

THE DONOVANS SERIES

Loving You

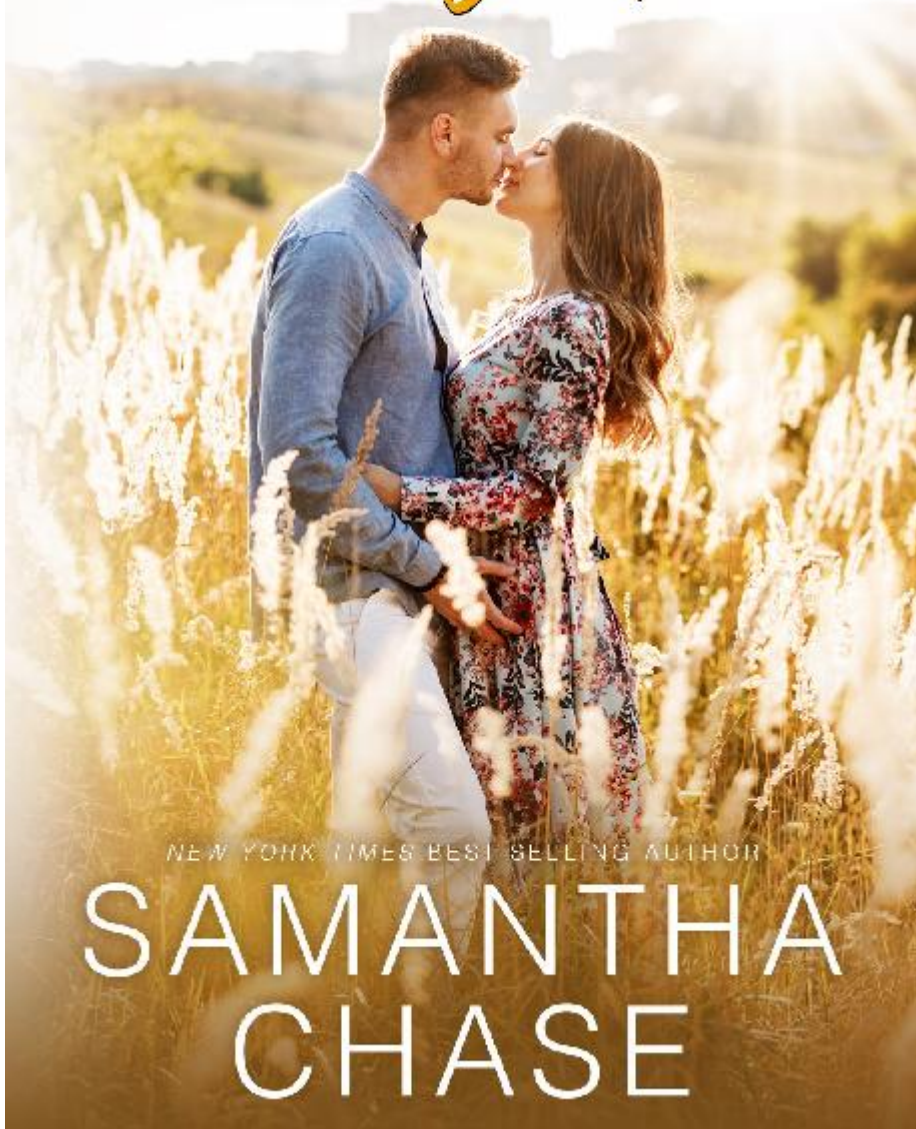


NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

SAMANTHA
CHASE

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Praise for Samantha Chase

“If you can’t get enough of stories that get inside your heart and soul and stay there long after you’ve read the last page, then Samantha Chase is for you!”

*-NY Times & USA Today Bestselling Author **Melanie Shawn***

“A fun, flirty, sweet romance filled with romance and character growth and a perfect happily ever after.”

*-NY Times & USA Today Bestselling Author **Carly Phillips***

“Samantha Chase writes my kind of happily ever after!”

*-NY Times & USA Today Bestselling Author **Erin Nicholas***

“The openness between the lovers is refreshing, and their interactions are a balanced blend of sweet and spice. The planets may not have aligned, but the elements of this winning romance are definitely in sync.”

*- **Publishers Weekly, STARRED review***

“A true romantic delight, *A Sky Full of Stars* is one of the top gems of romance this year.”

*- **Night Owl Reviews, TOP PICK***

“Great writing, a winsome ensemble, and the perfect blend of heart and sass.”

*- **Publishers Weekly***

“Recommend Chase to fans of Susan Elizabeth Phillips. Well-written and uniquely appealing.”

- *Booklist*

Chapter One

If you eat something and no one sees you eat it, it has no calories.

“Why thank you, fortune cookie. I have to agree,” Jade Mackenzie said as she popped the second half of the cookie into her mouth.

It was another riveting Friday night in Sweetbriar Valley.

Not.

Okay, maybe it was. After all, she was sitting on the floor in the middle of the little shop she was preparing to open. Books & Beans was something she had wanted to do for years and she was finally making it happen. The little indie bookstore and coffee shop was a pure labor of love and in another two weeks, she would open the doors to the public.

If the public would actually come.

Yeah, there was a small knot of dread that she couldn't quite kick where that was concerned. Jade wasn't exactly a neighborhood darling in Sweetbriar. She had hoped that the more time that passed, people would move on, but...there were quite a few who hadn't.

Still, she refused to let that stop her from achieving her dream. If nothing else, she wanted to prove to her son that

hard work, determination, and overcoming obstacles—even those in the form of rude and closed-minded people—lead to success.

Oh, please let this be a success...

“Jade? Where do you want these books to go?” her mother called out from the back room.

Slowly, she got to her feet and stretched. Every inch of her body hurt and all she wanted was to go home and soak in a nice hot bath. Unfortunately, the tub in her little rental house wasn’t big enough for her knees and boobs to be under water at the same time.

“When this store starts making real money, I’m buying a bigger house with one of those free-standing soaker tubs.” Laughing softly, she picked up the remnants of her dinner and tossed them in the trash. “And I’m going to take bubble baths every damn day.”

Sure, it was a silly thing to dream about, but it was important to set goals and have something to work toward.

Even when it was just a bathtub.

“Jade?” her mother called out again.

“What genre are they?” she asked.

“Judging by the cute couple gazing adoringly at each other on the cover, I’m going to say romance.”

Laughing softly, Jade walked back to where her mom was checking in the inventory. “Ooh...cute cover.” Grinning at her mom, she said, “We have the romance nook to the left of the coffee counter. Ask Dad if the stain is dry on the shelves though before you put them out. Is he back from picking up Silas yet?”

“No, but I’m sure they’ll be here soon.” They worked in silence for several minutes, stacking books and cutting up boxes. “I think he mentioned them stopping for ice cream on the way back. You know how the two of them are with their dessert.”

She wanted to be mad and maybe say something about how her son shouldn’t be having ice cream at eight at night, but sometimes you just had to give in. “I hope they bring some back for us.”

Beside her, her mother laughed. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Think of how melty it could be.”

“It’s a risk I’d be willing to take.” After taking another small stack of books out of a box, she sighed.

“Are you okay, Jade?” Her mother immediately put her books down and reached for her hand.

“Am I doing the right thing, Mom? I mean...maybe I should have looked someplace else. Another town or...or...”

Annoyance was the first expression on her mother’s face, but it was gone in a flash. “We’ve been over this. Did something happen before I got here?”

Yes.

Instead of saying anything specific, she shrugged. “People are just...well...there are a few who are being very vocal about not shopping here. I’m just afraid they’re going to make a big enough fuss that it’ll scare any potential customers away.”

“I’d love to get my hands on Victoria Nelson and give her a good hard shake.” Pausing, she gave her daughter a sly grin. “And maybe a good slap across her snooty face.”

“You and me both, but that’s not going to happen.”

Even though it happened almost nightly in her dreams.

“You’d think she’d want you to succeed for Silas’ sake! I mean...how heartless can you be?”

“I think we’ve seen how heartless she is. She has no interest in Silas or his well-being. She sees him as a nuisance, the reason her golden child son didn’t go on to greatness.”

“Pfft...her golden child son didn’t go on to greatness because he had a drinking problem and tried to wrestle a police officer during a DUI stop.” Cora Mackenzie was fiercely protective of her daughter and grandson, and she never hesitated to come to their defense. Even when no one was around. “You’d think more people would speak up about how she and Lloyd turned their backs on their own grandson! Not to mention the way Trevor walked away too!”

Jade shrugged. “I think Trevor walking away was a blessing in disguise. He’s a terrible role model, and I’d hate to think of how he would have been with Silas.” She let out another sigh. “Why can’t they just let me be, huh? I mean, I’ve asked nothing of them. I just want to raise my son and be left alone. That isn’t too much to ask, is it?”

“No, it’s not.” Cora pulled her in for a hug. “And I’m sorry that Victoria’s making things so hard for you.”

“Me too. I just wish...”

“Mom! Mom! Mom!” her son called out as soon as he ran through the door. “Guess what?”

His blond hair was a complete mess, his clothes were a bit muddy, and his face was covered in chocolate. All in all, he looked like a boy who’d had a great day.

“What?” she asked excitedly as she crouched down in front of him.

“Tommy’s dad is going to be the coach of the youth football team and he thinks I should try out! We were playing in their backyard and he saw me throw the ball and said I was a natural! How cool is that?”

“Very! That’s awesome, Si!”

“Gramps is going to take me shopping this weekend to get a football of my own so I can practice throwing some more!” Then he threw his little eight-year-old body at her and gave her a fierce hug. “It’s gonna be great!” He released her just as quickly when he heard his grandfather walk in. “We stopped at The Scoop House and Gramps got you and Grams ice cream. Milkshakes ’cause he said everything else would melt too fast.”

Straightening, Jade smiled at her dad. “Thanks.”

“Silas,” her father said, “you need to go wash up, okay?”

“Okay!” And then he took off for the restroom.

Jade took a sip of her chocolate milkshake as she watched her father kiss her mother on the cheek before handing her a strawberry one. After thirty-five years of marriage, they were still very much in love.

And she was wildly envious.

“Looks like you two were busy,” her dad said as he looked around. “Those shelves are all dry, so we’re good to put books out.”

“That’s great, Dad,” Jade said with a smile, and a bit of a brain freeze from the milkshake. When she put her cup down and went to grab a pile, her father shook his head.

“Just tell me where you want them, and I’ll get them there. Finish your dessert. Millie over at The Scoop House said to tell you hello and after I bragged about how great everything was coming along, she said she couldn’t wait to come in and see it all for herself.” Honestly, Sam Mackenzie was the greatest dad a girl could ask for.

And he didn’t mind doing a lot of the grunt work.

So Jade sat on one of the stools and simply gave directions for a few minutes. Silas came back out and regaled them all with stories of what an amazing athlete he was going to be. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind that he would be.

She just didn’t have to be happy about it.

Before long, it was clear how tired everyone was and she was shocked to see it was almost ten o’clock. “Okay, let’s call it a day,” she said around a yawn. “We’ve got two weeks before the big grand opening and I think we’re really making progress.” Stretching, she smiled at her parents. “Thank you for all your help today. I couldn’t do any of this without you.”

They each hugged her and promised to come in tomorrow to help wherever they could.

“No work on Sunday, though,” her mother said firmly. “We’re all going to go to church together, and then I’m making us a nice meal so we can relax.”

It would be pointless to argue, so she didn’t. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Do I have to be here tomorrow?” Silas whined. “There’s nothing fun for me to do.”

It was true; at this point there wasn’t anything exciting for a young boy to do here, but finding places for him to go when she was working long hours wasn’t always easy.

“Uncle Steve and Aunt Viv are going to take you to the movies tomorrow,” her mother announced, much to Jade’s surprise.

“They are?”

Her mother nodded.

“But...”

“Just because you don’t like to ask for help doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t know you need it,” Cora replied sweetly before looking down at Silas. “They’re going to pick you up here tomorrow and take you to lunch with your cousins and then to the movies! Won’t that be fun?”

“Yay!” was her son’s only response before he ran to the back door. “Can we go now?”

It took a few minutes for Jade to walk around and make sure everything was put away and turned off. In her mind, she was working out what she wanted to accomplish tomorrow and how she was going to get it all done.

“Mom!”

And she could finish thinking about it once she was home and her son was in bed. “Sorry, bud. I know it’s late.” Ruffling his hair, they locked up, hugged her parents and wished them a good night before climbing into their car. The SUV was a hand-me-down from her brother, but it was in good condition and felt a little sporty. As they drove home, Silas talked incessantly about what movie he hoped they were going to see and where he wanted to go to eat and all the fun he was going to have tomorrow instead of unpacking books.

“You should take the day off and come with us, Mom,” he said before yawning loudly. “You work too hard.”

Smiling sweetly at him, she nodded. “I promise to take some time off once the shop is up and running.”

“Okay,” he mumbled, but she saw the disappointment on his face.

School would be letting out in a few weeks—which was why she chose to open her store at that time. With more people home for the summer, it was the perfect time for them to come in during the day for coffee and a muffin and look at books. Jade had even reached out to the local schools to find out their summer reading lists and made sure to stock copies of all of them. She’d put so much work into making sure she’d thought of everything. The PTA at all three schools promised to promote her and would send out flyers with the students’ end-of-the-year packets to tell their parents that they could get all summer reading books from her store. It would be perfect and would hopefully help her kick off the opening of the shop with a bang.

I’ve got this...

Pulling into the driveway, she looked in the rearview mirror and saw that Silas was almost asleep.

“Hey, sweet boy. We’re home.”

He nodded sleepily and practically fell out of the car. Together, they walked up to the door and went inside. She helped him get to his room and took a pair of pajamas out of his dresser and handed them to him. While he went into the bathroom to change, Jade walked into her own bedroom and changed into her pajamas. They met back up in the hallway where she followed him to his room and covered him with his blankets once he was in bed.

“Good night,” she whispered before kissing him on the forehead. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Mom. Love you.”

Her heart squeezed. “Love you too.” Quietly, she walked to the door and turned out the light. There were things she really needed to do around the house, but she was so damn tired. It took less than three seconds to decide that putting in a load of laundry wouldn’t hurt and doing an online grocery order would be helpful.

The next time she looked at the clock, it was after midnight.

“Dammit,” she murmured and promptly shut her laptop, turned out the lights, and shuffled to her bedroom.

This space was her sanctuary and the most overly feminine space in the house. This was the one room she knew she could come to and truly relax. Canopy bed, twinkly lights, soft, muted colors...this room had been the one splurge she allowed for herself. If she was going to have to sleep alone, she at least wanted the room to be fabulous.

Jade was used to climbing into the bed alone, but sometimes she wished someone were there with her—someone she could talk about her day with and who would tell her she wasn’t crazy for taking on such a big venture.

Someone to hold her.

Someone to kiss her goodnight.

And someone to help her remember she was a woman.

As her eyes drifted shut, she told herself that was one dream that would probably never come true.

* * *

“Hey, Levi. They want to see you in HR.”

Levi Donovan looked up at his assistant and frowned.
“HR? Really?”

She nodded.

“When?”

“Now.”

O-kay...that wasn't what he expected. Rising, he grabbed his phone. “Do you know what it's about? Is anyone else going too?”

“Just you,” she said quietly before walking away.

There had been some conversations going around about some new policies regarding working from home, so he figured they were maybe calling all the top tier management in to go over it. Maybe his assistant just wasn't aware of it.

Stepping out of his office, he made his way down the hall to the elevator. He was in a good mood and this little surprise meeting wasn't going to bring him down. His advertising campaign for the travel bureau in Virginia was doing really well and he had a presentation prepared for a Michelin Star restaurant that was coming to Alexandria that he knew was going to blow everyone away.

Levi had always been creative and he was very at ease talking to people. That's why working for Creative Alexandria had been like a dream come true. He moved up the ranks quickly and right now he was their top guy, the main man, the guy all the other ad execs wanted to beat.

Not gonna happen...

Yeah, Levi knew so many of his co-workers wanted the clients that he had, but right now he was on a winning streak. It was like he had the Midas Touch that's lasted for almost two years. He was making great money, had a fantastic condo, was driving a brand-new Lexus SUV, and was dating a woman who was pretty fantastic.

He and Mandy had been dating quietly for several months and while he wasn't in love with her, he did like her a lot. They always had a great time together and although she traveled a lot for her job, the time they did have together was always great. Did he see a future with her? Maybe. But he wasn't sure if he would ever really see that with anyone. As a child of divorce, he kind of had a jaded view on the whole marriage and happily-ever-after thing.

So really, his relationship with Mandy was perfect for him.

Stepping into the elevator, his phone dinged in his hand. When he glanced down at the screen, he frowned when he saw his older sister's name. He'd been estranged from his family for the last several years, but after getting together for their father's 60th birthday last month, he promised to do better at keeping in touch.

Billie: Hey! In case you've forgotten, it's Mom's birthday in two weeks.

Billie: We were all hoping you could come visit for that weekend.

Billie: It would really mean a lot to her

Muttering a curse, Levi toyed with the idea of saying he was busy, but...he wasn't a liar. And really, there wasn't any particular reason for him staying away. He had worked hard to escape small town life and every time he went back to visit, he was miserable. Living in Alexandria was exciting; there was always something to do and plenty of places to go. Every time he went home to Sweetbriar Ridge, it was just a lot of the same old, same old. Nothing was new, everything was the same, and the people were just...not the kind he related to anymore.

Still...it was his mother's birthday and he knew he could suck it up for a weekend.

Levi: Hey! Just going into a meeting, but I'll definitely be there

Billie: Really? You mean it?

Levi: Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?

Billie: Because you've been known to say yes and then not show up

Sadly, he had done that on more than one occasion.

Levi: You have my word. I'll be there.

Levi: Are we having a big party or is it just a family dinner?

Billie: A small dinner party with us and a few friends at Sweetbriar's Steak House

Groaning, he forced himself not to comment on how they really should come to Alexandria so he could take them to a truly superior steakhouse.

But...he kept silent.

Levi: Sounds good. I'm putting it on my calendar now

Billie: Excellent!

Billie: We'll text you next week to confirm who you're staying with and what you need to bring

Levi: Thanks. I need to go. I'll talk to you next week

Billie: Love you!

Sliding the phone into his pocket, he stepped off the elevator and walked across the hall into the Human Resources department. A few people glanced at him before quickly looking away, and that's when he realized maybe there was something else going on that he wasn't aware of.

When Susan Greer, the head of HR, walked over to greet him, he noticed her somber expression. "Thanks for coming down, Levi. This way, please."

He followed her to her office, where he spotted his boss, Mr. Penwell, standing by the window.

"Um..."

There were two people sitting in chairs in front of the desk, and when they stood, Levi froze.

“Levi,” Mr. Penwell began. “I’d like to introduce you to my nephew, Eric, and his *wife*, Mandy.” By the way he emphasized the word *wife*, Levi knew he was in trouble.

She’s married?!

Mandy wouldn’t look directly at him and as Susan walked around to take her seat at her desk, everyone faced her. There were no other chairs to sit in, so he was forced to stand.

“Levi,” Susan said as she looked down at a file in her hands. “It has been brought to our attention that you have become...personally involved with a client.”

Swallowing hard, all he could do was nod.

“He’s sleeping with my wife,” Eric snapped angrily.

“Is it really necessary for them to be here?” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. “Shouldn’t this be a little more...private?”

That’s when Mr. Penwell chimed back in. “This sort of conduct is not acceptable, Levi. You knew this when you were hired. There is to be no fraternizing with clients! Especially married ones!”

“I had no idea she was married!” he fired back. And yeah, it seemed like a lame excuse, but it was the truth. “I’ll admit that I knew getting involved with a client was frowned upon, but I didn’t think it was a serious offense. And if I’d known she was married, I never would have done a thing! That’s not the kind of person I am!”

He glared at the back of Mandy’s head, but she never even acknowledged him.

“I’m sorry, Levi, but it’s more than frowned upon. It’s grounds for dismissal. Security will escort you up to your

office so you can pack your things. Your position with Creative Alexandria is terminated effective immediately.”

“But...but I have a presentation with the restaurant group...”

“Stan Heely will be taking that over. He’s being brought up to speed on it as we speak. Please hand over all your files to him before you leave.”

Screw that, he wanted to yell.

“Mr. Penwell, please. Don’t I at least get a chance to defend myself? I mean...how could I have known...?”

“The fact that you got involved at all is the issue, Levi, not whether you knew of her marital status.” He paused. “Now, please don’t make this any more awkward than it already is. The security team is waiting outside the door for you and Susan has some forms for you to sign.”

This was it. There was no way out of it.

With a small sigh, he stepped forward to sign the damn papers, but not before he caught Eric’s smug smirk. After he signed the papers, he figured he had nothing else to lose.

“Seriously, Mandy? You’re not going to say anything?”

She looked up at him, her expression oddly cool. “I’m sorry, Levi.”

“Security’s waiting,” his former boss said, which really was his way of telling Levi to get the hell out.

Well, fine. He’d go. And as he strode out the door, there wasn’t a doubt in his mind that he’d have a new job by this time tomorrow. He’d made a lot of friends in this business and he had a list of contacts a mile long.

With his head held high, he walked out, and in less than two hours, he walked out to the parking garage with the help of both security guards. He had several boxes and they were kind enough not to make him do this in several trips.

“Thanks for the help, guys,” he said before shaking their hands.

“Sorry to see you go, Mr. Donovan. You were one of the few execs who actually stopped and chatted with us.”

“Yeah,” the second one said. “And we always appreciated the breakfasts you sent to our department each month. Sorry it ended like this.”

“Me too. Believe me,” he said wearily before shaking their hands one more time. “Take care of yourselves. And tell Stan I sent you breakfast twice a month.” And with a wink, he climbed into the car.

It took several minutes for him to relax and for the events of the last two hours to truly sink in.

Fired.

He had actually been fired.

Glancing at the clock, he saw it was almost lunchtime and knew if he waited an hour or two, he could start making calls. With any luck, there'd barely be a break in the action for him. He could realistically be sitting at a new desk within twenty-four hours.

Feeling better, he pulled out of the parking garage and made the thirty-minute commute home. He left the boxes exactly where they were because he was confident that he'd just be taking them back out again tomorrow to load into a new office.

He called in a lunch order to a local Thai restaurant and waited for it to be delivered while making a list of his best prospects. By the time the food arrived, Levi had created a spreadsheet of who he was calling and in what order. He enjoyed his lunch, took a few minutes to scroll through social media, and then sat down and made his first call.

Unfortunately, someone seemed to have made calls ahead of him.

At least, that was his theory.

Three hours later, he had been turned down by eighteen different firms and all of them were less than polite about it.

Now he was feeling a little less confident, but not completely deterred. This just meant that he would have to consider relocating. With that thought in mind, he updated his resume and went onto several online job-hunting sites to see what was out there. Right now, he couldn't afford to be picky, and even though his eventual goal had been to have a firm of his own, clearly that wasn't going to happen in Alexandria.

Too many burned bridges thanks to Mandy.

Speaking of...

Taking out his phone, he immediately blocked her number and was about to delete all her texts when a thought occurred to him—he could potentially sue for wrongful termination. After all, Mandy pursued him, not the other way around. That could be some sort of entrapment, couldn't it?

Maybe his father was right about relationships. Maybe this was exactly the sort of thing he'd been talking about. Only... that would mean his father was referring to Levi's mother and...no...just no.

Still...this situation taught him you had to be careful with who you could trust. Thankfully, he hadn't been in love with Mandy or he'd be devastated right now. Clearly she was just a bored wife looking for a little excitement, and she'd used him to get it.

Costing him his job.

“And now I'm looking for a good attorney,” he murmured.

Basically, there were going to be a lot of things keeping him busy over the next few days, and they were all the keys to a better future.

“Bring it on, universe. I'm ready.” And after sending out an email to a lawyer friend of his, Levi relaxed in his chair and waited for a response.

Chapter Two

Jade looked around her little shop and felt overly emotional. In one hour, she was going to flip that little sign on the door to say “Open” and it was going to be the start of something wonderful.

The bookshelves were stocked.

The variety of coffee blends were fantastic.

And the small case of baked goods looked like something from one of those lifestyle magazines.

Towns like Sweetbriar Ridge were too small for those big coffee chains, but she was determined to make sure no one felt the need to drive twenty miles away to go to one. Her little shop was just as good, and they’d be helping one of their own make a living rather than lining the pockets of some major corporation.

If only they would give her a chance.

“Hey, boss lady,” Billie Donovan said as she walked out of the kitchen. “Are you ready for our grand opening?” Billie was a phenomenal baker, and Jade was thrilled when she applied for the job.

“I think so. Did we miss anything? Is anything out of place?”

Laughing, Billie looked around. “Jade, you did a phenomenal job. If I didn’t work here, I’d want to be here every day. You created a place that literally has something for everyone. I mean...look around you! Each little nook and section is dedicated to every kind of booklover from romance to mysteries and thrillers, to children’s and non-fiction. We’re a small store, but you managed to fill it with a little something to appeal to the masses.”

She nodded because that was her goal. “And we do have a program set up to special order anything anyone needs that we might not carry.” Pausing, she glanced around herself. “I think getting the schools on board will really be a big hit. I ordered a little extra of the titles on those summer reading lists.”

“You know that a lot of people read on tablets now, though, right? I’m not trying to be negative, but...”

“No, I know. But I’m hoping to encourage young readers to try holding a book in their hands. Plus, it seems like there are a lot of readers on TikTok who showcase physical copies of books. Maybe that will help too.”

“It certainly can’t hurt.” Stepping back behind the counter, Billie straightened some of the trays of goodies. “Okay, we’ve got chocolate chip muffins, blueberry scones, peanut butter cookies, oatmeal raisin cookies, lemon pound cake, brownies, blondies, and cinnamon rolls. We’ll have to start asking people what they’d like to see added or what they like or don’t like so we can make changes accordingly.”

Nodding, she agreed. They had decided on the menu to cover the basics and knew it might take a while before they had it finalized. It was a great starting point and the fact that they had the freedom to change it whenever they wanted was definitely a perk.

“I’m so glad Suzi over at the bakery isn’t upset that we’re selling baked goods. I was so worried about that.”

With a muttered “pfft,” Billie waved her off. “It’s really not the same. We just have a small selection here. She has an entire shop with cakes and pies. But I know what you’re saying. Suzi has been here for most of my life. Still, a little competition never hurt anyone.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that...”

“Is anyone from the Sweetbriar Gazette coming in to cover the opening?” Billie asked, changing the subject.

“Yes, um...I’m not sure who they’re sending, but they said someone was coming in. I had hoped to get someone from Channel 12 to do a story on us, but they never got back to me.”

“I’m sure they will when the Chamber of Commerce does their thing next month.”

The local Chamber of Commerce did a spotlight on local businesses once a month. Unfortunately, the timing of the opening of Books & Beans fell after their normally scheduled spotlight this month, so they promised she’d be their focus next time.

“Look at you, local business owner Jade Mackenzie,” Billie said with a smile. “You should be very proud of yourself. This was a huge accomplishment.”

Tears stung her eyes as she nodded. “I just hope it’s a success.”

Billie came around the counter and hugged her. “It will be. There’s been a lot of good buzz about it and I know I’ve been bragging about you for months now, and so have my mom and

sisters. The schools are all behind you, so really, how can you lose?”

“I can’t even think about it,” she murmured.

“Come on, let’s sit and have a pre-opening, celebratory cup of coffee and a little something sweet. What would you like? A muffin? Scone?”

“Definitely a muffin. What about you?”

“I’m going for the pound cake. It’s my grandmother’s recipe and a personal favorite.”

Within minutes, they were sitting down and toasted to their success with their mugs of coffee. “Thank you for being willing to share the recipe.”

“Are you kidding? She’s kind of loving the fact that I’m making it and selling it here.”

“You told her?”

Billie nodded. “Oh, yeah. Grandma Donovan is a big fan of people knowing what an awesome cook and baker she is.”

“My grandmother—my mom’s mom—was a good baker, but her specialty was pies. And sadly, I was never a big pie eater.” She shrugged. “But give me cake, cookies, or ice cream, and I’m in love!”

“So, what are your expectations for today? I know your mom’s coming in and will be working with us, but I guess I’m curious how you see the day going?”

“I think this week will be a bit of a slow start. People will come in out of curiosity and look around. Next week, it should all start coming together.” Pausing, she took a sip of coffee. “At least...I hope that’s what happens.”

Reaching over, Billie gave her arm a little squeeze. “You got this!”

Off in the distance, she heard her mother come in. “Good morning!”

“Grab a cup of coffee! We’re having a pre-opening cup,” Jade called out, and two minutes later, her mother was sitting down with them.

“What do you think, Cora? Are you ready for the day?” Billie asked.

Jade turned and looked at her mother, but noticed she looked a little distracted. “Mom? Is everything okay?”

“It’s nothing, sweetie.” She held up her cup. “Cheers to your first day!”

But Jade wasn’t fooled. “Mom...come on. Out with it.”

Her shoulders sagged as she let out a long breath. “You know my next-door neighbor, Gail?”

Nodding, she replied, “Of course. She’s the vice president of the PTA. Why?”

“Well...she told me that your flyers didn’t go out in the end-of-year packets,” Cora said sadly. “She said there was some sort of confusion and someone sent in coupons for some big online site for the students to get their books at 50% off. I’m so sorry, Jade. I know how much you were counting on those flyers bringing people in.”

Letting out a shaky breath of her own, she tried not to freak out.

But in her head, she was totally freaking out.

“I can go to the schools and bring a whole new batch of flyers and ask them to hand them out,” Cora suggested. “I’m not sure they’ll do it, but it can’t hurt to try, right?”

“My sister Chloe is a kindergarten teacher. I’ll text her and see if she can find out what happened,” Billie suggested. “She probably won’t see the text until lunchtime, but...”

“It won’t do any good,” Jade said miserably. “Mistakes happen all the time. It just sucks that it happened this time.”

They all sat in silence for several long moments before Billie stood up. “You know what? We don’t need their help. We’re gonna be just fine and still get the word out. Don’t you worry.” She finished her coffee and walked behind the counter. “I’m going to go and wash my hands and this mug so I can be ready when you open the door.”

It wasn’t until she was out of sight that Jade looked at her mother. “I don’t think this was an honest mistake,” she murmured. “I think someone specifically took my flyers out.”

“I didn’t want to say that, but...”

Even though her appetite was gone, she forced herself to finish her muffin and coffee. “There’s nothing I can do to prove it, so...we’ll make our own little signs promoting the summer reading books so anyone who comes in will definitely see them.”

“That’s my girl! You’ve got this.”

If only she felt that confident in herself.

At ten a.m., she opened the doors of Books & Beans and was pleasantly surprised by the small crowd waiting to come in. Billie was working the counter while Jade and Cora greeted customers and answered questions about the store and what kind of books they would be stocking.

By noon, she had scheduled her first official book club meeting as well as a weekly story time for kids. Every time she looked over at Billie, she got a thumbs up and a big smile.

Her father showed up at one with a group of his friends, who all ordered coffees and several baked goods each. In fact, they ordered so much they almost wiped out their case!

“Dad, you didn’t have to do this,” Jade said even as she hugged him.

“Well, now, your mother told me about what happened with the flyers and the guys and I had just gotten out of a meeting and figured we’d grab some goodies before heading back to the office.”

“I think you’re full of baloney, but I love you for it.”

It was after three when the biggest crowds came in—mostly parents of kindergarteners. Jade spent a lot of time helping to make coffee and answering questions about books for new readers. Billie was packing up to leave and came over to hug her.

“Chloe didn’t find out anything yet, but she sent most of her class here today!” Looking around, she smiled proudly. “I’d stay and hang out some more, but my brother’s coming to town for the weekend and staying with me. I need to go grocery shopping and finish making up my guest room.”

“I wouldn’t let you stay even if you wanted to. You put in a long day.”

“So did you, Jade, and I know you’re not leaving anytime soon.”

“Yeah, well...it goes with being the boss.”

“I know, but...I hate to see you doing so much on your own.” She paused and pointed toward the kitchen. “Okay, I’m going to come in early and get all the baking done for tomorrow and Saturday. We have backup stuff in the freezer if we need it, but that is totally a last resort type of thing.”

“Got it.”

“Are you sure there isn’t anything I can do before I go?”

Shaking her head, she gave Billie a playful shove toward the door. “Have a good night and please tell Chloe I said thank you.”

“See you in the morning, and I definitely will.”

There was a steady flow of people coming and going, and by the time Silas came in with her dad after five, she was practically dead on her feet.

“Oh, my goodness,” she said as she sat down and hugged her son. “Did you have a good day?”

He nodded around a brownie. “One more week of school! I can’t wait to go to camp so I can play all day!” Then he looked around. “How was your big day? Did everyone buy all the books you wanted them to?”

Laughing softly, she kissed his cheek before leaning back in her chair. “Well...not exactly. But close.”

“Good.” Then he glanced around again. “Gram said we’re having spaghetti for dinner. Are you coming home with us?”

“Not yet. It’s the first day so I really want to stay until closing time. I don’t want to leave our new workers here all by themselves.”

He pouted slightly but got over it quickly when her mother called out that it was time to go.

Jade kissed him goodbye and told him she'd see him at home before rising and going to spend time with her two new employees. Curtis was working toward a degree in library sciences and Erica was a young girl saving up to go to college. Jade adored them both and felt incredibly blessed to have them as part of her team.

She walked with them through the routine she hoped to set for the afternoon and evening shifts—everything from straightening the bookshelves to cleaning procedures mandated by the Board of Health. Right now, the shop was going to be open Monday through Saturday. It seemed odd to most people that she chose to open on a Thursday, but this was really more of a soft opening—a testing of the waters, so to speak.

Today, she opened at ten in the morning, but that was just because she was nervous about opening any earlier. From the feedback they received throughout the day, starting tomorrow, they would open at eight a.m. It would make things a little rougher for her because she needed to get Silas to school, but Billie assured her that she could handle the first thirty minutes of being open by herself.

Things were falling into place and now she wished she'd had the confidence to open sooner.

It was fifteen minutes before closing when she walked around to double check the bookshelves. There was an empty spot up on a top shelf in the non-fiction section and she knew it would bug her not to fill it. It would have been easy to ask Curtis to bring out the ladder and do it, but Jade didn't want to come across as the kind of boss who didn't think she had to do the heavy lifting. So she walked into the back room, pulled a

copy of the book she was going to replace, and grabbed the ladder.

This is a bit heavier than I thought...

“Do you need a hand, Jade?” Curtis asked, concern written all over his face.

“No, thanks. I got this!”

But...do I?

It took longer than she wanted to admit getting the ladder in place, and then she took a moment to catch her breath.

For the love of it, I'm 27. Why am I out of breath?

Staring up at the ladder, she stepped closer and started to climb at the same moment a customer walked in. It was all the distraction she needed to apparently miss a step and lose her balance.

“*Oh!*” she cried right as she started to fall.

“Holy crap!” She heard someone say and the next thing she knew, all the wind was knocked out of her.

“*Oof!*”

“I’ve got you,” a deep, masculine voice said close to her ear. “Are you okay?”

Jade’s eyes went a little wide because she thought she recognized him, but she wasn’t quite sure. “Um...I think so,” she replied shakily, and she was fairly certain she was blushing because her face felt like it was on fire.

Carefully, he put her on her feet and then gently grasped her shoulders to steady her. “Are you sure? Do you want to sit down?”

Curtis and Erica both came rushing over and began to fuss over her.

“Oh my goodness! You scared me!”

“Here, let me put that book up for you,” Curtis said. “And I’ll put the ladder away.”

“Let me get you some water,” Erica said as she ran back behind the counter. “You look pale!”

Her hero was still standing close and watching her. He was tall with sandy brown hair and an athletic build. Dark eyes and a chiseled jaw covered in a scruffy shadow made for one very appealing male specimen. But the closer she stared back, she noticed how exhausted he looked.

“Thank you,” she finally forced herself to say. “I think I would have definitely broken something if you hadn’t caught me.”

“Well, to be fair, you probably wouldn’t have fallen if I hadn’t walked in when I did. The sound of the bell over the door must have startled you.”

“Maybe. But really, thank you. I’m not usually that clumsy. I’ve climbed up and down that ladder dozens of times in the last few weeks without incident.” Erica walked over and handed her a bottle of water. “Thanks.”

“I’m going to take the trash out,” Erica told her just as Curtis walked away with the ladder.

“Coffee’s on the house,” she told her tall and handsome hero.

Ugh...I’ve been reading too many romance book blurbs...

“That’s not necessary,” he began, but Jade cut him off.

She walked over behind the counter and smiled while he gave the shop a cursory glance before joining her.

“Welcome to Books & Beans. What can I get for you?”

Raking a hand through his hair, he sighed as he looked up at the menu board. “I need the strongest coffee you have. Large. Please.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to mention the dangers of drinking full-throttle coffee so late in the day, but considering how he’d literally just saved her, she would make him whatever he wanted.

“I’m afraid we were getting ready to close, but I’ll put on a fresh pot for you. It’ll just take a few minutes.”

He groaned as he frowned. “I don’t want to put you out. I can just wait until I get to my…”

“No, it’s not a big deal. I swear.” And she quickly went to work making him a cup of her best robusta. Three minutes later, she looked over her shoulder and spotted him browsing through the books. “How do you take your coffee?”

“Cream and two sugars, please.” He continued to browse. “This is an interesting setup you’ve got here.”

“Thanks! We just opened today.”

Nodding, he walked over to the counter and reached for his wallet.

“I told you; it’s on the house.”

Smiling at her, he pulled a twenty from his wallet and put it in the tip jar before accepting his coffee. “Then that’s to wish you good luck.”

For a moment, they stood there smiling at each other, and Jade swore he was looking at her with more than a casual interest, but then he took a step back and wished her a good night.

“Well, that was disappointing,” she murmured when he was out the door.

* * *

Levi walked to his car and took a sip of the piping hot coffee, then moaned with pleasure. It was the best damn coffee he'd ever had.

And the blonde who made it was pretty damn spectacular too. He'd been on the verge of asking for her number until he remembered he was back in Sweetbriar and had no intention of staying beyond the weekend. It was a grueling five-hour drive from Alexandria and he was definitely going to shock his sister by showing up a day early. He probably could have skipped stopping for coffee, but he was bleary-eyed.

Or maybe he was just procrastinating.

Yeah. That was definitely what he was doing.

The last two weeks had been brutally eye-opening. For years, he had considered himself a rock star in the advertising industry, but right now, he was some sort of pariah that no one wanted to hire. He'd applied for jobs all over the damn country, done dozens of interviews via phone and Zoom, and he hadn't received even one offer.

It was both humbling and discouraging.

How had everything gone so wrong? And weren't there laws against slandering a former employee? It wasn't as if

Creative Alexandria was that big of a firm that they could have that kind of reach in blocking him from other jobs—which meant something far worse.

He wasn't as good as he thought he was.

Sure, he was awesome at that particular company, but beyond that, he wasn't anything special. There was nothing about him that made him stand out against other applicants, and now he was looking at either a possible career change or being forced to majorly downsize his life because he had no backup plan and not enough savings in place to keep him going. It became blazingly obvious that he had been living a little beyond his means and now was going to be paying the price.

With a muttered curse, he pulled away from the coffee shop and headed to Billie's. Hopefully she wouldn't freak out about him showing up early, but the walls had been closing in on him at home and he needed to get out and get away sooner rather than later.

The drive to his sister's took a little over ten minutes. On the way, he managed to finish his coffee and then tossed the cup on the floor of the passenger seat. In her driveway, he got out and stretched and couldn't help but laugh when the front door flew open and Billie stood there in wide-eyed shock.

"*Levi?* What in the world? I thought you were coming tomorrow!"

Reaching into the back seat, he grabbed his suitcase and slammed the door before walking over to her. "I figured I'd surprise you," he said with a lopsided grin. "So...surprise!"

He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. The last time he had surprised anyone like this was at his cousin Patrick's

house, and that had been a case of seriously poor timing. Hopefully Billie's life wasn't nearly as chaotic as his cousin's had been.

"I just finished making the bed in the guest room and was cleaning up a bit," she told him with a smile before hugging him. "Come in!"

Stepping inside, he couldn't help but smile. He swore his sister was like an old soul. There was nothing modern about the house. Hell, it reminded him a little of their grandparents' home, with the traditional decor and the afghan draped over the sofa. It was a one-story, three-bedroom, two-bathroom house—just like every other house in this neighborhood. It was very cookie-cutter, but he knew how much she loved it and how excited she was when she bought it three years ago.

He knew which room was her guest room so he walked down the hall to it and put his suitcase down before re-joining her in the living room. "I hope you don't mind that I'm early."

"Not at all. I feel bad that I already ate dinner. Are you hungry? I just had some soup and grilled cheese, but I can whip up some for you too."

"Don't worry about it. I'll just have something delivered." When he went to pull out his phone, Billie laughed.

Loudly.

"What's so funny?"

"Well, city boy, I'll tell you. Nothing gets delivered out here. So whatever app you're planning on using won't be of any use. Trust me. We've been trying to get some of them to come out this way, but..."

"Are you telling me that even the local restaurants won't deliver? Not even pizza?"

“It’s after eight on a Thursday night, Levi. Most places are closed already.”

Groaning, he let his head fall back against the afghan. He forgot how early everything closed around here. Turning his head toward her, he asked, “Can I get some soup and grilled cheese then?”

Smiling sympathetically, she nodded. “Of course. Now come into the kitchen and tell me what’s going on with you.”

He followed, but wasn’t going to share exactly what was going on with him. The last thing he wanted was sympathy or to look like he was a loser who was on the verge of losing everything.

Even though he essentially was.

Billie moved around the kitchen pulling out ingredients. “I’m guessing you’re going to work from here tomorrow. I got a new job baking in town so I’ll be out of here super early, but I should be home by noon. Maybe you can work it out so we can have lunch together and then we’ll go over and surprise Mom.”

“Uh, sure. Sound like a plan.” Sitting down at the table, he asked, “So, what’s this new job? Where are you baking?” Then he paused. “Wait...*why* are you baking? I thought you were working at the bank.”

Glancing at him over her shoulder, her eyes went wide. “Levi, I stopped working at the bank over a year ago, remember? I was burned out and started doing the whole baking thing here at the house? I made specialty cakes. And at night, I was teaching finance at the community college. Any of this ringing any bells?”

“Um...”

Shaking her head with disgust, she dumped a can of soup into a pot and loudly placed it on the stove. “You are unbelievable. We all sit and listen to you yammer on about your fabulous career and you can’t even be bothered to remember what your sister does for a living. How self-centered can you be?”

“I’m not self-centered,” he argued. “I just...I don’t know...my brain was just always focused on whatever campaign I was working on. It’s not a big deal, Billie. So I forgot this one thing!”

She assembled the grilled cheese sandwiches and put them in the pan before glancing over at him again. “Okay, what does Chloe do for a living?”

Shit. She was going to quiz him? Seriously?

Taking a minute, he racked his brain. She did something with kids...he remembered her college graduation...

“Teacher! *Ha!* Chloe is a teacher. See? I pay attention.”

“What grade does she teach?”

“Um...young kids, right? Pre-school?”

She laughed softly. “Close enough. It’s kindergarten.”

He nodded.

“And Ash? What does she do for a living?” she asked.

“For Pete’s sake, Bill. Can’t we just sit and chat? Do you have to grill me?”

“Just proving a point.”

“Ugh...fine. Ash is a...”

Crap. What *did* she do?

“She works in a salon, Levi,” Billie said with mild annoyance. “Lavish Locks. She got her cosmetology license and she does hair and makeup.”

“Oh, yeah...that’s right. She did everyone’s hair at Arianna’s wedding.” Nodding, he added, “She told me I have great hair.”

Rolling her eyes, Billie turned to flip the sandwiches. “Of course she did.” Two minutes later, she put a plate and bowl in front of him before sitting beside him. “So, how’s work going for you?”

He was about to answer when he remembered she had never finished talking about her job. “Nuh-uh. You first. Where are you baking?”

Her entire face lit up. “Wow. Color me surprised. You remembered that I never finished answering your question. Maybe there’s hope for you yet.”

“Ha, ha. You’re hysterical,” he murmured.

“Yeah, so there’s a new coffee shop in town and I’m doing all the baking for it. Nothing outrageous, just muffins, scones, cookies, brownies, and cinnamon rolls. At least for now. We literally just opened today so we’ll see if we need to tweak the menu as time goes on. I’m guessing I’ll add some seasonal stuff throughout the year.”

Taking a bite of his sandwich, he frowned. “Wait...the bookstore coffee shop?”

She nodded. “How do you know that?”

“I stopped there for coffee on my way here.”

She laughed again. “You were ten minutes away and decided to stop for coffee?”

He shrugged. “I was a little bleary-eyed. I haven’t been sleeping well.” He took another bite of his sandwich. “The coffee was amazing. Probably the best I’ve ever had and you know...”

“Yes, I know. You’ve lived in the big city and have access to a bunch of amazing coffee shops. Yeah. We get it, Levi. You’re worldly.”

Okay, so maybe he’d been kind of a jerk for throwing that around for the last several years.

Duly noted.

