



THE PARKER
SISTERS
BOOK FOUR

FIGHTING
FOR
Daisy

JAMIE ARRAS

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The Parker Sisters—Book Four

Jamie Arras

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PROLOGUE

“Please be money. Please be money,” Daisy Parker whispered, one hand sliding her card into the ATM, the other crossing her fingers. While waiting for her turn, she’d been mentally calculating what might be left in her account if the euros she’d transferred hadn’t come through yet. It had been years since she’d used her bank in New Bern.

Just as she pushed the button to see her balance, a rush of cold air hit her back as someone opened the outside door to the ATM vestibule. She thought nothing of it until she heard a panicked gasp from the man who’d just used the machine and an impatient groan from someone behind her.

Daisy turned and bit back a scream. A man wearing a balaclava ski mask was pointing a gun at her and the two others. Panic shot through her. Then annoyance. She’d lived in some of the most dangerous cities in the world and never had this happen. Now, one week into her hometown visit, she’s being robbed? Unbelievable.

“All of you against that wall.” The masked man used the gun to point at the wall behind Daisy.

The guy who’d been ahead of her obeyed immediately and rushed to stand where instructed. He was about Daisy’s height, just as skinny, and wore a multicolored scarf and loafers. She’d been so busy hoping her account had money, she hadn’t noticed another man waiting behind her. He towered over both of them, was twice as thick, and wore a baseball hat and a black bomber jacket. Testosterone rolled off him. Daisy made eye contact, and he gave a subtle nod and a slow blink, indicating she should comply. She took a step back to the wall. He wasn’t so quick to acquiesce.

“Now!” the robber yelled.

“All right. Take it easy.” The guy in the baseball cap sauntered over and stood on Daisy’s right. He moved slowly, but she noted shrewd green eyes darting back and forth, keenly assessing the situation. They were in a glass booth outside the

bank, and Daisy prayed someone walking or driving by would see them and call the police.

The man on Daisy's left stood with his hands in the air. The only thing rolling off him was fear and meekness.

"Hand it over," the robber said to Daisy, nodding to the purse slung over her shoulder. She hesitated. Having lived all over the world, she considered herself street-smart and capable. Sure, she'd been pickpocketed, but never robbed at gunpoint.

Being a victim didn't sit well, and she tried to recall if there was anything in her purse she could use as a weapon. Her dad had given her a canister of mace for Christmas last year, but she'd left it with a friend in Paris. If she could get her boot off, the three-inch heel might do some damage, but it wouldn't stop bullets.

"I don't really have anything of value," she said. Unfortunately, that was true.

"You got a watch," he said. "And a phone. I want both. And any money you have."

"My watch isn't worth much," Daisy said. It was a gift from her host family in Japan, and while it didn't have monetary value, it was special to her.

"Bitch, I ain't asking," the man said. One hand leveled the gun at her, the other was outstretched to take her stuff.

"Lady, just give it to him," Scarf Guy begged.

Staring down the barrel of a gun weakened her bravado and, deciding "stuff" wasn't worth her life, she handed him her watch and phone. He paused to give her a lecherous top-to-bottom scan. "Nice stems."

"Gross," she muttered, looking away so he wouldn't see her eye roll.

"You next," the robber said, turning to the pansy on Daisy's left, who still held his hands high. "Give me your wallet."

"Hey, I don't want any trouble. Take whatever you want," he said, offering his wallet, phone, and watch.

The guy in the baseball cap did a double-take and shot him a disgusted look. “You oughta give up that scarf,” he mumbled.

Daisy barked out a laugh, then slapped her hand over her mouth. She must be going into shock.

“Now you,” the gunman said, swinging the gun to Daisy’s right.

“No,” the man in the bomber jacket said. He looked like he could handle himself in a fight, but against a gun?

The robber approached him. The gun inches from his chest. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

“Dude, just give him your wallet,” the wimpy guy said, on the verge of tears.

“I’ve got other plans.”

“Oh, yeah,” the bad guy said. “What are you gonna do?”

In a series of lightning-quick punches and jabs, grunts and groans, the robber was disarmed, on his knees, clutching his stomach, and whimpering. If Daisy had blinked, she would have missed it.

The ninja in the bomber jacket spun the gun on his finger and looked down at the writhing crook. “I’m gonna kick your ass and take your gun.”

“Holy crap,” Daisy said, mouth hanging open. “That. Was. Awe-some.” Tough as leather and good-looking as sin—Bomber Jacket was quite the combo.

“Apologize to the lady and return her stuff,” the man said, hitching his chin at Daisy. He pocketed the gun and pulled out his cell phone like he didn’t have a care in the world. Dang, add chivalrous, and you had the perfect-man trifecta.

“You knocked...the wind...out of me,” the robber wheezed. “I can’t...even stand.”

“Well, that’s convenient,” the tough guy said, taking his eyes off the crook to dial. “Crawl on over there, and you’ll

already be on your knees to beg forgiveness.”

“What about my things?” the wuss in the loafers whined.

“You tripped all over yourself to give ’em to him. If you want ’em back, take ’em.”

Loafer Guy started to object but shut up after Green Eyes shot him an icy glare.

The masked man threw Daisy’s stuff at her feet and muttered, “Sorry.”

Bomber Jacket had the phone to his ear, waiting for whoever he’d called to pick up. “Uh, no. Get off your ass, hand the lady her belongings, and apologize like you mean it.”

Daisy thought he might be pushing it but didn’t say so. The robber crawled over, picked up what he’d tossed, and offered a slightly more sincere apology.

“Hey,” Hot Guy said into the phone. “It’s Walsh. Can you send units to a 10-65 at Horizon Bank on Trent Boulevard?”

He listened for a second and then said, “Nah. I got his gun. I’m off duty and don’t have any cuffs though.”

“I robbed a cop?” the thief mumbled. “You gotta be kidding me.”

Walsh poked the thief with his well-worn boot. “You need an aid car, dude?”

The robber shook his head, and Walsh relayed the message to the dispatcher before hanging up.

“Did you still want to use the machine?” her hero asked.

“Oh, no. That’s okay,” Daisy said. “You go ahead.” Before the interruption, the screen had flashed her balance. Twelve dollars was useless when the machine dispensed in increments of twenty. And who was she kidding? Even when the euros came through, she would still be broke.

While they talked, the robber stood and was inching toward the door. The cop must have sensed it. Without turning around, he said, “Don’t even think about it.”

Not heeding the warning, the robber made a break for it. In another speed-of-light move, Walsh turned, grabbed the man's hand, and twisted his wrist until he was once again on his knees and begging for mercy.

"This will work out better for you if you stay still and do what I say. Got it?" The robber nodded and sagged to the floor.

Within minutes, blue and red flashing lights bounced around the ATM lobby's glass. Officers took the man into custody and then took turns ribbing Walsh.

"Dude, leave it to you to find trouble your last week of work," one officer said.

"You got balls of steel, Noah," another said, slapping him on the back. "I'm gonna miss you, bro."

As the adrenaline wore off, Daisy found she was a little shaky. She closed her eyes and sucked in a breath. A warm hand grabbed her elbow, and a deep voice warmed her insides. "You okay?"

Intense, concerned eyes bore into hers. "Yeah," she said, blinking stupidly. Was it shock or his next-level handsomeness that had her in a daze? "I'll be fine."

Another officer whisked her away to give a statement, and by the time they let her go, her green-eyed hero had disappeared. Damn it.

CHAPTER ONE—Seven Months Later

Daisy closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and exhaled slowly. She rolled her neck and knocked twice before opening the door and letting herself in. Show time.

“Hey, yo!” she called out, heading for the kitchen.

“Daisy!” her mother greeted, wrapping her in a hug. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

Sunday meant dinner with the whole family at her parents’ house—a tradition they’d been doing without her for years.

“Honey, glad you made it.” Her dad took over the hugging once her mom let her go. “You know, for being stateside, we still don’t see you very often.”

“I’m sorry,” Daisy said. “I’ve only been back a couple of weeks. Settling into my new place and trying to keep up with the business has kept me busy.”

Her four sisters gathered around to greet her. When in town, Daisy was usually the center of attention, but that was only because she’d lived abroad and visits home were sporadic. Now that she’d moved back, her novelty would wear off soon enough.

“Hey, Ms. Thang,” Emma said. “You have your award-accepting outfit picked out?”

“Ha,” Daisy said. “You’re assuming I’ll win.”

“Of course you’ll win. You’re a Parker,” Lizzie said. “Parkers don’t take Ls.”

And wasn’t that the truth. At least for most of the Parkers. Her sisters were all successful business owners in town. Three of the four had married in the last year and wasted no time in baby-making. Kate, the oldest, had finally given her parents a long-awaited grandchild, and Lucy and Emma were cooking up numbers two and three—Lucy was due next month and Emma, two months after that.

Daisy was the youngest and had learned in early childhood it was impossible to measure up. Rather than compete with her uber-successful sisters, she'd fled the country to live like a hobo all over Europe.

After spending the last decade avoiding this particular rat race, she'd finally tired of it, decided she was too old to keep running from her problems, and returned to New Bern, North Carolina.

"What's the award called again?" Emma asked. "Newcomer of the Year?"

"Is it based on who has the most followers?" Lizzie said. "Cuz last time I checked, you had over two million. That's got to be some sort of record."

"I thought it had something to do with the fastest growing," Kate said, bouncing softly to soothe the baby in her arms.

"The award is Female Rookie of the Year," Daisy said. "And it's all that—lots of followers in a short amount of time. It's a people's choice kind of thing, so you have to get the most votes too."

"I've watched a lot of your videos on the YouTube," Nana said. "The camera loves you. I predict you'll win."

Nana had experimented with reading tarot cards and minds, but since she'd had no success with either, Daisy took her premonition with a grain of salt.

"We'll see," Daisy said. As much as she wanted this award, she wasn't a shoo-in by any means. "Competition is tough."

"Emma said two nominees already dropped out," Lucy said. "Why would they do that?"

"I don't know about the first one, but I'm 'friends' with Megan, the second gal to drop out," Daisy said, putting quotes around the word friends. Friends, *real* friends, in the online world were rare. Especially when they were competing for the same award. "She swore me to secrecy, so don't tell anyone, but she says she was blackmailed."

“Ooh. What’d she do?” Kate said, before turning to her husband, Adam. “Here, take Abby away. I don’t want her to hear me gossiping.”

Adam took the baby. “A, she’s one month old and doesn’t understand. And B, you could just not gossip.”

Kate tilted her head and gave him a cute-but-you-know-that’s-not-gonna-happen look.

“No, of course not.” Adam threw up his free hand. “Silly of me to suggest it.” He hoisted Abby to his shoulder. “Come on, little one. Your momma has important business to discuss.”

“Blackmail’s pretty serious,” their dad said. “Not to mention illegal.”

“Things are different in Cyberland. She has no idea who actually blackmailed her, just got the threats online over a chat app.”

“What kind of threats?” Lucy asked, rubbing an eight-month baby belly. Daisy still couldn’t get used to the fact that her sisters were procreating.

Daisy raised a shoulder. “Told her they had dirt on her and would release it if she continued to go for the award. I didn’t ask for details.”

“So I gave up the baby for nothing?” Kate said with a huff, and Daisy laughed.

“That’s not fair,” their mother said. “And what do you mean by ‘go for the award’?”

“Once you’re nominated, you still have to get the most votes to win,” Daisy explained. “You get votes from your followers and fans. So, you have to campaign constantly, give people the links to vote, and post videos that people will want to watch to be able to beg for the votes, etcetera. Etcetera.”

“It sounds like the nomination was the easy part,” Emma said.

“You’re not kiddin’,” Daisy said. “There were ten contestants. Now there are eight. It’s probably one of us that’s doing it. I just hope the others don’t think it’s me.”

“Anyone who knows you knows you’re too sweet for that,” Lucy said.

Daisy smiled. “Even so, I’ve gotta push hard for the next three weeks.”

“What’s your plan for getting the votes?” Kate asked.

“Make a video or two every day until the cut-off. I’m gonna take a road trip and chronicle it as I go. How to do local on the cheap.”

“But you just moved home,” their mother said, frowning. “I thought we’d see more of you.”

“You will, after all this dies down,” Daisy promised.

“Where you headed?” Emma’s husband, Dirk, asked.

“New York City. That’s where the award ceremony is. I plan to take off in a week or so and lollygag around, traveling up the coast.”

“You sure that car of yours will make it?” Lucy’s husband, Jack, asked.

“My trusty steed, Ethel? Course she will.”

Jack and her dad shared a look. “Let me just take a peek at it before you leave, okay?” her dad said.

Daisy shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

“Will you be back in time for my stage debut?” Nana asked. “Curtain’s up in four weeks.”

Acting was Nana’s latest “thing.” She bounced around from adventure to adventure, saying it kept her young.

“Of course,” Daisy said. “I heard you wrote the playscript too. What’s it about?”

“Here we go,” Lizzie mumbled.

“Imagine *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *The Sound of Music* had a baby,” Nana said. “A PG version.”

“More like a geriatric version,” Lizzie whispered to Daisy behind her hand.

“You telling her how great it’s going to be?” Nana glared at Lizzie, who nodded enthusiastically.

“I wouldn’t miss it, Nana,” Daisy said. “I’ll be back in plenty of time.”

“Does Blanche have pink hair in your adaptation of *A Streetcar*?” Emma asked.

“At least it’s not fire engine red anymore,” Kate said.

Nana huffed. “Red was in honor of the Fourth of July. This pink is a tribute to my favorite summertime fruit, watermelon. I’ll change it again before the play.”

Daisy wasn’t sure if Nana’s constant change of hair color was another way to stay young, a cry for attention, or just an eccentric quirk. At least the current hue was the *inside* of the watermelon and not a rind green.

Dinner was just as Daisy remembered—long and loud. And with her sisters marrying, the family’s exponential growth required that her father add another leaf to the table.

“So, you all settled in your new place, Daisy?” Emma asked.

“Just about,” Daisy said.

“How do you like it?” Kate asked.

“It’s fine for now, but it’s temporary,” Daisy said.

It was a junky little apartment on the outskirts of town that could barely be considered a “home.” Even now that she had cash in the bank, she still had no credit history, a sporadic international work record, and no local rental references. She’d had to have her father cosign the lease to be able to rent an apartment. At twenty-eight, that stung. She was working her way up to more, and at least it wasn’t her parents’ basement.

“It’s weird living alone,” Daisy said. “I’ve had a roommate ever since I can remember.”

“Was that just to save money?” Kate asked.

“Yes,” Daisy said. “I never made enough to have a place of my own.”

That was an understatement. Her family assumed all her overseas adventures were trouble-free, but they’d thought wrong. She’d never told them how close or how often she’d been on the verge of living on the street or coming home, tail between her legs.

Thankfully, gone were the days of living paycheck-to-paycheck, eating leftovers from work, and relying on roommates to help pay the rent.

Seven months ago, upon returning to France after a visit home for the holidays, she’d taken her sister Emma’s advice and started a social media channel. She logged her adventures abroad and showed people how to travel Europe cheaply. Thanks to an unintentional “wardrobe malfunction,” her subscriptions blew up shortly after.

She’d deleted the offending video, but her new audience stuck and grew, and her star had been rising ever since. Nowadays, she could make four figures in five minutes simply by promoting some company’s product.

“But now you’re rollin’ in it, right?” Kate asked.

“Yeah. What’s it like to be rich and famous?” Lucy said.

“Hah,” Daisy said. “I may have some extra cash now, but I’m hardly all that.”

“Remember that time someone tried to rob you, but you had no money?” Lizzie said.

“Hard to forget looking down the barrel of a gun,” Daisy said dryly. “Being broke came in handy then.”

Everyone laughed but her parents. They had not liked that story one bit. Which was why Daisy had waited months before telling it.

“Did you ever find the guy that beat up the robber and made him return your stuff?” Lucy asked. “What’d you call him? Bomber Jacket?”

Daisy chuckled. That was how she referred to the handsome ninja who'd saved her that day.

"No," Daisy said. "That was right before I flew back to France. I haven't bothered to look him up since coming home."

"Didn't you say he was hot?" Lizzie said. "I would find the time."

"I'm sure you would," Daisy said, waggling her eyebrows. Lizzie was a serial dater and churned through men like nobody's business. "I just barely got home. And I have more important things to worry about. I doubt he remembers it anyway. It was like another day at work for him."

After dessert, Daisy returned to her one-bedroom apartment and pulled out her laptop. With so much on the line, taking even a few hours off for dinner seemed risky.

If she wanted to win this award—and she desperately did—she'd need to spend the next three weeks giving it her utmost attention. After checking her page and those of her competitors, she jotted down ideas for video content and clever ways to ask for votes.

Winning this thing would be a game-changer. She might be playing it cool for her family, but she was all in to win.

CHAPTER TWO

Not used to a suit and tie, Noah Walsh was uncomfortable. He'd worn a police uniform for over a decade, but several months ago, turned that in for khakis and a polo.

His assistant, Janet, came into his office, clapping her hands.

"All right," Janet said. "Enough stalling. Off you go."

Noah grumbled and tugged at his tie. "I can't breathe."

"Relax," she said. "You'll do fine."

To avoid sweating through his dress shirt, he blasted the AC in the car on the way to the meeting. He wasn't so much nervous as annoyed. Okay, maybe a little nervous.

Every so often, he had to pitch a proposal for work, but public speaking wasn't generally part of his job description. Yet here he was. He'd joined the local Rotary chapter at Janet's suggestion. It'll be good for business, she'd said. You'll meet new friends and have fun, she'd said. What she failed to mention was that new members were eventually roped into doing a presentation on themselves and their businesses.

He arrived and grabbed his name tag. Of the twenty people in the room, most were strangers, some he'd consider acquaintances, and one or two might count as friends. The mayor of New Bern, Edward Parker, was in attendance, which upped the ante and added to Noah's agitation. Many of his current contracts were with city hall, so keeping the mayor impressed was essential to his growing business.

Noah had attended enough meetings to have seen other members present, so he had a handle on what was expected. Some of the presentations had been painfully dull and overly long. He was determined not to fall into the death-by-PowerPoint trap, and planned his spiel to be short and sweet. His slides were mostly pictures and memes. He even threw in a few jokes about mall cops.

When it was his turn to present, he gave a quick history of himself and his career as a New Bern police officer, then launched into what his current business did.

“Walsh Security Consulting works on many fronts. We have a cadre of police officers who sign up to work off-duty gigs for us. Anything from traffic control for road construction projects to security for private or community events. We also do consulting for businesses’ physical and/or cybersecurity.”

He wrapped up quickly after taking a few questions and returned to his seat for breakfast.

After the meeting adjourned, the mayor approached him.

“Noah,” Edward said, offering a handshake. “Nice to see you. Great presentation.”

“Thank you, sir,” Noah said. “I appreciate working with you and the amazing folks in your office.”

“Glad to hear it. Sounds like you have a solid business plan. Good luck with everything.” He left with a parting slap on the shoulder.

Noah accepted a few more accolades before hightailing it back to the office.

“How’d it go?” Janet asked.

“All right,” Noah said, ripping off his tie and unbuttoning the top button of his shirt. “I talked with the mayor for a second.”

“That’s nice. He’s such a good man. Been friends with my husband for years.”

Noah nodded and took the pink slips of paper Janet held up. Two messages were from officers who wanted on his schedule, and a third was from his mother.

“My mom called?”

“Oh, yes,” Janet said. “We had a lovely chat.”

“I don’t want to know what that means,” he mumbled, entering his office and closing the door.

His mom probably wanted to invite him to some family function. With three brothers and three sisters, all married with kids, there was always something on the schedule—a birthday party, recital, anniversary, sporting event, or holiday celebration.

After hearing about current events, he might get a lecture about it being time to settle down and find a wife. His mom and Janet seemed to tag team on that subject a lot these days. He was only thirty-two. There was plenty of time. Between the sting of betrayal from his ex, Sarah, and his guilt over what happened with his old partner, Tucker, he wasn't ready. Might never be. Sure, it had been a year, but that didn't mean the pain wasn't still fresh.

He didn't have time for a long conversation, but he also felt guilty he hadn't talked to her in a while, so he picked up the phone.

"Hi, honey," his mom said. "Kayla is here with me and wanted to call you. Here, I'll put her on."

Nine-year-old Kayla was the family treasure. And out of Noah's dozens of nieces and nephews, though he'd never say it out loud, she was his favorite. She had Down syndrome but never let that get in her way. She was the happiest, most loving person, child or adult, Noah had ever known. He could always be himself with her.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said. "How's my girl?"

"Uncle Noah," she said. "I miss you. School is out, and I play on a softball team with other kids like me. We're not very good, but we have fun."

"I'm sure you're fantastic. You remember what I taught you about throwing, right?"

"Arm up, elbow in, and let go by my ear. Yes. I remember, Uncle Noah."

They chatted a few more minutes before Noah's mom got back on the line.

"West Virginia's not that far a drive, son," his mother said. "And we haven't seen you in ages."

“I know, Mom. And I’m sorry,” he said. “Getting this business up and running has taken all my time.” Guilt washed over him. Yes, he was busy, but not so busy he had to neglect his family. His last visit had been right after quitting the police department, seven months ago.

“Sounds like you need a vacation.”

He chuckled. “Probably, but not yet. I promise I’ll come up soon. Give my love to everyone.”

His family was fun but took a lot of energy. As the only Walsh child not married, he was often forced into blind dates and unwanted setups whenever he visited. He was also the only one to leave White Sulphur Springs, the small town in West Virginia where he’d been born and raised. So, when he did come home, it was a big production.

At eighteen, he’d been chomping at the bit to ditch the sleepy town. College seemed like his ticket out, but after two years, he decided that wasn’t for him either. A buddy showed him an advertisement for the New Bern Police Department, and the rest, as they say, was history. He finished up his AA while working as a police officer and then got his bachelor’s degree in business a few years after that.

Business was his plan for after retiring from the police department. But after The Incident, the allure of police work vanished. Adrift, and having lost his edge, Noah quit the department and started Walsh Security Consulting.

Noah returned the other calls and worked on scheduling before heading to lunch. He’d blocked off the rest of the day to work on a presentation for a consulting job he was vying for. Securing the job would mean a good chunk of change for the business, but it would also be a way to expand his repertoire of services offered.

“Need anything before I take off?” Janet said, poking her head into his office.

“It’s five o’clock already?” He glanced at the clock. “Where did the afternoon go?”

“Guess that means no hot date tonight. You know, I could set you up with—”

He held up a hand, stopping her midsentence. “We’ve had this conversation, and my stance hasn’t changed.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said, waving and mumbling something about him needing a woman on her way out.

He sighed. Women were off his radar for now. Janet knew that. He packed up his stuff, turned off his computer, and drove home. To an empty house. He ate dinner for one, watched a movie by himself, and went to bed alone.

Alone was how he did most everything nowadays. After working a job that required a partner and having a live-in girlfriend, adjusting to living solo had taken some getting used to. But alone, he couldn’t get hurt and couldn’t hurt anyone. It was better this way. For everyone.

CHAPTER THREE

The next Sunday, Daisy once again found herself embraced by the chaos that was her family. She and her sisters had shown up early to lounge by the pool. They considered it “resting up” before helping their mom with dinner. Kate and Lucy fanned themselves at a table in the shade while Daisy, Lizzie, and Emma sprawled in chaise lounge chairs soaking up the sun.

“Note to self,” Lucy said. “Do not get pregnant in the winter again. It’s too bloody hot to be sweating for two all summer.”

“How many more days?” Emma asked, wistfully rubbing her own six-month belly.

“Twenty-nine,” Lucy said. “Not that I’m counting.”

“That’s just the due date,” Kate said. “Could be early. Or late.”

Nana made an entrance and sat with Kate and Lucy. Today her shirt read, “Step aside coffee. This is a job for alcohol.”

“Love the shirt, Nana,” Lizzie said. As a bartender, she appreciated liquor humor.

“I thought you might,” Nana said, sidling up to Kate. “Great-grandma reporting for duty. You want me to take that little one off your hands?”

“Sure, Nana,” Kate said. “That would be great.”

Kate kissed Abby on the head and handed her over.

“It’s too hot out here for her,” Nana cooed. “I’ll take her inside.”

Kate was already moving to a spot in the sun. “Scooch your chair, Daisy. I need some vitamin D.”

“You just wanna sit with the cool kids.” Daisy shifted her lounge to accommodate Kate’s. “I can’t believe how fast you lost that baby weight,” she said. “You look freakin’ fantastic.”

“Thank you, Daisy,” Kate said. “That might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“You’re one to talk, Daisy,” Emma said. “You and those legs! I’d kill for a set of stems like those.”

“These ol’ things?” Daisy said, dramatically crossing her legs.

“Daisy did get more than her fair share. Must take you forever to shave ’em,” Lizzie said.

“Oh, I switched to waxing,” Daisy said. “Painful, but worth it.”

“I’m so glad you moved home,” Emma said. “I missed you.”

“I missed y’all too.” Daisy smiled.

“Now that you’ve been back in the country a few weeks, anything taking some getting used to?” Kate asked.

“A crying baby at dinner is new,” Daisy said.

“Tell me about it,” Kate said. “*I’m* still adjusting to that.”

“How are Duke and Luna handling it?” Emma asked. Duke was Adam’s German Shepherd, and Luna was the spoiled fluffy Bolognese usually glued to Kate’s side.

“Duke’s great,” Adam said, having come out and sat next to Kate. “Luna...not so much.”

“Luna’s used to being the center of attention,” Kate said. “She’s having a little trouble sharing the spotlight.”

“Wow. That news is so surprising,” Lizzie said.

That earned an eye roll from Kate and a laugh from everyone else.

Their father emerged, carrying a plate of raw meat. “I’m starting the grill. Your mother’s ready for some helpers.”

Daisy and her sisters obediently headed inside. With so many hands, they whipped up the potato, green, and fruit salads in no time. Daisy finished the relish tray just as her dad reentered with a mountain of sizzling burgers, grilled to perfection.

Daisy's mouth watered in anticipation. A good ol' American cheeseburger. Exactly what the doctor ordered.

"You'll have to do without me for a couple weeks," Daisy said when someone mentioned next week's dinner. "I leave on Thursday for my road trip and won't be back until after the award ceremony."

"And don't forget. The week after that is my play," Nana reminded everyone. For the millionth time.

"We'll be there, Mom," Daisy's dad said. "Pete and Bella are even coming to town for it."

Pete was Daisy's uncle, and Bella, her sixteen-year-old cousin. Her aunt had passed away a few years prior.

"Fantastic," Nana said.

"It's community theater, but she's treating it like it's Broadway," Daisy's father whispered to her with a shake of his head and a smile. Nana could be a handful, but she also made things interesting.

"Hey," Lizzie said to Adam, who was refilling his wineglass. "Top me off, eh?" She held up her glass, and he poured.

"Speaking of booze," Adam said. "Any progress on selling the bar?"

"Kate said I'd be the first to know," Lizzie said, shrugging. Kate was a real estate agent, and Lizzie had hired her months ago to sell her bar. "We may have to implement Plan B."

"Um, what's Plan B again?" Adam asked.

"I do what Lucy did with the coffee shop and run both locations until I can unload the Main Street one. I wanted to sell it before moving, but I doubt you want your property sitting empty."

"Well, no," Adam admitted. "But I don't want you doing anything that'll put you in a financial bind either."

"If the new bar makes enough, I could close The Drop on Main Street and just keep paying the mortgage until it sells. I

can't run them both indefinitely—that'll split the clientele, and neither will be profitable. But maybe for a little while.”

Adam had purchased and renovated a small strip mall. Kate, Lucy, and Emma had already moved their businesses there. Kate, a real estate office. Emma, her accounting firm. And Lucy a coffee shop called The Drip 2.0. The original Drip was still open and running directly across the street from Lizzie's bar, The Drop.

Adam was holding the last space for Daisy if she wanted it. And if all went as planned, she just might.

Sophie Parker did not allow cell phones at her dinner table, so after dinner, there was always a mad rush to the basket in which they were kept. Since Daisy's whole life revolved around social media, it was especially nerve-racking to put it away for so long.

When Daisy retrieved her phone and checked her messages, she went pale. “Oh, my.”

“What?” Emma asked. “Something happen?”

“Another contestant is out of the running,” Daisy said.

“More blackmail?” Kate asked.

“No,” Daisy said. “Her name's Veronica. And she's dead.”

“How?” Adam asked.

“A car accident,” Daisy said. “There's a link to the article. Hold on.” She clicked on the link and took a second to skim through it. “Hm.”

“What?” Lucy asked.

“They think it might have been a hit and run. There were no witnesses, but there was damage to the side of the car, indicating it was hit before it left the road.”

“This worries me,” her dad said, brows knit in concern. “What if it has to do with the contest?”

“Oh, Dad,” Daisy said. “I doubt that. It's just a silly award. Important to business, but not worth killing over.”

“Well, it’s apparently worth blackmailing over. Who’s to say someone isn’t stepping up their game to take out the competition? And you plan to travel alone? What if something happens, and we can’t get a hold of you?”

Daisy put her arm around her dad’s waist. “It’s fine, Dad. If there’s really an emergency, Emma can track my phone.”

Her dad looked at Emma for confirmation. Like Daisy was lying or didn’t know what she was talking about. She tamped down the irritation. Even at twenty-eight, they treated her like a baby.

“That’s true,” Emma said, nodding. “I went with her to get her new cell phone, and she linked it with mine, so we can ‘find’ each other.”

“I’ve lived on my own for a long time,” Daisy said, trying to subtly remind her family that she was a full-grown and capable woman. “And I’ll be careful. I promise.”

“Uh, Daisy,” Kate said. “Do you read the comments on your videos?”

“I skim through them every once in a while. There are too many to read and reply to everyone. Why?”

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” Kate flipped her phone to show Daisy what she’d been looking at. “It’s in the comments of your latest video.”

“‘Drop out or your next,’” Daisy read out loud. “Huh. No, I didn’t see that.”

“They misspelled ‘you’re,’ so they can’t be too bright,” Kate said. “But it seems concerning.”

“Not the time for a grammar lesson, Kate,” Lizzie said.

“No. You’re right.” Kate waved a hand and shook her head. “Sorry.”

“I don’t like this,” her dad said. “You going off all by yourself.”

“What if someone comes with me?” Daisy said. “Kate’s got the baby, and Lucy’s too pregnant, but what about Emma or

Lizzie?”

“That just puts two of you in danger!” her mom said. “Do you really have to go?”

“I’ll go with you,” Nana offered. “I’ve been taking karate lessons.”

That explained the thick yellow belt she’d worn all through dinner.

“Thanks, Mom,” Daisy’s dad said. “But I want you safe too. Let’s think about it and talk again tomorrow, okay?”

Daisy left her parents more irritated than scared about the threat. She was taking this trip—with or without her parents’ blessing. No stupid online hack was going to keep her from winning this award.

CHAPTER FOUR

Noah hung up with the company he'd pitched for last week. Deal, sealed.

Most of their current work came from contracts for traffic control at road construction sites. But this new one was for a security assessment on a large warehouse outside of New Bern. This aligned better with what he had in mind when he started the business. If the city hall jobs were his bread and butter, these consulting gigs were the jam.

"Janet," he yelled to his assistant in the other room. "We got it!"

Janet pushed open his door. "Hey, boss. That's great news. Congratulations."

"They want us to start next month, but first they want me to present a proposed course of action to the full board. I have two weeks to get my shit together and make a plan."

"I can't believe how far you've come in just six months."

Neither could he. First, moving out of his spare bedroom to a bona fide office. Then hiring an assistant to do all the stuff he hated, like talking to people. She was the extrovert to his introvert.

"Guess I can keep you on a little longer," he said.

