

# Building What's Meant to be



USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR  
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## Full Page Image



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*To my trusty sidekick who's considerably smaller than Brave  
but just as lovable.*

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## *Author's Note*

Dear Reader,

I'm so happy that you're reading the sixth book in the Home Sweet Home, small town, sweet rom-com, series. All the titles stand-alone, and at the end of each book, there is an epilogue that bridges to the next book in the series along with providing context. It's told from the female main character's point of view. Tinsley, the main character in this book, has the POV in the epilogue in the last book, Extreme Heart Makeover.

If you've already read it, you may want to go back and refresh your memory. If you have not checked it out, I recommend doing so for a deeper and more enriching reading experience. Or I should say riches to sequins-covered rags. Wink, wink. Happy reading ♥Ellie

# *Chapter One*



If this were a movie scene with the main character on the run, she'd be looking over her shoulder, afraid she was being followed. Instead, this is real life and I am on the run, looking over my shoulder, afraid I'm being followed.

After a long flight from Los Angeles, I turned up at my parents' place in the middle of the night. Everyone knows New York City never sleeps. But my parents do, and I figured I'd slide into the penthouse apartment without disturbing them. Lucky me, they're out of town. No surprise there. I counted it as a bonus, considering my situation and the late hour.

However, the doorman informed me that my mother and father put me on the "Do Not Let In" list. When I told him they must've gotten me mixed up with someone else named Tinsley Humber, he gave me a sharp, "True New Yorker" look that told me he's seen it all, and nothing I could say or do would convince him to let me pass through the door.

The guy was old enough to be my grandfather and while I'd like to see him retire rather than work the night shift, I decided not to push my luck.

But that left me on the street. In Manhattan. In the middle of the night. Options spread before me like the city lights, but none of them glittered. I could've:

- Gotten a hotel and charged it to my parents as per usual.
- Called a friend and stayed with them, though doing that got me into this mess in the first place.

- Gone to any number of all-night parties that were only sure to be getting started.

Instead, the yellow light at the entrance to the underground parking garage caught my eye.

After some light flirting with the garage attendant, I managed to convince him to give me the keys to my parents' BMW. Considering they barred me from the building, I doubt they would've loaned me the vehicle so measures had to be taken.

Yes, it's stealing.

No, Mother, Father, and I are not on the best of terms.

But I promise I'm not a criminal. I consider this a rental.

My word might not be the most valuable currency, but at the moment, it's all I have. Other than grand theft auto, I have not committed a single crime. However, I was prepared to give the guy in the garage the emergency one-hundred-dollar bill in my wallet, so maybe theft with the intent to bribe is also considered illegal.

But that's the least of my problems.

Right now, I leave the dazzling New York City skyline behind me as I crank the radio and cruise north while the GPS on my phone guides me to Newport, Rhode Island. Far too soon, the bass-heavy song turns repetitive as I yawn and my eyes grow heavy.

"Only forty-five more minutes. I can do this. Not much farther." I almost don't recognize the sound of my own voice. Typically, it's light, bright. After all, I'm the Queen of Tinseltown, the New York Socialite, and for a brief time, Nashville Nobility—well, I was on my way to wearing that crown before my fall from country music groupie grace.

My voice is thick, scratchy after the long flight from Los Angeles and the even longer twelve hours of interrogation before that. I consider turning off the music, but that leaves too big of an opening for my thoughts to weasel in. They're sure to torment me with a revisit to everything that happened since

my rude awakening and likely the mounting questions and doubts that led to it as well as what's to come.

Gripping the steering wheel with both hands, instead, I imagine the "Cottage" where our family used to spend the summer. A broad, sweeping lawn leads to the colonial home with pillars and wide marble steps. Inside, there are too many bedrooms to count, so I'll take whichever one has the most comfortable bed.

The estate used to belong to one of those fancy Gilded Age couples who owned it like the Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, or that one that starts with the letter *S* and I can hardly pronounce. Stuyvesant maybe.

Of course, there's a ballroom, so the argument can easily be made that it's not a cottage. I might also consider that my *family* is hardly one—in name only. We're splintered, fractured, chasing everything except each other, and have been for a long time. Never mind a wide opening for unwelcome thoughts, that's a chasm. One I do my level best to ignore.

When I turn onto Fairhaven Street, I roll down the window. The mild, fresh salt air invigorates me and is a reminder that it's spring. That means Mother and Father are probably still at their place in Hawaii so I'll have the cottage to myself while I regroup.

Likely, after what happened in LA, I'll have to do some damage control. I should throw a Great Gatsby-esque party and invite everyone I know. Show my parents that I'm well on my way to making something of myself, despite their doubts.

When I pull up to the wrought iron gate, thankful there isn't a doorman this time, I scour my memory for the code and hope that it hasn't been changed. It swings open and I speed down the driveway, summoned by the lure of a thick featherbed and Egyptian cotton sheets.

The dim yellow glow of dawn emanates from behind the house, facing the east. How is it almost dawn?

"Welcome home," I say with a laugh as I slam the BMW's door and then go around to the side entrance where the

housekeeper used to hide a key under a rock. Of course, she's not likely to be here this time of year either.

I'm all alone and no longer on the run. Relief sweeps through me along with fatigue. The same Christian Louboutin crystal embellished high heels I've been wearing since yesterday and causing a significant amount of swelling in my feet, click along the slate path. I crouch and lift the volleyball-sized granite rock. My nail catches and chips. I mutter under my breath. When I stand to unlock the door, it swings open.

My oldest brother, John, stands in the doorway. His trim hair is dark and so are his eyes. "A rare appearance by the adult lady child."

A director once instructed me to dramatically grimace. I wear that exact expression now. Then again, everything I do is dramatic. John should know that by now, but the adult lady child comment? We can discuss when the granite rock no longer looks like a potential pillow.

"Ah, I stand corrected. You make plenty of public appearances, but not too many in the presence of the Humbers. What are you doing here, Tinsley?"

My instinct is to balk. But this is typical John—always quick to point out my shortcomings, especially because I was short growing up. At a shave under five feet ten, I've now caught up. I shove past him and drop my bag on the floor. "No, 'Hi, sis. Haven't seen you in a while. Welcome!' Where are your manners?" I huff then slide into my familial role. "You can bring this up to whatever bedroom is available. I'd prefer one with an ocean view and balcony."

He lets out a low laugh. "Tinsley, you're persona non grata."

I squint at him. Then again, I shouldn't be surprised that he's already this testy so early in the morning. John Humber III Esquire has always been a very unhappy man. And yes, even when we were kids, we'd joke that he was "The old man." The kind of kid that would holler at us for playing tag on the freshly mown lawn—not that he was the one to do the

work. He always needed quiet, order, and for everything to be just so.

I'll have to "reorganize" his closet later. He he.

He's the oldest and I'm the youngest and we couldn't be farther apart, opposites, in every way.

"Why the look of confusion? Do you need me to translate? *Persona non grata* means—" he starts.

"I know what it means." I bite the inside of my cheek.

He stabs the air with his finger. "Ah, then you're wondering why the change in status."

The comment drops like a pebble into the chasm because I probably know why even though he's revving up to tell me.

"Mother and Father do not approve of your lifestyle. You were given every opportunity to make the right choices, to make this family proud, and to live a respectable life. When you chose to flush your privilege down the drain along with the family name, they were also forced to make a choice."

Oof. That hurts a little. "And there I thought you were going to say you're glad to see me or at least remind me that nothing good ever happens after midnight."

He snorts. "It doesn't. And they don't even know about the most recent incident." His smile is wry. "But I do."

"What, do you have an online alert set with my name?"

He shrugs mildly.

"Stalker much?"

"You're my sister."

"I thought I was *persona non grata*."

He opens his mouth as if to fire back and then closes it. At least for this round, I've won. "Mother and Father are yachting."

"Good for them." I move deeper into the side entrance breezeway.

“And they said I could have full use of the house until they arrive in June.”

“Good for you,” I say.

He moves to block me.

I shift left. He mirrors me. I move right. He does the same.

A huffy huff escapes. “If you want to dance, there’s a ballroom just down the hall. As it is, I’m too tired to play games, John.”

“Then you can turn around the way you came.” Angling his fingers overhead, he spins them toward the door.

“I cannot,” I say simply.

“You don’t have a choice.”

“You’re saying that I can’t stay at my own house?”

“This is Mother and Father’s cottage.”

“Estate.”

“Right.” He grumbles, annoyed that I corrected him. “And I’m in charge.”

“Who appointed you King of the Cottage?”

“Mother and Father.”

“Why can’t we be normal and call them Mom and Dad?” I ask as an aside.

John’s lips form a tight little knot that reminds me of the business end of a hotdog. It’s an effort to contain my laughter, which borders hysteria at this point.

*So. Tired.*

“They named me the executor of their last will and testament.”

“You said they’re yachting, so that means they’re still alive unless yachting means something different since I last checked the Humber Family Dictionary.”

His lips flatten into a line. “Tinsley, unlike you, I take my life and my roles seriously. Mother and Father trusted me with

this important task because they respect me. As such, I happen to know that this is not your house, cottage, or estate. They've left it to me."

"What about Andrew and Vicky?" I ask, referring to our other siblings.

"Because Andrew is Manhattan-based, he'll inherit the building with the penthouse. Victoria gets the home in Hawaii." He rattles on about our parents' rules and expectations.

Even though he doesn't say, *And that leaves nothing for you*, I still hear the message. Loud and clear.

Then again, unless our parents purchase a fourth home, I guess there wouldn't have been one for me anyway. I've always been the oddball, the afterthought. The renegade. Ha! As if chasing fame were in any way rebellious. I just didn't follow the family mold to become an upper-crust socialite, a housewife, a trophy wife, or part of their legal corporation.

It's not that I don't want the luxury that comes with that lifestyle. I'm one of the most extravagant people I know. It's all I've ever known. Rather, I don't want all the fussy events, the strict dress code, and always having to do and say the right thing. Then again, in the circles I spin, we have our own sets of rules.

And I just learned a new one. Guilt by association. Thanks a lot, Puma.

Standing here on the threshold of a place I'd always called home, I don't feel wanted or like I fit in. But where can I turn? Because the truth is, the path that brought me here—the high life of an aspiring starlet, band groupie, and celebrity by proxy hasn't served me too well either.

I spent the night under inquisition for crimes I know nothing about.

So what am I looking for? To be seen? To be loved? The life I so recently fled during the party hours hasn't exactly worked out either. John has made it clear that I'm not wanted

here and even if I was, would I want to slide back into a mannequin's life?

Granted, I wouldn't mind a place to sleep. I'm already exhausted and all this thinking about change threatens to send me into a coma.

But if I woke up in a week, a year, or ten would anything be different? Like a whisper on the salty breeze, the answer comes.

*I'm the one who has to change.*

I'd like to send it out to sea, back where it came from, or get in the car and speed away from the idea that I'm the problem. However, I remain rooted to the spot because I'm stubborn and not about to let my too-big-for-his-britches brother drive me off. In fact, now that he's hit midlife, he is getting a slight paunch. Nothing major, but it's not the slim waistline that he's always prided himself on.

I drag myself out of the chasm of introspective thinking and back onto solid sibling-banter ground.

"Anything to eat around here?" I ask, interrupting John's litany of reprimands and expressions of disappointment on behalf of our mother and father. "Doughnuts maybe?"

He ignores me and prattles on.

If my family isn't going to change and welcome me in, I always have my friends. Although, the truth is, my phone has been unusually quiet for the last twenty-four hours. No calls, check-ins, or invitations to parties.

If I'm the one who has to change, after working so hard to have my name synonymous with being influential and relevant, what will my new life look like?

An itchy, humid summer feeling like a hot and sticky sunburn breaks out across my skin. I'm being silly, sucked into my brother's games. Of course, my family loves me. My friends adore me, and everything is going to be fine.

I'll spend the night then lie low for a little while until the whole thing with Puma blows over then I'll return to business



as usual.

Business being social events, shopping, and film spots.

“When Mother and Father find out about the latest scandal, they’re not going to approve,” John says as if keeping us on track during a boardroom meeting.

Talk about boring.

“Have they ever approved of me? Anyway, if they’re yachting, they won’t know.” I narrow my gaze. “Unless you tell them.”

Because of Father’s high-pressure job, if they’re on a boat, it likely means they’re unplugged from screens and devices.

“If you’d just try harder.”

“To what? Fit in? To be someone I’m not? Parade around like Mother’s little minion?”

John sweeps his hand from my head to my toes. “Oh, and this is who you are, Tinsley?”

I look down at the glittery high heels. Yes, those are definitely me. But the sequined mini dress that leaves little to the imagination isn’t Newport elite appropriate. Nor is it something I’d ordinarily opt to wear while flying, traveling, or going anywhere other than to a club.

It’s not made for a child, but it is child-sized. I adjust the hem, but if I pull too hard, it’ll reveal more skin than is optimal in front of my brother on top.

“Didn’t think so.” He speaks dismissively like our meeting is over.

Thank goodness.

However, I want to come up with a words-on-fire reply but something douses the flames inside. The problem is, he’s right. I love clothes, luxe fabrics, and sparkles, but this dress is something out of Barbie’s closet. Even though I resemble her, is that who I am? Plastic? Generic? A Hollywood cutout?

Perhaps deep thoughts like these are byproducts of the trauma of federal agents waking me from a dream, the

nightmare of a crisis that followed, and the kind of fatigue that only comes with being awake for over twenty-four hours.

“Tinsley, just remember. This is all a result of the decisions you made. It’s like you’re allergic to taking personal responsibility for your life and choices. You’re always pointing the finger because it’s easier.”

“Pfft. The only thing I’m allergic to is tarragon.”

“Don’t be mad at me.”

“That would be easier if you were nicer.”

He scoffs. “And when have you ever been nice? You nicknamed me Baldy when I was fourteen.”

“In my defense, I was only six and you had thinning hair.”

“You could say you’re sorry. Are you sorry?” John wears an expression I’ve never seen on his pale face. It almost looks like hurt.

I step back as memories rush toward me like a thick, cresting wave. My factory default with my family is to always be on the defensive. Easy because they often excluded me. I was the baby. A later-in-life child. Unexpected and at times I felt unwanted. They’re painfully judgmental, and I was a rascal to their uptight, buttoned-up order. But what would happen if I played nice?

The thing is, it takes two—or six in this case. Our parents plus my siblings and me. It’s like Mother and Father knew I’d be the outlier the moment I came into the world. They named me *Tinsley* for goodness sake while the others are John, Victoria, and Andrew.

“Sorry,” I say as plainly as possible.

John nods as if to say, *Apology accepted*.

“Now, can I please go lay down?” I brush my hand across my forehead.

“No,” John says in the same mild tone.

“No?” I repeat an octave or ten higher.

“No. I’m under strict orders not to allow you onto the property.”

A jolt of electricity runs hot through my veins. My skin turns clammy. My vision is liquid red.

“Don’t tell me you’re on the brink of a Tinsley Tantrum,” he says as if already bored by my antics.

Those two words remind me to be patient. I won’t allow myself to come undone in front of him. “Just to be clear, I’m an adult.”

“When was the last time you acted like one and not a spoiled brat, using Mother and Father’s credit cards and—?”

I hold up my hand. “I’ll stop you there.”

“Because you know it’s true?”

“John, I didn’t come here to engage in a war of words. I’m tired.”

“Not surprising, what with being involved in criminal activity.”

“I am not a criminal.”

“I didn’t say you were. I said, and I quote—” There he goes with his lawyer logic.

“To be clear, Puma allegedly did commit a crime. Multiple, including lying about his name, that I was staying at *his* house, among other things.” I only just learned that the Malibu mansion belongs to Julie and Harry Bergman who’re in their seventies and spend the winter and spring in Arizona. Suffice it to say, he did not have permission to occupy the space. But how was I supposed to know? I was his guest.

“Save it for the judge and jury, Tinsley.”

“Speaking of, would you offer me legal counsel?”

He snorts. “Figures you’d need it.”

I stomp my foot on the ground. “John.”

He arches one eyebrow.

I take a deep breath. “Obviously, the guy was a scam artist, but I was also scammed. Now, I’m involved in the scandal, and I didn’t do anything wrong. All I really want right now is a shower and sleep.”

“Was chasing all that glitz and glamour worth it?” he asks.

“Is making me feel like my family hates me and that I’m about an inch tall worth it?” I ask, straightening to my full height, making it so we’re nearly eye to eye.

John’s general energy is relatively still and quiet versus Andrew who is more animated, yet also has the aristocratic bearing that Mother and Father Humber tried very hard to cultivate in us. Victoria is Mother’s clone. When they got to me, they must’ve run out of gas, essentially leaving me stranded to find my own way, which it looks like I’ll be doing.

“Puma Palmer, aka Harold Jerrold Pumanowski, notorious member of the band Incurable Calypso Cyclo—” John stumbles over the name.

“Incurable Calypso Cyclotron,” I say.

“Right. His background is minimal. It’s as if he appeared on the scene out of the fog. He rose in rank on the music charts, filling stadiums, and causing scandals. But the biggest one wasn’t throwing televisions into hotel pools or trashing restaurants. He led the world to believe he was a raucous rock star, when in reality, he had a mind for numbers,” John says.

“Numbers with dollars attached to them from what I’ve gathered.”

“Numbers with foreign denominations and global leaders attached to them.”

“So you looked into the case?” I ask.

“Of course I did. My sister was taken in for questioning after the arrest of a man accused of extortion, embezzlement, and espionage.”

“Because it could damage the family name?”

“You’ve already made quite a dent, Tinsley.”

“By living in Hollywood? Going to concerts? Parties? Traveling all over the world?”

“Let me remind you that our father grew up approximately seventy miles from here in a building that has since been condemned. Until he went to grade school, he only got one meal a day. At the age of nine, he was too young to have his own paper route, so he talked the neighborhood kid who had it into letting him take over for seventy percent of the earnings. When things started looking up, he was sent to an orphanage. There, he organized the other kids to make felt Christmas ornaments and sold them on the corner. I could go on to how he learned to fix cars, became a lifeguard, and studied law at night even though it was doubtful he’d ever go to college.”

“I know the story. I also know that Mother had an affair and Father has been married to his job my entire life.”

My brother flinches at my accusation but plows ahead with his defense. He’s a great lawyer, but we’re not in the courthouse. “Our father has worked exceedingly hard for all of this,” John spreads his arms wide, “and you’re out there—”

“Yeah. I’m out there.” Tears pierce the corners of my eyes as I glance over my shoulder, ready to leave. “But that’s because I’ve never felt welcome here. Maybe Dad worked hard for all of this, but I’d be happy in that condemned building if I’d ever even had ten minutes of his time and attention. And as for Mom? She married into it. She hasn’t worked a day—”

“And you think all of this just holds itself together?” John asks, voice even.

“She’s never lifted a finger except for that time I walked in on her and—”

Again, he overlooks my comment about our mother. “You really don’t know how Mother and Father met? She was a maid at a hotel he stayed at in Texas while on a tournament trip thanks to his basketball scholarship in college. You think our parents look down on people who aren’t as wealthy as they are, but the truth is you look down on Mother and Father.”

“Then you’re saying she has a Cinderella story?” I snort, imagining our mother in a maid’s uniform instead of the designer clothing and pearls she ordinarily wears.

“Their story is even better. It’s the American dream.”

“You don’t understand, John. I’m pretty sure that dream includes fidelity and family. When was the last time Dad called me? Never. He has never called me to say hi.”

John blows by what I said. “No, you don’t understand because you’ve never wanted for anything in your life.”

“Not true. I wanted to be in movies.”

“I said you never wanted *for* anything, meaning you’ve always had access to three meals or more a day. You didn’t have to get a paper route at the age of nine to help pay rent. You weren’t orphaned.”

“No, except right now.” I cock my head sharply, jarring my brain which throbs with a headache.

He tilts his head with irritation. “Tinsley, you have no idea what Mother and Father went through to get here.”

Because they’ve never told me. Because they don’t talk to me. Because I mean nothing to them.

“But I don’t want all of this.” I indicate the estate with a flip of my hand.

“Then what are you doing here?” His voice is what I imagine a shark sounds like.

“Good question.” But again, the answer comes as if on the breeze.

*Because I don’t have anywhere else to go. Because I just want a family. To love and be loved.*

But the other answer from earlier is on its tail, rising out of my internal chasm like a fire-breathing dragon. The thing has the potential to burn it all down.

If I want all that, I’ll have to change.

“There’s a box in the garage containing some of your stuff,” John says.

“Just going to pack me up and ship me off like Mom and Dad did when they sent me to boarding school?”

“Father was giving you an opportunity that he didn’t have.”

I want him to be wrong. But we both are. We’re both wrong. We’re both right. The Humber family is complicated, and I feel like I was run over by a bus, a plane, and a car making my thoughts scramble.

John takes a step forward, ushering me out the door like an unwanted guest or a stray dog. He opens the garage and a cardboard box sits all alone in an empty bay flanked by my father’s nautical blue Maybach and mom’s diamond-white Mercedes convertible.

From my pocket comes the distinct tinkle of my cell phone, finally ringing. Relief sweeps through me like a masseuse working out the tension in my back. Finally, someone cares. Without looking at the caller ID, I answer.

## *Chapter Two*



This is the part of my job that I hate. Put me on the ground, in the thick of things, and undercover, I'm your man. However, I dread doing reports, which amounts to heaps of paperwork and cold call follow-ups.

I dial the number and the woman answers on the first ring. I make a mental note that she doesn't sound like she just woke up. My mother used to call me "Lil Sherlock" because I'd always notice details, find lost items, and solved my first crime when a neighborhood lawn mower was stolen. Little does she know that I got into the right profession.

"Hello, this is Agent Fuller," I say.

"What was that? Hello?" a bubbly female voice asks.

"Hi, this is Agent Fuller," I repeat.

"No, this isn't the Bagel Father. That's in Little Italy, on Grand at Baxter Street, I believe. If you hit Canal, you've gone too far and will end up in Chinatown."

The lines between my eyebrows crimp—the other day my sister Mae said the furrow was so deep, it reminded her of the Grand Canyon. Yeah, well, this case just keeps getting more and more complicated, not that she knows anything about it.

"Is this Tinsley Humber?" I ask, trying a different approach.

"How would I know if you got the right number? Who are you trying to call?"

Either an elderly woman with a youthful voice needs to adjust her hearing aids, this woman is messing with me, or we

have a bad connection.

I repeat my name, following protocol to properly identify myself in this situation. Neither my parents nor my sister have ever heard the Agent part attached to the last name Fuller.

“Sienna, is that you? Sounds like you had a late night. I promise you mine was later. As wild as they come. Wait until you hear the story.”

“Miss, I am an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and would like to discuss—”

“Wait, this isn’t Sienna. Who’s calling?”

“I just said—” I start but my own voice echoes back to me, suggesting something is wrong with the cellphone network. I pace the office, repeating introductions, but with each attempt, the conversation gets more garbled.

“I’m going to hang up and try calling back,” I say.

“If you’re asking if I’d wear off the rack, no. Designer only.”

I hang up before trying to decode what she means. I count to ten, taking deep breaths. Then I count backward. When my blood pressure still feels like a geyser about to erupt, I decide to calm *up*—it’s a method my mentor taught me. My mentor being Aslan. Yes, from *the Chronicles of Narnia*. During a rough patch almost a decade ago, I read the books by C.S. Lewis. The lion really spoke to me about purpose and how the big are meant to protect the little, among many other things.

He’s also a lion, which is a big cat, so I turn to kittens to center myself and refocus when I feel like kicking the can down the street and then running for the hills. Instead of calming down, I do something to elevate my mood.

I swipe to the internet search page and type *Cute kittens*. My smile is immediate. There are three orange and white long hair kittens in a basket, eyes wide, looking all around. My chest drops and my shoulders relax.

Works every time.

I dial Tinsley Humber's number again. She answers right away.

"Hello, this is Agent Fuller with—"

"Don't mess with me, Ferris Bueller is fictional and would not be calling me this early anyway." Like a federal attorney, she continues to outline her case against me being the movie character in great detail.

I rock back on my heels and stare at the white mineral fiber ceiling tiles common in offices. They've always reminded me of freeze-dried vanilla ice cream like the kind astronauts eat. A fluorescent light flickers in my periphery. I squeeze my eyes shut, wondering if I really should just become the mayor of Butterbury and call it a day.

"I think she's messing with me," I mutter.

Another agent, seated at a nearby desk, glances over his shoulder.

I simply shake my head.

"Tinsley Humber, you are speaking to a Federal Bureau of Investigation Agent, please cut the theatrics." I'm the one acting, using utmost calm when I want to say a few choice words to siphon off the frustration of this call.

But whatever ridiculous response she gives, I don't hear because the line goes dead.

It's moments like these that I'm ready to go full farm boy. Become a hay seed back home. It's bad enough I had to leave Butterbury and fly to Los Angeles when the case escalated at the arrest of Harold Jerrold Pumanowski. I have yet to determine his intentions—whether he was knowingly committing treason or was merely looking for a payday. Ultimately, that'll be left up to the judicial system, but when I conclude the case, I'll make a judgment for myself. In the meantime, I have to figure out whether Tinsley Humber is actually the skilled actress she aspires to be—at least according to intel—or in the wrong place at the wrong time. My peers let her off because of the latter, which is likely the case.

Agent Harrison swivels to face me and with a laugh, he repeats the last name, “Bueller,” like in the classic movie.

“Ha ha. Very funny. It’s too early for this.” I scrub my hand down my face.

“Or it’s late, depending on how you look at it.”

Out the window of the high-rise building, the Los Angeles sky makes me think of an eggplant. I ought to grow some in my garden once I get it going. Below, the city lights spread grid-like in every direction.

Without fail, when I fly into LA at night, I can’t help but stare in awe at how much light there is and how it abruptly ends where the ocean begins. Goes dark.

My future used to be like that, but now I see glimpses of it, where I can put down roots, shine some light on the earth and see what grows.

Harrison clicks his tongue. “Let’s see, Tinsley Humber comes from a well-to-do east coast family. Is an aspiring actress, including performances as ‘The cat food girl’ in a kibble commercial, a sidewalk sweeper in a musical mystery, and I can’t leave out ‘Sexy Alien Number Three’ in the sci-fi film, Distant Dust: Galaxy 2100.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever heard of it.” Despite the fact that my sisters think I’m a pleasure-seeking, jet-setting business tycoon, I can’t remember the last time I sat down and watched a movie in its entirety. It’s work or nothing and sometimes my work looks like nothing, but that’s just part of being an investigator.

Harrison chuckles. “So, Tinsley Humber is either A.) Just another girl with stars in her eyes. B.) A talentless hack. Or C.) A criminal mastermind in disguise.”

My instincts are on option A. But you can never be too sure, and it’s my job to exhaust all possibilities before I arrive at a conclusion.

“The guys cleared her,” Harrison says.

“But I want to ask her some questions myself.” Now, even more so.

“Of course you do.” Harrison chortles.

I raise an eyebrow.

He spins a photograph my way, revealing a compilation of what must be Tinsley’s acting/modeling collection of headshots and images.

I can’t help but let out a low whistle. She is a blonde bombshell. Long hair, longer legs, and big brown eyes.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t see her in Malibu when we arrested Puma.” Harrison’s tone lifts with disbelief.

“I’d prefer if we call him Harold.”

“He has a few bangers.” He sings a bar of an unfamiliar song.

I cock my head and cross my arms in front of my chest. “Harrison, how old are you?”

“Fifty-six.”

“Bangers? Really?”

“It’s what the kids say. I won’t even tell you the last case I was working on.” He brushes his hand across his forehead as if tired just thinking about it. “I had to create a glossary of terms just to understand what was going on.”

My chuckle dies when I think about Harold Jerrold Pumanowksi. Earlier at the house in Malibu, my focus was on criminal activity and an inept fame and fortune seeker. With a shake of my head, I answer Harrison’s question about having seen Tinsley Humber. “I saw sequins. That’s all.”

“Yeah, I bet. She had on some kind of nightclub outfit that would make my granny scold her six ways from Sunday. Apparently, Rickson and the guys woke her up from a dead sleep. My money is on her being innocent, but I understand why you might want to pursue your investigation.” He clears his throat suggestively.

I have a strict rule of never, under any circumstances, getting involved with a suspect, asset, or anyone remotely involved in an investigation. Officially, she's cleared, but I want to hear her story myself. I'm closest to this case since it connects back to Gatlin Stoll and Georgia, so I want to make sure we're not missing anything.

I absent-mindedly leaf through a few files, going over the conversation to cement it in my memory. Bubbly voice. Awake during the fourth watch unless she's on the east coast. Could be. Even there, it's early for a girl who frequents nightclubs. Then again, perhaps she never went to sleep and is at an afterparty. But I didn't hear any noise in the background.

"Since that call wasn't successful, what next?" Harrison asks.

"Depends on how you define success."

"Getting the answers you were looking for," he says.

"Sometimes what the person doesn't say gives you more insight than what they do say. And it's always a matter of asking the right questions."

"That's wise. You surprise me, Fuller. You have a reputation for being a maverick, a ladies' man. James Bond with southern swagger." He laughs.

I would chuckle too if it weren't true.

At work, I'll admit that I'm a bit of a renegade. I've been told that I have a pigheaded thirst for justice even when it means taking risks that others aren't willing or dumb enough to take. I call it courage. I'm not quite a loose cannon but on my way there. The fuse is lit, it's just a matter of whether I'll stay with the agency long enough for it to reach the gunpowder in the ignition chamber—my grandfather was big into Civil War reenactments, so I know all about cannons.

Truth is, I don't like bad guys. While most people would agree, I do something about it.

But my family doesn't know that. Around them, I'm the big cat, the fat cat, jetting around the world thanks to what my sister Mae calls my "fancy" job in finance. I have a hunch

Bess thinks I'm a felon. My crime? Leaving broken hearts in my wake.

The finance part is not entirely a lie as I deal in money, most of it illegally obtained and transferred. Not to my account, but among and between the criminals I intend to bring to justice. As for being a felon, Bess isn't entirely wrong.

I've never told a woman I loved them because that would've been a lie. I'm never in one place long enough for a relationship to develop beyond *like*. Can't stick around that long. Too risky on multiple levels.

But who is the real me? I've been playing multiple roles for so long that sometimes I've lost track, but nothing grounds me back to reality like being in my hometown. For better or worse, my current case happens to be in Butterbury, Georgia and I cannot wait to get back.

"You asked where to," I say, once again picking up on the question Harrison asked. The thing about me is I never lose a thread, even if it takes me a moment to tug on it and see where it leads.

In this case, home. The more I think about it, the more I hope this is my last case. In any event, I'll soon have a house waiting for me in Butterbury. The builders promised to have the bathrooms done by the end of the week—the last update I got, the contractor was waiting on the tiles and tubs.

Like a brick sliding into place, I realize something. The thread I most recently needed to pull looks more like a whisker. Not that I'd ever pull a cat's whisker.

I'll admit that my relationship with Butterbury's mayor got a little twisted. I set myself up as his enemy before realizing that I'd catch more flies with honey, so I made up a story about how I'm jealous of his success and really greased his ego. Wanted to see how the big dogs did things.

The guy lapped it up, so here I am, now my target's right-hand man. Or left, since I'm left-hand dominant. I let out a

long breath as I think about something important that I overlooked. Something furry.

“We’ve got Gatlin Stoll and his associates at Hydro-pro—a scammy for-profit outfit, under the guise of an environmental and community-first company which was initially why I was brought in to investigate. Despite the hydro name, they bleed counties dry,” I say, starting to think out loud.

“Yeah, the guys got a laugh when they heard you were being sent to some Podunk Georgia town.”

“Podunk, Georgia happens to be my hometown. Or my adopted one. My grandparents had a farmstead in Butterbury. Spent the best years of my childhood and young adulthood there. My sisters and I inherited it. Mae, my youngest sister, is on that show *Designed to Last*—”

“Oh, my wife loves those ladybosses. I do not—no offense to your sister. Every weekend, Michelle wants to go to the home improvement store and work on one project or another. Can’t a man watch a ballgame anymore? No, she’s got me looking at grout. Do you have any idea how many shades there are for grout? And how after a while they all look the same?”

That reminds me, I have to finalize the grout colors too. “If it’s your own home, I say that’s a worthy cause. Anyway, I have a history in Butterbury.” A future too, I hope.

“Careful. Don’t get too close. Don’t take it too personally.” Harrison pours us each a cup of coffee in a paper cup. He spins some cream into his while I drink mine black.

Thanking him with a nod, I take a sip, not caring if it burns my tongue. Anything to stay awake. “It’s always personal.”

Harrison chuckles. “You terrify me sometimes, Fuller. Anyway, from what I’ve gathered, you have enough dirt on Stoll to put him away for the rest of his life.”

“Stacks of crimes. Heaps.” I tell him about the alliance with Hydro-pro which is a shell corporation. There were also the fabricated taxes levied against his constituents, falsification of clerical documents, and the list goes on, which I give in great detail as the sky begins to lighten ever so



slightly from the east. “Not to mention he has a tab at the local diner a mile long.”

Harrison shakes his head. “What can you tell me about Silas William Fallon? Sounds like a white-collar felon if there ever was one.”

“You got that right.” I outline the ex-military, present defense contractor’s involvement along with the governor and his daughter, Dandy. Now, I can add the guy who fancies himself a musician and calls himself Puma, aka Harold Jerrold Pumanowksi, to the roster. I’d like to say this case just keeps getting more interesting. In reality, it’s tiring.

Usually, I ride an ongoing adrenalin rush during an investigation. This one has me wanting to sit on my back deck, kick up my feet, and watch the sunset.

Good thing I’m getting back to my roots.

“So you asked what’s next? I’m going to steal a cat.” I wink.

Harrison does a spit-take, showering coffee all over the desk.

We both start laughing.

I abruptly stop, and deadpan, I say, “I’m not kidding.”

“Are you going to steal a puma? You’re known for pranks and shenanigans. George Wilson said you left the guy who ran that international designer brand shoplifting ring with little more to wear than a plastic bag. Rumor has it Puma took an actual puma on tour with him, and would bring it out onstage when he made his grand entrance.”

“His name is Harold,” I correct. “And I’ll be sure to look into that to make sure it wasn’t mistreated. Also, it was a paper bag.”

“Your quest for justice is impressive.”

“It better be.”

“So you’re really going to steal a cat?”

Giving a lazy salute, I start toward the door. “Yep. Right now, Twinky is our number one asset.”

# *Chapter Three*

I'd like to say my friends and family have called to check in on me. Instead, I get a telemarketer or prankster with a bad connection. With my brother staring me down like a stray dog he'd like to remove from his property, I finally hang up and give John a sassy little snarl followed by a, "Woof."

Without so much as a flinch of recognition or remorse, he closes himself inside the estate, sealing me off from my family.

I have no idea what's in the cardboard box printed with my name, but I may as well take it. All of my belongings, including my favorite Christian Louboutin Desert Silk ankle-tie high-heel sandals are scattered all over the country with my so-called friends. Ones who still haven't called or texted. Did the events with Puma make them afraid to catch trouble like I'm contagious? A social pariah?

I gaze skyward. "Okay, fine. I've learned my lesson. I'll never date a musician or celebrity again. Definitely not a bad boy," I mutter.

I pick up the box and walk to the car. Without a backward glance, I wind down the long driveway and onto the road. I just have to lie low. But where? How? With what?

I go back the way I came and drive until I see the signs counting down the miles for New York City.

I've spent years being the guest at friends' houses along with their second and third homes in faraway locations, accompanied them on trips as part of an entourage, and spent more time than seems reasonable in hotels.

I could use one right now...or a friend. But as the exits skip by and the reality that I've skipped from friend to friend takes root, I realize I don't truly have any—certainly not a ride-or-die bestie for life or one who'd ask, *Where do we bury the body?* if I appeared with one. Not that I would. As mentioned, I am not a criminal.

I mentally catalog who I could call right now. Unless I'm looking for a good time or know where to find one, I don't think my sob story would be welcome. The people I associated with aren't the long-term, meaningful, memory-building kind that know much more about me than that my last name is Humber and there is a significant amount of money associated with it.

Money my father earned with my mother's support. Money that I spent without thinking. Money that I believed would someday be mine. Money that is no longer available. Well, except for my credit card.

A bottomless account. Unfortunately, I'm the one who feels like I've fallen into a pit. One of loneliness and misery.

I stop and get gas as commuters flurry to work, as kids go to school, as people carry on with their lives and as mine slips out of my hand like a dog's leash.

But who was walking who?

I thought by living my carefree, celeb lifestyle, I was free, but I was tethered to the whims of my so-called friends. I've repeatedly confirmed that my phone is charged and has service, yet no one checks on me. Not even to gossip. Then again, the connection at the estate was lousy.

Turns out that the roots of friendship aren't just shallow, they're nonexistent. The people I've spent the last decade with were superficial, players in a production I thought I starred in. But as usual, I've been forgotten. In all honesty, I wasn't a very good friend either. How many people floated in and then *out* of my life? All of them. Truth is, I did the same.

Whatever happened to Tasha? Did she get married and move to the countryside? Did Tabitha end up starting her

business like she said she would? What about Taylor? He's no longer in PJ and the Oakbrook Boys, but I hear he's still playing music...and happily married.

I let out a long sigh that turns into a gasp when a little girl with pigtails wanders into the lane next to the gas pumps for cars to pass through. A semi-truck, whose driver likely can't see the child over the broad hood, is only a few feet away. Waving my arms, I rush into the lane and pick the little girl up as the truck driver slams on his brakes.

The little girl, staring wide-eyed at the chrome grill of the truck, starts crying. I'd like to as well.

The truck driver hollers out his window, "Sorry about that. Everything okay?"

I nod and wave him off, no need to make a scene since I'm already plastered all over the internet. Trying to quell the panic in my voice, I ask the little girl, "Where are your parents?"

She points at the same time a woman rushes over, frantic, and takes her daughter into her arms. "I told you to wait in the car."

"I told you that I wanted to pick flowers." With tears tracking down her face she points to the trash-strewn median with a few weeds growing in it.

She reminds me of me when I was a little kid, precious, willful, and wanting nothing more than to be outside.

What's changed? I'm no longer the outdoorsy type...and usually have the sense to look both ways before I cross the street.

The mother lets out a choppy breath, thanks me, and then goes on to gently scold her daughter while hugging her close.

When I get back in the driver's seat, my limbs feel wobbly from the close call and quite frankly I feel like the truck struck me—the lack of sleep, the upheaval of my life as I knew it, the travel, and general lack of direction...

I have nothing except this car and what's in it. But I am in the driver's seat. I may have flushed my life away like John so

kindly pointed out, but that doesn't mean I can't change.

That I can't have the life that I want. But what do I want? To get to the top. And on the way, I'll make meaningful relationships to start. And sleep. After I get some of that, perhaps I'll be able to sort out the details.

As a sign welcomes me to New Jersey, my thoughts turn foggy and distant as I recall receiving the lifetime achievement award in my diva dream before the cops woke me up. The brutal truth is I've done nothing with my life. Unless you count a bit part in a Hallmark movie and the diva dream about the lifetime achievement award. Though I have to admit the Hallmark movie was all swoony romance and none of the drama in real life.

I could go for that with whipped cream and a cherry on top, please. However, I have yet to be bitten by the true love bug which is about as depressing as sitting down on a damp toilet seat, which happens after I pull into the first rest stop off the turnpike. After using the facilities and rubbing the remnants of the hand sanitizer I find in the glove box on the backs of my legs, I lock the car doors. With a sigh, I recline the seat, close my eyes, and finally get some sleep.

When I wake hours later, I forget where I am until I recall the license plates went from bright mustard yellow to a softer buttery yellow. That must mean that I'm in New Jersey.

If I were to consult a "Magic Eight Ball" and ask, "Am I hungry?" It would answer, "Probably." The follow-up, "Would I eat rest-stop food?" It would reply, "My sources say no." Fun fact: we share the same sources.

It's as if my thoughts pick up exactly where they left off even though I'd hoped that sleep would wipe the slate clean, like being exonerated for crimes not committed.

The agents seemed to believe my innocence as evidenced by the fact that they let me go, but that doesn't change public opinion. My phone remains quiet. No calls. No texts. Nothing other than social media posts about Puma and the Pariah.

That would be me.

I toss my phone onto the passenger's seat and get back on the road and fail not to think about the questions posted online about whether I was involved criminally or romantically with Puma.

Ew. No. His hands reminded me of a used towel on a hotel room floor and he went a little heavy on the hair gel.

But there goes my life in the spotlight. Now, I'm in the limelight. The difference is the spotlight follows the actor on the stage. The limelight sounds less pleasant with its greenish hue. Which is how I feel. Sick from the lack of a normal night's sleep, from being rejected, from not knowing where I'm going...and from what I'm seeing online. Or not seeing as the case may be.

People I thought were friends abandoned me. My family practically disowned me. My career is forgotten like yesterday's headlines except I'm now known as being *Puma's Gal Pal*.

When I stop to get gas again just over the North Carolina border. I go inside to get something to drink. A flatscreen television broadcasts the news while people wait in line. For once, I try my best to go unnoticed.

Not only am I used to traveling with chauffeurs, thanks to living that entourage life, but I also can't remember the last time I came to a place that sells pork rinds. What is a pork rind anyway?

The guy next to me in line must know because he holds a bag. He also has a thin, slick mustache like Clark Gable. Smelling like pizza onion sweat, he leans into my personal space and says, "Nice dress."

I adjust my position so all he sees is my back.

Behind me, two girls whisper about the artisanal water in my hand followed by giggling.

"Hey, that girl on TV is wearing the same dress as you," Clark Gable's Mustache says.

"Must be a trend," I mutter.



“No way, that’s you. You’re Puma’s Gal Pal. The one that was there during his arrest.” This must be revenge for giving him the cold shoulder.

“I just have a pretty face.”

“It’s totally her,” a woman says, flashing an image on her phone.

The two teenagers continue to whisper while looking my way and then indiscreetly snap selfies with me in the frame.

“I hear you got into a little hot water. I have a pool down the street if you want to cool off,” Clark Gable’s Mustache says.

“Uh, didn’t bring my bathing suit, but thanks anyway.” My voice is a pitch too high.

“Does that really matter?” he asks, getting closer to me.

As the small crowd closes in, thoughts from when the police led me away from Puma’s hideaway crash into me.

I’ve never been called smart, clever, or anything other than pretty. Not beautiful or gorgeous. Certainly not a bombshell. Just *pretty* as if my okay looks are all I’ve got going for me.

As for discernable talent, I won’t lie, that’s in short supply. I don’t have anything to offer an audience and Victoria got all the musical talent. But if I’m not an aspiring celebrity, then who am I? What good am I?

As the crowd asks me questions, the officer’s words echo in my ears. *If I’m smart...*

I had the sense not to say or do anything stupid while under interrogation, but what about now? Should I declare my innocence? Explain myself? Sign the requested autographs?

Thing is, I didn’t do anything heroic or worthwhile. I was just in a few photos, my name tossed around the tabloids, and am still wearing yesterday’s dress...or was it the day before? Time resembles the Slushie in a spindly guy’s hand as he gives me a once-over.

*Unless you can turn back the clock, keep moving, buddy.*

Maybe I no longer want to be the queen of Tinseltown. I'm not sure why I was other than the fact that I never turned down an invitation and had an endless supply of funds to keep the good times rolling.

Money my father started earning when I was busy calling my brother Baldy, pranking my sister by cutting her dolls' hair, and following Andrew around like his shadow. That was because I wasn't ever allowed a moment in the spotlight. It was always John, Victoria, and Andrew shining like a trio of gold stars with no attention paid to me. I'm by no means dumb, even if I acted like it. Academic perfection even failed to get Mother and Father's approval.

After I pay for my water, with little more than a friendly if not tentative wave at my new fan club, I rush back to the car.

The last time I was in North Carolina, I visited the set of an action thriller shot on the Outer Banks.

I could go there or take a right and head to Nashville. What if I keep driving until there's no more road—all the way to Miami? I know some people who live in South Beach. But my phone is still quiet. News probably traveled across the country while I was in flight and I am officially on the banned list.

Persona non grata is right.

Or more like persona forgot-a.

Persona ignore-a? Avoid-a? Brush off-a?

This would be the part of the movie when the main character turns up the music and sings the song of freedom.

Free from my family who doesn't understand me. Free from Puma and his illegal activity. Free to be me.

I probably ought to take a vacation. No, a man-cation. A vacation from men. It'll be me lounging on the beach with a frilly drink and no actors, musicians, or bad boys from now on.

I turn on the radio. Wouldn't you know it? A song by PJ and the Oak Brook Boys echoes. Naturally, the guitar player and #TaylorsGeorgiaPeaches come to mind. He and I sort of

had a thing. Or more accurately, I wanted a thing and in so many words he told me to get lost.

It went something like this: I showed up uninvited to a shindig he was playing solo at. Granted, it was open to the public so it's not like I was a gate crasher. I thought (er, hoped) the love song was penned with me in mind. Then I kind of insisted it was, blew up what turned out to be Taylor professing his love for someone named Mae, who, I later insulted by being super catty and calling her, *Meh* as in not much to look at.

Totally not fair of me because it was dark so I didn't get a good look. She was holding a chicken in her arms, which, upon reflection was an interesting sidenote.

But she was no shrinking flower because she had a comeback suggesting that I'm a meanie.

Then I practically pled with Taylor to take me back. When he didn't, I threatened to tell everyone how he misled me and then broke up with me. Which was a manipulative lie if there ever was one.

Shame over that little scene won't be making it into my memoir.

It was not my proudest moment and encapsulated what John referred to as a Tinsley Tantrum.

Then I sped off. I didn't make good on my threat because I moved on to...I don't even remember. Jackson? Jesse? Jasper? It was toward the end of my Nashville phase.

As I drive into the night, the last words Taylor said to me finally catch up. He said, "*Tinsley, you've created a story in your head. I'm sorry. We were never together so there's nothing to end.*"

Why does the truth have to hurt so much? It's not because I was particularly in love with Taylor, though there is nothing wrong with #TaylorsGeorgiaPeaches. More like something must be wrong with me. I have made up a story in which I'm the star, and it doesn't matter who I shove side stage or out of the frame to get the perfect shot of my good side.

After I get yet another tank of gas, I pull out my phone, tempted to call Taylor—and not with the hope of getting together. Rather, to ask what he meant. How he knew. What I should do.

Seems like his life wasn't going the way he wanted so he made a major change and took a risk. I wonder how that's working out for him. What it could mean for me.

When I get to the *T* section in my contact list, I can't find Taylor's name. Then I realize I labeled his number with the words *DO NOT CALL* as in don't get weak and reach out under any circumstances. There are twelve numbers with the same label. Probably including Jackson, Jesse, and Jasper.

Instead, I keep driving. However, I can't go fast enough to escape the regrets, the manipulation, and the deception. Not to mention that I was high maintenance. I guess this is my version of going into the desert, only it gets increasingly humid the farther south I go.

And I get increasingly tired the longer I drive. I pull off the highway with a blue sign for food and lodging.

After several more miles, I cruise past *Fortuna's FunWorld*, an abandoned amusement park. The structure of a splintered wooden rollercoaster looks ready for a bonfire. Carts in dull rainbow colors hang precariously from a small Ferris wheel. As I pass, a vandalized carousel horse leers at me.

