hurt you?” he asked, his voice soft and careful. She shook her head. But she could feel the pressure behind her

eyes, and if she opened her mouth, it wouldn't be words pouring out.

"He did hurt you," Quentin said.

She swiped at her eyes. "Not in the way you're thinking."

"How did he hurt you?" His voice was solid, matter of fact.

She shook her head again. "I can't explain it."

He waited patiently while she tried to put it into words.

"I used to be different."

"You mentioned that when you were talking about a boutique. How were you different?"

How did she say what she wanted to say without sounding like a washed-up ex-high-school-princess who had fallen from grace? But that's exactly what she was.

"I can't explain it," she repeated.

"Then don't." He slid his arm behind her back and pulled her to him. She pressed her cheek against his chest, inhaling his unique scent which had hints of some kind of wood and maybe a stain or paint or something, mixed with a whiff of clean-smelling cologne. It was amazing how close she felt to him, and this was only the second day she had ever spent with him. Third if you counted the ugly Christmas sweater day.

After a moment, she pulled away, squeezing his thigh. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice breaking in a whisper.

She swiped at her eyes. "It's fine. I've been over it a long time," she lied.

He played with her hair, studying her.

She smiled at him. “I bet you weren’t expecting this when you invited my mom and me out to dinner tonight, were you?”

He shrugged. “Some nights don’t go like I plan, but they’re somehow better.”

Her chest warmed, and she gave a nervous laugh. “I’d like to see one of your bad nights.”

“Will you go to the reunion?”

“No way.”

He nodded. “I probably wouldn’t go either.”

She considered him. “You wouldn’t?”

“Probably not. But then, I might, just to show the asshole that he didn’t win.”

“And how would I do that? By showing him that I’m thirty-two years old and still working in my mom’s gift store with no husband and no kids, while he’s sitting on top of the world with a family of four? That’ll show him.”

“You know, not everyone measures their success with a spouse and children.”

“I know they don’t. And I don’t either. It would be different if I had some fabulous job, or if I was doing a lot of traveling or painting, or woodworking,” she said, motioning toward him. “But I’m not doing anything of the sort. I’m right where I was when I came home from college and started working with my mom as a temp job before I went and got a real one, which I never did.”

“That’s because you had a real one. Besides, I think it’s probably less about showing him how your life turned out than it is about showing yourself that he didn’t break you.”

She wanted to tell Quentin that Evan *had* broken her. But she wasn't ready for that yet.

"If you decide you want to go," he said, "I'll go with you."

"That's sweet, but I wouldn't put you through that."

"It would be my pleasure. I'd love to meet the guy who made you cry just now."

She smiled. "Why, so you could take him out back and teach him a lesson?"

He shrugged. "If the chance presented itself. But I'd rather just be there to support you."

She let her shoulders sag. "You don't even know me."

"I'm getting to know you. You made me do nothing but dream about you for a month."

Her belly fluttered. "My evil plan worked."

"Any other girl, I would've forgotten about in a matter of days, but you lingered."

She had to take everything he said with a grain of salt, but he was certainly saying some good stuff. "I'm kind of like a virus in that way."

"Go meet your friend Vanessa tomorrow. Find out the details. And then you can think about it."

"I think you're a sadist, Quentin Broussard."

"I've been called worse." His phone buzzed, and he pulled it out of his pocket. "Damn Garrett."

"What's going on?"

"He's trying to get into the shop. I've got the only key."

"I thought he got in his car earlier."

“He ran an errand and then went back to the shop. He must’ve thought he had the key.”

She stood, and he followed suit. “Thank you for walking me home.”

“Thanks for letting me.” They headed toward the steps and he took her hand, staring into her eyes. “Think about the trip. Think about me.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand you.”

He shrugged. “Few people do.” He squeezed her hand and then leaned down and gave her a sweet, slow, heart-melting kiss. He pulled away. “Good night, Calliope.”

“Night,” she said, and then watched him walk away. She knew all too well not to get her hopes up, but he was making it nearly impossible.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Quentin backed his truck up to the door of the shop and then hopped out and pulled down the tailgate. He considered whether or not he wanted to try to lift the piece by himself. Even though he had it covered with a padded tarp, he didn't want to risk dropping it and nicking it.

He headed inside to grab Garrett and found him standing in the middle of the store talking to Savannah and Braxton. Garrett caught sight of him. "Hey, brother, come on over here. Braxton was just telling us about something Mom's friends are doing for her."

Braxton's face went red. "It's not really a big deal."

"It sounded like a big deal," Savannah said. "I think it's really cool."

"What's up?" Quentin asked, wondering why Braxton was acting weird.

"They're just dedicating this garden to her at one of the local parks. You don't have to come."

Quentin lifted his eyebrows. It was clear that Braxton didn't want him to come. "All right. Whatever you want."

“Of course we’ll all be there,” Garrett said, looking between his two brothers. It was like Garrett was the only pathway Quentin and Braxton had to each other. He was always there in the middle, balancing the two of them out.

“I’ve got to go,” Braxton said.

“I’ll walk you out. I’ve got to get across town to meet with that interior designer,” Garrett said in Quentin’s direction. He slid his arm around Savannah’s waist and kissed her. “Will you stay till I get back?”

Garrett and Savannah had gotten tired of never seeing each other due to their busy careers, so Garrett had asked Quentin if Savannah could work out of the shop sometimes. Who was Quentin to stand in the way of young love? Besides, it wasn’t like they were short on desks.

“Of course,” Savannah said, “as long as Quentin doesn’t mind me lurking around here.”

“My shop is your shop,” he said.

Garrett grinned like a dumbass in love. “Thanks, man.” He winked at his girl and then ushered Braxton out the door.

“I’m gonna go grab a coffee. Do you want one?” Quentin asked Savannah.

“I would love a frozen mocha,” she said.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you,” Savannah said, looking like he was her savior.

He didn’t really want a coffee. He just wanted an excuse to see Calliope. He would poke his head in the door of her shop to see if she wanted one.

He headed out the front door and looked into her shop, finding two older ladies instead. He opened the door, making sure he hadn't missed her.

"Can I help you, sweetie?" one of the ladies asked.

"Is Calliope working today?"

"No, honey. She'll be back later on this week."

She hadn't mentioned going anywhere, but that was shaking out to be not so unusual. She was private, which he understood. He just wished she wouldn't be so private with him.

He got the coffees and then took the chocolate milkshake thing to where Savannah was working at a desk in the back corner of the store.

"Oh my gosh, you are amazing." She took a sip and then closed her eyes. "I needed that."

"You should take a break. I don't know how you look at that tiny screen all day like that," he said.

"To be honest, I'm starting to question that myself."

"Not loving your work?" he asked.

"No, I'm not. I'm jealous of you and Garrett being out in the world doing things and not being stuck behind a computer all day. It's isolating."

Quentin thought about Steve, his longtime partner in Colorado. He was an asshole, but he was good at all that stuff. "I can see that. I hate that part of the business. That's why I've always had a business partner to handle the computer stuff."

She pursed her lips. "With my work, it's all computer stuff. But at least I get to work out of here sometimes and be near

my man.”

“Aww, so adorable.”

She wadded up a sticky note and tossed it at him. He caught it and looked down at it, thinking about how Calliope said she used to be different.

He sat on the edge of the desk next to the one Savannah was working at. “It doesn’t look like Calliope is working today,” he said as a conversation opener.

“She and her mom have gone to a tradeshow.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked, wondering why she hadn’t mentioned it the night before. Their conversation had gotten pretty heavy fairly quickly. Maybe there just wasn’t time to slip it in.

“Yeah. I dropped in there earlier to say hello before I got started here. She’s kind of hard to reach via text sometimes. I’ve sent her two that she’s not responded to.”

“Is that normal for her?”

Savannah shrugged. “Sometimes. Other times she answers right away. I honestly don’t take it personally. Some people are like that via text.”

Quentin thought about how Calliope said she had trouble trusting friends since her fiancé slept with her best friend. He wondered if Savannah had put that together. “You knew Calliope before she went to college, didn’t you?”

“I knew of her. I didn’t really get to know her until she started dating Braxton a couple years ago.”

“But you went to high school with her?”

“Yeah. She was two years ahead of me. Same age as Braxton.”

“What was she like back in high school?”

She turned toward him, ignoring her computer. “Do you mean the Great Calliope Koch?”

He gave her a wonky look.

“I’m not kidding, Quentin. Calliope was *the* ‘it’ girl of our school. She was like the Taylor Swift of our high school.”

Quentin tried to imagine Calliope on stage with a microphone. “Taylor Swift, huh?”

“But without the singing and songwriting. Just the *it* factor. She was the prom queen, homecoming queen, most popular, most unique style, you name it.”

“All the senior superlatives?”

“Well, technically, you could only win one senior superlative, but everyone knew she deserved several.” She wiggled in her seat. “Peyton and I used to sit in her room and talk about what Calliope Koch wore that day. We would flip through teen magazines and see pictures of girls who were wearing stuff that Calliope had on months prior and had already moved on from.”

“Sounds like she was a trendsetter.”

“Big time.” She squinted. “It’s possible I might be exaggerating a tad, but that’s how my memory has it.”

He nodded with a smile, knowing how it was easy to amplify good memories. He liked that there was someone who thought of Calliope as a legend. He was starting to buy into it himself. “Would you say she’s different now than she was back then?”

“Significantly. Not in a bad way, she’s just different.”

“How so?”

“She’s not as interested in fashion as she used to be. Not that she doesn’t dress cute. She just doesn’t really put herself out there like she used to.”

“So you’re saying she used to take risks?”

“One time she came to school in a pair of bowling shoes that she had lifted from the bowling alley. So not only did she have the cool factor for leaving her own shoes at the bowling alley and taking their shoes, but she had paired them with this mini skirt and fuzzy, fuchsia sweater that looked so good. Everyone was talking about it that day. Next thing you know, everyone’s showing up left and right with bowling shoes on—guys and girls. But Calliope never wore hers again.”

He nodded, proud of his girl... Then he remembered he’d never even taken her on a date. He pinched the bridge of his nose, getting a hold of himself. “What about...her spirit? How is she different as a person?”

Savannah thought about it. “I wasn’t really friends with her back then. I was more of an observer. But if I had to answer, I would say maybe she lost a little bit of her... liveliness?” She glanced at the wall that separated their stores. “I shouldn’t have said that. I love her, you know?”

“Sure,” he said, wanting to keep her talking.

She rolled closer to him, like she was concerned about being overheard. “It’s just that sometimes when I’m talking to her, I want to ask where the real Calliope Koch went.”

Quentin’s stomach roiled, thinking of that asshole and what he stole from her.

“Why are you asking?” Savannah asked.

“No reason.” He stood to head toward the back. “I think I’ll get over to the workshop.” That’s where he’d needed to be from the start of this day, but he’d loaded up that piece of furniture to make an excuse to come see Calliope.

“Wait,” Savannah said.

He turned toward her with his eyebrows lifted.

She gave him a sly grin. “How’s it going with her?”

“I don’t know.”

Her shoulders sagged. “You can do better than that.”

“I really can’t. I’m just getting to know her.”

“Fair enough. But I need details sooner rather than later,” she said.

“Aren’t details something you would get directly from her? She’s your friend.”

“Calliope doesn’t dish like a lot of my girlfriends do.”

“Why do you think that is?” he asked, feeling her out.

“I think she’s private. I wouldn’t have known that about her back in high school, but like I said, I didn’t know her back then. We became casual friends when she started dating Braxton. And then we got to be better friends when she was engaged. But since her wedding was called off, she kind of goes dark sometimes.”

“Like to a dark place or...”

“No, just not very responsive. I figured she needed time. Everyone grieves losses in different ways.”

“Sure,” he said, wishing Savannah would put together that Calliope had been betrayed by a friend and that she might need a little something extra to help her trust people again.

Savannah cocked her head to the side. “What?”

“Hmm?” he asked, feeling busted.

“You’re looking kind of funny.”

Quentin hadn’t realized his facial expressions were so transparent. “I didn’t mean to be.”

“Is there something you want to talk about?”

“No.”

“Is it the whole Braxton thing?” she asked.

“Yeah, what’s up with that?” he asked, taking the opportunity to change the subject. “He was acting weird just now, right?”

She bunched her mouth up to one side, giving him a look like she didn’t disagree.

“What the hell? He’s married now,” Quentin said.

“Yeah, but he might be weirded out about you and Calliope.”

Quentin’s chest burned. “How so?”

“I don’t know. We were talking about the two of you the other day—”

“Who was talking about us?”

“The four of us—Peyton, Braxton, Garrett, and me.”

Quentin rolled his eyes. “Continue.”

“Anyway, we were gossiping, basically, about how you two were sort of talking to one another, or whatever, and he

seemed...concerned.”

Quentin scrunched up his face. Fuck him...*concerned*. Who was Braxton to throw stones when it came to her? He'd broken her heart to be with Peyton. Who was Braxton to judge Quentin when *he* was the one who didn't want to break her heart? “I'll give him something to be concerned about,” he said under his breath.

“I'm sure it's fine. I just wanted to give you a head's up.”

“Whatever. I'm gonna head back to my shop.”

“Okay,” she said. “Thanks again for the coffee.”

He headed out back, closing his tailgate. He'd come back once Garrett had time to return from his meeting. Right now, he just needed to work on another piece and try to get his mind off his asshole brother, who was really starting to irk him.

Quentin was keeping his mouth shut about who their mother really was, just to baby Braxton and let him keep his memory of her pristine. And in return, all Braxton gave Quentin was suspicion and distrust. Quentin would keep his mouth shut just like he'd been doing since he was eighteen, but the struggle not to knock Braxton off his pious soapbox was getting harder every time he saw his little brother.

He shifted his focus to piecing together the puzzle of Calliope. Quentin had been with mysterious girls before. They had a way of keeping his interest more than the ones who were an open book. But none had intrigued him quite like this.

As he headed out of the Marigny, he wondered if he was too far in to shake this girl. He wanted to text her and see if she'd thought more about the reunion with her college friends and having him tag along. He couldn't care less about her

college friends, but he did want to do something to show her she could trust him and that he could be an asset to her.

He would text her about it, but he needed to let it sit for a couple of days. Right now, he needed to find a way to get her off his mind, which was much easier said than done.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

“You’ve been quiet this trip,” Calliope’s mom said, glancing over at her from her spot in the driver’s seat.

Calliope and Deborah were in the car on the way back from a trade show in Houston. It was true that she had been quieter than usual. She hadn’t been able to get the events of Sunday off her mind. So much had happened that day, from her leaving the Broussard party in a rush, to bumping into Vanessa at the restaurant, to her intense chat with Quentin. She hadn’t told her mom about any of it, including seeing Vanessa at the restaurant. Her mother had probably been too involved in playing pool with Garrett to notice.

Deborah didn’t know what happened at college. It wasn’t something Calliope could explain to her or anyone else. Her boyfriend hadn’t punched her in the face or raped her or anything of the sort. He’d just found ways to humiliate her and break her spirit. If she would’ve shared the things he had done, the first question would’ve been: why didn’t she just leave? Why not get out of the relationship? It was easier not to tell anyone what happened. And the more she kept to herself, the more things she found she couldn’t share.

“I’m just tired,” she lied.

Her mother nodded as if that made sense, but Calliope could feel Deborah glancing at her as the mile markers ticked away. One thing about her mother, she never pushed.

“Hey, I did want to ask you something,” Deborah said, looking contrite.

“Yeah?”

“Are you good if I take off the weekend of the twentieth? It’s in like three weeks.”

“Sure,” Calliope said, but she wondered if that was when the retreat was. She pulled out her phone to check. The retreat was the weekend prior to that one...not that she was sure she was going or anything.

She’d broken down and texted Vanessa on Sunday evening, just to thank her for reaching out. Vanessa had been a good friend to her for a long time. She’d helped Calliope through the devastation of her parents’ divorce her freshman year of college. She hadn’t seen it coming, and it had hit her like a semi-truck.

“Peggy and Elizabeth are both available, but there’s that art festival going on Friday and Saturday, so we may be busy,” her mom said.

“If we’re lucky. What are you doing?”

“Donald asked if he could take me to Maine for the weekend.”

Calliope turned toward her. “Maine? You’re kidding? You’ve always wanted to go there.”

“I know. I mentioned that, and the next thing I know, he’s making plans.”

“That’s amazing, Mom.”

She smoothed a stray hair from her forehead. She'd gotten it colored for the first time in years and it took ten years off her. She was styling it differently, as well, using a curling iron and everything. She looked fantastic. "I told him I insisted on paying for my plane ticket and all, and he won't hear of it."

"Then quit arguing."

"It feels...odd. I've done for myself for so long."

"Does he ever make you feel like you owe him when he pays for dinner or what not?"

"No. Never. He seems to enjoy paying. It's like he *enjoys* treating me like a queen."

"Lucky you,"

She shrugged with a satisfied grin that gave Calliope a sense of peace. Her mother was resilient. There was no doubt about that. But it didn't stop Calliope from worrying about her and wanting happiness for her, and Donald was definitely making her mom happy.

When Calliope dropped off her mom, she checked her phone before heading home. There was a text from Eleanor asking if she could drop Calliope's bowl by—the one that she had left at the Broussard home on Sunday. Sick with embarrassment for running out and leaving it behind, Calliope texted back, saying she'd be happy to come and get it herself. Eleanor replied, saying she would see Calliope at her home shortly.

Eleanor must have already been out and about, because when Calliope got to her house, the black Town Car was sitting out front. She parked in her small driveway, her heartbeat skittering as she walked toward the car. She felt like

she was about to be confronted by the principal after being caught vaping in the bathroom.

The driver got out and walked around to the passenger side door, opening the door.

“I’m sorry,” Calliope said. “I was dropping my mother off when we texted. I thought I would beat you here.”

“Why are you apologizing?” Eleanor said as the driver took her manicured hand, helping her out of the car. “I’m the one who interrupted your day.” She turned to the driver. “Trevor, I’ll be just a moment.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Eleanor handed him a bill from her purse. “I saw that new coffee shop you mentioned the other day...the one that had that drink you liked. What was it?”

The man got shy. “The ‘funky monkey.’”

“Yes, grab yourself a *funky monkey*.” Eleanor said, sounding like the Queen of England. The man tipped his hat and then headed down the drive.

Calliope turned to Eleanor. “That was observant of you to remember a drink he liked.”

Eleanor adjusted her purse strap. “It’s Shula. Ever since Truman died, I’ve been letting her humanize me.”

Calliope giggled, imagining Eleanor as a robot, and Shula with an oil can, bringing her to life.

Eleanor reached back into the car, retrieving Calliope’s bowl. “Here you are. Shula and I ate every bite.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m glad you liked it. I suppose it wasn’t a hit at Crystal’s house.”

Eleanor waved her off. “She failed to put it out. Said she forgot.” She rolled her eyes. “That was fine with me. Shula and I ate it all week.”

They started up the walk. “I’ve got to warn you, I wasn’t expecting guests,” Calliope said.

“I wasn’t expecting a clean house,” Eleanor said. She looked over at Calliope. “I’m not saying you don’t clean. I’m saying you’re a working girl. You’ve got more important things to do.”

As Calliope fumbled for her keys, Eleanor glanced around the neighborhood. Calliope opened the door, assessing the damage in her main living space as she grabbed a jacket off the chair and hung it on the peg by the door.

Calliope scurried over to the refrigerator. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’ll take a glass of water if that’s not too much trouble.” Eleanor set her purse down on Calliope’s coffee table as she sat on the couch.

“Of course. I also have wine if you’d prefer?”

“Then I’ll take a glass of wine instead.”

“Is Pinot Grigio okay?”

“A girl after my own heart,” Eleanor said, with a hint at a smile.

Calliope got down two glasses and a new bottle, even though the one from the other night was half full and sitting in the refrigerator. She stabbed the cork with the corkscrew. “So, you and Shula seem to be a good match, friendship-wise.”

“Yes, I guess you could say she sort of completes me.”

Calliope glanced into the living room to find Eleanor picking up one of her throw pillows and inspecting it. Calliope poured the wine and then grabbed the glasses and headed into the living room. “Shula lives there with you still, doesn’t she?”

“Yes,” Eleanor said, taking the wine. “Thank you.” She took a sip and then said, “She moved out after Truman died. That’s when I realized the person I was really married to was still alive. It felt like losing my spouse for a second time.” She looked off into the distance. “It was like someone had taken away the best part of me.”

It was such an endearing thing to say that Calliope felt pressure behind her eyes like she might want to cry. It was entirely too early in this conversation and the bottle of wine for that.

Eleanor shook her head and lifted her eyebrows. “I couldn’t live without her. It was that simple.”

Calliope’s heart warmed. “How did you get her back?”

“I begged. Made an offer she couldn’t refuse.”

“And what was that?”

“Basically, I told her if she came back home, I wouldn’t let her lift a finger. I told her I’d hire someone to cook and clean and I’d pamper her often.”

Calliope giggled. “And she accepted?”

“She did. But she said she wanted to do the cooking. She said she enjoyed it. I told her I never knew she enjoyed it. She said she didn’t when she had to do it, but when she didn’t have to do it, she liked it.” Eleanor gave a slow shrug of her shoulder and then relaxed it.

Calliope considered it. “I guess I can see where that would make sense.”

“So,” Eleanor said, setting her glass down, “What happened on Sunday? Why did you leave so soon?”

Calliope let out a hard breath. “I guess the whole day sort of took me by surprise.”

Eleanor folded her hands in her lap. “I suppose I’m partially to blame for that.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I am. I should’ve warned you we were going over there. I was afraid if you knew, you wouldn’t agree to come.”

Maybe Eleanor knew Calliope better than she realized. “How would you know something like that?”

“I know you girls think I’m caught up in my own world, but I pay more attention than you realize.”

Calliope took a gulp of wine.

“It didn’t escape me that you fell ill a few weeks ago when Peyton had invited you to the gathering at my home.”

Calliope winced. “I’m sorry. Sometimes I have trouble with...social situations.”

Eleanor lifted her eyebrows. “Join the club.” She took a sip of wine.

“You?”

“What? Do you think I’m impervious to social anxiety?”

“Well, frankly, yes. You seem so at-ease in social situations. As cool as a cucumber.”

Eleanor huffed a laugh. “Good. The ruse is convincing.”

“Definitely,” Calliope said, seeing Eleanor in a whole new light.

“I didn’t mean to leave you hanging out to dry. I got swept up in a conversation.” Eleanor made a flippant gesture.

“I would never expect you to babysit me at a party.”

“Nor would I do such a thing. But I should’ve excused myself to get you acclimated first, especially with Peyton and Savannah not being there.”

Calliope shifted in her seat. “I didn’t used to be this way, you know.”

“I do know.”

Calliope frowned at Eleanor.

“Sweetheart, do you think I don’t remember how you were in high school? Every girl at that school wanted to be you.”

Calliope smiled. “You knew who I was back then?”

“Of course I did. Savannah and Peyton talked about you all the time. The famous Calliope Koch. *You’ve got to take us to get these shoes. Calliope had them on today. No, I want the blue dress. Pink is out. Didn’t you see Calliope’s blue dress at the Mardi Gras ball?*”

Calliope’s smile was uncontrollable. “You’re making that up.”

“I think you know I’m not.”

Calliope messed with the tassels on the blanket hanging on the back of her couch. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been that girl.”

“It doesn’t mean she’s not still in there.”

Calliope frowned, feeling like an imposter. “I’ve been through some things in the past several years. Some... humiliations.”

Eleanor sat up straight. “Darling, I think I should disclose that there is a reason I have taken a liking to you.”

Calliope stared at Eleanor with intent. “There is?”

“I’m no stranger to humiliation, myself.”

Calliope frowned, awaiting the explanation. Eleanor couldn’t have known what happened to Calliope at college, but the whole town knew that she and her ex-fiancé had broken up because he had cheated on her with her maid of honor.

“I have felt the betrayal of a friend much the way you did last year,” Eleanor said.

Calliope winced. “I’m sorry that it happened to you as well.”

“I am, too.”

“Was it a close friend of yours?”

“The closest.”

Tingles ran up Calliope’s spine. She wondered if Eleanor could possibly be talking about Charlotte Broussard. “Was this in recent years or when you were younger?”

Eleanor closed her eyes as if she was digesting the memory, and then opened them and looked at Calliope. “I think you know who it was.”

Calliope put her hand over her heart. It must have been Charlotte. “I’m so sorry.”

Eleanor lowered her chin. “Nobody else knows.”

Calliope thought about Quentin and how Charlotte had forced him out of their home. This had to be the big secret he had found out about. “I won’t say a thing.”

“I’m only telling you because we have this in common. You understand that, right?”

Calliope nodded her head quickly. “Of course.” She couldn’t believe that Eleanor Boudreaux was disclosing such private information to her.

Eleanor swallowed hard and then looked down at the floor as if gathering herself. Calliope had never seen this poised, always-composed woman look so vulnerable.

“How long did it go on?” Calliope asked.

“I really can’t say. If I’m being honest with myself, I knew it was going on for longer than I was willing to admit. By the time I found out for sure, she was already starting to show symptoms of her disease.” She met Calliope’s gaze. “How do you hate an Alzheimer’s patient?”

The frog in Calliope’s throat was almost too big to swallow down. “You don’t.”

Eleanor gave a humorless laugh. “I confronted her about it once.”

“You did?”

“I was visiting her at the facility. She was remembering something fondly. I asked her who she was thinking about. She said it was her *main squeeze* and then giggled like a schoolgirl.”

“Did she know who you were at that time?”

“No. I don’t even know if she knew who *she* was. I said, ‘What’s his name?’ and she said, ‘Tru Bear. He was an

American president, you know?” Eleanor shrugged. “I suppose if the two of them had happiness together, that was a good thing.”

Calliope’s heart hurt for both Eleanor and for the woman behind the horrible disease that took her faculties away from her. “That’s quite an enlightened approach to take.”

“It’s either that or despise two dead people.”

“Does Mr. Broussard know?” Calliope asked.

“Why do you think he divorced her?”

Calliope tried to digest that. “Oh, wow.”

“It’s not my place to reveal this affair to everyone just so people won’t judge Radford Broussard so harshly for remarrying while his wife was still alive. Can you imagine Braxton finding this out about his mother? It would crush him.”

“No doubt.” Calliope thought about Braxton and his adoration for his mother that was borderline unhealthy.

“The betrayal can hollow you out inside,” Eleanor said.

Calliope nodded, trying to hold back tears. “It can.”

“Don’t let it.”

Calliope swallowed hard. “You shouldn’t let it either.”

Eleanor squeezed her knee. “I did for a long time, but I don’t anymore.” She stood. “There may be one other person who knows about the affair.”

Calliope blinked as she stood, not sure how she should respond.

Eleanor narrowed her gaze at Calliope. “He’s carried this burden for a long time. I’m guessing he could use a

confidant.”

Calliope nodded, brushing away tears. “Thank you for sharing this with me.”

“You know, I knew that when Quentin finally found the right girl, she would be someone special.”

Calliope’s cheeks went hot. “We’re just getting to know each other.”

“I know you are. But a pseudo-mother can dream.” She lifted one eyebrow and then headed for the door.

After walking Eleanor out, Calliope came back inside and collapsed onto the couch. Her phone’s muffled text alert sounded from its spot down in her purse. The only thing giving her the energy to go get it was the hope of seeing Quentin’s name in her notifications.

Her heart sagged when she saw it was Vanessa.

Vanessa’s text read, *Let me know if you have any questions about the details I sent you the other day. We would all love to see you there!*

Another text came through from a different number. She went back to her home screen to find Quentin’s name giving her heart a squeeze.

Hope you’ve had a good week. Any thoughts about going to that reunion?

She rubbed her forehead, her mind spinning. What would be the harm in going? She could see all the friends she’d left behind when she left college. Sure, Evan would be there, but it wouldn’t be a terrible thing for her to face that particular demon head-on. Maybe she could exorcise his voice out of her brain.

Also, Quentin had offered to go with her. It would feel pretty nice to walk in there with a hot guy on her arm. It would also feel good to be coupled with Quentin for the weekend, even if it was just for his emotional support. It would be like an escape from reality—a trip with a purpose.

It wouldn't necessarily hold them to anything when they got back. And after what Eleanor had revealed to her about his mom, she really wanted to talk to him more about how he was doing with her recent passing. She wanted to help him like he was offering to help her.

She typed back to him, copying over the link to the cabin where they were staying.

Are you sure you're up for the trip?

After a couple of edge-of-her-seat minutes, a message popped up from him.

Had to make sure Garrett could watch the store. I'm good if you are.

Her shoulders sagged with relief.

I'm good. Thanks.

You're welcome.

She dropped her phone down to the countertop and collapsed onto a barstool. Emotions swirled in her head as she imagined what she might have just gotten herself into. But a calming force settled them as she thought about braving the weekend with Quentin by her side. That feeling was both comforting and deadly dangerous all at once.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Quentin knocked on Calliope's door, exhaling a hard breath. He'd spent the last two weeks holed up in his shop, working on an order for the interior designer Garrett had connected them with. He wanted it done and off his plate before he left on this weekend so Garrett couldn't accuse him of running off and leaving work undone.

Garrett had been understanding and even encouraging when Quentin told him that he wanted to have this weekend free, but Quentin knew as cool as Garrett wanted to appear, he was watching every penny and every hour. It had started to feel like Garrett was the older brother and Quentin was the little brother fuck-up. But that's why he got into business with Garrett. He needed somebody holding his feet to the fire.

Calliope opened the door with an uncertain smile. "Hey," she said, eyebrows crinkled together.

He took her in. She had on a blue floral dress with short sleeves that brushed her knees. Her hair was blonder than it was the last time he saw her, and instead of it being straight like it was the last couple of times he'd seen her, it was wavy, like one of those models photographed at the beach.

Just the sight of her had a calming presence on him, lifting him away from a stressful two weeks of work and taking him to a new, much more relaxing place. “You look...beautiful,” he said.

“Come in,” she said, stepping aside and offering him into her place. “Listen, I’ve been thinking about it. You don’t have to do this. I can totally go on my own.”

“No way. I’ve been looking forward to this for two weeks.”

She gave him a doubtful look. “I get it. We had a sort of intense start to this...friendship or whatever. But you’re trying to start your new business, you’re newly back in town. You’re probably spending a lot of time catching up with old...friends.”

“Wait, is that what you think I’ve been doing? Going out every night?”

“It’s none of my business what you’ve been doing. I just —”

“Calliope, I told you, I had a big job I was working on.”

“I know that’s what you said, but—”

“That’s not just what I said. I’ve been working my ass off for two weeks so I could get that order done and feel good about leaving Garrett for the weekend.”

“That’s another thing. What is wrong with me, taking a brand-new retail store owner away from his store for a weekend? I can’t do that in good conscience.”

He took both of her hands in his and made her look him in the eye. “I want to be here. I’m going with you on this trip. It’s all I’ve thought about for two weeks.”

“Really?” She looked skeptical.

“Well, that and wood and sanders and nails and saws.”

She smiled. “You really have just been working?”

“My ass off. I’m sorry if I didn’t text more. I didn’t want to start something up that I couldn’t finish right away. I guess I kind of do that.” He let go of her hands. “I used to spend days at my shop in Colorado surviving off bags of chips and bottles of water and soda while I finished a big job. It’s hard for me to walk away once I get started.”

She nodded, pulling a lock of hair out of her face.

“You colored your hair,” he said.

She touched it as if she had forgotten it was there. “Yeah, I did.”

“And it’s different than it was before.”

“I guess I needed to feel good about going this weekend, you know?”

“You look gorgeous.”

She let out a huff. “That’s very sweet.”

“I mean it. You look good. He’s going to realize his mistake the second you walk in.”

She smiled at him, the first comfortable smile she’d given him since he walked in the door. “Thank you. You look pretty good, too. I’ve gotta admit, that’s part of why I asked you to come.”

His ego straightened its back. “I like to pull my own weight.” He glanced over at her suitcase by the door. “You ready?”

She nodded. “Let’s do this.”



THE GPS DIRECTED Quentin down a series of country roads until they arrived at a large house that gave the outer appearance of a polished-up yet rustic cabin.

“This place looks nice,” Quentin said.

“It does,” Calliope said, her eyebrows knitted together.

He pulled in beside a luxury SUV and turned off the engine. “Are you ready to do this?”

