



Claimed

BY MY BROTHER'S

BEST FRIEND

ELLA SLOANE

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AN OFF LIMITS ROMANCE

ELLA SLOANE

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Epilogue

Sneak Peek

CHRIS

SAV WAS CRADLED against my chest, her arms wrapped around my neck as I carried her up to my apartment. It was conveniently situated in the middle of town and wasn't very far from The Tavern where we'd just had a few drinks.

Sav had a few too many, and I was a little tipsy myself.

"I think you've had too much," I said, chuckling as I lowered her onto my worn-out couch.

I'd carried her because the alcohol in her system had deemed her legs unfit for walking and they had given up a half block away from my place.

Not that I was complaining. I didn't mind the excuse to be close to her. I breathed in her scent of honey and vanilla.

She must have been nervous about something because she was antsy the entire night and drank more than usual. Something was up tonight.

"Come here," she said, opening her arms after I set her down, seemingly wanting a hug.

I took in her pink cheeks and glassy eyes, and I decided it wasn't the best idea.

Sav was my best friend's little sister, and we had known each other practically our whole lives. She was beautiful and special to me in a way that was different from how I felt about any other woman.

I couldn't deny the chemistry between us. I always had to be careful I didn't cross the line with her because I found myself wanting to on more than one occasion.

I smiled and slowly shook my head. "I'm good, squirt. Let me get you a shirt to change into."

She pouted.

I chuckled and headed to my room to find something comfy for her to wear. It wasn't ideal that Sav was staying over at my place. But I reluctantly agreed when she said she didn't want her brother Sean or her grandpa to see her drunk, since I'd probably be held responsible for her drunkenness.

I found a clean shirt and handed it to her as she sat up. I remained standing and shoved my hands into my pockets.

Her kissable lips shifted into a smile as she patted the empty cushion beside her. "Come sit with me."

From the look in her eyes, I knew it wasn't a good idea.

It was the same look that women had when they wanted to get laid. It usually ended up with me taking them home for the night.

For *one* night.

In a few rare cases, I spent more than one night with a woman, but I never let myself get involved with them. It was the best way I found to keep anyone from ripping my heart out and stomping it. Having that happen once in my lifetime was more than enough for me.

I'd gotten pretty good at picking women who wanted the same thing: a lot of fun between the sheets and zero attachments or expectations the next day.

I didn't want that with Sav. Drunken meaningless sex. She was much too important to me.

It was hard enough to keep my hands off of her when I was sober, and with alcohol coursing through my veins, I wasn't sure I had the self-restraint.

I took a couple of steps back to make sure I didn't act on what I wanted. "You should lie down and sleep this off, and maybe you won't have the world's worst hangover tomorrow."

Her smile faded. "I know I'm not up to your usual standard, but I didn't think you'd be so horrified," she asked, turning away, her voice barely above a whisper.

I stared at her for a moment.

I hated that that's what she thought and hoped it was only because she was drunk. Even so, I refused to let her keep thinking that. I sat next to her and gently pulled her arm to face me, but she kept her head turned away.

"Sav, are you kidding me right now? Don't you ever say something like that. You're a beautiful woman. Any guy would be lucky to be in the same room as you." I meant what I said too. She was damn gorgeous. And she clearly had no idea how hard it was for me to resist her. "Will you look at me, please?"

I pulled her chin to face me, so I could read her expression and piece together how she was feeling.

She finally turned to me, and I got lost in her forest green eyes for a moment. We were so close, just a breath's width apart. My gaze drifted to her lips, and I forced myself to look up again. She leaned forward, closing her eyes as she pressed her mouth against mine.

I froze at first, unable to breathe.

How many times had I thought about what it would feel like to kiss her? And how many times did I have to push that ridiculous fantasy away and feel guilty about it later when I saw her or Sean?

I should have pulled back then, but I was weak. Her tongue slid across my lips, and I couldn't hold back anymore. I parted my lips and met her tongue with mine. We kissed hungrily, hands gliding over each other's face, neck, and shoulders. I sifted my fingers through her hair and tugged. She moaned in response, and I took the opportunity to deepen the kiss, circling my tongue against hers.

I wanted to hear her moan like that again, many times, because of me. The erotic sound rattled through me and had me pulling her in closer.

I knew I should stop.

That this would not end well, but I was lost in her taste and pushed the thought out of my mind. I ran my hands down her body and slipped them under the hem of her shirt, feeling her smooth, warm skin.

She pulled back just enough to take off her shirt, and I pulled mine off with one swift movement. As I ran my fingers up her back, she shivered and moaned again, the sound vibrating right down to my cock. My lips found hers again as her hands roamed over my body.

She shifted forward, aiming to climb into my lap. God, I wanted her to, though my guilt was growing along with my arousal.

My phone pinged with a text notification. I ignored it, my hands gripping Sav's thighs. It pinged twice more and the possibility of it being Sean or Sav's Grandpa crossed my mind. Guilt swooped in, reminding me that it was my best friend's little sister I was pulling into my lap.

I looked at Sav with apologetic eyes. "Sorry, I should check that." I reached for my phone on the side table and let out a deep sigh after glancing at it. "It's Sean. He's worried about you and is asking where you are."

"I'll just text him later," she said as she pulled my arm, trying to get back to where we left off, but I couldn't after seeing Sean's text, worrying about his little sister.

I held her by the arms to gently separate us. I had to put a stop to this.

I shouldn't have let it get this far.

I shook my head. "No, we're not doing this." I stood, putting my shirt back on. I grabbed the one I had gotten for her and pulled it over her head. She frowned as she swatted my hands away and finished putting it on herself.

I turned and pointed. “You’re going to sleep, and we’re forgetting this ever happened.”

Hurt spread across her face, and my heart ached to see it. “So, what? Am I not good enough for you?” She had to know better than that, didn’t she? But she kept going. “You had a sample, and it didn’t measure up to the women you bring home?”

Dammit, I had totally screwed up.

I frowned and put up my hand. “Sav, stop. You’re—”

“Didn’t realize you had such high standards, Chris,” she interrupted. “Considering you have a revolving door of women. Different flavor every week, right? What do all those other girls have that I don’t?”

“You’re not those other girls, Sav. And it’s sad you’d try to be one of them.” Tears filled her eyes as she looked away. I probably should have shut up, but I had to keep her from thinking something between us was possible, or I was going to give in and kiss her again. “You’re not like that. We’re not like that. You’re just drunk, and you need to get that childish fantasy out of your head right now.”

I stalked out of the room and closed the door behind me.

I was angry at myself for allowing this to happen and had a hell of a time sleeping. I peeked in on her a couple of times through the night to make sure she was okay and not sick from too much alcohol. She was sleeping both times.

She was gone by the time I woke up early the next morning to check on her again. I tried to call her, but she ignored my attempts to reach her.

I had screwed up bad.

I hoped Sav wouldn’t stay upset for long and maybe we could pretend that nothing had happened. I probably should have been braver and went to see her in person, where she couldn’t ignore me, and apologize for everything. Especially after being so harsh with her.

And I should have explained that I hadn't been angry with her, but myself. Because by the time I left her in that room, I knew that I'd never forget that kiss or how her skin felt under my fingertips. I was going to be haunted by that taste of what I knew I couldn't have, and I didn't handle it well at all.

I should have explained a lot of things.

I didn't. And then I ran into her while I was in a restaurant on a date the following week.

I wanted to get Sav out of my head, to move on and forget about what happened. The hurt look in her eyes told me she didn't feel the same way. I left the woman I was planning to sleep with that night sitting alone at the table while I went after her, determined to finally apologize and set things right.

Sav was gone by the time I got outside. She kept ignoring my texts and calls until I finally gave up.

I knew our relationship would never be the same.

SAV

FOUR YEARS LATER

A PIECE of hair slid out from behind my ear and tickled my forehead as I strained the noodles over the sink. Laughter filtered through the air, penetrating my ears as I sighed heavily. Sean, Nicole, and Grampa were seated in the dining room, exchanging stories about my brother and his girlfriend's spring break trip to Mexico.

Steam from the noodles coated my face, and I placed the pot back on the burner. I brushed my hair behind my ear and moved the noodles and meat sauce into serving bowls I'd placed to the side.

Sean entered the kitchen, lowering his head to get through the doorway. He was tall and lean while I was short and curvy. We were on opposite ends of the spectrum regarding body size because, like Grampa had always said, pride in his voice, there was no way either of us could ever be average.

"Do you need help?" Sean asked.

I gestured to the serving bowls. "These two are ready to go out. I'll grab the bread and lemonade."

His eyebrows rose. "Please tell me you made pink lemonade."

My lips shifted into a knowing smile. "Of course."

He pumped his fist. "Yes! You're the best."

My heart warmed at the compliment as he took the two bowls back into the dining room. I grabbed the bread bowl and the pitcher from the fridge and followed him.

Sean and Nicole sat on one side of the table while Grampa and I sat on the other. The two heads of the table were left empty. Grampa filled my glass with lemonade and gave me a wink.

We loaded our plates with food, and an uncharacteristic silence fell over the room. Usually, my brother talked a mile a minute, but he was rather pensive. After a few minutes, Sean awkwardly cleared his throat. “So, I was going to wait to tell you both, but Nicole and I have an announcement.”

Grampa and I paused our movements, bracing ourselves for his next crazy plan. I just hoped it wouldn’t take him somewhere far away.

He opened his mouth to speak, but a knock at the door interrupted him. Everyone looked at each other. “Should I get it?” Sean asked.

I shook my head. “No, I’ll get it.”

The person knocked again, and I rushed to the door. *Please don’t be another Jehovah’s Witness.* I had already shooed away two earlier and was starting to feel bad.

I pulled open the door to find a familiar set of dimples buried beneath a layer of dark, groomed facial hair.

Christopher Warner’s tall and wide frame filled the doorway. He was Sean’s best friend. And the object of the most stupid and ridiculous crush in history. Or at least in my life.

His broad chest and shoulders were covered with a black t-shirt and a sports jacket. His muscular legs were contained in a pair of tight-fitting jeans. A thick lock of dark hair flopped over his forehead, and his brown eyes twinkled as he took me in.

I hated how amazing he looked.

“Hey, squirt,” he said, dipping his chin and managing to look a little self-conscious.

His outright rejection four years ago had haunted me, but his presence still heated my skin. I hated myself for it, and I

didn't want him there.

As maturely as possible, I stepped back and threw the door closed, hoping to slam it in his much-too-handsome face.

He was unnaturally quick, shoving his foot in the gap and catching the ricochet before it banged me in the head.

“*Savannah.*” He carefully pushed the door open.

I let go and crossed my arms. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Sean invited me,” he explained.

“Chris, is that you?” Sean asked from the other room. “Dude, I forgot. Come on in. Sav made spaghetti.”

Chris wiggled his eyebrows at me as he walked past, heading into the dining room with my family. I blew out a frustrated breath and stomped back to my chair, ignoring how Chris's muscular ass swayed in his jeans.

“The food's still warm,” Grampa said. “And Sean was about to make an announcement.”

Sean snapped his fingers. “That's right. I'm glad you're here because we wanted to tell you all together.”

Chris annoyingly took the spot beside me, and we exchanged a look.

He winked, and I frowned.

My stupid cheeks heated.

“Go ahead,” Grampa said.

Sean took Nicole's hand. “All right. Well, I'll just come out with it. Nicole and I are engaged.”

My gaze instantly shot to her bare ring finger.

“It's being re-sized,” she explained instantly.

“Wow, congratulations,” I said with a lump in my throat.

“That's amazing!” Grampa added.

Chris hit a fist to his chest. “Congrats, bro.”

Sean hit a fist to his chest in response. I rolled my eyes at them.

“We want to get married this summer,” Nicole said. “But we still have details to work out.”

Sean nodded, resting his arm on the back of her chair. “Yep. We didn’t want to wait too long, but it was also a spur-of-the-moment thing. I proposed on the trip, and then we bought the ring yesterday when we got back.”

“Yep,” she agreed. “It was an eventful week.”

“Sounds like it,” I said, feeling a cluster of emotions from the news.

I was happy for my brother but couldn’t help the spark of jealousy. Long-term relationships and marriage seemed like far away concepts to me at this point. It’s not that I thought they would never happen, but it hadn’t happened yet.

Not anywhere close to happening, actually.

The conversation shifted back to the usual topics before Sean asked Chris if he was still looking for a new office space. Apparently, Chris’s company, White Oak Construction, was doing so well that they were expanding.

“No, not yet,” he said. “Still looking for a good spot downtown.”

“I might have a place for you,” Grampa said. “I’ve been considering selling the second floor of the bookstore to save money. It’s the perfect space for an office.”

I shook my head. “Grampa, we talked about this. We don’t need to sell. Sparks Bookstore is a fixture in this town that people have loved for years. We just need to make some changes, modernize it a bit, and business will pick back up fast.”

He sighed, running his fingers through his short gray hair. “I know you believe that, but I think it’s time. You’ve seen the sales. We haven’t been in the black in a long time, and I’d rather scale down than lose the place completely.”

I stared at him incredulously, struggling to understand how he could give up so easily. Sure, we were behind on bills, but I had some ideas of how to get us back on track.

“Actually, Jackson, I think that’d be perfect. As long as your asking price is in my budget, of course, I’d love to buy it,” Chris said.

My head snapped so quickly that I got a crick in my neck.

How dare he!

“It should be just the extra space I need,” Chris explained. “And I can probably cover any renovation costs.”

Grampa sat back in his seat, thinking it over.

“No,” I said. “I’m not working in the same building as him.”

“Uh, ‘him’ is sitting right here,” Chris said.

“Sav,” Sean chastised. “Don’t be rude.”

“It’s just a small office space,” Chris said. “It’ll be low foot traffic, so it shouldn’t interfere with the bookstore at all.”

“I said no.” I pushed my chair back from the table, seething. The legs scraped loudly against the wooden floor, but I didn’t care.

I needed to get out of the room.

I stood and walked out, heading to the bathroom for some space.

Memories invaded my mind, bringing me back to the moment I hated to relive all those years ago. The night that changed us. After years of friendship, passing glances, and late-night phone calls, not to mention too many drinks, I was convinced I could seduce Chris that night.

Unfortunately, it didn’t go the way I had planned.

What had I been thinking? That he would actually be into me? Chris had a new beautiful woman hanging off his arm every week.

After our awkward night together, I had briefly considered pretending nothing happened between us, to go back to the way things were. And then I saw him with another woman at a restaurant in town. Just a few days after the night we had kissed, no less. I felt hurt and betrayed, shoved aside, and ignored, like I was a cheeseburger when he was only interested in prime rib.

There was no way I could face him again after that.

I ignored his attempts to call and text me. If I knew he'd be somewhere, I made a point to be somewhere else. I'd skipped plenty of get-togethers and nights out because I found out he'd been invited.

When I did sometimes run into him in the grocery store or around town, even if he said hello, I walked away without speaking. At first, he called after me and tried to get me to stop and talk. Eventually, he said things like, "Well, I see you're busy, I won't keep *madam*," and "tell the fire you're rushing to I said hello" and other cheeky things he probably thought were cute.

He talked to me like he always had—teasing, flirty, sassy.

Like nothing had ever happened.

Even though he tried to pretend we were as close as we always had been, I ignored him. I had to. It hurt a little every time I saw him or was reminded of him in any way.

When I did respond to him, it always turned into an argument. I just wasn't ready to be civil, I guess.

And one rejection was bad enough. I couldn't take the risk of being his friend again, letting my guard down, and making a fool of myself *twice*. So I'd promised myself I'd never be stupid enough to fall for Chris's charm ever again.

I took a few deep breaths, wondering what the hell I would do if Grampa decided to sell Chris the space. There was no way I'd be able to keep that promise to myself with Chris working anywhere near me.

CHRIS

GUILT BURNED through my veins as I leaned against the table. Everyone had grown quiet after Sav left the room. A few seconds later, Sean broke the silence.

“Well, that was awkward,” he said and shook his head. He glanced at me. “Sorry about her, man.”

“Give her a break,” Nicole said, touching his arm. “It means a lot to her.” She looked at Jackson. “She’s always talking about how to improve the store.”

Jackson nodded, scrubbing at his salt-and-pepper beard. “She cares and wants Sparks to flourish. She doesn’t want to give up.”

Sean sighed. “Yeah, I know. The bookstore means a lot to her.” He stood, grabbing his plate and Nicole’s. “We need to head home soon. Nicole’s on cafeteria duty for breakfast.”

He carried the plates into the kitchen as Nicole said goodbye. Sean thanked me again for coming. “Sorry about Sav. I don’t know what got into her.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said.

It’s entirely mine.

He nodded and patted my back. “Let’s meet up this weekend for drinks.”

Once they were gone, Jackson and I sat in silence for a moment. Then he stood from his chair and went into the kitchen.

Should I leave? I wondered.

I wanted that space, but I might have to approach him about it later after he and Savannah discussed it. Before I decided what to do, Jackson returned with two beer bottles and gestured toward the back patio.

“Let’s talk.”

I nodded, relieved he was willing to discuss logistics. It had also been a while since I’d spent some alone time with him, so I was ready for his wisdom.

Or his disappointment. Whichever was coming.

The air was crisp and cold, causing a shiver to run up my spine. Mid-March temperatures still dropped below a comfortable level most nights, but it wasn’t unbearable. I shoved my hands into my pockets as we leaned against the railing.

Jackson handed me a beer. We clinked them together before taking a sip.

Jackson and I have had a few beers out on the patio countless times. My parents were shit, so he’s been my role model. My dad left when I was young, and my mom was too busy being hung up on men who didn’t love her to pay much attention to me. I had very few good memories of them. I hadn’t seen them in a long time, and I didn’t care to.

I was lucky to have Jackson and the Sparks family. When I was eight, Sav’s grandpa told me to call him Jackson, not Mr. Sparks. I’ve called him by his first name ever since.

“I’m sorry I upset Sav,” I said, starting the conversation.

It wasn’t the first time he pulled me aside with an issue involving his granddaughter. From a young age, I knew I was another one of her protectors.

Sean came to me when she had issues involving bullies at school or heartbreak over the loss of her mother and grandmother. Jackson talked to me when he wanted to check in and see how she was, knowing I would have the answers.

Unfortunately, I'd lost that connection with her since that day I set a hard, firm line between us four years ago. She didn't share intimate details or feelings with me anymore. We didn't even talk unless it was forced family events like this one or casual interactions that ended up in an argument with her storming off.

I missed our closeness almost more than I could stand. I was reminded of that every time I saw her.

Honestly, after I realized that she wasn't going to forgive me no matter what I did, I was angry. It pissed me off that she threw our friendship away so easily.

I'd learned not to date or get serious after Katelyn had toyed with me in a way no one should ever have to go through. I'd fallen hard for her in high school, thought we'd be together forever, so when she said she was pregnant, I did what I thought was the right thing.

I turned down my scholarship to the University of Colorado and put my big plans aside. I figured I'd go to community college when I could squeeze it in around working to support my family. I was going to marry her, be a man, and accept my responsibilities. Giving up the scholarship hurt, but I was in love. And I was going to be a father.

By the time I'd wrapped my head around that, I found out she'd been lying about the pregnancy. So I lost my first love and all the promise of the child I'd been imagining at one time. I was devastated and wanted nothing to do with someone who could hurt me that way.

Then she begged me to give her another chance, and I thought it over, wondering if I should forgive her. People make mistakes, I thought.

What can I say? I was young and dumb and thought I was in love with her. Then, she got pregnant for real.

With someone else's baby.

That feeling of being manipulated and used ruined me on the idea of love. After that, I didn't do relationships. I always wore condoms. I was honest and upfront with my intentions.

If I was getting involved with a woman, I wanted it clear that we were casual and nothing else.

And I could never just be casual with Sav.

She was Sean's little sister and a huge part of my life. Throwing that all away to hook up one drunken night would have been stupid, but it seemed that was what she'd wanted. If that was how highly she valued me, as a one-night stand, I knew I'd been right to turn her down.

After that night, she stopped taking to me. She never texted or called just because she missed me, like she used to. She stopped looking at me with light in her eyes. I missed that.

"Chris?" Jackson nudged me with his elbow. I guess I'd been zoned out, thinking about Sav. When I turned to him, he continued.

"It's not just you that's eating at Savannah," Jackson said, staring out into the woods behind the house. "She's been upset with how things have been going for a while. She wants to save the store, but the business isn't the same. People usually shop online for books or they go to the big chain stores. Keeping extra inventory upstairs isn't necessary."

I nodded. Not only had the book business changed, but so had everything else. I was fortunate enough to work in an essential field. Construction was a vital industry and would never stop. There was no convenient online way to get a house built to draw customers away.

"Do you think it's a bad idea if I buy the space from you? I don't want to make her life hell."

Jackson smirked. "I don't understand why it would. Years ago, it was almost impossible to pull you two apart. Neither of you have even hinted at what happened to cause all this animosity over the last several years, and I'm not going to pry, but I'm sure you'll be fine. You were too close for too many years for this to go one much longer."

I picked at the label on my beer, not sure he was right. A part of me also felt like a scumbag for possibly leading her on

that night, letting her think that something was going to happen between us.

I got lost in the moment and didn't shut it down quickly enough.

Now I had to live with that.

"Yeah, I hope so. I think we just grew apart." My stomach soured at my lie.

"It happens," he said. He turned to face me, and I could see he was skeptical that I'd told the whole truth. "But only when people let it. Do me a favor and go check on her." He gestured toward the house. "See if she's all right."

I knew I was the last person she wanted to see, but I wasn't going to argue with him. I nodded and went in through the back sliding door.

A steady stream of water was running in the kitchen, so I placed my beer on the table and rounded the corner, bracing myself to see her again.

It was stupid, but I always had to do it.

When my eyes landed on her, I felt that same pang in my chest I always did.

Sav stood at the sink, her dark hair falling into her face as she angrily washed dishes. Her full lips were twisted into a pout, and her breasts swayed with each movement.

I watched for a moment, enjoying the view before realizing I shouldn't be checking her out. I should be solving the issue at hand.

"Hey," I said, announcing myself.

She ignored me, continuing to wash dishes and place them in the dishwasher.

I stepped further into the kitchen, stopping beside the sink and leaning against the counter within her eyesight.

It had been a long time since I'd stared at her this close.

She'd always been cute in a tomboy way growing up. She wore baggy clothes, and her hair was usually wrapped in a messy bun, similar to how it was now. But the fitted top with the caption "Feminists Read Romance" across her chest had my eyes settling there.

My gaze trailed down, catching on to the tight high-waisted jeans that made her curvy hips and round ass look great.

At some point, she'd gone from the cute girl next door to the hot librarian, and I wasn't sure when exactly that happened.

"Will you stop staring at me?" she snapped, shutting off the water and stepping away.

She kicked the dishwasher closed and wiped her hands on a kitchen towel hanging from the oven handle. She crossed her arms, leaned against the counter, and glared at me.

The fire in her eyes lit my veins. I wanted to get lost in those beautiful forest-green eyes, but I knew my place.

I put my hands up in surrender.

"Okay, sorry. I like your shirt."

She glared harder, somehow.

Why is her glare turning me on?

"You can get one in the clothing section at Sparks," she informed me.

Her snark made me almost laugh, but I held it back.

"Noted. I came to say it's been nice to see you. We haven't talked in a while." She scoffed, but I ignored her and continued. "Look, Sav. I know it's been a long time coming, but I've always felt bad about what happ—"

"Is that *really* your idea of an apology?" she asked. She used a deep voice to mock me, saying, "I feel bad about being a self-centered jerk. The whole world revolves around me and my hot abs, so I don't think about how my choices affect anyone else."

I smirked. “You think I have hot abs?”

She threw her hands up in exasperation. “That’s what you’re going to focus on?”

I chuckled. “I was getting to the apology part, but you had to interrupt me to tell me how hot you think I am.” I couldn’t help myself as I teased her.

Even with her obviously pissed at me, teasing her like I used to felt normal.

She huffed. “You can save the apology. And stop laughing. It’s not helping your case here.”

“I could just take off my shirt instead. Would that help?”

Her mouth fell open in shock. She put her hands on her hips, looking as if she was going to really let me have it, but the screen door opened, and Jackson walked in.

He paused when he saw us standing there. “Did I interrupt something?”

“No, we’re done,” Sav said.

“She’s being stubborn,” I informed him.

His mouth formed a small “o” of pretend shock as he closed the door and walked forward. He stopped once he’d reached my side and leaned against the counter. “Chris is offering to cover the renovations, Savannah. That’s pretty generous.”

Sav rubbed her lips together, contemplating his words. I was mesmerized by the movement, but I willed myself to keep my eyes locked on hers instead of her mouth.

Jackson clapped his hands together. “I have an excellent idea. Savannah’s been going on about this coffee bar idea. She wants one in the shop. Do you think you could add that to your renovations? We’ll cover all supplies costs, of course.”

I nodded. “Yep. No problem. I’ll throw it into the deal and cover the labor.”

Sav looked between her grandpa and me as her shoulders fell. We were getting through to her. She nibbled on her lip,

and then a look of determination crossed her face. She looked me dead in the eye as she said, “All right. It’s a deal. Only because I’m clearly outnumbered and you two aren’t going to drop the whole idea.”

Jackson and I smiled at each other. He winked, and I gave a thumbs-up.

“God, I hope I don’t regret this,” she mumbled.

“You won’t,” I promised. “I’ll stop by the store tomorrow to look at the place.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’ve been to Sparks plenty of times before.”

“Not as a contractor. I’ll look around and take some measurements.”

Jackson patted my back. “Excellent.”

Sav surprisingly didn’t argue. “Fine. Just try not to get in my way.” She wasn’t exactly jumping for joy, but at least she intended to be there and not run away when I showed up.

I was already looking forward to seeing her again, even if she wasn’t thrilled about seeing me.

SAV

“TAKE A BREATH,” Penny said as I held the phone to my ear while I arranged and rearranged the book display near the cashier station. “You sound like you’re doing aerobics, for God’s sake.”

Naturally, I’d confided in my best friend that I had to face Chris at the bookstore. Even if I hadn’t, she’d have known something was bothering me, if not on the phone, when I met her later.

Penny worked as an art curator at a gallery a few stores down from mine, and lunch was our thing. She’d called my cell phone a few minutes ago to confirm our lunch date.

“I’m breathing just fine,” I said calmly, rearranging the bestsellers again. “There should be more of a blend between the new books and the classics.”

Grampa walked by, pushing a cart filled with books to restock. “Great job, Savannah. That looks lovely.”

I smiled. “Thanks.”

He tilted his head. “Yep, you can stop messing with them and get ready for Chris. He should be here any minute.”

I frowned as my shoulders slumped. “Okay, Grampa.”

He winked and chuckled as he walked away.

Penny snorted in my ear. “Text me if you need to be rescued. I have back-to-back meetings this morning, so I need to go.”

“All right. Bye,” I said with a pout.

“You’ll do fine.”

We ended the call, and the nervous energy festering inside me returned to life. Chris and I didn’t do fine anymore. Most of our conversations turned to arguments—no one needed to witness that, especially not customers. Luckily the bookstore was usually empty that early in the morning.

I sighed and returned to the register to sip on the latte I’d brought to work that morning and had left to go cold while I stayed busy. I closed my eyes, letting the vanilla and hazelnut flavor wash over me. It was damn good, even at room temperature.

Making myself a fancy caffeinated drink was how I usually started my mornings. I’d worked as a barista at a coffee shop near the university during my last year of my undergrad, and I wanted to bring some of that training and talent to Sparks.

There’s nothing like a good coffee and a great book.

After I’d gotten my moment of peace, I saw Chris approach the front door. He noticed his reflection in the window and slowed his steps to fix his hair.

Maybe he didn’t wake up looking perfectly sexy and irresistible. He had to try like the rest of us.

The bell jingled over the door when he opened it, and he glanced around, nodding in acknowledgment to Grampa before his eyes swept the rest of the floor. He looked at the ceiling and inspected the entire area before his gaze landed on me.

And for a moment, it felt like my heart had stopped.

I quickly turned away from him, and my cardigan caught on the corner of the book display. I tugged it free, and my arm swung too hard, knocking over half the books I’d worked so hard to place correctly.

Great, just what I needed.

“Need help?” Chris asked, appearing by my side to help collect the fallen books.

“Yeah, thanks,” I grumbled.

We worked quietly, arranging the books. Chris asked me where I wanted each item, and it felt nice to tell him what to do for once. I also couldn't help noticing the way his muscles flexed with each movement, causing my gaze to focus in on his arms and hands.

He'd always had such nice hands.

“Okay, crisis managed,” he said, returning the final book to its rightful place. He grinned at me. “I forgot how clumsy you can be.”

I huffed and crossed my arms. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of providing a retort. “Let's start with the tour, shall we?” I gestured for him to follow me.

He fell silent as I showed him around the bookstore. We walked through the different sections, and he stayed observant and perceptive, taking everything in. I showed him where the coffee bar might work, close to the register but along the back wall. The bathrooms were on the left side, and a hallway leading to an office was on the right.

Chris nodded. “I like it. It's a great idea.”

Once we were upstairs, talking became much more daunting. We were completely alone as we walked through the sections and shelves since most customers didn't travel to the second floor. It hurt knowing we were giving this area up, but Grampa was right. We could reduce our inventory and move everything downstairs.

Chris made himself at home, looking around without much commentary from me. He stepped on a small ladder and pushed one of the ceiling panels out of the way. I had no idea what he was doing, but his shirt rose, and I saw a sliver of his stomach, precisely where his happy trail began and disappeared into his light-wash jeans.

I salivated at the image.

“Sav?” he asked, pulling my attention away from his abdomen. His eyebrow quirked as he fought a laugh. He pointed at his face. “Get a good look? ‘Cause my eyes are up here.”

My cheeks heated as I turned away. “You’re not funny.”

He scoffed. “I am totally funny.”

“If by funny you mean ‘a jerk,’ then yeah, your stupid teasing is rip-roaring hilarious, Chris.”

I shook my head, facing him again. And I could have sworn his gaze lingered on my ass before he looked away fast like he’d done something wrong.

Was he checking me out, too? He’d made it pretty clear I wasn’t his type, so it must have been my hopeful imagination.

I hated that he was so hot. It wasn’t fair.

He jumped down from the ladder and approached me slowly.

“Look, we’re going to have to work together on this renovation, so we need to get along. If you think me teasing you is being a jerk, I’ll try to lay off. But you also make yourself such an easy target. You care way too much.”

The ass was still teasing me.

“No, I don’t,” I snapped, crossing my arms. “I don’t care what you think,” I lied.

He tilted his head. “Fine. Whatever. But I care what *you* think, and I want you to like me enough for us to get along through this transition. We have to be around each other, at least until the renovation is done, and I don’t want it to be a constant fight. Can we please call a truce?”

I nibbled on my lip. His dark eyes seemed earnest, and his stance was open. He didn’t seem defensive or blocked off. His face also matched his genuine tone, and it didn’t seem like he was making fun of me. I didn’t want to be in a position where I trusted him again because I knew where that would lead, and it wasn’t anywhere good. But I didn’t feel like I had much choice.

With a sigh, I relented. “Fine. Yes. A truce.”

His lips shifted into a smile, and butterflies erupted in my stomach. I was going to be sick.

“Excellent. Shake on it?” He offered his hand.

One of the hottest things about Chris was his hands. It was stupid, but I always thought of them as essentially hand porn.

They were large with the right amount of roughness to be considered manly. He kept them clean, too, and his nails were always perfectly trimmed.

I’d felt them slide over my body and tug at my hair once, and the moment was seared onto my brain forever.

Slowly, I placed my palm against his. His thick fingers wrapped around my hand, and we shook on it. His skin was warm and firm. I gazed at him, enjoying the up-close look I got at his high cheekbones and dark brown eyes. His strong eyebrows softened, and he smiled.

Neither of us let the other’s hand go, and we stood there for a moment.

I felt his thumb caress the back of my hand and I bit my lip, fighting the urge to throw myself into his arms.

“Great,” he said, breaking the spell and stepping back. “I’ll be by tomorrow and give you my notes on everything. I appreciate the tour.”

His expression softened a little more. “And the truce.”

He followed me down the stairs to the main floor, and because I’m a dork who can trip over her own feet, I stumbled halfway down.

“Whoa,” he said, grabbing me from behind with one strong arm and pulling me against him. I’d have fallen if not for him.

His chest was hard against my back. And to my embarrassment, my ass was pressed firmly against his crotch.

“Thanks,” I said breathlessly, shaken from my near tumble.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Just clumsy.”

He still hadn't let go. “We make a truce, and then I save your life. Damn, I'm amazing.”

I snorted at that, a genuine laugh. The moment reminded me of many we used to have. “Saving my life is a bit of a stretch. Saved me from some bruises, more like it. But I still appreciate it.”

“You could just focus on the ‘saved me’ part and forget the details, you know.” He finally put me down, carefully. I was extra cautious on the rest of the steps, and I couldn't stop thinking about my body pressed against his.

At the bottom of the stairs, he put his hand on my arm, real concern in his eyes. “Your ankle okay?”

“Totally fine, thanks.”

He grinned, letting his hand drop from my arm. “Okay, then. It was fun looking around with you and saving you from certain death. Later, squirt.”

I watched him walk away, feeling a thundering in my chest that was all too familiar. There was a reason I avoided and pushed him away.

It was the only way I could breathe around him.

I didn't start to feel calm again until after he was gone.

I was in so much trouble.

—

Penny was waiting at our usual table toward the back of our favorite downtown café. The sandwiches and drinks were delicious, and I noticed she'd already ordered me a mimosa. Her light brown hair was pulled into a low ponytail, and she had a stylishly sleek look about her that oozed “artsy” vibes.

“You survived,” she joked and clapped.

I offered a fake curtsy before sitting across from her. “Yep. Only minimal damage to my soul after showing him

around.”

She lifted her glass. “How’d you do?”

I shrugged. “Fine at first, but then I caught sight of his ridiculous abs, and my mind went blank. He’s too hot. He should come with a warning sign and protective lenses.”

She snorted. “Well, I’m glad you didn’t make a complete fool of yourself.”

I rolled my eyes. “No, that happened too. About two seconds into him entering the store, I knocked over half the books on my display.”

She gasped mockingly. “No way. After you worked so hard on them.”

I raised a hand to stop her from continuing to joke. “I’m not sure I’ll ever live it down.”

We snickered as a server approached. We ordered our usuals and then handed over our menus.

I nibbled my lip, the idea of my truce with Chris eating at me. I’d told Penny everything since we became good friends in the dorms our freshman year. We’ve been attached at the hips since then. She was my only true friend.

“Something interesting did happen toward the end of the tour,” I admitted, lifting my glass for a sip.

Penny’s eyebrow quirked. “You boned between the shelves in the back corner!”

I spit out the mimosa. “God, no.” I wiped my mouth with a napkin as her eyes sparkled with amusement. “He asked for a truce.”

She looked confused as to why that was juicy news. “Okay, and?”

“And nothing. He said we needed to get along while working together.” I left out him catching me on the stairs and holding me against him, and I wasn’t even sure why.

“Right. A very normal thing to say and ask for.”

I pinned my lips together. “A truce means I can’t push him away to protect myself. I can’t afford to fall right back into the same place I was four years ago.”

Penny blinked. “Sav, you’re not going to fall in love just because you’re temporarily nice to him. Keep your focus on what’s best for the bookstore. You said he’s helping you renovate, right?”

I nodded.

“Okay, then only talk to him about renovations. Being kind doesn’t have to mean you two become best friends. You can be distant and still maintain a positive rapport. How do you think I deal with Stacey’s petty workplace harassment?”

I shrugged and gestured for her to tell me.

“With grace,” she said. “And that’s what you need to learn. Some grace.”

I groaned. “I’m the least graceful person on the planet.”

“Hmm,” she mused. “Sounds like quitter talk to me.”

My gaze shifted into a glare. “Fine, you make some good points.”

She grinned. “I know I do.”

Our server returned a few moments later with our food. We spent the rest of the meal catching up on everything else. She showed me a video of her daughter taking her first steps, and I was so happy for them. Michael was a nice guy, and their baby was adorable and smart. As proud as I was, there was still a tiny part of me that panged with jealousy.

I didn’t begrudge Penny her wonderful husband and daughter, of course. But I wished I could have those things too.

When would it be my turn to find someone?

I’d once thought that person was Chris, but I’d learned how wrong that silly dream had been.

I couldn’t trust myself when my heart turned toward him like a compass always pointing north. The only thing I could

control was our distance. Even with us together every day in the bookstore, I had to find a way to maintain that distance no matter what.

CHRIS

“LOOK WHO’S FINALLY HERE!” Sean shouted from across The Tavern. I clocked him and Brian, another long-time friend, in a booth in the corner of the empty bar.

I’d known Brian since I was ten years old and his family had moved to Carswell from the city. Sean was book smart, I had been wild, and Brian was reliable. He worked for me as a project manager, so I saw him almost daily.

I forced a smile, waving at the bartender and other customers I recognized on my way over. Seeing Sean sent me a fresh wave of guilt after my impure thoughts about Sav earlier in the day. During my tour of Sparks, I kept checking her out when she wasn’t looking, imagining what her body looked like under the long skirt, book nerdy crop top, and light cardigan. When I held her hand in mine, I swear I sensed the same heat between us that I felt years ago on that night. I almost pulled her into my arms so I could feel her lips again.

Her face also captured my attention each time she spoke. She had the most adorable expressions, and I realized how much I missed being close to her. I missed laughing with her. Hearing her voice had brought back familiar feelings I’d pushed down long ago.

She was interesting, and I liked listening to what she had to say, but it’d been so long since I’d been lucky enough to hear her thoughts. It hurt to remind myself of how easily she’d dismissed me all those years ago.

I'd thought of her as someone I needed to protect at all costs, and I'd felt like she'd only seen me as someone she could casually sleep with on a drunken night.

But I did miss those times when I felt like we had a strong friendship. And I wanted to find a way to bridge that gap safely and find a way to feel comfortable around her again. A place where we could laugh and joke around. I hoped working together on the bookstore reno could possibly mend that bridge.

And damn it if I couldn't still feel my arm around her, her ass against me as I kept her from stumbling on the stairs.

"What took you so long?" Brian said. "Had to end a date early?"

"Unfortunately," I joked. "She begged for more, but my friends come first."