"Aren't you a barrel of laughs?" The best part about Janet was that she accepted his dry humor and didn't give him a hard time about not winning any personality awards.

The phone at her desk rang, and she left to answer it, only to return a minute later.

"It was Edward Parker," she said. "He'd like to see you. ASAP."

"The mayor?" Noah said, already standing and preparing to leave. Since the majority of his business came from city hall, this was a connection he couldn't afford to mess up. "That's

weird. I usually deal with the city manager. Wonder what the big man wants.”

Janet shrugged. “Guess you’ll find out soon enough.”

Noah arrived at city hall within half an hour and was immediately shown to the mayor’s personal office. Usually, when he came here, it was for meetings held in a conference room with several other city employees. Today, it was just the mayor in his office. And he’d shut the door. Noah’s curiosity piqued. Was this good news or bad? He would treat the summons as a potential interview.

“Thanks for coming, Noah,” Edward said, ushering him in. “Please, have a seat.”

“Everything okay with our contracts?” Noah asked, sitting in one of two leather chairs.

“Oh, yes.” Edward waved his hand. “I’m sorry. I forgot to mention, this isn’t about work. Well, not the city’s work. I need security, but not the kind you might think.”

“You mean personal security? Like a bodyguard?” Noah asked. “What’s up?”

“Yes, but not for me,” Edward said. “One of my daughters might be in trouble, and I’d like to hire you to protect her.”

“Oh.” That was not what he’d expected. “What’s happened?”

“She’s up for some sort of award. Two of the other contestants up and quit after being blackmailed. One died under dubious circumstances, and now Daisy is receiving threats.”

“What kind of threats?”

“It started yesterday with a vague, ‘drop out, or you’re next,’ but escalated quickly overnight,” Edward explained. “My daughter Emma called this morning to tell me about it. The award ceremony is in New York City. The new threats say, ‘I’ll make sure you never make it to New York. Show up and die. I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty.’ Stuff like that. I contacted Captain Baker at the PD, but he says this stuff

happens all the time, and without specifics there's not much they can do."

Noah had met Edward on several occasions and considered him a friend—not a close friend, but someone he respected and admired. He thought perhaps the mayor was overreacting, but wasn't about to suggest that. The captain was right. Stuff like this happened online all the time. Everybody was a tough guy behind a keyboard. "And you think it's serious?"

"I think whoever is trying to get the other nominees to quit has shown they lack scruples. And I'd rather be safe than sorry. The banquet is the Saturday after next. I'm looking for twenty-four-hour coverage until then."

"How does someone quit being a nominee?"

"It's a people's choice kind of thing. Each contestant tries to get their fans to vote for them, and the one with the most votes wins. If someone tells their followers not to vote or doesn't mention the contest at all, they presumably wouldn't get enough votes to win."

"What's the award for?"

"The category is Rookie Social Media Influencer of the Year. Or something along those lines. Daisy does travel vlogs and blogs and has her own social media channel. Honestly, I'm not exactly sure what it all entails."

It sounded pretty lame, but brushing off the mayor would be career suicide.

"So, twenty-four hours a day for two weeks? That'll be expensive. I can draw up a proposal and see who might be available. Most of my guys work full-time as police officers and do the city gigs as a part-time thing on their days off."

"I was hoping you could do it," Edward said. "I need the best. Someone I can trust. When I asked around, your name came up a lot. I don't just want some random guy glued to her side. If I know her at all, she'll keep working, which means some travel."

"Travel?"

“She’s planning a road trip to NYC. Leaving this week. I was hoping you could accompany her.”

“Oh,” Noah said. The request put him in a tough spot. City contracts were probably three-quarters of his business. Would saying no jeopardize that? He shifted in his seat.

“Don’t feel like you have to do this,” Edward said, sensing his unease. “Your decision won’t affect your business with the city. I’m not holding that over your head. You’re free to say no. It would be a favor to me, and I would pay you out of my own pocket.”

Noah knew the mayor to be a man of honor. Knew he wouldn’t bribe Noah or threaten him to do the job. The crease in his forehead and the worry in his eyes made it clear. He was scared for his daughter.

“Heard it through the grapevine that money isn’t an issue for you,” Edward said. “You could be retired and lounging on a beach somewhere. But instead, you started a business and work hard at it. I find that honorable.”

“Oh, yeah,” Noah said, hoping he wasn’t blushing. “I don’t tell many people about that. No one, actually.” Not since it destroyed his relationship with Sarah.

One of Noah’s hobbies was fiddling around with technology, and one day, he “fiddled” his way into a discovery that changed policing. He’d patented a device that was integrated into police body cams. Police departments nationwide used it daily, making Noah a multimillionaire.

Edward nodded. “Your secret’s safe with me. It doesn’t have anything to do with my request anyway. Just shows me what kind of man you are.”

“All right. I’ll do it.”

“Thank you.” Edward breathed a sigh of relief, and the tension in his shoulders relaxed. “You can’t realize how much that puts my mind at ease.”

“I’ll clear my plate,” Noah said.

Noah returned to the office and immediately began prioritizing everything that must be done before he took some time away. Payroll and scheduling shifts were nonnegotiable. He made a list for Janet of all the tasks he'd need help with.

“My biggest concern is the prep for this new contract. I'll have to do it while on the road. I can take calls and deal with any emergencies remotely. Just need you to hold down the fort and handle the routine day-to-day stuff.”

“I do that every day anyway,” Janet said. “It's about time you took a vacation.”

“Babysitting a twenty-eight-year-old social media star cannot be considered a vacation.” In fact, it almost felt like some kind of karmic punishment. One he deserved. As much as he did *not* want to do this, he did want to remain in the mayor's good graces. “It's definitely not part of my vision for the company.”

“Why *did* you start the business?” Janet asked. “You don't need the income.”

Janet was one of the few people who knew about his fortune.

“I gotta do something with my time,” he said, shrugging. “Rolling around in money gets boring after a while.”

“Have you watched any of her videos?” She waggled her eyebrows. “She's a very pretty girl.”

“Don't,” Noah said. “Just because you've been married a bajillion years doesn't mean it's your responsibility to marry off us content bachelors.”

“I'm just saying,” Janet said. “Perhaps it's time to get back out there.”

Noah had given up on women after his last disastrous relationship. “Sarah was a ‘very pretty girl,’ and look how that turned out.”

Janet huffed. “Sometimes I think you're just determined to not be happy.”

She'd said it as a joke, but it hit home. In a way, that's exactly what he was. After The Incident, he didn't deserve happiness.

"It would be horrible business to get involved with a client," he said. "Especially when that client is the mayor's daughter. Besides, if she's that pretty and into making videos, she's probably a spoiled, stuck-up snob."

"Wow, nice alliteration," Janet said, rolling her eyes. "It's bad form to judge her before even meeting her."

He shrugged. It didn't matter what she was like. This was a job and nothing more. He would keep an eye on her during the day and work on his business plan for the new contract at night. Two weeks would fly by, and then his life would return to normal.

CHAPTER FIVE

Daisy was not happy about this latest development. She never should have shared the threats with her family. They were nothing more than bluster from someone trying to scare her into leaving the race. But she was no pansy. And she needed this win.

It was Thursday, and she was all set to head out on her road trip. Her father had asked that she stop by before she left. Stupidly, she assumed it was to say goodbye and hadn't foreseen the ambush of thrusting a babysitter on her.

"Dad, I don't need a bodyguard. No one knows for sure that Veronica's car crash was intentional. It could have been an accident."

"Perhaps," her dad said. "But what if it wasn't? You seem to be the next target, and you're headed out on a backroads road trip! How easy would it be to run you off the road?"

She didn't have an answer for that. At least not one that would help her case.

"Emma tells me you're in the top running and are the biggest competition for someone who wants to win at all costs. That's great, but it puts a target on your back."

"Emma's too sweet," Daisy said. *And mouthy*, she thought, still mad that Emma had sold her out. As her best friend and sister, she was supposed to have her back.

"Look, don't think of him as a bodyguard," her dad said. "Think of him as a travel companion who will also keep an eye out for you."

"Honey, if nothing else, do it for me," her mom said, putting her arm around Daisy's shoulders. "I couldn't bear it if something happened to you that could have been prevented. Sure, it's just in case. But better safe than sorry."

Daisy sighed. It was no use arguing with *both* parents. Maybe if one had been on her side, she'd have a shot, but the two of them together were insurmountable.

“Fine,” Daisy huffed. “But if he gets in my way, I’m ditching him.”

“Please don’t,” her father said. “Also, he’s not as ‘wild and carefree’ as you, so maybe go easy on him, okay?”

“Oh, great. So he’s a bore too?”

“No. No, he’s great. Never mind I said that.”

There was a knock at the door. “That’s him. Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

Her father hurried to answer the door, probably assuming she was on the verge of changing her mind and sneaking out the back slider. He wasn’t wrong.

Daisy heard two gruff voices approaching and smoothed her hair, reluctantly prepping to meet her chaperone.

She was not prepared for what stepped into the kitchen. Tall, broad shoulders, and those unforgettable green eyes. It was Bomber Jacket!

“Honey, this is Noah Walsh,” her dad said.

“Holy crap,” Daisy said. “It’s you.”

At his dumbfounded look, she explained, “The ATM robbery a few months ago? You beat up the perp and made him give me my things back.” She mimed a karate chop and a ninja kick to help jog his memory.

“Oh, yeah,” Bomber Jacket said. “I thought you looked familiar. We don’t really use the word perp.”

“I never got to thank you.” Daisy threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. He tensed in surprise and remained frozen until she let go.

“So,” he said. “You’re a hugger.”

“Guilty,” she sang, ignoring the awkward moment. She was tempted to respond in kind to his snarky comment, but she had a reputation to uphold. Daisy’s online persona was cheerful, affable, and a tad ditsy.

“You’re the one that saved Daisy that day?” Daisy’s mom asked. “I’m Daisy’s mom, Sophie. I owe you a big thank you too.” She reflexively moved to hug him but stopped after seeing the look on his face. “We can skip the hug.” She held up her hands and backed away. Daisy snickered.

Nana entered the room in time to overhear that. She snuck up beside Bomber Jacket and slid her arms around his waist. “Thank you for saving my grandbaby,” she said dramatically, then looked at Sophie. “Someone should thank the man properly.”

Noah raised his arms to avoid touching her, but Nana would have none of that and just kept on hugging. Daisy saw the fear and confusion in Noah’s eyes and laughed out loud.

Nana finally let him go. “I’m Audrey,” she said with a wink. Noah shot Daisy’s dad a desperate, please-help-me look.

“Sorry,” her dad said. “I forget that not everyone is accustomed to drowning in women. It does take some getting used to.” He cleared his throat. “That was you at the robbery? What a coincidence. Once Daisy finally told us the story, I asked around to figure out which officer was there. All I got was that you were no longer on the force. I should have put two and two together. Anyway, I’m also very grateful.” He offered a handshake, which Noah seemed much more comfortable with.

“So, I guess we’re road-trippin’ together,” Daisy said, smiling despite her irritation. “Hope you like K-pop and stopping to pee every hour.”

“I do not,” he deadpanned.

Neither did she, but his reaction to her teasing didn’t bode well for an easy, just-pretend-he’s-a-friend trip.

Daisy faced her father and put her hands on her hips. “Not ‘carefree’? I can think of another word for it.” Screw her online persona. Out of this world handsome or not, she didn’t want to spend the next ten days with Mr. Grumpy glued to her side. “I don’t think this is gonna work out, Dad.”

“Daisy, please,” her father said. “I’m sure you’ll get along fine. It would really, really mean a lot to me.”

Daisy rolled her eyes and sighed. “Fine.”

She turned to Noah and made arm motions mimicking a robot. “Are you rea-dy?” she said in a staccato, monotone voice.

She caught his glance to her father, who had the same pleading look for Noah that he’d just given her. Noah pinched his lips together and held out a hand, indicating she lead the way.

“Oh, dear,” her mom mumbled.

They all walked to the driveway where her cherry red convertible VW bug sat, top-down, washed, and ready to go. A black Range Rover was parked next to it.

“This has to be you,” Noah muttered.

“It is,” Daisy said sweetly. “And I’m driving.”

“That thing’s not going to make it six hundred miles. My car is much safer and definitely more comfortable.”

She crossed her arms. “It’s not my fault you’re eight feet tall.”

“Probably ought to pick your battles, son,” her dad whispered to Noah, who grunted in response.

He unloaded a duffel bag from the back of his rig, threw it in the backseat of Daisy’s car, and tossed her father his keys. “So you can move it.”

He turned to Daisy. “We’ll take your car, but I’m driving. No negotiation.”

That was fine with Daisy. Then she could work and nap and fiddle with the radio.

“No negotiation,” she repeated, mocking his deep, gruff voice. Nana giggled, and her dad hushed her.

Daisy hugged her mom and Nana. When she got to her father, she whispered in his ear. “I love you, Daddy. But you

owe me.”

She slid into the passenger seat and tried to contain a laugh as Noah struggled to cram himself into the driver’s. Even with the seat back all the way, his long legs were too much for the space.

“We have to make one stop first,” she said. This might be the longest week and a half of her life. There was no way she was starting it without a java jolt.

CHAPTER SIX

Noah had been mistaken. After meeting Daisy and spending less than ten minutes in her company, he realized this wouldn't be a breeze. She was chipper and chatty, ditsy and dynamic—basically, his polar opposite. The next week and a half would probably drag out like a root canal.

They hadn't gone five miles, and she already wanted a pitstop.

"All right," he said. "Where?"

"The Drip. The new one on Trent Boulevard. You know it?"

He nodded and drove to the coffee shop.

"This place looks much better than it did the last time I was here," he said. The parking lot had been repaved, and all the storefronts redone in a woodsy, old-timey theme.

"Arresting kids for smoking behind the building?"

"And painting graffiti. Also known as destruction of property."

She smirked. "Can't start a road trip without my jitter juice," she sang gleefully before getting out of the car.

Coffee did sound good, and the aroma that hit him when he opened the door was a welcoming balm.

Daisy glided in on three-inch sandals, and all heads turned.

"Daisy!" a very pretty, very pregnant blond woman said. Daisy went to her and hugged her. After stepping back, the mother-to-be peeked around Daisy to look at Noah, and her eyebrows raised.

"Noah," Daisy said. "This is Lucy. One of my sisters."

"Nice to meet you," Noah said with a nod.

"Why are you working, woman?" Daisy said, reaching out to rub Lucy's belly. From what Noah's sisters had told him, pregnant women hated that, but Lucy didn't seem to mind. And they were sisters.

“I’m not,” Lucy said, attempting to subtly give Noah a once over. “I just dropped by for some paperwork and a snack.”

They ordered, and Daisy wandered over to a table of older men who’d called out to her. Noah followed a step behind. This bodyguard thing was new. Should he stay glued to her side? Or was being in the same vicinity okay?

“Hello, boys,” Daisy said. “How are my favorite retirees today?”

“Another day above ground...” one of the men said.

“Noah, this is Archie, Walter, and Gene.” She pointed to each. “We call them the Three Musketeers.”

“Gentlemen,” Noah said.

“Heard you’re up for some big shot award, Daisy,” Gene said.

“Of course you did. You guys hear everything,” Daisy said. “You fellas better not be betting against me.” She turned to Noah. “These three sit here all day, gossip, and make bets on anything and anyone.”

“You’re a shoo-in,” Walter said. “No one would bet against you.”

“Did you hear about the play your grandma’s puttin’ on?” Gene asked. “We all got parts, you know?”

“I did catch wind of that,” Daisy said. “It’s very exciting. And I will be there for the opening performance. Broadway, here you come.”

The door opened, and two more gorgeous women rushed in. One wore sandals like Daisy’s and had sleek blond hair. The other wore a pink sundress and had strawberry blond hair. They all had blue eyes and looked similar to Daisy.

“Damn it, Lucy,” Daisy mumbled to herself.

She touched his arm, and a shock jolted through him. “I’ll be right back. Keep an eye on these three, will ya?” she said with a wink. With that, she went to huddle with the newcomers.

“You might as well take a seat, son,” Archie said. “They could be awhile.”

“So, you and Daisy, huh?” Gene said. “Haven’t heard anything about that, so it must be new.”

“Oh, no,” Noah clarified immediately. “It’s not what you think. Her dad hired me to look after her. I work in security.” He didn’t want to say much more than that.

“So, you’re like a bodyguard or something?” Walter asked. “Is Daisy in trouble?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Noah said. “The mayor’s just being cautious. Who are those women?”

“Them’s most of the Parker sisters,” Gene said. “Though half ain’t Parkers anymore.”

“Where’d they come from?”

“My guess is Lucy texted them soon as you and Daisy walked over here,” Walter said. “If you’re new, they probably rushed on over to check you out.”

“They got here fast because they’re right next door,” Archie explained. “Kate, the blond in the high heels, owns a real estate firm two doors down. Emma, the one with the wavy blond hair and little baby bump, is an accountant. Her firm is next door. Lucy, the blond with the *big* baby bump, looks like you already met. She owns this place. I suspect Lizzie will be along soon.”

“Lizzie?”

“The fifth sister. She hasn’t moved over here yet, so she’s probably on her way from downtown.”

Sure enough, a minute later, a dark-haired beauty came rushing in and made a beeline for the group of women.

“Lizzie?” Noah asked unnecessarily.

“Yep,” Archie said. “She owns a bar on Main Street but is movin’ over here someday. If it ain’t obvious, Lucy and Lizzie are twins.”

The women were huddled in a circle, casting furtive glances his direction and whispering furiously. When he glanced their way, they all looked away quickly.

“Think they’re talkin’ about you, son,” Gene said with a chuckle.

“That does appear to be the case,” Noah said. “Not very subtle, are they?”

Gene chuckled. “Where you kids headin’?”

“New York City,” Noah said. “Apparently via some unknown, circuitous route.”

“Sounds like Daisy,” Gene said. “Should be a good time though.”

Noah took another glance at the women. They were laughing now.

“It’s a family of Barbies,” Noah mumbled, and the three men laughed.

“You should see their grandmother,” Gene said, wagging his eyebrows. “Those good looks run in the family.”

Finally, Daisy returned holding two to-go coffees and a brown paper bag of baked goods.

“Sorry about that,” she said, handing Noah his cup. “Crazy never takes a day off around here. In my family, there is no privacy, no secrets, and no boundaries.”

“Ah.” Sounded a lot like his own family.

“Those are my sisters,” she explained. “Dad told them he hired a bodyguard, and once I told Lucy you were the guy from the ATM robbery... Well, let’s just say I should’ve known better. My bad,” Daisy said.

“You’re Bomber Jacket?” Walter said. “You’re a legend.”

“Oh man,” Daisy said. “I gotta learn to keep my big mouth shut.”

“Bomber Jacket?” Noah asked.

“That’s what Daisy called you ‘cause she didn’t know your name,” Archie said.

“Oh,” Noah said. “Well, that was a long time ago.”

“Only a few months,” Gene said. “It was big news because armed robbery doesn’t happen every day in New Bern.”

“Surprised the mayor didn’t hunt you down and give you the key to the city for saving his baby,” Archie said.

“I left the police department right after that and then took a vacation. By the time I got back, it was probably old news.”

“Anyway, you’re a hero, son.” The three raised their mugs to him in a toast.

“Uh, thanks,” Noah said.

Daisy must have sensed his uneasiness and thankfully saved him from further discussion about the robbery.

“Good to see you guys,” she said. “Love to stay and chat, but we gotta get going. Take care.”

They folded themselves back into the car, and he pulled onto the main road.

“So, where to?” he asked. She hadn’t said anything about where they were headed, and the freeway on-ramps were approaching.

“Oh, um...” She rummaged around in her ginormous purse and finally pulled out a coin. “Heads, we head north. Tails, we go west.”

He swerved to the shoulder and slammed on the brakes. “Are you kidding me? You don’t even have a destination in mind?”

“Sure I do,” she said defensively. “We’re heading to New York City. I just don’t know the exact route.”

He grunted, and she laughed, clearly having fun at his expense.

“Fine. Flip it.”

She did, and it came up tails. “Westward ho,” she said.

He got back on the road and took the ramp to US-70. *It's just a job. You're being paid to do this. Focus on that,* he thought. The tiny car wasn't helping his mood. They drove the first hundred miles in silence. It was hard to talk with the top down anyway. She blared country music and sang along while he counted the minutes. At least it wasn't K-pop.

She wore a short sundress and had to continually press it to her legs to keep the wind from blowing it up. He tried to ignore her long, shapely legs, but hey, he was human.

They passed a billboard advertising a hole-in-the-wall diner, and she begged him to take the exit.

"These little roadside places always have the best pie," she reasoned.

"I'm getting lunch," he said.

After taking pictures of her pie from every possible angle, she finally took a bite. When she wrapped her lips around the first forkful, her look of sheer delight was oddly erotic. She blissfully enjoyed her pie, stared out the window, chatted with the waitress, and waved at random strangers who came in to eat.

After scarfing down a club sandwich, he felt marginally better and finally worked up the nerve to find out what he was in for.

"So, how are you planning to take a nine-and-a-half-hour drive and turn it into ten days?" he asked.

Blue eyes stared at him from across the booth, and he had to admit, they were very pretty eyes. "Oh," she said. "I figured we'd just meander our way north. I don't want to tie myself down to anything rigid. I have to work along the way, which means making some videos. We should check out Mallbury Park. The place Ruby recommended."

"Ruby?"

"Our waitress," she said. "It's supposed to be beautiful at sunset. We could hike up there and then camp at the park's campground."

“You camp?” That seemed hard to believe. She had spoiled rich kid written all over her.

“Sure. Haven’t you seen my videos?”

“I didn’t have time to study your genre, no.”

“Oh, well. My whole shtick is traveling on a budget. I avoid the touristy stuff and try to see how cheaply I can do things. I lived all over Europe for ten years but since I only started my channel recently, I spent the last seven months retracing my steps making videos. Now I’m transitioning to a domestic version.”

“Do you have camping gear?”

“No. That’ll be part of the adventure. And if we get it now, we’ll have it for the rest of the trip.” She smiled.

When the waitress came around to ask if they wanted anything else, Daisy asked where they could buy a tent and some sleeping bags and was directed to a no-name box store a few miles up the road.

“So, we’ve got to spend a lot of time together,” she said. “Might as well make the best of it. Tell me about yourself. Why’d you get out of police work?”

He knew it was too much to hope they could spend the next several days in silence. Noah was good at reading people and knew right away that for Daisy, long-term quiet wouldn’t be feasible.

“I was tired of it. My last day on the job was a week after we met. I own a security company now.”

“That’s cool. Do you like it?”

“I did.”

She tilted her head to one side. “Have I done something to offend you?”

“It’s not you. It’s me,” he said dryly. “I’m just not a people person.”

“Well, unless we want the next week to be unbearable, we should at least be friends. Don’t you think?”

“I doubt we have much in common.”

“Everyone has *something* in common,” she said. “Let’s see. If we were a Venn diagram, where would we intersect?”

He thought for a second. “We’re both pretty tall.”

She smirked. “What are your top three desserts? Mine are, in order, apple pie, lemon bars, and peach cobbler.”

“Fruit doesn’t belong in desserts. I’d say donuts, specifically chocolate cake with chocolate frosting and chocolate sprinkles, peanut butter cookies, and brownies.”

“Okay. What about movies?”

“*Die Hard*, any of the early Terminators, and *Rocky*. You?”

“None of those. What about books?”

“You read?”

She narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t think we’re gonna like the same books,” he said. “I like biographies and true crime. I take you for a rom-com or cozy mystery fan.”

“Stereotype much?” she said, standing. “Let’s just go.”

He paid the bill on the way out and struggled back into the driver’s seat, cursing the whole time. They stopped at the store the waitress had recommended and bought the bare minimum to spend the night in the woods—a tent, two sleeping bags, matches, and some bug spray.

“You sure this is it? You don’t want a mattress pad or a pillow?” He had a hard time believing she was this into roughing it. Even he wanted a pillow, but wouldn’t buy one if she didn’t.

“If you weren’t here, I wouldn’t even bother with a tent,” she said.

“Well, don’t do anything only on my account.”

“Trust me. I won’t.” She stomped off to the checkout counter.

“I think I found a point for our Venn diagram,” he said, catching up to her at the cash register. “You’re as stubborn as I am, maybe more so.”

“See, I knew we’d find something.” She smiled and winked. At least she was better at letting go of a grudge than he was.

In the parking lot, she pulled out her phone, read something, and frowned.

“What?” he asked.

She handed him the phone.

“How do you already have a thousand likes and twenty comments on a piece of pie you posted ten minutes ago?”

She shrugged. “Not that. Scroll down a little.”

““Last warning. Drop out, or you’re next,”” he read. A skull and bones emoji followed the comment.

“He must not like pie either,” she said with a chuckle. “At least he spelled you’re correctly this time.”

“This isn’t funny, Daisy. This is why I’m here.”

“Hm.”

“Did you post the name of the diner or what town we’re in?”

“Um.”

He scrolled back to the top to find out exactly what she’d said. One of the pictures was the sign for the diner. It wouldn’t take more than an internet search to figure out where they were. “Daisy, you’re gonna have to stop posting stuff like this.”

“What do you mean? I have to post. Especially during this time leading up to the award ceremony. That’s the whole reason I’m going to New York. I need to win this thing.”

“Need to? Why?”

“Never mind, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

She sucked in a breath and huffed it out. “If I win the award, I’ll get more viewers, which means more sponsors. That leads to more money, which gives me more freedom.”

“Freedom to do what?”

“Whatever I want. I wouldn’t be locked into specific tropes. I could post whatever I wanted about whatever topic I wanted. I wouldn’t have to worry about losing viewers or money.”

“You don’t like the travel stuff?”

“Let’s just forget it, okay?”

There was obviously more to it, but short of dragging it out of her, he’d have to wait until she wanted to tell him. It wasn’t important to their current issue anyway.

“Posting where you are in real-time puts you in danger. How ’bout a compromise? Do the videos, but post them only after we’ve left the area. So, maybe they’re all a day behind. No one will know the difference, will they?”

“I guess not. Fine. I can do that.”

“Also, screenshot that and text it to me. I’ll check into the username.”

“To every heart, there are two keys. One is thank you, and the other is...” she said. The rhyme was her mother’s favorite method for eliciting politeness when Daisy and her sisters were young.

He narrowed his brows. “Do it, or I’ll break your knees.”

She smiled. “See, threats are no big deal. Everyone makes them.”

He shook his head.

On the drive to the next town, a town due west and not at all on the way, Daisy worked on her laptop and remained quiet.

“What about food tonight?” he asked.

“We can buy some jerky or something.”

“You might be able to subsist on pie and jerky all day, but it takes more than that to fuel this machine.”

“You get hangry?”

“Big time. And trust me, you do not want to witness that.”

She laughed. “Why doesn’t that surprise me? All right. We can eat dinner before—” She stopped midsentence and pointed out the window. “Ooh, a farmer’s market.”

He groaned. “Oh, man.”

“Look on the bright side,” she said. “They have food.”

She took no less than one million pictures of anything and everything at the market, but didn’t actually buy much. One of the few things she did buy was totally impractical for a road trip.

“Why are you buying flowers?” Noah asked. “What are you going to do with them?”

“Enjoy them.” She stuck her nose in the bouquet and inhaled deeply. “Wanna smell?”

“No, thanks. We don’t have a vase. Where ya gonna put ’em?”

“Oh, Noah. Sometimes you just gotta live in the moment. Enjoy the now. Stop and smell the roses, as they say.” With that, she broke the stem of a pink carnation and placed it behind her ear.

He shook his head. Not his battle. What did he care if she wasted twenty bucks on flowers that would die within a day? She’d been right about the food. The fried chicken was some of the best he’d ever tasted.

After a jaunt through the booths, she decided on their next move.

“Let’s head east and find a lighthouse.”

“We just drove over a hundred miles west! Now you want to head east?”

“I forgot I wanted to see a lighthouse.”

Why did he get the impression she’d done this on purpose? Just to irritate him.

He grumbled. “Let’s go.” It was only the first day, and he was already counting down the hours until this job was done.

“Look,” she said. “I don’t like this any more than you do. Probably less. Why don’t I drop you at the nearest bus station, and we’ll tell my dad it just didn’t work out.”

The offer was tempting. Very tempting. He highly doubted Daisy was in any real danger. She was right about people making baseless threats all the time. Especially online, where there were rarely consequences for shooting your mouth off.

But he’d given his word. And on the off chance that someone *was* after her, he’d agreed to keep her safe.

“Sorry,” he said. “I made a deal with your dad. You’re stuck with me.”

“You seemed a lot cooler when you were just some mystery Superman,” she grumbled and returned to her phone.

He searched his map app for the nearest lighthouse and set the GPS to Nags Head. They arrived at dusk.

“Oh, it’s so pretty,” Daisy said, jumping out of the car and immediately taking pictures. Of course. “Come on. Let’s climb it.”

“Don’t you have to have tickets or something?” he asked.

“No idea. Let’s find out,” she said, running off to the little booth next to the lighthouse. He had eyes on her, but quickened his pace anyway. She was more apt to break an ankle running in those clunky high-heeled sandals than be hurt or killed in broad daylight. Either way, he should stay close.

“Shoot.” She returned breathless. “We do need tickets, and they’re all sold out for today. We can wait around for someone to be a no-show, or come back bright and early tomorrow.”

He shrugged. “Is the entire trip going to be like this? Nothing planned? No itinerary?”

“We have a destination. And we have to be there by a certain day. That’s two more things than I usually have.” She smiled. He had a feeling that smile often got her out of awkward or difficult situations. And that she used it, along

with her good looks, to skate through life, taking no responsibility.

“Whatever,” he grumbled. “I’m just along for the ride.”

“Great,” she said. “We’ll spend the night and come back first thing tomorrow. Right now, I want ice cream.”

On the way into town, she had him stop so she could arrange rooms at a motel near the lighthouse. He didn’t mention the camping gear they’d just purchased. It would be much easier to work on his project at a motel desk than hunched over his laptop in a tent.

The ice cream was her plan for dinner, but he talked her into real food at a restaurant on the water. They had delicious fresh-from-the-ocean, swimming-in-butter shrimp served over rice, and washed it down with beers. Even after that, she had room for ice cream.

They checked into separate rooms at the motel, and he plopped down on the bed, exhausted from dealing with her perky, happy-go-lucky energy. At least she’d deviated from the camping idea, giving him a real bed for the night. He got out his laptop and opened his plan for the new contract.

Before saying good night, he’d been clear that she should stay in her room, but not ten minutes later, he heard the unmistakable sound of her door opening and closing. He peeked out his window and watched her sneak across the parking lot toward the pool.

“Damn that girl,” he muttered, putting on his shoes and grabbing his room key.

When he rounded the corner, he caught a glimpse of her looking right and left before dropping her bikini bottom and diving into the water. The sight stopped him dead in his tracks. She was skinny dipping? That was something he could never unsee. Once his heart restarted, he stomped onto the pool deck.

A look of panic washed over her until she realized it was him. “Oh, it’s just you.”

“Daisy,” he said, hands on his hips. “I told you to stay in your room.”

“But it’s so hot out. A quick dip sounded divine. And technically, I’m still at the motel.”

“My exact words were ‘in your room.’ Do you know how vulnerable you are right now? If someone wanted to hurt you, it would be very easy.”

“You gotta relax a little,” she said, swimming to the wall and putting her hands on the pool deck. “Hand me my suit. I’ll get dressed, and then you can come in. The water feels so nice.”

“What if I’d been someone else? A creepy man? Or a family with kids?”

“It’s the middle of the week, and it’s ten o’clock at night.”

“It’s summer. Prime family vacation time.”

“Hm. I didn’t think about that.”

“You gotta think things through. This isn’t a joke to me or your father. It’ll be hard to keep you safe if you sneak away, and I don’t know where you are.”

