

a sweet, small town romance

Faking
WITH MY
BROTHER'S
BEST
FRIEND



AVA WAKEFIELD

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A Sweet, Small Town Romance

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Ava Wakefield Romance, LLC

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Chapter One

Caroline

Instead of ending my wedding with thunderous applause and a romantic kiss, I bring my beautiful, whimsical-themed ceremony to an end by fleeing the chapel before we even reach our vows.

“Caroline!”

With my white gown bunched in my hands, I kick off my heels and hurry down the sidewalk. I hear the voice of my ex-fiancé sounding from behind, but I keep running as my veil flies off my head and strands of wavy, blonde hair unravel. I don’t worry about comforting him. He probably has no clue I’ve caught on to him and all his lies. I wonder if he even realizes the perfume I smelled on his jacket this morning when we met with our photographer isn’t mine—poor guy.

But I digress. All I can think about right now is how long it will take me to run home, take off this silly dress, and eat Chinese takeout until I pass out.

Maybe it’s not how I pictured my night going, but I’d much rather end my wedding day single than with the wrong guy. And somewhere, the right man is out there. I just—!

“Oof!” I gasp as I turn the corner and collide with something solid. I stumble backward, thinking I’ve somehow hit a wall, but the wall suddenly has hands that grab my waist.

“Caroline?”

Ugh... *it can't be*. I steady myself and look up into the familiar green eyes of none other than Aiden Reeves, who pitches me the same stern look he's given me since we were kids. He's my older brother Max's best friend, which wouldn't be an issue if he wasn't as handsome as he is a total grump.

"What are you doing here?" I question him as I lift an eyebrow. It takes only a second to realize my hands are resting on the bulging pec muscles that protrude from his dark blue Sweet Water Fire Department T-shirt. I try to be stealthy as I remove them, but I can't help but look away with a dumb deer in headlights expression on my face.

"Jogging before my shift. I should be asking you the same," Aiden says, letting go of me and eyeing me up and down with an annoyingly amused smirk. "Aren't you supposed to be getting married right now?"

Since the fire station is right around the corner, I suppose I *am* the one out of place. His words hit me like a punch to the gut, but I straighten up and try my best to play it cool.

"Aren't *you* supposed to be rescuing people from fires right now?" I pitch back, not wanting to get into the truth with him. Who knows what he'll chastise me about this time? When we were younger, Aiden and I always butted heads. He thinks I'm too carefree and, therefore, reckless. And I think he's a total stick in the mud who wouldn't know fun if it jumped out of a cake and yelled, "Surprise!"

But such is my luck that Max would choose him, of all people, to form a lifelong bromance with.

Aiden gives me a pointed look as he crosses his arms over his chest, and I feel my face grow hot again. His muscles are noticeably bigger than they were the last time I saw him, and the sandy blonde hair I teased him for wearing in a ‘man-bun’ is now much shorter and compliments his neatly trimmed beard. I can’t help my mind as it wanders.

I know he’s a single dad, but I don’t know if he’s still... single. Not that it matters to me, but even without him looking like a shaggy beach bum, it would take a special kind of woman to deal with all his moody angst.

“Why do I always find you in some sort of trouble, Caroline?”

I wrinkle my nose at him, not liking his tone. He always acts like I’m some troublemaker when it’s usually quite the opposite.

“Says the man who got detention three times in one week,” I say, shooting his pointed look right back at him.

Aiden scoffs and shakes his head. “Now, you know that wasn’t my fault. That was—”

“Caroline!”

Speaking of troublemakers, I hear Max calling out from behind us. I whirl around and see him jogging toward me in his black suit, and a sheepish look fills my face.

“What in the world are you doing?” Max asks, leaning over to catch his breath. “Who runs from their own wedding?”

“I was just wondering the same thing,” Aiden says, drawing my attention back to him. His presence is so... demanding—like nothing else can be the center of attention. Or maybe it’s just hard for me to ignore him. His stern attitude *definitely* makes him hard to ignore.

I look between the two of them as the magnitude of the current situation hits me like a Mack truck. Did I actually *run* from my own wedding and leave all my friends and family sitting in their pews with no explanation? They must think I’m a total basket case!

“I’ll talk to you, but I’m not going back to that chapel,” I murmur to Max, not wanting to give Aiden any more arsenal than he already has. My sheer lack of luck when it comes to love is none of his business. Besides, what happened wasn’t *entirely* my fault. But I’m still the one who crashed the wedding by abruptly running away from it, and I know I will have to face the music eventually... just not today.

Max nods and bumps the side of his fist against Aiden’s. “I’m going to sort this out. I’ll see you at the bonfire?” Max asks.

He’s referring to the town’s biweekly bonfires down on the beach. They kick off at the start of every summer and usually run through the end of Sweet Water High’s football season.

“Yeah, my shift is about to start, but I’ll be there,” Aiden says before looking over at me.

My heart beats heavily in my chest as our eyes briefly meet.

I hardly ever miss a bonfire, but I don't recall the last time I saw Aiden show up for one. My initial reaction is a confused, conflicting web of feelings when I think about running into him again so soon.

Am I looking forward to it or dreading it?

Why can't I settle on an answer?

Aiden's eyes sweep over my wedding dress one more time. "You look nice," he says and continues his jog toward the fire station.

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. Wow. Did Aiden compliment me? Baffled, I turn to Max, who crosses his arms and gives me an expectant look.

"What happened, Caroline?" Max asks. "You were head over heels for Eric when I saw you this morning."

He's right. I *was*. It's crazy how quickly things changed, though. I went from being a happy bride-to-be to a bitter ex-fiance in what feels like a snap of the fingers.

"Eric isn't in love with me," I blurt out the words with clenched fists. "He—He's in love with someone else." I look down as the weight of my words sinks to the bottom of my stomach. How embarrassing.

But I suppose being left at the altar is pretty humiliating, too.

Max's eyes grow wide in surprise. "Care.... How do you know? I mean—Are you sure?"

A cold laugh leaves me as I look down at the dress I spent hundreds of dollars on. You best believe it'll be returned tomorrow.

“Oh, I'm sure,” I scoff, and my chest tightens. The realization that I'll have to start over again is almost more than I can bear. This was supposed to be it for me. Eric was supposed to be the *one*. I blink back the surge of tears. “I'll explain later, I promise, but I just need some time right now.”

Max sighs as he glances back in the direction of the chapel. “Well, go on and make a run for it, then. It might be DEFCON 1 by the time I get back there, but I'll take care of it,” Max says.

I throw my arms around him and hug him so tight it knocks the breath out of him. “Thanks, Max. I owe you one!”

I just hope he knows how much I mean it. Explaining my sudden case of cold feet five million times is not what I need to be doing right now. Orange chicken, my cat, and my couch are all calling my name, and I want nothing more than to escape this awful day.

Max squirms out of my death grip. He pushes back and gently places his hands on my shoulders. “I really am sorry, Care,” he says, looking deep into my eyes. “You know I'm always here for you. Call me whenever you're ready to talk about it.”

My face softens, and I give him a look of gratitude. I have the best older brother in the world. Max still has a hard time with it, so we hardly ever talk about it, but our parents died in

a plane crash when we were away at college, and he's been my rock ever since.

"It's for the best," I say, smiling.

I give his cheek a light pat before turning and continuing down Main Street toward my neighborhood, where my small but cozy beach bungalow awaits.

I don't get far before a fire truck pulls out of the station with its lights and sirens blaring. It stops me dead in my tracks, and my eyes trail the large vehicle as it turns and drives in my direction, blowing past me and giving my dress and hair a little ruffle. With a lazy smile, I imagine Aiden inside with his gear on.

My heart skips a beat, and I snap myself out of my thoughts before picking up my pace. Now is not the time to be ogling over Aiden Reeves and his perfectly chiseled bod.

Tomorrow is a new day, and it's time to start thinking about my happily ever after—Version 2.0.

Chapter Two

Aiden

My silver F-150 roars down the road, and I roll down the window to feel the breeze blowing off the Gulf of Mexico. The beach is pristine with white sand and water like glass, and with fall just around the corner, tourism is finally starting to slow down. You'd never know it with this intense heat, though. I reach down and crank up my air conditioner to full blast.

“Daddy, can we get ice cream?”

My eyes shift to the rearview mirror, and Kaylee, my seven-year-old daughter, looks at me with the cutest toothy smile as she hugs the giant stuffed unicorn she's had since birth. She has long, chestnut brown hair that she wears in a side braid and hates cutting, and I'm pretty sure she'd let it grow to her feet if I allowed it. I think about the possibility of her looking like Cousin Itt one day and smile.

“We still have a few more stops, but we can swing by Third Coast Creamery on the way home,” I say, looking back at the road ahead. The beach runs for miles, but Sweet Water only gets a small piece. It amazes me how much there is to do for such a small town. Aside from epic surf and year-round fishing, there's always some festival or farmer's market on the weekend.

“Sweet!” Kaylee shouts and pumps a fist before returning her gaze to the tankers in the distance.

The side of my mouth curls up a little. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me. She's so smart and funny, but she also has a heart of gold. Of course, she gets most of her good traits from her mom, who we lost three years ago to brain cancer. But I'm proud to announce that the apple didn't fall too far from the tree. She gets her dry sarcasm from me, and I couldn't be prouder.

I'll admit, the last few years have worn me down. Finding my footing as a single dad has been a challenge, but that little ball of sunshine in the backseat helps me forge forward.

Kaylee jumps as my phone rings and starts vibrating on my center console. I grab it and answer. "Hello?"

"Um... hey, Aiden."

It's a voice I'd recognize from anywhere. "Caroline? Hey. What's... going on?" I'm surprised by the call. Caroline and I don't exactly have the best track record. She's impulsive and makes decisions based on emotions. She's never logical, and it drives me up the wall worrying about what kind of trouble she will get into next.

Ever since I moved to Sweet Water in the third grade, Max has been my best friend. So, I always saw Caroline as the annoying kid sister who wanted to tag along everywhere we went. Usually, I wouldn't care, but Caroline seemed to attract danger. And anytime she got hurt doing something stupid, me and Max took the blame. Now that we're adults, we don't go out of our way to talk to each other without Max as a buffer, and I don't think I've seen her since before Holly passed.

My mind flashes back to the sight of Caroline in her wedding dress, and the visual stirs up an unfamiliar emotion that I want to shove back down.

I know I shut myself off from the world after Kaylee's mom. I never go out except for taking Kaylee to meet up with Max for an occasional dinner or cookout, and I stopped dating because I didn't want Kaylee to think I was trying to replace her mom. I only told Max I'd meet him at the bonfire because I promised Kaylee I'd take her if she cleaned all the dirty clothes out from under her bed.

"I didn't know who else to call, but I was moving some of my stuff back into my house from—it doesn't matter. I'm calling because my cat, Jasper, got out, and now he's stuck in a tree." Caroline sounds reluctant as she speaks. "Do you think you can come get him out?"

A slight tingle of amusement buzzes in my chest. I know she paced back and forth, trying to think of anyone else to call, but clearly, I'm the only man for the job.

"Sure. I'll be right over," I say, ending the call before she can get in another word. "Hey Kaylee, want to go help me save a cat from a tree?"

Kaylee gasps. "Yeah. Is it hurt?"

"No, he's fine. He's just stuck," I say, making a U-turn and heading toward the street that leads to Caroline's neighborhood. "I'm sure you'll even be able to pet him if he's not too scared."

I only know where she lives because Max asked me to help him weather-proof her house years back when she moved in. We've been lucky so far, but every hurricane season is an adventure, and we never know what to expect.

Kaylee swings her feet with excitement and wiggles in her car seat.

I take another right and drive down Paradise Cove Avenue, passing by little houses with vibrant, green front yards, palm trees, and colorful vinyl exteriors. I can spot Caroline's house from down the street because the outside is painted a light blue that rivals the Florida sky on its clearest day.

Caroline is standing outside in a white tank top and jeans shorts, peering up at one of the palm trees in her front yard.

"Who's that, Dad?" Kaylee asks as I park on the side of the street. "She's pretty."

Something stirs in my chest as I glance at Caroline. She's stunning, but I can't help the pang of guilt that hits me when the thought crosses my mind. She's Max's sister... and she *just* got out of a relationship.

"That's Caroline. She's Uncle Max's sister," I say before shutting off my truck and getting out. I help Kaylee out of the backseat and take her hand before we make our way to Caroline.

"How long has he been up there?"

Caroline looks up at me, then down at Kaylee, and completely ignores my question.

“Oh, hi! I love your shoes,” she says, gesturing to Kaylee’s pink and white sneakers.

“Thank you. Dad let me get them for me for school. My name is Kaylee.”

I smile at her good manners. I might be single, but I try my best.

“It’s nice to meet you, Kaylee. I’m Caroline.”

“Look what I can do, Caroline.” Kaylee stomps a foot, and pink neon lights flash through clear windows in the sole.

“Whoa, that’s so cool! Maybe they’ll help us get Jasper down from that tree,” she says, looking back up at me.

“He’s been up there for at least half an hour. I’ve tried to coax him down, but he looks scared stiff.”

I look up and see Jasper hiding in a nook where all the branches connect. “I’ll get my ladder and see what I can do.”

Caroline waits with Kaylee and looks up at Jasper while I run to my truck. “Hold on, buddy... Help is coming!”

I jog across the street and drop the tailgate of my truck. The bed is full of tools and other miscellaneous equipment. Being a firefighter, you learn fast how to be well-prepared for emergencies.

I grab my extension ladder and head back across the street to position it at the tree’s base and start my climb. It’s a strong ladder, but it’s old and starts to rattle when I’m halfway up.

“Oh... be careful.”

I glance down and see concern in Caroline's eyes.

I remember being at the house with Max when she brought Jasper home for the first time. He was just a mangy-looking kitten she found behind a dumpster at the gas station, and she was determined to nurse him back to health. I nod and continue, determined to get him down safely.

"Come on, Jasper. I know you remember me," I say, reaching the top of the ladder. I secure my foot on the top rung, coming face-to-face with him.

His eyes go wide, and his tail puffs up. He tries to back away at first, but when I grab him under my arm, he scrambles and latches his claws into my back, holding on for dear life.

I wince and grit my teeth as I start my slow descent back down.

"Hooray!" Kaylee cheers and claps her hands. "You saved him!"

Caroline laughs and nods. "He sure did." she agrees.

She coaxes Jasper until he retracts his claws and happily takes him from me. Then, she reaches out and places a hand on the back of my shoulder. Her touch feels warm. Or maybe it's just pain from the scratches. Either way, it feels nice.

"Sorry about that, but thank you. Really."

I shake my head, not needing an apology or a thanks. I do this more often than she realizes.

"Couldn't just leave him up there. He's your best friend."

Caroline smirks. “You’re making me sound like some lonely cat lady,” she says, then pauses with a thoughtful look. “Well, maybe I am.”

I glance toward her house and see her door still hanging wide open. Two cardboard boxes sit on her front porch. I suspect they’re from her ex-fiancé’s house, and my curiosity rises. I wonder what happened between them.

“You’re not a lonely cat lady, Caroline.”

Caroline smiles, ignoring me again, and bends down so Kaylee can see Jasper. “You can pet him,” she says, giving Jasper a good scratch on the back of the neck. “See? It’s okay.”

Kaylee looks up at me for approval, and I secretly hope she thinks I’m a wizard for being able to predict the future.

With my nod of approval, Kaylee places a shaky hand on Jasper’s back and gently smooths down his fur.

“He’s so soft,” she says in a whisper and continues to pet him.

“I know, right?” Caroline says. “Sometimes, I want to use him as a pillow because he’s so soft.”

Kaylee giggles, and it becomes so uncontrollable that I worry she might have an accident.

I watch their exchange and feel my chest begin to swell. I always knew Caroline was good with kids. She was one of the town’s top-paid babysitters when we were teenagers.

And I'll admit, it's nice seeing Kaylee get along so well with another woman. But I'm still unsure how I feel about her getting attached to Caroline, especially since Caroline and I have a long-standing history of driving each other up the wall.

I don't always know if I'm making the right decisions as a dad. Should I date, or shouldn't I? Bringing a new woman into our lives at this point in the game feels terrifying, but I know Kaylee deserves to be happy. And whether I choose to date or not, it's my job to make sure that happens.

What if she resents me for bringing a new woman into our lives or feels I'm not giving her the attention she needs? The choices I make now can have consequences that last the rest of her life, and I don't want to screw this up.

"I can take these boxes inside for you," I offer. When she doesn't object, I head to the porch and move them inside. All sorts of local art hangs on the walls in Caroline's living room, and her house smells like lavender and lemons. I don't stick around for long before heading back outside to tell Kaylee it's time to go and to say goodbye to Caroline and Jasper.

Caroline takes a step closer as she holds Jasper close to her chest. Her expression is soft, and I can tell she's worn out. "Thanks again."

"No problem."

Just then, a light Gulf breeze blows through her hair, and I'm hit with a new scent of vanilla and coconuts. It's intoxicating. I nod quickly and leave before I become rooted to the spot.

I didn't expect to run into Caroline twice in one week, and with the bonfire coming up, that'll make three.

They say the third time's a charm... but third time for *what*?

Chapter Three

Caroline

Enthusiastic shouts and upbeat music fill the air as the bonfire begins.

Supported by a large teepee built by members of the local football team, the fire is massive and crackles as its flames reach into the night sky.

Barefoot and laughing, Sweet Water residents of all ages gather around under a crescent moon and blanket of stars to dance, make smores, and catch up. It's by far one of my favorite parts of being a local.

I weave through a small crowd of people standing close to the fire and take in the smell of smoke and burning wood. A part of me winces, knowing I'll have to wash my hair when I get home, but seeing the town come together like this makes it worth every drop of the shampoo it will take to get the stench out.

"There she is. Caroline!"

I turn and see my brother standing next to a large ice chest. On the opposite side is Aiden, wearing black swim trunks and a *very* fitted gray tank top. I feel my temperature rise and scold myself for forgetting he was coming.

I know it's not his scene, but he seems relaxed enough around Max. I wonder if he's learned to have any fun since high school.

I greet my brother with a hug, and he gives me a concerned look when we break apart.

“How are you doing?”

I sigh and shrug. He’s asked me that question every day since I called off the wedding. I can’t be too mad, though. If it weren’t for Max’s damage control that day, my phone would *still* be blowing up with an arsenal of questions from half the town.

As for Eric, I haven’t talked to him in person, but I did send him a message telling him I’d be coming over to get my things while he was at work. I even wished him and Megan a happy life. Then... I *might* have blocked him.

Life would be so much easier if I could move on and never see him again, but I know that’s wishful thinking in a small town like Sweet Water.

