



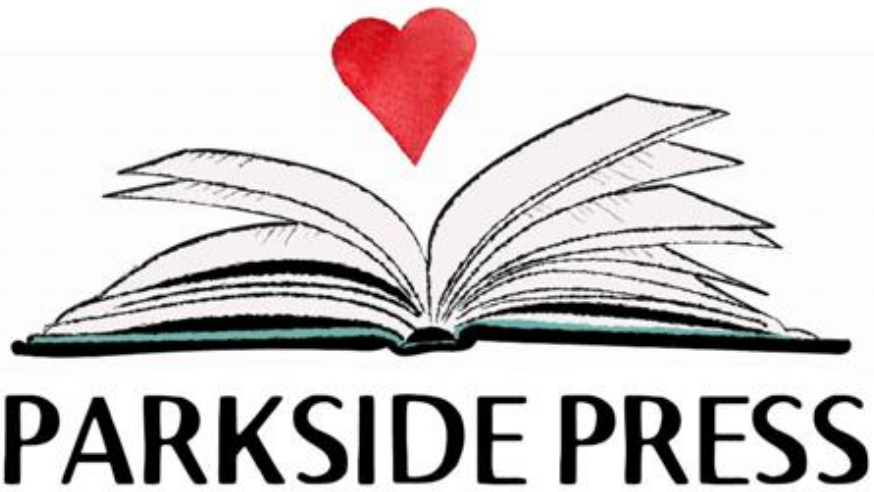
**THAT
DAY
IN
NYC**

A SWEET ROMANCE

USA Today Bestselling Author

Brooke St. James

That Day in NYC
The Memphis Players Book 3
Brooke St. James
Parkside Press



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Chapter 1

Natalie Meyers

New York City

March

I stared out of my hotel window, seeing Central Park and the rest of the gigantic city. It was like a postcard, which was the problem. I was staying in the heart of New York, and I had a beautiful view. But I hated being stuck in the room, and I ached to get out and experience it. I wanted to hear the murmur of crowds on the street. It was so unlike my home in Alabama, and I longed to get out there and take it all in.

At the same time, I was terrified and alone, feeling like I couldn't leave my room. I told myself that I could be brave and just go out on my own. I had experience in New York. I had been there two times before—this was my third. I stayed at this same hotel, the Park Hyatt, every time I came.

The only difference was that this time, I didn't have Annie. That was an absolute game-changer. I hadn't traveled since she passed away.

I wouldn't have been in New York at all, but ten of my pieces were about to go on display at the Museum of Modern Art, and I wanted so badly to be there to see it happen. The museum coordinators expected me to be there. I had been to the MoMA, but my paintings had never been hung on its walls.

This whole evening was supposed to be a dream come true for me, which was ironic because at the moment I was full of impatience, worry, and fear. I hadn't been on a single trip since Annie died. I didn't know if I would ever go on one again, and I wondered if this was a mistake.

I had Bridget there with me. Bridget was a hired assistant who I now considered somewhat of a friend. She would be able to do all the things Annie used to do. I reminded myself

of that fact as I sat in my room, not-so-patiently waiting for her. We still had two hours before we needed to leave for the museum, but I was already dressed and ready to go.

I knew it was an honor to have my paintings displayed there, and I knew I should be happy, but I was overwhelmed about traveling without Annie, and it made me feel stir-crazy. Annie would go along with anything on these trips. She was there for me, at my side, no questions asked. If she were here, I would not be stuck in this room right now.

But she wasn't here. She had passed away six months ago. And if I didn't have God in my life, I would have completely fallen apart. Annie was everything to me, and it was an absolute miracle that I was even thinking about being in New York without her.

Bridget had been hired to work part-time as an assistant to myself and Annie a few years ago. She had taken over Annie's duties as best she could since Annie passed, but it wasn't the same. I couldn't help but feel like something was going to go wrong during this trip. I felt a sense of impending doom as I sat in my room, staring out of the window, and I prayed and asked God to take it from me. It was only the first day of our trip, and I had doubted myself every step of the way.

Let me back up and make a bold statement.

I, Natalie Meyers, am a different sort of person.

I am not, nor have I ever been, what you would call a normal, regular person.

I live a different life, a special one, a life that most people would not understand or identify with at all.

I was now twenty-seven years old, and I had not spoken a single word to another human since I was six. I had been silent for the vast majority of my life. I had spoken in recent years, but never to someone else. I only did it when I knew for a fact that I was completely alone and would not be caught.

My life had changed forever when I was six.

I suffered severe trauma during an incident involving a robbery at my childhood home. My parents and whole world were taken from me, and I chose not to speak to avoid having to repeat what I saw. I had not spoken to anyone since. I had no desire to communicate at the time, and I made it a way of life.

I went to art instead.

I made art with any materials I could find.

I immersed myself in it, and I learned to speak visual art as my primary language. I became what people called a prodigy. I had heard that word in regard to myself a thousand times. Idiot savant was also a phrase I had heard, although that one was said behind my back whereas the term prodigy was always said to my face.

My grandmother was given custody of me after my parents died, and she basically turned me into a roadside attraction, forcing me to make art in front of people, telling me that performing my art for an audience was the only way our family could pay for food and clothing. I went on the Ellen show three times in the two years after my parents died.

People treated me as if I couldn't hear or understand them just because I didn't speak. My grandmother did all the talking, explaining to the reporters about how I went silent and then miraculously started making art after the incident with my parents. I silently stood up in front of audiences and painted pictures, and then afterward I cried and cried.

My grandmother was not a good person, and when I was ten years old my aunt successfully sued her in court and got custody of me. It was a two-year process that began when I was eight.

I had been with Annie ever since. From that point forward, I was never made to do another television appearance. I was no longer forced to make live art in front of an audience. That had been torture for me, and I was so happy and thankful for the freedom to make art privately.

My work had evolved, and I was a successful artist on my own terms now. I made large-scale paintings that took weeks or months to finish, and I sold them for tens of thousands of dollars to serious collectors. Usually, I worked on two at a time, but sometimes I had three or more going at once.

It was considered religious art and sold that way, but I just looked at it as me painting scenes that put my soul at rest. I had paintings in some of the largest churches in the world, and in the homes and collections of famous people.

I did not work on commission. I painted what I wanted to paint, and my art went on sale as I finished it.

The collection at the MoMA was privately owned, and the buyer had spent over a million dollars to collect them all.

I was a fairly notable artist now, thanks to the freedom and opportunities my aunt and uncle allowed me all these years. First of all, they let me heal in private. I made dozens of paintings during my teenage years, and I didn't sell a single one or paint them in front of anyone else.

Annie bought me canvases and supplies, and I was given the freedom to paint. My uncle Tommy worked as a plumber in Birmingham, and we lived a simple lifestyle. They made sacrifices to buy me art supplies.

When I turned eighteen, Annie started contacting agents to put my work in galleries and begin selling it. My grandmother was in bad health by that point, and she became disinterested in me.

I started making money soon after and was able to afford bigger and better supplies.

By the time I turned twenty-one, I bought a house with property. Tommy was ready to retire, and I wanted to live in some natural beauty with privacy, so I bought a house with property on Smith Lake, which was north of Birmingham. Arley was the name of the town. It was a nice place, and we lived a lowkey, rural lifestyle.

My aunt and uncle had their own section of the house, and I had space and privacy to create the art I loved so dearly.

I had top-of-the-line supplies shipped from online art suppliers, and I was able to focus on my work and turn out paintings I was truly proud of.

By the time I was twenty-five, my work was in high demand, and we had more customers than we knew what to do with. The house and property were in my name and well on their way to being paid for.

Annie and Tommy knew that I was sharp and capable of handling my own finances. They believed in me, but I was seen a little differently by the public. People thought I was ‘special’ because of the silence—even Bridget seemed to walk on eggshells around me. I didn’t try to come off as having problems processing information, but because of my mutism, people often assumed I didn’t have the capability to understand. I wasn’t trying to live a charade, but I didn’t mind my private lifestyle, and I didn’t bother explaining myself to the public.

My career and life had been centered around the fact that I was a mute prodigy who made epic oil paintings of scenes from the Bible. Annie had been my voice all these years, speaking for me as my advocate. She was the person I connected with most on this earth. It really was horrible to no longer have her. I trusted Bridget, but I didn’t love her or feel comfortable with her the way I loved and felt comfortable with Annie. Her companionship was dearly missed.

My uncle Tommy was still alive, but he wasn’t an option as a travel companion. Bridget knew how to handle herself in public speaking situations, and she knew how to speak for me. She was a much better option than Uncle Tommy for this type of thing. She had been with me for a while before Annie died, and she knew how we handled public appearances and the other aspects of the art business. I was thankful for that.

But I missed Annie.

Especially in this moment when I was stuck in my hotel room. She would have come out with me right then.

I had a driver all set up. He was at my beck and call for the rest of the evening. The problem was that I was ready to

go, and Bridget was not. She had already told me that she was tired from the flight and that she would be ready to go no earlier than an hour before our engagement at the museum. That was two hours from now, and I was stir-crazy.

Tomorrow was our only full day in New York. We had a day planned with shopping and a play, and then we would leave the following morning. One day was basically all I had, and now that Annie had passed away and traveling was so annoying, it felt like it might be my last trip. I was aggravated with Bridget for not being flexible and getting ready when I wanted to leave. I was paying her to be there, after all, and paying her way.

I felt like a prisoner in my own room.

Then I got a sudden wave of determination.

I sat on the edge of my bed and sent Bridget a text.

Me:

Hey, I'm going out. I'm going to get the driver to take me around for a while. We'll pick you up at six.

I sent the text. I wanted her to insist that there was no need for me to go out alone and say that she would get dressed and come with me. Annie would've offered that. But she would have offered earlier, when I mentioned it the first time. I waited for a text from Bridget, half expecting her to say that I should give her a minute—that she wanted to come.

Bridget:

That sounds great, have fun. I'll be ready at six & I'll meet you downstairs.

I blinked at her message.

I was staring at it when another one rolled in.

Bridget:

The driver is nearby. He's on call until ten tonight, so all you have to do is text him.

I knew as much—I had been standing there when he told Bridget all of that. I just didn't have his number. Just when I

had that thought, I saw a third text come through, and it was Bridget sending me his contact information. His name was Michael.

I texted him.

Me:

Hello, I would like to go for a drive, if you please.

Michael:

Sure thing. Now? I can be out front in 3-5 minutes.

Me:

Yes, please. See you in a minute.

I put my phone in my pocket and took a deep breath.

Annie's death had been a pivotal point for me. I had changed after that happened. Taking this trip had been big, and now there I was, texting a driver and venturing out into the city by myself.

"Lots of women venture out by themselves," I whispered the phrase to myself.

There was no one else in my hotel room, and still I kept my whisper to an almost inaudible level. It was odd for me to speak at a time when I wasn't at home. All of this was new and different for me. I felt like I wanted to text the driver and back out, but the wheels were already set in motion. The driver was coming for me, and I needed to go.

Five minutes later, I made it downstairs and found the driver. I had a handheld device with me and I typed a message onto the screen and handed it to him.

Hello! I need to be back here by six o'clock. I would like to drive around for a while before then, please.

He looked at me. "Yes, ma'am, just drive around?" he said with a smile.

I nodded.

He didn't seem to think twice about me using a device instead of speaking to him. I wasn't sure if he had been

informed of my condition, or if he was just that good at rolling with the punches, but he was friendly and he acted like reading from a screen was something he did every day.

My adrenaline was pumping as he opened the door for me and I climbed into the backseat.

“There’s a phone in the backseat,” he said. “You can use that if you think of somewhere you want to go or otherwise need to call me.” He caught sight of the small digital pad that I had flashed him a second ago. “Or you can text me at my phone number,” he said as if he wasn’t certain of himself.

I nodded and smiled at him, letting him know I was comfortable and that I understood. I grinned when he closed the door. I felt proud of myself, and hopeful but still a little scared. There was privacy glass between the backseat and the front, and I couldn’t see the driver when he got in, but I could feel the car shift when he sat in the front seat.

It was only seconds later when the back door opened and a young man stooped, looking inside, checking out the backseat.

“Headed to the Lincoln Center?” he asked.

Cool air came whooshing into the warm car, and I stared up at him as he hunched his shoulders to shield us, squinting at me and waiting for my answer. He had only said a few words, and I was so caught off-guard that I nodded even though I had no idea what he was talking about. He sat inside and closed the door.

Chapter 2

I didn't mind going to the Lincoln Center, and so I instinctually nodded when the man asked if I was going there. It had all been so rushed that I just nodded, and before I knew it, he was in the backseat with me.

The guy was strikingly handsome, and he was dressed nicely in a dark suit and tie. He smelled like expensive cologne—the woods and leather, and I felt like I was starring in a scene from a movie.

Only he had no idea that I didn't talk.

I blinked at him. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and I was stunned and uncertain of how to deal with it.

The driver obviously noticed that someone got into the car, and before I knew it, the window between us began rolling down. Quickly, I typed on my handheld device. I scooted forward and flashed it to the driver.

Lincoln Center.

That was all it said.

“You want to go to the Lincoln Center?” Michael asked, looking from me to the new guy curiously. I glanced at the guy, and he stared at me with a curious expression. I nodded and smiled at the driver.

“To the Lincoln Center?” he asked, clarifying again.

I nodded.

“What part of the Lincoln Center?” he asked.

“The opera house, right?” the stranger said as he tilted his head at me. He seemed to be borderline confused.

I nodded and smiled, letting them both know I was fine with going to the opera house.

Michael rolled up the window and then the car shifted as if he was about to pull into traffic. The backseat was large, and

I was on the opposite side of the stranger, glancing nervously at him.

I wanted to crack up laughing. I had no idea what I was doing. I was out of my element by being out by myself in the first place, and now I had ended up with a complete stranger in the backseat with me.

“I’ve never shared an Uber before, and this is fancy,” he said, looking my way. “I don’t know how this works. I’m starting to think I got in the wrong car. Are you going to the Lincoln Center as well?”

I hesitated and then shook my head a little.

“Oh, you’re not? Where are you going? Do we need to drop you off somewhere on the way?”

I hesitated again.

My instinct was to grab my tablet and type him a message, but I was frozen, unable to make my hands work. I stared at him, feeling more aware of my silence than ever.

He was one of the most strikingly handsome young men I had ever seen. He had dark hair and dark eyes, and all the shapes and lines of his face were perfectly proportioned. He was clean-shaven, but his hair was on the longer side and it was slicked back in a dapper hairstyle. His appearance made my heart race. He looked like the star of a movie. I glanced at his ring finger to see if he was married, and then I closed my eyes and looked away because I didn’t want to get caught doing that. This was not good. This man was strikingly handsome, and he was right here in the car with me.

I felt like I desperately wanted to talk to him. I could not make my hands work to communicate with him like I normally did, but I also didn’t feel like speaking to him was an option. I prayed in that moment that I would not have a meltdown and freeze completely. It was as if I was standing on the edge of a cliff and I knew I was about to jump off of it. I felt the urge to jump.

“Are you okay?” he asked since I was lost in thought and not responding to him.

I focused on his face again, and he was so handsome that I instantly looked away. I stared vaguely in the direction of the front of the car, but I leaned towards him.

I nodded.

“Yes, you’re okay?”

I nodded again.

“Why are you not talking?”

“Just driving around,” I whispered, barely.

At least I thought I whispered it. I tried to.

“What did you say?” the guy asked, obviously not hearing me. He leaned toward me, cupping his hand to his ear.

I leaned closer to him. “I’m just driving around, so I’m fine giving you a ride,” I said, ever so quietly.

He pulled back and smiled at me with a curious grin. “Why are you whispering?” he whispered, playfully widening his eyes at me.

He thought I was being quiet, but to me what I was doing felt like screaming. It was the first words I had said out loud to someone else in over twenty years.

My heart was absolutely pounding, and I felt like crying. I willed myself to keep it together. This man had no idea who I was or that I should not be talking.

I leaned in again. I put my mouth right next to his ear. “I’m early for my appointment, so I was just riding around, looking at New York. I’m fine giving you a ride.”

“I knew this was too nice to be an Uber.” He glanced around himself and then over his shoulder, back toward the hotel. “I’ve never even used a shared Uber before, but I figured this had to be too good to be true.”

I leaned in to speak to him again. “Sorry, but I am just driving around right now, so I can give you a ride. Unless you want to turn around and get your Uber.”

Those felt like the longest sentences anyone, in all of mankind, had ever said. It took all of my strength to get the words out. I felt like I was outside of my own body. It was terrifying and liberating, and I had no idea what I was doing. I let out a little giggle as I finished my statement, and the stranger pulled back looking at me. He sat there for what must've been ten seconds, taking me in.

I smiled at him, nervously waiting to hear his reply. I thought he might say that he wanted to go back to the hotel and get his other ride.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes. I-I was just driving around.” My voice came out barely a whisper, but it came out.

I smiled, feeling insanely proud of myself.

I scooted over, returning to my side of the car now that the ride was situated and all of my talking was over.

Talking.

I talked to someone.

It had happened.

I stared out of the window, not looking at the stranger at all. But I smiled at the thought of what I had just done. I spoke. My heart was beating like mad.

“You’re adorable, you know,” he said.

My head whipped around to regard him, and I saw that he was looking at me.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you,” he whispered back. He smiled, his wide mouth turning upward in a slow, easy grin that made me want to melt. “Who else?” he said. “And why are we whispering?”

“Are you seeing an opera?” I asked, ignoring the question.

“I am, but I don’t want to,” he said. “That’s probably why I was willing to get in a random car. Maybe I’ll miss my

appointment. I'm supposed to be there already, actually. My friends are there now."

I wanted him to keep talking. I felt like I had already said enough. I started to have thoughts like wondering if the driver had cameras in the back of the car and people would see that I had been talking. I wondered if cameras in cars were legal, and then I figured I was pretty sure I didn't care. I had a whole series of thoughts resulting from what I had just done.

"Are you okay?" the gorgeous one asked.

"Yes," I answered with a little smile, still whispering.

"Are you whispering by choice?" he asked.

I nodded. "Do you need to cancel with your ride?" I asked, gesturing to his phone.

He picked up his phone and pushed a few buttons.

"What's your name?" he asked afterward.

"Anne," I said, lying.

I had no idea why I lied, I did it by instinct.

"I'm Malcolm," he said. "But most people call me Shep."

"Why do they call you that if your name's Malcolm?" I whispered.

He leaned in closer as if asking me to repeat what I said.

"Why do they call you that?"

"It's my last name," he said, whispering back to me and assuming I had a thing for whispering.

"Nice to meet you, Malcolm Shep."

"Shepherd."

"Oh, Malcolm Shepherd?"

"Yes."

"What brings you to New York?" I asked.

He turned and grinned at me. "How do you know I'm not from here?"

“Because you were at a hotel.”

He leaned in to listen to me, and he turned to face me afterward. He took a second to check me out. I was nervous and reluctant.

“If you keep whispering in my ear like this, you’re going to make me think you like me... maybe you even want to kiss me.”

“I’m not doing it because of that,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” he said, realizing I might take offense to his comment. But I could tell he was a lighthearted guy. “Are you unable to speak at full volume? I hope not. That’s why I asked if you were whispering by choice.”

“No, my vocal cords are fine.”

“Oh well, I’m sorry, anyway,” he said, sitting up like he was planning on dropping the subject.

“I’ve never done that, besides,” I said.

“Besides what? What have you never done?”

“What you said, kissed a guy,” I whispered.

He was quiet for a second as he looked at me, scanning my face. He smiled a little and shook his head. “You mean you never kissed a random stranger in the backseat of a car?” he asked, acting like he couldn’t believe it but being silly.

“Yeah, that too, but, or at all.”

“What?”

I was still whispering, and my words didn’t seem to make much sense.

“What are you saying?” he asked, sitting up a little and looking at me more seriously.

“I’ve never done that,” I said, speaking slightly louder than a whisper since he was further away from me than he was at first.

His eyebrows were furrowed. He was so handsome that it felt weird talking about kissing men in front of him. I felt like

I wanted it to happen with him, which was outrageous. I had never kissed a guy before. I had never even thought about it. Okay, I had thought about it plenty. But I had never been this close to one when we had a conversation in which kissing was mentioned. I could not help but smile at this whole situation. My smile was from nerves, and I put my hand in front of my face to stop it.

“Are you in New York alone?” he asked, looking even more curious.

“I have a person named Bridget with me. She’s my... assistant.”

“Are you important at your job?” he asked. looking around the back of the very nice car.

“I like to think everyone’s important,” I said. “What are you doing in New York?”

“I have a friend who used to live here. He knows most of the cast of Wicked. He knows everybody. We’re seeing six shows while we’re here, and we go early to all of them because he inevitably has connections backstage at every show. Today is the first time I’m running late. I’m hoping they’re going to let me in without Abe. Why are you and your assistant in New York?” he asked.

“We’re here for business,” I said, being oddly vague because of my nerves.

“What do you do?”

“Art, a-art sales,” I said.

For goodness sake, I was talking.

I was answering his questions, and he had no idea who I was, so he didn’t care. It was the most liberating thing that had ever happened to me. I could not help but smile.

“Why are you grinning?”

“I’m just happy. Look. We’re in New York.” I spoke softly and then I gestured and turned to look out of the window. I stared out as we drove, the buildings passing by. I spoke. I could not believe it. Adrenaline coursed through my

body, and I felt hot, even though it was cool. I loosened my scarf.

“I’m a physical therapist,” he said. “I’m about to be. I’m about to graduate.”

“Oh, you’re a college student?”

“A graduate student,” he said. “But yes. I’m almost done with my PT training. I’m going to work with my friend’s dad. I already work there, actually, as an intern.”

We sat there for a second, and I knew it was my turn to speak.

“Where do you live?” I asked, still whispering.

“Memphis. You?”

“Alabama. A small town, north of Birmingham.”

“Hoover?”

“No, Hoover’s south of Birmingham. We used to live close to Hoover. How do you know about it? Have you been there?”

“I have an aunt who lives there.”

“In Hoover?”

“Yes,” he said. “That’s the only thing I know about Birmingham.”

“That there’s a place called Hoover near it?”

“Yes,” he said, laughing. “What’s your last name, Anne?”

“Meyers,” I said, telling the truth.

“Anne Meyers, she’s an art-business-woman extraordinaire, hailing from Birmingham.”

He tried out my name and made up title, and I smiled. He was funny, and animated, and he seemed like he would be a fun person to be around. Not to mention his perfectly symmetrical face.

“How long are you in New York?” he asked.

“Tomorrow’s my last day,” I said. “I leave the following morning.”

“Aw, did you hear that?”

“Did I hear what?” I asked.

“Your voice,” he said. “I heard it, and it was so sweet.” I knew I had spoken above a whisper, and I felt myself starting to blush at the fact that he brought attention to it.

“There was noise outside,” I said, making an excuse about speaking up.

“I’m sorry, but you’re adorable with your voice. It’s just the sweetest.”

“You smell nice,” I said.

“So do you,” he said.

I picked up my own shirt and sniffed it, causing him to laugh.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know what it is. I sprayed it on myself at the airport,” I said.

“You should have bought it,” he said.

I laughed a little. “I’m seeing a show tomorrow night, but not Wicked,” I said. “I wanted to see it, but I got free tickets to a different one.”

“Hamilton?” he asked.

“Yes. How’d you guess?”

“I saw it last night.”

“I know nothing about it.”

“You’ll like it,” he said.

“That’s what I hear.”

“Did you go to college?” he asked.

“No.”

“How old are you?”

“Both of those questions are rude. I’m a country girl, and we have manners where I come from.”

“You don’t look like a country girl.”

“I shopped for clothes on the internet,” I said. “They deliver them right to your door, country or not.”

“What do you normally wear? Overalls and farm stuff?”

