

STUDIO CLUB



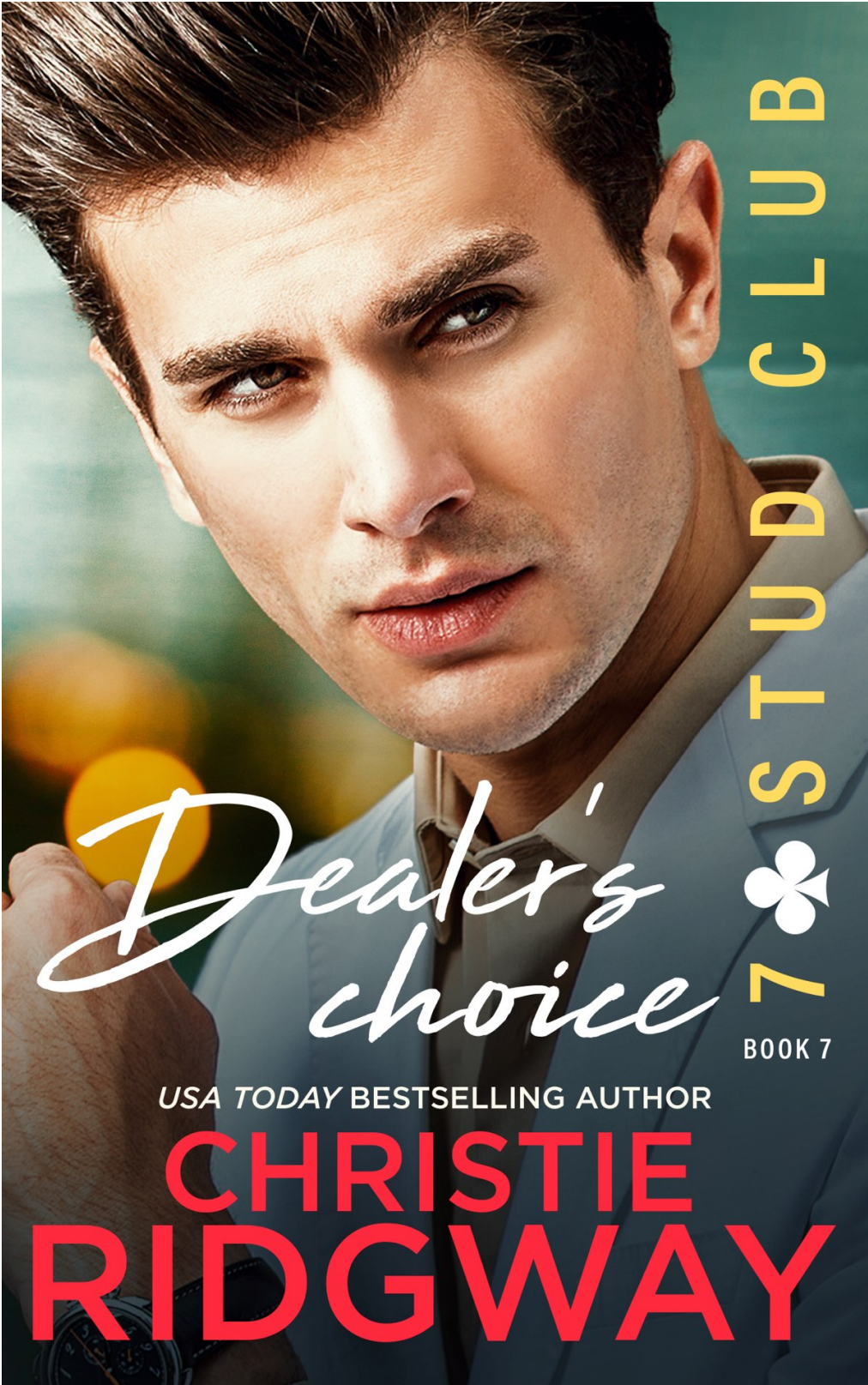
7

BOOK 7

*Dealer's
choice*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**CHRISTIE
RIDGWAY**



STUD CLUB

STUD CLUB

Dealer's choice



7

BOOK 7

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**CHRISTIE
RIDGWAY**

DEALER'S CHOICE

7-Stud Club Book 7

CHRISTIE RIDGWAY

CONTENTS

[Also Available](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Excerpt – TAKE ME TENDER](#)

[Excerpt – LIGHT MY FIRE](#)

[Also by Christie Ridgway](#)

[About the Author](#)

ALSO AVAILABLE

[All In](#) (7-Stud Club Book 1)

[No Limit](#) (7-Stud Club Book 2)

[Ante Up](#) (7-Stud Club Book 3)

[Slow Play](#) (7-Stud Club Book 4)

[Wild Card](#) (7-Stud Club Book 5)

[Smooth Call](#) (7-Stud Club Book 6)

[Dealer's Choice](#) (7-Stud Club Book 7)

[Almost Wonderful](#) (Almost Book 1)

[Almost Always](#) (Almost Book 2)

[Almost Everything](#) (Almost Book 3)

[Almost Paradise](#) (Almost Book 4)

[Take Me Tender](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 1)

[Take Me Forever](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 2)

[Take Me Home](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 3)

[The Scandal](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 4)

[The Seduction](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 5)

[The Secret](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 6)

[Light My Fire](#) (Rock Royalty Book 1)

[Love Her Madly](#) (Rock Royalty Book 2)

[Break on Through](#) (Rock Royalty Book 3)

[Touch Me](#) (Rock Royalty Book 4)

[Wishful Sinful](#) (Rock Royalty Book 5)

[Wild Child](#) (Rock Royalty Book 6)

[Who Do You Love](#) (Rock Royalty Book 7)

[Love Me Two Times](#) (Rock Royalty Book 8)

[Rock Royalty Boxed Set – Books 1-3](#)

[One Look](#) (One & Only Book 1)

[One Kiss](#) (One & Only Book 2)

[One Night](#) (One & Only Book 3)

[One Love](#) (One & Only Book 4)

[Make Him Wild](#) (Intoxicating Book 1)

[Make Him Want](#) (Intoxicating Book 2)

[Make Him Stay](#) (Intoxicating Book 3)

DEALER'S CHOICE

7-Stud Club Book 7

*“A sizzling combination of heat and heart.” Barbara Freethy,
#1 New York Times Bestselling Author*

Hart Sawyer had it all...and lost it on one tragic deal of fate's cards. As he learns to live with his grief, he also thought he'd learn to live alone for the rest of his life. Then, he finds himself locked away with caterer Sophie Daggett, the little sister of one of his best friends. With the unforeseen proximity an unexpected passion arises, complicating his vision of his future and putting at risk Sophie's vow to find a man whose heart can be hers alone.

Enjoy the 7-Stud Club! Seven poker night buddies who are very good with their hands...and are about to lose their hearts! Only great risk leads to great reward...

The 7-Stud Club Series:

All In (Boone & Gemma)

No Limit (Eli & Sloane)

Ante Up (Cooper & Willow)

Slow Play (Maddox & Harper)

Wild Card (Rafael & Erin)

Smooth Call (Shane & Delilah)

Dealer's Choice (Hart & Sophie)

DEALER'S CHOICE

7-Stud Club Book 7

© Copyright 2021 Christie Ridgway

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ISBN: 9781939286550

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

[Visit Christie's website](#)

[Meet up with her on Facebook](#)

[Follow her on Twitter](#)

[Sign up for Christie's Newsletter](#)

CHAPTER ONE

HART SAWYER TIPPED HIS CHAIR ONTO ITS BACK LEGS AND leaned his shoulders against the wall of the reception venue. It was that time in the celebration: the DJ cued up “Best Day of My Life” and the tables emptied, the dance floor filling with guests jumping, gyrating, and swaying in a circle surrounding the new husband and wife in a frenzy of collective happiness. The party would only amp up from there. He’d witnessed it three times before in the last five months as one by one the members of his long-time weekly poker crew got hitched.

Which was how he knew he only needed to last forty-five minutes, an hour max, before he could slink off without causing comment. It was yet another marriage of an old friend and though he was doing his best to become one with the wall, he didn’t want to overtly insult or disappoint the bride and groom.

An itch at the back of his neck had him loosening his tie and he glanced around, seeking the source of this new disquiet. There. Cooper Daggett, dressed in the dark suit chosen for the groomsmen, stood beside his pretty fiancée, Willow. He had an arm around her waist and his head cocked in the direction of hers, as if listening to her every word, but his gaze was trained across the room, his eyes narrowed in a

determined way that caused Hart's chair to re-right itself with a snap.

With the other man's attention clearly, squarely on him, Hart's every instinct screamed. *Time to go!*

Gathering himself to leave, he was half-off his seat when someone dropped into the chair beside his. "Hey, son," Randy Daggett said in his gravelly voice. Cooper's dad was a sixtyish obstacle to Hart's immediate goal of a clean getaway. Not just because he was a physical barrier to the venue's nearest exit, but because the older man had been a mainstay of his growing-up years.

Hart loved the guy and he couldn't ignore the friendly overture.

So he turned to him now, pasting on his best smile and hoping it wasn't more of a grimace. "How are you, Randy?" he asked. "And why aren't you out on the dance floor with Mrs. D?"

"She wore me out at Shane's wedding two weeks ago," the older man said. "I told her I didn't want to do the conga line then, but she dragged me into it anyway. Still trying to recover."

Hart chuckled, recalling the scene. One of Shane Rodriguez's many sisters had led the silly spectacle. As the participants wound their way toward Hart, he'd beat a hasty retreat. Whew.

"Good thing Raf eloped," Hart said, referring to Shane's half brother. "Who knows what madness might have ensued."

Randy nodded, his gaze wandering to the dance floor where the imposing figure of today's groom, John Boone,

could be seen over the boogying crowd. “The big man’s looking happy,” he observed.

“That’s true.” Hart’s smile felt less forced this time. “Like a mighty redwood, felled by love for his Gemma.”

“I wish that for you, son,” Randy said in a quiet voice, then paused. “Happiness.”

Hart froze, everything already cold inside him going sub-zero. His jaw was too stiff to allow his mouth to form an answer. What would it be, anyway? His own expectation for such a state had disappeared two years ago, when the woman he’d intended to marry had been alive one moment and gone the next, just weeks before their own trip down the aisle. Her brain aneurysm had been an instant killer.

Of her beautiful self.

Of their beautiful future.

Hart hauled in a careful breath, then forced himself to think of a change of topic. His gaze roamed the room until it lighted on a small figure on the outskirts of the cavorting throng. The petite honey blonde spun around in gleeful abandon, her head thrown back to expose the line of her throat. Her small breasts were molded by blue lace and the matching skirt swirled around her slender thighs.

A strange pang pierced Hart’s breastbone, but it somehow eased his paralysis. “Sophie,” he managed to say. Sophie Daggett, Randy’s daughter, Cooper’s little sister. Really, a little sister to their entire seven-man poker crew. “She seems to be, uh, having fun.”

Earlier in the evening she’d even sent a smile Hart’s way, which he’d been grateful for. The two of them had made peace, it seemed, after his past missteps. His protective

impulses had kicked into gear a while back and he'd stuck his foot in his mouth, over and over, by expressing disapproval of a man she was seeing. He winced inwardly now, remembering how he'd offered to fix her up with someone more suitable. She'd studiously avoided him after that and he'd missed her smiles and bright, effervescent energy even as he acknowledged he deserved her ire.

But time had seemed to soften her attitude toward him. That and his ability to keep his lips buttoned about anything personal when in her presence. Which was why he took great pains to keep his attention off her current dance-floor companion, despite the way the man had his sweaty paws glued to her swinging hips.

"Sophie never runs out of energy," her dad said, with a fond shake of his head. "I don't know that she ever slows down to take stock of her life, let alone a deep breath."

"Right," Hart agreed. The dynamo kept busy by working as a barista at the local coffee place in Sawyer Beach, Henry's, as well as running a part-time catering business. Then she'd added yet another gig to her already crowded work schedule. "How's her cooking class going?"

She ran it through the community center as part culinary education, part social group for singles. He'd almost signed up himself, shocking idea that it was, as a peace offering. Then he'd thought better of it, deciding she wouldn't appreciate his wet-blanket presence at anything even remotely social-adjacent.

Which reminded him. Time for his strategic retreat. Too long at the reception and he'd be sucked into attending the more-intimate after-party. The one time he'd not dodged that, a bouffant-and-long curls bridesmaid, apparently made aware

of his romantic tragedy, had landed in his lap in a tumble of tulle and tipsy tears. He'd been rescued in record time by Eli King, a poker buddy who had great experience with female drama thanks to his four younger siblings, but it wasn't something Hart was eager to experience again.

"Well, Randy..." he started. "I think—"

"You should walk with me over to the bar," the older man said, pointing. "I'm thirsty. I'm sure you could use a beer."

"Oh, I..." Frowning, Hart made a play of pulling out his phone and checking the time on the screen. "You see..."

"I see nothing," Randy said firmly, getting to his feet. "It's a Saturday night and all your friends are right here in this room. No better place for you. Come on."

When a man had bandaged your first skateboard scrapes and taught you how to drive a stick shift, it made him difficult to refuse. So Hart stood too, then trailed Randy as he skirted the dance floor. Upon queuing up in front of the white linen-draped bar, Hart was relieved to note that Cooper and Willow were nowhere to be seen.

Once they'd been served, Randy took the lead again. "Let's find Mrs. D," the older man said, with a glass of wine in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. "You haven't said hello to Carol yet and I know she'll want to see you."

Temporarily resigned—no way could he ignore the woman who had bandaged his second skateboard scrapes and also made the best chocolate chip cookies in the world—he obediently took a place at a round table where Mrs. D was ensconced—after delivering a warm kiss to her cheek, of course. She chatted about inconsequential things, pitching her voice over the dance music, and Hart nodded when necessary,

made noise during the pauses, and generally let her goodwill and calm acceptance of his limited participation in the conversation lull him into a false sense of security.

Because he didn't see Cooper coming until the chair beside his was jerked back and one of his best friends fell into the seat. "Save me," he said, his face red from exertion.

Hart slid his own untouched beer the other man's way.

Coop took a long swallow of the cold brew. "Thanks."

"Happy to oblige," Hart said mechanically.

His friend's smile stretched across his face, feathers practically waving from the corners of his mouth. Something dangerous glittered in his eyes. "Pleased to hear that."

Shit. Shit shit shit. Instincts screaming again, Hart glanced around, trying to ascertain the closest exit. "It's really getting late," he muttered.

"Too late," Cooper responded. "As a matter of fact, we've all let it go too long."

Yeah, that cryptic comment didn't sound good. Hart cleared his throat, gathering his excuses on the tip of his tongue.

Cooper's hand clapped him on the shoulder, trapping him in his seat—at least it felt that way. "What do you think of how Boone's big day is going? Despite his terror over putting together a wedding registry with Gemma and that existential crisis that was the boutonniere selection, he looked pretty calm saying his I do."

Hart shrugged, trying to dislodge his friend's hand. "You were closer than I was. Did you detect any trembling knees?"

“Nope. But we coached Eli in advance. As the best man, he was responsible for breaking the big guy’s fall if he went down.”

“Yeah.”

“Should have been you, though,” Cooper said, squeezing Hart’s shoulder then letting it go. “Standing right up there with Boone instead of skulking in the back row of the church.”

“Eli gave a great toast, don’t you think?” Hart asked, his tone slathered with enthusiasm, as he thought *deflect deflect deflect*. “Nobody could have done better.”

“Should have been you,” Cooper said again.

Shit. The fact was, Boone *had* asked him to be the best man, just as he’d asked Boone to be his best man at the wedding that wasn’t. But his big friend had understood when Hart refused. He’d not pressed. He’d not laid on the guilt. Hart shot an irritated look at Coop. “Look—”

“You’ve put yourself into a corner during all four of our friends’ weddings.”

“No one wants me in the thick of things at one of these events.”

Cooper frowned. “Not true. You’ve been self-exiling.”

“Best thing for me. I know what I’d look like in that snazzy suit like you’re wearing as a member of the happy wedding party. I’m too fucking thin, my face doesn’t smile well anymore, so I’d appear like...like...like...”

“Not like golden-boy Hart Sawyer of Sawyer Beach, California, the one who had stars falling down from the sky when he walked by.”

Hart blinked. “What the hell? Is that from a song?”

Cooper waved the question away. “Never mind. Been listening to music for my upcoming nuptials. Point is, yeah, you’ve been dealt a blow in what was previously a pretty magical life. But we need you back in the game now.”

“Coop...”

“I want you back in the game.”

“I’ve been attending our weekly poker get-togethers for months,” he said, his tone defensive. “The other six of you have won enough money from me to go in on a luxury sailboat.”

“That right there should make you ashamed and resolve to do better. I don’t need your sad-sack mood to win. I’m lucky, remember?”

It was true. Cooper found the last beach parking spot, the Ben Franklin in the gutter, his surfboard washed up on the beach, ding-less, after a gnarly wipeout.

Coop fixed Hart with a steely eye. “Here’s the thing. My brother begged out of his upcoming best man duties. Beau’s got a big work project and then a long business trip right before the wedding. So I’m back to asking you to do it, pal.”

Hart closed his eyes. Months ago, Cooper had given him the right of first refusal, and he’d done that. Refused to stand up with the man who’d done him the honor of wanting him by his side on the best day of his life.

Sighing, he opened his eyes, his gaze landing on the dance floor again. The party music had segued to a song slower. Sweeter. Beyoncé’s “Halo.”

There was Sophie and the same guy from earlier. His arms wrapped around her slender body, her face turned up to him, smiling.

I want to be that man, he thought.

Not that exact man, he corrected himself, hastily. Not the one with the right to hold Sophie so romantically close.

But for the first time in nearly two years he had an urge to step out of the corner. A desire to leave the back row. A craving to feel sun on his face again.

Amazed by the realization, yet still remarkably resolute, Hart turned his head toward Cooper, and nodded. All right. Time to get back in the game. "I'll do it."

Sophie Cooper carried a baking tray of her famous blue cheese and bacon bites into Eli King's kitchen and walked them directly to the oven for reheating. The new after-nuptials tradition, a gathering of the wedding party and close friends, was continuing at the home of the best man, Eli King. At the sound of stumbling footsteps behind her, Sophie paused to glance over her shoulder, grimacing. "Please, Cox, don't drop the dip."

He righted the bowl. "Floor's uneven," he mumbled. "Not the fault of Cox."

With a mental headshake, Sophie stowed her metal sheet on the nearest counter and reached for the Brie-and-artichoke concoction. "I've got it now."

"Not the fault of Cox," the man said again.

"Right," Sophie said, and turned to put it in the microwave. Her date for the wedding, she'd learned, sometimes referred to himself in the third person. Also, Cox was his last name and his first name was something normal

like Brian or Bruce—she couldn't remember—yet he preferred to be called by the word that began with a capital “C” and ended with “ox.”

When she'd mentioned the choice to her brother, he'd sent her a pitying look. “In college, he presided over his frat, Soph. *Of course* he'd go by Cox.”

Now she popped the appetizers into the oven. “I'm going to stay right here and mind these a while,” she told her escort. “You're free to mingle with the rest of the party, though.”

“Cox needs a beer,” he said, nodding his head, then pitched into a chair before righting himself and finding the open doorway leading to the great room where the guests were gathered.

On his way, he passed a woman entering the kitchen. He gave her a salute and a smile. “Cox,” he said, thumb to chest, then moved on without waiting for a response.

The former Erin Arthur, now Erin Rodriguez after eloping with Sophie's friend Rafael the previous year, looked after him. “Uh...”

“As he so succinctly informed you, that's Cox,” Sophie said. “He has a big truck, big muscles, and, surprisingly, not such a big ego, despite the fact he's not hard to look at and can keep up on the dance floor. He's even a little sweet.”

“Well, that's nice,” Erin said, glancing over her shoulder to take a second glance at the man. “It's good to see you with someone...”

Possibly eligible? One not heartsick over his dead fiancée? One who might look at you as something other than a little sister? Sophie mentally supplied all those endings to the first half of Erin's sentence, but settled for a simple, “Yes.”

For a while she'd stopped hiding the fact she'd been crushing on one of her brother's best friends, Hart Sawyer, for pretty much her entire life. But then she'd decided recently that banging her head against a wall wasn't a sensible use of her time. She was determined to get over her useless feelings and no longer was keen to advertise them.

Erin sniffed the air. "Are those the bacon and cheese balls that I adore?"

"Yes, they are," Sophie said, and opened the microwave to edge out the now-bubbling dip. "And if I recall you have a thing for Brie and artichokes."

"Who doesn't?" Erin demanded, then found pot holders and shouldered Sophie aside to remove the hot bowl. "Shall I take this to the buffet area?"

"Awesome. I left some crackers there in a basket on my way in."

"You're not coming?"

"Soon as I plate up the balls," she said, grinning. "Don't worry, the night is young."

Erin breezed out of the kitchen and Sophie watched her, smile dying as she caught sight of an unexpected figure in the crowd. Hart.

He'd been conspicuously absent from the latest post-wedding events. Before her gaze could linger too long, she returned her attention to the little window in the oven. While she might be glad he'd decided to extend his time with friends like this, it was better for her healing heart to avoid him in thoughts and deed.

Thanks to very rare, determinedly distant doses of Hart Sawyer, she was getting over him.

Using a pair of tongs, she was placing the heated appetizers onto a platter when she felt a new presence enter the room. Her insides jolted and her hand jerked, her wrist touching the heated edge of the metal baking sheet. She sucked in air and the tongs dropped with a clatter. “Damn,” she muttered, turning her hand to inspect the burn.

Strong, thin fingers grasped her forearm and her flesh prickled as she was towed toward the sink. “I’m fine,” she protested.

Hart shoved her wrist beneath a cold gush of water.

“It’s no big deal,” she said, holding still so as not to brush the body at her back. “I get burned all the time.”

Instead of answering, he shut off the water and lifted her arm to inspect the angry mark on her skin. It seemed to take longer than necessary as his hold gentled. Then he blew on the small injury.

The wolf blowing over the little piggy’s defenses. Her belly flipped and she dug her heels into the kitchen floor and ordered her knees not to noodle.

“You’ll live,” he finally announced, and handed her a paper towel as he released her and stepped away.

“Thank you,” she said, her tone less than gracious. Moving around him, she went back to transferring the cheese balls to the platter, though she could feel his gaze on her. *Okay, deal, Soph. Make some small talk.* It wasn’t as if he’d licked her from head to toe.

Oh, God.

“Nice wedding, huh?” she managed at last, trying to put her usual breeze into her voice.

“Yeah.”

Glancing back, she saw he was frowning. “You made food for the after-party?” he asked.

“We all brought something. Potluck, you know?”

“I stopped for beer and a bottle of wine.”

“There you go.”

“It would seem like you’ve got enough to do without taking on homemade midnight appetizers. I saw your Brie dip out there and those crackers you bake from scratch.”

That he recognized some of her signature dishes shouldn’t make her happy. “I like to keep busy.”

“Your dad says you have a thing against slowing down.”

Sophie shrugged. Slowing down gave her too much time to dwell on what couldn’t be. Who she couldn’t have.

“Sophie,” a new voice said. Her evening’s escort came into the kitchen, a beer in one hand and a glass of wine in the other. “Cox remembered you.”

“Oh, thanks, Cox,” she said, and beamed him a smile that included her best dimple. Taking the wine from his hand, she went on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

He smiled back, then looked to Hart. “Cox,” he said, touching his beer bottle to the center of his chest.

“Right.” Hart hesitated a moment then held out his hand. “Hart Sawyer.”

Former frat boys could deliver a solid shake, it seemed, because Hart winced as the other man squeezed. “Cox is glad to meetcha.”

Hart sent her an indecipherable sidelong look.

“Would you like to switch to coffee?” Sophie asked her date, hoping to steer him from alcohol to caffeine. The tendency to refer to himself in third person was seeming to increase with his beer intake. “I saw a station in the corner of the dining room.”

“Cox likes beer, not java,” he said, and downed the rest of his bottle to prove it. Then he wandered out, his steps weaving just the tiniest bit.

She glanced at Hart, waiting for his judgement.

He cleared his throat. “Your life going well, Soph? I’ve rarely glimpsed you in months.”

“Busy, like I said.” She made a great show of arranging the appetizers on the platter just so. “Henry extended the open hours at the coffee place now that we’re heading into summer.”

“And you’re the town’s favorite barista,” Hart said. “Any new coffee concoctions you’ve created? I’m afraid I haven’t stopped in for quite a while.”

She’d been grateful for his absence, she’d told herself.

From the living area beyond the kitchen rose a great shout. “Cox, you can’t—” followed by “Cox, don’t!” Then raucous laughter as the sound of bottles clattering and clanking reached them. Glass shattered.

Shaking his head, Eli King strode into the kitchen where he grabbed a broom and dustpan from the utility closet. “Your date is three beers past putting together a stable bottle pyramid,” he muttered and then was gone from the room.

Again she expected Hart to comment, but instead he moved on to another innocuous subject. “I had a chance to speak with your mom, and—”

“Cox is not my ‘date,’ okay?” she said, interrupting him. “I mean, yes, we went to the wedding together, but it was a fix-up.”

Hart nodded.

“It was going nowhere, even before he stopped using ‘I’ and ‘me.’” She turned away from the man to grab up the platter. “So don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” he asked mildly.

She swung around, ready to point out he was laughing or sneering or...or...judging, but instead he looked just as neutral as his voice. The truth was, he didn’t really care if she dated Cox or a box or a fox with green socks. When would she get that through her head?

Her cheeks heated. “Before...a few months ago...you...”

He held up his hands. “I learned my lesson, back then. I no longer hold opinions on who you’re seeing or who you’re not seeing, okay?”

“Sure,” she said. “That’s best. Great. Terrific.”

She heard another shout in the distance and her date’s voice. “Give Cox another chance,” he was saying. Her gaze slid to Hart.

“This is me walking away,” her former longtime crush said, sidling in the direction of the exit. “You won’t see me or hear from me for the rest of the night.”

“Great, terrific,” she repeated to his back. Then, with a big breath, she took herself and her famous bacon and cheese bites into the party.

As the night wore on, Hart did as promised, keeping to dark corners, apparently, where she didn’t see him. Then Cox

disappeared too, and as he was her ride home, she decided to track him down and suggest their fun was over for the evening.

Some people were in the den watching reruns of *SNL*. Another group was flopped on couches and in desultory conversation in the living room. The line for the bathroom was only two guys talking sports.

Cox was MIA.

Anxiety twisting in her belly, she stepped into the backyard. Once, when she was sixteen, she'd found her boyfriend making out in the darkness with her best frenemy. She'd escaped back to the party and her besties had walked her home, tears streaming down her face.

The pity of her classmates on Monday morning had hurt more than seeing Zip Waldorf with his tongue down someone else's throat. Two things she'd obviously not learned—avoid guys with three-letter nicknames and situations of the heart in which people end up feeling sorry for you.

“He's over here,” a voice called to her. Hart. “I was just admiring the starry night when he appeared on the back lawn and, well, fell over. I determined he's still breathing—just passed out, I guess. I was about to come in to get you.”

Sophie headed in the direction of his voice and blinked until she could make out Hart standing over the reposing hulk that was Cox. As she came to a pause beside her date, he snored like a hibernating bear.

“Damn.” Her hands found her hips. “He's my ride.”

“Not anymore,” Hart said, and bent to fish keys from the other man's pocket. “You can drive him home and then I'll drive *you* home.”

Her gaze ran over her ex-crush. He'd lost weight since Kim's untimely death. "You really think we can get him to his truck?" She hesitated. "To save all our dignity, I'm hoping we can take him through the side gate and not straight through the party."

"I can do it," Hart said, sounding insulted. Then, somehow, he had Cox on his feet and was directing the stumbling and mumbling man in the direction Sophie indicated. She trailed them, ready to...well, most likely jump out of the way if the drunken guy went down again.

But Hart managed to stuff Cox into the passenger seat and then he followed her to the big condo development near town. The frat prez had become acquainted with their group through Sophie's brother who frequented the complex's weight room there, as did the snorer.

Was it bad that they opted to leave Cox in his car, droning loud enough to rattle the windows? Sophie decided to let any guilt over that go as she climbed into the leather passenger seat of Hart's new sedan. "Oh, fancy," she said, smoothing her hand over the smooth surface.

He grunted, then as they drove a palpable tension began filling the space around them. Damn! she thought. They used to go to the movies. She used to bring him dinners. There were times when she lived to catch just a glimmer of his smile.

Now, it was all awkwardness between them. Ever since he'd snarked on a man she was seeing and she'd snapped back, the two of them like a couple of squabbling children. Their following estrangement had provided time for tempers to cool—as well as her unrequited ardor for Hart, she'd been hoping—but she couldn't help feel nostalgia for the old closeness they'd once shared.

Then, she'd been content that he regarded her like a little sister. It hadn't been so bad.

But it had! an inner voice reminded her. Her heart had ached every time she saw him, his tall, dark, and handsomeness so dear to her. She breathed in now, and his familiar scent entered her lungs. Subtle, expensive, salt and citrus and...Hart.

Resting her head against the seat, she closed her eyes.

"You look nice tonight," he finally said.

"Oh. Thanks." She fingered the full skirt of her blue bridesmaid's dress. The strapless bodice clung just right, and it had been hemmed to a length that worked for her on-the-short-side stature. She sent Hart a glance. "You look—"

"Too thin, I know," he said. In the streetlight streaming in his windshield, she saw him send over his own glance. "I've missed your home cooking."

"Um..." *Don't make promises you shouldn't keep!* her inner voice warned. The road to her continued crush-recovery was distance. Separation. As she'd thought before, it was better for her healing heart to avoid Hart in thoughts and deed.

"And I've missed you," he added. "A lot."

Argh! No! Her fingers clenched into fists, her short nails digging into her palms, the pain intentional, to remind her of what surely awaited her if she opened up her newly healing self to him.

Distance! she reminded herself. Separation!

The keys to sanity.

"But that's about to change," he continued.

Her eyes rounded. Her mouth went dry. “Um...huh?”

“Your brother’s upcoming wedding.”

“What about it?” she asked slowly. Cautiously.

“You’re the maid of honor, right?”

“Riiight.” Where was this going?

“I’ve signed on as best man,” Hart said, in the warmest tone she’d heard out of him in months and months. “That will give us plenty of time to work together. Be together again.”

Be together again? Sophie sucked in a breath. “Good news,” she choked out.

Disaster.

CHAPTER TWO

“THANKS FOR MEETING ME HERE,” DON GREER SAID, WITH A solid shake of Hart’s hand. He looked around, taking in the atmosphere of Tommy’s Tavern, all rough-hewn walls and neon beer signs, most customers wearing leather and motorcycle boots. “When I travel I like to seek out the local hangouts, the roadhouse type of places, you know?”

Don Greer was an old friend of the father of Hart’s fiancée, Kim, back to their college days at the University of Southern California. “Sure,” Hart said, sliding onto the empty barstool beside the older man.

“Much more interesting than big hotel bars,” Don continued.

“You won’t find one of those around here,” Hart said. “Sawyer Beach is not a big hotel kind of place. For that, you need to go north or south. Otherwise, we have plenty of inns, B & Bs, and wineries that also offer accommodations.”

Delilah Rodriguez, recently wed to Hart’s friend Shane, appeared in front of him on the other side of the bar. He sent her a puzzled smile, knowing her usual gig at the tavern involved waiting on tables.

“Helping to tend tonight,” she explained. “We’re down one guy who is taking a long weekend off for a pre-Sturgis ride.”

“Got it.” He ordered a local beer to match Don’s, then glanced over to see the man had unfolded a paper map, one provided by the local chamber of commerce and distributed at the businesses around town.

“I like this place,” the older man said, tapping the paper. “The entire area, as a matter of fact. Small, but with so many different economic opportunities.”

Hart nodded. This part of Central California included a robust winemaking region and organic farms as well as small colleges and a university. Some tech companies had fled the big cities too, creating their own more laidback haven. Tourists came for the good food and drink, the beaches, and the small, picturesque town of Sawyer Beach, which consisted of old-fashioned storefronts and other shops housed within homes dating back to the early 1900s.

“I understand your great-grandfather was the first to recognize its promise?”

“I’m not sure he was the first, but the town is named after him and the family has had a hand in land development for a hundred years.”

“Now you run the company.”

“My parents retired and live mostly in condos they own in Paris and London.”

Don took a quaff of his beer. “Must be nice.”

Nicer, was that their cold marriage was off Hart’s radar. His parents weren’t bad people, but they weren’t warm either...to their son or to each other. He smiled thanks at Delilah as she placed the beer in front of him.

“Your folks come back and weigh in on decisions from time to time?”

Hart didn't take offense at the prying. He knew Don had more than a passing interest in the town and the company. A couple of serious conversations between Hart and Kim's father had led to this "casual" meeting.

"As of two years ago, I'm the only one with a financial stake."

"It's run the way you want it to."

"That's right," Hart said. "I don't want to see our area overdeveloped. We're conscious of keeping open spaces and the California Coastal Commission is a diligent guardian of the beach areas, for the most part. We need housing—no doubt—but development must be careful. We're also involved in some projects in nearby states."

Don was nodding as if all this information wasn't new to him. "A new golf course or two might be a good draw."

Hart worked not to wince. "We have an excellent public course nearby. It dates back to Arnold Palmer's first design days and is highly popular." He kept his tone noncommittal. If he went through with the idea he'd been toying with, the one he'd discussed with Kim's dad in the last few months, then he knew change would be out of his control.

And change was what this notion was all about.

For two years, he'd been letting life march around him, while he stood still, midstream, mid-mourning. It didn't take a genius to know a shake-up was necessary if he was going to feel purposeful again.

To merely feel again.

Don shifted in his barstool, facing Hart more directly. "You're serious about selling your company? About leaving town for good?"

From the other side of the bar, a loud crash. His head came up and he saw that Delilah had dropped a glass in the stainless steel bar sink. She looked around, her eyes wide. “Sorry, everybody,” she called to no one in particular. “Just clumsy old me.”

She shot a glance at Hart, then busied herself with cleanup.

Distracted, Don moved on to another topic without waiting for an answer. Hart facilitated the new direction of the conversation—golf courses designed by champion players—until the older man declared himself satisfied with their initial meeting.

“I’ve been advised not to overwhelm you,” he said, shaking Hart’s hand in goodbye. “But I’ll be in touch soon. We’ll meet again.”

Promise? Threat? Hart couldn’t decide. He was sipping his second round of beer when another man took the empty seat beside his. With a sigh, he didn’t bother looking over.

“Delilah phoned you?” he asked his friend Shane.

“Sure,” the rangy man said easily. “I’m her ride home at the end-of-shift and she called to say she’s off early tonight.”

So maybe the woman didn’t spill the beans. Hart grunted, and took another swig of his beer, grateful that if one of his friends had to show up, it wasn’t one who wouldn’t talk his ear off. Another moment of easy silence passed between them.

“So...” Shane began. “Heard you accepted Coop’s best man gig.”

“Yeah.” He supposed he needed to add more, since he’d avoided participating in the last four weddings. “Trying to venture out of my rut.”

“I remember you encouraging me to do the same,” Shane said. “Great advice, by the way.”

Hart sent a significant look down the bar at Delilah, a breath of fresh air in the dim surroundings. “Worked out well for you.”

“I can’t disagree.” The other man wore a satisfied-new-husband expression. “Of course, I didn’t go so far as to contemplate leaving town.”

Damn. Hart shot his friend a look. “So Delilah did tell?”

One of his friend’s shoulders lifted. “She was startled by what she heard. And worried. This sounds serious.”

“For a while now, life has been that way for me,” Hart said, defensive.

“I get it, I get it.” Shane sighed. “You’d tell me if I could help with something? If I could do anything to improve things for you?”

“That’s why I’m considering...what I’m considering,” Hart said. “I’m not making any grand announcements yet, but taking a new path could...” His voice trailed off.

“Could?”

It was Hart’s turn to shrug.

“I don’t know,” Shane said, sounding dubious. “It seems as if an intention is only a good one if you can manage to say it out loud.”

Hart frowned, a desultory annoyance stirring. “This is your business how?”

“Twenty years of friendship,” Shane said, squarely meeting his gaze. “You’re like another brother to me, you

know.”

Ashamed of his half-hearted jibe, Hart shoved a hand through his hair. “Fine,” he said. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I have to own up to what’s been on my mind.”

“I’m listening.”

Hart let the words form on his tongue, steeling himself for his own emotional reaction. “Taking the last Sawyer out of Sawyer Beach. I’m really thinking of pulling up stakes and leaving town.”

Then he paused, gauging his gut’s feedback to the admission. Was it bad or was it good that instead of regret or relief or some other raw response he actually felt nothing at all?

Aware of a new customer’s arrival, Sophie pasted on a smile but kept her eyes down as she continued stuffing bills into the register. This afternoon she was manning the entire coffee counter, from ordering to cashiering to creating the coffee drinks.

At this time of day, there were usually lulls that allowed for breathing.

Usually.

Indistinct shouting caught her attention and she glanced up, to look through the café’s plate glass windows. A horde of bright-hued road bikers were racing by, as usual terrorizing walkers trying to cross the street and cars attempting to safely back out of parking spaces. She shook her head at the danger

they posed, then saw her mother pull open the door and stride inside.

Her gaze locked on Sophie. “You look exhausted.”

“Oh, hey, Mom.” Trying to sound more chipper, she strengthened her voice. “What can I get you?”

“A daughter who looks as if she’s taking care of herself.” Carol Daggett’s brows drew together. “Sophie, honey, I’m going to insist you come to dinner tonight.”

“Can’t do, Mom, I already told you.” Her hands automatically moved to grab a to-go cup—*don’t give the woman the idea she should linger*—and shuffled toward the espresso machine. Carol Daggett’s order never varied. “I’m going to stockpile some appetizers in the freezer for an upcoming catering event.”

Carol frowned, creating some lines around her vivid blue eyes, the same shade as Sophie’s own. “I still wonder if we should have told Nana you couldn’t have an Easy-Bake Oven that Christmas.”

Sophie felt a bittersweet twinge at the mention of her grandmother, now passed on. “Mom, I think you were the one who really loved that toy.”

“I know.” Her mom sighed. “All those cute little mix boxes and the cute little pans. I still have them, in the attic. I’m saving them for—”

“Grandkids. I know, I know.” Sophie slid the coffee drink across the counter. “Save that kind of talk for Cooper and Willow, why don’t you? They’re the ones getting married. Better yet, start on Beau. He’s the oldest and should be the first to fulfill your fantasies on that score.”

“Oh, you can’t say anything like that to sons,” Carol told her, then took a sip of coffee. “You have to be completely hands-off about marriage and babies when it comes to them. But with daughters...you can—”

“Apply all the pressure you want?”

“I was going to say ‘share what’s on your mind,’ but I get your point.” Carol sighed again. “I just worry about you. That you’re taking time for yourself, that you’re taking time to date, you know what I mean.”

“Honestly, I’m too busy to date right now.”

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“Someday I’ll have my own restaurant and all of this busyness will be proven worthwhile,” Sophie said in her most chipper voice.

Carol wasn’t buying it, if her second frown was any indication. “I keep asking myself, what are you trying to prove?”

More like, what am I not trying to feel?

The few days since Boone’s wedding to Gemma and her chat with Hart hadn’t given Sophie confidence on the current health of her heart. The man had walked into her mind again, just like that, haunting her with his lean face, his intense eyes, his voice. *I’ve missed you. A lot.*

She’d found herself mooning over him once again, remembering the touch of his hand on her arm, the scent of him wrapping around her as she rode in his passenger seat. The only defense that occurred to her was to work herself into oblivion. Accepting several more catering jobs meant she was cooking and baking until she swooned with weariness.

She moved through her shifts at Henry's like a zombie barista.

The chimes on the café's door rang out. Her mom glanced over her shoulder and her voice lowered to a whisper. "That's a cute one."

Sophie looked. Well. He was cute, and she knew him. Travis Butler.

He'd tick off one of your boxes, a little voice inside her whispered.

One of her anti-Hart boxes.

Since accepting he'd never look on her in a romantic way, she'd tried to kindle romances with different types of men. Different than Hart. No golden boys, no successful businessmen. No guy that would easily fit in with the 7-Stud Club crowd. There'd been the tattooed motorcycle mechanic.

Then she'd had a brief fling with an Australian surfing up and down the California coast. In his presence, just his accent had made her belly flutter.

Her heart had remained still as a stone.

Next, a solid single dad, one fifteen years her senior, had chased after her with gratifying effort until his preteen daughters had put up such a fuss he'd accepted defeat. Her decided lack of woe once he stopped calling told her he hadn't been the one.

Running her gaze from Travis's hat to his booted feet, she realized she'd never dated a cowboy. As she watched, he removed that hat and ran his hand through messy layers of sun-tipped hair. Then his gaze caught Sophie's and he grinned in an unabashed style that had her mom murmuring.

“Oh, honey. If he whips out his lasso, please don’t run.”

A snort of laughter erupted and she shot her mother a look. “You don’t know anything about him. What would Dad say?”

“He wants grandchildren too.”

“Shh,” Sophie urged as Travis began striding toward her. “Hey, Travis,” she said as he bellied up to the counter.

Her gaze took in his white, Western shirt with gleaming black snap fasteners. He wore the garment with dark-wash jeans that snugged his crotch in a way that had her neck heating. She pretended she hadn’t been staring as she met his green eyes.

One of her favorite colors.

“How are you, Miss Sophie?” he drawled. “The nights have been long since our group’s class hiatus.”

The class she ran through the community center. Billed as a cooking event for singles, it was also a barely veiled opportunity to meet others unattached. “You signed on for the next session?”

“Sure did. I’m eager to up my barbecue game.”

The eight weekly classes she’d offered in spring had covered pastas with seasonal vegetables, light casseroles, and her paella recipe as the finale. Summer fare would feature items easy to grill, from steaks and pizzas, to peaches with vanilla whipped cream.

“Glad to hear you enjoyed what you learned and want more.”

“I do want more,” he said, his body leaning toward hers.

Standing off to the side, pretending to study a paper menu, Sophie heard her mother make a little chirp of appreciation.

Ignoring her, she tilted her head. “Well, what can I get you right now, Travis?”

He still didn’t shift his gaze from her face. “Americano?”

She grabbed a cup and made to turn when his hand shot out to touch her wrist, causing her to pause. “But first...”