“I’m fine,” I say, trying to think of a way to change the subject to something less depressing. “Did Aiden tell you he saved Jasper?”

Max grins and pats Aiden on the back.

“He sure did. He said he hurried right over because he knows how important Jasper is to you.”

I lift a brow in surprise.

Aiden looks at his feet and shakes his head as the corner of his mouth turns up.

“Just doing my job. Off-duty.”

Is that a smile? It must be by his standards. And if anyone ever asked, I'd never admit it, but a smile suits him well.

"I'll have to make it up to you somehow," I say, meeting his gaze.

Aiden knows how to push my buttons, but it was a nice thing he did, helping me out today. I feel like I owe him one.

Before Aiden can reply, a shout sounds from behind us.

"Night swim!"

A small laugh breaks from me as I watch a group of teenagers run toward the water and splash through the whitewash. There's just enough light from the moon to be able to see. I glance at Max, and he gestures toward the shore.

"Shall we?"

"Duh," I laugh.

Pulling off my t-shirt and cut-off jeans, I think about how relieved I am to have gotten my favorite swimsuit back from Eric's house. I can't imagine wearing the only other bikini tucked away in my sock drawer. Not only is it over ten years old and faded, but I think it's safe to say I've outgrown it since high school.

I toss my clothes in a pile next to Max's shirt and look up at Aiden.

"You coming?"

Aiden watches Max disappear into the water with the others but still looks unsure. So, I give him my best puppy dog eyes

until he caves.

I have to pinch myself when he peels off his shirt. With all those new muscles, he looks more handsome than ever before. Disastrously handsome.

“You first,” he says, giving a challenging look.

Wow, Aiden Reeves wants to have a little fun now, too? It’s like my birthday and Christmas decided to get together and have a love child.

I smile, motioning him to follow before I run toward the shoreline.

“Ohh—!” When the first cold wave crashes against my legs, I shriek but continue pressing forward until my feet leave the sand beneath me and the water calms.

Aiden swims after me, the reflection of the night sky rippling on the water’s surface. We stop swimming and turn to face each other when we’re both far enough out not to touch the bottom.

“I haven’t swum out here in forever,” he admits.

I study his eyes and notice a sparkle I’ve never seen before.

“Why not?” I ask. He’s always been the serious one of the group. Sometimes, he’d harp on me so much that he started sounding like my father.

“*Be real, Caroline,*” and “*don’t be so reckless,*” he’d always say. He always turned his nose up at spontaneity and risk-taking.

Then, my mind flashes to the woman he used to be married to. I wonder if any of that has changed since she—

“I don’t know,” Aiden says, breaking my train of thought. “I guess I’ve been too busy focusing on work and taking care of Kaylee.”

“You should bring her out for a swim. The water is perfect this time of year. I bet she’d love it,” I say, hoping my words sound sincere enough to be encouraging. “You *do* have room in your life for fun, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Aiden smirks and changes the subject. “So, are you still working at the coffee shop?”

I nod as we continue to tread water, and the steady rocking of the waves slowly pulls us closer.

I realize I haven’t seen Max since we got out here, but talking to Aiden one-on-one isn’t as terrible as I thought it might be. Aside from him helping with Jasper, this is probably one of the most civil conversations we’ve had in our adult lives.

“You should come by. I make a mean cappuccino,” I say. “Unless you’re one of those grumps who drinks his coffee black.”

“Hey... what’s wrong with black coffee?” he asks, amusement lacing his voice.

Aiden might not realize the conversation he’s getting himself into. I can talk about coffee for days, and to say I’m obsessed would be an understatement.

“Nothing at all. It’s just that there are so many exciting things you can do with coffee. Think of all the different flavors and exotic blends you can experiment with. You’re limiting yourself when you stick to the same thing all the time and with the right blend of milk and syrups—who knows? You may open yourself up to a whole new experience.”

Aiden stares blankly for a moment before cracking a deep, guttural laugh that perfectly suits his muscular body and chiseled face.

“I have no idea what any of that means,” he says, proving my point that he’s still as dull as ever.

“Well, then... come by the coffee shop, and I’ll whip you up something amazing. I promise you’ll love it.”

I swim closer and hold out my pinky, but Aiden rolls his eyes and splashes me. “What are we, five years old?”

“I don’t care how old we are. We grew up on the rule that pinky swears are sacred, and I’m promising that my coffee will blow your mind.”

He narrows his eyes and gives me a suspicious look.

“Oh, come on. Afraid I’ll prove you wrong?” I challenge him.

“You’re incredibly competitive. You know that, right?” Aiden swims closer until there’s only a foot of space between us.

I don’t even try to argue as I wiggle my pinky inches away from his face. He knows I’m not the type to shy away from a

little friendly competition.

“You have to take risks every once in a while, Aiden.”

Air puffs out of his nose in an amused manner, and he finally gives in, wrapping his pinky around mine.

“Fine. I’ll promise I’ll stop by... one of these days.”

I smile and part my lips to speak, but the sound of shouting cuts me off.

“Watch out!”

“Ball incoming!”

I catch sight of a brightly colored neon football making a beeline toward my face before I forcefully launch myself out of the way of its trajectory. Fortunately, the ball whizzes past my head and crashes into the water a few feet away, but I can’t stop my momentum and crash into Aiden. We both go down under the surface for a moment.

Grabbing my arms, he kicks his feet and pushes us past the surface as I inhale sharply, trying to catch my breath. Driven by instinct, my arms automatically throw themselves around his neck.

“Whoa, calm down. I got you. Geez, can’t you swim?”

I draw back enough to shoot him a glare.

“Yes, I can *swim!*”

After a few seconds, Aiden’s lips slowly curl into a half-smile, and he lets out another laugh. “Alright. Just making sure since you nearly drowned us.”

He still holds my arms, and his grip is firm. I can't stop the laugh that leaves me, my head shaking. "I panicked, okay?" I say, our laughter mingling for a second before dying down. Silence lingers between us as we peer at each other, and a fluttering sensation fills my chest. It's like the atmosphere shifts, and it's just us in this endless ocean. *What in the world is going on?*

There's no time to collect my thoughts before Max swims over to us, and I quickly push away from Aiden, placing a safe amount of distance between us.

Chalk up any awkwardness to the fact that he's incredibly good-looking. Any woman with eyes would react the same if she were in my shoes, right? It's not like my feelings for him have changed. He's still Max's best friend and a royal pain.

But I have to admit... I do kind of like this new side of Aiden.

I wonder what else is beneath that tough exterior.

Chapter Four

Aiden

“Be good for Grandma and Grandpa, okay? I’ll be back in the morning to pick you up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Kaylee’s always an angel,” my mom says, playfully swatting my arm and giving me a peck on the cheek.

My parents’ house is on the outskirts of town and about a thirty-minute drive from the coast, but they’re always willing to help out with Kaylee as long as I agree to let them spoil her rotten when she visits.

“Sorry again for the late notice. Landon called out sick for the night shift, so I have to sub in,” I say, looking between my mom and dad.

I know they’re getting up there in age, but each time I see them, I notice more grey hair and wrinkles that fill the creases of their smiling faces. I know Max and Caroline lost their parents years back, so I try to remember to make time while they’re still around.

“We’re here anytime you need us, son. You know that,” my dad says, giving me a solid pat on the back. “We’ll see you for breakfast in the morning. I’m sure your mom and Kaylee will be up bright and early making pancakes.”

“Can we?” Kaylee looks up at her grandma with pleading eyes.

“We’ll make a whole stack,” my mom promises.

“Yay!” Kaylee cheers. “Bye, Daddy.”

“Bye, sweetie.”

I drop a kiss on the top of her head and say goodbye to my parents before hurrying to my truck. I climb into the cab and check my phone. I have just under an hour before I have to be at the station. I wasn’t prepared to work the late shift tonight, but my schedule can be unpredictable.

As I drive back to town, I decide to make a pit stop at Third Coast Coffee. I’ll have to be quick, but there should be enough time to swing by and grab a quick cup of coffee before they close.

I turn onto Main Street and park on the side of the road before walking around to the front of the coffee shop.

The coffee shop has been around since Max and I were in Junior High, but it’s changed over the years. Rumor has it that the original owners had to file bankruptcy, and after a new owner took over, the place gets a facelift every five or ten years when it starts looking a little weathered.

A neon OPEN sign currently hangs in the front window, and carved wooden letters read THIRD COAST COFFEE. The letters are painted light blue with a white exterior and hang above an entrance that faces the beach.

I’m hit with a blast of cold air when I push through the glass door and enter the empty coffee shop. It’s a pleasant change from the wet and warm air outside.

I look around at the golden strings of light strung from the ceiling before winding through a maze of glass tables and wicker chairs toward a counter with a giant chalkboard menu on the wall behind it.

“Welcome to Third Coast Coffee! I’ll be with you in just a sec—!”

I smile, recognizing Caroline’s voice as it echoes from behind a small door on the other side of the counter. While I’m waiting, the smell of coffee grounds and baked goods makes my mouth water. What is it about this woman and all the heavenly smells that linger when she’s around?

Caroline pops out of the kitchen with her hair tied back in a ponytail, a black apron secured around her waist, and the cutest look of panic creeping across her face.

“Oh, hey. You came!” she says, dusting her hands off on a dish towel. “Decided to take me up on my offer, huh?”

“Something like that,” I say, leaning down and resting my forearms on the counter. “I’m working the late shift and figured a little caffeine might help get me through the night. That, and you did promise me an amazing cup of coffee.”

“Yes, I did. Alright, Reeves. In honor of your bravery, this one’s on the house.”

Caroline turns to grab a canister of coffee grounds and glances at the clock on the wall. “Cutting it close, aren’t you?”

I smirk as I watch her flip on the espresso machine.

“Maybe. Better not screw it up then.”

Caroline pitches a playful look over her shoulder. “Do you remember the time you and Max tried taking over my lemonade stand? You and I were fighting over the best way to get juice out of the lemons?”

It feels like a lifetime has passed since those days, and I shake my head thinking about all the petty things we used to fight over. It’s like we were itching to find something to argue about. I’d never admit it now, but I always thought Caroline was cute when she was mad. Sometimes, I would push her buttons just to see how red her face would get.

“You never do listen to the voice of reason. You just don’t want to admit your way was inferior.”

Caroline scoffs and starts making an espresso shot. She grabs a pitcher and pours milk into it, moving quickly as she whips together whatever concoction she’s about to serve me.

“Ha! In your dreams.”

When she goes to steam the milk, a sharp whistling noise fills the air. I watch as she swiftly pours the shot of espresso into a to-go cup, adding the milk from the pitcher when it’s ready. She adds a few pumps of syrup from a bottle on the counter, then drizzles leftover foam over the top before snapping on a lid and passing it across the counter to me. “One cappuccino. On the house.”

Wow. I’ll admit, it smells fantastic. With her eyes on me, I take a sip and, oh yeah! It’s good. But I can’t tell her that without having a little fun with her first.

I frown and make a loud smacking sound with my lips.

“This is what you kids are calling coffee these days?”

Her hopeful expression fades before she rolls her eyes and groans. “Oh, *come on!* That’s our most popular drink.”

“I guess it’s not *that* bad... if drinking a cup of bitter milk with sugar is your thing.”

“Whatever. You’re such a jerk.” She huffs before turning and grabbing a towel to wipe down the machine.

“Alright, fine. It’s good.”

She spins on her heel and snaps her towel at me. “*Just good?*”

Quickly, it turns into a battle of wills as we stare each other down.

“I’m sorry. It’s *amazing*,” I say, ensuring each word drips with sarcasm.

She throws the towel, and it smacks me square in the face before falling to the floor.

With a fixed expression, I lift my cup, take another sip, and flash her my most winning smile.

“I hate you so much right now,” she says. I knew she wouldn’t stay mad for long.

“Thanks for staying open for me.”

“I did owe you a coffee.”

“An amazing coffee.”

I watch as a faint wash of red colors her cheeks and think about how simple and stunning she looks right now. I like it when she wears a ponytail. Her hair is brushed away from her face, and I can see every feature.

“Well, I guess I better head out,” I say, looking at the clock on the wall.

As I head for the door, I try to shake away the sudden onset of feelings that might otherwise cause me to hand over my man card. Besides, even if we’re adults, she’s still Max’s little sister. I shouldn’t be thinking about her that way.

“Hold up.”

Just before I reach the door, Caroline calls out.

“Do you have a minute? I have to grab my keys so I can lock up, then I can walk you out. If you don’t mind,” she says.

“Yeah, no problem.”

I can spare a few minutes since she stayed open for me.

Once Caroline grabs her things and shuts off the lights, we head outside, and she locks the door behind us.

As we head around to the back of the building, I look up and down the street for her red Camry.

“Where are you parked?”

“Down there,” she says, pointing up the road. “You don’t have to walk me to my car, though.”

“Come on, Care. You know how my parents raised me,” I say, starting to walk in the direction she’s parked.

“Still to be determined,” she says under her breath.

As she walks by my side, our hands brush against one another, and my heart rate spikes.

Between the shops on Main Street, I’m able to glance out over the Gulf and watch the sun begin to set. Blue, orange, and pink streaks paint the sky, and the sidewalks are busy with people walking, jogging, and roller skating. Sunset is a lively time for downtown Sweet Water.

“They ask about you from time to time, you know?”

“Who? Your parents?”

I nod.

She hums thoughtfully. “I’ve always loved your parents. They were always so nice to let me and Max come over and pick persimmons.”

The sweet taste of persimmons brings back a flood of good memories. As a kid, I’d bring them to school for all my teachers. Me and my friends would eat them as a snack after playing outside for hours. And now, I put Kaylee on my shoulders and let her pluck them straight off the tree.

“Feel free to stop by any time. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind if you wanted to pick some. They’d probably love to see you, too.”

I look over at her when she doesn’t reply.

Her eyes are wide and zeroed in on something ahead in the distance.

Following her gaze, I spot a couple rounding a corner and heading our way. They look about our age, and a strange feeling washes over me as they close in.

I glance at Caroline, and she looks like she's seen a ghost. We stop walking, and I turn to ask if she's okay, but I don't get a word in.

Caroline grabs my face and crashes her lips against mine.

Chapter Five

Caroline

The alarms ringing in my head dull to a low chime as Aiden's lips press against mine. His kiss is soft yet firm, and my heart beats so fast I'm afraid it might leap out of my chest. The thought of kissing Aiden has crossed my mind more times than I'd like to admit, but never under such an unfortunate circumstance as this.

When I finally snap out of my daze and pull away, Aiden flashes me a *very* perplexed look. Wishing there was time to explain, I glance up and catch the gaze of Eric, my ex-fiancé, approaching with a dark-haired woman on his arm.

I am *so* busted.

"Play along, and I'll give you free coffee for a year! Just... *please?*" I plead in a hushed voice.

Before Aiden can question what's going on, Eric and the woman come to a stop just a few yards away.

"Caroline?" Eric says. There's a shocked look on his face, followed by even more confusion when he looks over at Aiden. I don't know why his reaction makes me as angry as it does, but a part of me wants to rip into him right here in front of everyone.

What? So, he can move on a few weeks after we break up, but I can't? He's such a hypocrite.

When I feel Aiden put his arm around my shoulder and pull me close to his side, I hold back a sigh of relief. But now that he's caught up to speed, I still have to figure out what I'm going to say to the man I left at the altar... not that Eric looks too broken up about it.

My chest tightens, and my face burns with anger and sorrow. I have no interest in winning him back *or* competing with her. But is it too much to ask that I never have to see his sorry face again?

"Eric—oh. I didn't see you there," I say, forcing a laugh and plastering on the world's fakest smile.

I wrap an arm around Aiden's back and lean into him as if we can't bear to be more than an inch apart.

Eric shuffles awkwardly on his feet as the woman he is with glances between the three of us. Since our attempted wedding a few weeks ago, Eric looks different. His beard is gone, replaced by a clean-shaven face, and I'd be lying if I said he didn't look even better than he did on our wedding day. Albeit, he still doesn't hold a candle to Aiden.

"It's nice to see you. This is Megan," he says, introducing us to the tall, slender woman beside him.

Ah, the infamous Megan. You sure didn't waste any time, did you, Eric?

"This is Aiden," I say, smiling up at him and thanking him with my eyes.

“Nice to meet you both.” Aiden offers a polite smile that they stiffly return before looking back down at me. “We were just about to go to dinner.”

Eric and Megan raise their eyebrows and nod. The interaction makes me want to either puke, run, or hide—if not all three. I’m in *way* over my head, but there’s no turning back now.

“I see,” Eric says, pursing his lips. “So, I heard you got a booth at the Food and Bev Fest. Congrats on landing a spot in the contest.”

Aiden’s fingertips brush along my upper arm as his own silent form of congrats. I haven’t told him or Max yet because I don’t want to jinx it, but there’s a hefty cash prize for first place, and if I ever want to scale my coffee business, I know I’ll need that prize money.

“Yeah, I’m really proud of her. We were just on our way to dinner to celebrate.”

I flash Aiden the most gracious smile I can muster before turning back to Eric and Megan, and I notice her arms are folded tensely across her chest.

Clearly, this isn’t fun for anyone.

“Are you guys going to the festival?”

Eric and Megan nod as they glance at each other.

“Yes, we’ll be there. Megan is volunteering at the ticket booth. So... I guess we’ll see you guys there,” Eric says dryly

before taking Megan by the arm. “We should probably get going now. Enjoy your dinner.”

As Eric and Megan walk by, I’m left standing there with a face on fire and panic that grips my chest like a vice.

What on Earth kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into now, Caroline?

When the coast is clear, I whip around and face Aiden.

“I’m so sorry. I panicked, and it was the first thing that popped into my head.” I groan and cup my face, feeling racked with guilt.

Aiden looks just as confused.

“So, I don’t understand. Were you trying to make him... jealous?”

“No, not at all! Getting Eric back is the last thing I want to do. I just can’t stand the thought of him getting the best of me. I want him to know I can be happy without him,” I say, burying my face in my hands. “I know how pathetic that must sound.”

“You’re not pathetic, Caroline.” He steps closer and takes my hands, pulling them away from my face. “A little crazy, maybe, but not pathetic.”

A laugh breaks just as my eyes well up with tears. I never pegged Aiden as the one who would be cheering me up in the middle of an emotional meltdown, but he’s been surprising me a lot lately. Maybe there’s more to him than I thought.

“I’m still really sorry. I didn’t mean to drag you into my mess. And that kiss—”

“It’s no big deal. I mean, the kiss... it was nice,” Aiden replies, stumbling over his words as though searching for the right ones to say. “What I’m trying to say is don’t worry about it. I’m glad I was here so you didn’t have to face him alone.”