"What a heartbreaker," Sean said with a smile, knowing I was full of shit.

I'd been working late, shifting schedules around to accommodate renovations at the new location. One of the nice things about owning a construction company was that we didn't have to hire any outside contractors. I'd spent the evening scheduling meetings to discuss the changes with my team and determine our next steps. Brian knew this because he'd already confirmed the event invite I'd sent out thirty minutes ago.

"Sit," Sean commanded, patting the seat beside him. "Be merry. There's much to discuss."

Brian nodded. His eyes were slightly hooded. "Indeed."

These two were a few beers in, so I'd have to catch up.

I sat beside Sean, and he poured me a drink from the pitcher in the center of the table. I took a sip and licked the liquid from my lips. "So, what's up? Are we meeting for any particular reason, or did you just miss me?"

Sean grinned. "Can't it be both?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I suppose."

He leaned his forearms on the table and interlaced his fingers. “I brought you both here to ask you an important question.” He shifted his focus to Brian. “I told Chris last night, but Nicole and I got engaged.”

Brian’s eyes widened. “Congrats, man.” He offered him a fist bump.

Sean returned it. “We talked about what we wanted the wedding to look like and everything. We discussed the bridal party members, and we decided to have three groomsmen and three bridesmaids. So, since I can’t find anybody better than you assholes on such short notice ...”

He shifted, turning to face me. “Chris, you’ve been my bro since we were in diapers, man. I’d love it if you’d be my best man at the wedding.”

This was the first time in my life that I ever wanted to squeal with joy, but I held it back. I coughed into my fist and nodded. “Of course, bro.”

He hit his fist to his chest, our symbol of love and brotherhood between us.

He turned back to Brian. “I’d love for you to be a groomsman. We’ve been tight forever, and you’ll always be one of my best bros.”

Brian offered another fist bump. “I accept. I’ll be there for you, dude.”

“We’re having a dinner party soon, and we’ll get everyone together to discuss everything. There’s still some stuff to work out, but I wanted to get that settled. Nicole’s brother Lucas is a groomsman too, and Sav will be a bridesmaid.”

An image of Sav wearing a frilly pink dress flashed in my mind, and I couldn’t hide the smile that crossed my face. She was beautiful in her everyday clothes, but I rarely saw her dressed up. The wedding preparations and reception were also great excuses to be around her, aside from the renovations.

We ordered another pitcher and talked for a while, catching up on all the changes in our personal lives since we’d last

hung out. I saw these guys all the time, but we rarely got together for a beer like this anymore.

“So, I have a question for you, Chris,” Sean said. “This has nothing to do with the wedding, but I’ve been wondering why you and Sav aren’t as close as you used to be.”

My entire body tensed.

“Nicole mentioned it last night. She asked why you two hated each other, and I realized that things have been strained for a long time.”

Brian nodded. “I’ve noticed that too, actually.”

Playing it cool, I shrugged and sipped my beer. “We just fell off. She came back from college, and we didn’t have anything to talk about anymore. That’s all.”

I felt like hell lying to Sean, but I couldn’t tell him what had happened. I couldn’t look him in the eye and admit we made out, I shut her down, and then she never was cool with me again.

I messed up. I ruined our friendship by letting her get too close and think something was happening between us when it wasn’t.

I didn’t want my lack of good judgment to impact my friendship with Sean too. Sav never told him about what happened, and I considered that an act of mercy on her part. I could have lost them both in one fell-swoop over not being careful enough with her when she was drunk and vulnerable. Sav had all the power to destroy my relationship with her brother, and she chose not to. I wasn’t going to ruin that now.

“Damn,” Sean said. His shoulders sagged. “That sucks, man. She pulled back from me a little bit too. I figured it was just her getting older. She gravitated toward Grampa a lot more after she got back.”

“Maybe something happened at school,” Brian suggested.

Sean nodded gravely. “Maybe.” He sighed. “I also feel like she holds herself back from relationships in general. I’m glad I haven’t had to knock any guys out for being too friendly with

her, but she also doesn't date. She barely has friends. Losing Mom and Gramma so close together really fucked her up."

"That could be it. She might need help processing everything," I offered selfishly. I patted his back. "Let her know you're available if she needs to talk to anyone, and she'll come to you."

Hopefully not with the truth, but I still had to be a good friend.

"Thanks, man."

"Um, hi," a feminine voice interrupted, pulling us from our serious discussion.

A gorgeous blonde woman stood at the end of the table, looking at each of us with hungry eyes.

"Hello," Brian said and smiled.

"My friends and I have been watching y'all, and we were wondering if any of you might be single," she said shamelessly. She hooked a thumb over her shoulder, and I leaned over to catch sight of two women waving from the bar. They were like her. Tall and beautiful. "If so, would y'all want to share a table with us?"

Brian shrugged and smiled. "Yeah, sure. I'm single."

She beamed at him. "Awesome." She turned and narrowed her eyes at me. "What about you, handsome?"

My eyebrows rose. I let my gaze roam over her large breasts and tiny waist. Her lips were pouty and shiny. She radiated "down" vibes I was usually drawn to when it came to random hookups. Too bad I wasn't in a "hookup" type of mood. I wasn't sure what was wrong with me, but this objectively attractive woman wasn't doing much for me.

I wondered if that was because of my best friend's little sister.

Shit, I had to stop thinking about her so much.

"Yeah, I'm down," I said, eager for a distraction and to maybe help Brian out a bit. He was giving me the *don't let me*

down stare, so I knew I had to be there for him.

Sean chuckled. “I guess this is my cue to leave and get home to Nicole.”

The woman pouted. “Aww, you’re married?”

“Engaged, actually,” he corrected.

“Well, congratulations,” she said. “Give her a nice big kiss for me. Lucky gal.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Will do.”

Brian and I said goodbye to Sean and joined the women at a table. Marsha, who’d approached us, had pushed her chair directly next to mine. She placed her hand on my thigh and left it there as we talked. She was laying her claim, and I usually liked the straightforward approach, but something felt different tonight.

My mind kept drifting back to Sav, and I couldn’t help but feel like I was doing something wrong.

I grew agitated, wanting to disappear and head home. I stayed for Brian and did my service as his wingman.

After about an hour, he turned to the woman he’d been flirting with and asked point-blank if she wanted to get out of there. She smiled and nodded.

Marsha turned to me, waiting for an invitation.

“I think I’m going to head home, too,” I said. “Thanks for the lovely evening and chat, though.”

She frowned. “Seriously?”

I nodded, putting my hand up to my temple. “Yeah, sorry. I have a headache, and it keeps getting worse.”

She bit her lip. “You know orgasms are the best medicine, right?”

I laughed and shook my head. “I appreciate the offer, but I need a good night’s sleep.”

Marsha and her remaining friend looked at each other for a moment in disbelief. She removed her hand from my thigh.

“All right. Hope you feel better.” She kissed my cheek. “And maybe we’ll see you here again before we leave town.”

I forced myself to smile. “Yeah, maybe.” I knew it wasn’t likely I’d change my mind about her. I threw some cash down on the table to cover the drinks and tip as we stood. “Have a good night.”

“Bye, Chris,” they said and wandered over to the bar.

I sighed heavily, feeling conflicted. I couldn’t imagine going through with taking her home. Not when my thoughts were still wrapped up in someone else.

I hated feeling used, so I didn’t want to do that to anyone else either. If I was going to hook up with someone, I wanted them to be on my mind. Not another woman.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and headed home. Alone.

SAV

“WE COULD RENT STORAGE SPACE,” I suggested to Grampa as he discussed what to do about the inventory on the second floor.

It was midday, and I stood behind the cashier counter while he was on the other side, leaning over the list I’d made while brainstorming ideas. Chris wanted to block the stair entrance soon to begin developing the office space on the second floor. We had a few weeks to empty everything out, but they would reorganize the inventory to make room in a few days.

Grampa gave me a look over his reading glasses. “We can rent a small storage unit, but I don’t want to replace the money we’re saving with a new expense. We need to scale to about forty percent of the space we’re using to make room for your coffee shop idea.”

I nibbled on my lip, hating that he was right.

The second floor was primarily dedicated to historical, nonfiction, and rare books. I’d handpicked many of them, hoping they would find a home with the right people, but all they did was take up space. They hadn’t earned us any money or popularity.

I tapped my pen against the paper, thinking over what to do while Grampa organized the last-chance buys in front of the register. Bookmarks, post-it notes, stickers, etc. were scattered across the surface, and he seemed to want to make sense of the chaos. That was something we had in common.

“What about a massive sale?” I asked. “We could set the price based on how long the books have been sitting on the shelf and empty a lot of space.”

His gaze lifted from his task as he smiled. “That’s a great idea, pumpkin. We can donate whatever’s left, including the bookshelves.”

I nodded, writing the suggestion down and circling it. “I like that idea. It can be like we’re starting fresh.”

“Lord knows I need a fresh start,” he grumbled with a sigh. He patted the top of my hand. “Good job. I’m proud of you for taking this head-on. Sometimes life presents us with unwanted obstacles, but we must remember we still have the power to choose how we react to them.”

I nodded, soaking in his words.

His expression turned mischievous. “Speaking of obstacles... how were things with Chris the other day? You two looked like you were getting along.”

I focused on my notes, attempting to look unfazed. “Fine. We called a truce, so we’re all good now.”

He hummed with interest which caused me to glance in his direction.

He was hiding a smile.

“What, Grampa?” I asked, curious as to what his smile meant.

He shrugged. “No reason. Just seems like you guys have missed being around each other.” He grinned at me.

The bell chimed over the door, and Chris walked in.

He held a white plastic bag in one hand and a drink holder with three cups in the other. He lifted the bag to showcase the logo. It was from the café downtown that Penny and I frequented.

“I brought lunch,” he announced, stopping at the counter. He placed everything down and opened the bag, sorting to-go

boxes on the surface. “I told the cashier I was grabbing lunch for Savannah and Jackson Sparks, and she knew your usuals.”

“Lovely ladies over there,” Grampa said. He grabbed the box and cup labeled JS. “Thanks for the food, son. I’ll leave you two to your meeting.” He smiled at me and winked.

My face heated as I shifted my attention to Chris, hoping he didn’t see.

He wasn’t looking at us. He seemed distracted as he ran his fingers through his hair. He had deep, dark creases beneath his eyes that concerned me.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He avoided my gaze, separating our drinks from the holder and handing mine over. “I’m fine. I had a late night out, so I didn’t get much sleep.”

An image of him taking a woman home flooded my mind, cooling the warm feelings I’d harbored for him over the last twenty-four hours.

“Oh,” I said. I didn’t want to ruminate, so I quickly moved on. “I guess we should get started.” I gestured toward the back corner of the store. “There are some couches over there where we can sit.” They were hidden from the windows so no one would see us together and ask me questions.

Not like anyone really would, but still. Being caught in public with Chris would be gossip fodder in this town, and I didn’t want to feed the drama-filled masses. Just one wrong set of eyes on us and we’d be on the wedding announcement page in the Carswell Times by tomorrow.

We carried everything to the table, spreading out our food. I opened my notebook, placing it on the hardwood surface. Chris pulled a laptop out of the backpack I hadn’t noticed. My attention was focused on his hard chest and freshly groomed beard.

There was nothing hotter than a man who was adequately groomed. Chris was almost always clean and put together. His clothes always looked fresh and crisp unless he was sweaty from work or exercise.

He opened his computer and signed in. While his home screen loaded, he bit into his sandwich. I followed his lead, taking a bite and then sipping on the iced chai he'd brought me.

I moaned at the taste. "Sooo good."

He paused and slowly turned to face me, a stunned look on his face.

"What?"

Chris shook his head and took a deep breath, then focused his attention on his computer again. "All right. Let's get started." He rubbed his hands together. "What's your vision for the renovated bookstore? You gave some details yesterday, but I need more. What's the color scheme? What's the vibe you want? Take me into your brain so I can make your dreams a reality."

I snorted, deciding to be snarky. "Well, my dream would be to keep the store and not sell the second half to you."

He quirked an eyebrow. "I'm going to need your dreams to be slightly more realistic than that. Your grandpa needs the capital."

"A wealthy investor who loves old books comes along and throws money at us so we don't have to sell the second floor?"

He sighed. I knew I was being difficult, but it was hard to help.

"Fine." I sipped my chai. "I want Sparks Bookstore to have a comeback. I want this to be a place where readers *and* writers can connect. Since we're limiting our inventory, every single item in the store should be a guaranteed sale, so we'll have to spend more time advertising that we have certain books in the first place."

Chris nodded, typing notes. "I'm with you. What else?"

I tapped my finger against my lip, thinking hard about what I wanted Sparks Bookstore to be. I zoned out for a second, staring at the table.

When I glanced at Chris, I caught his gaze locked on my mouth. I pulled my hand away and anxiously licked my lips.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed, and his dark eyes lifted to meet mine briefly before he turned back to his computer. I shook off the heat growing between us. It had to be in my imagination.

“What about appearance? You gave me some vague ideas, but how do you want it to look?”

“I want it to be inviting,” I said. “Maybe lights hanging from the ceiling near the coffee bar will give the place a friendly, chill vibe. The bookshelves could have brighter lighting for people browsing, but I want a clear distinction of the mood for each area.”

He kept typing. “Great idea. Do you have any examples of what you want?”

“Yep.” I pulled my phone out of my cardigan pocket and opened Instagram. I navigated to one of my favorite bookstores and showed him their profile. He put his laptop down on the table and scooted closer. Our thighs touched as we leaned into each other.

“Wow, that looks amazing,” he said. “I’m not much of a book-type, but a place like that seems inviting enough.”

I smiled. “That’s how I feel. Let me show you some more.”

I showed him a few other profiles that were similar to my requests. They followed modern themes for reader aesthetics. He pointed out specific elements, claiming something similar would work for our space.

“I’m not much of an interior designer, but I can try to get you started,” he said.

“I appreciate it.”

I twisted to face him as he turned in my direction. Our faces were close, reminding me of the moment on his couch all those years ago. He had long, thick eyelashes that most

women would have murdered for. His lips were soft and supple, and I thought back to the kiss we shared.

His lips had felt so good against mine. So right.

He seemed as entranced as I was, staring at me without speaking. I let out a soft laugh. His eyes crinkled at the edges.

“What?” he asked.

I shrugged. “We’re getting along. It’s kind of weird. You’re taking me seriously and not making jokes at my expense.”

He gazed down at his hands in this lap as he rubbed them together. “Yeah, well, I heard you when you told me I’ve been a jerk to you. You’re usually combative, and I struggle with how to respond.” He looked me in the eyes. “I’ve always liked teasing you, but I’ve never meant to hurt or make you feel mocked.”

“Thanks.” I pulled the sleeves of my cardigan over my hands for comfort. “We used to be close, and sometimes I miss that.” Vulnerability bubbled out of me, and the words were out before I could overthink them. “I’m embarrassed about what happened before. And being around you is a constant reminder of my mistake.”

“I miss how close we were, too,” he said.

My eyebrows rose. He leaned forward, putting an arm around me to get closer. We were a breath’s width away now. Millimeters separated us.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed. Sure, it was awkward, and I wished it hadn’t stopped our friendship. I tried using humor to bridge that gap, but I didn’t know it made you feel worse. I’m sorry for that.”

My heart was beating so hard that I could hear it in my ears. Butterflies erupted in my stomach. I glanced down at his mouth, and he licked his lips. I thought about him kissing me that night years ago. And I thought about his arm around me when I tripped on the stairs, how he held me tight against him.

I swore I could see in his eyes that he wanted me.

It felt like he was giving me the okay to surge forward and claim his lips again, but the fear of rejection held me still. Nothing had really changed from then to now. We were the same people. One confession and apology hadn't changed the years of distance between us.

Chris leaned in. I shut my eyes and turned my face away.

His nose brushed my cheek, and he pulled back. Air rushed into my lungs as the separation seemed to have given me the space to breathe again.

"I need to go," he said, closing his laptop and shoving it into his backpack. He looked at his watch. "I forgot I have a meeting that starts in thirty minutes. It's across town, so I need to get going."

Disappointment washed over me.

Was he feeling rejected by *me* now? I'd imagined the tables turned a million times since that night, wishing I could be the one on the other side, handing out the rejection, but it didn't feel good. It sucked.

"Okay, thanks for lunch and the caffeine kick."

He nodded, still not looking at me. "No problem. I'll email you the plans I come up with, and we'll set another meeting before moving forward."

"Sounds good."

He stood and pulled his backpack over his shoulders. He leaned down to grab his to-go container and drink. He finally met my eyes and smiled. "Thanks for the talk. I'll see you soon."

My smile in return was faint. "Yeah, sure. See you."

I stayed sitting as he left the store.

I watched his ass again like the horny idiot I was.

Should I have let him kiss me?

My head said no, but my heart and a few other body parts were screaming yes.

CHRIS

RAIN COATED the streets as I parked outside Sean's house. He and Nicole lived in a two-bedroom starter home I'd saved and flipped over a year ago in the historical district of Carswell. One. The district was small, but our town was hellbent on protecting the houses in the area.

My company had developed a few of the houses in the neighborhood. Being a part of the town's initiative to preserve the historic district had earned us a good reputation. Many of our customers wanted restorations on property that had been in their family for generations. We provided end results as close as possible to the original design while implementing a few modern twists.

Sean and Nicole were looking for a house as soon as they'd gotten together, and he'd visited me when I'd been working on the house. He loved the layout and the design so much that he wanted to buy it, so I helped him negotiate a reasonable price.

It'd been a few months since I'd visited, so I was excited to see how they'd filled the rest of the space. I also couldn't ignore the buzz of energy I had at seeing Sav again outside the bookstore. Our moment the other day had replayed in my head repeatedly over the last thirty hours.

Her want had shined in her eyes as I drew close, and I wanted to feel her lips against mine again, just once. She practically shook with anticipation, and I knew she wanted the same thing. When her eyes closed, I thought she was giving in

to the kiss, but she turned away, saving us both from the damage that kiss would have caused.

She did the right thing, but I couldn't stop thinking about it.

I'd gotten a lung full of her honey and vanilla scent when my nose touched her cheek, and I wanted more. I wanted to be surrounded by it, and I knew that was wrong. I should be satisfied with the friendship we were reforming and leave it at that.

Familiar headlights poured into my rearview mirror. I glanced at my side mirror and saw Sav's tan Honda pull to the curb behind me. The rain had lessened over the last few seconds, so I climbed out of my car at the same time as her. I watched as she leaned into her car to grab her purse and a reusable cup.

The outside read, "*Reading Rocks!*" which made me smile.

Once she lifted her head, she caught sight of me and froze. I offered her a smile, and she returned it. The hood of her jacket covered her head, protecting her hair from the drizzle. She closed the distance between us and stopped directly in front of me.

"Hello, Christopher. How are you?"

I snorted at the use of my full first name. "Fine, *Savannah*. How about yourself?"

She shrugged. "Could be better. I'm about to be surrounded by a bunch of people I don't know that well. Not usually my idea of a good time."

We started down the street, swerving to follow the stone path that led to Sean's front door. "You know more than half the people there," I argued.

She gave me a pointed look. "Not really. Nicole's friends will be here, and I've only met them once."

I scrunched my nose. "They're not the friendliest, are they?"

She shook her head. “Nope.” Her lips popped with the “p” sound, and it was honestly too adorable. “But that might be my fault. I’m also not the friendliest person either.”

I sighed dramatically. “Lord knows that’s true.”

She elbowed me in the ribs, so I laughed as I cradled my side. She walked ahead a few paces before spinning on her toes and giving me a mock death glare. “Watch yourself, Christopher. Tonight could make or break our newly reformed alliance.”

I grinned. “Would you say we’re friends again?”

She tapped her finger against her nose a couple of times. “We’ll see.”

I loved seeing the playful side of her I hadn’t witnessed in a while. It warmed my heart that she could joke openly with me. She knocked on the door.

Sean answered, paused, and quirked an eyebrow as he looked at us. “Did you two come together?”

We shook our heads and said, “No,” simultaneously. Sav’s ‘no’ sounded sharper and more horrified than I would have liked.

“Okay, okay, don’t bite my head off, sis.” He pulled Sav into a tight hug, pushed down her hood, and kissed the top of her head. She laughed as he swayed her back and forth while doing this. I scanned the living room, seeing who I recognized.

Nicole’s friends, Anna and Laura, sat together in a chair. Anna sat on Laura’s lap, which caught me a little off-guard. They fluttered their fingers in a wave toward me, and I briefly raised my hand in greeting. A man seated in the middle of the couch stood, offering his hand. “I’m Lucas, Nicole’s brother.”

“Chris,” I said, shaking his hand.

Sean surprised me with a side hug, kissing my temple before I shoved him off. He chuckled, clearly in a really good mood. And why shouldn’t he be? He was marrying the woman of his dreams. I only hoped he never knew what it was like to be strung along and humiliated by a woman the way I had.

I had no reason to think Nicole would ever hurt him, but I wasn't sure it was worth it to trust anyone too much. I hated feeling that way, but I figured I always would.

I stood awkwardly, offering Sav the only available seat next to Lucas. I tried not to eavesdrop as they introduced themselves to each other and began chatting, but I heard every word. Apparently, Lucas loved to read. He was an English professor and taught creative writing. He'd published two books, and Sav seemed so impressed that I wanted to punch him in the face.

I wasn't being rational.

Brian patted me on the shoulder, making me jump. "Dude, relax. You look like you're guarding the queen over here."

I huffed, keeping my arms crossed. "Just hungry."

"Me too," he admitted.

We talked about work for a bit before Sean finally called everyone to dinner. We sat around the dining table, and Nicole set out the serving dishes. I couldn't tell what exactly the food was. It looked like various casseroles smothered in cheese to hide a scary mess underneath. I had hoped they would buy everyone pizza or something, so I regretted showing up to this event with an empty, rumbling stomach.

Nicole might not have been a great cook, but she could decorate. The entire house was stylish. Everything was neutral, dark, and warm colors. Tans, greens, and browns were the color schemes of each room, and it felt comforting and homey. I could tell they loved the house, and I was glad I played a role in making their first homebuying experience a great one.

Sav caught my eye from across the table.

She laughed at something Lucas said, and the irrational anger came crawling back. I'd wanted to sit beside her, but Sean wanted her next to him, and Lucas had lunged for the available seat on her other side. It would have been weird to insist, so I found an empty spot between Brian and Anna. Nicole and Sean sat at opposing ends of the table, and I'd

somehow landed myself in the middle, across from Lucas's dumb face.

“Okay, let's eat,” Sean announced.

People began passing around dishes, and I took what looked edible. After Sean made his plate, he discussed details about the wedding and what events we needed to prepare for, including an engagement party in a few weeks, a night out with the whole wedding party, and then a girls' and guys' day before the big day.

Nicole jumped in. “Essentially, we've paired everyone off, so you'll have to get familiar with your ceremony partner. Chris is the best man, and Anna is the maid of honor, so you'll walk down the aisle together. We'll also have you pose for photos together.”

Anna made a low *oooh*. She winked at me and said, “I hated joint assignments in school, but this one's okay since I'm with the hot one.”

I resisted the urge to cringe and gave her a half smile instead.

Brian leaned in and whispered, “You're definitely *not* the hot one.”

I faced him. “*You're* not the hot one either.”

He nodded. “You're right. Lucas is.”

My eyes landed on the man in question. He was stealing looks at Sav from the corner of his eye while she drank a glass of wine.

“You're full of shit,” I whispered, and Brian snorted.

Nicole continued. “Laura and Brian will be paired, and Lucas and Savannah will work together.”

Sav turned to Lucas and smiled. The look in her eyes made my heart squeeze. I almost missed the rest of the speech but tuned back in as they discussed dress requirements, theme, and a bunch of other stuff I didn't care much about.

“I'll detail it all in an email,” she said in closing.

“Great job, babe.” Sean clapped his hands together once. “Now that we’ve gotten all that out of the way, we can relax and enjoy the rest of our evening.”

“Yay,” Anna said, touching my forearm. “I can catch up with the best man. It’s been too long.”

I groaned internally.

I’d met Anna precisely one other time when she visited for Nicole’s birthday party. I thought she was hot at first, but once I talked to her, I quickly realized she had a shitty personality.

She complained about everything, including Nicole and Sean. Her attitude had bummed me out, and she sloppily propositioned me before the night was over. I turned her down, and she got upset. It was an event I wouldn’t want to relive.

“You should give me your number,” she said. “You didn’t give it to me last time, and Nicole said she didn’t want to violate your privacy by giving it to me without your permission.” She rolled her eyes like Nicole’s respect for my privacy was laughable. “We should be able to reach each other now that we’re important wedding party members.”

I hummed in response, trying to think of what to say. “I don’t give my number out too often, but you could add me on Facebook.”

She beamed. “Okay!” She pulled out her phone, and I searched for my profile.

I didn’t even have the app downloaded to my phone, so it wasn’t likely I’d ever check and see her messages to me. Sean could play the middleman between us. I doubted I’d see much more of her after the wedding. There was no point in establishing a solid line of communication.

She flipped through my profile photos. “I bet you get unsolicited messages from girls all the time with pics like these.”

“Not really.”

She scoffed. “Oh, come on. I’m sure you’re just being modest.”

If Anna wasn't already off-limits, she would be a plain "no," because she didn't respect me. I was a piece of meat to her. A pawn she would use to make herself feel better or whatever her goal was.

Sure, when I took women home, we both just wanted to feel good. But I respected them, and I expected them to respect me, too. I didn't take someone home and treat them like they'd just been a warm body. I treated them well. I just didn't want to continue the relationship into something more.

My gaze drifted to Sav, and I noticed her staring at us. She had a stern look on her face. I mouthed the words "Are you ok?" but she just gave me a long blink and looked away.

I thought back to her words that night. *"Why not me? You sleep with every other woman in town, but I'm not good enough? What do they have that I don't?"*

Those words crushed me. Guttled me.

That night four years ago, I'd felt like Sav saw me the way Anna did. Like I was a ride, and it was her turn. It had messed with my mind. Sav wasn't and would never be someone I just wanted to hook up with. She was special to me, and I wanted to be special to her too.

As I stared at her across the table, watching her laugh easily with Lucas, I wondered what she really felt about me.

And I refused to get my hopes up that it was anything like what I felt for her.

SAV

I KNEW from the moment I met Anna that she didn't like me. The last time she visited, she called my personal style dull and boring. Nicole had defended me and told her to shut up and stop being so mean, but the poor first impression had set in.

The glare she sent me when I walked into the house with Chris tonight stood out. Sean was embarrassing me with his overly affectionate way of joking, and she glared daggers in my direction. It wasn't long before she asked Chris questions from across the living room, trying to talk over Lucas and me, but Chris gave her short responses and didn't engage. He stayed right by my side, which had been both comforting and unpleasant.

I had no idea what was bothering him. I also wasn't going to miss out on my chance to talk to a published author. Lucas was attractive and kind, and I was glad he'd be my partner through the following events because he made me feel welcome and comfortable.

Brian wouldn't have been terrible either. We had never been close, but he wasn't a jerk to me or anything. He was relatively kind and inclusive. And he had a great sense of humor. A lot like Chris.

Lucas had kept our conversation flowing throughout dinner, and I should have kept my focus on him. Instead, I continuously glanced at Anna and Chris across the table. I watched him saying things while she thumbed something into her phone. He probably gave her his number.

He smiled politely at her, but the gesture never fully reached his eyes.

She kept leaning into him, brushing her large breasts against his arm, and I felt physically sick.

Being around Chris would give me an ulcer with how often my stomach tightened. Since our almost-kiss at the bookstore, I thought about him constantly. I was getting obsessed, and I didn't have the time or energy for that.

I'd missed half of what Nicole said because I'd been too hyper-focused on Chris, attempting to read his expressions from across the table. I was antsy and wanted an excuse to leave, but I didn't have any good reasons. I needed to stick it out for Sean.

As soon as everyone had finished eating, Sean wanted to move the party to the living room. Anna and Laura were staying the night, so they were willing to host everyone a little longer to entertain their guests. I saw it as a perfect opportunity to leave, so I hugged and said goodbye to the happy couple. I grabbed my stuff before walking out into the cold, wet night.

I pulled my phone out of my purse, ready to update Penny on the last two days' events. The baby was sick, so she'd been busier than usual and not as available. She didn't know about the almost-kiss yesterday. I was waiting until our next lunch meeting to fill her in, but I needed help.

I was quickly falling right back into being the woman I was all those years ago. Obsessed with Chris. Watching his every move. Feeling jealous of the women he talked to. It was so stupid. I was backsliding badly. Exactly as I'd feared I would.

I made it halfway across their yard before I heard a familiar voice.

“Sav, wait!” Chris yelled.

I twisted around in time to see him leap over the three stairs. His boots skidded to a stop right in front of me. Our toes

touched. His eyes were stormy rain clouds, darting back and forth as if he were searching into the depths of my soul.

What was he looking for?

“I’m heading home,” I said, separating myself from him and continuing my walk to my car. A newly established friendship did not mean allowing reignited crushes or weird mind games. I called over my shoulder, “I’ve got to be at the store early tomorrow.”

“Wait,” he repeated, racing past me to stand in my way.

I sighed heavily, throwing my arms up in defeat. “What? Why are you chasing me?”

“Why did you leave without saying goodbye?” he countered. “I thought our heart-to-heart changed things between us, but I still don’t know where I stand.”

I blinked. Why was he worried about me when Anna was practically in his lap all evening?

My stomach soured at the feelings growing there. His attention had been like a showering rain over a sprouting garden. The buds were beginning to bloom, and it felt like too much. He took all the air out of the room without even trying, and I didn’t know how to hold myself steady.

I hated his hold over me, and I was trying so hard not to let it affect me. It was stupid and immature, but it was my truth. The feelings I had for Chris ran deep. So much deeper than the last couple of weeks. They spanned back throughout most of my life. All the moments he showed interest in me played like a movie in my head and gutted me all over again.

I blinked away the forming tears, straightened my shoulders, and looked him dead in the eyes. “If we any hope of saving our friendship, I need you to not be so ... so *present*.”

He looked taken aback. “What does that mean?”

Damn, did I even really know what I meant? I didn’t know how to explain it, so I asked questions instead. “Why did you chase me out here? Why were you staring at me all night?”

He opened his mouth and then closed it. He tilted his head in confusion, and a battle broke out behind those eyes.

I thought things were fine when we arrived and we were smiling at one another, but maybe I was wrong.

“Goodnight, Chris,” I said, shoving past him and heading down the sidewalk. It wasn’t my job to soothe him, and I didn’t want to share how uncomfortable the entire night had made me. I needed to get home and crawl into bed with a good book.

“Savannah!” someone else called, halting my steps again. I was thoroughly annoyed, spinning around to find Lucas jogging over to us. He smiled pleasantly at Chris before walking past him. “We didn’t exchange numbers,” he explained, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“Oh, right,” I said. We had agreed to stay in touch.

Chris glared at Lucas, stepping closer to make it clear he wasn’t going to leave us alone. Lucas ignored him. “You rushed out of there before you could give it to me,” he said. “I went to get some water, and you were suddenly gone.”

I winced. “Sorry about that. I have an early morning.”

Lucas nodded. “Understandable. Although, I do wish we could have talked more tonight. It’s nice to meet another dedicated bibliophile. I’d love to stop by the bookstore while I’m in town and see it. Maybe we could even get lunch, and I can get your perspective on the latest Kristen Stein novel.”

Chris fisted his hands, but I kept my focus on Lucas. My heart warmed at the fact that he wanted to see Sparks. He’d loved all the details I’d shared about it, including the new renovations and ideas I’d discussed with Chris.

“That sounds fun.” I gave him my number, despite Chris’s looming glare now pointed in my direction. Lucas typed the number into his phone. He sent a text and asked me to confirm I got it. I glanced down at my phone already in my hands. “Yep, it’s right here.”

He sighed with relief. “Okay, awesome. Thanks again for making Nicole feel welcome around here. She was scared to

move so far for a relationship, but they seem to be working out.”

I hardly talked to Nicole, but I appreciated her saying kind things about me behind my back. “Yeah, she’s good to Sean.”

“Chris!” Sean called from the front of the house. I felt terrible for the neighbors with all the shouting going on out here on their lawn. “I forgot to ask you about a leak in the bathroom. Will you take a look before you leave?”

Chris’s eyes darted between my brother and me.

Our conversation wasn’t over, but he relented and walked back to the house. He glanced at us over his shoulder once more before disappearing inside. Sean waved from the doorway and shut it behind them.

“Is that dude your keeper or something?” Lucas asked, hooking a thumb over his shoulder toward where Chris had been standing.

I shook my head. “No. He might think that, but nobody’s my keeper.”

“Does he have a crush on you or something?”

The suggestion made me laugh. I couldn’t deny the heat between us and how he’d almost kissed me, but Chris didn’t have crushes. He had one-night stands. “No, he’s been friends with Sean for a long time, so I think there’s a bit of overprotectiveness there. Proxy big brother stuff. He’s not usually like that, though.”

Lucas quirked an eyebrow as if he didn’t believe me. But he let it go. “All right. Well, I’ll text you tomorrow. Drive safe.”

“Thanks.” I opened my arms for a hug, feeling socially brave for once.

He grinned and stepped in, pulling me close into a mildly inappropriate hug for two people who barely met each other, but it felt nice. He seemed like a good person, and the attention he paid me felt right. We pulled away and smiled at one another. “See you later, Savannah.”

“You can call me Sav.”

“Will do.” He winked, and my cheeks heated up.

He waited for me to get into my car and watched me drive away. As I drove to my little garage apartment next to my Grampa’s house. I turned on the radio, blasting the music to push the night’s negativity out of my mind.

The town was quiet at night because most businesses closed at six. Grampa had always said they rolled up the sidewalks at dusk. I pulled into the second driveway on our property, the one that led to my place. When I turned the car off and grabbed my phone, I noticed an unread notification.

It was a text from Chris.

Chris: Sorry. I’ll do better. I promise.

Relief washed over me. He was trying, so I couldn’t stay too annoyed. I texted back to let him know it was okay, we were good, and I’d see him later. Only the last of those statements was the whole truth.

CHRIS

THE MORNING after the dinner party, Sav surprised me with a cup of coffee. I was upstairs, helping Jackson organize their inventory closer to the stairs so I could begin renovating at least half the space. She brought Jackson a drink, walked up to me, and offered a cardboard cup.

“What’s this for?” I asked, inspecting the coffee.

She clasped her hands in front of her dark purple skirt. “A show of good faith.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “You didn’t poison it, did you?”

Jackson snorted.

She shook her head, hiding her smile. “No, I promise there’s no poison. It’s my way of saying thank you for everything.”

I glanced at the steaming cup and then back at her. I couldn’t get over how adorable she was. I loved her smile, and I wished I had seen it more over the previous four years.

Maybe I would get to from then on if I played my cards right.

“Thanks,” I said. “Jackson, keep national poison control on speed dial, just in case.”

“God, you two,” Jackson mumbled, but he was grinning. Sav shot a half-smile at me and went back downstairs.



Later that evening, I was heading home after catching up on the work at my usual office when I noticed the lights were still on at Sparks. I figured she was probably working late. The flyer for the massive sale went out earlier that day, and she'd stapled them up around town.

She was working so hard, and I admired her for that. She gave her all to everything important to her, and I couldn't help but want some of that passion aimed my way.

I decided to repay the coffee from that morning and stopped at the Thai restaurant she loved when she was younger. It was the only Asian food restaurant in town, and she had practically lived there in her teens. I ordered the Chicken Pad Thai, and I stopped by the bookstore.

Sav stood behind the counter, working on her laptop with papers spread out next to her. The spreadsheet she worked on reflected in her glasses. "Welcome to the Sparks," she called without looking up, typing away.

I closed the distance between us. She didn't shift focus until I was a few feet away from her, and the moment our eyes connected, hurt and guilt pierced through me at the more-than-friendly feelings that rose inside me.

This was already getting complicated.

I cleared my throat. "Thanks for the coffee this morning. It made my day."

She smiled hesitantly. "You're welcome. Did you forget something?"

I shook my head, presenting her with the bag. "I noticed you were still working, so I brought you dinner."

Her face lit up as she recognized the familiar restaurant logo on the bag.

Those two small acts of kindness followed us into the week. We made it a habit.

Sav brought me coffee in the mornings while I worked upstairs, and we had takeout in the bookstore a couple of times to discuss Sean's wedding or her new store space.

I wanted to make her dream come to life. She had a clear vision for everything, and I wished I was better at interior designing to copy it. I could lay the foundation, but I usually called for outside help with the decorating. I'd have to find a way to help make it work.

I had extra time in my schedule on Friday and found myself hanging around the Sparks. At first, I used the excuse that I needed to take measurements and write notes. Sav didn't question me. She nodded and told me to make myself at home.

I did what I came to do, but every few minutes, I found excuses to stop by the registers. I talked to her between customers, asking questions about the sale and anything else I could think might be relevant.

Each time I approached, her cheeks turned pink, and I grew hungry, wondering what other parts of her could blush pink for me.

I felt guilty for thinking it, not just because of our past but because she was Sean's younger sister. It didn't matter. I couldn't stop myself.

"I'm thinking about getting more into reading," I said, leaning against the counter, scrambling for things to say just to have more of her attention. "What would you recommend?"

She quirked a brow suspiciously. "Not sure. What type of books do you like?"

"I don't know. Let's start with your favorite books and go from there."

She drew invisible circles on the countertop with her finger. "There's a fantasy series I really love."

"Fantasy sounds cool," I said, hoping to keep her talking.

She caught my eye. "Don't laugh, but it's called *The Deadly Dragon Sins Series*. Each book features a different dragon that the protagonist must find and either destroy or

make an alliance with. Each book's perspective changes as new characters are introduced, including their reasons for searching for dragons."

"That's interesting," I admitted. "How many books are there in the series so far?"

"Eight. You could start with the first one and see how you like it. Each book can be read as a standalone, so you don't have to worry about cliffhangers at the end."

I nodded. "Okay, yeah. I'll check it out."

She beamed, and I felt weird sort of pride for making her smile that way. She pulled her phone out of her cardigan pocket and swiped it open. "I actually have some mood boards I created based on the series. I know it's dorky, but I want to give you a sense of the vibe."

"Lay them on me," I encouraged.

This felt like old times, so I was going to read every one of those dragon books to have something to talk to her about even if I hated them.

