

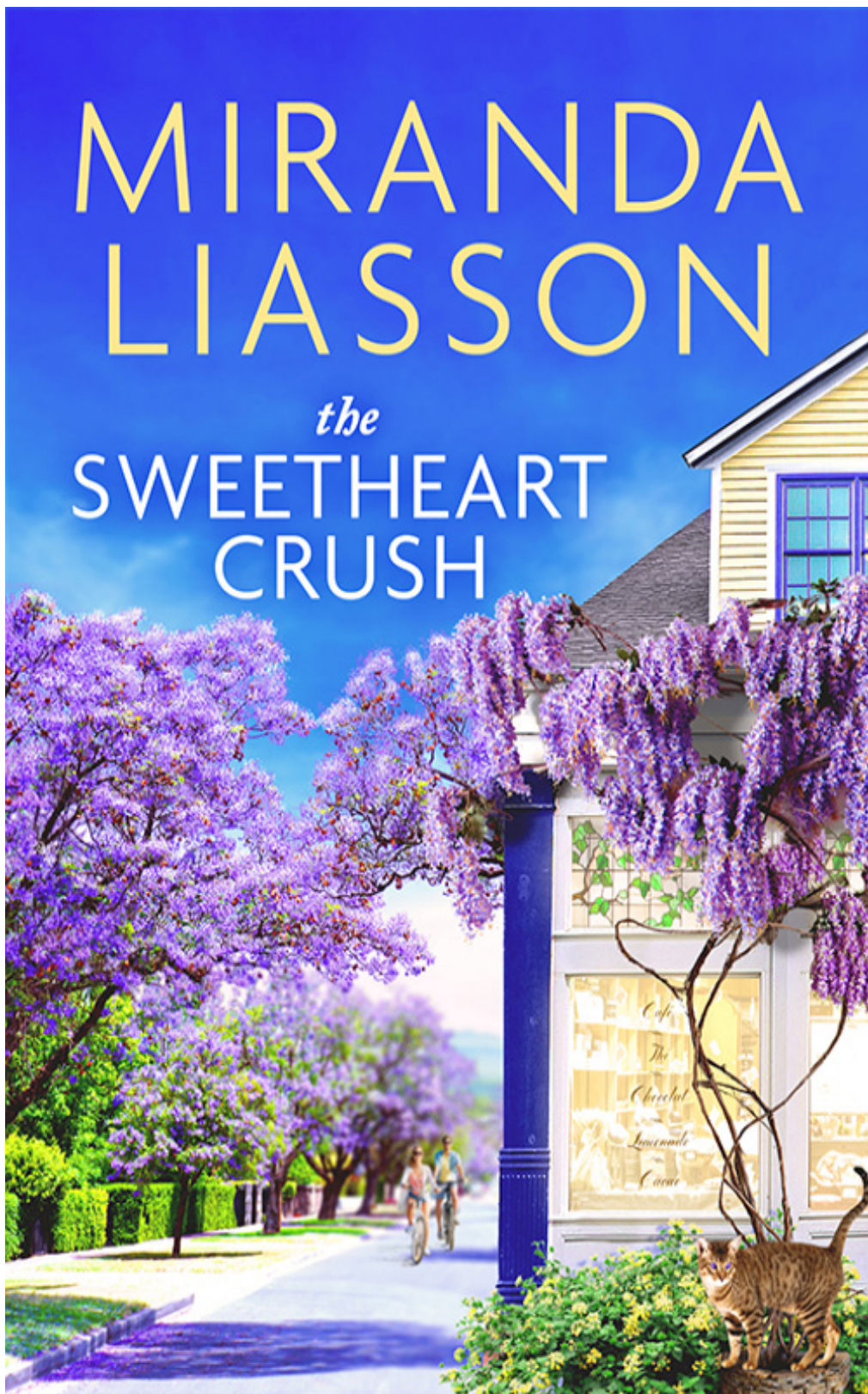
MIRANDA LIASSON

the
SWEETHEART
CRUSH



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LIASSON

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MIRANDA
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*For Sandra. Thanks for the pink hair. And most of all, for your
friendship.*

Prologue

12 years ago

Dear Diary,

I did something awful to my best friend. And now things will never be the same.

Today, Logan and I went to the Blossom Festival like we've done every single year since we both could walk. We checked out all the fun stuff, like candles from the candle factory and local honey, quilts from the quilt guild, and paintings and suncatchers and all kinds of cool art, and then we shared a famous elephant ear.

We were standing there laughing at how the cinnamon sugar got everywhere. Logan pointed at me and said, "You've got sugar on your face." He reached over and brushed it off—so simple—barely grazing my cheek, his touch as light as the wisp of a feather, but then suddenly everything got still. My heart stopped dead in my chest.

I could hear kids yelling and people laughing all around us, the scents of frying dough and sausage and peppers and tacos and french fries, all of it fading away as if someone had paused and muted the whole festival.

I'd never noticed how pretty Logan's eyes were, sort of brown and sort of green, with little gold flecks. He was staring right back at me, his eyes wide and with a melty-chocolate look that made my knees want to buckle, and I swear that there was this—this current zapping back and forth between us, binding us in place.

My whole body went boneless, like a noodle, and I got hot and cold and shaky all over. Part of me wanted to move, to run away, but my legs were heavy, frozen to the ground.

And then Logan leaned over, his face so close I could see the dark shadow of stubble on his cheeks. And his eyes were warm and shiny and—and different.

My best friend since we were in diapers was looking at me

like—well, like I was that sugary, warm, irresistible elephant ear. Looking at me in a way he never had before.

It's not like it would've been my first kiss.

But everything inside me just knew it would be my best kiss.

My breathing was all messed up, like I don't inhale 22,000 times each and every day of my life.

Then he moved even closer. I caught the fresh scent of his soap, like he'd just showered, and his gaze zeroed in on my lips.

My mouth went dry. I leaned into him. My lips parted.

And then I panicked.

My plans, all my plans that I've been working so hard for. To be something. To get out of this town. I couldn't get stuck here like my mom and sister did.

After all, they'd been warning me about that my entire life.

And so I did something awful.

Something so, so awful I can barely tell you what it is.

I turned my head.

His kiss hit my cheek. So, so awkward. Cringy.

I nearly died of embarrassment.

When he pulled back, I saw that he was embarrassed, too. No, more than embarrassed. The look on his face reminded me of the day he got that rejection letter about his writing.

Hurt. More than hurt. Devastated.

I wanted to rewind. Go back one minute, when I could dust the sugar off myself. Never eat the stupid elephant ear to begin with.

But life doesn't give you a rewind, does it?

Everything is different now.

And I think I just lost my best friend.

Chapter 1

Twelve years later

Viv Montgomery stood in the middle aisle of Christmas Every Day, squeezing her eyes shut, struggling for calm.

Except she'd never been calm a day in her life.

Her boss, Sheila Watkins, stood in front of her, clipboard in hand, surveying Viv's handiwork: three hours of arranging shelves of Santa figurines in the Santa section of the sprawling store. Twenty-five Santas, to be exact, all lined up in perfect order, as if they were about to march in a holiday parade.

Perfect. A state Viv could never achieve. But that didn't stop her from trying. Some might call that her superpower. But it was also a scourge.

"Hi, hon," Sheila said. Sheila was her age—they'd gone to high school together—so why she called Viv *hon* as if she were thirty years Viv's senior she'd never know. Sheila was wearing a cute blousy top and smiling her perfect red-lipstick smile. She'd always been beautiful, a great dresser, and had always dated the most popular boys. Viv instinctively smoothed down her red-and-white striped button-up elf shirt with the giant fabric-covered buttons.

Did horizontal stripes ever look good on anybody?

"You did a *great* job," Sheila said, eyeing the shelves. "It looks stunning." Her overly enthusiastic tone immediately made Viv's spidey-senses start tingling—for the worse. "Unfortunately, though," she continued, "we need to move the Satans"—she giggled and covered her mouth—"oopsy, I mean *Santas*—over to 12A."

Viv could relate to the slip. Sheila was the spike in her sole. The hangnail on her thumb. The shoe that looks so pretty on the outside but rubs your toes raw.

Of course, the Santas needed to be moved. Because that was Sheila's superpower—torture. Specifically, of Viv.

She reminded herself that she was grateful for this job that the sweet owner, Delores Teeter, had given her, and that she was just two thousand dollars away from blowing out of their town for good. And some people just disliked you, Viv thought, no matter how hard you tried to get them not to.

People liked Viv. She got along with everyone. But apparently not her boss, for no reason she could fathom.

“How many Santas are we talking about here?” she asked in as calm a tone as she could muster. She’d organized every Santa by occupation: Santa with a pickup sat next to Santa in his sleigh (means of transport). Sommelier Santa was next to baker Santa. Santa with puppies and Santa with puppies *and* kitties were both beside Santa with a baby on his lap because of the youth theme. The only one that defied cataloging was Voyeur Santa, which was what she tongue-in-cheek called the Santa with a telescope.

“Oh, all of them,” Sheila said, waving her hand over the full shelf as if that might magically rearrange them in no time. “It *might* require staying a little later.”

It was official. The horrible had finally come to pass: Viv officially despised Christmas. What kind of monster had she become? Was there a Christmas Haters Anonymous? Because, as an elf who hated Christmas, she was on the brink.

“You really are *so* creative,” Sheila said, noticing how Viv had placed all the Santas on different-leveled little boxes covered by layers of fake snow. A stunning presentation, if Viv could say so herself.

As a failed artist who’d studied photography, she knew all about other outlets for her creativity. Like the Christmas tree in aisle two she’d created out of ornament boxes and covered with layers of fake snow and lights. And the display of skinny trees at the front of the store she’d embellished with little stuffed elves dangling from and peeking out from behind the branches. Doing artsy stuff was the one thing she enjoyed about this job.

Failed. That was the thing she couldn’t get beyond, no matter how she tried. But she was trying. Hard. She wasn’t

even aiming for perfect here—she'd settle for falling smack in the middle of the normal bell-curve range of success, unlike her two high-achieving older sisters who were both waaaay on the high end. They'd made their family proud, Tessa by running her own French pastry shop, and Juliet as a popular marriage and family therapist.

But no matter how much she loved her family, there was nothing for her here to succeed at in their quaint town of Blossom Glen, Indiana.

“Just curious, why are we moving them?” All the Santas seemed to laugh. One actually did when Sheila abruptly picked him up. There was Santa holding a marlin, Santa with his feet propped up by a toasty fire pondering his list, Surfboard Santa on vacation at the beach—the display showcased Santa living out his life in so many different ways. In Viv's hands was number twenty-five, the big guy hanging on to the top of a chimney. When you pushed a little button, he belly-laughed a giant *ho ho ho* and wiggled his butt.

Santa was stuck in that chimney, just as she was stuck in life.

“Sorry,” Sheila said, not sounding sorry at all. “We've got a busload of enthusiastic shoppers coming from Madison and the display has to be more visible.” She gave a dismissive shrug. “That's just the way it is.”

Viv didn't believe her. Not only would the busloads of power shoppers want the stuck Santa, they'd also want anything in the store that wasn't nailed down, regardless of where it was. People flocked from all over the Midwest to the 365-day Christmas sensation in their little town off the Indiana turnpike. And they snatched up the merch faster than the annual January clearance sale at their famous candle factory.

Sheila checked her watch. “You don't have a date tonight, do you?” she asked with that same unrelenting smile.

Ugh, no, Viv did *not* have a date.

“Not tonight.” Or any night, for that matter. Nor did she have anything else planned except for hanging out with her

little seven-month-old niece, Rosie. Who was adorable but didn't make up for the fact that Viv didn't have much of a life.

But she was aggressively working on that.

As soon as she came up with two thousand more dollars, she would put plan Bust Outta Here into action.

Until then, her mantra was *Yes, Sheila*.

But that didn't stop her from imagining a Middle-Finger Santa.

...

"You must be sexually desperate if you're staring at Santa's butt." A little while later, Viv started at the sound of her best friend Robin's voice. She was moving Jingle-Butt Cowboy Santa, who wiggled his jean-clad hips while waving a lasso of holiday lights. As his hips swung, his drawers dropped enough to reveal a tiny heart tattoo over his right butt cheek.

"Maybe. But I'm *not* doing Bumble again after that guy from Riverton brought his mother on our date," she said.

Robin grinned widely, her brown skin highlighting pearly whites flanked by dimples. The beads on her box braids gently clacked against the stethoscope as she unwound it from around her neck. "Hey, she paid, so it wasn't all bad, was it?"

Viv chuckled. Robin was always 100 percent in her corner. "Why are you here on a Monday morning when every parent in town must be calling for an appointment?" To be fair, as a pediatric nurse practitioner in the group practice in town, Robin was busy every day. But Viv knew from Tessa that Monday morning sick visits were more valuable than Taylor Swift tickets.

"I only have a minute." She thrust a copy of the *Blossom Glen Daily News* in front of Viv's face. And yes, their town still had a daily print paper, something of which everyone was quite proud. The headline read, *Hunk Comes Home to Write Next Blockbuster*.

"Hunk?" Viv's gaze flicked from the headline to Robin. "I

don't get it.”

“Yes, you do.” She sent Viv an insistent look that sent her colorful tropical fish earrings swaying, the ones Viv had bought her for her birthday and that the kids loved.

That started Viv's heart pounding with a strange mix of terror and excitement. Her gaze dropped to the paper, where a book cover graced the front page. One that she immediately recognized.

She gasped, not because the name of the book was *Total Terror*, but because the author was Logan Matthews.

She knew the book because she stalked him online—or rather, *ahem*, followed his career.

Which was pretty hard to do, considering that Logan was probably the only author on the planet who didn't do interviews, podcasts, or have a social media presence.

“Logan's coming home?” she murmured in disbelief.

Robin confirmed that with a nod. “And look at this.” She flipped the paper so Viv could see the bottom half.

There, before her, was an image of her childhood best friend—well, make that *ex*-best friend—in a sweater and jeans standing against a tree in full fall colors.

Her mouth dropped open. Partly from shock, and partly because the photo showcased Logan, with his casually wavy hair, dark brows, stubbornly square jaw, and lean frame, as a fully grown, mature man in a way she'd never seen him before.

As a *hunk*.

She folded the paper so hastily she had no doubt the crinkling could be heard throughout the store. “The background on that photo is way too dark, and he looks kind of stiff,” she babbled.

“Vivienne, stop using your photographer brain. Look at him!”

That was precisely the problem. She couldn't *stop* looking.

And she couldn't resolve the image in her mind of the Logan she knew and *this* Logan. No wavy cowlick over his forehead that possibly resembled an elf curl. No collared, buttoned-up-to-his-neck polos when everyone else had been wearing Maroon 5 T-shirts. And most significantly of all, no warm hazel eyes or wide-open smile.

Her Logan had been open and honest, funny and vulnerable. This Logan...he appeared remote. Jaded. Worldly. Being a creative, Viv prided herself on reading emotions. And being trained as an artist, she understood the importance of conveying emotions in a photograph. But this one sent a little chill up her spine, and she didn't think the effect was intentional.

Maybe she was projecting the things she'd read about him in the press—that he was distant and unapproachable. “I heard he's difficult to interview.” She handed the paper back to Robin. “*Grinchy.*”

Robin patted her shoulder. “You're spending waaay too much time in here, honey.”

The image was no longer before her, but it felt burned into Viv's retinas, so much so that she felt a pang. She acutely missed the skinny boy with the bad haircut, unruly curls, and teenage acne who lived next door to her for eighteen years. Who'd listened to all her troubles and secrets and dreams, as she had his. Who'd helped her through her father's death. The one who always kept the tires pumped up and the chain oiled on her secondhand bike and kept it faithfully running for years. Who always told her what a great artist she was—or could be.

Well, he'd gotten *that* part wrong.

The fact that she'd lost his friendship was one of the biggest regrets of her life. And it had been all her fault. One stupid turn of her head had ruined it forever.

But had she really had a choice?

Viv forced herself back into the present. Robin was her dear friend, and she was lucky to have her. But even Robin didn't

understand the complexities of what had happened with Logan. Or the deep sadness she still carried.

“Hey, snap out of it.” Robin flicked her gaze to her watch and then at Viv. “I thought you should also know something’s happening today.”

Viv frowned. “Not the annual sale at the pharmacy on that moisturizer we love that costs an arm and a leg?” she asked hopefully as she glanced out the window. It was a perfect spring day, the crabapple trees that lined Blossom Glen’s Main Street in full, glorious bloom. She needed to lighten up. She gave her head a little shake, as if to get rid of the melancholy.

“He’s on the way over here,” Robin said, as calmly as if she’d just agreed their moisturizer was way too expensive. “With his publicist or something.”

Viv froze. Robin seemed to be speaking in extreme slow-mo. When her brain finally translated the words, she jerked up her head. “Wait. He—Logan? He’s on the...what?”

Robin gave her a quick hug. “I gotta go. But call me later, ’kay?”

No sooner had Robin sped off than the bell jingled over the door and a woman stepped in, wearing a white spring coat, a white dress, and matching designer heels. Her hair was as white-blond as her outfit, and her lips were an amazing shade of Gwen Stefani red that Viv had always coveted but could never wear because against her pale complexion, it made her look like a vampire.

“Oh my gosh, it’s soooo cuuuute in here.” The woman surveyed the packed-to-the-gills shelves complete with twinkling lights and a giant animated polar bear near the door, which held a pile of prettily wrapped packages that, in Viv’s opinion, scared rather than excited the children.

The woman walked over and extended a hand. “I’m Freyde Martin from Martin PR. Is Delores here?”

Viv, with full attention on the intruder, adjusted her elf hat, which had suddenly gone completely awry, just like her life.

Before Viv could call out, Delores Teeter, the owner, came

huffing out from the back room, a dust of glitter on the shoulders of her Christmas sweater, which today featured a penguin happily tangled in a lit-up string of Christmas lights. “Oh, hello there,” Delores said. “You work for Logan, don’t you?”

Wait. What? This gorgeous creature worked for Logan? And even more concerning, Delores *knew*?

“Thanks so much for letting us shoot a little video inside your store,” Freyde said.

Oh no. No, no, no. Why was a bestselling author of terrifying thrillers going to shoot a video inside a kitschy Christmas store?

“Feel free to walk around, dear,” Delores said, “and find the best place for your video. I’m happy to help, just give me a shout.”

Then she scurried away faster than a squirrel stealing a nut.

Viv caught up with the older but very spry woman in the ornament aisle, adjusting glitter-covered glass balls hanging from a light fixture. “Not so fast.”

Delores’s look was placid but her eyes were notably a little shifty. “Haven’t you heard?” she said in a too-innocent tone after clearing her throat. “Logan’s back in town to write his next book. Don’t worry, dear.” She nervously patted Viv’s arm. “It shouldn’t impact your work at all.”

Viv barely held in a groan. Also, she was ready to strangle Delores, even though she owed everything to her. She’d given her a job last year when she was out of work and luck. And she treated her very well except for assuming that she loved Christmas as much as she did, which was *a lot*. And then there was the fact that she’d hired Sheila, which she still didn’t comprehend.

“Delores, I do the social media for the store. Shouldn’t I have known about this?” She was going to keep this professional, even if she was wearing shoes that curled up at the toes.

Also, everyone in town knew that she and Logan had been

inseparable for eighteen years, but now they barely spoke.

“Honey,” Delores said, her eyes kind, “Logan just asked me for help this morning. I knew it would be good publicity for the store.” She looked like she wanted to say a lot more. Instead she gently patted Viv’s hand and smiled a smile that could have been in a toothpaste ad. “It’s going to be so much fun to see him again, don’t you think?” she said in an overly cheery voice. “Even when friends haven’t seen each other for so long, they usually pick right up from where they left off.”

Viv appreciated Delores’s compassion as much as she was horrified by it. “I—I just—” How could she tell Delores that she didn’t want to see Logan Matthews for the first time in forever wearing Velcro closures and dangling red bauble earrings that lit up?

Would he even speak to her?

Before Viv could say more, Freyde found them in front of the vintage snow-flocked village collection. She was looking around, scribbling notes on her clipboard. “So the plan is for Logan to walk in and pick up some cute props and—I don’t know, pretend he’s shopping for his mom.”

That was the best social media plan they could come up with? Viv had been taking PR classes over the past year since she’d been home. Plus, she managed her sister Tessa’s pastry shop website as well as the one for this store. For someone—Logan, that is—without a real social media presence, this plan seemed to have the makings of a disaster.

“Well, Miriam is Jewish,” Delores said, “and I’m not sure she celebrates—”

“It doesn’t have to be accurate,” Freyde interrupted. “Just cute.”

Viv pressed her lips together to avoid saying the obvious. That authenticity was *everything*.

“Viv, why don’t you go check to see if we got our new shipment today?” Delores shooed her off.

She was more than grateful to escape. But as soon as she got to the back of the store, she glanced up at the reflective

security dish mounted near the ceiling just in time to detect someone walking in.

A tall someone with broad shoulders.

She blinked, halting mid-step and staring up at the dish like it was a TV.

The man walking in was...built. Maybe it was Logan's security person. Logan himself was tall but had always been slight. Did up-and-coming authors have bodyguards?

"Mrs. Teeter!" said a familiar voice, a few octaves deeper than she remembered but still absolutely unmistakable. A warmth rushed through her, the kind you feel when you finally see a loved one after too long, and it stirred a flurry of memories. Some funny. Some the heartfelt, deep kind that only very close friends can share. And some sad. Like the fact that she hadn't really heard that voice in ten years, except from afar. "How are you?" He held out his arms to embrace Delores. "You look great."

"Why, Logie Matthews," Delores said as they hugged. She stepped back to assess him. "You're all grown up."

Viv glued her eyes to the big silver dish like she was watching a blockbuster. Logan's body was distorted, making him look enormously tall.

And then he laughed, a deep and resonant sound. Which stabbed her in the heart, too. Because at one time, his laugh had been practically as familiar to her as her own.

Viv pushed aside all her emotions to admit one thing: she needed to leave. ASAP. She was not going to have him see her looking like a fool, being bombarded by a truckload of feelings she couldn't even process.

She couldn't face him now. Not now. Not like this.

It wasn't just the elf suit...it was her life.

Logan had always known what he wanted. He'd written full sentences by six, plays for them to perform by ten, short stories by twelve. And the summer he was seventeen and laid up with a broken foot, his first novel.

Viv still didn't know what she wanted out of life, not really. She'd settle for a decent job, for starters. She hadn't made it in the world of photography, despite all the sacrifice from her family, and that had been hard. Embarrassing. It had kept her down for a while.

But she was digging herself out. Rerouting her dreams. Determined to make her mother's and sisters' sacrifices worth it. She wasn't going to let them down. They deserved better. And so did she.

And if jumpstarting her new dreams meant temporarily dressing up like an elf and dealing with Sheila, so be it.

But there was no need to run into Logan right now. She could control how and when they met. All she had to do was pry her eyes away and keep walking right out the back door and into the storeroom until he left. Easy peasy.

"We're so thrilled you're back," Delores said to Logan. "How long are you staying?"

"About a month." He sounded confident. Composed. Together.

"You'll be here for the Blossom Festival," Delores continued, noting their town's annual spring attraction. "Maybe you can do a book signing for all of us. Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"You there. Elfie."

Viv jumped and turned to find the beautiful publicist—Freyde, was it?—right behind her, smiling with those bright teeth and red, red lips. Who was she to Logan, she wondered? Scratch that. It didn't matter. "I wondered if you'd help us," Freyde said.

In the dish, Viv detected movement. Logan was looking around, probably for his publicist. Time to bolt.

"Would you mind handing Logan a few items as we film?" Freyde glanced around them in the ball ornament aisle, which displayed a complete rainbow-colored collection.

"I'm sorry, but I've got an appointment." Viv inched to the

storeroom door. “I’ve *really* got to go. Sorry.” She beelined, exhaling at her narrow escape as she made a final hard right toward the storeroom. Except her blind and panicked exit made her run smack into a hard wall of...Logan. Make that Logan’s chest. Which was covered by a soft black T-shirt but was so hard she practically bounced. Her nose tingled with an intoxicating mix of soap and spice that wrapped around her tighter than his instinctive grasp on her arms. Suddenly she was enveloped by him—his fingers pressing lightly into her skin, his startled but concerned gaze upon her, his presence filling all her senses.

She blinked in disbelief. The sound of her own blood rushed in her ears and the sudden surge of adrenaline made her knees wobble.

It was definitely the adrenaline. Not anything else. Not *him*.

It was one thing to see his photo and understand he’d changed. But it was quite another to see him up close—too close—and have his big hands gripping her.

He was so tall that her gaze traveled up and up, passing shoulders as wide as Main Street. She stabilized herself, pushing against the hard, unyielding tank of a chest—wait, weren’t authors mushy from sitting all day?—and met his gaze.

His eyes widened and he stared at her like he’d just seen Santa Claus.

The familiarity of looking into those hazel eyes slayed her. They echoed her same shock and surprise. There was a wariness there, too, a skepticism that suggested he did not trust her one bit. She made sure to steel her own features into that same hardened look.

His hair was wavy and dark and cut in a clean style that tamed his curls into submission and probably cost more than her rent. His jaw was stronger than she remembered, his face shaven but shaded with a trace of shadow that was so...

Dammit. Her former best friend was...sexy.

This was the boy who’d taught her to climb trees. The one

she'd read every single Harry Potter book out loud with and seen every single movie with and had endless discussions comparing the two. The one who taught her to rollerblade and cuss and explained every word guys used to describe male and female anatomy so she would head into her teenage years informed.

Suddenly her jaw began to quiver and her wall of steel crumbled in Jenga defeat. She willed it to stop by sucking in her cheeks and biting down hard. Even worse, her eyes welled with tears.

“Vivi?” He used that silly nickname he always used to call her. A puzzled look crossed his handsome face. “You *work* here?”

Chapter 2

Logan Matthews spent his days writing bestselling psychological thrillers, and so he considered himself not easily shocked. But *shocked* was an understatement when he walked into the Christmas store to find that his best friend for the first eighteen years of his life had become...an elf.

A *hot* elf.

A really hot elf.

Vivienne. The girl next door. The person who'd always known him better than he knew himself. Who *clearly* wasn't a girl anymore.

She was staring at him, her bright blue eyes wide with surprise, and her dark curls escaping her silly stocking cap every which way. Cute. Okay, more than cute. If she were any other woman...but no. Not going there.

It had taken him a long time to pack away his feelings for her, but he'd succeeded and moved on.

He just hadn't expected to feel a Class VI rapids rush of feeling within five seconds of seeing her again.

"Yes, I work here." She said it like that was obvious, visibly straightening her spine.

She kept balling and unballing her fists, a sure tell of her own nerves that somehow made him feel a little better. Because he hadn't been this nervous since waiting for his first major book review.

He flashed an uneasy smile and cleared his throat. "I feel like I should hand you my Christmas list or something."

As soon as he cracked that joke, he knew he shouldn't have.

"Don't bother," she shot right back, deadpan. "I'm sure you're on the naughty list."

Somehow, that made him smile even wider, even though he could tell by her frown that she wasn't pleased.

Her name meant *full of life*. Which had always been true. Except, now that he thought of it, maybe she should've been named *Stubborn*.

He'd known he would run into her, but like this?

Over the years, he'd cultivated a cool, detached persona that kept him apart from anyone who tried to intrude into the privacy that he valued so greatly. But he felt it threatening to melt off of him faster than a snowball in Miami.

She was the one thing he'd always had a soft spot for. Although she'd always been a little too pretty, a little too embraced as the baby of her family and the sweetheart of their town.

Her worst flaw was that she'd friend-zoned him and then left, suddenly and without warning. Without even saying goodbye. They'd still had two more weeks of that fated summer before college to spend together—but it never happened. She scurried away full speed ahead to start her life, leaving him behind.

“You look...” He couldn't seem to get the words out. “You look...”

“Please don't make an elf joke,” she interrupted.

“I was going to say nice. You look nice.” It had taken a full sixty seconds for his mouth to reconnect to his brain.

She looked dubious. And she didn't say, *So do you*. Nope. She was staring at him as if he was a raccoon peeking out at her from under the lid of a garbage can.

“Oh, there you two are.” Delores Teeter walked up and stood by Viv's side. “Vivienne's here for a while to work and do our social media, and she's amazing at it,” she piped in.

“I'm sure you are,” Logan said, looking directly at Viv. He tried to view her objectively, like his dear old friend he hadn't seen in quite a while, but it was impossible.

Because she was ten times more gorgeous than the day he'd left.

That was his problem. He'd *never* been able to be objective

with her.

But now he was a grown man, a dozen years older and wiser. So the mere fact that they were now face-to-face shouldn't suddenly bring all those hormonal adolescent feelings rushing back. Right?

"The better question is, what are *you* doing here?" she hit him with. She never was one to lie down and take things. His mom had told him that she'd been devastated when her attempt to break into the art world with her photography hadn't worked out, but her sass reassured him that she hadn't stayed down for the count.

"Visiting," he said. And trying to make sense of his life. He'd lost his true north. Needed to find his ground. He wanted to take a break from the spotlight and reconnect with his family. His sister, especially, who'd be heading off to college in a year. And he felt like there was a good chance he might stay in the one place that truly felt like home.

Freyde, who'd been scoping things out, joined them. "We need to get started."

Viv, ignoring her, asked him point-blank, "Why are you filming in here?"

"It's for my Instagram account," he said.

Trying to warm up his psychologically edgy image in the Christmas store might be the worst idea he'd said yes to in a long time. It was just that his publisher told him he'd have to get into the current century and be a partner in his book promotion *or else*.

Logan constantly struggled to understand why he should be judged on anything but his work. When his dad had been alive, his favorite saying had been, *It's all about the writing*. But then, those days where famous authors like his father led an anonymous life happily answering the occasional fan letter were gone. Not that his father had ever been happy, but that was another story. One he didn't dwell on.

"Yes," Freyde piped in. "We're doing a little hometown shoot so Logan's readers can learn a little more about him."

“That is charming,” Viv agreed, then addressed him directly. “But you write thrillers.”

“Yes, I do,” he said, frowning. “What’s wrong with charming? Thriller writers aren’t serial killers.” He paused. “At least I’m not.”

Instead of laughing, tiny frown lines creased her brow. But hell, even *they* were cute.

“What?” he asked. “What is it?”

She shrugged nonchalantly and tapped her lip, deep in thought. “I’m just wondering if this is a good move for your branding.”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Freyde asked with an easy shrug. “It’s a human angle. And Blossom Hills is Logan’s hometown.”

“Blossom *Glen*,” Viv corrected.

Waaait a minute. Not even five minutes in, and Viv couldn’t resist offering advice. The irony was that in the past, he’d usually taken it. After all, she was the reason why he’d continued to pursue writing against all odds. She was still a spitfire. Which made him oddly relieved and irritated at the same time. “I see you still have strong opinions.”

She shrugged. “You asked for my *professional* opinion.”

“Actually, I didn’t. But you offered it anyway.” He tried to look angry, but he found his mouth curving upward. She hadn’t changed one bit. And it was oddly reassuring.

No, more than that. Refreshing. And hot. Did he say hot before?

No one in his life bossed him around anymore. Or argued with him. Or gave him grief.

Success was like that. People acted like your friends even when they weren’t.

This inability to trust had worsened with his climb to fame and made him close himself off too much. He was lonely. He wanted to be around people who were genuine—people from

his hometown who liked him for the person he was, not the author he'd become.

Delores, looking uncomfortable, intervened. "You know that Viv made Tessa a YouTube star, don't you?"

"That right?" Actually, his mom had told him about Viv helping her sister with her YouTube baking channel, which had exploded into a great success that had driven sales to her new pastry shop. But why hadn't he heard a thing about Viv's job as resident Elf on the Shelf?

Once upon a time, Vivienne's dreams were way bigger than the size of their town. A talented artist, she'd wanted to photograph her way across Europe. So she'd left Blossom Glen at the age of eighteen to cross an ocean to make a name for herself. She'd gotten scholarships and acclaim rare for someone her age. So why wasn't she doing *that*?

"Did you two...date?" Freyde asked, her gaze ping-ponging from one to the other.

"No!" they both said in unison.

"Absolutely not," he confirmed. That earned him a glare from Viv.

"Because you two are acting sort of like a divorced couple," Freyde added.

"Friends," Viv said, waving a hand dismissively through the air. "We were friends."

He snorted. "Were?"

Viv had the decency to blush.

Freyde cleared her throat. "This is amazing. You two go way back, huh?"

"*Way* back," suddenly flew out of his mouth. After all, they'd shared playpens. Their mothers were best friends. Every first-day-of-school photo he'd taken for thirteen years showed him lined up against the red of the Montgomerys' century-old brick house with Viv and her two sisters. Growing up, their bedrooms were directly across the little side yard from each other, making it handy to send each other SOS

signals when needed. Once he'd tossed a bag of Skittles to her after she'd gotten grounded for breaking curfew with him. It had sailed through the window, hit her floor, and broken apart, scattering a rainbow of candy pieces everywhere just as her mother walked in. Which had caused Viv, by the way, to remain grounded. He'd made up for it afterward by buying her a brand-new bag.

Their friendship had been wonderful and genuine and innocent. Her mother and grandmother never had to worry about him overstepping the bounds with her.

It was only a matter of time, though, before one of them developed feelings that would complicate things and make their easy friendship impossible to continue.

And that would have been him.

"I'm going to grab some props," Freyde said. "Delores, can you help me?"

As they walked away, Logan turned to Viv. "We *were* best friends," slipped out of his mouth before he could stop it. "For eighteen years."

She crossed her arms and lifted an accusing brow. "I never meant for that to end."

He snorted again.

"What was that for?" Viv waved her arms. "You crossed a line."

The ladies who were part of one of the many bus groups that made pitstops at Christmas Every Day had been milling about and chattering excitedly over the finds in the next aisle. But Viv's passionate tone apparently struck them into silence. They stopped grabbing Christmas items and snapped to all-ears attention.

"You call a kiss on the cheek crossing a line?" He tried to whisper but it came out sounding an octave higher than usual. He took a big breath to get himself in check. This was ancient history. Why was he letting her get under his skin?

Viv was up in his grill. "You were aiming for my lips, but

you missed.” She paused. “But then that’s what teenage boys do.”

Okaaay, if she wanted to spar, he was going to give it right back. But her elf hat was a little bit crooked, which took her threat level down a notch or two. “I kissed you on the cheek because you turned away.” There, the truth. He saw from her alarmed expression that he scored a direct hit. But somehow it didn’t give him any satisfaction. He crossed his arms. “Trust me, I wouldn’t miss now.”

She rolled her eyes before dropping her voice. “What you did changed *everything*.”

“Vivienne, you cleared out of there faster than an eye blink.”

“I called you *and* texted you every single day for a month,” she said in an indignant tone, “but you hardly responded. You barely managed a *hi* whenever you came home. So don’t you *dare* accuse me of leaving our friendship behind.”

He stabbed the air. “And you went off to Paris. So you weren’t really home much to talk to, were you?”

He suddenly became aware that a dozen gray-haired ladies holding Christmas decorations were not only staring but also rummaging for their phones, searching the screens over their glasses...for their camera buttons? Surely they weren’t going to take videos of this.

Making a scene was absolutely not what he’d planned for his very first social media appearance.

Viv must have noticed, too, because she dropped her voice. “Well, things change.”

“And so do people,” he shot right back.

He caught her swallowing hard, the first indication that she was upset.

That tiny, barely noticeable gesture made all his bluster dissolve. *Just like that*. He never could stay angry with her for long.

Except for that final time. The anger and the heartache remained, unshakable, despite starting a new life at college.

Despite trying to reinvent himself all over again as someone tougher—less likely to dump out his feelings and get hurt. More muscular, too, since she'd described him to her friends as undatable—*he's like my brother* was the exact phrase. Ouch.

He'd banished his skinny, nerdy, dweeby self forever, transforming into an aloof, mysterious, untouchable author.

And he'd discovered his power over women, many of whom wanted him, even if Viv hadn't.

Then he'd poured all his heartache straight into a book. Which happened to get published—by a tiny press, but published nonetheless—and started his career.

A book where the villain was the town sweetheart, beloved by all. But in reality, she was spoiled, took advantage of her family, and enjoyed trampling on hearts. Oh yes, and she happened to be a merciless killer of anyone who had a crush on her.

Yes, he'd done that. What a fool.

He was startled back to reality by Viv looking him straight in the eye and saying...nothing.

He stared right back in a giant game of chicken, which they'd done often. Sometimes with food in their mouths, doing anything to make the other one blink. Except this time, it was different.

Their dare-me stare suddenly, startlingly, seemed to devolve into something completely different. Just for a flash, he saw something in her eyes that wasn't obstinacy.

She was no longer the bony girl who wore Converse high-tops and skinny jeans with an oversize Pink sweatshirt.

Just as he wasn't the nerdy boy with no muscles or confidence.

The anger seemed to dissipate around them like glitter in a sunbeam. The air itself seemed to crackle as the whispers of the bus ladies faded away. His pulse throbbed at his neck, his throat was parched, and all he could see was the clear, sweet, lake-water blue of her eyes staring back at him. Maybe even

softening.

She's beautiful.

No, no, no. He ripped his gaze away.

The intensity of whatever was happening buzzed through him, threatening to thaw the edges of his heart that he'd locked down long ago.

Freyde cleared her throat. He looked up to see her arms full of Christmas props and the tourist ladies staring from over the Santas. And their phones were going *click, click, click*.

He let out a curse under his breath. He was always calm. Never made a scene. Never made waves. What had he done?

“Logan.” Freyde held up her own phone. “How about picking up one of those Santas and saying something about how great it is to be back home? Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone,” she coached. “Imagine all those readers who can't wait to get to know the real Logan Matthews, right in his own cute little hometown.”

A little stunned, he grabbed the first Santa he could find. As he picked it up, the Santa began swaying his hips to “Jingle Bell Rock.” Then his pants dropped down to reveal his butt with a big old heart tattoo on it.

The ladies, chuckling, filmed that, too. He didn't even know how to post on social media. So seniors didn't, either, right?

Logan was vaguely aware of the ridiculousness of his situation. Making a scene, quarreling in public, holding a bare-ass Santa.

Sweat trickled down his neck. If this got out, he'd go from a serious writer to a laughingstock overnight, all because his publisher said he'd soon be out in starving-artist world if he didn't get his face out there.

But like *this*?

“Wait a minute,” Viv said, accidentally bumping elbows with a lady about to take a photo. “Oh, excuse me, I'm so sorry,” she said as she shimmied through the crowd until she stood in front of them. “Give us just a sec, and we'll get you a

really great photo, okay?”

What on earth was she doing?

Viv walked up to him, smiling her prom-queen smile, holding up a glittery, shiny, oversize ornament that looked like a disco ball. She turned him so that they were both facing Freyde—and the bus ladies. “We’re the oldest of friends,” she said, hooking her arm through his and beaming up a smile that still turned his blood to champagne bubbles. It dawned on him that she was helping him. *Rescuing* him was more like it.

Playing to the crowd, she made a dismissive gesture with her arm. “I’ve known Logie since he was in diapers. Our moms used to put us in the same playpen. And we’re used to teasing each other, aren’t we, Logan?”

“Why, are you the girl next door?” asked a woman.