“Yeah, farm stuff,” I said, joking.

He grinned at me in a way that I knew he was playing along. I was actually joking around. I had seen this on TV and had countless conversations in my own head but I have never tried it out with someone. I smiled again, thinking about the turn my day had taken.

“Listen, Anne, we’re not too far from our destination, and I wanted to follow up on something you said a minute ago. I thought you mentioned something about kissing, and I need to tell you I’d be happy to do that with you—right on the lips, if you want.”

“Did you think I said I needed to learn how?” I asked, putting a hand to my chest.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he said. He grinned a little, but I thought he might be serious.

“I am twenty-seven years old, and I have never done that.”

“Done what? Kissed someone?”

“Yes.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“How does that happen? Have you been locked in a dungeon?”

I looked around, making a face like I was trying to think of the right words to answer that. “In a way, I guess, maybe.”

“Is there someone who would get mad if I kissed you?” he asked, trying to figure out what was going on.

I smiled and then swallowed hard. “No. But there probably is on your end.”

“About a quarter of Memphis, including all the old ladies at my PT clinic.”

I laughed. The driver was merging out of traffic and before long, he would stop at the drop-off in front of the opera house.

“No one tells me who to kiss, if that’s what you’re saying,” Malcolm said the words while he was staring at me, and it was too much. I felt like he was going to actually do it. “Anne, I get it that we’re strangers and everything, but if you want to learn how to kiss a man, I’m the one to teach you. I would love to be that guy. All you have to do is say the word, and I’ll do it.”

This was all a gigantic lie, and I knew I should feel insanely weird about all of it. The whole thing was surreal. He called me Anne. This man, Malcolm, this stranger, said he was willing to kiss me for no reason at all. And the thing was, I desperately wanted him to. I felt compelled to pursue it, to challenge him to do it.

“This is weird, but I would love to learn how, actually,” I whispered the words as I stared downward, and before I knew what was happening, Malcolm leaned in and was moving toward me, advancing on me. He was confident and sure of himself, and he moved toward me as if he had every intention of kissing me right then.

Chapter 3

Malcolm Shepherd

The vehicle was in the process of slowing down in front of the opera house.

Shep knew if he didn't do something soon, he would miss the opportunity completely. He had no interest in going to the opera. He was there for his friend. Meeting this whispering woman in the back seat of the car had been what would probably be the highlight of his whole night.

She was different, a rare flower. She was terrified and confident in such equal portions that Shep couldn't get a read on her. He had no idea what to think. She was mature and stoic, she was gorgeous and kind, and there was just no way she had gone through life and never been kissed. He didn't think she was lying about it, but he also didn't think that it could possibly be the truth. He thought maybe she was acting. Either way, he wasn't going to back down from the opportunity to kiss her. He was not in a relationship at the moment, so there was no reason he couldn't do it. She had basically invited him to do it.

Seconds counted, and he moved across the backseat. She glanced at him, placing her face where he could easily gain access to her. He stopped moving with his mouth right next to hers. They were so close that they were almost touching.

"I don't know what I'm doing," she whispered. Shep touched the side of her face and leaned in, letting his mouth touch hers. They kissed. She met his touch with gentle resistance, and then Shep opened his mouth, taking her lip into his mouth and gently tasting her. She let it happen for several long seconds, and then she gasped gently.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"No, I-I liked it."

She glanced down shyly. She was nervous and breathless, and he smiled.

“You liked it?”

He kissed her again. She relaxed in his grasp, letting him, kissing him back. He let his mouth touch hers several times, and goodness, it was difficult for him to stop. He did not want to stop. The car came to a stop, though, and Shep snapped back to reality, knowing he had to. He sat up, pulling back and staring at her.

This wasn't the strangest thing Shep had ever done, but he seemed to be having a strange reaction to it. He felt like he had been hit with a ton of bricks.

“I assume we're stopping here for a moment.” The driver said through a crack in the window. “I'm happy to open the door when you're ready to get out. Just let me know.”

She took a phone out of her pocket and typed a text to him. Shep didn't look at it.

“I'm telling him not to worry about opening the door,” she said. “I said to just give us a second, and you'll let yourself out.”

“Yeah, I guess I need to do that,” Shep said, glancing out of the back window.

“Yeah,” she answered.

He hesitated, staring down. “So, this is the most interesting Uber I've ever taken.”

She half-smiled. “And it's not an Uber.”

“Yeah, that makes it even stranger. Also, I don't know why you have to lie and say that's never happened before.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “The kiss?”

“Yes.”

“I'm not lying. It's the first time. Maybe the only. Never mind. I don't know what I'm saying. I'm happy and thankful right now. This whole thing has been significant for me.”

It was a mouthful to say while whispering, and she smiled at him afterward.

“Do you think it’s significant for me too?” he asked, whispering with her and feeling a little confused.

She smiled. “No, it’s different for me. I’m sorry. I know you need to go. Thank you, Malcolm.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Do I owe you something for this ride?”

“Oh, goodness, no,” she said. “I hope I didn’t mess you up with your Uber driver.”

He felt stunned. “You didn’t mess anything up,” he said, not wanting to leave her. They were in a loading zone, and Shep knew he couldn’t stay. He put his hand on the door.

“You know what hotel I’m in. Maybe I’ll see you in the lobby at midnight.”

She didn’t say anything. He didn’t glance at her until he was out of the car and standing on the sidewalk.

“Thank you, Anne.”

“Thank you, Malcolm. Have fun tonight.”

She was waving and smiling and still talking quietly, and Shep felt like he was dying. *Who in the world was this woman, and how had that just happened?* Shep was pretty much up for anything, but he had never kissed a woman within the first ten minutes of knowing her.

“Bye,” he said.

“Bye. Hey.”

“What?” he asked, feeling happy to hesitate.

“Don’t tell anyone I talked to you.”

“Okay,” he agreed even though he didn’t know what that meant. He smiled at her and closed the door.

Shep somehow knew he was making a mistake by letting her drive away. He watched her mannerisms when they were together, and it really seemed like she was going through something. *Could his kiss have affected her that much? Was she in love with him? Was he in love?* He had closed the door

reluctantly, and he stared blankly at the tinted window when the car pulled away.

He felt an urge to chase after her, but then he relaxed when he remembered that he might see her tonight. He was relieved and thankful that he mentioned being at the hotel at midnight. He would go there, and if she wanted to see him again, she would come back.

It was just then that he felt a hardy slap to his shoulders. “Come on, everybody’s waiting for you.”

Shep turned to find his friend, August. He was tall and thin, and he was wearing a wool coat and a hat. Shep followed him. “We’re all going backstage,” August said.

“I kissed a woman in that car,” Shep said, dazedly. August slowed down and looked at him.

“You what?”

“Yeah. I got into the wrong car, and then I ended up... she said she had never kissed... never mind. She was just interesting.” Shep couldn’t think straight because he didn’t even know what happened. *How did he even end up there? Why in the world had he let her go?* “I told her to meet me at midnight at the hotel and I hope she goes there.”

“You kissed a woman?” August asked. “Is she staying at our hotel?”

“I have no idea. Maybe. Probably. That’s where she picked me up. She was stopped out front. I thought she was my Uber.”

“She’s a driver?”

“No, she was in the backseat. I just got out of the backseat a few seconds ago.”

“I know you got out of the backseat but I didn’t see a driver.”

“She wasn’t the driver.”

“Fine,” August said. “Who was she?”

“I have no idea. Her name’s Anne. My only hope of finding out more is if she meets me tonight.”

“Did you tell her a place?”

“I said the hotel lobby.”

August looked at him. “Is that where you first met her?”

“No, that was out front when I got in her car,” Shep said. “I don’t even know what happened to me just now. I feel weird.”

“Are you sure you told her to meet you in the lobby?” August asked.

“I’ll walk around the hotel and look for her at midnight,” Shep said with a shrug. “I think she’ll come. We were looking at each other and she had this look of just stunned amazement. She whispered the whole time we were together. I think she’s in love with me. We might be in love.”

“She whispered?” August said, making a face.

“Yes.”

“She whispered? How much did you say?”

“A lot.”

“What? Did she have a sleeping baby with her?”

“No, there was no sleeping baby. I would not have kissed her if she had a sleeping baby. She was a businesswoman with nice clothes.”

“I’m sorry if you think any of this seems real, but I think some woman was just messing with you,” August said.

“She wasn’t messing with me. She was a sincere person.”

“Somehow, Shep, as strange as this all is, I’m not even surprised with you. In fact, I might go down there with you at midnight just to see if you can find her. I’m curious now. It might be a love story in the making.”

“Fine. I want you to,” Shep said. “We’re going to run into each other’s arms like a freaking movie, and you’ll watch in awe.”

“Do you want me to catch it on video?” August asked, smiling as if he was getting a kick out of all this.

Shep reached out and pushed him. “She’s from Alabama,” Shep said.

“Alabama,” August said, using a thick drawl that caused Shep to punch him. “Dude, don’t be defensive about that woman. She’s probably not even from Alabama with all that other stuff she told you. Plus, it’s just weird that she whispered. I can’t even imagine that.”

“She spoke a little louder for a second. I heard her actual voice. But then I mentioned it, and she started whispering again.”

“Whispering is so weird. Are you sure she didn’t take your soul?” August said, widening his eyes and waving his fingers while speaking dramatically.

“I’m not sure,” Shep said, joking but feeling dazed ever since he met her.

They didn’t finish their conversation because just then they were walking up to the others in the group.

Three of them were traveling and staying at the hotel together. It was Shep and two of his closest friends, August and Owen. They were in New York visiting their director and new friend, Abe, who lived in Memphis now, but was in NY for a month, staying with family.

Shep, Owen, and August were only visiting for a week, and they were more than halfway through their trip. Shep had been ready for anything in New York, but he hadn’t seen that car ride coming. Anne Meyers. He could picture her hazel eyes, see them as if she was next to him right then. But he didn’t say any more about it. They encountered Owen and Abe, and all of them went to take a tour of the opera house. They were there for hours, touring the place and then watching a show.

Chapter 4

Malcolm Shepherd

The guys went to eat after the opera, and by the time they finished, it was ten-thirty. Malcolm was chomping at the bit to get back to the hotel.

He said goodnight to his friends and was in the lobby by eleven-fifteen. It was twelve-fifteen when August and Owen came into the lobby to meet him. Owen spotted Shep sitting there and he raised his hands as if asking where she was. Shep replied by shaking his head with a shrug and a disappointed expression.

“She’s a no-show?” August asked as they approached.

“Yes, and I’m sad. I had it all worked up in my mind that she was going to be here, and we’d live happily ever after.” Shep saw movement in the distance, and he peered around a lamp to see if he could see Anne. But it wasn’t her. It was an older couple.

Owen and August found a seat on the couch next to him and they sat there for another ten minutes, looking around and waiting for her. People came and went, but none of them were Anne from the backseat.

Finally, they walked to a pub on the next block and stayed there for an hour or so. Owen wanted to try to talk to some women, and Shep was just disappointed enough to go along with it. All three of them were actors. They were handsome extroverts who had no problems making friends or impressing women. They talked to some girls, having surface-level conversations that were not at all fulfilling to Shep. He wanted to go to the backseat of that car and see Anne again.

“Who is that?” he said, his heart stopping as he pointed at the colorful piece of glossy cardstock paper that was sticking out of one of the girl’s purses. It looked like Anne was on it. They had already said goodbye to the girls and were about to leave and head back to their hotel.

The girl, a redhead named Allison, glanced down at her bag. “Oh, that’s from the art museum tonight. That’s the artist, the woman I mentioned a minute ago—the woman with the Bible-times paintings. Natalie Meyers. We met her tonight.”

“You said the person you saw tonight had special needs,” Shep said, looking at the picture of Anne and feeling confused. The girls had only mentioned meeting one artist.

“Yeah, that’s her right here.” She pulled the flyer out of her purse and handed it to him. “Natalie Meyers, from the Ellen Show, years ago.”

Shep stared down at it, knowing in his heart that the woman in the photograph was Anne from the back of the car. “I thought her name was Anne,” he said.

“You thought this woman was named Anne?” she asked, looking confused and taking the flyer back.

“Wait, is this your Anne?” August asked, cutting in.

“Hang on a minute, can I have this?” Shep asked, plucking the flyer out of the woman’s hand.

She plucked it back. “Not really,” she said. “I would, but it’s my only one, and the artist signed it.”

“Can I see that one more time?” he asked. “Can I see her signature?”

She handed him the flyer again, watching him to make sure he was going to give it back. Sure enough, it was signed. The name written on the flyer was clearly Natalie. Shep stared at her picture again, knowing it was the same woman.

“That’s cool, where did you see her art?”

“It’s the one we were telling you about, from the museum. She doesn’t talk. She sat at a table and signed autographs. She’s got mental trauma from when she was a kid. I think it gave her a disorder where she stopped communicating. But it made her able to paint in a super-human way. She used to go on Ellen, like I said. That was when I first saw her. I was inspired because she was close to my age, but there was just no way I could paint like that. It’s

just a gift. It's obvious. She didn't paint for us tonight. She was just standing there with some of her completed pieces, then she signed autographs. We got to take a picture with her. You would have seen it by now if you checked my Insta."

"Could it be the same woman from the backseat of the car?" August was smiling as he started his statement, but his expression went neutral when Shep cut his eyes at him. "All I'm saying is it's no wonder she didn't show up tonight," August said defensively, shrugging as if it was some consolidation.

The redhead seemed curious about what August was saying, but Shep waved them off and told them goodbye.

The guys headed back to the hotel, and Shep stared down at his phone as they walked. "This is, a hundred percent, the woman from the car," he said, staring at the Google results for 'Natalie Meyers'. He saw videos from the Ellen show, and he also saw an auction video where one of her paintings sold for eighty thousand dollars.

"Apparently she hasn't spoken since she was a young child," Shep said, reading as they walked.

"Didn't she talk to you?" Owen asked.

"Not really, barely whispered," Shep mumbled, shrugging him off and feeling some sort of odd need to protect her, even though he was clearly lying.

The more photos he saw, the more convinced he was that it was the same woman he had encountered in the back of the car. He researched her some more, and he found out that she had suffered trauma as a child, and it rendered her mute, speechless. He remembered her speaking to him, whispering.

He couldn't get it out of his mind.

He kept replaying the encounter.

The following day, he went to the Museum of Modern Art in an attempt to encounter Natalie's paintings. Owen and August were thoroughly invested in the story by this point, and they went with him.

The paintings were in their own section of the museum. They were hung on black walls with dramatic lighting. They were realistic, and so large that the figures in the painting almost seemed to be life-size. They were all scenes from the Bible, and everything was so detailed that you could stand in front of it for an hour and still find new things.

“It says here that she’s not a Bible scholar, and yet her paintings are so historically accurate that people swear she would have to be a trained historian. It says directors of Bible movies and series have used her paintings as inspirations for scenes.”

Owen read from the brochure as they stood in front of a painting.

Shep heard the words Owen said, and he regarded the painting. She was special all right, and he was so mad at himself for letting her get away. He should have stayed in the car with her. He was pretty sure she would have let him. He could have told the guys that he was skipping the opera and spent all night getting to know her.

But then again, she gave him a fake name. Shep stared at the painting, and his world seemed to spin. The artwork in front of him was on a gigantic canvas, probably six feet by ten feet, and it appeared as though it could only have been supernaturally inspired.

Shep felt a wave of emotion crash over him so violently that he got nauseated.

“Where are you going?” Owen asked.

“To the restroom, ” Shep said since he knew he was about to get sick.

“I can’t believe you yacked from looking at a painting,” Owen said an hour later when they were on their way back to the hotel.

“I can’t believe Shep kissed the same woman who painted those things,” August said.

“I can’t believe we agreed to go to Hamilton again,” Owen added.

“You don’t have to come. You can go with Abe,” Shep insisted.

“No, I want to go,” Owen said. “I’d be mad if you found her and I don’t get to be there to see it. And I don’t mind seeing Hamilton again.”

“Is this the last hope in contacting her?”

“Her flight leaves in the morning,” Shep said. “Too bad Abe doesn’t know someone who could make an announcement at the show tonight asking if Natalie Meyers could come to the front.”

“You are not going to find someone to make an announcement at Hamilton,” August said.

“I know, I just wish we could. I don’t know how I’m going to spot her with all those people. What if I can’t?”

The three of them went to see Hamilton again, and while that show was excellent, there was no sign of Natalie... or Anne... whatever her name was.

Shep looked all over for her, and nothing.

He didn’t even regret re-watching a show. His only regret was that he hadn’t found her there.

He and the boys met Abe at one of Abe’s friends’ apartments after the show. They had a good time and made connections, and Shep did his best to be present in the moment. Of the three of them, Owen had the most drive and talent to make it on Broadway. Shep and August both had a lot to offer on stage, but Shep was there to have fun and not as much to make connections, and he felt like it was the other way around with Owen.

August would move to New York if the right role was thrust upon him, but he was a fairly new homeowner in Memphis, and he had a good job and life there. It would have to be something that was thrust in his lap—same with Shep.

Owen, on the other hand, had mentioned moving to New York several times on their trip.

Owen also mentioned Natalie Meyers at the get-together with Abe's friends. A few people were familiar with her stuff, and they got out their phones and showed each other pictures of it. Someone said the Pope himself had one of her paintings in his own home. They, too, mentioned the fact that she "had something wrong with her," and that kind of stuff really irritated Shep. It got under his skin. There was nothing wrong with her. He remembered the conversation clearly. Of course, he didn't say anything to come to her defense. He just listened to everything.

Owen and August just sat there and took it all in as well. They hadn't been personally affected by this woman, and they didn't know how Shep felt. He had met someone truly amazing, and he lost her as quickly as he found her. He tried to tell himself that he was only interested in her because he found out she was famous, but he knew that wasn't the truth. He had regretted saying goodbye the instant the car drove away. He really did think that she would've met him in the lobby the night before.

Shep had an idea while they were out that night, and by the time they got back to the hotel, he was ready to act on it. It was a last-ditch effort to reach her before she left.

It was one o'clock in the morning when he finished composing an email and sent it to the address posted on her website.

Chapter 5

Natalie Meyers

It was after seven when I woke up on our last day in NYC. I had a long day yesterday, and then a long night. My flight was scheduled at noon today, so I had no time to waste in getting ready and going to the airport.

There were some things I had missed out on with our trip being so short. I loved breakfast food, and I wanted to go to a certain place to eat breakfast while we were in New York. I didn't go yesterday, and we wouldn't have time today. I figured I would get a bite to eat at the airport, but it wasn't the same.

I couldn't believe my trip was over. It had been a complete whirlwind. My first evening was spent in a total haze because of venturing out alone. It was difficult for me to shake the encounter I had with a handsome stranger named Malcolm Shepherd. That interaction with him had been such an unbelievable moment in my life that the whole evening was a blur. I felt as though I was unable to regroup.

I went to the museum, and I met fans and took photos. I let Bridget speak for me like she planned on doing. But I had spoken for myself, and I couldn't forget it. Not only that, but I had kissed a man with my own two lips. We had kissed several times. I was pretty sure we both liked it. Maybe. He probably didn't especially like it—he was probably just being nice.

I had spoken words to another human being, though, and oddly enough, the kiss was the thing that consumed my thoughts. Either way, the whole encounter with Malcolm Shepherd played in my mind a thousand times since it had happened.

I considered the fact that he might try to meet me at midnight that first night, but I obviously couldn't do it.

Yesterday was busy and passed quickly.

We did some shopping and saw a show, and I didn't mention anything to Bridget about what happened the night

before.

The whole scene replayed in my mind continually, though. It felt so good to have someone not know who I was. I was free in that moment—free of my own past decisions. It felt amazing to speak words and have them be heard.

I would always have a special place in my heart for the sharp-dressed stranger named Malcolm Shepherd. I thought I would probably paint something about the experience once I made it home and could gather my thoughts.

Bridget and I had plans to meet in the lobby at 9am. The driver would be waiting outside. I went downstairs ten minutes early so that I could take my time and get a cup of coffee. There was a small coffee machine in my room, but I liked the regular drip stuff in the lobby.

I had packed light. I had a small piece of rolling luggage with me. I balanced my purse on top of it and made my way through the lobby. There were a lot of people down there. I liked that about New York—it was easy to get lost in the crowd.

I was adding cream and sugar to my coffee when he came from out of nowhere. I turned and he was there—the man who had taken over my thoughts. I put a hand over my heart and stepped to the side, hesitating.

I had my tablet nearby—I always did. I started to reach for it so that I could communicate with him, but that felt weird. My heart was pounding.

“Do you remember me from the car the other night?”

His deep voice and the point-blank question caused my heart to pound even more.

I nodded.

“Are you leaving?”

I nodded again.

“Are you Natalie? You’re an artist, right? I emailed you. Did you get my email?”

I shook my head. I stepped to the side, grabbing the tablet out of my pocket in the process.

When did you email?

He blinked at me after he read it.

“Last night.”

I shook my head and typed.

I haven’t checked my email this morning.

He read it and then blinked at me.

His eyes seemed to stare into my soul. I had been thinking about this man nonstop since we met, and now he was there, standing in front of me, gazing into my eyes. We had been sitting when we met, and I didn’t realize how tall he was. Physically, I was drawn to him. I loved how he looked, and I felt myself wanting to be near him. This was trouble. I swallowed hard.

Wait. He had called me Natalie.

He knew I was lying.

“Do you please have five minutes to spare before you leave?” he asked with a hopeful expression. “Can you give me five minutes?”

I nodded, and Malcolm gestured for me to follow him. I gave him a questioning look.

“I have a flyer from your art show upstairs in my room, and I was hoping I could get a signature.”

He knew who I was, and my heart was pounding because of it.

He reached for my luggage handle. “I can take care of rolling this for you so you can handle your coffee.”

I nodded thankfully at him and stepped out of the way so that he could take my luggage. I followed this man, looking at the back of his well-built frame as he walked and finding it hard to remember to breathe.

“Do you need to check in with anyone?” he asked since he knew we were venturing toward the elevator. I shook my head, and he kept walking. He didn’t seem curious about the fact that I wasn’t speaking. He didn’t ask. I wondered if he knew. He must.

Those seconds were dreamlike as we crossed the lobby and got into the elevator. I was prepared to explain myself to Bridget if I saw her, but I didn’t. One minute, I was stirring coffee, and the next, I was in an elevator with Malcolm Shepherd.

“I have two other guys in my room,” he said when the door closed and we were alone. “I wish there was a spot where we could be alone for a second.”

I thought you wanted my autograph.

I typed the words, and he read them and tilted his head at me.

“I would rather talk to you for a second,” he said.

There was a sweet, hopeful edge to his voice, and I reached out and pressed the button to go to my floor. I knew in my heart that I was going to go into my room, and once I was in there, I was going to speak to Malcolm.

Excitement started to build in my body, and I smiled uncontrollably.

He glanced at me while I was smiling, and he smiled back. Goodness. He knew I was lying to him, and yet he stood there and smiled at me.

I walked down the hallway and went into my room. He followed behind me.

“You made the bed? This room is clean. Are you sure we’re in the right place?”

I nodded. The door was closed. We were alone. And yet all I could do was stand there. Malcolm stepped into the room and came to stand directly next to me. He had on jeans and a long-sleeve thermal shirt with a nice pair of sneakers. He was handsome and sharp, even dressed casually.

“I would have continued talking to you in the lobby, but I wanted to see if getting you alone could give me the same results I had in the car. Is your first name Natalie? Why did you tell me it was Anne?”

He asked the questions in a no-nonsense matter-of-fact tone, staring at me curiously. I cleared my throat and leaned toward him, reaching for his ear. I needed to get close enough to him where I could whisper and also where I didn't have to look at his face while I spoke. His masculine features were very distracting and speaking alone took all of my concentration.