I smile and feel a blush warm up my cheeks. I’m glad he was here, too. And I can’t think of another guy I’d rather kiss—even though I know it’ll never happen again. Max would flip if he ever found out.

“What are you gonna do now?” Aiden asks.

“Do about what?”

“Well, aren’t you going to see them again when the festival rolls around?”

“I don’t know how I can avoid it. I’ll figure something out, I’m sure.”

I let out a sigh of frustration. I’ve dug myself into a hole, and now, I have no idea how to climb out without embarrassing myself even more. Maybe Aiden is right. Sometimes, my impulses really do get me into hot water.

Aiden rubs the back of his neck and shrugs.

“Or... we *could* keep it going until the festival is over,” he suggests. “Then, when the coast is clear, everything can go back to normal. How hard could it be? Plus, I don’t want that guy feeling like he has anything he can hold over you.”

Aiden doesn't know the half of what went down on my wedding day, and I don't think I'd have the heart to tell him even if I wanted to. I'm not sure I'm ready for him to see such a vulnerable side of me.

"I can't ask that of you, Aiden. Besides, what would Max think?"

Aiden grimaces, and a crease forms across his forehead.

"We'll just have to let him in on the plan. I know he's not exactly Eric's biggest fan. Surely, he'll be understand."

It's a crazy idea, but could it work?

Stress hits me in the chest like a sucker punch. I don't want to make things more complicated than they already are, but maybe Aiden is right. The last thing I need is for Eric to have anything he can hold over my head.

I glance down at my watch, remembering the time.

"Geez, Aiden. I'm so sorry. I'm not trying to make you late to work. Maybe we can meet up and talk more soon?"

"Okay. Let's meet at Craw's tomorrow night. Seven o'clock work for you?"

Excitement washes over me, and I give a curt nod. Craw's is a place that everyone has to visit at least once. It's more of a tourist trap, with all its pirate-themed décor and massive gift shop, but it's locally owned, and their seafood is some of the best in town. We used to go all the time as kids, and Max and I still meet there on occasion to grab a quick bite for lunch.

“Seven o’clock, it is. Thanks, Aiden. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

“It’s no big deal. Just promise you’ll text me when you get home tonight. I wanna know you made it safe.”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

After he walks me to my car, Aiden turns and heads back to his truck, and my eyes trail behind him.

What a bizarre day. And if conspiring with the only man who knows how to push all my buttons isn’t enough, now I’m getting excited about the time I get to spend with him.

It’s official. Aiden Reeves is my new fake boyfriend.

What can *possibly* go wrong?

Chapter Six

Aiden

“Daddy, are you going on a date?”

My heart comes to a complete stop as I turn away from my reflection in the bathroom mirror, and my panicked eyes land on Kaylee. She peers at me with a curious look on her face.

“No, honey. I’m just meeting with a friend. Do you remember Caroline?”

Kaylee doesn’t have to think for a second. She smiles and nods before approaching me and tugs at the side of the fitted khaki pants I paired with a dark blue, short-sleeved button-down shirt.

“I want to see her again. And Jasper, too!”

Oh, boy.

It makes me happy that she likes Caroline, but I still worry about her getting attached.

“I’ll have to talk to her and see when she’s not busy, okay?”
I say, crouching down so I’m at eye level with her.

Kaylee nods, and I hold up my palm for a high-five. When her tiny palm makes contact, I feel a slight sting, and I’m impressed by how far she’s come in the way of speed and accuracy.

“Are you ready to go to Grandma and Grandpa’s house?”

“Yes... but wait! I need my backpack.” Kaylee barely dodges the bathroom door frame as she makes a mad dash out into the hallway. Lucky for me, she’s coordinated too.

I turn back to the mirror, brush my fingers through my hair, and double-check my appearance. I know this isn’t an actual date or even a real relationship, but I still want to look nice. I know that no matter what Caroline wears, she’ll look beautiful.

And since she’s my fake girlfriend, at least for a little while, I need to look good for her, too.

It’s hard to wrap my mind around the fact that we are going through with this, but craziness has a habit of following Caroline anywhere she goes. It’s what makes her fun to be around. We should be fine as long as we keep Kaylee out of the arrangement. I don’t want her to get confused.

Once Kaylee is ready, we drive out to my parents’ house, and I drop her off before heading back to Sweet Water to pick up Caroline. When I pull into the drive, she’s already waiting on the porch in a strapless yellow sundress and white strappy sandals.

I freeze as she approaches, and all I can do is stare. My palms are so sweaty they start to itch, and I have to wipe them on my khakis. Then, it dawns on me that I might be coming off as a total creep.

Snap out of it, man!

I blink hard a few times and get out of my truck, heading around to the other side to get the door for her.

“You look... nice.”

Caroline smiles and lets her eyes sweep over me.

“Thanks. You clean up pretty nice yourself.”

I can't tell if she's flirting or just being nice. The line between what's real and what's for show may be hard to differentiate, given that our relationship is already complicated.

“I'm glad you picked Craw's,” Caroline says, and instant relief washes over me as we make our way to the brightly lit restaurant on the beach.

Craw's is the place to go for any big event, whether it's birthdays, graduations, homecomings, or any other celebration. We have a lot of good memories here, and I'm glad she approves.

“The best mahi tacos in town,” I say, my voice sounding unusually cheerful.

Caroline takes the defense and eyes me suspiciously.

“Better than Marina's Tavern?”

“Way better,” I say, with an authoritative tone.

She rolls her eyes, but I see a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“Guess we'll have to agree to disagree.”

“Wow. For once, you agree with me. I’ll take the win.” I say, lifting my brows.

She shrugs.

“I figure if we’re really going through with this, we’re gonna have to sell it.”

Touche.

She makes a valid point. We need people to think we’re a happy couple. Though, I do find it amusing that I’ll be trying to sell it with the person I argue with the most.

“We got this. Piece of cake,” I say—the itch in my palms returning with a vengeance.

We share a determined look before I pull into the parking lot of Craw’s. The building is a rustic two-story A-frame tucked away in the dunes with an upper deck overlooking the water. String lights hang to light the walkway, and sunset paints the sky with soft pinks and oranges. Judging by the parking lot, I can tell it’s another busy night, and I wonder how many people will recognize us.

I park and hop out of my truck, going around to open her door for her as I take in the smell of the salty air. I reach out and take her hand, helping her down.

“I’m glad I called in a reservation,” I say, leading her up the wooden staircase to the top floor.

“No kidding.”

Caroline follows me inside just as a large family starts to leave. She steps to the side and wraps her fingers around my bicep, staying close to me as I lead her up to the hostess.

“Reservation for Reeves.”

The young hostess looks over her list and nods.

“Right this way.”

She takes us out the back door to a small table on the deck close to a railing that faces the Gulf.

“Your server will be with you shortly.”

Caroline and I take our seats across from each other, and as our eyes meet, she quickly looks away—just like old times.

We order two sweet teas and an appetizer of grouper bites with homemade tartar sauce to start since we have a good deal to discuss, and the waitress takes our menus and disappears into the kitchen.

An awkward silence fills the space until Caroline speaks first.

“So, I was thinking about it, and we don’t have to do anything serious. We can go on a public date once a week until after the festival, then call it off. I think that would be convincing enough, don’t you?” Caroline says.

Her face looks hopeful, but I can sense the guilt radiating off her.

“That’s doable. And if people ask, I’ll say we started hanging out right after you ended things with Eric.”

“That’s *perfect!* We’ll say you were there for me after the wedding stuff, and we’ve known each other for a while... so we kind of just ended up dating.”

My mind flashes back to her wedding day, and I still wonder what happened. I’ve heard talk around town, but I know how easily rumors spread. I’ll only believe what I hear straight from the horse’s mouth. Only in this case, the horse is Caroline. And if Caroline is a horse, she’s nothing shy of an American Saddlebred.

The waitress drops off our appetizer and takes our orders for two platters full of shrimp, scallops, and oysters. Caroline and I reach for a grouper bite, and our fingers collide.

“Sorry, you go,” she says.

“Nope. All you.”

I wait for her to make the first move, and it becomes a battle of willpower as we stare each other down.

“Fine. Your loss,” I say, reaching out to take a piece of fried fish and popping it in my mouth. Craw’s seafood is so good that in the event we were being poisoned, I’d gladly be the one to go first.

She gives me a stern look, but as the flaky white meat melts in my mouth, I regret nothing.

“Do you know what you’re going to tell Kaylee?”

I pick up another grouper bite, this time squeezing lemon over it and dipping it in tartar sauces.

I shrug, knowing I'll have to figure out something soon.

"I swear that kid is too smart for her own good. Can you believe she asked if I was going on a date tonight? I had to lie and tell her we were meeting up as friends."

Caroline seems to force a laugh, and I can't tell if she's bothered.

"How long do you think she'll believe that?"

"Not long. I'll have to figure something out because, fake or not, I don't want her to know I'm dating."

Caroline's face softens, and she leans forward. She crosses her arms and rests them on the table.

"Are you worried she'll be upset?" she asks. "I mean, either way, you don't have to worry. I promise I won't say anything if I ever see her."

I give a slight nod of thanks and heave a sigh. Worry is an understatement.

"When we lost Holly a few years ago, it shook us both. I was devastated, and I think Kaylee was too young to understand. It's not that I haven't thought about dating, but it's something we've never discussed. I don't want her to think I'm trying to replace her mom."

"I understand," she says quietly. "I was sorry to hear about Holly. I remember when it happened."

Holly was my wife. She was teaching high school math a few towns over when she got sick. It was like a bomb went off

on the Florida Gulf Coast when the news of her death spread around Sweet Water. So, even though Caroline and I weren't close around that time, it's no surprise that she heard about it. So many people knew and loved Holly. Losing her was painful for all of us. I miss her a lot.

“Thank you. We'll just have to be extra careful when Kaylee's around.”

Caroline nods as the waitress drops off our seafood platters. We both go for the fried oysters first, which are fresh and flavorful, as always.

“So... on a lighter note, any ideas for our next fake date?”

Caroline smiles and hums and presses her lips together. “I've always wanted to go on one of those sunset dolphin boat tours.”

“Say less.” We laugh, and I feel some of the tension in my shoulders begin to melt. I know I'm not ready to date yet—at least, not for real—but maybe this arrangement can help with some of the anxiety I feel around it. Think of it like a test run. As for Caroline, I know she can be a pain sometimes, but at least she's a familiar pain. And right now, Lord knows how much I need something familiar.

“Want to go next Sunday? Let's say around noon,” she says after taking a few bites from a giant piece of fried shrimp doused in cocktail sauce.

The itch in my palms creeps into my armpits when she mentions Sunday.

“I, uh.... I can’t,” I say, feeling self-conscious. “Kaylee and I bake on Sundays. It’s kind of our thing.”

One of her favorite shows is *The Great British Baking Show: Juniors*, and every weekend, like clockwork, Kaylee wakes me up by bursting into my room and spewing ideas about what she wants to create next. I’ll admit, I’m lousy at baking, but we have a lot of fun, and I know it’s something Holly would be doing with her if she were still here.

Caroline’s smile grows wider. “Okay, no problem. We’ll play it by ear, then. Just know I’ll be expecting cookies in return, though.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say, wincing.

“And why is that? You don’t think I’m worthy of your cookies?”

“It’s not that. I just don’t want Max coming to hunt me down if I accidentally poison you.”

“Oh, come on! It can’t be *that* bad.”

“Trust me, I know it’s bad when Kaylee won’t even try them... and that kid is a Hoover when it comes to anything with chocolate chips,” I say, staring deep into my plate of food.

“Okay. So, no baked goods from you. Got it.” She laughs.

Caroline and I tear through the rest of our dinner as we hash out the final details of our fake relationship. Getting to ask each other questions about our likes and dislikes makes it feel like we are contestants on *The Newlywed Game*. I didn’t

realize there were so many things about her I didn't know. I wonder if she feels the same about getting to know me.

“Dinner was amazing,” Carolyn says as she climbs up into the cab of my truck. “Craw’s never disappoints.”

I nod in agreement as I crank the key and head back to her house. Tonight was surprisingly fun. Maybe getting out more will be good for me.

“Agreed. So, I guess we’re on for next Friday. Text me if anything comes up or we need to meet before then.”

“I will.” Caroline smiles, and from the corner of my eye, I watch beams from streetlights float across her face as we pass them by.

The ride back is less talkative, but the silence is comfortable. I park on the street and get out of the truck, crossing over to let her out and walk her to her door.

“That’s one good fake date for the books,” I say, feeling awkward as soon as the words leave my mouth.

We linger for a moment on her porch, and I wait for her to say goodnight and go inside. But she doesn’t.

Caroline and I are only a foot apart, but I can’t bring myself to step back. Her smile is vibrant, and the smell of perfume on her neck is sweet like a lemon and lavender cookie I scold myself for wanting to taste.

“Yeah. I look forward to the next one.”

We search deep into one another's eyes, and the tension between us is almost palpable.

I remind myself that this isn't a real date, but the thought of kissing her again, like it is, crosses my mind more times than I'm willing to admit.

Her eyes flicker to my lips, and any common sense flees the scene before I have time to protest. All I can focus on is how beautiful she looks and how much I enjoyed her company at dinner.

Would a goodnight kiss be *that* much out of the question?

Caroline must be thinking the same thing because we lean toward each other at the same time.

Her hot breath hovers over my mouth, and just before our lips touch, a familiar voice snaps us out of our daze.

“Um... guys?”

Caroline and I jerk away from each other and turn to face Max. His expression is shocked and confused, and I realize our plan may be over before it even starts.

Chapter Seven

Caroline

I can't believe my brother caught me almost kissing his best friend. *What on Earth was I thinking!?*

Of all the possible outcomes for tonight, this one has to be the world's most embarrassing attempt to cross enemy lines. And to make matters worse, now we have come clean with Max.

It's not like I planned on kissing Aiden. Not again, at least. But when he was standing there staring into the depths of my soul, it was like the *real* Caroline checked out. This version of Caroline was like a love-struck teenager looking to get her kicks while her parents waited inside.

Only, instead of getting busted by my parents, Aiden and I got busted by my overly protective older brother.

Geez. Could this night get *any* weirder?

"Oh Max, hey," I say coolly as if he *didn't* just catch me with my hand in the cookie jar.

It's my own fault. I completely forgot he was supposed to stop by after work to check on a whining noise coming from my air conditioner.

"Okay... I'm confused. What are you doing here, Aiden? I thought you two couldn't stand each other," Max says, crossing his arms over his chest.

Aiden shakes his head and looks like he just got caught cheating on a spelling test. “We’re fake dating,” he blurts out.

“Huh? Fake *dating*?”

A wave of nausea washes over me, and I think I’m going to be sick. I rub my temples, trying to figure out where to start. This is my mess, and it’s my responsibility to smooth out the wrinkles.

“I can explain,” I say, hoping to run some interference. “Aiden stopped by the coffee shop before I was closing up, and when we were trying to leave, we ran into Eric and his new girlfriend. And because I didn’t want Eric to think I’m some lonely, miserable cat woman who’s worse off without him, I panicked and kissed Aiden, and now they think we’re dating. Please don’t be mad at me.”

Max stares at me blankly after my blast of word vomit and scratches the back of his head. I expect him to be furious at Aiden, but instead, he steps towards me with a look of worry.

Oh, man. I sure am tired of all this sympathy.

“You’re far from that, Care,” he says, trying to soothe me. “But next time, maybe try walking the other way instead.”

I glare at Aiden, and he shrugs, giving me a look of relief as Max laughs at his joke.

His reaction surprises me, but having Max laugh about the situation rather than go clean his shotgun is the best-case scenario. It still doesn’t mask the guilt I feel for wanting to

kiss his best friend, though. A part of me wishes I could disappear into a sinkhole.

And the worst sister award goes to...

“Alright, so break this down for me,” Max says. “Why do you have to pretend to date just because you ran into them once on the street? And how long do you plan on riding this out?”

Aiden shakes his head, still trying to do damage control.

“Just until the Food and Bev Fest. He’ll be there with his girlfriend, and she’s working the doors. Caroline and I thought it would be easier to show up together than to have him think she’s single again and try to rub her nose in it.”

Max raises an eyebrow and purses his lips, still looking perplexed by our crazy scheme. Obviously, there are some kinks and things we haven’t ironed out, but we’re figuring them out as we go. Besides, this isn’t exactly my area of expertise. I run a coffee shop, not a dating service.

“What about after the festival? Don’t you have to break up?”

I glance at Aiden, feeling the tension still radiating between us. Is it odd that the thought of fake breaking up makes me sad?

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” I say, feeling my throat tighten as the words come out.

If tonight is any indicator of what the rest of our fake relationship will feel like, I can’t imagine not missing it when it’s gone.

Dating was never like this with Eric, and the closer we got to our wedding, the less effort he put into keeping our romance alive. Maybe it's because of our history, but Aiden makes spending time with me feel effortless. I can't remember the last time Eric took me out on the town and didn't make it feel like an obligation.

"Trust me, Bro. This is as crazy to us as it is to you," Aiden adds.

Max shakes his head.

"I don't know. It really does sound crazy. But Eric made the wrong move by hurting my sister. So... if this *fake* relationship makes him regret any part of what he did to her, then I guess you have my blessing. I say go for it."

Wow! Max is giving us his *blessing*?

I'm relieved, but I can't help but wonder how he would feel if Aiden and I dated for real. Not that it would ever happen. Aiden and I are cut from two *very* different cloths. But even if we weren't, would Max still be on board?

Max has always been a supportive brother, and I know I can count on him to have my back through anything—including ruined weddings. He's never shot down any of my crazy business ideas or swayed me from things I've wanted to do. He stands by me no matter what.

But growing up, Aiden was one of Max's only friends. And now he's his best friend. I could never ask him to give that up... not even for me.

Aiden squeezes Max's shoulder and gives it a shake.

"It's no big deal, man. Sorry we weren't upfront about it right from the go."

I nod in agreement despite feeling a sting in my chest from Aiden's words.

No big deal?

He's right and should be saying whatever he can to put my brother at ease. But I'm afraid what's going on between me and Aiden is starting to become a bigger deal than I bargained for.

"This is our first time talking about it since we ran into Eric and his new girlfriend."

Max looks between us and tucks his hands in his front pockets.

"Well, now that the cat's out of the bag," Max says, giving a nod toward my front door, "I just came to check the a/c." He gives another chuckle before bumping fists with Aiden and heading inside.

"I'll be right in..." I say behind him. I turn to Aiden just as the front door closes. My face burns red hot, and Aiden flashes a sheepish grin.

"I didn't want to tell him like that," I say, raising a cold hand to my cheek.