“Yep,” she said, looking not ready at all. He went to open the door and she grabbed his arm. “Wait. There’s one thing we haven’t talked about yet.”

“What’s up?” he asked.

“This is a big place, but I counted the number of bedrooms on the link Vanessa sent, and I think there’s just one bedroom for each couple.”

He sat back in his seat. “Ah.” It wasn’t like he hadn’t wondered how sleeping arrangements were going to go down, but he decided to go with the flow and whatever she wanted when they got there.

“I’m not sure how we should present ourselves once we get inside,” she said.

“Okay.”

“We could go the whole route where I pretend you’re my boyfriend and that we’re madly in love and all that.”

He imagined himself with his arm around her and hers around him, cozying up to him all weekend. “That’s a way to go.”

“But I really don’t want to put on a ruse. I don’t think I’m a good liar.”

“Then how about we tell the truth?”

“What’s that?”

He smiled. “That we’re new at this or whatever.”

“New at dating?”

“Each other, yeah,” he said.

“But we’ve not even been on a date yet.”

“Sure we have. A few weeks ago.”

“Are you talking about the night you and Garrett took me and my mom out to eat?”

“We can call that a date. Vanessa witnessed it. Garrett and your mom weren’t even around when she saw us.”

“So, we’ve been together a few weeks?” she asked.

“Technically it’s been a couple of months. We had our first kiss back in July.”

She gave him a skeptical look. “I’d hardly say that we’ve been dating two months.”

“Then be vague. When someone asks how long we’ve been dating, just say a while.”

“And you’re okay to sleep in the same room with me?”

He narrowed his gaze at her. “I feel like this is a trick question.”

“Seriously. Is it okay if we have to sleep in the same room, or maybe even the same bed?” She winced like it was some kind of punishment.

“It’s damn sure okay with me.”

She shoved him. “Please stop using humor to get through this awkward moment.”

“I’m serious,” he said on a chuckle.

“Are you okay if we have to sleep in the same room or same bed together and not...”

“Have wild monkey sex?”

“Quentin,” she fussed, but her smile couldn’t help but break through.

He raised his eyebrows. “Well, isn’t that what you’re asking?”

She pursed her cute little lips at him. “Yeah, that’s what I’m asking.”

“I’m good with whatever happens here. It’s not like I thought I was taking you on a romantic getaway. We’re in a cabin with a ton of your friends and some kids. I wasn’t expecting to have sex.”

“You weren’t?”

He chuckled. “Of course not. This trip is more... functional.”

She nodded once like she was taking it in. “Functional.”

“That’s right.”

“Good. I can handle functional.”

“Yeah, but can you handle sleeping in the bed with me and not having wild—”

“Quentin,” she said, giving him a good shove.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Calliope's heart pounded as she walked up the sidewalk to the house. Judging by the amount of cars in the driveway, she figured they were either the last ones there or close to it. If she would have planned better, they would have gotten there sooner so they could have eased in with just a few people rather than walking into the entire group. But Calliope guessed she'd inherently known better, because if they had gotten there and Evan was the only other one there, that would have been disastrous.

Quentin paused by the door. "All good?"

Quentin was awesome. Earlier, she'd felt terrible for asking him to join her on the weekend, but in the truck on the way there, he'd seemed like he was in a great mood. She'd been paranoid when he'd barely spoken a word to her for two weeks, and she also hadn't seen him in his store. But from the moment he showed up at her door, he'd seemed all in.

She nodded. "Yep."

"You look great, if that helps."

Her tense body relaxed ten percent. She wasn't sure what she had done to deserve him helping her like this. She didn't know what he was in it for. Maybe he thought he had feelings for her. But she knew her track record, and this would not last.

She had to make sure she kept him right where he was and didn't let herself fall any harder than she already had.

“Thanks. It does.”

He pushed the door open and voices sounded from another room somewhere. As they walked in and the voices crystallized, they became oddly familiar. Some of the accents were stronger than she had remembered, but a cackling laugh took her right back to her college days and the patio off the back of her apartment where they'd all gathered so often.

Calliope and Quentin walked through the room where two boys sat glued to a television, holding video game controllers. A younger girl sat at a large dining room table drawing furiously on a piece of construction paper. “Hello,” Calliope said to her. The girl glanced up at her with a leery look on her face and then went right back to her work.

As they rounded the corner, faces, familiar and foreign, turned toward her. She swept her hand in a semicircle wave. “Hello.”

What happened next was a blur of greetings, hugs, and introductions to new people that had Calliope's head spinning. She introduced Quentin simply by his name and no other label, and nobody seemed to want further clarification.

“Who wants wine?” Lindsey asked.

“I'd love a glass,” Calliope said. “Whatever you have open.”

“I've got IPA,” Lindsey's fiancé said to Quentin.

“Sounds great,” Quentin replied.

As the small talk ensued, Calliope got her bearings, glancing around. There were two notable absences. “Where's

Vanessa?” she asked, starting with the easy one.

“Her flight was delayed. Aren’t you on the group text?” Allyson asked.

Calliope took her phone out of her purse and didn’t see any new messages. “I guess not.” That was probably on purpose. Vanessa knew better than to share Calliope’s phone number with Evan.

She couldn’t be so lucky that he would have canceled for the weekend, could she? Or did she need to see him again? She wasn’t sure if she liked either prospect.

“We saved you guys the best room,” Allyson said.

“Well, the best of the smaller rooms,” Lindsey said. “We let the ones who have kids take the master suites.” She bumped Allyson with her hip.

“Of course,” Calliope said.

“Follow me.” Lindsey took them down the stairs to the basement level that had two bedrooms. “These two have the most privacy, and there’s access to the back patio through there.” She pointed to a set of French doors.

“Perfect,” Calliope said.

“It gets loud with the kids. Josh and I are your suite-mates right here.”

“Great,” Calliope said, relieved that Lindsey would be down there with her and not Evan.

“Why don’t you guys get settled in, then we’ll see you back upstairs when you’re ready.” Lindsey winked, glancing at Quentin. “No rush.”

“Sounds good. And thanks, Lindsey.” Calliope gave her a significant look, hoping to convey her appreciation for keeping her separated from Evan. But Lindsey just smiled and then walked away. Calliope wasn’t sure if Lindsey or Allyson ever knew anything had been bad between her and Evan. Vanessa knew, but she was a rock-solid ally who held secrets under lock and key better than Homeland Security.

Calliope sat on the bed. “I don’t know what I was thinking, coming here.”

“I thought the entry went fairly smoothly. Are you feeling overwhelmed?” Quentin asked.

“A little bit. But you’re right. It went as well as I could’ve expected.”

“The guy isn’t here yet, is he?”

“No. I don’t know if he’s cancelled altogether or if he’s just late.”

Quentin sat down next to her and took her hand in his. “It’s okay if he shows. We’ll get through this together.”

She studied him. “What’s wrong with you?”

He chuckled. “What are you talking about?”

“Why did you volunteer for this?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I get off on the drama of it all.”

She nudged him with her shoulder. “You do not.”

“It is kind of exciting, watching the whole thing. I’ve never had a group of friends like this. It’s interesting.”

She wondered about his life in Colorado and who he hung out with. “How did you make friends in Colorado?”

He shrugged. “There were people I knew at this bar I used to go to a lot when I was younger. That got old after a while though. Honestly, I didn’t keep a ton of friends.”

She smiled at him. “Girlfriends?”

“Girls who were friends, sure.”

“With benefits,” she said, giving him a knowing look.

“There was some of that.”

She wondered if that was a lonely life for him, avoiding relationships of any kind. She supposed it would be hard to trust once the person who you should be able to trust the most in the world forced you out of your own home. And now that she knew the real reason, she could strangle his deceased mother for doing that to him. She couldn’t believe how selfish Charlotte was, especially knowing what a saint Braxton held her up to be.

Calliope’s heart hurt for Quentin. She wanted to take him into her arms and hold him there until that pain went away for him, but she had to keep things light. “How are you doing with all this here? Does it bother you, walking into a social situation where you know no one?”

“Not really. Guys are usually pretty simple to talk to, as long as you know a little bit about sports.”

“Do you watch sports?”

“I watch enough SportsCenter to keep up.”

“Did you play sports in high school?”

“I played lacrosse.” He pointed at the scar above his eyebrow. “Left me a gift.”

She smiled. “I’ve been wondering where that came from. You’re lucky whatever that was didn’t take your eye out.”

“It damn near did.”

She imagined Quentin on a lacrosse field, swinging the stick or whatever it was they did. She mainly focused on the hot and sweaty part. She batted the thought away, re-orienting herself. “Thank you for coming here.”

“It’s no problem.” They looked into one another’s eyes, and the moment was made for a kiss. How easy it would be to lose herself in Quentin right now. He was hot—no one could argue that—but it went beyond that. There was something special about him that drew her to him.

But wasn’t that what she always thought? *This time was different. This time it would work out. He wouldn’t be a secret asshole who wanted to tear down her spirit, and there would be no cheating with best friends, or no pregnant ex-girlfriends to pop up, or no other secret loves that he couldn’t deny.* How many times was she going to fall for the lie of love?

She turned away, needing to keep control of herself. She stood up. “Are you an unpacker or do you leave everything in the suitcase?”

“I’m a guy. Suitcase.”

“Of course. I want to hang up a couple of my dresses.”

“I like that you wear dresses. You look good in them.”

Her chest heated up. “Thank you for saying that.”

He sat back on his elbows. “You say that like I don’t mean it.”

She shrugged. “I guess I wear them because they’re comfortable. I hate clothes that bind me at the waist.” She

huffed a laugh. “That didn’t used to be a problem. You should’ve seen what I wore back in high school.”

“Like the bowling shoes you stole?”

She turned toward him. “Bowling shoes?”

“I heard you set a trend at school by wearing a pair of bowling shoes that you lifted from the bowling alley.”

She thought about it and then giggled. “Oh my God. I did, didn’t I?”

“Trendsetter,” he said with a sly grin that had her gooey inside.

She waved him off, pulling her black dress out of her bag. “Savannah exaggerates.”

“How did you know it was Savannah who told me that?”

“Because I know she’s been at the shop a lot lately. You shouldn’t listen to her. She day drinks.”

“She was stone-cold sober when she told me how she and Peyton used to recap your outfits like Mike Tirico at the Olympics.”

Calliope shook her head, thinking about how ludicrous that idea was now, looking down at her dowdy, blue floral dress that hid her belly fat. “That was a lifetime ago.”

“I wish I would’ve known you back then.”

“I’m sure you don’t. I was full of myself.”

“I can’t see you being full of yourself. That doesn’t seem like who you are.”

“I thought highly of myself, I’ll put it that way. I needed to be taken down a notch.” She thought about Evan showing up at her doorstep to pick her up for a social and telling her she

needed to change, that nobody wanted to look at her flabby ass in those tight shorts.

“I doubt that,” Quentin said and then laid back on the bed, locking his fingers together and putting his hands behind his head.

The muscles in his upper arms bulged, and she found her body coming to attention. She went about her business as he lay there, staring at the ceiling like he was lost in thought.

He really needed to sit up. His body was open and calling to her. That was not what this weekend was supposed to be about. This weekend was about facing her demons and healing. She couldn't confuse that with romantic feelings for a hot guy...especially one who was also being thoughtful, considerate, and giving of his time and energy.

She finished hanging things up and then faced him. “You look comfortable.”

“This is the first time I've really relaxed in the past couple of weeks. I don't think I want to move.”

“Do you want me to tell them you don't feel well?”

He sat up. “Nah, it just feels nice to be done with a project.”

“Any chance I'll get to see the furniture you worked on these past couple of weeks?”

He pulled his phone out, swiping through, and then handed it to her.

The picture was of a buffet in a dining room. It was tan wood with a subtle black, swirly pattern and clawed feet. “This is gorgeous.”

He shrugged. “It’s an antique trend that’s popular this year.”

“You did that just these past couple of weeks?”

“Hell, no. I’ve been working on that for months.”

“So, this wasn’t for that client?”

“No. I don’t really want to show you that stuff.”

“Why not?”

“They wanted a style that’s not really my specialty.”

“But you took the job anyway?”

“I don’t turn jobs down. I’m not that good.”

“Oh yes you are. You crafted this with your own hands?” she asked, looking at the picture again.

“Yeah, but that’s been a work in progress for me for a long time.”

“Is it for anyone in particular?”

“No, just something I wanted to see if I could do.”

“Well, I’m here to tell you that you can.”

He huffed a laugh. “Thanks.”

“Not that I would know. You’ve seen my house.” Her cheeks went hot thinking of her silly giraffe in the corner and her eclectic, trashy, brightly painted furniture.

“I like your place. It feels like the *you* of your past that you talk about sometimes.”

She shrugged. “I guess it is. I’ve had that stuff a long time though. It was the decor of my twenties. It’s time for me to move into a new era. I just haven’t done it yet. It’s not like we’re killing it in the gift store business or anything.”

“You seem to have plenty of foot traffic.”

“We do, but it’s more something you do because you love it and not to make a million dollars, you know?”

“I definitely know.”

She pointed at his phone. “This furniture looks like it could bring in a killing.”

“I do pretty well with it, but it takes me a long time to do a quality piece like this one. I can rush a simple order through, but to do the kind of stuff that I can ask a lot of money for takes a lot of time.”

“Well, I’m impressed.”

“You wouldn’t be if I showed you the order I did this past week.”

“I bet I would.”

He pocketed his phone.

“I can’t see that furniture?” she asked.

“Nah. I only want you to see the best of me,” he said, gazing into her eyes.

She wanted to look away, but the pull to him was like a drug. He leaned in as if to kiss her, and it took every bit of power she had to turn away.

They both sat in silence for a moment, and then she said, “I don’t want to confuse things this weekend.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“I like you. And I’m so grateful for you showing up for me like you are. But I’m here, basically, to try to confront my feelings.”

He frowned. “Do you think you might still be in love with the guy?”

She couldn't help but laugh. “God, no. It couldn't be further from that.” She gathered her strength, and then said, “I don't want to be the way I am anymore.”

He took her hand in his, rubbing his thumb against her hand.

“There's this narrative that I run through my brain. Things that he said and did back then that changed me. When you say things like how you like the way I dress, I think about things he said that counteract that.”

His eyes burned with what looked like anger.

She squeezed his hand and then put her other hand on top of his. “I'm not telling you this to get you mad. He's an asshole. We both know that.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“This really isn't about him. It's about me confronting the beast in my brain. When you tell me I look good, I want to believe you.”

“Why wouldn't you believe me? Do I seem insincere?”

She shook her head. “You seem very sincere. And if you would have told me that stuff when I was back in high school, I'd have believed you, trust me. But everything changed at college.”

“How so?”

“Well, I gained the freshman fifteen for one.”

“They have a name for that on purpose. It's pretty common, I think.”

“But it wasn’t just the weight. It was the clothes and the general self-care. I just...relaxed with all the primping, I guess. I quit dying my hair and getting manicures, that kind of thing. And then Evan and I became a couple, and he sort of held up a mirror to who I had become.”

Her throat started getting dry. “When someone’s constantly pointing out your flaws, it messes with you. It changes who you are. I always thought I’d come home, and I would start eating healthy and take up running or something. But I would think about the things he’d said to me, and then I wanted to eat more. I wish I could have used all my anger to prove him wrong, but instead, I leaned into the negativity.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I wish you could see yourself the way I see you.”

She held up a hand to stop him. “I’m not trying to get you to compliment me. I just want you to understand what I’m doing here...why I came.”

He nodded. “I get it. But that quality that you say you lost, I don’t think you realize that you didn’t lose it.”

While her instinct was to feel like he was buttering her up, the undeniable sincerity in his gaze gave her a twinge of hope she hadn’t felt in a long time.

“Why do you think I followed you all over the supermarket that day?” he asked. “Do you think I’ve ever done anything like that before?”

She smiled. “I don’t know.”

He narrowed his gaze, considering her. “You’ve got this thing about you. I don’t know what it is, but I keep coming back for more of it.”

Her heart fluttered as she let herself indulge in what he was telling her, just for a moment.

“I’m gonna tell you something that I shouldn’t,” he said.

She wiggled her shoulders. “I love a good secret.”

“I stayed faithful to you when I was in Colorado.”

There was no way to stop her grin. “You did not.” She hoped desperately he was telling the truth.

“I did. How about you? Did you stay faithful to me?”

She chuckled. “I guess I did. But in all fairness, I wasn’t really trying. I’m not online dating at the moment and it’s not like there’re handsome, straight men flooding my day job.”

He smiled that gorgeous smile of his that sucked her in like a vacuum cleaner. “Good.”

Her body begged her to fall into him, but luckily, he broke the spell by standing up.

He held out his hand. “Wanna go mingle with your friends?”

She took his hand and stood. “One day I’m going to figure you out.”

“I’m really not that complicated.”

As he led her out of the room, her hand firmly in his, she felt like she could conquer the world, which could, in all fairness, be easier than facing Evan.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

They were all having drinks by the pool when a sedan pulled up in the driveway.

“Look, someone’s here,” Allyson said.

“It must be Vanessa,” Lindsey said. “Evan has his whole family with him. I think they’re driving up.”

Quentin glanced at Calliope, who was playing it cool, but he could feel the energy coming off her. He squeezed her knee, and she leaned in. “Vanessa had said his family wasn’t coming.”

Quentin furrowed his eyebrows and then shrugged.

The woman who had approached them at the restaurant got out of the sedan, followed by a guy. Quentin assumed it was her husband or boyfriend, but then Dustin stood. “Hey, it’s my man.”

One of the other guys said, “Two for the price of one, huh?”

The other guy, whose name Quentin thought might be Seth, looked at his wife. “That’s kind of weird,” he said under his breath, but loud enough that Quentin heard. He wasn’t sure if Calliope heard or not.

“Look who I found at the airport,” Vanessa said, wheeling her suitcase toward them.

The guy looked flushed, running his hand through his hair as he took in the scene, seeming a little stressed out. “Yeah, I was having a drink. Pregaming.”

Hugs ensued as the two of them made their way through the crowd. Calliope stood behind Quentin. He didn’t know if she realized she was using him as a shield or not. Based on her behavior, he was pretty sure this was Evan.

“Quentin,” Vanessa said. “I’m so glad you were able to come.” She reached in for a hug.

“Me, too. It’s good to see you.”

“So good,” Vanessa said. “Calliope.” She held out her arms wide and the two women hugged tightly. Vanessa pulled back, holding Calliope by the shoulders. “I’m so glad you could come.”

“I’m glad you invited me.”

“Of course I invited you.”

Quentin was trying to put his finger on the look Vanessa was giving Calliope. Maybe a hint of pity? Or was it guilt?

“Hey,” Seth said, shaking Evan’s hand. “Good to see you, man.”

“Yeah,” Evan said. The guy didn’t really smile so much as gauge people.

“You guys bumped into one another at the airport, huh?” Seth asked.

“Yeah, I was having a drink, like I said.”

Quentin took note of the number of times this guy wanted to make sure people knew he was having a drink at the airport.

“Where’s the family?” Seth asked.

Evan ran his hand through his hair again like he’d done when he first got out of the car and was assessing the group. “They decided to sit this one out.”

“That’s too bad. The boys will be disappointed. They were looking forward to seeing Spencer and Camille.”

“Yeah,” Evan said, glancing around. Even without what he knew about this guy, there was something about Evan that made Quentin want to punch him in the teeth.

Evan’s gaze landed on Calliope, and he blinked, taking her in. “Hey,” he said, looking Calliope up and down like a piece of meat.

“Hey,” she said. They stepped toward one another, both of them in an awkward stance, feeling one another out. Finally, Calliope held out her arms, and they gave each other a quick hug. She stepped back. “It’s good to see you.” Her nose twitched like it did when she lied.

“Yeah, sure,” Evan said, eyes still glued to her. He couldn’t seem to take them off her chest. “I didn’t know if you’d show.”

“I got here before you did.”

“True.” He stared at her like no one else was around...like he had the right. “I’m glad you came.”

She held her mouth open for a moment, words not coming out, until she finally seemed to remember Quentin was there. She grabbed his arm. “This is Quentin. He’s with me.”

“Oh yeah?” the guy said, as if he didn’t believe her.

Quentin stared daggers through the asshole. “Quentin Broussard.” He gave the guy a firmer handshake than was necessary. In all fairness, Evan gave it right back to him.

“Are you the one who runs the beignet factory?”

“My brother ran a twelve-store restaurant chain that sold beignets. But no, I’m not him.”

Evan looked back at Calliope with his first smile since his arrival. “You brought your boyfriend’s brother with you?”

Calliope’s face went blood red. “He’s not... I’m not...”

Jared came out of the house. “What’s up, man?” They did a handshake/hug thing, and Jared introduced Evan to the woman he had brought with him, whose name had escaped Quentin.

Quentin and Calliope stepped back to make room, and Calliope turned away from the group. “How did he know about me dating Braxton?”

Quentin knew the question was rhetorical. “Maybe Vanessa told him in the car on the way over here.”

“Vanessa doesn’t know about Braxton. Nobody knows anything about me. I don’t keep in touch with these people, and I’m not on social media.”

Quentin didn’t like the fact that this asshole was researching Calliope, but he needed to remain steady and not fuel this fire. “People find stuff out. Gossip. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

She nodded, looking stressed, so he brought her in for a hug. She fell into his embrace, putting her hand on his shoulder. Her touch made him feel like a king.

Evan glanced over at the two of them and then back to the group.

That's right, asshole. She isn't yours anymore.

"I'm so sorry, I'm late," Vanessa said, loud enough to get everyone's attention. "I've got a schedule for the weekend. I'm going to handle dinner. Lindsey, did our grocery order arrive?"

"Yep. All packed away."

"Awesome. Calliope and Quentin, you're on cocktail, appetizer, and salad duty tonight. I'm going to put together the main course. Let me just put my stuff up and I'll meet the two of you in the kitchen."

"Sure," Calliope said.

As the group dispersed, Quentin reached down to Calliope's ear and said, "I'll go heavy on the liquor in those cocktails."

"Please do."

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

As Calliope stood next to Quentin, chopping a tomato in this strange kitchen, she tried to imagine what drugs she had been slipped when she made the decision to come there for the weekend. Seeing Evan for the first time had been like a weird dream that she couldn't wake up from.

She'd built him up to be such a monster in her head that seeing him in the flesh was more frightening than it should have been. She'd wanted to clutch onto Quentin for dear life, but she didn't want to look like she couldn't stand on her own two feet.

She couldn't understand how Evan had known about Braxton, and worse, why he had chosen to disclose that information. It was like he wanted her to know he'd been stalking her.

"I'm almost sure you can buy these things already sliced," Quentin said as he ran a knife through a mushroom.

"Mmm-hmm," she uttered.

"I'd pour us both another drink, but maybe we should wait until after we've put the knives down."

"For sure."

Shouts came from the living room where there was some kind of game on. “Are you a football fan, man?” Jared asked from the living room, which was open to the kitchen.

“Sure,” Quentin said.

“Broncos or Saints?” Evan asked.

A chill crawled up Calliope’s spine. Quentin hadn’t mentioned anything about being from Colorado, not to Evan. But maybe he’d told one of the other guys and they told him, which seemed a little gossipy.

“I root for both.”

“What if they’re playing each other?” Evan asked. All the guys looked on as if Quentin was being tested.

“Then I’d have to be true to my roots.”

“Good answer, with your New Orleans girl standing next to you,” Seth said.

“Calliope doesn’t care about football,” Evan said.

Calliope’s chest went hot. How dare he act like he knew her better than Quentin? He did, of course, but still. “I’ve actually gotten into it over the years,” she lied.

“Oh yeah? What do you think of your draft picks?” Evan asked.

She glanced up at Quentin. He looked down at his own hand where he was giving a thumbs up sign.

“I think they’re solid. We look good this season.”

“We’ll see about that,” Evan said, lazily looking back at the television and saying something to Dustin under his breath.

Vanessa came into the room. “Evan, can you help me with my suitcase? Lindsey and I are going to switch rooms.”

Lindsey came up behind her. “I hope that’s okay. Since your family didn’t show, I was hoping Josh and I could have the bigger room. No need to waste a king-size bed on one guy.”

“And I was going to sleep on the couch, being the only single one,” Vanessa said, “but I will happily take Lindsey and Josh’s room and make Evan sleep on the couch.”

“How did I go from a king-sized bed to a couch?”

“You left your family at home,” Seth said.

Evan turned back toward the television, his face going red.

“Evan?” Vanessa said, and he set his beer bottle down, walking toward her like a kid being summoned by his mom.

The rest of them watched the game, some of the group filtering outside with the kids.

Quentin shifted his stance, clearing his throat. “Vanessa and Evan seem like they’re good friends, huh?”

“Vanessa’s like that with everyone.”

“Yeah, she seems like a caretaker.”

“Totally.”

After a moment, Quentin said, “Kind of funny that they bumped into each other at the airport.”

“Yeah. What was he doing sitting around at the airport having a drink, anyway?” Calliope asked. “It’s not like we’re not drinking here.”

“Right?”

After they finished putting together the salad, Calliope set out the appetizers, which included a vegetable tray, hummus

with pita chips, and a tray of swirly roll ups that smelled of sun-dried tomato and cream cheese.

“I think our work with the food is done,” Calliope said. “Should we start on the meal? Vanessa seems to be taking a while with that room change.”

“I think we’ve got some important bartending to do. What do you say we set up at that outdoor kitchen?” Quentin said.

She shrugged. “Let’s do it.” They gathered the alcohol and headed outside. After a couple of trips, they were all set up with ice, glasses, mixers, wine, and beer.

“This bar is fantastic,” Seth’s wife, Marla, said, bellying up...which was the only term to use for it, because she was clearly pregnant, even though it hadn’t been announced. Even so, Calliope wouldn’t say a word until either Seth or Marla brought it up.

Seth was out in the yard playing with Marla’s daughter and Allyson and Dustin’s boys. “It’s so cool seeing Seth with your little girl.” Calliope said. “I always knew he’d make a great dad.”

“Really?” Marla asked, seeming to sincerely want to know more.

“Absolutely. He was always in charge of stuff back in college. Like if we were going to rent a limo for an event, he would be the one who would take care of it.”

She nodded. “Sounds like him. It’s one of the reasons I married him—how responsible he is. And how good he is with Celia.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” Calliope said.

“So is Calliope. I’ve never heard it before.”

“Really?” She turned to Quentin in question.

“I’d never heard it before you,” he said.

“That’s crazy. I mean, I know it’s not the most common name, but I never thought it would be one people have never heard of.”

“Do you know where your mom got it from?” Marla asked.

Jared stepped up beside Calliope, behind the bar. “It’s a Greek goddess.”

Calliope turned to him in surprise. “No way.”

“No, it totally is. I looked it up.”

“Just now?” Calliope asked.

“Back in college when I first met you. I read it was the goddess of poetry or something,” Jared said.

Calliope held up her phone. “How is it that I’ve had the internet in my hand all these years and never thought to look up what my name meant?”

“Is your mom a poet?” Marla asked.

“No. She said she got it from a soap opera.”

“That tracks,” Jared said, and Calliope punched him in the gut, just like they were back in that apartment all those years ago. It was taking a minute, but she was starting to feel like her old self, prior to when she and Evan started up what they had.

Jared feigned doubling over, though she’d hardly touched him.

“What were you doing stalking my name back then, anyway?” she asked.

“You were hot. I had a thing for you.” He looked at Quentin. “Sorry, man. Just keeping it real.”

He shrugged. “I can’t blame you. She is hot.”

Calliope couldn’t help but smile at all the attention. She set a glass down on the bar. “I doubt that. You had every opportunity to ask me out and you never did.”

“I couldn’t. Evan had dibs.”

Calliope had just shoved the scoop down in the ice machine. She paused, looking at Jared. “I knew Evan for two years before he made any kind of move on me.”

“I know. He drove us all crazy. It took him that long to get up his courage.”

Calliope slid the ice into the glass, trying to wrap her head around that. How could a guy who took two years to get up the courage to ask her out tear her down the way he did once he got her?

Jared glanced around. “Anyway, keep this all on the DL. It’s still pretty new with me and Ashley.” He stood up tall. “She gets jealous.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“And you don’t, I’m sure,” Marla said.

“Of course not. I’m a completely well-adjusted young man.”

“Young?” Calliope said. “You know we’re in our thirties now, right?”

He put his finger over his lips. “She thinks I’m twenty-nine.”

Marla hauled herself up. “I’ll go set her straight.”

“Don’t you dare,” Jared said.

Marla feigned like she was running, but she barely covered three feet of distance. Jared played along like he was chasing her in slow motion.

Once they got out of earshot, Calliope said, "I like her."

"I do, too. She and Jared seem pretty familiar with one another," Quentin said.

"Seth and Jared must've stayed close all these years. They're from the same hometown."

"That's nice that they stayed in touch."

"It kind of feels like this whole group has been in touch," Calliope said.

"Are you sorry you slipped away from them?"

She looked over at everyone, all running around playing with the kids. As much as it hurt her heart not to have these people in her life, she knew getting away from Evan was the best thing for her. "I think I made the right decision." She glanced around. "I wonder if Vanessa ever made it to the kitchen."

"I don't know. Evan hasn't come out here either."

Calliope grabbed a bottle of vodka and held it in her hand, considering him. "You've mentioned that a couple of times now."

He shrugged, putting ice in a glass. "It's none of my business."

"You know he's married and has kids, right?"

"I didn't say anything."

Calliope thought of Vanessa and Evan as a couple, and it didn't compute. "Do you think they're together?"

“I don’t know. I just know he had his story straight with what he was doing at the airport when she bumped into him.”

“That would make no sense. Why would she have wanted me here if they were a couple? That’s not how her heart is.”

“It doesn’t seem that way.”

Evan came out the door and stood on the patio, knocking back a beer.

“Do you have any interest in talking to him by yourself?” Quentin asked.

“No,” Calliope said, not wanting Quentin to leave her side just yet.

“It might help. You could say stuff to him you’ve been holding back all these years.”

“Nobody wants me to do that. It would ruin the weekend.”

“You could be discreet.”

She thought about it. If she wasn’t going to talk to Evan, why did she even come? “I’m not prepared.”

“Understood. I do need to hit the head. Do you want to go inside and see what’s up with Vanessa?”

She let her shoulders sag, inwardly reprimanding herself. “No. Go on.”

“All right.” He smiled at her and then headed off.

As soon as Quentin got in the house, Evan started walking toward her, but then Marla came back over, sitting down at the bar again. Evan rerouted to the yard with the rest of the group. *Thank you, Marla.*

“So, Vanessa tells me you have a gift shop in New Orleans,” Marla said.

“With my mom, yes.”

She grinned. “I love that so much. My mom passed away a few years ago.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you. I love the idea of a mother/daughter shop. My mother never would have gone into business with me. I have a boutique in Nashville.”

Calliope couldn’t believe it. She had already felt a connection with this woman and she hadn’t even known that Marla held Calliope’s own dream job. What were the odds? “You’re kidding? What style?”

“Oh, whatever, really, but I tend to gravitate toward clothes that are stylish but comfortable.”

“Sounds perfect,” Calliope said.

“I don’t specialize in plus sizes, but I make sure to have plenty of twelves and fourteens available.”

“That’s fantastic,” Calliope said.

“They sell through. I hear your store is fabulous. Lots of bold colors and animal-themed furniture and such?”

Calliope shrugged. “With a name like The Pretentious Zebra, we better live up.” She squinted at Marla. “I’ve always wanted to open a boutique,” she said, almost whispering, not sure why.

Marla considered her. “You know, I’m looking for someone to fill in for me while I’m on maternity leave.”

Calliope grinned. “Congratulations.”

Marla rubbed her belly. “Thank you.”

“How far along are you?”

“Seven and a half months.”

Calliope’s eyes went wide. “Wow. I thought you might be pregnant, but I had no idea you were *that* pregnant.”

“I know. I’m not a small girl to begin with, so this pregnancy has been a little underwhelming in the showing department.”

“You look great,” Calliope said.

“Thank you. So anyway, if you know anyone who would be willing to fill in for me at my shop for two or three months, let me know.”

“You don’t have anyone on staff who can take the wheel?”

“My niece Riley is great, but she’s still so young and not completely self-assured. She’ll get there, but I’m not ready to leave her on her own in there yet, at least not long-term. She’s totally capable for breaks or even a day or two here or there though, and we’re closed Sundays.”