“You gotta think things through,” she mocked in a grumble before sticking her tongue out at him.

“Grow up, Daisy. Get out and get dressed.” He turned his back and waited to hear a splash. When he didn’t, he turned back around. She’d pushed off the wall and was swimming away from him. “Don’t make me come in after you.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said with confidence. “That would mean doing something spontaneous and a tad crazy. I don’t think you have it in you.”

He pulled off one shoe, then the other, and started to unbutton his jeans.

“Okay, okay,” Daisy said. “I’ll get out. I was done anyway.”

Thankfully, his bluff worked. He had no intention of getting in, but she didn’t need to know that. She was the most unserious, uninhibited person he’d ever met. One day together, and already he was regretting this decision. He should have charged the mayor more.

She swam to the side. He turned away as she climbed the ladder to get out, but still caught a glimpse.

After escorting her back to her room, he spent the remainder of the evening trying to scrub his mind of the image of her topless body. It was no use. That two-second memory was now seared into his brain for all eternity.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next morning, they checked out of the motel and grabbed breakfast on their way to the lighthouse. They purchased tickets but had a half hour to kill before their turn, which Daisy used to take pictures and videos of the water, the park, and the lighthouse.

She wasn't allowed to carry her tripod up the stairs, so he'd been called into service as a cameraman.

"So, I made it to the top," Daisy said after he started recording. "According to the brochure, that's two hundred and fourteen steps! Yes, I took a second to catch my breath." She did some screechy giggle he'd never heard from her before. "But, I gotta say, my feet feel great, and that's all because of these awe-some shoes." She sang the word awesome.

"They're comfortable and H-O-T hot. Check 'em out." She motioned for him to scan down. Down those long, lean legs until he reached the tennis shoes she was pushing.

Focus, Walsh, he had to remind himself.

"Mine are pink, but they have a million colors and styles. Link is below." She waved her hand to indicate he pan back up.

"One last thing," she said once he had the camera pointing at her face again. "Please, please, please vote for me. In case you missed it, I'm up for the Female Rookie of the Year award and sooo want to win. The link to vote is also below. Thanks, guys. You're the best."

She smiled and waved until he pushed the stop button. As soon as he lowered the phone, she went back to "normal."

"That was quite a show," Noah said. "Or are you really that excited about footwear?"

"It's a living." She shrugged. "Momma's gotta pay the rent. And these shoes *are* comfy."

Her ditsy, flirty act in the videos made him wonder who her target demographic was. Men? Teenagers? Twenty-

some things? Probably all of the above.

“What happened to ‘living in the now’?” he asked.

“I’m working,” she said. “The whole purpose of this road trip is to document cool places to see and things to do. I don’t normally post so often, maybe two or three times a week. But I’ve got to post at least a couple a day leading up to the award ceremony. It’s the only way to win.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “But I’m not here to be your cameraman.”

Filming meant having to watch her intently. Between the short sundress that exposed picture-perfect legs, her wavy blond hair blowing in the wind, and the flowery perfume she wore, it took all his concentration to keep the camera pointed at her. Focus he should be putting toward watching her back.

“I know,” she said, smiling and running a hand down his arm. “Thanks for helping out though.”

Her smile simultaneously melted and stoked his irritation. It was soothing and pretty, but he felt like she knew that and weaponized it to get what she wanted. It confused him and twisted him up inside. Did she have this effect on all men? Or just him? He shook his head. Didn’t matter.

They spent some time enjoying the view before coming back down. She picked up a free map from the lighthouse lobby and circled a finger around before plopping it onto the map to figure out their next destination, which turned out to be some dinky town in the middle-of-nowhere Virginia. At least they’d be heading somewhat in the right direction.

“What if we get there and there’s nothing to see?” he asked.

“It’s just a direction to head. I’m sure we’ll find something interesting on the way.”

He rolled his eyes and crammed himself back into the driver’s seat.

“Have you checked your website and email for any more threats?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I’ll do that while you drive. The last one was in the comments on a video. I’ll have to check multiple apps to make sure I don’t miss anything.”

She worked on her laptop while he drove and stayed more or less quiet. They stopped for lunch at, according to Daisy, the “cutest diner ever,” and continued driving until a loud popping noise interrupted George Strait’s “Amarillo by Morning.”

The car jolted, and Noah had to grip the wheel with both hands to keep from veering off the road. He hit the brakes and guided the vehicle to the shoulder.

“Holy crap,” she said. “What happened?”

“We blew a tire,” he said. “Shouldn’t take me long to change it.”

He clicked on the hazard lights and popped the trunk. She met him at the rear of the car with a sheepish grin. “Um, wee problem,” she said.

“You don’t have a spare.” It wasn’t even a question. He should have known.

“Also, there’s no cell service,” she said, holding up her phone.

“What is all this crap?” he asked. The tiny trunk was full of boxes and bags of clothes, many of which still had the tags on. “You go shopping before we left?”

“That stuff’s worth a lot of money,” she said. “Don’t touch it.”

“This junk?” He picked up a baseball hat with the word “love” spelled out in rhinestones on the front.

“I made five thousand dollars for filming a thirty-second video wearing that hat.”

“What?”

“How do you think I make money?”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

She rolled her eyes. “One way is sponsors. People pay me to promote their products. This is all stuff that if I throw it in a video somewhere, mention it on my blog, or post a link to the company’s site, I’ll get paid.”

He shook his head. “In the meantime, we have to hoof it into town because there’s no spare.”

“Hoof it? It’s like fifteen miles! We can hitchhike and get help once we find cell coverage.” With that, she packed up her laptop, hiked up her skirt, and put out her thumb.

He came to her side. “How have you survived life this long? You can’t hitchhike. Do you know how dangerous that is?”

“Well, I can’t very well walk fifteen miles in these shoes.”

She’d swapped out the tennis shoes for the same clunky high-heeled sandals from the day before.

“What about those H-O-T, oh-so-comfy shoes from this morning?” he said in a high-pitched tone, mocking her comments from the video at the lighthouse.

“Ha. Ha,” she said, just as a beat-up old station wagon pulled to a stop in front of them. “You worry too much. Watch and learn.” She winked.

A young man got out of the car. He looked to be in his teens and probably weighed a hundred pounds. Noah could take him if he had to. Hell, Daisy could take him if it came to that.

“You guys need a ride?” he said to Daisy’s legs. Noah chuckled.

“Yes, we do,” Daisy said. “Is there a fix-it shop in town that could send someone to fix my tire?” Her voice was higher and syrupier than normal. Like the voice she used in her videos. So, he was right. She *did* use her looks to get what she wanted.

“I work at the motel. It’s just down the street from the repair shop,” the kid said. “I’m heading to work and can drop you.”

“Perfect. Thank you,” Daisy said, trailing her fingers down the kid’s arm. Oh, he’d seen that move before. She’d used it on him just this morning. Unlike him though, this kid lapped it up like a thirsty puppy.

“Noah?”

He suppressed an eye roll. “Just sec.” He put the top up, grabbed his duffel, and locked the car. One gun was strapped to his ankle, but he wasn’t about to leave his backup weapon on the side of the road.

It was all he could do not to grab the keys and insist on driving. Daisy had already parked herself in the passenger seat, leaving him no choice but to sit in the back. He scowled at her before shoving his bag in and sliding in after it.

Daisy smiled at the kid, who was shaking with nerves. Probably never talked to a woman so pretty, much less had one in his front seat. Noah just hoped it didn’t affect his driving.

“Eyes on the road, kid,” Noah grumbled as they made their way into town.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Oh, man. Could this trip get any worse? First, she's saddled with a bah humbug escort who cringed at having to put more than two words together. Then, her beloved Ethel breaks down. Now, here she was, sitting next to a pimply-faced Don Juan, who wouldn't stop staring at her legs. Sure, she'd poured it on a little thick to ensure a ride, but he'd taken her fun, flirty chatter for something else.

The kid, who was just outside of puberty, laid a sweaty palm on her thigh. She heard a rumble from the back seat but took care of it quickly.

Daisy removed his hand from her leg. "I don't think so." No stranger to turning down men, she was nice but firm.

After that, the teen driver lost his eagerness, and they rode out the ten-minute drive in silence.

They parked at the motel where he worked. "Pretty much everything's within walking distance," he said. "Garage is that way." He pointed down the street. It was visible from where they stood.

"Thank you for the ride," Daisy said. The kid nodded and went inside, leaving them in the parking lot. "I guess this is what they mean by a one-horse town," she said, and Noah laughed.

"Oh, my. It does smile," she said, clutching her heart and feigning surprise.

"Ha. Ha," he said, the smile fading into his signature grimace.

"You should do that more often." He was handsome with a frown on his face, but when he smiled? Watch out. She blushed at the thought. "Let's go."

They walked the short distance to the garage, but only got bad news once they arrived.

"My tow driver left early. Can't get it till tomorrow now." The burly, gray-haired man spit onto the ground. Daisy backed

up a step and ignored Noah's chuckle.

"Oh, shoot. There's no way to get it repaired today?" she asked with a pout.

"Sorry, ma'am. First thing tomorrow, I'll send him out there to pick it up, and we'll get 'er fixed up as soon as we can."

"Okay, well, thank you."

"First time your little act didn't work on a man?" Noah asked once they were back on the street.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said indignantly. Sure, maybe sometimes she turned up the charm a smidgen to get what she wanted, but the men never seemed to mind.

"Uh-huh," Noah said, fighting a grin.

They stood on the sidewalk, sun beating down on them. "All the camping gear's in the car," she said. "Figures. We'll have to stay at the motel, I guess."

"Food first," Noah said.

"Yes, even I'm getting hungry. And while I can't imagine you any grumpier, I suppose it's possible."

There was a diner in one direction and a honky-tonk bar in the other. Without discussion, they headed toward the diner. They walked past a barber shop with a red and white striped pole out front, and she couldn't resist a picture.

Over dinner, Noah asked to see her phone again. He jotted some notes on a napkin before handing it back. Then he pulled out his own phone, typed for a minute, and put it away.

"Can you figure out who's leaving the threats from their username?" she asked.

"Honestly, probably not. But it's worth a shot. I've been meaning to ask you. You said some other contestants were blackmailed. Have you received any messages like that?"

"No," she said. "I don't have anything worthy of dropping out of the race over. Some embarrassing moments, sure, but nothing that would ruin my career."

“That could be good or bad,” Noah said, sipping his iced tea.

She raised an eyebrow.

“Well, if he could just blackmail you, he would. But if he can’t, he may feel like his only option to get rid of you is threats. And if threats don’t work, violence...”

“Oh, yeah. I see what you mean. How do you know it’s not a woman?”

“I don’t. It could be. Especially since all of your competition is women. Statistically, though, men are the killers when there’s no good motive. Women usually kill over feelings—love and/or hate—stuff like that. Men kill just to kill.”

“You must be a real blast at parties,” she said, and he laughed again. Watching his eyes light up had her vowing to try to make him smile more often.

They walked back to the motel, and she let Noah make the arrangements for a couple of rooms while she snapped pictures of the quaint little town. They were on Main Street, which appeared to be the only street with any businesses.

Noah returned with two keys and handed her one. “This might be a little rougher than you’re used to,” he said. “No spa or room service.”

“Pft. Is that what you think I’m used to?”

“You scream high class.”

“I’m not sure whether to take that as a compliment or an insult,” she said, following him to their rooms. “If you only knew.”

“What don’t I know?”

She looked at him and narrowed her eyes. “Do you remember the day we met? At the ATM. And you asked if I still wanted to use the machine, and I said no?”

“Vaguely.”

“It’s not that I didn’t want to. It’s that I *couldn’t*. The machine only had twenties, and I had twelve dollars in the bank. I was broke as a joke until a few months ago. I’ve lived in the dumpiest of dumps and eaten scraps from where I worked to survive. So forgive me if I’m insulted by your accusation.”

She snatched the key from his hand and let herself into the room.

“Don’t leave without telling me,” he said as she slammed the door in his face.

The room was crap, but it was still nicer than many places she’d stayed. She laid her laptop on the TV console, tore off the bedspread, and wadded it up in the corner. She used the restroom and splashed some water on her face. Why hadn’t she thought to bring her suitcase?

There was a general store just up the street where she could get what she needed. It crossed her mind to tell Noah, but it was only a block away, and this town was too small to find trouble.

She waited until the shower started in his next-door room and tiptoed out. She’d be back before he knew she was gone.

The warm summer breeze brushed her face. It was dusk, and the temperature was dropping along with the sun.

She bought the essentials: toothpaste, toothbrush, and deodorant. Just because she could live on nothing didn’t mean she was willing to stink while proving it. There wasn’t much in the way of clothing, but she found a T-shirt two sizes too big that would work as pajamas.

“Here you go, honey,” the clerk said, bagging her purchases. “You the one waitin’ on Bobby to get yer car?”

“Yes,” she said with a laugh. A true small town then.

“Well, if ya get stuck and need somethin’ to do, the county fair’s startin’ up tomorrow. It’s a big deal ‘round here.”

“Sounds fun. I’ll keep it in mind,” Daisy said, shoving the bag into her mondo purse. “Thank you.”

On the walk back, she peeked into the tavern. It was larger than she imagined. And nicer. The woodsy shiplap walls were covered with framed photos of Americana—small-town courthouses, baseball games, bottles of aged whiskey, old-timey police cars, and the like.

The bar itself, located on the back wall, was more modern. Neon signs advertising various beer brands surrounded a towering wall of shelved liquor. The twang of Hank Williams wafting from the jukebox lured her in. This would be the perfect backdrop for a video. Better than a dingy motel room anyway.

It was early, and there were only a few patrons. She grabbed a booth, made a few notes on the back of a paper menu, and then recorded the video with her phone propped up on the napkin holder.

She saved it, thinking of her promise to Noah to not post in real-time. Then again, who knew how long they would be stuck here? The only thing she'd posted today was a piece of pie, and if she had any shot at winning, she couldn't afford to be AWOL for an entire day. If the video didn't show what town they were in, that wouldn't hurt, right? Still, she hesitated.

Business had picked up, and feeling guilty for hogging a whole booth, she moved to a stool at the bar.

“What'll have, ma'am?” the bartender asked.

“White wine. Doesn't matter what kind.”

“Comin' up.”

After taking a picture and a long swig of Chardonnay, she posted a quick check-in, saying, “So far, so good on the road trip, and please vote for me.” She ensured the photo contained nothing to identify where she was, promised a video tomorrow, and hit “post.” She'd committed to no videos. A nondescript picture seemed harmless.

Daisy turned around on her barstool, crossed her legs, and sipped her wine. The jukebox hummed a Johnny Cash song, and she watched four men start a game of pool.

It was funny, she thought she'd miss France, but sitting here now, she realized it was America she'd missed. And, really, she could find adventure on any continent. Interesting people were everywhere, and here, she didn't have to muddle through another language to talk to them.

She pulled her leather-bound travel journal out of her bag and jotted down some thoughts. The ratty old notebook had gone from diary to planner to dreamcatcher. If she managed to pull off a win, she'd leverage it to fully establish her business and make as much money as fast as possible. Then use that income for a house, a retirement plan, and as seed money for her new venture. Winning was essential for life's next steps.

Just because she hadn't gone to college like all her sisters didn't mean she was stupid. Didn't mean she hadn't thought about the future. She knew this internet thing was temporary. New influencers came and went all the time. All it would take was a turn of the tide in what was popular, and she'd drop as quickly as she'd risen. Her main goal now was to figure out a way to launch her current fame into something more permanent. Something that would generate income for longer than a minute.

Writing a book was one way. She also wanted to talk to her dad about investing, but really, she liked the idea of helping people, maybe even being a life coach.

She put the notebook away and ordered a second glass of wine. Hanging out in the smelly motel room by herself held no appeal. Here, she could people-watch and think. Think about how Noah was sucking the fun out of her trip.

"Hey, darlin'," a man's voice said from behind. "What's a pretty girl like you doin' in a place like this?"

"Having a drink," Daisy said.

"You wanna dance?"

"Oh, no, thank you. I just stopped by for a minute."

He left, and she returned to her wine. Being hit on was nothing new. In France, though, she could feign ignorance of

the language, and men would usually give up after her third or fourth, “no hablo.”

After chatting with the bartender and the man sitting beside her, she turned around. The place was hopping now. All the booths had filled, couples danced on the small wooden dance floor, and there was a line to play pool and darts.

People-watching was one of her favorite pastimes. She liked to put herself in the minds of others and try to figure out what their life was like or what they might be thinking at a particular moment.

The same man that had hit on her was having a go with another woman. The woman’s body language said he’d missed his mark again.

“Hey there.” A big-haired woman, who looked to be in her mid-forties, approached Daisy. “You aren’t from ’round here, are you?”

“No,” Daisy said. “Just passing through town.”

“The guys sent me over to see if you wanna shoot pool. We can play guys against us girls. And girls never have to wait in line.”

The woman had a friendly smile and seemed nice enough. “Sure,” Daisy said, hopping off the barstool. “Can’t beat jumping the line. I’m Daisy. What’s your name?”

“Loretta. You any good?”

“I can hold my own.”

Thirty minutes later, Daisy and Loretta had beaten two sets of men. Three of the guys were good-natured and laughed about it, but one was bitter and drunk and loudly claiming that Loretta and Daisy had cheated. It was the same man who’d approached her earlier. His buddies encouraged him to calm down and go home, but he was good and worked up over losing to “a couple of lousy girls.”

“I want a rematch,” the man slurred.

“Dude,” his teammate said. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

The man approached Daisy and got right in her face. “You think you’re better than me?”

“No,” Daisy said.

She was mentally preparing to use one of the self-defense moves she’d learned and practiced over the years, but before she could, the man abruptly backed away from her.

Noah had him by the collar, and neither man looked happy.

“Go. Home. Now,” Noah growled. The man opened his mouth to complain but snapped it shut at Noah’s menacing glare. After thinking twice, he scurried away, muttering something vulgar.

“Hi,” Daisy said. “I had it handled, but appreciate the assist.”

His eyes narrowed. “I told you not to leave the room without telling me. Why’d you disobey me?”

“Disobey?” Daisy’s brows shot to her forehead. “Are you serious?” She turned away, thanked Loretta and the men she’d been playing with, stalked to the bar, and ordered a beer. She felt Noah come up beside her.

“Make that two,” he said to the bartender. “Please.”

Once they had their beers, she put her back against the bar, pointedly ignoring Noah. She heard him chuckle and turned to see him staring at her. His face softened. “Okay, perhaps not the best choice of wording.”

“Ya think?” She rolled her eyes.

“Daisy, I’m trying to protect you. Your dad is *paying* me to protect you,” he said, running his hand through his hair. “I can’t do that if I don’t know where you are.”

“Hey, baby,” a man said to Daisy. “You wanna dance?”

She shook her head, and the man retreated.

“I get it,” she said. “I just think this whole thing is unnecessary. Someone’s just trying to scare me into quitting. I don’t need a babysitter for that.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” he said. “But I promised your dad I’d see you safely to New York, and I always keep my word.”

“Hello, miss,” another man said. “May I buy you a drink?”

“No, thank you,” Daisy said, holding up her mostly full beer. “I’m good.”

“The balls on these guys,” Noah said after the man left. “I’m standing right next to you, and they’re still hitting on you.”

“I’m novel because I’m new.”

“Novel? Pft. You’re probably the hottest thing this town’s ever seen. They’ll talk about you for months after you’re gone.”

“Ha,” she barked. “You have noticed all the women ogling you, right? At least my gender has the decency to not make a move while I’m within earshot.”

“Maybe if you covered up those legs,” he said, ignoring her compliment.

“What’s wrong with my legs?”

“Not a damn thing,” he said, wiping a brow. “They could make a grown man cry.”

A third man headed toward them. Noah grabbed her hand and dragged her to the dance floor. “Maybe we can talk here without interruption,” he said, sliding his arms around her waist.

“At least those men ask,” Daisy said. “You’re very bossy.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s one of my best qualities.”

She laughed and draped her arms over his shoulders, holding her beer between both hands behind his head. It was nice dancing with someone taller than her. That didn’t happen often.

“Weird. I’m wearing heels and still looking up at you. That’s not a sensation I’m accustomed to. I forgot how big we grow ’em in the U.S.”

“Got tired of tiny French men? I hear their pansies too. That true?”

“Not everyone’s as tough as you.”

He shrugged. “So, what have you been doing while I’ve been scouring the town for you?”

“I picked up a few essentials at the general store and have been here ever since. I bought you some jerky.”

“That was nice. Thank you.”

“I figure it must be true what they say. You are what you eat. Next time, I’ll get sweetTARTS and see how that works out.”

He pulled her in close, presumably to shut her up. The long day and the alcohol caught up to her, and tiredness hit. She closed her eyes and laid her head on his shoulder. A big, strong man hadn’t been on her list of things to worry about. Still wasn’t, but she had to admit, it felt pretty nice.

When they started the karaoke machine, she rallied and was all in. “Noah, come sing ‘Country Roads’ with me. It’s my jam.”

“It’s like you don’t know me at all,” he said. “I don’t know that song anyway.”

“Liar,” she said. “Everyone knows ‘Country Roads.’”

Without him, she took her turn and sang her heart out to one of her all-time favorite songs. By the end, everyone in the bar had joined in. Well, everyone but Noah. He just watched with a blank, unreadable look on his face.

“I’ve decided you must be a robot,” she said, returning to where he stood. “Who can hear ‘Country Roads’ and not sing along?”

He pointed two thumbs at himself. “This guy.”

After that, they returned to the motel and their separate rooms. Before turning in, she wrote in her gratitude journal. *Thankful for the ability to enjoy life and make the best of any situation.*

It wasn't meant to be a dig at Noah. She wasn't judging him. She actually felt sorry for him. Cruising through life with a chip on your shoulder must be a real drag. Maybe she could change his outlook. He could be her guinea pig—her first attempt at life coaching.

That was where she wanted to steer her social media channel. Why not get some practice? He'd be the perfect specimen to start on. As long as he didn't find out about it.

CHAPTER NINE

Noah woke in a cold sweat, his heart racing, after having the same nightmare that had haunted him on and off for the last year. He called it a nightmare, but the more accurate term would be a memory. A horrible, all-too-real, life-altering memory. Sometimes, he'd go a month without it, but it always found its way back. Usually, just as he thought he might be moving on. The nightmare was a relentless reminder that he would never get over the pain. A persistent punishment for his poor decision.

Dispatch had sent him and his partner, Tucker, to a possible drug deal. They'd arrived at a vacant warehouse on the water and interrupted the exchange. They immediately called for backup, but everything went south before anyone else showed up.

Noah and Tucker confronted the dealer, who promptly pulled a gun as his business associate disappeared into the black night. Noah drew his weapon too but made the mistake of trying to reason with the suspect. As Noah shouted commands to surrender, the dealer fired and hit Tucker, who went down hard. Strongly worded demands were no match for a bullet.

Noah shot and killed the bastard, but the damage was done. He fell to his knees next to Tucker and called for an ambulance, using the portable radio clipped to his shoulder.

While they waited for aid to arrive, Tucker complained he couldn't feel his legs. Noah watched helplessly as the paramedics carefully loaded Tucker onto a gurney and into the ambulance. He followed them to the hospital and stayed all night while surgeons operated and did their best to fix what Noah had broken. He wasn't surprised when the doctors announced Tucker would never walk again.

Noah blamed himself, and the enormity and gravity of his mistake became a millstone around his neck. Guilt and shame were unshakable companions that ruled his life and affected all his decisions.

Having lost the edge, he'd quit the force and started the business. At least now, he wouldn't end up in a life-or-death situation again.

He sat up to catch his breath. When he opened his eyes, he was disoriented. It took him a second to remember he was at a dumpy motel in the backwoods of nowhere, and that he'd spent the last two exhausting days with a crazy person named Daisy. He woke from one nightmare only to realize he remained smack dab in the middle of another—the road trip from hell.

It wasn't quite dawn, but since he was awake, he laced up his running shoes and took off, heading west. That way, maybe he'd catch the sunrise coming back. Sure enough, on his return trip, the sky caught fire—red, orange, and pink clouds glowed over the town's low skyline. He slowed to a walk. It was beautiful, but the moment was lost on him. The minute he started to enjoy it, the always-close-at-hand guilt crept in. He shook his head, wishing that would throw off the burden, but of course, that was too much to hope for.

He showered and packed his duffel. Not hearing any movement from the room next door, he walked down the street and returned with two coffees and some pastries. Daisy didn't answer his knock right away, and he began to worry something had happened. Or that she'd ditched him again. "Daisy!" He pounded on the door.

When she finally answered, his mouth fell open. She wore only a towel and a look of alarm. Drops of water fell from her hair to the floor. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing." He swallowed hard. "I got worried when you didn't answer."

"I was in the shower," she said, walking back toward the bathroom, where the water was still running.

"I see that," he said, ignoring the same unprofessional and unsettling thoughts he'd had last night while they danced. He set the food and coffee on the tiny table near the bed.

“I’ll be out in a sec,” she called, shutting the door behind her.

After a minute, he heard singing. Neil Diamond’s “Sweet Caroline,” if he wasn’t mistaken. Of course she sang in the shower. He would expect nothing less. The water turned off, and after a few minutes, she came out wearing a baggy T-shirt.

“Well, this won’t do,” he said, more to himself than her. “Be right back.” He stalked next door, fished a pair of clean running shorts out of his bag, returned to her room, and threw them at her. “Put those on.”

“Ah, yes.” She laughed. “Wouldn’t want to make you cry,” she teased, clearly enjoying the impact she was having on him.

“Maybe I’ll just take my apple fritters and go,” he said, picking up the pastry bag.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” she said, snatching the bag. “As a wise woman once said, never get between a Parker and a pastry.”

“Who said that?”

“Me.” She smiled and rifled through the bag.

“Your car’s already at the station. I’ll walk over and grab your suitcase if you want.”

“That would be great,” she said around a mouthful of fritter. “Did you talk to anyone about when it’ll be fixed?”

“No, but I will when I get your stuff.”

After they ate, she put on yesterday’s sundress and walked over with him.

“Howdy, folks,” Bobby said. “Got some bad news. We ain’t got a tire that fits. Gonna have to get one from a couple towns over. Should have it this afternoon though. Could get you on your way by supper.”

“I don’t suppose there’s anywhere to rent a car around here?” Noah asked.

“Nah,” Bobby said. “But if you can drive a stick, you can borrow my truck.” He pointed his chin to a beat-up Chevy circa 1950.

Noah looked at Daisy, who shrugged but nodded. “That’s a really nice offer,” he said. “Sure you don’t mind?”

In response, Bobby threw him the keys. “The county fair’s startin’ today. If you’re lookin’ for something to do.”

Noah left his cell phone number, and Bobby agreed to call once the car was ready. He grabbed Daisy’s suitcase, she filled a backpack with some of the merchandise from the trunk, and they jumped into the pickup.

“Since we never got to it yesterday, let’s find a mountain to climb,” Daisy said. “If the car’s not ready after a hike, we can go to the fair.”

“You’re the boss.” A hike sounded fine, but the Podunk county fair, he would gladly take a pass on.

They stopped at the motel, and while Daisy changed clothes, he returned their keys and checked them out. She met him in the parking lot wearing shorts even shorter than the sundress she’d had on yesterday. Not helpful.

“You ever cover those things up?” he asked, nodding to her legs. Sure, he’d seen great legs before, but these were in a class all their own.

“It’ll be a hundred degrees today!” she said. “I’m sure a strong, tough man like you can handle it.”

He wasn’t as confident and grumbled in response. He was a tried-and-true leg man. Although, even if he’d been a boob man, Daisy had that covered too. Ass man? Yep. Foot fetish? Uh-huh.

“How ’bout a real breakfast before we hike?” Noah asked. “All that sugar’s gonna burn off quick.”

She agreed, and they parked at the diner they’d had dinner at the night before. He bought a paper and started the crossword puzzle while Daisy messed around on her phone. She only ordered coffee and rolled her eyes, mumbling something about him being bossy, when he told the waitress she’d also have eggs and wheat toast.

“You need fuel. Anything I should know about?” He hitched his chin toward her phone.

“No new threats, if that’s what you mean,” she said, sipping on water the waitress had left. “I gotta do some filming today. Hope that won’t be a problem.”

“That reminds me. You posted a picture last night. I thought we agreed you wouldn’t do that.” That was nicer than saying she hadn’t obeyed, right?

“You said ‘videos.’ And, even though I made one, I’m waiting to post it,” she said. “As for the pic, I made sure there was nothing to identify where we were in the shot. It could have been a glass of wine at any bar in the world.”

“Daisy.” He closed his eyes and prayed for patience. “The picture itself has data embedded that can show where you were.”

“Oh.”

“Just so we’re clear. No pictures, no videos, no posts of any kind, all right?”

She gave a smart, sarcastic salute, and he fought an eye roll.

Last night, when he thought she was safe and sound next door, he’d watched some of her videos. She was peppy and happy, but also full of good info. If he wanted to travel Europe.

The first video opened with a view of a street market, obviously in a foreign country.

“Here we are in Spain,” Daisy had started. “As many of you know, I lived here for a year a couple of years ago. I wasn’t making videos then, so I’m coming back now to show you what I did and what I learned.”

His jaw dropped as she proceeded to turn to a local merchant and have an entire conversation with him. In Spanish. From what little he’d retained from his high school Spanish class, and the fact that the man clearly understood her, he could tell she was fluent. She’d never mentioned that.

As he clicked video after video, he learned she was fluent in French and Italian too! She joked that her Japanese was rusty, and that she only knew a tiny bit of German.

Respect for her took a giant leap forward. He'd pegged her as a ditsy, look-at-me-I'm-pretty social climber. But even if she was that, she was also an intelligent woman.

After they'd returned from the bar, he'd watched a few more, including the one where she decided to come home. It was more serious in tone and just her casually talking to the camera.

Apparently, she'd done and seen all she wanted to abroad and was ready to settle down in the States. She listed getting older and her sisters marrying and having kids as other reasons. She promised to keep doing videos, but with a more domestic slant.

He felt he knew her a little better after watching the videos. And that maybe she wasn't as frivolous as he'd imagined. At every turn, she surprised him.

She gobbled up her eggs and eyed his pancakes.

"I thought you weren't hungry," he said.

"I'm not. But they look delicious." She picked up her fork. "Do you mind?"

He wasn't accustomed to sharing food, didn't particularly like sharing food, but one bite couldn't hurt. "I suppose." He pushed the plate to the middle of the table.

He was unprepared for what he felt when she put a piece in her mouth and syrup stuck to her lips. Her tongue flickered out to catch the syrup, and he dropped his fork. "Okay. That's it." He pulled the plate back. She looked up with wide eyes, oblivious to the effect she was having on him.

"So, Noah. Where are you from?"

"West Virginia. Lewisburg."

"What? Why didn't you say anything?" She sat up straight. "We're going right by there. Well, we *could* go right by there. You wanna stop and see your family?"

“No. That’s not necessary.”

“You don’t like your family?”

“I love my family.”

“Great, then it’s settled. We’ll stop.”

“And you think I’m bossy.”

“Ah. Another intersection on our Venn diagram.”

“Tall, stubborn, and bossy,” he muttered. “What could go wrong?”

It wasn’t settled, and they wouldn’t be stopping, but as long as he kept driving, she’d never know. He hadn’t been completely honest about his hometown. White Sulphur Springs was such a small dot on the map that he’d taken to citing the bigger, well-known Lewisburg as home. That way, he avoided the follow-up questions that inevitably came when he claimed the tiny town he was actually from.

