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Breaking the Bad Boy's Rules

REESE RYAN



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Breaking the Bad Boy's Rules

Reese Ryan

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Reese Ryan writes sexy, emotional stories featuring thirty-plus-somethings finding love while navigating career crises and family drama.

Reese is the author of the award-winning Bourbon Brothers series and an advocate for the romance genre and diversity in fiction.

Connect with Reese via [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#) or at reeseryan.com. Join her VIP Readers Lounge at bit.ly/VIPReadersLounge. Check out her YouTube show, where she chats with fellow authors, at bit.ly/ReeseRyanChannel.

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The Bad Boy Experiment

Dynasties: Willowvale

Working with Her Crush

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[Facebook.com/HarlequinDesireAuthors!](https://www.facebook.com/HarlequinDesireAuthors/)

Dear Reader,

It's been so much fun creating the world of Willowvale Springs, Wyoming, with the amazing Jules Bennett. In *Working with Her Crush*, we met Andraya Walker, who was devastated when she discovered that the horse ranch she hoped to inherit had been left to her former friend. Thankfully, she had her best friend, Alejandra "Allie" Price, to help her through the ups and downs. In *Breaking the Bad Boy's Rules*, we get Allie's love story.

When bad boy rocker Vaughn Reed returns to Willowvale Springs to renovate the old resort he inherited from Hank Carson, he hires his friend's family-owned construction company. He can hardly believe that the gorgeous interior designer managing the project is his friend's little sister Allie, who is all grown up. But dating his best friend's little sister is what led to the breakup of his rock band. So it's a mistake he doesn't plan to make twice. But Allie Price is determined to take her shot with her celebrity crush, and she's too tempting for Vaughn to resist.

For book news, giveaways and more, be sure to visit reeseryan.com/desirereaders and join my newsletter list.

Until our next adventure!

Reese Ryan

To reader Vilma Fitzpatrick Akins:

Thank you so much for coming up with the name for Vaughn's rock band, Sin & Glory. And thank you so much for being a supportive longtime reader.

To Jules Bennett:

Thank you for inviting me to join you on this project and for being both incredibly creative and unbelievably accommodating. It was a joy to work with you.

To my family:

Thank you for your love, patience and support.

To K. Sterling and Leigh Carron:

Thank you for keeping me company and keeping me sane as I finished this book. Love you both!

To our readers:

I hope you have as much fun reading *Dynasties: Willowvale* as Jules and I had creating the series. Thank you for joining us for the ride!

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One

Vaughn Reed stepped off of the private plane that had flown him from Dublin to LA. He said his goodbyes to the other members of the session band that had traveled the globe with a pop star whose talent lay primarily in being photogenic and an excellent dancer with a huge social media following.

Not the best gig he'd ever had, but not the worst, either.

More importantly, the gig paid well, and it kept him relevant—a waning commodity since his legendary rock band Sin & Glory had broken up four years ago.

Vaughn had been the reason the band—which had been together for fifteen years—imploded. The reason his personal and professional life had spiraled.

It was a mistake he wouldn't make again. To ensure that he didn't, he'd devised a set of rules for himself.

First: Don't think with your dick. *Period.* Second: *Never* get involved with your best friend's sister. Third: *Always* consider your career first. Fourth: *Never* fall in love.

For the past four years, those four rules had served him well. No more awkward or sticky situations. No career-destroying revelations. No public meltdowns. After all, he would be forty on his next birthday. If he didn't get his shit together now, he probably never would.

Vaughn hopped into his matte black Lamborghini Aventador. Then he made his way onto Hollywood Boulevard toward the empty house in the Hollywood Hills that awaited him.

* * *

Vaughn pulled into the three-car garage of the magnificent home that had previously belonged to one of his rock idols. The beautiful home boasted contemporary architecture and

gorgeous views of the iconic Sunset Strip, the ocean and the LA Basin. But the house held too many bad memories.

Now that he planned to spend the next few months in LA, maybe he'd finally have time to do a few updates and put the property up for sale.

He'd barely turned off the engine when his phone rang. It was his assistant, Cherry Bingham.

"What's up, Cherry?" Vaughn tried not to be short with her despite his exhaustion after the grueling eleven-hour flight and disappointment after reading the latest message from his agent. "If this is about Hannah's email... I already read it. The label isn't interested in funding a comeback album or tour for Sin & Glory without Steven."

Vaughn gritted his teeth. Steven Iverson was Sin & Glory's former lead singer and Vaughn's former best friend. And he'd made the mistake of dating, marrying and eventually divorcing the man's younger sister. The breakup of the marriage led to the end of their friendship and the dissolution of the band. Now, Steven was enjoying a mildly successful solo career, and Vaughn and the rest of the band were fighting for a place in the industry.

"Sorry. I know how hard you've been working to revive the band. Should I send Steven another certified letter?" Keys clacked in the background.

"He'll just ignore it like the others." Vaughn got out of the Lamborghini and unlocked his garage door and entered the kitchen. The house was pristine and smelled like lemons and fresh flowers. "The place looks great."

"Alonzo cleaned the pool yesterday, groceries were delivered this morning and Anita cleaned the house and put away the groceries earlier today," Cherry said. "Which brings me to the reason I called—"

"Don't tell me Anita broke something again?" Vaughn slipped the band from his dark, wavy hair pulled atop his head in a man bun his parents would've hated. His hair—long

overdue for a haircut—fell to his shoulders with a gentle shake of his head.

“No, this time I’m the one who screwed up.” Cherry’s voice suddenly sounded small. “Anita found an envelope underneath the console table in the entry hall. It must’ve slipped off the pile when I set your mail down there before sorting it. The postmark is from two months ago. I’m *really* sorry, Vaughn.”

“It’s okay, Cher.” Vaughn set his luggage just inside his bedroom, then massaged his stiff neck and circled his tight shoulders. “Who was it from?”

“A law office in your hometown of Willowvale Springs.” She seemed to be holding her breath.

What could that possibly be about?

“If the delay resulted in any kind of fees or loss, I’ll explain what happened, that it’s all my—”

“Relax, Cher,” Vaughn said calmly, hoping to allay her anxiety. “I’m sure it’ll be fine. Where is it?”

“Your mail is sorted and stacked on the desk in your office.”

“Great. Now back to this thing with Steven... I was hoping we could get everyone on board, but Matt suggested that we move forward without him.” Vaughn rubbed his chin and sighed as he stood at the glass wall in his bedroom overlooking the city. “Steven and I were best friends when we started Sin & Glory. Just a couple of broke-ass kids with big dreams.” He shrugged. “Maybe his reaction to the end of my relationship with his sister was unfair. But it still feels wrong to do this without him.”

“Plenty of other groups have moved on without their iconic lead singers, Vaughn,” Cherry said gently. “Besides, there’s a ton of talent out there. You’ll find someone else.”

“The guys are definitely open to it. But I’m not sure how our fans would take it. Especially since Steven is doing his own music now.”

“The fans just really miss hearing the old Sin & Glory songs. I think you’d be surprised by how happy most of them

would be to hear that the group is even considering a reunion tour.” There was the clacking of more keys. “There are three petitions going right now requesting a reunion tour. They have a combined total of fifty thousand signatures and counting.”

It was nice that the fans cared that much. Still...

“That still doesn’t address the issue of funding,” he reminded her.

He was doing quite well due to his generally frugal nature—thanks to a modest upbringing. The house in the Hills and the Lamborghini had been among his few splurges. He saved and invested wisely, more acutely aware of the realities of poverty and homelessness than the other band members, some of whom had come from wealthy families. But as much as he wanted to make this Sin & Glory reunion album and tour happen, it would be unwise to use his personal finances to bankroll the venture.

“Fan-funding is an option,” Cherry stated.

“What if it flops? We’ll lose whatever credibility the band has left.”

Cherry didn’t argue the point. “You could try to get a few investors to bankroll the project. Or maybe start playing the lottery.”

“I’ll consider it.” Vaughn chuckled.

He toed off his black-and-white Vans Old Skool Classic Skate Shoes—his preferred footwear for performing. He’d owned just about every color they’d ever made because they were both comfortable and functional when working the foot pedals of his drums.

“But right now, I just want to take a long soak in a hot bath while I enjoy the view, and then crash for a couple days. Could you order the calamari and rigatoni carbonara for me and then whatever you want? Have mine delivered in an hour,” he said. “Then we can meet over breakfast tomorrow.”

“All right, but don’t forget to open that envelope!” Cherry reminded him as he ended the call.

Vaughn groaned. He'd hoped to put off anything other than a hot bath and a warm meal until tomorrow. But Cherry would be stressed about her blunder with the envelope until she knew everything was okay.

He shoved his phone into the back pocket of his jeans, then made his way to the kitchen. Vaughn retrieved his favorite blend of freshly squeezed juice, guzzling from the glass bottle. He sighed contentedly. Every road trip reminded him of the simple joys of being at home.

Then he went to his office to retrieve the envelope.

Vaughn held the brown, craft paper in his hand, and for a moment, he froze. There was something surreal about seeing the words *Willowvale Springs* in print. He'd lived in Los Angeles for nearly twenty years. Yet, deep down, Willowvale Springs would always be the place that was truly *home*.

He'd lived there with his adoptive parents from the age of twelve to nineteen when his mother died barely a year after they'd lost his father. He still owned the old farmhouse his parents had left to him because he couldn't bring himself to sell the place. But he couldn't bear the idea of the old place sitting abandoned and unloved, either. So he'd been listing it on home rental sites for the past several years.

Vaughn roughly set down the small bottle on his desk, then settled in his chair. He sliced into the envelope with a letter opener and slid the thick document and an accompanying flash drive onto his desk. Then he read the letter paper clipped on top.

Holy shit.

Vaughn went back and slowly read the note from Phil Walker, whom he'd known growing up. Phil had apparently become a lawyer and had his own practice back home. He'd written to inform Vaughn that old Hank Carson—the godfather of Willowvale Springs—had died and left him the old resort ranch.

“This has to be a joke,” Vaughn muttered the words beneath his breath.

Hank wasn't a relative. In fact, he and Ms. Edith never had children. Nor had they been particularly close. Vaughn had simply worked for Hank as a bellboy and all-around seasonal help at the rustic old ranch for a few summers as a teen. He and the old man had had the occasional conversation. And when he'd given Hank his resignation and expressed his desire to move to Los Angeles to start a rock band, the old man hadn't been pleased. Still, he'd sincerely wished him the best of luck. A gesture Vaughn had appreciated.

Vaughn opened the flash drive, stuck it into the hub of his desktop computer, then opened the lone file. A video of the old man appeared on the screen, invoking a pained smile.

The man who had always loomed in his memory larger than life had grown thin and frail, ravaged by the effects of age and perhaps illness. Hank went into a hacking cough, then quickly recovered, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief.

“Hello there, Vaughn. I wish we were chatting under better circumstances, son. And that we were having this conversation in person. But I couldn't leave this earth without telling you how damn proud I am of you. You said you were going to start your own rock band and become famous. Sell out arenas all over the world. I applauded your gumption and your effort. But I honestly didn't think you had a chance in hell of making that happen.” The old man chuckled, prompting another coughing fit. “But my Edith believed in you. And you did it, son. Made fools out of every one of us that ever doubted you. I only wish your parents had lived long enough to see it. They would've been damn proud, Vaughn.”

The words seemed to catch in Hank's throat, and he dabbed his eyes with his hanky.

Vaughn was stunned.

Hank Carson had never been given to displays of emotion—though his adoration for his wife had been quite clear. So his words—uttered with such deep respect and heartfelt affection—made Vaughn's eyes sting and his throat burn. Especially the kind words about his parents. Arthur and Carolyn Reed had been well into their fifties when they'd rescued him from

the foster system and decided to take him in and raise him as their own.

He'd been lucky to have had two sets of parents who'd truly loved him. But he'd also had the unenviable distinction of burying both sets before the age of twenty.

“You know Edith and I never had kids of our own,” the old man continued. “But the children of Willowvale Springs were our family. A few of you made quite an impression on us. So as I face the time for me to leave this world, I'd like to leave each of you something. And to you, I leave the Willowvale Springs Resort. You were much more than a bellboy or a stable hand. You were a hard worker. Conscientious. Cared about the guests and the animals. It never felt like it was just a job to you, son. I've seen how you held on to your parents' farmhouse and how you've cared for the old place—even from a distance. So I'm leaving you the resort to do with as you please. I know you'll make the right decision, Vaughn. Good luck, son.”

The screen went black, leaving Vaughn staring at the blank space, stunned. So many emotions churned in his chest. All the words he'd never get to say to Hank ran through his head. He was grateful for Hank's thoughtful gift and his belief in him. But he had no idea what he would do with the old resort. He didn't even want the farmhouse he currently owned in Willowvale Springs. He simply hadn't had the heart to let go of the old place. Not even when he'd been struggling to make it in LA before his career had taken off.

Vaughn dragged a hand down his face and headed to the luxurious bathroom that afforded views of the entire LA basin while offering him privacy. He ran water in the tub and sprinkled in the lemongrass and lavender bath salt his housekeeper made for him because it helped him sleep. Then he stripped out of the clothing he'd been wearing for nearly twenty hours. He submerged himself beneath the warm, foamy liquid, soaking his hair before reemerging.

He wiped the water from his face, leaned against the cushioned headrest and squeezed his eyes shut, truly relaxing for the first time in weeks.

Vaughn had nearly drifted to sleep. Then his eyes shot open and he bolted upright, splashing water onto the white-and-gray Carrera marble tile floor.

Maybe he didn't need to play the lottery to fund a comeback album for the band. Hank Carson had seen to that.

Within minutes, he'd dried off, gotten dressed and called Cherry to make arrangements for him to meet Phil in Willowvale Springs. Then he called his childhood best friend, Reynaldo Price, whose family owned Price Construction. Because if the Willowvale Springs Resort was anything like he remembered, it would require a complete overhaul if it was going to generate the money he needed to get Sin & Glory's next album made.

* * *

Vaughn pulled his rented Audi Q7 SUV into the drive of the Willowvale Springs Resort at the edge of town. He'd spent summers working there as a teen. Then after high school, he'd worked at the resort full time. He hadn't seen the place in twenty years. And when he'd scanned the photos on the bare-bones website, it looked like the lodge had been stuck in a time capsule.

He exited the truck, slid his bôhten shades atop his head, and surveyed the main building. The tired photos had actually been quite generous. Not only had the place not been updated since he'd worked there nearly two decades before, it clearly hadn't been maintained for at least the past five years.

When he'd worked there, the old man was a stickler about ensuring regular maintenance was done. No wonder the resort was barely hanging on. It appeared about three steps from being condemned.

Just how long had Hank been ill?

Vaughn climbed the rickety old steps that led to the large, front porch. The old porch swings were still there but needed a fresh coat of paint and new chains. The decor framing the door looked the same as when he'd been there.

Vaughn stepped inside and made his way to the front desk. He'd been thinking that the old place looked as if it was in some kind of twilight zone where time had stood still.

He was wrong.

Instead, it felt as if he'd been transported back to the sixties...*the 1860s*. If he didn't know better, he'd think he was on the set of his parents' favorite old show, *Bonanza*. That Ben Cartwright, Adam, Hoss and Little Joe would appear at any moment.

"Vaughn Reed?" An older woman glanced up from the front desk, her head cocked. "My word! I haven't seen you since... since your mama's funeral. My gosh, that has to be ten or fifteen—"

"Twenty years ago," he said. "It's good to see you again, Mrs. Halston."

The woman had been working the front desk at the ranch for as long as Vaughn could remember. She'd been Willowvale Springs very own version of Dolly Parton. Her blond hair was now gray and her sparkling blue eyes weren't quite as clear as they'd been when he'd had a killer crush on her as a teen. But she still had an amazing figure and dressed like she'd stepped out of a fashion magazine.

"It's Mrs. Weinstein now." She chuckled with a glint in her eyes. "Barry died about five years ago. God rest his soul." She glanced up at the ceiling. "But call me Barbara. And my goodness, let me give you a hug."

Barbara came around the desk and enveloped him in a bear hug before releasing him. "What brings you here, sweetheart?"

"I'm the new owner of the resort." Vaughn practically held his breath as he said the words.

Barbara had been running the ranch for twenty or thirty years. Surely, she would've expected Hank to leave the place to her.

"Thank goodness!" Barbara pressed her hand to her chest, flashing her bejeweled nails. "Been terrified that the old buzzard was gonna leave this place to me like he left the

general store to Mabel Miller. Mabel wanted the store, mind you. Me? Not so much.”

“Why not? I mean...you’ve probably worked here longer than anyone.” He should just be grateful Barbara wasn’t upset about Hank leaving him the place.

“I’m a grandmother now.” She smiled proudly. “Got three grandkids and one on the way. Plus three bonus grandkids from Barry’s kids. I like getting out of the house and doing things. But these days, I’m wanting to spend more time with the grandkids and travel. I’ve been waiting to find out who the owner is so I can—”

“You’re quitting?”

“Not quitting...*retiring*.” She patted his arm. “But don’t you worry none, sugarplum. I won’t leave you high and dry. I’ll stay on as long as you need me to get you acclimated and to train my replacement. In fact, I’ve got time if you’d like a tour of the old place right now.”

Vaughn was still trying to process the information that he needed to staff the place and oversee things until he could find a good replacement for Barbara.

He glanced down at his watch. “I have about fifteen minutes before I’m meeting with a designer and a construction project manager to discuss renovations.”

“Well, hallelujah!” Barbara did praise hands and quickly scanned the room. “Lord knows this place could use it.”

Vaughn chuckled, glad the woman didn’t oppose taking a wrecking ball to the outdated floor plan and antiquated decor.

“Think we’ll have time to squeeze a quick tour in before they get here?” he asked.

“No, I don’t.” Barbara nodded toward the door.

Vaughn followed the woman’s gaze to a pair of sexy, tan-and-black leather booties with a stacked heel and side buckles stepping through the door attached to a pair of shapely legs. The creamy brown skin shimmered and glowed.

Dayum.

Vaughn hadn't returned to Willowvale Springs to find a hookup. But the woman who sashayed toward him—hips swaying in a black, midhigh-length blazer dress that perfectly accented her Coke bottle shape and thick thighs—could *definitely* get it.

“It’s good to see you again, Vaughn.” The woman placed a palm on his chest and leaned in and kissed his whiskered cheek. Her voice was slightly husky and oddly familiar. Her vibrant scent—like pomegranate, lilies and something spicy—lingered as she pulled away.

“I’m sorry but do I know...” His voice trailed off as he studied the woman’s gorgeous face, taking in the familiar mischievous dark eyes, button nose and cheeky grin. “No...no way.” Vaughn covered his mouth and shook his head. He turned toward Barbara who was more than amused by the exchange. “There is no way that this is *little* Allie Price.”

“It is. Only our little mischievous squirt had the audacity to grow into a lovely and incredibly talented young woman.” Barbara beamed as if she’d raised Allie herself.

Then again, in Willowvale Springs, you didn’t just belong to your parents. You were claimed by the whole damn town.

“Well, I can certainly see that.” Vaughn laughed. He held out his arms to give his childhood best friend’s little sister a proper hug. “It really is great to see you again, Allie.”

He hugged her, trying his best to shut down his dick, which stirred in response to Allie’s buttery soft curves cradled against him.

Refer to Rules #1 and #2. Not gonna happen, bruh. Not in a bajillion years. So calm the fuck down.

Vaughn pulled out of Allie’s lingering hug, cleared his throat and shoved a hand into the pocket of his rag & bone jeans. He diverted his gaze slightly, so as to at least give the pretense he was making eye contact with the stunningly gorgeous Afro-Latina woman who’d once been that adorable little snaggle-toothed girl who’d had an innocent crush on him.

Because the thoughts he was having about her now were anything but innocent.

“So are you here to introduce me to the designer and the project manager?” Vaughn rubbed his chin.

“That explains why you wanted to take pictures of this old place.” Barbara shook a finger at the younger woman, her eyes twinkling as if Allie was a naughty teenager who’d played a trick on her. “Vaughn hired your family to handle the renovations. Well, we simply couldn’t be in better hands. Been watching the work you’ve been doing over at the horse stables where I board my Molly. Your family does some amazing work.”

“Thank you, Ms. Barb.” Allie sifted her manicured fingers through her shiny, curly, shoulder-length tresses, tugging them over one shoulder.

Vaughn squeezed his free hand into a fist, aching to run his fingers through her hair. His eyes met Allie’s again. It had been accidental. Yet, he couldn’t tear his gaze away from hers.

The phone rang, and it seemed to shake them both from the awkward moment.

“I’d better get that,” Barb said. “If either of you needs anything, just give me a holler.”

“Will do. Thank you, Barbara,” Vaughn said. He shifted his attention back to Allie. “So...the designer and the project manager...”

“You’re looking at her.” Allie held her hands out, the way she often did when she’d put on some sort of show for them as a kid.

“So *you’re* the interior designer?” Vaughn frowned as he folded his arms, resting his chin on a closed fist as he studied her.

“Yes.” Her reply was less cheery with a hint of indignation this time.

“Okay. *Great*,” Vaughn said, only slightly sarcastically. “What about the project manager?”

“Again...you’re looking at her.”

“Wait...” Vaughn dropped his arms at his sides and stood to his full height. He wasn’t particularly tall, but he was at least half a foot taller than her. “You’re handling both jobs?”

He realized that he was a local boy and no longer a member of one of the world’s bestselling bands. But he expected to get at least a little star treatment.

Rey knew that this job was important to him, that he needed the place to look its absolute best, and that he was on a tight turnaround. And what did he do? He’d sent his little sister to play both designer and project manager.

Well, he was going to have a few choice words with his childhood best friend as soon as he sent little Allie packing.

“Look, I appreciate your time, and I don’t mean to be rude. But I made it clear to Rey just how important this job was and that I’m on a *really* tight schedule. So if he’s not taking this seriously—”

“That’s it.” Allie cursed in Spanish and slapped a nearby high-top table. She set down her colorful tote bag. Allie folded one arm over her chest and massaged her temple with the other. “Why is it that every good-looking man has to go and open his big fat mouth and *completely* kill the illusion?” she muttered. “This is pretty disappointing behavior from a man who has written some truly empowering ballads for female artists. Not to mention that you actually referred to yourself as a feminist in that *Rolling Stone* article.”

That article interview had been at least ten years ago. Did she really remember that?

Vaughn wouldn’t let Rey’s gorgeous little sister with her killer body and glowing brown skin sidetrack him. Maybe he’d been a little brusque, but he was still the customer, wasn’t he?

“If this is how Price Construction treats their clients, maybe it’s better if I go with another firm.”

Allie snorted and cocked one hip. Which wasn’t helping his attempts to not notice the delicious curves she’d acquired over

the years. His cheeks and forehead felt as though they'd suddenly burst into flames.

“Suit yourself, pal.” Allie snatched her bag off the table and glared at him. “But good luck finding anyone else around here to handle this project on such short notice. There's been a construction boom in the area. All of the other contractors in the region are just as slammed as we are. Rey sent me because I'm the best person to handle the design job. I'm also handling the project management because we are *completely* booked. If you're too sexist, pigheaded and generally chauvinistic to recognize that you are incredibly lucky to get to work with me, then you don't deserve the designs I've been working on day and night for the past three days. I'd say good luck, but we'd both know I don't really mean it.”

Allie turned on her heel and strutted her fine ass toward the front door.

Vaughn groaned and cursed under his breath. “Allie...wait!” He followed her, grasping her hand before she could escape.

He could swear a bolt of electricity traveled up his arm and exploded in his chest. It was the kind of instant attraction he hadn't experienced in a long time. A feeling that this jaded old rocker suspected he was incapable of anymore. But those butterflies eventually led to heartbreak and worse, they'd blown up his career.

Maybe you couldn't teach an old dog new tricks, but he was damn well going to try. He had no intention of making the same mistake twice.

Allie swiveled around, her dark eyes filled with fire as she glared at him expectantly.

Little Allie Price had grown up to be fucking beautiful, smelled like heaven, and had full, lush lips that sent erotic fantasies about their feel and taste spiraling through his brain.

But gorgeous or not, friend or not, Vaughn needed this job *done fast* and *done right*. And whatever happened, he most definitely would not make a move on the still annoying little brat who'd apparently morphed into an incredible goddess.

Two

“Is there a particular reason that you stopped me, or do you just *really* enjoy holding my hand?” Allie leaned in and whispered loudly.

Vaughn dropped her hand and stumbled backward, nearly toppling over a table that went out of style around the same time silent movies had. Allie grabbed his arm, steadying him.

The deep olive skin of Vaughn’s cheeks and forehead flushed as he recovered from his near fall.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Allie tried her best not to grin. She’d sent a clear message to her brother Rey’s old friend: *Do not try me*.

Allie clutched the tote bag, which held the tools of her trade, to her chest as she sized up Vaughn—who had the decency to look contrite for having underestimated her. The folder contained three days’ worth of blood, sweat, tears and lost sleep. Vaughn Reed might be a world-famous rock star. But there was no way she was going to let him just waltz in there and discount her hard work, precious time and brilliant designs.

She was the lone woman working in their family-owned construction company consisting of her father, who still called her *princess*, and four brothers—all alpha males, like their father—with a misguided sense of overprotectiveness. It had been an ongoing struggle to get them to take her seriously.

It had taken some time, but they’d agreed to add an interior design component to the company. A decision they’d likely considered an indulgence when Allie had refused to join the firm as either the office manager or bookkeeper. Both were fine jobs; they just weren’t right for her.

In addition to studying interior design, Allie had taken the same contractor courses her father had insisted that her

brothers take. And as soon as she qualified, she applied for and obtained her general contractor license. Allie made it her business to become well-versed and damn good in both disciplines.

“This is not my first go-round, you know.” Allie stared down the man she’d had a killer crush on as a young girl and throughout her teens. “I’ve handled design and project management simultaneously on other projects.”

Very small projects. But Vaughn didn’t need to know that.

“I’m an award-winning designer and a card-carrying member of ASID—the American Society of Interior Designers,” Allie explained, shoving one of her manicured nails in his direction. “And if you want to give this place a glam, modern makeover that will attract celebrities and put this place on the map, I’m your best bet.”

Her father and brothers respected her abilities—as long as she produced more of the same safe, cozy farmhouse interior designs.

Allie appreciated a neutral palette, comfy, oversize furniture, shiplap, barn doors and exposed wood beams as much as the next designer. But she also loved playing with bold colors and unexpected textures; the crispness of a sleek, contemporary space; Asian and Scandinavian-inspired interior design; and applying elements of feng shui. And she’d been trying to convince her family for the past few years that they could tap into the luxury market if they would be a little more open-minded with their design offerings.

Her father thought her ideas were too “jarring” for their customer base. So he’d always vetoed any designs leaning in that direction.

Allie got it. Every region had its own flavor, and people liked what they liked. But sometimes, people didn’t know they wanted something different until you showed it to them.

Price Construction could be at the forefront rather than chasing the trend once someone else kicked it off. And this project for Vaughn—who would be accustomed to and likely

appreciate a more glamorous, contemporary design—was the perfect opportunity for her to show her family exactly what she was capable of.

“Who said anything about going after celebrities?” Vaughn hiked an eyebrow and rubbed his bearded chin.

Something about the innocent motion set fireworks off inside of her.

She cleared her throat.

“Vaughn, you’re a badass, world-famous drummer who was a founding member of one of the best rock bands *ever*. Why wouldn’t you tap into the clout you’ve earned by trying to attract clientele who can afford to pay top prices?” Allie shrugged, glad the large, colorful, Classic Dezi Consuela tote bag shielded her body’s reaction to him. “Besides, from what Rey said, I got the feeling that you planned to hold on to the property, just like Kahlil and Mason have. And if so, naturally you want the resort to be a place worthy of having your name associated with it.”

When Hank Carson had died, he’d left his horse ranch to Kahlil Anderson and his farmhouse to Mason Clark. Both men were locals who’d worked for Hank on the respective properties as teens.

Vaughn was still rubbing his chin as he took a few steps, glancing around the space as if seeing it for the first time. His eyes lit up, and Allie was sure she saw dollar signs in them.

She had Vaughn Reed right where she wanted him.

Okay, where she really wanted him was in bed beneath her while she rode him hard, like a prize-winning stallion. But lapping up her design ideas, poised to write her family’s company a big, fat deposit check would definitely be a close second.

Get your mind out of the gutter, girl. Vaughn Reed is a client, and you do not sleep with clients.

Vaughn turned to her. “You really think we can turn this old place into a posh resort? Maybe even a wellness spa?”

Now Allie's eyes lit up. She was going high-end, but Vaughn was going even higher.

Cha-ching.

Cue the cash register opening and money shooting out of it like a fountain—cartoon style.

“I like the way you think, Vaughn Reed.” Allie shook a finger, her smile widening as she envisioned the space. “I’d incorporated space for yoga and meditation rooms and potential space for a salon and a few massage rooms. But I could easily upgrade the plans to include a true spa. We’d have to do some additional building on the property to make that happen. But if you’re targeting high-end clientele, you’ll be in a position to recoup those costs relatively quickly.”

The wheels were turning in Allie’s head, and she liked where this train was going.

“All right, let’s see what you’ve got, nena.” Vaughn gestured for Allie to have a seat at the nearby high-top table.

Had Vaughn been a stranger, Allie would’ve told him off for calling her *baby girl*. The term was used affectionately between romantic partners but could also be used as a term of endearment for a little girl. Hence, her parents, brothers, and Vaughn had often called her nena—or the English equivalent: baby girl. In fact, her father often still did. Still, it seemed weird to hear him refer to her as nena now. It confirmed that Vaughn still saw her as that mischievous little girl with a fiery tongue. Not as a grown woman who was extremely attracted to him. And he clearly wasn’t attracted to her.

It was just as well. He’d only be in town long enough to hire a construction firm, and she didn’t date clients. So why was Allie’s ego bruised over Vaughn’s lack of interest?

Not everyone has good taste. Pull it together.

Allie stood taller, turned up the wattage on her smile and set her bag on the table. She climbed onto the high barstool chair as gracefully as possible given her height of five-two. It took her by surprise when Vaughn pushed in her chair. His enticing scent—likely some insanely expensive European cologne—

was subtle. Yet, it surrounded her like a warm, soothing hug. She just wanted to wrap herself in it—and him.

“Let’s begin with the plans I’ve already developed. Then we’ll go into the additional changes and costs required to turn the resort into a full-scale wellness spa, and to do it as quickly as possible.”

Allie pulled her tablet from her bag and turned it so that they both could see the plans she’d created in her 3-D modeling design software. The moment she’d opened the first page, Vaughn made an audible gasp.

“Wow. That’s *incredible*, Allie,” Vaughn said once she’d taken him through the entire plan that she’d laid out for the resort. She’d handed her tablet to him so he could scroll back through various portions of the design. “You can really do this and have it up and running in a couple of months?”

“We can have the designs, as they’ve been laid out, completed by Christmas,” she clarified. “If you choose to go with the more entailed option of turning the resort into a wellness spa, it’s going to require us to build additional structures. We can handle that, of course. And we’ll complete the job as quickly and efficiently as possible. But a project like this... I always allot enough time to ensure that everything is done right. So if you’re pressed to reopen the resort as quickly as possible, we could always handle the project in phases. This would be phase one—” She indicated the designs Vaughn was still marveling over. “Then phase two would be the additional buildings, which would house key elements of the wellness spa.”

“I love that idea.” Vaughn stroked his chin, and Allie’s hand involuntarily closed into fists as she wondered about the feel of his beard—dark brown and laced with gray—abrading her skin.

She shut her eyes momentarily and tried to shake the thought from her head.

“That’d give me a chance to see how things develop in the initial phase of the project and then decide whether it’ll be

worthwhile to move forward.” Vaughn seemed to be thinking aloud more than speaking directly to her.

Allie jumped in anyway. “It will *definitely* be worthwhile to continue with phase two of the project. Give me a week, and I’ll design the wellness center of your dreams,” she assured him.

“Allie Price, you are as confident as ever.”

A small smile curved one corner of Vaughn’s sexy mouth. Her heart fluttered in response, and there were butterflies in her stomach.

“I remember how serious you were about designing your little dollhouses back in the day. You even had your mom make little slipcovers for the furniture out of your old clothes.” Vaughn chuckled fondly, his dark brown eyes flickering in the sunlight streaming through one of the few windows in the dark space. “I once asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up,” he continued. “You said you were going to be a builder, like your dad. But that you were going to build the most glamorous houses anyone has ever seen.”

“I said that?” Allie honestly didn’t remember that conversation.

She did, however, recall asking Vaughn to marry her when she was about ten years old. She’d overheard her parents talking after the death of Vaughn’s adoptive dad. They’d mentioned how he’d already lost so much. He only had his adoptive mother left, who was also sick. Beyond that, he didn’t have any other family.

Allie had decided to fix that by asking Vaughn to marry her. That way, he’d become an official member of the Price family.

Vaughn had been shocked by her question, but he’d handled her request graciously. He’d said that she was the little sister he’d never had, and he wouldn’t want to ruin that.

Allie had shrugged, said okay, then returned to playing with her dolls.

“You did.” Vaughn handed the tablet back to Allie. “Even at ten, you were a girl who knew exactly what you wanted. And

I'm glad to see that you've been able to make your dreams a reality."

"Thank you, Vaughn." Allie tucked a few strands of her hair behind her ear and smiled sheepishly. "I was thrilled to see that you became a world-famous drummer, just like you set off to do when you left Willowvale Springs. But then again, I never doubted you would. You were one of the most focused, determined teenage boys I'd ever met."