Her head tilted again, and she recognized the classic flirtation move. *Way to go, Soph!* she congratulated herself, *your instincts are still alive and well!* “First?”

“I thought maybe we could have a little one-on-one...”

“Cooking lesson?”

His lips turned up at the corners. Damn, he *was* cute. “Well...”

The bells on the door chimed again and she automatically looked toward the entrance. Another man stood there, tall, dark, and the one her wayward instincts recognized as the love of her life. Hart.

She allowed her eyes to briefly close and she gathered herself together, then opened them to smile at Travis again. “Let me get that Americano.”

The few moments that passed allowed her to reinforce her composure. With the cup full of fragrant brew, she turned to hand it to the cowboy and saw that Hart had queued up behind him.

As Travis drew his wallet from his back pocket, she commanded herself *not* to make comparisons. Except it was impossible not to note her pulse had accelerated at the first glimpse of Hart. His hair was longer than usual and she told

herself not too long to push it off his face. She took in the lean muscle of his torso and arms and could only remember the competent way he managed Cox, and then the tender touch of his fingers on her arm when he blew on her burn.

The spot throbbed now in memory.

Her mother turned, ending her faux-study of the menu and exclaimed in pleasure to find Hart in line. They exchanged pleasantries as Sophie looked back at Travis expectantly. “You were saying?”

Now her mother decided to join the conversation. “Soph, look who’s here!”

“I recognize Hart,” she replied, without looking at him. “I’ll be with you shortly.”

Travis glanced over his shoulder, then back at her. “I was wondering if you’re free one night soon.”

She thought she knew where this was going, but she had to be sure. “I don’t usually do solo lessons—”

“A date, Miss Sophie. You’re not attached, are you?”

“No,” her mother put in now. “Sophie’s my daughter, by the way. She’s a bachelorette. Free as a bird. Ring finger vacant and available.”

There was poisoned quiche in her mother’s future. Sophie leaned toward Travis and lowered her voice. “Ignore the strange woman. I’ve never met her before.”

His lips twitched. “She looks remarkably like you.”

“We have one of those faces.”

He laughed. “Can we meet for dinner one night this week?”

Her mind ran through her schedule. “I’m afraid—”

“She works too hard.” Her mother started talking again.

“Mom.”

“You do!” Carol said, then felt the sharpness of Sophie’s gaze and backed away. “Sorry. I’ve been a little crazy lately.”

“My brother’s getting married soon,” Sophie told the cowboy. “Tulle has replaced the brain cells in her skull.”

“I don’t know what tulle is. Let me take you to dinner and you can explain it fully.”

So cute.

“Sophie,” Hart put in now. “Sorry to interrupt this fascinating meet cute...”

Her gaze swung to him but there was no bite to the words or any expression at all on his face. “Sorry, Hart—”

“But I’ve got a meeting coming up and I’m in immediate need of a beverage if I’m going to stay awake for it.”

“Yeah, sure.” She sent a silent apology to Travis who took a step aside so that Hart could take his place. “What would you like to order?”

At this time of day he’d go for a flat white, no doubt, no deviation, but she didn’t feel like giving away she was that familiar with his habits. Not that half the town didn’t rely on her memory to retain their favorite, but Hart...

He didn’t need to know how everything about him was etched on her soul.

Damn!

In a terse few words, he ordered the drink and she turned away to make it. Travis still stood by the counter, but she

couldn't really go out with him, could she? Was it fair to accept a date when she could barely breathe in the presence of an entirely different man?

Sliding the coffee onto the counter, she was counting Hart's change as Travis spoke up again. "Dinner, Miss Sophie. This week."

Without thinking, she peeped at Hart, trying to assess his reaction to another man's keen interest in her. His only response was to stuff bills in the tip jar and turn for the door.

"I would love that," she said with enthusiasm, raising her voice to reach her would-be date, her nosy mother, the man who considered her a little sister, and fate.

Maybe professed eagerness to be with someone else would turn her as unfeeling toward Hart as he seemed to be toward the idea of Sophie on a date with a cowboy.

CHAPTER THREE

POKER NIGHT. AFTER KIM PASSED AWAY, HART'S FRIENDS HAD left him out of the weekly hosting rotation. But he was back in now, and he busied himself setting out the chips and cards on the game table he had purchased years ago. Each of the guys had their own particular arrangement, especially chosen for the evenings they played together, a tradition dating back to sophomore year in high school when they'd all been enrolled in the same auto shop class.

Cards and learning inventive curse words had been the glue of their early bond.

Now it was years of shared history.

He opened the front door and left the screen in place, the early summer night air warm. On the way to his kitchen, he heard a feminine "yoo-hoo," and spun around, expecting the food and the caterer he'd booked for the evening.

But a different woman stood on his front porch, her arms laden with a stack of insulated carriers. The handles of a brown paper sack hung from each elbow.

"Delilah," he said, rushing to usher her in. "I wasn't expecting you."

He'd booked Sophie, his usual go-to for poker night, partly to throw her some business, mostly because she knew exactly the kind of fare that pleased seven poker-playing friends.

"I'm subbing as delivery and setup," she said, heading to his kitchen and the large island there. She'd been to his house before and knew the layout. "You want dinner buffet-style, right?"

"Right."

With efficient movements, Delilah began unpacking.

"Do you need..." he began.

"Not a thing. I have my instructions."

The food emerged from the containers, salad green and crisp-looking, a lasagna made with white sauce and fresh vegetables that smelled of garlic and parmesan. He, who rarely had an appetite these days, felt his taste buds perk.

"Wow."

Delilah sent him a puzzled glance. "Surely you've had Sophie's cooking before."

He nodded. "Many times. It's just..." His eyes rounded as she pulled out a pan that held a dozen small pastries that looked like individual... "Apple pies?"

"Miniature ones. Sophie calls them tassies," Delilah said. "They're an experiment she said, so she wants feedback."

"Sure. Happy to do that." Once upon a time, he'd been the beneficiary of her cooking "experiments," new recipes that never failed to impress him. That was in the before times, though, before their falling-out.

He'd thought they'd made it past that however, on the night of Boone's nuptials. But maybe not?

Clearing his throat, he focused on the dinner rolls that emerged from yet another container. "She couldn't make it by herself tonight?" He'd arranged the catering gig the day after the wedding, via text message. When he'd dropped by Henry's the other afternoon, there'd been no chance to mention it.

Delilah shot him a swift glance from under thick lashes. "Um...I think she had another, um...engagement that conflicted."

Hart's mind instantly shifted to the coffee place. The guy in the boots, holding a straw ten-gallon hat, leaning toward the barista with a disarming aw-shucks and yes ma'am-attitude. *Dinner, Miss Sophie. This week.*

Miss Sophie. Gah. Like she ran a rooming house and he was a Western drifter looking for a clean bed and a good woman.

Was this her date night?

"What do you know about the guy?" Hart asked abruptly, not bothering to even confirm his suspicion. Of course it was her date night. Hadn't she told the other man *I would love that*, in a voice loud enough to reach Hart as he strode out the door?

"Um..." Delilah's head stayed down as she focused on carefully folding the paper bags.

"Does *anyone* know anything about this guy?" Hart demanded, then winced, remembering he'd promised himself not to pry into Sophie's social life. Promised Sophie herself the very same. "Forget I asked," he muttered, then shoved his hand through his hair. "I only wish her every happiness, that's all. She deserves the kind of man who can give her everything."

The kind of man who makes her light up just thinking about him.”

Because Sophie *was* light. Pulsing energy and golden sunshine.

“That’s nice,” Delilah said vaguely. “And maybe Travis is that guy.”

“Travis,” Hart echoed. Why did the name taste bitter in his mouth?

Smoothing the bags once again, Delilah hesitated. Then she lifted her gaze to Hart, her eyes meeting his. “If you want to know what I really think—”

The sentence was interrupted by the slam of the screen door and a jumble of male voices. The poker crew, arriving *en masse*, apparently.

Delilah was already scurrying out of the kitchen, the moment of imminent candor apparently lost. Resigned, Hart sighed, then stirred himself to greet his oldest friends.

Minutes later, they were all around his large kitchen table, plates filled with the delicious food. Ritual prescribed they enjoy dinner and dessert before decamping to the poker table and the evening’s games of chance.

Enjoy was the word, Hart thought, scooping up another bite of the pasta dish. The vegetables were bright and added a splash of fresh flavor to the delicious sauce. He’d barely finished his first portion before he was up for a second helping, adding another roll and more salad as long as he was on his feet. God, it tasted and smelled so damn good.

Was it some of Sophie’s special magic? That sunshine in cuisine form? He could see her small hands in his mind’s eye,

capably chopping and stirring. Her neat figure moving about the cooking space, light on her feet and a sparkle in her eyes.

At one of the weddings, he'd been coaxed on the dance floor by someone and when one song ended and another began, by tacit agreement everyone had turned to find a new partner. He'd shifted at the same time as Sophie, and they'd stood, facing each other, inches between them. Unable to look away from her flushed face that only served to make her blue eyes stand out like jewels, he'd felt a wave of...something roll through him.

Disturbed, he'd retreated like his shoes were on fire, but since then, he'd occasionally woken in the night, imagining he could almost feel her in his arms. *Sophie.*

"Hey." Eli rapped on the table, jerking him from his reverie. "Are you okay?"

Hart dropped back into his seat. "Sorry, just mesmerized by the food."

"I haven't seen you eat this much in months," Cooper said. "Sophie will be pleased."

"You think so?" Instead of making his delivery personally, however, she'd gone out with another man.

Which he wanted, he hastened to remind himself. Sophie, who was like a sister to him, finding happiness in a man's arms. Real Sophie, not the fantasy that Hart could only almost touch in his dreams.

"If you leave town like you're thinking," Shane said slyly, "you'll lose your access to Sophie's goodies."

Sophie's goodies. Now Hart's mind leaped to her bare shoulders in that blue dress at Boone's wedding. The swell of

her small breasts over the lace. The gamine smile, the line of her throat, the nape of her neck.

The dimples in her cheeks caused by her curving lips. The other dimples at the small of her back, the ones known as the Dimples of Venus, that he'd noticed when he'd seen her in a bikini last week. He, driving by the beach on the way to a meeting, was made to brake because a swarm of speeding road bikes ridden by skinny men in spandex and helmets had taken over the road. While he cursed their reckless pace and lack of caution for cars and pedestrians, his gaze had snagged on Sophie, standing with a group of women gathered on either side of a volleyball net set up on the sand.

Then he noticed that collective silence surrounding him. The stares from the other men. "What?"

Raf glanced at his brother. "Did you say Hart's thinking of leaving town?"

"For a vacation?" Mad asked, a suspicious-cop expression taking over his face.

Hart shot a narrow-eyed look at Shane.

The other man shrugged. "There was a day not long ago when you spilled the address of my secret hideaway to anyone who would ask."

"Payback has never seemed your style," Hart muttered.

"Remember?" Shane crooked a brow. "If it's a good intention you should be able to say it out loud."

"Especially to your closest friends," Mad added. "So... what's this all about?"

Hart blew out air and ran his gaze over the other five men. Boone was still on his honeymoon, but he might as well break

it to the majority now. “It’s true. I’m considering selling my business and relocating.”

“No way,” Cooper said, clearly disbelieving. “You *are* Sawyer Beach.”

“Uh, no.” Hart gestured to the group. “You are Sawyer Beach, a cop, business owners. This is your town.”

“And yours,” Cooper said stubbornly.

“I thought so all my life, it’s true.” Hart cleared his throat, trying to summon the words that might explain. “But I’ve just felt so damn stuck in my head lately. At first, well, I knew I was grieving and I knew that was natural. Necessary.”

“Of course you needed to mourn,” Eli said. “Need to mourn still. There’s no timeline, Hart. When I lost my parents, I learned there’s no day when the feelings of pain and loss are miraculously over.”

“Yeah, I get that.” He grimaced. “But now I feel like I’m trudging through life, and the trail I’m carving is getting deeper and deeper but I’m not getting any closer to a destination. Pretty soon the dirt is going to swallow me up.” At Boone’s wedding he’d thought about wanting to feel the sun again, but it seemed so impossible to him at times.

He hauled in a breath. “So maybe if I make a big move like this, it’ll shake things up. Shake me loose.”

A long moment of silence passed, then Raf slapped both his hands against the tabletop. “Nonsense. The only thing you need is to get laid.”

The rest of men groaned, Hart included.

“What?” Raf asked, wide-eyed.

“You’re a dog,” his half brother said.

Raf wagged a finger. “But a dog that is right.” He shifted his attention to Hart. “Instead of all this navel-gazing, you need to do some gazing at the opposite sex.”

“Good God,” Mad said. “Porn is not the answer.”

“Who’s talking about porn? I mean a real, live, warm-skinned woman.”

Sophie popped into Hart’s head again. Unbidden, but there all the same, her face, her figure, the scent of her perfume when he drove her home in his car the night of the wedding.

“I can introduce you to someone who won’t take things too seriously.”

Hart didn’t doubt it. Before falling for his wife Erin, Raf had been known for his string of no-strings bed partners. “I don’t think that’s for me,” he said.

“Why not give it a try?” The other man hesitated a moment, then snapped his fingers. “Julie Booth.”

“Didn’t you go out with her?” Shane asked.

Raf ignored that. “She’s smart, kind, and extremely flexible.” As the rest of the poker friends hooted, he sent them all a glare. “Okay, forget the flexible bit. That does make me sound like a dog.”

When the laughter calmed, Shane leaned back in his chair, his gaze trained on Hart. “I see that look on your face. What are you thinking?”

“Some random hookup isn’t going to work.” *Especially* with Julie Booth. That had already been a disaster.

Raf frowned. “You haven’t—”

“I have, okay?” At the expressions of astonishment on his friends’ faces, he gave a grim smile. “Sort of. My...situation has led to a lot of sympathy offers.”

“I witnessed it myself,” Eli said. “Remember that bridesmaid? She had you by the tie and was practically dragging you to the nearest bedroom.”

“Well, you rescued me that time, but there was another opportunity.” Hart swallowed. “I can’t believe I’m telling all of you this.”

“This what?” Shane said.

“Look, it didn’t work, all right?”

Raf’s eyes widened. “Are you talking about your disco stick? Your firehose? Your Hammer of Thor? Was it limp? Because there are pills—”

Hart reached over and cuffed the side of his friend’s head. “Shut up. I’m just saying that I couldn’t just...just be in the moment and feel. I was stuck in my head and her scent wasn’t right and the texture of her hair wasn’t right and...and...can we just leave it that there was no satisfaction? I’m sure it was embarrassing for both of us.”

A new sound had his head jerking toward the front of the house. The living room light illuminated Sophie Daggett, in jeans, boots, and a lightweight embroidered blouse, the front tucked into the fly of her tight denim. Her mouth was rosy and her cheekbones were flushed and obviously she’d just overheard some of their conversation.

How much, he couldn’t say. But her eyes did plenty of speaking.

Her big blues stared straight at him, like he was a great big loser.

An ache burst in his chest.

Damn, that hurt, was his first thought. *But for once I'm feeling something*, was his second.

Who knew a simple tassie pan could cause so much trouble? As Sophie's late afternoon/early evening date with Travis ended on a warm, yet uninspired note, she'd headed over to Hart's to retrieve the piece of cookware she'd forgotten she would need first thing in the morning.

"Sorry to interrupt," she'd said, as six gathered members of the 7-Stud Club looked at her. "Um...I should have put the desserts onto a separate tray before delivery."

Without meeting Hart's eyes, she'd rushed into the kitchen and rushed out of the house. That was eight days ago.

Now it was Friday afternoon and a large group—including friends and neighbors of all ages—had gathered in Boone's backyard to put together a welcome home from the honeymoon-present. In the spirit of an old-fashioned barn raising, they intended to build a new gazebo, assemble a massive, fancy barbecue, trim the existing landscaping, then add new plants and even a small vegetable and herb garden. When the newlyweds arrived home from Tahiti they'd bliss out all over again.

Sophie, however, wasn't in a blissful frame of mind. Her intent from the get-go was to avoid the awkwardness of a face-to-face with Hart, but he kept emerging in the periphery of her vision, causing her to scuttle from one corner of the yard to another, and then dart into the bathroom followed by an

emergency kitchen dash—luckily Eli and family had a key since they'd been taking care of Boone's cat.

And more luck for her that there was plenty to do, which caused people to wave Hart over to help haul mulch or wield a hammer or figure out why there seemed to be a missing beam in the gazebo kit according to the plans.

“I am an awesome friend,” Sophie muttered to herself as she brought out glasses filled with lemonade and set them on a picnic table. It would have been much easier to make up some justification to avoid the gathering, but, well, she *was* a good friend and, to be honest, she'd used the event as a reason not to meet with Travis today. It wasn't in her to duck a second date and then duck out on the very excuse she'd used.

It didn't help that she was a terrible liar.

She spun around to return to the kitchen for more liquid refreshment. A hand caught her by the shoulder.

It would have been nice to be able to fib to herself and think she didn't feel the touch all the way to her toenails. On a silent sigh, she said, “Hey, Hart.”

“Have you been avoiding me?”

Of course she didn't turn around. “I don't know why you'd say that.”

“You haven't responded to any of my texts.”

She hadn't opened any of his texts since poker night. “You know me. Busy busy busy.” And she couldn't imagine what he'd want to say to her after what she'd mistakenly overheard.

Can we just leave it that there was no satisfaction? I'm sure it was embarrassing for both of us.

It didn't bear commenting upon from either of their sides.

His fingers squeezed her shoulder. “You haven’t invoiced me for the catering job.”

“Oh!” She swallowed and made a sweeping gesture with her hand. “No worries. Why don’t we just, uh, consider it even.”

There was a long pause during which he didn’t let go of her. Goose bumps trickled down her spine in an endless stream of hot and cold reaction.

“The fact that you now know something very private about me,” he said, in a musing tone, “is worth a Michelin-quality dinner?”

That got her turning around. She looked up at him, trying to broadcast her sincerity. “I’ve forgotten anything that was said. Immediately upon hearing it. I promise. As for Michelin —”

“You’ve forgotten?” he said, his tone skeptical.

“For all intents and purposes, yes. Think about it. Have I ever bandied about any of the secrets I learned the many times I eavesdropped on you and the guys during your campouts in our backyard?”

His jaw dropped even as humor glinted in his eyes. “Sophia Melinda Daggett, are you telling me you were a sneaky snoop?”

She waved her hand again. “Well, yes. Hello? For years, I had a passel of boys in close proximity who I mooned over endlessly. Of course I spied on you.”

“You mooned over us?”

Just one of you. “Obviously. You were right there, my own personal version of a boy band, excluding my brother,

obviously.”

“Aren’t each of the boy band members given a role? Who was what in your mind? Which was the boy-next-door, the bad one, the—”

“I didn’t take it that far, Hart,” she said testily. *You were the only one.*

“Okay, okay.” He laughed and cupped her face with his warm palm, then moved his hand to pinch her chin between thumb and forefinger. Hard. “Invoice me.”

Sophie could hardly breathe, his touch squeezing her lungs. “Sir, yes sir.”

His eyes gleamed as he turned away and she heard him laugh again.

Hart. Laughing.

With a new spring in her step, she returned to the kitchen for more beverages. Okay, awkwardness overcome. Normalcy of a sort restored. Though she might have had a physical reaction to him, she didn’t think she’d given it away.

A little more time and her nerves would stop jumping in his presence and her heart would get the message that he was a lost cause.

And she’d be completely over him.

“You look happy,” Delilah said, as Sophie slid a tray of glasses and a pitcher of water beside the lemonade.

“Yeah?”

Delilah leaned near. “Something to do with the cowboy?”

Sophie narrowed her eyes. “Did my annoying mother pay you to ask about that?”

With a grin, Delilah shook her head. “I love your mom.”

Shame gave Sophie a poke as she remembered the other woman didn't have a mother and had basically raised herself and her little brother. Of course, Delilah had a tribe now, what with Shane's blended family of siblings and half siblings and the two matriarchs who showered them all with love.

They were a curious group too, Sophie knew.

“You still haven't answered the question,” she pointed out. “Did someone put you up to getting the scoop regarding my date with Travis?”

“Just asking for me, myself, and I,” Delilah said, unashamed and grinning again. “I'm a romantic, I'll admit it. I blame it on being married to the love of my life.”

Sophie glanced in the direction of where she'd seen the other woman's husband last. There stood Shane, arms stretched, holding up a board while Hart hammered a nail beside him. His arms were raised as well, lifting the hem of his T-shirt above the waist of his jeans. Did he look more filled-out than he had just a week ago?

When Cooper returned the pans from that night, her brother had told her the poker crew had lavished her dinner with praise and practically demolished every morsel. The idea made her frown, because she'd made more servings than necessary, hoping Hart would have some leftovers to enjoy.

“Not good, huh?” Delilah asked with sympathy. “Travis didn't rope you in?”

“Oh, I wasn't...” Sophie decided not to explain. “Your cowboy wordplay is noted, Delilah. But to be honest, not really.”

“That's a shame. I heard he's cute.”

“Can sparks fly in just one direction but not the other?” Because the cute cowboy had definitely seemed smitten by the end of their date. Sophie, not so much.

“Well...” Delilah began.

“But of course sparks can fly just one way,” she muttered, answering her own question. Who knew that better than she?

Delilah blinked, then cocked her head. “Sophie, what—”

Her question was cut off by a shout from across the yard. Somebody cursed. Another person called for an elastic bandage. A third asked for water. The two women headed in separate directions to attend to the urgent requests.

The emergency was of the minor variety and the group settled back into their self-appointed tasks as someone fired up the outdoor speakers and the yard flooded with the loud sound of classic rock. Sophie took a look at the flats of pansies awaiting planting and went in search of a trowel and maybe some gardening gloves. Finding them not in plain sight, she headed for a narrow wooden shed in a deserted corner of the yard. The door was half-propped open with a stick that she accidentally dislodged on her way inside.

The door snapped shut behind her, plunging her into darkness. Sophie squealed in surprise.

“Is that a mouse?” a familiar voice asked. “A mouse named Sophie?”

“Hart?” She blinked, but the darkness was unrelenting. “What are you doing in here?”

“Well, now I’m waiting for rescue,” he said. “I know from past experience the shed locks automatically.”

“What?” With her hands outstretched, Sophie located the door and realized there was no inner knob. “This is a design flaw.”

He made a noncommittal sound.

Tamping down an unreasonable burst of alarm, she banged on the door. “Someone will have to hear us.”

“Over Lynyrd Skynyrd?” Hart said calmly. “I don’t think so.”

Sophie cupped her hands around her mouth. “Help! Help!” Then she frowned in the direction of Hart. “You could chime in, you know.”

“They’re not going to hear us, Soph. Not until the music’s turned off or unless someone wanders to this end of the yard and wants in themselves.”

“But you could *try*,” she insisted, her voice edging higher. “Somebody might die.”

“What is this, sweet Sophie?” Hart mused aloud. “Are you claustrophobic? Afraid of the dark? Or...afraid of being alone with me?”

“Hah hah hah.” She barely resisted scratching her fingernails against the rough-hewn wooden door. But an odd dread was rising in her belly and her pulse was racing and her face felt too hot. Her whole body felt too hot.

Then ice rolled across her skin as the air shifted. Hart, in the too-small space making it even more confining by moving closer.

“What are you—” She swallowed the rest of her words, nearly choking on them, as he took her into a loose embrace.

“Relax, angel,” he said. “You’re working yourself into a panic.”

You’d panic too if your heart was hammering against your ribs and there wasn’t enough oxygen to sustain life. Still, she tried not to breathe, because then she’d be breathing in Hart’s scent and as it was she felt light-headed.

“Mushy knees,” she said, making a feeble attempt to push him away.

His hold firmed. “Then let me hold you up.”

Her eyes squeezed shut, her senses inundated with Hart while her desires and her common sense warred inside of her. *Lean on him.* No, don’t give an inch. *Take this moment.* Danger, danger, danger!

“You know what this reminds me of?” Hart asked.

My worst nightmare. She cleared her throat, aware she was trembling from head to toe but trying to sound somewhat sane. “I don’t know. Playing sardines?”

“Another game.”

“No idea.”

“A bigger kid game.”

She was beyond more guesses. Her legs gave out and she was forced to prop herself against his chest. Muscled, strong chest. Her fingers curled into fists instead of clutching at his shirt like she wanted to. Her forehead braced on her knuckles, she felt another shiver roll over her.

“Seven minutes in heaven.”

“Right,” she said. It was heavenly to be held by him, even though Sophie was well aware there’d be hell to pay later.

“You remember it? A pair would be locked in a closet for seven minutes to allow...well, whatever to happen.”

“Right,” she said again, barely registering anything beyond the sound of him talking and the sensation of Hart surrounding her.

His voice lowered and she thought his head did too, because his words stirred her hair. “You smell so sweet, Soph.” Big hands stroked over her back. “Everything about you is so sweet, Soph.”

A new note in his voice had her looking up, warning signals going off inside her. “Hart?” she whispered.

“You, Soph. I only smell you. Feel you.” He hauled in a breath. “Need to taste you, Soph. Bad.” There was a hesitation. “Soph?”

At the questioning note in his voice, common sense fled and blindly she lifted her mouth higher, going on tiptoe to seek out his.

Their lips touched. He groaned, one arm banding at her waist, the other sliding lower to scoop her closer to his body.

Her heart stilled. Time suspended. There was only this kiss—tender, then deep. Questing, then demanding. Tongues twining. Her body pressed close to his, her nipples hard points, an almost unbearable throbbing beginning between her legs.

A rush of wetness.

He lifted his head. “Sophie,” he said, his voice almost tortured. Then he ran his mouth across her cheek, over her jaw, down her neck. “You, your skin.” One of his hands moved up to grasp her head and hold her still for another deep kiss. “Your hair, Sophie.” His fingers tightened in it.

She lifted her own to his dark layers, and felt them cool and crisp against the sensitive inner surfaces. Her tongue slid inside his mouth and she felt as well as heard his deep, low groan.

Then, suddenly, he put inches between them, even as he cradled her face in both palms. “Damn,” he cursed softly.

“What?” Disappointed, dazzled, she fell back on her heels.

“Rescue arrives,” he muttered, then stepped completely away.

The shed’s door swung open, letting in painful light. And a painful realization.

No true rescue was imminent.

She was in over her head. Again. As always. Forever.

Forever Hart’s, whether he’d ever really want her or not.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I’M RAVENOUS,” HART SAID, RAISING HIS HAND TO ORDER another turkey burger and fries from the café’s waitress. “This is after bacon, eggs, and pancakes this morning which followed an early breakfast of granola and fruit.”

Maddox Kelly’s brows rose. “You sound like a hobbit with your second breakfasts and elevensies. How has the rest of your week been besides eating your weight in calories every couple of hours?”

Hart swirled a french fry through a puddle of ketchup—and he didn’t even like ketchup—before shoving it in his mouth and chewing, then swallowing. “I’ve gone to the gym every day, lifting weights and running on the treadmill. Then there’s how I cleaned up at poker last night.”

Mad winced. “That reminds me, you’re paying for this meal.”

“Fine, fine.” Hart smiled his thanks at the server who placed his next platter in front of him while lifting away the other. “But it’s only fair for me to win back a little after all I’ve lost to you guys the last couple of years.”

“You were paying attention. Not playing by rote.”

Hart considered that. “It’s true. I have focus.” The paperwork piling up on his desk hadn’t seemed so overwhelming this week. His inbox was almost cleared out. Even his assistant had smiled when he handed over his messages, probably because he knew this time Hart would make the necessary callbacks in a timely fashion.

Pausing with his burger inches from his mouth, he stared at his friend. “I feel almost human.”

“If a human could eat that much food without exploding,” Mad said in a dry voice, then smiled. “I’m glad for you, bro.”

“Me, too.” Even though there was a thought niggling at the back of his mind. *It’s not enough.* He was able to assuage his renewed physical hunger, but there was another lack inside of him that food wasn’t filling.

“What do you think caused this sudden turnaround?” Mad asked. “Change of seasons, maybe? Your promise to be in Coop’s wedding party?”

“I don’t know.” He took a bite and chewed. Agreeing to be Coop’s best man wasn’t a duty he could shirk—or do half-assed. What if this new mood went away and he let down his friend? That couldn’t happen. “You have any clue as to what’s going on with me?”

Mad half-closed his eyes as if he was considering the question. “You still lost big at poker the night you hosted, but I remember we all noted your interest in the food. We hadn’t seen that in a while.”

“Yeah.” Hart mulled it over, remembering that night and the flavors of the pasta and the crisp crunch of the salad. Had his taste buds awoken then like the rest of him? “Maybe Sophie’s food is some sort of magic elixir for me.”

“Could be.” Mad smiled. “Easy enough to test your hypothesis. Go beg her to make you some meals. She’s always looking for taste testers.”

“I could pay her,” he said. After he’d confronted her in Boone’s backyard, she’d invoiced him the next morning and he’d immediately transferred the amount from his digital wallet to hers.

“Sure, whatever. I bet she’d be happy to help you out.”

“Right.” Except Hart wasn’t so certain. They hadn’t seen each other or talked since that...uh...seven minutes—or however long it had been—in Boone’s backyard shed. He might have permanently put her off him.

Surely not. She’d been there, kissing him just like a teenager experimenting during a party game. A little diversion. A little something to smile about later. Nothing more.

Nothing to worry about. Nothing to bother her.

“Yeah,” Mad said, nodding as if it was a done deal. “You need more Soph.”

“Her food,” Hart hastily amended. And maybe a little of her sunshine...but from a respectful distance. Something about her was providing that light he needed to bask in—at least until he fulfilled his best man obligations.

If that required an apology for the liberties he’d been unable to resist in the warm darkness, well, he could do that. Anything to ensure they could regularly rub shoulders without discomfort.

Unwilling to put off his new plan, Hart decided to track down Sophie. Making nice with the medicine that was improving his mood was imperative.

It was the marquee outside the Sawyer Beach community center that gave away her location. Sign-ups for the new session of classes and camps were taking place from two until seven pm in the main hall. He figured she'd be there to greet interested parties and answer questions.

The sound of murmuring voices reached him in the hallway and he double-timed it to the entrance doors, eager to get on with his plan. First, discover if there lingered any weirdness between them. Second, do whatever necessary to dissipate it. Third, somehow formalize the solid return of their friendship—a movie night? an offer to wash her car?—which would allow him to be around her with regularity.

Striding in, his gaze searched her out among the tables, easels pinned with promotional materials, and attendees. He caught sight of her and his feet stuttered to a stop. His hand went to his chest as his lungs shut down.

Sophie. Sophie wearing nothing the least remarkable—jeans, a sleeveless top in sunshine yellow, and a pair of chunky leather sandals. But instead of sitting behind a table like the other instructors in the room, she perched atop it, legs left to swing, a tray of small treats nestled in paper cups on her lap.

A knot of people gathered around her, holding napkins and partaking in whatever she'd brought to tempt them.

Tempt him.

A memory slammed into him—the warmth of her small body against his, the lushness of her mouth, the sweet tremble that ran through her. It had been so damn dark in the shed that since leaving it he'd been almost able to separate the fact of those heated kisses from the woman who had shared them with him. Sophie.

He'd been kissing *Sophie*.

A sweat broke out on his hairline and a sudden need to flee spiked through him.

But then he saw her glance up, notice him, and he realized he couldn't retreat.

He didn't want to retreat, damn it, because somehow she'd become the source of what he required to feel alive again. To step out of his dour shell so that he could be the kind of man who stood up with one of his best friends and didn't dim the other man's most joyous day.

Sucking in a breath, he started forward again. Sophie's attention had been diverted by an attendee and she didn't seem aware of him coming to stand on the outside of the circle surrounding her.

He took the time to observe her in a new way. She'd always been part of his world, since he was bumming cookies from her mother's kitchen and throwing footballs around in the street outside her house with her brother. A little kid, then a girl, then a bouncy teen that he took a vague, sort of cousinly interest in as she entered high school.

She'd been a woman for years, he knew that, but now, while watching her interact with strangers, he gained a new appreciation for her mature yet easy manner, her friendly smile, the warmth that radiated from her.

What a natural to lead a series of cooking classes that were part social occasions. She'd put even the shyest person at ease with delicious food and effortless friendliness.

As the group around her shifted, he took the opportunity to step in. Stick his hands in his pockets. Smile. "Hey, Soph."

Her gaze swung to him and it was as if an Arctic wind blew through the meeting hall. Uh-oh.

A woman at her elbow asked a question and Sophie slid off the table to land on her feet, turning her body to address the woman. And give Hart her back.

Uh-oh.

Pursing his lips, he bided his time, listening to the raves for what she was calling amuse bouches. According to a placard beside the tray, one was a tater tot topped with a small dollop of sour cream and a couple of crumbles of bacon. Another was a deviled egg sporting an upright mini triangle of cucumber and a dusting of chile lime powder.

His stomach grumbled, despite the amount of food he'd already consumed that day.

He reached for an egg, then reconsidered. Depleting her enticements to join the class wouldn't make her feel any more charitable with him. Glancing over, he caught the ice in her gaze as she took in his continued presence. His hand slid right back into his pocket, and his fingers clenched.

It took a few more minutes before he had another chance with her. She handed out a flyer to a man wearing board shorts and a vintage T-shirt and as that guy moved away, Hart smoothly stepped in to take his place. Her cool seemed to have warmed some, but he thought that might be because of a desire to not scare off potential students. "Hey," he tried again.

"Hey, back." She made a point of looking around his shoulder at the people queuing up for the offered food. "Kinda busy here."

"I see that. Great idea to show off your skills."

“It’s the skills they’ll learn too, if they want to take the class.”

“Right. Great idea, as I said.” Floundering in the face of her, well, face, he looked down. “Could I take you out for coffee after the registration event?”

“Coffee?”

“Or dinner,” he added hastily. “A drink? Dessert? Hey, can I wash your car?”

“I’m too busy and my car’s clean.” Her lips curved in a polite nonsmile.

“Your bike then,” he said quickly. She often commuted from her cottage to Henry’s on a sturdy beach cruiser painted a sunny canary.

“No, thank you.”

She was shutting him down! This wasn’t acceptable. They had to get back to their old, comfortable footing so she wouldn’t freeze him out and leave him stranded in that desert he’d been wallowing in for so long. “Soph, we should talk.”

“I’ve got students here to sign up,” she said, her expression implacable.

Hart grasped at the straw directly in front of him. “And I’m one of them,” he said quickly. “Here to register to become part of your class.”

“You’re muttering to yourself,” Sophie’s friend Harper said, watching her set up for this first cooking class of the new session.

Sophie continued moving about the room, the one borrowed twice a week from the culinary arts program at the nearby community college. Each station had a sink, prep area, and a box with the utensils and edibles necessary for the evening's class. Tonight would start by a short lecture on the meaning of "organic" and the standards necessary to label a food as such. Then the students would make a simple appetizer presented in endive leaves, a salad dressing, and then the salad itself from various farm-fresh ingredients.

During the social-hour portion of the class, the participants would consume their creations along with sipping beer, wine, or sparkling water along with some cheese-topped focaccia bread that she'd made in advance and was keeping warm in the classroom ovens.

"My grandfather will be here on time if that's what you're worried about," Harper called from the front of the room. She'd written the man's name on the whiteboard and was listing the ingredients in each student's box.

Sophie stopped and looked over at her friend. "Oh, I'm not worried about that," she said. "Sorry to be so distracted."

"It's not like you," Harper pointed out. "Grandpop's presentation is all ready, I promise. He practiced on me last night."

Sophie forced herself to smile. "I know he'll be awesome and we're so lucky to have him and the food from your farm. I'm glad he could come."

Maybe Hart wouldn't, Sophie suddenly thought, her mind spinning away from the matters at hand again. Since those "seven minutes of heaven" in the shed, she'd been often distracted, too easily diverted by memories of the interlude, recalling over and over Hart's strong arms around her, the

intensity of the kisses, the surrender of her body to the responses he elicited.

She'd been floored when he'd showed up at the community center, not yet ready to face him, as she'd yet to concoct a strategy to handle the intimacy they'd shared. Just kisses, sure, but his heated whispers had invaded her head and stayed with her in dreams.

You, Soph. I only smell you. Feel you.

There was a terrifying significance to the simple words. Terribly significant to *her*, she was sure. The jaws on a trap shutting down on her.

Snaring her within these feelings and fantasies that she'd promised herself to get beyond.

She'd promised herself to get over him, but now he'd signed up for her class, meaning she wouldn't be able to avoid him two times a week for the next couple of months.

Hart wouldn't come, she thought again. Of course he wouldn't. He'd been antisocial for two years, practically a recluse unless his friends dragged him from home. A few kisses couldn't have caused a 180 like that. Yes, he'd paid for the course but that was probably the equivalent of offering to wash her car, a sort of unspoken apology for taking advantage of the darkness and her mouth. He'd probably pretended he was with—

But he'd said differently. *Sophie. You, your skin. Your hair, Sophie.*

There was no doubting he'd known the woman he was kissing. Meaning, then, she'd just been a named substitute for the person he truly craved. The one forever lost to him.

Tears stung her eyes and she cursed herself for her foolish heart. For this foolish obsession with the wrong man, the one she could never have.

“He’s not going to come,” she muttered under her breath. “He can’t possibly come.”

But then footsteps sounded on the tile floor and somehow she recognized them. Him. Her head lifted and her gaze found his, even as she cringed inside.

“Hey, Soph, here I am,” he said, spreading his arms. “All yours.”

Thank goodness the rest of the class filtered in immediately after, allowing Sophie to avoid responding to his greeting. Not that her pulse didn’t quicken and her heart didn’t skip a beat or two. But professionalism took over and she felt somewhat composed as she welcomed the students, discussed the evening’s lesson, then introduced Harper’s grandfather Eugene. As the older man took over at the front, she retreated to the back of the room, pouring herself a cup of water and drinking it in the alcove that housed cooking equipment when not in use.

Harper joined her there. “What’s going on?” she demanded in a low voice. “You can fool some of the people all the time, but you can’t fool me now. You’re practically vibrating with tension.”

Sophie surreptitiously tried relaxing her jaw and neck. “I don’t...” she began, and then realized she only needed to fool one person. Harper she could trust, because the two of them had grown up as friends and it had been wonderful to reconnect with her since the other woman had returned to Sawyer Beach and reunited with Mad Kelly. “The truth is... it’s Hart.”

The other woman's expression turned sympathetic. "You told me you'd vowed to move on from your feelings for him. That's not working out so well?"

Hesitating, Sophie peered in the direction of the classroom and the students who seemed engrossed and entertained by the elderly farmer's talk. She saw the back of Hart's head, and remembered the feel of the layers of his dark hair between her fingers. Then he'd broken the kiss and she'd panted in his arms, surrendered, ready for whatever he wanted next.

When rescue arrived, she'd been there, all in, no protection in place for her heart at all.

Dare she say what happened, even to a friend? "He..." Maybe it would exorcise the memory, render it powerless if she spoke it aloud. "Hart kissed me."

A line formed between her friend's brows. "On your cheek? I've seen him do that. Your hand? For the good food you make it should be your feet—"

"He kissed me on the lips. He put his tongue in my mouth." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "He caressed my ass."

Harper's eyes went round. "Uh...good?" Then her expression turned stricken. "Or did he call you by his fiancée's name? That would be truly awful, but maybe understandable, though truly, truly awful—"

"No, he said my name." Sophie rubbed her temple. "We got locked in Boone's shed the other day, remember? He said it reminded him of the teen party game seven minutes in heaven. You know, the one sort of like spin the bottle..."

"Where you had the chance to experiment with kissing different partners? You got the chance to make out with the

guy you never considered before or the one who always seemed unattainable.”

“I was an experiment,” Sophie echoed slowly, a chill coursing through her blood. “Oh.”

“We don’t know that exactly,” Harper said. “Maybe... maybe...”

“Maybe it was a test to see if he was ready at last to kiss someone else.” There was that confession she’d overheard at the poker game. About his unsatisfactory attempt with another woman.

“From your reaction, I’d say he proved himself ready just fine.”

“With a named placeholder,” Sophie murmured, feeling both ashamed and annoyed. Then she jumped as the audience applauded in the other room. “Showtime,” she said with a grimace.

She threw herself into it, because she didn’t know any other way. For a while she didn’t dwell on her confusion or her misery and enjoyed as much as possible the questions from the new students and banter among the previous ones. Cowboy Travis held a place on her roster but he hadn’t made it to class. Glad to have one less man to sidestep, she stopped by one of the new students to explain a better and safer chopping technique.

From the corner of her eye she kept track of Hart’s progress, amused despite herself at the precise way he was measuring the ingredients for the balsamic vinaigrette. “Students,” she said, raising her voice. “In the case of salad dressing, feel free to have a less or more liberal hand depending upon your personal taste. Do you like fresh ground

pepper? Add more. Go off-recipe and add a little dash of lemon zest if that's your thing."

Next it was time to eat the products of their labor and they grouped chairs around a few produce boxes that she covered with a cloth and used as a communal table. There, she set out plates and napkins. One pair of students who'd taken the class before helped with the beverages and she served the fragrant focaccia to appreciative moans and groans. For some reason, her gaze found Hart's and she had to look away from the warm expression in his.

Then their time was over and she exchanged goodbyes as students left for home and left her to the usual cleanup, made easier by those experienced students who knew to stow the used dishes and utensils in the commercial dishwasher. Before leaving for her own place, she'd flip its switch to On.

As she bent to grab her purse and a bag of supplies from the shelf beneath the front table, a low voice made her jump. "Sophie."

Heart in her throat, she straightened so fast her head took a spin. "Hart."

His expression contrite, he came closer. "I was halfway to my car and decided I couldn't leave it another night without speaking to you."

She tried for nonchalant. "Oh?"

"First, I want to say what a great instructor you are. You worked hard to make the evening a success and I'm impressed with...well, your plans, your execution, you."

Warmth suffused her face. "I...thank you."

"I'm afraid you might not have quite made it to full-fledged adult in my mind until I saw you handle that little

squabble over scallops versus scallopini.”

She had to laugh. “Scallopini is decidedly not mini scallops. But that’s not the first time I’ve waded into a subject like that while leaving everyone with their dignity intact.”

He shook his head. “Clearly all grown up, Sophie. I see that now.”