“I'm sorry I lied.” I paused and breathed, and he stayed still, patiently waiting for me to continue. “It's the first name I came up with.” I took a second and breathed again.

“I read online that you haven't spoken for a while. Do you only speak to certain people?”

Seconds passed.

I was frozen, not knowing what to say.

I shook my head.

“No, what?” he asked.

“I don't speak to anyone,” I said.

“You mean at full volume?” he asked.

“I mean at all. This is the first time. The other night in the car... that was the only time this has ever happened to me. That's why I asked you not to mention it since it might be a big deal to some people.”

“It's a big deal to me,” he said putting his hand to his chest. “It should be a big deal to you.”

“I know. I have to take time to sort all of this out. I just lost my aunt a little while ago, and I'm not settled from that yet. My whole life would feel like a lie if I...” I sighed. “You know what, never mind. I don't know what came over me the other night, and I don't know what I'm doing right now, but thank you for being cool about it. Thank you for not trying to call me out down there in the lobby.”

“I would never,” he said. “Don’t be nervous. Why are you nervous?”

I was wiggling around as I stood there, not able to stand still. It was no wonder he could tell I was nervous.

“Because I don’t normally talk. And I didn’t expect to see you again. I’m nervous.”

“We did kiss. Are you nervous because you like me?” he asked, sounding sweetly hopeful.

“No.”

“Thanks,” he said, smiling sarcastically.

“Well, you don’t like me either. Don’t try to act like you do. That only happened the other night because you were trying to do me a favor.”

“Nothing about our encounter the other night was a favor to you. I did exactly what I wanted to do.”

I shook my head. “You were a gentleman, and it was one of the best things that ever happened to me. You should know that I’m thankful for meeting you.”

“Then why didn’t you meet me at midnight? I was there. I even tried to go to Hamilton.”

“You went to Hamilton?”

“Yes.”

“For me?”

“Yes.”

“That’s so sweet of you.”

He stared at me. His dark eyes were deep-set and full of mystery. He glanced at the door with a disconcerted look as if dreading something. “Didn’t you think I might want to see you again?” he asked.

“No, I didn’t think that,” I said.

“Well, I... I wanted to see you again. I hated that I let you drive off, and then I saw a flyer with your face on it.”

He was standing close to me, and he reached up and placed his hand near the side of my face. He didn't touch me. He hesitated, asking my permission. I let my hand rest on his, pushing the remaining inches to the side of my face. I wanted so badly to feel his skin on mine. I wanted to accept the affection.

We touched. But it was impossible to let myself relax and fully enjoy it.

"This whole situation is just a dream," I said breathlessly, quietly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's not real, Malcolm. This isn't real. You know my name, but that's all we have. My flight's in a few hours, and then I'm back to my regular life in Alabama."

"Say my name again," he said.

"Malcolm," I said, in a voice that would probably sound weak to anyone else but sounded strong to me.

He pulled me into his arms when I said that. I let him do it. I had rarely been hugged by anyone, much less have someone stand there and hold me in his arms. I took a hitching breath as I got settled in his tight embrace. Having a man hold onto me was a sensation I did not know I had been missing in my life.

"Can I hold you?"

I nodded. "You already are."

"You're beautiful, and your voice is beautiful," he said. "Your artwork is unbelievable."

"Thank you."

"Can I talk to you again?" he asked. "Would you answer my email once you get home?"

I nodded.

He let out a long, relieved sigh, holding me near. I loved how his chest felt when it moved. "I know you have to go," he said. "And I'm not expecting you to act like you know me

when we get downstairs. I'm just happy if you say you'll answer my email."

"I will," I said, whispering. "I'll answer it."

I had on a coat, but I could still appreciate his big, strong arms around me. I was so caught up in the moment. He gave me a relieved smile as he pulled back.

"I'm sorry if I told you the wrong name."

"You definitely told me the wrong name," he said.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'm sorry I waited downstairs for you this morning."

"Did you do that?" I whispered.

"Yes." This guy was the stuff of movies... he was handsome and sure of himself, and he stared at me like there was some kind of chance we could ride off into the sunset together.

There was hardly a chance of that.

I was face-to-face with him, and he was a gloriously handsome human being. I knew the chances of us keeping in touch would be slim.

"Why'd you stop smiling?" he asked.

"I should go," I whispered, focusing on his eyes again.

"I know. Thank you for coming up here with me. Thank you for talking to me."

My heart raced when he said it. He sounded so sincere. "Thank you," I said.

He headed toward the door. "We'll talk again soon, okay? We'll stay in touch."

I nodded and followed him to the door.

Suddenly, I desired to get his attention before he opened the door. My luggage was between us, so I couldn't reach out and touch him.

“Malcolm.”

He turned.

“Thank you for waiting for me this morning.”

Chapter 6

I got into the elevator with Malcolm.

He hadn't kissed me. He had no reason to, and maybe it would have been weird for it to happen, but I still regretted that it didn't.

Malcolm must've been thinking about it, too, because he reached out and took my hand and lifted it to his mouth, letting his mouth rest on the back of my fingers. He positioned it there, touching my hand to his mouth as if to kiss it without kissing it. I felt his warm mouth and his breath on the back of my hand and it was too much. I felt like I wanted him. The elevator moved and I had no time, so I moved toward him, aiming my mouth at his and going in for a quick kiss. I managed to make contact, and we stayed there for a breathless second before I pulled away.

It was just in time for the elevator to ding and the door to open. We were on the ground level, and there were people waiting to get on the elevator, so I acted casual, looking down and smiling vaguely.

"Oh, my gosh, you have no idea what you do to me..." Malcolm said the words at my back as we got off of the elevator. No one paid attention to us, and I just smiled as I got off the elevator and made my way into the lobby.

I turned around to regard him. I set my phone down on a nearby ledge and typed on my tablet.

It was wonderful meeting you.

"You too," he said.

Bridget walked our way. "I didn't expect to see you come off of the elevator. I thought you already came down here a while ago," she said, coming up to us. "Thank you for helping," she added, speaking to Malcolm and obviously seeing that he had carried my luggage.

"My pleasure. Anything for Miss Meyers."

"Oh, do you know Natalie's artwork?"

“Yes, I saw her work at the museum. I loved every piece.”

“We appreciate the support,” Bridget said. “My name’s Bridget, I’m Natalie’s assistant.”

“Shep,” he said, using only his nickname. “I was hoping to get a picture with Natalie,” he added.

Bridget glanced at me and I gave her an almost imperceptible nod. “Of course,” she said.

He handed her his phone, and we backed up. She snapped a few photos and then Malcolm hugged me as she was in the process of putting the phone down. He held me close, hugging me more securely than seemed normal for strangers.

“You kissed me in the elevator,” he said, whispering in my ear before he pulled away.

It took us a second to break the hug, and by that time I had thoroughly blushed. I let him go, and Bridget was looking at us like she didn’t know what to make of the encounter. She and I turned around, heading outside to meet the driver.

“That guy was strange,” she said once we were settled in the backseat.

I signed to her. “Why?”

“He hugged you for about an hour. He looked like Superman.”

I made the sign for, “Which Superman?”

She shrugged. “Any. I don’t know the difference. He just looks like Superman. But he was a little too touchy-feely, if you ask me.”

Her words made me have a flash of memories. We had embraced, we had kissed, we had talked. I had functioned as another person when I was with Malcolm.

I turned to my phone as we drove to the airport. I checked my email, and there was nothing from Malcolm. I had to go to my spam folder to find it, but sure enough there was an email

that came in from him at one o'clock in the morning. I read it while I was sitting in the back seat of the car.

Natalie/Anne,

I'm Malcolm Shepherd. We met last night in New York. We shared a ride from the Park Hyatt to the opera house. I knew when I closed the car door that I was making a mistake because I had no way to reach you. Then I ran into someone who had a flyer from the art museum, and your picture was on it. Today I went and saw your work, and I just wanted to let you know that I was blown away. I could tell that you were an amazing person when we met, and that was confirmed when I saw the work of your hands. It was unbelievable. I tried to run into you at Hamilton tonight. I know you will be leaving New York tomorrow. I am going to be in the lobby of the Park Hyatt at eight or nine in the morning. I would love to see you again.

Malcolm

I took my time in crafting a response.

I started it during the ride to the airport, but I didn't send it right away. I revisited the draft again a few hours later when we were on the airplane.

Malcolm,

I wasn't acting like myself when I communicated with you, and that scared me, so I lied about my name. I'm sorry for that. I guess you found out that information about me, which is embarrassing. Thank you for not exposing me in front of other people. I did find that I enjoyed communicating differently with you, and that also scared me as I'm not ready for that in my life. I'm sorry for being vague, but communicating in that way is something I've never done before. Thank you for being a gentleman about it. This whole experience was a whirlwind for me. Also, I appreciate you for seeing my art at the museum. I'm grateful to be featured there. It's a dream come true.

All the best,

Natalie.

I told myself I would send the email that evening once I arrived at home.

Bridget and I went our separate ways at the airport in Birmingham. I used my tablet to communicate with the Uber driver, but it all felt like a lie now that I had spoken to another human.

I had some soul-searching to do.

I was glad to see Uncle Tommy, and glad to be back home where I could physically relax and get back into my routine with my canvas and paints and my sweatpants.

Uncle Tommy had replaced the faucet in his bathroom while I was away. He always liked to talk about what a bad job the plumber before him did, and he filled me in on other things he had to fix when he replaced the faucet.

Even talking to him was a lie. I listened to him, and then I responded by using my tablet.

I wanted to just open my mouth and speak to him. There was just no way I could do it—if I did, my life up until now would feel like a lie. I couldn't do that to Uncle Tommy, so I used my tablet and behaved like normal.

I had only been home for a few minutes when I went to the draft folder and sent the email.

I checked my email ten minutes later, and I had a response from him.

Natalie,

I understand not being ready for certain things. I am not trying to rush you. I also think it would be wise on your end to capitalize on any momentum you have. I want to keep in touch. I am in New York for two more days, but I'll have my phone on me all the time. Please call or text me. We could maybe try to see each other again sometime once I get home.

He signed his name and added his telephone number. I read the email twice, and both times it gave me the feeling that he liked me. This gave me the feeling that I was in some kind of alternate reality.

This man was gorgeous by the world's standards and honestly, it felt like a trap. It seemed too good to be true. I had never in my life been pursued by a man, and there was no reason why an incredibly handsome, smart, and well-put-together man would seriously want to pursue someone like me. I knew all of these things, and because of this I didn't write him back right away.

I didn't write him back for days.

Days turned to weeks, and before I knew it, a month had passed.

I thought about Malcolm Shepherd a lot, but I didn't follow up. I was not myself when I was with him, and as exhilarating as it was, I was used to a certain life.

Malcolm was the type to take trips and see shows. He was outgoing and probably active in his community. There was just no way. Being at home in my normal work routine reminded me that I didn't have a lifestyle that was suited to being anyone's girlfriend. I had long since come to terms with the fact that I would never marry, and I was fine with it. Not that Malcolm wanted that with me, because I was sure he didn't. I wasn't sure what he wanted, actually.

Either way, I didn't call or write again.

I went to work, painting.

My exhibit at the MoMA had piqued interest in my work, and I had big-money buyers for a couple of pieces that I had just finished. I had them sold in auction format, and today, I brought home my largest payday yet.

The auction closed a few hours ago, and I made a ton of money... and my house was as quiet as ever.

Uncle Tommy didn't say much about my work, and Bridget had already come and gone for the day. It was like any other silent night here at the house, only I was a lot richer.

I wasn't a materialistic person, but this type of money did a lot for me. It would mean I could pay off this house and get a car, and still end up with money to put in savings for years to come. Annie had always taught me to be smart with money,

but this payday was more than I had ever made before. I started to think I would need an accountant to help me make the most of it.

It was a good afternoon.

I was happy that bidders were willing to pay such amounts for my work. I felt unworthy and thankful.

It was later that same evening when I received an email from Malcolm Shepherd. My heart stopped the instant I saw his name in my inbox. I opened the email and began reading.

Natalie,

I wanted to say congratulations on the epic auction of your paintings tonight. I thought this would be an email telling you that I bought one of them. I thought I would be all big and bad and be the winner of one of your paintings, and then I watched in amazement as the price went up so fast that I didn't even get to place a bid. I had no idea you were so famous. Congratulations. I'm happy for you. I wanted to let you know that you're still on my mind. I would love to hear from you. No pressure. We can correspond in writing and just as friends. I just wanted you to know I was still thinking about you.

He signed his name and added his phone number again.

Chapter 7

I texted Malcolm Shepherd that very same night. I thought about emailing, but I sent a text to his phone instead.

Me:

Hey, it's Natalie. Thanks for the email earlier.

I heard back from him within seconds.

Malcolm:

I'm so happy right now.

Me:

Why?

Malcolm:

Why do you think?

I sat there and thought for a minute while I tried to decide what to say. I knew he was looking at the thought bubble on the other end. I stood there, staring at my screen, trying to think.

Malcolm:

It's because I'm talking to you.

Me:

I'm happy too. What are you doing?

Malcolm:

I'm doing some work on my thesis. I graduate next month.

Me:

Congrats! Do you want to let me go so you can do your work?

Malcolm:

No, I don't. If anything, I want you to call me so we can talk.

Me:

You do?

Malcolm:

Yes.

Me:

On the phone?

Malcolm:

It's easier than sitting here typing.

I wondered if it would be possible. Tommy was on the other side of the house. There were cameras in the common area. If I kept my eyes on the cameras, there would be no way anyone could sneak up on me and hear me.

I was in a good mood after the auction, and Malcolm's suggestion fell on confident ears.

Me:

I'm thinking about it.

I typed the text, smiling and knowing the whole time what my answer was. I could not explain it, but I felt the urge to talk to him. It wasn't about romance. It was about talking, and something about Malcolm Shepherd made me feel comfortable enough to do that. I pulled up the security camera on my laptop and had a shot of the living room displayed on the screen.

Me:

I think so.

Malcolm:

Do you want me to call you?

Me:

Are you alone?

Malcolm:

Yes.

Me:

You can call.

My pulse quickened as I pressed send. *What in the freaking world was I getting myself into?*

It rang. My phone never, ever rang. I didn't even know what the ringer was because the foreign melody sounded loud and startled me.

I answered the phone. "Hello?" I said quietly. I didn't whisper, but I spoke quietly, and even that was a stretch. I cleared my throat.

"Hey, Nat," he said, a smile in his voice.

"I always wanted someone to call me that."

"There's no way I'm the first."

"You really are. People assume they have to be really formal with me."

"How so?"

"I don't know," I said. "People treat me differently than they treat each other. That's probably why I was so intrigued to meet you. You had no idea who I was, and you just treated me like anyone else."

"I wouldn't say I treated you like anyone else," he said, smiling again and causing me to laugh a little.

"You know what I mean. This talking thing is new for me. It sounds crazy for me to put it like this, but honestly, it's forbidden for me." I spoke slowly, softly, and cleared my throat again when I was finished. I had a bottled water nearby and I took a drink from it.

"Forbidden?" he said. "Do you feel like someone would get upset?"

"I don't know. Yes. Maybe. My whole life, my professional career, has been based around the fact that I don't talk."

“Yes, but is that any reason to continue that way if you want to change.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know the answer to that. I had sort of just resolved in my heart to have a certain life.”

“And you still can. Just because you talk to me doesn’t mean that you’re off track. I’m not going to tell a soul.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m just also going to tell you the truth, which is that it’s your life, and you can choose to live how you want.”

“One step at a time,” I said, speaking quietly.

“Yeah, one step at a time,” he agreed sweetly. “The theater group that I’m a part of had auditions for a play last weekend.”

“Are you doing a play?”

“No, I didn’t audition for this one. I have to wrap up my last semester. I’m too busy.”

“What play are they doing?”

“The Wizard of Oz.”

“I bet that’s a good show.”

“Yeah, it’s fun. I’ve done it before.”

“What were you?”

“The lion.”

“Shoot, I should’ve guessed,” I said.

“What would you have guessed?”

“I don’t know,” I said, regretting the offer. “I don’t even know the characters.”

He laughed.

“You have no idea how fun this is for me,” I said. “I’m terrified and having so much fun. I feel like I’m flying right now.”

“Can I come to you?” he asked.

“What?”

“Would you let me drive to you? I could come by there so we can talk in person.”

“Yes, sure. Sometime. When?”

“Now. Can you hang out with me for an hour or two if I drive over there?”

“It’s eight o’clock at night.”

“I know. I just searched it. I can be there by eleven.”

“Then what?”

“Then I’ll stay for a minute and drive back home.”

“You have your thesis.”

“I do have my thesis. But I’ll get it done. I can spare a few hours.”

“You’ll be too tired to drive.”

“I promise, I won’t. But I don’t need to come tonight if you’re uncomfortable with that. We can plan it some other time.”

“I mean, I want you to come, I just didn’t want you to have to make all that effort.”

“I’m the one who offered.”

“I would, of course, love you to come. Nighttime is good, because, Uncle Tommy’s in his room.”

“I’m coming,” he said.

I could hear rustling around, and I could not help but smile.

Was he serious?

“Are you serious?” I asked.

“Yes. Are you?”

“Yes. I would love to see you.”

What was I saying? How was I gushing? I knew better.

“I’m going to let you go for a minute. I need to get some things together to get on the road. I’ll call you in thirty minutes.”

“Are you really doing this?”

“Is it okay?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then, yes.”

“Okay, call me back, I guess.”

Malcolm texted me when we hung up, asking me for my address. I gave it to him, and then I instantly got scared and started thinking about all the things that could go wrong. I instinctually trusted Malcolm, but I had no idea what I was doing agreeing to let him come over to my house. I had never done anything like this before. My emotions were all over the place, and I started cleaning my house.

He called me back thirty minutes later.

“I’m scared,” I said.

“Of what?”

“Of everything. I’m scared of you coming over here, and I’m even more scared of you not.”

“Are you scared of me?”

“No. I mean, I feel like I should be. I have no experience with things like this.”

“I think you’re stronger than you think you are.”

“On a human level, I’m happy you’re coming over.”

“I’m happy you’re happy,” Malcolm said, smiling. “Can I bring you anything? I’m already outside of Memphis, but I can stop off of the interstate if you want something.”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Do you need to get off of the phone, or can you talk?”

“I can talk.”

“Tell me something about yourself, Natalie.”

“Did you read my bio online?”

“Yes. There’s not too much. But I did read about the trauma that caused your condition. I’m sorry about your parents.”

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago.”

“I know, but I’m sorry. I can’t imagine what could have caused you to turn inward like that.”

I proceeded to tell Malcolm the whole story.

I had gone silent to avoid telling it, and now I just told it to him like it was the most natural thing in the world. That was when I realized that my connection to Malcolm might be supernatural. Even if all we ever became was friends, maybe God had provided Malcolm as a sort of therapy for me. First, it was Annie’s death, and then a feature at MoMA. I was primed for a change when I met Malcolm, and something about his tone and demeanor... he was a perfect confidant.

He gently asked me for details of my story, and all along the way, I warned him that I didn’t want to overshare. Malcolm insisted that he was fine, and one statement led to another until I told him everything. I had seen and heard terrible things, and I kept details of that story locked in my mind until now. The authorities had caught the people who did it, and the case had been closed for so long that I had forgotten some of the details. I had forgotten more of the details than I thought I had.

Malcolm was a patient, kind listener. The story and our conversation pertaining to it took up a good bit of his trip. We talked about it for two hours, and it seemed to go by in a few seconds. I was so focused on the conversation that I didn’t even clean.

Malcolm felt like an instant friend to me. I got the feeling he was a ladies’ man in his life, but he wasn’t like that with me. He treated me with genuine concern, asking thoughtful questions and listening while I answered.

Time passed quickly, and those hours slipped by. He stopped to get gas and use the restroom, and we got off of the

phone.

It was then that I started to overthink things. I had told him about all of my baggage—even all about my grandmother and how heartless she had been after my parents died. It had been a lot to unload on Malcolm, and I would not be surprised at all if he turned around and started driving back to Memphis. I had thoughts of regret when he got off of the phone. I told myself he might not come over, but I went back to cleaning my house, just in case. I was just cleaning absentmindedly, anyway, since I never made a mess. Uncle Tommy's area of the house was messier, but we would stay completely out of there. I walked around and did some detail cleaning while I waited to see if he'd call back.

Chapter 8

If you had asked me earlier today, I would never have dreamed that Malcolm Shepherd would be on his way to my house, and now I desperately hoped he was still on track to come over. I would be really sad if he didn't come.

It had been fifteen minutes since we got off of the phone, and I was overthinking my choices and regretting telling him so much about my life. I thought he would have called back by now.

Finally, after another ten minutes, my phone rang, and I smiled as I picked it up.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey. I would have called back sooner, but I ran into the store, and then I had to call my mom."

"Oh, that's fine," I said as if I hadn't noticed how long it took.

"I was supposed to go over there in the morning, and I called to reschedule."

"Oh, is it because you're coming here?" I asked.

"Yes, but I don't mind rescheduling. I was going over there for myself in the first place. My dad's helping me build a table. Mom was going to cook breakfast. I told her I was making a quick trip to see a friend and that I'll be catching up on sleep tomorrow morning."

He paused, and I knew it was my turn to speak.

"Thank you," I said.

"Oh, no, thank you for letting me come over. I'm pumped. I'm only forty-two minutes from your house."

"Uncle Tommy's here, but he doesn't come out to my side of the house. He's got his own kitchen and everything, so we won't bother him."

"Are you and your uncle close?"

“We are, sort of. I was close to my aunt. She was the one always talking and playing music, but Uncle Tommy’s a quiet guy, so there’s a lot of silence around here. We love each other, but we can go a couple of days without talking. He’s a calm, quiet person. I only remember one time that he did something spectacular.”

“Ooh, you’ve got me curious using that word. What’d he do?”

“It was a normal thing for most people, I guess. It’s definitely not that big of a deal. I just remember that one time, for Annie’s birthday, he went to the store and got all the stuff to make a pancake that was a face. He bought bacon and chocolate chips and cherries and whipped cream, and he built a face out of it. I remember seeing her react to that breakfast like it was the best thing Tommy had ever done. And I thought it, too.” I laughed. “All of my life since then, I’ve always thought that food-art is the epitome of telling someone you love them.”

We both laughed. “I think maybe you’re right,” he said. “Maybe there’s something to it.”

“I’ve seen stuff online where moms make food that looks like art for their kids, like raisins on celery like little ants.”

“I remember stuff like that,” he said.

“It’s funny, because it’s simple, but in my mind, that’s like the highest act of love.”

We laughed.

“Food art,” he said. “That’s good. I know a lot of chefs think of cooking and presenting food as an act of love. It’s an art to them. I would say maybe you should be a chef, but I think it’s safe to say you already found your calling.”

“You mean painting?”

He laughed. “Yes. I mean painting. I’m still amazed about yesterday. You could buy a small house with the sum you brought in at auction.”

“I’m amazed, too. That’s the most I’ve ever made off of one painting.”

“You’re talking quieter,” he said. “Either that or there’s something wrong with my phone.”

“No, I’m quieter,” I said. “I don’t mean to be. My voice is just... tired. I’ve been practicing while I’m alone, but it’s not used to this kind of action.”

“Do you want me to tell you a story so you can give your voice a minute?”

“Sure, I’d love it. Do you have something in mind to tell me?”

“No, I need to think for a second. I can just tell you about some of my friends. I’ll start with the ones you know. Owen, he grew up rich. His dad’s a physical therapist, like me. He’s the one I’m working with. That’s a good job, but it’s a fairly normal one in terms of money. Owen’s money comes from his mom, and it’s old money. His great-grandpa was in the gasoline business or something. I don’t even know. But they have money that has nothing to do with physical therapy. Anyway, so Owen has always been really confident. He basically owns Memphis, but it was different in New York. Abe had us at this place with all these big names, and Owen was acting like himself, like he expected everyone to be charmed, but these people were not having it. They were tough customers. They were not impressed.”