“You done?” At her nod, he excused himself to use the restroom and pay the bill. When he returned, she got up to take a turn using the bathroom. He grabbed his hat and noticed the crossword puzzle he’d been working on was complete. She’d filled in all the hard ones. He double-checked her work, and sure enough, she’d solved all the clues he hadn’t been able to.

“You finished my puzzle?” he asked in disbelief when she returned.

“Don’t look so surprised. You did leave all the easy ones.” She winked, and he couldn’t help but laugh. Damn, this woman was an enigma.

Daisy asked around the diner for a hike recommendation and got a consensus on one not too far away. They found the trailhead, and two hours later, had huffed and puffed their way to the lookout point.

She hadn’t taken his advice about covering her legs, and after he tripped over several roots, staring at them instead of the ground, he finally told her he was taking the lead. Things went much smoother after that.

“Noah, look,” she whispered, pointing to a spot in the sky. An eagle flew over the ridge with a fish in its mouth. “How awesome is that?”

“Aren’t you going to take a picture?” he asked. That seemed to be her answer to everything.

“No,” she said, watching the eagle soar around a tree before landing in it. “Sometimes, you just gotta live in the now.”

Not five minutes later, she asked him to hold her phone while she made a video, telling everyone about the hike and the eagle.

He stopped her once when she said the name of the highway they were on. Then stopped her again when she mentioned the town they were in.

“Noah, I can’t really do any editing out here, so I need to get this in one take. If you keep interrupting, it’ll take me all night. I already said I’d wait to post. That’s my concession.”

They’d finally gotten a take they were both happy with. In the video, she’d made an over-the-top pitch for some granola bar, which they split afterward.

“How much you get for plugging this?” He held up his half of the granola bar.

“Three grand.”

He coughed on the bite he’d just taken. “I’m in the wrong business.”

“And free granola bars.” She waggled her eyebrows.

She took a bunch of selfies, checking the camera after each one and moving an inch to the right or left. At one point, he thought he caught her taking a picture of him, but couldn’t be sure. Rather than fight it, he sat on a stump and ate jerky until she finished.

Bobby hadn’t called, so they found the fair to kill some time.

“Scones and elephant ears for dinner,” she said. “Yes!”

“I’m gonna get me some brisket,” he said, the smell drawing him like a magnet.

They indulged in fair food, walked around the 4-H barn, and then headed to the rides. On the way, they passed the games, and she begged him to win her a giraffe at the shooting game.

“This is rigged,” he muttered when his shots continually missed the targets. “I’m an expert marksman and should be hitting these all dead center.”

“You can do it,” she said, cheering him on. It took him forty dollars to figure out the “gun.” If he aimed two inches low, he hit everything square on.

When he finally earned enough points to get her the stupid giraffe, she celebrated like he’d won a million dollars. She hugged him while jumping up and down, yelling how fantastic he was.

“Everyone’s staring at us,” he said, trying not to laugh. “Calm yourself.”

“Oh, but Noah. It’s the most wonderful giraffe in the whole world,” she said dramatically.

“All right, all right. I thought you wanted to ride the Ferris wheel. Let’s go.”

She looped her arm through his and bounced her way to the ticket booth. “We’d like tickets for the Ferris wheel, please,” she told the man.

“Ten bucks,” he replied, stone-faced.

Undeterred by his gruffness, she pulled out a ten and slipped it halfway to him. “How about ten dollars and a smile?” She gave him a silly grin that had him huff out a laugh and shake his head.

“You’re nuts, lady.” He handed over the tickets.

“I hope you have the most fabulous, exciting night,” she said, waving goodbye and skipping off toward the ride. Yes, skipping.

Noah noticed the man checking her out. No doubt her hotness let her get away with all sorts of nonsense. He bit back a laugh as he followed her to the ride.

They stopped every thirty seconds to reload the buckets, and when they paused at the very top, he looked over at Daisy. Night had fallen, and the flashing lights from the rides lit up her beautiful blue eyes. A soft, melodic country tune drifted up from a live band playing off the midway.

He saw the moment she decided to kiss him. And damn if he could stop himself from letting her. It was simple. She just leaned over and planted her lips on his. But that was all it took to ignite a fire in him. He gripped her head and kissed her fiercely. Her hands snaked around his neck as she melted into him.

The wheel started again and jolted the common sense back into him. “Shit.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That was my fault. Sometimes I get carried away, living in the moment. It gets me in trouble.”

“That can’t happen again,” he said. “I work for your dad. I’m supposed to be protecting you, not kissing you.”

“Yes, I agree. Never again,” she said. But the mischievous glint in her eye belied her commitment.

As they exited the ride, Noah’s phone rang. It was the garage. Saved by the bell.

“Sorry about the delay,” Bobby said. “Long story, but the car’s finally done. I’ll leave the keys under the mat. You can do the same with the truck. My wife’s comin’ to take me home, so it don’t matter when you come back.”

“What about the bill?”

“I’ll leave it with the keys. Did your friend find you?”

“What friend?” The hair on Noah’s neck spiked, and he started a scan of the crowd.

“Some guy. Short fella. Was lookin’ for ya. Told him you might be at the fair.”

Noah paused, quickly analyzing the implications. “Does he know what we’re driving?”

“Nah. Didn’t talk that long. Somethin’ wrong?”

“Maybe. Gotta go.” He hung up. “Daisy, we gotta get out of here. Now.”

“Why. What’s wro—”

Bam! Bam!

Two gunshots interrupted her. Noah pushed her to the ground and covered her with his body while still searching the crowd. Chaos ensued on the midway, everyone screaming and running. Amid the panic, he hauled Daisy to her feet. “Let’s go. Stay close to me.”

“What the hell just happened?” Daisy asked.

“Someone tried to shoot you.”

Noah had no way to ID the shooter. He didn’t even bother pulling his weapon, fearing people would mistake him for the gunman.

He grabbed Daisy’s hand. “Keep your head down and blend in with the crowd,” he said as they ran to the parking lot. They arrived at the truck and jumped in.

He started the engine and drove over the embankment to bypass the line of cars waiting to leave the parking lot.

“How do you know they were shooting at me?” Daisy asked. “Couldn’t it have been anyone?”

“Maybe, but the bullet in my shoulder tells me it was meant for someone standing near me.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Noah!” Daisy cried. “Shot? Why didn’t you say anything? Where? Are you okay?”

“Calm down,” he said, grimacing as he shifted gears. “I’ll be fine.”

“There’s stubborn, and there’s stupid,” Daisy said curtly. “At least pull over and let me look at it.”

“Get in my duffel bag. On the left side, at the bottom, there should be a first aid kit. It’s not much, but it’ll do for now.”

They drove twenty miles east, ensuring they weren’t followed, before Noah finally stopped in a wooded area outside of town. He pulled over, parked, and killed the lights. The quiet darkness engulfed them.

Daisy had been pressing a gauze pad to Noah’s shoulder as he drove but now took the time to assess the damage. Holding a flashlight, she peeked under the blood-soaked bandage.

“Hold still,” Daisy said. “The bleeding hasn’t stopped yet.”

He stripped off his shirt, and his broad chest in the moonlight was distracting, but she had to focus. The bullet *had* only grazed him, but it still left a long, deep gash. It looked like someone had sliced his upper arm with a knife.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you were hit,” she said. “This could have been so much worse. You could have been killed.”

“It’s not that bad.” He ripped open another gauze pad with his teeth. “Stack this on top of the old one. My first aid kit’s pretty rudimentary. There are only two more pads.”

“I’m no doctor, but it’s painfully obvious you need stitches,” she said, taping down the bandages. “What should we do?”

“I’m thinking.”

“How do you think he found us?”

“Your wine picture probably led him to town. Once there, it wouldn’t be hard to find your cherry-red sore thumb, which isn’t exactly inconspicuous.” Noah used his good arm to shrug. “He chatted up Bobby, who promptly offered the information that we might be at the fair.”

“Small-town folk do tend to be very trusting.” She sighed. “Noah, I’m so sorry. You were right. I shouldn’t have posted.”

He grunted. “Anyway. I’m weighing the pros and cons of going back for the car. Or at least the camping gear. We should go at night if we do.”

She felt like he was talking more to himself, mentally working things out, so she just nodded.

“We weren’t followed, so assuming we ditched him, we’ll blend in better with this truck. Well, until we get to a big city. We need a rental car. This bucket of rust won’t make it to NYC anyway.”

She couldn’t argue with that.

“I’m thinking we wait a bit, slink into town, grab what we need from the car, leave a note and some money for Bobby, and hit the road again. Then just drive until we find a hotel.”

“I’m sure Bobby wouldn’t mind if we kept the truck a little longer. Once you explain what happened.”

“And drop enough cash.” He chuckled. “We’ll head east but tell Loose Lips we went north. That might throw off the shooter if he goes back to Bobby. If he believes that, and as long as you *quit posting*,” he paused to give her a pointed stare, “we should be fine.”

“I’m sorry, Noah,” she said. “This is all my fault. I can’t fathom that someone would kill over a stupid internet award. This just seems so surreal to me.”

“I want a list of all the other nominees. Will you text or email that to me? I’d rather play offense than defense. Let’s see if we can figure out who we’re dealing with.”

With their limited supplies, she patched him up the best she could. “Won’t you need a tetanus shot or something?”

“I’ll worry about a doctor later,” he said, starting the engine. “Will you grab me a shirt out of my bag?”

“Gladly,” she muttered. “You think legs are distracting.”

While he drove, she dug around in the glove box for some paper and wrote a note to Bobby saying they would call to explain but needed the truck a while longer. She forwarded Noah the email with the names of her competitors and then took a quick look at her page.

“There’s another message,” she said glumly.

“What’s it say?”

“Next time, I won’t miss. Drop out now.”

Noah killed the headlights two blocks from the auto shop and rolled to a stop on the side street nearest it. Besides the cars parked in front of the bar, Main Street was deserted. They snuck in from the alley. Noah left a wad of cash and the note under the mat in Daisy’s car. He grabbed the sleeping bags and tent while she filled her purse with merchandise.

“Do you really need all that stuff?” Noah whispered harshly.

“I still have to work,” she said. “Everything I’m packing is worth money to me.”

He huffed out his frustration but carried the camping gear so she could focus on her weighed-down bag. They packed up as much as they could carry and were back at the truck in less than five minutes.

“I don’t think anyone saw us,” she said as he started the pickup. “I checked the map, and if we head east, there’s a town with a motel about thirty miles away.”

They drove in silence, both lost in thought. How was this happening? Who cared enough to kill over an award? *Should* she just drop out? It wasn’t worth getting hurt or someone trying to keep her safe getting hurt.

When they arrived at the motel, Noah told her to stay in the truck. “You’re too pretty to not stick out. All anyone would have to ask about is a blond-haired, blue-eyed Barbie doll, and

even a pizza box would know who they were talking about,” he said.

“Thank you?” she said, thinking there was a compliment in there somewhere.

He returned from the motel office and reparked in a space right outside the room door. “I only got one room this time. I’m not letting you out of my sight again.”

She wasn’t going to argue. Being shot at had scared her, so sharing a room was fine. Noah had been vigilantly watching for anyone following them, and continued to scan the parking lot and general area for anything suspicious. Once they were in the room, with the door locked and deadbolt in place, he relaxed a little.

“I’ll take the bed nearest the door.” He pulled a gun from an ankle holster and put it on the nightstand. “You know anything about guns?”

“My dad used to take us to the range, but I haven’t been in years. I could shoot one if I had to, but to answer your question, not much.”

“Don’t touch it then.”

“Yes, sir,” she said in a gruff voice. She couldn’t fault him for his grouchiness this time. Getting shot would put anyone in a foul mood. She threw her stuff on the second bed and glanced over at him.

“Noah, you’re bleeding again.” She went to the bathroom and wet a washcloth.

He didn’t say anything when she carefully took off his T-shirt, taking care not to raise the injured arm, and pushed him to sit on the bed. He looked dead on his feet. She removed the bloody gauze and tape, pressed the washcloth to the wound, and held tight.

“Please tell me you have some pain medicine in that monstrosity of a bag you carry,” he said.

“Of course. Hold this. I’ll get you some.” He took over the pressure, and she searched her purse for some Tylenol and a

water bottle. “Sorry, the water’s warm, but I assume going out for ice isn’t in the cards.” She smiled.

“Thank you.” He swallowed the pills, laid down, and closed his eyes while she tended to him. Now that she had light, she could see that the first aid kit was better stocked than originally thought. Using equal parts ingenuity and tenacity, she bandaged him up MacGyver style.

When she returned from cleaning up the mess and taking a quick shower, he’d fallen asleep. She took advantage of the opportunity and studied him. The crease between his brows had relaxed, and he looked almost at peace. Almost. Apparently, whatever was haunting him couldn’t be kept at bay, even during sleep. Softly, she smoothed his hair and turned out the light.

After changing into pj’s and climbing into bed, she pulled out her notebook and jotted down a few thoughts about the long, emotion-filled day.

While being shot at was definitely on the list of newsworthy events, it was the Ferris wheel kiss she found herself lingering over.

Kissing him had been one of those impulsive things that often got her into trouble, but she didn’t regret it. There was no denying she hadn’t thought about it. Frankly, ever since his studly performance at the bank robbery, she’d had a tiny crush on him.

His words might be harsh, but his lips were soft. And when he’d kissed her back? Well, it was a good thing they’d been in a Ferris wheel bucket. Otherwise, who knows what she would have done. Mr. Surly Pants sure knew how to kiss a girl. And if his kiss was any indication, there was some pent-up passion she wouldn’t mind freeing.

It was rare for him to make eye contact, but each time she met those Caribbean Sea-green eyes, she wondered what caused the pain in them. While he didn’t seem like the type to overshare—or share at all, really—she sensed that the gruff exterior was shielding something painful. And that there was more to him than just that shield. It made her want to crash

through and find out what was on the other side. She had a feeling it might be worth it.

Noah was right though. Now that they knew the danger was real, they had to keep things professional.

She finished journaling and tucked the notebook into her bag, then drifted off to sleep, thinking of Noah—his arms around her while they danced and his lips on hers while they kissed.

She woke to him groaning and mumbling. “Noah?” she said.

“Tucker! No!” he yelled.

Daisy clicked on the light. His eyes were closed and one arm reached out blindly, as if in the midst of a nightmare. Probably brought on by the shooting.

She put a hand on his uninjured shoulder and shook him. “Noah. Wake up,” she said sternly. “You’re having a nightmare.”

After coaxing him awake, his eyes finally fluttered open. He sat abruptly and searched the room frantically, head twisting right and left.

“It’s okay,” Daisy said. “It’s okay. It was only a dream.”

It took him a second to fully wake, and she watched as embarrassment crept across his face. “I’m...I’m sorry,” he said, still groggy.

“For what?” she said. “You were shot tonight. I’d worry about you if you *didn’t* have a nightmare.”

“It’s not that.” He shook his head. “Never mind. Sorry I woke you. Go back to bed.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Okay.” She turned the light off and climbed into her bed. She longed to comfort him, but of course, he was too manly for that. It didn’t take him long to fall back asleep, and once he had, she allowed herself to sleep as well.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning, Daisy woke to Noah typing away on a laptop.

“Sorry if I woke you,” he said.

“What are you working on?”

“A presentation for work that’s due the week after next.”

The aroma of coffee wafted through the air, and she sniffed, looking for the source. “Maybe we can take half a day to settle somewhere and work. I could use some quality time with a computer. Do I smell coffee?”

“If you use the term loosely.” He chuckled and handed her his paper cup. “It’s the K-cup from the motel coffee maker. Not the best.”

She sipped at the lukewarm coffee-flavored water and hummed. “It’ll do for now.”

“I have some bad news,” he said.

“Of course you do.” She sat up, covered a yawn, and threw her arms above her head to stretch. When she looked at him, he was staring at her with a look she couldn’t read. “Well, lay it on me.”

“I ruled out the people you said had already quit and checked out the rest. They’re all posting pretty much nonstop, and they all have alibis for last night. None of them are the shooter.”

“So, somebody’s friend?”

“Maybe.”

“Great,” she said. “Where does that leave us?”

“I don’t know. I had a police buddy try to find the source of the threats, and he hit a dead end too. The IP address is hidden behind a million VPNs, so there’s no way to tell whose account it is or where it’s coming from.”

A soft, mewing noise outside interrupted their conversation. She got up to investigate, but he jumped in front of her.

“Wait,” he said. “It could be someone trying to lure you out.”

The noise sounded again. Noah grabbed his gun and peeked out the window before inching open the door, leaving the deadbolt chain engaged. Something tiny and furry shot between his legs and under the bed.

“What the...?” he said.

“Please tell me that’s not a rat.” Just in case, she jumped onto the bed.

He shut and locked the door and put down his gun. “Hand me the flashlight,” he said, kneeling to look under the bed.

She hopped from her bed to his and handed him the flashlight from his nightstand.

“It’s a kitten,” he said. “Come here, dude.”

“A kitten?” Daisy said gleefully, jumping off the bed and kneeling next to him. “Here, kitty, kitty.”

He stood. “Not what we need right now.”

She finally coaxed the little guy out, using a piece of jerky from her purse. It was so young. She wasn’t even sure it could eat solid food. “Here,” she said, thrusting the tiny beast into Noah’s hands. “Hold him for a sec.”

She found a plastic cup in the bathroom, used a pocketknife to cut the bottom off, and poured two coffee bar creamers into it. “Here you go, little one,” she said, taking the cat back and letting it drink from the makeshift bowl.

“I’m not sure I want to know the answer to this,” Noah said. “But just what do you plan to do with that?”

“Um, we’re keeping him. Obviously.”

“What if he belongs to someone?”

“We can ask the clerk when we check out, but it doesn’t look like anyone’s taking care of him. He won’t be any trouble

at all. First chance we get, we'll stop and buy supplies. There must be a feed store around here somewhere."

His only response was a grunt. "I'm gonna take a shower, and then I need food."

"I showered last night and can be ready in five minutes."

"If you want to post something today, do it just before we leave town."

"Yes, sir."

He grunted again, rummaged through his bag for a second, and went to shower.

After slapping on some makeup and running a brush through her hair, she recorded a quick video using the kitten as a prop. She was still debating whether to comment on being shot at when the water turned off.

She hurried to pack up, slipped into her flip-flops, and stood at the ready when he came out of the bathroom. Wearing only shorts. Yowsa.

"Is there anything left in the first aid kit to cover this up?" He nodded at the angry red wound on his upper arm.

"Noah, we gotta have someone check that. I think you need stitches."

"We can stop for some butterfly bandages and maybe some of that super glue for wounds. In the meantime, is there a big enough band-aid or any gauze and tape left?"

She looked through the kit and found the biggest bandage she could. "This will have to do. The gauze is gone."

He sat on the bed while she dried his shoulder, applied some ointment, and jerry-rigged some bandages to protect the wound. They both stood.

"I understand what you mean now," she said. "Any chance you could cover all that up?" She made a circular motion around his broad chest. All that naked skin was distracting and making it impossible to think about anything other than being wrapped up in those big, strong arms.

“What?” he teased, flexing his pec muscles one at a time.
“This bother you?”

“I don’t have the self-control you do,” she said. “You better put those guns away.”

He chuckled. “This gun?” He flexed his good arm while the injured one hung useless.

Was he trying to tempt her? Well, two could play his game. She sauntered over to him, laid her hands on his chest, and slowly slid her fingers up to his shoulders and down his biceps.

His smile was gone, and his neck muscles tensed. “Daisy?”

“Yes?”

“You’re playing with fire.”

“You started it.”

She could tell the instant he lost his internal battle. Bad arm and all, he scooped her up and tossed her gently onto the bed.

“Ah,” she squealed.

He covered her laugh with a kiss that took her breath away.

“Let the record show,” she said. “That I was ready on time.”

“Noted,” he said before resuming the kiss.

Just as things were heating up, the cat meowed, and Noah’s stomach roared. “Reality check.” He stopped what he was doing and rolled off of her.

She sighed. Stupid reality.

They packed up what little they had and left. Noah returned from checking out with a small cardboard box. “The clerk said the cat was a stray, and we’re welcome to it,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Even gave me a box for it.”

“Oh, look, Mr. Fluffy Pants. Mr. Noah brought you a bed.” She wadded up Noah’s bloody T-shirt, placed it in the box, blood side down, and laid the kitten on it. “He loves it.”

“That’s disgusting,” Noah said. “Both the bloody shirt *and* what you’ve named it.”

“The shirt’s a goner anyway. I’m open to suggestions on a name.” She took his silence to mean he didn’t have a better idea.

They made a pitstop for coffee and breakfast sandwiches, Daisy posted her video, and they sped out of town. At the first sign of civilization, they stopped at a box store for medical supplies and pet paraphernalia.

Before they got back on the road, she redressed his wound with the new butterfly bandages. All the while contemplating Noah’s spontaneous kiss at the motel. Even though she’d goaded him into it, his spur-of-the-moment seizing of the day surprised her. In a good way. Maybe there was hope for him yet.

She carefully pulled the skin together and matched up the sides of the wound. In case they couldn’t find a doctor soon, she would do her best to help him heal.

While she worked, Noah called Bobby, put him on speakerphone, and explained what had happened. “We’ll return the truck as soon as we can.”

“Hell, you can have it,” Bobby said. “I feel sick about putting you in danger. Plus, the money you left is twice as much as that piece of junk is worth.”

Noah chuckled. “All right. Please call me if the guy shows up again.” Bobby agreed, and they hung up.

“Good thing chicks dig scars,” Daisy said. “Because if you keep refusing to see a doctor, that’s exactly what you’ll have.”

They grabbed a drink for the road, and Daisy posted the hike video as they pulled out of the store parking lot.

“Think you can handle this beast?” Noah asked about an hour later.

“I’m willing to try.”

“I wanna do more research on these candidates, but I don’t want to stay in one place very long. You wanna drive for a spell?”

“A spell? Sure,” she said in a southern drawl. “I reckon’ I can do that.” That earned an eye roll.

They crossed the state line into West Virginia, and she fiddled with the radio until she found a country station. After several minutes, she lost patience.

“Hand me my phone, will ya? This is taking too long.”

“I do not like where this is headed, but here.” One hand on the wheel, she used the other to open the music app on her phone.

“I can’t believe they don’t just play this on repeat. Sorry, but it must be done.” She hit play, maxed out the volume, and started singing “Country Roads” at top volume, using the cat’s brush as a microphone.

When the song ended, she was breathless from the exuberant performance. He looked at her like she was crazy. “How can you not sing along to this?” she asked.

“I told you. I don’t know the song,” he said. “Can I get back to work?”

“You are *from* West Virginia. There’s no way you don’t know that song,” she mumbled. “Fuddy-duddy.”

She drove for about thirty minutes before noticing he’d quit typing. When she glanced over, he was sleeping, head tipped back, mouth agape, and snoring softly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Noah jerked awake at the sudden quiet. The grumble of the engine and Daisy's humming must have lulled him to sleep. Panic shot through him as he glanced out the window to see a vaguely familiar sight. "Daisy, where are we?"

"I don't know. A little town called White Springs? White something Springs. I don't remember the exact name. You wanna call your parents and tell 'em we're coming?"

Noah's eyes snapped open, and he looked around frantically. They were parked at the pump of a gas station he knew well. He must have slept for over an hour.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Oh, um. Nothing," he said. No reason to mention that she'd inadvertently stopped at the only town he wanted to avoid. If he kept his mouth shut, they could fuel up and be gone before anyone was the wiser.

"Don't suppose you want to pump while I pee and get a snack?"

He shook off the tiredness. "Sure," he said, unbuckling. "That's fine. I'll drive again too." Right out of this town.

He got out to pump the gas. His arm throbbed, and he had a crick in his neck from sleeping at a funny angle. Maybe tonight, they could find a decent hotel with comfortable beds. One with a hot tub even.

After setting the pump to automatic, he walked a few feet to stretch his legs. Perhaps he should call his parents. It had been a while since his last visit. No, he was working. Plus, he didn't want to put them in any danger.

A white suburban turned onto their street, and he ducked his head as Daisy approached from behind.

"Did you see something?" she said, slouching to match his posture.

“Oh, no. Just, uh, need to tie my shoe.” They both looked down at his already neatly tied shoes. “Er, I thought it was untied.”

The driver of the suburban slammed on the brakes and made a sharp U-turn, heading back to the station.

“Should we worry about that?” Daisy asked.

“Not in the way you think,” he muttered as the SUV came screeching to a halt on the opposite side of the pump.

Crap. He’d hoped they could get in and out of town without this happening. Of course, the way his luck was running, this was exactly what he should have expected.

“Sweet fancy Moses on buttered toast,” his oldest sister, Marcy, said. “The prodigal son returns. It’s about damn time.”

“Hey, sis,” Noah said with a sheepish grin. “Long time.”

“Well, get over here, ya ginormous galoot,” she said, getting on her tiptoes to hug him. She was tall, almost as tall as Daisy, but still several inches shorter than Noah. “Does Mom know you’re here? I’m surprised she didn’t say anything.”

“Uh, no. I’m not really ‘here.’ Just passing through.”

Hurt crossed her face. “Oh.”

“It’s not like that, Marcy,” Noah said, feeling like a real jackass. “I’m working.”

“So busy you can’t stop in and see your momma?” She raised an eyebrow and shifted her eyes to Daisy, clearly indicating she didn’t believe for one second he was telling the truth.

As he opened his mouth to respond, Daisy jumped in front of him. “Hi. I’m Daisy. Noah is... for lack of a better term, keeping an eye on me,” she said. “He *is* working, but we’re not so busy we can’t stop by and see his family.” She looked back at Noah and rolled her eyes.

“Hi, Daisy. I’m Marcy, Noah’s big sister. If you’re sure, I’ll call Mom right now and set up dinner.”

“Wait—” Noah started but shut up at his sister’s hand in his face. She was used to getting her way and was not one to be trifled with. He tried Daisy instead. “I thought you wanted to shoot some videos today.”

Daisy turned to Marcy. “Would a couple of hours from now be okay?”

“Even better,” Marcy said. “I can rally the whole family by then.” She flashed Noah an innocent smile, but the glint in her eye told him she meant trouble. “Simon and Teddy have a baseball game at Parkworks. Starts at two-thirty. Stop by if you can.”

The women said goodbye, and Marcy returned to her car, already on the phone.

Noah replaced the gas nozzle and took the receipt. “Daisy, what was that about?”

“You told me your hometown was Lewisburg.” She crossed her arms and tapped her foot, giving him a look very similar to the one he’d just gotten from his sister.

“White Sulphur Springs is too big a mouthful. Plus, no one’s ever heard of it. I tell people I’m from Lewisburg because it’s close and better known.”

She harrumphed her disbelief. “Why are you avoiding your family?”

“I’m not. I do want to see them, but this is business. We’ve got a schedule to keep.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna have to call bull crap on that. You know I wouldn’t care, and you know we can spare the time. You gonna tell me or not?”

“Not.”

“Fine,” she said, getting in the truck. “Then I’m not sharing my animal crackers with you.”

Daisy was the last person he would come clean to about why he dreaded coming home. It wasn’t that he didn’t love his family. He did. But ever since the incident with Tucker and subsequent breakup with Sarah, they treated him differently—

like he was fragile and weak. Visiting also brought feelings of guilt and betrayal.

Add to that, Sarah still lived here, and he'd rather take another bullet than run into her. He supposed he should thank his lucky stars it was Marcy and not Sarah that had seen him at the gas station.

What was done was done. And he actually did look forward to seeing his family. They were a rowdy bunch of hicks, but they were also fun as hell. He hid a grin.

He chauffeured Daisy to some of the scenic places around town and watched her make a few short videos, even holding the phone for one. The camera loved her and ate up her friendly smile and easygoing chatter. No wonder she was so popular.

After she got enough footage, they drove to the city park. Two of his nephews played on the same little league team and had games most Sundays. The game was progressing painfully slow. Eight-year-olds overthrowing, under-catching, and swinging at anything or nothing made the innings take forever.

Noah was talking with his brother and lost track of the game. A crack of the bat and an uproar from the crowd snapped his attention back to the action. His nephew, Simon, had his head down and his little legs churned as he made for first base.

A hit. An actual hit. The crowd jumped to its feet, and cheering louder than anyone else was Daisy.

“Run, Simon. Run. You got this,” she yelled.

At the sound of her voice, Noah looked over and was caught off guard. She held a baby—one of his nieces—on her hip with one arm, and pumped the other in the air to cheer for his nephew. The moves were so natural, you'd think this was how she spent every Sunday afternoon.

She cheered as if it was game seven of the World Series, and she had her life savings riding on the outcome, which made him laugh.

As Simon approached first base, the shortstop overthrew the ball. When the first baseman missed the catch, Simon's coach sent him running for second. A calamity of error after error ended in Simon sliding into home plate for a home run hit.

"Hey," Noah said to his brother, Owen. "You got a future MLB player in the making."

Owen puffed up his chest. "He gets that from me."

When Noah glanced back at Daisy, his heart did a wonky little giddy-up. Backlit by the sun, hair flowing in the breeze, her face flushed from all the yelling, she looked like an angel. A leggy, sassy, dangerous angel.

His brother caught him staring. "She seems nice," he said.

"Shut up," Noah said, and Owen laughed.

Simon's home run was the only exciting part of the game, and after two and a half hours sitting on hard bleachers, Noah was ready for a cold beer and a soft seat. They all packed up and headed in separate cars to Noah's parents' place on the outskirts of town.

It had been several months since Noah had been home. He'd catch flack for that but was willing to take his licks. It wasn't his family's fault they were perfect and delightful, and every time he hung out with them, he ended up in a sour mood. Visits would start out fine, but guilt over enjoying himself and running around with his nieces and nephews would eventually take over. Why should he be able to run when Tucker couldn't?

He and Daisy arrived at his folks' house to a driveway full of SUVs and minivans. Of course Marcy had called in the cavalry.

"You sure you're up for this?" he asked. "This brood can be downright overwhelming."

"Hah. You've never actually met my family, but trust me. I can handle anything."

"Suit yourself. I have six siblings, each of whom has a spouse and a few kids. Don't bother trying to learn everyone's

names. It's impossible, and new ones just keep coming."

A very pregnant woman rushed out to greet them. "See," he said, and Daisy laughed.

Before they got out of the car, Noah leaned over to Daisy. "Whatever you do, don't tell my mom about the bullet wound."

He should have known Daisy would fit right in. She jumped out of the truck and made herself at home, introducing herself to everyone before being whisked away by the kids to play kickball.

Begrudgingly, he had to admit she wasn't the snooty princess he'd assumed she'd be. Before falling asleep in the truck, he'd stolen a few glances at her while she drove. Window down, hair blowing, scream-singing "Country Roads," she seemed happy as could be. Didn't care that they drove a rust-covered, older-than-dirt clunker. No complaints about the lackluster AC. She'd taken it all in stride. Nothing seemed to bother her. He envied that.

After his mother scolded him for not telling her he was coming to town, she put him to work in the kitchen, where two of his sisters were already hard at work. His dad, brothers, and brothers-in-law sat on the porch, watching kids and drinking beer. They'd corralled the little ones on blankets or in playpens, and the bigger ones played a game of kickball. No doubt Daisy brought pizzazz to that scenario.

"Why can't I go drink beer with the men?" Noah asked.

"Shelling peas is your penance for not calling me sooner," his mother said. Then she smiled and took the bowl from him. "Go say hi to your dad. Beer's in a cooler outside."

Noah didn't have to be excused twice. He jumped up and hustled to the porch, grabbing a beer before copping an empty rocker.

"Bro, I thought you swore off hot women after Sarah burned you," Kevin, one of his brothers-in-law said, pointing the neck of his beer bottle in Daisy's direction.

“I did. We’re not dating. Her dad hired me to protect her for a week or so.”

“From what? Men throwing themselves at her?”

“Something like that.” Noah huffed. “Do your wives know you’re out here ogling her?”