Something goosed her to put one hand on her hip and tilt her head. A saucy pose. “You didn’t figure that out the other afternoon at Boone’s?”

He blinked, looking unbalanced. “Uh...”

Okay, this felt good. For the first time since that bright shaft of light had pierced the darkness surrounding them in the shed, she felt a new confidence. A steadiness. Like she just might have the upper hand. “And about that.”

Hart blinked again and he stepped back. “About, uh, that?”

“Yes. I want to thank you.”

Discomfort clearly crossed his face. “Maybe I should be the one—”

“Nonsense. I’m not afraid to admit I’ve been going through a short dry spell. And kissing you...well, it reminded me of how much I like kissing. I’m going to do more of it.”

His eyes widened and he took another step back.

“Obviously not with you,” she said kindly. “But I’m going to work harder at putting myself out there. The one for me can’t be far, don’t you think?”

CHAPTER FIVE

HART STRODE UP THE WALKWAY TO RANDY AND CAROL Daggett's home, his Sunday dinner offerings—a bottle of wine and a six-pack of beer, both made locally—in hand. His mood, already upbeat, lifted as he took in the fresh coat of paint on the front door of the ranch house, a nineteen-fifties original that was well-tended and comfortable in its bones.

The door swung open and the hostess appeared as if he'd conjured her, looking just as well-tended yet comfortable with herself in a tunic, leggings, and bright driving moccasins the same shade as her front door. "I like the red, Mrs. D," he said, gaze switching from her feet to the new paint.

"I was tired of the navy blue," she said, "and it was past time to replace the old thing."

"It's a brand-new door?" Hart asked, feeling strangely sad at the change.

"Between you kids and the dogs over the years, it was looking ragged around the edges."

"But not you," Hart said, brushing his lips over her cheek. Silly to regret that such a little thing didn't stay the same. "Lovely as always."

She beamed up at him. “I don’t know when you became such a sweet talker.”

“About the time I ditched that horrible teen body spray. And for that thank Bridget Markham who gave me an aftershave for my seventeenth birthday sold at the department store.”

“Bridget Markham...” Carol mused, pulling him into the house. “Whatever happened to her?”

He shrugged. “Went to college back east and never made it back.”

The older woman tsked, as if there was no accounting for taste. Hart had to grin, because Carol had never hidden her partiality for the town where she’d lived her entire life and raised her family. As she towed him through the house to the back veranda, he was still smiling. She pushed him toward a chair pulled up to the patio table set with colorful dishes.

“I like to see that cheery expression on your face,” she said, exchanging the bottles he’d brought for a cold one from a vintage cooler box. “And you’re not so thin.”

“I’ve gained ten pounds,” he admitted. “I’ll try to leave you some leftovers tonight, but there are no promises.”

She patted his shoulder. “You’re welcome to take whatever you need, honey.”

The Daggetts had always given him so much. This home, their table, the warmth found around it had been so necessary during his growing-up years.

Randy Daggett came around the corner of the house, setting aside some yard gloves in order to shake Hart’s hand as he stood to greet the older man. “It’s been too long since

we've seen you at our table," he exclaimed, then turned to his wife. "You let me know when to start the barbecue."

"We'll wait until the kids come," she said, then disappeared into the house only to reappear with a platter of dip, raw vegetables, slices of cheese, and stacks of crackers. "This should stave off your hunger."

He didn't bother with polite reluctance, his appetite still a raving beast. Randy and Carol took seats too and they watched him mow through the pre-dinner food with obvious relish. "Sorry," he said, swallowing. "I'll slow down. I know you are expecting other guests."

He assumed the "kids" Carol referred to meant Cooper and his wife Willow. Sophie too, he thought, and was glad he'd had that chat with her a couple of days ago at the cooking class. He'd cleared the air—well, actually *she'd* cleared the air.

I like kissing. I'm going to do more of it.

That had been direct, just as her follow-on, *obviously not with you.*

Dumbfounded, actually, by how direct she'd been, in the moment he'd been unable to form words, which had prevented him voicing his first thought—why not with him? A completely inappropriate question, of course, and not one that would have smoothed the roiled waters between them. Thank God he'd kept his mouth shut, which meant that he could accept this dinner invitation at her parents' without worrying that he and Sophie had anything uncomfortable lying between them anymore.

"Are you expecting the whole gang tonight?" he asked Carol and Randy, noting that six places were set.

“Not Beau,” the older man said. “But the rest, and it will be like old times to have you here.”

He’d spent uncountable hours with the Daggetts, escaping the smothering quiet of his home.

“How are your parents?” Carol asked, as if reading his mind.

Sometimes just thinking of them could dim his mood, but not today. “I spoke with them this morning.” Their obligatory weekend call. “Paris is hot so they’re heading back to London.”

Carol shot a glance at her husband. “We seem so dull in comparison to those jet-setters. Randy. Maybe we should—”

“You’re perfect just as you are,” Hart interjected, then felt heat rise on his neck. “I mean, of course you must do whatever you like, but you should know...uh...”

Carol reached out and covered his hand with her own. “What, Hart?”

He looked away. “I’ve always wanted what you have here. The house, the marriage, the...unity.” When he’d proposed to Kim, he’d thought of the Daggetts as the role models for what he planned for their future.

The older woman squeezed his fingers and he looked up, noting a sparkle of tears. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be.” With a napkin she dabbed at her eyes. “I know I speak for both Randy and me when I say that honors us.”

“What have you done to make my mother cry?” Cooper demanded, arriving on the patio with his fiancée, Willow. “Remind her of that coffee commercial she’s partial to?”

The sentimental moment was lost in the greetings and mild mayhem of getting the newcomers settled with beverages and portions from the appetizer platter Carol replenished.

Hart grimaced. “Lucky for you guys your mom expected a wildebeest at her table and made enough for you too. I’m afraid I gorged on more than my share.”

“You’re looking great,” Willow said, with a sincerity that made him smile.

Cooper sent his soon-to-be wife a mock glare. “Settle down there, missy, and remember whose ring you wear on your finger.”

She lifted her chin and mischief entered her gaze. “I heard from the moment I moved to Sawyer Beach that Hart Sawyer was the town golden boy. You can’t blame a woman for what catches her eye.”

Cooper rolled his and shook his head, then planted a brief kiss on Willow’s lips. “I blame you for catching mine. Wanted you the instant I saw you.”

“It’s true,” Hart attested, lifting his palm. “I was there.”

Reminiscing ensued, back to the charity event that had precipitated the meeting of the spouses-to-be. Hart sat back in his chair, enjoying the moment. If he sold his business and followed through with the plan he’d been toying with, he’d be leaving this, his town, and the social fabric that had sustained him as a kid and kept him afloat in the darkest days of his life. But he wasn’t sure that staying was right for him. While his spirits were on the upswing now, he couldn’t be sure they’d last.

He’d had a long call with the interested party, Dan Greer. Numbers had been shared, a timeline bandied about, and both

had seemed favorable to him. Very favorable. Yet Hart had hesitated to pull the trigger.

“You’re frowning,” a new voice said, and Sophie dropped into the chair beside his. “We’re banning frowns today. Only happy grins allowed, unless you’re smirking, of course, at how sappy my older brother gets around the woman who experienced a moment of insanity and agreed to marry him.”

She shifted her attention to Willow. “You know about that hot sauce thing, right?”

A smile broke over Hart’s face and he relaxed, watching her interact with the others at the table. As the evening continued, that sense of contentment didn’t diminish. They ate and laughed and told boyhood stories about Cooper to Willow, who seemed to slide easily into the family. Though Hart was aware that in the past Cooper and his father had butted heads at times, any friction had now disappeared.

They stood side by side to tackle cleaning the grill while Willow and Carol went in to see about dessert. Sophie disappeared in the direction of the kitchen with a stack of dishes and returned shortly, joining him at the edge of the yard that overlooked the neighborhood and beyond to the ocean.

“Nice night,” he said. “Are you sure I shouldn’t go inside? I wield a mean sponge.”

“You’re the guest,” she said. “Plus, we might have to roll you, if you wanted to move that far. Two steaks, Hart. *Two*.”

“Your dad said there was extra,” he said defensively, even though he couldn’t miss the teasing note in her voice.

“I heard your new physique even turned Willow’s head.” She curved her hand around one upper arm and pretended to

test his muscle tone. “The lifting’s paying off. Really, um, hard, Hart.”

His entire body had turned to stone at her casual touch. He managed to shift his gaze, staring at her illuminated by the moon and the glow of the landscape lights. Sophie.

Sophie.

Beneath his skin, his blood heated, coursing through his body, awakening nerve endings and shouting a message he’d never heard before. Or never listened to. *Sophie.*

Maybe feeling his regard, her gaze came to his, and her fingers tightened on his arm. Then she cleared her throat and dropped her hand. “How was your weekend?”

“Fine,” he managed to say. “Yours?”

“Busy. A baby shower, an engagement tea, and I delivered dinner to two bachelor brothers who complain about each other incessantly but haven’t lived apart for fifty years.”

So no time for kissing, he thought.

Then he remembered that interlude in Boone’s shed, and the way she melted against him. The way he’d kissed her without anyone else in his thoughts. The way he’d kissed her with increasing intensity. Without little control.

“Sophie,” he said, because she’d turned to look at the view instead of at him.

“Yes?” Her gaze stayed fixed ahead.

“I...” Now it was his turn to clear his throat, because as he studied the lines of her sweet face, it seemed to close on him. This was Sophie, and something had changed, though her profile was as pure as ever. Sparks seemed to jump between

his body and hers, and his muscles twitched, as impulse goaded him to close the few inches between them.

This was Sophie, whom he'd known practically forever, but now he was looking at her as a woman, not as a kid, nor as a friend. *Sophie*.

No wonder he'd felt so confused and conflicted around her. She wasn't the girl of his memory any longer. Instead, the woman she was now, and the man he was now...well, they had chemistry. The kind of hot, combustible chemistry that lit skies and started wildfires.

That caused kissing in dark sheds.

Should they talk about it?

Just as he opened his mouth, she jumped and reached for the phone in her back pocket.

"What is it?" he asked.

"An alarm I set to remind myself." She glanced at him without meeting his gaze and shoved the device away. "I've got to go. I have a late date."

A late date? Another man? His primal instincts leaped up, ready to bar the doors. *No*. Attempting to get a hold of himself, he tried thinking his way through this. "Sophie, I..."

This time she sent him a longer look. "Yes?"

What to do? He could tell her they had something to discuss. She'd wait and he could hem and haw and hem some more until she felt compelled to tell this other person she'd be a no-show.

Or he could tackle the issue head-on. Acknowledge the heat simmering between them, the heat even now flaring up, like little flashfires along his spine. He could push her to

acknowledge it too and then he'd use it to influence her next move. *Tell the guy you can't meet him*, he'd say, running his fingertips up her bare arm.

She'd give in. He remembered her responses in the shed. The soft yielding of her body against his. She'd definitely give in, because this chemistry between them had that much power.

And then what? What would Hart do next?

Fuck, he thought. There was no "next" for him and Sophie.

"Hart?" she asked now.

"You have a nice rest of your evening," he said, the words sounding as if he'd dragged them along a gravel road before leaving his mouth.

She hesitated.

His body tensed, strung tight between good intentions and base desire. Would she stay or would she go?

She went.

Fuck, Hart thought again, watching her rush away, his good mood running off with her. She's doing it. She's hurrying off to kiss another man. *The one for me can't be far, don't you think?*

And considering his past history, shouldn't he be happy for her?

It had been a lie, Sophie telling Hart she had a date with another man. In reality, she'd set that alarm as a pre-emptive move, in case she needed to make a quick escape from her parents' Sunday night dinner, starring the guy whom she

couldn't get out of her head. Though she was an admittedly terrible liar, she'd been that desperate. In the end, the darkness and Hart's willingness to casually, quickly wave her off had made her fib good enough to get her safely home alone, and at a decent hour.

Tonight, though, tonight she *did* have a date and she was planning to give it and the guy—Travis Butler—her very best. She needed a new romantic interest, a focus other than some man who'd been lost to her years ago and who might have new muscles but the same old broken heart.

So she shifted in her chair and fixed her attention on the cute cowboy across the table from her. "Tell me everything I should know about you."

"Didn't we cover that the other day when we walked on the beach?"

Okay, a man of few words. "Right. You're from Arizona, took the job as ranch manager here in the Sawyer Beach area last January, and you're in the market for a puppy."

"Every guy with a truck needs a dog to ride shotgun. It's a rule."

See? Cute. "What happens when you meet that special someone, though?"

"The dog gets the back of the cab. It's extended." He grinned at her. "Do I pass?"

"Well, I suppose you do. Any test questions for me?"

"I already know you can cook, you're a hard worker, and," he thumped the flat of his hand against his chest, "you make my heart beat faster every time you smile at me."

So she couldn't help but do that, smile, and he pointed a finger at her. "There it is. Gorgeous."

A blush warmed her face. Could it be this easy? Succumb to the cowboy's charm and find another romantic focus? A substitute for Hart...who perhaps was so desirable because he was, indeed, unattainable?

That was something to think about.

At another time. For now, she wanted to enjoy the potential that her date presented. *I declared our first date a dud too soon*, she thought, optimism rising as if she'd taken a gulp of wine on an empty stomach.

Travis cleared his throat. "Okay, there is a tough subject we should tackle," he said, and paused.

She took a breath. "So soon? On date number two?"

"Well..."

Her stomach tightened. Damn. "I'm ready," she declared, putting on her game face.

Travis leaned closer. "Is there ex damage? Someone who walked all over you and your heart?"

"No," she said easily, because that *was* an easy one. Hart had never set out to hurt her and would probably break out in hives if he knew how she'd longed for him all these years.

"That's good," Travis said, and anything more was interrupted by the return of their server with the meals they'd ordered.

She took a professional look at both plates and observed with approval that the presentation was detailed without being fussy. No parsley garnish either, which was a total mood-killer, in Sophie's estimation.

“You see something you like?” Travis asked, his expression amused.

“Promise you won’t think I’m weird?”

“I can swear to it,” he said, grinning.

“Parsley. Unless it’s in the dish itself, it has no business being on anyone’s plate.” She pointed to the spiraled radishes next to her grilled fish. “These are a nice touch. Same about that braid of thyme and lemon grass balanced on top of your mashed potatoes.”

“Wow,” Travis said in an admiring tone. “I’ve never thought about...” He made a vague gesture.

“Garnishes.” She smiled at him again. “You just stick with me, kid.”

“I think I might want to,” Travis said slowly.

Now it was Sophie’s heart pitter-pattering.

“Another question,” he said, his gaze never leaving hers.

“Okay.”

“How do you feel about PDA?”

“Public displays—”

Before she could finish, he leaned up and over and pressed a quick kiss to her mouth. Sweet and short and brief enough that he was back in his seat before she really registered what happened. “Well,” she said, looking down, and then away. Whatever she intended to say next left her, as she registered Hart sitting alone at a table across the restaurant.

But he was expecting a companion, she knew, because the hostess had left the other setting in place. A diner eating alone would not be reminded of that by being forced to stare at

unused napkins and cutlery. As she watched, he glanced around the room and she edged back, hoping to remain unseen.

“Sophie?”

She glanced at Travis and picked up her fork. “I can’t wait to try this,” she said with determined enthusiasm, promising herself to concentrate on her escort and her plate. She had a good, available man a foot away and he deserved—she deserved—to give him a chance. “Tell me if you like what you chose.”

The meal and the conversation continued from there, pleasant and casual. She relaxed and hardly had to remind herself not to let her attention drift from Travis. When she excused herself to use the restroom, she couldn’t be faulted for glancing about, but there wasn’t anyone at Hart’s table.

After using the facilities, she washed her hands and touched up her lipstick. Then she pushed into the corridor and came face-to-face with the man she’d intended to avoid. “Oh, hey.” Taking an automatic step back, her butt hit the door and Hart grabbed her hand to tug her farther down the hall.

“Don’t let me stop you from, uh...” She pointed toward the men’s room in the opposite direction.

“I was waiting here for you.”

“Oh?” *Why?*

“I can’t help myself...” he began, stepping closer.

Sophie’s pulse leaped and she threw up her hand to cover her throat, afraid Hart might see the evidence of her reaction to him. It reminded her of standing beside him the other night in her parents’ yard, when she felt ready to jump out of her skin. Or jump him.

Now she was on a date that held real possibility, but it turned out that running into the man you've been in love with for as long as you knew what that meant was a romance killer. She glanced over her shoulder, wondering if a glimpse of Travis would settle her down.

"He's not going anywhere," Hart said. "It looks as if he's really into you."

She frowned. "You were watching us?"

No guilt crossed Hart's face. "Mad stood me up. He caught a case."

Detective Maddox Kelly was known to be a no-show from time to time.

"I didn't think you'd appreciate me joining you and your date for dinner," Hart continued.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "So instead you entertained yourself by staring at us?"

"You look beautiful, Sophie." He hesitated. "I don't think I've ever said that before."

"You told me I looked nice at Boone's wedding." Not that she was hoarding compliments or anything.

"It was a very pretty dress," he said, nodding. "This one too."

She stroked the material covering her flank. It was swishy and silky and wrapped around her like a loving hand. "I bought it at Gemma's store. Her mom and aunt embroidered the bodice." She ran her fingertips over the crossed vee of material, embellished with colorful thread fashioned into leaves and flowers.

Hart's gaze fell to her cleavage, shot back up. "In any case, it suits you and obviously your date agrees."

"Travis Butler."

Hart's eyebrows shot up. "You think I should know his name?"

She shrugged. "I guess time will tell." But did the man in front of her have to look so darn good? In dark jeans and a casual shirt, he was the epitome of handsome, confident, success. At seventeen he'd been her perfect ideal of a steady boyfriend and even in his grief he'd never lost that air of self-assurance. A man like him would come out on top, it was a given. Maybe it would take time, but some woman would come along and be the yin to the new yang that was an older and wiser Hart Sawyer.

"I wish I had half your confidence," she murmured without thinking.

He jerked back. "What? Sophie Daggett, the whirling dervish of hard workers, caterer extraordinaire, baker of renown, deft hand with people and food surely doesn't lack *confidence*."

She smiled a little. "Early dates are hard."

With a gentle fist, he bumped her chin. "C'mon, tiger. You can do it. Buck up, and go find out if he's that one you deserve."

Taking the remark as a dismissal, she turned. Was it possible to intend romantic feelings into place? That would be a nice trick, she thought, returning to her table.

Without a backward glance at the man who made her ache, she worked to retrieve her earlier optimistic attitude. Everyone said she was one of the most positive people they knew.

Smiling, she slid into her seat. “Sorry I was so long. I ran into an old friend.”

“Don’t worry about it. It gave me a little time to think.”

Her hand paused on the way to her water glass. “Oh?”

“That ex damage question? I should have shared right away I have a wound or two myself.” He hauled in a breath. “I’m divorced. Not quite a year. My ex got the kids.”

Her belly tightened. “Oh—”

He put up a hand. “They’re actually her kids from a previous relationship, but...but I loved them. I don’t know that I’ll ever see them again.”

God. No cowboy cute could mask the misery on his face.

“To be honest, I’m a bit of a mess,” he confessed. “Maybe more than a bit.”

“I should have said I’m not unscathed in the romance wars either.” Sophie reached across the table to briefly squeeze his hand. “So let’s decide to be friends who understand that wounds need time and space to heal.”

“Kissing friends?” he asked, borrowing an expression from that puppy dog he’d yet to purchase.

“Coffee friends,” she said firmly. And just as firmly moved Travis Butler out of the Maybe column and squarely into the Never.

CHAPTER SIX

AT THE NEXT COOKING CLASS, DURING THE SOCIALIZING portion of the evening, Hart snagged a local beer and sidled up to one of the other participants. The man hadn't attended the first class of the session, but tonight he'd walked in and instantly been hailed by a couple of the veteran students. Hart recognized him from the coffee line at Henry's and from the restaurant the night before.

Travis...Butler.

Sophie's new guy.

As Hart had told her, she deserved a guy, a great guy who could unreservedly be her everything, and who had everything to give her. It wouldn't hurt to probe a little and find out for himself if Travis had the chops to rate a place beside the honey blonde who put all his protective instincts on alert.

Holding out his hand to the other man, he smiled. "Hart Sawyer."

"Oh, hey." The cowboy shook with a decent, yet not too-macho amount of grip. "This is your first session?"

"It is. I'm definitely going to make the bruschetta again." Tonight they'd been given a choice of appetizers to make, five different recipes, though participants could choose to make as

few as three if they desired. “And those bacon-wrapped jalapeno peppers had just the right amount of heat.”

Travis lowered his voice. “I stuck to the antipasto kabobs.”

“Those were good too.” Skewers laden with chunks of salami, cheese, olives, cherry tomatoes, marinated artichoke hearts, and basil leaves.

“Don’t tell our teacher, but I *only* attempted the antipasto kabobs.” A self-deprecating smile crossed Travis’s face and Hart thought he could partly understand the other man’s appeal. That aw-shucks thing would lower a woman’s guard. “I’m not very skilled in the kitchen.”

“Well, that’s why you’re here, right?”

Travis made a noncommittal sound, then his gaze wandered to Sophie who chatted with another student across the room. “Why’d you register, Hart? I seem to recall seeing you at Henry’s. You’re acquainted with our instructor?”

Clever man. “Right. I’ve known her since she was in pigtails. Her brother is one of my best friends.”

“Yeah?” The other man’s eyes shifted to Hart, then narrowed. “You two have a past history?”

“Uh...” Puzzled, he tried understanding the suspicion in the other man’s voice. “I may have stolen her Halloween candy once and only gave it back when she let me have the biggest bar of chocolate.”

“I like Sophie.”

“Right. She’s great. I like her too. We...my friends and I, her brother, we all watch out for her. We don’t let people mess with her.” Guilty, Hart shot a look in Sophie’s direction. She wouldn’t appreciate him putting Travis on notice like this.

“Somebody’s already messed with her,” Travis muttered. “And I wouldn’t mind finding out exactly who that was.”

“*What?*”

“Look, Sophie has a sweetness, a brightness...it’s...”

Tempting, possibly addicting. And it had been *messed with*? A burn of anger filled Hart’s gut. “What are you talking about, exactly?”

“I wanted to start something with her, I won’t lie. I don’t think anyone would blame me. Hell, look at her.” Travis gestured across the room.

Hart followed direction and took a second glance at Sophie. Tonight, she wore a chef’s jacket over a pair of checked chef’s pants and some stubby kind of shoe. Nothing like the formfitting dress that had sleeked over her sweet body last time he saw her. The night she’d dressed like a sexy nymph for her date with Travis. But her arresting face was the same, those jewel-blue eyes, the plump, rosy mouth. The fresh, vibrant sex appeal that a burlap sack couldn’t hide.

A thought suddenly niggled. He turned to face Travis. “Wait, you say you *wanted* to start something with her?” Past tense.

“We talked. I shared. She’s the kind of woman you come to ready for parent meets and ring-shopping, you know?”

The organ in Hart’s chest made a sudden lurch. “Surely you need more time to get to know each other before *rings*?” The idea of Sophie setting a wedding date made him grab for the nearest chair and hold on.

Travis took a swig of his beer. “Yeah, but you know with a woman like her you need to respect what she’s heading for.

Casual hookups, a weekend of hot rolling around in the hay is not what she's after."

Hart worked not to picture it. "You're probably right."

"I'm definitely right," Travis said, his voice morose. "And I'm not in the same place as she is."

Oh-kay. "Recent bad experience?"

The other man nodded. "Recent bad marriage. I explained, Sophie understood, and we agreed to be friends."

Friends with benefits?

"*Coffee* friends," Travis said, as if he'd heard Hart's unspoken question.

"That's uh, good then?" Shit, that sounded wrong. "I mean, uh..."

"I get you," Travis said. "But I'd still like to know who did a number on her."

Hart sucked in a breath, that thing in his chest twinging again. "You're sure someone did a number on her?"

"She told me her heart's been banged up too. And it didn't seem like a minor scrape. I'd like to meet the bastard that made that sweet ray of sunshine suffer."

Hart couldn't help thinking the same thing for the rest of the social hour. Had he been so immersed in his grief that he'd missed Sophie's own pain? Of course, he'd kept his distance the last few months, after his judgement about the men in her life had pissed her off.

But maybe he'd not been wrong. Maybe he should have stuck closer to make sure she didn't get hurt. Sophie wasn't made for hookups and hay rolling, Travis was right about that.

It's why he'd decided against an honest discussion about that sexual attraction that had been rearing its insistent head.

Hart wasn't in a place for anything *but* hookups and hay rolling, and even then, his single foray had been an abject failure.

Except for that afternoon in Boone's shed, yes, but...but that was better not contemplating.

Instead, he'd find out who had hurt his Sophie and if there was any way he could help.

As the other students filed out, he approached the instructor, his brows rising as he saw her settle behind the cooktop at the front of the room and draw some produce from a canvas bag. "You're not heading home?"

"Not right away," she said, her gaze on the food she was organizing. "I have this space for another hour and thought I'd make some stuffed mushrooms that I'm delivering to a client tomorrow."

"I thought you usually work at the kitchen at Henry's." He knew, vaguely, that health codes meant she had to use a commercial space to prepare foods for her catering business.

"Usually. And I also rent a ghost kitchen at times that's in one of the industrial parks on the outskirts of town."

"Ghost kitchen?"

"That's what they call physical spaces where people like me create food for off-premises consumption."

He frowned. As a real estate developer, he was usually on top of things that people rented. "Why don't I know about this?"

She shot him a quick glance. “You’ve had other concerns besides the latest trends in meal prep and delivery.”

“Still...” He studied her as she worked, noting she’d undone the fastener at the throat of her jacket, revealing a notch of her perfect skin. His head spun off in a fantasy of placing his mouth there. Sucking. Claiming.

“I’ve been thinking I could open my own restaurant from the ghost place.”

With effort, he pulled his head out of the sexy daydream and cleared his throat. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, it’s not all that different from my catering, not really. I would create a menu, just like any restaurant, and offer pickup and delivery only. I’d have an internet presence, but not a brick-and-mortar storefront.”

“This is a thing?”

“Sure. And even chain restaurants are doing it. They’ll try out different menu items from a ghost kitchen, naming themselves something else in case the food’s a flop.”

“You would never flop,” Hart said.

A smile curved her mouth. “Thanks for the vote of confidence. Though I’m beginning to think it’s really doable myself, because the rent in the industrial park isn’t terrible and I wouldn’t have to pay for any front-of-house operations.”

“You’ve thought this through.”

“I like to keep my hands busy and my head occupied, you know that.”

“Soph...” Were her whirling dervish ways a strategy to avoid that hurt Travis had told him about?

She was stirring something garlicky and buttery, and despite all he'd consumed earlier, his new appetite growled. Looking up, Sophie smiled again. "There's leftover baguette slices from the bruschetta. Bring them over and we'll spread some of this mushroom goodness on top of them."

"I won't say no." Rummaging in her bags, he found the bread and laid the pieces on a paper plate.

"I'll toast them first," she said, lighting up the grill beside the burner she was using. Then she spread butter on the slices and gave them a quick flip on each side before spooning the mushroom and spinach mixture on top of one. With practiced movements, she grated a little Parmesan on top of it and then lifted the piece toward his mouth.

He leaned in, taking the bite she offered.

Flavors exploded on his tongue. "Oh, God, good," he said around the deliciousness. "Give me the rest of that." Snatching it from her hand, he watched as pure delight suffused her face.

Struck by the expression, he paused before taking a second bite. "Feeding people gives you pleasure."

"Of course," she said, her attention dropping back to her pan. "But in particular, seeing *you* like this, awake to..."

"Scents. Tastes." *You.*

Though he didn't say that last word aloud, she looked up, her gaze meeting his, her face flushing as they stared at each other. Awareness filled the space between them, a humming, living thing.

Without thinking, he set aside the slice of baguette and came around her table so they were on the same side of the workspace.

“What are you doing?” Sophie whispered.

Blindly, he reached for the controls and managed to turn the heat off under the pan. “I believe I’m losing the battle,” he murmured.

“We’re not at war.”

“Not us. Me.”

She took a step back. “I don’t understand what’s happening.”

That caused him to pause. He cocked his head, studying her face. She looked beautiful as always, but confused and wary, and...worried.

He remembered when she’d stepped into the shed that afternoon and the instant note of panic in her voice. “Are you afraid, Sophie? Was I right that you’re afraid to be alone with me?”

She shook head. “No?”

But she didn’t sound the least bit certain.

“I just...” She swallowed, started again. “You’re looking at me...strangely.”

His lips twitched. “Like I’m hungry?”

“You’re always hungry lately.”

“My appetite’s back.” He reached for her hand and rubbed his thumb across her knuckles. It trembled in his hold. “But I’ll ignore it if you want me to.”

Her brows came together and she licked her lips. “Hart...”

Again, that small note of fear. It woke his good sense. God! What was he doing? Cringing inside, he dropped her hand and stepped away. “Fuck. I’m a total shit.”

“What? Why?”

Hart shook his head. “Not an hour ago I agreed with Travis that you’re not in the market for a purely sexual relationship and here I am, letting all the smoke and heat between us obscure that very fact.”

Sophie bristled. “What? You were discussing me with Travis and...and deciding for me what I need?” Then she shook her head sharply, as if his other words registered at last. “Smoke and heat? Between us?”

He stared at her. Did she really not know? “You feel it, right? The sparks, the tension? That electric buzz in the air when we’re together?”

All huge eyes, she nodded slowly. “You...you too?”

“Baby.” He wanted to go to her and hold her so bad he had to drill his feet to the floor. “About the same time I started tasting food again, I began smelling your perfume, and watching your every move, absorbing your every smile. I’ve been one big, libidinous knot over you.”

“Libidinous knot,” she repeated, as if trying out the sound of it.

He nodded. “The result of a powerful sexual chemistry.”

Her rosy mouth dropped open.

Steeling his spine, he took another step in retreat. “And now that we’ve got that out in the open, we’re going to do the right thing and let it die a quick death.”

It took a day for Sophie to go from shocked to mad to fuming. Big, libidinous knot indeed! What kind of phrase was that to throw at a woman? Oh, and then to proclaim he'd decided what kind of relationship Sophie would welcome.

After discussing it with Travis.

As the cooking class students filed into the room, she glared at the cowboy in question, who seemed blithely unaware of her ire.

“Uh-oh,” Erin Rodriguez said, “that guy’s hair should be on fire.”

“I wish,” Sophie said. “Men!”

“A single word that encompasses so many things, I’ve found. Frustration, admiration—”

“Stupidity, arrogance.”

Erin took a longer look. “He doesn’t really seem like the arrogant type,” she said, then continued unpacking the wine she’d brought from Sun Hollow, the winery where she worked. They had released a new varietal in honor of the owner’s birthday and Erin would be serving it to the group along with giving a talk on wine and food pairings.

“I’m mostly mad at Hart though,” Sophie said, watching the door for his arrival. Upon seeing him, she was sure the correct tactic for dealing with her temper and his overbearing presumption would occur to her.

“Why?”

She lowered her voice. “He presumes to know me and in knowing me, says I’m not interested in a purely sexual relationship.”

The other woman’s eyebrows rose. “Well, are you?”

Sophie threw her arms into the air. “I don’t know. It would depend upon who offered one, wouldn’t it?”

“Absolutely.” Erin hesitated. “But, uh, you yourself told me you’ve been into, uh...”

“Hart, for way too long,” Sophie said, waving her hand. “That doesn’t mean I don’t have itches that need scratching. I could be completely open to some guy taking on the task on a temporary basis, don’t you think?”

“I do,” Erin said. “I was willing to be in a purely sexual relationship with Raf because, well, he’s just that hot, but then it morphed into something more.” A little smile played at her mouth.

“One of the great surprises of the last couple of years,” Sophie said. “None of us thought he’d settle down and then be the first one of the 7-Stud Club to put a ring on it.”

Another secret smile from the other woman. “Happy endings aren’t just for fairy tales.”

“But one kind of happy ending could very well be just a happy orgasm without some huge expectation of heavy commitment to follow, right?”

“Absolutely,” Erin said again, nodding. Then her gaze sharpened. “Wait. I think I’m a little slow here. Is there someone, uh, offering the happy orgasm?”

“Hart himself.” At her friend’s expression of shock, Sophie threw up her hand again. “I know. And it wasn’t exactly a proposition. He said he wanted to, and then he said he wasn’t going to, because even though it was clear we had some smoke and heat circling the pair of us, clearly I am a woman who requires more than mere sexual chemistry.”

Erin continued staring. “Um...uh...I’m at a loss for words.”

“He’s found his hunger again, he says.”

Concern crossed Erin’s face. “Sophie...” she began, warning in her voice.

“Oh, I can’t be with him, I know that.” Because she’d made a promise to herself to move on, and miring herself in something purely physical with Hart would jeopardize her vow, no matter how tempting it might be to let her body take the lead and forget everything else. “But he also can’t go around discussing me and my needs with random men. That’s like being an uh, cock blocker, right? Is there a female equivalent of that phrase?”

Erin winced. “I don’t like to use the C word.”

“Well, you know what I mean and I’m not going to be able to let this go until I have it out with him. The other night he dropped all these bombs on me and I didn’t have a chance to respond before he turned tail and escaped.”

“Okay,” Erin said. “I get that you have to talk to him about this. But promise me you’ll approach this rationally,” she said. “Listen to your head when dealing with Hart and leave the other parts of yourself out of it.”

“Good advice,” Sophie said, and decided after class she’d insist they go somewhere neutral, a cozy bar, or better yet, that ice cream place not far from the community college. She’d not let him get away with avoiding her.

Except it turned out he was a no-show. Hart never stepped inside the classroom.

Coward, she thought, curling her lip as she pushed in chairs and took a last look around at the room. Erin had stayed

to keep her company, and now she glanced up from her phone, an odd expression on her face. “Hey, I think you should know...”

An alarm went off inside Sophie. “What?”

“Maybe it’s no big deal, but Raf and I were just texting and he said no one’s been able to get in touch with Hart all day.”

The 7-Stud Club was like that, they kept pretty close tabs on their tribe. “It doesn’t have to mean anything,” she said, as even more warning bells sounded in her head.

“No, of course not.”

Still... “I’ll go to his place and bring soup,” she decided. “Even if he’s perfectly fine, he’ll not turn down my chicken noodle.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea, considering...well, this new dynamic between the two of you?”

“I’m not wavering on my promise to myself to move on,” she told the other woman, snatching up her canvas tote bags. “It’s merely a simple welfare check.”

“Then takes this bottle of wine with you,” Erin said, handing one over. “But save it for a reward when you get back home after performing your good deed.”

Approaching Hart’s porch steps, Sophie realized she’d tucked the wine under arm. Oh, well, just another good deed. She’d gift it and the soup to Hart and turn right back around and return to her own place.

At her ring, several long moments passed before the door swung open. Her heart stumbled in her chest as she took in the haggard, beard-scruffed man standing before her, his gaze dull. Shoeless, he was dressed only in ragged jeans and a T-shirt

that appeared a hundred years old. With that one look, any thought she might have had about tacking onto this welfare assessment a discussion of his effrontery fled. The Hart in front of her now wasn't up for any kind of confrontation.

“What is it?” he asked.

Having grown up with two brothers and been around a passel of men her whole life, she didn't give him a chance to make any manly protests. Instead, she pushed past him. “I can tell you haven't eaten. I've brought my chicken...” Her words died away as she took in the mess. Half a dozen packing boxes sat on the floor of the living area, their flaps open. Contents were either on their way in or way out, she couldn't tell, but there appeared to be sports equipment, cold weather gear, file folders, and...old mail?

She glanced at Hart over her shoulder. The Hart she knew was allergic to untidiness. “Spring cleaning a little late?”

“I'm...thinking of moving,” he said, his voice gritty.

Her eyes rounded. Since when? Kim had never actually lived here, so she didn't think her presence haunted him. But the guy owned a real estate development company, so maybe another property had caught his eye. “You loved this house when you designed and had it built.”

“Right.” He forked his hands through his hair and glanced around, as if seeing it for the first time. “I just...”

Still puzzled, she crossed to the kitchen and stowed the wine in the fridge and set the soup container on the counter. “You definitely need to eat something.”

He'd trailed her and now stood by the island. “Sophie. I... now isn't a good time to visit.”

“Oh.” Chagrined, she stepped away. He didn’t want company and that was his right. “Okay. Sure. I’m sorry I intruded.” Walking fast, she skirted him to straight-line it for the front door.

As she sped through the living room, she turned her head to address him. “Text your buddies so they don’t worry.” Then her foot found a stack of mail and the pieces scattered. The sole of her shoe slipped on one envelope and she almost went down. Slapping a hand to the floor, she regained her balance but found herself nose-to-paper.

Then her eyes caught on the lines on the front of each small rectangle. The address was this one, of course, and written in elegant calligraphy. The tiny hairs on her body rose and she straightened up, one of the pale blue envelopes in hand. “Um...” She looked at Hart.

“The wedding RSVP cards,” he said, his gaze on what she held, like it might be a snake. “I was going through a closet and found them at the back.”

“The RSVP cards for your wedding,” Sophie said. Obviously that’s what they were. She licked her lips and then crouched to begin gathering them together again. There had to be close to a hundred, and somewhere in there was the one she’d received and sent back. Yes, she was planning on attending, she’d written. Who had she decided upon as her plus-one? So much time had passed she couldn’t recall.

“I looked through them,” Hart said. “I don’t recognize the names of more than half the people who said they planned on showing up.”

Sophie cleared her throat, her attention still on the floor. “As I recall, Kim had a lot of extended family. It’s common for the bride to have an edge on the guest list numbers.”

“I never had a chance to see her in her wedding dress,” Hart said in a toneless voice. “Shortly after...after she was gone, her mother sent me a photo of it.”

That thought stabbed Sophie in the solar plexus. Closing her eyes against the pain, she forced herself to breathe and then continued collecting the envelopes into a few neat piles. It was the only thing she could think to do.

When they were bundled again, she glanced at the box where they’d been stowed for two years. “Do you want—”

“I don’t want to feel like this anymore, Sophie,” Hart said suddenly. “Feel like this again.”

Leaving the envelopes, Sophie stood, not sure how to respond to his clear distress. “I understand.” A platitude, a filler, the only thing that came out of her mouth when of course she couldn’t truly appreciate what he’d been through.

She swallowed. “Maybe I should call Cooper. Or Eli? Is there someone...?”

“Before, I liked the numbness, you know?” He drifted closer to Sophie, his gaze fixed on her face. “Then my senses awakened again and...and it would be terrible to go back to frozen. To not smell, taste, feel anything.”

Her hands clenched at her sides and she forced herself to stay in place, even as she longed to go to him, to console him in any way he’d allow. But then her intention was shattered, as Hart reached for her, jerking her into his arms.

Hers immediately circled him, clinging as he put his face to her hair, breathing in. “Don’t let me go cold again, Soph. Let me smell your hair, feel your warmth. It reminds me I’m alive.”

She tightened her hold on him. “Okay,” she said.
“Whatever you need. For however long you need it.”

He brought her tighter against him. “Stay right here.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she assured him, every fiber of her yearning to give him what comfort she could.

And the intention of moving on vanishing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER A FEW MINUTES, HART FORCED HIMSELF TO RELEASE Sophie from his octopus-clutch. He even managed to chuckle a little as he dropped his arms and stepped back. “Did I do any lung damage?”

“None whatsoever.” Without looking at him, she turned toward the kitchen. “But we both need something to warm us up. I’ll heat the soup.”

She was cold? Hart couldn’t allow that. “Do you want a sweatshirt? A sweater?”

Behind her back, she waved a hand. “Don’t bother.”

But she’d bothered to come here and check on him. He strode for the fireplace, powered by gas but that burned actual wood. Though he rarely used it for heat, he’d laid a fire months ago. He didn’t like the look of an empty hearth—too much an echo of the hollowness inside him. Now it was nothing to get a small blaze going.

He fed it while Sophie pattered in his kitchen. At the sounds of plates and cutlery rattling, he felt his tension ease and an unfamiliar contentment washed through him. The house began to smell like comfort, chicken soup working magic. *Sophie* working magic.

He kept his gaze off the haphazard mess of the moving boxes and the orderly stacks of RSVP cards. Direct regard of them would threaten his improving but still unstable mood.

“That’s cheery,” Sophie said as she came into the room, her hands bearing a tray with steaming bowls, spoons, wine in glasses. She set it on the wide outer hearth then settled on the rug in front of the fire.

He dropped down beside her and took the serving of soup she handed him. “Can I get this stuff on a subscription service? Like how I get my toothpaste and shaving cream sent to me regularly?”

“You have only to ask and I will supply,” she said, her voice light.

But what if he truly followed through and left Sawyer Beach? There’d be no Sophie’s food, no poker nights...and also no unwelcome reminders of what hadn’t been. Dan Greer had called again earlier in the day and Hart had decided to let his subconscious work out the pros and cons while he took an inventory of all he’d possibly have to pack in a moving van.

It occurred to him that the poker crew must have been uncommonly close-mouthed if Sophie didn’t pick up on his mention of moving. He sent her a sidelong glance as he scooped up the last of his soup. If he left town, not only would there be no more of Sophie’s food, there’d be no more proximity to Sophie.

He’d only learn she found that one man she sought by some random text from a friend or if he received a wedding invitation in the mail. He glanced over at the RSVP cards on the floor. Finding them had shoved an icy shard into the middle of his chest and then he’d felt the cold spread everywhere.

Something told him gazing upon an invite to witness Sophie's nuptials would hurt too. Damn.

"You missed cooking class tonight," she said.

"I wasn't fit company." He returned his now-empty bowl and spoon to the tray.

Sophie followed suit. "Do you want more?"

"No, thank you." He fell onto his back, and then reached to drag over a floor pillow. It was a large square of soft, wide-wale corduroy, big enough to cushion the heads of both he and Sophie as she mimicked his pose. They lay side by side and wordlessly contemplated the flames.

Five minutes passed, and then he jackknifed up and got to his feet. Sophie propped herself on one elbow and watched him retrieve her orderly stacks. Then he sat before the fire, cross-legged with them in his lap. He took stock of his mood, checking for reluctance. Did he have a sentimental attachment to these cards?

They were only pieces of paper. The commemoration of an event that actually never occurred.

Without thinking further, he tossed one into the fire.