For a second, Logan’s heart shuddered. Because *The Girl Next Door* happened to be the name of that ill-fated first book.

Good thing he’d written it under a pen name, and it’d had a very, very small print run. Over the years, a few people had recognized his photo on the back. But so far, no one in town knew.

Except soon the whole world would know. His agent had recently told him that first publisher was planning a new print run using his real name.

A wave of guilt ran through him now that he was face-to-face with the woman who’d broken his heart a long time ago and never even known it.

“Yes. Yes, I am the girl next door,” Viv said with an amiable laugh. “Well, here you go, Logan.” She held up the ball for the ladies. On closer inspection, he saw that it said *Auld Lang Syne* across the sparkly surface. “That’s a Scottish saying, did you know that?” Viv spoke in a sincere voice that kept the crowd spellbound. “It means *times gone by*. What it really means is that we are utterly useless if we don’t cherish the relationships from the past and remain in touch with the people who made us who we are today.”

Then she reached over and kissed his cheek.

It stung. It tingled. It throbbed. He fought all of it by clenching his jaw and his fists. Nothing could stop the wave of feeling that bowled him over.

How ironic that they were starting right where they left off twelve years ago.

Her quick thinking got to him. But her kindness got to him even more.

Even after barely talking for more than a decade, she still had his back.

Cameras flashed. The bus ladies oohed and aahed.

Viv passed him a knowing look and a slight nod, then turned and left, leaving him in the middle of the Santa aisle literally holding the ball.

With his cheek tingling, the entire side of his face numb, and a certain other vital body part responding in a whole other way.

On top of it all, his heart filled with dread. How could he ever explain to her what he'd done?

Chapter 3

“The Montgomerys’ house is looking good,” Logan said as he stood at the sliding door in his mom’s kitchen surveying the house next door as twilight approached. “I can’t believe it, but is that a hot tub out there?”

“Joanna is finally living a little.” His mom came up behind him, giving him a little squeeze, and regarded the view. “Except she’s not home to enjoy it much. She’s been dating Marco Castorini.” She dropped her voice. “She spends most of her time at his place.”

Ah yes, Marco was Leo’s dad. Leo ran his family’s longtime Italian restaurant and had turned it into a smashing farm-to-table success. And he happened to be married to Viv’s oldest sister Tessa.

According to Logan’s mom, the fact that Joanna Montgomery slept with Marco was the *big* story in town. In Logan’s opinion, Mrs. M deserved true love and happiness. She was a first-class human as well as a second mom to him.

His mom turned to set the table, but as he watched, the Montgomerys’ screen door opened and Viv walked out onto the deck with her camera.

As always, the vision of her jolted him. She walked barefoot across the deck, her long legs shapely and toned in cutoff shorts, looking to be on a mission. She stood at the railing and began to shoot photos of the sunset. He was suddenly flooded with relief that her drive to take photos hadn’t died after all, no matter what people said.

He could almost hear the camera whirring away. A far nicer sound than the clicking of all the smartphones earlier.

Viv had always loved to take photos. Of people. Of beautiful things. Of her family’s many pet cats over the years. He chuckled to think that he’d spent almost as much time watching her take photos as she had taking them.

He had to ball his fists and hold himself back because he

was overcome with the desire to walk right out there and join her. Have a conversation. Hang out on the deck.

But he had no right to any of that.

He kept forgetting that they were strangers now.

Just then, his seventeen-year-old sister Elise walked in, holding up a takeout bag and smiling. As he acknowledged her with a little wave, something in his chest tightened with gratefulness that he was here with his mom and sister. His mom called them to the table, and suddenly it was family time, the whole reason he'd come home.

"This is delicious, Mom." Logan dug into his favorite pasta—linguine with clam sauce.

"Thank your sister." His mom nodded to Elise, who sat across from him biting into a margherita pizza.

"Ordering takeout from Castorini's was really hard," she said with a grin. She sounded so adult, but when he looked at her, he still saw a little girl with lopsided pigtails and giant blue eyes who called him Lo-Lo because she couldn't pronounce his name.

"She even picked it up," his mom said, beaming and patting Elise's hand.

"You can pick up tomorrow," Elise said tongue-in-cheek, casting a knowing glance at Logan.

Logan bit back a smile. His mom, a true New Yorker through and through, only cooked when forced. But she never failed to deliver just what they needed, be it love, food, or always plentiful (though sometimes unwanted) advice. And he had a feeling more of that would be coming after his run-in with Viv, because half the town was surely talking about it over their own dinners.

It was bad enough that Freyde had posted the ornament video.

No one seemed to care much about that one. The other one, with them trading barbs, had gone viral.

Thank you, bus ladies.

And that was precisely the reason he didn't believe in social media.

As he devoured the food, he made a sound low in his throat. "This is fantastic. I've missed it." He looked up. "But mostly I've missed being home."

"We've missed you, too," Elise said. "And now that you're here, I have a whole lineup of things you can do to make up for lost time. Like talking to my class about being a famous author."

He chuckled. "Okay, but I'm glad you've chosen nursing for your career. Smart girl."

"What's wrong with writing?" Elise crossed her arms. "I mean, you're great at it. And don't say Dad struggled with success. Not everyone does."

He wanted her to understand that it was important to choose a practical job, not one that was unstable for so many people. Not that he had to worry about her. She was hardworking, compassionate, and great with people, and he knew she'd be a great nurse. "Writing as a career is really hard, Elise. It's a life of struggle unless you get lucky. Even if you get a book contract, there are a dozen people behind you waiting for your sales to fall so they can take your spot. Your workday depends on how creative you are, and some days really suck. And there are no benefits like health insurance, so you have to plan for that in other ways."

"If it's so terrible, why do you do it?"

"I—" Logan was lost for words. Why *did* he do it? Because a writer was who he was, and he couldn't imagine anything else? And that was where his passion was? He couldn't say those things in good conscience. He just couldn't.

"Nursing is such a rewarding career," their mother said, picking up the slack. "Think of all the people you'll help. And you'll never lack for a job." She smiled at Logan. "Speaking of working while you're home, I was talking to Joanna, and she thought it might be fun for you to set up your books for a book signing near their food truck at the festival. They're

going to be baking elephant ears again, and you know how people come from miles around for them.”

Ah, yes, elephant ears being the famous sugary fried dough concoction that was the hit of the festival every year. Nice of Mrs. M to think of him.

“Do people who are excited about food buy more books?” he asked, wondering about the connection.

“I don’t know,” his mom said with a grin, “but it can’t hurt, right?”

Logan chuckled, suddenly having a panicked visual of him signing books to people who couldn’t stuff the sugary warm dough creations into their mouths fast enough. Actually, he’d definitely be one of those people, too. Yep. If there was a competition, hands down, the elephant ears would win.

“How’s Fraid-y?” his mom asked.

“Her name is *Freyde*, Mom.”

Elise crinkled up her nose. “Fraid as in a-fraid?”

“Correct,” Logan said.

His mom set down her fork and shook her head. “Frankly, after today, *I’d* be afraid to invite her back.”

He gave her a don’t-go-there look.

But of course she was going to go there. Because his mom was his mom.

“She’s a terrible publicist,” his mom said. “Never date your publicist. Do you date your publicist?”

“I don’t date her.” Okay, he did sleep with her a while back. But they’d both known that it would never turn into anything serious.

His mom speared him with a look that made him worry he’d said that out loud even though he didn’t. “Whatever.”

“I’m uncomfortable with this conversation,” Elise said. “I’m going over to Maisie’s.” She rose with her plate, kissed them both on the cheek, and deposited her dish in the dishwasher on

the way out.

Elise was everything he wasn't at her age. Attractive, self-assured, funny. And the icing on the cake, a genuinely nice person.

He just wished he hadn't missed so much of her growing up. His sister was one of the main reasons he'd come home. He'd been so busy these past years, and he'd left home when she was just a kid. Being home now gave him one last opportunity to get to know her better and make some great memories before she started college.

He never wanted her to doubt how much he loved her. As he sometimes did about their father.

As soon as the door shut behind Elise, his mom looked at him with a pained expression. Her eyes got a little watery. Why was he making women cry today? "I just feel that you've lost your way."

"Dad lost his way. I have not."

He didn't say anything about how his dad had used alcohol to cope with the pressures of a brilliant writing career. About how he'd slowly detached himself from them. About the divorce. And how his mom had held everything together for him and Elise. She'd been the reliable one, the sensible one, the one who'd loved them enough for two parents.

"Your father had a disease," his mom said in her usual practical tone. "He did love you, you do understand that, right? And you know that you are mentally a far stronger person than he was."

Was he? He wasn't sure because his feet were in the career fire now.

"I know you're at a crossroads, Logan," she continued. "You can't go on being mysterious and not facing the public. Because it's not mysterious to be invisible—it just makes everyone forget about you in a competitive market." She took a sip of water. "Of course, I wouldn't have chosen an appearance in the Christmas store as your introduction to social media. But what do I know? I've been teaching fifth

graders for longer than you've been alive. But I follow a lot of authors on social media, and it seems to me that it's all about branding. How on earth is Christmas Every Day your brand?"

Logan winced. "Okay, I admit that was a mistake." He reached a hand across the table and squeezed hers. "I've got things handled. And I'm really excited about being home."

I am not lost, he repeated to himself. But she was right, he was at a turning point. One he hoped that writing the best book he could and making some compromises about visibility would fix.

He'd saved himself from his father's fate by staying in the shadows. By letting his books talk for themselves. Because fame had helped kill his father.

"I never wanted you to become a writer." She smiled sadly. "Not that I don't think you're brilliant. It's just so much stress."

Tell me about it.

His dad's first book was brilliant and was still considered a literary classic. He'd tried to surpass that with each book after, but the pressure he put upon himself as well as the expectations of the public had interfered with his writing and caused him to drink even more.

Basically, fame had ruined their family.

His mom's voice cracked and a tear welled up in her eyes that she quickly swiped away. "I begged you to choose any other occupation. Yet you defied me anyway." Her voice held a strange mix of anger and pride. "I just want to make sure that the stress doesn't destroy you, either."

Logan heaved a sigh. "That's why I'm here, Mom. To find some balance." He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "And I can't wait to get started on my next book. I really believe that if I can find some peace and quiet in Blossom Glen, I'll do my best work." And if he could figure out a way to get over his massive phobia about giving interviews, he might be able to save his career. And not have to do terrible videos in local stores.

“I’m excited to be home. And no worries about going to your conference next week. Elise and I will be fine. I’m looking forward to spending some time with her.”

His mom squeezed his hand back. “Well, it is wonderful to have you home. And I know Elise feels the same way.” She took a sip of wine. “Maybe there’s one positive thing to come out of the Christmas store fiasco. Wasn’t it nice to see Vivienne again?” His mother’s tone was innocent. But he knew her waaay too well.

She’d been best friends with Viv’s mom since the third grade. And the two had been colluding for years to get them together. When they were toddlers, their mothers had made a scrapbook with a giant lace heart on the cover titled “Vivi and Logie” with a photo of the two of them eating drippy ice-cream cones.

That’s what he was dealing with here.

You’d think after a dozen years of him and Viv being incommunicado, their mothers would have given up by now.

His gaze strayed back over to the glass doors. In the dim light, he could barely make out Viv’s form sipping a beer and reading.

He almost laughed out loud, because she was wearing an LED headlamp around her head, the kind that runners use to see in the dark.

He shook his head in humorous amazement. She used to read all the time. If not on the porch, in her bed—everywhere and anywhere. He would lie in bed at night in his room directly across from hers and see the glow through the window, so he always knew exactly how late she stayed up.

“Yes, Mom, very nice.” It *had* been nice to see her. He just hadn’t expected to still...feel things. But maybe that was simply from the shock of seeing her.

“You two were inseparable for eighteen years,” she said carefully.

“Yes, we were.”

She gave him a firm look.

“I really don’t want to talk about this.”

“I’m your mother, remember? I know why you pulled away. I didn’t agree with it, but I do understand it.”

“Ancient history, Mom.” He really didn’t want to rehash the long-dead past with his mother of all people.

“You were in love with her.” She got that pitying look in her eyes that made him feel like he was a teenager again. “With your best friend.”

He rubbed his neck. “Ma, did you hear the part about me not wanting to talk about this?”

His mother ignored that. “Vivienne feels terrible about losing your friendship. She asks about you all the time. I sincerely hope that you two can repair it.”

He tried to give a nonchalant shrug, but it felt anything but. “I’ll be here for the next month, so I’m planning on trying.”

His mom put a hand over her heart. “Wonderful. Does she know about the book?”

Ah yes, *The Book*. That juvenile piece of trash he wished he could pay every single library and bookstore to remove permanently from their collections, even though he hadn’t even published it under his real name. “I don’t think she reads my books.” This had to be the most uncomfortable conversation since his mom had driven him to soccer practice, locked all the doors so he couldn’t escape, and given him the talk about always using birth control.

How his mom had found out about that book was unclear, because he hadn’t told a soul. She told him she’d learned about it from an online mystery and thriller book club that tended to pick obscure books and had picked his randomly. But he’d never really believed that story, even though she’d stuck to it all these years.

“All I can advise you to do is tell her everything before she hears it from someone else. Something you did as a heartbroken young man is forgivable. But the truth always

finds a way of leaking out. *You want to be the leaker,*” she said adamantly. “No one else.”

He wasn’t sure if what he’d done really was forgivable in the big scheme of things.

Who would want to be imagined as the man-eating psychopathic scream queen of a scary novel?

He definitely was not going to mention it now when they could barely speak without arguing.

Hey, Viv, just wanted to let you know I envisioned you as the villain of my first bad novel. And it got published.

Thank God the book hadn’t had a lot of visibility. But a big editor happened to read it and had seen his promise.

And he’d been off to the races, landing a big contract.

“Vivienne singlehandedly transformed Leo Castorini’s restaurant and Tessa’s pastry shop into sensations.” His mom really should have spent her career in PR. “She does all the social media for the Christmas shop. She’s still honest and genuine.”

Logan put down his fork. “Mom,” he said gently, “don’t you think it’s about time to give up your dream of us getting together? I’m not about to date her.”

“That’s up to you. What I’m saying is that you should *hire* her.”

Chapter 4

Some people had offices where they did their best thinking, and some had hot tubs. Well, technically the hot tub belonged to Viv's mom, but since her mom was out of town visiting her aunt, Viv had agreed to watch her golden doodle, Raphael. Raphie for short. So the hot tub was all hers for the taking.

At about eleven that night, Viv pulled her hair up into a bun, threw a towel on the wooden deck, stripped down to her undies, and climbed in, making certain to turn off the patio lights for privacy.

Logan was probably staying at his mom's. But no one would suspect she was here, after eleven at night, soaking in the hot tub.

Viv lived in a small garage apartment not far away where her sisters had each stayed for a while, but she loved spending time in the neighborhood where she grew up. Despite losing her dad when she was fourteen and the hard times that followed, she'd had a great childhood. Even now, she loved watching the lights flick on or off in the homes that surrounded theirs. Miriam was an aunt-of-the-heart to her, and Viv felt especially protective of Logan's little sister. Elise was artsy, a creative, someone unafraid to march to the beat of her own drum. Lately, Viv had seen some girls from the so-called popular group give her a hard time in the Christmas shop, where the kids sometimes passed through after school because of Delores's extensive snack selection. She hoped everything was okay and made a note to casually ask Elise how things were going.

As Viv sank silently into the steamy water, some of the shock at seeing Logan melted away.

Through her closed eyes, she saw again his dark curls, now tamed by the wonders of a good haircut. Those expressive eyes she'd never really noticed because they'd always been hidden by thick glasses. Yep, Logan Matthews had transformed into a real hottie. Was the Logan she'd loved still

lurking underneath that new hunky facade?

Viv looked up at the spring sky, dark as velvet with bright pinpricks of starlight. The air was cool but earthy smelling, with the promise of warm, sunny days ahead. For one minute, she simply went weightless, letting the water lift her body and clear her mind.

Her Zen moment was interrupted by a familiar voice. “Still like a midnight dip, I see,” Logan said from the deck.

She stifled a groan. “This one’s legal,” she shot back, knowing that he was referring to when they used to go skinny dipping in a lake just outside of town.

“Might not be if you’re walking around our neighborhood naked.” She heard the suppressed laughter in his voice. “I mean, there are young children and pets around, you know?”

She didn’t grace that with an answer, just rolled her eyes. She never expected him to casually drop by like the old days. Not to mention the fact that they hadn’t had a conversation longer than a string of words in a decade.

She had to keep reminding herself of that, even if they did somehow have the uncanny ability to fall back exactly into their old, intimate patterns.

He’d always been so much fun to banter with.

On the other hand, he’d thought nothing of sauntering over here to torment her in a place it wasn’t easy to escape from.

Wearing a wicked grin along with a T-shirt and shorts, he pulled off his tennis shoes.

Wait. Pulling off his *shoes*?

She sat up so fast the water slapped over the edges of the hot tub. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Joining you,” he said matter-of-factly.

What the... She was struggling to find the words to set him straight when he peeled off his shirt and tossed it down. All coherent thought fled at the sight of his tanned, bare chest, broad and ripped and...well, perfect in every way.

“I—um...” As she struggled, he stood there, still grinning, his teeth white in the darkness. A man who exuded confidence, who was completely comfortable in his own skin.

“Lost your words?”

“You’re *not* coming in here,” she managed. If he’d stunned her into silence, she’d never admit it.

He moved to take off his shorts.

“You’re *definitely* not coming in here.” When he slipped his fingers under the waistband, she got panicky. Throwing her arms out, she said, “For God’s sake, keep those on.”

“Do you have *your* shorts on?” He sounded very amused.

“That’s irrelevant,” she shot back. “It’s my hot tub.”

He cocked a brow in question. “Well, I really don’t care either way.”

“Yes, I have something on,” she said. She felt distraught, and not just because a sports bra and granny panties might be okay in private but...yeah. Not the best choice for right now.

Logan walked over to stand near her on the outside of the tub. She wasn’t naked but the way he was looking at her made her feel like she was. “I just want to talk,” he said innocently. “And I’m sure you’ve seen men in their underwear.” He glanced up. “You have, haven’t you?”

For that, she splashed him. As she gave an exasperated sigh, he, unfazed, stripped down to his briefs—navy blue boxer briefs, to be precise—and climbed in.

She absolutely didn’t notice his muscular thighs or his lean legs or his ripped abs or his bare chest. Or anything else that was barely being contained in those boxer briefs.

Yikes.

The hot tub suddenly felt too small. Too steamy. Too... everything.

Logan, on the other hand, looked as relaxed as a cat about to nap. He sat back and stretched out his arms against the sides and casually surveyed their neighborhood, the place where

they grew up—the old houses, the narrow yards. Her mom’s tidy painted deck with stairs down to the tiny lawn.

“So what did you want to—um—talk about?” she asked. She’d never noticed how white the spouting was on his mom’s house. Or how tall that maple had grown in their backyard. Funny how one noticed things when trying not to notice a certain half-naked man just a few waves away.

“First of all, thank you.” His gaze rested on her, making her feel jumpy and hot. “For today. You saved my ass. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. The thank-you surprised her almost as much as him climbing into the hot tub. It softened her. “I’m sorry we argued in the store,” she conceded. “In public.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t realize people knew who I was.”

She sat forward, the water swirling around her. “Are you serious? *Everyone* knows who you are.”

“I was trying to check the boxes of doing something public and interesting that would showcase my personality. But I didn’t think it through.”

She thought carefully before she spoke. “Social media is a commitment for someone with a public persona. It has to be very carefully mediated.”

“I get it.” He got quiet. “It’s great to be back,” he said, firmly changing the subject. “How about for you?”

Her first thought was that coming home had been bittersweet. “I love helping out my mom and grandma. And watching Tessa’s baby Rosie do new and amazing feats almost daily—and seeing Juliet start her career as a marriage and family therapist.”

“But?” he asked.

But home was not a place where she could ever thrive.

“The ‘but’ is that I’m leaving. As soon as I make enough money for rent in New York.” She’d applied for a job at a bunch of PR firms, including Preston and Preston PR, one of

the largest in NYC. It would be a way to make a fresh start, to learn from the best, and to take her career in a different, more stable direction.

“You got a photography job?” He looked surprised.

“That...didn’t work out.” She swallowed hard. “Turns out I’m not Ansel Adams or Anne Geddes after all. But I’m almost finished with my PR degree. I’ve been taking classes at night since I’ve been home.”

He lifted a thick brow. “Interesting.”

“I still love to take photos. I helped Tessa and Leo jumpstart their businesses using photos. So it was a natural transition.”

“I see.” She knew the look on his handsome face. He was disappointed in her. Having him feel like that about her hurt, even though their friendship was on life support.

“I have to pay bills and I can’t as a photographer,” she hurried to explain. “That’s just a cold fact of life. Not all of us who chose a creative profession have achieved your level of success.”

She’d really, really tried to make photography work. She’d used her family’s blood-and-sweat-earned money to make her dream come true, and still failed.

Now she was determined not to let her family down. They’d done too much for her.

She just wished Logan wasn’t looking at her like she’d given up. She braced herself for his reply. “I’m sorry becoming an artist didn’t work out,” he said. “But if what you did for me today is any indication, you’ll do great in New York.”

She couldn’t tell if he was being sincere, feeling sorry for her, or just being polite. Not being able to read him reminded her of the giant chasm between them.

She knew she’d hurt him long ago and injured his pride. But saying that to him now seemed impossible.

She remembered a time when she could tell him anything. Confess her faults, her shortcomings. He’d never judged her.

All he'd done was develop a huge crush on her. In return, she'd shut him down.

She looked Logan in the eyes. Honesty was the only way to try and repair their friendship—which, she realized, she wanted to do, because in truth, their rift created an ache in her heart every single time she looked at the house next door, spoke with his mom or his sister, as well as every time she passed their old hang-out places in town, heard some silly joke, or saw a bag of Skittles in the grocery store.

“I’m here to save money. And to help out my family. And I’m one class away from a PR degree. That’s it.” She shrugged. “That’s me at thirty.” She hadn’t met the big goals she’d set for herself at eighteen. But she’d finally said something honest.

He busted out laughing.

Her “What?” was filled with indignance.

“Just that you’ve always minimized your accomplishments, and I see that hasn’t changed.”

“I’m not minimizing.” He was being irritating again. “I’m being truthful.”

He counted off on his fingers. “You studied in Paris, left here when you were eighteen no less, made your sister a YouTube star, earned a college degree in art, and practically another one in PR. That doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“I’m not a *New York Times* bestselling author.” His life had gone precisely to plan, and hers had not.

“You were also the one who convinced me to continue with my writing.”

She threw up her arms, bringing water with her that ran down her arms. “You were sixteen, for goodness’ sake. So was I, for that matter.”

“And look how much insight you had.” He shrugged. “I got that rejection, and I was certain I wasn’t cut out for writing.”

A rejection. For a book he’d written when he was *sixteen*. “Logan, how many sixteen-year-olds submit books to

publishers?" He'd always been exceptional. Goal-directed. All he'd needed was someone to encourage him.

It had been really easy to be that person. And it hadn't taken much for an enthusiastic sixteen-year-old friend who believed anything was possible to tell him to keep going.

He shrugged again. "They weren't wrong. It was a terrible book. It was about a boy who goes on safari and fights for conservation in the Serengeti."

"See? A valuable message." She chuckled. "All I told you was to not give up on what you loved."

Across the hot tub, a hint of a smile curved his lips. The steam was making his hair even curlier, which was funny because it was making hers straighten and fall right out of her bun. "Every adult I knew discouraged me. My father wouldn't even address that I wanted to write. My mom begged me to stop and go to med school. Mrs. Pratt told me that my high school essays were terrible. All I had was a form rejection for a very bad book."

She couldn't help smiling. "To be fair, Mrs. Pratt told all of us that our essays were terrible." She snickered at the memory of their very strict and very elderly high school writing teacher. "Writing was too much a part of you." She couldn't remember a time when he hadn't pulled a notebook out of his pocket and started scribbling. If he saw something beautiful. If someone told a funny joke. If she said something interesting. He was constantly writing stuff down. "I just stated the obvious."

He looked directly at her. "The point is, you made a huge difference in my life."

Oh. Viv wished she hadn't looked at him just then because, like a vacuum cleaner in full force, the eye contact suddenly sucked all the air from her lungs.

Or maybe that was all the chlorine, which made her suddenly cough.

And for God's sake, Viv, cut the eye contact already, she admonished herself. "What was it that you wanted to talk to

me about?”

“What you did today was clever. How you bailed me out.”

“I knew something had to be done fast.”

“Well, your instincts were right. Turns out your little speech is creating a lot of buzz.”

She frowned. “The ornament speech?”

“A thousand likes on Instagram in the past few hours.”

She didn’t put much stock in it. “Social media can be so fickle,” she said. “I read about someone whose heartfelt video went viral not because it was meaningful but because the person had spinach between their teeth.”

“Well, um...” He cleared his throat. “There’s actually more to tell. While the friendship-slash-ornament speech you gave is getting a decent number of likes, the one of us arguing got nineteen thousand.”

She sat up with a thought. If Freyde had done her job, this never would have happened.

“Afraid that’s not all.” His full lips quirked up in a smile.

Her heart dropped, imagining embarrassing scenarios like elf wardrobe malfunctions. “Tell me already!”

His eyes glinted with mischief. “Everyone’s asking who the hot elf is.”

Logan gave a little chuckle. While her mind was exploring disaster scenarios. “You think that’s *funny*? What about your reputation?”

Of course he did. She suddenly remembered how that same little chuckle had lightened many scenarios her more serious brain tended to imagine the worst about.

“I don’t take myself seriously, Viv. I also have low expectations about social media. And...I can’t help it if you’re the most interesting thing I’ve had on my feed for years.” He punctuated that with a lift of his brow.

Was he flirting? No, of course not. He was just being Logan.

“You should take this more seriously. If your publisher had hired a competent person—”

“Like you?”

She stared at him, the wheels of her mind churning. He needed help and she needed...

“Yes, like me,” flew out of her mouth. “Hire me,” she added before she could think too much.

Her stomach did a somersault as she realized that her mouth had just highjacked her brain.

“Done,” he said, just like that.

She bit back the no that was on her lips and tried to think. She needed money, and he was desperate for help. Help that she knew how to give. “Are you serious?”

“As the choir at Christmas.”

“Don’t joke. We haven’t even agreed on a price. Or—or what you need.” She knew what she needed—money. But was she willing to enter a minefield for it?

“I need everything. How much do you want?”

“Two thousand,” she said, her heart racing. This was absurd, she knew it.

She’d opened her mouth to tell him she’d changed her mind when he said, “I’ll pay you four. And please don’t say no. My publisher will pay you the same as Freyde if I request it.”

She fixated on one word: *job*. Social media manager for Logan Matthews. That would be a *giant* resume builder. It could help her land that New York job. Just what she needed. Second only to money.

There was just that pesky little problem of her new client’s hotness. How hard could that be to ignore for a few weeks?

For four thousand dollars, not that hard.

“I have to warn you,” he said carefully, “I’m terrible at interviews.”

Not a dealbreaker. She narrowed her eyes. “How terrible?”

“Like, freezing-up terrible. It may be incurable.” His tone indicated he wasn’t kidding. “Sure you don’t want to back out?”

For that much money, she could tolerate a lot of bad. “I like a challenge.” She stared at him across the steamy pool. “Full disclosure on my part, too. I’m leaving soon.”

He frowned. “How soon?”

“A month.” Now she could make plans. She could tell her friend Tasha in NYC that she could share the rent. She could apply for more jobs there too, knowing she’d be free to go.

Freedom. A fresh start. Yes!

“Perfect,” he said. “That’s plenty of time for a good start.” He paused. “You seeing anyone?”

She jerked up her gaze.

“I—I’m only asking because we might be working some odd hours,” he said a little too quickly. “I mean, with my deadlines and your job.”

No big deal. She wasn’t going to read anything into it. “No point. Home is just a means to an end—for me to make enough money so I can leave for New York.” Another long silence, this one spent wondering about him. She was not going to ask. But then suddenly an image of the chillingly gorgeous Freyde popped into her head. “You?” she blurted.

Nice. Smooth, Viv.

“I’m here to focus on my work,” he said. “And reconnect with my family. And my plan is to hopefully stay.”

No girlfriend. She did *not* breathe out a small sigh. She did not feel the tiniest bit relieved. *Not at all.* “I’m sure Elise and your mom are thrilled to have you back.” She adored Logan’s sister. In fact, she and her sisters sort of thought of themselves as Elise’s older siblings, looking out for her and helping her navigate life.

“It’s great to see them, too.” He assessed her, his gaze sweeping her up and down in a way that absolutely didn’t feel friendly.

She tore *her* gaze away and sank down up to her chin in the water. “Let me poke around at your online presence and do a little assessment.”

He gave an ironic laugh. “That will take you five minutes. I’m literally a social media black hole.”

“Well, I want to come up with a simple business plan.”

“You’re incapable of doing anything simple.”

She nearly cracked a smile, because even after all this time, he still knew her. “I’ll lay it out and get back to you.”

“Great. Thank you.” He stood up, dripping wet, forcing her to pry her eyes off his gorgeous body.

His full lips turned up in the tiniest smile. “Nice to do business with you.”

Business. Except he didn’t look much like business.

She glanced from his extended hand to his face and realized he was making a peace gesture. And she saw it in his eyes, too, which had softened, just like the old Logan’s.

Maybe *that* was why he was hiring her. To make peace.

It didn’t matter. She was going to show him how good she was.

His big hand wrapped around hers, stirring something warm and fuzzy inside of her that she didn’t want to acknowledge.

Something that was most definitely not businesslike.

“I—um—” It took every ounce of self-control not to think about his hand surrounding hers. How it had sent a tingle zipping up her arm that melted into a cascade of warmth all through her. Being aware of that but pretending that she wasn’t was taking all the willpower she possessed. “Meet me at Castorini’s tomorrow night. We’ll assess your interview skills.”

“Not Happy’s?” They’d logged a lot of hours as teens in Happy Hamburgers, the popular diner downtown with bright orange booths and lots of noise.

“Happy’s a part of our past,” she said, looking up at him. “This is about business, not friendship.” She had to draw a line and make it clear from the beginning.

He nodded. And kept holding her hand as he spoke. “Agreed. Strictly business.”

Oh, come on now. His touch was literally melting her hand. Soon she’d be a puddle of water, indistinguishable from the rest of the water sloshing all around them.

She gathered her wits and took back her hand, because—well, enough already. “All right then. The first thing that I advise right now is for you to post something on your Instagram account to distract people from the elf thing.”

“I was thinking of posting a photo of my old desk—sort of where it all began—and telling people I’m home.”

“That sounds fun.” And boring. “Put yourself in the photo.” When he sent her a questioning look, she explained. “A photo of your desk is dull. But you sitting at it or saying something about being back home or something sentimental about the desk—these are just ideas—will be fun and interesting. Elise could show you how to do a selfie or even take a photo for you.”

“I know how to do a selfie,” he said. His lopsided grin hit her hard in places it shouldn’t have. “But I have a feeling that everyone would rather see a Hot-Elf-on-the-Shelfie.”

She groaned at his joke. “Do me a favor. Please don’t try to be funny on your social accounts. Leave that to me, okay? For now, anyway.”

He gave her a salute. “Anything you say, Captain.” He shifted his weight forward. “It’s getting late,” he said. “Time to go.”

Part of her was relieved when he rose from the tub, water splashing everywhere. Viv briefly squeezed her eyes shut to get a grip, then opened them in time to see lots of flexing muscle as he swung his leg over the edge of the tub and left. The sight of his very tight butt made her gasp—loud enough that she clasped a hand over her mouth.

He turned around. She smacked herself in the chest and cleared her throat to cover it. “Frog in my...”

His response was a knowing grin. A *flirty* grin, if she wasn't mistaken.

As he walked away, she slid down slowly until she was underwater. Which wasn't the smartest thing to do because it would probably turn her hair purple from the chemicals, but she needed a distraction. When she surfaced, he was gone, jogging through the yard back to his mom's.

Chapter 5

“Two large lattes please,” Viv said the next morning to Margie Liu, the owner of Cool Beans, the coffee shop on Blossom Glen’s main drag.

“I hope one of those is for me,” Robin said as she walked up behind Viv. “You on the way to work?” Robin’s gaze swept her up and down, obviously noticing the lack of elfwear.

“I leave the costume in my office,” she said, then lowered her voice. “And I vow that on my very last day, I’ll burn it.”

“Wow. Such hidden rage.” Robin was clearly trying not to smile. “But I get it,” she added, not without compassion. The women thanked Margie, took their drinks, and stepped out into the sunlit street.

“Thanks for thinking of me,” Robin said as Viv handed her a drink. “But you never order a large. Living next door to the hottie giving you sleepless nights?”

Viv cracked the lid and let the steam escape. “The rule is not to tease before coffee. And I did have a restless night. But not because Logan is hot.”

“But you admit he *is* hot.” She grinned. “I’m your best friend and the rule doesn’t apply because I *always* tease you. So tell me what’s going on. That video of you two arguing went wild before someone finally took it down.”

Geez. Viv blew on her coffee, which was still burn-your-tongue hot. “I contacted the woman who filmed it and asked her to take it down.”

“What?” Robin looked incredulous.

“I don’t feel that Logan’s PR person is competent. She’s not setting him up for success. I had to show him how to delete the other video with the ornament. He’s never even done Facebook before.”

“Poor man,” Robin said. “Good thing he’s got you to help him.”

Viv stopped walking. “That’s the problem. I agreed to be his social media manager for the next month.”

Robin’s eyes grew wide. “Like, he’s paying you?”

“A lot. But he’s a social media nightmare. While we were in the hot tub, he told me that he tends to botch interviews. I mean, the man needs social media intensive care.”

Robin’s grin was huge. “And you’re just the doctor he needs. Did you say *hot tub*?”

This was what tended to happen before Viv got caffeine in her system. She didn’t monitor herself. “I went in there last night and he joined me. We talked business. We were clothed.” Sort of. “I think I’m making a huge mistake.”

Robin gave her a squeeze. “I think it’s sweet.”

“It’s going to get me to New York sooner. That’s the only reason I’m doing it.”

Robin narrowed her eyes. “C’mon. Be honest with yourself. You hated what happened between you two. Now’s your chance to make it right.”

She had missed Logan’s friendship. But rekindling it seemed dangerous in ways she couldn’t quite articulate.

“Just remember,” Robin said with a kind smile, “people only have room for one best friend, and that’s me. And I’m not relinquishing my spot. So you need to decide where he fits into your life.”

“You will never stop being my best friend,” Viv said. Robin had picked her off the ground at her lowest moment, when she’d lost Logan so long ago, and she would never forget that.

“You bet, girlfriend.”

Viv checked her watch. “I’d better get going.” Viv gave Robin a squeeze. “Thanks for being here.”

“Always.” Robin hugged her right back. “Thanks for the coffee.”

They headed off in opposite directions, Robin away from the shops toward the pediatric office building several blocks

down the tree-lined street, and Viv through the thick of downtown, past Bonjour Breads!, where she waved at her mom behind the counter, Castorini's Restaurant, Tessa's pastry shop, the candle factory, the ice-cream shop, Happy's Hamburgers, and the art gallery.

A block from Christmas Every Day, Viv hesitated. For once, it wasn't the dread of having to show up for her shift that slowed her steps. Right across the street from the Christmas store stood a corner office building with large plate glass windows. A large sign announced that it was for sale. It had been ever since a dance instructor took her business to a larger space in Pinesville, the next town over.

The location was smack in the middle of the hustle and bustle of downtown, which Viv loved. Her imagination loved it for another reason—it would make the perfect photography studio. The main room would be fantastic gallery space, if a person were to display photographs for sale, or have showings of different photographers' works.

She peered in the two large windows, then couldn't resist peeking around the building, where she saw a parking lot and some greenspace in front of a strip of woods separating the Main Street businesses from the neighborhood behind it.

Maybe it was the pleasant warmth of the sunny spring day that made Viv do it, but after checking her watch—yep, still early for work—she walked all the way around to the back. There were big paned windows overlooking the lot that probably belonged to offices. She went to sit on the concrete steps near the door. A few irises were in bloom in a neglected little patch of garden, and two large old rhododendron bushes abutted the woods, preparing to bloom a deep, dark pink.

She thought she'd spend a moment thinking about why the space affected her so much if she'd moved on to a different career path. Instead, she found herself thinking of Logan. Logan of the tight butt. Logan who'd joined her in the hot tub. Logan who desperately needed social media savvy, which was just her specialty.

Suddenly she heard a rustling near the woods. Sometimes

deer made their way through there, but what jumped out of the overgrown grass was no deer but a little yellow tabby cat, the size of a six-month-old kitten, the striped pattern especially evident on the legs, as if she—he?—was wearing striped socks.

Viv's heart quickened. She wished she had something enticing—cat food, tuna, a treat—but she only had a few drops of leftover latte in her cup. She set it on the step beside her on its side, then made her voice extra gentle. “Well, hello there, kitten. How are you?”

Surprisingly, the kitten continued over, giving a giant hi there! meow as she sat a few feet away and began to nonchalantly lick her paws.

“Don't pretend you're ignoring me.” Viv grew up with cats. Her sisters both had them. She always knew that she wanted kitties in her life. Well, not now exactly, but when she was settled.

The cat came a foot closer. Viv put her cup on the concrete at the bottom of the steps. Unbelievably, the cat approached the cup and sniffed it.

“It was a great latte,” she joked. “If I'd known we'd meet, I'd have saved you more than a few drops.”

The kitty gave another plaintive meow as she poked her nose into the cup and lapped up the drops of latte.

“I feel so unsettled, kitty. I need the money I can get working with Logan but... I don't know, it's complicated. Is life complicated for you, too? Do you have a home?” The cat was small but looked well nourished. No collar, though. She worried about it being on its own and wondered if she should take it to Brandy who worked at the cat shelter.

The kitty looked up, froth on her whiskers, and blinked.

“You are too cute. Where did you come from?” Under the stairs was some latticework, surrounded by overgrown clumps of weeds—maybe she lived in there? If she was a she, that is.

Just then, a chipmunk darted out of a tree, and the kitty turned and zipped after it, quick as a bolt of lightning.

“Whoa,” Viv said. “So sweet, yet so savvy.”

She felt a strange connection to the little animal, like they were kindred spirits.

Standing up and collecting her cup, she said out loud, “I’ve got to be sweet but savvy, too. I can handle this. I’m going to be friendly but businesslike and professional. I can do this.”

Because this was not the time to make deep connections, feline or human.

Chapter 6

Logan walked into the Christmas store to pick up Vivienne for their business-slash-dinner date, but she was nowhere to be found. After scoping out the aisles, he walked up to the counter, where he found Sheila Watkins, their old classmate, sorting through receipts.

“Oh, there’s our handsome author-in-residence,” she said. “You brought us a lot of business the other day. Anytime you want to do another video in the store, feel free.” She looked him up and down. “If you need someone to reacquaint you with the town, let me know.”

Yikes, was she flirting with him? “I’m actually here for Vivienne,” he said quickly. “She said to meet her at her office?”

“Oh, sure. It’s right over there.” She pointed to a door against the wall, in the middle of the store. “I’m sure she’ll be right back from the storeroom.”