There was a quiet moment between them that was sweet and familiar, yet painfully *awkward*.

"I'd love to claim that focus as some admirable character trait I was born with," Vaughn said. "But the truth is that losing so much when you're young and then being cast in a situation where you feel you need to fend for yourself...it forces you to grow up faster than you should." Vaughn shrugged.

"Well, how you chose to direct that focus was a conscious choice, Vaughn." Allie placed a gentle hand on his wrist and smiled. "So don't ever discount your achievements. You've worked damn hard for the career and life that you have. You cofounded Sin & Glory. You've been featured on some groundbreaking albums and record-breaking tours. Then there's your songwriting career that's really starting to take off."

"Wow..." Vaughn rubbed his chin. "I didn't think anyone back home followed me like that." He regarded her curiously.

Oops! She'd gone from playing it cool to stalker vibes in two seconds flat.

"I...uh...well, I've always loved a variety of music. Besides, you were my brother's best friend and you're one of Willowvale Spring's very own homegrown celebs. It's not like we have a ton of those." Now it was her turn to shrug. "You've done well for yourself, Vaughn. Folks around here are proud to consider you one of us."

Allie let go of his wrist, cleared her throat and tried to ignore the warmth that had trailed up her arm when she'd

placed her hand on his skin.

“So it sounds like you’re prepared to move forward with what we’re now calling phase one of the remodel.” She tapped on the keys of her laptop, updating the parameters of the renovation and the corresponding figures.

Allie used the resort’s antiquated printer to print out the contract. She circled the projected completion date and the estimated cost. “This is the estimated price tag for the project.”

Vaughn whistled in response.

“Sticker shock?” Allie teased, laughing when he nodded. “You want a high-end finished product, you’ve got to use high-end supplies. Besides, just imagine how much this project would cost you in LA.”

Vaughn groaned quietly and accepted the pricey fountain pen she extended toward him. “True.”

They went over the paperwork and executed the necessary documentation. Allie climbed down from the stool and gathered her things. She tucked Vaughn’s retainer check into her portfolio along with the signed contract, then slipped them into her bag.

“My team and I will be out here on Monday,” Allie said. “In the meantime, I’ll be drawing up plans for phase two of the project. We can start as soon as we’re done with phase one. Or, if you’d prefer, we can begin the second phase at a later date. But once you see how we transform this space—” Allie glanced around, excited about the prospect “—you won’t be able to sign that second contract fast enough.”

“After what I’ve seen... I don’t doubt it.” Vaughn stood, too. He pulled her into a hug. This one was far less awkward than their first. “Sorry if I came off as kind of a—”

“Divo?” Allie couldn’t help laughing at the way his eyes widened in response to her referring to him as the male version of a diva.

“I was thinking asshole, actually. But...fair.” Vaughn rubbed his chin and smiled sheepishly. “I’m feeling more pressure to get this job done than I thought. Thanks for fitting

th project in and for saving me from tumbling over that old table. I could've broken something.”

“No problem.” Allie hitched her bag onto her shoulder and grinned. “Besides, I had to protect the hand that’ll be writing the checks.”

They both broke into laughter and it felt...*nice*.

“See you on Monday, kid.” It was another nickname he’d frequently used when she was little.

Allie said her goodbyes to Vaughn and Barb, then got into her car. She couldn’t wait to tell her father and brothers that she’d secured the project and that this time, they’d be doing things her way.

On the drive back to the office, she couldn’t stop thinking of Vaughn and how the man had aged like fine wine. But their relationship was a business one coupled with an old friendship, and it would never be anything more.

It was for the best. Yet, Allie harbored a hint of disappointment that she’d never fulfill her long-held fantasy of being with the man she’d adored long before he’d become a famous rock star.

Three

Vaughn woke up early on Monday after a late-night flight in from LA and a two-hour drive from the Casper-Natrona County International Airport. He'd gone to LA to attend a couple of important meetings. The first was with a studio exec he and his agent were trying to convince to give Sin & Glory an album deal. The second was a singer from the UK whose star was on the rise internationally. She'd gushed that her parents always listened to Sin & Glory so she'd be "honored" to work with him to write songs for her highly-anticipated second album.

He'd scuttled the first deal since the studio was offering an insultingly crappy advance unless he could convince his former brother-in-law—Sin & Glory's lead singer Steven Iverson—to rejoin the band. The second he'd accepted because the studio was offering a lucrative deal for him to cowrite songs for the young artist, whom they were sure would be the next big thing.

Vaughn was honored that she'd been genuinely eager to work with him, but damn if his conversation with the bubbly, optimistic twenty-year-old singer hadn't made him feel like a rock and roll relic.

His parents' house was booked solid through the fall and the holidays via a popular vacation home rental app. So he'd had no choice but to move into one of the unoccupied cabins on the property during the renovation of the resort. The one-bedroom cabin was a stone's throw from the main house and not far from the outdoor pool. It was private and cozy, but like the rest of the resort, the cabin was in serious need of updating.

Renovating the individual cabins would be the latter part of phase one. Today, Allie and her crew would begin work on the main house.

Allie.

Vaughn groaned quietly, then abandoned all hope of sleeping in. Despite his long travel day and late arrival, he'd barely gotten any sleep. His thoughts kept returning to the gorgeous, talented, fiery-tongued Allie Price.

How had he not recognized her from the moment she'd sashayed into the room? In many ways, Allie was much the same as she'd been as a kid. She was sweet and adorable as long as you were nice to her. But mess with her or one of her friends, and the littlest thing on the playground converted into a fire-breathing dragon with a stinger for a tail.

Vaughn had been like another big brother to Allie. But the handful of times he'd been prepared to step in to protect her from some larger bully, she'd either played the dozens, trading barbed insults that practically brought the bully to tears, or she'd demonstrated the meaning of fuck around and find out long before it was a popular hashtag.

Vaughn chuckled, recalling the time he'd had to haul Allie off of a bully about twice her size. Her legs were kicking and her arms were flailing as she cursed in English and Spanish at the older boy she'd gifted with a busted lip and a black eye. Vaughn rubbed his jaw at the memory of the pain from when he'd accidentally caught one of those flying elbows in the chin.

He climbed out of bed, headed for the bathroom, then hopped into the shower.

Vaughn was nine years older than Allie, which would make her thirty now. In the larger scheme of things, their age gap didn't make much of a difference anymore. They were both adults. But he doubted that Allie's four older brothers would see things that way. His childhood best friend Rey, particularly.

Before arriving back in Willowvale Springs a few days ago, he'd never thought of Allie as anything but an annoying little pseudo-sister. But since he'd laid eyes on the woman who'd given him a well-deserved dressing down, he hadn't been able to stop thinking of her.

It was lust: pure and simple. And there was no way in hell he was going to blow up another friendship by getting involved with his best friend's sister. He'd been there, done that, and had the souvenir T-shirt, emotional scars and stalled-out career to prove it.

Don't be a dumbass twice, man. Learn from your mistakes.

Maybe working out would burn off his anxiety about the start of the renovations and take his mind off of the gorgeous woman Allie Price had grown into.

Vaughn slipped on a pair of charcoal gray sweatpants, an old white-and-black Sin & Glory T-shirt, and his socks and sneakers. Then he grabbed a towel from the bathroom and headed for the gym in the main building. Maybe he'd even have time to make himself something quick for breakfast before demolition on the kitchen started.

He'd be in and out before Allie and the crew arrived. And the way he'd been obsessing over her the past few days, he'd decided it would be best if he minimized the number of times he and Allie crossed paths.

Then what are you doing here in Willowvale Springs? Why aren't you in LA? It's not like you ain't got shit to do.

The voice in the back of his head sounded a lot like Allie, and like her, it wasn't afraid to call him out on his bullshit.

He popped in his wireless earbuds and cranked up the music to drown out the pain-in-the-ass voice of reason that demanded an answer. It was already set to one of his workout playlists. This one leaned heavily toward Queen and kicked off with "Somebody to Love."

Vaughn locked up the cabin and jogged toward the main house.

Why was he here in Willowvale Springs when he had so many other things he needed to be doing right now? He could've just engaged the Prices' construction company to handle the renovations, then flown back to LA and kept in touch with Allie via phone. But his brain wasn't built that way. He was a perfectionist who wanted things just the way he

wanted them—especially if his name was going to be attached to the project.

This renovation was important to Vaughn. Not just because he was using the unexpected inheritance to fund the making of Sin & Glory's new album if they didn't get a better offer from one of the recording studios. The resort was an incredibly thoughtful gift from a man who meant a lot to him. Hank wasn't a man of many words. But the words he'd uttered had meant a lot to Vaughn. Especially after the loss of a second set of parents before he'd reached the age of twenty.

Hank had promised Vaughn that if he stayed, he and Ms. Edith would take care of him. Treat him as if he was their very own flesh and blood. He wondered if the old man truly understood just how much he'd appreciated his offer.

Still, Vaughn needed to go out into the world and make his own way and go after his dreams. And he was glad that he had. But as he made his way toward the main house he was overcome with feelings of guilt. Yes, chasing his dreams was an important pursuit. But he should've made time to see about Hank, Ms. Edith and the Prices. They'd been family to him as much as the parents he'd been born to and the ones who'd adopted him.

That's why he was determined to ensure that the renovated resort would be worthy of the town he'd always have a soft spot for. And of Hank's magnanimous gesture. And he wouldn't do anything stupid—like making a move on Allie. He wouldn't ruin his relationship with the only family he had left.

* * *

Allie parked her Tango Red Audi A5 Sportback, opened up the back hatch, removed the collapsible wagon and set it up before loading it with a tray of breakfast sandwiches, a fruit tray, a box of doughnuts, two boxes of coffee and all of the necessary accouterments.

Getting the wagon up the steps without tipping everything over was tricky, but she managed. She punched in the lockbox

code and entered the empty building.

There had only been a handful of reservations through the end of the year. So Vaughn had opted to cancel them with his deepest apologies and the promise that he'd honor their booking price when they rebooked at the newly renovated resort. Then he gave Barb paid time off while they completed the initial phase of renovating the main house, so Allie's crew could get the work done as quickly as possible.

She washed her hands, then got started setting up everything so the mini feast she liked to treat her crew to on the first day of a job would be ready before the first worker walked in the door.

“Something certainly smells good.”

“Vaughn?” Allie turned suddenly, nearly toppling over the jugs of cranberry and orange juice she'd gone back out to the car to get. She steadied the teetering containers and Vaughn hurried over to help her.

“Sorry, Al. I didn't mean to startle you.” Vaughn placed a solid hand on her shoulder, and Allie could swear she felt a tiny zap of electricity.

Then again, it was late fall in Wyoming. With the dry air, static electric shock wasn't uncommon. But dammit if the man wasn't glistening with sweat and wearing a pair of fitted, charcoal gray sweatpants and no shirt.

Despite his slim build, the man was surprisingly fit, and his muscles were toned. The fine hair on his chest trailed down over his washboard abs and disappeared beneath the waistband of his pants.

Allie swallowed hard, her heart beating wildly and the sound of her pulse echoing in her ears.

“No worries. I just didn't expect you to be here.” Allie smoothed down the front of her shirt.

“I thought I'd get a quick workout in and connect with the old place one last time before your crew starts tearing into the walls.” He glanced around the space reverently.

Allie's gaze dropped to the bulge in the front of his dark gray sweatpants. The bulge that was practically saying, "Hello, how you doin'?" in its best Madea voice. Or maybe that was all in her head.

She cleared her throat and raised her gaze, just in time to meet his once he turned back to face her again. "That's nice, but I meant I didn't expect you to be here in Wyoming. I thought you flew back to LA the day after our meeting."

"I did," Vaughn acknowledged. He slipped on the black T-shirt that had been hanging over his shoulder. "But this project is really important to me and to my future plans for Sin & Glory. I figured I should remain onsite and accessible." He shrugged.

Great. Another client who'd be looking over her shoulder the entire project.

"When it's time to select paint colors, flooring, furniture and any other design choices, we can easily collaborate via video conference or text message." She checked her watch, then returned to setting up the table.

"Actually, I'm more of a hands-on kind of guy."

Allie froze. The unintended double entendre shot straight to her sex and tweaked her nipples...*hard*. She cleared her throat, keeping her back to him and wishing she'd worn a padded bra.

"But you already signed off on the design." Allie glanced over her shoulder. "Do you not trust my judgment?"

"Of course I do, Allie. I wouldn't have hired you if I didn't. But I've always been a very visual, tactile kind of person. It's how I best absorb the necessary information to make a decision."

Allie opened the bottles of juice and then set them near the upside-down stack of red cups—the kind used in every backyard barbecue she'd ever attended. She turned around with her arms folded over her chest.

"You said this project was important to the future of the band. I didn't realize the band had a future," Allie said tentatively. It was a touchy subject, and she didn't want to piss

off her biggest client to date. “I mean, you guys broke up what...four or five years ago. And in every interview of Steven Iverson’s that I’ve seen or read he’s always pretty adamant that there would *never* be a reunion for Sin & Glory.”

Vaughn winced. Whatever memories were going through his head were clearly painful. She instantly regretted having brought up Steven’s apparent animosity toward the band.

“I’m sorry, Vaughn. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine.” He forced a smile, seemingly more concerned about any discomfort the conversation might be causing her.

That was the Vaughn Reed she’d always known. Sweet, thoughtful and accommodating. Emotionally intelligent. Conscious of the feelings of the people around him.

No wonder she’d fallen head over heels for him as a girl.

“You’re right. Steven isn’t interested in doing a reunion album or a reunion tour. But the rest of the band is, and I’m not going to let him hold the rest of us hostage especially when his animosity toward me and the rest of the band is—”

“Based on a lie?” Allie searched Vaughn’s eyes, needing his confirmation.

The thing that had broken her heart more than learning that Vaughn was marrying Steven Iverson’s sister was the news that Vaughn supposedly cheating on her was what had caused their divorce and the dissolution of Sin & Glory.

She hadn’t believed it. Couldn’t believe it. Because it wasn’t in keeping with the personality of the man she’d revered growing up. But the tabloid and gossip blogs were adamant about it and the stories seemed so convincing. Still, a tiny sliver of her heart held out hope that it wasn’t true.

“That’s right.” Vaughn scratched at the stubble on his chin. “Eva has always had Steve and her parents wrapped around her little finger. So he wouldn’t listen to anything I had to say. And he was just as angry at the rest of the guys when they tried to defend me. I’m convinced it was all a part of the plan. Eva had been pushing Steve to go solo for a while. I wouldn’t

put all of the fallout that happened past being part of her design to maneuver her brother into a solo career.”

“How would that have benefited her?” Allie didn’t doubt Vaughn’s assessment. She just didn’t quite understand it.

“She’d become his agent a couple years before that,” he said. “At the time, Steve was her only client. After he went solo, she picked up a few more clients. Most of them were part of bands but had aspirations of going solo, too.”

“Wow. Your ex was a piece of work, wasn’t she?” Allie muttered the words beneath her breath, more to herself than to him.

“That she was.” Vaughn heaved a quiet sigh. “But I’ve spent enough time being angry with her for lying and Steve for not even being willing to hear my side of the story.” He shrugged. “And despite all of that, I still tried to make amends with the guy. To see if he’d be open to listening now that some time had passed and he had a chance to reassess the situation. But he hasn’t budged on his position. So now we’re moving forward.”

“But Steven was the voice of Sin & Glory,” Allie reminded him. “And he has a distinctive, gritty tone that’s easily recognized. How do you replace a unique talent like that?”

“I’ve been worried about that, too,” Vaughn admitted. “But my team assures me that the Sin & Glory fan base is hungry for a reunion, even if it means doing so without Steve.”

“Wow.” Allie was fascinated by the drama behind the scenes of the Sin & Glory breakup. She blamed her mother’s obsession with telenovelas when Allie was a kid. “Coffee?” She filled one of the disposable coffee cups.

“*Please.*” Vaughn approached the table, his eyes sweeping the spread as if he’d been waiting for her to ask. “And maybe one of those raspberry Danishes, too?”

“Of course.” Allie slipped a sleeve onto the hot cup and handed it to Vaughn. “The sugar, cream and stirrers are there. As for anything else... Help yourself to anything you’d like.” Allie gestured to the breakfast spread.

But when she raised her gaze to meet Vaughn's again, he wasn't looking at the food. His eyes scanned her body—as if *it* was the only feast he was interested in partaking of. There was a deep longing in his soulful, brown eyes that sent a wave of desire through her chest and nearly took her breath away. She swallowed hard in response to the shiver that ran down her spine.

“Thanks.” Vaughn tipped his chin, his eyes assessing hers. He used a napkin to grab a raspberry Danish.

Allie's heart thudded with the realization that—for the first time in twenty-five years—maybe this crazy crush she'd always had on Vaughn Reed wasn't a one-way affair anymore. But of course, it would happen at the one moment she couldn't act on it.

Vaughn was a client. She didn't date clients or any of the contractors they worked with. It had been a hard, fast rule that her father had instituted before he'd finally given her the reins to handle projects like this one on her own, without one of her brothers lurking around. Until now, it had been a rule she'd always agreed with.

Allie had gleefully recited the rule to creepy clients or contractors who'd gotten overly familiar. If that hadn't been clear enough, she'd gone what her brothers often referred to as “full Allie” on them. Even if it meant losing the job or the contractor relationship. But this was Vaughn.

What she'd discovered upon his return was that the crush she'd had on him—the crush she'd been so sure she was over—was still in full effect. Only now, she wasn't a silly little girl with a crush on a much older boy. She was a grown woman and Vaughn's equal.

Except for the whole client thing.

Allie huffed quietly as she watched Vaughn make a small plate of fresh fruit. She should let Vaughn go on his merry way doing whatever it was rock stars—typically nocturnal creatures—did whenever they were awake at this time of the morning. But another part of her couldn't resist the opportunity to spend some time with him.

She glanced at the time on her wrist, then cleared her throat.

“I’ve got about fifteen minutes before the guys begin arriving,” Allie said hurriedly, her pulse racing. “Wanna have breakfast with me?”

A smile slid across Vaughn’s handsome face. He nodded. “Sure. Is it okay if we eat at the high-top table?” Vaughn indicated the table where she’d first shown him her plans for the renovation of the resort.

“That’d be perfect.” She grinned as she hastily made herself a plate so she could have breakfast with Vaughn.

Four

Vaughn sat at the Roland FP-90X Digital Piano he'd brought back with him when he'd returned from LA and played a few of the notes he'd written the other night. He'd spent the week since his return trying to write songs for Extreme Overload—a band that had opened for Sin & Glory back at the height of their career. But now Extreme Overload was the big-ticket act selling out stadiums and reigning supreme on the rock charts.

He'd written a couple of songs for the group before. But the band's bass player and chief songwriter had died in a car crash that summer. So this time, they wanted to collab with Vaughn on writing their entire album. He'd taken the gig because his old friends needed the help, and after such a huge loss, they wouldn't be ready to head back into the recording studio for a while. But the date he'd promised to deliver a handful of songs to get the creative process started was looming, and he had yet to write a song that was worth the paper it was written on.

Maybe he'd been a little burned out after touring and the session work, but he'd been struggling with a serious creative block the past few months. And if he didn't get over it soon, he'd lose his credibility as a songwriter—an element of his career he planned to expand further.

He'd tried reading, listening to music, going for long walks in the mountain terrain and working out daily. Nothing seemed to work.

He played a few chords he'd written the other night.

While he did his songwriting on the keyboard, it was when he was seated on the throne behind his drum set—his feet working the pedals and his sticks connecting with the snare, high hat, toms, and cymbals—that he felt free and allowed himself to get out of his head and let go of whatever was bothering him.

Playing didn't fix everything. But it wouldn't hurt to give it a try. Besides, in a moment of gear acquisition syndrome, he'd ordered himself a new custom Yamaha drum kit. It'd been delivered the day before, and he'd spent the morning setting everything up just the way he liked it. Why not try working out some of his frustrations on the drums?

Vaughn slipped onto the leather drum throne and settled in behind his new drum set. He put on his isolation headphones, cranked up his favorite Extreme Overload album, and picked up his sticks. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and then exhaled deeply, trying to push out all of the noise in his head right along with it.

He twirled the stick in his right hand, then dove in, playing in time with the music. With every rimshot, stroke, crash, and groove his mind felt freer. Playing the drums alleviated the stress that had been agitating him. His concerns about the future of Sin & Glory. Worries over whether he'd taken on more than he could handle with this wellness spa. His anxiety over not being able to write these past few months. And the guilt over his growing attraction to the one woman he couldn't have: Allie.

* * *

After nearly an hour of playing, Vaughn had shed his T-shirt, sweat dripped down his back and forehead, and his hair—which had come loose from the top knot—was flying with every movement. He made one final cathartic crash the cymbals in time with the last note of the album but was startled by movement and the sound of applause.

Vaughn jerked his head around and was greeted by the gorgeous face and bright smile of the woman he'd found himself so preoccupied with.

“Allie?” Vaughn stilled the cymbals, then dragged his fingers through his sweat-dampened hair. “How did you—”

“I knocked, but there was no answer,” Allie said. “The front door was open and I heard you playing, so I let myself in.”

“What brings you by?” he stammered.

“I brought way too much food for me to eat alone but not enough to share with the crew.” Allie smiled sheepishly. Her dark brown eyes glistened in the sunlight streaming through the cabin window. “I was hoping I could interest you in having a bite to eat with me while I update you on the project. The private concert and male revue show...” Her gaze glided over his sweat-slickened skin, and Vaughn could swear his skin tingled in the wake of it. “Well...those were bonuses I definitely wasn’t expecting.”

Vaughn’s cheeks heated. He cleared his throat, silently congratulating himself for at least wearing pants. “That’d be great. I could definitely eat.”

“Great.” She glanced at the set of drums, then at him. “Nice drum set. But that doesn’t look like the setup you usually play with.”

“It isn’t. Just had this delivered yesterday. But how’d you know...”

“I’ve seen you in concert a few times with Sin & Glory and a few other artists over the years. Then there’s those drum tutorials you did on YouTube.” She shrugged.

“You came to our concerts? If I’d known, I would’ve gotten you tickets and backstage passes.” Vaughn got up from his drum throne and retrieved the shirt he’d tossed when he’d gotten too damn hot.

Thoughts of Allie had commandeered his brain as he drummed along with a song about falling for the girl you’d least expect. Allie appearing at the cabin unannounced definitely wasn’t making it better. Still, he was glad to see her.

“We hadn’t seen each other since I was a kid. I didn’t want to be that person who only reaches out because they’re begging for free concert tickets.” She propped a hand on her hip as she looked around. “What happened to the dining room set that was in here?”

“I had the movers put it in the storage shed at the back of the property.” Vaughn towed off his damp skin and hair, then slipped his shirt back on. “Figured it didn’t go with the new

aesthetic anyway. But don't worry, it's undamaged in case some museum is interested in it." He winked, and Allie laughed—a sound he'd come to love.

"Well, I need to heat these in the oven." Allie held up a fancy, fabric lunch bag.

"Please do." Vaughn gestured toward the kitchen. He excused himself to freshen up, wash his hands, and change into a fresh T-shirt. When he returned, he settled onto one of the stools at the breakfast bar.

Vaughn tried his best not to notice how well the one-piece, beige jumpsuit Allie was wearing clung to her shapely figure as she moved about the kitchen. The belted waistline showed off her full breasts and curvy bottom. The brown leather booties she wore gave her a few inches of height and looked perfect peeking from beneath the wide legs of the pants.

Ignoring his growing attraction to Allie Price had become a daily exercise. And he was pretty sure he was getting worse at hiding it.

Since their impromptu breakfast on demo day, he and Allie had had breakfast, coffee, or at least a quick chat nearly every day he was on-site because he'd insisted on being kept up-to-date on the project.

She'd caught Vaughn up on all the goings on in Willowvale Springs over the past two decades. They'd talked about who'd gotten married and had kids, who'd moved away, who'd returned to town, and which members of the community had passed away.

Price Construction had a hand in building the new residential communities on the edge of town and a new shopping center. They'd also been instrumental in the apparent construction boom since Hank's death. Each of the men whom Hank had mentored as teens and subsequently bequeathed one of his prize properties had returned to town and upgraded the property.

Tech entrepreneur Kahlil Anderson and retired pro baseball player Mason Clark had decided to make Willowvale Springs

home again. His life was in LA and on the road, so he wouldn't be putting down roots here again. But it was just as important to him to uphold Hank's legacy and create a facility that would benefit the town that had nurtured and raised him.

Of course, Kahl's and Mason's decisions to stay had more to do with them falling for the women who'd been their childhood best friends: Andraya Walker and Darcy Stephens, respectively. Since his best childhood friend was Rey Price—who was married and whom Vaughn was pretty sure had never nursed a flame for him—he felt safe in stating that the same wouldn't be happening for him. Still, if seeing their old friends again had been anything like his reaction to reconnecting with Allie again—Vaughn could understand how things had progressed so quickly for both men.

He and Allie hadn't had nearly as close a relationship.

Yet, since returning to town, he'd enjoyed getting to know her, and he looked forward to their frequent interactions. Vaughn was so damn proud of the woman Allie had become. She hadn't let her parents or older brothers coerce her into a career she had no interest in for the sake of the business.

Vaughn had been wanting to say as much to Allie, but he didn't want her to think he was being condescending. He admired Allie, and he was glad she was flourishing in a career clearly meant for her. Vaughn would forever be indebted to his adoptive parents for buying him that first drum kit as a gift for his sixteenth birthday. But he honestly didn't know if he would've pursued his dreams of being a professional musician if either of his adoptive parents had still been alive.

He'd been so grateful to them for taking him in and raising him as their own. So he'd been obsessed with trying to be the perfect son to the older couple who hadn't been able to have children of their own. He wouldn't have been able to walk away from either of his parents who were older and infirm. They'd needed him as much as he'd needed them the day they'd visited that foster home and recognized just how unhappy and alone he was.

“So...” Vaughn tried to shake his rumination about the possible taste of the shimmering, peach lip gloss rimmed with a brown lip liner on Allie’s lips. “What’s for lunch?”

“It’s a surprise.” Allie plopped onto the seat beside him.

Her bright smile was contagious and her soft, floral and fruit scent tickled his nose. Vaughn fought the urge to lean in and get a deeper whiff.

“But while the oven is warming, I have a few things to go over with you. It isn’t great news, I’m afraid.” She frowned, shifting effortlessly from the playful woman who always knew how to make him smile to the businesswoman who demanded to be taken seriously by her father and brothers as well as her clients and contractors.

“Been holding my breath and waiting for the other shoe to drop. There’s bound to be some unplanned disaster when renovating older structures.” Vaughn sighed. “So let’s hear it. What’s wrong and what’s the blow to my budget?”

Allie showed Vaughn photos of water damage and rotting wood as well as leaky old water pipes. It was a definite hit to the budget, but they were still well below the contingency they’d built into the budget. Hopefully, it would stay that way.

As they discussed the issues that had arisen during the renovation, Allie removed a foil-covered item from her lunch bag, loosened the foil a bit, then set it on a cookie sheet. She placed the food in the oven.

“Anything else?” Vaughn asked.

“Actually, yes. The lumberyard where I like to get my flooring is having a big sale in the coming week. If you like one of the options they offer, we can recoup some of that additional cost.”

“Well, that’s good news,” Vaughn said.

“Great. I’ll pull up the website. You can review the options and let me know if anything stands out.”

Allie pulled out her tablet, opened the website and then handed it to him already on the page for the flooring on sale.”

He thumbed through them. But without being able to see them in person and touch them, it was hard to gauge how much he liked any of the options.

Allie wandered over toward the keyboard set up on the opposite side of the living space. She pointed at it. “I forgot you also play both the piano and the guitar. Since you found your success as a drummer, I didn’t realize you still play the piano.”

“I use the keyboard or the guitar when I’m writing songs,” Vaughn explained.

“Are you writing something now?” she asked. When he indicated that he was, she sat on one end of the bench and patted the other. “I’d love to hear what you’re working on. Would you play it for me?”

Vaughn had planned to decline because the song wasn’t anywhere near finished. But with such excitement in Allie’s voice and a genuine glint in her dark eyes, he couldn’t refuse her. He moved over to the keyboard and sat on the other end of the bench, painfully aware of her subtle teasing scent and the warmth emanating from her golden brown skin.

“I’ve had a lot going on the past few months.” He was already apologizing. “So I’ve been in sort of a creative slump,” he admitted. “I’m not quite sure what to do with it, but this melody came to me the other night. Right now, it isn’t much. Just a piece of the puzzle.”

“So the song is raw and unfinished. Sort of like my renovations to your place.” Allie’s smile was sweet and reassuring. “I get it. You saw my vision. I’d like to see yours.”

Vaughn stared into the penetrating eyes that gazed up at him with affection and admiration. Heat emanated from where Allie’s shoulder leaned into him, and warmth spread through his skin.

Alejandra Price was like a bright burst of light capable of illuminating even the darkest night sky. She was a breath of fresh air, and his world instantly felt better and the weight on his shoulders lighter whenever he was around her.

Vaughn shook out his wrists and stretched his fingers. He drew in a deep breath, then started to play. He'd intended to play those same few chords that had been playing over and over in his head. But as he sat there beside Allie, the next chords came to him, and the next.

"That's beautiful, Vaughn. And I definitely wouldn't describe it as 'not much,'" she chided.

"I promise you that these last few chords came to me just now." He grabbed a pencil and started to jot the notes down. "I've been working on this for the past few days and I was getting absolutely nowhere. Then you ask me to sit down with you and play the song and the next notes just came to me."

"Does that make me your muse?" Allie broke into laughter at his surprised expression. "I'm teasing you, Vaughn. You would've come up with the rest of the song whether I was here or not. But it was amazing to witness your creative process firsthand."

Vaughn stared at Allie as they sat shoulder to shoulder. There'd always been something *special* about Allie. He'd never really been sure what it was. He just knew that the feisty kid always seemed to have an inner glow. Even on his worst days, she'd found a way to do something that would make him smile or just feel a little less sad. That inner light hadn't dimmed. If anything, it had gotten stronger. It surrounded her like a force field. As Vaughn sat beside Allie, her warmth penetrated his skin, and her teasing smile filled his chest with a deep affection he hadn't experienced in so long. It felt as if he'd been drawn into her light.

He was captivated by it, and by her.

But Allie was just a friend. More importantly, she was his oldest friend's younger sister. And she was his interior designer. All good reasons not to entertain thoughts of her as anything more. So why couldn't he tear his gaze away from those tantalizingly plump lips of hers.

"Empanadas," he said suddenly. "That's what's in the oven—your mother's empanadas."

“You remembered.” Allie’s delighted smile lit her dark eyes. “Impressive.”

They sat there, neither of them moving as their eyes met and only a few inches of space separated them. Vaughn swallowed hard, his gaze dropping involuntarily to her mouth again.

He gripped the edge of the bench and resisted the urge to cup her cheek and lean in for a taste of her sensual lips.

Suddenly, Allie’s phone rang over on the breakfast bar.

“I’d better get that,” Allie said after a beat.

Had she been hoping he’d lean in to kiss her?

Vaughn closed his eyes and sighed. He should be grateful for the interruption. It had prevented him from making a huge mistake by kissing Allie.

He needed the distraction. Something to keep his brain from imagining how good it would feel to take Allie into his arms and trail kisses down her neck.

Vaughn played the notes again, including the ones he’d first played sitting there with Allie. The notes kept coming. Like finding the key piece to a puzzle that made it clear what came next and what came after that. For the first time in weeks, it felt as if his creativity had been unleashed. He jotted down the music notes and a few lyrics that came to him. When he glanced over at Allie, she appeared to be having an animated conversation. He’d been too absorbed in his sudden burst of creativity to hear what the heated conversation was about.

Maybe Allie was right about being his muse. At the very least she’d provided inspiration and helped him get unstuck.

That was a gift he wouldn’t squander.

* * *

Allie indicated that she was going to take the call out on the porch, then stepped outside in the crisp fall air, wishing she’d thought to grab a jacket. But between the heat running through her body after stumbling upon the enthralling vision of Vaughn Reed playing the drums, half-dressed and hair flying, and the

irritation she felt at her brother, she barely noticed the chill in the air.

“Reynaldo Price, who the hell do you think you’re talking to?” Allie asked in a harsh whisper. “I may be your baby sister, but I am *not* a child. So *do not* talk to me like I’m one.”

Her brother huffed. “Look, I’m not trying to treat you like a kid, Al. But you will always be my kid sister. I won’t apologize for looking out for you.”

Allie sighed, and the rage in her belly died down. When she’d told her brother that she was at Vaughn’s cabin and they were going over a few pressing items over lunch he’d proceeded to lecture her about “being smart” and “staying safe.”

“I appreciate that you love me and want to protect me, Rey,” Allie said. “But I’m not a little girl anymore. I’m as invested in this business as you are. I’m aware that there are inherently more concerns for my safety, and I act accordingly,” she assured him.

Rey snorted in response, but she chose to ignore it.

“This is Vaughn we’re talking about for God’s sake. He was as protective of me as you all were. Are you really saying that you don’t trust your best friend?” Allie continued.

Vaughn was still working on the song he’d played a sample of for her. It was soft and emotional. A stark contrast to his vibrant, kinetic drum playing. And the notes seemed to come to him more easily now. She smiled, hoping he was having a much-needed breakthrough.