Ahead, a red neon sign for the Amusement Motel flickers with the word *Vacancy* beneath.

Hard pass.

I've had bit parts in a variety of movies, but I'm not going to volunteer for a horror film. No thanks.

Where are my federal agent bodyguards when I need them? I didn't notice any of them wearing wedding bands. Then again, that's probably prohibited while on the job for security reasons. I wonder if Southern Agent was available? He had a well-dressed tough guy look that I could really use right now.

But maybe what I need to do is be single for a while and do all those things the social media influencers say about going on a retreat to find themselves. My man-cation, as it were.

Well, I'm exhausted and may as well be lost here on the side of the road, so surely before long, I'll find something. The GPS on my phone freezes and while I try to get it to work so I can figure out how to get back to the highway, my phone rings. The top of my bun bonks the roof of the car.

"Sienna!" I say into the phone.

"Hey, Tinsley." Her voice is tentative. "I, uh, wanted to let you know that the trip to Cannes for the film fest was canceled."

"They can't cancel the film festival," I say, shocked.

"No, just, uh, the trip."

"But your boyfriend is in one of the films...wait, did you guys break up? I'm so sorry. I've been so caught up in—" See? I need to be a better friend.

"No, we're still together. It's the trip. We, uh, we think that considering circumstances, that it's probably best..."

"Oh." She doesn't want me to go with them anymore. "Oh. Okay. I understand."

"Well, um, good luck."

I manage to croak a pathetic, "You too," and get off the phone. I feel like I just plummeted to the bottom of the rickety roller coaster except instead of a thrill, my heart remains in my stomach. I'm on the side of the road long enough for the shadows to get long, for the sun to fade into the distance, and for me to realize I just received the final *buh-bye* of my career and social life.

As an aspiring actress, I've had my fair share of rejections, passes, and times I didn't get a callback. But it's like a door just closed and Sienna bolted the lock.

I turn around and drive back to the intersection for the highway. The yellow glow of a dingy convenience store is the

only light around. It certainly isn't a beacon to guide me in any particular direction. I could turn around and go back to NYC. Find the nearest airport and head to LA. Return to my old life.

Instead, I dig through my bag and pull out a sun hat and my sarong, intended for my day with Sienna. I'll use it to attempt to be incognito so I can go inside without drawing attention to myself. A young couple stands in front of me in line. They hold hands as if they can't bear to be apart while paying for their pretzels and sodas.

She stumbles slightly when they get to the register and he crouches down to tie her shoe. When he stands up, she rubs his nose with hers and then kisses him.

They're as sweet as the cinnamon buns warming on the counter next to the hotdogs. Sadly, I've never had that kind of a relationship or a real boyfriend period. I've dated, but it's never been official...and it's been a long time since I've had a cinnamon roll.

When it's my turn to pay for my water and a granola bar—the healthiest thing I could find in this place riddled with sugar-laden Big Gulps and pork rinds, which definitely come from questionable origins—I give into the temptation to get a cinnamon roll. I lost my social standing and probably can't afford to gain weight given my drive to get to the top—I'll make a comeback yet, I tell ya!—but if I can't have true love, I'll take something sweet all the same.

I slide my credit card and the machine beeps harshly. The word *Declined* flashes on the screen. I try again.

After the third time, the clerk says, “Do you have another card?”

I pull out my wallet and try the other one my parents pay for. It doesn't work either.

Apparently, I really can't afford the cinnamon roll.

When I get back into the car with this useless plastic rectangle, the tears that pierced the corners of my eyes while in the store spill over.

This isn't a Tinsley Tantrum. More like loss...and it's my fault.

My parents don't owe me anything especially when I've done nothing but take from them. Neither do my brothers and sister. As for my friends, what friends?

This is a good pity cry.

John was right. I had opportunities. What I lack is humility. But where can I find that?

Maybe in Miami. I'll make a new life there. I have connections.

What I won't do is cavort with people like Puma. I won't flirt or catch a crush or have a fling.

I was with guys because they were *someone*, which was better than being with no one, making it so I was never alone. But here I am, driving solo anyway.

And away I go. I crank up the music and sing along, hardly noticing when lights spin and flash behind me. A siren blares. I don't remember that being part of the song.

I glance in the rearview mirror. A police car tails me. I think I'm supposed to pull over to the side of the road.

Did the feds change their mind and catch up with me?

My breath freezes in my chest as I come to a stop. The officer takes a long time to come to the window.

"Sir, you really brought the club vibe." I bop a little in my seat.

He peers into the car and his gaze is unamused like metal, like steel. "Miss, please turn off the radio."

I swallow thickly and do as told.

"Do you realize you were going thirty miles over the speed limit?"

I shake my head, blurring the letters printed on his uniform *Officer Henley*.

"Do you understand why legal rates of speed are posted?"

“So we follow the rules?”

Somehow his mustache frowns at my response. It’s more of a Robert Redford situation than the slick Clark Gable mustache from the gas station. “For public safety. I have to write you a speeding ticket and...” His words trail slowly from his lips. “And I have to place you under arrest.”

“Sir, I was cleared. I was not involved in the thing with Puma. I swear.”

He inclines his head. “Miss, have you been drinking? Are you under the influence of alcohol? Coming from the club by any chance?”

The answer to all of his questions is a resounding no, however, the way he says *club* so stiffly makes me want to giggle. Perhaps my friends have been ignoring me as people do before a surprise party so the tension builds and everyone thinks their friend forgot. Then *boom!* They bounce out of their hiding places and shout, *Surprise!*

But no one appears from the darkness beyond the road. My headlights beam into the distance as the police officer’s lights spin on the roof of his patrol car.

This situation suddenly seems so absurd that I want to laugh.

But I don’t. I know better.

“You’ll have to come with me,” Officer Henley says.

*If you’re smart...* The federal agent’s words come to me, but this time I don’t heed them. “Sir, why are you arresting me?”

“For driving a stolen car. New York plates. Reported missing yesterday.” He clicks his tongue. “Not only that but you do not have a valid driver’s license...unless it’s 2015. I’m sorry to say this one expired quite a while ago.”

I bite my lip. “I usually use my passport for identification.”

“Can’t help you here. Please come with me.”



I am handcuffed and put into the back of the police car. My eyes tingle with tears, but I blink them back as we pass a sign that says *Welcome to Butterbury: a small town with a big heart.*

“You have got to be kidding me,” I mutter.

“I’m afraid not, Miss,” Officer Henley says.

I want to explain that I was here for the Fall Festival but keep quiet because now I don’t have a car, am stranded here, and will have to answer for my crime.

Fear trickles slowly over my skin and sticks like a spider’s web as the vague memory of Butterbury takes shape with its quaint Main Street. We pass a diner, a few shops, and the headquarters for the HLTV show *Designed to Last*. Looks like I can’t escape my past or show business.

The next minutes are a blur as I’m unceremoniously booked, am tested for alcohol, and have my mug shot taken—it’s not half bad even though my makeup has all but melted off.

Officer Henley locks me in a jail cell like a common criminal. Like Puma. I let out a long breath and then drop onto the wooden bench along the wall.

Maybe Taylor can bail me out. Or the feds. They can attest to my innocence. I would not object to Southern Agent either. He would’ve been incredibly handsome if not for the glare cast in the general vicinity of all criminal activity. He had cheekbones that would be the envy of any aspiring Hollywood Hunk, and lips that would’ve been delicious if he weren’t in what appeared to be a permanent scowl. His hair was tousled and brown with the slightest hint of red. I wondered what color his eyes were.

From across the room, the guy didn’t even notice me. Now, I’m a far cry from Malibu.

With a long sigh, I peer through the bars into a second cell. A manly, well-groomed man with an intense gaze glances at me and then away.

Now I know the answer to my question. Southern Agent's eyes were blue. My stomach does a swoop. Shockingly, he's in the cell next to mine.

# *Chapter Four*

**M**y gaze collides with the woman's in the next cell like a slow-motion action shot. The clock on the wall above the window slows. Officer Henley's voice takes on a drone-like quality. The fan moving back and forth on the desk goes at half speed. But my focus turns exclusively to her because she's arrestingly familiar.

She has balanced features with clear skin and an angular jawline. My attention drops to her collarbones before it lifts to her lips. My eyes don't know where to land. My pulse either. Now would be a good time to look at kittens online. But all my thoughts float out the window when I meet her eyes again. They're big and brown and soft.

Eyes that make me forget to breathe.

But then my gaze drops to her dress covered in gold sequins, and I realize where I've seen this bombshell before.

I physically jolt like I was tasered. Then it's as if the sudden awareness of my reaction resumes the normal forward motion of time. No, it goes at a breakneck pace because I was looking at photos of this woman yesterday, or was it the day before? The days and nights blur together since I went to Los Angeles, returned, and was arrested with no thanks to my nearest and dearest, but I digress.

Tinsley Humber looks at me with shock, curiosity, or a plea in her eyes—I can't tell. Her big brown-eyed gaze is mesmerizing. Why she isn't the star in every feature film is a mystery. But perhaps it's because her expression refuses to

settle, to focus. Whereas moments ago I saw shock, curiosity, or a plea, now there's caution, possibly even fear.

Maybe it's because of the obvious. We're in a pair of jail cells—the only two in Butterbury, I might add.

Unless she is a hardened criminal in disguise, I imagine she's as terrified as my sisters would be if they found themselves in the slammer. Which they will or my name isn't Aiden Fuller King of Pranks.

They will pay for this little turn of events. They will pay with my laughter at their expense. I thought the days of playing practical jokes on Bess and Mae were over—especially after my baby sister shared that the way Taylor and I used to torment her with ghost stories and all manner of mischief upset her deeply. He was my best friend back in the day and is her husband now. I called it quits on being a big brother rascal.

Then they had to go and get me arrested. Granted, had it been anyone else breaking into the mayor's house and making a getaway, I would've encouraged the community watchdog behavior. Especially since I plan to be the future mayor.

Thankfully, Twinky is safe in an undisclosed location.

Tinsley steps closer to the bars and I back away, washing my face of recognition when I feel my brows knit together from surprise at this turn of events.

“Fuller,” Officer Henley calls.

“Yes, sir,” I say, on my best behavior.

“For the last time, will you please tell me where you put Twinky.”

I pat my trim stomach. “As I mentioned, I haven't had a Twinkie in years.” My eyes flit to his modest paunch. “However, I do know where you can get a doughnut. Also, Butterbury is renowned for its pies at the Starlight Diner and the Sweethearts Bakery & Café has delicious chocolate and baked goods, but I'm probably biased.”

He barely conceals rolling his eyes at the ceiling. I mentally convey that the best way to tolerate my antics is to count slowly to ten. I've had to do so more than a few times because without my phone in here, I can't look up pictures of cute cats.

“Fuller, you know the Twinky that I'm talking about. The mayor's cat. Eyewitnesses say they saw you climb out the window with it in your arms.” He looks down at the report. “And I quote, ‘The suspect stuffed the cat in a baby carriage, closed the top and zipped up the sides. He looked both ways before crossing the street and then ran at a sprint past the dog play park. On the corner of Spring Street and Elm, a terrier got loose and started chasing the assailant. The wheel busted off the carriage and there was a lot of zigging and zagging.’ Shall I continue?”

It wasn't my finest moment.

“You stole a cat?” Tinsley Humber speaks for the first time. Her tone is one of shock and dismay.

“I didn't steal a cat.” I *rescued* the feline from a cage in the mayor's garage. I hardly entered and I didn't break. Really, I consider it public service. Potentially evidence.

“Your voice sounds familiar,” she says.

“Miss, I'm going to ask you to hang tight while I process you both. Today is the busiest day in Butterbury since Les Streckle broke into the Easton Estate. I had to pursue him in a high-speed chase when he tried to get out of Dodge.”

I let my gaze float over her from top to bottom. I may have found a few twigs in my hair after I landed in the bush earlier, but at least I've showered and changed in the last few days. Tinsley Humber is wearing the same sequined dress when I briefly saw her while at the house in Malibu. Is she on the run or did she run out of gas here in Butterbury? My mind sparks with questions...among other things.

“Last time, Aiden. Just tell the truth and this can be over. Did you steal Gatlin Stoll's cat?”

“No.” Also not a lie because as I pieced details together while still in LA, I concluded that Twinky isn’t actually the mayor’s cat. Rather, Twinky has now experienced an abduction and a rescue. Or, more accurately, in this case, a cat-napping.

Not to be confused with a nap, which I could sure go for right about now.

Officer Henley returns to his desk, no doubt writing up his report, reminding me of the calls I made to Tinsley. Likely, she heard snippets of my voice or may have noticed me at the house in Malibu. Let’s hope not. I try to keep a low profile. Not only am I the King of Pranks, but I’m also a chameleon.

Her eyes get heavy as she gazes into mine. “A sweet southern voice,” she says, imitating a drawl. “Like honeydew melon fresh off the vine. Like the slow drip of molasses. A hot, sultry summer afternoon.”

I blink a few times to keep myself from getting hypnotized. As if defying my better sensibilities, a rumble springs up inside of me. It’s like thunder in the distance, warning me of an incoming storm that’ll change the landscape. My inner landscape.

Tinsley bounces on the balls of her sparkly high heels. “How’d I do?”

“How do you do?” I’m starting to wonder if she has a hearing or communication problem, given the phone call earlier and now this.

“No, how did I do reciting those lines? Don’t you recognize them? They’re from *A Golden Deception in Texas*. I read for the part of Annabelle Alden.” She gazes at her hands. “Didn’t get it, obviously.”

I hardly notice that I have an accent, a slight one at best. But it’s time to play a role of my own. “It’s not every day you see a beautiful woman with immeasurable talent in a place like this.”

Her eyes flick to mine and her lips quirk with laughter. “Immeasurable talent?” Her voice fills with disbelief.

Perhaps my slick undercover schtick when I channel James Bond isn't what I chalked it up to be. "Too much? Did I lay it on too thick?"

She holds her thumb and forefinger a measure apart. "A tad."

"Well, I wasn't playing about the beautiful part." Truly. The inner rumble like a low wind rolling through a canyon and growing louder by the minute confirms this.

She seems to go still even though she can't go very far. "Really?"

"Truly," I say out loud this time.

She looks down at her hands and twists them. "I've never had anyone tell me that before."

"I find that hard to believe. But I'm pleased to be the first." I try to replace what I reckon is a shy, boyish grin in her presence with a manly smolder.

Then like a switch flips in her mind, she cocks a hip and plants her hand there. "Wait a minute. Did you really steal a cat? I don't know if I can trust the judgment of someone who steals a cat."

"I didn't steal a cat. It was a misunderstanding."

"Fuller, where is Twinky?" Officer Henley calls presumably having overheard the conversation.

She's safe, but I don't say that. "You should probably ask Gatlin Stoll where the cat is."

"I think he's out of town. Haven't seen him in a few days."

That's news to me. I file away that bit of info to look into later. "Perhaps you should keep better tabs on our good mayor."

"I thought you were his assistant now."

I clear my throat into my fist. "Right. Well, I assume he took a personal day. I was wrapping up some business of my own out of town," I say, which is true.



Henley looks up at me over the cheater glasses perched on his nose. “Is that so? I’ll need an alibi.”

Oh, brother. We’re going to have to talk later and by *talk* I mean show him my badge—which, no slight to our local boys in blue, or in this case, he wears a tan uniform—holds a little more clout. But I can’t say any of this at present, as I originally planned, because now one of the people involved in the case I’m on stands in the cell next to mine.

I return to her, forcing myself not to be captivated by her eyes, her cute little button nose, or her lips, or her anything. But it’s hard not to as the rumble gets louder in my ears. It erases all rational thought, restraint, and the aloof cat-like persona I’ve created...unless I want affection.

Moving closer to her is a mistake because the next thing that comes out of my mouth cannot be helped. At least that’ll be my thought in hindsight. “Someday, we’ll tell our kids that we met in jail.”

The rumble booms inside followed by a loud cracking as if the walls I’ve built come down, but only wide enough to let Tinsley through. It’s as if instead of being struck by lightning, I was struck by Cupid’s bow.

She inhales sharply as if scandalized yet charmed. I guess maybe I do have a voice like a honeydew melon fresh off the vine. “A meet-cute in jail? No, that will not be going in my memoir.”

“Are you writing one?”

“Not yet. Someday.”

“What will you call it?” If she says, *Confessions of a Celebrity and Criminal*, I’ll make sure she stays behind bars. Then again, I wasn’t kidding. Her beauty should be considered a capital crime.

She taps her chin. “Tales of a Shining Star.”

“Nice, but don’t be so sure that this isn’t our meet-cute. I have a feeling you’ll feature me in a chapter or two,” I say, being my usual charming, flirty self. At least, when it comes to women.

My reputation is not entirely undeserved. But I had to build a moat between myself and real relationships because I'm sometimes so deep undercover that I can't tell what's real and what's for show. For instance, when was the last time I flirted for real?

My chest twinges. *Talking to Tinsley feels pretty real.*

The way my skin warms when she looks at me feels real too.

Or perhaps this isn't our meet-cute because technically we already met—by several degrees of separation at the house in Malibu and over the phone. Now bars separate us.

Can't be a good sign.

“How about when we get out of here, we go on a date?” So I can ask some questions. It won't be an inquisition or even an interrogation. More like a conversation about what she can tell me about Harold Jerrold Pumanowksi.

She plays with a loose hair by her neck. “I, uh, don't think that's a good idea.”

“Is it because you won't date a felon?” I tease.

Her lips quiver. “You might be a cat thief, but I swear, I didn't do anything wrong. I was afraid you'd recognize me.”

I force my lips into an innocent frown. Does that mean she knows who I am? Better play dumb. “Truly, I don't recognize you other than the woman who should've played Annabelle Alden in *A Golden Deception in Texas*.”

Her cheeks turn a faint shade of pink. “Well, I just thought maybe you recognized me from the news.”

I lean closer, curious about what she might reveal. “A tiny town with a big heart. Don't tell me you're on the run Bonnie and Clyde style?”

She giggles. “No. Not even close. Does the name Puma ring a bell?”

I draw a deep breath and am thankful for the involuntary bunching between my eyebrows. “Like a cat? We have a lot of

animals here in Butterbury.”

“Speaking of cats...” Officer Henley comes over.

I hold up my hands, the picture of innocence. “You have my word that I did not catnap Twinky.”

“Mmm. A catnap would be nice right now,” Tinsley says.

My sentiments exactly.

Dark circles that I didn’t notice smudge the space under her eyes. Guilty of working with Harold or not, she looks tired.

Officer Henley clicks his tongue with disapproval. “Are you talking about the musician Puma Palmer? My daughter texted to say he was arrested. Some kind of embezzlement. Guess it’s a federal case.”

“International espionage, considering he’s here illegally from Bugarithia.”

“Where’s that?” Tinsley asks.

“Near Poland,” I answer casually, belatedly realizing I acknowledged that I hadn’t heard of Puma then shared details about his background. This woman makes it hard to keep my story straight.

“He never mentioned that he’s not from the United States.”

“Word must travel fast,” Henley says as if picking up on my blunder.

“I didn’t make the connection until you added the *Palmer* part to his name,” I say.

Henley squints at me at the same time as his police radio goes off and he turns it up to listen.

Tinsley picks a loose sequin on her dress. “Turns out his actual name is Harold Jerrold Pumanowksi. In case you haven’t yet, you’ll soon see that I was at his house when he was arrested. Well, it wasn’t his house. He was ‘borrowing’ it. Or at least, that’s what I imagine he’d say. Now, I’m guilty of his crimes by association. I didn’t do anything, but unfortunately, the public has taken shots at my credibility.”

“Ow-ski is right.”

She looks so despondent standing there alone in the jail cell in her gold dress that whatever remaining sympathetic emotions I have after seeing how ugly the world can be rise to the surface.

“Is this going to follow me everywhere? Forever? Officer Henley even knows about it and, no offense, but he doesn’t seem like he keeps up with the times.”

Officer Henley removes his cheater glasses and uses them like a pointer. “Ah ah ah. Actually, I’m well-versed in pop culture. Have to keep my finger on the pulse of things. Just last month my daughter and I saw Puma perform live in Atlanta. Not my kind of music, but I didn’t want her going alone. Plus, the case is all over the news.” He turns to me. “Turns out this little lady was getting rather cozy with Puma as his Gal Pal.”

She winces. “Sir, please. I didn’t do anything. You can ask the FBI. I spent the night at their office, pleading my case, and answering all their questions. Some, repeatedly. I’m innocent.”

I stop short of nodding in agreement.

“I’m sure you are. But you did break the law.”

“And I’m sorry, sir. I won’t do it again,” Tinsley says.

“I reckon I believe you. All the same, I have to do my job. Can’t let word get out that I’m slacking.” The police radio crackles again and Officer Henley gets to his feet. “I’ll be back. We have a goose on the loose.”

When the door to the station closes, we both chuckle.

When I go quiet, I say, “I don’t think that’s code either. My sister’s llama escapes all the time. I can assure you that as the future mayor of Butterbury, some long-necked neighbors nose into people’s business, but we mostly keep to ourselves. All the same, it sounds like your reputation preceded you. Though, Butterbury is a fairly forgiving place.”

I hope. I still have to prove to my sisters and buddies like Nash, Taylor, and the others that I was not in cahoots with

Stoll, but that'll have to wait.

Tinsley tips her head to the side. "Can you be mayor with a rap sheet?"

She may have a point. But I'm an options guy. I'll figure something out. I'm also a doughnuts guy and could really go for one right now when Henley returns with a pink box sealed with the Doughnut Dollies Sticker.

"The goose?" I ask, eyeing the box.

"Is with the gander," Henley replies, straight-faced.

Maybe it *is* code for something. I ought to brush up on my local lingo.

He opens the box and inhales deeply. "These never get old." He twinkles his fingers over the open box. "Boy, these doughnuts sure are delicious. They always hit the spot. Come to papa."

Both Tinsley and I grip the bars of our cells. Like monkeys in cages, we practically drool while staring at him.

Officer Henley looks up, lips cracking with a smirk when his gaze lands on me. "Oh, Miss Humber did you want one of these?" He passes her a glazed old-fashioned on a napkin through the bars. "I'd be happy to share with you too, Aiden. If, and only if, you tell me what went on at Mayor Stoll's house. The witnesses should be along soon. I'm sure they'll have more to tell me. Perhaps even some evidence."

Doubtful. I'm not a criminal, but I am a federal law enforcement officer so I've observed the behavior of plenty of bad guys and had the sense to destroy the evidence—that being the baby carriage and not the cat, just to be clear.

"Sounds to me like we have a couple of misunderstandings on our hands." I wag my hand between Tinsley and me, indicating our arrests.

"No, I broke the law. I was speeding and my license was expired. I didn't realize." Tinsley speaks clearly as if not at all in need of a catnap. Like she woke up from a fog and realizes what she did wrong.

Henley nods at her as if in approval, then turning to me, he says, “As I said, I have a doughnut with your name on it, Aiden.”

“In fact, you said no such thing, but if the doughnut has my name on it, technically it’s mine.”

He plucks another from the box and holds it a few inches from my cell. “Last chance.”

“To plead my innocence. I did not *steal* a cat.”

He looks me over carefully as if assessing my honesty. I’d like to assure him that I rescued Twinky but hold back.

“Oh, alright. Here. But don’t go telling anyone that I went soft.” Henley rolls his eyes and passes me the goods.

I’d like to say I take dainty bites of the doughnut like Tinsley who still works on hers, but I stuff the thing in my mouth like a caveman. I haven’t had anything to eat since I was on the airplane, going west.

Tinsley watches me with warm curiosity.

It’s hard to ignore how pretty she is, but that’s not what this is about. Best to keep an asset close and see what kind of info I can glean.

When I’m done chewing, and full of bravado, I say, “As the future mayor, I assure you I won’t say a word, officer.”

“We’ll see about that,” he mutters.

I turn to Tinsley. “Since you’re the future Mrs. Mayor, I apologize for forgetting my manners. I’m Aiden Fuller.”

She gives me a long look that’s just short of penetrating. Icy panic slides through my veins instead of the usual rush of adrenaline. Does she recall the choppy phone conversation?

Federal Agent and Aiden sound an awfully lot alike.

“You just seem so familiar.” Her voice is throaty.

I wink. “I get that a lot. Must be my handsome good looks.”

“Yeah, must be.” Her cheeks turn a faint pink.

My nerves spike but not only because I risk blowing my cover. No, this woman jolts something inside me, sends a rumble running through me, a bolt of lightning aimed straight at my heart.

I school my expression and reach my fingers through the bars to shake her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Tinsley.”

Her palm is a little sticky from the doughnut but fits nicely in mine. My gaze travels from her thin wrist up her arm to the curve of her shoulder before my eyes rest on her collarbones. The rumble inside grows as if it knows something I don’t.

The future Mrs. Mayor? Not sure where that came from other than my cheat sheet taken from James Bond’s smooth-talking playbook. Yeah, not getting married. Hasn’t happened. Won’t happen.

However, she and I shake hands for longer than is customary. I can’t be sure if it’s because this is the first time my future wife and I touch or if she doesn’t want to let go because her situation is the kind that requires handholding. Assurance that it’ll be okay.

The rumble rolls through me again, and instead of a lightning strike, I have a jolt of knowing that comes from nature or is of supernatural origin—I’m a believer and don’t question God’s plans. The message is a bolt from the blue but is as clear as they come.

Someday, I really am going to marry this woman. I take a deep breath, count backward from ten, and could really go for cute cat pics right about now because the notion of settling down excites and terrifies me in equal measure.

Especially with a potential accessory to a crime I’m investigating.

# *Chapter Five*



I t's hard not to get lost in Aiden Fuller's eyes. They're sparkly blue and full of mystery—have I mentioned that I love sparkly things? All of that sounds cliché, straight out of the *A Golden Deception in Texas* script. But this would be the moment in the movie when we slide closer together, gazes locked, and with expressions of longing burning between us. The music would crescendo...

Then I remind myself that I'm on a man-cation.

And that steel bars separate us. My first reaction to being locked up was sheer panic. That gave way to a surreal sense of unreality. Is this actually my life?

Less than forty-eight hours ago—I think because hours and days are blurring and bending—I was living the life of luxury having returned from a night out at “Qube,” a new club, and crashed at what I thought was Puma's Malibu mansion. I had plans to meet Sienna for a spa treatment the next day. We were going to hang out in the infinity pool at her boyfriend's house after brunch at the famous restaurant at the end of the pier.

If I didn't know better, I'd think I walked right off the end of the thing and into someone else's life.

Like cut scenes from a movie, I try to piece together the interrogation by the FBI, my flight to New York, my brother basically ejecting me from the family, and then driving without a clear destination other than the bottom-most part of the country. Sure, I'd planned to go to Miami, but now I'm in jail.

*I'm in jail!*

When John finds out he's going to have a field day. Wait, did my parents report the car stolen? Are they the reason I'm here?

“Officer Henley, sir? Do I get to make a phone call?”

“Of course,” he says simply.

“Oh, really like from the movies?”

“Often it's portrayed as you only get to make one call, and while that might be true in some jurisdictions, you can make as many calls as you like as long as the person on the other end is willing to pay for it. In other words, you have to call collect.”

My breath runs roughly from my lungs. “Okay. Thanks.”

The truth is, I'm not sure any of the Humberts would accept a collect call. Can cell phones? Because I don't think anyone I know has a landline never mind the fact that I don't have their numbers memorized.

Side note: I didn't realize those were still a thing, relics from old movies. Seeing as my friends, except Sienna who didn't seem all that concerned, haven't so much as checked on my welfare, I'm not sure who to call.

The Ghostbusters? I amuse myself because I also tried out for the part of a ghostbusting trainer in the latest in the movie franchise: “Ghostbusters: Spooky School.” I didn't get the part, nor do I think it ever made it to theaters.

“Did you want to make a call?” the police officer follows up.

I have to give the guy credit, he's been nothing but kind and understanding. He's merely doing his job. The fact that he holds to the letter of the law in my case means he probably also keeps actual criminals off the streets—ones that seem relatively few in this town.

“Maybe later. Thank you.”

I'd love to take these high heels off, but going barefoot in here is probably about as smart as walking through airport security without socks on, which is to say it would be dumb.

While the cell is relatively clean and not the kind from a movie set with a metal bowl encrusted with substances that ought to go to a crime lab, a filthy floor with rat droppings, and a wall emblazoned with scratch marks that denote the number of days the inmates have been inside, I don't dare get too comfortable.

“What are my rights as an arrested person?” I ask.

The police officer stumps over, hiding a playful smile behind his mustache. “I read them to you earlier, but you have the right to remain silent.”

“Are you telling me to be quiet?”

“No, I'm just suggesting you can refrain from answering if Aiden over here pops the question.” He chuckles as if he overheard my fellow jailbird talking about us getting married and me being the future Mrs. Mayor.

Aiden's smirk grows at Officer Henley's comment.

When Officer Henley arrested me, he asked if I was under the influence of alcohol. I wonder if he submitted Aiden to the same line of questioning. Though he doesn't seem drunk, he's either slightly off-center or extremely confident. I've been around plenty of guys like him. All talk. No substance.

If we'd met in any other circumstance, I wouldn't mind going on a date. But I imagine he's just trying to make this detainment bearable. To be honest, I don't blame him a bit.

But he did say I'm beautiful. I tuck the compliment away for now to spare myself disappointment when he sees the real me.

When our eyes first locked a little while ago, I pegged him as the Southern Agent from Malibu. But that's way too small world—and I'm not talking about the Disneyworld ride. My thoughts are so muddled, stretched so thin from lack of sleep, and relative disorientation due to the current state of affairs, that I can't be too sure of much other than my name.

My cell neighbor can't be the guy from Malibu. The house crawled with investigators and countless people were in and out of the room at their headquarters building. In my memory,

the night is already foggy, bleary, and it's very unlikely a member of the FBI would be locked up with me in this little town in the middle of nowhere.

Also, I'm hungry and anything I say or do can be blamed on the doughnut not quite doing the trick. I wouldn't say no to dinner with this guy—dressed in a well-tailored suit and expensive shoes. He looks like he knows how to shop and frequents the gym, focusing on bicep curls. I could go for some cheese curls. Stress makes me crave junk food. I could also go for French cuisine—they're big into cheese. I daydream about my wedding—a French countryside theme in lavender and green? Parisian inspired with an abundance of flowers, lacy accents, and miniature Eiffel Tower centerpieces?

“Can you get married in jail?” I ask.

Officer Henley loops his thumbs through his belt. “That's a good question. Don't reckon I know for sure, but I believe so. I think you need special permission, but seeing as this isn't officially jail and you're merely detained, I suppose you won't be here long enough for me to answer that.”

Excitement at being released flashes through me like the City of Light on a clear night.

He leans in slightly to add, “Now, just don't go getting into any more trouble.”

“What about me? Am I free to go?” Aiden asks.

Officer Henley walks toward his desk, taking my hope with him. Maybe that was a tease and being the lone man here, he plays the joint role of good cop and bad cop. He drops into his chair with a creak and kicks his feet up on the desk, steepling his fingers as if thinking.

“Am I going to have to be on parole?” I ask, not exactly knowing how this arrest thing works other than what I've seen on TV.

“Seeing as I run the show around here, I've been contemplating your sentencing.” His tone is grave.

Aiden's expression shifts like a camera lens adjusting focus. I don't know quite what to make of it. Of him. He's attractive and flirty, but he's also here, which means he might be crazy or dangerous.

Then again, I'm behind bars too and no one would apply those two words to me. More like flakey and spoiled. I'm surprised at my rare moment of self-awareness and inner humility. I guess getting arrested will do that...along with the anti-pep talk from my brother.

Officer Henley claps his hands together, startling me from my thoughts. With surprising fluidity and speed, he bounces to his feet. "I got it."

"You got what?" Aiden asks.

"Your punishment." The keys rattle in his hands.

"You're letting us go?" Hope lifts my voice.

"Of course."

"Did you do this just to mess with me?" Aiden snaps both his fingers and points at the police officer. "Mae and Taylor put you up to this. It's a prank. It would've been epic had you put Murder Doll in the backseat of the cruiser. Just saying."

"Murder Doll?" I whisper.

Aiden gives a little shiver then waves his hand dismissively.

"No, this is not a prank. You were arrested for breaking into the mayor's house and stealing his cat."

"You have no evidence."

"Eye witnesses."

Aiden slumps back.

"Lucky for you, Mayor Stoll is out of town and I couldn't reach him to see if he wanted to press charges."

"So you're letting me go?" Aiden asks.

"Yep, on a few conditions."

He and I grip the bars, waiting for Officer Henley to reveal our fates.

“Miss Humber, you may not drive until you pay the fine for operating a motor vehicle with an expired license and apply for a new one, of course.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Don’t relax just yet.”

I stand at attention.

“Because the BMW you were driving was stolen, and much like Stoll, I was unable to contact the owners to find out if they want to press charges, it will remain in police custody until I receive instruction from,” he glances at a piece of paper, “says here the vehicle is registered to John and Meredith Humber. Any relation?”

“They’re my parents.”

“You stole your parents’ car?” Aiden asks.

“More like borrowed it. But does this mean they didn’t report it stolen?” Fingers crossed, they don’t know.

Officer Henley nods. “The supervisor of the garage where they keep it parked filed the report because an unauthorized user claimed the vehicle from the night parking attendant,” he reads from the paper.

I knew I should’ve given the guy my emergency hundred-dollar bill. Nonetheless, relief comes and I let it linger. For now, my parents aren’t the ones who had me arrested. Then again, they’re yachting, so they may not know about my little getaway or what prompted it.

I bite my lip. “Could I just return the car? That way no one ever has to know?”

Officer Henley’s mustache twitches which amounts to an eye roll as if I shouldn’t have bothered asking.

“Alright, Aiden, you are not to set foot on the premises of thirty-two Briarwood Court.”

“The mayor’s house? He filed a restraining order?”

“No, I did. For now. Behave yourself and I’ll see that it expires sooner rather than later. I also expect you to find that cat and return it.”

Aiden’s cheeks puff with a breath and he stares at the ceiling. “Yes, sir. But if, by chance, the cat doesn’t cooperate or prefers her current residence...”

Aiden gets the mustache twitch look.

“Alright, alright. I’ll try to track down Twinky. Is that it?”

Officer Henley wears an expression that I can’t read. It’s like he knows something we don’t. I glance around, looking for cameras and a crew to pop out and exclaim that we’ve been caught on hidden camera, or pranked, or some other cruel version of reality television.

“You will both perform thirty days of community service here in Butterbury.”

Aiden waggles his finger between us. “Together?”

“You got it.”

Suddenly heavy with dread, I say, “Did you say three days or thirty?”

“Thirty days, miss.”

“Thirty days of community service here in Butterbury, together?” I repeat as my world comes to a screeching halt.

“You got it,” Officer Henley says as if he just announced that we’re going to an overwater bungalow on Bora Bora. I could really use a trip like that right now.

Instead, I’m stuck. Here. In Butterbury.

“Can we rethink this? I’m supposed to be in—I mean I was planning to—” But there isn’t anywhere I’m supposed to be nor are the people I know in Miami expecting me. Plus, we only met once before while at a birthday party for a mutual friend while at a resort in Cabo.

Aiden leans against the bars as if he’s as thrilled as me by this turn of events, which is to say the news is about as welcome as getting arrested and thrown in jail.

“My good buddy Bubba has his hands full at the moment. Seems that the television show, *Designed to Last*, really boosted business. He can hardly keep up. Sadly, neither can his building. It’s half sunk into the marsh, overtaken by weeds, and the roof among other things needs repairs,” Officer Henley says.

“I can ask Mae and the ladybosses if they can take on the project. They love Bubba’s,” Aiden replies.

“Mae?” I ask without thinking.

“Yeah, my sister. She and her friends, who call themselves the ladybosses, have a show on HLTV called *Designed to Last*. Have you heard of it?” Aiden asks.

“Yeah,” I answer vaguely because I’ve also heard of Mae...and I met her. And said some unkind words to her.

“She’s married to my best friend, Taylor Whitmer.” Aiden leans as close as possible given the bars between us and lowers his voice. “You may have heard of him too. He used to be the guitarist in PJ and the Oak Brook Boys.”

Officer Henley hums one of their hits.

Even though it’s cold in this cell, I draw heat from somewhere and it goes straight to my face. Not in a flirty way. Nope, it’s like I’m caught red-cheeked. “Oh, right. Yup. Mmmhmm. I’ve heard of him. Them. The band. The guy too. Yep.” My response comes out twisted like a pretzel and dry too. I have a sudden coughing fit.

“Are you okay, miss?” Officer Henley asks with concern followed by Aiden gripping the bars closest to me.

I turn around and catch my breath, waving them off and saying, er, croaking, “I’m fine. Just swallowed wrong.”

But I’m not fine. Taylor and I have a history and there was the whole showdown at his farmhouse when Mae showed up with a chicken.

When I finally attempt to take a deep breath, it’s like my windpipe suddenly has edges and the air won’t quite go down all the way.



Officer Henley inserts the key in the lock of Aiden's cell. "I have your word?" He claps him on the shoulder and his fingers flex slightly, suggesting his grip is firm.

"Yes, sir. I will try to find the cat, return it, and of course, do whatever Bubba needs."

"Good man. I'll check in on progress." Then Officer Henley turns to my cellblock.

I stand in the center of the small space as the key slides in, the door opens, and my freedom awaits.

But I don't move. I might be better off in here. The problem isn't only Taylor Whitmer and Mae, but that she's Aiden's sister and we have to work together on Bubba's—whatever that is—for thirty days.

When the small-town connections are made, I don't think Aiden will be joking around that I'm the future Mrs. Mayor.

"You coming?" Officer Henley says, gesturing for me to exit.

I'm about to wring my hands and ask if he has a cot, so I could just stay here. He wouldn't need to lock the door or anything unless the townsfolk come for me.

When he gestures, I stumble forward, hoping Aiden is about as protective over his sister as my brothers are over me, which isn't protective at all.

"Too bad we didn't meet under different circumstances, Miss Humber, but welcome to Butterbury. I hope you enjoy your stay," the police officer says as I follow Aiden outside.

"Thanks," I say lightly.

If I were to write a postcard it wouldn't say *Miss you, love you, wish you were here!* Nope. I'm not sure what I'm about to walk into, but by the looks of the gathered crowd, it can't be good.

# *Chapter Six*

I take a deep breath as I step outside. The sky is bright despite clouds covering the sun. I squint a little. It's a fresh spring day with only a hint of humidity in the air.

Tinsley exits behind me. It's impossible not to have a keen awareness of her and not only because of the clicking of her high heels. She's tall and slender but doesn't take up a ton of space, yet she has a formidable presence.

This woman could enter a room full of people and not have to announce herself. All eyes would draw her way. Attention would shift to focus on her. I can see why she flew in the celebrity crowd. The camera must love her.

Speaking of crowds...I stop in my tracks when my sisters, Mae and Bess, along with their gentlemen, Taylor and Cassian respectively, stand on the sidewalk along with Louella Belle, Bo, Christina, Buck, Camellia, and Nash.

They're either celebrating my freedom or ready to run me out of town with pitchforks.

"I could've really used the get out of jail free card a few hours ago." Stopping abruptly in front of them, I jolt slightly forward. Tinsley bumps into me. I turn around to make sure she's okay when I catch Mae launching missiles at close range. Strangely, she looks at Tinsley with the same amount of contempt as she did at me. Bess follows suit.

They all look grim and grumbly.

"Is this an anti-welcome party?"

Mae crosses her arms over her chest and they rest on her very pregnant belly. Ordinarily, I'd joke about whether she uses it as a tray, but now is not the time. I stepped in something and it wasn't by the dog park.

"What did you expect?" she asks.

"Is this about the cat?"

"This is about you cavorting with the enemy," she hisses.

"I can explain." But because we're outside the police station, I add, "Just not here."

"Oh, you'll be explaining," Bess adds with a look that could melt steel.

"I promise you, it's not as bad as it seems."

Mae grunts. "No, it just got impossibly worse."

I don't blame my sisters for giving me the stink eye. Not sure about the beef the others have with me other than pretending to change alliances and working my way into the mayor's good graces. Plus, Taylor and I are like brothers. I'm also friends with Nash. I know everyone. But does anyone actually know me? That's something I don't think about. If I could actually explain my agent status, they'd understand my situation. Only, I can't because I vowed never to put anyone I care about at risk. Keeping my profession private is for their protection.

I move closer to them on the sidewalk, intending to put a little space between us and the police station. "Listen, I know what it looked like when you saw me in the town hall with Stoll and how I've been working with him."

"You're no better than Les Streckle," Mae says, glancing at Christina.

She nods as if agreeing.

"A slippery, slimy, backstabbing cat thief," Mae adds.

I could be ticked off, feeling backed into a corner, but I've been in so many different types of high-pressure situations,

I've learned the surest ways to diffuse them without losing my cool. Most of the time. Cute cats usually help.

I pump my hands. "Slow down. Will you give me a chance and let me tell my side of the story?"

"I'll listen," Louella Belle says. "But if you do anything to ruin Butterbury I'll personally see to it you end up back in there." She points to the police station.

Louella Belle is about the same height as Mae, which is to say snack-sized, but I don't doubt that she'd make good on the threat.

Bo, Buck, and Nash form a wall of muscle as if to back her up.

"We've all been through a lot here in Butterbury and seeing as I'm also a resident and property owner, I assure you nothing I've done will ruin the town like Stoll tried to do several times over. In fact, I was the one instrumental in stopping him. We all were."

Christina and Camellia exchange a glance as if to say that I have a point.

"Maybe you got power hungry and are trying to usurp Stoll and take the throne for your own," Bess says dramatically. She lives in a castle now so this isn't entirely surprising.

"I'm not a monarch nor do I have any intention of lording over anyone." I lower my voice and indicate they gather close. "Stoll and I had locked horns too many times to count. I wasn't making progress, so I decided to change my approach. Butter him up as it were." That's entirely true, but not exclusively for the reasons they'd assume. After I discovered his dealings with the governor, I had to get intel and fast.

Mae rocks back on her heels and narrows her eyes, studying me.

Bess nods slowly as if she's slightly closer to believing me than our little sister.

The guys shrug like it makes sense. The other ladybosses seem to agree.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Bess asks.

“I don’t have a good reason other than that y’all have been busy with your respective projects and partners.” I didn’t think before I spoke, but this is also entirely true.

With all of them paired off, I’m the last man standing. The sole bachelor. I can’t claim to be jealous, but it’s hard not to notice how happy they all are...well, except right now. They’re not too pleased with me.

Preoccupied with this colossal dumpster fire of a confrontation, I catch Taylor’s gaze. Forget missiles, the guy’s glare is nuclear...and it’s aimed at me as well as the figure in a sequined dress standing just left of my six.

There is a tiny, yet important, detail that only reaches me now, on this side of freedom.

If I remember correctly, Taylor and Tinsley have a past. Not a sordid one and not a particularly involved one...unless there’s someone else named Tinsley. Likely not. She was instrumental during the period we call his “Midlife Blues.” And it wasn’t all musical. She was one of the reasons he took a break from the band and decided to come home—the attention was too much. From fans and from her. In fact, I had some choice words to remind him that she was a manipulative, lying, cheater—not that I knew that last part for sure. All I heard were his routine complaints about a woman named Tinsley. I never met her but slim chance there are two Tinsleys.

I clear my throat, and say, “Everyone, this is Tinsley—”

“I know,” Mae and Taylor say in unison. Though it’s more of a gnashing and grinding sound than regular speech.

“Tinsley, you’ve met Taylor and Mae, I belatedly realize.” To say I was distracted by her bombshell beauty, not to mention the case, is an understatement and not something I feel too good about. “Mae is my sister and Taylor is one of my

oldest friends. Meet Louella Belle, she's a Butterbury local, born and raised along with Bo, her husband."

"Hey, you're Mr. Fix-It," Tinsley says, body angled away from Mae and Taylor as if she thinks by not facing them, she can avoid them. Not likely in this small town.

Forget a dumpster fire. This is a flaming cesspool of discomfort.

Bo's stony nod suggests he picks up on the general vibe of the situation.

"Louella Belle, Christina, Camellia, and Mae are the ladybosses."

"From *Designed to Last*. I love that show." The bubbly tone Tinsley tries for pops with each word.

"Yep. Then you remember Buck from the Easton Estate makeover. He and Christina are married. Camellia and Nash fixed up the inn on Main Street just down there."

"The Christmas special was so romantic. Congratulations." Tinsley smiles warmly.

"Thank you," Camellia says.

Mae elbows her.

"And this is Bess, my other sister, and her husband Cassian. They're the latest and greatest additions to the town."

He's ex-military and is aware that I'm not the jet-setting lover boy I make myself out to be. He also made it clear he doesn't want to know more than that—about my job and love life. I've had a few flings. More than a few. But the longer I've been in Butterbury, the more I want to linger. To settle down. To grow roots. No one knows that and probably assumes the worst about Tinsley and me exiting the jail together.

This crew is my real-life family, so I don't want to do anything to mess it up. But I also have a duty to my country and the two cannot overlap.

"This is like a who's who of Butterbury," Tinsley says.

I spread my arms grandly. “They’re the best. Can I buy y’all pie and we can talk some more?”

“Don’t try to butter us up like you did with Stoll,” Mae says.

Bess lengthens her spine. “We cannot be buttered.”

I brush my hand across my forehead. “Guys, I was just in jail. I’m hungry.”

“Speaking of, what about the cat?” Christina asks.

“The cat is fine,” I answer.

“So you admit to stealing it?” Christina gasps.

I open and close my mouth then whisper. “I rescued it.”

Mae pokes me in the chest. “Aiden Peter Fuller, you better come clean about the cat and everything else.”

That’s a tall order and I’d like to. But I can only give them some info and it’ll be best done over the ultimate peacemaker, pie.

And the Starlight Diner across the street has the best crust and filling anywhere. Time to lay down the law.

“If you didn’t notice, I was just in jail. I’m going to get a slice of pie. Maybe some biscuits and gravy too. Anyone that would like to join me and have a civil conversation is welcome,” I say.

Mae and Bess exchange a look of surprise as if they’ve never heard me speak with such authority before. And that’s because, in front of them, I only show my farm boy self, the funny side. The practical joker and hard worker. They’ve never witnessed the motorcycle maverick and for good reason.

I gesture for Tinsley to join us if only because I have a feeling she may also need to explain herself.

“I’ll only go if she doesn’t,” Mae says, arms still folded defiantly.

I gently drop my hand onto her shoulder. “Given the history there, I’d ordinarily go along with that, but as it is,



you're stuck with both of us. Officer Henley sentenced us to thirty days of community service at Bubba's."

"Together?" Mae asks.

"That's what I asked," Tinsley mutters.

Christina rubs her palms rapidly like this is exciting news rather than hard work. "Bubba's is in desperate need of some TLC."

"I was going to say some DTL as in Desperate Loving Care," Camellia says.

"I definitely think we should encourage a new expression, making DTL synonymous with TLC, considering that's the status of most of our projects on the show," Christina says.

"I like it," Camellia adds.

Their laughter is a welcome snip to the tension.

Tinsley trails behind on the short walk to the Starlight. I open the door, holding it until she passes through. With the sequins on her dress sparkling like mermaid scales and with her big brown eyes, she looks like a fish out of water—though she could probably walk a red carpet with no problem.