“What did he do?”

“He persisted, and by the end of it, they were eating out of the palm of his hand. I’ve never seen him face a tough crowd like that, and it was cool to watch him win them over. It was just magical to watch because for more than half of the night, he was striking out, and by the end of the night, he had won them all over. He got like four girls’ phone numbers that night.”

“What about you?”

“What do you mean... did I get girls’ numbers?”

“No, how did you get along at the party?”

“Oh, everyone loved me from the start.” He laughed. “I’m just joking, but I’m probably a little more relatable than Owen. You can just smell the richness coming off of him. His dad built that physical therapy place where I’ll be working. It’s a gorgeous building and the clinic has top-of-the-line everything.”

“Is that where you’re doing your internship?”

“Yes, I’m already there twenty hours a week. I’ll just switch over to full-time and get a new job description when I graduate.”

“Are you going to miss school?”

“I am, actually. I made some good friends there. I even did a couple of college plays when I was doing my undergrad studies. Technically, I minored in theater.”

“But no theater this year?” I asked, clarifying.

“No. I’m too busy with my thesis.”

“Where are you in that process?” I asked.

“I’m almost done. I already presented it to my professors. I have a set of corrections that I’m going through now.”

“I have no idea what that’s like. I’ve never been to college or even in a school setting—definitely not college. I went to a regular school as a young child, but not for long.”

“It’s nothing you couldn’t handle,” he said. “Do you have any interest in going back to college?”

“No. My art was featured at a few universities, and I went to a couple of them to see it. But no. I’ve been on campuses but never taken a class. Are any of your theater friends in college with you?”

“I have friends in college that I’ve met there, but not the ones you know about, August and Owen, they’re theater friends only. I do work with Owen’s dad. Abe’s a theater guy, too, but he’s newer to the group. None of them go to my school. I have different friends at school.”

“I’m surprised Owen didn’t go into physical therapy like his dad.”

“He still wants to make it as an actor—stage or screen. He works at it. He just started to seek out some film auditions.”

“Is there much of that in Memphis?”

“No. He travels. I mean, there’s a movie made every once in a while, but not like in Hollywood.”

“Do you think he can make it as an actor?”

“I do. Abe wants him to go to New York, and Owen liked it when he was there, but I think he’s leaning more toward California.”

“How about your other friend, August, how did he do in New York?”

“Great. All of us are extroverts. He’s probably the quietest of the three, but we’re all talkative.”

“Mm, I’m not,” I said seriously.

Malcolm was quiet for a second and then he laughed. “Did you just make a joke?”

I laughed. “In my mind, I make tons of jokes,” I said. “In my own mind, I’m a brilliant conversationalist.”

“You are in real life, too,” he said.

“That’s sweet and thank you, but I went from saying nothing at all to saying it all at once. I didn’t mean to unload on you about my whole life story. That’s probably a little unaware on my part.”

“All you did was answer my questions,” he said. “That’s not unloading.”

“Then tell me something about your childhood,” I said. “It’ll make me feel better.”

“Me? Something bad? Some trial I went through?”

“No, not necessarily. Just a story.”

“It’s not really a story, but I do love Christmas,” he said without hesitation. “My mom’s into collecting these ceramic houses and town pieces. She sets them all out on the countertops during December, and I sit and just stare at them. I would imagine myself in miniature form, going to all the shops and houses.” He laughed. “I know that’s not what Christmas is all about—it really has nothing to do with the true meaning of Christmas. But I really get nostalgic when I think of that little set. My mom loved Christmas music, and often times it would be playing in the background as I sat and stared. Sometimes it’ll be the middle of June and I think of hearing Silent Night and staring into the candy store. I haven’t done that in a couple of years, so it makes me even more nostalgic when I think about it.”

“Annie liked Christmas too. She didn’t have one of those sets, but she did a lot of decorating. I like to do it too, I’ve collected some stuff over the years. I like nutcrackers.”

“Yeah, nutcrackers are cool. I was thinking about how I imagine life in that little Christmas village, and I was wondering what you see, what you imagine, what your process is when you paint.”

“I was scared of this.”

“What?”

“Scared that if I talk, then people will ask me about my process.”

“Why would you be scared of that?”

“Because there’s nothing to explain. I’m not a Bible scholar, and God doesn’t show up to me in some miraculous vision. I just paint what comes to my mind as it comes to my mind. People expect that God gives me these revelations—like there’s something amazing that happens, something I’ve been holding in my silent mind.”

He sighed. “I see what you’re saying, but talking doesn’t change what you’ve been able to say. You’ve been able to communicate all this time. It’s not like you talking is suddenly

going to make everyone start making you explain yourself about painting.”

“I guess you’re right,” I said, even though I wasn’t convinced. I wasn’t going to say that right now everyone treated me like I had something wrong mentally—I didn’t say that people walked on eggshells around me. But things would all change if I started talking, and I knew that. I couldn’t believe how easily I spoke to Malcolm when doing it to anyone else seemed like such an impossible feat.

“You should just take it all at your own pace, though,” he said.

“Yeah, I have a lot to think about. At this point, I can’t believe I’m letting even one single person hear me do this.”

“I’m almost at your house,” he said. “Then we can see each other and talk in person.”

Chapter 9

Malcolm Shepherd

Shep was always joking around. He was always a high-energy person who laughed a lot and also was dry-witted and sarcastic. He was one who could see the humor in situations, and he was always ready with a joke. He felt serious about Natalie Meyers, though, and he treated her with a type of sincerity he wasn't used to experiencing within himself.

Natalie had a relationship with God, and she was led by Him to create these beautiful, complex, accurate, flawless artworks. She had a supernatural gift, and it was like nothing Shep had ever seen. He loved and respected that about her.

He wanted to get to know her as a man gets to know a woman, but he was in no hurry. He would be her friend if that was what she needed. It was already remarkable that she was talking, and Shep innately knew not to rush her. He wanted to help her and love her, not forcing her into anything.

Natalie told him a story about her uncle making a face with breakfast foods, and Shep made a quick stop at a small supermarket before he made it to her house. He didn't want to be late, and he ran through the store, focused and determined. He had to improvise with sausage patties instead of bacon because the bacon was expired. He forgot chocolate chips but he figured he would get extra points for remembering other things, including syrup. He bought maple. He also bought an array of other breakfast items, knowing he would put it all together in some kind of face, some kind of work of art.

Shep wouldn't normally consider himself an artist, but he would do what he had to do. He thought she would love it, and he wanted to please her. It was eleven-thirty when he made it to her house. She lived in a lake house in the middle of the dark woods, and Malcolm parked in her driveway and got out of his truck.

He caught sight of her right when he started walking toward the house. Her hair was down, hanging below her shoulders, and she had on loose jeans and a plain white t-shirt.

She had been dressed up both other times they saw each other, and Shep loved seeing her in her casual clothes. He loved seeing her, period.

She waved at him, squinting shyly as he approached. She motioned for him to be quiet by putting her finger to her lips, and Shep could not stop a grin from covering his face. He leaned in for a hug, and he was happy when she easily opened her arms and hugged him back. She smelled so nice.

“What’s all this?” she whispered.

“Are we whispering for Tommy? This is breakfast food.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I’m not trying to stay the night. I was hoping we could cook it now. If you want.”

She nodded and Shep followed her into the house.

“This is really nice,” he added, still speaking quietly.

“Thank you,” she whispered, and he wondered if they needed to be that quiet, or if she found it different to speak to him in person than on the phone.

“Are we whispering for Tommy?” he asked again.

“Not really. I’m just... it’s still new to me... oh my goodness what’s in here?”

She had reached for the bags once they made it to the kitchen, and she saw how heavy they were and how much was in them.

“It’s a bunch of stuff, and some of it needs to be in the fridge.”

“Oh, my gosh, you got sprinkles and cherries. Maple syrup—whipped cream.”

“I forgot chocolate chips,” he said.

“Uh, are you making a... is this for a...”

“For a what?” he asked, smiling at her.

She turned to put the cold items in the fridge. “You know,” she said.

“It’s for a pancake-guy, if that’s what you’re saying.”

“It is? I can’t believe you did this.”

He shrugged. “I found a store off the highway. I had an ice chest in my truck so it’s still cold.”

“This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” she said, smiling as she put up the groceries.

The thing was, it sounded completely sincere, like she meant it. It was fifty dollars in groceries and four minutes in the store. Shep couldn’t believe he was the first person to find this woman and make her some breakfast art.

“Thank you for allowing me to come into your home,” he said.

She finished putting everything into the fridge. “It’s crazy that you just picked up and drove over here.”

“I think it’s crazier that your paintings did so well today. I’m happy for you.” He picked up his hand to high-five her, and she smiled as she reached out and touched her hand to his. She didn’t high-five him and then pull away. She left her hand there, touching his for a few seconds.

It was long enough that Shep felt like he was about to explode. His heart was hammering in his chest. She smiled and pulled her hand away, and he smiled back and let her. She trusted him enough to let him into her house. He wasn’t going to initiate any physical touch... other than the high-five. He couldn’t believe what this woman had been through—what she had seen and then how her world had been inside of paintings for all these years.

She had a remarkable calmness at the moment for someone who was clearly out of her comfort zone on so many levels. He wanted to hold her, and he had to resist the urge to take her into his arms and do it.

Shep was actually more impressed that her process wasn’t more complicated than just painting what she feels. That made him know she was close to God, and that was what intrigued him the most about her. He wished she had left her hand on his, but she pulled back, smiling and sighing.

“When do you want to cook?” he asked.

“Anytime,” she answered. She spoke louder than a whisper, but still quietly. “My Uncle is sleeping,” she said, louder still. “I don’t know why I feel like I have to be quiet.”

“It’s fine,” he assured her.

“Yeah, I’m hungry now if you want to make this,” she said.

“I’m hungry too,” he said.

“I guess so. You’ve been driving for hours.”

“Do you drive?” he asked.

“Yes. Not often, but yes. Tommy taught me how to drive on an old, standard transmission car, so I can pretty much drive anything. I don’t have a car, but I can drive.”

As she spoke, she got out a few bowls and a pan. She left the cupboards open and she gestured to the whole area in the kitchen. “Just make yourself at home here. I have utensils and tools and everything in here—these two drawers.”

“This is a nice kitchen,” Shep said, reaching in for a few cooking supplies.

He set them down on the countertop and then he moved to the sink. He gave her a questioning expression, asking if it was okay to wash his hands there, and she nodded.

“Tommy has his own kitchen in his side of the house.”

“Does he do any of the cooking?”

“He eats a sandwich for lunch every single day, and for dinner he makes two things, a stew and pasta. He varies the pasta, but the stew stays the same, beef stew. Otherwise, I cook, or we eat takeout or frozen meals. I don’t mind cooking.”

“This art is gorgeous. It’s beautiful. Where did you get it?”

“It’s all my silly stuff I do in between paintings.”

He glanced around at them. Her house was full of large-scale, unique artwork. Most of it was abstract, color-block work, but Shep could see from a glance that there were several different styles and color families throughout the house. The art in the kitchen was mostly in tones of blue, green, and grey. He couldn't believe she had painted them. They were so different from her other stuff.

"I make this art for a breather in between my other, more intense work. These are just little doodles."

"Your doodles are masterpieces."

She laughed. "Thank you, but hardly."

Malcolm wanted one of them. Selfishly, he wanted one. He wanted to ask her to sell him one right then if they were 'hardly masterpieces', but he knew he had to take things slow.

"They're seriously beautiful," he said. "To me, they really are masterpieces. You could have a whole art show with these things. Do you ever sell stuff like this?"

She laughed like the thought had never ever crossed her mind, and Shep became more intrigued by the minute.

He focused on the food.

He made sausage in one skillet and pancakes in the other. He was no artist, and he was standing in the midst of a truly great one... and yet he was confident and secure in his ability to make something funny and great on the plate.

He made two different faces on two different plates, one for each of them. He cut the sausage patties into shapes and used them in different ways on each plate, his were used as ears, and hers were used as eyes. The plates were as funny and detailed as he could make them. He was fueled by love, and they honestly came out amazing because of that.

The two of them talked while he cooked, but it was small talk about past experiences with food. Shep had steered the conversation in the car, and it had been deep enough for tonight. He wanted their time together to be fun and lighthearted.

He told her about different memories he had with food, and she did the same.

“It’s not fine art, but...” he slid the plate in front of her. Whipped cream and sprinkles had been the finishing touches, and it put the whole design over the top. She stared down at the plate after he slid it in front of her.

“You are the nicest person in the whole world for doing this.”

“You’re the nicest for thinking this makes me nice.”

She tilted her head and squinted comically at him. Her eyes were glossed over even though she was smiling. She had been holding back tears when she looked at the plate, and the sight of her emotion made Shep feel desperate to go to her and hold her.

“I really want to...” Shep was about to come right out and tell her that he wanted to hold her in his arms, but then he stopped himself. “... make this for you any time. I-I’m glad you like it.” Shep normally did not have a hard time playing it cool, and with Natalie, he was anything but cool. He wanted to impress her so badly that he overthought everything he said.

He told himself to go with it and trust his instincts. He had never cooked a pancake a day in his life and these puppies were golden brown and grilled to perfection, like freaking IHOP. Love could enable you to do some amazing things. *Did he love her? Could this be love?* Her eyes reflected her happiness, and it made his chest swell. He played it cool, starting to cut into his own pancake.

“Wait, wait, wait.”

“What?” he asked, stopping in mid-motion.

“I’m not usually one for photos, but this has been a good day, and I, I love this so much. Would you mind if I take a photo?”

“No,” he said, fixing the spot where he had already cut into it.

“It makes him look tough,” she said.

“A little scar from fighting one time,” Shep added, fixing it up.

She retrieved her phone from a nearby table and took a picture of the plates. She then went to stand next to Shep and turned her camera on them to take a selfie next to him. Shep had to fight the urge to take her into his arms and hold her there. Instead, he smiled at the phone and let her take a photo.

“Send me that,” he said.

She nodded, agreeing to do it, but she set her phone down so that she could focus on the food and their time together.

“Do you have any scars?” she asked. “Physical scars?”

“I have one on my face.”

She looked at him, and he pointed to his upper cheek, near the corner of his eye.

“It’s from saving a baby from a burning building.”

She knew he was joking, and she smiled and tilted her head, waiting for him to say the real cause.

“I fell on my bike. I was eight years old, and I absolutely ate it. My bike tire just came unbolting, and I lost control and face-planted on the pavement. I assure you it was not nearly as romantic as saving a baby. I have a few other scars from that same fall. My knee, hip, and hand.”

“Wow, that was a bad one.”

“It was really bad. I was young, and I still remember how bad it was.”

“Where on your hand?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, I’ll show you in a minute,” Shep said, playing with her but also being serious. He wanted her to know he was interested.

“What’s in a minute?” she asked, flirting.

“I might want the excuse to hold your hand in a minute.” Shep shrugged. He wore a mischievous grin as he spoke, and she cut her eyes at him. She was gorgeous.

The two of them smiled a lot. They talked a lot, and laughed, and ate their pancakes, in an instant, it was two o'clock in the morning.

"I should go," Shep said.

"Do you want to lay in here and get a few hours of sleep before you head back to Memphis? Uncle Tommy's not up and around until eight."

"No, I'm good for a few hours until I get back home. I'm glad you thought of making me a cup of coffee. That'll help."

"Are you sure? I feel a little worried about you driving."

"I'm sure," he said, standing up and stretching.

"This has been the best time," she said, glancing at him. She looked away when his shirt lifted up as he shifted and stretched. Shep wanted so badly to kiss her, but he knew he wasn't going to do it. He had been planning on refraining from it all along. It was his idea to go over there, and it was late. He didn't want to pressure her.

Chapter 10

Malcolm Shepherd

The two of them walked together, through the house toward her front door, and Malcolm felt like he was in a dream... a nightmare. *How could he be leaving her so soon, and how were there no future plans to see her?* This was terrible.

“I know it’s late, and we didn’t think about saying goodbye, or anything, but I’m hoping we can keep in touch. I hope it’s not so long before the next time I get to talk to you.”

“I would like that, too,” she said, giving him a shy smile.

“Can I call you tomorrow? Is that too soon?”

“No,” she said, surprising him how fast she got the word out. “It’s not too soon.” She stood in her entryway, leaning against the wall with her legs crossed.

“Okay, good, thank you. And thanks again for letting me come over tonight. This was really fun. Your house is beautiful. I should have known.”

“The lake’s really pretty in the day. Maybe you can come back sometime when you can see it.”

“I would love that,” he said. He smiled at her, and he got caught staring at her mouth when she smiled back. He was drawn to Natalie on so many levels that he could scarcely contain himself. He could hardly stop himself from taking her into his arms. He fought the urge to kiss her. He didn’t do it. He hugged her. It was a quick embrace, and he reached for the door handle afterward.

“Whoa,” she said, touching his hand before he could pull on the door.

He stopped and looked at her, his eyes instantly meeting hers. His gaze locked on hers, staring into her eyes, asking her why she had stopped him.

He knew the reason why, though.

“What?” he said, pretending.

“I just thought since you were leaving...” She trailed off, staring downward and looking shy. He wanted to kiss her so badly he was shaking. He wanted to kiss her passionately. He imagined it. He could easily take her into his arms and do it. His heart pounded as he regarded her.

“Since I was leaving, what?” he said.

“You know what I was thinking.”

“Are you asking me to kiss you?” He prayed she would agree.

She nodded, and Shep did it without hesitation. He leaned in and put his mouth to hers. She wanted it to happen and she stretched upward, pushing forward, solidifying the contact. Shep kissed her a few times, and all of them were gentle. His mouth barely opened on the last one, and he could hardly stop himself from kissing her deeply.

The fact that Shep was the only one she had ever talked to made him feel like he had some kind of license to take her and kiss her however he wanted, but he stopped himself knowing it was just the opposite of that. Natalie trusted him. He needed to pull back. He needed to be respectful of this night. A lot had been said. He wanted her to know he was taking this whole thing seriously. He held her face and kissed her a few more times. He could hardly bear to stop, but knew he had to.

“I am leaving,” he said. “I don’t want to, but I am. Thank you for everything tonight.”

“Thank you for my special breakfast,” she said. “And for everything.”

His mind was blown. *How was he supposed to leave this woman?* “Talk to you soon, okay,” he said, wishing he could think of something better. He reached for the handle again, and this time she let him open the door.

Malcolm walked out, and she didn’t stop him. He turned and looked at her from over his shoulder and she waved and smiled at him before closing the door. He had a three-hour

drive in the middle of the night, and he did not care at all. He would do it again tomorrow.

He might as well have been walking on clouds. Natalie had loved the pancakes, and it gave him the best feeling to see her so happy as she was eating them. Maybe she was just happy he was there. Either way, she was happy. Shep was happy, too. He was grinning as he opened the door of his truck.

An older man was sitting in the passenger's seat.

Shep was calm under pressure, and his mind worked quickly. The man jumped when Shep opened the door, and Shep knew he had been sleeping even though the guy tried not to act like it. He had a pistol sitting next to him on the seat, but Shep wasn't afraid of him. He had a serious expression, but not an upset one.

"I'm Natalie's Uncle Tommy," he said. His voice was deep, sleepy.

"Yes, sir," Shep agreed, sitting in the driver's seat. He closed the door. His windows were tinted, and he didn't want Natalie to notice that Tommy was out there. "Malcolm Shepherd. I'm from Memphis."

"I saw that you were in the house with my niece."

"Yes, sir."

"How do you know Natalie?"

"We met in New York, when she was there in March."

"I didn't bring this gun out here with me to intimidate you." He paused. "I'm not going to do anything with it but defend myself."

"Well, I won't give you any reason to defend yourself," Shep said.

"It's late, and I assume you want to go home, so I'll get straight to the point."

"Yes sir."

“I saw that someone had come here earlier tonight, and I was about to go into Natalie’s side of the house to see who it was, but then I heard you. I heard Natalie.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tommy cut his eyes at Shep. “She was talking.”

“I know,” Shep said sincerely with a nod.

There was a long minute of silence. Shep didn’t know what to say.

“Annie and I caught her a couple of times before. Annie had caught her down at the lake a couple of years ago, and then she was doing it again in her bedroom, and we both heard her. We knew she could do it. We knew she could talk.” He paused for a long time again. “Annie said she would talk to someone else when the time was right. I told her she was never going to do it, but Annie swore she would. I told Annie we should just tell her we heard her. I thought if we told Natalie she’d been caught, well then she’d have no choice but to talk. Annie said we needed to let her do it on her own time. I caught her crying and praying out loud after Annie died. She was saying she wished she would have talked to Annie. I know she felt bad about not talking to her, so I’m surprised she hasn’t talked to me. Bridget hasn’t said anything, either. I’ve heard her speak before tonight, but she never has to me or anyone else, as far as I know.”

“I think I caught her at just the right moment in New York,” Shep explained.

“Did she talk to you in New York?”

“Yes, sir, but like I said, I think I caught her at just the right moment.”

“Also, you’re twenty-five and you’re built like a Mack Truck.”

“I’m not trying to take advantage of her,” Shep said.

“I figured you should meet the crazy old man in the backwoods of Alabama who goes along with Natalie. If you’re planning on taking any sort of advantage of my niece, you

should just get in your truck and go back home. I'm an old man, and I ain't afraid of dying. I'll defend that girl to my last breath."

"I definitely understand why you would want to protect her. I'm glad she has an uncle like you, Mr..." Shep hesitated because he wasn't sure of the man's last name. He was almost certain that it wasn't the same as Natalie's. He just went with, "Mr. Tommy."

"Well, I'm glad we straightened this out, Malcolm. I'm going back in and going to my own bed."

"I understand. It was nice meeting you. I didn't mean to hide from you by coming here at night. It was a spur-of-the-moment trip. We were on the phone, and I asked if she wouldn't mind me coming over. All we did was make a meal together." Shep wasn't in the habit of overexplaining, and so he stopped talking.

Tommy nodded thoughtfully. "She seemed to be comfortable with you," he said. "I'll give you that."

At that, he opened his door and climbed out of the truck. He had on slippers and jeans and he gripped that pistol with his work-hardened hands.

"Thank you, sir," Shep added.

"Take care."

Shep barely heard him now that he was outside of the truck. And just like that, Tommy closed the door.

Shep didn't see him after that. He must've circled around the house because he didn't go in using the front door. He started his truck and drove away. He wondered if Natalie had seen her uncle, and he almost called her to ask, but they had plans to talk to each other the following day, and he figured he should stick to those plans.

He drove straight home, stopping once, to get gas and some candy to keep him busy. Shep wasn't falling asleep, anyway. He was excited and happy in spite of the unexpected meeting with Tommy. He was in love, and he knew it.

He thought of the paintings that were hanging in her house, so different than her other artwork. Natalie was a complex creature, and Shep never dreamed he would fall in love with someone like her. She was amazing, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life getting to know her. He wanted to turn back around and go back to Alabama that instant. If only she could go to Memphis with him.

Then there was the fact that she currently didn't speak to anyone but Shep. It seemed like such a small issue to Shep that he forgot in most people's minds it would be a monumental one. In Natalie's mind it was definitely a monumental one.

He wondered whether or not he should tell her that Tommy had heard her. He thought he would leave out the fact that Annie had heard her, but knowing Tommy had heard her might help. It might make her feel like she could turn over a new leaf. Or maybe she would just be humiliated if she knew. Shep thought about it during the drive home, and the whole thing went quickly.