The fact that Vaughn had purchased a drum set and had it delivered to his cabin made Allie hopeful that Vaughn planned to spend more time in Willowvale Springs. It was the perfect respite to escape the hustle and bustle of LA and find some peace and solace. Perhaps the lovely plains, the pristine river, the nearby hot springs and the majestic mountains would spur Vaughn’s creativity.

“Al!” Rey called her name, impatiently.

“Yes?” Allie stared at Vaughn through the window. His fingers were flying over the keys and he was singing to himself, then he’d stopped to write down a few notes.

“Vaughn and I haven’t been close in a really long time. I love the guy. Always will. But money and power change people. Make them think they can have whatever they want whenever they want it. Never forget that, Allie.”

“Has Vaughn given you the slightest indication that he’s changed in any significant way?” Allie turned her back to the window and propped a fist on her hip.

“No,” Rey admitted. “But the old Vaughn wouldn’t have insisted on priority treatment on such short notice.”

“Which he was willing to pay handsomely for,” Allie reminded him. “You and Dad pull your weight with vendors all the time. So what?”

“Didn’t say anything was wrong with it.” Rey chuckled. “Just said the old Vaughn would never have done it.”

Allie peeked over her shoulder through the window at Vaughn. She could faintly hear the timer going off. Before she could tap on the window to ask him to remove the empanadas from the oven, he was on his feet donning oven mitts so he could take the pan out. He inhaled the smell of the savory meat pies and a soft smile spread across his face.

She smiled too.

“Look, Rey. Vaughn loves you, too. He loves our family and the town of Willowvale Springs. He would never do anything to jeopardize his place in any of that. The guy is all alone. No family. No band. We’re the only family he has left. Maybe think of that next time we’re seated at our family feast and you’re surrounded by your wife and kids, parents and siblings, nieces and nephews,” Allie said. “He’ll be here at this run-down little cabin trying to decide whether to order in pizza or heat a frozen meal.”

“Shit. Never thought of it like that.” Rey sounded remorseful for having intimated that being alone with Vaughn

might put her in jeopardy. “I should ask Mom and Dad if it’s okay for me to invite him to dinner on Sunday.”

Allie smiled, her heart dancing a little.

Little Sister 101. How to manipulate your older brother like a marionette on a string.

If she’d invited Vaughn to dinner, it might’ve raised eyebrows. But she’d gotten her brother to do it instead.

“The way he’s in there inhaling the scent of those empanadas, I’m pretty sure he’d gladly accept your invitation.” Allie laughed and her brother did, too. “I realize that my last serious relationship blew up big time. Yes, it shook my confidence a little and my desire to get involved seriously with anyone again. But I’ll never learn to start trusting myself again if you all are always second-guessing everything I do and policing my interactions with every man on the planet.”

Rey sighed quietly but didn’t respond. So Allie continued.

“If I need you to interfere on my behalf for any reason, I won’t hesitate to ask. But you’ve gotta give me room to breathe, make my own mistakes and live my life. All right?”

There was a long pause. Finally, Rey groaned. “All right.”

“Thank you. And don’t forget to tell the others. I do not want to have this conversation five more times.”

“You’ve got it.” Rey chuckled. “Love you, kid.”

“Love you too, knucklehead. See you on Sunday.”

Allie smiled, her heart full. As annoyingly suffocating as her older brothers and parents could sometimes be, she couldn’t imagine not having them in her life.

She stepped back inside the cabin and rubbed her arms. Allie glanced toward the kitchen, but Vaughn wasn’t there.

Movement in the living space drew her attention. Vaughn rose to his feet, holding his hands out to the fire in front of him.

“Thought you might be chilly after being out there without a coat. I considered bringing you one, but you were in a pretty intense conversation.” He paused, as if hoping she’d provide details. When she didn’t, he continued. “So I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“You built a fire for me?” Allie walked over to stand beside Vaughn. She wasn’t about to divulge that the time she was spending with him was the topic of her heated phone conversation with her brother. “That was incredibly sweet of you.”

“Well, you did bring me empanadas.” Vaughn shrugged. “Which reminds me... You ready to eat? I didn’t realize it before you arrived, but now I’m ravenous.” His eyes trailed down her body momentarily, and he sank his teeth into his lower lip before returning his gaze to the fire in front of them.

Allie’s skin tingled with awareness, and a warmth trailed down through her chest and made her sex feel damp and heavy.

He was talking about the food. Pull it together.

“I’m starving, too.” Any chill she’d felt from being outside without a jacket was long gone. “I need to heat up the arroz con pollo in the microwave and take out the salsa verde anyway. So grab a seat whenever you’re ready, and I’ll make our plates.”

“Please tell me it’s your mom’s homemade salsa verde.” Vaughn held praying hands up in front of his chest and briefly closed his eyes.

He was absolutely adorable.

As much as she loved her work in construction and interior design, there were few things that gave her more pleasure than cooking for the people she cared about and watching them enjoy her food.

“Of course, it’s homemade.” Allie grinned, moving toward the kitchen. She washed her hands again, then put the bowl filled with chicken and rice in the microwave. She pulled out

the container of homemade salsa verde. “Seems like you’re making some progress on that song.”

“I am.” Vaughn shifted his gaze from hers and jammed his hands into his jean pockets. “Maybe this place is good for me, after all.”

“Then maybe you should stay.” Allie glanced back at Vaughn momentarily before grabbing plates for them. “I realize this will be one of the top rental units once renovations are complete and that you’d need something bigger than your parents’ place. But you could always build your own place like Andraya and Kahlil are doing.”

Allie couldn’t be happier for her best friend despite the fact that they saw much less of each other since she and Kahl had gotten together.

“That sounds more appealing than you might realize.” Vaughn’s gaze was on her again, and its heat was unsettling. Yet, she couldn’t turn away from it. “But my life...the industry...most of it is based in LA or New York.”

“True. But lots of celebrities have chosen smaller, more laidback communities as their home base. Places like Austin or Jackson Hole, just a few hours away from here,” Allie noted.

Maybe she was being a little selfish in trying to convince Vaughn that he should build a house in Willowvale Springs. Because A: she’d love to design and build a home for famous Sin & Glory drummer, Vaughn Reed. And B: she liked having Vaughn around. But there was a more important reason she was pushing Vaughn to consider relocating to Willowvale Springs. He was more at ease than he’d been when he’d first rolled into town. She was suggesting that Vaughn stay because it seemed to be in the best interest of his mental and emotional health.

“I’d forgotten how beautiful and peaceful it is here.” Vaughn sat at the breakfast bar and rubbed his chin. “It’s kind of weird just being alone with the sounds of nature and my own thoughts.” He chuckled. “Relocating to Willowvale Springs wouldn’t be impossible, but it would be pretty damn

inconvenient. Especially once we start recording the next album or whenever I'm called on to do session work," he noted. "Getting session gigs is as much about availability as it is my talent or name recognition."

Allie tried her best not to pout about Vaughn gently shooting down her idea.

"You don't actually believe that a studio or artist would rather have some rando drummer just because he lives nearby when they could have Vaughn Reed of Sin & Glory, do you?" Allie asked incredulously.

When Vaughn didn't respond, she continued.

"Aside from that, Willowvale Springs is obviously inspiring you." She gestured toward the keyboard setup in the other room. "And it's a place where you'd get to spend time with the folks who've always felt like family. So would living here be less convenient? Maybe. But the trade-off would be totally worth it."

Vaughn chuckled and shook his head as he leaned forward on his elbows at the counter.

"You're as determined and persuasive as ever." Amusement lit his dark eyes as he watched her apportion the food onto their plates, then set them in place.

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Allie added ice to their glasses, then filled them with pineapple juice produced from her seemingly bottomless lunch bag.

"Never said it was bad." Vaughn chuckled. "It's just completely on brand for a Price."

Allie climbed onto her stool, then they dug into their food and Vaughn murmured with pleasure.

"Your mom is an amazing cook," Vaughn muttered through a mouthful of food. "Her food is better than I remember."

"Mamá is a phenomenal cook," Allie agreed, taking another bite of her food. "But I made the empanadas and the arroz con pollo."

“Wow.” Vaughn’s eyes widened as he shoveled more of the arroz con pollo into his mouth. “All those years you spent underfoot in the kitchen with your mom certainly paid off.”

“I suppose they did.” Allie couldn’t help smiling. There was something about seeing someone she really cared about enjoying the food she’d prepared for them. But this wasn’t a date. It was a working lunch with an old friend. She wasn’t auditioning to become Vaughn Reed’s latest flame, so she should really pull it together. “About those flooring choices. I assume you didn’t get the chance to look at them. I’ll send you the link to the warehouse so you can take your time and study the options. I know you said that you’re very visual and more tactile. So if there’s something you’d like a sample of, I can grab it while I’m there. I’m going to make the drive in a couple of days to pick out some flooring for another job.”

“I should just go with you.” Light flickered in Vaughn’s brown eyes.

“The warehouse is an hour and a half away in Cody,” Allie noted.

“I don’t mind.” Vaughn shrugged, shoveling more rice into his mouth. “Unless you do...sorry.” He set down his fork. “I shouldn’t have invited myself. You might be planning to meet another client. Or maybe make it a road trip with your boyfriend or something.”

Is he asking if I’m seeing someone?

“I’m not meeting another client. I’m just placing her order. And I wanted to go in person so I can shop the sale, see what options might work for the resort, and stock up on samples.” Allie turned on the stool and tried her best to rein in a smile. “And no, I’m not seeing anyone. How about you?”

“No. Me neither.” Vaughn picked up his second empanada and bit into it. Steam rose from the flaky, hand-rolled crust filled with minced beef; boiled, diced potatoes; onions; bell pepper; and garlic in a savory tomato sauce.

“If you’d like to ride with me to the warehouse...great.” Allie finally spoke again, filling the awkward silence between

them. “But I’m leaving at seven sharp on Friday.”

“In the morning?” Vaughn frowned, then held up a hand and laughed when Allie raised an eyebrow. “All right, fine. I’m the one who’s crashing your party, so seven it is.”

Allie nodded, then they resumed eating and went back to chatting. They had a lovely lunch together. She’d honestly meant to just have a quick meal with Vaughn then dash out to run some errands. But they were having such a great time, two hours had passed before she’d even realized it.

When the plumber called to see if Allie could come over and take a look at something, she held on to her smile for Vaughn’s benefit, promised to be right over and hoped to God this wouldn’t mean another huge hit to their renovation budget.

It was Vaughn’s money, not hers. Still, she was conscientious of how she spent her client’s money just as her father had taught her to be. That applied whether she was doing a bare-bones renovation or a high-end one like the revamping of the old resort into a new-age wellness spa.

“Gotta run.” Allie grabbed her purse and slipped on her jacket. “But I’ll see you on Friday at 7:00 a.m. sharp.” She pointed a finger.

“What about your lunch bag and the rest of the leftovers?” Vaughn followed her to the door.

“You could use some real food,” she said. She’d noted that his fridge, freezer, and trash can were evidence of all the fast food and convenience foods he’d been subsisting on since his return. “Help yourself. I’ll grab the lunch bag and my glass storage containers when I pick you up on Friday at—”

“Seven sharp,” Vaughn said in an exaggerated tone meant to mimic her voice. He even rocked his head from side-to-side for added effect.

“Watch it, sucka.” She punched Vaughn in the arm, playfully.

He broke into a belly laugh. “Not you going full Aunt Esther on me.”

She'd loved *Sanford & Son* as a kid and had often used the retort on her brothers, Vaughn, and any classmate who was on the verge of seeing the flip side of her usually sweet disposition. It was the equivalent of a warning shot.

"Hey, if it ain't broke, why fix it?" Allie shrugged innocently. "I'd better go before someone puts an APB out on me. Try eating something that doesn't come from a fast food joint or out of a freezer box every now and again, huh?"

Allie hugged him, then lifted onto her toes and dropped a kiss on his whiskered cheek. When she pulled away, their eyes met for a moment. Her belly flipped and her pulse raced. There seemed to be a crackle of energy in the air between them.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and smiled. Then she turned to leave. Just as Allie rounded the corner toward the main building, she glanced back and caught a glimpse of Vaughn. He was standing on the porch staring after her, his hand pressed to where she'd kissed his cheek.

Allie tried to calm the fluttering in her belly. But there was something happening between her and Vaughn.

Whether it was desire, simple curiosity, or the potential for something more, Allie was intrigued by her growing interest in Vaughn Reed. And once this job was over, she planned to find out exactly which one it was.

Five

Vaughn sat on a rickety, metal stool and sifted through samples of wood flooring at the warehouse. It helped to be able to see and touch the flooring options. But it was hard to concentrate while he was watching Allie out of his peripheral vision. She was several yards away talking with one of the salesmen. The older man seemed as taken with Allie as Vaughn was.

He couldn't blame him.

Allie was dressed simply. Minimal makeup. A pair of black skinny jeans. An oversize cream-colored top tucked into the front of her pants but not the back. A knee-length camel duster coat. Matching camel booties. A pair of oversize, tortoiseshell shades. Yet, she looked effortlessly cool and more glamorous than any of the actresses or fellow musicians who'd accompanied him on the red carpet over the course of his career.

Her shiny, shoulder-length, loose, natural curls had smelled like honey and pomegranate when she'd sailed into the store past him with the elegance of an angel floating on a cloud. Vaughn could swear that every pair of eyes within a sightline of that door had focused on Allie. And while he knew he didn't have the right to, he'd instantly felt a twinge of jealousy.

It was ridiculous. He and Allie weren't involved; couldn't get involved. And even if they were, there was no quicker way to lose a woman like Allie Price than by behaving like an insecure simpleton.

He tried to tell himself that he was just being a protective older brother figure to her. But there was no point in lying to himself. Because the truth was that he'd been enamored with Allie since the day he'd returned to town. The more time they'd spent together, the fonder he'd become of her.

Allie was a gifted interior designer. She had a clear vision for the project and impeccable organizational skills. She had a warm, affable personality that drew people in and made them fall over themselves to please her and earn her praise. Yet, she was assertive when she needed to be. And she wasn't afraid to call out the men she worked with on their bullshit, even if they towered over her in size.

He'd never really considered that he might have a *type*. But getting to know the all-grown-up version of Allie Price, he was pretty sure that she was everything he ever wanted in one tidy little package wrapped up neatly in a bow.

"Find what you're looking for?" Allie was staring at him from where she stood, and now so was her companion.

The man didn't look happy that Allie had interrupted his inept attempt at flirting with her to check on Vaughn.

"I don't know." Vaughn dragged his hand through his hair and heaved a sigh. "I've seen so many samples at this point. They're all beginning to look alike."

The man rolled his eyes and folded his arms.

"I know it's a lot to take in. That's why I suggested you allow me to whittle down the choices and bring you a few select samples." Allie smiled at him sympathetically. "But no worries. I'll be there in a sec, and we'll figure it out."

Vaughn nodded, a sense of relief washing over him. Maybe he was being too hands-on with this project. But the wellness spa needed to be profitable for him, a valuable addition to the town *and* a space worthy of Hank Carson's legacy.

"Thanks, Allie."

Maybe Vaughn was being needy. But at least he'd been mature enough not to flip off the old man, who seemed irritated that Allie was abandoning their conversation to take care of him.

"I need to see about my client, Bill. But if we need anything else, I'll be sure to let you know." Allie placed a hand on the man's arm and offered a warm smile before joining him at the table.

Allie climbed onto the stool beside him and set her large, trapezium-shaped, black leather tote bag on the counter. She slid her shades on top of her head, grabbed one of the sample books and flipped through the various types of wood flooring.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to break up your conversation with your friend over there,” he said, his eyes on the sample book.

“It’s no trouble, Vaughn. That’s why we’re here.” She flipped another page.

“Pretty sure your friend would disagree.” He glanced up at the man. Bill was glaring back at him.

Allie tried her best not to laugh. Who would have thought that her reluctant smirk could be even sexier than her million-watt grin? It honestly should be illegal to possess the ability to render a man speechless with the slightest hint of a smile.

“Bill is the second-generation owner of the flooring warehouse. He’s harmless,” Allie assured him. She turned another page. “And he’ll be fine. There are plenty of other customers for him to chop it up with.”

“But none as beautiful as you,” he noted.

Allie flashed a shy smile that made Vaughn’s heart feel like it might explode in his chest.

“It isn’t like that,” Allie said.

“You sure? ’Cause the guy is staring at me like he’s planning a covert attack.” Vaughn was only half-joking, but he wouldn’t be turning his back on the man any time soon. He flipped a page.

Allie chuckled quietly. “I’m pretty sure he’s trying to figure out where he’s seen you before. Don’t celebs usually leave the house in a baseball cap and dark glasses when they don’t want to be recognized?”

“Never been much for hats,” Vaughn responded. “And I’m having a hard enough time telling the difference in these samples. I don’t think dark shades would help my cause.” He leaned closer to Allie.

Both of them broke into subdued laughter, not wanting to make it obvious to Bill that he was the topic of their conversation.

“Fair.” Allie turned toward him on her stool, and her knee brushed his thigh.

God, she smells amazing.

He turned to face her, too. With Allie seated this close, he was pretty sure that his pulse rate had doubled. He mentally chastised himself for briefly imagining what it would feel like to lean in and get a taste of her shimmering, gloss-covered lips.

Vaughn swallowed hard, then met Allie’s gaze again. A knowing grin spread across her gorgeous face as she raked her hair over one shoulder. Neither of them spoke as she studied him. It was as if she was daring him to lean in and kiss her. Something he wouldn’t put past the bold, audacious woman who’d gotten into her share of misadventures as a girl

“Maybe we should order lunch. Got a feeling we’re going to be here a while,” Vaughn said.

“Actually... I was thinking that we should go with one of these three options.” She arranged three samples of tongue and groove hardwood flooring in front of him: a warm, golden hickory; a khaki-colored oak; and a light gray Canadian Ash.

“They’re all nice.” Vaughn ran his hand over each sample. “But very different.”

“True. It would probably help if you saw the flooring with my ideas for the paint color and the kitchen and bathroom tile. That will require a trip just up the road. If you’re okay with us selecting one of these three options, we can head there now,” she said.

Vaughn studied them. He’d been sitting there for nearly an hour and Allie had floated in and selected three perfect options in a matter of minutes. She not only knew her craft, but she also had a good sense of what he liked.

“It’s between these two for sure.” Vaughn indicated the hickory and oak samples. “I prefer the soothing, warm tones of

those to the cooler gray tone.”

“Excellent. We’ll get samples of these two that we can take to the granite yard, and I already have samples of the paint.” Allie hopped down from the stool and beckoned Bill over. She asked him to pull together a list of items.

“Yes, ma’am.” Bill scribbled on a pad he’d produced from his back pocket, along with a pen. He called over a younger man and asked him to pull the order together. Bill cocked his head and folded his arms as he studied Vaughn. “Pretty sure I’ve seen you somewhere before, young fella.”

Young fella? Seriously?

Vaughn scratched at the wiry gray strands in his beard. He hadn’t been called a young fella since he was in his twenties.

“I get that a lot. Got one of those familiar faces, I suppose.” Vaughn shrugged and tried his best to hold back a smile despite Allie’s snicker.

“That you do,” Bill said.

“There was something else I meant to ask you, Bill.” Allie shot Vaughn a pointed look as she grabbed her purse. Then she led the way toward another section of the warehouse. She called to him over her shoulder, “I’ll meet you in the car in a few.”

Vaughn took his cue and disappeared into the parking lot, glad he’d insisted on driving. He slipped into the rental luxury SUV and waited for Allie to emerge. The entire time, his wayward brain obsessed about whether Bill had Allie cornered somewhere in the store or if he was hugging her again, as he had when they’d first arrived and Allie had handed him a container from her trunk, presumably filled with some sort of food.

Finally, Allie appeared with the young store employee in tow, who loaded two boxes into the back of the SUV.

Allie climbed inside and studied him for a moment before shaking her head and smiling.

“What?” Vaughn couldn’t help laughing. There was something about the woman’s smile that instantly put him at ease and brought him a sense of peace.

“Got one of those familiar faces, I suppose’?” she said, mimicking the tone and cadence of his voice with a shake of her head as she secured her seat belt. “I thought celebrities lived for being recognized.”

“Not all of us live for the spotlight, Allie,” Vaughn noted. “For most of us, it’s more about doing the thing that we love. Yes, there are definitely some perks to fame and notoriety, but it also comes with a price. Ceding any notion of privacy and anonymity is a part of the cost, but very few of us live for fame or recognition. The folks who do? Those are the ones who either self-destruct or take the biggest emotional dive once the fame comes to an end. And it almost always does,” he added.

Vaughn heaved a quiet sigh, then forced a smile, feeling like he’d brought down the mood. He wasn’t chastising Allie. He was just being honest. Too honest, maybe. Her radiant smile disappeared.

“I never thought about it that way. Sorry if I—”

“There’s nothing to apologize for, Al.” Vaughn placed a hand over her forearm, propped on the center console. “Maybe I shouldn’t have responded quite so honestly.”

“I like getting to know the real you,” A smile slid across Allie’s face. “You were a staple at our house. But now I realize that there’s a lot I didn’t know about you. And what I did know... It’s all kind of hazy, being sifted through the rose-colored glasses of a little girl with a huge crush on her older brother’s best friend.”

Allie’s smile deepened as she met his gaze again. “Besides, that was a long time ago. It’s nice getting to know the man you are now as opposed to the enigmatic boy I once knew or the man portrayed in the media.”

“I appreciate that you recognize that there’s a difference,” Vaughn said.

It was common for people to assume they knew exactly who he was based on the media portrayal of him as the “bad boy drummer of Sin & Glory.” It fit a predetermined narrative and was based on mistakes he’d made as a young adult living on his own in LA and navigating a near-meteoric rise to fame before he had the foresight and experience needed to handle it.

“And I feel the same. It’s been great getting to know you too, Allie. The industry can be crazy, so it’s nice...stabilizing even...to have friends outside of the industry. People who are there to remind you that some of the fucked-up shit we’ve come to accept living in this world isn’t exactly healthy,” Vaughn said.

“I’m glad you consider me a friend now, and not just Rey’s little sister.” Allie’s eyes glinted in the midday sunlight.

For a moment, Vaughn felt disoriented, as if he’d fallen into the inky depths of those dark eyes, narrowed by her impish smile.

When she’d been a kid, that smile had put her brothers on alert that she’d had some devious plan or was congratulating herself for playing a practical joke on one of them—hiding their favorite pair of sneakers or worse...filling them with half a can of shaving cream. But that was a million years ago. Now, he couldn’t look into those eyes without his heart racing and his pulse pounding.

No, he definitely didn’t see her as Rey’s kid sister anymore. And while he saw Allie in a completely different light now, he doubted that Rey’s protective stance had much changed. So he needed to act accordingly.

Vaughn removed his hand from Allie’s arm and cleared his throat. “As your *friend*—” he emphasized the word as a reminder to them that this was a friendship and nothing more, regardless of the tightness in his groin or the zing of electricity that zipped up and down his spine “—I would’ve been happy to carry your things out to the car,” Vaughn told her.

“I would never ask a *client*—” she emphasized her chosen noun to describe their relationship “—to schlep around stuff for me.” Allie slid her shades back on, then glanced at the time

on her phone. “We should get over to the granite yard before it gets too busy.”

“Which way are we headed?”

“About five miles up the road in that direction.” Allie pointed.

Vaughn started the car and they drove for a few minutes in silence before she spoke again.

“You weren’t jealous of Bill, were you?” Allie kept her gaze on the terrain passing by the window.

“Jealous of Bill?” He said it as if it were a preposterous notion despite it being true. “I don’t even know the guy, Al. Besides, it’s not like you’re *with* him.”

“I’m with you,” Allie was saying simultaneously.

“Right,” Vaughn agreed. “You’re not into him, and you’re not *with* me. So why would I be jealous?”

“Solid logic.” Allie nodded. “But then, one might wonder why you were glaring at the man and making him uncomfortable?” She cocked her head and hiked an eyebrow before returning her attention to the road ahead. “You’re worse than my dad and brothers. Do I need to leave you in the car when we get to the granite yard?”

“No, of course not,” he said. “And I’m sorry if I was acting —”

“Territorial?” She looked at him again.

“I was thinking overly protective,” Vaughn said. “But okay, we can go with what you said.” He heaved a quiet sigh. “I just wanted to make sure the guy wasn’t being creepy and invading your space. Is that so wrong?”

“You never were a good liar.” Allie shook her head, then laughed at his expression of outrage. She turned toward him again. “I laugh at a few of his jokes and occasionally bring the guy some pastelitos or queso fundido with chorizo and he keeps me in the loop about new products and offers us a great price.” She shrugged. “Everyone goes home happy.”

“Ouch. I thought I was special.” Vaughn placed a hand over his heart.

“You are. That’s for damn sure.” Allie shook her head and laughed. “But if you must know, *friend*, Bill’s wife died a few years ago after a long and brutal terminal illness. He was so heartbroken. I know a little home cooking and friendly conversation won’t ever replace what he lost. But I like to think that my visits bring a tiny bit of happiness to him and his son.”

“That was his son?” Vaughn groaned, thinking of the emo kid who’d hauled Allie’s stuff out to the car. “Shit. Now I feel like a complete asshole.”

“Good.” Allie scrolled through her phone. “Cause you kind of were.”

She wasn’t wrong. And though he should feel insulted by Allie’s direct hit, he didn’t. Because she was right. He loved that she didn’t hold back the truth to boost his ego or spare his feelings. But rather than creating the distance between them that he should, he was even more drawn to her.

* * *

Allie almost felt bad about the guilt she’d just laid on Vaughn for behaving like a jealous lover over her chat with Bill. But the last thing she needed was another man who behaved as if he’d been personally assigned as her guard dog.

She already had a family full of alpha males who thought it was their job to protect her from any man who came sniffing around. Particularly since her last long-term relationship had flamed out so spectacularly and very, *very* publicly. She didn’t need Vaughn joining the crew.

Aside from their working relationship, all she wanted from him was friendship. Because the more time they spent together, the more she’d gotten to know the man Vaughn Reed had become instead of the boy she’d adored or the rocker she’d idolized as a teen. She was getting to know what felt like the real Vaughn.

In many ways, he was much as he ever was. Thoughtful. Kind. More cerebral than her brothers had been at that age. But then again, Vaughn had lived many lives before he'd arrived in Willowvale Springs, hadn't he?

"Can I ask you something, Vaughn?"

"Of course. Ask me anything."

Allie resumed walking among the slabs of marble and granite, and Vaughn fell into step beside her. "You were once such a big part of our lives. Yet, I feel like I know everything and nothing about you."

"What do you mean?" Lines furrowed Vaughn's forehead as he studied her face.

"You never discuss your life before you came to Willowvale Springs."

Allie stopped walking when she realized that Vaughn was no longer beside her.

When she turned to look back at him, he stood frozen with a pained look etched on his handsome face. Allie's heart ached for him, and she immediately regretted having given in to her curious nature which her brothers preferred to call plain old nosy.

"I'm sorry. I should've taken the hint." Allie walked back toward Vaughn, the words tripping over her tongue and her cheeks feeling flushed. "You obviously don't talk about that time in your life because you don't want to. Just forget that I ___"

"No." He rubbed his chin and started to move forward again. "We were talking about building a friendship as adults, right? So it's a fair question." Vaughn shoved his hands through his chin-length brown hair, which he'd worn loose.

The movement exposed the gray hair at his temples, which gave him a sexy grown-man look that she was particularly drawn to. Then he shoved his hands into the pockets of his rock-star-worthy skinny jeans. Slim enough to qualify as skinny without being tight enough to show everything.

“You’re right. I don’t talk about it because it was a really tough time for me. My birth dad was in the military and died before I really have much of a memory of him.” Vaughn clutched at the jeweled pendant of the sun and moon hanging around his neck. He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple working. “My birth mom was...*amazing*.” A soft smile lifted one corner of his mouth and exposed crinkles around his eyes. “But she and my dad were both only children, and we didn’t have any other family. So when she got really sick with leukemia, the time came when she realized that she didn’t have much longer. She wanted to be sure I’d go to a good home and had me placed in foster care. She didn’t want me to be there for the end with no one to support me. So she did everything she could to ensure I ended up in a good situation.”

“And were you placed in a good situation?” Allie asked, despite being reasonably sure she knew the answer.

Vaughn stopped and his shoulders tightened. He ran a hand down a gorgeous, polished slab of light gray quartz marbled with darker tones of gray. He seemed to need a breather from telling the painful story, so she’d wait until he was ready to continue.

“That’s pretty. It’s a good option for the bathrooms,” Allie said.

Vaughn nodded his agreement, then continued down the row.

“Things aren’t always as they appear,” Vaughn said, finally. “My mother believed she was putting me in a good situation. I’d like to believe that the caseworker did, too. But the couple I was placed with...they weren’t the same when it was just us and them. So no, it wasn’t a particularly good situation.” Vaughn flexed and tightened one fist, then shook it.

There were a million questions Allie wanted to ask, but she wouldn’t push Vaughn or cause him further pain. So rather than asking any of the questions racing through her brain, she pointed out a lovely slab of travertine in a creamy, golden hue punctuated by hints of brown and gray.

Vaughn nodded his approval, indicating that they should add it to the list of possibilities. Allie made note of it in the leather-bound, black traveler's notebook engraved with her full name, her constant companion on these sorts of exploratory shopping trips with clients.

"I was an angry, sullen kid. I was mad that my mom had dropped me there instead of permitting me to stay with her. I knew she was sick, but I was so fixated on the idea that she would eventually get better. So I didn't really understand that she'd done what she felt was best for me. It wasn't until my adoptive mother was sick and we talked about it that I realized what a heart-wrenching choice that must've been for my mom. It must've been agonizing for her to leave this world knowing she was leaving her only child behind and having no idea if I'd be okay."

His voice felt distant and his eyes were filled with unshed tears.

Allie swallowed hard, her heart breaking for both Vaughn and his birth parents who had never gotten to discover who he'd become. She regretted putting her shades atop her head again. Fat tears clouded her vision and spilled down her cheeks before she could stop them.

"I'm so sorry, Vaughn."

When he turned toward her, Allie lunged forward and hugged him tight.

He froze, his muscles stiffening beneath her palms. Then he released a quiet sigh as he rested his chin atop her head and wrapped his arms around her.

"There's no need to be sorry, baby girl." Vaughn's deep voice was reassuring. "In fact, thank you for asking about my parents. For a long time, I buried my memories of my birth parents out of the misguided belief that missing them was being unappreciative of my adoptive parents. Besides, thinking of them just hurt too damn much. So it was easier not to, but then I'd feel guilty about acting as if they'd never existed."

They stood like that—him comforting her as much as she was trying to comfort him. Finally, she slipped out of his arms and wiped carefully beneath her teary eyes, thankful she'd chosen to wear waterproof mascara.

There were times when he'd looked so pensive as a teen. She'd wondered what had been going on inside that head of his. And now she knew.

"I'm glad you found your way to the Reeds and to Willowvale Springs." She offered a small but sincere smile. "According to my mom, becoming your parents changed their lives. It was a dream come true for them."

"A dream come true?" Vaughn huffed as they resumed their walk among the large slabs of expensive stone. "That's a bit of a stretch."

"No, it isn't," Allie insisted. "I once overheard your mom tell mine how lucky they were to have such an amazing son. She said you were almost too perfect."

"I definitely wasn't perfect," Vaughn said. "Then or now. But I can understand why my mom might've felt that way. Especially in comparison to your brothers who were always getting into shit."

They both laughed because Vaughn wasn't wrong. The Price brothers were always up to some sort of mischief or other. Especially the older three.

"Compared to Manny, Reynaldo, and Rafael, you were an angel." She guided him toward a row of travertine slabs with much bolder designs and coloring."

"Maybe." Vaughn chuckled. "But it wasn't because I was some inherently angelic child. Everything I did or didn't do was a calculated decision. From making my bed in the morning and volunteering to do the dishes or passing on whatever wild scheme your brothers were contemplating... It was all a part of this desperate need I had to be a *good* kid."

It felt as if a light bulb had lit up over Allie's head. She stopped suddenly, and Vaughn stopped, too. She turned to

study the handsome face that was now more weathered with age and a life she couldn't even begin to imagine.

“When I heard your mother singing your praises that day, I remember being jealous that your mom thought you were perfect when mine was always telling me I wasn't being ladylike enough, that my skirt was wrinkled, my face was dirty, or that I wasn't crimping the edges of the empanadas correctly,” Allie admitted. “But you weren't trying to be a Goody Two-shoes. You were trying to be the perfect kid because you were afraid of upsetting your parents. That maybe they wouldn't want you anymore if you were anything less than perfect.”

Vaughn nodded solemnly. He looked relieved. As if someone had taken a weight off his shoulders.

“The families that you were in before...did they...” Allie swallowed hard, not wanting to say the words aloud.

Did they hurt you if they thought you were being bad?

Vaughn stretched his hand and flexed his fingers—something he'd done earlier when she'd asked about his life in foster care. But this time he gazed down at his hand as he did it. Finally, he looked up at her again.

“At that first foster home, the guy shoved me hard because he said I was being unappreciative. I tumbled down the stairs and broke this arm.” He flexed his hand again. “His wife, who was actually really nice, convinced me to tell the social worker that I'd slipped and fallen down the stairs. I did it because she convinced me that if I told the truth, I could end up somewhere much worse. And that the other kids—who were younger than me—might, too.”

Allie slipped her hand into the one he'd been flexing mindlessly as he spoke. Vaughn stilled.