Sophie released a little gasp, and he felt her big eyes on him. "It's okay," he murmured, flipping another to be consumed by the flames. "It's okay."

They were rendered to ashes without fuss, though Sophie sat up and edged slightly closer, as if protecting him from any emotions that might surface. As the last rectangle curled into a fetal position before giving way to the flames, he looked over at Sophie. "Are *you* okay?"

She fell back to the pillow, he followed, and she rolled her head to meet his gaze.

He frowned, now doubting his actions. “I shouldn’t have done that with you here.”

“Did it help?”

“Yeah,” he admitted.

Her mouth curved in a smile. “Then we’re good.”

“I always want us to be good, Soph.” He paused. “You don’t know how much.”

Her palm slowly came up to cup his cheek. “That’s nice.”

He placed his hand over hers, then moved his mouth to kiss her palm. She trembled, he could feel her reaction, even see it, her pulse beating hard against the thin skin of her throat. Hart hauled in a breath, trying to steady himself, and Sophie’s light perfume entered his lungs.

“Sweetheart...” He didn’t move, afraid to upend the fragile harmony of this moment. He met her gaze, fell into the blue depths of her eyes, and felt his own begin to sting.

Shit. Tears! He moved to bury his face in the tender warmth of her neck. Her hand stroked his hair while he beat back a wave of emotion that had nothing to do with the past. It was all about a new kind of fear infusing him, a fear of reaching for something that would elude him forever, a fear of damaging the precious trust the woman beside had always conferred upon him. She expected him to never hurt her. He would hate himself for the rest of his life if he did.

Murmuring an apology, he tried scooting back, but she sifted her fingers in his hair and held on. His scalp stung as he lifted his head to look at her, the little pain shooting straight to

his cock and he went hard in an instant, his libido roaring to life.

“God,” he murmured, trying to look away from her flushed face.

But she only used her hold on him to drag him inches higher, to align their lips.

The kiss could be blamed on them both.

His tongue surged into her mouth and she sucked on it, causing him to groan from deep in his chest. He shifted, half-covering her body as he consumed her, her fingers clutching at his back and still digging into his hair. His body felt alight, burning from the inside out, and he couldn't stop himself from breaking the kiss so he could strip off his shirt. Dropping to his elbows, he held himself over her, breathing hard.

She made a little noise of appreciation, her hand wandering across his pecs. His nipples tightened, hard, sensitive points that she rolled over with the edge of her thumb. Air caught in his lungs and he let his head drop and his eyes close. “God, Sophie,” he muttered.

Then she sat up and pushed him down, flat on his back again, and she kissed him, hard, even as her hands didn't stop moving. His heart was thundering against his ribs, his pulse so loud in his ears that thoughts couldn't formulate in the mist of desire that fogged his brain. Now her lips trailed over his chin and down his neck and he held his breath when her little cat tongue found one nipple and flicked it, wickedly playful. His fingernails dug into the short fibers of the carpet and he gritted his teeth as she moved to the other nipple, teasing again, then using the edges of sharp teeth to take a nip.

His belly hollowing, he groaned. Sweat broke out on his hairline as her hot mouth continued exploring. She traced each rib, leaving behind the wet imprint of soft kisses. Then her tongue whirled in his belly button, and he felt his head take a dizzy spin along with it. His cock pulsed against the placket of his jeans and he shifted his hips, trying to alleviate the discomfort.

“Poor you,” she whispered, and then insinuated her slender hand beneath the denim waistband and then inside his boxers. She circled his hard-on with her fingers and he bucked into her touch, control slipping away from him by the second. Then her hand was gone and he was ready to cry again, but she was already unfastening his jeans, giving him room and air and then a touch of her hot breath as she pushed denim and cotton down his legs. He was shoeless and sockless, thank God, and he shoved the material all the way off with feverish movements.

She stroked him from tip to balls and his legs fell open, her touch so overwhelmingly pleasurable that his head took another wild spin. He could hear the air moving in and out of his lungs, a rough, sawing sound of incredible need.

“Baby,” he said, trying to gather what was left of his mind and figure out what he should be doing except submitting to her ministrations. He reached for her. “Let me...”

“Shh.” She pushed his arm down. “Let *me*.”

He dropped his hand to the floor, drunk on the giddiness in her voice, on the obvious interest she took in his hard cock as she stroked the pulsing length with her fingertips, then cupped his balls in her palm and gave them a light, testing squeeze. His tip went wet with pre-cum and he bit his lip, watching through half-closed eyes as her face flushed.

Fully dressed, she leaned over him, the ends of her honey hair brushing his belly. Hart held his breath, promised himself not to thrust, then lost that battle when her mouth took in the sensitive crown. She didn't protest, just swirled her tongue around him and began a rhythm designed to drive him mad.

Not too mad, he reminded himself, as she began to suck. *Don't get carried away.*

She hummed around his length and her gaze flicked up to his, chips of flaming blue setting more fire to his blood even as he tried holding back. *Little minx*, he thought. *She's enjoying making me struggle.*

Then she lifted her mouth from him—thank God—only to pepper little kisses down his cock, up again to flick her tongue at his slit, then low, lower, so he automatically widened his thighs more and she thoroughly bathed his balls. There wasn't enough breath in the world to keep him alive but that didn't stop him from feeling the top of his head explode as she took one in her mouth to suck.

Her lips opening around the second drove him beyond all willful thought.

Perhaps she sensed she'd defeated him, because she straightened, wearing a sexy little smirk on her pretty face. Her heated gaze shifted to his. *Now*, he thought, *make your muscles be more than melted wax and turn the tables, bare her and then—*

Thoughts extinguished as she went down on him again, no more licks or kisses meant to tantalize and tease. She bobbed up and on his shaft, purposeful, a show of her own power, and he lifted his hips once, twice, until her small hand pressed them to the floor and that little show of force sent him over.

He tried to give a warning, but whatever came from his throat couldn't have allowed time enough for her to stop what he shot down hers. God, God, good, good.

His muscles continued to twitch as she released him and sat up, the back of her hand wiping moisture from the edge of her mouth. Fuck. It was so sexy a gesture that he might have rallied for a second round if he didn't realize he was...

Smashed. Dry drunk, but inebriated all the same in the aftermath of the first satisfying sexual experience he'd had in two years.

"Sophie," he said, his words thick with a profound, sudden exhaustion that fell upon him. "My room...my bed...you."

In one graceful movement, she got to her feet. "No." Snagging the throw hanging over the edge of the couch, she stood over him.

"It shouldn't be like this. Not right."

"Think of me like a nurse or a nun or something," she said, bending to tuck the soft fabric around his body.

His eyes could hardly stay open. "Act of charity or act of mercy?" he mumbled. "God. I owe you...something."

"Sleep," she said, and he was aware of her moving toward the door as he drifted off. "Forget about owing me anything. In the morning, we'll both consider this a dream."

Sophie was still working hard at doing that very thing a couple of evenings later when she attended a fitting for the bridesmaids' dresses at a bridal salon the next town over. Her brother's and Willow's wedding was just around the corner.

“I could do this for everyone myself,” Delilah Rodriguez said, holding the gown chosen for her against her body and inspecting her reflection in a massive mirror. She was accomplished and experienced with needle and thread, having done alterations for years and now branching out into her own designs.

“No doubt.” Willow held out her champagne glass for Erin, who was pouring bubbly for the women in attendance. “But you’re one of the wedding party, not the wedding party seamstress.”

Sophie admired her own dress, hanging on a stand beside a velvet draped alcove, and also admired her brother’s wife-to-be for incorporating all of the 7-Stud Club wives into the wedding party. The men were a tight-knit group and their women were becoming as close.

The shop’s entry bells rang out and Gemma, the last of the bridesmaids to arrive, walked through the door. Her appearance caused a flurry of excitement as they grilled the just-returned newlywed on her honeymoon. Sophie drifted farther from the chattering crowd and checked her phone.

Hart again, who had been texting her regularly. He wanted to talk. He wanted to know how she was. He reminded her he owed her. Sheesh. The man should let it go.

She had to let it go.

Gemma strode over for a hug and then grabbed a glass of champagne. “How have you been Sophie? We love what you guys did to our backyard. Thanks so much.”

“Um, you’re welcome,” she mumbled, and felt her face go hot as she remembered her moments locked with Hart in the shed that afternoon. “You two had a wonderful time?”

“A great time,” Gemma said, her enthusiasm causing her cheeks to redden as well. “I distracted Boone at every opportunity, even though he still managed to worry that he’d left behind work, the cats, and Hart.”

“Hart’s doing, um, okay, I think,” Sophie said. Boone was a man with a capacity for caring as large as his Bunyan-sized body.

“He went on total radio silence a couple of days ago, but Sophie did a wellness check,” Erin said. “How’d that go by the way?”

Sophie inspected an unseen piece of lint on her sleeve. “Didn’t I text the 7-Stud Club? I’m sure I told them he was breathing and eating and I assumed they’d pass that along to their ladies.”

“It’s so sweet how the guys look out for him,” Delilah said. “Do you think he’ll ever be the happy man I heard he was before he lost his fiancée?”

“The grief’s changed him,” Harper told her. “In high school, he and the others were always planning elaborate pranks on each other. I can’t see him doing that now. And the girls who flocked to him...he had to be dating a different one every night of the week.”

“Now I can’t imagine him dating *anybody*,” Sloane said, twirling before the mirror so the layers of pale green silk that made up the skirt of her dress floated around her. “He seems sort of...monk-like.”

Erin shot Sophie an amused glance.

“What a waste.” Willow shook her head. “All that handsome man-ness going untapped. Do you really think he’ll

never kiss a woman again? Never touch a woman again? That he'll never, well, be *that way* again? You know, virile."

Erin's eyes seem to bore into Sophie.

"It could be the case, you know." Willow continued her musing. "Maybe his sexual potency has dried up and—"

"That's not going to happen, okay?" Sophie said, the words bursting out of her before she could hold them back. "I mean, recently he's been plenty virile, and *that way* in fact, with...with...someone."

Every person in the room stared at her, including the fiftyish seamstress who was pinching the extra fabric at the waist of Delilah's pale blue frock.

"Oh." Willow blinked. "I know you two are good friends, so I guess he felt comfortable sharing with you."

"Right." Sophie looked down.

"It seems a little off, though," Willow continued. "I mean, that's kind of on overshare for—"

"It was *with* me, okay?" Sophie said, her head coming up to take in the surprise on the faces surrounding her. "I was there. I *was* the someone."

Then, with a huff, she snatched up her dress and swept aside velvet curtains in order to enter the alcove, leaving her finally silent friends behind.

Once wearing her gown, a pale yellow that was like sunlight filtered through silk, Sophie took a deep breath, then emerged into the room and confronted the murmuring crowd. "I'm back. And first, I want you all to promise that you won't tell your husbands—or fiancé—" she sent a look to Willow, "about any of this."

“What’s said in bridal salon stay in bridal salon,” the seamstress declared in a heavily accented voice. She pointed to a beautifully embroidered piece hung in a gilt frame across the room that proclaimed exactly that.

Sophie nodded. “Then I’m prepared to listen to you.” Because she knew there’d be plenty they wanted to share and a woman needed her friends, especially when the ground beneath her feet seemed so shaky.

Gemma half-raised her hand. “I, for one, am glad to know that Hart’s, uh, interested in the physical side of life again,” she said. “That’s good. Normal.”

“But is it good for our Soph?” Harper asked.

Sophie rounded on her friend. “Give me some credit for knowing the score, okay?” But her voice held no heat. They’d known each other since childhood and Mad’s new wife was only concerned for her.

“What exactly *is* the score?” Gemma asked. “I mean, was this a one-off, or...” Then she closed her eyes, opened them. “I’m sorry, Sophie, that’s none of my business. It’s just that we’ve been so worried about Hart for so long.”

“I get that.”

“And we worry about you too, Soph,” Erin said.

Sophie sighed. “I don’t want to get into too much detail—”

“Details? Please give us details!” Delilah raised her hands under her chin and curled her fingers, looking like a ridiculously darling kitten begging for a treat.

“I don’t want to get into too much detail,” Sophie repeated with a pointed stare at Shane’s unrepentant wife, “but he was

in a low mood, and what started as comfort just turned... sexual.”

Her friends stared at her, clearly expecting more.

She sighed again. “If you want to know the truth, I mostly sort of seduced him.”

“Woot!” Gemma raised her fist in the air. “Sister got her some.”

No, and she’d thought it safer that way. Pleasing him without taking anything for herself had allowed her to hold onto her secrets. “As far as I’m concerned, it was a one-off. We didn’t discuss it, though. I’ve been avoiding his calls and texts since.”

“But Sophie,” Harper said, “why avoid him now? After this change in circumstance? You’ve always...”

“Right.” She hung her head. “At least half of you know about that little crush I always had on him. But that was more of a ‘what if’ kind of thing than something I believed could ever come true.” She cleared her throat. “A childish daydream.”

“I don’t know that it could *never* come true,” Gemma said. “If he caught a look at you in that gown...”

“Yes, yes.” The seamstress bustled up with her measuring tape and pincushion and proceeded to tug down the bodice of Sophie’s dress. “And I think we should show him a little more of your muffins.”

At that, they all started laughing which relieved the lingering tension in the room. More champagne was poured and to Sophie’s relief they abandoned the topic of Hart as everyone took a turn getting fitted. Next, they removed the dresses that were then shrouded in bags and swept off to the

workroom where the seamstress—name of Magda—would do her work.

Regarding herself in the main room's largest mirror, Sophie smoothed her top and tucked the front tails into the waistband of her white jeans. Behind her, Erin reached out to smooth her hair. "Pretty Soph. No wonder you got to him."

She sent her friend a grateful glance, then stared at her reflection again. "He never looked at me before. What's different now?"

"He's different," Willow said, coming to stand beside her. "He's not some cute boy in the neighborhood but a man who's known both love and loss."

"But I—"

"You're no longer the pesky little sister he grew up with," Harper said. "He realizes you're a woman now."

Sophie nodded, thinking of the night after the first cooking class and what he'd said then. *I'm afraid you might not have quite made it to full-fledged adult in my mind until I saw you handle that little squabble over scallops versus scallopini.*

It made her smile. "Still..."

"You're the biggest worrier I know," Harper said. "How about you stop overthinking this?"

"Doesn't everyone consider every possible worst outcome and prepare at least three responses?"

Sophie's friends traded looks and rueful laughs. Magda tsked as she strode through the room with a gown over her arm and muttered something under her breath.

"So be honest." Turning to face her friends, Sophie crossed her arms over her chest. "Let's take me out of the equation and

consider Hart only. You all know him and have observed him as closely as he'd let anyone."

"Yes," Gemma agreed in a wary tone.

"Do you think he'll ever truly be able to move on from his grief? Will he ever seriously entertain the idea of a future with a woman after Kim?"

"Sophie, you—"

"Not me," she said quickly. "Take me out of this, I said."

Glancing around, she saw each woman wore an uncertain expression.

"Just as I thought." She waved an arm. "And consider the woman herself. Could she enjoy her life aware she's not his first choice?"

"Sophie." A line formed between Gemma's brows. "I can't believe that Hart would ever commit to someone he considered second best."

"Maybe he would tell himself he could be happy, but could he really? I remember Kim. She was a tall brunette who played basketball in college and then had a job working with disabled athletes. Hart *loved* her." An ache in Sophie's chest made breathing impossible.

Sloane stepped up, her expression serious. "Yes, Sophie. The Hart of two years ago had found his match. But she's gone and some of him is gone with her."

"No," Sophie protested. Her Hart was injured, but not irrevocably altered. "No, I—"

"Hart Sawyer is a different man, and will be a different husband."

“Quite true,” Magda said, nodding at Sloane as she marched through the room again, carrying two empty champagne bottles.

Still, Sophie shook her head. “What if later—”

A crash startled the women and their gazes swung to Magda, who had dumped those heavy bottles into a metal trash can. She muttered something that sounded like a guttural curse and slammed her hands to her hips.

“Youth is wasted,” she declared, glaring at them. “You are mostly foolish and undeserving of your very pretty faces.”

“Tell us how you really feel,” Harper replied, sounding amused.

“How I feel is you should throw your arms around this moment,” Magda advised. “And tomorrow, let it take care of itself.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

HIS BARE FEET UP ON HIS COFFEE TABLE, HART GAVE HIS phone a casual glance when it buzzed on the sofa cushion beside him. Then he straightened from his slumped position, soles slapping the floor as he grabbed the phone. Fumbling, he dropped it, and a curse and two attempts later managed to pull up the screen to read the incoming text from Sophie.

After two days of freezing him out, she'd finally responded.

The message was succinct. Confirm with a yes if he could pick her up at the address provided ASAP.

He promised to be there in five minutes.

Optimistic, that promise, because she was waiting at a bar on the other side of town, but he pressed heavy on the gas pedal and luckily avoided the SBPD because it only took him ten to screech up to the curb.

Right next to Sophie, who blinked at him like an owl from under a streetlamp.

Pleasure rushed through him at the sight of her. She wore strappy shoes on her feet, white jeans that wrapped her petite figure from hips to ankles, and a simple thin blouse that looked as if she'd missed a button or two more than usual.

Maybe he got hung up on that, because as she slipped into the passenger side her brows slammed together. “Are you staring at my muffins?”

“Your what?”

She flopped back in her seat and waved a hand. “Never mind.”

That’s when he realized she must have imbibed more than usual too. “Um...everything okay?”

“I needed a favor, that’s all.”

“Well, good. Great.” He stole another look at her face, relieved and grateful to have her nearby. When she’d ignored him after their...interlude, he worried he’d put her off him completely. Not that what happened was his fault, he would have argued if she’d given him the time of day.

He’d been putty in her hands.

A bottle bomb to her flame.

At the memory, he felt a new rush of his blood southward, but he gritted his teeth and told himself to ignore it...just as he was ignoring the trace of Sophie’s delectable perfume that had entered the car with her small, warm body.

“Home?” he asked, swearing to himself he’d take her anywhere, do anything, to get them back on track. Be Hart and Sophie again, pals forever.

“Sure,” she said and he saw her close her eyes, then they popped open again. “Is the car spinning?”

He shook his head. “What have you been drinking tonight?”

“Started with champagne at the bridesmaids’ gown fitting. Then Harper dragged me to a couple of other bars and...” She put her hand to her head. “Don’t make me remember.”

Grinning, he took the turn toward her house. “Stick with me, kid. Soon you’ll be home in your flannel jammies and hugging your favorite teddy bear.”

“Kid.”

When she didn’t expand, he felt a twinge of guilt. While he’d used the term as a callback to their former, long-time, at-ease-with-each-other relationship, it sounded patronizing to his ears now. But hell, he wanted to ensure that her hands on him, her mouth on him, hadn’t erased their past history. He’d been like a big brother to her all her life!

But she wasn’t a little girl now.

And his brotherly feelings toward her had been gone for quite some time.

Ignoring those thoughts, he pulled into the driveway that led to her place. Her little cottage sat on the corner of a big piece of property planted with stone fruit and citrus trees. She rented it from the aging couple who lived in the larger farmhouse beyond the orchard. Sophie’s dwelling was cream stucco built on a foundation of river rock. Her yellow cruiser bike sat on the front porch.

He’d barely braked when she slipped out, digging in her mini purse. With her head down, her feet stumbled on the steps as she continued searching for what he supposed were her keys.

Without waiting to be asked, he jogged to catch up with her, then tugged the leather clutch from her hands and found the ring himself. In moments, the door swung open and he

hesitated. When she tripped on nothing again as she ventured inside, he followed her. *See her safely to bed, Sawyer.*

In the small living area, he glanced around, noting nothing had changed. A lamp glowing in a corner, a love seat, a TV and an easy chair that he knew she and her mother had found at a garage sale and reupholstered. The kitchen area was small, but he saw the pans still hanging on a rack and her personalized leather roll of knives sitting on the countertop.

Unlike Hart, Sophie hadn't been raised in a home that was required to be photo-spread worthy at all times. A haphazard stack of magazines sat on a small side table, a knit throw blanket had slipped to the floor near the love seat, a sweatshirt was tossed over the back of the easy chair, a pair of shoes sat abandoned by the door.

She was looking at him, wearing a little frown. Was she about to kick him out? "Can I get you something?" she asked, politeness winning.

"How about I make you some tea?" His gaze landed on that unusual amount of cleavage revealed by her shirt and he cleared his throat. "You could put on something...else."

She glanced down at herself, noted the gaping fabric and made a face. "Oh," she said, clutching the sides together. "That dumb jerk popped one of my buttons!"

Hart felt one of the veins in his temple pop at the revelation. "Soph..."

But she was gone, weaving just the slightest toward the short hall that led to a bedroom and bath.

On a sigh, he made his way into the kitchen, to find and fill the teakettle and set it on a burner to boil. Then he pattered

about, locating tea bags and mugs. *Maybe she's hungry*, he thought. *She should eat something to absorb the alcohol.*

He rummaged about to put together a plate of crackers and cheese and then found some cookies in her jar shaped like a mermaid. They were vanilla rounds with a clear glaze and dusted with what looked to be nutmeg. Biting into one, he considered the flavor. Eggnog? Maybe a test for the next Christmas season.

In the distance, he heard water run in the pipes and figured she must have jumped in the shower. "Good," he murmured aloud. It gave him a few more minutes to prepare his little impromptu meal. Finding a container in the refrigerator labeled "vegetable soup," he used the microwave to heat a couple of mugs of that too.

Then he brought it all to her small coffee table. The little meal, the tea, and then finally a tiny vase he'd found on her windowsill that held a few delicate wildflowers. He heard the bathroom door open and caught a whiff of soap-scented steam and Sophie.

"Come, sit," he called, pleased with the repast he'd put together. The women in his life had always been so self-sufficient. He found he enjoyed taking care of Sophie...it had been too long since he'd done something for someone else.

Raf had said there'd been too much navel-gazing lately. Recalling how the poker crew had thought the other man was suggesting Hart turn to porn to ease his doldrums, he laughed a little.

"What's so funny?" Sophie asked, coming into the room.

He stared at her. She'd taken him at his word and donned sleepwear after her shower. Between the edges of a plush robe,

he could see the evidence of a white cotton nightgown embellished with tiny pleats. Her hair had been loosely braided and revealed her face, freshly washed and her lashes still spiky with water.

A feeling rose in him, tenderness twined with lust. Affection and greed.

Refusing to listen to the primal call, he gestured toward her love seat. “Sit down. Eat.”

She collapsed onto the cushions and reached for the tea. “I could really use this,” she said, bringing it to her mouth.

There was space beside her, but not a lot, so when he took his own seat, his outer thigh pressed against hers. Though he was hyper aware of it, he didn’t move to distance himself. *At ease with her Sawyer*, he reminded himself. *Getting back to that.*

Her gaze slid toward him over the mug, the steam from the hot liquid rising around her face. “Thanks. This is nice.”

He cleared his throat. “Do you want to tell Uncle Hart what went wrong tonight?” He inwardly winced at the “Uncle Hart,” but it was out and she didn’t respond to it.

Instead, she sighed. “Remember, years and years ago, when you told me you’d always come when I called, no questions asked?”

“I do. And shortly after you phoned following a disastrous home hair color experiment.”

“You drove me to the drugstore to buy an emergency antidote.”

He grimaced. “Which left it kind of greenish—”

“Better than the brassy platinum that would have given my mother a heart attack.”

“So tonight was the equivalent of a bad dye job?”

“Not entirely. It was just one little thing after another. I went bar-hopping with Harper and when she was ready to go home, I decided to stay. I’d run into someone I knew, see, and...” She sipped tea again. “I should have remembered Cox can’t hold his liquor.”

Alarmed, he couldn’t help but put his hand on her leg. “Sophie.”

She stared into her mug. “I don’t need any lectures. The fact is, he has this disarming charm until about, oh, four beers.”

“How did you lose a button?” Hart demanded.

“Not the way you’re thinking. Just chill, okay?”

Exasperated, Hart squeezed her thigh then removed his hand. “Why would you hang out with that guy again?”

For answer, she shook her head. “After that, the rideshare driver canceled on me.” Making a little sound of disgust, she set down her tea. “It’s been a day. I started at Henry’s at six this morning, and for some weird reason now I’m feeling more wired than tired.”

At the new, hoarse note in her voice, his need to care for her resurged and redoubled. “Come here,” he said gruffly. Her light weight made her easy to maneuver, and soon he’d positioned them on the love seat with his legs stretched out and her sitting between them. “It’s time to relax,” he said, and put his hands on the muscles between her neck and shoulders.

Kneading there, he felt the tense brittleness of her frame. “Too much material,” he muttered, and brushed the thick fabric of her robe down her arms. Now only delicate straps of fabric stood between him and Sophie’s skin. He placed his hands there again, massaging.

She made a whisper of sound, pleased sound he believed, and he looked down at her, smiling a little.

A smile that died as he realized with the robe gone he could see the shadow of her nipples beneath the thin nightgown. As his thumbs dug deeper into firm tissue, he heard her draw in a quick breath and then watched as the tips of her breasts visibly tightened beneath the fabric. He inhaled sharply, pushing his hips back into the arm of the love seat to prevent her from becoming aware of his stiff cock.

But then she wiggled too, and her bottom snuggled up against him there.

Fuck. This wasn’t the way to return to how they used to be. Hardening his jaw, he tried ignoring the contact and the little twitch of his traitorous dick. His hands continued working her knotted muscles, though she didn’t seem any more relaxed.

The ends of her braid tickled the back of one hand and he halted his movements to transfer it over her shoulder, letting it hang over her chest. He stared at the sweet expanse of skin at the nape of her neck and saw the little red mark at her hairline.

An angel kiss. He recalled hearing of them somewhere.

No surprise Sophie had attracted the attentions of some celestial being. Sweet Sophie.

His chest rose and fell on another large breath and he commanded himself to resume his ministrations. He could do

this. *They* could do this. Find the old track. Return to their regular path.

Hart hardened his jaw and began rubbing again. A tremor worked itself down her spine and he cursed under his breath.

“Maybe I shouldn’t let you...” she began.

“Of course you should.” His brain wasn’t operating on all cylinders when so much of it was preoccupied by that angel kiss, the scent of her, the slender body that trembled again. “Think of me like a nurse or a nun or something.”

Her spine snapped straight. Her whole body hummed under his hands. And what he’d just said hit his brain like a bolt of electricity.

What was he thinking? That wasn’t a callback to the old days, a reminder of their shared childhood. That was a callback to two days ago, when she’d returned his sexuality to him with her heated mouth and teasing tongue.

Slowly, slowly he saw her turn her head, each second charging the air surrounding them with more dangerous, crackling heat. He felt the hair on his body lift, and his scalp prickled in anticipation. Then her gaze met his.

Instantly he was lost in their bottomless blue.

Good sense, good intentions drowned in it right along with him.

His hands tightened on her and in that moment he doubted he could ever let her go.

Now it was his turn to move in incremental degrees, his mouth lowering. His lips found her ear, and he caught the lobe between his teeth and then tongued her there, her intense response betrayed by the next sharp quiver of her body.

“I said I owed you,” Hart said.

She shivered.

“And while true, right now I can only think about how much I want you.” He slid his lips to the corner of her mouth and licked there, his entire body throbbing with need.

“Angel,” he whispered. “Let me take you to bed.”

In a devil’s voice Hart had called her “angel” and with that single word, she only wanted what he wanted. Bed. “Yes,” she said, her voice hushed, forgetting all about keeping herself invulnerable to him. “Yes, Hart, yes.”

He swept her up in his arms and she heard herself laugh. It was too much like every romantic daydream of him she’d ever had.

“You won’t be laughing later,” he said in that same dark voice and her heart struck her ribs once, twice, three times, a heavy knell of warning. Still, liquid fire raced through her as he dropped her to the mattress in her darkened bedroom, lit only by the filtered light coming from the bathroom across the hall. Sheets and blankets and bedspread had been left askew, dragging to the floor, so she lay on the bottom sheet. The shadows cocooned the two of them as Sophie reached for him when he came over her.

His hard body landed on hers, his clothes rough against her sensitized skin only protected by the thin nightgown. The robe had slithered off when he’d lifted her from the couch, tangling with his legs and forcing him to kick it away with an exciting amount of masculine impatience. Now he settled his weight

and she sucked in a breath at the delicious press of his body against hers.

“I’ll never want to stop,” he murmured, his mouth finding her neck.

She arched it to allow him more access. “Please,” she said. Why not ask for what she wanted? They might be ruining a longtime friendship but she felt no regret—at least not yet—only a low, demanding pulse in her womb.

There was no thinking when Hart lay in the cradle of her spread thighs, his arousal blatant and her response to it heady. Where he pushed against her she was swollen, wet, and aching. Rocking upward to increase the friction, she slid her hands into his crisp hair and brought his mouth to hers.

Their kiss shot her desire to emergency level. She moaned as she took the thrust of his tongue and felt her breasts swell and her nipples harden, their sensitivity almost painful.

One of his hands drew up her nightgown, his hot skin burning against her naked thigh. God, yes. Her blood pumped under her skin, every part of her yearning for his touch, for satisfaction.

He drew the fabric over her head and sat back. She was breathless, her chest heaving as she watched him take in her nudity. His gaze felt like hot licks on each inch of skin and she found herself paralyzed by the lust that seemed to ooze from his pores.

Nerves prickled to the surface, becoming goose bumps on her arms and chest.

His eyes jumped to meet hers and he frowned. “You’re cold.”

Mute, she shook her head, then forced out words. “Maybe a little anxious.” The thought of disappointing him in this arena made her want to cringe.

Instead, she sat up and reached for the hem of the ragged T-shirt he wore with another pair of old jeans. It was almost like being with a different Hart now. In the past, even as a kid who came to their house to play with Cooper, he’d always been dressed in clothing that looked brand new and newly ironed, not besmirched with stains and tears like that of her rambunctious and intrepid brothers. The golden boy of Sawyer Beach, the one who would have always maintained a certain formal reserve, seemed to have broken from some subtle confines, leaving a man less rule-bound, more raw, and just...*more*.

Overcome with a sudden shyness, her reaching hand fell to her side and she drew up her legs as one arm crossed her breasts. A tardy sense of self-preservation drove her to scoot back, putting more space between them.

Instead of concern, a glint of satisfaction sparkled in his eyes. “I’ve been right all along. You *are* nervous to be alone with me.”

She swallowed. “Why do you sound happy about that?”

“Because you always have everything under control Sophie, going a hundred miles an hour, managing five careers and fifteen thousand demands on your time. It’s not your usual nature to be anything but confident and composed.”

“If only you knew that confident veneer comes at the expense of some heavy worrying.”

He tilted his head, clearly unbelieving.

“What if the tomatoes I ordered for a catering event don’t arrive or aren’t ripe if they do? What if my barista replacement

at Henry's doesn't show for his shift? What if a client forgets to tell me about a guest's food allergy and I send someone to the hospital? Why, I can't tell you how many times I've woken up, my stomach in knots wondering about the next romaine lettuce recall. Then there's—"

A warm palm clamped over her mouth. She jumped, and another rush of goose bumps broke out over her skin. In her chest, her heart thrashed up and down and sideways.

Hart moved closer. "In any case, I like you like this, Sophie. On edge." He lifted his hand and one of his fingertips coasted along her jawline and down her throat.

Fire followed behind it.

Grasping her wrist, he pulled it away from her chest and then he took the other one too, so he held both in one hand, his grip firm.

Implacable.

Oh, God. Her heart bobbed and weaved again, but her body felt enthralled by him as he bent low and then took one tingling nipple into his mouth. Her back bowed as he sucked with a tender rhythm, then harder, and the fingers of his free hand plucked at its twin.

Desire built again, doubling then redoubling with every second he played with her. She squirmed, and began tugging to reclaim her hands. To do *something*.

"No," he said, against her soft skin. Looking up, he blew on her wet flesh, the contrast of cool air shooting up her temperature another ten degrees.

"N-no?"

His fingers tightened on her wrists. “No. You won’t manage me this time, Sophie. You won’t be the one orchestrating this event.”

She blinked, her brows slamming together.

His tone turned cajoling. “Won’t it be nice to let me take over, to let yourself lie back and be tended to by me?”

A trickle of apprehension crept down her spine, and she felt like a doe in a meadow spotted by a mountain lion. His gaze said he was ready to gobble her up.

“I’ll do all the work,” he promised, whispering in that devil-voice. “All the planning and the prepping, all the serving and the cleanup too.”

That should make her smile, but a disquiet still fluttered in her belly. “Hart—”

“Shh, Sophie.” He brushed her hair back from her face. “You leave everything to me.”

For a woman who had every hour of every day mapped out to the minute, he had to know his proposition was a tempting, heady one. But it was his kiss and his touch that sealed the deal. Before she could protest again, he’d taken her mouth in another burning, intimate kiss that had her going pliant. He used that yielding to draw her down on the bed, where he began exploring her with a detail bordering on obsessive.

He traced his mouth down her throat to lick in the notch of her collarbones. His tongue traced her shoulder and down her arm and he sucked at the tender skin in the bend of her elbow. She moaned, and then again when he drew each fingertip into his mouth, his hot tongue curling around it just as he’d done with her nipples.

She was a needy mess of want, nearly sobbing with it, and he'd been avoiding all the throbbing, begging, pulsing parts of her!

“Hart,” she said, trying to infuse a demand in her voice, even as his seductive mouth had made her paradoxically both desperate and dangerously docile. “Touch me.”

His gaze came to hers. He was nuzzling the cup of her palm, his evening whiskers teasing skin she'd never considered the least bit erogenous. And yet, another trickle of wetness seeped between her thighs.

The place he hadn't yet ventured.

“I am touching you,” he said, flattening her hand to delicately lick her lifeline.

A shiver overtook her and she thought she might scream if he didn't stop this maddening, frustrating, long-winded mode of seduction. “Let *me* touch *you*,” she offered, and found the strength to take her hand from his, reaching for the fastening on his jeans.

“Whoa, whoa, *whoa*,” he said, and he caught her fingers before they found their goal. A chuckle rose in the near-darkness. “How impatient you are.”

“Yes,” she snapped, trying to rise from the bed as well as reclaim her hand. “Impatient and...and...”

His next kiss swallowed whatever else she would have said. It was drugging, taking her under and deep into his spell. She subsided once again on the bed as he kept exploring her mouth and she was vaguely aware of the thump of shoes hitting the ground, the rustle of more clothing being removed. He broke the kiss to removed that blasted shirt he wore and then he was naked next to her.

Hart and Sophie naked on a bed, just as in dreams that had left her empty and restless upon awakening.

Now, though, now she was helpless under his touch and his low-voiced murmurs.

He laid another kiss on her, a sequence of them, and she took in the taste of him and breathed in his skin, that salty scent now taking on an earthy, muskier note. Arousal, matching the taste of him she remembered from that night when she'd driven him to distraction.

Payback was heaven, because pleasure had her twisting on the sheets as his big hand caressed her breasts then made its way over her belly. He cupped the place between her thighs, pressing the heel of his hand along the seam of her mons, making her moan and lift into his touch.

“I can feel how wet you are for me,” he whispered. “I want to taste you, Sophie.”

Her stomach curled on itself as he insinuated a finger into the folds of her pleated flesh and as he withdrew it, even in the low light she saw it glisten. Fascinated, she watched as he lifted his hand and painted one nipple with excruciating care, covering the aching tip with her own essence.

More heat flashed over her and she felt helpless to do anything but watch him, watch his head lower and his mouth encompass her there, his tongue swiping at the flavor he'd left behind. He hummed in pleasure, and she lifted her hands to his head.

He looked up at her, a little frown between his brows. “What did I say, Sophie?” he asked in a scolding tone that made her shiver again. “Let me have you without direction.”

Oh, God. Sophie's hands dropped to the mattress and her back arched as he went back to his work, licking and then gathering more essence for the other nipple to lick there too. Her body was one aching nerve, one helpless bundle of want as he trailed kisses down her belly and made a place for himself between her thighs.

This intimacy she generally avoided, previous lovers having given the impression they found it a burden or an obligation. Her legs moved in a sudden need to escape, or as a way to offer *him* escape from the duty.

"I'm not going anywhere, Sophie," he said in that new, gravelly voice of his. And though she felt sure he didn't mean it to sound like forever, her silly heart gave another stumble as his fingers settled on her upper thighs and pushed them apart for better access. The vulnerability of her position was deeply arousing and she felt more trembles shaker her body.

He breathed in deeply, his gaze lowered to the exposed flesh. "God, Sophie. I love the scent of you."

Goose bumps pricked everywhere and she thought she might die as she waited for him to move. Then his mouth was *there*, on her, and she moaned, her nails curling into the bedclothes as he licked in delicate circles designed to drive her mad because of his diligent avoidance of the most sensitive place.

Which caused her clit to throb even harder and she moaned again, lifting in invitation. He placed a hot palm on the flesh below her navel, directing her to stay still. She moaned again. "Shh," he said, breathing cool air on her aching flesh.

Then the very tip of his tongue touched the very tip of her hard nub.

Sophie gasped, feeling tears sting at the corners of her eyes as need rose like a wave in her belly and up to her throat. “Hart,” she choked out. “Please.”

He gave it another tender nudge, then changed tactics and moved lower to slide his tongue inside her in forceful, pulse-pounding thrusts. Her heels dug in the mattress. No man had ever tasted her so deeply.

“There,” he said, almost gloating with satisfaction and lust. “That’s good. I want to drink more of you. I want to bathe my face with you.”

Who knew that always polite, ever reserved Hart Sawyer could say such a thing, do such things, be the kind of lover who then sat back and watched her expression as he played with her private flesh? “So soft, so sweet.” He brought his hand up to his mouth and licked at what she’d left on him, then made a growling sound and swooped down again.

Now he showed less restraint, and Sophie’s head thrashed on the pillow, biting her bottom lip to keep from begging. He was consuming her, eating away at her inhibitions and her self-defenses. Her fingers curled into his hair and he didn’t protest as her nails bit into his scalp. His groan was only encouragement and she found she was lifting into his mouth, grinding against his lips and tongue in a way certain to make her feel embarrassed in the morning.

But nothing could stop her from yielding to her desire and luxuriating in his clearly heady enjoyment of her body.

Then he had both hands under her bottom, serving her up for his pleasure...and for hers. His tongue circled her clit, insistent licks that had her breath stopped in her lungs. Her body tensed, every muscle taut, every nerve screaming for release. Then he slipped two fingers inside her, now three, and

she lost her last hold on herself. Delight surged into full-bore pleasure, and even that word was not adequate to describe the sharp bliss rising and scattering in wave after wave, from her womb to her fingertips.

With ripples of carnal joy still wracking her body, she lazily opened her eyes to see Hart hovering over her, an expression she couldn't decipher on his face. "What?" she croaked in a hoarse voice. She swallowed to lubricate her throat. "What's the matter?"

A quick smile quirked his mouth. "No condoms."

Ah. She trailed a hand along his shoulder. "We don't need them. I'm protected...and...safe."

"Thank God." His head fell back. "That might be the best news I've ever heard."

She surprised herself by releasing a giggle. "And you?"

"I would never hurt you, Sophie. Or allow you to be hurt."

Her smile felt rueful, knowing that promise was likely a futile one. But it didn't stop her from urging him over her. Instead of allowing her the lead even now, he arranged them so they lay side by side, and then he drew her upper thigh over the top of his. "Like this, Sophie," he said, his nose touching hers, "so I can look at you."

His hand closed around his erection and he guided it to the place where she was wet and ready and aching for him again. He slid inside her and they both gasped as he drove to the root. *God, Sophie thought, it's happened.*

Hart possessing her.

Both protests and hosannas played out in her head. Then he thrust again and all thoughts flung far and wide as her body

reacted to each heavy intrusion, the sensation of being filled causing her to tighten on him each time he moved back.

“Sophie,” he said on a groan, and as if he couldn’t help himself, he rolled her to her back so he could rise above her, his fascinated gaze fixed downward to watch himself enter her with another forceful lunge.

Sophie couldn’t help but run her hands over his chest, appreciating the lean plane of muscles and the twitch of his skin in response to her touch. She found his nipples, plucking at them.

“Sophie,” he said, now a sharp warning.

But she ignored it, only to wet her thumbs with her mouth then return them to the stiff nubs surrounded by a light fur of crisp hair. He groaned again, his hips lowering, his erection breaching her in sharp, almost uncontrolled jabs. She lifted into him, grinding against the hard, delicious intrusion.

“Fuck,” Hart said, as earthy as she’d ever heard him, and his face wore a pained expression. Clearly he was holding on by the skin of his teeth.

“Let go,” she whispered and lifted her head to place her mouth against his. “Let go.”

But instead he brought his hand to the place where they joined, gentle fingers playing at her clit even as his body shuttled into hers with near-violence. The contrast sent her from simmering to boiling and she kissed him harder, driving inside his hot mouth with her tongue even as a climax broke over her.

Hart shuddered, muttering curses and praises, and then she felt him spasm in both her inner and outer holds. Her mind went blank, erased of everything but satisfaction.

Of having Hart in her bed and in her body. Of having giving him some relief, she was sure, of his unrelenting grief.

He collapsed on the pillow beside her. “A minute,” he said gruffly.

A moment for their breath to calm, then she felt him stir again, to come up on one elbow and study her face. “Sophie, are you okay? Was that all right?”

“Fishing for compliments?” A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, even as heat crawled up her neck. “Of course I’m okay. More than. And it was more than all right for me too. Don’t say it wasn’t obvious.”

A very male grin broke over his face. He dropped a quick kiss on her nose. “Stay put,” he ordered, then crossed with quick strides across the hall to the bathroom and returned with a warm, wet washcloth.

To her embarrassment, he used it to bathe her, giving her a speaking glance when she tried to protest. She fell back to the pillows, one arm over her eyes until he left again, then returned.

With wine in glasses.

Sitting up, she groped for the top sheet and pulled it up to tuck over her breasts and beneath her arms. He’d slipped into his jeans, but his chest was bare and she felt her head take a spin at the unlikeliness of this. Hart Sawyer, half-naked after being full-naked just a few minutes before. *He’ll leave soon*, she told herself as she watched him take a seat on the edge of the bed beside her hip, *and then he’ll probably avoid me until Christmas*. Still, she took the glass he handed over, deciding to enjoy another few moments with him.

He waited until she took a sip of the sauvignon blanc that had been chilling in her refrigerator. “I think we should see each other,” he said.