“We’re watchin’ the kids,” Kevin said defensively, and they all laughed.

“She’s got some legs on her,” Owen said. “That’s for sure.”

Daisy had kicked off her high-heeled sandals and was dribbling the ball toward the makeshift goal—they had apparently switched to soccer. Her sundress fluttered around her legs, the sun bounced off her hair, and her infectious laugh floated in on the breeze.

Daisy was pretty. There was no denying that. But Noah was beginning to suspect there was more to her than that. She passed the ball to his niece, Kayla, then shielded her with her body while Kayla dribbled to the goal. Kayla scored, and the kids screamed like happy banshees.

Kayla ran to Noah to ask if he’d seen her score. He scooped her up in a hug and said yes. It had been the best goal ever made.

Kayla’s Down syndrome had been a shock to the family, but one they took in stride. They were grateful she was able to play and communicate. Her unique talents included melting hearts, coaxing smiles, and bringing joy to everyone.

Daisy came up behind Kayla, skin flushed from exerting herself in the heat, and a massive grin on her face.

“Your friend is pretty,” Kayla said, smoothing her hands over Daisy’s hair.

“She is,” Noah said. “But not half as pretty as you.”

“Daisy says you got a kitty named Mr. Fluffy Pants.”

“Oh, crap. The cat. Daisy, we should get him out of the truck. Even with the windows down, it’s hot.”

“Already did,” Daisy said, pointing to the ball of fluff sleeping near the back door. “You wanna pet him?” she asked Kayla, who nodded fervently and raced to where the cat lay.

Daisy helped Kayla pick it up and bring it to Noah. He hauled Kayla and the kitten onto his lap.

“Daisy, take a break,” Noah’s dad said. “Grab a beer and sit down.”

“Whew. Don’t mind if I do,” she said, catching the bottle Owen threw at her with one hand. She popped the twist-off top and took a swig before plopping down on the porch steps.

His dad coughed. “Boys?”

Noah’s brothers stood hastily and offered their seats. Noah tried standing, but with Kayla and the cat on his lap, it was a struggle. Daisy thanked them but said she was fine. After BSing with the men, she excused herself to see if his mom needed help with dinner.

“She seems different from Sarah,” his brother, Ronnie, said. “Just as hot, but way nicer.”

Noah and Sarah had dated for almost three years. He’d procrastinated proposing over a nagging feeling she was only with him for the money. Little red flags, like expecting lavish vacations, never offering to pitch in for expenses, and not caring what anything cost. When it came to light that she’d been cheating on him with a fellow officer, he’d broken up without a backward glance.

“And more down to earth,” his dad agreed. “More your type.”

“She didn’t care when Buster jumped on her. Or that Pearl spit up on her. Seems like a keeper to me,” Owen said.

“Does she know about the money?” Ronnie asked.

“No. There’s no reason to tell her,” Noah said. “Guys, I’m not dating her. She’s received some online threats, and my job is to protect her. Someone was following us, but I’m confident we lost him. I do want to ask that you keep an eye out for strangers after we leave.”

“So, you’re her bodyguard?” Owen asked.

“I guess you could call it that. And don’t say it,” Noah said, holding up a hand just as Owen said, “I *bet* you’ll guard that body.” Noah rolled his eyes as his brothers and in-laws laughed.

“Are you gonna marry her?” Kayla asked.

“Oh, no,” Noah said. “Let’s change this topic real quick.”

“I like cats,” Kayla said, hugging the kitten. “Maybe Mom will let me get one.”

Noah looked at Ronnie, who was Kayla’s dad, and raised a questioning eyebrow. “We just picked it up at the motel this morning. Probably needs a vet visit.”

Ronnie held up a finger and stood. “I’ll go ask the boss.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Daisy wasn't used to so much running around. Peeling potatoes with Noah's sisters, sisters-in-law, and mom in the kitchen was a welcome break. After telling them briefly about her family, she got the lowdown on Noah's.

"So, Noah's the only Walsh not married?" Daisy asked.

"Yes," one of his sisters said. "He was close, or so we thought, about a year ago, but she burned him good, and he's been gun shy ever since."

"Sarah cheating bothered him," another sister jumped in. "But not as bad as was what happened with his partner. That's what really messed him up."

At Daisy's blank stare, Marcy looked at her mother, who nodded.

"Long story short," Marcy said. "Noah and his partner were in a situation where a drug dealer pulled a gun on them. Noah hesitated, and Tucker was shot and paralyzed from the waist down. Noah blames himself."

"Holy crap," Daisy said. That explained Noah's nightmare. It hadn't been about the fair shooting after all. "That's horrible. What happened to the bad guy?"

"Once he fired first, Noah shot him. Killed him. But in Noah's mind, it was too little too late."

"So he wasn't always so surly?"

"No," Mrs. Walsh said. "He still holds the guilt and can't let go. He thinks he has no right to be happy. Not while his friend is in a wheelchair."

"Hm." That explained a lot. Daisy had caught glimpses of Noah on the cusp of having fun or wanting to laugh and watched him stop himself. He must deal with the burden on an hourly basis.

She looked out the patio doors and saw him smiling at Kayla, who sat on his lap holding the kitten. It appeared to be

a genuine smile, and she was struck again by how handsome he was. Sunlight bounced off his short brown hair as he laughed at something someone said. He seemed almost... relaxed.

Once they finished dinner prep, she followed Noah's sisters out onto the porch.

"Uncle Noah, will you play my favorite song?" Kayla asked.

"Um, how 'bout some Bob Dylan instead?" Noah said, side-eyeing Daisy and shifting nervously in his seat. "'Blowin' in the Wind'?"

Kayla shook her head.

"You gonna turn down my baby girl's request?" Ronnie said.

"No," Noah said. "Of course not."

"I'll get your guitar," one of the nephews said, running into the house.

Daisy stared at him, but he wouldn't look at her. Noah played the guitar? Huh.

"Here it is, Uncle Noah," the boy said, carefully handing Noah the big case.

By now, the whole family had gathered. Noah unpacked the guitar and strummed a few times, twisting knobs between each stroke to tune it. Daisy leaned forward. This should be interesting.

Noah cleared his throat, looked right at her, and, with a glint in his eye, started into a perfect version of "Country Roads."

She narrowed her eyes but couldn't help but laugh.

* * *

Noah didn't see Daisy again for almost an hour.

"Uncle Noah," one of his teenaged nephews said. "You gotta play Miss Daisy at chess. She beat me twice, and she's

really good. Since you're the only person who can beat me, you two should have a playoff."

"Oh, yeah?" Noah said.

Daisy lifted a shoulder in a what-can-I-say sort of way.

"Fine," Noah said. "Bring out the board, and I'll school her good."

They set up the board on the porch coffee table and played while his family cheered them on. Thirty minutes later, most of the traitorous Walshes had turned Team Daisy.

She looked almost bored, beating him twice in a row. "Are you cheating?" he asked.

"No!" she said indignantly.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Are you smart?"

She crooked an eyebrow. "You don't have to sound so surprised."

"Noah Lincoln Walsh!" his mother admonished. "You apologize right this instant."

"Sorry," Noah said. "That didn't come out right. I just mean... Oh, never mind."

"What? You think you're smarter than me?"

"I didn't say that," Noah said defensively.

His mother glared in a way he hadn't seen since his teens. His entire family had just watched him get his butt whipped by Daisy at chess. And now, they were on the verge of witnessing a different kind of whipping by his mom.

"I said sorry. Is it time to eat yet?" he said, attempting to change the subject. His family laughed.

"Actually, yes," his mom said, shaking her head and giving him a look that said he would hear about this again later. "I came to ask one of you to start the grill. Everything's ready but the meat."

All the men but Noah screamed, "Not it!" before she'd even finished the sentence. In that nanosecond, he'd been saddled

with grill duty.

“Fine,” he said, standing and stretching his legs. “Let’s get crackin’ then. I’m starving.”

Between his dad’s help and the industrial-sized grill, they had the meat cooked in under twenty minutes.

Daisy filled a plate and hunkered down at a picnic table with a couple of his sisters. Noah thought that might be dangerous. Who knew what childhood skeletons they were regaling her with. He should probably get ahead of that.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

Daisy sat beside Kayla. The cat curled up between them on the bench. She scooted over to make room for him.

“You just don’t want us spillin’ your secrets,” Marcy said, pointing a fork in his direction. “Don’t think we ain’t figured that out.”

“I’m sure you would never,” Noah said.

His sisters grunted their disbelief, but he didn’t move. The price for keeping his reputation intact was having to dine over conversations about canning peaches, baby barf, dog barf, and the latest low-carb diet. Daisy fit in seamlessly.

After dinner, some of his family left. Those who remained watched kids chase fireflies from rocking chairs that lined the long wrap-around porch. Kayla sat on a blanket, petting the kitten.

“She sure loves that cat,” Daisy said to Noah.

“Uh, yeah,” Noah said. “About that. I gave it to her.”

“You gave her Mr. Fluffy Pants?”

“Yes?” Noah gritted his teeth and smiled.

She rolled her eyes. “You owe me a cat,” she said, pointing a finger at his chest. “That’s not because I beat you at chess, is it?”

“Of course not. She’s so happy with it. I didn’t have the heart to tell her we’d be taking it.”

“I understand, but still. Between that and the ‘Country Roads’ lie, there must be consequences.”

Noah got an uneasy feeling. “Like what?”

“Oh, Mrs. Walsh.” Daisy looked Noah in the eye and winked. “Did Noah mention he was shot last night?”

Then, she sat back smugly as all hell broke loose—his sisters fawning over him and his mother going ballistic that he hadn’t told her. He shot Daisy a wicked glare laced with a warning that this wouldn’t be the last of things.

* * *

Daisy leaned back in the rocking chair, sipped her sweet tea, and laughed. That’d teach Noah to mess around with her.

While his mom tended to his “scratch” and forced out the story of what had happened, Daisy watched Noah. She’d learned a lot about him during the day and had a better handle on what made him tick. He thought he’d prevented some gossip at dinner, but she’d already heard the scoop by then.

Once his family was convinced death wasn’t imminent, and that his injuries were minor, things returned to a dull roar. Amid protests from his mom, Daisy helped with clean up. The rest of Noah’s siblings and their families left soon after to avoid the incoming storm. Daisy found him on the porch swing, sitting in the dark.

“May I?” she asked, nodding to the space next to him.

He nodded, and she sat. “You survived. I’m impressed.”

“Told you I would,” she said. “Your family’s great.”

“They’re all right,” he admitted.

“It was hard to keep track of who was who, but I had a really fun day.”

“Hm.”

“You did too,” she said, pushing off the ground to put the swing in motion.

He huffed out a laugh. “Yeah. I did.”

“And that makes you feel guilty.”

“They told you.” It wasn’t a question. The warm wind picked up, and lightning struck in the distance, followed by a rumble of thunder. The storm was close.

“Yeah.” On impulse, she grabbed his hand and held it between hers. “You shouldn’t. Feel guilty, I mean.”

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t.”

They sat in silence for several minutes, swinging and thinking. “You think we’re safe now? From whoever shot you?”

“For now, yes. I wouldn’t have come here if I thought there was any danger. My mom says we can spend the night here. You wanna do that or find a hotel in Lewisburg?”

“I already told her we’d stay,” Daisy said. “What with the storm comin’ and all.”

He nodded and went quiet again. The rain came in fast and hard and surrounded them. Flashes of lightning, followed closely by deafening cracks of thunder, shook the night.

She wanted to kiss him, but controlled her impulses. They wouldn’t get the best of her this time. After a few minutes, she excused herself to go to bed and left him sitting on the swing, deep in thought.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the morning, Daisy found Noah on the porch, nursing a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper. Except for a symphony of birds chirping and the wind rustling the trees, it was quiet and calm. It had stopped raining, but moisture from the overnight storm still hung in the air.

She sat across from him. “Gosh, there must be a million types of birds out here. It’s so soothing and peaceful.”

“Yeah, once you get rid of all the people talking, kids screaming, and babies crying, it’s rather nice. No offense to my family.”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t take any.” She sipped her coffee. “What’cha workin’ on?”

“Crossword puzzle. You have to get up pretty early around here to have a shot at it,” Noah said. “What’s ‘scold harshly’? Eight letters. Second letter might be an a.”

“Lambaste,” she said without hesitation.

“Of course.” He smacked himself on the forehead. “Sorry again about insulting your intelligence last night. The more I think about it, the more I can’t believe how rude it was.”

“Did your mom put you up to apologizing?”

“No.” He chuckled. “It’s just that smart *and* sexy is such a rare combo.”

“Why, Noah Walsh,” Daisy said, feigning surprise. “Are you paying me a compliment?”

“There’s no denying you’re sexy,” he said matter-of-factly. “It was the smart that snuck up and surprised me.”

“Eh. You’re not the first person to see me that way.”

“Well, I’m sorry on behalf of society then,” he said, and she smiled.

“It’s all right. It’s like having a secret weapon. Plus, I’m more street-smart than book-smart. My skills aren’t really useful for making a living.”

“All the foreign languages you speak could come in handy.”

“I suppose. Maybe I’ll become a spy.”

He rolled his eyes.

Together, they finished their coffee and the crossword puzzle.

Noah’s mom came out to let them know she’d made pancakes and eggs. “You solved the whole puzzle?” she asked Noah. “That’s impressive.”

“It was Daisy,” Noah said, tipping his head to her. “I get the easy ones. She solves the hard ones.”

“Good for you, Daisy.”

After breakfast, Mrs. Walsh hugged them goodbye. “Don’t be a stranger,” she said, kissing Noah’s cheek. “You either, Daisy.”

Back in the truck, he asked where she wanted to head next.

“Let’s just drive,” she said. “I’ll get a feel for where to go once we’re on the road.”

“You’re killing me. You know that, right?”

She laughed. “I know, Mr. Must Have Everything Planned to the Minute. You’ll survive.”

“I’ll do this fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants planning, but not in this hunk of junk. First stop is Lewisburg to get a reliable rental car, and I don’t want any argument.”

“I don’t want any argument,” she mocked in a deep voice. “That’s fine. I wouldn’t mind a functioning air conditioner.”

While they waited for someone to bring the rental car around, Noah called her dad but walked away so she couldn’t hear what he said. He returned with a grim look.

“Your dad’s kind of freaking out.”

“Well, if you told him about the shooting, I can see why.”

“He’s the one paying the bill. I have to keep him up to date and be honest with him. He wants you to come home and forget this whole award show.”

“Not gonna happen. I’m not letting someone scare me into hiding.”

“That’s what I said you’d say,” he said. “He agreed and told me he’d pay me extra to kidnap you and bring you back.”

She glared at him. “Don’t even try it.”

He chuckled. “We’re not there yet, but it’s on the table.”

His shoulder looked less angry this morning, and after re-wrapping it before leaving his folks’ house, they’d decided he could wait on a doctor. They drove for a few hours, then stopped for lunch. After eating, they stayed in the booth to work for a bit—her on her videos, him on who the culprit could be.

“Who’s this?” he turned his laptop to show her a picture.

“That’s Gabbi, one of my competitors. I thought you ruled all of them out.”

“No, this person behind her.” He pointed to someone in the background. “He’s in several of Gabbi’s videos.”

Daisy squinted at the picture. “That’s Gabbi’s best friend, Lance. He’s kind of her sidekick.”

“Hm. Something about him bothers me.”

“Okay,” Daisy said, dragging out the word, not seeing anything out of the ordinary.

She purchased a map at a gas station and swung her finger around to pick their next destination.

“Looks like we’re heading to the beach,” Daisy said, plopping her finger down in the middle of the Atlantic. “Which sounds great. After all that running around yesterday, I could use a day lounging in the sun.”

He shrugged. “Why do we keep coming inland if we’re just going to end up on the coast again? Can we at least head *northeast* this time?”

“Sure,” she said. “If we drive straight through, we could be on a beach in Delaware by late afternoon.”

“Why do I get the feeling ‘straight through’ means something different to you than it does to me?”

“Next big store you pass, let’s stop to buy a couple of towels and a small cooler.”

“I knew it.”

They got all they needed, drove more-or-less straight through, found a beach, and set up camp. He held the camera while she filmed a video romping around on the beach, building a sandcastle, pitching a vitamin water, and begging for votes. When she finished, they took a dip and then laid on their towels to dry off in the sun.

“What’s with the act in your videos?” Noah asked. “You’re smart and can be serious. Why not show that side of you?”

“That’s not what people want, and I have to strike while the iron’s hot. I mean, all this,” she circled a hand around her face, “won’t last forever.”

“You almost sound bitter that you’re pretty.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

He raised an eyebrow, clearly waiting for an explanation.

“I’m not naive enough to think people watch my videos solely for their informative content. I’ve got to do what sells. What will make money. Plus, right now, I don’t just want this award.” She paused. “I *need* it. Not only for my business, but to prove to myself and my family that I’m not a screw-up. At least not anymore.”

“You think that’s how they see you?”

“You don’t understand. My whole family is successful. Kate is a fabulous real estate agent who married a wealthy real estate investor. Together, they produced the cutest baby this side of the Rockies. Lucy owns two coffee shops, married an heir to the Stargaze Hotel fortune, and will have a baby just as perfect as Kate’s next month. My sister Emma has the most successful accounting firm in town and married a New York Times best-selling author. They are cooking up brilliant baby number three.” She paused and took an exaggerated breath

before continuing. “Lizzie owns the most popular bar in New Bern. My dad made a ton of money in various businesses before becoming the mayor, and my mom is just the most wonderful person to ever have lived. I’m the youngest and have a lot to live up to.”

“Is that why you moved away?”

“Like my sister says, Parkers don’t take Ls.” She shook her head. “If they only knew how many losses I took abroad. I left so I wouldn’t have to compete.”

“Except life’s not a competition.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to figure that out. I’d like to do more serious content,” she admitted. “That’s why I need to win this award so badly. If I can cement myself as a fixture on the internet—make a real name for myself—then it wouldn’t hurt if I lost some of my audience by shifting subject matter.”

“I see.”

After getting some vitamin D, she dug around in her purse for a tube of sunscreen. She took care of her front and then turned to Noah.

“Um, I hate to ask, but could you put some on my back?”

“Why do you hate to ask?”

“It would involve touching me,” she said, turning away from him and pulling her hair out of the way. “You seem adverse.”

He huffed out a laugh. “I don’t know about adverse,” he muttered. The tube made a sputtering noise as Noah squeezed out a glob. His big hands spread the sun-warmed cream over her shoulders and down her back. She tried to ignore the shot of heat that ran through her. Why was applying lotion so sensuous?

“Done,” he said gruffly.

“You want me to do yours?” she asked.

“I’ll lay on my back.”

“Suit yourself,” she said, laying on her stomach and untying the string of her bikini top.

He groaned. “What are you doing?”

“Relax,” she said. “I just don’t want a tan line.”

He mumbled something about her being the death of him, and she smiled. The notion of a fling with Noah had crossed her mind. If they were stuck together anyway, why not? They’d kissed twice, and both times, she thought she’d combust on site. Sex with him would no doubt be fantastic.

She talked herself out of making the first move, reasoning the fallout wouldn’t be worth it. Plus, he was so uptight, she couldn’t see him breaking the rules and didn’t want the embarrassment or awkwardness of being turned down.

“Wanna camp here tonight? I think I saw a sign that said it was allowed.”

He groaned. “I don’t like being out in the open and so vulnerable. I was going to suggest a nice hotel with secure entry points and a deadbolt. A hot shower and big beds would be a bonus. This isn’t over, you know? Until they catch whoever’s doing this, you and the other contestants are still in danger.”

“I know. But you said we weren’t followed. And I haven’t posted since lunch, so there’s no way anyone could’ve tracked us. Please!” She batted her eyelashes and puckered her lips into a pout.

“Does that usually get you what you want?” he asked, raising an eyebrow to indicate it would not work on him.

She smiled. “Nine and a half times out of ten.”

“What about dinner?”

“We could fish.”

“With what? You got a fishing pole in that fifty-pound bag of yours?”

“I have dental floss. We just have to find a stick.”

He laughed. “As much as I’d like to see you try that, no. I need real food.”

“Real fast?” She chuckled.

“Yes.”

“We can compromise. We’ll go out for dinner but sleep in the tent on the beach.”

“Fine.”

They packed up the towels and cooler and enjoyed fresh-caught fish while overlooking the ocean from the deck of a seafood restaurant.

After dinner, they bought two quarts of firewood from a man who was selling it out of his truck bed on the shoulder of the road. When Noah got back into the car after loading the wood into the trunk, he handed her a fistful of daisies.

“For me? I love them,” she cried. “Where did you get them?”

“There’s a ton growing over by those trees.” He shrugged. “It’s no big deal.”

Noah doing something sweet and spontaneous? Yes, it was a big deal. A very big deal. She knew better than to make it a big deal though.

“He loves me.” She plucked one petal off and threw it out the window. “He loves me not.”

“I wouldn’t have picked them if I thought you were just going to destroy them,” he said.

“You’re right,” she said, abandoning the petal plucking. “They’re beautiful. Thank you, Noah.”

She leaned across the console of the car and planted a kiss on his cheek. Then watched as he blushed.

They pitched their tent well out of range of the tide, and at dusk, Noah lit a fire. An hour later, they sat around a roaring bonfire, listening to the waves and stargazing.

“I love nights like this,” she said. “No phones, no lights, no distractions. It’s so peaceful.”

“This is nice,” he mused. “But we can’t let our guard down.”

“I’m still having a hard time wrapping my mind around the fact that someone wants this so badly they’re willing to kill over it. But, sure, we’ll be careful. Don’t want to be like the stupid girl in a horror movie who walks right into danger.”

“Thank you.”

“I emailed the contest organizers to tell them what happened at the fair. They said they would let the police investigating Vanessa’s car accident know, but really, what can they do?”

“Cancel the award ceremony.”

“That’s not gonna happen. There are a lot of other awards besides the one I’m up for. That would be overkill. They did say I could prerecord an acceptance speech instead of showing up. If I win, they’ll play it. If not, they’ll delete it.”

“I don’t suppose you would consider that option?”

She shook her head.

“I figured. When does the voting end?” Noah asked. “There wouldn’t be any point in hurting someone if it didn’t affect the outcome.”

“People can vote until noon the day of the ceremony. They tabulate votes right before, so no one knows ahead of time who’s going to win.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, the waves and crackling of the fire singing a soft lullaby.

He was lying on his side, long legs outstretched, holding his head up with his hand, and staring into the flames. The firelight bounced off clear green eyes, and he could not have been more tempting. It was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Noah woke, Daisy was no longer beside him. The tent flap was unzipped and he could see her sitting in the sand, facing the ocean. She had her knees pulled up to her chest and her hair wadded up in one of her promotional baseball caps. The sun was poised to break above the water.

Quietly, he emerged and sat next to her. She hummed a hello but didn't take her eyes off the horizon. They sat together in silence while the sun made its daily debut.

"These are the moments that make life worth living," she said reverently.

"Yes."

After a few minutes, Daisy stood and brushed the sand off her butt.

"Now what?" he said.

"I don't know about you," she said. "But I'm going back to sleep for a couple more hours. Sunrise may be amazing, but it also happens way too early."

Once they'd gotten a little more rest and decamped, they stopped for breakfast at a local diner. It was the kind of place where the waitress called everyone honey and everyone knew everyone else.

Over omelets and French toast, they agreed to take some time that day to work. Daisy posted the beach videos as they headed out of town, and after driving a couple of hours, they found a hotel with free Wi-Fi and checked in.

Daisy edited photos and videos, made content for her blog, and planned how to best use the last few days to win votes.

Noah concentrated on his laptop, head hunched over, typing furiously to get everything prepped for his consulting job. He was hyper-focused and in the zone when Daisy got up and started into a downward dog.

"Of course you do yoga," Noah said.

“My butt is numb from sitting for so long. Isn’t yours?”

“Now that you mention it, yes,” he grumbled. “I hadn’t noticed until you said something.”

“Come try this pose with me,” she said, doing some sort of slow lunge with her hands over her head.

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s not gonna happen. I think I’ll take a walk around the block and stretch my legs though.”

“Oh, yes. I’ll come with you. We can stop by the antique mall I saw a few blocks over.”

“Antiquing? You’re killing me. I was just talking about a quick break. I still have lots of work to do.”

“Okay, fine. We’ll skip the mall. But let’s pick up something for dinner.”

“Sold.” Hunger was approaching, and he had to stay ahead of that beast.

They walked to a Chinese restaurant and got Kung Pao chicken, chow mein, and egg rolls to go. After eating in the hotel room, Noah worked until his eyes wouldn’t focus while Daisy messed around on her phone.

As he stood to stretch, Daisy came up with a deck of cards she’d fished out of her bag. He wondered what she *didn’t* have in there.

“Wanna play a game?” She tried to shuffle, but the cards got away from her, and she had to scramble to corral them.

He shrugged. It couldn’t hurt, and it was better than watching TV. “Okay. What game? And what are the stakes?”

“How about poker?” she said, still struggling to keep the cards together while shuffling. “*Strip* poker.” She raised an I-dare-you eyebrow.

He’d already seen her naked—an image he would never forget—and he didn’t think she’d go that far anyway, so what the heck?

“Sure.” He moved to the table where she sat and took the seat across from her.

“Okay,” she said. This time when she shuffled, she did some fancy bridge thing where all the cards fluttered perfectly in line. She cut the deck with one hand and tapped it decisively on the table. “Five-card draw. Duces wild.” The wicked gleam in her eye told him he’d just been played.

Fifteen minutes later, he sat in his boxer briefs, staring at her, still fully clothed. “Are you cheating?”

“No!” she said with an indignant look, which melted into a smile. “I probably should have mentioned though, that I was a dealer on a cruise ship for about six months.”

“Dealing doesn’t mean winning. You still have to come up with the cards.”

“Poker is more about reading people than having good cards. I mean, obviously, you need those too, but I’m just saying...”

He threw down his cards. “I quit,” he said, pulling on his pants.

“But things were just about to get interesting.” She laughed. “You deserve it for lying to me about not knowing ‘Country Roads.’ I knew you knew it.”

“Hah. The look on your face when I started playing was priceless.”

“Fine,” she said. “We even?”

He nodded. “Yes. We’re also done playing cards.”

She dealt out a game of solitaire and played a few games while he tried to refocus on his presentation.

Daisy’s phone, blaring Kelly Clarkson’s “Since U Been Gone,” broke the silence. She looked at the caller ID. “My dad,” she muttered. “Probably gonna try to convince me to forget all this and come home.”

“Look, Dad,” she answered. “My mind’s made up—”

Her face fell as she listened. “We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

She hung up and stood. “Change of plans. Take me to the airport.”

Without hesitation, he started packing up his laptop. “What happened?”

“My uncle’s had a heart attack and is in the hospital,” she said, throwing clothes helter-skelter into her small suitcase. “My family’s headed there now. What’s the fastest way to Charlotte?”

“Flight out of D.C.,” he said. “You can book tickets while I drive.”

In under ten minutes, they were packed and checked out of the hotel. He raced to the airport, where they turned in the rental car, paid a penalty for not returning it to where they said they would, and blew through security.

Once on the plane and buckled up, she texted her dad and switched off her phone. “The last update was that they’d taken him into surgery. Everyone’s flying over there now except Jack and Lucy. They were visiting Jack’s parents in Raleigh and will drive to Charlotte from there. Hopefully, there’ll be good news by the time we land.”

The flight was quick but grim. Daisy was unusually silent and impatient. Once they landed, they grabbed a cab and went straight to the hospital.

Daisy gave her name at the check-in desk, and they were escorted to a small private waiting room on the ICU floor. The nurse opened the door, and despair leaked out. Edward stood and shook his head. Daisy ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. “I’m so sorry, Dad.”

Slowly, the story came out. Pete had a heart attack at work. They’d rushed him to the hospital and into surgery but were unable to save him. The announcement of his death had preceded Noah and Daisy’s arrival by only a few minutes. Emotions were still raw. A teenage girl sobbed uncontrollably. “What am I going to do?” she wailed.

Daisy whispered to explain. “That’s Pete’s daughter, Bella. Her mother passed away several years ago.”

“Oh, honey,” Sophie said, wrapping her arm around Bella. “It’ll be okay. We’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

They were a mass of arms and tears. Hugging and crying and consoling each other. Noah hung back to let them grieve.

He’d met Sophie and Audrey the first day of the road trip. And between what the old guys at the coffee shop had told him and Daisy’s synopsis of her sisters, he quickly deduced who was who in the rest of the family. Adam and Kate would be the two huddled around a tiny newborn. Lucy was easy to spot with the eight-month pregnancy belly, so the man next to her must be Jack. That left Dirk and Emma as the last couple. And Lizzie he remembered, because she was the only one with dark hair.

Once the initial shock wore off, they started to talk. It was quietly decided they would each take a turn seeing Pete to say goodbye, and then they would head to Pete’s house.

Daisy and Lizzie escorted Bella and went first. Edward and Sophie took Audrey next. While they were gone, Noah introduced himself and asked if it would be helpful to call some taxis and arrange for food to be delivered to the house. It was the only useful thing he could think of.

Kate gave him Pete’s address and thanked him. He retreated to the hallway to make the arrangements.

Daisy returned from her uncle’s room, wiping her eyes and sniffing. Noah slipped his phone into his pocket. She came easily into his open arms, and he held her as she cried.

Later that night, after the Parkers had gone to bed, Adam, Dirk, Jack, and Noah stood in the kitchen drinking beer.

“What’s gonna happen with Bella?” Dirk asked.

“Edward and Sophie are willing to take her in,” Adam said. “They’ll talk to her about it and see if she’d like that.”

“She’s welcome to live with us,” Jack said.

“Us too,” Dirk said.

“We’ve offered as well,” Adam said. “She won’t be homeless. That’s for sure.”

They all took a swig as the conversation stalled. It was always hard to find things to say when someone died unexpectedly. Especially someone you didn't really know. Or, in Noah's case, had never even met.

"So, Noah," Jack said, breaking the silence. "How're things going with Daisy? Heard you got shot? Any idea who did it?"

"Just grazed," Noah said. "And, not great. Local PD got nothing from the fair witnesses. The guy from the fix-it shop—the one who told the shooter we'd gone to the fair—is the only person who saw him, and his only description was male with brown hair." He rolled his eyes.

"Not too helpful," Dirk said.

"No," Noah said. "I checked out all her competitors, and according to the times and locations of the videos they posted that night, they all have alibis. One was doing a live feed at the time, two live in Europe, one in Japan, and the rest are from the West Coast. I don't know who else would have motive."

"So, what?" Jack said. "There's no way to catch him unless he tries again?"

"Pretty much. The username of the person leaving threats is a dead end. I tried talking Daisy out of going to New York, but she's dead set on it. Best I can do is just keep her safe."

Edward came into the room, and they all shut up.

"Don't stop talking on my account," he said. "Got another one of those?"

Jack popped the top of a beer and handed it to him. He took a long pull.

"I caught the end of what you were saying, Noah. I just talked to Daisy, and she says she's fine with skipping New York."

Noah sighed. "Good."

"I told her she should go," Edward said.

Noah's head snapped around. "What?"

“Life’s short,” Edward said, lifting a shoulder. “And risky. Sure, it’d be nice if I could wrap her in a bubble and ensure nothing bad ever happened, but I told her if it means that much to her, she should go for it.”

“So, she’s going?”

Edward nodded. “She’ll hang around here with us tomorrow and fly out Friday morning. I’m hoping you’ll see it through. Go to New York with her? I’m trusting you to make sure she comes back.”

“No pressure,” Noah mumbled.