“You did what you needed to do to survive and to protect the other children there,” Allie said quietly, conscious of the other people wandering around the granite yard. “Don't feel guilty about it. You were just a kid, and that couple...*they* were supposed to be protecting *you*.”

Vaughn lifted the back of her hand to his mouth, pressing a brief kiss there before releasing it.

“In my head, I know that’s true.” Vaughn tapped two fingers to his temple. “But in my heart—” he placed his palm over his chest “—it feels like I should’ve done a lot more.”

Allie couldn’t begin to imagine the mental anguish Vaughn had suffered because of that experience. Just considering it put every childhood complaint she’d ever had into perspective.

“But it’s nice to hear someone else say it.” Vaughn started walking again. “Believe me, I paid my therapist a hell of a lot of money for just that.”

He laughed bitterly, the pain and resentment evident.

“How about this?” Allie pointed to a slab of travertine in a khaki color with bold ribbons of deep browns and slate gray running through it.

“This is the one.” Vaughn ran his large palm over the surface of the stone reverently. “It’s perfect.”

Allie couldn’t help wishing it was her skin Vaughn was fondling so admiringly.

“Excellent choice.” She pushed the thought from her head. “This is the one I had in mind. Glad to know we’re on the same page. I’ll let them know we want this one.”

“Seems you would’ve done just fine on this trip without me,” Vaughn said.

“There are still plenty of chances for me to be completely wrong about what you want.”

Vaughn’s gaze met hers, and for a moment, time seemed to slow and there was no one in the world but the two of them. The heat in his eyes seemed to liquefy her insides and make her legs suddenly feel unsteady. Her pulse sped up and she tried her best to ignore the jolt of electricity that ran down her spine and reminded her just how close she was standing to the man she’d fantasized about regularly as a teenager.

“I definitely know what I want when I see it.” Vaughn’s tone was breathy and full of meaning as his gaze trailed down

her body momentarily. He cleared his throat and took a step back. “But you obviously know exactly what I want, too.” He folded his arms over his chest. “So the floor tile is this way?”

Allie nodded blankly, rendered speechless momentarily. Her heart beat like a drum as she met Vaughn’s gaze.

“Great.” Vaughn placed a hand on her low back as he guided her toward the sign that denoted the location of the tile section. “After this, I’m taking you to lunch.”

“You don’t need to—”

“I know...you would never allow a client to pay for lunch,” he said the words before she could finish them. “But as an old friend, I appreciate everything you’ve done, and I insist on treating you. After all, you’re not just my interior decorator, Allie. Seems you were onto something with that whole muse thing.”

It’d been a couple of days since she’d brought Vaughn lunch and he’d played her a few bars of the song he’d been working on.

“Wait...did you finish your song?” she asked excitedly.

“I did.” Vaughn nodded proudly. “It was the first song I’ve finished in months. And I was so inspired that I was able to write a couple more.”

“That’s fantastic, Vaughn. What happens next?”

“Since these songs are for another group, I wanted to make sure I was headed in the right direction. I called a few of the group members up and played them a little of each of the songs.”

“And?” Allie was wholeheartedly invested in whether the group liked the song she’d somehow inspired Vaughn to write.

“They loved all three songs and gave me the go-ahead.” Vaughn beamed. “So the least I can do is spring for lunch.”

“Wow. Interior decorator. Contractor. Rock muse...”

“Don’t forget badass goddess and empanada fairy.” Vaughn’s eyes danced as his handsome face split with a grin.

“You’re going to need a longer business card.”

“Is professional muse even a thing?” Allie asked. “If so, what exactly is the going pay for it these days?”

They both broke into laughter and an older couple gave them a pointed look.

“Another Price trying to get me in trouble,” Vaughn teased.

“You love it.” She elbowed him in the side.

“Damn right I do.” Vaughn’s smile deepened, and there was something in his eyes that made her chest expand.

Vaughn’s phone beeped with a message, and he pulled it from his back pocket and looked at the screen. He chuckled. “Speak of the devil. It’s a text message from Rey.”

“My brother’s ears must’ve been burning.” Allie ran her hand over a marble tile in an elongated hexagon design. “What does he want?”

“He invited me to your parents’ place for dinner.” Vaughn didn’t seem as pleased by the invite as she’d hoped.

“You don’t want to come to dinner?” She tried not to sound too disappointed.

“That’s not it. Tomorrow, I’m headed back to LA for a few days. So I can’t come this Sunday.”

“Oh.” Allie tried not to sound disappointed that Vaughn was heading back to LA. “Then come the following Sunday.”

Vaughn still seemed hesitant.

“Is there something else?” she asked.

“I know your parents are just being polite. They probably still think of me as that twice-orphaned kid they need to look out for.”

“If you think that my parents are just being polite, I should tell you that Mamá is upset that you haven’t been by to visit her yet.” Allie raised a brow. “So I suggest you bring her a big bouquet of flowers. White roses are her favorite.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Vaughn chuckled. He typed out a quick reply to her brother’s text message. The phone quickly dinged again with Reynaldo’s response. Vaughn held up the phone. “He says next Sunday will be fine. So guess who’s coming to dinner?”

Allie couldn’t help laughing thinking of the movie *Guess Who*, where Zoe Saldana’s character had surprised her parents by bringing home her fiancé portrayed by Ashton Kutcher. A remake in reverse of the brilliant Sidney Poitier movie *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?*

Vaughn’s eyes widened and he looked panic-stricken. “Not that I’d be coming as your—”

“Fiancé?” Allie elbowed him. “Relax, Vaughn. I think I’d know if we were engaged,” she stage-whispered behind her open palm. They both laughed, and the tension in Vaughn’s shoulders seemed to ease. “And don’t worry, I have no intention of asking you to marry me again.” She grinned. “But it’ll be nice to have you over to the house for dinner.”

“Hey, you know how much I love your mother’s cooking.” Vaughn rubbed his belly. “I adored my mother and I appreciate everything she ever did for me. But that tuna casserole just didn’t hit quite the same as your mamá’s Sancocho de siete carnes.” Vaughn made the chef’s kiss gesture and seemed to be in heaven just thinking about the seven-meat deluxe Dominican version of the meat and root vegetable stew that was her mother’s specialty. “Takes me back to my roots and reminds me of the delicious meals my birth mother used to make.”

“That’s right. She was from... Argentina, right?”

On Vaughn’s sixteenth birthday, Mamá had gone all out helping Vaughn’s mother prepare a traditional Argentinian asado. The elaborate barbecue was Argentina’s national dish but was more like a social event. They’d invited half the town because his parents had wanted to cheer Vaughn up. He’d been missing his birth parents on the eve of such an important birthday.

“That’s right.” Vaughn grinned, seemingly pleased that Allie remembered. “Anyway, I just didn’t want to be an inconvenience. I know there are a lot more people at your family’s dinner table these days. But if you’re really sure your parents don’t mind, I look forward to dinner.”

Vaughn looked at the time, then shoved the phone into his back pocket. “Speaking of food, let’s pick out some tile so I can take you to lunch.”

He slipped his hand into Allie’s and tugged her toward the tile displays. Holding Vaughn’s hand for the second time that day felt like the most natural thing in the world. Like her hand was made to fit in his.

Six

After a week in LA, Vaughn had returned to Willowvale Springs. While in LA, he'd met with the other members of Sin & Glory about possible replacements for Steven as the lead singer. They'd also discussed a new direction for the band's look and sound. The remaining members hadn't been able to come to a consensus on either point. And they'd been just as stalled in their efforts to get backing for the new album, given the way the group had imploded in the midst of a sold-out worldwide tour before. To say the plans had been frustrating would be a gross understatement.

But the entire week hadn't been a complete bust. He'd sat in on a few live sessions for small, intimate performances by Liza Jaymes—an old friend he'd dated before his marriage to Eva. Like Sin & Glory, Liza was trying to make a comeback. She'd looked and sounded better than ever after spending a few tough years in and out of rehab and terrible romantic and business relationships.

The performances were sold out and received rave reviews. It made him hopeful that Sin & Glory would get the same sort of reception from their fans once they could finally get all of the pieces into place.

It had felt a bit strange to be back in his house in LA. Normally, after time away, he looked forward to returning to his Hollywood Hills home. But instead, he'd found himself looking forward to his return to the little cabin in Willowvale Springs that had become his home away from home. More specifically, he'd found himself missing the bright smile and lovely face that always made him feel a sense of peace and joy.

He and Allie had spoken on the phone several times over the course of the week. Vaughn had called to get regular updates on the project and to run ideas past Allie about the second phase. And upon his return, once he'd put away his

luggage, the first thing he'd done was walk over to the main building to check up on the progress of the project.

The possibility of getting studio backing seemed slimmer after his recent trip to LA. So it was a strong possibility that the resort would be funding the recording of the album. That only made Vaughn more anxious about getting the initial phases of the project completed quickly and on budget.

He'd been disappointed that while Allie's crew had made some progress in the week since he'd left, they weren't as far along as he'd hoped. He'd posed a variety of questions to the men he'd encountered working about the progress.

Vaughn returned to his cabin and sat on the front steps and surveyed the land around him. The old pool was just a few yards from his cabin. The heated pool was older than he was, but it was still functional and saw a lot more business than the resort did. Members of the community paid for a membership. So while he'd closed down the resort during the renovation, he'd agreed to keep the heated outdoor pool running. But in the next phase, they'd be doing both a functional and aesthetic remodeling including reconfiguring the pool's shape, updating the surface tile to something that felt more modern, and adding features that high-end guests would expect.

Vaughn pulled out his phone and jotted down a few notes about the pool to go over with Allie. He'd been so engrossed in typing his notes and looking at examples of pool renovations that he hadn't heard her approaching until she was a few steps away.

"Hey, Allie, I was just about to call you."

"Why does that not surprise me?" Allie sank onto the step beside him and leaned back on her elbows.

"Okay. I can see that you're a bit annoyed." Vaughn held up an open palm as Allie assessed him with narrowed eyes.

How is it that she managed to be gorgeous even when it looked as if flames might erupt from her ears?

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Allie asked incredulously as she hiked one perfectly arched eyebrow and pursed her full

lips.

Vaughn tried not to laugh at the sarcastic remark, but he was doing a terrible job of hiding his amusement. “I know I’ve been calling about the project quite a bit. But I swear I’m not intentionally trying to be a pain in the ass.”

“Okay, if you’re not *trying* to be a pain in my ass, why is it that you’re questioning my guys and calling me nearly every day that you were away to check up on me?”

“I’m not checking up on you per se...” He totally was, but just not in the sense she’d meant it. He wasn’t checking up on Allie the interior decorator or contractor. He’d been checking in with the woman he’d started to look forward to chatting with nearly every day over coffee or lunch.

While he was away, yes, he’d been concerned about the project. But a part of him *needed* to hear Allie’s voice. It was an instant balm that soothed him and brought a smile to his face in moments when it felt as if everything else was going wrong.

“I just want to make sure I’m doing whatever I can to speed the project along,” he assured her.

“Well, it feels like you’re undermining me with the guys. At the very least, you’re causing confusion. In fact, I came here from another project because one of them called me. He said you weren’t happy with our progress.”

“That’s not exactly what I said. I was just surprised that we aren’t further along—”

“Before you left town you were gushing about how I get your aesthetic and seemed to know what you want. A week later you’re questioning everything I do. Do you still not trust me?” Allie sounded hurt and there was a pained look in her dark eyes.

“That isn’t it at all, Allie.” Vaughn sat up straight, his arms folded over his knees as he assessed the beautiful woman seated beside him. “Of course, I trust you.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.” Allie’s voice was tight.

“I’m not questioning your abilities. I’m just very eager for this project to come out just as we envisioned it. Your designs are brilliant, Allie. I just—”

“Don’t trust that *I* can execute them.” Allie jabbed a thumb into her chest. “Not like Rey, or Manny, or my dad could. Or any member of my family who pees standing.”

The searing disappointment in her dark eyes reminded Vaughn of when Allie was ten and he’d had to sit her down and tell her he couldn’t marry her, and she needed to stop telling everyone that he would.

He’d broken her little heart then and he was pretty sure he’d disappointed her just as much now. Only this time, sneaking her a bag of her favorite Goetze Old-Fashioned Caramel Creams Candy probably wouldn’t resolve the issue.

“This isn’t about me not trusting you because you’re a woman, Allie. If this were Rey, or Manny, or your dad, I’d be just as much of a stickler about the details because this project means a lot to me and to the town. And I don’t take it lightly that Hank left me this *incredible* gift.” He gestured to the land around them.

Allie didn’t respond. She turned to look out at the pool. “You certainly didn’t hover over Rey like this when he was renovating your parents’ house.” She glared at him accusingly.

“To be fair, Sin & Glory was on tour in Europe at the time. I had my assistant Cherry managing the renovation for me. She actually did pop into town and take photos,” he said. “And believe me, I was as involved as possible from nearly five thousand miles away. Your brother was none too pleased about it at the time, I assure you.” Vaughn chuckled. “I’m surprised he didn’t tell you that.”

“And admit that he’s not perfect?” Allie snorted like she had when she was a kid. “There would be *zero* chance of that.”

“You’re being hard on your brother, aren’t you?”

Despite considering the Prices family, Vaughn wasn’t blood and had no right to interfere. But Rey was the closest thing he’d had to a brother. He couldn’t not speak up if he could

help smooth over whatever was going on between him and Allie.

“Well, Rey is hard on me.” Allie folded her arms. “He doesn’t trust that I can handle things on my own. And if I make a mistake, he *never* lets me forget it.”

There was something in Allie’s eyes. Something she wasn’t saying. Vaughn wanted to know what it was, but he wouldn’t press. He shifted the conversation back to her initial concerns.

“Look, Allie, about my hyper interest in this project... I know that I’ve been away a long time,” Vaughn said. “But Willowvale Springs and this place—” he indicated the ground beneath him “—mean a lot to me. This town will *always* feel like home. A piece of my heart resides here.” He pressed his palm to his chest.

“If Willowvale Springs, and presumably the people you left behind here, mean so much to you—” she studied his face “—why haven’t you come back before now?”

Vaughn scratched at his beard and heaved a sigh. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be forthcoming with Allie about why he hadn’t returned to Willowvale Springs. It was more a matter of his own need to avoid dwelling on his reasons for staying away.

“If I’m being honest with myself, something I clearly don’t enjoy—” Vaughn laughed bitterly “—I guess I’ve stayed away because the desire to avoid the sad memories has always been a hell of a lot stronger than the pull to revisit the happy ones.”

“I’m sorry about your parents, Vaughn.”

Allie’s expression softened, and there was such genuine affection in her sweet tone. Tranquility and warmth spread through his chest as she placed a gentle hand on the tattoo on his right forearm.

It was an exact replica of the misshapen heart and names carved in the tree in the backyard of his adoptive parents’ home. Vaughn had insisted that Rey and his crew keep the old tree—despite the landscaping nightmare it had caused.

Vaughn covered her hand with his much larger one.

“Thanks, Al.” He squeezed her hand, then let go of it, afraid that if he didn’t release it right away, he might not let go of it at all. “Like I said, I have a lot of good memories here. I’m lucky the Reeds saved me. That they loved me like I was their own flesh and blood. But before I met your brother and became an honorary member of your family... I was a pretty lonely kid,” he admitted. “I would’ve done anything to have a house filled with siblings. Even annoying ones like Rey.” He nudged her shoulder.

Allie huffed and raked her fingers through her glossy curls—a feature he’d always loved.

Yes, she was gorgeous with her straightened hair. But there was something about seeing her in those natural curls that made him want to sift his fingers through them. He’d spent more nights since his return than he cared to admit imagining those shiny, dark curls spread out on his pillow as he cradled her to his chest.

Allie tried her hardest to resist, but finally, she cracked a smile. She leaned back on her elbows again. “Okay, fine. Maybe I should appreciate my knucklehead brother more,” she conceded. “After all, he did bring me my sister-in-law and two beautiful nieces—all of whom I adore—plus you.” She nudged him this time, her smile widening. “I’m definitely grateful that because of Rey you were a big part of my life growing up. It took you long enough, but I’m glad you finally came back.”

Her eyes twinkled and her lips had never looked more kissable than they did at that moment.

He swallowed hard and forced himself to look away from the mouth he’d been wanting to kiss from the moment she’d told him off.

“Maybe next time, don’t be a stranger for so long.”

Vaughn leaned back on his elbows, too, both of them staring up at the setting sun.

“I won’t,” he said. “Promise.”

Allie stood and dusted off her bottom—a move Vaughn tried hard not to notice. But in a pair of fitted, black dress

pants that clung to her sweet curves, not noticing them was a monumental ask of any single, straight man with a pulse.

“It’s getting late. I should go,” Allie said. There was almost a hint of reluctance in her voice. As if she wanted him to ask her to stay.

He wanted to. But if he was going to maintain his commitment to not crossing the line with Allie, it would be better if he didn’t.

Vaughn stood, too. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“That isn’t necessary.” Allie pulled her keys from the front pocket of her pants.

“Then humor me.” Vaughn shrugged. “Besides, it’ll give me a chance to tell you what I’ve been thinking about for the pool renovation.”

“Not that you’re micromanaging me.” Allie rolled her eyes, then huffed. “Fine. Come on then. It’s been a really long day and there’s a tub surrounded by candles with my name on it.”

Allie naked in a tub?

He stumbled over his own feet and nearly face-planted.

“Vaughn! Are you all right?” Allie reached out to steady him. She regarded him carefully, which made his skin flame.

“I’m fine.” His cheeks and forehead were so hot they were probably glowing like Rudolph’s nose. He started toward the lot for the main building where her car was parked. “So about the pool... I’d like to convert it to an indoor pool as part of the initial renovation rather than waiting for Phase Two.”

“No objections here.” Allie nodded thoughtfully. “But I thought you wanted this first phase to be quick and dirty.” *Quick and dirty? Seriously? Allie was killing him right now.*

“And cost-efficient,” he felt the need to add.

“Which is why I suggested it for phase two instead of phase one,” she reminded him with a hint of amusement in her voice.

“I know. But if we want to start booking high-end guests off the rip, I figure we should go hard or go home, right?”

“Okay.” Allie nodded. “Let me work up some numbers and talk to a few people to see what their availability is. But given that we’re approaching the holiday season, I would temper my expectations on this. Understood?” She used the remote to unlock her car as they approached it.

Vaughn jogged ahead of Allie and opened the door for her.

Even at the end of a long workday wearing very little makeup and just a work shirt and some dress pants, Allie Price was absolutely stunning. When his gaze met hers, an impish grin curved one edge of her mouth.

Why did this feel more like the end of the night on a first date than saying goodbye to his interior decorator or his best friend’s kid sister?

“Again, apologies if you feel like I didn’t trust you. What I said at the granite yard... I meant it one hundred percent. You’re an amazing designer and an organized, efficient project manager, Allie. And as you said the day you showed me that proposal, I’m lucky to be working with you.”

Allie covered her face as if she was embarrassed. She shook her head. “I can’t believe I actually said that to you and you still hired me.”

They both laughed.

“It wasn’t the kind of proposal I’m accustomed to,” he admitted. “But you were right. So thanks for taking on this project on such short notice and for coming up with such an incredible plan. This is going to be a fabulous venue and a financial boost to the town.”

“Yes, it will.” Allie nodded proudly as she glanced over at the main house.

Vaughn studied her profile as she took in the resort that was slowly being transformed. He sucked in a quiet breath and fought the growing desire to pull Allie into his arms and kiss her.

“Hank would be really proud of what you’re doing here, Vaughn.” Allie’s voice and smile were soft and warm. “And so would your parents.”

Allie wrapped her arms around him, her cheek pressed to his chest.

He permitted himself the luxury of indulging Allie's innocent gesture. He breathed in her sweet scent and the hint of vanilla wafting from her hair. Vaughn rested his chin atop her head.

"Thank you for saying that. I hope you're right."

"I usually am. Remember that next time we're selecting design materials, and you'll save yourself from having to spend the day traipsing through home improvement stores with me."

"Can I tell you a secret?" He smiled when she nodded. "I wouldn't have traded that trip for anything. It was one of the best days I've had in a really long time."

Allie pulled back, a bashful grin animating her gorgeous face. "I'm not sure if that's the sweetest thing I've ever heard or the saddest," she teased. "But it was a good day for me, too."

They stared at each other for a moment in silence, his heart thudding in his chest.

"Good night, Vaughn." Allie lifted onto her toes and kissed his cheek. "I'll see you at my parents' house on Sunday, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Vaughn winked.

Allie slipped inside her Audi A5 Sportback and drove off into the evening, leaving Vaughn wondering what might have been if Allie had been anyone in the world other than the sister of one of his closest friends.

He squeezed his eyes shut and shook the thought from his mind. Vaughn headed back to his cabin, reminding himself that this time around, he was too smart to make the same mistake. No matter how incredible a woman Allie Price had turned out to be.

Seven

Allie stood over the steaming pot of Sancocho de siete carnes. The flank beef, pork belly, pork ribs, chicken, goat, pork sausage and smoked hambones had been marinated in garlic, cilantro, salt and oregano, then cooked to tender, delicious perfection in a stew. Slices of corn on the cob and a variety of root vegetables like plantain, yam and cassava had been added later so as not to overcook them.

“¿Necesita más sal, mamá?” Allie ladled the fragrant stew onto a spoon and gave her mother a taste. She didn’t want to go too heavy-handed with the salt for their guest, but she wanted the meal to be as good as Vaughn remembered when her mother had made it for him.

“No, es perfecto, princesa,” her mother responded proudly, looking like Allie’s slightly older twin. A reality she’d finally made peace with in her midtwenties.

Her mother flashed her a knowing smile, her skin practically glowing as she stared at Allie.

“What is it, Mamá? There’s something wrong, isn’t there?” Allie asked, finally.

“No, sweetheart. The Sancocho es perfecto. It’s your best yet.” Her mother rinsed out a damp rag and wiped down the countertops while humming.

Allie stopped stirring and turned to her mother. “Then what is with that look you keep giving me?”

“Look? What look? I cannot look at mi hija and smile?” Her mother could barely contain her grin.

Allie hiked an eyebrow and her mother burst into laughter.

“Mamá!” Allie whined.

“Okay, okay.” Dianelys Price stopped her cleaning and beamed at Allie with such a wide smile that her cheeks

must've hurt. "Vaughn comes back home and you're spending all this time with him."

"Because I'm his interior decorator and the project manager for his very extensive renovation of Hank Carson's old resort. You know this, Mamá. It's not like I've been following the man around town like a lost puppy."

"The way you used to when you had such a crush on him?" Her mother grinned.

Allie chose to ignore that. "He is the most particular, hands-on client that I have ever worked with," she whispered, not wanting her brothers or father to overhear the conversation. "And after all of that, he usually ends up going with one of my suggestions anyway."

"Our little Vaughn has grown up to be an international rock star." Her mother beamed as proudly as if she'd given birth to the man and raised him herself. "He's a celebrity now. He's accustomed to calling the shots and having whatever...and *whomever*—" she met Allie's gaze with dancing eyes "—he wants."

"It's not like that, Mamá. Vaughn and I are just friends."

"First he's just a client, now he's just a friend." Her mother shrugged with a smile. "Things are moving muy rapido between you two, eh?"

Allie sighed and rubbed her forehead, her cheeks and neck suddenly hot and no doubt flushed.

Yes, she definitely had a thing for Vaughn. And not the same teenage crush she'd had. Her growing attraction to Vaughn Reed was based on the incredible man she'd been getting to know over the past few weeks. The man who'd permitted himself to be vulnerable with her by talking about his past and sharing stories he'd probably never even shared with her brother. But as long as they were working on this project together she needed to keep her head on straight.

Vaughn's renovation of the resort was the biggest and most profitable one she'd led or designed. She needed to think of

her career first and how quickly things could go sideways if they crossed the line while still in the midst of the project.

Besides, she didn't want her father and brothers worrying that every handsome, single client she handled might sweep her off of her feet. It had been hard enough to get them to acknowledge that she was capable of handling a project of this magnitude on her own. And if the rest of the team hadn't already been involved in other, ongoing projects, she doubted they would've given her this chance.

So she needed to knock it out of the park and prove her worth. That meant she couldn't have Mamá grinning at the dinner table and hinting that Allie still had a crush on Vaughn.

"He's my client and *our* friend." Allie gestured to everyone in the house. "And that's all. So please, Mamá, don't do that... that *thing* with your face." She indicated the grin that her mother was doing a horrible job of hiding. "You'll have Papá and the boys worried over nothing. And you know how they are with me. I don't want—"

"You're right, princesa." Her mother sighed, her expression sober. "I know that you get frustrated with your papá and your brothers, and I understand why. I'll keep talking to them about it. But try to remember, *mija*, they adore you, and they just want to keep you safe. All right?"

Allie nodded solemnly, then turned back to the large pot and stirred the Sancocho again.

"I will keep your little secret," her mother said quietly.

"There is no secret to keep, Mamá," Allie insisted.

Her mother folded her arms and cocked her head and one hip—a move Allie had adopted and perfected.

"You always complain when I ask you to make Sancocho with just three meats instead of one. But Vaughn is coming to dinner—which you cleverly persuaded your brother to arrange—and now you're voluntarily making it with all seven meats? *Tu madre no es tonta, niña.*"

Irritation flickered in her mother's eyes at the thought that Allie was treating her as if she was too foolish to recognize

that her daughter still had feelings for Vaughn.

Allie groaned quietly and set the spoon back in the trivet. She glanced around the kitchen to ensure they were alone, then placed her hands on her mother's shoulders and lowered her voice.

"Okay, maybe I like him a little. So what? As long as we are working together, nothing is going to happen. So I am *begging* you, Mamita, please, please don't make things weird and awkward for both of us. I just want Vaughn to be able to come here and enjoy a relaxing, home-cooked meal with the people who have always considered him family. I'm pretty sure he could really use a night like that right now."

Her mother's broad smile returned, her eyes bright and shiny as she cupped Allie's cheek. "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"What? No, Mamá. I said I *like* him." Translation, she had nightly dreams of Vaughn Reed taking her over and over. Something she had no intention of sharing with her mother. "But as always, you go from zero to a full church wedding in sixty seconds flat."

"Hmm..." Her mother sniffed. "You don't realize it yet, but I can see it in your eyes, princesa." Her mother smiled confidently. "You've always had a soft spot for him. Everyone knows this. Besides, Vaughn would make a very, *very* good son-in-law. Es dulce, guapo, en forma, viene de una buena familia y tiene mucho dinero." Her mother ticked each item off on her fingers.

"I know that Vaughn is sweet, handsome, fit, comes from a good family and has a lot of money, Mamá," Allie whispered harshly. "But I can take care of myself, muchas gracias. So would you *please* stop looking for a son-in-law beneath every rock? When I'm good and ready, I'm fully capable of finding my own man."

Her mother hiked an eyebrow and without saying a word, they both knew she was reminding Allie of the disastrous relationship she'd invested two years of her life into.

It'd been two years since that relationship had ended, and her family still wouldn't let her forget it.

“Anyone can find un hombre, princesa. But I am not talking about just any man. I'm talking about a man like your father and your brothers. Someone who will love you and treat you like una reina, because that, mija, is exactly what you are. Lo entiendes?”

“I understand, of course.” Allie nodded.

And that was why she couldn't stay mad at her mother, despite her meddling. She wanted her to find a man who would treat her like a queen. How could she be angry with someone who loved her so much and only wanted the absolute best for her?

“But about dinner—”

“I will say nothing. I promise,” her mother conceded. “Pero tu padre y tus hermanos tampoco son estúpidos,” she warned.

Allie sighed at her mother's reminder that her father and brothers weren't stupid. Her brothers might be a lot of things, but oblivious certainly wasn't one of them. So she would heed her mother's warning. That meant none of her usual flirting with the dashing Vaughn Reed.

They were old friends and nothing more. No matter how much she wished things between her and Vaughn could be different. And while she'd admit to being in lust with the bad boy drummer, she certainly wasn't in love.

Even Mamá wasn't right about everything.

* * *

“Mrs. Price.” Vaughn leaned down to hug Dianelys Price, who was a few inches shorter than her daughter who looked so much like her. “It's wonderful to see you again. Sorry I haven't made it over here sooner. I hope you can forgive my oversight.”

Vaughn handed Allie's mother a crystal vase filled with two dozen white roses.

“Oh, *mijo*! They are so beautiful. *Muchas gracias*, Vaughn.” The woman who’d practically been a third mother to him beamed. Tears shone in the dark eyes that were the spitting image of Allie’s.

After all these years, hearing her call him *mijo*—the term of endearment she used with her own sons—made his heart swell. His gut knotted with guilt over not having come back to visit the Prices before now.

He’d kept in contact with Rey and always asked about the family and sent his love. But it wasn’t the same as coming to visit them or, at the very least, picking up the phone and calling them.

“And I don’t care how long you’ve been away,” Mrs. Price said, as if she’d been privy to his thoughts. “You’re still a member of this family. So call me *mamá*, just like always.”

“Yes, *Mamá*.” The guilt that tightened Vaughn’s chest eased. He turned to the tall, barrel-chested man who approached.

Walter Price’s full head of dark, curly hair was much thinner now. And what was left of it was salt-and-pepper gray—standing in stark contrast to his deep brown skin. He extended his large hand to Vaughn, then pulled him into a hug.

“Good to see you again, stranger.” The old man’s expression served as both a warm welcome and censure for staying away so long. “How’s everything going with the renovation project?”

“Fantastic, sir,” Vaughn said, mindful of Allie’s concerns that her father and brothers were always looking over her shoulder. “The project is in good hands with Allie and her crew.”

“Glad to hear it.” The old man scratched his wiry beard. He leaned in and lowered his voice. “Thank you for being accommodating. Normally, Manny or Rey would’ve handled a project of that magnitude but—”

“Allie is doing an incredible job, sir. Honestly,” Vaughn interrupted the man.

The hair on the back of Vaughn's neck bristled slightly. He didn't like the man's implication that Allie was essentially a third-string benchwarmer that he'd had to put into the game in a crunch.

"I'm lucky to be working with Al. Her designs are fresh and modern. She's creating *exactly* the kind of zen space I envisioned for the wellness center. And she's really good with the crew, too. She's tough but fair. They seem to love working for her, and they're doing a great job. In fact, I've been so impressed that I was talking to Allie the other day about going forward with the renovation of the pool."

"Is that right?" Walter rubbed his chin and studied him.

The way the old man was sizing him up, Vaughn wondered if he'd overplayed his hand. Not that everything he'd said about Allie wasn't true. It was. Every single word of it. But maybe he'd been a bit too effusive with the praise. Because now the man was looking at him less like a client and more like a man who'd come 'round to take his only daughter on a date.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, son." Mr. Price stepped aside, gesturing for him to make his way through the house toward the large sun porch where the family often gathered. "C'mon in, and don't be shy."

He was greeted by Rey, Manny, Rafi, and their wives and children. Their youngest brother, Felix, was there with his girlfriend. But Allie was nowhere to be found.

Vaughn wanted to ask where she was but didn't want to bring attention to the fact that he was looking for her. So he played it cool instead.

"Don't worry. Allie is in the kitchen cooking. She'll be out in a minute," her mother said in a low voice that only he could hear. Her eyes danced and there was a knowing grin on her face.

Had he been that obvious?

Vaughn smiled and nodded, not quite sure how else to respond.

“Does Allie need help in the kitchen?” Vaughn asked.

Mamá’s smile deepened. Rey, Manny and Walter eyed him as if he’d said something heretical.

“What?” Vaughn shrugged.

“Always the santurrón.” Manny shook his head.

He’d just basically called him a Goody Two-shoes. But there were worse things a person could be.

“You just hang out with the boys.” Manny’s wife, Meera, elbowed him in the side and stood. She set their infant on her husband’s lap. “We’ll see if Allie needs anything else. C’mon, Yvette.” Rey’s wife handed their toddler off to him and followed her sister-in-law to the kitchen.

“Man, you’ve been here like five minutes, and you’re already upsetting the status quo,” Rey teased.

“If Allie’s in the kitchen doing all the work while you four sit around and chill, maybe the status quo needs to change.” Vaughn shrugged. “She works hard in the business just like all of you do.”

“I love this man,” Mamá said. “And he makes a very good point, doesn’t he, mi amor?”

Walter hiked one of his wiry, gray eyebrows and stared daggers at Vaughn. He took a long, slow sip of his Corona before finally responding. “He sure does, sweetheart. So next Sunday, why don’t you let the boys and I cook? We’ll make my famous soul food feast. Right, fellas?”

Allie’s four brothers muttered their agreement while glowering at Vaughn, and he couldn’t help laughing.

“Glad you find it so funny, son,” Walter said. “Since this was your idea, it’s only right that you come back next week and join in on the fun.”

“Umm...sure. I’d love to come for dinner again next Sunday,” Vaughn said. “But I’m not much of a cook.”

“I wouldn’t be either if I had a chef and a house in Hollywood Hills,” Felix said.

“That’s all right. I’m gonna teach you everything you need to know. Just show up in something you don’t mind getting sauce on and we’re all good.” Walter picked up one of his grandchildren who had toddled over and plopped her onto his lap.

“Yes, sir.” Vaughn was distracted by the sound of Allie’s laugh coming from the kitchen.

He glanced in the general direction of the sound, and when he looked back, Allie’s mother was grinning at him again and her father was staring at him with that raised eyebrow.