She went to her Instagram and showed me posts on her profile. They were dark and mysterious looking. They had a distinct vibe and about fifty likes each.

"Wow," I said. "They look great. Kinda dark and sexy."

"Dragons are kind of sexy. Don't you think?"

I couldn't stop my chuckle. "Never really thought about that before. They seem scary and ... firey. Burning people up and eating them. Knocking down buildings in Tokyo. Not super sexy to me."

"Tokyo?" She laughed, tossing her head back, giving me a great view of her soft, supple throat. "Godzilla isn't a dragon, dumbass, it's a kaiju."

I laughed, my mouth dropping open. "Hey, no need to name-call because I don't know as much about *things that don't exist* as you do, you big nerd."

"I work in a bookstore. Nerd is a compliment. Dork."

“Geek.”

“Again, not an insult.”

“Do you insult customers when they don’t know the difference between big lizards too, or is that kind of disdain reserved for me?”

“I scream at them and tell them to go to Barnes & Noble with all the other riff-raff, of course. And Godzilla isn’t a lizard. It’s a giant amphibious reptile, most likely. Did you forget that it came out of the sea, brainiac?”

She was having a hard time controlling her laughter at that point.

“Sorry, I flunked ‘distinguishing lizards from sea monsters and dragons’ in college.”

“Clearly.”

“A smart-ass *and* a know-it-all. How the hell are you still single?” I meant it to be a joke, not a genuine question. Her smile slowly faded as she shook her head. I wanted to take the stupid question back, but it was too late.

Sav shrugged. “I don’t know. I dated here and there, but I’ve never really met the right guy, I guess.”

“Hey, I was only teasing.”

“That’s okay. You know, I’ve never really even had a boyfriend. Big shocker, huh? How are they missing out on all this *fantastique*.” She gestured up and down at herself, but her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes.

I blew out an incredulous breath. “That’s impossible. How could you have never had a boyfriend?”

She stared at me for a long moment. “There was someone else I liked for a long time. I’d always hoped he’d see me for who I was and want me back, but that never happened.”

I stared back at her, unsure what to say. Suddenly, her confession shifted how I’d seen the interaction all those years ago.

I felt unsteady as if my entire world had just tilted.

Back then, my feelings for her were buried so deep because of my distrust and hurt that I hadn't seen it for what it was. My fear of letting down my best friend had kept his little sister firmly on a pedestal in my mind.

Untouchable, even though I'd wanted her.

In seconds, I realized how wrong I'd been. Our interactions since we'd reconnected through the Sparks were more and more like the ones we used to have. And I started to wonder how I'd ever thought Sav could have used me. All the signs had been there, for years, that she felt something for me.

I'd been tipsy, but not enough to blame my stupidity on alcohol. I thought back to Katelyn, and I honestly hated her a little more for stealing my trust, for making me so damn paranoid about getting hurt that I'd been mistrusting of Sav of all people.

I still wanted her.

And in rational moments when I wasn't getting so lost in her eyes that I tried to kiss her, I still thought of her as untouchable, deep down, because of Sean.

I wasn't sure if that was a good enough reason anymore.

"Sav—"

"Excuse me," someone said, breaking the spell between us.

"Yes?" Sav answered.

Mrs. Sharp stood a few feet from us. "Sorry to interrupt honey. Could you help me find a book for Beth? She turned twelve this year, and I don't know what the kids like nowadays. Her mother says she likes to read, but I don't want to get the wrong thing."

Sav smiled brightly at her. "You're in luck because I love middle-grade books. I can help you find something." She gave me an apologetic look, and I smiled, gesturing for her to help Mrs. Sharp. She lived just a few houses down from Jackson and Sav and made the best fudge cookies in the word. She had always made an extra batch for the neighborhood kids when we were growing up.

I watched Sav walk away, staring at her ass in her skirt and wishing I could hold it in my hands.

I felt a thick knot in my stomach, pulling me toward her like a magnet. I did want our friendship back, and I was feeling lighter every day we got closer.

But I couldn't pretend that I didn't want more than that. I knew I couldn't keep getting away with making up fake reasons to see and be around her.

I needed to sort my shit out soon.

I glanced over my shoulder and noticed Jackson stacking books nearby.

Was he there the whole time? It'd be embarrassing if he heard me gushing over her favorite books and asking her personal dating questions. He didn't seem like the type to tell Sean, but I wasn't sure.

He glanced up at me with a little smile that didn't give away whether he'd heard or not. If he had, he clearly didn't mind my flirting.

Maybe Sean wouldn't either?

With a shake of my head, I grabbed my notebook and headed for the stairs, ready to get some actual work done to get ahead for tomorrow.

SAV

“THANKS MRS. SHARP. I hope Beth really likes the books,” I said as I handed over the paper bag filled with some great middle-grade series. “Please wish her happy birthday for me.”

I waited until she was gone to relax, feeling exhausted from the minor customer rush a few moments ago. The advertising for the store-wide sale seemed to be working as people came through in droves for new books at half the cost.

Many customers thought we were closing, so Grampa and I had to repeatedly explain that we were only minimizing our store space. Many also asked what we were doing with the second floor, prompting us to explain that White Oak Construction would open an office above.

“Oh, I love White Oak! They renovated our bathroom a few years back.”

“Oh, wow! Chris built our house for us when we bought a new patch of land.”

“Christopher Warner will be working above you? Good luck, girl. That man is way too hot for his own good.”

I’d cringed at that last one, mainly because it came from Betty, a woman I knew had slept with Chris. I knew this because Sean had made fun of him in front of me one day, and Chris had blushed and told him to shut up.

“I’m proud of you, sweetheart. Your idea is working like gangbusters,” Grampa said, squeezing my shoulder affectionately.

We took turns ringing up customers and helping people find the books they were looking for. If the next couple of Saturdays were like this, we would quickly clear out that inventory.

“Thanks, Grampa. I’m proud of you, too,” I said.

He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me in for a side hug. “Life might have thrown us a few curveballs, but we’re still making it happen. We might not always like the results, but that’s okay. Life is about adjusting and compromising.”

I nodded, taking in his words. “You’re right.”

Life became more manageable as I adjusted my expectations and compromised with Chris. Our friendship was developing again as we seemed to meet each other at the same level of kindness and openness.

I’d thought building a thick wall between us had protected my heart, but all it did was make the pain worse. It festered inside me and grew. Only after I decided to stop fighting against him had I felt any peace with it.

Sure, I was still attracted to him and had feelings, but I felt more in control of my emotions than before. Seeing him wasn’t highly triggering and didn’t immediately take me back to that place. I didn’t immediately feel the urge to ignore him or be rude or argue. And clearing the air helped me put it to bed.

The bell rang over the front door. Chris walked in and glanced around the now empty store. Usually, he didn’t work on the weekends, but he carried his toolbox.

Grampa stared at Chris for a second, patted his front pockets, and put his hand on his forehead. “Oh, shoot. I just remembered I left one of my medications at home. It’s getting close to lunchtime, and I need to take it with food.”

He kissed my cheek, and I gripped his sleeve. I didn’t buy his excuse to leave me alone with Chris *again*. “You already took your medication, Grampa,” I reminded him.

He laughed awkwardly. “There are others you don’t know about it. Sorry to leave you here alone, but I’ll be back as soon

as I can.” He really wasn’t a very good actor. I figured he didn’t like that Chris and I had grown apart and was intent on making sure we spent a lot of time together to make up.

Chris ambled up to the register. “Don’t worry, Jackson. I’m here to work, so I’ll be around if she needs anything.” He winked at me.

Grampa was already heading out the door, leaving us alone in the empty bookstore. Chris and I stood awkwardly by the front counter, and I shouldn’t have felt so nervous about him when we’d been hanging out a lot more than usual lately.

Maybe it was because I hadn’t expected him to stop by on his day off. It didn’t seem like him, and the unexpectedness had my heart racing. I took a deep breath and glanced at him.

Dammit, he was staring directly at me with an amused look on his face.

“What?” I asked, keeping my lips in a straight line.

He shrugged. “Nothing. Just seeing you flustered is pretty cute.”

My eyes widened. “Did you come to work or practice your lame pickup lines?” I asked.

He barked out a laugh. His lips curved into one of those smiles that I knew attracted women to him. I knew it, because it worked on me too.

“Believe it or not, I did come to work,” he said. “I have some guys coming a little later. We need to finish setting up frames for the new walls we’re putting in next week.”

“Sounds like hard work.”

He nodded. “It is, but it needs to be done. We’ve been falling behind.” He flexed his arm and slapped his bicep, talking in a low, stilted growl. “But big strong man no mind work hard.” He grunted.

“Oh my god,” I said with a laugh. “Maybe you wouldn’t fall behind if you didn’t keep coming by the front desk and flirting with the workers.” I leaned over the counter and

whispered, like it was scandalous. “I think Grampa is getting creeped out.”

He tilted his head, grinning mischievously. “You’re wrong. Jackson loves when I flirt with him. Makes him feel young and desired.”

My cheeks burned, but I couldn’t keep the laugh inside. Then I scoffed. “Have you always been this weird?”

“Always and a day, squirt.”

For the first time in over four years, hearing his nickname for me didn’t upset me by reminding me of the way things used to be. I liked hearing it again. It made me think that we’d gotten back to a good place.

He grabbed his toolbox. “I’ll be upstairs if you need me.”

“Probably won’t, but thanks for the memo!”

I needed some time to rest my feet, so I went to the back office and sat in the ergonomic chair Grampa bought for the desk. I slipped off my shoes and massaged my feet for a few minutes, thinking about the shift in me that had me liking the banter between us again.

I’d hear the ding on the front door or the bell at the register if a customer needed anything, so I decided to check email the Sparks Bookstore email account for inquiries or replies. Sometimes I sent proposals to authors, asking them to do a book signing at our store. The buzz of a celebrity author stopping by the store might bring in some more business, especially if they also read an excerpt of their work.

As I read through the emails, replying to inquiries about book clubs and story time for children, I stumbled upon a reply from Kristen Stein, the author of *The Deadly Dragon Sins* series.

My heart leaped into my throat as I opened the email.

Hi Savannah,

First, I'd like to thank you for thinking of me and expressing your love for The Deadly Dragon Sins. As you might know, they're very near and dear to my heart. With the approaching release of the ninth novel in the series, I'm looking for new locations to add to my book launch tour. Your email came at the perfect time for me to add you to the list.

There was more to the message, but I stopped reading and screamed. I jumped up from the chair and danced, thrilled to know I'd be working with my favorite author on a project like this. Sure, she would only stop by on her tour, but I'd get to meet her and shake her hand.

I'd talk to her and watch her read an excerpt from the new book.

I could get a signed copy!

Chris rushed into the room, looking panicked. "What's going on?" He looked around the room, his whole body tense, like he was ready to pounce.

I couldn't keep the giddy smile off my face. "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I just got really good news."

"Jesus, Sav. You scared the hell out of me." He blew out a relieved breath and raked his fingers through his hair. "What's the news?"

I told him about Kristen Stein, and he encouraged me to read him the rest of the email, listing dates and times she would be available in the area.

"That's awesome, Sav!" I was still bouncing on my toes behind the desk, so he came around it and embraced me in a bear hug, lifting me up in the air like I weighed nothing. Like he used to do, years ago. I wrapped my arms around his neck and squealed as he laughed.

When he lowered me to the ground, he pulled his head back to look at me, but kept his hands wrapped around my waist. Our faces were inches apart.

"It's inspiring to see your nerdy dreams come true."

I snorted and pushed against his chest. “Oh, shut up.”

He pulled me closer with one hand and used the other to grab my hand, pressing it against his chest as he stared at me. The corners of his lips were slightly curved in a subdued smile. “I like how nerdy you are. It’s adorable. Aside from your nerd-alert scream making me think you were being attacked and freaking me out, of course. The rest, very cute.”

I scoffed, but my cheeks warmed at the compliment. I tried to pull my hand back, but he kept a tight hold on it. I looked away because the intensity in his gaze was too much, but he caught my chin between his thumb and forefinger and raised my face until our eyes connected again.

My breath was trapped in my lungs, my heart pounding beneath my breastbone. His dark eyes drew me in, and I slowly leaned closer. I felt like I had no control over my body as my gaze lowered to his lips. He licked them and then closed the distance between us.

His lips met mine, just a light press against my mouth. I melted into him, placing both hands on his chest to grip his shirt.

Chris’s palm pressed the small of my back, pinning me to him. The hand holding my chin softened, and he caressed my cheek before cupping my jaw. Our noses lightly brushed as I tilted my head and parted my lips.

My heart raced as he kissed deeper. I shivered when his tongue slowly licked at the seam of my lips, and I opened more for him, wanting all of it. This was better than the heated kisses we’d shared four years earlier. I still felt out of control, but not because I’d had too many drinks.

I felt completely tipsy on him instead.

I couldn’t think of anything beyond the present moment as his tongue slid against mine. I was lost in his scent and surrounded by the heat of his body.

My arms slid up his chest, and I wrapped them around his neck, drawing him closer. I was drunk on his kisses and felt like I could do this forever. I never wanted to stop.

“Sav,” he breathed against my lips, then kissed me again, his hands moving under my rear end to lift me onto the desk.

Someone cleared their throat. I jumped away, leaving at least two feet of space between us. A beautiful woman stood in the doorway.

She smiled good-naturedly. “Sorry to interrupt. I was looking for Chris.”

My shoulders slumped as I glanced at him.

He smiled brightly. “Are you Melanie?”

She looked relieved. “Yes, I am. I didn’t mean to interrupt whatever was going on here, but I’m meeting with a few clients today.”

He shook his head. “No, of course. I should have been out there waiting for you, but I lost track of time.”

She smiled at me. “I can see that.”

Chris turned to me, looking distracted, almost as if he barely remembered I was in the room. “Sav, this is Melanie. Melanie, this is Sav.”

Melanie stepped into the office and offered her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” came from my lips, although I’m pretty sure it wasn’t me that said it. It was some other Sav who’s a coward with no backbone.

Did he really kiss me when he had a date coming for lunch? *Stop being so suspicious*, I told myself. *If she’d been his date, she would have known who he was and wouldn’t have announced she was there to see Chris.*

She also probably wouldn’t have been thrilled to find him kissing another woman.

But years of mistrust kept me wanting to turn it into some sort of betrayal. The fact that he’d shifted gears so quickly and was running out without an explanation didn’t help.

“I’ll be back later,” he said. He cupped my shoulder and slid his hand down my arm as he stepped away. As if that

touch could make it all okay.

He gestured for Melanie to walk forward and followed her out. I watched from the window as he caught up to her and began talking animatedly. She laughed at something he said, and there was a pang in my chest.

I rubbed the spot, wishing I could take back the last few minutes. Maybe she wasn't a date, but he looked at her like he enjoyed what he saw. And I knew his reputation with beautiful women.

I'd only just stopped denying how much I still wanted to spend time with Chris after years of telling myself I was better off not knowing him. And as soon as he'd kissed me, I realized just how desperately I still wanted that, and more.

Damn Melanie for ruining my moment.

CHRIS

“I’LL GIVE you a call as things develop,” Melanie said as we stood outside Sparks Bookstore. We’d walked down to a nearby café for lunch, so we’d hammered out the final details of the project on the stroll back.

“Thanks again for meeting with me,” I said, offering her my hand.

She shook it. “No problem. We’ll be in touch soon.”

I stood outside, watching to ensure she backed up safely before driving away. I glanced at the sky, admiring how nice a day it was.

After the kiss I shared with Sav earlier, nothing could ruin this day. We were making progress I didn’t think was possible, but there were many issues we’d have to face if this went any further.

The idea of Sean finding out worried me. We’d been good friends for most of my life, so how would he feel about me kissing his little sister? How would he feel if he knew the whole story and found out it wasn’t even the first time?

But was the possibility of his disapproval worth giving up the possibility of something with Sav I’d only ever dreamed of?

It was hard to tell. I was at war with myself, not knowing or understanding the next step, but I needed to figure it out soon. Sav would eventually want answers like she did back when I was better at hiding my feelings for her. I could keep

them shoved down where they were easier to ignore. Now, it was as if they were waking up to the world and recognizing what the connection between us had always been.

With a sigh, I turned back to Sparks Bookstore and went inside. I wanted to find Sav and kiss her again, but she was nowhere to be found. She wasn't in the office or at the registers. She wasn't in the small breakroom they had, and she wasn't upstairs.

Maybe she was in the bathroom, but I wasn't going to creepily wait outside for her, so my only option was to get back to work.

Jackson returned shortly after I'd gotten back to work, and we decided to move more inventory since there was more space downstairs. We worked in tandem, packing carts full of books. Some of my employees showed up around this time too, ready for that overtime pay I'd offered to anyone willing to come in Saturday and help.

Everyone found their place in the chaos, working to clear more of the area and set frames for the walls we were installing next week. Everything went much quicker, and Jackson didn't have to do much heavy lifting.

After a while, I grew sweaty and stopped to take a drink from my water bottle. We'd been working for about an hour and a half and were nearing the end of what needed to be done. I leaned against the railing where one could look down and see the first floor.

Sav's laugh stood out to me. Then I heard a distinctly male voice talking as she laughed more. I wondered if it was Lucas, back to stake his claim again like he'd done at the dinner party a few nights ago.

I thought he was out of town. I hoped he was.

I charged down the stairs, ready make myself a third wheel and try to keep her from giving him too much attention.

I thought about the way Sav had laughed with him all night, and how I had to work twice as hard to get those laughs out of her.

I rounded the corner and found her standing with one of my employees. He was young and a newer member of the crew. He grinned hungrily at her as he said something else, and she laughed again. He had a self-serving smirk that pissed me off, even though the guy was doing nothing wrong.

“Dylan,” I barked, making them both jump.

He glanced at me guiltily. “Yes, sir?”

“Rene’s been handling half the job by himself up there while you’re flirting down here. Get upstairs and help him now or I’m docking your overtime pay.”

His eyes widened. “Yes, sir,” he repeated and then scurried away.

Sav snorted. “Wow, did you have to be such a caveman?”

My gaze shifted from the direction Dylan had disappeared back to Sav. She was glaring at me with her arms crossed.

“What’s your problem?” I asked.

Her glare turned to a blazing fire in her eyes. “You’re the one with the problem. Why were you being all threatening and weird?”

“He’s got work to do. You shouldn’t be flirting with him and distracting him.”

She flinched back, covering her chest with her hand. “Excuse me? So what if I’d been talking to him for *two minutes*? Where do you have the right to say anything about it?”

She stepped forward, poking me in the chest with her finger. There was a pain in her eyes, and I felt like a jerk. Today was supposed to be a good day, but I was ruining it by being jealous.

What was wrong with me? I didn’t get jealous.

Especially not insanely jealous over something trivial like laughing, but the back and forth between us made me crazy.

“You flirt with every woman that walks by, and I can’t chat and have a little laugh with one of your coworkers? I wasn’t

even flirting with him.”

“He was clearly flirting with you.”

“Oh no, sound the alarms! Someone flirted with Sav for five minutes, news at five.”

Damn, what was I doing? I was pushing her away.

It was becoming insanely obvious that I didn’t know how to do this. How to show her I cared without taking things to the extreme.

I took a deep breath and lifted my hands. “Okay, I’m sorry.”

Her eyebrow quirked. “Really?”

“I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I was a dumbass. You don’t deserve that.”

She blinked at me a few times, clearly in disbelief that I’d apologized. “I ... okay.”

I almost laughed at how shocked she was. I opened my mouth to say more and maybe try express my feelings better, but there was a thump on the second floor and a shout.

“Oh, shit!” someone yelled.

“Is he okay?”

Sav and I looked at each other with wide eyes before we raced for the stairs. As soon as we hit the second landing, I saw Jackson sprawled out on the carpeted floor. His eyes were closed as if he’d passed out, and my guys were crowded around him, looking scared and confused.

“Call 911,” I said.

She looked anxious as she started to say, “What—”

I cut her off. “Sav. Call 911. Now.”

I knelt next to Jackson and grabbed his wrist, checking for a pulse. Everyone was asking me questions until one of them shouted for the others to quiet down.

His heartbeat was strong, and his breathing seemed normal. He was a little paler than normal, but otherwise *looked*

okay.

“What happened?” I asked.

“He fell,” someone said.

“How? What was he doing?”

“He was climbing a ladder and lost his balance,” Dylan said.

I cursed under my breath as I worked to wake him gently. I stayed on my knees next to him until then, and Sav knelt on his other side, patting his hand and trying to wake him, staring at her grandpa with tears brimming in her eyes.

He slowly blinked his eyes open and looked at her. He seemed embarrassed and tried to stand, but I kept him lying down and told him to listen to the paramedics. He reluctantly agreed and did as they asked.

They strapped him in and quickly carried him downstairs and out to the waiting ambulance. I called Sean to let him know that Jackson was in an ambulance on the way to the Maxwell Hospital a few towns over. Sav seemed to crawl inside herself as the scene unfolded. Her arms stayed tightly crossed over her chest as she stared with wide eyes as they loaded Jackson into the ambulance.

“That’s my granddaughter. Can she ride with us?”

“Sure,” one of the paramedics said.

Sav glanced at me over her shoulder, and I nodded encouragingly for her to go. “I’ll meet you guys there,” I said. “Sean is on the way too.”

She nodded and climbed into the back of the ambulance. Thunder roared in the distance as I realized the sky had grown cloudy. It was a stark contrast from the bright sunshine I’d experienced only a couple of hours ago.

Rain began to fall, and I breathed a sigh, turning to my crew standing in front of the bookstore. “All right,” I said. “Let’s clean up and get out of here.” I started for the front door. “And don’t worry. Everyone will still get the hours promised on their next check.”

“Thank God,” one of them said, and I didn’t turn around to see who it was because I probably would have decked them.

SAV

THE BRIGHT WHITE walls of the hospital creeped me out. The sight of them forced goosebumps to cover my skin as my mind was assaulted by memories of being in this same waiting room, waiting to hear news about my mom or grandma. I was in one of the rooms down the hall from where I sat, watching as Momma took her last breath after her battle with a brain tumor.

A hand covered mine on the armrest, shocking me back to the present. I glanced over my shoulder at Sean who gave me a weak smile. “It’s okay, Sav. Grampa’s gonna be fine.”

He couldn’t know that. None of us knew that yet. But I appreciated his comfort.

I gripped his hand and sighed heavily, wishing they would hurry with the results already. Chris sat on Sean’s other side, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

After a few more moments of silence, the doctor left Grampa’s room and walked down the hallway toward us. I braced myself for the news. Whatever it might be.

“Your grandfather is in stable condition,” he announced. “No head trauma or broken bones from the fall, just a couple of bruises. He’s going to be fine, but he’ll need to be careful, and no more ladders, until we get his blood pressure medication adjusted properly.”

I knew we’d all feared the worst, that he’d lost his balance because of a stroke, a heart attack, whatever awful things

happen to people as they get older. Dizziness from his blood pressure dropping too fast was nothing compared to those.

There was a collective sigh between the three of us. Sean put an arm around my shoulder and squeezed.

“Can we go see him?” I asked.

“Absolutely. We see no need to keep him overnight, so the nurse will be in soon with his discharge papers.”

We followed the doctor to Grampa’s room. I knocked on the open door, relieved when he smiled at me from the bed. He had more color in his cheeks now and seemed much happier. I rushed to his bedside and threw my arms around his neck, hugging him close and inhaling his familiar scent of Dial soap and Old Spice.

He was my rock. I didn’t know what I’d do without him.

“I’m okay,” he said quietly, rubbing my back. “Your grampa is okay.”

I pulled back and playfully swatted his chest. “You need to be more careful,” I said. “No more heavy lifting with Chris.”

He nodded and chuckled. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Damn it,” Sean hissed. He was staring at his phone. “Nicole’s car won’t start. She’s stuck at the school.”

“Why was she there?” Chris asked. “It’s Saturday.”

Sean sighed. “She volunteered to teach Saturday school. Usually, she finishes at the same time as everyone else, but she stayed to finish some grading. She just tried her car, and it’s not working.” He groaned. “I feel bad making her wait until Grampa’s discharged.”

I’d ridden in the ambulance, so I couldn’t offer to help.

“I can take them home,” Chris offered.

Sean sighed in relief. “Thanks, man. That’d be great.”

Chris stared at me, like I might have something to say about it.

I shrugged. I just wanted to go home. I didn't care who took us.

Sean kissed my cheek. Then he moved passed me to hug Grampa and tell him bye. I glanced at Chris from behind his back. He gave my brother a bro hug before he left the room.

"Thanks for coming," Grampa said to Chris. "I know you still had some work to get done today. Sorry if this put a damper on your progress."

Chris shook his head. "Are you crazy? Of course I was gonna come and make sure you were okay. Work can wait."

We settled into casual conversation while we waited for Grampa to be discharged. They put him in a wheelchair, and I rolled him down the hallway and onto the curb. He didn't want to be in the wheelchair any longer than necessary. I sat between him and Chris in the truck.

The radio was on low as we drove, and I lectured Grampa about putting too much stress on himself.

"Oh, I'll be fine," he said dismissively.

"Grampa," I chastised. "It could be more serious next time. You've got to make sure you take your pills on time and let the doctor know if you don't feel quite right. Don't wait until you fall to point out how dizzy you've been next time, please?"

"I'll be more careful." He patted my hand. "Try not to worry."

"I don't want to have to go back to that hospital just because you're not taking care of yourself," I warned, crossing my arms.

Once we arrived home, Grampa tried to sneak off to the main house where Sean and I had grown up. I lived in the detached garage that was converted into an apartment for Sean and Chris when they were in their early twenties.

I tried to follow Grampa into the house, but he turned on his heel and stared at me. "Where do you think you're going?"

My eyes widened. "To help you."

He shook his head. “I don’t need help, honey. I’m going inside for a nap. You can have Chris take you to the bookstore to get the car, maybe keep yourself busy for a while.”

Grampa continued walking and waved me off over his shoulder. “I’ll have plenty of time to be old and need your assistance, but not today.”

I knew he didn’t want to cause me stress. But the way I coped often involved caretaking.

I blew out a breath, slowly turning around to find Chris waiting for me. He was leaning against the front of his truck with his hands in his pockets. He shrugged and offered a small smile. “Need an escort?”

I shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

His eyes widened. “No arguments, really?”

“Yep. Come on. Your invite window is closing.”

I rode with him back to the Sparks to get my car, lost in thought about Grampa and whether this incident was just the first of more to come or just an unfortunate fluke. He was going to have to let me make sure he had the right pills in his day-of-the-week dispenser. Maybe I should find a reason to sneak and check every day to be sure he took them properly.

“He’s going to be fine, you know,” Chris said. “Everything’s okay, Sav.”

I’d been staring out the window, but I turned to him. His little smile seemed confident enough to make me feel better.

“Yeah. I know.”

I thanked him when I got out, then I realized he was following me home.

I hadn’t asked him to, and he hadn’t told me he would.

When I got back to Grampa’s and got out, he was already out of the truck, walking toward me.

“I just wanted to make sure you were going to be okay,” he said as he reached me. “I know sitting at the hospital ... well, I know how tough that must be for you.”

I nodded but didn't trust myself to speak.

"I can hang around a while, if you want some company. I mean, seeing that Sean's not here to do it."

I laughed out on a breath. Sean was wrapped up in Nicole. If not for her, he'd have been there all afternoon and would be the one asking me if I needed company.

Chris knew his best friend pretty well.

The mild argument we were having when Grampa fell flashed through my mind, but I really didn't want to be alone and caught up in morbid thoughts and fears about Grampa's health.

"Okay," I agreed. "Thanks, Chris."

I unlocked the door, feeling his presence behind me as I pushed it open and prayed the living room was relatively clean enough for company. My living room was tidy, and my sink was only half full of dishes. There were panties on the floor near the couch, so I quickly picked them up and chucked them into my open bedroom door.

Chris chuckled.

I eyed him, daring him to say anything, but he smiled. It was genuine and warm.

I had to look away and grab the wine I had in the fridge. I bought it a few days ago but hadn't dug into it with Penny yet. When I returned from the kitchen, Chris sat on my small loveseat, looking around the room with his arm spread across the back of the couch.

"This place looks so different from when Sean and I lived here," he said.

I snorted, placing the glasses on the table before working to open the bottle of wine. "I bet it's much cleaner."

"And you have furniture," he joked. "We used to just sit on fold-out chairs and watch the TV he had on the floor in the middle of the room."

I pulled out the cork, and Chris held each glass for me as I filled them up.

“Boys will be boys, I guess,” I said.

I placed the bottle on the table and sat on the empty cushion beside him.

Our legs were close enough to touch.

Chris leaned back and gulped his glass. He made a face. “Goddamn, this is sweet.”

“Just the way I like it,” I said.

He grinned. Being close to him again like this made me feel excited even if a part of me was still distraught over what happened today. He seemed to remember too as his smile slowly faded. He brushed a piece of hair behind my ear and cupped my cheek.

“How are you?” he asked. “Do you need to talk about today?”

The smile on my face felt frozen as the rush of emotions came flooding to the surface. “Honestly? I don’t know.” I shook my head. “Being in that hospital again reminded me of Mom and Gramma. The long hours waiting to hear what would happen to one of the most important people in my life. It was triggering.”

He nodded, listening intently.

I shook my head. “It sucks, you know. Because it had me thinking about what would happen to me if Grampa died? How would I run the bookstore by myself? Would Sean and I fight over his house? Would we still get together for Sunday dinner? Or would Sean even stay in the city? Would I be left all alone in this world that takes away the people we care about the most when we least expect it?”

My voice broke on the last sentence, and I realized I was rambling.

A few tears escaped my eyes, and Chris brushed them away with his fingers before I could move. His gaze was so severe and intense as he watched me.

I felt naked. Exposed.

I didn't want to be the only vulnerable one right now. I wanted to feel what I felt earlier when I was in his arms standing in my office. I didn't think and just acted, quickly closing the distance between us to wrap my arms around him in a tight hug.

He hugged me back just as fiercely. "I know you're still shook up, but he really is going to be okay," he said softly.

I lifted my face. The soft look in his eyes, and the way his gaze flicked down to my lips, was all it took for me to press my lips against his.

I gave him a peck first, experimenting with how far he would let me go. When I pulled back, his focus was on my lips. I took his wine glass and placed it on the table next to mine. I moved quickly, leaning back in and kissing him again. I savored the feeling, wanting more.

"Sav," he whispered, and I didn't know if he was encouraging me or warning me. I just wanted to forget everything.

Chris matched my intensity, sliding his fingers into my hair and tilting my head to caress my tongue with his. I whimpered, pressing myself against him. My arms wrapped around his neck, and I moved to straddle his lap.

As quickly as it started, it was over.

I was on the couch alone with Chris was standing above me, breathing heavily. The guilt in his eyes made me realize how stupid I'd just been.

How was it possible that this was happening again? How could I have made the same mistake twice?

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

He shook his head. "No, Sav. Don't be sorry. It's my fault."

God, I was like all the other women who pined after him. All the other women waited for their turn. I didn't know if he

was currently dating anyone, but I wasn't dumb enough to think any of this classified as an exclusive relationship.

"It's okay. You can go if you want," I said, void of emotion.

His eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "I don't want to go, Sav. I don't want to leave you here alone. We just—"

"You don't owe me anything," I said, forcing a smile as I looked up at him. His eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "Seriously. I'm fine. I'm just feeling emotional right now, so it's probably best if you go."

He stared at me for a long moment, seemingly weighing the options in his head. He eventually sighed and scrubbed his chin with his palm. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I nodded, faking contentment as much as possible. "Yeah, it's fine." I stood, gesturing for him to leave. "Drive safe."

Chris stared at me for a long moment, then he pulled me close and kissed my forehead before he walked out. I waited until I heard his truck drive away to slide down to the floor. I leaned against the front door and sighed.

God, I was an idiot.

CHRIS

MY PHONE BUZZED on my work desk. I glanced down to see my mom was calling and quirked an eyebrow. She didn't usually call me, especially during work hours when she knew I was probably at the office. The last time we spoke was months ago on Christmas while I spent it alone at home.

A knock at my open door luckily saved me from the phone call. Unfortunately, it was Dylan. He'd been avoiding me since I snapped at him nearly a week ago. Why did everyone feel the need to confront me on a Friday afternoon?

"Yes?" I asked.

"Hi, Mr. Warner—"

"It's okay to call me Chris," I said, leaning back in my chair.

His cheeks reddened. "Okay, Chris. I wanted to ask if you were offering overtime again this weekend. The money has been helping a lot, and I don't want to be excluded because of what happened last weekend. I promise I wasn't flirting with Ms. Sparks. We were talking. That's it. I have a girlfriend."

My eyes shifted closed for a moment. Great, I created this problem by not thinking before acting. I sprung on them like a wildcat without thinking about the repercussions.

Usually, I didn't care about things like that. I barely cared if a woman I slept with the night before was snuggling up next to another man the same day. I always thought it wasn't my business.

Now, I'd veered too far off in the other direction, acting like Sav's business is mine whether she's talking to me or not. And since Saturday night when I didn't want to take advantage of the situation while she was hurting, she'd barely talked to me.

The woman who might be holding the reins to my heart was upset with me again, and the guy I wrongfully accused of causing a rift between had avoided me all week too, until then.

"Forget about what happened last weekend," I said. "I was being an asshole, which wasn't fair to you. I don't have anything on the calendar for tomorrow, but I can let you know about future opportunities if you want."

He nodded. "Yes, sir. I'd appreciate that."

"No problem. I promise you aren't being excluded from anything. I can be a dick sometimes, but you're a great worker, and I wouldn't want you to feel uncomfortable or leave."

That satisfied him, so he left happy. I was glad somebody could be.

With a sigh, I shifted back to my computer and continued to work on my expense reports. I needed to turn them in by three and then head to the Sparks to organize supplies and set up some foundational spots to begin renovating downstairs for the coffee bar.

After a few minutes of work, my phone buzzed on the table again. I'd forgotten Mom had even called. I swiped to answer and clicked on the speakerphone option. "What do you need?" I asked, still moving my mouse around to continue working.

There was a long pause before she answered. "Just wondering how my only son is. How's business going? Ginger says you're expanding White Oak?"

"If Ginger says it, then it must be true."

Another awkward pause. "Okay, that probably means business is doing well, right?"

I just wanted her to get to the point. “How much money do you want?”

“I was going to at least catch up with you for a few minutes first,” she admitted.

I rolled my eyes, even though I knew she couldn’t see it. “You don’t need to do that. What do you want money for?”

She clicked her tongue in disapproval. “You also don’t need to be so rude.”

“How am I being rude? You’re bothering me on a workday while I’m trying to finish some important paperwork. If you need money, ask and tell me why. I’m not giving it to you for stupid shit, but I will help if you’re in a bind, so what’s the issue?”

She sighed. “Your stepfather got fired this month, so we’ll need some money to help cover bills until he finds something else.”

I asked how much she needed, and the amount pissed me off. “This is for *one* month of bills? Where are y’all staying? In a high-rise condo in downtown Denver?” Last I knew, they lived in a trailer on the other side of the state.

A snuffle came through the line. “You know I wouldn’t be calling you if we had any other choice. It’s bad, Chris. We’ve been behind for a while, and Sam losing his job just...” She broke off the sentence with a sob.

I realized my office door was still open and anyone walking by could probably hear this conversation. I took the call off speakerphone and pressed it to my ear. “I can send enough to cover what you owe and a little extra, but I don’t want to hear from you for a while, okay? Sam should get his shit together and stop drinking long enough to keep a job.”

She cried harder. “Thank you. Thank you.”

We discussed the details involving sending them money. I was emotionally drained by the time the phone call was finished. She told me she loved me toward the end, and I didn’t have the emotional capacity to say it back. Why say it, when I wasn’t even sure I felt it?

—

After finishing work, I went to see Sav. I was determined to talk to her and smooth things over.

I wasn't sure I could keep myself from taking things as far as Sav would let me, but I didn't want it to happen when she was so vulnerable.

I didn't want it to be something she might regret when she felt stronger.

I entered the bookstore and found Jackson right away. He was rearranging the displays at the front of the store. "You're looking better."

He beamed. "Yep. Sav finally let me come back to work."

"She's a tough one," I joked. "Where is she by the way? I wanted to talk to her about the coffee bar." I didn't really, but I'd had the excuse ready.

"She's in the office," he said.

I thanked him and headed that way. Their office was located down a short hallway. There were large windows that usually allowed them to see customers approach the registers or for customers to see them if they needed to ask a question, but the curtain to the window was drawn.

I knocked on the door.

"Just a minute," she said on the other end.

I waited a few seconds, and she opened the door. My eyes widened as my mouth instantly grew dry.

She was wearing makeup. Her dark hair was styled and curled, falling over her shoulders in thick waves. She wore a dark green dress that showed off every curve of her body and made my mouth water. Her black tights were made out of a shiny fabric that hugged the curves of her legs all the way down to her black heels.

“Damn, Sav,” I croaked before I could stop myself.

Her eyebrows rose. She was still wearing the glasses she used when reading or on the computer, and they made her look even hotter.

She had the sexy librarian look down.

I wanted her to shush me while I did sexy things to her.

She stepped back from the door and grabbed her purse from the desk.

“Where are you going?” I asked, wanting to follow her anywhere just to watch her sway in that dress.

“None of your business,” she said.

“Okay.” I licked my lips. I closed my eyes so I could try to recall the reason I’d stopped by. “I wanted to see if we could talk.”

“About what?”

I opened my eyes again so I could give her my full attention. I ignored how hot she looked. “About last weekend. I feel like you’ve been avoiding me since Saturday night—”

“Chris,” she interrupted, putting up her hand to stop me. “We don’t need to relive it. It was embarrassing enough that it happened in the first place. Let’s move on with our lives.”

I froze. “What do you mean?”

“The kiss was a mistake, and I don’t want to think about it anymore. I don’t want to play this game anymore. It’s pathetic, honestly.”

My head tilted to the side. “It’s not pathetic.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Of course, you’d say that. You get to be the nice guy who stops the stupid girl when she doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

That’s not what I was doing, was it?

“I’m not some evil mastermind, Sav,” I said. “I have feelings, too.”

She looked at her phone. “I gotta go. I’ll see you at our planned meeting about the reno on Monday.”