Chapter 11

Natalie Meyers

The following day

I got invited to eat lunch with Uncle Tommy the following day. I had been in my studio, and he left a note in my side of the house saying that he was making sandwiches for lunch and wanted me to come over.

I walked into his part of the house at eleven-thirty knowing that he ate at the same time every day. Annie knew some sign language, but Tommy never learned, so I always used my tablet to communicate with him. It was a little odd for me to do this on the heels of an evening when I had spoken so much to someone else. It made it difficult for me to go back to typing my responses to Uncle Tommy. I felt emotional about it and torn, and I dreaded typing but I also dreaded breaking the news to him.

He had my plate prepared for me when I went over there. There was a Dixie brand paper plate on the bar, and on it was a white bread turkey and cheese sandwich with mayo, mustard, and lettuce... just like he always made it. The sandwich was cut diagonally with chips running down the center of the plate. They were classic Lays potato chips, as always.

“All I have is milk and water,” Tommy said, looking in the fridge. He glanced at me, and I held up three fingers in the shape of a W for water. Uncle Tommy understood and grabbed a bottle of water for me.

He sat across from me, and I nodded a ‘thank you’ to him before we started eating. I had my tablet sitting next to me in case he asked me something other than a ‘yes or no’ question.

“You were up early this morning.”

I nodded.

“I saw you in that studio this morning at seven o’clock. You had your light on.”

I nodded at him.

“I thought you’d sleep in. Were you working on something new? I thought you might take the day off after last night.”

My heart dropped, but I stayed cool. I made a questioning expression at him because I was afraid he knew something.

“After your auction yesterday,” he explained, causing me to give him a relieved smile and nod.

For the next few minutes we ate in silence. Not total silence, as Uncle Tommy always had his television on in the background, but we didn’t talk.

He finished his sandwich before I did, and he went into the kitchen to make coffee.

“Do you want a cup?” he asked, glancing at me. I shook my head and used my right hand to type on my tablet.

I had a painting in my heart, so I stayed up last night. I was up all night. I haven’t slept yet. I’m going to bed in a minute, and I’m going to sleep a few hours, so I need to skip the coffee.

I set the tablet on the table and pushed it over to his spot.

He read it when he got back to the table with his coffee. “Can I see that painting?”

I tilted my head and stared at him with a surprised expression because Uncle Tommy had never asked me to see any of my work-in-progress paintings before. Annie had done that sometimes, but Tommy didn’t show any interest until the end, and even then, it was vague interest.

“I wanted to see what had you up so late,” he added.

I pulled the tablet in front of me again and typed.

I’m fine with that. You can come over with me when we’re done here. I will tell you that it’s not like my normal work. It’s not something I’ll sell.

I pushed the device across the table, and Tommy read it. He nodded. “That’s fine,” he said.

He went on talking about the sandwich... how the store didn't have any of his normal brand of bread the last time he went, and how he didn't like the sandwich as much because of it. I was listening to him, but my mind was racing. Yesterday had been a big day, and now Uncle Tommy was acting different than usual, asking me about my art, asking to see it.

I felt like something was off—like maybe he was tipped off to Malcolm being here last night. I tried to act casual, leaning back in my chair.

We wrapped up lunch, and five minutes later, we made our way down the hall and into my side of the house. We crossed the living room and went down another hallway to my studio.

I had a beautiful studio space. It was a large, twenty by twenty room with a wall of windows on the far side. I had high-tech blinds built into the windows that let me have privacy and filter the light as needed. It was a dream to have such a nice room to work in, and I happened to adore the painting that I saw when I walked in. It was far from complete, but it was mapped out with some of the color ideas filled in.

“Wow, that's not really your normal style, is it?” he said as he walked closer to it. “What is it? Is it a table? The top of a table... is that breakfast food? Is it a face? It's two faces.” Tommy talked the whole time he walked up to it.

The painting was as tall as me, six feet square and he stood there and inspected it. The shapes were drawn in and some of the colors were starting to be painted, but it had a long way to go.

I typed and flashed my tablet at him.

It's looking down on a breakfast table.

“Yeah, and there's two people sitting at the table,” he said, pointing to the edge of the painting where you could see the hands of one person.

He glanced at me, and I nodded.

“And the house smelled like pancakes last night. Is this your friend who came over?” He pointed to the painting, at the

figure, at the person who was indeed Malcolm. I knew he knew something.

I typed.

I started to play dumb, but I couldn't.

Did you see something last night?

"Yes," he said.

I typed.

What?

"I saw that you had a gentleman caller here." Tommy looked serious and concerned.

I wished he would be excited about me meeting someone, but as it stood, I stared at his face and I felt like he was mad. I had nothing but fear and dread that he was bringing it up. My heart raced.

I typed a message.

His name is Malcolm Shepherd. I met him in NY last month.

He read it and then turned and stared at the painting for so long that I moved and shifted in front of him to get him to snap out of it.

"I can't help but worry, Natalie."

I shrugged, asking why.

"Because this joker shows up out of nowhere on the day you made a fortune."

I shook my head, denying it instantly.

He gestured to the painting. "It's just that I can see you're getting all excited here. When you told me you were up all night, I knew you were really affected by this guy, and I want to warn you."

I typed on my pad.

Nothing happened.

I tried my best not to shake.

His eyes met mine. “Do you not think it’s convenient that he calls you when your paintings went for a fortune at auction?”

His question hurt me. I felt a physical pang and I cringed.

“I’m not saying that to hurt you, I’m saying it to protect you.”

I typed.

Don’t say it, please.

He read the tablet and then looked at me. “I know your heart, Natalie. I know this painting means something to you, and as an outsider I can see that he got in touch with you on the same day you made a whole ton of money. That auction was posted live on the internet.”

I nodded, feeling sad and trying my best to hold it together in a moment when I felt like crying. I wanted Tommy to be happy for me, and this reaction made me feel like I would never be able to meet someone. It made me feel like I’d never go a step further and tell him I had spoken.

I was having that thought when he said, “I heard you talking to him.”

My heart stopped.

My breathing stopped.

For a few seconds, I stood there, stunned, unable to form a coherent thought.

He knew.

He knew.

I had been scared that he overheard us when we were cooking last night. This all made sense as to why he invited me for lunch and was so inquisitive about my painting. I felt choked. I felt so stunned that I just stood there in a daze.

And then about a hundred memories and emotions hit me at once and I began to cry.

I put my face in my hands and I said, “I’m sor-ry,” out loud as I cried.

I let out a long sob as raw emotion surged through me.

Uncle Tommy took me awkwardly into his arms, approaching me from the side. I leaned into him and cried, feeling guilt and shame wash over me. I was embarrassed that he had heard me, and I hated that it happened that way instead of me working up the nerve to tell him myself.

“Annie always knew you would speak when you found a man you like.”

“What?” I asked quietly as I cried.

“She always said that, and I guess I just wanted you to be careful and not go falling in love with someone on the first meeting. He seems like a nice enough guy, but just looking at him you can tell he’s been around the block.”

I cried. “What block?”

“He’s a nice-looking young man, Natalie, but those are the most dangerous kind. You don’t know anything about him. I just want to protect you.”

He rubbed the back of my head as I cried. In that moment, we said nothing. I had already spoken to him. This was a whole new thing—me talking, him hugging me. This was all out of character for us, a gigantic deal. Uncle Tommy never hugged me like this. We stood there while I cried in his arms for a minute or two.

“I’m sorry,” was the first thing I said.

“Why are you sorry? You’re a grown woman. You’re not in trouble. It’s your house. I just live here. You can have a man over if you want.”

“I’m not sorry about that,” I said, quietly. “I’m sorry about being able to...” I sighed, looking for the right words. “I’m sorry for not talking to you. I’m sorry about Annie.” I cried, and Tommy held me. His arms squeezed me, to try to make me calm down, and it was a necessary comfort in those seconds. We stood there for another minute or two. He didn’t

know what to say, and I needed the moment to let quiet tears fall.

“You used to be a talkative little girl,” he said, finally. “Before it happened, you talked all the time. We knew you had a voice. It’s not like you didn’t have a voice.”

“I’m sorry I talked to a stranger and not to herrrr.”

He held me when I cried again. “It’s okay. Annie thought it might take a man in your life.”

I didn’t look at him. I tucked my head into his chest and stared at his flannel shirt. “I have so many reasons why this is terrifying and I feel like I can’t do it.”

“What? Talking? Why are you scared? You seemed like you were having fun last night.”

“I was having fun, and that’s what I’m scared of. I can’t just change out of nowhere and start acting normal. People think a certain thing of me. I’ve been doing the same thing for all these years. It would be weird of me to just change and start acting a different way.”

“It would be brave of you to do that.”

“You don’t think it would invalidate all the years before this? What about my career? You don’t think people would feel differently about buying my paintings? What about the people who just paid a ton for them? Would they be mad if they knew I wasn’t some mute, prodigy artist?”

I had to speak slowly in order to keep it together and not cry the whole time. He rubbed my back.

“Honey, I think you’re thinking about this too much.”

“How can I not?” I asked.

It was an honest question. I wanted to know.

“You can’t care about other people’s reactions to your life. You can’t base your own decisions on how you think people will react to them.”

“You say that like it’s easy.”

“It is easy. You just talk if you want to, or you don’t if you don’t want to. I don’t care who you talk to. You didn’t lose any value to me when I heard you do it.”

Hot tears streamed out of my eyes when he said that, and he held me.

“And you don’t have to keep quiet to sell paintings. If you can’t be yourself, they don’t deserve your art, anyway.”

I wasn’t sure I completely grasped exactly what he was saying, but somehow it was the perfect thing. “Thank you, Uncle Tommy. I’m sorry I didn’t talk for so long.” I spoke in a high-pitched tone because raw emotion welled in my throat.

I still wasn’t great at talking, and this whole scenario was overwhelming. It had snuck up on me so suddenly that these moments were like a dream. Uncle Tommy kept a hold of me even though this was not like us at all.

“You’re good,” he said. “You don’t need to be sorry. I’m sorry for what you went through. I’m sorry about your grandmother. And about all you went through. I don’t blame you for keeping your mouth shut.”

“Those paintings did well yesterday,” I said. “So I have some in savings. I feel like I have a little more leeway to be true to myself and start talking to people, even if it means my art goes down in value. I would just hate that for whoever has some of my art.”

“Why do you just assume that your art is going to lose value?”

“I don’t know, maybe the change in me would invalidate me as an artist.”

“You said that exact thing a minute ago. Listen, Natalie.” He paused and looked at me like he changed his mind about what he was going to say. “You know what? With what a big Christian you are, you sure aren’t talking like you have any faith or trust right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it okay to be a certain way in your life and then just feel like you can make different choices one day? You can change your habits, change your life. I know I’ve had ten times when I went through changes in life. Nothing the same as what you’re going through, but I’ve had to start new with different things. Everybody has their own battles to fight, Natalie. I know yours is a different one than most people. That’s why I try to protect you. I’m proud of you for talking. I just want you to be careful with that guy. He came out of nowhere.”

“He’s a good person, Uncle Tommy.”

“I trust you to judge that, I just wanted to tell you what I could see from the outside.”

“I know what you think you see with the auction, but Shep’s a good person.”

“I thought his name was Malcolm.”

“It is, but he goes by Shep... to most people. I usually call him Malcolm.”

“Why’d you just call him Shep?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I felt like it. He’s a good person, though. He didn’t call me because I made a lot of money. He only knew that because he wanted to bid on a painting. I know you’ve never met him and it might be hard to understand how someone like him could like me, but I really think he does.”

“It’s not hard to understand how he could like you,” Tommy said, “I just want to protect you.”

“I know. But I think he’s genuine.”

We sat there for a minute.

“I like your voice,” he said, hugging me and causing me to cry again.

Chapter 12

I was exhausted and delirious from getting no sleep at all the night before. After Uncle Tommy and I talked, I thought and cried for a bit, then I slept deeply but only for a short period of time.

When I woke up, it was 5pm that afternoon.

I knew I needed to get up so that I could try to get back on my normal sleep schedule. I wanted to talk to Malcolm. I thought of him and wondered how he made the trip home. I had hoped that he would text to check in with me, but I hadn't heard from him.

Catching up with Malcolm was in the back of my mind, and I hoped we would talk sometime before the night was over. But foremost in my mind was the painting. I was wired to make art, and within a minute or two of opening my eyes I was already standing in front of the canvas.

It felt like three minutes had passed, but it had been an hour. I knew it because my phone rang, and I looked down at it and saw the time was just after six. It was Malcolm calling, and I picked it up as quickly as I could.

"Hello?"

"Hey."

"What are you doing?" I asked, putting down my brush and stepping back. I wiped my forehead with the back of my forearm to get some stray hairs out of my face.

"I'm finally home," he said. "I'm at my apartment."

"Are you just getting home from my house?" I asked, feeling worried that something had happened to him.

"I am, but I'm fine. I had a good trip. I got a few hours of sleep, and then I went to my parents' house earlier. Then I had that thing for Anne-Marie this afternoon. I'm just getting back home."

I knew what he meant by that thing. His friend from the theater, Anne-Marie, was having a birthday party, and Shep

had already committed to going. He had told me about it when he was at my house.

“How’d that go?”

“It went good, but I was tired.”

“I know, I’m sorry. That’s my fault.”

“No, I’m so happy I went, I’m just out of it. I’ve only had a few hours of sleep since the last time I saw you.”

“Same with me. My nap was more recent than yours. I’ve only been up for an hour. But I’m in the same boat.”

“How did you only get a few hours of sleep? What happened?”

“I stayed up painting, and then Uncle Tommy invited me to lunch. So, we ate, and then he came into the studio, acting all curious. Long story short, he told me he heard me talking.”

“He did? Really? What did he say?”

“He started by saying that he had seen you here, and then he waited a little while, and then told me he heard us talking. He heard me.”

“How’d that go?”

I sighed. “Good, considering. You know, I don’t know what I expected—some explosion to go off, maybe, fireworks. It was just words between us. He told me he had heard us talking, and I got emotional. I cried and told him I was sorry for not telling him and Annie that I could talk.”

“What did he say?”

“He just said that I didn’t need to be sorry. He said they both knew I would do it... one d-day.” I stuttered because of what Tommy had said about me falling in love.

“Wow, that’s a big deal, Nat. You and Tommy had a conversation?”

“Yes.”

“That’s crazy. What a day. I’m proud of you.” We were quiet for a few long seconds, and he spoke again. “I talked to

Tommy last night.”

“You did?” I asked, feeling shocked.

It took me off guard to learn that because I thought that once Tommy met Malcolm, he would know what a sincere guy he was and not warn me about him. I felt instant disappointment to think that Tommy met him and still warned me.

“You met Tommy? Is that what you said?”

“Yeah, on my way out,” Shep said. “He came out to the truck and basically told me to mind my p’s and q’s around you.”

“How did that go? Was he nice?”

“He was okay. He kind of warned me, but I think we came to an understanding. I tried to tell him I was sincere, and it seemed like he heard me. I’m sorry that he didn’t tell you. I thought about whether or not I should mention it, and I didn’t want to keep it from you. I did meet him. It was brief, but I talked to Tommy.”

“Did he tell you he heard me talk?”

Shep was quiet for a few long heartbeats, and I knew the answer before he said it.

“He did. I wasn’t sure when he was going to mention it to you.”

I got quiet, thinking about everything. “I haven’t told Bridget,” I said. “I don’t know how I want to tell her.”

“Was it difficult with Tommy?”

“No, it wasn’t actually.”

“You said you cried.”

“I did, a little. But it’s just because there was a lot of emotion, and...” I trailed off.

“And what?” Shep asked.

“And nothing. I cried because of all the emotion. There was guilt and fear, but he was really sweet. He hugged me

which he almost never does. It was a good moment.”

“Well, if it went that well with him it’s only gonna go easier and easier with everyone else. Bridget’s really no big deal. Are you going to still have her come to the house and help you out?”

“Yeah, I mean, I think so. I guess I just have to see if telling her changes our dynamic. I was thinking about getting a car, which would take away the need for her to do errands for me, but really, I like having time to paint, and she helps me out a lot. I think I’ll keep things the way they are with Bridget—as long as she’s good with that.”

“Did you say you were thinking about getting a car?”

“The thought has crossed my mind lately. Today.”

He laughed. “How did you guys leave it?” he asked. “You and Tommy.”

“Good. We’re good.”

“How does it feel?”

“I don’t know. I’m still a little delirious, I think. I haven’t had time to process it all.”

“I’m tired, too,” he said. “But you’ve been through a lot. Did you say you were up all night working on a painting?”

I loved the sound of his voice. I could just imagine what he looked like. I stood in front of the painting and looked at his likeness on the canvas. It was just a piece of his body, but it brought the vision of him to my mind.

“What did you say?”

“What painting are you working on?”

“I’m looking at it right now,” I said. “It’s something different.”

“How big is it?”

“Six by six.”

“Taller than you.”

“Yes,” I said, staring at the top of it.

“What is it?”

I hesitated for a few seconds.

“Nothing,” I said with a smile in my voice.

“Now I really want to know.”

“No, it’s no big deal. It’s just that it has to do with you, maybe, so I’m sort of being shy.”

He paused, hesitating. “It has to do with me?”

“I’m sorry if that makes you feel weird. It’s not your face, but I don’t have to finish it if you don’t want me to—”

“It doesn’t make me feel weird,” he said, cutting me off. “I don’t feel weird. I feel amazing. I don’t even know what you mean when you say it has to do with me, but I don’t care. I love whatever you mean by that.”

“I’m not telling you what it is. I’m going to wait till I finish.”

“You still need to text me the pictures we took last night.”

“The painting has to do with that,” I said.

“It does?”

“Yeah, but that’s all I’m telling you. I regret saying that just now. I want to finish it and show you when it’s complete. I’m thinking about it all the time, so I think I’ll finish it in a week or two.”

I stopped talking, thinking he would respond. It took him a moment, and I said.

“Malcolm?”

“I’m sorry. I’m just...” his voice was soft and thick with emotion. “I was thinking.”

“About what? Are you okay with me painting this?”

“I’m so okay with it,” he said with a little laugh. “I’m more than okay.” He cleared his throat. “Listen. I’m a funny guy. I’m known for that. They typecast me to be the funny character. We laugh because I never have to be dramatic unless I’m joking. I’ve never even been cast as a character who had

to do a dramatic scene. Anyway, I'm, like, feeling like crying right now. I admire you so much and I am amazed by your God-given ability. I tried to imagine what it could possibly be that you've painted, and it just makes me feel... things that I don't normally feel. I am beyond excited, Natalie. I love your work."

"I think it's going to be a beautiful painting," I said, staring at the shapes of the table and our whimsical breakfast plates. The colors weren't there yet, but I could see them in my mind. "I'm excited about it," I added as I stared.

"How do you feel about officially socializing?" he asked.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I have a play to go to. It's not the Memphis Players. It's another organization called ACTS. But I have friends in the play. They're doing Clue. It should be good. It's a fun play, and I know most of the cast."

"In Memphis?"

"Yes. But I can come pick you up."

I laughed at the sweet offer. "I might get a car," I said. "Or get Tommy to drop me off at the airport."

"Yes, please, to either of those," Shep said excitedly.

"But I don't know for sure yet," I warned. "I don't know how I feel about it. I don't know what I'll say. What if your friends look me up on their phones and they see that I don't talk?"

"If you come, everything will be okay. If you can trust that everything will be okay, then you'll have a good time. But if you're worried about it, that'll just make it harder. We can take it slow, though. You can start by telling Bridget. I can come see you a few times, and then we can try a play later if you want."

"When is it?"

"Clue? Not this coming weekend, but the next."

"So, like twelve or thirteen days away?"

“Yes. They have performances all weekend. Thursday through Sunday. Are you even thinking about it?”

“Yes, I am.”

“It’s a small theater group,” he said. “They’re good, but it’s not like Broadway or anything. I don’t want you to plan this big thing and drive for hours thinking it’s big. It’s in a small playhouse. A blackbox.”

“I’m not even thinking about the show,” I said. “I just kind of want to go there to sit next to you.”

There was a smile in his voice when he said, “Yes, okay, then, great. Think about it, and if you wanna come, let me know so I can get tickets.”

“Just get tickets for Friday night, and if I can’t make it then I’ll pay for them, anyway.”

“Okay, yes, good, Friday night.”

“This is the first weekend in May?”

“Yes,” he agreed.

“I don’t think I would be able to drive back after I watch a show at night. If I come, I’ll get a hotel.”

“You should stay with my parents,” he said. “I mean you don’t have to, but I want you to, and I know they’d love to have you. My little sister is the only one who still lives at home, and they have two empty bedrooms.”

I sighed at the thought of talking to his family. “Let me think about all this,” I said.

“But you want me to go ahead and get the tickets for Friday?”

“Yes. I think so. I’m nervous now, but I’m thinking about it.”

“Don’t think about it. Don’t worry about it. It’s an easy venue. We can go on a date, a real date. We can have dinner and then go to the show. I don’t mind picking you up in Alabama if you need me to.”

“No, just let me think about it. I have to think about all of this again after a good night’s sleep.”

Chapter 13

I was accustomed to time passing at a faster-than-normal rate while I was working. I would settle in with paint and a canvas, and spend a three or four hour clip in what felt like a few heartbeats.

I thought about going to Birmingham to purchase a vehicle, but even that seemed like a daunting task because of how much I wanted to work on the painting. I ended up asking Tommy if I could use his truck to go to Memphis instead of buying my own. I didn't want to make that kind of purchase hastily, and I didn't feel like devoting time to it when I was so involved with the painting.

It was large and intricate enough that I worked on it exclusively and full-time for the next week.

I told Bridget the news about me deciding to talk again, and she planned on continuing to work with me and help me out with my life's tasks so that I could devote my time and attention to painting.

As far as Bridget went, our dynamic hadn't changed much since she found out I could talk. She and I still shared a lot of quiet time in each other's presence. Tommy and I were the same way. We talked some, but I didn't turn into a chatterbox at home, which was no surprise to any of us.

I had plans to drive Tommy's truck to Memphis and go with Malcolm to a play that following Friday evening. I would leave that day at around noon. I would watch the play and spend the night in Memphis before heading back home on Saturday.

Shep and I would go on a real date. We would sit across from each other and have dinner. We would see a play together, and we might even hold hands in public. We had texted and talked on the phone every day since he came over to my house, but we hadn't seen each other since then.

I worked feverishly on the painting, and in my off-time, I spoke to Malcolm. Days passed, and the Clue weekend snuck

up on me quickly. I was glad I had an outfit that was dressy and appropriate for a night at the theater. I packed a light blue dress and a few other things. I put them into a bag along with some of my makeup, perfume, soap, and lotion.

I was out of my comfort zone in so many ways, and I didn't care. And the driving force behind all of it was that I wanted to see Malcolm. He had invited me to Memphis, and there was just no way I was going to deny him. I had to make it happen. I had to go.

I felt reluctant once Friday morning rolled around, but I put one foot in front of the other, packing my things and getting ready for a big evening. I wore jeans and a t-shirt for the trip, and I brought the dress and my other clothes with me.

Tommy had a medium-sized truck that was only five or six years old and it was trustworthy enough to make the trip. He gassed it up for me, and I left before noon.

It was a good time for me to step away from the painting. It was ninety-eight percent done, and I thought the break was perfectly timed. I would step away for an evening and then be back Saturday afternoon at which time I could add the finishing touches.

All that was missing were small details, and the break would do my eyes some good before committing to them. At least that was what I told myself. In theory, I wanted to be completely done with the painting before I left for my trip, but that didn't happen.

I asked Tommy if I should rent a vehicle, but he insisted that he could go a day without his truck. He had plenty of groceries and a few people he could call if he needed something while I was gone.