Vaughn forced a smile and tried his best to relax. But he really needed to work on his subtlety because at this rate, every single person in the Price family would know just how enamored he was with Allie.

* * *

Vaughn wasn’t the only one who needed to work on being less obvious. Because her mother’s less-than-subtle matchmaking efforts weren’t lost on him or Allie. And while Manny, Rey and the rest of the family might’ve been oblivious to what was going on as they dealt with spouses and small children, Mr. Price certainly wasn’t. Vaughn could feel the man’s sense of concern heighten the longer the evening—and Mamá’s efforts—went on.

Dianelys Price had done just about everything she could, short of saying the words, to indicate that she envisioned him and Allie together. First, she’d nearly shoved Felix’s girlfriend—who was a Sin & Glory fan—out of the way when she’d tried to sit next to Vaughn. Then she’d insisted that Allie sit beside him instead. And Vaughn couldn’t swear to it, but it felt like his and Allie’s chairs were scooped a little closer than all the others. Close enough that their thighs kept touching and they barely had enough elbow room as they ate their meals.

Mamá had waited with bated breath as he’d tried each element of their meal. The mouthwatering Sancocho de siete carnes stew. The arroz blanco—simple white rice—and the avocado slices that accompanied it. The morir soñando—a

surprisingly refreshing cocktail made with orange juice and milk. The delicious pudín de pan—a spiced bread pudding set in a bundt pan. Rich, decadent caramel flan that put to shame any other flan he tried during his travels around the world.

After he tried each item of food or drink and was quite obviously enjoying it, Mamá would say, “Es good, no? Princesa made it. She is such an amazing cook.” Then she’d gush about some of the other meals Allie made from other Dominican and Caribbean favorites to a variety of soul foods and classic American cuisine.

Poor Allie’s gorgeous, terra-cotta-colored skin would flush a deep red around her cheeks and forehead. He could sense the tension and heat coming off her body—so close to his—in waves. There was one moment when he was sure she was going to snap. Vaughn placed a subtle hand on her knee beneath the table and she inhaled deeply. Likely in surprise at the fairly intimate contact.

She snapped her head in his direction.

“Your mom loves you, and she means well. So don’t worry,” he said quietly.

Allie nodded; her sigh of relief audible. Her cheeks slowly returned to their usual color and her breathing slowed.

As they enjoyed dessert after their meal, Mamá bragged about how Allie updated the interior design of their home, which was quite lovely. Then she’d shown Vaughn before and after pictures of the cottage Allie had purchased and renovated a few years earlier.

He’d already known that Allie was a talented interior designer. But the transformation of her cottage was stunning. And she’d done wonders updating her old childhood home. He’d chimed in singing Allie’s praises in relation to her work on the resort, which brought a huge smile to both Mamá and Allie’s faces, but made Mr. Price regard him even more warily.

Between Mamá and Mr. Price seemingly analyzing every conversation and every gesture between him and Allie, Vaughn felt a bit self-conscious.

He was a well-known celebrity personality. He'd lived his life in a fishbowl for more than fifteen years. Still, it felt odd in this setting—seated at the Prices' dining room table and surrounded by the people who felt like the only family he had left in the world. A space that always made him feel safe and happy as a kid who hadn't always had those luxuries in the years between losing his parents and coming to live with the Reeds in Willowvale Springs.

When her infant granddaughter got fussy, Mamá insisted that Rey give the little girl to Allie. She seemed to calm down immediately. Then her mother pointed out what a good tita Allie was to her nieces and nephews and that she'd be an incredible mother someday.

When they'd settled back in the den, Mamá sat on one side of Vaughn and ensured that Allie was seated on the other side of him. When she left to grab the family photo album, Allie nudged him with her elbow and whispered, "Now's your chance. *Run.*"

Vaughn broke into laughter. "And leave before I see embarrassing high school photos?" He rubbed his hands together. "You saw me in real-time at my awkward stage. There's no way I'm missing this. It's only fair, right?"

"I'll have you know that I was extremely cute in high school." Allie adjusted her sleeping niece on her shoulder and rubbed the little girl's back as she sucked her thumb in her sleep. "But seriously, this might be your last chance to escape. If I were you, I'd be running for the hills by now, determined to never, ever return."

Vaughn chuckled. "Well, that ship has sailed. Your father has already recruited me to come back next Sunday and help him and your brothers cook your dad's famous soul food feast."

"Papi is going to cook next week? He never cooks unless he's pissed off Mamá," she said. "How did that happen?"

"I might be slightly to blame for that." Vaughn rubbed his jaw. "I mentioned that you work as hard in the business as they

all do, so maybe you shouldn't have been the only one in the kitchen cooking.”

“Shit,” Allie whispered, then immediately glanced at her niece to ensure she was still sleeping and that the word hadn't reached her little ears. “That and the fact that my mother is quite obviously trying to hook us up is why Papá keeps looking at you like you're my date to the prom or something.” Allie heaved a quiet sigh. “I am so sorry about all of this. If I'd had any idea she was going to go into hyper-matchmaking mode, I would never have...” Her words trailed off. “I mean...”

“Wait...it wasn't Rey's bright idea to invite me to dinner, was it?” Vaughn studied Allie's face, her cheeks turning crimson again. It was all the confession he needed.

“Rey would've invited you eventually,” Allie insisted. “It's just that with work and his family he hadn't thought of it. And maybe he didn't think his famous, rock star friend would be down for a night filled with crazy family and a basic meal when you're used to traveling the world, staying in five-star hotels and eating meals prepared by your private chef. So maybe I just hurried the process along.” She shrugged one slim shoulder, exposed by the black, off-shoulder dress. The soft fabric hugged her delicious curves and the hem, which hovered just above her knees, had drifted upward while she was seated, showing off the gleaming, brown skin of her toned thighs.

Vaughn shifted his gaze from Allie's thigh and met Mr. Price's gaze. The man's frown deepened.

Vaughn swallowed hard, then returned his attention to Allie, continuing their whispered conversation while her mother was searching for family photo albums.

“I thought it would be nice for you to have a real meal made with love, surrounded by the people who've always considered you family,” Allie continued. “I did not expect Mamá to be in such rare form with her heavy-handed attempt to hook a son-in-law. So seriously, no one would blame you if you took this opportunity to bounce before she gets back.”

“Allie, it’s fine. Like I said...” He resisted the urge to place a hand on her knee again. Under the watchful eye of Walter Price, it would be an ill-advised move. “Your mom...she loves you and wants to see you happy. Who can fault her for that?”

“God, would you stop being so incredibly gracious and accommodating? You’re making me feel even guiltier for arranging this whole mess.” Allie gently rocked the baby—who’d been startled in her sleep—from side to side and rubbed her back.

Mamá appeared with a stack of family photo albums before Vaughn could respond.

“Here, let’s trade.” She handed the stack of photo albums to Vaughn, then took Allie’s sleeping niece and propped the child—who’d been startled again by the transfer—onto her shoulder. “I’m going to lay this little one down upstairs.”

Rey took one look at the photo albums and shot to his feet. “No, Mamá. We were just about to head out to get the kids home to bed.”

“¿Tan temprano?” their mother objected, holding on to the child as if she was considering not giving her up.

“It’s not that early, Mamá,” Rey countered. “Besides, we’ve all got school and work in the morning. Dinner was great as always. But we really have to go.” He reached for his young daughter.

The older woman clucked her tongue, then handed off the child reluctantly.

“We’ve got plenty of leftovers. I’ll pack some up for you to take home.” Allie started to stand, but her mother quickly objected.

“No, you stay. Show Vaughn the photos. And don’t forget that year you won the Miss Willowvale Springs contest.” Mamá beamed. “I’ll pack the leftovers.”

Rey shook his head and rubbed the back of his now fussy daughter. “Sorry, man. I had no idea my mom was on the hunt for a son-in-law. I’m sure you’re probably dating some hot

actress back in LA. So thanks for playing along and not bursting her bubble.”

Allie seemed to bristle at Rey’s insinuation that he was seeing someone.

Vaughn slapped Rey’s outstretched palm. “No worries, man. Your parents are good people. And it’s nice feeling like I’m with family again.”

“You *are* family,” Rey corrected him. “Always have been, always will be. No matter how long you’re away or where you are in the world. But it’s nice to have you home.”

Vaughn’s heart squeezed in his chest and he nodded. He stood and hugged his friend. “Thanks, man. I appreciate the invite. It feels good to be here again.”

“You got us cooking next week, so your ass had better be here in the kitchen helping us slice sweet potatoes and prepare greens.” Rey grinned. Then he rubbed his chin. “Since it looks like you’re really going to be hanging around this time, if you’re not busy on Saturday, you should come by the house. The fellas are hanging out, watching hoops and playing some billiards.”

“I’d like that,” Vaughn said.

“Cool. I’ll text you the time and address.” Rey bumped fists with Vaughn, then turned to his sister, who’d also stood to say goodbye. “Thanks for dinner, sis. It was incredible. Text us to let us know when you get home.”

Allie nodded, then they said their goodbyes to her other brothers and their families since everyone seemed to be leaving.

Rey’s words kept cycling through Vaughn’s brain.

Since it looks like you’re really going to be hanging around this time...

That explained why his old friend seemed a little standoffish.

Vaughn had expected that his friendship with Rey would pick up where they’d left off. But most of their conversations

had been by phone and were about the project. Rey hadn't indicated that he'd wanted to connect socially. Vaughn figured that between work and family, Rey had been too busy to hang out. So he hadn't pushed. But now he understood.

His friend was more hurt by Vaughn taking off and not returning than he'd admitted.

Whether he'd been reluctant to truly reconnect because he was afraid Vaughn would simply abandon him again or he'd been freezing him out as a punitive measure, it seemed that Rey was finally willing to let him in.

Had dinner with Rey's family been some kind of test?

If it had, Vaughn had apparently passed to Rey's satisfaction.

But as for Mr. Price... He'd liked Vaughn just fine when he'd been a friend of his son's. Now that his wife had clearly set eyes on him as a possible suitor for his daughter...not so much.

Reluctantly, Mr. Price went to see off his grandchildren who weren't quite ready to leave their abuelito and abuelita. The older man gave Vaughn what could only be described as a warning glare before leaving the room. It was the first time he and Allie had been alone together all night.

They regarded each other for a moment.

Allie sank onto the couch and picked up one of the photo albums he'd set there. "We should go through these before Mamá comes back and insists on giving you the full, annotated version of every single photo. At least I can give you the quick and dirty version." Allie patted a space beside her on the sofa.

"Rey is wrong, by the way. I'm not seeing anyone." Vaughn wasn't sure why he felt compelled to make that clear again.

"Okay." Allie didn't look up from the album, but offered a ghost of a smile. She'd reapplied her gloss after dinner, drawing his attention to her pouty, shimmering lips. "But you don't owe me an explanation, Vaughn." She finally turned to look at him. "Despite Mamá's very obvious attempts to make it so, we're not together."

Vaughn fought the urge to lean in and kiss those full lips—as alluring as the call of the siren to the sea—before one of her parents, siblings, or rambunctious nieces came barreling through the door. He cleared his throat instead.

“Right. Still, I just thought you should know.” He managed to tear his gaze from her tantalizing lips and focused on the photo album spread open on her lap. “So let’s get started.”

Allie had shown him photos of her and her family throughout the years that Vaughn had been away. Far from being bored, he enjoyed catching up on the parts of their lives that he’d missed. And he couldn’t help wishing he’d been there for it. Especially for the big moments like his friend’s wedding and the births of his children. And he couldn’t help wishing he’d been there in person to cheer Allie on when she’d won the town beauty pageant at seventeen.

The photo albums had been a walk through the lives of the only family he had left in the world.

During the years that Sin & Glory was together—even before they became famous—he’d taken solace in the found family he had with the band. But since their dissolution, he’d felt more alone than ever. His was an aching loneliness that he’d attempted to fill with material luxuries, travel, female companionship, and all manner of vices. Yet, nothing seemed to soothe the festering hole in his chest inflicted by the loss of not one but *two* sets of parents.

Having been surrounded by his friends all evening—people he’d once considered family—it felt as if that hole might finally be beginning to heal. And as he sat beside Allie, so close that their thighs touched, he was reminded of just how amazing it felt to be with someone whose very presence truly made him happy.

Allie was smart and incredibly beautiful. No one had made him laugh as much as she had in ages. But as much as he wanted to kiss her and to tell her just how much he was feeling her, a small voice in the back of his head reminded him of his self-imposed rules. The rules meant to protect him from a repeat of the self-inflicted wound he’d suffered four years ago.

Don't think with your dick.

Never get involved with your best friend's sister.

Always consider your career first.

Never fall in love.

Vaughn sighed quietly as he recited the rules in his head again and again. Because right now, he was in danger of falling for the beautiful woman for whom his adoration was growing by leaps and bounds every day. The woman whose family meant so much to him. Coming back to Willowvale Springs reminded him of what was important in life. Love, family, community. The elements that had been sorely lacking in this life. He wouldn't jeopardize that. Even if it meant he'd never get the chance to be with Allie.

"Everything okay? You seemed far away for a moment there." Allie nudged him with her shoulder. "I'm sorry, I know this must all be incredibly boring to a man who has toured the world with the likes of The Rolling Stones and Imagine Dragons."

"No, it's not boring at all," Vaughn objected. "It's *normal* and comforting and wonderful." He placed a hand on her wrist, his eyes drawn to her expressive eyes. "Best night I've had in a really long time."

He stared at her for a moment, neither of them speaking. A sense of longing seemed to build between them, as if she was hoping that he'd lean in and kiss her.

"Princess." Walter stood at the entrance of the den, a frown set firmly on his face. "Mamá and I are cleaning up. She sent me to ask if either of you would like café con leche or more dessert."

The old man seemed pained to have been sent to do his wife's matchmaking bidding when he was probably itching to plop down on the sofa and squeeze his girth between them.

"Your parents are cleaning up after all of us?" Vaughn turned to Allie.

“Usually, Mamá and I handle cleanup alone after the boys and their families are gone.”

“Then we should help them. C’mon.” Vaughn stood, then pulled Allie to her feet before turning to her father again. “We’ll help with clean up. But if it’s not too late when we’re done, I’d love some coffee and more dessert.”

The stoic expression chiseled on Mr. Price’s face softened and his shoulders relaxed. “You’re a guest, Vaughn. You don’t have to—”

“I know,” Vaughn said. “But I’d really like to. Besides, the meal and the company were outstanding. It’s the very least I could do.”

The old man nodded approvingly and gestured for them to follow him.

Vaughn and Allie helped her parents clean up the kitchen and dining room and straighten up the den. Then the four of them sat in the den and had café con leche—espresso with steamed milk and sugar—and what remained of the pudín de pan. It was a long night, and he was tired, but Vaughn couldn’t have felt more at home.

At the end of the night, Vaughn walked Allie to her car, hugged her and kissed her cheek, then watched her drive off before going to his car and doing the same.

On the drive back to the little cabin that would feel cold, lonely, and bereft of the sounds and smells of the Price’s big, warm, cozy family home, he couldn’t help thinking of how desperately he’d wanted to take Allie in his arms and kiss her. How he’d wanted to invite her back to his place so he could get to know every inch of her ruddy brown skin and become intimately acquainted with each of her curves. But at some point, he needed to learn from his mistakes.

So despite it breaking his heart, he was determined not to do anything that might jeopardize his chance to be part of a real family again.

Eight

Allie ran a hand down one of the freshly tiled bathrooms on the second floor of the resort. The elongated hexagon marble tiles with hints of cream, gold and gray were beautiful, and her team had laid them perfectly.

Everything was really coming together with the renovations at Hank's old resort. And she couldn't help wondering what the old man would think of the new look. But then, she also wondered what the resort's current owner would think.

Vaughn had come to her parents' place for dinner two weeks in a row, and his friendship with her brother had kicked up a notch since then. Vaughn had been hanging out with her brothers and their friends when he wasn't back in LA for one reason or another. But things between Vaughn and Allie had definitely cooled.

The anxious resort owner had stopped making random pop-in visits during the day to check out the progress of the renovations. His calls were far less frequent. When he did call, Vaughn kept things friendly but focused on the business at hand. There had been none of the teasing and flirting that had been common between them in the weeks prior to him coming to dinner. In fact, it was beginning to feel like Vaughn was intentionally avoiding her.

Had her dad or one of her brothers warned him off?

Allie completed her walk-through before locking the resort up. It was a Wednesday evening and her entire crew was gone. If she had to guess, most of them were probably trying to catch happy hour at the local watering hole. But they'd worked hard and certainly deserved it.

There had been a few setbacks, but they were back on schedule again. The walls had been painted. The hardwood flooring had been installed throughout the first floor and the

tiling had been done in all of the bathrooms. Custom cabinets would be installed in the kitchen the next day.

It was an exciting stage. So after wanting to be involved every step of the way early in the process, it seemed odd that Vaughn suddenly seemed to have lost interest in the project. Or perhaps it was her that he'd lost interest in.

Allie couldn't help thinking of that first evening Vaughn had come to her parents' house for dinner. It had been an amazing night—despite her mother's matchmaking shenanigans. But to say that Allie had been disappointed when Vaughn had passed on the chance to kiss her not once but *twice* that evening was like saying that the gray-haired, aging-like-fine-wine Chris Pine was just *a* man or that the incredible Denzel Washington was simply *an* actor.

She certainly hadn't prompted her brother to invite Vaughn Reed to their family dinner for the purpose of making out with him. But when they'd been alone in the den to go over the photo albums, the opportunity had presented itself. Then when Vaughn had walked Allie to her car at the end of the night, they'd stood together in the dim light cast by one of the outdoor lights. The way he'd looked at her, neither of them speaking for a moment, she'd been so sure that Vaughn would kiss her good night. But he hadn't.

Instead, Vaughn had given her a warm, friendly hug. Then he stepped back and waited patiently for her to get into her car and drive off. Twenty minutes later, Vaughn texted Allie to make sure she'd made it home okay. When she'd assured him she had, he texted back to say he'd had a great time with her family and then wished her a good night.

Allie had gone home frustrated and yet still giddy about having spent such a wonderful evening with Vaughn and with her family. But since then, she'd barely heard from him.

Still, he couldn't avoid her forever, and tonight she needed to speak with him. They were at the point where they needed to make some decisions about the decor. So after she locked up the house, she walked the short path over to his cabin. His rental car was in the drive but when she knocked at the door,

there was no answer, despite the front door being ajar. Allie knocked again, but then she noticed Vaughn over by the pool.

She walked over to the pool and joined him. He was wearing earbuds and seemed completely lost in thought as he stared into the water. Yet, when she walked up and stood beside him, he didn't seem startled.

Vaughn flashed her an almost shy smile.

“Hey.” He pulled the buds from his ears and shoved them into the pockets of his classic B-3 style sheepskin leather bomber jacket in a cognac brown. Then he shoved his hands into the pockets of his dark jeans.

“Hey.” Allie glanced around at the pool deck and waved a hand. “This is all going to look completely unrecognizable soon.”

“I know.” There was a hint of nostalgia and perhaps regret in Vaughn's voice.

Allie turned to him, concerned. There was definitely something going on with Vaughn.

“I thought you were excited about revamping the old pool? You said you wanted to make this the kind of indoor spa resort pool high-end guests would expect.”

“It's what a spa of this caliber demands.”

“Then why the long face?”

Vaughn stared at the steam rising from the heated pool in the crisp, fall Wyoming air. “Do you remember how it was a thing for local teens to sneak up here and take an unauthorized midnight swim in the pool?”

A faint smile curved Allie's mouth. She couldn't speak from experience, but she'd heard her older brothers talk about taking The Plunge.

“Sure. Why?”

“I never did.” Vaughn kicked at a stone on the concrete deck with the toe of his black, Old Skool Vans sneakers. He had the

shoes—with their classic white Sidestripe—in at least four or five different colors.

“You’re kidding?” Allie folded her arms and cocked a hip. “Manny, Rey, and Rafi have done it lots of times. I just assumed you were with them on at least one of those adventures.”

“I was.” He rubbed his chin. “But after my time in foster care, I was terrified of doing anything that would make my parents want to send me away. I served as a lookout, but I wouldn’t go onto the property. So the next few times the fellas went, they went without me.” Vaughn shrugged. “I can’t blame them. They thought I was being a santurrón.” His pronunciation of the word was perfect.

“They thought you were being a holier than thou, Goody Two-shoes, when the truth was that you were terrified the Reeds would send you back.” It broke Allie’s heart to say the words aloud. “I’m so sorry, Vaughn. I know your mom and dad didn’t do anything to make you feel that way, but still...no kid should live with that kind of constant pressure.”

She squeezed his large hand with her gloved one.

But the gesture didn’t ease the tension in Vaughn’s shoulders. It seemed to heighten it.

Allie released his hand and tried not to take his reaction as an insult.

“If it makes you feel better, I never took The Plunge either,” she said.

“That’s surprising.” Vaughn cocked his head.

“Why?”

“Because you were a rebel and a badass. You were always pushing the limits to see what your parents and brothers would let you get away with.” Vaughn rubbed his bearded chin.

His chin-length hair was pulled up into his preferred man bun. She resisted the urge to run her fingers along the buzzed sides of his head.

“I might’ve pushed the boundaries a little, but I wouldn’t go straight to badass.” Allie grinned.

“Well, you’re definitely a badass now.” His smile widened and his dark eyes twinkled. “You stand your ground with your dad, your brothers, even your mom when you need to. You haven’t allowed any of them to dictate your personal life or your role in the business.” Vaughn placed his large hands on her shoulders. “I’m proud of you for that, Allie.”

His words made her heart swell, and her eyes stung a little. She wasn’t sure why Vaughn’s praise hit so hard, but it definitely felt like the thing she needed to hear right now.

“Thanks for saying that, Vaughn. I’m proud of you, too.”

He dropped his hands from her shoulders and rubbed his chin again. “So why didn’t you ever take The Plunge?”

“Honestly? I got into it enough with my parents back then. I didn’t need the added grief of getting hauled in for trespassing. Just didn’t seem like the risk was worth it.” She shrugged. “But now you kind of have me feeling like I missed my moment, too.”

They both stared at the water regretfully for a few moments, neither of them speaking.

Allie took off one glove and stooped down to slip her hand in the water. It was really warm while the temperature around them was in the mid-forties. No wonder there was so much steam coming off the water.

She stood, staring at Vaughn for a moment. She worried her teeth with her lower lip, her brain churning. Finally, Allie sucked in a deep breath, her eyes closed momentarily.

Allie was either going to break the ice that seemed to have formed between them in the past couple of weeks or she was going to make a complete fool of herself in a way she might never recover from. But it was Vaughn...so she had to try.

“We’re standing here regretting not having taken The Plunge—a rite of passage for every kid that grew up here in Willowvale Springs,” she said. “But the pool isn’t gone yet. So

it's not too late to take our place in the annals of town history." She offered a hopeful smile.

"Wait...you're talking right now?"

"Why not?" Allie asked.

"It's near freezing out," he noted in disbelief. "Besides, I'm pretty sure that neither of us brought a swimming suit."

"Neither did most of the kids who took The Plunge." She shrugged. "They just stripped down to their underwear and hopped in. So why can't we?"

"You're not serious," he said.

"Watch me." Allie grinned maniacally.

She unzipped her parka and tossed it into a nearby chair, followed by her sweater and the shirt she was wearing beneath it. The air was frigid, but she was too far in to turn back now. She kicked off her platform heel Doc Martens boots—a holdover from her emo period. Then she shrugged off the slim jeans that clung to her curves.

Allie danced from one foot to the other as she stood there on the concrete deck in her sports bra, a pair of boy shorts and her bare feet. She rubbed her arms.

"Don't tell me that the bad boy rock star is going to chicken out?" She raised an eyebrow, nearly biting her tongue from shivering.

"It's not considered chickening out when I never committed to doing this in the first place," he reminded her.

Technically true.

"C'mon, Vaughn. Two minutes ago you were commiserating about never having had your chance to do this. There's no one here but us. So here's your chance to correct that. What's wrong? Did you go commando today?" Allie poked him in the gut and laughed when his eyes widened. "If so, don't worry," she whispered loudly. "It won't be the first peen I've seen, and it definitely won't be the last. So relax."

Allie took a deep breath, stepped to the edge of the pool and jumped in. It was a shock to the system, but the water was soothing and warm. After a minute or so, she felt great. Now it was up to Vaughn whether he decided to join her or not.

* * *

It won't be the first peen I've seen, and it definitely won't be the last. So relax.

The first part of Allie's statement hadn't bothered him. She was a stunning, confident, thirty-year-old woman. It wasn't surprising that she'd had past relationships. He'd certainly had his share, including a marriage that had failed spectacularly.

It was the latter part of Allie's declaration that had snatched Vaughn by the throat and was currently squeezing the air out of his lungs.

It definitely won't be the last.

Why should that matter to him? He and Allie weren't involved. In fact, Vaughn had spent the weeks since he'd gone to dinner at the Prices' home trying to create distance between himself and the woman whose wit, charm and beauty had driven him to near obsession since his return.

He'd spent time hanging out with her brothers. He'd made another brief trip to LA. And he'd forced himself not to check in on Allie or the project unless it was absolutely necessary. Instead, he'd waited until Allie and her crew had left for the day before he'd venture over to see how things were going. And he'd repeated the rules in his head many times since encountering the grown-ass woman version of the girl whose sincere marriage proposals he'd had to reject repeatedly.

Vaughn squeezed his eyes shut and silently recited the rules.

Don't think with your dick. Never get involved with your best friend's sister. Always consider your career first. Never fall in love.

But all of the warning bells that had helped Vaughn make good decisions thus far where his best friend's little sister was concerned currently seemed to be malfunctioning. Because the

only voice he heard in his head now was Allie's. She was inviting him to join her with the promise that the water was fine. All while swimming in her lacy, black underwear—a vision he would probably never get out of his head—like she was an Afro-Latina version of legendary synchronized swimmer Esther Williams or Halle Bailey as *The Little Mermaid*.

“Are you praying or are you in the midst of a medical emergency right now?” Allie clung to the side of the pool and peered at him with a mixture of concern and amusement. “Blink twice if you can hear me,” she added when he didn't respond.

He blinked twice because he could be as much of a smart ass as she could. Then he rubbed his forehead and sighed. “The answer, by the way, is neither. I was just considering all the reasons this is a terrible idea.”

Allie assessed him for a moment with her head cocked, as if she was trying to decide whether to say what she was thinking.

As much as he wanted to know, a part of him was equally hesitant to find out.

“What I'm hearing is that you really want to join me, but that part of your brain that is still conditioned not to disappoint people is interfering.” She stated the words without judgment. “So if you're worried that my parents or my brothers won't approve, here's your reminder that I'm a thirty-year-old woman who has the right to do what she wants—regardless of whether my family approves of my choices.”

Vaughn didn't respond, so Allie continued.

“If you're worried whether it's inappropriate for us to be in a whole ass swimming pool together wearing nothing but our underwear, I should tell you that my actual swimming suits are far more revealing than what I'm wearing now. And I'm pretty damn sure I've seen you in one of those candid celeb magazines wearing a Speedo that was like two sizes too small.” Allie held up two fingers for emphasis. “So, like everyone else who saw that photo online, I've pretty much seen the goods.”

“It was France, Allie. You literally cannot wear swim trunks to the pool there,” Vaughn felt the need to point out.

“Why doesn’t matter, Vaughn. The point is I’ve seen what you’re working with.” Allie winked, then swam away so gracefully it looked like she was born doing the backstroke. “You’re not really going to make me do this alone, are you?”

Allie’s toned arms and thighs sliced through the water as she lay on her back.

“Fuck it,” Vaughn whispered under his breath. He shrugged out of his expensive coat, then stripped out of all the other layers of clothing meant to protect him from the frigid air, which was growing colder as evening descended.

He was probably going to die of pneumonia or suffer penile frostbite like Prince Harry. Either consequence he’d probably deserve because this was an awful idea and he knew it. Only he couldn’t resist joining Allie in the pool. Partly, because she was right. He’d regret not taking The Plunge at least once before the old pool was demolished. But also because he seemed to have zero resistance when it came to Allie Price.

Vaughn had taken off everything except his black boxer briefs and his jewelry—a couple of rings and the sun, moon and stars necklace he wore almost constantly. He stepped to the edge of the pool, dismissed all the thoughts of how Mr. Price and Rey would both want to strangle him, then jumped into the water.

He’d gone from freezing to warm and now he was surrounded by a soothing heat as he tried to get oriented in the space. Vaughn blinked, wiping water from his eyes as his gaze swept the pool looking for Allie.

“You did it!” Allie wrapped her limbs around him like an octopus as she hugged his neck from behind, her lips pressed to his ear. “Didn’t it feel amazing?”

Actually, what felt amazing was having Allie’s full breasts smushed against the top of his back and the warm space between her thighs pressed just above his ass. But saying so didn’t seem like a very good idea.

“It did,” Vaughn said instead, still wiping water from his eyes.

“Race you?” Allie let go of him, and he missed her warmth and the heavenly feel of the curves he’d dreamed about most nights for the past few weeks.

By the time his brain seemed to be fully functioning again, Allie had taken off for one end of the pool. And instead of her smooth, fluid movements that barely disturbed the surface of the water, she employed big kicks that intentionally doused him, all while laughing her ass off.

Vaughn shook his head and took off after her, splashing as much water onto her as he could along the way, both of them laughing.

“Okay, now that we’re both sufficiently wet—” Allie tightened her loosening ponytail “—here are the rules... We go all the way to that end and back. Whoever hits this wall—with any body part of your choosing, preferably not your head,” she added. Likely because he’d done just that when he’d gone on a trip to Florida with her family when he was about fifteen and had nearly cracked his head open. “That person is the winner. Simple as that.”

“And what exactly is it that we win?” Vaughn stretched his arms and shoulders in preparation for their impromptu race.

Allie considered his question. “How about we let the winner decide?”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“We’re both sensible people,” Allie said. “I trust that you won’t demand my car or a pro bono house build.”

“Good point.” Vaughn rubbed his hands together.

“I am not getting out of this water until it’s time for us to leave.” Allie seemed to shiver at the thought. “So how about we both place our feet against the wall?”

Vaughn nodded and placed one foot against the wall.

Allie counted them down, then they both took off as quickly as they could.

Vaughn had a little bit of a lead at first with his longer legs and arms. But by the time they'd reached the opposite wall, Allie had caught up with him, and by the time she'd hit the midway point of the final lap, she was well ahead of him. He managed to regain some ground, but Allie went into another gear and made a mad dash at the end. She touched the wall and shouted in triumph a few seconds ahead of him.

"You were toying with me that entire time, weren't you?" Vaughn dragged a hand down his face, wiping water from his eyes. "You could've left me in the dust and completely whipped my ass, couldn't you?"

Allie shrugged and gave him a sheepish smile. "If I'd beaten you too badly, you wouldn't have wanted to race again."

"Okay, that's it, kid." He shook a finger at her. "Best two out of three?"

"Why not?" Allie shrugged. "But are you sure you don't need a Bengay break first?"

"Oh, you're funny." Vaughn shifted an eyebrow and rubbed his hands together eagerly. "Go ahead. Talk your shit, little girl. I'm fueled by my haters. You ain't got nothin' on the Reasons I Hate Vaughn Reed manifesto created by VaughnReedSucks382."

"People actually do things like that?" Allie's dark eyes filled with compassion. "God, that's awful. What kind of person does something like that?"

"A crappy one." Vaughn focused on the other end of the pool. Now wasn't the time to evaluate the level of misery that would make a person put that much time and effort into hating him. "This time, we go on my count. Ready, set, GO!"

Vaughn put every bit of effort into hitting that first wall first. Maybe he should've paced himself because his breathing was labored as he made his way back, and Allie started to gain on him. But as she closed in on him, he got another burst of energy, pushed hard and touched the wall a full half-length ahead of her.

Allie laughed at his celebratory jig. “Fine, you won. We’re tied,” she said. “That means this last one is for all the marbles. You need a breather, old man?”

“No.” He did, but he wasn’t about to admit that to her when she looked like a goddess emerging from her watery kingdom. “Do you?”

“You’re cute.” Allie laughed, then patted his chest. She turned to face ahead, then angled her neck, as if trying to get out any kinks or stiffness. She stretched her arms above her head and arched her back, giving him an eye-popping view of the full breasts that were one stiff breeze shy of escaping the lacy, black sports bra.

Not fair, Allie. Not fair at all.

But he wouldn’t admit that to her either.

Allie counted down and they took off, neck and neck for most of the race. At the tail end of the final stretch, he was exhausted, but trying to push forward. Allie seemed to sense as much. She surged forward with an outstretched hand and touched the wall just a fraction of a second before he managed to.

“Ha! I won. Take that,” Allie raised a fist in victory as she bounced on her heels.

Vaughn couldn’t help wondering how she managed to keep the girls contained in that lace bra. But the feat made her victory dance far more impressive than his. Moments like this—spent with Allie and her family—had been the most fun he’d had in a really long time.

Was it any wonder that he’d found every excuse he could possibly think of to extend his stay there in Willowvale Springs rather than just handing the project off to Allie, who was more than capable of handling it?

“Okay, fine. It was a close race, but you won it fair and square.” Vaughn chuckled. “So whatever you want—”

“*You.*” Allie’s expression had gone from gloating and victorious to soft and demure as she stood in front of him looking more vulnerable than he’d ever seen her before. Allie

wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her eyes studying the shock evident in his as their lower bodies pressed together.