“Wait,” I said as she walked past me and down the hallway. I followed behind her, wanting to force her to explain herself until I saw someone familiar at the store’s entrance.

Lucas smiled at Sav and waved. He was dressed nicely in slacks, a button-down shirt, and a tight blazer. My eyes narrowed as I neared them. Lucas opened his arms for a hug, and Sav went right in, hugging him tight like they were close.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yep.” She turned to Jackson. “Thanks for closing up, Grampa.”

He dismissed her thanks with a wave. “Of course.”

Lucas looked over her shoulder and saw me approaching. “Hey, Chris. Sav’s been telling me all about how you’re helping renovate the bookstore.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Yeah, we’ve been working together.”

Sav turned to leave. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Lucas smiled sheepishly. “Later, man.”

He put his hand on the small of Sav’s back as they left the bookstore. I wanted to rip his hand off and feed it to him.

I swore I wouldn’t be a dick to her again over some guy’s attention after making an ass out of myself when I thought she was flirting with Dylan, so I stood there, unsure of what to do.

They left the store together, and there was an awkward silence. It felt loud and aggressive.

Jackson broke it. “All that girl does is work and read, and lately it’s been mostly working. She deserves to go out and enjoy herself.”

“Yeah.” I still stared at the front door, like they might be about to come back. “Of course, she does.”

Jackson appeared beside me and took a deep breath. “Seems like you don’t do much but work lately, either. You should go out and have some fun. Maybe the two of you could go together sometime soon. If you had a mind to ask her, that is.” He cleared his throat. “And I suspect you do.”

He walked away before I could find something to say.

SAV

“ARE YOU OKAY?” Lucas asked for the tenth time as we stood in the waiting area of Bernard’s, a fancy French restaurant in the town across the lake from Carswell.

He could tell something was bothering me, but I didn’t want to talk about it. Talking about it meant thinking about it, and I didn’t want that either.

I wanted to remove my brain from my body and place it on a shelf for later, so I could be present and enjoy my evening with a man who didn’t churn up a hundred confusing feelings inside me.

“Yep. I’m fine.” I made a show of looking around the restaurant. The dining room had low lighting and see-through walls separating the sections. The tables were well-spaced apart with white tablecloths. A circular bar sat in the center of the restaurant with multiple nicely dressed bartenders making drink orders.

All the staff looked polished and professional, making me feel like Lucas might have been pulling out all the stops on this first date.

I liked the idea of being cherished and catered to like this, especially when I felt I was begging Chris for crumbs. But I also didn’t want Lucas to have certain expectations.

He was clear that this was a date. He didn’t try to hide it behind a possible work collaboration or two friends meeting to discuss books. He’d called me Sunday, the day after everything went down with Grampa and Chris, and asked if

I'd like to go on a date and have dinner with him while he was visiting.

I'd said yes without hesitating.

"It's lovely. I haven't been here in a few years," I said. "It's nice to have a reason to come back."

His shoulders slumped. "Oh, you've been here before?"

"Well, I live only fifteen minutes away," I pointed out quickly.

"Yeah, that's true." He peeked at me with a small smile. "Who took you here before? Was it another first date?"

I shook my head. "Nope. Grampa took me for my sixteenth birthday. It was me, him, and Sean. And Chris." Chris had given me a silver butterfly necklace that I wore almost every day for years until my stupid drunken pass.

"Nice place for a sweet sixteen. You seem like you're a close-knit family."

I nodded. "We are. We have to be when we're all each other has, you know?"

He stared at me for a long moment, and it occurred to me that Nicole might not have filled him in on our past. I was going to ask if he and Nicole were close, but his name was called, and we were led to a table in the center of the dining room.

Lucas scooted my chair out for me, and I thanked him as I sat. He ordered a bottle of wine. I didn't recognize the name, but I was sure it tasted fine. I wasn't too picky when it came to alcohol. I didn't go out much, so I wasn't well-versed in what was good.

Lucas clasped his hands together at the edge of the table, smiling at me. He had a cute smile, and his blonde hair was styled to fit his face frame. He was a well-put-together man.

I took a sip of water. "Is your family close-knit? Are you super close to Nicole?"

He shrugged. “As close as siblings usually are, I suppose. We check in with each other every few days to see how the other is doing. She always supported my writing while my parents wanted me to do something else. I depend on her for family functions because I cannot deal with our parents for extended periods of time without her as a buffer.”

I appreciated the honesty. I rested an elbow on the table and placed my chin on my hand. “What about your grandparents? Are you close to them?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Not really. They’re worse than my parents. They like to control, guilt trip, and all kinds of highly annoying things.”

“That’s unfortunate,” I said.

The waiter returned with our drinks. He filled our glasses with wine and then placed the rest in a bucket with ice. We thanked him and took our first sips. The taste was crisp but also slightly sweet.

“Wow, this is good,” I said.

He grinned. “It’s one of my favorites, so when I saw it on the menu, I had to order.”

“Good choice.”

“Are you ready to order?” the waiter asked.

Lucas ordered something with steak while I picked out a seafood dish. The waiter didn’t write anything down but nodded and left us alone again.

There was an awkward silence for a moment. We avoided eye contact as I wondered what to say. I’d forgotten what we were talking about before ordering our food. Then I remembered my good news from last weekend.

“Oh, did I tell you the news about Kristen Stein?”

I filled him in on her plans to stop by the store on her book tour. He smiled kindly. “That’s awesome, Savannah. It’s great that you’ll get to meet a favorite author.”

Something was missing compared to the response I'd gotten from Chris. Lucas was happy for me, but Chris had been happy to be a part of my initial reaction.

He was so excited for me at the moment that he couldn't help but kiss me.

I didn't want Lucas to want to kiss me right now. His response was perfectly appropriate and polite, but I couldn't stop thinking about Chris hugging me in his excitement.

"Think I can get a signed copy if I stop by around that time?"

My head tilted. "Sure, but it won't be for another few months."

"I plan to continue visiting Nicole, so I might be in town around that time. Would that be okay with you?"

"Yes, of course. You can come by any time."

He beamed. "Okay, great."

I took another sip. "Are you excited about the wedding?"

"I'm excited for Nicole's sake. Weddings aren't my thing, but I enjoy watching my sister get what she wants out of life. If there's anyone who deserves it, it's her."

"That's sweet."

"It's the truth," he said. "What about you? Are you excited?"

"Yes, but also no. I don't like being the center of attention, so walking down the aisle will be embarrassing."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I'm not excited about that part either." He winked. "At least we'll have each other."

My cheeks heated. "That's true." Chris sprung to my mind again as I thought about the fact that he would be walking down the aisle with Anna. I didn't know if he liked her the same way she liked him, but it shouldn't have mattered.

He shouldn't matter to me as much as he did.

"What are you thinking about?" Lucas asked.

I blinked, realizing I'd been staring off into space. He was watching me intently with a blank but polite expression.

I shook my head. "Nothing. Everything. The wedding."

He hummed. "What's the nothing and everything part?"

I closed my eyes briefly as I collected my thoughts. "Can I be honest?" I asked, looking up at him for approval. He nodded. "The nothing part is Chris."

His eyes widened a fraction, and then he tried to hide his smile. "Oh, is it?"

I matched his amusement. "What does that mean?"

He shrugged. "Means I knew something was going on between you two."

"Yet you still asked me out?"

"You're a beautiful woman. I wanted to get to know you." He leaned forward. "I thought you were an excellent conversationalist, and I was interested to see where things went. But that guy hates me for even talking to you. I thought maybe it was one-sided. At least, I was hoping for that."

It all seemed too complicated to explain, especially when Lucas wasn't hiding his interest in me. "There's nothing happening between us. I mean, there is, but ... it's nothing. It's complicated."

"I can see that. And I think maybe you wish there was?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly."

He blew out a breath as if he were overwhelmed. "Okay, now I'm confused. If you don't want something between you, why is it complicated?"

"That's the difficult part," I said. "Because what's bothering me is everything else. Before I can even unpack my feelings about Chris, I have to acknowledge that he and Sean have been close friends my entire life. Chris has been there for important family events and the most tragic moments in my life. At one point, we were close. We talked daily, and we shared our feelings with one another. He was there for us when

my dad bailed and we had to move in with my grandparents. He was there a few years later when Mom died. And he was there again when Gramma died shortly after that. We have a history that goes beyond stupid, passing feelings like lust or romance. Sometimes I forget that and get caught up in it, thinking I might be special or this time might be different. I get myself to believe these lies, and then when he pushes me away... I don't know how I'm supposed to feel."

Once I finished my speech, I quickly downed the rest of the wine in my glass. Lucas stared at me for a long moment, blinking slowly as if he were processing all the information I had laid out for him.

Hell of a first date, Sav.

"Wow," he finally said. "It sounds like things have been pretty rough for you, with your mom and grandmother. I'm sorry."

I waved a hand dismissively. "It happens to everyone eventually."

He shrugged. "That doesn't make it any easier."

I took a deep breath, feeling strangely lighter after saying all that aloud. But also a bit like an ass for blurting it all out on a first date with someone who barely knew me.

"I'm sorry for laying that all on you. I don't expect you to help me analyze anything, but it felt good to get it off my chest. I probably shouldn't have come out with you, given everything," I said apologetically.

"Don't be silly. I'm glad you did. I'll admit, I'm a little disappointed, but I like having dinner with friends too, you know." He put his hand over mine. "You don't have to be looking for romance to share a meal with someone beautiful and interesting."

He was too good to be true. A lot of guys would have left me feeling like a heel at that point, but he was apparently the good guy I thought he was. "Thanks, Lucas."

Lucas cleared his throat and, bless his heart, changed the subject. "You said you want authors to come by and do book

signings or read excerpts from their new novels. How would you feel about collaborating on something like that with me?”

“Oh! I’d love that. Do you have something new coming out?”

“It just so happens, I do.”

Lucas told me about his new project and said he’d already sent it off to his publisher for edits. We planned for when the book signing would work best in his schedule. He’d be reading and signing at the Sparks well before Kristen Stein’s event.

The rest of the night was pleasant, with no more outbursts from me about Chris or anything else. The food was delicious. We talked and joked while we ate. I offered to split the tab, but he insisted it was on him. I saw the check, and I was secretly glad he insisted. I did not have that type of cash sitting around.

He dropped me back off at the bookstore where he hugged me goodbye. I had a good feeling about him the first time we hugged, and that feeling seemed accurate. Lucas was a nice guy and would be a great connection to keep in contact with.

“I’m always available if the situation with Chris turns out to be nothing, after all,” he said with a grin.

“Believe me, I won’t forget that,” I said, smiling back.

I drove home, putting on my favorite indie rock playlist and singing at the top of my lungs. I hadn’t been on a date in such a long time, and they usually weren’t as fun as this one. They were all forced situations with people I’d met on a dating app or set up by Penny and her husband.

I couldn’t wait to tell her about this one.

I pulled into my driveway, realizing a familiar truck was parked by the road. Chris was parked outside, but Sean wasn’t. Maybe they came to visit Grampa together.

As I inched closer to my apartment, my headlights lit up the short porch I had on the side, and my breath caught. Chris was sitting on the small bench I’d found at a thrift store years ago. He glanced up and squinted as the headlights blinded him.

I shut them off and parked. My heart hammered in my chest as he stood, hands in his back pockets.

If he'd come to interrogate me about the date that was *none of his business*, I was prepared to put my foot down with him and send him on his way.

CHRIS

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” Sav asked as she rounded her car. Relief spread through me for multiple reasons, including that she was home early, alone.

Her outfit, makeup, and hair were still intact. It didn't look like anything had happened with Lucas.

She stopped at the bottom of her two-stairs porch and waited for a response. I couldn't read her expression, but she was definitely guarded. That was my fault.

I cleared my throat. “I'm sorry,” I said. “I'm sorry for many things, including being confusing and indirect with you about my feelings.”

The porch light shone on her face, and I saw her beautiful expression shift from apprehension to confusion.

“Okay,” she said hesitantly and took a step forward, climbing the short steps to her porch. Even under the harsh, unflattering porch light, she looked like a gorgeous angel.

I swallowed hard, steeling myself to say the words clearly so she'd understand. I rubbed my sweaty palms on the front of my jeans.

“We need to clear the air,” I said. “I don't want to keep hurting you like I have, but I need to know where we stand.”

Slowly, she nodded. “I agree. We should talk.”

After we went inside, I told her, “Go sit down,” I said. “I'll get us something to drink.”

She did as I asked, kicking off her shoes and fidgeting in her seat on the couch. I returned with two glasses of water and handed her one. “Thanks,” she said, her voice sounding distant as if she were nervous. “I thought you were going to hand me something stronger,” she joked.

The corner of my mouth lifted in amusement as I sat beside her. “Not tonight. I want us to be of sound mind tonight so we can’t blame anything on being tipsy or buzzed.” I looked down at my water glass. “I’m sure Lucas bought you some expensive wine. He seems like the type.”

She snorted. “Yeah, he did. He was a gentleman. I had a great time.”

I sighed, loosening the grip that had tightened around my glass. It was good that she had a night out. She deserved it after all the hard work she’d put in, just like Jackson said. I needed to remind myself that she came home alone tonight which meant I still had a chance.

“That’s good,” I forced myself to say. I glanced at her, and she gave me a genuine smile that made my stomach clench.

I looked her in the eyes as I admitted the truth. “I’ve always cared about you, Sav.”

She stared at me for a long moment. “I’ve always cared about you, too.”

I shook my head, struggling to communicate my feelings. “That’s not exactly what I mean.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Okay... so...”

“I have feelings for you,” I blurted. “I’ve had them for a long time, but I always pushed them down so it wouldn’t threaten our friendship. After what happened when you came back from college, I didn’t know how to react. What about Sean? And what if I gave into my feelings and it didn’t work out? Then what? Jackson is like a grandpa to me too, so would I lose everyone?”

She frowned. “What? No, you wouldn’t. You would never lose me.”

“But I did,” I said.

She flinched, a wounded look on her face.

“I did lose you,” I repeated. “Last Saturday, I got scared. You were hurting and sad, and I didn’t want either of us to feel like I’d taken advantage of that. That wouldn’t have been fair to either of us.”

She nodded slowly. Her focus moved to her fingers as she fiddled with a loose fabric from her throw pillow. “It felt like how it was all those years ago. I thought I was stupid for believing even for a second that things were different this time. Even though I know you prefer the casual, easygoing type who spend one night and then you never see them again.”

I couldn’t stand the way she avoided my eyes during this conversation. I put my fingers under her chin and lifted her face, forcing her to look into my eyes. Her forest green eyes were damp.

“Sav, what I feel for you is too big for one night. I wouldn’t be able to walk away from you. That’s not how it would happen.”

She swallowed thickly. “How would it happen?”

I brushed my thumb along her skin, skating up to feel her plump bottom lip. She let me, keeping her focus zeroed in on my mouth. “With purpose,” I said. “Carefully. With sound mind. All in. I wouldn’t be able to do this halfway with you, and I wouldn’t want that. And I think I finally understand that you wouldn’t want that either.”

She blinked rapidly, shaking her head a little. “I wouldn’t. That was never what I wanted, Chris.”

I mustered up all my courage to ask, “What did you want?”

I could see the hesitation in her eyes. I knew Sav well enough to know the gears were spinning as she tried to figure out whether to put a stop to this right now or to answer my question.

Finally, her the corners of her mouth tilted up, and relief flooded through me.

“You,” she said.

My pulse kicked up speed. She looked so vulnerable as she said it, her chin quivering a little.

“I just wanted you,” she repeated, “and I wanted you to want me, instead of the dozens of women you went with instead, you incredible dumbass.”

We both laughed, the tension broken.

I wasn't sure who moved first, but our lips came together almost with a sigh, like we'd been holding our breath until we could kiss again. Sav pressed against me, fisting her hands in my shirt and tugging on the fabric. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close as I tilted my head and took advantage of the small part in her lips, sliding my tongue in to meet hers.

We made out like teenagers getting our first taste of each other. We licked, sucked, and nipped at each other's lips. I let my hands explore, cupping her tits, brushing my thumb over her nipples and teasing her until she whimpered.

She ran her fingers through my hair as she straddled my thigh. Her leg pressed against my crotch, my cock already hard behind the fly of my jeans. Sav cupped my face in her hands and kissed me deeply, then she pressed herself down against my thigh, rocking her hips.

She was riding my thigh, and the thought that she was giving herself pleasure that way nearly had me coming in my jeans.

She tossed her head back, so I licked the front of her throat and sucked lightly.

While I loved the idea of her using my leg to get off, I wanted to be the one to make it happen. To show her what trusting me with her body could do.

I wrapped my arms around her and pushed her onto her back on the loveseat before moving above her. I put my thigh back in place against her as I kissed her. I wasn't sure how it

was possible, but she kissed me with more passion than before.

She possessed me, consuming every aspect of my soul as I surrendered to her mouth. I grabbed Sav's hands and pinned them to the couch beside her head, loving the way she squeezed me every time I rocked forward, my thigh pressed against her pussy and giving her the friction she needed

My cock was maddeningly hard. It ached and begged to be deep inside her. I wanted to rut into her and lose myself. I wanted to feel her wrapped around me, hot and tight.

I'd never had sex with a woman without a condom after what Katelyn did to me. I didn't want to catch anything, sure, but I also wanted to make sure I couldn't get anyone pregnant. Even if they were on birth control, I used one.

But I wanted to feel Sav without a rubber in the way. I wanted that like I wanted my next breath. But I wouldn't push for it if it made her uncomfortable.

"I want you so badly, Sav. You on the pill?"

She looked confused for a sec, then she shook her head. "No, I'm not on birth control."

It didn't matter, then. I didn't have a condom in my pocket like I would have on a date. "Do you have a condom? I might in the truck."

I sucked the skin of her throat, nuzzling under her chin.

"Chris," she said warily. "Wait."

I stopped. Had I already gone too far too fast? I looked down at her, hoping it was anything but that. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I'm great. It's just ... you should probably know ... I should have told you before now ..."

"Sav, what is it?"

She closed her eyes and rattled out the words, "I'm a virgin."

SAV

CHRIS'S EYES widened so much I thought they might fall out of his head. He gaped at me, looking totally and completely shocked.

I felt stupid.

I should have said something earlier before we were at the point to discuss condoms.

“What do you mean,” he said as he pushed himself up, “you’re a virgin?”

“I mean what I said. I’ve never had sex.”

He narrowed his eyes. “With anyone?”

I shook my head. “Nope. No one.”

He blinked slowly like he couldn’t understand. “You’ve never had sex.”

I groaned, covering my face with my hands. “No, Chris. I’ve never had sex with anyone. No one has ever seen me naked. I’ve only made out with a few people, and that’s about it.”

“Wow,” he finally said. He stared at the throw pillow under my head in wonderment. “Wow,” he repeated.

“Could you stop saying that?” I asked. “It’s rude and kind of annoying.”

He met my eyes, and his expression softened. “I’m sorry. I’m just ... how in the hell? I mean, look at you, Sav. I just

really didn't expect that."

He was complimenting me, but I still felt like an inexperienced child. "What does that mean for us?"

His brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

I shrugged, feeling defensive. "Does it matter to you that I've never been with anyone before? Maybe make you change your mind? I know you're used to—"

He put his fingers against my lips. "Stop. Never mind what I'm used to or anything that's happened before. Of course I'm not going to change my mind."

I rubbed my hands together anxiously. "So, you don't care?"

He shook his head. "Care? That no one has ever touched you the way I'm *aching* to? No, Sav. I don't care. Quite the opposite. The thought that I'll be the first man who gets to make love to you ..." He kissed me, as if to reassure me. "That turns me on even more."

Those words sent a shiver down my spine as a distinctly vivid image manifested in my mind. I'd been getting all kinds of ideas about Chris over the years, imagining what having sex with him would look or feel like.

Hearing him say the words was very different. My cheeks heated and my core pulsed. I suddenly hoped there was a condom in his truck even if it was there because of his dating history.

"But," he continued. "Maybe we should take this a little slower. Not rush into the physical part as much as we might like."

I couldn't help feeling disappointed. "Why? You think it should be some magical, special moment?"

He gave me a look. "I do want your first time to be special. And clearly *you* must think it should be too."

"Why do you say that?"

“Because I have eyes. You’re hot as hell, and I can’t imagine a world where guys don’t want to be with you. The fact that you’re single and a virgin is a choice. I know you said you’ve never really had a boyfriend, but I’m still sure you’ve had opportunities to have sex.”

He was right. I didn’t think of myself as hot, but I knew other guys who thought that. And I hadn’t had sex in high school or college because I saved myself for him. Part of my fantasy that I’d get to pick up the pieces Katelyn left in her wake and make him see how those other women weren’t what he needed or wanted.

After my drunken pass at him, I didn’t want to be hurt again by anyone else, so I protected my heart and body. I stopped myself from letting anything develop with anyone else because I was angry that I’d been so focused on him and a relationship that would never be.

He leaned forward and grabbed my hand. “This is important to you,” he said. “That makes it important to me too.” He cupped my cheek, brushing his thumb against my skin. I loved the callouses on his hands. He had a working man’s hands, the hands of a reliable man, a provider. “Don’t be ashamed of wanting something special. You deserve it. I want to give you what you deserve, so we should go a little slower. Not rush into this tonight.”

Reluctantly, I nodded. “Does that rule out everything else?” I asked hopefully.

A deep, warm chuckle radiated from him, drawing my attention back to his face. He had this naughty gleam in his eye that I’d always fantasized about. He released my hand and covered my thigh with his palm, squeezing the skin. His warmth seeped through the thin fabric of my tights, and I wanted his hands to drift higher.

I licked my lips while he watched.

He groaned. “You are so damn hot,” he said. “I’m glad I don’t have to pretend I’m not thinking that all the time anymore.”

“You’re also stupidly attractive,” I admitted. “I’ve been having dirty thoughts about you for a long time.”

He squeezed my thigh again. “Oh yeah? How long?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to say.”

He squeezed harder to where it tickled, and I giggled.

“Tell me.” He went for my sides, grabbing my ribs and squeezing with enough pressure to tickle.

“Stop,” I begged, grabbing his arms as I giggled out of control.

We began to wrestle—something we hadn’t done in many years. I gripped him back, tickling him and causing him to laugh and pin down my arms. At some point in the scuffle, Chris started kissing me again. I ultimately gave up struggling and submitted to him, running my fingers through his thick dark hair.

His mouth moved down my neck, licking and sucking my skin as my hands roamed over his broad shoulders and back. His hands slid up my thigh, pushing my dress up to my hips. He pulled back and locked eyes with me.

“If you won’t tell me how long you’ve had those thoughts, then tell me what they were about,” he said.

It would have been embarrassing to admit I’d been thinking about him sexually since middle school. But I could handle sharing some of my fantasy.

I ran my fingers through the stubble on his cheeks, wanting to feel the slight indent where his dimples were. I gazed into his dark eyes, feeling a sense of warmth spreading from my center and throughout my body, filling me with the urge to go further with him. To trust him in a way I hadn’t for four years.

“You tell me first,” I joked, testing the limits to see what he would say.

He chuckled. “I’m not sure you want to know what goes on in my head when it comes to you.”

I gave a mock pout. “Why not?”

He shook his head and narrowed his eyes. “It might shock your virginal ears.”

I laughed. “I haven’t had sex with another person, but that doesn’t mean I’m a complete innocent. Tell me.”

He growled, rolling his body against mine. His thigh pressed against me in just the right place. “I’ve thought about making love to you in every way I could think of. Burying myself inside you.”

“I’ve thought about that too,” I whispered. “You filling me all the way.” I rocked myself against his thigh, and the building pleasure made me moan.

He groaned. “That, the way you moan. I’ve thought about causing that so many fucking times.”

His hands grazed down my sides, sliding underneath to grab my ass cheeks. He shifted so that he lay completely between my legs, the hard mound of his cock pressed against me instead of his thigh. I needed more.

“Touch me,” I whispered. I reached down and grabbed his wrist to push his hand against me. My tights were damp, and I felt like I should be embarrassed, but it only made me hotter.

“You’re so wet, aren’t you?” he rasped. He closed the distance between us, kissing me with the same passion he’d shown a few minutes ago.

He pressed his palm between us, rubbing me through my panties and tights. Chris used just the right amount of force, and it had my clit twitching beneath his hand.

I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close while my hips swayed to meet his every move. My body grew tense, and a familiar zing went from my core out through my skin. My breaths turned to pants, and I moaned into the kiss.

“That’s it, baby,” he whispered. “You’re gonna come for me?”

I nodded, gripping his forearms tightly as I thrust my hips against his hand. He pressed down and rubbed hard, causing rippling waves to crash over me.

“Oh, God. Chris,” I moaned.

He kissed me, slipping his tongue into my mouth as he pulled pleasure from me in all directions. My body spasmed as I came. I hungrily sucked on his tongue, and he growled into my mouth.

His fingers continued to brush over my pussy as the aftershocks sparked through me. Our kiss grew shallow, and he slowly pulled back. He placed his hand over my chest to feel my racing heart.

His eyes had a softness that I hadn't seen in a long time. A gentleness that made me feel at peace. He kissed me softly again, and I savored being this close to him.

It was what I always wanted.

After moments of gentle kissing, Chris finally pulled back and sat up. “I need to get going.”

All the positive emotions I'd felt over the last few minutes dissipated. “Why?” I didn't want him to leave. I wanted to make him come, to make him feel as good as he'd made me feel.

“It's not for a bad reason. I think if I stay here, it's not going to be possible for me to go slow.” He kissed me quickly. “And I want to take you on a proper date first.”

“What about you?” Feeling a boldness I'd rarely felt, I put my hand on the mound in his jeans. “Let me?”

He stared at me, leaned toward me, and I thought he'd given in. I kneaded his cock through the denim. But he gently gripped my wrist and moved my hand before he kissed me again.

“You have no idea how much I want that. But even more, I want this night to have been about you.”

He reached down to put on his shoes. I didn't remember when he'd kicked them off. Or when I'd kicked out of mine.

I was touched that he was content to have given me pleasure without taking any for himself. But I still could hardly wait until it was my turn.

“I’ll text you later.” He tilted his head. “Probably after I’ve come two or three times while thinking about tonight.”

I snorted. “Don’t tell me that, you weirdo.”

He grinned. “The idea of me touching myself and thinking about you isn’t hot?”

My cheeks heated. “You know it is, but... I don’t know. I’m embarrassed.”

“Don’t be,” he said. He grabbed the back of my neck and kissed me again. “Because I’m going to be thinking of you doing the same thing.”

He wasn’t wrong. I’d be running over and over the evening in my mind later that night. And I may have been a virgin, but I knew how to take care of myself.

We took a few minutes to say goodbye, holding each other by the front door as we occasionally kissed between staring into each other’s eyes. It was how I’d wanted things to be with us before, but I thought it wasn’t possible.

I watched him from my front door as he went to his truck, got in, and drove away. My heart fluttered as I closed the door and leaned against it, playing everything through in my mind.

I decided to go to bed early, and he was right about how hot it was to imagine him stroking himself while thinking about me.

CHRIS

I TOOK my time Saturday morning. I woke up feeling optimistic about the future—a feeling I hadn't experienced in years. I'd felt motivated by goals I set for work or events I planned with friends, but this optimism for the future felt like it was for me.

And Sav was the cause.

Leaving her apartment the night before without making love to her, without even getting off after I'd been so turned on, had been a superhuman feat.

But I'd managed it. I wanted to make sure she knew I could give without taking. To know that I was more concerned for her pleasure and happiness than mine for a change.

I'd done exactly what I'd told her I would while thinking about her, hot and damp against my hand, rubbing against me, coming and moaning into my mouth. I'd jacked off twice, thinking about the little details.

I was amazed that she thought being a virgin would bother me.

God, I could barely wait to sink inside her. But it was important to me to take her on a proper date first, to do everything right.

I tried to think of a way to show her I cared about her and our future, but I wasn't sure how. I wanted to buy her something, so I went out, roaming the aisles of the closest

large department store. I'd driven forty-five minutes out of town, but I finally found something I knew would excite her.

Eager to give it to her, I texted to see where she was. She was at work, of course. The Sparks closed earlier on Saturdays and was closed on Sundays. She and Jackson usually traded working on Saturdays, but they'd both been working the last few weeks because they were so busy.

I asked if she was working alone, and she'd texted yes.

Sav: what are you planning? *thinking emoji*

I shook my head, chuckling at her response. I told her nothing and pocketed my phone before loading my truck with her gift.

As I drove, I grew nervous that she wouldn't like what I got her. In my last serious relationship, I sometimes indulged in grand gestures, wanting to impress the woman into believing I was more than I was.

Katelyn had sometimes found it embarrassing if people knew about us or saw how much I cared about her. I'd started questioning my instincts, thinking I'd been wrong. I'd jumped through so many hoops trying to impress her, but it was never good enough.

As I sat at a red light, I wonder why I was thinking about her at all. She didn't even live in Carswell anymore. She rarely crossed my mind, but suddenly, memories of all the red flags I'd never noticed until it was too late flooded my mind.

It had been nearly a decade since she'd shattered my heart into a thousand pieces. I hadn't taken any women seriously since then. Promised myself I never would again.

I didn't know what the future held for me and Sav, but I was serious about her, despite my promises to myself.

Savannah wasn't Katelyn. She never took me for granted. She was still a virgin, and it seemed like that was because of me.

My cock throbbed at the thought that I'd be the first to make love to her. That she'd turned away everyone else

because she'd been pining for me.

I needed to tell Sean.

And I needed to man up about it.

I knew what he would say, because he knew my history with women. I knew he wouldn't think I'd hurt Sav, at least not intentionally, but I guessed he'd be right to be concerned.

No brother would want his sister to be with a man who dated women only to sleep with him. And Sean was protective. Over-protective sometimes.

He wasn't going to be happy about it, at least not at first.

Not until I told him how I really felt about Sav. How I'd felt about her since she was eighteen and I'd started to see her a woman instead of my best friend's kid sister. I only hoped he wasn't too upset that I'd never said anything before.

I pulled into a spot in front of the Sparks. I looked around and ensured Jackson, Sean, or Nicole's cars were nowhere to be found. I grabbed the gift from the truck's bed and went inside.

The front desk was empty, so I figured Sav was either in the bathroom or her office. The floor was relatively empty of customers, and there was a cleared-out section in the back corner that was ready and waiting for the coffee bar.

I walked down the short hallway and saw that her office door was open, a light on inside. She sat behind the desk, staring at the computer, the screen reflected in her glasses. It took her a few seconds to notice me standing in the doorway.

Once she saw what was in my hands, her eyes widened, and she gasped. "Oh, my god!" She leaped up from her chair and cleared some space on her desk.

I sat the espresso machine there proudly and rested my arm on the top of the box. "To get you started. I know you wanted to work on mastering a few classic drinks and trying out some latte art."

She stared at it for a long time but didn't say anything. The silence grew.

Shit.

“Was this wrong?” I asked.

Was I that much of an idiot that I would screw up another grand gesture?

She shook her head. Her mouth shifted into a trembling smile. “This is just the sweetest thing anyone’s ever done for me. You bought me a whole espresso machine. Like who does that?”

I shrugged, grinning as I leaned forward. “Guys who are crazy about the woman they’re wooing. That’s who.” I pecked her on the lips, and she beamed.

“Wooing?”

“What, it’s a good word,” I said with a laugh.

“Yeah, it is,” she agreed. “Where should we put it?” she asked excitedly. “Let me get some scissors.”

“I got it,” I announced, pulling my pocket knife out to cut the tape along the edges.

I stepped back so she could take over from there, unboxing the appliance and pulling out the different parts that went with it. She needed some help lifting the machine to remove the box. Once it was free and everything was laid out on her desk, she stared at it for a few moments with a soft smile.

“Chris, this is so cool. I don’t even want to know how much money you spent on it. I’d feel guilty and want to pay you back.” She clasped her hands in front of her. “And I’m too broke for that,” she added with a laugh.

I loved how her messy bun was falling out of the hairclip she’d put it in earlier today. She was free of makeup and had clear, beautiful skin. She was so fucking pretty all the time. She wore a cropped t-shirt that said, “*Chicks who read become the ones who lead,*” and it went perfectly with her long, purple skirt.

Everything about her was so cute and precious. I wanted to hold her close and kiss her over and over again. I wanted to

see what she looked like first thing in the morning. I wanted to be her first in many ways, and she'd be mine too.

The first girl that ever honestly had my heart.

As terrifying as the thought was, it was true. I'd thought I was in love with Katelyn, and I hadn't even seen Sav as anything but a kid at that time, but the way I felt about her now was so much more than I'd ever felt for Katelyn.

Sav glanced at me, and I realized I was supposed to have said something in return, but I couldn't remember what it was anymore. I felt drunk on her, leaning forward without conscious thought. She had this magical, magnetic pull that made me gravitate toward her, feeling all these vulnerable and gushy emotions I'd usually pushed down.

Her cheeks seemed to turn the slightest shade of pink, and I leaned in to kiss her cheek.

She quickly turned her head, catching my mouth and kissing me back. Our bodies melded together. My arms went around her waist while hers went around my neck. She tugged me closer, and I held her tight. We got lost in each other again, kissing like the world might be ending soon.

In a way, my life was ending. The way I'd always known it to be. The singledom I'd proudly protected. The aversion to complicated relationships with women. I'd always had one eye on Sav and hadn't even realized it. All of this led me closer to wanting more. I was both soothed and terrified by it.

We pulled apart but stayed close. Our noses brushed, and she smiled. My heart skipped a beat.

I rubbed my nose against hers, and she giggled.

I loved her giggle.

I wanted to do lame romantic things like this all the time if it meant pulling more of those heavenly sounds out of her.

"Go out with me," I said quietly.

She bit her lip as she nodded. "Okay. Yes."

I snorted. "That was easy."

“You only had to buy me an espresso machine. The thought of rich lattes and perfectly foamed milk apparently makes me easy.”

“I wished I’d known that years ago,” I joked. “I’d have planted coffee trees in my yard, maybe raised a dairy cow or two.”

We grew quiet and stared into each other’s eyes. I loved how the green was separated by dark speckles, making it look like a deep forest where I wouldn’t mind getting lost. Her scent filled my nostrils, and my cock stirred in my jeans.

There’s no way I could wait long to claim her.

I wanted to make her mine.

“Tonight,” I said. “Let’s go somewhere nice. Wherever you want to go.”

A bell jingled on the main floor, and we jumped apart. I’d forgotten we didn’t really have any privacy, and I’d been holding her. Anyone could have seen us. Jackson, Sean, or anyone who wandered by.

Sav smoothed her hair and headed for the door. She spun around and smiled brightly. “Thanks for making my day.”

My chest swelled with pride. “Seeing you so happy made mine.”

She smiled dreamily as she turned back around and headed out of the office.

I stared at the espresso machine and pulled out the manual. I wanted to set it up for her and get a jumpstart on how to use it.

Making her day really had made mine fantastic. The delighted smile on her face was like some kind of gift. Sav was going to have to get used to little surprises from me, because I wanted to see that smile aimed at me a lot more.

SAV

“I’M so glad you texted me,” Penny said, placing her duffle bag on my loveseat and zipping it open. We were in my living room, and I was preparing for my date with Chris. She started digging around in the bag. “I haven’t been anywhere but work and home for a few weeks now.”

After Chris officially asked me on a date, I texted her as soon as possible, asking for her help to get ready. I also filled her in on what happened between us the night before, including me admitting to being a virgin. We agreed that it was highly likely I was a few short hours away from sharing that special moment with the man I’d always fantasized about.

She placed a curling iron on the table, a pair of sky-blue heels, and her makeup kit. Then she turned and sat on the edge of the couch, arranging the items and side-eying me. “I haven’t been getting any invites to come over for drinks. Seems like you’ve been too preoccupied dating multiple guys.”

My cheeks heated as I looked away. “Oh, shut up. One dinner with Lucas doesn’t qualify as dating. And I guess tonight is just one date too. There’s always the chance he’ll change his mind.” It didn’t seem likely after everything he’d said, everything we did, but the old doubts kept trying to creep in.

She stared at me for a long moment, not saying anything. I stared right back. Finally, she sighed. “Sav, you need to believe in yourself more. You hold power here, too, not just Chris. You two have been dancing around each other for years.

Either woman up and take what you want or leave the man alone.”

“It’s not that easy,” I said defensively.

“I didn’t say it was easy. I presented you with your options.” She scooted closer and took one of my hands in hers. “If you don’t grab the brass ring with him soon, you run the risk of staying in limbo forever. I don’t want that for you, boo.”

“I don’t want that either,” I reluctantly agreed.

She clapped her hands together. “Okay, good. So, we’re going to pull out all the stops tonight. You’re going to look hot as fuck and be yourself. He’ll realize how lucky he is that you’ve given him as many chances as you have, and the two of you are gonna be a thing forevermore.” She grinned. “I just know it.”

I was so lucky I had Penny in my corner. I wouldn’t know what I’d do without her unyielding optimism and support.

—

“He’s here!” I yelled when Chris knocked on the door at seven.

“Hold still. I’m almost done. He can wait,” she said as she held the top of my head to keep me from squirming. I kept my eyes closed as she patted my eyelids with a soft makeup brush. My body vibrated with anticipation as she finished. “There. Done.”

She clicked her makeup box closed, and I looked at my bathroom mirror to inspect her work. “You are a miracle worker,” I said, noticing how she contoured my face to accentuate my best features. I knew enough about makeup to do my own most days, but she had a knack for it and knew how to take things to the next level.

“You’re gorgeous,” she said, organizing her supplies back into her makeup bag. “Your shoes are in your room. I can let him in if you want.”

I nodded. “Yes, please.” I grabbed her arm before she left the bathroom. “Thank you so much for this. And for all your support through everything. No matter what happens, I’m glad I have you in my life.”

“Aww.” She bent down and hugged me. “That’s so sweet. I’m glad I have you in my life too.” She blew out a breath. “All right. Time to release you to your mister, sister.” She winked and walked out of the bathroom.

I stared at myself in the mirror. The top half of my dress was black, and the long skirt was an indigo blue. I decided on brown sandals because I wasn’t sure where we were going, but it was beginning to grow warmer in the evenings lately.

We’d lightly curled my hair and then brushed out the curls, giving me a voluminous look. This was more than I usually did for dates and special occasions, but I wanted to take this date seriously like Penny had suggested and give it my all.