* * *

The next day, the family set a date for the funeral and started making notifications and arrangements. They took turns accommodating visitors, accepting condolences and casseroles, and taking care of Bella, who, at sixteen, was now an orphan. Noah helped where he could, primarily herding the hordes of well-wishers who arrived at a constant clip, but felt pretty useless.

When Noah went to find Daisy to ask if there was anything he could do, he’d walked in on her holding Bella while she cried. Daisy soothed her the way you would a baby, stroking her hair and whispering platitudes that everything would be okay. His heart broke for her and her family.

Daisy had a maternal side that seemed to come naturally. He’d seen her with his family and now hers, easily getting along with whatever age child was in front of her. From sixteen-year-old Bella to one-month-old Abby, she took it all in stride.

Noah felt like you could tell things about a person based on how they treated kids. Daisy would be a wonderful mother someday. Not of *his* children. That wasn’t where this train of thought was headed. Just in general.

It was another hour before he found Daisy alone. “Is there anything I can do?” he asked. Daisy was as sober as he’d ever seen her. Both the megawatt smile and the spark in her eyes were heartbreakingly absent.

“Did my dad tell you he thinks I should still go to New York?” she said. At his nod, she asked if he would still go with her.

“Of course,” he said. “I’ve come this far. I won’t ditch you now.” That got a half a laugh out of her.

“I’m done with the road trip. Could you book us two tickets to fly to New York City tomorrow? Any time is fine. That’ll put us there the day before the ceremony.”

“I’ll take care of everything,” he promised.

“Thank you. I’ve already booked the hotel, so don’t worry about that.”

“Daisy, have you eaten? Can I get you something?” She not only looked sad, but exhausted and probably dehydrated.

“No, thanks,” she said. “I don’t feel like eating. Nothing sounds good.”

While Daisy and her family dealt with funeral arrangements, he booked two flights from Charlotte to JFK for the following morning. Then found a bakery that delivered and ordered apple pie, lemon bars, and peach cobbler—all her favorites. His plan was to tempt her into some sustenance with sugar. He’d work up to something nutritious from there.

Later that afternoon, Edward cornered him for a private conversation. “I have a favor to ask,” Edward started. “It’s kind of big.”

“Name it,” Noah said.

“We’ve been working on a plan to surprise Daisy and be at the award ceremony. We had tickets from New Bern, but now we’ll need to fly out of here. Jack and Lucy are out—Lucy’s too pregnant—but the rest of us still want to make it happen.”

“So, book tickets for everybody. Bella? Audrey?”

“Yes. They’ve both said a break would be welcome. The ceremony is Saturday night. There’s a lot to do here, but we can spare twenty-four hours. This is a big deal for Daisy. We’d like to be there for her.”

“She’ll be thrilled,” Noah said.

“I already arranged for a table at the banquet. Bella is the only one I didn’t know would be there, but there was an extra seat at the table anyway.”

“So, you wanna come in on Saturday afternoon and fly out Sunday morning?”

“As close to that as possible, yes. And we’ll need some rooms.”

“Consider it done.”

Edward emailed him the information required to book the tickets—names and dates of birth, etcetera. Noah got out his laptop and began searching, only to find that on such short notice, it would be impossible to get them all on the same flight. Finally, he just chartered a jet. It was pricey as hell, but even if the mayor didn’t reimburse him, he wanted to do it for them. For Daisy. And why have all this money if he couldn’t use it for good?

Hotel rooms in NYC were scarce. Between it being tourist season and a weekend, they were also far from cheap. Not caring about the price, he booked the closest one with enough rooms. He arranged for Adam and Kate’s room to have a crib and then hired a ten-passenger limo—with an infant car seat—to drive them to and from the hotel. He tried to anticipate their every need but didn’t want to overstep either. They would be on their own to walk or take a cab the short distance from their hotel to where the banquet was.

Everyone had been cc’d on the email Edward sent, so Noah just “replied all” with the flight and hotel information.

When finished, he went to find Daisy. She was in the kitchen, eating pie.

“Ah. You fell into my sugar-laden trap,” he said, rubbing his hands together, hoping to coax a smile.

She huffed out a laugh. “Hard to resist apple pie,” she said.

“All part of my plan to get you to eat. Next comes broccoli casserole.”

Even in tragedy, Daisy continued to surprise him. His initial expectation that she'd be an entitled princess had already blown up. Then, his assumption that because she was pretty and acted ditsy in her videos, she wasn't too bright fell apart. Now, he had to admit that every supposition he'd had was crumbling quickly. Seeing her serious, empathic side had added yet another dimension.

He shook his head. He wasn't here to get to know her, or catalog the pros and cons of her character. He was here to protect her, and he'd have to focus on more than her fabulous legs and winning personality to do that.

"I'll see you in the morning," he said, standing abruptly and leaving her to her pie. He needed some time alone to readjust his priorities and get his head on straight. Once they arrived in New York, she'd be out of hiding and in danger again. To keep her alive, he had to stay vigilant. That meant no more musings about Daisy and her attributes.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Friday morning, Noah and Daisy took a cab to the airport.

“You sure you’re okay leaving?” he asked.

“I wasn’t doing much good anyway,” Daisy said. “My sisters are closer to Bella than I am because they see her more. They’ll take care of her and Nana. Poor Nana. I’ve never seen her so shaken up.”

“I’m not sure I’ve said it yet, but I’m sorry for your loss.”

She laid a hand on his arm. “Thank you.”

Once she was away from the house and the doom and gloom, she felt a little lighter. Death sucked, but it was part of life. The worst of it was helping those left behind. In this case, Nana, Bella, and her dad. Her dad was tough, but he’d lost his brother, and no matter how stoic he was, that couldn’t be easy.

The plane ride was uneventful, and they landed on time. In the cab to the hotel, Daisy nodded off and woke with her head on Noah’s shoulder. “Sorry,” she said, yawning. “I haven’t slept well the last two nights.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “Hey, now that we’re back in this, everyone will know where you are, so we’ll have to be on high alert again.”

“I know. I thought of that. But there are millions of people in New York, so no matter where you go, there’s a crowd. Shouldn’t that deter someone from trying anything stupid?”

“Maybe. New Yorkers aren’t exactly known for their willingness to jump in when someone’s getting shot at though.”

She shrugged. “Is anyone in any city?”

“Touché.”

They arrived at the hotel, and Noah paid and tipped the driver. He grabbed both of their bags. Watching him with the luggage, she realized that unless he had a tux crammed into his

duffel, he probably didn't have anything suitable for the ceremony.

"Um, what do you plan to wear tomorrow?" she asked as they entered the hotel lobby. "The dinner is a black-tie thing. If you come with me, you'll need something formal."

"Your dad mentioned that before we left. I rented a tux from a local shop. They'll deliver it in the morning."

Her jaw dropped, and he laughed. "I find things go more smoothly when you actually plan ahead for them."

She ignored the dig. In the lobby, she ran into Cho, one of her competitors, who eyed her warily. Daisy didn't blame her. If Cho was also getting threats, it was only logical to suspect the other contenders for the foul play. She took the bull by the horns.

"If you've received any nasty messages about the contest," Daisy said. "They're not from me. I've gotten them too, and someone actually shot at us on our trip here."

Cho's eyebrows jumped to her forehead. "You were? What happened?"

"My friend took a bullet for me." Daisy hitched her chin at Noah.

"Will you stop making it sound so dramatic?" Noah said. "I'm fine. Do you have someone to watch out for you?" he asked Cho.

"Oh, no. I just arrived from Japan. I did get a few mean messages, and my parents begged me not to come, but I'd been planning it for so long." Cho was tiny and timid, and Daisy couldn't imagine her being behind the malicious events.

"I understand," Daisy said. "Just be careful."

At the counter, she turned to Noah. "I booked the room months ago. I had no idea you'd be with me. There's only one bed. We can ask, but I doubt there are any rooms left."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight," Noah said. "We'll share the room you got and make it work."

She arched an eyebrow but let it slide that he was telling her, not asking her. To be honest, she was glad. Having just helped plan a funeral had sort of put mortality front and center in her mind. She wanted this award, but not enough to die for it.

They requested two keys and made their way to the suite on the twentieth floor.

“Geez,” Noah said, setting their bags on the bed. “This is nice.” It was a large corner room with views of the city and the river. “I thought you did everything on the cheap.”

“First of all, nothing in New York City is cheap. And second, sometimes you gotta treat yourself. It is a splurge, but I was feeling pretty confident and saucy when I booked it. I may have gone a little overboard.”

She hopped onto the California king and bounced a few times before flopping onto her back and spreading her arms. “Ah, yes. This will do nicely. The bed’s so big, we could both sleep here and still be a mile apart.” She had to put thoughts of sharing a bed with him aside. Sleeping with him was a bad idea two days ago, and it remained so.

“Well, we’re gonna be stuck in here for a while, so good thing it’s roomy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Daisy, it’s not a good idea for you to be parading around New York, or even the hotel. My advice, my *professional* advice, is that we hunker down here until the dinner tomorrow.”

“No way!” she said. “This is New York. We’ve got to get out and see something. Plus, there’s a reception tonight for all the nominees. I plan to go to that. That’s why we came to town a day early.”

“A party with all the competition? That would be the perfect place for someone to make a move. On any or all of you. You’d be walking right into his hands.”

“That part’s over. Killing me now won’t do any good. Most of the votes are already in. There wouldn’t even be enough

time for news to get out that I'm dead.”

“Please don't talk about your death so cavalierly. And please promise me you'll think about this. I had to leave my guns with your dad. I flew them to Charlotte okay, but New York has stricter rules, and I didn't bring the right storage container to fly them here. The idea of running around New York City unarmed, after everything that's happened, does not sit well with me.”

He had a point. But still. She plopped down on the bed. “This sucks!”

“We can order room service and watch a movie. And when all this is over, we'll come back and do every touristy thing there is.”

“We?” What did he mean by that?

“I meant you. *You* can. You know what I mean.”

Of course he hadn't meant we. That would imply there was something between them other than a professional relationship. Something *was* brewing—she was certain he felt it too—but she didn't expect him to acknowledge it, much less pursue it. At least not while he was working for her father.

She opened her suitcase and began unpacking. Her formal dress needed pressing. Hopefully, the hotel's laundry service could handle it. The outfit she'd planned to wear tonight was also wrinkled, and she decided to iron it, on the off chance she could talk Noah into changing his mind. He wasn't paying attention and probably assumed she was ironing something for tomorrow. She finished and hung the short jumpsuit in the closet.

“You working on your work presentation?” she asked.

“Nah. Still trying to figure out who the culprit is. Since it's not any of the contestants, I'm looking at friends and family now. There's always the possibility they hired a stranger, but I have no way of tracking that.”

She walked up behind him to look at his monitor. Headshots of all the candidates were in a spreadsheet. “Okay, so, two have dropped out, one died, it's not me. That leaves six. I think

we can rule out Cho. The girl from the lobby? She seems too sweet.”

“Maybe,” he said. “That would leave five. You know enough about any of them to take a guess at who would be so ruthless?”

“No. I kind of knew Megan, one of the gals that backed out, but even that was superficial.”

“Do you have the name of someone I could contact about security for the event?”

“I have the email they sent saying I’d been nominated.”

“That’s a start. Will you send it to me?”

She did and then worked on compiling a few videos she could post every couple of hours. “I can post now, right? Since everyone knows where I am anyway?”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s fine.”

After posting a video using the beach footage, she recorded another that explained where she’d been the last day and a half, and scheduled it to post automatically in two hours. While she hated using a death in the family as an excuse—people might think she was gunning for pity points—it was the truth, and she couldn’t afford to mess around. Missing that time set her back, and she had to catch up.

She took a video of her room and the view, carefully avoiding Noah, and set that one to post in the morning. Those would be her last big pleas for votes. The polls closed tomorrow afternoon, so she had to get in as many as possible in the next sixteen hours.

“Noah,” she said. “Can we revisit going to the party tonight? It’s starting soon. We could just stop by for a second, say some hellos, eat some shrimp, and leave.”

“Sorry, Daisy,” he said. “Still not on board. The contest organizers replied to my email, and security is a joke. They think colored wristbands will keep unwanted guests out. Of the few people they hired, none of them will be armed and

don't have any authority to arrest. They're all rent-a-cops meant to act more as bouncers than security."

She knew her pouty face wouldn't change his mind, but she hadn't come all this way to sit in a hotel room. Noah was being overly cautious. No one would be stupid enough to shoot her in a ballroom full of people. The bigger the crowd, the better.

When he excused himself to take a shower, she made a hasty decision. This was her only shot at freedom. She'd just pop down and say hello, have a quick drink, and be back before he knew it. As soon as the water started, she slipped into the sparkly jumpsuit she'd brought for the event, threw her hair into a messy bun, grabbed her heels, and tiptoed out.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Before heading to the party, Daisy took the elevator to the roof and posted a quick video begging for last-minute votes. She had to dig deep to put on the happy-go-lucky persona, and she felt like a traitor to her family for seeming so peppy, but she had to finish this. This award, in her mind, meant freedom.

By the time she got downstairs, the video already had a hundred likes. She slid up next to the bar and ordered a cosmopolitan, which the bartender produced quickly. A man approached her, and she thought nothing of it. She also wasn't surprised when he started a conversation.

"I recognize you," he said. "You're Daisy Parker, right?"

"Guilty," she said. She looked away and scanned the room for anyone she could excuse herself to go talk to.

"I voted for you," the man continued, reaching for something behind her. When she turned around to grab her glass, he was swiping a napkin back and forth.

"Awesome," she said, taking a sip of her drink. He looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. "Thank you."

"Yeah, I think you're the best new talent I've ever seen. Your videos really make me want to travel Europe."

"I appreciate it." Her stomach somersaulted, and she sipped again, hoping to settle her nerves. Was it guilt over ditching Noah? No, that wasn't it. A bout of vertigo hit, and she grabbed the bar to steady herself. Something felt wrong.

"You okay?" the man asked. "You don't look so good."

"I do feel kind of funny," she said. "The room isn't spinning, is it?" She tried to joke, but fear crept in. Was she going to pass out?

"How 'bout I help you to your room," the man offered.

Normally, she would never agree to such an offer, but her stomach was in full revolt, and she didn't want to barf in the

middle of the party. She grabbed her phone, intending to call Noah, but gave up when her fingers quit working.

Amid a dense brain fog, she finally placed the man and wondered why Gabbi's best friend Lance would say he voted for her. The thought came and went as she focused on remaining upright.

Lance took her elbow and guided her through the crowd. People said hi, but their blurry faces seemed to fade in and out. Her stomach roiled again, and she wanted to pick up her pace, but each foot weighed a hundred pounds. She must be wading through quicksand.

They made it to the elevator bay, and the last thing she remembered was telling Lance which floor she was on.

When she woke, everything was still hazy, but the sickening, gut-level awareness that something was very wrong rang through the haze loud and clear. The room was pitch dark. Her hands and feet were bound, and a soft, wet cloth filled her mouth. She attempted to sit, but the pressure on her chest and upper thighs brought the terrifying revelation that she was strapped to the bed.

It all came rushing back. Meeting Lance at the bar. Feeling sick after two sips of a drink. He must have drugged her. She'd been kidnapped, and no one knew where she was. Panic took over. She yelled, but the gag did its job properly and her muted screams went nowhere.

She inhaled deeply through her nose, knowing she had to calm down. Now that her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, she could tell she was in a hotel room. Similar to the one she and Noah had checked in to. So, she was still at the hotel. That was good. She also seemed to be alone. At least for the moment. Also good.

A plan. That's what she needed. Her mind remained muddled, but she was aware enough to know she had to escape. Situations like this rarely ended well, especially when someone had already tried to kill her.

It couldn't have been five minutes later, she heard a click at the door, followed by a rush of light as someone entered the room. Her heart rate doubled, but she closed her eyes and calmed her breathing. Better to fake unconsciousness until she had a handle on what was happening.

"Still not awake?" a gruff male voice said. Lance. "Come on. Wake up, sunshine." He touched her leg, and she flinched.

"Ah, that's what I thought," Lance said, turning on a lamp. "Sorry. Had to make an appearance downstairs to lock in an alibi for where I was while you were upstairs ODing on drugs."

She tried to talk around the gag in her mouth, to ask what the hell he was thinking, but only mumbles and groans escaped.

"You should have dropped out, like I suggested," he said. "Now, you're forcing me to do something I really don't want to."

He walked out of sight for a minute and returned with a syringe and a short piece of plastic tubing. Fear coursed through her, clearing the mental fog even further. She struggled, attempting to free herself.

"It's too bad about your drug problem. And how it finally killed you right before the big award ceremony."

He was going to kill her over a stupid award. She kept trying, begging him to remove the gag so she could talk to him. "Please, please," she mumbled through the cloth.

"If I take out the washcloth, you'll scream," Lance said. "Obviously, I can't have that."

She shook her head. "I'll be quiet. I promise," she said. It came out so muffled, she wasn't sure he understood.

"I don't have much time, so let's make this quick."

"Why are you doing this?" Daisy asked through the gag. He must have made out what she'd said.

"For Gabbi," he said simply, shrugging his shoulders. As if murder was a perfectly normal way to make an impression.

Did he really think Gabbi would love him after finding out he was a murderer? Did he really think he'd get away with this? Then again, he just might. Noah had no idea where she was. No one did, except maybe Gabbi. And for all Daisy knew, Gabbi could be in on it.

All this for a trivial trophy? She thought winning was so important—vital to her business and her confidence. But now, faced with death, she realized how inconsequential it was.

How ridiculously unimportant it *all* was—her goal to win, her online persona, her whole life, quite frankly. She flitted around the world, making stupid videos. Earned money by looking pretty, acting dumb, and promoting products she never would use otherwise. Money had become so important to her that she'd put her life in danger over it. And she was about to pay for that risk. She'd gladly forgo the award, but it was too late now.

Lance tied the plastic around Daisy's upper arm. One thing was certain, she wasn't giving up without a fight. She thrashed wildly and punched at him with her bound hands. With her shoulders and thighs pinned down, movement was limited.

He backed away for a second. "Stop fighting me, or I'll drug you again."

Was that possible without getting her to drink something? How many ways could he have to drug her? And if he tried to force her to drink, he'd have to remove the gag. Then, at least, she could let out a few good screams. She kept kicking.

"Plan B," he said, reaching for a pillow. "I'll just smother you till you're unconscious. Then inject the drugs."

Shit. Was this how she was going to die? Time slowed, and she had what she assumed to be a near-death experience. What did she regret? What did she miss out on? What would she do if she got out of this mess?

Amid the terror, a niggling thought poked through. The thought had tormented green eyes and a dry sense of humor. Noah. If she survived this, she would take a shot. Tell Noah

that she'd fallen for him. That despite their differences, it was entirely possible she was in love with him.

She struggled as long as she could while he held the pillow over her face. Just as the darkness closed in, and she was about to give up, she heard pounding on the door.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Noah turned off the water. He felt bad he'd shut Daisy down on the idea of going to the reception tonight. It would probably be fine as long as she stuck close to him. He'd apologize and tell her they could go downstairs for a bit.

The second his feet hit the shower mat, he intuitively knew something was off. Hastily, he threw a towel around his waist and opened the bathroom door, calling Daisy's name.

When she didn't answer, he charged into the room, unconcerned that he was dripping water all over the floor. It only took a quick scan to see that she was gone. He checked the closet and noticed the dress she'd ironed earlier was also MIA.

"Damn it, Daisy," he muttered, reaching for his clothes. He dried off and got dressed in a matter of seconds. When he went to grab his room key, he saw a note lying next to it, written on the hotel notepad.

Nipped out for a quick appearance. Be back soon. Below that was a big cursive D and a smiley face.

What part of "don't leave the room" did she not understand? He scrawled a note of his own, telling her to stay put and call him if she got this before he returned.

He shoved his phone into his pocket, ran his hands through his still-wet hair, and left. The night-before reception was downstairs somewhere, but the hotel was huge. He headed down to start searching.

After passing a wedding reception, some kind of work conference, and a bar mitzvah, he finally found it at the end of the hall. He entered and scanned the room for a tall, leggy blond. Unfortunately, the place was full of them. He quickly realized Daisy's bright personality didn't stick out as much in a room of social media stars.

There were three bars. They would be the best place to start. At the first one, Noah asked the bartender if he'd seen a pretty blond wearing a sparkly dress. The bartender had laughed, and

Noah could see why. His description fit two thirds of the attendees. He tried the other bars, but no one was helpful. There were about a hundred partygoers, and he felt like he'd gotten a look at them all. Maybe she'd gone back to the room, and they'd just missed each other on the elevator.

He called her cell phone, but was sent straight to voicemail. Worry inched up his spine. As he made his way to the exit, he stopped dead in his tracks at the mention of Daisy's name.

"Did you see Daisy Parker?" a woman said to her friend. "She was so drunk, she could barely walk."

"Oh, yeah," the friend replied. "Sasha said Gabbi's BFF had to practically carry her out of here."

Alarm bells went off. Daisy hadn't been gone long enough to get that drunk.

"Excuse me," Noah said to the women. "I overheard you talking about Daisy Parker. How long ago did you see her? And who was she with?"

Eager to gossip, the women told him what they knew.

"This was just a few minutes ago," one woman said, tossing her hair over her shoulder and giving Noah a come-hither look. "She was slurring her words and could barely stand by herself. She must have been throwing 'em back pretty hard."

"Gabbi's bestie, Lance, was helping her," the other woman added. "Which was weird. I thought he never left Gabbi's side. He's so obviously in love with her, and she has no idea."

After watching some of Gabbi's videos, Noah had come to the same conclusion. Lance's body language as he followed Gabbi around and interacted with her was evident. He loved her, and she seemed disinclined to reciprocate the feeling. There was definitely some unrequited love. What lengths would he go to for her attention? And was that a motive to kill?

The women scoured the room until, finally, one of them said, "There's Gabbi." She pointed to a woman Noah recognized from the videos he'd been watching. "I don't see Lance with her, but he's usually not far off."

“Thanks,” Noah said over his shoulder, already walking away.

Gabbi was talking to someone, but stopped abruptly at Noah’s hard stare. “Hellooo,” she said, wiggling her fingers in a wave.

“Where’s Lance?” Noah said.

Gabbi’s smile fell, and her brows creased, clearly put off by his bluntness. She crossed her arms. “Who’s asking?”

“I’m a friend of Daisy Parker’s. I think Lance took her.”

“What? No, he was just here,” Gabbi said. She went up on her tiptoes to scan the room.

“Two people said they saw him leave with Daisy about ten minutes ago.”

A confused look crossed her face. She opened her mouth to respond, but then her eyes lit up. “There he is,” she said, pointing to the entrance.

Noah’s head whipped around. Sure enough, he’d come in alone and was heading their way.

“Where’s Daisy?” Noah asked as Lance approached.

“Huh?”

“Daisy Parker. People said you left with her. Where is she?”

“Oh,” he said. “Yeah. She was super drunk. I helped her to her room.”

Noah turned on his heels and left without another word, breaking into a run as soon as he cleared the ballroom doors. Had he overreacted? Was she intoxicated, but safe upstairs?

His feeling of unease hadn’t abated and wouldn’t until he had eyes on Daisy. His impatience mounted as the elevator stopped on three floors before dropping him on the twentieth. He stalked to their room and entered.

Empty, and nothing had been touched. His note was where he’d left it. The bathroom door remained open, the condensation from his shower still hanging on the walls.

Damn it! Now what? Lance had lied. And been the last person seen with Daisy.

Fear mounting, Noah double-timed it back downstairs.

“She’s not in the room,” Noah said, grabbing Lance by the arm. “What did you do?”

“What? Nothing,” Lance said. “I swear. I took her to her room and left her there.”

“Which room?”

“I don’t remember. Somewhere on the twentieth floor. Let go of me.”

Noah plowed a hand through his hair in frustration as he walked away. Could she have left again and gone somewhere else? He searched the lobby, called for her in the women’s restroom, and then ran outside, looking up and down the street. If she was wandering the streets of New York, it would take forever to find her. And if she’d gotten a cab, forget it. Sirens wailed in the background, and it took all of Noah’s self-control to remain calm. Sirens in New York City were common. It didn’t mean they were meant for Daisy.

Defeated, he returned to the room and called Edward. “Sir, I’ve got some bad news. Daisy’s missing.”

Edward was calmer than Noah expected. “She ditched you?”

Apparently, he knew his daughter well. “I was only in the shower for a minute. I thought she’d agreed with me that she shouldn’t go out tonight. I misread her.”

“She’s a stubborn one,” Edward said. “I should have warned you about how bull-headed she can be.”

“Any idea where she might go? I’ve already searched the hotel.” He didn’t mention the possible drunkenness.

“Hold on,” Edward said. “I just remembered. Emma can track her phone. I’ll have her call you.”

“Great. That would be a big help.”

“Let me know when you find her,” Edward said before hanging up.

While pacing the room, waiting for Emma’s call, he noticed Daisy’s notebook on the bedside table. He sat on the bed and stared at it. It would be a ginormous violation of her privacy to open it. But what if there was a clue as to where she’d gone? It would be irresponsible *not* to check if that was the case. Desperate to find her, he picked up the book, which fell open naturally to something nestled in its pages.

Noah gawked in amazement at a flattened daisy—the one he’d given her at the beach. She’d kept it. Huh. With Daisy, that didn’t necessarily mean anything, but it still warmed his heart.

He skimmed through the pages, noticing mind maps and bullet lists. Most looked like things pertaining to her business. Guilt washed over him, and he flipped hastily to the back. The last page with writing was a to-do list of things to be done once she returned to New Bern. There was no mention of where she might be, and, feeling all sorts of wrong about snooping in the first place, he slammed it shut and placed it back exactly how it had been on the nightstand.

The two minutes it took for Emma to call him felt like an eternity.

“Hi, Noah,” she greeted. “I show her on West 24th Street between Seventh and Eighth Ave.”

“Damn it,” Noah said. “That’s the hotel, but I’ve looked everywhere. Unless she’s in someone’s room, and I’ll never be able to check each room.”

“Sorry I can’t be more specific,” Emma said. “Daisy’s resourceful. I’m sure she’s fine, but I’ll keep an eye on the tracking and call you again if she leaves the area.”

“Thank you,” Noah said, ending the call. Her family didn’t seem all that worried, but then again, Noah hadn’t been totally forthcoming with all the information he had. If she’d been drugged and Lance had taken her somewhere, she could be anywhere in the building. All clues led to Lance.

Noah raced back to the party, but this time, when he found Gabbi, Lance was no longer by her side.

“Where’d your friend go?” Noah asked.

“You’re being super rude,” Gabbi said in a snotty tone. “I’m done talking to you.”

“I think your friend is responsible for the other candidates dropping out and disappearing. And if you don’t help me right now, I’ll assume you’re in on it.”

“What? I would never.”

“Was Lance with you last Saturday night?”

“He…” She stopped and thought for a minute. “Well, no. He said he had to work. I haven’t seen him all week. We just met up this morning. Why?”

“That’s the night someone shot at Daisy. Was he around the day the other contestant died in a car accident?”

Gabbi’s brows knit in concentration. “No, actually. He was traveling that weekend. I remember because when I called to tell him about it, he was at the airport coming home.”

Noah raised an eyebrow.

“Look,” Gabbi said. “If he’s doing bad stuff, I don’t know anything about it. I swear.”

“Prove it,” Noah said. “Take me to his room. Right now.”

She took a second to process but finally acquiesced. “Okay. Just to prove it’s not him though.”

Noah guided her through the mass of people to the elevator bay.

“I can’t believe this,” Gabbi said. “But now that you mention it, he has been acting weird lately.”

“He’s in love with you and wants to please you,” Noah said.

“No! We’ve been friends for years, and he’s never said a word.”

“Maybe this is his big move to prove his love for you.”

They got off the elevator, and she led him to room 512. Noah put his ear to the door. Nothing. He pushed a finger to his lips, indicating she keep quiet, and knocked.

“Lance,” he shouted. “It’s an emergency. Gabbi’s hurt and sent me to get you. She needs you.”

The door opened a crack, and Noah shoved his way in, knocking Lance backward. Relief flooded him, but anger quickly took its place. Daisy was tied up and gagged on the bed.

Lance scrambled to his feet, and Noah punched him in the face. He fell hard, and Noah prayed he’d get up so he could hit him again.

There was a needle lying near Daisy’s arm. Her eyes were full of tears and terror. Noah undid the tie holding a cloth around her mouth, and she sucked in air and sobbed.

“Oh, Noah,” she cried. “Thank God you found me. This guy’s a psycho.”

Gabbi came into the room. “What the hell’s going on?” she asked no one in particular.

“After he smothered me unconscious, he planned to inject drugs into me,” Daisy said. “Kill me and make it look like an overdose.”

Tears flowed down her face as Noah pulled out his pocketknife. He cut the zip ties binding her hands and feet, and released the two straps that bound her to the bed. She immediately threw her arms around his neck and sobbed into his shoulder. He held her tight, thankful she was safe. Her body went rigid at the clicking sound of a gun cocking.

“Lance! What are you doing?” Gabbi screeched. “Put the gun down.”

“I’m doing this for you,” Lance said. He’d crawled over to his suitcase, gotten to his feet, and was now pointing a gun at Noah and Daisy.

Noah put Daisy behind him and turned to face Lance. He stood too far away for Noah to disarm him, but close enough

that it would be impossible to miss if he shot. And any bullet would pass right through him and still hit Daisy. “Get on the floor,” he said to Daisy without taking his eyes off Lance. He felt her squat behind him.

“No. No,” Gabbi said. “I don’t want this.”

“But you said you wanted to win,” Lance said. “At any cost, you said.”

“I didn’t mean by killing people,” she yelled. “Are you insane? Did you kill Veronica?”

The word insane seemed to strike a nerve. Lance stood tall, and his eye twitched. “I’m not crazy,” he said in an eerily calm voice. “I love you, and I’ll do anything for you. I thought if I helped you win this award, you’d finally see what a great team we are. Not just as friends.”

“Lance, I don’t love you. And I couldn’t possibly after finding out what you’ve done. You should go to jail.”

The look on Lance’s face made it clear he hadn’t seen this as a possibility and was rapidly making new plans. He turned the gun on Gabbi. “I’ve devoted my life to you. And this is how you repay me? You want me to go to jail? If I can’t have you, no one should.”

Gabbi’s eyes widened, and she threw up her hands. For a split second, Lance seemed confused. And that was all Noah needed. He lunged for the arm holding the gun and twisted until Lance screamed and dropped the weapon. Noah delivered a series of quick punches and swept his feet, knocking him to the floor. He kicked the gun away and stood over him.

“Do not get up,” he ordered. “Gabbi, call the police. Daisy, are you okay?”

“Yes,” Daisy croaked. “I’ll be fine.”

Gabbi ran to the hotel room phone and called the front desk. She relayed what had happened and hung up.

“Daisy,” she said. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea he was doing this.”

Lance wailed from the floor. “I love you. I love you. How can you not see that?”

Daisy and Gabbi huddled together while Noah stood over Lance. The police arrived, took him into custody, and split the rest of them up to get statements. The police told Noah that Lance had admitted to slipping GHB into Daisy’s drink. They thought he should know in case she had a bad reaction or required medical attention later.

After Noah gave his statement, he called Edward to tell him he’d found Daisy and that everything was fine. He’d save the details for when he saw him tomorrow.

Once the police finished their interviews and arrested Lance, Noah took Daisy back to their room.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked, slipping off her shoes and handing her a water bottle.

“Much,” she said. “Thank you, Noah. I’m sorry I left and went to the party. You were right.”

He waved a hand. “Usually am. It’s a tough burden to carry,” he said dryly, and she chuckled. “Can I get you anything? Are you hungry?”

She stood and slid out of her dress. Noah’s jaw hit the floor.

“Hold me?”