"Welcome to the Starlight Diner," I say. "Rhondy and Paul, Cassian's parents, own it and are the best baker and cook in the county."

"The country," Mae says giving me a sharp side eye as she brushes past.

My nerves settle at the familiar sweet and savory scent of the Starlight. Since Mae lives in the old family farmhouse and I'm not yet done building my house, I currently consider this place home.

Notably, a pair of older women with poofy white hair occupy the table where Stoll usually holds court. The guy eats no less than three slices of pie per day, which is significant even though it's the best stuff in the country. I'm just going to agree with Mae from now on.

Even though I teased and pranked her when we were younger, it was in good fun. This is next-level sibling animosity and I can't take it.

There are twelve of us so there's no way we can fit into a booth. Instead, we fit several tables together toward the back of the restaurant. Better to talk in private.

Rhondy brings over a stack of menus, not that we need them. Her smile is smaller than usual and she gives me a once-over as if she too knows about the cat. I'm going to have to work on my burglary skills. Thing is, usually, I'm the one trying to stop crime. Though this investigation is a long game and I have to play my hand carefully.

Paul, the cook, calls from the kitchen window, "Hey, Aiden. Why will you never find a farmer in jail?"

Cassian leans his elbow on the table and rubs his eyes as if he's heard this dad joke a hundred times.

"Because a farmer can always make bale." Paul chuckles.

I do the same because I'm not above cheesy jokes.

Tinsley presses her lips together as if she too wants to laugh but isn't sure it would be welcome here. I notice she sits on the edge of her seat as if ready to run at a moment's notice.

Rhondy goes around the table and takes orders. When she gets to Mae, seated to my right, they confer in hushed tones. My sister's gaze flits to me a few times.

"New beard?" Bess comments from one seat over from Tinsley who sits on my left.

I rub my hand along my jaw, but it's more contemplative than anything. How will I get them to trust me again? "It's *less* beard and more of a I-haven't-had-a-chance-to-shave-in-a-few-days situation."

"I hear the plumbing is coming along at your new place," Buck says.

We talk construction for a moment before my attention snaps to the two women to my left.

“So, it would seem you’ve met my brother,” Bess says as if standing in for Mae. “He was instrumental in helping to save our town, and then he turned around and stabbed us in the back.”

“A stabbing? Is that why you were actually in jail?” Tinsley asks, eyes wide with horror.

“No, he stole a cat,” Bess says.

“I didn’t steal Twinky. I thought we established that I *rescued* her.”

“Did you stab Twinky?” Bess asks, eyes now as wide as Tinsley’s.

I drag my hand down my face. “No, I didn’t stab a cat.” My tone drops with irritation that they’d think that. Then again, they don’t know that my real job is dangerous and often involves weapons.

“Then where is she?” Accusation riddles Mae’s voice who jumps in on the conversation.

“She’s safe and sound.” I clap my hands together. “Listen, no one is leaving this table until you hear me out so we can put this misunderstanding behind us once and for all.” I glance over my shoulder to make sure Stoll isn’t back. “Nash, please keep your eyes on the door and let me know if Stoll walks in. I have a lot to say.”

“Got it,” he answers.

“And you’d better have a really good reason that you were cavorting with the enemy.” Mae cuts her eyes at me again. I have a feeling the harsh punishment from my fun-loving sister is revenge for the many times Taylor and I pranked her—thought we were past that. I make a mental note to bring her some M&Ms and have a conversation during which I beg forgiveness for not being a better brother. But that’s for another time.

“I was not cavorting. That would imply that I was frolicking around when in fact, you and the ladybosses were the ones cavorting that night at the town hall.”

“We weren’t cavorting. We were spying,” Camellia interjects.

“Exactly. I’d like to point out that if any laws were being broken, it was by the four of you.” I point at the ladybosses.

Bess raises her hand. “Five. I was there too.”

“You’re not supposed to confess,” Mae hisses.

“Well, the cat’s out of the bag now,” Bess says.

“Please don’t tell me the cat is in the bag,” Christina says from the other end of the table.

I puff my cheeks on a breath. This is going to be a long conversation. I shoot Tinsley a look of apology but am glad she’s here because even though I’m taking the roundabout route, I want to hear how she figures into this story or if she knows anything that can help me identify the mastermind behind all of Stoll, Harold Jerrold Pumanowksi, Mayor Pickering, and Silas Fallon’s wrongdoings.

“There is no cat in a bag. The cat is—” I exhale as Rhondy sets a plate of peach pie with lattice crust in front of me. A perfect scoop of vanilla bean ice cream melts on the plate. “Thank you.”

“Figured you might need a little energy for this mission. I have a feeling it’s going to be a long one.” She winks.

Leave it to Rhondy to sense what’s going on without knowing the details. The woman is always in the right place at the right time with the right pie. Peach is my favorite.

“Okay, so you ladybosses broke into the town hall the night of Cassian’s surprise birthday party,” I say around a bite.

No one disagrees.

“Officially, it was a stakeout,” Bess says.

“Why are you confessing?” Mae scolds.

“Because we’ve had enough of Gatlin’s dictatorship.”

This time, everyone agrees.

“In the cover of darkness, we crept over to the town hall. The light in Gatlin’s office was on and dim shadows passed behind the blinds,” Bess’s voice is low like she’s telling a spooky story.

“We climbed in through an open window,” Camellia says proudly.

“I kept lookout,” Mae says.

“Me too, Christina adds.

“You didn’t do a very good job,” I mutter.

Rhondy brings everyone’s meals as Bess continues in a lowered voice, “We heard Gatlin say, ‘They’ll never see it coming.’ Then a very familiar voice replied, ‘With all due respect, sir, I do think they’ll see a bullet train coming. It’s not exactly small or stealthy.’ Then Gatlin said something about everything being signed by the end of the week.”

I remember the conversation well. “Then he added, ‘*Goodbye, Small town with a big heart. Hello, big bucks.*’” And I still cannot figure out what he meant because the bullet train thing was a decoy...unless it wasn’t. But I haven’t found any evidence of him dealing with a bullet train company. It was a rumor he started to take attention away from what he was really intending to do along the coastline.

Almost imperceptibly, Cassian’s eyes flick to mine.

If only I could tell them what we both know—that I’d gathered intel that our nuclear submarine base was at risk. Cassian was instrumental in stopping it from falling into the hands of the enemy.

“And if you recall, I advised Stoll that he’d be breaking several laws,” I say. “Much like you did when you broke into the town hall.”

“Laws shmaws,” Mae says, unknowingly repeating what Stoll said in response.

“What’s a shmaw?” Tinsley whispers.

Camellia snaps her fingers. “My question exactly.”

“Then the door flew open and you were standing there,” Bess says.

“Yes, I know. I was there.”

“Then you can explain what Gatlin meant when he said, ‘I’ll be long gone by the time anyone does anything. I finally get my payday and can wash my hands of this pathetic town.’”

In the commotion, I must’ve missed that comment.

“If you haven’t noticed, he’s not in Butterbury,” Buck says from the other end of the table.

“Any idea when he left?” I ask.

Bo leans back in his chair. “I last saw his convertible at the intersection of Route Seventeen two days ago.”

That would’ve been shortly after I went to LA.

“What time?” I ask.

“Shortly before eight am,” Bo answers.

“Which direction was he going?”

“He was heading south.”

“South,” I repeat.

“You sound like you’re conducting an investigation,” Mae says.

*I am, sis. I am.*

“For the record, we were at the town hall because we’re concerned citizens. What excuse do you have?” Mae juts her chin.

My patience runs as thin as the Formica covering the table. *Oh, ya know, I’m just an FBI agent, actually conducting an investigation.*

Instead, I say, “I’m also a concerned citizen and if you didn’t notice there’s no bullet train running through the center of Butterbury, so I consider that a win.”

“Fair point,” Nash says, eyes still scanning behind me in case we have company.

“Thank you,” I say then add evidence to my case. I put a lot of money behind stopping Hydro-pro, government money, but still. I helped expose the shifty taxes Stoll tried to impose, and the historic preservation of the original town meeting house. I caught him falsifying clerical documents, among other things.

“The big question I have is why Stoll trusted you,” Taylor asks me as if he’s not sure how much he does with Tinsley sitting by my side.

“He’s not the brightest bulb. He saw dollar signs in his future and was blind to anything other than that. The guy got sloppy and saw me as an asset instead of an enemy.” I shrug.

“Did you find out anything useful?” he asks.

Tinsley shifts behind me and the sequins on her dress mesmerize me for half a second before I notice the way they reflect on the wall from the light through the window. With a gasp, I barely stop myself from inhaling the last bite of pie as I realize something crucial.

# *Chapter Seven*



**T**o my left, Bess, Aiden's sister, leans over and says, "I can't decide what I think of the facial hair."

I think it's nice. Everything about Aiden Peter Fuller is nice. No, a bump up from nice. If you took nice and elevated it to handsome and hot, slightly mysterious with a subtle commanding and authoritative posture that makes a guest appearance on his otherwise easy-going and entertaining one-man show. That's Aiden Fuller.

He catches me glance at him and flashes a dangerous wink. I remind myself I'm sitting beside the enemy and stare at the untouched sandwich on my plate. I used to be the kind of woman who'd only pick at her food in the presence of men. As of going on sixty hours since my life turned into a dark comedy, I'll clear my plate and then lick it clean so there aren't any crumbs left. Except right now. Mae and Bess have me in a state of nervousness akin to when I'm around my siblings. Thankfully, right now the friend group talks among themselves.

"Can I have your pickle? I love pickles." Aiden points at my plate.

"Uh, sure," I reply. "Not a big fan."

"What about cucumbers?" he asks.

"Did I tell you guys our cucumber vine started growing?" Christina interjects like it's a small miracle.

Louella Belle comments about vinegar preservation and the fermentation process. "I hope you have a bumper crop."

“I do like cucumbers,” I say, getting a word in to respond to Aiden’s question.

“But not pickles? They’re practically the same thing. Is it the flavor?” he asks.

“Wait, do pickles come from cucumbers?” I ask, putting two and two together.

Everyone looks at me, slack-jawed.

“What?” I steal another peek at Aiden in case he signals we make a run for it. After Officer Henley’s community service order and Aiden’s invitation to join the crew for lunch, I get the sense we’re in this together.

Despite what Bess said, he doesn’t quite have a beard. It’s just the right length between full facial hair and a few days of unshaved scruff. I can’t say I mind.

He rubs his hand along it and then says, “Yep. Pickles come from cucumbers.”

Bess says, “I’m sorry for thinking you were cavorting with the enemy.” She looks at me less like I’m an enemy and more like I’m the butt of a joke.

“Fraternizing,” I say without thinking...because that’s the correct word and because I’m not dumb. I legitimately didn’t know where pickles came from. Growing up, we had a chef and instead of hot dogs and hamburgers, we had beef tartar and beluga caviar on the regular.

Bess lifts one eyebrow in surprise. “Right. That’s what I meant.”

This would be the moment in the movie when the audience cringes because I’m on thin ice with the Fuller family and Taylor as it is and I just dug in my toe pick, causing a crack along the surface.

I swallow thickly. “I just say that because I’ve read a lot of scripts and have had to look up specific definitions to ensure that I’m accurate with the stage direction. It’s common to get cavort and fraternize mixed up.” I’m about to share the mnemonic device I use to remember the distinction when I

realize everyone at the table is quiet and looking in my direction. “Sorry,” I murmur, feeling as humble as...well, the pie that’s no longer on Aiden’s plate.

Since meeting the ladybosses and their guys outside the jail, I’ve wanted to fade into the background, blend into the shrubbery, or ghost. Poof. Where are the Ghostbusters when you need ‘em? This might be a first because my typical position is as close to centerstage as possible.

None of those exits are easy to do in a sequined dress... and without a car or any idea what I’m going to do when I leave this diner. Another reason I threw myself to the lionesses is because I need time to regroup and think about my next steps. It’s not like I can leave Butterbury until the thirty days of community service are under my belt.

“Thank you for the apology,” Aiden says to Bess.

Like a cat watching a toy zip back and forth, everyone swings their gaze to Aiden and Mae to see what she’ll say.

“Your explanation about the thing with Stoll was acceptable. I’m also sorry for thinking you were up to no good. However, you’re still cavorting with the enemy.” Mae looks pointedly at me. Earlier, I sensed she was going to tackle me, pregnant belly and all.

I clear my throat and correct, “Fraternizing.”

“Thanks for the vocabulary lesson, Tinsley,” Mae says dryly. “However, from where I sit, it sure looks like my brother is doing plenty of *cavorting* with his eyes.”

Someone at the table titters. Someone else mutters, “Ooh, burn.”

Aiden opens his mouth as if to deny it then thinks better of it. However, he seems to relax as if relieved his sister is a degree or two less angry with him than she was when we got to the diner.

If only my siblings and I could make up so fast.

“Well, for now, you’re stuck with us.” Aiden leans back in his chair and stretches in a way that looks like he’s making

himself at home.

His shirt shifts, drawing my eyes to his midsection. I can tell it's tight, toned.

Mae grunts.

I avert my eyes. If I weren't on a man-cation, I ought to find a nice, normal, average guy. One who clocks in at an office promptly at nine am and is home for dinner by five thirty. We'd watch a show together in the evenings and go to home décor and improvement stores on the weekend.

I would not be ogling the guy next to me. I mean, the pie. It was indeed drool-worthy. Not that I'm going to have any.

My brother may have accused me of acting like an adult lady child, but I can behave like a grown-up.

How old am I? Old enough not to want to answer. Old enough to worry that I might lose roles because of the fine lines appearing around my eyes. But not too old for Aiden Fuller.

Mae gives me a flat look like she's reading the bad girl thoughts about her brother—that decided to throw a party, complete with confetti—in my mind.

“So, um, tell me about Bubba's,” I ask not knowing if it's a who, a what, or a where.

“Bubba's is a—” Louella Belle starts before Mae interrupts.

“As if Tinsley would get her hands dirty.”

I look down at my slender fingers and manicured nails—most recently painted in the French style with sparkly tips instead of the traditional white. It would be a shame to break another one after the granite rock incident in Newport. But I got myself into this mess, I'm going to get myself out of it.

“Mae, be nice,” Louella Belle scolds. “We ought to show Tinsley some southern hospitality. Bless her heart, she's new in town.”

“No, she's been here before,” Mae says.

“For less than a day,” I reply.

“And that’s less than a day too long,” Mae quips.

Aiden stiffens beside me as if the bickering has gone on long enough. I agree, but I also understand why she dislikes me. Heck, if I were her I’d dislike me. Sometimes I dislike me. Here are all these women, some sisters and the rest who seem like sisters, perfectly comfortable with each other and in their skin, never mind their clothing. The sequins on my dress dig into my thighs and my hair may as well belong to my mother’s Lhasa Apso between groomings. Paul, back there in the kitchen, could fry an egg on my greasy forehead. I’ll make nice if only to ask one of them if I can use their shower.

Talk about a walk of shame. Yeesh.

“Now that we know Aiden didn’t steal a cat, what sent you to jail, Tinsley? Did you have a rough night?” Camellia’s English accent doesn’t make the question sound patronizing. Her voice is the kind that could be delivering the lines of a supervillain and still seem soothing.

But I get major stabby eyes from the sisters Fuller. This would be the part in the movie when PJ and the Oak Brook Boys play a tune of reckoning like in an old cowboy movie. Or Taylor could do it if he’s not busy playing love songs for Mae. I’m not jealous. Definitely not envious. But surrounded by all these couples, I wouldn’t mind someone having my back.

“Wait a minute. I think I recognize you,” Christina says.

“Yeah, she showed up at the Fall Fundraiser Festival,” Mae says darkly, reminding me of how I made an uninvited guest appearance and stormed the stage, acting as if the love song was for me when I had a feeling Taylor’s heart belonged to someone else. In fact, it never belonged to me, if I’m honest with myself.

Getting stared down by ten sets of eyes on top of the last couple of days will humble someone faster than a stolen BMW speeding south through Georgia. Clarity whizzes toward me like a boomerang. I can catch it and clutch it. Do the right thing. If I don’t, it’ll keep coming back to me until I set my

ego aside and make the right decision. Or it'll just wallop me upside the head.

Swallowing the dregs of my pride, I shift to face Taylor. "I want to apologize for my behavior back when you were in the band and afterward too. I'm sorry for being clingy, manipulative, and for making assumptions."

He looks at me as if I'm a stranger as his eyebrows climb his forehead. "Can't say I ever expected to hear you say that. That's mighty big of you, Tinsley. Thank you. Apology accepted."

A low sound comes from Mae's throat.

I draw a deep breath for this one. "Mae, I am sorry for the day at the festival and the night after. I was out of line, rude, and behaving like a selfish diva. I apologize if what I did upset you, hurt your feelings, or ever made Taylor doubt his feelings for you. He never wrote a love song for me. Just saying." That's because he never loved me. I never loved him for that matter.

I wade into the depths of my loneliness on the edge of an island, all alone with tourists floating by on their yacht, watching me. I prepare for them to point and laugh.

Instead, Mae eyes me like we're meeting at a dusty intersection in the middle of an old western town. "Thank you. Apology accepted." Her gaze trails to her brother. "As for you, Murder Doll has plans of its own."

The space between Aiden's eyebrows tightens. "I have it in my custody."

"For now," Mae says like the low and foreboding note in a horror movie.

Christina breaks the silence that follows when she says, "I knew it. I thought I recognized you, Tinsley. You were at the house in California when Puma Palmer got arrested. It's all over social media. Such a scandal."

I wince.

Aiden's eyebrow lifts almost imperceptibly.

I was hoping the gossip didn't spread through this backwater town. I suddenly want to leave all the wreckage from my old life behind me. To kick off these high heels, tear off this sequined dress and put on something sensible, something made of cotton.

"So what happened?" Camellia asks, leaning in.

As briefly as possible, I tell them the truth. I was sleeping, woke up, was taken in for questioning, then released. I leave out the part about my family banning me from the New York City building, stealing the BMW, and fleeing to Newport, Rhode Island only for my brother to reject me. Among this group, that seems more scandalous than what sent me running from LA.

As I tell the story, Aiden nods, reminding me of the guys who asked about Puma.

"The only upside of the last however-many-hours was I got to see firsthand that federal agents are brawny, burly, beefcakes. They're strong, protective guys. Then there was the Southern Agent..." I wave my hand in front of my face like a fan. "But I'm going to enjoy being single for now. Take a break. A vacation. A man-cation."

Christina says, "I did that once. Then I got married a mere few months later to this guy. Good luck." She scootches closer to Buck and pecks him on the cheek.

"Thank you. Seeing as I'm stuck here and don't plan to stay any longer than necessary, it shouldn't be a problem."

"Well, don't be too quick to judge Butterbury. We all unexpectedly ended up here and love it," Camellia says.

"It's home," Louella Belle adds. "Home sweet home."

I've never had one of those.

They break off and talk about Butterbury and who knows what else.

Rhondy clears some plates. She eyes my barely touched sandwich. "You'll want that later."

I shrug. My stomach is in such tight knots, I can't tell if I'm starved or overrun with nerves. Both?

“Can I get anyone else pie?”

“Do you have to ask?” Louella Belle says.

When we came over here from the police station, Camellia walked beside me and talked about the weather. At first, I worried it was a trap and these women were going to snap photos and slander me all over the social media apps—I've caught glimpses since having my phone back, primarily while Aiden was talking to everyone in front of the jail. Then I figured, I was already arrested today, am ostensibly homeless, and carless. I wondered can it get much worse. Yep, they sell pie. And Aiden's slice of peach with ice cream looked like something sent from heaven on a white platter.

Despite the apologies, I'm worried that I'll get a pie in the face. I get the sense that Aiden's sisters don't like me despite my apology so I pass on the slice.

“You remind me of Christina when she first wandered into the diner,” Rhondy says.

Christina nods in agreement. “You won't last long, Tinsley.”

I just barely stifle my gasp. I thought she tolerated me. Maybe she's a Puma Palmer fan and thinks, like so many do, that I'm the reason he got in trouble. It wouldn't take much effort for the social media trolls to dig into what happened and discover that I had nothing to do with his arrest, but I'm somehow implicated because there are photos of me online leaving the Malibu house. It wasn't even his residence!

Christina's voice comes to me as she describes baked goods from cookies to brownies to chocolates to pies—all reasons I won't last long. “Rhondy is the very best baker. I'm telling you, it won't be long until you break and give in, begging for a slice of her apple pie. That's the gateway pie.”

Rhondy winks. “When she's ready.”

I am ready for a nap. Anywhere to rest my head. I discretely hold out my credit card for Rhondy to take. “I'd like



to cover the bill.”

She smiles. “That’s mighty kind of you.”

Bess sits next to me reading the *Butterbury Bugle*—the local newspaper. The headline reads *Suspect Apprehended in Cat-Napping*. The words blur and then double.

Yep, I really need to find a place to stay. I’m about to ask if there are hotels nearby when Rhondy returns and discretely slides my credit card into my hand. She whispers, “I’m sorry, sweetie. It was declined.”

“Could you try again?” I ask without moving my lips.

“I tried the maximum number of times.”

I thought the trouble at the gas station was a fluke. Heat creeps across my cheeks. Did my parents cancel my credit card? I didn’t look at the bill, but I imagine it’s more than one hundred dollars. If the cards don’t work, my emergency Benjamin is all I have. I dig into my purse and pass it to Rhondy. “I doubt this will cover it, but I can pay the rest back.”

Like a high roller, Aiden slides two one hundred dollar bills into her hand. “That should do it, right?”

“I want to pay.”

“Next time,” he says.

If I weren’t surrounded by veritable strangers, I’d hang my head in my hands. I don’t know what I’m going to do. On top of being homeless, carless, and jobless, now I have no money.

Bess turns the page in the newspaper.

“Is there a classifieds section with apartment options or rentals?” I ask.

“As great as this town is, it’s slim pickings in Butterbury.”

“We’d offer you a place at the bed and breakfast, but we’re booked for a wedding,” Camellia says.

Bess scans the section. “Nope. Not one rental except the one that resulted in a flood and me dumping water on the

mayor from the second-floor window.”

Everyone laughs as they recount the story.

“I’ll take it.”

“There are cockroaches,” Cassian says. “I saw one when I was looking under the sink.”

“That’s, um, okay,” I say with a nervous little upturn to my voice.

“And mold,” Bess adds. “You don’t want to stay there. At least not until the owner gets the insurance money and does repairs.”

A cold sweat spreads across my skin.

This isn’t a Cinderella story because, in the end, she got the prince. As for me? I’m experiencing the anti-Cinderella moment. My life is her story in reverse.

There I was, living in the lap of luxury with regular shopping sprees, swanky dinners, and VIP events. My friends called me Tinsley, the queen of Tinseltown. Whether there, in Nashville, or in NYC I strutted along the golden paved streets. Now, I’m in Nowhereville aka Butterbury, Georgia. I don’t even have a pumpkin to turn into a carriage to make an escape.

Stressed, I start to have second thoughts about the pie, but I don’t even have a way to pay for it.

Through the windows, all of a sudden, rain drops in buckets, hammering against the glass. I’m afraid the same is about to pour from my eyes.

“Oh no, I left the windows open at HQ.” Louella Belle races toward the door with Bo on her heels.

“I did the same but at the inn,” Nash says and he and Camellia leave.

“Our windows are closed,” Christina assures Buck. “However, the dogs probably need to go out.” They filter toward the door, leaving Aiden’s sisters, their guys, and the two of us.

“Any other ideas?” I ask. “I probably need a job too.”

“Oh, that’s easy. Weren’t you just saying you guys need help at Sweethearts Bakery and Café?” Bess asks Mae.

She shoots her a sharp look of warning followed by a cringe because Rhondy appears at that exact moment.

“Did I hear someone say they have a candidate for employment at our sweets shop?” Rhondy’s face lights with hope.

“Sure do. Since Tinsley is going to be here a while, she said she needs a job.” Aiden claps me gently on the back.

“Well, you’re in luck. With the ladybosses busy with Designed to Last, I can’t run this place and Sweethearts by myself.”

“She won’t admit it, but she needs a break,” Paul calls from the kitchen. “Please say you’ll do it,” he directs to me.

Like a guppy, my mouth opens and closes. “I, uh—”

This is a moment of truth or non-truth. I can’t tell them that I’ve never worked a day in my life. They’ll leave me outside the city limits then I’ll get arrested for bailing out on my mandatory thirty days of community service.

“Yeah, I’ll do it,” I say.

“Really?” Rhondy asks with her arms lifted like she wants to hug me.

“Sure.” How hard can it be? I don’t have a chance to ask because she pulls me to my feet and gives me what can only be described as a warm, motherly hug. I’d like to remain in her embrace for the foreseeable future.

“Is that going to conflict with community service?” Aiden tips his head in question.

“I’ll only need her from six am until ten. She can get to Bubba’s in five minutes no problem.”

“Actually, there is a problem. Unless Tinsley has a bicycle in the back of her BMW, she doesn’t have wheels, meaning we’ll have to rideshare to Bubba’s.”

“Does that also mean she’ll stay at your place?” Bess asks pointedly.

“She’ll have to.”

“But...” I stutter.

“But we could start at Bubba’s at ten am, giving me time to get some other things done,” Aiden says as if it’s decided.

Cassian gives him a subtle but knowing look. He nods slightly in reply. Does Cassian sense the chemistry between us and doesn’t disapprove like Mae and Bess surely don’t? Or is it something else? Maybe it has to do with the cat. All the same, jail cell bars or not, I’m magnetized to Aiden even though I have zero intention of staying in Butterbury beyond my thirty days of community service.

“I’m on a man-cation!” I say loudly and as if to remind myself.

Mae was sipping water and snorts through her nose with laughter.

“I’m not worried about these two making eyes. No, it’s something else.” Rhondy must’ve caught the look her son and Aiden exchanged because she looks them over carefully. “I’ve known you a long time, Aiden. Something doesn’t add up.”

“No, it doesn’t, Rhondy,” Aiden confirms.

She cuts her gaze slightly. “You have a look in your eye. Like if you told me the full story, you’d have to kill me.”

The corner of his lip lifts in a friendly smile. “That’s why I won’t tell you.”

Briefly, I think about the small-town drama versus real-life drama and not the kind in movies, shows, or the superficial he-said-she-said stuff I was involved in. Looking back on all the gossip I was part of makes me feel small, like a crumb left on a plate.

Aiden shifts in his seat, brushing against me. He somehow takes up a lot of space...and oxygen. It’s like he has his own orbital system and I’ve been pulled in—I played an alien once in a movie and our ship got sucked into another galaxy,

resulting in the lady aliens having to marry the Zingots who were extremely handsome lifeforms on the nearest planet.

“We’re in this together. I have a place for you to stay.” Aiden claps his hand on my thigh and then draws it quickly back as if he touched a hot stove burner.

I glance down at the spot where his hand was, expecting there to be a mark, a sign, a scorch. Something. But it’s my normal, smooth, tan thanks to my routine use of tinted moisturizer. However, nothing about the way this man makes me feel under my skin is normal. My belly swoops and my very bones feel electric.

It takes a long moment for me to comprehend what he said and when I do, I have a cautionary case of déjà vu. Last time someone offered me a place to stay a bunch of men in black woke me up from a diva dream. But what other choice do I have?

“Seeing as I’m stuck here and don’t plan to stay longer than necessary, that’s probably the best option. Thanks.”

Our eyes meet then dart just as quickly away.

I’m somewhat relieved not to be sleeping on a park bench, but it’s not like I have any other options. Hopefully, while I sleep, Mae won’t come at me with Murder Doll or whatever Aiden was talking about earlier.

Or maybe I’ll wake up in the morning and this will all be a long, strange dream.

# *Chapter Eight*

Several warning signals flash in my periphery—Stoll’s whereabouts, Cassian and Rhondy giving me long looks, and my offer for Tinsley to stay with me.

The case should take priority, so I tell myself that keeping Tinsley, a potential asset, close could prove helpful.

As for Cassian and Rhondy, he’s former military and has the discipline to keep quiet. I’d trust her with my life, and that’s saying something. I don’t think there’s a person in Butterbury that would disagree, but she’s part, if not all, angel.

New baby? She’ll bring the family food.

Someone sick? She’ll bring food.

Loved one pass away? She’ll bring the bereaved food.

She also checks on locals, gets their mail, drives people to appointments, and generally helps out on top of making the best biscuits and pie in the world. Oh, and she’s a prayer warrior. I’ve seen enough in my profession to know that it works.

I could use one right about now.

Somehow, I’ll fix this mess. I always do. In the meantime, I like to have options, and having Tinsley nearby keeps a channel open to Harold Jerrold Pumanowksi.

At least that’s what I tell myself.

The silence at the table is somewhat surprising given Bess’s gift of gab, but also awkward because Mae wears what we call a resting brat face. As the youngest, she’d sometimes

get upset if she didn't get her way. This is one of those times, but I'm not sure what she wants.

Revenge? Blood? Tinsley's first born?

Even though Tinsley apologized to my sisters, she doesn't know that she's a frog in a pot and the ladybosses control the heat.

I'm straight up in hot water. Not quite over my head but getting there. The case, I can handle. It's the way this woman's proximity raises my pulse, my temperature. I wasn't just being coy when I said she'd be the future Mrs. Mayor. Okay, I was being a little flirtatious. But I've never used that line on anyone. I've never felt this strange rumble inside. It's akin to seismic activity. Mini internal earthquakes building to the "Big One."

My typical MO is maximizing fun with a fling while minimizing meaningful time spent together. That way no emotions come into play and no one gets hurt when I inevitably move on. A lot of people might disagree with my lifestyle, flitting from woman to woman, but it's what works for me...because of my work.

Except for the idea of making someone my Mrs. Mayor has *forever* connotations...and for the first time in my life, that amount of time doesn't result in me zooming away on my motorcycle.

I tug on the collar of my shirt to circulate some air. Is it suddenly hot in here? When I shift, I slide a little on the vinyl seat, and my thigh brushes against Tinsley's again. Like when we shook hands between the bars of our jail cells, tingles in the same family as pins and needles, but without the discomfort that leaves my limbs limp, vibrate up my arm. This is more of an energized feeling. Like her touch powers me up.

She shifts slightly away when Mae notices the contact.

"We've probably taken up these tables long enough," Taylor says.

He helps Mae to her feet. The baby she's got baking in there is going to be big.



“Mom, Dad, you need any help?” Cassian asks Rhondy and Paul.

They both decline, but he and Bess stay behind as Tinsley and I follow my other sister and Taylor toward the exit.

On the sidewalk, the O’Donnell family walks their new cocker spaniel puppy. Drawn to all things furry, Mae greets the dog and chats with Janet. Tinsley crouches down and plays with the puppy and chats with the kids.

Taylor’s eyebrows lift. “I have to admit that I was surprised to receive an apology from her and that she’s playing with the puppy and talking to the O’Donnell kids and that—”

I cut him off, afraid he’s going to point something out that I’m not quite ready to hear. “Is this one of those ‘Wonders never cease’ moments?”

“No, that happened when the two of you walked out of the police station together. We knew you were locked up, but my jaw just about bounced off the pavement when she followed in that getup.”

I exhale through my nose. “She’s hard to miss.”

Taylor turns to face me, eyeing me carefully.

“Don’t tell me that I have food on my face.” I wipe my lips.

“More like egg, bro.”

“Am I supposed to be embarrassed by something?”

“Yeah. Don’t let those sequins hypnotize you.”

“I’m not at risk of being lulled into an altered state by a dress.” But by the woman wearing the dress? That’s a different story.

Taylor grips my shoulder. “Aiden, I know you...and I know Tinsley. Remember? She’s one of the reasons I came back to Butterbury. You had to talk me off the ledge numerous times when she’d call me, harass me, and beg me to spend time with her. It was all for show. She’s a fake.”

I plant my hand on his shoulder. “Taylor, you don’t have to worry about me. I’m a professional.” Laughter lifts onto my lips.

“Yes, you’re a career-focused businessman, the kind of guy who plays the field, and is the last person I image to settle down.”

I hold my hands up in exasperation. “I’m in the process of building a house up on Riverview Street.”

Taylor tips his head from side to side as if I have a point. “Do I need to remind you about when she came here last time? When she humiliated me in front of a crowd and potentially ruined my future with Mae?”

“Yes, I remember that day and finding Murder Doll in my car.”

Taylor truly is like a brother which is why I notice the slight twitch of his lips like he’s holding back a laugh.

I wag my finger at him.

“Don’t get me off track. I’m trying to save you from yourself. I can read you too. Like a book. I see the way you look at Tinsley. The body language. The whole—” He does a poor imitation of my casual lean topped with a smolder.

“Is that expression or whatever you want to call it what won Mae over?” I tease.

He playfully punches my arm then retracts his fist and rubs it. “Forgot how solid you are. You’re not as built as Buck, but I bet you two would be evenly matched.”

This time my eyebrows lift. “I work out.”

“Clearly. Have some frustration you’ve been needing to release?” He adopts a boxing stance and punches the air.

“Something like that.” I rub my hand down my face, wondering if I should tell him who I am and what I do.

Taylor knows that after I lost my grandparents, I went to the city. Which city though is another story. I got a job in finance, started traveling, and the owners of the firm

approached me with a lucrative offer, but it came with a catch. They wanted to involve me in some shady dealings. I discretely exposed them to the authorities. The authorities had been tracking the case, yet I was the one who picked up on the discrepancies they'd overlooked for years. The agency recruited me because I do have an eye for detail, but mostly it comes down to pattern recognition and when something interrupts it. Anyway, the rest is history. My particular role is deep and I've found it's easier, and safer, for my family and friends not to know.

However, lately, the secrets are taking their toll. Maybe that's because I play two roles. The big question is when the time comes to retire, who will I be?

"I'm just here to warn you," Taylor says.

"I thought you were going to use the bro code."

"Can't. Tinsley and I never officially dated. Part seven, section two-c of the bro manual."

I chuckle.

"Listen, when she starts Tinsley-splaining, run for the hills."

"I think I can handle myself." I'm well-versed in the art of observation, interrogation, and combatting manipulation. It's my job to see through obfuscation to the truth. And I do, one hundred percent of the time.

"I know you can, but can you handle Tinsley Humber?"

I suppose that remains to be seen, but up until now, I've been having a back and forth with myself about completely ignoring her and carrying her in my arms to the nearby church.

"My primary concern right now is Stoll. Any clue where he went?" I ask.

"Not the foggiest."

Mae, very pregnant, waddles over. "What are we talking about?"

“Stoll,” Taylor and I say at the same time as if in agreement that we will never mention the previous conversation or Tinsley to my sister if we can help it.

“Are you still intending to make a run for mayor?” she asks me.

“Sure am.” I’m an options guy and like to have several on the table. The next race isn’t until November. Hopefully, by then, Gatlin Stoll will be in jail and the case will be closed, meaning I can retire. Then again, the case has become a rat’s nest. Emphasis on rats.

Mae clicks her tongue. “I don’t know. Now you have skeletons in your closet.”

Frowning, I shake my head. “No, I cleared them out. Just Murder Doll remains.”

“Sometimes you worry me.” Mae affectionately leans her head on my shoulder. I pat her on the head because I’ll always be her big brother even when we have our differences.

But right now, I worry because my gaze drifts to Tinsley who talks animatedly to the O’Donnells. They all smile and laugh. Despite what Taylor told me, she seems like a decent enough person. Perhaps she’s changed. Maybe everything that happened in LA and then getting arrested was a wake-up call.

Or perhaps the worry is because she’s lulling me into a trance.

I only vaguely register that Mae and Taylor say goodbye because my eyes are glued to Tinsley. My sister snaps her fingers in front of my face. I give my head a little shake.

Taylor mutters, “I warned him about those sequins.”

They walk hand in hand down the sidewalk. My heart bounces a little in my chest. I’m happy for my best friend and my sister. Thrilled they’re starting a family. But I have to admit, being a perennial bachelor isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be. Not having anyone to share life with seems like a bleak future.

I recall when Taylor said nearly these same words to me. I told him to jump into the unknown. I wonder if I should take my own advice.

Ungluing myself from these deep and potentially life-altering thoughts, along with the spot on the sidewalk, I greet the O'Donnells. They continue their walk while Tinsley tells me all about Sterling and Silvia, her family's cocker spaniels when she was growing up.

"I think they were the only members of my family who liked me." She laughs lightly.

I'm not sure whether she's joking or not. I try to catch a glimpse of her expression, but she looks at the row of shops next to the diner.

"As the future mayor, I should give you a tour of the town."

"Seeing as I'm stuck here for the next thirty days, sure. I ought to know my way around."

"I have a feeling you'll like it."

"I'm more the city type."

"Dressed like that, yes. Do you have any luggage that we should get from your car before Henley takes it into the country for a joyride?"

She gasps.

"I'm kidding."

"I thought this was the country. Does it get country-er than this?"

I tip my head back with laughter. "Tinsley, you ain't seen nothing yet."

When looking for property, I had several requirements. Most importantly, the ability to nestle the house in the center so there would never be a chance that I'd see neighbors. Also, my parents will have a place on the property but out of my line of sight in case we get sick of each other.

After nearly two decades of experiencing the underbelly of the world, I've had enough people-ing. I can people on demand. That said, the requirements for the build-out of the house, were many to keep me entertained. He he.

I start my tour of Butterbury for Tinsley. "Next to the Starlight is the Designed to Last Boutique and above that is Designed to Last headquarters. The space used to be Flora & Fawn Flower Shoppe. Fawn was Louella Belle's aunt. She raised her. From what I remember, she was a lovely woman."

I can't quite read Tinsley's expression—wistful? Worried? Overwhelmed? All of the above.

"Here we have McIntyre's. From spark plugs to drain plugs, they have it all. Next up is the Sweetheart Bakery & Café, and Above the Cut Barbershop. Down that way is Butterbury Bed & Breakfast, owned by none other than Camellia and Nash."

"I saw their episode. They seem the same in real life as they are on film."

"No fakers here," I say then recall Taylor's warning.

Tinsley opens and closes her mouth as if she wants to say something but holds back.

"On the other side of the Town Square is the library, town hall, Doughnut Dollies, Jack & Junie's Jewelry, and Brick Bookstore."

My office is above, but I leave that out.

"Butterbury also boasts several farms, including the Creamery with the best ice cream around. Plus, Bubba's, of course. There is also Buck's forge, Mulberry Grocery, Auntie's Antiques, and the Little Red School House Nursery school. I'm probably forgetting a few businesses. Oh, and you can't forget boating, fishing, and leisure on the River Coh."

Tinsley stops and looks around. "Is there a hair salon?"

"There's the barber shop." I point.

She blinks slowly, and although I don't think of her as fake, at least from what I've seen so far, I'm not entirely

convinced she'll survive in a small town with the faux eyelashes and hair extensions.

“Savannah is only thirty minutes away,” I offer.

She visibly relaxes. “For a moment there, I was worried that I’d look like a contestant on the survival show ‘Abandoned in the Boonies’ by the end of my thirty days of community service.”

The rumble inside rolls because I don’t want her to leave after thirty days.

# *Chapter Nine*



**S**o this is what a fall from grace feels like, huh? I have to admit, it's not as bad as I thought and certainly not as bad looking. Well, except for my current appearance. Disheveled is putting it mildly. More like hot mess.

I'll admit that Aiden is looking like a quarterback from behind but instead of a football uniform, he's wearing well-worn jeans and cowboy boots. He opens the passenger's side door of a highly polished Maybach and gestures for me to get in.

At least, I think it's his car. Considering I stole my parents' BMW, I suppose anything could be possible because a Maybach is not the kind of vehicle I expect to see in Butterbury or driven by a man in jeans and cowboy boots.

This is a rusty pickup truck kind of place. Or so I thought.

"Nice wheels," I say.

"Eh, this old thing." He waves his hand dismissively but wears the subtlest boyish smile that suggests that he cares what I think.

"Don't be so modest," I say, trying to figure out if I'm reading him correctly.

His lips twitch. "Won it in a bet of sorts."

I slide into the buttery leather seat. When he was around his family and friends, he was, in a word, relatable. One of the gang. Very clearly himself. Now that we're alone, it's like he's trying to impress me. No, that can't be right. I look like I was

up all night, slept in a car, and woke up in jail. Because I basically did.

I'm used to big guys with big money knowing they're the big cheese. This is something different. It's almost like I'm the girl next door, he picked me up for a date and is hoping his car doesn't smell like cheese.

*Interesting.*

I've never been the girl next door. My brother has a silver Maybach. My father has two. Up until now, it was practically a requirement that the guys I dated have flashy cars, their names in lights, and an inexhaustible credit card.

At the moment, whether it's because I'm tired or something else, I wouldn't care if we'd gotten in a rusty pickup truck as long as the destination was the same...a bed, sleep, a shower. Perhaps Aiden is a secret billionaire with a luxury home somewhere in this nowhere town. Maybe he's hiding his true identity.

Aiden glances over at me as he backs out of the parking spot. His gaze is soft and understanding. "You look like you're thinking."

The mental gears do feel a little rusty, but that's only because I dove into that chasm of thought that I've been avoiding and it's hard to navigate. "Thinking isn't exactly what I'm known for. Is it that obvious?"

"I just meant your expression is thoughtful, peaceful."

"Tired." My body isn't sure whether to yawn or sigh or tell the truth. I'm playing a role too. Looking back, I have been for a long time. "Aiden, for the record, I'm not entirely a bubbly, flirty, ditzy blonde." The words are solid and strong but they don't have sharp edges.

"I'm sorry if that's what it sounded like I was implying. Not what I meant."

"No, I know. You were right. I was thinking. My family has always expected me to be that way, but only because I'd conditioned them to do so. It was how I got attention. When I was the little nerdy kid with glasses who went to the library—

in our house, not the public one—and researched the lifecycle of fireflies in the encyclopedia for fun or when I memorized lines from Shakespeare in my early teens, I was forgotten. Left to my own devices. I suppose I should've taken advantage of it. But like any kid, I wanted to be seen, heard, given a gold star." I pause, half expecting Aiden to interject, but he simply listens—gives me what I needed all those years ago.

"I tested the waters with one bit of outrageous behavior after another. I made them spend over a hundred thousand dollars on my sweet sixteen, complete with a performance by the boy band Six Pak Boyz. For my seventeenth birthday, I insisted on using the family helicopter to get to a weekend music festival in the desert. When I turned eighteen, they rented me an island for a weeklong party because I threatened to share embarrassing family photos online if they didn't."

Aiden whistles low. "That's intense."

I share anecdotes that I once flaunted proudly and now make me cringe. As Aiden continues to listen, he pulls into the parking lot of an autobody shop with a tow truck in front.

"Anyway, that didn't get me the approval and affection I'd have liked, but it got me something." I gaze down at my hands.

"And now?" he asks.

"Now, it feels like I have nothing."

Letting out a breath, he says, "Well, it might feel that way. Aside from your stuff in the car," he points, "you might not have much in the way of what you're used to. But you could also think of this as a new opportunity. A chance to start over in a way."

His gaze lingers on mine and instead of longing, I see something else. It's simple. It's real. It's the truth. It's as if this man is on a lifelong quest for the truth.

And what have I been seeking? Fame, fortune, pleasure.

I can't quite pinpoint what's going on between Aiden and me, but I've never had someone look at me the way he does.

Like maybe I'm part of a puzzle he's been trying to put together.

Don't get me wrong. Usually, guys *look*.

But not like this. There's a certain intensity in his blue eyes like he's waiting for me...or has been waiting for me.

Or perhaps it's the other way around.

After a beat, he opens the car door and says, "Come on. We should head in. I bet Willy wants to get home on time for supper."

I follow Aiden into *Willy's Wrecker and Auto Service*.

It's exactly how they portray places like this in the movies. A few metal chairs with cracked vinyl seats. Blinds with bent slats. A calendar on the wall with the car of the month. The smell of grease is strong and stains most surfaces.

"Hey, Willy!" Aiden says with a smile. "Wasn't sure whether to come here or swing by Gus's."

The two men shake hands. Willy's is considerably meatier than Aiden's as if he often has dessert after dinner.

"Hey, it's good to see you. I hear you're back in town."

"Happy to say the rumors are true. Well, most of them. Don't believe anything if Stoll's name is involved."

"Nah. I stopped trusting him when he sent me a letter quadrupling my business tax. No, sir. That don't fly around here." He slaps a bug that lands on his neck.

If I were Mayor Stoll, I'd make myself scarce too. His fans are few and far between.

"Anyway, Gus's tow truck has a broken tie rod. Henley had me park the BMW in the back. I take it you'd like to collect your personal items." For the first time since entering the office, he looks at me.

"Yes, thank you."

"Not a problem." He holds out the keys and then winks. "Just make sure you bring 'em back. Rules are rules."

Aiden chuckles. “Don’t worry. She’s not going to drive off.”

I snort as I take the keys but not at his comment. Strangely, running away hadn’t even occurred to me. Only now does the thought float into my mind that I could call my parents, explain the situation, and use one of their lawyers to erase this blemish from public record. It can be done. Andrew had a late night, got pulled over, and no one knows what happened next because Mother and Father took care of it.

Previous to now, I think I would’ve pressed the “Easy Button.” But would I accept their help if they offered it? Would they offer it? I shake myself from the probing thoughts and take the keys.

I trail Aiden to the car while Willy locks up his office for the day. We transfer my bags to the Maybach as a familiar police cruiser pulls up.

Without thinking, I hold up my hands and the keys fall to the ground. Officer Henley gets out with a loud guffaw and holds a paper shopping bag.

“So jumpy. Don’t worry, kids. I’m not back to arrest you. Saw you parked here, Aiden. Wondering what time should I tell Bubba to expect you?”

Unfazed, Aiden says, “He can expect us at ten.”

“Sounds good. He appreciates it.” Officer Henley passes me the bag.

I’m confused because I already have my luggage.

“This is for tomorrow. You and Mrs. Henley are about the same size.” I peek inside to find a pair of boots, overalls, and gloves. “She keeps goats and makes soap, has plenty of working clothes. Figured you might need something to wear for work.”

“Oh, right,” I manage to mutter with a glance at my sequined dress, sparkling in the late-day sunlight. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.” With a wave, Henley gets back in his car.

We do the same. As I sit down, I eye the forklift in the parking lot. Aiden might need to employ it to get me out of this seat when we get to his house. I’m not only tired, but I’m also touched.

The man who arrested me and sentenced me to thirty days of community service thought to bring me a change of clothing for work. I’m not typically a teary person, but his thoughtfulness moves me. To keep the emotion at bay, I pull out my phone and check my social media accounts. The array of hearts and comments, though considerably less than I’m used to, do nothing to stoke emotion.

I check to see if any of my friends reached out in private messages, but most people share their opinion about my and Puma’s innocence or guilt. The trolls think I should go to jail.

Been there. Done that. Have the community service assignment to prove it.

“For the record—” I start.

“Do you get the sense that I’m keeping records?” Aiden asks with a smile as he turns onto a country road.

My lips quiver, but this time with a smile.

“I just mean, in case you’re wondering, I had absolutely nothing to do with the charges against Puma Palmer. Much like you and I right now, we were just hanging out. He wanted more, but—” I shrug, suddenly uncomfortable with where I took this conversation and what Puma’s wining and dining suggested. My stomach churns with regret. What was I thinking? I know the answer. I wasn’t thinking. I was wanting.

“But I wasn’t interested,” I say.

“Much like right now,” Aiden repeats in a low, measured tone.