Calliope nodded, processing the idea of a maternity leave fill-in stint in Nashville.

“I need someone full-time—someone who knows how to run a retail store but may be interested in a boutique specifically. Know anyone like that?”

Calliope smiled at her obvious insinuation. “I don’t know anyone who lives in Nashville.”

“That’s not a problem. I’ve got a rental in the Sylvan Park area that I’ve blacked out for that time period.”

Calliope must have been looking at her funny, because Marla waved her off. “It’s a great area...close to the shop and near plenty of good stuff...really walkable. And anyone staying there to run my store would do so rent-free, of course.”

Calliope pressed her lips together, letting out a sigh. “You really know how to grease the wheels, don’t you?”

“It’s what makes me a great retail salesperson, and what makes my shop super fabulous.” She waggled her eyebrows.

Calliope stared at Marla, watching possibility swirl around them. But her bubble burst as she looked over Marla’s shoulder to see Evan approaching.

Marla glanced over her own shoulder as well, and then turned back to Calliope. “Think about it,” she said and then stood up and walked away. Calliope wanted to reel her back in like a fish.

“What’s up?” he said.

Calliope shifted gears from hopeful possibility mode to exhausting self-improvement mode. She liked it much better a few minutes ago. “Just doing a little bartending.”

“What are you making?”

“I don’t know. I have vodka and bourbon and gin, I think.” She turned a bottle toward her to confirm. “Can I make you something?”

“I’ve got this beer,” he said, holding it up.

“Right,” she said, grasping the lip of the bar and letting out a deep breath.

He bore his gaze into her, taking her right back to those days and that eerie feeling that something was coming. “Does it make you that uneasy to see me?”

“Who said I was uneasy?”

“Your body language. You forget that I know you.”

She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. “No, I haven’t forgotten that.”

“Are we going to talk about the fact that you fell off the face of the earth after graduation?” he asked.

Her chest seized. “After we broke up, you mean. I went on with my life.”

“We never broke up.”

She blinked, panic gripping her. What did he mean, they hadn’t broken up? That was insane. Or was it? Had they not somehow? This was what he did to her. He made her question what was real and what was impossible. “Of course we did,” she said.

“You said you needed time. I thought that meant temporarily.”

She didn’t say anything, just considered him, trying to remember the conversation.

“You said, ‘Let me go home and see my mom. Let me have some time with her.’ That’s what you said.”

She looked down at the bar, fiddling with the rubber mat in front of her. He was right. That was what she had said. She’d just been trying to get away from him without World War III ensuing.

“Don’t you think I deserved some kind of closure?” he asked.

She gave him a look. “You knew it was over.”

His face went red. “I didn’t know that.”

“I was back in New Orleans and you were in Birmingham. How was that going to work?”

“I imagined us building a life together.”

She had to laugh. “You can’t be serious.”

He looked genuinely taken aback. “Of course I’m serious. You were my girlfriend for two years.”

Her heartbeat sped up. “Evan, we were a train wreck.”

“No, we weren’t.” he said, his voice breaking. He looked so innocent she almost forgot what a monster he was. She shook her head, tossing up her hands, backing away. “I can’t do this right now.”

“Fine. Just go ahead and walk away. Shut me out. That’s what you do best.”

She wanted to walk away worse than anything, but she couldn’t give him the satisfaction of being right. “I’m not walking away. I’m simply choosing not to have an unproductive conversation.”

“Unproductive for you, so that’s all that matters.”

The fury inside of her built to the point that she was losing control. “I don’t think you want to do this with me right now.”

“Okay, fine. What does your calendar look like? When can we talk about how you threw away the best relationship you’ve ever had?”

She could feel her eyes going wide. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“Calliope,” he said, leaning closer. “You crushed me.”

She stood there, stunned into silence. She had no idea she had that kind of power over him. As much as she wanted it to make her feel powerful, it made her feel like a heel. “I didn’t mean to crush you.”

He shook his head. “Forget it.” He started to walk away and then he turned back toward her. “For the record, I didn’t think we were broken up.”

He walked away toward the kids playing, leaving her feeling like everything she’d known for the past decade was wrong.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Calliope had been off ever since Quentin left to go to the bathroom. He saw her talking with that asshole, and it didn't look like it was going well. Quentin hadn't meant to leave her in the lurch. He just knew the whole point of her coming there was to confront her demons.

Calliope had had four failed relationships that she'd mentioned, but for whatever reason, the only one that seemed to have impacted her was the one with that guy—even more so than her fiancé who cheated on her with her best friend. It seemed to be a nonissue that she had been in a relationship with Quentin's own brother. Typically, that kind of thing might get in the way, but Calliope seemed to be perfectly comfortable around Braxton and his new wife. Hell, Peyton was one of her closest friends.

Calliope sat with the girls by the pool, chewing on her thumbnail, something Quentin had never seen her do. He stood with the guys talking about football for the sixth hour of the day, with two noticeable absences from the group.

If Vanessa and Evan hadn't fucked five times since they'd been there and once in the car on their way over, Quentin would wear a tutu to the next Saints game. He just couldn't

figure out why Vanessa had insisted on Calliope having a front row seat to her relationship with that poisonous dickhead. Calliope had elevated Vanessa to sainthood status. She seemed like a sweet girl, but what she was doing was wrong. Quentin couldn't understand it.

He excused himself and walked over to Calliope. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Hey, I'm getting kind of tired. I think I'm gonna go to bed."

She nodded. "Okay."

The women sat in awkward silence, clearing their throats, one of them snickering.

"Oh," Calliope said, standing up. "Right. Bed."

"You don't have to come," Quentin said. He wasn't at all sleepy, but he had tired of her friends. Seth and Jared were both cool. Dustin was a little less cool, but that's probably because he was Evan's closest bud. Quentin's favorite of the group was Lindsey's fiancé, Josh, but probably only because he was the only other guy there who hadn't been a part of the original group. He certainly knew those guys better than Quentin did, though. It was obvious they'd hung out plenty prior to the weekend. They'd probably known him for as long as Lindsey had been dating him.

"Night, everybody," Calliope said, giving a little wave.

The guys walked up. "Sorry to keep you up past your bedtime," Evan said with a sneer.

"I doubt they're going to do much sleeping," Josh said, making Evan's neck turn red. Maybe Josh didn't know Calliope and Evan had dated. Or maybe he did and thought he'd mixed it up, in which case, Quentin liked him even more.

"Are you a boat guy?" Evan asked Quentin.

“I’ve been on boats, but I wouldn’t call myself a boat guy.”

“That’s right. You’re a mountain guy.” He stuck out his chest, hamming it up, acting like an imbecile. “Maybe you can regale us with stories of climbing Pikes Peak.”

“All right,” Seth said. “Time to switch to beer.”

“Fuck you. I’ll drink whatever the hell I want.”

Dustin, Evan’s best buddy, got interested in his shoes. *Enabler.*

“Night,” Quentin said and walked away with his arm around Calliope. He heard the asshole say something else. He wasn’t sure what, but still, he reached down and gave Calliope a pat on the ass and then scooted her in front of him as she giggled.

Once they got inside the house, Quentin said, “Sorry if that was inappropriate. I think I understand now why you hate that guy so much.”

“I shouldn’t have laughed.”

He gave her a funny look. “Why?”

“It’s a long story,” she said, heading down the stairs.

He closed the door to their room behind them. “I have all night.”

She waved him off. “I’m gonna get ready for bed.”

“That’s cool,” he said, relaxing back on the bed while she gathered her stuff and then headed into the bathroom.

He collected his own toothbrush, shorts, and T-shirt, and then waited for her to come out. She opened the door, and he sat up, taking a look at her. She wore a pair of lime green

sweat shorts and a pink T-shirt that had a dragon or something on it.

She held up a hand. “I know. I’m supposed to be wearing some kind of cute pajama set or something. I meant to buy one. We got busy at the shop this week.”

“Why are you making apologies for your pajamas?”

She tugged at her sweat shorts, pulling them down. “I know some girls like to look cute for guys they’re getting in bed with—even ones they’re not planning on sleeping with.”

“Who said you didn’t look cute?”

She gave him that doubtful smile and then pulled the covers back.

After he got changed and brushed his teeth, he opened the door. “If you want to pretend to be asleep, now’s your chance.”

She closed her eyes tightly and feigned loud snores.

He slid into what had to be a full-size bed, next to her. “That’s the best you’ve got? I’m told I snore like a freight train. Good luck with that.”

She squinted one eye at him.

“It was Garrett who told me that, in case you were wondering.”

She smiled at him. There was something about her smile that made him want to scoop her up and never let her out of his arms.

“Are you gonna tell me what happened tonight, or am I going to have to get it out of you some other way?” he asked.

“What are my options?”

“Well, the first option is the easiest,” he said. “In that option, you simply tell me what happened.”

“What’s the second option?”

“I tickle you to the point of breaking.”

She nodded, trying to contain her smile, but it was coming through. “And the third option?”

“Straight up waterboarding.”

“Well, seeing that I absolutely hate being tickled, and I don’t really want to feel like I’m drowning right now, I think I’ll choose the easy way out.”

“Good choice.”

She brushed her fingertips across her forehead. “I just got taken off guard, that was it.”

“How so?”

“He’s really upset with me.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “I’m sorry. *He’s* upset with *you*?”

“He says I crushed him.”

“You crushed him? How did you do that?”

She squirmed. “I guess I didn’t make it super clear that we were breaking up.”

“What did you say? Do you remember?”

She winced. “I guess I told him I needed time to spend with my mom, and then I never returned his calls or texts. Eventually, I changed my number, got off social media.”

“So it was a full-on ghosting.”

“But it wasn’t just of him. It was of everyone.”

“I know I’m on your side, but if a girl tells me she needs time, I can read between the lines.”

“That’s easy to say now. But what if the girl had been your girlfriend for two years? Maybe sometimes long-term couples do take time and then get back together.”

“Let me ask you this, why did you make it vague?” he asked.

She looked like she was thinking about it. “I don’t know.”

“I think you do know.”

She let out a sigh. “Because I was afraid of how he would react.”

“And to be clear, you weren’t afraid he was going to react like he was sad. You were afraid he was gonna go off, weren’t you?”

She scratched her forehead again. “I guess.”

“Calliope, come on.”

“It’s hard to remember. It’s been so long.”

“All I’ve heard you say about this asshole is that he’s like a monster in your head. That doesn’t sound like a guy who would take a breakup easily.”

“I know, but—”

“He’s manipulating you. Can you see that?”

She nodded, looking away. “I know.”

“Hey,” he said, getting her attention. “He’s manipulating you.”

She stared into his eyes, looking like she wanted to believe him. He was starting to understand at that moment exactly

how much damage this jackoff had done to her.

“I know,” she said as if she was resigned to accept it but hadn’t quite gotten there yet. “But I really do think I hurt him.”

“I’m sure you did.”

She widened her eyes. “Don’t hold back.”

“Of course he was hurt. He lost a wonderful girl. But he deserved to lose you.”

She stared at him, studying his face. “What if I’m not a wonderful girl? What if I’m the asshole and he’s the good guy?”

“I’ve spent at least five or six hours with the guy. I can confirm he’s the asshole.”

“But can you confirm I’m not one?”

“A hundred percent.”

She smiled, her eyes getting lazy. “You’ve really turned out to be different than I thought you were going to be.”

“How so?”

“You’re not at all into yourself.”

“You assumed I was some kind of self-centered, egocentric asshole?”

“I’m sorry. I had the wrong idea.”

“You thought since I didn’t come home when my mom got sick that I was a self-absorbed jerk, didn’t you?”

She scrunched up her face and then covered it with her hand. “Don’t kill me.”

He pulled her hand away from her face. “Don’t cover that up. I like looking at it.”

She blushed. “It’s just that you’ve blown my mind a little bit.”

“I blew your mind? That sounds pretty major.”

“You’ve taught me a lesson in perception. Things aren’t always what they seem, are they?”

“No, they’re not. But to be fair. I should’ve been here with Braxton and Garrett. I should’ve done my part. I don’t get a free pass because of what she did to me back then.”

She ran her thumb underneath her bottom lip as she considered him. “What was your relationship like with her when you were gone?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, a delay tactic.

“You said she sent you money, but did you have a relationship with her? Did she check on you and care about what was going on with you?”

His stomach soured. “I don’t think you really want to know the answer to that question.”

She pressed her lips together like she was rubbing in lip balm, and then she said, “Eleanor Boudreaux came to see me a couple of weeks ago.”

“Oh yeah? What did she have to say?”

“She told me that her husband had cheated on her with her best friend.”

He closed his eyes and then opened them, looking down, unable to face her just yet.

“I can’t believe she kicked you out so that she could continue her affair. That’s unthinkable, Quentin.” Her voice was soft but reassuring. Part of him hated that she knew, but the other part was relieved. He’d never told anybody, and he hadn’t planned on doing so. But it felt good knowing that someone else was outraged on his behalf.

“It is what it is,” he said, meeting her gaze.

“It’s got to be so frustrating knowing that Braxton and Garrett both think she was such a saint.”

“Braxton thinks she was a saint. Garrett wasn’t as close with her.”

“Maybe that’s why you chose him to do this storefront with.”

“Maybe. Either brother would’ve been an improvement on my business skills. They’re both good businessmen. I’m not at all.”

“I think you probably are. You’ve landed on your feet for eighteen years.”

“Yeah, but for most of those years, I had a partner who was good at business.”

“I’m sure he was thrilled to have a great product to invest his time into.”

He shrugged, wondering exactly what Eleanor had told her. “Do you think Eleanor knows that I know about the affair?”

She nodded. “I think that’s why she told me.”

He thought about that, wondering what Eleanor was up to.

“I think she wants us to be together,” Calliope said.

He chuckled. “I wonder why?”

Calliope lifted her eyebrows.

He grabbed her hand, which was resting between the two of them. “Nothing against you. I just wonder when she started giving a shit about my love life.”

“I think she sees you as one of her own.”

“She did come visit me a few times in Colorado.”

“She did?”

“She’d always say she was there for some other reason, but I knew she was checking in on me.” He smiled, remembering. Eleanor had always held a special place in his heart.

“Was that weird for you at all?”

“No. She’d always done things to show she cared about me. She commissioned me to build her a shelf when I was still at home. Paid me something ridiculous for it.”

“How did it turn out?”

“Shitty. I think she’s still got it up in one of the bedrooms. I need to replace it with a better one.”

“Was it awkward at all when she came to visit?”

“It was sometimes a little stilted. I mean, it is Eleanor.”

She lifted her shoulder in concession.

“But it wasn’t weird or anything. She wasn’t trying to hit on me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She giggled. “That would’ve been weird. But I can’t see her doing something like that. She’s way too...”

“Refined?”

“I was going to say proud,” she said.

“That, too. She doesn’t seem like the kind to want to be caught in a scandal.”

“That’s probably why she kept quiet about her husband’s affair all those years,” Calliope said.

“Good point.”

He realized he was still covering her hand with his, so he went to pull away, but she grabbed it, taking hold of it and putting it back in between the two of them. He loved that she seemed to feel comfortable around him in an intimate way.

“You’re a really good brother for protecting them from your mom’s dirty secret all this time,” she said.

“I’m the worst brother. I left Garrett and Braxton to deal with everything while I was gone and my mom was sick.”

“Yeah, but you could have told them what she did, how she made you leave.”

“I’d rather them think I’m an asshole than ruin their perception of her.”

“You never answered my question,” she said.

He would’ve asked her what question, but he knew. He looked down at their clasped hands. “She sent me money.”

“We established that.”

He thought about those days when he was still a teenager living in a strange state, not knowing a soul, trying to figure out how to sell furniture, making mistake after mistake, wishing like hell he had someone to talk to. “I think it was too hard for her to talk to me.”

Calliope shut her eyes as if she couldn’t bear the thought. “I’m so sorry she did that to you.”

“I’ll tell you what sucked the most. My dad would call and try to get me to come home. He would tell me that she was spending all her time sitting at the kitchen table, crying, because she was so upset that I left. I couldn’t tell him that I wasn’t allowed to come back.” He thought about how torn he felt and how desperately he wanted to expose everything to his dad, but he couldn’t blow up the family. It riddled him with shame and guilt. “Keeping secrets like that fucks with you.”

She ran her thumb back and forth over his hand.

“This is pretty heavy for a first date,” he said.

“Is this our first date? This weekend?”

“One of these days I’ll take you on a real first date.”

She looked down at their hands, losing her smile. “I don’t want to think of anything past this weekend.”

“One step at a time?”

“I’ve told you about my track record,” she said.

“I know you have. I don’t know what that has to do with me.”

“I can’t do it all again.”

“You can’t do what again?”

She gave him a lazy look. “You know what.”

He did know what. Typically, a woman telling him she didn’t want a relationship was like music to his ears. But hearing Calliope hammer the door shut on one made him a little sick to his stomach. “If you’re talking about the relationship thing, you can relax. I don’t do those,” he said, his ego launching a counterattack.

“You don’t?” she said, looking amused.

“You know this about me.”

“What’s your plan here then?”

“I don’t really have one,” he said. It was true. He hadn’t formulated an exact plan, but he wasn’t going to let her steer this ship into the friend zone.

“What do you think we should do? Mess around until we get tired of one another and then go along our merry way? Is that what you usually do?” she asked.

He looked into her eyes and got the overwhelming sensation to be sincere. “I don’t know if I could do that with you.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Don’t do that,” he said, squeezing her hands.

“Don’t do what?”

“Roll your eyes at me. You do that anytime I get real with you.”

She met his gaze and then looked down at their hands. “Maybe I have a hard time believing you.”

“You’re making me suffer for the sins of your exes.”

“That’s probably true.”

“I’m not them.”

“I know. You’re nothing like them. And I even dated one you’re related to.”

He thought about Braxton and how different he was from him. It was hard for him to reconcile Calliope with him. And he damned sure didn’t want to think of the two of them lying together in a bed like the one they were in now. He inwardly cringed. “Is that weird for you?”

“Of all the reasons I shouldn’t date you, that one’s at the very bottom of the list.”

There was a question he needed to ask her, no matter how badly he didn’t want the answer. “Were you in love with my brother?”

She closed her big, blue eyes and then opened them, looking upward. “Maybe? I don’t know. I know I was in love with the idea of him.”

“Him in particular, or just a solid relationship?”

“Braxton’s really good on paper,” she said.

It was true. His brother was reliable, attentive, caring, worked hard, and was a good provider—all the typical things he would think a woman would want in a guy. Quentin worked hard. That was about the only one of those traits he had.

She squeezed his hand. “Tell me about the loves you’ve had.”

He bit the inside of his cheek.

“Come on. We’ve shared a lot with one another. You can tell me this.”

“What if I’ve never been in love?”

“Of course you have. You’re in your mid-thirties. You’ve dated a ton. There’s got to be one girl who stuck out over all the rest of them.”

He looked into her eyes, getting lost so deep he wondered if he’d ever find his way out. “What if I were to tell you I’ve never felt as close to a woman as I do to you?” As soon as the words came out, he wanted them back in. It was too much too soon. It wasn’t so much that he knew he was in love with her.

He just knew what he felt was on a different level than he'd experienced before.

Her eyes widened as she looked at him, seeming like she was trying to decide how she felt about him exposing his feelings like that. All his muscles clenched as he wracked his brain for a way to take back the words...some off-hand joke...

She scooted closer to him, and his body relaxed as he tried not to exhale his held breath too hard.

“Did you just get closer to me?” he asked.

“Of course not. I told you we can't do anything tonight.”

“I know that's what you said, but you just scooted closer to me.”

“You're dreaming. Go to sleep.”

He scooted closer to her this time. “You just did it again,” he said.

She widened her eyes. “That was you, not me.”

“I admit nothing.” He ran his thumb along her cheek.

“This can't go anywhere. You know that, right?” she asked.

“I know you've made that crystal clear. I'm still not sure I understand why.”

“Because every relationship I've ever had has ended poorly. I don't want this to end at all, so the only way I know to ensure that it won't is to make sure it never starts.”

Hearing her say she didn't want this to end fueled him. The train was rolling now, and he'd be damned if he'd let it derail. He shifted his eyes to the ceiling. “I'm trying to follow that logic.”

“Well, don’t worry about trying, because it’s nonsensical. Welcome to my brain.”

“I know we’re not allowed to get close.”

“Right,” she said, scooting even closer to him. Their mouths were so close he could almost taste her toothpaste.

“I’m wondering what would happen if our lips accidentally touched,” he said.

She grinned. When he made her smile like that, it was like he’d won the lottery. “That sounds scandalous,” she said.

“Especially with all these rules in place.”

She gauged him. “How can you take a horrible day and turn it into something that makes me feel this good?”

The thought that he’d turned her mood around made him happy in a way he wasn’t used to feeling. “I don’t know. But you seem to have that same gift.”

He put his hand on her shoulder and then brushed his knuckles across her cheek. “I think you’ve got me under some kind of spell.”

“Does it make you feel happy and anxious, but warm and gooey all at the same time?” she asked.

“That’s the one.”

“Then I think we’re both spellbound.”

Their lips met, and his whole body filled with a warmth he’d never known his entire life. He brushed his lips against hers over and over for the longest while like they were a couple of kids discovering mouths for the first time.

She finally pulled back, smiling at him. “I’m blaming it on this bed. It’s really small.”

“What a shame,” he said, holding her gaze and then going in for more kisses.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Calliope woke up on Saturday morning cuddled in Quentin's arms in the exact spot where they had fallen asleep the night before while they were kissing.

She'd never experienced anything like this in her life. There was no progression to hands-on boobs or butts or midsections. It was like they had risen to a level above simple sex, like a magic show, but she still didn't know what the trick was.

The only thing pulling her off of him was her extreme need to pee. Damn all that wine she'd had.

She rolled off him, but he grabbed her hand. "Morning," he said, his eyes still closed.

"Morning," she said with a smile and then hustled to the bathroom. She locked herself in there and stared in the mirror, her smile covering her face.

What in the heck was she doing? She was completely losing herself in this totally hot playboy. He'd never been in a relationship before. He said he'd never been in love before. He told her he felt more for her than any woman he'd ever known. How could that be real? How could she possibly trust that?

He got caught up in the moment. Anybody would've gotten caught up in that moment. Stuck in a small bed together, kissing like teenage virgins. It was intense and beautiful, and it took her back to a time before she understood how real heartbreak could swallow her whole.

She'd see how it went moving forward. She didn't need to get her hopes up. This intensity would drop off. He'd barely been present for the two weeks between the time she asked him to come on the trip and when he had come to get her. Was that how he operated? Intense moments full of more love and passion than anything she'd ever known, and then nothing for weeks? Was that what she was relegated to? How was she going to live that way?

She needed stability. That's why she'd gone for his brother. Braxton was as stable as they came. She craved that after her erratic past. But she'd not been in love with Braxton—she understood that now. In her most intense moments with Braxton, she hadn't felt half of what she felt for Quentin last night—what she felt for Quentin right now. What did that mean?

She couldn't talk herself into thinking Quentin was *the one*. Her person. Her ride or die. She'd felt that about her last four relationships, and all four had gone up in epic flames.

As she brushed her teeth, she tried to regain some control over herself. She couldn't be swept away by a hot guy who knew the right things to say. She was smarter than that.

She opened the door and found him sitting on the side of the bed, running his hand through his disheveled hair. He moved that hand down to his face, playing with his stubble. He had thick stubble to go with his dark, rich hair. She was so

attracted to him that it almost made her sick to her stomach. She guessed that was the ache of loss to come.

“I wonder what time Sergeant Vanessa has us meeting for that boat trip,” he said.

She giggled, putting her finger over her lips and then pointing to the wall.

“If she can hear us through that bathroom, she needs to go work for the CIA.”

She shuffled over to her side of the bed and got in.

He looked over at her, raising one eyebrow lazily. “Hold that thought.”

He walked to the bathroom, and she enjoyed the view of his beautifully rounded ass in his boxer shorts. All the guys she’d been with had worn boxer briefs. There was something old-school about his boxers that she thought she might love.

She pulled the covers up to her chin, staring at the ceiling until he came out of the bathroom, sliding back into bed with her. He rolled over onto her, running his hand over her waist like it was the most natural thing on earth—like she was his.

He buried his face in the pillow. “I think I’d rather lie here in this bed all day than go on a boat.”

“Not a boat guy?” she asked.

“I think I’m just a Calliope guy.”

She smiled, trying not to let her imagination get away from her.

He lifted his head, looking over at her with one eye squinted. “Did you brush your teeth?”

“Maybe?”

He rolled over to get out of bed.

“You don’t have to brush yours.”

“Yeah, I do.” He brushed his teeth with the door open. There was something electric about watching him be domestic. He stood in the doorway, looking at her as he ran the brush over his teeth. He had strong legs with muscly thighs that made her want to kneel before him and run her hands over them while she kissed her way up.

After he rinsed, he stuck his tongue out to the mirror, inspecting himself. She had to wonder what that tongue was capable of. He closed the bathroom door behind him and walked over to the bed, sliding in, this time putting his arm around her and pulling her against him. “Can we make your friends leave?”

She had dated hot guys before. Braxton was hot in a stuffed shirt kind of way. Malcolm, the bartender who she had most recently dated, was definitely hot, but in a nontraditional sort of way. But Quentin was so ridiculously gorgeous. He had perfectly proportioned lips, and he would kind of press them together and they’d go off to the side slightly like he was being mischievous. When he did that, she could eat him like a hot fudge sundae.

And his body...his *body*. He was big and broad, and she fit so perfectly right in his nook where she was laying. Malcolm was the last guy she’d been with and it felt like he was half Quentin’s size. She ran her hand across his substantial chest, her body humming with want.

“What would we do here all day long if they were gone?” she asked.

“Hmm, that’s a tough question. I think they have board games upstairs.”

“You want to play board games?”

“Fuck, no.”

She giggled. “You’re really going to be the end of me, aren’t you?”

“Or maybe I’ll be the beginning.”

He had to quit saying that kind of stuff. She was starting to believe him, and that was where things were going to get dangerous. She lifted her eyebrows.

“I want to be something you don’t think I’m going to be,” he said.

“What do you think I think you’re going to be?”

“Nothing good. You’ve made that clear.”

Her stomach soured. “I don’t mean to make you feel bad.”

“You don’t make me feel bad. You’re being cautious. I can respect that.”

Her legs wrapped around his body like a glove.

“I don’t think I’ve been this disciplined since I was a kid,” he said. “Scratch that. I wasn’t even this good back then.”

She started to roll off of him “I’m not trying to be a tease.”

He grabbed her by the ass and pulled her right back to him. Quentin’s big hand manhandling her ass sent tingles through her whole body. “Don’t you move a muscle. I want you right where you are.”

Her heartbeat was going a thousand miles an hour. “I’ve never had such a G-rated night in my life.”

“Do you think you’re the only one?”

“I think we both showed amazing restraint,” she said.

“We should be rewarded for that.”

“With what?”

“Well,” he said, running his hand up and down her back, “we weren’t that good for that long just to mess it all up this morning, were we?”

“Of course not.”

“So, we could get out of bed right now and go out on that boat, and make each other crazy all day long until we can get back into this bed.”

“We could do that,” she said. But going on a boat ride with the crew upstairs was the last thing she wanted. “Or we could push our limits.”

He looked down at her. “I think this might be a good time to tell you I didn’t bring any condoms with me.”

Her heart sank. “You’re kidding?”

“You made sure I knew it was a *friends* thing. I didn’t want you to think I was disrespecting you.”

“Why do you have to be such a good guy?”

“That’s debatable. I take it you didn’t bring any either?”

“Of course not. I was going to be so good.” What had she been thinking?

“I really like that you’re talking in past tense right now.”

She bit her lip, closing her eyes tightly, not believing she was getting ready to say her next words. “I’m on birth control, you know.”

He got that *cat that caught the canary* smile. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“I don’t make it a practice of going scot-free with a new guy, but for my side of things, I got tested after I learned my fiancé cheated on me, and I’ve only been with one guy since, and we used condoms.”

He nodded as if this were helpful, good news.

“What about your side of things?” she asked.

He raised his eyebrows like he was getting his thoughts together. “Well, I haven’t been tested in a while, I’ll just put that out there. But I’ve been really good about using condoms. I got hardcore about it after Garrett had a pregnancy scare way back.”

She giggled. “Garrett’s pregnancy scare was enough to set you straight?”

“Oh yeah. Can you imagine me, a father?”

She could, actually, very much so. But that was beside the point.

He looked like he was thinking about it. “It was more than that, actually. I was so afraid of getting tied down.”

“I get that.” She didn’t for herself. She seemed to do nothing but enter into serious relationships. But she understood he was the exact opposite of her in that way. “Did any of those women ever try to tie you down?”

His expression went dark. “One or two.”

“How did you handle that?”

He shrugged. “Not well, admittedly.”

She braced herself. “How not well?”

“I’d remind them that I’d told them how it was upfront.”

“Yeah, I can’t imagine that would go over well.”

He pursed his perfect lips together like he heard her but wanted to stand his ground. “I’m a big believer in making things clear upfront so nobody gets hurt.”

She nodded. “Sounds like that didn’t always do the trick.”

“I guess not. It’s kind of impossible to predict the future and how you’re going to feel about someone.” He stared into her eyes, and she could feel something radiating between the two of them. She didn’t know what it was, but she knew it was alive.

“If we do this,” she said, “does that put us into some kind of free-for-all fooling around agreement?”

His brown eyes sparkled. “I like the sound of that.”

“But you understand, I don’t want to free-style with you while you’re out free-styling with other women. That’s just gross.”

“I’m good with free-styling with just you.”

Her body heat rose at the idea.

“But if we do this, there’s no turning back,” he said.

She lifted her eyebrows, unsure of what exactly he meant.

“If we do this the first time with no condom, we’re never gonna go back to using them. It feels too good without one,” he said.

If she didn’t get this man inside of her soon, she was going to combust. “You really sound like you’re tempting me with a good time.”

He moved onto her, pressing his erection against her. The pressure of him on her mixed with her craving for his body was almost more anticipation than she could handle.

She smiled. “That happened just now?”

“That’s been going on since I woke up.”

“I might have something going on, too.”

He reached between them, and she bit her lip as he slid his fingers between her legs.

“No doubt,” he said.

She grabbed his shoulders as he played with her. A moment later, he tried to pull his hand away, but she grabbed it and led him back to what he had been doing. She clutched him while he moved onto her, bringing her fantasies from the past couple of months to life.

She pressed herself to him, the heat amping up between them as she came apart around his hand. She breathed into his neck as she floated down off her high.

She rolled off of him and the two of them pulled down their shorts. She didn’t bother with her shirt and neither did he. He just rolled over on top of her and found where he needed to go, sliding inside.

She gasped at the sensation of him inside of her, bare to her, as he moved back and forth, creating a rhythm with her.

“Calliope, fuck,” he said, and then pressed himself close to her as he kept up his rhythm, making every bit of the wait worth it. “I can’t hold out much longer.”

“Let go,” she whispered, and he did, collapsing on top of her.

He worked to catch his breath and then kissed her neck. He rolled off of her, bringing her onto his chest. She was starting to feel ridiculously comfortable there.

“Sorry I didn’t last longer. It’s been a long time since I ditched the condom.”

“It’s all good.” *Really good.*

“No going back,” he said.

“Promise?”

He grinned, eyes closed.

The sound of the bathroom door from the other room opening got their attention. The distinct noise of a toilet seat hitting the back of the porcelain pot had Calliope frowning. A strong stream of urine thundered into the bowl of water. Women did not sound like that when they urinated.

A clearing of the throat turning into a cough had Calliope sitting straight up in bed. “That’s Evan.” She’d know that series of bodily functions from him anywhere.

Quentin hauled himself up onto his elbows, not saying anything, and looking not at all surprised. “I think he’s probably purposefully making himself known.”

She blinked, not believing what she was processing. “I know you alluded to them being together yesterday, but I didn’t believe it.”

“You didn’t want to believe it.”

“She’s with him?” she asked, redundantly.

He shrugged.

She put her fingertips to her forehead. “He’s married. They have kids.”

“She’s not married, is she?”

“No. She’s single. She’s never been married. She said so last night.”

He lifted his eyebrows, looking at the wall. “Wonder how long that’s been going on.”

Calliope squinted as she processed through the initial shock. “Do you think it’s been happening for a while?”

“Who knows?”

“Do you think she’s been with him as far back as college?”