“Hey, Penny. What are you doing here?” I heard Chris say from around the corner.

I stayed back, wanting to see how he would react to Penny being here. Did he want to keep us a secret, or was it okay to tell my closest friend about us?

“Helping Sav get ready for your date,” she answered truthfully.

He hummed thoughtfully. I could hear the smirk on his face. “How does she look? I hope you didn’t put her lips on her cheek.”

I heard a smack, probably Penny slapping his arm. “She’s gorgeous. You’re going to lose your shit when you see her.”

He chuckled. “I believe that.” He was quiet for a moment. “What do you think about this? Me and Sav?”

My heart fluttered at that question.

“I think it’s about damn time,” she said, making me snort.

I walked out of the bathroom and through my bedroom, leaning against the door frame once Chris was within eyesight. He glanced up and over Penny's shoulders, and the amused smile he'd had on his face slowly slipped away.

He wore a casual suit and had his hair styled back. He'd put as much effort into his appearance as I had, ditching his usual jeans and t-shirt look. He'd trimmed his beard to perfect five o'clock shadow, making him look like he could have crawled right out of GQ magazine.

His gaze roved down my front and back to my eyes. He visibly swallowed. "Wow, Sav," he started, his voice thick before he cleared it. "You look... amazing."

"Thank you," Penny said in a sing-song tone.

She and I laughed, but Chris only smiled. His gaze had grown intense while he stared at me. I closed the distance between us, ready to hug him in greeting. Once I was close enough, he grabbed me around the waist and hauled me to him, kissing my neck and sending tingles throughout my body.

I was embarrassed he did that in front of Penny, so I placed my hands on his shoulders and pushed back. He released me. "Sorry. I didn't want to mess up your lipstick this early, but I needed to get my mouth on you."

My cheeks heated at that response.

"Okay, looks like that's my cue to go," Penny announced.

This time Chris laughed with me. We helped Penny collect her things, and then I locked up. I said goodbye to my best friend, and she waved before climbing into her car and driving away. Chris opened my door for me, and then we were off.

He drove me out of town to a restaurant called Mario's. It was new in a town where we didn't venture too often, farther down the lake and closer to the city. Chris held my hand for most of the drive as we talked, catching up on what happened over the last week or so we hadn't had a chance to discuss.

Suddenly, I felt silly for putting distance between us after Grampa's hospital visit. I'd been so afraid of a repeat from four years ago that I quickly shut everything down, blaming

myself for messing things up again. I didn't give him a chance to explain, and I thought it was impossible that he would ever feel even close to the same as I did.

I'd been standing in my own way.

He parked in the lot and opened my door again, holding his arm out for me as we approached the restaurant. Everyone stopped and looked at us when we walked in.

Women stared at Chris as he checked in with the hostess before we were seated.

He pulled my chair out before taking his seat. He was catering to me in a way I didn't know he would. He grabbed my hand and held it in the center of the table, staring into my eyes like I meant something to him.

He meant something to me, too, and the thought scared me.

I glanced up at the server who stopped at our table and froze when I recognized her. She stood staring like a deer in headlights at Chris.

Chris's mouth dropped open. "Katelyn?" he asked.

This was the woman who'd gotten pregnant with another man's baby while in a relationship with Chris. He'd given up his scholarship, his dream, for her, and she'd thrown him away. I remembered Chris crying to Sean, wondering how she could do that to him.

Katelyn was the reason Chris went through women like other people went through tissues.

I hated her for hurting him.

Her mouth opened and closed as if she were a fish. She still looked as beautiful as ever with her platinum blonde hair and blue eyes, and I hated her for that too.

She looked back and forth between us. "I'm so sorry. I'll tell my supervisor I can't take this table. Someone will be with you in a moment."

She rushed off before we could say anything else. Chris's expression turned sour as he shook his head and muttered something under his breath that sounded like *unbelievable*.

"Chris? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he said, but it didn't seem true.

"We can leave if you want."

He looked like he was considering it for a minute. "It's going to be hard to get into a nice place without a reservation. I only got this one because I called right after someone else canceled."

"It doesn't have to be a nice place. We can go anywhere."

He grabbed my hand again. "I really wanted tonight to be special."

"It is," I admitted, realizing the truth of it. "Because I'm with you."

Katelyn must have walked across the room far behind me because Chris looked past me, another stunned look on his face. I'd been completely thrown by her being there, so I could only imagine how he felt.

"Maybe we should go," he admitted. I was so relieved that I hopped up, not paying enough attention to what was going on around me. I bumped into a server who carried a plate in each gloved hand. He nearly dropped one, and I grabbed for it to keep it from happening.

"Hot!" he shouted as I grabbed it, but it was too late.

The plate was scalding. I let go so fast that he couldn't hang on to it. The plate and its contents splatted on the rug.

"Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry," I said, pressing my stinging hands together as I knelt to help. "Let me—"

"Ma'am," the server said. "It's fine. We will clean it. Please, return to your seat."

Katelyn stood a few feet away, watching. I didn't look long enough to see the expression on her face. She might have felt

bad for me for all I knew, but I imagined her as smug, happy I'd looked like a fool.

"It's my fault. I should have watched where I was going." I tried to grab a napkin from the table and pulled down my water glass, spilling it on myself and the floor, drawing another gasp from the server.

"Ma'am, please, there's no need for you to trouble yourself." He was practically begging me to get up, saying it was no problem, accidents happen.

"Savannah," Chris said, cutting through the whooshing noise filling my head. "They'll clean it up."

I stood, my heel tilting as I did and causing me to bump into the server and knock his chin with the top of my head. He cringed in pain and covered his mouth with his hand, his eyes wide. Two or three people gasped and sounded like they were trying not to laugh too loudly.

"Sorry," I said again, then grabbed my purse and ran out like the place was on fire.

CHRIS

MY FIRST REAL date with Sav had been a shitshow. I'd texted Sav after I dropped her off, promising that next time would be better, but she hadn't replied.

I still couldn't believe that Katelyn happened to work at the new restaurant I took her to. Last I'd heard, she lived in Denver. Not a tiny town super close to Carswell.

I hadn't realized how shaken Sav was until she got up to leave. After the fiasco with the server and the spills, she hadn't been hungry anymore and wanted to go home.

I looked at her hands, worried she'd really burned herself, but she said it had been too fast to do any damage.

I didn't want the night to end that way.

I didn't want her to, I wanted to go somewhere else and start over, but she'd clearly been thrown by Katelyn and embarrassed by what happened after. There was no saving the date after that, and I didn't want to make her feel worse by acting too disappointed.

I'd dropped her at home. She hadn't even kissed me goodnight.

I needed to do something to cheer her up, so I stood outside her door a few minutes before nine with her favorite breakfast sandwiches and iced coffee. I shuffled everything into one hand and knocked.

I glanced around the neighborhood, and there wasn't much movement. It was early Sunday morning, so I assumed many

of her neighbors were sleeping in or at an early church service. No movement came from Jackson's house, but I wasn't too worried about him seeing us.

The door opened, and Sav was on the other side, wrapped in the purple comforter from her bed. She blinked sleepily at me, but she held a cup of coffee in one hand, so she'd been up for at least a little while. She was so cute with the red splotches on her face from her pillow and the messy hair atop her head.

I couldn't stop myself from grinning. "Morning, beautiful. Can I come in?"

She sighed heavily and stepped back, letting me into her apartment. She put the coffee on the table, then went straight for her bed, flopping face down on it while I placed the food and drinks next to her cup.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as I crossed her small living room to the bedroom. I stood in the doorway, watching as she rolled herself into a tight burrito.

"Terrible," she mumbled so quietly I almost didn't hear it. "Like I stumbled my disaster self through a fine dining restaurant and probably now have my face on the wall in the back room to keep from entering the premises."

"Makes sense. It was a little bit like *reptile amphibian* Godzilla, not lizard Godzilla in case you were wondering, rampaging through Tokyo."

"Hey!" she said with a laugh.

"And I'm sure you're absolutely right that your photo is now on their keep-out wall where they throw tomatoes and eggs when frustrated. But since we're not going back there, who cares?" I grabbed the edge of her blanket and unrolled her.

I shoved off my shoes and crawled onto the bed with her. She attempted to cover her face with her blanket. I pulled it down, and she pulled it back. We both kept pulling until it slipped from her fingers, and she punched herself in the face.

"Ow," she whimpered.

“Poor baby,” I whispered, lying beside her and cupping her cheeks with my hands. She blinked at me, looking vulnerable and adorable. I kissed the tip of her nose and then her cheek where she’d hit herself. She sighed softly as her eyes slowly drifted closed.

I gently kissed the corner of her mouth, and she turned her head, connecting her mouth to mine. We kissed how I’d needed to kiss her since last night, and she melted into me. After a few seconds, I pulled back, brushing my nose against hers.

“Don’t let last night keep bothering you.”

“I’m not awake enough to let it bother me too much, but thanks for reminding me to get on that.”

I brushed my lips against her cheek. “You need get up and get dressed. We need to hit the road.”

She sat up. “The road?”

I lifted myself up on my elbow and nodded. “Yep. We’re going on an adventure.” I squeezed her thigh, hidden beneath her blanket. “I want to make up for the not-so-great time last night. We need to put it in the rearview and start fresh. I’ve made plans.”

She bit her lip and looked down at her hands as she fiddled with her blanket. “You don’t have to do all that for me.” She sniffed. “I’m sorry for freaking out last night. I can be a bit nutso sometimes.”

“Hey,” I said, reaching out and grabbing her hand. I squeezed it, and she squeezed back. “It was an unusual set of circumstances. I mean, there was no way to predict she would be there. Or that they’d have such clumsy waiters who couldn’t even hang on to a damn plate, right?” I teased.

She snorted and shook her head.

“We got out of there without setting the place ablaze or committing any other crimes. I’m counting it as a win. Maybe we should even celebrate it, you think?”

Her grin slowly grew. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

“You are too, baby,” I said, closing the distance to kiss her again.

Her gaze was soft when I pulled away, looking at me with that adoration I’d always loved seeing in her expression. I hadn’t understood what it was when we were younger, but it was clear now. I wanted to soak myself in the feeling and never let go, but we needed to get going. She needed a good mental health day, a day of nothing but fun, and I was there to give it to her.

“Come on. Let’s get up and get you ready.”

—

A lightness seemed to fill Sav after she’d had her breakfast and more coffee. We sat at the small breakfast bar that separated her kitchenette from the living room. There were two stools, but the space was so small that our legs were squished together throughout the meal.

I loved it.

I saw her up close as we ate. She didn’t put makeup on at first, and I always enjoyed seeing the unfiltered version of her.

Once on the road, I kept my hand in her lap like I had done the night before. I held her hand against her thigh and occasionally rubbed my thumb against her skin. She had a consistent smile as I drove, and I was glad to see her so happy.

We drove out of town, heading north for a good hour and a half. She kept asking where we were going, and I insisted it was a surprise.

“You don’t need to make up anything about last night, by the way,” she said. “I’m the one who made a scene. Not you.”

I shook my head. “Last night was supposed to end differently for both of us, Sav. You should have woken up this morning in my bed. Besides, I’d already planned to surprise you with this trip.”

Her mouth fell open in mock surprise. “You expected to get lucky on the first date?”

I chuckled. “I mean, you were ready to jump my bones before, so I assumed last night would have ended with you taking all kinds of advantage of me. I was hoping for that anyway.”

She looked away, but I caught the slight pink in her cheeks.

She cleared her throat. “Okay, you have a point.”

I was relieved we could joke around like this. I was struggling with this whole relationship thing. It’d been such a long time since I was committed to someone that it felt like I didn’t know the steps anymore.

Katelyn had been a harsh reminder of my failure in the relationship department last night. The initial shock of seeing her had rocked me, but I quickly worked through it. Comparing her to Sav made me realize Sav wasn’t like her and never would be.

I had nothing to fear about the woman who currently owned my heart. I wasn’t sure if I could live up to what she deserved, but I would try.

We arrived at my big surprise and pulled into the relatively empty lot. Sav glanced around, seeing the sign, then stared at me wide-eyed. “Chris, what is this place?”

I grinned, unbuckling my seatbelt. “Can’t you smell that? It’s a coffee roasting plant.”

The building was a little larger than Sparks Bookstore with large glass windows that showed the machinery inside. To the right of the building was a picnic area with two food trucks, and people were outside enjoying freshly brewed cups of coffee.

“Wow,” she breathed. Her shocked expression shifted into glee, making my heart stutter. She beamed at me. “This is so cool. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Let’s go inside and check it out.”

We got out of the truck and held hands as we walked to the shop. We were greeted by an older couple at the front desk, and I confirmed the tour appointment I'd made a few days ago when I'd concocted this entire plan to get her espresso machine and surprise her with this trip.

"You're in luck. A large group just left, so it's going to be a cozy tour," the woman said, shooting us a wink. I glanced at Sav, and she still had a wide smile.

Goddamn, she was so beautiful.

We went through the tour, watching the entire process behind the scenes. Sav asked questions and seemed excited by everything she learned. I stayed quiet, keeping my hands tucked into my jeans pockets as I watched her interact and nerd out.

I loved seeing her gush over her hobbies, and I wanted to be the one to give her more experiences like this.

Once we got to the end of the tour, they showed us how to make a proper espresso using a machine similar to the one I'd bought her. She also had a speedy lesson in latte art that she seemed incredibly focused on.

"Thank you for everything," Sav said as we took our to-go cups of coffee and left the building. One of the food trucks had tacos, so we ordered and sat at a picnic table, enjoying our lunch together.

"What'd you think?" I asked, hoping she loved it.

She covered her mouth as she finished chewing her bite. "It was so amazing," she said. "I didn't know much about processing the beans, so that was interesting. I'm also excited for Linda to visit Sparks and check out the coffee bar when we open. She signed up for our newsletter and everything."

"That's great, babe. I'm so glad you had a good time."

"I can't wait to tell Grampa about it." She paused and gave me a soft look. "Seriously. Thank you so much for today. I haven't had a fun day out like this in a long time."

I grinned. She had no idea I still had other things planned for today and tonight. I'd already taken the day off tomorrow, knowing Sav would have Monday off too because she worked Saturday.

I wasn't going to waste any of it without her.

SAV

I WAS EXHAUSTED in a new way as we headed back to Carswell. Last night had been an emotional rollercoaster, and today filled me with excitement and wonderment over the idea of developing a new skill. Chris made me feel better about the disaster at the restaurant, and I felt understood in a way I hadn't experienced before.

The feeling inspired memories of the last time we were close. Chris used to pick me up from school and take me out for pizza and milkshakes before taking me home. In college, I called him at least a few times a week to hear his voice while lulling myself to sleep.

All the memories inspired a sense of comfort I'd been missing since that stupid drunken night that had put distance between us, but I was also terrified about what it all meant. The distance over the years hadn't lessened my true feelings for him. If anything, they'd grown stronger, and our new relationship was already beginning to feel ... permanent.

I only hoped I was right. I wasn't sure I'd survive another heartbreak.

As I thought about this, we passed my house, continuing to head into town. I turned to face Chris. "Where are we going?"

His face shifted into a mischievous smile. "You didn't think I was done with you for today, did you?"

My cheeks heated. "What does that mean?"

He grabbed my hand and lifted it to his mouth for a soft kiss. “That means I’m taking you back to my place for the rest of the day.” His gaze stayed focused on the road in front of us. “I’m making you dinner, and you’re staying the night with me. If you want to, of course.”

If I wanted to?

I almost laughed like a maniac. Of course, I wanted to.

“What about a change of clothes?”

“I grabbed some things while you were showering this morning.”

I gasped, placing a hand on my chest in mock surprise, though I was a little shocked. “You snooped through my things? My *underthings*?”

He shrugged. “Yep. Sorry, but I wanted to keep the surprises coming.”

He turned and grinned at me. It probably should have bothered me that he’d gone through my things without asking, but I trusted Chris. And I really didn’t mind him getting in my underwear drawer, especially since my old-lady panties and time-of-the-month panties were shoved all the way in the back.

“You *are* full of surprises, Christopher Warner,” I said.

He smiled and winked at me.

As we crossed through downtown and drove out of town on the other end, I realized I didn’t recognize the area. I’d never been to Chris’s house before and had never had reason to visit the area. The apartment he’d had when I graduated college had been downtown. He hadn’t bought the property in the country until after we weren’t friends anymore.

The driveway was bright white gravel that almost looked like no one had ever driven on it. His two-story blue farmhouse appeared as we drove through the thick trees on both sides of the drive.

Everything looked well-designed and brand-new. The porch had a white railing that looked freshly painted, and a

wooden swinging loveseat hung near some large potted plants. Compared to the messy young man's apartment I'd visited in my early twenties, this was amazing.

This was an adult man's home. An accomplished man.

Suddenly, I felt like I was out of my league all over again. Why would a man like him be interested in me? He was successful, while I managed a small family bookstore that hadn't been thriving in a long time. I had my BA degree, but I didn't earn much money. Not enough to even move off Grampa's property.

Chris parked to the left of the house and unbuckled his seatbelt. "Home sweet home," he said and gave me that panty-melting smile of his.

"I knew every inch of your grubby apartment years ago. It feels strange that I've never been here before," I admitted out loud.

"I never liked that. I always wanted to show it off to you."

"Well, now's your chance."

As we went in, I took in the homey decor. "Wow, you decorated this?" I asked in awe. I pointed at some of the artful photos on the wall in amazement.

He smiled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Uh, no. I hired an interior designer. I sent her pictures, and she printed them out and framed them. She used the few items I owned as inspiration to decorate the rest of the house. I'm sure it'd be pretty empty without her input."

"She worked some magic. This is great."

"Make yourself at home," he said. "I'll grab us some drinks."

He headed into the kitchen, and I decided to explore. I was sure he could find me wherever I ended up. There was a cozy sitting room with a couch and two recliners to the left of the front door. To the right were stairs that led up to three bedrooms. One was converted into an office, another was the

spare bedroom, and the one at the end of the hall was the master bedroom with a modest master bath.

Back downstairs, I followed the door to the right and entered a converted garage. Being so out of touch with Chris, I'd almost forgotten his favorite hobby. Sean hadn't mentioned it, and I guess I'd assumed he'd given up wood carving, too busy with building his construction business. But the room was full of sculptures in various stages of completion.

A miniature sculpture of a woman sitting on a stool reading a book with a tall stack of books beside her sat on the desk. The stack was tall enough to reach past her head. She wore glasses, and her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail.

I turned when I heard footsteps behind me. Chris stood in the doorway with two glasses of wine. He seemed nervous as he crossed the distance between us, offering me a glass. I took it and sipped. It was the semi-sweet wine I'd mentioned liking during one of our conversations. Had he gone out to buy it specifically for me?

Chris was much more thoughtful than I realized he would be. I couldn't stop feeling giddy and lucky that his attention was on me. I turned and pointed to the miniature sculpture.

"Who's that?" I asked. She looked like Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, but I couldn't be sure.

His cheeks darkened in a blush. "Oh, that's, uh, you?" he phrased it as if it were a question.

I blinked. "Me?"

He nodded, shuffling his foot. "Yeah, I carved it a few months ago while thinking about you."

"A few months ago?" That was before our truce. Before we had drawn closer, he had already been thinking about me.

He stepped closer. "You were always on my mind. Always have been. If I could be around you like we used to be, I figured I could have a sculpture of you nearby, at least. Of you and your books." He grinned. "I remember going into your room when we were younger and finding you with a book in your hands and a huge stack from the library beside you." He

chuckled. “Smoothing down the pages and putting your bookmark in between them just right, so nothing got creased.”

My heart thundered at how he’d always paid such close attention to me, noticing things few other people did.

He licked his lips and gestured for us to head back into the main house. “Come on. I’m gonna get dinner started. You can watch.” He offered his hand, and I took it, letting him lead me anywhere he wanted.

—

Chris cooked a fantastic meal. He made steaks with mashed potatoes and chopped broccoli. I tried to help by cleaning areas after he was done, but he insisted I sit at the island bar and relax. We sipped wine and talked about anything and everything that came to mind.

I found myself enjoying simply staring at his back while he cooked and talked. I liked hearing the passion in his voice as he talked about White Oak Construction.

He also mentioned that his sculptures sometimes get displayed in nearby galleries. I had no idea. I was even more impressed.

We sat at the bar and ate. I couldn’t stop staring at him. I’d thought about the last time he’d touched me and how I was spending the night in his bed.

I was nervous, but the anticipation was starting to wear at me.

Forget the food and fuck me, please.

Once we finished dinner, Chris put everything in the sink and rinsed the dishes. He stood on the other side of the bar and kept up the small talk for a while, and it seemed like he was trying to be a gentleman and not rush anything.

I was relieved when he finally came around the island and picked me up off my stool, causing a surprised giggle to burst

from my lips. “Think it’s time to move things to the bedroom?” he asked.

I nodded eagerly, wanting that more than anything.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as he carried me upstairs. “Big man no mind carry woman?” I said in a low voice with a grunt, remembering what he’s said at the bookstore one day.

He made a few grunting noises. “Big strong man about to give woman screams.”

I laughed, but the thought also sent a rush of heat down my body. If anybody could make me scream in pleasure, I was sure it was Chris. He took me into the master bedroom I’d explored earlier and threw me on his king-sized bed.

Chris pinned me beneath him and covered my mouth with his. The playfulness fell away as he deepened the kiss. My fingers sifted into his hair, and I held on as I grew brave, gliding my tongue between his lips to meet him stroke for stroke.

He groaned, holding my face while we kissed. After a few moments, his hips began to move, grinding into me and making me gasp. His lips moved down my neck, licking and sucking me as I grabbed the hem of his shirt and lifted.

He pulled back enough to pull it over his head and throw it to the side. He went for his belt next, unbuckling it as he stared down at me with glazed eyes and swollen mouth. Then he dragged my jeans down my legs and threw them to the side.

He peeled my shirt off next, and I reached back to unclasp my bra. Chris’s eyes zeroed in on my breasts once they sprang free.

“Oh, Sav.” He shucked his jeans before bending down and sucking my nipple into his mouth.

I gasped and whimpered, grabbing his shoulders as my pussy clenched. He held one of my breasts with his hand, gripping it while he sucked and licked my nipple like it was candy. His other hand slid down into the front of my panties.

“Fuck,” he hissed. He looked at me with a dazed expression. “You’re so ready for me.” He kissed me, stroking my clit, then he whispered, “You ready for me to make you mine?”

I nodded, thrusting forward against his hand, eager for more. I reached between us to pull his cock from his underwear, stroking it in rhythm with how he touched me. He carefully worked one finger into me, pressing his thumb against my clit.

Chris pushed me back on the bed and pulled my panties off. He finished stripping and crawled up my body. When his face hovered between my legs, I shuddered in anticipation. He moaned softly as his tongue slipped into my folds, gliding over my clit.

I gasped, my back arching. I’d never imagined anything feeling that good. He tongued me again, and I didn’t recognize the desperate sound I made.

“God, Sav. You’re so perfect.” He licked me, faster and firmer, his tongue teasing at my opening and slipping inside, always so careful. “I’m gonna make you come so hard,” he gasped before sliding his tongue hard against me and sucking on my clit.

I sank my fingers into his hair as I came against his mouth, rolling my hips and crying out his name.

“I can’t wait anymore,” he said, sounding like he’d been sprinting. “I’ve got to have you right now.”

“Yes,” I said, the last of my orgasm still rippling through me. “Take me, Chris.”

He reached over to his nightstand and pulled out a condom. I watched him roll it down his thick length and imagined what it would feel like to have him inside me.

He hovered over me, leaning his hand on the pillow beneath my head. “Sav, baby, are you sure? You sure you really want this?”

“Please, Chris,” I whispered. “Please, fuck me.”

He groaned and closed his eyes. Then he covered my mouth with his and I felt him rub his cockhead against me. When I whimpered, both with nerves and excitement, he lifted his face and gazed down at me.

He never looked away as he slowly pushed in, searching my face for any sign of hesitation.

There was none. I wanted him so fucking much.

“Stay relaxed, baby,” he whispered.

He moved his arm behind my back to cradle me closer. I wrapped my arms around his waist, holding him close as he slowly eased in, stretching me enough to take him. I whimpered at the slight sting, and then I felt how hard he was inside me.

“Fuck, Sav,” he gasped. “You feel so fucking good.”

He pushed into me slowly, filling me to the hilt before slowly pulling out. He kept the same pace, slowly warming my entire body up and making me crazy. He kept eye contact as he steadily increased his speed, the new angle hitting me at that special place deep inside.

“Please,” I begged, unsure what I was begging for.

One of his hands moved between my legs, stroking my clit as he continued to thrust into me deep and slow. I lost myself in the feeling, and when he shifted a little, the angle changing, my second orgasm felt like it had come out of nowhere, possessing my entire body as I moaned his name.

He dropped back down, taking my mouth with his as he thrust harder, faster, and soon I was crying out with each thrust, in the throes of another orgasm. He swallowed my cries, pumping his hips a few more times before his body tensed.

“Sav,” he grunted, shoving in deep and holding himself there as he came, his body shivering with tension, before he thrust fast a few times, drawing out the pleasure for both of us.

We clutched each other tightly, catching our breath. He slowly peppered kisses along my neck and jaw, working his

way back to my lips. We kissed like the world was ending, and I felt it deep in my bones.

If I'd ever had any doubt, he'd burned it away over the last day. I was one hundred percent in love with Christopher Warner.

CHRIS

A BODY WIGGLED AGAINST ME, waking me slowly. My curtains blocked the sunlight, keeping the room dark, but I could make out the faint outline of sunshine bordering the windows.

I glanced down at Sav and brushed her thick dark hair off her face. She breathed steadily, still asleep, as gorgeous as any fairytale princess famed for her beauty. I wrapped my arm tight around her and pulled her close, memories of last night already waking up every part of my body.

She moaned quietly, and my cock twitched at the sound. I'd gotten lots of sounds like that out of her last night.

I coaxed three orgasms out of her, and I wanted more.

I was a hungry man. Starving for more of her.

We'd fallen asleep not long after sex, and we needed to make up for it today before I dropped her back off.

Holding her close, I breathed in her scent. Her body was so warm and inviting. Her thighs felt good against mine, and her ass pressed into my crotch. I placed my lips against her bare shoulder and kissed her before slowly moving my mouth and nose along her neck.

She moaned again then wiggled her ass more purposefully, pushing it against me. She giggled softly and turned her head to look at me.

I cupped her cheek and pulled her face to mine, taking her lips in a gentle morning kiss. She rolled over, facing me as she

threw a leg over my hip. She pressed herself against me, my cock nestling against the dampness between her legs.

“Let me back in,” I whispered.

She groaned. “I want to, but I’m pretty sore. Besides,” she said as her fingers trailed across my abs, “there’s something else I want to try.”

I grinned in anticipation. “Yeah? What’s that?” I asked, sliding my hand up her thigh to touch that heavenly place again.

She giggled, throwing the covers off me and leaned forward to press my shoulders back. “There’s something I’ve imagined a lot over the years.” She licked her lips, already blushing. “I’ve wondered what it would feel like to suck your cock.”

Hearing her say that so openly made my cock twitch.

She noticed and took it in a firm grip to tug it. I let out a groan.

“I want to know what it feels like to make you crazy with my mouth. I want to make you lose control like you did for me.”

“Baby,” I groaned as she stroked me again and leaned over to suck the tip of my cock between her pretty lips. I cursed, closing my eyes as she twirled her tongue around the head.

“Does that feel good?” she asked. “Tell me what you like.”

I breathed out slowly, trying to regain my composure before I took over. “Eager beaver,” I said with a smile. “Like this.” I held my cock at the base and told her how I liked it. She grasped around my shaft as she sucked on the head, moving her hand for more pleasure.

She slowly worked her lips down with me urging her, taking me deeper and deeper as she went. She’d pop her mouth off when she got tired and moved to lick my shaft. Then she sucked on the head again, making my leg muscles tense as I strained for more of her mouth. I was so close to coming.

I didn't want to come alone, though, so I grabbed her hair and pulled her mouth off my cock. I groaned. "I need to taste you," I said.

She pouted. "I'm not done," she whined. She stroked my cock with both hands, driving me crazy. "I want to make you come."

"I will come, baby," I said. "With you against my tongue."

Her eyes went dark with arousal, so I directed her to turn her body and straddle my face. It was awkward at first, and she hovered above my head before I wrapped my arms around her thighs and pulled her down onto my face. "Chris!" she shouted when I sucked her clit hard.

I spanked her thigh twice and then held up my cock, letting her know it was time to return to her task. She leaned over quickly, gulping me down to the back of her throat. She coughed, having gone too far, then tried it again with better success.

I groaned as her pussy pulsed against my mouth. I alternated between sucking on her skin and licking between her lips. Her head bobbed and she moaned continuously, seemingly lost in the pleasure. I lost myself, too, going off instinct and following her movements and the sounds of her pleasure. I spanked her thigh again, and she cried out.

I felt her come, pulses rippling through her muscles. I kept the same speed, wanting to get her there again if I could. She shifted to lift off me, but I didn't let her. I pinned her to me by her legs, and she pulled her mouth off me to groan loudly.

She sounded like a wild animal, and it spurred me on.

"Chris. Please. I can't take it."

I sucked, lapping my tongue against that bundle of nerves until she shouted. Her pussy fluttered, and she shivered as I licked her thoroughly while she came again.

After her peak, she focused more on what she was doing with her mouth. I hissed, holding her against me as she bobbed her head up and down.

She was blowing my mind. Having her suck my cock at all was like a dream come true. But she was going at me like it was her *job*.

Tingles spread throughout my body, lighting my skin as I panted. I kneaded her ass as the pleasure hit and I came, spilling into her mouth.

She kept sucking like she wanted to suck me dry, then she moved more gently, with tiny licks up and down my shaft. Eventually, I had to stop her because I was too sensitive, and the pleasure bordering on pain was going to melt my brain. She moved off and lay beside me while I caught my breath

“That,” I started, taking another deep breath, “was amazing. If they gave medals for that at the Olympics, you would have just earned the gold.”

“Hey, look at the book nerd crushing a sporting event,” she said with a giggle.

I wrapped my arms around her and kissed the top of her head. Then she leaned back to look up at me. “I want French toast for breakfast,” she said.

“Random girl is random, but okay.” I chuckled. “Done. I’d get you anything you wanted after that.”

We spent the rest of the morning in a great mood. We found reasons to touch one another, and I gave her one of my t-shirts to wear while I cooked breakfast. She smiled more than I’d seen from her in the last few years, and I was proud to know it was because of me.

I drove her home after we cleaned up. She liked the spare clothes I picked for her—a purple skirt and a black crop top. I purposefully didn’t pack her a bra because I liked seeing how her breasts moved under her shirt. She didn’t seem to notice or care though.

She kept hanging onto me, holding me close and staring at me as if I held her heart. As if it were mine to protect from the whole world.

I wanted to be that guy for her. I *would* be.

The biggest issue was still hanging over my head as I kissed her goodbye on her front porch. I still hadn't figured out how to approach Sean about us. How would I break the news? I worried he'd react badly at first, and I didn't want to deal with that.

I resolved to do something about it soon, though. As I drove away after dropping her off, I promised myself I would tell Sean about us as soon as possible. I'd lay it all out and hope our long friendship was enough to let him trust me with Sav's heart.

SAV

CHRIS DROPPED me off Monday afternoon, and we talked on the phone again that evening. I'd almost suggested I spend the night with him again, but I actually was sore and pretty tired. And I knew if I was in his bed, I'd push that aside and want him to make love to me again.

It wouldn't look great if I was helping customers at the bookstore while being barely able to walk, I thought, feeling a little wicked at thinking such a thing.

I'd had no reason to be nervous about my first time, not with him. He was gentle, touching me expertly and bringing me to orgasm so easily.

It had been perfect, and I felt like my feet hadn't touched the ground since he'd carried me up the stairs to his bedroom.

We'd spent most evenings together since then, and several of the nights, usually over the weekends when he didn't have to worry about being up early to oversee a job site.

The store was busier than usual for a Monday. Grampa came in, even though he worked Saturday, and I'd encouraged him to take the day off. We changed some of the displays, and I bought a few chalkboards to decorate. I used them to separate the new sections and lead people through the store.

Word had gotten around about the new coffee bar and espresso machine. People were coming in for a latte, buying a new book, and then sitting in one of the designated seating areas. The bar area wasn't even completely finished, but it was close.

I'd always wanted the Sparks to be a cozy spot for book lovers, and it was slowly becoming known for that in the community.

As the school semester ended, there was a high chance parents would begin trickling into the store with their children's summer reading lists. We had a thriving library community in town, but there were only so many copies of each book, so people still came in to purchase some.

Grampa and I organized an entire section dedicated to the reading list Sean supplied for us.

Thoughts of Sean made me feel guilty. I hadn't seen him much since the dinner party at his house. I'd mostly talked to Nicole, who contacted me here or there about wedding plans. I thought Sean and Chris talked about as often about upcoming dates and deadlines, tux fittings, that sort of thing.

I'd missed Sunday dinner last night, claiming Penny needed someone to babysit at the last minute. I felt horrible lying like that, but Chris and I hadn't discussed when we were telling my family.

He'd kissed me on my front porch multiple times in the last few days, so maybe he didn't care if they noticed or knew. But I didn't want to jump the gun and announce anything without talking to him about it first.

We didn't need any more misunderstandings between us.

"How's Chris doing?" Grampa asked as we stood near the registers. We were mostly caught up with work, so we were waiting for the wandering customers to check out or need assistance.

"Fine. Probably. How would I know? Why?" I'd sounded more panicked than I meant to.

He glanced at me with a quirked eyebrow. His lip twitched with an amused smile. "Not any real reason. Just been noticing his car in our driveway more often. Seems like he's visiting my granddaughter at all hours of the morning and evening lately."

I licked my lips, giving myself time to think of an excuse that wasn't exactly a lie. "We've been hanging out."

"Oh? Hanging out?"

I shrugged. "We made up."

He hummed unhelpfully, and I wanted to bury my head in my hands. "So you're friend again, huh?"

"Yep."

"Just friends? Or are the two of you hardheaded people"—he leaned over to whisper—"finally getting your shit together?"

I gasped. Grampa rarely ever cursed, and I didn't know whether to laugh or hide my face at the fact that he clearly thought he knew what we were up to. I wracked my brain for what to say in response to that, but I was saved by the bell. The front door opened, and Chris and a couple of his workers walked in. He winked at me as he waved. They stopped at the register to say hi and explain what they were doing.

"We're working on your bar today," he said. "But there are also some issues upstairs we've run into, so we'll be back and forth."

"Sounds good," I said.

I glanced between him and Grampa, who had a cat-that's-got-the-canary grin on his face.

I was going to have to catch Chris and tell him what Grampa said. Or try to convey it to him telepathically. I frowned and focused, but he didn't catch on.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked me. He leaned over the counter and spoke softly enough I guessed he didn't think Grampa would hear. "I *know* you didn't wake up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. Know that for a fact." He winked, thinking he was being clever.

And it *was* damned adorable.

Grampa cleared his throat. I'd have bet anybody a hundred bucks he wasn't as hard of hearing as he let on and had heard

every word Chris just said to me.

“So, Chris,” he said. “I was just asking my granddaughter why I’ve been seeing your car in the driveway so much lately, and yet you haven’t stopped by to say hi.”

Chris straightened as if caught, then he relaxed his shoulders and grinned. “Didn’t realize you wanted to see my ugly mug more than you already do here at the Sparks, Jackson. I’ll make sure to stop by next time.”

Grampa nodded. “Good, but I noticed you ignored the most important part.”

Chris looked between Grampa and me. He raised his eyebrows at me, and I knew he was asking permission. I nodded. Grampa already seemed to know anyway, so what could it hurt.

“You keep seeing my car there, because ...” Chris looked at me, grinning. “I’m pitching woo.”

“Oh my God,” I said.

“I’m sweet on your granddaughter, and I’m doing my best to woo her.”

Chris and his old-fashioned terms. I laughed, and I could feel my face heat up at the idea that it was really out in the open now, at least with Grampa.

“That’s alright isn’t it, Jackson?”

Grampa laughed. “It’s not up to me, is it. As long as Sav wants you around, woo away. About damn time, too.” He looked genuinely happy about it. I couldn’t help but wrap my arms around him for a hug that he eagerly returned.

Then Chris said, “Now that you know about it ...” He reached for me over the counter and pulled me into a quick kiss. “Don’t have to avoid doing that at the Sparks anymore, do I?”

He still glanced around to make sure no customers were paying attention. I guessed it was one thing to be open about it in front of Grampa, but other people who might notice were something different.

“Have you told Sean the good news?” Grampa asked.

“No. And Jackson, I’d appreciate if you kept it to yourself for a while yet, too. I’m working on a way to bring it up.”

Grampa took a deep breath. “Alright. But remember, he’s your best friend, Christopher. And you’ve always been like family.” He clapped Chris on the shoulder and headed off to arrange a display. Chris kissed me quickly again, and I wanted to talk to him about it, but one of his men called for him from upstairs.

I returned to work, creating content for our social media channels and weekly newsletter. Before I knew it, it was lunchtime. Penny and I had to skip our lunch date because she was meeting with a client, so I left and grabbed some sandwiches for everyone.

The guys were surprised and thankful when I brought them upstairs. Chris beamed, and I could feel the affection and warmth pouring off him during our interaction.

I wished we could have snuck off to someplace private and spent a little time together.

I left the men to their work and disappeared into my office where I focused on organizing all the papers on the desk, ensuring all completed projects were put away. I took a short break to check my phone and respond to notifications on Instagram. People liked my recent photo and commented on how cute my chalkboard art was.

I’d knocked a paper off the front of my desk and gotten up to get it while looking at my phone. As I straightened, arms wrapped around me from behind, making me jump and squeal. A familiar chuckle sounded in my ear, and I relaxed against Chris’s chest.

“You didn’t need to scare me like that,” I said, swatting his arm.

He pressed his lips against my cheek and smiled. “I was missing you,” he whispered. “Wishing I could have my girl in my arms again.”

He gripped my hips and tugged me backward until my ass met his crotch. I could feel the distinct pressure of his erection in his jeans. I hummed thoughtfully. “You’re going to get us caught,” I joked, eager to see his reaction.