“Right. You’re helping me out. I appreciate it. I’ll pay you back too. I—” I pause, snagging on a thought. “Wait, why are you helping me?”

A pause stretches between us as the sun shifts to the tops of trees, painting the field in shades of pastel watercolors.

He rolls down the window, letting in a pleasant breeze, carrying a fresh mowed grass scent along with his reply. “Much like the work clothes.”

It takes me half a beat to understand what he means. “Oh, it’s southern hospitality? Generosity?”

“Something like that. You could just say it’s how we do in Butterbury.”

“Despite half a day in a jail cell, I’m going to admit something that might surprise you. It surprises me. It’s not so bad in Butterbury. I don’t plan to get used to it, but so far, it’s scenic. If I were scouting a location for a romantic drama, I’d pick here.”

“It’s home.” Just then, Aiden turns down a thickly tree-lined road with barely enough room for two cars to pass. In fact, had I been driving, I would’ve missed the turnoff. A frog and cricket-filled forest stretch in both directions. We leave the remainder of the sun behind.

Actually, plot twist. Scratch the romance movie. It’s turned into a horror film. This would be the part of the movie, when the audience yells, *Go back. It’s not safe. He’s leading you to your doom.*

My knuckles pink up as I grip the armrest on the door.

Aiden leans back in the seat, one lazy hand on the wheel as if he just left something behind.

His sense of direction?

“Where are we going?” I ask in a voice that sounds more like a mouse than a human.

“I told you, my place.”

“A murder cabin in the woods?”

He chuckles, and I tell myself the rough sound does not belong to a killer. Aiden coughs and then clears his throat. “Sorry. Inhaled a bug. I’m okay.”

I roll up my window as we reach a clearing.

“Welcome to my humble abode.”

Humble is right. A tow camper trailer sits on a concrete pad behind a rusty pickup truck. Under an awning, sits a folding chair and table along with a grill. A muddy four-wheeler hulks off to the side along with a shiny motorcycle. There’s some major incongruency between the camp gear and the Maybach.

“I could’ve taken a portion of the family property, but I wanted Mae to be happy. No doubt she and Taylor will carry on the Fuller Farm legacy. Plus, I wanted to start something new. Something of my own.” He gets out of the car.

I tentatively follow while tucking his goals and desires away to think about later because right now I’m worried about the present. Swallowing thickly, I say, “This seems like the place a Murder Doll would live.”

Aiden laughs long and heartily then slaps his thigh.

I edge toward the car. I could lock myself in if I have to. Then again, I don’t think anyone will come looking for me. If I scream, I doubt anyone will hear me this far out in the middle of nowhere.

When Aiden’s laughter goes quiet, he says, “Never, not once, has anything related to Murder Doll done anything other than giving me the willies. Fortunately, Murder Doll has been locked in my trunk since the Fall Fundraiser Festival.”

Forget feeling droopy, my eyes bulge.

“Taylor and Mae hid it in my rental car,” he goes on to say more about the prank, but I realize something catastrophic.

Embarrassed, I cover my face. “You were there?”

“Where? At the Fest?”

I nod slowly.

“Sure was.”

“That means you saw the whole thing.” I fight a massive cringe.



His lips quirk. “Sure did. Didn’t make the connection at first.”

If I were in my mother’s dressing room, I’d flop onto her antique tufted chaise longue. I’m barely recovered when I choke out, “You don’t seem to hate me like Mae and Bess. Taylor too.”

“They don’t hate you.”

“They don’t *not* hate me.”

“Give them a chance to get to know you.”

“Not if you kill me first,” I say not entirely sure if I’m joking. Although, the horror movie set aside, these last hours with Aiden make me feel giddy like the night before a big premier.

He steps closer, hands held where I can see them. “Promise. I’m not going to kill you. Although, I have a couple of steaks I’d like to toss on the grill if you’re hungry.”

“Just don’t say you like to eat yours bloody.”

He waggles his eyebrows. “I admit, I prefer it grilled rare.”

We both laugh—me nervously as he gestures that I take a seat. He goes inside the trailer and makes a few return trips. Questions about how we’ll both fit in there comfortably toss in my mind while I watch carefully to make sure he doesn’t charge at me with an axe or other sharp tool. Instead, he brings out another chair, a plate with a couple of steaks, and a can of bug spray.

I swallow with relief. While he lights the coals, I say, “So this is where you live? It’s kind of small, no?”

“This is where I live for now. What do you drink? I have sweet tea, lemonade, sparkling flavored water, and regular water.”

“You have plumbing?”

“Yes. Toby has all the bells and whistles.”

“Toby?”

“Yeah, Toby the trailer,” Aiden says in all seriousness.

The nervousness takes flight like the fireflies that appear in the field as the last of the silver threads of daylight disappear.

“Come on, I’ll give you a tour.”

Stepping inside, I kick off my high heels, leaving them on the welcome mat with a daisy on it. I brace myself for a miniature bachelor pad. I’m right about it being small—not even twenty feet from end to end. Barely enough for the kitchenette, the bathroom-ette, and the bed-ette. Barely enough room for Aiden and me.

But here we are, nearly pressed together so close I can’t escape his cool, woody cologne. The way his blue eyes spark in the dim light. The way his chest lifts and falls with each breath. I can practically feel his pulse.

Mine too, and it’s racing. Not because I’m afraid for my life. No, I’m afraid that my life as I knew it is changing...and I can’t say that I mind.

# *Chapter Ten*

**M**y breath turns slightly rough as I stand in the small trailer next to Tinsley Humber. Even without high heels, she's tall, slim, and fit. A blonde bombshell Barbie doll with big hair and brown eyes. Her voice is like honey, but she's not sweet. More like sweet adjacent. Like she was born smart and sweet but left it behind in the home library she described from her childhood.

"Where are you going to sleep?" I notice, not for the first time, that she has a slight gap between her two front teeth.

My lips part slightly as I try to think about my answer and not her lips. "Where am I going to sleep?"

She nods slowly, having transformed the pout she wore when she saw that "My place" is a trailer affectionately named Toby. I can thank Bess for that and the welcome mat. Now, Tinsley wears a look of curious caution like a cat who discovers a paper bag on the floor and is really tempted to see what's inside.

I have to admit that it's kind of cute.

I get us each a can of sparkling water from the fridge. I crack mine and take a much-needed sip. Is it possible for a woman to make you thirsty while at the same time somehow quench a thirst you didn't know you had?

I visibly reacted when I saw Tinsley for the first time, partly because I recognized her from the case, but also because she's undeniably attractive. As the day has worn on, loose pieces of her hair fall out of the messy bun she wears. I found a sequin stuck to my arm and tucked it in my pocket.

Evidence. As she gets more and more comfortable, even though this isn't the kind of luxurious comfort she's used to, she's somehow gotten more attractive.

She looks at me, still waiting for my response. I give my head a little shake. "Right. Where am I going to stay? I have a place through there." I gesture vaguely through the woods.

"In your car? On a hammock in the forest? A cave?"

I chuckle. "No, I'm building a house. It's a work in progress, but the bathroom is doable, so I'll be fine. Though I think I may have to shower down here."

"Is it safe?"

"The shower? Yes. Clean water. I had it tested. This used to be a hunting camp, so they had an RV hookup."

"No, I mean, what if a bear comes or a Sasquatch?"

Like when I choked on the bug on the ride over, I cough on my sip of water. "You don't have to worry about a Sasquatch."

"Do you have them around here?"

"I think the more important question to ask is are Sasquatch real."

Tinsley has flashbulb eyes as she looks over my shoulder. Concerned I'm about to see the answer to my question staring through Toby's window, I twist in that direction. My arm brushes hers, sending tingles through me.

Instead of a hairy beast, a flame from the grill lights up the night. "The steaks!" I hurry outside and am happy to say that's the last of the excitement for the night.

We eat the steak and a salad I got at Mulberry Market when I picked up some cat food. I go over the plan for the next day for me to drive Tinsley to town for her first day at Sweethearts Bakery and Café before she and I head over to Bubba's.

"Don't forget your change of clothes. We can go into Savannah on the weekend so you can get some more stuff," I

offer. I also wouldn't mind taking her to River Rocks, a waterfront restaurant with great seafood.

"You don't have to chauffeur me around."

"Do you have another driver willing to do the job?" As soon as I ask this, given the tidbits she's fed me about her childhood, I wouldn't doubt that were the case.

She bites her nail and then shoves her hands into her lap. "I'm guessing Mother and Father won't send anyone."

"You're not kidding."

"Sadly, no. They're yachting at the moment, but as soon as they find out about my, uh, scandal—" She shakes her head.

"I'm sorry."

"What about your parents?" she asks.

"They live in Virginia so my dad could be closer to the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. He loves planes. He went into insurance but missed his calling in the aircraft field. However, Mom is getting tired of their weekly visits and misses home. I'm aiming to move them here."

"To the trailer?"

I laugh. "No, but I want to build them a house on this spot. I have a feeling once they meet Taylor and Mae's baby, Dad will decide to stay. That way the whole family will be in one area."

"Bess lives here too?"

"Yep, she moved down from North Carolina not long ago. She and Cassian had what she affectionately calls a 'Meet Ugly.' She crashed into his car, became his housekeeper, got him to dust off his heart...and the rest is a prince and princess happily ever after story. Literally. They live in a castle a few miles away."

"There's a castle in Butterbury?"

"Sure is. His grandparents built it. If you haven't noticed, this town is a special place."

“Seems like you and your family are close. Your friends too.”

We’re close enough except they don’t know what I really do for a living. “We went through a little rough patch after we moved here from New Hampshire. The grandparents needed some help. It was Mae’s senior year. I’m about ten years older and was happy to help, but I was ready to be out on my own. Had to quit college. That’s what we do for family. Embarrassingly, I resented it for a time. Came to my senses though.”

“Seems like even without schooling, you did okay for yourself.” She eyes the Maybach.

“Yeah. I do alright. Everyone has setbacks and can either figure out a way forward or...not.” The Maybach was part of a prank on a previous case. Liked it so much that I decided to keep it.

Tinsley nods like she’s thinking about the way forward part. I have a feeling the chauffeured life doesn’t quite fit anymore.

“What about your family?” I ask because I’m curious to hear her talk as well as wonder if there’s some connection to Governor Pickering and the case.

“My brother recently reminded me that my father grew up poor. The story goes that at nine, he talked a neighborhood kid into letting him take over his paper route and drove a hard bargain to keep seventy percent of the earnings.”

“Enterprising, entrepreneurial.”

Tinsley nods. “But then when things started looking up, he was sent to an orphanage. There, he made lemonade out of lemons, or more accurately, he organized the other kids to make ornaments out of felt and sold them on the corner. He took on every job he could, eventually putting himself through law school.”

I tap the air, realizing where I’ve heard the last name *Humber*. He’s a leading corporate lawyer and word has it he

invests well, possibly with thanks to insider trading, but that's not my case. At least not this time.

Tinsley tells me she recently learned he and her mother met when she was working as a maid at a motel down in Texas.

“Kind of like Bess and Cassian.”

“Though I'm not sure they have a happily ever after. Granted. Mother and Father are still married, but it's like their lives are a game of chess. Meanwhile, I was living mine like it was Candyland.” Tinsley looks at me like she's wondering if there's a middle ground.

“Life doesn't have to be a game,” I say as if mine isn't.

“No? But isn't it a stage?” she asks, referencing Shakespeare.

“It doesn't have to be,” I say as much to her as to myself. I'm not an actor in the classical sense, but I do play a role. At least for now. But the longer this day gets, the more the lines feel like they blur. I can only let myself flirt until I wrap up this case.

“We should probably clean up. You must be exhausted.”

“I think I've bypassed exhaustion and stepped into the Twilight Zone.”

We both get up at the same time and our knees bump. The internal rumble just won't quit. Not when I'm near her. Warning signals are loud in my mind, especially since I told myself I can only wade into the water with Tinsley. No further. Nothing more. Nonetheless, my gaze drops to her lips and then lifts to her eyes before they shift back again.

I struggle to return to the thread of our conversation. My breath is ragged when I say, “The Twilight Zone? No, Tinsley, this is real.”

“I'm afraid so,” she says nearly as breathless.

As if both sensing where this is going, we shift apart and then start to clean up. However, being elbow to elbow in the kitchenette doesn't help matters. I go to the car to get her bag



and when I return, I find her on her phone. The smile she wore for most of the evening slowly slips off her face.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

She tucks her phone into her lap. “Yeah. Totally. Just—” She looks around. “This is just different.”

“Yeah. The night noises take some getting used to. You’ve traded police sirens and honking cars for crickets and frogs. But how about we trade numbers? If you need anything, I’m a phone call away.” I already have hers, but keep that to myself.

After we swap, Tinsley takes a deep breath. I leave her in the doorway of the trailer before getting on the four-wheeler and starting it up.

“The keys are in the car,” I holler, hoping I find her and it here in the morning.

The new house is a little more than halfway done. For now, four walls, a roof, and bathroom plumbing are in minus the shower. That’s good enough for me. It smells like freshly cut pine and damp drywall joint compound. I love it...and I hope Tinsley loves Butterbury as much as I do.

For now, I feel like I made the right choice not showing her my own version of a castle. I think she needs to find the middle ground for herself. Will it be in a trailer in the middle of the woods? I’ll find out in the next thirty days.

As I drift toward sleep, my thoughts linger on how it felt like showing Tinsley around Butterbury and bringing her here was the same amount of nerve-wracking as it would be to introduce her to my parents. No, that’ll be easier.

From there, I mentally cruise to how I was acting a little off when we got to my car. The Maybach is slightly ostentatious, but it’s part of my bachelor-in-finance persona. Plus it goes fast. Though my motorcycle is even more fun. Can’t deny I enjoy putting down the pedal on these empty roads.

However, I’m just as happy driving Judy—that’s the pickup truck behind Toby. The name is also with thanks to Bess. I don’t want Tinsley to think I’m a rich, flashy guy. I’ll

heed Taylor's warning to an extent. I'd like her to like me for me and not anything I own.

Good thing I'm lying down because that last thought slams me like a runaway tractor tire—happened to Bubba's brother who lived to tell the tale.

Hold up. I want Tinsley to like me?

Moving on. It's hard not to notice her phone remains silent even though she goes on it frequently. No one has called to see how she's doing. I checked her social media accounts—for work, I swear. She's quite a presence, yet she's here. Why was she passing Butterbury where the only person she knows is Taylor? I don't get homewrecker vibes unless she's playing some kind of twisted long game. No, I sense she's been rejected. Turned away by family and friends.

Is she alone?

I must fall asleep before I answer the question because the next thing I know, my phone beeps repeatedly and it's not the alarm setting.

Bleary-eyed, I glance at the screen. Tinsley.

I rocket out of bed, tug on my pants from yesterday, grab my sidearm, and am on the four-wheeler in less than sixty seconds.

Possibilities rev in my mind as I focus on the uneven terrain in the dark. It never occurred to me that one of Puma's fans or a troll might try to hassle or harm her.

Toby is dark as I approach. The four-wheeler's lights shine on the white metal exterior. I'd like to have made a quiet approach, and imagine I scared off whoever was here, but they couldn't have gone far.

Toby's door flies open. "Stealth. I said to be stealthy. Didn't you check your phone?"

My concern turns into consternation. "No, I didn't because I wasn't about to waste a second getting down here. It's four am. It's not like I thought you were calling for room service. I figured it was an emergency."

Previously puffed up, she deflates a little and her arms fold in front of her chest. “If you’d read the message, you’d have known that I heard something scratching around out here.”

“Like a critter?” I check around with my flashlight but don’t see any signs of an animal—human or four-legged.

“I don’t know.” Panic fills her voice.

“Well, it’s long gone now.”

“But it’ll be back. Next time, please try to be quiet. Could’ve been a Sasquatch,” she says in a whisper.

With a tired chuckle, I shake my head. As I get back on the four-wheeler, I have to admit I like the idea that there might be a next time. Not because I want her to be afraid or to be woken from a dead sleep. Rather, that she’ll be sticking around for a while.





Morning comes too soon. I head down to the trailer to shower. I find Tinsley asleep, wearing blue cotton pajama shorts and a coordinating camisole. Last night, fired up with adrenaline, I didn't even notice. I try to be quiet as I go to the tiny bathroom, but she sits up, eyes fuzzy and with a pillow crease on her face. There goes the rumble in my chest. Hopefully, she can't hear it.

In a word, she's adorable. Vulnerable, but not in a way that would make someone take advantage of her. Rather, like without makeup and all the sparkle and polish, she's a regular person. A beautiful one at that.

Maybe even more so without all the fuss.

"I, uh," I gesture over my shoulder and my arm feels floaty, disjointed like it belongs to someone else. "Shower," I manage to mutter.

While the water cascades over my muscles, I can't stop thinking about the woman at the other end of the trailer. I didn't know the kind of woman I was looking for—classic, humble, honest, funny, silly, smart...all of it. More? I don't know, but I think I found her in the most unlikely of places, but will I be able to make her mine?

# *Chapter Eleven*

Yet again, I wake up disoriented. For the length of a yawn, I'm not quite sure where I am or how I got here. But then I glimpse fresh-out-of-the-shower-Aiden Fuller.

Forget small town. This is the big leagues.

Aiden Fuller first thing in the morning is a sight to behold. Meanwhile, I look like I asked the raccoon or whatever it was that paid me a midnight visit for a makeover.

Morning-Aiden comes through the bathroom-ette door on a billow of steam at the same time he pulls a black T-shirt over his head. But first, I get a peek at his chiseled abs. There are dips and lines and crown molding.

Slightly damp, his skin glistens like a real-life aftershave ad. Considering he's a finance guy and probably spends a lot of time in an office, he also sports a slight tan. Could be from working outdoors on his property? Maybe he works remotely...here in this trailer? He did mention an office in town. Perhaps part of his run for mayor?

My future plans are about as mushy as my brain at the moment. All I can think is *Boys, take a number. There is a man in town.*

There is nothing mushy about this man. Firm muscles, strong hands, and a just shaved jawline that has authority all its own. His blue eyes land on me, staring like the ultimate fangirl. I can't even hide it or pretend otherwise because my eyes are so big they probably fill the trailer. My mouth hangs slack like the stereotypical movie depiction of a half-witted

Hillbilly. If there were flies to catch, I wouldn't need breakfast.

This must be the new me...and cut! Just call it a wrap. I've become a country bumpkin in less than twenty-four hours. The transformation is complete because if this is how they build men in the country, I'm hooked. Addicted, and I'll never go back.

Aiden smooths his palm through his wet hair, leaving it tousled.

*Have mercy. I'm new at this! A girl can only take so much at once.*

Yes, of course, I've seen many outrageously attractive men in my life. Name an actor or musician on the "Top 50 Most Desirable Men Alive" list and chances are we've "Canoodled." Not sure what that means in this context, but the gossip bloggers who post images of me and these "Examples of Man Candy" can give you the official definition. Take Taylor Whitmer for instance. He was rated "Cutest Country Musician" for three years running. I sure know how to pick 'em. However, not one of them made me feel like this.

I don't know what *this* is, but it comes with a blush that goes beyond my cheeks. It also includes butterflies that are likely from the Jurassic period with the way their wings flap-flap-flap in my belly, and a center of gravity that leans more north than south.

My entire body swoops in his just-out-of-the-shower presence.

"Good morning." Aiden's voice has a hint of early-hour sleepiness that curls around his subtle and smooth southern drawl.

"Howdy," I reply only it sounds more like "Help!" because I slide off the edge of the narrow bed and somehow end up twisted like a pretzel around the table legs. Have I mentioned the trailer is an incredibly compact space?

Aiden rushes over, intoxicating me with his soapy, aftershave scent. "You okay?"



“Yeah. I’m fine. Not struck, er stuck.” Not struck by your impossibly hunky first-thing-in-the-morning look or your dripping tousled brown hair. Not the lazy smile that suggests you know why I’m staring and falling all over myself. I’m not gawking either. Nope. Not at all.

I clear my throat. “Just thought I dropped something.”

My dignity? Yep. It’s right here under this table.

Aiden extends his hand to help me up. Doing so requires a few grunts and the twisting of my limbs. Good thing I own loads of fashionable yoga apparel yet have never taken a class.

I straighten, brush off, and then blow a loose piece of hair out of my face. “Oh, and that was a new, exotic fitness program called *Goga*—it’s an exclusive variation of yoga and is meant to be done on the go, in hotels, on vacation, on a man-cation,” I add just to remind myself.

Aiden silent-chuckles like he knows I’m full of beans... and butterflies. His expression has the look of amused laughter but without the sound. “I have a few calls to make. You can find me outside when you’re ready.” He glances at the chunky, masculine platinum watch around his wrist. “You have a little less than an hour.”

“Less than an hour?”

“Yeah. Figured that was more than enough time to get ready. Remember? It’s your first day at Sweethearts.”

That’s pennies when it comes to time. “You’ve never had a woman living in your trailer, have you?”

“No, but I grew up with two sisters. I made an approximation. Mae takes twenty minutes. If we’d let her, Bess wouldn’t come downstairs for an hour and twenty.”

“Try three hours, Aiden. That’s how long my routine takes, at least.”

“Rhondy is expecting you at six sharp so get your hustle on. Oh, and skip the sequins today. Health codes.” Aiden opens the door to exit.

I holler after him, “I planned to run that dress over, leave it to stew in the sewer, and then burn the thing.”

He goes still. “Don’t you dare.”

I frown at the finality in his tone. “What? Why not?”

“It was what you were wearing when we officially met.”

“And...?” I ask, baffled by his sudden seriousness.

“And I expect you to wear it on our honeymoon. I’m looking forward to a little before and after. That’s the before...”

A squawk a laugh so loud that if there were neighbors, I’d have woken them up.

“And the after is you, barefoot on the beach with your hair windblown and your face sun-kissed.”

“I don’t apply anything less than SPF75.”

“People change. Although I like you the way you are, as I said, before and after. I have a feeling you’re on your way to experiencing a classic Butterbury transformation.”

“And how about you?”

“Mine is inside out.”

“There’s nothing you need to change about the *out*,” I blurt while running my hand through the air from Aiden’s head to his toes.

His lips pooch with amusement. “Glad you appreciate what you see. The feeling is mutual.”

He leaves Toby without another word while I’m just standing here gaping and gawking and I don’t know what-ing other than not getting ready.

And the clock is ticking. This is day one of thirty. I take the fastest shower of my life, whip through my skincare routine, and am on a collision course with my suitcase when I realize I don’t know what to wear to Sweethearts. Ordinarily, I’d consult Sienna or one of my stylist “friends.” At the very least, if this were an event, I’d ask the internet.

But with half my time gone, I start to perspire as I rifle through my limited clothing selection, tossing skirts and blouses over my shoulder.

“Come on, Tinsley. Figure this out.”

Okay, if I were cast as a worker at a bakery, what would the costume designer select for my wardrobe? Something low-key but cute. I opt for a flirty, flowy, floral skirt with hidden shorts that hit mid-thigh and a fitted light pink shirt.

Now, for hair and makeup. I half my typical products and opt for a bright, dewy look before blowing out my hair and then adding a few playful curls.

Standing all the way on the other side of the trailer so I can see most of myself in the bathroom-ette mirror. From a distance, I pass for a cute, twenty-something star in a made-for-TV movie about a spunky girl whose meet-cute will happen at the bakery involving a bit of frosting on her lip and the bad boy biker who returned after years of absence to visit his sick mother. Naturally, he stops to pick up her favorite cupcakes and meets the future love of his life.

Classic love story. But what will mine be?

When I exit the trailer, Aiden casually leans against the Maybach, phone to his ear, voice indistinguishable.

While Toby is as good as it gets for tiny trailers, the door squeaks. Aiden turns slowly in my direction.

No, it's more like slow motion. If he were the bad boy in the movie, returning home to the small town in hopes of redemption, he'd lower his sunglasses, his eyebrows would lift, and he'd let out a low whistle.

Then with a manly grunt of frustration, he hangs up on whoever he was talking to.

Suddenly nervous that I did something wrong, I gulp. “Is, did, I, uh—?”

He cocks his head. “Butterbury better buckle up. And so should we so you're not late.”

I try to make sense of his comment as he reviews our meeting time for my second shift of my new workday at Bubba's.

I've always had a "Fake it 'til you make it" approach as I climb to the top. I just pretend I followed everything he said.

Aiden glances at the sky. My gaze follows to a high ceiling of clouds with sunlight peeking through. He gives a short nod as if making a silent agreement with an invisible weatherman and saunters over to the motorcycle.

"Ready?" he calls.

"Hmm. Not ready."

"It's a nice day, perfect for a ride on the bike."

"What about the car?"

"I ought to get gas and we don't have time. Come on. It'll be fun."

"The last time I was on a motorcycle was with Sylvester Bulheimer aka 'The Bull,' a Hollywood bad boy who, it turns out, did not do his own motorcycle stunts because he didn't know how to ride the thing. Found that out on Sunset Boulevard."

Aiden's voice is deep confidence when he says, "I promise I'm licensed and know how to ride."

I shift from foot to foot. It's not like I have much of a choice.

"Ready?" he asks again.

"As ready as I'll never be," I mutter as I sling my leg over the saddle and settle in behind him.

As if I've done this a thousand times, I wrap my arms around Aiden's chest. I can feel my pulse pressing against his as he accelerates and slides smoothly onto the street. But I've never felt this way before—the way my belly swoops each time we make contact. Like I don't know how to breathe or speak or think straight.

His body seems to hum under mine like he feels it too. We're quiet because of the roar of the motorcycle, but it's like our bodies communicate soundlessly. The way I lean into him when he goes faster down a long straight road. The way he supports me as he turns onto another street.

Aiden Fuller has me twisted around him in the best of ways. I wish I minded more. Too bad I'm on a man-cation.

When we pull up in front of Sweethearts, I try to get off the motorcycle as gracefully as possible, wishing *Goga* was a thing so I was a bit more flexible. I stand there for a long moment as if waiting for the tension between us to snap or... Do I take it with me? Leave it behind? Was I imagining it?

"Good luck on your first day." Aiden leaves me another one of his dangerous winks.

I give a weak wave as the sign hanging in the door to Sweetheart's flips to *Open*. Rhondy, formidable and intimidating at any hour, but especially before coffee, greets me with the kind of smile teachers give on the first day of school.

"Welcome to Sweethearts Bakery and Café. You sometimes hear people ask if they have a favorite child. I only have one so the answer is easy. But between you and me, the Starlight Diner and Sweethearts are my bonus babies." Her smile is warm, affectionate. When she turns her gaze on me, I see a mama bear word of caution.

Reading between the lines, she's telling me I'm the babysitter and she'd better not get a call that her kid is in the hospital with a broken limb. Or that I burned the house down.

Message received.

Still standing under the white light-up sign with hearts and black script that says Sweetheart Bakery & Café, Rhondy points out the patio area adjacent to the sidewalk. Pink and white umbrellas provide shade over white wrought iron tables.

"Customers are welcome to sit out here, especially with their dogs. We have a few metal bowls you can bring out with water. Otherwise, it's counter service only. Please make sure

you periodically check to make sure trash is disposed of, crumbs are wiped up, and sweep the cement so we don't attract pests."

I blurt, "Just so you know, this is my first job. I appreciate you telling me everything there is to know."

"This is your first job at a bakery?"

"No, it's my first job," I correct, regretting sharing that tidbit.

"Your first job at a café?"

"No, I mean my first job ever." I wring my hands. "I was actually surprised you hired me. Don't potential employees usually have to fill out an application or submit a resume?"

Rhondy's expression falters, but her voice is bright when she says, "We do things differently here in Butterbury. It's worth noting that we all start somewhere. I was a beginner once too. Though my first day was when I was twelve. You'll catch on."

"I'm sorry that I don't have more experience."

Rhondy gives me a long look. She has the kinds of eyes that see everything—mom eyes. Well, not my mother, but maternal eyes. Warm, friendly, generous, but also full of knowing.

"I believe in chances. First, second, and sometimes even third chances. Do you?"

I nod. "Most of the time."

"If you mess up, will you give yourself a second chance?"

"I've never thought of it that way. Yeah, I suppose so."

"Will you learn from your mistakes?"

"Definitely. Yeah. The last few days have been one long lesson."

She pats me on the arm. "Good. I think you'll do fine."

Rhondy didn't give me a long lecture, proffer a threat if I do something wrong, or make me feel like one of the ants

trailing along the sidewalk. But I want to prove to her that I can do this. Maybe to myself too and that I'm not an adult lady child.

I follow her inside. A bar with stools lines one bank of windows and several tables dot the other side. Facing the rear wall are two display cases. One contains chocolate candies and baked goods fill the other. The register sits in the middle. On one wall is a beverage station and on the other, a mural with two hearts painted to look like wings with the Sweethearts logo on top.

“Mae designed that.” Visitors and fans of the Designed to Last show, of which Rhondy explains there are many, like to take their photos in front of the mural.

My rough start with Aiden's sister aside, every detail of this place was considered with love and care. From the coordinating pink, gold, and white polka-dotted cups to the pink straws, to the wax bags. The string and ribbon for tying pastry boxes, the fabric on the chairs, to the menu for a girly girl like me—who appreciates a good eye for design and attention to detail—is in heaven.

Rhondy waits on a few customers—all of whom order a coffee to go plus a pastry or muffin. I watch her easy and friendly manner with people. The way she makes them feel at home. Their smiles in return.

I've never been on this side of the counter before, but know very well what makes me have a pleasant experience at an establishment. A little bubble of excited confidence rises in me. I think I can do this.

Next, Rhondy shows me behind the counter where drawers below the display cases hold supplies. She goes over the register and then opens a binder with all the opening and closing procedures.

“Christina made this, including an FAQ in the back.”

“Looks like I have some reading to do.”

Rhondy's laugh is like bells. Like music. I imagine the first time her husband heard it, he fell in love. The first time her

son heard it, he knew he was loved.

After a couple more customers come in, one for an assortment of baked goods for a Bible study and the other for a gift for his sweetheart, we head through the double swinging doors containing a pair of heart-shaped windows that lead to the kitchen.

I have to take a deep breath because now I'm out of my depth. There are stainless steel shelves, tables, and lots of buckets and bowls. Tubs of things labeled with ingredients, tools that I've never before seen, and another binder filled with recipes have me lingering by the door while Rhondy gives me a crash course in running a bakery café.

"You'll be here with us first thing so I can open up at the Starlight. One of the ladybosses will take over in the late morning. The only times we'll have you bake is if we have a big order or if we're low on something and for some reason one of the others can't get to it. I'm the master chocolatier, so don't worry about making that." She winks. "But do worry about eating it. One of the job perks is you will get plenty of samples."

We return to the front.

I swallow but not because I'm concerned about my chocolate habit. No, this room is an all-things baked goods paradise. A wonderland. There should be bars around the display cases...not that I'd steal. I've already been behind bars, but the only thing I really know how to do when it comes to bakery-cafes is to be a customer. How to serve? Not in my wheelhouse. My feet remain glued to the floor by the door, but I want to be able to do this.

"Any questions?"

I shake my head but a little squeak escapes.

Rhondy claps me on the back and says, "You'll do fine."

Thing is, I want to do better than fine. My entire adult life, I've been "Faking it 'til I make it." The truth is, I never made it. Not in Tinseltown, Nashville, or New York City. I was



always the extra. The friend of convenience. The body in the room.

For once, I want to succeed. To be good at something. If that something is working at a bakery, fine. But I don't want to settle for anything less than being the best bakery girl this town has ever seen.

Rhondy squints at me like she knows what I'm thinking. With a smile and nod, she greets a customer. I follow suit and do my best to shadow her.

However, all too soon, she passes me an apron with pink, gold, and black polka dots against white fabric.

"Welcome, to the family, Tinsley. We're glad you're here." She walks toward the door.

Doubts and fears burn in my mind while the rest of me breaks out in a glacial sweat. I can't do this. Can I do this? I go back and forth rapid fire.

Before Rhondy exits, I sweep in front of her, blocking the door. She meets my gaze but instead of questions, I see confidence. I feel it too.

Without thinking, I wrap my arms around her in a hug. A hug that I feel like I've needed to give for a few days now. I settle into it with this veritable stranger, but she hugs me back like this is perfectly normal. Welcome and wanted. Like we're old friends. Relatives even.

"Thank you," I say when we part. I want to thank her for trusting me.

With a smile, she glances at the chrome clock on the wall and says, "I'd better get back to the Starlight. You're a lifesaver."

Now, all alone, I'm afraid Rhondy took the confidence she had on loan with her instead of leaving it with me.

And boy do I need it along with an instruction manual. Yes, there are the expertly organized binders, but I've never had to operate a point-of-sale system never mind refill receipt paper, sugar shakers, or napkin holders.

Usually, I'm on the other side of the counter, placing orders and not taking them.

It doesn't help that my life has suddenly gone wrong or that I hardly slept last night because I was thinking about Aiden. Then the critter that woke me up, scratching on... something. For a minute—okay, twenty—I thought it was Murder Doll trying to escape from the trunk of the Maybach. After that, I jumped to a Sasquatch trying to break in—I was an extra in Hunt & Seek Sasquatch II and everyone on set claimed it was real.

Never mind that, now is not the time to have a crush on anyone, least of all Aiden Fuller. His sisters hate me. Taylor is married to one of them. They're best friends. It's bad timing. Bad everything. I can't afford the chocolates in here nor can I afford to fall in love.

And how could I fall in love if I'm not interested?

Wait. Am I interested?

*Pfft. No way.*

It's as if Aiden smells better than chocolate, and that says a lot since I'm practically bathing in it right now. His eyes are the kind that see beyond the exterior and superficial—it was like he could see me, the version of me beyond the sequins.

I need a distraction.

Chocolate. I could go for some. I don't want to take a piece from the display case, so while I'm in the back getting more cream for the coffee station, I spot some in a container on the shelf. I open it and inhale. It's not quite as sweet as I expect. Perhaps it's one of those fancy dark chocolate kinds that boasts high percentages of cocoa.

This is just what I need to satisfy the hunger inside—not the breakfast kind. More like the man-cation breakfast buffet kind.

I take a little bite of the chocolate and then spit it out like a cat with a hairball before scraping my tongue with a napkin. It's the most bitter thing I've ever tasted. "Ew, ew, ew."

I read the label on the top of the container. *Baking Chocolate*.

How can baking chocolate taste so disgusting when it comes out so delicious? Must have something to do with the oven, of which there are several in here.

Thank goodness no one saw that and thank goodness I don't have to bake. I do not know my way around the kitchen. For instance, once I was helping my friend put together a recipe because the caterers were late. She said to add cheese so I just tossed the brick of cheddar in with the rest of the ingredients. Turns out I was supposed to shred it. I thought shredded cheese was its own thing. Don't blame me, I grew up with a chef.

Also, just yesterday I learned that pickles come from cucumbers. The more you know, am I right? The Fuller Sisters seemed to think that was funny, but not their brother.

The door to the front jingles and I bring up fresh cream since the container was getting low. While I get the customer their coffee, I think about how Aiden seems like an open book. But that's a result of judging him by his cover. He has a big personality, is generous, and gorgeous. But those eyes tell another story. Not only does he see me, but I also sense he's seen a lot. More than he lets on. Maybe he's not so much a book but a diary with a padlock. Does he contain secrets inside?

Whatever. I can't let myself read a chapter never mind the first page. It's been a while since I've read a book at all. Seems like something people do in Butterbury or while on a man-cation.

"Miss, I think that's plenty of cream," the woman with thick glasses says from the other side of the counter.

I look down to see the cup overflowing. Apologizing, I get her another coffee. "Must've been distracted."

"Mmm. I know that look." She winks. "You were thinking about a special someone."

I shake my head. “Nope. Just chocolate. I have chocolate on my mind. And books. And my man-cation.”

She laughs like she knows I’m full of beans.

“Do you know where I can get a book?”

“That’s broad. Do you mean a Bible or fiction? A cookbook? A how-to guide? Fantasy? Romance?”

I bounce on my toes and point. “Yes, that. Definitely romance.” Perhaps that’ll help clear up whatever it is that suddenly seems to be afflicting me. Or perhaps it’s a byproduct of working at a place called Sweethearts because I cannot stop thinking about Aiden.

I’m afraid he’s got me good.

# *Chapter Twelve*

I mmediately after I drop Tinsley off, I hurry across the street to my office. It's on the second floor in the building above Brick Bookstore. The owner, Aggie Miller, is a proud tinfoil hat-wearing founder of the Anti-Stoll Society of Butterbury. She started the one and only chapter during the first round of Stoll's attempt to destroy the town.

Also, she reads a lot. Mystery mostly. Some thrillers too. She also keeps tabs on Stoll's every move. If I didn't know better, I'd say she's a covert member of our investigative team. In other words, she's a good person to know.

I've had it in my head to become mayor for a while now, but Aggie really encouraged me to go all in. Well, as in as I can against a guy who has this place in a stranglehold.

Aggie greets me when I enter the bookstore, but the real attention comes from Hercule, her Finnish Forest Cat. His bushy tail is a wonder to behold.

"Hello, sir." I give him a good scratch.

"Morning, Mr. Fuller," Aggie greets me with all the efficiency of a Revolutionary War general leading troops into battle. In fact, she considers this a siege against Stoll. "Status update: all is well with the asset most recently involved in Operation Pierate." Her gaze travels upward in a not-so-subtle way. "Fed, watered, etcetera. No additional intel available."

She doesn't know all the details, of course, but because Stoll loves pie and he's something of a pirate, she dubbed the cat situation Operation Pierate. Also, I assume the *etcetera* refers to Twinky's litter box.

“Thank you for your service.”

Aggie swallows and looks around to make sure we're alone even though this is her shop, “The asset and Hercule had a meeting. She cooperated and Hercule signed off with his approval. She's clean. Innocent.”

“Well, that's good news,” I say, playing along. “I appreciate your help, Aggie.”

“Any word from Rat Tail?” That's the code name she gave Gatlin Stoll.

“Unfortunately, no.”

“That's concerning.”

“Indeed. I'd better say hello to Twinky and get some work done before I head over to Bubba's.”

“Ah, yes. I hear your arrest went as expected. I'm only grateful the rescue was successful. I think going into the witness protection program is the best option for the asset after what she's been through.”

I try not to chuckle. “I'll see to it that she's safe. Will you be able to continue checking on her while I'm out?”

“Certainly sir, yes sir. Additionally, Hercule is a proud member of this operation and he will see to it that she has companionship as well. I imagine protective custody can get lonely.”

“Glad to hear it. Thank you.”

We give each other a playful salute and I go upstairs to my office where I find the white and tan Persian cat lounging in a patch of sunlight. Much like Stoll, she's rotund. Her tail flicks when I enter and she looks at me like I'm interrupting her morning nap. I suppose I am and I could go for one after last night's rush through the woods when Tinsley called. I didn't see any signs of wildlife last night, but it's not unusual for raccoons, skunks, and other critters to get curious.

The real danger was Tinsley looking cute in her pajama set and after she got ready for her first day at Sweethearts. I tell my pulse to settle down.

“Twinky, I’d like to take a look at your collar.” She’s a spoiled feline and in addition to gourmet meals, she has a collar embroidered with gold thread and studded with gems that sparkle much like Tinsley’s sequined dress. It gave me the idea that perhaps the collar might hide something. Then again, the short, sequined dress left little to the imagination.

I check the collar and fiddle with the gems, but there’s nothing unusual about it. I thought perhaps they might give something away. Provide a clue. Even though Twinky wears a collar, there aren’t any tags—not even a bell. All I know is Stoll called her Twinky.

I give the cat a pet before returning to my desk, reviewing notes and intel that I’ve collected. My leg jostles up and down restlessly as if to point out that I’m missing something.

“Come on Stoll, reveal what you’re hiding,” I whisper to myself as I review the recent security camera footage from the town hall. I watch him come and go then stop on the last time he was seen there. The same morning Bo saw him on the road.

I rewind the tape to check something when a door creaks. I check the floor, but the cat no longer stretches in the patch of sunlight. Nor is she on the windowsill, in her cat bed, or by the bookshelves.

My stomach drops. That can only mean one thing, Twinky escaped.

I rush downstairs toward the street. It’s bad enough that I’m keeping her here, but the last thing I want for her is to be lost and scared in a world she’s never known after being pampered her whole life.

Relief calms my pulse when I spot her seated at the foot of the stairs. She licks her haunch and then peers up at me. After a long, appraising look during which I don’t dare move, she turns tail and races down the sidewalk.

I’ve pursued all kinds of bad guys on foot, and although Twinky isn’t one of them even though I think she’s somehow tied into Stoll’s misdealings, I’ll count it as the low point of my career if she gets hit by a car.



Twinky streaks by the narrow lane that separates our building from the town hall. Just then, familiar laughter echoes off the stone.

Five men who I know all too well walk toward me, talking among themselves. Then our eyes meet. Like following a laser pointer, their gazes land on Twinky. It's like a slow-motion action shot as they make the connection as to why I'm racing down the sidewalk behind a cat.

Bo looks dubious. Nash's focused expression suggests he does a numerical calculation for how much this could cost me as a potential mayoral candidate. I can't read Buck from under the beard. Taylor is most definitely amused. Cassian's brow lifts with knowing.

Like the best friends slash brotherly football team they are, they gently "tackle" Twinky—don't worry, not a piece of fur on her head was hurt—though Buck does get scratched by a shrub and not the cat.

Taylor passes her to me. "Office. Talk. Now."

I'm used to giving orders, but I guess I owe the guys an explanation.

As we pass Brick Bookstore, Aggie gives me a short but meaningful nod of comradery.

The guys gather in my small office and I secure the door behind us. Dropping into my chair, I'm now on the other side of the proverbial interrogation table.

"Did we just catch you red-handed with Stoll's cat?" Taylor asks, incredulous.

"Red-pawed?" Bo suggests.

They don't laugh.

"So Officer Henley wasn't wrong? You did take the cat." Buck says.

"You're going to need a lawyer," Nash says.

"I have several." Funded by the US government or slippery insiders who know their way around online

documentation. But I keep that to myself.

“Did you or didn’t you steal Mayor Stoll’s cat?” Cassian asks.

“I rescued her.”

“Dare we know why?” Bo paces in front of the window with his hands hammocked behind his head.

“Stoll went on a spur-of-the-moment business trip and returned with the animal. Seemed suspicious,” I say simply.

Buck narrows his eyes as if trying to read between the lines.

I part my hands and shrug. “Little known fact, I’m a cat guy.”

“A cat guy?” Taylor asks.

I lift and lower my shoulder like it’s no big deal. “Yeah, I prefer cats to dogs.”

“Man’s best friend is not a cat,” Buck says matter of fact.

“I’m independent and travel a lot. Trust me, it makes sense.”

“There’s more,” Nash says astutely.

Cassian shoots me a look that suggests if he were to hold a pair of scales, they’d weigh more heavily toward me telling them the whole story if I don’t want to face the wrath of my best friends.

It’s now or never. I need their help. I owe them the truth. My job as an agent isn’t top secret, but I’ve kept it from everyone in my life for their safety and to compartmentalize things. Makes it easier for me. But this situation grows increasingly difficult.

I start by saying, “I have every intention of becoming mayor and turning things around in this town.”

“Not with an arrest record,” Nash cuts in.

“I’m ready to go full local. First, I need y’all to trust me. This thing with Stoll is a lot bigger than you think.”

“Obviously, Governor Pickering was involved,” Buck says.

Cassian looks at me the way he would a pro poker player, curious to see how I’ll play this hand. I have to come clean. Of course, I can’t give them the confidential details of the case, but I need their help. They have to know.

“Guys, I’ve been keeping something from you.”

“Yeah, that you’re criminally minded,” Bo says.

“You’ve taken this too far,” Nash adds.

I get to my feet. “Guys, listen. I’m an FBI agent.”

There’s silence. Then everyone except Cassian laughs.

Taylor comes over, pats me on the shoulder, and says, “That might be the best one yet. Do your sisters know? They’ll get a kick out of this joke. If we throw another Halloween party, instead of dressing up as a monster, you can go as a spy.”

“I’m not a spy and no one knows. Not Bess or Mae. They think I’m in finance or business. Those are relatively broad terms. Yeah, I’m in the *business* of catching criminals. As for the finance piece, I mostly deal with criminals involved in financial schemes. At least that’s how this case started.”

The loose mood in the room tightens like a rubber band pulled tautly.

“You’re not kidding are you?” Nash says serious.

I loop my thumbs in my belt and shake my head.

“Sure he is. He’s kidding,” Taylor says.

I flash my badge.

Taylor frowns. “We’re like brothers. You know all of us. Everything about us, about me. But you didn’t tell me this? Harsh, man.”

“I can understand why you’d be upset, hurt. But I hope you understand that I kept it to myself for your protection and my

sisters.” Ever since the original incident with the Kravens, I’ve wanted to protect the world. Now specifically Tinsley.

Taylor’s cheeks puff as he exhales. “Okay. Yeah. I guess in your position I may have done the same.”

Cassian rests his knuckles on his chin as he takes up the pacing as if this helps him think and gets right to business. “So where are we at?”

“Aggie affectionately calls the case Operation Pierate.”

“Is she an agent too?” Taylor asks.

“No, she despises the mayor, wants to save the town, and has been helping me with the cat. Trust me guys, this isn’t my first rodeo. I’m a trained professional.”

“But the mayor is missing. Any idea where he wandered off to?” Cassian asks.

“Last known whereabouts, other than on the road out of town, was a predawn visit to the town hall.” I tell them about the security cam footage.

Bo and Buck exchange a glance as if it hits them that I’m telling the truth.

Nash says, “Cassian, are you in on this?”

“Given my training, I can sometimes recognize federal employees. I had a hunch.” I appreciate him not sharing that I’d hinted at my status when he was about to storm the town hall not long ago.

“Whew, my mind is exploding,” Buck says.

“Don’t let it. Seriously, I need your help,” I say.

Taylor says. “Wait, does Tinsley know?”

“No!” I say more loudly than I mean to.

Buck taps his finger with the air. “No, because of her involvement with Puma? Christina knew she recognized her.”

“Can we trust her?” Bo asks.

“I think Taylor can answer that,” Nash grumbles.

I straighten. “Tinsley doesn’t have the best track record among us.” I nod at Taylor. “And in the past, she may have been a bit over the top. But yes, I think we can trust her.”

Taylor snorts. “Why her, Aiden? There are millions of women in the world and you had to pick her?”

I’m about to explain myself, which amounts to a rumbling within, an attraction that is hard to fathom and goes well beyond the physical when Nash asks, “Why us?”

“Remember how Bo and Buck caught Streckle at the Estate? Nash stood by Mikey when he didn’t have to. Taylor stepped in when William Taylor hassled Mae. When Cassian intervened after Stoll, Silas, and Pickering threatened our shores? You guys always do what’s right even if it isn’t easy. What I do is always hard. I want to save Butterbury and stop whatever Stoll and his cronies are doing.”

“And what’s that?”

“I don’t know exactly. For the first time through this whole case, I’m stumped,” I admit.

“Seems to me that there is a fly in the buttermilk,” Cassian says.

“Maybe multiple,” I add.

Twinky flicks her tail as if agreeing.

“Sure is. But I know this cat has something to do with it. Stoll got a piece of mail from Gannon, Louella Belle’s brother. A week later, the mayor took a trip to Atlanta. When he came back, he had this cat in his car. Found her in a cage in the garage. Brought her here.”