He reached over and rubbed her leg. “I don’t know, sweetie.” The gentle gesture and pet name soothed her shock and dismay.

She pointed to the bathroom door. “That is bonkers.”

He frowned. “You’re not jealous, are you?”

“Of Evan? Are you freaking kidding me?” she whispered.

“Just checking.”

“I’m mortified. What’s he doing to her?”

“I don’t think I wanna know.”

She gave him a playful shove. “I don’t mean that. I mean what if he’s tormenting her the way he did me?”

He winced. “Leopards don’t usually change their spots.”

She let her shoulders sag. “I can’t believe this.”

“Why do you think she wanted you to come here so badly?”

“That’s a damn good question.”

He stared at the wall like he could see through it. “She seems like a decent person. It’s hard to believe she wanted to shove it in your face.”

“I don’t believe that either.”

He looked over at her. “Do you want to go talk to her about it?”

“Right now?”

“Or later on today.”

The idea of hanging around all those people for another day, knowing that Evan and Vanessa were messing around, seemed wrong. “I don’t think I wanna be here anymore.”

“We can leave.”

“And say what?”

He squinted like he was thinking about it. “I’ll say there’s an emergency with my family.”

“You would do that?”

“Of course I would. Who knows? We may not even bump into anyone upstairs. They may all still be in bed.”

She mulled over the ramifications of leaving early and without notice. “I feel bad.”

“Why?”

“Aren’t we supposed to be pulling our weight? Isn’t there, like, a schedule or something?”

“We did our part with the salad and stuff last night. I don’t think we’re on today’s schedule.”

She grabbed her phone to pull up the schedule Vanessa had sent. “I think we’re supposed to help with dinner clean up

tonight.”

“Well, if we’re not here to mess it up...”

She tossed away her phone, too distracted to pull up that spreadsheet on her phone. “True.” She took a moment to digest the enormity of the situation. “I can’t believe she’s with him. What about his family?”

“Why don’t you go talk to her.”

“Right now?” she asked.

“Why not? You can confront them both together in bed.”

She imagined the two of them in bed together, which seemed as likely as peanut butter and pickles. “That’s crazy.”

“If not, we can wait for them to get up and be in another part of the house and then you can do it.”

She stared at the wall, crystalizing the two of them on the other side of it in her brain. “She’s got him in her room down here right next to us. It’s like she wants me to find out.”

“He damn sure does. He made sure you heard him in there just now.”

She summoned her strength. “I’m going to do this. I’m going to confront them.”

“Go for it. Do you want me to pack up our stuff while you’re doing that?”

“Yes, please.”

“Consider it done.”

“Thank you.” She scooted off the bed and stomped toward the door.

“Do you want to get dressed first?” he asked as she reached for the knob.

“I don’t want to give them any more time. She might kick him out or I may lose my steam.”

“Get in there.”

“I will,” she said, turning the knob.

“Actually, will you please put on a bra first? Your tits are at attention and I think we established I have exclusive rights to those at the moment.”

She had to admit, the humor put her a tiny bit at ease. “Yes, I’ll put on a bra.”

“Thank you.” He stood up off the bed and went to her. He pulled her in and held her to him. “I’m right here if you need me.”

“Thank you,” she said, his warm embrace engulfing her.

“No problem.” He pulled away and then smacked her on the ass, sending her on her way. She loved it when he did that. It was such a masculine show of possession.

She opened the bathroom door and then tiptoed through the doorway, listening at the door, hearing voices. The last thing she needed was to walk in on the two of them having sex. She gathered her bearings and then knocked on the door.

“Just a minute,” Vanessa said, and then Calliope heard the sound of sheets moving.

She opened the door, which wasn’t locked, and found Vanessa getting out of the bed with her nightgown on.

“What’s up?” she asked, eyes wide.

Calliope glanced at the lumpy bed. “Vanessa, come on. He made himself known when he was in the bathroom.”

Vanessa dropped her posture, turning toward the bed. Evan pulled back the covers, looking triumphant.

Calliope turned to Vanessa. “What are you doing?”

“I know what this looks like. But I want to explain.”

Calliope crossed her arms over her chest.

“He’s leaving his wife. It’s been a long time coming.”

“It’s not my place to judge,” Calliope said, a hundred percent judging.

“They have a terrible marriage and he and I just work well together. All that history,” Vanessa said with wide eyes, shaking her head like it was a definitive statement that made everything okay.

It was clear Vanessa had drunk the Evan cocktail and was all in. Could Calliope blame her? She’d drunk the same mixed-up drink over a decade ago and had stayed drunk off of it for two years.

Looking at the two of them in this sordid situation had one positive effect—it gave Calliope full clarity. She wanted no part of this nonsense. She just wanted out.

“Got it.” She turned toward Evan. “I want you to know that I am sincerely sorry for not making it clear that I was breaking up with you.”

“Whatever,” he said, pulling back the covers and then standing up, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs. Not one single part of her was turned on or nostalgic in any way as he walked toward the closet.

Vanessa looked confused. “But *he* broke up with *you*, didn’t he?”

It was clear Evan had spun a different version of the events to Vanessa than he’d discussed with Calliope yesterday. But Evan’s lies weren’t Calliope’s problem anymore. “I think I need to leave.”

Vanessa cocked her head to the side. “Calliope, we can be mature about this.”

Calliope turned back to her, considering for a minute what alien might have taken over her good friend’s sanity. Then she turned to the alien in his boxer briefs standing by the closet and tried to recall what had ever drawn her to him in the first place. She came up empty.

“This isn’t me being immature, Vanessa. This is me realizing that I’ve had the wrong voice inside my head all these years.” She reached for Vanessa, touching her on the shoulder. “I love who you are. And I really wish that you would reconsider what you’re doing here.”

Vanessa gave Calliope a pitying look. “He’s not the person you made him out to be all those years ago.”

Calliope inhaled a deep breath, working to keep her composure. “I’m sincerely happy to hear that he’s...different.”

“I’m not *different*,” Evan said, turning toward them, holding a shirt in his hand. “I was never ‘mentally abusive’ to you,” he said, air-quoting with his free hand.

Vanessa looked at Calliope with her eyebrows raised, like a lie had been exposed.

All of the remarks about Calliope’s flabby ass and her beer gut swirled through her brain—the porn he would watch as he lay beside her, the way he would pound inside her like he was

punishing her and not making love to her. The two of them could act like that hadn't happened, but Calliope wasn't crazy. And she also didn't have to be a part of any of that anymore.

She turned to Vanessa. "Thank you for inviting me here, though honestly, I'm not sure why you did."

"Because Evan and I are going to be together, and I guess I needed your blessing."

Calliope closed her eyes, rubbing her temple. She opened them back up, letting her shoulders sag. "You don't need my blessing, Vanessa. What you're gonna need is some thick skin and a good therapist."

Calliope walked back into the bathroom, and Evan said. "Fuck you, Calliope."

She closed the door behind her, hearing Vanessa tell him to calm down and leave Calliope alone.

She walked into the room where Quentin was closing up her suitcase. "If you give me permission, I'll be happy to go in there and line that fucker out," he said.

Calliope waved him off. "Please. A *fuck you* from him is a compliment compared to what he's said to me over the years. I'm ready to move on."

"I'll grab our stuff out of the bathroom and then we're done here."

"Good," she said, realizing she was still in her pajamas. Who cared? They could pass for slouchy road trip clothes. She just wanted to leave. She checked the room for stuff, and then Quentin came back in carrying his shaving kit and her toiletry bag.

He tossed both of them inside his duffel and then put it on his shoulder. "Let's get the hell out of here."

She stopped him, giving him a kiss. "You're pretty perfect, you know?"

He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "Compared to him, I look like Captain America."

The voices in the other room got louder as it sounded like Vanessa was trying to keep Evan from charging into the room.

"Let's go," Calliope whispered.

"Gladly," Quentin said as they hustled out the door.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Conversation had flowed steadily until they neared New Orleans. Calliope had gotten quiet but was still responsive when Quentin asked her questions. She didn't seem upset, just thoughtful.

When they got to her house, he pulled her travel case out of his duffel and then grabbed her suitcase. He followed her up the walk and waited while she opened the door. For a moment, he wondered if he was going to be allowed into the house.

She opened the door, motioning him inside, so he brought her stuff in and set it down in the foyer. "Thanks for bringing that in...and for packing it up."

"No problem. I'll bet it's good to be home after the last twenty-four hours you've had."

"It is, but it's also a little uncertain."

He gave her a quizzical look. "What's going on with you?"

"You said earlier that you thought it was important to make things clear on the front end."

"That's right."

"Have we done that?"

He thought about it. They'd agreed to be sexually monogamous. They hadn't actually agreed to be in a relationship. "Is there something you wanna say?"

She let out a deep breath. "On the one hand, you say that you've never been in love, that relationships aren't your thing, and you pretty much only do sex. Is that accurate?"

This was a trick question. "Can I neither confirm nor deny?"

She rolled her eyes like she was exhausted with him, and he got it, but he also didn't know what to say.

"Then on the other hand, you do and say these really sweet, great-guy things."

"Would you rather me be an asshole?"

"If we were only having sex, maybe."

He wasn't sure what to make of that.

"I'm trying to figure out if you're someone who is super creative and passionate and feels things strongly in the moment, and then when the moment is over, you're onto the next thing."

He gnawed on the inside of his cheek, trying to decide if that was an accurate statement. "If I was someone who fell into a whim of emotion like that, wouldn't it add up that I would fall in love at every turn?"

She lifted her eyebrows, staring past him as if that was a point she hadn't considered. Maybe he was saying something right.

"I'm gonna be honest," she said.

"Please."

“Those two weeks scare me.”

He thought about the two weeks she must be referring to—the ones that preceded this weekend. “What about those two weeks?”

“You were completely off the grid. I didn’t hear anything from you.”

“To be fair, I didn’t hear anything from you either, other than arrangements for the trip.”

“I know, but if I would’ve been on your mind, you would’ve picked up the phone, whether or not you were on a big project. You would’ve wanted to hear something from me.”

He scratched his cheek, trying to figure out how he was going to say what he wanted to say without giving too much away. “Would it help if I told you I wanted to pick up the phone, but I was afraid to?”

“What were you afraid of?” she asked.

“That I wouldn’t get that order done.”

She gave him a doubtful look. “Quentin.”

He felt that familiar pull that often steered him away from relationships. “You know what. Maybe I should just head out.”

She nodded as if it was inevitable. “I understand.” She put her hand on the door like she was ready to shut it behind him. For the first time in one of these situations he felt more compelled to stay than to leave.

“That’s it?” he asked. “You’re not going to try to keep me here so we can duke this out?”

“You’re not a prisoner. If you don’t want to be here, I don’t want you to stay.”

“I never said I didn’t want to be here. I just want you to have a little faith in me.”

She scrunched up her face, scratching her head. “That’s kind of hard.”

His heart melted for her. He had to remember all she’d been through and that breakups were inevitable for her. He’d never really been through one. Maybe the women on the other side of the arguments he’d had would say different. But he never promised them anything. And he hadn’t promised Calliope anything either. But he didn’t want her tossing him away like he was her next bad breakup story.

He moved toward her, taking her hand from the door and holding it in his. He took her other hand as well and circled their clasped hands in between the two of them. “You don’t want to fight for me? You’re just gonna throw me away?”

That got a smile out of her. He loved making her smile. It felt like a superpower.

“Look, sweetheart,” he said. “I know you’ve had a rough go of it and you’re cautious. But I wish there was some way that you and I could move forward on our own terms doing our own thing without past experiences having a say.”

“I think that’s probably why they call it baggage.”

He pulled her flush to him, wrapping his arms around her waist. “That’s true. But I like you. I’ve never wanted to stay and argue with someone before.”

“I don’t wanna argue at all,” she said.

“There’s something we have in common.”

She pulled away from him. “I think we’ve had sort of an intense start. Maybe we should slow things down, just a little.”

He pinched his temple, thinking for a second while he formulated a plan to regain control of the situation. He took her by the shoulders. “I know this is scary. I’m fucking terrified, if I’m being honest. But I’m also nowhere near ready to back off or take a break or give this some space or any of that bullshit.” He let go of her shoulders, taking a step back. “We had this weekend planned together, and I don’t care if we’re in Mississippi or New Orleans or Australia. I get the rest of today and at least half of tomorrow with you, and that’s the end of the story.”

Her lip quivered as she held back a smile. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. You good?”

“Yep.”

“All right,” he said, feeling like he could demand peace in the Middle East.

“What do you want to do?” she asked.

He slid his hands around her waist. “Do you mean before or after I take you bed?”

“Can I take a shower first?”

“Can I come with you?”

She grinned. “Really?”

“Hell yeah.”

“All right,” she said on a giggle.

He slid his hands onto her hips. “What’s so funny?”

“I’ve just never done that before.”

“Showered with somebody?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Glad I’ll be your first,” he said, going in for a kiss.

She turned around to lock the front door, and he slid behind her, his hands going to her breasts. It was a crime that they’d been doing this dance for months and he hadn’t seen them yet.

He grabbed the bottom of her shirt and pulled it over her head. She twisted to face him, and he took in her cleavage, stuffed into her purple, silk bra. “Damn, those look good.”

She slid out of her shorts. As he was getting out of his clothes, she left him, heading down the hallway, dropping her bra just before disappearing into the bathroom.

“Wait up,” he said, hopping out of his shorts.

He found her in the bathroom, gloriously naked, holding a hand under the stream of water coming out of the showerhead.

She let her hand drop down, revealing her chest to him. He didn’t think he’d ever seen a more beautiful sight than Calliope’s naked body. He could and would lick every delicious curve from her gorgeous tits down to her inner thighs.

His hands went to her boobs, holding them like pieces of treasure, which they were to him. “You’re so beautiful.”

“Thank you.” She lifted an eyebrow as she peered down at him. “So are you.”

His dick was already coming to attention. It damn sure didn’t take much around her.

Their mouths met, and he took in her sweet kiss. Every kiss with her got better than the last one. She was often standoffish or hard-to-get, but she let herself go with her kisses. He swore that first kiss they'd had together got him through the month without seeing her.

She pulled away and tested the water again. "I think we're good."

"Definitely," he said, looking her up and down. Her ass was no doubt the most spectacular one he'd ever had the pleasure of laying his hand on. He could rest one hand on her ass cheek and the other on one of her boobs and call it a day.

She stepped into the shower, letting the water roll down her body. He didn't know how he was going to make it without losing control. It'd been years since he'd showered with someone, and that seemed like a distant, unwanted memory compared to what was happening in the present moment with Calliope.

He stepped in behind her and pressed his hard-on to her ass. She twisted to face him, threading her fingers through his hair and pulling him in for another delicious kiss.

She pulled away, switching places with him. While he let the water beat down on his neck, she grabbed a bottle of body wash, pouring some into her hands and then offering some to him. She rubbed the soap onto his chest and over his shoulders, seeming to appreciate his physique. She squeezed his biceps, and he tried not to flex, as much as he wanted to impress her.

He rubbed the body wash she'd given him into his hands and then went for her boobs, lathering them up, feeling like he was in his own personal porn. He moved his hands down her body, one in the front and one in the back, sliding over her ass

and between her legs. She closed her eyes as he rubbed the soap over her, letting him play as long as he wanted.

She grabbed his cock and squeezed, and he was about to lose it right there before they barely got started. She backed against the shower wall, and he pressed himself against her, sliding inside.

“You okay?” he asked, knowing she couldn’t be comfortable against that cold wall.

“I’m perfect,” she said, so he pressed on.

She wrapped one of her legs around his back as he pumped inside of her. Everything she did turned him on to the point that he wasn’t able to last as long as he usually could. It was like he was being introduced to a whole new kind of getting off—one that was wrapped up in more than the physical.

She gripped his shoulders, pressing him closer to her, their wet bodies melding together as one. She let out a breathy sigh that indicated she might be good, which was a beautiful thing, because he couldn’t hold out a second longer. He let go inside of her, breathing against her.

She ran her hands behind his back and over his shoulders, bringing him in for a kiss. He kissed her back and then pressed his forehead against hers while he caught his breath.

She slid her hands up to his shoulders and his neck. “You’ve got some really good stamina. That couldn’t have been easy for you.”

“You’re kidding, right? That was the best thing I’ve done in a long time.”

She giggled. She was so cute when she did that. “You were holding my whole body up for a minute there.”

“I was? I didn’t even notice.”

She shook her head at him with a smile, and he didn’t think he’d been this happy his whole life.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

Quentin and Calliope had gone for round two when they finished their shower, so she found herself in her bed with Quentin lying beside her with his face buried in the pillow and his arm stretched across her chest, hand resting on her boob. He'd left it there when he'd rolled off her and he hadn't moved it since. She was starting to wonder if he was going to fall asleep with it like that.

There was a moment in the shower, right after they'd finished round one, where he was looking at her with such admiration that she was starting to lose herself in him. But she had been down this road a handful of times and it had never ended well.

He wasn't the first guy to look at her like that. There was a time when his brother Braxton, whether he'd ever admit it or not, was getting invested in her. And they all knew how that had ended. Things had started to get pretty serious with Malcolm when his pregnant ex had sauntered into the picture. And Parker, even though he had been cheating on her, still wanted to marry Calliope. When she'd found out what had been happening with Tiffany and confronted him, he'd cried like a baby and begged her forgiveness.

She'd never had trouble getting a guy to fall for her. It was the retention that she sucked hard at.

She looked down at his hand on her boob. "Are you gonna let me have that back at some point?"

He squeezed it. "Nah, I'm good."

Why did he have to be so cute? "I'm glad you like it so much."

"I like it so much I wanna marry it."

She smiled, not wanting to make more of his joke than was inferred.

He turned over on his side, fluffing the pillow up so he could see her. "How are you doing?"

She lifted her eyebrows. "I thought that was obvious."

"I mean about..."

She realized he was talking about Evan. "Oh, that," she said, steepling her fingers together on top of her stomach. "I'm fine."

"Just fine?"

"I guess I'm realizing how ridiculous it was that I let this one asshole get to me all these years. It seems so senseless."

"Good. I'm glad you see it that way."

She shook her head. "Now he's got Vanessa under his spell. I don't even understand that. I guess I should, because I was caught up in him way back then. But I was so young. And really, it was more about other members of the group coupling up and then us turning to one another. I didn't wanna lose my spot in the group and I felt like he had firmer ground or something."

“Did you expect him to still be so into you now?”

She waved him off. “He’s not into me.”

“He was so clearly into you. He’s been stalking you.”

She shook her head. “He probably just did a little research before the weekend when he found out I was coming. I remember now that Braxton and I were pictured in a few night-on-the-town features. I Googled it while we were driving home. It was pretty easy to find.”

“Why do you always do that?” he asked.

“Do what?”

“Blow off how appealing you are.”

She rolled her eyes.

He put his hand on her rib cage. “I’m serious. You act like it’s all a big joke.”

She shrugged. “Nothing’s ever been real, not my whole romantic life.”

“This feels pretty real to me.”

She glanced over at him with a smile. “I don’t know. Feels like it might be a bit of a mirage.”

He stared at her, considering her. “You never talk about what I would think would be the most significant relationship of your past.”

“Oh,” she said, thinking he was likely talking about her fiancé. “He’s not worth discussing, trust me.”

“I don’t mean to harp on it, but you were going to marry the guy, weren’t you?”

“Yeah,” she said, finding it hard to believe now.

“Were you in love with him?”

She thought about that question, staring at the ceiling. “I was going through something, I guess you’d say.”

“When you agreed to marry him?”

“I’d turned thirty. Braxton and I had broken things off and I was starting to feel like it was never going to happen for me. Parker was decent-looking, he had a good job, his friends meshed well with mine... A little too well,” she said under her breath.

“There’s one other guy you never talk about,” he said.

“Malcolm?” she asked. “That relationship didn’t last that long.”

“Your father.”

“Oh.” That familiar pit rolled around in her stomach.

“Is he around, or...?”

“If you mean is he alive, the answer is yes.”

“Is he in New Orleans?”

“He used to be, but he’s not anymore. He’s in Seattle.”

“That’s a long way from here.”

She nodded, unable to say more. She had never settled into the fact that her father was basically getting a redo of his life, raising two girls instead of one this time. It sometimes felt as if her whole childhood had been a lie.

“When did he move to Seattle?”

She pulled the sheet over her body. “He left just before Christmas when I was a freshman in college.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice careful.

“It’s fine. It was a long time ago.” Her own voice was higher than usual.

He put his hand on top of the sheet over her torso. She could get used to how attentive he was with her. “Were you ever close with him?” he asked.

She closed her eyes tightly, the pain searing her heart. “I was a total daddy’s girl. He used to put me on his shoulders and carry me all around this town. He told me never to settle for anything in life, that I was destined for great things.”

“That’s nice,” he said.

She went on. “He would tell me if I wanted to be an astrophysicist or a newscaster or the first female president, that all I had to do was put my mind to it.” She huffed a laugh. “He made me feel invincible. He’s probably the reason I was the way I was in high school. So ridiculously full of myself.”

“And then he moved to Seattle when you were eighteen?”

“Not right away. He divorced my mom and moved to Baton Rouge. He still had his job in New Orleans. He just wanted some space, he said.”

“That must’ve made it hard on you having to split your time between the two towns.”

She looked over at him, feeling seen. “It was really hard. I was trying to build friendships at college, but with him being in a different town, I had to go home twice as much. It wasn’t like I could hit up both houses easily with Baton Rouge being an hour away, and it was a five-hour drive to get home as it was.”

“That sounds like a lot to manage.”

“It was.” She wiggled, adjusting herself in the bed. “I finally told him I couldn’t keep doing it. I told him I was going to come home once a month and stay with Mom. I said if he wanted to see me, he needed to come to New Orleans.”

“Did that work out?”

She rolled her eyes. “Not really. He’d come, and we’d meet for lunch, but sitting across from him and forcing conversation is not the same as lying around on the couch watching figure skating, shouting out our own completely uninformed scores, or cooking a meal together in the kitchen, throwing in wacky ingredients in hopes that we’d create this crazy good combination that nobody had ever thought of.”

He smiled at her. “That sounds nice, the way you were with him, prior to the divorce, at least.”

Her heart pinged with the loss. “It was nice. But after the divorce, even if we’d have been in the same town, we wouldn’t have done those things. I was so mad at him all the time.”

“That’s understandable.”

“It was all so frustrating,” she said, bailing up her fists. “He never gave a good reason for leaving.”

“There wasn’t another woman?”

“No, not at first. He found Nancy online dating but that was like a year later.”

“Did your mom seem to understand why he left?”

“She was as blindsided as I was. You should’ve heard her talking to me on the phone that first semester. To hear her tell it, they were living it up, salsa dancing, a cooking class.” She pursed her lips. “Great sex.”

“Your mom talked about sex with your dad?”

“I know, but she was happy. It was such a relief, because I was worried about both of them when I left. We were such a close family unit. I didn’t know what my absence would do to them. You hear about empty nest syndrome. It can hit some parents hard. I was so relieved that they were enjoying their time. But they weren’t. He wasn’t, at least.”

“So, he married that woman you mentioned, Nancy?”

“When I was twenty.”

“And he moved to Seattle then?”

“Yeah, my junior year of college. They wanted to get married right away because she was forty-one and desperately wanted to have kids.”

“Do you have siblings?”

“Yeah, I do,” she said, the guilt covering her heart.

“Sisters, brothers?”

“Sisters. They’re ten.”

“Are they twins?”

“Yeah. They were doing all the fertility stuff. Ended up with twins. I guess it’s pretty common.”

“Do you ever see them?”

She winced, remembering the message she’d gotten a month or two ago. “Not enough. I send gifts though.” She looked at him for some kind of acknowledgment that it was okay that she’d pretty much been completely absent from their lives.

“That’s something,” he said.

She shut her eyes, her chest tightening. “Not really.”

“Are they sweet or are they bratty or what?”

“A little of both. They’re my dad’s girls, so I can imagine that their heads are as big as mine was at that age.”

“What is their mom like?”

She turned on her side, facing him. “She’s fine,” she said, having a lot more to say than that, but not wanting to rake the woman over the coals. “She’s a litigation attorney.”

“Is she at all like your mother?”

“She couldn’t possibly be any more different from my mother. I think that’s part of the rub, at least for my mom. He didn’t go out and find someone younger and full of life. He went out and found this totally serious, uptight woman who wanted to bog him down with more kids at forty-five years old.”

“Did he want more kids when he was with your mom?”

“No. That’s what’s crazy. She desperately wanted a sibling for me, but he didn’t want any more kids after I was born. She said they fought about it all the time when I was a baby.”

“Wow. Sounds like he did a one-eighty.”

“A total one-eighty.”

He squinted at her. “Have you ever talked to him about all this?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Back then? When it was all happening?”

“Yeah,” she said, trying to remember those conversations but coming up empty.

“Have you tried to talk about it in recent years?”

“I barely even talk to my dad about the weather much less why he decided to leave his family and go start a new one.”

He took her hand in between them and looked at her fingernail polish as he spoke. “I’m not a psychologist, but I don’t think it takes one to put together some of the pieces here.”

Her chest heated up. “What pieces?”

“You said your dad left when you were eighteen.”

“Yeah?”

“And it pretty much turned you upside down. You had no idea what happened or why.”

“Right,” she said.

“And you said he doted on you your whole life and held you up on a pedestal.”

“Totally.”

“And then he walked away without much of an explanation or anything you could make sense of.”

She was oddly surprised at how spot-on his assessment was. “Exactly.”

“And then he got married to this totally opposite woman when you were twenty.”

“Yeah.”

“And what else was going on when you were twenty?” he asked, looking her in the eye.

Her chest constricted. “Are you talking about Evan?”

He put his hand on her hip. “Listen, sweetie, you’ve been through so much over the years, and none of it seems to bother you except for this relationship when you were twenty. And that was going on at the same time all this was going on with your dad. Do you see how this could all kind of be wrapped up in the same ball of confusion?”

She turned over on her back, unable to look at him. He slid his hand around her waist. “I’m not trying to upset you. But I think you’ve got to deal with some shit with your dad.”

The pressure built against the back of her eyes. “There’s nothing to deal with. He won’t talk about it.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“It’s been years.”

“Have you thought about going to see him?”

“No, I haven’t thought about it,” she said, her voice sounding snippy.

“I’m sorry I’m laying this on you.”

She wanted to tell him it was okay, but she couldn’t open her mouth. She was trying to fight back the emotion.

“Why don’t we go out there?”

She looked over at him. “We?”

“Yeah, *we*.”

“Quentin, you can’t—”

“I can.”

“You’ve got your new shop.”

“I’ve got Garrett. It’s not like we’d be out there more than a few days.”

She let out a sigh. “Garrett’s gonna think I’m this totally incapable person...that I have to have you for everything I do.”

“Garrett doesn’t have a clue about anything that’s going on with you.”

“You don’t tell him about my psychosis?”

“You don’t have psychosis. And no, I don’t tell him about this kind of stuff.”

“You would come with me all the way out to Seattle just so I could talk to my dad?”

“I would love to do that with you.”

She stared into his eyes, trying to solve the puzzle. “Why?”

He opened his mouth, but words weren’t coming out. Instead of saying something, he locked his mouth onto hers, and his kiss told her all she needed to know.

She slid on top of him, pressing herself against him. She moved on him as they kissed, finding his cock between them, bringing it to full attention. She slipped him inside of her and moved on him, grasping onto his shoulders as she lifted herself up. He put both hands on her breasts and held them as she pumped up and down. Having him inside her, filling her up, was like the missing piece of a puzzle she’d lost and had been looking for her entire life.

As the sensations built inside of her, she squeezed his shoulders, letting him know it was time, and he let go with her. She collapsed onto him, and as he held her there, she knew this time was wholly different. This wasn’t Evan or Braxton or Parker or Malcolm, or any of the other ones in between. This was something uniquely special that she would never find

again. She wanted to hold onto it as long as she could, however long that would be.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

It'd always been in the back of Calliope's mind that her father's leaving was the real problem she needed to address, but Quentin had brought it to the forefront and made it a reality for her, as painful as that might be. She'd spent so much time not talking about her father that it had been comfortable to ignore that problem and focus on something else.

Who was she supposed to talk about him with? Her mother didn't want to hear about it. Nobody else understood.

Vanessa had been really helpful at the time of the divorce, but as the years went on, it seemed like enough time had passed that Calliope should have been over it. Talking about it seemed like dredging up an old problem. But since she had never actually addressed the old problem, it had festered.

She tried to talk to Tiffany about it at some point in her mid-twenties, but Tiffany hadn't gotten along with her father, so she hadn't understood. She'd nodded along, but Calliope could see the look in her eyes that said, *Welcome to my world*. So Calliope had swept it all under the rug and mentally focused on Evan as being the source of her misery.

The shop phone rang and Calliope picked it up. "Pretentious Zebra, how may I help you?"

“Is this Calliope?”

She stilled. “Yes, it is.”

“It’s Marla, Seth’s wife.”

Calliope relaxed. “Hey. How are you?”

“I’m great. I’m sorry to sort of jump in with a phone call. I didn’t have your cell number, and Vanessa was reluctant to give it to me, which I totally understand.”

“No, it’s fine,” Calliope said, pinching her temple and feeling like an idiot. Why was she such a head case? She was sure Marla thought it was strange that Calliope was so private.

“Well, I’m calling because I wanted to let you know that I was serious about asking you to watch my shop while I’m on maternity leave.”

“Oh.” Calliope had to admit she’d been curious about whether or not Marla had been serious. While Quentin was in the shower on Sunday morning, she’d Googled Marla’s store. It looked like Calliope’s dream shop but better. The whole place had a dreamy, ethereal feel to it. There were a few pictures people had taken that were posted online, but Calliope wished the shop was there in New Orleans so she could walk in and see it for herself.

“I know this is a strange request, because you have your own shop to run. But you’ve also got your mom there. I would be more than happy to help find temporary help there in New Orleans for your absence. I would place an ad on one of the job-searching websites and I’d do all the vetting and interviewing.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Calliope uttered, not knowing how to respond.

“I know this all sounds strange. But I’m looking for someone trustworthy who knows how to run a retail business. I don’t want to bring someone in who I don’t know.”

Calliope gave a nervous giggle. “You don’t know me.”

“No, but Seth knows you. And he thinks the world of you. That’s enough for me.”

Calliope actually loved the idea of working in Marla’s boutique for a couple of months. It would be the perfect way to get her feet wet and learn the business. Leaving Quentin while they were getting amped up didn’t sound like any fun, but in a way, this was her dream job. Who got the opportunity to go sample their dream job for a couple of months?

Deborah glanced over at Calliope with a curious look. Calliope turned away from her, huddling against the wall. “I can’t really talk right now, but let me take down your number so I can text you later.”

“That would be wonderful. And I’m sorry for interrupting your day.”

“No, it’s no bother,” Calliope said. Marla read off her number and Calliope typed it into her phone. “I’ll text you later.”

“That sounds good. And, hey, we missed you on Saturday.”

Calliope’s chest got hot, wondering what Vanessa told everyone about their early departure. “Thanks.”

They ended the call and Deborah glanced over at Calliope while she straightened a shelf. “Who was that?”

“It was a woman named Marla. She’s Seth’s wife.”

“One of your friends from college, right?”

“Yep.”

“What did she want?”

Calliope opened her mouth, trying to figure out how to word what she wanted to say. She didn't lie to her mom. But she also didn't want to tell her about the offer, because Deborah would stand on her head for Calliope and what she wanted. Calliope wanted to think about the offer before Deborah started putting wheels in motion for a part-time replacement.

The door to the shop opened, and Savannah walked in, saving Calliope, at least temporarily.

“Hello, fabulous retail divas,” Savannah said with a huge smile on her face.

Calliope and her mother smiled at one another, because Calliope knew Deborah didn't feel or seem like a diva, and neither did Calliope, at least these days.

“How are you, fabulous marketing professional?” Calliope said in return.

Savannah looked at the ceiling, pursed her lips, and then looked back at Calliope. “That doesn't sound nearly as good as your title.”

“Yeah, but a whole lot more legit,” Calliope said.

Savannah shrugged, approaching them.

“Are you not loving your job right now?” Deborah asked.

Savannah considered both women and then said, “No, actually, I'm not.”

“I'm sorry,” Calliope said.