He choked on his reply. “You sure about this? Could just be the adrenaline talking. Lots of people make horrible decisions right after a life-threatening situation.”

She walked to him and pulled at his T-shirt. He allowed her to strip it off over his head. And then he followed her to bed, where they stayed until the next day.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Daisy woke feeling a hundred percent better. The drugs were out of her system, and a handsome man lay beside her. He would be swimming in doubts over what they'd done, but she had no regrets.

While she'd jumped fully on board with sleeping with him, she'd chickened out on telling him how she felt about him. And now, in the light of day, she was glad she'd hesitated. Her near-death, made-under-duress decision to declare her love might have been a tad premature. She'd play it cool and see how today went before doing anything drastic.

With the danger gone, now they could go out. She slipped out of bed and took a shower, then called for room service and ordered one of everything on the breakfast menu.

Noah stirred at the knock on the door but didn't fully wake until the hotel waiter had rolled in a cart of food and left again.

"Please tell me there's coffee," he said, sitting and rubbing his eyes.

"Can't start the day without it," Daisy said.

He raised an eyebrow at the spread. "Feeling better, I see."

"Yes, and I'm starving." She bit into a croissant and relished the buttery goodness that melted on her tongue.

"Is it hard to stomach American versions of stuff like that?" he said, nodding to the croissant.

"You have no idea. I'm constantly settling," she said.

"I'm glad you're bouncing back," he said.

"Yeah, I was pretty scared there for a while, but I knew you'd save me."

"Daisy, it was blind, dumb luck that I put things together and found you. This could have easily had a very different outcome."

"Well, it didn't." She shrugged. "And now, we don't have to have a *Bodyguard* moment, where you figure out at the last

second that it's the cameraman and jump in front of me to take a bullet." She smiled.

"You're so not funny," he said. "You scared the crap out of me."

"I'm sorry. Truly," she said, laying a hand over his and squeezing. "And thank you for saving my life. He really did mean to kill me." She kept the fact that he'd come pretty damn close to herself.

"Hey. I'm just glad I got there in time."

"And now that we're out of danger, we can have some fun. You wanna do some sightseeing before the banquet?"

He pulled up a chair to the cart with the food on it. "Let's eat, then talk."

She laughed and agreed. Over coffee, eggs Benedict, and waffles, they ran through the possibilities of what to do around town. That was until he brought up the elephant.

"We gonna discuss what happened last night?" he asked. "Twice."

"Um, no thanks," she said. If they discussed it, he might ask what it meant to her, and, despite her deathbed resolution to come clean, she wasn't ready to tell him she'd fallen for him.

At least, she *thought* she had. She did harbor a few doubts. Could one really fall in love in under a week? And what if he was right about her just being caught up in strong emotions because of the kidnapping? He'd taken a bullet for her and saved her twice now—seven months ago from an armed robber and last night from a murderer. Could her feelings merely be based on gratitude or the fact that he could keep her safe? Until she was sure, she wanted to avoid conversation about it, so she played it off like she usually did anything important.

"Last night was just for fun," she said. "A celebration of life. I hope you didn't take it to mean more."

Something resembling hurt crossed his face, but it flashed so quickly she couldn't be sure. "No problem." He shrugged.

“Like I said, life-threatening situations tend to bring out those feelings. As long as we’re on the same page.”

“Good, we agree then,” she said. “So, Empire State Building? Grand Central Station? Times Square? How should we kill the day?”

“Horrible choice of words, Daisy.”

They walked to Times Square, but it was so crowded and the weather so muggy, they ended up ducking into a shop on Fifth Avenue just for the air conditioning. It was ritzy and regal, and formal dresses lined the walls. Noah groaned.

“It’s a sign,” Daisy said. “I brought a dress, but I feel like cheating death calls for something more extravagant.”

As she suspected, Noah wasn’t much of a shopper. He excused himself to deal with some work stuff while she tried on dress after dress.

By the time he returned, she’d picked one and was at the register paying for it. The clerk had already bagged it, so he hadn’t seen it.

“Do you need to get back to New Bern?” she asked. “Now that Lance is out of the way, I’m fine attending the banquet by myself.”

“After all we’ve been through?” he said. “I’m coming to the banquet. I want to be there when you win. Enough to suffer through a few ounces of reheated chicken and overcooked green beans.”

She smiled.

They stopped for lunch, and she took a second to make one last-ditch video to beg for eleventh-hour votes.

“Well, that’s that,” she said, turning off her phone and dropping it into her purse. “Nothing else I can do now. We’ll see if it was enough tonight. Who are you texting?”

“Oh, no one. Just a notification from the tux company verifying they dropped the suit at the hotel,” he said, putting his phone back in his pocket.

She'd meant what she said about being fine attending alone. She just didn't *want* to. Now that she'd gotten used to Noah and his moods and strong presence, she was pretty sure she would miss it. Going from 24/7 companionship to being alone again cold turkey might take a minute to get used to.

As they exited the diner, she spotted a palm reading place.

"Oh my gosh," she said. "Let's do this."

"You don't actually believe in that stuff, do you?" he said.

"Not really, but it might be fun." She grabbed his arm and dragged him inside.

"Hello," she greeted the woman in the shop. "We'd like to get our palms read."

"I sense negative energy," the lady said, pursing her lips and looking at Noah.

"I'll be outside," Noah said, and Daisy laughed as he let himself out.

"That one has a lot of pain bottled up. He needs to deal with it."

It didn't take a physic to figure that out, but Daisy nodded. "I just want to know if I'm going to win an award tonight."

"Palm reading doesn't work like that," the woman said. "I don't have any appointments available anyway."

Daisy didn't believe her, but the whole idea was losing its enchantment now that Noah wasn't with her. She thanked the woman, left, and found Noah standing in the shade, looking at his phone.

"That was quick," he said. "You too tough to read?"

"Ha. Ha," Daisy said. "She didn't have time for me."

They took a cab back to the hotel, thinking it would be cooler than walking, but they might as well have climbed into an oven and asked for a ride. Sticky and sweaty, they picked up Noah's tux from the concierge's desk.

On the way to the elevator, Noah was acting cagey and kept scanning the hotel lobby as if waiting for a second boogeyman to jump out at them. Daisy figured he was just being extra cautious and chalked it up to his natural paranoia. They played rock paper scissors to decide who got to shower first. Noah won. Before he dressed, Daisy put a clean bandage on his wound, which was healing nicely. Coping with his naked torso took some willpower, but she stayed strong.

She had to remind herself they weren't "together," and tonight wasn't a date. She'd claimed sleeping with him had meant nothing to her, but that had been a big fat lie—one she wasn't ready to come clean on yet.

The truth was, sleeping with Noah easily fell into her top three Best Moments of all Time. Right up there with meeting the Dalai Lama and seeing the view from atop Machu Picchu. Part of her was scared he didn't feel the same, and the other part was terrified he did. It was too much to deal with now. Once she got through tonight, she'd reassess.

When it was her turn to get ready, she took her time in the shower. She'd been too busy to have her legs waxed recently, so she gutted through the arduous chore of shaving them. She washed and conditioned her hair and moisturized everything moisturizable.

By the time she finished in the bathroom, the room was empty. Noah had left a note saying he'd be back for her at six. She dried her hair, did her makeup, and slid—there was no other way to describe how the silk overtook her body—into the slinky, red, spaghetti-strap sheath dress. It fit her like a second skin. As soon as she'd put it on that afternoon, it stood out as *The One*! A thin gold chain holding a small round diamond—a gift from her father—hung at her neck, and a knockoff, glittery bracelet encircled her wrist. She finished securing the delicate buckles on her strappy high-heeled sandals, and just as she took a final look in the mirror, someone knocked at her door.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Daisy was unprepared for the utter and complete transformation of the man standing at the door. Noah looked fantastic in anything—jeans, cargo shorts, the pajama pants he slept in—and most men looked good in a tux, but this was other-worldly hotness. The suit was stunning, but it was the smile, the beautiful, genuine smile on his face, that melted her heart completely. If she hadn't been in love before, she was now.

“Holy crap,” she said, biting her lip.

He chuckled. “Right back at ya,” he said, getting a serious glint in his eye. “You look freaking amazing.” He advanced on her as if coming in for a kiss, which she would have welcomed with open arms.

Instead, he shook his head and backed away at the last second. He slapped himself on the cheek. “Get it together, Walsh,” he said, and she laughed.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“Oh,” she said, grabbing her clutch. “I love surprises.”

“So, you nervous?” Noah asked once they were alone in the elevator.

She thought for a minute. “I can honestly say that if it weren't for the business implications, I couldn't care less about this thing. After everything that's happened lately, my priorities have evolved, and I realize that in the grand scheme of things, this is all pretty trivial.”

“You have been through a lot this week.”

“But don't get me wrong,” she added. “I want this damn piece of glass. It would suck if you took a bullet and had to endure a week with me for nothing.”

He smiled. “It wasn't so bad.”

She tried not to read too much into his response. Was he saying he'd had fun this week? Come to like her this week?

Perhaps more than like?

Thoughts fled when he put a hand on the small of her back to lead her from the elevator. They made their way to the same ballroom from the night before, only tonight it was set for the banquet. Dinner wasn't for another half hour, but the room was already packed.

"Close your eyes," he said. She did, and he looped her arm in his so he could guide her. When he told her to open her eyes, they filled with tears, as she couldn't believe what she saw.

"Surprise!" her family yelled. It was everyone but Jack and Lucy. Tears overflowed, and she swiped at them before they could ruin her makeup. Kate, always prepared for anything, handed her a tissue.

"Oh, my gosh," Daisy said. "You came. Even after all that's happened. You came."

Her mom hugged her. "Of course we came, honey. This is your big moment. There's no way we'd miss it."

"But all the stuff with Uncle Pete..."

"It can wait a day," her father said.

"What if I lose?" Daisy said.

Emma put an arm around her waist. "Do you really think we give a flying crap about that? Win or lose, we love you, sis."

Daisy instinctively looked at Lizzie. Of course Emma would say that. She was Daisy's best friend. Lizzie approached and grabbed both of Daisy's arms. "Emma's right. Nobody gives a rat's ass whether you win. You're awesome just cuz you're you."

"What about Parkers never taking Ls?"

"Ha." Kate jumped in. "Don't listen to Lizzie. We take Ls all the time."

"Speak for yourself," Lizzie said with a grin, and Kate rolled her eyes. Lizzie turned to Daisy. "The *other* thing I say is that you have to take the Ls to earn the wins. And if you're

not taking Ls, you're not trying anything new. In other words, the Ls are just as important as the Ws."

Daisy nodded, getting the message loud and clear. Her family loved her, whether she won or not.

Over Emma's shoulder, Daisy saw Noah talking to her father, no doubt giving a play-by-play of what had happened yesterday. The horrified look on her dad's face, followed by relief, confirmed it. He slapped Noah on the arm before pulling him in for a one-armed man-hug. Adam and Dirk flanked them, listening in. They cleaned up all right and looked pretty good in their suits, but didn't come close to outshining Noah.

"What's with Dad?" Emma asked, noticing the drama behind her.

"I'll go see," her mom said, leaving Daisy with her sisters.

"I think Noah's regaling him with the details of last night," Daisy said.

"We only got the *Reader's Digest* version. What happened?" Emma asked.

"Some psycho drugged me, took me to his room, tied me up, and gagged me. He planned to kill me with drugs so it would look like an overdose," Daisy explained.

"What in the damn hell?" Lizzie said. "Over an award?"

"Like I said," Daisy said, twirling a finger next to her ear. "Not all there. It was the friend of a contestant trying to prove his love. He did kill Veronica and would've killed me if Noah hadn't saved me. He busted in and kicked ass just as it was about to be lights out." She stuck her tongue out sideways and drew a thumb across her neck.

"You must have been so scared," Kate said.

"Out-of-my-mind scared," Daisy admitted.

"How are you so calm now?" Emma asked.

"I worked it out of my system last night." She tipped her head toward Noah.

“Oh, my gosh,” Kate whispered, leaning in. “Did you guys...?”

“Knock boots?” Lizzie wiggled her eyebrows up and down.

Daisy winked. “Do not tell Dad.”

Her sisters pulled imaginary zippers across their lips just as their mother approached from behind.

“Don’t tell Dad what?” her mom asked.

“If we tell you, you’ll tell Dad,” Daisy said.

“If it’s that you and Noah have had out-of-wedlock sexual relations, I already know.”

Daisy and her sisters laughed. “How?”

“I’m your mother. Stuff like that doesn’t get past me often. There’s a vibe in the air around you two.”

“Nana’s filling her purse with sugar packets,” Kate mumbled. “Better put the kibosh on that.” She excused herself to take care of their sticky-fingered grandma.

They talked until the emcee called for everyone to find their seats. Daisy and Noah sat at a table closer to the stage than where her family was. She nervously picked at the salad and chicken entree.

“You gonna finish that?” Noah asked after cleaning his plate. At her head shake, he raised an eyebrow.

She swapped plates with him and watched as he finished off her dinner. Dessert was another story. When they served the blueberry cheesecake, she dug in with gusto and, after finishing hers, looked at Noah.

“Fair’s fair,” she said, eyeing his half-eaten cake.

He smiled and handed her his plate. “True.”

Her award was near the end of the ceremony, so she had plenty of time to wallow in nerves. Finally, they called her category. The main, and really only, qualifier was that you’d started your career less than a year ago. Topics of interest varied. One gal had a bass fishing channel, and Cho made

videos tutoring math. The rest were a mixture of makeup and hair tutorials, nutrition and exercise videos, and general fashion and lifestyle advice. Daisy's brand was the only one focused on travel.

The emcee called out the finalists, and a picture of each flashed on the big screen.

"May I have the envelope please?" he said to his leggy helpers.

"And the winner for Female Rookie of the Year goes to..." He opened the envelope, then paused to create tension.

Daisy's heart pounded like a jackhammer. Noah grabbed her hand under the table and gave her an encouraging look. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Daisy Parker."

The table of Parkers erupted immediately, screaming like they were on fire. A lip-splitting smile spread across Daisy's face, and the spotlight swung around to where she sat. She stood, gave a small wave, and made her way to the stage.

Two more Barbie doll helpers guided her to the stairs and escorted her to the podium. Not all the winners got to give speeches, but this was one of the biggest awards, so Daisy was allotted a minute.

Standing in the spotlight, she heard Nana yell, "That's my girl." Followed by more cheers from her family. All at once, emotion overwhelmed her. Amazed that they had come to surprise and support her. And comforted that they loved her, no matter what. She ditched her preplanned comments and went with simple.

"Thank you," she said, wiping a single tear. "Thank you to all those who voted for me. Thanks to all the other nominees for pushing me to do my best. You guys are all so talented. Thanks to my sponsors for making this financially possible. And a big thank you to my crazy, loud, totally awesome family. I love you nut balls." She blew a kiss, grabbed her award, and returned to her seat.

Noah wore a proud grin and was clapping furiously. He was the most handsome man she'd ever met. But more than that, he was sweet and honorable. They'd started as polar opposites. With only stubbornness and advanced vertical prowess in common, they'd somehow built a friendship. For Daisy, it was more, but they could talk about that later.

"Sorry I didn't thank you," she said.

"You barely know me. Why would you?" he said. "Don't worry about it."

"Well, you did save my life."

He shrugged. "Just doing my job. This is your moment. Enjoy it."

After the ceremony, Daisy accepted congratulations from what seemed like everyone in the room. Her family waited in line to give hugs and say goodbye.

Daisy noticed the flowers from the centerpiece sticking out of Nana's purse. Clearly, she hadn't completely licked the "borrowing things that weren't hers" problem. If it was harmless stuff, Daisy wouldn't say anything. And flowers that would be dead tomorrow seemed benign enough. As long as she didn't have the silverware in there as well.

"We're headed out early in the morning, honey," her mother said. "Have a good time tonight."

"I'll be home the day after tomorrow," Daisy said. "Thank you so much for coming. That you would all pack up and fly out here just for a few hours, means the world to me." She swallowed the lump in her throat.

As the room cleared, Bryson, the guy who won Male Rookie of the Year, waved a hand to get Daisy's attention.

"Mr. Hot Stuff wants to talk to you," Noah mumbled as he approached.

"I knew you'd win," Bryson said, hugging her. He was tall and handsome, but Noah had him beat on both fronts.

"You going upstairs to the after party? It's at the rooftop bar," Bryson asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said. She’d rather go back to the room and celebrate with Noah.

“There’ll be sponsors there. You really should.”

“Yeah,” she said. “You’re probably right.”

Noah stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting. She turned to him. “There’s a party upstairs I should make an appearance at. You okay with that?”

“Sure,” he said.

As she made to leave, Noah cleared his throat. “Uh, Daisy? You forget something?” He nodded to the award.

“Ha.” She laughed. “Oh, yeah.” She’d gone through so much to earn it, only to forget about it ten minutes after winning it.

She grabbed the trophy, and they headed to the elevators. Daisy thought Noah would come to the party with her, but he got off on the twentieth floor, saying he was done for the night.

Upstairs, she got a drink and made the rounds of the sponsor tables. She spent a few minutes at each booth, putting names with faces and schmoozing the reps.

She ran into Gabbi a little while later.

“Congrats, Daisy,” Gabbi said. “If it wasn’t me, I’m glad it was you. And after all Lance put you through, you deserve it.”

“That was pretty wild,” Daisy said. “What d’ya think will happen to him?”

Gabbi shrugged. “I’m sure he’ll go to jail. I can’t believe I didn’t see what kind of person he was. What he was capable of.”

“He was willing to kill for you,” Daisy said. “He must really love you.”

“No. That just means he’s not all there,” she said. “You, on the other hand, have a perfectly sane, perfectly gorgeous man willing to *die* for you. *He* must really love *you*.”

Daisy smiled. And then wondered what the hell she was doing up here when Noah was downstairs in their room waiting for her. Screw the sponsors. They knew how to contact her, and she felt confident they would.

“I gotta go,” Daisy said, gulping down the last of her drink.
“Later.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Outside the hotel room, Daisy checked her breath, fluffed her hair, and smoothed her dress. All of which proved unnecessary because the room was empty. Noah had packed up his stuff and left. A hastily written note lay next to his hotel key card.

Had to get back. Took an early flight. Congrats on the win. Noah.

He'd ditched her. Huh. Okay. His job was technically done, so of course, he had every right to go home. But to sneak out in the middle of the night? Without saying goodbye? She must have grossly misread their situation. Bare minimum, she thought they'd become friends. And friends didn't just slink away.

She changed into pajamas and crawled under the covers. Alone. The bed seemed a mile wide without him in it.

The award she'd gone to so much trouble to win sat on the TV credenza. She assumed winning would make her feel confident, successful, accomplished, something. As it turned out, the win didn't seem as important as it had ten days ago.

After the death of her uncle and her own near-death experience, the award seemed pretty trivial. It did, however, mean she could put her new plan into motion. And that was really what she wanted. Wasn't it?

Now that starting something different was an actual possibility, she wavered. What if the new venture failed? What if people couldn't get past her as the ditsy, low-budget traveler? And mocked her for trying to be serious?

No. She pushed aside the self-doubt. She'd stick with her plan—milk this win for everything she could, and use the profits to fund her next endeavor. Which wasn't all that different from what she did now. It was still a social media channel. But it had the potential to make a real difference in people's lives. Help them to believe in and better themselves.

It was late, but she texted Adam to ask if the fifth space at the strip mall was still available.

When he responded yes, she asked him to write up the lease. She wanted it.

Daisy flew home the next day and jumped into the fray of nonstop family obligations—Uncle Pete’s funeral in Charlotte, helping pack and move Bella to her parents’ house in New Bern, and enduring a schizophrenic play put on by a hodgepodge of geriatric thespians. Still mourning her son, Nana had debated canceling the whole thing, but in the end, decided the show must go on, saying it’s what Pete would have wanted.

It wasn’t until Sunday dinner that she finally had a chance to tell her family about her plan to expand her brand.

“I’ll stick with the ‘traveling on a budget’ theme as my bread and butter,” she said. “Income from that will pay my rent and expenses. But I’m also going to start another channel to deal with personal development. It’ll be all-encompassing—exercise, nutrition, meditation, positive affirmations. Stuff like that.”

“That’s a great idea,” Kate said. “Those are all the rage right now.”

“I realize it’s a competitive field,” Daisy said. “And I know it won’t be as lucrative as my current business right off the bat. But winning the award bought me some time to grow a new audience.”

“So, what do you need the storefront for?” Adam asked.

“It will mainly be a place to record videos, but I also want to branch into personal coaching and perhaps write a book or two on travel. I’ll have you cut the space into sections that will act as backdrops. So, a corner that looks like a gym to film exercise videos. A mini kitchen to do recipes and talk about nutrition. An office with bookcases and maps and stuff to do more general videos. And I’ll need storage for the endless barrage of merch I get.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all planned out,” her dad said. “I’m really proud of you, honey.”

“*We’re* proud of you,” her mom said.

Daisy blushed. Sharing her ideas with her family was climbing out on a limb. And now that they were out, she'd have to get going on them.

“In the meantime, while the remodel's happening, I'm gonna strike while the iron's hot and do some local travel. I'm leaving tomorrow on another trip.”

“So soon?” her mother complained.

“Sorry, Mom,” Daisy said. “It won't be for long.”

She could have easily put the trip off, but staying around town, wallowing in pity over Noah ditching her, wasn't an option. Traveling—that sounded better than running away—was her go-to method for dealing with unwanted situations.

Later that night, Emma and Daisy were alone in the living room. They had always been especially close, but since Emma had gotten married, heart-to-hearts with her were rare.

“Hey, sis. Can you keep a secret?” Emma asked.

“Of course,” Daisy said. “Even though I think I already know what it is.”

“Oh, really?”

“You find out the sex of my next niece or nephew?” She nodded to Emma's midsection.

Emma laughed. “Yes. The little bugger finally quit being so modest and gave the doc a peek. I've been dying to tell everyone, but, well, you know.”

“I get it,” Daisy said. “Uncle Pete's death, Bella moving in, Lucy about to pop any day. There's a lot goin' on around here.”

Emma smiled. “Yeah, and it's a little anticlimactic when Kate's already had one, and Lucy's about to have another.”

“Somehow, I don't think Mom will ever tire of it. So, I'm dying here. What is it?”

“A girl.”

Daisy had never seen a bigger smile on her sister's face. "I'm so, so happy for you," she said. "I won't say anything until you find an opening to announce it."

"So," Emma said. "What's up with you and Noah? You like him?"

"Pretty sure I jumped past like," Daisy said with a sigh. "I know I can be impulsive, including falling in and out of love easily, but this felt different."

"So, you love him?"

Daisy shrugged. "I don't know. I thought so. Is it possible to fall in love in under a week?"

"Sure," Emma said. "It only took Lucy and Jack five minutes."

"Yeah, maybe. Even if I did, he doesn't feel the same. He skipped out while I was at the after-party, and I haven't seen or heard from him since."

Emma's brows knit. "That's weird. Did something happen after we left?"

Daisy frowned. "I can't think of anything. Bryson, the guy who won the male category, came over and asked if I was heading upstairs."

"Could Noah have misread the sitch? Maybe he thought he'd be a third wheel."

"Huh," Daisy said. "I didn't consider that. I suppose it's possible. But if that were the case, he should have said something. Asked me about it."

"Is that the kind of relationship you have?"

"No," Daisy conceded. "Probably not. When he asked what sleeping together meant to me, I lied and told him nothing."

"What if it meant more to him, and you hurt his feelings?"

"Eh. I doubt that. He readily agreed the sex was just for fun. I think we just weren't on the same page. Which doesn't surprise me, considering we're as different as night and day."

“I don’t know,” Emma said. “He seemed into you. You gonna call him before you head out again?”

“No. I’m sure he’s busy getting back to business and all that. He had a big presentation coming up, and I doubt he got very far trying to prepare for it while we were on the road.” She shrugged. “I was just a job to him. Don’t worry, I’ll get over it.”

Emma gave her a dubious look. “Maybe you *can*, but do you want to?”

Daisy waved a hand, done talking about it. “I can’t wrap my head around all of you getting married and having babies. Seems like only yesterday we were fighting over clothes and boys and bathroom time.”

“Ah, yes. The good ol’ days,” Emma said.

Dirk came in and sat next to Emma, grabbing her hand. “Am I interrupting? I can take some laps around the neighborhood if needed.”

“No,” Emma said. “It’s fine. I told her the news, but she’ll keep it a secret.”

Dirk smiled, and Daisy’s heart warmed for him. He’d lost his young son and wife in a car accident a few years ago. This would be a new beginning for him.

She said her goodbyes and returned to her tiny apartment to pack. It wasn’t much, but it was home for now. Business had blown up since her win. That meant new sponsorship offers and more ad revenue. A lot more. She planned to allocate it evenly toward savings for a home, a retirement account, and reinvesting in the new business.

Adam said he could have the remodel done in a few weeks. Until then, she’d do her travel videos and make money promoting products. Earning thousands of dollars for wearing shoes and eating protein bars seemed obscene, but she wasn’t about to complain.

She lay in bed, thinking of Noah and pondering how long it would be before he wasn’t the last thing she thought of before drifting off at night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Noah berated himself for sneaking out on Daisy. It had been a chickenshit move, but he sucked at goodbyes. Especially goodbyes that involved a complicated woman, and an equally complicated relationship.

He spent all day Sunday in taxis, airports, and airplanes. Not having preplanned tickets was a pain, and for the millionth time, he wondered how Daisy got along just floating through life with no plan. When he finally made it back to New Bern, he'd taken a cab to the Parkers' to retrieve his Range Rover. Once home, he fell into bed and stayed there until Monday morning.

"Welcome back, boss," Janet said. She handed him a mug of coffee. "Thought you could use this."

"You're the best," Noah said, sipping carefully at the steamy goodness.

Janet sat across from him. "So, how'd it go? How's your arm?"

"It's fine." He'd been checking in periodically, so she knew most of what he'd done up until Friday. He filled her in on the excitement of the weekend—Daisy being kidnapped, him rescuing her, her winning the award.

"Wow," she said. "Guess you earned your money after all. Soooo, what's Daisy like?"

He held up a hand. "Don't go there."

Janet tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "Something happened with you two. I can tell."

"How? How can you tell?"

"Ha. You didn't deny it. I knew it!"

"I don't kiss and tell."

"Ah! So, you kissed her."

He pushed a hand through his hair. "No, that's not what I meant." Crap, everything he said was getting him into trouble.

Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut?

Janet sat back in her chair and smiled. "Love looks good on you."

"What?" Noah practically came out of his seat. "No one said anything about love. How could you possibly come to that conclusion from what I've said?"

"Nothing to do with the words comin' out of your mouth," Janet said. "Everything to do with the look in your eye when you talk about Daisy."

"Humph."

"I watched the live stream of the award ceremony. When they announced her name and put the spotlight on her, I could tell in one second, by the way you looked at her, something was going on. And now you've completely given yourself away."

"Did you come in here just to harass me?"

"Not specifically, no. But I won't deny it's been fun."

"You can go now," he said with a smirk, and she laughed.

Janet returned to her desk, and he stared after her, thunderstruck by what she'd said. How on earth did she think he could be in love? With Daisy.

They were so different. Which was why it was so hard to understand the draw. A draw he could no longer deny. He might not be in love, but he was most definitely attracted to her. Not just that Barbie doll body, but her sense of humor and thirst for adventure. He started the trip thinking she was unorganized and unserious, but over the last week, he'd been proven wrong again and again.

He'd judged her harshly and prematurely. Sure, she came across as ditsy, but ditsy didn't mean stupid. And he wasn't just saying that because she finished his crossword puzzles and whipped his ass at chess. She was smart in a lot of ways. He'd also come to realize that what he'd seen as flighty was really just happy and optimistic. And what was wrong with those qualities? Just because he had neither.

Still, he'd been hired to guard her, not befriend her. Certainly not to bed her. How would Edward feel if he knew he was paying for hanky panky? Was there a way Noah could discreetly subtract a few hours from the bill? Create a line item on the invoice and call it "personal time"? That would read better than "glorious, best-sex-ever with your daughter, so, no charge."

The job was done, and he had to get back to real life. People didn't fall in love in one week. Especially polar opposites, like him and Daisy. Setting all that aside, he did feel bad about the way he left things. Should he at least call to apologize? Or just let it go?

He put it on a list of things to deal with later. Right now, he had to focus on his presentation for this new job. He'd done a pretty thorough outline while on the road, but it was far from ready. He spent the week and the weekend finishing and polishing it, and presented the final product on Monday morning.

"Did you wow 'em?" Janet asked when he returned from giving the presentation.

"You know me? All razzle dazzle," Noah said, loosening his tie. "Glad to have it done."

Now that he could focus on something besides work, he got back to his Daisy conundrum. He still owed her an apology. Just as he summoned the nerve to make the call, Janet entered his office.

"Forgot to give you messages," she said, handing him a short stack of old-fashioned pink slips. "Tucker called and wants to see you."

And just like that, the blanket of guilt enveloped him again. All thoughts of Daisy fled—any joy she'd brought to his life, gone.

Janet left, and Noah corralled his emotions before calling his friend. Tucker said he needed to speak to Noah and asked that he come by his office as soon as possible. Noah said he'd be there after lunch.

After the shooting and aftermath, Tucker had become a mortgage broker and did very well for himself. Making much more than he would have if he'd stayed on the force. Not that money was all that mattered, but there was no point in denying it helped.

"Hey, man," Tucker greeted. "Long time no see. Whatcha been up to?"

Tucker seemed happy. Much happier than the last time Noah had seen him. Of course, that was because Noah was horrible about keeping in touch.

Noah told Tucker about his foray into bodyguarding. "That's the last bit of that I'll do though. Just trying to stay in the mayor's good graces."

After some small talk, Tucker got to the point. "Bro, I'm getting married."

"What?" Noah said. "That's wonderful."

"You don't have to sound so surprised. People in wheelchairs get married all the time."

"No. No, I didn't mean it like that," Noah stammered.

Tucker smirked and rolled his eyes but then got serious. "I want you to be my best man."

Noah's jaw dropped. Whatever he'd expected for today's meeting, this was not it. "I...I...You do?"

Noah wasn't even sure how Tucker could look him in the eye. Now he wanted him to be his best man?

"Noah," Tucker said. "I know you feel guilty about what happened. I know me telling you not to won't stop you from feeling that way, but look. I got over it. You need to too."

"What do you mean?"

"Leo and I still talk." Leo was a mutual friend who had been their coworker before Tucker was forced to retire and Noah quit. He worked as one of Noah's part-time employees now. "He told me you get surlier by the day."

"Leo should mind his own business," Noah muttered.

“I had my doubts until Mike confirmed it,” Tucker continued. Mike also worked for Noah. “I believe ‘a miserable SOB’ was the exact term he used.”

Noah grunted.

Tucker paused, apparently collecting his thoughts, before continuing. “When it first happened, I was a wreck. I was mad at God, at the world, at myself, and yes, at you. But it wasn’t personal. I was just in a really bad place and hated everything and everyone.” He sighed. “It took me some time to process my new life, but I have. I’ve gotten over the anger, and let me tell you, it’s very freeing.”

“How?” Noah asked. “How do you get over something so horrible and life-changing?”

“Well, a good woman helps.” Tucker chuckled. “I’d say time was a big factor. Time to come to grips with my new reality, and time to work through all the feelings that came with it. I read books. I went to a therapist. In fact, that’s who I’m marrying. If it hadn’t been for this wheelchair, I wouldn’t have met Renee.”

Noah shook his head, still not sure he would ever get over the incident. Maybe if he put some time and effort into it, like Tucker had. Noah’s strategy to cope had been to ignore and repress all feelings related to it. That obviously hadn’t worked out so well.