“Concerning,” Bo says, presumably about the connection to Louella Belle’s brother.

“Strange,” Nash adds.

Like a team of agents in a secret room with maps and schematics, hanging swipeable glass computer screens, and an array of dangerous gadgets Q from James Bond would be proud of, the guys and I outline what we know, starting with

Hydro-pro and concluding with the most recent interaction with the Governor and Gatlin in Cassian's driveway.

He explains, "Pickering and Stoll tried to shut down production of Designed to Last over supposed tax evasion. They wanted my grandparents' property because it offers access to the saltmarshes where they'd intended to position the enemy so they could bring our sub and navy fleet down under the guise of military testing gone awry."

"Then why isn't Pickering in jail? All of them?" Taylor asks.

"Despite Captain Dufour's influence, my testimony, and Stoll's history, Pickering covered their tracks. There will be an appeal case, but for now, they're clear," Cassian answers.

"For now," I emphasize. The truth is close. I can feel it. I pet Twinky. "Stoll is bound to get sloppy. That's the problem with secrets and lies. The truth always reveals itself like the sun after a storm while the lie requires fuel to continue to burn."

"Poetic. What else don't I know about you?" Taylor asks.

That I'm falling for Tinsley?

I show them the security footage I'd been reviewing. "Have a look at this. I've watched him come and go repeatedly. Then, I noticed something different about the last time he was at the town hall." I pause the recording. "Stoll is wearing a different shirt."

"These are all different days though. That's not unusual."

"It's a different style shirt," I clarify.

The guys lean in.

"It's a Hawaiian shirt," I say.

"Casual Friday at the office?" Nash suggests.

"This was from last week. No one has seen Stoll in town since."

"Have you spoken with his secretary?" Bo asks.

“I am his secretary. He didn’t tell me anything and I have access to everything, guys. All his emails, files, all of it. That’s why I quote-unquote sold out. I sensed he was going to make a big move so I had to get as close as possible.”

“But you didn’t find anything,” Buck says astutely.

“Nothing other than Twinky.”

“Explain what’s unusual about getting a letter from Gannon Barnes, going to Atlanta, and having a cat?” Nash asks.

“Taken separately, nothing is especially strange about those three pieces of information. No offense to Louella Belle, but her brother’s contact is a red flag though they were friends, I guess. The trip to Atlanta was personal, not mayoral. As for the cat—”

We all look at the tan and white, long-haired Persian cat with a rhinestone studded collar.

“Yeah, okay. Weird that Stoll would suddenly adopt a cat,” Nash says.

“I think he stole her from someone and is holding her hostage.”

The guys burst into knee-slapping stitches of laughter. I’ll have to run it by Harrison because it doesn’t sound odd to me at all. Then again, I’ve never had to ask for help to solve a case. That’s why I’m a maverick, a lone wolf. I can usually do this on my own. If anything is strange, that’s it.

“What if someone in his family couldn’t take care of her anymore and he did a good deed by adopting her?” Buck asks, uncharacteristically giving Gatlin the benefit of the doubt.

“Then why did he leave abruptly with her in a cage in the garage?”

“Perhaps he meant to come right back,” Taylor says.

“But he didn’t. And that’s where the trail runs cold. He vanished without a trace. Unless...unless he was kidnapped.”

“Or he ran away with a mistress,” Taylor suggests.

We all squint at him.

“To do that he would’ve had to have been married. Was Stoll married?” Buck asks as if shocked someone would exchange vows with such a vile man.

“Not that I know of.” But their questions stir my mind like silt at the bottom of a river. I close my laptop and hold up a key. “Guys, I present to you an all-access pass to the mayor’s office.”

“Does this mean we can trash the place?” Nash asks.

I shake my head. “No, this is a federal investigation and what I’m offering you is very illegal, but I’m asking you to take a look, see if I missed something. And please leave everything exactly as you found it.”

“Where are you going?” Bo asks.

“Community service at Bubba’s,” I say from the doorway and for a ride on my motorcycle, which is where I do my best thinking.

Taylor shakes his head and exhales a breath of disbelief. “Just how deep undercover are you?”

Deep and about to get deeper because I can’t stop thinking about Tinsley.

“Don’t tell me Bubba is in on it too,” Buck says.

“No. Definitely not. I just want to help the guy out. But if anyone at the town hall asks, you’re there to surprise Stoll with an office makeover, a special edition of *Designed to Last*.”

Bo snaps his fingers. “Good plan.”

“Oh, and not a word of this to anyone. Not about the case, me, or any of it. Promise?” I ask, giving them all a hard stare.

I pray they’re not the kinds of guys who tell their wives everything because if so, I’m going to have two angry sisters to answer to and I’d rather tell them myself than face the music—which will consist of the low bass tones of Mae’s



simmering rage and the raucous cacophony of Bess's hysterics.

I hurry downstairs because I don't want to be late for Bubba...or Tinsley.

Instead of finding her waiting by my motorcycle, I spot Henley lingering by it like he was yesterday by the Maybach when he arrested me.

"Are you hear to arrest me again because this scene looks suspiciously like one I'd prefer not to repeat."

"No, I just wanted to uh, let you know that you're clear." Henley coughs into his hand.

"Of the charges?"

His mustache twitches. "Yeah, I apologize. Didn't realize your position. Would've been nice if you'd told me."

"I'm undercover," I say low. "Well, I just told the guys. I'd rather my sisters not know for now."

"Your secret is safe with me, but if I can help..."

"If you see Stoll, I'd like to be the first to know."

"Of course." He says with a respectful nod.

Tinsley exits Sweethearts Bakery & Café and waves as she slowly approaches, likely wary of seeing Henley again.

"You know that you don't have to do the community service," he whispers.

"From what I remember the last time I was by Bubba's place for some ribs, there's a lot of work to be done. I have access to some of Stoll's sticky finger funds that I'd like to reinvest into the town and I plan to start with Bubba." I wink.

Henley laughs then juts his chin in Tinsley's direction. "You sure that's the only reason?"

I smirk and neither confirm nor deny the allegation.

# *Chapter Thirteen*

The morning at Sweethearts Bakery & Café is a blur of mishaps. Getting sugar and salt mixed up along with regular and decaffeinated coffee—rookie mistakes. I even walked out with my apron still on before Louella Belle whistled to catch my attention and so I could put it in the wash basket.

It's not until I spot Aiden, standing on the sidewalk, that anything in my life comes into focus. His back is turned, but there's a lot to admire from here—his tousled hair, strong shoulders, and his backside suggests he's no slouch at the gym.

When he shifts slightly and then turns around at my approach, my stomach knots—I'd like to say I took advantage of working at a bakery and café, but nervous about the ladybosses stopping in all morning kept my appetite tied up.

Aiden standing by his motorcycle with Officer Henley doesn't help matters. The cop greets me and then saunters off.

“Hi,” Aiden says almost breathless.

“Everything okay?” I ask, wondering if he wants to arrest me again or if Henley got word that the FBI wants to take me into custody.

“With Henley? Yep. He wanted to tease me about stealing the cat.”

“Did you steal it?”

Aiden chuckles as he gets on the bike. “For the record,” he starts, using the phrase I did yesterday, “I'm not a thief.”

Except for lady hearts. I press my hand against mine. What has gotten into me? Fatigue? Hunger? I'll take some cheese curls, please!

But speaking of cats and ladies, as in ladybosses, I have a few questions that maybe Aiden can answer because I'm not used to being around women who're so nice to each other. Not catty at all. It's almost unnerving.

"Are the ladybosses and Bess really best friends?"

"They really are," he says. "If I didn't know better, I'd think they were all sisters separated at birth. They're just that close."

"I watched *Designed to Last* but heard Louella Belle and the others applied to be on *Mr. Fix-It* before they got their show on HLTV. Doesn't that mean they were competitors?"

"As I understand it, Louella Belle's aunt who raised her passed away, but she didn't find out until months later. She'd been traveling abroad and her brother neglected to inform her. He also tried to take her inheritance, but that's another story. Rhondy got worried when she wasn't at the funeral. Once back here and living in the Flora & Fawn van, Louella Belle got desperate and applied for the show."

"What about the others?" My heart aches for Louella Belle's loss and the way she found out about her aunt.

"Christina was a social media personality with her @DomesticDiva brand, so it makes sense she'd want to level up. Mae was in a slump and living on Bess's couch. So while Mae was sleeping Bess sent in the contest application."

I laugh. "Seriously?"

Aiden nods with a smile.

"If my sister did something like that..." I trail off. But she wouldn't. I can't remember the last time we even spoke.

"As for Camellia, I'm not sure other than she was a widow and wanted change."

"How'd Louella Belle become Mrs. Fix-It?"

“She didn’t. They all lost. But she and Bo did fall in love. There was a lot of drama. Some of which involved a toilet. You’ll have to ask her.”

“I’m afraid to. They intimidate me,” I confess.

Aiden tucks his chin. “They intimidate you? I’d think it would be the other way around.”

“They’re successful women in life and love.”

“It wasn’t always that way. Remember what I said about Louella Belle coming back to Butterbury with her tail between her legs? She lived in a van. She and Bo didn’t get along at first. And Christina and Buck straight-up hated each other. It didn’t look like the estate was going to get done. They even fell through a ceiling.”

I gasp. “I must’ve missed that episode.”

“I don’t think it’s been easy for any of them.”

Guilt creeps in like a poison vine when I think about how I nearly ruined Mae and Taylor’s relationship.

“I guess you could say they had a choice when they all lost the contest. They could return to their lives and never look back or take a risk on friendship. They did and now have their own show buying, remodeling, and donating to charitable organizations.”

“It’s not just that, they have an empire, Aiden. The boutique and sweetshop with merchandise and food.”

“Don’t forget the farm tours. And Bess has her show which she’ll start filming soon.”

“Exactly.” I gaze at my hands. And what do I have? I’m successful at being a failure.

“Do you have dreams of running a home makeover show, boutique, bakery, or a farm?”

I shake my head. “No, no, no, and no.”

“What are your dreams?” Aiden asks as he starts the bike.

“That’s just it. I don’t know.” I get on the back and wrap my arms around him. Tingles rush through me and I fail to answer the question about my dream by the time we pull into a parking lot that’s more dirt than gravel.

I glance up at a low brown building with white trim and a flat roof. Several picnic tables sit haphazardly in the front and off to the side. Grass grows around them along with a red, hand-painted sign that says *BBQ*.

“It’s a little early for lunch, no?”

“This is Bubba’s. Bubba’s BBQ.”

“Oh. Do you think Officer Henley included a hazmat suit with the work gear?” I pull it out of the saddle bag.

Aiden laughs. “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Please don’t say it’s worse.”

“Best BBQ you’ll ever eat.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had BBQ.”

“Then your life is about to change forever.”

“I don’t see a restaurant grade posted on the door.” Which probably means it got an F.

“Bubba is a fourth-generation pit master. He inherited this place from his dad who got it from his before that.”

“And they haven’t changed a thing in eighty years, have they?”

“Sadly, no. The focus is on the food and getting by. Because it’s a family business, Bubba is very generous. He takes care of his mother and has six kids. His hands are full, leaving little time for cosmetic upgrades.”

“Forget cosmetic, Aiden. This place is in shambles.”

“Business picked up when he catered the Designed to Last set, but he has a hard time keeping up. And I have a feeling because of that he’s missing out on fans who come out this way. Like yourself, people turn their noses up because—”

“Because the marsh is reclaiming the land? The roof is rotting? The picnic tables look like they’ve been picked over by vultures?”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration.”

I pinch my fingers together to signify that it’s slight, almost nominal.

“Why don’t the Designed to Last ladybosses make it over?”

“Businesses aren’t in their contract. Has something to do with insurance. But they’ve donated a lot of leftover materials. And whatever they don’t provide will be part of our community service project.”

“I earned all of four dollars in tips today. I don’t have much to donate.”

“Don’t worry about that. First, let’s head in and say hello. Bubba is going to be thrilled that we’re here.”

I let Aiden go first even though he holds the door open for me like a gentleman. He takes a deep breath. I’ll admit that it smells good, but the smudged chalkboard menu does little to entice my appetite.

It consists of only five items:

- Ribs
- Slaw
- Collards
- Fries
- Soda

Another board lists sauce options, including, honey barbecue sauce, honey hickory, sweet and spicy, sweet and tangy, citrus spice, mesquite, mustard, white sauce, red sauce, buffalo, maple, bourbon, teriyaki, peach with vidalia onion, and a secret sauce.

I frown, afraid to know what’s in it.

When a large man wearing a greasy apron appears from the kitchen, I back toward the wood-paneled wall. Bubba is what I imagine the creature that was scratching around outside the trailer last night looks like. In other words, a Sasquatch.

He and Aiden shake hands.

Aiden smooths his fingers and thumb along his own, freshly shaven face. "I see you're going with a new look."

"Oh, the beard? No, I just haven't had a chance to shave. Ginny just had the baby and it's been all hands on deck all day and night." Dark circles ring his eyes and his hair needed a cut well before the baby was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Wait, does that make seven kids?"

"We're at eight." He smiles proudly.

My heart bounces, recognizing something I've never seen before. The man has eight kids and doesn't think of them as a burden. No, he has absolute love and adoration in his eyes. Never saw my father look at me like that and there were only four of us.

I let out a sigh, unintentionally snagging Aiden's attention because Bubba's appearance is the stuff of "Unsolved Rural Mysteries."

He introduces us. "Ah, Officer Henley said you'd be by to help out. I appreciate it an awful lot. Things around here have gotten away from me. My great-granddaddy wouldn't recognize the place. It was his pride and joy and I've let it fall to ruin."

I don't think he had all that much to work with, to begin with, but I keep that to myself.

"We're not quite the Designed to Last team, but how would your granddaddy feel about a little makeover?"

"As long as I don't change any of the sauce recipes, apart from the honey, I don't think he'd object." A buzzer sounds from the kitchen. "I'd better get that. Have a look around and I'll fix you lunch before you get started."



Aiden and I head back outside and he faces the building. “Thankfully, Bo and Buck jacked up the foundation and fixed that so we can work from the bottom up. I’m thinking of a new roof with vaulted ceilings, fans, and a rustic yet industrial look. Kind of like Buck’s forge. There’s enough room for a vestibule and front porch. The patio will be in the back where we can move the outdoor dining.”

This is the part in the movie where one of the characters says the task cannot be done. It’s hopeless. That would be me.

“I thought we were just going to clean up.”

“Yep. Clear brush, landscaping, and assess the roof. And build an entryway.”

“You’re thinking big.”

“You met Bubba. I think he too adheres to the ‘bigger the better’ philosophy. It would be great if we could scrounge up some familial paraphernalia to really showcase the generational element,” Aiden continues as if undeterred.

“What did you say your job is again?” I ask.

Aiden gets a little hitch in his step as we walk around to the side where he then peeks under a tarp that covers materials.

“You could be a stand-in for one of the ladybosses.”

He straightens and meets my eyes. “When I see something, I go for it. When I start something, I see it through.”

In other words, he’s not a failure like me.

“I want customers to know that if they come to Bubba’s they’ll eat like a king and be treated like one.”

“King of the Swamplands.”

“Sure. Nothing wrong with that.”

We go around to the rear of the building where a slight hill leads down to a broad field that stretches to the woods, er, swamp. I let out a breath and a sigh follows, unbidden.

Aiden’s voice is low when he says, “Not a bad view.”

“It is peaceful. Serene.”

We turn to face each other and his eyes dance over my face as if not sure where to land. He brushes a hair from my cheek, likely plastered there from when I struggled to keep up at Sweethearts. My throat bobs with a swallow. His lips part slightly and I’m not sure if he’s going to say something or—

A telephone rings from somewhere inside, startling us both.

I press my hand to my chest. “I didn’t know they still had those things.”

Aiden’s smirk is mischievous like he got caught about to do something other than talking.

We go inside where Bubba is on the phone talking about a broken ice maker.

Aiden moves to peek in the bathroom then waves his hand as if thinking better of it. “New bathrooms.”

Bubba gets off the phone and Aiden gives him the scope of work, adding a new ice maker to his immense list.

“I’m awfully thankful for your help, but is all of this really in the town budget?” he asks.

“Stoll’s pockets are deep.” Aiden winks.

Bubba’s eyes widen. “You sure the mayor wants to invest? I thought he was intending to sell Butterbury.”

Aiden balks. “Sell Butterbury?”

“You can’t sell a town, can you?” I ask.

“Not if you don’t own it.” Aiden’s brows creep together. “What makes you think Stoll intends to sell the town?”

“He said so.” Bubba wipes his hands on a rag and then leans on the counter.

“When? To who?” Aiden asks.

Bubba rubs his hand through his beard. “Probably about two weeks ago now, he was in here with two men. Dark suits, sunglasses. They looked like characters from the movies.”

“Like Men in Black or—” I ask to clarify.

“All I know is he called them both Kraven. Kinda weird that they had the same name, right?”

Aiden’s eyebrows couldn’t inch any closer. “Kraven as in the Kraven Corporation? As in Kraven Casinos? Kraven Cash?”

“I’ve been there. Puma performed at their Las Vegas property several times. I got my room and everything else comped.” I smile.

“Oh, those Kravens. I think they were involved in some alien stuff,” Bubba says straight-faced.

“Men in Black for real?”

Bubba goes on to outline some crackpot conspiracy theories about aliens and data harvesting.

Aiden’s nostrils flair and the muscle in his jaw ticks. “Interesting.”

I whisper. “I’m not sure any of that is real.” Though I can now verify that Sasquatch are.

“Maybe. Maybe not. But the Kravens are real, and they are bad, bad guys.” Aiden stares into the distance for a long moment.

“But you can’t sell a town,” I say, already on Team Butterbury.

Aiden remains silent as if thinking.

“Don’t tell me you think Stoll is trying to sell it to aliens,” Bubba asks.

He shakes his head as if the director instructed him to shake off a dark thought or distraction then he pounds his fist in the air. “Gatlin Stoll is more crooked than a dog’s hind leg.”

“Then why is he still mayor?” I ask.

“The governor was protecting him,” Bubba says.

“He’s the weak link. They need him in play. He’s their puppet, but they can’t say that. I almost had him. But the

corruption went further. Now I know where it leads,” Aiden says almost to himself.

“Do you still want lunch?” Bubba asks.

“Definitely,” Aiden says with a smile as if having moved on from whatever dark place his thoughts took him mere moments ago.

We take a seat on the cleanest picnic table outside with two baskets of ribs, fries, and slaw along with a roll of paper towels.

Aiden digs in and I pop a French fry in my mouth. It seems safest. When he’s halfway done with his meal, he says, “Seriously, Tinsley try it. Like I said before, Bubba’s BBQ will change your life.”

“If I get tetanus it’ll change my life.”

“Have you had the shot within the last eight, ten years?”

“I don’t know.”

“Henley put gloves in the bag of work gear.”

“Are you suggesting I eat this with gloves on?”

Aiden tips his head back and laughs.

“I was thinking a fork and knife at least,” I say.

“Come on. Eat up. It’s going to be a long day.”

I relent and am glad I do because by the time we have the weeds and refuse cleared from the front outside the building, the sun dips toward the tops of the trees, and my stomach rumbles. Sweat and dirt form a fine sheen on my skin.

Backlit, Aiden stands a few paces away. He goes still and stares at me. I turn around slowly, afraid Sasquatch creeps up behind me and is preparing to bite my head off. Nothing there other than the field, bathed in golden light.

Gaze locked on me, Aiden stalks my way. Shivers run across my skin. He stops in front of me as a bee buzzes past. The shovel in my hand becomes limp.

Without taking his clear blue eyes off mine, Aiden leans the shovel against the wall. He pulls off each of my gloves and examines my hands.

“You didn’t even break a nail.” His voice is like the gravel under our feet.

“Not yet.” Mine is choppy like my body isn’t sure whether to inhale or exhale.

He turns my hand over and brings it to his lips before pressing them to my skin. His eyes capture mine again. Already flushed, my skin heats further. When he kisses the inside of my wrist, the heat moves from the outside in, flooding me with warmth.

Maybe my man-cation is over. I open and close my mouth, not sure what to say or what to do when Aiden walks across the lot to gather his tools and then waves goodbye to Bubba.

I remain rooted to the spot where the weeds just were, wondering what just happened and why he didn’t want more. Why I do.

The guys I’ve been with either want it all on demand or, like Taylor, keep a respectful distance. Aiden is somewhere in between.

Where does that leave me? Confused and really, really wanting a slice of pie.

# *Chapter Fourteen*

If my life were a dry fuse leading to a powder keg, Bubba's claim that the Kraven Corporation has something to do with this case lights the end. Dire possibilities crackle and burn in my mind. If this is true, I'm not sure I stand a chance.

When they catch wind that I'm the agent on the case, it's game over for me.

Better to enjoy late spring doing community service with a beautiful woman than to dwell on what's suddenly a more dire situation than I could've fathomed. While I can, I'll make my last-ditch efforts to save Butterbury.

When I saw Tinsley standing on the worksite at the end of the day looking delightfully dirty and disheveled, I couldn't help myself. Life is too short. Mine perhaps more so now.

Her lips drew me close, but I don't want to move too fast, to make her think this is anything but the real deal. I've never felt so overwhelmed, so drawn, so consumed by a woman.

My mind is like a switchback trail and returns to the Kraven brothers. We go way back. In addition to the fuse with the powder keg, there is also a timer attached to explosives. I'm not their favorite person and they're not the kinds of people to play nice or fair. Me neither. I won't go down without a fight, but it's not one I'm confident that I can win. After all, it's two against one.

I wait for Tinsley while she changes out of her work clothes. She and Bubba stand in the doorway. She wears a friendly smile at something he says.

At first, her uncertainty and discomfort at coming here were beyond obvious. Bubba is big and hairy, but he's a good guy. Much more so than Puma and the other people she kept company with in Los Angeles. There's no denying he looks like a Sasquatch, but he'd offer a place at his table to anyone, even Puma.

Well, probably.

Tinsley moves slower than usual when she approaches the bike.

"Long day?" I ask.

"Bubba asked me if my dogs are tired."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said they're dead."

I stare at her, aghast.

The corners of her lips drop. "We lost the cocker spaniels during my senior year at boarding school. I didn't get to say goodbye. My mother has standard poodles now. Porter and Paris. They hate me."

I take Tinsley's hand. It's small and soft, warm and sends a thrill racing through me. "I'm sorry."

"That my parents or the dogs hate me?" Tinsley asks without humor.

"Both. I'm sure that's not true. Your parents can't hate you."

"I haven't given them a reason to like me."

"That's not entirely your job."

"Yeah, but I could've been less of a spoiled brat."

"Were you a spoiled brat?" I ask with a semi-air of disbelief because the Tinsley I've been with the last couple of days isn't much like the high-maintenance, manipulative girl Taylor warned me about or the person I assumed she'd be based on the situation with Puma.



“I was the worst. But I can do better, and I’d like to start with some pie.”

The corner of my lip lifts with a smile. “You want pie? I know just where to go.”

She gazes at her feet. “Yep, my dogs are tired. Dead tired.”

“I take it that Bubba told you what that expression means.”

She gets on the back of the motorcycle. “Sure did.”

I welcome her arms around me. Her touch is better than pie.

We leave the exterior of Bubba’s BBQ in slightly better shape than when we arrived. Twenty-nine days to transform the place...or less, depending on the extent of the Kraven brothers’ involvement.

After we stop back at the trailer to freshen up, we take the car to dinner at the Starlight followed by two jumbo slices of Derby pie with pecans and chocolate topped with homemade whipped cream. My body wants to curl up on a blanket under the stars with Tinsley. However, my mind volleys between the case and the Kravens. It goes back and forth, left to right, reminding me I’d better check on Twinky and play with her or else she might tear apart my office.

Even so, now would be a good time to pull out my phone and look at cute cats. To summon calm. Or is this when I call upon the lion? I don’t know if I should bring the case to my superiors, or tell them that I’m out. Conflict of interest. The other option is to attempt to bring the Kravens to justice and potentially die trying. They have their hands in more pockets than most and not because they’re a particularly charming pair. No, they have dirt on everyone in politics, finance, media, and the whole shebang. They also have thugs to do their dirty work.

And trust me, all their work and money and intentions are dirty.

What the Kravens want, the Kravens get and it’s all because of me. Granted, they were never on the straight and narrow, to begin with, but after time in jail, they didn’t repent

for their sins. No, they went all in and have been tearing people, businesses, and countries apart ever since. Maybe space too if what Bubba said is true.

What would Aslan do?

While Tinsley uses the bathroom, I rest my head in my hands. A shadow falls across the Formica table that's as old as the diner itself. When I look up, Rhondy smiles. "You're better together."

"Did I ask any of the questions rattling around in my head out loud?"

Rhondy laughs. "No, you just look like you have a lot on your mind. As for me, I take stubborn situations to God first then Paul, my friends, and my family. When I take the word *me*, and turn it to *we*, I often find that I was the one being stubborn."

I tilt my head, thinking. "Thanks for the pie and the advice."

"I'm always here if you need me, offering up my unsolicited thoughts." She winks.

Unsolicited maybe, but definitely a welcome reminder.

I can't do this alone. I need help, but that would mean endangering the people I love. It's too big a risk.

Tinsley comes back and we chat with Rhondy for a moment before settling the bill.

"You okay?" she asks as we step outside. "When I came back from the ladies' room you seemed..."

"Preoccupied? Yeah. Before we head back to Toby, do mind if we make a pit stop?"

"Considering you're the one shuttling me around, it's your call."

"Are you allergic to anything, say cats?" I ask.

Tinsley's brow furrows. "Just tarragon. It gives me hives."

"That's very specific."

“Ruined a trip to France once. They use a lot of that herb in their cooking. Which is something I don’t know how to do.” She eyes the glowing Sweetheart Bakery & Café sign.

I take her hand, offering assurance. In addition to the normal chest rumble at her touch, she anchors me now. I have someone, in addition to my beloved family, who is special to me. Rhondy’s words echo in my mind. “Better together.”

“Hmm?” Tinsley asks.

Suddenly self-conscious because this isn’t my usual approach with women, my ears heat. Thankfully, it’s dark. “Oh, um, I know how to grill. I could teach you and you’ll learn how to bake at Sweethearts. That’s a start.”

“Yeah, it’s just not how I expected my life to go.”

“What did you expect?”

“Earlier, you asked me about my dreams and now my expectations. I guess I thought it would always go up, up, up, or at least stay the same. I didn’t realize I was riding a roller coaster,” she says as if suggesting her life has gone downhill.

The rumble intensifies because with the kiss earlier and our hands clasped now, I feel like this is an adventure, filled with highs and lows, sure, but also thrills and excitement.

Maybe she doesn’t feel the same.

We cross the street and climb the stairs to my office.

“You’ll meet Aggie who owns the bookstore soon. Suffice it to say, she’s a character.”

“I was just thinking that I should start reading more.”

“You came to the right place.”

Upstairs, I slowly open the door and a pair of eyes shine then disappear when I flip on the light.

After closing the door behind us, I click my tongue and crouch. Twinky struts out from under my desk.

Tinsley looks around at the desk and bookshelves then gasps when she hones in on my office buddy. “You did steal

the cat!”

“I rescued her. Stoll stole the cat. Scouts honor.” I lift my three fingers in a salute.

“Why would the mayor of your town do that?” Tinsley pets Twinky who purrs.

“Collateral. A trade.”

“For what?”

“Not what. Who. His wife. Sibling. Cousin.” I wince. Maybe. It only occurred to me as a possibility when I learned he met with the Kravens. It has to.

“Gatlin Stoll stole a cat to trade to get a relative back?”

“It’s a theory.”

“Why would he need to do that? Why would someone kidnap his wife, sibling, or cousin?”

“Still trying to figure that out,” I say, but wonder if it has to do with the Kravens.

Tinsley narrows her gaze. “I’ve gathered that the mayor doesn’t have many fans in Butterbury, but is that a reason to steal the cat that he stole?”

I shift from foot to foot, trying to figure out on the fly how much to tell Tinsley, considering the guys now know about my role in the case. As they say, the cat is out of the bag. “It’s complicated.”

“Are you some kind of small-town vigilante?”

“Only after hours.”

She checks the clock on the wall as Twinky rubs her leg.

“It’s almost eight pm. Does this count as after-hours?”

“Depends on the day.”

“Are you speaking in riddles?”

“No, but this case is one. What do you say, Twinky? Are you going to tell us your side of the story?” I catch myself,

worried Tinsley heard me slip by using the word *case*. I clear my throat, reminding myself that I can't get sloppy.

Tinsley pets the cat. "Aren't you Miss Fancy Pretty Kitty —" She leans forward and squints, examining something. "Wait. You say her name is Twinky, but that isn't what is embroidered on her collar."

"That's what Stoll called her."

Tinsley loosens the clasp and holds it up to show me.

I just see sparkly thread at first, but then letters take shape.

Tinsley points. "Look, it says *Cindy* then there's a red gem. Next it says *Claw* followed by a white gem. Last it says *Ford* with a pink gem."

"Cindy Crawford?"

We both laugh and then look at the Persian cat with her swishy tail. She looks back at me like I'm a numbskull and then at Tinsley like she's brilliant at finally figuring it out.

"So your name is Cindy Crawford?" I ask.

She purrs loudly.

Tinsley runs her fingers over the embroidered letter and gems then flips it over. She tilts her head and looks more closely. "This looks like a number on this side."

"More like an abstract design."

"No, look, this is a two, a seven, and a nine." She goes on and reads two more sets of digits.

I grab a pen and paper and then write them down. "Could it be a code or a coincidence?" I ask absently.

"A code to what?" Tinsley says.

But I'm not sure because I'm overwhelmed by this unexpected woman of my dreams. She was talking about dreams and expectations. I didn't know what mine were either, but it was like my future, what I didn't know I was waiting for, is sitting right in front of me.

The case, the town, none of it makes my pulse race the way her smile does, her laugh, her eyes.

Tinsley looks up at me and our gazes meet. A question vibrates between us. The answer is on my lips.

I incline my head and say, “Tinsley, you’re a surprise in my life. Summer rain on a sunny day.”

Her expression brightens and then dims. “Usually rain is considered an inconvenience. Ya know, the whole parade thing.”

“Not if you’re a farmer. Not if it brings a rainbow.” Everything I’m saying is strictly confidential. No one can know about these sweet somethings and that I mean them.

The distance between us flirts with inches instead of feet.

It’s impossible not to inhale Tinsley’s dewy scent which reminds me of lilies and fresh rain.

My fingers dance just above her shoulders, her arms, and back up again as if I’m afraid of what will happen when we touch.

Tinsley wraps her fingers around my biceps. “Cheese curls.”

“What?” My lips press together with a smirk because it’s obvious what we’re doing to each other.

“I didn’t mean to say that out loud,” she breathes.

The rumble inside grows along with my pulse. “Hmm. I prefer to think of them as pie-ceps, considering Rhondy always pushes a slice on me when I go to the Starlight.”

Her giggle turns into a ragged inhale as she catches her breath. “You smell good,” she whispers.

“You said that out loud too,” I reply.

“I did?” Her voice takes on a dreamy, detached quality like we’re both floating dangerously toward the same place. “I did,” she repeats, a statement rather than a question.

Sight, smell, touch...I can't help but wonder what she tastes like. I brush my lips across hers then come back and linger briefly before pulling back so I don't fully kiss her. It's the softest press of lips, the logical progression from her hand earlier then to her wrist.

She sighs and then presses the pads of her fingers to her mouth. She hides a smile, but it reaches her eyes.

I've never been the kind of guy to take it slow, but I want to savor every moment with Tinsley. I don't want to rush through the first kiss or make her feel like I'm just passing through. That goes for every first, second, and third too.

No, I'm here to stay. I'd like her to as well.

"That was some smooch," she says, breathy.

"A smooch?"

"No, a smooch. I've never been smooched. It's between a smooch and a kiss, the warm-up if you will."

"A smooch. I like it." Especially because it's something that's all our own.

I take her hand as we exit the office to ward off the reminder of the countdown—twenty-nine days for her and possibly fewer for me when the Kraven brothers find out that I'm going to do everything in my power to keep them from taking over Butterbury.

Outside, familiar laughter filters from the street. Bess and Cassian go still. Like a teenager caught by his parents, my instinct is to drop Tinsley's hand, but my heart tells me to tighten my grip. Not to let go. Not to back down.

Bess's gaze lands on our joined hands. "Hey, bro. Whatcha doin'?"

Cassian, usually serious, wears a smirk like he's about to watch some entertaining reality TV.

"Leaving the office. Had to check on some things. Long day over at Bubba's."

"Oh, right. Your community service," Bess says.

“Hi, guys.” Tinsley gives a friendly wave. “I also had my first day at Sweethearts.”

Even though she’s not here, I can practically hear Mae making a snarky comment about how she’s thankful the place is still standing or she’d say something about how hard it must be for Tinsley having to work like a regular person.

Instead, Bess smiles. “What do you think of Bubba?”

Ah, she’s being civil, but this is a test to tell whether Tinsley is one of us or still the selfish, social media-obsessed, city girl Mae likely warned her about. I know my sisters well and I wish I could caution Tinsley.

“My first impression of Bubba was that he was a bit dim,” she starts.

Bess gasps.

“You asked. I’m being honest. My second impression was that he was a squatchy, conspiracy theorist what with all the hair and the comment that Stoll is wrapped up in some deal to sell Butterbury to Kraven Casinos.” She flips her hand dismissively.

I don’t miss the sharp look Cassian throws my way.

Tinsley goes on, “My third impression is that Bubba uses more of his brain than most people. His hands too. He’s the best pitmaster in the world for sure, not that I have anything to compare his BBQ to, but it was amazing. Lastly, like Rhondy, he’s a Butterbury staple and I’m willing to fight for him not to lose his business if someone plans to plunk a casino down there.”

Even though we’re on Main Street, if someone dropped a pin, a feather, or something equally small and light, we’d be able to hear it.

“Okay, she passes,” Bess says.

“I saw him with his kids. He’s a loving dad. I heard him talking to his wife. If a guy looked at me like that, even if he was a hairy beast, I’d know I was loved. But he’s worried. I’ve been to the casino loads of times for concerts and events. It’s



fine, but the world, or at least Butterbury, needs Bubba more than it needs another casino. Also, I think whatever is in the secret sauce is addictive.”

Cassian laughs like he agrees one hundred percent.

“Wish Mae could’ve heard that Ted Talk,” Bess says.

Tinsley’s eyebrows pinch with concern.

I say, “I don’t think you need to prove anything to her. Just be yourself.”

Bess nods in agreement. “We were with Mae and Taylor at the Creamery, but they went home. She didn’t feel well.”

“Too much ice cream?” I ask.

Bess holds her arms in front of her belly. “And a lot of baby.”

“I’ll stop by the farmhouse tomorrow. We’d better get back. Another full day ahead of us.”

We wave goodbye to my sister and Cassian and head back to the property in the Maybach.

Tinsley and I talk about *Bubba’s BBQ* and after her impassioned speech, she’s fully onboard to fix up the place and even contributes a few ideas like a live edge bar by the windows for customers dining alone or in pairs, a backlit metal sign that reads *Bubba’s BBQ hand worked by Buck in his forge*, and some plants to add a splash of green to the otherwise neutral décor.

Even though it’s still spring, the windows are down and Tinsley’s hair blows in the wind. Wearing a smile, and floating her hand on the breeze, she looks wild and free, totally at ease.

Totally Tinsley. More herself than I’ve seen her. Totally the woman I want to kiss more than anything.

“Aiden, watch out,” she says abruptly.

Like with the cat in my office, a pair of eyes reflect in the headlights of the car. Thankfully, I am far enough away that I’m able to stop in time.

A very tall and elegant llama stands in the middle of the road.

“What is it?” Tinsley asks.

“That’s Svetllama.”

“What-llama?”

“Mae and Taylor’s llama, Svetllama. She keeps escaping, trying to visit Archie at night.”

Tinsley looks at me with concern.

Getting out of the car, I chuckle. “Once again, welcome to Butterbury where the animals have a lot of character.”

Tinsley locks the doors.

“She’s harmless. Perfectly safe. Just big and intimidating in the dark.” I greet the llama with soft words. She knows me, but putting her nose in the air, she turns her back on me. “Oh, don’t tell me Mae turned you against me. Svetllama, you of all people should understand forbidden love. You’re sneaking around to meet an ostrich.”

She makes a humming sound which could mean anything.

“Listen, if you’re concerned about Tinsley, don’t be. She’s sorry for what happened with Taylor and Mae.” I pull out my phone to call Svetllama’s owners before I actually give Tinsley cause for concern.

Tinsley’s eyes were wide but now they’re soft with curiosity. I guide the llama to the passenger side of the car and gesture that she rolls down the window.

“Mae and Taylor are on their way. Svetllama, don’t spit,” I warn when I sense her stiffen.

“She spits?”

“Only at people she doesn’t like.”

Tinsley’s eyebrows crimp, but she gets out of the car.

I take her hand in mine and show her Svetllama’s favorite place to be pet.

“She’s so soft.” Then she clears her throat. “Svetllama, you’re so soft.”

Svetllama hums again as if approving of the comment and leans into us.

A truck rumbles our way and brakes on the other side of the road. Once more, with Tinsley’s hand in mine, I feel like I’m in trouble, but we don’t pull apart even though Tinsley draws back a little. I flash a look of confidence even though if anyone is going to take my head off, it would be Mae.

She follows Taylor slowly out of the truck.

I let him take care of Svetllama and hurry over to my sister.

“Hey, you okay?”

“I’m pregnant. Very pregnant.”

It’s then I remember that while I was preoccupied with Cindy Clawford aka Twinky, the due date came and went.

We chat for a few agonizing moments where I anticipate she’s going to blurt that Bess informed on us, that we were holding hands, or that she saw it with her own eyes.

Instead, preoccupied, Mae mumbles about being tired but not being able to sleep then gets in the truck and is promptly snoring while Taylor loads Svetllama in the trailer.

“With the belly, lately, she sleeps better sitting up,” Taylor whispers. “Don’t worry. I won’t leave her in here overnight.” With a chuckle, they drive off.

Tinsley and I return to Toby. Not exactly wanting tonight to end, but being tired myself, I walk her to the door as anticipation builds inside of me.

“Could it have been the llama out here last night?” she asks.

“Probably not. Archie, the love of her life, is in the other direction. His pen is on Cassian and Bess’s property.”

Tinsley’s lips twist with a secret smile. “I bet you were the kind of guy who’d sneak out to meet up with girls.”

I nod as memories sneak back. “Yes, very much so. I imagine you broke rules like that too.”

Tinsley’s nod and expression match mine. “All the time. I’d force my parents to make rules just so I could break them.”

“So you were a troublemaker?”

“In a sweet, subtle way.”

“I bet you were a handful.” I wrap my hands around her waist.

“I liked getting what I wanted.”

“Me too,” I agree.

“Oh yeah? And what do you want, Aiden Fuller?”

My gaze floats to hers then bobs to her lips. “I want you, Tinsley.”

She shimmies her shoulders and then laces her hands around my neck. “Funny, I want you.”

“Then will we both get what we want?”

“I think so,” she answers, voice husky.

My lips quirk as the space between us diminishes.

If there were a red button that I wasn’t supposed to push. Too late. Finger locked and loaded. *Beep, beep, beep*. My internal alarm sounds with a warning. Explosion commencing in three, two, one.

It’s time to give in to temptation.

# *Chapter Fifteen*

**H**ow much do I love Aiden's lips on me? From my knuckles to my wrist, to the smooch on my lips, he's made my belly swoop in the best way. It's wonderful, delightful, all the -fuls. Aiden Fuller makes me feel full of something I've never before experienced from something so simple as a kiss.

Actually, there is nothing simple about his lips on mine right now. This goes beyond a peck or a smooch. This is a full kiss. A proper one. The kind I wouldn't describe to family or friends.

My stomach dips ever so briefly when I realize that I don't have either of those. Not anymore. Not really.

But a little sound from Aiden's throat draws my attention back. I do have this and him, for now. The tickle of his scruff forces me to focus. The way his hands tangle in my hair keeps me rooted to this moment.

I forget about the placement of my palms on the broad swath of his muscular back. I lose track of the gallop of my pulse against my ribs. The way my breath is shallow.

At this moment, all I can think about is him. This moment demands I focus on *us* and not me, me, me.

There's a spark and crackling between us as hands and fingers rove. As breath comes shallow and heavy. As our mouths push and pull, deepening the kiss.

He presses against me and I curl into him. It's like our bodies were molded for each other. He nibbles my lip and then

releases it when we part. His eyes are heavy and meet mine. I sense they contain hearts, sparkles, and the unmistakable look of someone who's been kissed senseless.

My lips feel puffy. My expression glazed over.

“Hi, you,” Aiden says, smoothing a piece of my hair between his fingers before dropping them to lace around mine.

“Hi,” I reply.

Our hands swing between us for a long moment as what just happened settles. If there were clouds, I think we'd both be floating on them right now.

Instead, the stars sparkle overhead in the night sky. One twinkles like it's winking as if it caught us in the act. I wink right back.

Aiden takes a few steps toward the four-wheeler, our arms stretching between us. Then our fingers loosen and we let go.

“Goodnight,” he says as he gets on and the quad starts with a roar.

“Goodnight,” I whisper.

From what I've seen, Aiden easily shifts between a maverick biker dude, easy-going in slacks and a button-down shirt but hiding a prank behind his smile, a businessman in a well-tailored suit, and a hardworking guy who wants to help his town.

I don't know what to make of him, other than that he's Loki-like. A shapeshifter. A trickster. I just hope the joke isn't on me.





□

The next morning at Sweethearts Bakery & Café, I put the napkins in the dispenser backward and win the prize for hashtag cake fails. It's only my second day, but Rhondy had a last-minute cake order but couldn't write the message on a heart-shaped cake because it hadn't cooled before she had to head over to the diner.

She tasked me with printing two simple words *Hug me*. She told me a story about a couple who have an inside joke. Well, now they have a new one because their cake says *Huge me*.

What does that even mean? I don't know.

Do I know how to spell the word *hug*? Yes, I do.

Did I make the mistake because I was tired? Nope.

Distracted? Yep, by the epic kiss with Aiden last night.

There was nothing scripted about it, but if I were to write a kissing scene it would've been the perfect kiss. The one to send the audience atwitter. To give them the same swoop that I feel every time I think about it. The one that made me add an *E* at the end of the word *Hug*.

I do my very best to remove the offending letter. Then with a toothpick, I try to swirl the pink icing to hide the blemish. It looks like the cake has a pimple. A white head.

Letting out a long breath, I have to figure out a way to fix this. I pull out my phone and ask the internet. All I get is a long list of cake disasters instead of cake saves. At least I'm not the only one, but I can't let laughter distract me too.

I go to the kitchen, looking for more icing. Could I make some?

The door in the front jingles, indicating there's a customer. I hurry out, beading up with sweat. It's only my second day. I can't mess this up.

A young man with glasses stands at the counter. He has a pimple on his cheek that reminds me of a reverse dimple as he

smiles. “You did it. This is perfect,” he says.

“It is?”

“Yes, she’s going to love this.”

“Really?” I’m about to point out the blunder, but with fresh eyes, it doesn’t stand out as badly as before. “Way better than I could’ve done. It’s perfect.”

“That’s great. Wow. I’m glad you like it,” I say, wondering if I should be fair and point out the mistake I tried to hide and give him a discount.

He pulls a picture of a cake out of his pocket drawn in crayon.

I tilt my head in confusion as he plunks it down.

He explains. “You see, originally, I made a cake but it turned out more like a hockey puck, or, and I quote, ‘the kind of thing that will require dental surgery after one bite.’ Not my best work. Anyway, I drew my girlfriend a picture of what I’d meant, but distracted, I added the letter E at the end of the word *hug*. Now, it’s kind of like an inside joke. But thankfully, this one will be edible.”

“That’s so romantic.” And maybe misspelling simple words like *hug* happens to people who’re in love.

After I ring him up, he leaves with a little bounce in his step.

“Go get ‘em, tiger,” I holler, leaning back on the counter with relief.

The rest of the morning I experience several more close shaves but manage not to mess anything else up too bad—except I lock myself out of the register. Thankfully, Camellia picks up the shift after me. She’s all sunshine and smiles. After she gives me a tutorial on how to fix the register, Aiden saunters in.

My stomach has had a pretty regular swooping habit since he’s become part of my life, but after the kiss, it hits basement level before doubling back and shooting through the ceiling.

*Take any damages out of my pay!*

In reality, I don't move, frozen to the spot. Camellia hides a smile like word of our hand-holding last night spread among the ladybosses. Or perhaps it's down to the way he's looking at me right now.

When I first arrived at the jail, I thought Aiden looked at me once, but not twice. I'm not used to being ignored. Overlooked. Actually, that's not true at all when it comes to my family but not by men. Perhaps I was wrong because he sure seems to be looking...and likes what he sees.

As the day goes on and we're doing our community service, I realize that he hasn't stopped looking at me. Not when I emerged from Toby fresh this morning, when he picked me up at Sweethearts, or now when I'm already sweaty midafternoon from toiling at Bubba's.

Today is what he called a demolition day. Bubba hung a handwritten sign that says, *Pardone our mess. Renovations in progress.*

I have to admit, I appreciate that extra E, and I appreciate Bubba. His wife is a lucky woman. His kids too. Today, two of them help us haul chunks of linoleum and hunks of wood to a dumpster that's nearly as big as the building.

The kitchen remains open and we moved the picnic tables to the other side where Bubba has a window for orders. I'll be the first to admit that clearing and cleaning are a lot easier than baking.

Bubba comes out with four cups with straws. The kids take a sip and go wild.

“Don't tell Mama.”

I take a sip and taste Dr. Pepper. All of a sudden my eyes feel damp. While Aiden gives Bubba a progress update, I wander to the back of the restaurant. The kids run around in the field, already hopped up on sugar.

The nearly forgotten memory of the one time we visited my grandparents in Texas filters to me as if from a dream. I remember Mom was grumpy the whole time. Dad was busy

with work stuff. My brothers and sister were older and wanted to be at the “cottage.” But our grandparents were thrilled at our visit.

The memory of their house is vague, but the fragments remind me a bit of Bubba’s BBQ. Well, before we tore into it today. In other words, modest. My grandmother had white hair and an apron to match. My grandfather was bowlegged and quiet.

They gave us each a can of Dr. Pepper. While my grandmother took in the laundry, I ran around in a field. I picked flowers. I helped her in the kitchen. My grandfather put me on a horse. I’d never been so happy as I was that day... until my mom flipped out about something and we left early the next morning.

I never saw them again, but know they passed away some years ago. The tears bubble up along with questions. I’ll probably never know much about my mother’s relationship with her mom and dad, but what’s wrong with *me*? Why didn’t I ever call or visit them? Why is my family so dysfunctional?

I wipe my face and wander down to where the kids play. Taking one more sip of soda, I jump into their game of chase. While we run, the wind makes my hair tickle my neck, the sun shines in my eyes, and sweat pools on my skin, but I don’t care because the kids and I are laughing and smiling.

This is the answer—jumping into what matters. Not waiting for an invitation or expecting life to be one big shiny event. It’s this, right now.

As one of the kids chases me, something pings off my skin. It almost feels like a sting, a pricker. Then another.