Savannah waved her off. “It’s my own fault. It’s not like when I was a young girl, I dreamed of being a marketing consultant. It’s just the work that I fell into.”

“How did that happen?” Deborah asked.

“Braxton, if I’m being honest. When I was in college, I was studying anthropology, and he told me I should change to sales or marketing and then I could come work at Boudreaux’s when I got out. It seemed like the logical thing to do.”

Calliope gave Savannah a look. “Nothing like Braxton to encourage a girl to do the logical thing.”

Savannah lowered her chin. “I know, right? Braxton, with his sensible choices and straight and narrow paths.” They all glanced at each other with knowing smiles.

“What about the anthropology thing?” Calliope asked. “It’s not too late for that.”

“I don’t want to go back to school. Not right now.” Savannah leaned in like she was going to tell a secret. “But do you know what I love?”

Both women lifted their eyebrows.

“Working in that stupid furniture shop.”

“Really?” Calliope asked.

“Yes. I love the interaction with people. They fascinate me. That’s probably why I wanted to get into anthropology to begin with. I probably should have majored in sociology, but I didn’t really understand what it all was when I declared a major.”

“You are great with people,” Deborah said. “Everyone loves you.”

“I don’t know about that. But I know I’m a good talker. I could talk anyone’s ear off. Someone’s just got to rein me in because I ramble. Kind of like I’m doing right now.” She shook her head. “Anyway.” She turned to Calliope. “I’m here to see if you might accompany me to the art festival this weekend, just for a little while. It’s no big deal if you’re busy with the shop. I just haven’t seen you much lately.”

Calliope’s heart warmed. She had to do better about scheduling time with Savannah and Peyton. “I would love that, but Mom’s gonna be gone this weekend, so I’ve got to be here.”

“Oh no,” Deborah said. “It’s fine. My trip with Donald got canceled.”

“What?” Calliope asked. “You didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sorry. I thought I told you. Anyway, Peggy and Elizabeth are out of town this weekend so I can’t leave you here all alone.”

“I’ll fill in,” Savannah said.

Both women looked at her and then back at each other. “Really?” Calliope asked.

“Absolutely. I just told you how much I love working in that stupid furniture shop.” She glanced around like she was a kid in a candy store. “I can’t imagine getting to work here.”

“*Getting* to work here?” Deborah said on a laugh.

“Are you kidding? This place is like my spirit animal.” She clapped her hands together in front of her. “Oh please. Let me work here this weekend so you can go on your trip. You have no idea what a treat that would be for me. I have retail experience, not only in the furniture store, but I’ve been filling in at Peyton’s chocolate shop as well.”

“What about the art festival?” Calliope asked.

Savannah waved her off. “That was just an excuse to see you. But now I get to work with you the whole weekend.”

Calliope and Deborah looked at each other and shrugged. “Is it too late to do the trip?” Calliope asked.

“I don’t know,” Deborah said, pulling out her phone, and then she gave Savannah one more serious look. “You’re sure?”

“I’m not only sure, I’m excited.”

Calliope smiled at each woman feeling really lucky to have them both.

“Okay then,” Deborah said, “Let me give him a call. And thank you.”

“Thank *you*,” Savannah said.

Deborah headed off, and Savannah turned to Calliope. “I’m so excited.”

“Are you considering cutting back on your marketing business?” Calliope asked.

She gave Calliope a guilty look. “I already have.” She glanced around the store. “This is gonna sound awful, but ever since I’ve been solid with Garrett, I’ve been able to relax a little bit on the financial front. We haven’t really announced it yet or anything, but we moved in together.”

“That’s amazing,” Calliope said.

“Thank you. We’ve talked about marriage, and I think it will happen at some point. We’re just focused on the new store right now. But things are going in a really great direction.”

Calliope covered her heart with her hand. “I’m so happy for you and for him.”

“Me, too,” Savannah said with a grin.

“Where are you living? Your house or his?”

“He gave up the lease on that little place he was staying at in the Irish Channel and we’re getting my place ready to rent out. We moved into one of his properties in the Garden District. It was perfect timing because his renters were leaving.”

“Was it his idea?”

“Yep. Well, fueled by the convenience of his renters giving their notice, but I think the timing was pretty good.”

“I’d say,” Calliope said considering her friend. She indulged herself in a dream of what it would be like to be Savannah’s actual sister-in-law. She shook her head, shaking that thought off. She could not let herself slide into fantasyland. Quentin and Calliope were far from marriage.

The door opened and Quentin walked in. Calliope’s neck went hot, as if he could see her innermost thoughts. Savannah turned to him. “I’m going to be a Pretentious Zebra employee,” Savannah said and then rushed past him toward the door. “I’m gonna go tell Garrett.”

Calliope’s heart thumped as Quentin strutted toward her. “I didn’t know you needed help here.”

“It’s just for this weekend. Mom’s going out of town.”

“Cool.”

“Did you know Savannah wasn’t happy doing the marketing thing?” she asked.

“Yeah, she talked to me about it the other day.”

Calliope felt like a terrible friend. She would definitely make an effort to try to open herself up more.

Quentin slid his arm around Calliope's waist. "I missed you last night."

They'd spent the rest of the weekend together, but he had gone home on Sunday evening. They hadn't even been apart twenty-four hours yet, but she had missed him in her bed last night something terrible.

"That's probably a good thing. Wouldn't want you getting sick of me."

"I don't think there's any threat of that," he said, moving a lock of hair behind her ear, brushing the side of her face with his knuckles.

She glanced around. They were alone. Deborah had gone to the back room, and no one was in the store. Calliope reached behind his head, threading her fingers through his hair as she gave him a kiss to get her through the rest of the day.

The bell on the door dinged, and they pulled apart. A woman had two little children with her and appeared to be too busy with them to notice Quentin and Calliope. They stepped apart from one another, clearing their throats.

Calliope addressed the woman. "Let me know if you need any help."

The woman gave her a smile and a wave and then told one of her kids not to touch something.

"I'm here to formally ask you on a date," he said.

Calliope grinned. "Oh yeah? What kind of date?"

"A real one, with food that's not fried and decent clothes and all that."

“Sounds fancy. When is this date supposed to take place?” she asked.

“At your earliest convenience.”

“Mom’s gonna be gone starting Friday, so probably Thursday night is our best bet.”

“Thursday night it is. I’ll pick you up.”

“You can pick me up from here,” she said.

“How’s six o’clock?”

“Perfect.” The sound of glass breaking had Calliope turning her head.

“Luca,” the woman admonished and then looked over at Calliope with pink cheeks.

“I’ve got to go,” Calliope said quietly.

Quentin pointed at her. “Plan on Thursday night then.”

“I will.”

He winked at her and then headed out, leaving her missing him already.

If that’s how she felt knowing she was going to see him in three days, what would it be like knowing she wouldn’t see him for three months?

The maternity leave fill-in gig was out of the question, not that she would seriously consider it, anyway. She couldn’t leave her mom alone at the store with a fill-in for that long.

She’d let Marla know tomorrow. No harm in having the evening to dream.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Quentin's father had insisted on a lunch with his boys, which is how Quentin found himself walking into the dark restaurant at his dad's country club that featured a large cigar bar and a walk-in humidor on the day he was set to take Calliope out on their first real date. Savannah had agreed to watch the store, which had been Quentin's one excuse to get out of the meal.

It wasn't like he was the only one who didn't want to participate. Braxton had claimed work meetings and everything else under the sun, but Quentin supposed their dad had finally worn him down, because this timeslot had suddenly become available.

The other three men were already there, Garrett having come from the store, and Quentin opting to work from his workshop all morning. He found that while he always wanted to sell his furniture direct-to-consumer for a larger profit margin per piece, he had not found that he had the knack with people that Garrett had. Garrett had the keen ability of being able to make the customer feel heard and respected, but also to wrap things up when the conversation meandered outside of the furniture. Not many people had that kind of panache.

Quentin was too involved in the work. It made him cringe when a potential customer inspected his piece, brow furrowed like they were finding fault. He often found himself going to a dark place of mental *screw-yous*, which he didn't do a good job of hiding on his facial expression, or so Garrett had told him.

His brothers and his dad all looked like they were born to lounge in this very rich-male place, all three holding glasses of brown liquid, even though it was barely afternoon.

As Quentin approached, Garrett's smile widened, while Braxton's faded. Their dad stood up a bit taller, always jockeying for position when it came to Quentin. Quentin had made the mistake of growing an inch or two taller than his father, which obviously never sat well with the man. Neither did Quentin's *artsy-fartsy* disposition or his *numbskull* behavior.

"What's up, brother?" Garrett said, giving Quentin a rough pat on the back. He was either in a great mood or on his second drink.

"Not much. Having lunch with my family," he said, surveying the three men. Braxton maintained his permanent scowl.

When Quentin had come home for his mother's funeral, Braxton hadn't exactly welcomed him with open arms, but he also hadn't been an asshole. But ever since Quentin had been home permanently, Braxton had seemingly been in a cranky mood. Quentin's guess was that Braxton had no problem with Quentin as long as he was heading back to Colorado. But Quentin's permanent presence in New Orleans was clearly rubbing Braxton the wrong way.

Their dad handed Quentin a glass of whatever the three of them were drinking. Quentin thought about mentioning that circular saws and alcohol didn't really mix, but instead, he decided to keep the peace.

"Let's have a seat," his dad said, motioning Quentin toward an empty leather chair. "So, how does it feel to be home, son? I haven't seen you in weeks."

"It's going well," Quentin said, meeting Garrett's gaze for confirmation. Garrett grinned and then looked back at his dad.

His dad lifted his chin. "So Garrett tells us. He says he's really embracing sales. Not what I sent him to Tulane for, but I guess it's not the worst thing in the world to see two of your sons opening a business together."

Braxton huffed a resentful snicker, taking a sip of his drink.

"Seems to be a good partnership," Quentin said. "I like to make furniture and Garrett likes to schmooze people into buying it."

"Speaking of that, Crystal went by your store yesterday. Came home talking about some credenza. She asked if you could paint it red."

Quentin inwardly shuddered. "I can do whatever she wants as long as she's paying."

"We'll give you guys a discount," Garrett said.

"How about a free piece of furniture for floating your bill to Colorado," Braxton said.

They were definitely on their second drink. They'd probably met a half an hour early to pregame so Braxton could stand to be around Quentin. Tensions must have been building

even more so than Quentin had realized, because Braxton was blatantly picking a fight.

Quentin glared at Braxton. “How about you mind your own damn business.”

“Boys,” their dad said with that snooty air of authority, holding up a hand. “Let’s not start. I just want one lunch without hearing about nail polish or video games.”

“You do know those things come with the territory when you marry a twenty-something with an eight-year-old son, right?” Braxton said.

Their dad exhaled an exhausted sigh. “I love Crystal and her son. I don’t regret anything. But everyone needs a break once in a while.”

“Sure they do,” Braxton said, staring daggers through Quentin. “Just ask Quentin.”

“Is there something you want to say to me?” Quentin asked. “Because I didn’t come here to listen to your thinly-veiled jabs.”

Braxton sat up, “How about my not-so-thinly-veiled ones?”

Quentin stood up. “Bring ‘em on.”

Braxton stood, and then Garrett stood in between them. “Guys, come on. Not here.”

Quentin and Braxton held each other’s stare, neither brother backing down.

Their dad stood. “Come on, Braxton. Let’s check to see if the table’s ready.” Braxton stood still a second and then, when prompted one more time, followed his father.

Once out of earshot, Quentin turned to Garrett, palms up. “What the fuck?”

Garrett waved him off. “It’s nothing. Don’t stress it.”

“Seriously? The past couple of times I’ve seen him, he’s been salty, and then Savannah tells me he’s pissy because of me dating Calliope. Why is that a problem? He’s married.”

“It’s not a problem. We all love Calliope.” Garrett punched him on the shoulder, a smile plastered on his face. “Good catch, man. She’s hot. I remember her from high school. I always wanted to date her, but she was two years younger. I couldn’t do it.”

Quentin narrowed his gaze. “Will you shut the fuck up with all that? I’m already dealing with her having been with Braxton.”

Garrett held up a hand in apology. “Sorry. Are we good? No fist fights at lunch today?”

“Did I start that shit?”

“No, you didn’t. He’s just grieving. He bore the brunt of Mom’s care. I wasn’t really there. Not like he was. He had the stomach for it when the rest of us didn’t.”

The rub was that Quentin didn’t know if he had the stomach for it or not. He honestly didn’t know how she would have reacted to seeing him.

He knew it sounded like a copout, but he couldn’t take the rejection. From what he understood about people with dementia, they didn’t necessarily pull any punches, and sometimes their emotions or feelings could be heightened. He imagined going to visit her and having her yell at him to get out, or worse, having her fear him, not fully understanding why.

Quentin and Garrett found their dad and brother in the dining room. Their dad had obviously talked Braxton into sucking it up, because that's exactly what he did as they proceeded forward with the phony lunch. As they talked about the state of the stock market, the president's foreign policy, and the new indoor tennis addition to the local country club, Quentin found himself feeling more and more like an outsider in his own family.

He wanted to come home to reconnect with his blood relatives, but he couldn't possibly feel more disconnected from the three of them. Quentin didn't care about the stock market, follow politics, or play tennis. He spent his days working on furniture and listening to music. In Colorado, he was a runner. All he had to do was walk out his front door and head to the neighborhood park, which he didn't have to get into a car to do. Here, he walked out his front door and was accosted by loud tourists and busy streets.

He never ate at nice restaurants, and today he would eat at two of them, seeing that he had reservations at J. Kelley's for his date with Calliope. He wasn't sure who he was becoming in this town, but he was beginning to not recognize himself. He wondered why the hell he was trying so hard to change.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Calliope checked herself in the mirror one last time. She was acting like she was going on her first date ever, not her first date with a guy she'd slept with multiple times. But this was their first real date. She tossed her lip gloss into her purse and headed out to the main part of her store.

“Look at you, Miss Priss,” her mother said. That was her name for Calliope back in high school. She hadn't used it in a long time. In all fairness, the name didn't really fit her much these days. But it sort of did tonight.

She'd taken off early on Tuesday and done some shopping. She hit a few boutiques she'd been wanting to check out but both time and money constraints had kept her from them. However, tonight's date seemed to merit throwing caution to the wind.

She ditched the big flowy dresses that hid all her fat and went with something more figure-flattering. She took the risk even though she had to expose her body for exactly what it was. She found a retro, cap-sleeved dress with a black top that buttoned up to her neck, and a tan skirt with mesh stitching featuring butterflies.

She forgot how the right dress could have a visceral effect on a person. In this dress, Calliope actually felt more confident than she had in the one that was built for comfort that she'd been wearing all day.

She smoothed out the waist of her dress. "Do you like?"

"I love," her mom said. "Where did you find that?"

"A sort of eclectic boutique on Magazine Street. It popped up awhile back and I've always meant to go."

"I'm glad you finally made it over there."

"Thanks. Me, too." She held the skirt out to the sides, twisting, watching the fabric flow.

The door to the shop opened and they both turned to find Quentin walking in, wearing casual gray pants that fit snugly, but not too tight, with a navy blue button-down, looking as handsome as she'd seen him look.

"Wow," he said, looking her up and down. "You look really...cool."

She and her mother turned to one another. Her mother shrugged with a smile. "I think I'd take it as a compliment."

"Definitely," Quentin said. "How are you, Deborah?"

"I'm wonderful. You two look like something off Page Six. I hope you're going somewhere to show off your outfits."

"I have reservations for J. Kelley's."

She and her mother looked at each other again. "You don't mess around, do you?" Deborah said.

Calliope leaned in to kiss her mother on the cheek. "If I'd have known this, I would've worn the stretchy dress."



AT DINNER, Quentin looked like he was a man on trial for murder. He didn't have much of anything to say as Calliope rattled on about New Orleans events, concerts she'd been to, and the town gossip she had picked up from Lucendia Waverly, who had been in the shop earlier in the day. She tried asking him questions about himself, about living in Colorado, and even about the sports teams he liked, but his answers had been short and sweet, and he hadn't done much to stoke the conversation.

When the bill came, he didn't even look at it. He simply handed the server his credit card, which he had at the ready.

Calliope leaned in. "What's wrong? Did you not enjoy your hasenpfeffer stew?"

His cheeks went red like he had been caught. "No, it was good, oddly. It's just that places like this make me nervous."

"We didn't have to come here," she said. "I'm not somebody who needs to go to J. Kelley's on a date. I'd be just as happy with Hurricane Henry's."

He gave her a look. "I wouldn't take you to Hurricane Henry's for our first real date."

"I wish you would if it would make you more comfortable."

He scratched his forehead. "I'm sorry. It's just that I was at my dad's club earlier today for lunch. I can only take so much of the pomp and circumstance in one day. I should have told them I couldn't go today."

She frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me you had lunch with your dad today? I’ve been droning on about nothing all this time.”

“I didn’t want to talk about it.” He glanced around as if looking for the server.

“Were your brothers there, too?”

“Yeah. It was a shitshow, if I’m being honest.”

The server came back with the bill for him to sign and he took it, his face going beet red. After he signed, he closed the folder and stood. “Are you ready?” He held his hand out to her. She grabbed her clutch and stood up, taking his hand. She took two steps to his every one as he strode out of the place.

When they both got inside the truck, she said, “What was so bad about it?”

He pointed at the restaurant. “That’s not who I am anymore. It’s not who I’ve been since I left home when I was eighteen.”

She studied his flushed face, trying to understand.

He gripped the steering wheel. “I don’t fit in here.”

“At this restaurant or in New Orleans?”

“With my family.”

“What about Garrett? You’ve got a business with him.”

“Garrett could get along with a rock. It’s impossible for him not to like someone.”

“He likes you so much he wanted to go into business with you. I’d say he likes you a little more than a rock.”

He let out an exhaustive sigh and then looked forward, still not starting the truck. “You should have seen him today.”

“Garrett?”

“No, Braxton.” He said his brother’s name like it was sour on his tongue. “He despises me, like with a passion.”

She reached for his arm, but he moved it, so she pulled back. “He’s misinformed, that’s all.”

“He’s hurting like hell, and I’m making things ten times worse for him. I’m his big brother. I’m supposed to be looking out for him.”

“You are looking out for him...by keeping this secret.”

“Sometimes I wonder if that’s enough.”

Her stomach sickened at the idea, because the only thing she could think of that would be enough, would be him leaving.

He turned toward her. “I want to take you to my apartment.”

She considered him. “Okay.” She should have been relieved that he wanted her to see where he lived, but there was something off with him that had her radar up.

“Is that cool?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Good,” he said, starting up the truck.

It was a strange night, and she wasn’t sure what she could say or do to get them back on track. She wondered if they were hitting their first real bump in the road, or if this was the start of a rockslide.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

Calliope had thought they were going to Quentin's apartment, but they were approaching the French Quarter. Had he changed his mind and decided to take her somewhere on Bourbon Street? Not that she didn't love a good Bourbon Street jaunt, but it definitely didn't seem like he was in a down-and-dirty, hellraising kind of mood.

As he pulled into a covered parking place, Calliope was trying not to ask questions, but she couldn't contain her curiosity. "Are you sure it's okay to park here? You're not afraid you'll get towed?"

He turned off the engine. "No. Come on."

They headed up a set of stairs, and then he stopped in front of a door, unlocking it. He opened it and motioned her inside. It was a full apartment with a kitchen and a living room and high-end decorating featuring a theme of dark gray with pops of turquoise with an ornate mirror over a fireplace and a crystal chandelier over a formal table and chairs.

She turned to him. "Are you renting this?"

He put his keys in a bowl on a skinny table by the door. "No."

She squinted at him. "Are we squatting?"

“No. This is mine.”

She glanced around, trying to compute that Quentin lived on Bourbon Street. Nobody lived on Bourbon Street. She turned back toward him. “You own this apartment?”

He nodded.

“I had no idea your furniture business did this well.”

“I don’t have this because of my furniture business. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Sure.”

“You like Pinot Grigio, right? I bought a bottle,” he said.

“That’s great, thank you,” she said, taking in the room. She wasn’t an art connoisseur, but from what she could tell, the paintings looked intricate and valuable. They were all colorful interpretations of famous New Orleans landmarks—Jackson Square, Saint Louis Cathedral, Preservation Hall....

He approached her, handing her a glass of wine.

“This art is incredible. Who is the artist?” She couldn’t find a signature on any of them.

He scratched his face. “Um...”

She met his gaze, curious. “Did you do these?”

“A long time ago. I didn’t put them up, just so you know. They were here when I moved in.”

She opened her mouth to ask what he meant by that, but he spoke first.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do about this place. I haven’t had a chance to think about it since I got here.”

“How is this place yours?”

They sat down on the couch. “It was my grandmother’s.”

“Were you close with her?”

“I guess so, with me being the oldest grandkid and all. When I moved to Colorado, she was so confused. I’d told her my plans to stay in New Orleans and build my business there, so she couldn’t understand why I went to Colorado.”

“Did you tell her why you left?”

“She knew something was up, but I told her I couldn’t talk about it. I guess she probably wore my mom down, because eventually, she quit asking.”

“Do you think your mother would’ve confessed that to her?”

“It’s possible. My mom could be ruthless, but she also carried a lot of guilt. Not a lot got past my grandmother, so it probably didn’t take much for her to wear my mom down.”

Calliope glanced around. “So your grandmother left you this place?”

“She got sick when I was twenty-one. I came home to see her, and she told me how ashamed she was of my mom. She told me I deserved better and that she was sorry she wasn’t able to do more to help fix things between me and my mother. I guess she left me this place to repent for my mom’s sins.”

Calliope’s heart warmed. “I’m so glad you had that validation, especially at such a young age to be living on your own and...”

“Shunned by my family?”

She nodded, her neck going hot.

He looked down at his own glass of wine. “When my grandmother died, it was like she took the whole secret with her. She never told anyone that I know of.”

“I imagine she was trying to protect her daughter, even though she was frustrated with her.”

He nodded as if he understood that.

“But I’ll bet it hurt,” she said. “You probably went from being seen by someone to falling right back into that place of feeling like you’d done something horrible when all you did was learn of somebody else’s wrong behavior.”

He stared at his glass. She wanted to pull him into her arms, but he felt raw, too delicate for her to make any sudden moves like that.

“Are your brothers jealous that she gave you this place?”

He huffed a humorless laugh. “They don’t know.”

“They don’t know where you live?”

“They think I’m living here for cheap courtesy of a girl I knew in high school.”

Calliope had a sneaking suspicion that she knew who this girl might be. “One of the girls I met at your dad’s house?”

“Yeah, actually. She came in when you and I were talking in the living room.”

That was the one. Calliope remembered the woman who greeted him with the intense hug that day, and it poked at her heart. “It looked like there was a special connection between you and her.”

He squinted, looking off past her. “You know, I hate lying to my brothers,” he said, ignoring her comment. “But I can’t

tell them the truth.”

“You’d have to reveal your mother’s dirty secret and why your grandmother gifted this place to you.”

“Right,” he said, looking defeated. “That’s what I hate about the club I was at today and that place we were at tonight. If all these assholes weren’t so plastic and concerned with impressing one another…”

“Then you could’ve stayed in New Orleans like you’d planned and built your business here.”

“Exactly.”

She reached over and squeezed his hand. “But you’re doing it now.”

He frowned in a way that made her wonder if he was rethinking that business he’d started.

She searched for a subject change. “Back to the artwork. Quentin, seriously, I can’t believe you did those.” She stood up and walked over to the painting of Preservation Hall. “How old were you when you painted this?”

He joined her. “I don’t know. Maybe fifteen or sixteen?”

Her jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious? When I saw these, I thought they were some crazy expensive paintings done by some old pretentious artist.”

He chuckled. “Thanks?”

“No, I don’t mean it like that. I mean they look super professional, especially for a teenager.”

He shrugged, looking contrite.

“Do you paint like this anymore?”

“I haven’t in a long time. Painting sort of brings back the whole reason why I had to leave in the first place.”

She looked at him curiously, waiting for him to elaborate.

He lowered his head, and then looked up at his artwork. “I was painting that day when it happened.”

She swallowed hard. “That day you found out about your mom and Truman Boudreaux?”

“Yeah. My mom painted, too, and she had her own studio in our house. I’d gone in there to see if she had a canvas I could borrow. Nobody was home. We all worked at Boudreaux’s after school on Tuesdays, but I’d blown it off that day. I sat down at one of her easels. Her space was so conducive to painting. It was a sunroom, full of outside light and greenery.”

“Sounds amazing.”

“It was. I’d had a really good day, for whatever reason. So I guess I was feeling inspired. I sat down and went to work, then in a bit, I heard her come in, and I heard Truman with her.” He narrowed his gaze. “At first, I didn’t think anything of it. Our two families were so intertwined, it was nothing for one of us to be at the other’s house. But the way they were talking to one another was more...intimate than usual.”

“Like, sexy talk, or...?”

He winced. “Kind of. I was getting ready to make myself known, when she squealed and told him to stop, but not in a way that she really wanted him to stop.”

Calliope inwardly cringed, imagining. “That sounds mortifying. What did you do?”

“I froze. I sat there stone-still. I was afraid to move. Then they were clearly kissing, and I wanted to leave so bad.”

“Was there a door on that sunroom?”

“No, it was just like a room full of windows. There was no exterior door.”

“What did you do?”

“I waited it out.”

She closed her eyes, imagining the horror. No wonder he was so scarred from the whole thing.

He ran his hand through his hair. “I was such an idiot. I should have cleared my throat the second I heard his voice.”

“But you didn’t know. You still probably thought it was innocent.”

He shook his head, looking off into the distance.

“Didn’t she see your car in the driveway?”

“All us brothers rode together every day. Garrett had just gotten his license and was thrilled when I told him he could drop me at home and have my car for the rest of the day.”

She rubbed his arm, squeezing his biceps. It all made so much sense now...why she’d wanted him totally out of her life. She was humiliated. She’d had sex with another man steps away from her own son with him forced to take in every detail. “I’m so sorry she put you in that position.”

He just nodded.

“How did she discover you?”

“I thought I was in the clear for a moment, but then she wanted to show him a painting of hers, and that’s when I knew I was fucked.”

“Oh, Quentin. I can’t imagine.”

He let out a sigh like he was exhaling the whole experience. “Speaking of her, there’s going to be a dedication ceremony at this park for her. It’s in a local neighborhood. I guess she was friends with some ladies who lived there, and they’re devoting a local garden to her.”

“Oh, wow,” she said, a little sick at her stomach at the thought of this woman being immortalized in nature somehow.

“Will you come with me? Everyone will be there.”

“Yes, of course. When is it?”

“It’s next Sunday.”

She squeezed his hand. “I’ll be there.”

“Thanks.” He kissed her hand and then smiled at her. He dropped her hand and then walked over to a small credenza by the French doors to the balcony. “Want to go toss some beads?”

“Of course I want to toss beads. Do you have some?”

“I’ve got a drawer full.” He pulled open a drawer and grabbed a handful of beads, passing them to her and getting another handful for himself.

He opened the French doors, and what had been the murmur of Bourbon Street came alive. They walked out on the balcony to find a swarm of people walking, drinking, and basically living it up. A group of young women stopped, one of them pointing at Calliope and Quentin. He tossed a strand.

“You can’t let them get off that easy,” she said. “You’ve gotta make them work for it.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Have you never tossed beads before?”

He chuckled. “No.”

“What? You mean you’ve lived on Bourbon Street for how many months now and this is the first time you’ve tossed beads?”

“I’ve been a little bit occupied. And also, wouldn’t that be creepy if a single guy walked out onto a balcony and started making women show him their boobs for a strand of beads?”

“I see your point.”

The women shouted at them, and so Calliope dangled a strand of beads. “Let me see you work it,” she yelled.

The girls shimmied and twerked, so she tossed each of them a strand. “That’s how it’s done.”

“Duly noted.”

They played on the balcony for a long while, engaging with the crowd, tossing beads until they were all out.

“What good are we to these people now?” Quentin asked.

“True. We better get inside before they start throwing stuff at us.”

They went inside and Quentin locked the French doors behind him.

“What’s it like living here?” she asked. “Do you ever get a decent night’s sleep?”

“I bought one of those machines that makes noises while you sleep. It helps...except for when this one guy with a megaphone starts up.”

“A megaphone?”

“Yeah, he dresses up like Jesus and tells everyone they’re going to burn in hell.”

“That might make it hard to sleep.”

“It’s not the best kind of lullaby.” He gave her a curious look. “Could you ever see yourself living here?”

A shot of heat went up through her chest as she wondered if he was gauging her, which was weird, because earlier, she wondered if he was rethinking living here at all. “I don’t know. It’s different for a guy, even just parking in your place down below here and walking to the stairwell. You probably don’t think about those things, but women do, or at least I do.”

He nodded as if he was considering it.

“But if I could get over that, it seems like it would be fun for a while. How long do you plan on staying here?”

He shrugged, looking around. “I don’t know. I moved in just because I had the place, but I never planned on it being my long-term home.”

“What do you do with it when you’re not living here?”

“I rent it out.”

“I bet you make a killing.”

“Pretty much. The income from this place has floated my furniture business on plenty occasions.”

“Nice little nest egg.”

“But it doesn’t come without guilt.”

She nodded, hating what his mother had done to him and his whole family.

He slid his hands around her waist. “Sorry, I don’t mean to be such a downer tonight.”

“Are you kidding? We had a bead-throwing party. I haven’t done that in years.”

“The way I see it, this night can go one of two ways.”

“Okay,” she said, readying herself.

“We can go back down the steps and play Bourbon Street Tourist for the night, hit up some bars, maybe catch a few beads ourselves.”

“Nice option. Or?” she said, turning her head to the side.

“Or...”

He pulled her in for a kiss, his lips on hers giving her body sensations it was unfamiliar with before he came into her life. She ran her fingers through his hair, drinking in his kisses as they became more deliberate, more passionate.

She pulled away. “I don’t want anything else to drink.”

“And I don’t want any beads.”

“I think we have our answer,” she said.

“Very good answer.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

If Quentin spent the same kind of energy focusing on how to cure world hunger that he did thinking about Calliope's boobs, there would be no starving children. He got busy on the buttons on her dress, starting at the bottom and working his way up. He moved her dress off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. She had on a purple silk bra and panty set, and her full figure burst out of both the top and bottom. He grabbed her ass and squeezed. "I love the way you look."

She glanced at the French doors. "This is so weird. I feel so exposed. Like all those people know what's happening in here."

"They can't see through the curtains."

"I know, but it feels weird, you know?"

"You feel amazing," he said, squeezing both of her tits through her bra. Holding her boobs in his hands was like coming home.

"You at least need to join me," she said, pulling his shirt tail out of his pants.

He sped through the buttons on his shirt and then let it fall onto the floor. She put her hands on his chest, studying it like

it was a painting. “I love your body. You’ve got just the right amount of chest hair.”

He chuckled. “Thanks, I think?”

She squeezed his biceps. “You look really good.”

“So do you.”

She turned around, and he unhooked her bra and then slid it off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. He grabbed her bare tits from behind, unable to get enough of them. “I feel like we’re doing some sort of exhibition,” she said as the sounds of Bourbon Street permeated through the cracks in the doors. “Are you sure no one can climb up on that balcony and come through that door?”

“They’d have to be a damned ninja. Besides, it’s locked. Just in case.”

“So you admit there’s a chance it could happen?”

“It’s Bourbon Street. Anything can happen.” He took her by the shoulders and turned her toward him. “But don’t you worry. I’ll protect you.”

“I know you will,” she said giving him a grin. He didn’t know which he wanted to do more, look at her boobs or hold them in his hands, so he did both. “You are a gorgeous woman.”

She gave him a doubtful smile. “You’re sweet.”

“Trust me, ain’t nothing sweet going through my head right now.”

She smiled and then undid the button on his pants. “Mine either, if I’m being honest.”

She unzipped his pants and then pulled them down to the floor along with his underwear. He stepped out of them and then took her by the hand, leading her to the bedroom. He pulled back the covers. He'd made the bed, trying to impress her, not realizing he was creating an extra step to get to her naked body.

She pushed him onto the bed using one finger on his chest. He took in his girl. He could devour every inch of her body and pretty much planned to. She slid her thumbs into the sides of her panties, teasing him.

He shook his head. "You're killing me."

She smiled and then slid them down to the floor. He had never wanted a woman the way he wanted her. He craved her body, her taste, her smell, her curves. It was different than the way he'd wanted women...hookups...in his past. He didn't want to simply get off, he wanted to get off with *her*.