He walked through the store and approached the dark green door. While he waited, he entertained himself looking at the framed photos hung around the office doorjamb. His mom had told him to be sure to see them.

Viv had taken photos of people in town. He recognized Delores, dressed up in Christmas finery, holding a glowing snow globe. Then there was Frank Morgan, a retired math teacher, who tended to hang out and play chess in front of the parks and recreation office in the summer—and taught many a kid to play. The photo showed a look of intense concentration on a child’s face while Frank pointed to a piece on the board.

Another photo showed people lined up for Christmas Candle Evening around the square, a few of the old Victorian homes all decked out for the holidays. There was one of Viv’s mom and dad in the bakery, their arms around each other. Each photo captured a special moment and was a special tribute to the people of their town.

Viv was talented. That certainly hadn't changed.

Just then, the back storeroom door opened and Viv came out, short of breath. "Oh, Logan, hi," she said. "I'm sorry to run late."

She ran up and handed Sheila a key. "I finished counting the icicle light boxes like you asked. The final count is three hundred and seventy-five."

Three hundred and how many? Why on earth was she doing that? It seemed like a time waster.

Viv motioned for him to come into her office, then closed the door and tossed her elf cap on her desk, her curls coming free at last.

"You counted three hundred and seventy-five light boxes?" slipped out of his mouth.

She shrugged. "Don't ask. And please turn around." She made a circle motion with her hands.

He obeyed. Rustling noises ensued as he could tell she was changing for dinner. He forced himself to count the fine cracks in the wall to avoid the temptation to turn back around. And kept talking. "Sheila told me you were doing inventory."

"'Inventory' began fifteen minutes ago when I was supposed to be off the clock. Sorry to be late."

When she gave him permission to turn around again, she was dressed in black pants and a pretty pink blouse with flowers on it.

"I'm ready," she said with a smile. Yes, she was, and she looked stunning. Her hair was a little wild like always, her smile dazzling, her eyes...well, to him, they held that same smile in their deep blue depths.

"Nice transformation from elf to human." He couldn't help smiling right back. Or complimenting her, apparently, because "You look nice," flew out of his mouth before he could bite back the words.

He pried his eyes off of her and willed himself not to say more. But it was hard. Because he dealt in words. And he

could think of a million to describe how he felt right now.

Discombobulated. Thrown. Completely transfixed.

Elf or human, she was radiant, and that was the truth.

“Thank you.” His gaze locked with hers, lingering a bit too long to be decent.

Finally, he got it together enough to say, “I’m starving.” He held the office door so she could pass through, catching a whiff of her scent that he could only describe as clean and simple as a breath of fresh air. “Do you always work this hard in the Christmas store?” he asked as they walked out.

She gave a dismissive gesture that indicated she didn’t want to talk about it. That fit with what his mom told him, that Sheila was a difficult boss and Viv was counting down the days.

A little while later they occupied a table in a quiet corner of Castorini’s Restaurant complete with a red-and-white checkered tablecloth, soft lighting, and a flickering candle that was making her eyes sparkle and look soft.

The only reason he was noticing everything about her was because he was a writer. It was like a sixth sense, cataloguing everything around him. He was usually proud of this ability to emotionally observe his surroundings. But tonight he wished he could turn that skill off.

Viv looked around the quaint Italian restaurant. “Leo’s done a lot with it, don’t you think?” She seemed nervous, trying to make small talk.

Seeing her sitting across from him made his heart pound, just it had at eighteen. Even though he was certain she was planning on grilling him with lots of questions he dreaded answering.

To make things worse, a couple sat at a nearby booth practically sitting on each other’s laps and talking in hushed tones.

Yep, they definitely should have met at Happy’s under the glaring fluorescent lights with all the giggling teenagers. Yet

he pushed his discomfort aside because he needed her expertise. Despite all that had happened between them, he trusted her professionalism. He was certain that Viv, with her skills and intuition, was the one who could truly help him out of his antisocial media cave.

Except the romantic ambience, the smell of warm bread and garlicky pasta sauce, not to mention the weird way their gazes kept colliding, made this meeting feel an awful lot like a date.

Like the couple in the corner, who were holding hands. The guy reached over and whispered something in the woman's ear, and she giggled.

Fortunately, Leo Castorini, Viv's brother-in-law and the owner, walked over wearing a chef's apron. "Hey, Viv," he said, giving a nod to Logan even as he gave him the big-brother once-over. Logan, having a younger sister himself, immediately recognized the protective expression. "Nice to see you, Logan," Leo said. "I just finished *Night of Terror*. It was awesome."

"Thanks," Logan said. "Glad you liked it." Logan was grateful for the friendly gesture. Leo had been a few years ahead of them in high school, had been a football star, and had been somewhat larger than life,

Leo glanced from Viv to him. "What's the occasion, you two?"

"We're celebrating our friendship." What made that fly out of his mouth?

Leo smiled politely and then placed his hand protectively on Viv's shoulder. "Well, it's great for friends to get reacquainted." Leo smiled pleasantly enough, although Logan felt he was assessing him carefully. "I'll bring the wine list. And I might have a few suggestions."

"We are *not* celebrating our friendship," Viv whispered as soon as Leo left, wrinkling her nose in that certain way that he would've called cute if he wasn't trying so hard to stuff away all his emotions into a box and close the lid.

"Yes, we are," he said defiantly. He wasn't sure why he'd

said that, but it felt right to just go with it. Besides, it had always been fun to spar with her.

“We barely know each other,” she said. “We agreed yesterday this was a business arrangement.”

“I’ve been thinking that it might be a good idea for us to clear the air. After all, we’re going to be working together. Unless you’d rather not?”

Clearing the air would help him to get all these rogue feelings out and done with so they could get down to saving his career so it didn’t die a horrible death like the victims in his books.

Her friendship had once been the most important thing in his life. Fate was giving him an opportunity to make it right. Why not take it?

“Clear the air, huh?” She clutched her stomach. “Maybe I should have brought some Pepcid for this conversation.”

He rolled his eyes. “You may not believe this, but I really haven’t changed.” Although, he reminded himself, *she* had. She’d lived in Paris and had a lot of fun there, according to her social accounts, full of good-looking men and adventures. His own social accounts might be deader than old yeast, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t creeped on hers.

“What do you mean you haven’t changed?” she asked. “You’re so intimidating, I saw the teenage waiter tremble as you passed.”

“Me? Intimidating? That’s a rumor that circulates since I’m not on any social media.” It wasn’t a crime to be guarded, was it?

She called him out by counting on her fingers. “First, you wear all black. And you scowl a lot. And I’m not even going to try to delve into your psyche to understand why you write books with *terror* in the title.”

“I’m the same person I always was,” he said calmly, forcing himself to look into her eyes. “The same one you knew. And I’m going to prove it to you.” It suddenly became important to show her that he was still...himself. Except maybe with her

he'd always been his *best* self.

Maybe he shouldn't have come. Because ever since he'd sat down, he'd been digging himself into a hole, led by feelings he couldn't shake.

He tried to look away, but the couple was really snogging now. With a lot of tongue action. Where else could he look?

They ordered wine, and a waiter delivered a basket of bread. Warm bread, judging by the smell. Ah, just what he needed. Eating bread was safer than getting locked in a staring contest with her or trying not to watch the couple, who now had their tongues down each other's throats.

Sheesh.

"Their gluten free bread is to die for," Viv said, "and the best part is it's from my mom's shop. She's perfected it after making it for me all these years."

It had been hard for her, growing up in a family who baked delicious things she couldn't eat, but she rarely complained.

He reached for the bread, but she moved the basket. "Not so fast. Answer a question, and you get the bread."

"But it's warm," he said with longing.

She shrugged. "The price of business."

"That's just cruel."

The look she gave him proved she wasn't kidding. "Pretend you don't know me," she said, flipping a page of the notebook she'd brought with her. "Logan Matthews, tell me in your own words who you are as a writer."

His stomach pitched and he hedged. "I'm not sure what you mean. But the smell of that bread is distracting me." Actually, *she* was the distraction. But it was easier to blame the bread.

It was her turn to roll her eyes. "Give me your bio in a few sentences."

"You definitely don't look like a piranha, but you totally are one, aren't you?"

She frowned. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said innocently.

He circled his index finger in the air in front of her. “You look all sweet and cute but you spear people with questions.”

Through the frown, he saw something in her eyes that told him that maybe being called sweet and cute wasn’t the worst thing.

“Just answer them and then we can eat, okay?”

“Okay, fine.” He crossed his arms. “I write stories that scare the crap out of people.”

She threw up her hands. “Great, I’m interviewing a psychopath. Let me rephrase. *Why* do you write scary stories?”

“Because my mind is a *very* scary place.” He wasn’t lying. Right now it was running wild with rogue thoughts of her—like how she’d looked in that hot tub the other night, her hair piled up high and little strands spilling onto her neck.

She shook her head. “Be serious.”

Leo was suddenly back, sparing Logan from answering. “What would you like?” he asked, nodding to Viv first.

“I’ll have the gluten-free linguini with clam sauce. But there aren’t any other shellfish in the clam sauce, are there? And is it possible to do the clam sauce dairy free? And can you please substitute burrata for the blue cheese in the salad?” With a snap, she closed the menu and handed it to Leo.

“I’ll have the spaghetti with meat sauce,” Logan said.

She continued like she didn’t just submit a dissertation instead of a meal order. “You’re very good at evading questions with humor. Let’s try something easy. Tell me a little about what made your first book a success. You know, your publishing story. Everyone wants to know how a writer got published.”

The bad, guilty feeling returned and stabbed him straight in the abdomen with a vengeance and made him break out into a sweat. He definitely couldn’t talk to her about that. And the reason had nothing to do with his weird interviewing phobia

and everything to do with her. “I got published by a small press when I was twenty-four, but that first book was pretty juvenile, if you ask me. I’m a much more mature writer now.” Was that enough, he wondered, to keep her away from it forever? Had she read any of his books? He didn’t think it wise to ask.

“I really couldn’t recommend it to anyone,” he added as a precaution.

She scribbled something down while she was listening, tiny lines forming between her eyes as she concentrated. “It couldn’t be that bad if it caused you to be discovered. Are you like one of those actors who can’t stand seeing themselves act?”

“Sort of,” he hedged.

In the corner, things were heating up even more, the couple kissing intently, glassware clinking as one of them bumped the table in haste. Viv seemed oblivious, but it was amplifying his inner turmoil. “Let’s focus on now,” Viv said. “Tell me something about your upcoming book.”

He blew out a breath of relief. She’d probably never find his awful first book but one never knew. He just had to make sure it stayed that way. “My newest is about a divorced couple where the guy had an affair and his lover comes after his wife.”

“Wait. I thought you said they’re divorced.”

“They are, but there’s still something there.”

“That’s scary in so many ways.”

“Being interviewed is scarier.”

“Nice. And if I was a fan of thrillers, the reason I would want to read it is...?”

“Um, it’s about marriage.”

“Wait, did you just say it’s about marriage? That is *not* a typical marriage!”

“Marriages have ups and downs.”

“I wouldn’t call being pursued by a psychopathic killer a typical down, Logan!” She put down her pen and folded her arms. “You are officially terrible at this.”

He shrugged. “I told you this before.” And she didn’t know the half of it. He alternated between both ends of the spectrum: he either clammed up completely or came down with a case of verbal diarrhea.

And, of course, he’d told no one. He just avoided doing interviews. Which meant, as with anything else one avoided, it would likely come back to bite him in the ass.

“What have you got against interviews?” She was trying to get him to stop cracking jokes and get serious.

“Just google my interview in London from three years ago.” That was the truth. No joking around this time.

The look in her eyes indicated she felt sorry for him. And reminded him way too much of old times. “There are media coaches for that, you know. I’m sure your publisher could set you up with one.”

In fairness, he needed her to understand what she was getting into. “I completely froze. I was just lucky not many people on this side of the pond saw it. I appreciate your optimism, but the problem might not be fixable.”

She frowned. “Of course it’s fixable. You’re handsome. You’re confident, except when people ask you to talk about yourself. And you clearly have talent.”

“*Many* talents,” he said. “Not just bookish.” Ugh, that just flew out of his mouth. He blamed his nerves. Also, she’d just called him handsome.

“Do you always flirt with people you work with?”

He picked up a roll. “The answer to that is no, not usually.” Well, he had once—with Freyde—and maybe if he hadn’t, he would have fired her before now. Except he *was* flirting with Viv. He couldn’t seem to help it. “But, to be fair, you *did* call me handsome.”

She waved her hand in the air. “I was speaking in general.”

He reached for the butter, and she stopped him by lightly grasping his hand. He couldn't help but notice hers was soft and pretty. When she realized what she'd done, she dropped it like a hot potato. "One more question. But you've got to answer it straight."

He set down his bread on his plate. "So much pain to earn a meager bite of bread."

She shook her head sadly. "Why is this so hard for you? And if you can't give me an honest answer, you can text it to me if that helps."

He pulled out his phone and typed.

Why do you ask for so many substitutions?

"Because I have gluten sensitivity and a non-bivalve shellfish allergy. Except I'm not allergic to blue cheese—it just gives me a headache." She set down her phone. "Now tell me the truth."

He knew it was time to stop fooling around. She was trying to help him, and he needed her help. "The media ruined my father." There. He'd said it. Part of it, anyway.

"Oh," she said, maybe half shocked.

He was coming to realize that for reasons he couldn't entirely explain, he trusted her. And a reckless hope rose up inside of him that if anyone could fix this, she could.

A waiter showed up with steaming plates of pasta.

"Thank you. It looks amazing," she said as the waiter placed the plate in front of her. Then she turned to Logan. "I'm sorry."

He didn't expect that. "Sorry?"

"About your dad. That must be very hard, being in the same profession as he was. Having to handle the same stresses."

That he hadn't been able to, was what she didn't say.

He nodded, suddenly shaken to his core. Yes, she got it. He felt her compassion. He saw it in her eyes, and that nearly broke him.

She certainly wasn't fitting the bill of someone who was the beautiful, spoiled little sister, the one who'd gone to Paris on her family's dime and come back broke.

"You don't want to let in anything that can destroy your writing," she said softly.

Even his therapist hadn't gotten him that quickly. He frowned to disguise that thought. "What do you mean?"

"A writer has to stay focused. No distractions. Once people start wanting to get to know you, it takes away from your writing. And maybe you feel that the demands of the public are what hurt your dad. Is that right?"

He shrugged. But the truth was, she was exactly correct. His father had a love-hate relationship with the media. They'd chewed him up and spat him out. "The media pursued him relentlessly. He developed writer's block. And convinced himself that he was losing his touch. It was all downhill from there."

His dad had always warned him to hold his personal life close. Not to reveal too much. That was exactly how Logan got through life. Not feeling too much. Not getting close enough to anything—anyone—to get burned.

That's what happened when you grew up with a lot of hurt, he supposed.

Viv was sitting there, not looking at her food. Looking at him. Teary.

"Don't feel sorry for me." His throat suddenly clogged so that his voice came out extra raspy. Aw, why did she have to be *nice*? One sad look and all his anger at her was melting away.

"I'm not feeling sorry," she said. "I'm just...*feeling*."

"Feelings are complicated," he said in a low voice. How could she have such an abundance of everything that was so hard for him?

Despite the mess this dinner had become, Logan found himself wanting to keep her there longer. "Let's have dessert,"

he said after they'd cleared their plates.

"Forget dessert for now," she said, folding her arms and putting them on the table. "Now that we're on a roll, let's keep being honest." She leveled her blue gaze directly on him. "Is that why you gave up our friendship? Because feelings got complicated?"

He flicked his gaze right back up at her. Now was his chance to do something right. Something honest. He took the leap. "Yes."

She leaned forward, her eyes still misty, and he suddenly dreaded what she was about to say. "I felt so lost without you. I never meant for us to lose our friendship over a stupid kiss."

"Can we go back to the author questions?" he asked. But he knew joking wasn't the right thing to do. "Okay, fine. I left a painful situation. I had to grow up, and to do that, I had to stay away." *From you.*

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Viv didn't back down. "I felt that our friendship wasn't important to you—I felt like *I* wasn't important to you."

How could he tell her that staying away from her had been a simple act of self-preservation? How could he ever be honest and open like she was, when he had to extract every word with pliers from his soul? "Don't ever think you weren't important to me." But his words sounded flabby and weak. How could he admit that her leaving had almost killed him, but staying friends would have for sure?

"Would you like to see the dessert menu?" Leo asked, suddenly reappearing at their side.

Whew. Saved by dessert.

Viv cleared her throat. Her eyes were still a little watery, but she managed to smile up at Leo. "Dinner was amazing," she said. "But I'm stuffed."

"I think we're ready for the check." As Leo left, Logan turned to her. "Viv, listen, I—I sense that you have the expertise I need."

But he wasn't really thinking about his career.

He was thinking that he was an idiot. Because he wanted to tell her what a huge mistake he'd made letting their friendship go. How, despite all the women he'd dated and the few serious relationships he'd had, he'd never achieved the intimacy that they'd shared—even though the closest they'd ever come to being physical was that awful, clumsy flub of a kiss.

"I think I can help you," she said, tapping her wineglass, deep in thought. "But you have to be honest—with me and with yourself. You have to be willing to dig deep to open up and express yourself—what's in your heart. Not to the public, at first, anyway, but I have to know your feelings so I can help you to express them."

He leveled his gaze at her. "Great. Yes. That's what I want." Right. Too bad that was his worst nightmare.

"I can make sure you're being authentic and genuine. And I also promise not to make you reveal anything you feel is too intimate. *You* decide what you want to reveal about yourself. Okay?" Her demeanor was cool and professional.

"Okay."

He stared at her hand on the table. It was small in size compared to his big paws, and he had the urge to take it up. Hold it. Rub his thumb on the soft underside of her palm.

A current ran between them. It felt like a herd of horses stampeding through his gut.

Still.

She was quiet. He was quiet. Finally, he worked up the courage to speak. To at least tell her how much he'd missed their friendship. And how he wanted put their past behind them. To start anew. "Vivienne, I—"

From the corner came a little moan. Viv turned in time to see the couple pretzled around each other, really going at it.

She coughed suddenly, then took a sip of water. "There's no reason we can't be friendly and do business together too. After all, we're both professionals." Her smile was a little too

confident, a little too wide.

“Of course.” She sounded...withdrawn and distant. Like she was backing up, shutting down. While his emotional walls were melting down faster than the butter on his warm bread.

But then he noticed something. The smallest, practically unnoticeable detail. Her neck was blotchy.

Faint, flat patches of pink. Her hand fluttered briefly to her neck and then she cleared her throat.

He blinked, then looked again. Yep, still there. Her neck was positively blooming pink. Maybe it was because she was embarrassed by that couple, who were basically having each other for dessert.

Or maybe, like him, she was having rogue thoughts too. Because her skin always got blotchy when she lied.

Chapter 7

“So Logan’s hiring you to do his social media *and* you two had dinner at Castorini’s last night,” Juliet said to Viv early that Saturday morning in Bonjour Breads!, their family’s hundred-year-old bakery. “Hmmm.”

“I’ll be able to head to New York even sooner,” Viv said. “It’s a good thing. Getting my life going. Hanging up the elfwear.”

Placing some croissants on a plate, Viv tried not to roll her eyes at her sister, who of course was digging for info, which she just couldn’t seem to help. Being a therapist suited her perfectly: she’d been a natural-born prober since birth.

Every Saturday after the morning rush, all the women in her family sat down together in the bakery to chat—about life, about problems, or just to relax and catch up. This had been going on for as long as Viv could remember and made working the early-early shift totally worth it. It was also one of the things Viv had missed the most during her time away. There was just something about warm croissants, a foamy latte, and sunshine streaming in through the old paned windows that said *family time*, where the people who drove you the craziest also loved you more than anything.

“Things going better at work?” Tessa asked, who was sitting at a table nursing Rosie.

“Not really,” Viv confessed. “Sheila seems to enjoy inventing different forms of Christmas torture just for me.”

“She’s been going through a divorce,” Juliet said.

Viv halted with a croissant in hand. “How did I not know that?” That was shocking news. Sheila had always seemed to lead a charmed life. Maybe this explained her need to control every part of the store and everything Viv did. *But still.*

Juliet shrugged. “You’d be up on all the gossip if you stuck around.” She heaved a sigh. “I don’t mean to lay on the guilt. It’s just that I love having you home. Jack and I are having a

big barbecue next weekend. It's so fun having all three of us close by."

Juliet was happily married to Jack Monroe, the mayor, a solid guy who was from Texas and proud of it.

The fact that Juliet's voice cracked and she teared up a little made Viv emotional, too, and made her forgive her tendency to pry. She loved her family, even though they sometimes were, well, a lot.

Tessa chimed in. "I love us all being in town. Now spill the tea about hunky Logan before Mom and Gram come out from the back."

Viv shrugged. "I don't know hunky Logan. I only know skinny sweet Logan."

"Skinny sweet Logan is still in that body of steel somewhere." Tessa held Rosie's tiny hand and glanced up at her sister. "Think about that, babe. You really can have it all."

Viv held up her hands. "I just want closure." Heal a friendship and do her job. Then get her life started. No need to make this complicated. She'd just have to ignore the more troubling parts of him. Like his sense of humor, the vulnerability he tried hard not to show, his nice smile, and, of course, his very hot bod.

"I'll tell you how to get closure," Juliet said with a glint in her eye. "Make sure to close your door when you take him to your bedroom at Mom's." Juliet laughed like this was absolutely hilarious.

Even Tessa chuckled.

Viv tossed her a look. "Not you, too." Tessa was her *nice* sister. The one who didn't usually give her grief.

"You can't blame us," Tessa said. "We've been dying for a tiny morsel of info from you all week."

"There's not much to say." She slid the croissant tray back into the case and dusted off her hands. "Logan and I talked about the past. We both said our friendship meant a lot. And he's paying me to help him get a social following. That's it.

We've both moved on from those angsty teenage years."

Tessa smiled down at Rosie and smoothed down her blond, sticking-up hair, a simple, sweet gesture that made Viv's heart fill with happiness for her sister—who had waited a long time for this—and also longing for that kind of love one day. It felt like an impossible dream. "Leo told me you two couldn't take your eyes off each other."

What would it feel like to be away from a place where everyone knew your business before you even had a chance to tell them? "That was only because there was a couple making out in the corner the whole time so there was no other place to look." She wanted her sisters to know she had this handled. That she had a plan, and goals, and nothing was going to derail her. She desperately did not want to go down in history as the sad, hapless sister. "I've always felt awful about what happened between Logan and me. And I'd like us to make amends. *That's all.*"

"You're taking Mom's words too seriously," Tessa said.

"What words?" Juliet asked as she finished off her first cup of coffee.

"All the warnings we heard growing up about not falling for a man before you fulfill your own dreams. It's okay to be open to the possibility of something happening between you two."

Their mom had been a voice major at Juilliard, but she'd followed their dad to the heartland so that he could manage his family's bakery. But when Viv and her siblings were teenagers, her dad died, and her mom had taken over the business. Now, after many years of struggle, the bakery was finally thriving. They were all thriving, actually. Except Viv. But she intended to change that.

"I'm leaving, remember?" Viv said. "I don't want anything serious."

Juliet smiled a very wide smile. "Who says it has to be serious?"

Ugh, she was so annoying. "Nothing's going to happen, serious or otherwise. And I love it here, but if I stay much

longer, I'll never put up a single Christmas decoration ever again."

"I heard the part about me." Their mom walked out from the back wiping her hands on her apron. "Just to clarify, maybe I never fulfilled my dream of singing, but I've had a full life. And I've come to love working in this bakery. I've always wanted to impress upon you girls the importance of having your own dreams—I raised you to be the independent women that you are. And I couldn't be prouder."

"We're proud of you, too, Mom," Viv said, giving her a side hug as she set the croissants down on the table near Tessa. She wanted with all her heart to show her mother, after all her family's hard work and sacrifice, that she had it in her to succeed, too.

"Maybe you can fulfill your dreams here," her grandma said as she followed her mom out with a tray of coffee. "I love having all three of you together again."

"The empty dance studio would be a great place to display your photography," Juliet said. Of course, Juliet would intuitively see that space in the same way Viv did.

"Plus it comes with a cat," Tessa said.

"How do you know about that cat?" she asked a little too emotionally. Did the cat have other favorites besides her? Somehow she had it in her head that she was the kitty's favorite. Which might be a little messed up.

"Delores told me a little yellow tabby lives under the stairs. She's tried to get close to it, but it always runs into the woods."

Aw, so maybe the cat had picked her. Wait. No. "I don't have time for a cat," Viv said quickly. "Not to mention I'm in no position to start a business right now. I can barely afford food at this point."

"Eat Mom's food while you're living there," Juliet said with a shrug. "That's what I did when I was broke."

Her mom shook her head at Juliet's antics. And patted Viv's hand. "You can stay at the house as long as you like."

As sisters do, Juliet read her mind. “Viv, out of all of us, you worry the most and give yourself the least credit. I think you need to remember that we’ve all had rough patches.”

“True,” Tessa said, smiling. “Just keep being open to new adventures. You never know what can happen.”

“Thanks,” Viv said. Her sisters were trying to make her feel better, and she appreciated it, but she hated to be the focus of her family’s worry. Plus, the only new adventure Viv wanted was one that got her life on track so that everyone could stop feeling sorry for her.

They were digging into the croissants when the door opened and a distinguished-looking gray-haired gentleman walked in, looking elegant in a white polo shirt and golf pants.

“Hi, Mr. Templeman,” Tessa said. Viv recognized him as her grandmother’s next-door neighbor and the retired principal of Blossom Glen High.

“Juliet, you’re looking just as lovely as ever. How’s that pretty baby, Tessa?” He admired Rosie, who was now tidily slung over Tessa’s shoulder being burped, but his eyes were all for Gram.

Gram, who had turned red and didn’t seem to know what to do with her hands.

Uh-oh.

He handed Gram a brown bag. If Viv wasn’t mistaken, it smelled good. Like, edible good.

“What’s that?” Gram asked, looking from the bag to her visitor.

“I brought you all some bagels,” Mr. Templeman said. “Because you said you were hungry for some.”

“Thank you, Maurice,” Gram said, looking even more uncomfortable.

Hmmm. Their elegant, strong, kick-butt grandma looked like she wanted to bolt out the back door. Interesting.

“You’re welcome.” He smiled and nodded his head ever so

slightly, like a gentleman taking his leave from a lady. When he got to the door, he turned back around. “Sophie, is it okay if I use my electric clippers on your hedge? I noticed it could use a little haircut.”

“You *really* don’t have to do that, Maurice,” Gram managed, practically choking out the words.

“I want to. Please let me.”

Gram shrugged. “Okay, if you insist. Thanks.”

As soon as the door tinkled, signaling his departure, Gram went back to pouring coffee. Except she spilled some.

They were all staring at her, mostly with their mouths open.

“Gram, you’ve got a beau!” Juliet said, clapping her hands.

“I most certainly do not.” Gram dropped the sugar spoon, which their mom picked up off the floor.

Gram finished pouring the coffee. “You three are enjoying this way too much.”

“Make that four,” their mother said with a wicked smile.

“What’s wrong with Mr. Templeman?” Viv asked. “He’s very nice. He tips well. He knows all our names. And he obviously really likes you.”

“Maurice was your grandfather’s friend,” Gram said. “And that is that.”

Gramps had been amazing. He’d served in the marines, often proudly showing them the shiny medals they were fascinated with. He’d taught them to fish and play football. And every Saturday night in the summer, he used to pitch a tent in his and Gram’s backyard and invite them to sleep over, Gram helping them make s’mores while Gramps told them ghost stories. Their grandparents had been there for them after their dad died, and their grandpa had done his best to stand in when he could and make up for the loss.

Gramps had been gone for about ten years now, and Viv knew Gram still missed him a lot.

“I’m not ready,” she said firmly. “And that’s that.”

“Okay, well, we could switch and pick on Mom for a while,” Tessa said. “How’s living in sin with Marco?”

That might have gotten the spotlight off of Gram, but their mother rolled her eyes and gave them a *you girls* head shake.

“I did *not* come here to talk about my love life,” their mother said firmly.

“Neither did I,” Gram agreed.

“We like Marco, Mom.” Tessa finished burping Rosie, who was now fully asleep, and tucked her skillfully into the stroller beside the table without a stir. “Just think,” she said with a mischievous grin, “if you marry him, my father-in-law will also be my stepdad.”

“That’s mind-boggling,” Juliet said with a laugh.

Their mom wasn’t laughing. “I mean,” Viv said, “we all think Marco’s great, if you want our permission.”

Viv was always the peacemaker. The one who tried to please, to not make waves. Juliet was the instigator, and Tessa was the wise older sister. When the sisters were together, they fell so easily into their old roles.

“I don’t need your permission,” her mom said a little testily.

Gram stopped with her croissant in midair. “She needs her *own* permission,” she said softly.

Surprisingly, tears sprung to her mother’s eyes.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Juliet asked, grabbing her arm. The sisters exchanged worried glances. They all had come to love Marco, who doled out practical advice and delicious homemade pasta in equal measure.

“I love Marco.” She swiped at her eyes with her apron. “He’s asked me to marry him.”

Viv gasped. All three girls stared at their mom. It shouldn’t have been unexpected but...her mom getting married? It was still sort of shocking.

“I said no,” she said quickly. “I don’t want to be married. Every day, I go to work in the bakery that was your father’s

dream. And it became my dream, too. We worked together to make it what it is. Your father is very much still a part of that for me.”

“No judgment, Mom.” Tessa held up a hand. “We get it.”

“Totally your decision, Mom,” Juliet said, for once not being pushy.

Viv thought a little differently. Maybe someone should tell her mom that she’d suffered long enough and that their father would want her to be happy. That happiness required risks. But she was not one to talk.

Of course, Logan came to mind. She was coming to realize that she’d never really faced her feelings long ago. They’d been lying in wait under the surface like a shark in the water, and now there was no escape.

The opportunity to say something passed, and they ate in silence for a while. Had seconds of everything and tucked into the delicious bagels, too. Tessa told stories of Rosie’s latest antics and Juliet talked about life with Jack in their beautiful new home on Jack’s family’s land outside of town.

Ugh, her sisters were both so happy. While Viv was going to be single and wearing elfwear until she died.

Just then, the door opened, and Logan’s mom walked in.

“Hi, girls,” she said, looking stylish in a pair of white Vans, leggings, and a long pink hoodie that said *Blossom Glen Is for Lovers*.

“Hi, Aunt Mimi,” the girls said back as she gave each of them a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Elise is right behind me.” Miriam gestured out the plate glass window. When she got to Viv, she squeezed her hand. “Logan told me that you’re going to help him. How nice of you.”

“It was great to see him again,” Viv said, which she thought was a neutral comment.

Miriam looked her over with a gaze that only a fifth grade teacher could perfect. “I want you to know that I think my son

is still crazy about you.”

“Oh, please.” Viv shook her head and made a *pfffft* sound to brush off the comment. But wait, *still*? What did that mean? She wrote it off as a typical matchmaking attempt between the two mothers that had literally been going on since birth.

“I know it because each night, he paces back and forth in front of the sliding doors waiting for you to use that hot tub.”

More like waiting to torture her once she got in it and had nowhere to go, but she didn’t say that.

“You use my hot tub?” her mother asked.

Viv shrugged. “You didn’t say I couldn’t.”

Her mom heaved a motherly sigh that seemed to acknowledge that her house had been overrun by her child. But then she seemed more interested in signaling something to her longtime friend. “Miriam.” Her mother sent her a poignant look. “You know what we said.” She put a finger to her mouth and then turned to Viv. “You know there’s no pressure from us about you and Logan getting together. It’s entirely up to you two.”

“Right.” Tessa smiled, sending Viv a conspiratorial wink.

Viv decided this was the perfect time to get more coffee. That was when something caught her eye outside the big window storefront.

Logan’s sister Elise was leaning against the brick wall of the bread shop, wearing her tie-dye backpack with peace signs, her bright pink hair tied up in two little ponytails on top of her head. Viv admired her because she was creative, original, and never seemed to feel the need to follow the crowd like Viv had at her age—but that was also exactly the trait that worried her.

As Viv watched, three girls approached Elise. A pretty brunette tugged on her backpack, knocking it off her shoulder as they passed. Viv recognized her as Gretchen Watkins, Sheila’s niece. The red-haired girl was Lainey Chu, whose parents owned the bookstore. And Viv didn’t know who the blond girl was. All three laughed and, before Viv could make it to the door, continued down the street.

A quick glance over at the table of women showed them to be laughing and chatting away. When Elise turned to enter the shop, Viv ran back behind the counter, not wanting to get caught watching.

“Hey everybody, hey Mom.” Elise walked over to the women, acting as though nothing had happened.

“Hello, sweetheart,” Gram said, pulling out a chair. “Come have a croissant.”

A minute later, Elise pulled her laptop out of her book bag. It was in a blue-and-pink flowered case that sort of matched her hair. “I hate my senior photos,” she said. “They’re the *worst*.”

Viv was always up to look at photos. She gave an excited clap and walked over to the table, gesturing for Elise to hurry up and bring them up. “Oh, let’s see them.”

Everyone gathered around as Elise clicked through them.

The photographer had taken traditional shots and had even attempted to subdue Elise’s hair color to look more “normal.”

“You’re beautiful. They’re all lovely,” Tessa said in a careful tone.

“Your hair color is so dull,” Juliet, never one to mince words, said.

“The photographer should celebrate your personality, not try to make it bland,” Viv couldn’t help saying. “I mean, what the heck?”

“I don’t care for them, either,” her mom said. “But you already paid the sitting fee.”

“I know,” Elise said. “It took a month of waiting tables at Happy’s to afford it. I just wish there was one pose that I liked.”

“They’re really not bad,” Juliet said in a way that sounded like she thought they were, indeed, all bad.

Viv pulled her chair back. “These poses are traditional—awkward and boring. This person even tried to alter your hair

color, probably to make it look more..."

"Normal?" Elise said.

"I was going to say average." Viv waved her hand in the air. "These photos are all average." Unimaginative. "Not one of them captures your spunk, your personality." Viv could do way better, she just knew it. That conviction gave her an idea.

"I don't have money for another shoot." Elise looked genuinely distressed.

"Well," Viv said, "if you're willing to take a risk, I'd be happy to do one for you. If you want, we could pick a sunny afternoon and drive out to Dinkler's Farms. I think they'd let us shoot in their big field if that's a location that seems fun."

"You'd do that for me?" Elise sounded and looked relieved. Viv was pleased she could help, and this was right up her alley.

"Don't be too thankful until you see my work," she said. "I'm not a portrait photographer, but hey, I'm free." She sent Elise a warm smile, wanting her to feel okay with it. And let her help.

"You're not a portrait photographer," her gram agreed. "You're an *artist*."

Oh, Gram. Her words were kind. It made her want to secure that New York job so she could show her gram and everyone else that she was headed in a great direction. A direction they could be proud of.

As Elise hugged her, Viv sort of wondered about where Elise herself was headed next year—she'd chosen nursing for a career. Not that artsy people didn't also do nursing, but Elise had been sewing and painting and crafting her entire life, and the majors she'd mentioned the last time they'd talked were art history and English lit. Viv hoped they could have a little chat. And she'd also be sure to find out the skinny on those mean girls.

"Text me some of your free afternoon dates and I'll check my schedule," Viv said.

“Thanks, Viv.”

As Viv helped clear away plates, she felt a little better about things. Feeling unsettled wasn't solely in the realm of people her age. She wondered if giving their mom and grandma passes on topics that were a little awkward to talk about was the right thing.

Maybe it was because she was sensitive to being unsettled herself. Regardless, she wanted to help.

And Viv truly knew she could help Elise. She just had to be careful that her involvement didn't lead to getting more wrapped up with her hot brother.

Chapter 8

The next Saturday, Vivienne found herself in the middle of a field at the edge of town testing out her camera lens, focusing an old barn in her sights, and trying some different aperture settings for Elise Matthews' photo shoot, when she heard rustling.

Expecting anything from a wayward cow who'd strayed from his buddies to a snake in the grass, she was relieved to see a person appear from the woods. Except the relief didn't last long.

She glanced up to see Logan strolling through the tall grass, the afternoon sun illuminating the dark waves of his hair as he made his way to her in long jean-clad strides.

He was a photographer's dream. She fought an immediate urge to start shooting.

Instead, she almost dropped her camera. And half wished for that snake in the grass instead, which somehow seemed a lot safer.

To combat her nerves, she snapped a few quick photos.

She just wanted to capture the moment—Logan in all his self-assured, easy beauty making his way across a bright green field, spring sunshine all around.

It was all picture perfect...except for the pink flowered duffel bag he carried at his side. And the rainbow hues of outfits on hangers over his shoulder. And was that a bottle of hair spray tucked under his arm?

Why did the fact that he was a caring big brother make her heart pitter-patter even more?

"You scared me." She held a hand over her heart to still it.

He held up the duffel. "Please don't tell me you're taking revenge photos."

"The duffel suits you," she couldn't resist teasing. "It might even go viral, and then everyone would want one." She

paused. “Come to think of it, if I post this, it might be really cute.”

“No posting,” he said firmly.

“For now,” she said, just to torment him.

It worked, judging by his frown.

He was close, his hazel eyes looking more green than brown today with their golden flecks visible in the bright sun. He always had nice eyes, but she never remembered having this annoying tendency to get lost in them.

So she yanked herself back to reality. *Keep it professional, Viv.*

It was just the repressed artist in her, always finding things fascinating. That was all.

Then her heart sank. Because she suddenly realized why he was here.

That was confirmed when he said, “Elise had me bring a few things. You don’t mind if I stay, do you? My mom’s out of town for a few days so I said I’d help out.”

Aw, he really was an awesome brother. But drat, he’d be right here the whole time, watching Viv work.

That made her stomach toss and an uncomfortable sensation of nerves buzz through her.

She tamped them down. She could handle him watching. But that meant she wouldn’t be able to have her little talk with Elise. And she really needed to say something about those girls who seemed to be bullying her, because Gram had mentioned seeing them outside the bakery giving her a hard time again. She probably should tell Logan, too. After she made him pinky swear that he wouldn’t overreact.

Logan patiently shifted the outfits from one arm to the other. “Where should I put this stuff?”

Any man who could sit through thirteen different outfit changes, five pairs of shoes, refreshes of lipstick and hair—well, that said a lot in ways that completely confused her. It

made it impossible to think of him as Logan, the famously aloof author.

On the other hand, maybe he didn't really know what he was getting into here.

Logan delivered the goods to the barn. "She says she needs ten more minutes," he called as he walked back to the field.

"Okay. Want to practice interviewing skills while we wait?" she asked in a cheery tone.

"No," he said flatly, but his full mouth quirked upward.

All righty then. "How about I take a few photos of you while we wait?"

He looked like she'd just asked him to hurl himself off the wooded ravine at the base of the field.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's not all about you. I need to find the right light and backgrounds for your sister, and I could use you to do a few practice shots. And I promise I won't post anything without your permission. So...okay?" She was mostly telling the truth. Something about the afternoon light and the way it was playing off Logan's features made her feel desperate to shoot him.

With her camera, of course.

He shot her a grin that went straight through her, clear down to her toes. "If it will help Elise to get done faster, I'll do it."