“Look,” Tucker said. “I don’t feel like I need to forgive you, because I never saw the shooting as your fault. I don’t blame you for how things went down. But if you need to hear that, well, I forgive you. And you need to forgive yourself. Consider it a favor to me.”

“I don’t know, Tucker.” Noah shoved a hand through his hair. “I don’t know how.”

“Let me put it this way. Your pity pisses me off. You sulking around wasting your life pisses me off. Do you see me as less of a man because I’m in this chair?”

“No, of course not,” Noah said, eyebrows shooting up. “I just see it as my fault. Your life could have been so different.”

“I’m happy with my life, Noah. It’s insulting and degrading to me that you assume my life sucks. And that you seem to think I want you mired in guilt. Is that the kind of man you think I am?”

“I never thought of it like that,” Noah said. Emotion overwhelmed him, and he had to swallow past the lump in his throat. “I’d be honored to be your best man.”

He left Tucker’s office feeling twenty pounds lighter. The burden he’d been packing around lifted with Tucker’s words of forgiveness and wisdom.

And if Tucker could find love after tragedy, maybe Noah could too.

He and Daisy hadn’t discussed their *feelings* for one another. They’d teased each other, shared a handful of unforgettable kisses, and a glorious night in bed. That didn’t mean love. Especially for Daisy. Her live-in-the-moment lifestyle might mean Noah was an out-of-sight, out-of-mind thing. It was possible she’d chalked him up as a good time but had already moved on. She’d said the sex didn’t mean anything, but he had doubts.

There was only one way to find out. On the drive back to work, he realized he didn’t know where she lived, and this wasn’t a conversation he wanted to have over the phone.

He had Edward’s and Emma’s phone numbers. That was a no-brainer. He pulled into an empty lot and parked before dialing.

“Emma Davidson,” a sweet voice answered his call.

“Hi, Emma.” He cleared his throat. “It’s Noah. Noah Walsh. I was hoping to get some information from you.”

As much as he was tempted, he didn’t ask whether Daisy had said anything about him. Didn’t ask if Emma thought Daisy liked him. That was too junior highish. But he took it as a good sign that Emma was willing to talk to him. Not that she had any useful information.

“I can give you her address, but it won’t help right now. She’s on a trip,” Emma said. “I know she took a train and is

headed, and I quote, ‘west.’ I don’t have details on where she plans to stop or stay overnight or anything.”

“Of course not. Daisy doesn’t operate like that.” They both chuckled. “Thanks, Emma. It’s a start.”

Defeated, he realized he’d probably just have to wait until she returned to New Bern. There was no point running all over the country trying to find her. He didn’t even know if she wanted to be found!

A minute later, he got two texts in a row from Emma. The first was a link to one of Daisy’s recent videos. And the second, the link and login information to an app that enabled him to track her phone. Score.

He clicked on the video link, and Daisy popped onto the screen. An involuntary smile spread across his face.

“Hey, y’all,” she started. “I wanted to take a minute to thank you for the award. I couldn’t have won without you. A lot of you are asking, ‘What now?’ Well, I have some big ideas I plan to share soon. In the meantime, I’m on a train working through some stuff.” She put stuff in air quotes and huffed out a laugh.

“Have you ever met someone who has changed you irrevocably? Someone who’s touched you so deeply, kissed you so thoroughly, you can’t go back to normal? And even if that person walks away, there’s no pretending life hasn’t transformed?”

She paused for a second before continuing. “If you’ve watched my channel for any length of time, you’ve heard me talk about life’s moments. As I always say, ‘minutes make up time, but *moments* are what make up life.’ I used to think the moments had to be monumental—the bigger, the better. But I’ve come to realize, moments can be subtle. So subtle you might miss ’em. An awakening, an evolution, a change of heart. Those quiet moments can be just as powerful and life-altering as the momentous ones.

“I hope you’re watching for those moments. However and wherever you can find them. They’re what make life worth

living. I'd love to hear about your moments. Big or small. Leave 'em in the chat." She winked into the camera. "Daisy out."

Noah shifted in his seat. Was she talking about him? To him? It sure seemed that way. He was reasonably certain he'd just had one of those moments with Tucker not ten minutes ago. The lightening of his soul had to count.

Unsure how common those unforgettable, subtle moments were, he was pretty sure he'd miraculously had two. The second being that he'd fallen in love. In love with a woman so completely his opposite. So out of his league, so much better than him.

He called Janet to tell her he wasn't returning to the office, drove straight home, packed a bag, and hit the road.

Daisy had accused him of not being spontaneous. Well, stand by, Daisy Parker.

The good news was that trains moved slower than dirt and took twice as long to get anywhere. Daisy's one-day head start was no match for a fast car and a determined man. Add the phone tracking app and a heap of tenacity, and he was sure he could find her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Daisy settled into her window seat and got out her new soft-bound leather notebook. Fancy? Yes. She'd picked it up at the airport in New York. Her way of treating herself after the win. Or consoling herself after losing Noah. One of the two. Maybe both.

By noon, she'd filled almost half the pages with ideas and plans, this time in an organized, intentional way. Unlike her last notebook, which housed every thought under the sun, this one would be a blueprint for her business.

After lunch, she posted a video about life's moments and then focused on emails and tactics for her current channel. Since winning the award, companies she'd never heard of were emailing, begging her to promote their brands. She was most excited about the publishing company that had reached out. One of her goals was multiple sources of income, and writing a book fit the bill perfectly. Once the hoopla from the win died down, she would start that project.

They arrived in Charlotte that evening. She had to get off to switch trains but saw no reason to hang around—she'd been there a thousand times—so she grabbed dinner and hopped the next train. It was a red-eye trip, and she intended to sleep, so she splurged for a sleeper room.

In the morning, she disembarked in a city outside of Atlanta. After getting coffee at a local shop and checking messages—still nothing from Noah—she toured a small-town Civil War Museum and found a BBQ pit for an early lunch. She put together a video montage of the pictures she'd taken of the little town and posted it. Then she caught a bus back to the train station, bought a ticket, and boarded the train to Tuscaloosa. She spent the afternoon reading a self-help book, enjoying the scenery, and ruminating.

It was everything she would normally do on a trip—stuff she'd done a hundred times before. Chatting up the locals, learning about their town, and partaking in local food, but for some reason, it wasn't as fun.

She thought she did best alone, but after having had a travel buddy—even one paid by her father—she'd decided it was more fun to share the experiences. And not just with two million faceless followers.

The road trip with Noah had set a new standard. That was what her “moments” video had been about. Though she didn't believe it possible, falling in love had only taken a week. She'd analyzed it backward and forward, trying to make absolutely sure it wasn't just gratitude because he'd saved her or good ol' infatuation. No, no matter how she sliced it, all signs pointed to heartbreak. Unrequited love was something she'd never dealt with. And she hoped never to again.

In Tuscaloosa, she ate at a downtown diner, browsed a mom-and-pop bookstore, where she bought a book on time management, and checked into a motel. The room looked like every other small-town motel. Dated decor, an ugly as sin—and probably just as dirty—comforter covering a hard queen-sized bed. Tiny bathroom with low water pressure and carpet she wouldn't walk barefoot on for a million dollars.

She was getting too old for this way of life. Sleeping on futons, staying out all night drinking and dancing, and eating sugar-filled garbage had been fun ten years ago, but she was pushing thirty. It was time to grow up. Her new venture necessitated a lifestyle change anyway.

The next channel would not only be a rebrand of her social media persona, but herself as well. It would be hypocritical to promote a nutritious diet while eating pie for lunch. Disingenuous to preach exercise when she only did a yoga class here and there.

A naturally high metabolism had kept her slim for years, but she was ready to put *healthy* over *skinny*. Focus on whole-body wellness—physical, mental, and spiritual. In preparation, she'd been studying self-help books and was convinced that personal responsibility and a positive mental attitude would get you farther in life than playing the victim.

She planned to document her journey and show people how they could change their lives too. It would not be easy. Life

was about to take a one-eighty.

Women in their thirties would be her new demographic. Once she got the channel up and running and making money, she'd phase out the younger, twenty-something audience she'd been catering to. Flitting around Europe on a dime was a young person's game, and she had to admit, she was no longer feeling so spry.

Recent events had cemented her change of heart. Realizing she didn't need to compete with her sisters, falling in love with Noah, losing her uncle, and almost her life had changed her. She felt as though she'd matured a decade in the last two weeks. When all that was added to her sisters marrying and having babies, her parents and grandma aging, and the simple fact that she was tired of the adventures, she had no choice but to make a change.

Five years ago, it was freeing, knowing she wasn't tied down to anything or anyone. Nowadays, that freedom felt more like a hole in desperate need of filling. Maybe she'd matured, or perhaps she'd had it all wrong in the first place, but finding someone to share life with sounded pretty darn good these days.

That realization led to Noah. Though they had only just met, she'd come to hope he would be her person. The one she shared life's adventures with.

Granted, they were completely different, but even so, there was an undeniable attraction. More than just a physical one too. At least, from Daisy's point of view.

If someone had told her at the beginning of their road trip that she would fall for him, she'd have bet all her newfound money against it. He was so not her type. But after only one week together, figuring him out, finding out what made him tick, and getting to know the real Noah, she'd fallen hard. The gruff exterior was a mask to cover the pain. And she ached to help him past that pain. She thought she could if he'd give her a chance, but he didn't want that. Didn't want to see where things might lead under normal circumstances. Didn't want anything more to do with her.

Clearly, she'd read too much into their brief but intense attraction. He liked her body, but not her mind. Story of her life. That stung, but at least she knew where she stood. Back at square one. Alone again and ready to start over. Which wasn't anything new. It's how she started in each new country she landed in—fresh, with no job, no home, no friends or family. At least this time, she was starting with a home, a family who loved her, and a plan.

That's what this trip was about—remaking herself, rebranding her business, and resetting her heart.

The following morning, she checked out of the motel, bought a ticket to New Orleans, and boarded the train. Seated at a table, sipping black coffee and watching the landscape sail by through huge windows, she caught movement out of the corner of her eye.

“You're a tough woman to track down.”

Noah. Her pulse geared up to turbo as green eyes bore into hers. He looked as handsome as ever, and she had to tamp down the urge to jump into his arms and immediately forgive all. She took a deep breath.

“So, why bother?” she said, feigning indifference.

He sat in the seat next to her. “I wanted...scratch that...I *needed* to find out,” he said, “if there was more to us.”

“Listening.”

“I'm going to say something crazy,” he said.

“I love crazy,” she said, shrugging one shoulder. He laughed, and the sound melted her insides and forced her to smile.

“I love you, Daisy Parker.”

Her mouth fell open, but nothing came out. He what?

“Don't tell me the queen of quick wit is speechless?”

“What did you say?” she said, shaking her head, believing she must have misheard him.

“I said, I love you.”

It took another minute to wrap her head around what he'd said, but then a mile-wide grin spread across her face.

"Please say something," he said. "You're killing me with the quiet."

She threw her arms around his neck. "I love you too."

"So, we're up to four things in our Venn diagram."

"What more do we need?" she said.

He laughed again. His spirit seemed freer and happier.

"You let go of the guilt." She took his hand in hers.

He sighed. "I did. Tucker called me up and wanted to see me. The gist of his message was that I was being an idiot. He told me to get over myself and move on. He's getting married and wants me to be his best man."

"That's wonderful," Daisy said, laying a hand on his cheek. "You deserve to be happy."

"You make me happy, Daisy."

"How 'bout we spend a while making each other happy?"

"When's the next stop? I want off this train. Now."

"We just left, silly," she said. "But if you're thinking what I'm thinking, you might be interested to know I got a sleeper car for this leg."

He stood and pulled her to her feet. "What are you waiting for?"

They more or less ran to her room and ducked inside after hanging the "do not disturb" sign. She fell into his arms for one of those momentous kisses she'd been referencing. The kind that changed your life and that you could never, in a million years, get enough of.

"Please tell me we're heading west," she mumbled into his lips.

"So we can tell people we rode off into the sunset?"

"Exactly!" She laughed. "You know me so well."

“I wanna know everything about you,” he said thoughtfully.
“Starting right now.”

EPILOGUE—Three months later

The hospital waiting room brimmed with Parkers. Fragrance from congratulatory flowers overwhelmed the small area, and mylar balloons coated the ceiling.

Three months had passed since Noah had tracked down Daisy's train and declared his love. In that time, she'd overseen the remodel for her space at Parker Place—that was what they privately called the strip mall—bought a house, launched her new brand, gotten engaged, and planned a wedding. Well, to be fair, her mom had done the lion's share of the work on the wedding, but she'd helped.

Daisy paced the waiting room floor. The baby wasn't due until next week. Emma was supposed to be good and pregnant for the wedding, not recovering from giving birth. And while Daisy worried a little about the ceremony, she was more concerned for her sister and soon-to-be niece. Dirk kept them updated with periodic updates, telling them what a champ Emma was and that it shouldn't be long now.

"There's no chance this will take two days, right?" Daisy asked.

"I hope not," Kate exclaimed. "No, she should have it sometime today or tonight."

"You're going to have another cousin soon," Lucy cooed to Connor, her two-month-old baby boy.

"I'm going to be a grandma again," Sophie said.

"Great-grandma trumps both," Nana said, proudly wearing a T-shirt that read, "Mom, Grandma, Great-grandma. I just keep getting better and better."

"I feel like we were just here for Lucy's baby," Lizzie said. "We'll be on a first-name basis with the staff soon."

"How much longer do you think?" Bella asked. After her dad's funeral, she'd moved in with Edward and Sophie and blended seamlessly with the family.

“First babies can take a while,” Lucy said. “But surely any time.”

After what seemed like forever, Dirk came out to announce the arrival of Hannah June Davidson. Emma’s baby. Daisy swiped at the happy tears. Emma had wanted this for so long, and Daisy was over the moon excited for her.

Everyone took a quick turn to congratulate Emma and introduce themselves to Hannah. Emma’s day in the spotlight was short-lived though. There was another monumental moment for the Parker family just around the corner.

* * *

Two days later, the Parkers were gathered together again. Beautiful fall mountains made a lovely backdrop for the wedding. Every shade of red, orange, yellow, and brown leaves engulfed the log cabin at the base of the Smoky Mountains. And the October sun bouncing off the trees gave the impression they’d caught fire.

Sophie Parker had once again outdone herself, coordinating a day to remember. Everything was picture-perfect and meticulously organized. While the men welcomed and escorted guests to their seats, Daisy and her sisters lounged in a room designated for the bride’s family.

“Thank goodness you gave up the idea of hiking to the top of a mountain for your wedding,” Kate said.

“Well, between Noah’s best man being in a wheelchair and three of my sisters having tiny babies, I figured that wouldn’t be feasible,” Daisy said.

“Plus, the whole thing about mom getting a cake up there,” Lizzie said.

Daisy laughed. “That too.” She was so happy, she didn’t care if they tied the knot next to a dumpster. She was just excited to get on with the rest of her life with her green-eyed hero.

“I can’t believe you gave birth less than forty-eight hours ago,” Kate said to Emma. “You should get some kind of medal or something.”

“Well, you do not want to know what’s going on under this dress,” Emma said. “But I couldn’t let my girl get married without a maid of honor.”

“I’m just glad you’re here,” Daisy said, giving Emma a hug, being careful not to disturb the little one in her arms. “And whatever’s happening downtown, the dress hides it perfectly. You look lovely.”

“And at least she had it before and not during the wedding,” Lizzie said.

“True,” Daisy agreed.

“These weddings were a lot more fun when y’all could drink,” Lizzie said, holding up her glass to clink with Daisy. Since Kate, Lucy, and Emma were all nursing, and Bella was underaged, they were the only two drinking mimosas.

“More champagne for us,” Daisy said.

“And, since you’re the one gettin’ hitched, I get my pick of men,” Lizzie said.

“Noah’s brothers are all married,” Daisy said. “Stay away from them.”

“Sure, but have you seen his buddies from the police force?” Lizzie licked her lips. “A couple of them look promising.”

“Forget Mom starting a bakery,” Emma said, changing the subject. “She should be a wedding planner. Everything looks so beautiful.”

“She’s good at it, but does she enjoy it? Or is she doing it for us?” Lucy said, standing up to bounce little Connor, who started fussing.

“If that’s the case, one more for Lizzie, and she’ll be done,” Emma said.

“Don’t forget Bella,” Lizzie said. “She’ll probably get married before I do.”

“I’m only sixteen.” Bella laughed. “So, I doubt that.”

“I can’t wait to meet the man who nails down Lizzie Parker,” Daisy said. “That will be quite the feat.” They all nodded in agreement.

“Well, since Daisy and Noah took the fifth strip mall spot, Mom’s off the hook for opening a bakery anyway,” Kate said. “The whole idea was that Parker women own all the spots.”

“Which is ironic,” Emma said. “Because most of us aren’t Parkers anymore.”

“Mom did seem rather relieved to hear that we wouldn’t be pushing her into that any longer,” Lucy said. “How’s your space, Daisy? You all settled?”

“Yes,” Daisy said. “We had a furniture delivery last week and moved the rest of the boxes in too. We’ll be ready to start there when we return from Hawaii.”

Daisy and Noah had decided to share her space at the mall. Noah would use the front third for his business, while Daisy took the back two-thirds. Adam’s team had done a wonderful job on the backdrops she’d requested and built her a lovely office.

“What about me?” Lizzie said. “Don’t have too much fun until I get over there.”

“I’m surprised Kate hasn’t sold the bar yet,” Lucy said.

“I’m trying,” Kate said. “Baby-making has kept me a little busy.”

“I thought you were the queen of multi-tasking,” Lizzie said. “Make some magic.”

“Workin’ on it,” Kate said. “In the meantime, Adam will hold it for you. It’ll cost him, but he’ll do it.”

“That’s him thinking wearing a husband hat instead of a business hat,” Emma said. “Good for Lizzie, not so much for Adam.”

When the time came, her sisters helped her into her dress. Daisy thought she’d be nervous, but she wasn’t. Not one little bit. Noah was the man for her. The one she’d been waiting on

all these years. Every dead-end relationship, heartbreak, and lousy date had led her to Noah.

Once he let go of the guilt, she'd seen a whole other side to him. Gone was the grumpy, stick-in-the-mud she'd met in her parents' kitchen. She wouldn't exactly call him wild and carefree, but he was definitely a more optimistic, I'll-at-least-give-it-a-try kind of guy.

Even if he never became Mr. Spontaneous—and she harbored no illusion that he would—she loved him just the way he was. He was the yin to her yang, the peanut butter to her jelly, the calm to her crazy. They were perfect together, and she couldn't wait to start their adventure as husband and wife.

* * *

Noah sucked in a deep breath, then headed down the aisle, Sophie Parker on his arm. He escorted her to her seat and took his spot next to the preacher. Between his family and Daisy's, the place was packed. To avoid a wedding party larger than the audience, they'd agreed to only a best man and a maid of honor.

It had been three and a half months since meeting Daisy, and he'd now spent enough time with the Parkers to know that the merger of their families would be seamless. They were both their own brand of crazy, but also just as loving and accepting.

After relieving himself of the guilty burden he carried constantly and tracking down Daisy on that train, his life had kicked into overdrive. Everything happening at warp speed.

He and Daisy spent every available second together and found that their polar opposite personalities complemented each other in a way that grounded them both. He'd thought about waiting to propose, but in the end, only waited a few weeks. Not wanting to marry in the dead of winter, their options were to wait until spring or do it as soon as possible. He hadn't balked when she picked sooner over later.

His niece, Kayla, walked down the aisle, carefully throwing rose petals along the path his soon-to-be bride would walk shortly. Dirk escorted Emma, who smiled, taking her place opposite Noah while Dirk took a seat in the crowd. That's when everyone stood, and the bridal march started.

Only it wasn't the bridal march anyone expected. The chorus of "Country Roads" blasted through the speakers as Daisy and her father danced down the aisle, Edward spinning her under his arm, both singing as they went. Noah couldn't help but laugh as the audience chimed in.

When the song faded, and everyone stood in their designated spots, Noah took Daisy's hands, and the preacher started the ceremony that would change his life forever.

The End

Thanks for reading!

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Want a sneak peek at the last book in the series? Just turn the page!

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Betting on Lizzie

The Parker Sisters—Book Five

CHAPTER ONE

This was not Lizzie Parker's first break up. In fact, it was the second this week.

She stared at Andy, the handsome yet overly gung-ho man across from her. He'd stopped by the bar to ask if she wanted to meet his parents. Hard pass.

"We've only been on two dates," Lizzie said. "What's the hurry?"

"Well, I mean, you did just turn thirty..."

Oh, no, he did not. An eyebrow shot up. "And?"

Reading the room correctly, he shut up and shrugged. Unfortunately for him, the comment had sealed his fate. She was glad they were at her bar instead of her home. This pill went down easier with a crowd.

"I'm sorry, Andy. I'm just not girlfriend material," she said. "You deserve someone better than me."

Andy nodded silently, and she smiled. *This* was her forte. Dating, she was only so-so at, but breaking up? Her time to shine.

"Well, I've got to get Charlie home for dinner," she said, standing. "Keep in touch, okay?"

Hearing his name, her seven-year-old Great Dane ambled over and nudged her thigh with his ginormous nose. She scratched his head and watched Andy walk out. "Whew," she said to the dog. "That one was a little awkward. Anywho, you ready to go?"

Charlie's sweet eyes met hers, and just like the first moment she saw him, her insides melted. After Lucy, her twin sister and next-door neighbor, got married, Lizzie found she had a lot more time on her hands. At the suggestion of Emma, another sister, she'd gone to the shelter looking for a friend. It had been exactly a month since Lizzie had fallen in love with Charlie. The only male to ever capture her heart so completely. Now, he was her constant shadow.

"Later, guys," Lizzie said to her employees. "Call if you need anything."

Charlie jumped into the back of her Jeep, and Lizzie buckled him into his doggie seatbelt. "You're such a good boy," she cooed, getting into the driver's seat. "Maybe Kate and Adam will bring Duke and Luna to dinner. Would you like that?"

Kate was another sister who had married recently. Although, there was no longer any point in differentiating sisters by whether they were married. As of last month, *all four* were hitched. Lizzie remained the lone single Parker sister. Her mother didn't pressure her overtly, but Lizzie knew she worried. Her being thirty and all.

Thankfully, her siblings had gotten straight down to business producing grandkids—three this year—which took some heat off Lizzie's singleness.

She pulled up to her parents' mini-mansion. Judging by the cars in the driveway, she was the last to arrive. Damn it, that meant all the good hors d'oeuvres were gone. She encouraged Charlie to pee in the front grass before heading inside.

Every Sunday was the same. Lizzie's sisters, their husbands and babies, her Nana, and now her cousin Bella, gathered 'round a burgeoning table and stuffed their faces with whatever deliciousness her mother made. With the exponential growth of the family, and to take some of the burden off their mom, they'd converted to a semi-potluck style dinner.

"I'm here," Lizzie called out, hoisting a box of wine bottles. "Party can start now." As a bartender, her standing potluck contribution was the booze.

Nana, wearing a T-shirt that read, “I want the job where I push scared skydivers out of the plane,” appeared from nowhere, holding a wine glass. “Finally,” she said. “Whatcha got?”

“Two reds, two whites, and a rosé,” Lizzie said. “Pick your poison.”

Once everyone had their food and drink, they settled in at the table, and the battle was on. Lizzie’s father called it conversation combat—everyone talking at once, over, under, and around each other. If you had something important to say, you had to come in armed for a fight.

“Lizzie,” her mother said. “You bringing anyone to Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Oh,” Lizzie said. “Probably not. Andy had to be let go this afternoon, so my slate’s clean.”

“Let go...” Emma laughed.

“You make him sound like an employee. What’d this one do?” her dad asked. That opened up a can of all the wacky reasons she’d ever dumped a guy.

“Coughed or yawned too loud?” Kate guessed. “I think you broke up with one of each.”

“Bad breath?” Emma’s husband, Dirk, said. “Bad driver? Bad kisser?”

“Doesn’t know all the words to ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’?” Daisy asked.

“Sewed his own clothes?” Lucy said. “That guy was awesome.”

“Only ate foods that were green?” Adam said.

“Wouldn’t sneeze in front of anyone?” her mom said.

“Thought Stevie Nicks was a man?” Lucy’s husband, Jack, asked.

“Mistook your dog for a horse?” Daisy’s brand-new husband, Noah said.

“Never mind,” her dad mumbled. “Sorry I asked.”

“I think they’re making fun of you, Lizzie,” Nana said. “Not sure if you caught that.”

“Yes. Thank you, Nana,” Lizzie said, rolling her eyes. “Y’all are hilarious. And wrong. He wanted me to meet his parents after two dates.”

“Geez, Lizzie. How many guys have you broken up with?” Lizzie’s cousin Bella asked.

“A few,” Lizzie said at the same time Lucy said, “Countless.” She shot her twin a dirty look.

“Oh, remember that guy that carried a purple rabbit’s foot everywhere?” Emma said.

“That was an employee I fired, not a boyfriend,” Lizzie said defensively. “And he was frickin’ weird. One day he forgot the thing and had to go home for it before he would start his shift.”

“Can you wash something like that?” Kate asked. “I mean, if he’s rubbing it all the time and it never gets cleaned...”

“Leave it to my wife to think of the hygiene aspect,” Adam said, putting his arm around Kate.

“Wasn’t so lucky the day you fired him,” Noah said, and Daisy snickered.

“Anyway...” Lizzie said, dragging out the words. “Surely someone has something else on the docket. Bella? How about you? How’s the new school? You making friends?”

Bella, recently orphaned, had just come to live with Lizzie’s parents. Moving from Charlotte to New Bern meant starting from scratch at a brand-new high school.

“Pretty good, I guess,” Bella said, shrugging. “I made friends with a girl named Maya. She’s pretty cool. I’m sleeping over tonight since tomorrow’s Veteran’s Day, and there’s no school.”

Lizzie wondered if the thick, black eyeliner and over-sullen attitude had anything to do with her new friend. Or maybe the

mourning of her father, who'd died of a heart attack less than six months ago. Either way, Lizzie wouldn't judge. First, because she'd gone through a similar phase, and second, Bella had had a rough go the last few months and deserved some slack.

"That sounds fun. I'm sure it will get easier the longer you're here," Kate said, and everyone nodded in agreement.

Sophie Parker did not allow electronic devices at her table, so after dinner, there was a mad rush to the wicker basket that held phones. Lizzie had a desperate message from Justin at the bar, begging for assistance. Tricia had gone home sick, and the place was packed.

"Crap, I gotta go help out at work," she said, grabbing her jacket. "Come on, boy. Later, y'all." Charlie trotted over to her.

Since his adoption, Charlie had become a constant fixture at The Drop. It might be some kind of health code violation, but she'd purposely never looked into it so she could claim plausible deniability if anyone ever complained. Sometimes, he'd mosey around and greet patrons, but mostly, he just slept in Lizzie's office. Especially at night. He'd gone straight to his bed after they arrived, and Lizzie jumped in to take over bartending.

Awhile later, a group of guys came in, obviously celebrating something. She recognized one of them as Dax, a firefighter she'd dated for a couple of weeks. From the look of his crew, he was with friends from work.

One guy stood out. He appeared to be a little older and a lot impatient with their obnoxious, rowdy antics—maybe he was their boss. As he approached the bar, Lizzie saw wariness in his soulful, coffee-brown eyes.

"Your best añejo, neat. Please," he said.

Lizzie's eyebrows inched upward. Sophisticated drink for a sophisticated man?

"You seem out of place with that crowd," she said, reaching for the top-shelf tequila.

“Yeah, I probably am,” he said. He had some gray at his temples and a few creases in his forehead, but that didn’t detract from his commanding presence and handsome face.

“Lizzie, we want to do shots,” Dax said, sidling up beside the man. He nodded to the bottle in her hand.

Lizzie held up the bottle of Don Julio, her finest tequila. “This is añejo. It’s not for shots,” she said.

“Why not?” Dax asked. “What’s the difference?”

The man spoke before she could answer. “Añejo is for sipping. Reverently,” he said, a touch annoyed if she wasn’t mistaken. She passed him the drink. He took a small sip and hummed his appreciation.

“Oh, Ben,” Dax said. “We’re celebrating, not pondering the wonders of the world. Lighten up.”

“Heathen,” the man named Ben mumbled.

Lizzie lined up six shots on a tray, poured, and pushed them toward Dax.

“I miss you, Lizzie,” Dax said, clearly pushing past tipsy. He turned to his friend. “You don’t wanna get mixed up with her, Ben. She’ll break your heart.” Dax took the tray of drinks and returned to his booth.

“Boyfriend?” Ben asked.

“Not for long,” Lizzie said. “Can’t date someone who doesn’t appreciate fine liquor.”

He handed her thirty dollars. “No change.”

Hm. Generous paired nicely with tequila connoisseur. She stuffed the money into her bra, and he raised an eyebrow. She winked and turned away to take another order.

Three hours later, she locked the bar doors, loaded up Charlie, and drove home to her condo. She’d no sooner shut her front door and dropped her purse when her cell phone rang. What the heck? It was two in the morning. This couldn’t be good.

“Hello,” Lizzie said.

“Lizzie,” Bella whispered. “It’s Bella. I need your help.”

Lizzie jotted down the address and left immediately, leaving Charlie sleeping on the couch. She pulled into the driveway of a huge two-story Victorian on the lake. Hip-hop music blared from inside. Probably some rich kid throwing a party while his parents were out of town. Bella was waiting on the porch.

“What’s goin’ on?” Lizzie asked. Bella smelled of alcohol and was unsteady on her feet.

“It’s Maya,” Bella said. “She’s pretty drunk, and there’s a guy here giving her a hard time.”

“Why don’t you guys leave?”

“Our friend Taylor was the DD. We were supposed to spend the night at her house, but she got sick and left us stranded. I didn’t know who else to call. I don’t want Uncle Edward to know, and Maya’s dad can’t find out either.”

“Let’s find your friend,” Lizzie said, heading toward the door.

Bella panicked when Maya wasn’t in the living room. “I shouldn’t have left her,” Bella said. “She obviously didn’t want to be alone with Devon.”

Lizzie searched the house, starting with the bedrooms upstairs. Behind one door, she heard high-pitched protests. She shoved open the door to find a teenage kid with his arms around a terrified girl. Both were still dressed, but Lizzie knew from experience how quickly this kind of thing could go south. She grabbed the guy by the hair and yanked his head back. “Beat it,” she growled into his ear.

“Who are you?”

“I’m your worst nightmare,” Lizzie said. “Get your sorry ass out of here. Now.”

The teen wisely backed out of the room without saying another word. Bella ran to Maya, who was crying. “Are you okay?”

Maya looked at Lizzie. “Thank you,” she said. “I thought he just wanted to make out. He wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Let’s go,” Lizzie said. She loaded the girls into her car and took them back to her place. They would get a stern lecture on the perils of underage drinking from her tomorrow, but it was too late tonight.

After making them each drink a bottle of water, she put them to bed in the guest room. Exhausted, she took a quick shower to wash away the day, then fell into bed.

She’d barely drifted off when “Red Red Wine” blaring from her phone woke her. The caller ID showed an unknown number.

“This better be good,” she mumbled.

“Elizabeth Parker?” a man’s voice asked.

“Yes.”

“You own The Drop on Main Street?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Who’s this?”

“New Bern FR. We need you to come down here right away.”

“Fire department? What’s going on?” she asked.

“Your bar’s on fire.”

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About the Author

Jamie recently relocated to the beautiful state of Tennessee, where she lives with her husband of 24+ years and their dog, Bella. Their wonderful, brilliant children are all grown up and out of the nest. Jamie now spends her days traveling, gardening, writing, and waiting patiently (more or less) for some grandbabies.

She loves dark chocolate, dogs, and sitting on the back porch with a good book.