“Anyway, great coffee, and it looks like a cool little setup,” he said. “Do you like it there?”

“We just opened today, but I’ve been working with Jade for over a month now, and I think she has what it takes to make it a success.”

“But...?”

“What? There’s no but.”

“There’s always a but,” he replied.

Sighing loudly, she nodded. “Fine. There’s a but.”

“And?”

“Just your typical small town gossipy stuff,” she explained. “There are a few people who don’t particularly like Jade and they’re doing their best to...I don’t want to say sabotage, but...”

“Got it. But knowing some of the people around here, I’d say sabotage is fairly accurate. What are they doing?”

“There were flyers that were supposed to go out at all the schools today that were replaced by coupons from a big online

retailer. I mean, come on, right? That's obviously someone's doing."

He nodded and took a spoonful of clam chowder. "Definitely, otherwise both things would have gone out and not just one."

"Jade was really counting on them, too. She worked with all three schools to get their summer reading lists so she could stock all the books. She's going to make a more prominent display so anyone who comes in will see them and hopefully opt for convenience, but..."

"But don't most people read on their phones or tablets? I mean...I didn't think bookstores were even a thing anymore."

Frowning, she shook a finger at him. "You are exactly what's wrong with the world! Not everything needs to be done electronically! What happened to the simple pleasure of picking up a book and holding it in your hands? Or...or the joy of walking through a bookstore or library and picking out something, huh?"

"Okay, clearly I've struck a nerve..."

"You're darn right you have! We've gotten so used to sitting at home and ordering things online that we've forgotten to go outside and interact with people!" With a sound of disgust, she got up and began cleaning up. "Whatever happened to wanting to see the little guy succeed, huh? Why are we continually helping big corporations grow but not our neighbor?"

"No one's saying..."

"That shop—the one Jade restored—had been sitting vacant for years. *Years!* She and her dad and a bunch of people worked together to turn it into something beautiful. It's a

business that can bring people to Sweetbriar and yet the closed-minded people in this town would rather let some of those buildings downtown sit and rot than encourage anyone to utilize them.” Then she snorted. “Well, not anyone, just Jade.”

“What the hell did this woman do to make enemies like that?”

Rather than answer, she waved him off. “I’m determined to help her make this a success. Today, Chloe sent her entire class to the coffee shop after school. It was awesome. We were packed and Jade looked ready to cry with relief.”

“That’s all fine and well, Billie, but Chloe can’t send people there every day. That’s not practical.” He took another bite of his dinner. “What kind of marketing is she doing? Is she advertising anywhere?”

“The Gazette was supposed to come in today to check us out, but I don’t think they ever did. That would have been some great free publicity.”

“Agreed, but I’m sure people here in Sweetbriar already know she’s there. She should be inviting reporters from the surrounding towns to come in or placing an ad in their papers with a coupon for a dollar off a coffee and muffin combo or something like that.”

Slowly, she turned to him, her eyes wide. “Levi, that’s brilliant! Do you think you’d have time to come in and talk to Jade? She’s kind of overwhelmed right now, but maybe if you could just spin some ideas with her...” Then she stopped. “Oops. Sorry.”

He frowned. “For what?”

“I’m sure you were about to tell me how busy you’re going to be tomorrow, and all the important calls you were going to be on. I forgot. Plus, I know you think this sort of thing is beneath you. After all, you’re the head of national advertising campaigns. You don’t do small town, mom and pop places.”

Tossing his grilled cheese down, he stared at her. “Is that really what you think of me? That I’m that big of an asshole?”

“Um...”

“Look, I get it. I moved away and was vocal about how this was not the way I wanted to live. I wanted more, Billie, and it’s not a crime!”

“No one said...”

“Yes, you did. All of you did. Every time any of you look at me, you’re judging.”

“And you do the same to us, Levi! You come home and you sneer and make little comments about how much better your life is in Alexandria. Not everyone wants that life, though. If you enjoy it so much, then good for you. Not everyone is looking for world domination!”

“And no one said I was looking for world domination! I just wanted something beyond Sweetbriar Ridge!”

“Then good for you! You got it. You’re a success. We’re all proud of you, but maybe you don’t have to rub it in everyone’s faces every chance you get.” Turning her back to him, she went back to washing the pot and pan she used to make his dinner.

Raking a hand through his hair in frustration, he blurted out the one thing he swore he wouldn’t.

“I got fired,” he said gruffly, and then waited for his sister to turn and mock him.

Instead, she turned off the water and came over and hugged him. “Oh, Levi, I’m sorry. I know you’ve got to be devastated.”

Hugging her back, he nodded.

When she pulled back a bit, she offered him a smile. “But if I know you, you’ve already got leads lined up and mulling over a bunch of offers.”

Silently, he shook his head and sat back down.

“Oh, um...well then I’m sure you’ve got a nice, fat savings account to tide you over.”

Another head shake.

“Well, shit, Levi. What are you going to do?”

“Honestly? I have no damn idea.”

Chapter Three

On Saturdays, the plan was originally to close at six. But much to Jade's surprise, they had a line of people to ring up for books and another small group had just walked in. She wouldn't say that she was breaking any sales records, but all of this seemed like a good start.

Walking around to straighten up, she spotted another empty spot on a high shelf and immediately thought about the handsome stranger who helped her Thursday night. Talk about perfect timing. Maybe she was over-romanticizing the situation because it was the first time in a long time that a man had even touched her, but she was thinking about him a lot since it happened.

Probably more than she should.

She'd had zero interest in dating after Silas was born—not to say that she hadn't gone out with a handful of guys over the last eight years—but maybe it was time to think about it again. After all, not every guy was as big of a jerk as her ex was. At least she hoped they weren't. It really had been a long time since she'd even thought about it and, since she knew most of the men in Sweetbriar, she knew she needed to look elsewhere if she were seriously considering dipping her toe in the dating pool again.

And...we're back to thinking about the cute guy with the strong arms and dark eyes...

It was close to seven when another group came through the door—this time led by Billie.

“Hey!” Jade said with a smile and mild confusion. “What are you doing here? I thought you had a big family thing tonight.”

“I did and here they all are!” Billie said, motioning to the party with her. “You know my mom, Marie...”

“Hey, Marie! Happy Birthday!”

“Thanks, Jade! The place looks great!”

“Thank you,” she beamed.

“I know you and Ashlynn know each other...” Billie went on. “But this is my sister Chloe. She’s the kindergarten teacher.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” Jade said to Chloe. “And thanks for sending your students in the other day. I really appreciate it.”

“No worries,” Chloe said softly, and Jade could tell she was a little on the shy side.

“I’m more than happy to put flyers out at the salon,” Ashlynn said. “I will totally sing your praises to all of my clients!”

Ashlynn was wildly upbeat and could do amazing things with hair. Jade had gone to her a salon a few times and always loved the results.

“This is my Aunt Phyllis and Uncle Jeff, my Aunt Sara and Uncle Scott, and our friends Trent, Doreen, Jeanie, and my

brother Levi. Everyone, this is Jade!”

Everyone was talking at once, but Jade was a little shocked when she saw that the man who had literally saved her the other night was Billie’s brother. No wonder he looked familiar to her. He was a year older and she remembered him from high school. She did her best not to appear too wide-eyed or eager to talk to him. No need for anyone to know she was harboring a little crush on her hero. Although, now it was nice to actually have a name for when she thought about him.

Like tonight when I crawl into bed...

When Levi finally stepped forward to say hello, Jade totally felt a little like a giddy schoolgirl and knew she was blushing. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he said with an easy grin. “How’s business going?”

“Good! I realize it’s only been three days, but I think it’s going well.” She paused and fussed with her ponytail. “So, um...”

“You guys!” Billie called out. “Let’s put our dessert orders in so Jade can finish getting ready to close. I made Grandma Donovan’s lemon pound cake and it’s freaking delicious! There’re also brownies, blondies, and I did a caramel apple crumb cake this morning, so...tell me what you want and I’ll get the order started!”

Before she knew it, Billie was behind the counter plating up the dessert orders and Erica was making cups of coffee and tea. It felt wrong to be standing there and not helping, so she looked up at Levi and excused herself. “It was nice seeing you again. I need to give them a hand.”

Following her to the counter, he asked, “Do you have the coffee I got the other night? I don’t know if you remember,

but...”

Jade nodded. She remembered. “You’re in luck. It looks like Erica just made a fresh pot.” Turning, she poured him a cup. “Cream and two sugars, right?”

His smile was downright lethal, and she noticed that he had dimples.

Yeah, I’ll be thinking about them too...

“Yes,” he said. “You’ve got a good memory.”

“Thanks, I...”

“Here, I’ve got that,” Billie said as she took the mug from her hands. “I know you’ve got things to do before we close. Plus, I think my Aunt Sara has a question about a book.”

“Oh. Um...great.” Looking over at Levi, she smiled. “It was nice meeting you.”

He was still smiling as she walked away, and she forced herself to keep her own smile in place as she walked over to help Billie’s aunt pick out a romance novel.

“Tell me what specific sub-genre or trope you like and I’ll do my best to find you the perfect book,” she said.

Glancing around a bit, Gail replied softly, “Well...I’m kind of into rock stars right now. My husband thinks I’m ridiculous, but I can’t help it. I enjoy them, but I don’t want anything that’s too sexy or too...I don’t know...over the top. Does that make sense?”

Nodding, Jade reached up and pulled a book down. “Okay, I think you’ll really like this. The hero is a rock star in hiding. Sort of. His band is on hiatus and he took a shot at singing on Broadway and completely flopped. Now he’s hiding out from the paparazzi and staying at his best friend’s place.” Then she

smiled. “And spending a lot of time with his best friend’s younger sister.”

“Ooh...” Gail hummed appreciatively. “That sounds perfect!” She glanced at the back cover blurb. “Is it a stand-alone?”

“Nope,” she assured her. “There are three more books in the series, plus it’s a spinoff of another series, so...”

“Perfect! Thanks, Jade. I’ll take it!”

Walking her up to the counter, she stepped back and let Erica ring up the sale.

Glancing around the shop, she couldn’t help but smile. Besides Billie’s group, there were still a few people lingering and two people had just gotten on line with books in their hands. But as thankful as she was for the business—and the chance to officially meet Levi—she honestly couldn’t wait to get home. Silas was with her parents, and she was beginning to regret the long hours she was putting in.

It’s temporary. In a few weeks, you’ll feel better leaving Curtis and Erica to close on their own.

At least she hoped she would.

That was the plan, and she knew it was foolish to get this down on herself when she hadn’t even been open for a week. This was all going to take some time to adjust and she was lucky that her parents were so willing to help with everything and that Silas would be leaving for camp in a few weeks. She was going to miss him like crazy, but she knew how much fun he was going to have.

And the only reason she had even considered the option was because her cousins owned the camp and Silas was finally old enough to go.

Still, it was going to be the longest they had ever been apart—two weeks. Hopefully she'd get a lot accomplished during that time so that when he came home, they could settle into a routine. Of course, they still had six weeks after he got home to get through before school started up, but Jade had managed to get him signed up with the local YMCA day camp three days a week. The rest of the time, he was going to have to be here with her. It wasn't ideal, but she was determined to make it work.

“Whoa, you're looking a little fierce over there, boss,” Billie said with amusement. “You okay?”

“What?” she asked, shaking her head clear of her inner musings. “Sorry. I was just thinking about the summer and everything I'm going to need to do with Silas.”

They had talked about this countless times while preparing for the opening of the shop, so Billie knew exactly what she was talking about. “It sounds like all the camps are going to be great and the few days a week he's going to be here, we'll find a way to make it like an adventure. We can make chores seem fun.”

That made Jade laugh. “Okay, good luck with that! If you can make that happen, I'll have to give you a raise because I haven't figured out a way to get Silas to do any chore without complaining.”

Billie just shrugged and rang up all the desserts she'd just served before pulling out her credit card.

“Billie, come on. I can't let you do that. I appreciate you bringing everyone in, but...”

“Oh, hush. There wasn't anything great on the dessert menu at the restaurant, and after everyone listened to me brag

about my baking skills, they wanted to come here. And there's no way I did it expecting to get it all for free, so...stop it."

With a loud sigh, she had no choice but to accept the generous sale, but she held up her hand when she saw the tip amount. "Billie!"

Grinning, Billie signed the receipt screen and tapped enter on the tablet. "And I don't expect that to go to me. That's for Erica and Curtis, for all their hard work."

"You're too good to me," Jade quietly admitted. "But thank you."

"What are friends for?" Grabbing the last slice of lemon pound cake and a cup of coffee, Billie winked. "Now I'm going to go and finish celebrating with everyone and then figure out how to help my brother."

When she turned to walk away, Jade couldn't help but stop her. "What's...um...what's wrong with your brother?"

Because from where I'm standing, he looks pretty damn perfect...

Now it was Billie's turn to look around nervously before whispering, "He just lost his job." She shook her head. "And I don't think he's got anything lined up and he doesn't seem to have enough in savings to keep him going for too long." Looking over at Levi, she shook her head again before facing Jade. "My brother is the most confident person I've ever known and he's always been successful at everything he's ever tried. So for this to have happened, I know it's messing with him. I mean...look at him. He's practically a disheveled mess."

Um...there were several words Jade would use to describe Levi Donovan and disheveled and mess weren't even in the

top ten. To her, he looked...sexy, casual, and relaxed.

Yummy.

Ugh...seriously? My interest in men had to come back now?

“Anyway, he’s staying with me and tomorrow we’re planning on a little intervention. Fingers crossed he doesn’t get mad at us and take off. I worry about him.”

There wasn’t really anything she could add to that, so she simply nodded and wished her friend a good night.

An hour later, all the customers were gone, the doors were locked, and she and Curtis and Erica were getting ready to leave. There was a newspaper on one of the chairs in the thriller section and she went to go get it.

“No!” Curtis said as he stepped in front of her. “I’ve got it. I’ll toss it in the dumpster on my way to my car. No worries.”

He sounded nervous and maybe she was being overly suspicious, but it seemed like he specifically didn’t want her looking at the paper.

Which reminded her...

“Is that the Gazette? They were supposed to do a write-up on us for today’s edition.” She walked over to the table, but Curtis beat her to it.

“Nope,” he said, folding the paper up into a small square. “Just the sports section. No biggie. Come on. It’s late and I’m sure you’re dying to get home to Silas.”

Yeah. She wasn’t going anywhere until she saw the paper. Wordlessly, she held out her hand and held his gaze until his shoulders sagged.

“Jade, seriously...you don’t want to see it.”

That made her heart sink. “They gave us a bad review, huh?” she murmured.

“Not exactly...”

Sighing wearily, Jade unfolded the paper and began flipping through the pages. The Gazette wasn’t particularly long—and the fact that it was still in print was a little impressive—but she didn’t see anything.

Looking up at Curtis, she said, “I don’t get it. There’s nothing in here.”

He looked utterly defeated as he opened to page five and pointed to the full-page article about a new café and coffee shop that was opening two towns over.

“Oh.”

Apparently, the new café was boasting the best gourmet coffees, baked goods, and sandwiches, along with free wi-fi and a digital borrowing library full of magazines, newspapers, and best-selling books.

Shit.

It wasn’t that Jade believed she tapped into something new with her shop, but it seemed rather coincidental for something similar—and maybe a little better—to be opening so close to home. Fortunately, they weren’t opening until the end of the summer, but still...it was close enough that she knew Books & Beans would take a hit.

“I’m sorry, Jade,” Curtis said quietly.

“Me too,” Erica chimed in.

“Thanks, guys.” Letting out a long breath, she offered them a brave smile. “We’re gonna be fine. Not many people read The Gazette anyway, right?”

They nodded.

“Go on home and thank you for a great night. I’ll see you both on Monday.”

Jade watched them both drive away before pulling out of the parking lot. She looked at her little shop and said a silent prayer that things were going to get better and the personal slights would stop.

But for now, she was going to go home and snuggle with her son while they watched a little TV and maybe shared a bowl of popcorn.

Things would get better, she told herself.

They had to.

* * *

Levi slept in the next morning and groaned when he saw it was almost noon. While he was thankful his sister hadn’t woken him up, there wasn’t a doubt in his mind that his being lazy would add to her already-obvious concern about his well-being.

Standing, he stretched and grabbed a change of clothes from his suitcase before going and taking a quick shower. The hot water felt good even though the spray wasn’t nearly as powerful as he liked it, and it just helped him step out quicker.

By the time he was walking out of the guest room, he heard voices.

Several voices.

All female.

Shit.

Hanging his head, he let out a long breath. Clearly, all of his sisters were there, along with his mother. Last night, everyone had been laid back and happy to be celebrating his mom's birthday. He managed to slide under the radar without bringing up anything about his personal life, but he had a feeling that Billie had pretty much ratted him out.

"Well someone needs to go and wake him up," Ashlynn was saying. "He can't sleep all day. That's just rude."

"Maybe he's exhausted," Chloe said. "After all, he's got to be devastated by this turn of events in his life. We should cut him some slack."

Yeah, so Billie definitely ratted him out.

As much as he wanted to be mad, he couldn't. Plus...it was kind of a miracle that it had taken this long for them all to start circling.

"I'll go and wake him," Billie said. "No need to ambush him when he comes out here and..."

Levi beat her to the punch. "Too late," he said with a mirthless laugh. "As long as there's coffee, you can all get on with your ambush."

"It's more like an intervention," Ash said as she walked over and kissed him on the cheek. "And we do it with love."

"And the coffee...?"

"I remember you saying how much you liked the one you got from the shop the other night, so I made sure to bring some

home,” Billie said as she fluttered around the kitchen. “Sit. We were getting ready to have lunch. I hope you’re hungry.”

Nodding, Levi walked over and kissed his mother hello and then did the same with Chloe. “Yeah, I’m hungry. Thanks.”

“Good. We have a broccoli and cheddar quiche, a tortellini salad, a fruit salad, and Mom made her famous chocolate chip cookies,” Chloe said. “We know they’re your favorite.” Her smile was sweet, and out of his three sisters, Chloe was most definitely the sweetest and least confrontational. So even though he knew they were setting him up, he wouldn’t take it out on her.

Instead, he let out a long breath and sat down at the table and waited for whoever was going to kick off the lecture to begin.

“Oh, unclench, Levi,” Ash muttered as she took the seat beside him. “We’re just worried about you.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say there was nothing to worry about, but it would be a lie. Hell, even he was worried about himself.

When his mother pulled out the chair on the other side of him, she gave him a sympathetic smile. “We all know how much you enjoy your privacy and hate when we pry, but this feels a little too important to worry about your boundaries. For you to admit that you were fired instead of coming here and pretending your life is fabulous like you always do...”

“I wasn’t pretending,” he murmured. “It was fabulous. Until it wasn’t.”

She reached over and squeezed his hand. “I’m not going to ask what happened because it’s not important. What I want to

know is if you're okay.”

Billie put Levi's mug of coffee down in front of him before she and Chloe began putting food out on the table. “You mentioned not being particularly...um...financially okay,” she said as she put the quiche down. “As someone who's worked in finance, I can tell you the importance of having enough money in savings to cover you for, say...six months.” She sat down and looked at him. “How much do you have put aside?”

“Bill...”

“Okay, fine. We'll circle back to that,” she said with a frown. “Have you applied for other jobs?”

Now he was annoyed. “Do I look stupid to you? Of course I've applied! I've applied for dozens of them! And not just in Alexandria, but all over the freaking country! And you know what? No one wants to hire me!”

“Jeez, Levi, what the hell did you do?” Ash asked as she served herself some tortellini salad.

Before he could say anything, his mother did. “It doesn't matter,” she said sharply. “He can't change the why. All he can do is move forward from here.” She gave his hand another squeeze before saying, “Now let's all eat and then we'll work on helping Levi get back on his feet.”

He couldn't help but roll his eyes. “I'm not that far gone, Mom,” he said, careful not to sound too defensive. “I see now that I was living a little beyond my means, so...I'm waiting to see where I'm going to end up working and then I'll sell my car and move into something smaller for a while.” He shrugged. “It's not a big deal.”

“Okay, but...what if it takes a while to find something? Shouldn't you do some of that stuff now to put a little money

back in your own pocket?” Ashlynn asked.

“It would be pointless for me to move to a smaller place in Alexandria if I end up with a job in...say...somewhere in California. Or New York.” Another shrug. “The car I could probably sell now, but I’ll have to bite the bullet on my place. Plus, I’m going to have to pay a penalty for breaking my lease.”

“When will that be up?” Billie asked.

“Three months, so...”

“You’re in a pretty high-demand area,” she reasoned. “I’m sure they’ve got a waiting list and you could work something out to maybe cut that penalty down a bit.”

“It’s a moot point,” he argued. “I don’t have anywhere to go. And until I find a job...”

“Live here,” Chloe interrupted, and it was hard to say who was more surprised by her suggestion.

“Um...what?”

She nodded as she pushed her fruit around on her plate. “Move back here with one of us. You’ll definitely save money and then when you get a job, you can just go. I think that makes the most sense.” Then she delicately picked up a grape and popped it in her mouth. “Mmm...so good.”

Then, four sets of eyes were on him.

Great.

“I get what you’re saying and it does kind of make sense,” he began cautiously, “I think we all know that’s not gonna happen. I left Sweetbriar because...well...small town life is just not my thing. I don’t need everyone looking at me like I’m

a failure.” Shaking his head, he added, “You might not agree, but...I can’t do it.”

Everyone ate in silence for several minutes and he felt himself starting to relax.

“Screw that,” Ashlynn said loudly, causing him to nearly choke on his lunch. “How big of an idiot do you have to be? Believe it or not, no one around here is keeping score of your life, Levi. No one’s going to see you and pass judgment on you. That’s not a thing.”

Putting his fork down, he leveled her with a glare. “Oh, really?” And yeah, he was heavy on the sarcasm.

“Yeah, really.”

Picking up his napkin, he wiped his mouth before challenging her. “How about Billie’s boss Jade? Are you going to sit here and tell me that no one’s giving her a hard time? Because from what I’ve heard, it seems like there are still a few people here in town who like to pass judgment. Loudly and unfairly,” he added. “So do you still want to sit here and tell me again that it’s not a thing?”

She frowned and seemed to think about how to counter what he’d said, but couldn’t.

“Don’t bring Jade into this,” Billie said wearily. “That’s a completely different situation and you can’t compare the two of you, okay? Suffice it to say that yes, there are some judgmental people, but they’re everywhere, Levi. When you go back to Alexandria tonight or tomorrow or whenever, there are going to be people who see you and know why you’re not working and they’re going to pass judgment. Deal with it. You can’t control what closed-minded people do.”

“Sadly, she’s right,” his mom said from beside him. “You can’t hide from the world and you can’t control it. All you can do is hold your head up high and keep moving forward.” Then she reached for his hand again. “I really do think you should consider coming home. It doesn’t matter which one of us you stay with; no one’s going to charge you rent.”

“I might,” Ash mumbled around a mouthful of food.

“Then your brother won’t live with you,” Marie said tartly. Then she looked at Levi again and her expression softened. “If you stay with me or Billie or Chloe, we won’t charge you rent. You can stay as long as you need to, and if you really get bored, we’ll find some small jobs for you.”

“Oh my gosh!” Billie began excitedly. “That’s it! I already have a job for you and it’s in advertising!”

He felt his eyes go a little wide. “Really? Where?”

Her smile grew. “Right here in Sweetbriar! Jade really needs help from an outside source for Books & Beans. No one around here is as creative as you, Levi. And, as you already know, people are giving her some shit, so we need to find ways to get the word out on the shop without dealing with the locals.”

She was looking at him expectantly and honestly, he had no idea how to respond.

Moving back to Sweetbriar, even temporarily, was beyond unappealing. However, did he really have a choice? And some income was better than none, right?

“Don’t get me wrong, Billie, I appreciate the offer, but...it doesn’t look like Jade’s got a big advertising budget and anything I suggest would take a week, tops. That’s not exactly the equivalent to having a job. Not a real one, anyway.”

“Don’t be such a snob,” she retorted. “I didn’t say it was a big, national account. But it’s something!”

“As much as I think you’re being a total ass,” Ashlynn said, reaching for some fruit. “I know the salon has been trying to come up with some creative advertising too. I mean, obviously these aren’t big businesses, but it’s a better way for you to pass the time than sitting in your big city condo staring at the walls.”

Dammit, he hated that she had a point.

“I just don’t want...”

“We know!” Ash cut him off. “We get it. This isn’t where you want to be. There’s no big company that’s going to give you all the attention.” She groaned. “Suck it up, buttercup. You’re not landing any jobs as the company superstar. Everyone needs to start somewhere, and clearly you have to start over. Deal with it.”

Rage filled him as he pushed away from the table. “Is this your idea of a pep talk or encouragement?” he yelled, raking a hand through his hair. “I already was feeling really crappy about my life and I don’t need you piling on!”

His mother reached for him, but he stepped away. “Ash, we said tough love, not bitchy,” she murmured.

“Well, I’m sorry, but we’ve all had to struggle at one time or another. Just because the little prince over there always had everything handed to him doesn’t mean it’s going to be that way forever! He didn’t give a damn when I was working three jobs and going to school at night to get my cosmetology license! He didn’t care when Chloe almost dropped out of college because of her anxiety! And he sure as hell didn’t come around when Billie quit her job at the bank and was

trying to get her shit together! Why are we all tiptoeing around trying to help him out?”

You could have heard a pin drop in the room and it hit Levi hard that this was how his family saw him.

And how big of a jackass he'd been to them over the years.

That was an even more bitter pill to swallow than finding out he wasn't talented enough to land another job right away.

How the hell did my life go so far off the rails?

He was pissed off—not at his sister, but at himself. Storming out of the kitchen, he made a beeline for the guest room and was about to slam the door when he heard Chloe speak.

“Everything you said was true, Ash,” she began. “Levi wasn't here and it was okay. Do you know why?” She paused. “Because we had each other. Levi being here wasn't going to change any of our situations. But he doesn't have anyone. And you know what? Being there for him can make a difference. From the sound of it, we're all he has. Do you really want to be that petty and spiteful when you have the chance to potentially change someone's life?”

He heard Ashlynn curse, and he hung his head and laughed quietly.

“You don't have to open your home to him,” Chloe went on, “but you can open your arms and hug him and let him know that he's loved and that it's all going to be okay.”

Everyone went silent and even Levi found himself holding his breath.

“Yeah, well...none of this matters if he doesn't want to stay,” Ashlynn said after a minute. “And I really know that the

salon has been looking for ways to drum up business as well as a few other local places that could use his help. But I'm not going to beg him either, so you can forget that."

"No one said beg," his mother said wearily. "Just...be a little less hostile."

"Fine."

The ball was in his court and he knew he couldn't just walk away like a child. He was a grown man and needed to deal with the fact that he'd screwed up his life.

Him and no one else.

Well...that wasn't true. Mandy certainly lit the fuse on that whole bombshell.

With a small nod, he knew what he needed to do. Walking back into the kitchen, he paused beside the table and watched as the four most important people in his life stared up at him. He shot Ashlynn a hard glare before looking over at Billie.

"What do you say, Bill? You up for having a roommate for a few weeks?"

Chapter Four

“I don’t think I understand.”

“Just...hear me out,” Billie was saying to her Monday afternoon. Their small lunch crowd had left and they were straightening up a bit. “My brother was a big advertising executive and he...um...the company is downsizing and Levi’s position was eliminated.”

“Oh, no. That’s terrible!”

Nodding, Billie straightened a few chairs before going on. “Anyway, he’s going to be staying with me for a little while until he gets another job and I think he can help you find some creative ways to get the word out on Books & Beans. Ways that don’t involve dealing with anyone here in town because...”

“Yeah. I know. After the school flyers and the article in the Gazette, trust me, I’m not looking to work with anyone local either. Fool me once and all that...”

“I asked Levi to come in at two so you can talk with him.”

She felt a few flutters in her belly at the thought of seeing him again, but...

“I appreciate what you’re suggesting, but I can’t afford to pay him. Like...at all. I was counting on the free publicity

from the flyers and the article. I didn't budget beyond that. So..."

"Don't worry about it. He's not doing it for the paycheck. He's doing it as a favor to me. Besides, it's a good way to keep those creative juices flowing," Billie said with a laugh. "You'd actually be doing him a favor. Trust me."

"Oh, well..."

"You don't have to commit to anything, just...sit and talk to him and I guarantee you he'll come up with something. He was a rock star at his last job."

"That's just sad then that they'd let him go." She shook her head. "He must have job offers piling up. Why would he move back here instead of just moving on to something bigger and better?"

Billie didn't answer right away, but then said, "He needed a little time to decompress while he mulls over which job he's going to take. We just thought it would be nice if he came home for a bit to do it. He's been living in Alexandria for so long that we hardly get to see him."

"He's lucky to have all of you. Family is so important. I know I wouldn't have this shop if it weren't for mine. Between all the physical help I got from my father and brother and cousins, and the help I got with Silas so I could get everything done, I don't know where I'd be."

"Be sure to tell him that too," Billie murmured before heading back to the kitchen.

While Jade walked around straightening books, she wondered what kind of ideas Levi would come up with because that wasn't exactly her area of expertise. After all, the only things she'd come up with were flyers. He would

probably think she was a bit ignorant and he wouldn't be wrong.

Great, way to bring yourself down...

That was something she was trying hard not to do anymore. Every day she read little empowerment quotes to start the day, and she'd already forgotten the one from this morning.

Never let defeat have the last word.

So while she might not know anything about advertising, that didn't mean she couldn't learn. And if Levi looked down on her for not knowing more, then shame on him! Did he know how to run a coffee shop? Or how to be a single parent? Was she going to put him down for not knowing? No! So he could just go and screw himself if...

A hand on her shoulder made her jump as her heart kicked hard in her chest. "Ohmygod!" she cried out. When she turned, she saw Levi standing there smiling. "Oh...sorry. I was a little lost in thought."

"It seems I keep scaring you when I come in," he mused. "Thankfully you were on solid ground this time."

Heat flooded her cheeks as she nodded. "Um...yeah. So... Billie just told me about your offer and I really appreciate your time." Walking toward the counter, she looked over her shoulder. "Can I get you some coffee and something to eat?"

"I'll never say no to a good cup of coffee," he replied as he studied the bakery case. "Oh, and a slice of my grandmother's lemon pound cake. Please."

"You got it."

Jade handed him his order and told him to find a table and she'd join him in a minute. Billie was supposed to be getting ready to leave, and Erica and Curtis weren't due in for another hour.

“Um...I hate to ask...”

“No worries,” Billie said before Jade could even explain herself. “I've got some prep work to do for the morning, so I'll cover the counter until everyone comes in. You go talk to Levi and hopefully inspiration will hit!”

Forcing a smile, Jade ran a hand over her ponytail and looked around to see where Levi sat. It took her a minute, but she found him in the corner of the romance section nook.

Oh, good Lord...

Grabbing a bottle of water, she walked over and sat down.

“So, um...I figured you more for the mystery/thriller type,” she said nervously.

He looked at her oddly. “Excuse me?”

Motioning to the books around them, she said, “Books. I figured you would have sat with the mystery and thriller books.”

Once he glanced around, he gave her a boyish grin. “Sorry, but I wasn't even looking at that. I just saw a quiet table in the corner and...”

Now she felt silly for even bringing it up and figured the best thing to do was change the subject.

Quickly.

“I know nothing about advertising!” she blurted out, and when his eyes went wide, she just kept going. “I mean, I

thought handing out flyers and having the local paper come in and do a story would be enough, but anything beyond that is going to be like Greek to me. So...if you're not interested in working with me because I'm clueless, I completely understand." Letting out a long breath, she opened her water and drank deeply. As soon as she put the bottle down, she waited for him to respond.

"Are you done?" he asked softly.

"I am," she replied with a small nod.

Pulling his tablet out of the satchel she hadn't noticed, he put it on the table. "Okay, I have zero problems with you not knowing anything about advertising. If anything, it's beyond helpful. I'm going to toss out some ideas to you and I want this to be a discussion—not just me talking. If there's something you don't understand or anything you don't like or agree with, you can let me know. This is your business and you're going to have the final say on what it is that we do."

Then he smiled at her, and Jade felt that flutter in her belly again.

"How does that sound?" he asked.

"It sounds good. Thanks." Pausing, she added, "And sorry that I just verbally exploded on you. What you do intimidates me a little."

"Really? Why?"

Shrugging, she replied, "Because my brain just doesn't work like that. I can do the business stuff and crunch numbers, but if you asked me to draw anything or think up promo stuff beyond a coupon, I'm lost." Laughing softly, she shook her head. "So I'm not sure how helpful I'm going to be."

“Honestly, Jade, it’s not as difficult as you think. For example, have you set up any social media accounts to promote the shop?”

She shook her head and Levi instantly began typing notes on his tablet.

“That’s where we’re going to start. I’m going to create a Facebook page, an Instagram account, and possibly a TikTok account. Do you use any of them personally?”

“My mom is always on Facebook, but I tend to scroll on Instagram more. And TikTok? I haven’t had the time to look at it. Occasionally I’ll see some video that’s gone viral, but other than that, I’m not on there.”

He nodded and typed up more notes.

“Obviously, I grew up here in Sweetbriar,” he began, “and Billie mentioned some of the issues you’re having and let’s just say I’m not surprised. Have you lived here your whole life?”

Part of her wanted to be offended that he didn’t remember her, but then again, she hadn’t recognized him at first either.

“Born and raised,” she told him. “You graduated a year ahead of me. I remember you from all the sports you played. You...um...well...the guy I dated played almost all the same sports as you, so...”

“Really? Who was it?”

Ugh...why did I bring this up?

“Trevor Nelson.”

His face scrunched up a bit and she assumed he wasn’t a fan of her ex’s either.

And that just made her like Levi even more.

“I remember Trevor,” he murmured.

“Say no more,” she said before he could go on. “Trust me, he was a jerk and an awful human being.” There were more colorful ways she could describe him, but she didn’t want to waste her time. “Anyway, so we both grew up here and know what kind of people we’re up against.” Sighing, she went on. “And I know it shouldn’t get to me because 98% of the people in this town are awesome. It’s that lousy two percent that just have nothing else to do but be mean.”

“One of the reasons I moved away was because of that two percent. Granted, they weren’t the main reason, but they certainly helped me make my decision.”

Jade couldn’t imagine anyone giving Levi a hard time. Everything she remembered about him was positive. He was the hometown hero who everyone liked.

“Let’s not focus on them,” he said after a moment. “Let’s look at some of the ways we can get creative on a small budget, but with a big impact. How does that sound?”

“Small budget is putting it mildly. Look, I appreciate that you’re doing this as a favor to Billie, but I am completely tapped out right now. I don’t have hardly anything to invest in this.” Her shoulders sagged again. “I’m sure you’re very good at what you do, and even though I don’t know anything about advertising, I do know that it requires money.”

He studied her for a long moment. “Jade, let’s not give up before we even start. Let’s talk about the business and what you’d like to see happen, and then I’ll come up with some potential campaigns, okay?”

“Levi, I…”

He held up a hand to stop her. “Humor me. Please. I promise we’ll find something that you’re comfortable with.”

She didn’t see how, but there were worse ways to spend an hour than sitting with an attractive man.

* * *

Billie had gone home, Jade was helping customers, and Levi was coming up with a social media campaign to start building followers for Books & Beans. It was times like this that he wished he had access to a large video department, but he’d find a way to make this come together. He was scrolling through TikTok for inspiration when someone walked up beside him.

A kid.

“Whatcha watching?” the boy asked. He looked to be maybe eight years old, blonde hair, blue eyes, and a chocolate mustache that clearly came from one of Billie’s frosted brownies.

“Some videos,” he replied casually.

“Like cartoons?”

Levi shook his head. “No, these are more like ads.”

The kid moved to stand right behind his shoulder and looked at the screen. “That looks kind of boring. You should watch cartoons. They’re more fun. Or play video games.” Then he looked up at Levi. “Do you play video games?”

He nodded. “Sometimes. What’s your favorite game?”

“Mom doesn’t like it when I play too much, but my favorite is Mario Kart. It’s so much fun and sometimes my

mom plays with me, but she's not very good at it."

"Maybe she just needs practice. Not everyone is good at games they only play once in a while."

The kid seemed to consider this. "Hmm...maybe. I'll have to see if she'll play it more with me." Then he paused. "But I'll be going to camp soon and then at the end of the summer, I'm gonna play football. That's gonna be so cool. I asked if I could get a football video game to help me, but my grandpa said it wasn't the same. Do you think it's the same?"

Levi slowly looked around to see where this kid's mother was. Didn't he know not to talk to strangers, especially at such great length?

"So do you?"

"Um...do I what?" Levi asked.

"Do you think video football would help me learn to play football? My friend's dad said I throw real good, but I don't know anything else about the game."

Big blue eyes stared back at him with genuine curiosity, and Levi wasn't sure how to answer him. "I don't think the video game explains all the moves. You'd be better off talking to your dad or a coach."

"Oh." With a little huff, the boy turned away and Levi had to wonder what he said wrong.

"Silas! It's time to go!" someone called out.

Someone who sounded suspiciously like Jade.

"I'm over here, Mom!" the boy, Silas, called back before looking at Levi. "Enjoy your videos. I have to go home with my grandma now. Mom can't leave yet."

“Silas? Grandma’s waiting and...” Jade came to a complete stop when she spotted her son standing next to him. Her eyes went wide and that was when Levi saw the resemblance between the two of them. Clearing her throat, she said, “Why don’t you go and wash up before you go? You’ve got frosting on your face.” Walking over, she crouched down in front of him and smiled. “How about tacos for dinner tonight?”

Silas’ whole face lit up. “Are you making them? At our house?”

She nodded. “Yup! As soon as I finish up with Mr. Donovan and go over the schedule with Curtis and Erica, I’m going to go grocery shopping to get all the ingredients.”

“Yay! Okay, I’m gonna go wash up!” As he was walking away, he called out things he wanted her to remember. “Don’t forget the sour cream! And the hot sauce! And can we have the cheesy rice with it?” On and on it went until his little voice faded away.

“Sorry about that,” she said to him as she straightened. “I hope he didn’t bother you.”

Levi shook his head. “So, you have a son?”

Something flashed across her face—something like annoyance—but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why.

“Yes. Silas is my little boy and my entire world,” she stated firmly. “He’s why the success of this business is so important. I need to provide for him because I’m all he has.”

And that statement spoke volumes. If he had to guess, the boy’s father was out of the picture, leaving Jade as a single parent.

“Then it’s a good thing we’re going to come up with several great options to bring customers in.”

She didn’t look overly optimistic and that just made Levi more determined to find the perfect campaign to help her business grow.

“If now isn’t a good time, I can come back tomorrow,” he suggested. “I don’t want to be the one to delay taco night.”

Before Jade could respond, Silas came jogging back over with a clean face and a wet shirt. “We can’t have tacos tonight, Mom,” he said solemnly.

“Why not?”

“It’s not Tuesday. We’re supposed to have Taco Tuesdays!” he told her, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Can we save them for tomorrow and make something different tonight?”

Jade looked like she was considering her options. “Only if tonight’s dinner doesn’t have to start with an M.”

The boy cracked up before turning to walk away. “How about macaroni? Or meatballs? Or...milkshakes and meatloaf?”

He cackled a little more before someone else called out, “We’ll see you at home!”

Laughing softly, Jade shook her head and sat back down. “Sorry about that.” She took a sip of her water. “So? Where were we?”

He studied her for a moment. “What are you gonna make for dinner?”

“Um...what?”

“Dinner,” he said with amusement. “Now I have to know if you’re going to make something that starts with an M.”

Fortunately, she laughed. “Well, I was thinking of making monster burgers—which are really just burgers stuffed with cheese and topped with bacon and guacamole—but since we’re having tacos tomorrow night, I’m not sure I’m in the mood for ground beef twice.”

“Because...?”

“What? You don’t think that’s weird?”

Shaking his head, Levi told her, “Two totally different things—except maybe the cheese and guacamole. There’s never a wrong time to eat tacos or burgers. And as someone who once was a boy your son’s age, I can tell you he’s not looking at it like that.”

She chuckled some more. “Okay, I get that, but...I have to eat it too. So really, this is more about me than Silas.”

“Ah. Got it. In that case, you could do monster chicken sandwiches. All the same stuff, but you’re switching out the burger for a piece of chicken. We have relatives who own a pub down in North Carolina and they make a killer chicken sandwich with those ingredients and it was awesome.”

“Hmm...”

“Some sweet potato fries on the side and I’ll bet Silas will love it.” Then he chuckled. “Hell, now I’m hungry. What do you think the odds are that I can convince Billie to make those for dinner too?”

Smiling, Jade shook her head. “I think if you brought home the ingredients she wouldn’t say no, but right now, I’m sure she’s probably taking a nap. She gets here every morning

at 4:30.” She paused and let out a soft sigh. “I don’t know what I’d do without her. She’s amazing.”

“I have to agree. I still don’t get how she went from being an executive in finance to baking, but as long as she’s happy, then I say good for her.”

They sat in companionable silence for a minute before Levi realized that he had enough information to be able to sit down tonight and begin putting together a pitch for her. He was enjoying sitting and laughing with her, but knew she had other things to do.

“How about I come in tomorrow around the same time and show you what I’ve come up with? Will that work?”

“Absolutely. And thanks, Levi. I’m sure this isn’t exactly how you’re used to having meetings.”

Standing, he slid his tablet back into his satchel, picked up his mug and plate from his snack, and took them over to the dish bin. “This was actually pretty awesome and way more relaxing. I may end up coming here to work while I’m in town.”

Jade stood and fidgeted with her ponytail. “That would be just fine.” She looked like she was about to say more when a customer walked over.

“Excuse me, my daughter is going into the eighth grade and I heard you have some of the books from her summer reading list. Can you help me?”

“Absolutely,” she said with a smile before looking over at him. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Levi. And thanks again.”

After she walked away, Levi gathered his things and left. As he climbed into his car, he found himself thinking about the chicken sandwich he and Jade were talking about and decided

he would go grocery shopping and hope that Billie would take pity on him and cook. They never discussed meals or anything like that, so maybe that was a discussion they should have tonight over dinner.

He was about to pull out when he saw Jade jogging toward him. Putting the car back in park, he opened the door and stepped out. “Is everything okay?”

She let out a long breath and laughed softly. “I’m a little more out of shape than I realized...”

Just then, he gave her an appreciative look. She was tall and curvy, and definitely attractive. If he wasn’t on a dating hiatus because he didn’t trust anyone at this moment, he’d consider asking her out.

Again.

Because...yeah. He thought about that the night they met, but that was when he had zero plans for hanging out in Sweetbriar. Now that he knew he’d be here for at least a couple of weeks, he thought Jade might be someone interesting to go out with.

But he was definitely jaded by the whole dating thing—which...his choice of words made him chuckle. Jade. Jaded.

Damn, I’m funny...

Okay, humor aside, he needed to be logical here. And considering Jade had a son, he knew they were most definitely not compatible. Not that he had anything against kids—he just wasn’t looking for any kind of commitment should he start dating again. And he had a feeling dating a single mom would signify at least some level of commitment.

“Um...Levi?”

“Sorry. I kind of got lost in my head there and zoned out for a moment,” he said with a small laugh of his own. “So...?”

She held a small duffel bag up to him. “Billie forgot this, and I figured since you were going home, you could bring it to her. I’m not sure if it’s important, but...”

He went to take it from her hand and they somehow ended up in a slight tangle of fingers. Her hand was small and delicate and her skin was warm and soft and he wanted to kick himself for noticing. “Um...yeah. Sure. I’ll get this to her.” Taking a step back, he was about to say goodbye when she took a step forward.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure...”

“If Billie weren’t your sister and you and I had just met...”

Oh...he saw where this was going and figured he’d cut her off before she embarrassed them both.

“Look, Jade, I think you’re great. You’re beautiful and smart and funny, but I’m not looking to date anyone right now. I’m sorry.”

She looked at him like he’d lost his ever-loving mind.

“Um...”

“Yeah, uh...I was going to ask if you would have taken on Books & Beans as a client if Billie hadn’t asked you to,” she murmured, her cheeks flushing a light crimson.

Groaning, he closed his eyes and called himself every kind of idiot.

With nothing else to do but own his mistake, Levi ran a nervous hand along the back of his neck. “Sorry. It felt like

you were going in a completely different direction with that intro.”

She took a step back and nodded. “It’s fine. Really. I wouldn’t expect someone like you to date me anyway. So... about Books & Beans...”

Tossing Billie’s duffel bag into his car, he faced Jade again. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Billie mentioned how you were kind of a rock star at your last job and handled national accounts. I’m sure my little coffee shop is a huge step down for you and...”

“Not the coffee shop, Jade. The comment about someone like me. What is that about?”

He figured she’d try to make light of it or find an excuse to walk away, but she didn’t. If anything, she stood a little straighter and met his gaze head on. “You clearly aren’t the kind of man who’s looking to hang around this tiny little mountain town. That much you’ve made clear. I’m just saying that someone who’s all about city life and all that culture stuff wouldn’t have any interest in a woman whose roots are deeply planted here. I know my strengths and weaknesses and I actually like who I am and don’t feel like I need to change to please anyone.” She shrugged. “But...I’m also a single mom and my first priority is my son, so I can’t go traipsing off at a moment’s notice to go see a show or out for a late dinner at some trendy restaurant.”