After a bit of convincing, he finally followed her directions and sat down in the grass.

"I feel like a rock star sitting in a field for the cover of an angsty album," he grumbled.

She lowered her camera and surveyed him.

Through the lens, she saw the worry of his brow, the way his gaze shifted awkwardly from her to the camera, and it made her feel a little better.

Mr. Suave and Calm maybe...wasn't.

"Relax," she said. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just going

to take your picture.” She smiled before she looked again through the lens. “Besides, you *are* a rock star. Of the thriller genre.”

His laugh was hearty and genuine, and it stabbed her in the heart because she hadn’t heard it in so long.

Click, click, click.

She’d missed that laugh. She wished she could think of another dumb joke just so she could hear it again.

He glanced at his watch.

“If she’s like a typical seventeen-year-old getting her senior pics taken,” Viv said, “multiply ten minutes times two and then add five.” His smile had faded, and he looked nervous again. “So you might as well just suck it up and keep smiling.”

He gave a miserable, very sad attempt.

“Come on, you can do better.” She gave a heavy sigh. “Think bestseller list. Great reviews. Unique and original plot twists. Whatever fancy annual award thriller authors get.”

“I don’t care about that stuff,” he said dismissively.

He didn’t? She lowered her camera. “How about being Baldacci, Patterson, King?”

“They’re great but—nope.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “Well then, what do you care about?”

“My mom. Elise. Taking care of them. Making sure Elise has a good brother-slash-father figure and a great future.”

Ker-chunk. A giant slab of ice just cracked off her heart and fell into her thoracic cavity with a *plop*.

“What do you care about?” he asked.

That was easy. “Making sure my mom gets a nice condo someplace sunny and warm where she can put her feet up and read a book and not have to be in the bakery every day before sunrise. Taking a million photos and videos of Rosie so I can document every single milestone in her life. Seeing my sisters

fall in love and start their families and live happily ever after.”

Oh, and one more thing she couldn't say aloud: making it up to them somehow for everything they'd ever done for her.

She fell silent.

“You okay?” he finally said.

Viv looked up from the lens to find that Logan was staring at her. “What? Did you think I was completely spoiled and didn't care about my family?”

“I never thought that you didn't care about your family.”

She stabbed the air with her finger. “But you thought I was spoiled. The baby of the family, who got things a little too easily.” The words had just spilled out, and now there was no way to put them back. She didn't know why she'd started this. Only that it had been churning in her mind for, oh, about ten years or so.

“Can I be honest?” he said.

Absolutely not. “I want you to be,” she said instead. But she was certain she wasn't going to like it. So she preempted him. “At one time, I did think I was special and that I deserved to study in Paris. And I would have clawed tooth and nail to get there.”

She forced herself not to wince. But it sort of felt good to say that to him. He couldn't tell her anything she didn't already know about her young, somewhat self-centered self.

He sighed. “You are really hard on yourself, you know that?”

She jerked up her head. Because, well, she hadn't expected *that*.

He stood up, and despite all her confusion, she snapped a few more shots. He was just that good a subject.

Plus it distracted her from this awkward conversation.

Maybe he was just being nice. But it brought her to tears anyway. Which she hid behind her camera.

Logan walked over to her and gently lowered her lens. “Vivienne,” he said softly, in a tone that made her heart break even more. He was shining kindness down on her, in a way that made her realize that maybe what she’d needed all these years was someone to tell her that maybe her young self wasn’t quite as bad as she thought. She’d just never imagined that person would be him.

“You had a big dream and big talent,” Logan said. “Your family recognized the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and sacrificed for you because they loved you. And you took your chance. Which is pretty incredible for anyone at eighteen.” His penetrating stare pierced her soul, making her knees so weak she was afraid she was going to face-plant in the field. He made her sound so...human. So...forgivable. “But spoiled—no.”

Even if she didn’t really believe him, it was nice to hear. “I’m going to pay them back—every penny.”

He looked her up and down. Assessing her. Make that seeing *through* her, as only he could do. “Sometimes you talk like Paris was a waste.”

“Well, look where it got me.” She waved her hand around at the field, the battered barn.

“Maybe it got you back here reassessing things and helping out your family. No shame in that.”

“Thank you,” she said, swiping her eyes. His words had lightened her soul a little.

Viv had assumed he’d thought the worst of her. It was a huge relief to find that he didn’t.

“And you know what else?” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny tissue, folded into eighths.

She blew her nose.

“Thanks.” What thirty-year-old man carried tissues like that? It was something her elderly grandfather had done. But she was too grateful to poke fun. “What else?”

“Most of us are a little egocentric when we’re young. It’s

probably good that we are, or we'd never take any risks."

That was a gut punch, too. An ironic one—because turning away from him had been all about her being afraid to take a risk. Of not wanting to miss her opportunity to get out.

Suddenly she wondered if she should tell him the whole truth. That she *had* cared. She'd simply been afraid. But that would change everything.

"Am I taking too long?" Elise called, sticking her head around the barn door.

"You're fine," Viv called back. "Do you need some help?"

"No. Almost ready." She disappeared behind the barn door again.

"Bet you're sorry you came," Viv said, eyeing him sideways.

He smiled in a way that caused her pulse to thrum at her throat. Just as she'd finally managed to calm down, he said, "Movie contract."

She frowned, completely confused. "What?"

"You were asking me about things that made me smile. I always dreamed that one day someone might want to make a movie out of one of my books. That would be so cool."

She had to laugh. But she was still, strangely, crying, too. She didn't know why, exactly—maybe it was the admission of something that had weighed heavily on her, the loss of his friendship that maybe wasn't completely lost after all, or the fact that despite everything, he could always cheer her up.

Before she knew what was happening, Logan took a few steps forward and wrapped his arms around her. They were big and strong and made her feel something she hadn't felt in a long time—completely safe. "It's okay, Vivi," he said, his voice low and gravelly as she couldn't do anything but sink into his embrace.

Okay, scratch the safe thing. He was the most dangerous man she'd ever met. Dangerous to her heart.

He smelled like soap and shaving cream. And she could possibly blame that for the woozy way she felt, but she knew better. Being held by him felt like every cliché in the word. Like stardust whirling in the wind, sweeping her up and making her head spin and her knees go weak, and feeling as if warm lava were melting all over her body.

She felt it all so intensely, she forgot all about her camera, which was awkwardly wedged between them. And was probably stabbing him in the chest.

When he looked into her eyes, her heart pounded so loud she was certain Elise could hear it in the barn.

And then he stared at her lips.

She froze.

For a single moment, they became one of her photographs: still and quiet, with a picturesque background. Just him and her, two subjects starting anew, the past far, far away, the ties that had bound them together all those years ago regaining their strength and drawing her forward as she tilted her face up to his.

“Here I come!” Elise’s voice carried through the spring afternoon.

Logan hurriedly pulled back, accidentally tugging on her camera strap, which made it slide off her shoulder. As she tugged it back into place, she felt him surveying her, his expression unreadable. He cleared his throat.

“You do know that since I hugged you, this means we’re friends again.”

Friends? Judging by how dazed and confused she was, that wasn’t quite the word she would have picked.

Logan took another step back. When he spoke again, it was as if they hadn’t just been millimeters away from a lip lock. “I’m lucky I’ve got a really talented photographer who can work with a guy who smiles in every photo like he’s got a gun at his back.”

Viv stepped back, too. With Elise around the corner, this

wasn't the time to talk about what just happened, so she'd let it go for now. "You've challenged me, and I'm going to show you that you're going to take the best photos you've ever taken in your life."

Whatever else was happening here, he still believed in her. And that made a huge difference.

And she knew one thing about herself: she *could* capture the real essence of people. She loved to do it, she worked hard at it, and the end result was often good.

"Well, work your magic." He glanced up at her.

She snapped the shot. And tried not to think too hard about anything else.

As she shot him up against the barn with his hands folded, in the grass, against the sky, sitting on a split rail fence, she said, "You know, I have lots of fun photos of us as kids, so I actually can prove that you've taken great photos."

He shrugged. "I had a long awkward phase."

She lowered the camera and assessed him. "No, you didn't. You were cute."

"I was a gangly, skinny teenager, but thanks." He rolled his eyes, and his face got a little red. "I think."

"Well, you aren't anymore. Your author photo is attractive. It makes you look like a dark count, with your dark eyes and dark clothes. Maybe you should write about vampires."

He laughed. And she snapped more pics.

"Hey," he said. "That's not playing fair."

She stood straight up. "You're paying me for a product. You didn't set parameters on how I obtain it."

He released a heavy sigh. "Ha. Tricky." He stayed silent a long time. "Back to the awkward, skinny teenager...you thought I was cute?"

Slowly lowering her camera, she said, "I always thought you were cute."

“In a best-friend sort of way.” He kept pushing her, but why?

“Of course.” That was the sensible thing to say. The answer with the lowest risk.

Her hands went clammy on her camera. She wiped her hand down her jeans. She’d spent a third of her life regretting that one night so long ago. Regretting how she’d hurt him and lost the best friend she’d ever had. And running away from the pain that had caused in her life.

She had to stop running from that.

She set down her camera. “I thought you were *adorable*.”

It was his turn to jerk up his head. “Adorable?” His brows knit down in a frown. “Like a puppy?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re stiff. We need a prop.” Then she had an idea. “Just a sec.”

She left him in the field and grabbed her backpack from where she’d propped it in the shade against the trunk of a big oak tree.

“What do you think my sister’s doing in there?” he asked.

Rummaging through her pack, she took out a book, ran back, and put it in his hands.

He gave a reluctant look at the book. The cover showed an intent-looking man in camouflage, a woman, and a German shepherd.

He lifted a brow. “Navy SEAL romance?”

“Just give my idea a try, okay? We don’t have very long.”

He sat under the tree.

“Okay, now, hold the book and look at it.” He stared at the cover. “No, open it and pretend you’re reading.”

His lips twitched. “I like looking at hot guys on the covers.” She snapped a photo, just to get him back.

“Don’t make fun of Navy SEAL romance until you’ve tried it. And go ahead and read a few random lines, please. For the

photo.”

She got into position.

Logan opened a page and began to read. ““She looked like the best thing he’d ever seen, soft and vulnerable, tough and determined. Her lips were soft and full, and her hair was shining in the sunlight, and he would’ve given anything to kiss her.””

He looked up, mischief in his eyes. And her camera clicked away.

He was trying, no doubt, to throw her off balance. But she didn’t care, because the book had distracted him enough that he stopped thinking about posing. Just then, Elise came running up, a little breathless. “Here I am. Sorry, I just couldn’t get my hair right. Did I take too long?”

“Not at all.” Viv smoothed down a wayward strand at the top of her head. “You look lovely. How about you go sit by your brother?”

“Wait—together?” She blushed.

She nodded. “Why not?”

She expected Logan to balk. Instead he said, “It’s a great idea.” He nodded to his sister. “Let’s do it.”

She gave a little clap, obviously thrilled. Logan smiled warmly at his sister, which didn’t make Viv hate him.

He seemed to come alive as he proudly put his arm around her. They pulled silly faces. He made bunny ears behind her head and she got him right back. Then Logan whispered something to Elise and she burst out laughing.

“Okay, my turn,” Elise said, holding out her hands for the camera. “Viv, go stand by Logan.”

Viv looked up, surprised, a protest on her lips. Elise was gesturing. “Come on. It will look so pretty.”

“No, I really don’t think—”

“Oh, come on,” Logan said. “Be a sport.”

Two against one. So Viv reluctantly went and stood next to him.

“You’re not even in the same frame,” Elise said, motioning for them to scootch closer.

“You heard her,” Logan said with a half smile. “I showered this morning, I promise.”

Ah, but that was not the problem at all, was it?

Elise handled taking the photos as well as any teen who’d taken a million of them. Logan put his arm around her, which felt amazing and fit just right. “Smile, Vivi,” he said, which really did make her smile but also quietly poke him in the ribs for using that old nickname.

After a few shots that Viv barely registered through being flustered, Viv took over, and for the next hour, she shot photos of Elise against the barn, the tree, in the field, and in three separate outfits. Logan eventually retreated to under the tree with his phone.

“I have a date tonight,” Elise said when the shoot was over. She turned to Viv. “Which outfit should I wear?”

“*Not* that short one,” Logan called.

“I really like the jean skirt,” Viv said. “Casual but really cute.”

“That’s my favorite, too,” Elise said as she rifled through her outfits.

“I’ll email you the photos, okay?” Viv said to Elise.

Logan checked his watch. “I have a business call with my agent, and I should get home to check on a few things.”

Elise turned to him. “My friend Micah is picking me up in a few minutes, so you don’t have to wait for me. We’re going to grab a burger and watch the girls’ soccer game. So I’ll be home around seven-ish. Okay?” She smiled, ran over to him, and gave him a giant hug. “Thanks for coming.”

Logan hugged her back. Viv caught his eye. He seemed surprised and maybe even a little bowled over. “Being with

you was fun,” he said. Then he paused. “But how about this guy picks you up at the house so I can meet him?”

Viv could tell Logan was getting ready to dig in his heels. She really wanted a minute to talk privately with Elise, so she said, “I have to lock up the barn, so I’ll stay until her friend comes.”

She nudged Logan toward his car. “I promise I’ll check things out,” she said in a low voice. “You’ve got to trust her a little, you know?”

After Logan left, Viv packed up her equipment and then met Elise in the barn as she was gathering all her stuff. “Hey, before you take off, do you have a sec?”

“Yeah, sure. What’s up? If it’s about my brother, I just want you to know he was watching you the whole time you were taking my photos.”

“Oh.” *That* was interesting. “This isn’t about Logan. It’s about you. I, um—I saw you the other day outside the bakery. With a few girls who—who didn’t seem very nice.”

Elise blushed, which to Viv was telltale, but then she brushed off the comment with a hand wave. “Oh. Those girls...they’re just kidding around. No biggie.”

Viv had gone this far, so she decided to push a little further. “I saw one of them knock your bag off your shoulder. Then they laughed and walked away. No one should treat someone like that. If they’re giving you a hard time, you’d tell someone, right? Me or your mom or Logan...”

Elise sighed. “Look, Viv, the last thing in the world that I want is to have Logan involved. Because he’d, you know, extract blood from someone. I can handle this, okay?”

Viv sighed, unsure if she was doing enough. “I want you to know I’m here to talk to. And if they cross a line, I can help. Okay?”

Elise gave her a quick squeeze. “Thank you, Viv. I appreciate it. Don’t worry about me.”

Viv wanted to let her know she wasn’t alone. “You know

you're amazing, don't you? And they're not."

Elise gave her a quick hug. "Thanks. And for the photos. I can't wait to see them."

A car pulled up. A very clean, very old model Buick something-or-other. Except there was no grandpa behind the wheel but a cute teenage boy around Elise's age.

"I think your ride home is here," Viv said. "And he's really cute."

Elise was shaking her head, her color high. "His name is Micah," she said, a big smile overtaking her face. "And I guess he is."

Viv helped Elise get all her stuff into the car. As she picked up her Navy SEAL romance from the ground, something made her scan the bookmarked page that Logan had read from, searching for words like "vulnerable" "tough" and "determined." Nope. Not on that page. And she would know, because she'd just been reading the book this morning. Not only that, it was a favorite, one she'd read many times over. She also scanned for "hair shining in the sunlight" and what else did he say? Something about giving anything to kiss someone.

The words he'd read didn't exist, at least not on that page. She didn't recall them being a part of the story at all. Which meant that Logan had made them up.

And if that was the case, then she was in big trouble.

Chapter 9

“Hey, turn that down a little, okay?” Logan called out from his old room as he sat at his desk trying to get some work done.

Elise was playing some unidentifiable rap music with a heavy bass beat that made his head feel like it was being beaten on by a drumstick.

Between the rap music and his own thoughts, he wasn't getting a word written.

It had been fun to spend time with his amazing sister. And he and Viv seemed to pick right up from where they'd left off.

Well, and then some.

He'd been shocked by his resurrected feelings, back in full force...times ten. Like a virus that lies dormant in your body for years and then suddenly emerges and wreaks havoc.

Viv was his virus.

Which actually might be an idea for his next thriller.

Running his hands through his hair in frustration, he got up and walked over to the window, where he looked over at the Montgomerys' house. There was Viv's window, straight across from his, but it was pitch black now, like a ghost of things past.

He couldn't help cracking a smile. The two of them had each sat in their respective windows, practically inventing their own sign language in order to communicate at all hours of the day or night.

When they finally got cell phones, they'd sit there and text each other, looking up and smiling and giving thumbs-up or laughing.

Logan tried to drown out the music from Elise's room with ear buds and his old headphones layered on top of them, but nothing was working.

Somehow through the noise, he was able to hear a rap on his

door. More like an avalanche of excited raps that startled him worse than the blaring music.

“Logie, let me in,” Elise said excitedly—more like yelled—over the music. “Want to see my photos?”

She burst in, fresh from her shower, her wet hair smelling like strawberries. Wasn’t it just yesterday that she was an adorable three-year-old who would climb on his lap and beg him to stop typing his high school papers and play a movie for her on his computer? Which he almost always did. “Here,” she said, shoving a laptop into his hands. “Take a look.”

He rubbed his neck. He must be getting old, reminiscing. Disliking loud music. And also fretting about how he was ever going to get his work done with all these interruptions, even though it was nice to see Elise excited about something.

He took the laptop expecting to see typical high school photos—sweet young teens posing awkwardly with overdone hair and makeup. But what he saw was Elise looking up from a book, smiling at the camera, her warm soul shining through on all accounts. Vivienne had captured her spirit in simple, unpretentious ways. It made a frog catch in his throat. It made him...feel.

“You okay?” she asked him. He turned to her, somehow seeing a six-year-old with a gap-toothed smile and pigtails instead of a nearly grown woman.

Yikes.

He forced a smile that he hoped wasn’t too melancholy. “I think I just realized how fast time flies.”

Elise rolled her eyes. “Gosh, Logan, I turned seventeen, not died.” She patted him on the shoulder. “It’s going to be okay.”

“These photos are amazing,” he said.

“I know.” She smiled brightly and clapped her hands. “Right?”

“The only problem is that you’re practically grown up, and I don’t really understand how that happened.”

“Okay, enough,” she said, taking the laptop from him and

shutting it. “Viv made it easy. Plus, she’s a great photographer. Oh, I almost forgot.” She stopped and turned halfway to the door. “Viv sent me the ones she did of you.”

“Oh. I—uh—you can just email them to me.” Because he hadn’t been kidding when he’d said that he’d never in his life taken a photo he liked. And no matter how talented Viv was, he felt certain he’d look as stiff as a gingerbread man with a creepy icing smile. Elise’s photos might have all the grace and shine, but he would rather have a colonoscopy than take a photo, and he knew it would show. It always did.

Despite his protests, Elise thrust the laptop back in front of his face where he couldn’t avoid seeing a photo of him sitting in the grass, a vivid, bright green of spring. And in the middle of it, he sat smiling, not a maniacal smile of a person on edge but of someone who seemed quietly amused.

Wow. He kinda liked it.

He clicked rapidly through the others—him leaning against the barn, sitting on an old bench with the book flipped over, and the ones of him and Elise together. They were all great shots, capturing moments of warmth and emotion.

Real.

And then there were the final photos, the ones of him and Viv that Elise had taken.

He only stole a quick glance at the first one, as if laying eyes on it would curse him to love her forever. But that was ridiculous. Besides, he was so drawn to it that he couldn’t not look. His hand rested on her shoulder, both of them laughing into the camera. Her arm wrapped around him and rested lightly around his waist. A strange feeling came over him, a cross between heartburn and an eye twitch.

They fit together naturally, easily.

He couldn’t help but think of other ways they might fit together just as well.

His sister stood looking over his shoulder. “I told you she was amazing.”

Just then, a few other photos of just him under that big old tree popped up. One image in particular startled him. He swore he could see every emotion that he'd always thought he'd been able to hide. The expression on his face was intent and admiring as he looked at Viv like she was sassy. And smart. And beautiful. And talented.

And sexy.

He clicked quickly past it.

Hopefully no one else saw that moony expression in his eyes. Ugh, had Viv seen it while looking through the lens of her camera? Or was all of this in his imagination? He didn't know, but it caused an uncomfortable churning in his gut.

"You could definitely use one of those for your author photo," Elise said. "They're all much better than that one you have now."

"That one I have now cost a fortune. It was done by a famous photographer in New York."

"How much did that cost?" Elise asked.

"None of your beeswax."

"Come on, you can tell me."

Just then her phone, which she'd laid on his desk, buzzed off. He happened to glance down at it just as it lit up with a text.

Hey, loser, bet you're home alone again tonight.

What the...

As she snatched up the phone, he caught her flush.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

She managed a stiff smile. "Yeah, sure. Just some friends joking around."

Friends? He scanned her face for answers but found none. She kissed him on the head and took off. "I have to go study. See you."

He called to her before she hit the door, making her turn

back around. “Hey, you know you can tell me stuff, right?”

“Don’t worry about me, Logan. I’m *fine*.” She stopped with her hand on the doorknob and turned, giving him an unconvincing smile. “Really.”

He certainly hoped so. Because he had no idea what to do if she wasn’t.

He went to click out of the photos—or look at them more, he honestly wasn’t sure which—when a text from Viv popped up on his phone. I think the photos turned out nice. What do you think?

Very nice, he texted back. How did you get my number?

I always have the numbers of people who will be paying for their sister’s photos. That was followed by a happy-crying face emoji.

He chuckled and typed back: As your temporary employer, I’d like to request a business meeting.

That will cost you extra.

Okay, fine. My higher-ups fired Freyde over the PR fiasco, but they want more posts. Meet me in the hot tub at 11?

Can’t. I have a date.

A date? Someone in town? He sent that one before he thought better of it.

Logan set down his phone, wondering why he felt even more unsettled on top of his discomfort about his sister. The fun, jokey mood from texting had dissipated and he felt...odd. Melancholy. And like he needed to do something.

Like what? Scream “Date me instead”?

Why hadn’t anyone mentioned that Viv was dating someone? More importantly, why did he care?

He had another concern. Viv was enormously talented. The photos proved that without question. So then why was she working in the Christmas store instead of doing what she loved? And now that they were friends again, should he ask

her?

...

At eleven, Viv took Raphie for his evening stroll up and down the old tree-lined street. The trees were bursting with millions of tiny leaves, newly unfurled, their lives bright and fresh and full of possibility.

She hoped her life would be on track again soon, too. Was it weird to compare her life to a leaf?

As Raphie sniffed and snorted his way with great enthusiasm down the uneven sidewalks pushed up at wild angles by ancient roots, Viv noticed Mrs. Matthews' purple and pink hyacinths blooming in bunches all along the front of their house. And Mrs. Patel's teapot collection lining her glassed-in front porch. And the cute Georgian brick house on the corner where a newlywed couple had just moved in and strung cute white lights on their back patio, which made Viv feel happy that the neighborhood was getting an infusion of young people. Overall, it had held up well, and she loved it. But it also gave her the feeling that everyone around her was carrying on with their lives, while she was walking along, observing but not participating.

A feeling she was determined to rectify soon. Once she added her work for Logan to her resume, she was certain she would land a job in the city.

She walked to the corner and back, letting Raphie in the house, where he promptly scuttled over to his bed, circled twice, and flopped down for the night. She gave him a good rub, told him what a good doggie he was, and kissed him on the top of his head. Then she ran upstairs to her room, tossed on a bikini—no granny panties tonight, just in case—and grabbed her terry robe, making sure not to turn on her bedroom light, which would surely alert Logan that she was home.

It was hot tub time, but not with her hot neighbor. She just needed a minute to soak and think. And not about the almost-kiss, which was exciting and horrifying all at once, or the

snappy bantering with Logan that always seemed so fun and electric. It felt exactly like how their friendship used to be—with the same kind of spontaneous back-and-forth and mutual understanding that had made them best friends in the first place.

No, it was something entirely different that was more troubling. She'd never told a soul—not even her sisters—how badly she felt about letting her family down after Paris. Oh, she'd tried—but Tessa had made light of it, told her things like they loved her and were so proud of her. But Logan had listened and understood her pain and wrapped her up in his embrace without hesitation.

Karma seemed to love to play tricks on her. The last time Logan had been in her life, she'd faced a decision about following these kinds of feelings or starting her life away from here. Here it was a dozen years later, and history seemed to be repeating itself.

Viv had just very quietly sunk into the tub—without turning on any lights, even in the downstairs—and closed her eyes, picturing the New York skyline, visualizing herself walking down a street in lower Manhattan with cute little boots and a stylish raincoat—part of her city wardrobe, of course—carrying a portfolio and looking like she knew where she was going. Or maybe she'd imagine herself jogging through Central Park with her tiny dog. (*Do tiny dogs jog?*) Suddenly, she heard someone clear their throat.

Oh no. *How* had he found her yet again?

“Where’s the hot date?” Logan asked. Her eyes flew open in time to see him leaning his elbows along the side of the tub, fully clothed, staring at her. More like drilling his gaze straight through her and calling her out on her lie. She just hoped he didn’t start stripping off clothing again.

“I just tucked him in.”

“You just...” His gaze traveled from her to the house. “Does he happen to be hairy and weigh about forty pounds and answer to Raphael?”

“Probably forty-five, he’s gotten a little chunky.” She couldn’t help smiling. “How did you know I was here?”

His answer wasn’t in words but in a singular look that said, *I just know you.*

“How’s the viral video fallout?” Surely that must be why he was here, to talk business like he’d suggested.

“I’m still getting DMs asking who’s the hot elf.”

She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Hmmm. Wonder how far *hot elf* will get me on my resume.”

He gave a casual shrug. “Depends on what your end goal is.”

She burst out laughing. He shifted his weight, which made her panic. “Please don’t tell me you’re coming in here again.”

“No. But I wanted to ask you a question.”

“Okaaay...” Was it wrong to be a teeny bit disappointed that he wasn’t joining her tonight?

“I was worried about something that you might be able to help me with.”

“Sure. What is it?”

The joking look went out of his eyes. “Elise seems to like you a lot. Does she confide in you?”

The way he rubbed the kink out of his neck told her he was genuinely worried about something.

“Funny you should ask, because I’ve been a little concerned about her, too.”

He looked relieved to share the burden. “You know, I came back to be closer to her, but every time I try to really talk, she tells me everything’s under control and cuts me off.”

“She’s very independent,” Viv said. “But don’t give up. I don’t know if you could tell from those photos, but her whole face lit up when you posed with her. And I think she made you more relaxed, too.”

He smiled. “The photo shoot was fun.”

“Fun? Did Dr. Gloom just say the word *fun*? Amazing for someone whose books usually have words like *death* or *fear* in them.”

“Oh come on, I’m not that—”

“Grumpy? Stick-in-the-muddish?”

“Is that even an adjective?”

“I don’t know, you’re the writer,” she tossed back.

There was that look again. Like he liked her sass. And he just might think it was hot. Was she okay with that? No, of course not. Maybe? Her thoughts were all jumbled up in the worst way. She feared she was losing her resolve. He was wearing it down like water on a rock.

Drip, drip, drip.

“Anyway, back to my sister. She got a weird text tonight when we were looking over the photos. It was something like *Hey loser, bet you’re home alone again.*”

Viv sat up in the tub, horrified and sad all at once. “You actually saw it?”

“Her phone was on my desk when the text popped up. I could tell she was embarrassed because she snatched up her phone and turned red. And she covered by saying it was a joke, but something doesn’t seem right to me.”

Viv thought about that. “I was in the bread shop the other day when I saw her waiting for someone outside. These three girls passed her, and one knocked off her backpack, and then they all laughed. I asked her about it yesterday, but she shrugged it off and said she had it under control. The girls looked like a clique, you know? Dressed very fashionably, very pretty. With an attitude about them.”

“Bullies?”

She confirmed that with a nod. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“If I can’t get to the bottom of this, will you help?”

“Of course,” she said automatically. She felt strangely happy that he’d actually asked her a normal thing that a friend would

ask. *Just like the old days.* And she genuinely wanted to help.

She met his gaze, and that same wild wave of chemistry surged up between them as always, strong as a magnetic field, drawing them together despite the resistance.

And Viv was putting up a *lot* of resistance. She was getting a little tired of it, in fact.

“My mom’s coming back from her conference, and I’m heading up to the lake this weekend to write,” he said, breaking the spell. “I wondered if you might meet me up there one afternoon to work on some interviewing stuff? I’ve got to prepare for a televised interview later this month. It’s a popular show, tons of viewers.”

Viv was surprised his family still owned the sweet little cottage on a lake that she’d visited often as a kid. She shrugged her most noncommittal shrug while struggling to keep a straight face. “I’d love to help, but I charge extra for weekends.”

He shrugged his big, distracting shoulders right back. “Name your price.”

Wow, he’d actually thought she was serious? More importantly, he was willing to pay? She didn’t even know how to process that. “I’m kidding. Actually, I promised to watch my little niece Saturday afternoon.”

“Oh.” With his poker face, she couldn’t tell if he was disappointed. “Maybe Sunday then?”

She shrugged. “My whole family’s doing dinner together.”

He gave a little smile. “Well, I’ll catch you Monday, then.”

She nodded, relieved she had excuses not to go to the lake house, which held way too many memories. Good ones as well as not so good ones. “Well, good night,” she said. “Have a nice weekend.”

“Those photos were really something,” he said, his feet still planted in place.

Shoo, shoo already, she wanted to say. “You’re biased.”

“I’m really not.”

“I’ll say thank you then.” She forced her focus onto what was important. “Your sister is a cutie pie. I hope she’s okay.”

He nodded. “Me, too.” He turned and took a couple of steps but then swung back around. “One more question.”

She pretended to tap a fake wristwatch. “You do know you’re past your limit, right?”

He ignored that. “Should I be offended that you prefer being alone out here to being with me?”

Busted. “What makes you think that?”

“You just admitted that you had a date with your mother’s dog, Viv.”

“Don’t take it personally. I can’t think clearly when you’re around.” Oh no, where did that come from? She resisted the urge to slap her hand over her big, unruly mouth.

He leaned in. He was so close, she could see his dark, dark irises. Well, at least they looked dark because his pupils were dilated in the dim light. His gaze seemed to pierce the part of her mind where all her thoughts about him were as jumbled up as unsorted laundry.

“I’m *glad* you can’t think clearly when I’m around.” His voice was low and gravelly.

A shiver went through her. He was close enough to touch. To *kiss*. She felt a flush travel up her neck and into her face. She cleared her suddenly dry throat. “Why is that?”

He attempted to suppress a smile. As if he was secretly reveling in her discombobulation. She suddenly realized she’d been staring at his lips, which were full and very nice, indeed. She forced her gaze upward, but he had mischief in his eyes. Mischief and something else that was melting her from the inside out, and it had nothing to do with the temperature of the water.

And then, just like that, he leaned over and kissed her. His mouth landed gently on her lips, slow and purposeful. Self-assured. A direct hit, leaving her thoughts scattered and her

body trembling, hot and cold and dizzy all at once.

He took his time, gently exploring her mouth, dropping feather-light kisses, as if her lips were braille and he was reading them, one letter at a time.

Without thinking, she brought her hands up to his face and pulled him closer to the steamy water, closer to *her*, as she kissed him back. He tasted wonderful, his kisses drugging her with their sweetness, their soft and unrushed intensity. Her fingers tangled in his thick hair, silky and coarse at the same time. He leaned over the hot tub, his arms flexing as he grasped the rim for purchase. She felt him shudder as their lips collided.

The kisses deepened and quickened. Their tongues met, and someone let out a groan. Maybe her. She angled her head and tried to lift herself out of the water to get to more of him.

He felt so good. Warm and familiar and yet not at all.

He broke the kiss suddenly and pulled back, panting a little. His shirt—actually, the entire front of him—was wet.

“Logan, I—” She had so much to say. She felt so much, but she couldn’t think of where to begin. She couldn’t think at all. And she wanted more kisses, but why wasn’t he kissing her?

He found words first. “I’m glad you can’t think clearly because that means we have unfinished business to discuss.” He pushed back off the hot tub. “Enjoy your quiet time.”

Like that was even possible.

Because he’d completely wrecked her.

Chapter 10

The next morning, Viv's first thought was that it was Rosie time, which she needed badly.

She was off, so she didn't have to think of Sheila or the Christmas store the entire weekend.

And she was not thinking about the hot tub kiss.

Okay, kisses, plural.

Good thing she wasn't going up to that cottage with Logan.

There. Problem solved. No, not really. Truthfully, it wasn't solved at all.

To prove she was determined in her goals, she sent an updated resume to Preston and Preston PR, mentioning Logan as her high-profile client and listing him as a reference.

But even doing that couldn't make her avoid what was really going on here.

Suddenly Tessa and Rosie were there, at the front door, Rosie in her mom's arms, grinning a sweet, toothless grin and raising her tiny arms toward Viv.

"I love you," she gushed, happily taking her from Tessa and kissing her sweet baby-shampoo-smelling head. Rosie gave her the once-over with her huge brown eyes and let out a giant milky burp.

As Tessa handed Viv a cloth diaper to wipe Rosie's little rosebud mouth, Viv said, "That means she loves me, too. She just doesn't say it eloquently—yet." To Rosie, she said, "Auntie Viv is going to spoil you silly while your mommy's gone."

Tessa smiled, Viv thought a little weakly. She was dressed for work, her hair up in a bun, looking put together and professional...but also tired.

"Thanks for watching her this afternoon," Tessa said. "I know you don't have much time off from the store and that

you're working for Logan, too."

Viv shook her head. "I'm thrilled to hang with her. I want you to know I surveyed the whole attic looking for our old barn animal set"—she gestured to the little plastic barn with the carry handle they'd all spent hours playing with—"and I found a problem up there."

Tessa lifted a brow. "That our mom is a closet hoarder?"

Viv frowned. "What's a closet hoarder?"

"It's where the house looks very tidy and neat but everything behind closed doors is a disaster."

"Exactly! I found drawings from the third grade, old Halloween costumes, and every Christmas ornament we ever made as kids, most of them with our school photos glued to them."

"I'm sure she kept all your old artwork," Tessa said pointedly.

Viv sighed. "From what I saw, it's completely indiscriminate. My point is that we need to clear the attic before the house burns down. And possibly before Mom kicks me out."

"Ha, I have time for that," she said sarcastically. "I barely have time to shower these days. Not that I'm complaining. Rosie is amazing." She kissed her daughter on the head, who smiled at her mom and babbled something unintelligible. "Also I'm not sure Mom's ever coming back here, regardless of the town gossip."

"Are you saying she might marry Marco?"

Tessa shrugged. "I don't know. She's got to work through it, you know? She'll know when she's ready."

"Maybe sometimes people need a little push," Viv said. "I mean, to help get over their fears. Do you think we should get her to talk about it more?"

"You're welcome to," she said with a smile. "Good luck with that."

Viv checked her watch. Tessa was always compulsively early, probably from starting work before civilized people even crawled out of bed. “Do you have time for some tea before you go? We could sit on the deck. It’s a beautiful day.”

“I’d love it,” Tessa said.

“Me, too.” Viv was thrilled to be able to catch up with her older sister, who had always been there for her. She wanted to show her that she could be there for her, too, even though watching her niece wasn’t a sacrifice at all. While Tessa set up an old quilt on a sun-dappled part of the deck and set up the toy barn for Rosie to play with, Viv made iced tea.

“You look a little tired,” Viv said. “Everything okay?”

“I am tired. Leo is tired. We’re both working too much. And everyone in our families who takes turns watching Rosie says they love it, but I’m worried that I’m imposing on them.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Viv said as they sipped tea under the shade of an old oak just off the deck, “every time I talk to our mother, she spends at least ten minutes gushing about Rosie’s newest feat. I don’t think she feels imposed on.”

“Our whole family—including me—sort of has this idea that daycare is a place where she’ll get ear infections and one viral plague after another, and everyone’s rallied around to take babysitting shifts, but I just don’t know if this arrangement is the best thing for anybody.” She was quiet a long time. “It took me so long to finally be doing what I want, and I’m so happy with Leo, but some days, I just want to be with her. I don’t want to miss a single second of everything she’s learning. I want to be there to wipe her tears and rock her to sleep and purée her squash and change her poopy diapers. So basically, motherhood is a giant basket of conflicting emotions you can’t ever resolve.”

Purée her squash? Change poopy diapers? New parents were...weird.

Also, Viv totally got it about the conflicting feelings. “Why don’t you and Leo plan a night out where you can reconnect and relax and let me babysit? You know I’d do it in a

heartbeat.” Viv unfortunately kept seeing the hot tub out of the corner of her eye, which made her think of the steamy tub, the cool night air, and the feel of Logan’s lips on hers as he kissed her, softly and slowly and deeply and—

Enough already.

Maybe they should continue this discussion inside.

She forced her gaze and her thoughts away from the tub and onto Rosie, who had gotten hold of a short, stout farmer figure and put it straight into her mouth.

“I love you, Viv,” Tessa said, “and I appreciate all your help. But all this might need more than a night out to fix.”

“This conversation is scaring me,” Viv confessed.

“Because it makes you not want to have kids?”

“Ha. I probably need to find a partner first. But I was thinking more in terms of balance. I don’t even have it now. What will it be like if I ever have children?”

“Rosie is the best thing that’s ever happened to us. And I know it will work out—somehow.” She took a sip of tea. “Now tell me how you’re doing.”

Before Viv could even say anything, Logan walked out of the house next door with a duffel bag. Not a floral one this time, Viv noted. He was wearing a gray T-shirt and jeans, looking strong and lean and tanned and basically better than anybody had a right to. A little sigh escaped before she could hold it back, which, judging from the narrowed-down-eyes look Tessa just gave her, put her sister on high radar alert. Even worse, as soon as Logan saw them, he set his bag down on the deck at his feet and walked right over. Of course.

Because why wouldn’t Logan find an opportunity to insert himself into her every waking moment? It was bad enough that he was already overtaking her dreams. And most of her thoughts, too.

He greeted Tessa with a hug while tossing Viv a slight nod. “Hi,” he said, looking her up and down in a way that made goose bumps shimmy up and down her arms. She felt a slow

blush creep up her neck as his gaze skimmed from the hot tub to her in a knowing way.

Ugh, reminding her again of those awful, wonderful, toe-curling, blood-boiling kisses that she couldn't help but relive over and over in her mind.

Which confirmed what she already knew. That there was *no way* she was going up to that cottage with him.

Nope. Nuh-uh. Absolutely forbidden.

“Logan.” She tried act like they hadn't had their tongues down each other's throats, but of course her gaze gravitated straight to his and held.

Rosie threw a cow, and it hit Logan's shoe. “Hey, great pitching arm there, Rosebud.” His response was to pick it up and kneel down and hand her it back, making a loud, sonorous “*mooooo*,” which made Rosie grin. After which she promptly tossed it again.

As for Viv...well, she was completely unaffected by such antics. Zip up that steel vest protecting her heart, because she was absolutely not going to let him get to her. No siree.

But still. When a guy moos like that, how can you not be stirred?

“Hey, neighbor,” Tessa said to Logan. “You look great.”

He smiled. A genuine smile. “Thanks. You, too.” He picked up a tractor. “You, too, Rosie Posie.” Rosie rolled right over to him, giving him a look of adoration.

And then—be still Viv's heart—he bent over and picked her up.