"Yeah, me either, but at least it's out of the way."

Our eyes meet again, and we share another crooked smile. The air between us is hot and humid and grows thick as the thought of kissing him crosses my mind.

“So... I guess I’ll see you next week.” I look down at my feet and reach up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. Once again, I feel like Caroline, the love-struck teenager, out on her very first date with her new boyfriend.

What is it about Aiden that suddenly makes me feel this way?

“Sunset cruise.” Aiden flashes his perfect smile.

Teenage Caroline giggles and nods.

I didn’t expect Aiden to go for my idea of a dolphin watch tour, but now that he’s agreed to it, a buzz of excitement stirs deep inside my chest.

Going out on the water with Aiden to watch the sun’s colors melt across the sky sounds so... romantic.

“I had a nice time tonight.” I start to take a step closer, but I step back instead. I know Max is waiting on me inside, and there’s no way I’m falling into another one of Aiden’s thirst traps.

“Me too.”

When my pulse finally stops racing and teenage Caroline turns in for the night, my thoughts drift back to our dinner conversation. I wonder if this is the first time Aiden’s been out on a date since Holly passed. Because the last thing I want to do is make his life more complicated than it already is.

“You know...If you ever want to pull the cord and stop, we can,” I say, talking as much to myself as I am to Aiden.

He lifts an eyebrow at me.

“Tapping out already? Am I that bad of a fake date?”

Despite my conflicting thoughts, I can't stop the smile that spreads across my face. Who knew Mr. Cranky Pants could make me smile and laugh so much?

“I'll see you next week,” I say, playfully rolling my eyes.

Before turning in for the night, I pause and take one final look at the seriously fine specimen of man standing on my front porch.

“Thank you,” I say, lifting my hand in a small wave.

Aiden shakes his head dismissively.

“Thank you.” Aiden smiles and walks back to his truck.

As I watch him drive away, my forehead creases in thought, and an excited, tingly feeling shivers in my chest.

I wonder why he thanked me. He's the one doing me this colossal favor, and it's not like I'm his favorite person to be around.

We've clashed for years, but he was there for me when Eric came around that corner. Like a knight in shining armor, he stepped up to the plate and saved me, and now he's acting his heart out by being my fake boyfriend for the next few weeks. After being away from each other all these years, I can't help but wonder if it was meant to be that he was there with me that

night in front of the coffee shop. Or on the day of my wedding, for that matter.

With a smile lingering on my face, I turn and head into my house. My sandals clack against the hardwood floor, alerting Jasper, who rushes to meet me.

I hear Max tapping away on my thermostat in the living room to my right, but I ignore him. I float down the hall to my bedroom in a dreamlike trance and change into my softest, most comfortable silk pajama pants and matching top.

Max pokes his head in my room before he leaves to let me know that my air filter was filthy with cat hair and that I owe him lunch for replacing it. He lets himself out, and I have the house all to myself.

With Jasper curled up at my feet, I reflect on the day's events and hope my heart can handle what's in store.

Then, I think about Aiden... and how amazing he looked in his khaki pants.

Chapter Eight

Aiden

Two weeks have passed since Caroline and I started fake dating, and things have been running smoothly. Almost eerily smoothly. You'd think pretending to date my best friend's sister would feel more taxing, but it's not that bad.

The hardest part is keeping Kaylee from finding out. And now that word is spreading around town that Caroline and I are together, keeping our intentions under wrap is getting complicated.

People seem happy when they hear I'm dating. Mostly, they ask how Kaylee is doing. There's a learning curve that comes with navigating those types of questions. But, like all things, it gets easier with time. Spending time with Caroline has me facing all sorts of situations that push me out of my comfort zone.

Like taking someone out on a date, for example, or talking to people about what dating is like as a widower. And—who can forget my personal favorite—facing the fact that what I feel for Caroline isn't entirely plutonic.

I pause outside Third Coast Coffee, struggling to get enough air in my lungs and calm my nerves. As fun as it's been to "date" Caroline, the thought of something real coming out of it makes it hard to breathe. Besides, with Kaylee and Max to consider, I don't know if we could make it work if we tried.

I take a moment to smooth down my dark gray, collared shirt before walking inside, and the bold smell of fresh coffee grounds greets me when I do.

“Welcome to Third Coast!” Caroline’s voice rings, rising above the murmur of multiple conversations and reggae music that fills the air.

I weave through the tables full of people chatting with friends, working on their laptops, and enjoying the atmosphere while they sip their coffee. The moment Caroline’s eyes land on me, her face brightens.

“Oh, hi!”

My face breaks into an effortless grin. Our dynamic feels different than it used to whenever she was around. Things are... good—no needless fighting or frustration. *Really* good.

“Hey, good looking.” I greet her and lean across the counter to peck her cheek.

Like clockwork, Caroline’s cheeks light up fire engine red, and I fight the sudden urge to jump over the counter and kiss that look of embarrassment right off her pretty face.

I know we say none of this is real, but watching her react stirs something within me, making me question whether she ever thinks about me as more than her brother’s best friend.

“The usual?”

“Please.”

Caroline spins around and nearly bumps into her boss, Gina, as she emerges from the kitchen.

Everyone in town knows Gina Ladnier. Not only does she own Third Coast Coffee, but she also owns Third Coast Creamery and does business consulting on the side. At just thirty-seven years old, she's a local legend. She started the Third Coast franchise just after the original coffee shop owners backed out, and now, she's one of the most familiar and friendliest faces in town.

"Aiden Reeves, is that you?" Gina gasps and puts her hands on her hips. Her black hair spills down her back in thick waves, contrasting her bright paisley print dress.

"It is," I say, giving her a friendly smile.

"As I live and breathe," she says in her thick Georgia drawl as she looks between Caroline and me. "You two are just cute as a button together!"

Caroline smiles and turns to me with a bashful look. "I was just about to make him a coffee. Are you taking it to go?"

I shake my head. "I figured I'd hang for a minute."

Gina nudges Caroline. "Nathan is coming in soon. He can cover while you take your break," she says, then turns to me. "How's Kaylee, Aiden? The last time I saw her, I remember thinking how big she's getting!"

"She's sprouting like a weed. That's for sure. She's good. She loves being back in school. It's all she talks about anymore."

The thought has me wondering where all that time went. I swear I was changing her diapers and cleaning spit up off my shirt just yesterday.

Gina gasps in awe, placing her manicured hands on either side of her face.

“And I bet she just *adores* you,” she says, turning back to Caroline.

Caroline’s eyes widen. Her lips part to speak, but no words come out. She pitches me a look of uncertainty as though unsure how to respond. We both agreed not to say anything to Kaylee.

Luckily, a young, dark-haired guy in his early twenties walks into the coffee shop and breaks Gina’s curious gaze.

“Oh! There’s Nathan.” Gina waves at the man.

I faintly hear Caroline sigh in relief, and I’m right there with her. I know how much Kaylee likes Caroline. She’s asked about her multiple times already. But I have to think carefully about whether or not I want the two spending quality time together.

“I’ll get your coffee ready,” Caroline tells me before getting to work.

Gina reaches across the counter, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. “Lovely seeing you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine.”

I wait for Caroline at one of the small tables in the back of the shop, and my heart rate increases at the sight of her walking toward me with a coffee cup in her hand.

“Thanks. You know how to spoil a guy.”

It took some convincing, but I finally talked Caroline into serving my coffee in its most proper form—straight black. There’s something different about the way she makes hers, though. I’ve never tasted anything like it... and that’s saying something. I drink a *lot* of coffee working graveyards at the firehouse.

“Suck up,” she says with a smirk.

As she takes the seat across from me, her hands reach up to tighten her ponytail, and I swear she looks as gorgeous as ever. My eyes wander down to her mouth, and I imagine her lips calling me as they glisten from her pink lip gloss.

I smile at the thought and take a sip. I’m greeted by a rich, flavorful blend that only she can master. Aside from cappuccino, she’s talked me into trying a few other frilly drinks, like macchiatos and frappuccinos, but her special blend is out of this world. It has the legs to stand on its own and doesn’t need any cream or sugar.

“Are we still on for our date this Friday?”

Caroline frowns. “We might have to reschedule.”

I don’t expect to feel so let down by the news. I look forward to our nights out, and my time with her has been the most fun

I've had in years, aside from the quality time I have with Kaylee.

“Getting tired of me already?” I say, trying to hide my disappointment.

Caroline flashes me a pointed look and playfully reaches across the table to swat my arm.

“No, I'm bummed, but the Food and Bev Fest is right around the corner, and I need to prep.”

“Oh, yeah. Tell me more about that. I know about the festival, but what's the deal with the contest?”

She perks up in her chair, and I can tell by the gleam in her eyes that talking about it excites her.

“Well, the contest is for local vendors who sell food and drink products. I've been working on the side on my own line of custom blends, and Gina's been letting me sell them here in the store for a while now. Business is alright, but it could really take off if I had more start-up cash. I need to find a way to produce more coffee and start an online store so I can ship across the country.”

As Caroline talks, she moves her hands in an animated fashion that I find utterly irresistible, and I'm surprised to learn so much about her. I knew she liked her job, but I had no idea she was planning to launch her own business. I lean back in my chair, listening intently as she goes on.

“And if I can sell enough to wow the judges, there's a cash prize at the end. First place is \$5,000.”

“Is this what you’ll be selling?” I say, holding up my cup.

Caroline smiles, looking nervous, and nods.

“Well, if that’s the case, I think you’ve got a real shot.”

I give an encouraging smile. I can tell she’s worried but doesn’t need to be. Whatever she’s mixing in that kitchen is sure to turn more heads than just mine.

She reaches across the table and places a hand over mine.

“Thank you. That means a lot.” Caroline says as her face softens. “After the wedding, I lost a lot of motivation. For a minute, I didn’t think I’d bounce back. But when I started spending time with you, you inspired me. You’re a strong man, Aiden. And you may not like taking risks, but you know how to face adversity. I could stand to learn a lot from you.”

The tenderness in her voice takes my breath away. Aside from being her favorite person to spar with, I would’ve never thought Caroline was capable of seeing the good in me. I can tell how much she has grown. She’s more determined now and way nicer to me than I deserve. There’s no way I can take credit for that.

“I don’t know the details, but for what it’s worth, I’m sorry about your wedding,” I say, feeling the warmth of her touch spread up my forearm.

Caroline’s eyes settle on mine as she takes a deep breath. “Before the ceremony, I took his phone by accident.” She lowers her gaze and pauses, and it’s like she’s searching for the least painful words to say.

“I wasn’t trying to snoop, but when he got a text from Megan, I read it. She was begging him not to marry me, then told him she loved him, too,” she say, pausing again.

“I thought long and hard about that last text and what she said... Too. Why would she use that word unless—.” I watch tears well up in her eyes, and suddenly, I want to find Eric and feed him to the sharks.

“I didn’t say anything at first. I kept telling myself that it was all just one big misunderstanding. But when we met for photos, I smelled perfume on his shirt collar. I knew he was with her at the office that morning, and it was like I was drowning in it. Then, I guess I just... snapped.”

I rub my fingers against the back of her hand and try to imagine how any man could betray a woman who loved him as much as Caroline did.

“I had my suspicions after she started working there, but he always assured me she was just a coworker. I was so stupid.”

I feel my sadness turn into anger as she finishes talking. That prick had better hope I never find him in a dark alley.

“I’m so sorry, Care. You don’t deserve that. You want a man who never breaks your heart... Someone who makes you happy.”

I want to add “like me,” but scold myself for being so selfish.

Caroline is quiet for a moment, then squeezes my hand. “I hope *you’re* happy, Aiden. I can’t imagine how hard things

have been for you, but I hope you know how much you deserve to be happy, too.”

I can't count how many times I've thought about kissing her, but add this one to the list.

“I think it's safe to say you've been helping me out in that department,” I admit, giving her a wink.

She smiles, and we share another warm look before our hands break apart. It's hard putting how I feel into words, but what I *can* say is that I'm glad she's back in my life. I didn't know how much I needed her until our worlds collided. Literally.

The only thing left to do now is wait until Caroline decides to hit the brakes on our fake relationship and watch it all come crashing to an end.

Chapter Nine

Caroline

A delicious aroma fills Third Coast Coffee's kitchen as I finish grinding my secret combination of exotic coffee beans. I've been working on my latest concoction—a deep, smooth blend with notes of caramel and wild honey—for about a month now, and I'm sure I've found my winner for the contest. Now, I just have to produce a batch big enough to sell.

And the clock is ticking.

I grab a small custom bag with “Sweet Water Coffee Co” printed across the front in swirly, black letters. I get excited thinking about having access to extra money. Branding and marketing are at the top of my investment wish list, but being able to afford better equipment and having a larger workspace come in at a close second.

Before I start scooping coffee into the bag, my phone vibrates, and the Star Wars *Imperial March* ringtone blares from my back pocket.

Amused, I smile, and I fish it out.

“Aiden?”

“Hey, Care. Sorry to bother you. Are you busy?”

The sound of Aiden's voice makes my heart rate spike. “No, I'm just at the shop. Is everything okay?”

“Kind of,” Aiden replies.

His voice sounds strained.

“Something happened at work, and I’m at the hospital. They wanted me to call someone since I’ll be here a while.”

“The *hospital*? Hold on. I’ll be right there!” As I bolt towards the door of the coffee shop, I shout to my co-worker, Lily. “No time to explain! I need you to cover for me.”

“Yeah, I got you, girl. Go!”

On the way out, I toss my apron on an empty barstool and fish my keys out of my purse. Luckily, there’s only one hospital in Sweet Water, and it’s less than five minutes away.

I peel into the parking lot and nearly take out a stop sign and three pedestrians moving entirely too slow for my liking. Fortunately, I find parking in the front row and make it through the double sliding doors in record time before rushing to the reception counter like a mad woman.

“I need to see Aiden Reeves. He was recently admitted.”

“Just a second,” the receptionist tells me before typing away on her computer. She pauses and reads before looking back up at me. “He’s in room 102. Just down the hallway and to the left.”

“Thank you!” I say, following the direction of her pointed finger. My eyes jump from left to right as I hurry past the rooms on either side of me. When I see 102, I poke my head in and see Aiden lying in his hospital bed with a sling on his right arm.

My stomach twists in a knot as I approach his bedside. “What happened?”

He catches sight of me and smiles. Aiden shakes his head dismissively and acts all cool and casual... like he *didn't* just land himself in the hospital.

“We were putting out a fire at this two-story house, and I went in to help the owner get her kids out. I had a guy on the other side helping them through a window, and when I was the last one inside, the ceiling gave out. I don't know what, but something landed square on my shoulder and knocked me down,” Aiden says, wincing as he tries to lift his right shoulder.

My eyes unexpectedly burn as I take his hand and notice scratches and bruises on his arms. “Are you going to be okay?”

Aiden laughs. “It's going to take more than that to put me down,” he assures me before tugging me close to his chest. “Hey, it's okay. I'm fine. Don't cry.”

When I realize my eyes are full of tears, I swallow hard and blink them away, but my chest and throat still ache. I could've gotten a very different call if he had gotten hit on the head or in the wrong place on the back.

The thought makes my stomach feel bottomless, like a void of anguish filling me whole.

“Sorry. It's just... if anything bad ever happened to you, I don't know what I'd do.”

Our eyes lock, and Aiden presses a soft kiss against the top of my hand. His lips are warm and have a calming effect.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’d better not.” I manage a weak laugh that makes his eyes sparkle. He smiles and sweeps a strand of hair off my forehead.

“Does Kaylee know?”

Aiden sits up carefully, wincing as he shifts to face me.

“No. That’s another thing I was hoping to talk to you about. You can say no, but I was wondering if you could pick her up from school and keep an eye on her until they discharge me. I still need some x-rays, and it’s taking forever.”

My eyebrows shift upward. “You’re okay with me doing that?”

Aiden shrugs.

“I know she’d love to see you. My parents are out of town, and Max is at work. Besides, she knows we’re friends. I’m sure it’ll be fine just this once.”

Deep down, I know I’m starting to see Aiden as more than a friend. Or he’s the only friend I’ve thought about kissing a hundred times.

“I’d be happy to,” I say, trying not to sound overly excited. “I’ve been wanting to see her, too.”

“Thank you. Really. You look pretty today.”

Better make that a hundred and *one* times. I have to stop thinking about kissing him!

After getting all the information I need to pick up Kaylee, I leave the hospital and go to Sweet Water Elementary, following the line of cars that roll up to the front of the school as people pick up their kids. Seeing all the kids with their little backpacks and cheery smiles melts my heart into a gooey mess.

When it's my turn, I roll down my passenger's side window, and a pick-up assistant leans down.

"I'm picking up Kaylee Reeves," I tell her.

"Kaylee!" the assistant calls out.

On cue, Kaylee pops out of a crowd of kids waiting under the awning, and her hand shoots up in an excited wave.

"Hi, Caroline!"

I smile and wave back, and the excitement of seeing her blasts through any frazzled nerves that previously existed.

Once Kaylee is safely situated in the backseat of my car, I pull away from the school, my eyes moving to the rearview mirror to glance at her.

"Your dad had a little accident at work, but the doctors are patching him up as we speak."

Kaylee's eyes grow wide. "Is he okay?"

"He's just fine," I promise her. "What do you say we go to the coffee shop, and you can help me with my *super* secret

coffee blend until your dad comes and picks you up?”

I can tell the prospect piques her interest enough to relax her as she nods excitedly. “I want to know the secret!”

A weightless sensation fills my chest as her eyes light up. Something about Kaylee makes me happy in a way I’ve never experienced before, and suddenly, I want to make her laugh and smile while keeping her safe at the same time. I don’t think I’ve ever felt this level of protectiveness before.

“It’s gonna blow your mind!” I say, winking at her in the rearview mirror.

When we arrive at the coffee shop, I help her out of the car and lead her to the kitchen to pick back where I had left off.

“Let me give you the tour,” I say, gesturing to the metal kitchen counter I use as a workspace.

Kaylee sticks to me like velcro as I show her all the different canisters of beans, the electric coffee grinder, and my bagging station.

“Mmmmm. I like that smell,” she says, poking her nose over a canister of Guatemalan French Roast.

“Oh, you do, huh? Want to help me make some?”

Her jaw drops. “Really? I can help?”

I laugh and pick up a partially empty bag of Arabica coffee beans, giving it a shake so she can hear them rattle inside.

“Absolutely.”

She drops her backpack on the floor and lines up with the kitchen counter. Watching my every move, she carefully loads a scoop of coffee beans into the top of the grinder and snaps the lid in place.