The kids go still. So do I as a swarm of bees surrounds me.

“Dad,” one of them calls.

“Are you allergic?” the other whispers.

I don’t know. As the buzz builds in my ears, a vision of a swollen tongue and difficulty breathing replace my fear of hives like I get from tarragon. I don’t know if I’d have a reaction and would rather not find out.

Aiden and Bubba hustle down the hill toward me. But what can they do? How do you ward off a swarm of bees?

Closing my eyes and praying I don't get stung, Bubba calls, "Don't panic. Stay still."

"I am," I say through a clenched jaw.

"Just relax," Aiden adds.

Easy for him to say. But the tension across my back, in my shoulders and neck, and all my muscles makes me feel like I might splinter, break apart like the wooden slats in the walls from the demo earlier.

Small, soft feet pad across my bare arms and legs. Are the bees preparing to eat me from the outside in? No, silly, they sting. They're going to load me up with their venom. My thoughts start to spin away.

"Tinsley, breathe," Aiden says.

I let out an exhale through clenched teeth and then relax my jaw. The drone in my ears gets quiet. I picture myself running in the field, laughing, smiling, and free. My entire body settles and I feel a strange connection to the earth like I have roots. The air fills my lungs and the sunshine warms my skin. I forget about chasing shiny things and social media and the unending hunger I'd tried to satisfy for years with things and people who don't care about me. Instead, there's light, filling me up. I'm floating but it's not from an Aiden-induced swoop or because I was stung.

In the face of danger, it's like I've come home to myself. The real me. Sweaty, scared, and sun-kissed.

The air fills with the faint scent of smoke, drawing my senses back to the surface. The bees buzz away.

I open my eyes and Aiden rushes over to me and places his hands all over me, inspecting for injury. "Were you stung?"

"No, surprisingly."

"They must like you," says Angie, one of the kids.

“Papa, why doesn’t Gramma keep the bees anymore?” says Billy, the other one.

“It got to be too much for her,” he answers with a hitch in his voice as he sets down a little contraption. He tells the kids the smoke from the device disorients the bees and is usually used directly in the hive for inspections.

“Pa, does that mean you don’t use this honey for the sauce now?” Billy asks.

Bubba’s eyes widen and he presses his finger to his lips in the universal symbol for *be quiet*.

Aiden and I exchange a look. I guess we now know the ingredient in the secret sauce.

“Maybe one of you can learn how to do it when you’re a little older. Gramma would love to teach you,” Bubba says to his son.

My jaw loosens and I say, “In the meantime, I could learn.”

All eyes shift to me.

With a little shrug, I add, “If your mother would teach me.”

Aiden looks me over then one of the kids says what everyone must be thinking. “I thought she was the fancy one. She seems pretty regular to me.”

“And she played with us,” Angie says.

“I’m serious.”

“Okay. I’ll talk with Ma and see what she says.”

“You sure?” Aiden asks me.

“Yeah, why not.” I’d like to learn a skill.

Aiden looks dubious but draws me into a tight hug, relieved I’m okay. “Let’s just hope it’s only tarragon that you’re allergic to.”

“So far so good.” I look over my arms and legs. I might consider myself lucky to not have been stung. But I think the

luck comes with my sudden fascination with the insects and my interest in harvesting honey.





□

Over the next few days, I become obsessed with bees. After that first long day of demo, while Aiden went to his office, I headed to the library and took out a stack of books on *apiculture*. I learn about the history of beekeeping dating back thousands of years to modern apiaries or “bee yards.”

I also become obsessed with kissing Aiden. We have morning kisses, after work at Sweethearts kisses, and goodnight kisses, plus, a few in between.

Okay, there are a lot of in between smooshes—before and after meal smooshes. I just got the mail smooshes. I’m going to make a phone call smooshes. Really, “The Smoosh” is an all-purpose *I can’t stay away from you* form of expression.

My lips are bee-stung and I don’t mind. It’s cheaper and better than lip fillers.

As the days pass, I get to know Camellia and Louella Belle, but she’s mostly busy at ladyboss headquarters.

Bess pops in and gives an update, saying that Mae is very pregnant. I’d like to say working at the bakery gets easier. But maybe now I’m just distracted and intimidated because Rhondy signs me up to help in the kitchen.

On Wednesday, I add cayenne to a batch of muffins instead of cinnamon, have to scrap it, and start over. Story of my life lately.

On Thursday, I bake a plastic spoon into a tin of banana bread...and I forgot to peel them. Don’t ask.

Then on Friday, I mistook Celsius for Fahrenheit on the scones recipe I was following.

More than anything, I want to prove myself, but I just don’t feel like I fit in. The ladybosses are best friends, and I realize I don’t have any. I arrange the scones on a tray and they look more like giant wads of chewing gum than something edible when Mae walks in. Well, more like waddles.

She gives the scones the expected look of disgust then turns her attention to me. I get a glare. No surprise there.

“Listen, I want to talk.”

I offer an open smile, the kind Rhondy sometimes wears yet brace my hand on the display case. “Okay,” I say, thankful the counter is between us because, given the look on her face, I wouldn’t put it past her to take a swing.

“Tinsley, you have something very special to me in your hands. Do not, under any circumstances, break my brother’s heart.”

“No, of course not. But Aiden’s reputation suggests he’s the heartbreaker.”

“Exactly. His is untried. Not calloused by the trials of a real relationship.”

“Truth be told, mine isn’t either. I had superficial relationships or ones I made up,” I say, alluding to the one with Taylor.

Mae rocks back slightly. “Still, if you so much as scratch Aiden’s heart with those nails of yours—”

“These nails?” I hold them up in a reverse position of surrender. They’re not dirty, but they’re chipped and no longer manicured. In fact, looking at my palms, those have callouses.

“Oh. Well...”

“Isn’t it usually the brother that makes these threats?”

“Tinsley, I am the big protective brother and I’m concerned about whatever the two of you think you’re doing.”

I nod. “Understandably. I don’t have the greatest track record. But—” I sink back slightly and blink slowly.

“Oh,” she repeats as if not expecting me to acquiesce. She studies me for a long moment. “Oh, wow. You have heart eyes.”

“Hmm?” I ask, feeling a little punch drunk and disoriented like the bees after Bubba released the smoke into the air.

As if laying down her weapons, Mae retreats. “I’ll have to get confirmation, but this is huge. Well, just be careful. Be good to each other.”

“Of course.” And because I don’t want to do anything that would make me have to face her wrath.

The bells on the door jingle with her exit at the same time the kitchen timer beeps. I open the double swinging doors with heart windows and release a cloud of smoke.

Waving my hands, I’m thankful there aren’t any swarms of bees—swatting them can prompt stings...and that Mae is gone because she’d definitely have something to say about this smoky snafu.

This is the part in the movie when the baker realizes she’s in over her head. I’m terrified that I’m about to burn down the bakery with a batch of brownies in the oven.

“What do I do?”

I can’t call Sienna or my siblings to help. I’m trying to avoid my parents. But there is Aiden. He’s confident, charming, and capable. He can talk anyone into almost anything, but can he get rid of the smoky evidence and a burned pan?

I call him and shout, “I need you!”

# *Chapter Sixteen*

**A**drenaline courses through my veins as I sprint across the street. Dark scenarios rush through my mind involving everyone from Puma to the Kravens.

From the front, Sweethearts looks perfectly normal with no signs of trouble. I take note of the cars parked on the street. No customers inside. The air carries the faint scent of smoke. I open the door, annoyed by the jingle altering my presence, and it gets stronger.

My eyes pin to the pair of glass heart windows in the doors. Instead of clear, they're gray.

"Tinsley!" I shout.

"In here."

"Get out of there," I say as I bust into a wall of smoke, billowing in the air.

Her eyes are wide with fear and red from the smoke.

"What's burning?"

"Brownies," she squeaks.

"Go to the front, open the doors."

She does as told as I wade through the smoke to the back and open the door. I flip all the switches on in case one of them belongs to an overhead fan. Creating some air circulation, I search for a fire extinguisher and have it at the ready when I open the oven door.

Instead of a blaze, I pull a very charred pan of brownies from the oven. It's little more than ash. I toss the thing in the

sink where it lands with a sizzle.

Meanwhile, my phone beeps repeatedly. I'd just been researching the Kravens and making connections to their corporation and the governor. Perhaps it's one of my leads. I'll have to ignore it for now.

Another fan sits on a shelf mounted to the wall, and I turn it on to help clear the place. A cross breeze works well to eliminate most of the smoke when I finally find Tinsley in the front. Her apron is in her fist and her eyes aren't just red. She's crying.

"Come on, let's get you some fresh air."

She shakes her head. "No, I ruined everything. Rhondy is going to fire me. I can't do anything right."

"It was an accident."

"I set the timer for an hour and twenty minutes instead of twenty minutes."

"Honest mistake."

"No, Aiden, it's my job. It's simple. Teenagers can bake. Adult women. Grannies. I'm useless."

I want to comfort her, tell her that it's not true, but my phone continues to beep and now rings.

"Aiden, it's me. Mae is having the baby," Taylor shouts from the other end of the line.

My heart leaps. I grip Tinsley's cheeks, give her a gigantic smooch that I'd like to have turn into a kiss, then rush out the door. "Keep everything open until the smoke clears out. I'll be back. Love you!" I holler.

Those last words only catch up to me when I park in front of the birthing center—a purple and green Victorian house with a ramp going up the side.

*I love her.* My breath shudders at the realization, but I know it's true in every cell of my body. Every fiber of my being.

I take a deep breath and go inside. I can hide my job from my sisters. But no way can I keep love under wraps.

Inside, Bess and Cassian stand in the hallway. My sister scrunches her nose. “You smell like burned chocolate.”

“Yeah, uh, there was a brownies mishap.”

Bess huffs. “Don’t tell me it was Tinsley.”

I hold my tongue because this isn’t about her. “Where is Mae? How is she doing?”

“She’s having a baby. Mom and Dad got here last night.”

“I didn’t realize they’d left.” They’d come down to Butterbury around the due date and stayed at Mae’s. We’d been discussing house plans before I had to fly to LA. Admittedly, in the time since, I’ve been preoccupied with the case...and kissing Tinsley.

“Dad wanted to go to an airshow up north. I guess he said it’ll be his last one.”

I nod knowingly.

“Do you mean they’re really moving back down here?” Bess asks.

“Mae is luring them with a baby. I’m building them a house and—”

“And I’ll just...contribute some charm.” She shimmies.

“You always do, Bess.”

“Thanks,” she says as though disappointed she doesn’t have something better to offer. “Actually, I bet Mom would love to work a few days a week at the bakery.”

“Tinsley would appreciate that too.”

“What did she do?”

“We’ll talk about the brownies later. How’s our sister?”

“Mom is in there with her and Taylor too. Dad is getting some celebration pie from the Starlight.”

“Does that mean the baby is here?”

Bess's gaze shifts to the side and she listens.

A baby's cry splits the softly playing instrumental music from somewhere nearby.

"I'd say the answer is a yes."

Despite my usual composure, the three of us jump up and down and hug.

Less than five minutes later, Dad is back. We exchange a greeting around a stack of pie boxes and paper plates. "Rhondy said she'll be over later with dinner."

Taylor ushers us into the room to meet our nephew. He's small, pink, and has a shock of dark hair. Everything about him is tiny, precious. Perfect. My eyes mist over at the little miracle that just took place.

After we all dote on Mae, Taylor, and the baby, Mom and Bess pass out plates of pie. I take a bite, feeling full of love, life, and the faith that anything is possible.

From across the room, Mae says, "Aiden, you have a look on your face."

Bess agrees. They all do.

"I'm in awe." I tip my head toward the infant, resting in my sister's arms.

"Yeah, but it's something else."

Bess wags her finger at me.

"I'm in love."

"Yep. I knew it." Mae exhales. "I warned her not to break your heart. Do not let her break your heart."

"Take it easy, Mae Bae," Taylor says.

Mae pushes to sitting. "I'm just saying if she so much as \_\_\_"

"You already warned Tinsley," Taylor adds.

"You warned her?" I ask, aghast.

"Just doing my sisterly duties." She juts her chin defiantly.



I scrub my hand down my face. “Thank you, I guess.”

“You’re welcome.”

Taylor kisses his wife and son on the forehead then comes over to me when the ladybosses arrive.

“Did you have to pick Tinsley?” he asks in a low voice.

“I don’t think it was a matter of selection. It just happened, but if you’re uncomfortable with it, we can talk.”

“No, it’s not that. As mentioned, we never officially dated. I’m just worried that you won’t walk away unscathed.”

I almost roll my eyes. “I think I can handle it.”

Taylor’s expression wrinkles. “What about the, uh, ‘If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you’ situation?”

“Taylor, I don’t typically kill people. I’m a federal investigator.” I rub my temples.

“But does she know about your job and the case?”

“Oh. Uh, not yet.” Uncertainty pinches me inside. This far down the road, I’m not sure how to tell her without one of us getting scathed.

The pursed-lip look Taylor gives me suggests I may have a problem on my hands.

“Don’t worry. I’ll deal with it. I always do.”

After we visit for a while longer and well-wishes filter in and out, Mom has everyone leave to give the new family some time to rest.

I exit into the hallway in a daze to find Tinsley standing there.

She holds a pastry box from Sweethearts. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Mae and Taylor have a healthy baby boy.”

“I made brownies.” Her smile wavers.

“That was so *sweet* of you.”

“I didn’t burn them.”

“And very responsible.”

“From now on, I’m going to do a great job at Sweethearts. Nearly burning the place down was a wake-up call. Rhondy came by in case I hadn’t heard about the baby, and I told her everything. I’d been on my phone, distracted when I set the timer. I wasn’t focused.”

I smooch her cheek and am tempted to do the same on her lips, but she draws back.

“I don’t know why I’m here.”

“Is that an existential question?” I guide Tinsley toward the door and outside where there is a garden and bench. We sit down with a nice view of the town.

“You have a look on your face,” she says.

She’s got that right. I can’t tear my gaze from her.

“I just witnessed the meaning of life and realized something important.”

“Do you mean you witnessed the miracle of life?”

“That too.” I turn to Tinsley and our knees bump. Taking her hands in mine, I say, “I know what I want. You. Us. A family.”

Her lips part slightly, but she doesn’t say anything. Instead, her big brown eyes search mine.

When she still doesn’t reply, I say, “I’ll take a smooch.”

Our lips collide and a smooch quickly turns into a smooch which becomes a kiss. A long kiss where I pour my love into her. Love I want her to receive with open arms. Love that I didn’t know existed never mind the kind that I’d ever be lucky enough to feel.

I caress her jaw, rub the soft spot by her ear, and trace the nape of her neck with my rough fingers. I want to make every part of Tinsley mine, today, tomorrow, always. My heart races toward her. My pulse barely keeps up as the kiss deepens on this late spring morning when I finally have met my match.

When we part, Tinsley's gaze searches mine. I've found what I'm looking for. I hope she has too. My chest swells and my stomach tumbles as I take her hand and kiss the back of it, an anchor as I prepare to take a risk.

"Tinsley, life is too short to live it lukewarm. I realize I have big, hot feelings for you." I try not to smirk. "I'm wondering if you'd like to make this more official? I haven't asked anyone this since high school, but I'm wondering if you'd like to be my girlfriend?"

"Your girlfriend?" she repeats as if it's a foreign word or she expected me to say something else.

Doubt slinks in as seconds drip like a leaky faucet between us, taking my mojo with it. Then Tinsley leaps toward me, throwing her arms around my neck, clobbering me. She pulls back and then grips my cheeks with her hands before smooshing me again. "Yes, yes, I'd love to be your girlfriend."

"Really?"

"Really. Why do you seem so surprised?"

"For a second there, I wasn't sure—"

Tinsley drops back and looks at her hands. "Believe it or not no one, not even in high school, ever officially asked me out."

I shake my head. "Nope. I don't believe that. I've seen your social media. You've, uh, had plenty of boyfriends." And I'd like to knock out every single one of them. Then again, if they'd been half the gentleman she deserves, she wouldn't be available.

"No, Aiden. No one ever officially asked me out like that. Sure, we'd go on dates and that would sometimes last for a few weeks or months, but not one of them ever said what you just did."

"Really?" I repeat with a squint.

"Yes, really. Why is that so hard to believe?"

I wave my hand from her head to her toes. "Because you're you."

“Me with the big head and feet?”

“You don’t have a big head.”

“It’s hidden behind all my hair.”

Tinsley goes on to cite several more things she’s self-conscious about. I shoot down each one and follow it with a smooch. Despite the silly name, I’ve come to understand the smooch is a caress, a constant kiss, and one that remains there long after our lips part.

At last, she goes quiet, having exhausted her list.

“And now, I’m going to tell you all the things I love about you.” My list is twice as long. When I’m done, I wrap my arm around her and say, “Since neither one of us has officially done this before, we can call ourselves a work in progress.”

“And a baker in progress,” she adds.

“And a beekeeper.”

“Do you really think I can do it?”

“Tinsley, I bee-lieve in you.”

With her head resting in the nook between my shoulder and chest, I feel her smile lift her cheeks.

“No one has ever said that to me either.”

“Then you’ve been hanging around with the wrong people.”

“You got that right. You seem to really love your family.”

“That I do.”

“And this town.”

I nod then glance down before tipping up her chin so I can see her big brown eyes. “And you,” I add.

“You love me?”

“Mmmhmm.” When she doesn’t say it back, my heart sinks a little, but perhaps this is the first time she’s hearing it too. I have a feeling it has to do with her family, and I don’t

want to press. But I do want to hold her in my arms for as long as she'll let me.



□

Later that evening, I drop Tinsley over at Bubba's family compound where she'll meet his grandmother and learn about beekeeping. Meanwhile, I'm in my office, reviewing the latest bit of intel confirming a shell corporation linking the Kravens to Hydro-pro, an environmental organization that donated to Governor Pickering's last campaign, and an offshore bank account under the name Cindy Clawford.

The dots are starting to connect, but I still cannot figure out exactly why the cat is involved only that she is or how she connects to Stoll. I followed my instincts and I was right, this bank account confirms it. But how? Why?

It's been over a week since we've seen our good mayor. More like a grifter, but that's beside the point. "Where are you, Stoll?" I whisper.

While Tinsley and I were sitting on the bench outside the birthing center, the vision of my life spread clearly before me like I was watching a movie. I'd like to finish the house, get married, and maybe work out a way to have a family. I'd retire from the agency and become mayor of Butterbury. I'd take care of my home, my family, and this town. That'll be my legacy.

Thinking about it now sends a thrill through me.

I open an interdepartmental email from Harrison. He tells me Silas Fallon clocked out, code that the guy is dead. I lean back in my chair, hammocking my head.

Having dealt with the Kravens in the past, I know all too well that when people start disappearing and dying, they're getting closer to closing whatever nefarious deal they have in the works. It also means that it's only a matter of time before they find their way here, but *why* is still a question I can't answer.

Over the next few days, I research Gatlin Stoll, which was where I should've started because I learn there are no long-term records for anyone by that name. He appeared a few years ago out of thin air. There are no traces of him prior to

him running for mayor despite his grand claims of being a lifelong Georgia resident and a graduate of Georgia Tech along with a roster of achievements including being in the army reserves and helping to rebuild homes after flooding along the coast. However, none of those places have records of his attendance or participation.

Not only is the guy a grifter, but he's also a swindler.

And I'm stupid for not researching his background, to begin with. Because he was elected mayor, I took him at his word, that he was who he said he was.

Interestingly, I repeatedly tie him to Gannon Barnes, Louella Belle's lousy brother. He was arrested not long ago but before that, he was running scams in Las Vegas. Turns out, he was released from jail roughly the same time Stoll went to Atlanta.

I try to link Gannon and the Kravens, but they keep the identities of their lackeys locked up pretty tight. I have a dead-end feeling, but that's not right. I'm overlooking something and it's probably right under my nose.

The door to the bookstore downstairs jingles at the same time the cat arches her back, hisses, and runs under my desk. I peek down there and she cowers in the corner.

"You okay, Cindy?" I ask.

She looks at me with wide eyes.

I go to the window and see a black sedan pull out of the parking spot and then hurdle down the street. Locking up, I go downstairs to find Aggie snarling and muttering under her breath.

"Hey, Aggie. Everything okay?"

"Just a couple of thugs came in here looking for Stoll. Said he has bills to pay."

My eyebrow spontaneously arches.

"I told them any money he owes comes to Butterbury first."



“And rightly so. Anything else? Can you tell me what they looked like?”

“Sure. One was tall. The other short. One thick and the other thin. They both had dark eyes. Something wasn’t right about them.”

Sounds like the Kravens sent their bullies to play fetch. I rub my chin, thinking. What do they want with Stoll? Maybe he’s not missing. Perhaps he’s on the run.

“Aggie, if you see them again or anything suspicious, let me know right away.”

She salutes me as I rush out of the shop. Time to call an emergency meeting.

Instead of my office, the guys meet me at the Starlight. Not my first choice to discuss confidential information, but good enough.

Gathered around a booth, I tell everyone except Taylor, who is home with Mae, about the unwelcome visitors. Buck looks ready to pound someone’s face. Nash scowls. I wouldn’t be surprised if Bo organizes a vigilante group to patrol the town. As for Cassian, as usual, he’s calm, cool, and calculating. I know the gears in his mind turn with the same detail-oriented sophistication mine do. It’s down to our training and our nature—despite the fun-loving farm boy my friends and family know, I have another side that I’ve kept hidden since my original run-in with the Kraven brothers.

We discuss Stoll’s history and the holes I found in it.

“Come to think of it, he did just sort of appear,” Buck says.

Nash lets out a breath and his shoulders drop. “The rest of us weren’t here yet, so we didn’t know any different.”

“If I so much as see that man who claimed to be mayor—” Bo adds with the fierceness of someone who grew up in Butterbury and intends to guard it with his life.

“Remember, you’re speaking in the presence of a federal agent,” Cassian says in a low voice.

“True, but I appreciate your enthusiasm, Bo.”

“So Stoll faked his identity,” Buck says.

“There’s a chance he’s left a trail of scams in his wake, using fake names all along.” I just need a hint like in a crossword puzzle.

“Hey boys, looks intense over here. Everything okay?” Rhondy asks when she refills our drinks.

I take a sip of my sweet tea. “Yeah, just discussing Stoll.”

She grunts. “When he showed up, Paul said if that man becomes mayor, he has a bridge in Brooklyn he could sell. In other words, Stoll was a silver-tongued liar if ever we’d heard one. Talked a big game. And now where is he?”

“Exactly,” Bo says.

“Brooklyn Bridge,” I say lighting up.

“That’s a far click from here,” Rhondy says as she leaves to help another table.

“Yes, but legend has it that the phrase came about after a man sold the bridge *twice* along with Madison Square Garden and the Statue of Liberty. He’d falsify documents, create fake personas, and con country folk.”

The guys lean in, listening intently.

“So Gatlin may have pulled a similar scam but in reverse, faking his identity, going from town to town, and chasing down money.”

“Could be, but what about the cat?” Nash asks.

“That still has me stumped. Do you think the ladybosses would be up to join us for dessert?”

“Or we could bring it to them. They’re at HQ, planning a new product line,” Bo says.

We move the meeting next door and bring two kinds of pie for brainstorming: chocolate cream pie with chocolate crust and chocolate shavings and an apple caramel cinnamon swirl pie that has my mouth watering.

“What brings you boys up here?” Louella Belle asks.

To my surprise, Mae sits in a new rocking chair, nursing the baby. Taylor sets down a screwdriver next to a footstool he must've just assembled.

Hands on my hips, I announce, "I have something important to tell you."

"Is it about Tinsley?" Mae asks, already sounding perturbed.

Bess says, "Yeah, where is she? You two have been inseparable."

"And you've fallen in love." Mae's tone is flat then she adds, "I'm learning to accept it."

"Good because she's here to stay and so am I, no matter what you think about what I'm about to tell you."

It's as if everyone in the room holds their breath, even the guys who know what I'm about to say.

"Bess, Mae, there's something about me you don't know. Everyone, this is confidential and doesn't leave HQ under threat of a town-wide pie ban when I become mayor."

"You can't become mayor. You were arrested." Mae huffs.

"Officer Henley dropped the charges."

"You stole a cat," Bess adds.

"I rescued a cat and that's what this is about."

"That you're a cat-kleptomaniac?" Christina asks.

The guys chuckle. My sisters do not.

"Listen, this is serious. I'm an FBI agent and have been on a case. I took the cat because she's involved."

This time the ladybosses laugh.

The guys and I remain silent, straight-faced.

"Wait, you're not kidding," Bess says.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Mae asks.

I brace myself for her to throw something. "To protect you. There are bad people in the world. I might not come across as

the thuggish brother who gets in your business, but I trust you both not to have knuckleheads in your life. There are enough in mine. My protection comes in a big picture kind of way.”

“But you didn’t trust us with the truth,” Mae says in a small voice.

“You might think that and I don’t blame you. I’m sorry if that makes you feel bad, but please trust me that I was working in your best interest.”

“And why tell us now? What changed?” Bess asks.

I don’t tell them that my life is at risk more so than it ever has been. The Kravens sent their thugs to Aggie’s bookstore, whether looking for Stoll or me, I have no idea. Surely the brothers won’t be far behind unless I crack this thing wide open before they have a chance to come after me.

“Because I need your help,” I say.

Mae straightens in her chair as best she can. “Oh. How so?”

I tell them about the case, leading up to learning about Stoll’s true identity or lack thereof.

“One question, does Tinsley know?”

“No!” I say.

A smile peeks across Mae’s lips like she finally feels like justice has been served. “Where is she?”

“With Bubba’s mother, learning the art of beekeeping.”

My sister’s eyebrows lift with surprise but not as if she wants Tinsley to get stung. Perhaps Tinsley’s new hobby gives her some respect in my sister’s eyes.

Moving on, I ask, “So what can you tell me about Stoll? Anything, everything. I’m missing something and I can’t figure out what it is.”

“I know that Gatlin Stoll has a tab at the diner a mile long,” Louella Belle says.

Cassian scowls likely because Rhondy is too generous to force Stoll to pay it.

“He left a receipt for a Hawaiian shirt at the inn,” Camellia says.

“What was he doing there?”

“He stayed with us the night before he left or went missing or whatever.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Camellia shrugs. “Because I didn’t know you were investigating him.”

“I didn’t think to mention it.” Nash flinches.

“Why would he stay at Butterbury Bed & Breakfast?”

“Have you been to his house?” Taylor asks.

“Only to retrieve Cindy Crawford.”

“Who?” Camellia asks.

“The famous model is involved too?” Christina asks, confused.

“I think he said *Crawford*.” Louella Belle scratches the air like a cat but with her fingers.

“Yes. Gatlin called the cat Twinky, but her collar says *Cindy Crawford* along with the series of numbers on the back.” I explain the stitching.

“Sounds like it could be the code to a safe. My mother has one in her dressing room for her jewels.” Christina rolls her eyes.

“We searched his office from top to bottom. Didn’t see one there,” Buck says.

Thinking, I bite the inside of my cheek then lift my first two fingers and thumb. “As I see it, we have three choices. One, I’ll do my job, figure out where he went in Atlanta, and where he is now. That’s the most logical. Two, smoke Stoll out by making this public—all his past misdeeds, his mistreatment

of the cat, and destroy his credibility. That's a last resort. Or \_\_\_”

“The first two options sound complicated, tedious, and expensive,” Nash says.

“Or three, cut holes in the toes of Stoll's socks, run his underwear up the flagpole, and declare this town ours.”

Taylor punches the air. “I like it.”

My sisters both shake their heads at me.

“What do you say we move this party to Gatlin Stoll's house?” I ask.

“Taylor and I are going home because *baby*, but we'd like a full report,” Mae says, getting to her feet.

Nash and Camellia bow out because they have to head back to the inn. That leaves Louella Belle, Bo, Christina, and Nash to accompany me on a search without a warrant.

“We'll consider it a friendly, neighborly house call to check on the mayor,” Louella Belle says.

I like the way she thinks, but what will Tinsley think when she finds out about my real job and involvement in the case?

# *Chapter Seventeen*

**A**fter my third lesson on beekeeping from Bubba's mother, his wife Tammy brings me back to Aiden's property. She said she welcomed the time with another adult woman after being with the kids most of the day. She and I are opposites in almost every way, but with the windows down we both sing along to a PJ and the Oak Brook Boys song and chat about the updates to the BBQ joint. I also asked if she had any family photos that I could use for a project at the restaurant.

We remain in the car, gabbing until the sun is about to set. When I wave goodbye and go inside the trailer, I realize that I'm still smiling. Wouldn't you know it? I think I made a friend.

After freshening up, I alternate between watching YouTube videos about bees and baking tutorials. I listen for Aiden's motorcycle and eventually must doze off after the long day working at Sweethearts and learning to spackle.

Who have I become?

A scratching sound wakes me from a dream about a river of honey. I bolt to sitting and listen carefully. The moon is high in the sky and paints the field surrounding Toby with an eerie, ethereal shade of pale white.

I step away from the window, not quite sure I want to see whatever is out there. Aiden's Murder Doll, trying to escape the trunk of the Maybach? He used to tell Bess and Mae ghost stories, and I'm starting to wonder if they're real. Or if I'm



going to be a victim of some dastardly urban legend, er, rural legend.

Getting back in bed, I tell myself to ignore it and go to sleep. The trailer door is locked. I keep my phone charged and within reach. It's probably just a curious critter. Harmless. Definitely not a Sasquatch hungry for human flesh.

The night noises of birds, bugs, and branches blowing in the wind seem especially loud tonight. Was that the scratching? Footsteps? Is someone breathing heavy? I swallow thickly.

Tammy told me about the pack of wild hogs they had to chase from their property the other night. I'm not quite brave enough to go outside to scare it off—I haven't been in the country that long to gum up what Tammy called "Country Courage." And I don't want to bother Aiden again.

There was a protective ferocity in his eyes that night he came down on the quad that scared me. Not for my welfare, but for anyone who crossed him. He alternates between being a laid back capable country guy who works hard, a slick businessman who's no stranger to a devastating smolder, to someone else—an alpha male who'll burn down anything in his path if it means protecting those he loves.

Including me, it turns out.

Aiden told me he loved me. In much the same way that I do my level best not to think about what's lurking outside, I've tried to clear those words from my mind. To cancel them. To forget them.

They scare me because no one has ever said them to me before. Not my parents or siblings. Not previous guys I've dated or anyone in my life.

No, that's not true. When we left Texas after the one visit to my grandparents, they told me they loved me. I didn't want to leave their house and had one of my renowned Tinsley Tantrums. My grandmother kissed the top of my head and uttered those words. My parents had to cart me off, kicking and screaming.

I wanted to play in the mud, drink from the hose, and pick wildflowers.

Mother would have none of that. As we drove away with my face plastered to the car window, she said, *“This was a mistake. We never should have come.”*

Dad retreated to steely silence while she complained and nagged us kids.

See, the thing is, I can’t allow myself to get too attached. I’ll let myself have fun while this lasts, but we’re on day twenty-three of my community service. Only seven to go. What then? I’ll go back to my life. Right?

My mind swarms with thoughts about the past and future, but what I need to do is sleep right now.

Letting out a sigh, I sit back up and give the box my brother gave me a little kick. I’d forgotten about it in the BMW and Officer Henley brought it to me since my name was printed on it before the car went back to New York.

Flipping on a light, I open the flap and find relics from high school and even from when I was younger. Books, notes, keepsakes, and a T-shirt from a theater production. I flip through photos, glimpsing who I was before I tried to fit in and stand out.

Sounds like an oxymoron, but I molded myself into who I thought my peers would like while also being such a brat three nannies quit before my parents found one who, unbeknownst to them, just left me to my own devices. At the time, that was predominantly my device where I captured every moment of my life on social media.

Who cared about my grooming habits, shopping sprees, or nightlife? It turned out a lot of people. I have millions of social media followers. But the minute I got into a sticky situation by being in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong person—I’m looking at you, Puma!—all those people “forgot” that I exist.

I find a glossy program from a high school theater production. I played, of all things, a farm girl. I pull the plaid

shirt from my costume. Still fits even if a little snug. I tie it at the bottom. This feels like a trend in the making.

Since the shirt still fits does that mean I could still be that girl? Rather, a woman now?

I always wanted to get to the top, but I imagine it's lonely up there and likely there's always further to go, a never-ending, never satisfying climb. I'd rather remain here with friends, meaning, and purpose.

For years, I thought I was independent. An influencer. A trendsetter. Turns out I'm a follower like in my diva dream. It floods back now and I recall feeling self-conscious about viewers seeing every pore, every fake eyelash, the mole above my lip which sometimes sprouts hairs, and every age line...all of it. All of me.

I wanted them to see me, and yet I didn't.

Aiden sees me, and I don't mind. I like it. He looks at me with...love. It's real.

All too real.

But the lifetime achievement award from the deep sleep diva dream was not and it's certainly not something I could claim in real life.

It's been just over three weeks since I drove away from everything I knew. What do I have to show for myself?

- Bangs I cut myself and freckles on my face from being outside most of the day.
- Chipped nails and callouses that prove I've been working hard.
- A few extra pounds and much stronger muscles.

But there's more. The screen time on my phone is down and I've contemplated deleting my social media accounts. I've learned new skills, including beekeeping. Beatrice, Bubba's mom, said I'm a natural. And there's a certain guy who asked me to be his girlfriend. Who told me he loves me.

Who I love. But I'm afraid to say it. To make it real because what if I finally have what I want and it gets taken away? Aiden is a maverick, a gentleman, and a hard worker. But it's like he still hides the essence of who he is behind those sparkly blue eyes.

My thoughts return to my dreams when I was a kid—I wanted to be a cowgirl but took dressage. I wanted to dance like the girls in the country music videos on television but took ballet lessons. That was my mother's doing. When I finally cut myself loose, I didn't choose much differently. I wanted to be free and ended up putting myself in a box by aspiring to become an actress, by fitting a mold of what I thought it took to "make it" and be seen and adored by the public and anyone who put up with my antics.

In my diva dream, the host of the awards show congratulated me on winning the award, saying I'd done so much to deserve it. His exact words return to me like a message from my past self, "*You've enriched our communities, given selflessly to children and the least among us.*"

I've done nothing of the sort. A yearning builds inside. I want to do something to deserve respect, make a difference, and not just parade around for my own sake.

Getting back in bed, my mind finally settles as I tuck away this new goal to be a better person, to be generous and giving, to be worthy of any kind of achievement award—not that I expect one, but I'd rather not earn a trophy for being *Society's Most Selfish Socialite* which, looking back, was about all I qualified for.

Less than an hour later, my phone beeps. Startled from sleep, I check it to find a text from someone. Eyes bleary, I read it.

**DO NOT CALL: Hey girl, I miss you. Finally out on bail. What a mess. Ready to pick up where we left off.**

It takes my brain a few revolutions of thought to realize it's from Puma. My breath catches in my chest.

I'm not sure what wasn't clear about me being rudely awakened by federal agents and carted off for questioning that might indicate I'm interested in ever speaking to him again. Ignoring the message, I roll over and go back to sleep.

At dawn, my phone beeps again.

**DO NOT CALL: Hey, thinking about you. Seriously, we need to get together. Where are u?**

My eyes burn and I let out a long breath. My finger hovers over the keyboard, but I drop the phone onto the bed. No, I'm not going to dignify him with a response. I should change the contact label to *DO NOT REPLY*.

Even though I'm exhausted, I somehow make it through the morning at Sweethearts without setting anything on fire, messing up orders, or causing problems. I count that as a win. While I wait for Aiden to pick me up, I find about ten messages from Puma.

They continue with him wanting to get together then verge toward desperation before ending with a threat. He probably wants to talk to me to make sure I don't know anything I shouldn't.

**DO NOT CALL: Tinsley, this is serious. Answer me or I'm coming to look for you. We have to talk.**

My skin prickles and my upper lip beads with sweat. I brush my finger over the mole there, mostly having forgotten about it and all the little things that used to make me self-conscious. My morning routine is now under an hour. Earlier, I felt ready to take on the world. Now I feel like retreating into hiding.

My phone beeps one more time, but I don't look at it and slide it into my purse as Aiden pulls up, gets out of the car, and greets me with a kiss.

Right now, out of the three versions of him that I've seen, he's Aiden-the-protector. Shoulders back, eyes sharp. The man is strong and he loves me. I don't have to worry about Puma. There's no way he could find me in little ole Butterbury.

Aiden asks me about my morning, and my phone suddenly feels like a blinking alarm in my purse, signaling that I have a secret.

“I’m tired. Heard the scratching again last night.” As I speak the words, I get a case of flop sweats, worried that it was Puma. But that’s silly. If he were looking for me, he wouldn’t scratch around outside the door.

“Why didn’t you text me?”

“Didn’t want to bother you.” My voice is slow, sleepy.

“Am I going to have to pitch a tent outside Toby to keep an eye on things?”

“Is Murder Doll still in the trunk? If so, that might not be a good idea. It could sense your vulnerability while you’re sleeping under nylon and go after you.”

Aiden chuckles, but as I connect my comment to Puma’s messages, my stomach tightens on top of the nervous perspiration coating my skin.

“Is it hot in here?” I crank up the AC.

“Welcome to southern summers. The house is supposed to be done in less than a month. We’re a couple of weeks behind because I pulled the guys off the job to help at Bubba’s, but I can’t wait to give you a tour.”

At first, only Aiden and I were working on Bubba’s, but last week a crew of guys appeared and went full blast, building and finishing off an addition and then the roof. I was wondering where the crew came from.

“I’m surprised your place isn’t a Designed to Last project.”

Aiden bristles. “Nah, they’re busy.”

What I’m more surprised at is that I haven’t been up there yet, but he said he wants to do a grand reveal. Apparently, not even his sisters have been inside.

“Don’t want to get into it with the ladybosses over creative differences?” I ask around a laugh.

“Something like that.”

“Did you visit Mae, Taylor, and the baby last night?” I ask.

“Actually, they were at Ladyboss HQ for a bit.”

“What were you doing there?”

“Um, discussing the future and Gatlin Stoll. He still hasn’t turned up.”

“Oh, you mean the future like running for mayor.”

“Yep. And like I said when we first met, I’d like to make you Mrs. Mayor. I saw you and knew.” Aiden playfully elbows me.

“No, you were just amusing yourself while in jail.”

He tips his head from side to side. “I had an inkling. I didn’t know this at first, but after spending these last weeks together, being with you made me want to come home, settle down, and—”

I’m afraid to hear the rest of the sentence. “But you are home, right? Don’t you have to be a resident of Butterbury to become mayor? And you’re building a house. That seems pretty settled if you ask me.”

“Yeah, but my work takes me all over the place.” When he says this, he suddenly sounds as tired as I feel after the poor sleep last night.

My phone beeps, startling me. I ignore it when several more messages come in.

“Are you going to check that?”

I shake my head. “Nah. Anyone who needs me knows where to find me.” Except for Puma. I hope.





□

In addition to Aiden and my community service, it seems half the tradespeople in town have been in and out of Bubba's these last weeks as we framed the addition, hung drywall, and installed a new-old wood floor using reclaimed lumber. Other guys are working on tiling the new bathroom, hanging stainless steel wall panels in the storage and prep areas, and generally redoing the entire place.

When we pull up, several dusty pickup trucks already sit in the parking lot. Bubba stands in a crowd of guys and looks dubious as we approach.

For the first time in my life, the group of men don't ogle me. I used to wear it as a badge of honor to be desired, but now I'm relieved, especially after I glimpse the text messages from Puma.

He insists I reply or he's coming for me. Not coming to see me, to talk, or catch up. No, he's "Coming for me."

The sweat from earlier doubles, especially in the increasing heat of the day.

Aiden tells Bubba that we're kicking him out of the kitchen, so it can be fixed up. He seems uncertain, but Aiden points out a food truck behind the pickups.

"Rented that for you to work out of this week."

"Aiden, you're really going out of your way. You didn't have to—" Bubba starts.

"How many meals have you fed me? All of us? How many times have you helped people broken down on the side of the road, donated food to community events, and time to neighbors? We're doing this for you...and you can thank Stoll." Aiden winks.

"Haven't seen him around..."

Aiden grunts. "Yeah. He's, uh, on vacation."

One of the workers mutters something about hoping it's a permanent vacation.

I think about my man-cation. With a glimpse at Aiden, I can say that it's officially over.

We tackle the various projects to get the kitchen back online STAT, including stocking the silverware and assembling the refrigerated stainless steel food prep unit. It's sweaty, elbow-to-elbow work, and although I'm already tired, it feels good to create something and see progress. The updates and extra space are going to make Bubba's life easier and the restaurant will be a great destination for visitors to Butterbury and locals alike.

While we break for lunch, I imagine coming back here someday and remembering that I took part in this. Aiden and I sit in the chairs I brought out to the field when Beatrice was helping me with the bees.

"I hear you're a pro beekeeper now."

I tip my hand with a dismissive wave. "I still have a bit to learn."

"Does that mean you're going to stick around?" Aiden taps his boot against mine. "Get it, stick, sticky, like honey. Listen to me, making dumb jokes. Of course, you're going to stay."

I was thinking someone else would take over with the beekeeping when the time comes, but I'm afraid to say that and quite honestly am not sure where I'll go. I can't keep taking up space in Aiden's trailer. This is community service. It's not designed to last, which makes me think of the ladybosses' show.

"You should have a makeover show on HLTV too, only you'll rehab businesses," I suggest, eager to change the subject.

Aiden chuckles. "Oh yeah? What would it be called?"

"How about 'Nailing down the Details?'"

Aiden's lips twist as if he's considering it. "What about 'Building a Bond?'"

"Hmm. Not specific enough."

"No?"

“You want the audience to know exactly what they’re getting. How about ‘Restoring with Aiden the Handy Man?’”

He clutches his stomach and laughs. “That’s a good one, but no. I don’t think I’m a good candidate to be the face and name of a television show.”

I turn to him and walk my fingers up his arm then press my hand against his face. He hasn’t shaved in a few days and I’m here for it. I like the rugged look. It’s intimidating, manly.

My phone beeps again and I let out a thick breath.

“Anything important I should know about?” Aiden’s gaze drifts from mine to my purse hanging over the arm of the chair.

He has enough on his plate today, so I leave out the details. “Nope. What about ‘Remodeling Lives’ for the show?” I also don’t want to revisit the past that keeps trying to buzz its way back into the present. In a way, my life was remodeled. Like on demo day, I pulled out the notion that the only place worth going was to the top and replaced it with being here, where I am...with Aiden.

He links his fingers through mine and swings our hands between us. “I kind of like ‘Constructing a Love Story.’”

“Ah, a story like a second floor. Clever.”

“And like our story. We’re building our love story.” His blue eyes penetrate mine.

My breath stops then he leans over with a smooch before getting up and returning to work.

Again, my phone beeps, but I close my eyes, feeling the ghost of Aiden’s lips on mine. I wander over to the beehives for a long moment. This field is a place for running around and having fun, a place to commune with nature, with the bees and their honey. It’s a place of peace.

With Aiden and while here, I feel deeply connected to everything that matters. I don’t pick up my phone for the rest of the day, hanging onto the peace that comes from nature and hard work. From friendships and community.

At the end of the day, when we return to Toby and grill up dinner, I wander out to the field surrounded by woods. Over the tops of the trees, I can see the peak of the roof to Aiden's new house. I turn my attention back to the hum of the bugs and the whisper of the wind in the leaves. I let out a calm yet courageous breath.

I'm about to tell Aiden how I feel. That I'm scared, not sure about the future, but that I love him...when he hollers at me.

“Don't make any sudden movements.”

I look up and meet a pair of dark eyes. Now, all I feel is fear.

This is the part in the movie when the main character gets attacked by a werewolf, has to live with a facial scar on her otherwise ivory skin, and experiences the agony of the monthly shift into an untamable beast.

# *Chapter Eighteen*

**W**hen I spot the mangy animal on the edge of the woods, I go full beast mode, pulling out my sidearm and prepared to end the wolf if it moves a muscle.

Thankfully, Tinsley goes still, and almost imperceptibly, she backs up.

Just then, tires crunch over the dirt in the driveway as a truck parks. I don't tear my focus from the animal or my woman as I make my approach. I am laser-focused, and I don't waver from my mark.

Granted, she struck an arrow right into my heart, and if anything happens to her, I could never forgive myself.

My senses are on alert as footsteps approach from behind. I pivot slightly so I don't have a target on my back, nor do I take mine off the wolf. There are about five yards between it and Tinsley and Tinsley and me. My objective is to decrease the distance, get her to safety, and not have to fire a shot. However, I'll do whatever is necessary to protect her.

As I shift my position, a familiar female voice asks, "Aiden, what the flapdoodle are you doing?"

My voice is practically a growl when I say, "Mae, it's not safe. Take the baby, go back to the truck."

"Are you about to shoot that husky?"

"Mae, it's not a dog. It's a wolf and it's going to attack Tinsley."

She rolls her eyes. "It is not going to attack Tinsley." Without another word, she marches through the field toward

the animal.

I lower my weapon because no way am I going to risk a miscalculation with two women and a baby that I love in my line of fire. But I will throw myself between them and the wild animal.

I'm about to aim words of reprimand at my sister for endangering herself, the baby, and my girlfriend—her hatred for Tinsley has gone too far—when for the first time in recorded history, they seem to be having a civil conversation. Tinsley joins Mae at the forest's edge.

She crouches down and extends her hand. The beast sniffs and approaches slowly. Every one of my instincts begs me to caution them, but I hold back because now that they're so close, I don't want to startle them and cause a bigger problem involving sharp teeth and who knows what kind of disease.

I'm a few paces away when Tinsley says, "Aiden, he's a husky, not a wolf."

"We've seen him a few times on our property. Taylor was worried at first, but Svetllama approved." Mae smiles.

"You're going on the judgment of a llama with questionable taste in men," I mutter.

"Don't let Bess hear you say that. She fully supports the budding relationship between my llama and Archie," Mae says.

I scrub my hand down my face. Maybe I shouldn't retire. Sometimes, it's easier to understand criminal minds than this barnyard world.

Okay, fine. I concede. Up close, the animal has the classic black and white husky markings framing its slender face along with a dusting of red. Those same three colors make up its matted fur. Its eyes are dark but curious. And the corners of its lips lift slightly as if it's smiling. From a distance, the dog looked like a wild mongrel with the intent to kill.

Tinsley gives him a pet and he leans into her hand.

“Anyway, we’ve fed him a few times, but he never stuck around. Taylor called the area animal shelters and veterinarians to see if anyone reported a missing dog, but—” She shakes her head then uses doggy-speak when she says, “I’m not sure this good boy has a home.”

“Are we sure he’s good?” I ask.

Tinsley and Mae tilt their head in the exact same direction and give me a long-faced *look*.

“Oh boy. Maybe I liked it better when you two were at loggerheads.”

They both burst into laughter.

Mae says, “Who uses the word loggerheads?”

I straighten to my full height. “Your older brother.”

“Alright, alright. Don’t get testy. Hold your nephew while Tinsley and I take care of this good boy baby doggy man,” Mae says, emphasizing the last part.

The two women bond over the husky, getting him water and digging out some chicken from the fridge in Toby’s kitchenette.

With the real baby still in my arms, I sit down in a lawn chair and gaze at this little bundle of squooshy boy. His eyes move under his closed lids. He coos a little. I wonder what he’s dreaming about.