She blinked. “We do see each other. All the time. At cooking class, when the 7-Stud Club hires me to make the food for poker night—”

“Sophie.” Hart looked away, then cleared his throat. “I mean I think we should date.”

If he’d slapped her in the face it wouldn’t have surprised her more. “Date?”

“That thing people do. Movies. Dinners. Hold hands too.”

Her fingers curled on the stem of her wineglass. “I don’t... how...” Stymied with all that seemed wrong about the proposed scenario, she settled on, “It will agitate our friends.”

“But confuse our enemies.”

She looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. “We don’t have any enemies.”

He shrugged. “If we did.”

Her mind reeled, trying to understand his motives, the possible ramifications, the ultimate outcome that would surely be disaster. “Admit it would be messy,” she said. “And you don’t like messy.”

Taking the wine from her, he set it on the bedside table, next to his. “Sophie,” he said, in a light tone. “How do you handle that heavy worrying you told me about?”

More confused, she could only answer him with the truth. “I construct backup after backup. Put together plans B through X.”

“Then you go ahead and work on those,” he suggested, and found her ankles beneath the sheet. Yanking on them, he pulled her flat on the mattress then rolled to bring himself over her. “While I work on you.”

CHAPTER NINE

SOPHIE USUALLY LOVED HER SHIFT AT HENRY'S, BECAUSE THE popular coffee place was, well, popular. Which meant her time there went by quickly and she enjoyed seeing neighbors and acquaintances stop by. Just like most people, she didn't mind finding out interesting tidbits of information about new jobs, new loves, new anything. She was curious by nature and friendly, so she never minded lingering with a customer to chat if there wasn't a long queue behind them.

But today she would have preferred to ride her bike to a job in an isolated office, doing something with a computer as her only companion so she didn't have to converse with anyone and could spend her day holding her memories of Hart close. Given the chance, she'd go over each moment of the night before in meticulous detail—each of his movements, each time he'd made her come, every word that he'd said.

I think we should date. Those were his last words before he'd left her house.

She made change and some innocuous conversation, her customer an older man she didn't recognize. He was dressed in slacks, dress shirt, and jacket and he took his drink to a corner table. Probably early for a meeting, she decided. Sawyer Beachers often met business contacts at Henry's, not in little

part because she was a damn good barista—if she did say so herself.

I think we should date.

There was no opportunity now to properly consider his plan. Her first inclination had been to suppose he'd made a rash, sex-influenced pitch, but it *had* been the final thing he'd said when he'd bid her goodbye at her door, well past midnight. Knowing she had an early shift, he'd left her to her bed but not without too much to think about.

I think we should date.

Instead of answering, she'd gone on tiptoe to give him a farewell peck that had turned into a deep dive of passion. Her head spun as he'd stepped back, and he'd looked so damn pleased with himself she'd decided not to tell him he had a hickey on his neck.

She was pleased with herself over that.

Until she'd had to slather on makeup this morning to cover the beard burn on her own.

“What can I get you?” she asked the next customer who stepped up to the Order counter.

When only silence followed, she peered up. Oh. Her brother Cooper, was staring at her like she had lost half her head. “Right,” she said briskly. His choice never changed. “A large cappuccino with an extra shot.”

His gaze narrowed. “What’s different about you?”

She resisted the urge to clap a hand on her throat, and turned away to make his drink.

When she passed it over the counter, he still regarded with something bordering on suspicion. “Is it your hair? I only like

your hair the usual way.”

Instead of answering, she peered around him, sorry to see there wasn't another customer in the queue.

“Cooper...”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “I like it the usual way, or those little piggies you used to put on each side? Those were great.”

Sophie gave a lavish roll of her eyes. The French braid had been a way to tame hair that seemed to be as disordered as her thoughts this morning. “You mean *pigtails*. And I stopped wearing them circa age eight.”

“I don't like change when it comes to you.”

A pain throbbed at her temple. She'd told Hart that it would agitate their friends if they went public with a closer relationship, but that was nothing to the reaction she suspected would come from her brother.

He'd probably flip his lid if she dated his best friend. Not just because he didn't want to view her as having grown up, but because he'd know the risk she'd take in becoming involved with Hart.

Though was it a risk when there wasn't any real chance with the man and she knew it as well as she knew her own face?

If she could manage not to *fall* fall for him, then could she go out to dinner with the man, catch a movie, hold his hand? And not lose her heart for it never to be recovered again.

Hesitating, she sent her brother a speculative glance. Would he make any kind of decent sounding board? After all, he knew both the parties involved. Maybe he'd surprise her

with some worthwhile advice. She cleared her throat and prepared to broach the subject. “Cooper—”

The bells on Henry’s entry doors rang out. Willow Ray hurried in, her face alight with happiness. “There you are,” she said, rushing toward Cooper.

Delilah was at her heels, also smiling.

“Look, look, look!” Willow said, holding out a box. “It’s perfect!”

“From your expression, it definitely is,” Cooper said, his own expression indulgent as he took the proffered package. He ducked his head to press a quick kiss on her mouth.

“You should thank Delilah,” she declared, and he obligingly turned to the other woman and kissed her too, on the top of her blonde hair.

Sophie quickly made a couple of drinks for the two women—their usuals—then watched with interest as Cooper pried the top off the box. Below a fold of tissue paper was a pretty, lace edged white pillow. Willow held it up to give Sophie a better view. It was a ten inch by ten inch square and covered with flowers embroidered in white. A satin ribbon was fixed to the middle.

“Wonderful isn’t it?” Willow glanced at Delilah. “I love it.”

“It was quite simple,” the other woman said, “though I’m glad you approve.” Then she looked at Sophie. “It’s the ring bearer’s pillow, made from the handkerchief your grandmother carried at her wedding. Your mother hopes you’re going to use it someday too.”

“Oh, nice,” Sophie said, feeling her smile stiffen a little. Talk of her own someday wedding made her stomach jump in

an unpleasant way.

Delilah narrowed her eyes. “Are you doing okay, Sophie? You look different today.”

“She should be wearing the tail thingies,” Cooper said in a distant tone, as he rubbed his knuckles over his fiancée’s flushed cheek, staring down into Willow’s eyes. “That’s what’s wrong.”

Or maybe it was the lovey-dovey stuff that was causing Sophie’s belly to behave strangely. Suddenly she wanted all of her friends to stop marrying and then after marrying stop being so stupidly besotted all the time. Guilt gave her a very mean pinch, because she was currently on tap as Willow and Cooper’s maid of honor, but she was so tired of the ever after of the happiness gig being thrown in her face.

She’d been happy last night, though, hadn’t she? Without a care to what came next.

I think we should date.

Maybe Hart would forget all about it. But on the heels of that thought, a man pushed into Henry’s, the ring of bells heralding his arrival.

Hart, looking more his customary starched and buttoned-up self. Except his gaze instantly found hers and his gaze turned warm. Intimate.

A smile tugged at her lips and she felt her face heat. What would he do when he came close? And if he revealed anything about last night through word or deed in front of Cooper, Willow, and Delilah, how would they handle it?

Her pulse sped up and she wiped her damp palms on her apron. Hart took another step, then another, but then the

businessman at the corner table stood and hailed Sophie's lover of last night.

Hart's head turned, then his feet followed suit and he strode toward the other man, hand already out to shake.

They both sat down.

Half-disappointed and half-relieved, she took a moment to compose herself. Then she realized her brother and the two women were exchanging conspiratorial glances.

"What?" she said, frowning. "What's going on?"

"That's him?" Cooper asked Delilah.

"That's definitely the man he was speaking with at the tavern."

Cooper stole a glance toward the corner of the room. "I still can't believe he's considering it."

"Considering what?" Sophie demanded. "Are you talking about Hart?"

"Um..." Delilah looked down. "He hasn't said anything to you, Sophie? To be honest, Shane has already dismissed the idea, which is why I didn't mention it to you during the dress fitting."

"I dismissed it too," Cooper said, lifting his coffee to his mouth. "But if he's meeting with the man a second time..."

"We don't know it's the second time," Willow pointed out. "We don't know how far along they are in negotiations."

Sophie stared at her sister-in-law-to-be. "What negotiations? Someone explain or I'm going to recall those coffees you're holding."

Cooper sighed. “I didn’t take him seriously. But Hart said he’s looking into selling his company and leaving town.”

Sophie’s jaw dropped. Then she remembered his cluttered living room floor. *I’m thinking of moving.* She’d assumed he’d meant relocating to a different house, maybe one in a different neighborhood, but not a change as radical as this.

Cooper shook his head. “A man who suffered loss like that shouldn’t make rash decisions so soon.”

“It’s been two years,” Sophie said, as her mind tried absorbing the new knowledge. If it involved any other person, she’d probably commend the idea. A new start in a new place could be exactly what was needed. But this was *Hart* they were talking about. Hart, who had said, *I don’t want to feel like this anymore, Sophie.*

If exiting Sawyer Beach was what that took, then she should be behind his decision all the way...right?

Her heart had grown heavy in her chest, as if he’d already packed those boxes and driven away from her.

“Sophie.”

Her head jerked up, and there was Hart, on the other side of the counter. “Oh. Hey.”

He smiled. “Hey. Could you...”

“One flat white coming up,” she said briskly, turning away before her expression betrayed the sadness and the longing twining inside her.

When she turned back, he was alone at the counter, Cooper, Willow, and Delilah having taken one of the tables near the front windows.

Hart held out his debit card, his gaze studying her face.

“On the house,” she said, setting down the coffee.

One of his hands caught hers before she could blink. “Thank you, Sophie. I...hope we can find a minute to talk later.”

No, she thought, but the word wouldn’t come out of her mouth. Damn. Shouldn’t she refuse? When did self-preservation kick in and she retreated despite his desires—not to mention her own?

And could he truly still be of the mind that they should commence “dating”? She glanced at the man waiting for him on the other side of the room. What would that look like, exactly, considering he apparently had one foot outside the figurative door?

Then a memory of his voice echoed in her head. *Don’t let me go cold again, Soph. Let me smell your hair, feel your warmth. It reminds me I’m alive.*

What would “dating” mean for her, who couldn’t help the leap in her pulse when he touched her, and who knew a future without him in it would be achingly empty?

Yet that would be the case whether they changed their relationship from platonic to...well, whatever.

So maybe, like Magda suggested at the bridal salon, Sophie should embrace the moment. Think only of the present. Her gaze lingered on their joined hands.

On that chicken soup night she’d made a promise to him, she remembered. *Whatever you need. For however long you need it.*

CHAPTER TEN

SOPHIE'S SCHEDULE WAS A THING MADE TO ENDLESSLY frustrate Hart. Since that night in her bed, he'd been wanting to pin her down—to him, under him—but the demands on her time were at war with his wishes. In the last several days they'd texted friendly exchanges, he'd dropped by Harry's for coffee and to stuff overlarge tips in her jar, and during both of this week's cooking classes he'd stared at her for two hours and wished the rest of the people in the room would disappear.

But that hadn't been enough for him nor had it dissipated the wariness he sensed in her. Yes, he got it, no doubt she was worrying herself silly about the implications of them being together when she wasn't involved in the minutiae of her many and varied work obligations, but he wasn't going to join her in those concerns.

The mannered, courteous Hart Sawyer he'd been raised to be would have let her take the lead, proceeding with caution and small steps, but his need for Sophie was a physical, breathing thing, and he couldn't deny its existence.

As he left his car in the beach parking lot and headed for the late-afternoon rendezvous he'd managed to cajole her into, he looked about, taking in the summer crowd. This beach was a locals' destination, and today they all seemed to have the

same idea as him, he thought, as he barely managed to dodge the phalanx of speeding bikers who never seemed to slow for pedestrians or people operating other two- or even four-wheeled transportation.

Damn. He'd wanted to have a bit of privacy while settling Sophie into the idea of them having a more...regular relationship.

She'd throw up a few barriers, he guessed, spotting her familiar figure in the distance. His body hummed to life and he lengthened his strides. It was just too bad that she was nervous about them as a unit, he thought with an unfamiliar and aggressive indifference. She'd returned to him his sexual agency and he wasn't going to back down until he'd wrung from her—

The wind lifted her hair, pulling it into a bright flag behind her. Sunlight limned her slender figure and he saw she was wearing a bikini, with a sarong tied around her waist. He'd probably been around her dressed like this dozens and dozens of times, but the sight of her pierced him now, a bright stab that made him feel as if he was bleeding inside. Bleeding scalding, burning blood.

What the hell was he doing?

It was one thing to want to feel alive again, but to risk more...

A hand clapped him on the back, and he stumbled two steps forward. "Get moving, old man," his friend Raf Rodriguez said, his wife at his side. "It's your birthday and a party awaits."

His birthday! He'd forgotten completely, it was true, and now he realized that Sophie had agreed to meet him not so that

they could be alone and talk, but so that she could put on a party for him. A celebration.

Beach blankets, coolers, a portable stereo and tray after tray of food sat on low-lying portable tables. Along with beach chairs, they were ubiquitous pieces of equipment for every member of their crowd. More people hailed him as he walked up in a near-daze, nodding at the greetings of well-wishers.

His birthday, he thought again. He'd noticed a missed call from his parents that morning and not thought a thing about it.

Sophie appeared in front of him, and pushed a cold can of beer into his hand. "Happy birthday." On tiptoe, she pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek and then jumped back.

"You made me believe I talked *you* into coming to the beach today," he said.

She smiled. "Hasn't anyone ever surprised you before?"

"No." He dropped into one of the chairs, still unsettled, still feeling raw inside.

"We're all going to watch the sunset together and toast you," she said. "There's cupcakes for later and everything."

"Did someone say we're going to roast Hart?" Mad asked, falling into the chair beside his. "Great. Let's talk about his birthdays past and marvel at how he didn't turn into an insufferable prig."

"Please," Hart said, hand up. "Don't start—"

"Remember the biology lecturer from the university? I think we were eight. I was promised snakes, but there were only pictures."

"Yeah," Boone said. "When other parents were hiring magicians or setting us loose to wreak havoc and maim

ourselves at the skateboard park for an afternoon...”

“Remember when we were invited to a ‘luncheon’ at that fancy restaurant on the hill when Hart turned twelve? Dress shirt and ties!” Eli said in an injured tone. “Seven courses of food I couldn’t pronounce.”

“I don’t know how you put up with me,” Hart admitted. “Thanks for not tying me to the flagpole in front of the school on a regular basis.”

“Only because you passed down your barely used skateboard parts and got the best car at sixteen.”

Boone handed him a plate of food that Sophie had prepared—potato salad, slices of watermelon, and little spicy hot dogs wrapped in pastry that was scattered with poppy seeds. “Lent us all a little polish.”

The afternoon wore on toward sunset like that, the camaraderie of long friendships making the conversation flow easily. They ate and drank and laughed. Somebody dragged out their skimboard and several of the women in the group went to the shoreline to attempt gliding across the surface of the sand using the momentum of incoming waves. Most of the men followed, ready to offer tips and show off their own prowess—or lack thereof. No one cared about their self-image or their pride. It was why his parents had never understood his gang and why he considered them the best part of his growing-up years.

Boone sat on a beach blanket several yards away, his wife Gemma between his legs, her back leaning against his chest. They faced the ocean and seemed content in their tranquil bubble, paired up for a lifetime.

Envy twinged, but then Hart became aware of a bustling behind him. Glancing around, he saw that Sophie was tidying up their picnic area, dumping used paper plates in a trash bag and placing plastic covers over the trays of food. Keeping busy.

Watching her from the corner of his eye, he could only admire the sweet indentation of her waist and the curve of her hips. Noting her lack of shoes, he saw her toes were painted a cerulean blue. A delicate chain of gold and silver links encircled an almost fragile-looking ankle.

Desire for her sparked again and grew, seeming to heat the air, and he stretched out his legs to ease bunched muscles. Every instinct clamored at him to snatch her up and take her away with him, find a door that could lock and a bed behind it, or a floor, or a wall, anything they could use to facilitate coupling. Passion roared in his blood and he wanted to rut on her, any façade of domestication falling away.

His fingers curled into fists and he hauled in a long breath of the salty air, trying to calm and trying to understand how this one woman, whom he'd known practically his whole life, could infuse him with this sudden surge of untamed lust.

But knowing better than to fall upon her like a ravening beast, he bid his time, waiting until another task took her within arm's reach. Then his hand snaked out and caught her wrist, tumbling her onto his lap. She made a little sound, quickly swallowed, and tried to struggle up even as he banded her waist with his arm.

“Give me a proper birthday kiss,” he demanded in a low tone.

She glanced to the crowd several feet away on the shoreline and then at Boone and Gemma. No one appeared to

pay them any mind. “A quick one.”

Her head bent and he thrust his hand into the back of her hair, so that quick turned into slow and his tongue thrust deep to tangle with hers. She wiggled, torturing the growing stiffness of his cock and he placed his hand over the thin material covering her thigh, squeezing to still her. Instead of quelling her movement, she leaned into him and drew her mouth over to his ear. Her hot breath thrilled him. “I never knew you could be so bad, Hart Sawyer.”

“What’s this?” a new voice demanded.

They both looked up to see Sophie’s brother Cooper, hand-in-hand with Willow, wearing a ferocious frown. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re unfashionably late,” Sophie said, jumping to her feet. “Let me get you food and something to drink.”

She practically leaped over to Boone and Gemma and tapped the big man’s shoulder. “Here’s Cooper. I told you he’d be late, didn’t I? Weren’t you going to tell him about... about...”

Boone stared at her, then clambered to his feet. “Coop,” he said, nodding at the other man.

Sophie had already thrown herself into filling plates for the newcomers. Willow looked less than surprised by interrupting the kiss, but there was no missing the dark expression on Cooper’s face and the way his attention was riveted on Hart. But the tense moment was interrupted when Eli and Harper came running up from the waves declaring that now the sun had gone down it was time for cupcakes.

They lit a bonfire in the cement ring made to contain it and the group regathered on the blankets. Sweatshirts were

donned, women tucked glow-in-the-dark flowered headbands in their hair, and Sloane declared it “Beach Boys time” as the sounds of the ever-popular California surf band floated in the air. Sophie passed off a platter of cupcakes to Mad and Harper jammed a candle in one and lit the wick. The small flame struggled against the evening breeze but didn’t go out as the “Happy Birthday” song was belted out over the strains of “All Summer Long.”

Hart made a silent wish that Sophie’s glowering brother would take a long walk off a short pier before blowing out the candle and sinking his teeth into double chocolate cake and icing. He’d barely swallowed the last bite when he felt a hand close around the back of his shirt, pulling him from his chair and then hauling him into deeper shadows.

“You’ve got a lot to explain,” Cooper said, coming around to face Hart.

“I—”

“Yes,” Shane said, arriving to stand beside the other two, “particularly about how you can even think of skipping town and leaving such warm and jolly friends.”

“I…”

“You’ve got to do better than that,” Cooper said.

Before he could, a bundle of energy emerged from the direction of the bonfire and latched onto her brother’s arm. “What are you doing?” Sophie asked in seething tones.

He stared down at his sister, her delicate features alit by a crown of glimmering colors. “What any—”

“Idiot would do,” she finished for him. “Do I insert myself in your business? Do I judge you or give you the impression you don’t know your own mind?”

“Well, no, but—”

“You come back to the fire and leave my life to me,” she said, dragging Cooper in the direction of his fiancée. The sarong had slipped from her waist to low on her hips as she stomped away, the material revealing those perfect dimples at the small of her back. Lust roared again.

Shane turned to Hart. “You were saying something? ‘I...’” he prompted.

I have to have her. No doubt about it. Not even if in the short while they’d be together it burned him to a crisp and left him mere ash.

Exhausted from a long day, Sophie pulled into the lane that led to her little cottage and blinked, wondering if she was seeing things. Hart’s fancy sedan sat parked near her front porch. After his birthday beach party the night before, Eli and Boone had spirited him away for some further celebrating and she and Hart hadn’t made plans for tonight.

Climbing the steps to her door, she felt a familiar warmth overtake her skin, a familiar breathlessness overtake her lungs. But she was an old pro at disguising her true feelings for him, so she flung open the unlocked door and stepped inside without a sign of trepidation.

The fabulous scents of garlic and onion assailed her. She blinked, staring at Hart’s back as he stirred something on her stove. He glanced over his shoulder. “You’re not the only one who can surprise people.”

“How did you get in?”

“I have a key, remember? You told me to hold onto it after that time I attempted to keep your plants alive.”

“I was going to give you another chance, but I’ve yet to replace the dead ones.”

He chuckled, then turned back to the stove. “I’m betting you’re hungry.”

She slowly traveled the space between them to peer over his shoulder. “No one’s ever cooked for me before.”

“No?” This time when he looked at her his expression softened. “Why don’t you go change and I’ll have it ready shortly. I heard via the grapevine that you were shopping at a couple of farmers markets today.”

Feeling almost as if she’d entered an alternate universe—Hart cooking for her!—Sophie made her way to her room. With dismay, she looked at the messy bedcovers and the clothes thrown over a chair. Had meticulous Hart taken a look at this space? Her kitchen was scrupulously clean, as always, but now, thinking about it, she recalled her living room had several cookbooks lying open on the coffee table, a discarded teacup on an end table, the jacket she had meant to take with her hanging over one arm of the love seat.

Then she shrugged, and gathered new jeans, undergarments, and a T-shirt to take across the hall to the shower. Though she’d be quick, she needed a moment to gather herself.

Once refreshed, she returned to the kitchen. Hart met her with a glass of chilled wine and showed her to the small café table set with a pair of salads—greens, shaved pieces of Parmesan, some croutons that looked handmade.

She stared at them.

“I found them in your freezer,” he confessed. “But the rest I managed myself. We’re having chicken breasts in wine sauce and wild rice following the salads.”

Her head came up. “For me?” she asked, as he pulled out her chair.

“Of course for you.” He touched her shoulder to press her down into her seat.

Wondering, she picked up her fork as he settled himself across from her. “Should I ask why?”

“Because you work hard. Because I have one dish I know how to make from memory. Because...” He shook his head. “Tell me about your day.”

It was so domestic. So like an evening she might have made up in her mind if she ever dared to dream this big when it came to Hart. “I did go to some farmers markets, not to shop, really, but to make contact with possible suppliers if I’m going to get my ghost kitchen restaurant off the ground.”

“What are your obstacles?” he asked.

“Do you really want to know?”

“Of course I do. Didn’t I ask?”

Sophie hesitated, bowled over by his sincere interest. This is what it could be like, she thought. A man to listen to her, to feel like he was all in with her. Then nothing would seem impossible, would it? She cleared her throat. “It comes down to one thing.”

“Which is?”

“Taking the risk.” She took a breath. “I’d have to quit Henry’s, cut back on the catering too. The cooking classes would have to go as well.”

“The restaurant would be your sole focus.”

She sighed. “Pretty much.”

“Risk is hard,” he said. Then he took their empty salad plates to the sink and returned with plates bearing the fragrant chicken and rice. Asparagus spears sat on the side.

“Wow,” she said, cutting off a small bite. “You’re impressing me.”

“I’ll accept the compliment and give you one of my own. I’m impressed that you’re pursuing your dream.”

“It’s a long way from mud pies,” she said lightly. “You’ll remember those.”

He smiled. “I do, but I’m serious about the compliment, Soph. You amaze me.”

The warmth in his gaze flustered her. “Thank you.” She hesitated. “I’m taking a page from Cooper’s playbook. He never hesitates to go after what he wants.”

“True.”

She peeked up at Hart, swallowed. “I talked to him. He’s agreed—”

“I spoke with him as well.”

“Uh-oh.” Sophie made a face. “Are you out as best man?”

“No. Too much history for that.”

“History is what I used. I told him if he made any remarks about...well, uh, us, that I’d tell Mom the truth about who broke her grandmother’s cranberry glass candy dish.”

“Saved by the candy dish,” he said, and took a bite of his food.

A few moments of silence passed as they ate. “Are we going to do this, Hart?” she finally asked, the question bursting out of her. Flustered, she looked down at her plate. “I mean, I don’t know if you still want—”

“I still want, Sophie.”

Her belly fluttered and the interior of the cottage warmed by ten degrees. “Yes, well...then maybe we should talk about your dreams too. I didn’t know you were thinking of leaving Sawyer Beach.”

“Nothing’s been decided about that,” he said quickly.

“Talk about big risks, though.”

“Yeah.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin. “I’m not blind to the fact that in the past much has come without me having to try too hard.”

“Sure, it’s your family’s company,” Sophie replied, “but you’re the one who’s been running it alone for a while now.”

“Right. And I’m happy with our success. But...”

“But?”

Hart shrugged. “Maybe I need to leave town to take a true gamble...and through that get my life back.”

She nodded her head as if wisely considering it. Bowing to impulse and diving under the table to grab hold of his ankles to anchor him here would appear seriously unhinged. “Could be.”

“Does the possibility of me leaving mean you’re unwilling ___”

“No.” God help her. But she’d committed herself to living in the present and she found the possibility of being with him,

no matter the limitations, the caveats, or the asterisks irresistible. “I’m not unwilling.”

“Okay.” He studied her face, then smiled. “That’s good.”

His steady gaze made her want to squirm. She had to distract them both before she found herself making untoward confessions about love and begged him to stay in Sawyer Beach forever. “God, look at us being all grown-up and stuff. It’s sort of making me sick.”

His lips twitched. “Sick, how?”

“Well, shouldn’t we be shoving the dishes off the table and then get down to doing it?”

Hart sat back in his chair. “Or maybe we should finish eating, *do* the dishes, and then get down to doing it somewhere more comfortable.”

“I think you’re getting old,” she declared. “That sounds so...so...”

“Sensible?”

“I was going to say buttoned-up, dull even, but you be you.”

A glint entered his eyes. “You’re goading me.”

“Maybe.”

“Because, as I’ve pointed out again and again, you’re nervous when we’re alone.”

She pushed her plate away, her jumpy stomach unable to take in another bite. “Go ahead and think that, if it makes you feel like you know me.”

Hart abruptly stood. Sophie’s heart lurched and she tilted her head back. “What?”

He came around to pull her up by her arm. “I know you well enough to decide you should sit over here on your love seat with a cup of tea and relax a while.”

“Relax?” She found herself being practically dragged to the living area.

“Sit,” he ordered. “Watch TV. That food channel you enjoy, or whatever.”

“I’m starting to like the show that chronicles dangerous women who take revenge on the controlling men in their lives.”

He placed the remote in her hand. “Get ideas for my downfall while I clean up the kitchen and make that tea.”

With the pleasant sound of running water in the background, Sophie channel surfed. When she hit upon a British period drama, her body relaxed into the cushions and she closed her eyes. Just a little cat nap. It had been such a long day and so much emotional upheaval at the end of it. Hart’s admission that he was seriously thinking of leaving Sawyer Beach...

Sophie came to drowsy wakefulness when her body hit the comfortable mattress of her bed. “Uh...” Blinking, she tried comprehending what was happening.

Socks off. Her jeans sliding down her legs. T-shirt worked over her head.

The night shirt that had been thrown across the bed replacing it.

“I don’t sleep in my bra,” she said to Hart the Undresser, her voice husky.

“There’s only so much sainthood a man can aspire to. You can either sleep in it this once or wait until I leave to take it off.”

“You’re going?” He was, though, wasn’t he? Leaving Sawyer Beach and leaving her behind. She squeezed shut her eyes.

“I don’t particularly want to, baby,” he said, pulling up the covers to her chin. “But face it, you don’t have it in you for any dish-shattering coitus tonight.”

She managed a chuckle. “Funny. But you didn’t want to break them anyway.” Reaching out blindly, she caught his hand and pulled, gratified when he sat down on the mattress beside her hip. “Sorry.”

His hand stroked her hair. “About?”

“Tired. Hit my limit. You’re right.”

“I like the sound of those last two words.”

She flapped a hand, slapping at his arm. “Means even you can’t stir my sex drive tonight.”

“There’ll be other nights, pretty Sophie.” He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Her eyes stung, tears forming behind the lids. “You’ll think I’m too much trouble.”

“Never,” he said. “You’ve always been worth it. You’ll always be worth it. If you ever doubt that, then you give me a call wherever I am and I’ll set you straight.”

“That sounds like a goodbye,” she said, and hoped she didn’t sound as mournful as she felt.

“Sophie...” He sighed. “Scoot over.”

Obedying, she heard the thump of shoes hitting the floor. Then Hart was lying on top of the bed and he gathered her into his arms. Her head snuggled into his shoulder.

They sighed together.

“We could make out like teenagers,” she offered, barely suppressing the *like I always dreamed of*. “Give you a few minutes of sugar before you go home.”

“This is sweet enough,” he said, tucking her closer against him.

Tears pricked her eyes again. *Too sweet to last.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HART STRODE THE EARLY MORNING STREETS OF SAWYER Beach and acknowledged he'd never been this horny.

The uncomfortable state was all because he'd made the stupid decision to climb into bed and cuddle as Sophie fell asleep.

For a man used to wearing light cotton pajamas to bed and who'd always maintained a comfortable mattress-distance from lovers during the snoozing hours, when he came to a little past midnight it was to find a nerve in his neck pinched, one of his hands asleep, and near-bruises on his skin from his leather belt and the buttons of his button-down. Somehow Sophie had found a way to dig her hand beneath the cotton, straining the stitches and making the slim-fit almost strangling.

Extricating himself from her hold in order to head to his own bed had been dicey, because he'd not wanted to awaken her.

She did deserve her sleep.

Now all he wanted was to fuck. There didn't seem to be a civilized cell left in his body.

Pondering the why of that made him only more frustrated as his strides ate up the sidewalk. Without a destination in

mind, he could only blame himself again when he walked past Cooper's pub, Fun & Games, just as its owner stepped out the door.

They reeled back to avoid a collision, then scowled at each other.

“Watch where you're going,” Cooper barked out.

Hart swallowed a sigh. He'd hoped they were over this. Sophie had been right, though, the two of them going from platonic to, well, a more *physical* friendship had agitated their friends. He'd fielded calls from more than one, not including his near-hostile chat with her brother the day before. But he'd stayed the course, willing to face their concerns in order to have Sophie at his side.

Temporarily.

Though he didn't want things to turn sour between them when it ended—as it naturally would, because she'd find the man who could give her all that he didn't have to offer anymore—his intention to leave Sawyer Beach meant he wouldn't have to face the collective ire of their friends.

That same exit plan would spare him the discomfort of watching sweet Sophie hurtling into her happy-ever-after.

Cooper now made to move past Hart, his shoulder roughly brushing against him. Realizing he'd never seen his good-natured friend in a temper like this, he caught the other man's arm and turned him back. “Hey,” he said, his tone mild. “Want to talk about it?”

“We already talked. I agreed to stay out of whatever you have going on with my sister.” He didn't look happy about that still, but something else was troubling the other man.

“Pub trouble?” he asked, nodding at the façade of Fun & Games.

“It’s going fucking gangbusters,” Coop muttered. “I’m a genius.”

Hart laughed. “Glad to see that makes you so thrilled with the world.”

Cooper threw out a hand. “Willow’s pissed at me.”

“Is that all?” Hart relaxed a little. “She’s not the first.”

“I didn’t get in her face about who she’s seeing,” he said. “Though I might have made a teeny comment about the wedding favors.”

“Teeny comment?”

Cooper hung his head and muttered. “Something about thinking half of them will be left behind.”

“What?”

“I told her I thought people wouldn’t take the wedding favors home, so why bother?” He hauled in a breath. “And then she wanted to know why bother with any of it, maybe we should get married at city hall and I can wear my most ragged board shorts and she’ll wear the clothes she uses to paint in. After that, she burst into tears and drove herself home. That was last night.”

“What are the wedding favors?”

“Caramel apples. Sophie’s going to make them.”

Hart shook his head. “Coop, nobody’s going to walk away from caramel apples. Especially the ones your sister makes.”

“Yeah, well.” Cooper rubbed at his chin.

“Sounds like maybe you’re both under a little stress.”

His friend blew out a long breath. “Did you and Kim have any fights leading up to the wedding?”

The wedding that wasn't. Hart didn't resent Cooper for the reminder. Too many people skipped that part of his life, as if not mentioning Kim could ease his pain. He thought back and a rueful smile tugged at his lips. “I might have made a teeny comment about the seating arrangement for the reception,” he admitted, echoing the other man's phrasing.

Coop blinked. “You had an opinion about *that*?”

“You had an opinion about caramel apples.” Except Cooper was right. Why the hell had Hart cared about such a thing? A holdover from his upbringing, maybe, when the small town's social hierarchy had been impressed upon him along with table manners and business etiquette.

The man he was now wouldn't give a fuck about who sat where.

The man he was now was...different.

As he pondered that, Cooper gave a brisk clap of his hands. “All right. I'm going to solve this. Time to get some flowers and prepare to grovel. I'll catch her before she gets out of bed and not let her get out of bed without making sure she knows how much I love her—and the idea of caramel apples.”

Cooper punched him in the shoulder before sauntering down the sidewalk. “Good talking to you, pal.”

Rubbing his arm, Hart smiled after his old friend, then recalled his old friend's purpose. A romp in bed with his wife-to-be. His body strung tight with renewed tension.

If someone was going to get to fuck, why couldn't it be him? he thought resentfully, and continued marching down the sidewalk.

It wasn't like he could make an impromptu visit to Sophie because...well, they weren't there yet. Sure, they'd come to a verbal agreement about seeing each other, but that didn't open the gates for spur-of-the-moment booty calls.

A nice dinner, a concert date, even a ride up the coast first. Merely showing up for sex was not only impolite, it bordered on disrespectful. Yeah, he was a different man these days, but he wasn't a *caveman*.

From across the street, someone hailed his name.

He looked over, and his spirits sunk straight to his toes. Damn it. Julie Booth.

Failed sexual encounter Julie Booth.

But a man couldn't fault her for the way his own grief got in the way, so he gave her a casual wave but kept walking. She kept walking too, crossing the street to come face-to-face with him on the sidewalk.

At least she was smiling.

Another woman might have been insulted.

"How are you?" she asked warmly, wrapping her fingers around his forearm. "What's it been since I last saw you? Six months? I've been thinking about you."

Probably thinking of all the ways she wanted to wring his neck, Hart thought wryly. He'd invited her to dinner three times and they'd had perfectly pleasant evenings. They'd kissed, also perfectly pleasant. Not the least bit passionate.

On their fourth date, she'd invited him to her place and he'd known what accepting meant. Though still mired in the depths of his misery, he'd recognized that inertia was an

enemy to be vanquished. Perhaps a pretty woman, some bed play, an orgasm...

But when he'd been with her that night, sitting on her couch with soft jazz filtering through speakers, all he could think about was how she wasn't Kim. How she didn't smell like Kim, how her skin didn't feel like Kim's, how the texture of her hair was so un-Kim-like. It was a hell of a thing to watch the realization spread over Julie's face...that he wasn't aroused and wasn't about to be.

He'd tried to handle it with good grace. Making excuses about an early morning and a punishing workout in the gym. Assuring her he found her attractive. Likely he'd bungled it, because he'd been mortified and also relieved.

Sex with anyone who wasn't Kim hadn't appealed in the slightest, and at that moment he couldn't overlook the fact.

But it had been a harrowing truth to accept.

Because the logical endpoint of it all was that he wasn't going to be having sex ever again.

Until Sophie got shut in a stuffy shed with him.

Julie Booth was chattering at him now and he tried to catch up with the conversation. It was nice to see him. Her mother had been visiting from San Francisco for a few days. She was on her way to meet her sister and her sister's kids at the park. Did Hart want to walk that way with her?

God knows why he agreed. Those manners that had been drilled into him as a kid, though his mother had never covered how to behave around a woman who did her best yet still failed to get his cock to resemble anything but a weak noodle.

A burn of humiliation rode the back of his neck and he could only imagine the tales Julie might have told around town

regarding their encounter. But she hadn't said a word, because surely the rumor mill would have chewed on it and spit out many a lively story to reach his ears.

But none had.

"Thank you," he suddenly said to Julie.

She blinked her warm brown eyes that were surrounded by lush lashes. She really was very pretty.

The unreleased sexual tension in his body tightened more.

Julie seemed to pick up on his mood. Her brows came together, then one arched up. "Instead of the park...we could go for brunch? Share a pitcher of mimosas?"

Then take me to bed, was left unspoken. *You could redeem yourself.*

Hart thought of Sophie. They'd made no promises to each other. As a matter of fact, she knew he was deep in plans to leave Sawyer Beach, so she had to know commitment was off the table. What was between them wasn't serious and she wouldn't think so either.

Still, he hesitated.

After a moment, Julie smiled again and tucked her hand into his elbow to pull him along in the direction of the park. "I hear you're seeing Sophie Daggett."

His feet stumbled. "That's out there?"

She patted his chest with her free hand. "I think you're a perfect match," she said in a blithe tone. "Everybody loves Sophie and she deserves the best."

Those words echoed in Hart's ears as he continued on, escorting Julie to the community park situated on bluffs over

the ocean. *Everybody loves Sophie and she deserves the best.*

There was no arguing with that, only with the implication that he, Hart Sawyer, was the “best” that she deserved. He was temporary in her life, a fling, an affair between friends, something they both found fun and agreeable and—

She was the only woman he’d had since losing his fiancée. She was the only woman he could imagine being with since losing his fiancée.

He stole a glance at Julie and knew that a brunch with her and a dozen pitcherfuls of mimosas wouldn’t change what his body knew. For him, right now, it was Sophie. Maybe because he knew her so well, the sex worked between them.

But was it fair for her?

Everybody loves Sophie and she deserves the best.

With that question at the forefront of his mind, was it any wonder that she was the first person he spied in the park? It consisted of large flat fields of grass for soccer practices and exuberant cartwheels, with a play area of sand, swings, and slides at the rear of the space. There, he could see her, back turned to him, pushing a child in a toddler swing. Sand toys lay scattered nearby and a tote bag sat on a bench, sure to be filled with juice and healthy snacks.

As he watched, a man approached the woman and child from the north, and he shouted something, smiling and waving.

Sophie turned to wave too.

It wasn’t Sophie.

But her doppelganger had the life that was going to be Sophie’s. Her future, with a handsome husband and a child or

two. A whole man who would look at her as he imagined the stranger was looking at the woman in the park.

She deserved the best, not a broken man barely patched together with the glue of sympathy and long friendships. She deserved to be some man's one and only love, not the casual bedmate of a guy who'd already found his one and only love and lost her.

He blew out a long breath and felt a familiar bleakness drop over him. A shroud.

Sophie smiled at Hart as they perused the stalls of the Sawyer Beach farmers market. "Brilliant of me to bring you along. You make an excellent bearer of bags." The handles of four canvas totes were clutched in his hands.

He grunted.

She gave him a sharper look, uncertain of his mood. When she'd suggested the outing, he'd agreed with alacrity and she'd assumed it was her promise of an early dinner afterward that cinched the deal. "I thought I'd pick up some fresh fettucine from the pasta guy and make an easy pesto sauce to go with it. I'll buy some artisan bread too."

His next grunt gave her pause and she couldn't help but notice his grim expression. "Did you get some bad news?"

He shook his head, then hauled in a breath. "We need to talk, Sophie."

Their footsteps had taken them into the booth that specialized in fresh herbs and dried seeds. Hiding her alarm, she selected some basil, sage, pine nuts, and a bag of roasted

pumpkin seeds then handed over cash to Kathy, a long-time acquaintance. The older woman doled out her change and a sly smile, her gaze shifting from Sophie to her silent companion. “I’ve heard about you two.”

Beside Sophie, Hart stiffened, and she gave the woman a quick wave and hustled out of the stall. “A talk about what?” she asked, because his obvious tension was impossible to ignore.

“What if I decide this is a wrong move for us?”

Her feet halted, but her momentum almost had her falling flat on her face. Hart caught her elbow, steadying her, only to immediately take his hand away.

“I’m sorry I’m always so busy,” she began.

“This isn’t about you being available for me,” he said. He looked off, his jaw tight. “It’s...it’s about me not being available to you.”

Meaning? She frowned at him.

He turned his head, meeting her gaze. “You know what I’m saying? You know if I leave...when I leave...”

“What’s this about?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Don’t you see? What if we’re better off as friends...that what we’ve been doing is just a postponement of your inevitable?”

Better off as friends? Postponement of her inevitable? She blinked. “Uh...what?”

“There’ll be someone else for you. Your future lies ahead, and...and...”

Did he mean to confuse her? “Hart, I could get the kind of wisdom you’re dispensing from one of those fortune balls we played with during slumber parties.”

He blew out a breath. “Let me try again.”

Her attention was diverted by movement in the next stall over. “Wait, Henri looks like he’s ready to close up shop and I want to buy a couple of quarts of his hot fudge sauce.” Without checking if Hart followed, she rushed over to the candy maker’s tables and made her purchases, even as she mulled over Hart’s words.

Better off as friends.

It’s about me being not available to you.

When I leave...

The words coalesced into a burning column of truth. He was reneging on their deal! His conscience or something else was prodding him to cut off what had just begun. Instead of being disappointed, though, now she found herself feeling a distinct irritation. She was going to get whiplash from all this jerking around and she didn’t like it.

At all.

When she emerged, Hart was standing a few feet away, beside another man who slouched in jeans, hoodie with the sleeves cut out, and motorcycle boots. Her eyes widened in recognition. Tyson Crooks, in all his bad boy, tattooed glory. She wasn’t sure the two men had ever actually met, though Tyson had accompanied her to some social events in the past.

She plastered on a breezy smile and surged forward. “Hey, Ty!”

He swung toward her, his grin a counterpoint to a smoldering gaze. Her pulse fluttered, because he did have that dark and dangerous thing down pat. She glanced over, noting the contrast with Hart, who stood ramrod straight and was giving her an unfathomable, narrow-eyed look.

“Do you two know each other?” she asked. “You remember my friend, Hart Sawyer, Ty? Hart, this is Tyson Brooks.”

Ignoring the introduction, Tyson moved in to steal a kiss. She turned her head just in time so that he caught the corner of her mouth instead of full on the lips. “It’s always good to see you, Soph.”

“You’re back in town?” she asked. Their short-lived romance had died an amicable death a few weeks before he’d moved to help his brother-in-law in some sort of business in Arizona. Window installation?

“Hot as hell in Phoenix right now. I came back for a beach break.”

“Good for you. Well...” She smiled at him again. “We—”

“Let’s go out,” Ty said. “Meet for some beers. You could ride that cute bike of yours to that place downtown we liked. Are you free tonight?”