I watch in awe. Her eyes are narrow with determination, and her tiny hands work to ensure no grounds are lost as she pours them from the grinder into an empty bag. Maybe she makes me so happy because she reminds me of myself.

I've always wondered what it would be like to have a daughter. I thought there could've been a chance with me and Eric, but he never wanted to talk about children. He'd always say it was too soon to have such conversations or that we needed to focus on our careers more. So, we did. And we all know how *that* ended.

Now, as I watch her having the time of her life in clouds of ground coffee, I'm glad things didn't work out between me and Eric. If they did, I would've never gotten this close to Aiden. And I never would've met Kaylee.

Aiden is right, though. I can't get attached. It would be too confusing for her, and I'm still healing from my last heartbreak. Neither of us needs any more disappointment.

I break free from my thoughts when Kaylee looks up at me with her big brown eyes and a smile that melts my heart, and I remember something Max told me a long time ago that stuck.

Despite failure, nothing good in life ever comes without great risk.

Chapter Ten

Aiden

I don't get discharged for another hour and a half after Caroline leaves.

There's some deep bruising in my shoulder and a slight strain in my rotator cuff, but the x-ray looks fine, and the doctor says I need to rest until I'm back to a hundred percent.

I head to the coffee shop to meet Caroline and pick up Kaylee. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about them being together.

Caroline is incredible with kids, but I know how vulnerable Kaylee is. Aside from my mom and her teachers at school, she's never spent time with a woman I've been close to. Mainly because I've never let myself get close to another woman. Not since Holly, at least.

I walk into the coffee shop, and Nathan greets me. I give him a nod and head into the kitchen to see coffee beans all over the floor. Caroline and Kaylee are laughing and tossing coffee beans into the top of a small coffee grinder like they're shooting a game of hoops.

"Hey, ladies. What's going on?"

"Daddy!" Kaylee shouts and runs to me.

I sweep my good arm around her, scoop her up, and prop her on my waist. The smell of coffee fills the room, and I notice

Kaylee's hands and face are dusted with black powdery streaks.

"She's been helping me pack up the last few bags for the day. I'm still not where I need to be, but we made good progress," Caroline says, looking as proud as she does adorable. "Couldn't have done it without my helper."

She reaches out and ruffles Kaylee's hair.

"You helped her pack all those?" I ask Kaylee, turning to the stack of bags at the end of the counter.

Kaylee beams and nods.

"First, you grind the beans. Then, you put them in the bags."

"She's a fast learner," Caroline says. She looks down at my arm and frowns. "So, what about you? How are you feeling?"

"I'll be fine. I'm taking the week off to rest up, but the good news is I'll get to spend extra time with this knucklehead."

"Hey, I'm not a knucklehead!" Kaylee throws her arms around my neck and squeezes me tightly, and Caroline laughs as I fight for my next breath.

"Yeah, yeah. So, you say. You ready to go home?"

Kaylee shakes her head. "I want to stay and help Caroline."

Caroline takes a step forward and places a hand on Kaylee's back.

"Sorry, kiddo. I'm all tuckered out. It's time for me to go home, too. Thanks for helping me today."

“Can we come back tomorrow?” Kaylee turns and gives me her best pouty lip.

Oh, man. She’s hooked, alright. I can’t blame her, though. Caroline is a blast to be around. I know we grew up together, but now I’m seeing a whole new side of her—a side I really like.

“Soon,” I promise. And a part of me makes the same promise to myself.

“Kaylee, you and your dad are welcome anytime. Here,” she says. Caroline picks up Kaylee’s backpack from the floor, and we follow her into the service area. “I’ll walk you guys out.”

“Yay, yay, yay,” Kaylee chants and bounces up and down on my hip. I’ll be glad when my arm heals. A lively seven-year-old and a pulled shoulder don’t mix well.

“Did you have a good day at school?”

Kaylee nods as we leave the coffee shop and round the corner down to where I parked my truck.

“Caroline picked me up. It was the best day ever!”

I chuckle and glance at Caroline.

“It was mine too,” Caroline says, reaching out to tickle Kaylee behind her knee.

Kaylee shrieks loudly in my ear and squeezes me tighter, and I’m struck with a dizzying sensation that has nothing to do with the chokehold she has me in.

I haven't felt this happy in a long time, but the fact that it's stemming from my feelings for another woman makes it so much more complicated.

I know that Holly would want me to be happy and to find love again, but what about Kaylee? How would she handle me falling in love with someone new? And what happens if I let my feelings for Caroline grow and things turn sour?

It breaks my heart to think about losing the special connection I have with Caroline. Especially considering how long it took us to get to this point.

"Alright, up we go," I say, hoisting Kaylee into her car seat. Caroline hands me her backpack, and I dig inside until I find Kaylee's book about sand dollars. She takes it, and I shut the door and step around the back with Caroline, where Kaylee can't see us.

"Thank you for picking her up today. You were a real lifesaver."

"I'm glad you asked," Caroline says, looking at me with those big blue eyes. Why does she have to look so beautiful? And why does she have to be Max's sister?

The situation seems complicated, but everything is clear when I'm with her.

"I trust you," I say.

Caroline glances toward my truck and then back at me.

"She's a special girl. You should be proud." She smiles softly. "Max thinks so, too. I'm glad you've made her a part of

his life. He's always hounding me to get married so I can make him an aunt."

My heart stops for a second, and my mind paints a picture of me, Kaylee, and Caroline—together and happy. For so long, I've felt a gap in my life that makes me isolate myself. But Caroline bridges that gap and makes it feel safe to open up.

"Yeah, I've been pretty lucky."

"You think she suspects anything? I made sure not to say anything about us."

I rub the back of my head, and a part of me wonders if it would've been all that bad if she did. I push the thought aside. Falling for her was never part of the plan, and I remind myself that it'll all be over soon.

"Yeah, thanks." I pause, and there's an awkward silence before I put my foot in my mouth. "So, the festival is coming up so soon. When do you think we should—uh... break up?"

A sheepish look fills Caroline's face, and she laughs nervously.

"Honestly, I haven't thought about it. I know I should be planning ahead, but I guess I've been living in the moment a little too much here lately."

She's not the only one. Sometimes, I get so comfortable spending time with her that I forget we're pretending. I'm still trying to figure out what's so fake about any of these feelings I've been having. They *feel* real.

“Why? You’re not counting down the days already, are you?”

“Nah,” I say, trying to play off the fact that I’m dreading the day when things go back to normal between us. “Just making sure I mentally prepare myself.”

“Mentally prepare yourself?”

By her frown, I can tell I’m digging myself in deep. I shrug and give her an awkward smile. “You know what I mean.”

Caroline takes a step closer and slides a hand up my arm. “You were really brave today. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Yep. Just doing my job.”

I don’t expect Caroline to know how I’ve been running away from pain for the last three years. How could she? We hardly ever spoke before all of this. But there’s something exhilarating about running into a burning house. Fires can get out of control, but only if you don’t understand them.

I didn’t have any control over Holly’s cancer, and there was nothing I could learn about it that would save her. But fires, I do understand.

I can save people from a fire.

Time stands still as our eyes lock. The rest feels like a dream as Caroline lifts on her toes and carefully curls her arms around my neck.

I wrap my left arm around her waist, pulling her body against mine in a firm embrace. The smell of vanilla and coconuts washes over me until I'm in a tropical paradise. One that I never want to leave.

I lean down, breathing her in as I whisper, "For what it's worth, I think you'd make a great mom."

Chapter Eleven

Caroline

The festival is in two days, and I am freaking out.

If I win, it's a cool \$5,000 cash in my hot little hands. But if I lose, there's no telling how many extra shifts I'll have to pick up to make the money I need. So, unless I plan on dialing for dollars, I better get to work.

I check my inventory, and it looks like I've got about fifty bags packed and ready to go, but I'll need to double that number just to be safe. The plan is to sell as many bags of coffee as humanly possible and impress the heck out of all the judges. That means I'll need plenty of product on hand and enough coffee brewed to keep the samples flowing. I've got my work cut out for me.

With my Bluetooth speaker blasting my favorite Pandora Y2K Pop radio station, I find my groove and start grinding away. I'm on my fifth bag when I hear the familiar whine of the kitchen door as it swings open. I turn, and my jaw drops at the sight of Gina holding the door as Aiden and Kaylee come through the door with a large box of donuts.

"What are you guys doing here?" I pause my music before dusting any leftover coffee grounds off my hands.

"We're here to help!" Kaylee says, skipping over to me and throwing her arms around my waist. She looks up at me with bright eyes and a broad smile shy of a front tooth.

“That’s great, you guys, but it’s 8 a.m. on a Saturday. Shouldn’t you be sleeping in or watching cartoons or something?”

Aiden smooths a hand over Kaylee’s wild and unruly hair that I can only assume she brushed herself.

“We wanted to surprise you. We know this contest is important to you, so we figured we’d make a morning of it and lend a helping hand.”

It’s such a sweet gesture that I have to fight a sudden urge to ugly cry and kiss Aiden right here on the spot. The fact that he and Kaylee even thought about helping makes all the stress leading up to my big day worth it.

I guess I’ve gotten so used to doing everything by myself that I underestimate how overwhelming working under tight deadlines can be, even if it’s something I’m passionate about.

“Really, you guys... I can’t thank you both enough.”

“Can I help grind the coffee beans?” Kaylee asks with hopeful eyes.

I cradle her rosy cheeks with my hands and smile.

“Absolutely. Let’s get you an apron.”

It’s funny how things have a way of working themselves out for the best. I crashed back into Aiden’s life, and now Kaylee is crashing into mine. I can’t explain how thankful I am for him trusting me with her. Especially after we agreed that bringing her around could complicate things.

“Okay, you two,” I say, tying an apron around Kaylee’s neck and tossing another at Aiden. “Let’s get started!”

While Kaylee and I focus on the grinding and blending, Aiden takes over the bagging. I turn the music up, and we find a groove that has us cranking out twice the amount I was able to produce working on my own. We work together like a well-oiled machine.

Wannabe by Spice Girls starts playing, and Aiden and I laugh as Kaylee hops from foot to foot. She pumps her fists in the air and twirls, and when I start singing the words, she looks up in awe.

“I think this is the first time she’s heard this song,” Aiden says.

“You got moves, girl!” I laugh and sway to the beat, dancing along with her.

Aiden watches with an amused look as the atmosphere becomes lighter and more airy. It’s like the world doesn’t exist outside of our cozy little nook in the back of the coffee shop.

“Dad, come dance!” Kaylee says, pointing at Aiden.

“Uh-oh. She’s calling you out, Reeves. You better bring it,”

“There’s no way I can move like that anymore. Look, I’m injured,” he says, pointing to his sling in objection. “I better sit this one out.”

“Oh, please! Don’t be such a grump.” I grab his hand and pull him closer. “You can still move your feet, can’t you?”

He playfully rolls his eyes, letting go of some of his grumpiness, and shuffles from side to side.

Okay, maybe Aiden can't move like that.

But it sure is fun watching him try.

I smile and let him give me a twirl before stepping to the side and inviting Kaylee to take my place. I clap and cheer them on as they sidestep and shuffle around in a circle. Seeing the way Aiden completely lets go of any reservation while dancing with his little girl ignites a fire inside of me until, all of a sudden, I'm the one wanting to call for help.

I regret ever thinking he was incapable of caring or having any fun. Maybe I didn't know him like I thought I did. Or, maybe he changed.

None of that matters now, though. What matters is that the man I've come to know these past few weeks is one of the best people I've ever met, and I don't ever want to go back to how things used to be.

When the song ends, Aiden gives Kaylee one last twirl before giving a bow. Pinching my fingers together, I raise them to my mouth and let out a loud whistle as he straightens up and runs his fingers through his hair.

"Wow, that was a workout," he says, gasping for air.

This, coming from a man who can run out of a burning building with a full-grown adult draped over his shoulder, amuses me to no end.

"Well, if either of you needs a little pick me up, I can help."

I head over to a large fridge in the back, pull open the silver door, and grab a can of whipped cream.

Kaylee's eyes grow to the size of saucers as she runs over to me. "I do, I do!"

I give the can a good shake as she tilts her head back and opens wide. I pause and look to Aiden briefly for his nod of approval, then proceed to fill her mouth with enough whipped cream to form a mountain past her lips.

She squeals with excitement. I laugh and follow suit, tilting my head back and spraying a dollop in my mouth. Its frothy sweetness is heavenly.

"Come on, Aiden. It's soooo good." I murmur through a mouth full of foam.

Aiden doesn't protest. He walks over to me and parts his lips, but when he tilts his head back, I spray a generous serving on his nose instead. He recoils in surprise and shakes his head, whipped cream flying everywhere.

Kaylee screams as some lands on her arm, and we all break into laughter.

I watch Aiden wipe the remaining whipped cream from his face, and the whole display has me laughing so hard I have to clutch my stomach and wipe tears from my eyes.

He shoots me a vengeful look, which I innocently avoid.

"It was an accident. I swear."

"I'm sure it was," he says, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

Then, when I think the coast is clear, he lunges forward and wraps his arm around my waist, lifting and spinning me around.

I cry out in protest as my feet leave the ground, and the firmness of his body and the bold smell of cologne hit me like a tidal wave.

I really like being in Aiden's arms—or, should I say, arm—but when he finally puts me down, I have to hold on to the counter until the room stops spinning.

Aiden keeps a steady hand on my back while still maintaining the smirk on his face. “It was an accident. I swear.”

I playfully shove him, and we share another laugh, our eyes locking as the air grows thick.

“What on Earth is going on in here?” The sound of Gina's voice cuts through the tension as she pushes through the swinging door.

“We're eating whipped cream!” Kaylee calls out. “Want some?”

Aiden raises an eyebrow at me, and I shrug, wondering if I should make a run for it now while I still have a job. But I'm relieved when I see a smile creep across my boss's face.

“Why are you eating whipped cream when we have brownies up front?”

Kaylee turns to Aiden with pleading eyes, and Aiden chuckles and nods. “You can have one. But just one. Don't

forget you wanted to stop for donuts,” he adds sternly.

Gina takes Kaylee’s hand and ushers her back into the service area, but not before turning and giving me and Aiden a wink. She must think she’s so slick.

I turn and wave the can of whipped cream at him. “I promise I won’t spray any on your face this time.”

Aiden doesn’t even look at the can. His eyes are on mine as he walks closer to me, and his hand gently slides around to the small of my back.

“I want something sweeter.”

I tilt my head in confusion, but it’s all I can manage before his lips are pressing against mine.

At first, my eyes are wide with shock, but as I melt into his kiss, I feel my heart flutter like it just sprouted wings. Giving in, I lean in even closer, and my fingers grip his bicep for balance.

Before pulling back, Aiden plants one more soft peck on my cheek and presses his forehead against mine. “I’ve been wanting to do that for a very long time.”

“You... have?” I open my eyes and look up at him.

I’m completely blindsided. I knew Aiden and I had this whole flirty friendship vibe going on, but never in a million years would I think he was attracted to me.

In my defense, it’s not like he’s the kind of guy to wear his heart on his sleeve. Heck, I’ve had advanced calculus books

that were easier to read.

Aiden nods. "I wasn't sure if I should or not."

"Oh, you totally should. Please. Kiss me anytime," teenage Caroline says before I have a chance to stop her.

Aiden gives another smirk and lightly brushes his nose against mine.

"Noted."

I can still smell the lingering scent of whipped cream and want him to kiss me again so badly, but we break apart before Kaylee walks in on us.

When she finally returns after enjoying her brownie, we get right back to work, and I'm sure she doesn't suspect a thing.

Every so often, Aiden and I glance at each other to share a quick smile or playful wink. It's exhilarating, but it's also nerve-racking having such strong feelings for someone and not being able to act on them.

There's so much I want to say, but before I even try explaining my feelings to him, it's time I figure them out for myself.

Chapter Twelve

Aiden

The sweet smell of white lilies lingers as I stand in the foyer, staring at the bouquet I picked up this morning from the town florist. I can't believe today is finally here. I've been so wrapped up in my time with Caroline that, for the first time, it completely slipped my mind.

Maybe that's a good thing. Or is it terrible I'm so hooked on Caroline that I'm starting to forget?

"Kaylee, are you almost ready?"

"Not yet!" Kaylee's shouting sounds from her room down the hall. She insisted on picking her outfit and doing her hair. It's a big day for her, too, so I let her take her time.

I set down the bouquet on the small entry table by the door when their scent becomes a little too overwhelming. I feel the weight of the world settle on my chest, and I glance at them again, remembering how one looked tucked behind her ear. And I remember how seeing them always made her smile.

Before my memories come flooding back in full force, I hear a knock on the door. Confused and still in a daze, I pull it open, jarred by the sight of Caroline standing on the porch.

"Oh, Caroline. Hey," I stammer.

She smiles and seems to glow as sunlight falls on her shoulders. She's wearing a thinly-strapped white dress, and her long blonde hair is braided to the side.

She looks... radiant.

“Sorry to show up out of the blue and unannounced, but I finished setting up my booth early and thought I’d stop by. You and Kaylee really helped me out yesterday. I’d love to take you guys to lunch as a thank you,” Caroline says before eyeing the black suit jacket and pants I’m wearing with a white button-down. “Oh, but if you’ve already got plans—.”

I open the door wider, and her eyes fall on the bundle of flowers. Her look shifts to confusion as I motion for her to come inside.

“It’s the three-year anniversary of Holly’s passing,” I say.

Caroline lifts a hand to her mouth, and instead of stepping forward, she steps back. “I’m so sorry. I’ll go.

I grab her hand before she can get any further and pull her close to me, shaking my head in protest.

“You don’t have to. Me and Kaylee were just on our way to the cemetery to visit her grave.” I glance behind me toward Kaylee’s room as she appears in the hallway wearing a light blue dress and white sandals. She even brushed her hair. “You look very pretty, sweetie.”

Kaylee smiles, and her eyes grow to the size of saucers when she sees Caroline in the doorway. She sprints down the hallway and throws her arms around Caroline’s waist, nearly taking her down.

“Caroline!”

Caroline places her hand on the back of Kaylee's head and hugs her tightly.

"It's really nice that you guys visit every year. I know your mom would love knowing that you still find ways to honor her memory," she says gently.

"I'm trying to teach Kaylee the importance of celebrating her life instead of mourning her loss," I explain, giving Kaylee a pat on the back. "She lived an incredible life and made a lot of people happy. That's the memory we try and honor the most."

As the words leave my mouth, I think about how many times I've wished I knew how to mourn less. It was hard losing Holly, and the grief still hits me when I least expect it. A part of me will always love her, but I know I can't isolate myself forever. I have to stop shutting down and shutting people out when the pain is too much. I have to stop *running*.