“What happened to us being sensible people?” Vaughn’s arms instinctively circled Allie’s waist, tugging her even closer, his gaze not leaving hers.

“Who says we aren’t being sensible?” Allie asked. “This makes perfect sense to me.” Her eyes drifted closed as she leaned in closer.

Vaughn swallowed hard. His heartbeat raged in his chest like Meg White’s drum line in The White Stripe’s “Seven Nation Army.”

Maybe Allie was right. Maybe the two of them together did make sense and they just needed to convince everyone else in their collective world of that.

During the past two weeks, he’d been trying to “be good” and get Allie out of his system. But he’d felt an aching sense of loss without their daily interactions, which had become the highlight of his day.

And what if they couldn’t convince Mr. Price, Rey and the rest of Allie’s brothers that the two of them were a good fit?

It didn’t matter. Because Vaughn was done fighting his growing feelings for Allie. He wanted her...*desperately*. And he’d come to need her in his world and in his life. Allie’s family would just have to accept that.

Vaughn drew in a deep breath and closed the space between them, finally tasting the soft lips that had taunted him for weeks.

He lifted Allie, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He backed her against the side of the pool, her soft curves pinned between the concrete wall and his hard body and growing length.

He ravaged the sweet mouth whose taste he’d imagined more times than he could remember. Allie Price was like a drug and he was sailing as high as a kite off of her taste, her warmth and the sweet little murmurs that increased in sound and intensity the longer they kissed. He swallowed the sensual

sounds she made. Each one seemed to vibrate down his chest and go straight to his cock, making him increasingly desperate for her.

She broke their kiss and cradled his jaw. The moon was reflected in her dark eyes as she dragged a thumb across his lower lip. “I could really use a shower right now. Mind if I use yours?”

Vaughn froze, his mouth suddenly incapable of forming coherent words. His pulse raced and his dick strained against the thin layers of fabric between them. He swallowed hard and nodded clumsily. “Yes... I mean...no, I don’t mind at all. I’ll grab our things.”

Allie grinned, then moved toward the stainless-steel ladder. As she climbed the three short steps to exit the pool, one cheek bearing his handprint had escaped her black boy shorts.

Vaughn sank his teeth into his lower lip and climbed out of the pool, his body aching for her, and filled with heat despite the chilliness in the air surrounding them.

This was going to be a night neither of them would ever forget.

Nine

Allie had barely gotten through the door of Vaughn's cabin before he'd dropped their things in a pile on a nearby chair, pulled her into his arms, pushed her up against the closed door and kissed her again.

Vaughn's fervent, hungry kisses filled her with intense heat. He kissed her like a man who'd been awaiting this moment as long as she had.

But he hadn't. Until a few weeks ago, Vaughn had probably only ever thought of her as Rey's annoying kid sister. But she'd been waiting for this moment since she was twelve years old and Vaughn had packed his things and moved to LA. She'd been as devastated by Vaughn leaving as Rey had—though her brother probably had never admitted as much to his best friend.

She'd eventually moved on. But the moment she and Vaughn sat down at that table to review her plans for the resort, those old feelings came creeping back.

In the weeks since then, they'd solidified into something that felt fully formed rather than the hazy fantasy of a little girl who had no real understanding of romantic relationships. She and Vaughn might never have what her parents had or what Manny, Rey and Rafi had found with their spouses. But she would take this...one night, one week, one month. Whatever it was that they could have before Vaughn returned to his life in LA and left her behind again.

Allie pressed her palms against Vaughn's chest, breaking their kiss. His damp skin was chilled. And now that she'd put a bit of space between them, she was shivering.

"You're freezing, baby." He regarded her with concern, his gaze hooded and his chest heaving. "Let me get you—"

"Hot shower," Allie finally managed to say, her teeth practically chattering.

“Of course.” Vaughn rubbed up and down her arms, his dark brown eyes crinkling with concern. “There are plenty of fresh towels in the linen closet in my bathroom. You go ahead and shower while I get the fire started.”

Vaughn pressed another kiss to her lips, then slapped her bottom as she walked past him, taking her by surprise.

Allie hesitated at the door, which led to the main bedroom suite, her pulse racing. She turned back to Vaughn.

“Give me a few minutes, then join me?” She met his gaze hopefully.

“Be there as soon as I can.” His reserved smile widened.

Allie sank her teeth into her lower lip and sighed quietly as her gaze skimmed the straining bulge in his black boxer briefs.

I am really going to enjoy that ride.

She turned and made her way through Vaughn’s bedroom and into the dated old bathroom. The premium cabins were next on the project list once the main house renovations had been completed.

Allie turned the old porcelain knobs and allowed the water in the shower to heat up. The cramped space definitely didn’t scream sexy, but it would serve its purpose just fine.

She wanted that chlorinated pool water off of her skin and out of her hair as soon as possible. Allie made a quick run to the bathroom and then washed her hands. She stared at herself in the mirror, her stomach tied in knots.

Allie wasn’t having second thoughts about kissing Vaughn or about what she wanted from him tonight.

They were two unattached adults acting on their strong attraction to each other. They’d have an amazing night together. Then—whether they decided to do this again or not—at least they could maintain the friendship they’d been building since Vaughn had gotten to know her as a woman. Not as his best friend’s kid sister. But no matter what, she wouldn’t allow herself to get caught up in the belief that this

relationship could be serious. Because Vaughn wasn't staying, and Allie wasn't leaving.

Yes, being Mrs. Vaughn Reed had once been the dream. But she'd matured since then. So she'd enjoy their night together for what it was rather than entertaining her teenage fantasy of a future with Vaughn.

Allie used Vaughn's designer brand shampoo and conditioner to wash the chlorine from her hair. Then she used Vaughn's lemon verbena-scented shower gel to scrub the pool water from every inch of her skin twice.

There was a tap at the bathroom door, which she'd left open just a crack. Allie sucked in a quiet breath, butterflies fluttering wildly in her stomach as she anticipated Vaughn joining her in the shower.

Once they crossed this line, there would be no going back. She was ready for it. Yet, a part of her understood the gravity of this moment—for both of them.

"Allie, is it okay if I come in?" Vaughn asked.

"Yes, of course." She was embarrassed that she'd been so in her head about this moment between them that she'd failed to respond to his initial knock. So maybe she was more nervous about this than she was willing to admit even to herself. "In fact, you'd better hurry before we run out of hot water. You know how these old water tanks are."

"I do." Vaughn chuckled, and she could hear the door close behind him.

When she peeked her head out of the shower curtain, Vaughn had stepped inside the room, but he was leaning against the door instead of making his way toward the shower.

"If you plan to join me, you'll need to lose those." She indicated his underwear.

"I suppose I do." A smirk lit his eyes. He shoved his underwear down his hips and his dick sprang free.

Impressive.

Those Speedos from that tabloid photo definitely hadn't told the entire story.

Allie tried not to stare or to lick her lips or to instantly get wet at just the sight of it. She failed miserably on all three fronts.

He kicked off his underwear, shoved the curtain aside, and stepped inside the old shower/tub combo.

Without thought, Allie stepped backward to make room for him in the small space. The old ceramic tiles were cold against her back.

Vaughn's gaze didn't roam her body—as hers had his. Instead, his gaze locked with hers as he pressed his hands to the walls on either side of her, boxing her in. He dropped a soft, sweet kiss on her lips, then another on her neck, followed by a kiss on her shoulder.

He lifted his head and met her gaze.

“You're sure about this?”

“I am.” She tipped her chin defiantly, despite the fluttering in her belly. “Are you?”

Vaughn cocked his head, as if surprised that she'd noticed his hesitancy. He rubbed the bearded chin that had abraded her skin as he kissed her neck and shoulder.

“No.” He practically whispered the word. “I haven't been able to get you out of my head since the day you strutted into the resort in that sexy little skirt. And every moment we've spent together since then has only made me want you more. I've tried a million times to get you and the thought of us together out of my head, Allie. But no matter how hard I try... I just can't.”

Vaughn lifted her chin and their connection seemed to intensify as she met his gaze again. “I want you in my bed, Allie. I want to spend the rest of the night showing you all the ways I can please you. Tasting every inch of your gorgeous brown skin. But if you have the slightest concern that—”

Allie didn't allow him to finish. She didn't want to permit him the space to talk them both out of the thing they wanted so badly: each other.

She looped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a passionate kiss as she pressed her naked body to his, pinning his rock-hard length between them.

Vaughn angled his head as he took control of the kiss. His kiss was greedy and demanding, and she wanted more of it and more of him than the small space would permit. The water began to cool and Allie pulled back enough to meet his eyes, both of their chests still heaving.

“Does that answer your question?” She flashed a smirk that made him smile, too. “Now, I need to rinse my hair, and you should get cleaned up before this becomes an ice-cold shower.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Vaughn chuckled.

She rinsed the conditioner from her hair and Vaughn scrubbed his skin before letting his hair down and washing and conditioning it, too. They stepped out of the shower, toweled off, then made their way into Vaughn's bedroom.

As she approached his bed, nerves seemed to grab hold of Allie again. But as soon as Vaughn slipped his arms around her waist and kissed her, she relaxed and got lost in his passionate kiss.

Vaughn lifted her onto the bed. He sucked in a quiet breath, his eyes trailing her skin and eventually landing on the hardened peaks of her breasts.

He went back to the bathroom, returning with a strip of condoms, which he tossed onto the nightstand after tearing one off and sheathing himself. Vaughn slipped under the cover and lay over Allie as he kissed her.

Her heels dug into the mattress as she spread her knees apart, making room for Vaughn between them. Allie loved the feel of his hard body pressed against hers. Loved how perfectly the two of them seemed to fit together. As if they were made for each other.

She pressed her fingers into his back, her nails scraping gently at his damp skin as his tongue glided against hers. When Vaughn trailed kisses down Allie's neck, then her chest—his beard scraping at her skin—her breath hitched. She pressed her palms to either side of her on the mattress and lay back, her chest rising and falling with each breath.

When he took one of the pebbled tips into his warm mouth, Allie gasped. The pleasure that had been slowly creeping down her spine—making her nipples tingle and her sex feel heavy—exploded in intensity.

Allie cursed softly as she swept Vaughn's damp hair aside to give her an unobstructed view of his mouth on her skin. When his eyes met hers, there was something wild in his heated gaze that made her tremble with her growing desire for him.

Vaughn moved to her other nipple, giving it the same treatment. Then suddenly, he was kissing his way down her body again. He placed delicate kisses on her belly, then on her mound. He pressed soft kisses to her inner thigh. Then finally, he pressed an open mouth kiss to the space between her thighs ravenous for his touch.

Allie cursed softly, her head dropping back onto the pillow behind her as Vaughn kissed and sucked her delicate, sensitive, swollen flesh. Until she was gasping and cursing and begging him for more.

When he delved inside her with his tongue, she shot up onto her elbows again as she looked down at him. Leaning on one elbow, she swept the hair from his face again as he tasted her again and again, the heat between them rising.

But when he stuck his fingers inside her and curved them, she gasped in response to the sensation. Vaughn grinned with a wicked glint in his eyes. Then he sucked on her clit and she nearly screamed with pleasure.

Allie lay back on the bed and clutched the sheets as the sensation built, then rocketed through her body as she called Vaughn's name.

No, nothing between them would ever be the same. But she couldn't regret a single thing.

* * *

Vaughn watched as Allie fell apart, his name on her sweet tongue. Her chest rose and fell heavily. Conversely, her belly did, too.

He lay tender kisses on the flesh along her quivering, pink center, the taste of her on his tongue and the smell of soap and sex filling his nostrils.

Vaughn was pretty sure that he was already addicted to Allie's taste and to the sexy little sounds she'd made as he'd used his fingers and tongue to take her over the edge. To the way she shuddered as she cursed and called his name.

He lay between Allie's thighs, his head resting on her belly as she mindlessly raked her fingers through his hair. Vaughn had finally found his own personal Shangri-la, and he never, *ever* wanted to leave her or this bed.

Allie sighed softly, then kissed the top of his head.

Vaughn couldn't help smiling in response to the euphoric expression on Allie's face. He pressed a kiss to her hip. Then he climbed up the bed and lay on his side, facing her. "I didn't think it was possible, but you look even more gorgeous than usual."

"I'm completely blissed out." She sighed, a dreamy look on her beautiful face as she stroked his cheek. "And I have the distinct feeling that my night is about to get even better."

"Oh yeah?" Vaughn chuckled. "And why is that?"

Allie kissed him passionately, her naked body cradled against his. She pulled back, nuzzling her nose against his. "You're not going to make me beg again, are you?"

"No, sweetheart, I won't."

Vaughn rolled Allie onto her back and hovered over her as he studied the face he saw in his dreams every night. The lips he'd imagined kissing more times than he could count. He

knifed his fingers through her damp hair that smelled like his shampoo. Nuzzled the neck that smelled like his shower gel. Then he kissed her.

Allie looped her arms around his waist. As their kiss intensified, she held on to him tight, her nails digging into his skin as she clamored for more.

Finally, he gripped his shaft, pumping it before he began his torturously slow entry, permitting her body to adjust to his. Allie arched her back and cursed softly. Her chin tipped and her shoulders pressed back against the mattress as Vaughn began to glide his hips. He slowly pulled back, then went in again, going deeper this time.

Allie's eyes met his as she moved against him slowly at first. But then Vaughn's hips rocked in a small circle. He created friction against her sensitive clit, taking her higher and higher. Until she'd screamed, "Yes!" over and over again, punctuated by his name.

Vaughn kissed her neck and her shoulder as he moved inside her with more speed and intensity. Until his body stiffened, every muscle in his back suddenly tight as the most delicious sensation of bliss exploded inside him.

He lay beside Allie, pulling her into his arms.

"That was fucking amazing, babe." Vaughn kissed the top of her head.

"It was." She nuzzled her cheek against his chest. "You definitely won this round."

"I think we both won." Vaughn rubbed a hand up and down her back.

"You're not wrong there." Allie lifted her head. Her wide grin made his heart soar. "But next time, I'm definitely going for the win."

"God, you're competitive, woman."

"I can't help it. I have four brothers." Allie held up four of the manicured fingernails that had carved a trail down his back moments earlier.

“How about I scrape together something for dinner, then we go best two out of three?” Vaughn asked.

“Are you asking me to spend the night, Vaughn Reed?”

Vaughn hadn't even considered the need to formally ask Allie to spend the night with him. He'd just assumed that she'd want to stay as much as he'd wanted her there. But if he needed to formalize the request, he had no problem doing so.

“Sí. Quédate conmigo, esta noche, Alejandra.” He kissed the palm of her hand. “Por favor, cariña.”

Allie cupped his cheek, her gaze softening. “I can't believe you retained that much of the Spanish you learned from growing up around my family.”

“I've traveled the world for the past two decades, and I spent quite a bit of time in Buenos Aires and the Tortuguero National Park in Costa Rica. Helps to know the language. Pero no respondiste mi pregunta,” he added, making it clear he was aware that she'd cleverly dodged his question.

“Sí, me encantaría quedarme contigo esta noche, Vaughn,” she finally responded.

Yes, I would love to stay with you tonight, Vaughn.

He released a slow breath and smiled broadly his heart racing.

“But why don't I scrape together something for dinner while you move my car and grab my purse from the trunk? It probably isn't a good idea for me to leave it in a spot where it's visible from the street. Not unless we want the entire town to know I'm spending the night here.” She kissed him, then climbed out of bed and headed toward the bathroom. “The keys are in my coat pocket.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Vaughn was mesmerized by watching Allie strut to the bathroom in nothing but the glorious brown skin she'd come into the world with.

She shut the door behind her.

Vaughn lay back with his arm folded behind his head and stared at the ceiling. When Allie's father and brothers learned

there was something going on between them, all hell would probably break loose. But tonight, he was just going to marinate in the incredible bliss of having Allie Price in his arms and in his bed.

Ten

Vaughn had been all over the world. He'd awakened to fresh air in a hut nestled in the mountains of Tibet. To the demanding cries of howler monkeys in the rainforest in Costa Rica. To the sights and sounds of nearly every major city in North America and Europe. He awakened in palatial luxury suites and in a grass hut while volunteering on a mission in his birth mother's home country of Argentina. But he was pretty sure that he'd never awakened more content than he had that morning holding Allie in his arms.

He'd slipped from beneath the covers, gone to the bathroom and brushed his teeth before returning to bed. The moment his skin met hers, Allie wrapped herself around him again.

Allie's soft, warm curves were nestled against him. Her cheek was pressed to his chest, and one arm and one leg were slung across his body as she breathed softly.

Her face was shielded by her wild, loose curls. And she wore one of his old Sin & Glory T-shirts and nothing else—since her bra and panties had been hand washed and were hanging in the bathroom to dry.

When Vaughn glided a hand up and down her back and kissed the top of her head, Allie stirred. She stretched and yawned, her face still pressed into his chest and hidden by her dark, silky strands.

He brushed her hair away and kissed her forehead.
“Morning, beautiful.”

Even seeing just half her face, the smile that slid across it made Vaughn's heart swell. She slowly opened her eyes and glanced up at him with a grin before burying her face in his chest again, distorting her words. “Good morning, handsome. What time is it anyway?”

Vaughn glanced at the bedside clock. “Six thirty.”

She groaned. “I could lay here all day but—”

“Then stay.” He cradled her against him. “You’ve only had four hours of sleep.”

“I wish I could stay. But your custom cabinets are going in today, then we can finish laying the hardwood floor in the kitchen. Besides, if the crew arrives and sees my car, it won’t take much of a leap for them to realize I spent the night here.” She kissed his chest. “But I could stay again Saturday night, then I’ll make a full spread for breakfast on Sunday morning.”

Any disappointment he felt melted in the wake of her radiant smile and those glittering dark eyes that hinted at mischief.

“It’s a date.” He pressed a quick kiss to the soft, plump lips that he’d kissed so fervently the previous night. When he tried to slip his tongue between the seam of her lips, she immediately withdrew, pressing a hand to her mouth.

“Let me brush my teeth first.” She scampered out of bed, grabbed her purse from a chair on the other side of the room, then ducked into the bathroom.

Vaughn chuckled as he stared at the ceiling with one arm behind his head. With the other hand, he ran his fingers over the charm around his neck. His mother would’ve really liked Allie. They both had bold personalities, vibrant smiles, an irreverent sense of humor and a contagious laugh.

Allie returned a few minutes later. She hovered over him, tucking her hair behind her ear. “So...where were we?”

Vaughn pulled her into bed and she let out the most delightful squeal of surprise, then she giggled. The sounds made his heart dance. He hovered over her, studying her gorgeous face, scrubbed free of all makeup. He thought about the little girl who’d asked him to marry her. Who would’ve believed that time and distance had brought them here?

Vaughn leaned down and nuzzled her neck, then pressed kisses to her ear.

“Your brothers are going to kill me,” he whispered. “But I’ll die one happy man.”

Allie burst into laughter. She kissed him, then lay back with a gleam in her eyes. “Then it’s a good thing your secret is safe with me.”

Vaughn kissed her, his tongue exploring the minty taste of her mouth. Suddenly, her words hit him.

It’s a good thing your secret is safe with me.

“Wait...what do you mean my *secret* is safe with you?” He studied her face. “Are you saying we need to hide our relationship from your family?”

“Okay...relationship is a strong word,” Allie said with an uneasy, teasing-but-not-teasing smile. “We literally spent a night together, Vaughn. I don’t think that’s something I need to announce to my entire family.”

Vaughn sat up and wedged a pillow between his back and the headboard. “I thought you said you didn’t need your brothers’ approval when it came to your love life?”

“I don’t need my brothers’ approval when it comes to my *sex life*.” Allie sat up beside him. “But that doesn’t mean I hop on the family group chat to announce every hookup I’ve ever had, either.” Her tone was soft and teasing.

This was clearly no big deal to her. So why did it feel like one to him?

“So for you, last night was just a hookup?” Vaughn cringed inside just saying the words.

“Isn’t that what this is for you?” Allie seemed genuinely puzzled. She pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them as she studied his face. “I know we didn’t discuss it, but I just assumed...” She raked her fingers through her hair and tugged it over her shoulder, then heaved a quiet sigh. “You’re returning to LA once this project is done.

Allie furrowed her arched brows, her doe-like eyes assessing him carefully. When he still didn’t respond, her gaze softened. He could swear there was a hint of pity in her eyes.

“Given the situation, what was I supposed to think?”

Her words cut deep, and Vaughn wasn't even sure why. He'd probably used every one of the lines Allie had just said.

Relationship is a strong word. We literally spent a night together. I'm returning to LA after the tour.

So this was how it felt to be on the other side of that conversation. Or maybe he felt different because it was Allie saying those words.

From the moment Allie Price had strutted through the front door of the resort and smiled at him, he'd been an absolute goner. Even before he'd realized who she was.

He'd spent the past few weeks fighting his attraction to her and vehemently denying his growing feelings for his best friend's kid sister. But Allie was all grown up now.

She was a brilliant, accomplished woman who was sweet and funny. Allie was confident in her abilities. She knew just what to say to set his world right again when it felt like things were going sideways. And she'd inspired him to write some of his best songs yet.

Suddenly, it was clear why things felt so different for him this time. He'd spent the past few weeks falling for Allie, despite his efforts to keep things between them platonic.

Vaughn cradled Allie's face and kissed her. When he pulled away, she stared at him, studying his gaze.

He grazed her cheekbone with his thumb. "Baby, do you really think I'd risk blowing up a lifelong friendship and my relationship with your entire family for a few nights together?"

Her throat worked as she swallowed hard. She opened her mouth, yet no words came out. He'd rendered the opinionated Allie Price speechless. Something that might never happen again.

* * *

Allie stared at Vaughn. Her heart raced, and she went through a variety of emotions in the blink of an eye. Shock. Guilt. Embarrassment. Affection. Flattery. More guilt.

She opened her mouth to speak, but her brain and her mouth suddenly seemed incapable of functioning. Allie sighed softly and squeezed her eyes shut as she leaned into the palm resting against her cheek. She opened her eyes and studied the face that had occupied her thoughts from the time she was a tween until she was twenty.

That was the summer Vaughn Reed had married the younger sister of the band's lead singer. Allie's heart had been broken, and she'd been forced to banish the notion that Vaughn Reed would one day return to Willowvale Springs, confess that he'd loved her all along and whisk her away to join him and his bandmates on Sin & Glory's latest tour.

Now it was ten years later, Vaughn Reed was back home, very single, and she'd just awakened in his bed.

Allie wasn't a little girl who fantasized about love and relationships anymore. She was a grown woman who'd known the heartbreak and humiliation of a relationship that had failed quite publicly. She'd learned to accept that not every connection was meant to last forever. Some were only meant to last a season—however long or short that season might be. She'd been loving her life since she'd learned that very painful lesson.

So no, she hadn't expected that Vaughn was interested in anything more than a spectacular one-night stand or perhaps a clandestine fling.

"Vaughn, last night was *incredible*," Allie finally managed to say, her pulse racing. "And we've already made a date for Saturday night."

"You mean we've made plans to *hook up* on Saturday night," he corrected her. One eyebrow shot up and his nostrils flared. He dropped his hand from her face, and she immediately missed his touch.

"I would happily spend every night with you for as long as you're here in Willowvale Springs." Allie kissed him and smiled. "I just didn't want to assume that's what you wanted."

“That’s fair. But now you know that I *do* want to see you again.” He toyed with a strand of her loose hair, his gaze not quite meeting hers. “So now what, Allie?”

Allie worried her lower lip with her teeth, her heart thudding in her chest. She took his hand in hers. “I’d still prefer we kept this between us.”

The pained look in Vaughn’s eyes made her chest ache. She had valid reasons for her concern, so why did she feel like such a terrible person?

“Being one of the bad boys of rock is part of your brand, Vaughn. People expect you to be in and out of relationships and have random one-night stands.”

“Is that what’s bothering you? My reputation in the tabloids?” Vaughn asked. “Because I’d think that by now you know I’m not the guy they portray me as for clickbait online.”

“I do know you, Vaughn.” Allie forced herself to meet his gaze. “But I have my life and reputation to worry about. If you and I had met under any other circumstances, I wouldn’t hesitate to let my family know we were seeing each other. But you’re a business client, Vaughn. Do you have any idea how long it was before my father and brothers trusted me alone on a job with the crew members or male clients?”

Vaughn sucked in an impatient breath, that one eyebrow cocked even higher. But he didn’t respond.

“Three years.” Allie held up three fingers. “One of them would always make an excuse about why they needed to come along or they’d suddenly pop in. I had to threaten to move to Salt Lake City or Vegas for them to start treating me like an adult. I don’t want to go back to that because they’re worried I’m going to be swept off my feet by every handsome, wealthy male client I encounter. Nor do I want the contractors I work with to think that this suddenly means they have a shot.”

“I know how overprotective your dad and brothers are.” Vaughn ran his thumb along the back of her hand. “And I don’t want to make things difficult for you. But I don’t want to

play games either, Allie. Nor do I want to lie to my oldest friend about being with his sister.”

“And why would you have to lie? It’s not like Rey is going to randomly interrogate you about whether or not you’ve been banging me.” Allie nudged Vaughn’s arm playfully.

“There is such a thing as a lie of omission,” Vaughn said. “I should know. My ex-wife was really good at it.”

Allie threaded their fingers and leaned her head on Vaughn’s shoulder. “I’m sorry about how things worked out with your ex and that it led to the dissolution of the band. But it sounds like she was holding back information you were entitled to as her life partner,” Allie said. “My family isn’t entitled to know who I’m sleeping with, Vaughn. It isn’t the same thing. You see that, right?” She hoped so. Because she wanted to keep seeing Vaughn while he was in town.

“I do. So if you want to keep this between us, that’s what we’ll do,” he said begrudgingly. “But I need to make something clear...” He lifted her chin. “I won’t lie to your brother about us. Is that a gamble you’re willing to take?”

After all her talk about how she was her own woman, she wasn’t about to back down. Not if it meant walking away from Vaughn before either of them was ready.

“Deal.” She extended a hand to him.

Vaughn didn’t shake her hand.

“And what if this is just the beginning and we eventually want more?” Vaughn swept her hair from her shoulder and kissed her neck, then her ear. “Because when it comes to something I really want... I’ve never been a halfway kind of guy.”

There were butterflies in Allie’s stomach. Her childhood crush was actually worried that he might be falling for her. This night just didn’t seem real.

After years of crushing on Vaughn, she’d finally come to the painful realization that her feelings for him had been a childish, one-sided, imaginary affair. That he’d never seen her as anything more than Rey’s kid sister, and he never would. So

despite her bravado in going after Vaughn, she was stunned by his question.

This can't possibly be real.

Allie was sure that any minute now she'd awake to discover that this was all some lust-induced dream and the hand that had taken her to such great heights had been her own.

A part of her was terrified to consider the possibility that Vaughn might actually be serious about her. That he might want more from her than some forbidden fling.

Allie shoved his shoulders back against the rickety old wooden headboard and climbed onto his lap, her sex positioned over the bulge in his boxer briefs. She ground her hips and pressed her mouth to his, ending any objection he might've had to her evading his question.

Vaughn lifted the hem of the shirt, and she raised her arms to accommodate him. He tossed the shirt onto the floor and grazed her nipples with his thumbs, his eyes locked on to hers.

His gaze seemed to tell her that he knew exactly what she was doing, and he was choosing to let her get away with it.

Fair enough.

Vaughn dipped his head and took one of the pebbled tips into his mouth. Teased her with his tongue. Grazed her erect nipple with his teeth.

Allie dropped her head back, her hips moving more deliberately over his thick length. She murmured softly at the delicious friction provided by the now damp fabric encasing his erection as it made contact with her hardened clit.

Vaughn grabbed hold of Allie's waist, pulling her hard against him.

She cried out from the unexpected pleasure of the sudden move, her pulse racing.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a wicked smile. Vaughn lowered his hands, gripping her bottom so tightly she held back a small yelp. There was a hint of pain that only intensified the pleasure she was feeling. Then he repositioned

her. She moved back and forth with increased fervor, chasing the high of the mind-blowing orgasms he'd given her last night. He pulled and pushed her, moving with her and increasing the friction for both of them. Until she came hard, calling his name so loudly again and again that her throat felt hoarse.

Vaughn flipped her over, then he reached for one of the remaining condoms and sheathed himself as she lay on her back looking up at him as she tried to catch her breath.

She whimpered softly at the sensation of him filling her until he'd reached bottom. Hands behind her knees, he'd lifted her legs, his hips gliding back and forth slowly at first. Then more quickly. He'd taken her over the edge again, her fingernails digging into his biceps as she called his name. Until he'd stiffened, his back arching as he'd emptied himself inside the condom.

He lay on his back beside her, both of them huffing, as they tried to catch their breath. Vaughn wrapped his arms around Allie and pulled her against him, dropping a kiss on her head.

Allie sighed quietly, her heart still racing as she held on to him. She squeezed her eyes shut, thinking about Vaughn's question.

What if this is only the beginning and we eventually want more?

It was too late for that.

She'd gone into this telling herself that her flirtation with Vaughn was only a bit of fun. A chance to bang her celebrity crush and check something a little wild off of her bucket list. Knowing that having anything real and long-term with Vaughn Reed was an impossibility because his life was in LA and hers was there in Willowvale Springs.

But now she wasn't so sure. Because that little voice in the back of her head that had always believed that she and Vaughn were meant to be together had grown louder. And she wanted to believe it, too.

Eleven

It was Vaughn's fourth consecutive Sunday evening at Allie's parents' home; the second since that night at the pool that had changed everything between him and Allie. Since then, they'd spent every evening together at his cabin and she'd spent nearly every night in his bed. He was in a state of utter bliss.

This was the happiest Vaughn had been in longer than he could remember. And it'd been an insanely creative period for him. He'd finished the rest of the songs for Extreme Overload's album and had started working on a few possible songs for Sin & Glory's comeback album.

Nearly every song was either inspired by Allie or centered around the ideas of coming home or reconnecting with friends and family.

Vaughn was in a great space mentally and physically—free of the stress and anxiety that had become his constant companions over the years. He was enjoying his life more than he had in a long time. But he was in a very different place in his life now. Nights of partying, hard-drinking, eating out every night, subsisting on minimal sleep, and living out of a suitcase didn't seem so appealing anymore. In fact, maybe they never really had been.

He'd found surprising contentment in the quiet nights he and Allie spent in front of the fireplace playing Uno Flip while a movie they'd both seen a dozen times like *Hitch*, *Groundhog Day*, or *Coming to America* played in the background, and in nights like the one he was currently spending with her family were his true idea of happiness.

A tug on his pant leg pulled him out of his temporary daze.

"You okay, Tío Vaughnie?" Stella—one of Rey's adorable little girls—looked up at him, her huge, doe eyes filled with concern.

“Of course, sweetheart.” Vaughn put on his widest smile for the little girl who looked so much like her tía Allie. “But your abuelita and tía Allie fed me so much delicious food that my brain is a little fuzzy right now.” He chuckled, prompting the little girl to dissolve into giggles.

“My tummy is full, too.” Stella rubbed her tummy, her big smile showing off a recently lost tooth. She leaned in closer with one hand covering her mouth and whispered conspiratorially, “But I always have room for another slice of tres leches cake.”

Vaughn ruffled the little girl’s hair, worn in two long, curly ponytails that bounced with her every movement. Then Stella skipped off to play with her younger sister.

“The girls love their new tío Vaughnie.” Rey handed Vaughn an opened beer, then sank onto the sofa. “And I have to admit, it’s been good having you back.” Rey sipped his beer.

Vaughn joined his friend on the sofa, abandoning his plans to find Allie and sneak in a hug or a quick kiss. He took a sip of his beer.

“It’s been great reconnecting with you and your family,” Vaughn said. “The other day, I visited my parents’ gravesite for the first time since my mom was laid to rest there.”

He’d stopped himself from adding that Allie had been standing beside him with her hand tucked in his and her head leaned against his shoulder. That her presence had infused him with her quiet strength and much-needed support.

There is such a thing as a lie of omission.

Vaughn tried to ignore the uneasiness in his gut.

“I hope it gave you some closure.” Rey clapped a large hand on Vaughn’s shoulder. “And I hope that being back here has been as beneficial for you as it has been for the town and for us.”

Vaughn thought of his time with Allie at his cabin and their adventures exploring Shell Canyon together about an hour and

a half away. “Being back home has been really good for me, too.”

“Good. And look, I realize that my mother puts on the pressure for you to be here for dinner every week, but I know you have big plans for Sin & Glory. You can’t make them happen when Mamá has you in the kitchen helping her and Allie slice plantain or clean collard greens.” Rey chuckled, and Vaughn did, too. “Like I said, you’re always welcome here. I just don’t want you to feel obligated to stick around for us.”

Rey was right. Vaughn had been focused on his songwriting and spending time with Allie and her family. Despite multiple nudges from Cherry and one from his agent, Vaughn hadn’t pursued meetings with studio execs or taken the next steps in the search for a lead singer to replace Steven.

Had the choice been intentional? He wasn’t sure. But thinking about everything he needed to do to set the album and a promotional tour in motion made his head spin and his chest ache. It was the very opposite of how he felt sheltered in the cocoon of family, friendship and deep affection that he was enjoying there in Willowvale Springs.

Vaughn had spent most of the evening chatting with Allie’s brothers and her parents, entertaining her nieces and nephews, and playing a lively game of spades with Allie as his partner. She’d become his default partner for game night since every other adult in her family was either married or had a significant other. Later, they planned to watch a movie together—though they still hadn’t settled on which one.