My dream stands a few feet away, stroking the dog’s fur. She wears a warm, wide smile. My heart melts. It’s complete liquid. Between the baby and Tinsley, I’m no longer made of skin and bone. I’m a puddle. A puddle of love.

As if to punctuate my thoughts or razz his uncle, the little dude toots. Laughing internally, I get up, smoosh Tinsley, and ask my sister, “Where is your diaper bag?”

Mae’s eyes widen. Tinsley’s go even bigger.

“Uncle Aiden is going to change your diaper? Wonders never cease,” Mae says, directing me to the necessary



materials and then mercifully giving me a crash course in the art of the diaper change.

It's a dirty job, but I'm a proud man to do it. I'm a bit on the older side to start a family, but I can imagine a future with Tinsley—kids and a dog running through this field, visiting their grandparents, and lazy Sunday afternoons grilling, swimming, and smooshing.

With his diaper clean, Tinsley takes a turn with the baby and Mae helps me fix dinner. As usual, we grill.

As my sister puts together a salad, she says, "I have a confession."

I go still, braced for something personal I do not want to hear involving her and my best friend, Taylor.

"You don't need to—"

She waves me quiet. "I'm sorry that I wasn't welcoming to Tinsley."

"It's understandable. She wasn't exactly a prime candidate for a friend when you first met."

"No, but I misjudged her. Or perhaps she's changed. I don't know, but I do know that over the last three weeks, she's helped Rhondy out a ton, fixed up Bubba's, and befriended Beatrice Baskin while learning about bees. No offense to Bubba, but that woman is like gristle. But his BBQ sauce has never tasted so good."

"People change."

"Beatrice is ancient."

"I meant Tinsley."

"Yeah. But I wasn't nice to her. That probably wasn't fair. I also—"

I wave my hand this time. "It's fine. I appreciate you looking out for me."

She gazes through the window at Tinsley rocking the baby in her arms and the dog lying down at her feet.

A long sigh seeps out of me.

“I can see it too. Just maybe not in this trailer. You drive a Maybach, surely you can do better than this?”

I laugh. “Don’t get nosy and wander over to the house. I want to do a big reveal.”

“I cannot fathom what you’ve got going up there only that I saw a truck with a rock climbing wall drive down Main Street the other day.”

My lip crooks with a smile as we walk outside. I pat my firm stomach. “Have to stay in shape.” I give the baby’s foot a gentle tug. “And I’ll teach this little man to climb too.”

We say goodbye to Mae and sit down for dinner. The dog has seconds.

After we clean up, Tinsley says, “Do you think he was what I heard scratching outside?”

“Could’ve been and if not, he’ll scare off whatever was out here.”

“So you think I can keep him?”

“The real question is can I trust him alone with you?”

Tinsley grins. “Can I trust you alone with me?”

I loop my hand around her waist and pull her close. “I have to say when I saw this guy eyeing you...I got a little protective.”

“I’ll say. More like jealous.”

“Ha ha,” I say dryly.

The dog shifts closer to Tinsley as if not wanting to let her out of his sight. It’ll help me sleep better knowing he’s down here with her. With the pending case, I can’t be too careful. I wasn’t joking about pitching a tent outside Toby.

“Forget man’s best friend. He’s a woman’s best friend.” She roughs up his neck and then boops his nose.

“Does that mean he and I are friends? If so, I’m glad he let go of his first impression.” Mae did.

“I think he’s exactly what I’ve been looking for. What should I name him? Something strong. Powerful.”

“How about Aiden Junior?”

She chuckles. “Hmm. I’m thinking Brave. What do you think, boy? Do you like the name Brave?” She gives him a rub and then nuzzles him. “Oh, you need a bath.”

We both laugh. While I clean up, Tinsley goes into the trailer to get some soap and then starts to bathe the dog with the hose outside.

Once again, I watch her through the window. She’s tall and graceful. Her freckles popped from being in the sun. The woman is a bombshell, but one who’s come home. Returned to roots she didn’t know she had.

I always said I was going to be the last man standing and this woman has clearly knocked me down. Is she my kind of woman? Yes, the one I didn’t even know I wanted, needed. This thought unleashes a strong desire in me and an idea attaches itself to the grand reveal of the new house.

I glance over my shoulder as if looking back. I left behind a woman after I closed every case. Not one of them knew who I really was. I’ll have to tell Tinsley, but will that change anything? I should be brave.

Instead, I go outside and ask, “What made you name the dog Brave?”

“It’s what I’ve needed to be these last weeks. It’s what I’ll need to be now and...”

As if we’re both looking into the future, we gaze into the field.

Tinsley turns to me, sudsy and damp. She laces her arms over my shoulders. “There is something I want to tell you, Aiden.” She swallows and her eyes soften.

I lean close, worried it’s about the case.

She swallows then says, “I wub you.”

Brave and I both tilt our heads as if not quite understanding.

“I mean I wuv you,” she tries again.

“Do you mean—?”

She shakes her head and places her finger across my lips. “I need to say it. Aiden, I lurve you.”

She’s not quite there, but I pull her into me, not caring that she’s wet and covered in dog hair.

I say, “I’ve done a lot in my career, but love is new to me too.”

She nods her head against my neck as we embrace.

We start with a smooch and finish with the kiss that sends a shooting star across the sky.



□

It rains for the next three days, which, despite the profession of love, matches my mood. I'm ready to be done with the Stoll case. Ready to retire and go full country, but Tinsley doesn't have to worry. I'm keeping the Maybach.

We lose a few days on the exterior of Bubba's but are just about done inside, which means the crew can return to my house. All that remains there is a long punch list, including installing the light switch plates, vent covers, and weatherstripping around the French doors off the back deck.

I decided not to decorate yet because there's a certain someone I want to help me with the project. Hint: we're not related nor does she have her own show on HLTV.

Tinsley covers Mae's shifts at the Starlight and each day she proudly tells me what she baked. I guess Rhondy even graduated her to decorating cupcakes, which she has a knack for. I also find my way there for a daily mid-morning coffee break.

The bad weather also gives me extra time to work on the case. I traced the Hawaiian shirt receipt to a store in Savannah. I visit and sure enough, the security tape footage shows Gatlin Stoll making the purchase two days before he disappeared. Taking a copy, I watch it carefully in case he was being followed.

I review every detail of the case, writing them all on index cards, and pinning them to the wall in chronological order. Unfortunately, having fallen in love seems to have dampered my usual Sherlock Holmes-esque ability to make deductions based on my observations and clues.

First order of business: I contact Gannon Barnes, who tells me he wrote Gatlin to let him know he got out of jail. Don't believe it.

Next, I call every animal rescue in the Atlanta area and none of them had a cat in their possession that fits Twinky aka Cindy Clawford's description.

For the third time, I search Gatlin's emails and calendar to try to figure out why he went to Atlanta and returned the next day with a cat.

I talk to everyone in the town hall, slide surreptitious questions into conversation at the Starlight, and finally return to Stoll's house.

We scoured the place the other night and came up with nothing. As the rain pounds down, I sit in the driveway, trying to clear my head, and let the answers in. They're here somewhere. I'm simply missing something.

Despite my better judgment, for the third time, I break into Stoll's house. It's a bit musty and mail spills onto the rug under the slot in the front door. Like when Louella Belle, Bo, Christina, Buck, and I came by recently, I don't dare turn on a light. Shadows play and jump as the wind blows outside.

"Stoll, where are you?" I whisper as I go from room to room.

Nothing seems out of place except my being here. I rifle through drawers, look in closets, and check for loose floorboards.

I go to his office and run my fingers over surfaces, checking for the seams of hidden compartments in his desk. Nothing.

"Stoll, what are you hiding and where is it?"

I spin in his chair to face the fireplace behind the desk. The Easton Estate has hidden rooms and passageways accessed by bookshelves. Perhaps the fireplace has a lever somewhere, spins, and opens to a lair where I'll find Stoll's grand master plans stuck to the wall with thumbtacks.

Instead, I look into a painting of the man himself—it's massive. Then again, so is he. About as wide as he is tall. His face has a reddish hue in the painting, set with beady eyes, and a smug grin.

I steeple my fingers and think. If I were Stoll, why would I want to take over a town? Why the greed? Why the cat? And if

I were to leave anything to point to my involvement in illegal activities, where would I hide it?

In plain sight? Even he's not that stupid.

I meet his gaze on the wall then shake my head as I get up and try to remove the painting above the mantle. It's on there good. I lift the left corner, but it doesn't budge. I try the right and the painting swings on a hinge, opening to a safe.

"Bingo." Anticipation rushes through me as I try the numbers from the cat's collar. The thing doesn't open. I try them again and a third time. Maybe it's reversed. Nope.

I go to the car, open the trunk and flinch at the sight of Murder Doll before retrieving my tools. Cracking my knuckles, I go to work, breaking into the safe. It's a long and arduous process, but with each click, my anticipation builds.

When I finally get it open, all I find is a scrapbook filled with photos of Stoll and a woman.

I take it, close the safe, and return to the office. I'm about to go upstairs when I pause and head into the bookstore instead.

Aggie greets me. "You have a puzzled look on your face."

"I could go for a piece of pie." Instead, I show her the scrapbook with several pictures torn out.

She pulls on a pair of rubber gloves and handles it the way a forensic technician would. My prints are already all over it. "Looks like Gatlin Stoll was married, went on a honeymoon to Hawaii, and several cruises, along with the usual shots of a couple—" She gasps. "Look at who is in the background of this shot."

I peer over Aggie's shoulder to see a cat lounging on the couch behind Gatlin and the woman who're clinking glasses together.

"Also, if you notice, of the photos that remain, not one of them offers a clear depiction or portrait style image of her."

"But now we know the cat is connected. But who and where is Mrs. Stoll?"



I do the obvious and review records of all known associates, but a Mrs. Stoll doesn't come up. I can't do a facial recognition match because, as Aggie pointed out, none of the pictures show her face clearly. This could be the reason some of the photos are missing.

Apart from my inability to comprehend how someone could marry Gatlin Stoll, my mind floats with thoughts of marriage and what I'd be like as a husband—if someone, namely a woman with long blonde hair, big brown eyes, and a slight gap between her two front teeth would want to say, *I do* to a guy like me.



□

The next day, when I pick Tinsley up from Sweethearts before we head over to Bubba's, she exits the boutique instead of the bakery. She carries a very large dog in her arms.

I leap out of the car and move to take Brave from her, but she twists away from me.

"I got him. Carrying those bags of cement for the porch footings over at Bubba's really built up my strength."

"Why are you carrying the dog?"

"It finally stopped raining and the pavement is hot."

"Brave is a dog."

"Who has sensitive toe beans?"

"Toe what?"

"Footpads. I need to get him those little paw protectors."

I press my hand to my eyes. "Don't listen to her, buddy. You have strong, tough, manly dog feet."

She giggles and her phone beeps. She struggles to adjust her bag on her shoulder with the dog in her arms.

"Want help?"

"Nah. Just ignore it."

She ignores her phone a lot lately. When she first came to Butterbury, she was plastered to the thing and looking at social media. Now, she rarely goes on her device, but she's been receiving tons of texts.

It beeps again and the screen illuminates. Nestled toward the top of her purse, it draws my eyes. The word DELETE scrolls across the screen. The other day, I noticed it said IGNORE. Before that, it said DO NOT CALL.

My investigative senses go off. Seems strange, but Tinsley doesn't look at her phone, and I can't make sense of the various contact names.

We get into the car. Brave rides in the back of the Maybach like a furry prince.

“I take it you had him stay at the boutique while you were at work.”

“He’s my Velcro dog and doesn’t like to leave my side but because of health code stuff, I can’t have him inside the bakery. Christina had Gremlin and Dulcie at HQ. Let’s just say they became insta-friends.” Tinsley sing songs.

Her comment reminds me of my case of insta-love with the rumbling inside. It rolls through me like thunder across a field with flashes of lightning in the distance. Sometimes I think they’re bolts of love, others, a warning.

While we head over to Bubba’s, my mind floats with the safe, the plane tickets, and Tinsley’s texts. I’m missing something and I hope it won’t soon be her.

# *Chapter Nineteen*

Since coming to Butterbury, I've learned several things. I have a knack for baking and decorating cupcakes. After multiple false starts including a baking powder and baking soda mix-up, rock-hard scones, and cookies that spread to fill the entire pan, instead of throwing in the dishtowel, I decided it was time to focus, to up my game.

Oh, and let's not forget how I almost burned the place down. My repeated failures lit a fire under my butt, no pun intended. I became determined to get really good at baking.

I've even impressed Rhondy with my cupcakes, which says a lot if you ask anyone in Butterbury. They even have their own shelf in the display case.

Today's flavors include vanilla, double chocolate, chocolate and vanilla twist, and my personal favorite, strawberry lemon. My frosting is the real icing on the, er, cake. It's smooth and silky whipped buttercream in the French style. Who knew I absorbed anything from my time overseas other than living that luxe life with the credit card bills to prove it?

Tammy, Bubba's wife, also gave me a T-shirt that has a honey bee on it and says "Bee-utiful." Until recently, I'd never have worn something like that, but I change into it before I head over there for lunch and before my last day of community service.

Speaking of, I've learned how to tear up floors, install new ones, and paint a ceiling. It's not as easy as it looks. I'm definitely not ready to become a member of the Designed to Last crew, but I hold my own on the jobsite.

After I hang up my apron, I update Camellia on the morning and that we're out of sunrise muffins. Of all the ladybosses, she and I have become the closest, but I can't deny that Mae and I are officially friends. She had me over the other day, showed me around the farm, and I spent time with the baby so she could shower. We even folded laundry together and if that doesn't spell friendship, I don't know what does.

I hurry over to the boutique to pick up Brave before Tammy gets here. Louella Belle rearranges a shelf and Christina clicks away on the computer.

Brave perks up when the bells on the door jingle and his tail wags when he sees that it's me.

"Who's a good puppy sweet boy? Who does mommy love so much?" I ask in a baby voice while giving him good pets and nuzzles.

Louella Belle laughs. "You sound like Christina with Gremlin. Remember when you thought he was going to kill you?"

"Gremlin wouldn't hurt a fly," Christina scoffs.

"Yes, but when we went to Buck's for the first time and—"

Christina's eyes widen as if reliving the memory. "Of course, I remember. I also thought we were going to get hacked to pieces in the woods."

"Our @DomesticDiva has changed a lot," Louella Belle says.

"She's not the only one. I hardly recognize Tinsley in her T-shirt," Christina says.

"It's cah-yute!" Louella Belle says, taking a look.

"Tammy got it for me."

"I have to give you credit for spending time with Mrs. Baskin." Louella Belle shivers.

"You mean Beatrice?"

"When I was a kid, she terrified me. Still does. I can't believe she lets you call her Beatrice."

“Her typical stern expression is a bit intimidating, but she’s as gentle as a honey bee.”

The ladybosses laugh.

“Do you hear yourself?” Christina asks.

“More importantly, have you looked in the mirror lately? I think she’s one of us.” Louella Belle slings her arm across my shoulders and smiles warmly.

I glance at the full-length mirror by the clothing display, wondering what they mean.

My hair is in a ponytail. I’m wearing a modest amount of makeup for a more natural look, and I have the T-shirt on. I guess I look more like a local than a trend-setting socialite who flies all over the world on the private jets of her rich and famous friends.

For a hot minute, I miss that life and the glamour, but these friendships seem to be made of more than passing trends and fleeting moments. And what I have with Aiden fills every hole in my life, my heart, and my world when he allowed me to love him.

All along, I wanted attention and sought validation when getting to the top wasn’t a climb at all. More like a falling...a falling in love.

I guess I have changed. “Do you mean I fit in here?”

“Sure, though you and Christina set the bar pretty high. I can’t just show up to work in a tank top and cutoffs,” Louella Belle says.

We both squint at her.

She looks down at her outfit. “Oh, right. I guess that is what I’m wearing.”

“What we mean is you’re like us because you’re in love,” Christina singsongs the last part at the same time as two of Tammy and Bubba’s kids bust through the door and rush over to Brave.



He's equally happy to see them. The dog lives for attention. Sounds kind of familiar. At least it used to be true about me. Okay, who am I kidding, I'm definitely still an extrovert, but I also enjoy time alone now. The old me couldn't spend a second by herself. I always had to be with people or plugged into my social media.

Before the ladybosses can grill me about being in love, I say goodbye and meet Tammy. She and I gab the entire way to her house. She mostly gushes about how lately Bubba comes home a new man. "He no longer slogs through the day at work. Don't get me wrong, he loves his job."

"And we love his ribs," one of the kids says from the back of the minivan.

"Can we have wings for lunch?" another asks.

Tammy answers that they're having sandwiches with Gramma before she continues. "But every day, something at the restaurant would break or go wrong, taking time away from cooking, smoking the meats, or giving his customers the family-style dining experience the BBQ joint had been known for. Quite honestly, he was in over his head."

"I'm glad to hear my getting arrested and assigned community service helped," I say with a laugh.

"I remember when Bubba came home that first day. He said you were like a deer in headlights. He didn't think you'd survive the week," she says with a warm laugh.

"And here we are. The project is just about done."

"Thanks for helping, truly. I don't just mean with Bubba. Beatrice missed those bees. Without someone to take over for her, I guess she gave up."

Unlike when I'd audition for a role, play an extra in a movie, or show up at an event all gussied up, a great sense of meaning fills me because I realize I get by living and giving. This is my life and not a performance or film set.

"I'm happy to help," I say and mean it. Even if it took me losing everything, I've gained so much. A sense of purpose, humility matched with pride, and relationships with people

who aren't gauging what they can get from me in terms of popularity—or vice versa. It's refreshing. It's real.

After we have lunch, Beatrice and I sit in the rocking chairs on her low front porch. She has arthritis and doesn't get around much, but knows more about bees, their life cycle, honey production, and troubleshooting than I've found online or in books. I fill a binder with notes.

"I always wanted to produce enough honey to provide to Bubba's, but also jar and sell. Never got around to it. I even made up a design for a label. Let me go find it." With great effort, Beatrice gets up from her chair and goes inside.

Brave plays on the lawn with the family dog when the kids come out and turn on the sprinkler. They run through it and squeal with delight. Brave jumps and tries to bite the spray of water.

The screen door opens and closes. Beatrice chuckles. "They're such a delight. But you've been smiling since you got here. I know that look. Been a while since I wore it. My Bubba, not my son, and I met at a barn dance in Texas."

"In Texas?" I ask, my voice lifting a few octaves. "That's where my mother was from. We visited my grandparents there once. Don't know the name of the town though." I should call my mother and ask, but I can't remember the last time we spoke.

She pats my knee, acknowledging my comment. When I don't say more, she continues her story, "He was there with his father, uncles, brothers, a whole crew. Us girls were from a small town nearby and having an influx of handsome young men was like Christmas morning. Bubba asked me to dance that night. I fell in love with him the next day when he bought me a soda. At the time, I had a suitor. He was a bit of a bully and would do things like bump into me so I spilled my soda then make a fuss about how it was an accident then try to help clean me up." She rolls her eyes.

"Sounds like a backward way to get a girl to like you."

“Oh, Benjamin Bullock was as backward as they come. He once ran his brother over with a tractor.”

I tuck my head back.

“I’ll spare you that story. Suffice it to say, Barney did live to walk again. Anyway, Benjamin must’ve seen Bubba and me talking at the dance the night before. He got jealous and did the old bump-and-spill move. My girlfriends hollered at him because that wasn’t the first time.” She shakes her head.

“That creep.”

“Bubba took one look at my ruined shirt, kissed me on the cheek, and said, ‘Don’t hate me for what I’m about to do.’ Suffice it to say, Benjamin never bothered me again and Bubba replaced my soda. Every evenin’ about nine o’clock, after the restaurant closed, we’d come out here, sip a soda, talk about our days, then do it all over again the next day.”

“That’s so sweet.”

“How about you?” Beatrice asks.

“How about me what?” I ask, knowing full well she refers to my love life, but not knowing that for some reason I cannot seem to speak the words *I love you* to Aiden.

“You’ve been smiling like you’ve been sippin’ soda with someone.”

“Me? Well, I was, we, you know—”

She smiles like she understands then shows me a piece of paper with two hand-drawn honey bees face to face, kissing, and surrounded by a heart. Across the top, it says, *B & B Blossom Honey*. Then on the bottom, *Butterbury, Georgia*.

“*B* like Bubba and Beatrice,” I say, making the connection.

“*B* like brave,” she says.

“Like my dog?”

“Sure, but also be brave. You might’ve had your misgivings about small-town life, but you’ll never go wrong when it comes to taking a chance on love.”

“That’s just it. I’ve never taken a chance on it.”

“Tinsley, have you ever pondered the miracle of all the things that could happen but haven’t? For instance, we could be struck by lightning in this very spot.”

I glance at the sky. “It is clouding over.”

“What I mean to say is to think about the miracles that do happen. Love is one of them. It would be lucky to go through your life without getting struck by lightning. It would be a shame to go through your life and not open yourself to love.”

My rocking chair goes still when Aiden pulls into the driveway in his truck at that very moment.

Beatrice chuckles and passes me the paper and winks. “How about you hang onto this? I can just picture jars of honey for sale at Bubba’s, Sweethearts Bakery, and the Boutique.” She winks. “Oh, and remember to be brave. I wouldn’t object if you changed the name to that. Still works with the B’s.”

I smile and hug her. When we part, we watch Brave, the wet and muddy dog gallop in Aiden’s direction before giving him a doggy version of a hug in the form of a full body press. Brave nearly knocks him over.

When I meet him with a smooch, he says, “Well, I guess it’s a good thing I’m going to a worksite.”

On the ride to Bubba’s, I tell him about Beatrice and Bubba Senior meeting at a dance in Texas.

“I know it’s not a competition, but our first-time meeting is better. We met in jail.”

“Would we really tell that to our kids?” I blurt, and my heart thrums at the notion.

Aiden chuckles as the truck rumbles down the Baskin’s driveway.

I can’t help the way my gaze objectifies how good he looks. From his tousled brown hair, to the stubble along his masculine jawline, to the powerful muscles hiding under his shirt, and the way the ones on his arms flex as he shifts gears.

This man kills me with how he looks as good in a suit as he does in a pair of boots. I've said and done all the things that a girlfriend who loves her boyfriend would do except speak those magic words.

"Last day. You ready?" Aiden says, pulling me from my thoughts as he pulls into the parking lot at Bubba's BBQ.

I'm not ready because I don't know what's next. We haven't talked about it, and I'm afraid Aiden thinks that things will continue as they have been with me staying in Toby, working at Sweethearts, and tending the bees.

I can't live in his trailer in perpetuity. What about my life before? What I left behind? My future?

The answers to those questions feel slippery. Ones I don't want to hear, but if I let go of my old life, where does that leave me? In Butterbury forever?

This was supposed to be a blip on my way to Miami. Sure, I had some figuring out to do after the whole thing with Puma, whose number I have now blocked after his texts turned threatening.

But what would I amount to if I stay here? Could Aiden and I really sip soda together at the end of the day...every day forever?

What about the future? My name in lights? The glamour and luxury? I wanted to become someone. A household name. The kind of woman that girls envy.

I linger by the truck as thunder rolls in the distance.

I'm not sure if this would be the part of the movie with a shot of the main character sitting by a rain-streaked window while she ponders her life or a montage of before and afters, highlighting the restaurant makeover. The place went from a dingy hole in the wall—literally, there were several in the plaster—to having a fresh and welcoming exterior with a wide front porch with craftsman-style beams overhead. The walls are white shiplap, the same as inside, with black trim and a red awning. Even the sign is new along with the menus on the wall. The shiny plank floors, the bar stools with blue cushions,

and family-style dining with wooden tables and benches fill the dining room. A wall of family photos Tammy and Beatrice shared completes the experience.

The sky opens with rain and I rush undercover. I spend the afternoon helping finalize things in the kitchen, including attaching drawer pulls, filling salt and pepper shakers, and organizing napkins, cups, and silverware.

I'm about to ask Aiden where to put the dish rags when he gets a phone call. His posture instantly changes from being a relaxed but helpful worker and into a dangerous dude. His expression turns stormy like the weather outside. Without a word, he blusters out the door to the car and peels away.

Bubba and I exchange a look of concern and I immediately call Bess, worried something happened to Mae or the baby.

She answers, but the connection breaks up. I gather that she's at a meeting for her new program on HLTV. It's a 'Complete' makeover show, including a home remodel plus making over the residents for a style upgrade, and an overhaul of various aspects of their lives with leading experts and life coaches, resulting in the complete makeover concept.

"Do you know if everything is okay with Mae and the baby?" I ask.

"I can't really hear you, but yes, I'm okay. I can't wait to tell you all about the show."

When I hang up, a truck pulls up in front of Bubba's. Minutes later, Mae, Taylor, and the baby come in, half-drenched.

"You guys are alright?" I ask.

Taylor's eyebrows ripple.

"Yeah, we're fine. Heard you guys were wrapping up here," Mae says.

"Looks fine." Taylor whistles low.

Bubba exits the kitchen and greets them.

“I was thinking we should do a little feature on the Designed to Last social media accounts of the new and improved Bubba’s,” Mae says.

“Think of it like a nod to the man who fed us during production,” Taylor adds.

“I’d love to give you a tour.” Bubba smiles proudly.

“And we’ll come back with the crew and a few cameras when the weather isn’t so nasty,” Mae adds.

“Couldn’t have done it without Tinsley, Aiden, and his guys,” Bubba says.

“Speaking of Aiden, where is he?” Mae asks.

“I was going to ask you the same thing. He was just here, got a call, then left without a word. I got worried about you guys.”

Mae and Taylor exchange a look. My stomach twists.

The baby makes a gurgling noise, drawing their attention to him.

“We’re just hungry. Missed lunch.” Taylor’s voice sounds unusually stiff. Then again, I’m not exactly his favorite person, but I don’t think he hates me anymore.

“I can help with that,” Bubba says and returns to the kitchen.

I finish up my projects and by the time Taylor and Mae are done with their late lunch, I have officially completed my community service.

A crestfallen sigh escapes because I wanted to celebrate this moment with Aiden. We did it, finished our community service and Bubba’s. However, he’s not back yet. Brave and I get a ride into town with Mae and Taylor.

Mae points to the second floor over the bookstore. “Looks like the light in his office is on.”

“Maybe something happened to the cat and that’s why he had to leave suddenly.” My shoulders knot with nervousness as I thank them for the ride.

Brave and I rush upstairs to Aiden's second-floor office. We burst inside and instead of some kind of *catastrophe*, I find Aiden seated at his desk with Cindy Clawford in his lap, looking at images of...cute cats.

Instead of swooping, my belly tightens. He ran off the worksite to browse pictures of cats...with a cat? Something about this is fishy and it's not the smell of the food in the dish by the door.



# *Chapter Twenty*

**T**insley stands in the doorway, staring at me with a mixture of curiosity and concern. Brave stands by her side, eyes locked on the cat.

I close my laptop and swivel in my chair, petting Cindy Clawford's head. "If you think I'm an evil mastermind, you're sorely mistaken," I say in my best supervillain voice.

She laughs lightly. "Good to know, but what happened? You left Bubba's so abruptly."

"Sorry, I had a call. Work stuff. Sometimes I forget that I have a job." I don't, but it's easy to get caught up in Tinsley and ignore the pressing matter of the case.

"Is everything okay?"

"As right as rain." I glance out the window.

She gazes at her hands and then says, "My thirty days are up. Done. I'm free."

The cat hops off my lap, and Brave trails it.

"Sniffing only. No touching," Tinsley says to her dog.

I get to my feet. "Congratulations, by the way. You survived."

"Did my duty. Now..."

"Now, we should celebrate. I have a meeting with Officer Henley in ten minutes. I'm meeting him at Doughnut Dollies. Shall we end the way we began?" I joke, recalling the jail cell doughnuts.

“Yeah. Sure,” Tinsley says, lacking enthusiasm.

I grip her upper arms. “Sorry, I’m preoccupied. Getting a doughnut probably isn’t the most exciting way to celebrate.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s what you do around here, right?”

“Small town life. I could take you on a horse ride in a field, a drive through the country, to the coast...”

Tinsley rocks on her feet a little. I can’t quite read her other than she seems disappointed. I’ll make it up to her because not only is Bubba’s done, the house is nearly there too and I am itching to share it with her.

We risk leaving the cat and the dog alone in the office, we go down to Doughnut Dollies.

Henley sits at the counter, halfway into a glazed old-fashioned doughnut. “Ah, the woman of the hour. You almost don’t look like the same girl who wandered into our town illegally.”

“I’ve been hearing that a lot lately—the looking different part. Promise not to break the law again.”

Henley claps his hands. “Your service is officially complete.”

Tinsley bumps me with her hip. “Couldn’t have done it without this guy.”

“You two make quite the team. Could give the Designed to Last crew a run for their money.”

I pump my hands. “I wouldn’t go that far. Now that Bubba’s is done and my house nearly too, I think I’ll take a break from building projects for a while.”

“Oh yeah? What’s next for you?” Henley lifts and lowers his eyebrows.

Tinsley’s gaze flits to me and then quickly away and she studies the rows of doughnuts.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” I didn’t plan for her to be here for this meeting, but it would look strange if I went to meet him alone, given she doesn’t know about my

job. I try to think of a way to ask Henley without revealing anything.

“Take a seat.” Henley gestures to the empty stools.

Dora, a plump woman with a rosy face and red hair walks over with the coffee pitcher and refills Henley’s cup. “Dora, have you met Tinsley yet? She’s the newest resident of Butterbury. Tinsley meet Dora Gooseby.”

Her eyes sparkle with a smile. “We haven’t officially met, but I’ve heard about her plenty. I see you traded in your sequins.”

“For now,” Tinsley says as she settles on the stool.

My ears prick. She and I haven’t talked about the answer to Henley’s question, *What’s next?* I figured *we* are next, but the way she said that makes my skin tight and I wonder if she plans to stay.

“All the same, it’s nice to meet you. You’ve got your hands all over this town from the bakery to the BBQ joint, the bees, and rumor has it a certain young man.” She winks at me.

Tinsley opens and closes her mouth like she’s going to reply but then just orders a glazed old-fashioned just like Henley gave her in the jail cell, and I get the same.

“Ah, so is this what you meant by the goose being with the gander?”

Henley laughs. “Yep, code for my doughnuts were ready for pickup.”

I’m happy to have that cleared up, but I can’t help but still think the solution to this case is a lot closer and more obvious than I think, but it still eludes me. More than once, I’ve considered giving up and passing it off to someone else. I’m stumped. Or perhaps just distracted.

For two decades, I’ve gone from case to case, never stopping or settling down

I’ve decided this is my last job before I retire. I’ve put in almost twenty years. That’s plenty of time to almost die more times than I can count. Drove off a cliff in a high-speed chase.

In my defense, so did the assailant and I didn't want him to get away on foot. I've been shot four times. Oh, and I choked on a very dry chicken sandwich while eating alone in my car during a stakeout. Now, I just stick to steak cooked rare.

If I were a cat, I'd be on life eight point five.

Time to get back to real living.

My gaze travels to Tinsley. Her blonde hair frizzes from the rain. Her smooth profile with her button nose makes me want to lean in, smooch her by the ear, on the neck, and along the collarbones.

Who knew I was a collarbones guy?

"So, what's on your mind?" Henley asks, startling me from my thoughts about the woman by my side.

I craft my words carefully. "Now that Bubba's is just about done, I thought it would be nice to have a grand reopening and for the mayor to cut the ribbon, but we don't have one of those."

"Not at present. I officially declared him missing." Henley takes a long sip of coffee.

I wish I could say that was what sent me rushing to my office. No, Mrs. Stoll aka Joyce Estelle Blanchard was also declared missing by her neighbor. A quick search revealed Joyce Blanchard to be the daughter of oil baron Bill Blanchard of Louisiana. She married a young man by the name of Sheldon Gatlin Hebert. Last known address: Las Vegas, Nevada. I was able to follow a few leads and contacted his former lawyer, who hinted that although Sheldon had a will, there was little to leave the next of kin: Cindy Clawford.

Could there be a connection? I think so.

"Like a missing person?" Tinsley's eyebrows curve like two lopsided question marks. Now is not the time to think about how adorable and cute and beautiful she is. "Missing like he was kidnapped or he skipped town?" Tinsley asks.

Henley replies, "Not sure. As mayor, he's supposed to follow a protocol if he's taking a vacation or otherwise unable

to fulfill his duties.”

“Not like he did much of that anyway,” Dora says as she passes.

We probably should’ve had this discussion somewhere more private. “We need a mayor. Who can stand in?”

Henley smirks. “Typically it would be the deputy mayor, but we didn’t elect one. I’ll have to go to the town hall to confirm, but I believe in the original town charter, the mayor’s next of kin would stand in for him until the town elects someone new. Usually, thirty days after the mayor is declared unable to perform his or her duties.”

“Or in this case missing,” I say. “But that’s what I was afraid of.”

Henley claps me on the shoulder. “Son, I know you’re angling for the job, but we have to hold an election all the same.”

“I’m aware and wouldn’t think of doing anything illegal.”

“Well, there is a market that needs repair over on Route Seventeen. Mitch’s old place if you feel like updating another local business. Things like that sure look good on a ballot.”

I laugh dryly. “That’s not it. Sir, Twinky, er, Cindy Clawford is Stoll’s next of kin and the recipient of his estate in the case of his untimely death.” I have a copy of the will on my phone but ought to keep the finer points to myself, so I don’t arouse suspicion in Tinsley.

“Thought you said she was stolen.” Henley cocks an eyebrow.

“Indeed. From his wife. I have reason to believe he stole the cat back from whoever took it in the first place. In any case, the veterinarian records show she belonged to Estelle Stoll.”

“Estelle Stoll? I’ve never heard of her.” Henley rubs his chin.

“I can provide you with all the documentation to confirm.”

“Where are Gatlin and Estelle?” Henley asks vaguely as if the answer will materialize in the hole of the doughnut as he takes a bite.

“All I have is the name of Gatlin’s once-upon-a-time wife, video footage of his last sighting, and the receipt from the purchase of a Hawaiian shirt, but I’m working on it.”

“I bet you are...and working your way into the mayor’s office,” Henley says knowingly.

“You sound like a private detective in a whodunnit movie, but did you say Estelle?” Tinsley asks, breaking from her chat with Dora.

“Yeah, supposedly that’s Gatlin’s wife’s name.” I keep her real name to myself because I can’t easily explain why I have that other than my federal database clearance.

“I knew an Estelle Blanchard—she played Sierra Mahoney’s mom on the show. Sierra was the main vampire-wisp. Estelle was so sweet and always brought cookies to the set.”

I tilt my head like Brave when Tinsley calls his name. It’s a flimsy lead, but I’ll look into it all the same. But first, I want to talk to Tinsley about tomorrow and the day after that and the next...

Henley takes a last sip of coffee and then puts on his hat. “Time to get back to work.”

Yeah, me too, but I’m tired. Tired of chasing clues and criminals. Tired of always looking over my back. Tired of obfuscating and bending the truth.

I should just tell Tinsley about my job and my status. Clear things up now. We’ll go back to the office to talk. Hopefully, the animals haven’t torn the place to shreds.

The rain still comes down as we step outside. Thankfully, it’s a short walk, but Tinsley goes still the moment she sets foot on the sidewalk. She ducks behind me.

“What’s wrong?”

I glance down the street as a black Lamborghini with a red and gold claw mark wrap whizzes by. “That’s out of place in Butterbury.” Then I glimpse the four letters on the license plate. “Puma.”

Taking Tinsley by the arm, I lead her out of the rain and upstairs to the office. Brave greets us like celebrities. She goes still when she spots something on my desk.

“Is there something you’d like to tell me?” I ask, alarmed that he found her here unless they’d arranged to meet.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” she fires back.

A long and pointed silence stretches between us as the cat weaves and rubs our legs. I look at my desk and notice an open file—Twinky must’ve flicked it with her tail. Clipped to it is a black and white mug shot of Harold Jerrold Pumanowksi.

I move to close it, but Tinsley beats me there and her eyes widen at the federal heading on the top sheet. Her eyes scan until they reach the bottom where she stops. Her nostrils flare. I know what it says without having to read it myself. I’ve memorized every detail of this case.

“Known associates? Tinsley Louise Humber? Aiden, what is this?”

My breath stalls, unsure whether to go in or out. I’m not going to lose my cool, but I need to keep my calm. I could really use those cute cat pics right at the moment. I’m not mad at her. No, far from it. I’m upset with myself for not coming forward with the truth sooner and for being so careless.

When I don’t answer, she shakes her head and then rushes out the door and down the stairs.

As she disappears, time seems to stop abruptly. I’m losing her, but the details and clues of the case pile up then swiftly come into focus, leading me to the logical conclusion. In the flash of an instant, I link the pieces together—Stoll’s connection, Puma’s involvement, and the Kraven brother’s intentions. It all becomes clear as if by her leaving, I made mental room to solve this case.



However, I don't want to let her go. I can't.

I hurry after Tinsley.

Aggie pops out of the bookstore and points at the car across the street. "Is that part of Operation Pierate?"

"Please protect the asset," I say, gesturing upstairs while scanning for Tinsley.

"Copy that," Aggie says.

Tinsley stands by the curb on the corner and looks up and down the street. The rain still comes down in sheets. The sinister red taillights of the Lamborghini idling in front of the Starlight drum up my adrenaline. She runs in that direction. I chase after her but don't want to holler her name and give away her location to Puma.

She stops short by the Lamborghini and then darts in the opposite direction before disappearing into the boutique.

I breathe a sigh of relief, but then a figure dressed in black gets out of the vehicle and follows her inside. My pulse vibrates in my ears as the man who stands a head shorter than me whips around when I enter the shop.

"What brings you here, Harold?" I ask.

His expression falters then he regains his mask of cool confidence. "Harold? Don't you know who I am? I'm Puma Palmer."

Standing behind the counter, Louella Belle's eyes bulge. A trail of wet footprints leads to her. No doubt, Tinsley hides back there.

"The name Puma means nothing here," I grind out, wanting to keep his attention on me and not either of the women.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Federal Agent Fuller."

He snorts a laugh. "Federal Agent? I've been hearing that a lot lately. My fan club is growing by the day."

“I am no fan of yours. One more time, what business do you have here?”

“Just came looking for something that’s mine.”

“Unless you want to buy some Designed to Last swag, I don’t think you’ll find anything like that here.”

“No, I think I will. I’m looking for Tinsley Humber. Tall, blonde, beautiful. She’d stick out in a place like this.”

“She is not yours,” I growl.

“Ah, then you know her?”

My patience is about as thin as a cat’s whisker as he looks me over with barely veiled hostility.

He steps closer to me. “Wait a second, you questioned me in LA. I already told you everything I know.” He simpers a laugh.

“You told me everything you knew at the time. What new information do you have, Harold?”

“I hoped to find Tinsley first because there is someone else who’s looking for her. Someone who thinks she knows more than she should. More than is good for her. I just want to make sure that’s not true.”

“Are you making a threat?” I lift my jacket slightly to reveal my sidearm.

He holds up his hands. “No, sir. Not at all.”

“If you know what’s good for you, never step foot in this town again.”

“Who’s going to keep me out? Are you the mayor?” Harold laughs. “No, the mayor of this place sold you out.” He spins in a circle. “Soon, all of this will be—” He puffs his hands to indicate...a doughnut? A cloud? An explosion.

I grip him by his arm and then tug him toward the door.

“Hey, take it easy unless you want to hear from my lawyer.”

“Shut your mouth unless you want to—” But I go quiet because we’re still in Louella Belle’s presence then drag him outside. “Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

“Isn’t that a wedding ceremony line? Sorry, not interested.” Harold titters.

“Tell me what you know or you’ll find yourself back behind bars.”

“I know people in important positions. Let’s say they picked me out with the promise that I’m safe from the long arm of the law. He titters. “Anyway, Tinsley and I have unfinished business.”

“No, you do not.” Unless she didn’t tell the agents everything when she was questioned.

“If she’s been hiding out in this sorry little nowhere town, I want her to know that I can give her more. So much more. The whole thing in Malibu was a misunderstanding. I wanted to take her out, go shopping, have a nice meal, go somewhere on my private jet.”

“You’re grounded. No traveling outside US borders.”

Harold leans close. “I’ll go right to the edge.”

Anger rushes through me like red hot coals. I grab his shirt collar. “And I’m the kind of guy that steps over it, so I suggest you watch what you say...and what you do.”

At this moment, I realize Tinsley tamed me, brought the version of myself when acting as an agent and the real Aiden closer together—a man who will work hard and fight for the justice I believe in while doing the same for love.

I shove Harold toward his car. He might be out on bail and awaiting trial, but he doesn’t get to come into my town, looking for my girlfriend.

“If I see you here again, that Lamborghini will be in the car compactor over at the scrapyard.”

“Whatever. I have another one.”

“You’ll be in it,” I growl.

He brushes himself off but won't meet my gaze.

My breath comes heavy as I watch him get into the Lamborghini and drive off. As I calm myself without the help of cute cats, questions drench my thoughts. Why is Harold looking for Tinsley? Does she know more than she should? Did she hear Harold and my exchange?

And most importantly, will she ever trust me again?

# *Chapter Twenty-One*

The thundering in my ears is so loud, I can't tell whether it's from the storm outside or my pulse when I spotted Puma's Lamborghini. Seeing him leaves me dizzy with fear.

I should've told Aiden about the incessant texts.

He should've told me he was somehow involved.

Is he watching my back or is it something more that I don't know about?

Voices rise and fall from the boutique downstairs before moving outside. I'm huddled in the back of the storage closet, probably ruining supplies because I'm wet from the rain.

It's hard to know if it was the change in weather or something else, but things have felt off all day. I've been on edge like I'm sliding toward another unknown. There are crater-sized holes starting with Aiden's sudden departure from Bubba's, to finding him in his office, and the strange meeting with Officer Henley. Also, there is the potential Estelle Blanchard connection, the FBI file on Aiden's desk, and now Puma shows up in Butterbury.

He has holes in his awareness too because I have zero interest in the so-called musician. However, I didn't think he'd find me in Butterbury—must've made the connection from some social media posts when I first got to town.

I lean against the back of the closet, feeling rung out like a rag, except I'm soaked. My breathing slows, but there's no

doubt Puma saw me run in here, not to mention I probably left a trail of wet footprints.

Thankfully, Louella Belle didn't question me when I yelled, "*I need to hide!*"

My leg cramps so I quietly slip out of the closet. The rain pounds against the window panes in the front of the office. I creep over to see if Puma's car is still parked in the street below.

I imagine Puma thinks I know things about his trouble with the law and wants to keep me quiet. Now, would be a good time to have a bodyguard and a lawyer. I think about my family. I doubt they'd help me at this point. Not one of them has reached out to see how I'm doing.

Two dark figures dot the street below. Aiden stands taller than Puma and shoves him toward his car. Rain flies from his jacket as he points at the guy who scrambles to get into the vehicle and then speeds away.

I press my hands over my face. "What is going on?" I whisper.

Confusion and questions batter me as I slide to the floor and lean against the wall, head in my hands.

Footsteps approach and Aiden appears at the top of the stairs. "Tinsley, please come with me." His tone sounds a lot like the agents dressed in black who woke me up from my diva dream.

That's when the realization comes back. I knew I recognized his blue eyes.

"You were there when Puma was arrested. I thought I was crazy for thinking you were the Southern Agent." No, I was crazy for ignoring my intuition. For falling so blindly for him.

Aiden's shoulders droop like he's the one caught breaking the law.

There should also be rules and regulations about breaking people's hearts because if I'm right, Aiden should go back to jail. Only this time, I won't be in the next cell, all starry-eyed

and buying into his talk about how I'll be the future Mrs. Mayor.

When I don't move, he says, "We have to talk."

Crossing the room feels like moving through cement. Like I'm pressing against the driving wind outside. It's as if whatever drew us together before repels us with the power of a massive magnet.

We hurry across the street and return to the office. As usual, Brave is excited to see us, but I can't match the enthusiasm. He plonks down on my feet when I drop into a wooden chair. Aiden sits stiffly at his desk.

"What can you tell me about Harold Jerrold Pumanowksi?" Aiden asks with a certain smugness—the kind reserved for "Suit Aiden"—and danger, which usually goes with biker Aiden. Right now, I'd prefer cowboy boots delightful Aiden.

"Is this an interrogation? If so, I already told the other agents everything I know, which is next to nothing. I'll tell you the same thing I told them." I clear my throat. "I vowed to swear under oath that I didn't even know who the vice president is. But if they were to ask me who starred in the latest Casablanca remake as well as the original, I could give you names and birthdays. Though now I do know who the VP is."

"This isn't an interrogation, but why was Harold looking for you?" Aiden's posture is fierce like he's ready to tear the musician's throat out and break his fingers, but his expression softens.

"Who? Puma? I don't know. He'd been texting because he wanted to catch up. I thought maybe he wanted to apologize." I go on, speculating and describing how the texts escalated the more I ignored them.

Aiden crosses his arms in front of his chest and huffs. "Sounds like Tinsley-splaining to me."

If I had long nails still, they'd be digging into my palms. "Did Taylor use that term? That's rich. What else did he tell



you about me? In case you guys didn't notice, which seems odd since the rest of the town seemed to, I've changed. But it turns out I didn't know you at all."

"I can explain."

This time I huff and fold my arms in front of my chest. "Please do. From what I've seen, you've easily shifted between a maverick biker dude, easy-going in slacks and a button-down shirt but hiding a prank behind your smile, a businessman in a well-tailored suit, and a hardworking guy who wants to help his town. I don't know who I'm getting when, and should've known better than to trust you. I was afraid the joke was on me. I was right."

"Only partially right, Tinsley. I wasn't pranking you. Far from it. Everything between us was real. Is real. But the truth is that I'm a federal agent. I've been on this case for a while. As I gathered intel, it grew and grew, going beyond a corrupt mayor in a small town all the way to the governor. There are some bad actors involved, and I'm only now putting the pieces together."

"But I had nothing to do with it."

Aiden gives a short nod. "I know."

Something sticky yet slippery wells inside. "Then why didn't you tell me?"

Aiden hesitates. He's hard to read. Multidimensional, unlike a scripted character. I hardly knew him, at least not how I thought I did. Realization dawns like a fiery sun. The liquid turns lethal and then into flame. "Because you didn't trust me."

"No, that's not it. Not exactly. I didn't want to endanger you."

"Have all the geese in Butterbury been parading around, knowing the truth while this little ugly duckling was in the dark?" My voice is shrill as the tears return. They're dense like the rain beyond the windows.

Brave makes a doggy sigh as if he senses how upset I am.

“No, not even Officer Henley knew until after he released us from jail. And you are not an ugly duckling.”

“Tell that to my sister Victoria.” I’ve rarely spoken of my family because there are ruins there, as fragile as the ones in Rome.

“Tinsley, trust me when I tell you I wanted to protect you. All I can say is that this case has to do with national and foreign alliances, nuclear assets, and a lot of money.” He balances his elbows on his knees and rests his head against his hands.

“You could’ve just said so in the beginning.”

“Not even my family, sisters, or the guys knew until recently.”

“Leaving me the last woman standing.”

Aiden shifts closer to me and says, “That fits since I was the last man standing.”

“How can I trust you when our relationship was built on a lie?”