"That's a beautiful way to look at it," Caroline says, smiling. "Anyway, I don't want to hold you guys up... See you at the festival tomorrow?"

"No!" Kaylee pouts, squeezing my hand in protest. "I don't want you to go. Daddy, can Caroline come, too?"

"Kaylee's right. We'd love to have you join us... if it's not too weird, I mean."

I know it's a huge favor to ask, but Caroline has become such a big part of my life and Kaylee's. It only feels natural to ask.

Caroline looks hesitant at first. Then, she looks down at Kaylee, who gives her sad puppy dog eyes and pouty lip. It doesn't take long before she gives in.

“You know... why not? Sure. I'd love to.”

We all pile into my truck, and I drive us down the road to the Sweet Water Cemetery. Sitting right under an acre of land, it's small but serves its job well, offering a peaceful resting place for many of our town's loved ones. By now, Kaylee knows where her mom's headstone is by heart and leads the way for me and Caroline.

As we approach the far East corner of the cemetery, we find Holly's granite headstone, and Kaylee turns to reach for the flowers. “Can I do it?” she asks.

“Of course.”

Kaylee takes the bouquet of lilies, and I step back reverently. I watch as she kneels in front of her mother's grave and places the flowers down at the base of the headstone. She looks like an angel, and I imagine Holly smiling down at her.

“I miss you, Mommy. Dad says when I'm sad, look at the sky, and you'll be right there looking back, even if I can't see you,” Kaylee says.

I swallow hard as I listen. Even though she was young, Holly's death took a big toll on Kaylee. It's improved with time, but she still gets nightmares or cries at night. She is the only reason I stay strong.

Caroline gently laces an arm through mine, standing close by my side as we listen to finish her words.

“I never knew her personally, but I’ve always heard great things about her. It sounds like she was a very special woman,” Caroline says quietly.

I smile thoughtfully and nod. “No one ever had anything bad to say about her. She loved everyone she ever met. It was her heart that I fell in love with first.”

Caroline squeezes my arm and lays her head against my shoulder. “I’m glad you two found each other when you did. I can’t imagine a world without Kaylee in it. Sounds like she’s carrying on her mother’s legacy.”

My heart melts as I watch Kaylee, and I can’t explain how much I love her or how grateful I am to have her. I see so much of her mother in her, and it reminds me of memories from the past I might have forgotten. I also see hope for the future. It’s the same hope I feel when I’m around Caroline.

I’m ready to be happy again, and I see how she brings it out in me. Despite our rocky past, I can’t deny my feelings. I’m falling in love with her.

“Thank you, by the way,” I say, looking back at Caroline. “You make Kaylee so happy. And you make me happy, too.”

She lifts her head and peers back with a smile.

“Seems like a fair trade if you ask me. After everything that happened with Eric, I was starting to worry. I didn’t think I

could bounce back, but I was wrong. You two sure have helped me find calm throughout the storm.”

I think about Caroline’s words for a moment. And she’s right. Life is full of the unexpected, but I think that’s what makes it special. The twists and turns and the shock and awe. It’s a refining fire that makes each moment all the more precious, and I thank my lucky stars I get to experience it with Caroline.

I briefly press my forehead against her temple before kneeling to sit on the grass beside Kaylee. Caroline follows my lead and sits on Kaylee’s opposite side.

“Did you know your mom was an amazing softball player?” I ask, and with awe-filled eyes, Kaylee shakes her head.

I share a smile with Caroline before telling Kaylee a few stories about her mom during her softball days. Soon, one story turns into the next, and before we know it, we’re all sharing stories of our own.

For a long time, I avoided grief like it was the plague. But maybe facing it isn’t so bad.

They say time heals, but love heals, too. And with so many supportive people around me, I wish words could express how important they’ve become.

There’s a vast and promising future for us, and I see it every time I gaze into Caroline’s eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

Caroline

Hundreds of residents and even more tourists flood the main strip of the beach as the Sweet Water Food and Bev Fest kicks off with local music, fantastic food and drinks, a sandcastle contest, and plenty of sun and surf.

I stand at my booth, which consists of a folding table under an easy-up tent, with coffee bags stacked and ready to be purchased, a coffee machine ready to brew samples, and a large urn full of cold brew to serve. Admittedly, I'm pretty nervous, and anxiety makes my hands shake ever so slightly as I finish setting up my display of business cards and a small tower of disposable cups.

There's a long line of vendors on either side of me selling all sorts of things and offering a healthy dose of competition. With everything from donuts to pickled vegetables and lemonade to local honey, I'll need to be on top of my game if I want to stand out from the crowd.

Everyone here had to earn their spot by going through an intensive application process and having a panel of judges vote on which applicants made the final cut. Now, I'm surrounded by only the best of the best. I know it'll be a tough contest, but I can't help the feeling of pride that swells in my chest as I see so many people from town filling the beach to support us. Small businesses are the backbone of Sweet Water, and we can only survive if people buy our products. This festival not only

helps us get our names out there, but for one lucky individual, it offers the chance to win a nice chunk of change.

“Caroline!”

I look toward the sound of a familiar, cheery voice breaking through the noise of the crowd, and immediately, a weight is lifted off my chest when I see Kaylee and Aiden walking my way. I step out from behind my table and bend down to hug Kaylee tightly.

“It’s so good to see you! Are you having fun?”

Kaylee nods as she peers at me through oversized pink plastic sunglasses.

“Dad says we can go on the Ferris wheel!”

I shoot her an amazed look before shifting my eyes to Aiden.

“Sounds like fun.”

Aiden flashes a smile that makes me want to melt like a popsicle in the summer sun.

“We wanted to stop by and wish you good luck before it gets too crazy.”

“I’m glad you did. I’m kind of freaking out, wondering if I’m forgetting anything.”

The truth is, I can’t stop thinking about the kiss we shared yesterday, and it’s making it hard to focus on the task at hand. I’ve never felt so emotionally connected to someone before, and I wish there was more time to tell him. Maybe I’d even tell him how I’m falling head over heels in love.

That's right. I said it. I am falling in love with Aiden Reeves. What I feel when I'm with him is stronger than anything I ever felt with Eric, and because we have so much history together, my feelings for him are deeper, too.

If the old me ever tried to say that all these years of conflict and intense emotions would grow into such a deliciously satisfying romance, I'd have had her committed.

"You'll do fine. I've had your coffee, and I guarantee no one has a product as unique," Aiden assures me. "And I should know, considering I've been living off it for weeks. Just flash them those pearly whites and keep the samples coming, and the coffee will sell itself."

I can't help but laugh. He's right. He's been coming into the coffee shop nonstop. Even though I know he wasn't coming just for the coffee.

"I hope you get first place!" Kaylee says as she holds my hand, bouncing up and down.

I playfully tap her nose with my forefinger, starting to feel the tension in my shoulders melt away with each encouraging word.

"I hope so, too."

Prize money or not, I know my business can only benefit from my being here. Hundreds of people will get to see my packaging and try my coffee. This will be the most exposure I've ever had, and if I focus on making lasting first impressions, who knows what will happen.

“Is Max around?” Aiden asks, his eyes scanning the crowd.

“He’ll be coming in from work later,” I say. I know my brother will do everything in his power to catch the winner’s announcement at the end.

Fortunately, Max hasn’t mentioned anything about the night he almost caught Aiden and me kissing. And even if he was suspicious, it’s probably as awkward a conversation for him as it is for us.

He nods and steps closer, leaning near my ear. “Can we talk later?”

My heart hammers wildly in my chest. I don’t know exactly what he wants to talk about, but I know what I want *him* to talk about. I’m dying to know if Aiden feels the same way as I do. And whether or not he’d be willing to risk it all to make something real out of this fake relationship.

“Yeah, I’ve been wanting to talk to you, too.”

Aiden lifts a brow, and a smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “Oh, you do, huh?”

I smile and nod, resting a hand on his bicep. *Oh, yes, teenage Caroline purrs. I want nothing more than to blurt it out right here and now.*

But responsible adult Caroline knows how to practice restraint. I know now’s not the time, and I don’t want to mess this up. “I really do.”

Aiden’s eyes trail down to my lips for a moment, and I feel like he wants to kiss me, but with Kaylee only a few feet away,

he holds back. “I’ll be looking forward to it. Oh, and good luck. You’ve got this.”

I squeeze his arm, my hand sliding down it to brush my fingers against his before he heads off with Kaylee. I take a deep breath, walk to my station behind the table, and check the time. Only two minutes left until the vendor booths open and the contest begins. It’s showtime!

I can already see the stampede of people leaving the music and merchant tents to make their way over, and I hustle to get a tray of samples poured from a freshly brewed pot of coffee.

Just as it’s time to open, a small group approaches my booth, and I rush to greet them.

“Morning, guys! Care to sample my Smooth Waves Medium Roast? It’s a local blend made right here in Sweet Water. I promise you’ve never tried anything like it.”

Hands shoot up, and I start passing around samples. Soon, with cash in hand, bags of coffee fly off the shelf. Falling into a groove, I move like I have eight arms, working to restock my table while brewing, pouring, and ringing up orders.

And the best part is that I never tire of talking up my brand. I can see the excitement in peoples’ eyes when I explain the origins of my beans, how I source them, and why all the flavors create such a perfect balance when combined. Floridians sure do love their coffee.

I’m on such a high that I can’t imagine anything bringing me down. That is... until I spot Eric and Megan walking up to the

donut booth next door.

Eric looks around, and I catch his eye. I'm surprised when I don't feel any sadness or frustration. In fact, I don't feel anything at all besides a longing to see Aiden and Kaylee again. My relationship with Aiden may have started fake, but nothing feels more real than my love for him now.

A part of me wants to put Eric in his place right here and now, but I've already wasted enough time on the village idiot.

Besides, I have a contest to win. And judging by how busy the vendors around me are, I suspect it'll be a much closer race than I had anticipated.

Chapter Fourteen

Aiden

“**A**lrigh**t**, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time to announce Sweet Water’s 7th Annual Food and Beverage Festival’s winning vendor!”

Excitement crackles like electricity in the air as crowds form around the entertainment stage.

I grab Kaylee’s hand and push through the masses until I spot Caroline and Max standing near the front. As if she can feel my eyes on her, Caroline turns and looks over her shoulder, immediately locking in on my gaze. That radiant smile of hers is enough to make my knees want to collapse under me, and I wonder what I ever did to get so lucky.

“Hey, guys! Look who finally made it.” Caroline nudges Max playfully.

Max chuckles and bumps his shoulder against hers.

“What? You didn’t think I would miss it when they announced the big cash prize, did you?”

“Uncle Max!” Kaylee kicks up sand as she sprints toward my brother, and he scoops her up effortlessly.

“Hey, Kaylee, girl. Did you come to cheer for Caroline, too?”

“Uh-huh,” she says, bouncing her head up and down. “She’s gonna win!”

Caroline's eyes are fixed on Kaylee, and she looks like she might tear up at any moment.

"See? Even Kaylee knows," Max says, squeezing and spinning her around until she squeals.

"Alright, alright. Don't jinx it now," Caroline says. She moves beside me as Todd, the town's lead entertainment agent and festival organizer, takes the microphone.

"It's the moment we've all been waiting for, and as you know, only one will be awarded the \$5,000 prize for best overall. Ladies....," Todd says. On his cue, two young women walk to the center of the stage with a massive presentation check.

The crowd roars and claps with excitement, and the vendors huddle with their friends and families. Todd waves his arms in an orchestrated fashion until it becomes so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Caroline leans close to me and whispers something softly in my ear.

"I'm glad you're here."

The warmth of her body radiates against mine, and all I want to do is put my arm around her waist, pull her in close, and ask her to be mine. Man, I really want her to be mine.

She places a hand on my upper arm above my sling, and I cover it with mine.

"And the winner is..."

My eyes slip down to her lips, time seeming to slow as the world threatens to fall away and fade around us, leaving us with pent-up feelings and so many words to say.

“Caroline Adams!”

Caroline’s eyes widen in shock, and we both look toward the stage.

“Did he just say my name?”

As everyone cheers and claps, her eyes snap back to me, Kaylee, and Max.

“See, I told you!” Kaylee exclaims as she thrusts a fist up in victory.

Happiness and pure pride swell in my chest, making my heart stop for a second as Caroline’s eyes lock with mine.

“I won,” she breathes out in disbelief.

It’s like a spark turns into a flame. My desire for us to be something real consumes me whole, and my lips are on hers the next second. I cup her flushed face with my hands and feel her smile into our kiss as she grips my wrists.

All I can think about is how happy I am for her. We both get lost in the moment for a few seconds before breaking apart, breathless and smiling.

I look down and see Kaylee beaming. I also don’t miss Max’s shocked face, but the guilt doesn’t knock the breath out of me this time. I love his sister. I’m not going to break her heart.

As far as Max knows, we've been putting on one heck of a show for the crowd, which gets even louder when we kiss. I glance down at Caroline, who blushes up a storm when she hears a few people start to whistle.

"Go on. Get that check," I say, motioning toward the stage. "You earned it."

Caroline smiles another one of those smiles that could solve world peace and gives my hand one final squeeze before climbing the steps to meet Todd.

He shakes her hand, and one of the women presents her with the check. She holds it up with a proud look while a photographer snaps pictures.

"Way to go, Caroline!" Max shouts, cupping his hands around his mouth and sparking another wave of applause.

He doesn't appear to be phased by our kiss. Did he even see it?

I peer up at her with a rapidly beating heart, knowing the revelation of my feelings will have to come later. She's in the spotlight right now, and I want her to take it all in.

I glance around and see quite a few people with bags of coffee in their hands. That's my girl.

When Todd gestures to the microphone and steps aside, Caroline steps up and sweeps her eyes over the crowd. At first, it seems like she's at a loss for words, but she tilts her chin up and speaks.

“Thank you. All of you. It means the world to me that so many of you support our local businesses,” Caroline says, her voice echoing across the beach. “As many of you may already know, creating my own line of coffee has been a dream for years. And if we’ve met, I’m sure I’ve talked your ear off about it, too.”

Gentle laughter rolls through the crowd, and a fond grin crosses my face. Hearing how passionate she is when she talks about her business gives me hope for the future of this town. *And* hope for us.

“This check will give me the funds to expand my business and achieve my dreams. So, thank you all so much!” Caroline calls out.

I clap for her along with everyone else, looking down to see Kaylee peering up at the stage with awe and excitement in her eyes. She’s looking up to a wonderful woman.

Caroline holds her check up and smiles as more photos are taken for the local paper and the festival’s website. It doesn’t take long for other people and vendors to swarm and congratulate her.

“I want to see her!” Kaylee whines as she lifts onto her toes, trying to see over the crowd of people surrounding Caroline.

I place my hand on the back of her head, gently petting her soft hair.

“We’ll see her in a minute, okay?” I can’t blame her for being impatient. I’m dying to see her, too.

“I can’t believe he still has the nerve to show his face around town,” Max says, nodding to Eric and Megan standing in the part of the crowd that hangs back from the stage.

I don’t know Eric as a person, but I do know that he made a mistake in letting someone like Caroline go. I’m sure he’s happy with Megan, but he’ll never be as happy as I am when I’m around Caroline, which is why I’m willing to risk it all and ask her to be mine.

“His loss, right?”

Max chuckles and nods.

“Yeah, Caroline is one of a kind.”

My expression softens as I turn my head and finally catch a glimpse of Caroline making her way off the stage and through the crowd.

“She sure is,” I say, unable to tear my eyes away.

When I turn back to face Max, I notice his expression has changed. He doesn’t look angry.

No. I know that look. Finally, he’s starting to look suspicious.

Chapter Fifteen

Caroline

I can't stop staring at the insanely large check they gave me for winning first place.

The real check is much smaller, of course. But after ogling this one for the hundredth time, I can't imagine ever wanting to part with it. Maybe I should frame it and hang it on the wall as a reminder that hard work really does pay off.

I only tear my eyes away when I hear loud clattering noises coming from my kitchen, followed by laughter. I raise a suspicious brow and leave the check on my bed before heading to the kitchen.

“What’s going on in here?”

Max, Aiden, and Kaylee look at me with guilty smiles as they hover over two almost empty pizza boxes. After the festival, we all ordered pizza and had a mini celebration at my house.

“There’s only one slice of pepperoni left,” Max says, flashing a playful glare toward the other two.

“You’re fighting over pizza?” I smirk and walk around my kitchen island. After rattling around in my silverware drawer, I pull out a knife and cut the last piece into three even parts, dropping each on a plate.

“Kaylee doesn’t like crust, so she gets the point,” I say as I pass plates around. “And Aiden *loves* crust, so he gets the top.

That leaves the middle for you, Max.”

“Thank you!” Kaylee takes her slice and skips to the living room. Cartoons buzz from the TV, and she sets her plate on the coffee table to watch while she eats.

“Yeah. Thanks, Care,” Aiden says, giving me a wink.

As our eyes lock, we share a smile that makes my heart pound heavily, and Max lets out an amused laugh as he looks between us.

“Wow, you guys sure are good at faking it. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost think you liked each other.”

Our shared smile turns a bit tense. I’m sure he thinks our kiss at the festival was just another publicity stunt, but it was so much more. He kissed me in front of Kaylee, which she’s gladly brought up multiple times now, as well.

That has to mean *something*, right?

“We’ve just had to spend a lot of time together,” I say before hopping up on the counter and clapping my hands together. “So, who’s coming with me to cash my check tomorrow?”

Max and Aiden both laugh at my enthusiasm.

“Geez, the way you’ve been gawking at it all day, I’m surprised you’re not gonna frame it and hand it on the wall,” Max says.

I scoff at him and shake my head. My brother might know me a little *too* well.

“Oh, come on now,” I say, brushing him off. “I know it’s not like I won the lottery or something, but \$5,000 is a lot of money. You know how hard I’ve been working to get my private label up and running.”

I know he’s just giving me a hard time, but when it comes to expanding my business, this is the most I’ve ever been able to put into Sweet Water Coffee at once.

As it stands, my turn-around times are slow, and I’ll need better equipment to start producing in bulk. Plus, I’ll need to hire a web designer to help me launch a professional site so I can start taking online orders. It’s a lot to do for just one person on a meager salary, but it’s my dream.

I remember when Gina served me my first cup of coffee. I was still a teenager, and I’d stop into Third Coast to cram whenever I had a big exam. I was blown away. The rich, bold, and smooth flavor and its deep and intoxicating aroma made it feel like perfection in a cup. And I’ve been hooked ever since.

I’ve been fortunate that Gina took me under her wing all those years ago and hired me. Now, my life’s work has become recreating that experience for others.

Max puts his arm around my shoulders and gives me an affectionate squeeze.