He was going to strangle all three of his sisters because, clearly, this is the way they described him to people.

“Anyway, trust me when I say the feeling is mutual. You’re not the kind of man I’d date either. I’m just genuinely

curious about how you really feel about this project Billie roped you into.”

Right now, he was feeling like he should get in his car and drive back to Alexandria because he was definitely out of his element.

When he noticed she was staring at him expectantly, he knew he had to say something. “It’s been a long time since I’ve done anything quite like Books & Beans, but I’m confident I can get you results. And if it weren’t for Billie and you approached me about it, I probably...well...if I wasn’t out of a job, I probably would have turned you down,” he admitted quietly.

She nodded. “I appreciate your honesty. Now I think we can truly work together.” Moving in close, she gave him a hug. She smelled a little like coffee and vanilla, and he had to stop himself from leaning in closer and inhaling. “Thanks, Levi. And tell Billie we sold out of her caramel crumb cake.” Then she turned and walked away. “Have a great night!”

He stood there for a solid minute wondering what the hell had just happened. Did she essentially turn him down without him actually asking her out? That was a completely new sensation for him and he wasn’t sure how to process it.

Still, he had to appreciate her honesty as well. They weren’t suited for each other, no matter how pretty she was or how great she smelled. He was here to help her out as a favor to his sister and that was that. Hell, with any luck, he’d be long gone from Sweetbriar once again in a month’s time. He’d already made arrangements to move out of his apartment in Alexandria this coming weekend. The property management people were almost giddy that he was leaving because they

had such a long waiting list and he was able to break his lease for only half the required penalty.

Small victories.

He gave himself a month to be forced to live in his hometown and then he hoped to be on to his next big adventure.

So what if the local shop girl wasn't interested in him? He was coming off a breakup anyway. And even if he wasn't, Jade Mackenzie wasn't his type.

Climbing back into his car, he pulled away from Books & Beans and made his way to the grocery store to get the ingredients for dinner. And as he shopped, his mind wandered to whether or not she was going to take his suggestion and make the same thing for her and Silas.

None of my business...

He grabbed a package of chicken breasts, a package of bacon, some pepper jack cheese slices, a fresh avocado, and four brioche buns. Then, because he'd mentioned it to Jade, Levi walked down the frozen foods aisle and grabbed a bag of sweet potato fries. Yeah, dinner was gonna be awesome. He should have mentioned to her how awesome the fries were when you dipped them in sour cream.

Again...none of my business. They can dip their fries in whatever they want.

Once he had all the ingredients, he roamed around the store and grabbed a few other essentials so everything wasn't on his sister. After all, she was already giving him a place to stay, it just made sense for him to chip in and help with the groceries. He must have been there longer than he thought

because suddenly he spotted Jade walking toward him pushing her own cart.

“Hey!” she said with a smile. “Fancy running into you here.” Then she glanced in his cart and chuckled. “So you’re really going to make the chicken sandwiches too, huh?”

“Guilty,” he said with a small smile of his own.

Then she moved around him. “I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

“Yeah, um...you know...I’m not sure if it’s your thing, but...sour cream is kind of awesome for dipping the fries in. Like an alternative to ketchup,” he said and almost groaned at how lame he sounded.

“Ooh...that does sound very yummy. Normally I use ranch dressing with a bit of sriracha sauce added.”

“Ooh...” he mimicked. “That sounds interesting.”

“It gives it a nice little kick. Silas likes it too.” Pausing, she laughed. “Actually, that child is all about making things spicy. I had to start keeping the hot sauce up on the top shelf so he’d stop adding it to everything.”

“Clearly he has good taste.”

Nodding, she told him, “He was eating Szechuan when he was two. I should have known then that he was going to be an adventurous eater.”

“I’ll bet more parents wish their kids were like that,” he replied.

What am I doing? Why would I even know that?

“That’s true. Whenever Silas goes out to eat with his friends, their parents always comment on how impressed they

are. He eats his vegetables and isn't afraid to try new things."

"Good for him. Hopefully he'll enjoy the...uh...monster chicken sandwich."

Smiling, Jade nodded again. "I'm sure he will, and thanks for the suggestion!" She stepped around him. "I'll see you tomorrow!"

"Um..."

"And enjoy your sandwiches!"

Levi watched her walk away and realized he was standing next to shelves stocked with condiments. When he spotted the sriracha, he grabbed a bottle.

"Could be interesting..."

Glancing over his shoulder, he found that Jade was gone, but that didn't stop him from thinking about her.

And that worried him because maybe, just maybe, he was a little interested in Jade Mackenzie.

Unfortunately, he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

Chapter Five

Two days later, Jade was staring in wide-eyed wonder at all the Books & Beans social media sites. Levi had set up accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Then he took pictures of just about every inch of the shop.

But no people.

When she questioned him about that, he gently pulled her aside and explained.

“Okay, please don’t be offended, but...” Pausing, he gave her a sympathetic smile. “Considering the issues you’re having with certain residents, I thought it best to hold off on introducing pictures of you on any of the posts. Obviously, when the Chamber of Commerce comes in to do their thing, they’ll include pictures of you and the staff, but for now, I’d like the focus to be on all the great books and baked goods and coffee you have to offer. Is that okay?”

As much as she hated the reasoning for it, it made sense.

Plus, it took some of the pressure off of her.

“I get it and it’s fine. Should I hire someone to come in and take pictures?”

“That won’t be necessary. I kind of dabble in photography—it’s a secret hobby of mine—so it was fun to come in and do

that.”

“Why keep it a secret?”

Shrugging, he said, “Whenever anyone says they’re into photography, people always ask to see some of their work. In the past, I did the photos on a few campaigns but never took credit for them. I just like knowing they’re out there.”

Scrolling through the posts he’d put up on her Instagram page, she was seriously impressed. “You’ve got a gift, Levi. These aren’t your typical, boring shots. You made everything look a bit artsy. If I didn’t own the shop, I’d want to come in and check the place out.” Smiling up at him, she added, “The shot of the coffee and muffin on the corner table is wonderful. I’d love to get a copy and have it framed.”

He looked like he was blushing. “You don’t have to say that. And besides, it’s nothing great...”

“Oh, stop!” When she spotted Billie, she called her over. “Billie, come over here and look at this picture. Doesn’t it look amazing?”

His sister joined them and glanced at the photo. “Definitely. It’s captivating—almost like there’s a story there.” She smiled up at Levi. “Not that I’m surprised. Levi got the lion’s share of the talent in the family.”

“Billie...” he whined.

“What? Am I lying?” she mused before returning her attention to Jade. “Seriously, it’s not fair. Everything he tries, he’s good at. I’d hate him if he weren’t my brother.”

“Maybe tell Ash to try that,” he muttered.

“Knock it off,” Billie replied, playfully smacking his arm. “You know she loves you.”

“If you say so...”

Off in the distance, a timer went off. “That’s my first batch of cake pops. I can’t wait for them to cool so I can dip them in different glazes!” Before either Jade or Levi could respond, she practically skipped off toward the kitchen.

“Okay,” Jade said after a moment. “We’ve got the pages up and you said you’re doing something to garner engagement, which will lead to followers, right?”

He nodded.

“Is there anything I should be doing?”

“For right now, I’m going to monitor the pages and check on the analytics to see what types of posts garner the most interactions. Then, next week, we’ll talk about changing anything.”

This all seemed too easy and she felt foolish for not doing any of it, or even thinking of any of it, herself.

“So...what’s next? Or do we just let this ride for a few weeks?”

“Having an online presence is the most important thing right now, so I’m putting all my energy into that. Getting the social media accounts set up was the most important step. Now I can set up a website. Soon, we’ll start to get a feel for who your customers are so we know how to target them with online ads.”

“Are those free?” she asked nervously. “Because we talked about this, and...”

“Jade,” he softly interrupted, “don’t worry. I’m keeping that in mind, and we’ll find a way to make it work.” He

stopped for a moment. “What about the Fourth of July Festival? Do they still do that here in Sweetbriar?”

“Oh, yeah. Silas is thrilled that he’ll be back from camp for it. We go and watch the fireworks show every year. How come?”

“Well...I don’t think serving coffee in July would be a big hit, but maybe set up a booth with the baked goods and have flyers to hand out to anyone who stops by. I’m sure you’ll have to pay for the booth space, but I think you’ll make that money back without any issue.”

No, she knew she’d make her money back, but she also knew that Victoria Nelson was the head of the festival committee.

“Um...I think the registration time has passed,” she said and hoped she sounded disappointed. “It’s less than a month away and they closed that out back in the beginning of May, so...”

Levi’s gaze was intense.

And...knowing.

“Got it. The committee members aren’t fans.”

She let out a small, mirthless laugh. “At least one of them isn’t.”

They both fell silent before he said, “Let me think about this. I’m going to look at what other events are being held in the surrounding towns and reach out to the local businesses.”

“But...”

“Not the shops, but the offices. Those kinds of businesses. If we can come up with a campaign to cater their monthly

meetings, or breakfast once a week...if we can get our feet in the door, Jade..."

"That would be..."

"Mom! Mom! Mom!" Silas called out as he ran through the door, just like he did every day after school. He came to a halt beside her and Levi, a little breathless and sweaty. "Mom! Guess what?"

"What?" she asked, smiling down at him as she combed her fingers through his hair.

Reaching into his backpack, he pulled out a flyer. "Look! It's for sign-ups for a football camp! It's not until August, but we need to sign up *now* so I can get a spot! I told you Tommy's dad said I was a natural, and now I can go to this camp and get even better! So can I, Mom? Can I? Please, please, please!"

"Hey, Buddy!" Levi said as he high-fived her son. "I heard you liked the monster chicken sandwiches the other night. Did you use sour cream on the fries?"

Silas nodded enthusiastically. "I did! Mom added the sriracha and it made it even better! You should try it sometime."

Nodding, Levi pretended to consider it. "You know something? I already did and it was awesome!" They high fived again and started talking about all the cool things you can dip french fries in.

Meanwhile, Jade put her focus on the flyer in her hand, and her heart sank a little. The cost of the camp was a lot more than she was comfortable with, and having Silas play any sport was a bit of a sore spot with her. She knew it was only natural

and plenty of kids did it, but...she didn't want him taking after Trevor—not in any way, shape, or form.

Unfortunately, there was no way she could admit that out loud without sounding like a horrible mother.

“I'll tell you what, we'll talk about it tonight over dinner. What do you say?”

His expression fell as he took the flyer from her hand and shoved it back in his backpack. “Fine.” When he turned and walked away, his head hung down, and he dragged his feet.

“Why don't you grab a snack and set up at one of the tables to do your homework?” she called out, and all he did was nod.

With a weary sigh, Jade sat down in the closest chair before resting her face in her hands.

“Hey,” Levi said quietly, and for a minute, she had forgotten that he was there. “Is everything okay?”

Ugh...how did she even begin to describe it?

Straightening slightly, she glanced over at him. “Just another perk of being a single parent. Sometimes there are events or activities that aren't within the budget. So far, most of them haven't been a big deal, but now that he's starting to show an interest in sports? I have a feeling this is going to turn into a huge deal.” She sighed again. “I don't think there are enough tacos or monster burgers to make this right.”

“Damn,” he said before reaching over and placing his hand over hers. “I'm sorry.”

“That makes two of us.”

Her mind was spinning wildly as she tried to think of ways she could possibly make it work, but unless the shop started

making money, it definitely wasn't going to happen.

Forcing thoughts of football aside, Jade put her focus back on business. "So...what's the plan for the weekend? Anything I need to be doing?"

"I want you to just keep doing what you're already doing and focus on getting to know your customers. The better rapport you build with them, the more it will work in your favor. I'm going back to Alexandria for a few days to pack up my place and get everything moved here."

"Oh? When are you leaving? I'm not keeping you from doing stuff you need to do, am I?"

Before he could answer, Silas came stomping back over.

Loudly.

"I just want you to know that if you say I can't go to football camp, I'm *never* speaking to you again! *Ever!*" And then he stomped away.

Jade knew she should go after him but didn't want to make a scene in front of her customers. Instead, she hung her head again and fought against the tears stinging her eyes.

"Jade, I..."

Without looking at him, she stood. Swallowing hard, she said, "Good luck with the move and I'll just plan on seeing you sometime next week." When she turned to push her chair in, the first tears fell and Levi was standing close enough to see them.

Dammit.

Without a word, he pulled her into his arms and shielded her from prying eyes as she gave in and cried. It wasn't a full-

on cry, but it was enough that she was making the front of his shirt wet.

It took a minute, but she took a couple of deep breaths and pulled herself together. Lifting her head, she met his gaze and...damn.

The intensity that he was watching her with made her heart skip a beat and had her knees going a little weak. It had been years since a man looked at her like that and if they were anywhere else—and if he were anyone else—she probably would go up on her toes and initiate a kiss.

“Jade, I...” he whispered, and she swore he was lowering his head.

“Levi...” Her tone was equally soft and she was definitely closing the distance. Everything about him called to her even though she knew it shouldn't. But...dammit...she had forgotten what it was like to feel desired and the look in his eyes told her he was most definitely interested in her.

Just one kiss...that's allowed, right?

“Hey, is it okay if I let Silas try the cake pops?” Billie asked as she rounded the corner toward their table. Her eyes went a little wide, and Jade instantly stepped out of Levi's arms.

Wiping furiously at her cheeks, she nodded. “Um...sure. He's in a bit of a foul mood, so maybe those will cheer him up.”

Billie looked suspiciously between the two of them but kept whatever she was thinking to herself. “Then maybe I'll bring him back into the kitchen and let him dunk a batch of cake pops in their glaze. One of the trays didn't come out quite

right and I was going to just ditch them, but I think Silas might get a kick out of decorating them.”

Smiling with gratitude, Jade nodded. “Thanks, Billie.”

“No problem.” But before she walked away, she shot Levi a hard look and there wasn’t a doubt in Jade’s mind that the two of them were going to discuss this when they got home.

Although, there really wasn’t anything to discuss. She was upset and he was comforting her. It wasn’t a big deal.

No kiss.

Not even a quick brushing of lips.

And it was crazy how disappointed she was.

But again, nothing happened, so there was no reason for Billie to be upset.

But then she looked over at Levi and he was still watching her intently and she realized she might be fooling herself because by the look on his face, it *was* a big deal.

* * *

It didn’t seem possible, but Levi managed to pack up his entire life in a weekend.

He wasn’t sure if that was impressive or pathetic.

The bulk of his stuff went into storage and he took whatever he could back to Sweetbriar with him, which wasn’t much.

Because he’d had so much to do, it was the perfect distraction to keep him from thinking about Jade.

Beautiful Jade with the long silky hair and the deep soulful eyes...

Every time he thought about her, he wondered what would have happened if his sister hadn't interrupted them. What would the kiss have been like? Soft and sweet? Deep and wet? Somewhere in between? In his mind, it was all of them. He would have wrapped his arms around her and she would have let out a sexy little hum as she raked her hands up into his hair.

Yeah...

And he fantasized about her gripping his hair a little tight and giving it a tug as she pulled him closer and then...

Well...in his mind, they were alone in the coffee shop in one of the secluded nooks, and that's where things went from some sexy kisses to some downright sultry and naughty action on one of the plush, oversized chairs.

Okay, so maybe even packing up his life in Alexandria didn't distract him quite as much as he had hoped.

Still, he'd gotten everything done that he needed to accomplish and was back to Billie's on Monday night just in time for dinner. She had cleared out the guest room a little more to give him some space to make it his own temporarily. It was a sweet gesture, but the room was too small for him to do more than unpack his clothes in.

So, he was going to need to rent a small storage unit in Sweetbriar now.

Awesome.

"I still can't believe you got it all done," she said as they sat down to eat. She'd grilled burgers for them and made some pasta salad to go with them. "How was it even possible?"

Shrugging, he poured them each something to drink. “Dumb luck. I rented one of those pod things that you fill up and then they store everything for you. They brought it Saturday morning and I had a couple of buddies of mine come and help me load it up, and then the company came and picked the pod up this morning. Nothing to it.”

Which wasn't completely true.

The pod part was, but he'd had to pay people to help him pack it up. None of his so-called friends were available, like his sudden run of bad luck was contagious or something. So a couple of strangers had helped him move the furniture and then Levi packed up everything else and moved the boxes himself. Thankfully it was just a one-bedroom condo; otherwise, he'd probably still be there packing.

“Well, color me impressed,” Billie said with a big smile. “I can't imagine what it must be like to have everything work out when you need it to.”

“Yeah, well...”

“So I wanted to talk to you about Books & Beans.”

“O-kay...”

“I know you're already aware of Jade's financial situation, and she's desperately trying to do as much free publicity as she can.”

Nodding, he took a bite of his burger.

“You and I both know that's only going to get her so far. She needs a little boost. Nothing that's going to break the bank, but something that's going to do more than get her a few likes or follows on social media.”

“I’m going to start reaching out to some of the offices in the area about having Books & Beans cater their meetings or breakfasts.”

“No, I’m talking actual paid ads either online or in a bigger publication, Levi. Something that’s going to give the shop some real attention and bring in customers who aren’t looking for a freebie.”

“I’d love to see that happen too, but I can’t force Jade to spend money she isn’t comfortable spending.”

“What if...what if she wasn’t the one spending it?” his sister casually suggested.

“What exactly are you trying to say?”

Putting her burger down, she wiped her hands with a napkin, squared her shoulders, and said, “I’m saying that I want to help. I’m willing to pay for some ads that will actually do something for the business.”

Now he was confused. “It’s not your business, Bill. I mean, I get that Jade’s your friend, but you work for her and you need to make a living too. It’s not your place.”

“And yet you’re helping with ideas for these campaigns and she’s not paying you either.”

Yeah...there was that. However...

“That’s different. You’re giving me a place to stay while I try to get my life back on track.”

“Maybe that’s part of it, but I have a feeling you would have helped her out even without the promise of free room and board.”

The thought almost made him laugh. A week ago, he would have turned down anyone who asked him to do this sort

of thing pro-bono. But obviously having his entire world collapse around him had him re-evaluating his priorities.

“It’s still not the same,” he argued lightly before tasting the pasta salad.

The serene smile on her face should have been a warning that there was more to the situation than met the eye.

“While you were off dominating the advertising world in Alexandria, I was kind of dominating things here in Sweetbriar Ridge.”

Somehow he didn’t think that took much, but he kept that to himself.

“I was offered the job of bank president. I was making big money. Believe it or not, I’ve traveled all over the country, and you know what I found?”

He shook his head.

“I hated it. I hated every moment of it.” Then she laughed. “Okay, that didn’t come out right. I loved seeing the country—what little of it I actually got to see—but I hated the job and the pressure it was putting on me. I enjoy living a simple life. I was making more money than I ever dreamed of and I invested it well.”

Frowning, he asked, “So what are you saying? You’re rich or something?”

Her smile grew. “Or something.” Then, with a shrug, she went on. “I’m not looking to throw money at the business for the sake of Jade hitting a sales goal. I want to invest in it so the business will grow and become profitable.”

“Jade doesn’t strike me as the type who wants charity,” he argued, and even though he didn’t know that with any great

certainty, he just had a gut feeling about it.

“It’s not like that.”

“Billie, I just think...”

“Jade’s had a hard life since she got pregnant with Silas. I didn’t really know her back then, but you know...small towns and all that.”

Nodding, he felt himself tense up.

“She’s worked so hard and it feels like she should have crossed the finish line when she opened to the public, but then all these little things kept going wrong. I know you’re doing a lot to help her and I really appreciate it.”

“You’re giving me a place to live until I get my shit together, so...”

Reaching over, she took his hand in hers. “I want you to come up with something you’d pitch to Jade if she had an advertising budget. But...I want you to pitch it to me.”

“That just seems wrong. I don’t want to lie to her.”

“But you’re not!” she argued. “She doesn’t have to know about this. I just want to help jumpstart things so she can relax and breathe a little. The summer is going to be stressful enough for her with summer camp for Silas and then juggling childcare for him until school goes back in the fall. If business improves, she can hire someone else so maybe she can go home a little earlier and spend time with her son. Or...hell... maybe she can get involved in one of those singles groups and meet a nice guy, or...”

“Singles groups?” he asked. He didn’t like the sound of that even though he had no idea what she was talking about.

“There’s a group that meets once a week over at the community center. I’ve been begging Jade to go, but with the store opening, and school getting ready to end for the year, and then all the summer stuff...” She sighed. “There aren’t enough hours in the day. But if business improves...”

He saw where all that was going, and he still didn’t like it.

Which made no sense because he’d already given himself multiple pep talks regarding Jade. He could acknowledge that she was attractive. He could acknowledge that she had a great sense of humor and that he enjoyed talking with her. And yes, he could even acknowledge that their hug at Books & Beans last week had been more than a little arousing even when it shouldn’t have been. But no matter what, he wasn’t staying in Sweetbriar for long and he wasn’t looking to get involved with anyone right now.

“Jade’s personal life is no business of mine,” he snapped with a little more heat than he intended and clearly his sister picked up on it based on the grin she was giving him.

“I told myself I wouldn’t ask...”

“But...?” he prompted.

“But I saw that little embrace the two of you shared last week,” Billie said as she toyed with her pasta salad. “I know she was upset over Silas’ outburst, but you didn’t look like you were hating it.”

“Bill, come on. I was just comforting her. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Billie...”

“Okay. Fine. You were just being a good guy.” Then she shrugged. “Not that I’m surprised. You’ve always been a good guy.”

“Thanks,” he murmured.

“Just one more thing.”

He went to pick up his burger but paused.

“Don’t mess around with her,” she said solemnly. “If you say you were just being a good guy, then fine. But if you’ve got any thoughts in your head about hitting on her, please don’t. She’s dealt with enough rejection from charming guys like you. She doesn’t need to go there again. So...just...” Pausing, she sighed. “I hope I’m wrong and making a fuss over nothing...”

“You are.”

Liar.

“Okay, then. Good.” Picking up her fork, she visibly relaxed. “So talk to me about what kind of options you think we have for a bigger campaign for the shop!”

* * *

She’s dealt with enough rejection from charming guys like you.

That one statement played on a constant loop in his head all damn night.

And well into the next morning.

Honestly, he hadn’t slept much, and it wasn’t all because of Jade. While he’d been back in Alexandria, he had made a few more calls to some former business acquaintances, and they all led nowhere. His self-esteem officially hit rock bottom

and he was seriously losing confidence in himself. Hell, even this project for the damn coffee shop was giving him anxiety.

When he got out of bed and went to make himself a cup of coffee, he thought about his sister. She was definitely the caretaker of the family. She always had been. After their father walked out on them, their mom had to work two jobs and Billie had simply stepped up to take care of him and his sisters. And from what he could tell, now she was looking to take care of Jade too.

It's sweet. Don't look at it as a bad thing.

Okay, maybe he couldn't say it with any great certainty, but he just felt that someone like Jade prided herself on accomplishing this goal with the business on her own. And just like he had told his sister last night, it wasn't her place to step in.

But she was going to and he was going to help her and Levi didn't know if that made him a good guy or a bad one.

Right now, it felt like he didn't know anything anymore.

“Okay, I need to snap out of this pity party and get my shit together. Something's gotta give, and there's bound to be the perfect job for me out there somewhere.”

At least, he hoped there was.

Coffee in hand, he sat down at the kitchen table where he'd left his laptop the night before and immediately went through his emails. Most of them were nonsense that he automatically deleted, but there was one from a company he applied to down near Atlanta.

Dear Mr. Donovan,

Thank you for reaching out in response to our job posting. After reviewing your resume, we would love the opportunity to talk with you via Zoom regarding joining our intern program. Please find our calendar link at the bottom of this email and feel free to schedule a time that is convenient for you.

He stopped reading at that point because the position he applied for was a senior advertising associate, a paid position. The internship was likely an unpaid position and honestly more than a step down from where he'd been.

Slamming the laptop shut with a curse, Levi raked both hands through his hair. "Why is this so damn hard?"

Standing, he paced a bit for no other reason than he had all this pent-up frustration and energy and nothing to do with it. When his phone dinged with an incoming text, he dove for it like a lifeline.

Ashlynn: Hey! I heard you're back in town

Ashlynn: Do you have time to stop by the salon and talk to my boss about ad stuff?

Ashlynn: And your hair could use a trim

Ashlynn: LOL!

Groaning, he shook his head.

Levi: I've got nothing but time

Levi: When's a good time to stop by?

Ashlynn: How about after lunch?

Ashlynn: Then we can go and grab some coffee and yummy stuff from Books & Beans!

He was beginning to wonder if maybe he should ask Jade for an actual job because he was there more than some of her employees.

Levi: Sounds good. I'll see you later

Ashlynn: One more thing...

Levi: ???

Ashlynn: You really should call Mom.

Ashlynn: She's kind of sad that you're back and haven't reached out

Levi: I've been back for less than 24 hours, Ash

Ashlynn: And all last week

With another groan, he remembered why he enjoyed living far away from family.

Levi: Fine. I'll call her now

Ashlynn: She's at work, doofus. Just...call her tonight, okay?

Levi: Then why tell me about this now? Why not share it later over coffee?

Ashlynn: Because it was on my mind! Sheesh!

Ashlynn: Gotta go. See you after lunch!

He was about to toss his phone down when inspiration hit.

Levi: Hey! How's my best girl? Would you like to go to dinner tonight? Just the two of us?

Since she was at work, Levi figured it might take some time before his mother responded. To his surprise, her reply was almost instantaneous.

Mom: What a wonderful surprise! It's a date!

Sadly, it was the closest he was going to have to a date for the foreseeable future.

Levi: I'll see you at 6 😊

Okay, one hurdle for the day crossed.

Now all he had to do was deal with his smartass sister, try not to overthink how much he was looking forward to seeing Jade, and then have dinner with his mother.

Sitting back down, he took a sip of his now-cold coffee and grimaced.

“I seriously need to get my life back under control.” Room temperature coffee while sitting at his sister's kitchen table at ten o'clock on a Tuesday was not his definition of living the dream.

Chapter Six

It was the last day of school, and Jade had agreed to let Silas sleep over at his best friend Jimmy's house. They had begged her about it because they were going to different camps and wouldn't see each other for almost a month. Part of her wanted to say no because she wasn't going to get to see him for two full weeks and they'd never been apart that long, but she knew how important this was and reluctantly agreed.

So after school, she had left Books & Beans and took her son home to pack and promptly brought him over to Jimmy's with a promise to pick him up the following day after lunch. When she left the coffee shop, Curtis was there, but Erica was late. She hadn't texted to say anything was wrong, and Curtis had assured Jade he could handle things until Erica got there. But, because Jade was a worrier, as soon as she dropped Silas off, she went back to the shop to make sure everything was okay.

She knew something was wrong the instant she walked through the door.

Erica looked at her with wide eyes, but she wasn't behind the counter and didn't have on her apron.

"Hey," Jade said casually, her smile firmly in place as she walked over to her. "Is everything okay?"

“Um...” Toying with her hair, Erica wouldn’t look directly at her. “I kind of need to talk to you, Jade.”

It was pointless for her to mention that she should have done that hours ago if it was this serious, but decided to hold judgment until she heard what was wrong.

Sitting in the non-fiction section, Jade told herself that no matter what the issue was, they’d handle it. “So...what’s going on?”

With a soft sigh, Erica looked at her sadly. “I’m quitting.”

“Oh?” Gently, she cleared her throat before asking, “May I ask why?”

“It’s nothing you or anyone here did, Jade,” Erica assured her. “I just...well...I got a scholarship for college and it starts next week with the summer semester.” She paused and her smile grew a little. “You know that I’ve been working so hard to get money for college and this scholarship really came out of nowhere. Honestly, I don’t even remember applying for it, but there’s no way I can turn down the opportunity. As it is, I’m kind of being forced to rush around and pack up to move to Richmond. Luckily my grandparents live there so I can stay with them and save money on housing, but I’m so overwhelmed and there just wasn’t time for me to give you any notice. This all literally happened this morning. I’m so sorry.”

There was no way Jade could fault her. After all, if someone had given her an opportunity like that when she was younger, there wasn’t a doubt in her mind that she would’ve done the same exact thing.

“As much as I hate to lose you, I’m actually thrilled for you, Erica,” Jade assured her, reaching over and squeezing her

hand. “This is an exciting opportunity and it’s kind of amazing that it’s all happening so fast!”

“I know!” Erica said as she seemed to relax a bit. “I’ve applied for several different scholarships, but this one really didn’t ring any bells. And it’s from a local association or something, which is even weirder because I would have thought those would go to the current graduates.” With a small laugh, she shrugged. “Either way, I’m glad someone with the Nelson Foundation thought I was worthy of this!”

Everything in Jade froze.

“The...Nelson Foundation?” she repeated slowly. “That’s who the scholarship is from?”

Nodding, Erica replied, “They said it’s a scholarship to give individuals the chance to achieve greatness even when circumstances try to hinder that path.” She laughed again. “I thought it was kind of a weird statement, but it’s right there in the letter, so...”

Rage filled her like never before, but she did her best to keep her smile on her face while she congratulated her now-former employee and wished her well. Once Erica was gone, Jade knew she couldn’t leave Curtis to close up alone and resigned herself to staying until closing time.

When things were slow, she pulled out her phone and called her mother because she needed to vent.

“Hey, Sweetie! Is Silas over at Jimmy’s? It’s all he talked about when I picked him up from school!”

“I dropped him off and I swear he was ready to burst with excitement,” Jade told her before the weary sigh escaped.

“Uh-oh. What’s going on?” her mother asked. “Did something happen?”

Jade told her about Erica's scholarship. "I know it's a wonderful thing for her, but...it's from the Nelson Foundation. Nelson. You know Victoria's behind it!" Then she told her the mission statement. "I mean, if that's not a direct dig at me, I don't know what is!"

"Oh, Jade, I'm so sorry! What can I do?"

"There's nothing you can do. I just needed to vent." Then she sighed. "And now I have to hire someone fast; otherwise, I'll be living here while Silas is at camp."

"We can't have that," Cora murmured. "You need some time to yourself, Jade." She paused for a moment. "Let me talk to some of my friends. You know that Loretta and Robin and Nora are always saying how bored they are since they retired."

It wasn't the worst idea...

"Thanks, Mom. I hate to have to grovel like this."

"Nonsense! Now don't you worry. We'll get it all worked out. I'll take Erica's shift tomorrow since I know you've got a lot to do to get Silas packed up for camp. Then on Monday morning, I'll go to the shop while you drop him off. Your father will go with you so you're not there by yourself. I'm sure it's going to be hard watching that bus pull away."

Damn...now she was even more depressed.

In the distance, she heard the bell over the door ring and knew she needed to go out and help Curtis. "I need to go. Customers are coming in."

"Okay. Try not to let this get you down, sweetheart. And don't worry about the shop tomorrow. Billie and I will have it covered."

“I’ll still have to come in tomorrow night to help Curtis again, but...”

“Stop fussing,” her mother gently scolded her. “We’ll work it out. Now go.”

“Thanks again, Mom. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Hanging up, she walked over to the counter and smiled at the small group of customers. It was an hour before everyone was gone and she had a minute to talk to Curtis.

“So...”

He gave her a sympathetic smile. “I know you’re upset, but this is kind of a big deal for Erica.”

“I know and I’m thrilled for her. I’m just overwhelmed with making sure we have enough coverage here.”

“Jade, I don’t mind being here on my own for the last hour. It’s normally very quiet by that point and maybe we can tweak the hours for a little while until you find someone.”

As tempting as that sounded, it wasn’t ideal. With school out and the days staying lighter longer, she knew staying open until eight during the week would be beneficial. And her plan had been to stay open until ten on Saturday nights. She expected complications when she planned to open her own business; she just didn’t expect so many of them in the first few weeks.

“I have a couple of friends who might be interested in the position,” Curtis offered after a moment. “I mean, I can’t say with great certainty that they’d be a good fit or anything, but I can definitely ask.”

That made her smile. “Thanks, Curtis. I appreciate that. I’m afraid to put it out there publicly that we’re hiring

because...”

“Because Mrs. Nelson will somehow use it to discourage would-be applicants?”

When Jade’s eyes went wide, he chuckled.

“People talk,” he said with a shrug. “If it makes you feel any better, there are a lot of people telling her to stop, but...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...I know. Victoria doesn’t listen to anyone.”

“My uncle used to own the Christmas tree farm over off of Statesville Lane. Well, Mrs. Nelson used to go there every year and critique every tree on the lot and then announce that she would buy her tree elsewhere.” He snorted. “I mean, who does that?”

“Believe me, we could probably stand here all night, or for the next several days actually, and not run out of stories,” Jade said with another sad sigh. “The fact is that I need to hire someone fast so I don’t end up moving in here and sleeping in the back room.”

Grinning, Curtis gave her a quick hug. “We’re not going to let that happen. Now let’s get things cleaned up so we can close on time.”

“Sounds good to me.”

For the next hour, they cleaned everything and prepped for the next morning. At eight o’clock sharp, Curtis wished her a goodnight and Jade locked the door behind him. She was more than ready to leave, but she had some paperwork to do and decided to sit down with a cup of tea, a slice of lemon pound cake, and curl up in one of the comfy chairs to do it. Maybe she could have taken it all home and done it there, but there

was something incredibly peaceful to be in her little shop all by herself.

Peaceful.

It didn't seem possible for her to feel this way after the way things went earlier, but she was going to have to learn to roll with the punches. It had been over eight years; why Victoria Nelson found it necessary to keep tormenting her, she had no idea. It wasn't like she ever held Trevor back. He'd bailed on her almost as soon as she told him she was pregnant with Silas. He was away in college on a football scholarship and had high hopes of getting drafted into the NFL. So it wasn't like he had to quit school and become a father. If anything, he made it abundantly clear that he was staying in school and even if he made it big, he wanted nothing to do with her or the baby.

Ugh...what did I ever see in him?

Still, it wasn't long after that when Trevor's life seemed to go off the rails, through no fault of Jade's. He was always a partier, always doing everything to excess. So when he got caught drinking before a game, he was put on suspension. That pattern repeated itself several times and when he graduated, he somehow landed as a 7th round draft pick in the NFL. But, in typical Trevor fashion, he'd gone out celebrating that night and got pulled over for a DUI, tried to punch a cop, and was found to have cocaine both in his system and in his car. So, there went his big career.

Again, no fault of Jade's, but for some reason, Victoria Nelson had decided that Jade had somehow distracted Trevor and was the sole reason for his spiraling behavior.

Now he was a used car salesman down in Florida, married to a woman who had two kids of her own, and never once

asked to know anything about Silas. The only contact she had from him was to state that he didn't want his name on the birth certificate. She had only been six months pregnant at the time and it had almost been a relief to know that he could never claim her child in any way, shape, or form.

Honestly, she and Trevor were good. No lingering problems.

Except his mother.

Taking a sip of her tea, she let out a small groan as she got more comfortable. Typing in her receipts on her laptop, she glanced at the time. With any luck, she'd be done by nine and home by 9:15. The yawn was out before she could stop it, but with a little effort, she'd get everything done and be able to crawl into bed and relax sooner rather than later.

* * *

As far as Friday nights went, this one was borderline pitiful.

It was almost nine o'clock and Levi was driving back to Billie's house after taking his mom to the movies. Granted, it was a good movie and it was nice spending yet another night with his mother, but this was so ridiculously far from what his life was like two weeks ago.

And it was making him crazy.

Driving slowly through the nearly deserted downtown area, Levi found himself slowing down a little when he saw Books & Beans in the distance. There were lights on and he found that odd at this hour. The closer he got, the curiouser he became. When he stopped directly in front, he saw Jade sitting by herself in one of the chairs, looking half-asleep.

“Well that can’t be good,” he murmured, parking his car.

Taking a minute to watch her before climbing out of the car, he knew he should check on her. Jogging up to the door, he knocked lightly on the glass and almost smiled when she startled slightly before spotting him.

Slowly, Jade got to her feet and stretched before padding over to the glass door. Her expression was a little sleepy as she reached for the lock and turned it.

But the door didn’t open.

She pulled on it again with no luck.

“Did you lock the bottom bolt?” he asked, his eyes never leaving hers.

On the other side of the door, she crouched down and unbolted that bottom lock before straightening and opening the door. “I don’t even remember locking that one,” she said with a small laugh.

“Are you here alone?”

She nodded before yawning. “Sorry...yeah, I had some reports to do and I didn’t want to bring them home with me. I thought if I stayed, I’d get it done faster, but somehow, I nearly fell asleep.”

“Where’s Silas?” he asked, looking around. “Do you need to go pick him up?”

She shook her head. “He’s at a sleepover tonight. I had big plans of enjoying a night to myself, but...” She yawned again. “It clearly wasn’t meant to be.”

“Are you almost done?”

Another nod.

And another yawn.

“Maybe?” she asked with another small laugh. “I’m not sure.” Taking a step back, she motioned for him to come in. Once he did, she closed the door and locked it. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Um...”

“As much as I hate to do it, I’m going to make myself a something with just a little caffeine so I can drive home. I think the tea I was drinking made me sleepy.”

“I can drive you home,” Levi offered. “I’m sure your car will be safe here overnight. You shouldn’t drive if you’re this tired.”

But she waved him off as she worked behind the counter to make her drink. Glancing at him over her shoulder, she said, “Come on, Levi. Have something to drink with me. There’s some of your sister’s lemon pound cake too...”

That made him chuckle. “Literally trying to sweeten the deal, huh?”

“Well...”

“Caffeine doesn’t really affect me if I drink it late at night, but I also don’t want you to make an entire pot of the Robusta. Hmm...” Pausing, he took a moment. “Just make me a cup of whatever you’re having and if it’s not a problem, I’ll gladly take a slice of the cake. Thanks.”

Within minutes, they were sitting down and he sipped his coffee while Jade finished working on her laptop. It didn’t take long, and she closed it and smiled at him. “Okay...sorry about that. I just had a few more receipts to enter. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“No worries.” He took another sip and then frowned. “Why are you here so late? I thought you went home at three now that things are settling down.”

Her expression fell slightly before she told him about her employee quitting.

“Damn, Jade. I’m sorry. That sucks. What are you going to do?”

“Right now, my mom is going to come in tomorrow for a few hours to cover things so I can get Silas packed for camp. He leaves on Monday morning.”

Levi heard the slight tremble in her voice and he could only imagine how hard all of this was for her.

“At least this scholarship thing wasn’t directed at you,” he said and almost wanted to kick himself because it was an awkward statement at best.

“Oh, it was directed at me,” she stated before launching into her history with Trevor Nelson and his mother. Levi had already figured that Trevor was Silas’ father, but he was more than a little shocked at how he had essentially waived all his parental rights.

“So...wait...you literally have nothing to do with Trevor and have no part of his life and she’s still dogging you? Why?”

“Because it’s easier to torture me than to take responsibility for the fact that her son is a degenerate who screwed up his own life,” she said with disgust before taking a sip of her coffee. “Honestly, if I thought it would do any good, I’d call Trevor myself and tell him to get his damn family off my back. He didn’t want to be a part of mine or my son’s lives? Fine. I didn’t even fight him on it! I thought it was the right thing to do and yet I’m being punished for it.”

She groaned and took another sip of her drink.

“Why is life so damn unfair, Levi?” she asked miserably. “My only mistake was staying involved with him after he left for college. In the back of my mind, I knew we wouldn’t last, but...I don’t know...we still kind of cared for each other. I just want to move on with my life and it’s like I can’t because of this bitter old bitch.” Then she snickered. “Sorry.”

“I think those words are actually a little too kind,” he said with a grin.

“So, what about you? I know you’re struggling since your company downsized and your position got cut. What’s next for you?”

Company downsized? What?

“Um...”

“Damn,” she muttered. “Sorry. Billie shared that with me. Did you not want anyone to know?”

And since she had been brave enough to share the unflattering part of her life, Levi felt like he owed it to her to do the same with his.

“My sister might have...twisted the truth,” he began slowly, unable to meet her gaze.

“Meaning...?”

“I got involved with a client,” he said solemnly. “She traveled a lot for business—or so she said—and so we didn’t see each other often. Still, I really liked her and even though I knew it was frowned upon to get involved with someone who was...you know...”

“A client,” she prompted.

He nodded. “Well, it turned out she wasn’t just a client. She was a *married* client and her husband was related to my boss.”

“Oh...wow...”

Another nod. “So yeah. Once her husband found out, I’m guessing he went to my boss. I got fired and all Mandy said was, ‘Sorry, Levi,’ like really blasé, like she didn’t really care.” He took a slow sip of his coffee before looking up at her. “I thought everything would be okay, that I’d pack up my stuff, go home, make some calls, and have a job by the next day. But apparently, calls were made to most of our competitors and no one would hire me.” Shaking his head, he snorted quietly. “So believe me when I say I know exactly how you feel. It sucks to have other people dogging you for things that aren’t entirely your fault.”

“Yup.”

“And believe me, I know I’m not blameless. I never should have gotten involved with her, but I wasn’t the one to approach her. She approached and pursued me.” He paused. “I’m not trying to make excuses...”

Jade held up her hand to stop him. “I know, and I get what you’re saying. It’s a little like Trevor and me. When he was leaving for school, I brought up the subject of us breaking up and he swore it wasn’t what he wanted. He told me how important I was to him and how much he needed me. I’m pretty sure he was cheating on me the entire time, so I’m not sure why he was so hell-bent on us staying together.”

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes while they each finished their coffees. It was getting late and he was sure she was tired and was about to suggest they go when she spoke.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure...”

“Last week,” she began, and this time she was the one not fully looking at him. “The day that Silas had his fit and I got upset. Do you remember?”

Nodding, Levi said, “I do. How come?”

This time, she looked up at him. “I was just curious. It felt like you were going to kiss me.”

He nodded again. “I was.”

Jade’s eyes went a little wide. “Oh. Um. Okay.” She frowned slightly. “Was it going to be like a pity kiss or did you actually want to kiss me?”

They’d been brutally honest with each other so far, so there was only one thing for him to say.

“I genuinely wanted to kiss you, Jade. I know the time wasn’t right and it probably wasn’t appropriate, but...”

He never got to finish because she leaned in and pressed her lips to his.

For a moment, neither of them moved. It was simply Jade’s lips touching his. But then...

Oh...

Slowly, Jade seemed to just melt against him on the softest sigh, and Levi was right there to catch her. Their moves were languid as the kiss went from chaste to curious to a full-on slow seduction. Together, they gently maneuvered to get closer. Her arms draped over his shoulders before her hands moved up into his hair, while Levi banded one arm around her waist as his free hand moved up to caress her face. Her skin

was warm and smooth, and she tasted like the sugary sweetness of her dessert.

Delicious...

It had been ages—years—since he enjoyed the simple act of kissing so much. There was no other plan here except to kiss and be kissed for however long it lasted. When Jade lifted her head—it could have been minutes or hours, he had no idea—the look she gave him was of pure temptation.

“Wow,” she whispered before licking her lips. “That was better than I imagined.” Resting her forehead against his, she added, “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” he returned gruffly. “That was pretty damn spectacular for me too. And for what it’s worth, it’s better than I imagined too.”

Lifting her head, she gave him a shy smile. “Really?”

One hand was still cupping her cheek, and his thumb caressed her skin. “Oh, yeah.”

Her blush was instantaneous as she began to slowly pull away. “Still...I feel like I should thank you because...well...I guess I really needed that. It’s been a long time and...” Stopping, she shook her head. “It’s just nice to know that someone still finds me attractive.” As she got to her feet, she groaned. “Ugh...how pathetic did that sound? Just...ignore me. I’m clearly tired and delirious.”

Before he knew what was happening, she was gathering their cups and plates and walking away. There was no way he could ignore her and immediately stood and went after her. In the kitchen, he found her at the sink washing the dishes.

“Hey,” he said softly, and waited for her to look at him. When she did, he cupped her face again. “You are a beautiful,

sexy, and desirable woman, Jade. Hell, I was interested in you that first night I stopped in here for coffee. It's been a small slice of hell to keep my distance these last two weeks."

Blindly, she reached out and turned off the water. "Then why have you?"

"Honestly?"

She nodded.

"Because I'm not planning on staying in Sweetbriar. As soon as I get my life together, I'm out of here. It didn't seem right to start something when I knew I would leave the first chance I got."

"Oh." She licked her lips, but he didn't think it was intentional. "But if you were planning on staying...?"

"There wouldn't be a damn thing I could do to stay away," he admitted. "Believe me."

Sometimes being the good guy sucked.

"I appreciate your honesty, Levi," she said before quickly turning and finishing the dishes. He didn't know what to say, so he just stood back and waited for her to be done before following her back out to the front of the store.

Quietly, she gathered her things and led them over to the door, where she paused to look around before yawning again.

"Are you going to be okay to drive? My offer still stands to take you home."

Her smile was a little sad as she shook her head. "Thanks, but I don't live far. I'll be fine."

Together, they walked out and again he waited while she locked the door before walking her to her car.

There were so many things he wanted to say, but in his head, he knew there were no words that wouldn't somehow come out sounding trite. He wanted her, wanted to spend the night with her and possibly as many nights as he could before leaving Sweetbriar for whatever came next, but that wasn't fair to her.