I had doubts. Uncle Tommy being by himself wasn't the extent of my worry. I had driven some, but never such a long trip, and I wondered how I would physically feel after doing it.

Honestly, though, all of my worry seemed insignificant to the excitement I felt about seeing Malcolm.

I had plans to stay the night at his parent's house, so he gave me the address and I went directly there. My map app brought me to a neighborhood that was on the outskirts of Memphis, and I was in a dazed state and feeling out of my element as I drove to the destination. The whole thing was so unlike anything I'd ever done that it felt a little like acting. I was pretending to be confident and okay as I parked at his parents' house.

It was a large but not flashy home in an established neighborhood with large, open yards and mature trees. I parked behind Malcolm's truck. By the time I got my bag out of the back of Tommy's truck, Malcolm was already outside.

I heard him approaching and I abandoned my luggage and turned to greet him with a hug. He hugged me tightly and then stood back, looking me over with a huge smile. It was sunny, and he was squinting while I had on sunglasses. He was barefoot with jeans and a fitted t-shirt. I could feel his muscles through the thin fabric, and I felt a warm surging feeling in my core.

He was gorgeous and it made me feel... *was this butterflies? Was there a level beyond butterflies?* I was done for with this man. He was masculinity at its finest. He was a tough, strong man who also understood art and was a talented singer and actor. I had never seen him perform live, but I had seen a few videos of him on stage, and I was smitten. I was beyond smitten, honestly.

All he had done was hug me there in his parents' driveway, and I felt like I wanted to run away with him, settle down immediately and make babies.

"I am so happy you're here," he said, squeezing me. He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek before pulling back and reaching for my bag. "My mom's right in there. She's on her way out, but she wanted to stay around and meet you before she left."

"Oh, okay," I said.

He smiled and kissed my cheek again on his way to the house. He left me breathless. I wanted him, and he looked at

me like he wanted me too.

“My little sister is here, too. They’re both inside. They’re taking off in a minute, but I wanted them to meet you.”

He took my bag while I closed the door to the truck.

“I don’t usually bring women around here to meet my family.”

I put a hand to my chest, making a face of surprise. “Are you calling me special right now?” I asked, smiling and causing him to smile.

“You have no idea.”

“Are you sure I’m not in their way staying the night?” I asked. “Because I don’t mind getting a hotel.”

“No. Believe me, my mom was sad when I told her we would be gone all night at the play. My parents have plenty of room, I promise.”

I followed him inside through what looked to be the side door. It led us in through the kitchen, and his mother was on the far side of it.

“Lizzyyy!” she yelled, aiming her voice up a set of stairs before turning her attention to me. She had dark, shoulder-length hair and a warm smile. “You must be Natalie. I’m Maria. Oh, my goodness, it’s wonderful to meet you, sweetheart. I feel like I’ve been waiting my whole life for this.”

“Mom.”

Malcolm and his mother made eye contact.

“Baby boy, could you go to the garage and get a pack of chicken thighs out of the deep freezer and bring it in here? I forgot to take it out to thaw for tomorrow.”

“Really?” he said, staring at her.

“Yes, really. Please? It’s on the top shelf, I think. Either that, or the bottom shelf.”

He laughed.

“I’m pretty sure it’s not in the middle,” she added as he jogged away.

Maria stared at me intensely once he was in the other room. She held onto my arms and regarded me right in the eyes. “I’m sorry to come out and say this so quickly, but I don’t know that we’ll ever get another minute alone. Shep said he’s got plans for you tonight and that you’re leaving tomorrow. But I wanted to tell you... my son thinks you’re really special. Malcolm has never, in his life, brought a girl into my house. We laugh about how it has never happened, not even once.” She held onto me with both of her hands. “So, I just want to tell you that from a mother’s standpoint, it’s a big deal that you walked through my door. I think you might be significant to my son.”

“Uh, he’s significant to me, too,” I said quietly.

I barely had time to get the words out before he came back into the room, carrying a package of meat. He was staring at me like he hoped I was okay, and I gave him a reassuring smile. He was like a leading man. He seemed like a handful, and I felt ill-equipped to handle him but I knew I had to try.

“Here you go,” he said to his mother, cutting into the room, and handing her the package of chicken.

She waved him away and gestured across the room. “Could you put it in the fridge?” she asked.

And I watched as he did it.

His sister came downstairs at that moment. She was a beautiful young teenager with long hair and straight teeth, and she smiled at me and looked me over. I could tell she was curious about me.

“This is Natalie,” Shep said to his sister.

“Lizzy,” she said, offering me a little wave.

I waved back at her.

“Lizzy would normally just be coming home from school right now, but she had a dermatologist appointment today, so

she got checked out earlier. We did that, and now we have to go to the store to get a shirt she needs for a thing at school next week.”

I nodded and smiled but didn't know what to say to respond. I almost asked “if she liked school,” but that felt cheesy and I opted for silence in that moment. I tried to think of something better to say.

I was out of breath and overwhelmed because the moment felt like it meant something. I didn't know what I was getting into when I signed up for meeting his mom and sister this weekend, and it felt more meaningful than I was expecting it to.

Chapter 14

I stayed in the kitchen and talked to Maria and Lizzy for a few minutes when I arrived in Memphis. I didn't know what to say at first, but I found that they were easy to talk to. We asked each other a few questions based on things Shep had told us. They asked me about my art, and I asked about Lizzy's hobby, which was music. She had several guitars and had been taking lessons. I liked to listen to music while I worked, and we talked about different types of music for a few minutes.

I could feel that my face was hot and I was blushing at times while we talked, but I stuck with it. I answered their questions and asked questions of my own, getting past the lump in my throat.

"What are you working on now?" Maria asked, looking at me.

"Oh, I'm... I'm actually almost done with a piece that Shep's been really curious about."

"You think?" he said. "I'm so curious about it it's not even funny. She works on it all the time, and every day, I ask her to Facetime me so I can see it. She's given me just enough vague details to get me insanely curious."

"That sounds exciting," Maria said. "It must not be like your normal work."

"No, but I love it," I said. "It's not like anything I've ever done."

"See what I mean?" Shep asked. "She says stuff like that, and I'm dying over here."

"I brought a picture of it with me," I said.

"You did not!" Shep grabbed me like he might just shake it out of me. He was so excited and animated about it that I let out a little laugh.

"I-I did."

"You have a photograph of that painting?" he asked, his grip loosening.

“Yes. I’m almost done with it.”

“Let’s see it!” Lizzy said, surprising me and causing all of us to look at her.

I smiled and went to look for my phone.

“I cannot believe you are showing us a... I seriously can’t believe you guys are getting to see this. I’ve been begging her for weeks to let me...” Shep craned his neck, stretching to try to see my phone. Maria reached for it, and I handed it to her. “Oh, no you did not!” he said dramatically, causing me to laugh.

He knew I was just giving him a hard time by showing his mother first, and I loved how he was dramatic and overreacted to make us all laugh.

“That’s so cool!” Lizzy exclaimed, looking over her mother’s shoulder.

“It’s breakfast,” Maria said, inspecting it with a smile.

“It’s breakfast?” Shep said, looking at me.

“It is breakfast, a cool breakfast,” Lizzy said, smiling and staring at the screen.

She went to zoom in and get a closer look, but Shep snagged the phone out of her hand. It all happened so quickly that she yelped and made a face at her brother.

He turned the phone around and stared at the screen. “This is unbelievable. I... I...” he looked at the phone for a few seconds and then at his mother. “I did this. That’s my art, right there. I made these plates. These were real.” He looked at me stunned. “How did you get them so accurate?”

“I have a picture.”

“That came from a picture?” Maria said, marveling. The perspective was a little warped and bird’s-eye, giving it an artistic flare. She came over and looked over Shep’s shoulder, staring at the phone again.

“I made these plates of food, ” Shep repeated. “I made this when I went to see her that night. Right now I feel famous.

I can't believe you painted this, Nat. It's amazing. Is it six feet tall?" He paused and stared at me, unblinking. "I'm basically a famous artist now. I'm going to pause to let this all sink in."

Shep was hilarious in his delivery, and he had me laughing as his mom and sister continued to look at my phone.

I loved how excited he was about the painting. I could see the excitement in his smile and hear it in his voice. He stared at me like we had some secret code, like he was attracted to me, like he might eat me alive once he had me in private. He was the most handsome, sweet man I had ever seen, and I wanted so badly to impress him. My heart pounded. I had a feeling of joy and elation as a result of his reaction to the painting. My pulse raced as his family checked it out. I knew the photo had not done the painting justice, and I could not wait for him to see it in person.

"That's really neat," Maria said. "Is that you and Malcolm in the picture? I'd love to see some of your work in person one day."

I almost let her know that I was going to give that painting to Shep, but I didn't say it. "Thank you," I said. "I hope so too."

She smiled at me, focusing on me with a sentimental expression. I saw Shep in her features, and I was happy to be on the other end of a motherly stare. In those seconds, I felt like I wanted to cry, and I had to turn away and blink, smiling to hide my emotion.

"Well, we need to go pick up that shirt, but we'll be back. And my husband will be home a little later," she said, hugging me. "I do hope he'll get to meet you some time while you're here."

"I'll make sure she meets Dad," Shep said.

He was cool and calm, and I smiled at him.

"Show her to your old room," Maria said, looking at her son.

"I will," he agreed.

And just like that, the two of them left.

They were the first people I had been introduced to when I just spoke to them like anyone else would do. I had been in conversations with Uncle Tommy, Bridget, and with Shep, but Maria and Lizzie were the first people I had ever been introduced to normally. The whole interaction made me feel alive.

Shep stared at me when the door closed behind them. He made a face, and I laughed and said, “What?”

“You know what. That painting.”

I smiled, relieved that he wasn't mentioning my nerves. “Do you like it?”

“You painted the exact plates I made.”

“I know. Isn't it beautiful? You did a great job.”

He stared at me. “I think the painting is far greater than the food itself was.”

“Do you like it?”

He licked his lips as he smiled. It was utterly irresistible. I had to remember to breathe.

Shep didn't answer me right away. He was staring at me like he was about to kiss me, and I was desperate for it to happen and nervous at the same time.

I shifted. His mom and sister were outside by now, and I so badly wanted to throw myself into his arms. The tension was thick in the air between us.

“Do you want it?” I asked.

“Do I want what?”

“The painting. What did you think I meant?”

He stared at my face, at my mouth. “Are you asking me if I want the painting? Are you going to sell it to me? I was about to beg you not to sell it, but if it's to me, then we're good.”

“I’m not selling it to you, I’m giving it to you. I painted it for you.”

I felt his big warm hand touch my lower back after I said that.

“I wrote your name on the canvas before I started painting. It’s under there somewhere. Sometimes I do that, write a short phrase. A lot of times, it’s scripture.”

“And you wrote my name on this one?”

His hand was on my back so inevitably we were standing close. I reached out and let my hand rest on his muscle-lined forearm. He was so handsome and masculine, and he was the only man I had ever been in this position with. I went from nothing to everything. I wished I had more practice and could be more confident, but Shep made everything seem so natural. He made me feel like I was good at being in this proximity to a man, even when I had no experience whatsoever.

“I wrote ‘to Malcolm’ on the canvas before I got started,” I said. I had actually written ‘to Malcolm with love’ but I left the last part out. He would never see it. No one would.

“I love the sound of you saying my name.” He closed his eyes and leaned in as if he was concentrating. “Can you repeat what you wrote?”

“I just wrote that it was to Malcolm on the canvas before I started painting because I knew I was painting it for you.”

He reached up and touched my face, letting his fingers rest on my cheek. He breathed a sigh, his chest rising and falling. I stared at his chest because it was even with my line of vision. His t-shirt was a faded cranberry color, and it was threadbare. My gaze moved, and I stared at the edge of his collar, how it rested against the skin of his neck. I stared at his body, taking in the way he looked. He had muscles, and I was weak in the knees.

“You did great with my family,” he said.

“I did?”

“Yes. They love you.”

“How could you tell that?” I said in a disbelieving tone.

“I can tell. I know my family, and I can tell how they react. Plus, they know...” Shep trailed off in mid-sentence.

“What do they know?” I asked.

His hand was no longer on my face, but he was still lightly holding me. My body was on fire in the places where I felt him. I was keenly aware of every place our bodies touched. His mouth was perfectly shaped. I knew because my gaze fell on it when he spoke.

“They know how I feel,” he said. “They’re aware of my situation.”

My eyes snapped to meet his. “What’s your situation?” I asked.

“That my mind is fixed on having you, so they sort of don’t have a choice in the matter. I already told them how I feel about you. I knew they would love you.”

“Do they know my past and everything?”

“Yes,” he said, simply. “Thank you for coming here, Natalie.”

“I am happy to be here. I’m excited about the play. I don’t know anything about Clue. I’ve never even seen the movie.”

“I’m going to take you to eat at a fancy restaurant before the show. The guy’s a celebrity chef.”

“The one you were telling me about? Zack?”

He nodded, adjusting me in his arms. “I shouldn’t get comfortable. I’m going to take you to my old bedroom so you can get settled in.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling at him.

“It’s a new thing for me that I want you to stay here and that I’m introducing you to my family. That’s not meant to make you feel any pressure because I don’t want you to do anything but be yourself. I’m just telling you it’s a big deal on my end.”

“Your mom told me that. That’s what your chicken errand was about.”

He grinned. “What did she tell you?”

“That you don’t usually bring ladies around here,” I spoke quietly because the subject made me feel shy.

“I don’t,” he whispered. He used a finger under my chin. He was going to tilt my head upward, but I wanted to kiss him so badly that I gave no resistance. I moved before he did.

And just like that, our mouths met, and we were kissing. Malcolm Shepherd kissed me deeply. We stood in his parents’ kitchen and he kissed me like we were the only two people on earth. No one was home. The house was quiet and empty, and he kissed me for real. We had hardly kissed the last time we saw each other, and this was way more than that. Malcolm held me and touched me like he was thirsting for my kiss. I experienced a heart-stopping sensation as he kept me in his grasp. His kiss was electric. His tongue in my mouth was a warm, silky intrusion that had my insides hot and melted. I felt heavy, like my body was given over to him. He was the only man who had ever or would ever kiss me, and because of that fact, I gave in to the passion of it all.

Shep kissed me feverishly and for so long that our breathing was heavy when he finally pushed me back. He seemed reluctant, having to pry himself away.

“My goodness, Natalie. I have to stop. You’re such a…”

He trailed off, and I feared the worst since I was such a novice.

“I’m such a what? Such a novice?”

“Such a what?” he said, laughing.

He kissed me again. It was meant to be a quick one, but we became engaged in it again, and another minute or two passed before he pulled back. Shep’s mouth was perfect. It was warm and soft, and it was like a magnet to mine. He groaned when he pulled back for a second time.

“No, Natalie, I wasn’t saying you’re such a novice, or whatever you just said. I was saying you’re such a temptation for me. I can’t let myself get too... I have to exercise some restraint here. We’re at my parents’ house, and we’re... not... married.”

He said the words reluctantly, and I giggled causing him to squeeze me.

“I have never said that word to a woman before. It felt weird coming out of my mouth for a second, and then I realized I want to say it to you. Do you know how incredibly beautiful and special you are? I’m out-of-my-mind-excited that you’re here in Memphis. And I’m so amazed about that painting. I can’t wait to see it in person.”

“Next time you see it, you’ll be able to take it home with you.”

He kissed me on the cheek. “I want to take you home with me.”

“I am home with you,” I said. “I’m here right now.”

“It’s not exactly what I meant, but I’ll take it.”

Chapter 15

Malcolm Shepherd

Malcolm was in love.

He wanted to shout it from the rooftops. He wanted everyone to know that he loved Natalie Meyers and she was his. He loved her and that was all there was to it. She had only been in Memphis for a couple of hours, and he already felt like she would be in his life forever.

She had just gone to his room to get dressed for their evening out, and he texted his friend, Bailey.

Shep:

Are you going to see Clue tonight?

She texted him back within a minute.

Bailey:

No, we went opening night. It was so good. Kennedy's amazing. Are you going tonight?

Shep:

Yes, and I'm taking my gf. I wanted you to meet her.

Bailey:

I know a few people are going to tonight's show. I'm sad I'll miss you. You're calling her your gf now? Who is this girl? Still the painter from New York?

Shep:

She's not from NY, but yes, we met there. Yes, same girl. We're eating at Zack's place before the show. He gave us reservations even though they were full. Thank you for knowing cool people.

Bailey:

I really want to meet your lady. I might stop by Zack's. Are you okay with that?

Shep:

Yes.

Bailey:

You seem so domesticated, even via text. Haha

Shep:

I am so in love, B. I want to marry her and have babies. If you can, please talk her into that when you see her tonight. Talk me up.

Bailey:

You're so funny. And of course I will. She's the one getting a catch.

Shep:

Aw, you love me?

Bailey:

I do love you. That's why I want to meet the girl who turned your head.

Shep:

I want you to meet her.

Bailey:

I'll prob see you tonight. What time?

Shep:

The show starts at 7. Dinner reservations at 5:30.

Bailey:

Okay, see you at Zack's.

It was ten minutes later, and Shep was in the middle of getting dressed when he got a text from his friend, Gina.

Gina:

Hey, Bailey said you and your girlfriend are going to Zack's restaurant tonight.

Shep:

We are. But I thought you're seeing Clue tonight.

Gina:

I was. I was planning on going with Owen and August, but I can't. I have to help my parents tonight and see it tomorrow. Can I come by the restaurant and meet your lady, though?

Shep:

Yes. 6pm. Work it out with Bailey and you guys come together.

Gina:

Okay, see you then.

Shep smiled as he tossed his phone onto his parents' bed. He brought his clothes over here and he was using their master suite to get dressed while Natalie did the same in his old room.

His parents and Lizzy were all in the living room. He would go back out there before Natalie finished getting ready. Shep considered whether or not it was a mistake to allow Bailey and Gina to go to the restaurant. He didn't want Natalie to be overwhelmed.

But it would be fine.

He would make sure she was fine.

He would protect her.

He heard knocking on his parents' door followed by the words, "Knock, knock!" His mother was calling through the door, and he yelled back and told her to come in.

"Hey, you look handsome."

"Really? Because I'm trying." He squinted in the mirror, adjusting his hair.

"You look so handsome," she assured him. "Really. You look great, baby. I'm proud of you. But, hey, I wanted to tell you... I wanted to talk to you before Natalie came back down here."

"What is it?" he asked, focusing on his mom with a concerned stare.

“It’s fine, it’s good. I just wanted to say... it’s obvious that Natalie loves God. It comes out in this joy and peace that makes her seem larger than life. She isn’t uptight or religious, but she has a way about her that makes it obvious she was connected to something bigger than herself.”

“I know, Mom,” Shep said. He knew Natalie was built differently, and it was unbelievably attractive to him.

“I know your relationship is pretty new and everything, and obviously it’s not anything I would ever want to pressure you about. But that is an amazing quality to look for in a mate, Malcolm. I know you’re not thinking about marriage right now, but I—”

“I am thinking about marriage,” he said. “I would not have her here at this house if I didn’t think she was the person I want to marry.”

Maria stepped back and regarded her son, looking him over as if asking if he was serious or not.

“I’m not joking,” he said with a smile.

He casually went back to making final adjustments to his appearance in the mirror as his mom stood there with him.

“I knew when we first met that she was different. I was done for after New York. I never got her out of my mind—out of my heart. I know she’s the one. That sounds weird coming from me, but she definitely is. I need her, and I’m pretty sure she needs me. She’s been through a lot, so I’m trying to take it slow, but yes. I’m planning on doing my best to be with her indefinitely. Marriage and all that stuff.”

“Well, honestly, after meeting her, I feel like you could do a lot worse.”

“Literally anyone else would be a lot worse.”

She stared at her son. “I can’t believe you’re in love. I told your father when it hit you it was going to hit you hard, but I don’t even think I knew what I was saying. I didn’t expect this, but at the same time I’m like you where I know it’s right and good.” She touched his arm. “I can hardly believe my baby boy is introducing me to a woman he loves.”

Malcolm took a deep breath as he turned to face Maria. "I'm so motivated to have her, Mom."

She gave him a sincere once-over before touching his broad shoulder and smiling like she felt so proud of him. "Well, she's the one who's lucky, if you ask me."

"Did you see that painting with the plates?" His eyes sparkled with excitement as he regarded his mom.

"I did see," she said. "She's really talented."

"You have no idea until you see them in person. That breakfast one is as tall as me, and they're breathtaking in person. It's hard to believe a person even paints them. The first time I saw them, I threw up."

"You did not!"

"Yes, I did."

Maria cracked up at the thought, and Shep chuckled at his mom.

"Have you told her that?"

"No, I haven't. I've thought about it, but I thought she could take it the wrong way."

She smiled as she regarded him. "W-what happened? Why did you throw up?"

He sighed and smiled. "I don't know, just emotion, I guess."

She touched the side of his face.

"It's just a date, Mom."

She shrugged and smiled. "Kind of."

They were both downstairs in the kitchen a few minutes later when Natalie came back into the room. She had her hair styled and she was wearing a long blue dress that seemed to be made of linen or something natural. It was casual but sophisticated. She had on a light sweater that was a darker blue. Her hair hung over her shoulders, and Shep wanted to reach out and touch it—to touch her. She didn't always wear

glasses, but tonight she had on small round glasses that looked adorable on her. She was a little lady, his lady. He wanted to parade her around Memphis, getting everyone's attention and announcing that she was his. Natalie Shepherd. He knew it would come to pass that he would marry her. He stared at her, there in his parents' kitchen, and he felt in his heart that they would be together for the rest of their lives.

It was thirty minutes after that when they sat at their table in Zack's restaurant. His place was a small, dimly-lit, hipster kind of fine dining restaurant, but Zack made the experience easy. The restaurant was full, and so they got to sit at the family table.

Bailey and Gina were two of Shep's best friends from the theater, and they walked in together and went straight to the table where Shep and Natalie were sitting.

They both smiled as they hugged her and checked her out. Their food hadn't arrived yet, and the girls took a seat at the table, explaining that they'd only stay for a minute.

"What did you guys order?" Bailey asked.

"I'm having chicken and Shep's having steak."

"It's all so good," she said. "Have you ever eaten here?" Her question was directed toward Natalie and Natalie shook her head.

"No. This is my first time in Memphis."

"Oh... cool... so are you in town for..." Bailey hesitated. "Are you just here for the night?"

"Yes. Malcolm was saying he knew a few of the actors in Clue, and I had never seen it, so yes. I'm here to see that play. I just drove in for the show."

He absolutely loved seeing her interact with his friends.

"I saw it already," Bailey said. "You guys are in for a treat."

"Shep said you're an artist," Gina said.

"I am."

“Is it Christian?” she asked.

“Mostly,” Natalie agreed with a nod. “I’m working on one. Shep helped me with the design.”

“It’s true, it’s true. I’ll go ahead and tell you that I am the artist who made the actual thing she painted. I’m sure the painting is a lot better than the original object, but still, I’m really proud that something I made got into her art. She’s amazing.”

“What is it? What did you make that she painted?”

“Breakfast,” Shep said.

“He made pancakes that looked like faces, and I painted them.”

“It’s gorgeous. You should see it. All of her art is amazing. She has a gift.”

He shifted and extended his leg under the table. His ankle touched hers, and her eyes met his when it happened. She smiled like she was glad he did it.

“I can’t wait to see your stuff,” Gina said.

“I would love that, and I’d love to see you guys in a show,” Natalie said.

“I’m driving her by the Blackbird after this, if we have time before the show starts.”

“Oh, yeah, Shep’s already told me about that theater. I bet it’s beautiful. I can just imagine it by the way he described it.”

“We live upstairs, and you’re welcome to come by anytime,” Bailey said.

They talked for a few minutes before a server came into view with the food.