He rubbed his nose against my neck and smelled my hair. “I’d be okay with that,” he said. My heart soared. “I want everyone to know you’re mine.”

His.

I was his.

He pulled back enough to spin me around. My arms went around his neck. He planted a soft kiss on my lips that almost turned my knees to jelly.

“I need to be inside you again,” he murmured. “It’s all I think about.”

I glanced over his shoulder, and no one was within eyesight. “I want that too,” I admitted. “I ache for you.”

He growled. “I need you to myself for a full weekend,” he said. “We should get away. We could stay at a nice hotel. Go out to dinner. Stay in bed as long as we wanted.” He pulled my arms from his neck, holding my hands between us. “Next weekend. What do you say?”

I bit my lip, wondering how I’d explain the trip if Sean found out. “What about Sean?” I asked, voicing my concerns out loud.

“Tell him you’re going away with Penny or something.”

It occurred to me that Penny was all for me being with Chris. I could recruit her. “I could see what she’s doing this weekend. Maybe she can cover for me.” He let go of my hands so I could send her a text. She responded a few seconds later, telling me she would be out of town visiting her in-laws. “She’s not going to be in town. Looks like it’ll be a perfect cover.”

“Great.” He kissed me again. “I’ll tell Sean I’m visiting my mom. Then he won’t have to wonder where either of us are.”

I didn't like lying to Sean, but I knew Chris was building up to telling him. So I twirled my finger on his chest. "You're devious."

"Only when I have to be," he said with a grin. "We'll tell him about us soon." He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Let me show you where I was thinking of taking you." He scrolled through his screen. "I'm deciding between two places, but I wanted your final opinion before booking anything."

Excitement rushed through me. He was being considerate of my needs. He wanted to know what I preferred. He'd surprised me multiple times in the short period we'd been together, but he wanted to include me in future decisions too.

I was pretty sure I was beaming and blushing.

Footsteps down the hallway drew my attention. Dylan, the young worker Chris had caught me talking to a couple of weeks ago, poked his head in. "Hey, Chris. Sorry to interrupt."

"You're good," Chris said. "What's up?"

"We found an electric issue in the walls where you wanted a charging hub. We might have to get a professional in to take a look."

Chris cursed. "All right. I'll come to take a look." He placed his phone on the edge of my desk, the screen showing a website for a bed and breakfast, one of the places he wanted to take me, I guessed. After Dylan disappeared, Chris kissed my cheek. "I'll be right back."

"Okay," I said softly, feeling dreamy all over again.

I looked at the website on his phone. The place was charming, and had it had a special coffee lounge for guests. The man knew me well.

I went back to straightening the office. I dusted the surfaces and swept the carpet. A buzzing caught my attention, but my phone was silent. Chris' phone sat on the desk, vibrating.

The gorgeous woman who'd met him here one day, interrupting our first kiss in four years, lit up his screen.

Melanie.

So much had happened since then, I'd forgotten all about her.

Why the hell was she calling him?

CHRIS

MY PALMS WERE SWEATY as I walked to Sean and Nicole's front door. There was a chill in the air, so I wore the grey hoodie Sean bought me a few years ago when he was traveling abroad. I hoped seeing me in something he bought for me would be a nice reminder and protect me from a bad reaction when he found out about Sav and me.

Sav and I were leaving for our trip the next day. Jackson would be working Saturday at the bookstore, and employees knew where I'd be. They also knew not to contact me unless faced with a dire emergency.

Everything was set for the weekend away, but I felt guilty leaving without Sean knowing about us. Sav didn't like lying to him either, so I'd decided I'd go ahead and tell him. Rip the band-aid off and get it over with.

I needed to tread carefully when it came to this, and the best way to tell him would be in the comfort and safety of his own home.

I couldn't imagine my life without Sav, and I couldn't imagine it without Sean, either. They were both so important to me, and I could jeopardize everything if I went about this the wrong way.

I knocked, and after a few moments, Nicole opened the door. "Hey, Chris. I didn't know you were stopping by today. Come on in."

She stepped back to allow me into the house. "Sean!" she called out. "Chris is here."

Sean was seated at the dining table off to the left with his laptop open. He had on his reading glasses which he didn't often wear. "Hey man, what's up?"

Nicole turned to me. "Do you want a drink or anything?"

I shook my head. "Nah, I'm good. Thanks."

She smiled and walked off. I stood halfway in the living room, staring at my best friend as he worked hard on whatever was on his computer. He noticed me staring because he eventually quirked an eyebrow and looked up from his screen.

"Come sit down. There's beer in the fridge if you want it."

"I'm good," I said, shoving my hands into my jeans pockets as I closed the distance between us. I sat in the chair adjacent to him and blew out a breath.

He eyed me from his peripheral vision and smirked. "What's up, bro?" he asked distractedly, clicking on his computer. "You're acting kind of weird over there."

I cleared my throat. "Yeah. There's something I wanted to talk to you about." I leaned forward in my chair. "Something I think might—"

"Crap!" he shouted at the screen. He whipped the mouse and frantically typed. "Are you freaking serious?"

I waited for whatever it was to pass.

He glanced at me and winced.

"Sorry, man. Hold on." He shouted for Nicole to come into the room. She rushed in, and he informed us of the problem. "They're canceling the venue," he said. "There's some building issue, and they're not sure when they can get it taken care of."

"What?" she asked in a panicked tone. "What about our deposit?"

"They're sending it back. How will we find another place in time?"

"I can't believe this," she said, palming her forehead.

I went into problem-solving mode. I explained that a previous client of mine owned a winery not too far from their original location.

“I could call her and ask if there are any openings close to that date.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful,” Nicole said, clasping her hands in front of her as if she were saying a prayer. Sean reached out and clutched her hands in his.

I called and told her about the situation, and she checked her books. I put her on speakerphone as she searched. “Looks like I’m booked for the fifth, but I have an opening the next day around three in the afternoon. Could that work?”

Nicole and Sean looked at each other, communicating silently. They’d only known each other for a fraction of the time I’d known Sav, but they had wholeheartedly learned to trust one another. They seemed perfect for each other, and I was so proud and happy for Sean that he could find that in this crazy world.

“That works for us,” Sean said.

“Okay, great. Let me get some information from you.”

They relayed the specifics of their wedding to Sarah who took notes over the phone. “Would either, or both, of you be able to drive out in the next few days to tour the location and finalize these details?”

They agreed to meet her over the weekend. I grew worried they would need me for this meetup. Surely, they could find the winery and talk to Sarah on their own.

Sean and Nicole hugged after I hung up, both of them relieved that they didn’t have to postpone the wedding to another weekend, or another month.

“Thanks, man. You really saved us there. Everything’s been falling apart lately. Nicole’s car, all the wedding plans, and the personal stuff with her family.”

That caught my attention. “What personal stuff?”

He shook his head. “One of her cousins found out his best friend had been sleeping around with his sister. Now, everyone has to pick sides.”

Best friend. Sister. *Shit.*

Nicole sighed. “I wanted everyone here for the wedding, but now a bunch of people are saying they won’t go if she brings the friend as a date.”

Sean rolled his eyes. “I don’t understand how people can be so selfish, you know? It takes a special kind of asshole to mess up the family like that.”

My heart pounded hard, and I swallowed thickly. “Yeah, that’s so messed up.”

Nicole nodded. “Everyone’s torn up about it. And we *cannot* handle any more bad news right now.”

Sean kissed her temple. “We’ll get through this, baby. And Chris already helped us put out one fire.”

Nicole leaned into him. “That’s true. We appreciate your help.”

Sean looked right into my eyes as he said, “I know I can always count on you, bro. You’ve never let me down.”

I wouldn’t be able to tell him.

I did not want the first time I’d ever disappointed Sean to be right before his wedding, especially after what they just told me. I was reading the room loud and clear and knew I had to keep quiet for at least a little while longer.

“I’m going to get the laundry folded,” Nicole said, kissing Sean on the cheek. “Thanks again, Chris. I’m glad you were here to help us with everything.”

I nodded. “No problem.”

She walked out of the room, leaving Sean and me alone. He blew out a breath and scrubbed his face. “That’s enough internet for today,” he said, closing his laptop. He shifted in his seat to face me. “So, what’s up? You wanted to tell me something when you first came in before the shit hit the fan.”

“Oh, right.” I cleared my throat. “Uh, I’m going out of town this weekend to visit my mother.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Really?” He crossed his arms. “I thought you were done letting her suck you into her constant drama.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah, I am.” I scrambled for some reason to visit, returning to the phone call I’d had with my mom recently. “I feel like I need to check in and make sure she’s living okay, you know? I can claim that I’m over her all day, but I still worry.”

All of that was true, but I felt awful for lying to Sean about why I’d be out of town. He deserved to know, and he would eventually. Just not right now.

Sean bobbed his head. “Okay, man. If you’re sure. I’m here if you need to call to vent or anything.”

“I appreciate that.” I rubbed my palms together slowly. “You’re not going to need me to meet up with Sarah, right?”

He shook his head. “No, you’re good, man. I hope you have some fun even if you’ll be with your mom.”

I nodded slowly. “Thanks, man.”

We sat in silence for a moment. “Apparently, Sav will be out of town too,” he said. “She told me today that she’s going somewhere with Penny.”

I avoided eye contact. “Oh, yeah?”

“She didn’t tell you about it?”

I shrugged. “She might have. Yeah, I think she mentioned something about it.”

He hummed in response, then he tapped his armrests and stood. “I’m tired of sitting here. Want to grab some beers and go outside for a bit?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.” I put on a happy face for Sean and tried not to look too nervous or disappointed that I couldn’t get the secret off my chest just yet.

SAV

I STOOD outside waiting for Chris. My duffle bag was on the white wood porch, and my backpack was on. I'd opted for yoga pants and a t-shirt, my hair in a loose ponytail.

He pulled into the driveway, and he grinned when he saw me waiting for him. I rushed down the stairs and jumped into his arms as soon as he exited his truck. He chuckled and held me close, twisting my body back and forth as we laughed together.

"My beautiful girl," he said in my ear. He kissed my neck, and I closed my eyes in bliss.

I'd chosen not to mention the other woman's call to his phone the other day. He'd come back to the office, excited to show me a room with a jacuzzi tub and a lovely garden space in the courtyard. I'd told him it looked like it was straight out of a book, and he'd smiled.

He was proud of himself and the effort he'd put into finding a great place. I knew there was no way he was putting as much effort into anyone else, so I decided to drop it. Melanie probably wasn't important, and I didn't need to get lost in my head being insecure about it.

"Ready to go?" he asked after he'd put me down.

I nodded. "Yep."

He loaded my things into his truck, and we headed west. Being with Chris over the last few weeks opened my eyes to all the beautiful things just a driving distance away. Usually, I

stayed in my bubble. I went to work, had lunch with Penny, and then spent evenings by myself or with Grampa. I hardly left town.

I'd gotten used to my routine because it was easier to spend time alone than to open myself up to being hurt.

As we drove down the highway, I watched the trees pass the windows, and I allowed myself to think of all the people I'd lost.

For once, I wasn't distraught over the thought. I was able to look at it objectively. Chris had been with me throughout the most tragic moments in my life, and I was here with him now as I began to heal from it all. It felt like all the choices we'd made to lead us here felt like the right ones. As if my entire life had been mapped out for me to connect with Chris now instead of back then.

I turned in my seat and looked at him. His focus was on the road. He had one firm hand on the steering wheel while the other was in my lap as usual. His trimmed beard made him look rugged and handsome, and his tanned skin added to his outdoorsy look.

It had been chilly that morning, so he wore a flannel over his white t-shirt and light-wash jeans. He turned his head, realizing I was staring at him, and grinned. I returned it, reveling in the feeling of being with him.

We drove past a vineyard, and I pointed out the endless rows of grapes. Chris didn't say anything, but he looked a little smug as when we turned right at the end of the field to go into the vineyard.

As we rolled down the driveway, I noticed a large house behind the front office that looked a lot like the photos he'd shown me. "We're staying here?"

He nodded as he parked in front of the small office building. "Yep. We're getting the tour before our dinner tonight."

I jumped out of the truck and hooked my arm in his, giddy with excitement.

We checked into our room on the second floor of the bed and breakfast. I freshened up before our tour, and Chris came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me. He touched his nose to my neck and inhaled before letting out a contented sigh.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” he said.

I turned my head and slid my fingers into his hair to draw his face to mine. We kissed softly. I felt warm and protected in his strong arms. “I’m glad I’m here too,” I said, earning one of his most dashing smiles.

He smacked my ass. “Let’s go, before I throw you down on the bed and we miss everything. I’m excited to see the tour.”

“I didn’t know you were so into wine.”

He threw our duffle bags on the chair in the corner of the room. “I enjoy seeing how things are made. They’re also a client of mine, so they’ve invited me to come out and see the property multiple times.”

I finished applying blush. “I didn’t realize you had so many connections.”

He hesitated, then crossed his arms. “Sav, funny you should say that ...” He looked at me guiltily.

“Why?”

He sat on the edge of the bed and grabbed my crossed arms, pulling me to stand between his legs. He placed his hands on my hips and looked up at me.

“Nothing crazy, don’t worry.” He smiled weakly. “I went to Sean’s last night. I wanted to tell him about us.”

My hands clutched lightly at his shirt.

“I know I should have said something to you first, but I had a burst of courage and thought I’d better take advantage of it. But I didn’t get a chance to say anything because they were told their venue had some building issue, so their reservation was canceled.”

My hand went to my mouth. “Oh, no.”

He nodded solemnly. “Yeah, I know. It was right when I was going to tell him. But I was glad I was there, because I happen to have a connection at a winery, one this vineyard sells to, and got them in the day after their original plans.”

A mixture of emotions flooded me. I wasn’t sure how to feel. “I’m glad you fixed the issue for them before it got too chaotic. I don’t understand what that has to do with us.”

He licked his lips. “Afterward, Sean started telling me about the other stress in their lives. The car. The planning. Everyone’s travel plans. Nicole’s family is also broken up right now because of... a similar situation to ours. It seemed clear that if I told him about us right that second, he would have freaked out.”

He pulled me closer and stared into my eyes. “I promise we’ll tell him as soon as the wedding’s over. We don’t know how he’ll react to the news, so I don’t want to stress him out. I don’t want him to look back on his wedding photos and remember how it was almost the perfect day if he hadn’t found out I was screwing around with his sister.”

I pushed against his chest, stepping back and out of his grip. “Is that what you’re doing?” I asked.

“God, Sav,” he sighed. “No, I didn’t mean it like that.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me to him again. I resisted, but he stood and wrapped his arms around me. “You’re more to me than that. Surely you know that by now,” he said in my ear, causing goosebumps to ripple down my spine. “I didn’t mean it that way. I meant that’s how he’ll probably see it at first. Before I prove to him that I’m serious about you.”

He grabbed both my hands and held them between us.

“I’m in this for the long haul.”

I gazed into his eyes and found truth there. He wasn't lying to smooth things over. He truly believed what he was saying, and I had no reason to doubt him anymore.

He kissed me. "You understand, don't you? I don't want to hide, but I don't want to possibly ruin his big day."

The more I thought about it, the more I thought Sean would accept it, once he realized that I wasn't just one more notch in Chris's bedpost. But I understood. I cupped his face. "I believe you. We can wait."

He touched his forehead to mine. "Thank you," he said with relief. We kissed again, and when we pulled apart, he checked his watch, then he smiled and grabbed my hand. "The tour starts in a few minutes. Let's get down there."

I resolved to have a good weekend away with him. If we were truly in this for the long haul, we had the rest of our lives to tell others about us. All we could guarantee was the here and now, and I wasn't going to waste it wondering about what-ifs.

That problem was reserved for future Sav and Chris.

CHRIS

DURING THE VINEYARD TOUR, I couldn't keep my eyes off Sav. Our conversation in the hotel room left me on edge, worrying I'd made the wrong decision about when to tell Sean.

I kept her close throughout the tour, holding her hand or wrapping an arm around her when it seemed appropriate, and she welcomed my touches. I enjoyed watching the breeze blow back the few wisps of hair that had fallen from her ponytail away from her face.

Her cheeks and nose were pink from the chilled air. And I soaked in every smile she sent my way. Being around her warmed me in a way I'd never felt before, and it was exciting to know she was officially mine.

"What are we doing for dinner?" she asked as I unlocked the door.

I opened it and gestured for her to walk ahead of me. Once the door closed, I approached her from behind and wrapped my arms around her, holding her body flush against mine. She gasped and then released a breathy giggle.

She turned her head, and I kissed her beautiful lips. She felt so tiny in my arms. Sav was petite and curvy, and I wanted to feel her soft body pressed against mine

"Whatever you want to do," I said. "Are you hungry now?" I slid one hand up to cup her breast and the other down between her legs. She whimpered, melting in my arms. "Or do you want something besides food first?"

She laughed, sliding one of her hands into my hair. “Seems like you’re hungry for something else.”

I pressed my nose to her neck and inhaled. “I am.” I pulled down the neckline of her shirt and worked my hand inside her bra, wanting to feel her bare skin against mine. “Hungry for you.”

Her fingers slid into my hair, pulling on the strands hard enough to make me groan. She pushed her hips back against me and nodded against my shoulder. “I know the feeling,” she said.

“Good.” I gestured toward the bed. “Let me watch you undress?”

She grinned like she was turned on by the idea as much as me. I stood back and watched as she pulled off her shirt and bra, tossing them to the side. She turned and looked at me over her shoulder as she tugged down her tight yoga pants.

Damn, her ass had looked amazing in them all day. So amazing I’d kept an eye on the other men to make sure they weren’t looking at her too hungrily.

She pulled her yoga pants down her legs to reveal a sexy thong. Her fingers went to the waistband, but I stopped her. “Leave those on,” I said.

She smiled over her shoulder at me, licking her bottom lip seductively. She crawled onto the bed, giving me an excellent view of her ass and the thin strip of fabric between her legs. She shimmied her hips, then sat and waited for me.

I stared at her, taking in her rosy, pink nipples and pale skin. “Touch yourself?” I said, my voice hardly above a whisper.

Her cheeks pinked, but she didn’t hesitate. She slid her fingers inside her thong, and I watched hungrily as she slid them up and down. As she touched herself, I started undressed slowly, not wanting to take my eyes off her.

She shifted further back on the mattress, leaning on one elbow while she pleased herself. When I shoved my jeans and underwear down, she focused on my cock. The desire in

her eyes made me proud. She wanted me, and I couldn't imagine anything better than that.

I unzipped the side pocket of my duffel bag and pulled out a couple of condoms.

As I strode to the bed, she said, "You don't have to use those, Chris."

A small surge of panic rushed through me. I didn't want to use them either, but I wouldn't risk getting her pregnant. We'd never talked about the future enough to know if having kids was something even on the table for either of us, and I wouldn't risk it happening accidentally. I hoped she understood.

"Sav, I don't want to risk ... something happening before we're ready for it."

She wasn't upset. Instead, her smile grew, and she blushed while she continued stroking herself.

"I got on the pill so we wouldn't need them. It's been over seven days, so if you don't want to use one, you don't have to." The hand in her thong moved with more purpose, and she gasped. "I don't want you to."

I hadn't had sex without a condom since Katelyn.

I stared into Sav's eyes and didn't even hesitate to toss the condoms into the air, over my shoulder. She laughed, and I closed the distance between us to kiss her.

"Do you have any idea how special this is to me?" I kissed down her jaw, her neck, licking her shoulder, cherishing her in every way I could. "Not just that you'd touch yourself for me, but that you want me without anything between us."

She let her head fall back, so I kissed the arch of her throat.

"I do," she said. "I want to feel every part of you."

I slid my hand into her thong, pressing my fingers down on hers. They were damp, and the heat beneath them made my cock twitch.

I sucked her nipple, teasing it with my teeth and tongue, while I rubbed her own fingers against her pussy. I loved watching her touch herself, but I wanted to be part of it, to feel her come against her own hand.

I rocked against her, my cock sliding against the soft skin of her thigh. What a gift she'd given me, surprising me with the pills. I could hardly wait to bury myself inside her slick heat, to really feel it against my skin for the first time.

Her fingers flexed beneath mine as she touched herself in the way she needed to. She rocked her hips, pressing herself against her hand, and I added even more pressure. As I licked my way across her chest to suck on her other nipple, she shuddered and tilted her hips, grinding against her fingers.

"Ah!" she cried out as she came. I kept my fingers pressed against hers, moaning at the spasms that rocked through her.

"God, Sav. Need you," I groaned, lifting my face to kiss her hungrily again. I moved to lie on top of her, my cockhead slipping between her thighs and sliding against her damp sex. But she pushed my shoulders and urged me onto my back.

"Let me," she said, and I wasn't sure if she was asking or demanding, but I didn't care. She could do anything she wanted with me, and I'd never complain.

She straddled my thighs and gripped my cock in her hand, stroking me slowly a few times. My cock jumped in her hand, eager to be touched. As she lifted up, pressed the head against her hot, wet center, I sank my fingers into her long, dark hair.

"Oh, baby. Yeah, Sav." I gripped her hip with my other hand to help her get into position. Then she sank down on me, wrapping me in the heat of her body.

I moaned loudly enough I worried I'd disturb the other people staying overnight, so I sucked my lips between my teeth to stay quiet. As she finally took me all the way in and sat on top of me, she put her hands on my chest to brace herself.

Sav's eyes were bright with concentration, and her pink lips were damp from her licking them. "Oh, Chris," she

breathed, squeezing around me. She felt like wet silk, warm and luxurious. I knew I wasn't going to last long.

When she lifted her hips, sliding up my length, then lowered herself onto me again, I held my breath to keep from losing it then and there.

"Baby," I groaned, both my hands on her hips to help her move. "Ride me," I all but begged, wanting more.

She was ready. Her movements were slow and easy at first. By the time I'd shifted a hand around to thumb at her clit, she was practically bouncing on my cock, her beautiful tits bouncing with each thrust.

"Chris," she whispered, and her pussy clamped around me as she moved, pulling the orgasm from me at the same time her clit throbbed under my thumb and she came.

She ground her hips against me, my cock fully inside her, and rubbed herself against my thumb, moaning wantonly. Seeing her so lost in pleasure and taking as much for herself as she could sent another lightning pulse of pleasure down my cock into my limbs.

Sav's back arched as she clamped around me again, and I reached up to cup her breasts in my hands.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I said. She dropped down onto my chest, then kissed me, open-mouthed and hungry as the last throes of her orgasm shuddered through her.

We lay there, holding each other, for what felt like a long time, just breathing together and letting our racing pulses slow.

She sighed contentedly and let me slip from her body, but she stayed on top of me, her head against my chest and shoulder.

"Sav?"

"Yeah?"

"I think you might have missed your calling working at the bookstore."

She lifted her face to look at me. “You’re going to say something filthy, aren’t you?”

“No,” I said, pretending to be shocked that she’d suggest such a thing. “I just think you’d have made a damn fine cowgirl.”

She slapped my chest with a laugh and put her cheek back down. “I’m too tired to go out now,” she said. “How about you?”

“Yeah. Feel like I was the bucking bronco in a rodeo, don’t know why. Room service?”

“Room service. And you know, you’re not nearly as funny as you think you are.”

I stroked her hair, then let my hand glide all the way down her shoulder to her hip. “Wrong. I’m hilarious. You’re just hungry and not thinking clearly.”

That earned me another playful slap. “Order the food before I get *hangry* and resort to real violence.”

“Yes, madam,” I said, slapping her ass just as playfully. “Right away, madam.”

I was hard again by the time the food came, because Sav couldn’t keep her hands to herself, even when we were both damn near exhausted.

I didn’t mind.

SAV

AS I WOKE UP, I almost forgot where I was until Chris's woodsy, manly scent washed over me. I touched the strong arm around my waist and smiled at how good he'd made me feel the night before.

Before dinner. After dinner. We couldn't get enough of each other.

That was nothing new, so I thought no longer using condoms and maybe being out of town with little fear of discovery had something to do with it.

We needed showers before bed, and it hadn't taken more than a few minutes of soaping each other up before he pinned me against the wall, thrusting into me and growling into my ear, calling me his.

I didn't want to get up, but I needed to pee. I carefully slid out from under arm and tiptoed to the bathroom. I looked at myself in the mirror for a moment, enjoying the slight pink of my cheeks and the fact that I couldn't stop smiling.

I still felt high, and I still wanted more.

I slid back into bed, pulled Chris's arm over me, and closed my eyes. Being in his arms felt like a dream I never wanted to end. Sometimes I worried I'd wake up and realize none of it had been real, that we'd never rekindled our friendship at all, let alone given in to our other feelings.

Those thoughts quickly vanished when Chris stirred, squeezing me close and sighing against my neck. His cock,

hard as it usually was first thing in the morning, pressed against my backside, and he gave a sleepy little moan. “Morning, beautiful,” he said into my ear.

My skin felt sun-warmed, a pleasant heat traveling over my body. “Good morning,” I said.

His hands roamed freely for a moment, moving over my body in a way that set me on fire. One hand fondled my breasts, teasing my nipple. When I moaned and pressed my ass back against him, he chuckled against my ear and pressed closer.

“I already want you again,” he admitted.

I opened my legs slightly when his hand slid down my stomach, giving him more room to explore. He hummed approvingly and slipped his fingers into my folds to tease my clit.

He sucked and licked the base of my neck, his cock sliding against my ass cheek. He played me like an instrument, his fingers stroking and tapping in a perfect rhythm, and when I felt the tension coiling inside me, I whispered, “I’m close.”

“I want you so much,” he breathed against my neck. His cockhead brushed against my entrance, so I opened my legs more, inviting him to take me.

He trembled as he pushed himself deep, then he fell into a rhythm of sliding out slowly and filling me again. His movements were so slow and measured, it felt like he brushed against every nerve inside me, spreading ripples of pleasure throughout my body.

He hooked his hand around my thigh, lifting it and opening me more for him.

“I could wake up like this every morning,” he said.

Chris’s hips hitched, as the words affected him the same way they did me. He thrust a little faster, deeper, his fingers tapping and stroking me with renewed purpose.

“Want to make sure you know you’re mine as soon as you open your eyes.”

I pressed my hand against his, rocking my hips forward as his possessive words washed over me. “Chris,” I gasped as I came, his fingers dragging the pleasure out of me. I gave myself over to it, letting him claim me with every thrust.

Chris made low, wounded sounds as I came down from the pleasure. Then he slid away and pressed me onto my back to kiss me. As his tongue slid against mine, he filled me again, hooking his arm under my knee to spread me wide.

He didn’t hold back, thrusting into me and bringing himself to the edge. His body pressed against me with each snap of his hips, brushing against my sensitive clit just right. I clutched his shoulders and pulled myself up to meet him.

“Fuck,” he gasped. “Sav.”

He thrust deep and the movement sent me into another spiral of pleasure. He came, shuddering against me, as the spasms of another orgasm squeezed my muscles around him. We both gasped into the kiss, panting for air, but unwilling to stop.

Finally, he rested his forehead against my shoulder and laughed breathily. “Sav. You’re going to kill me.”

I rubbed the back of his neck. “You’re dramatic,” I said, but I was secretly pleased about it.

“I’m not. I think my brain just melted.” He lifted his face to grin at me and kiss me again. “Can’t think of a better way to go, though.”

He rolled onto his back and pulled me to his chest. “We’re going to need another shower before we head out.”

I groaned and clung to him. “Can’t we just stay in bed all day?”

“Don’t tempt me. I’ve made us plans that happen to include a very nice lakeside lunch and a late afternoon wine tasting.” Chris pressed his lips against my forehead. “But we’re going to have to order room service for dinner, because I’m going to wrestle you into the bed and not let you out again. If that’s alright with you.”

“Alright with me? If you hadn’t suggested it, I was prepared to body slam you onto the mattress Hulk Hogan style to have my way with you. After dinner, of course.”

“I like the way you think,” he whispered, then we got up to shower and enjoy the vineyard.

CHRIS

THE SHORT TOUR we'd had the day before was nothing compared to today's self-guided one. We walked through the vineyard, lost in the greenery and powerful sunshine. Sav *oohed* and *aahed* as we moved up and down the rows, holding hands and allowing ourselves to speak freely about whatever came to mind.

I took her to a bistro nearby for lunch. The restaurant sat on the edge of a small lake, so pretty at midday with sunlight shining off the water.

But I couldn't keep my eyes off Sav. She kept catching me staring at her when most people might have been enjoying the view outside. I was in love with her. There was no point in fighting myself over it. The way she looked at me sent shivers down my spine. My whole body was drawn to her, like as close as possible to her was where I belonged.

She leaned forward like she was going to share a secret. I leaned in, meeting her halfway across the table. "This is probably the best date I've ever been on," she said.

"Probably?" I asked, arching an eyebrow. "Just probably?"

"I'm being conservative. I don't want you to get a big head."

I snorted, then quickly looked around hoping no one was paying attention.

"The vineyards are beautiful, the lunch is delicious, this lake is stunning with the sun glinting off it like that. And I

know that when we get back to the room, I get something better than all those things.”

I might have been in danger of my head getting a little bigger if she kept it up, but I couldn't resist asking, “And what's that?”

“Time alone with my man.” She reached across the table and took my hand.

I really liked hearing her call me her man. “Your man, huh?” I brushed my thumb over her knuckles. “Guess that makes you my girl.”

“I like that,” she admitted. “Your girl.”

I glanced around again to make sure no one was close enough to hear. Then I leaned as close as possible over the small table. “For a minute, when you said you'd get something better after we went back to our room, I thought you were going wax poetic about my amazing cock.”

“No.” She laughed and threw a fry at me, but then she shrugged. “But it's not half bad.”

I threw the fry back.

After lunch, we changed and went to the pool. No one was in the water, but an older man slept in one of the lounge chairs with a book open on his chest.

It didn't take long for Sav to point out that she'd been on the swim team in high school, and she was sure she could whip my ass in a race.

“I live next to a lake,” I pointed out. “I've been swimming longer than you.”

“Only because you're older. It'll be a challenge.” She splashed me.

“For you. Like taking candy from a baby for me.” I splashed her back, then dunked her.

We taunted each other a little more before we went to the far wall and got ready to race.

“Hey, you’re standing out further than me,” she whined. “No fair. You shouldn’t get a head start.”

“I will always have the upper hand because I’m taller than you,” I joked. “You should just give up now.”

She smirked and started the countdown. “One, two—”

“Three,” we said together and then pushed off the wall, diving into the water.

I swam leisurely, wanting to give Sav a fighting chance. I underestimated her, and once we were there, I had to pick it up a notch to stay past her. I beat her by a few seconds and wouldn’t let her touch the wall when she reached me.

Our laughter accidentally woke the sleeping man, who grumbled and stomped out with his book.

We returned to the tasting room for another tour at sunset. I felt energized from swimming and excited about another night with Sav in my arms.

As Sav selected a bottle to bring upstairs for us to share, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I almost ignored it, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I’d have worried about it being some kind of work emergency until I checked it.

Sean had texted me, and fortunately it was all good news.

Sean: Thanks again for the recommendation. We visited the venue today and loved it. We’re going to keep the reservation.

Sean: I owe you a beer when you get back to town.

The guilt I felt about lying about where I was hit hard. Waiting until after his wedding was going to be a hell of a challenge.

Chris: Sure man. Glad I could help.

“Ready?” Sav asked. I glanced up from my screen and found her holding a bottle of sweet red she’d enjoyed during the tastings.

I shoved my phone in my pocket and took her elbow to lead her back to our room. “I am. I’m ready to make our last

night here one to remember.”

SAV

AFTER MY WEEKEND WITH CHRIS, I had a delicious ache between my legs every time I moved, and his naughty texts were making me ache even more. I tried to ignore my phone while I worked, helping customers and balancing our accounts, but every buzz and ping had me reaching for it, hoping there was another message from him.

The door chimed, and my heart raced again. Chris told me a few hours ago that he had some meetings and inspections before he was going to come by and help at the Sparks later today. I hoped he'd finish an hour early because he wanted to see me as badly as I wanted to see him.

I deserved an Academy Award for my forced cheerfulness when I realized the door chime was Sean. I loved my brother and enjoyed seeing him, but he didn't stop by very often just to say hello. When he came, he usually had a specific reason.

Paranoia got the better of me for a second. I worried maybe he'd found out about me and Chris and had come to confront me.

It's probably about the wedding. Calm down, Sav.

His expression didn't give anything away. He smiled at me, drumming his long fingers on the countertop by the register. "Hey, sis," he said affectionately. "How was your visit with Penny?"

I shuffled some things around under the counter, trying to look busy and not guilty. "Good, I hadn't seen her parents in a while, so visiting was nice."

He stared at me for a few seconds, then he frowned. “Where were you Sunday evening?”

My instinct was to say ‘with Penny,’ But he should have assumed that, so why was he asking?

“Sunday night?” I said, stalling.

“I saw Penny at the grocery store Sunday morning, but you weren’t home for Sunday dinner. Grampa said he thought you were still with Penny, so he didn’t know where you were.” He didn’t seem annoyed or like he was accusing me of anything. He sounded casual enough.

I tilted my head, trying to decipher why he was asking me all these questions. And honestly, feeling a little annoyed myself that he thought he had a right to know. “I was just tired after the trip. Why?”

He narrowed his eyes. Then he shrugged. “I was just wondering. You usually don’t miss it.” He cleared his throat and leaned over the counter, and it seemed like he was letting it go. I let myself take a slow, steady breath as he said, “Nicole has me making the rounds to remind everyone that we’re having our combined night out this weekend.”

“Oh yeah. Thanks for reminding me. I’d forgotten about it, honestly. With everything going on.” I gestured to the recent renovations.

Sean glanced around the store. “It looks great in here. Chris is doing a good job.”

“Yep, he’s great.”

He grinned. “You’ve sure changed your tune about him.”

I shrugged. “Can’t hold a grudge against a man that’s making my dreams come true.” As I said it, my whole body tingled with the truth of it. I gestured toward the coffee bar as an afterthought.

“Too right,” he said. “I’m glad you two are getting along again. It really sucked when you were on the outs.” He knocked on the counter. “I was hoping to find him. He went away this weekend, too, you know. To see his mom.”

Chris told me the lie he'd given Sean, but I figured it'd be safer to pretend I didn't know. "Yeah?"

"You didn't know?" He lifted an eyebrow. "Huh. He knew you were visiting Penny."

I cleared my throat and told myself to stay calm. "Chris was here when she invited me."

"Oh," he said, but there was something about the way he looked at me that got under my skin. He kept talking. "I was worried about him, going to see her. First time in years. I texted him yesterday, but he didn't say anything about how it was going. I didn't want to pry while he was in the thick of it, but I really want to talk to him about it. Make sure he's okay."

"You're a good friend," I said.

"Not really. I've been so wrapped up in wedding stuff, I feel like I've let a lot of other things slide. But I'm trying."

I put my hand over his. "Sean, you're getting married to the woman of your dreams. You're *supposed* to be focused on that right now. This is your time, and it's alright to be wrapped up in that. It doesn't make you a bad friend."

He gave me a soft smile, then he clutched my hand in his. "What about a bad brother?"

"What?" I scoffed.

"I feel like we haven't really talked lately. And you're acting ... I don't know. Different. Are you sure everything's okay? You didn't miss dinner because of anything that's wrong, right? Or even because you're worried about Penny, or Grampa? You can talk to me, Sav. I want you to."

I wanted to tell him right then. The guilt I felt at him worrying about me unnecessarily was twisting my stomach into a knot. But if Chris was right and it would only upset him at first, we could at least tell him together, after the wedding, to reassure him that I knew exactly what I was doing.

Maybe I couldn't tell him in that moment, but the least I could do was make sure he didn't worry about his little sister.

“Sean, if I’m different, it’s because things are good. Great. Better than usual. The Sparks is crawling toward the black, Grampa’s taking better care of himself and on the right dose of blood pressure meds, and hey, I’m going to meet one of my favorite authors soon. She’s doing a reading here at the bookstore.”

“Wow,” he said, beaming at me. “Okay. I can handle a *good* different.” He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “And then there’s Chris.”

“What?”

“You don’t act like you want to claw his eyes out every time you’re in the same room together anymore. You’re even friendly again. One more thing on your good-stuff list, right?”

“Yeah. Yes. One more thing. Of course.” I laughed nervously. “Everything’s great.”

The door chimed, thank God, because I wasn’t doing the greatest job trying to seem casual. I wondered if the word “liar” had broken out in hives across my forehead yet.

Chris walked in, smiling as soon as he saw Sean. “Hey, man. Saw your car out front.”

Sean leaned his elbow against the counter and thanked Chris again for the new venue. He talked about how the wedding planning was going to kill him and made some of the same jokes about it I’d heard him make at least a few times already. Sean needed some new material.

I busied myself at the counter, trying not to listen too closely. But Sean started asking Chris about his mom, and I couldn’t help but pay attention.

The more I listened, the worse I felt.

While I’d been fidgeting and nervous and struggling with what to say to Sean, things that were less an outright lie than a lie of omission, Chris unfurled a story about his mom that I’d have fully believed if I hadn’t already known it was a lie.

He relayed things they’d said to each other. How she’d tried to make small talk, and he knew she just wanted money,

so he asked her outright what she needed it for. He gave such a convincing *he said, she said* detailing of their conversations, I wondered why he was doing construction and not writing fiction.

Chris was a natural. He was as skilled a liar as I'd ever seen.

We were both lying, but I hadn't expected him to be so damn good at it.

Stop it, Sav. You're being ridiculous. He's not lying to you.

Chris glanced at me after he'd finished his story, and I couldn't even force myself to smile. "Great to see you, bro," I said, as I walked around and hugged Sean. "I've got to take care of a couple of things in the back."

I left the room, hoping that by the time I came back to the counter they'd both be gone.

CHRIS

SAV DIDN'T WANT to ride together to Sean and Nicole's bridal party outing. I didn't think it would seem suspicious if we arrived at the same time, and I wanted to take her home to my bed afterward, but she claimed she had an important meeting first thing in the morning and needed to go to bed early.

Our weekend trip away had been fantastic, but the next day she started acting differently. It was a subtle change, and I wasn't sure if it was because I'd done something wrong or she had something else bothering her.

She come to my place a couple nights that week, we'd had dinner, made love, and everything seemed fine for a while. But she seemed to talk and joke with me less. And she hadn't wanted to stay overnight either time.