“So, um...”

Jade yawned again before laughing softly. “Sorry.” Then she smiled at him. “Thanks for hanging out with me and for... well...the rest.”

“It was my pleasure, believe me.”

Nodding, she inched toward her car. “I need to go. I'm not even sure what time it is and...”

“Jade?”

“Hmm?”

“Get in your car before I do something we'll both regret,” he said, his voice a little low and rumbly.

And then, to his surprise, she stepped in close. With her hand smoothing up his chest, she gave him the sexiest look he'd ever seen. “Maybe I'm okay with regret. Maybe...”

This time he was the one who didn't let her finish before silencing her with a kiss that was merciless. He devoured and plundered and pretty much gave and took what he wanted before lifting his head. They were both breathless and a little dazed, and he half expected her to slap his face. Instead, she took a step back and gave him a sultry grin.

“Follow me home, Levi.”

She didn't have to ask him twice.

Chapter Seven

Jade was glad she lived so close to Books & Beans because there wasn't enough time for her to have second thoughts.

Not that she was going to.

Something snapped in her tonight—that part of her that was always so cautious got kicked aside because where had it gotten her, huh? Nowhere. In her constant quest not to upset anyone, she still ended up getting walked all over and talked about by a bunch of closed-minded people. She was a good friend, a good daughter, a great mother, and an all-around decent human being, and yet somehow, she was still getting dumped on. So why not take a little risk and have a night of what she was fairly certain would be some mind-blowing sex?

She was feeling pretty proud of herself until she turned onto her block and reality hit.

I'm going to have sex...

“Oh, shit...Levi's going to see me naked!”

The last person to see her naked was her gynecologist, and that certainly didn't count. Other than that, the last man to see her naked in a sexual way was freaking Trevor.

“Oh, God...” she groaned as her stomach immediately clenched. “Oh, God. Oh, God, Oh, God, Oh, God, *God!*” Glancing

in her rearview mirror, she saw Levi's car following her and almost cursed the fact that he hadn't changed his mind.

It wasn't that she didn't think she was in shape; it was just that she was...curvier than she used to be and had stretch marks and definitely wasn't wearing sexy underwear.

That sent another wave of panic over her because she was fairly certain she wasn't even wearing matching underwear right now.

When she pulled into her driveway, a part of her wanted to get out and tell Levi that she changed her mind—she wasn't impulsive and was too tired to really be thinking straight. But when she parked her car and climbed out and watched him walking toward her, her mouth went dry.

He was too great of a temptation, and it was only for tonight. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that she would regret it for the rest of her life if she turned him away.

As if sensing her confusion, Levi walked right up to her and gently cupped her jaw. "Nothing has to happen here, Jade," he said softly. "If you've changed your mind and want me to go..."

"No," she said adamantly. "I...I don't want you to go. I just...I wasn't expecting this and..."

The look of pure relief on his face was exactly what she needed to bolster her confidence.

"I'm not exactly dressed for seduction."

"It's not about what you're wearing," he told her as he moved in even closer. "It's this face. I see it when I close my eyes at night. So it doesn't matter if you're wearing exactly what you're wearing now or silk and lace, I'm going to want you."

Damn. Her knees went a little weak at his words.

“Just remember you said that,” she teased lightly before taking one of his large hands in hers and leading him to the front door.

The house was set far back from the road and on a large, wooded lot. They had plenty of privacy and normally she loved her little cottage, but she couldn't help but wonder what Levi was thinking.

Why would he be thinking about your decorating skills when you're leading him up to your bedroom, dummy?

Oh, yeah. That.

Jade turned on just one light as they walked up the stairs to her room. Her heart was hammering hard the entire time and luckily Levi wasn't trying to make small talk with her either. At the door to her bedroom, she stopped and faced him.

“Um...just a heads-up...it's a little...girly in here,” she said carefully.

“Jade...”

Stepping aside, she reached in and flipped the light switch and waited for him to walk in ahead of her.

The room was done in soft grays and white. The wall behind her bed was covered in shiplap and her bed was...well, it dominated the room. The headboard was made of reclaimed wood and she had four posters that were wrapped and draped in gauzy fabric for a canopy. It was a little over the top and there were some twinkly lights woven through it, but it was the one spot she had that was entirely hers and she loved it.

Levi stepped into the room and seemed to study the bed for a long moment before turning and holding out his hand to her.

His smile was downright wicked.

“I can’t wait to see you naked and sprawled out in the middle of that magnificent bed.”

In that moment, all her doubts and insecurities completely disappeared. Taking his hand, she let him tug her toward him, and the next thing she knew, they were kissing. There was no slow lead up like they’d shared at the coffee shop. No, this one was like that first drop on a roller coaster—it was wild and thrilling and she had no idea what was coming next, but she held on and knew she was going to enjoy the ride.

She didn’t want a slow seduction.

She didn’t need soft or flowery words.

She wanted this man—this incredibly handsome, sexy man—to give her a night she would never forget.

She wanted naked and sweaty, hard and fast, and then maybe a little slow and sweet.

Maybe.

Breaking the kiss, she breathlessly looked up at him. “I want you,” she admitted.

He grinned again. “That’s good because I want you too.”

Taking a step back, she pulled her simple white t-shirt up over her head and tossed it aside. Then she kicked off her tennis shoes and shimmied out of her jeans and socks. Standing there in her turquoise panties and white bra, she let him see her and all her flaws.

There was a slight tick in Levi’s jaw as he watched her hungrily. “I knew you’d be like this,” he said gruffly. “I knew you’d be curvy and soft and…” One hand reached out and gently teased the lace trim on her bra. When his eyes met hers,

she saw the same heat and need she was certain was mirrored on her face. “I’m afraid I’m going to be too rough for you.”

Shaking her head, she moved in close. “I don’t want you to be gentle with me, Levi. I want you to be exactly who you are. Don’t hold back.”

He tugged his own shirt off, followed by his shoes, jeans, and socks. Standing there in the snuggest pair of boxer briefs she’d ever seen, he looked like an athletic god. Slowly they walked to the bed where he kissed her before gently guiding her down onto the mattress.

It was the last gentle thing he did for a long time.

* * *

“Talk to me about this bed,” he said quietly.

It was after midnight and Jade had told herself not to expect him to stay once they were...well...done, but Levi didn’t seem to be in any rush to leave.

And it was incredibly satisfying.

“I love the rustic chic kind of look,” she told him. They were still snuggled up in bed, all tangled up in each other, while one strong hand gently caressed her arm. “My dad and I built the bed and it was fine on its own, but I was on a Pinterest kick and saw this whole fabric draping thing. I thought I might be a little too old for a canopy bed, but considering it’s just me, who was going to complain?”

“It’s actually very cool. It feels a little like a fort,” he said with a small laugh.

“Silas says the same thing. He went through a phase where he was always on some kind of adventure, and this was always

the hideout. I had to put a stop to it when I kept finding swords and action figure under the blankets. I've screamed more than once when my foot touched on something that wasn't supposed to be there."

They both laughed at that.

"He's a great kid, Jade."

She couldn't help but smile. "Thanks. I think so too." And as much as she normally enjoyed bragging about her son, tonight she just wanted to be Jade the woman and not Jade the mom. Maybe it was a little selfish, but for this one night, she figured it was okay.

So before he could say anything, she twisted a bit and rolled onto her stomach and looked up at him. "Would it be okay if we..."

"Didn't talk about your son?" he finished for her with a hint of a smile. "No problem. We don't have to talk about anything you don't want to."

"Thanks. It's just...you know...we're here all naked and sweaty and that just isn't the time I want to be thinking about..."

"Say no more," he interrupted before reaching out and gently hauling her back into his arms. "Back to the bed and this room." Glancing around a bit, he took a minute before looking at her again. "It's really like a room you'd find at a B&B or something."

"Once I started with the bed, I knew I had to transform the whole room. I really love living near the mountains, and I wanted to reflect that a bit in the décor." Then she remembered how much Levi did not enjoy living in Sweetbriar. "I know

you prefer the big city life, but this has always been home for me. I can't imagine living anyplace else."

"Don't get me wrong; I don't hate it here. There is nothing like the view of the mountains or the way the foliage is in the fall. It's breathtaking. If there were more things within a short driving distance, I probably wouldn't be so against it, but I really enjoy the convenience of everything being so close."

There were times Jade wished there were more things closer to town, but she enjoyed the simplicity and not having to deal with traffic and crowds everywhere she went.

Although, a more populated area would be a huge boost to her struggling business.

"How often do you usually come back to visit?"

He shrugged as his hand went back to caressing her arm. "Rarely." Then he let out a mirthless laugh. "Hardly ever is probably more accurate. I either stay in Alexandria and ask my family to come to me or I go down to Laurel Bay, where my father lives, and see my sisters there for a holiday or whatever."

The sigh was out before she could stop it. "I couldn't imagine not living close to my family. My parents are here and I have one brother who is also close by, plus a bunch of cousins who are still in the area too. I realize not everyone likes that sort of thing, but...I do."

Great. Point out more ways the two of you are different, Jade. Awesome.

Levi hugged her a little closer and placed a soft kiss on the top of her head. "There's nothing wrong with that. My family is just...well...not like that. My parents split when I was eight..." He paused. "Correction, my father *left* when I was

eight. He said he couldn't handle the responsibility of four kids and it was a shit show after that. The twins are five years younger than me and were a surprise, apparently. It all became too much for him and he just up and left one day. Later on, I found out that he sent money, but he just couldn't handle the pressure of four kids under the age of ten."

"Yikes."

"Exactly. I don't know why he thought my mom could handle it on her own," he went on. "But...she did. Billie and I sort of grew up fast. We had to."

"But you said you go and visit him now. Are you close with your father?"

He shrugged. "I wouldn't say close, but...I get along with him better than my sisters do."

Another kiss on the top of her head.

"I think I can relate to him because he just needed to go..." With a muttered curse, he shook his head. "That sounded terrible. Sorry."

Tilting her head back, Jade looked up at him. "There's nothing wrong with being honest about how you feel, Levi. While I don't condone someone leaving their family the way your father did, who's to say things would have been better if he stayed?"

He frowned slightly. "It wasn't right and he knows it wasn't right. He's apologized for it dozens of times, but...I don't know. Maybe that's really where I got my...my wanderlust from."

Okay, this was almost as bad as being naked and sweaty and talking about her son, Jade thought. She needed to turn things around.

Fast.

Shifting slightly, she leaned over and placed a soft kiss on his chest.

Then swirled her tongue around his nipple.

At the sound of his low hiss, Jade knew they were done analyzing his life. Normally she was all for getting to know someone and figuring out what made them tick, but...this relationship wasn't like that. They were on borrowed time and this was her first fling.

And dammit, I deserve to get...flung...

Next, she let her hands get in on the action as she did her best to touch Levi everywhere. He groaned and fisted a hand in her hair and it made her feel powerful, sexy, and like she could actually be a seductress.

When she had him writhing on the bed whispering all the naughty things he wanted to do to her, Jade had to hide her smile. Levi flipped her onto her back and took control and she was more than willing to share it, because all too soon this little moment in time would be over.

And if all she was going to have left were her memories of how it felt, then she was going to make damn sure that she felt everything he was willing to give her.

* * *

It wasn't like he snuck out on Jade, but...Levi did leave while she was still asleep.

In his defense, the sun was coming up and they had discussed the situation after making love for the third time. It wasn't something he wanted to do, but she had specifically

told him that this was the one and only time they were going to have together and she didn't want an awkward goodbye in the morning.

Message received.

Fortunately, by getting home at seven in the morning meant that his sister was already at work.

And he was thankful for small favors like that.

There was no way he could have possibly explained anything to Billie after the night he and Jade shared. It was perfect. *She* was perfect. And in a perfect world, he'd get to go back over to her house tonight and do it all again.

But he couldn't.

As much as it bothered him that Jade waited until the wee hours of the morning to drop the one-night-only bomb, it was the first time those parameters bothered him. Normally, he was all for something casual, with no labels or expectations. Hell, he and Mandy lived like that for months and Levi had never given it a second thought. But hearing those words from Jade left him more than a little disappointed.

Still, he knew she was right. There was never a scenario where things were going to work for them. So they had their night, settled their curiosities, and now they could move on.

Feeling good about it, Levi walked into the kitchen and made himself a cup of coffee before considering going to his bedroom and crashing for a few hours. He'd maybe slept for a total of two hours tops last night. It was Saturday and he had nothing else to do, so...

Dumping the coffee down the drain, he put the mug in the sink and made his way to his room, where he promptly

stripped down to his boxers, crawled into bed, and fell right to sleep.

The next time he opened his eyes, it was because something hit him in the head.

“What the...?”

Then something else hit him.

“Hey!”

Thump!

Sitting up, he looked around and spotted Billie standing in his doorway throwing rolled up socks at him. “What the hell are you doing?” he demanded.

“Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?” she snapped before throwing another balled-up sock at him.

“So was I!” Chloe chimed in as she stepped around Billie.

“I was just curious,” Ashlynn added as she strolled into his room.

And promptly threw one of the socks right at his face.

“Hey! That’s enough!” he said loudly and was about to climb from the bed when he remembered he didn’t have pants on. “Now, will the three of you get out so I can put some clothes on?”

“Don’t be such a prude, Levi,” Ash said with amusement. “If you’ve got boxers on, you won’t traumatize us.”

“Speak for yourself,” Chloe said before turning and walking out of the room.

“Yeah, I’m out too,” Billie said before shooting him one last glare.

When it was down to the two of them, Levi knew it was basically going to be a battle of wills. “Seriously, Ash, just... give me five minutes and I’ll join you out there. I’m entitled to my privacy.”

“Oh, I agree. But I’m also entitled not to start my day with Billie calling me up and freaking out. I get that you’re a grown man, but you’re living with Mother Hen and she worries. So do us all a favor and either keep it in your pants until you’re out of here, or at least give her a heads-up when you don’t plan on coming home, okay?”

“It’s nobody’s business what I do or where I spend the night,” he argued. “Just because I’m staying here doesn’t mean you all have the right to pry into my business.” Raking both hands through his hair, he let out a long breath. “This is why I moved. This is why I had to get away!”

She moved in close in the blink of an eye until they were practically nose to nose. “Maybe for once you can stop being a selfish prick like Dad, okay? Maybe stop making this about you and think about someone else’s feelings. Billie worries about everyone. Hell, she wants to take care of everyone and, for whatever reason, that includes you too. So get your sorry ass out of this bed, apologize to her for making her worry, and be thankful that someone other than you gives a damn about whether you’re dead or alive.”

Pushing away from him, she stormed from the room, slamming the door behind him.

“Well, that escalated quickly,” he muttered, kicking the blankets off. As much as he wanted a shower, he knew Ashlynn was right. So he threw on the same jeans he wore yesterday and pulled on a clean t-shirt. And when he walked

out to the kitchen, all three of his sisters turned and stared at him.

Ugh...

His shoulders dropped, along with his attitude, as he stepped into the room, his eyes solely on Billie. “I’m sorry. I should have called or texted to let you know I wasn’t coming home. It was completely selfish of me and I promise to be more considerate from now on.”

Tears instantly swam in her eyes before she got up and hugged him. “Thank you,” she whispered, practically squeezing all the air from his lungs. “I was really worried.”

Hugging her back, he rested his head on top of hers. “I wasn’t thinking.”

Sniffing, she pulled back and gave him a watery smile. “I don’t need to know specifics, just whether or not you’re coming home and if you’re okay. That’s all I ask.”

“You got it,” he promised before moving to sit down.

“I brought lunch,” Chloe said. “Just sandwiches, nothing exciting, but if you’re hungry...”

“Famished,” he said before accepting the deli sandwich she handed him.

“I’m sure you are,” Ashlynn teased. “Are you going to tell us who you were with?”

Shaking his head, he smiled at Chloe as he took the bag of barbecue potato chips she held out to him. “I am not.”

“Well, damn. I was looking for a little hot gossip. Nothing exciting has happened around here lately. I thought you would provide a little something to keep me from dying of boredom.”

“Sorry to disappoint, Ash, but there’s no way I’m going to provide any fodder for this town,” he told her. “You’ll have to look elsewhere for your gossip.”

“Well, damn,” she said before accepting a sandwich from Chloe and sitting beside him. “How’s the job hunt going, then?”

“Other than offers to join intern programs, I’m not getting anything,” he admitted. “There’s no way this is all from someone in my former company making a call—at least, I don’t think it is—but then it means I suck at what I do.”

“I’m going with the phone call,” Billie said as she put drinks out. “You’re freaking awesome at what you do. Just look at everything you’ve done for Jade!”

He almost choked on his sandwich at the mention of her name, but luckily, he kept it together.

“It’s not like you’ve solved all her problems, but I think with some of the ideas you and I tossed around, she’s going to reap the rewards. And no one deserves it more than Jade.”

All he could do was nod.

“And my boss really liked everything you pitched to her last week. She wanted me to ask you to come in on Monday so you could get started.”

Another nod. “I can do that. Sure.”

They ate in silence for a minute before Chloe spoke up. “So, um...I think I’m going down to Laurel Bay for a week to see Dad. Now that school’s out and I have the summer off, I thought I might go and visit him and see everyone again.”

“We were all there last month for Arianna’s wedding,” Ashlynn reminded her. “Why would you want to go back

again?”

She shrugged. “Like I said, I just thought it might be nice to go back when there wasn’t a big holiday or celebration going on. You know...just go and hang out. Besides, I don’t have anything else planned for the summer.”

“Any chance you might want to work at the coffee shop?” Billie asked. “Erica quit so we’re shorthanded, and even though Jade’s already putting up an ad, we kind of need help sooner rather than later.”

“Why did Erica quit?” Ashlynn asked.

“The freaking Nelsons,” Levi responded before Billie could. “I mean, why can’t they just leave Jade alone? She’s not asking a damn thing of them, so why are they hell-bent on messing with her? And that scholarship? How desperate do you have to be to screw up someone’s life if you’re willing to pay for a complete stranger’s education just to keep her from working at the coffee shop?” Muttering a curse, he shook his head. “It’s bullshit.”

That’s when he noticed no one was speaking.

Or moving.

Possibly not even breathing.

“Um...”

“Oh my God! You slept with *Jade!*” Billie cried before tossing her sandwich down. “Dammit, Levi! The one person I specifically asked you not to mess with...”

“Wait...what?” Chloe asked as she looked between the two of them.

Ashlynn laughed with pure satisfaction as she leaned back in her chair. “Oh, yeah. This is gonna be good.”

Levi glared at her before turning his attention back to Billie. He could sit here and deny the accusation, but why?

“It’s none of your business, Bill. Hell, it’s not anyone’s business except mine and Jade’s, okay? You don’t get a say in it.”

She looked ready to spit nails.

“Why are you like this?” she demanded. “In a town full of people you know and probably more than a handful of single women you could have hooked up with and you had to pick Jade!”

And because it rubbed him the wrong way that she was basically saying he wasn’t good enough, he leaned in and murmured, “Maybe Jade picked me. Did you ever think of that?”

“Ooh...this is awesome!” Ashlynn said giddily before reaching for her chips.

“Hush,” Chloe whispered, even though she looked wildly interested in the discussion.

“Of course Jade would pick you,” Billie countered. “You’re a charming, attractive man! What single woman wouldn’t pick you?”

The list is endless...

“But you *knew* better, Levi,” she went on. “You’re not staying and you’re just going to end up hurting her.”

Since the cat was already out of the proverbial bag, he figured it couldn’t hurt to share.

“For your information, Jade told me it was...you know... only for last night. So you can unclench and relax. No one’s

getting hurt and no one has any expectations. It was a one-night stand. Are you happy now?”

Beside him, Ashlynn snickered before Chloe smacked her on the arm.

“If you’re expecting sympathy, you’re going to be wildly disappointed,” Billie said with a smug grin.

“I wasn’t expecting anything,” he retorted. “Like I said, this was none of your business, but you kept pushing.” Sighing loudly, he raked his hands through his hair, his appetite gone.

“Do you have feelings for Jade?” Chloe asked after a minute. “I mean...I realize you can have sex without having deep feelings for someone...”

Ashlynn snickered again before muttering an apology.

Frowning briefly, Chloe shot her twin a hard look before returning her attention to Levi. “Was this just a casual hookup, or were you hoping for something more?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure.”

This time Ash snorted. “Typical guy.”

“Would you just shut up?” Chloe said with frustration. “Jeez!” It was her turn to sigh before adding, “What aren’t you sure about?”

They’d come this far...

“In a perfect world, I wouldn’t be out of work and homeless.”

“You’re not homeless...” Billie said quietly.

“You know what I’m saying,” he clarified. “And in a perfect world, we’d be on the same page about where we are and what we want. I’m not saying I’m in love with Jade or

thinking of marriage or anything like that, but...it would have been nice to have the option of seeing where this could go.”

They were all quiet for several minutes before Billie stood up and declared, “Well, shit!”

“What? What’s the matter?” Chloe asked, looking around in confusion.

“I don’t want to feel sympathetic, but now I can’t help it,” she muttered, glaring at Levi the entire time. Then she slowly circled the table until she was right back where she started. “Promise me right now that you’re serious, Levi. That this isn’t a game and you’re just upset because she beat you to the one-night stand punch.”

He fought the urge to roll his eyes. “I promise. I genuinely like Jade.”

That seemed to work because she gave him a curt nod. “Okay, then. This is what you’re going to do...”

Chapter Eight

Jade was no stranger to heartbreak. She'd lived through a breakup while pregnant, dealt with the rollercoaster of hormones after having a baby and being all by herself, she'd suffered disappointments over her life not turning out the way she imagined...

None of them compared to standing by as her son got on the camp bus and watching him wave to her as it pulled away.

Thankfully, her father was with her and he literally caught her in his arms when she almost collapsed in tears.

"Hey, now," he said softly. "This is a good thing. You know Silas is excited about this big adventure."

She nodded because it was something he'd been talking about for almost a year. He was finally old enough to go to a sleepaway camp and this was a huge milestone for him.

It just hurt more than she thought it would.

"But it's the first milestone I'm not there for," she said between sobs. "What if he...he gets scared? Or has a bad dream? Or gets hurt?"

Her father hugged her close. "He's going to be fine. And he's only an hour away, so if he needs you, you know you can get to him."

Jade knew this and had been telling herself that it was going to be fine, but it felt completely different now that it was happening.

“You know what you need?”

She shook her head.

“A day to yourself,” he said as he slowly began maneuvering them toward his car. “Maybe take today and go and get your nails done or get a massage. Your mom is working at the coffee shop to cover your shift, so you don’t have to worry.”

If only...

“Thanks, Dad, but...I haven’t found a replacement for Erica yet, so I’ll need to work tonight. I can’t expect Curtis to work alone.”

“Hmm...okay, but that still gives you a large chunk of the day to yourself. C’mon, sweetie, what do you say? Take a little time for you. You’ve earned it.” They were standing next to the car when he gave her another hug. “When is the last time you just threw caution to the wind and did something for yourself, huh?”

Saturday night when she’d gotten naked with Levi and had more orgasms than she’d had in a very long time.

“I’m...not sure,” she lied.

“Then today’s the day,” he said sternly, helping her into the car before jogging around to the driver’s side. As soon as he was seated, he gave her a serious look. “I’m serious, Jade. I don’t want you going to Books & Beans until it’s time for your shift. What time is that, 3:00?”

She nodded.

“I’m going to let your mother know, and she’ll tell me if you show up sooner.”

She couldn’t help but chuckled. “It’s okay, Dad. I promise I’ll find stuff to do.”

“And nothing that involves laundry or food shopping. Something that is genuinely all for you.”

Sadly, that would be laundry and shopping for groceries.

But she kept that to herself.

“Maybe give one of your friends a call and go out for lunch?” he suggested. “Anything that gets you out of the house so you don’t spend the day crying.”

“Everyone’s at work, and I don’t have a lot of money to spend on something frivolous, like going to a spa.”

He made a non-committal sound and the rest of the drive was made in silence. Thankfully, it wasn’t a long drive and they were pulling up to her house less than ten minutes later.

“Thanks for coming with me, Dad. It’s times like these that being a single parent is hard.” Leaning over, she kissed him on the cheek. “You want to come in for a little while?”

“I wish I could, but I’ve got to get to the office.” Pausing, he reached into his pocket before holding out his hand to her. “Here.”

“What’s this?”

“This is a little mad money for you to do something for yourself today.”

“Dad...”

“I’m serious, young lady. That’s not for groceries or to pay a bill. This is for you.” He gently squeezed her hand. “I really

do need to get going. I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

Tears stung her eyes as she nodded. "Sounds good. And Dad?"

"Hmm?"

She gave him a watery smile. "Thanks."

The silence hit her hard as soon as she stepped into the house. There was a tiny part of her that imagined she'd come home and be giddy about having the place to herself and relish the peace and quiet, but right now it was a painful reminder of just how alone she truly was.

Like...seriously alone.

Other than her parents and some close friends, Jade had no one else in her life. She was fine with the fact that she didn't have a husband, but she wouldn't mind having a man in her life. It would have been nice to come home and have someone hold her while she felt sad and nervous and anxious about her son being away from home like this for the first time—someone to kiss her and tell her everything was going to be alright.

And someone who definitely wasn't her father. Bless his heart, he meant well, but...

Ugh.

Instantly, Levi came to mind.

Good Lord, what she wouldn't give to have him here right now and have him do all the things he did to her on Friday night.

Twice.

What she really wanted was for things to be different. For Levi to want to stay in Sweetbriar and for them to maybe see where this attraction between them could go. Unfortunately, knowing that he wasn't staying meant that she couldn't get involved with him.

Well...beyond the obvious.

They were going to work together on some other campaign to drum up business, but eventually, he was moving away. Sooner rather than later, she imagined.

“Just my luck. I meet a great guy who I genuinely like and have great chemistry with and he's not sticking around.” Sadly, she wandered around her house and tried to think of something to do. Getting her nails done was an option, but she really wasn't in the mood to be around anyone right now.

Unless it was Levi.

Then she'd gladly deal with being around someone.

Around...over...under...it didn't matter. She'd do it *all* if Levi were involved.

Groaning, Jade kicked off her tennis shoes and flopped down on the sofa. “You had to go and say it was just for one night,” she murmured. “Like a jerk. No wonder no one wants to date you.”

It was a ridiculous conversation to be having with herself, but oddly enough, it was making her feel better.

She was a practical and levelheaded woman. One night of great sex shouldn't have her over-romanticizing the situation. Just because they shared an incredible night didn't mean it had to lead to anything. That was an old-fashioned way of thinking and the main reason she never attempted a fling before.

Although, a fling usually implied more than one evening, didn't it?

And because she was curious, she pulled out her phone and Googled it. “Fling: a short period of enjoyment or wild behavior.” The snort was out before she could stop it. “And I reject the notion that a short period is only one night.”

Tossing her phone aside, she closed her eyes. This was getting her nowhere. She was a mess of contradictions and had no idea what to do with herself.

So...she went and got her nails done. While she was at the salon, Jade ran into a friend and they went to the café for lunch.

At 2:45, she walked into Books & Beans.

And promptly froze.

Levi was standing behind the counter with her mother and Billie, wearing an apron.

“I made an executive decision,” Billie proudly announced with a big smile. “I know you’re looking for help, but we got busy today and Levi wasn’t doing anything, so I put him to work.”

“Oh, um...”

“The customers love him!” her mother said with an even bigger smile.

I'll bet they do...

“I know it’s only temporary,” he said to her with a grin of his own. “But I’m happy to work whatever shift you need. I don’t have the best grasp on all the different drinks you offer...”

“We’ve had to throw a lot out today,” Billie murmured.

“But I’m willing to learn,” he told her.

It was almost laughable. He looked so earnest and hopeful and yet clueless all at the same time. The only thing saving her was that she wouldn’t have to be the one working with him. Right now, she needed someone covering the afternoon and evening shifts with Curtis. This really was just a temporary fix, but it was also incredibly sweet.

“I don’t even know what to say,” she told the three of them, feeling emotional all over again. “I hate that you had to give up your free time to come in today, Levi.”

“It wasn’t a big deal,” he said, and it just wasn’t fair that he was so handsome and also such a good guy. “Hey, how did it go with Silas this morning? Was he excited?”

Tears stung her eyes, and her mother was instantly at her side, hugging her. “Oh, your father said you were upset. Come on. Come sit down and I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

Shaking her head, Jade refused to be coddled and quickly wiped away her tears. With a small smile, she thanked Levi for asking. “He ran onto the bus with his friends and his smile was the biggest I’ve ever seen.”

He nodded.

Billie walked over and gave her a hug too. “I hope you’re not too upset with me. I really just wanted to make sure no one left here upset because we were shorthanded.”

“I appreciate everything you do and I’m so thankful to you,” she replied, hugging her back. “Now, go home and relax. You’ve put in a long day and thank you for handling everything here today.”

“Hey, what are friends for?” With a smile, she took off her apron and walked back to the kitchen.

“You too, Mom. Thanks for helping out today.”

“It was my pleasure. And I want you to know that I spoke to a couple of my friends and they’d love to volunteer a couple of hours a week. Nothing formal, but just maybe two hours a day, three days a week?” She paused as she took off her apron too. “It’s not ideal, but it could help in a pinch.”

“That sounds good too. Thanks.”

“Wonderful! I’ll get things coordinated, and we’ll talk about it tomorrow. Is that going to be okay?”

“Of course. Go home and relax too.” She was about to turn to grab an apron for herself, but she stopped and held up her hands and wiggled her fingers at her mother. “And be sure to tell Dad I got my nails done.”

“Will do, sweetie,” Cora said before walking away to grab her things, leaving Jade and Levi alone.

Looking around, Jade realized there were no customers in the shop and she decided to take advantage of that and try to talk to Levi privately.

“Hey, um...can we talk?” she asked quietly, motioning to the non-fiction book area.

“Sure.”

Her mother walked out waving as she went, but Billie was still back in the kitchen, so she knew they weren’t completely alone.

“I hope your sister didn’t force you to do this,” she blurted out. “Or that you did this because of...um...I mean...you know...”

“Jade,” he said softly, and waited until she met his gaze. “I’m here because you needed some help. I would have done it even if we hadn’t spent the night together.”

A wave of relief washed over her. “Okay. Great. And again, thanks.” She smiled up at him and he was smiling back and...

I just want to touch him...

Yeah, the urge was strong, but she resisted.

The bell over the front door rang out and she turned to see Curtis walk in. “Hey, Jade! Hey, Levi!” he called out on his way to the kitchen.

“So, um...I appreciate you coming in this afternoon, but you don’t have to stay. I already planned on being here tonight with Curtis.”

Levi nodded and moved just a little closer. “I thought maybe I’d stay too. Cora said it’s usually a little quieter at night, so I thought I could practice some of these drinks. Off the clock.”

She felt her eyes go wide and was about to tell him it wasn’t necessary, but she got a whiff of his cologne and he was close enough that she could feel the heat of his body. In that moment, she decided that she might as well torture herself a little and maybe, just maybe, they could talk about their one night turning into a few more.

* * *

By the end of the night, Levi vowed to apologize to every barista he ever met.

Who knew making coffee was so damn challenging? He swore he probably cost Jade about a hundred dollars in dumped drinks.

It was a little after eight and Curtis was walking out, taking the trash with them, and wishing them both a good night. Levi followed him and locked the door before walking around and making sure all the shelves were straightened and all the tables were wiped down. Jade was running some end-of-day reports and within minutes, he had half the lights turned off and simply waited for her to finish.

When she walked out of her tiny office and smiled up at him, he could tell she was tired.

And yet she still looked so beautiful that he had to fight the urge to walk over and wrap her in his arms.

“So,” he began instead, “any big plans for tonight? Binging a new show? Ordering takeout?”

She laughed softly. “Hmm...more like probably having a bowl of soup and trying not to fall asleep in it.”

That made him laugh. “Well that wouldn’t be fun.”

“What about you? Is Billie holding dinner for you or something?”

“No. We’re not really doing that. She always cooks enough to have leftovers and if I’m there at dinnertime, great. But if I’m not, I know I can heat something up. Although, I honestly don’t expect her to do that. I’m fine with getting some takeout.” He paused. “Although...I really wish there were a little more variety around here.”

“Oh, I agree. If I want sushi or Thai, I need to drive twenty minutes to get to it.” Now she paused. “Dammit. Now I want sushi.”

That sounded good to him and gave him the opening he was hoping for.

“How about I go and grab us some sushi and bring it to your place?” he suggested. “We’ll watch some TV and just hang out. You know...like friends.”

That last part didn’t even sound believable to him.

Jade nodded. “Or...” she began as she moved closer to him. “You could go and pick up the sushi, bring it to my place where we can hang out and maybe...not be just friends.”

Wait...was she serious? He didn’t have to ask—or beg? Could his luck be this good?

“Jade, I...I thought you said...”

She held up a hand to stop him. “I know what I said, and I was wrong. I thought that was the sort of thing I was supposed to say and even though we both know this isn’t going anywhere because...well...you’re not staying in Sweetbriar, but I’ve got the house to myself for two whole weeks.” Now she was standing toe to toe with him, resting her hand on his chest. “And I wouldn’t mind if I had company for some of that time.”

He knew it would kill the mood if he jumped up and yelled “Yippee!” so he did the next best thing.

He kissed her.

And damn were her kisses addictive. She was all soft and warm and tasted like the vanilla latte she’d had earlier. Together, they slowly wrapped their arms around each other and shared lazy kisses that held a whole lot of promise. He lost track of time, and it wasn’t until Jade broke the kiss that he came to his senses.

“So, um...sushi?”

He watched as she swallowed hard. “Or we could forget about the sushi and have grilled cheese sandwiches in bed.” Her lips twitched even as she looked a little uncertain.

“I’m a big fan of grilled cheese—in or out of bed,” he told her.

Blushing, she nodded. “Just let me grab my purse and we can go.”

When she walked back to her office, Levi pulled out his phone because he was a good brother.

Levi: I won't be home tonight

Levi: Just letting you know

Billie: Wow. You work fast.

Billie: I thought for sure this would take a few days

Levi: I don't know how to respond to that

Levi: So I won't 😊

Billie: Well you're no fun

Levi: Says you

Billie: I guess I'll see you at some point tomorrow?

Levi: Probably here at the coffee shop

Levi: I'm working tomorrow night

Billie: You're a good man Levi

Levi: You may be the only one who thinks so

Jade walked out of the office with her keys in her hands and smiled at him.

Levi: I gotta go. Talk to you tomorrow

Levi: Love you

Billie: Love you too!

And that was probably the first time that he texted that because he wanted to and not because he felt obligated to.

Huh...maybe this little break is good for me...

Together they walked out to their cars and he was tempted to haul her in close and kiss her, but he had a feeling people were watching. Instead, he waved to her and watched as she climbed in her car and drove away. He waited a solid five minutes before following. It was slightly paranoid, but just like he told Ashlynn the other day, he refused to be fodder for gossip. He might be leaving in a few weeks, but Jade lived here full time. There was no way he'd do anything to make things harder for her.

As he drove toward her house, he couldn't help but smile. She had blown him away with her invitation. He had been sincere in his offer to come over and hang out as friends—

even though it would have been the ultimate test of his self-control—but he would have done it just because he genuinely liked Jade. She was smart and passionate and funny and...

And the kind of woman any guy would be lucky to call his.

If I were a different kind of guy...

Stopping himself before letting that thought go any further, Levi opted to put his focus on all the things he wanted them to do tonight. He was hungry; that was obvious, but he'd be more than willing to wait to eat if it meant getting Jade into bed sooner. Just thinking of her sprawled out in that big bed was enough to...

Stopping himself again, it hit him how difficult this day had been for her. When she walked through the door of Books & Beans earlier, he could tell right away that she was sad. After initially talking about Silas leaving for camp, she seemed to pull herself together, but he could still tell she wasn't her usual cheery self. He knew she probably didn't want to be alone and as much as he hated that for her, he was grateful that she chose him to want to spend time with.

"I've got the house to myself for two whole weeks. And I wouldn't mind if I had company for some of that time."

Two weeks wasn't a lot of time, but he vowed to make the most of it for both of them.

Starting right now.

Pulling into her driveway, he hoped she didn't think he changed his mind. After all, he didn't follow right away. He climbed from the car with purpose and smiled when she opened the door for him.

"I was afraid you'd..."

Hauling Jade in close, he kissed her thoroughly. When he lifted his head, he murmured, “I figured it was safer to give you a few minutes’ head start. You know...in case anyone was watching.”

She visibly relaxed. “That was very sweet of you, but I don’t really care what anyone sees. I’ve been single for a long time. I’ve dated occasionally and people have seen me around town with other men, but nothing that ever went beyond a date or two, so...”

With a curt nod, he said, “Good to know.”

“Come on,” Jade said softly, taking his hand in hers. “Let’s go upstairs and...”

Inspiration hit.

Levi stopped in his tracks and hid a smile as she came to a halt and glanced over her shoulder at him. “Um...”

“I thought that we’d go to the kitchen first,” he said silkily, gently pulling her back to him. “And then I’m going to make a couple of sandwiches for us while you sit and relax. We’ve got all night. Why not start out with dinner and then see where things can go from there?”

Those beautiful eyes went a little wide. “You...you want to make dinner for me?”

Nodding, he leaned in, resting his forehead on hers. “It’s just grilled cheese, but I promise to do better tomorrow night.”

Her eyes went even wider. “You want to make dinner for me tomorrow night too?”

Another nod. Reaching up, he cupped her face. “I do. And then maybe one night we can go out somewhere.” He paused.

“You know, if you want to. If you’d rather have some time to yourself...”

This time, she was the one who wouldn’t let him finish. Jade leaned in and silenced him with a kiss that verged on dirty and he was having serious second thoughts about having sandwiches right now. But when she pulled back and gave him a sexy smile and led him toward the kitchen, he figured he’d done something good here.

Something right.

Who knew that making dinner would be such a turn on?

In the kitchen, Jade started to pull out ingredients, but he simply led her over to one of the chairs and told her to sit. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Actually, I have a bottle of wine that I bought just for tonight.” Pausing, she laughed softly. “I mean, I bought it for myself and wasn’t going to drink it all tonight, but figured I’d treat myself to a glass of wine with dinner while Silas was gone.”

And before he could let her think on that too hard, he spotted the bottle and handed it to her. “You handle the wine and I’ll handle the food. Deal?”

“Deal,” she replied as they worked in silence for a few minutes. “So, how’d you enjoy working as a barista today?”

“I seriously want to go back and over-tip every barista I’ve ever met. I had no idea how challenging coffee could be.”

“You get used to it. I didn’t want to have some extensive drink menu like Starbucks, but I also needed to offer more than just a basic cup of coffee. I had trained Erica, Curtis, Billie, and my mom on all of it, but I was essentially learning along with them.”

“I know Billie was getting extremely frustrated with me, but...” He shrugged. “I’m sure I’ll get the hang of it.”

“You really don’t have to. I appreciate you helping today, but...really, Levi, no one expects you to keep doing it.”

He glanced over at her and wanted to be a little offended, but she looked so relaxed sitting at the kitchen table that he simply shrugged again. “I’ll be there until you find someone to replace Erica. You shouldn’t have to work twelve-hour days. You have two weeks to simply be yourself with a few less responsibilities. Why spend them all at the shop?”

Nodding, she took a sip of her wine. “Because it’s my shop. I’m the boss and the owner, and it’s my responsibility.”

“But...?”

“But...I get what you’re saying. I’m just used to always being in...I don’t know...motion. When I found out I was pregnant with Silas, I knew I needed to work hard and save money so I could afford to stay home with him for those first six weeks and then afford to pay for childcare.” After another sip of wine, she continued. “I’m so thankful for my parents because we lived with them for the first six years of Silas’ life. I don’t know how I would have accomplished anything without them, but I’ve worked nonstop for most of my adult life. I don’t question it; I just do what needs to be done.”

“And that’s very commendable, but for this particular situation, you don’t have to be the one jumping in to work. I’m here to help.”

He assembled four sandwiches and put them on the griddle, waiting a few minutes before flipping them.

“But just out of curiosity, do you have any leads?” he asked, and loved hearing her husky laugh from behind him.

“A few. Curtis has a friend who’s coming in tomorrow for me to meet, and some of my mom’s friends want to volunteer too. I don’t know what hours they’re looking for, but any extra help will be wonderful.”

He flipped the sandwiches one more time before plating them. “I’m sure. I’d like to talk to you some more about a marketing idea I had. I thought...”

Jade held up her hand to stop him. “As much as I love how much you’re doing to help me with the business, right now, I’d love it so much more if we didn’t talk about...you know...business.”

It was almost comical how he had tried to do something romantic and was totally ruining it.

“You’re right, you’re right. Sorry.” Sitting beside her, he let out a long breath. “I promise I’ll be a much better date tomorrow.”

She blushed slightly before resting her hand over his. “You’re kind of a perfect date right now. Thank you for this.”

“It’s just grilled cheese.”

“I know, but it’s grilled cheese that I didn’t have to make.”

They ate in companionable silence for a minute and Levi thought about her comment. As a single mom, he figured all of the cooking was on her, but rather than focus on that, he decided to turn the conversation in a sexier direction.

“We could take them upstairs right now,” he suggested with a wink. “There was talk about that back at the shop.”

Her smile was slow and sweet and a little sexy, but rather than say anything, she simply stood with her plate in her hands.

Then she reached for her wine.

Levi did the same before following her up the stairs to her bedroom.

They put their plates on the bedside table, and he watched as Jade took another sip of her wine while holding his gaze. As much as he was ready to reach out and slide his hands under her shirt and touch her soft skin, he wanted to let her set the pace.

Putting her glass down, she kicked off her shoes. “I know they won’t reheat well, and they aren’t great cold, but...maybe we just take another bite or two before...”

Stepping in close, Levi rested his hands on her waist. “Get naked and on the bed and we’ll finish eating before I roll you under me and do all the things I’ve been dreaming of doing since Friday night.”

Her hand smoothed up over his abs and chest before raking up through his hair. “What if I’m not hungry anymore?”

“Trust me, you’re going to need the energy.” He kissed her soundly, pouring everything he had into it. “I promise it will all be worth it.”

Stepping back, Jade peeled her t-shirt off before shimmying out of her jeans. When she was standing before him in nothing but her bra and panties, she straightened and let out a nervous laugh. “Um...I’ve never eaten naked.”

That’s when he saw the vulnerability there and knew they could compromise. He stripped down to his boxers before picking her up and gently placing her on the bed. “Then we’ll eat just like this and our reward is getting naked when we’re done. What do you say?”

Biting her lip, she made herself comfortable. “I think this may be the best date I’ve ever had.”

“Me too.”

And as crazy as it sounded, he truly meant it.

Together, they climbed onto the bed, got under the blankets, and laughed as they finished their sandwiches. As he watched Jade’s face light up with pure delight over this random and ridiculous setup, he knew he’d be happy even if they didn’t have sex. Seeing her this happy was more than worth it.

Chapter Nine

Business was thriving.

Silas was having a blast at camp.

And Jade was walking around with a perpetual smile on her face.

It had been a long time since she'd felt this good—this happy and positive—and as much as the business and her son were mostly responsible, she owed so much of it to Levi.

The happy sigh was out before she could stop it, and luckily, no one was nearby to hear it.

For the last week, they spent every night together, all night. He worked at Books & Beans for the first half of the week, and then would come right to her house and make dinner for the two of them. It turned out he not only made wonderful grilled cheese sandwiches, but also made a killer marinara sauce and knew how to grill the perfect steak. Every day she learned something new about him and found herself liking him more and more.

She was sliding into dangerous territory, and yet she didn't want to do a thing about it.

It was a gorgeous Friday afternoon and she had left Curtis and her new employee, Paisley, to handle the late afternoon

and evening shift. She needed to stop at the grocery store because tonight she wanted to make a nice dinner for Levi. He cooked those first few nights, then they'd gone out for pizza and a movie last night, so tonight she wanted to have a night in.

She walked into Publix, grabbed a cart, smiling and waving to a few people as she went. After scanning the produce and grabbing what she needed for a salad, she walked over to the butcher counter and considered her options. She was bent over checking out their selection of steaks when someone nudged her cart. With a smile still in place, she straightened and...

"Sorry, I...oh. It's just you." Victoria Nelson looked like she sucked on a lemon as she gave Jade a once-over. "Excuse me."

"Oh, so you *do* have some manners," Jade said sweetly. "I thought maybe that was just a rumor."

Obviously, Victoria did not look the least bit amused at her sarcasm, but that didn't stop Jade from poking at her a little more.

"It's so nice that you're handing out college scholarships now. We were all thrilled for Erica. We hated to lose her at Books & Beans, but, luckily, I had a long list of applicants and filled the position almost immediately." Reaching for her wagon, she smiled even wider. "I hope you and Thomas are doing well. Take care!"

And with her heart hammering in her chest, Jade gave her a jaunty little wave before walking away. It wasn't until she was three aisles away that she stopped and took a moment to catch her breath.

Over the years, she ran into Victoria plenty of times, but this was the first time in at least five years that she'd spoken even one word to her. And for the life of her, she had no idea what had prompted her to do it today.