“Oh.” She glanced at Hart, his expression still unreadable. Just minutes ago, he’d been dancing around a big brush-off, she recalled, and felt annoyed with him all over again. There was a for-your-own-good vibe about it, and it nudged her temper higher.

“I don’t see why n—”

“She’s got a date tonight,” Hart said over her, and slung his arm around her shoulders to tuck her close to his body. He felt

warm, over-warm, and his muscles had gone granite-hard. “As a matter of fact, she’s got a date every night.”

Ty lifted both hands. “Sorry, didn’t know, just offering up some good times.”

Sophie shot Hart a quelling look but something told her not to move out of his hold. “I’ll call if I find myself free,” she promised Ty, then was being propelled out of the farmers market.

Fuming, she practically had to run to keep up with Hart’s longer strides. “Good times,” she heard him mutter, like a curse.

The atmosphere in his car was suffocating as he drove her home. She’d walked from the cottage and almost considered telling him she’d make her own way back, thank you very much, but the produce and the heavy jars of chocolate convinced her otherwise. She didn’t even object when he carried the groceries into her kitchen.

Though the room seemed too small when he silently loomed over her as she put her purchases away. Let him stew as long he likes, she thought, getting out smaller glass jars in which she’d transfer the hot fudge. It was a staple she put in catered picnic baskets for dipping almond biscotti.

She used a narrow spatula to dig out the gooey contents as Hart’s continued silence seemed to hammer at her eardrums. Then, unwilling to take it anymore, she whirled to face him. “No one’s making you stick around,” she said.

“You’re not going out with that tattooed ego ever again,” he growled.

Incredulous, she laughed. “How are you going to ensure that? Are you planning to take away my car keys and my

phone? Confiscate my beach cruiser?”

He opened his mouth, closed it, his glower causing her temper to burn brighter. She slammed her free hand on her hip. “What’s so bad about Tyson? When it comes to that, what’s so bad about the other men I’ve dated the past couple of years? You’ve passed judgement on all of them.”

His gaze shifted away. “You can’t blame me for trying to protect you.”

“I have two older brothers and a father,” she said. “You know that. And then there’s my own mind, my own choices. If you respected me—”

“I do. It’s not that.”

“Then why have you gone out of your way to announce your disapproval? Everybody saw it, Hart, and it’s not cool.”

“It’s because...” He seemed to be searching his mind. “I just thought...”

“What?” she demanded. “Why did you—”

“It’s jealousy,” he suddenly roared. “I’ve been jealous of those men.” His shocked expression made clear the truth was as surprising to him as it was to her. “Shit,” he said, rubbing his face with both hands. “Shit, Sophie.”

“Well.” Her temper dissolved and everything inside of her quieted. “That’s very dog in the manger of you, I suppose. Should I find it flattering?”

He let his hands fall and when he looked at her now, there was fire in his eyes, as if all her ire had transferred to him. “Do you still want to fuck me, Sophie?”

At the crude words, she didn’t flinch. “Yep.” God help her. She straightened her spine and crossed her arms over her

chest. “Unlike you, no backsies for me.”

“Why?”

Why the hell not? “Because of that chemistry between us. Because sex feels good and why shouldn’t I indulge in feeling good?”

“Yes. But...”

She knew exactly the point he wanted to make. There was no future for them. “And because I’m embracing the moment, Hart. That’s all. The moment.”

He stared at her, his chest moving up and down with labored breaths. “Fine, then,” he finally muttered.

Sophie’s heart started to pound as he advanced one step, halted. “Take off your clothes,” he ordered.

She licked her lips. “Why?”

“Because *I’m* embracing my inner caveman,” he said in that dark voice she’d heard him use before, the one that made her shiver. His hand plucked the spatula out of the jar on the counter. “And I love those tight white jeans. I don’t want to get chocolate on them.”

The sun was lowering in the sky, filling the kitchen with the last of its golden light. Sophie cast another look at Hart, taking in the implacable expression on his face, the hard set of his shoulders, the subtle—and astonishing—sense of threat he exuded.

I’m embracing my inner caveman.

Her fingers rose to the buttons of her lightweight, sleeveless blouse. Hart would never hurt her, she scoffed, not in a physical way.

But her body trembled anyway, excited by these edges of his she'd never before detected.

"Keep going," he said, his gaze on her stalled fingers. "I didn't tell you to stop."

She stripped off the shirt, kicked off her sandals, shucked her jeans. Standing in panties and bra, she lifted her chin. "Now you."

He didn't stop until he wasn't wearing a stitch, a lean, muscled example of masculinity. Without clothing to soften him, he was naked lust, no disguise, no civilized camouflage to conceal the greed in his gaze and the eagerness displayed by his stiff rod. He palmed it, unselfconscious. "Remove the rest."

Her heart thumped as her hands fumbled with the closure of her bra. When that fell to the floor, he pointed to her panties. "Off."

The thin fabric slipped noiselessly to the tile, cold beneath her feet, his gaze hot as it flicked over her nudity. "Come here."

As if pulled by an unseen chain, she came to a stand in front of him. His free hand took her face in a gentle, but vice-like grip, forcing her gaze to his. "I'm in no mood to treat you tenderly."

She tried tossing her head, but he held her too firmly. "Stop thinking you must protect me."

"But you're so precious to me," he whispered, even as his hand kept her in that ruthless grip.

Her pulse raced. *This* is what she needed, steel and velvet. She ran her fingers down his chest until she curled them

around his erection, sliding to the root and then back up to the tip. Her thumb circled there, feeling wetness gathering.

He sucked in a breath through his teeth, then caught her hand, pulling it away. He stepped back. “You’re not to move, not unless I order it.”

Her mouth dried at the dictatorial tone and she went soft and wet between her legs. Her thoughts spun, trying to work up some outrage at his arrogance, but the truth was, she liked the idea of following his lead.

Hart smiled, thin and knowing, and she wondered if he’d read her thoughts. Embarrassment made her flush, and then she forgot all about it as he lifted that spatula, sticky with chocolate. Her eyes widened. “What are you going to do—” she began, but he showed her, painting each nipple with the gooey substance.

Her belly hollowed as she drew in a sharp breath and a little laugh choked out of her. Then he was closer, his head bending so that his mouth could lick and suck and eat away at her, her breasts swelling and the crests tightening into stinging points. He gave each a careful nip, and she bowed, her hands grabbing at his head, her fingers holding him there as he groaned and played, teased, licked and bit some more.

It was too much; it wasn’t nearly enough. She urged his lips to hers and he gave into the pressure, and then he took control of the kiss, his tongue surging inside, licking into her mouth until she was clutching at his shoulders, her blood on fire and the place between her legs aching.

He palmed her bottom with one hand, and her legs turned rubbery. Her knees dropped to the tile and then she looked up at him, gauging his expression as she seized the chocolate-covered utensil from his hand.

His face was humorless. “Do it,” he said in that dark voice. “Then clean me off with your tongue. If you miss a spot...” The hint of menace in his voice had her shuddering. It was a game, but she loved it all the same.

Hand shaking, she slowly spread the chocolate on his penis, the heat of his flesh causing the sauce to turn glossy. It should have been fun, or perhaps even funny, but when she let the spatula clatter to the floor, she only thought about how hungry she was, how much she wanted to please him.

He sifted his fingers in her hair and she opened her mouth over him, then allowed him to control her movements. She reveled in the erotic ease of it, no wondering about how fast or how slow, just opening herself while listening to his voice.

Instruction. Praise. Demand.

Her pulse was pounding at her clit and the nails of her hands were digging into his thighs when he suddenly bent, and jerked her up by the elbows. “My turn.”

And God, he took a turn, lifting her onto the countertop, where there was just enough space for her to sit, her hands behind her, as he spread her legs. Then he dipped his fingers in the jar of chocolate and decorated her with the stuff, using one hand to hold her sex open so he could delicately spread sauce around her sensitive flesh.

Then he pulled a chair close, sitting so he could perform the next step, a meticulous search for every sweet drop, until her breasts were heaving and she was digging her nails into the unforgiving countertop. “Hart,” she said, her head dropping back. “Please.”

His head lifted. “Beg more.”

And she did, because dignity was nothing compared to pleasure and she'd already been at his feet tonight. His mouth centered on her, lashing her clit with masterful strokes of his tongue, then slowing as he ate at her soft flesh.

"Please, please," she said again, imagining him standing, then shoving away the chair so he could impale her, owning her more as he watched her come apart.

But he did nothing so tame. Instead, he lifted her off the counter and bent her over the bistro table, her aching breasts against its cold mesh metal surface. Then his hot chest came over her back and without thinking she widened her legs, allowing him to come between them and then into her on one hot slide of bliss.

They groaned together. And then again as he shuttled back and forth, taking her. His hands found hers on the table and he laced their fingers. She began rearing into each thrust, unable to stop herself from seeking the climax even as she wanted this burning pleasure to go on forever.

Then he took both wrists in one hand, holding them against the table as his free fingers slid around her hip to the place where they were joined together. "Opened by me," he murmured in her ear, one finger tracing the tender aperture stretched by his delving cock. "And still dripping."

He drew the moisture up to her clit, his touch an echo of his experienced tongue and she felt the orgasm gathering, concentric circles of sensation swirling inward, then a flash of brilliant physical joy that made her cry out and her body shudder. The circles swirled outward now, sensation carrying to the tips of her breasts, her toes, the ends of her hair.

His hips slammed into her buttocks with fierce strokes, once, twice, three times, and then he groaned as she felt him

spasm inside her. Sophie closed her eyes, wrecked, sticky, depleted.

Hart made an inarticulate sound—that caveman again—and she smiled.

It died when he pressed a tender kiss between her shoulder blades and her heart wanted to cry out the truth. *I love you. I love you.*

Pressing her fingernails into her palms and clamping her front teeth on her bottom lip, she used pain to hold back the words. Embracing the moment sounded great until the moment ended and you wanted another and another, endless others, more than anything in the world.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HART WATCHED SOPHIE BUSTLE ABOUT A COUPLE OF TABLES AT Henry's, organizing the assembly of the plastic bags she'd use to hold the caramel apple wedding favors. The actual making of those was a few days away, but this afternoon was the first step, and he, Harper, and Maddox had been conscribed as her assistants.

A sticker with the nuptials date and the name of the bride and groom was to be centered on each plastic bag. Eight-inch ribbon lengths—in the colors that Willow selected—were then to be affixed in the proper position on the back of the bag with a clear plastic decal.

“That way, after I make the apples, I can place them inside and have only to tie up the ribbons for the final presentation,” Sophie explained, eyeing the materials she'd laid out.

“I can help when it's time to do that,” Harper volunteered, then glanced at her husband and Hart. “I'm sure the guys will be happy to pitch in too.”

He traded glances with Mad. “She's bossy.”

The other man shrugged. “She makes me happy.” He paused, studying Hart. “And you're, uh, looking... comfortable.”

Glancing down, he realized he was wearing ancient jeans and another T-shirt that came from his bottom-of-the-drawer collection. It included a worn hem, a stain on one sleeve, and was as soft as the skin on Sophie's ass.

So far from the way he used to dress. Kim had fallen for that other Hart, spit-polished, and ironed to perfection. He'd been the polite college boyfriend, the one easy to bring home and beloved by her sorority sisters. She'd adored his little courtesies, flowers sent to her on special days, the gentle way he'd massage her back and shoulders as she studied. He'd cherished her studious nature and her low-key personality.

They should have stayed together following college graduation. Looking back, he realized that they'd only broken up afterward because it seemed the mature thing to do.

Now Sophie passed by and brushed her fingertips through his hair. Instantly, his body reacted to that casual touch, his cock stirring beneath the worn denim. Raring for more of her, he eyed the short blue skirt she wore with a matching, belly-skimming top. Her legs were bare and her flats wouldn't give her enough traction to escape him if he chose to chase her into the back room.

The café was mostly empty at this hour, and he actually considered it.

See, he didn't feel mature about Sophie. And he was pretty certain he could persuade her to play hide the sausage in the storeroom. She didn't suppress the fact that she liked what they did together, and made clear that she liked this new person he was—shabby wardrobe, indecorous sex and all.

That meant something to him, because she'd also known the former person he was—starched and somber. Somehow through her, they'd morphed into one, and now he was a man

who had a little hope in his heart, finally, after two years of darkness.

“How are you coming on your plans to leave town?” Mad asked.

“Still in talks, but things appear favorable,” he said. Nothing was set in stone, not quite yet, but it made great sense to take this opportunity. It freed him from worrying about watching the relationship he had with Sophie going from great to bad, because he himself would be going.

Also, it would free him from having to witness her moving on to another man, the one who would give her all the love she deserved, that forever he wanted for her.

Last night he'd examined her body in detail, kissing each bruise he'd left behind during the past week when they'd regularly romped in bed. He'd begun apologizing for the marks, but she'd brushed him off with a low laugh. The earthy, untamed nature of their encounters—so different from his previous, decorous lovemaking—suited the man he was now, the last two years having stripped him down to the essentials.

But Sophie didn't mind that either, and her sweetness and yielding softness were the perfect counterpoint to his new edges and rough surfaces. Her acceptance of him both incited and soothed the beast. God, he was grateful.

What did he do for her? Nothing? He'd broached the subject the night before and she'd smoothed his worry lines. You listen to all my talk about the restaurant, she'd said. You have good suggestions regarding financing.

At that, he'd made a sour face and she'd laughed, then rolled him over to his back. *The orgasms you deliver are fabulous.* Pretending to be still disgruntled, he'd refused to let

her take him into her body, until she dropped a dozen kisses on his face. Then, he turned the tables, flipping her over and going down on her until his face and fingers were bathed in her erotic, addictive scent. He swore their orgasms had made the walls of her cottage quake.

Yeah, he was grateful.

“Wow,” Mad said, grinning at him. “you’re going to burn the café down if you keep staring at Sophie like that.”

“I—” What was he supposed to do, deny? “I like to look at her in blue,” Hart mumbled.

Mad chuckled, then leaned closer. “Much better than those dead eyes of the last two years.”

Sophie suddenly jumped. “Oh!” Her gaze swung to him. “I forgot!”

Accustomed to her sudden moves and swift bursts of energy, Hart got to his feet. “What?” he said, sending her an indulgent smile. “I’ll get it. I’ll do it. I’ll find out. Whatever of those you require.”

She flashed him a bright look but headed around the coffee bar to retrieve her purse. “We’re low on soy milk. I need to get more.”

“Let me—”

“No, no. I’ll just run across the street to the market. Thanks for offering, though.” With one hand on the doorknob, she sent another cheerful glance over her shoulder. “You’re the best.”

Everybody loves Sophie and she deserves the best.

The echo of that earlier remark caused a chill to run down his spine. Without knowing exactly why, he started after her.

“Soph...”

But she'd already exited the café. Still, he trailed her, watching her out the plate glass window. As she stepped into the street, that damn flock of road bikers came out of nowhere, their speed making him gasp. But she rocked back in time, and he felt relief wash over him.

Then she moved forward again, the sun shining on her hair, and she didn't see what he did, a lone rider, clearly double-timing it to catch up with his mates. A warning caught in his throat, and fear wrapped around his heart, barbed wire cinching tight.

The collision occurred despite Hart's silent scream.

Body meeting bike was louder than you'd think. Behind him he heard Harper cry out and Mad curse and then Hart was shoving through the door, pushing past a crowd of people circled on the street so he could get to the crumpled body.

Sophie. Crumpled.

He said her name over and over as he dropped to his knees beside her. Mad rushed to her other side. “I called 911,” he told Hart. “Breathe, man. Help is on the way.”

“It was spectacular,” Leo, the sixteen-year-old box boy from the market said to Sophie, grinning like a loon. “Total ass over teakettle. Legs in the air, purse flying. Wish I'd had my phone out. You'd be a viral star.”

He laughed. “Ass over teakettle,” he repeated.

Seated on the sidewalk bench outside of Henry's, Sophie listened with half-closed eyes. “Your colorful commentary is

much appreciated,” she said dryly, then winced as the EMT daubed at the scrape on her cheekbone. “Merry, don’t let anyone say you have a deft touch.”

The other woman patted her shoulder. “It could have been so much worse.”

Behind her came a grunt, one she recognized. Hart. Once the pros had determined there was no injury to her neck or spine, he’d scooped her up and placed her on the bench. Now he hovered, casting a mood shadow that was as dark as a raincloud.

Merry glanced up at the man. “Why don’t you get her some water, Hart?”

“Leo, get Sophie some water.”

The teen hurried off, recognizing the voice of command and Merry made a little surprised noise before she started humming “I Will Always Love You” from *The Bodyguard* under her breath.

Sophie closed her eyes all the way and tried to ignore the throbbing in her face, hands, elbows, and knees. Apparently, at the last second the bicyclist had tried to avoid the collision so she hadn’t taken the full brunt of him and his two wheels of destruction. The inevitable clip had been enough to send her flying anyway. “Road rash sucks,” she said. “How’s the other guy?”

Merry sounded cheerful. “We loaded him into the truck. Maybe a broken wrist. He wants you to know he’s sorry.”

The mood cloud behind Sophie turned from dark to veritably stormy.

She tilted her head, trying to address the man without moving too much. “Maybe you could call Cooper, Hart? He

can give me a ride home.”

“Soph—”

“I rode my beach cruiser to Henry’s today and I’m not up for another close encounter with two wheels.”

As if conjured by his name, her brother rushed up. “I was in Fun & Games when I heard the news.” He dropped to the bench beside her and patted her hand.

She jerked it away, protective of the scraped heel and a couple of raw knuckles. “Where’s Mr. Wrinkles when you need a comfort pal?”

Her brother chuckled. “That goofy stuffed Shar Pei.”

“The one you and your criminal friends kidnapped, only to be found without his insides a day later.”

“It’s not our fault that Mr. Lee’s cat discovered where we’d hidden him,” Cooper said, defensive.

Hart’s hand smoothed over her hair. “I’m sorry you had such a boorish brother.”

“Oh, right,” Cooper said, glancing up with a frown. “Pretend you weren’t in on the payback from the get-go.”

“I didn’t think you cared about those plastic army men anymore,” Sophie said, to distract herself from her aches and pains and that looming presence behind her. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have sent them down the creek in my homemade raft.”

“Remind me not to hire you on as part of a construction crew,” Hart said, with another gentle touch of her hair.

Mention of their shared history didn’t work to cheer anyone. Hart hovered in a heavy near-silence and Cooper

frowned as he ran his gaze over her various wounds until Merry proclaimed her work done. “Go home, lie down, take some pain relievers, Sophie. You might feel a little shock-y, so stay warm and well-hydrated.”

“Thanks,” she said, and struggled to her feet, holding onto the back of the bench when she wobbled a little. “Coop, take me home, okay?”

Her brother glanced over at Hart. “Uh...”

“I’m giving her a ride,” the other man said.

“Uh...” His gaze on his friend, another moment of wordless conversation seemed to pass between them. “Hart’s got this.”

Tears pricked her eyes. But, as always, she didn’t want to look like a big baby around her brother and his friends. Around Hart. She squared her shoulders, and grabbed her purse, the one that Leo had collected from the street along with its contents. “Where’d you park?” she asked, in her best no-nonsense voice.

No matter what, she was going to hang onto her composure, even though she felt certain a “what” was in the offing. The man was practically gnashing his teeth.

They walked together to his sedan and she settled into the passenger seat with a sigh as he came around to the driver’s side.

Inside the small confines, she could barely breathe alongside the temper Hart was clearly battling. His hands gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles.

“I’m pressing charges,” he said through clenched teeth. “Those riders are menaces.”

“It was just the one,” she said, dropping her head against the seat back. “But as a member of the police department, Mad said he’s going to talk to the entire group.”

At her house, Hart rushed around to help her out of the car. She held her purse tightly to her midsection as she climbed the porch steps with his solicitous hand at her elbow. Her knees remained wobbly.

Sheesh. A little fall and she was a wreck.

But it wasn’t the fall that made her insides unsteady. Behind her closed front door, one look at Hart’s hard face made them tremble again. With efficient movements, he created a bed of sorts on her love seat with a pillow from her room and two quilts, producing a soft sandwich. She settled between the layers and he slipped off her shoes. Then he brought her tea and some pain relievers.

After that, he sat down on the coffee table, his elbows on his knees, his hands between his legs. He looked down, as if gathering his black thoughts.

Sophie’s mouth dried and she cleared her throat. “I should phone my mom. Surely she’ll hear it from someone else if I don’t, and she’ll be anxious to come over and take care—”

“I called her. I told her I’d be here for you.”

Closing her eyes, Sophie tried to imagine there was some warmth in his voice. But the truth was, he sounded bleak and wrung out. The earlier anger seeping away.

“I don’t have what it takes anymore for this,” he finally said.

She reminded herself he couldn’t be breaking up with her, because, good news, they weren’t *together* together anyway. “There is no ‘this,’” she said, staunchly. “We agreed.”

He slowly nodded. A long silence stretched between them.

Then his hands went to his head and he continued to sit, shoulders slumped.

“Call my mom back,” Sophie said. “Or get one of my friends over here. Harper. Willow. I’d be just fine, actually, alone—”

“I watched her,” he said, as if from a great distance. “I watched her fall to the ground. I was right there and I couldn’t rouse her. She was already gone.”

Her heart squeezed, and pain leaked out, infusing her blood, making her bike accident injuries nothing. Afraid to touch him, she clutched the blanket over her stomach. “I know.”

His hands dropped, his head lifted, and he frowned at her.

She smiled faintly. “You’ve told me many times, Hart.”

“What?”

“I think...four. Three times when you were drunk and then one time when I tripped over your big feet and woke you up where you were sleeping on the floor at the lake cabin.”

Hart blinked at her blearily, like he had then too.

“I think you were half-dreaming and you began narrating the nightmare you found yourself stuck in.”

“I said...”

“The two of you were rushing to see a baseball game in L.A. Kim’s home team was on a winning streak and she was an ardent fan.” Sophie tried to smile again, but it sort of fell off her face. “Tickets were impossible to come by, but you managed. You’re that kind of man, Hart.”

“One willing to pay scalpers outrageous prices?”

“You recognized and cared about what was important to her.”

He looked away. “Maybe if we’d been somewhere else. Done something else that night.”

“There wasn’t a way to prevent it,” she reminded him. “You know that.”

His fingers went to his temple. “It was ticking away in there. God. I loved her so much. I would have done anything —”

“Of course,” she assured him. “No one doubts that. And you know there was nothing you could have done.”

His hands curled into fists and her heart contracted along with them again.

“It did something to me.” He thumped one of those fists against his chest. “I’m different. Frosted over.”

“I know that too.” Her calm was eroding around the edges, but she kept it together through sheer force of will. As agonizing as it was to know he was backing away from her, watching him hurt like this was so bad too.

Love sucked.

She thought he might go home after that, but wasn’t surprised when he stuck around. As evening descended, he rummaged in her freezer and found chicken soup that he thawed and served to her on a tray with crackers. There was no matching meal for himself.

“You’re not eating?” she asked.

“No appetite.”

His face had already taken on that lean and haunted look of the past two years.

She nodded, letting the soup do its best to warm and relax her sore body. Every minute that passed she expected him to make his excuses and take off, but he only cleaned the dishes, watched some TV with her for a while, then trailed her into her bedroom when she claimed to be too tired to keep her eyes open.

He didn't help her into pajamas, but he drew back the covers on her bed. Then he excused himself and she could hear the shower in the bathroom running. She sighed as she slipped under the covers.

Of course, Hart Sawyer would never leave a damsel in distress. He might have made buddies with his inner caveman, but the heart of him was as noble as ever. Instead of joining her in bed naked, per his recent habit, he wore his boxers as he took the place beside her, putting a hefty space between them.

She cursed choosing the king mattress when her parents offered to set her up with bedroom furniture a few years back.

“Soph...”

“Yes?”

“I'll be sure to keep my distance, but let me know if I hurt you in any way, okay?”

Hah hah hah. But damn, she'd known going in that there was going to be pain. She tried willing herself to sleep, but the sandman was a stubborn ass. *Men.*

Her head rolled on the pillow and she looked at Hart in the dark, only managing to make out the outline of him, a darker, still shadow.

“I liked Kim,” she said. “I only met her a couple of times, but I really thought the two of you... Well, it should have had a different ending.”

“Yes.”

Her voice lowered to a whisper. “But that day...she was on her way to watch something she loved, with someone she loved beyond measure. I could tell.”

He groaned softly. “Ah, Soph. Sophie, sweetheart.” A minute ticked by and then he spoke again. “How much you deserve to be loved beyond measure. To be someone’s one and only.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ONLY RARELY DID THE 7-STUD CLUB CANCEL THEIR WEEKLY men-only poker game. But tradition had been bent in recent years as the once-entrenched bachelors found women to whom they owed allegiance as well. Still, Sophie was pleasantly surprised to find she didn't need to twist arms when preempting their usual evening of playing games of chance in order to strategize for the upcoming joint bachelor/bachelorette party taking place in two weekends at her parents' nearby lake cabin. The four-bedroom, three-bathroom house would serve as the event headquarters, but she'd arranged for more rooms at neighboring residences.

She ran into Shane and Delilah on the walkway leading to Eli's farmhouse-style home, the site of their planning session. Though it wasn't far from her cottage, and other summer nights she would have been delighted to ride her bike there, she continued to be slightly spooked about two-wheeled vehicles. The stroll had been pleasant.

"How are you this fine evening?" she asked the pair.

"More important, what about you?" Delilah asked, her gaze running over Sophie. "We heard about the bike running you down. Have you recovered?"

“Sure, sure,” she said, and quickly changed the subject, directing her attention to Shane. “I really appreciate you guys giving up your poker night. My schedule has only a few holes in it and this was one.”

“No problem,” he said, then smiled. “We were under direct threat. Accommodate you, or else.”

She frowned. “Cooper?”

“It was Hart,” Shane said. “He made clear you were to have help, and a lot of it, since you run yourself ragged as it is. With the maid-of-honor duties on top of that... Well, we got the message.”

Delilah looked at her with big eyes. “*Very* forceful. *Very* caring.”

Sophie cleared his throat. “He’s the best man. Getting all of you on board is for his benefit too.”

Delilah rolled her eyes, but let Sophie have the last word and they all entered Eli’s to see a crowd already assembled. Someone had spread out butcher paper on a table and Gemma held a marker, apparently having designated herself as secretary. “You’re here,” she said. “We’re just waiting for orders.”

Sophie ran her gaze around the room. The men of the 7-Stud Club were present and accounted for except for her brother—he and Willow had been forbidden to attend—and Hart. Letting out a slow breath, she relaxed a little. Pretending around the guys she’d known her whole life and their wives that something between her and Hart wasn’t amiss would have taken more energy than she had tonight.

“Looks like a good turnout,” she said lightly. “Thanks, everyone.”

“Don’t worry,” Sloane said blithely. “Hart’s on his way too. He’s picking up pizza.”

“Awesome.” Maybe she could have the whole weekend structured and the assignments doled out before he made it here with the obligatory boxes of pep and mush with extra cheese. That way, she’d avoid him and could rush back home, alone.

Lock him out.

Sleep alone all night, for the first time since the collision.

Before that, at the beginning of their not-a-relationship, they’d tangoed on the sheets but always separated to sleep in their own beds. Since then, since he’d said, *How much you deserve to be loved beyond measure. To be someone’s one and only*, he’d been at her side all night long.

But never in her body.

No kisses, no caresses, no caveman sex.

Putting all that firmly from her mind, she straightened her spine. “Okay, everybody, here goes.” She explained to the assembled group that the weekend theme was “summer camp” and that she had a list of events in mind.

“Panty raids?” Raf asked in a hopeful voice.

She sighed. “Since you’ll be sleeping in your own room with your own wife, I’ll leave the two of you to come up with your own games. I’m suggesting a bocce ball tournament one day and a ping-pong tournament the next.”

The attendees took off with the idea from there, enthusiastic as they considered activities inspired by their own camp days. Sack races, relay races involving raw eggs,

someone wanted to make crafts and Harper thought she could remember how to braid keychains with plastic lacing.

Sophie sat back and made her own list on her phone, as she'd given herself menu duty. Tater tot breakfast casserole. S'more makings.

The front door punched open and the scent of tomato sauce and garlic wafted inside. Hart was hailed.

Sophie sank back in her chair. She hadn't really expected to avoid him.

Raf summarized their ideas, cataloged their progress, and gave all kudos to Sophie.

Hart's dark eyes swung her way. She pretended not to notice as his gaze swept over her. She'd known his *I don't have what it takes anymore for this* signaled they were finished, but he still regarded her with an intimacy that made her want to squirm in her seat.

Instead, she addressed Raf. "I had other themes in mind. I think Willow will get a kick out of 'summer camp' but you're sure Cooper will like it?"

Hart answered instead. "Are you kidding? This is the man who owns a pub called Fun & Games. You're brilliant, Soph."

As he handed over the boxes of pizza to Eli, he continued addressing the room. "She's planning to open a killer restaurant, you know. I expect all of you to make it a great success."

A decree from the king of Sawyer Beach. She tried to dig up some resentment, but it was weak stuff when she realized his order underlined the fact that he wouldn't be here to witness it himself. He'd be...wherever he intended to go when he sold his business and started a new life.

A big slice of pizza didn't improve her lowering mood. She guzzled beer and then more, holing up in Eli's backyard with the other women. The men had gathered in the den, around a TV tuned to a baseball game.

"The wedding's almost here," Gemma said, plopping onto a cushioned bench beside Sophie. "I bet you'll be glad when things get back to normal."

Sophie stared at the other woman. Yes, things back to normal sounded good, but for the first time she realized that the wedding was it. *It*. Hart hadn't announced firm plans for his big move because he was waiting until after Cooper and Willow's wedding.

He'd fulfill his obligations as best man and then proceed with his future.

Panic fluttered in her belly. "I wonder...I wonder if I could turn party planning into a paying gig," she mused aloud. "Bachelor and bachelorette parties, joint like the one we're talking about or not. I could come up with themes, menus, and games to go with, do all the cooking myself, of course, and—"

"Sophie," Harper said, from her nearby chair. "What are you talking about?"

"I was told I'm brilliant," she answered, half-smiling. "I think other people could benefit, other maids of honors and best mans, who find themselves too busy for the design and organization of such occasions."

Shifting, she found Delilah in their small knot of women. "Hey, through your design and alterations business, would you hook me up with some wedding dressmakers and bridal salons? I could leave cards for my new venture and..." She broke off, finally noting the way the others were staring.

“What?” She patted her hair. “A hole? An entire other head?”

Gemma sighed. “I appreciate your entrepreneurial spirit, Sophie, I’m a small business owner myself, but have you considered you’re biting off more than you can chew?”

“I’ve not choked yet,” she said defensively.

Harper’s eyebrows rose. “But to add another gig to your already overfull plate?”

“I like to keep busy.” It was the line she’d used a thousand-and-one times. And when Hart was gone, keeping busy was going to keep her sane.

“Tell us about this restaurant you’re intending to open,” Sloane put in. “I knew it was a long-term dream of yours, but not that you were going to pursue it so soon.”

Sophie explained about ghost kitchens, about how it was really not that much different than her catering business, though learning to order properly for six- or seven-day a week availability without incurring waste would be a skill set she’d need to acquire. “I have some names from the culinary program at the community college who I could hire as kitchen staff.”

Talking about the project cheered her. “And Hart helped me figure out the financing,” she concluded. “I think I can really do it.”

Her friends exchanged looks. Sophie shifted to the edge of her seat, anxious to hear if they thought the same. Each of these women were savvy and a few of them worked for themselves.

Gemma smiled at her. “I have no doubt you can really do it,” she said, and the others chimed in with their own positive

reactions.

“But,” Harper put in, “how can you possibly think of adding another burden on your time, such as event planning, when your heart is in your restaurant?”

“You always need a backup,” Sophie said. “And backups of backups.”

“Sure, but the restaurant is what you want most. Shouldn’t you give it your all?”

Sophie agreed, in the logical part of her brain. But there was an emotional echo in her head that she couldn’t seem to drown out. “My grandmother once told me girls like me don’t get to have everything they want.”

“What?” Harper’s eyes widened. “Is this your mom’s mom, your nana Webb? When we were growing up you said you were close to her.”

“I loved her. She read books to me, baked cookies with me, took me for special outings. Then things changed.”

“Changed how?”

Sophie shrugged. “I’ve never discussed it with my mom, I think it’s painful for her, but looking back, Nana must have gotten dementia.”

Erin grimaced. “It’s very difficult, seeing a family member go through that.”

“I didn’t understand. But there was one Christmas...Nana asked me what I wanted and I coveted this mermaid bracelet I’d spied in a local shop. It wasn’t particularly expensive, as I recall, but I knew it would be even more precious to me if she was the one to gift it.”

“Then what happened?”

“Christmas Eve at her house, she beckoned me into her bedroom and brought out this wrapped present she said I could open early. Of course I expected the bracelet and I’m sure I looked very disappointed to find a set of handkerchiefs instead.”

“Poor Sophie.”

“Nana didn’t think so. When she saw my expression, she slapped my face and angrily told me I would never get my heart’s desire.”

Her friends gasped.

“I know. Dementia, right? My loving nana would never have said such a thing. But the message etched itself into my brain anyway.” She made a face. “It’s as if there are gremlins in my head. Now, if I want something too much I automatically assume it will forever stay out of reach.”

Hart slipped back into the den, the cold bottle of water sweating in his palm. He re-took his seat, a comfortable leather recliner that matched another occupied by Eli. Two of the guys were on the leather couch and Raf and Shane were stretched on the carpet, pillows bunched behind their heads as they all focused on the game.

Instead of allowing his mind to replay the little scene he’d just stumbled upon, he directed his attention to the TV. God, it wouldn’t work. He closed his eyes, then felt a soft touch on his forearm. He jerked, his gaze shooting to—

Paige. Paige Clark, Eli’s stepdaughter, soon-to-be real daughter when the adoption was finalized.

“Hey, you,” he said, smiling. Blonde and blue-eyed, she looked like her mom and had only blossomed more since the wedding that gave her an entire family, not just a dad, but four aunts too. Eli had once craved independence from his role as the head of the household, sure that he’d been wrung dry by all the years of caretaking his siblings after their parents died, but Sloane had moved across the street and he’d found an entire well of love and devotion previously untapped.

He claimed it only grew deeper and wider the longer he loved them.

“Hi, Hart,” Paige said now, her expression serious. A piece of paper and a pencil were held in one small hand.

“What’s that?” he asked, glancing down.

“I need you to write your name and address here,” she said, holding out the items.

“Sure,” he said, taking them. “What do you want them for?”

“My birthday is coming up. I want to invite you to my party.”

“Oh.” He glanced over at Eli and saw his friend was watching the interaction. “I’m honored.”

“Mommy said six friends. Daddy said I could have as many as I want.”

Hart’s gaze shifted to Eli again. Daddy. Sweet. He saw the other man smile in deep satisfaction. Handing back the paper and pencil, he told her he wouldn’t miss her party for the world. “Even if I’m away, I’ll make sure I return for it.”

With a little wave, Paige danced off.

The “daddy” watched her, still smiling, then looked to Hart. “You’re a lucky man,” he told Eli.

“I know.” But his friend didn’t look smug about, just happy. “Sounds like you’re not changing your mind. Still bent on leaving Sawyer Beach and all of us behind?”

“I’m not enthusiastic about losing the closeness of my friendships, you know that. I’m just trying to...to find some ease.” At that, his brain conjured up the image of Sophie getting struck by the bike. His chest ached, recalling the way his heart had been struck by pain as her body crumpled to the asphalt.

He’d been numb after Kim passed away and he’d despised it. Now, though, now he craved peace.

But then another scene played out in his mind. He’d gone to the kitchen for water and the back door was open. Several women were gathered on patio furniture and they all were focused on Sophie. Spitfire Sophie. High energy Sophie. Optimistic go-getter Sophie.

Or so he’d always thought.

Now, if I want something too much I automatically assume it will forever stay out of reach.

What a little actress she was, he thought, stoking his temper. Had he ever really known her?

For another minute he sat with the TV droning on about baseball as he tried forgetting more of what he’d heard.

She slapped my face and angrily told me I would never get my heart’s desire.

How the fuck could he be angry at her over that? But remembering those words made more prickling heat gather

under his collar. Standing abruptly, he left the den, deciding they needed to talk. *Why did you let me think you were always sunny and self-possessed?* he was going to demand. *Was I not worthy of being trusted with your doubts as well as your dreams?*

Pissed all over again, he strode out to the backyard. The assembled women glanced up and at their alarmed faces, he tried smoothing out his expression.

“Is something wrong, Hart?” Sloane asked.

He made a vague gesture. “Looking for Sophie. Uh...party business.”

“You missed her,” the lady of the house said. “She’s already gone home.”

“Okay.” Blowing out a breath, he tried calming himself. “I’m off too. Good night.”

His car didn’t take the road that led to his home, however. He found himself pulling in front of Sophie’s cottage, and he lingered outside, struggling against the urge to see her.

Since the bike accident, he’d slept with her, not touching her of course, but merely listening to her breathe in the dark to steady himself after the shock to his system that was watching that collision.

This morning, though, as he’d let himself out her front door he’d glanced back and caught the expression on her face. Resigned, maybe. Like she realized that the overnights were for him—and not so much a caring act for her—and she was reconciled to putting up with his pathetic needs.

More pity, after two years of it.

So he’d vowed never to cross her threshold again.

Yet here he was, he realized, watching his fist rise to rap on the door.

Sophie swung it open, blue eyes big. “Uh...” Her body moved forward as if to block his entrance.

Electricity buzzed under his skin, energizing him, boosting that temper he’d been trying to deny. Why did everyone think he was such a good guy—he was well aware of his reputation—when that simple sign of Sophie’s resistance lit his passion? His cock stirred, already half-hard with want, and he had to clamp down on his burning desire to take her mouth.

“Hart?”

“I’m not coming in,” he said. Of course he wasn’t. Good sense and good manners prevailing despite his baser needs.

She appeared to relax. “Okay. Then why are you here?”

An excuse presented itself. “To let you know about the bachelor/bachelorette party. I didn’t get a chance to tell you I won’t be there until late on Saturday afternoon.” The guests were scheduled for Friday dinner-hour arrival and a late Sunday departure.

“Okay.”

She seemed prepared for that to be the end of it, so he spoke up again. “I have a meeting Saturday morning, with the uh, prospective buyer and his business partner. It was the only time they had free.”

“No problem.”

So accommodating, he thought, heat racing through his blood. There’d be another man she’d make nice to someday. Some asshole with tats or cowboy boots or a surfboard like that Aussie she’d giggled around town with for a couple of

weeks. Another man who'd take in all her surface charm and sweet smiles and never know that he should be digging deeper, working hard to discover the emotional needs that a good, decent partner should learn to satisfy.

They stared at each other a long moment as tension filled the air between them. Then she put one hand on her hip. "Are you here for sex?" she asked with a belligerent little smirk.

"What was the giveaway?" he growled, stepping forward.

Still smirking, Sophie shifted to give him room to pass into her space.

"I recognize the caveman," she said, trailing him to her bedroom.

He grunted. Good enough. As he breached the doorway, his feet halted at the sight of her room, clothes tossed over a chair, the bedclothes hanging off the side of the mattress. No neatnik, this girl.

It made him smile, and then that died as a new thought struck. He'd fucked Sophie in that bed, bareback.

Not once had he ever had sex without a condom. Not once before Sophie, that was. Even with his fiancée, he'd worn latex. They'd re-met, became engaged, and arranged a wedding in a whirlwind, and Kim had been insistent that an unplanned pregnancy not get in the way of their future.

Sophie had shared with him an intimacy that belonged to no one else.

She came up behind him, her hand sliding under his T-shirt to find the bare skin of his back. "You're hot."

He shook off his memories and glanced back at her, grinning. "Thanks."

“I mean, your *skin* is hot.”

Not wanting to waste time, he began yanking at her clothes, first baring her breasts. “Damn,” he muttered, staring down at them as he unhooked her bra from behind. “This is a good idea.”

“You have some energy you need to burn off?” Still beneath his shirt, her hands crawled up his chest, nails scraping over his ribs and then his nipples. He sucked in a breath and thumbed hers, watching her eyes half-close and her front teeth close over her bottom lip.

He bent his head and took one stiff crest into his mouth, sucking hard, not bothering with a warm-up. She had energy to burn off too, obviously, as her back instantly bowed and her hands came to his head.

He toyed with her breasts, her nails digging into his scalp and her little panting breaths making his cock twitch in his jeans. Then she was palming him there, her small hand firm over his pulsing flesh.

Out of patience, he scooped her up and tossed her onto the bed, following her down so his weight pinned her.

She couldn't get away from him now.

Her lips latched onto his and her tongue plunged inside. He returned the kiss even as he came up on his knees to unfasten his jeans and shove them and his boxers down his legs. He was hobbled by the fabric and his shoes, but it didn't matter, not when she tasted like sunlight and her hands were running down his back to his ass. Squeezing.

He grunted. “Get naked,” he said. “Quick.”

She didn't protest, just made short work of it, even as he watched her, the dim light from the bathroom across the hall

enough illumination for him to see she was already wet for him. He shuddered, then pushed her thighs wider and fit his cock to the glistening notch.

They groaned together as he entered her.

Tight. Wet. Sophie.

His head spun with the bliss of it, and he reared back to shuttle in again, no finesse, just need. She urged him on, her hands on his ass again, her legs widening around his hips. The smell of her, perfume and sex, filled the room and he breathed it in, his skin tightening over his muscles, his cock seeming to swell with every thrust.

He could hear them, rough pants and moans and his belt buckle clinking with his movements. Lust poured into his bloodstream and he stared down at her, the shadows of her lashes feathering her cheeks. Her mouth looked swollen and delicious and he swooped down for another go at it. She sucked on his tongue and he was hard as iron as he pounded into her hot channel.

He lifted his head to pull in air, aware he'd never been so forceful with a lover, but Sophie was with him all the way and he let the passion burn in his veins, burn out all the confusion and the frustration. She moaned his name, and there was a soft wonder in her voice. It made him pause, and he slowed, his movements gentling, his invasion turning tender.

“Sophie,” he whispered. “Sweet Sophie.”