I'd asked her a few times if something was wrong, but she always said it was just work stress or she was tired.

Then I remembered how she'd acted when I was talking to Sean. With all the wedding activities coming up, and our plan to tell Sean after, I thought maybe her nerves were getting the best of her. I wasn't looking forward to telling him either, but I was anticipating finally getting it all out in the open and dealing with his feelings, for better or worse. I didn't want to have to lie to my best friend anymore, and I was sure she was tired of lying to him too.

I shoved my hands into my jeans pockets as I walked down the sidewalk. We were meeting at the only bar in town that resembled a club. It was dark with loud music and flashing

lights. I squinted as I glanced around the room, spotting the group in a back corner.

Sav looked gorgeous in a tight black dress and heels.

I approached her first, coming up behind her while she talked to Lucas. I was less bothered by him now, and he nodded when he saw me. I could tell that he knew about me and Sav in the way he left more distance between them when I approached and the look in his eye. I was surprised by this, but Sav knew him better than I did. Maybe she'd told him just to have someone to tell.

Sav glanced over her shoulder at me, then she glanced at Sean standing at the bar.

“Do you need anything?” I asked her.

“Nope. Fine. Thanks.” She turned back to talk to Lucas, leaving me feeling dismissed.

The cold shoulder hurt. I stood there for a few more seconds. She must have wanted to make sure there was no hint of us being close at all.

I greeted everyone else, handing out bro hugs to Sean and Brian and giving Nicole a side hug. I was caught off guard by a full-body hug from Anna. She'd thrown herself into my arms, her breath already sharp with alcohol. She smacked a kiss onto my cheek. I resisted the urge to scrub at my cheek with my fingers.

“I'm so glad you're finally here,” she said. “Everyone else is so boring.”

If I could have brought myself to be a little more of a dick, I would have pointed out that even if I hadn't been in a relationship, I would never have been interested in her.

She was the exact type of woman that would cause trouble. The type of woman I'd avoided since Katelyn.

“Hey, man,” Brian said, coming up beside me. “Wanna go halves with me on a round of shots?”

“Yeah, I'm okay with that.”

Brian made an announcement and rounded everyone up by the bar. Everyone ordered what they wanted, and Anna stayed glued to my side. I hoped Sav would come over, stake her claim even if she couldn't say as much, and discourage Anna from flirting with me. But she stayed close to Lucas.

She glared in my direction every few minutes, glares I thought were directed at Anna but I couldn't be completely sure.

Brian made a toast to the happy couple, wishing them a successful wedding and a happy life. We raised our drinks and took the shot. My whiskey went down smooth, and I licked my lips to savor the taste.

"A whiskey man," Anna said. "Rugged. I like that."

She kept leaning too close and bumping into me, forcing me to take little steps away. I didn't know if she had a drinking problem or just couldn't take a hint, but I was in no mood to be pawed at.

She put her empty shot glass down on the bar. "Butterscotch schnapps for me."

I tried to make actual conversation with her since she obviously wasn't going away anytime soon. "I don't know how you can drink that," I said, my mouth puckering at the memory from when I was nineteen and tried it for the first time. "Too sweet."

"I know I am, but what are you," she said with a giggle. She ran her fingertip down the line of buttons on the front of my shirt and leaned toward me, lifting up on her toes like she might try to kiss me.

That was enough for me. I grabbed her hand, gently but firmly. "Stop."

Nicole turned her head toward us, but I held onto Anna's hand to keep her from grabbing at my shirt or moving any closer.

"Sorry," she said, finally realizing that she'd overstepped. She looked like she might cry.

I looked toward where Sav and Lucas had been talking, but he stood there alone.

“Just ... drink some water, okay? It’s early yet.”

That was as much comfort as I could muster for her. I made my way to Lucas through the crowd. “Where’d she go?”

He gestured over his shoulder. “Outside.”

I found her behind the bar in a seating area filled with picnic tables. Sav was seated alone at one of them, scrolling through her phone.

“Sav? Everything okay?”

She glanced up from her phone but didn’t answer.

I didn’t think she could glare harder, but she did. She would have set me on fire with those eyes if she had the power. I wanted to make her feel better, but I needed to know the problem first. I couldn’t fix it if she didn’t let me in.

“Sure, if by okay you mean how I’m starting to feel like a dirty little secret.”

I sat and took one of her hands. “I don’t like keeping our relationship a secret, either. You know that, don’t you?”

She wasn’t glaring anymore, but she didn’t answer me, either.

“Sav, if you want us to tell him right now, we’ll march in there and do it. But he’s got so much on his plate, and I don’t even blame him for not liking the idea of his sister being with me. At least not until I can explain to him and make him see what you mean to me.”

I could see her swallow. She sniffed. “You really do intend to tell him after the wedding, don’t you?”

Where was this coming from?

“We’ve talked about this. We’re going to tell him together. As soon as they’re back and all the wedding stress is behind them, we’re going to sit down with Sean and tell him about us.”

It bothered me that she didn't say anything. She cleared her throat. "Do you have any idea what it's like to see another woman doing her damndest to lay one on you from across the bar? And want to run up to her and tell her that you're mine, but be unable to do that?"

I cupped her cheek. "I wanted that too. It wasn't a hell of a lot of fun on my end, either."

"Why didn't you walk away from her the second she got too forward with you?"

Did Sav think I'd enjoyed any of that? "I was trying to be polite. And my patience ran out, so I put a stop to it."

She let out a long, slow breath. "Seeing her flirting with you, thinking about all the other women like her—"

"No, baby. Not like her."

"—and all the gorgeous women—"

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever known."

"—all the experienced women, and how you might start to think about what you're missing out—"

I shot to my feet and rounded the table to pull her up by her shoulders. "Savannah, don't. I don't know why you're thinking these things, but you're wrong. I don't care what other women look like, or how much experience they have. There's not a single woman I've ever known who can hold a candle to you."

I took her face in my hands. "No one has ever made me feel the way you do, Sav. Are ... are you having second thoughts about me?"

Again, Savannah didn't answer the question, and panic start to build behind my breastbone. "You're what matters to me, baby. No other woman will ever change that. I only want you."

She looked so sad, I almost couldn't stand it. I kissed her softly, and to my surprise she returned it eagerly. Sav clung to me, pressing her body against mine.

“Sav, I want to kiss you so badly, but somebody might see us out here.”

She stiffened in my arms and pulled away. “I know. But I’m not ready to go back in there.”

“You don’t have to. Come on,” I said, gesturing toward the parking lot.

She hesitated for a few seconds before she started walking next to me. I didn’t know what was going on or why she was feeling how she did, but I’d do whatever I could to fix it.

SAV

CHRIS'S TRUCK was parked along the back fence of the parking lot where there were few cars and only one nearby light to illuminate the space. It was the kind of place a woman wouldn't want to walk alone because of the poor lighting and distance from the bar.

We got into his truck, and as soon as the cab light faded, he put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close.

“What can I do to make you feel better, Sav?” He cupped my cheek, and I let the arm around my shoulders pull me in for a soft, slow kiss.

Part of me wanted to push him away and go back inside. I worried that he didn't want to tell Sean about us, even after the wedding. It felt like a ridiculous fear, but I couldn't shake it after seeing him lie so easily to my brother. And seeing Anna get so close to him made me think about all the other women he'd been with.

And how he'd pushed me away that first time we'd kissed.

That was insecure Sav really getting into my head. I could hear Penny's voice telling me to stop worrying so much, but it wasn't helping.

Another part of me, the less hurt and more jealous part, had wanted to stride across the bar and kiss Chris in front of Anna and everyone so they'd all know he was mine.

All those years when I barely spoke to him, I'd been so jealous of every woman he was with. I told myself it didn't

matter, he wasn't worth thinking about, but I knew I was lying to myself.

I knew it with even more certainty now that I'd fantasized about grabbing Anna by her hair and yanking her away from him.

The thought had been so unlike me, a Sav I barely recognized, that I'd felt even worse.

I didn't know what to do about it. But Chris kissed me so sweetly, and we seemed well-hidden and far enough away from anyone who might see us, that I decided I could make myself feel at least a little better.

Maybe I could kiss him in front of my brother and everyone at the bar. But I could show him, and reassure myself, that he belonged to me.

I pressed my hand against the crotch of his jeans and squeezed. He gasped into the kiss and held me tighter.

I liked catching him off-guard. Chris had so much more experience than I did, so he naturally tended to take charge when we made love. Each time I'd turned the tables on him, he'd been surprised and so turned on, he seemed to struggle to keep himself from coming too fast.

His excitement turned me on too. It made me feel powerful. After watching Anna come onto him, I'd felt weak and unable to do anything about it.

I didn't want to feel that way anymore.

I crawled into Chris's lap and pressed myself down against him. He was already hard, just from me palming him through his jeans and kissing him.

Chris gasped and grabbed my hips to pull me tightly against him, rocking his hips up. "Look what you do to me, Sav."

I kissed him, rough and filthy, rolling my hips like he was already fucking me. "I didn't like her being that close to you," I breathed against his lips. I reached and fumbled with his fly.

“Neither did I.” He watched me unfastening his slacks. “Baby, I’m yours. I don’t care about her. You’re the only woman I want.”

I shut him up with another kiss as I pulled his cock free and stroked him, fast and rough. “Show me,” I said, my voice rough.

Chris lifted his hips to push his slacks down his thighs a little more, then gripped my hips to help me rise up.

He groaned as I hovered above him, his cock head pressed against my panties. I didn’t give him the chance to take charge. Instead, I pulled them to the side and fucked myself onto him, taking him into me in one fast movement.

He grunted, shuddering beneath me, staring at me with his mouth open like he couldn’t get enough air. “Sav,” he said, his voice strained.

I didn’t give him time to say anything else. I rose up and dropped my hips down again, hissing at how hard he was inside me. I could barely make out his features in the dim light, but I could tell he stared at me, looking like he was in a kind of pleasant shock.

I whimpered as I rode him, my hands clamped onto his shoulders for leverage. As the tension started to coil in my lower body, I slid a hand around the back of his neck and leaned into him, focusing on making myself come.

With the steering wheel behind me, there was little room for my hand or his between us. It didn’t matter. I was going to come without the help. I felt powerful, like I was claiming him for a change.

Claiming him as mine.

It didn’t take long for Chris to tighten his grips on my hips and thrust up into me with a muffled shout. I squeezed around him, the powerful feeling of making him come sending me over the edge on a couple of seconds later.

Chris made a strangled sound of pure pleasure that was so sexy, it sent another wave of bliss rippling through me. I

caught his next moan in another heated kiss while I slammed my hips down onto him in the last throes of my orgasm.

I rested my cheek against his while we panted and shivered, coming down from the peak of it. Chris slid his hands up my back, stroked my arms and thighs, kissed my neck and shoulder.

“Savannah,” he breathed, sounding stunned.

I’d surprised myself, too.

I climbed off Chris and dug in my small purse for tissues to clean myself up while he tucked himself back into his slacks. When we were finished, he reached for me again, cupping my neck to kiss me. I gave myself over to it, feeling more confident and less jealous, but I still couldn’t think about Anna leaning against him without shades of that jealousy popping back up.

“You alright?” Chris asked, brushing his knuckles over my cheek.

“Yeah. Definitely better now,” I admitted.

He took my hand. “Sav, you know I’m yours, right? Even though almost nobody knows it but us, I belong to you.”

Deep in my heart, I thought I really did believe that, despite the petty jealousy I’d let take a hold of me.

“And as soon as Sean gets back from his honeymoon, everyone can know it. I can’t wait to tell people that I’m lucky enough to be with you.”

He kissed me quickly. “And that you’re lucky enough to be with me,” he teased. “Because I’m quite the catch.”

The rest of my tension melted away as I laughed and shoved his shoulder. His grin in the dim light looked exactly as the one he’d given my brother once or twice while they’d talked the other day.

When they’d talked and Chris had lied so easily about the trip he hadn’t taken.

Stop, it Sav. My inner voice sounded like Penny again, scolding me for being stupid and insecure.

“I’m ready to go back inside now. Before you keep us here for hours listing all your wonderful qualities.”

When we got out, he helped me smooth down my dress, and I helped him get his shirt tucked back in properly, so we wouldn’t look like two people who had just had toe-curling orgasms together in a parked truck.

I took his hand and held it most of the walk back to the bar because I needed to feel like we weren’t hiding, just for a few more seconds. And if I’m honest about it, I think I wanted people to see, for our secret to come out, so we could stop pretending.

When we got close enough that the brighter streetlights would hide nothing, Chris had better sense than I did and let go of my hand, letting me get ahead of him to walk into the bar first. He didn’t follow me, obviously intending to wait outside at least a few seconds.

Anna sat in the entryway where a bouncer checked IDs. Her face was puffy like she’d been crying. I might have felt bad for her for just a second, woman to woman, if she hadn’t glared at me like she wanted to scratch my eyes out.

I walked past without a word. As I went into the bar, I heard the front door open behind me and knew it was Chris coming in. Somehow, I managed to keep myself from turning around to see her expression.

The pettiest part of me wanted Anna to know we’d been together outside and for her to realize that Chris only wanted me, so she never stood a chance.

CHRIS

I PULLED into an empty spot in front of the bookstore. It was Monday, and Sav was off today because she'd worked Saturday before the bridal party incident. I had a surprise I'd been planning for her, and I needed Melanie's input to make it happen.

I was even more determined to make sure her dreams for the Sparks came true. I'd been bothered by what happened at the party all the weekend. Sav had to know she didn't have to worry about other women flirting with me. But she'd seemed so uncertain about everything.

I still thought about the way she'd taken charge in the truck, too. She'd completely blown my mind, and I wanted her to do it again, but not because she felt insecure about where my heart really was.

I'd almost told her then that I loved her, words I hadn't said out loud yet. But the timing didn't feel right. I didn't want her to think I was only saying it to reassure her. When I said it, I didn't want her to be able to find any reason to question it.

Until then, I planned to do everything I could to show her that nothing mattered to me more than her and her happiness.

Melanie's car was parked a few spaces down from mine, but she wasn't waiting for me outside. I walked in and found her near the back, looking at books in the nonfiction section.

"Looking for something to read?" I asked, shoving my hands in my pockets as I stood beside her.

She shrugged. “I love self-help books. A lot of them repeat the same information, but it makes me feel like I’m getting my life together every time.”

I scoffed. “You seem like you have things together to me.”

She laughed. “That’s the secret to designing. Make things appear as if they’re together on the outside, even if the inside might need some work.”

“I never looked at it that way before.” She was talking about designing, but her words hit home. I was starting to face the fact that I’d presented myself one way to everyone around me for years, the playboy content with one-night stands, while secretly I’d longed for something more. With Sav. It had been so secret, I hadn’t even admitted to myself until recently.

I thought about that for a moment before clearing my throat. “Are you ready for me to show you around, or do you want to browse for a while? I have some stuff I could do upstairs—”

“No, no. I’m ready,” she said, placing the book she’d selected back on the shelf. “Let’s go.”

I showed her around every room, even traveling down the hallway to the office. She peeked into the bathrooms and frequently hummed as she looked around.

“I have some ideas,” she said, making notes on her phone. “There’s another venue I designed that had a similar set-up. It’s at the Brimstone Hotel in Mayberry.” She locked her phone and threw it into her purse. “I could show you, so we can be on the same page.”

I glanced at my watch. I didn’t have another meeting for a good two hours. Mayberry was a thirty-minute drive out of town, heading south. “Sure. I can drive and save you the gas. It’s the least I can do.”

She shrugged with a grin. “Thanks. I’ll take you up on that.”

I waved at Jackson as we left while he stood at the register. “You coming back later?”

I nodded. “Yeah, just running an errand. I’ll be back.”

He gave me a thumbs-up, and we left the store.

“I love Carswell,” Melanie said once we’d gotten into my truck. “And the bookstore is such a cute location.”

“Yeah, it’s a nice little town,” I said as I backed out. “Have you lived around here very long?”

She shook her head. “Oh, no. I’m from Denver, but I wanted to live somewhere more quiet. I was tired of the city.”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. Carswell’s been my home for as long as I can remember.”

I thought back to when I’d considered going to college. Leaving and experiencing new things sounded fun, especially because Sean left for Denver to pursue his degree at twenty-two. We’d both stayed in town after high school graduation, but he eventually realized he wanted to teach, so he left.

I stayed behind, sculpting and working odd jobs. It didn’t take long before I realized I was good at applying my skills to home renovation. I worked well with wood, which easily translated over to working with other standard materials.

When Sav went to college, there was a small period of time when I’d worried she might not come back. I thought she might like the city so much she’d move there. If she hadn’t been so close to Jackson, she might have considered it, especially after what happened between us.

I didn’t even want to think about what my life would be like if she’d left Carswell for good. I’d still be sleeping around, and she’d probably still be giving me the cold shoulder.

“You’ve never thought about leaving and living anywhere else?” Melania said, drawing my attention again.

“The place doesn’t matter too much to me,” I finally said. “I’ve wondered what’s out there, but I’ve also always wanted to stick by the people closest to me. I have friends here that are more like family. As long as they’re here, I’m not going anywhere.”

She hummed thoughtfully. “That’s great. Sometimes I wish I had people I was close to like that. I’m not that close to my family and never had close friends, so staying in one spot never mattered that much to me.”

“Maybe that’ll change now. Small towns are different. People are friendly, and most of them take pride in a real sense of community. It’s hard to get that in a city, I’m guessing.”

“You guessed right.”

She told me about Denver during the rest of the drive. It sounded like it was least a culturally rich city. People in the arts scene probably gravitated there more than some other big cities. But some of her stories about rude people made me glad I wasn’t interested in city life.

When we went into the Brimstone, Melanie stopped at the front desk and talked the clerks, who clearly knew her. “I wanted to show a client the lounge,” she told them.

They nodded. “No problem, Mel. Let us know if you need anything.”

She took me to the back of the hotel, to a large room was filled with sofas, tables, and a long bar with a bartender in a suit. Several people sat around the room, talking quietly, or working on their laptops.

“Obviously, the area would be smaller than this, but what do you think of the color scheme and aesthetic?” she asked, gesturing around the room.

I didn’t know much about it, but I pulled open the pictures Sav had sent me for reference. We sat at the bar and had a drink while we discussed Melanie’s ideas and how they would give Sav the customer reading area around the coffee bar that she dreamed of.

My phone buzzed on the table with a text.

Sean: You around? We need to talk about something.

He probably wanted to talk about the wedding or thank me for then tenth time for suggesting their new venue. But my

stomach dropped at the “about something.” Wouldn’t he have just said what it was if it was about the wedding?

I was being paranoid. Guilt did that to a person, I guessed.

I must have stared at my phone for too long.

“Is everything all right?” Melanie asked.

I cleared my throat, placing my phone face down on the surface. “Yeah, everything’s good. It can wait.”

We talked more about the plans for the bookstore. Sitting there in a space so similar to Sav’s idea helped me get a feel for the vibe she wanted. Her space would be a little less formal, a little less bartender-in-suit, and more Bohemian and laid back, like her. But it still helped Melanie and I settle on a design and a plan for getting it done.

All the way back to Carswell, I thought about the text I’d ignored, knowing I needed call him as soon as I could to see what was going on. I decided to assume it was Best Man business and to try to sound chipper and normal when I called Sean later.

SAV

ALTHOUGH IT WAS my day off, I was lonely and bored at home, so I decided to go out and stop by the store before getting lunch with Penny. We hadn't seen each other much over the last couple of weeks, and I needed to fill her in on everything that had happened.

I turned into the downtown square, looking for a parking spot closest to the store. Chris was getting into his truck. I lifted my hand to wave, about to honk my horn, when I saw a woman getting into the passenger side.

Melanie.

They were both smiling and talking as he backed out of the spot.

I'd promised myself that I'd stop being paranoid, that I'd believe in Chris and not make stupid assumptions.

Apparently, I'd lied to myself when I made that promise. Old fears and insecurities rose up into my throat, and my eyes tingled.

No. I was not going to cry.

I didn't know why he kept seeing this woman, but he'd introduced me to her. There couldn't be anything going on. Chris would never have kissed me and then introduced me to someone he was having an affair with.

I could tell myself those things all day long, but I'd seen them together now. I was going to obsess about it and revisit all my old feelings about Chris over the four years that we

barely spoke. All the hurt I'd felt, the betrayal, the lack of trust. Those would come back and try to convince me I'd been right all along if I didn't do something about it.

I needed to see for myself where they were going and what they were doing. I considered this an improvement since I was investigating instead of jumping straight to being angry with him, but it still felt bad to be questioning him at all.

I had three options. I could follow them and confess to it later once I discovered nothing was happening between them. I could go into the bookstore as I'd planned and resolve to trust Chris and not question his devotion to me. That option would leave me feeling like a fool if it turned out later that I was wrong. It also meant I'd probably worry and keep waiting for that to happen.

Or I could follow them and find out they were having an affair. It would crush me, but at least I wouldn't have to wonder anymore.

Guiltily, I followed them. I had to know.

Penny's voice rang in my ears. How can you love someone you don't trust? They go hand in hand, Sav. She'd said that to me years earlier, when I'd gone to her crying about Chris. She was trying to convince me that I didn't love him because I didn't trust him.

She later admitted that she thought I loved him, but she also thought that if I could stop believing that, I'd be better off.

I took the next turn and headed back to the store. And the memory of how I felt when he rejected me four years earlier ran in a loop through my mind. I got back on the main road and followed them, despite the guilt I felt about it.

The cars between us started disappearing, turning off the highway once we were fifteen minutes out of town. I had to drive slowly to avoid him seeing me in his rearview mirror, letting cars pass me so I wouldn't be directly behind him.

I followed them all the way to Mayberry only to watch his truck disappear into the parking garage of The Brimstone.

They'd gone half an hour out of town to a hotel.

I didn't follow them into the garage. I didn't need to. I pulled over on the street until I felt like I had control of myself.

I considered waiting right there to watch the garage until they came out, then following them back to Carswell so I could see them when they got out of the truck. Would it be obvious that they'd been together? Would her skirt be on crooked, or his shirt be wrinkled?

But why torture myself. I was already going to imagine it all without needing to see anything.

I had a good cry while I was parked on the street, then I wiped my faced with tissues and drove back to the bookstore.

I wanted to see Grampa. Tell him what I fool I'd been and get one of his bearhugs that made me feel safe and protected.

Sean was there, standing stiff on his side of the counter. Grampa stood behind it, hands on his hips. They looked like they were arguing about something.

I couldn't face Sean, not right then. I turned to leave before they saw me. I'd go down the street to Penny's office and wait for her.

"Hey, Sav," Sean said.

I pretended I didn't hear him, but he caught up before I reached the front door. He cupped my face like I was a little kid. "Hey," he said. He looked me over, and I realized what I mess I must have been, my nose and eyes probably red from crying. "What's wrong, sis?"

"Oh, nothing," I said, trying to act casual and hating how nervous and unsure I sounded. "One of those days, you know? Women and our hormones, right?" I tried to laugh, but it came out more like a nervous sob.

"This looks like more than that." He pulled me into a tight hug. "What's going on?"

I almost bawled on his shoulder.

It felt so good for Sean to hug me like that, and his concerned touch me. But I held it together and sniffed loudly. “You really do not want to hear my PMS complaints, big bro.”

“Sav.” He clearly wasn’t buying it.

“Sean, I’m okay. But thanks for the hug. I needed it.” I pulled free and stepped back.

His hands were still on my arms. “Anytime. You need another one, you tell me, alright?”

I chuckled and nodded.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where Chris is, would you?” he said.

“Sean.” Grampa sounded tense. The word came out like a warning.

My stomach dropped.

Sean *knew*. He knew something was going on between us.

I glanced away. “I don’t know.”

“Really? I’d be surprised if that were true.”

“Sean *Sparks*,” Grampa said from the register.

“I think he had some meetings planned for today,” I said weakly. At least that was true. But I could tell the look in Sean’s eyes, he knew. Maybe that was why he and Grampa looked like they were at odds when I walked in.

“I really need to have a chat with him.” He sounded furious now. “He and I needed to have a talk yesterday.”

There was no point in lying about it anymore. “Sean—”

“Does he have anything to do with this?” he asked, gesturing at my face. “Did he make you cry?”

“What? No.” But I felt my chin quiver, so my answer was hardly going to be convincing.

“See?” he asked Grampa, turning to him. “This is why. This is what I was talking about.”

“Sean, listen to—”

“Sean,” Grampa said, his voice stern. “He’s been your best friend your entire life. He’s like a part of this family.”

“I know, Grampa. I love Chris. But *this is my sister.*”

Grampa came from behind the counter while he said, “And she’s been happier over the last several weeks than she has been in years. Chris has been happier too. But you’ve been too busy to notice. He’s changed, Sean.”

“Wait, you knew about this?” Chris still held one of my arms and gestured at me with his other hand. “You let this go on, when you knew what kind of a player Chris has always been? She should never have—”

“Stop talking about me like I’m not here!” I said. I put a hand over my face and tried not to sob, but I couldn’t stop the tears.

Grampa put an arm around me, rubbing my back. “There, now. I’m sorry. We’re sorry,” he said, glaring at Sean. “Tell me why you were crying before you came in here.”

That only made me cry harder after everything Sean had said about Chris being a player, his whole concern about me getting close him. Grampa made a motion toward Sean, so he walked away and stood by the register.

“I was stupid, Grampa. I saw him leave here with a woman, Melanie something. They went into a hotel together. And I—”

“God *damn* it,” Sean said. “This is what I worried about, Grampa. You see?”

He’d only pretended to give us privacy but had apparently strained to hear every word.

“Don’t worry, Sav. I’ll take care of it.” Sean stormed out of the bookstore with Grampa calling after him.

“Oh, he’s such a hothead,” Grampa said. “And you’re almost as bad.”

“What? Me?”

“Following him and jumping to conclusions.”

“They went into a hotel together. An out of town hotel.”

“A hotel with a restaurant, and a bar, and meeting rooms? One where people do all kinds of business every day of the week? He’s a contractor. They could have gone for any number of reasons.”

“Grampa—”

“Yes, the reason you’re thinking is always possible. But it’s hardly the only explanation. Especially when anybody with eyes in their head can see how much that man loves you.”

My breath caught. Chris hadn’t told me he loved me, but hearing it stated so plainly from Grampa made my heart do a flip-flop.

“He’d be an idiot to do anything that jeopardized what you two have. Especially after it’s taken so long for both of you to stop fighting it.”

I wasn’t sure what he said was true, but I hugged him, grateful to have someone like him on my side.

“You should call him, Sav, and at least warn him so when Sean finds him, he knows what to expect.”

I didn’t know exactly how I was going to explain myself, or how I was going to deal with the feelings I had after seeing him and Melanie go into that hotel, but I pulled my phone out.

I didn’t get a chance to dial. Sean’s angry voice carried in from the street outside.

CHRIS

AFTER WE GOT BACK from The Brimstone, I pulled in as close to Melanie's car as possible. After she left, I realized Sav's car was out front. I hadn't expected to see her all day, so my day was instantly better.

Sean came out of the bookstore and stopped short when he saw me.

"Well, hey, Chris. What's shakin'?" His voice was tense, his words clipped off, like he was angry.

"Not much. Something wrong, bro?"

"You tell me."

Heat spread across my chest as my adrenalin surged. Sean was red in the face, his shoulders spread, his hands balled into fists. He *was* angry.

"You tell me what's wrong, *bro*," he ground out. "I came here to find you, since you practically live here now."

I tilted my head. "I'm here a lot, because I'm putting an office on the second floor. You knew—"

"And since you seem to be spending all your free time with Sav. Who's inside right now, crying over you."

"What?" I glanced past him to try to see through the glass. "What did you say to her?"

"Nothing that didn't need to be said. But I'm not the one who made her cry, *bro*. That's on you."

“Sean, you need to calm down for a minute and make some sense. Why is she—”

“I thought we were friends, Chris.”

I wanted to get past him to see Sav and figure out what was wrong, but that stopped me short.

“You’re my best friend,” I said quickly.

“That’s what I thought. And then I find out you’re fucking around with my little sister.”

“I’m not fucking around—”

“At my own wedding party, no less.” He stepped close, finger in my chest. “You fucked my sister in your truck *outside my wedding party*.”

I swallowed hard. Hearing him say it drove home how irresponsible we’d been, doing that where anybody could see. But there was no one around, and I hadn’t thought we were in any kind of danger of being discovered.

Sav obviously hadn’t either, since she was the one who made the first move.

“Don’t try to deny it, Chris. Anna saw you.”

Fucking Anna.

I knew she was that kind of troublemaker, so I shouldn’t have been surprised it was her.

“I’m not going to deny it. But you’ve got it all wrong.”

“And two days later, you’ve already moved on to somebody else!” he shouted.

“Sav and I aren’t just fu—wait, what?”

“You need to up your sneaking game, man. You’ve gotten caught twice in three days. She knows you went to a hotel with another woman. Not me that made her cry, Chris. That’s on you.”

How the hell could she have known that Melanie and I went to The Brimstone? I had to explain, so I tried to step past Sean. He stepped forward, forcing me to move backward away

from the door. I could tell he wanted to punch me. “Sean, this is all a misunderstanding. I wasn’t *with* another woman.”

I could hardly believe Sav would think that, after everything we’d said.

Everything we’d done.

I could tell him about Melanie’s design for the bookstore now. I wanted to earlier, to share my excitement about it with my best friend, but I didn’t want him to suspect I was doing it because I had feelings for Sav. Thanks to Anna’s big mouth, that didn’t matter anymore.

“It’s a simple explanation. I didn’t—”

Sav and Jackson stepped out of the door behind Sean.

“Sav, baby,” I started. “Listen to—”

“Don’t you call her that,” Sean snapped. “You stay the hell away from her.”

“Sean,” Jackson said. “This is between the two of them. And you’re making a scene in front of my store!”

Jackson grabbed Sean’s arm and urged him to move away from me. Reluctantly, he followed his grandpa and let me take the few steps I needed to reach Sav. Her nose was pink and her eyes-were red-rimmed. She looked on the verge of fresh tears as she gazed at me.

“Savannah,” I said, putting my hands on her shoulders. “Baby, I don’t know who told you that I took a woman to a hotel, but—”

“Nobody told me.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “I saw you.”

I shook my head. “What?”

“I came to the bookstore and saw you leaving with her. So ... I followed you to Mayberry.”

I felt like my heart stopped in my chest. My explanation was so simple, and even though it would ruin some of the surprise I had in store for her, I had to tell her to keep her from thinking the worst. But the thought that she’d followed us to

see what we did, she'd *assumed* the worst, then came crying to her grandfather instead of simply asking me about it ... it fucking hurt.

I hadn't done anything to betray her trust. Was she always going to hold it against me for pushing her away on that night four years ago? Would she ever be able to trust me?

I still held her shoulders, mostly because I couldn't bring myself to let her go. I was afraid of the question I was about to ask her. I wasn't sure I could handle the answer, but I didn't feel like I had a choice.

If we were going to make this work, I had to know.

"There's an explanation for what you saw. It's not what you're assuming, Sav. And I'll tell you what it is. But first, tell *me* something. If I promise you that nothing went on between me and Melanie without explaining anything else ... will you believe me?"

Sav swallowed hard. She blinked a few times. "Chris, it's just that—"

"Sav? Don't you realize that I would never hurt you? Don't you trust me?"

She stayed silent long enough, biting her lip and trying not to cry, that I had my answer even before she blurted, "I'm trying. I want to."

I stroked my hands down her arms and finally let them drop. "Melanie is an interior designer. She's helping me renovate the Sparks for you. We went to The Brimstone so she could show me a lounge area kind of like the one you're dreaming of for the bookstore. I only kept our meeting secret because I wanted to surprise you."

I smiled sadly and thought about offering her my phone with all the photos Melanie had sent me over the last few weeks of her ideas for the design. But if she didn't trust me, what did it matter?

Tears streamed down Sav's face. She looked at me so full of regret that I wanted to pull her into my arms and tell her

everything was okay. But even then, I wasn't sure she believed me.

Sav didn't trust me. There was no getting around that.

Sean brushed past me and pulled Sav into a hug.

He'd always been so protective of her, I wasn't even really mad about him getting in my face. But it hurt that I'd been right about his reaction. I guessed he didn't trust me any more than she did.

Jackson took my arm and pulled me aside. "Cooler heads will prevail, Chris," he said softly. "You know Sean as well as I do. When he calms down—"

"Maybe," I said. I appreciated him trying to comfort me, but at that moment, I really needed to be far away from all the Sparkses. I needed to lick my wounds and try to figure out where to go from there.

"I think it's best if I go."

"I'm not sure that's true," Jackson said. "Let's try not to make any rash decisions while everyone's upset."

"I know. I've just got some things to do, and I need ..."

I couldn't explain it, and I didn't want to say out loud that I needed the hell away from there. Jackson nodded at me as if he understood.

I drove off and tried not to look back to see if Sav was watching me leave.

SAV

I WOKE with a pounding headache as little fingers slapped my face. I flinched and pulled back, slowly opening my eyes to find Penny's daughter, Olivia, pulling back her hand to slap me again.

"Ouch," I said, and she laughed.

"Olivia, what are you doing?" Penny said, sounding as if she were in the kitchen. I had crashed on the couch after splitting a bottle of wine with my best friend. And drinking most of another one myself.

Penny let me cry about Chris. She rubbed my back, and we watched *Bridesmaids* until I conked out at some point, and she'd sweetly covered me with a blanket.

"She's beating me up," I groaned.

Before she could strike again, Michael scooped her up. "Sorry," he said. "She's an escape artist." He walked her over to her little playpen and placed her inside. She fidgeted and cried before he handed her a favorite toy.

Penny appeared with two steaming mugs, bless her beautiful, caffeine-delivering soul.

"I have a meeting in a few," Michael said, kissing his wife on the cheek.

Penny nodded. "I got her. Don't worry."

He kissed the top of my head. "Hope you'll feel better soon."

“Gonna try,” I said.

Penny put our coffees on the table and sat beside me. “I’ll make some eggs and toast whenever you feel like eating.”

I was lucky to have Penny as a friend when I’d been so anti-social for most of my life. “I’m so glad we were roomed together freshman year,” I said.

“Me too,” she agreed, squeezing my calf. “Are you feeling any better from last night?”

I pouted. “Not really.”

“Maybe you should turn your phone back on,” she suggested. “Things might not be as bad as you think.”

Penny had tried to tell me last night that no, I shouldn’t have followed them, and no, Chris shouldn’t have left when he did. She seemed to think we’d work it out between us. Her confidence made me feel better, but I still felt like I’d screwed everything up beyond repair.

My insecurities kept rising up, causing problems. What if that never stopped? What if I flew off the handle anytime a beautiful woman looked his way? What if I was such a stunted child when it came to love, that I was incapable of having an adult, trusting relationship even with the man I’d wanted almost my whole life?

Olivia started getting fussy again, so Penny went to get her.

I sat up slowly, mindful of my throbbing, hungover brain, and got my phone out of my purse to turn it on. I’d been too scared to leave it on last night.

I’d missed three calls. One from Grampa, one from Sean, and one from Chris.

I couldn’t imagine why he’d even want me anymore. My jealousy had to be a turn-off. Then dealing with Sean at his angriest might have been a nail in the coffin. I’d convinced myself of that, so I was surprised to see that he’d called at all.

Grampa left a voicemail. He just wanted to make sure I was okay. Sean didn’t leave one, but he’d texted to say he was

sorry, and that we needed to talk.

Chris's message simply said, "Sav, please call me when you can."

He'd left a few text messages after that. One said that he was coming over to talk to me. After he got there and found that I wasn't home, he'd texted asking me to let him know I was okay. Finally, the last text from just twenty minutes earlier, said, "Please call me. Nothing in this world is more important to me than you. I'm free for the next hour. In fact, I'm going to clear the day. Call me anytime, and I'll drop whatever I'm doing. Call me, Sav."

"Chris wants to talk," I said.

Penny nodded, swaying side to side while she held Olivia. "I need to change her and give her a snack. So you'll have some privacy." She shot a look over her shoulder as she left the room. "Call him already," she hissed.

I didn't even know what I wanted to say. I was so confused and feeling foolish for everything.

I breathed out slowly, bracing myself as I dialed. It only rang once before he picked up. There was a pause where I felt like my heart might fall out of my chest.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

His voice was like silk, wrapping tight around me. It felt like the softest hug. I realized instantly that he was what I needed. I needed him so badly that it hurt every molecule in my body. I feared how much I needed him.

"Sav?" He sounded so worried.

"I'm here," I said, my voice sound raw. "I'm okay."

"Can I see you today?"

I shook my head even though he couldn't see me. "I don't think that's a great idea," I said.

There was a hitch in his voice as he asked, "Sean finding out about us was supposed to be our beginning—not our end."

Those words hit me hard, and I felt as miserable as I had yesterday all over again.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Chris’s voice sounded broken. “I shouldn’t have left yesterday. Should have stayed to talk.”

“I should have trusted you,” I admitted.

The silence stretched out until Chris finally said, “But you don’t.”

I sobbed. “I *think* I do, and then I start thinking about everything, and ... I want to, Chris, more than anything. But maybe I’m just not capable of it.”

“I don’t believe that,” he said. “Not for a minute.”

“Because you don’t want to. Doesn’t mean it’s true. I think maybe I’m just broken.”

“Stop it, Sav. You’re not broken. It’s been a difficult situation, keeping it from Sean, worrying about who might find out what. We made this hard on ourselves, and especially on you. Now that we don’t have to pretend anymore, it’ll be okay. We’ll get through this.”

“I don’t know,” was all I could choke out. I wanted that more than anything, but it seemed like any faith I had in myself when it came to Chris had disappeared overnight.

“Sav? What are you saying?”

I could barely get the words. “I think ... maybe we should ...”

“No, baby. Please. Don’t walk away from this. We’re just getting started.”

I could hear the desperation in his voice, and it broke my heart. But my fears kept me from giving in. The hated memory of Chris pushing me away after our kiss four years ago started playing in my mind.

If this was going to end in tears no matter how hard I tried, wouldn’t it be better if I was the one to end it this time?

I couldn't bring myself to say it. It hurt too much. I'd need time to find the strength to face the pain that was going to cause us both. "I can't talk about this right now, Chris. I'm sorry. I'll ... we'll talk later."