Her own poor quivering heart sank. It was so much easier not to fall for him when...well, when he didn't do *that*.

“How old is she now?” he asked as Rosie stuck her hand right on his mouth and he responded by pretending to gnaw on her fingers. Rosie wasn't the only one completely enchanted.

Logan glanced at Viv, his eyes darkening, sending her a message that he hadn't forgotten last night.

Judging by the hot flash she was now experiencing, she was either in premature menopause or else she hadn't forgotten, either. She resisted the urge to fan her face.

"Seven months," Tessa answered, looking in puzzlement from Logan to Viv.

"She's really cute," Logan said. As he passed Rosie off to Viv, she saw questions in his eyes. Ones that she couldn't answer. Or maybe she wasn't brave enough to.

Tessa cleared her throat. Okay, maybe they were staring at each other for more than a moment. Viv turned her attention on Rosie and stepped back to get more space.

Logan's tone became businesslike. "I'd better get going. I'm heading to the lake. Viv, is it okay if I email you some interview questions?"

"Of course. Sure." She tried to sound neutral, too. Despite herself, she felt...sad. Cowardly. And like she wanted to tug on his shirt and say, *Take me too!* "Have fun," she said, forcing a smile.

"Sure will." He gave a polite nod. "See you Monday." He tossed them a wave as he picked up his duffel and left.

Tessa's face held a big-sister tell-me-more look. As soon as he was out of earshot, Tessa said, "*That* was interesting."

"What's interesting?" Viv asked. "The fact that he's all grown up? Great with kids?" Tessa shook her head. "Then *what?*"

"You know what. Tell me everything."

"Stop imagining stuff." Viv waved a hand dismissively. "You always wanted us to get together."

"Yes," she said without compunction, "and someday maybe you two will be smart enough to finally listen to me."

Tessa took Rosie and lifted her high enough to smell her butt. "Time to change your diaper, little PooPoo," she said as she carried her daughter into the house. "He still makes you blush," she tossed behind her.

Ugh. Sisters were so annoying.

Viv followed Tessa into the living room, where Tessa pulled out a changing pad and got to work on the floor.

Viv took a seat on the couch. “Why don’t you let me take over and you go do your errands now? Also, I did *not* blush.”

Tessa looked up long enough to cast Viv a *yeah, sure you didn’t* expression as Rosie licked the wheels of the tractor. Tessa did some fancy machinations involving diaper wipes, moving baby legs, and sneaking a clean diaper under her all at once.

“With the money Logan’s paying me for the social media help, I’ll finally be able to get settled.” Viv used the most positive tone she could muster; it was probably intended to reassure herself as much as Tessa. “My friend Tasha in New York has a temporary roomie for another month and then she’ll need a new one. So this all works out perfectly. I’ll finally be able to get settled.” She almost said *leave*, but that was upsetting for her to say—and for Tessa to hear.

“Are you really going to move all the way to New York?” Tessa gave a heavy sigh. “I mean, I’m really proud of all you’ve done, but...I don’t know. If it were up to me, I’d keep you here forever. But I’ll try not to be selfish. Just tell me you’re sure this is what you want.”

Viv’s stomach was rolling. She felt a little sick. Just nerves, she told herself. An upcoming major life change, that was all. “I’m back on track, and nothing’s going to derail me this time. Not even myself.” Viv loved her family. She just didn’t see a way she could ever find a good future for herself here.

Tessa gave a short, snorty laugh, then cast a guilty look at Viv. “Sorry, I’m laughing because that was exactly how I felt a few years ago. But look what happened.”

Viv stabbed the air with her finger. “It was a miracle of epic proportions that you met Leo and went to pastry school.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Tessa said softly. “It was a lot of working it out. But I understand that you have to do what’s right for you.”

“If you did all that, you can definitely figure out the balance

thing,” Viv said.

“Thanks, but don’t change the subject.” Tessa eyed her carefully. “You’ve accomplished so much. We’re very proud of you. You know that, right? I just want to make sure you’re going for the right reasons. Not out of guilt because you feel that you need to chase success in some way.”

Viv had heard this before. But she knew the truth. That she’d piggybacked off her family members’ hard work. They’d made her opportunities possible. And she’d screwed up. She vowed to pay them all back as soon as she got a real job—a real job she needed ASAP.

Tessa walked over and gave her a hug. “You’ve always expected perfection from yourself. And what I’m learning is that life isn’t perfect. It’s messy—but wonderful. Look at my life. I would never have expected all the things that have happened to me.”

“You worked hard to make them happen,” Viv said. “And I want to do everything in my power to make things happen, too.”

“Some of it was just saying yes to risk. You know that, right? Like, literally, taking a chance on something completely out of your comfort zone because if you don’t, you’ll lose your chance completely.”

But Viv had a plan, because without a plan, what would happen to her? “But how did you know which risks to take?”

Her sister smiled and patted Viv’s shoulder. “Trust me, you will know when that is a choice.”

Tessa had taken a huge, wild gamble with Leo. And look at what it had gotten her. Her dreams. Her wild, messy, wonderful dreams.

Viv hugged her sister hard. “I want you to know that I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. All the sacrifice. I’m going to make you proud.” *And repay you*, she said silently. Then maybe Tessa could hire a nanny. Or she and Leo could take a weekend trip. Or...whatever they wanted.

Tessa held on tight. “I’m proud of you right now, just as you

are. You don't need to do anything to make me more proud." She pulled back. "Okay?"

That made Viv tear up. She was grateful for those words.

"Okay, stop crying," Tessa said, "You know I love you, but I'm going to change the subject for both our sakes." She swiped at her own eyes. "So I saw the video," Tessa said.

A dark feeling fell over Viv like a cloud. "I took it down."

"Not before a lot of people saw it."

Viv groaned.

"It's very interesting," Tessa continued. "I actually downloaded it." She flipped through her phone as Rosie sucked on a sheep. Actually, more like gnawed, as if to say, *I'm getting hungry here. Does anyone care?*

"I really don't want to watch it," Viv said. "It's embarrassing."

Tessa pressed play and stuck it in front of her anyway.

The video was muted. But she saw what looked like a scene from a rom-com. Cute elf versus hot guy mixing it up with Christmas props.

Her sister was smiling at her. "Chemistry, body language, the way he's looking at you."

Yeah. All of that. *Disastrous.*

"I really don't see it." She definitely wasn't going to tell Tessa about that kiss. "Logan wants me to go up to the lake and work with him on his interview, but of course I'm not going."

"You're afraid," she said in her big-sister-know-it-all tone.

"I'm not afraid," Viv countered, crossing her arms. "I'm *leaving*. I don't want to make a mistake just when I've finally almost got my life up and running again."

There. That was the truth. But saying it out loud didn't give her any relief.

Rosie dropped the sheep and let out a yell. And sucked

vigorously on her fist. Tessa picked her up and started to walk to the kitchen. “Let’s get her bottle, then maybe you can feed her while I get going? After she eats, she’ll nap for about an hour and a half, so maybe you can get something done.” She stopped and turned to Viv. “Maybe the worst mistake is not taking the chance. Besides, how many times in life do we ever get a redo? You got one—you just need to decide if it’s what you want.”

A rap on the screen door made them both turn. Logan’s mom came running in, wearing joggers and a quarter zip and carrying a cord. A little breathless, she asked, “How long ago did Logan leave?”

“Probably twenty minutes?” Tessa looked at Viv, who confirmed with a nod.

She held up the cord. “He forgot his laptop cord. I have a class on Zoom until six, and Elise is at work, and I really don’t want either of us driving out in the country at night. Especially with rain coming in.”

Tessa asked, “Viv, didn’t you say you needed to pick up something for your camera in Evansville?”

Vivienne tried not to send her a death glare. Because she’d done absolutely no such thing.

“Oh, sweetheart, really?” Mrs. Matthews said. “Are you sure it wouldn’t be any trouble?”

“Of course not.” Viv forced a smile. “I can get it to him by this evening.”

“Oh, wonderful. Thank you, sweetie. I’ll call him.”

As soon as Miriam left, a cool silence descended. Viv shook the cord at her sister.

“The problem’s not going away unless you face him head-on,” Tessa said. “Besides, you were the one who said we should push Mom a little. Maybe you need a little push, too.”

“Sisters suck,” Viv replied.

“Love you, too,” she said with an annoying gleam in her eye.

Chapter 11

The evil twin in Logan's book was knocking at the door, terrifying the good twin, who was looking for a way to escape. Even worse, since Logan's laptop battery died three hours ago, his characters were having to terrify each other on paper. Which was especially scary because while he wrote as fast as he could, his handwriting looked as if an entire flock of chicks had scuttled across his notebook.

He thought getting away and being alone at the cottage would help clear his mind, but it had not. Adding to his stress, that big interview was looming.

And then there was the matter of the other night. He'd kissed Vivienne because...well, because he wanted her. And he was 99 percent sure she wanted him, too. So why wasn't she up here with him? She seemed to give every excuse not to come. Didn't she want to be with him, too?

It had been far less humiliating than the first time he'd tried to kiss her. This time she'd kissed him back. *Enthusiastically.*

He had to stop obsessing about last night. Deadlines didn't stop for emotional turmoil. And so he went back to his work.

Oddly, even when he stopped writing about the knocking, it persisted. Surely his exhausted brain was playing tricks.

Finally realizing that there was a real someone at his door, he got up and opened it to find Vivienne herself standing there, looking like a beam of sunshine, dressed in a yellow T-shirt, jean shorts, and white sneakers.

A breath of fresh air.

A fresh chance—was that what he wanted with her? Or was this the same inconvenient attraction he'd always felt—that maybe he would always feel? His soul's penchant for misery?

And yet he had to look on the bright side. Because lo and behold, there she was, holding out his laptop cord.

"Oh, wow," he said, which sounded a little desperate, even

to him.

As he took it, his hand grazed hers.

She glanced up, her breath hitching, her lips pressing together. The struggle on her face told him that whatever this was between them, she felt it, too. Or was trying not to.

“Thanks,” he said, remembering his manners. “I was just about to head back to town for this.”

She looked past him into the cottage as she deposited the cord in his hands. “Guess I saved you a couple of hours.”

“You shouldn’t have driven all the way up here—”

“I stopped and got a lens for my camera at that shop in Evansville,” she said quickly. “So it was no trouble.” She studied him with a critical gaze.

Which made him suddenly comb his fingers through his hair. It occurred on him that he hadn’t combed his hair and was wearing an ancient Coldplay T-shirt he’d found in a drawer. From the look on her face, his appearance must be worse than he thought.

She shook her head sadly. “If this is what your creative process is like, it’s even scarier than your books.”

“It’s great to see you, too.” He couldn’t help grinning. Because it really *was* great to see her. And...she was concerned about him. He could tell.

“You’re just saying that because I brought your cord. Besides, I’m probably the only person around.” If he wasn’t mistaken, she was struggling not to crack a smile, too.

“Not true.” He shook his head. “Vick’s here.”

She frowned. “He must be ninety.”

“Ninety-one. Still fishes every day.” A few little cottages dotted this side of the lake, and Vick’s was the nearest one. He was as much a part of the lakeside landscape as this place, but he rarely said any words beyond hello.

Viv lifted a finely shaped brow. “He’s more talkative now?”

He shrugged. “Well, no. But it eases the mind to know someone’s nearby.”

Her chuckle echoed as she walked through the cottage, leaving a trail of soft, fresh scent. Even with his writer’s brain, he couldn’t describe what it was. Sophisticated but with a touch of...donut?

He wisely kept that to himself. But the fact that she probably drove through Stan’s donut stand and got some warm fresh ones as they always used to do on the drive up here made him think that maybe she wasn’t in a giant hurry to leave.

She surveyed the bright chairs, the colorful pillows on the comfy couches, the big lake landscape of the view out the window that his mom had painted herself. “Cute,” she said. “The place looks familiar but also updated. Very nice.”

“I always loved it here,” he couldn’t help saying. No matter how bad the writing day, the killer view always put that in perspective.

She smiled. “I did, too. Your mom was always so nice about inviting me.”

“My mom thinks of you like her third child.” It was true, and he could sincerely say her mom felt the same way about him. “You should see the new firepit I bought. It’s going to be amazing. If you stay, I’ll break it out.”

There he went again. He could be cool and calm to the rest of the world, but never with her.

She nodded, then reached up a hand and smoothed down his rumpled hair. Her touch was...nice. And it made him crave more. “Hard day?” she asked.

“Better now,” he said softly.

She rolled her eyes, but her mouth had curved upward the slightest bit. She surveyed the galley kitchen, taking note of his half-full coffee pot, an open box of Oreos (emergency creativity generators), and the scattered groceries on the counter he hadn’t bothered to put away.

Oh no. Not the groceries. He ran to stand in front of them,

leaning against the counter and bracing himself with his arms. “Are you in a hurry?” he asked. “We could take a hike.” But she looked right over his shoulder and homed right in on his pasta boxes.

Busted.

“Yes. A *huge* hurry,” she said in a very unhurried way, then turned her gaze on him, scanning his face like she was reading it for clues.

“Seriously,” he said, avoiding her by glancing past her out the window. “It looks like rain, so we should go out. For old times’ sake.”

She reached around him, her side brushing his, her lovely scent filling his nostrils. “All your groceries are gluten free.”

His heart sank as she examined his stuff. “The pasta noodles, the bread.” She picked up a smaller box. “Gluten-free breadcrumbs? Gluten-free Oreo knockoffs? I love this brand!”

At least she sounded excited about the cookies. “I—well.” He cleared his throat. “The grocery store up here has this really amazing selection of GF products. I mean, once I started looking, I couldn’t even stop myself.”

She crossed her arms and called his bluff. “Johnston’s Corner Grocery and Tackle Shop has all this?”

He was screwed. If they were going to get anywhere in this relationship, he had to do better. Make himself vulnerable. Even if she rejected him again.

“Vivienne.”

“Yes?” She turned around.

That had the effect of bringing them into very close proximity. So close he could see a little throb at her temple. A tiny birthmark on her cheek. The tiny little scar at the outside corner of her eye, a near miss from when she was seven and Juliet threw something and missed. (Or rather, didn’t miss.) “I would really, really like to cook you some dinner.” He paused. “And Johnston’s still doesn’t have much besides worms and cold beer. Which isn’t a bad thing in a pinch.”

She looked worried. “How did you know I would come?”

“I didn’t,” he said honestly. “But I was going to stop by and ask you again when I went back for the cord.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me to bring it?”

“Because I wasn’t inviting you to dinner to bring me my cord.”

“Oh.” Her voice sounded a little choked up. She paused. “Thanks for the invite. I accept.”

She said yes. He did a mental fist pump. “Great.”

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Her face lit up. “I brought donuts.”

So he wasn’t wrong. “Raspberry jelly filled?” he asked hopefully.

She nodded. “For brain power. The donut light was on, so I had to stop.”

“Great. Now you can stay for breakfast, too.”

He mentally slapped himself in the head. Did he actually say that? Out loud?

She frowned and pushed back mock-hard against his chest, which made him back up. “You must be desperate for company. And you’ve only been gone a few hours.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s clouding up, and my weather app says a storm’s coming. So I’ll take off right after dinner.” She looked out the big window, which overlooked a little dock and the lake. “Ready to hike?”

“I’m up for anything.”

“Better fill the water bottles,” she said without sympathy. “This is just what you need to clean out all those cobwebs.” In response to his puzzled expression, she said, “We’re climbing up to the lookout.”

Chapter 12

“We won’t be seeing a sunset tonight,” Logan said as Viv noted the thick gray clouds that were rapidly rolling in and blotting out the sun at the horizon.

It had taken them an hour to make it to the top of Great Bluff Lookout, but the climb had been worth it. The view was just as spectacular as Viv remembered, even after all this time.

This was the place they couldn’t wait to get to as soon as the Matthews’ van pulled up to the cottage’s winding gravel driveway. Where she and Logan told each other their dreams and their fears, celebrated their successes, shared their disappointments. Or sometimes just enjoyed the killer view of pine trees, cliffs and hillsides, and a river flowing quietly far below.

She had a plan to help him with his looming interview, hoping that being in this place would help him to speak from the heart.

And as for them...well, they needed to sort that out, too.

“It’s beautiful here no matter what the weather.” She caught her breath and looked around the plateau, at the flattened boulders, the perfect for an overlook. She slid her light backpack off her shoulder and sat. “Remember that time when we stayed too late to watch the sunset and didn’t have cell service?”

Logan laughed. “My mom never lets me forget that there were two policemen and two park rangers waiting for us at the bottom.”

“We used our cell phone lights to see our way down. It’s a miracle we didn’t break a leg.”

“Or get eaten by something.”

“Let’s just make sure to get back before the rain comes.” She took a breath of the clean, fresh air. “This place is so inspiring,” she said. “I see why you want to work here.”

“The perfect place to write,” he said. “But to be honest, it might be a little too quiet. I’m not sure how long I can stay here alone.”

“People need people,” she said with a knowing smile. “Even you.”

“Me?” He pointed to himself. “I’m social. I have friends and stuff.”

“And stuff?”

He shrugged. “I mean, I’ve had girlfriends. Relationships.”

“And how did those go for you?”

“That’s a little personal, isn’t it?”

“To be fair, this is the place for honesty.” She looked around at the rocky terrain. “I remember you confessing your undying love to Maria Martinez right at this very spot.”

“Give me a break, Viv. I was ten.”

She shrugged.

“Okay. Fair enough. I just haven’t found The One yet.”

“Did you get close?” She found herself holding her breath, waiting for his answer.

“Maybe one time,” he said, staring at the gathering clouds encroaching upon the blue sky. “What about you?”

“Oh, sure, I’ve dated. Had my heart broken a time or two. The last time was a guy from Paris.”

He looked at her sideways. “Do I need to go rough him up?”

She smiled right back. “I’m over it. He wasn’t The One, either. But thanks.”

“Anytime. The thought of anyone hurting you still makes me crazy.”

That went straight to her heart. She could tell he meant it. He’d always been very protective of her. She somehow knew, no matter what, that he’d always have her back. And she wanted to let him know she’d have his, too.

Making sure he wasn't looking, she quickly opened the Voice Memos app on her phone and tapped the record button.

Forgive me for this tiny deceit, Logan.

“So, you never did tell me the other night why you write dark, scary stuff. And don't joke about your mind being a scary place. Like, what do you love about writing an edge-of-your-seat, heart-pounding story? I mean, that *is* what you love, isn't it?”

Logan took a seat on the flattened ledge of rock, looking over the tree-covered drop-off and the river below. In profile, his jaw looked set, his nose strong and straight. *So handsome.*

“You really want to know?” When she gave an eager nod, he continued. “For me, I think it's about good versus evil. Characters being tested to the limit and triumphing. Using their smarts to not let evil defeat them.”

“Interesting. I'm sensing a pattern,” she said.

“Darkness?” He wiggled his brows in a mock-sinister fashion.

She laughed. “I was going to say meeting challenges. Fighting the good fight. Is that what writing is about for you?”

“Maybe,” he hedged.

She didn't think that his battle was against an evil part of himself. “You're thinking about your dad,” she said softly. Then she held her breath. Because maybe she'd taken it too far.

He gave a careful nod.

She totally got it. Even when Logan was eighteen, he worried about being swallowed up by fame, by an industry that was fickle and difficult even for the best. After all, he'd watched it destroy his father.

Scratch that. Not just his father—his family.

“I've been warned against writing my entire life,” he said. “It's always been described as this scary thing, something that could destroy a person if they weren't careful.”

“Is it scary?”

He gave a brief laugh. “Every day I have to conquer the fear of sitting down and creating something out of nothing. But it’s also...fun. A joy to create a story, to escape, to find connections and lessons in relationships. It’s a world you can control, unlike this one.”

“You do love it.” That came through loud and clear. She felt pride at what he’d accomplished. And amazed at how certain he was about what he did.

He looked over at her sideways and smiled. “I can’t imagine what else I would do.”

“You never told me how you got published. How did you get a big publisher’s attention?”

“You really want to know?” He rubbed his neck and looked down, seeming uncomfortable with talking about himself.

“Yes.” So would everyone else, but she didn’t say that. “Tell me.”

“It’s about...” He drifted into silence, shifting his weight, something he’d always done when he was nervous.

“My early work was bad, but an editor ran across it, saw promise in it, and gave me a chance.”

“By luck?”

“I’m not sure how he found me. But it was lucky for me. My big break. Then it was off to the races—I’ve been doing a book a year ever since.”

“That sounds like fun. But also demanding.”

He acknowledged that with a tight nod and a smile. “I’m handling it so far.”

“I have a confession,” she said. “I haven’t read any of your books.”

He clutched his heart. “I’m crushed.”

“Well, you know. Too much emotional baggage between us—I never had the courage to pick one up. But I did put a few

of the newer ones on my Kindle.”

“Tell you what. I’ll give you one I’m particularly proud of, okay? You can start there.”

“I’d like that.”

He smiled. And she smiled back. Then he sat down next to her on the rock, their shoulders bumping.

Viv felt the warmth of him through her shirt. She knew she should move, but it felt too good. “Those questions weren’t so bad, were they?”

“They didn’t count. We were just...chatting.” He stood and picked up a stick and began snapping it into smaller pieces. Behind him, the clouds had completely blotted out the sun. They appeared heavy, filling up like water balloons, getting ready to let loose. “You’re much less threatening than an actual interviewer.”

Viv picked up her phone. “An interview is just talking, too.” She shook the phone back and forth. “That’s why I recorded our conversation.”

His eyes flew open.

She pushed a few buttons. “I just sent it to you. Your answers were great and very natural. Except you could probably sell your books more.” She grinned. “You can type your answers out if you want and practice them for the interview. I can think of more questions, too, if you’d like.” She paused. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“Furious,” he said with a smile. “It’s easy to talk to you, Viv. Just like always.” He glanced up at the sky, which was turning even darker, clouds now rolling in at a fast clip. “We’d better get going.”

They hightailed it down the trail. Twenty minutes later, they were back at the perimeter of the lake, a short distance from the cottage.

Logan slowed his pace. “I want to ask you something. Out of concern. Okay?”

Viv’s pulse kicked up. She hadn’t expected that. “Okaaay,”

she said in a reluctant tone. He'd been honest with her, so she supposed it was fair to reciprocate.

He asked her head-on, "I want to know what happened with your photography."

Anything but that. But judging by the determined look in his eye, he wasn't going to give up until he got an answer. "Talented photographers are a dime a dozen." She shrugged. "I just wasn't that talented."

"I don't believe that."

She shook her head. "You're biased. I had to be realistic. My talent wasn't exceptional. I had to go to plan B."

"Tell me what happened."

She sighed. "Fine. I ran out of money—my family's money. I couldn't sell any of my work. I lived on Nutella and stale baguettes while I flipped crepes and worked taking tickets at the Louvre and the d'Orsay and doing photos for couples in front of the Eiffel Tower. I lost my apartment, so I slept in the teaching studio until my professor found out and made me leave. My boyfriend dumped me. *Everything* I thought I knew about myself was wrong. I wasn't a huge talent, just a small fish in a big pond, getting swallowed up by larger fish. *That's* the whole truth. That's what happened." She bit down on her lip to stop from saying more, but somehow she said it anyway. "My ego was larger than my talent, and I failed. I utterly failed."

She saw the pity in his eyes. And she hated it. Also, she'd said way too much. Even worse, it began to rain, cold and steady.

"Sounds like a really tough time," he said. "But maybe you should try again."

She stopped dead on the trail, frozen in her tracks. Had he not heard anything she'd just said? Like the part about being practically a broken human being without a penny to her name?

Her first thought was, *Why is he giving me advice?* Because she hadn't asked for it. She had done everything possible to

keep trying to make her way. Until she simply couldn't anymore.

"I mean, you were young and struggling. Maybe with mentorship or better support you could have—"

"You're not going to give up on this, are you?" Her anger flared, and she tossed up her hands in the air. "Mr. I-wrote-a-novel-at-sixteen-and-was-published-at-twenty-four." She whirled to face him. "Look, I tried to help you with your interview skills. And maybe I was being a little pushy by recording you, but you're paying me for my help. But if you think that giving me advice is helping me in return, I really didn't ask for it."

She never should have told him the truth. She hadn't wanted to bask in her defeat. But to not have him understand was just too much.

"I'm not trying to give you advice," he said. "I'm just observing that maybe you didn't give yourself enough of a chance."

She stabbed a finger into the air. "You don't get to judge me after all this time. You—you don't know me anymore."

She wasn't sure if that was really true, because at times she felt that he got her more than anybody else she knew. He'd always had that ability. But this assumption smacked of arrogance.

He stood straight in front of her in the middle of the path so that she had no choice but to face him. He gave a little snort. "I know exactly who you are, Viv. A long time ago, *you* called *me* out when I was afraid to fail. When I was afraid to take the risk. I saw those photos hanging outside your office. They're...amazing."

"I did those for fun. Not to sell them or show them."

"Everyone in town loves them because everyone knows the people in them. You captured everyone in just the right way. They're joyful. Each one tells a story."

"I was just having fun."

“No, Viv,” he said firmly, “that’s *talent*. Maybe you were right about yourself—that you were a little brash and overconfident as a teenager. But that attitude got you somewhere. What happened to it?”

Tears stung her eyes. He’d put his finger right on her worst wound and it hurt like hell. “We all try to reach for the stars, Logan, but not all of us make it.”

He had no right to call her out on giving up, on not trying. She *had* tried. Until her physical and mental health were in danger. Then she’d come home.

With that, she gave a tug to adjust her backpack and headed down the dirt path to the cottage. Make that to her car, because it was time to go.

And then the rain let loose.

Chapter 13

He was an ass.

That hadn't gone the way Logan had expected. And Viv was really upset, judging by how fast she'd taken off. Plus, the rain was pouring down like a waterfall. Logan caught up to her along the lake path. "Viv. I didn't mean to hurt you. I mentioned it because I care."

"Care?" She shook her head, which flung water everywhere. "Funny, now that we're finally talking to each other, the first thing you do is give me advice." Then she plowed forward.

The bad feeling in his gut told him she was right. He had no right to question her about her choices. To push her. She was just so talented. And she still clearly loved taking photos.

When she'd done the same for him, long ago, it had made all the difference.

Logan knew he had to do something quick. Talking about his feelings was something he sucked at. But he couldn't lose her again.

"Vivienne."

She gave him a hand wave over her head that might have been a flip-off—he couldn't tell in the pelting rain—and kept going.

"Vivienne," he called again. "Please listen."

She turned around on the path, exasperation all over her face.

He had to yell because the rain was crashing down in loud, noisy buckets, rustling the leaves, millions of drops pelting the surface of the lake and turning it into hammered silver. Not to mention soaking them both to the bone. "When I lost you, I lost the most important relationship of my life."

It was the most honest thing he'd said. He saw the moment her eyes widened and his words sank in. Meanwhile he stood there, every muscle frozen, not daring to breathe. Not caring

that he was drenched through to his skin, shivering, icy cold water dripping from his hair straight down his back.

She stood stock still, staring at him. But something in her eyes made him continue.

“We used to be good at being honest with each other. I only brought this up because I saw how you handled that camera in that field with my sister. How you captured feelings. And sometimes secrets, too.”

Her fists were balled, she was frowning, and she still looked furious. “Logan, what the hell are you talking about? What secrets?”

His heart was pumping so fast he felt a little dizzy. A sense of urgency drove him to act. This time, he wouldn't let their friendship end. He wouldn't be afraid to demand more of himself.

Logan rummaged in his sopping pocket for his phone, scrolled through it, then held it out for Viv to see.

Her hair was hanging down in wet strands, straight for once. And yet she'd never looked more beautiful. She pushed it out of her eyes and glanced from the phone to him. “What is this?”

“It's me looking at you,” he said.

Confusion passed over her face. “This is you in the field the other day. I—I don't get it.”

“Yes, you do,” he insisted.

Her eyes got huge as recognition dawned. And filled with tears. Or was that just the rain?

“You see it, too,” he said carefully. “Tell me that you don't.”

“Logan, I—” She rubbed her hand over her forehead. “It's just a photo. Just a moment. Nothing special...”

“It *is* something special.”

Logan had just shocked himself. Put himself out there because he had no choice. He realized in that moment that he would do anything to avoid the difficulties that had separated them for a decade. Anything, including telling her how he felt.

His feelings for her were something he kept private, deep inside, and having them spill out like this stunned and also humbled him. “I’m sorry I overstepped. I just believe you have a tremendous amount of talent. But I know that no matter what you do next, you’ll be great at it.”

She took a deep breath. “I understand that you were trying to help. But I’ve got my life under control. And maybe you haven’t had this experience, but sometimes people have to accept failure and move on.” She looked around at the pelting rain, the swaying branches, the intensity of the sudden storm. “It’s best if I go.”

As she ran to her car, Logan called after her. And again. Begged her to come back to the cottage and at least dry off. Her only answer was a brief wave, leaving him alone in the middle of the storm.

...

Viv fled down the now muddy path. In her car, she blasted the heat and the defrost to thaw her cold and soaked self. But that did nothing to stop her shaking. She understood that being warm and dry wouldn’t fix a thing.

She’d run away from Logan again. Just like she’d run long ago from Blossom Glen to find a better life. To prove herself.

Had she really done exactly the same thing with photography, like what he seemed to imply?

She wasn’t sure. But she did know one thing: she’d gotten really good at running.

Viv thought of the last dozen years. The things she’d been afraid to say that had gone unsaid. All the feelings she was afraid to feel, the risks she’d always been afraid to take.

The feeling that nothing was perfect, and she’d have to wait until it was to get her life started—or else.

Tessa had told her there was no such thing as perfect.

Like a meteor destined to strike the earth, her life had collided with Logan’s for one brief, extraordinary moment,

and she had the power to seize that moment if she could bring herself to take the risk.

She didn't want their story to end this way.

Viv got out of the car, her shoes squeaking and squishing from the water as she wrapped her arms around her shivering body and rapped hard on the door.

Talking to him had better be worth it, because if he didn't let her in, she might just die of pneumonia.

And then the door opened. Logan stood there, his shirt off and a towel wrapped around his waist, like he'd been ready to jump in a nice hot shower. Behind him, a fire now burned in the little fireplace, and she could feel its warmth seep into her bones.

He exhaled a sigh of relief and with one swoop pulled her to him. "You're freezing." He drew back and assessed her. His concern accompanied something else that flamed in his eyes.

That look was enough to ignite a fire. It thawed her icy body and clogged her throat with emotion. Unable to speak, unable to think, in her heart she knew one thing.

She wanted him, plain and simple.

He wrapped an arm around her and ushered her in, closing the door behind them. "I'm sorry," he said. "I had no right to assume what you've been through. Forgive me."

"I don't know if I gave up too easily," she said, realizing she was still crying. "I may never know. But I came back so I could make my own way. And I have to choose a path that will support me. I can't gamble on pipedreams that might not work out."

"Viv, no matter what you do, you'll be amazing at it."

"You don't know that."

He took up her hands. "Yes, I do."

She didn't want to wait for her life to be perfect. She didn't want to run anymore. She realized that she'd made her decision. It didn't even feel scary; it felt right.

His eyes were hungry, devouring her. But he was giving her the reins. It was that unselfishness, that handing over of control, that slayed her.

Water trickled down her back, setting off a new wave of shivers. She tried to peel her shirt away from her skin so she could make some warmth, but it was no use. She was a drowned rat.

“Please stay until the storm passes.” Worry permeated his voice. “Have a shower and some dinner, then I’ll drive you back. Sometimes the water floods the road—”

“I want to stay.”

Creases formed between his eyes. “As long as you like.”

“No, I mean, I want to *stay*.”

...

Viv stood before him, sopping wet, soaked through, her bra unable to hide what was beneath.

He’d been pacing back and forth in front of the fire, cell in his hand, worrying about her. Regretting what he’d said.

But now she was here. And so beautiful. Every wall, every defense that he’d taken years to build fell. Tumbled down. The fear of losing her again had brought emotions to the surface he’d barely admitted to himself before now. Now he tried to hold it together long enough to think.

She walked up to him, near the fire. Directed those big blue eyes in his direction. “I’m not in a place for a relationship. I need to take this day by day. Are you okay with that?”

Was he okay with that? Did he literally banish every single food item with a speck of gluten from this entire place in the hope of having her here? Unable to help himself, he cradled her cheek with his rough hand. It was pure velvet, and it thrilled him when she leaned into his touch. “I’m fine with day by day,” he said out loud. As soon as she nodded, he wrapped himself around her, rubbing her arms to warm her.

Funny, but what she’d said was often his line with women.

Hearing it from her, he didn't care for it much.

The truth was, he'd have her any way she'd let him. She was here, in his arms, soft and wonderful, and he wasn't going to let go.

He reminded himself that long ago, he'd never even kissed her, and he'd practically been destroyed. He could only imagine what making love with her would do to him.

In all these years, he'd never let himself fall for anyone the way he'd fallen for her. That should be a warning not to let history repeat itself.

Eff it. He'd do it anyway. It would be worth the self-annihilation.

She was worth it.

Vivienne pulled back and looked up at him, her eyes reflecting the firelight. He was on fire for her. His blood boiled for her. And yet he waited for her to make the first move.

Then she lifted herself up on tiptoe and touched her lips to his. It was just a brush, a light graze, but the sensation slammed into him like a semitruck. She wrapped her arms around him and he pulled her flush against him. Every nerve fired, electricity surging everywhere from the contact. Her softness, her curves, fit perfectly against him. "Vivi," he whispered into her hair, inhaling her sweet scent before he definitively scooped her up and headed back to his bedroom. "I'm so glad you came back."

He'd take whatever she could give.

...

Logan swooped Viv up effortlessly, thanks to the power of muscle, and carried her through his tiny bedroom into the bathroom, where he set her down. "Mindless sex starts with a hot shower. You in?"

Vivienne grabbed the hem of her sopping shirt and tugged it off. It landed with a wet *plop* on the tile floor. She had the pleasure of watching his eyes grow wide as his gaze landed on

her bra, which was now little more than a thin, sheer piece of fabric. She dusted off her hands and smiled. "I'm in."

Her gaze nervously wandered over to his countertop. There, next to his toothpaste, was a box of condoms.

A big one. Unopened, she noted.

She put a hand on her hip, not missing how his gaze devoured her. Her heart beating loudly in her ears, she said, "Should I be worried that you have a box of condoms in a cottage in the woods? Like, who were you expecting?"

"Only you." He filled his eyes with her, looking her over in a way that made her cold body suddenly flush with heat. He smiled right back, a wide, wicked smile full of promises he seemed determined to keep. "Let's just say that gluten-free noodles weren't the only things I picked up at the store."

She tried to disentangle the part of her brain that told her she was in way, way over her head. That mindless was not mindless at all. That it was impossible to disengage from the fact that she knew and loved him as a friend forever.

But this was completely new.

So was seeing him naked.

Well, all good. It was now or never. Taking a deep breath, Viv stepped out of her soggy bottoms and kicked them over to land atop her other sopping clothes.

Her brain short-circuited as he took her hand, opened the shower door, led her inside, and positioned her under the hot, vigorous spray. The steamy water penetrated her skin, relaxing every icy muscle as it seeped to her bones. Her gaze roamed his body, admiring every inch. He was all muscle and sinew, strong and virile, steady and sure. The heated look in his eyes declared that he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

Despite her nerves, she was at ease. No one knew her better, even after all their time apart. As he lowered his head, catching the spray and deflecting it, he kissed her, gently at first, then deeply and thoroughly. And as she kissed him back, all her worries about the future faded away as he coaxed her body into oblivion.

...

Sometime in the middle of the night, Viv's eyes flew open to find herself cuddled up to a big, warm hulk of man who was radiating heat and sleeping soundly, judging by his deep, even breaths. Her arm curled lightly around his lean waist, and she could feel the rise and fall of his chest against hers.

Memories flooded into her half-awake brain. The soft, tender kisses. The deep, desperate ones. The tenderness. The passion.

Everything she'd held back for years. Not that she'd been inhibited in her relationships, but sex with Logan had been uninhibited and freeing. She'd been completely and fully herself. It had been playful and fun and amazing, all at once.

The fire he'd lit in the tiny bedroom fireplace was now down to a few glowing embers, still emitting a little heat.

They'd eaten dinner in front of it—bacon and eggs and fried potatoes at midnight. And it had tasted better than the most expensive meal she'd ever eaten.

She rubbed her forehead, as if that would stop the flood of feelings she couldn't process.

Viv lay a hand over her chest. Her heart was bursting. A normal person might have called it happiness, but she didn't dare.

She'd always suspected that the chemistry that made them spar so effectively with each other with words would carry through to the bedroom, but she never imagined it could be like...well, like it had been.

Logan was sweet and relentlessly passionate in ways that were completely unexpected. He was also endlessly gentle, mischievously skilled, and intensely focused in the best way.

Careful not to disturb him, she rolled over on her back and stared at the rustic wooden beams that crossed the ceiling. *What now?*

Her brain had snapped back into action, questioning her, threatening to tug at her happiness.

But only if she let it.

What if she quit thinking of perfection and just lived in the moment, being grateful for every bit of happiness?

Oddly, she was wearing one thing: her wristwatch. Which told her it was five thirty a.m.

They'd fallen asleep around three, and why she was awake now, she didn't know, but Logan was catching all his Zs.

She heard the steady rhythm of his breathing. Rise and fall. Rise and fall. She tried to mimic it with her own breathing, seeking calm.

Her body felt limp and energized, all at the same time. She was thrilled to be next to him, but suddenly realized that regardless of the easy red line she'd drawn, the *just sex* line, she had to admit that she'd crossed it the second she'd touched him.

What had she done?

Slept with her best friend, that was what.

Slowly, silently, she edged a leg over the mattress, lifting up the covers as gently as she could, and slid out of the bed. Just as she'd placed a foot on the floor and was about to swing the other one over, a hand came to her elbow.

A strong hand, warm and steady.

She held her breath. Maybe it was a reflex. Logan, deep in sleep, responding to the shift in weight on the bed.

His head popped up from the pillow and he blinked.

Oh no. There'd be no running now.

"Good morning, Vivienne." Logan's voice was gravelly from sleep. Which sent an involuntary tingle up her spine.

Also, he'd called her Vivienne. Which he always did when he was serious.

His hair was tousled, and he looked adorable, unlike her, who she was sure looked like a ruffled mess with her hair sticking up at all kinds of weird angles.

Yikes. Please, not the morning after. She could not deal with this right now.

“Tell me you’re not getting up to let my dog out,” he said, a lazy smile crossing his face.

“You don’t have a dog.” She stayed silent, still dreaming of slinking away into the night, but his grip was as locked in as a seat belt.

“Yet.” He chuckled. “Or maybe you’re going out to get the paper. Oh, silly me. No Sunday paper this far out from town.”

She reached over and smoothed out his frown. He seemed worried that she was leaving. “I have to go,” she said. “I’ve got to work.”

He slid his hand slowly down her arm in a way that gave her goose bumps, flashed a sleepy smile, and rubbed his thumb against her wrist, which soothed her and made her want to crawl right back under the covers and all over him at the same time. “Let me drive you back to town.”

Let me what? He wanted to drive her? “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“We could get coffee. Spend a little more time together.”