Vaughn relished the vibrancy of these Sunday night dinners filled with love and family. And he appreciated that Dianelys, Walter, and their extended family all seemed to go out of their way to make him feel like he was a part of it.

And despite being in a house overflowing with her family, he and Allie couldn’t stop exchanging lingering glances and meaningful touches. They even managed to sneak in the occasional hug and kiss.

No, he definitely wasn’t there out of a sense of obligation. He was there in Willowvale Springs and at the home of the

Prices because he wanted to be. Because this place and the people in it had become his sanctuary.

“I know.” Vaughn nodded. “But thank you for saying so.”

Vaughn’s phone buzzed in his pocket, despite being set to Do Not Disturb. Only three numbers were permitted through when his phone was set to that status: Cherry, his agent, and Allie. He was hoping it was Allie asking him to join her in the basement or the backyard for another quick kiss.

He pulled the phone from his pocket and his agent’s face appeared. Vaughn sighed quietly. He held up his phone. “I should take this.”

Vaughn excused himself and stepped into the kitchen, which was quiet for the moment—a rarity on these busy Sunday evenings. He put the call on speakerphone since he was alone.

“Hey, Hannah.”

“Vaughn! There you are. I was beginning to think that the rumors that you were retiring from the business were true,” Hannah said, her voice raspy from years of smoking.

“I’m not retiring, Hannah,” Vaughn assured her. “I’ve just been taking a little break to work on a very important project, spend some time in my hometown, get reacquainted with old friends. You know...have a life.”

“A life, huh?” Hannah repeated the words as if they felt foreign on her tongue. “Oh, yes. I recall now. A life is that thing that *nonfamous* people get to have, sweetie. Famous badass rockers like you, Vaughn, have *careers*. Careers that require constant tending and watering. Which, of course, is why you have me,” she concluded proudly.

Hannah wasn’t wrong, so he didn’t object.

“You know how much I love you and appreciate your relentless pursuit of my career, Hannah.” Vaughn glanced around the kitchen, his impatience growing. “So I doubt that you called me on a Sunday evening to have your ego stroked. What’s going on?”

“Well, since you asked so nicely...” Hannah chuckled bitterly. “My idea that you should start writing for other people is paying off *big time*. The nominations for the GRAMMY Awards are in and that power ballad you wrote for that pop princess was nominated for both pop song of the year and song of the year. So now what do you think about writing songs for ‘baby artists’?” Hannah mocked his earlier complaint.

“You were right, as always.” Vaughn grinned. “That’s really great news. Beckett’s a good kid. I hope she wins.”

“You mean you hope *we* win,” Hannah corrected him. “After all, song of the year is a songwriter’s award. The studio is throwing a fancy event for nominees this coming Saturday. I expect to see you there.”

“I don’t know, Hannah.” Vaughn rubbed the back of his neck as he glanced around the space. “I’m kind of busy here. We’ll be going into the next phase of the renovation of my resort soon. Besides, I’m not trying to poach Beckett’s shine. She deserves this moment.”

“And so do you,” Hannah reminded him. “In fact, the head of Beckett’s label called to personally extend you an invitation. He asked if you were still trying to make a Sin & Glory reunion happen, and I got the distinct feeling that they’re open to financing the entire thing, so you won’t need to rely on your little side hustle to fund the project.”

“The wellness center is *not* just a side hustle.” Vaughn dragged his hand through his hair, trying to remember that Hannah wasn’t being intentionally insulting. She was a no-nonsense kind of woman, which is why he’d liked having her as his agent. She always gave him the news—good or bad—straight no chaser, the way he liked it. “But their interest in the band is intriguing. Maybe when the excitement of the nominations dies down they’ll want to talk.”

“Got a meeting for you with the head of the studio a couple days after the party!” Hannah squealed—which was unlike her—and it startled him.

“Great, thanks,” he said. Though he wasn’t sure how much he meant it. “I assume you’ll be attending both events. So I

guess I'll see you on Saturday night.”

“Oh no,” Hannah said. “We need time to work on our pitch, get you and your date fitted in designer clothing, work the promo circuit...you know the routine.”

“Right.” Vaughn heaved a quiet sigh. “What if I fly in on Thursday?”

“Make it Wednesday so we can get to work first thing Thursday morning,” Hannah said, then made a kissing sound. “Congrats, sweetheart. You truly deserve this moment.” She sounded like a proud mother for a moment, but then Hannah shifted back into cutthroat agent mode. “Now, let's milk it for everything it's worth and then some.”

Vaughn couldn't help laughing. That was the Hannah he knew and loved. She could be as bristly as a cactus on the outside, but she always had his best interest—and the best interest of their collective bank account—in mind.

“I will. Thanks, Han. I'll see you on Thursday morning.” Vaughn ended the call, still trying to process the fact that the song he'd written had been nominated for two Grammy awards. For some reason, this felt different from the songs he'd help write for Sin & Glory that had gone on to win awards. He felt good about the nomination and the studio exec's interest in producing a Sin & Glory reunion album. Still, he wasn't looking forward to leaving Allie to return to LA for what would probably be a week or more. Especially since he was already booked to spend two weeks in London immediately after that working with another young artist to write songs for their upcoming album.

“You won an award? This is so very exciting!” Vaughn turned to find Allie's mother hovering in the pantry.

“No, Mamá, I haven't won. At least not yet,” Vaughn said. “A song I wrote for another artist was nominated for a couple of GRAMMY awards.”

Mamá squealed almost as loudly as Hannah had, bringing half the family running. When they did, she turned to him, beaming. “Vaughn, you must tell them your good news.”

Vaughn had wanted to share the news privately with Allie first and explain to her that he needed to return to LA for a week instead of spending the week before his trip to London with her as they'd planned. But Dianelys hadn't left him much of a choice.

"The song I wrote for Beckett...it was nominated for pop song of the year and song of the year," Vaughn shoved a hand into his pocket. As the entire family clamored excitedly, Vaughn turned to Dianelys and whispered, "Were you in the pantry the entire time I was on the phone?"

"I was organizing." She shrugged nonchalantly without making eye contact with him. "That is not the point. The point is that you need to return to LA to attend that fancy party and meet with those studio executives."

"What party? And what studio executives?" Allie demanded, one hip cocked. Her gaze shifting from his to her mother's. "And how is it that you know so much about this, Mamá?"

"I might have overheard him on the telephone," she admitted sheepishly. "But that is not the point," she repeated, seemingly annoyed that neither of them seemed to understand that.

Everyone congratulated him, hugging him and shaking his hand. Walter declared that this called for the good rum he kept in the cellar and more cake for the kiddos.

News of more cake made the children's mothers frown. Likely at the thought of dealing with their children's sugar rush right before bedtime when they had school the next day.

Before Vaughn and Allie could return to the dining room with everyone else, Mamá grabbed each of their wrists and held them back. She surveyed the space to ensure no one else was around. Then she whispered loudly, "Alejandra should go to California with you. She can be your date for this event."

Both Vaughn's and Allie's eyes widened.

"Date? Mamá, I told you—"

“Before you finish that sentence, princesa, I’m pretty sure it is a sin to lie to your mother.” Dianelys narrowed her gaze and pointed at her daughter.

Allie snapped her mouth shut, then glanced back at the entry to the kitchen. “Mamá, I cannot just declare that I’m going to Cali to be Vaughn’s date for this thing. Papá would have an absolute fit.”

“If you say you are going there to be his date...yes,” Dianelys agreed. “But Vaughn has been saying for weeks that he wants to update his home in LA with the thought of selling it, no? So Allie can go there to assess the situation. Of course, you do not have to hire her if you do not want to,” her mother added. “But your father certainly isn’t going to turn down a potential design contract of that magnitude, and it would give you an excuse to accompany Vaughn to California.”

Allie’s mother folded her arms over her belly and grinned proudly. “It’s a good plan, no?”

“It’s a brilliant plan.” Vaughn turned to face her. “That is... if Allie wants to go.”

“A chance to finally see your place in person and maybe tag along to a few Hollywood parties?” Allie said. “Of course, I’d love to come.”

“Perfecto.” Allie’s mother grinned, heading toward the door. She stopped and turned back to them. “But maybe we don’t mention this part of the plan until the day before you leave.”

“Everyone will be busy with the cake for a few minutes.” Her mother flashed them a knowing grin, then disappeared from the kitchen.

“Your mom is a genius. We definitely don’t tell her that enough.” Vaughn pulled Allie into his arms and gave her a kiss. He released her reluctantly.

“Please don’t tell her that. She’ll be absolutely insufferable.” Allie grinned, slipping her hand into his. A soft smile lit her gorgeous face. “And Mamá’s right. I’ll bid out the job, but please don’t feel any obligation to hire me for it. I’m

sure you'd prefer working with an established interior designer who's a household name in LA."

"I told you before, you'd be a hit in LA. This will give you the chance to see for yourself that you're more than ready for primetime." Vaughn kissed her again. "C'mon, we'd better head in there before your father sends out a search party."

Allie laughed, and they walked out of the kitchen and joined the rest of her smiling family, eager to celebrate Vaughn's latest accomplishment. Having Allie at his side and being surrounded by her family for such a pivotal moment in his life and career felt truly gratifying. And it pained him to think of ever leaving her or them behind again.

Twelve

The four days Allie had spent in LA with Vaughn had been absolute heaven. It had been her first time on a private plane and her first time in LA. She'd ridden through the streets of LA in the passenger seat of Vaughn's black Lamborghini Aventador. She was fascinated by everything from the palm trees synonymous with the town to the famous Hollywood Boulevard and Sunset Strip. They'd taken a short walk along the Hollywood Walk of Fame and had taken photos in front of the iconic Chinese Theater.

That first night, Vaughn had taken Allie on their first official date at Pace, a cozy Italian eatery with a warm, romantic vibe and impeccable service. He had the prime rib—grilled to perfection—and she had the Chilean sea bass. Both were delicious, as was their famous warm chocolate cake piled with whipped cream. It had been worth every bit of the wait. The wine and the overall ambiance had been perfect for what felt like such a special night. But what was most memorable about the evening was being on a proper date with Vaughn.

Allie hadn't realized just how badly she wanted a night like that with him. Or to be able to simply stroll down the sidewalk hand in hand or with his arm draped over her shoulder.

Vaughn was right. Whatever this was and for however long they were doing this, she didn't want to hide their relationship anymore. But it wasn't a conversation that should be had with her family over the phone. Nor did she want to potentially stress Vaughn out about it when he had so many other things on his mind.

Being nominated for his first solo songwriting award. Convincing the studio execs to finance Sin & Glory's comeback album and tour. The album he was working on with Extreme Overload. The trip he'd be taking to London to team up with a British singer to write her next album.

In the scheme of things, Allie being ready to tell her meddling but well-meaning family about them was small potatoes, and it could wait until he'd returned from London.

Now she stood in the main bedroom of Vaughn's gorgeous house in the Hollywood Hills that she'd fallen in love with the moment she'd seen it. It honestly broke her heart that he wanted to sell the place. The contemporary architecture of the home was breathtaking, and the location provided stunning views of the ocean and LA Basin.

Allie looked out at the water and smiled softly.

She couldn't believe that she'd gotten to wake up to this view while wrapped in Vaughn's strong arms for the past three nights. It'd been like some crazy fever dream. A reality that exceeded any of the fantasies she'd had about being with Vaughn Reed. Except, in those fantasies, she and Vaughn would get their happily-ever-after.

Allie cared deeply for Vaughn. More so every single day. And she'd enjoyed spending time with him there in LA.

But while this glamorous world where one could encounter a movie star, sitcom actor, or rock legend at the local Starbucks was a great place for Allie to visit, it simply wasn't home. Yet, it was exactly where Vaughn belonged. More importantly, it was where he needed to be. He was staying in Willowvale Springs to be with her and with her family. She could see now that it was holding him back and stifling his career. She couldn't be the reason that his plans for Sin & Glory's comeback failed. Yet, the thought of ending something so beautiful broke her.

"Hey, sweetheart. Is everything okay?" Vaughn slipped his arms around her waist as he stood behind her staring at their reflections in the glass. He placed a gentle kiss on her neck. Vaughn had shaved his beard two days earlier. The stubble tickled her skin. "You aren't nervous about tonight, are you? Because you look stunning, and you're gonna knock 'em dead."

Allie turned around and wrapped her arms around his waist beneath his black tuxedo jacket so she wouldn't wrinkle it.

“Thank you.” She pressed a quick kiss to his lips, thankful the makeup artist had selected a non-transferable coral lip stain. “You clean up pretty nice yourself.”

Vaughn looked incredibly handsome in the graphite-colored tuxedo jacket with gleaming, silver thread running through the fabric. The black, satin lapels of his jacket were affixed with a collection of silver pins. A burgundy shirt provided an unexpected splash of color. His hair had been trimmed and was worn loose and straight.

“And it only took an army of stylists to make it happen.” Vaughn chuckled, then glanced around the room which was quiet again after it had been brimming with people for the past several hours. The same people who were waiting impatiently for them to emerge so they could see them off to the GRAMMYs and get lots of pics to share on their respective social media sites. “It’s nice to at least have this room to ourselves again. But I can’t wait to get you back here and out of that gorgeous dress once they’re all gone.”

A deep smile made her cheeks hurt. “Clearly, it pays to know people in high places.”

Allie had no shortage of formal dresses. From bridesmaids’ dresses to evening gowns worn to the quinceañeras of younger family members. But the dress she was wearing tonight was more than she could have ever expected. The café-au-lait-colored gown covered in hand-stitched, gold-sequined appliqués had a crisscross back and cutouts on either side of her waist.

Getting to wear the gorgeous loaner dress created by up-and-coming Afro-Latina designer Porsha Sanchez, whom Allie had gotten to meet, and having her hair and makeup done by legends in the business was like being in a surreal fairy tale. And later, she’d get to walk the red carpet on Vaughn’s arm.

“You hungry?” Vaughn asked. “Because it’s going to be a long night. I suggest you slip a few snack bars in that tiny purse of yours.” He indicated the matching sequin clutch Porsha had gifted her.

They'd begun the day with a tremendous brunch at Chateau Marmont and she was still full.

"I can wait until dinner." Allie picked up her bag and took Vaughn's hand.

Vaughn put his hand on the doorknob, then stopped. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Perhaps, he was more nervous about the pressure of the night than he was letting on.

"Hey, this isn't the actual award ceremony," Allie reminded him, hoping it would ease Vaughn's tension. "It's a party to celebrate the nominees, which has already netted you a meeting with studio execs. "Everything is going to be fine." She ran a hand down his chest, then kissed him. "So relax, okay?"

* * *

Vaughn forced a big smile and shook hands with yet another studio exec Hannah had introduced him to. He nodded along and tried his best to follow the conversation. But his attention kept drifting to the other side of the room where Allie was chatting with the partners and girlfriends of a few other industry guests. She was all smiles and looked gorgeous in her designer gown.

It had been adorable seeing the excitement on Allie's face as she encountered one celebrity or another and the way her wide eyes had lit up as they'd visited LA landmarks like the Hollywood sign, Griffith Park and the observatory.

Allie's genuine elation reminded him of how wide-eyed and naive he'd been when he'd first arrived in LA. He'd had a few rough years, but through a lot of hard work, a massive amount of determination and a little luck, eventually he'd made it to the top of his game. He'd done it before, and he could do it again. This time, with Sin & Glory's name and reputation behind him. But as he stood in the room filled with a who's who of the industry the hunger he'd once felt no longer seemed to be there. Instead, his only concern was when he

could grab Allie's hand, make their way to the limo and retreat to his bed again.

This time, he would say the words that had gotten stuck in his throat earlier that afternoon. That he was in love with Allie, and he wanted more from this than a series of clandestine hookups. The realization had hit him the previous evening. He wanted to be able to take Allie out and spoil her as he had there in LA. And he'd wanted to be able to pull Allie onto his lap and kiss her at her parents' house as her brothers often did with their significant others.

Vaughn hated that he wouldn't be able to attend Sunday dinner at the Prices' home for the next few weeks.

And he missed the peace and solitude, fresh mountain air, and slower pace of life in Willowvale Springs where there was no traffic, smog, or relentless paparazzi.

He'd found creative inspiration again in his hometown. Or maybe he'd found it in the woman across the room who was wearing the hell out of that dress and smiling at him seductively. The festivities had yet to begin in earnest and he'd been toying with the idea of grabbing her by the hand, grabbing a to-go bag from his favorite greasy spoon dive eatery, and whisking her back to his place so he could spend the remainder of the evening worshipping every ounce of her golden-brown skin.

Hannah's pointy elbow brought him back to the conversation as one of the record execs gushed over his favorite Sin & Glory songs. Vaughn thanked the man and tried to get back into the right headspace for the evening. But as he tried to connect with the two men who might hold his band's future in the palm of their hands, Vaughn wasn't so sure that a future with Sin & Glory was what he wanted anymore.

Thirteen

Industry events like this one always felt interminably long. But tonight's event felt especially so. This was Vaughn's final night in LA with Allie before he put her on a plane headed back to Wyoming. Then, after his meeting with the execs, he would board a flight for London. So he didn't want to waste a moment of their remaining time together.

He'd ducked Hannah—who was probably still looking for him—and grabbed Allie's hand when she exited the ladies' room.

He escorted her to a quiet corner at the end of the hallway, pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

“And what did I do to deserve that?” Allie gazed up at him with the sweetest expression.

His heart thudded in his chest, the words, *I'm in love with you, Allie*, caught at the back of his throat.

“I just wanted to thank you for being here with me,” Vaughn managed instead. He kissed her again. “Having you here means the world to me. But we only have a few hours left, and I'd much rather spend them back at my place, memorizing every inch of your skin and showing you how desperately I need you.

Allie's eyelashes fluttered. She sank her teeth into her lush, lower lip. “Sounds like a damn good plan. Let's go.” She slipped her hand into his and they turned to leave.

A familiar figure slumped against the wall outside the bathroom. It was his friend, Liza Jaymes. Last he'd seen her, she'd looked amazing. But tonight, she looked...*rough*. Her eyes were red; her lipstick and mascara smudged.

“Liza?” Vaughn stopped. “What are you doing here?”

“Getting dumped, apparently.” Liza laughed bitterly.

Vaughn dragged a hand through his hair and heaved a quiet sigh. Why had Liza chosen tonight, of all nights, to get completely trashed?

He turned to Allie and lowered his voice. “Al, this is an old friend of mine—”

“Liza Jaymes.” Allie flashed a polite smile. “You two dated before you and Eva got together. But she’s had a rough decade or so.”

Vaughn raised an eyebrow. Allie always maintained that she’d been a big Sin & Glory fan. He just hadn’t realized that she’d been versed on his complete dating life.

“What? The relationship was covered in all the celebrity magazines back then,” Allie whispered. “I know you worked together recently, but I didn’t realize you two were still friends.”

“We’ve kept in touch over the years. That’s why she asked me to sit in during her set here in LA a few weeks ago.” Vaughn turned his back to Liza and lowered his voice so only Allie could hear him. “She looked and sounded amazing that night.”

“Hi, I’m Liza.”

They both turned to her and she waved, a giddy expression on her face.

“I got dumped tonight by a complete asshole.” Liza pushed her signature wild, red hair away from her face. “He was supposed to help me rebuild my career but apparently, he’s been promising that to a *lot* of second-rate, has-been artists.” Liza’s big, brown eyes filled with tears.

Vaughn squeezed Allie’s hand. An unspoken apology for their plans going off the rails. With his free hand, he squeezed Liza’s arm. “You are *not* a second-rate artist, Lize. You just need the right opportunity.”

“That’s really kind of you to say, Vaughn.” Liza sniffled and placed a hand over his. She offered him a watery smile before turning her attention to the woman at his side. “And you must be... Allie. Vaughn told me all about you when he played my

show. I'm pretty sure he loves you, but...shh..." She held a finger up to her mouth and whispered conspiratorially. "I'm not sure he knows it yet."

"Is that right?" Allie shifted her amused gaze to Vaughn momentarily before returning her attention to Liza. "Well, Vaughn couldn't stop talking about how amazing your sold-out shows were. He's excited for the music you'll make next, and so am I."

"He is?" Liza seemed happy about the compliment, but suddenly her expression crumbled, and tears slid down her cheeks. "Vaughn has always believed in me. But I'm always disappointing him, aren't I?"

"You aren't disappointing me, Liza," Vaughn said gently. "I just want you to be healthy and happy. You were in such a good place when I saw you a few weeks ago. But tonight—"

"God, I'm a mess," Liza blurted, then ducked through the bathroom door that swung open when another patron exited.

"Fuck, I'm so sorry about this, babe." Vaughn turned to Allie. "I wanted you to have an amazing night and—"

"I have," she assured him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Encountering your inebriated ex doesn't change that. But what are you going to do now? You can't just leave her like this."

"I know." Vaughn groaned, rubbing his chin. "I wish I could whisk you away to the limo, take you back to my place, and finish what we started this morning. But if something happened to Lize, I'd never forgive myself."

"No, you wouldn't." Allie touched his cheek and smiled. "Because you're a genuinely good guy, Vaughn Reed." She lifted onto her toes and kissed him. "Go take care of your friend. I can find my way back to your house, and I remember the key code."

"Good. But you take the limo. I'll let Simon know that you'll be out front in ten minutes. I'll get back to the house as soon as I can." Vaughn pulled out his phone and shot off a quick text message to his limo driver.

Liza reemerged from the bathroom and leaned heavily against the wall before Vaughn could ask Allie to go in and check on her.

It looked like Liza was about to slide down the wall.

“It’s okay, babe. I understand, and I’ll be waiting for you,” Allie squeezed his hand. “And if I see Hannah, I’ll tell her something important came up and you had to leave.”

Hannah. Crap. He’d completely forgotten about her.

“Thanks.” Vaughn pulled Allie into his arms and kissed her long and hard before finally letting her go.

Vaughn called a car service, then he looped an arm around Liza’s waist and guided her out of the hotel, trying to keep as low a profile as possible. They made their way to a coffee shop just up the road where he’d asked the car service to meet him. Vaughn bought a couple of bottles of water and a huge cup of black coffee.

They got in the car and began the drive to Liza’s townhouse in Studio City. He was worried about his old friend and would ensure that she made it home okay. But he couldn’t stop thinking about Allie and what Liza had said about him. *I’m pretty sure he loves you, but I’m not sure he knows yet.*

Even drunk, Liza was perceptive. But she was only half right. Because Vaughn had become increasingly clear on his feelings for Allie. He just needed to find the right time to tell her how he felt. He only hoped that Allie could see a future for them, too.

* * *

Allie had tried her best to stay up and wait for Vaughn while watching movies. But when he’d called at 2:00 a.m. to say he’d be at least another hour, she’d tapped out and had fallen asleep. But she felt a kiss against her temple, smelled Vaughn’s familiar scent and felt his beard scrape her skin.

“Hey, you’re back,” Allie muttered into the pillow, barely able to raise her head. “Is your friend okay?”

“I choose to believe that she will be.” Vaughn pulled Allie into his arms and kissed the top of her head. “Thank you for being so understanding. Not many people would be, given our history.”

Allie studied Vaughn’s handsome face. She could see the concern for both his friend and for her feelings. The more she got to know Vaughn, the more thoughtful she realized he was. They lay on their sides facing each other and she cupped his cheek.

“You’ve never given me a reason not to trust you, Vaughn.” She kissed him.

Vaughn ran his fingers through her hair, which she’d released from the low bun she’d worn along with an expensive, jeweled barrette. Then he caressed her cheek with his thumb. “And I love you, Allie.”

She smiled, her heart full and butterflies fluttering in her belly. Allie wanted so badly to tell Vaughn that she loved him, too. But part of her worried that she was rushing into this. That this was just the grown-up version of her teenage crush. That even if the two of them had fallen in love it couldn’t survive the distance and their wildly different lives.

“Vaughn, I love the relationship we’ve been building and every moment we’ve spent together. But what about your life here?”

He drew in a quiet breath, as if it was a barrier he’d been considering, too. “You’ve had a good time in LA, right? You could move here. I’d even help you set up your own interior design practice if that’s what you want,” Vaughn said.

Allie sat up. “You’re serious?”

Vaughn sat up in bed, too. “I am.”

“LA is a fun place to visit. But my life...my family, my friends...they’re all back in Willowvale Springs,” she said gently as she threaded their fingers.

“Then I’ll move to Willowvale Springs.”

She was moved that he was willing to make such a big sacrifice for her. But she couldn't be the reason Vaughn gave up his dream of reuniting the band and traveling the world making the music that he loved.

“What about your songwriting, your session work, and your plans to reunite the band? How will any of that work if you move back home?”

Vaughn sighed heavily but didn't answer.

Did his heart ache as badly as hers did at the realization that there was no good solution to their dilemma?

Allie forced a smile, though her heart was broken knowing that one day soon this fairytale would come to a painful and abrupt end.

“We only have a few hours until my flight. Let's not spend it mourning what we can't have. Let's focus on the moments we have left together before I return home and you go off to London.”

“Then maybe reconsider coming to London with me?” Vaughn cupped her cheek.

She honestly wished she could. But it made her heart swell and her tummy flutter knowing that he wanted her to be there with him.

“I can't, babe.” Allie kissed his palm and forced a smile. “But when you return to Willowvale Springs, if you still feel this way, we'll talk more about it. Okay?”

“Okay,” he agreed reluctantly.

“Good.” Allie forced a broad smile, despite her heart breaking. “Now, I think I remember you promising a night I'd never forget.”

Allie sank beneath the covers, laughing, and Vaughn joined her. But as they made love a little voice in the back of her head couldn't help wondering if they'd ever be together like this again.

Fourteen

Allie had been back in Willowvale Springs for more than a week, and she missed Vaughn desperately. They'd spoken at least once each day. But because of the seven-hour time difference, they usually messaged each other. And despite having no clue how they were going to work things out, she couldn't wait for him to return. She missed having him there with her and waking up in his arms each morning.

Allie walked through the cabin she and Vaughn had been sharing the past few weeks. She'd wanted to surprise him. So she'd instructed her crew to begin updating it the day they left town. They'd sanded and polyurethaned the floors, repainted the walls, replaced the appliances and laid new carpeting in the bedrooms. The old furniture had been removed and the new furniture was being delivered that afternoon. She'd placed markers where each of the items should go to make the furniture delivery quick and efficient.

"My goodness. This looks like an entirely new place. Hank and Edith wouldn't believe what y'all have done with this old cabin." Barbara stood in the open doorway, marveling at the fresh new paint job and refinished flooring.

"And do you like it?" Allie couldn't help being a bit nervous about Ms. Barb's reaction to the more contemporary colors and decor.

"Like it? Sugar, I love it. You've truly outdone yourself on this project, Allie. The main building is absolutely stunning. With just some simple changes, you've completely transformed this cabin. This place is going to be booked all the time."

"That's certainly my hope." Allie smiled, glancing around the space.

Allie's phone buzzed in her pants pocket. She pulled the phone out and looked at the text. It was from Rey.

Urgent. Come to Mom and Dad's place. NOW.

Panic shot through Allie. She typed out a quick response.

Are they both okay?

Allie's heart raced as the three dots went into motion right away.

Physically? They're fine. But we need to talk. Let's save the questions for in-person.

Now that she knew her parents were okay she was irritated with her brother's tone.

"Everything okay, hon?"

She'd practically forgotten that Barb was there.

"I think so," Allie said. "But I have an important meeting to attend. I was hoping the furniture would've been delivered by now. I need to leave for an hour or so. Do you think you could ___"

"Say no more. I'm on it." Barb waved a hand and grinned. "You go ahead and take care of whatever it is that you need to. I'll make sure everything is placed just where you want it."

"Thanks, Ms. Barb. You're a lifesaver. And please, examine each piece before they bring it in. Make sure there are no cuts, no marks and no funny odors. You'd be surprised how hard it is to get them to take away a damaged piece once you let them bring it inside."

"Yes, ma'am. Will do." Barb saluted as if they'd just exchanged sentinel duty. "And I'll lock the place up when they're done"

"Thanks, Ms. Barb." Allie hugged the older woman, then made her way to her car and drove to her parents' house hoping everything was okay.

* * *

"Mamá! Papá!" Allie called as she walked through her parents' house.

In the kitchen, her mother had been in the midst of peeling potatoes and cutting up vegetables, but it looked as if she'd

suddenly abandoned the task.

She walked into the den and her parents were seated on the sofa, her father comforting her mother who dabbed tears from her eyes.

“¿Qué pasa, Mamá?” Allie hurried to her mother’s side and held the hand her mother wasn’t using to dab her face with a tattered napkin.

“I thought that Vaughn was tu novio, princesa.” Her mother sniffled.

Every muscle in Allie’s body stiffened. She glanced around the room at her father and brother, who both seemed angry.

What the hell is going on?

“I never said Vaughn was my boyfriend, Mamá. In fact, I’ve always maintained that Vaughn and I were just friends,” Allie said carefully. “But why does it matter?”

“This is why.” Her mother produced folded, wrinkled pieces of paper and handed them to her.

Mamá had printed what looked like a webpage from a gossip blog. The headline read: *Sin & Glory’s Bad Boy Drummer Is Up to His Same Old Tricks*. The story had what were undoubtedly paparazzi photos of Vaughn with various women.

Him hugging Liza Jaymes on stage at her show. Vaughn carrying Liza into her town house. Vaughn “creeping out of” Liza’s place hours later. Red carpet photos of Vaughn and Beckett. Photos of Vaughn and Allie on the red carpet and candid shots of them stealing kisses later in the evening. A photo of Vaughn and the young British singer he was writing an album with boarding the plane for ‘a long, cozy flight to London.’

Allie’s heart thumped inside her chest, her pulse was racing, and her face and chest were hot with embarrassment. It felt like she was back to that day when her mother read the engagement announcements only to discover that her ‘boyfriend’ of two years had gotten engaged to someone else who was much older and much wealthier.

She closed her eyes and heaved a quiet sigh, then handed the pages back to her mother. “No puedes creer todo lo que lees, mamá.”

“I do not believe everything I read,” her mother protested angrily. “But I do believe what my own eyes see, Alejandra. I would never have suggested you go to LA with Vaughn if I knew that he was not exclusively committed to you, princesa.”

“This isn’t what you think, Mamá.” Allie shot to her feet and paced the floor.

“Well, explain it to us, baby girl,” her father finally spoke through gritted teeth. “Because this doesn’t look good.” He gestured to the wrinkled pieces of paper in her mother’s hands. “This article makes it seem like—”

“Vaughn is taking advantage of my sister and the kindness and generosity our family has always shown to him.” Rey’s tone dripped with outrage. “What were you thinking, Alejandra? Vaughn is a business client. We do *not* date clients.”

“Don’t yell at your sister.” Her mother sniffled.

“Felix is literally dating a former client’s daughter, and they started seeing each other *during* the project!” Allie yelled back, then took a breath and sighed. “And Vaughn isn’t just a client. He’s a friend.”

“Yes, *my* friend.” Rey slapped his chest. “Not yours. Besides, he’s too old for you.”

“It’s nine years, Rey. Which was a big deal when I was ten. But not now that I’m thirty. You’re six years older than your wife. And no one batted a single eyelash about that,” Allie noted. “So you can stop it with the double standard bullshit.”

“Alejandra!” her parents both said.

She folded her arms and cocked a hip.

“Dammit, Al. Why must you always be so stubborn? We’re only trying to protect you. And when you don’t listen, look at what happens,” Rey said.

“I’m a freaking adult, Reynaldo Price. I don’t *have* to listen to any of you.” Allie gestured to all three of them, and her parents’ eyes widened and they both looked insulted.

“I realize that in this context the photos look quite damning. But this isn’t a news article. It’s gossip and lies. Vaughn would never behave as they’re implying he has.”

“So you two *are* seeing each other.” There was disappointment in her father’s voice.

“Yes,” Allie admitted. “Vaughn thought we should tell all of you, but I asked him not to.”

“Why, princesa?” Her mother sounded truly hurt, and guilt churned in Allie’s gut.

She sank onto the sofa opposite her parents. “Papá and the boys already watch my every move and treat me like a child.”

“So to prove that you’re not a child, you behave as one, hiding your relationship with Vaughn rather than being honest about it?” Her father hiked one of his furry eyebrows as he tapped the edge of the sofa.

Yikes. Point for Dad.

She didn’t have a good response for that one, so she didn’t even attempt it.

“Vaughn isn’t staying, Dad. I figured that if you all knew about us it would upset you and Rey for nothing and Mamá would needlessly get her hopes up.”

“Translation: the two of you were just hooking up, so you didn’t want the rest of us to know about it.” Rey rubbed his jaw.

Allie glared at her brother but decided against throwing a shoe at him. She ignored him instead.

“Like I said...each of these photos is quite innocent.” She moved to the other side of the room and took the paper from her mother. “Here Vaughn is congratulating a friend on a great performance. Here, he’s escorting that same friend home when she got drunk after getting dumped rather cruelly—which I happen to think was quite admirable of him. The photos of us

are self-explanatory.” She quickly cleared her throat. “This is Diva Divine—the British R&B singer Vaughn is collaborating with to write songs for her next album. She was one of the *ten* passengers on that private flight to London.”

Allie handed the pages back to her mother.

“I’m disappointed that you all would believe this of Vaughn. The man adores this family. That’s why he was so reluctant to give in when *I* pursued *him*,” she said. “He was worried about losing your friendship—” she nodded toward Rey “—and he didn’t want to disappoint either of you and risk his place at your dinner table.” She gestured toward her parents. “Because we’re the only family he has left.”