“I guess we should let you guys get back to it,” Bailey said, seeing her coming. “Thanks for letting us crash your date.”

“Yeah, thanks for letting us meet your girlfriend,” Gina said. She smiled at Shep. She was baiting him to see if he

would tolerate the use of the word, but he didn't care. He wanted everyone to say it.

"I wanted you guys to meet her, thank you for coming by," he said sincerely when they left.

The two of them made their way out, and Natalie smiled at him from across the table just in time for their server to walk up to the table with their food. Shep moved his foot, touching her ankle again, and causing her to smile. Neither of them were paying attention to the food. The server explained what it all was, but all he could think about was Natalie's leg resting on his and the fact that she was there with him at all.

The steak looked delicious and everything, but he could feel her warm skin under the bottom of her skirt, and that was enough to take in at the moment.

Chapter 16

Natalie Meyers

Shep's leg was touching my leg, and it was difficult to hear our server or pay attention to anything she said. I was breathless and distracted. He was intentionally touching me, and I loved it.

He was dressed nicely in dark slacks and a blue-grey button-down shirt. Our colors coordinated, and we looked nice next to each other. His mom had mentioned it before we left. We had talked to his family for so long on our way out that we ran late to make it here for our reservation. We barely got to the restaurant on time. Because of that, everything had seemed like it happened in a haze.

I talked to his family, and then I went to the restaurant and talked to the server. His friends from the theater group came by the restaurant, and I talked to them as well. It was an evening that went off without a hitch... like something I had imagined. It was all like a movie. I felt as if my life was a movie to an odd extreme at the moment because I had only seen scenes like these in movies. It was a real date where I met Shep's friends and talked to them like I was just a normal person who lived on the earth like everyone else. I never had that feeling before, and it was glorious.

I was smiling and talking to Shep as we finished our dinner and feeling a bit like I was walking on clouds. That was the state of mind I was in when a woman walked up to our table. She approached the table cautiously as if she was afraid to interrupt us. She focused on Shep and approached his side. I looked to him for reassurance. He smiled at her and stood halfway to shake her hand.

"Mrs. Shanahan."

"Malcolm, Shep, Shepherd, I didn't know if you'd recognize me. I'm so glad you do. I'm sorry to interrupt your meal. I tried to wait until you were finished with your dinner, but we need to be going, and I wanted to come by."

“It’s good to see you,” he said.

“Thank you.” The woman turned to me. “I was Malcolm’s middle school art teacher, and I didn’t even know if he’d remember me.”

“Of course I do. You introduced me to screen printing. That was fun. I’ve secretly wanted to work in a t-shirt shop since then.”

She touched her chest like she was blushing. I could tell she was nervous. “Well, that makes me feel so good that you remember me at all. I’ve seen you in a few of your shows during the last few years and you really are amazing, Malcolm. We saw you as donkey in Shrek and my daughter got a picture with you, but there were a lot of people there, and I don’t think you recognized me.”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry I didn’t even realize you were there.”

“Yeah, yeah you were busy after the show, and I didn’t want to bother you with... I mean, you didn’t really have time to catch up or anything like that. And I know you don’t have time now, but I just...” She still had her hand on her chest and she turned and regarded me nervously with a pleading expression. “I’m really sorry, but... being an art teacher and all... you must understand how I could... if you didn’t know this... you bear a striking resemblance to a woman named Natalie Myers. She’s a painter, an artist. Have you ever heard of a woman named Natalie Myers? I actually do a section in my class on her. I teach in public school, and I technically can’t share my faith in the classroom, but this woman... her art is... I would call it supernatural.” She stared at me. “I would look into her if I were you, because you bear a striking resemblance to her. She looks exactly like you.” She blinked at me.

“She is me,” I said. “I am she.”

“You are who?”

“Natalie Meyers.”

“No!” she said in disbelief.

“She’s Natalie Meyers,” Shep said.

She let out a yelping sound as she turned to Shep. “Natalie Meyers who painted Adam in the Garden?”

“Yes,” Shep said.

“Goliath is Dead?” she asked.

“That was one of my early pieces,” I said, sounding impressed. I was impressed. That was one of my very early pieces.

“I’m sorry for saying this,” the teacher said, looking confused. “But I thought you were... I thought you used a computer to talk to people. I thought you were deaf. I taught my students that you were deaf. I’m sorry for saying that. I’m really sorry. I’m nervous right now. But I just didn’t want to get it wrong, so I wanted to ask you.”

Shep stretched forward, asking me to give him my hand over the table. I leaned in and put my hand in his.

“Do you mind if I answer for you?” he asked, looking at me.

“No,” I said since that was the most glorious offer anyone had ever made me. I could feel myself starting to turn red and lose my train of thought, and I was thankful that he took over.

“It’s an amazing story, actually. To put it in a nutshell, she got healed. She never was deaf, she could always hear. But now she speaks and hears. It was a miracle that happened.”

“What caused it?” she asked, looking at him.

“Love,” he said, with a wry grin that only Malcolm Shepherd could pull off. So hot. He was actually so hot. I wasn’t even the type of person to say ‘hot’, but it applied in this situation. This man was smoking.

“Is this true?” she asked, taking a step back and regarding us as a pair, wondering if this was the love he was talking about.

I only nodded.

Shep had taken care of everything. He had told the truth in a short, sweet way that left her blinking at us like she could

just cry.

“I am so sorry for interrupting your dinner, but I thank you so much for taking the time to share that with me. I really respect your art, Ms. Meyers, and to put you with one of my former students who I’m so proud of... it’s just a great moment for me. Can I have ten more seconds to snap a photograph with you guys? I don’t have to show it to anybody, but just to have it for myself would be so amazing.”

Shep glanced at me and I nodded, letting him know I didn’t mind.

“Let me see your phone,” he said.

She nervously handed him her phone, and he stood up, coming around the table. I stayed where I was and the two of them stood on either side of me. Shep held the phone out and snapped a photo of us. It was a good picture, I could see it on the screen.

“I’m okay with you showing that photo to your friends,” I said to her.

I could see that she was sincerely excited to meet me, and it made me feel at ease about the whole talking thing. Shep made me feel at ease in general.

“I’m definitely okay with it,” he said. “And you can tell your class we’re in love.”

She let out another little yelp when Shep said that. “Thank you.” She spoke in a high-pitched tone that sounded a little like she was crying. She waved and walked away thanking us again as Shep sat down in his seat.

“I think she was crying,” I said.

“She was.”

“That was sweet,” I said. “And what you said to her was really sweet.”

“It was true,” he said with that easy confident smile that had my stomach full of butterflies. He had told her we were in love. We hadn’t said the L word to each other yet, but I

wondered if that phrase was the same thing—maybe it was more.

Our server came back at that point. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “I knew you were expecting the first visitors, so I assumed the second lady... I hope she wasn’t bothering you.”

“No, she was my art teacher.”

“Are you an artist?”

“No, this was years ago. In middle school. She’s an artist, though.”

“Oh, cool, okay, how was everything tonight?” she asked, having no clue what Shep was saying.

“Amazing,” he said.

“Zack’s parents are on their way to eat, and he’s in the weeds back there or he would come out.”

“No worries, I figured we wouldn’t see him tonight. I see how busy you are. Tell him, thank you for the food. It was amazing as usual. Let me give you this, since you have his family coming in.” He handed the server his credit card as we stood up.

“This is great, thank you. Do you guys mind waiting in the front, so we can get the table cleaned up?”

“Not at all.”

“Oh, Shep Shepherd!” A large, outspoken man with a beer gut and a goatee came into the room followed by a much smaller woman. “I was wondering who they had in here at the family table. This is Shep Shepherd. We met at Ryan’s wedding.” The man said that to his wife who was coming in behind him.

“We sure did,” Shep said cordially. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Is this your girlfriend?”

“Yes sir, this is Natalie. These are Zack’s parents, the Horners.”

“Bobby and Sandra,” the man said.

“It’s a pleasure. Your son is an amazing chef,” I said. “I’m so thankful we got to eat here. I live out in the country, so I don’t get to experience places like this very often.”

“Zack won’t let us pay for food, and therefore his mother won’t let him cook for us. We’ve already eaten tonight. We’re here for dessert.”

The servers worked to clear the plates. The family table was large and his parents had room at the other end, but they still worked around us to clean.

“That sounds delicious,” Shep said. “We’re off to see a show. You guys enjoy your dessert, and tell Zack thanks again.” Shep shook hands with Zack’s dad, and we made our way toward the door.

Our server made eye contact with us and met us at the register. Shep signed the check, and I just stood there next to him. He reached out for my hand as we left, and I didn’t hesitate to hold it.

It was like there was an electrical current going through my hand in the place where he touched me. The effects I felt from his touch were physical, almost magical. I could hardly keep a gigantic grin off of my face.

I followed him out of the restaurant and to his truck. He walked me to my side of the truck and opened the door for me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome.”

I put my hand on his arm to stop him from walking away. “And thank you for that—what you said in there.”

“To my teacher?”

I nodded.

“I was hoping that was okay.”

“It was perfect. I’m comfortable and happy.”

He blinked at me. “I’m really glad to hear that.”

“You’re glad to hear that I’m happy?”

“And comfortable, yes.”

“Oh, well, then you should be really glad because I’m both of those things.”

I stared at him just the right way when I spoke. He knew what I was doing. He knew I wanted to be kissed. He glanced around and then back at me, moving a little closer.

“I see how you’re looking at me, Natalie, and I want you to know that if we weren’t right here out in the open, and there wasn’t a car running right here next to us, things would be different.” He stared at me. “I can see that you’re daring me, and I want you to know that I’m going to take that dare as soon as we’re not standing here in front of so many people.”

“I wasn’t even daring you,” I said casually as I sat in his truck.

We smiled at each other as he closed the door.

Within seconds he opened his door and sat in the driver’s seat. He smelled like a man, and his presence in the truck with me caused me to feel out of breath.

“I don’t know why I said that just now. I don’t know why I said I wasn’t daring you, because I clearly was. I was daring you, and I got shy when you called me out.”

He started the engine but he didn’t move. We sat in the truck. The windows were tinted and I was daring him again.

“Natalie.”

“What?”

“Let me tell you something, just in case you didn’t know.”

“What is it?”

“I l-like you. I am past like. I need you to know that any hints you give me about liberties I can take—I want you to know that if you hint around that I can do something, I’ll probably do it.”

I stared at him. The tension was extremely thick between us. My body felt like I was swimming in some warm, gooey liquid.

“I like you too,” I said, staring at him.

He leaned in, pulling me to him.

We kissed with such light, gentleness that it caused an aching sensation in the pit of my stomach. I groaned when he pulled back, and he smiled and blinked at me before he cleared his throat.

“We need to go, or I would stay here for the next hour.”

Chapter 17

We met up with a group of Shep's friends in the parking lot of the playhouse, and we all walked in together.

I went straight into the restroom when we walked inside. It had been going well, but this night was so far removed from my normal life and routine that I could feel myself getting overwhelmed when we met up with six other people in the parking lot and walked in together.

Owen and August were among them, and I spoke to them. There were others in the group as well, and I did more talking in those five minutes of meeting up in the parking lot and walking in than I had done in my whole life.

Shep had already told them about me, and they asked questions and seemed genuinely interested. No one said anything about the fact that I used to be silent. They asked me about other things, and we all smiled, and it was great.

I could tell that they thought it was curious that Shep had a girl with him, though. I didn't know all of their friendship dynamics, but he and Owen seemed like the ones who couldn't be tied down, and there seemed to be a layer of surprise that Shep finally met someone he liked.

This whole evening was all great and good, but it had been exhausting, especially in contrast to my normally quiet life.

I went to the bathroom stall for a place of refuge before the show started. I lined the seat with paper so that I could sit down comfortably for a minute and be silent.

I had only been in there for a few seconds when my worst nightmare happened.

I overheard a conversation between two other girls. They were chatting while they looked at themselves in the mirror, and in their conversation, they brought up Shep. They mentioned other guys, but of course, I couldn't get it out of my mind that they said Shep's name specifically. He had been holding my hand when we first walked in, but apparently, they

didn't see that. They had just seen him right before they came into the restroom, and they were extremely chatty about it.

I sat there for a minute as they spoke of Malcolm as someone they were interested in. They talked about him by name. Shep, they said. It was surreal hearing that conversation. It made me feel so jealous that I wanted to fight them. I physically felt the urge to fight. The girls were relentless with it, talking about all the available guys at tonight's performance.

They were still chatting as they walked out of the door and I was left there in a bathroom stall with my fist clenched. I had to smile at myself. One minute, I'm at home in the woods of Alabama, not talking to anyone, and the next I'm in a public restroom, shaking my fists and having thoughts of jumping a couple of girls for talking about my man. I laughed inwardly at the turn my life had taken.

I finished by taking my time, washing my hands before I headed out there. By the time I got all that done, there were others in the restroom with me.

I found Shep in the lobby. He was standing with Owen and they both looked my way when I walked up to them.

"You guys can go ahead and get to the seats," Owen said. "I'm going to wait here for Caroline."

I knew that Owen's sister was planning on meeting us, so I put two-and-two together about Caroline being her name. He stepped to the side, closer to the door, to wait for her.

"Do you want anything to eat before we go in there? I don't think there's an intermission if you want to grab something right now."

There was a crowd of people standing at the concessions area, and I thought about it.

"I can't think about food because we just ate... and because I feel like fighting right now."

"Fighting, what's that about?"

I smiled. “Nothing. The restroom. There were girls in there, and it was almost comical how they were talking. It was almost like you paid your friends to go in there and do that. Did you?”

“What happened?” he asked, tilting his head and looking at me curiously.

“There were women in the bathroom, talking about you, Owen, and August. They knew you guys were here, and they were all excited. They were in there talking and giggling their heads off, like they had a chance with you.”

I made a face of disapproval, and Shep laughed. “I did not have anything to do with girls going in the bathroom, but I do love seeing you jealous.”

“Oh, my gosh I’m so jealous. Is that what girls in Memphis do? Just announce their intentions in public restrooms? I wasn’t even paying attention to using the restroom. I was just in there with my fist balled up, feeling like I was about to fight someone. I would have honestly said something to them if it had continued too much longer. I am usually so nonconfrontational, but I was sitting in there listening to them feeling like I wanted to...” I hesitated smiling at the memory. I just experienced it a minute ago, and I still had a rush of adrenaline from it.

Shep smiled and bit his lip as he pulled me into his arms. He held me tightly and put his mouth near my ear. “I am so happy you’re jealous,” he said. “This is wonderful.” He held me and spoke slowly, and I knew he was attracted to me. There was the promise of male attraction in his voice, and the way he held me... it made my heart pound. He touched the back of my head with his hand as he spoke near my ear again. “I say we leave no doubt in anyone’s mind that you’re here with me.”

“You do say that?” I asked, breathlessly.

“Yes.” He hesitated for a second.

“I’m fine with it,” I said.

He moved and kissed me, letting his mouth touch mine for a brief second before pulling back, still looking at me. The crowd noise, the murmur of voices went on around us, but I couldn't hear it. I was in a different world. Malcolm's mouth had been on mine, and now he was staring at me sweetly. His dark eyes were intense, and I felt love and attraction like I never imagined.

I cleared my throat. "I guess we should find our seats."

"Do you want something to eat before we go in there?"

"I'll take something to drink," I said. "If it won't make us late."

We waited in line and purchased drinks and some candy before going into the theater to find our seats. We only had a minute or two to spare, and so most people were already in their seats by that time. It was a small blackbox theater with intimate seating on three sides of the stage. There were only four rows of seats in each section, meaning there were only a hundred or two in the whole venue.

The lights were dim, but we could still see other audience members and we were vaguely aware of them. Our seats were downstage and we were on the third row. Shep was on my left, and on my right was one of Shep's friends, a woman named Tori.

I loved how it smelled in there. I loved how it felt. I felt alive, and I smiled at Shep after we got settled in our seats.

"You're so beautiful," he said, looking me over.

"Thank you," I said, smiling. "I'm excited."

"About the show?" he asked.

I nodded and then added a shrug. "Yeah, and everything. Not only about the show."

He smiled at me and then he leaned in and kissed me again, right there in the theater with other people able to see us. I wondered if the women from the restroom were noticing, but that was just a fleeting thought because, goodness gracious. Malcolm's lips were like true goodness. They were

cool and warm at the same time, and I wanted to melt. The audience and the stage disappeared and for a heartbeat, it was just the two of us again. He pulled back, smiling at me. We were making all sorts of promises to each other this evening, promises that didn't need words. I loved him and he loved me, and we said it with how we looked at each other.

“Have you ever seen Clue?” Tori asked from the other side of me.

She was living life and being a normal person. Her question was totally normal. It only seemed outrageous and shocking to me because I had totally forgotten where I was. I turned to face her when she asked the question. I had to snap back into reality since she was clearly talking to me.

“I haven't,” I said, turning to her.

She told me a little about Clue and then we got into talking about other shows and different aspects of theater. We spoke for a few minutes. I paid attention to her as best I could, but Shep's large, warm hand rested securely on my thigh, and half of my brainpower was consumed with noticing that—the way it felt, the way it made me feel. He was protective of me, and it was a precious gift.

Chapter 18

I had never seen a play in an intimate setting like this blackbox theater, and it was such a good time. The actors did an excellent job, and I was engaged during the whole production. Shep kept his hand on me the whole time, either touching my leg or holding my hand.

The lights finally went down for the last time, and we clapped for the cast when they came on stage for the curtain call. It was a small cast, and we stood to our feet while they came out one by one for bows. The people in our row all knew Kennedy who played Ms. Scarlett, and we cheered extra loud for her.

It was the first time I cheered. I had practiced it in my head—imagined myself doing it, but I had never tried it. I didn't go crazy or anything, but I let out a little yell. Shep was also yelling, and he didn't notice me or make a big deal about it, but it was a big deal to me.

Shep turned to me while the cheering was still dying down. "Everyone's going to want to go out after this, to a diner, or something like that. Would you want to go?"

I nodded at him. "I'm up for whatever you want to do."

We waited for Kennedy after the show, and she came with us. There were seven of us, including August, Owen, and Owen's sister. We sat three on each side of a booth with a chair pulled up to the end of the table where August sat. Shep sat in the innermost seat, cocking his leg onto the booth and turning to face everyone. He was animated and funny, and I loved sitting next to him. It felt like I was along for some kind of ride this evening, and I didn't know what would happen next.

I sat between Shep and Owen on the bench seat of the booth. Physically, they were a couple of imposing gentlemen, but they were both kind-hearted and laidback, and I felt at ease there between them.

Shep told the group about us eating at Zack's restaurant prior to the show and how we ran into his parents. They had

all met Zack's parents at Ryan and Bailey's wedding, so they were familiar with them.

"We ran into my old art teacher there, too, and she was starstruck by Natalie," Shep said.

"I thought you were about to say she was starstruck by *you*," Kennedy said, laughing at Shep.

"That too," Shep said, dusting off his shoulder and making us laugh.

"That's cool though that she recognized you," Kennedy said, taking him seriously and looking at me. "I heard you were an artist. You must be famous."

I knew Kennedy the least of all of them, so I wasn't surprised she didn't know much about me either.

"She is famous," Owen said. "We saw her paintings in New York, the Museum of Modern Art. There was a whole, big display about her."

"Yeah, Shep yacked," August added.

"August!" Shep said.

"What?" Kennedy asked. "What happened?"

"What?" I said, staring at him.

He shook his head like it was nothing. "I might've thrown up. But I didn't know if I was going to be able to find you again, and honestly, it was just the paintings themselves. They were so amazing, I just... I... threw up."

Shep was a good storyteller and everyone laughed along with him as he recounted the events of that day. He gave more details about my paintings and his feelings.

"That's how messed up this woman has me," he said, causing them to all laugh again as he finished the story.

"Yeah, and isn't there some other kind of amazing fact about the story... like you had an illness?"

Kennedy had asked the question honestly, staring at me like she heard something about my health but couldn't

remember what it was. I started to panic inwardly, and then I remembered that Shep would know what to say.

“Yeah, no, Natalie’s story is amazing,” he said, cutting in casually. “We ran into my old art teacher at Zack’s restaurant, and she knew all about Natalie—her life story, sort of. Anyway, I was telling Ms. Shanahan sort of a nutshell version of everything, and it’s just so cool. Nat didn’t talk for years, and then it was basically a miracle. I told her we would try to publish our story, and we will eventually.”

We were waiting for the food while having this conversation, and everyone was listening intently with no distractions. August was the first to respond to Shep.

“Uh, that sucks.”

“What sucks?” Shep said, looking defensive.

“That’s all you’re giving us? You say you have this really amazing story but you’re not going to tell us?”

Everyone was quiet and seemed to agree with August. They seemed interested, and it made my heart race. I didn’t blame them for being curious. I had been trying to come across as casual about it all, so I could see how they thought it was okay to ask.

I glanced at Shep, and he gave me a questioning expression. He was asking me how much I wanted to share, and I just shrugged because, honestly, I didn’t care. I wanted him to decide. I trusted him, and I wanted him to say what he wanted to say about it.

“I’m going to end up telling the truth,” he warned.

I nodded even though the thought of it made me feel a sudden rush of anxiety.

I felt ashamed of my life’s choices, weak, unworthy.

I felt scared of them finding out that I had chosen not to speak when I was perfectly able to.

I didn’t want them to judge me for that, and more than that, I didn’t want Shep to be judged.

He put his hand on the other side of my legs, pulling me into his embrace, leaning over me and covering me protectively. He made it seem like he was leaning in to get closer to the group so he could hear the story, but I knew what he was doing, I could feel it. I inwardly repeated the phrase, *the truth will set you free*, several times as a moral boost in this moment of anxious worry.

The server showed up with our food just then.

Some of us ordered pie or something simple, and a few ordered entire meals. I thought they might lose interest, but everyone stared at Shep when the server walked away. They still wanted to hear what he had to say.

“Okay, so, when Natalie was tiny, a young child, in kindergarten, she saw some of the most horrific things a person could ever see. Look, I know we’re eating, and I’m not going to go into details for all of our sakes, but suffice it to say, she lost her parents in this incident and she was witness to things that were dramatic and traumatic. During that time, her best option was to shut down, to be quiet, to turn inward. Okay, so right after all that happened, God gave her a talent for painting. This little girl started painting these amazing artworks. But instead of this gift being fostered in her, she was used and not treated well. So. there was more childhood trauma from her grandma, which resulted in Natalie turning inward, painting, staying quiet. Her aunt eventually helped her out and provided a good home, but silence was all Natalie knew. She hadn’t said anything to anyone in decades before the day we met, and then I sit in the backseat of the car with her, and we just talked, just like that.”

He glanced at me and smiled, that mischievous confident smile which made me smile back.

“That is... (I cleared my throat.) That’s the truth. I didn’t talk to anyone for twenty years, and then Malcolm sits in the backseat of the car with me, and I just opened my mouth and talked.”

“She also let me ride with her, knowing I thought it was a shared Uber.”

“It was a blacked-out Mercedes with a privacy window,” I said, shaking my head as if Shep knew what he was doing.”

They all laughed.

“The truth was, I had no idea how monumental that whole conversation was,” he said. “I didn’t know it was the first time she had done anything like that. I didn’t know, and yet it was still monumental for me. I fell in love that day, I think.”

They all reacted with, “Aw,” and Shep smiled and shook his head and kept talking.

“No, seriously, I had mentioned to her that she should come see me in the hotel lobby, and I was so torn up when she didn’t come.”

“He was torn up,” Owen agreed, nodding.