This was *not* how the morning after mindless sex should go. Was it? She wouldn’t know because she’d never done that before.

“That would be a waste of your writing time.”

“It’s my time to spend, isn’t it?” He looked her directly in the eye. He sighed. “Go if you must, but I only want to know one thing before you do.”

“Okaaay,” she said, bracing herself for whatever he was about to say.

“Tell me it was good.”

Her breath hitched. He’d certainly cut to the chase.

She rolled her eyes and flashed him a half smile. “It was... okay.” It was the best she’d ever had. Ever. Sex with him was Christmas Day. Her birthday. Cake and ice cream. Make that chocolate ice cream. Wildflowers in a field bursting with

rainbow colors. Yellow and purple and bright green bursting on a sea of gray. With glitter sparkles. And every perfect day she'd ever had, all rolled up at once.

Of course, she said none of this. Because it had been just sex, right? Not making love. Not *that*.

He tugged on her wrist, which brought her down close to him. Then he rolled them over until he was half on top of her.

She could read in his eyes that he was going to kiss her. And God help her, she wanted him to. Make that *needed* him to.

Panic made her place her fingers firmly over his lips. "Yes, it was good. It was...amazing." Her heart was racing, pounding wildly in her ears. She tore her gaze away, before she told him even more.

He started to kiss her fingers. One by one. Slow, light kisses that sort of...tickled. "Were you about to say something else?" he asked, his eyes filled with mischief.

"I don't remember." She felt dazed. Half coherent.

He nuzzled her hand out of the way and kissed her, slow and deep.

He was not playing by the rules, was he? What were the rules?

She didn't know, because she'd forgotten everything but him. The feel of his lips. Of his warm skin against hers. How he was kissing down her neck, down, down, down.

He lifted his head to catch her gaze. As she struggled to focus, a smile curved his full lips.

She was weak, breathless, shaky.

He smiled the most wicked grin. "See how much fun it can be when you don't turn your cheek?"

...

Viv had fallen back asleep, and Logan lay there, listening to the sounds of her slow, even breathing, inhaling the flowery scent of her hair spread out on his pillow, viewing the soft

curve of her shoulder peeking out from the covers as she lay next to him. Outside, the birds were waking up, ushering in the day with song.

He had the urge to write. And somehow he knew the words would flow. Because his soul was full.

Perfect. They were perfect together, their lovemaking as open as their friendship.

In all these years, with any of the women he dated, he'd never surrendered his heart.

He'd always been wary. But there was something about Viv that had always made him more than what he was.

A fierce protectiveness welled up inside of him. An awareness of how precious this moment was. How lucky he was to have her as his friend again—and now more.

He knew he'd hurt her by insinuating that she was settling for a career, but he'd only wanted her to see that he believed she could do anything she set her mind to.

He didn't want her to settle. But he'd support her in whatever she did.

They'd always been honest with each other. He would do anything, bare his soul to her, he realized.

Except for one small thing. One stupid, youthful mistake that had the potential to ruin everything.

When he got back to town, he vowed to personally remove every copy of that awful first book that he could find in the library and the bookstore.

Then he would come clean. And pray that she would forgive him.

He was going to do everything in his power to make her see that the two of them could be the whole package. Friends. Lovers. Soulmates.

She was The One.

Viv, he realized now, had had his heart all along.

Chapter 14

“Viv, sweetie, move your butt so you don’t get burned,” her mom called as she whizzed by with two cookie sheets full of golden elephant ears fresh from the fryer and set them down on the marble bakery counter in front of Viv.

“Oh, sorry!” Viv scrambled to get out of the way.

Her body was present in the bakery, but her mind was far away...still in Logan’s bed tangled up together under the sweet quilted coverlet in the little cottage.

Viv had always somehow sensed how it would be if she and Logan ever had sex, but in this case her wildest imagination had fallen very short. Nothing could have prepared her for the wonder, the pleasure, and, oddly, the absolute comfort of being with him.

“Are you sick?” her mom asked, eyeing her critically.

“I just have to work all day, and I’m a little tired.” That much was true. Her hand slid surreptitiously up to her neck. She was 99 percent sure she didn’t have a hickey.

She felt certain she was wearing some physical sign that announced to the world how she’d spent last night. She was a grown woman and very close to her mom, but how could she tell her that she’d just had sex with the guy her mother had been trying to fix her up with since infancy?

She wouldn’t want her mom to be disappointed if things didn’t work out. She and Logan weren’t even dating. So what were they doing? It was too new, too early, too...overwhelming.

Her confused state of mind must have been apparent to her mom, who had that certain mom-sense that knew all. That was probably why her mom was still standing in front of her, not budging. “Need some coffee?” she asked, a suspicious expression on her face.

“Great idea.” As Viv scurried to get some for both of them, she said, “Tell me what I can do, Mom.”

“Okay,” her mom said, swiping a curl off her forehead and getting down to business. “First, thanks for coming to help this morning so I can be done before church.” Her mom was frying elephant ears as a trial run for the festival and taking a big batch to the weekly farmer’s market around the square—not completely for kindness’ sake, but also to whet her fellow Blossom-Glennites’ appetite for more.

Making something so American as elephant ears was food sacrilege for Viv’s French baker mom, but everyone loved them and the festival raised a ton of money for charity. This year it was for the new mental health center that was being built.

Viv’s mom led her over to the fryer. “So I’ve got the oil at three sixty-five degrees and I have to watch these things cook and then fish them out with these”—she gave a pair of long tongs a snap—“when they’re done. I want you to transfer them to the paper so some of the oil soaks up, and then coat them with cinnamon sugar.” Viv gave the sugar cylinder with the little handle a shake.

“I’m sorry I can’t taste them for you, but they smell ah-*mazing*.” Viv’s stomach grumbled, even though she was used to being here in the bread shop and not being able to eat most of the treats.

“Here we go, now they’re perfect.” Viv’s mom snapped into action. Viv watched her flip the golden bread rounds over and pull them out with the tongs.

“Okay, I’m manning my station.” Viv rolled out more parchment paper and grabbed the sugar sifter. Her mom looked over her shoulder to make sure Viv was thoroughly covering both sides.

“Mom, chill. I can sprinkle sugar, okay?”

“I know you can, but I just want to make sure everything’s completely covered.” Her mother couldn’t help herself. Anything that came out of this bakery had to be up to snuff. Viv wanted to be up to snuff, too.

So she pulled out her phone and began taking photos. Her

mom gave her a look and pushed her curls back again. “Viv, really. I’m not fit to have my photo all over the town blog today.”

“Just smile, Mom. You look bea-u-ti-ful, and it will help sell more and advertise the festival and our bakery. So it’s a win-win.”

“Okay, fine. Win-win.” Her mom relented and gave a big grin for the camera.

“Miriam told me you took Logan’s cord up to him yesterday,” her mother not-so-casually mentioned as she gently floated three more dough rounds in the oil and set the timer, which she didn’t actually even need because her instincts were far better.

“Yes,” Viv said. “The cottage looked so cute. Even cuter than in the old days. I was really happy to see how cute it was.”

She was rambling about decorating. Also, she’d just said *cute* three times. She would’ve head-slapped herself if she didn’t have sugar everywhere.

“I helped Miriam plant the perennials in the garden.” Her mom counted on her fingers. “Daisies and lilies and black-eyed Susans. Wait till you see it in summer.”

“Cool.” A thought crossed her mind: by summer, she’d be gone.

She squeezed her eyes shut to push back the dread and ended up overdoing the sugar.

Her mom picked up the elephant ear and shook off the excess. She gave a sigh.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Viv said.

Her mother smiled that kind of smile that warned Viv more was coming than a comment about baking. “Although they can be terribly inconvenient,” her mom said, “it’s okay to have complicated feelings. You know that, right?” She looked up and locked eyes with her daughter. “You’re smart enough to make good choices,” her mom added.

“I just don’t want you to be disappointed if things don’t work out. Romantically, I mean,” she added. “My career is number one.”

She wanted her mom to understand that nothing would stop her from accomplishing her goals of job stability and independence. But was that really all she wanted?

Her mom reached out and tilted up Viv’s chin, a move that, along with all the emotions coursing through her, instantly made her teary. “My sweetheart, you’re misunderstanding me. When the winds change, sometimes we have to adapt to them, not close the door and stay inside.”

Viv cracked a little smile. “Don’t you think my life is complicated enough without speaking in metaphors?”

“I’m just saying that sometimes you have to throw caution to the wind and see where it blows you.”

Wait—her mom was telling her to go for it with Logan?

Before she could ask more, there was a rap on the glass.

Strange because it was still early, and the bakery wasn’t even open yet. And yet there stood Logan, peering through the window, the early morning sun lighting him from behind, highlighting his hair with gold like he was a radiant Adonis sent down to find her. Or torture her, she wasn’t quite sure which. Which, the way he went about it, was pretty fun, too.

“Give him a fresh one,” her mom whispered. “And see the ones under the warmer? They’re for you. I cooked them before the others, so they’re not fresh-fresh, but they should be pretty good.”

“Aw, Mom,” she said. “You really do love me.”

She smiled. “Lots of people appreciate gluten-free options. And I think I’ve got the taste pretty close to the other ones. Tell me what you think.”

She kissed her mom on the cheek. “Okay, I will.”

As Viv moved toward the door, her mom rested her hand on her elbow and lowered her voice. “The metaphor wasn’t meant to be complicated,” she said. “It was meant to remind you that

you're smart enough to go for what you want and figure out a way to make it happen."

"Thanks, Mom," Viv said, "but please don't say anything, okay?" But her mom was already running to let Logan in. She got that her mom was telling her to take some chances. That sounded right. But certainly not simple.

Her mom greeted Logan and ushered him in. He was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt, making Viv's mouth water more than the smell of fried dough that she was certain now permeated all her clothes and belongings.

Oh well. She belonged to a bread family, and she was proud of it.

"Hi, Viv. Hi, Mrs. M," Logan said. "I heard you might need some help getting this bread to the farmer's market."

Viv's mother frowned. "Leo sent you?"

Logan nodded. "I ran into him at Cool Beans. He's setting up the tent and asked if I would drive your truck there."

"Oh, fantastic, thank you," Viv's mom said. "I've got all the warmers in the truck on and ready to go."

Viv's mom handed Logan a cinnamon sugar shaker. "Okay you two, keep shaking it up while I check on the truck." Viv gave her mom a warning look. She wondered how long it would take before her mom told Miriam. She gave her secret until noon before the entire town knew.

Logan washed his hands, put on gloves, and came to stand at Viv's side.

On impulse, she walked around the counter and grabbed her phone.

He looked wary. "You know I didn't come here for a photo op, right?"

She glanced at him over the phone. "But it's something fun and interesting. So let's just go with it. Okay? Maybe pretend I'm not here."

"That's impossible." The way he slowly dragged his gaze

over her from head to toe made her smile. And feel wanted. And desired. And made her wish she didn't have to work all day.

“What is it going to take to get *you* to smile?” she teased as she kept taking pics.

A slow, wide grin suddenly bloomed on his face.

“What? What is it?” It dawned on her that he was teasing. “Never mind. Don't tell me.”

He dropped his voice. “I'm thinking of what you did to me last night when you—”

Viv shushed him just as her mom made another trip to the counter with a large tray. “These are the last ones,” her mom said as she set it down. “I think I made enough.”

As Logan shook the sugar and her mom slipped the elephant ears into little white bags with the Bonjour Breads! emblem, Viv took more photos, including one of her mom and Logan. Her mom didn't hesitate to wrap her arm around him, and he returned the mutual affection.

“Mom,” Viv said as she sent Logan the photos, “can Logan post that photo of you and him? It's really cute.”

Her mom patted him on the shoulder. “If it helps him sell books, sure.”

“I actually thought I could post it on our Bonjour Insta, too.”

She snapped another photo of him holding an elephant ear. Then he actually held it up to his face, pointed at it, and smiled, like he was examining what this amazing thing was.

Viv snapped some more and then lowered her phone. “I can't believe it.”

He gave her a look of mock surprise. “What?” he asked innocently.

“You—you're hamming for the camera. On purpose.”

He shrugged. “Maybe if we post that one, it can help bring more business to the festival.”

Viv turned away, pressing her hand over her chest. He couldn't care less about his own social media. But he cared about their town. *Geez.*

She was doomed. This mindless sex thing was the most *unmindless* thing she'd ever done.

"Great idea," Viv's mom said. "Viv, will you finish bagging? Logan, maybe you can help me to load the truck."

With Logan's help, it didn't take long. Fifteen minutes later, Viv grabbed some plates and loaded two pastries on Logan's and one on hers and motioned for him to sit down.

He motioned to her plate with a look of concern. "You're able to eat that?"

"My mom made some just for me," she said. "She always has some available for special dietary requests."

"Sweet."

"Haha." Viv took a bite and wiped off the sugar granules with the back of her hand and smiled up at her mom. "Ah-maz-ing. Thanks for the gesture of love, Mom."

Viv's mom kissed her on the head as she brought them coffee. "Sit with us." Viv patted the seat next to her.

"I'm going to dress for church." She asked Logan, "How are they?"

Logan made a sound deep in his throat and licked his fingers. "I don't know about my books," he said with a grin, "but these are bestsellers."

Her mom laughed out loud. "Logan, you're too funny. Bye, you two." She untied her apron and waved over her shoulder as she left out the back.

Logan tried to lick the sugar from his lips, but it was everywhere, and of course Viv snapped some photos of that and selfies of the two of them eating. "So you're running the bakery this morning while your mom is gone?"

Viv nodded. "My grandma's coming in to help."

"Nice."

She got a little quiet. Drummed her fingers on the table. Decided how to say what she needed to say.

He set down his coffee and wiped his hands. “Is something wrong?”

Viv took a sip of coffee, which she’d loaded with lots of cream and a little sugar. *Perfection.*

It helped her get up the courage for what she wanted to say. “Not wrong. But I want to say that we have a long history of being honest with each other, and I don’t want that to change. I want us to always be truthful with each other. No matter what.”

“I’ll be truthful.” He looked way too eager to share. “Last night was incredible. You’re incredible.” He looked unconcerned. Like he’d just told her about his favorite TV show or food.

Even if what they’d done was way more than sex, she wasn’t going to admit it now. Couldn’t. *Way too dangerous.* But she needed to be truthful. “I appreciate it but this is serious. You’re the writer. The one who pours out all his emotions. I—I need some time. And you promised we could keep this loose. Easy. That means no discussing feelings.”

She squeezed his hands. And tried to fight getting lost in the green-gold of his eyes. She had to rein this in. It was better to keep this in check so no one got hurt.

“Agreed,” he said.

Oh. “Are you okay with that?” she asked.

“Viv, I promise to always be truthful about my feelings for you.” Then he leaned over. “You can call *this*”—he waved his finger between the two of them—“whatever you need to call it. But that doesn’t change what it was for me.” He paused. “Phenomenal.” He gave a firm nod, like *there, glad I said that*, then got up and kissed her on the head, just like her mom had. And then he left.

Chapter 15

Logan took his place at a counter underneath a small white tent, one of fifty that circled the clock-towered courthouse as part of the weekly farmer's market.

The tiny warming truck was stationed right behind him, its racks chock full of warm elephant ears. While he waited for the onslaught of dough lovers, he decided to do some social media of his own.

He posted the photo of him and Mrs. M and captioned it, BEST ELEPHANT EARS IN TOWN. #BLOSSOMGLEN #BLOSSOMFEST #BONJOURBREADS.

No emojis, though. Once he had a girlfriend whose emoji-to-text ratio was at least ten to one, enough to sour him on them for life.

Next he put up the one of him pointing to an elephant ear looking perplexed and explained exactly what it was—of course, the most fabulous treat ever. LIKE MY BOOKS? HE WROTE. I GUARANTEE THESE ARE EVEN BETTER.

And finally, he put the one of him and Viv eating the ears, sugar coating their faces, and captioned it, SHARING WITH MY BFF.

Viv wanted personality in his posts, and that was his best effort.

Okay, so he probably shouldn't have basically told her that mindless sex wasn't mindless for him. But the truth was, that was the subdued version. Because he was completely in over his head. And if he were examining this from a neutral standpoint, which for him probably wasn't possible, he'd have to say that Viv herself hadn't behaved like they were having a one-night fling. She'd put her body and soul into that lovemaking, and so had he.

What that meant, he didn't want to think too hard about.

But he would give her space.

It had been easy for him to be truthful about that, but he hadn't yet come clean about his book. That loomed in his mind, hanging over him like a sword about to fall.

Telling Viv would hurt her no matter how he tried to soften it, but he had to do it, even if it might end this fragile...thing that they had. The thing that Viv refused to call a relationship.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" someone said. He looked up to see Leo dressed, for once, in a polo shirt and slacks.

"That's a good look on you," Logan said with a grin. "First time I haven't seen you with a chef apron on."

Leo swept a hand over himself in demonstration. "Proof that I really do own other clothes." He chuckled. "Tessa and Rosie are busy chatting with like, everyone in town. So I'm free. Put me to work."

Logan shook his head and smiled. "You can't help but gravitate toward food, can you?"

"Want to know the truth?" Leo leaned in and dropped his voice. "I feel sort of responsible for this. I suggested it a few years ago when Joanna was looking for a contribution to make to the festival."

"I thought she had a thing against sugar." Everyone knew she refused to serve pastries in the bread shop. Chocolate croissants were her one indulgence because they were traditional boulangerie fare.

"Exactly." He stabbed the air. "Not to mention that elephant ears aren't anywhere near being French."

Logan considered that. "Where do they come from, anyway?"

"It's an incredible story, actually." Leo helped place a tablecloth over a long table under the tent. In front of them, people began to mill around, but a line hadn't yet formed. "They're from the Native Americans, when they were forced off their lands and given lard and flour rations by the government." Leo shook his head. "It's about ingenuity. Making something amazing out of a bad deal." He glanced up at people starting to trickle over. "Guess church is over. Here

comes business.” Always social, he rubbed his hands together, excited for the onslaught. Logan, on the other hand, wasn’t so sure he could say the same.

“So, heard you got your cord back yesterday,” Leo said.

How did he... Oh, Tessa. Never date a woman with sisters.

Date. That sounded really good.

A huge grin spread over Leo’s face. “You get your mojo back, too?”

Logan rolled his eyes. “First of all, I never lost my mojo. And second, a gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

Leo shook his head and pointed at his face. “Ha. You don’t have to say a word. I can see it all over your face.”

“What? Sugar?” He swiped the back of his hand over his mouth.

Leo ignored his bad joke. “Your *feelings*. Now is probably a good time to tell you that Vivienne is like a little sister to me—actually, she *is* a sister to me. Bottom line: I would never want to see her hurt.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Logan said definitively, thinking that that possibility was a lot more likely for him than for Viv.

“Viv’s had a rough couple of years,” Leo said. “And I know she’s stuck around for her family. Just so you see that. And take this seriously.”

“I do. I will.”

“Maybe she needs someone to shake her up a little. It upsets Tessa that Viv hasn’t submitted any photographs anywhere since she’s come back from France.”

Aha. So Tessa was worried about Viv’s change in plan as well. “I wondered about that.”

“So if you’re here for a few weeks and are planning to move on—”

“The last thing I want is to hurt Vivienne,” Logan

interrupted.

Leo scanned his face, as if he were trying to reach a final verdict about Logan. Then he smiled a little. “I’ll take you at your word. Okay, brother?” He held out his hand.

“Message received.” They did one of those complicated fist-bump-slide-multiple-move handshakes that only guys do.

A glance up showed the farmer’s market crowd headed straight for their tent. So they quickly finished setting out as many elephant ears as they could fit on the table.

“I’m reading your backlist,” Leo said as they finished setting up. “So far I’ve done *Night of Terror* and *The Wife’s Secret*. I really enjoyed them.”

“And I’m doing the same.” Jack Monroe, the mayor, who was married to Juliet, tipped his Stetson as he walked up. “I’ll tell you what. You’re a friendly looking guy, but the stuff you write is scarier than my grandma when she’s mad.” He chuckled and clapped Logan on the back. “I stayed up half the night reading it.”

“Great. Thanks. You have ereaders?” Logan asked, thinking again about that burr in his side, that fateful first book.

“I do, but sometimes I prefer print,” Leo said.

Logan nodded and renewed his vow to comb the bookstore and library just to make sure no old copies were available nearby. Not that anyone would pick up on his pen name, but the photo in the back of the book, while of a much younger him, was definitely recognizable.

Jack moved on to admire the other stalls, say hi to everyone, and do mayor stuff, while Leo and Logan passed out the sugary treats.

In the rapidly forming line, Logan caught Elise’s eye. She waved, but it wasn’t an exuberant, carefree wave—his brother senses could tell immediately that something was off. The way she was shifting her weight back and forth, the way she stood, as if she was carrying a fifty-pound weight on her shoulders, the way she pressed her lips tightly together.

When she finally made her way to the front of the line, her demeanor didn't seem any lighter.

He offered her a fried dough round but she didn't even take it. "How long are you here for?" she asked.

"About an hour. Unless you need me?" He looked around for any sign, but he wasn't sure what he was looking for. A high school guy causing a problem? None in sight. But the look on her face instantly took him back to when she was four and their cat, Socks, had gotten lost. Easy fix—they'd found the cat hours later curled up asleep in the shade of the Montgomerys' sunflower patch.

He had a feeling this fix wouldn't be so easy.

She glanced around nervously before shaking her head. "No, that's okay. I—um—I was just wondering if you were going to be home later. I was going to ask my friend Micah over, but I didn't want to disturb you if you were planning to work this afternoon."

"Ask him over," he said. "For sure." He thought about that. "As long as you stay in the family room at least sit six feet apart from each other. And don't mind me moving my laptop down there to sit with you."

She rolled her eyes.

He pointed to her face and grinned. "Better watch out, they might get stuck up there," he said, a line their mom was still famous for. That elicited the barest-bones smile. "You sure you're okay?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that three girls had congregated, one tall and dark-haired, one blond, and one red-haired. They appeared to be sneaking glances at Elise. And giggling.

"Want me to have a word with them?" He gestured with his head. It seemed to Logan that they wore the exact same look that a certain minority of pretty, popular girls had way back when he was in high school. One that smacked of privilege, beauty, and a penchant for making some people's lives miserable. Not to mention waaay too much makeup. And

unfortunately, the malice seemed targeted on his sweet sister.

“Absolutely not.”

He narrowed his gaze. “If you were having a problem, you’d tell me what was going on, right?”

“Of course. It’s nothing.” She gave a forced smile. “See you at home.”

“Hey, don’t you want your…”

Elise didn’t even take the elephant ear. As she ran off to meet some friends who had called out to her, the group of three girls made their way over to the line.

“You’re Logan Matthews, the famous author, aren’t you?” asked the red-haired girl. “I’m Lainey.” The two girls on the sides of her looked more interested in grabbing the sugary treat and running than conversing with him.

“I’m Logan, yes.”

The girl wore a look he saw often from his readers—one of excited interest. “If I brought one of your books from home, would you sign it?”

He gave her a friendly smile. “Sure. I’d be happy to.”

“I want to be an author, too,” she blurted.

“Try passing English lit first,” the pretty brunette, who seemed to be the posse leader, said.

The blonde snickered like that was hilarious, while the red-haired girl’s face turned as crimson as her hair.

Logan frowned. “I think everyone needs to have dreams.” He directed his next comment to the other two. “Dreams are nothing to laugh at.”

The brunette blushed. Her blond friend knew enough to keep silent.

“Good luck with the writing, Lainey,” he said, handing her an elephant ear. “We’ll be here for the next hour or so, so feel free to bring your book back.” She thanked him with a quick smile she quickly tamped down as soon as her friends saw it.

As they walked away, Logan heard the brunette say to Lainey, “You sure you can afford the calories?” She nudged her elbow and laughed.

Yikes. If this was the world that Elise had to deal with, it was no laughing matter.

The elephant ears went fast. It took less than an hour for them to give away the whole truckful. Afterward Leo offered to drive the truck back to the garage behind the bakery.

Logan glanced at his phone. His social media posts had around twenty likes each. Not great, but at least he’d given it a try.

Maybe he’d visit his favorite social media guru and get her take on it. And, more importantly, her opinion on how he could help his sister, since he didn’t seem to be getting anywhere with getting her to confide in him.

Funny how it seemed natural to confide in Vivienne, to open up to her in so many ways. She’d helped him to not be afraid to show his personality on social media, too. Lately, he seemed to be incapable of not saying exactly what he was thinking, which he really hadn’t done with anyone since...well, her. He just had to extend that tendency by coming clean about his dreaded book. And pray it didn’t ruin everything.

Chapter 16

Viv stood in the window of Christmas Every Day watching two buses packed full of senior citizens pull up to Castorini's Restaurant.

“Brace yourself, we're the next stop on their tour!” Delores said, scurrying to the front desk. “They'll be full and happy and ready to shop. Man your posts, people, it's going to be a busy one!”

Viv couldn't help but laugh. The seniors were sweet and genuinely excited to check out all the newest baubles and Christmas creations. They were also good customers, so Delores was right, they were in for a wild afternoon.

It was a great day simply because Delores was here, and Sheila wasn't. Without her micromanaging boss, handling the crowds would be a joy. Viv just needed her phone and her elf outfit, both of which were in her office.

The amazing vibes she felt from being with Logan added to her great mood. His aloof and mysterious author persona had fallen away to reveal that he was the same open and honest person she'd always known.

She didn't want to examine her own feelings too carefully, but the fact that she'd regained Logan's friendship plus some added benefits made her overjoyed in a way she hadn't been in way too long.

All those happy thoughts dissipated into thin air when she reached her office door, coming to an abrupt stop as she discovered that all the photographs that lined the outside of the doorway had been taken down, exposing the wall, which looked naked and sad. Now it was a garish color somewhere between pea and puke green. Yep, whoever did this definitely shouldn't have.

Maybe there was some explanation, she tried to convince herself, even as her pulse throbbed at her temples and tiny trickles of anger began seeping into her great mood.

Maybe she was jumping to conclusions, but this had Sheila's name written all over it. Who else would take them down without asking?

She walked into the tiny office to find that she'd left her elfwear at home in the laundry room—but no biggie, because she didn't think Delores would mind too much if she dressed like a normal human for once. More concerning was where were her photographs? She checked the storage area, a little panicked.

Now that they were gone, she realized how proud she actually was of them. She'd never thought too much about it, but now she realized, as Logan had pointed out, that she'd done them as a tribute to the hardworking people of their town, a celebration of their community.

She was in the middle of taking deep, calming breaths to not get upset and rummaging through a box deciding if Delores would accept a reindeer-antler headband as a substitute for her elf suit when there was a rap on her door.

Viv turned to find Elise standing in the doorway, clearly close to tears. She tossed the antlers back into the box and walked over, instantly curving an arm around her shoulders. "Oh, honey, what's the matter?"

"Can I—can I come in a minute?" she asked, a giant sob interrupting her words.

"Only if you tell me those awful girls aren't in the store. Because if they are and they're the reason you're crying, I'm booting them out. And maybe doing a few other things, too."

"They went to get frozen kale smoothies."

Figures. "Like their ice-cold hearts." Viv's joke didn't even elicit a smile, making her worry that somehow this bully situation had escalated. She steered Elise to the only seat, a red velvet Santa throne that also doubled as her office chair, and handed her a box of Kleenex covered with a crocheted Santa, compliments of her own grandmother during her brief yarn craft phase. Elise slid her book-bag strap off her shoulder, letting it fall with a *plunk* to the floor.

“I don’t want Logan to know,” she rushed to say.

Viv’s stomach sank faster than an iPhone accidentally tumbling into the toilet. Trouble was one thing but *secret* trouble? That was an even higher level of bad.

How to handle this? This was a Tessa thing. A problem for someone who had maternal instincts and experience.

What did Viv have to offer? Only friendship. And a deep desire to sentence those bullies to eternal shifts in this Christmas shop under Sheila’s tutelage. Or at least figure out some way to turn them into kind beings—but even she wasn’t that much of an optimist.

“Elise, your brother cares about you a lot.” Even if he seemed to be struggling to express that. Also, why was she so nervous about confiding in him? “Maybe we should give him a call and then you could tell both of us at the same time.” What a good way to get him—meaning *someone else besides just her*—involved ASAP.

Viv absolutely did not want to be sworn to secrecy about anything. That was always a recipe for disaster.

Elise blew her nose loudly. “I don’t have anyone else to tell this to but you. Not my mother, not Logan. *No one.*”

“Did you murder someone?” Viv asked, half to break the tension. Which didn’t work because it was not funny. This was getting worse and worse.

Also, the seniors were probably finished with their tiramisu by now, so she would have to head up to the frontline ASAP.

“I—I made it to the finals in a contest.” Elise’s big blue eyes got watery. “A contest that’s—important to me.” She burst into tears all over again.

Viv handed her another tissue and patted her arm. “That’s wonderful. Congratulations. What kind of contest?” Logan had told Viv that Elise often sewed her own clothes. She was always painting or doing some kind of artsy project. And she wasn’t afraid to express her creativity, like with her pretty pink hair.

Elise sniffed. “It’s—it’s not with the school. It’s for a \$1000 scholarship. But I found out that one of those girls made it to the finals, too.”

“Wait—is it Gretchen?” Viv’s first thought was that a streak of bullying ran strong in that family line.

“Lainey Chu.”

Viv remembered her as a little kid, sitting in the bookstore window reading with her orange cat. Sweet kid. Or at least she used to be.

“Gretchen and her friends hate me,” Elise sobbed. Viv sat on the edge of the desk and patted her back. She’d known Elise since the day she was born, and she had a soul as kind as a Labrador puppy’s—incapable of intentionally hurting anyone.

But she’d gone and applied for a scholarship without telling her family, which was odd. And these girls seemed to be after her for some reason. Maybe simply because she dared to be different.

Viv felt way in over her head. Should they report this to the principal? Should she have a talk with Sheila? Right, like *that* would be helpful.

Viv sent Delores a quick text. I’m tied up for a few minutes. Be out as soon as I can. “You’re cool and nice. So why don’t those girls like you? Is it about the scholarship? Do they feel threatened by you?”

Elise shook her head. “It started when I dyed my hair pink. But it got really bad when Micah asked me to the Blossom Festival a few weeks ago.”

Micah...the cute boy who had picked Elise up from her photo shoot. Aha. “Because one of them *likes* him.”

“Obvi. He dated Gretchen last year and broke up with her. She’s sort of the head of the posse.”

Viv thought about that. “Does Micah know?”

“He keeps trying to get me to report them. But they’re just going to do even more awful things if I do.” That made her upset all over again.

Viv got it. She could feel Elise's despair and hopelessness. That there was no way out from endless torment. All pretty terrible things to endure.

At least it sounded like this boy Micah was on Elise's side. She hoped. Suddenly Viv frowned. "Define *awful things*." How bad were these people, anyway?

"They send me Snapchats calling me a loser or say that Micah would never like me if he found out what I'm really like."

Snapchats that quickly vanish into thin air. A great media for cowards.

"What can they do that you're worried about? They can't take your award away or anything, right?"

Elise shook her head. "You don't understand. If I go to the awards ceremony, they're going to tell him things about me that aren't true—like that I'm a slut. That I've slept with different boys. They're even going to get some boys to back up the lie. They'll find some way to embarrass me."

"Are you taking screenshots of the snaps? If you aren't, you should start immediately."

"It doesn't matter. I'll get labeled a tattletale if I turn them in, and they'll get me back times a hundred."

Viv was about to ask Elise why on earth she would keep something like potential scholarship money a secret when Delores knocked on the door. "Hey, Viv. Oh, hi, Elise honey." She glanced around the doorframe. "You take those photos down? I hope not. I loved them."

"I'm not sure what happened to them," Viv said. Now she knew that the culprit surely had to be Sheila.

Delores saw Elise's puffy eyes and the wads of Kleenex and made concerned eye contact with Viv. "I'm really sorry, Viv," she said apologetically, "but the seniors are in a giant line, and I can see the chips from their credit cards glinting in the Sunday sunlight. I need all hands on deck." She turned to Elise. "I'm short some staff today. Want to earn some money for a couple of hours?"

“Oh, thanks, Mrs. Teeter, but Micah’s taking me to Indianapolis today. We’re going to see a play.”

“Okay, sweetheart.” Delores patted her on the shoulder. “But the offer stands if you want to apply here, okay? I’m going to need summer help. You can make some cash for college.”

“Thanks,” Elise called as Delores beelined back to the store.

“How fun about the play,” Viv said. “What are you seeing?”

“*Death of a Salesman*. It’s being put on by a theater group at a community college.”

“Great choice,” she said, because she could tell how excited Elise was. “Hey, are you going to be okay?”

Elise nodded and sat up straighter in the chair, a move that made Viv’s heart ache. She didn’t want her to go through this alone.

Viv put on her reindeer headband. “Listen, Elise, let me think on this. For now, you’re going to that awards ceremony. You’re not going to let those bullies stop you. And as far as Micah...my advice is to tell him exactly what’s going on. If he really likes you, he’ll stand by you.”

“Even if he believes me, this is probably too much for anybody,” she said.

Viv put her arm around the girl. “Yes, it’s a lot. Too much for anyone to handle on their own. Are you sure you don’t want to let Logan in on it?” She still wasn’t sure why Elise had come to her.

“Logan will overreact and make the situation worse. Trust me. I can’t tell him about the scholarship.” Yep. Stubborn as her brother.

“He loves you, you know,” she said softly.

Viv could see the struggle in her eyes. “It’s...it’s just a long story. I was hoping maybe you’d come to the scholarship presentation.”

Okay, it was one thing not to want Logan to come. But to have Viv come instead? That would break Logan’s heart.

“Elise, please tell me what’s going on here. Why would you apply for a scholarship without telling anyone and not want your family to know?”

She blew out a frustrated sigh. “It was a writing contest, okay?”

Viv brought her hand to her chest to suppress her gasp. “You entered a writing contest and made the finals?” Her first thought was that Logan would be so proud. And her second thought was he was going to kill her.

Wait a minute. Lots of people wrote essays for college scholarship money. Maybe Elise wasn’t in love with writing after all.

“I want to be a writer,” Elise said, “but everyone in my family will kill me if I tell them.”

Okay, this was bad. Viv understood why Elise didn’t want her family to know. They all had such conflicted views about writing. Even Logan, who was successful at it. “What if you win?”

“Only one person gets the scholarship. If I don’t win, I’m not saying anything to him or my mom.”

Viv knew she wasn’t going to convince her otherwise right now. “Okay, let’s talk again. But I’m glad you came to me. And I promise I’ll help however I can.”

“Thanks, Vivienne.”

Viv gave her one last hug. As she flew out of the office to get to work, her cell rang. “Hey, Viv, honey,” Delores said. “We had a little Senior Starbucks spill. Can you bring the mop with you? Thanks, love.”

Viv ran to the broom closet. As she reached for the bucket, she spotted a pile of photo frames on the shelf above the utility sink. *Her* frames, all stacked up. In the janitor closet.

As she placed a bucket in the sink and let it fill with soapy water, Joe Traverse, who ran the warehouse and brought in all the new stock as fast as it was unloaded from the trucks, walked up.

“If you fill that, I’ll take it up front,” he said.

Viv had already gathered as many of the frames as she could carry. “Oh, thanks, Joe.” It occurred to her that Joe was in and out of the store all the time. So she asked, “You wouldn’t happen to know why Sheila took these down, would you?”

“New policy,” he said. “She said the only decor allowed now has to be Christmas-themed.”

Viv handed him the bucket and thanked him. Then she carried all the photographs into her office. Maybe the fact that this happened was a good thing. A wake-up call that made her realize that the photos meant something to her. And maybe also to the people who saw themselves in them every day. Seeing them was an opportunity to relive old memories, embrace friendships, and see people in a different light. They fostered community pride. Photographs were important. Most importantly, photographs were important to *her*.

Whatever Elise’s contest was, maybe Viv could go as the official awards ceremony photographer. That way she could walk around and at least try to make sure those other girls stayed in line.

She’d insisted on honesty between her and Logan. So how was she ever supposed to keep this from him?

Chapter 17

The spring evening was coming to a close when Logan found himself on a bench in Blossom Park, trying to get his thoughts together for his big interview, which was scheduled for the next morning. But even more, he was thinking that the time to tell Viv the truth about his first book had come. He just hoped she would somehow forgive his young, stupid self.

The historic Blossom Glen fountain directly in front of him was almost as popular an attraction in their town as the Christmas store, and right now it was splashing noisily, almost like it was chiding him to not be stupid. It was tall, with a giant bowl in the middle, from which a bunch of water fonts shot up. The bowl was surrounded by miniature bronze versions of the pink-blossomed trees that lined Main Street and marched clear down to this park.

It was hard not to love his town at this time of year. The crabapple trees, now in full bloom, were heavy with delicate pink blossoms. Their sweet scent was the scent of home, of every amazing hometown spring he'd known. Even at seven in the evening, as the birds were loudly singing their good night chorus, tourists abounded—some wandering through the gardens, but most scooping fallen blossoms into little bags or straight into their pockets.

His phone lit up with a text—*Whatcha doing?*—which gave his heart a sudden jolt. It was Viv.

Prepping for interview tomorrow, he typed back.

Need some help with that? came her reply.

He'd practiced answering any imaginable question so many times that he'd been repeating answers in his sleep. Which still didn't guarantee that he wouldn't simply shut down like he had in that first ill-fated interview.

Nah. But I could use some company?

He was filled with the urgency to come clean. To get the heavy burden he'd been carrying off his chest. And hope she'd

understand.

“Hi,” Viv said, accidentally bumping her shoulder with his as she sat down on the bench with a sizable cardboard box. Okay, maybe not so accidentally. Her pretty scent came with her, so different from the powerful scent of the blossoms. Simpler, easier.

Logan bumped her shoulder right back, something they’d done often in their youth as a greeting. He felt so many things. Happy to see her, even though she looked tired and a little strained. Relieved that she wanted to be with him even when he was nervous. Anxious to tell her things. “Whassup?”

“Long day,” she said with a little smile. “But on a positive note, I forgot my elf costume, so I was just Viv all day. It felt really good.”

He gave a little chuckle. “You ever get days off?” he asked.

She gave a little shrug. “Usually when I have time off, I try to help out my mom or watch Rosie for Tessa. I mean—it’s not a big sacrifice. I want to spend as much time with my family as I can before I leave.”

He considered that they’d both had the same kinds of thoughts about family, only she was leaving and he was staying. “I know how that feels. Except I’m trying to make up for lost time.” He paused. Now or never. “Hey, I need to talk to you about something.”

“Okay, sure.” She shifted the box from the bench to the ground. He got up to help it reach the ground in one piece and found it to be sort of heavy. “What’s in here, anyway?”

“My photos from around my office door.” She heaved a deep sigh. Uh-oh. He’d thought maybe she was overworked or distracted, but maybe she was actually upset.

“Why did you take them down?” He smiled. “Aren’t they locally famous?”

Her brows were knit down in worry. “Not anymore. Sheila doesn’t feel they have a place in the store. Not Christmassy enough.”

“You’re kidding.” Anger rose up within him. Viv’s photographs shouldn’t be at the mercy of someone who knew nothing about photography—or getting along with people, for that matter.

They both fell silent. Laughter from couples admiring and collecting fallen blossoms drifted over to them.