Because you're done being a pushover...

Okay, there was that.

That and the fact that she was feeling confident for the first time in years. Her business was doing well, Levi had presented her with more marketing ideas that they were implementing, and the people of Sweetbriar Ridge were genuinely starting to come in and support her. She might have missed out on the crucial marketing in those first weeks, but thanks to Levi, they were making up for it.

So, screw the Nelsons and whatever else they were going to try to do to inconvenience her. Whatever they threw at her next, she'd handle, just like she'd handled everything else.

Once her inner pep talk was done, Jade turned the shopping cart around and went back to the butcher counter and picked out two strip steaks before going over to the seafood counter and grabbing a couple of crab cakes to go with them. Levi was picking up the wine and dessert, so other than grabbing a few other basic necessities she needed for herself, she checked out and drove home.

And sang along to some classic Carrie Underwood the entire way.

Yeah, she was definitely feeling good and couldn't wait for Levi to get there so she could feel even better.

While she waited, she set the table, turned on some soft music, and then ran upstairs to change into something that

didn't smell like coffee. By the time Levi knocked on the door thirty minutes later, Jade was more than ready to see him.

"Hey, you," she said softly as she kissed him.

"Hey," he replied, but he seemed distracted. He stepped inside and went right to the kitchen where he put a bottle of wine on the counter along with a small white box from the bakery.

"Is everything okay?"

"Um..." Pausing, he let out a long breath. "Actually, no."

"What's going on?"

"I need to go to North Carolina for a few days," he said.

"For a job interview?"

Shaking his head, he moved around, opening the wine and pouring them each a glass. "To see my dad. Apparently, he had a bit of a health scare and since I'm not working, my sisters and I decided that I should be the one to go and check on him."

"Oh. So..."

"I'm leaving Monday morning and will be back on Wednesday night."

"Oh."

Then he was in front of her with his arms around her waist. "You have no idea how much I hated telling you this. We only have another week to ourselves and I'm going to miss part of it." Then he paused. "Unless..."

Jade knew her eyes went wide. "Unless..."

Taking her by the hand, he led her out to the living room and motioned for her to sit on the sofa. "I was waiting until

Monday because I didn't want to miss out on us having the weekend to ourselves."

"O-kay..."

"But...and there's no pressure here...maybe we could go together for the weekend," he quickly suggested. "Like...get up early tomorrow and hit the road. It's a five-hour drive and he lives in a tiny little coastal town called Laurel Bay. But I have a bunch of cousins who live there and we can stay with any of them and...and..." Pausing, he took a long sip of his wine before adding, "And I'm rambling. Sorry."

It was crazy how nervous he was and how incredibly sweet his offer was. Holding out her hand to him, she gently tugged him down onto the sofa beside her. "What's going on with your dad? What kind of health scare did he have?"

"My uncle called and said they thought he had a heart attack, but that wasn't it. While he was in the hospital undergoing a bunch of tests, they found that he's got some blockage in his arteries, so he's going to need bypass surgery and he's refusing to get it."

She nodded. "So this visit is to try to talk some sense into him."

"Exactly." Levi took another sip of his wine. "I know we can all call him or video chat with him, but I think it would make more of an impact if one of us went and talked to him face to face."

"That makes sense."

At least, it sounded like it did. Jade knew nothing about the Donovans other than that there were four of them living in Sweetbriar Ridge, plus their mother, and that his parents were

divorced. And as much as she loved that he asked her to go with him, she couldn't.

Taking his hand in hers this time, she let out a soft sigh. "First, thank you for inviting me to go with you."

He hung his head. "But...?"

"But...I can't," she gently told him. "Besides the fact that this seems like a private family matter, I can't be that far away from the shop or Silas. I realize he's at camp, but if something happened and I was five hours away..."

"It's okay, Jade. I get it. It was a crazy idea anyway," he said solemnly.

"No, it wasn't. It really wasn't." Reaching up, she cupped his jaw and kind of loved the little pout he was sporting. "I am honored that you asked and if things were different, I would have jumped at the chance. And as much as I love that you were willing to wait until Monday to leave because of our weekend plans, I don't want to do that to you. If you need to go, then you should."

He shook his head and kissed her palm. "My Uncle Shane assured me that there is no urgency for me to get there. I've talked to my father and he doesn't know I'm planning on coming there. My staying through the weekend was purely for me. For us. We already don't have a lot of time left before Silas comes home, and we won't have opportunities like this after that. So..." He shrugged. "I'm fine waiting until Monday to leave. Trust me."

And the thing was, she believed him. She also appreciated his honesty and how he was counting down the days they had left to themselves, just like she was. It felt weird to miss her

son as much as she did, even as she was thankful for the time without him.

Ugh...am I a bad mother?

Before that thought could take hold, Levi was speaking again.

“It feels weird to even want to go and check on him in person. I mean, I’ve told you how we’re all not that close with him. But the thing is, he’s getting older and then something like this happens and...I don’t know. I guess I’d like to try to have a relationship with him. If he turns me away at this point, then that’s on him. My conscience will be clean because I’ll know I tried.”

“I’m so sorry you’re dealing with this. Can one of your sisters maybe go with you? I realize Billie’s working with me, but if you need her to go, then we’ll make it work. Family is more important than any job.”

He laughed softly before kissing her palm again. “You’re amazing. You know that, right?”

“Me?” And yes, she laughed with him. “Why?”

“Because you’re selfless, Jade. You worry about everyone else, even when it will inconvenience you.” He shook his head. “I’ve never met anyone like you before.”

“Levi...”

He moved closer, and this time when he kissed her palm, his tongue gently moved to tease and tickle her fingers. Her low moan was out before she could stop it.

“You’re sexy and beautiful and always smell and taste so damn good,” he murmured before leaning in and kissing her throat.

She loved when he did that.

Carefully, he put his wineglass down on the coffee table before doing the same with hers. When both their hands were free, it was hard to say who reached for who first. She was kissing him or he was kissing her—all Jade knew was it was only Levi that ever made her feel like this. She wanted to kiss and touch every inch of him and make the most of their weekend.

Dinner could wait.

Hell, right now, she didn't care if they ate at all.

Before she knew it, he was tugging her tank top up and cupping her breasts. She broke the kiss just long enough for him to pull her top off and toss it aside.

Then he was kissing her again as if he were just as ravenous for her and she loved it.

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if he wanted to go upstairs, but they were fine right there on the couch. As she pulled him down on top of her, she realized this was exciting. They were so needy for each other that they couldn't wait. Her shorts were sliding down her legs, and the feel of Levi's jeans as he settled between her thighs was a little naughty and decadent.

At least to her it was.

He pulled his shirt off and within minutes, they were both naked and she wanted to cry out with joy because she was so damn happy.

Then she was crying out for other reasons and it was even better.

* * *

“Levi! What on earth are you doing here?” Ronan Donovan called out from behind the bar of Donovan’s Pub.

Smiling, Levi walked over and went right behind the bar to hug his father. “Just making sure for myself that you’re doing okay. I know you said on the phone...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...” his father said with a hint of amusement. “I know my brother ratted me out and got you all worked up. Come on, take a seat, and let me get you some lunch. What are you in the mood for? A burger? Sandwich? Pot roast?”

He thought about the chicken sandwich he had originally told Jade about. “Um...wasn’t there some sort of chicken, bacon, and avocado sandwich on the menu?”

Grinning, Ronan nodded. “Excellent choice!” He called one of the waitresses over and gave her the order. “And send my brother out please. Tell him my son is here.”

The waitress smiled at him and if Levi wasn’t mistaken, it was a rather flirty smile. He smiled back, but he felt nothing. There was a time when he genuinely enjoyed a woman’s attention, but he didn’t want to encourage anything and he was already cursing the fact that he was going to miss out on almost three days with Jade.

This is for a good cause, he reminded himself.

A glass of sweet tea was placed in front of him as he settled on a barstool and thanked his dad.

“How long are you in town for?”

“My plan is to head back to Sweetbriar on Wednesday morning,” he replied. “I’m doing some work with a few of the local businesses and I didn’t want to be gone too long. But I also wanted to check on you.”

“Bah,” Ronan muttered. “I don’t need anyone babysitting me. The doctor told me what I needed and I’ll get to it when I’m ready.”

“Dad, this really isn’t something you should be putting off. It’s not going to get better on its own and the recovery time isn’t that bad.”

“I’ve never had surgery in my life. Look at your uncle—he fell and broke his hip last year and you know what? His recovery time has been awful! Nurses coming and going all the damn time and he was using a walker and then a cane. I don’t want that!”

“It’s not the same thing. A broken hip and bypass surgery are completely different. You’ll spend a couple of days in the hospital and then a week at home. That’s it. You’ll be back here behind the bar in no time.”

“I said I’ll think about it and I will,” Ronan said firmly. “And you can go back and report that to your sisters too. Chloe’s called me every day since Shane blabbed it to all of you, and Ashlynn keeps emailing me healthy eating tips.” He shook his head. “The only one I haven’t heard from is Billie, so that’s how I know this ain’t that bad.”

Chuckling, Levi asked, “What kind of logic is that?”

“Because she’s the stubborn one in the family, and I know I’m not her favorite person. When she starts calling, then I know I’ll need to worry.”

“Dad...”

“Levi! Hey!” his cousin Jamie called out as he came out of the kitchen. “This is a surprise!” They shook hands. “When did you get in?”

“Just a few minutes ago. I drove right here because I knew this is where I’d find Dad.”

“Can I get you anything? Did you put an order in?”

“Sadie took his order,” Ronan said. “And she looked at him like she wanted to take him home with her. I almost had to turn the soda hose on her.”

“Uncle Ro...come on,” Jamie said with a laugh. “I’m sure it wasn’t that bad.” Then he glanced at Levi. “Was it?”

Shaking his head, he said, “It wasn’t. She smiled; that’s all.”

“Oh. Okay. Good.” Looking around, Jamie waved to a couple who were leaving before facing Levi again. “How long are you here for?”

“Just till Wednesday, then I need to head back.”

“Any luck on finding a job?” Then he muttered a curse. “Sorry. I hope you don’t mind that your father told us.”

That made him laugh. “Please, we all know my father can’t keep a secret.”

“Hey!” Ronan called out in mock offense. “You make it sound like I’m some sort of gossip!”

That made Jamie laugh even harder. “Uncle Ronan, everyone in Laurel Bay knows you’re a big gossip. We all come to you when something’s going on so we can get the latest news!”

“Yeah, well...” He laughed a little. “So what were you saying, Levi? How’s the job hunt going?”

As much as he hated talking about it, there was no point in lying. “It’s not going well at all. I’ve gotten offers for internships and positions that I’m overqualified for. Right now, I’m doing odd stuff in Sweetbriar, but it’s not enough to live on. Hell, one of them I’m just doing as a favor to Billie. The place where she works needed some marketing help.”

“The bank?” Ronan asked. “Why does a bank need help?”

“Dad, she’s not with the bank anymore, remember? She left there almost two years ago.”

For a moment, Ronan thought about it. “Why don’t I remember that? So where is she working?”

“She’s baking for a new coffee shop in downtown. It’s called Books & Beans and it’s a bookstore, coffee shop, and mini bakery all in one. Billie’s been making Grandma Donovan’s lemon pound cake and it’s damn near perfect.”

“Oh, man! I haven’t had that in years!” Jamie said.

“Had what in years?” his Uncle Shane asked as he walked over and joined them.

“Grandma’s lemon pound cake,” Levi said. “I was just telling everyone that Billie’s been making it at the new coffee shop she’s working at.” Then he stood and shook his uncle’s hand. “Good to see you, Uncle Shane.”

“You too, Levi. Thanks for coming.”

Before Levi could respond, his father spoke up.

“You need to mind your own business, Shane. It wasn’t your place to go and get my kids involved in this. I’m fine and I don’t appreciate you acting like a mother hen!”

“That’s too damn bad, Ro,” Shane said with more than a hint of annoyance. “They have a right to know, and you’re too damn stubborn to take care of yourself.” Then he looked over at Levi. “Everyone’s coming here for dinner tonight since there’s so many of us now.”

Yeah, this branch of the Donovan family had almost doubled in the last year. All of his cousins were either married or getting married soon and having babies. It was crazy because he still looked at all of them like they were still kids—himself included! So it was all a little surreal to meet all the new members of the family.

“How is everyone?” he asked.

His uncle smiled proudly. “Well, Arianna’s about three months along in her pregnancy. They announced that right after the wedding. She’s feeling good and Will treats her like she’s completely fragile.”

Smiling, he said, “I’m sure she hates that.”

Laughing, Jamie nodded. “Trust me, she does!”

“What about you? How’s Asher doing?”

His cousin smiled and pulled his phone out to show him pictures of his son. “He’s getting so big, and Fallon and I are just amazed at how much he changes every damn day. It’s crazy!”

Levi scrolled through some pictures and it was obvious to him just how happy his cousin was. “That’s a good-looking family, Jamie. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks.”

“What about Liam and Tessa? How are they?”

“Well, their wedding’s next month. You’re coming for that, aren’t you?” his father asked.

Damn. He’d forgotten about that. “Um...yeah. I think I RSVPed.”

“I think Liam is going to be thrilled to have all the wedding stuff over with. Tessa’s so excited and it’s all she talks about, but I know my brother is just ready for them to settle down and start a family too.”

“Liam was always the most practical out of all of you,” Levi commented. “And Ryleigh and Ryker?”

“Their wedding is going to be in the fall and you should be getting your invitation soon,” Shane said. “They opted for something small and intimate, but then they’re taking a month to travel.”

“Wow! Good for them!” He took a sip of his tea. “What about Patrick and Marissa? Any baby news from them yet?”

Everyone laughed quietly, but his father was the one to reply. “We’re expecting that announcement any day. Trust me. He’s been walking around like a nervous wreck and watching Marissa like a hawk. It’s kind of sweet.”

“But mostly hysterical,” Jamie added with a wink.

Sadie walked over with Levi’s lunch. “Here you go, Levi,” she said with another come-hither smile as she leaned in close. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Um...thanks, but I’m good.”

She pouted slightly before walking away and when he looked at his father, uncle, and cousin, they were all staring at him with amusement.

“What? What did I do?”

“Dude, you barely looked at her!” Jamie said. “So who’s the girl?”

“What?”

“Oh, come on. The only time a guy doesn’t acknowledge when a pretty girl is flirting with him is when he’s seriously involved with someone.”

With a snort, Levi picked up his sandwich and glanced up at his family. “First of all, she wasn’t flirting; she was simply being polite. I would think you’d be happy that your servers are nice to the customers.”

“Yeah, um...I know Sadie’s always nice,” his uncle chimed in, “but she was clearly flirting with you a little.”

“Seriously?” Then he shrugged and took a bite of his lunch. “Damn. That’s even better than I remembered.”

“You want some ketchup for the fries?” his father asked.

“Um...actually, how about some ranch and sriracha if you have it?”

“I’ll be right back,” Jamie said before walking away.

“So?” Ronan asked, leaning on the bar. “Who is she?”

“Who’s who?”

“Levi...”

Taking another bite, he thought about it. Hell, during the five-hour drive, he thought a lot about Jade and how things felt anything but casual. They’d had an amazing weekend together, and it wasn’t just about sex. They talked, they cooked together, they just genuinely had fun. On Sunday, they had gone to the actual ridge in Sweetbriar and had a picnic lunch and hiked some trails. It was one of the best days he’d had in a long time.

They were good together; they fit. And that wasn't necessarily a good thing because he wasn't staying. That was never the plan.

And no one else would understand that like his father.

Slowly, he put his sandwich down and pretty much blurted out everything about him and Jade—from how he caught her when she fell off the ladder to their picnic in the park yesterday.

“She sounds great!” his father said. “That’s wonderful! And Billie works for her?”

He nodded. “She does, and she loves it. Hell, she wants to help Jade grow the business without Jade knowing she’s doing it.”

Ronan laughed quietly as he shook his head. “That sounds like your sister. So what’s the problem?”

“Jade’s not the kind of person who wants charity, Dad.”

“Not that part,” Ronan said with exasperation. “I mean with the two of you.”

“Oh, um...” And as much as he wanted to talk about this, he had hoped to have this conversation with his father when they were alone.

As if sensing that, his father picked up his plate and began walking toward one of the booths. Levi caught his uncle’s grin. “You might as well follow. He’ll set up camp over there and wait all day if he has to.”

With a sigh, he did just that. When he slid into the booth, his father pushed his lunch back over to him. “So, what’s the deal with this girl? It sounds like you’re crazy about her.”

“I am, but...I shouldn’t be.”

“Why not?”

Before he answered, he took another bite of his lunch—not only because it was delicious, but because he needed a minute to think about how he was going to explain how he felt without starting an argument.

“I know a stalling tactic when I see one, Levi...”

With a shrug, he finished chewing and got comfortable. “Okay, here it is,” he began. “I’m just like you. I’m not staying in Sweetbriar Ridge. My being there is a temporary thing. Jade’s a single mom who just opened her own business. There’s no way she’s leaving there. So...this can’t get too serious and I can’t let myself start feeling things for her, because I’ll be moving on soon.”

For a solid minute, Ronan simply stared at him. Then he slowly leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table, and he looked incredibly fierce.

“First of all, what does being just like me have to do with any of this?”

“Dad, come on. You bailed on us—your wife, your kids, all of it—because you didn’t want to live the small-town life. Everyone knows that. Hell, I couldn’t wait to get out of there either. So I think the comparison speaks for itself.”

But his father shook his head. “That’s where you’re wrong, Levi.”

“What does that mean?”

With a loud huff, Ronan leaned back in his spot. “You may not believe this, but I loved living in Sweetbriar Ridge. I loved everything about it.” His voice was low and a little gruff as he crossed his arms. “Your mom and I met at a summer camp when we were fifteen. I fell head over heels in love with her.

We lived several hours away from each other, but we wrote letters and called each other, and I went to see her every chance I got.”

“Dad, none of this is new information.”

Frowning, Ronan snapped, “I’m getting to it!”

Okay, then...

“Obviously I grew up here in Laurel Bay, so living in a small town was all I knew. I never looked to move to a big city or be any kind of world traveler. The simple things in life are what I love.”

Clearly, this wasn’t going to be a short story.

“We had you and Billie right away.” After a pause, he laughed softly. “Well, Billie and then you. And that’s all I wanted.” Another pause. “I’m not a particularly smart man, Levi. I worked in a garage fixing cars during the day and tended bar at a pub a couple of nights a week just to make ends meet.” He shrugged. “It wasn’t great, it wasn’t glamorous, but we got by.”

“I remember Mom working as a receptionist at the dentist’s office.” Levi chuckled. “We had the cleanest teeth in the world growing up.”

But his father didn’t laugh. “Yeah, Dr. Collins took good care of you kids. Always.”

Um...that was an odd statement, he thought.

“When we found out we were pregnant with your sisters, well...the timing wasn’t great. I had gotten laid off at the garage and I couldn’t make a living tending bar and supporting a family.” Another pause. “Then we found out it was twins.”

“That had to be a shock.”

“More than you know, Levi. More than you know.”

They sat in silence for several long moments before he spoke. “Dad, what are you trying to say here? I’m not...I mean...what exactly happened?”

Waving him off, Ronan went to slide out of the booth. “I couldn’t take the pressure and I left. End of story. Everyone knows that.” He stood. “Finish your lunch, but I need to get back to the bar. Jamie’s no good at making drinks and Shane has stuff to do in the back.”

Levi glanced over toward the bar and saw no one sitting there.

That’s when he got seriously suspicious.

Getting to his feet, he blocked his father’s path. “No one’s at the bar and you can’t start a story like that and not finish it. It’s time we talked about this, Dad!”

It took a solid minute before Ronan’s head fell forward with resignation. Silently, he sat back down in the booth and motioned for Levi to do the same. Suddenly, he wasn’t so sure he was prepared to hear whatever was about to be said.

“I want you to know that I was fine being the bad guy,” his father began. “After all, I was the guy who couldn’t deal with having more kids and wasn’t smart enough to have a career that paid enough to support a large family.”

“Dad...”

“The truth is, Levi, your mother could do better than me. She deserved better than me. And when we found out we were pregnant with your sisters, well...I didn’t handle it well. She was working for Brad Collins and I sort of got the feeling that there was more going on there than just a professional relationship.”

Oh.

Shit.

“We argued about it and—looking back, I’m not proud of this—but I accused her of...” He shrugged. “I didn’t think the baby was mine. Well...babies.”

“Oh my God!”

Nodding, he went on. “Before you ask, yes, Ash and Chloe are mine. Of that, there is no doubt. But the damage was done to our relationship. I stuck it out as long as I could, but... neither of us was happy. Nothing got any better and soon my biggest fears became a reality. Your mother used to compare me and Brad and tell me how great he was and how he knew how to take care of people and...”

“And you left so she could be with him,” Levi solemnly said.

“Exactly.” Letting out a long breath, he looked across the table with utter devastation. “She had been so adamant about how she could do better and how you kids would be better off, and I believed her. I went up to Long Island and lived with my brother Brian for about five years and then went down to Florida and stayed by your grandparents. Eventually I knew I’d end up back here in Laurel Bay, but that didn’t happen until eight years ago.”

“Why so long?”

Another shrug. “I wanted to try to make it somewhere, but I never did. So I showed up here one day and asked Shane if I could work at the pub with him. It’s a family pub, but as the oldest, it went to him. He and Kate welcomed me with open arms and I finally found a place where I fit in.”

Levi studied him for a minute. “I don’t get it, Dad. Mom never got together with Dr. Collins. I don’t remember them dating or...or...”

“That’s something you’ll have to talk to your mother about,” he said gruffly. “Just know this—I would have stayed in Sweetbriar for the rest of my life with all of you. But a man can only stay so long when he’s clearly not wanted.”

Well...crap. That just blew a lifetime of beliefs about who he was and who his father was, and he didn’t know what he was supposed to do with that.

“I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“It wasn’t something I ever wanted to share, but I don’t want you thinking there’s something wrong with you. You’re a fine man, Levi, and I’m fiercely proud of you. If you feel something for this girl, don’t tell yourself you don’t have staying power. But you also shouldn’t stay someplace where you’re not happy.” He paused. “And just know that there’s nothing wrong with wanting to live someplace else. It has nothing to do with me and everything to do with where you want to see your life. Don’t hold yourself back; whether it’s a job or a relationship, you need to follow your heart.”

All he could do was nod.

“I’m not an eloquent speaker and I know I’m rambling and probably not making much sense, but...there is nothing like the love of a good woman. There was never anyone else for me except your mom.” Then he laughed softly. “I’m not saying I didn’t date—because I did—but I never met another woman like her.” Another pause. “Don’t take it for granted. If you see even the hint of a future, you should take a chance. And don’t blow it like I did.”

“Dad, you weren’t alone. I think Mom has a share in the blame and...”

“No,” Ronan quickly interrupted. “And I don’t want you hashing this out with her. She was a good wife and an even better mother. She raised the four of you and you’re all amazing. I messed up, not her.”

“But...”

“No,” he said again, more adamantly. “I didn’t tell you this so you can argue with your mother. I want you to have a better understanding of who you are. That’s all.”

They sat in utter silence for several minutes. Levi’s appetite was gone, and he gently pushed his plate aside. “So talk to me about this bypass surgery. What are you thinking?”

Chapter Ten

“The service was slow, the coffee was cold, and the cake was stale. Overall, you should avoid Books & Beans at all costs.” Jade groaned after reading the review someone left online for them and then cursed when she saw who left it. “V. Nelson. Oh, come on! She didn’t even *try* to hide her identity!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Billie said, reading it over her shoulder. “I know how to get that review pushed way down so it won’t be the first thing people see. Plus, we all know she was never in here, so...”

“Yeah, but no one else knows that.” Another groan. “Seriously, she needs to get a hobby.”

“And a life,” Billie added. “I would almost get it if you and her son had married and gotten a divorce or had some sort of bitter custody thing going on, but it seems like the only one holding a grudge is her!”

It wasn’t like she needed the reminder, and it wasn’t something she wanted to discuss.

“I heard from Levi this morning and he’s on his way back.” Fortunately, it seemed like Billie realized how much she didn’t want to talk about the Nelsons.

“How’s your father feeling?”

“According to my brother, he looks fine, but he knows he’s going to need the bypass surgery.”

“It seems like a fairly common procedure now,” Jade commented. “I’m sure he’s not looking forward to it, but he’ll feel so much better once it’s done.”

They were prepping for the small lunch crowd they usually saw, and Billie was restocking the bakery case and didn’t really respond. Jade didn’t think too much of it and figured maybe the topic was upsetting because no one wanted to think of their parents getting sick and needing surgery.

“Do you think Levi can remove that review?” she asked to change the subject.

“Sadly, no. Only the person who wrote it can.”

“Well, that sucks.”

She was about to say more when her phone vibrated in her pocket. When she pulled it out, she couldn’t help but smile.

Levi: I hope you don’t have plans for dinner tonight

Levi: I should be back in town by 3

Jade: Hmm...I did have plans...

Levi: Oh

She chuckled because she envisioned him pouting slightly.

Jade: But they all involved you, some pasta, some wine, and my bed

Jade: Will that work?

Levi: I'll pick up the wine and meet you at your place

Levi: What time will you be home?

Jade: I'm out of here at 4, so anytime after that will work

Levi: I'll see you then

Smiling, she slid the phone back into her pocket.

“By that sappy grin, I’m guessing that was Levi?” Billie asked.

Busted.

Neither of them had mentioned the fact that she and Levi were involved, but it looked like that was about to change.

Gently clearing her throat, she nodded. “It was.” And she just knew she was blushing because suddenly her cheeks felt like they were on fire. “We were...um...making plans for dinner.”

Then something occurred to her...

“But if you would prefer it for him to go to your place so he can get you up to date on your dad...”

The bark of laughter was not the response she expected. “Jade, you don’t have to worry. Your plans for tonight are fine. Levi and I talked earlier and I know everything that’s going on and really, I’m fine. I’m not particularly close with my dad, so this all really isn’t a big deal to me.”

It would have been easy to go with that topic and explore it a bit, but she felt like there was something more important to address first.

“So I really need to ask you something,” she blurted out.

“O-kay...”

“Are you okay with me and Levi...you know...seeing each other?” Rolling her eyes, she realized how ridiculous and juvenile that sounded. “I know I should just say dating, but this is all temporary, so...”

After straightening a tray of brownies, Billie wiped her hands on her apron and studied her.

Hard.

“Okay, the truth? I wasn’t thrilled about it,” she began slowly. “I adore you and I love my brother, but...I was feeling more protective of you. I knew Levi wasn’t going to be here long and I didn’t want him messing around with you and then walking away. That’s not what you deserve.” She sighed. “But I had no idea you were into him too.”

“To be fair, it all took me a little by surprise too. I have never done anything like this, and...”

Billie held up her hand to stop her. “You don’t owe me an explanation, and it’s really none of my business. I can’t help that I’m a worrier and protective of the people I care about.” She smiled. “You’re a good friend, Jade, and I don’t want to see you get hurt. Not that I think Levi is going to hurt you. Obviously you are two consenting adults, but...”

Rather than say anything, Jade walked over and hugged her. “Thank you.”

Laughing softly, Billie asked, “For what?”

“For worrying. For caring enough to worry about me.” Taking a step back, she smiled. “I have some really great friends, but all they do is encourage me to get back out there

or go and get some.” She rolled her eyes again. “No one has ever looked at my getting involved with anyone as a risk or an opportunity to get hurt.”

“I get that. Most people do the same to me. They’re constantly looking to set me up with someone or tell me how great it would be for me to date more.” She shrugged. “No one bothers to ask why I don’t.”

Jade eyed her warily. “Now I want to ask, but...”

She laughed softly again before moving away to wipe down the counter. “There was a guy and he was the love of my life and everything to me. But...things just didn’t work out. And as hard as it is to believe, since everyone accuses me of hovering over them like a mother hen, I’m content with my life. I love taking care of my family and I seriously love baking and not having such a high-stress job anymore.”

“And I, for one, am thankful that you no longer have that high-stress job and wanted to come bake for me!” They both laughed, and before Jade could say anything else, they had customers walking in. As she watched Billie helping Kylie Winters, who owned the local nail salon, she realized it wasn’t just the baking skills she was thankful for, but the friendship. Billie Donovan had turned out to be a blessing in more ways than one.

Hopefully, I’ll be able to repay her someday...

The lunch crowd came and went and there was always a lull between two and three. After that, they would get another small rush from the after-school groups. This was the time that Billie would normally prep for the next day’s baking, and Jade would restock books and clear off tables, but at just a few minutes after two, Ashlynn came through the door looking ready to spit nails.

“I’m quitting my job!” she announced as she walked through the door. “And this time I mean it!”

“Um...”

“Get her a brownie and a full-caff with three sugars and I’ll be right out!” Billie called out from the kitchen.

Jade did just that and carefully placed them on the counter. “Are you okay?”

Ashlynn’s eyes went wide. “Am I okay? Hell no, I’m not!” she replied loudly. “I have been busting my ass over there for Becky for the last two years. Hell, I even got her to hire Levi so he could help her grow the business! And you know where that’s gotten me? Huh? She gave the big booth to Sandy! *Sandy!* Can you believe it? We’ve all been coveting that booth and she goes and gives it to the person who does the least! How is that fair?”

Jade glanced toward the kitchen and wished Billie would come out, but she didn’t. “Have you thought about opening your own place?”

“Of course I talked...” Ashlynn froze. “Wait...what?”

“Have you thought of opening your own salon?” she repeated. “We all know that Becky’s been here since most of us were kids and she’s been the only place in Sweetbriar, but...maybe it’s time for something new.”

Frowning, Ashlynn stared at her. “I thought you were going to ask if I talked to her about it. That’s what everyone else did—my mom, Chloe, and my best friend Avery.” She paused. “Why didn’t you ask that?”

Shrugging, Jade nudged the brownie toward her. “I figured you would have done that already and that’s why you were so determined to announce you were quitting. You don’t strike

me as someone who sits back or that you're too afraid to speak up for yourself when you're upset." Then she laughed quietly. "I mean...look at the way you came in here."

Fortunately, Ashlynn laughed too. "Okay, fine. Yeah, I do sort of speak my mind and believe me, I just spoke it loudly to Becky. I mean...I can't believe she did that!"

"Okay, okay, okay," Billie said as she walked out of the kitchen. "What's going on? What did I miss?"

Ash quickly filled her in and then grabbed her coffee and brownie and went to sit down. Billie went and sat down with her, and Jade was more than happy to let them have a little one-on-one sister time. Sometimes she wished she had a sister, but her brother had always been there for her and they were close. When he got married, Jade found that having a sister-in-law was pretty awesome too.

There were times she dreamed about Silas having a little brother or sister, but the more time that passed, the more she wondered if it was ever going to happen.

That naturally had Levi popping into her head and her wishing they weren't watching the clock and counting down to when this thing between them was going to end. It was both exhausting and depressing.

But mostly depressing.

With a weary sigh, she straightened up and almost sagged with relief when Curtis and Paisley walked in. She gave them the rundown of what needed to be done for the night and when she was done, she went into the office to grab her things. When her phone vibrated, she hoped it was Levi saying he wanted to come over early.

And it was.

Levi: I picked up a great bottle of Merlot for us.

Levi: Any chance you'll be home early?

Smiling, she tapped out her response.

Jade: Leaving the shop now

Jade: Meet me in 15?

Levi: You're on!

* * *

It was crazy how much he missed Jade and how he was almost desperate to see her.

And how relieved he was when she said she was coming home early.

Well...only by 45 minutes, but still.

When he pulled into the driveway and found her climbing from her car, he couldn't help but smile. She was dressed in a pair of navy capris, a white t-shirt, and a pair of tennis shoes. Her hair was up in a ponytail and there wasn't anything out of the ordinary and yet all he could think about was how beautiful she looked. And when she turned her head and smiled at him, Levi swore his heart squeezed hard in his chest.

He'd been attracted to a lot of women in his life and had even gotten serious with a few of them, but he never remembered feeling quite like this.

Slowly, he got out of his car and walked over to her. The closer he got, the wider Jade's eyes grew until he cupped her

face and kissed her. Everything in him both relaxed and perked up. The visit with his father wasn't relaxing at all, and he'd had five hours to dwell on it. But seeing Jade—feeling Jade and kissing Jade—seemed to right everything for him.

When he lifted his head, he couldn't help but smile at the dazed look on her face.

“Wow,” she whispered. “That was some greeting.” Her eyes scanned his face, and she leaned in and gave him a soft kiss before stepping back. “How was the trip?”

Together they walked into her little house and he followed her to the kitchen before he remembered he'd left the wine in the car. “Long,” he said after a moment. “It's five hours and not a lot to see.”

Nodding, she said, “I remember how much fun road trips were as a kid. My brother and I would play games the entire time. As an adult, though, it's almost painful. I took Silas to Busch Gardens last year and the drive almost killed me.”

“Yeah. I listened to a couple of podcasts on the way there, but on the way back today, my mind was sort of all over the place.” He accepted the bottle of water she handed him as they sat down at the kitchen table.

“Did you have a hard time convincing your dad to have the surgery?”

“Not as hard as I thought it would be. But...he sort of shared some stuff that I wasn't prepared for.”

“Oh?”

Then he just blurted out the entire story and didn't hold anything back.

“Wait, so...all this time...”

“All this time we all blamed my father and painted him as this deadbeat who walked away from his family when it wasn’t quite as black and white as that,” he said, raking a hand through his hair. It didn’t matter how much he and his father talked about it over the last couple of days; it was still hard to wrap his brain around it.

Jade sat there quietly for a minute before asking, “And what do your sisters think?”

“I haven’t told them. Other than me and Dad, you’re the only other person I’ve talked about this with.”

And yeah, her eyes went comically wide. “But...why?”

“Why what?”

“Why haven’t you told them? Billie mentioned that she had talked to you...” Then she paused. “Are you going to tell them?”

Good question.

“I honestly don’t know. I mean...I get why he shared what he shared with me. We were having a conversation and...and he just laid it all out there.” The mirthless laugh was out before he could stop it. “If anything, he seemed both relieved and hesitant about it. But for me to tell Bill, Ash, and Chloe? I’m not sure it’s going to help anyone.”

She nodded, and they sat in companionable silence again. Finally, she said, “Okay, just...hear me out for a minute. Billie mentioned not having a great relationship with your father. Could this be something that could help the two of them?”

“Um...”

“I’m not asking for specifics, Levi. I’m just genuinely trying to help you look at this from all sides. If this is

something that affects your entire family, then they have a right to know. And maybe having it come from you rather than your dad will be beneficial.”

“I don’t see how,” he murmured.

“Because you’ll all be able to discuss it together without your parents being there. Sometimes it helps to talk with a sibling about a parent before talking to the actual parent. Trust me. I’ve dealt with that a lot with my folks.”

It wasn’t something he was ready to commit to right now, and this was definitely not what he had in mind when he asked if he could come over earlier.

So he stood and leaned in and kissed her. “Thanks, Jade. I left the wine out in the car, so I’ll be right back.”

She nodded. “I’m going upstairs to change.” Then she gave him that sweet and sexy grin. “Why don’t you meet me up there?”

“Two minutes, tops,” he said before kissing her soundly and leaving the room. Quickly, Levi sprinted out to his car and was back in the house in the blink of an eye. Jade was already upstairs and he considered pouring them each a glass of wine or leaving it for dinner.

“Levi...” She called down, her tone sultry and inviting.

“Leave it for dinner,” he murmured to himself before kicking his shoes off and taking the stairs two at a time.

At the door to her bedroom, he stopped and swore he went hard in an instant. Jade was lying in the middle of that incredible bed, wearing some sort of baby blue lacy thing. It could have been a slip or a nightie, but whatever you wanted to call it, it looked sexy as hell.

“I’ve never worn anything like this in my entire life,” she said with a small laugh. “I ordered it online so no one would see me buying sexy stuff at Target.” Resting her hand on her hip, she added, “I had no idea what you liked, so I just took a guess...”

Tugging his t-shirt off, he tossed it on the floor as he slowly made his way toward her. “I told you before, Jade, it doesn’t matter what you wear. It’s not the packaging. It’s you.” When he stopped next to the bed, he stared down at her. “It’s your face. Your face and your laugh and just...everything. You could have been lying here in what you were wearing downstairs or an old t-shirt or a damn potato sack and it wouldn’t matter.”

Her blush made her look even sexier.

Placing a knee on the bed, Levi leaned down slightly. “But I think you look like a damn fantasy like this. And in case you were wondering, blue is my favorite color and you look perfect in it.” He stood back up and stripped off his jeans and socks before joining her on the bed and instantly taking her in his arms.

“I missed you,” she said softly, her gaze firmly on his chest.

Tucking a finger under her chin, he gently forced her to look at him. “I missed you too. I hate that we lost almost three days.”

“Me too, but it was important for you to go. And we’ll just make the most out of the time we have left, right?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to clarify just what exactly that timeframe was, if everything was ending as soon as Silas got home, but that was a conversation for later. Right now, all

he wanted to do was touch her, kiss her, and show her just how much he missed her.

Slowly, Levi rolled her beneath him and kissed her, savoring the taste of her. One hand went from caressing her face to her throat before cupping her breast. She was all soft, warm skin and breathy sighs, and he swore he'd never felt this at peace before. Jade whispered his name as her hands raked up into his hair, and at that moment, he knew he didn't want to overthink this. The clock was ticking and there'd be plenty of time to think later. Right now, he needed to feel. And from the way she was writhing beneath him, she felt the same way.

* * *

The following afternoon, Levi stood in the middle of Billie's kitchen with all three of his sisters staring at him and he wished he had taken Jade up on her offer to be here with him. He knew she had enough on her plate without involving her in his family drama, but there was a small part of him that felt like she would have been a good backup for when his sisters all lost their minds on him.

Of course, there was a small chance that wouldn't happen, but...

"What the hell is this about, Levi?" Ashlynn demanded as she poured herself a glass of wine. "You said this was important and now you're just standing there frowning. I canceled an appointment with a client for this."

Grabbing the bottle of wine, he poured himself a glass and took a long sip before he forced himself to speak. "So, I went to see Dad."

“And you told us he was fine and going to have the surgery,” Billie said, looking just as annoyed as Ash sounded. Only Chloe looked genuinely interested.

Nodding, he took a seat and carefully considered his words. “He’s going to have the surgery and it all sounds very routine. The recovery time isn’t particularly long and Uncle Shane and Aunt Kate both swore they were going to look after him.”

“That’s very nice of them,” Chloe said. “How did he seem, though? Did he look sick?”

With a small smile at his youngest sister, he replied, “He looks exactly like he always does. You would never know anything was wrong with him.”

“Well, that’s good,” she said as she cautiously looked at their sisters. “Did something happen while you were there? Is that what this is about?”

Letting out a long breath, he knew this was one of those moments where you just had to rip the bandage off. “Do you guys remember Dr. Collins? The dentist mom worked for?”

“He was awesome,” Ashlynn said with a big grin. “Do you remember how his practice always sponsored the softball team?” Pausing, she took a sip of her wine. “I don’t know if I would have been able to play if it weren’t for him.”

“He did the same with the tennis team,” Chloe told them, nodding. “I remember Mom taking me to get my tennis racquet and new sneakers and telling me how Dr. Collins was sponsoring the team.” Then she frowned. “But now that I think about it...no one else on the team knew anything about it. I just assumed he wanted it to be a secret, and the only reason we knew was because Mom worked for him.”

Levi stifled a groan because so many things were starting to make sense.

“Dr. Collins awarded me a scholarship for college,” Billie said fondly, a serene smile on her face. “I could have gone away to school, but the community college offered everything I needed and his scholarship covered almost everything. He was a good guy.” Looking at the three of them, she added, “I was really bummed when Mom stopped working for him.” Her gaze landed on Levi. “Didn’t he sponsor the baseball team when you played in high school?”

Raking a hand through his hair, he nodded. “Here’s the thing...I don’t think Dr. Collins was sponsoring the teams so much as he was sponsoring...us.”

Three pairs of eyes stared blankly at him.

“Um...okay,” he started again. “Dad and I were talking and I was telling him about Jade and me and how I didn’t think things were going to last because I’m so much like him and how I wasn’t going to stay in Sweetbriar.”

“Wait...so you’re serious about Jade?” Ashlynn asked, leaning forward and looking wildly interested in this bit of news.

“Can I just...finish what I need to say?”

“I don’t know. Can you? Because it feels like you’re beating around the bush,” she countered.

“Mom was having an affair with Dr. Collins!” he blurted out. “It went on for years—both before and after Dad left! According to Dad, he didn’t want to leave, but...he felt like he had to because Mom told him we’d all be better off with someone like...”

“Dr. Collins,” his sisters all said in unison.

“Exactly,” he murmured. “Dad never wanted to leave us or Sweetbriar. The only reason he moved around as much as he did after that was because he was...lost. Devastated.” He sighed. “At first, I thought he was lying, but the thing is...once he put it out there, so many things just fell into place.”

“Oh my God,” Billie whispered, shaking her head. “We have to talk to Mom about this.”

“Do we?” Ashlynn asked. “Because I don’t think that’s going to help anything.” Then she glared at Levi. “And for that matter, why even bother telling us this? It doesn’t change anything. The fact is that Dad left and we grew up without him. If he really gave a damn, he would have fought harder for us!”

“I think...”

“I have to agree,” Billie said as she straightened in her chair. “This doesn’t change anything and for all we know, he’s twisting the facts! The bottom line is that he left and we were just fine without him!”

Okay, this wasn’t going at all like he thought it would and he was about to apologize when...

“Maybe he couldn’t fight for us,” Chloe said sadly. “Maybe he was so devastated and convinced that Mom was right, that we would be better without him. Maybe in his mind, he thought he was doing what was best for us. We’re not the only ones that missed out. He did too.”

You could have heard a pin drop in the kitchen.

“Well, shit,” Ashlynn cursed after a minute. “Why do you *always* do that?”

“Do what?” Chloe asked defensively.

“You always take everyone else’s side! Why can’t you just agree with us, huh?”

Chloe’s eyes went wide and instantly filled with tears as she looked at her twin and then at Levi. “But...I...I just...”

Reaching over, Levi took her hand in his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “I’m with Chloe on this one. We don’t know everything, but...based on things I remember and what Dad told me, I can honestly say that he is full of regret.”

“Why would he do that?” Billie demanded. “Why would he let us think he was the bad guy all this time?”

“Because he never stopped loving Mom and didn’t want us to get mad at her,” he said solemnly. “He’d rather be the villain if it meant...”

“That she wasn’t,” Billie finished for him. “Crap!” Jumping to her feet, she paced away from the table. “So...now what? What are we supposed to do with this information? Do we confront Mom? Do we just pretend like we don’t know? I mean...I have no idea what to do with this information, Levi!”

“I don’t have an answer, Bill,” he told her. “I’ve had a few days to process it all, and I still don’t know. I just felt like... well...you all deserve to know too and to do with it what you want. We’re a family and there shouldn’t be secrets like this.”

“Oh, *now* you want to be a family?” Ashlynn snapped. “You ran out of Sweetbriar just like Dad did and didn’t want anything to do with us either! You’re just like him!”

There wasn’t anything he could say right now that wasn’t going to make matters worse, but things were already tense and he wanted to at least try to defend himself.

“Yeah, I left and I stayed away too long and it was something I needed to do. I don’t regret going and following a

dream, Ash. No one told you that you had to stay here either, so don't put that shit on me," he said, his voice laced with a hint of hostility. "There was nothing for me here, so I left." He paused. "And now I'm back and...and I don't know what happens from here. Between losing my job and not finding one right away and now this...I have no idea what the future holds for me. I feel like this has all been a major reality check that forced me to open my eyes."

All she did was glare at him.

"The thing is, I'm seeing things through the eyes of an adult now," he went on. "I'm not an immature kid. None of us are. Do I want to stay in Sweetbriar?" he shrugged. "I don't know. What I do know is that staying here isn't...well...I'm not as opposed to it as I used to be."

"Because of Jade?" Chloe asked.

"She's part of it," he admitted. "But that's not something we've even remotely talked about. Jade's got a lot on her plate. She's a single mom and just starting a business. There's no way I could put more demands on her time."

"Holy crap," Billie said quietly. "You really care about her, don't you?"

He nodded. "Crazy, right?"

And before he knew it, she was wrapping her arms around him and hugging him tightly, leaving him speechless.

Then Chloe stood up and joined them, hugging them both.

After a moment, they all turned and looked at Ashlynn.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," she muttered as she got to her feet. "Do not make me get my hopes up and then bail, Levi."

She was all bark and no bite because she came around and joined their group hug.

And it was the best moment he'd ever had with his sisters in his entire life.

Chapter Eleven

It was Saturday night and they were eating dinner on her back deck under a gorgeous, starry sky. The rest of the week had flown by and tomorrow, Jade was picking Silas up from camp. She was beyond excited to see him and hear all about his adventures, but it meant that moments like this with Levi were essentially over.

Her emotions had never been so conflicted in her entire life.

“You’re looking pretty fierce over there,” he said quietly before taking a sip of his wine. They had made some grilled salmon and vegetables along with a rice pilaf for dinner. They had made it together and it was delicious and she was going to miss doing this sort of thing with him.