“So, the next day, I drug Owen and August to the museum, where we already talked about what happened. I knew I needed to find her again. I couldn’t believe the woman who had painted these believable works of art was the same woman from the Uber. I think I was sick, thinking I couldn’t talk to her again. And that fear came true. We lost touch for a month. I asked her to get in touch, but I think it wasn’t the right time for her yet. Then I wrote to her again last month, because I couldn’t stand it any longer, and she responded, thank God.” Shep paused and reached over to take some fries off of Owen’s plate before chomping down on them. He chewed for a second and swallowed before continuing. “She speaks to anyone now. It’s a miracle, and I’m not saying I had anything to do with it, but...” He hesitated like he was trying to remain humble, hamming it up for the story. “It was meeting me that made the shift, though. I love her too much for her to be quiet. She just can’t resist me. It’s a love story.”

“Well, I’m sorry for the stuff from when you were a kid,” Kennedy said.

Maybe she felt bad about being curious, but I didn’t care. The whole truth was coming out, and honestly, it wasn’t as scary as I thought it would be. They didn’t seem to judge me

for being quiet. It seemed more like they thought it was a miracle that I now spoke. I guess that was because of Shep and the way he had framed everything. He was funny but loving, and he wanted to set me free of my worry by telling the truth in an easy, casual way. I loved him for that, and I felt happy that these people now knew me for who I was.

Chapter 19

We stayed at the restaurant, talking to Shep's friends for a while after he told that story. It was a good time, and it was neat to experience the dynamic of a friend group. I had seen these scenarios in movies, but I had never been a part of a group of friends interacting around a table. It was a challenge for me, but it was worth it. I had a blast and made memories that were important and significant.

I was thankful for such a successful evening, and I felt at ease when we finally made it back to his house and I talked to his parents. It was after eleven when we got back, and they said they had waited up for us but were headed off to bed. Shep told them he was staying for a while and that he might stay the night on the couch instead of going back to his apartment.

It was midnight when I finished my shower and went into the living room to meet him again.

"You changed?" I asked from across the room.

"Yes. I showered."

"So did I," I said.

"I see that. I like your PJs."

"I like your PJs too," I said, feeling breathless. He had on sweatpants and no shirt, and it was so glorious that I thought I might die. I wondered if it was possible for a person's heart to actually stop from sheer attraction to the opposite sex. I wondered if anyone had ever had a heart attack from too many butterflies.

He stretched on his shirt. He was still slightly damp from his shower, and I saw a few darker spots on his shoulder where there was water. I knew he conveniently left that shirt off until I came out here, and his plan had worked. Seeing him was nearly too much to bear. I wanted to begin kissing him—to throw myself at him. I would love snuggling next to him on the couch. Kissing would surely happen then. I couldn't wait.

We had plans to watch a movie, and he made the couch comfortable and inviting with extra blankets and pillows. I had stayed in hotels, but never in someone else's home. I was aching with attraction for him, and overwhelmed and happy to be in his parents' home. "What are you thinking?" he asked, smiling at me as I came near him in the kitchen.

"The couch looks so comfy, and I was thinking about how happy I am to see you in here."

"You are happy to see me?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I guess you just liked seeing me without my shirt on."

I laughed. "I knew you did that on purpose."

He reached out, lightly holding my hand as I came near him. "Well, I'm not going to let ten hours a week in the gym go to waste. I had to let you see the goods—you know, persuade you that I'm a keeper or whatever. It's got to do with courtship." He raised his arm slowly and flexed his bicep, being funny, and I made eye contact with him.

"I appreciate the effort, but I assure you, I need no persuading."

"You need no persuading?"

"No persuasion necessary. I need no persuasion at all."

"Does that mean you don't want to see my bare body anymore?"

I took a deep hitching breath. "It means quite the opposite of that. I probably want to see it too much."

He leaned toward me. "There's no such thing as wanting to see me too much," he said.

"Yes, there is. At least for tonight, and probably the near future."

"Yeah, of course, if you're talking about... but what I'm saying is that it's okay that you want to. I'm happy you like me."

“Then you should be really happy.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, Shep.”

He pulled me closer, touching me with such great gentleness that it made me feel urgent and impatient. My heart was absolutely pounding. He was still warm and damp from his shower, and he smelled nice. I smelled nice. The house smelled nice, for goodness sake. The whole moment was as perfect as they come, and I was experiencing the warm fuzzies you get when you're in the epitome of comfort.

Shep was about to kiss me when his phone rang. We both knew it rang because it was on the counter a few feet away and it began to vibrate. He made a confused expression.

“My mom's the only one who would call this late, and she's in the next room.”

He leaned over and reached for his phone.

“August,” he said.

“You should answer it.”

But he was already in the process of picking it up when I said that. “Hello?”

I couldn't hear August.

I stepped back to give him a second to talk to his friend. Malcolm's expression turned to one of serious concern, and my heart skipped a beat.

“I guess I'll ask her, but I'm not sure what you... (a pause) ... I'll ask her, August.”

He put his phone down and pressed the button to mute it before looking at me.

“He's asking about you.” Shep's expression was regretful. “I might have told them something about kissing you in New York, because he's putting together pieces, and he asked... (sigh) he's asking me if that's the first time you ever kissed someone. I'm sorry. Of course, I know it was, but I didn't know what you wanted me to tell him. I can just tell him it's

none of his business. He sounds really worked up, he's babbling. I'm not sure what's going on."

"I don't care if you tell him that," I said. "You told him I didn't talk to anyone for twenty years, I'm pretty sure he knows I didn't kiss anyone."

I said the words, but I was still confused about why August would care about my kissing track record in the first place.

Shep pulled me into the living room, and I went with him. "I'm just going to sit here and get comfortable before I talk to him again because he was talking fast, saying all kinds of stuff about brainstorming and asking us some more questions. Please don't answer anything you're not comfortable with."

I nodded, wondering what in the world was going on.

Shep and I made it to the couch and he plopped into the corner of it pulling me down with him. We got adjusted, me sitting next to him as he pulled me into his arms. I watched as he pressed the button to unmute the phone and put it to his ear.

"August? Okay. Yeah. I'm back..." Shep paused like he was letting August say something.

"Yes, that was her first time. Why?"

Shep was quiet for another minute. I sat there, waiting for him to finish, unable to hear what was being said on the other end. Shep gave me a reassuring smile about halfway through August's speech, and I continued to wait.

"Hang on," he said. "Let me repeat what you said to Natalie. Yes. She's right here. Because, I'm filtering... just hang on August, let me tell her what you said."

He muted the phone and looked at me. "He can't get our story off of his mind. He said he's a reader, and he's an actor. He has never tried to write anything in his life, but he feels compelled to write our story as a play. He yelled when I said it was your first kiss and said it was going to be perfect onstage with a narrator doing your internal dialogue." Shep shrugged.

"Whoa."

“Yeah, I’m sorry if this makes you uncomfortable. I can tell him we can talk about it tomorrow if you want. He’s all pumped up, saying it’s God’s will because he’s never wanted to write anything before.”

“Does August say stuff like that? Is he always dramatic?”

“No,” Shep said. “He is when he has to be in the theater, but, no.”

“Then, maybe we should let him write it. There’s no harm in him writing it down. It’s a sort of cool story, anyway. The most that would probably happen would be that it gets written and then performed in a little place like tonight, right?” I shrugged, feeling at peace with the thought of my story being told in that way. Earlier tonight, Shep had put it in such a way that I didn’t feel ashamed. I felt confident because of it.

“We can just hear him out, and then tell him we’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

I shrugged. “I think it’s going to end up happening.”

“You do?”

I nodded. “Are you okay with it? You are a notorious lady-killer, and if people go writing a story about us, well, word might get out that you’re... taken.” I was flirting with him, but I was also being a little serious. I wished he would say that he wanted August to write our story.

Shep looked deadpan as he unmuted his phone. He put it on speaker, only half paying attention to his phone because he was too busy looking at me. “August?”

“Yeah.”

I could hear August now.

“Yeah, we’re fine with it.”

“You’re fine with what? The interview? Me writing the play? Are we doing this? I think we have to. Do you guys ever have a feeling about something? I just feel this, you know?” August was usually a pretty easygoing guy, but he was definitely excitable-sounding on the phone.

I smiled at Shep, and we made conspiratorial expressions at each other. He held my hand with one arm while still holding his phone in the other.

I leaned toward his phone to speak. “I think it’s a great idea, August.” I started to add ‘even if nothing comes from it,’ because I didn’t want to get my own hopes up, but I didn’t say it. That was the thing, though. My hopes were already up. I wanted it to happen. August was right. I could feel that it was a good thing to do.

“Really? You’ll let me tell it? I’m going to do my best, seriously. I’ll interview you guys and I’ll tell the story just how you like it. Maybe we could even have some of your art on display at the show. No, we can’t start planning the show yet. I have to get through the writing. Thank you guys. I’m... I’ve never done anything like this obviously, but I’ve read a ton of books and I know what a good quality product is. If I can’t get the script right, then we won’t do anything with it.”

“It’s fine, August, it’s going to be great.” Shep was smiling, and so was I. We stared at each other. “Look, she’s leaving tomorrow and I’m gonna let you go, but yes, the answer is ‘yes’.”

“Yes, oh, thank you, and great. Oh, my gosh. It was great seeing you, Natalie. Have a safe trip home. Thank you. I-I’ll be in touch with you guys. Thank you so much, again. Goodnight.”

We told August goodnight and Shep turned off his phone before tossing it onto the other end of the couch. He situated himself with a pillow, getting comfortable and helping me get comfortable. I rested in his embrace and neither of us said anything for a moment. He was solid and wonderful, and I had no idea what I was missing for all those years. I ached to be closer to him even though I was basically on his lap.

“Are you okay with it?” he asked, since neither of us had spoken.

“I’m so okay with it.” My tone reflected just how confident and convinced I was. I didn’t hesitate at all, and Shep smiled just before he pulled me in and kissed me.

Chapter 20

Two months later

I drove to Memphis during the first weekend of July. Shep had been busy with starting full-time work, and I was into a couple of new paintings, so it had been a month since we had seen each other face-to-face. I had seen him in May when he graduated, and then in June when he came to Alabama for the weekend. He left with the painting that time, and it was currently hanging in his apartment.

This visit was for a meeting with August, and I was so happy and excited for the excuse to spend some time with Shep. I would be staying at his parents' house again. They were kind and assured me they wanted me to stay with them rather than get a hotel.

I drove straight there, and Shep was waiting at their house when I arrived. He came outside wearing jeans and a t-shirt with no shoes, and he picked me up and spun me around when we saw each other.

He was the most fun person in the whole world, and I had no idea what I had done to deserve him. It was only God. I liked knowing that because if it had come from any other source, I would be afraid to lose it. I hoped and prayed that I would never lose Shep.

I knew he loved me by the way he spoke to me on the phone, and that made it so much sweeter when I saw him in person.

We had plans to meet up with August for dinner. We originally planned on meeting at a restaurant, but August had too many things to bring with him to the meeting, so he asked if we could get takeout and do it at his house.

Shep and I left for his place at 5:30 to make it there by 6. He had a small house. It was in a nice neighborhood, and he was in the middle of doing some improvements on it that would make it worth a lot more than he paid for it.

August was a smart guy, and I could see evidence of that when we walked into his house. He had two large bookcases full of books, and he had thoughtful but masculine decorations. August and I had talked a lot during the last two months, and I had come to really like him.

He was nervous when he let us in. I was happy because I was nervous, too, and it made me feel better. He had a whole table prepared with food, and we sat and ate, intentionally talking about other things besides the script for the first part of our visit.

We ate tacos together and talked about my art and Shep's job. August told us about his job as a realtor while we ate dessert, which was strawberry shortcake. He had graduated college with a degree in business, but he had recently gotten his real estate license and was already doing well at it. He was smart and had a good eye for design, and he worked well with clients, so selling houses was something that seemed to come naturally to him. He had always worked part-time at a bookstore to fuel his love for books, and he mentioned it as we finished our meal.

"I just quit like two weeks ago," August said. "I can go back anytime, but I'm not on the schedule anymore."

"Whoa, no bookstore?" Shep said. "What are you going to do? How will you get your discount?"

August laughed. "They'll still give me a discount. They love me over there. I love them too. I miss it, I just can't right now."

"Why?" Shep asked.

August tilted his head at Shep. "The play," he said. "I have enough going on with real estate that I can't do that second job and still do this play the way I want to. I have a good plan for this. Are you guys ready to come in here and see it?"

"Come see what?"

"There's a whole set-up," August said. "It's in my spare bedroom. I use it for... you know, an office or whatever. I

have other stuff in there too, but... just come in here, if you're ready." August walked as he began to head to the room.

As we came inside, I could see a desk with a whole display on inspiration boards. There was even a piece of artwork, a large hand-drawn scene of people on stage in a theater. I could see an actual crowd in the seats, but there was also a play and audience scene happening on the stage. It looked like the people were watching a play about people putting on a play. I had no idea what it was, but it was interesting. I instantly went for it, looking closely, staring at it.

"What is this?"

August waved me off. "Hang on, hang on, just sit right there if you will."

There was a futon in the room, and Shep and I took a seat on it while August went to stand next to the desk where everything was set up. The inspiration boards were three-panel boards like a science fair project. There were two of them, and all of it was really well done. That piece of hand-drawn art was propped on a stand in front of it all. August was artistic, and it showed with this display of ideas.

"Okay, you guys, if this doesn't tell you enough, I am so excited about this project. I know it's obvious by how I've already been talking to you, but I am taking this whole thing completely seriously, and I want you guys to know that it's important to me I do it right. So, just sit back and relax, and I'm going to run a few things past you. We need to make sure we're on the same page with the vision before I continue with the actual script."

Shep and I readjusted.

I kicked off my shoes and let my feet rest on the couch next to me as I cuddled up next to Shep. August stared at us with a serious expression and then he put his fist in front of his mouth. "Oh my gosh, this right here is a scene. This is going to be a scene in the play with me showing you all of this information. You guys are too much. This is too good."

He took a deep breath, staring at all of his material, making mental notes.

“Are you saying this moment that’s happening right now is going to end up being a scene in your play?” Shep asked.

“Yes, it is. I didn’t know it until just now, but this has to be part of it. I’ll figure it out. Hang on let me make a note.”

August leaned over and made a note on a notepad. It took him a minute and we just sat there and waited for him.

“Do you guys know I’m taking this seriously? I have never written a script before, so I don’t know technically what the process should be, but I know how a script reads. I have an idea of how I want to make my process work, and I’m going to share it with you now. After I get this script written, and I’m satisfied with it, I will give it to you to make sure you’re happy with it. And let me just add that I would love if you consider letting me direct it. I think it’s realistic to say we could perform it at a blackbox theater, and I would definitely feel comfortable directing it if you guys are okay with it. I want to. That’s sort of what this whole thing is leading up to. I would love to write and direct this play. I hope you’ll consider that. But don’t say anything now, just think about it. I know you love Abe and he has experience. Just think about it. But for tonight, these are the bones of the show, laid out how I see it happening. I have a tentative plan for how it’s going go, scene by scene. About a third of the play will be young Natalie, you as a child. We’re going to have to find a special little girl to play that role. Owen said he knows someone who might be right, his little cousin, I think. I’m also thinking I’ll ask Owen to play you, Shep, but I haven’t mentioned it to him yet. We’ve still got a long way to go. He knows I’m writing it, but I don’t know how seriously he’s taking it. Honestly, I don’t know how seriously anyone will take it. I’ve never done this before. But we have a good story here.” He pointed to the inspiration boards, looking at us with an expression of hopefulness.

“I really think I can make this great,” he said. “I think it’s going to be a great story. It is a great story. Obviously, I just added a scene, so this is still just a rough outline, but I have a

plan—a good plan. Now I just have to write the lines—fill in the blanks. I’ve done a lot of the work already, a lot of the planning. I feel like the lines are going to come easy now that I have the scenes and the story pretty much built. And this, this drawing. This is my best idea of them all. I couldn’t resist having someone draw it for me.”

He pointed at it. It looked like a theater inside a theater.

“That’s going to be the last scene. The very last scene of the play, the actors will be on the stage, but in an audience. Whoever is playing you two will be in the audience on the stage, watching your own play. We’ll have some of the ensemble come up and pretend to be doing the play while the mains are in the audience watching. That’s the last scene, and it’s going to be amazing because you guys, the real Shep and Natalie, can actually *come to the show*. The show will end with a scene of your characters watching the play be performed and then the spotlight will go on you, and the audience will realize that the real, *actual couple* is in the playhouse, and they’re living the last scene in the play.” August paused and looked at us with wide eyes, hoping we would understand what an amazing idea it was. He clapped a few times. “Whoa! Isn’t it perfect?” August brought his clasped hands up to his face, hiding behind them, smiling and waiting for our reaction.

He held his breath, and Shep surprised me by letting out a loud whistle from right next to me. He began clapping, and I smiled and joined him, clapping a few times and laughing at their excitement.

“That’s a great play, August. That’s such a great idea about the last scene being us watching it! That’s the most recent thing that will be happening in our real lives at that very moment. How cool. It catches the audience up to real-time.”

“Isn’t it so good?” August said. “I almost cried when I thought of it. I don’t know how we’re going to pull off an audience on stage with a small production, but I’ll think of something.”

“Of course, you can direct it, if you want to,” Shep said.

“Yeah, we certainly don’t mind,” I added. “I think you have the vision.”

“Oh my gosh, you don’t mind? I know I’ve never done it before, but I’ve been in a lot of shows, and I’m going to give it my all. I really think I can write and direct this. For the last two months, I have done nothing but think about it. I mean, I’ve sold a few houses because I have to pay my mortgage, but I’ve thought about it a lot, and it’s going to be great.”

“It is going to be great,” Shep said. “Is the scene where I throw up in there?”

“Of course it is. That’s a great scene.”

“I see it, actually,” Shep said, pointing to the inspiration board where the words ‘Shep throws up in museum’ were written next to a photograph of the MoMA.

“I really do think I can make it great,” August said.

I smiled at him. “I’m excited about it.”

“I’m not excited about this,” I said thirty minutes later when we were in Shep’s truck on the way back to his parent’s house. “I am, but seeing all that stuff makes me take it more seriously than I was before, and I realize I’m scared. I didn’t want to seem reluctant because August is so excited, but it hit me that it’s scary having my story up there. The murders and everything—my silence—that’s deep stuff. I guess I’m just scared that people won’t like it and they’ll judge me, or judge you, or August or anyone involved. I’m worried that you guys will somehow be judged because of how I’ve lived and all the decisions I’ve made. I was taking August seriously this whole time while he was interviewing me and everything, but it’s different now, seeing it on those boards. It seems more real.”

“It is real,” Shep said. “And it’s good. You’ve been scared every step of the way, and you still do it. You still move forward and keep going. That’s what the whole story is about. That’s why it’s relatable. Everyone has struggles of their own.”

“Well, I guess I need you to remind me of that.”

Shep held my hand and glanced at me. “That’s something I’m happy to do.”

Epilogue

That fall

Another trip to Memphis

I had just arrived in Memphis a half-hour ago, and I was only at the house for a few minutes before Shep and I headed out. I had no idea where we were going. That was up to him, and it seemed like he had plans.

We drove out of town, toward the country. We talked about my work. I had just finished a couple of paintings, and I was planning on hanging onto them to build a larger series before releasing them for sale.

“The script is going to be completely finished by next month,” Shep said. “I talked to August yesterday. He said we’re on track to hold auditions in December and start rehearsals in January. The show would be in May, and he’s already talking to some people at that little playhouse where we saw Clue.”

“Oh, my gosh, that would be so exciting. Where are we?” I looked all around. The sun was going down and the sky behind us was pink and blue and so gorgeous. “Why are we stopping? Whoa, this is pretty out here. Are we stopping at this bridge?”

We pulled off of the road at the foot of a small bridge. It was large enough for two lanes of traffic, and there was a narrow walking path on the side. Shep led me, and we set off on the path toward the center of the bridge. I stared at his backside as we walked, feeling thankful for what an attractive man he was. Goodness.

“Is August still talking to Owen about starring as you?”

“Yes,” Shep said. “It means Owen will have to sit out of a production with the Players, and he was worried about that because he’s being scouted more and more... but August let him read the first half of the script, and Owen’s all-in. He wants Bailey to play you, but it might wind up being Gina.”

“I would be lucky to have either of them play me,” I said.
“What’s wrong with Gina?”

“Nothing. Bailey looks more like you. It might be neither of them. Gina might be doing the spring production with the Players. I don’t think August has talked to her yet.”

Shep was holding my hand, and it gave me a feeling in the pit of my stomach that had nothing to do with a fear of heights. I loved the feeling of his skin touching mine. I had been missing him.

It wasn’t a tall bridge, even when we got to the top, I wasn’t scared or intimidated. I got the sense that I could jump off of it and land in the water below and be fine. It was a small stream or river below us, and I didn’t even bother asking where we were. It was gorgeous and the most amazing part was the sunset.

We sat down at the center of the bridge, letting our legs dangle over the edge. There were rails and we held onto them, feeling secure.

“This is the coolest place to watch a sunset ever. I can’t believe we’re the only ones here.” I said

“It’s private property. I know the owners.”

We sat on the bridge.

There was no traffic, and we had the perfect view of the sunset. I held onto Shep’s hand, looking out at it.

“Thank you for taking me here,” I said staring at the sky.
“I rarely get to see skies this color—even on the lake.”

“I was talking to Owen about a scene that’s going to be in the play but hasn’t been written yet.”

“What is it?”

“It hasn’t happened yet, but it’s a proposal.”

“A marriage proposal?” I asked, my heart starting to pound.

“Yes.”

I was quiet for a few long seconds.

“Does the proposal happen at sunset?”

“Yes.”

“With our feet dangling off of a bridge?”

“Don’t you think it would be a good scene?”

I shrugged casually even though I didn’t feel casual about it. I loved it up there. I didn’t feel afraid, and I loved the view. I might as well have been in heaven at the moment. This was really happening. He was proposing. I could feel it.

“It would be a good scene,” I agreed casually. “But how would they do that, set-wise? We’re so high off the ground. They can’t build this on a stage.”

He shrugged. “Sure they can. They can build some rafters and make it look like the actors are up on a bridge with set pieces and lights.” Shep gestured to the bridge itself as he spoke, and I could just see the actor doing that same thing as he recited this scene.

“Are these words going to be in the play?” I asked, when that thought crossed my mind.

“Yes, probably.”

“Well, if you brought me up here to ask me to marry you, then my answer is going to be ‘yes’.”

“I have a ring in my pocket.”

“I’d love to see it.”

He took it out and removed it from the box. “Let me put it on you,” he said, reaching for my hand before I could see it.

I gave him my hand, and he found my ring finger and confidently slipped the ring onto it. I pulled it back, holding it several inches from my face so that I could inspect it.

“Malcolm, it’s the most beautiful ring I’ve ever seen.”

“It is the most beautiful one that exists,” he said confidently. “I can’t understand why anyone would settle for anything else when it’s the only one you’ll ever buy.”

I smiled at his sweet self-assurance. “I love you,” I said.

And he leaned in and kissed me, a long, lingering sticky kiss that had my stomach tied in knots.

He pulled back, holding my hand and peering out at the low-hanging sun. “I love you too,” he said thoughtfully.

“Shep?” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Whoever’s acting as us, Owen and whoever else, they’ll have to kiss each other for this scene.”

He nodded.

“And a few other scenes,” I added.

He shrugged. “It is a love story.”

The End (till book 4)

About The Author

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Brooke St. James is a USA Today bestselling author and Amazon Kindle All-Star. She writes contemporary romance novels with Christian and inspirational themes and happy endings. She was born and raised in south Louisiana but has had the opportunity to travel and live throughout the U.S. An avid reader, writer, audio book addict, and fan of all things artistic, Brooke constantly has her hands in some creative activity. She's currently back home in Louisiana enjoying life with her husband, children, and two lazy dogs.

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