Allie glared at the three of them, none of them meeting her gaze.

“Too bad none of you hold him in the same regard. Because he would never have thought the worst of any of you.” Allie huffed. “I need to go. We’re putting the finishing touches on Vaughn’s cabin this week.”

“You mean your little hookup shack,” Rey said.

Allie was beyond caring what any of them thought at the moment.

“You wanna call it that? *Fine*. But it beats your old hookup spot—the bed of your old pickup truck—any day of the week.” Allie glared at her brother.

Rey’s face flushed as their mother stared at him with widened eyes and their father frowned at him.

Her father cleared his throat. “Allie, Rafi’s project is winding down. Maybe it would be better if—”

“*No*, Papá,” she said firmly. “I plan to see this project through from start to finish, and I need to go back to it.” She kissed her parents’ cheeks, then glared at her brother again on her way out of the den.

Allie got in her car and drove back toward the resort.

She’d fiercely defended Vaughn, and she believed every word that she’d said to them. But as she sat in the quiet of her

thoughts, the pain and humiliation of the words of that blog post, which would likely get picked up on lots of gossip shows, burned her chest and made her eyes sting.

What that post had intimated about Vaughn's relationship with those other women might not have been true. But now that the accusation was out in the world, people would always regard her as the poor little pathetic girl who "thought she was special."

Vaughn hadn't done anything wrong. Yet, she'd ended up humiliated and fodder for the gossip circuit. She loved Vaughn, even if she hadn't been ready to tell him so that day. But if this was what she'd have to endure for them to be together...was it worth it?

Allie wiped the warm tears from her cheeks and sniffled. She needed some time and space to figure that out.

* * *

Vaughn stepped out of the London studio after seeing a 9-1-1 message from Cherry. He called his assistant as quickly as he could.

"Hey, Cherry. What's going on? Is everything okay?"

"No, I'm afraid it isn't. Have you been looking at the Google alerts I set up for your name?"

"No. Sorry." Vaughn stretched, his neck, shoulders and back stiff from long hours seated in the studio. "We've been going hard at this for the past week. In fact, we're pretty close to being done," he said. "Why? Is there something I should see?"

"Yes," she said after a long pause.

His phone dinged with another text message from Cherry. When he clicked on the link she'd sent, his blood started to boil.

"Shit! Have any other networks or podcasts picked up this story?"

Another pause. "I'm afraid so, Vaughn. I've already contacted Hannah about getting the PR team on it, but she

thinks it's best to just let a story like this peter out on its own. You know Hannah's philosophy. All PR is good PR."

"And you know mine, Cherry. Especially when these lies are hurting the person I love," he said without hesitation.

"I do." There was a softness in Cherry's voice. "That's why I drew up a response for you to review. I just sent it to your email address. Review it. Tweak it. Scrap it and write your own. Whatever works for you."

"Thank you, Cherry," he said. "I need to call Allie before she sees this."

"It might already be too late for that," she said. "But may I suggest that before you put out this denial you check with Allie first. If she's seen this, I can only imagine how distressed she must be feeling, whether she believes it or not. When something like this happens, you feel powerless. So maybe let her have a say in how you respond to it. She might also prefer that we let this story die out rather than putting her at the center of it and garnering more press."

He heaved a sigh. "You're right. Let's not do anything until I speak with Allie." Vaughn ended the call and dialed Allie's number. But the call rolled over to voice mail. He called again and the call went to voice mail immediately. Vaughn sent a text message.

Sweetheart, I just saw that blog post. You know none of that is true, right?

Three dots indicated that Allie was typing. But they started and stopped several times with no response coming through.

Vaughn paced the hallway outside of the studio as he awaited Allie's response. Finally, her two-word response came.

I know.

There was more typing.

My mother saw it first. I explained about the photos, but it's a lot for everyone to process. I just need a little time and space. We'll talk when you're back in town.

Vaughn swallowed hard, his chest aching. His gut told him that Allie wanted to end things, but that she had the decency to want to end it to his face. But if there was even the smallest chance in hell that he could convince Allie that he loved her and wanted to be with her, he had to take it.

Fifteen

Vaughn had barely put his rental car in Park beside Allie's car in the cabin's short drive before turning off the engine and hopping out. He jogged up the front steps and made his way inside.

His gaze swept the space, his heart thumping furiously. She wasn't there. But when he sucked in a deep breath, Allie's subtle, sweet, signature scent tickled his nostrils.

"Allie, babe, are you here?" Vaughn called out, but there was no answer.

He froze, listening carefully. A soft smile curved his mouth as Allie belted out the chorus to "With You or Without You" in that awful singing voice that he'd come to adore.

His heart swelled. Because even in a moment when this woman was probably furious with him, she'd resorted to singing a song he'd written and on which his drum play loomed large right alongside Beckett's vocals.

Vaughn made his way into the bedroom where Allie was wearing her AirPods and singing her heart out as she placed pillows on the brand-new bed. He glanced around the space. The entire room was freshly painted and had new decor. He'd been so focused on seeing Allie, he'd hardly noticed any of it. And with her headset on and the music blasting, she obviously hadn't heard him, either.

He placed a gentle hand on Allie's shoulder and she nearly jumped out of her skin, then immediately went into a karate stance that would've made Bruce Lee proud.

"It's just me, sweetheart." Vaughn held up his palms.

"Don't ever sneak up on me like that! You nearly got kneed in the nuts just now." Allie ripped the earphones from her ears, her hands shaking slightly. She shoved the AirPods into the pockets of her gray, plaid skirt and stared at him

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be in London.”

“I called you, but you couldn’t hear me,” he said. “And as for why I’m not in London... You wanted to talk in person instead of over the phone, so I’m here.”

“You flew all the way to Wyoming in the middle of writing Diva Divine’s next album?” she asked incredulously.

“I needed to make sure you knew that story isn’t true. I would never treat you that way, sweetheart.” He took a tentative step closer.

“I know.” Allie’s perfectly arched brows furrowed as she dropped her gaze.

“Then why wouldn’t you talk to me?” Vaughn was genuinely confused by Allie’s response. He gently lifted her chin, forcing her gaze to meet his. “Babe, I’ve been worried sick about you.”

“I didn’t mean to worry you, Vaughn. I just...” Allie heaved a quiet sigh and frowned deeply. “This whole ordeal has been so heart-wrenching and humiliating. I hadn’t even had a chance to tell my family about us. That’s my fault, I know,” she added. “But having the story come out that way... It was awful. Every single person in town knew and had some opinion. I needed some space. A chance to pretend none of it was really happening.”

Allie slid out of Vaughn’s grip and his gut knotted.

He felt like he was losing her. The warmth and light that had emanated from her every pore seemed dim. Her eyes were filled with a pain Vaughn would do *anything* to take away. She’d done nothing but bring love and joy into his life, and he repaid her with humiliation and anguish.

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry.” His throat clogged with emotion. “I would never do anything to hurt you. I should’ve seen this coming. I should’ve known that—”

“There’s no way you could’ve known that the paparazzi was cooking this story up, Vaughn. She squeezed his arm. A comforting touch despite her own pain. “And I know you

didn't do what that article intimated. That you have no desire to get back with your ex. Still..."

Allie's eyes became watery and her frown deepened. But when he reached for her, she turned her back to him, walking a few paces away. The heels of her knee-high boots clicked against the beautifully refinished wood floor.

Vaughn wanted to take Allie into his arms and convince her of how truly sorry he was that this had happened. That he'd have done anything to prevent this ordeal. To tell her that his publicist had already issued a statement denying the lies in the article. That he loved her. But Allie clearly needed the space to express her feelings about what had happened.

He wouldn't deny her that.

Vaughn held onto the gold sun and moon pendant hanging around his neck that was all he had left of his birth parents. He'd always hoped it would bring him the unparalleled love it brought them but none of the tragedy and pain.

Allie finally turned to face him. She tipped her chin and looked him squarely in the eye.

"We've always known this relationship would end sooner than later, Vaughn." Allie shrugged. "The first phase of the renovations is complete." She gestured toward the space around them. "It feels like a good place to end things, you know?"

"No, baby, I don't." Vaughn took a few steps forward and gently gripped her elbow, his eyes stinging at the thought of losing her. Hers were filled with unshed tears, which only made his heart ache more. "I thought things were good between us. Would I have invited you to come to London with me if I felt otherwise?"

"I know. I did, too. I was on Cloud 9 the entire time we were in LA. And I'd been walking around here grinning like an idiot because I was so incredibly happy." She laughed bitterly. "Then... BAM. Everything blew up." Allie swiped a finger of her free hand beneath her eyes and sniffled. She cleared her throat and then flashed a pained smile. "I don't

blame you for any of this Vaughn. But it gave me a glimpse of what publicly dating you would be like. I don't think I'm strong enough to handle that."

"Alejandra Price..." He used the perfect pronunciation of her name—rolling the *R* on his tongue like she'd taught him those nights they'd lain together in the bed just a few steps away. "You are one of the strongest, most confident women I have ever known." Vaughn's voice wavered slightly. "So don't tell me you can't handle it. Tell me you don't want to."

He dropped his hand from her elbow and raked his fingers against his scalp in frustration.

"You have every right to feel that way, Allie. But unfortunately, in this business, even the most beloved celebrity couples have to endure the lies and the bullshit—no matter how solid their relationships are. No matter how adored they are. And there's nothing I can do that will change that. I don't want this to end. But I won't lie to you either, sweetheart. I can only promise you that I will always be honest with you and that I will always love you, Allie."

Her gaze shot to his. She swallowed hard. "I believe that you have feelings for me, Vaughn. But I need you to be honest with me and with yourself about whether you're in love with me or with my family."

Allie's shoulders were tense as her dark eyes carefully assessed him. He hated that she'd felt the need to ask, but he could understand why.

"Easiest question ever. Both." Vaughn laughed when Allie's eyes widened with confusion. He pulled her into his arms and stared down at her. "I know it sounds like I'm evading your question, but it's true. I've loved your family since I was a kid. I used to dream of being a Price. But Allie, sweetheart, this—" he gestured between them "—isn't about my admiration for your family. It's about the brilliant, funny, badass woman who captured my heart. Baby, I do love your family. But if I had to choose between you and them, I would choose you... every single time. Maybe that seems impossible because it's only been a couple of months. But what I feel for you, Allie..."

Vaughn smiled, his chest bursting with all of the emotions he was feeling at that moment.

“I’ve never felt this kind of deep connection and frantic need for anyone. I know you probably don’t believe that—”

“I do, Vaughn. Because I’m in love with you, too.” A sad smile lifted the corners of her mouth. Tears slid down Allie’s cheeks. She swiped angrily at them. “But there are so many other factors to consider. Your life is in LA. Your career takes you all over the world. And I love that for you. But my life and career are here in Willowvale Springs. I can’t give up the place and the people who mean so much to me.”

“I’d never ask you to give up all of the things that make you *you*, Allie.” Vaughn cradled her damp cheek and smiled. His heart leaped with joy at the possibility that the two of them could move forward. That Allie just might be willing to give this a chance. “I’ll stay here in Willowvale Springs and sell my place in LA.”

“You can’t do that.” Allie pressed her hands to his chest as she gazed up at him sincerely. “You’re far too talented a drummer and a songwriter to give up everything you worked so hard for. Then there’s your dream of reuniting Sin & Glory... You’re so close to having everything you’ve ever wanted again, especially with all the attention your recent nomination is garnering. You can’t give that up.”

“But I wouldn’t have you.” Vaughn stroked Allie’s cheek. “And for you, sweetheart, I’d give up the house in LA, the car, the reunion with the band.”

“You’d be miserable,” she protested. “Eventually, you’d regret giving up the things you’ve worked so hard for. You’d resent me for making you choose between everything you’ve ever wanted and me.”

“What I have always wanted, Allie, is to feel like I truly belonged. To have the love and sense of family I’ve been chasing since my birth parents died. To be with someone who would be a true partner in love and in life. And baby, I believe with everything in my heart that I’ve finally found that in you.”

Vaughn stared into the depths of Allie's shimmering, dark eyes, hoping she felt the same.

* * *

Allie could barely speak. In fact, she could barely breathe. First, Vaughn had flown in from London just to make sure she was okay. Then he'd confessed his love for her, prompting her to admit that she felt the same. But now, Vaughn was actually willing to give up life in LA and his dream of reuniting the band just to be with her?

After years of fantasizing about Vaughn falling for her and them finding their happily-ever-after...was it possible that she would get just that?

None of it felt real.

Allie was sure she was in some fever dream. Any minute now, she'd awaken to discover she'd gotten lost in some all too real fantasy like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* or Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Vaughn kissed her, his hands gliding around her waist as he pulled her closer, heat building between them.

Finally, she broke their kiss, taking a step back. Her head was spinning, and butterflies fluttered in her belly.

"Vaughn, you're not serious," she said, finally.

"I am." He threaded their fingers and led her over to the bed where they both sat.

She rested her head on Vaughn's shoulder, melting into him. They'd spent little more than a week apart. Yet, she missed him desperately. She'd missed his warmth, his touch, his smile. The way he'd been so supportive and encouraging of her career. The way he listened when she needed him to. How he made her laugh. The way he'd stood up for her to her family. His gift for making her feel like she was the most important person in his world.

But as much as she wanted the happily ever after she'd long dreamed of, she could never be happy knowing it had meant

Vaughn sacrificing his dreams.

“You’ve been fighting so hard to get Sin & Glory back together. Doing all of this...” Allie lifted her head and cradled his stubbled cheek, needing to see his face. “How can you just give up everything you’ve worked for, Vaughn?”

He pressed a kiss to the palm of her hand, then met her gaze again. “The money, the fame...yeah, it was great. But I’m not that same twenty-year-old kid who was desperate for those things. I understand now how high the price can be, and that they don’t necessarily bring happiness. I realize now that there are far more important things in life.”

Vaughn turned toward her with one leg folded on the bed. He held her hands in his, and his expression exuded such genuine warmth and affection that it felt as if her heart might burst.

“I had a lot of time to think on that flight to London,” he said. “And I realized that the reason I wasn’t excited about meeting with the record execs was because what I was really chasing was the sense of belonging and community I felt as part of the band. We were a dysfunctional family, but we were a family nevertheless, and I’d missed that since the band broke up. I felt alone the way I did when my birth parents died and then again when my adoptive parents died. I was trying to recreate that sense of family. But being back here in Willowvale Springs, getting reacquainted with everyone, feeling like a part of your family again, and falling for you... I’ve never been clearer about what I want, Allie. And what I want is to be here...with you.”

Allie couldn’t stop the tears of joy from falling, and she wouldn’t even try. She kissed the generous, loving, accomplished man she’d fallen in love with. The man who’d brought her so much joy and happiness.

“And you’re really okay with making this your home base?”

“There will be times when I’ll need to be in LA or London or New York,” Vaughn conceded. “But I want Willowvale Springs—the place where everyone feels like family, and the

woman I adore is waiting for me—to be the place I call home.”

He dropped a sweet kiss on her lips and it practically took her breath away.

“I don’t want to expose you to ridicule like this tabloid article. But I won’t hide what we have either. Not from your family, and not from the world. All right?”

“Okay.” She nodded. “But what if I said that as open and progressive as I am about love and relationships that one day I’d like to be a wife and a mother?” Allie held her breath as she gauged Vaughn’s genuine reaction to the words she hadn’t been willing to speak aloud again since the implosion of her previous relationship.

Vaughn’s eyes widened, and a look of pure joy animated his handsome face. His eyes were misty. He pressed a soft, sweet kiss to her lips, then pulled back and studied her. “Then I’d say that I can’t wait until the day that I get to make you Mrs. Alejandra Price-Reed or the day that we get to welcome our first child into the world.”

Allie’s heart felt so full, it felt like it had grown too big to fit into her chest. A smile spread across her face.

“Then if we’re really doing this, I know that together we can face anything, Vaughn. My family will come around. As for anyone else...it’s us against the world. And baby, that’s enough for me.”

Vaughn pulled Allie into his arms, his lips crashing against hers. His tongue met hers as he glided his fingers into her hair and tilted her head to deepen their kiss.

Allie had missed Vaughn’s touch, his taste and the panty-melting kisses that left her dreamy and reeling long after they’d gone their separate ways.

She fumbled with the buttons on his shirt, and within a flash, their clothing was strewn on the floor and they’d burrowed beneath the covers of the bed she’d made so meticulously just minutes before Vaughn’s arrival.

Allie didn't care. All that mattered was that she would get to have this beautiful, caring, brilliant, talented soul in her life every single day for the rest of her life.

Epilogue

Three Years Later

Vaughn glanced over at Allie, seated beside him. She was stunning in a slinky, red, backless gown with a high slit and embellished with crystals. Her dark hair cascaded onto her bare shoulders in beachy waves, and the platinum and diamond barrette gave her look an old Hollywood feel. They'd been together for three years and married for a year and a half, but when Allie flashed that magnificent smile his heart danced and his breath caught every single time. As the nominees for Song of the Year GRAMMY were listed, the only tell of her intense nervousness was how tightly she gripped his hand. Her bright red nails nearly broke his skin.

He lifted her hand to his mouth and gently kissed the back of it, hoping to calm her nerves. Her grip loosened and the tension in her shoulders seemed to ease.

“Regardless of whose name is in that envelope, I’ve already won.” His lips brushed her skin as he whispered in her ear.

“I should say so, Mr. Songwriter of the Year.” Allie’s dark eyes twinkled. “After tonight, we’re going to need a proper, lighted trophy display case.”

The night had already been long and incredibly surreal. Like the realization of a dream he’d never even had the audacity to imagine. At the Grammy Premiere Ceremony—the hours-long show that happened before the televised one—Vaughn had received the Songwriter of the Year award. Projects he’d written songs for had already taken home the awards for Best Rock Album and Best Pop Solo Performance. Songs he’d played drums on had been nominated in the Rock and Rap categories. And earlier that evening, he’d been reunited on stage with the four other original members of Sin & Glory—including lead singer Steven Iverson—for their first performance together in seven years. They’d performed a

medley of their biggest hits in celebration of the twentieth anniversary of their debut album. And in a few weeks, they'd be heading into the studio to record a reunion album.

"I'm not talking about the awards, babe. I'm talking about us. About our family." He placed a hand over her belly. She was six months pregnant with their first child and he'd been bursting with joy from the moment Allie had shown him the positive pregnancy test. "Being with you...it's been such a remarkable gift. I honestly couldn't want for anything more."

Allie's eyes flooded with tears. She cupped his cheek and pressed a kiss to his lips, just as his name was being called along with the two members of Extreme Overload he'd worked with to write their latest album. There was thunderous applause all around them as the members of the band headed to the stage and beckoned him to join them.

Vaughn sat, stunned as he glanced around the room at industry professionals he'd admired his entire life climbing to their feet and applauding him.

"Congratulations, baby. You deserve this." Allie kissed him again, then lumbered to her feet, standing and applauding with the rest of the crowd as he rose to his feet and joined his fellow songwriters.

Vaughn stood on stage, clutching his Song of the Year GRAMMY as the two members of Extreme Overload talked about the difficult journey of making the album and how they'd dedicated it to the band member they'd lost. When it was Vaughn's turn at the mic, all the noise and sounds seem to fall away. His focus was on the woman he adored.

Alejandra Price had come into Vaughn's life again, prompting him to break every single one of his self-imposed rules. Rules he'd put in place to protect his heart. But instead of being hurt again, Vaughn was happier than he'd ever been.

His songwriting and session drummer careers were soaring. They'd broken ground on the final building for Vaughn's summer music camp for kids in foster care or underserved communities which would be opening in Willowvale Springs that summer. He had good friends, an amazing extended

family, and a brilliant, loving, supportive partner with whom he was so damn lucky to share his life. And in just a few months, they'd be starting a family of their own.

Vaughn fingered the sun, moon, and stars hanging around his neck, then placed a quick hand over the tattoo on his forearm, hidden beneath his clothing, before reaching inside his breast pocket and pulling out the 'just-in-case' speech he'd written at Allie's insistence.

Vaughn swallowed hard, his eyes stinging and his vision blurry. He wished his parents had lived to witness his achievements. That they could share in the joy and happiness he felt tonight. One of the last things his birth mother had said to him is that she and his dad would always be there watching over him. That even when things got bad, he should never ever lose faith because better times were ahead.

Maybe his parents couldn't be there with him tonight, but they guided him to Allie and her family. And for that, he would forever be grateful.

* * * * *

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by Jules Bennett

One

“Come on, you big ugly thing.”

Kira Lee grunted and tugged at the obscenely hideous tree she'd just purchased from the cutest Christmas Tree Farm here in Willowvale Springs. Unfortunately, this close to the holiday, the pickings were slim. But she'd bought enough garland and ornaments to tuck into the holes of this pathetic excuse of a tree, and she was only using it in her tiny rental for a few weeks.

The workers at the farm loaded it on top of her small SUV, and she didn't take into account her height, or lack thereof, or how to get this beast inside the cabin.

“Who's winning the fight?”

A masculine voice startled her, and she couldn't see the other side of her car for all the evergreen blocking the view.

“I'm going to win,” she insisted with another hard pull. “You could be a gentleman and help.”

Normally she'd have better manners, but the frigid Wyoming air made her rush to get inside by her cozy, crackling fire. The altitude was a bit different here than Portland.

“I never said I was a gentleman,” the faceless man scoffed.

Wow. She'd only been in town less than a day for her forced vacation from her bestie and she was already agitated. But this situation was her own fault. She'd wanted her bland cabin to be a little spruced up for the holidays. She couldn't believe the owners of this dude ranch didn't go all out with festive decor.

Kira gave another jerk of the burlap sack between the tree and the top of her car. She tumbled backward when the bundle shifted. Finally. She might actually make it inside before dark.

“Let me get that before you hurt yourself.”

The voice drew closer and Kira glanced over to see the hunkiest cowboy she'd encountered since she'd gotten to town. Okay, maybe he was a little short on the sweet side, but he more than made up for it with his looks. Tanned skin, black hat, black wool coat, dark jeans, and boots? He probably had a black, menacing horse somewhere close by and a gaggle of women just swooning at his feet.

Well, all she wanted was help with her tree. Nothing else. But she wasn't opposed to taking in the view for the time being.

With a strength she didn't expect, the guy hoisted the tree off her vehicle and over his shoulder, then motioned toward her cabin.

“Can you at least get the door?” he grumbled.

Kira offered her sweetest smile, then turned on her heel to head up the steps to her door. “Someone is in a festive mood.”

She punched in the code and opened the door wide for him to enter ahead of her. Once he maneuvered the tree through the opening and managed to dodge the steps, he turned toward the open living/kitchen combo.

“Where's the bucket?” he asked.

Kira stilled. “Bucket?”

“To put the tree in.”

He swung around to face her, giving her the first good look at his chiseled face. If the man actually smiled, he might be considered lethal. Those dark eyes resting beneath thick, black brows could mesmerize a woman into forgetting her own name.

“You do have something to put this in, right?” he added.

Oops.

“Didn't think that far ahead, but I did get some gorgeous decorations,” she snickered, but she seemed to be the only one to find that amusing.

The stranger walked toward the fireplace and carefully laid the wrapped tree on the rug. When he stood, her eyes traveled up to take in his impressive height.

“You didn’t plan this out very well, did you?” he asked.

Before she could answer, he muttered something about being right back. He marched out the door, leaving it open for the cold air to rush in.

Kira glanced out and watched as he drove off in his ominous black truck... But of course, what else would he have?

She closed the door, pushing out the wintry wind. When she turned to the sad tree lying on her floor, she felt like joining it. She was positive there were some similarities between her and this half-dead tree.

Kira tried to concentrate on this adorable getaway her bestie had set up for her instead of the disaster her life had become through no fault of her own. Between the immediate loss of her condo and her mother planning her fourth—yes, fourth—wedding and the burnout from her demanding career, she needed a break.

Kira had always had a mundane, boring life. She’d been perfectly fine with that. Structure and planning down to the final detail worked just fine for her. So all of this upheaval had nearly caused a panic attack and total meltdown. Thankfully, Delia recognized Kira’s state of mind and found this quaint dude ranch in Wyoming, far away from the issues back in Oregon.

Maybe the tree she’d found was hideous, but something about it made her smile. Maybe just because something was damaged didn’t mean it had to be destroyed...much like her life. She could rebuild and shift her focus, just as soon as she allowed herself the time to decompress and stop worrying about everyone else’s problems—her clients, her mother, her landlord. She had to switch the attention to herself for once—or so Delilah said.

No doubt her bestie would have been all over that sexy, brooding cowboy, but Kira wasn't here for antics or flings. She had to figure out what to do with her life, namely where to live and how to get a hold of this career burnout that was a very real problem.

She didn't think Mr. Tall Dark and Grouchy would be any help.

* * *

Paxton Hart didn't have time to set up the saddest excuse for a Christmas tree he'd ever seen. Hell, he didn't even want to be on this dude ranch.

Unfortunately, he couldn't go anywhere for the time being. For reasons that he still didn't understand, Hank Carson thought it would be a good idea to leave his ranches, farms, house, and resorts to a group of guys who had worked for him over the summers years ago. Pax hadn't seen ole Hank in over a decade, but apparently Pax had left an impression on the farmer's life.

Mason, Kahlil, and Vaughn all inherited Hank Carson's properties over the past six months along with Pax. The other guys came back with every intention of selling and leaving, getting back to their busy lives, but fate had other plans. Each of them had worked for Hank as teens and each of them had vowed to achieve bigger and better things. They'd become successful in their own fields with lucrative, fulfilling careers, yet now they were all back. Pax had assisted his old pals in trying to sell their properties, but for one reason or another, the men had opted to stay and hold on to their inheritance.

The main reason, though, was that they had all fallen in love and planned to settle now in Willowvale. The three guys were either engaged or married, which scared the hell out of Pax. He didn't come back to town to fall in love or whatever those guys thought they felt. Pax had a full schedule and a checklist of career goals—namely that new start-up real estate agency in Spain. Spending time in Willowvale Springs didn't make the cut on any of his lists.

By the time Pax grabbed a good-sized bucket from the closest barn, he still hadn't shaken the fact that the new guest in one of the rental cabins was one of the most adorably petite women he'd ever laid eyes on. He wasn't sure if he was agitated that he had to take time out of his schedule to prop up an ugly-ass tree, or if he was annoyed at how she'd affected him.

Both. Definitely both.

He followed the old familiar path back to the row of cabins. This dude ranch used to thrive with visitors from all over the country and even some international guests. Now, well, according to the recent records, the average was about half the capacity. He supposed that was a good thing, considering he had no clue how to run a dude ranch and a good bit of the staff had left. The manager stayed on after Hank passed, but mainly because he had nowhere else to go and he'd just started a few months prior to Hank's death.

Pax might have worked here over several summers back in his teen years, but what did he know about running a dude ranch? His life revolved around buying and selling real estate. He'd already dominated the US market, and now, fingers crossed, he'd be opening his new location in Spain in the next few months.

Which was why he didn't have time for this dude ranch or the sexy tenant in Cabin Five.

He pulled to a stop just behind her small SUV. With bucket in hand, he stomped up the steps to knock the snow off his boots. Pax tapped his knuckles on the door, even though he'd told her he'd be right back. He still respected her privacy, and they were strangers.

The sturdy wooden door swung wide and another punch of lust to his gut caught him off guard. The petite woman with her adorable high ponytail, fitted red sweater, and body-hugging jeans shouldn't be getting to him. Had to be all this frigid air making him lose his mind and all common sense.

"Where do you want it?" he asked, hoping to make this quick and painless.

She glanced around the room and pointed to the corner near the fireplace.

“That’s perfect.”

Pax stepped over the half-dead tree and set the bucket in the empty spot. When he turned, he nearly ran into her. She startled and took a step back.

“Sorry.” She offered a smile and wrinkled her nose. “Do you think it will look good there?”

Pax resisted the urge to just flee. He didn’t care where she put the tree because this wasn’t his cabin and likely when he went to move it, the needles would fall off.

“If that’s what you want,” he replied.

She seemed to think for a minute, which was about fifty seconds longer than his patience allowed. He thrived on efficiency. Wasted time did nothing but stall progress. No matter what the situation might be.

Finally, she nodded.

“Yeah, let’s do there. It will look great with a crackling fire and a stocking.”

“You are aware Christmas is in just a few days, right?”

A smile spread across her face as her gaze shifted back to his. “Which is why we need to get this tree up.”

She started to bend down, but straightened. “Wait. I don’t even know your name.”

“Does it matter, when all you need is my help to put the tree in the bucket?” he countered.

“Scrooge it is.” She held out her hand for him to shake. “I’m Kira.”

He eyed her, then the extended hand, and there was no way he was touching her. His stomach had balled up in knots just from looking—who knew how he’d react with a simple touch. No attachments of any kind. He’d vowed that to himself long ago.

“I have more things to get,” he told her, easing around her to head back out to his truck.

He picked up the pace, gathering the bag of sand and getting back inside. He didn’t want to be here a minute longer than necessary. For one thing, he had an online meeting in an hour that he couldn’t miss, regarding this new development in Barcelona, and for another, well...he just couldn’t be here with Kira.

Even her name sounded adorable. Everything about her seemed adorable, from her girl-next-door hairstyle to her petite frame to her bubbly personality. Adorable wasn’t his typical type. He preferred someone almost high-maintenance, more glam, over-the-top, because that way he wouldn’t get attached and he could walk away easily.

But this trifecta before had him focusing on setting the tree as straight as possible in the bucket with sand, and now she’d already gotten under his skin.

“Hold that steady,” he told her as he continued to shift the sand around and adjust the trunk.

“Doesn’t this need water, too?” she asked from above him.

“It needs dumped somewhere and put out of its misery,” he muttered.

Once he figured the thing was as good as it was going to get, he eased back out from beneath the tree. He’d come back home to Willowvale Springs to figure out the best way to sell this unwanted, inherited property, not frolic and help the guests.

“Wait until you see it decorated,” Kira stated, smiling up at the tree like she could already see the image in her mind.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

She glanced over to him, and her dark brows drew in. “You have something better to do than decorate a Christmas tree? I bet you don’t even have one up.”

“You’d win that bet.”

“Are you always so surly?” she asked, propping her hands on her hips.

“Are you always this chatty with a stranger?” he countered.

Kira shrugged. “Occupational hazard.”

Don't ask. Don't ask.

“And what is it you do?”

Clearly he didn't take his own advice, but seriously, what career did someone have that could make them so...perky.

“You're a wedding coordinator,” he guessed.

Kira laughed and rolled her eyes. That laugh warmed something inside him—something he hadn't even known had chilled. This whole situation was utterly ridiculous.

“Not hardly,” she replied. “I'm a Life Coach.”

Pax snorted and waited on her to laugh, but she continued to stare.

“Oh, you're serious?”

“Why wouldn't I be?” she volleyed back.

She reached up and grabbed her hair in two spots, gave a pull, and tightened her ponytail. He knew that maneuver. It was like some battle-ready move women did when someone pissed them off. Clearly he was that someone.

“What exactly do you do?” he asked, not sure why he insisted on staying when he had a call and literally anything else he should and could be doing.

“At the moment, trying to figure out why you won't give me your name, you seem to get angry over Christmas trees, and how I can fix you.”

Offended, Pax crossed his arms over his chest and widened his stance. “Fix me?” he repeated. “What do you believe needs fixed?”

“Your attitude for one thing, though you did help me with the tree, so thank you.”

She moved over to a stash of bags she'd set on the sofa and started pulling out garland, boxes of lights, and ornaments. Pax wondered when the items would stop coming out of bags and where the hell she thought she could put all of that when the branches were so sparse.

"Did your wife put up a tree at your house?" she asked, still sorting through her things.

"You dodged my question, and that wasn't a subtle way of asking if I'm single."

She tossed a saucy grin over her shoulder. "I'm not answering your question and I don't care if you're single. I assume there's no way you'd put up a tree on your own so I'm assuming if there's one in your home, then your wife did it."

"I'm not married and I don't have a tree."

She pursed her lips and turned with a box of lights in hand. "You live here on the ranch?"

"Something like that," he muttered.

Passing through didn't count as living, but considering he was staying in the main guesthouse, he'd just keep his response vague. He wasn't here to make friends, just to sell off this dude ranch and turn over a nice profit. He'd moved on from this small town long ago and looking back had never been on his to-do list.

"I'm going to guess you're into something depressing and stuffy like accounting. Is that why you're angry? Because if I had to do math all day, I'd be a grouch, too."

Where did this chatty woman come from?

"Are you here alone?" he asked.

The words slipped out before he could stop himself.

"Forced vacation," she told him with a half grin. "My best friend booked this for me after some...we'll call them issues back home."

Issues? He sure as hell didn't want anyone's issues to deal with, not when he had more than enough of his own.

His cell vibrated in his pocket, pulling him from the moment. Pax reached in and cringed. He'd been standing here talking so long and this was the call he'd been waiting on.

“I have to take this. Enjoy the decorating.”

He started for the door, sliding his finger across the screen to answer at the same time.

“Let me know when you need help with yours,” she called after him.

Pax cursed himself for finding her amusing, but even more so for letting her distract him from one of the most important calls of his career. Damn it. He needed to be back in his office in a professional setting with his notes and his laptop.

He answered the call and drove away from Cabin Five, making a mental note to let the property manager deal with any more of Kira's needs.

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ISBN-13: 9780369742452

Breaking the Bad Boy's Rules

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