Hell, she was going to miss *him*.

They had gone into this with a two-week time frame and now those two weeks were up.

She knew he was probably more than ready to move on. It was kind of surprising that he wasn’t talking more about leaving Sweetbriar considering how opposed to being here he was just a few weeks ago.

“Jade?”

Oh, right. He'd said something...

"Sorry," she said, feeling her cheeks heat. "My mind wandered."

"Everything okay?"

She nodded.

"Are you excited that Silas is coming home tomorrow?"

"I am," she said, but the sigh was out before she could stop it. Looking up at him, she knew they needed to address the elephant in the room.

Or...yard, such as it was.

"I've really enjoyed our time together," she began. "And... as excited as I am for my son to come home, I'm sad that... this..." She motioned between the two of them. "Is over."

He nodded solemnly before taking another sip of his wine.

"In my head, I guess I just thought this time would just be about sex, but the thing is, Levi, I genuinely like you. This was all so much more than I even let myself imagine and...and it just kind of sucks that it's ending." Swallowing hard, she waited for him to say something, but he didn't. "I'm sure by now you're just about dying of boredom from being in Sweetbriar for so long and sending out resumes by the dozen."

He shrugged.

O-kay...

"I noticed that you haven't really talked about your job search, but I wasn't sure if that was for my benefit or not. You know...maybe you took a break from all of that because of the time we were spending together and then all the stuff with your father."

Another shrug.

Ugh...if this is what it was like for a relationship to end, Jade swore she was happy to stay single. Between the drama with Trevor and the non-drama with Levi, she found both to be frustrating.

“So, um...I guess we can go inside and...um...go upstairs one last time if that’s what you want,” she murmured before standing and reaching for the dishes.

Levi’s strong grip on her wrist stopped her.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“Eating? Um...yeah. That’s why I was going to clean up.”

“I wasn’t talking about the food,” he said patiently as his grip loosened. “I was referring to that little speech you just gave.”

“Speech?” Frowning, she gently pulled her hand away. “I was trying to have a conversation with you, but you refused to join in. Basically, I was waiting for you to say something. Anything!”

Slowly, Levi got to his feet and moved in close until they were toe to toe. “You want me to say something?”

“Um...” Suddenly, she wasn’t so sure.

But rather than saying anything right away, he turned and collected their plates and walked back into the house. With a huff of annoyance, Jade grabbed the last few things from the table and caught up with him in the kitchen, biting her tongue the entire time.

Seemingly without a care in the world, Levi rinsed all the dishes and put them in the dishwasher before washing and drying his own hands.

Then he turned and faced her.

“I’ve sent out resumes almost every day,” he began, his voice low and a little gruff. “The responses I’ve received ranged from insulting to ridiculous. In the meantime, I’m working on stuff for you, the hair salon, the pub, and I got a call today from The Pampered Pup.”

“Wow...who knew Sweetbriar businesses were so in need of help, huh?”

He chuckled. “That was my thought too. What I’m finding, though, is that they’re all in a similar situation as you—a great business and not enough customers.”

“Really? That’s...kind of surprising.”

Nodding, he said, “I know.” Pushing away from the counter, he walked over and gently took her by the hand and led her out to the living room so they could sit on the couch. “And just like you, they don’t have big advertising budgets, but we’re working on things to just sort of get the word out on all of them.”

What he was trying to say, she supposed, was that the work here wasn’t enough to keep him going. Not that she was surprised, but, for the life of her, she had no idea what all this meant.

So she asked.

“What happens now?”

His thumb was caressing her wrist and his expression was serious. “Well...I keep working and trying to figure out where my career is going while hopefully not being too much of a burden on my sister. And...” His eyes met hers. “And you and I figure out if there’s a way to keep this from...not ending.”

Her soft gasp was her first response.

He wasn't leaving.

Yet.

He wasn't breaking up with her.

Yet.

Ultimately, he would. They both knew that. But for now...

"Levi, I...you have to know that Silas is going to come first," she began.

"I know that, and I'm not asking for you to change anything." With a lopsided grin, he explained, "I'd still like a chance to be a part of your lives. I know Silas and I haven't spent a lot of time together, but I think he's a great kid. And if you're okay with me coming around sometimes when he's home, maybe the three of us can...go to the movies or out to dinner or to the park or...I don't know! Whatever it is the two of you like to do, maybe I can tag along."

He sounded so earnest and sincere, and this was something she struggled with whenever she tried dating in the past. Most guys didn't want to be around her son; they wanted to go out with her and pretend she wasn't a single mom. And here was Levi trying to make plans for the three of them with no mention of the two of them needing to be alone.

Ugh...I am seriously falling in love with this man...

Tears stung her eyes as she fought the urge to crawl into his lap. "I don't even know what to say to that. I never expected you to even want that. I'm fiercely protective of my son, Levi, and I don't want him to get hurt. He already has to deal with the fact that he doesn't have a father and I'm worried that he'll get attached to you and then..."

As if reading at least part of her mind, he carefully pulled her into his lap, placing a soft kiss on her forehead. “You can set the pace, Jade. Silas already knows me and is used to seeing me around Books & Beans. He doesn’t have to know there’s anything romantic between us. I promise to keep my hands to myself, and it will just be like we’re a couple of friends hanging out together.”

“Levi...”

“And if you ever want to have a date night where he sleeps at a friend’s house or over with your parents, I promise *not* to keep my hands to myself,” he said with a wink.

“I do like the sound of that...”

“But again, Jade. You set the pace. We play by your rules.” Pausing, he placed another kiss on her cheek. “I’m not ready for this to end. Being with you these last couple of weeks has...well...it’s made me happier than I thought I could be. You’re good for me and I’d really like to keep seeing you.”

Her heart skipped a beat at his admission.

This was so much better than how she envisioned things going and even though a small part of her was afraid to get her heart broken, he was the first man she was genuinely willing to risk that for.

“I’d really like to keep seeing you too,” she whispered, kissing him softly. Cupping his jaw, she added, “In fact, I’d really like to see more of you right now. Upstairs.”

His smile was so damn sexy as his arms banded a little tighter around her waist. “I think I’d really like to see more of you up there too.” He glanced around. “But maybe I can see more of you right here too. You know...for starters.”

And humming her approval, she moved closer. “That sounds even better.”

And they stayed right where they were and saw a whole lot of each other for a long time.

* * *

Sunday afternoon had Jade practically bouncing on her toes as she waited in the parking lot of the elementary school waiting for the camp bus. Both her parents were with her and it was sweet to see just how excited they seemed to be too.

“You know he’s going to want to tell us about every single minute of every single day,” her mother said with amusement. “And we’re probably going to be hearing these stories over and over in the coming weeks.”

“At least until football camp starts,” her father said.

“Um, yeah...about that,” Jade began hesitantly. “I don’t think I’m going to let him do it.”

“What?” they both said in unison.

Nodding, she explained, “It’s a lot of money and...sports are just so time-consuming and expensive. Plus...he could get seriously hurt. You know how dangerous contact sports are, and...and...that’s not a route I really want him to take. It’s all just too much right now. Maybe I’ll reconsider when he’s older, like in middle school.”

“Jade,” her father said, his voice soft yet firm. “Are you sure that’s how you really feel or is this possibly about Trevor?”

She’d be lying if she didn’t acknowledge how she desperately didn’t want her son to be anything like his father.

In her mind, she hoped he would be more studious, with zero interest in sports.

“Maybe a little,” she admitted. “But it’s not the end of the world for him to not do this one camp. We all know he’s going to be a little disappointed, but...I’m trying to get the business going and I can’t do everything.”

“We can help pay for the camp,” her mother interjected.

But Jade was already shaking her head. “Absolutely not. You already helped pay for this camp.” Her shoulders sagged. “The two of you have done far more for me than I ever expected. It’s time for me to be more independent. You gave Silas and me a place to live and you helped with Books & Beans. I need to do some things on my own. Even when it means disappointing my son.”

She could tell by the looks on their faces that they didn’t fully agree, but at least they weren’t arguing about it.

One hurdle crossed.

“How’s business going?” her father asked to fill the awkward silence.

“Actually, it’s doing well. We’re hitting our sales goals and Levi’s been doing a lot of social media posting for us; that really seems to be a hit. We’ve got a lot of engagement and even though I don’t know who’s going to take it over once he leaves, I’m thrilled with the results we’re getting now.”

“Why is he leaving?” her mother asked. “Did he find another job? Last I heard, everyone in town was vying for his help.”

Smiling, she nodded. “He does seem to be working with a lot of the mom-and-pop places, but they can’t afford to pay him on a scale like he was making back in Alexandria. This

was all just temporary. Heck, he only helped me as a favor to his sister, so he's not even getting paid for all the work he's put in."

"It's a shame he can't stay," Cora said with a small tsk-ing sound. "Honestly, this whole town could use a good campaign to draw a little attention to it and maybe spruce it up a bit. As much as I love our little town, sometimes I wish there were more conveniences here. But with no big businesses or tourist attractions, why would anyone come here?"

Beside her, her father nodded. "Remember the old ski resort, Cora? It closed down maybe fifteen or twenty years ago. It's too bad no one ever took that over. It was a big boost to Sweetbriar and I don't think the town ever recovered from it." He laughed softly. "Funny, I haven't thought of that old place in years."

"It was a beautiful place. I think every once in a while a rumor starts that someone's going to come in and finally buy the place and bring it all back to life, but it never happens," Cora said sadly.

Jade thought about all the possibilities if that actually happened—the revenue for the town, the traffic of having actual tourists coming through...

"That would be amazing, but unless one of us wins the lottery or suddenly meets someone who's a millionaire looking to invest in an abandoned ski resort, it's all just wishful thinking."

And before anyone could comment further, they all turned at the sound of the busses pulling into the parking lot. Jade knew she was smiling from ear to ear, and all thoughts of ski resorts and tourists completely fled her mind as she anxiously waited for Silas to get off the bus and jump into her arms.

* * *

Levi stared at the computer screen and couldn't help but smile.

The campaigns were working.

All the campaigns were working.

He was currently sitting at a corner table at Books & Beans, and as he leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head, he felt a sense of pride. His self-esteem had taken a huge hit since getting fired, but it seemed like he was finding his niche here in his hometown and...he wasn't hating it.

All of the businesses he was working with were seeing an increase in engagement across their social media accounts, which was important. But more impressive was how they were all seeing increases in sales and phone calls and customer traffic. In the last week, Jade saw a fifteen percent increase in sales, Ashlynn told him the salon had been fully booked in the same timeframe, Martin Crane who owned the pub called this morning to say that business was up twenty percent, and The Pampered Pup had to hire another groomer to keep up with demand.

So basically, he was doing a good job freelancing like this, but unfortunately, it wasn't enough to support him. Tomorrow he was driving down to Winston Salem to trade in his car. He loved his Lexus SUV, but the payments were killing him and he was able to work out a trade-in with a dealership that would put him in a three-year-old Chevy SUV. It was far from his dream car, but he was eliminating his car payment completely with this deal, so...

Living with Billie meant he had no rent, now he would have no car payment, but he still had credit card debt to pay off and he desperately wanted a place of his own and a job with a steady income. Honestly, he wasn't sure how much longer he could handle sleeping in his sister's guest room.

Okay, it wasn't so much that as it was that he hated sleeping alone now that he couldn't spend the night at Jade's. For almost two weeks, he had spent his nights there and it was crazy how fast he had gotten used to sleeping beside her. It had bothered him that he couldn't take her to a place of his own and it was slightly emasculating, but she hadn't complained. It was his own issue.

Glancing around, he was beginning to feel like he had another one.

She owned her own business—something she literally built from nothing and was currently succeeding with. And what did he have? Nothing.

Again, not that she ever compared or brought it up, but in the back of his mind, it bothered him.

“Ugh...I have way too many issues,” he murmured.

Silas had been back for a week and the three of them had gone out a handful of times. Today they were getting ready for the big Fourth of July festival over at the community park. There were rides and carnival style games and several food trucks. The plan was to go and check it all out and just have some fun before settling in on a blanket over at the high school for the fireworks show. Silas was excited about all of it and seemed most excited about the two of them tossing a football. The kid was seriously obsessed with the sport and Levi had to admit that he was kind of looking forward to playing around a bit while they waited for the fireworks to start.

Although, he was also looking forward to Cora and Sam offering to take Silas home with them tonight and he felt a little guilty about it. He wasn't sure if it was Jade's idea or Cora's, but he was fairly certain that they were going to have a night for themselves tonight.

Which reminded him again of how much he wished he had a place to take her to that wasn't her house and wasn't Billie's spare room.

But that wasn't going to happen and he needed to let that dream go.

"Hey, Levi!" Silas called out as he ran across the shop. "Check it out! Gramps got me a new football!"

Sam walked in behind him, chuckling and shaking his head before walking over and shaking Levi's hand. "Second one in a month," he said lightly. "Somehow the other one disappeared, right, Silas?" Ruffling his grandson's hair, it was obvious how much he loved him.

"Well...I might have thrown it over the fence," Silas mumbled before explaining further. "And I could have gotten it back, but Mr. Parsons doesn't like people going in his yard and he has that mean dog, so I couldn't even sneak back there, so..."

"It's okay," Sam assured him. "Balls get lost all the time. Let's just try to keep this one around for the rest of the summer."

"I will, Gramps. I promise!" The kid's smile was absolutely adorable, and Levi was sure he could use it to get out of just about anything.

And he should know because he'd been the same way when he was Silas' age.

“Okay, who’s ready to ride some rides?” Jade said with a huge smile as she walked over to join them.

“Who’s working this afternoon?” Sam asked as he glanced around.

“We’re going to close at five, and Curtis and Paisley have it covered,” she replied. “I’m not expecting a lot of traffic coming in since pretty much everyone in town is going to be at the festival. I almost considered closing at three, but…” She shrugged.

“Your mother is supposed to meet us here,” Sam said. “But you three should go on ahead and I’ll wait for her. I know Silas was looking forward to getting his face painted and playing some games.”

“And eating hot dogs and cotton candy and funnel cakes!” Silas added excitedly before looking up at Jade. “So, can we go? Can we go now?”

“I kind of feel bad leaving before Mom…”

“I’m here! I’m here!” Cora called out as she walked through the door. “It was not easy finding a parking spot.” She came over and kissed Jade, Silas, and Sam before smiling at Levi. “When was the last time you were here in Sweetbriar for the festival, Levi?”

“Um…” He had to think about it for a moment. “I want to say it was the summer right before I left for college. After that, I didn’t get home as much, but I never found a celebration like they do here in town.”

“That’s because our town’s the best!” Silas exclaimed before tugging on Jade’s hand. “Can we go now? Grams is here. We’re all here. Can we go eat?”

Levi picked up his laptop and tucked it into his satchel. “Is it alright if I leave this in your office?” he asked Jade.

“That’s not a problem. Here, we’ll lock it in the safe just to make sure nothing happens to it.” And when she walked away with a promise to her family to be right back, he followed. Once they were in the office, he playfully tugged her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

She softened against him and if he had his way, they’d skip the festival and find a place to go off to alone and spend the day in each other’s arms rather than smiling and making small talk with everyone in town.

“Mmm...now that’s the kind of kiss that’s going to get me through the day,” she said as she smiled up at him, her hand on his chest. “Thanks for doing this.”

“You’re the one letting me keep my laptop here so I don’t have to leave it in my car...”

“Not the laptop,” she interrupted. “Coming with us today. I’m sure it’s a little hokey compared to the places you’ve been, but...”

“Hey,” he said, this time being the one to interrupt. “Believe it or not, I have always enjoyed the Fourth of July Festival. The only reason I’m not a little more...excited about it is because I’d much rather be somewhere alone with you.”

“Levi, you know...”

He placed a finger over her lips. “I am going to have a great time today,” he assured her. “It’s been years since I’ve been to the festival and I’m looking forward to it. I know why we’re doing this and no one’s saying anything bad about it. Your son is awesome and he’s great to hang out with.” Then he moved in close, resting his hands on her hips. “It’s not my

fault that you're so damn sexy and tempting that you make me want to just tune out the rest of the world once in a while.”

And then he kissed her thoroughly before stepping back and handing her the laptop.

When they walked back out to her family, Levi watched with amusement as Jade tried to hide her blush.

This girl...

There was a sweetness, an innocence about her that he was thoroughly entranced by. He'd never dated anyone else like her and he was realizing that he didn't want anyone else but her.

Possibly forever.

It seemed completely foreign to him because that was never part of his plan, but even before his father's whole revelation, he was starting to see all the ways he wasn't like his old man.

And he was more relieved than he would ever dare admit.

Silas was practically bouncing on his toes waiting for them, and Levi took pity on the kid.

“Who's ready to challenge me to some ring toss?” he challenged.

“Me! Me! I am!” Silas replied excitedly before running toward the door. “Let's go!”

* * *

Two hours later, Levi felt completely exhausted. The kid never stopped moving. He had no idea how Jade kept up with him all

the time because this wasn't just a day of fun at a local festival; Silas was treating it like an Olympic event.

They'd played all the games, eaten way too much food, and went on most of the rides. Levi had begged to go on one of the slower rides, one just like a merry-go-round, but everyone looked at him like he were crazy.

"I would've gone on it with you," Jade admitted after they had walked away from the ride.

"Sure, now you tell me," he teased.

Silas was currently in line to get his face painted, and Levi paused when he spotted Ashlynn in the booth.

"Oh, look!" Jade said when they stepped closer. "I had no idea your sister was working this booth, did you?"

He shook his head. "Not a clue." Hell, he knew Ash had a cosmetology license and was good with makeup and all that, but he had no idea that extended to art and face painting.

When they got to the front of the line, Ashlynn smiled at them. "Hey, you guys!" Then she looked down at Silas. "You're up, buddy. What are we painting on you today?"

"Um...can you do like...Star Wars stuff?" he asked.

"Hmm..." his sister pretended to think about it. "Would you like to look like Yoda or Darth Vader? Or...a Storm Trooper, or..."

"A Storm Trooper!" he yelled with barely contained excitement.

"You got it," she told him before turning to Jade. "Is that okay with you? Or was there something specific you wanted for him...?"

“He’s in a Star Wars phase, so this is perfect! Thanks, Ashlynn.” She paused and stood a little to the side while Ashlynn started drawing on Silas’ face. “I had no idea you did this sort of thing.”

“Oh, yeah,” Ash said, her eyes never leaving the boy’s face. “I’ve always loved to draw, and art was my favorite subject in school. This is the first year I’m doing the face painting here, but I used to do it part-time at birthday parties and stuff like that to make a little extra money.”

“Really?” Levi asked. “Why don’t I remember that?”

With a frown, she glanced at him over her shoulder. “Because you were gone and never came to visit.”

Hanging his head, he sighed, but refused to take the bait. It was safer not to respond at this point.

Meanwhile, his sister and Jade chatted about the coffee shop, the hair salon, and local gossip, and before he knew it, Silas was done.

“Levi! Check it out! I’m a Storm Trooper!”

“You sure are, buddy! And you look great!” Glancing at his watch, it was hard to believe that took less than ten minutes. “He looks amazing, Ash! Seriously, that is very cool!”

He expected her to preen and brag, but instead, she blushed. “Really? You think so?”

“Heck yeah!” And because he knew they were both really trying to work on their relationship, he walked over and hugged her. “It’s pretty cool that you’re so talented.”

Looking up at him, he caught the return of her impish grin. “Well, we couldn’t let you be the only big shot in the family.

The rest of us are pretty impressive too.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” he said, kissing her cheek. “How much do we owe you for the face painting?”

“I’ve got it,” Jade said, stepping forward and handing the money to Ashlynn with a smile of her own. “He’s thrilled. Thanks for doing such a great job.”

“My pleasure,” Ashlynn said before glancing over Jade’s shoulder. She frowned and Levi immediately followed her gaze and found an older guy complimenting Silas on his face painting.

“Hell no,” Jade mumbled before turning and going to her son’s side. Levi quickly followed.

“So you’re a Star Wars fan, huh?” the man was asking. “Who’s your favorite character?”

“I like them all! But I really like watching the Clone Wars. They’re my favorite. What about you?”

“Um, Silas,” Jade firmly interrupted. “What have we said about talking to strangers?”

The kid looked up at her, and Levi saw the regret on his face. “I’m not supposed to talk to them,” he murmured. “But he liked my face paint!”

She took her son by the hand and almost shoved him behind her while she glared at the guy. Levi was about to step in when Jade’s words stopped him.

“Thank you for complimenting his artwork, Mr. Nelson. Now if you’ll excuse us…”

Nelson? This was Trevor’s dad? And he had the audacity to come up and try to talk to Silas? Now he definitely wanted to step in.

“I...I just thought it would be okay to say hello,” Mr. Nelson said meekly.

The more Levi looked at him, the more he saw the resemblance to his son. He already knew what a bitch Victoria was, but he had no idea what this guy’s deal was.

Except...he kept looking at Silas like he really wanted to talk to him and maybe get to know him.

“If you ever want to speak to my son, you need to speak to me first,” she said, her voice low and firm, and she saw the older man flinch. “He doesn’t know you.”

“I realize that, and I’d really like to try to make up for all the time that we...”

“No,” she cut him off. “You don’t get to try anything.” She paused when her parents approached and she somehow managed to smile and suggest that they take Silas to get some popcorn.

No one argued.

When they were alone again, she turned on Trevor’s dad with a fierce protectiveness that was beyond impressive.

“You had the opportunity to be a part of his life, but you chose not to. You chose to ignore that child for over eight years,” she sneered. “Your wife has done her best to sabotage my business—the very livelihood I need to raise my son and your grandson—and you think it’s okay to simply stroll over and strike up a conversation with him? How dare you!”

He held up his hands in defeat. “Jade...I’m sorry. I...thought maybe after all this time...you’d feel differently.”

“Why would you even think that? You chose not to be in his life. Why should my disgust with you change when you’ve

done nothing to even try to make amends?”

He looked at her oddly.

She continued, “I wanted you and Victoria to be in his life, but the two of you snubbed me and labeled me as some sort of villain all those years ago. Silas would have loved having both sets of grandparents around, but that was your decision, and I think it’s despicable.”

“Jade...I...we...we told Trevor years ago that we wanted to be part of your son’s life and he said...” He paused and seemed to swallow hard. “He said you didn’t want that and that we had to stay away from you. So we did. I swear, we always thought it was your decision.”

For a moment, it was like everything stopped around them. Levi was stunned by the confession, so he could only imagine how shocked Jade was feeling. The only issue was that this wasn’t the place for this discussion.

Stepping close to Jade, he wrapped his arm around her waist. “Why don’t you set up a time to get together later in the week?” he softly suggested to her. “There’s only so much popcorn Silas can eat and I can see your father is ready to come over and he doesn’t look happy.”

Silently, she nodded and seemed to take a moment to compose herself.

“Levi’s right. This isn’t the time nor the place to talk about this. I need a few days to wrap my head around this. But if you’d like to come to the coffee shop maybe on Thursday morning, we can sit and talk.” Then she paused. “I don’t know what your work schedule is, but...”

Mr. Nelson shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. This is more important. Will eleven work for you?”

She nodded again.

“Then we’ll see you then, and...again...I’m sorry, Jade. I didn’t mean to upset you.” He turned away and seemed to disappear into the crowd, and he felt her sag against him.

So much for a family fun day.

Turning to him, she looked pale and sad. “Um, I’m sorry you had to witness that.”

“Jade...”

“But I don’t want this to put a damper on our day. We’ve got another hour or so to kill before we head over to the high school for our picnic. I’d really rather not get into this whole thing with my folks, so...”

It was his turn to nod. “Understood.” Reaching out, he caressed her cheek. “Are you okay? We can totally go. I know it’s not ideal, but I’m sure your folks will be fine taking Silas to see the fireworks.”

“No, I really want this time with him. He’s going home with them later and I almost hate asking them to do it.”

And as much as it pained him, he said, “Then don’t ask them to. If you need this night with your son, then that’s what you should do. I’m not going to get in the way of that.”

She seemed to consider it and then shook her head. “I’m being ridiculous,” she said after letting out a long breath. “I want us to stick to our plans because I’ve been looking forward to them all week.”

Then it felt like he let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “Okay, then.” Taking her hand, they went over and caught up with her family and ended up having a great day.

They wandered around the festival and had to reel Silas in because he wanted to taste, touch, and ride everything a second time. When it was time to head over to the high school, he was surprised when Cora announced that she and Sam had taken care of all the food for them, plus had chairs and a blanket for them to sit on. And when they settled into a spot, it was even more surprising when all three of his sisters walked over along with his mom and set up a blanket right beside them.

“Wow! This is like a big family night!” Cora said as she hugged his family. “I have plenty of food, so don’t be afraid to grab something if you’re hungry.”

“We’ve brought enough for a small army ourselves,” his mother said with a small laugh, “and we’re more than willing to share too!”

After that, it was a little...

Well, he thought it would be awkward, but it wasn’t.

If anything, everyone was laughing and smiling, and when Jade settled in his arms as they sat on the blanket and prepared to watch the fireworks, Levi felt like maybe, just maybe, he was finally home.

Chapter Twelve

Maybe she was a little more emotional than normal, but everything suddenly felt like...more.

Levi's kisses? More.

His touch? More.

The way he looked at her? Oh, so much more.

Tears stung her eyes as he slowly made love to her and there was a connection there, an intensity, that hadn't been there before.

At least...she didn't think it had, but it certainly felt that way and it threatened to overwhelm her.

It was late when they were finally breathless and spent that she rolled toward him, curling up at his side. One strong arm wrapped around her before she felt him place a soft kiss on the top of her head. She hummed softly as she snuggled closer.

"Mmm...thank you."

She felt more than heard him chuckle. "No need to thank me. I thoroughly enjoyed it too."

"That's not what I meant," she said quietly. "I mean thank you for coming home with me. I'm sure today was a lot and

you might have appreciated going home and having a little peace and quiet.”

He shifted slightly so he could see her face. “I’m not going to keep having this conversation with you, Jade. I had a great time today. I loved going to the festival and seeing it all through Silas’ eyes. You may not believe it, but I actually enjoy spending time with your son. He’s a great kid. And tossing the football around with him while we were waiting for the fireworks was just...hell...I can’t remember the last time I felt so carefree.”

“I really wish he had some other hobby. I’m not a fan of this whole football thing. He’s been bugging me about that camp next month and I keep trying to distract him, but I don’t think it’s working.”

“Why are you so against it? I get that kids his age have a short attention span, but he seems genuinely interested in it.”

“It’s just...” She paused because the way she felt did not paint her in a good light. “Sports are dangerous,” she said instead. “I worry about him getting hurt.”

But Levi wasn’t a fool and he was getting to know her well enough to know when she was lying.

“Try again,” he said.

“Ugh, fine. I don’t want him to be anything like Trevor, okay!” Moving away from him, she flopped back against her pillows and stared up at the ceiling. “You heard what Mr. Nelson said earlier. It was Trevor who was telling them to stay away.” She muttered several colorful curses before she reeled herself in. “What kind of person does that?”

“Well, not that I’m defending him, but look at the situation with my dad. He walked away too and we were all old enough

to know it. But now we know there was a reason.”

“Levi, you can’t compare the two. Yes, he walked away, but he still stayed in your lives and didn’t keep others from you. Trevor was just selfish and everyone knows it. He walked away and made sure my son not only didn’t have a father, but didn’t have grandparents.” There was enough snap and annoyance in her tone to convey how she felt, and she hoped he’d just let this go.

But he didn’t.

“Yeah, I get that, and it was wrong on every level. I’m just saying that...” He stopped. “You know what? You’re right. They aren’t the same and I’m sorry.” He rolled toward her, propping his head on his hand. “I’m really sorry. I never should have said anything.”

The sigh was out before she could stop it. “I get it, Levi. Both situations suck, but they’re not the same.” And because she didn’t want to talk about Trevor or his parents anymore, she sort of changed the subject. “It was nice to spend time with your family tonight too. It looks like things are good between all of you and your mom.”

He let out a mirthless laugh. “Well, we haven’t talked to her about what my dad shared with me. I can’t speak for my sisters, but I know I want some answers. It’s not going to change anything, but...”

Pausing, he shook his head before closing the distance between them again and kissing her softly.

“We have this one night together and this is not how I want to spend it. We have all the time in the damn world to commiserate about crappy parents and unfair situations. I wanted tonight to be about us.”

Another kiss. Then he trailed a line of kisses along her cheek and jaw before he moved down a bit and shifted so he was lying between her thighs again.

“I miss sleeping beside you.” Now he softly teased her nipple before leaning in and kissing it. “I miss waking up and you being in my arms.” He moved to her other nipple and gave it the same attention. Then he looked up at her and gave her a grin that was lethal. “So, for the rest of the night, let’s leave the outside world on the other side of the door. The only thing that’s important to me right now is you. Only you.”

Sighing, Jade raked her hands through his hair and nodded. “I feel the same way, Levi. I’ve missed you too.”

That seemed to please him. “Then no more talking.” His grin widened. “Unless it’s some dirty talk, because I love the things you say to me.”

She felt herself blush all the way to her toes even as she whispered in his ear some of the naughty things she wanted him to do.

And the rest of the night was pure bliss.

* * *

On Thursday morning, Jade was pacing behind the counter of Books & Beans. Her mother was there, of course, and watching her warily.

“If you don’t want to do this, you don’t have to,” she said. “No one’s going to force you to let those people into your son’s life. You don’t owe them anything. Especially that hateful Victoria.”

That had been exactly what she'd been telling herself for the last few days, but unfortunately, this wasn't only about her. She had to think of Silas and what would be best for them.

"Just think of how Trevor turned out," her mother went on. "Is that the kind of influence you want around Silas?"

At this point, the answer wasn't quite so clear.

"Mom, I appreciate what you're doing, but I really need to figure this out on my own. Please."

Cora didn't look pleased, but she didn't say anything else.

Then Billie chimed in. "I hope you don't mind, but...can I say something?"

"Um..."

"You obviously know my family history and I know Levi's told you about this recent...uh...development."

Jade nodded.

"Well, even though my dad wasn't around much—or hardly at all—my grandparents were. Both sets. But Grandma and Grandpa Donovan were just incredibly...I don't know...sensitive, I guess, to the situation. They didn't say anything about my dad. They didn't condone what he did, but they also didn't condemn him to us. They were just there to be grandma and grandpa." She shrugged. "I realize this situation is different and you have a rather contentious history with Victoria, but maybe hear them out and then take some time to think about it."

She nodded again. "Thanks, Billie."

The bell over the door chimed, and Jade turned to see the Nelsons walk in. Thomas looked nervous and Victoria still looked like she was sucking on a lemon.

Yeah, this wasn't going to be easy.

Her gut was telling her to simply throw them both out and say hateful things so they'd feel as bad as she had these last nine years, but her mother raised her to be better than that. So instead, she pasted a smile on her face and stepped up to the counter.

"Hey," she said with a friendliness she didn't quite feel. "Welcome to Books & Beans. I'm glad you were both able to come by. Can I get you some coffee or something to eat?"

Thomas visibly relaxed as he ordered a tall Robusta with cream and a slice of the lemon pound cake. Victoria simply shook her head with a mumbled, "No, thank you."

But her husband leaned in and said, "She'll take an Earl Grey tea and one of the blueberry scones, please."

Billie made their plates while Cora made their drinks. Once everything was ready, Jade put it all on a tray and led them back to the non-fiction nook so they could talk privately.

There was a long, awkward silence that was making her want to squirm when Thomas finally spoke.

"I want to start by apologizing again for what happened at the festival. I didn't mean any disrespect." He glanced at his wife, who was sitting primly and ignoring her drink and cake. "I called Trevor last night and he refused to talk about the situation. Not that I'm surprised," he added. "Any time I've ever brought it up, he cuts me off and says to let it go."

"As you should have," Victoria murmured. "This is all ridiculous. Betraying our son like this..." She shuddered. "At least he had the good sense to listen to Jade when she broke up with him and told him to stay out of her life."

“Wait, *what?!*” she demanded, her voice louder than she intended. “I wasn’t the one who broke up with Trevor and I wasn’t the one to tell him to stay out of my life. That was all on him! He thought he was becoming a big name in football and didn’t want to be burdened with a wife and a baby! I even have the letter he wrote telling me he didn’t want anything to do with us and the legal papers stating he was terminating his parental rights!”

Victoria’s eyes went wide for just a second before her cool demeanor was back. “Lies,” she stated. “More lies. You forced him to sign those papers when you saw he wasn’t going to be famous. You got pregnant on purpose to trap him and cash in on his fame.”

“What fame?” she cried. “He never took playing seriously! It wasn’t like he was going to get a degree in anything. Football was all he had and he wasn’t even a good player because he spent too much time partying and getting high!”

“Because of the pressure you were putting on him!” Victoria countered, and that’s when Jade had enough.

Coming to her feet, she stared down at the woman. “No, because of the pressure *you* put on him. *You* were the one who kept pushing him to use his football skills to go places. *You* were the one who filled his head with ideas about it being an easy way to get rich so that he could buy you a big, fancy house that was anywhere but here!” Right now, she felt sick to her stomach. “I never wanted to marry your son. Ever. We weren’t compatible and I tried breaking up with him multiple times, but he always charmed me into believing he was going to change. That’s on me. But everything that happened to him—the accident, the legal charges, and losing his big chance in the NFL? That’s not on me. My conscience is clear. He had

already wiped his hands clean of me when that all went down.”

“Jade,” Thomas weakly interrupted. “I’m so sorry that Trevor put you through all of that.”

Even though he was being very kind, she wasn’t feeling particularly charitable right now. “I was fine with what your son put me through. I made my peace with that as soon as he told me he wanted no part of our son’s life. What I’m not okay with is your wife’s smear campaign against me. She’s made my life hell, far worse than anything Trevor did.”

“Oh, please! Hell?” Victoria challenged. “You seem to be doing just fine. You’ve even found yourself another successful young man to latch onto.” She gave Jade a smug smile. “I’m sure you’ll drag him down just like you did to my Trevor and poor Levi will lose his next big career goal because of you too.”

“Victoria!” Thomas hissed, but his wife wasn’t listening.

Tears stung her eyes and she refused to cry in front of these people.

“I really thought we could sit and talk like rational adults, but it appears that’s not possible. There’s nothing left for us to discuss, so...have a nice day.” And with her head held high, she walked away.

Calmly, she walked back toward the counter where her mother and Billie were standing in wide-eyed silence. Neither said anything right away, but her mother followed her into the kitchen.

“Jade? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she lied.

“Sweetheart, talk to me. Please,” Cora begged, but Jade wouldn’t be swayed.

“I just need a few minutes to myself, Mom.” Her voice shook and she knew she’d probably feel better if she let everything out that she was feeling, but she couldn’t. Not yet.

It wasn’t until she was alone in her office that she let herself cry.

And it was easily an hour before she forced herself to get up and go back out and face everyone. Fortunately, the Nelsons were gone, but they were never going to truly be out of her life. At some point, Victoria would find a new way to poke at her again.

* * *

“Hey, Dad,” Levi said with a smile. “How are you feeling?” It had been almost a week since the festival and his conversation with Jade regarding Silas’ grandparents was still weighing heavily on his mind.

On the other end of the phone, Ronan chuckled. “You know, before you knew I needed this heart procedure, you would call and simply ask how I was doing. Now it’s all about how I feel.” He laughed again. “I’ve been feeling fine the whole time. Still do.”

“I know that’s what you keep saying, but I just thought I should ask.”

“I’m good, Levi. How are you doing? How’s the job search going?”

He groaned.

“That good, huh?”

“Yeah, well...I don't think things would be an issue if Sweetbriar were a bit bigger of a town.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I'm having fantastic results with the local businesses. Like...superb results.”

“That's wonderful! But why don't you sound happier?”

“Because they're all too small, Dad. I can't make a living with just them. If I were to start my own firm...”

“Is that what you're thinking? Of doing it on your own?”

He sighed and got comfortable on his sister's sofa. Thankfully Billie was still at work so he knew he could talk freely. “I'm thinking about it.”

“Because of Jade? Because you want to stay with her?” There was no mistaking the hopefulness in his voice.

“That's part of it, but...” He let out a long breath while raking his free hand through his hair. “If I can't get anyone else to hire me, then this is what I need to do. I have to work and I love what I do, so why should I be waiting on anyone else?”

“Hmm...I suppose.” He paused for a moment. “You really need to reach out to your cousin Patrick and talk to him. I'll bet good money that he would have some leads for you.” Then he laughed softly. “Actually, he was here at the pub yesterday complaining about the lack of properties in Laurel Bay right now. He's antsy to try something else, but I think he's managed to buy and sell most of the available property here in town. Not that it was hard to do. You know how small Laurel Bay is.”

Levi laughed too. “Are you kidding? Laurel Bay is practically a big city compared to Sweetbriar. Too bad it wasn’t closer. I’ll bet Patrick could do wonders with some of the places here. There’s a lot of vacant storefronts here in town and I noticed a lot of houses that are vacant and in need of repair. He’d probably make a killing.”

His father hummed again. “Do yourself a favor and call your cousin. I’m telling you; he may be just who you’re looking for. Both you *and* Sweetbriar.”

“Dad, we’re five hours away. It’s not like he’s going to come here and do what he did in his own hometown.”

“You don’t know that. Trust me, I sat here and watched that boy start with one tiny, broken-down house and now he’s the go-to real estate guy in the area. Well...real estate and property management. Patty really made a name for himself. Call him. Do you have his office number?”

“Actually, I do,” he said. “When I stayed with him for your birthday and then again when Arianna and Will got married, he gave me his business card.”

“Call him, Levi. Stop waiting for opportunities. Sometimes you have to make them happen for yourself.”

“Oh, I firmly believe that now,” he said with just a hint of amusement. Then he paused before he blurted out, “Did you ever ask grandma and grandpa not to be involved with us when we were kids?”

“*What?!* What the hell kind of question is that?”

Shit.

The only way to explain it was to tell him about Jade and the Nelsons. “I guess I’m just a little curious how involved

you were with how...you know...involved they were with us, that's all."

"Jeez, Levi...there was never a question of them not being involved with you kids. I wanted them to be in your lives and your mother never asked them not to be. If anything, she encouraged it. But it's not the same as it was for Jade. It sounds like she didn't have a good relationship with the Nelsons to begin with, and it's obvious that their son is a prick, so..."

That made him chuckle. "Definitely. I went to school with him and I never liked him, so none of this is really surprising, but I hate how it's hurting Jade."

"Has she talked to them since the festival?"

"She has, but all she said was that it didn't go well. I can't get her to give me any specifics and I don't want to push and upset her."

"Can I offer you a bit of advice?"

"Um...sure."

"Don't wait too long to push. If you're serious about her, this situation will affect you too."

He'd been thinking the same thing, but any time he brought it up to Jade, she said she didn't want to talk about it. So, he was giving her space. Unfortunately, it seemed like that space was growing between them and he didn't know what to do about it. She was busy with the shop and Silas, and he didn't want to be just another responsibility on her plate.

"Listen, Levi, the lunch crowd's coming in and I need to go. I'll talk to you soon, okay?"

"Definitely. And thanks, Dad."

“Any time!”

Putting the phone down beside him, Levi let out a long breath. He hadn't been lying about the thought of starting up his own firm, but now that things were a little weird between him and Jade, he had to wonder if now was the right time for him to be thinking of moving back to Sweetbriar full time. After all, if she ended things with him, would he really want to be living here?

“Okay, I am getting way too ahead of myself. It's just been a few days, not a few weeks. Just breathe.”

And while he was breathing, he forced himself to stop thinking about his relationship with Jade and to focus on calling Patrick. It seemed like a long shot on all counts, but it couldn't hurt to feel him out and see what he thought.

Or if he had any leads on a job.

Rather than sit there thinking about it, he decided to simply make the call.

“Levi! Hey!” Patrick said when he answered the phone. “This is a surprise. I think we've talked more in the last three months than we have in the last three years!” He laughed before asking, “How are you?”

They had just seen each other when he had gone to Laurel Bay to see his father, so it probably seemed odd for him to be calling.

“I just got off the phone with my father and he suggested I give you a call.”

“Oh? Is everything okay?”

“I'm still searching for a job, so that's been a bit depressing.”

“I’m sure.”

“Anyway, I mentioned how I was thinking of starting up my own firm, but that it didn’t seem practical to set up shop here in Sweetbriar because it’s such a tiny town.”

“You’ve mentioned that before, but...how tiny?”

Levi chuckled. “It makes Laurel Bay look like a booming metropolis.”

“Wow!” his cousin replied with a laugh. “Okay, okay... so...I’m not sure what this all has to do with me.”

“Dad mentioned how you sort of conquered Laurel Bay, and I was curious if you were possibly looking to conquer another small town.” Then he paused. “Or if you knew of anyone looking to hire an advertising guy.”

“Hmm...you know what? Hang on and let me put you on speaker so Marissa can join the conversation. She’s kind of the brains with thinking outside the box on stuff.”

“Oh, uh...”

“Hey, Levi!” Marissa was Patrick’s wife and now partner in their real estate firm. “How are you?”

“I’m good! How’s your mom doing? Any updates?”

“Aww...aren’t you sweet,” she gushed. “Mom’s doing great. Her doctors are thrilled with her progress and we’re thinking that by this time next month she’ll be coming home. Of course, she’ll need a full-time home healthcare person with her, but that’s three months sooner than we were expecting.”

“Yeah, we’re in the middle of doing renovations on their old house to make it more accessible for her mom,” Patrick added.

“That’s awesome. I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to finally be home.”

“Definitely,” Marissa said. “So what’s going on? What am I adding to this conversation?”

“Levi was telling me how dire his little town of Sweetbriar Ridge is,” Patrick explained, “and asked if we were looking to conquer another town.”

It was kind of sweet the way he included Marissa in the equation.

“O-kay...but...aren’t you like...five hours away?”

“Exactly,” Levi replied. “It was something my father mentioned and I don’t know anyone personally who does what Patrick’s done.”

“Hang on,” she murmured, and Levi could hear her typing on her keyboard. “Let me pull up the town and see what I can find.” She paused. “Oh, wow...okay. Definitely a small town. Population 1,500...there are some pictures...yikes...”

“I know,” Levi interrupted. “It’s in desperate need of some fresh blood. There’s a new coffee shop, but that’s the first new thing to come to town in the last five years. Like I said, I don’t know anyone who does what you do, or if you know anyone who invests in this sort of thing...”

“Are there any big businesses nearby?” Patrick asked. “Something to bring in the tourists?”

“Not since the ski resort closed like twenty years ago.” He shook his head. “It’s been sitting up on the mountain abandoned ever since a new resort opened about fifty miles from here.”

“Yeah, that’s something a little beyond my comfort zone,” his cousin admitted.

“Wait...” Marissa said after a moment. “You remember when we met Ryder Ashford? He did that resort that opened up right between the border of Magnolia Sound and Laurel Bay. He specifically asked if we knew of any investment opportunities for another resort.”

“Oh, right...and he didn’t care if it was coastal; he’s just the kind of guy who’s always looking for something new. Levi, let me make some calls and get back to you. I could be speaking completely out of turn, but who knows? Ryder could be interested.”

“That would be awesome for the town. Not sure if it would do anything for me at this point.”

“No, but I can ask Ryder about that too, if you’d like. He’s got his hands in all kinds of businesses around the country but seems to have settled in Magnolia Sound. He married a local girl and is doing his best to do something similar over there like I did here. Only...Magnolia was in much better shape and already had a bunch of involved locals and a founding family who had it all under control.”

“Well...good for them,” Levi murmured.

“Anyway, let me make some calls and in the meantime, if you’re looking for some clients, you should reach out to Liam. You know he and Will have the fishing resort that they opened and things are going well, but they’re always trying to come up with ways to drum up more interest. Again, it’s not going to be anything huge, but if you keep going like this with your local stuff and a bunch of remote businesses, you’ll have a decent roster to launch with.”

“That’s true...”

“Levi, I’m going to do a little more research on Sweetbriar and I may send you a questionnaire for you to share with some of the locals to get a feel for what they’re looking for. Will that be okay?” Marissa asked.

“Of course! But...you don’t really have to do that. I don’t want to take you away from your clients or anything.”

“Dude, don’t even argue with her,” Patrick said with amusement. “My wife loves a good project like this and particularly when it involves bringing new businesses around and finding creative incentives. Trust me.”

He grinned. “I guess I’m going to have to.”

“Give me a couple of days and I’ll be in touch.”

“Great. And thanks, Patrick. I really appreciate it.”

“You are more than welcome.”

“And thank you, Marissa,” he added. “I’m looking forward to seeing what you come up with!”

When he hung up, he actually felt hopeful.

And a little invigorated.

Standing, he stretched and went to the kitchen to make himself something to eat. When he opened the refrigerator, he couldn’t help but shake his head. It was both sweet and sucky how much his sister was taking care of him. There were containers of leftovers with little notes on them about the best ways to reheat them, and he made a note to himself to do something nice to repay her.

He just didn’t know how yet.