“Can I see?” He nodded to the box.

She placed it between them and took out the top few photos.

The first one was of Delores in the middle of the store holding an illuminated snow globe, her face glowing a little from the light. But even more than that—she looked completely...joyful.

Viv leaned over to see it, tracing the wooden frame with her hands. “I chose this shot because I felt like it showed everything Delores feels about Christmas.”

“Viv, this is magical,” he said.

Next was one of Delores’s husband, George, wearing an apron and smiling behind the desk of his hardware store. It was juxtaposed with one of George’s grandfather fifty years earlier sitting behind the exact same desk. There were photos of several old-timers gathering at the diner laughing over coffee, a group of candle factory employees holding candles and standing before the big lit-up Christmas tree on the square, a huge tradition every year. Another group running in the annual Thanksgiving eve charity turkey trot and Leonard Morgan accepting his trophy for the 5K Fourth of July run—his twentieth time running, and his first win. More photos showcased old homes in the original part of town, the Blossom District, decorated for Christmas. A cute little kid with freckles smiled while eating an ice-cream cone that was dripping literally everywhere, totally in the moment. And one of the police chief, Aaron Masters, holding a lost puppy that ultimately became his own dog.

“You know what these are?” Logan said, stacking them neatly and replacing them in the box. “A love letter to our town.”

She flicked her gaze up to his, her eyes a little misty. “Thank you for appreciating that—I’m not sure that’s what I set out to do, but it feels exactly right. My aim was to celebrate everybody.”

In that moment, he’d never seen her so beautiful. He thought part of it was that her love of her art was lighting her up from inside. “I’d say you succeeded. These are fantastic. They’re... humanity. Full of feeling.”

“I am proud of them. But I didn’t take them for me. I took them for everyone. For the sense of pride in our community.”

He decided to speak his mind. “They should be hung up somewhere where everyone can see them. Like a gallery.”

“You’re biased but thank you. Maybe it’s good that Sheila took them down. That way I can find an even better place for them.”

“Yeah, like the Met. Or MOMA. Or somewhere else where everyone can see them.”

That made her laugh and swat him lightly on the arm. He was glad to see her joke around.

“I came here to keep you company before your big interview, and here you are helping me.”

Silence fell. They watched the streetlamps turn on and the crowd dissipate. He reached for her hand and she put it in his. It felt soft and warm and pretty wonderful. They sat there a long time, enjoying the mild evening breeze and just being together.

“Funny how everyone still flocks here in full force for those blossoms every single year,” she mused.

He laughed. “Wonder which version of the Blossom Glen Curse—I mean *legend*—they’ve heard.” He couldn’t resist smiling. Rumor had it that the first head of the park service a hundred and fifty years ago made up the now infamous saying about gathering the fragrant blossoms—not only to bring tourists from far and near, but also to ensure that they were cleaned up each spring as they coated the pavement, thick as carpeting.

“Obviously the nice romantic one,” she said. “*Sprinkle blossoms on your head...*” she said in the singsong voice they used when reciting the jingle as kids.

“...into hellacious damnation you will be led.”

She let out a massive snorty laugh. “Stop! I literally haven’t heard the teenage-boy version of our town legend for years.”

“Okay, fine... *Always instills a sense of dread.*” He was having too much fun, and she was rolling with laughter, which made it all worth it. “...*don’t miss the warning signs ahead.*”

“*Find your true love just ahead,*” she corrected. That was the way it was supposed to go.

“*Take the girl you want to bed.*” He gave her a look that made sure she knew how he felt about that.

“Those are awful,” she said, laughing. Just to irritate her, he tickled her in the ribs.

“You are”—she tried to catch her breath and swatted him away—“so not a romantic.”

“I disagree. I’m an impossibly romantic romantic who believes anything is possible as far as love is concerned.”

As their laughter died, their gazes snagged. She was holding his wrists, their arms suspended in midair, all shenanigans suddenly halted.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered.

She sucked in a breath. “What if I’m terrified?” she whispered back.

“Terror is a strong emotion,” he said, not letting his eyes off her. “I deal with it all the time when I write.”

Her fine brows knit down. “I’m not following.”

“Having terror means you *feel* something.”

She let his wrists go, but he quietly gathered her hands up and held them. “Vivienne, I’m going to show you that I have your back. That I’ll be by your side as you figure things out. That I’d never ask you to choose between your career and me.

You know that, right?”

She searched his eyes. “I do know. Thank you for saying it, though.”

“Look, we said we wouldn’t overthink this, and I think we should stick to that, okay?”

She looked surprised. “You’re really okay with that?”

“I’m okay with you figuring out anything you need to in your own time.”

He didn’t expect her to suddenly wrap herself around him. “Thank you—for giving me space,” she whispered into his neck.

He held her close and vowed not to say more. Although it was hard. Because he was pretty sure he was in love with her. Like, head over heels.

They held hands the few blocks to her mom’s house. As they stood on the sidewalk under the streetlight, she faced him. “So, you want to come over?”

“To practice interviewing? No, thanks. I’m just going to let the cards fall where they will, as my dad would say.”

She shook her head.

“Hot tub?”

Again, a head shake.

“What else did you have in mind?”

“Just...come in. If you want.” She paused, probably to let that sink in. And it did. It definitely did.

It took him less than a second to answer. “I definitely want.”

They walked around to the back deck and approached the back door, where she dug an old key out of her pocket and turned the lock.

“I want you to know I’ve always got your back, too.” She took his hand and led him into the house.

“Well then, lucky me,” he said. And left it at that. He didn’t even realize until the next morning that he’d completely

forgotten to tell her about the book.

...

At midnight, Viv's stomach let out a rumble.

"I bet they can hear that three streets over," Logan said, lightly stroking her arm as they lay together in bed, her head resting on his chest. "Did you have dinner?"

She lifted her head to see him. Ah, so handsome. So kind and clever, in bed and out. Her heart overflowed with a strange sensation that she was afraid to define. "Actually, come to think of it, I forgot."

His mouth turned up in a lopsided grin that squeezed her heart again. "I'm going to take that as a compliment that you're only realizing that at midnight."

She grinned right back. "Well, you've kept me really busy."

He shifted his weight and sat up. "You have eggs? I'm making us omelets."

She didn't object. But a little later, as Viv sat on a bar stool at the kitchen counter watching him flip his creations, she could tell something was a little off by the way he kept dropping utensils, his phone, even the butter. Yet he kept answering "I'm okay" whenever she asked.

She decided to start the conversation with a confidence builder. "You did a great job with the Instagram post of us eating elephant ears," she said. "It's got a ton of likes. Not only that, the bakery phone's been ringing nonstop with people wanting to place orders."

His face brightened for a moment. "That's amazing."

"Only one problem. They don't take orders for elephant ears. It's a festival thing."

He flipped an omelet with considerable skill. "Well, maybe they should."

"Tell my mom that." She set down her phone. "Anyway, your post is cute and natural and fun. Nice job."

“Thank you. I think I’m proud of myself.”

She laughed. “You should be. You know, it’s the same thing with interviews. Just be natural. Yourself.”

“That is easier for some of us than others,” he said. “But I’ll do my best.”

He seemed worried, stressed. Very unlike his usual self. She wanted to help him in a way that wasn’t going to make him more nervous.

As he brought the plates to the counter and sat down to eat, she kept the conversation light, mostly about how the mushroom, onion, and cheese was the perfect combination and how he could make her omelets anytime. After a while, she said, “If you don’t want a mock interview again, how about we talk generalities? Like what to mention and what to avoid?”

His face displayed instant relief. “That sounds really helpful.”

She started talking strategy. “What’s the thing you’re most afraid of being asked? My guess is that it might be about your dad’s relationship with the media. How they were constantly after him and how the attention became not only a distraction, but something that put even more pressure on him to produce. Am I right?”

“Exactly.” Logan pushed his plate away, barely eating anything. “That and being asked about my relationship with my dad.”

She set down her fork and turned toward him. “Would you want to talk to me a little bit about that? So we can sort out what you could say?” She understood that this was personal for him. That the media had hurt his family.

Logan seemed like he’d been thinking about this for a long time and wanted—or maybe even needed—to talk about it. “Despite being a writer, my dad did everything he could to discourage me to write.” He gave a wry smile. “Including having me shadow every doctor or lawyer friend he had before I went away to college, and threatening not to pay for any writing classes I might want to take. The message was loud

and clear that he didn't want that way of life for me. Maybe I'm lucky that for most of my teenage years, he was so wrapped up in his own darkness, he didn't have much time to deal with me."

Viv placed her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry, Logan."

"Honestly, if they ask me about my relationship with my dad, I really wouldn't know what to say. My writing was a huge rebellion because I did the one thing he told me never to do. I'm not sure he ever forgave me for that."

Viv was coming to understand how much of Logan's wanting to write had been a huge red flag to wave in front of his dad to get—well, not attention, but love.

He fell silent. "Telling the truth—that there really wasn't much of a relationship—would be like marring his name. And I don't want to cause any more pain to my mom."

"I remember him, Logan," Viv said softly. "Remember that one year your mom had a birthday party for your dad in the backyard? You'd written a poem for him, and he carried the piece of paper around with him and recited it to everyone."

"It was a limerick."

"He loved it." There was a lot Viv didn't understand about Logan's father, but she wanted Logan to remember there had been some good. "And I remember him at graduation. He kept wanting photos of the two of you together. I think I might have taken some of them. Anyway, I remember his expression. He was proud—he just...he was troubled."

Logan shrugged. "You sound like my mom. She always cuts him slack. Isn't it kind of messed up that the only memory I have of my dad being proud of my writing is from when I was thirteen?" He paused. "All I know is that my mom has been there for me. And that has to be enough, right? I try not to dwell on the rest."

His words were full of pain. Viv understood that it was an art to answer an interviewer's questions. And that some people were really clever at downplaying certain truths and bringing others forward to create a careful balance of exactly what they

wanted to communicate—or not. Logan, however, was a straight-shooter who told the truth and didn't embellish or skirt around it. This fit with everything she'd ever known about him and fit with the most important evidence—that he seemed incapable of hiding his feelings about her.

She didn't mind that. Actually, she might even love it. But she was afraid to analyze her own.

Viv tried to be professional. After all, that was why he was paying her. So she stuck to the facts. “Everyone has things they prefer not to discuss. But the problem is that your dad was famous. And interviewers are usually great at picking up subtext—things you don't want to discuss. Because pressing you on that gives a great interview. So let's think of some things you can say if your dad does come up. What do you think of him as a writer?”

“He's a genius. Brilliant. Unparalleled.”

“Those are good ways to honor him.”

“My dad never wanted to talk about his ideas, and yet he was always being asked about them. I think he felt talking about them jinxed him. Or gave him writer's block. Even when he couldn't write, people never stopped asking him when the next book was coming.”

“One idea is to focus on yourself—getting the word out about your new book, discussing the old ones, talking about your process, why you love writing. That way you avoid talking about your family and personal life. Be personable but not personal.”

The delicious omelet churned in her stomach. For someone as worried as Logan was about interviews in general, she was afraid that telling him to censor or edit his thoughts was going to be too much.

“Okay. I'll skirt around the bad stuff and emphasize the good stuff.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Thanks for your help.”

He began working his way down her neck with more kisses when she tore herself from the bar stool and returned with her

laptop. This was too important, no matter how fun the distraction. “Let’s write out some questions and answers and rehearse them again. I just want to make sure we’ve covered all the bases.” She worried that if he had blanked one time, it could happen again. Then that would be all anyone would want to talk about for weeks. But she didn’t say any of that.

They worked a while longer until Logan suddenly reached over and gently closed her computer lid. “How about a little later? I think what I need the most is more of you wishing me good luck.” He lifted his brows in question and nodded toward the stairs.

As she surrendered the work and followed him to bed, she wasn’t sure if she’d given him the right advice. But what other way was there to protect him and his family?

Chapter 18

The next morning, Viv and her mom and sisters were meeting at her gram's house for breakfast. When Vivienne got to the little house in the Blossom District, she found her grandmother in the yard with her floppy sun hat on, holding a garden spade and talking to her next-door neighbor, Mr. Templeman, who was holding an electric weed trimmer.

The Mr. Templeman of the I-brought-you-all-bagels variety.

"Hello, Vivienne," he said, bowing his head a little, like an old-fashioned gentleman would. Or so she imagined, since she didn't really *know* any old-fashioned gentlemen, except for him.

"Hi, sweetie." Her grandma instantly pulled her into a giant hug. "You're early."

"I was just leaving," Mr. Templeman said. "Think about what I said, Sophie."

As Viv stood there watching them both, her grandma blushed, worse than that day in the bakery. She'd never seen her grandma's face turn that particular color of persimmon, changing to cinnamon, peach, and then a bright, flaming red.

"Where's your water bucket?" Viv asked as Mr. T left down the now tidily trimmed walkway.

Distracted, her grandmother turned to her with a puzzled look. "In the shed. Why?"

"Because your face needs to be doused." Viv chuckled.

"Mind yourself," Gram said, giving her a fake-harsh frown as she hooked her arm through Vivienne's and led her into the house. "You're enjoying yourself way too much. And I am *not* blushing."

"Okay, Gram," Viv said as she entered the cozy little bungalow with its comfy couches with toile throw pillows, warm pastel colors, and French country flair. The house smelled like cinnamon rolls, and the little dining room table

was already set for five. “Whatever you say.”

“He just asked me to the Blossom Festival.” She followed that mini-bombshell with, “Want some breakfast?”

She hugged her grandma and decided to not comment for now and be grateful for breakfast, the plentiful hugs, and for her gram always making her feel loved and pampered. It was hard to imagine not being able to pop in for a last-minute breakfast and be welcomed so effusively. And she especially appreciated it today when she was worried about Logan’s interview.

Gram looked up from pulling the rolls out of the oven, the warm cinnamon-and-dough smell filling the air. “What’s on your mind?”

“How did you know there’s something on my mind?” Gram had this talent of asking them all questions about their lives that Viv suddenly realized might be a clever way of deflecting conversation away from herself.

“I don’t know. The look on your face. And the fact that the whole town is talking about you and Logan.”

“How is that possible? We’re not even dating.” Were they dating?

Gram counted on her fingers. “First it was the elf video, and now it’s the elephant ears. We’ve had people calling the bread shop night and day to place orders, did you know that?”

Viv frowned. “That’s what Mom told me. Logan’s really catching on to the social media thing.”

Gram smiled. “I’m glad he created a buzz.”

Viv shook her head. “Me, too. But so far the ones with me are getting a lot more hits than the posts about his books. I’m not sure it’s a good thing that Logan’s love life seems to be of more interest than his professional life.” Today’s interview might change that. She’d be sure to post about it on his social media if it went well.

She fought off a sudden chill. It would go well, wouldn’t it?

A smile spread over Gram’s face. “So you two have a love

life, eh?”

“We’re not exactly...dating. What I mean is, it’s not serious,” she rushed to add.

Gram shot her a cut-to-the-chase look. “What you mean is you’re sleeping with him but you don’t want to get involved because you’re leaving soon.”

“Oh my gosh, Grandma.” Now it was her turn to blush. But she looked her grandmother in the eye because she was, after all, an adult now. Besides, the way she handled this discussion might help her grandma deal with her own dating dilemmas. “Okay, fine. I’m sleeping with him.”

“I knew it.” She made a self-satisfied sound. “I can tell by the starry-eyed way you two stare at each other. And by the way you look when you talk about him. Plus, you did say *love life*.”

Just then, the screen door banged, and Juliet walked in.

Oh great. Alone time with grandma—gone.

On second thought, maybe that was a good thing as she wouldn’t have time for more prying.

“Hi, Gram, hi, Viv.” Juliet looked pretty in real work clothes that Viv could only envy, a cute blouse with a pattern of purple lilacs and green leaves. Envious not just because her clothes were stylish but also because they weren’t red and green, a combination Viv swore she’d never wear again as long as she lived.

“So you’re sleeping with Logan?” Juliet asked as she sat and poured some tea. “How’s that going?”

Before Viv could answer, the sound of the weed whacker fired up on the side of the house. It got a few decibels louder as Mr. T walked around to the grass near the walkway.

“Mr. T invited Gram to the Blossom Festival,” Viv said. Why should her love life be the only one up for discussion?

“But I’m not going,” Gram rushed to say. “I’m not ready to date.”

“But Gram,” Juliet argued, the therapist in her not giving Gram a pass. “Do you like him? Is he fun? Grandpa would want you to have fun. And you’ve known Mr. Templeman forever. Maybe it’s time to take a chance.”

Viv sat back and took a sip of tea. What reason would there be for Gram to not want to go? They *had* known each other forever. They were both widowed. He was certainly nice and seemed kind. So what was the problem?

“Thanks to both of you for your opinions,” Gram said. “But can we please focus on something else?”

“What’s going on?” her mom asked as she and Tessa walked in and sat down.

“I have a problem I could use everybody’s help on,” Viv said, deflecting the discussion, not because she didn’t want to hear about Gram’s love life, but she needed her family’s opinion about something more important. “Actually, it’s something that can’t get back to Logan.”

“Why not?” her grandmother asked.

“It’s about Elise. I could really use some advice.” She looked at Juliet. “Especially yours, Juliet, because you’re a family therapist. She’s being bullied.”

“Oh no,” Tessa said. “Not sweet Elise.”

“That’s terrible,” her mom said.

“Let us know what we can do,” Gram said.

Juliet set down her teacup and leaned forward. “I’ll help any way I can.”

Viv plunged in. “Elise came to see me. She made it to the finals in a contest where the prize is \$1000 scholarship money.”

“That’s wonderful,” Viv’s mother said. “What kind of contest?”

“Fiction writing.”

Her mom and Juliet gasped.

“Miriam’s not going to be thrilled with that,” Juliet said.

“I thought Elise was going to college for nursing?” Tessa asked.

“That’s what I thought,” Viv said. “Apparently writing is something she’s keeping a secret, for obvious reasons.”

“She obviously trusts you if she told you,” Juliet said. “What’s the problem?”

“These girls have been giving her a really hard time—bullying her, there’s no other term for it. One of them made it to the finals, too, so they’ll all be there, and they’ve already warned her not to show up or they’ll embarrass her, make her life a living hell at school, break her up with this boy she likes, that kind of threatening stuff.”

“I might know the girls,” Tessa said. “They come into the pastry shop sometimes. They torment and tease other girls, too.”

“Bullies have power when their victim is isolated,” Juliet said. “And they have no power if their peers side with the victim. So you can round up her friends to come support her. Like, a show of solidarity. So big that the bullies will have to back down.”

“Okaaay,” Viv said in a reluctant tone. “How do I do that if no one is supposed to know about this? If a million people show up, Elise will never talk to me again.”

Gram got up, walked over to the counter, and brought the daily paper back. “Good thing seniors like me have time to read things from cover to cover.” She opened it up to a page, folded it, and sent it over to Viv.

Viv read aloud, “Blossom Glen High Seniors Reach Final in Prestigious Writing Competition.”

“It’s not a secret anymore,” Gram said with a smile.

Sure enough, there were the names of the finalists. Could this work? Viv hoped she could come up with a plan without breaking Elise’s confidence.

“Viv, to pull this off,” Tessa said, “you should do something

cool so Elise looks out and can immediately tell how many people came to support her. Like matching T-shirts.”

“Like family reunion T-shirts?” Viv recoiled in horror. She couldn’t think of one teenager on the planet who would think that was a good idea.

“I like the idea of a gesture of solidarity,” Juliet said, tapping her lips in thought, “that might make those girls back off. We’ve got to come up with something along those lines, but less embarrassing.”

“You said Logan doesn’t know?” her mom asked.

“Elise asked me not to tell him.” That weighed heavily on her mind.

“You may have to ask forgiveness, not permission.” Juliet patted her hand. “It’s a tough predicament. Wanting to help Elise but trying to keep her confidence.”

“Tell me about it.” Viv glanced at her watch. A half hour before Logan’s interview. She mentally sent him all the positive vibes.

“That’s the third time you’ve checked your watch,” Tessa said. “You still have an hour before work.”

“Logan has a big interview this morning.” She paused. He’d been nervous but adamant that he’d be fine. Told her to go to work and they’d catch up later. But something wasn’t sitting well with her about that.

“Oh, that’s so exciting,” Gram said. “I’m sure he’ll be wonderful.”

Viv’s mom looked a little worried. “How does Logan feel about it?”

“He’s prepared and he’s going to do great.” Viv knew that he was, even though he was so worried this morning he barely touched the great breakfast she’d made. And then he’d kissed her and told *her* not to worry.

Sheesh. “He said he was okay going it alone. And told me not to bother coming.” She fidgeted her fingers. “We’ve practiced. I’m sure he’ll do great.”

She didn't want to show up if he didn't want her there, but what if he did want her there, but felt like he shouldn't ask? That sounded as confusing as she felt.

Gram looked her over with eagle eyes. "It sounds like you might feel better if you showed up to support him."

"That might be nice," Tessa said.

"Go for it," Juliet said.

"Why not?" her mom added.

Viv looked around at all the concerned looks her family was giving her. Yes, why not? "You're right. I don't want him to go through that alone." She pulled out her chair and stood up. "Thanks for everything, love you all," she called as she ran out the door.

He had her back, and now it was time for her to have his.

...

Logan was finally settled in front of a fireplace in the old wing of a Queen Anne Victorian mansion that the studio had chosen as a backdrop for his interview.

His throat was dry and he'd already asked for water—twice. And then he'd had to pee. But now the clock was ticking down, and the time had come to do what he had to do.

No more avoiding it.

Just the thought of Viv's sweet, smiling face settled his nerves. She'd wanted to be here, but he did not want her to witness this if the worst happened and he blanked.

Not that he was planning to. He'd been replaying his answers on tape and practicing everything that Viv had helped him with.

In front of him in the shadows of bright TV lights, a camera crew bustled around equipment and wires. Sweat trickled down his back, a function of heat from the lights and his nerves.

He loved his dad, but it was so complicated. How did he

keep his dad's legacy intact? How did he open up to talk about the things that had hurt his dad and that he feared would hurt him, too? The media could be savage. But he also knew it was necessary. He might never learn the perfect balance of truth and distance. He just wasn't that calculated.

He scanned the crowd, looking for a friendly face, even though he'd told Viv not to come. Being on his own was what he'd always done.

Viv had changed that by her steady presence. Her friendship. And more. She was with him in spirit. He drew strength from that.

For now, he'd focus on the present and future. That way no one would compare him to his dad.

He'd be friendly and open, even though he felt about as open as one of those heavy steel sewer caps on the road. Impenetrable. Guarded. Yep, on second thought, there was a great possibility of effing this up.

A voice pulled him from his thoughts. "Five minutes, Mr. Matthews," a technician with a clipboard behind a camera said.

Logan managed a nod and a smile. He slipped a finger under his collar to let in some cool air. What had he been thinking, wearing a collared shirt under a sweater?

He glanced around the shadows again, looking for her. He couldn't help himself.

Maybe the scariest thing of all was that he was starting to need her, despite himself.

I'll be fine, he told himself. *Just be myself, but don't be myself.* Whatever that meant.

Someone adjusted his mic. He asked for more water. He suddenly couldn't remember what to say and what not to say. *Damn nerves.*

"Hey there, handsome." He jerked up his head to find Viv standing there dressed in a black shirt and jeans. No elf stripes. She looked pretty, and that made him smile despite his panic.

Worry suddenly slid off of him, a weight dropping off his shoulders, and he could finally breathe.

She was here.

He reached out and grasped her hand.

She smiled. “Your hand is freezing. You okay?”

He managed a smile. “I am now.”

He stood up and stepped over some wires to get to her, placing his arms on her shoulders and searching her eyes. “Is something wrong? Are you okay?”

She was a little out of breath as she held his hands. “I can be a little late to work. Look, Logan, I’ve been thinking about something important. I think I was wrong when I told you to cover up your feelings, to shield yourself from the hard questions.”

He raked his hands through his hair. The butterflies in his stomach felt more like a herd of out-of-control cattle, but he tried not to dwell on that, either. “You know, I sort of memorized those answers we talked about. What are you saying?”

“People already know what happened to your dad. It’s okay to be honest about that. Just...be you.”

He struggled to understand what she was telling him. “Why the change of heart?”

“It’s not good to hold secrets. Or to pretend you’re not hurt when you are. That’s what you and I did for all those years. You’ve always been more open and honest with me.” She put her hands over his sweater, on his chest, as she looked into his eyes. Which had the effect of making his heart beat wildly, crazily, under her touch.

“What are you saying?”

“Logan, you—you mean a lot to me. You always have.” She paused. “And I—I want to be honest with you, too.”

Was she trying to tell him something? That she’d been holding back her own feelings?

He didn't have time to ask. Someone took Viv by the arm. "I'm sorry, but the show is going live. We're going to have to ask you to watch from back here. Mr. Matthews, it's time to take a seat with Lacey."

Viv grabbed his arm, a desperate look on her face that made his stomach plunge. "I love you," she blurted. "You're going to do great!"

A crewman with a headset guided him back to his seat as he tried to process that. Somehow, the world continued on, the hustle and bustle of the techs, the beeping of the cameras as they focused on his interviewer, Lacey Stevens, now in her seat overlooking her notes.

But his entire world had just tipped on its axis.

Emotion flooded him. She loved him?

I love you, too, he mouthed. That was the easiest part of his day. He always had.

He was forced to pay attention as Lacey made introductions and joked around. "Why did you move home to Indiana from New York? I mean, you're a national bestselling author. What does Blossom Glen have to offer?"

He had this one covered. "What's not to love about one of the most picturesque small towns in the Midwest? Blossom Glen has got our world-famous candle factory, a gorgeous park and golf course with green accommodations, an Italian restaurant with a Michelin-star rating, and a world-class pastry shop. Not to mention a great shopping experience on Main Street, and a Blossom legend. Lovers flock from all over to see our trees blossoming up and down Main Street." Had he talked his town up enough? "But the most important thing of all is that my family is here."

So far so good. Putting in a pitch for his town or showcasing anyone else besides himself was easy. The trouble would come when he had to talk about himself. That's what made his blood turn into an ice slushy.

"It's no secret that your father was John Matthews," Lacey said. "He was brilliant."

Okay, here goes. “Yes, he was.” He cleared his throat. “My dad was a brilliant writer.”

Silence. Was that enough? Should he say more?

Lacey didn’t seem concerned about his short answer. “You’ve been said to be a purist about your writing, like your father. But I see you’ve recently gotten a social media presence. What’s changed?”

“My dad was a huge influence in my life, but his generation didn’t connect with fans the way authors do today. It used to be all about the writing. But readers want a more personal connection. I don’t mind that. Don’t you read a book and want to know more about the author or why they wrote it? I mean, I always do.

“And truthfully, the media attention my father got interfered with his creative process. I always feel protective of my own privacy. I’m—I’m learning to find a balance.” He smiled at Viv, who sent him a thumbs-up.

“It’s no secret your dad was troubled,” Lacey continued. “Do you find that writing dark topics exposes your own mental deficits? Are you prone to depression?”

Sweat accumulated on his brow, and he swiped at it with his sleeve. He’d prepared for this. Viv had told him to be honest.

He wanted to honor that.

He sat up in his chair and looked directly at Lacey.

“I get depressed when I don’t get a paycheck,” he said, flashing a smile. “Seriously, though, I use psychological darkness or the terror that a thriller instills in the reader to do what I really love to do—explore the depths of humanity, the universal themes of love, family, and what it is to be human.”

Then he decided to go a little further. “Look, no family is perfect, and mine certainly wasn’t. I learned a lot about drive and hard work from my dad, and his love and wonder for books and his dedication to the craft of writing. And for that I’ll always be grateful.”

Logan’s heart was pounding as Lacey moved on to ask

about his upcoming book. He discussed the characters and teased the story a little but not too much.

He hadn't made a fool of himself. And he'd been honest. Not closed off.

Viv had taught him how.

"For my final question," Lacey said, "I have to ask you about your social media feed. What about the elf everyone's talking about?"

He blinked. Through the glass, he saw Vivienne, her face lit up. She gave him two thumbs-up. And...she was smiling.

She was there for him now, and she wasn't going anywhere.

He turned to Lacey and forced himself to speak slowly. And as he began, he said a little prayer up to heaven directed to his dad. *Dad, this is for you. For the times you couldn't say it or didn't know how.* "Writing is my job, but it's not my life. I love to write and I'm finding that I love to connect with people who read my books, but I'm a lot more than that, too." He looked out at Vivienne. "The person you see in my feed is someone I've cherished for a long time—my publicist, Viv Montgomery. Who also happens to be my lifelong best friend."

Then he stood up. "Lacey, thanks for asking me here today. I appreciate it." Then he slid off his mic, set it down, and held out his hand to shake hers.

"Thanks, Logan. It was a pleasure to speak with you." He was already walking out of the sound room when she said, "Okay, everyone, the new book is called *The Girl at the Top of the Stairs* by Logan Matthews. And it's out May twenty-ninth, just in time to take it with you to the beach."

Viv was waiting for him. He took her hand and walked with her down the hallway and out into the gardens.

"I'm really proud of you," she said, counting on her fingers. "You told the truth. You were open and approachable. And you were totally yourself."

"Thanks." He wasn't really focused on the compliment

because he was more concerned about other things. “So about what you said before. Is it the truth? Or were you just trying to save my ass?”

“Truth,” she finally said, looking him in the eye. “I’m letting myself take a risk. I want to give us a chance, Logan. I mean, if you do, too.”

His answer was to reach out and cup her face in his hands and kiss her, pulling her against him, giving it all he had.

When they finally broke apart, he was pleased to see that her eyes were a little unfocused, and she gripped his arms like she was a little unsteady on her feet. He was feeling the exact same sense of disequilibrium when she smiled up at him and whispered, “But I was also trying to save your ass.”

Chapter 19

Viv wanted to join the celebration at Bonjour Breads! where everyone had agreed to gather after Logan's interview. And she wanted to keep reveling in the giddy rush of feelings that were swirling around inside of her, as sparkly as a young teen's nail polish.

She'd just told Logan she was okay with being in a relationship. But it didn't feel scary. It felt good. Great, actually.

But she understood that part of being in a relationship meant sometimes doing hard things. And so she walked with purpose to Christmas Every Day and straight into Sheila's office, which was on the second floor.

"Hi," she said as cheerily as possible as Sheila hung up the phone. "Do you have a minute?"

Sheila's gaze wandered over her sandals, jeans, and the simple black V-neck top Viv had worn to Logan's interview, clearly noticing that it was not elfwear. "You're not working today?"

She walked over to Sheila's cute white desk and took a seat in front of the big paned windows. Nice office. "Delores is covering for me this morning. I wanted to speak with you about something important. It's not work-related. It's about my next-door neighbor, Elise Matthews." Viv thought she detected a little note of surprise in Sheila's face. "She's like a little sister to me."

Sheila frowned. "If this isn't about work, I'm not sure I can help you." Her gaze strayed to her computer screen. She acted like it was a great sacrifice to speak to Viv in the middle of her busy day.

Viv stood to command her attention and spoke as directly as possible. "This will only take a second. But it's important. I have a concern that Elise is being bullied by some girls at school. One of them is Gretchen."

Sheila blinked a few times, the only telltale sign that she might be flustered. But she turned to Viv with a placid expression on her face. “I’m sorry your neighbor is being bullied. But that doesn’t sound like anything my niece would ever do.”

“I know it might not, but I saw—”

“My niece is a sweet girl,” Sheila said quickly. “I’m sorry that you want to make your time here so fraught with conflict.”

Oh geez. Sheila was gaslighting her. Of course she was. “I’m not trying to create any conflict. I’m just trying to make you aware—”

“I’ll certainly check into it, Vivienne,” she said in a brusque tone. Her phone rang. “Oops,” she said, “you’ll have to excuse me. Got to get this.”

Outside on the street, Viv pushed down her anger and a feeling of helplessness, too. What had she expected, anyway? Sheila was just...Sheila. She knew one thing: she had to tell Logan what was going on.

A few minutes later, Viv walked into the bread shop to find Logan there, along with what seemed to be half the people in town, all of whom were congratulating him and clapping him on the back. “We listened to your interview live,” Leo said. “You did a great job.”

“You honored your father in a beautiful way,” Logan’s mom said, clasping his hands tight. “He’d be so proud.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Logan said as he hugged her.

“We’re *all* so proud,” Viv’s grandmother said. She carried today’s paper and was making weird eye movements, her gaze zipping from the paper to Logan and back to Viv.

Sort of like she had an eye twitch.

Gram pushed the paper in front of Logan as her mom said, “We’re doing mimosas in your honor.”

“Great,” Logan said. “Let’s celebrate.” He turned to Viv and lowered his voice. “Why does your grandma keep pushing this

newspaper in front of me?”

As Logan took a sip of coffee and grazed over the headlines, Viv made eye contact with Gram.

All she had to do was let him discover what was in front of him. That would absolve her of breaking Elise’s confidence.

But wasn’t that a cop-out? It felt deceitful. And it felt like Viv was asking her family to do what *she* needed to do.

Viv never broke promises. Especially not to a teenage girl who was having a really difficult time and who had actually trusted her enough to tell her what was going on. She saw that for what it was: a cry for help.

But this situation seemed beyond promise-keeping and was orbiting a true crisis. One with repercussions she couldn’t even imagine.

Sometimes being a teenager really sucked.

And sometimes breaking a promise really sucked. But what was the alternative? To do nothing and let those girls destroy Elise’s happiness, self-esteem, and peace of mind?

Viv opened her mouth to say something, but the words got stuck in her throat. She hated to break the mood, but what choice did she have?

“Thanks, Sophie, for the paper,” Logan said as Gram actually reached over and flipped the newspaper to page three. He glanced from Gram to Viv. “Is there...is there something in here I should be reading?”

“Actually, dear, there is,” Gram said, giving him a kind look as she refilled his coffee.

Viv made eye contact with her grandmother and gave a little smile. “Thanks, Gram.” Then she folded the paper over and cleared her throat. Turning to Logan, she said, “Gram’s trying to help me not break a promise. To show you something that’s difficult to say.” She smiled at her grandma. “I’ll take it from here, Gram.”

Logan frowned, flashing her a concerned look. “Is everyone okay? No, you wouldn’t make me *read* something if they

weren't, right?"

His writer's imagination seemed to be spinning full force. "It's about your sister." Viv reached over and took up both of his hands. *Please forgive me, Elise.* "She's being bullied, Logan. Pretty intensely." She closed her eyes and took a breath. "She took me into her confidence, and I'm breaking that now by talking with you. But I sincerely believe that we need to band together to intervene somehow."

Logan let out a pained groan and rubbed his forehead. "I suspected it, but she wouldn't say anything. I've been so concerned with this interview—"

"No. Don't even go there. I let her know the door was open to talk to me and she finally did. I think she thought she could handle things, but this proved to be too much. She came in upset and told me everything."

Logan looked down at the article but just stared at it, frowning. "This may sound petty, but she came to you, not me. I feel like the worst brother in the world."

She shook her head and tapped on the article. "Take a look. Your sister made it to the finals in a writing contest, Logan. She told me she wants to be a writer."

His gaze dropped to the paper and he began to read. Viv shifted nervously in her seat until finally he spoke. "A writing contest." His voice was full of shock and surprise. But also, if she wasn't mistaken, pride. He folded the paper and gave Viv a wry smile. She couldn't tell if he was upset, disappointed, or proud. Probably all three. "She placed in a statewide writing competition." He paused. "And she didn't want me to know."

"No."

He blew out a big breath that spoke volumes. "Of course, she didn't. I flat-out told her writing was a terrible career choice." He looked up at Viv. "I mean, it is," he said, as if he were trying to justify his feelings. "It's high pressure, competitive, and uncertain—a roller coaster. I mean, compared to a job with stability and benefits..."

"Maybe you're forgetting why you became a writer despite

everyone telling you all those same things.”

“Passion.” He put his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands. “Does she love it? I don’t even know because she didn’t discuss it with me!”

Viv spoke in a gentle tone. “You can discuss that with her later. Believe it or not, her interest in writing is not the issue here. One of the girls who torments her made it to the finals, too. And their posse warned her not to show to the awards ceremony, can you believe that?”

“Or else what?” He cast her a murderous look.

“They’ve threatened that they’ll embarrass her. They have the capability of ruining her reputation and breaking her up with this boy she likes.”

“Why would anyone want to do that?”

Viv shrugged. “I don’t understand that, either, but I do know one of the girls used to date the boy.”

The paper rustled as Logan stood up fast. “I’m going to the principal. I’m going to those girls’ parents. I’m going to—”

She placed a hand on his arm. “I’ve had some time to think this through. And I asked Juliet, who has experience with bullying. And I think I’ve come up with a plan.”

...

Vivienne’s plan was a little out there. But then, Logan had to admit, this whole situation was, too. But he trusted Viv as much as he needed Elise to know that they had her back more than anything.

He arrived at the Blossom Glen Community College campus later than he’d wanted to—it was nearly seven, time for the awards ceremony to begin. From the back of the crowded auditorium, he noticed the four finalists sitting on stage in folding chairs along with about twenty or so other high school kids who were here for various awards given by the college, various organizations, and the state. He immediately recognized Lainey, the red-haired girl at the festival who’d

been excited about his books, sitting next to his sister.

As for family and friends, they filled several rows—thanks to Viv. Frankly, it was hard to miss them because of a strange occurrence—they all had pink hair. Including baby Rosie, who was sporting a Cindy-Lou-Who sticking-up ponytail that was pure pink. Robin waved and indicated an empty seat near her. Even his mom and Mrs. Montgomery had turned their hair the same bright cotton-candy shade. And Grandma Sophie had gotten on board too.

More remarkably, an entire row of teens sat behind the families, and they all had pink hair, too. All the adults in the world could show, but without friends, Viv's plan wouldn't stand a chance.

That had been the reason he was running late. He'd never realized how complicated it was to dye hair. He smoothed his hair down, not that that would make it any less noticeable. Thank goodness the color was temporary.

Viv had wanted Elise to look out into the audience and find support. She wanted her to know she had everyone's love behind her. *That she was loved.* And that love would hopefully triumph somehow over people who weren't nice. With a little help.

Hell, Logan would've shaved his head to make certain Elise never doubted him again.

Now, if only he could restrain his desire to get revenge, things would be okay. He hoped.

He desperately needed Elise to know that he was here and with her all the way. Because somewhere along the line, she'd started feeling that she couldn't tell him things. And that meant he'd failed her in a very elemental way. He had to make her understand that she could count on him for anything.

In the audience, he caught sight of Tessa, also with pink hair, holding up Rosie, who was clapping. He heard some *awwwws* as people chuckled at the cute baby. Viv was standing in the aisle with her camera. She winked and gave him an enthusiastic wave.

Logan noticed the empty seat next to Tessa that Robin had indicated and made his way down the aisle, noting that Gretchen was sitting by her blond friend.

As he took his seat, he heard a gasp. And noticed some muffled buzzing and finger-pointing in his direction. A few people pointed cameras and snapped photos. Great. His pink hair was creating a stir. Maybe it was over the top, but it was an important message to his sister that he was with her all the way.

He looked up to the stage to catch her eye, but she was already staring at him. With her mouth open.

Was she angry? Maybe she had a right to be. They were interfering in something she hadn't wanted them to know about. He offered up a smile, hoping for the best.