"Sav—"

I hung up and sat there, picturing the pain in his eyes when I couldn't tell him that I trusted him in front of the bookstore.

You should let him go. You don't deserve him.

"But I'm in love with him," I whispered out loud, trying to silence the hateful voices in my head.

I loved him, and I wasn't sure how I was going to be able to handle having him working upstairs and watching him leave without me every night.

I hoped some wild thought or bright idea that would make everything okay would pop into my head. I didn't want to end things, but I felt like I needed to for both our sakes.

I needed a fairy godmother to fix things for me, someone to wave a wand and take back the last entire day as if it had never happened.

Instead, I had Penny, who had put Olivia down for a nap and reappeared in the living room to see me crying into my coffee.

"Is it too early in the day for wine?" I said, trying to laugh through a sob. She sat on the couch and pulled me into a tight hug.

CHRIS

MY PHONE CALL with Sav didn't go the way I'd hoped. I couldn't believe that just when I'd finally found her again and faced my feelings for her, it was going to be over.

I'd come home the night before, sulking about her not trusting me as much as I wanted her to. I'd been hurt, both by her and Sean. I wallowed in it a little.

And then I'd decided I was being an idiot.

Trust wasn't something you couldn't flip on and off like a light switch. I'd hurt her years earlier without meaning to. And she knew my history with women.

So did Sean.

Our relationship was still new. And Sav had been a virgin before me.

I realized I was expecting a lot from someone who'd always been insecure about herself, at least when it came to men. I needed to be more patient than that.

She'd trust me completely one day, and it took her some time to get there, I'd just have to deal with that. And I'd keep proving how much I loved her, and how safe it was to trust me, every day until then.

Sav was worth the effort.

It was going to be damned hard to romance her and teach her to trust me if she broke things off, though.

My phone rang. Jackson Sparks. I had the dark thought that maybe he wanted to buy back the second floor, save Sav from having to see me all the time. I wouldn't blame him if he tried.

"I'll give it to you straight," Jackson said, when I answered.

"Okay."

"You were a damn fool for going to that hotel with a woman."

"Jackson, it was a business—"

"I know it, son. And I believe you that it was completely innocent. But you've spent too many years with too many women, doing whatever you wanted without a care, and I guess you don't understand how things will have to change if you're going to be with Sav."

I almost told him that it didn't look like I was going to be, but I couldn't make myself say the words.

"Chris, when you're in a serious relationship, you can't go to a hotel with another woman, especially not without telling the person you're in the relationship with. I don't care if she's a business associate or the damn queen of Sheba. You don't want to even give the appearance you're doing something wrong, because people talk, and where love's concerned, people don't always think clearly. Do you follow me?"

I'd been so intent on surprising Sav, I hadn't even considered any of that. "You're right, Jackson. I guess I *have* spent too long as a bachelor that I didn't even think."

"You could have at least told *me* who she was. And at least some of this could have been avoided."

I remembered him being behind the register when I left with Melanie. "You never asked me about her."

"Wasn't any of my business. And I had no reason to think you were up to anything. Only a complete moron would bring a woman he was sneaking around with to the bookstore where his girlfriend works."

“Then—”

“Before you ask why Sav didn’t see it that way, I’m on the outside. I can be objective. She’s so tied in knots over you it’s a wonder she can’t get her shoes on the right feet.”

I chuckled at that, and I felt a little warmed that Jackson was trying hard to help.

“Okay, I’ve been an idiot. But I told her what happened, and I don’t think she wants to see me anymore. We just talked, and ... I think I upset her when I left.”

“She was upset, but it wasn’t just because of that. Sav messed up too, and she knew it.”

“What if she can’t get past everything, Jackson,” I asked. “What if—”

“I’ll tell you something Sav’s grandmother said to me when we first got married and I stayed out too long with a couple of friends one Friday night, leaving her to worry I was crashed in a ditch somewhere. Boy, I had some making up to do for that, and I thought she’d be upset with me for months about it. She wasn’t. And it wasn’t the last time I screwed up during our marriage, either. But we were as much in love the day she passed as we were the day I asked her to be my wife.”

His voice had gotten thick, so he cleared his throat. “She used to say, ‘Love forgives.’ And Sav’s more like her than she realizes. If she loves you, and I think she does, she’ll forgive you.”

I couldn’t speak, Jackson’s story moving me almost to the point of tears.

“You going to give up on her, Christopher?”

I finally got the words out. “No, sir.”

“Good. That’s what I expected to hear. Have you talked to Sean yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Then I expect you’d better get on that, hadn’t you? I’d be telling him to call you, but he’s so stressed with the wedding,

maybe you should be the one to make the first move.”

“Yeah. I guess I should.” Before I hung up, I had to fight my emotions again to be able to say, “Thank you, Jackson. It means a lot to me that you’d call.”

He simply said. “That’s what you do when family’s hurting. And you’re family, son, where it counts.”

It took me a few minutes of wiping my eyes before I was ready to do what I needed to do.



Sean hadn’t answered his phone when I tried him, so I texted him and asked him to come to my office or meet me anywhere he preferred. I’d started to worry that he wouldn’t answer me at all, but he texted me and invited me to come to his house.

I hadn’t expected that, so I let myself get my hopes up as I knocked. Nicole answered the door with a smile. “Chris, he’s in the garage.”

I asked how she was, and she said fine but busy, so I headed to find him. Sean sat on one of two old beaten up recliners that we’d used once upon a time when we lived in Jackson’s converted garage. He motioned toward the mini fridge in the corner.

“Grab us each one.”

I pulled two bottles of beer out and popped the caps, then sat in the recliner next to his, waiting for him to explode or apologize or tell me he never wanted to see my face again.

“Nicole’s pretty pissed off,” he said, sipping his beer.

I sighed. I’d forgotten Anna had told her about seeing me and Sav in the parking lot. “I’m sorry. When we went out the truck during your party, we didn’t go out there just to—”

“Not about that, you dumbass,” Sean said, a half-smile on his face. “Though, damn, you could learn to get a room. She’s pissed at me. For being pissed at you.”

He took another sip. “You lied to me, bro. Both of you lied right to my face.”

“I know. And I’m so sorry. We were waiting until after the wedding to tell you.”

“Because ...”

I scoffed. “Obviously, because I thought you’d go through the roof. Pretty much exactly like you did.”

He stood up and paced back and forth. “Not fair, Chris. That was as much about being lied to and her coming in looking like she’d been crying for an hour than you two being together.”

“Are you saying that you *wouldn’t* have been upset about me dating Sav?”

Sean sighed and dropped into the recliner again. “I would have.”

“See?”

“At first. But I would have come around. If the two of you had come to me together and explained, I think I’d have been okay with it. I love you, man. You’re my brother. If you’d have told me that this was different, that you loved her and wanted to put your bachelor days behind you, I’d have been okay. It hurts that you didn’t trust me with that. I could have been happy for you.”

I took a deep breath. “It hurts that you would think, even for a minute, that Sav could ever be only a one-night stand for me.”

“Chris, it’s not that I would think that, not really.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “I’m just an overprotective hothead. You should know that better than anybody. I mean, clearly you do know that, or you two wouldn’t have kept it a secret.”

That was true. I sipped my beer, and finally Sean stood again. “Looks like both of us fucked up, huh?”

“Yeah. And I’m really sorry, about all of it.”

“Me too. Especially the way I talked to you outside the Sparks. I just ... seeing her so upset, man. I just lost it.”

I stood and put my beer on his worktable. “I know. It’s okay.”

“So, she was an interior designer, huh? You’re not going to make the bookstore look like some kind of fancy-ass boutique or something, are you?” He hooked his thumbs in his beltloops “If that’s what Sav wants, I think we need to gang up on her and refuse.”

I chuckled. “No, nothing like that.”

We stood a foot from each other for a few more seconds, until Sean grabbed me and pulled me into a hug. “Come here, asshole.”

“Dick,” I said, hugging him back just as tightly.

“If you’re dating my sister, you ought to have to call me sir or something, right? Be extra nice to me so I don’t kick your ass?”

I stepped back. “She’s having some doubts after everything. And I feel like I have a lot to make up for.”

He sat down with his beer again, so I did the same.

“So, make up for it.”

I stared at him, shocked at the change from him barely able to keep from punching me outside the Sparks to encouraging my relationship with Sav.

“What?” he asked as I stared at him. “If you love her, fix it.”

“If I can.”

He snorted. “You’re so *stupid* in love you can’t even see it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ve known Sav as long as I have.” He took a long draw on his beer. “You ever see her cry over a guy? Even a boy when she was in high school?”

I hadn't. She'd never shown any interest in guys. Only me, I thought guiltily.

"Yet she was bawling her eyes out over you. You'd better shoot your shot, Warner. She's obviously got it bad for you, God knows why."

He grinned at me, and I flipped him off.

"Seriously. A girl like Sav doesn't come along every day," he said. "She's special."

"You don't have to tell me that."

Sean sighed heavily. "So, this falling out thing between you and Sav four years ago ..."

What was the point in trying to hide it anymore when he clearly knew? "She got too drunk and spent the night at my apartment. We kissed, and I stopped it before it went any further. But it hurt her, and things were never the same."

He tilted his beer bottle in my direction. "Back then? Yeah. I would have definitely wanted to kick your ass."

"Fair," I said.

"That explains a lot. Nicole suspected something almost exactly like that."

"She's a smart lady," I said.

Sean held his bottle out for me tap mine against. "One of the many reasons I'm marrying her."

I felt so much better after we talked. When I left Sean's garage, I was ready to show Sav that I wasn't going to give her up without a fight.

SAV

GRAMPA ENCOURAGED me to take a few days off work. He said I could return on Saturday to cover for him, and I agreed. I didn't like leaving him alone every day, but he claimed the business from our clear-out sale was slowing down anyway. And Sean went over in the afternoons and evenings to help

I stayed away from the bookstore during those days because I knew Chris would be there. It was the longest I'd been away from the place at one stretch in years. Even with Chris possibly being there, I looked forward to getting back there the next day.

I spent a lot of time at Penny's house, where she did a great job trying to distract me. But when the subject of Chris came up, she encouraged me to call him. She thought I was making a huge mistake if I ended things.

I thought so too. The longer I spent away from him, the more I missed him. The mistakes I'd made didn't seem so bad after a few days, but how could I be sure?

I was stuck, not knowing what to do. I thought maybe once I got back to work and in a regular routine, things might seem clearer.

I needed some groceries since I planned to give Penny some space and stop moping around her house so much. With a baby and a husband, she didn't need me there underfoot all the time.

While I was on my way to the store, Sean called me. When I explained I was on a grocery run, he said, "Can you stop by

while you're out?"

"Sean, I really just want to get what I need and go home."

"Please, sis? I owe you an apology, and I want to do it in person. You need groceries, right? So come over for dinner. Let's talk."

I couldn't find a good reason not to go. When I knocked, Nicole opened the door and gave me a tight hug. "How are you holding up?"

I cringed. "Sean told you everything, I guess?"

"Yes," he said, coming around the corner. "That's what happens when you ask someone to marry you. You tell them things." He kissed her cheek and pulled me away from her into another tight hug. "Come sit down."

We sat on the couch together, and he took my hand.

"Big brothers have a code, you know? You watch out for your siblings. Anybody hurts them, it's your job to fix it. To protect them. And since you're all I've got, I feel extra protective of you."

"I know, Sean."

"But I was an asshole the other day. I popped off without thinking, and I made an already upsetting situation worse. I'm sorry, Sav. I want you to understand why I did, because I love you, but I know I had no right to act that way."

I squeezed his hand. "I do understand, Sean."

"Good. Then we're okay, you and me?"

"We're okay."

Sean and I were okay. I didn't know what Chris and I were.

"The wedding ... what are you going to do?"

He frowned. "Get married?" he said, as if I was losing my mind.

"I mean, after everything, with you and Chris?"

"We talked. We're good."

I heaved a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank God. I was so worried that all of this would mess something up for you.”

“Nope. But I’m going to tell you what I told him. It hurts that you lied, but I understand why you thought you needed to. No more of that, okay? You talk to me about things, like you used to. I’m here for you, no matter what.”

He hugged me again, and I felt a weight lift off my shoulders.

“Have you talked to Chris?” he asked.

“Not since the next morning. Sean, I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you love him?”

I felt tears spring to my eyes. “Yes. So much.”

He cupped my cheek. “Then I think you’re wrong, sis. You know exactly what to do.”

“But what if—”

“Savannah, no. No what-ifs. You love him. And if he loves you back the way I think he does, then you’ve got nothing to worry about. You remember what Gramma always used to say?”

Thinking of Gramma made it harder not to cry. I missed her so much. “Love forgives.”

“Yep. If you and Chris really love each other, you can always find a way.”

“Dinner’s ready,” Nicole called from the kitchen.

I felt hungry for the first time in days.

We mostly talked about the wedding over dinner, though Sean made it very clear that Nicole had been pretty unhappy about the scene he described to her outside the Sparks. She seemed pleased with the way he’d apologized, at least.

While I was there, she showed me pictures of the dresses and gave me the date for the fitting, and I enjoyed being distracted from my own problems for a while.

When I left, Sean hugged me and kissed the top of my head. “See you later,” he said. “I’ll stop by the bookstore tomorrow morning to see you.”

“I really am okay, you know. You don’t have to keep checking on me.”

“Hey, can’t a guy come visit his little sister just because?” He waved me off with a smile, and I went to the grocery store. I hoped he did start coming just because. I missed that sort of thing and looked forward to seeing him more often after the wedding.

Before I went to sleep that night, I stared at my phone, debating whether to send Chris a message or not. I wanted to apologize again, tell him I missed him, try to salvage things if I could, even though part of me thought he’d be better off if I left him alone and we went back to being acquaintances who rarely spoke.

Thinking that threatened to make me cry, so I did what I often do when I can’t make a decision. I did nothing. I put my phone on the nightstand and tried my hardest to sleep, hoping the answer would present itself in the morning.



Morning came without any answers, but also with me missing Chris even more. I didn’t know how much longer I could stand not talking to him, but I still had no idea what to say or how to tell him how I felt.

I was dressed and had another hour before I needed to be at the store, so I kept scrolling through our old text messages, letting myself try to feel as happy as I did when we were sending them back and forth.

When my phone rang, my heart flip-flopped with the hope that it would be Chris. It was Grampa calling from the store.

“Savannah? I need you to come in early today.”

“Are you okay?” I thought about his pale face when he’d fallen off the ladder weeks ago. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, I just need to get some things done before we open today, and I can’t do it alone. When can you get here?”

I still felt like something was wrong, despite what he said. “I can leave now.”

“Good. See you soon.”

He hung up before I could ask any more questions.

I hurried out to my car to head for the store, wracking my brain on the drive about what he could be talking about. We wouldn’t let him lift heavy boxes, and the books from upstairs had all been transferred already. Maybe he’d found some boxes we’d missed and wanted the books put on display.

As I turned into the square, the front of the store caught my eye. Multi-colored balloons decorated the front, with a huge banner that said, “Grand Opening.”

Grand opening?

A few people on the street peeked through the glass as they walked by, clearly interested in what was happening. When I went inside, Grampa came out of the office. “That was fast.” He took my hand and led me into the store.

“What’s going on? Why is there a grand—” I gasped as we turned the corner.

“It’s the official grand opening of the Sparks coffee bar and book lounge,” Grampa said, waving his arm in an arc.

It was perfect.

Tables, chairs, comfortable but chic loveseats and one longer couch filled the space in front of the bar. The whole area had been freshly painted and hung with Bohemian-looking art. Macrame, tie-dye, and other abstracts gave the entire place an easygoing flair.

Everything from the light fixtures to the rugs on the floor had obviously been chosen with care and an eye toward the laidback, cozy design.

Melanie really was good, I thought guiltily.

“What do you think?” Grampa asked.

“It’s perfect.”

“Not quite yet.” He took my hand and led me behind the bar. Then I looked past him to see Chris with something folded up in his hands. He stopped in front of me and held it out.

It was an apron that said, “I run on books and caffeine” with a logo on the pocket: Sparks Bookstore and Coffee Lounge. The design was professional, and I realized that the mugs bore the same logo with funny sayings about coffee and books on the opposite sides.

“Oh my God,” I said, looking around in amazement. “You did all this in the last few days?”

“With some help, of course.”

“Chris, I ... I don’t know what to say.”

“Whoa, whoa,” he said. “Save the speech for the ribbon cutting.” He pulled a pair of scissors decorated with a bow from behind his back. I have some connections, so I managed to do some online advertising. A little word of mouth at local restaurants, that sort of thing.”

I was stunned. I looked between him and Grampa, and then Sean appeared. “Hey, this looks fantastic.”

“You knew about this too?”

“The T-shirts were my idea!” he said proudly, pointing to a rack on the wall that held stacks of multi-colored T-shirts with the Sparks logo on the chest. “And the coupons.”

I looked at Chris. “Coupons?”

“Buy a coffee on opening day, get a free coffee on another visit in the next month. He’s a marketing whiz, who knew.”

“I certainly didn’t,” I said with a laugh. This was everything I’d wanted, and a fantastic way to drum up business for the bookstore. It felt like Christmas morning.

Chris put the scissors on the counter. “Oh, one more thing before the crowd gets here. Would you go upstairs for a second and look down?”

I wanted to grab Chris and hug him, tell him I was sorry. I was so overwhelmed with what he'd done, I wanted to cry, happy tears for a change. And he wanted to me to look down from the balcony? "Upstairs?"

"Yeah. Hurry up, hurry up," he said, shooing me with his hands.

I laughed as I went up the stairs, wondering what else was in store. When I looked down, I didn't see anything different. Then he pulled on a tan trench coat, rolled up his sleeves, and held up a ... boombox?

He held it high above his head while he looked up at me. Somebody was singing *in your eyes*.

"What are you doing?" I said.

He scoffed. "What do you mean, what am I doing?" he said, thrusting the boombox higher. "I'm wooing you!"

CHRIS

SAV'S FACE when she saw the transformation at the Sparks had been all I'd hoped for. I knew that wasn't enough—I couldn't just present her with the renovated lounge area and hope that would make everything okay. But it was a hell of a start.

I'd figured she would stay away while she was off, if only to avoid seeing me. That was okay. The wait would be worth it.

My workers and I had busted our asses to get everything done, Melanie had gone above and beyond, and I'd begged for favors from everybody I could think of that could help make the coffee lounge grand opening a success. Screen printing, newspaper ads, word of mouth, social media advertising.

I figured, worst case scenario, she'd find out before the surprise, but I'd gotten lucky.

When she went upstairs, and I tried to reproduce the serenade scene from *Say Anything*, I thought it would end with her in my arms, maybe laughing about me doing something goofy and romantic.

Instead, when she asked what I was doing and I told her I was wooing her, she looked happy but confused. “Is that your favorite song?”

I heard Sean bark with laughter somewhere below me. “She's never seen the movie. Oh my God.”

I shouted up. “John Cusack? *Say Anything*? The iconic boombox serenade scene?”

Sav shook her head.

“You’ve really never seen it?”

“I guess not?”

I repeated Sean’s “oh my God” and put the boombox on the counter. I could only imagine how strange it all looked. I never even considered the possibility that she hadn’t seen the movie.

I took the steps up to her two at a time and took her by the shoulders. “I’d have serenaded you properly, but I was afraid that if I begged you to take me back after scaring you with my off-key screeching, it would run you off forever. And holy hell, Sav, we’re going to watch that movie on our next date. I think it’s illegal for someone your age to have never seen it.”

Her grin softened. “Our next date?”

To my relief, she wasn’t protesting. Instead, she looked at me with a dreamy expression on her face. I pulled her close. “Sav, I’m sorry. A thousand times, I’m sorry. I will do my best to never give you reason to doubt me again if you’ll give me another chance.”

She swallowed hard, and Sean’s voice echoed in my head. *You’d better shoot your shot, Warner.*

I cupped her face in my hands. “I’m so in love with you, Sav. Can you find it in your heart—”

Sav kissed me, her arms going around my neck. I held her tight and kissed her back, nearly sobbing with relief, until she leaned her face away from mine.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she whispered. “I’ve made so many mistakes ... but I can’t stand being without you.”

“It makes me so happy to hear you say that.” I kissed her again, and when we parted, she put her hands on my chest.

“I know I hurt you when you asked me if I trusted you. I do, Chris. As much as I can trust anyone. It’s just ... sometimes ... I think about the past ...”

“It’s okay, baby. Trust isn’t black and white. It’s earned. And if you take care of it, like a plant you water and feed, it grows. I should have known that, because I’ve had my trust betrayed before too. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to trust my heart with anyone again.”

I touched her beautiful face. “Loving you helped me realize I could. So if you have doubts, talk to me. We’ll figure it out together.”

Her cheeks were damp with tears I brushed away with my thumb.

“I love you, Chris.” Sav threw herself into my arms and kissed me again. I didn’t want to let go. The relief that she still wanted to be with me, that *she loved me*, made me feel almost drunk. I kissed her deeply, holding her close, trying to make up for the last several days when I couldn’t.

Until someone cleared his throat. I looked down to see Jackson and Sean, their hands behind their backs, while they looked everywhere but up at us.

“Ribbon cutting?” Jackson said.

“Right, right.” I took Sav by the hand and led her down the stairs and outside, where I had a couple of my guys stringing a wide red ribbon across the door that we had to duck under.

A nice crowd for a Saturday morning showed up for the little ceremony, with many people eager for a coffee and to be able to say they were there on the day the coffee lounge opened. Lots of people would be getting free coffees in the next month, and the hustle and bustle inside the store made Sav so happy.

One of my worker’s girlfriends worked part-time at a Starbucks, and I’d paid her to come in and help since it seemed like there’d be a pretty big demand for coffee. The second machine I’d purchased helped, too.

When the busiest time seemed to have passed, I stepped behind the bar with Sav. “Are you happy?”

“It’s amazing, Chris. Better than I’d hoped for.”

I kissed her, and she quickly leaned back as if we'd done something wrong, glancing around to see who might have noticed. Then she remembered.

“Oh. We can do that now, can't we?”

I pulled her close. “Yes, we can. No more secrets. No more sneaking.”

A woman walked by the bar, a book in her hand. “I love this woman,” I said to her, and she smiled and walked away nervously, probably not used to strangers tell her things like that. “See? Everybody can know now. *I love this woman!*” I shouted loud enough for most people in the bookstore to hear.

When Sav laughed, I kissed her. “I'll shout that from any rooftop, anytime, anywhere.”

She pulled me back down by my collar and laughed against my lips. “Telling me quietly is good enough for now.”

EPILOGUE

SAV

I SAT in the dressing room, waiting while a stylist put the finishing touches on Nicole's makeup. She looked gorgeous in her princess ballgown-shaped wedding dress. It was off-white with lace across the chest. Her blonde hair was half up with a veil clip stuffed into the ponytail holder.

She'd chosen lavender dresses for her bridesmaids. They were modest but of excellent quality. Chris couldn't keep his hands off me when he'd picked me up that morning, pushing me back into my apartment so he could do very naughty things to me.

"You look nice, Sav," Anna said with a fake smile.

"Thanks, you too," I said, returning her smile, making sure it was just as fake. She did look nice, but I wasn't about to get too flattering with her.

Telling Nicole about seeing me and Chris in his truck was bad enough. But knowing that she probably only saw us because she was looking for Chris made it worse. She steered clear of him now, at least, since everyone knew we were a couple. I guess that was a mark in her favor, but I was never going to like the woman, and I thought that was okay.

A knock sounded on the door before it opened. Nicole's father asked if she was ready, and the stylist claimed she was. She turned Nicole's chair so she could see herself in the mirror, and her smile lit up the entire room.

She was a stunning bride, so much so it almost brought tears to my eyes. I hoped I didn't cry at the wedding and smear

my mascara everywhere.

I checked my phone, ignoring the messages I had from Chris. He'd been messaging me a mixture of naughty and sweet things since we were separated two hours ago. My cheeks had grown hot, and I didn't want anyone to suspect we were texting dirty things, so I had to read them later.

It was time now that the bride was ready, so I put my phone away and lined up behind Anna and Laura.

Nicole's dad led her down the hallway on his arm so he could walk her down the aisle and give her away. We stood under a small canopy that hid Nicole from the guests until the last minute. I peeked around the corner and saw Sean alone, looking nervous.

Someone pinched my side. "Boo."

I flinched. Lucas had stepped close and was grinning at me.

I slapped his arm. "Don't scare me like that."

He laughed. "Sorry. Couldn't help it."

"Keep your hands to yourself, Lucas," Chris said, approaching from the other side.

Lucas raised his hands, hiding a smile. "My bad."

I'd seen Chris that morning in his gray suit with his hair gelled back, but it was like seeing him for the first time all over again. He had a fresh haircut and beard trim, looking put together and unbelievably sexy.

"You do look awfully pinchable," Chris teased. He kissed my cheek and whispered in my ear, "Don't forget to check your messages. I detailed all the wicked ways I plan on defiling you tonight when we're in our hotel room."

He winked at me as he hurried away to get into place. I hooked my arm in Lucas's, but stared right into Chris's eyes as we walked down the aisle.

When I saw my brother's face, watching past us, I almost cried. The second he spotted Nicole, he simply melted and

looked at her with so much love. He kept wiping his own eyes, and I knew my mascara was a goner. I wasn't going to be able to help it.

The ceremony was mercifully short. They wrote their own vows and cried as they spoke them, and I barely made it through without tears running down my face.

The reception was indoors in a ballroom a few feet from where the ceremony had taken place. They weren't particularly strict about seating arrangements, so Chris took the spot next to me. Sean was on my other side, and Lucas sat beside Anna on the other end of the table. While we waited for our food, guests took turns giving speeches about the couple.

Grampa gave a great speech about watching Sean grow and how he'd never seen him as happy as he'd been since he was with Nicole, and I had to agree. Sean had been a bit of a lost soul before he'd found her.

Chris gave a best-man speech that had everyone laughing so much, parts were hard to hear. Sean hugged him afterward, and they held onto each other longer than usual. I think because they were both trying not to cry.

After all the speeches were finished, Sean and Nicole shared their first dance, holding each other tight and whispering in each other's ears. Everyone watched, and a spotlight shone on them in the ballroom. Chris grabbed my hand and had the cutest smile when I glanced at him. He looked excited and dreamy and strangely boyish.

He kissed me softly, and I leaned into him, wanting to feel his warmth. He tugged me to my feet when their song finished, asking me to dance. The dancefloor was full of people, and my cheeks hurt from smiling so much over the last couple of hours.

Suddenly, the music cut off, and Sean's voice echoed through the reception hall. We all turned to face him and Nicole on the stage together. "Excuse us, everyone. We're glad everyone's been having a great time tonight." He wrapped an arm around his bride. "It means everything to Nicole and me that you've all here to celebrate the start of our life together."

People applauded, halting his speech. He stopped talking and smiled before gesturing for everyone to quiet down.

“I appreciate the support,” he said. “I’m so grateful for the family in my life, especially the new members now that Nicole and I are officially family. Thank you to her parents for being here and her brother Lucas who did a lot to help make this day happen. I’d also like to thank my grandpa and sister for putting up with us over the last few months as we realized how hectic planning a wedding actually is.”

Everyone chuckled at this.

Sean cleared his throat, and Nicole nodded encouragingly at him, rubbing his chest affectionately as she looked at him with all the love in her eyes. “Anyway, there’s another person here tonight we wanted to shine a spotlight on. My best friend Chris has been my partner in crime since as early as I can remember. I’ve always thought of him as my brother.”

Sean’s voice got thick. “And I think pretty soon it’ll be official, depending on what my sister has to say about that.”

My face went hot. I couldn’t believe that Sean just said that to his entire reception full of people. Everyone looked at me and Chris. He took my hand and got down on one knee.

My heart pounded. I felt faint because I almost couldn’t breathe.

Was this really happening?

Oh, God, don’t cry. Not in front of all these people.

“Savannah Bailey Sparks,” Chris began. “I loved you for so long. And I love you more every day.” He spoke quietly, just loud enough for me to hear. He wasn’t trying to project his voice for the benefit of the crowd. It felt like a private moment between us, because I couldn’t see anything but his smiling face and the way his mouth trembled like he was holding back his emotions.

He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a ring box. When he cracked it open, I gasped. It was a simple diamond solitaire with tiny sapphires ringed around it. It was perfect.

“I know this might be too soon to ask you this question, it can be as long an engagement as you want. but I don’t want to waste any more time without telling you that I love you and want you to do me the honor of becoming my wife.”

Chris took my hand in his and slid the ring on my finger. “Will you marry me, Sav?”

I dropped and hugged him, wrapping my arms tight around him. I cupped his face in my hands and kissed him. Applause erupted around us, and he said, “I’m going to take that as a yes.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll marry you,” I said with a laugh. Then I kissed him again.

“Congratulations!” Nicole cheered into the microphone as everyone cheered along.

I remembered then that this was Nicole and Sean’s wedding reception and felt a little self-conscious that we’d drawn attention away from that. But Sean must have known since he’d basically cued Chris by saying the lovely things he’d said.

“You planned this with Sean?” I said, letting Chris help me to my feet.

“I wanted to propose after they were married. Doing it here was his idea, and Nicole was as excited about it as he was.” Chris beamed at me, and his smile was so beautiful I had to kiss him again.

I looked toward Sean, who was struggling to get the microphone back into the clip, sending popping and scraping noises over the loudspeaker.

I kissed my fingertips and pushed them his direction. He made a heart shape with his hands over his chest, then he kissed his new wife. Grampa had cried at the wedding, and he sat blinking tears at one of the front tables. I sent a kiss his way like I had Sean, and he pretended to catch it and hold it to his chest.

“Can I have this dance, future Mrs. Warner?” Chris asked, pulling me close.

“Mrs. Warner. I like the sound of that. You know, I used to doodle that in my notebooks when I was sixteen.”

Chris laughed. “Really? I’m flattered.”

My voice broke as I said, “And now my dream’s coming true.”

Chris cupped my cheek. “Our dream, Sav. Ours together.”

We danced the rest of the night, but I’m not sure my feet ever touched the floor.



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SNEAK PEEK

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The plan was to move in with my grandma to help her out while I figured out my life.

Then I met Axel. He's rude, obnoxious, and cocky.

And I totally want him.

He agrees to be my fake boyfriend when my ex rolls into town.

He pulls me close, gives me fake kisses, and I know I'm in trouble.

Because I like it way more than I should.

It was just pretend.

Ending up in his bed was not part of the plan.

Neither was falling in love.

Our family drama keeps tearing us apart, and I'm not sure we can last.

But with every touch and every kiss, I keep falling deeper.

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Chapter One

Ronnie

I didn't have the time or energy to try to bake another cake from scratch, one I'd probably also burn or destroy in some other freak kitchen catastrophe.

I figured I'd buy a pre-iced one and call it a day, but I couldn't see the cakes in the display case thanks to the tall hunk of *beefcake* blocking my way.

His cream-colored T-shirt was smudged at the top of his shoulders, like he'd been doing dirty work and brushed them off in a hurry.

His jeans and boots had that hard-at-work look about them, too.

He stood at least six feet tall, probably a little more, and his biceps had the look of a man who's done some heavy-lifting, and not just in a gym.

I wanted to touch one to see if it felt as hard and smooth as it looked, but I knew better than to touch a stranger.

And I knew better than to start thinking along those lines at all, no matter how sexy I found men in work clothes who looked like they knew their way around a hammer and drill.

Stop it, Ronnie.

I let go of my cart and stepped beside him, eager for a look at his face, and it didn't disappoint.

His dark hair covered part of his forehead, and his hazel eyes took me in when I stepped close.

He was gorgeous, so I smiled the way one does when she finds herself standing next to someone who looks that good.

He smiled back at me, and the fact that he had dimples beneath his sexy stubble didn't surprise me.

He was the tall, handsome, brickhouse-built kind of a guy I could enjoy fantasizing about in a spare moment or two.

I probably would later.

If I kept it all to fantasy, no harm done, right?

Then I realized why he stood where he did, blocking my view.

Two finished cakes remained on one of the shelves: a round two-layer cake covered in white icing with a sweep of flowers in a half-circle and “Happy Birthday” written in uncommonly neat cursive, and a hideous rectangular cake covered in dark yellow icing, the shade of a really good, grainy mustard. Balloons in colors that should have been bright and cheerful but looked mixed with enough black to make them dingy dotted the top.

That cake said “Congrats!” in shaky block letters.

I reached for the round cake. Mr. Beefcake next to me reached for it at the same time.

We stopped, our hands both close enough to touch the plastic cover and laughed.

“Sorry,” he said.

“That’s okay.” I grabbed the side of the container at the same he did. I didn’t let go when I scoffed at him. “You just said *sorry*.”

“Sorry I bumped your hand.” He frowned and tried to lift the cake.

I held onto it, panicking a little.

The bakery was already closed, and the nearest grocery store with cakes like those was in the next town over.

“I thought you were being a gentleman and letting me have it.”

He chuckled, and if he hadn’t been so damn gorgeous with that sparkle in his eyes, I might have given up and let him have it. But guys who looked as good as he did were probably

so used to getting everything they wanted, I wasn't about to fold and let him have it without a fight.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“I was here first, but somehow I’m supposed to let you have it just because you’re a woman?”

He looked me up and down, but not with scorn or any of the accusation in his tone.

When his gaze met mine again, he seemed pretty damned pleased about what he saw.

I tried not to look happy about it. “That’s not what I said!”

“That’s what ‘gentleman’ implied.”

“Okay, sorry, maybe that was the wrong way to phrase it.” I glanced at the cake and tried to look desperate, which wasn’t hard, since I was. “I tried to bake a birthday cake for my poor old grandmother earlier today and ... I think the cake mix was bad or something. I can’t give her that one, and I don’t have time to bake another. I can’t let poor old Granny go without a cake.”

“Hmm,” he said, one of his eyebrows arching. “That’s a sad story.”

I nodded, sensing possible victory, and laid it on thick. I looked up at him through my lashes.

“We never know which birthday might be the last, you know? I can’t let tomorrow come without a cake for the poor old soul.”

When he dropped his chin, I thought I’d won, and he was going to hand over the cake.

Instead, he narrowed his eyes, one corner of his mouth turning up.

“Sorry, darling, but I need the cake for a party tonight, and I really don’t have time to bake one. You have until tomorrow.”

“Grandma’s in a wheelchair! I’ll be spending so much time caring for her, I don’t think I’ll have time to bake anything.” I

tried not to cringe at myself.

I'm not usually much of a liar, but I was desperate. My grandma could probably outrun me on an ordinary day and was the furthest thing from a poor old soul in her final years.

She only needed my help running her business and doing a few things around the house while she recovered from an injury.

But it wasn't a total lie—she was in a wheelchair. Temporarily.

It didn't matter anyway, because the way I blurted it, he obviously thought I was making it up to play on his sympathies.

Sympathies he clearly didn't have.

“An even sadder story,” he said, shoving out his bottom lip. “So glad I got to hear it, but now I've got things to do.”

He pulled the cake quickly enough that my hand dropped free.

The *brute*.

Obviously, appealing to his sense of chivalry wasn't going to work, so I tried to turn on the charm and appeal to his other senses.

I wasn't looking my best after a frustrating day of dealing with my mother's relationship troubles and somehow managing to make a cake I was almost ashamed to even throw outside for strays.

But my jeans were snug enough, and my V-neck was cut low enough, that maybe I could turn his rational brain off long enough to let me have that damn birthday cake.

“Wait.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “She really is in a wheelchair while she's recovering from an injury, but she does a lot herself. That was a slight exaggeration, because I really do need that cake. I just don't want her to be disappointed, again. I was across the country last year on her birthday, and my mom didn't even remember it, let alone give her a cake or a gift.”

He looked at my hand on his shoulder, so I slid it slowly down his arm and stepped closer to tilt my head and look up at him. “I’d really, really appreciate it if you let me have the cake. After the last couple of days I’ve had, it’d be a huge relief.”

His expression softened. He dropped his head a little closer to mine and said, “Did you get her a gift?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Then you won’t be showing up empty-handed.” He turned to walk away.

I grabbed the cake and held on so he couldn’t completely turn. “Are you kidding? You’re really going to take a cake away from a poor, little old—”

“Yep.”

“Who’s yours for?” I hooked my fingers beneath the ridge of plastic around the bottom.

“A little girl who would be far more disappointed than your grandma.”

“Then obviously you should take the other one. It’s all bright colors and balloons. You could scrape off the message and write something else.”

He laughed. “I’d have to scrape all of it off. There’s no way I’m giving a ten-year-old girl a hideous, baby-shit yellow cake that looks like it was decorated by an evil clown. That might turn her off to birthdays for good.”

“And I can’t give it to my grandma.” I pulled lightly.

“You have more time to fix it than I do.” He pulled back.

If he had any idea how useless—no, how *dangerous*—I could sometimes be in the kitchen, he’d have realized how stupid he sounded. As it was, I didn’t have the time or desire to explain it to him.

“Please let me have the cake?” I asked as sweetly as I could.

“No.”

“You’re the rudest, most selfish man I’ve ever met.”

He tugged hard enough I almost lost my grip on it. “If you believe that, you’ve clearly led a sheltered life.”

Oh no. No, he did not. My life had been a lot of things. *Sheltered* wasn’t one of them.

“You don’t know anything about me,” I said, startled at how growly I sounded.

“I know you were just flirting like mad to try to get a cake.” He stepped forward as he said it, which let me get a better grip.

“I want this cake, but I would’ve flirted with you anyway!”

He opened his mouth to counter me, then he stopped. “Oh.”

I hadn’t meant for that to come out, and it caught me off-guard at the same moment.

In the seconds after, we both decided to pull. My fingers slipped free, and he didn’t have a good enough grip on the bottom to support its weight. As it tilted and dropped from his hands, the cake slid against the side and popped the plastic cover free.

It landed half off the plastic tray on the floor, the cover rolling away and spinning in a circle for a few seconds before it stopped.

“Look what you did,” he said slowly.

“What *I* did?” I actually thought it was more my fault than his, but I wasn’t about to admit that to him.

He put his hands on his hips and exhaled slowly.

Then he gestured at the ruined cake that neither of us had moved to touch. “Nice job. Now neither of us gets it. I’m not paying for that.”

I’m not proud of what I did next. When his eyes cut toward the yellow cake in the cooler, I grabbed it and backed up out of his reach.

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