Excitement built all the same, just her smooth skin and lovely limbs closing around him all it took for a climax to build. “Sweet Sophie,” he said again, gazing deeply into her eyes.

Her hand lifted to cup his face, and he saw the flush rise from her chest to her cheeks. “You’re close,” he said, reaching for where they joined. “Come for me, Sophie.”

Only for me.

After, he held her snuggled against him, her cheek on his chest. It ached with the pressure of holding in something he’d wanted to say to her since earlier in the night.

Turning them both, he looked at her beautiful face and then smoothed her hair off her forehead. “A confession,” he said.

She frowned. “What?”

“I overheard you in Eli’s backyard tonight. When you talked about your grandmother.”

“Oh. That was just talk. You know.” Sophie shrugged, an obvious play at nonchalance. “Nothing to—”

He placed a finger across her mouth. “I *heard* you, Soph. You can be honest. You don’t have to pretend with me.”

She was so precious to him, with those big eyes on his face, and that little tremor working through her body.

“And I want you to know I’ll do anything,” he continued. “*Anything*, Soph. Anything in my power to help you achieve your heart’s desire.”

A long beat of silence passed. Then she pressed one hand to his cheek. “Even if that’s you, Hart? Because if you want honesty, then that’s the truth. I’m in love with you.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HART HAD CRIED.

Days later, as Sophie prepared for the bachelor/bachelorette party at the lake cabin, the memory still tore her up inside. No great sobs, no shuddering shoulders, just Hart, staring at her until he shifted to sit on the edge of the bed, his hands covering his face.

Her heart in her throat, she'd remained frozen in place. Then, as he'd swiftly dressed, she'd caught a glimpse of the wetness on his cheeks.

Had it hurt him because the last woman to say those words had been his beloved Kim?

Was his pain the pain of Sophie's own betrayal, because she'd gone into the non-relationship relationship while hiding her true feelings for him?

Yet she didn't regret the admission even now, even when she hadn't seen or spoken with Hart since. Somehow the words had released a dam inside of her and she'd made other momentous decisions.

I'm brilliant. Hart had said that.

I'm brave. She knew that now.

She stepped back to examine the welcome spread she'd prepared. Buckets of ice full of drinks, bags holding snacks, sunscreen, and a piece of paper listing the weekend's agenda for each guest. As she heard cars turn into the drive, she felt a rush of anticipation. No matter what, she had these friends and their collective happiness that she hoped proved infectious...at least for the next couple of days.

The 7-Stud Club and their wives piled out, followed by other friends from Sawyer Beach and beyond. For a while she was busy directing the chaos, assigning rooms in the house and directing others to their accommodations in neighboring homes. At six o'clock the crowd re-gathered at the Daggett place, where drinks waited on the deck overlooking the lake along with appetizers and easy snacks she'd prepared in advance. In the kitchen's oven she had big pans of chicken Alfredo. Salad in the refrigerator. Rolls and butter on the counter.

Following dinner, the party took on a mellow vibe, everyone winding down from a work week and not yet gearing up for the celebrating ahead. Her gaze found Cooper and Willow, the pair sharing one lounge chair, looking as relaxed as she'd seen them since announcing their engagement. Not everyone attending tonight was paired up, so she didn't feel like a sore thumb, but she slipped into the shadows nonetheless, content to be an observer.

And glad that Hart wouldn't be showing up until tomorrow. She'd be immersed in details by then, too busy to feel weird in his presence.

A man sauntered up. "Hiding?"

"Hey!" She smiled.

Her oldest brother Beau slung his arm around her neck and ground his knuckles into her scalp until she—naturally—squealed. Pushing him away, she inspected him from head to toe. “You’re looking good. But no lady on your arm this weekend?”

“Too busy to find one,” he said, shoving his hands through his hair. “I just got back from that business trip.”

She shook her finger. “Mom wants grandchildren. Better get on it.”

He grinned. “I deflect when she brings that up. I tell her she’s better off hassling you. Tick-tock, tick-tock, you know.”

She shoved him again. “That’s cruel. I’m younger than you and have things I want to do first. Time for me to be an auntie, that’s all.”

They both turned as one to look upon Cooper and Willow. “Up to them,” they said together, and laughed.

“Where’s the best man?” Beau asked. Along with the members of the 7-Stud Club, Beau was a groomsman, though he’d been too busy with work to take on the lead role. “I thought Hart had promised to do his duty.”

“He also has some pressing business concerns. He’ll be here tomorrow.” She hoped their last encounter hadn’t run him off altogether.

“How’s he doing?” Beau asked. “He didn’t look so good when I saw him several months ago.”

“Better now,” she said. “I think he sees a way out of his grief.”

Beau’s eyebrows rose. “Another woman?”

“Another town.” She explained about the sale of the company and his plan to move.

“Wow. Won’t be the same without a Sawyer in Sawyer Beach.” He nudged her with an elbow. “Would be like going into Henry’s and seeing someone else serving coffee behind the counter.”

“As a matter of fact...”

“What?”

When she told him her news, he let out such a loud whoop that he attracted the attention of the other guests. “What’s going on?” Coop demanded, craning his neck.

Beau grinned at her in approval. “Our sister has finally hung up her barista apron.”

Sophie frowned at him. “I make damn good coffee and there’s nothing wrong with serving it to paying customers.”

“It’s not that,” Beau said. “It’s that I know you want other things.”

If I want something too much I automatically assume it will forever stay out of reach. Sophie pushed that old thought away, shutting out the doubts.

I’m brilliant.

I’m brave.

Willow was out of her chair, Cooper on her heels. “You did it!” she exclaimed and swamped Sophie with a fierce hug. “You’re going to pursue the restaurant?”

“Doing it,” she said, when she could breathe again. “I gave up Henry’s because I was using it as a crutch. I will limp along with catering gigs and the cooking classes until everything is

in place, but I already have worked up a business plan, an expense sheet, and financial projections for the next five years.”

“You can do it,” Cooper said.

She nodded. “I can do it if I believe in myself...and I do.”

More praise and excited exclamations followed, along with the gratifying grumbles about losing her talent at Henry’s. But Sophie cleaned up the kitchen and took to her bed with a tired sense of satisfaction.

She might not avoid a broken heart, but she could work toward a whole life despite it. Managing to get up the nerve to confess her feelings for Hart had given her the confidence to go forward. That, and his belief in her.

If she couldn’t have his love, that belief along with her own resourcefulness would be enough.

The next day, she felt Hart before she saw him. They’d started the morning with a bocce ball tournament, took a break for lunch, then moved on to some games organized by other guests. Later, while some relaxed on the dock on the lake, others read in the shade, while others worked on their ping-pong skills. She was bustling about the kitchen, readying pre-dinner snacks and drinks before the scheduled big barbecue when she felt a presence in the doorway.

She forced her hands not to falter.

“How’s it been going?” Hart asked.

“Fabulous,” she said, infusing her voice with unmitigated cheer. “Cooper won the bocce ball tournament—he cheated, I’m sure of it—but as the groom-to-be, everyone let him.”

“Soph...”

At the serious note in his voice, she shot him a quick glance. Her heart jolted in her chest. Tall, dark, and handsome had always been the best descriptor of him, but years of familiarity didn't lessen his impact on her senses. She battled a brief urge to escape, then straightened her spine and squarely met his gaze.

It wasn't so hard, she discovered. Now with all her cards on the table, she wasn't tying herself in knots trying to keep them close.

"How's it been going?" he asked again.

She recalled his words of the other night. *I heard you, Soph. You don't have to pretend with me.* He didn't want any phony enthusiasm. "Honestly, I think the entire event is going to be rated a smash hit, if I can get a little help re-stocking the beer and opening wine that is."

"I can do that." He smiled.

She smiled back.

They worked as a team throughout that day and into the next. It wasn't awkward at all, unless you counted the great pains she took to make sure their hands didn't touch or their shoulders didn't brush. Then, while they were stowing the remains of lunch in the refrigerator, her brother Beau spilled the beans.

"Did you hear, Hart?" he said, strolling into the kitchen. "Sophie finally quit Henry's."

"Sophie!" Hart swung her way, grinning. Then, before she could dodge him, he swept her into his arms for a friendly bear hug. "Great news."

He held her a beat too long. She squeezed him back a second longer than that. Then they awkwardly parted, Sophie's

face burning. She glanced at Beau and caught a speculative expression on his face. Taking him by the arm, she shoved him in the direction of full trash bags. “Get busy, big bro. Take these out to the cans in the garage.”

Of course, that left her and Hart alone. She scrubbed at a countertop while he rearranged condiments in the refrigerator. “How did your meeting go yesterday? I’m sorry I didn’t ask before.”

“My meeting. Yeah. Right.” He sounded muffled with his head in the fridge. “Just fine.”

When he emerged, he looked disheveled and a little out of sorts. “What’s next on the party agenda?”

“Some crazy relay race that Raf dreamed up.”

Hart groaned. “Crazy will be the word.”

“I know.” She already had her own excuse ready and on a generous impulse decided to share. “Though tomorrow a cleaning service is coming to the homes we borrowed, I’m going to deliver thank you baskets of nonperishables during the final game time. I can claim to need your help.”

His eyes gleamed. “You’re an angel.”

In the end, she appreciated his presence getting the big items in and out of the car—that is until the one moment when he walked forward and she walked back, and they ran into each other, her back plastered to his front. Her heart jolted again, her skin tingled, and her breath evaporated in her lungs.

They stayed that way, stuck in place for several long moments.

Then he hastily moved away. “It’s never going to be the same, is it?” he asked, his tone rueful.

“I suppose not,” she said, trying to sound practical. Calmly resigned instead of acutely regretful. But returning to platonic friends was never an option, not really, not from that first kiss in the dark shed.

Back at the Daggett house, their errand meant they’d avoided being placed on one of the relay-race teams. Instead, they sat in chairs on the deck and watched as four groups assembled. Each had five bulging plastic bags. The rules were dictated by Raf—the members of each team dressed one of their group in the costume found in the bag...no peeking first. Then that person ran a twenty-five-yard dash and back, before passing the baton to the next one on the team who had to be dressed in the next costume before taking their turn.

Sophie and Hart looked at each other. “Costumes,” she said.

“No peeking first,” he chimed in next.

They both sat back.

Okay, it was hilarious. Clown, Santa, space alien, bumblebee, and, finally...bride.

Cooper, the last of his team to step up for his leg of the race, stared at the white lace, tulle, and fancy pumps. “No,” he said, blanching and backing away. In a panic, he glanced around at the other three teams. Their last players were women. “No fair! Let me be Santa,” he begged. “Or the bee! I kick ass at buzzing!”

Willow, one of his teammates, narrowed her gaze and crossed her arms over her chest. “Rules are rules.”

“But...but...*that?*” Cooper gestured at the costume. “I have an image to maintain. Dignity to uphold.” He turned to point at another guest who had a phone trained on him, clearly

ready to snap some pics. “I see you.” Then he appealed to his fiancée again. “Please, Willow.”

She sent him a sweet smile. “If you love me, you’ll do this.”

Cooper groaned and tugged at his hair.

“Would you insist?” Hart asked, sliding a glance at Sophie.

“Insist might be the wrong word. If you’re asking me if I’d swoon if my man made a sappy, messy, possibly embarrassing gesture because he thought it would make me happy?” Her lips tipped up. No matter what had happened, she was still just an older version of that dreamy girl who’d crushed on Hart. “In two words...you bet.”

The days following the bachelor/bachelorette weekend went quiet on the wedding front. Hart found himself at loose ends. The schedule for Sophie’s cooking classes had skipped this week, poker night was on hiatus until after Cooper’s honeymoon, and his desk at work remained clear, thanks to all the hours he’d put in during the previous months.

One morning he took a tour of town, following the same path that he’d taken with Dan and his business partner on the previous Saturday. They’d claimed to enjoy the walk, but now he wanted to revisit the same haunts on his own.

The salty breeze stirred the warm morning air as he walked from his office toward the town center. Dogs barked in the distance, a baby wailed from a nearby house, a boy rode by on his bike, followed by a trio on skateboards. He stood aside to allow them to whiz past, the scent of sunscreen and bubble

gum flowing in their wake. A wave of nostalgia crashed over him.

On a grassy expanse near the beach popular with locals sat a brick monument. One side bore a plaque commemorating the year the town had been founded. On the other, another plaque was installed, this one listing those who'd been lost in WW I. He ran his fingers over names, thinking of the thousands—and thousands and thousands, over the years—who'd called this place home. A good place, with all the bounty that California had to offer, from the ocean to foothills, from seafood to wine, from sunshine to the inevitable fog. Life in all its facets.

He moved on, taking the boardwalk that skirted the sand, checking on the surfers chasing today's waves. His experienced eye assessed the conditions and he concocted in his head his own surf report. *Superb conditions for a surfer of any stripe...light to offshore wind...fun-sized, back-to-back swells.*

Number one on his relocation must-have list would be decent surfing within a reasonable drive.

Number two to infinity didn't exist, because for all the exercising he'd been doing of that muscle between his ears about *whether* to go, he'd not once considered *where* to go.

Shit.

Shoving his hands in the pockets of his ratty jeans, he continued on, his gaze tripping on other landmarks as he passed them—the taco shop that offered the best breakfast burritos, the hardware store that stocked trucks and wheels for skateboards.

The spot on Main Street where Sophie had fallen.

It had shaken him then and remembering the occasion shook him now, and he collapsed onto the bench where she'd been tended to that day. To reassure himself, he slipped his phone from his pocket and pulled up some photos he'd taken over the weekend. There she was, hale and hearty, head down as she dressed a salad, face tilted up as she laughed at something her brother Beau said, blowing a kiss to Cooper while he gave a thank you speech at the party's end.

Then another memory of her. In bed. The two of them alone. Inside Hart's chest, his heart rocked, stabbed by anguish, as he remembered that moment when she'd said she was in love with him.

He'd cried like a baby.

The words had cracked him open, leaking more pain. It did the same now.

Sophie should care for a man who had more to offer than him, he thought, scrubbing at his face with his free hand. His grief over losing Kim had laid a sheet of ice over his emotions and though he'd thawed enough to get by better than before, he was a man diminished.

He didn't think it fair to be a mere sponge to her bright vitality.

Damn it! There wasn't adequate love in him anymore to deserve Sophie's life.

Gritting his teeth, he tapped a different icon and brought up other, older photos.

Kim. Zooming in on her face, he studied the familiar features, the demure smile in her eyes, the sprinkle of freckles across her nose. A familiar ache shouldered its way in, shoving at the sharp pain left by Sophie's *I'm in love with you.*

His breath eased. This hurt he knew and over the last couple of years he'd almost grown comfortable with it.

Almost grown comfortable with the idea that Kim, and the future they had planned, were gone forever.

With his fingers, he played with the photo, now zooming out so that the screen was filled with more than Kim's face. There was a tree, flowers at her feet, the sky behind her, a brilliant blue with clouds.

He stared, and a thought came to him. Over the years a dozen people had attempted to speak to him about grief. He'd tuned them all out, because, damn it, he *knew* grief.

They were best friends, and grief was a consuming, obsessive companion who intruded on every thought and who insisted on being part of every action.

He'd sat with his grief over dinner, lain in bed with grief at night, drank grief like his orange juice at breakfast.

But now, looking at that blue sky, the tree, the flowers, he remembered a card someone had sent, with drawings, describing a grief model by Dr. Lois Tonkin.

In it, she proposed that grief doesn't diminish over time, but a person's life grows around it. As new experiences come to the one still living, their life expands even as the woe stays the same. Within that bigger circle, the living one can experience joy and satisfaction and all the attending emotions of existing while the sadness still has a place.

But there *is* life again, within that larger sphere surrounding grief.

Hart's hand curled around the phone, its edges cutting into his palm and fingers as he put that muscle between his ears to work again. How did this idea sit with him?

“What are you doing out here, boy?” a crusty voice demanded. “That long face of yours is going to discourage customers.”

Startled, Hart twisted around. Henry. That’s right, he was lost in thought outside of Henry’s café, and here was the man himself, his expression irritated.

“Uh...hey,” Hart said, and got to his feet to face him, holding out his hand. “It’s been a long time, Henry.”

The old man gave his hand a begrudging shake. “I’m retired.”

“Right. How’s that going?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” he grumbled. “How does it look like it’s going?”

Hart recalled the elderly man’s history. He’d bought the café decades ago, run it along with his life partner, Theo Gray. When his lover had been stricken with cancer, the pair had left the day-to-day running of Henry’s to others.

Theo had passed a while back...maybe five years?

Grief hadn’t done much for Henry’s disposition, but Hart could commiserate with that. “I should come in and get a coffee,” he said.

“You should, because I could use the business, but don’t, because I can’t work that high-tech machine for shit.”

A reluctant grin turned up the corners of Hart’s mouth. “I’ll take what you can manage.”

Henry beckoned him toward the door. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. But I did and you owe me, so come in and buy a cup. The tip jar’s a little light too.”

Following the man inside, Hart felt another pang at how the place looked different without Sophie standing on the other side of the counter, the brightness of her smile bouncing off the walls and windows. Warming the customers.

She'd warmed Hart too, finally allowing him to achieve full animation again when they'd kissed in that shed.

Behind the counter, Henry banged and rattled the espresso maker, all the while cursing under his breath. Shaking his head, Hart recalled the man hadn't even asked for his order... and that he'd claimed Hart owed him.

"Henry," he said, pulling his wallet from his pocket as the other man slid him a cup of...well, it was a dark liquid, that's all he could say. "What did you mean that I owed you?"

"Word on the street is that you're going to sell to some outfit out of Los Angeles or Silicon Valley."

"Word on the street is not always right," he said. Dan and his partner were from Seattle.

"Yeah? Well, are you going to move? Because I heard that too."

Hart pulled a bill from his wallet and watched Henry make change. He stuffed the returned cash in the tip jar. "Should a person live in the same place their entire life?"

"You actually want to leave?"

No. The answer came, direct and loud. Sawyer Beach was his legacy, but more than that, it was where he had friends, a family of sorts that might be stronger because it was one he'd chosen. One he'd found as a youngster and managed to keep even during the last two years when he'd become something between a hermit and an ogre.

A hogre. Sophie would get a kick out of that. He'd have to tell her.

Except he couldn't talk to her like he once had.

I'm in love with you.

Even as hogre-ish as he was, she'd said he was her heart's desire.

That didn't mean he couldn't stay in Sawyer Beach, though. He'd have to be careful to give her space, to give her the time and distance she'd need to move on. Then he'd watch from afar as her heart found another, more suitable desire.

As Sophie found the best man for her bed, for her life. For that future she would have that included all the joys and satisfactions of living.

Fuck. But he'd handle that with dignity, he told himself, even as it tore him up a little inside.

Even as it meant he wouldn't be the one to listen to her dreams and her doubts, or be the one there for her when she needed comfort and care on the occasions life inevitably collided with her like that bike on Main Street.

Glass ground in his belly. On second thought, it would definitely be better if he left Sawyer Beach.

Henry was grumbling again. "If you sell and those out-of-towners take over, then there'll be a Starbucks and a Peet's on every corner."

Hart wanted to assure the old man that wouldn't happen, as the local planning department didn't allow chain stores in the city center. But he couldn't guarantee that wouldn't change, particularly if he was miles away the next time a proposal showed up on the agenda.

It would be out of his hands.

Everything and everyone here would be out of his reach.

“It wouldn’t be so bad,” Henry continued, “under other circumstances. But I lost Sophie. What am I going to do without her?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

COOPER AND WILLOW'S WEDDING DAY DAWNED, THE forecast a perfect sunny and seventy-five degrees. Hart cast a look at Henry's as he drove through town on his way to the nuptials location—a former estate a dozen miles up the coast turned event venue. He imagined he saw the elderly owner inside and reminded himself to set his own grumpiness aside, at least for the next twenty-four hours.

Be the best best man you can, Sawyer, he told himself. Smiling, cheerful, selfless.

Set aside your own issues.

As luck would have it, however, the first person he saw was Sophie. The bridal party and the groomsmen were supposed to dress in separate wings, but there she was, with damp hair, wearing yoga pants, a T-shirt, and rubber flip-flops. Catching sight of him, she smiled.

“You’re beautiful,” he said without thinking. Her bright face didn’t dim even as he cursed himself for getting personal. “Uh, sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” She shoved the box into his arms. “I like compliments, especially when I’m not even close to my full glory.”

“You’re always beautiful,” he mumbled and glanced down at the box. “What’s this?”

“The boutonnieres for the guys.” Then she patted his cheek. “See you at the altar,” she said, and, turning, skipped away.

He watched after her, aching, yearning, cursing himself for already being sidetracked by his own issues. *See you at the altar* echoed in his head, a sweet promise he tried to forget as he found the wedding planner and followed her directions to the groom’s suite.

Inside, it didn’t take long for not-unexpected chaos to require his full attention. No dummy, he’d thought ahead and asked his buddies for advice regarding what might be required of him. So he had an extra pair of socks for Raf who’d forgotten them, found Mad’s tie which had been stuffed in his jacket pocket, and pried a third Red Bull from Coop’s hands.

“A nervous groom is one thing,” he said, “but jittery won’t do.”

“Fuck,” his friend said, fiddling with the French cuffs of his dress shirt. “Why am I so jumpy? Marrying Willow is what I want more than anything.”

“Let’s go through the checklist,” Hart said, in a calm tone. “You have your fancy clothes, obviously. I took the marriage certificate from your hands myself and delivered it to the wedding planner who will oversee you signing it after the ceremony. The rings—”

Horror overtook Cooper’s face.

“Oh, shit,” Hart said, dismayed. “Did you forget to buy rings? Coop—”

“Of course I bought rings,” Cooper said, glaring. “You were with me when I picked them up.”

“Okay. Right.” Relief calmed his pulse.

Then, still clearly perturbed, his friend glanced over at the ring bearer, a fidgeting six-year-old who stared at cartoons on his dad’s phone. “I’m supposed to tie them on that pillow my cousin Luke’s kid is gonna carry down the aisle...but I forgot to bring them with me this morning.”

Be the best best man you can.

Instead of shaking his old buddy, Hart clapped his hands together. “All right. Time for a retrieval mission.”

“You do it,” Cooper said.

“God, yes. It wouldn’t do for anyone seeing *you* speeding off like a runaway groom.”

“Yeah. Good thinking.”

“They’re at your condo?”

He was already shaking his head. “They’re in the safe at Fun & Games.”

“Give me the combo,” Hart demanded, already reaching for his keys.

Cooper’s face went blank. “Oh, hell.” His hands trembled as he ran them through his hair. “I...I can’t tell you. I can’t remember!”

“Don’t panic,” he commanded them both. “Who else knows it?”

Coop swallowed. “Sophie! Sophie knows it.”

“Okay. On it.” He yanked out his phone, informing Coop’s sister they had a 911-level emergency.

She promised to meet him at his car.

He ran for it, and found her there, still in yoga gear and flip-flops but with her hair and makeup done. The contrast hit him between the eyes and he stared at her, fixed in place. “God, Soph. Full glory.”

“Not yet,” she said, and slipped into the passenger seat after he beeped open the car locks. “I’m going with you. The level of used tissues in the bridal suite is threatening to reach knee-level and I’m desperate for a break from all the sentimental weeping.”

Setting his jaw, he climbed behind the wheel. “You should never need a break from sentimental weeping,” he said. Was it his fault she’d lost some of her romantic luster?

“This is my fifth wedding in a row as the only single, unattached sidekick in the bridal party,” she explained. “Don’t tell, but I might be a little burned out.”

He winced, because her fire should never, ever be extinguished. Was that his fault too? Of course it was his doing, he realized, wanting to smack himself in the forehead. She’d told the cowboy she’d been hurt. And Hart was the one she professed to love.

Sick, he stole another glance at her. “Sophie—”

“Pedal to the medal, pal,” she said. “Today, we can risk a speeding ticket.”

But he couldn’t risk Sophie, he thought, his gaze shifting to the speedometer, then back out the windshield. He’d already experienced a moment when he thought he’d lost her.

It was why he couldn’t love her.

The risk was too damn great for him to bear.

“What?” she asked, turning her head to stare at him.

He'd not spoken it aloud, he was sure. But maybe she could hear his heart slamming against his chest wall as the echo of what he'd said reverberated through him. *It was why he couldn't love her. The risk was too damn great for him to bear.*

But they'd reached Fun & Games, and there wasn't time for further examination of his psyche. Retrieving the rings took precedence.

Thank God, the missing symbols of everlasting love turned out to be the only and final hurdle to Cooper and Willow's happy-ever-after. Once they'd been retrieved from the pub's safe, the wedding ceremony was accomplished without a hitch, the setting sun a perfect backdrop for the bride and groom. The guests clapped as they returned down the aisle as husband and wife.

On the expansive patio the tables were dressed in blues and white for the sit-down dinner. The wedding party was assigned places at a long table, Hart beside Cooper who was beside Willow. At her side, Sophie sat, shining that light of hers as if she'd never admitted to nuptial burnout.

Hart had looked forward to his best man speech. It contained all the compulsory elements, the gentle ribbing of the groom, the sincere admiration of the gorgeous bride, a callback to a few childhood events that signified Coop's true nature, which was equal parts charming and daring.

And then, smiling, he made the newlyweds a promise. “And I'll be here, Cooper and Willow, like all of the Sawyer Beach community, watching over the happy outcome of your life together.”

The gazes of the poker crew shot to his and he gave them a slight nod of affirmation. “Staying?” Coop asked, his own smile growing wider.

“Staying,” Hart murmured as he held up his glass for the toast. He’d finally accepted that fact as he stood beside the groom, bearing witness to the joyful occasion at his best friend’s side, no longer lurking at the back of the crowd. Sawyer Beach was where he belonged.

Sophie stood up for her turn and as he gave his attention to her, he lost it. His hearing, his thought processes...his sense of self-preservation.

Because he had no defenses against the sight of her now, her honey-blond hair in a fancy knot of some kind, with a few curls hanging at the nape of her neck. The dress she wore, a buttery yellow that looked like sunshine was wrapping her curves, reminding him of how she’d felt against him, her skin warm and her limbs supple. That yielding, heated strength of her so damn enticing. The gift of independent, feisty Sophie Daggett surrendering to him, letting him touch all her light intoxicating.

She’d allowed him to see into her heart.

I’m in love with you.

Applause sounded, waking him from his reverie, and it was time for the bride and groom to take to the dance floor. Poleaxed by the emotions churning inside him, he stared vacantly ahead until Mad, on his left, jabbed his elbow into his side. “It’s now the wedding party dance,” he reminded Hart. “Time for you to pair up with Sophie.”

Pair up.

He shouldn't. He couldn't make excuses, though, and she didn't appear to have any of his qualms as she moved into his arms.

"Cheer up," she said, glancing at him, "your duties are almost over. And you saved the day with the rings."

"*We* saved the day and I'm not unhappy," he said, realizing it was true. "I'm not the least bit unhappy."

At her uncertain look, he drew her in closer, urging her cheek to his shoulder. Everything inside him relaxed, and as they turned and swayed, he let his eyes close.

While something inside him opened. Walls fell and he found a new space. An expansive space. A previously unknown well where love and devotion could dwell and thrive.

If only he'd risk feeling that much again.

Cooper tapped on his shoulder and he and Sophie were separated as the wedding party changed partners again and again and again. When the guests were invited onto the dance floor, Hart escaped, heading for the bar, taking a place at the back of the line.

"We meet again," a man said, turning. Sophie's dad, Randy Daggett.

They shook hands. "You've gained another daughter," Hart said. "Congratulations."

"And I understand you had a change of heart, Hart," he replied, then laughed. "I might make dad puns as infamous as dad jokes."

"You know..." Hart ventured, unsure. What had he given away while dancing with Sophie?

“That you’re staying in Sawyer Beach, despite rumors to the contrary. Good news, good news!”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Randy nodded toward the dance floor. “It’s smart you’re taking a break. They’ll be cuing up the pina colada song soon.”

Hart shook his head. The damn song was a family tradition that Cooper and Willow had taken for their own. “I guess it wouldn’t be a Daggett event without it.”

“You looked pretty good out there, dancing with my Sophie.”

There it was. The older man was watching his face carefully, and Hart couldn’t blame him. Who knew what scuttlebutt had reached the Daggett household during the last month when he and Sophie had been enjoying each other’s charms? He braced. “Uh...”

“She’s not second-best material, Hart,” the man said, without heat, but with certainty.

“I’d be the first to agree with that,” he said quickly. “I wouldn’t...I won’t...” Wiping his hand over his mouth, he tried collecting his thoughts.

His courage.

Damn it, why couldn’t he love her? He was no longer a black hole, only capable of absorbing her light. He was a better man than that. The fucking best man.

Wouldn’t he be good for her? Hell, yes, he would. He’d be good for her, good to her. He’d give her everything he had, all these new, untapped spaces that would expand, like life would expand.

And the truth was, he already loved her. His heart rocked in his chest at that thought, then it settled again. Firm. Sure. Thumping against his ribs in a steady rhythm, attesting to the fact that he was alive and well.

Loving Sophie wasn't a risk to choose. Loving Sophie was...destiny.

The only gamble now was convincing her he wasn't too blind and bullheaded for her to take a chance on loving him in return for the rest of their lives.

The morning after Cooper and Willow's wedding, a knock at her front door surprised Sophie. She'd be on time for the after-nuptials breakfast taking place at the community park if she left in the next five minutes. Getting delayed by a salesperson would upset her schedule.

Though she supposed she could be a little late, she decided, as she made for her entryway. Her mom had taken over the planning and prep of the event, a thank you to the wedding party and the out-of-town family and friends.

As a matter of fact, there was some question regarding the attendance of the bride and groom. Cooper had confided to her last night, right before he and his new wife left the reception, that they might get up at sunrise and head out on their honeymoon—a drive up the coast to the Pacific Northwest.

She glanced out her peephole, then swung her door wide. "Harper? What are you doing here?"

"I'm, uh, going to escort you to the park," she said, bouncing on her toes.

“I know my way there,” Sophie said, her gaze narrowing. “Is something the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter!” the other woman said in an over-loud voice. “Come on.”

“Let me get my car keys—”

“We’re biking,” Harper said, and gestured toward Sophie’s beach cruiser parked on the porch.

Sophie peeked at it, reared back, looked again. The wicker front basket was filled with flowers—daisies, roses, ranunculus, and gladiolus, the bouquet a blaze of pink and yellow. “What...?”

“We have to get going,” Harper said, her voice high with clear excitement.

“Okay, okay,” Sophie said, eyeing her friend. “I guess I’m ready.” She’d dressed in a simple sundress and sneakers.

Harper was already rushing down the steps to her own bicycle, another single-speed that she’d had since high school.

After grabbing her purse and settling it bandolier-style over her chest, Sophie hopped onto her own vehicle. She hadn’t ridden it since the bike accident, but she put that from her mind, distracted by Harper’s air of eagerness. “It’s only bagels and cream cheese, Harp,” she called to her friend as she pumped her legs, trying to keep up. “Maybe those Danishes you like, but nothing that spectacular.”

“I’ll show you spectacular,” Harper muttered as Sophie came abreast of her.

“What?” Sophie turned her head to stare at her friend.

“Pay attention,” Harper said. “Look sharp.”

Puzzled, Sophie redirected her attention to the road and then her feet slowed on the pedals. A sign was stapled to a nearby electric pole.

SOPHIE DAGGETT, YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL

The message was written in blue paint, the second “t” dripping off the cardboard.

Her eyes widened. “Harp, what is this?”

“We’re going to be late,” her friend said. “Keep up.”

They took a turn, and halfway down the block another sign greeted them.

SOPHIE DAGGETT, YOU AMAZE ME

Her heart shifted to her throat and she had to swallow it back down. “I don’t understand.”

“You will.” Harper flew ahead.

Sophie stood on her pedals as they took the next turn onto Main Street. As they passed the shops and boutiques on the way to the park, she couldn’t miss the buckets of flowers dotting every few feet of the route. Each one displayed a yellow and pink bouquet that matched the flowers in her basket.

The warm morning breeze felt cool against her hot cheeks. “What’s going on?” she demanded of Harper.

Her friend shook her head. “You’ll see.”

And then she did. Another sign, this one a banner, made from a...sheet?...strung across Sawyer Beach’s central thoroughfare.

SOPHIE DAGGETT, YOU DESERVE THE BEST MAN

Cold washed over her and she braked to stare up at the message, in more blue paint. With more drips. Obviously made by hand.

“You deserve the best man,” she repeated aloud. “Is this some sort of joke?”

“It’s a clue,” Harper said, gesturing. “Come on.”

Glancing over her shoulder, Sophie saw a group of people were following, likely curious about what was going on. Moms with strollers, some kids on skateboards, the daily walkers out for their 10,000 steps.

She turned back in time to notice she was passing beneath another banner, more dripping paint.

SOPHIE DAGGETT, I LOVE YOU BEYOND MEASURE

And then, right before the entrance to the park, a final stretch of painted sheet.

SOPHIE DAGGETT, WILL YOU BE MINE?

Standing beneath it, his clothes and arms and even his face streaked with matching blue paint, stood Hart Sawyer, his arms full of flowers.

“The best man,” Harper said with satisfaction.

Sophie stopped pedaling and her bike clattered to the street. Though vaguely aware of a gathering crowd, she only had eyes for the tall, dark, handsome—and paint be-speckled—man in front of her. “I...” she began, then found she was speechless.

“Surprised you again,” he said, with some satisfaction as he approached her, holding out the flowers.

Automatically taking them, she clutched them close to her chest, crushing the blooms so their glorious scent rose around her.

“Soph,” he said, smiling fondly as he stopped in front of her. “I have a thousand things to say to you.”

She shook her head, trying to put all the pieces into an arrangement she could understand. “Start?” she suggested. “Start with just one, because I’m very confused.”

“Okay.” He inhaled a breath, his warm gaze fixed on her face. “I wasn’t lying about doing whatever I could to help you achieve your heart’s desire.” His hand reached out to trace her cheek. “Even if that isn’t me anymore.”

“What...I...” She shook her head again.

“You heard yesterday that I’m not leaving Sawyer Beach and I’ll bear it if I must...you being happy without me.” He stroked her face again. “But I realized, Soph, that *my* heart’s desire is you.”

Someone in the throng made a noise of appreciation and she glanced around, momentarily distracted by the size of the group now circling them. It looked like half the town, to her astonished eyes.

Swallowing, she glanced back at Hart. “Maybe we could go somewhere private.”

Now he shook his head. “This is my sappy, messy, possibly embarrassing gesture,” he said. “Extra points, I hope, for the very public nature of it.”

The gesture she’d told him would make her happy. And then she remembered something else, that she’d told him he’d recognized and cared about what was important to Kim. And now he’d done the same for Sophie, he’d *heard* her, and

recognized and cared about what she felt was important too. A sappy, messy, possibly embarrassing gesture that would make her swoon.

Her arms tightened on the flowers and her body trembled. But...

Kim.

“I love you, Sophie,” he said now, as if he could read her reservations on her face.

“You said you weren’t available to me,” she whispered.

“I know.” He watched her carefully. “I can’t say I didn’t go kicking and screaming into losing my heart again, Soph. I think you understand why, though, because you know me so well.”

“I do know you well.”

“I’ve been afraid to risk it, of course.” He raised his arms. “But fear couldn’t keep me from acknowledging the truth. And then reaching for what I want more than anything. And that’s you.”

Her heart started pounding, so loud she could barely hear the appreciative murmurings from the mob of onlookers.

“I unknowingly hurt you before,” he said, his voice low. “I’ll never intentionally wound you again.”

Her one-sided feelings hadn’t been his fault, not any more than he should be blamed for being in love with someone else. Kim. He’d probably always love her. Probably always love her best.

The pain of that thought settled Sophie some. “We should take our time,” she said slowly. “Think everything through carefully. Get to know each other—”

“Soph, you know me. And I know you better than anyone,” he replied, stepping nearer, and studying her face with an intensity that made her pulse trip. “What’s going through that head of yours?”

If I want something too much I automatically assume it will forever stay out of reach.

His expression darkened and he moved in, enclosing her in a close embrace that smelled of flowers, salt, and acrylic paint. “If I can take the risk, damn it,” he said, “then so can you. I know you can. I believe in you.”

Her resistance began to melt. She licked her lips. “But...” But maybe it would be enough to be second in his life.

“Oh, Soph.” He crushed her to him, bringing her head to his chest and stroking her hair. “Are you sure that I loved Kim with everything I am?”

“Of course,” she said, unsurprised he was reading her mind. “Yes.”

He pushed her away a little and pressed his forehead to hers. “Then when I love again, why do you think it would be any less? Why do you think I would offer you, my sweet Sophie, any less than that?”

Tears pricked her eyes. She allowed the flowers to drop to their feet as her arms came around him. “You wouldn’t,” she said, knowing it was true to the marrow of her bones. To her heart. To her soul. “I believe in you too.”

His eyes closed and his arms tightened on her. “Still, you’ll let me show you every day, right, Soph?”

“You think I’d let anyone else?” she asked, a smile turning up her lips and she felt a sudden lightness, as if she might float if he didn’t hold onto her. “I love you, Hart.”

“For about two minutes I had some noble idea of giving you up,” he said, his gaze boring into hers, “but then my inner caveman kicked in and said, she’s mine.”

Her pulse tripped. She loved the rough caveman just as much as she loved the golden boy of Sawyer Beach. “Is that right?”

He nodded. “Mine for all time.”

Sophie tugged his head down for a kiss and the crowd cheered. No louder, though, than her heart.

Her Hart.

The 7-Stud Club held its final poker night with a single member in its ranks just before Christmas. The fare—spaghetti and meatballs, green salad, and garlic bread—had been provided by the almost-bride. She’d been too busy to deliver it, though, what with a wedding scheduled for the twenty-fourth, but Hart waved a hand at the laden buffet and promised his friends they wouldn’t be disappointed.

He couldn’t keep the grin off his face, the same one that that had made his cheeks ache the day, a month after he’d convinced Sophie of his love at the park, that she’d agreed to marry him. “I’m feeling it tonight, boys,” he told the other men. “When you pull out your wallets, prepare for them to bleed.”

Good-natured curses and mild insults followed that declaration, but they wouldn’t mind him raking in all the pots tonight, not really. They were happy for him—because that’s

the kind of friendship they had forged over poker, surfing, love affairs gone wrong and then so right.

They settled around the table to eat. “What are we going to do in the new year?” Hart mused. “Once all the wedding and holiday excitement dies down?”

Raf looked up, a light in his eyes. “Oh. I’ve got something.”

“Yeah?” his half brother asked. “What’s that?”

“There’s going to be a baby...” Raf glanced around the table, still looking lit up from the inside. “...Erin’s pregnant.”

Stunned silence gave way to raucous whoops and hollers. Cooper got up to pass around more beers. Boone asked of no one in particular, “When the hell did we get old enough to be fathers?”

Eli cleared his throat. “Sloane and I, uh, we’re expecting too.”

Mad threw his napkin in the air. “Well shit, we’re going to be uncles!”

Uncles, friends...family. Smiling again, Hart pulled out his phone and texted his fiancée.

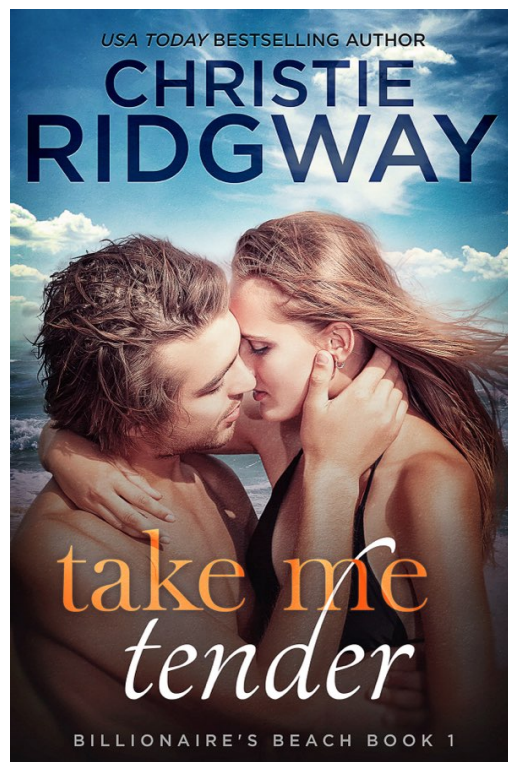
Love abounds, sweet Sophie...and more to come.

###

Thank you for reading! I love this series and hope you enjoyed the finale as Hart and Sophie found each other and the love they both deserve. If you missed any of the other books in the 7-Stud Club series, you can get [ALL IN](#) (7-Stud Club Book 1), [NO LIMIT](#) (7-Stud Club Book 2), [ANTE UP](#) (7-Stud Club

Book 3), [SLOW PLAY](#) (7-Stud Club Book 4), [WILD CARD](#) (7-Stud Club Book 5) and [SMOOTH CALL](#) (7-Stud Club Book 6).

If you want more sexy and emotional romances, let me take you to Billionaire's Beach. The first in the series is [TAKE ME TENDER](#).



Read on for an excerpt.

To not miss out on new Christie Ridgway releases, sign up for [my newsletter](#). You can also follow me on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or visit [my website](#).

Spread the word by leaving a review on your favorite book site
so other readers can find good books!

EXCERPT – TAKE ME TENDER

Excerpt – TAKE ME TENDER

Billionaire's Beach Book 1

© Copyright 2015 Christie Ridgway

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Sabrina fair

Listen where thou art sitting

Under the glassie, cool, translucent wave,

In twisted braids of Lillies knitting

The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair...

—JOHN MILTON, COMUS: A MASQUE

A good cook is like a sorceress who dispenses happiness.

—ELSA SCHIAPARELLI, FASHION DESIGNER

Chapter One

Slowly threading through the tables of the darkened restaurant, Nikki Carmichael refused to let a single tear fall. No, she wasn't going to cry, though the night's last entree had been plated and served two hours before and the last patron escorted

out the door thirty minutes ago. For the final time, she'd heard the clear-bell clink of the wineglasses greeting their partners as they were slid into their nightly resting place in the rack over the bar. The kitchen's enormous stock-pots that had simmered broth all through the dinner service were now clean, their steam no longer able to corkscrew the baby hairs that escaped her braids.

Pausing beside a table, she tweaked a white linen napkin already folded in the signature Fleming's twist, ready for the next day's dinner rush.