The campaign the two of them had come up with to help the coffee shop had been a success, and Levi still hated taking her money for it. There was only so much he could do for free; the rest you actually had to pay for the advertising. Still, it had worked and it just proved that Billie had a good heart and how much she loved taking care of other people. He seriously wished there was someone who would appreciate that about her and then take care of her. Not that she ever complained, but he could tell. She sighed dreamily whenever she talked about him and Jade and whenever he asked her about who she was dating or even just interested in, she waved him off like it wasn't a big deal.

Grabbing a container with leftover chili in it, he put in the microwave before grabbing some shredded cheese and the sour cream. But his mind was still on his sister. That led to him thinking about Ashlynn and Chloe. It didn't seem like either of them were dating anyone and he had to wonder if it was a lack of decent guys here in Sweetbriar or if it was something else.

“Like their lack of any positive male role models, perhaps?” he murmured. “First Dad leaves and then I go and do the same.” In his mind, he was fairly certain his sisters had a very negative view of all men, and he felt partly responsible.

Maybe I should talk to them about it...

Um...no. He pushed that thought aside immediately because that was opening a big can of worms that he could totally do without. Besides, he had his own issues right now to deal with—mainly getting his relationship with Jade back on track.

When the microwave beeped that his chili was done, he took it out and added his toppings and brought it over to the

kitchen table. Then he went and grabbed his phone before sitting down.

If he and Jade were going to move forward, they were going to have to talk. There was no way he was going to let Trevor or his parents screw up the best relationship he'd ever had. Levi knew he wanted a future with her and the only way that was going to happen was if they were open and honest with each other.

It was a far cry from the man he was just a couple of months ago and it actually felt...good.

Right.

Scrolling on his phone he did something he realized he'd never done for Jade—he bought her flowers. He knew her schedule and arranged to have them delivered when she got home later this afternoon. Next, he scrolled to see what kind of family-oriented events were happening in the area. There wasn't anything going on in Sweetbriar, but there were some fun activities that he knew Silas would enjoy in some of the other mountain towns.

“Sugar Mountain,” he murmured as he read about gemstone mining and some kid-friendly hiking trails. But when he continued to scroll, he saw something that was possibly way cooler.

The Shenandoah Caverns.

It was almost a three-hour drive, but maybe they could do it and stay overnight...

Tapping his phone to bring up his texts, he knew he wanted to try to get this planned right away.

Levi: Hey! Are you and Silas up for an adventure this weekend?

He knew if he asked what they were doing this weekend, it would give her the opportunity to tell him she was busy. By wording the text the way he did, he hoped it would intrigue her enough to not shut him down.

Jade: An adventure???

Jade: What kind of adventure??

Levi: The three of us going to the Shenandoah Caverns and exploring!

Levi: Besides touring the caves, there's gemstone mining and a parade

Levi: I think Silas would love it!

Jade: That sounds right up his alley...

Jade: But isn't it far away?

Levi: 3 hours, but I figure if we leave early Saturday morning we can get a full day in

Levi: We can stay overnight and come home Sunday morning

Jade: Oh, I don't know. Staying in a hotel together?

He knew she would push back on that one point and was already prepared for it.

Levi: Two beds. You and Silas take one and I take the other.

Levi: Or...Silas and I buddy up and you take the other. It's up to you.

Jade: Hmm...

Jade: I'll admit I'm intrigued. I've always wanted to go to the caverns.

Levi: Then now's your chance!

Levi: C'mon. It will be fun and Silas is going to love it.

She didn't respond right away and he felt a sudden sense of panic and disappointment. He knew they could still find something to do together this weekend, but he liked the idea of getting her out of town and away from any of the Nelson drama. A change of scenery tended to go a long way when dealing with touchy situations.

At least, that had always worked for him.

He took a spoonful of chili and did his best to focus on his lunch and not on the fact that she wasn't replying to him. He was halfway through his lunch when his phone dinged with a text.

Jade: Okay! We were supposed to have a BBQ with my folks, but they were totally in agreement that going to the caverns would be way more fun.

He almost sagged to the floor with relief.

Levi: Great! How about I pick the two of you up around 8 on Saturday morning?

Jade: Sounds like a plan. 😊

Jade: And Levi?

Levi: Hmm?

Jade: Thanks. I've missed you.

His smile was instantaneous.

Levi: I've missed you too. See you Saturday.

Chapter Thirteen

The weekend was a huge success.

Jade knew what it was like to grow up as part of a happy family, but this was the first time she felt like she was offering that sort of thing to her son.

And it was all because of Levi.

It was amazing how much had changed since their initial meeting. She had truly believed he was going to breeze in and out of Sweetbriar Ridge and she'd never see him again. But lately she noticed that he didn't talk about moving back to Alexandria or any big city. He seemed content working with the local businesses and he told her about the conversation he had with his cousin about bringing in people to maybe help the town have a bit of a resurgence. Honestly, she had no idea how practical it was, but it did her heart good just knowing he was interested.

Then there was the way he interacted with Silas.

She'd only tried dating a few times since her son was born, but there had never been anyone that was interested in being involved in his life. And there certainly wasn't anyone who was overly thrilled with becoming a stepdad. But she'd been watching Levi and Silas' interactions since the day they met, and the two of them had just been instantly at ease with each

other. They played video games together, laughed at the same corny jokes, and Levi always included Silas in their conversations when they were all hanging out together.

It was the one part of her life that was seriously going well, and it was nice to have someone to relax with that she genuinely liked.

Liked? Seriously, that's all you can say?

Okay, fine, she was definitely beyond the “like” stage with Levi, but she was too scared to say anything and risk ruining what they had. It was safer to just...maybe hope that he shared his feelings first.

Business was doing well, but she still wished she could do more to draw in customers. Levi's social media stuff was working and somehow the local businesses were reaching out and asking about having her cater for their meetings, but she had really hoped the bookstore part of the shop would draw in more. After the whole flyer debacle, it felt like the books were more decoration than sellable inventory. And just thinking about it made her think of Victoria Nelson and all she'd cost her.

It had been almost two weeks since that whole fiasco and yet she still found herself looking over her shoulder every time she walked out of Books & Beans. Oh, how she longed for a normal life—to own her little shop and actually make a living out of it, go home to a good man and their children. Never in her life had she imagined just how hard all that was going to be to achieve.

But maybe now...?

Maybe.

She'd given up dreaming a long time ago, but lately, things seemed...possible.

"Mom!" Silas called out as soon as he walked through the door. He'd been at a friend's house all day and her mother picked him up for her. "Mom! Guess what?"

"What?" she asked with a smile before kissing him on the cheek.

"Tommy's dad said there's still room for me in the football camp! We just need to get a check to him by Friday!"

Dammit. She thought they had moved on from this. She'd been distracting him and he hadn't asked about it recently... until now.

"Why don't you go and pick out a snack while I finish up here?" Ruffling his hair, Jade gave him a gentle nudge toward the counter. Billie was still there restocking the bakery shelves and gave Silas a big grin as he walked over.

"Okay, young lady," her mother said softly but firmly. "You're going to have to put an end to this and tell him he's not going to that camp."

"I know, I know. I just...I hate disappointing him."

"It goes with the territory, unfortunately. You and your brother didn't get to do everything you asked for."

She nodded.

"And no one was traumatized or scarred for life over it, so just sit him down and tell him."

She sighed. "He's going to hate me."

"Probably. But only for a little while." Cora gave her a hug before stepping back. "Don't let this linger, Jade. He's going to

try to wear you down.”

“I know...”

“And your father and I would be more than willing to help...”

“Mom, we’ve been over this. You both already do far too much for us. I can’t keep letting you swoop in like that.”

“Alright,” her mother said quietly. “I won’t bring it up again.”

The sound of the bell over the door rang out and they heard Silas call out Levi’s name. Her whole body seemed to sigh and relax at the sight of him and it was crazy how her heart beat just a little faster.

“In case you didn’t already know,” her mother whispered, “*that* is a good man. And I believe he’s a good influence on Silas. Maybe get him involved in this football thing.”

“Maybe...”

With a little huff, Cora kissed her on the cheek. “I need to go. I have to stop at the grocery store and pick up something to make for dinner. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Walking around, Jade wiped down a couple of tables and kept glancing toward the counter to see what was going on. Levi, Billie, and Silas all seemed to be having some animated conversation, and she loved seeing her son looking so happy. Billie laughed and handed him a brownie and then gave a second one to Levi before they both headed in her direction.

Maybe get him involved in this football thing...

If she could get Levi to back her up on this, maybe Silas wouldn't be quite so upset. The idea definitely had merit.

“Ooh, brownies. Good choice!” she said cheerily before looking at Levi. “What brings you in today?”

“Just wanted to come in and see your face,” he said, and she knew he was refraining from saying anything overly romantic in front of Silas. Even when they went away for the weekend to the caverns, he kept it all very platonic.

“Well, I'm glad you did,” she said. “Hey, Si? Do you think you can give Levi and me a few minutes? I need to talk to him about something.”

“Can I read that Spiderman book over there?” he asked around a mouthful of chocolate.

“You sure can!”

And he was gone in a flash.

“What's up?” Levi asked, and Jade motioned for him to take a seat.

Sitting beside him, she took a moment to figure out how to say what she wanted to say. “Um...okay. So I have to break some bad news to Silas,” she began carefully. “And I know he's going to be wildly disappointed.”

“Is this about football camp?”

She stiffened slightly. “How did you know?”

With a shrug, he replied, “Because he's been asking for weeks and I can tell that you've been doing your best to distract him and you never really answer. So what's the deal? Is this about him possibly getting hurt?”

“Um...sort of? I don't know. Maybe. But basically it's about finances. He's already gone to one camp this summer and he's at The Boys and Girls club a few times a week.” She sighed. “I can't afford to send him to another. It stinks, but... there it is.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “Are you sure that's the reason?”

It bothered her that he was even questioning this. “Of course it is,” she said stiffly.

“Why don't I pay for it?”

“Excuse me?” she asked, nearly choking on the words because that was the last thing she thought he'd say.

“Yeah. I'll pay for it. He already told me how much it cost and honestly, I know what it's like to want to play a sport and be unsure if we could afford it. Hell, it turns out the only way I was able to play most of the sports in high school was because someone else helped foot the bill.” He paused. “And you know what? I'm really grateful for it.” Then he chuckled. “Of course, after learning a few things about that time in my life, it maybe feels a little awkward, but...it's not like that for us, right?”

“Um...”

“Come on, Jade. Let me do this for him.”

It took a minute for her to clear her mind because so many things were racing through it. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because you just admitted to how you feel awkward about your past and yet you're willing to jump in and do the

same exact thing that you're pissed off that your mom did!" And because she was getting mildly upset at the entire situation, she knew she had to make him understand. "Tell me, have you talked to your mother about this? About what your father confessed to you? Have you told her how it makes you feel?"

"Jade..."

"I remember how you looked and how you sounded when you told me about it, Levi. You told me how your sisters reacted. How do you think Silas will feel someday when he finds out?"

He was shaking his head. "These are two completely different situations. You have to see that."

Now she was the one shaking her head. "The only difference here is that we haven't exactly been keeping our relationship a secret—except from Silas—but having you offer to do this, knowing your family history with this exact same thing, just feels...I don't know...dirty. Wrong."

He looked at her as if she were crazy. "Are you kidding me right now? Dirty? Wrong? Jade, I'm trying to do something good here. Something nice. And not to get into your good graces or because we're sleeping together, but because I genuinely adore Silas and this is something he's really psyched about."

The huff of annoyance was out before she could stop it.

"He gets psyched about a lot of things and most of them are short-lived. I know he's going to be disappointed about the camp, but he'll get over it. I just thought maybe you could be there and point out some of the other fun things he can do instead of playing football."

Leaning back in his chair, he gave her a hard stare. “So this isn’t so much about the cost of the camp as it is about football itself. Specifically, that you don’t want him doing anything that Trevor did.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to,” he countered. “I just think it’s a little selfish on your part to put that kind of pressure on him when he has no idea why. Don’t punish him because of something his father did.”

Now she was pissed.

“Might I remind you how Silas is *my* child? Mine. No one else’s. I’m going to raise him how *I* see fit. I’m not asking for your permission or your approval. And I certainly don’t appreciate you telling me it’s okay for him to be like his father!”

“Jade, you don’t get to decide that!” he argued. “We are a product of our parents, whether we want to be or not! That’s like saying you’re going to change the color of his hair because his father had brown hair too! Or he can never eat pizza because Trevor liked pizza! There’s nothing wrong with him having similar interests and you should give him the chance to try this for himself. The more you keep him from it, the more he’s going to want to play and while he can’t do much about it now, there’s going to come a point when it’s going to be a real issue.”

“It’s already a real issue,” she snapped before getting to her feet. “And you know what? Never mind. I’ll deal with this myself. I should have known you’d take his side.”

She didn’t go two steps before he was in front of her. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that I knew you wouldn’t understand. You have no idea what it’s like to struggle like this or...or...to guide someone so they don’t make mistakes you know will one day hurt them.”

A mirthless laugh was his first response. “We’re talking about flag football, Jade, not anything dangerous like skydiving or taking drugs. And just because he wants to play doesn’t mean he’ll want to make a career out of it. Hell, I played all kinds of sports in high school and college and you don’t see me playing in the big leagues, do you?”

All she could do was stare at him.

“If you’re going to be like this, then at least be honest. You’re going to lie to that kid for your own selfish reasons. Now I know that sometimes, as a parent, you have to lie. But it’s usually for their own good. Not your own.” He took a step back. “I never pegged you to be like that.”

She fought the urge to roll her eyes.

“Are you worried that the Nelsons are going to find out he’s playing and want to get involved? Or...or that they’ll jump in and tell Silas about his father?”

“This has nothing to do with the Nelsons!”

“I think it does,” he countered. “Although, I’m really just guessing since you refuse to talk to me about how that whole situation went down.”

Groaning, she wished she were anyplace but here. “For crying out loud, Levi, what is it you want from me?”

“I want to be a part of your life! I want to be able to talk about things like this with you and bounce ideas off of each other without it turning into all this! Dammit, Jade, I’m in love

with you *and* your son and...and...and I just want a chance to help with this!”

Wasn't this the exact thing she was wishing for earlier? Wasn't this exactly what she wanted? And yet she couldn't focus on that part because the one thing she hadn't counted on was him disagreeing with her where her son was concerned. For all the time she judged the men she dated for not wanting to be a part of Silas' life, she never considered what would happen if one of them were.

She'd been her son's only parent for over eight years and that meant she made all the decisions. And having Levi basically refuse to take her side completely rubbed her the wrong way.

Swallowing hard, she took a step back and did her best not to get too emotional. “You know what? I can't do this,” she said quietly. “I thought I could, but I can't. Things are... complicated right now and I need some space.”

“Jade, I...”

But she held up a hand to stop him. “He's my son and I know what's right for him. I'm not looking to share that responsibility with someone like you.”

The look on his face nearly broke her heart. “Someone... like me?” he repeated.

Nodding, she said, “Things always go your way, Levi. You've never had to worry about anyone but yourself. Hell, even growing up, you never had to worry because someone was willing to foot the bill for you and your sisters.”

Even as she said the words, she hated herself.

“I won't live like that. I can't.” Taking another step back, she found she couldn't look him in the eye and instead focused

on a spot just beyond his shoulder. “Everyone’s got something to say about my business, my life, how I raise my son, and it’s all just too much. So...”

“So that’s it?” he asked gruffly. “We’re through? All because I dared to voice my opinion?”

When he put it like that, it sounded harsh. Shallow.

And yet she still nodded.

With a curt nod, he turned and cleared his snack from the table and turned and walked out, leaving Jade feeling more alone than she’d ever felt in her entire life.

* * *

“Who’s ready for some good news?”

Levi wanted to growl and throw his phone across the room, but his cousin didn’t deserve that kind of greeting.

“Hey, Patrick,” he said, and even to his own ears, his voice sounded pathetic.

“Not quite the energy level I was looking for, but I wanted to see what you’re doing tomorrow.”

Probably still sitting on the sofa in the same clothes I’ve been wearing for three days and looking like a hobo.

Yeah, that was something else his cousin didn’t need to know.

Clearing his throat, he replied, “Um, tomorrow? Nothing. Why?”

“Remember I was telling you I was going to reach out to Ryder Ashford?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Well, I called him and then he came to the office and Marissa gave a presentation about what she’d put together so far, and he was seriously interested. He wants to fly up and meet you and check out the town. Isn’t that great?”

Levi tried to work up the enthusiasm he knew this moment required, but seriously fell flat. “Yeah. Definitely. So, um... what time are you getting in?”

“Is everything okay, Levi? You don’t sound like yourself. If tomorrow’s not good for you, we can do it another day.”

The snort was out before he could stop it. “The way things are going, I doubt there will be a good day for me. Like ever.”

He heard Patrick’s soft sigh. “What happened?”

“Jade and I broke up. I know it has nothing to do with Sweetbriar, but I’ve just been sort of sitting here at Billie’s being miserable.” Then he shook his head as if to clear it. “But I swear I’ll get my shit together for tomorrow.”

“Are you sure? Because if you don’t want to do this...”

“Patrick, the town needs this more than anything. Even though things didn’t work out with Jade, my family still lives here and any improvements will help them. So I can put my personal business aside and, you know, do what I can to help the people here.”

“Do you think you’ll still stay, or are you interested in a position elsewhere?”

He laughed softly. “So far, it seems like elsewhere isn’t interested in me either,” he joked. “But I’m open to anything that comes my way. I guess I’m not as tied to staying here as I was a few days ago.”

“That’s understandable.” He paused. “And you’re sure you’re okay with us coming?”

“Absolutely. Tell me what you need from me and I’ll get it done.”

“There really isn’t anything. I think Ryder wants to just sort of check things out and meet some of the business owners and get a feel for it all. After that, it’s anyone’s guess. I’ve never worked with him before and the last time I was in Sweetbriar was probably twenty years ago, so...it will be all new to me too.”

“What time will you get in? We can meet at the café.” Although he really would have preferred to meet at Books & Beans, he didn’t think that would be good for anyone.

“We’ll be there around ten. And by there, I mean in Sweetbriar. Ryder’s an early riser and is picking us up at seven.” He laughed softly. “He’s a little intense, and that’s really saying something because I always thought I was that way, but this guy has me beat.”

“At least he promised us coffee and muffins,” Marissa said in the background.

“Tell Marissa to save room for some of Billie’s stuff. She’s quite the baker too.”

“Believe me, I will. So we’ll see you in the morning?”

“Sounds good. And thanks, Patrick. I appreciate this.”

“I think this is going to be good for all of us, Levi, and I’m looking forward to it.”

Standing, he stretched and looked at the clock and saw it was almost time for Billie to come home. She had been walking on eggshells around him, and he just hadn’t felt like

talking about what happened with Jade. If Jade had said anything, his sister wasn't sharing that.

He was miserable and curious as hell if Jade was okay. He was curious about Silas too, and how the whole football thing went down.

Looking back, he realized his mistake. It wasn't his place to tell Jade what was right and what was wrong. He wasn't a parent. And while he didn't have to agree with her decision, he also could have kept it to himself and just tried to be supportive.

Only...he knew this was setting up a pattern that wasn't going to be good for her or her son. Her insecurities and her need to make sure Silas didn't turn out like Trevor were going to put a strain on their relationship at some point. Couldn't she see that?

Walking into the kitchen, he grabbed himself a bottle of water and almost dropped it at the sound of the door slamming.

"Okay, I have kept my mouth shut for three damn days, and I'm done," Billie announced, before slamming her purse on the kitchen table. "What the hell did you do to Jade?"

His eyes went wide. "What did *I* do? Why does it have to be my fault, huh? Why not ask what the hell Jade did to me?" he snapped.

And for a moment, his sister was comically still with her jaw wide open. "Um..."

He didn't mind being the bad guy, even though in this instance it was sort of a draw as to who was more at fault. So, he calmly explained to his sister what had happened as he paced the kitchen.

“And before you say anything else, I already know that I should have just kept my mouth shut. But I couldn’t.” He looked over at her helplessly. “And for the record, she said some pretty insulting things too.” Sitting down at the kitchen table, he sighed. “Part of me doesn’t know if I fully agree with her on the part about our family, and that’s weighing heavily on me too.”

Billie let out a long breath before sitting down beside him and nodding. “Jade told me everything—well, almost everything—earlier. I just wanted to get your side of it.”

It was wrong to be offended by that, so he just nodded. “I thought I was doing a good thing, Bill. I thought I was preventing her from making a mistake.”

“Okay, I get what you were thinking, and I’m sorry I just assumed the worst.” She rested her hand over his and gave it a small squeeze. “But you have to see it from her side. She hasn’t had to deal with anyone challenging her parenting decisions—I mean, other than her parents. This was the first time someone who could have realistically been a parent, a partner, with her didn’t think she was doing a good job.”

“No, I think Jade is an awesome parent. I just think that this is a sensitive subject that only got worse after the whole run-in with the Nelsons.” He muttered a curse. “I don’t think she would have been this sensitive about Silas playing football if those two hadn’t upset her.”

“Levi, Victoria Nelson has been upsetting Jade for years. I don’t think them showing up has anything to do with this. I think she’s genuinely struggling with the fact that Trevor is going to be a part of her son’s life even though he’s not involved in it. Personally, I don’t fully understand it, but then again, I’m not a single parent.”

“I get it. I think it’s got to be hard to have this child you love so much and yet they remind you of someone you seriously hate and who hurt you.”

Billie looked up at him and smiled.

Which was odd considering what they were talking about.

“What? Why are you smiling?”

“Because I think that what you just said was extremely wise.” She squeezed his hand again. “I’m very proud of you.”

“Pfft...lots of good that does me. Jade hates me. And my wisdom, apparently.”

“She doesn’t hate you. I think she’s just overwhelmed. This summer has been a lot for her. Just give her a few days to calm down.”

They sat in companionable silence for a minute before he asked, “And how’s Silas? Do you know if she told him he couldn’t go to camp?”

“I honestly don’t know. He’s been to the shop a few times and seems like his usual self, so...”

“Then she was right. The kid’s resilient and I had no right to butt in like that.”

“Levi...”

But he shook her off and knew he had to change the subject. “Listen, I just got off the phone with Patrick a little while ago and he’s coming to Sweetbriar tomorrow.”

Her eyes went a little wide. “Really? How come?”

He told her about his previous call to him and how he was coming with an investor he knew to check out the town.

“Holy crap, Levi! That’s incredible!” She was out of her chair and hugging him. “That is...oh, my goodness, I can’t believe you did that!” When she sat back down, she was both smiling and looking like she was about to cry.

“Don’t get your hopes up just yet. We have no idea if anything’s going to come of this.”

“I know, I know...but there is a small chance, right?”

“Definitely.”

They both grew silent again.

“Okay, I don’t know how to fix things between you and Jade, but there is another relationship that I think we can do something about.”

He looked at her oddly.

“Mom, Chloe, and Ash are coming for dinner tonight and we’re going to hash out this whole situation about her, Dad, and Dr. Collins.”

“What? Why? Why are you springing this on me now?” he demanded, and realized just how freaked out he sounded.

Shit.

“Because it’s been on my mind since you dropped that bombshell on us,” she admitted lowly. “And then, after listening to Jade talk, it felt like maybe it’s time to address the elephant in the room. I’m not saying it’s going to do anything for your current situation, but it’s something that needs to be discussed. For all of us.”

“I guess...the timing just...it sucks.”

“I know, sweetie, and I’m sorry.” She straightened in her chair. “But you have got to go and shower and clean yourself

up. I didn't want to pry because you were clearly dealing with something, but enough is enough. I miss seeing you looking like your usual handsome self. So...go."

"I guess a shower wouldn't be the worst thing..."

And an hour later, he had to admit that he felt like a new man. He had showered, shaved, changed the sheets on his bed, and had on clean clothes.

Progress.

At five o'clock, Chloe showed up looking a little apprehensive. She was carrying some sort of casserole dish that Levi took from her as he kissed her on the cheek. "What's in the dish?"

"Oh, um...Billie said we were doing Mexican, so I made some of my cheesy Mexican rice."

"Mmm...sounds delicious." They walked to the kitchen. "You're the first to arrive and I'm not sure where Billie's at..."

"I'm here!" she said as she joined them in the kitchen. "I went to grab a quick shower once you were done."

Ashlynn arrived five minutes later and Levi figured they should discuss what they were going to say once their mother arrived.

"So, what are you thinking, Bill? You initiated this, so I'm going to let you take the lead."

"*Me?*" she said with horror. "Why me? I figured you'd do the bulk of the talking since you're the one Dad shared this with!"

"Yeah, um...that's one way to go, but if that's what you wanted, you should have let me know you were doing this!"

I'm kind of dealing with my own crap right now and this particular situation is a bit of a sore spot!"

"I think Chloe and I are missing something," Ash interjected. "Want to share with the class what's going on?"

Raking his hands through his hair, Levi groaned.

"Fine, I'll tell them," Billie murmured before launching into an abbreviated version of what happened between Levi and Jade.

"Oh, so basically you were going to be the Dr. Collins in this situation," Ashlynn said with a smirk. "Do I have that right?"

"It's not the same," he argued. "I wasn't trying to be Dr. Collins. Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not so sure," Chloe added. "It seems to me what you were offering to do for Silas was exactly what Dr. Collins did for us. So if we're going to argue with Mom about this..."

"Okay, no one said we were going to argue," Billie corrected. "We just need to find out what exactly Mom's relationship was with Dr. Collins." She paused. "And for the record, Levi, you were totally pulling a Dr. Collins."

"Can we all stop saying Dr. Collins?" he shouted.

"Oh, good gracious! What is going on in here and why are you all even talking about Dr. Collins?" their mother asked in wide-eyed confusion.

You could have heard a pin drop in the room.

He and his sisters all looked at one another, and Levi was certain he was going to have to be the one to speak up when Ashlynn beat him to it.

“Were you sleeping with Dr. Collins while we were kids?” she blurted out, and Levi groaned as both Chloe and Billie gasped and his mother paled.

“Great start, Ash,” he mumbled.

“What in the world...?”

“Mom,” Billie began. “Here. Sit and let’s just back up a bit.”

Marie Donovan stared at her children cautiously as she sat. “What is going on? Why would you even ask me something like that?”

Now Levi knew he had to speak up.

“I went and saw Dad and...well...the subject came up,” he began as he slowly sat down beside her. “And you can’t be mad at him for speaking up because we’re all adults here and enough time has passed.”

All she did was nod.

He glanced up at his sisters who were all silently telling him to keep going.

“Was Dr. Collins the reason you and Dad split up?”

Her expression went from shock to annoyed. “I don’t see why this is even up for discussion. If your father’s still trying to make excuses...”

“Mom,” he began calmly, “We’re all just trying to figure some things out. I would hope that you’d be able to handle this in a reasonable manner.”

She frowned. “What exactly did your father tell you?”

“That you were spending a lot of time with Dr. Collins and...” He opted to leave out the part about him questioning

the paternity of Ashlynn and Chloe. “And how you were always comparing the two of them and telling him we would be better off with someone like Dr. Collins as a father. He said that’s what pushed him to leave because he thought you were right.”

For a minute, she didn’t react at all, and then her face just seemed to crumble.

With a nod, she hung her head. “That’s exactly what happened. And...yes. I was having an affair with Brad. I’m not proud of it, but...things were always such a struggle with your father. He just...” She looked up at the four of them. “I wanted more out of life. I wanted more for all of you, and your father just wasn’t ever going to be the kind of man who could give that to us.”

Well...shit.

“I don’t understand,” Chloe said, her voice quiet and shaky. “You made Dad leave so we could supposedly have this great life that you thought Dr. Collins would give us, but that didn’t happen either. We all remember him paying for a bunch of stuff for us, but the two of you...?”

Marie shook her head. “He wasn’t looking for an instant family, but he still wanted me.” She let out a trembly breath. “I agreed to keep the affair going because he fulfilled a part of me that your father never could, and he helped me with you kids. He didn’t mind being generous in that respect, he just didn’t want...”

“Us,” Ashlynn murmured. “Awesome. So, you managed to get involved with two men who didn’t want us. That’s just great, Mom. Good job.” Then she stormed from the room and out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

“I’m sorry, Mom, but...” Chloe looked ready to burst into tears and Levi reached for her, but she stepped away. “You tore our family apart, and the only one who benefitted was you.” Tears streamed down her face at that point. “I need to go.” And then she followed Ashlynn out the door.

“And then there were three,” Billie said flatly as she sat down.

“Well, this certainly wasn’t what I expected from a family dinner,” Marie said and seemed to wipe away her own tears. She looked up at him and his sister. “I don’t even know what to say. I never thought...”

“You never thought Dad would tell the truth?” Levi finished for her, but there was very little heat in his words. “He kept your secret all these years. All this time, everyone painted him as the villain in this scenario and he accepted it and felt like he deserved it. Hell, I doubt he ever would have said anything if I hadn’t gone to him with my own issues.”

“What issues?” his mother asked. “Are you okay?”

“No, but it doesn’t even matter.” He leaned back in his chair and let out a long breath before looking at Billie. “You were right. I never should have told anyone about this. What good did it do? Ash and Chloe are out there in tears, my relationship with Jade is over, and we made Mom cry.” Another sigh. “This is why I should have just stayed away. It would have been better for everyone if I had just found a way to work through my shit after losing my job.”

“Levi, you can’t think like that,” Billie said. “And you know what? This all needed to be out there. I’ve been angry with Dad for so damn long because I only knew half the story. I’m not saying I’m thrilled with him now or that all is forgiven, but it does make me look at him differently.” She

paused. "If anything, I feel bad about all the times he tried to reach out and I shut him down."

They all grew silent again, and Levi swore it was enough to make him go mad.

"Your father is a good man," Marie said quietly. "He's got a good heart, but he's not exactly motivated to do much. I kept thinking he'd realize that he couldn't be so laid back when he was a father, but he never changed. We squeaked by and I was...I was ashamed. Brad gave me the job at the dental practice and showed me how much I was missing."

"Oh, please," Billie snapped. "You were only thinking of yourself, Mom! He showed you how much you were missing? What about us? Didn't you think about what we'd be missing by Dad leaving? Seriously?"

"Billie," Levi warned.

"No, she's right," his mother said. "I was only thinking of myself. I had spent years putting your father and you kids first and I was exhausted. Brad came along and...I don't know...it was nice to be appreciated. I realize now how wrong that was, but...I can't go back and change it. I'm not sure what it is you want me to do or say here."

Unfortunately, neither did they.

"I think I should go," she said as she got to her feet. "I don't think your sisters are still outside, but maybe one of you can call and check on them."

"Isn't that something you should be doing?" Billie challenged.

"I don't think either of them needs to talk to me right now, and honestly, I don't even know what I'd say." She picked up

her purse and turned and walked out the door, leaving Levi and Billie staring at each other.

“Got any other great ideas?” he asked her.

“Yeah, I guess we should have discussed it as a group first.”

He nodded. “You call Chloe and I’ll call Ash and see if they’ll come back.”

“Are we sure that’s a good idea?”

Levi knew his smile was sad, but he nodded. “Misery love company. And besides, we’ve got all this food to eat. Might as well commiserate a bit while drowning our sorrows in chips and queso.”

“Don’t forget the guac. Guac goes a long way in making you feel better.”

“I thought that was chips and salsa?”

She chuckled. “It all works. And I’ve got all the makings for margaritas too. If the food fails us, there’s always alcohol.” Then she stood and picked her phone up off the counter. “Come on. Let’s get the girls back here and try to salvage this night.”

He stood and walked over and hugged her. “It’s going to be okay, because I think we’re also taking the first step in salvaging this family.”

Chapter Fourteen

“You might want to go in the back,” Billie whispered as she stepped directly in front of her.

Jade frowned. “What...why...?”

“Victoria Nelson is walking up to the door. Go! Hide in your office. I got this.”

And the thing was, it would have been super easy to do just that, but Jade was itching for someone to lash out at. Nothing would give her more pleasure than to lash out at this crazy bitch who’s been making her life hell for years.

“Thanks, but...I’ve got this.”

The look of pure delight on Billie’s face said it all. She stepped aside and went to refresh the muffin tray.

Jade stepped up to the counter just as Victoria did the same. “Welcome to Books & Beans! How can I help you?” she said with the brightest smile and cheeriest tone she ever used.

“Good morning, Jade,” Victoria said solemnly. “I was hoping we might have a word? Please?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say no or to tell her she had to purchase something or leave, but pettiness wasn’t her style. Instead, she offered her a cup of tea and was shocked when the woman actually thanked her and paid.

Hell is definitely freezing over right now.

She handed Victoria her tea and then motioned for her to follow her to a table. Jade caught Billie's shocked expression but kept on walking. Once they were seated, she simply sat primly and waited to hear whatever nonsense was about to be hurled her way.

"It has been brought to my attention that certain...*facts* about our...history, may have been, um..."

"Lies?" she finished for her.

The older woman frowned at her before giving a curt nod. "Yes. It appears that Trevor was not completely honest with us on...well...several important details regarding you and...your son."

It was almost comical the way she was still trying to be all prim and proper rather than calling her son out for being a lying jackass.

"After my husband and I were here and heard what you had to say, it really opened my eyes." Then she had the decency to look regretful. "Actually, Thomas was so angry with me and once I calmed down and made myself listen, I realized that my son had possibly manipulated us. All of us," she added.

"I see. And...what conclusions have you come to?" Jade prompted with a hint of snark.

"Well, I know now that you never said we couldn't be involved in your son's life. That was all Trevor's doing and I'm devastated that I allowed him to convince us of such a thing." She looked down at her hands before glancing back up at Jade. "I've behaved horribly toward you because I believed you were being spiteful to us because Trevor had left you."

It was pointless for her to mention how she wasn't all that torn up by their breakup.

“There is no way I can go back and fix all the hurt I've caused or make up for more than eight years of being an absentee grandparent, but maybe someday you'll find it in your heart to forgive me and allow me the honor of getting to know my grandson. Silas.”

If she hadn't said her son's name, Jade could have held on to at least some of her anger, but for some reason, that little acknowledgment went a long way.

“And if I may ask one more thing,” Victoria said meekly. “Please don't hold my actions against Thomas. For years, he tried to convince me to come and talk to you and find out that there were maybe two sides to this story, but I refused. The day he went and talked to Silas...well...he was just so happy to even have that one little conversation with him. He's a big Star Wars fan too, and it made him smile to see Silas all painted up like a Storm Trooper.”

The smile was automatic as she thought about how cute her son looked that day.

“I know I have no right to ask, but...if you'd like to come for dinner sometime—you, Silas, and Levi—Thomas and I would love to have you. We've been hearing about all the great things Levi's doing for the town and...and I think he's a lucky man to have someone like you in his life.”

For a moment, she thought Victoria was being sarcastic and couldn't help but comment.

“Lucky? Last week you accused me of ruining his life the way I ruined your son's.”

Her expression fell. “Yes, well...I was lashing out and...” She paused. “I have no excuse, Jade. I’m so sorry. As a mother, you know how it feels to never want to think your child is capable of doing something wrong. Well, imagine how it would feel to realize that not only had your child done something wrong, but that he was an openly cruel and heartless liar.” Pausing, she shook her head. “I was blind to so many things and you were a convenient target. A target my son gladly put in front of me with his lies.”

At least she was finally seeing it...

Jade let out a long, slow breath as she tried to figure out exactly what to say. Being mean would have been easy because, well, she wanted everyone to hurt the way she had been hurting. But her mother raised her better than that.

“I’ll have to think about it, Mrs. Nelson. This is a lot for me to take in.”

She nodded. “And I completely understand.” After taking a sip of her tea, she looked around and started to smile. “You know...you really created something wonderful here. The concept seemed a little odd to me at first, but once you come in and look around, you really do just want to curl up with a book and read.”

“That was my thought too. Unfortunately, the book part of the business isn’t doing as well as I had hoped.” And when Victoria met her gaze, a bit of her frustration came out. “I had arranged for flyers to go out to all the students so they could come and get their summer reading books from me, but... someone lost the flyers, causing me to...lose that business.”

She had the good sense to look ashamed.

“The summer’s not over yet,” Victoria said cheerily. “And you never know where business may come from.”

They weren’t sitting far from the front door and when the bells chimed, Jade instantly looked up. The soft gasp was out as soon as she saw Levi walk in with three other people. One of them looked like he could play James Bond because he oozed class and sophistication and was incredibly handsome.

“Oh, my,” Victoria whispered. “Who’s that with Levi?”

“I...I don’t know.”

They both stared as the other gentleman with them walked over and hugged Billie before introducing her to the woman with them.

“And who are they?” Victoria asked.

“No idea.”

When she turned and looked at Jade with confusion, Jade simply shrugged before excusing herself. She meant to go and join Billie, but Levi met her halfway with his ridiculously handsome friend.

“Hey,” she said awkwardly.

“Hey,” he said, his voice low and gruff, and she wanted to reach out and touch him.

But refrained.

“So, um...what’s going on?” Then she looked over at Billie and the couple she was talking with.

“Jade McKenzie, this is Ryder Ashford,” he said. “And the couple over there with my sister is my cousin Patrick and his wife Marissa.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ryder,” she said as she shyly shook his hand. The man was tall and intimidating, and she’d never met anyone like him in her life.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Jade. Levi’s been singing your praises all morning.” He glanced around. “And I love what you’ve done here with Books & Beans. Have you ever thought about branching out? Franchising?”

It felt like her eyes were about to fall right out of her face. “Um...what?”

He nodded. “This is a great concept and I’d love to see it in more spaces. I own a couple of resorts and would love to talk to you more about it.” His phone rang and he excused himself, leaving her alone with Levi.

“Um...what just happened?”

He chuckled. “So...that’s Ryder, and apparently he’s all about starting and growing towns and businesses.”

“No, seriously. What just happened? Was he serious?”

“I can’t really speak for him because I just met him an hour ago, but he seems to have a knack for all-things business. You’ll have to ask my cousin about it because he knows him better than I do, but...”

She was almost too stunned to speak, and that’s when Victoria walked over to join them.

Great.

“I can see that you’re busy, Jade. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.” She smiled up at Levi. “I’m looking forward to getting to know you more too, Levi. Take care!”

It wasn’t until she walked out the door that Levi looked down at her with the same confusion she felt. “Okay, so...

what was *that* all about?”

Jade nodded. “It’s been a hell of a morning.”

He stepped in close, close enough that she could smell his cologne and feel the heat from his body, and it took every ounce of strength not to lean in and wrap her arms around him. “Are you okay? What did she do this time?”

Her shoulders sagged as she looked up at him. “She apologized. For everything.”

“Um...what?”

“I know. I’m still a little in shock too. Apparently, after the whole shit-show that happened here, she finally confronted Trevor, who—shockingly—admitted that he lied to them about everything. So she showed up here this morning asking for forgiveness.”

“Holy shit. What did you say?”

“I told her I needed some time. This was all just...bizarre.”

“I think that’s an understatement.”

“Then she invited us to dinner. Like...us—you, me, and Silas.”

“Oh, and...and what did you say?”

“Again, I told her I’d have to think about it.” She sighed. “And you know the weirdest part?”

“You mean other than everything you already told me?” he asked with mild amusement.

“I really wanted to lash out at her. Like when she walked in, Billie tried to get me to go to my office, but I was just primed for an argument. But once we sat down and she started

talking, I actually felt bad for her. I mean, she's been nothing but horrible to me and I was sympathetic toward her."

"That's because you're a good person, Jade," he said softly. They stood there silently for a moment before he added, "I miss you."

"I miss you too. I've been thinking about..."

"Sorry about that," Ryder said as he re-joined them. "That was the agent for the ski resort. He wanted to know if we could head that way now instead of after lunch." He smiled. "I told him yes."

"Oh, um..."

"I'll go get Patrick and Marissa and maybe a slice of that lemon pound cake. I've heard it's legendary." He smiled at Jade. "It was nice to meet you and I'm hoping we'll have some time to talk later today if possible. I'll have Levi call you, if that's okay with you."

"Um..."

He was already walking away before she could answer.

"He's a little like a force of nature," Levi said. "But if you don't want to talk to him..."

"I'm not opposed to it; I just have no idea what it is he wants to talk about or if I'd understand what he's saying."

With a soft chuckle, he nodded. "I'll tell him to reel it in."

"And what's this about the ski resort?"

"You guys ready?" Ryder called out as he headed for the door. "I'll meet you in the car!"

Levi groaned. "He's an investor and he and my cousin Patrick are here to see if maybe they can help Sweetbriar out."

“Levi, that’s amazing! What can they...?”

“You ready?” Patrick asked as he joined them. He smiled at Jade. “Hey, I’m Levi’s cousin Patrick and this is my wife, Marissa.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Marissa said. “And I love this shop!”

“Thanks,” she replied, and felt completely overwhelmed.

“Can you guys give us just a minute?” Levi asked and it wasn’t until they were out the door that he faced her again. “I don’t know much of anything right now. They literally got in an hour ago and I feel like I’ve just been smiling and nodding while the three of them seem to talk in their own language.”

“Wow...that’s...wow.”

“I know. But I need to go with them because I’m the one who initiated this whole thing, so...would it be alright if we called you later?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

“Okay.” He stood there and seemed to want to say more, but she knew everyone was waiting for him. “You should go. We’ll talk more later.”

He took one step back and then another before waving to his sister and smiling at Jade. “We’ll definitely talk later.”

When he was out the door, she had to wonder if he meant they’d talk about business or if maybe he wanted to talk about them as well.

Now all she could do was wait.

* * *

By five o'clock, Levi had a raging headache and a strong urge to tell everyone to just shut up. Honestly, it was never quiet. Ryder, Patrick, and Marissa talked almost nonstop, and it was impossible for him to keep track of all the different directions every conversation went.

Ryder saw potential in everything and was already planning a second trip back to Sweetbriar. His cousin also found some projects he'd like to take on, but he needed to go back to Laurel Bay and work some things out. And even Marissa found some retail space that she had ideas for and knew of clients who might be interested. All in all, it sounded very promising.

He was just tired of listening to it.

They were driving down the main street and came to a stop by the café where they'd left Levi's car.

"Listen, I know I definitely want to talk with Jade, but things ran longer than we initially planned and I promised my wife I'd be back tonight before our son went to bed," Ryder explained. He handed Levi his business card. "I'll be back in town next week and I'd like it if Jade could call me and let me know a time that works for her because I feel strongly about seeing a Books & Beans in a few of my resorts, existing ones and future ones."

Levi was almost too stunned to respond.

"If you don't mind talking to her, tell her we'll talk about numbers and contracts next week if she's interested." Then he held out his hand. "It was nice meeting you, Levi, and I can't thank you enough for bringing all of this to our attention. I'd love to have you on my team."

"Oh, umm..."

“We’ll talk next week too. I can see you handling all the advertising and PR for the entire project,” he added with a smile. Looking over at Patrick, he asked, “You ready to head to the airport?”

“Definitely,” Patrick agreed. “Levi, tell your sisters I promise to see them next time. I’m not sure I’ll be coming with Ryder next week, but if things work out with some of this, I’ll be coming to Sweetbriar a little more often.”

“Sounds good, Patrick. Thanks.” He shook his hand and then kissed Marissa on the cheek before watching them all drive away.

And he nearly sagged with relief as he simply stood and relished the silence.

All he wanted to do was go home, maybe have a glass of wine, and crawl into bed. It was crazy how exhausted he was—both mentally and physically—but he had a feeling Jade was curious about why they hadn’t come back yet. He knew she’d probably gone home already, so he opted to text her instead of going back over to Books & Beans.

Levi: Hey. Sorry for the delay. Things took longer than anyone expected.

Levi: They had a plane to catch, but Ryder wants to meet with you next week

Levi: He left his business card with me to give to you so I’ll pass it on to Billie

Jade: Where are you?

Levi: By the café. I left my car here earlier.

Levi: Are you still at Books & Beans?

Jade: No, I came home because I needed to start dinner

Levi: Yeah, I'm sorry if we held you up

He desperately wanted to see her and talk to her, but clearly that wasn't going to happen tonight.

Jade: Would you like to join us?

Jade: It's just burgers

And just like that, he felt rejuvenated.

Levi: That would be great! Can I bring anything?

Jade: Unless there's anything specific you want, I think we've got it covered here

Levi: I'll see you in a few minutes.

Jade: 😊

Climbing into his car, he quickly gave Billie a call to let her know what was going on too.

“Hey! Are you bringing Patrick and Marissa home for dinner?” she asked.

“No. They're already heading back to the airport. Why? Were you planning on that?”

She laughed. “Actually, no. I was just afraid that’s why you were calling and I was panicking!”

“Well, don’t worry. No one’s coming home with me. Including me.”

“Um...what?”

“That Ryder guy wanted to talk to Jade about the shop, but because things ran long, he didn’t have time, so he gave me his card to give to her. I texted her to let her know what was going on and...she invited me to have dinner with her and Silas.”

“Oh...really?” she asked hesitantly, which was weird.

“Uh, yeah. Why?”

“No reason. Just didn’t think you guys were doing that right now, that’s all. So, I’m on my own tonight.”

“If that’s alright. I know you and I don’t do the whole sitting down to dinner thing a lot, but...”

“No worries. I actually considered calling Ash and Chloe and grabbing something to eat with them. If you weren’t going to Jade’s, I would have asked you too. After the other night...”