She was a conundrum. Half the time when he complimented her, she seemed like she didn't believe him. But then she also seemed to be full of self-confidence at the same time. It was as if she was humoring him. He wasn't sure if he was offended or turned on, and that excited him.

She leaned down and put her hands on his thighs, acting like she was going to kiss him, but instead, she pushed away and then dropped to her knees before him. She nudged his legs apart, settling in between them. He watched as she took him into her mouth. Just the sight of what she was doing made him hard as a rock. As she moved up and down on him, his body rocked with sensation. He'd had plenty of blowjobs in his time, but none had gotten him to the point of no return so quickly.

He touched her shoulder, "Calliope, I'm gonna..."

She didn't stop, and he couldn't stop himself. He let go with an intensity he hadn't felt in years, maybe ever. It was as if his feelings for her were getting tangled with his orgasm, and the result was a euphoria he wasn't familiar with.

She let go of him and kissed his torso up to his chest as he caught his breath. She straddled him, settling on his body. As he looked into her eyes, three little words begged to jump off his tongue, but he wasn't ready. They weren't ready.

He cupped the back of her neck and shut himself up with a kiss. He slid his hands under her ass and stood up off the bed holding her to him, and then he turned them around and laid her on the bed. He slid between her legs, kissing from her knee to where her leg met her body. She covered her eyes with the back of her hand. He'd watched every second of her getting him off, but he supposed she wasn't into the optics like he was. To each their own.

He settled in between her thighs, teasing her and getting his first satisfying taste. He was starting to get hard again despite the fact that he'd just gotten off. She had that much power over him.

She grabbed his shoulder, breathing his name, and he'd never enjoyed this act more than at this moment. She shook and let out a wail that probably had some tourists turning their heads down on Bourbon Street.

He kissed his way up her body, spending plenty of time on her torso near her belly button. Her skin was softer than the lushest chenille he'd used on any sofa or chair. He spent longer than he probably should have on each of her breasts, which were soft and plump and the most gorgeous sight he'd ever seen. As he made his way up to her neck, he was hard and

ready for her again, so he found his way to her and let himself in.

There was something so intimate about how they'd never used a condom. They never had that barrier between them. He didn't make a practice of that, but everything was different with Calliope. There was trust there, even though she had been hurt so often in her past. He knew he wasn't going to hurt her. Maybe she felt that. He hoped she did.

Sex with Calliope was natural. He hadn't felt like he had a home since the day his mom kicked him out. But with Calliope, he knew he was home.

"Quentin," she breathed, grabbing onto his shoulders.

Surely she wasn't going again? "You okay?"

"Yes," she said, pulling him closer to her. He didn't want to crush her, but that was exactly what she seemed to want him to do. He relaxed his weight against her, and their bodies melded together. He couldn't get any closer to her if he tried, but he still somehow wanted more. "I love...this," she said.

"Me, too," he said, wanting to say more, but trying desperately to contain the words.

He wished he could keep this going all night, but he was losing himself in the moment. With other women, he could go all night, but he wasn't in control like that with Calliope. She did something to him that he couldn't understand. No other woman had tapped into whatever that was, but she'd hit a nerve, and he couldn't imagine a world without her.

He let go again, and she squeezed him to her. He was afraid he was crushing her, but she didn't seem to mind, and he didn't want to peel himself off her anytime soon.

After a bit, she patted him on the shoulder—her signal that she was tapping out.

He rolled off her. “Sorry, I hope I wasn’t crushing you.”

She kissed him and then pulled away, giving him that million-dollar smile. “I loved every second of it.” She pointed to the door. “Bathroom?”

“Yeah, it’s out there, right across the hallway.”

“Thanks. And do you care if I get some water?”

“There’s bottles in the refrigerator.”

“Do you want one?”

He started to get up. “I’ll get it while you’re in there.”

She grabbed his arm. “I got it. Stay right where you are.” She kissed his shoulder and then headed off.

He watched her sashay out of the room and a sense of love overwhelmed him so greatly that he almost choked up. And then a sour feeling took root in his belly.

How dare Braxton make him feel like he didn’t belong in this town? This was where Calliope was, so this was where he needed to be. He was tired of his little brother making him feel like a pariah. Next time he saw Braxton, he’d make it clear that he wasn’t going anywhere. Once he got that settled, he’d tell Calliope he loved her and solidify this thing between the two of them. Fuck Braxton, and fuck his dad, too.

His chest filled with anxiety, just at the thought of telling his brother to fuck off. He loved his brother, but Quentin had never really connected with him like he knew he should have. Quentin and Garrett were each other’s best friends as kids. When Braxton came along, he was such a mama’s boy that it had isolated him from the two of them. He played with them,

of course, but any time their mom entered the picture, Braxton gravitated toward her.

Quentin guessed that made him and Garrett even closer. Garrett could never find his way with their mother. He was the classic middle child, always acting out to try to get attention. Quentin and his mother had gotten along fine...better than she did with Garrett, but when Quentin really needed a mother figure, he made an excuse to go to the Boudreaux house and hang around Shula and Eleanor.

Shula would put him to work over there, cleaning the pool or raking up leaves, then she'd tell him to come inside and see if her gumbo or whatever she was cooking needed salt. She'd tell him he had to sit with her until she got it right.

Even Eleanor Boudreaux, who arguably came off cold and distant to most people, would come through the kitchen and see him there, lifting her eyebrow at him. She'd say something like, "If you have time before you leave, I have a blank canvas that needs some imagination." And there always was a blank canvas in their guestroom, set up with standard paint colors and brushes. It wasn't until Quentin got older that he realized Eleanor wasn't an artist, and that she likely kept those things there just for him.

Both of those women had felt more like mothers to him than his own had. But when he'd left, he'd lost them as well.

Calliope came into the room and handed him a bottle of water. "Thanks," he said and took a drink. He set the bottle down and then pulled Calliope onto his chest. They lay there together in comfortable silence. That was something else he loved about Calliope—she didn't see the need to fill every silence with chatter. Maybe that was because she was a private person, and she was keeping all her thoughts to herself. That's

certainly what he'd done for the past eighteen years. Who else was he going to tell his innermost thoughts and feelings to?

It wasn't long before she seemed to be snoozing—he could tell by the way she was breathing. Holding her there in his arms felt so right and so scary all at the same time. Having someone who loved and cared for him always seemed like a temporary privilege. Sure, Shula and Eleanor made him feel wanted, but he knew he couldn't move in over there. His mother would proudly display his artwork and even his furniture when he started making it in his teens, but he always felt the distance from her.

His father was its own separate thing altogether. He'd never understood Quentin. He put Quentin in football when he was four years old and kept signing him up year after year, despite Quentin's clear indifference to the game. It wasn't until Braxton came along and latched onto the sport that Quentin could finally bow out without an argument from his dad.

As Quentin got older, and his artistic side had become *cause for concern*, he'd signed up for lacrosse. Some friends of his played it, so it seemed logical. But he always preferred painting or woodworking.

Braxton had been the golden child—a football star for his dad and a mama's boy through and through. If he'd have come first in the birth order, there would have been no need for Garrett or Quentin.

A little drool dropped out of Calliope's mouth onto Quentin's chest, making him smile. God, he loved her. How had that happened? All those years of keeping women at bay, making sure they all knew where he stood, and then the second he got back to the town he'd been banished from all those years ago, this one captured his heart. He'd thought he

was impervious to love...incapable of it. But Calliope had shown him that wasn't the case.

He'd clear up this nonsense with Braxton. This was his town, too, and he wasn't going anywhere. Braxton would have to deal with it.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

As Calliope came back into the shop from picking up lunch, she found Deborah hanging up the shop phone, looking guilty.

“Who was that on the phone?” Calliope asked, setting their food down on the counter.

“It was your friend Marla.”

Calliope winced. She hadn’t texted her like she had said she would. While Calliope’s initial reaction was guilt, she had to admit she was starting to get a little perturbed with Marla’s persistence. But she couldn’t fault her. Calliope owed her the decency of a response.

“I’ll text her when we get done eating,” Calliope said.

Deborah just nodded as she took her container out of the bag.

Calliope eyed her mother. “Did you talk to her for a minute?”

“I did,” Deborah said and then raised her eyebrow at Calliope.

She dropped the tension in her shoulders. “She told you, didn’t she?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because there was nothing to tell. I’m not doing it.”

“Why not?” Deborah asked.

“Uh, because I have a job here?”

“Would that be something you would want to do?”

“It’s in Nashville. And it’s right in the fourth quarter through the Christmas season. It’s all too much to even think about.”

Deborah considered Calliope. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about.”

“Yeah?” Calliope said, setting her fork and napkin packet on top of her container. They would take turns eating in the back room. It was her mom’s turn to go first.

“I’ve been thinking about turning the business over to you.”

Calliope shifted her weight backward, resting her hand on the edge of the counter. “What?”

“I think I’m ready to get out of this business.”

Calliope stilled. “Mom, what are you talking about?”

Deborah sighed and then pulled her purse out from under the counter. She rooted around in it and then came up with a ring that she slid on her ring finger.

Calliope grabbed Deborah’s hand, staring at the rock. “Mom, are you engaged?”

“Maybe?”

Calliope cocked her head to the side. “What is happening?”

“Donald wants to get married. He wants me to quit working here so we can travel. He’s retired and ready to see the world.”

Calliope let that sink in. “What about you? What do you want?”

Deborah rubbed her forehead. “It’s a hard offer to turn down. Your dad never wanted to travel, which was one of the reasons I opened this shop. I knew I would never go anywhere.”

“But now?”

“I don’t know. It’s a possibility I had never considered.” Deborah gazed at Calliope. “Oh sweetie. I’ve been so worried about you all these years.”

“Me? What have you been worried about?”

Deborah glanced around the empty store and then focused on Calliope. “Sweetie, you’ve just not been the same ever since Dad left. And all of these heartbreaks over the years... I’ve been waiting for you to meet the right boy, so I didn’t have to worry about you anymore.”

“Mom,” Calliope admonished.

Deborah waved a hand in apology. “I know that’s the wrong thing to say. I know that young women are strong and can handle themselves and don’t need a man to take care of them and all that. But I’m a mom. I worry. You and Quentin seem so happy together. It seems like he could be the one, right?”

Calliope put her fists on her hips. “What does this have to do with you leaving the shop to go travel?”

“I don’t know. I know I’m saying the wrong things, but I also know this shop isn’t your dream. It was my dream. Your dream is a boutique. If I were to step out of the picture, you could have your boutique right here.”

“I don’t want to kick you out of your own shop,” Calliope said, feeling stung.

“Of course you don’t. But you wouldn’t be kicking me out. I’d be trying this new thing. And you could try your own new thing.”

Calliope thought about a shop on her own. She wasn’t sure if she was ready for that. Her mother had always been there as her support system. She didn’t know how she felt about doing everything by herself.

“Why don’t you go fill in for Marla for this maternity leave? It seems like such a great opportunity.”

“What about you and the shop here?”

“I’ve got Peggy and Elizabeth.”

“Yeah, but not every day. They only like to work here and there. We’re entering the busy season.”

“We’ll work it out.”

She shook her head, overwhelmed by the idea. “I couldn’t do that to you.”

“I can hire help.”

“You know how that goes. It’s impossible to find the right person. That’s why we’ve relied on Peggy and Elizabeth all these years.”

“Just think about it. Marla seems absolutely lovely.”

Calliope pursed her lips. “She is.”

“Could you give her a call?”

“I’ll think about it.” Calliope considered her. “Do you love Donald?”

Deborah smiled. “I think I do. He’s a good man, sweetie.”

Relief blanketed Calliope. No one was more deserving of a good man than her mother. “And you’re ready to marry him?”

Deborah lifted her eyebrows. “Possibly?”

“You haven’t answered him yet?”

“He knows I’m thinking about it.”

“He’s a very lucky man.”

Deborah smiled. “I love you, sweetie.”

“I love you, too, Mom. Now go eat.”

Deborah picked up her container and headed off. As her mother closed herself into the back room, Calliope ran her hand over the top of her head. Her mother getting married. She couldn’t even begin to process that. Calliope needed to get to know Donald better. Was he good enough for her mother?

She opened her container and took a bite of a grilled chicken tender while she thought about things.

She picked up her phone and pulled up a text message to Marla.

Thanks for checking in. I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch. It’s a lot to think about. If you find someone else, please move forward. I just can’t commit right this minute.

She hit send, and then she realized this was her first time texting Marla. She followed up with:

This is Calliope, by the way.

A moment later a text came through.

I know who this is, and I don't want anyone else.

She added a heart emoji, which both warmed Calliope's heart and made her nervous all at the same time.

It was a lot to think about—her mom leaving to go travel, Calliope having free rein over what to do with the store. She needed to talk to someone about all this. Quentin was a phone call away, but she wasn't ready to tell him that she might be going to Nashville for three months. How would he feel about that? How would she feel about leaving in the prime of their relationship?

Things were going well, despite what felt like a setback the other night. He'd been in a weird mood, but they'd made love, and it had been beautiful. He'd been introspective afterward. She'd wanted to leave him alone with his thoughts, so she'd let herself drift off.

She'd felt like something was off with him, but she was trying not to panic. It didn't feel like a good time to talk to him about something like this. Maybe he was reconsidering their relationship, and if she told him about Nashville, he'd shoo her right out the door. If that was what he was going to do, she needed to let that happen. But she wasn't ready to let him go yet.

She needed a friend. Unfortunately, she was short on those these days. She didn't want to talk to Savannah or Peyton, because she didn't want to put them in the position of having to keep a secret from their partners. But there was one person who might be right for this talk.

She pulled up the text thread.

Would you like to have lunch with me soon?

A few seconds later, a response came through.

Of course, darling. How's Saturday at noon? Trevor and I can pick you up from your lovely shop.

Calliope smiled. *That'd be great. See you then.*

Confirmed, was Eleanor's final response.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

Quentin walked through the streets of the Irish Channel, making his way to Garrett's favorite bar. He'd barely seen Calliope all week. The art festival had blown up both of their shops with customers, which in turn meant lots of work for Quentin with orders for new furniture.

He understood that sales were a good thing, but Garrett was a little too good at it. Quentin was only one guy, and he couldn't keep up with the workload. If they were going all in with this business, he would have to talk to Garrett about bringing on a second craftsman. But before he did that, Quentin needed to make sure *he* was all in.

It was fucking Braxton. Quentin still hadn't talked to him about how he was staying in this town, like it or not. Work had been really busy, but still, Quentin hadn't picked up the phone to schedule a time to talk to him to clear the air. He wasn't sure what was holding him back.

He *had* scheduled time to meet with Garrett, though. Peyton had invited Calliope and Savannah over for a girls' night, so Garrett had invited Quentin out for a drink, probably because he knew Quentin had no other friends. He hadn't stayed in touch with anyone when he left. It was too hard to

explain to people why he didn't want to come home and visit more.

He found Garrett walking slowly toward the front door of the bar as he thumbed into his phone. He was on that thing nonstop these days.

"Hey," Quentin said, getting his attention.

Garrett looked up from his phone. "Hey," he said, with a smile, and then went back to his phone. "Give me just a second." Quentin glanced around while Garrett finished up. He finally pocketed his phone and held up both hands. "We're killing it, man."

"I'm aware," Quentin said.

Garrett opened the door to the bar and they headed inside. "Do I detect some animosity?"

"No, man, you're doing a great job," Quentin said. Garrett always looked at him with such admiration, it felt like kicking a puppy to tell him he was doing something wrong. And he wasn't doing anything wrong. He was doing everything right. That was the problem.

They sat down at the bar, and a guy around their age walked up with a big smile for Garrett. "What's up, man? Haven't seen you in here in a minute."

"Yeah, we've been busy. This is my brother Quentin."

"Hey man," the guy said, shaking his hand. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Oh yeah?" Quentin said, feeling guilty that he didn't know who this guy was.

"I'm Malcolm."

Malcolm. That name sounded familiar. “It’s good to meet you.”

“What are you drinking?” Malcolm asked. Quentin and Garrett both ordered beers, and he drew them from a tap in front of them. “How’s the new store going?”

“It’s going well,” Garrett said. “We got a bunch of orders last weekend from all the foot traffic. The art festival over in the Marigny.”

“Oh yeah,” Malcolm said. “I wanted to check that out, but I’ve got a lot going on with the new baby and all.”

“I’ll bet,” Garrett said. “How’s everything going?”

Malcolm shook his head. “Brutal. I think I get more rest here than I do when I’m there.”

Garrett chuckled. “No doubt, man.”

A guy bellied up to the bar, and Malcolm asked him what he wanted to drink.

Garrett turned to Quentin. “Patrick told me they’re selling the building. What do you think? Want to buy it?”

Quentin swallowed hard. He wasn’t sure he wanted to stay in business there, much less buy the building. “Seriously?”

“Why not? It’s a great location. Plenty of foot traffic. I think we can get a decent deal on it, too. He told me he’s looking to avoid real estate agents and fees.”

“Something to think about,” Quentin said, adjusting himself on his stool.

Malcolm came back over. “Hey, how’s Calliope doing?”

Garrett looked at Quentin “Um...”

“I’ve been thinking about her. Man, that was fucked up how it all went down. She and I were really hitting it off, and then this bombshell drops.” Malcolm ran his hand over the top of his head. “I wish I could talk to her, but I don’t wanna jump back in her life again if she’s hitting it with some other guy.”

Quentin’s blood heated. That was where he knew that name. Calliope had said it when they were talking about her exes.

“Do you know if she’s seeing anyone?” Malcolm asked.

Garrett just looked at Quentin and then back down at his beer.

Malcolm caught on. “Oh. Fuck. Sorry, man.”

“It’s not a problem,” Quentin said, running his fingers up and down his beer mug with one hand and squeezing his thigh with the other.

“Excuse me,” Malcolm said, and then he went to tend to a couple of girls who had just sat down.

Quentin met Garrett’s apologetic gaze. “What the fuck?”

“Man, I’m sorry. I thought he was back with his ex—the mom of the kid.”

“If he is then he’s a son-of-a-bitch for wanting to get back in touch with Calliope.”

“I don’t know the story there. They may not be together.”

“It’s not like it matters,” Quentin said, feeling both territorial and guilty. Here he was having second thoughts about everything he was doing in New Orleans, and in the meantime, he was tying Calliope down, keeping her from other guys.

“Of course it doesn’t. She’s your girl, right?” Garrett said.

“Yeah, of course,” Quentin said, his heart sizzling.

“Good,” Garrett said.

“Good,” Quentin said.

They both took drinks of their beers. Quentin glanced around, feeling uneasy and unwelcome in this place. “How’s it going with Savannah?” She and Garrett had recently moved in together.

“Good,” Garrett said. “Man, I really do think she’s the one.”

“Oh yeah?” Quentin said, not at all surprised. Garrett had been giddy since the day they took their friendship from friends to much more.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

“To propose?”

Garrett nodded, looking serious as a heart attack.

“That’s great,” Quentin said, his stomach feeling a little wonky. He held out his hand to his brother and they clasped hands and then hugged, Quentin patting Garrett on the back hard.

“Do you think I’m doing the right thing? You like her and everything?” Garrett asked, looking like Quentin somehow had all the right answers.

Quentin dropped his head to the side. “Come on. You know I like her. Everybody likes her.”

Garrett grinned. “They do, don’t they?”

“When are you going to pop the question?”

“I don’t know. We’ve got so much going on with the store. It’s not a good time.”

“So, you’re going to wait till this magical good time falls in your lap?”

“I hear you,” Garrett said, studying his beer. “I just know that this needs to be a big deal. I don’t want to do some half-ass wedding with no honeymoon. I want to do it all right.”

“Then do. I’ll watch the shop while you’re out.”

“Then who’s gonna make the furniture? We’ll run out of stock.”

It was on the tip of Quentin’s tongue to suggest they hire someone, but he needed to talk to Braxton first. “Don’t worry about it. Just make your move.”

“I’m looking at rings,” Garrett said, raising an eyebrow.

“Do you want to show me?”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

He glanced over at Malcolm, who was eyeing him as he poured liquor into a glass. “No, let’s go right now.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Are they open this late?” Quentin looked at his phone for the time.

“The guy’s actually only open at nighttime.” Garrett waved his buddy over. “We’re gonna go ahead and tab out.”

Malcolm walked over, waving him off. “It’s on the house.” He turned to Quentin and held out his hand. “Man, I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” Quentin said shaking the guy’s hand, probably squeezing a little too hard.

“She’s a great girl,” Malcolm said.

“Don’t need to tell me that.”

Something in Malcolm’s eyes told Quentin that if he backed down for a second, he would pounce.

“Thanks for the beer,” Quentin said.

“Thanks for being cool,” Malcolm said, taking Quentin’s and Garrett’s beers and dumping them in the sink. “Tell her I said hello.”

“Will do.” When pigs flew.



GARRETT DROVE them to a jewelry shop on Frenchmen Street that sold one-of-a-kind pieces. They walked into what looked like a seedy shop from the outside, but once inside, the place was nice. There was an armed guard standing by the door, which was a bit unsettling, but there was a bar off to the side with beer and a few bottles of liquor. They even had a humidor with a decent selection of cigars. The place was clearly designed to attract men who were ready to spend a boatload of money. Quentin supposed the alcohol was to help prod that process along.

“Hey,” Garrett said, shaking hands with the guy behind the counter. He looked like he was in his fifties with hair he should’ve cut off about a decade ago. Rings covered his fingers and bracelets adorned his wrists. He looked like an aging rockstar.

“This is my brother,” Garrett said. “I wanted to get his opinion.”

“Never hurts,” the guy said. “You fellas want a drink?”

“I’m good,” Quentin said. He wasn’t about to get caught up in this racket.

“We’ll just take a look at the ring,” Garrett said.

While the guy was busy getting the ring out that Garrett had his eye on, a different ring caught Quentin’s eye. The stone was dark and sort of mysterious with hints of green and blue. He’d never seen anything like it. For a split second, he imagined it on Calliope’s finger.

The guy peered at Quentin. “That’s a black opal.”

“Hmm?” Quentin said, snapping back to reality. “Oh, no. I’m not getting married.”

The guy gave him a smirk that indicated it would only be a matter of time. Quentin’s stomach dropped out for a second, and he was this close to telling the guy to mind his own damned business.

The guy pulled a ring out of the case and set it down on a velvet cloth. Garrett picked it up, inspecting it. “Well? What do you think?”

Quentin took it from him, squinting at it. He didn’t know what to think. The ring was nice—there was no doubt about that. But the gravity of what the ring stood for hit Quentin hard.

Garrett was getting married. That wasn’t something to take lightly. It came with responsibilities and difficulties. There was pressure and a serious need to commit to one person forever. It came with a public label that you had to live up to. And if that person wanted to be with someone else, they would either have to fight that feeling or lie and cheat.

“Well?” Garrett asked.

Quentin handed the ring back to Garrett. "It's beautiful. She's gonna love it." He pulled his shirt collar away from his neck.

Garrett admired the ring. "She is going to love it. You know what? Let's do it." He set the ring down, pushing it toward the sales guy.

"Whoa," Quentin said. "You're buying this right now?"

"Yeah. You don't think I should?"

"Let's just talk about this a second," Quentin said, feeling like he was on hot coals.

Garrett gave him a look like he was from outer space. "Are you okay, man?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just that this is a big expense." Quentin turned to the sales guy. "How much does this ring cost?"

The guy gave him a strange look, and then peered at Garrett.

"Don't worry about how much it costs," Garrett said. "You're not paying for it."

"I know I'm not paying for it, but you are, and we're in business together. What if we don't sell enough furniture to pay for this thing?"

Garrett glanced at the security guard and then the guy behind the counter. "Will you excuse us a minute?"

He shrugged, taking the ring and wiping it with a cloth.

Garrett walked out of the shop and Quentin followed him. Once on the sidewalk, Garrett said, "I thought you liked Savannah."

“I do. I like her a lot.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

Quentin wiped his forehead. It was hot outside, but he was sweating where Garrett was not. “Look, I just think marriage is a big step. You’ve not even been with her six months yet.”

“I have been with her six months. I’ve been with her more like nine months and I’ve known her for three decades.”

“I just hope you know what you’re doing,” Quentin said, feeling sick to his stomach. “I’m gonna go.”

“Let me drive you,” Garrett said, following him.

“No,” Quentin said, leaving no room for discussion. “I’m gonna go. Buy your damned ring,” he said, feeling more like the asshole he became when he had hardened himself in Colorado all those years ago and less like the man he wanted to be when he came back to New Orleans.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

It was a couple of minutes before noon, so Calliope told her mom she was heading out and grabbed her purse. She didn't want to make Eleanor and Trevor wait. As she stood on the sidewalk in front of her store, she glanced over at Quentin's store. He was always in his workshop, which was miles away. She wondered why he even wanted a storefront. He was never there.

She peered through the window and was shocked to see him standing by a desk, talking to Garrett. He glanced over Garrett's shoulder, catching sight of her. She waved and then turned around to face the street, stung that he hadn't come over to say hello to her.

What was going on between them? Ever since the night they went to J. Kelley's, he had been weird.

She messed around on her phone, wondering if she should go back inside her shop. A moment later, the door to Quentin's shop opened. "Hey," he said.

"Hey." She came off too enthusiastic, but she was trying to make sure he didn't think she was upset. The last thing she needed right now was to pick a fight.

"I was going to come over and see you," he said.

“It’s no problem. I’m heading out to lunch with Eleanor.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked.

She wasn’t sure if he seemed surprised in a way that said she was infringing upon his territory or not. She really needed to not overanalyze things. “Yeah.” This is where she probably should’ve invited him along, but the whole point was to talk to Eleanor about the Nashville possibility, and she couldn’t do that in front of him.

“Well, I hope you two have a good time,” he said.

“Thanks.”

They stood in awkward silence until he said, “How was girls’ night?”

“Great. It was really good to spend some time with them.”

“Good.”

“Did you have a good time with Garrett?”

He scratched his head. “Yeah.” He glanced into the store and then back at her.

“Go ahead if you guys need to work on something. Eleanor will be here any minute.”

“No, that’s not...” He met her gaze. “What are you doing tonight?”

She tossed up a hand. “No plans.”

“Do you want to come over? Or I could come to your house. Then we could go to the ceremony together tomorrow, if you’re still planning to come?”

“Of course I am. Why don’t you come over to my house? I’ll make something for us.”

“You don’t have to go to that trouble.”

“It’s no trouble,” she said.

“Okay. What time?”

“Whenever you’re done with work.”

The Town Car pulled up. “I’ll text you,” he said.

“Sounds good.”

He took her by the arm and kissed her on the lips like she was an old friend and not his girlfriend.

Quentin opened the car door for Calliope. “Hey, Eleanor.”

“Hello, darling. I’d invite you along, but the reservation is only for two.”

“You ladies have a good time,” he said, giving Calliope half of a smile, and then he closed the car door.

As they pulled away, Eleanor considered Calliope. “Is everything okay in paradise?”

Calliope pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to get her words together.

Eleanor leaned up. “Trevor, take the long way to the restaurant, please.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, and then a separator powered its way up between the front seat and the backseat.

Eleanor tapped Calliope on the knee. “Now. Tell me what’s going on.”

Calliope told Eleanor about Marla and the shop and about her own longtime dream to have a clothing boutique.

“Well, that’s certainly no surprise. You are quite the fashionista.”

It was nice of Eleanor to use present tense, but they both knew Calliope was no clotheshorse these days. But it didn't mean she didn't want to be.

“What does your mother say about all of this?”

Calliope told Eleanor about her mother wanting to get out of the business and marry Donald.

Eleanor sat back in her seat. “I had no idea they were that serious. Do we like him?”

“I like what I know of him, and my mom seems to like him quite a bit. She says he really is a great guy.”

“Well, then there we have it.”

“I just don't know about the timing of all this. Marla is due any day. I would need to leave immediately. I can't leave Mom in the lurch like that.”

“Savannah has done nothing but talk about how much she loved working in the shop with you. Why don't you see if she'd like to take your place.”

“I have thought of that, to be honest.”

“Truth be known, I might like to fill in as well.”

“Really?” Calliope said, trying to imagine Eleanor working in a quirky gift shop.

“I've filled in a time or two for Peyton.”

“I didn't know that.”

“I didn't say I was great at it. But I also don't make hot fudge sundaes.”

Calliope giggled. “We don't sell those at the Pretentious Zebra.”

“Why do you think I’m offering my help?”

Calliope grinned at this woman who she liked so much. “Thank you for offering.” Her smile faded. “But I just don’t know about any of this.”

“Is the thing you don’t know about the same thing we just left on the corner?”

She winced. “Maybe?”

Eleanor nodded, folding her hands together on her lap. “I know that love is a powerful drug, but having the chance to fulfill your professional dreams is not something to let slip past you.”

Eleanor stared at the back of the seat in front of them, and Calliope wondered if she was thinking about her own lost dreams.

“That’s good advice,” Calliope said.

“So,” Eleanor said, sitting up straight. “Tell me about this fabulous boutique you’d like to open.”

Calliope did. The more she explained what her boutique would feature and what it would feel like, the more excited she got. But the whole conversation was overcast with whatever was happening with Quentin.

They were off. There was no doubt about it. If she was going to fight for them, she didn’t need to be leaving for three months. There was a lot to think about and a lot on the line. If only she had a crystal ball or someone to tell her exactly what to do. But the only thing she could count on right now was her gut.



CALLIOPE'S PHONE rang while she and Eleanor were at lunch.

A shot of worry went through her when she saw Quentin's name. "It's Quentin. He knows I'm here," she said.

"Go ahead and take it, my dear. He probably wouldn't be calling for nothing."

"If you're sure you don't mind?"

"Please," Eleanor said, and went back to her salad.

Calliope stood up from the table and headed toward the bathroom hallway. "Hey," she said, sounding anxious. She hated how rude this must seem to Eleanor.

"Hey, I'm so sorry to bug you, but Garrett scheduled a dinner for me and him and a business contact. He said he told me about it, but I don't remember that."

She tried not to let the disappointment come down too hard on her. "It's fine. You've had a lot on your mind."

"I'm sorry. I really wanted to see you."

Her heart squeezed with emotion. "I wanted to see you, too."

"Can I come over afterward?"

She sighed. Is that what they were turning into—late night fuck buddies? "Sure."

"I'll text you when I'm on my way."

"Okay."

"Bye," he said.

"Bye." The call disconnected, and an overall ick filled her chest, as she headed back to the table.

Eleanor studied Calliope as she picked up her fork and messed around with the pieces of her salad. Eleanor set her fork down. “Tell me, dear, what are your concerns?”

There was something so authentic about Eleanor that made Calliope feel like she could tell her any secret she had. “I don’t know. He’s so closed off sometimes. But then other times he’s sweet and open.” She adjusted herself in her seat. “It’s like, sometimes, when he’s with me, he’s ready to go all in. Then he can go days or even weeks without even contacting me.”

Eleanor narrowed her gaze. “Do you ever hear him talk about friends he left back in Colorado?”

Calliope’s neck got hot. “No.”

“Darling, being alone is all he’s ever known since he was just a child pretending to be an adult.”

Calliope’s heart sank. “You’re right.”

“Just keep that top of mind. This boy comes a bit... disassembled.”

Calliope smiled. “And without an instruction manual.”

Eleanor smiled back at her. “How are your technical writing skills?”

“Not great, but I’m learning on the job.”

“I hear that’s the best way to learn.” Eleanor picked up her fork, giving Calliope time to mull over those thoughts.

Maybe she’d talk to him about Nashville tonight. She’d feel out his mood and see if this could work for him. Maybe he could use the extra time to acclimate to their relationship. Maybe he needed some alone time while he continued to adjust to this new life here. Or maybe she was projecting to suit her own needs.

She wished she had an instruction manual, because she hadn't felt this lost in a long time.



THE SECOND CALLIOPE opened the door for Quentin, she knew the night was going to end poorly.

“Hey,” he said a little too loudly, running his hand through his hair, glancing around.

“Hey.” She studied him as he strutted into her house. It was like another guy had entered his body, from his mannerisms down to his voice. The sweet guy she had fallen in love with was replaced by some asshole she met at a bar for a hookup. “Did you have a good dinner?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was good.”

“Good,” she said.

He looked her up and down. “You’re in your pajamas.”