“I know you’ll get there. You’ve proven yourself to the town and won’t stop until the world knows your name. It’s just who you are,” he says.

Just then, an alert sounds from the television. With a confused frown, Max enters the living room to investigate and leaves me and Aiden alone for a moment.

“Max is right,” Aiden says. “You’re going to achieve everything you’ve set out to do. I believe in you.”

He leans close to kiss my forehead, then squeezes my hand before following Max.

That man—I sure do love him.

But I don’t dare say anything. These things take time, and I want to wait for the right moment before I go bearing my heart and soul to the same guy I used to dread being around.

“Caroline!”

I hurry into the living room to join the others as they stare at the television, which broadcasts a new weather report.

“I remember hearing about a disturbance in the water a few days ago, but I’ve been so busy lately I forgot to check on it. It’s only a tropical storm, but it’s heading right for us, and they think it’ll get stronger over the next few days,” Max says.

Kaylee’s eyes widen as she sits cross-legged by the coffee table with Jasper in her lap.

I look between Aiden and Max, seeing concerned creases on both their foreheads. It’s not like hurricanes are a new thing, but when one is heading right for us and getting stronger over warm water, it can be a bit nerve-wracking.

“How strong do they think it’ll get?”

“A cat one. Maybe two, let’s hope,” Aiden says, crossing his arms over his chest. “It’ll hit the east coast first, then it’ll die down before it reaches us. But we should prepare just to be safe.”

“I want to stay with Jasper,” Kaylee says as she softly pets Jasper’s back.

I smile, warmth filling my chest.

“Maybe we can all camp out together during the storm. Whose house is safest?”

Max motions to Aiden.

“He’s more inland.”

Aiden nods.

“Yeah, that works for me. I’ve got some boards and sandbags in my shed.”

Max clasps his hands together.

“Alright. Sounds like we’ve got a plan. We can go ahead and keep watching it, but let’s start securing the house soon.”

I walk over to Kaylee and crouch beside her, giving her a comforting smile. She’s old enough to know about hurricanes and tropical storms, but I can tell she’s nervous by how she pets Jasper.

“Want to run to the store with me? We have to get water, batteries, and snacks.”

“Snacks?”

I laugh softly, figuring that'd be the part that would interest her. I look back at Aiden and Max.

“We'll run to the store and meet you at Aiden's house.”

Aiden and Max nod before we grab our things and head out.

Max hops in his red Jeep and takes off, leaving me and Aiden to get Kaylee situated in the back seat of my car.

“I'll keep a close eye on her,” I tell Aiden once we shut Kaylee inside.

He takes my hand and leads me around to the back of the car.

“I know. I trust you.”

I peer into his eyes, so many words lingering on the tip of my tongue.

“Thanks for helping me with the festival.”

Aiden smiles.

“I would've been to support you either way.”

My heart beats quicker than I can get words out of my mouth. Life has been moving so quickly lately that there never seems to be a good time to talk to him.

“I'll see you at your house.”

Aiden looks down at our joined hands and nods, his thumb brushing over my knuckles. He lets go of me and heads toward his truck before pausing at his door.

“You know... I never thought playing a fake boyfriend would be so fun.” He flashes me a grin before getting into his truck and starting the engine, its rumble echoing throughout the block.

This plan turned out to be nothing like I expected. I wave goodbye to him before getting in the driver’s seat and heading to our main grocery store in town, which is already getting busy with people thinking the same as us. It’s always better to be over-prepared than to lack supplies and be without basic needs when roads are flooded, and the power goes out.

Kaylee and I fill up a cart with necessities, and I toss in a bag of gummy worms and some animal crackers for good measure. By the time we check out and make it to Aiden’s house, they’ve already boarded the windows and cleared the porch and yard from anything that might go flying.

Kaylee and I bring the groceries inside before she gets an early start on the gummy worms. With an amused smile, I head back outside to see Aiden on a ladder checking the roof.

“Hey, Caroline. Can I talk to you for a second?”

I turn to my brother, who motions for me to step into the garage with him. Knots twist in my stomach, and as I join him, I briefly glance over his shoulder at Aiden.

“Everything okay?”

Max nods and crosses his arms over his chest, shifting a bit on his feet like he’s nervous, but there’s no way he’s more nervous than I am right about now.

“Obviously, I don’t want to get all up in your business, Care... but what’s going on with you two? You guys are acting awful funny here lately, and it makes me wonder if there’s something you’re not telling me. I mean... even the other night, when I showed up to fix you’re a/c. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say it looked like you two were about to kiss.”

My heart rate spikes to an all-time high, and silence falls between us. I try to think of something to say but have no idea where to begin. I know I want to be with Aiden. But that’s something he and I have yet to talk about. He may shoot me down for all I know.

“I love him, Max.” I blurt out the words before I can chicken out of saying them. He deserves to know the truth, even if it means him finding out before I have a chance to tell Aiden myself. “Look. I’m sorry, okay? I’m sure he’s the one guy that’s off-limits, but it just... happened.”

Max stares at me for a few seconds before shaking his head.

“I’m not mad, Care. Surprised? Yes,” Max replies with a faint chuckle. “But if you’re happy and Aiden is happy, that’s great. I just want you guys to be honest with me. That’s all. I care about both of you.”

I finally release the breath I’ve been holding, and tension drops from my shoulders.

“Really? You’re not mad?”

Max pulls me forward by my shoulder and embraces me in a hug that eliminates any fears or doubts that linger.

“I want you to be happy, Caroline. I don’t care who it’s with.”

I rest my chin on his shoulder as Aiden climbs down the ladder and looks over at us, his eyebrows knit together in confusion.

All I can do is smile, but I’m still terrified deep down. What if he rejects me? Even with Max’s approval, Aiden still expressed his concerns about Kaylee. I feel foolish for getting my hopes up.

But... it’s the calm before the storm, and all I have left is hope.

Chapter Sixteen

Aiden

Sideways rain pummels my house as sixty and seventy-mile-an-hour blow through the small town of Sweet Water. Hurricane Sara struck land as a category two but died down to a tropical storm as it crossed the Florida peninsula to where we are. The streets on my road are flooded, and many homes have lost power... including mine.

“It’s getting worse,” Max says, peeking out the front door.

It’s dark, and I feel Caroline’s fingers wrap around my bicep as she moves to stand behind me in the foyer. I can tell she’s tense.

“You okay?” I say, placing my hand over hers. We’ve been listening to weather reports on my emergency radio for hours now, and we are finally getting hit by the center of the surge. There’s nothing left to do now but ride out the storm.

Caroline nods and leans her cheek against the back of my shoulder.

“Kaylee is in her room with Jasper. I think they’re keeping each other calm.”

I chuckle a little.

“Careful. You may lose your cat.”

Caroline laughs.

“I think Jasper is starting to love her more than me.”

Max turns with a smirk on his face. “Your cat has no loyalty. There was a time when he loved me the most.”

“A very short amount of time,” Caroline says, pitching him a look.

I laugh at their banter. “It looks like I’ll have to start spending more time with Jasper to see what all the fuss is about.”

A sudden, loud thud in the near distance makes us all jump, our eyes widening. We all know what that sound is.

“There goes someone’s tree,” Max says, stealing another peak out the front door. “You sure they said this is a tropical storm?”

“Ughh,” Caroline groans. “And when is it finally going to end?” Caroline heaves a sigh and presses her forehead against my back.

I turn around to wrap my arms around her, resting my chin on the top of her head. The sweet smell of her hair helps me relax, and I close my eyes for a moment, listening to the sound of natural chaos outside.

“I’m going to make use of those hurricane snacks,” Max says, patting me on the back before heading to the kitchen.

I smile and rub Caroline’s back, feeling more at ease after talking to Max.

I saw him in the garage talking to Caroline before the storm, and I felt it was time to come clean. He still won’t tell me what the two of them were talking about, but when I told him I was

falling for his sister, he seemed oddly enthusiastic—assuming I don't run off and break her heart like Eric did.

Maybe this is the perfect opportunity to tell her how I feel. She's in my arms, peering up at me like she has a thousand things to say, and I want to tell her everything. I want to tell her how I've fallen in love with her, how I want her in my life forever, and how she's made me so happy, even after I was sure I'd never be able to feel this way about someone again.

But one thing still holds me back—Kaylee.

She seemed happy about the kiss, but I want to make sure she's okay with Caroline being a constant in our lives. It's always been just me and Kaylee. It's hard to gauge how she'd feel about Caroline becoming my wife one day. She may not realize how much our lives would change, and I don't want her to be blindsided or upset.

“I should check on Kaylee, but let's talk later, okay?”

She nods, her fingers playing with the ends of my hair. It's so soothing that it makes my eyelids feel heavy.

“Okay. Tell her I've got a bag of gummy worms with her name on them,” she says before heading to the kitchen to join Max.

My eyes trail her until she's out of sight, and a nervous sensation creeps into my hands and makes my chest tighten. I guess now is as good of a time as any to rip off the band-aid.

I head down the hallway that leads to Kaylee's room, hearing her talking, and a smile crosses my lips as I poke my head into

her room.

Tucked under bright pink bed sheets, she reads Charlotte's Webb aloud—her giant pink unicorn on one side and Jasper curled up on the other.

If things go how I want them to, maybe this can be a new normal for us. Granted, I've never considered keeping a cat in my house before, but I'd be willing to allow it so as long as it was a package deal.

“How's everything going in here?”

Kaylee sits up as I approach her bed, her long hair streaming down the back of her white t-shirt with different types of butterflies scattered across the front.

“Jasper is sleeping.” She puts her finger against her lips.

I stifle a laugh and sit down next to her, my eyes sweeping across the walls of posters and pictures of princesses and animals that decorate her room. She's the type to love just about anything, and she's always been able to find a silver lining. I admire that about her, along with so many other things.

The wind howls outside, and Kaylee's eyes dart to her window as the rain gets heavier.

“It'll be storming for another few hours, but we're safe inside,” I say, knowing that lightning and thunder scare her.

Kaylee nods and lets her feet hang off the bed.

“Can Caroline play hide and seek with me?”

I feel optimistic when she asks about Caroline. I know it's a good sign, but I wonder if she only likes Caroline around as a friend. How would Kaylee react if she took on a more maternal role?

"I'm sure she'd be happy to. I want to talk to you first, though."

"About what?"

"About Caroline," I say, watching Kaylee curiously tilt her head to the side. "What do you think about her? Do you like her?"

Kaylee smiles brightly and nods.

"She's my friend!"

I smile back and nod.

"Good. That's good. I, uh... I like her, too. A lot," I say, feeling a knot form in my stomach.

"Do you love her? You kissed," Kaylee asks with a cheeky look on her face.

I can't help but chuckle a little. I can't sneak anything past her.

"I do. I love her a lot. If I asked her to be a part of our family, would you be happy? If you wouldn't be, be honest with me. I promise I won't be upset."

Kaylee nods fervently, nearly bouncing on the spot.

"You smile when she comes over. That makes me happy," she replies with the sweetest look on her face.

Relief washes over me like a wave, and the last bit of weight on my shoulders finally falls away. The fact that she's so fond of Caroline and able to see how happy I am with her makes me that much more excited about our future. We're going to be so happy.

I've wanted that for Kaylee for so long now.

"I'm glad she makes you happy too." I place my hand on the back of her head and smile down at her. She's the best kid I could ever ask for. How in the world did I get so lucky?

"I sure do love you, Princess."

"I love you, too, Daddy," Kaylee says, sitting on her knees and wrapping her arms around my neck. She squeezes tight, and my mind flashes to an image of her quitting college one day to run off and join a women's pro wrestling circuit. At least I won't have to worry about her as much when she starts dating.

I chuckle through my breathlessness and hug her back.

A storm may be raging outside, but it pales compared to the peace I feel inside. I'm surrounded by the people I care about the most, and I think I'm finally ready to tell Caroline how I feel about her.

Chapter Seventeen

Caroline

When the storm finally passes, gray clouds linger in the sky, blocking most of the sun as we step onto the front porch. I frown and run my fingers through my hair, glancing up and down the street. The damage is heartbreaking.

The roads are still flooded, fallen trees and branches litter the streets, and debris is blown everywhere.

When we hear a commotion down the street, we carefully maneuver our way down the porch steps and slosh down the sidewalk in ankle-deep water. Aiden finally took off his cast this morning and is able to lift Kaylee to carry her with his good arm and takes my hand with his other, leading us safely.

My eyes finally catch on to what's causing the excitement, and I let out a groan. "Oh, no...!"

Most of the neighborhood looks intact, minus some roof and flood damage, but I see a section of Aiden's neighbor's house that took a nasty blow from a fallen Live Oak tree. The yard sits on a steep enough incline that, fortunately, there's no standing water. But from the looks of it, their garage door was impaled by one of its branches, and the windshield of their SUV is shattered.

Aiden picks up his pace and leads us to the front yard of the house, which is covered in tree bark, loose palm tree leaves, and other large debris from the Oak.

Greg and Laura Jensen, the owners of the house and a sweet, older couple, stand huddled together in their yard as they stare in shock and despair.

“I can’t believe this!” Laura cries and leans into Greg’s chest as he wraps his arms around her.

“It’s okay. At least we’re okay,” Greg says. He pets her hair and comforts her as other neighbors rush over to make sure they’re okay.

I reach the devastated couple and place a hand on Laura’s arm, making her teary blue eyes shift to me.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, knowing my words won’t fix what’s broken.

The Jensen’s have lived in this house since before Max and I were born, and I went to school with their son. We always see them at local events, and I know what big supporters they are of the community. But being retired, I know they are on a fixed income now. It doesn’t seem fair that this happened to them.

Laura pats my hand and gives me a grateful but worrisome look.

“Thank you, Caroline,” she says between snuffles. “This house has been in our family for three generations now. I can’t believe that old oak did all this damage. No telling what it’s gonna cost to fix everything.”

“Is there anything inside you want me to grab? I can call up some of my guys and go in,” Aiden asks as he moves to my

side.

Laura and Greg exchange a quick look before nodding.

“There’s a square, wooden box in the bedroom on the dresser. It’s full of family jewelry and heirlooms,” Greg says.

Aiden nods and lets Kaylee down before taking his phone out and giving Greg a pat on the back.

“You got it.”

I take Kaylee’s hand as we wait. I smile as I watch Aiden head off to make the call, and my heart turns to mush. He’s such a good man. Then again, this town has a habit of attracting good, kind-hearted residents, and the number of people that approach to offer help and give condolences stands as a testament.

Without the support of Sweet Water residents, I would have never had access to the kind of money I did to scale my business, and Sweet Water Coffee would be nothing.

Just as Max arrives on the scene, an idea hits me.

“I’m going to give Mr. and Mrs. Jensen my prize money.”

Max’s eyes widen in surprise as he steps closer to me.

“Wait, Caroline... *really*? Are you sure? That money’s for your business, and you worked hard for it.”

He’s right. It was a fantastic reward for all my hard work and efforts, but it’s just money.

“I’m sure,” I say, knowing they would do the same if I were in their shoes. “They need it more than me.”

Max takes Kaylee's hand as I carefully cross over to Greg and Laura. "I want to help you pay for the repairs. I have a check for \$5,000, and I'd like to transfer the money to you."

Greg and Laura shoot each other a look of confusion before shaking their heads in unison.

"*No*. Oh, Caroline..." Laura says in protest. "We can't possibly take that money from you. We saw you at the festival, and you won that money fair and square."

I give them a firm smile, knowing it'll take time and convincing. "Sorry, Mrs. Jensen, but I've already decided. Your house is a part of Sweet Water's legacy. Please let me do this for you."

Laura places a hand on Greg's shoulder and gives him an unsure look.

"We can help clean up your yard, Mr. and Mrs. Jensen," Jacob Cartwright, a teenage boy from the JV football team, says, stepping forward with his two younger brothers.

Greg starts to say something, but he is interrupted.

"I know a good car guy." Bill Sutherland, an older man from down the street, chimes in. "He deals with windshield repairs, and he owes me a favor. I'll call and see what he can do."

Tears flow freely down Laura's face as she looks around. "Oh, Greg," she sobs.

Greg puts his arm around her shoulders and nods. "Thank you. All of you."

Just then, Aiden appears in the doorway with a jewelry box in his hands and walks back over to us.

“The guys are on their way to assess the damage. If you think of anything else you might need for now, let us know.”

Max nudges Aiden. “Did you hear? Caroline is giving them her \$5,000.”

Aiden turns to me with a proud look. “Oh, you *are* now?”

I smile and nod before looking down at my feet. I know how much I’ve talked everyone’s ears off about wanting to win that contest, but there are more important things in life than money. And I believe good actions reap good rewards.

“I want to help,” I say, humbled by such unexpected circumstances.

Aiden shakes his head in disbelief before cupping the back of my head and pressing a firm kiss against my forehead.

“You’re the most amazing person I know, Caroline.”

I close my eyes for a moment and revel in the feeling of his lips against my skin. He has no idea how much his words make my heart flutter like it’s somehow sprouted wings and is trying to escape.

“You’d do the same thing. So many people in this town would.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that.”

He brings his eyes down to meet mine, and all I want to do is blurt out my feelings and let go of the words I’ve had in my

head for so long now. Maybe there isn't a perfect moment for me to wait for. All this time, I've been waiting for the ideal moment to tell him what's in my heart, but maybe there is no perfect moment. Maybe I should tell him—.

My thoughts are interrupted by Julie Reynolds as she alerts everyone.

“Damage is pretty bad closer to the beach. They're organizing a clean-up effort in the area. Anyone want to go?”

Hands begin to raise, and murmurs of agreement echo around us before a dozen people start heading west toward the beach.

Others stay behind with Greg and Laura, who are busy making a list of things to get out of the house until the garage is repaired.

“I'm going to head to the beach to help. Are you guys good here?” Max asks.

Aiden and I nod as Kaylee stands before us—a determined look on her face.

“I'm going to pick up all the sticks!” Kaylee says before scurrying around the yard, leaning over to pick up every twig and small branch she sees.

Max chuckles and bumps the side of his fist against Aiden's before giving me a quick hug. “See you two lovebirds later.”

Aiden smirks and tucks me under his arm, leaning the side of his head against mine.

“I’m glad he’s not upset.”

“It’s Max. We probably shouldn’t have been worried about it in the first place,” I reply. He’s always had our backs, no matter what. I don’t think anything can change that.

We watch Kaylee dart around the yard and create her pile of sticks with proud smiles on our faces.

She may not be my daughter, but I’ve come to care for her deeply, and all I want is for her to be safe, happy, and healthy. Aiden has done such a fantastic job raising her. If I’m allowed to ever have any part in that, I’d be honored to help.