“It wasn’t a lie exactly. More like concealment of the truth.”

I cock my head. “Then let me rephrase. How can I trust you when our relationship wasn’t built on truth?”

“It’s not like you told me that Puma had been texting you.” His tone turns sharp.

“And I ignored and deleted him.”

“But you could’ve been in danger. He didn’t look like he was fixing to take you on a date.”

I shiver. Aiden is a capable man. He was going to protect me from Brave, who he thought was a wolf. Plus, he’s professionally trained as a federal agent. Physically, I feel safe with him. Emotionally, I feel anything but. It’s like I jumped into a jungle ravine. All manner of creatures, poisonous insects, carnivorous plants, and what feels like a deep, natural love for this man could take me out at any turn.

I have to protect myself. “Aiden, technically, your case is the reason that I lost my social standing. I could get revenge and return to my old life.” Or spill the truth about how I love him.

He goes still. “What do you mean?”

I narrow my eyes. “I know where you keep Murder Doll.” I have never seen the thing but the name alone sets his teeth on edge. At the moment, it’s the only thing I can think of to get back at him, considering he has my emotions twisted like a *Goga* student.

“You wouldn’t.” His eyes narrow.

We have a stare-off. It’s everything I can do to hang onto my anger and not give in to the temptation of his blue eyes.

“Murder Doll,” I whisper to keep myself from falling off the rails and back into his arms.

He flinches.

Guess I found his weak spot. “Why didn’t you bother to tell me that you were in Malibu that night? That you knew who I was? You had every opportunity.” I want him to say something that erases all my doubt, but it’s carved into this conversation now. There’s no erasing or ignoring the truth and the pain. Mae didn’t have to warn me about breaking her brother’s heart. She should’ve reserved her sister-bear ferocity for him.

“Tinsley, if you dealt with the kinds of people I do on a daily basis, you’d understand that it was only to protect you.”

“I want to appreciate that. I do, but how can I when I didn’t even know that I needed protection? When I only knew half of you? If you looked at it from my perspective, you’d see that I don’t know how I’ll be able to trust you.”

“I’m sorry,” he says softly. “I’m sorry, but I was just doing my job.”

I want to accept his apology, however, the *but I was just doing my job* add-on threatens to cause a Tinsley Tantrum.

“What comes first? Us or your job?” I’ve seen how this scenario plays out in my family and don’t like the result.

Aiden’s shoulders drop and he gazes between his hands at the floor. “I just have to finish this case.” His voice is low as if he’s talking to himself.

“I want to believe that, but how can I?” I start toward the door. Brave follows me. I don’t know whether I want to stay or go. For Aiden to follow me or remain in his office.

I’m not sure of any of it other than I wish we could rewind and go back to yesterday. Then again, that wouldn’t change that he’s a chameleon. That I believed the vague explanation that he was in business, finance. That I’d doubted my memory and that he was the Southern Agent.

The guys I used to date were celebrities with a side of bad boy. Aiden is no different, except he’s a good guy—at least when it comes to his job. As for us, I ended my man-cation early and fell for him.

Unfortunately, I was right. The joke was on me.



□

The rain lightens when I go to the boutique. Louella Belle offers to bring me to Toby the Trailer. I'll stay there tonight, pack up, and call my family. If I have to, I'll beg them to help me this one last time. Rhondy will understand that I have to leave on short notice. Beatrice too. My new friends, my new life. *Boom*. Gone.

Just when I'd started feeling like this was home, it's time to go. This town isn't big enough for Aiden and me.

Neither my mother nor my father answer their cell phones. I try John and it goes to voicemail, so I leave a message. I gather my things from around the trailer. I'm stuck here—no car, no boyfriend, nothing except this dog who doesn't leave my side.

He's a girl's best friend, all right. I snuggle up with Brave and he places his paw on my hand. Such a good, loyal boy.

An hour later, my phone rings. I jolt, afraid it's Puma. The scene on Main Street replays in my mind. My breath sticks until I see it's my brother's name scrolling across the screen.

"John? The adult lady child needs your help," I say when I answer. "Thanks for calling me back."

"Yeah, Mother and Father mentioned you'd called them. When I asked what was going on, they weren't sure. When I asked why they didn't know, they said they didn't answer."

My chest craters. Is he just calling to remind me they've all but disowned me? Is it really just Brave and me?

"Our family situation is a bit muddled, a lot dysfunctional," he says after a beat.

"Ya think so?" I ask, not glad that's the case but relieved he sees it now.

He snorts. "Yeah. Sorry for doubting you back at the cottage. I knew the thing about Mother. Tried to ignore it. As for Father, work came with less drama. But I've followed Puma Palmer's case. Obviously, you didn't have anything to

do with it, but Mother and Father don't see it that way. They think you've given the family a bad name."

"But if they'd let me explain..." The second the words are out of my mouth, it's like a carrier pigeon flies into my line of sight. Its message says the same thing except replaces *me* with Aiden. I let him explain a bit, but didn't extend the understanding I want from my mom and dad.

"Sure they've worked hard, but they're wrapped up in status. It's like you were always an afterthought," John says.

I don't know whether to cry with sadness or relief. "That's exactly how I've always felt. I just want a family. To love and be loved."

"I wish things were different, but—"

But I am loved. Aiden loves me. He said so himself. And he showed me that by being my Bubba against Beatrice's Benjamin. But it was Puma who spilled the symbolic soda on my shirt.

"Listen, I want to help you out. If you need any legal assistance, just give me a call."

"I need transportation assistance," I say even though I'm not sure where I'll go.

"Ah, that's right. The stolen car. It didn't even occur to me that was Mother and Father's BMW when you were at the cottage."

"I'm still stuck in the small town where I got arrested, but I have no way to leave." I brace myself for a disapproving scolding.

John says, "I'll get you a plane ticket and a car service in the morning. What's the nearest airport?"

Even as the generous offer is out of my brother's mouth, I feel torn. Do I really want to leave? What's waiting for me? Where will I go?

I belatedly answer, "Savannah, I think."

“It’s late. Why don’t you call me in the morning, and we’ll get it sorted out.”

“I appreciate it.”

We hang up, and I gaze into the night. In the distance, the leaves of the trees on the hill leading to Aiden’s house flicker with light.

It isn’t only that I can’t trust him, but he didn’t trust me. Not with the truth of who he is and his job. Not by showing me his house. Not with much at all...except his heart, but was that even real?

For a moment while on the phone with John, I’d wavered, and considered trying to fix things here. I don’t really want to leave Aiden or Butterbury, but what other choice do I have?

I should sleep well having made my decision, but I toss and turn, hot, humid, and miserable.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Brave wakes with a long, mournful howl.

“Me too, buddy. Me too.”

The next morning, I want to go to Bubba’s and visit him, Tammy, and the restaurant one more time. Walk through the field to the hives, and apologize to Beatrice for having to put off her dream.

Instead, Aiden waits for me with the Maybach running to bring me to Sweethearts—little does anyone know it’s my last shift. I don’t meet his eyes, but imagine they’re as dark-rimmed as mine. The drive to town is agonizing silence. His tight grip on the wheel may as well be a vice around my chest. The sky is clear, but the air sticks in my lungs.

“Thanks,” I say when he drops me off in front of Sweethearts Bakery & Café.

“I can keep Brave for you today if you’d like,” Aiden offers when I’m halfway out of the car.

I pause, considering. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m leaving, Aiden.”



“No,” he says sharply. “Please don’t—”

“Aiden, I have to.”

“What about us?”

Inside, I have a Tinsley Tantrum and my mind spins with lots of Tinsley-splaining. On the outside, I remain calm and clear. “I don’t think it’s going to work.” The words are like shards of glass in my throat.

“Are you saying it’s over?”

Now, I’m underwater, choking. “I’m not sure it was ever —” I slam the door and bring Brave to the boutique where I find Camellia behind the counter.

Unlike yesterday, Aiden doesn’t follow me. Doesn’t come to my defense.

But I guess this time, I’m my own enemy.

Truth is, I don’t want it to be over. Not at all, but I don’t know how I can accept his love.

Camellia greets Brave. “Everything okay? I heard you had some trouble yesterday.”

Swallowing back tears, I wave my hand dismissively then trot to the door to go over to the bakery for what will be my last shift. “Yeah, everything is fine. It was just a misunderstanding.”

I guess I’m a decent actress after all.

# *Chapter Twenty-Two*

I don't know how long I stay in the car, but I'm pretty sure my heart stopped the second Tinsley closed the door. The songs on the radio change. People walk by on the sidewalk. My phone beeps a few times.

Thanks to the wonders of gravity, it's not possible for a person to fall if they're already seated, but if last night with the way I left things with Tinsley was torture, now I'm floored. I've hit rock bottom.

Like a creeper, I used my night vision gear to make sure she was safe in the trailer. Brave was there, but I wanted to make sure Puma wasn't lurking around, trying to make good on his threats during the encounter on Main Street.

After Tinsley and my conversation in my office, I scolded myself because I shouldn't have allowed myself to surpass the usual flirty interest in her. What was I thinking?

It was in my best interest professionally and otherwise to have kept my distance. I couldn't afford to reveal my identity. But I crossed the line. I knew better.

I'm so close to putting a lot of corrupt people in prison, I shouldn't have risked it. Tinsley was involved with Puma even if she didn't do anything wrong. At first, I told myself it was just to keep an eye on her. To get info. Who was I kidding? I fell and I fell hard.

My job is to protect the innocent. Indict the guilty. I've kept it simple until now, and look where that got me. Sitting alone in my car.

My phone beeps again. My heart restarts at the possibility that it's Tinsley.

I check. It's Harrison. I'm close to cracking the case and have to wash my hands of it. I relented and relinquished my maverick title. Did something I never before had to do, I asked for help. Last night, when I couldn't sleep and knowing Harrison is in an earlier time zone, I shared everything I know. I read his text.

**Harrison: The rats have left the nest.**

Officer Henley's code for a doughnut run comes to mind, but I can't make sense of what this could mean.

I start to type a message back when a shadow crosses the side of my car. An identical Maybach pulls up, only it's blood red.

Didn't Tinsley say her father owns one? Perhaps he's come to pick her up.

In sync, two tall, pale, and sharp-eyed men get out and stalk toward Sweethearts Bakery and Café.

My heart accelerates. I go from stationary to revving with adrenaline.

The Kraven brothers are in Butterbury.

Every muscle in my body coils, prepared to spring into action, but they haven't done anything yet. Nothing that I can prove. And if they see me and make the connection, that'll compromise the case.

They know I'm the reason they originally went to prison, not that it made much of a difference given it didn't slow down the construction of their evil empire.

This is what Harrison must've meant by the rats leaving the nest. This confirms my sense that the case has become a rats' nest

It can't be a coincidence that the Kraven brothers came here the day after Harold Jerrold Pumanowksi paid a visit.

“Give me a reason to put you both away for the rest of your lives,” I hiss under my breath.

The two hawkish city slickers enter the Sweetheart Bakery & Café.

Something in me snaps.

They entered a no-fly zone. I cannot hold back and with bad intentions, I get out of the car.

But upon entering the bakery and as Tinsley welcomes them, I can't reveal our connection. I just hope she's mad enough at me to pretend I don't exist.

The Kravens are the kinds of guys who'll go after the family, friends, and loved ones of people who owe them something, including Stoll's wife. Including Tinsley, if I don't act fast.

I'll just keep my head down and order a coffee like a normal customer...one with a pair of handcuffs, leaving me with a bit of a delicate situation.

One of them edges toward the little plywood half door that separates the area behind the counter from the rest of the bakery. They're not messing around.

“What can I get you guys?” Tinsley asks brightly.

She ignores me, thank goodness. At least for now.

The other brother says, “Your number.”

Her cheeks blister and her expression crumbles like she's uncomfortable. “Oh, um, I don't give that out. I have a—”

All I have going for me right now is the element of surprise. These two idiots are too arrogant to watch their six. Likely, they have a thug or two outside, but at the moment, I have the upper hand.

I remove my sidearm and rack the slide so they know I'm not fooling around. “Hands up where I can see them.”

One obeys. The other starts to turn around.

I take a step back so I can keep them both in my sights.

“Miss, please leave the premises,” I say, hoping she goes out the back door and directly to the Starlight. Rhondy will know what to do. She always does.

The other Kraven brother lifts his hands. I don’t expect them to come easily and I have to buy time for Henley to get here with a second pair of cuffs.

“What’s this about?” the brother on the left asks.

“It’s about blackmail, kidnapping, extortion, and the illegal purchase of this town, among other things. The list is long, boys.”

“You can’t prove a thing,” the other brother says.

“I can and I will and the two of you will go back where you belong.”

The second brother completes his rotation and looks at the sidearm then at me. “Aiden Fuller. Well, this is an interesting surprise, considering you tried to ruin us.”

“Tried, failed, won’t happen again.”

“Did we become your pet project?”

“No, I try to avoid scum like you, but as fate would have it, you stepped onto my turf. For the record, a bad deed will not go unpunished,” I grind out.

“Fuller, you can be sure you’ll be seeing us again.”

“Yep. Behind bars.”

“On what grounds?”

“I’ll come up with something and I’ll be sure to visit. Then again, you shouldn’t get lonely since you have each other. Misery loves company and all that.”

Sirens wail nearby and in less than sixty seconds, Henley is by my side and on alert. I half expect the Kravens to attempt to run or put up a fight, but we have them surrounded. They underestimated our little town.

We make the arrests and the Kraven brothers occupy the same jail cells Tinsley and I did until I arrange transport to

another facility.

After doing the necessary paperwork, I want nothing more than to find Tinsley and make sure she's okay, but the guys intercept me with a box of doughnuts and don't let me go until we head up to my office for a debrief. Aggie joins us.

"Okay, secret agent. Explain what all just went down," Taylor says as if in awe.

I arrange the pieces in my mind, most of which only came into focus today, like a Sherlock Holmes grand reveal. "Sheldon Gatlin Hebert was a scrappy, scrawny, skinny kid from a small town in Louisiana. He fell in love with the daughter of an oilman. Joyce Estelle Blanchard grew up wealthy and her daddy would accept nothing less for her future."

"I take it Sheldon Gatlin Hebert is also known as Gatlin Stoll," Bo says.

"You got it. So the young, enterprising man skimmed some money from the coffers of the local swim club where he worked as a custodian. He placed a bet on a horse at the Louisiana Downs and won. He must've enjoyed the thrill because he kept betting until he amassed a nice little nest egg to present to Daddy Blanchard in exchange for the blessing of their union."

"Sneaky," Buck says.

"What's sneaky is the two of you having a boys club meeting up here without us," Mae says, appearing in the doorway.

"You have your own headquarters," I reply.

The ladybosses and Bess all file in and take seats.

"Where's Tinsley?" I ask.

"She's with Rhondy."

My shoulders settle. She should be here with me, but I understand why she's mad at the moment. I owe her an apology and an explanation, but I have to get through this inquisition first. I owe this group the facts. Tinsley will want

those and more...and I'm ready to give her anything she wants—all of me—if she'll take me back.

“Can you start from the top?” Bess asks.

I repeat what I told the guys then add, using the familiar names for ease of understanding, “Shortly after Gatlin and Estelle were married, they moved to Nevada. Supposedly Stoll had a job there, but he got in over his head gambling. Years passed in a feast-or-famine fashion. Then the Kraven Casino opened.”

“And that's owned by the two guys you just arrested?” Christina asks.

I nod and Cassian eyes me like he knows there's more to that story.

“Suffice it to say, the Kravens and I go back. I went to work for their company and quickly moved through the ranks then they made me an offer I had to refuse. Turned them in to the authorities. Became an agent because I detected something their best men did not. I have a way with numbers.”

“And all that time, we thought you had a way with women,” Bess says.

“That too.” I smirk though only one woman comes to mind.

“So you got the Kravens in trouble?” Nash asks, impressed.

“I did and have been watching my back ever since. They're a vengeful, merciless pair. Back to the story. Gatlin got in over his head gambling. Unbeknownst to his wife, he sold off everything they owned to cover the gambling debt. Then he met a guy named Gannon Barnes. Some of you may know him.”

Louella Belle bristles.

“Your brother?” Camellia asks.

She nods regretfully.



“The two ran countless scams and just when it looked like Gatlin was going to recover, he lost it all, including Estelle. She left him. That is until he made his way here, and became the mayor. However, the Kravens still wanted their money so they blackmailed him into participating in their shady dealings. He became their puppet.”

“Hydro-pro, among the other arrangements?” Buck asks smartly.

“You got it.”

“So the Kravens don’t only own the casino?” Christina asks.

“They owned Gatlin and have their fingers all over every piece of dirty money in this country. Now, I can prove it,” I say.

“What about the cat?” Aggie asks.

I nearly forgot she was here. “Stoll wanted to prove to his wife that he wasn’t a complete loser and made the mistake of reaching out to her. After multiple failures with Hydro-pro, the tax stuff, falsifying documents, deeds, liens, and reallocating town funds into his own account, he made a final gambit. He’d sell Butterbury to the Kravens. It was the perfect plan.”

“He can’t sell a town.”

“No, but a certain Gannon Barnes convinced him he could.”

Louella Belle puffs her cheeks as she exhales. Bo rubs her shoulders.

“The Kravens took Estelle as collateral to make sure Gatlin was good for the deal.”

“What about the cat?” Aggie repeats.

“I’m getting there. The Kravens kidnapped Estelle. Gatlin got word and went to get the cat because Cindy Clawford is listed as the heir to his estate. Not that there is one.”

“Then why did he leave the cat in the garage?” Camellia asks.

“What about the Hawaiian shirt?” Bess asks.

“Where is Stoll?” Mae follows up.

Aggie gets to her feet and picks the scrapbook up off my desk, skipping the gloves this time.

“You would’ve made a fine agent, Aggie,” I say, confirming her suspicions.

“Stoll is in Hawaii where he and his wife spent their honeymoon. You could say he got cold feet and has been trying to negotiate Estelle’s release from the Kraven’s clutches.”

“I thought Gatlin was broke, how did he afford a plane ticket?” Bess asks.

“Don’t tell me he used tax money,” Taylor growls.

“Nope. Tinsley realized the cat’s collar had a number on the inside.”

Christina gasps. “To a safe.”

I nod. “When Sheldon Gatlin Hebert got carried away and gave away their house, Estelle Joyce Blanchard took the remains of her inheritance and put it in a safety deposit box at a bank in Nevada.”

“What about Mrs. Stoll, is she going to be okay?”

“I think so. We’re working on it. Stoll is being brought in. The Kravens are going to jail for a long time. This case is the tip of the iceberg. Their crimes are wide, deep, and cold. Would chill you to the bones, but they’re clever and cover their tracks. Now, we have something solid.”

Cassian claps me on the back. “Well done.”

“What’s your next case?” Aggie asks.

I chuckle. “How about the mystery of the missing book?”

“Sounds right up my alley.”





That night, Tinsley refuses to answer Toby's door. She won't talk to me. I blew it just when I'd decided to choose her over work. But I had to finalize the case. Serve justice one last time. Finish what I started before I begin my new life.

The next morning, a sleek black sedan pulls up to Toby as I trundle through the woods on the four-wheeler. The driver, in slacks and a white button-down shirt, puts Tinsley's luggage and a box in the back. She and Brave get in. I'm too late. Now, they're really gone.

I spend the day in the office doing paperwork. Even though I solved the case, my life unraveled. I had it all for thirty days. It's over.

I try to take a few deep breaths, but not even cute cats help me now. Not a big one like Aslan either. All is lost. I'm alone.

Later, when I get back to the trailer, I find traces of Tinsley. Her dewy, rainy scent lingers in the air. She left a pink hair tie on the counter. One of Brave's chew toys is on the floor under the table.

And on the bed, freshly made, a doll with a chubby ceramic face and rosy cheeks leers at me from its glassy, eerie eyes. Its hair is sparse like maybe a mouse ate it when pickings were slim. The doll wears a tatty floral dress and holds what looks like a pitchfork.

### Murder Doll.

I stagger slightly then honing my senses, I listen. Footsteps patter and someone whispers. I grab the flashlight by the door and shine it into the night. "Who's there?"

"Wooo. It's the ghost of..." a spooky female voice starts then whispers, "What was I again?"

"Shh. He'll hear you."

"I'm Lucinda, the ghost of love, here to tell you that you've been a fool."

A second, eerily possessed voice, says, “And I’m Murry the Murder Doll, here to exact revenge for the one you lost.”

I whip around, but the doll remains still on the bed in the trailer. Never sleeping there again.

“Wooo, you have a choice to make,” the ethereal, ghostly voice says.

I roll my eyes, realizing my sisters are out there putting this on.

“The choice I’m going to make is which sister to get first.” I rush out the door and the two of them, crouched by the grill, scatter.

I make chase, not wanting either of them to go into the woods or get lost up here in case there are wolves or coyotes nearby. For a moment, I feel young again, free, and like I wear the same smile Tinsley did when she was playing in the field with Bubba’s kids—moments before her encounter with the bees. I want Tinsley more than anything. Maybe my sisters can help.

It’s dark and late. There’s a good chance we could come across much worse than insects.

“Bess, Mae, want something cold to drink?” I call.

“Yes, please. I forgot how sweaty I get when I run,” Bess calls, panting.

“Do you have chocolate?” Mae asks. “I’m only calling a truce if there’s chocolate.”

“I can’t make any promises. Maybe Tinsley left some.”

A deep grunt comes from nearby, and I crash to the ground having tripped over something at the same time all one hundred-something pounds of my baby sister tackles me.

From the hard landing, I groan as the wind kicks out of my lungs. “Ow, what are you doing?”

Mae holds me down. “That’s my line. What did you do to send Tinsley packing?”

Rolling over so I can get up, I lift Mae to her feet and brush us both off. “It’s what I didn’t do. And since when do you defend Tinsley?”

“I do what’s right and fair.”

“Sounds familiar,” I mutter.

“We are not leaving until you spill your guts, even if we have to drag it out of you,” Mae says.

I recoil. “You’re not painting a pretty or appealing picture.”

“Just remember, Murder Doll is watching,” Bess singsongs in a creep-tastic way.

We go inside Toby and I keep a careful eye on Murder Doll. Give me criminals and thugs, and I can handle myself, but I’m convinced that the thing is an actual article of the devil. It’s so disturbing with the way it stares as if it attempts to penetrate my soul. “Actually, can we get that thing out of here?”

“Only if you call up the love of your life and get her back here before she gets on an airplane.”

“How do you know she didn’t already leave?” My tone is somber, the sound of someone who has all but given up.

“She called Christina and asked if she knew of any luxury hotels in Savannah that allow dogs. Tinsley’s brother helped her out, but she’s not sure where to go,” Mae says.

Bess glares at me. “She should go here. Er, come here. You know what I mean.”

“Mae asked me what I did. It’s what I didn’t do. I didn’t tell her about my job.”

“You didn’t tell us for nearly two decades. I have to give you credit for keeping the secret. You’re like James Bond-level sly.”

“I prefer Sherlock Holmes, but yeah. Sly, sneaky, stupid.”

“Ah, so you admit it,” Mae says.

“Yes, of course, I was being stupid. I wanted to protect her. To keep her safe. To separate my job from the rest of my life. Not sure how well you keep track of criminals, but I deal with some pretty nasty characters.”

“And there we thought you were a jet-setting playboy.”

I wink. “I was that too.”

“But Tinsley tamed you.”

“You might say that. She’s everything I didn’t know I wanted, I needed.”

Bess and Mae simultaneously sigh. “Sounds like love.”

“Oh, it’s love. One hundred and ten percent. I want it to be forever.”

This time they gasp at the same time.

“We know what to do,” Bess says.

“We do?” Mae asks.

“Yes. You’re going to go to Savannah. Buy a ring. Propose on the promenade by the water. Then—”

“I don’t even know where to find her.”

Bess shakes her head like I’m an egg short a dozen. “At the luxury hotel where they allow dogs.”

The space between my eyebrows pinches tight.

“We’ll ask Christina. We’ll figure it out. It’s what you do for love,” Mae says.

“She won’t want to talk to me. I broke her trust.”

“Then you have to face Murder Doll—and what was the name of the ghost?” Mae whispers to Bess.

“Oh, brother.” I press my hand to my face and draw a raspy breath.

“That’s you.”

“Yes, that’s me. Never thought you’d be helping me out with this.” Then again, I guess today is a day to drop the lone wolf bit, especially if I want Tinsley back.

“Aiden, think about it like this, if you took the risk to keep her safe by doing what you thought was right to protect her, you’re willing to take the risk to go to her, lay your heart at her feet even if it means she might kick it into the gutter—”

Mae shakes her head. “I don’t think that’s helping. What Bess means is you always said you were going to be the last man standing. That means you’ve seen all of us fall in love, but what happened before that?”

“Taylor thinking I was going to kill him if he so much as looked at you,” I say, recalling our bull session. The bro version of a heart-to-heart. “But he risked it anyway,” I say, seeing where this is going.

“And Cassian and I could’ve gone our separate ways, but we’re better together.” Bess flutters her lashes like she’s as in love as ever.

“So you’re saying that true love is worth risking my pride for even if she decides she doesn’t want me back?”

They both smile and nod like I just suggested we go get ice cream, which I could go for right now. I get why it helps the brokenhearted and desperate during times like this.

“Okay, I’ll go and do it, but Murder Doll has to disappear, forever, and...” I give them instructions if Tinsley returns to Butterbury with me and it involves flowers, chocolates from Sweethearts, and our closest friends.



# *Chapter Twenty-Three*

My vision blurs as I leave Butterbury. I don't think I've remained in one place this long, at least not in recent memory. It's like I grew roots, blossomed, and now, as I leave, I'm withering on the vine.

Brave sits next to me, on alert, as I reel through what transpired today.

My boyfriend and I officially broke up. Then he transformed back into Southern Agent as he took charge, made arrests, and closed the case. It was an impressive sight of commanding, efficient excellence to be sure, but it turns out I hardly knew the guy I loved.

At least, I think the case is closed. I'm not sure how that all works except what I've seen on television and we all know that's rarely real. But I'm not sure I want the scoop. I'm more of a romantic comedy, relationship drama fan—though *A Golden Deception in Texas*, a western film, was excellent.

If my life were a movie, it would be called *An Epic Deception in Butterbury* or *A Woman and her Dog: a 'tail' of loss*. Actually, that sounds like a tear-jerker. I rest my head on Brave's flank as I think about what to call my feature film.

I'd meant to take a vacation from men, so perhaps it should be called *Tinsley's Failed Man-cation*.

Or not. The life I lived in Butterbury wasn't one for cameras with a soundtrack. At times it was gritty, others sweet, and above all, it was mine. Free from caring what people would think.

Ironic, since it's headquarters for HLTV's *Designed to Last*.

But for once, finally, I could be myself. Above all, I wanted to be myself.

My life isn't a movie or a dress rehearsal or anything but real. And right now it feels like I'm running from it. Possibly with my tail between my legs.

"What would you do, Brave?" I whisper.

The car my brother hired to bring me to Savannah whizzes past fields on one side and forest on the other. The sun plays peekaboo with the clouds. But I feel dreary like I'm going in the wrong direction even though I initially thought I wanted nothing more than to get out of Butterbury.

I mentally scroll through my recent memories starting with the last time I fled. The result: I landed in jail. On the upside, I met Aiden. On the downside, I fell in love with him and am now headed...nowhere.

Granted, I have a room at a hotel thanks to my brother, but then what?

I can't go back to Los Angeles, New York, or Nashville. There's nothing for me there. What about Miami, my original destination? Who was I trying to fool, I hardly knew the people I'd intended to visit. Then again, I hardly knew Aiden either.

For so long, I was a stand-in in my own life. When I finally made one of my own, here I am, leaving.

But there's nowhere to go...and there's no one I'd rather be with other than Aiden. Yes, even though he deceived me. We were both playing roles. But I can't help but think about how, like my father, he was married to his job. Unlike my mother, I did not have an affair, but all the same, the trust was broken.

Beside me, Brave lets out a little whine. Can Aiden and I rebuild trust just like Brave did by accepting the humans in his life were going to take care of him?

How about Mae and me? I was a royal jerk to her, but she forgave me. Taylor too. Could Aiden and I see past our mistakes and try again?

I think of Beatrice and her bees. Her love story buzzes in my mind. Aiden is my Bubba with the soda, sticking up for me to the bad guys. He's my partner in crime, er, community service. He believed in me every time I did something stupid at the bakery and when I decided to become a beekeeper. In a world of randomness where the miracles are all the things that don't happen, that's a pretty wild hobby.

And the chances of falling in love are even slimmer. But I do love him. A lot.



□

At the hotel, I set my alarm for early the next morning to catch my flight. But I don't sleep. Instead, I replay these last days in my head. I'm still watching the highlight and lowlight reels when I drag myself out of bed, shower, and get ready.

The same driver as yesterday picks me up, and my greeting sounds more like a grumble than I mean for it to, but my thoughts won't stop or pause or do anything other than rewind and repeat.

What did I do when it was my turn to stand by Aiden when he got lost? When he didn't quite navigate his life the way I'd have liked him to? I turned my back on him.

I won an award in my diva dream, but the only one waiting for me is if I do the right thing, even if it's the hard one. For so long, I was chasing what I thought was a dream when really it left me feeling empty. Alone, even when I was with friends and dating guys. Empty, even when surrounded by luxury items and expensive clothes.

Aiden filled me up with real love even if it didn't come with any accessories. Well, his Maybach leaves me with a question about what else he might be hiding. Guess those love hearts in my eyes were pretty big not to have asked about that.

I have to fix this. It's up to me.

The answer to my question is a lot closer than I think. I give the dog a scratch. "Thanks, boy."

It's time to be brave.

Maybe I'll turn around this riches-to-rags love story yet.

"Sir," I call to the driver. "Can you bring me back to Butterbury?"

When I get to the boutique, Christina decorates a shelf with colorful bunting. Camellia sends a text. Louella Belle brings some boxes in from the back. Mae sits with the baby in her arms, nursing. It's a picture-perfect scene of friendship. For a minute there, I was part of it. Could still be, I hope.

Brave lets out a little bark, announcing our return.

They all stop what they're doing and rush over to me except Mae who waves, and says, "You're back." Though I can't tell if it's a statement of welcome or if she's asking if I forgot my toothbrush.

"Mae, I don't want to make this your problem, but your brother is driving me crazy. I'm in love with him." I slap my hand over my mouth.

The corner of her lip lifts in a grin. "And he's on his way to profess the same to you."

"On his way where? I'm here."

"By now, he's probably in Savannah."

I press my palm to my forehead.

"But let's talk about driving and crazy, seeing as he's actually driving to Savannah and what went down here in Butterbury was actually crazy," Camellia says.

"I can't stop thinking about him." I go on to describe everything I love about the man. "His business look, the biker dude, and how sometimes he's rumbling inside like an uncaged beast. Also, have you seen his face?" If I were to see mine in a mirror right now, I'd have hearts and stars in my eyes.

"Yes, he's my brother, of course, I've seen his face," Mae says with a grimace.

"He's so good-looking. And have you smelled Aiden? He smells like clean and aftershave and man and his muscles and the way he smooshes and—"

"Alright, I get it," Mae interrupts, pumping her hand for me to stop gushing about her big brother.

"Yep, sounds like he's really driving you wild...and he just called from Savannah, frantic, because you're not there," Bess says, tucking a box from Sweethearts behind her back.

"She knows," the others chorus.

"Where'd you come from?" Louella Belle asks.

“Oh, just, uh, doing stuff over at the bakery with Rhondy. You know, things.” Bess clears her throat as if she’s hiding something.

“Seems suspicious,” Christina says.

“Shh,” Mae hisses, then says, “Our brother is a proud alpha male, possibly slightly damaged from the job we didn’t know he had until recently, and averse to being vulnerable.”

The others nod in agreement.

“But after Murder Doll visited him last night, he came to his senses,” Mae says matter of fact.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

Bess’s phone rings and she hollers, “The eagle has landed. I repeat, the eagle is here.” She hangs up. “Yeah, I could never be a secret agent.”

“I take it that was code for me returning to town?” I ask.

Bess nods.

We all burst into laughter. Brave’s ears perk up and he wears a doggy smile. Relief washes over me, introducing a little liquid to my laughter. For once, I don’t care if it messes up my makeup.

Thankfully, the ladybosses and Bess spend the next half hour distracting me until my attention drifts to the familiar, low rumble of a motorcycle approaching on Main Street.

Mid-sentence, I stop what I’m saying and rush outside. Aiden kicks the stand down on his bike and then does a double-take when he sees me standing there.

He gets off and swallows thickly. “Hi, you.”

My belly swoops on cue. Yep, still in love. Hopelessly, wonderfully in love.

This is the part of the movie where I rush into his arms and he spins me in a circle. His embrace is strong, unrelenting. I have a feeling he’ll never let me go again—symbolically speaking. And I don’t want him to. Despite the misunderstanding and misinformation, I want to be with him.



“We can fix this,” I exhale into the warm slope of his neck. I breathe in his spicy aftershave.

Aiden sets me on the ground and says, “I’m sorry for not telling you about my job. It was wrong. Even though you were an aspiring actress. I was playing a role to protect you.”

“I guess we’re not that different.”

“I’ll never keep anything about myself from you again.”

“Likewise, especially if a creep repeatedly texts me.”

“Do you get that often?”

“Not if I delete all the DO NOT CALL contacts in my phone.”

He gives a short nod as if that’s a good idea. “I have news. I’m retiring.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s time. Cats only have so many lives, ya know? And I want to make one with you. A life, uh, not a cat. That’s weird.” He brushes his thumb across his lips as if shy, boyish.

Around a laugh, I say, “Bubba’s isn’t the only thing that had a makeover. Me too. Or a makeunder, depending on how you look at it.”

“I’d say it’s an improvement, but when I first saw you, I knew you’d be the future Mrs. Mayor.”

“Are you still thinking of running for office?”

“Yes, but I have a feeling Cindy Crawford is going to be stiff competition.”

I chuckle. “Are mayors usually bad boy secret agents?”

“This one is, however, that is not motorcycle-appropriate attire.” Aiden looks me up and down, long and slow as if he likes what he sees despite his comment.

I glance down at my skirt. “Mae and Bess said you went to Savannah. How were you planning on getting me and my luggage back here on the bike?”

“Fair point, but I wanted to drive fast. I couldn’t sleep last night. I’ve hardly eaten. Tinsley, I don’t know if anyone has ever told you this, but you’re hard to live without.” He plants his hands on my waist, pulling us together.

Before I can address what’s happening in my body—a rush of love that has the ability to reconfigure my cellular composition and what I believed about myself and my worth—Aiden presses his lips to mine in a smooch.

My belly swoops.

Longing radiates through me, zipping to my chest. I feel wild and free at last. It’s dangerously exciting. And so is the wink that Aiden gives when we part, telling me there’s more where that came from.

“Tinsley, will you go for a ride with me?”

“In this? On that? I thought we decided this isn’t a biker outfit.”

“Let’s live on the wild side.”

“All my stuff is here and Brave.”

“I won’t let him miss you for too long.” Aiden saunters over to the bike and gets on.

I arrange my skirt as ladylike as I can so my mother doesn’t find herself sipping her tea and having a meltdown that she can’t explain then I get on.

Wrapping my arms around Aiden, I realize that whether I’m in a sequined dress, a skirt that would meet Mother’s approval, or a T-shirt and jeans, I belong here with this man in this town.

We zip toward his property but then take an unfamiliar turn. Going uphill, I tighten my grip around him.

A mailbox with a stone-covered post and flowers planted around the base sits at the end of a paved driveway. Aiden turns and takes it slow. The canopy of trees forms a tunnel of dappled light before it opens to a wide clearing with a massive house in the center of a manicured rolling green hill dotted with ornamental trees. Decorative shrubs and flowers surround

the craftsman-style home with a stone base, wood siding in a medium brown stain, and thick support beams.

I get off the motorcycle and stare.

“What do you think?”

“What do I think? If you were a house, this would be it. It’s so you. Strong, sturdy, and undecided between the clean-shaven look or letting a little scruff fill in with the wood and stone.” I brush my fingers along his jaw.

Aiden takes my hand and leads me up the stone-lined pathway. To the right is a large window with a pine tree perfectly shaped for Christmas lights. The entryway has a certain grandness to it, but the double, dark wood door also suggests that unwelcome guests ought to turn away.

It’s Aiden Fuller to a T.

He pauses in front of the door and says, “Welcome home.”

“Home?” I ask.

“This is the house I built. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I designed it for us.”

“How do you mean?”

“For one, it has a home theater and seeing how you love movies...There’s also a garden in the back with plenty of room for beehives. The kitchen is massive, perfect for baking. Wait until you see the pool, the climbing wall, the entertainment and game room. I think we could have a lot of fun here.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure. Perhaps it has something to do with Taylor’s warning. He wasn’t too keen on you.”

I wiggle uncomfortably. “The warning wasn’t unfounded.”

“Also, I kept it quiet because of my job and obviously didn’t want it to be broadcast on TV as a Designed to Last project.”

I make finger guns. “Gotcha.”

“But now I realize I didn’t tell you because I wanted us to have this moment.” Aiden drops to one knee and presents a dark blue velvet box. He opens it and says, “Tinsley, I want to officially carry you over that threshold. Will you marry me?”

I gasp and press my hands to my mouth. My belly swoops like it never has. Then I start jumping up and down, drawing him to his feet.

I plaster Aiden’s face with smooches. With each one, I say, “Yes.”

He lifts me into his arms and then gently kicks the front door open.

Light floods the open floor plan. The dining room is to the immediate right followed by the kitchen. To the left is a huge stone fireplace and the living area. Broad wooden beams span the ceiling, but my attention goes to the view out the windows in the back with the deck overlooking Butterbury. The river snakes to one side, hills bump along the horizon, and the town fills in the rest.

“Okay, Butterbury, you win. I’m staying.”

Aiden wraps his arms around me from behind as we take in the view. He nuzzles my neck, giving me little smooches that repeatedly make my belly swoop. I imagine us growing old here and hope those swoops never go away.

“Brave is going to love it,” I say.

“Lots of room to run around in the back.”

Below the deck is a pool and lawn that eventually drops toward the hill and trail that Aiden must’ve used to travel between here and Toby. I squint because it looks like several people emerge from the woods.

“Who’s—?”

“Hang on.” Aiden presses his pointer finger to my lips. “I want to kiss you once before the welcome party shows up. I, uh, kinda planned this, hoping you’d say yes and not kick me out of my own house.”

My eyebrows lift, but his lips are on mine. Our kiss fills me with something other than yearning. It's light, bright sunshine parting the clouds, rainbows shining overhead and inside. It's the best of our recent past and a promise of the future, filling me entirely.

Aiden gives me all of himself in that kiss, and I do the same.

When we part, the voices of our friends and Aiden's family filter from below.

Before they come inside, I say, "Wait, there's no furniture."

"I was hoping you could fix that."

"Seriously?"

Aiden nods. "As you said, the outside reminds you of me. I want the inside to be Tinsley."

"How about Tinsley and Aiden?" I say.

"I like the sound of that."

Aiden gives me one more smooch before the door swings open and everyone shouts, "Congratulations!"

Louella Belle, Bo, and Brave enter first. Aiden and I give our dog a lot of pets then trade hugs with Christina and Buck, Mae, Taylor, and the baby who is in a sling on his mama's chest, Camellia and Nash, Bubba, Tammy, the kids, and Beatrice follow. Rhondy and Paul make a brief appearance as well, bringing pies. Even Aggie from the bookstore pops over with a collection of mystery thriller novels for Aiden now that he's retired from the bureau.

Treats from Sweethearts, iced tea, and various food items fill the counter. It's part engagement party and part housewarming party.

Aiden gives tours of what amounts to a six-bedroom, seven-bath mansion. I am in awe. In love. When he and I find ourselves alone on the deck, Aiden slings his arm over my shoulder, pulling me close.

He points toward the west. “We’ll have a nice view of the sunset there.”

“This beats a jail cell.”

“They say marriage is like a ball and chain, but I’ve never felt so free.”

I beam a smile. “I’ve never felt so much like me.”

“Does that make a *we*? As in we’re free to be ourselves?” he asks.

“No more acting. No more roles. Just us.”

“Justice,” Aiden says with a laugh. “I look forward to being a happily retired and happily married man.”

“What about becoming the mayor?”

“Are you still up for being Mrs. Mayor?”

“I think I’d look great in a parade,” I say with a shimmy.

Aiden tips his head back and laughs. “What if we adopt Cindy Crawford? Do you think she and Brave will get along?”

I gesture over my shoulder to where they sit at attention by the screen door. “Looks like they’re already friends.”

Aiden cups my jaw. “Tinsley, I’m glad you were brave and said yes to us.”

Our dog barks as if agreeing.

I meet Aiden’s blue eyes, finally seeing the mystery they hold—love. “You made it easy.”

“Wasn’t hard when we were building what’s meant to be,” he adds.

Our lips collide and we kiss for love, freedom, and our future together.

## Epilogue

**T**hree months later.

*Thank you for joining Aiden and Tinsley on their special day. Please sign the guest book.*

Ha ha. Very funny that you guys did a partners in crime theme for your wedding. And the mugshots for the photo booth background are clever. Just so you know, marriage if done right is not imprisonment. Also, the little cake topper couple was cute in black and white stripes. I'm just glad you didn't walk down the aisle in handcuffs. Though the part of your vows when you said that Tinsley holds the key to your heart was sweet. Just stay out of trouble! Love, Bess & Cassian

We're glad to have you on team Butterbury and that you're calling the town home. Your house up on Riverview is amazing, if only we'd featured it on *Designed to last*. But we're so excited you offered to let us cover the building of your parents' house on your property. The airplane idea for the roof and the cockpit theme for your father's man cave are winners. Kendra, our producer, caught wind of you and suggested you host a show making over criminals. Sorry that I didn't ask first, but I told her it was a pass. Happy wedding day! Love, Louella Belle & Bo

From one bougie bumpkin to another, welcome to the family as an official ladyboss! What can I say, having Brave be the ringbearer was brilliant. He was so proud to march down the aisle and stand up there with you. I think Gremlin and Dulcie were jealous. Also, they're super excited to have a furry house guest while you're on your honeymoon. I asked

Buck if we could get another dog and he said if this visit goes well, we'll consider it. I'm not worried because Brave is a very, very good boy who deserves lots of treats. Wink wink. Enjoy Bora Bora! Love, Christina & Buck

I had a feeling you two were going to be Butterbury's latest hot-out-of-the-oven item! Tinsley is a cutie pie and there was no denying Aiden only had pies for Tinsley, I mean eyes, when he first came into the Starlight Diner. He had pies in his eyes. Love heart pies. He was making pies, er, eyes. Paul is telling me to cut it out with the pie puns, but it's so fun! One more: we hope you two enjoy your tro-pie-cal vacation! Love, Rhondy & Paul

What can I say, I thought the days of pranks were over, but you got me good, Aiden. The scarecrow in the closet nearly gave me a heart attack. Taylor and even baby Aiden were shocked. But from now on, you have to be on your best behavior because you're an uncle and a role model. And I know what you're thinking. No, you can not teach baby Aiden everything you know unless it's how to be a good big brother, which you are. Most of the time. In fact, you're the reason Taylor and I got and then stuck together. Though I should warn Tinsley about your practical joke streak. Love, Mae, Taylor, and baby Aiden

What a small world that we both ended up in Butterbury. Never thought I'd leave Boston or you'd leave "business," Aiden. Oh, and those pranks you wanted me to take care of. Consider them done. The check is in the mail. The chickens are home to roost. Stoll and the Kravens, who I always despised because they meddled with the markets, won't know what hit 'em. Genius to name the town dump after Stoll and use the residual funds from the Kraven Corporation to commission a statue of two brothers behind bars in the park on Wall Street. Well done and well wishes for a wonderful marriage! Love, Camellia, Nash, and Mikey

Congratulations! Thank you for all your help at Bubba's and for letting us cater your event. And you did not have to build the playground and school room in the field behind the restaurant. You always go above and beyond. Now, the kids



want to come to work with me every day, which is a good thing because I get to see them more often and teach them the meat-smokin' ropes. Plus, Tammy does their homeschool back there with Gramma's help. We're naming our next Bubba sauce after you two. Love, Tammy, Bubba & the kids

Can't wait to taste the first batch of Be Brave honey. Glad to have passed the torch to an amazing beekeeper, to have made a new friend in my old age, and that you found your Bubba. Remember what I said about miracles. Best wishes for a long and happy marriage. Love, Beatrice Baskin

Tinsley, you've gone through quite the transformation, and I couldn't be a prouder big brother. I don't think anyone in our family has told you this, but you're appreciated, loved, and welcome. Just don't make an announcement. Show up, uninvited, and leave the rest to me. He he. Aiden, you're a lucky man and I hope my sister gets all the love, affection, and pampering she deserves. Just watch out for the Tinsley Tantrums, though hopefully, she grew out of those. Love, John on behalf of the Humber siblings

Congratulations on your special day. We wish you a happy marriage and are working on our own. Thanks for the nudge. We apologize for not being more available when you were younger. We understand now that money isn't everything. (-Dad)

But a yacht and a private plane are important. (-Mom)

It's Dad again. Your mother can't do without our luxury lifestyle, but now that I'm retired, I plan to come down to visit often.

Butterbury seems like a nice place to build a mansion. I hear you know some women with a show. Feel free to put in a good word. (-Mom)

Love, Mom and Dad

I hope you enjoy your retirement, Aiden. If you ever find yourself on another case like Operation Pierate, you know where to find me. Oh, and be sure to pop into the bookstore to visit Hercule. He misses you (and the asset who he'll always

think fondly of as his Twinky). Wishing you both a wonderful marriage! Don't be a stranger. Oh, and Tinsley, I have those books you ordered. Love, Aggie

It's *pawsitively clawsome* running the town as the new *meower*. I look forward to having you as my deputy, Aiden. At first, I thought you were *kitten* around and playing one of your *hilarimouse* jokes, but when I saw the *docatments*, I knew the *pawsition* was meant for me. It's *clawvenient* to have Svetllama as my secretary, Archie on security detail, Eggetha keeping records, and Pumpkin running the town welcoming committee. *Befur* I forget, I hope your honeymoon is *purrfect* and I'll hold down the *furt* until you get back.

*Meowfully* yours, Cindy "Twinky" Clawford, Butterbury Town Mayor.

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## *Acknowledgements*

I'm so glad you joined me in Butterbury. It's been an adventure renovating homes, saving the town, and playing Cupid. I hope you enjoyed these love stories, had a laugh, and found an escape between these happily ever after pages.

A great big sweet & swoony thank you to all you wonderful readers who enjoy these mushy, gushy love stories and happily ever afters.

You're my favorite humans.

# *Also by Ellie Hall*

♥All books are clean and wholesome, Christian faith-friendly and without mature content but filled with swoony kisses and happily ever afters. Books are listed under series in recommended reading order. ♥

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## *About the Author*

Ellie Hall is a USA Today bestselling author. If only that meant she could wear a tiara and get away with it ;) She loves puppies, books, and the ocean. Writing sweet romance with lots of firsts and fizzy feels brings her joy. Oh, and chocolate chip cookies are her fave.

Ellie believes in dreaming big, working hard, and lazy Sunday afternoons spent with her family and dog in gratitude for God's grace.



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