“It’s ten o’clock.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“Do you want to leave?”

“If I wanted to leave, I wouldn’t have come over here.”

She let out an exhaustive breath, not sure where to go from there. “Did you bring a bag for tomorrow?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, looking around. “It’s in my car.”

“Did you drive over here?”

“I walked.”

“From where?”

“I don’t know, a few blocks away.”

She ran her fingertips across her forehead. “Do you want to go to bed?” she asked, because she damned sure wasn’t gonna offer him another drink. She didn’t know if he was drunk, but he’d definitely had enough to get him in this kind of mood.

“Sure.” He followed her into the bedroom.

“Do you need something to sleep in?” she asked. Unfortunately, her shorts would probably fit him.

“No.” He took off his pants. “I’ll sleep in my boxers.” He took his shirt off and tossed it on the floor. “Do you have a toothbrush?”

“Yeah, there’s a new one in the drawer to the right.”

“Cool.” He swaggered across the room, and as irritating as he was right now, she still found herself attracted to him, *dammit*.

She got in bed and pulled the covers over her. There was no way she was having sex with him tonight. He might be hot, but this wasn’t her Quentin, and she wasn’t about to sleep with a stranger.

He took an extra-long time in the bathroom. There were no offending odors coming out of there, so she wondered if he had passed out. But eventually, he came out.

She was turned away from the middle of the bed, facing her nightstand. All she wanted to do was go to sleep. But she knew sleep would not come her way anytime soon. She wasn’t that lucky or skilled at drifting off.

He got into bed next to her, but he didn’t make a move on her. Instead, he just lay there quietly. She watched the minutes

tick away on her bedside digital clock until her eyes started to get droopy.

The next thing she knew, she felt a hand slide around her stomach and an erection pressing against her butt. She was transported back in time to a place that made her sick to her stomach. She jumped out of bed in a panic.

He sat up. “What’s wrong?”

She could only see the silhouette of him, so she flipped on the lamp. “What were you doing?”

“Sleeping.”

“No, just now.”

“Fucking sleeping. What the fuck, Calliope?”

She stared at him. He looked completely innocent. What was wrong with her? She put her palm to her forehead.

“Hey,” he said, squinting at her. “Are you okay?”

Had she dreamed that? And now that she thought about it, what if she hadn’t dreamed it? What if it was simply him rolling over and showing her how excited she made him? What was wrong with that? Unless he had used Internet porn to get that way.

“Where’s your phone?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” He looked around. “Probably in my pants on the floor over there.”

She walked over to where he left his jeans on the floor and picked them up. Sure enough, his phone was in there. She let out an exhaustive sigh as she reconnected with reality. “I’m so sorry.”

He stood up out of the bed, and she could see clearly that it had been a dream, as was evidenced by the blatant lack of an erection.

“Come here.” He pulled her into his arms. With that one move, and with the lack of any further questioning, the Quentin she had fallen in love with was back. And with that, all of her conviction about going to Nashville dissolved away.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

Calliope smiled at Quentin from the front seat of his truck, and he smiled back, but they'd barely spoken two words to one another since they'd woken up.

Last night had been intense. She'd clearly had some kind of dream that had disturbed her, and he'd been a part of it. He understood that dreams were out of people's control, but he couldn't help but wonder what that said about the way she was feeling about him.

Everything had been off since the day he'd had lunch with his dad and brothers. He was in his head, analyzing everything. He was in no condition to be making decisions about hiring more people or buying buildings, which was exactly what they'd been doing last night.

Garrett had successfully brokered a deal with Patrick to buy the building for a price that the two of them should be ashamed of. But Patrick and his brother Terry had agreed to all the terms. Garrett needed to teach classes on negotiation and sales tactics.

Quentin parked on the street and walked around to help Calliope out of the truck. She took his hand. "Thanks. I'm so

wobbly in these heels. They were probably a terrible idea for a garden dedication.”

“You look fine,” Quentin said, knowing he sounded like an asshole, but he couldn’t help it. He’d been in a terrible mood lately, and last night had shaken him. He was losing the one thing he’d cared about in decades, and he didn’t feel like he could do a damned thing to stop it from happening.

In addition to screwing things up with Calliope, he was also torpedoing his relationship with his middle brother. He’d called Garrett and apologized for his behavior at the jeweler on Friday night. Garrett blew it off like it was nothing, but Quentin ruined an important moment for him, and he was really disappointed in himself.

Calliope held onto Quentin’s hand as they walked up the sidewalk to a common ground area in a neighborhood that had a flower garden with a plaque. It was like Calliope was trying to show him that she wasn’t freaked out by him after jumping away from him last night like a monster had joined them in bed.

There were more people than there should’ve been in the small space. Who were all these people who knew his mom? And what side of her did they know, exactly?

Garrett turned as if looking for something and appeared relieved when he spotted Calliope and Quentin.

Braxton, who stood next to Garrett, turned as well and said, “They’re here. We can start.”

“I didn’t realize we were late,” Calliope said under her breath.

“We’re not,” Quentin said in a stern voice, glaring at the back of Braxton’s head.

A woman holding what appeared to be a Bible called everyone to order and began droning on about life and death and some other nonsense. Maybe Quentin *had* made them late. Garrett had said to be there between two and two-thirty, and Quentin had chosen the latter. The last thing he wanted to do was mill around making conversation with his family, which made him wonder what he was doing in this town to begin with.



WHEN THE CEREMONY CONCLUDED, everyone stood around talking. They were supposed to head to Eleanor's house for a reception, so Quentin couldn't understand why they all wouldn't just fucking go there.

He was ready to leave, but Calliope was deep in conversation with Savannah and Peyton. He guessed it was good that they were connecting. Calliope appeared to be trying to make efforts to trust friends again, which was a positive thing, but selfishly, he wanted to get this shitshow on the road.

Braxton was talking to their father nearby and kept glancing at Quentin. He could tell that at any minute, Braxton was getting ready to come over to him. Quentin needed to talk to him, but not there.

Crystal, their dad's second wife, walked over to him. "Hey, Quentin," she said in her over-exaggerated southern drawl. He didn't know where she was from, but it wasn't New Orleans.

"Hey, Crystal."

"Thank you so much for agreeing to watch Connor next weekend. I think it'll be great for the two of you to get to know each other."

“Who?” Quentin said, and then realized she was probably talking about her son. But more so, he was confused about what the fuck she was talking about in general.

The expression on her face dropped. “Connor, your brother?”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “My brother?”

Crystal’s cheeks went pink. “I take it Radford hasn’t had a chance to talk to you yet.”

Quentin was dealing with enough shit. He didn’t have the energy to focus on whatever she was yapping about. He peered over at Calliope, who was still talking to Savannah and Peyton. Why wouldn’t they all just take this whole operation to Eleanor’s already?

“Excuse me.”

Quentin tried to head over to Calliope, but Braxton stopped him. “You were supposed to have been here at two.”

“Garrett said two-thirty.”

“He said between two and two-thirty,” Braxton said.

“Right, so I made it on time.”

“He should’ve said two. We were all waiting on you.”

“If you had a time you wanted me to be here, you should’ve told me yourself. But that would have required you to be man enough to have a civil conversation with me, and we both know that’s never gonna happen.”

Braxton narrowed his glare at Quentin. “You know I dated her, right?”

So, he was going there. Quentin hadn’t known if Braxton had the balls or not, because truth be told, Quentin barely even

knew his youngest brother. "I'm aware."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Well, I would prefer my baby brother hadn't had his dick inside my girl, but I don't have a time machine, so here we are."

Braxton huffed a humorless laugh. "Your girl?"

"That's what I said. Why, are you jealous?"

He scrunched up his face with that snide look of his that made Quentin feel like the baby brother and Braxton seem like the adult. "That's absurd."

"Then what's your problem? You're married, you know? To the girl who is the reason you broke up with Calliope."

"I'm aware of who I'm married to."

"And who you broke up with?" Quentin asked.

Braxton waved him off. "You know what? You're not worth it."

He started to walk away, and Quentin's chest burned with that familiar mix of guilt and frustration. "I've heard that my whole damned life. What makes you think you saying it's gonna matter?"

Braxton turned toward him. "You know, you're the one who decided to leave." There was something in Braxton's eyes that gave Quentin pause. It didn't feel as much like hate anymore as it seemed like hurt and abandonment. Quentin had been hurting all those years, but Braxton had been as well. For the first time in weeks, Quentin wanted to hug his little brother instead of pummel him.

When Quentin didn't respond, Braxton said, "Look, I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot."

"No shit."

"I don't wanna argue with you," Braxton said. "It's just that this is a little strange." He indicated Calliope.

"The only one it's strange for is you, and you're not in our relationship."

His expression shifted, and he messed with his chin. "It's just that she's been through a lot. I would hate to see her get wrapped up in something with you and then you decide you're not ready to be here."

Quentin pointed at his own chest. "*I'm* not ready to be here? I think you mean *you're* not ready for me to be here."

Braxton smirked, glancing around. "You can be wherever you want to be. But you haven't wanted to be here before now," he said, almost under his breath.

"If you've got something to say to me, why don't you go ahead and say it?"

Braxton's face turned red, and Quentin could see eighteen years' worth of rage bubbling to the surface. He squinted at Quentin. "You have no idea what you did to Mom when you left."

Quentin stared at him wordlessly, his heartbeat pounding.

"She sat at the kitchen table crying for months. Dad had to take her to the doctor at one point to get her on meds for depression."

Quentin struggled to keep his cool. "You know, people move away all the time. They live in different cities from their families."

“I know that, but did you have to go the day you turned eighteen? Couldn’t you have given her some notice?”

Quentin shook his head, trying to wipe his own indignant smile off his face. He couldn’t see it, but he knew it was there. “What would notice have done? It was time to go.”

Braxton huffed a laugh. “You’ve only ever thought about yourself, haven’t you?”

“Yep,” Quentin said, glancing around. He was getting ready to bolt with or without Calliope.

“All those years, you wouldn’t even come home for Christmas.”

“I came home for Christmas,” Quentin said through clenched teeth.

“Not until Mom was already too far gone to know who you were. It’s like you were trying to punish her by staying away.”

Quentin closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Look at you,” Braxton said. “You can’t even look me in the eye. Do you know why? Because you know you’re a selfish bastard.”

Quentin looked over at Eleanor, who was watching their conversation with interest. Everyone was. There was no way he could unearth this monster right here in front of all of them.

“What can I say, little brother? I’m a selfish prick.”

“And now you’ve gotten Garrett mixed up in your world. I care about Calliope and I don’t want you hurting her, but if you fuck Garrett over in any way, shape, or form, I’ll come after you like a tornado in Texas, brother. Do you hear me?”

Quentin glanced around at this group of people he called his family. His dad, who he had never gotten along with even before he left home, stood with his new wife, glaring at him like a papa bear who saw a mountain lion messing with his cub. Eleanor, in all her astuteness, lifted an eyebrow at him in warning. Garrett looked like he was trying to figure out how to fix all of this. Peyton stood there with crinkled eyebrows like she was solving a math equation. He hadn't even thought of Peyton in all of this. How would she feel if she knew her father had had an affair with her husband's mother for years?

What was he doing? Why had he left Boulder to come here? His mere presence here was upending all these people's lives.

How moronic had he been? He couldn't rejoin this family of his. They hated him, all except Garrett, who only liked him because of some birth order hero worship. Quentin rubbed his forehead and then looked down at his little brother, who had murder in his eyes. He and Braxton had never been best friends, but Quentin was the older brother. It was his job to protect Braxton at all costs, not to mention all these other people.

"I... I've got to go." He started to walk off.

"Where are you going?" Braxton asked, but Quentin couldn't respond. He walked over to Calliope. "I need to go." He turned to Garrett. "Can you get Calliope home?"

Garrett gave a solemn nod.

Quentin peered down at Calliope, who looked up at him with her brow furrowed in concern. He took her by the arm and then reached down and kissed her. He pulled away, staring into her beautiful, blue eyes, the pain and enormity of what

he'd done by coming back here swallowing him whole. "I love you," he said, and then headed toward his truck.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

Calliope drove to the shop, her head spinning. It was the moment she had been waiting for ever since she'd met Quentin in the grocery store. It had been a matter of time—she'd known it all along. He was going to leave. They always left. She'd been left so many times that she was finally able to see the signs. He'd told her he loved her, but he might as well have said, "It was nice knowing you."

That was the sign she needed. She'd been farting around with this decision about going to Nashville because she hadn't wanted to leave Quentin. What had been wrong with her? A chance to try out her dream job and help someone in the process? What had she been thinking, banking on a man, especially with her track record?

She parked behind the shop and went in the back door, her heart racing. "Mom," she said, glancing around the showroom.

Her mother poked her head up over one of the shelves. "What is it, sweetie? Are you okay?"

Calliope wanted to burst into tears and tell her that she was not okay, that she hadn't been okay since she was eighteen years old. "I'm fine. I didn't mean to scare you."

Her mother put her hand over her heart. “Goodness. How was the ceremony? You’re back awfully quick. Wasn’t there a reception at Eleanor’s house afterward?”

“It was fine. Listen, I want to take you up on your offer to let me go to Nashville.”

“Really?” she said, straightening up.

“Yes. I think Savannah will be great to help you through the fourth quarter. And I think Eleanor might even help some, too.”

“And Peggy and Elizabeth as well. Don’t count them out.”

“Of course not. But, yes, I want to go.”

“Then I’d love for you to go.”

Calliope threw her arms around her mother, holding her tight. “Thank you,” she said, squeezing her and then pulling apart from her.

“And you’re on board to close the store?” Deborah asked. “I’d be okay to start discounting the merchandise and hold off on further orders?”

“Let me get up there. Let me work for a few weeks in clothing before you start discounting everything. But if it goes like I think it will, we can start running a closeout sale in about a month or so.”

“Have you talked to Marla yet?”

“No, I wanted to talk to you first. But I’m going to tell her I’m ready as soon as she needs me, which I have a feeling is going to be as soon as possible. She mentioned wanting me to come as soon as I could for training.”

“So realistically, how long do you think you’ll be gone?”

“I’m thinking through most of December. Probably right up until Christmas Eve. I’ll tell her I want to be home for Christmas. Are you okay with all that?”

“Whatever you want. This is your journey now.” Her mother took her hands.

Calliope swallowed hard. “I guess it is.”

“Let me know what you need from me,” Deborah said.

“You’ve given me all I’ve needed all these years. I think I’m ready.”

“I know you are, sweetie.”

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR

Quentin pulled a duffel bag out of his closet and started filling it. He needed to get away. He had to think.

He'd signed a lease with Garrett. He'd started a business with him. He couldn't just leave.

Or maybe he could. He could sell his Bourbon Street apartment and use the money to do whatever damage control had to be done. He was no lawyer, but he would try to work something out with Patrick Lamontagne. Hell, they were trying to sell the building. Wouldn't a broken lease make things easier on them?

Quentin's phone buzzed. It had been doing that ever since he left the ceremony. He didn't want to talk to anybody. He couldn't face any of them right now.

Garrett would land on his feet. He was a hotshot attorney. He could get a job anywhere. Quentin leaving would only make everyone else there thrilled. Get the disease out of their life.

Calliope had known he was going to leave. She expected it. To her it was just a matter of time. Maybe she'd come with him? Start that boutique she wanted to start in Colorado. Was that where he was going?

It didn't matter, because Calliope's life was here—her business...Savannah and Peyton. He doubted she'd ever leave her mother. He damned sure couldn't come between two more family members.

The feedback of the megaphone that Jesus guy used squealed through the air. "Quentin Broussard, may I please have a word with you?"

Quentin stilled, wondering if he was dreaming or if that was Eleanor Boudreaux's voice coming over a megaphone on Bourbon Street. He walked over to the window and split open the blinds to find Eleanor in her black dress pants and high heels, holding a megaphone, the Jesus guy standing next to her looking on curiously.

"Shall I come up or would you prefer to come down?" Eleanor said into the megaphone.

Quentin could see this wasn't a problem that was going away. He walked into the living room and out onto his balcony.

She handed the Jesus guy back his megaphone and then put both hands on her hips. "I have procured us a table at Smelly's," she said, motioning a manicured hand at the dive bar directly across from his apartment. "I'm also happy to join you upstairs if you deem that appropriate. Which would you prefer, darling?"

He let out an exhaustive breath. "I'll be right down."

"Thank you," Eleanor said.

Quentin locked up and then headed down the steps to Bourbon Street. He crossed over and found Eleanor sitting at a booth, using a wet wipe to clean off the table in front of her. Just as Quentin sat down, a server brought over two classic

Hurricane glasses filled with red liquid and set them down in front of the two of them.

Quentin gave her a curious look, wondering if this was Eleanor's way of making a joke or breaking the ice. "We're on Bourbon Street," she said. "I thought it was only appropriate."

"Did you follow me here?" he asked.

"No." She took a sip of her drink and then set it down. "Well, that was fun until I tasted it." The server walked by and she gracefully reached out and touched his arm. "May I please have a dry martini with an onion?"

"You didn't like your drink?" he asked.

She gave him a smile. "It was lovely. I've simply changed my mind."

He looked over at Quentin. "What about you? Did you change your mind, too?"

"I'm good."

The server gave him a look up and down. "Yeah you are." He walked off and Quentin met Eleanor's gaze.

"Well," she said. "I wouldn't have guessed that about him, but I suppose people surprise you."

"Sometimes."

She shrugged in concession.

"How did you know where I lived?" he asked.

"Who do you think told your grandmother about why you really left for Colorado?"

Quentin felt like he was being punched in the gut. All those years he thought his mother had broken down out of

guilt and told his grandmother about what happened. But Eleanor had been the one to tell. The hits just kept coming.

“Why did you do that?”

She shrugged. “Because you deserved reparations...and maybe, selfishly, I had nobody to discuss it with, and here was a reason for me to expose the secret.”

“What if she had told my dad?”

“Your grandmother never would’ve exposed her daughter like that.”

Quentin looked down at his sugary drink. “You could’ve talked to me.”

“You were a child.”

“I was a legal adult.”

“You might’ve been legal, but it didn’t make you an adult.”

“We could’ve helped each other.” Quentin said.

She lifted an eyebrow. “Why do you think I came to visit you in Colorado?”

A chill ran up his spine. “You never brought it up.”

“That’s because I sat across from you that first visit and saw how vulnerable you were. I’d had a vision of you as this strong, capable young man, out in Colorado, building furniture and flourishing in this mountain man environment. Because of your size, I suppose I always thought of you as being so strong and resilient. But as I looked at you that day, I knew you could barely handle your own pain, much less mine.”

He ran his finger along the base of his glass. “I’ve ruined everything by coming here.”

“Is that right?” she asked.

He looked up at her. “Braxton hates me. I think he could kill me and feel just fine about it.”

“Braxton is grieving and he’s using you as his punching bag.”

Quentin rubbed his forehead. “My dad hates me for abandoning my mom.”

“Your dad knows more than he lets on.”

Quentin’s chest tightened. “Does my dad know about my mom and Truman?”

Eleanor raised her eyebrows, and it all sank in for Quentin like the Grand Canyon was being formed. “That’s why he divorced her, isn’t it?”

“If he would’ve told Braxton the real reason why, it would’ve destroyed him.”

“No doubt.”

Eleanor sighed. “But Braxton’s not a little boy anymore. He’s a grown man and it’s time for us to start treating him like one.”

Quentin frowned at Eleanor. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying it’s time for Braxton to know what happened.”

“No way. He makes me so mad I feel like I could throttle him sometimes, but I love him, and it’s my job as the older brother to shield him from this.”

“To what end?”

Quentin thought about that. “So he can grieve in peace.”

“What about your grief?”

He adjusted in his seat. "I'm fine."

"Then what about respecting Braxton enough to give him the truth?"

He blinked, considering Eleanor. "I respect Braxton," he said, his voice softer now.

She sat back. "Quite frankly, it doesn't seem like it. You're protecting him. It was fine when she was alive, and you didn't want to cause a divorce or ruin the family dynamic. But she's gone now, and I'm less concerned about sullyng her memory and more concerned about this fractured family beginning the real healing process."

Quentin stared at Eleanor, letting her words sink in.

She pursed her lips at him. "Maybe it's not only about Braxton. Maybe it's about Radford, too...and me." She lifted her eyebrows in challenge.

He studied this woman across from him who took care of him as a child, as a kid masquerading as an adult, and now as a grown man. Maybe it was his turn to take care of her.

He held out his hand to her, and she frowned at it. He left it sitting on the table, and finally, she laid her hand in his. He squeezed her thin fingers. "I'm sorry we couldn't talk before now."

"It wasn't time."

"But it's time now, huh?"

"It's time."

They smiled at one another, a peace flowing between them that was palpable. She let go of his hand, glancing around like she remembered she was in public.

He sat back and ran his hand through his hair. “I’ve got to go fix things with Calliope. I’ve been an ass lately.”

“That’s the next item on my agenda.” Eleanor sat up straight, clasping her hands together on the table in front of her.

“Oh yeah?” he asked with a curious chuckle.

“You know how I feel about these young women and their professional opportunities, I assume?”

Quentin didn’t know, but based on that sentence alone, he assumed it was important to Eleanor. “Yeah, of course.”

“I think Calliope should do this maternity leave stint in Nashville.”

Quentin’s whole body froze. “I’m sorry...maternity leave?”

“It’s been her dream for years, and now that Deborah wants to close the store, it’s perfect timing for her to test the waters and get a feel for what it’s like to work in a clothing boutique.” She set her hand on top of his. “Now, no one is more supportive of your relationship with Calliope than I am. Trust me. She’s my number one pick for you, and I think you know me well enough to know I don’t like many people.”

He just nodded along, dumbstruck.

“But she needs this. And I’d love to see you support her in this. A strong love will stand a few months apart, and you’ll be even stronger when she sees that you put her and her dreams before your own selfish...needs.” She sat back in her seat. “That’s all you’ll hear me say on the matter.”

He searched the past few months, trying to piece together the puzzle.

She stood. “I know you’ll do the right thing.” She squeezed his shoulder and then walked out the door, leaving him reeling.

Maternity leave? Nashville? Store closing?

Eleanor had given him all the answers, the problem was that he had no idea what the questions were.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FIVE

Quentin knocked on Calliope's door, his heart in the pit of his stomach. Maternity leave? What had Eleanor been talking about? Was Calliope pregnant? He couldn't understand and he needed answers.

Calliope opened the door, her face impassive.

"Are you pregnant?" he asked.

"What?" She looked as confused as he felt.

"What is this maternity leave thing?"

Calliope shook her head. "Just come inside."

She closed the door behind him but didn't step out of the foyer. "I'm going to Nashville. I'll be there through Christmas."

"What's in Nashville?"

"Marla's boutique. She asked me if I would sub in for her while she was on maternity leave."

Relief blanketed him followed by an uneasiness. "Wait, so you're not pregnant?"

She tossed up both hands. "No, I'm not pregnant."

“Forgive me, but I’m a little confused. I had to hear from Eleanor that you want to go to Nashville?”

“Boy, word travels quickly. I just hung up with Savannah fifteen minutes ago.”

“You called Savannah before you planned on telling me? When would I have found out if I hadn’t knocked on your door just now?”

“I’m solidifying everything. You were on my list.”

“Oh, great. I made the list.”

“What about you? Would you even be over here right now if you didn’t think I was pregnant?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I know a brush off when I see one. Back at the ceremony, where you left me?”

His stomach soured. “I asked Garrett to get you home.”

“Thanks so much for working out the logistics.”

He stepped away for a second to regroup. “I think we’ve gotten off track here.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

He let out a deep breath. “What’s this about Nashville?”

“Marla, Seth’s wife, has a boutique in Nashville. She’s about to give birth any day now and she asked me to come up and fill in for her for two or three months while she has her maternity leave.”

Two or three months? He was ready to go all in with her and now she wanted to be apart from him for two or three months? “What about your store?”

“Mom wants to close. She wants to travel and enjoy her new relationship with Donald.”

He looked at this woman who he was madly in love with but felt like he didn't even know. “How long have you known this?”

“I don't know. A week or two. You've been busy...and distant.”

Quentin clenched his teeth because he knew she was right. He'd been messed up ever since the day he had lunch at the club with his dad and brothers. He'd seen her that night, but he hadn't made much effort to see her since then. He'd been too busy battling his demons.

“Are you okay with that?” he asked, softening his voice.

“Yeah. I've been spinning my wheels there for years. It's time for me to go for what I want.”

“Is going to Nashville part of that process for you?”

“Yes. It'll enable me to get my feet wet running a boutique. I know retail with the gift shop, but it's different with clothing. I want to see how it's done, which is why I need to go sooner rather than later.”

His stomach went sick. “How soon?”

“I need to leave in the morning.”

His heartbeat picked up speed. “Tomorrow morning?”

“She's due to have the baby any day. I need to get up there while she can still train me. Otherwise, I'll be flying solo, and I'll screw everything up.”

He scratched his neck, feeling itchy all over. “I don't know what to say.”

“There’s nothing for you to say. This is something I’m going to do, and you have things to figure out yourself. Now you’ve got the headspace to do so.”

His heart ached with the sting of her rejection. He went toward her. “Calliope...”

She stepped away. “Don’t.”

He blinked, the weight of what was happening bearing down on him. “When will you be back?”

“Christmas.”

Christmas seemed like an eternity from then. “Really?”

She shrugged. She was trying to give off a cold exterior, but her lip trembled. He didn’t know if he could take it if she started crying.

He nodded, knowing he needed to leave. “I wish you all the best in Nashville.”

“Thanks,” she said, opening the door for him.

He stood there with his mouth open but no words came out. She waited him out, looking down at the floor, holding the door open.

He gave his girl one last look, the idea of disconnecting from her seeming unreal. “I meant what I said back at the ceremony.” He knew his words were hollow—that wasn’t how a man told a woman he loved her for the first time. And he didn’t need to do it right now while she was trying to let him go.

“Mmm-hmm,” she said, closing the door.

As he stood on her front porch, banished from her home, he’d never felt more alone in his life, and for him, that was

saying a lot.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SIX

Quentin got a text from Eleanor asking him to pick up her other daughter, Marcelle, from the airport. Eleanor had her own driver who was paid to make these kinds of trips, but she also had her own reasons for doing things.

He pulled up and found Marcelle waiting, poking into her phone. She had escaped New Orleans and their families post-college on her own terms for a life in Los Angeles doing something in the TV and movie industry. Quentin had kept up with her a bit on social media, but he hadn't actually laid eyes on her in the flesh in probably eighteen years. He should've come home for her father's funeral, but the last thing he needed was to watch his mother grieving over the man who was the reason he was banished from New Orleans.

He got out of the truck, and she looked up, her face transforming into a grin. "Oh my God. Quentin Broussard."

"What's up, Hollywood?"

They wrapped their arms around one another, and it was like hugging his childhood. They both pulled away, inspecting one another.

"Look at you," she said. "I remember you being tall, but when did you fill out like this?"

“Look at you. Where’s that skinny little kid who used to boss us all around?”

“Oh, trust me. My coworkers would tell you you’re looking right at her.”

He took her bag and loaded it in the back of the truck and then opened the door for her.

As they headed out of the airport, she said, “I heard a rumor about you.”

He wasn’t sure what she knew. So much had happened lately. “Which one?”

“The one where you landed Calliope Koch.” She nudged his arm with the back of her hand. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

He wiggled in his seat, resting his elbow on the doorframe, trying to figure out how to answer. It’d been two weeks since Calliope had left, but it might as well have been two years. They hadn’t spoken, and not an hour had gone by that he hadn’t re-evaluated how he could’ve done things differently.

“Oh no. Do I have old information?” she asked. “Are you not together anymore?”

“She’s in Nashville,” was all he could bring himself to say.

“Like permanently?”

“For a few months. She’s filling in at a friend’s store while she’s on maternity leave.”

“That’s nice of her, and nice of you to be cool about it.”

Cool was not a word he would use to describe his feelings about Calliope leaving.

“Well, sometimes absence can make the heart grow fonder.”

“And sometimes you’re out of sight and out of mind.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He didn’t know what he wanted other than to right all the wrongs of the past two decades. “I’m good. So what brings you home?”

“I’m honestly not sure. I was summoned.”

“By Eleanor?”

“Yep. I was told we were going to have a family discussion.”

So that was the reason he was asked to pick her up. He’d been putting Eleanor off for the past two weeks. He wasn’t ready for another explosion, and he was grieving the loss of Calliope, whether it was permanent or temporary.

“Any ideas what this could be about?” she asked.

“I might have an idea,” he said, swallowing hard and preparing himself for whatever was next.



WHEN THEY GOT to the Boudreaux house, all the usual suspects were there—his dad and Crystal minus her son, Braxton and Peyton, Garrett and Savannah, Eleanor, and Shula.

His father approached him, his expression showing hints of anguish. “Hello, son.” Definitely something was up.

The mood was light as everyone greeted Marcelle. Shula and Eleanor had prepared a Cajun feast that included shrimp

creole, chicken and sausage gumbo, and dirty rice. They all sat down to eat at the patio table, Marcelle filling what could've been an awkward silence with stories of her work in L.A. on reality TV shows.

When they finished, Shula stood and grabbed her plate. A few of them stood to help, but she held up her hand. "Everybody sit down." She and Eleanor exchanged a look, and then Eleanor cleared her throat.

"There's something I'd like for us to discuss."

"Sounds serious," Garrett said with half a smile.

"Thank you, Marcelle, for flying in," Eleanor continued. "I thought it was important for the whole family to be here."

Shula closed herself inside the house. "Where is Shula going, then?" Peyton asked.

"Shula has opted out of this conversation."

"Is that an option for me?" Garrett asked.

The look on Eleanor's face told him it wasn't the time for his jokes.

Eleanor hadn't given Quentin official warning that this was going down right now, but he supposed the airport pickup was her way of doing that.

She turned to Crystal. "Thank you for finding a sitter for Connor."

"It was no problem. I dropped him off at a friend's house. He's found this friend who likes to play the same video game as him, so from time to time, his mom and I exchange favors. This one time—"

Radford must've squeezed her leg under the table or something, because she looked over at him, and he shook his head.

"It was no problem," she said, wiggling in her seat.

"I know it feels like there's been tension since Quentin arrived back in New Orleans permanently," Eleanor said. Braxton's face reddened. "But the truth is the tension has been there for a long time." She gave Quentin a significant look. "Eighteen years to be exact."

Quentin scratched his eyebrow, his heartbeat racing. This was happening whether he wanted it to or not. It was time, and he was ready for it to be over with.

"Braxton, darling," Eleanor said, "Quentin didn't leave because he wanted to."

"Do you mean from the ceremony? I didn't see anyone pushing him out of there."

"Not from the ceremony," their father said.

Quentin's dad bore a guilty gaze into him, and a shiver ran up Quentin's spine.

"What's going on?" Garrett asked.

Eleanor sat up straight. "Radford, would you like to tell them, or should I?"

Quentin's father hung his head. "I wish I would've told everyone a long time ago... I wish I would've known."

Quentin narrowed his gaze at his father, trying to figure out exactly what he did and didn't know. He knew about the affair. Did he not know about Quentin's excommunication?

"Told us what?" Braxton asked, looking agitated.

Eleanor locked her fingers together in front of her. “Your mother and Truman were...together.”

Peyton’s ears turned red. “Like a couple?”

Marcelle reached over and squeezed her mother’s arm.

“Quentin found out and Charlotte didn’t want her secret exposed, so she asked him to leave,” Eleanor said.

Quentin swallowed down a frog climbing up his throat.

“Wait.” Braxton addressed Quentin. “What does she mean, Mom asked you to leave?”

Quentin worked hard to keep his composure. “She made me a deal. She said if I got out of town, she’d help set me up wherever. I just needed to stay away and keep my mouth shut.”

Savannah wiped a tear falling down her face.

“Did you know about this, Mom?” Peyton asked.

Eleanor wiped the corner of her mouth with her napkin and then lifted her chin high. “I suspected the affair for a long time, and then yes, I knew.”

“About Quentin’s being forced to leave his own home?” Garrett asked, his protective brother instincts obviously kicking in.

“Yes,” Eleanor said, her voice cracking, but tears were not coming. Eleanor had spent a lifetime refusing to crumble. She was built for moments like this.

“Wait, how did you find out about all this?” Garrett asked. “Did Mom tell you?”

“I want to know how Quentin found out about the affair,” Crystal said.