The roar of a large truck in the distance snaps us out of Cupid’s trance.

Like a knight in shining armor, a shiny black F-350 Super Duty with chrome rims and a lift kit makes its way toward us, and even the flooded roads are no match as the tires make waves big enough to ride.

“Those are my guys from the firehouse,” Aiden says, slipping his arm away from my shoulders.

I grab his wrist just before he slips off and immediately pull his attention back to me. “Be careful.”

Smiling, he slides his hand over to mine, curling my fingers to kiss the top of my knuckles. “Always am.”

My cheeks burn slightly as our hands break apart. I watch him greet three guys as they hop out of the big truck, wearing dark blue shirts and cargo pants. I’ll probably always worry

about him with a job that dangerous. But thinking about dating a man who saves lives daily sends shivers down my spine.

And sure, I'll admit... the fact he can throw me over his shoulder like I weigh no more than a sack of flour doesn't hurt, either.

Chapter Eighteen

Aiden

A week has passed since Hurricane Sara swept across Sweet Water, causing flood and property damage throughout town. But nothing can dampen the spirits of its residents.

Repairs and restoration projects are underway, and it looks like this town will be back up on its feet in no time.

It's what I love most about this town. People here are as kind and welcoming as they come, but we're tough as nails, too. Watching everyone pull together to help one another reminds me why I never want to leave this place.

And I know it's why Caroline donated her prize money to Greg and Laura Jensen, which is precisely why I need to do something big to give back to her.

I started by talking to everyone we know. From local business owners to the local town council and even the mayor, I reached out to anyone who would listen and made sure they all knew about Caroline's selfless act of kindness.

Even after knowing her for all these years, she still has an innate ability to keep me on my toes. It's just one of the many things that I love about her.

She deserves to know how much she means to me. And tonight, with a bit of help from our friends, I'm going to tell her everything.

I linger outside Third Coast Coffee at sunset as fiery colors paint the sky. The sound of heels clicking against the concrete sidewalk catches my attention, and I see Gina heading toward me with her keys in her hand.

“Hey, Gina.”

Gina smiles and pats my arm. “You’re a doll for doing this, Aiden Reeves. Seriously. If anyone did this for me, I’d faint from happiness.”

I laugh and step back so she can unlock the door of the coffee shop, which Caroline locked up an hour ago when she closed for the evening.

“She deserves more than I’ll ever be able to give her. But I’m hoping this will be a good place to start.”

Gina unlocks the door and turns back to me, a look of awe crossing her face.

“You’re a good man. Caroline is going to be a very happy woman.”

That’s kind of what I was hoping for. I want to make her so happy that I get to see that radiant smile of hers every day for the rest of our lives. Today is only the beginning.

“Thanks, Gina. I owe you one.”

Gina pats my arm one last time before opening the door and looking past me at the line of townspeople who came to help me surprise Caroline.

“Alright, everyone. Listen up! I’ll be calling Caroline in a few minutes and telling her there’s an emergency at the coffee shop. So, make sure you wait for my cue,” she says.

I lead the group inside, and the coffee shop is completely packed by the time the last person is in. I linger by the order counter until I see Max enter with Kaylee and my parents, and I wave them over.

“Thanks for watching her while I rounded everyone up,” I say, pulling Kaylee close. I reach out and give my mom and dad a quick hug, glad they can be here for this special moment. They’ve been rooting for this since I told them about my feelings for Caroline, and it makes me wish her parents could be here, too.

Max stands on the other side of Kaylee and waves a dismissive hand. “It’s no problem. What you’re doing for my sister is amazing, man. She’s going to be so happy.”

“I’m so glad this is happening,” my mom says. She shares a special look with my dad, and I think about the lifetime of exceptional looks I want to share with Caroline.

I smile and look down at Kaylee, who is bouncing on her feet with a mixture of excitement and impatience.

“Are you ready to surprise Caroline?”

“Yes!” Kaylee says, clapping her hands together.

Overlapping conversations fill the coffee shop with a low murmur, and a few of the other baristas go behind the counter to start brewing some of Caroline’s coffee for everyone who

showed up. It only took me a few days to pull this all together. Mainly because rumors of what Caroline did for Mr. and Mrs. Jensen spread like wildfire, and everyone wanted to find a way to show her appreciation.

“Okay, I need everyone quiet now. I’m making the call!” Gina says, holding her phone up in the air. A hush falls over the room, and everyone goes silent.

She presses her iPhone against her ear, waits for a few seconds, and then starts speaking. “Hey! Caroline, hun... I’m so sorry to bother you this late, but someone called and said there’s a weird flashing light coming from inside the coffee shop, and I’m out of town. Would you be a doll and go check it out?”

I hold my breath, hoping she says yes.

Gina smiles big, and her eyes widen as she gives me a thumbs up. “Great! Thank you so much, dear. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Gina hangs up the phone and announces to the crowd. “She’s on her way!”

Excited voices and claps ring throughout the small space as everyone turns to face the door, waiting eagerly for Caroline’s arrival.

Relief washes over me as I remind myself she only lives a few miles away, and it’s just another reason to love small-town living.

But time always seems to drag out when waiting for something important. As anticipations rise, my knee begins to bounce involuntarily as the minutes tick by.

Finally, we all hear the jingle of keys. *She's here.*

Caroline pushes the door open and hurries inside right after she gets it unlocked, and her jaw nearly hits the floor as her eyes scan across the room of smiling people. Everyone cheers and claps while a confused but happy look fills her face.

“Woah! What’s going on?” She laughs as she looks around, trying to make sense of everything.

I walk through the crowd toward her, soon catching her attention.

“Surprise.”

Caroline meets me halfway, and I take her hands in mine.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many people here before,” she says, sniffing the air and looking toward the order counter. “Are they brewing my blends?”

I smile as a crowd surrounds us, eagerly watching our every move.

“They are. Everyone in this room has paid for a bag of your coffee,” I say, gesturing to all our friends. “They all showed up to support Sweet Water Coffee.”

Caroline’s eyes sparkle as she looks at everyone around her, and she lifts her hand to cover her mouth before shaking her head in disbelief.

“Oh my gosh, you guys... Thank you so much! All of you. This means the world to me.” Her eyes fill with tears, and her voice is shaky.

“That’s not all.” A deep voice sounds behind me.

Caroline glances past me and looks even more shocked than before.

“Mayor Daniels!?”

Bobby Daniels has run this town for the past three years, improving citizens’ livelihoods and helping us build our local economy. Like us, he grew up here as well, and when he got elected to office, he made it a personal mission to make Sweet Water the best it’s ever been.

“Hello, Caroline. I hear you stirred up quite the commotion when you gave all your prize money to Greg and Laura Jensen,” he says.

Bobby’s a stout man with a thick mustache and a round face that emits cheerfulness every time he speaks, which is perfect, seeing how this town thrives on positivity. He places a firm hand on my shoulder, and Caroline’s eyes dart to mine, filled with curious suspicion.

“Oh, you *did*?” Her lips curl into a smile as she gives me an accusing look, and Mayor Daniels nods, flashing his trademark smile.

“I tried your coffee at the contest, and hands down, it’s the best I’ve ever had. I even voted for you,” he says, winking at her and making her blush. “So, when Aiden told me how you

gave up your prize money to help the community, I knew you deserved a little recognition. A lot of people around here think so, too.”

Caroline swallows and blinks, her eyes glistening. “What can I say? I love this town. I can’t imagine living anywhere else.”

“This town wouldn’t be what it is without people like you. And that’s why Mr. Reeves and I have been in contact with people all over town, trying to come up with a special way to thank you for what you did. Because you deserve it.”

Caroline and I turn just as Max and Kaylee push through the crowd to present her with a giant check, just like the one she got at the festival. Only this time, the amount was much more significant.

“We came together and raised the money you need for your business,” I say, showing her the check. “Well,” I add, “...at least we *hope* it’s enough.”

“Oh my...” Caroline gapes. “Does that say \$10,000?”

“Yes, ma’am. It does,” Mayor Daniels says as he holds the lapel of his light gray suit jacket. “We want you to take this money and put it into your business. Sweet Water Coffee can become a national sensation, and we hope this can help get you started.”

“This is... I...” Caroline stumbles over her words, unable to string together a sentence. She turns in a complete circle as

people clap and shout words of encouragement. “Thank you so much. I promise I won’t let any of you down.”

I hand the check back to Max, who has a proud look on his face.

A slightly nervous, fluttering feeling fills my chest as I approach Caroline. “And there’s something else I want to say to you.”

Caroline’s eyes glisten as she gazes up at me, her hands joining in front of her chest.

“Yes?”

I let my fingertips brush down the side of her upper arm as I peer into her eyes, captivated by the beauty she probably doesn’t even realize she has.

“I told you that you’re the most amazing person I know. Even that description doesn’t do you justice. I’m lucky to know you and to have you in my life. And I don’t want you ever to leave it,” I tell her as I take her hand and pull her closer.

“I never thought I could feel as happy as I do when I’m with you or when I see you with Kaylee. You’ve rocked my whole world, Care, and I love you more than words can describe.”

Caroline is speechless at first and looks like she’s on the verge of crying as she stares at me. A tear then slips from the corner of her eye.

“I love you too, Aiden. So much,” she says as she grips my hand tighter. “I was running around blind, looking for love, but

you've been in front of me the whole time. You're all I want. All I've ever wanted."

Every ounce of tension leaves my body as I smile in relief and press my forehead against hers. Our eyes lock briefly before our lips collide in a sweet kiss.

Caroline leans up on her toes, her smile pressing against mine.

People around us cheer, and I can distinctly hear Kaylee's happy laugh. The moment hits me more intensely than I could have ever prepared for, taking my breath away and sweeping me off my feet all at once.

Caroline and I share a warm look when we break apart, reveling in the moment and never wanting it to end. We both have everything we need, and together, we can give each other everything we've ever wanted.

With her in my arms, the future looks bright, and the best part is that we're only getting started. This is only one happy moment out of the thousands that I can't wait to share with her.

Epilogue

Caroline

A year and a half later...
Pachelbel's "Canon in D" floats over the white sand and rippling waves of Sweet Water's beautiful beach. Rows of white wicker chairs full of friends and family are nestled in the sand, forming a natural aisle that leads to the town's best officiant and Aiden, the love of my life.

My stomach twists with nervous excitement as Max offers his arm.

"You sure you're not gonna run this time?" He looks down at me with an amused smirk.

"You *hush!*"

I squeeze his arm tight and think about how proud our parents would be if they were here with us.

Then, as quickly as they came, all the nerves pass, and I'm overcome with a sense of calm. Maybe they *are* here. And maybe Holly is, too.

I gaze up towards the sky and let a few tears slip down my face as I smile and laugh them away.

Max pulls out a handkerchief from his coat pocket and hands it to me, which makes me cry even more, and I laugh.

"Max, my makeup!" I say as if he has any control over my overactive lacrimal glands. My brother has been there for me

every step of the way, and I can't think of anyone better to walk me down the aisle.

A light breeze tries to ruffle my hair, but this time, I made sure to use enough hairspray that no amount of wind can take it down. The lace bodice of my mermaid wedding gown fits me perfectly, and a train billows around me as I proceed forward. I've never felt so close to being a princess before.

My gaze falls on Aiden, who's gazing at me with wide eyes full of love and awe. He places his hand on the left side of his chest and drums his fingers like he's trying to coax his heart to beat again. In his black suit with a red rose boutonniere pinned to his lapel, he is the most handsome grump ever to hit the Florida coast, and I'm dying to be in his arms.

His firefighter buddies make up his groomsmen, and they reach forward and give him playful nudges, knowing that he's trapped in an enchanted gaze as I get ready to walk down the aisle toward him.

"You're up, Kaylee," Max says as he looks to my right.

I turn and immediately feel my eyes burn with happy tears at the sight of Kaylee approaching in a soft pink dress with a basket of white roses. Carefully, I kneel so I'm at eye level with her.

"You look so beautiful," I say in a whisper.

Kaylee eats up my compliment as she smiles and sways, causing her dress to flutter around her.

"So do you," she whispers back.

I hug her, feeling my heart skip. We've grown so much closer since I moved into Aiden's place with the two of them. The past year and a half has been such a rush. From kicking off my online coffee shop and shipping bags across the country to getting engaged and becoming a part of Aiden's and Kaylee's family, I can't think of any other time in my life where I was this happy.

The old me would say I don't know how things can get any better, but I've learned not to bother thinking that way. Being with Aiden has helped me realize that happiness has no limit. And when you think today is the best day ever, tomorrow comes along and serves you a slice of humble pie.

But for real, today is *definitely* the best day ever... so far.

I straighten up, giving Kaylee the nod, and she walks ahead of me, scattering flower petals down the aisle. I grip Max's arm tighter as we follow her, my eyes sweeping around as all our guests slowly rise from their chairs.

We invited quite a few people, and I can't even begin to thank everyone who has supported me and my business this past year.

There's no town greater than this one.

When I reach Aiden, I take his hand and let him pull me in front of him, the air leaving my lungs for a second.

"Hi." My voice is nearly breathless as I smile at my future husband.

Aiden grins as he lets his eyes roam over me.

“You look beautiful.”

My face warms up as we hold each other’s hands and look intently at our officiant, Ken Brown, who has officiated almost every wedding in town since I was in diapers.

“Welcome, everyone. Today, we’ve gathered here to witness the love between Aiden Reeves and Caroline Adams and to celebrate their long, happy life together. They’re both beloved members of our Sweet Water community, and I’m sure I can speak for all of us when I say they’re a perfect match for each other.”

I gaze up at Aiden, seeing our future flash before my eyes—a peaceful, happy home, beautiful bond with Kaylee, and adventures with my brother’s grumpy best friend that never end. We’ve gone through so much together, things most couples don’t have to ever experience, and we’ve come out ten times stronger and closer on the other side.

If that doesn’t say we were meant to weather life’s storms together, I don’t know what does.

“Now, Aiden and Caroline will declare their loving commitment to one another,” Ken announces before turning to me. “Caroline, do you take Aiden to be your lawfully wedded husband? To love and cherish him through good times and bad from this day forward?”

I give Aiden’s hands a happy squeeze as I nod.

“I do.”

When I say the words, I mean them with every ounce of my being and every bit of my heart. No matter what, I'll be by his side.

Ken faces Aiden.

“And Aiden, do you take Caroline to be your lawfully wedded wife? To love and cherish her through good times and bad from this day forward?”

“I do,” Aiden replies as he smiles at me. “Always.”

My heart flutters, remembering the night he proposed to me. And Aiden will never let me forget it, either, because it was in the same spot we ran into each other when I fled my wedding with Eric. If I hadn't run into him that day, I wonder if things would be different today. Would we have still found our way to each other?

I believe we would have, but I'm happy with our love story and how it has played out so far. We've got so many chapters left to go!

“We'll do the exchanging of rings now,” Ken says before gesturing to Kaylee, who's being carefully guided toward me and Aiden by Max with the rings resting flat in her tiny palm.

“Thank you, Princess,” Aiden says, leaning down to kiss her cheek as he takes my ring.

I peck her other cheek and take Aiden's wedding band from her other hand. When Aiden and I straighten up and face each other with excited expressions, I let him take my hand.
Finally!

“With this ring, I promise to love you until the end of our days. My heart is yours, and your heart is mine. There’s no other person I want standing in front of me today,” Aiden says before sliding my glistening wedding ring on my finger.

My throat tightens as a swell of emotion rocks me. My last wedding didn’t go as planned, but being with Aiden has made me more and more sure that my failed relationship with Eric was a blessing in disguise. He’s not the man I was meant to be with.

The man in front of me today is the one I’ve been searching for all along.

“With this ring, I promise to love you with everything I have. My heart. My soul. Everything. I’ve never been so happy before, and I look forward to every day we have together.” I slide his wedding band on his finger before we resume holding hands, facing the officiant eagerly.

We know what finally comes next.

“By the power vested in me by the State of Florida, I now pronounce you husband and wife!”

Before he can tell us to kiss, Aiden and I reach for each other, unable to hold back for another second. Our lips crash together as our guests jump to their feet and applaud us. Every tense, complicated, and fantastic moment that Aiden and I have shared leads to this moment—the best moment of our lives.

So far.

Aiden cups my face and presses his forehead against mine.

“I love you, Mrs. Reeves.”

I nuzzle my nose against his.

“I love you too, Mr. Reeves.”

It’s not long before I feel a small hand tugging on my dress, prompting me to look down and see Kaylee beaming up at us.

“And we love *you!*” I say as Aiden scoops her up with ease.

Aiden laughs as he holds her on his hip, leaning her close so we can all embrace.

“You did such a good job!”

Kaylee looks as proud as can be as she looks between us.

“I did?”

I laugh as she eats up the attention.

“You sure did. Here comes Uncle Max!”

Max steals Kaylee away from Aiden and gives her a playful squeeze as she squeals with delight.

“This one stole the show,” Max says as Kaylee wraps her arms around his neck. He gives both me and Aiden a half-hug. “Congratulations to both of you. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks, man. That really means a lot,” Aiden says as he gives his best friend a pat on the back.

Max glances behind him and points Aiden’s parents out to Kaylee.

“Look who’s here!”

I smile and lean against Aiden's side, our fingers twining together as we take a moment before walking back down the aisle together.

"She's the child I've always wanted," I say dreamily.

Aiden pauses for a second before cocking his head to the side and giving me a curious look.

"You know... I bet she'd be an amazing big sister."

My heart stops when his words register. Tears instantly fill my eyes.

"You'd want another child? *With me?*"

"I want everything with you, Care."

I let out an uncontrollable sob and throw my arms around his neck, hanging on tight as his arms wrap around my waist and lift me off my feet. In his typical fashion, he knows how to make an amazing day even better, and the celebration of our love has only just begun.

"Ready?" Aiden asks, motioning to the aisle where friends and family members eagerly wait to congratulate us.

With him by my side, I'm ready for anything that lies ahead. Joining our hands, I smile and nod.

"I've been ready."

THE END

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He was enemy #1 – a grumpy critic set to destroy my career—Until the night we got stuck together, *and he kissed me.*

And just wait until my best friend finds out the hunky dad I've been shacked up with is her little brother.

I better start running now!

The plan was to quit my job and open my own restaurant.

But plans changed when some faceless food blogger started coming after me.

I knew I had to find this miserable little internet troll before he destroyed my rep.. And my sanity.

Ok. I'll admit it.

Showing up on his doorstep to confront him on the verge of the biggest snowstorm of the year was NOT part of my master plan.

But love can be confusing.

And it was only a matter of time before this drop-dead gorgeous mountain man and the precious little girl that called him daddy made me question everything I thought I knew about him.

And myself.