The dinner rush Nikki wouldn't be here to see, sweat over, or even swear about, as from now on a different sous-chef was responsible for the production of the restaurant's elegant meals.

Still, she wasn't going to cry.

After all, she'd been the one to turn in her resignation. And she'd had plenty of time to accustom herself to the idea of leaving the place where she'd worked since cooking school.

Not to mention that she never cried—not since she was fourteen and her father told her at her mother's funeral that crying was something big girls didn't do. *Don't let anyone think you're weak.*

At the locked door of the employee break room, with nothing left to do but gather her things and head home, she keyed in the pass code and then pushed it open.

“Surprise!”

Startled, Nikki took an instinctive step back and felt that familiar, dangerous doughiness in her right knee. Her leg almost gave way, but she gritted her teeth and fought for

balance. The small crowd in the room didn't seem to notice, and then she was being dragged inside.

Colleen, the youngest member of Fleming's full-time waitstaff, grinned at her. "You didn't think we were going to let you go quietly, did you?"

Nikki had really hoped so. She didn't know how much longer she could remain upright on her listing leg.

But slices of the pastry chef's celebrated Chocolate Can't Kill You cake were already set on a rolling cart beside champagne glasses filled with bubbly. The dishwashers, grizzled Joe and his baby-faced sidekick, Carlos, passed out forks. Colleen danced around with the champagne.

"To Nikki!" she finally said.

And everyone there, from the bartender, to the waitstaff, to her favorite prep cook who must have made a return trip just for the occasion, echoed the words, their glasses held high. The enthusiastic goodwill surprised Nikki all over again. She'd inherited her keep-your-distance DNA from her dad, so she didn't get too friendly with people, not even coworkers.

In the convivial atmosphere, though, Nikki did okay through the next few minutes, sipping at the champagne she hoped would work like ibuprofen. Then Colleen asked her about her future plans.

"Do you have your next chef job lined up? You said you had prospects."

It took a moment for Nikki to clear her throat of her latest swallow and her sudden awkwardness. "Not, um, yet. I'm still, uh, sifting through those prospects."

"I have a friend—"

“What about—”

“Why not—”

The room filled with suggestions. Wearing a polite smile, Nikki listened to each of them. Her excuse for leaving Fleming’s was creative burnout, so their ideas ran the gamut from Japanese to Egyptian to a place that touted a Swiss-Argentinean fusion cuisine.

That last gave her pause. Swiss-Argentinean fusion cuisine. What would that be, exactly? Reuben sandwiches?

After the cake and champagne were consumed, the well-wishers walked her out to her car. She was forced to smooth her gait as she headed across the blacktop, pretending for the crowd she had two completely functional legs. She’d never wanted pity, or worse, the inevitable questions: Why not see a surgeon? Surely some doctor could...? There were reasons that wasn’t going to happen.

Once home, in the smallest rented condo Santa Monica had to offer, she called out, “Fish, I’m back,” then limped about to gather a 32-ounce bag of frozen baby peas and a week’s worth of unopened mail. With a sigh of relief, she perched on the recliner in the living room, setting the envelopes on the small table bearing a lamp, her answering machine, and the goldfish bowl.

Nikki switched on the light to cheer the early A.M. gloom, then tapped the aquarium with her fingertip. “How you doing, Fish?”

In seconds, she’d popped off her cooking clogs and shimmied out of her black-and-white baggy chef’s pants. Sucking in a breath, she stared at her knee. Swollen to the circumference of a summer melon, it throbbed with each one

of her heartbeats. She slapped the bag of frozen peas on it, then pushed back on the chair to elevate the aching joint.

“I’ll take the anti-inflammatories before bed, Fish,” she said, glancing over at her finned roommate. Her eye caught on the top envelope in the pile of mail. Her name was written in a beautiful hand and the return address was Malibu, California, the famous seaside enclave just over the Santa Monica Mountains.

Curious, she picked it up. Leaving the hectic, ever-active restaurant business had become a necessity, thanks to her injury, but doing something else besides cooking—well, she wasn’t trained for anything else besides cooking. With a wonky knee and a decidedly private personality, she’d hit on the idea of working in a home kitchen where her work space and her contact with others would be limited.

So she’d advertised in L.A.-area neighborhoods where households might be interested in a private chef.

Bel-Air.

Beverly Hills.

Malibu.

Nothing had come of it...until now? Her pulse quickened as she tore open the seal—and then it slid back to a slow thud.

This piece of mail wasn’t what she needed. It was an advertisement—granted, a beautiful advertisement—for a yarn shop, address on the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu.

Join us each Tuesday for

Knitters’ Night at Malibu & Ewe!

Make a Connection!

Make something beautiful...friends, too.

An enclosed brochure showed the exterior of a cottage-styled shop overlooking a golden beach and an endless ocean. Other photos captured the displays of yarn and a cozy, comfortable-looking seating area filled with women chatting and knitting. There was an open spot on a particularly inviting sofa.

Shaking her head, Nikki tossed the papers back on the pile of mail. What she needed was a job, not a hobby.

“And who needs friends, Fish,” she murmured, glancing at the aquarium as she pulled the bands free of her braids and untangled her gold and brown hair, “when I have you?”

With a frown, she noticed his tail sinking southward and used her fingers to spoon him out of the water. Then she wound the tiny screw on his side and tossed him back in, gratified as he whirred around his little pond just as if he was a real, live pet.

He was perfect, wasn't he? Perfect for her, anyway. She didn't have a good track record keeping things that lived and breathed. And a twenty-seven-year-old woman with culinary school loans and without a job couldn't afford to feed another mouth anyway.

“Yes, you are perfect, Fish,” she said aloud.

And she wasn't going to cry, even though her knee was still throbbing like a bitch.

It was then she noticed the light blinking on her answering machine. Who would be calling? Her parents were dead and her social life was practically nil. Was this something about a job? Her heartbeat picked up again, even as she remembered

how disappointing the envelope from Malibu & Ewe had proven to be.

Make a Connection!

She needed a way to make a buck or she wouldn't be able to afford the water to fill Fish's bowl, let alone the rent on her condo.

Crossing the fingers of her right hand, she reached over with her left to press Play. A man's voice rumbled into the air.

"Yo. Nancy? Nellie? Whatever. Your friend Sandy gave me your number. Said to call. This is Jay Buchanan."

Nikki crossed the fingers of her other hand. "Fish..." she breathed. Jay Buchanan. Editor for the hip men's magazine *NYFM*, L.A.'s man about town, and former employer of her fellow cooking school student Sandy Bivers. For two months, Sandy had worked for him while he wrote a journal-style account of the bachelor joys of having a woman in his kitchen who wasn't also warming his bed. The attention had garnered Sandy a gig on one of the food channels.

Nikki's mind flashed on what her fellow chef had told her about the man. Like that yarn shop, Jay Buchanan was a resident of Malibu, and though he was credited with the magazine's sexist signature tagline, "Men are boys and women are toys," Sandy claimed the worst thing anyone had ever said about him was that he was born under a lucky star on a sunny day at a Southern California beach.

"I've seen him charming water from the devil," Sandy had gone on to say, "at the same time he was slipping the panties off an angel." Nikki had caught a glimpse of him herself, in a pictorial layout in *NYFM*. Leaving a charity function at an L.A. club with a starlet on his arm, he'd appeared both classy

and capable. A guy in black tie who looked as if he could make a mixed drink or change a car tire with the same aplomb.

“I need a cook—a chef,” the man was saying now. “Just for August. I’ve got a house guest for the next few weeks and then a big event to host at the end of the month.”

Her heartbeat ratcheted up another notch. Okay, it wasn’t long-term, but it was something, not to mention a likely way to make future contacts. And anyhow, she’d do whatever she had to if it meant cooking and keeping off her knee at the same time.

“If you’re interested, come by tomorrow. Ten A.M.” The address he gave was on the Pacific Coast Highway. “We’ll talk.”

Her gaze flicked to the time. Given the late hour and the traffic she’d likely encounter heading to the beach on a summer morning, if she went to bed now, she’d have enough time to get four hours of sleep. Her knee needed at least seven, but she’d make do.

“Oh, yeah,” the male voice added. “And bring your best batch of cookies.”

Two hours of sleep.

Optimism would keep her awake, though, and maybe work as an analgesic as well. “Jay Buchanan, you’re the answer to a prayer,” she said, though still not allowing herself even a single grateful tear. But God, how much she needed—

The chance. Not him.

No, not him.

She might be in a tight spot, but long ago she’d learned the hard way what it was to need a man and she wasn’t about to

make that same mistake again.

Bleary-eyed and fuzzy-brained from lack of sleep, Jay Buchanan yanked on a pair of shorts and stumbled barefoot toward the front of his beachside house, where someone had the annoying gall to knock on his door at the early hour of—

He paused, then leaned back and craned his neck to read the clock on the coffeemaker in the kitchen. Why, oh why, was the carafe empty when he needed it full, and why did the digital numbers claim it was almost 10:00 A.M.? He'd just woken up and...oh, yeah. He'd just woken up because he hadn't hit the sack until after 4:00. An idea for a couple of ManTalk columns had nagged him until he'd stopped tossing and turning around midnight and headed for his computer instead.

The idea was worth it. It was all about New Year's resolutions and he'd had a sufficient number of words on the subject to fill the required inches for *NYFM's* print edition with enough left over to offer a slightly different slant for the online version.

Not so different, actually. They were both about giving up women for the forthcoming three hundred sixty-five days. The columns were for the January issues because magazines worked ahead—and Jay did, too.

While in his latest writing for the magazine he resolved to give up the fairer sex in the new year, though it was only August he'd already made that commitment to himself.

As of today, no females.

No how.

It was going to put a hiatus on his popular “In Search of the Perfect Woman” articles, a series inspired by his discovery of his grandparents’ old Broadway cast album of *My Fair Lady* in the back of a cabinet. Rex Harrison rapping his way through “A Hymn to Him,” which asked the immortal question, “Why can’t a woman be more like a man?” had sent Jay on the hunt for just such a one—and his readers voraciously feasted on every account of his failures. So while he’d yet to find a breezy, sexy, sloppy-emotions-unnecessary female, now he was determined to go without looking for the rest of this year and all of the next.

There was that irritating bam-bam-bam on his door again. Obviously, the irritator wasn’t giving up. Fine, he’d send them on their way and return to bed.

The soles of Jay’s feet registered the rug in the entry, then his hand found the knob and he wrenched open the door. Heat wafted over him, as well as the scent of car exhaust and hot asphalt mixed with something sweet. The Pacific Coast Highway was as close to the house’s front entry as the ocean was close to his back one and the four lanes were already bumper-to-bumper with Angelenos out for their sand-and-surf fix.

He blinked against the bright sunlight, his gaze now taking in the leggy teen on the doorstep, her hair in two loose braids and her hands clutching some kind of lunch pail.

“Fern’s out,” he said, making the assumption about his young cousin since she hadn’t answered the knock herself. “Don’t know when she’ll be back.” Without waiting for a response, he swung shut the door.

It bounced off the toe of a bright yellow rubber clog. “Mr. Buchanan?” the braided girl said. She had a curiously low,

intriguingly husky voice. “I’m here to see you.”

He’d written a ManTalk column last year debunking the myth of the hunch, so it was ridiculous of him to feel cold, webbed feet goose-stepping down his spine. Ignoring the sensation, he inched back the door and peered again at the intruder.

Leggy. Braids. Now that he looked more closely, she wasn’t the teenager he’d first thought. He made a vague gesture to his right, still hoping he could shoo her off. “No, you can’t use the bathroom. And the public beach access is three doors down.” He couldn’t hold back a little grin. “Right between Geffen’s mansion and that equally over-built monstrosity next to it.”

Her brows, he noticed as they came together over her small nose, were a shade darker than her brown hair that was heavily laced with lighter streaks. “What?” she asked.

It was one of Malibu’s longest-running feuds—the privacy-obsessed celebs versus the public’s right to beach access. Newspaper articles and court battles had proven that some of Hollywood’s most liberal were anything but when it came to sharing the sand in front of their homes. Jay wasn’t entirely unsympathetic. In the summer, he’d had his share of sun worshippers trespassing while in search of showers and toilets. But even when his grandparents had built this house in the 1950s, they hadn’t assumed the beach bordering it was theirs and theirs alone.

“It’s the price of privilege,” he explained to the girl. “You get the incredible property, but you have to share it from the high-tide line to where the surf breaks. There’s a public path to the water two hundred and fifty feet down that way.”

Leggy with Braids frowned at him. “Mr. Buchanan, I said I came here to see you.”

He hadn't missed that, not really, he thought, rubbing his hand over his bare chest. But as his mother always said, Jay was a hoper, and he'd been hoping to get back to sleep. Yet he should have known better, because nothing was ever simple when there was a woman involved. Why did they always have to complicate everything? Leggy with Braids even looked like a complication. A man just couldn't ignore that sweet, full mouth and she had an interesting sprinkle of freckles across her nose that—

Crap. There he went again, heading off into muddy and probably mined female territory. “What, then?” he demanded, sounding surly even though he was mostly mad at himself. “What is it you want?”

To wring his neck, if her expression was anything to go by. But she gave him a tight little smile, not a slice of teeth showing. “I want to talk to you about the private chef position. Remember, you called me yesterday? I'm Nikki.”

“Oh.” He let his gaze run down Leggy with Braids. Nikki. Nikki of the cute freckles, the slim body, that pretty, earth-and-sunlight-colored hair. “Sorry, you won't do.”

Without a whiff of remorse, he shut the door again.

Again, it bounced off a rubber toe.

Jay sighed. This was what was wrong with them. Women. They were tenacious and stubborn in the most troublesome ways. You tried to let them down easy, but they would never take the hint. Why couldn't they appreciate fun and games? Why couldn't they accept when the fun and games were over? But no, they'd always come back—

“Mr. Buchanan,” her low-pitched voice was forced to find its way through the narrow crack in the door, yet still he could hear it over the rumble of the traffic on the highway and the surf’s crash-and-shush at his back. The goose made another march down his spine. “You called me. Remember?”

Right. There was that. With a sigh, he pulled back on the knob to gaze on her again, girly as all get-out. “Look,” he said, “it’s nothing personal. It’s just that I’ve sworn off women.”

His last chef had worked out great. Sandy was businesslike, quiet, and a lesbian to boot. When she’d recommended her friend Nikki, Jay had assumed—which reminded him of one of his grandfather’s favorite old saws, “Assume makes an ass out of u and me”—that she’d be of the same sexual persuasion.

But after studying the woman on his doorstep...well, to put it bluntly, this leggy darling was no dyke.

“Mr. Buchanan—”

He held up his hand, once again wishing like hell he’d had a cup of coffee waiting for him when he rose, which was just another reason to regret this pretty chef person wasn’t an ardent fan of *The L Word*. “I’ve got enough trouble right now, okay? Believe me, I’ve sworn off women.”

Those eyebrows slammed over her nose again. “Then we’re even, because I don’t like men.”

Jay stared in surprise. Could it be? Could his lack of caffeine have impaired his usually impeccable, spot-on radar? “You...” He shook his head, because now he noticed something even more remarkable about her. Pretty chef person, Leggy with Braids, Nikki-who-said-she didn’t-like-

men had the most amazing eyes. One was blue, and one was green. Like a mermaid, like a witch, like a...?

Could it really be? He frowned. "You don't like men?"

She took a breath.

He leaned forward so as not to miss her answer.

Another female's voice found him first. From the vicinity of his back door floated a light, sugary voice that he was painfully familiar with. "Jay? Jay, darling. I can't go another minute without seeing you."

Tension tightened a strangling hand around his neck. He closed his eyes, opened them, and was distracted for a second from the sticky problem coming up behind him by Nikki's pretty, pretty face and those witchy, witchy eyes.

Hmm. Was she or wasn't she?

"Jay?"

Uh-oh. The sticky problem was getting closer.

"Jay, honey, where are you?"

Nikki's bi-colored eyes were big and full of questions.

Jay had one of his own, of course. Did she really dislike men or didn't she? But there wasn't time to speculate, not with the minty breath of his worst double-X chromosome mistake bearing down on him.

And then, bam, it hit him. Call it an impulse, call it a brilliant idea, call it both. He kicked aside the unsettling warning that not all his impulses or even his brilliant ideas had panned out to be oh-so-successful.

Like Mom said, Jay was a hoper.

And now he hoped to kill two birds with one stone. A single, simple move—and oh, how he liked things simple—could clear up one little question as well as one big problem.

As high heels clacked on the tile behind him, he grabbed Nikki-who-might-not-like-men, yanked her across the threshold, then pulled her close for a kiss.

[TAKE ME TENDER](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 1)

[TAKE ME FOREVER](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 2)

[TAKE ME HOME](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 3)

[THE SCANDAL](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 4)

[THE SEDUCTION](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 5)

[THE SECRET](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 6)

EXCERPT – LIGHT MY FIRE

Excerpt – LIGHT MY FIRE

Rock Royalty Book 1

© Copyright 2014 Christie Ridgway

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Chapter One

The children of America's premier rock band learned early to sleep through anything. Late night jam sessions, liquor (and worse) -fueled arguments, raucous parties raging from dark to dawn that were peppered with wild laughter, breaking glass, and the squishy thud of fists against skin. At twenty-four, Cilla Maddox had not lost that skill, though she'd recently come to view it as something less than a gift.

Still, she didn't stir from her curled position on the edge of the king-sized bed when a tall, broad figure entered the room in the middle of the night. No streetlights disturbed the darkness this deep in Laurel Canyon and the newcomer found the bed only by deduction. When, at his sixth cautious step, his shin met an immovable object, he dropped the motorcycle boots and duffel bag he carried to the plush carpet and took a

leap of faith by tipping his long body forward. Finding firm mattress and feathery pillow, he instantly fell into sleep.

Hours later, Cilla came awake to the sound of birds tweeting and chirping their odes to another Southern California morning as they flitted through the shrubbery and tall eucalyptus trees that grew inside and outside the canyon compound where she'd grown up. Eyes closed, she breathed in the country-scented air, such a surprise when the famous Hollywood Boulevard and its twin in notoriety, the Sunset Strip, were less than a mile away. Flopping to her back, she stretched to her full five-feet, five inches. Then she pushed her arms overhead and swept them back down until her fingertips met—

Something solid. Warm. Alive.

On a gasp, her eyes flew open and her head whipped right. She yanked her hand from a man's heavy shoulder to press it against her thrashing heart.

As it continued to beat wildly against her ribs, she stared at her bedmate. Though his body was plastered to the mattress belly-down, his face was turned toward hers and it only took another instant to realize he was no stranger. But recognition didn't calm the overactive organ in her chest that continued sending blood sprinting through her body.

She blinked, just to make sure her eyes weren't deceiving her. They apparently had told the truth, she decided. After years of adolescent fantasies, she was actually sharing a bed with *him*. With Renford Colson.

No mistake, it was her teenage fantasy man. His glossy black hair that tangled nearly to his shoulders. His days'-old stubble of beard that made his mouth look softer, fuller, more

kissable if that was even possible. Those were his spiky lashes resting against his sharp-angled face.

Yet...was he really here? To make herself believe it, she mouthed his name. *Ren*.

As if he heard the silent syllable, his eyes flipped open.

She started, their distinctive color—a silvered green, just like eucalyptus leaves—jolting her to the marrow.

Dark brows met over his straight nose and she watched the drowsiness seep from him as his gaze sharpened. “Priss?”

She frowned. He was the only one to call her that nickname and it had annoyed her since she was old enough to understand it telegraphed something about the way he viewed her. “Excessively proper,” she remembered reading in the dictionary. “Prim.”

“Cilla.” Her voice sounded morning-husky as she made the correction.

One corner of his mouth kicked up. “Priscilla.”

Ugh. That was worse. To her mind, Priscilla was the name of some old-fashioned china doll that was deemed too nice to play with and so grew dusty on a high, forgotten closet shelf. As the youngest “princess” of rock royalty (an article in *Rolling Stone* had described the nine collective children of the Velvet Lemons in just such terms), she’d often been overlooked. Likely Ren hadn’t given her a single thought in the nine years since she’d last seen him.

“Why are you here?” she asked, sitting up.

His gaze dropped from her face to the size XL T-shirt she wore, an authentic Byrds concert souvenir, one of the several such clothing items she’d collected (read: purloined from her

careless father) during her lifetime. “Priss,” Ren remarked with a note of mild surprise, “you’ve grown up.”

Grown-ups didn’t react to the red flush they could feel crawling over their skin. Grown-ups didn’t check out their chest to determine if it was a modest B-cup that led him to such a conclusion. So ignoring both compulsions, she repeated her question. “Why are you here?”

“Couple reasons.” Ren flipped over then jackknifed on the mattress to face her. Both palms rubbed over his eyes and down his cheeks, his beard making a scratchy sound. He’d fallen asleep in his worn jeans and wrinkled dress shirt. On the floor near him were a pair of battered boots and a leather bag, both as black as his hair. His hands went to the buttons marching down his chest.

She swallowed. “What are you doing?”

“I’ve been wearing this damn thing for—Christ, who knows?—it’s got to be a couple of days. However long it took me to get here from Russia with a fucking long layover in Paris.”

Her gaze didn’t leave his nimble fingers as they continued unbuttoning to reveal a stark white undershirt beneath. “You didn’t stop off in London?” That was where he was based. Ren had started as a roadie for the band, then moved into concert tour planning and security. When he’d left the employ of the Velvet Lemons, he’d set up shop across the pond and continued doing the same thing—just not for their fathers’ band.

Cilla couldn’t blame him for that. The three Lemons might as well have been named the Odd Ducks. They’d achieved superstardom in the 1970s and when they were nearing forty, somehow decided they wanted more than sex, riches, and

scandalous reputations. Each had produced three kids before declaring their paternal urges satisfied. No mothers came attached to the children they'd fathered. They'd been bought off or wandered off and as long as Cilla could remember the nine rock progeny had spent their childhoods in the expansive Laurel Canyon compound that consisted of three separate houses and then this smaller cottage where she and Ren had chosen to sleep.

Inspecting the hand-tied quilt covering the bed, Cilla ran her fingers over the psychedelic-inspired design. "You know about Gwen?" she asked, referring to Guinevere Moon, an original Velvet Lemons groupie who'd been the closest to a mother figure the band's offspring ever had. This had been her house.

"Of course," Ren replied. "I couldn't get here for the memorial service, but I came as soon as I was able to make arrangements for my replacement."

As head fixer for some other band's tour, Cilla supposed. "Her real name was Donna Carp," she said, her heart squeezing to think that the spiral-curled, caftan-wearing gentle soul was now gone. "Gwen's, that is."

There was a short silence, then Ren laughed. "Baby, you didn't think she really had Guinevere Moon on her birth certificate?"

Mortification spread heat over Cilla's face once more. Okay, so she had. "Thanks for thinking I'm a fool," she said, glancing up to glare at him.

The spit in her mouth dried.

Ren had tossed his shirt over the side of the bed and then stripped free of the undershirt he'd worn too. Beneath that...

He was cut. Ripped. His abs were perfectly defined above the waistband of his jeans. His pecs were slabs of thick muscle that drew the eye to broad shoulders that led to arms that were sinew, bone, and more muscle. Over his left pectoral began a primitive-yet-elegant tribal tattoo that swirled in black ink over the cap of his shoulder to reach as far as his elbow. Though most of his forearm was unmarked, on his wrist was a lone, stylized half-curve. She stared at it and then his long fingers, unwilling to let her gaze wander back to that beautiful chest.

She'd been fifteen when she'd last seen him. He'd been twenty-two. Then, she'd only dreamed of his kisses, chaste kisses at that, and hadn't wondered about his body or his hands or what he could do to a woman with them.

It was what consumed her thoughts now.

That, and how they were sharing a bed.

Galvanized by that fact, she leaped from beneath the covers, her bare feet landing on the carpet. The overlarge shirt swung around her body, the hem tickling the top of her thighs. With Ren's gaze on her, her attempt at escape seemed a foolhardy choice. Suddenly her legs felt too naked, and she was acutely aware of what was under her tee—just a scrap of lacey panties. In another not-so-suave move, she swiftly re-inserted herself under the quilt and between the warm sheets, pulling them high to conceal more of herself. "It's, uh, cold out there," she said, by way of explanation. Her breathless state made her voice sound reedy.

Ren's expression had gone blank and his thoughts were impossible to interpret. Staring at her, he ran a palm along his stubbled jaw. "You cut your hair, Priss."

Her fingers flew to the bobbed ends. She still wasn't accustomed to how the dark blond stuff curled and waved now that eighteen inches of weight had been taken from its length.

"I thought you'd vowed never to take scissors to it," he continued.

He remembered that? She shrugged. "Like you said, I've grown up." The haircut hadn't been her idea, though, and a wave of humiliation at the memory of it washed over her.

Ren's gaze narrowed. "Priss..."

"Cilla."

"Cilla, then. Something wrong? Something bothering you?"

A lot was bothering her. Up to and including the fact that her old longing for Renford Colson was not dead, but just hibernating until the day his hot body arrived on the doorstep. Now her hormones were stirring and she felt oddly out-of-sorts and unfamiliarly ravenous. Not unlike the California black bears, she figured, that would emerge from their hollow trees and mountain caves in a few short weeks.

"It's been a lousy month or so," she said. He couldn't doubt that. "Gwen's passing, the wild circus the Lemons made of her memorial service before they rushed back out on tour, and then there's the Beck situation."

"Beck?" Ren frowned. "What about Beck?"

The Velvet Lemons' drummer had named his three kids, Beck, Walsh, and Reed—all boys—after musicians he admired: Jeff Beck, Joe Walsh, and Lou Reed. Ren's father had given all three of his progeny, two boys and a girl—Renford, Payne, and Campbell—the surnames of their long-gone mothers. Cilla never got a straight answer from her own

dad. She figured he didn't remember why he'd picked out Priscilla, or why he'd chosen Brody and Bing for her twin older brothers.

She took in a breath, stalling. Beck was the oldest of the nine and Ren was the next closest in age. How would he take the news? "He's missing. Nobody told you that?"

Ren went still. "I don't have regular communication with anyone."

The princes and princesses of rock royalty had scattered as each came of age, but she hadn't realized how out of touch Ren had been. "You don't talk to Payne or Campbell?"

Ren was shaking his head. "Not very often."

"Beck hasn't been in steady contact with Walsh or Reed either. That's why we don't really know exactly how long he's been missing."

"Missing," Ren repeated.

"He took a freelance assignment to do a long piece on the Nile for one of the nature magazines. About nine months ago. No one has heard from him since."

"Hell."

"His dad and the magazine put feelers out, though it's not clear whether Beck is actually lost or merely following the story. It just seems weird that he's been silent for so long."

Ren relaxed, and ran his hand through his hair, giving Cilla another glimpse of that interesting, incomplete-looking tattoo on his wrist. "I'm sure Beck's fine."

Cilla wished she had his certainty. "I hope you're right."

“I am.” He half-turned to punch the pillows behind him then settled back, crossing his arms over that magnificent chest. His biceps bulged.

Gathering the covers closer, Cilla pretended she didn’t notice them. “So...you’re just, uh, passing through on your way back to London?”

“Moscow to London via Paris and L.A.? I know we had shitty upbringings, Pri—*Cilla*, but our schooling wasn’t so bad. Pretty sure you’d see there’s no logic in that.”

There wasn’t logic in anything at the moment. Particularly how she was absolutely electrified by the presence of Ren who was gazing on her like she was a ditzzy puzzle and not a desirable woman.

Though she’d been doubting the desirable part for months already. Her fingers wandered again to the shorn ends of her hair.

She forced her hand to her lap. “So what exactly does bring you home?”

He drew up his knees and rested his wrists on the top of them, his big hands dangling. “I got a package from Gwen’s lawyer, telling me about some box she left me, as well as a key to this place. Then Bean tracked me down. That was a first.”

“String Bean” Colson, the band’s lead guitarist and Ren’s father. “What did he have to say?”

Ren shrugged. “The gist of it was he wanted me to come to the canyon, look things over at the compound since the band’s been gone for months. That, coupled with Gwen’s death...” Looking down, he ran a finger over the tattoo on his wrist. “I decided to check in.”

His gaze lifted to her face. “What are you doing here, Cilla?”

Hiding. Licking my wounds. Trying to resurrect my sense of self in the one place where I always found comfort. “I received my own package from Gwen—including a key as well. So I decided to leave my place at the beach and move to the canyon for a while. She left me her costume collection and I thought I might sort through it from here.”

A brief smile gave her a glimpse of Ren’s straight white teeth. “You always liked to play dress-up.”

Didn’t that make her feel five years old? “It’s my business now,” she said, bristling a little. Cilla’s career had been seeded by Gwen. The older woman had left home at sixteen and become an infamous band groupie. Over the years she’d amassed a vast number of costumes from the most renowned rockers in the world and Cilla had always been fascinated by them. “I make custom clothes for professional dancers, skaters, and yes, even music stars.”

“We really have been out of touch,” Ren said. “I had no clue.”

Cilla lifted a shoulder. “Every Lemon kid left the compound as soon as he or she could and never looked back.”

He studied her. “Which means you, as the youngest, was alone at the end.”

At the beginning and in the middle too. But they’d all had to raise themselves with only Gwen as a stabilizing figure. “I’m okay.” She had been, anyway, until Tad Kersley.

“Sure you are,” Ren murmured, his gaze not leaving her face.

His steady regard lifted chill bumps on the surface of her skin. She suppressed a shiver and tried to think of something to drop into the awkward silence developing between them. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips.

Ren exploded into motion. "I've gotta get into a shower."

Cilla drew back. "Oh, sure. And I can make you some breakfast before you leave."

"Leave?" Ren paused in the process of scooping up his discarded clothes.

"You know." She made a vague gesture. "I'm here. I'll keep an eye on the compound."

"All alone? It's pretty isolated."

It was better than sharing that isolation with him. Cilla wasn't up for dealing with the way he made her tingle all over. Even if she was only just looking, her sexuality was already messed up enough without having to brush up against Ren-tosterone on a daily basis too. "Really, I'm good."

He was looking at her again, in that intense fashion of his. One hand absently traced over the bare skin covering his ribs, re-drawing her attention to all his masculine bone and muscle. God, he was gorgeous, she thought, her own flesh turning hot and her breath catching once again in her throat.

"Yeah," he agreed softly. "I can tell you're good."

Not if he could read her mind. Not if he could know how his sexy body and his beautiful green eyes made her hyper-aware of every erogenous zone between her head and her heels. "So then..."

"We'll talk about it after I shower."

Her palms went damp in desperation. "Really, Ren—"

“I’ll think about it.”

“Look.” She grasped at straws. “It’s not seemly.”

“What?” he asked, clearly puzzled.

Did rock royalty even comprehend such a word? Cilla waved her hand. “Even if you stay at Bean’s house, your old house—”

“If I stay, I’m staying here.”

“Well, *I’m* staying here.” She had to spell it out for him? “So, you know...*you* can’t. Two single people, one a man, one a woman, sharing close quarters...”

A smile split his face. “So that’s not ‘seemly,’” he said, shaking his head. “Priss—”

“*Cilla.*”

His smile didn’t dim. “C’mon. ‘Two single people’? Surely we’re more like...like...”

Oh, don’t go there, she thought on an inner groan. *I’ve enough doubts about myself and my attractiveness to the male sex without you saying what I think you’re about to say.* But then, of course, he did.

“...brother and sister.”

Ren exited Gwen’s small, canary-colored cottage that dripped with gingerbread trim and strolled into the morning sunshine, its warmth immediately starting to dry his shower-damp hair. Narrowing his eyes against the California-brightness, he sucked in a breath and tried shaking off the strangeness of the morning.

Jet lag was seriously screwing with him, he decided. Usually a few hours of sleep would clear his mind. But today, he'd opened his eyes and things had gone from weird—an unexpected woman in his bed—to weirder.

Priscilla Maddox's mouth had turned his normal morning wood to a rod of aching steel.

Shit.

Shoving that thought from his head, he turned in a circle, taking in the pool and tennis court in the distance as well as the three homes where he and the other rock royalty had grown up. At seventy-five yards away, Bean's place was closest. Western-styled, with a shake-shingle exterior and a front door sporting a steer skull, it looked the same as when Ren had lived there. Beyond it was where Mad Dog Maddox had built a rock-faced castle-type abode, with a Rapunzel tower which Ren remembered had been a particular refuge for little Priscilla. The third member of the band, Hop Hopkins, had a severe glass-and-chrome two-story home where Beck, Walsh, and Reed had grown up.

His mind snagging on the missing member of that family, Ren pulled his phone from his jeans pocket and pressed a speed dial number.

"Yo," a male voice answered. "Isn't it like the middle of the night wherever you are?"

"I thought when you went home everything was supposed to seem smaller," Ren said to his half-brother Payne, by way of answering. "It's all so...so." So sun-drenched. So lush. So bright with flowers and birds and colors.

The arresting blue of Cilla's eyes.

There was a small silence. “Are you telling me you’re at the compound?”

“Yeah. I needed a break.” When he said it, Ren realized it was true. He’d been on a grueling schedule for months, years, maybe, and if he told the complete truth, learning of Gwen’s death had thrown him a little. “And Bean put the pressure on me to personally ensure the place was doing okay in the Lemons’ absence.”

“That’s bullshit. A gardener comes by. The pool guy. Seven of the nine of us live within an hour’s drive if traffic isn’t jammed. We’d look in if asked.”

“Well, I’m in California now.” And not resenting the arm-twisting so much. He *did* need a breather. Then his brother’s words sank in, *seven of the nine*, and he remembered his purpose for calling. “Why the hell didn’t you call and tell me that Beck is missing?”

“I didn’t know you’d care.”

That rankled. Ren paused as he started up the path that led toward the fruit orchard planted on the hillside behind the pool. “Way to make me feel like an asshole.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Payne responded mildly. “We all live pretty independently.”

“Shit,” Ren muttered under his breath. “Give me a Cami report,” he ordered, referring to their younger half-sister, Campbell. “And I don’t want to hear that—surprise!—she’s married with a passel of children.”

“As if any of the Lemon progeny are eager for that state,” Payne said, “given that not one of us knows what a normal, healthy relationship looks like.”

Ren grunted. His brother had that right. “So, she’s what...?” Not much would surprise him, not after he’d realized that little Priss—Cilla—had actually grown up and now had a *career*.

“She runs one of my wrecking yards by day,” Payne said. “Getting gigs to sing by night.”

“Hmm.” Ren ran his fingertips over the yellow skin of a lemon as he breathed in the scent of their blossoms. That’s what Cilla had smelled like this morning, he realized. Citrus blossoms. He remembered that Gwen used to rinse the little girls’ hair with water infused with the tiny flowers and he wondered if Cilla continued the practice. “The wrecking yards doing okay?”

“I’m in my element.”

Ren knew that was true. His brother had been crazy for cars—and totaled a few—before he’d even had a driver’s license. They’d all learned to drive a golf cart around the seven-acre compound as soon as they could reach the pedals. Payne had convinced a handyman to strap blocks on them so he could crash and burn earlier than the rest.

“So how long are you staying?” Payne asked now.

“I don’t know that I am,” Ren said, grimacing. As much as a vacation sounded like an appealing idea, there was the issue of Cilla to consider. Finding her sharing the pillows had been a surprise, and a bigger shock came when he realized she’d gone from the coltish adolescent he remembered to a lovely, blue-eyed blonde with a tight body and an adorable tendency to blush.

It scared the hell out of him.

No, scratch that. His reaction to the succulent small package that was Cilla Maddox was what alarmed him. And the intensity of that alarm was only further alarming.

Shit.

She was too sweet for a man like him. Too good for what he'd wanted to do to her, with her, the minute he'd put his eyes on her. But her bare legs and the touch of her pink tongue to her lush upper lip had made him ache like a raw nerve. As much as he found her worry about seamlines amusing, she had a point.

Two single people, one a man, one a woman, sharing close quarters...

Too bad it sounded so damn tempting.

A crackling noise came over the line from Payne's end. Likely the sound of him breaking into a package of his favorite breakfast of strawberry Pop-Tarts with sprinkles. "You came all this way just to take off again?" his brother asked around a mouthful of unhealthiness.

"Cilla's here."

"Yeah?" Payne munched again. "Cami ran into her at a club where she was playing a couple months back. She's into costume design or something."

"Mmm." Ren swung around to glance at the cottage and his gaze instantly found the woman in question. She'd wandered out of the cottage too, and stood in a shaft of sunshine. It caught all the gold in her cap of wavy, bouncy hair. A pair of cropped jeans hugged her curvy hips. The outside seam on each side of light denim was embroidered in a dark blue pattern that was repeated on the straps of the sleeveless, peasant-y top she wore. The hippie-chic style

suited her. A dozen narrow bracelets circled one wrist and he remembered that each of her fingernails had been painted a different color.

The Byrds T-shirt had looked damn good on her too, the logo of five swirly letters in red and yellow on black cotton draping her high breasts.

“She had a boyfriend with her,” Payne added.

Ren went instantly alert. “What?” Maybe that was why Cilla wanted to get rid of him. She was at the canyon for nookie-time with the man in her life.

“They broke up, though. Cami and Cilla made a date for coffee and when that day came, Cilla said the guy was history. Cami figured she’d really decided to move on because she’d also lost her long mane of hair.”

Something about that story sent a cold finger down Ren’s spine. He shrugged the uneasiness away and ran his palm over his clean-shaven cheek. “She’s not a big fan of being at the compound with me.”

“What’s the big deal? You’re practically a brother to her.”

Except Ren wasn’t, he thought, closing his eyes. He was seven years older and back in the day, he’d had little contact with her. And no man who was practically a brother to a woman would be experiencing this unsettling and powerful surge of raw horniness every time he looked at her.

Maybe he should have gotten laid more often in Moscow.

What warned him next, he couldn’t say. But he opened his eyes in time to see a couple of scruffy young men summiting the ten-foot wall that separated Gwen’s cottage from the narrow, one-lane road that led to the compound. Cilla still

remained in her ray of sun, unaware of the strangers invading her bucolic moment right behind her back.

A wave of protectiveness welled in Ren's chest and he started toward her at a run. "Gotta go, Payne," he told his brother. "But just so you know, Cilla's no sister to me."

[LIGHT MY FIRE](#) (Rock Royalty Book 1)

[LOVE HER MADLY](#) (Rock Royalty Book 2)

[BREAK ON THROUGH](#) (Rock Royalty Book 3)

[TOUCH ME](#) (Rock Royalty Book 4)

[WISHFUL SINFUL](#) (Rock Royalty Book 5)

[WILD CHILD](#) (Rock Royalty Book 6)

[WHO DO YOU LOVE](#) (Rock Royalty Book 7)

[LOVE ME TWO TIMES](#) (Rock Royalty Book 8)

ALSO BY CHRISTIE RIDGWAY

[All In](#) (7-Stud Club Book 1)

[No Limit](#) (7-Stud Club Book 2)

[Ante Up](#) (7-Stud Club Book 3)

[Slow Play](#) (7-Stud Club Book 4)

[Wild Card](#) (7-Stud Club Book 5)

[Smooth Call](#) (7-Stud Club Book 6)

[Dealer's Choice](#) (7-Stud Club Book 7)

[Take Me Tender](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 1)

[Take Me Forever](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 2)

[Take Me Home](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 3)

[The Scandal](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 4)

[The Seduction](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 5)

[The Secret](#) (Billionaire's Beach Book 6)

[Our Last First Kiss](#) (Heartbreak Hotel Book 1)

[Me and Mr. Jones](#) (Heartbreak Hotel Book 2)

[My Quickest Wedding](#) (Heartbreak Hotel Book 3)

[We Belong Together](#) (Heartbreak Hotel Book 4), *Coming soon!*

[Almost Wonderful](#) (Almost Book 1)

[Almost Always](#) (Almost Book 2)

[Almost Everything](#) (Almost Book 3)

[Almost Paradise](#) (Almost Book 4)

[Light My Fire](#) (Rock Royalty Book 1)

[Love Her Madly](#) (Rock Royalty Book 2)

[Break on Through](#) (Rock Royalty Book 3)

[Touch Me](#) (Rock Royalty Book 4)

[Wishful Sinful](#) (Rock Royalty Book 5)

[Wild Child](#) (Rock Royalty Book 6)

[Who Do You Love](#) (Rock Royalty Book 7)

[Love Me Two Times](#) (Rock Royalty Book 8)

Rock Royalty Boxed Set – Books 1-3

One Look (One & Only Book 1)

One Kiss (One & Only Book 2)

One Night (One & Only Book 3)

One Love (One & Only Book 4)

Make Him Wild (Intoxicating Book 1)

Make Him Want (Intoxicating Book 2)

Make Him Stay (Intoxicating Book 3)

7 Brides for 7 Blackthornes - Multi-Author Series

Devlin - Barbara Freethy (#1)

Jason - Julia London (#2)

Ross - Lynn Raye Harris (#3)

Phillip - Cristin Harber (#4)

Brock - Roxanne St. Claire (#5)

Logan - Samantha Chase (#6)

Trey - Christie Ridgway (#7)

7 Brides for 7 Soldiers - Multi-Author Series

Ryder - Barbara Freethy (#1)

Adam - Roxanne St. Claire (#2)

Zane - Christie Ridgway (#3)

Wyatt - Lynn Raye Harris (#4)

Jack - Julia London (#5)

Noah - Cristin Harber (#6)

Ford - Samantha Chase (#7)

Must Love Mistletoe (Holiday Duet Book 1)

Not Another New Year's (Holiday Duet Book 2)

Holiday Duet Boxed Set

First Comes Love (In Hot Water Book 1)

Then Comes Marriage (In Hot Water Book 2)

Nothing But Blue Skies

Out on a Limb (novella)

Snow Job

The Thrill of It All

Three Little Words

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestseller Christie Ridgway is the author of over 70 novels of contemporary romance. All her books are both sexy and emotional and tell stories of heroes and heroines who learn to believe in the power of love. Christie is a six-time *RITA* finalist and has won best contemporary romance of the year and career achievement awards from *Romantic Times Book Reviews*. A native of California, Christie now resides in the southern part of the state with her family. Inspired by the beaches, mountains, and cities that surround her, she writes tales of sunny days and steamy nights.

[Visit Christie's website](#)

[Meet up with her on Facebook](#)

[Follow her on Twitter](#)

[Sign up for Christie's Newsletter](#)