Quentin expected someone to admonish her for that inappropriate comment, but they all just gave him a curious look. It wasn't something Quentin wanted to rehash, but if ever there was a time, it was now.

He exhaled a deep breath. "It was after school one day. I was supposed to be at work at Boudreaux's, but I was in the sunroom, painting. They didn't know I was there."

"Holy shit," Garrett said, staring at Quentin, mouth agape in disbelief.

Braxton studied Quentin like he was solving a puzzle. "Maybe you misunderstood what was going on."

"The affair went on for years," Crystal said.

Braxton's neck turned red, and he opened his mouth, but Peyton grabbed his arm, giving him a warning look.

"Braxton, darling," Eleanor said, "I know this is painful for you especially. But you need to understand that your brother didn't leave on his own."

Braxton scoured the table like he was looking for answers. "But Mom cried for months when he left. She was never the same."

"Because she felt guilty," Radford said. He was obviously trying to keep it together, but his dad had a breaking point, and Quentin could see it coming sooner rather than later.

Braxton glanced around the table, looking like a trapped rabbit. "Did everybody know about this? Am I the only one who was left in the cold?"

He met Garrett's gaze, and Garrett held up a hand. "Don't look at me. This is the first I'm hearing of any of this."

“I never told anyone, until Calliope,” Quentin said under his breath.

Braxton’s eyes went big for a moment as he obviously was processing through things, and then he seemed to calm down as he stared at Quentin. Quentin stared right back.

Braxton glanced between Eleanor and Quentin. “Did the two of you plan this little intervention together?”

“We talked about things after the ceremony,” Eleanor said. “I couldn’t stand by any longer and watch Quentin be the subject of your anger.”

“He’s not the one you need to be mad at,” Crystal said.

“Sweetie,” Radford said.

Garrett sat back in his chair “She’s not wrong.”

Crystal widened her eyes. “Thank you.”

Braxton touched his forehead, shaking his head. “I’m gonna have to think about all this.”

“Think about what?” Savannah said, speaking up for the first time. All eyes went to her. “Your mom did a horrible thing.”

Braxton just glared at Savannah, looking like he was grinding his teeth. He and Savannah were tight. They’d worked together at the Boudreaux’s headquarters for a decade. Quentin supposed this wasn’t the first time she had lined his ass out.

Savannah pointed at Quentin. “She banished her own son from your family. That’s why he was gone all those years. Not because he was selfish. Because he was selfless. He was protecting all of you.” She motioned around the table.

Peyton's lip quivered.

"I'm sorry, Peyton," Savannah said.

"No, I'm sorry," Peyton said, addressing Quentin.

"About what?" Quentin said on a chuckle. "You didn't do anything."

"About all of this." She glanced at Braxton.

He pushed his chair away from the table. "I need to think." He turned to Peyton. "You ready?"

Peyton nodded. Braxton headed off, and Peyton stood. "I'm so sorry," she said to everyone. "He's hurting."

"We know, dear," Eleanor said.

She stared at her mom, shaking her head. "I'm so sorry."

Eleanor gave one solemn nod and then Peyton left.

Quentin met Garrett's gaze.

"I don't have to think about anything," Garrett said.

Quentin had never done anything to deserve Garrett's undying loyalty, but he was damned sure thankful for it. "Thanks, brother."

Garrett looked at his father. "How long did you know about the affair?"

"I found out after Truman's funeral, so it was too late to kill him."

"How did you find out?" Garrett asked.

Their dad pursed his lips. "Your mom gave it away. She was ill by then...childlike at times. She cried like a baby. Said she had lost the love of her life. I think she forgot who she was

talking to, because when she came to, she looked at me and said, ‘Am I in trouble?’”

Quentin had heard the stories of his mother’s behavior as she was progressing through her disease, but he hadn’t experienced it firsthand. Sure, he’d had his reasons for staying away, but his banishment also conveniently got him out of the tough stuff.

“So you had nothing to do with Quentin being asked to leave home?” Garrett asked.

Radford turned to Quentin. “I didn’t know, son.”

Quentin turned to Eleanor, and she said, “Radford and I have never spoken of this, not until this past week.”

“I didn’t know if she knew,” Radford said, his gaze trained on Eleanor in apology.

Marcelle shook her head, considering Quentin, Radford, and Eleanor. “You guys. I don’t even know what to say.”

Eleanor squeezed her daughter’s hand. “Nothing to say, darling.”

Savannah stood and walked around the table to Quentin. She held open her arms, and he stood up and gave her a hug. She pulled away, holding his shoulders. “He’ll come around. He’s just got to think about all of this.”

“I know,” Quentin said, but he didn’t believe it.

Garrett stood, shaking his head. “I had no fucking clue.”

“How could you have?”

They broke off into individual conversations and Crystal walked over to Quentin, pulling him aside. “I know how you

feel. My mama kicked me out of our trailer when I was fifteen.”

Quentin’s heart sank. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

She shrugged as if it was water under the bridge. “I should’ve known better than to wear a bikini around Cliff.” She must’ve read the horror on Quentin’s face at the possibilities of what might’ve happened to a young Crystal, because she said, “He didn’t rape me or nothing.” She pointed at him. “But he did try. I kicked him in the balls and went and got my daddy’s rifle. He taught me how to use it when I was a kid, before he died.”

Quentin swallowed hard. He hadn’t thought much about Crystal since she’d entered his dad’s life. Getting a glimpse of what her life might’ve been like before they all knew her made him want to get to know her better. She was one of them now and she made their dad happy. She was worth getting to know.

“Hey, I’m sorry I flaked on that babysitting thing.”

She waved him off. “I’m sorry I bugged you with that. I didn’t know any of this was going on. Eleanor talked to us about it soon after I had that conversation with you. I’ve been hurting for you ever since.” She reached out and squeezed his arm.

“Thanks,” he said, feeling ashamed. He’d been excommunicated but set up with plenty of money. He couldn’t imagine that was the case when Crystal’s mom kicked her out of their trailer. “I would like a chance to hang out with Connor. Let me know when might be a good time. You and my dad can have a date night or whatever.”

She smiled. “I’ll take you up on that. It’d be nice to get Connor off the video games for a night. Maybe you could

show him how to use a miter saw or something.”

Quentin’s dad hadn’t shown him anything like that. He’d learned taking shop class. The kid could probably stand to learn how to use some tools and build something. “Anytime.”

Quentin and Crystal broke away from one another, and he considered his family standing around this place, these people he’d been separated from all these years.

As tough as this was, it was a necessary first step. He’d broken through this portal, and he’d made it out the other side. He still needed to work things out with Braxton, but he’d have to be patient and give Braxton time to think about what Quentin had known for eighteen years.

He knew his brother was hurting, and that hurt him. But for the first time in a long time, he was starting to piece his life back together, which was something he’d never known was possible until now.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN

When Quentin pulled up to his workshop on Thursday morning, he spotted Braxton's car and breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't what he had planned on doing first thing this morning, but he was ready to deal with his brother—the good, the bad, and the ugly, in whichever order those things were to come.

When Quentin got out of his truck, Braxton did the same. Quentin mentally prepared himself for the throwdown.

"I didn't want to text," Braxton said, his expression hard to read, but his voice and demeanor were calm.

"Okay." Quentin walked to the door of the shop. "Want to come in?"

"Yeah."

Braxton followed him inside, glancing around. "You've got it really organized in here."

"It's small, so I have to make good use of the space."

Braxton pulled out one of the drawers from underneath his workbench. "This is handy. Where did you find this table?"

"I made it."

"Oh," Braxton said, his cheeks going red.

“Do you want one? I could come measure the space where you want it and design it to fit.”

Braxton met his brother’s gaze. “You’d do that even after the way I’ve behaved toward you?”

Quentin rested his weight against his tall shelf. “You’re my brother. I’d do anything for you.”

“Even take the blame for something that wasn’t your doing?”

Quentin gripped the pole, focusing on something on the shelf.

“You should have told me...way back then,” Braxton said.

“You were fourteen.”

“Then when I was eighteen or twenty-five or when I was being a total dick at the club that day. Why didn’t you set me straight?”

“You’re grieving.”

“And you’re not?”

Quentin pushed off from the shelf. “Don’t worry about me. I can handle myself.”

“Clearly. But so can I.”

Quentin stared at his baby brother. “I wasn’t there for you all those years. Keeping the secret was the least I could do.”

Braxton scratched his forehead. “I’m having a hard time with all this.”

Quentin didn’t know exactly what that meant, so he just said, “Okay.”

“Not you. Her.”

Quentin breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry."

"You're not the one who needs to be apologizing, brother." He met Quentin's gaze. "I don't even know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything."

"No, I do." Braxton shook his head. "I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry, too, for the whole situation."

They stood in silence for a moment, and then Quentin said, "Look, man, she was only human."

"I know. I'm figuring that out. I just always thought of her as being superhuman, I guess."

"I think a lot of people think that about their parents."

Braxton narrowed his gaze at Quentin. "You really heard them that day?"

Quentin let out an exhausted breath. "Yeah, man."

"Were you traumatized by that?"

Quentin shook his head. "I don't know. The whole thing was weird. But I was about to turn eighteen. It wasn't like I was a kid."

"But you were a kid."

"I don't know," Quentin said glancing around, feeling itchy.

Braxton's neck turned red. "She should've apologized to you, figured out ways to protect you. I can't reconcile her behavior with the person I knew."

"I get it," Quentin said, trying to put himself in Braxton's place.

“I feel like I was lied to my whole life. Not that I’m trying to make this about me.”

“It is about you. It’s about all of us.”

“I can’t figure out how she could’ve been so selfish. She didn’t seem like a selfish person to me.”

“Maybe this was her one thing she did for herself, even if it was wrong. She took care of all three of us and Dad all those years. Maybe this was her way of taking care of herself and her own needs.”

“By cheating on Dad? By sending you away from the family when you were just a kid? That’s not how you take care of yourself.”

“I know.”

“Then quit making excuses for her.”

“Okay.”

Braxton stared at Quentin. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to make this up to you.”

“It’s not your job to make anything up to me.”

“I’ve been awful to you. I told you that you didn’t belong with Calliope.”

Quentin looked away, the sound of her name stinging his heart.

“You didn’t take that to heart, did you?” Braxton asked.

“She’s in Nashville now,” was all he could say.

“I know where she is. Where are you in that relationship?”

Quentin shook his head and looked around. He didn’t know where he was with anything right then.

“Man,” Braxton said, “If I can do anything right now to help fix that, I’m going to do it.”

“There’s not anything you can do. I fucked that up really badly.”

“Because of me and what a dick I’ve been lately.”

“It wasn’t because of you,” Quentin said. “I guess I didn’t feel like I deserved her.”

“And I didn’t do anything to help that.”

“You don’t get to blame yourself for this one. I screwed it up all on my own.”

“Fuck that. Go get her back. I’ll drive you.”

Quentin considered his little brother. “It’s not weird to you for me to be with her?”

Braxton visibly relaxed his shoulders. “If the only thing right that can come out of all this is you being with her, then I can live with myself. She’s a wonderful girl. If it weren’t for Peyton, I probably would’ve married her.” Braxton lifted an eyebrow. “I hope that’s not weird for you.”

“It’s a little weird. But it’s not like I can blame you.”

“Do you love her?”

A sense of desperation covered Quentin. “I love her like you can’t even imagine.”

“Do you want her back?”

It was like asking him if he needed to breathe. “I’m so lost without her I can’t think straight. The other day I nailed a set of coffee table legs onto the bottom of an armchair.”

“Go see her, man.”

Quentin shook his head. “You didn’t see her when she was breaking things off with me. She shut down.”

“That’s what she does.”

“She did that with you?” he asked. It’s not like he wanted to go there with Braxton, but he needed to know.

“Of course she did. She’s private, and she’s been through a lot of shit.”

Quentin wondered what Braxton knew about her dad and about the asshole from college.

Braxton must have read the look on Quentin’s face because he held up a hand. “Man, I probably don’t know half of what you know. She was so closed off with me. I’ll be honest, I wasn’t even ready to break up with her. But the second I talked about Peyton, she was out of there.”

Quentin narrowed his gaze. “Do you mean she broke up with you?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not how she remembers it.”

Braxton shrugged. “Who the fuck knows? I just know this—if you let her go, you’re gonna regret it for the rest of your life.”

Quentin swallowed hard, trying to imagine a life without Calliope. He couldn’t conceive of it.

“Let’s do this, man.” Braxton said. “I’ll drive you up there.”

Quentin looked at his brother, an idea popping into his head that would’ve terrified him a few weeks ago but gave him more peace than he’d ever known. “I don’t need you to

drive me to Nashville, but I would like you to go somewhere with me tonight.”

“Anywhere.”

Quentin smiled, ready to face the biggest moment of his life.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-EIGHT

Calliope was growing to love Marla the more she got to know her, but for the life of her, she couldn't understand how the woman opened her boxes. A shipment had come in, and there was not a box cutter to be found anywhere. So far, Calliope had used her car keys, a pair of open scissors, and her fingernails to rip through tape on boxes. For Marla's Christmas present, Calliope was going to buy ten box cutters and stick a ribbon on them. *Get ready to have your life changed, woman.*

Calliope was about to lean down to tackle the box with her bare hands when Riley, Marla's eighteen-year-old niece, slid up to her looking apologetic. "I thought I would run an idea past you?"

"Shoot."

"I was wondering if we might consider moving these yellow dresses in place of this rack right here and that would pull in the color of these green dresses over here and things might flow just a little better?"

Calliope considered the puzzle. "I think it's brilliant. Let's do it."

"Are you sure?"

“Of course I am.” The two ladies went to work switching the racks out. Riley was sweet but so unsure of herself. Calliope remembered herself at that age and how certain of everything she was, and how wrong she’d been about all of it.

Marla had told Calliope that she considered letting Riley run the shop if Calliope would’ve ultimately declined, but she didn’t think Riley was quite there yet on a confidence level to take the helm. Calliope had to agree, but she did feel like even in the few weeks that they worked there together, Riley was stepping into her own skin a little more each day.

Riley had been a source of strength for Calliope, more than she could ever know. Calliope had to be strong for Riley, being the temporary store manager, and Riley was showing Calliope the ropes as well. Calliope was great at putting on a tough front, but leaving Quentin had proved to be more devastating than any breakup she had experienced.

If it weren’t for Riley, Calliope might’ve fallen into a dark hole that she would’ve never been able to pull out of. And she did indulge in that darkness when she went home each night. But she had to put on a brave face when she came back to the store each morning. That might have been the only thing getting her through this time.

Calliope knelt down to wrestle with the tape on the box. The bell on the door dinged and Riley greeted whoever came in. “Let us know if we can be helpful.” She was always afraid to ask if she could help for fear of coming on too strong. Every sales associate had her own style.

She bent down into Calliope’s ear. “Hot guy alert.”

If it had been a few months back, she’d have been curious enough to check him out. But the last thing she was interested

in these days was a hot guy. She'd been with the hottest guy in history, and where had that gotten her?

The last couple of weeks before she left, Quentin made it clear he was pulling away from her. Why was she surprised? It had been inevitable. That was the thing that got to her the most. She'd walked right into that relationship like a woman stepping off a cliff.

It wasn't like he hadn't warned her from the beginning. He was a huge player. He told her he had never had a girlfriend. Why was that not a red flag?

"Does Calliope Koch work here?"

Calliope froze. She knew that voice. She daydreamed about that voice.

"Sure," Riley said. "She's right—"

Calliope looked up at Riley, widening her eyes. Riley knew about Quentin—not much about him, but Riley had walked in on Calliope crying in the back room one day, so Calliope had to tell her that she was going through a breakup so Riley didn't think it was anything she had done. Teenagers were egocentric. They thought everything was about them, the good and the bad.

Riley held up a finger. "Let me just..." She knelt down beside Calliope. "This is him, isn't it?"

Calliope nodded.

"Wow," was all Riley had to say.

Calliope shrugged apologetically.

"Do you want me to tell him to leave?"

"No." She smoothed her hair out of her face.

“You look fantastic, if it helps.”

“Thank you.” Calliope squeezed Riley’s arm, and then stood up.

Quentin Broussard stood in the middle of this girly boutique, in jeans and a T-shirt, bringing New Orleans to Nashville, Tennessee. How could she feel so connected to him after how disconnected they’d been in the weeks prior to her leaving?

“I couldn’t wait until Christmas,” he said.

Riley put her hand over her mouth, and then she pulled it away and mouthed the word, *Sorry*, as she straightened a rack.

Calliope tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, looking down at the floor. She couldn’t allow herself to get excited. She walked away from him for a reason. She couldn’t start the fruitless cycle again. “I’m sorry you wasted a trip. Nothing has changed for me.”

“Everything has changed for me.”

She met his gaze, wanting to know what was going on with him but trying to keep her guard up.

He glanced over at Riley and then turned back to Calliope. “Can we go somewhere and talk?”

Calliope looked over at Riley, and Riley said, “I’m fine. I’ll get you if we get busy.”

Calliope nodded and then led him to the back room. She closed the door behind him and faced him. It felt so intimate standing in the close, windowless space with him. In other circumstances, they might’ve taken the opportunity to jump each other, but today, she was trying to keep her heart guarded.

He relaxed his shoulders. “I know I was an ass the last couple of weeks before you left to come here. But it was only because I was terrified of what was happening.”

She tossed up her hands. “What was happening?”

“I don’t want to use my mom making me leave as an excuse for everything, but ever since that happened, I feel like...if my own family wouldn’t love me, then how could I expect someone else to?”

The iceberg that had formed around her heart melted. She reached for him, “Quentin...”

He took a step back. “I’m not trying to get you to feel sorry for me. But I need you to understand that I’ve been fucked up in ways I didn’t even comprehend until now. I told you I’ve never been in a relationship before you. I didn’t think I deserved to be in one. But for the first time, you broke through. It’s because of you that I’ve finally been able to talk to my family about what happened all those years ago.”

She perked up. “You did? When?”

“Last weekend.”

“How did it go?”

“It went okay. My dad didn’t know about my mom asking me to leave until now. Eleanor finally told him.”

“That’s a relief, I guess, right?”

He shrugged. “It’s better than the alternative.”

She considered that and decided he was right. If his dad had known as well and didn’t do anything to stop it from happening, it would be hard to recover from that. “And Braxton?” she asked.

He gave her a hint of a smile with a nod. “We’re all good.”

“Oh, Quentin,” she said, wanting to wrap her arms around him, but she had to be careful, so she covered her heart with her hand. “That’s great.”

“I could never have done that without you.”

Guilt blanketed her. “You didn’t do it with me.”

“You weren’t there, but you gave me the strength. You’re the first woman I’ve wanted to fight my demons for.” He looked away like he was gathering his courage, and then he met her gaze. “I haven’t felt like I’ve had a home since I was seventeen, but you make me feel like I belong somewhere now.”

The tears welled up whether she wanted them to or not. There was no stopping them. “That last thing you said to me before you ran off at the ceremony...”

He held her gaze steady, nodding.

“You meant that?”

“With every fiber of my being.”

She wiped a tear away.

He took her by the shoulders, boring his gaze into hers, making her feel possessed and precious to him. “I love you, Calliope. I love you so much.”

He scanned her gaze, looking for something there. She needed to give him a response, but she’d been down this road so many times before. She shook her head. “I can’t keep doing this over and over. It’s too hard.”

“Then don’t ever do it again. Marry me.”

She blinked, not sure she heard him right. “What?”

He reached into his pocket, and she lost her stomach like she was coming down the hill on a roller coaster.

His hand shook as he went to open the black box, and it toppled out of his hand and onto the floor behind her. They both knelt down to retrieve it, and she stayed down there, taking a seat. She was afraid her legs wouldn't hold her up right then. She opened the box to find a ring so uniquely her style that she almost couldn't believe what she was seeing.

He sat down in front of her. "It's a black opal. If it's too nontraditional, we can take it back. The guy I got it from said —"

She swallowed his words by pressing her lips against his. Her heart beat so fast she thought she might need to go to the ER. She could eat him up, she loved him so much.

She pulled away from him, holding his face in her hand. "You make me feel like I deserve your love."

He closed his eyes, resting his forehead against hers. "I want you to be my wife so bad."

She giggled, loving and trusting this moment with him. Then reality set in. She pulled away. "I can't go home with you right now. You know that, don't you?"

"I know. Christmas, right?"

"Christmas," she said, and no one had ever said that word with less enthusiasm.

"I don't care. I just need to know that you're mine now and we're going to make it official soon."

"How soon?" she asked with one eyebrow up.

"Christmas?" he asked.

She giggled again. “We can’t get married on Christmas. That’s Peyton and Braxton’s thing.”

“Then New Year’s. We can go to the courthouse right now for all I care. I just want to marry you.”

She considered him. “You would go to the courthouse right now and marry me?”

“Without hesitation. Our families might kill us, but I’ll handle the fallout.”

She thought about the months of planning all the perfect details for her wedding to Parker that never was. There was no way she could do anything of the sort again. “I’m going to be honest with you. I don’t want a big wedding. I already planned for that and it never happened. I get an icky feeling from all that wedding stuff.”

“I don’t want any kind of big wedding either. I just want to be married.”

“You’re absolutely sure about this?”

“Not a question in my mind.”

She grinned at this wonderful man, not able to believe she was considering this.

“What about your mom?” he asked. “Do you want her there when you get married?”

“Oh no. My mom? She’s been considering a proposal from Donald herself. I can’t overshadow this moment for her.”

They sat with their knees touching one another’s, and he ran his hands up her thighs. “Whatever you want, just let me know. I’ll do it.”

She pulled the ring out of the box and put it on her finger.
“This is the most beautiful engagement ring I’ve ever seen.”

“I thought it looked like you when I saw it. It felt like you.”

She met the gaze of this thoughtful man who knew her and truly cared about her. “I want to do it. I wanna go get married.”

“Let’s do it.”

EPILOGUE

Quentin had wanted to fly up to Nashville so he could ride home with Calliope, but she told him not to. Her travel plans were up in the air based on several factors having to do with schedules and foot traffic at the boutique on Christmas Eve. She wanted to be able to leave at the drop of a hat.

As it turned out, Marla's husband Seth got an unexpected day off, and Marla told Calliope she would work the shop herself on Christmas Eve day so Calliope could be home for Christmas Eve night.

Though Quentin knew Calliope could handle herself, he couldn't help but be worried about her traveling alone. He'd never worried about anyone this way before. They belonged to each other now, so she was under his care. It was a new feeling that was both beautiful and terrifying all at the same time, because he couldn't lose her, never again.

Savannah walked up and put a hand on his shoulder. "She'll be here soon."

"I know," he said, looking out the window at the Boudreaux's driveway. "I should have insisted on flying up there so I could ride home with her."

“She’s fine. When’s the last time you saw her, Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah. Way too long ago.” He had wanted to see her for one more visit between Thanksgiving and Christmas, but she said they were so slammed at the shop that it would be tough to get time with him anyway. She told him he had to be patient and that she would make it worth his while. He had done nothing but dream about what exactly she meant by that.

The second he spotted her black sedan pulling down the driveway, he vowed to never let her travel without him again. That was ridiculous, and he would, of course, but right now, he planned to not let her leave his side, indefinitely.

He opened the front door and jogged to her side of the car. She got out and he scooped her up into his arms, inhaling her scent and holding her body against his. He pulled away, holding her up by her sweet ass. “Hello, wife.”

She grinned. “Hello, husband.”

She looked like something off a Paris runway in a short green dress with long see-through sleeves and suede ankle boots. She’d been shopping in the boutique where she worked, and she said she’d been experimenting with her style. He’d love her if she wore a brown paper bag, but what he really loved was that she seemed to be coming back into her own and feeling good about herself.

“Does anyone know yet?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Where’s your wedding ring?”

“In my pocket.”

“Are you ready to put it on?”

He'd been putting it on every day when he got home from work and taking it off right before he left the apartment the next day. They both wanted to wait until she was back before they announced it to anyone, including Garrett, which had been tough, but he'd kept his mouth shut. "It's been killing me not to wear it."

She jumped down from his arms. "Let me see it on you."

He pulled it out of his pocket and slid it onto his finger. She held her hand up next to his. Her fingertips were painted red with her ring finger candy cane striped. He kissed her hand near where her ring was. "It looks so good on you."

"I've gotten so many compliments." She met his gaze. "I'm so proud to be your wife. I've been showing your picture to everyone."

"No fair. I've had to keep my mouth shut." He took her by the hand. "But not anymore."

"Do you think we should wait till after Christmas so we don't overshadow the holiday?"

"That's the beauty of everyone loving you so much. It'll be like a Christmas present to them."

She gave him a skeptical look. "Let's not go overboard."

They unloaded all the presents she'd brought back. When he grabbed a plain brown bag with a red bow, she said, "That one stays. It's for my dad."

They were leaving a few days after Christmas for a trip to see her dad, stepmother, and two sisters. Calliope said that working with Marla's niece had inspired her to get to know her siblings better, so she had vowed to get out there at least once a year, starting with this one. Quentin was thrilled that she was taking him up on his offer to go along. He wanted to help her

smooth the edges of their strained relationship, just as she'd helped him do with his own family.

They headed up the walk, bogged down with bags. "I don't see my mom's car. Is she here?"

"Yep, Donald got a new car. That's his Porsche over there."

"I guess my mom and I both did pretty well."

"I like him," Quentin said.

Quentin and Donald had spent some time together. Quentin went with him to several car dealerships when he was trying to make up his mind on which way to go. Quentin had enjoyed the browsing and the companionship. Donald had been surprised that Quentin wanted to spend the time with him. But Deborah was Quentin's mother-in-law now, and he wanted to make sure she was being cared for by a good guy. From what he could tell, that was the case.

Savannah opened the door for them, saying, "I let you have a good hello, but now you've got to share her with us."

Calliope set her bags down and then wrapped her arms around Savannah. "My savior."

Calliope told Quentin that she and Savannah talked almost every day. He imagined it had probably been hard for her not to let Savannah know that she and he had gotten married. Savannah would likely be the most shocked of anyone... That was if Deborah hadn't told her already at the shop. They had been working together for three months. Deborah knew, because Calliope couldn't keep that from her, but Calliope said her mother was an excellent secret keeper. So most likely, all these people were getting ready to be in for a nice surprise.

They made their way farther into the house, and Quentin put the presents under the tree while everyone said their hellos.

He joined Calliope, sliding his arm around her waist. She and Savannah were chatting about the boutique they were planning to open in the new year. As it turned out, Savannah loved working retail and had decided to wind down her marketing business in exchange for opening a boutique with Calliope. They were going to do it in the same spot where the Pretentious Zebra was. So Garrett and Quentin both would have their girls right next-door.

Peyton leaned in. “So to be clear, you didn’t hate being away too much.”

Calliope winced. “No, I didn’t.” She held up a hand like she was hiding her words from Quentin and whispered, “Don’t let him know that.”

Quentin was thrilled that Calliope loved running the boutique in Nashville. It was what she always dreamed of doing and she got to get her feet wet in an established boutique. It was a great opportunity for her and he loved that she’d had it. But she had told him she was ready to come home as soon as possible and get her own business underway. That was just fine by him.

Peyton zoned in on Calliope’s ring finger. She grabbed her hand. “What is this?”

Quentin and Calliope looked at one another, with Calliope biting her lip.

Savannah went for Calliope’s finger next. “Are you engaged?”

Calliope smiled at Quentin. “Not engaged.”

Eleanor was in on it now. She'd been in another conversation, but she slid over to them. She considered Quentin and Calliope. "My darling, did the two of you get married?"

Quentin squeezed Calliope to him. "I figured I better nail her down before some cowboy snatched her up."

"I didn't see any cowboys in Nashville. I think they stay in Texas."

"Well, then some aspiring young country music singer."

"That's more like it."

Peyton's eyes went wide. "So you're my sister-in-law now?"

"And my future sister-in-law?" Savannah asked. Garrett had popped the question in early November on a trip to Sedona.

"That's right. You're stuck with me. Sorry about your luck."

The girls brought her in for a hug and the three of them danced around, squealing.

Garrett and Braxton walked over, looking like they wanted to know what all the fuss was about. "What's going on here?" Garrett asked. "A middle school slumber party?"

Savannah picked up Calliope's hand. "They got married, you dodo brain. Why didn't you tell me?"

Garrett's expression fell. "You got married?"

Guilt covered Quentin. "We didn't want to tell anybody until she got back."

"I knew," Braxton said, standing up straight.

Garrett and Quentin both gave him a look.

“Okay, not that he got married, but I did know he bought a ring.”

“You told him you bought a ring?” Garrett asked.

“He took me with him to buy it,” Braxton said.

Garrett punched Quentin in the shoulder. “What the fuck, man?”

“Language,” Eleanor said.

“Come on, give me this,” Braxton said. “You guys are always leaving me out. You own a business together.”

Quentin shrugged. “We were having a brother moment.”

Garrett looked between the two of them. “I guess I’ll let it slide this once. Come here, man,” Garrett said, bringing Quentin in for a hug, and then Braxton did the same.

Deborah and Donald joined them, along with Quentin’s dad, Crystal, Connor, and Shula. He got hugs from each of them.

Shula patted him on the chest. “You done good, child.”

“That means a lot coming from you.”

“I approve as well,” Eleanor said, “Not that my opinion matters as much as Shula’s.”

He considered these two women he loved like mothers. “I’m really sorry we didn’t wait until you both could be there. Neither one of us wanted to make a big deal of it.”

“All that matters is that you married the right woman,” Shula said.

“Here, here,” Eleanor said, holding up a glass of champagne. Someone tapped Quentin on the back and he turned around. Donald handed him a glass of champagne. Quentin looked around, and everyone had one.

“We came prepared,” Donald said.

Garrett’s dad held up his glass. “I’d like to make a toast to my oldest son and his beautiful wife.”

They all held up their glasses. “May the two of you enjoy a strong friendship and a long, loving relationship.”

“Here in New Orleans with the rest of us,” Braxton said.

“With prosperity in both of their businesses,” Peyton piped in.

“And good-looking kids,” Garrett said.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Crystal said.

“With plenty of good food,” Shula said.

“And someone to mow their grass,” Donald said.

“And clean their lavatories,” Eleanor said, making them all chuckle.

Deborah lifted her glass high. “To my beautiful daughter and my handsome new son-in-law who makes her happy. I love you both, and I couldn’t be happier that you found your way to one another.” She wiped the corner of her eye, and Donald wrapped his arm around her. If Quentin wasn’t careful, he was going to get emotional as well.

“Here, here,” they all said, and then Shula said, “Who’s hungry?”

The group dispersed, leaving Quentin and Calliope to soak it all in.

He turned to her. “If you would’ve told me six months ago that I’d be standing in front of the love of my life as a married man, I’d have thought you were nuts.”

“I’m the same way. I thought this would never happen for me.”

“Do you trust it? Do you trust me?”

She ran her hands across his shoulders. “I trust you with everything in my heart and soul. There were a lot of roadblocks on the way here, but we both conquered them all.”

“I’m so thankful for you.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you back.”

She crinkled her brow. “You know what, I don’t even think we’ve talked about where we’re going to live.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “I thought that was obvious.”

“It is?”

“Yeah. Your place.”

“Really?”

“My place is like a bachelor pad. We’re married now.”

“So you’re saying you’re no longer the Bourbon Street Bachelor?”

He slid his hands over her hips. “Sweetheart, I’ve been a devoted man since the first day I saw you.”

“You mean, the day you called me quirky?”

“Maybe I knew then. Maybe that’s why I convinced my brother to dump you.”

“Good answer.”

“I thought you’d like that,” he said, and then kissed the woman who made him whole again.



Do you want to see Calliope and Quentin get married? Click [HERE](#) to read all about their wedding day on my website.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Chambers writes contemporary novels for young, new, and actual adults. A Nashville native, she spends her days working in the music industry and her nights getting lost in her characters. While she's slightly obsessed with alt rock, she leaves the guitar playing to her husband and kid. She never misses a chance to play a tennis match, listen to an audiobook, or eat a bowl of ice cream. (Rocky road, please!) She's a member of several online and local writers groups, all of which she treasures and is unendingly grateful for, and has served as president for the Music City Romance Writers. She is the author of the Love Along Hwy 30A series, the Destiny Dunes series, the Broussard Brothers series, the Before Forever series (YA), Courting Carlyn (YA), and Two Boy Summer (YA).