“Yeah, it wasn’t a great time, but I think the four of us made our peace with a lot of stuff. Still, it’s nice that you want to check on them and see how they’re doing.”

“I’m not checking on them...”

“Oh, please,” he teased. “You are totally checking on them and you know it. You can’t help yourself. You’re a nurturer and we love you for it.”

“Ugh...you’re a dork, but I love you too. Tell Jade I said hello and that I’m hoping to make that caramel crumb cake

tomorrow.”

“I’ll do that and I’ll see you later.”

“Well...maybe you’ll get lucky and I won’t see you until tomorrow.”

“Um...no. Silas is home and that is a big deal-breaker. I refuse to be that guy. Not that it matters because Jade and I...”

“Oh, for the love of it, Levi! Just go and I’ll see you when I see you!”

They hung up and he couldn’t help but smile. It would have been nice if this were a dinner for two where they could work things out and he could spend the night, but those days were gone and he had to come to grips with it. He’d never been in a situation where he stayed friends with someone he once dated, but he’d make the exception for her. It would be better to see her as a friend than not see her at all.

The drive to her house was short and he sat in his car for a minute to think about how he was going to handle all of this. True, they might not be through. There was a chance that she wanted to work things out. He knew he did. But if she wanted to end things amicably, he’d deal with that too.

This was how he knew he was in love with her—all he wanted was for her to be happy.

Even if it meant she wasn’t with him.

“Great time to figure this out, genius,” he mumbled before climbing from the car.

At the front door, he rang the bell and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

When Jade finally answered the door, she was flushed and breathless. “Hey. Sorry. I was, uh...I didn’t hear the bell. Come on in.”

“Thanks.” He stepped inside and waited for her to shut the door before following her to the kitchen. “Where’s Silas?”

“Oh, he is with my folks. When I thought I was going to be meeting with Ryder, I had no idea how I would keep Silas busy so he wouldn’t interrupt us. My mom offered to take him home with her, and the plan was for me to pick him up once we were done. Then when you texted, I let her know and she just said he and my dad were out flying some new kite and that they wanted him to sleep over, so...”

“So when you asked me to join you and you said us...?”

“I figured with the way things went with us last week that you might not be feeling too kindly toward me, but maybe you wouldn’t say no to Silas,” she quietly admitted.

“Wow. So we’re dropping truth bombs right away,” he said with a small laugh. “Um...for the record, I would have come over no matter what. I was trying to give you space, Jade. And I’m so sorry for interfering and making you feel like...”

“Levi,” she quickly interrupted. “Don’t, okay? It was all me. I didn’t handle the situation well and I know it. I’m the one who owes you an apology. I’m not used to anyone having a say in my son’s life. I just figured you’d go along with whatever I said because...well...no one’s ever challenged it before.”

Pausing, she motioned for him to sit down at the kitchen table and then poured them each a glass of wine.

As soon as she sat down beside him, she continued. “Basically, I behaved like a brat and I’m ashamed of myself.

Your only concern was for Silas and my only concern was for...me. I feel awful.”

“You shouldn’t,” he told her. “We just had a similar conversation with my mother, so you’re not alone, and I think all parents do that at one time or another.” He took a sip of wine. “The thing is, Jade, it wasn’t my place to challenge you and I should have found another way to have the discussion without putting you on the defensive, so...I’m sorry.”

She laughed softly. “At some point we’re going to have to stop apologizing, right?”

“God, I hope so...”

They both grew quiet.

“So, um...where do we go from here?” she asked softly. “The things I said weren’t what I really felt, Levi. And you said...”

“I said that I was in love with you,” he replied gruffly. “And I am. But I understand that this is all happening fast and...”

He never got to finish because she was instantly in his lap, in his arms, and kissing him.

Which was pretty much the greatest thing to ever happen to him.

It was a little wild and needy, but as his arms banded around her, all he could think of was how he never wanted to let her go. She was it for him and it didn’t matter if he had to live in Billie’s spare room for another year or more; it would be worth it to be with Jade.

They were both breathless when they broke apart, and Jade caressed his jaw. “I love you, Levi. I never thought I’d say that

to anyone ever again, but...I do. I love you. I know my situation doesn't exactly make things easy for us..."

"I don't care about that, Jade. I never did. Silas comes first. I wouldn't want it any other way, and do you know why?"

She shook her head.

"Because it means that you are an amazing, unselfish woman."

"That's not what I was admitting to just a minute ago..."

"One instance in eight years," he reasoned. "Your track record speaks for itself. You're an incredible mom, an amazing businessperson, and the sexiest woman I've ever met."

She blushed at his words, and it was freaking adorable.

Holding her close, Levi simply breathed her in and felt like this was exactly where he was supposed to be. All the craziness and disappointment and insecurities that had plagued him in the last few months led him right here to this woman, and that made it all worth it.

Jade hummed softly. "Okay, I have one question."

"O-kay..."

"Monster burgers and then sex, or sex and then monster burgers?"

"Hmm...you ask a good question," he said before gently running his tongue along the shell of her ear. "I'm totally in favor of sex and then burgers. I mean, we're going to work up an appetite, right?"

She hummed again. "Absolutely." Squirming in his lap, Jade breathlessly panted his name, and it was all he could take.

Standing with her in his arms, he carried her up to her bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him.

In his mind, he wanted to slowly make love to her, but they were both a little frantic and needy. Slow went out the window as soon as she bit him on the neck and practically growled his name.

Later, he thought. They could do the whole slow thing later. Right now, his need for her—and her apparent need for him—was all that mattered. And as he covered her body with his on that magnificent bed, all he could think of was how freaking lucky he was and how he couldn't wait to share the rest of his life with Jade.

Chapter Fifteen

It was just a little after ten, and Jade was thoroughly exhausted, but she didn't want to close her eyes. If she fell asleep, it would mean missing time with Levi. It had been less than a week since their fight, and she'd never been more miserable or thought she could miss someone so much.

She'd seriously thought she'd blown it, that she had behaved so horribly that he wouldn't forgive her. But he was a good man, an honorable man, and he was all hers. Snuggling closer, their legs tangled together, she sighed happily. They had made love twice, eaten dinner, had ice cream for dessert while watching a little TV, and it was the perfect night.

Unfortunately, her brain wouldn't fully shut off and there were things she felt they really needed to talk about.

“So tell me what you know about Ryder Ashford.”

He chuckled. “Please, I don't know if I can possibly talk about him any more today. He truly is a force of nature. I never met anyone like him.”

“Yeah, that's what I thought too. But...do you trust him enough to do business with him?”

Levi pulled back a little and looked down at her. “Me personally? Um...I don't really know. What I do know is that

my cousin trusts him and that's a good sign. Patrick is an incredible businessman who pretty much single-handedly brought his hometown back from the dead." Then he laughed again. "Okay, maybe that came out wrong. I mean, their town was a little like Sweetbriar; a lot of businesses had left and the ones that were there weren't thriving. He came up with a plan to rebuild and rebrand the town and did a lot of it himself. And from everything I learned today, Ryder's done that same sort of thing, but on a much bigger scale."

"I Googled him and have to say I'm impressed. I still can't believe he wants to put Books & Beans in his resorts. That's just crazy."

"Well, I guess you'll learn more about it next week."

She paused. "Um...yeah. About that..."

Now he pulled back even further and frowned.

"So...I might have lied a little earlier," she began hesitantly.

"About...?"

"Ryder actually called me when you were on the way over. That's why I didn't answer the door right away. I was talking to him."

All he did was nod.

"Anyway, he called and pitched his idea to me and then asked me a lot of questions about you."

"About me? Why?"

She shrugged. "I thought it was a little odd, but I didn't say anything overly personal."

"O-kay..."

“He sent over some preliminary paperwork for me to look at and then suggested I let a lawyer look at it. But basically, he’s seriously interested in Books & Beans and is willing to invest a lot of money to help it grow. It’s a little like having a silent partner.”

“Jade, that’s...that’s...” He stopped and frowned again. “Wait...is that a good thing or a bad thing? Because when you and I first started working together, you seemed pretty adamant about doing it all on your own.”

“And I do still feel that way, but...this is sort of the opportunity of a lifetime. I’d simply be a consultant on all the new locations. I wouldn’t have to move or anything, although I think he mentioned the possibility of visiting the new sites, but that he’d handle hiring and training people.”

“Then I’d have to say that it sounds like an incredible deal.”

She nodded. “I know. I’m still a little in shock. I mean...if you hadn’t reached out to your cousin, none of this would be happening.”

“Maybe not on this kind of scale, but I always thought you were going to be a big success. We just needed to get people to come to the town.”

“You know what I think is funny?”

“No, what?”

“You were the guy who was all about leaving Sweetbriar and who was totally against even coming back here temporarily. And now look at you? You’re the town hero. I’ll bet they’ll throw a parade in your honor when all this goes through. Especially if someone re-opens the ski resort.”

“I’m not a hero...”

“Oh, stop. You are too.” Twisting in his arms, she smiled up at him. “You’re my hero. You came in and helped me in a way that no one ever has before. You didn’t swoop in and take over, you were right there beside me, encouraging me the entire time.” Tears stung her eyes. “And the way you care about Silas and how you put his needs first...I never knew there were men who were as kind as you.” Resting her head on his chest, she let out a long breath and willed herself not to cry. “I just hope you don’t give up on me. It’s been just me and Silas for so long and...and...”

Levi tucked a finger under chin and gently guided her to look at him. “Jade, I could never give up on you. I respect all that you’ve been through and you can totally set the pace. I told you that from the very beginning and it’s still true. I just want a chance. I’d like for us all to spend more time together and maybe someday we can be a family.”

Her heart melted. “Really? You...you’d want that?”

He nodded. “More than anything.” Then he pulled her back against him and they shifted slightly until they were comfortable. “You know my family history. We’re just now figuring out just how screwed up everything was.”

“Oh, that’s right. You mentioned talking to your mom. How did it go?”

“Not good. She owned up to it, which I wasn’t sure she would, but that just pissed Ashlynn off and she stormed out. Then Chloe got upset and walked out.”

“Damn. I’m so sorry.”

“Billie and I were sitting there with Mom and she...I don’t know...it felt a little like she was sorry, but...not. It was weird. I think she didn’t like being called out on it more than

she cared about how we felt about the whole thing. And you want to know what the worst part of it was?”

“What?”

“That she was still trying to blame my dad. Like she was trying to justify why what she did was okay.”

“And then I go and do something...”

He placed a finger over her lips to silence her. “Don’t even go there. You are nothing like her. You did one minor thing, Jade. One.” Then he paused. “So, how did Silas take the news about not going to football camp?”

She sighed loudly. “He was fine, but that’s only because I never told him. I thought about what you said and...I signed him up. The coach offered me a discount and asked if I’d do snacks twice a week...”

“Isn’t it only a two-week camp?”

“Yup. So basically I’m bringing cookies and juice four times and I’m good with it. I hate taking them from the shop, but maybe I can ask Billie if she’d mind making extras.”

“If I know my sister, she’d be more than happy to do it.” Hugging her close, he kissed the top of her head. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks.”

“And for all we know, Silas isn’t going to even enjoy playing football and all your worrying will be for nothing.”

She thought about it for a moment. “Well, I’m not too worried about it.”

“How come?”

“Because we all know that Trevor’s a jackass, a liar, and a loser, right?”

“Uh-huh...”

“But he gave me a really great kid. So I’m hoping Silas only got the good stuff from him, and if he didn’t, it won’t matter because I’m going to love him no matter what. If he really wants to play football, then I’m going to be that mom cheering and screaming from the sidelines.”

He nodded. “And I want to be right there beside you, if that’s okay.”

“Are you kidding? It’s more than okay. That actually sounds like the best possible scenario.”

They lay in companionable silence for a few minutes until Jade yawned. “I can’t believe how tired I am. It’s not even eleven o’clock. I shouldn’t be feeling like this.”

Levi didn’t answer right away and that was because he was yawning too. “I think we exhausted each other and being tired is justified.”

“Does that mean you won’t be offended if we go to sleep?”

“Sweetheart, I would be thankful if we go to sleep.”

She kissed his chest and shifted slightly before completely relaxing against him. He reached out and turned out the bedside light, and she closed her eyes.

“Levi?” she whispered.

“Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For giving us a chance and for being willing to come here tonight, even when you had no idea what you were walking into.”

“I told you, Jade, I love you. I would have handled whatever it was that you wanted, as long as it made you happy.”

“I love you, Levi.”

“Love you too, beautiful girl. Now get some sleep.”

And she finally did.

* * *

A week later, Levi was fairly certain his jaw was on the floor.

“I’m not...um...*what?*” he asked as he looked at the business proposal in his hand.

“We want to get a leg up on this campaign, Levi,” Ryder explained. “Fourteen months from now, the landscape is going to look very different and we want to make sure that people are lining up to come and check out all Sweetbriar has to offer.”

“Okay, but...”

“If you look through the proposal, you’ll see that we’re looking to cover the reopening of the ski resort, the new restaurant and vacation chalets we’re planning to build. On top of that, there are going to be vacation rentals—the ones that Patrick and his team will be working on—and the new shops that Marissa is overseeing for right here in downtown Sweetbriar. You’re going to be heading up the entire campaign.”

Levi looked up and still wasn't sure how he felt. They were sitting around multiple tables at Books & Beans and now it made sense why members of the local government were here. Bill Weiss, the town manager, spoke next.

“Levi, we're hoping you'll accept the position because it's not only going to encompass the projects that Mr. Ashford and Mr. and Mrs. Donovan are overseeing, but basically we need someone who is going to promote for the entire town. We're prepared to hire you on as an independent contractor because we like the idea of having one person—or one firm—handling this so all the advertising and promos will be cohesive.”

Nodding, Levi was still stunned at the opportunity. This was the kind of thing he had hoped to find when he left Creative Alexandria, the kind of thing he didn't think was ever going to happen. And that it was happening in his hometown was just...well it was better than he ever thought it would be.

“I'm all in,” he told the group. “Not only did I grow up in this town, but I came back after some time away and have been spending a lot of time getting reacquainted with a lot of the local businesses. I feel like I've got a firm grasp on what we have and what we can be. And I'm ready to get started when you are.”

They spent another hour discussing a lot of details, but honestly, this was all just the beginning. The next fourteen months were going to be a whirlwind, and he was eager to get started.

By the time everyone was leaving, he was relieved to see Jade walking over to him. Just seeing her smiling face made him want to smile. “Hey, beautiful.”

“Hey, yourself, Mr. Bigshot Ad Guy,” she teased. “Have they started planning your parade yet?”

Laughing, he pulled her in for a hug. “Not yet. But I’m hoping it happens when we do our big launch next year. I’d like to be on the lead float.”

“The lead float? Oh, Levi, everyone knows the biggest name goes on the final float,” she told him seriously.

“How do you figure that?”

“Um...maybe you’re forgetting when Santa Claus always arrives during the parade? He doesn’t kick it off; he’s the grand finale.”

“Oh, yeah...okay, then I want to be that. I want to be like Santa Claus.”

She chuckled softly. “Including the red suit?”

“I said I wanted to be like him, not him exactly.”

Smiling, she nodded. “Good to know.” After giving him a very thorough kiss, she pulled back. “So? What’s the plan for the rest of the day? Are we still on for dinner tonight?”

That’s when his cousin walked over with a very satisfied look on his face. “Good job today, Levi,” he said as they shook hands. “I wasn’t sure this was going to fall into place the way it has. And I wasn’t really sure this was going to be something Marissa and I would be able to be a part of because it’s so far away from Laurel Bay.”

“Well, it’s not like it’s the other side of the country or anything,” he countered. “But I get what you’re saying.”

“We’re fine doing things remotely for a while, but once the ball gets rolling, we’re probably going to rent a place up here for maybe three to six months so we can oversee everything and be as hands-on as possible.”

“That’s awesome!” Then he paused. “But...how do you think your mom is going to handle having you so far away?”

Patrick laughed. “I’m sure she’ll throw a lot of guilt our way, but knowing we’re up here with family will make her happy. And who knows, maybe I’ll get your father to come up and check it all out. I hear things are good with all of you for the first time in a long time.”

Levi nodded. “We have a lot to get through, but with his health being what it is, we’re trying to get everyone to play nice.”

His cousin laughed again. “Even Ash?”

“Even Ash,” he told him while laughing along. “Go figure.”

“Speaking of your sisters, we were talking to Billie earlier and want to have a big celebratory dinner tonight. I’m hoping you both can join us. And Silas and your folks too, Jade.”

“Oh, wow,” she said and Levi could tell she was surprised by the invite. “Yes, of course. We’d love to!”

“Excellent. Ryder made reservations at some steakhouse, I think.”

“Just...I hope he won’t be too disappointed. I mean, this is still a small-town steakhouse. I’m sure he’s used to a much higher standard.”

“Pfft...don’t worry about Ryder. He’s pretty low-key once you get to know him. His wife’s a fantastic chef and owns a couple of restaurants, but he’s never been a snob around us. He’s eaten at our pub a lot in the last week and I think he’s now my mom’s favorite customer.”

“Wow! If she approves...”

“Exactly,” Patrick said. “So it sounds like Billie’s reached out to Ash and Chloe, and you guys are coming...is there anyone else we should invite?”

“Like...?”

With a shrug, Patrick suggested, “Maybe your mom? I haven’t seen her in years, and...”

“You don’t have to do that,” Levi said. “Things are still a little tense between her and the twins because of all the stuff my dad finally shared.”

“Yeah, he shared it with us too. Sorry.”

“Hey, it’s about time the truth came out. I hate how he let everyone think the worst of him for so long.”

“That’s Uncle Ronan for ya,” Patrick said. He smiled as Marissa walked over and joined them.

“Dinner’s all set for six o’clock. Will that work for everyone?”

“Absolutely,” Levi assured her. “I’m glad you don’t have to rush to fly home tonight and can relax for a little bit. But I am sorry that you have to stay at a hotel after your family pretty much housed all of mine the last time we were all visiting.”

“Don’t give it another thought,” Patrick told him. “We don’t really mind at all. We’re just glad we get to hang out with you this time.”

“But I would like to go back to the hotel and freshen up a bit,” Marissa said. “We were up early for the flight here and I feel like we’ve been on the go all day and I need to crash for a little while.”

“Then go and do your thing and we’ll see you for dinner at six,” Levi said. “And thanks for setting that all up.”

The shop emptied after that, and Jade led him to a corner table where they sat down. “Are you sure you want me to invite my parents and Silas? I can ask them to babysit. It’s not like there’s going to be other kids there.”

“That’s completely up to you, but Silas is family, and this is a family dinner. I’d really like it if he got to know my sisters a little better.”

“Well, he already adores Ashlynn because of her face painting skills...”

“They are impressive.”

“I just don’t want anyone to be uncomfortable because we brought an eight-year-old to dinner.”

“No one’s going to be uncomfortable. Ryder’s got a son and my cousins are all having kids, so I’m sure Patrick and Marissa are good with being around them. But more than anything, I want him there. This is a big night for all of us and he should be there to celebrate.”

She looked ready to cry, but in a good way.

“Have I mentioned today how much I love you?” she whispered.

“You have, but maybe you should tell me again.”

“I love you, Levi. And thank you for making a place for Silas and me in your family.”

“Someday it’s all going to be for real,” he told her. “Because loving you the way that I do? That’s forever. And the sooner we cross that bridge, the better. You’re my forever, Jade. I love you.”

And he was seriously ready for their forever to start.

It might be too soon to get down on one knee and ask Jade to be his wife, but now that he had a fantastic new job, he was already making plans. His first purchase was going to be a ring that he would hopefully put on her finger sooner rather than later.

And together, they were going to make a life here in the town that he—at one time—wanted to escape. Fate had brought him back, and between Jade and his family, he knew that life in Sweetbriar was definitely going to be sweet.

Epilogue

Three months later...

“You know...I had forgotten just how brutal the winter months are here,” Levi said as a snowball plowed into his back. He hung his head and laughed. “Am I supposed to retaliate? Is that allowed?”

Jade laughed as she made another snowball. “Nope. It’s not allowed. You’re bigger and stronger and I have a feeling any snowball you make and throw is going to hurt.”

“I would never hurt you,” he assured her. “And I certainly wouldn’t do something so low as to...” In a flash, he tackled her down into the snow while rubbing a snowball against her cheek.

They were both laughing hysterically when Silas came running over. “Hey, what are you guys doing? I thought we were going inside to have cocoa.”

“We were,” Levi said as he stood and held a hand out to Jade. “But your mom thought it would be funny to throw a snowball at me. And after I helped build such a magnificent snowman!” He pouted comically and Silas cracked up.

“Cheap shot, Mom. You always said never to throw stuff at someone’s back.”

“Well...I had forgotten about that rule,” she murmured.

“Are we going to go inside now?” Silas asked. “I think my fingers are getting numb.” Then he turned and ran into the house.

“That was weird,” Jade said as they followed him at a slower pace. “Normally I have to drag him in when there’s snow on the ground. Last year he built an igloo and swore he could stay out there all day and all night.”

“Now that sounds like fun. We may have to build one tomorrow. Of course, if someone had told me the igloo story earlier, we could have done that today instead of the whole snowman thing.”

“Oh, stop. Snowmen are fun. And you just said he was magnificent.” Arm in arm, they walked into the house and had to step over her son’s snow boots, coat, scarf, and gloves. Sighing, she began picking everything up. “I’ll get to the cocoa after I clean all this up and dry the floor.” Pausing, she went into the powder room and grabbed a towel. “Silas! What have I told you about leaving your wet stuff on the floor?” she called out.

“Sorry!”

“Yeah, I bet,” she muttered. It only took a few minutes, but then she finally took off her own snow gear and took a moment to catch her breath.

That’s when she realized how quiet it was in there.

Almost too quiet.

Slowly, she walked toward the kitchen, but no one was there.

Then she walked into the living room and froze.

Both Levi and Silas were down on one knee in front of the fireplace. “Oh my goodness, what is happening?” she whispered as one hand flew up to cover her rapidly beating heart.

“Jade McKenzie,” Levi began, “I love you more than I ever thought a person could love. From the moment you fell into my arms, I was a goner. I never thought I would be so lucky as to find the most amazing woman in the world and have her literally fall from heaven the way you did. I love the life we’re making together, and I’m excited about all the possibilities to come.” He paused and put a hand on Silas’ shoulder. “This morning, I asked your son’s permission to come in here today and ask you to marry me. And he said...”

“I told him no,” Silas said proudly.

“*What?!*” she cried, not sure where this was going.

“Levi’s not just marrying you, Mom. He’s marrying us. Me and you are a package deal, right?”

“Oh my goodness...Silas...”

“And he was right,” Levi went on. “So, I clarified that yes, the two of you are a package deal and that nothing would make me happier than to marry you both, which would make us a family.”

Jade looked at her son. “And then you said...?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “I said yes, so you should too.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, you heard him. I have to say yes.”

Levi frowned slightly. “I was hoping you’d say yes because you want to, not because you have to...”

“Levi?”

“Hmm?”

“Ask the question.”

Now he grinned. “Will you marry me, Jade?”

She nodded. “I will.”

Then she was in his arms and being kissed as if their lives depended on it, while her son cheered on while jumping on the couch.

She’d correct him on that later.

For now, this was the best and most perfect moment of her life, and it was just the beginning.

Who will be the next Donovan to
fall in love?

Find out in

Teasing You

One

Ultimately, Hazel Channing's hair was the straw that broke the camel's back.

That miserable, blue-haired old bitty...

"*Ashlynn Donovan!*" she had nearly screeched. "What did you *do* to my *hair*?"

"Um..."

"Look at it! Just look at it! I look like something out of one of those...those...videos that you millennials post all over the place!" She stared at her reflection in utter horror.

It would be wrong to correct her and tell her it's millennials, not millenniums...

"Miss Hazel," Ashlynn began calmly. "It's not that bad. It's a little...bluer than usual, but we can tone it down and make it right. Just let me..."

"Becky! Becky, where are you?" the older woman cried out. "Oh, this is a nightmare. A nightmare!"

"It's not so bad," Ashlyn assured her. "I can put a rinse in to..."

"You'll do no such thing! Where is your boss? Becky!"

Oh, good Lord...

Ashlynn was already in a tense standoff with her boss and this situation wasn't going to help. They had been arguing for months over seniority and which stylists get the prime booths—something that she had been passed over twice for—and had been very vocal about.

“What in the world is going on in here,” Becky Marshall asked in a hushed tone. “Everyone is freaking out just hearing all the screaming. Now what happened?”

“Look at my hair, Becky! Just look at it! It's blue!”

“Um...”

“You know how white my hair is and I wanted to tone it down a bit and Ashlynn explained the process when I showed her a picture of what I wanted.” Then she pulled up the picture in question. “Does this look blue to you? No!”

Becky came closer and began running her hands through Hazel's hair. “Why didn't you just use the Quick Fix solution? That's specifically what it's for.”

“I was going to, but...”

“I don't want her touching my hair!” Hazel snapped while glaring at Ashlynn in the mirror. “Girls her age have no right touching older women's hair.” She snorted with derision. “This never would have happened if Louise were still here.”

Becky gave her a patient smile. “Hazel, you know that Louise retired two years ago. We've been over this.”

“Still, most of the girls here have been okay, but this one...”

Ashlynn bit her tongue so she wouldn't come out and say something she might regret. “Miss Hazel, there's a rinse we

can use right now that will help. If you'll just step over to the sink..."

But Hazel was on her feet—her blue hair spiking out in every direction and her salon cape flapping wildly. "I refuse to let you put anything else in my hair!" Then she looked at Betsy. "You fix this!"

"Of course, Hazel. Go ahead down to my booth and I'll be right with you." It wasn't until Hazel was out of earshot that Becky put all her attention on Ashlynn.

"Well, I hope you're happy. That woman is going to bad mouth us all over town, thanks to you!"

She fought the urge to roll her eyes at how dramatic this was all getting. "Becky, you and I both know that this was an honest mistake. One extra drop of blue and it went rogue! And white hair is particularly tricky! Now I'll admit that I might have messed up when I mixed up the colors, but she's blowing this way out of proportion! It's not like her hair's electric blue or something!"

The look her boss gave her was openly hostile. "If you want to argue with me, then I would appreciate it if you would be professional enough to wait until we were in my office with the door shut. But here you are, making a scene as usual."

"As usual?" she repeated. "What the hell does that mean?"

"And your language...really, Ashlynn. I can't have you representing Lavish Locks. I've tried to look past all your eccentric...um...quirks, but I just can't do it anymore. Please pack up your things and go."

"Excuse me?" she asked incredulously. "You're firing me? But...but...I've got three more clients today, and a full roster of them tomorrow and every other damn day this week!"

“Language...” Becky sang out.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” she hissed before she turned and started to figure out how to get all her brushes, scissors, and supplies out in one shot.

“I just said...” Becky snapped.

“Oh, yeah? Well, what difference does it make what language I use? Apparently, I don’t work for you anymore!”

And that’s how her Monday started out.

It took three trips to her car to get all of her belongings out of the salon, and it wasn’t until she was sitting in her car shivering from the cold that reality set in.

“I’m unemployed. Shit,” she muttered.

Happy freaking New Year to me...

Okay, right now, this was definitely bad. She wasn’t prepared to be unemployed and there weren’t any other hair salons in Sweetbriar. Of course there were more in the surrounding towns, but she had a feeling she was just going to clash with whoever was in charge there too. Anyone who knew her knew she had an issue with authority. Not always, just...sometimes.

Starting the car because it was really freaking cold, Ashlynn let it warm up while she tried to figure out what she should do first. With her phone in her hand, she was about to call her BFF Avery, but she was at work and already had her hands full with her upcoming engagement party this weekend. Although, the only good news to come out of this was that she’d have more time to do her friend’s hair and makeup for the party.

She could call her twin sister. Unfortunately, Chloe was her polar opposite and would more than likely gently suggest that she go back inside and apologize.

That wasn't going to happen.

Her older sister Billie would suggest that she take a day or two just to regroup and then start applying for jobs—any jobs—right before making her a bowl of soup or giving her a plate of brownies.

That scenario had some serious potential.

Of course, she could always go and talk to her brother Levi, but he was currently living with Billie and recently got engaged to Jade McKenzie who owned Books & Beans and they were pretty busy all the time. Still...between the two of them, they would probably be the best ones to talk to right now.

Decision made, she drove the two blocks to Books & Beans and smiled when she spotted Levi's car parked out front. Eventually he was going to have to get a real office to work in, but for now he was running his advertising firm here at the coffee shop or at Billie's kitchen table.

"Hey!" she called out cheerily when she walked in.

Of course, Billie also worked there as well, so it was really a matter of killing two birds with one stone in her mind.

"Just making a coffee run for the salon?" her sister asked.

"Um...sadly, I will no longer be making coffee runs for Lavish Locks because I no longer *work* for Lavish Locks."

Billie's eyes went wide right before she came around the counter and gave her a fierce hug. "It's going to be okay. We're going to help you get through this."

“Thanks, Bill. I’m kind of okay...”

Pulling back, she gave Ashlynn a sad smile. “Of course you’re going to be okay. What can I get you? Some coffee? A brownie?”

Nailed that one...

“I’ll take a coffee please,” she replied. “And a brownie.”

“I think you deserve a bit of caffeine overload. No worries.”

Before Ashlynn could say anything else, her brother came walking over. “Hey, Ash! Doing a coffee run for the salon?”

Ugh...

“Um...no,” she told him. “I just lost my job there, so...”

“Oh, damn. I’m sorry.” And then he hugged her.

O-kay...two for two.

He stepped back and also gave her a sympathetic smile. “Is Billie getting you anything? Coffee? A brownie? A croissant?”

“Wait...there are croissants?” she asked. “When did you start making croissants?”

Billie stepped up to the counter and put the coffee and brownie down. “Today’s actually my first time putting them out there. I experimented with a couple of recipes last week and we all voted on this one. Would you like to try one instead of the brownie?”

“Um...excuse me? *Instead* of? Why can’t I have both? I just lost my job and I’m sad, I totally deserve both.”

“Fine. But don’t blame me tomorrow when your skinny jeans are suddenly squeezey jeans,” her sister huffed before walking away to put a croissant on a plate.

“Consider me warned,” she said back. “So...”

“Hey, Ash!” Jade said as she walked out and joined them. “Are you here for the coffee run for the salon?”

“I was fired! I lost my job! I gave Hazel blue hair and yelled at Becky, and now I’m unemployed! My life is in complete shambles and all I want is a croissant and a brownie without everyone asking me a thousand questions!” she cried out and then was mortified to see three pairs of wide eyes staring back at her. “So, um...sorry. It was just...all three of you asked the same thing and it’s been like...ten minutes since I left the salon and...”

Jade hugged her. “I get it. Believe me. You snapped and it’s okay.” She grabbed both plates as Ashlynn reached for the coffee. “Come on. Let’s all go sit and you can tell us what’s going on or you can tell us to mind our own business. Whatever you need, we’re here for you.”

They were heading for a table in the corner and Ashlynn got in step with her brother and whispered, “I really like her. Good choice.”

“I heard that, and thank you,” Jade said with a grin.

Once they were all seated, everyone was staring at her as if waiting for some big, dramatic confession or meltdown.

“Look, we all knew the last few months have been tense for me with Becky. I think she was just looking for an excuse to fire me.” She took a sip of her coffee. “And maybe I was looking to force her hand so I’d have an excuse to leave.”

“You know this isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” her brother began. “Almost six months ago, I was in your shoes. I had gotten fired and had no idea what I was going to do.” He shrugged. “Actually, I thought I knew exactly what I was

going to do, but that didn't happen. So I guess my advice to you is to keep an open mind when you go home and start looking for a job."

Billie walked over and joined them. "I'm sure there are plenty of salons that would love to hire you. You're great at what you do and your clients love you."

"I guess. I just hate the thought of starting over and having to prove myself. I'll get the crappy booth and be the low man on the totem pole again." She groaned. "It sucks."

When she glanced over at Jade, Ashlynn noticed she was frowning.

"Okay, you have to tell me what you're thinking right now," Ashlynn prompted.

"Well...I guess I'm thinking...why do you have to start over? When you came in here a few months ago threatening to quit, I asked you if you had ever considered opening your own salon. I guess my question still stands. With all the revamping Sweetbriar is getting—and with your brother working with everyone involved—I think now would be the perfect time to look into that."

It would be a total lie if she said she hadn't been thinking about that almost non-stop since Jade mentioned it to her that one time. It was a daunting thought and there were a million thoughts racing through her head telling her she couldn't do it—that she wasn't good enough and she'd be a disappointment.

That was a whole lot of childhood trauma trying to keep her down, but maybe it was time to silence those thoughts and try something new.

"Look around this table, Ash," Jade went on. "We've all done what you could do. I started this business and it was

terrifying. My folks helped, but I did a ton of research and put a lot of sweat equity into this place and now look at it. We're doing really well!"

Levi nodded. "Six months ago, I thought I had my dream job and in a flash, it was taken away from me with no warning. Now I'm heading up all the ads and promo for the town and all the new businesses coming in. I never thought I'd be heading up my own firm at this point in my life, but I'm loving it."

Beside her, Billie sighed. "Well, I'm not exactly on par with these two, but I walked away from a wildly successful career in finance because I wasn't happy. The stress was killing me and one day I just looked at myself in the mirror and knew I deserved more. So I quit and chased my passion, which is baking. Now I'm here with Jade and I've never felt better in my life." She reached over and squeezed Ashlynn's hand. "You deserve to be happy, Ash. Chase after your dream!"

After letting out a long breath, she looked at the three of them. "You make it sound so easy, but...I don't know if I can afford to open my own salon. It would cost a lot of money and...I'm just not sure I'd be able to do it."

"Come for dinner tonight," her sister told her. "You forget what a financial whiz I am. I'll bet we can crunch some numbers and then maybe talk to Patrick and Marissa—well, mostly Marissa—and see what kind of incentives they can offer to someone willing to open a business here in Sweetbriar."

"Isn't that kind of...I don't know...a morally gray area? Patrick's our cousin; Marissa is his wife. They're family. I don't think it would look good for them to be granting me any favors."

“That’s just one of the questions we’ll have to ask them then,” she reasoned. “So what do you say? Dinner tonight? I’ve got a batch of corn chowder cooking in the crock pot as we speak.”

And there was the soup from her earlier scenario.

“Only if you’re sure...”

“Ash, you’re not alone. We’re all going to help you. Plus, I was going to be eating alone tonight because these two are going house hunting.”

Looking over at Jade and Levi, she smiled. “Really? You’re finally going to get a place together?”

They nodded.

“The wedding is in just a few months and we want to have a house all ready so we can come home from our honeymoon and just start our lives,” Jade said dreamily before leaning in and kissing Levi.

“Ugh...you guys are sickeningly cute and I can’t handle that right now.” Picking up her brownie, she took a huge bite. “Damn, Billie, these things are incredible.”

Her sister preened. “Thank you.”

“Then she took a bite of the croissant and moaned. “Holy crap, that’s amazing too! You should combine the two and make chocolate croissants. I swear I’ll buy a ton of them once I’m working again. Like dozens, I swear!”

“Just...one thing at a time, okay? Let’s just get through taking a day for yourself and maybe tomorrow you can ask me about chocolate croissants by the dozen.”

“Deal.”

* * *

“Baylor! The captain wants to talk to you!”

Reid Baylor carefully folded the rag he was using to wax the rear section of the firetruck. As he walked away, he gave a nod to his buddy, Mike. “Thanks, man,” he said as he walked through the firehouse and to the captain’s office.

Getting called in to see his captain didn’t fill him with any sense of dread. If anything, just the opposite. Reid had a five-year plan and everybody knew it. So if he was getting called in to talk, he had to believe it was for a good reason.

“Captain,” he said as he knocked on the open door.

“Hey, Reid,” Captain Walters said, motioning for Reid to come in and sit down.

“Thanks.”

“This is your weekend off, right?”

“Yes, Sir. A buddy of mine just got engaged and his family is throwing a party for him and his fiancé. I’ll be heading out of town after my shift on Thursday and I’ll be back to work Monday morning.”

“Mm-hmm,” he replied as he picked up a packet of papers from his desk, glanced at it, and then tossed it back down. “Reid, how long have you been here in Roanoke?”

“Two years now.”

“And how do you like it here? Is Roanoke a place you want to call home, or would you be open to moving?”

He took a moment to think about it. “Well, I guess I’m open to moving.”

“You guess?” The captain shook his head. “Reid, you need to be a little more decisive than that.”

“We moved around a lot when I was growing up, so it’s not a big deal for me.” He paused. “But I supposed I’d be more decisive if I knew where I was potentially being asked to move to.”

Captain Walters smiled. “Fair enough. I believe I saw on your transcript that you used to live in a town called Sweetbriar Ridge, is that correct?”

Smiling, he nodded. “That’s actually where I’m heading this weekend. We lived there the longest and obviously I kept in touch with some of my old friends.”

“So then you might not be opposed to moving there.” It wasn’t a question.

“Is there seriously a position open there? When I was growing up in Sweetbriar, there was only one fire station and it was about the size of a postage stamp. I figured they would never have to look outside of the town limits for firefighters. Or fire inspectors.”

“Well, they’re growing. It seems like there was an old ski resort that’s getting renovated and will re-open by the end of the year, along with an influx of vacation homes and businesses.” He shook his head. “I’ve never been to a town that small, but from everything I’ve read in this proposal, it’s not going to stay small for long.”

This was almost too good to be true. A job back in Sweetbriar? A town where he still had friends? Moving there would *not* be a hardship in the least.

“And the position is for a firefighter at my rank? It wouldn’t be a step back into the probationary rank, would it?”

You know, because they're growing."

His captain studied him for a moment. "Reid, you've been very open about wanting to work your way up through the ranks and eventually becoming a chief or fire marshal or inspector. You've taken all the courses and are certified for all of it, but there haven't been any positions open."

"Well, there have been, but most stations seem to promote from within."

"True. I've worked with you for the last two years and I know you're more than qualified for those positions, but... you're still one of the newer guys. Your work ethic is fantastic, but it's a matter of seniority. That's why I think moving to a small town could work in your favor."

He nodded.

"It's entry level right now, but from what I understand, they're going to grow fast, so the sooner you get in and establish yourself, the better." Pausing, he smiled. "So here's what I'm suggesting: go and visit the fire station while you're there this weekend. Introduce yourself and tell them you're applying. And be prepared that they might want you to start ASAP."

Another nod. "I can do that."

"Excellent." He handed Reid a large envelope. "This is all the information you'll need and the links to where to apply online." He smiled again. "I hate to lose you because you're a damn fine firefighter, but I want to see you achieve your dreams, so...good luck."

They stood and shook hands, and Reid had to hold in the urge to whoop with excitement. He knew something would come up eventually, but to have it come up in a place he was

not only familiar with, but that was the closest thing to a hometown that he'd ever had? It almost seemed too good to be true!

All he wanted was to tear open the packet and read through it, but he was still on the clock and there were a ton of chores to be done. Just because there wasn't a fire anywhere didn't mean the squad could just sit down and relax. So for the rest of his shift, he forced himself to focus on his task and to forget about the envelope in his locker.

But when his shift ended, Reid was the first one out the door.

He only lived fifteen minutes away, but it seemed to take forever before he was finally home and tearing the packet open.

The more he read, the bigger his smile grew. This position felt like it was custom made just for him. There was constant talk of advancement and he knew if, given the chance, he could climb the ranks and be on his way to a senior position before he was thirty.

Just the thought of all of this falling into place practically made him giddy, and if he didn't tell someone soon, he would burst. The most logical choice would be to call his parents, but he opted to call his friend Leo—the friend whose engagement party he was going to this weekend. Reid figured maybe his friend could help him navigate the best way to simply show up at the station.

“Reid! Hey! What's up? You're not canceling on me, are you?”

He couldn't help but laugh. “Why is that the first thing you thought of?”

“Because we’ve had a couple of people cancel today because they’re sick, so...”

“Ah, yeah I’m fine. Perfectly healthy. No worries there,” he confirmed.

“Whew! Avery will be relieved. The closer we get to the party, the more she’s freaking out.”

“Really? Over a party? Does she know it’s going to be like ten times more stressful when it’s the actual wedding?”

Leo groaned. “Dude, please. I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Sorry.”

“So what’s up? Are you still planning on getting in Thursday night?”

“That’s the plan,” he agreed. “Listen, my captain gave me a heads up on a position opening up in Sweetbriar with the fire department, and...”

“Are you kidding? That’s freaking awesome!”

“I’m actually really excited about it. He gave me the link to fill out the application and suggested I stop in at the station and introduce myself.”

“Sounds logical.”

“Do you happen to personally know any of the firefighters?”

“Me? No. No, um...yeah, no.”

“That was a weird reaction, Leo. What was that about?”

He huffed with annoyance. “Avery used to date a guy on the squad. He moved away, but...it always bothered me when

we saw him around town because he was big and buff and I'm...you know...not."

Unable to help himself, he laughed.

And immediately apologized.

"Sorry, that was rude of me. But you obviously know that even with him being all...that, she's marrying you. So, who's really the better man?"

"Ugh...stop being all sunshine and unicorns. It's annoying."

"Can't help it. Life is good and I'm hoping it's about to get even better." Leaning back on his sofa, he let out a contented sigh. "Sweetbriar's the only place that ever really felt like home to me. I hated when we had to move, so this would be a truly amazing thing if I had the chance to move back."

"Reid, you're an adult. You could have moved back at any time," his friend reminded him.

"And if there had been any openings in the fire department before now, I would have done it."

"So do you think this is a shoo-in for you?"

"I honestly don't know. I'm hoping it is because how many people are looking to move to a tiny town, right?"

"Well, if things keep going the way they're looking, we're not going to be tiny for long. There's talk of all kinds of new businesses and restaurants coming. It feels like it's going to turn into a resort town."

"A resort town? All because they're going to renovate the old ski lodge?"

“It’s supposed to be a huge deal. They’re not just renovating it. They’re expanding it and building a bunch of condos and maybe one of those boutique hotels. The whole town is really psyched about it.”

“I can’t believe someone’s actually going to rehab that place and re-open it. I can’t believe the place is still standing!”

“They are, and I am freaking psyched about it. It’s going to be nice to have somewhere to ski right in our backyard.”

“Isn’t the place you normally go only thirty minutes away?”

“Yeah, but...now I can spend those thirty minutes on the slopes rather than in my car. Keep up, Reid.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever gone skiing. In my head, I imagine I wouldn’t be very good at it.”

“Finally! We found something that the great Reid Baylor isn’t good at!” Laughing, Leo added, “I was beginning to think we’d never find something.”

“Okay, but to be fair, we don’t know that for sure. I’m just guessing...”

“When the resort opens, you and I will be there opening day,” he challenged. “For once, I’ll be better than you at something.”

“Knock it off. You’re better than me at a lot of things. You always got better grades than I did.”

“Right. I can’t tell you how many girls threw themselves at me when they heard I aced geometry.” He snorted. “Don’t try to throw some pity skill at me. You were the jock and I wasn’t and everyone knew it.”

He let out a long, irritated breath. “And since we’re not in high school anymore, no one cares. Can we please focus? I really wish I knew someone who knew someone who was currently on the fire and rescue squad. Do you think Avery could introduce me to someone?”

“I’ll ask her when I see her tonight, and I’ll text you and let you know.”

“Thanks, Leo, I appreciate it.”

“No problem. What are friends for?”

“You’re the best. And you’re sure you’re okay with me crashing on your couch this weekend? I could stay at a hotel...”

“No way. We don’t get to hang out that much anymore, so it’s no problem.”

“If things go my way, we’ll be hanging out a lot more real soon.”

“Things are going to work out, I’m sure of it. In the meantime, I’ll see you Thursday night.”

“Thanks again, Leo. We’ll talk soon.”

When he hung up, Reid felt like he was on top of the world. Good friends, a great job opportunity, and the chance to return to Sweetbriar ridge. It was all going to be awesome.

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A Christmas Rescue
Christmas Inn Love
The Christmas Plan

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Preston's Mill Series:

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Speed Dating

Complicating

The Protectors Series:

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Ford

7 Brides for 7 Blackthornes:

Logan

Standalone Novels:

Jordan's Return

Catering to the CEO

In the Eye of the Storm

A Touch of Heaven

Moonlight in Winter Park

Waiting for Midnight

Mistletoe Between Friends

Snowflake Inn

His for the Holidays

Wildest Dreams (currently unavailable)

Going My Way (currently unavailable)

Going to Be Yours (currently unavailable)

About Samantha Chase

Samantha Chase is a New York Times and USA Today bestseller of contemporary romance that's hotter than sweet, sweeter than hot. She released her debut novel in 2011 and currently has more than ninety titles under her belt – including THE CHRISTMAS COTTAGE which was a Hallmark Christmas movie in 2017 and WEDDING SEASON which was a Hallmark June Wedding movie in 2023! She's a Disney enthusiast who still happily listens to 80's rock. When she's not working on a new story, she spends her time reading romances, playing way too many games of Solitaire online, wearing a tiara while playing with her sassy pug Maylene...oh, and spending time with her husband of 34 years and their two sons in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

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