She didn't smile back. Ironic, wouldn't it be, if this all backfired and his sister never forgave him for the spectacle?

Professor Rosenblum, the chairperson of the English department, introduced herself and passed out a few undergraduate awards. And so did the STEM faculty. And the art faculty. And the history faculty.

And then at last it was time.

"This is the twenty-fifth year for our fiction writing contest for high school students," the professor said. "Our entrants have gone on to explore writing, creative and otherwise, in a variety of ways. Normally, we offer one finalist admission to our six-week creative writing experience this summer, which is a college-level course for full credit.

"This year, we have a special circumstance," she said. "We have a tie. So without further ado, I'd like to announce that the winners of the Blossom Glen Community College Award in Creative Writing are Lainey Chu and Elise Matthews."

Logan's heart swelled with pride. Viv took photos of Elise accepting her award, then turned and smiled at him.

And then Elise did, too.

He blew out a breath of relief. He was so proud of his

amazing sister, who felt that she had to hide her accomplishment from all of them.

But, he knew in his heart, from him especially.

The ceremony over, the kids on the stage disbanded, and as Elise and Lainey walked down from the stage, Gretchen met them. “This was obviously rigged,” Gretchen said to Elise, loud enough for him to hear. “Your brother’s here. He probably had something to do with it.”

Logan felt his murderous urge return with lightning speed. He cracked his knuckles. Did this girl not understand who she was dealing with? Did she not know not to mess with a vengeful older brother?

Just then, Viv appeared, a careful hand on his arm just in time.

“I’m going to apologize for my actions in advance,” he muttered, taking a step forward.

“Give it a sec,” she whispered back, tightening her grip and nodding to a group of teens milling around straight ahead.

The boy who’d picked Elise up at the barn the day of her photos, who took her to see that play—Micah, was it?—suddenly appeared at Elise’s side. “Stop it, Gretch,” he said. “She won fair and square.”

Whoa. What?

“Her brother *and* father were writers,” Gretchen complained. “That’s more than just coincidence.”

“I won fair and square,” Elise said. “And so did Lainey.”

Go, Elise.

Gretchen addressed her posse. “We’re leaving. Lainey, come on. Let’s go.”

Lainey turned red and glanced around nervously. “I—I’m not going.” She took a big breath. “Elise won. And—she deserved to win. I’m not going to do this anymore, Gretchen. It’s wrong.”

“Yeah, it’s wrong,” another boy said. “Why do you have to

be so mean?”

Logan saw the recognition enter her eyes that her reign of terror was over as her perfect façade crumbled. “Fine,” she said, balling her fists in anger. “Then I’ll just leave.”

Logan almost felt bad for her. But not that bad.

“Congrats, Elise,” someone said.

Lainey said, “Yeah, congratulations. You deserved it.”

“*We* deserved it,” Elise said. “Congrats to you, too.”

“Let’s go get pizza,” someone said.

And then Gretchen ran down the aisle and out one of the back doors to the auditorium.

Across the way, Robin got up and followed her out. If anyone could exorcise the bully out of someone and show compassion in the process, it would be her.

Then Elise walked over. Glancing up at Logan’s hair, she shook her head. “That is the worst dye job ever.”

He tossed back his head and laughed. Heaved a sigh of relief that she wasn’t furious with him. Then he opened his arms and welcomed her into them.

“I—I didn’t know how to tell you,” she said, her voice muffled in his shirt. He felt her tears through the fabric.

It hurt that she didn’t tell him she was writing, even though he was a writer. But he understood he hadn’t made that easy for her.

“You’re serious about it?”

She looked up at him, her eyes wide. It was as if he was seeing that freckled, pig-tailed toddler version, not a young woman on the cusp of being an adult. He swallowed hard. He had to talk to her like an adult. Like a brother. No matter how hard.

He pulled back and made her look at him. “Don’t you know that I love you and care about everything that goes on with you? I’m sorry if I haven’t let you know that loud and clear.

Elise, I'm so proud of you, proud of the wonderful person you've become. I care about every single pink hair on your head, do you hear me? I love you."

She squeezed him hard. "I love you, Logan."

He was still reeling from a fierce sense of love and pride when Elise left to hug Viv.

"Thank you," she said, "for all the pink support."

"You handled it," Viv said, hugging her back. Logan detected the pride in her voice, too. "We were just here for solidarity." Viv glanced at Logan and then addressed Elise in a serious tone. "I hope you're not too upset with me."

Logan put an arm around Viv. "With *us*."

Viv nodded. "We just wanted to show you that we love you. I'm sorry for breaking your confidence."

"Well, it worked," Elise said. "I can't be too mad at either of you." She looked at her brother. "Talk more later?"

Logan nodded. "For sure."

A crowd of her friends were gathering round. "We hate to waste all this pink hair," Micah said. "We're going roller-skating after pizza. You down for it?"

"Sure," Elise said.

Micah addressed Logan. "Mr. Matthews, is it okay if I drive Elise?"

Logan saw the way this kid looked at his sister. And the way she gazed back at him, starry-eyed. That made him momentarily panic, until Viv jabbed him in the ribs. And also when did he become *Mr. Matthews*? Sheesh. Out loud, he said, "Have her back by eleven."

"Yeah, sure." Micah grinned.

Elise gave Logan one last squeeze. "Thanks, Lo-Lo," she whispered. "See you later."

"Or else," Logan said. But he was smiling. Even though he really meant it.

“Hey, Micah,” he said before they could leave. He walked over and shook his hand. “Thanks for standing up for my sister.” The kid had showed a lot of maturity for his years. But Logan wasn’t about to tell him that. Yet. He was still a guy interested in his sister and therefore had to be managed with extreme caution.

“Your sister is awesome, sir.”

“Yes, she is. But eleven o’clock is a non-negotiable curfew. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mom lets me stay out until midnight...or so,” Elise said with the kind of grin that made him believe she was pushing the limits. Then she ran back and hugged him one last time, fluffing his hair. “Your hair is really pink,” she said. “Hope you used the temporary kind. Love you.” She waved goodbye as she caught up with her friends.

“Not past midnight,” Logan reluctantly relented. Which left him rubbing his neck, thinking about everything that just happened.

“Your sister is amazing,” Viv said, linking her elbow through his. “No matter what she does in life, she’s going to be just fine.”

“She’s pretty special.” He took her into his arms. “But then so are you. Vivienne, you are the kindest, most caring person I know. And how you just pulled this off, I’ll never know.”

“How I pulled it off? I just talked to Micah and he rallied a bunch of their friends. It helped that he’s really likes your sister. And it was really easy to get a dozen teens to dye their hair. They had a blast.”

“Hmm,” he said. “Maybe that’s why the drugstore was so low on hair dye.”

“Ha,” she said. “We probably cleaned out all the pink dye for miles. I’m going to go straight home and wash this out.”

“With just one wash?” Logan frowned. “My tube said it takes ten to thirty washes to fade.”

Viv stopped in her tracks. “Ten to *thirty*?”

Her reaction made the hair on his neck prickle. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s what it said.”

Viv laughed, a throw-her-head-back kind of laugh, which she quickly tried to suppress by holding her hand over her mouth. “Oh my gosh, Logan, you must’ve used semi-permanent dye.”

“What’s that? I mean, it was the only kind left.”

“As opposed to *temporary*.”

Uh-oh. “The way you’re looking at me, I’m sensing that’s not good.”

Viv ran her hand through his hair, inspecting. “Wow, yeah. That is some color,” she said in an ominous tone. Then added hurriedly, “But, um—no worries... I’m sure it will go back to normal.” She grinned like she was enjoying this way too much. “...in a few weeks.”

Chapter 20

When Viv walked into Tessa's kitchen the next morning, the first thing she saw was a baby with pink hair and orange squash all over her face.

"Nice," Viv said. She was inspired to pull out her camera and start snapping pictures. "This is one for posterity, Rosie Posie." Tessa, who was packing up her own lunch, looked up in puzzlement.

"You know," Viv said. "Pink and orange. This is amazing."

Tessa chuckled. "She fell asleep in the car on the way home last night and I just gave her a sponge bath this morning. So it's pink hair day today, too, isn't it, sweetie pie?"

The baby gave her mom a huge gummy grin. Which Viv also captured on camera. "You two are the cutest," she said. "And may I ask why you aren't at work?"

"Morning off," she said.

"Oh. That's interesting."

"My new hire is good. And...I like spending time with Pinky here."

In response, Rosie blew orange squash bubbles.

"Does a little more time off solve some of your babysitter troubles?" Viv asked.

"To be honest, no. I have to stop and get her blanket that I forgot at Gram's yesterday. Rosie slept terribly last night not having it. It's like her comfort thing, you know?"

Oh, yes. The white blanket with colorful polka dots had made it into many a photo Viv had taken.

"I'm thinking it might be better for all of us if we had some kind of routine. In fact," she took a big breath, "I took the plunge and signed her up for daycare a few days a week. We're going to see how it goes. Actually, starting this morning. I'm dropping her off on the way to get my hair cut."

“Wow, bold move.” Viv considered that. “I think it’s going to be great for everyone.”

“Thanks for your support. We’ll see.” Tessa shrugged and ran a paper towel under water and attacked the little pumpkin’s squash face amid dodging and noisy protests. “So why the early morning visit?”

“I just came from Curl’s Up and thought I’d stop by,” Viv said. But that wasn’t the real reason. She’d found a letter in her mailbox that was burning a hole through her pocket. And she needed Tessa’s help. She hadn’t even opened it yet and it was already giving her hives and indigestion. And a headache. And maybe threatening to throw a wrench into all her plans.

Tessa gave Rosie a break and glanced up. “You don’t look like you just got your hair cut.”

“I made an appointment for Logan this morning with Margo to re-dye his hair. You might see him there. He accidentally used semi-permanent color.”

Tessa burst out laughing. “That’s amazing.” She stood up. “On a serious note, I hope what we tried to do works.”

“I think it helped a lot. And I have to give Micah credit,” Viv said. “He seems like a true friend.”

“Elise stood her ground, too.” She surveyed Viv up and down. “You look...happy.”

Viv waved a hand over her elf suit. “Short shift today, then I’m headed up to the Matthews’ lake house. Logan’s meeting me there tomorrow. I actually get an afternoon off, and I’m going to take full advantage.” She looked around the kitchen and family room. “Got any reading material? I want to lie out on the dock and get some sun.”

“Good for you,” Tessa said. “I’m really happy for you and Logan, Viv.”

“I feel really happy,” she confessed, then smiled as she waved a hand over herself. “Well, as happy as one can feel in red and green. But...soon I’ll be hanging up the elf suit for good.”

Tessa unlatched Rosie's bib and lifted her out of her chair. "Giving up the... Wait, you're quitting?"

Viv pulled two envelopes out of her spacious elf pocket that resembled a kangaroo pouch. "Something happened."

"Wait—two envelopes? Two job offers?"

"Not exactly."

Tessa put Rosie into her playpen, which was sitting between the kitchen and the family room, and sat down across from Viv. Viv slid over one of the envelopes.

Tessa examined it. "It's from Preston and Preston. You haven't even opened it yet."

Rosie pressed a button on a toy that sang about brush, brush, brushing your teeth. Which was cute but got old fast.

"It's a job offer," Viv said. "They've already called me."

"Oh Viv, wonderful. Congratulations." Tessa assessed her with a frown. "You seem—pretty calm. Too calm."

"Thanks for the congrats. I'm grateful to have a real job," Viv said. Truthfully, the job offer had filled her with dread, not excitement. It meant starting over in a new city far away from everyone she loved. And it meant leaving Logan. But what was she supposed to do, be an elf her entire life?

She slid over the second envelope. "This one's from Robert Benjamin," she said. "He does photography gallery shows. After Sheila took down my photos, I revenge-submitted them. Otherwise, I wouldn't have dared." She paused. "He's a kingmaker."

Tessa looked up from the envelope. "What does that mean?"

"He helps artists rise. If you get his attention, your work might actually go places. It's like when an author gets an agent to represent them to get published." She paused. "Of course it's still a long shot but...oh Tessa." Her eyes filled with tears. "I've had it in my pocket all morning. I'm terrified. And excited. And way too hopeful." Her voice actually cracked on the last word. "I need you to open it."

Tessa grabbed her hand. “Oh, honey.” Alongside them, Rosie gave up on the toothbrushing song and began tossing big plastic rings. Viv got up and gathered them and stacked them up for her again. Then Rosie chose an orange one to taste. What was with this kid and orange today?

Tessa tapped the edge of the envelope on the table. “Let’s think about this for a minute. How will the information in here change your life?”

“Tessa, I don’t want to stay here for a man. But I don’t want to leave, either. I want to grab on to this one golden thread of happiness. But I have to somehow make the rest of my life work out, too.”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes.”

“I thought so.” She grabbed a knife and tore the envelope open. “So I guess the next question is, how much do you love doing photography?”

“You know what a risky business it is.”

She frowned. “I didn’t ask that.”

“You know I love it.”

“I can see that you’re way more excited about this than the job offer. What does that tell you?”

Viv shook her head. “It tells me that I can’t afford to be foolish. I need job stability. I need people to stop feeling sorry for me. I mean, I should be absolutely thrilled with the Preston and Preston job after all those classes and all those shifts at the Christmas store but...”

Tessa looked her straight in the eye. “But what?”

That’s when she really started to bawl. Tears sprang from her eyes and she wiped them on her T-shirt sleeve.

“Oh, honey.” Tessa enveloped her in a hug.

“I haven’t told Logan. Funny how I would’ve been thrilled about this before Logan came back into my life. This job was exactly what I’ve been waiting for. But now...”

She'd finally managed to navigate herself out of her rut. So then why wasn't she happy?

"I was going to say it might be your nerves talking," Tessa said. "Or it might be your heart telling you it's just not what you want." She smiled. "Let's open it."

Tessa ripped the letter open. She offered it to Viv, but Viv motioned for Tessa to read it, which she did. Finally, she looked up and said, "He wants to show your photos in his gallery as a collection. And he wants to feature you as an upcoming new artist."

"What?" Tears filled her eyes again. "Upcoming artist? Really?" She tugged the paper out of her sister's fingers and read it over herself. "He loved them. He loved my work."

Tessa nodded, her eyes shiny with tears herself. "Yes."

"It was Logan—he encouraged me to submit the photos." Just then, a vision entered Viv's mind, unsummoned, of the little corner studio. Filled with photographs—hers and others. A gallery. A place to display photos, to showcase them, to run classes, to create her own art.

It was a pipe dream. She was years away from realizing that. And also there was no way she could possibly afford the space.

Even preparing for a gallery show as an up-and-coming artist would require tons of time, more photographs, serious dedication...

She'd known what it had been like to be the chosen one, a person lauded for her talent, headed for an amazing career. And then she also knew what it had been like to lose everything.

Yet deep inside, it was as if a teeny-tiny little flame had suddenly been reignited, like a pilot light that had gone out long ago and had just flamed back to life, leaving her excited and also terrified.

Rosie let out a wide yawn, indicating that she had to get to her day. It was getting late, and Viv still had a million things to do. "If I bring you a couple of cans of tuna," she asked Tessa,

“will you stop by and feed that little cat this weekend?”

“That kitty needs a real name,” Tessa said, “and a real bed.” She made it sound as if adopting a cat was the easiest thing in the world for Viv to do right now.

“Please stop looking at me like that. Maybe I could take her to the shelter.” And maybe she should. But the thought of not visiting the little cat or playing with her was too hard to think of. As was handing her over to the shelter, even though she would be the perfect pet for someone. Someone else, that was. Not Viv.

Tessa grabbed a couple of books from the end table and pressed them into Viv’s hands. “Leo told me these are Logan’s earliest books. He found them at a garage sale. Go to the lake, relax, talk to Logan. Things will work out.”

Viv looked gratefully at her oldest sister, who had been like a second mother to her growing up. “Thank you for listening.” She kissed Rosie on the head. “Good luck at daycare, sister. You’re gonna love it.” Viv took the strangely affirmative noise accompanied by a raspberry as definite positives.

Tessa gave her a squeeze on the way out. “My only advice is to decide what you really want, not what you think you *should* want.”

Which was a whole lot easier to say than do.

...

Logan was sitting in the beauty shop, barely ten minutes into getting his hair turned back to its normal color, when Tessa walked in and spotted him sitting in a dryer chair between Mrs. Margolis, who was eighty-two and hard of hearing, and Mrs. Ramadi, who was reading a *People* magazine while actively trying to matchmake him with one of her four daughters.

“*Help*,” he mouthed from across the room.

Tessa walked right over. “Logan! How fun.” She eyed his hair, which Margo of Curl’s Up had coated with some kind of brown pasty concoction, which also made it stick up all over.

“Are you enjoying your salon time?” She appeared to be taking great pleasure in his discomfort.

“You bet,” he said. “Shouldn’t you be working?”

“I hired some help and I just dropped Rosie off at daycare. I feel strangely terrified but also strangely relieved. Plus I have a whole hour to sneak away just for me.”

She did look more relaxed. “Glad to hear it.” Logan glanced at his watch. “Margo,” he called out, “how much time did you say I have left?”

“Twenty more minutes, baby,” Margo said as she used a round brush and a blow dryer on a client with an authority that made Logan have all the respect.

“Maybe he’d like his nails done next,” Mrs. Margolis whispered to Mrs. Ramadi.

“Hey,” Tessa said, examining her own. “Robby Bosch gets his done and they look better than mine.”

“Thanks, love,” Margo said. “Robby’s got amazing taste. Have a seat, Tessa. I’ll be with you as soon as I finish here.”

Tessa laughed. “No hurry. I’m relishing every second of this. I want that special head massage you do when you shampoo me, okay? I’ve been looking forward to it all month.” She took a seat across from Logan. “How’s it going?”

Logan smiled, glad to have Tessa’s company, despite the fact that she appeared to be enjoying his predicament a little too much. “Besides the pink hair? Good. Great.”

“Oh good. I think my sister would echo that. She was excited to have the afternoon off and be able to head straight up to the cottage. In fact, Leo found these old books of yours at the bookstore. He hasn’t even had a chance to read them yet. I ended up sending them with Viv for the weekend.”

Logan sucked in a breath as he sat forward. He’d been so busy, he hadn’t made an effort to survey the town for that first thorn in his side. He tried to force himself to be calm, because what were the odds it was *that book*? Very, very slim. “Which ones were they?” He hoped he sounded nonchalant. Because

he was starting to sweat.

Tessa stared at him for a second. Probably because he sounded a little intense. He tried to drop the pitch of his voice. “I—um—I just wondered if you happened to remember the titles.”

“Um, let’s see.” She considered thoughtfully, listing the features on her fingers. “One of them had a cover with a white background and a terrified woman looking behind her shoulder in the middle.”

Logan mentally thumbed through his books. That could be any number of them.

“Oh, I remember now,” Tessa said with enthusiasm. “Leo told me he was trolling through a pile of old books that had just come in from an estate sale and ran across your photo on the back cover of one of them. Something like you wrote the book under a pen name or something? When Leo’s done, I’m going to read it, too. We’re going to binge-read all your books from the beginning.”

His heart sank. Fate really was a bitch. And he was totally screwed.

Logan bit back a curse and accidentally plowed a hand through his hair, immediately coating his fingers in dye.

“Now, sugar, you know you’re not supposed to touch that stuff.” Margo pointed with her thumb. “Use the sink back there to wash that dye off your hand.”

“Excuse me, Tessa.” Logan got up, bypassed the sink, and walked directly over to Margo. “Margo, I’m sorry to ask this, but I have to get my head rinsed. Like, now.”

“Is everything all right?” Tessa asked.

Nothing would be if he didn’t get to Viv ASAP. Logan walked back over to Tessa and dropped his voice. “Viv *can’t* read that book.”

“Well, I mean, I know Leo wanted it bad, but she promised to take good care of it.”

He sat back down on the edge of the seat. “Not for that

reason. It's the one I wrote when I was young and—angry.”

“You were young and angry?” Mrs. Ramadi asked over her glasses. “Maybe you aren't suitable for my daughters after all.”

“Make that young and *heartbroken*. Over Viv.”

“Oh. That sounds interesting,” Mrs. Margolis sort of shouted from under the dryer.

“Not really,” Logan said. “It was my revenge book.”

“Lots of women come in asking for revenge bangs,” Margo said. “I always try to discourage them.”

Tessa stood up and pulled Logan over to the side, out of hearing range. “Are you saying you wrote a book about my *sister*?”

He cleared his throat. “Not exactly. I sort of—wrote a villain that very slightly resembles her. Er—in a bad way.”

“Oh.” Tessa stared in disbelief, trying to wrap her head around what he just said.

“It gets worse,” Logan said. “I haven't told her.” He touched her shoulder with his non-dyed hand. “I've got to go.”

He started to take off his cape, but Margo steered him over to the sink bowl. “Keep your britches on, honey. You've got fifteen more minutes on that color. You sure you can't wait?”

Logan cast her a look that was probably worthy of one of his crazed villains.

Margo threw up her hands. “Okay, it's a love mission. I get it.” As soon as he sat down, she pressed his shoulders down to position him under the sink and turned on the water.

A minute later, Margo had wrapped his head in a black towel and helped him sit up. He thanked her, then promptly yanked off his cape and the towel. Grabbing two fifties out of his wallet and leaving them on Margo's counter, he nodded to Tessa and left, not even bothering to smooth his hair down on the way out.

Chapter 21

Logan tried not to speed on the winding country roads. He attempted to breathe deeply and calmly. But he wasn't calm, and the smell of the donuts he'd picked up was making him nauseous. Hell, he was making himself nauseous.

The donuts were a bad idea. A terrible idea. But he was desperate.

He'd told himself there was never a right time to tell Viv about the book. And he'd been right—there never would be. Plain and simple, he'd avoided doing what he should have done.

He prayed for a break. *Please, don't let her read it.* Or maybe she'd started the book but fallen asleep in the sun and would wake up a little sunburnt but not hating him.

Who was he kidding? He pounded himself in the head, but that didn't give him any more sense. How could he be so stupid?

He knew exactly why. Viv was tough, hardworking, loving, and funny. But in one way she was fragile—in her view of herself—her past failures, specifically. Yet she'd finally let him in, despite all her reservations.

He hadn't wanted to do anything to jeopardize that. She was like a beautiful rare bird that you want to come and sit on your shoulder. One false move, and *poof*... gone.

That's what he'd been afraid of.

And now his hesitation would cost him the relationship of his life.

As he drove up the winding gravel drive, foreboding grew like a balloon in his stomach, larger and larger, expanding his dread.

The lake was quiet. *Serene* was how Logan would describe it on any other perfect spring day, the sunshine sparkling so luminously off the water that it hurt to look. But his heart was

hammering against his chest, his shirt was sticking to his skin, and the sense of calm that simply pulling up to the cottage always instilled in him now did exactly the opposite. As he got out of the car and ran past the house and straight down to the water, the entire lakefront looked deserted, empty. Kids weren't out of school yet for the summer, so the air was devoid of happy screams and splashing, the sense of stillness adding to his unease.

The first thing he did was run to the dock, where he found a beach towel and a can of diet soda. Abandoned?

Calm down, he told himself. Maybe Viv went in for a snack. More suntan lotion. Her phone. A Band-Aid. To pee.

"She's gone," someone said. Logan whirled around on the dock to find old Vick standing behind him on the shore, stroking his white beard, his ever-present fishing pole in one hand. "Left in a hurry a little while ago. Yellin' and cryin' and wavin' her arms."

Logan wasn't sure what was more shocking: the fact that Vick was talking to him for the first time in years—with actual words, not his usual passing wave—or that he'd actually noticed that Viv was upset. On the other hand, it sounded like Viv's state of mind would have been hard to miss.

Stupid, stupid him.

"Did she—did she say where she was going?"

"Naw, I stayed out of her way. She took one of those big hardcover books"—he used his hands to demonstrate the size—"and hurled it right into the water." He made an overhead motion, like he was fly fishing. Or sinking a basket.

Or throwing away a relationship forever.

Logan was cooked. He was dinner. He was the most pathetic man on the planet. He was algae. Pond scum. Red tide.

"Thanks, Vick," he said, handing him the box of donuts. Because he sure wasn't going to be needing them anymore.

...

For the first time in years, Viv had no desire to capture the spectacular sunset that just unfolded before her on her mom's deck—hues of salmons and pinks, then the pure blue of the sky deepening to indigo.

She wished it were cloudy. No, that it was snowing. Blizzarding. Anything to blot out the beauty.

No sunset could soothe her heartbroken soul.

How could Logan do it? How could he paint her as a caricature, as a beautiful, spoiled, murderous villain? Had he hated her so much?

Yep, that sunset was completely wasted on her tonight.

The creak of the Tek flooring of the deck gave away Logan's presence even before he said a word. Viv swiped at her eyes and sat up, bracing herself. She'd known he'd find her—had been expecting him, even—but that gave her no relief. It didn't stop the awful nausea or the ice-cold sense of dread that pumped through her veins and gave her goose bumps despite the warm evening. How could the brilliant-hued sunset, the noisy chattering of the birds, and the earthy scent of growing things, all so much a promise of springtime and joy, still be bursting all around when her world had suddenly turned pitch black?

She needed time to think. Time to make sense out of what she'd read. But everything was a jumble.

Viv swallowed hard, but her words got stuck in her throat like a giant wad of balled-up Kleenex. She'd used a lot of those today, too.

"Viv, I—" Logan stood at the top step, pausing there before he walked onto the deck. "I'm sorry you found out this way."

She squeezed her eyes shut. Because if she'd had any doubt at all, his words just confirmed the worst to be true—that the character in his book possessed all of her worst characteristics, every single trait that she'd ever disliked about herself the most. Everything she'd had to reckon with about her past, it was all there, all spelled out in Times New Roman for the whole world to see. "Were you ever going to tell me? That you

wrote me as the villain of the book that made you famous?”

He'd painted his character as the beautiful, popular girl who cared too much about what people thought. The girl who thought she was special, who believed that her talent was exceptional. Who took advantage of her family.

It was nonsense. But there were enough bits and pieces of her everywhere that it stung hard.

Logan sat down across from Viv. To his credit, he didn't try to sit next to her or soothe her. “Vivienne,” he said softly, “that character wasn't you.”

She pierced him with a glare. “Bernadette is my middle name. Which is a nice name. *Way* too nice for a psychopathic killer.” She counted off on her fingers. “Your character has a French background. She's a wannabe artist. She was a cheerleader. She hates peas. Shall I go on?”

“There's no need.” He stood up and paced the deck. *Creak, creak, creak*. The noise made her flinch. How could a formerly pleasant sound now seem worse than nails on a chalkboard? “Please hear me out. I'm going to tell you the whole truth. Something I should have done a long time ago.”

She swept her arm out in front of her. “Please, go for it.” She shook her head sadly. “And to think that you were the one out of the two of us who I thought was incapable of holding back the truth.”

He winced, and that made her feel just a little better. He was the one who'd peeled back all her walls. Who couldn't hold back his feelings. Who had been so honest with her. She was the one who hadn't wanted a relationship. Who'd had such difficulty dealing with her feelings. But he'd made it all seem possible. That she could figure out her life and love him at the same time.

He'd made it easy to fall in love with him.

Fall in love. Yep. That's what she'd done.

“Vivienne, everything I've told you has been the truth.”

She stabbed him with a look. “Except for this little

omission, right?”

He threw his hands up as he paced. “I wrote that stupid book when I was in college. In *college*, Viv. I started it when I was twenty. Do the math, Viv. That was two full years after that night I tried to kiss you.”

He paused—hesitated, maybe. But she didn’t understand what he was getting at. “I-I’m not sure what you’re trying to say.”

“I poured out all my heartache and rage on the page. Did I cast you as the villain? Yes. Did I write it because I was angry? Hell, yes. Was I hiding that from you? Also yes. I tried to tell you, but there was never a good time. You were so reluctant to give me a chance, Viv. And dammit, I wanted that chance with you. Desperately. I wanted you to trust me and let your guard down. And when you finally did, I...I couldn’t believe it. There seemed to never be a good time to throw a wrench in things and risk having you shut down again.” He looked her in the eye. “The book isn’t very good. But it’s passionate. And that’s why it got published. Because I poured two solid years of heartache into it. I hope you can forgive me my youthful mistake.”

She sat on the edge of her seat. She didn’t want to know the answers to her questions, but she knew she needed to hear them. “Is that who you thought I was? Maybe I was a selfish and self-centered eighteen-year-old. And maybe I did care too much about what my friends thought about a lot of things. And maybe I did feel that I was some kind of Ansel Adams or something because my photos won a few contests.

“But you were my *best friend*. I never betrayed you. And I never, ever set out to crush your heart.” No, she hadn’t. Turned her cheek, yes. Ran from him, again yes. But betrayed their friendship? *Never*. “Logan, you betrayed me. What I don’t understand is why.”

He walked in front of her Adirondak chair and squatted down, placing his hands on the arms and looking her straight in the eye. “Vivienne, I’m going to tell you the whole truth. The truth that I never told you.” He paused and stared at her,

his face so familiar, so...open. He didn't seem like the kind of person to take revenge from a stupidly missed kiss. She'd thought she knew him through and through. Yet now it seemed she didn't know him at all.

"I didn't just 'have a crush' on you." He used air quotes. And paused a long time before continuing. "I was *in love* with you. When you turned your cheek and told your friends I was like your brother and there could never be anything more between us, I was devastated. Crushed. *That's* why I didn't stay in contact. I *couldn't* be friends with you anymore. What was between us was always more than friendship for me. I had to save myself. I *had* to get away to a place where I could have a chance of forgetting you."

She gasped.

Logan stood and paced back and forth in front of her on the patio with the grace of a stalking cat. "I was embarrassed, and that made it difficult to face you. But I fricking *loved* you. I can call it what it is now. I couldn't just pretend things were the same. I had to get over you somehow. That's why I wrote the stupid book. It helped me to villainize you. But even that didn't get me very far because the second I saw you again in that silly elf costume, I fell all over again.

"I think I could have forgiven that you didn't want me. But then one of your girlfriends—Helen What's-Her-Name—told me that you'd said that I wasn't your type—too lanky, not enough muscle. That motivated me to get contacts. And new clothes. And to start working out." He gave a soft huff. "I gotta tell you, a broken heart is good for self-improvement."

Viv's anger flared. She got up and followed him across the deck. "You—you—oh, for being so smart, you're so...dumb. It was *never* about what you looked like. It was never about a pimple or being skinny or wearing glasses." She made an exasperated growl of frustration. "Of course I told Helen we were just friends. She had a huge crush on you, and besides, it wasn't any of her business!"

He shook his head. "Let's at least be truthful. You wouldn't have turned away unless you found me unattractive." He

stabbed the air with his finger. “You were *repulsed*.”

“I was not repulsed!” Viv threw up her hands. *Exasperating man*.

“Don’t try to cover it up.”

“I thought you knew me better than anyone. But clearly you don’t.”

A puzzled look crossed his face. “What are you talking about?”

“I loved you, too!”

He stared, disbelieving.

“Not just as a best friend,” she continued. “I had feelings for you, too, but you blindsided me with that kiss.” Her voice cracked as tears filled her throat. “I was terrified that admitting my feelings would ruin my future. I didn’t want to be tied to this town. I didn’t want anything serious just when I was about to get away and find what I thought would be success. I thought that giving in to those feelings would ruin all of that, and maybe our friendship, too. Which happened anyway.”

His expression changed from surprise to shock but never softened. Instead, his brows knit down into an angry frown. “You *ran*, Viv. No, I take that back. You didn’t just run—you *vanished* faster than I could apologize or explain or try to make any kinds of amends.”

She folded her arms. “And then *you* cut me off.”

He folded his right back. “Well, it looks like we’re still not on the same page.”

No, they certainly weren’t. “Maybe I did run. Maybe I was afraid. But I never meant to hurt you. You’re the one who painted me as your villain. You’re the one who was content never to tell me what you did. You—you *started your writing career* from what happened.”

He shook his head sadly but didn’t say anything.

Pain made her stifle a sob. “I’ve decided to take a job in New York. So I have to tell you thanks for the social media

experience. It made a difference.”

“You finally got what you wanted.” He said it with so much bitterness, she cringed.

“Yep.” She could barely speak. This definitely wasn’t turning out the way she’d thought it would. Because hadn’t they both admitted that they’d loved each other? That they’d fallen all over again? Then why were they breaking up instead of making up?

He whirled about one last time. “Be honest with yourself, Viv.” He opened his arms wide. “All this isn’t really about two confused eighteen-year-olds, or an angsty book I wrote as a twenty-year-old who didn’t understand a damn thing about life. This is about what it’s always been about. You have it in your head that you need to prove to everyone you’ve reached some magical level of success. This book thing is just a way to push me away so you can feel better about leaving.”

She choked on a sob. “I’m not ashamed to say that I’m determined.” But that felt...wrong. What she was was completely devastated, and she had no idea how to fix this.

He walked up to her and pointed to her. “*You’ve* got to decide who you’re going to be. You’ve got to decide if you’re going to take the risks to be who you really are or play it safe and be who you think you should be.”

Ouch. That was the final hit. And it hurt so much. “That’s so easy for you to say.”

“Don’t think it was easy for me because I found success at a young age. Writing is my job, Viv. It’s not who I am. I don’t crave success like you do. You want to wait until everything about your life is in perfect order to be able to admit that you’ve found love. I’ve got news for you. Life is never perfect. Love is as close as it comes. You took risks when you were eighteen, but you don’t seem big on taking them now.”

She stubbornly stood her ground. “And clearly you aren’t big on telling the truth.”

He stood there, daggers in his eyes. At that moment, he’d never looked more devastatingly handsome—or more hurt.

“For what it’s worth, you’re not the character in the book. You’re sweet and kind and giving. You love your family, and you love *my* sister like family. The only person you don’t seem to have faith in is yourself.” He turned back one final time. “Congrats on the job. I hope it brings you what you want. I’ll put your check in your mailbox.”

And then he walked away.

Chapter 22

Viv somehow made it on time for her shift the next morning at Christmas Every Day, her very last shift, which should have been a cause for rejoicing. Physically, her body was there. But her mind was completely out to lunch. She broke a box of ornaments, forgot which aisle she left her sticker machine in, and couldn't get rid of a pounding sinus headache from a night of crying.

Sheila walked up to her as she was using the sticker machine to put prices on a million ornament balls in a giant barrel.

"Oh, there you are," she said. Today she was wearing a glittery gold sleeveless blouse and white pants. Viv couldn't help thinking that she resembled one of the shiny balls in the barrel. "I have something special for you to do today. It will be a break from all this." She waved her hands around, like she was offering a reprieve from the stickering, the stacking, the inventory. A spark of hope lit up in Viv's broken elfin heart.

Was Sheila giving her a break? Had she noticed Viv's puffy red eyes and the fact that she kept dropping used Kleenexes from her pockets on the floor like a trail of breadcrumbs?

Maybe the world wasn't all bad. Maybe she could get through this day. Maybe Sheila wasn't an evil alien life-form after all.

More importantly, Viv had avoided confronting her—about the photographs and especially about Elise. Apparently, Viv was excellent at running from conflict on all accounts.

At that moment, Viv heard bits and pieces of Logan's words. *Quit playing it safe. Quit pleasing everyone. Find out who you are.*

The words had been hard to hear, but nevertheless, he'd been right.

Part of her was angry about his juvenile book—about his not telling her more than anything. But maybe she *had* pushed him

away to safeguard her plan to move to New York.

Which was not a bad plan for someone who loved doing PR.

But sadly, she realized deep in her heart, that someone was not her.

“Come here.” Sheila beckoned for Viv to follow her down the aisle to Viv’s office.

Viv was almost done with Christmas Every Day. She could hold it together for a few more hours, right?

Sheila reached into Viv’s office and pulled out a giant—*something*—that looked like two posterboards connected together by straps.

“What is it?” Viv asked, her heart already sinking.

“It’s a body billboard,” Sheila said cheerily, touching the twin yellow straps.

A body *what*? It occurred to Viv that Sheila wanted her to wear the signs. Over her shoulders. She tugged on the straps. Apparently, body billboards weren’t light.

The front of the sign read, *At Christmas Every Day...* and the back continued, *Christmas IS Every Day!*

That was the dumbest sign she’d ever seen. Period.

“I’m sorry, I’m not doing that.” She said it without thinking. It just...came out.

It could be that she hadn’t slept, or that she was distraught and worn down and heartbroken. Or maybe she’d just finally reached her threshold for toxicity.

Sheila’s finely arched brows shot up. “Excuse me?”

Viv took a deep breath. “Why do you have it out for me? What have I ever done to you?”

Sheila shook her head in denial. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Viv had expected that. And the old Viv would have backed down. But not now. “Yes, you do. Every day you give me some unreasonable, redundant task. And every day, I do it. But

not today. Today I want to know why you dislike me so much.”

Sheila faced her, and for the first time Viv saw her usually perfectly placid face break into anger. “You want to know why I don’t like you?” She paused and shook her head. “I guess it doesn’t matter since you’re leaving.”

Viv took a breath and stood up straighter. “It does matter.”

Sheila studied her carefully, as if debating if she should speak. “You want to know? Okay, fine. I’ll tell you.” Sheila stabbed the air with a manicured finger. “You’re pretty. Everyone likes you. You had all this talent, and you went off to Paris, but then you came home to work here just to make money before you go off on another scheme, to do whatever you want. Some of us work and actually live here. This is our job, our life. You were just biding your time before you leave.”

Oh. Viv thought about that. How she’d felt just the same about Sheila in high school—a pretty, popular girl who’d seemed to have it all. So much so that Viv had been afraid to be her friend. “You’re not wrong—about some things. I desperately needed money and Delores did me the favor of hiring me. But I’m not spoiled, or blind to other people’s feelings. And I’ve shown up and done my job, every day.” She considered something else. “Did I—did I ever do anything to hurt you? If I did, I never meant to.”

Sheila snorted. “Oh, come on, Vivienne. You’ve always been the town sweetheart. Universally loved.”

Hardly. Viv thought back to herself as a teenager, when she’d thought Sheila had everything—beauty, brains, and any boy she wanted. Now she saw her in a different light. Now Viv understood that no one had a perfect life.

Viv’s photography had been her ticket out. Maybe she *had* thought a lot of herself. But she had learned hard lessons. And she was done focusing on her failures instead of her successes. This time—this time she was going to stand up for herself.

“If I hurt you, I’m sorry. I’ve never intentionally been mean to anybody. I probably had other problems, though. Like

thinking I was special. Or assuming that life was easy. Or trying too hard to get people to like me. But I'm not like that now. I also hope you know that I've done nothing but keep my head down and do every single time-wasting task you've asked me to. It's funny, but when we were in high school, I envied you so much. I thought I wasn't worthy to be your friend. So maybe we've misunderstood each other from the beginning."

Sheila looked her in the eye and Viv felt like maybe, for the first time, they were having a real conversation. "My grandma is sick and I help my mom care for her. I'm stuck here. But I'm determined to make a success out of managing this store."

Oh wow. And hadn't she just been through a divorce? "You have great management skills," was the most positive thing Viv could say. "And I'm sorry about your grandmother." She thought about bringing up the photographs, or even telling her more about what an awful boss she'd been.

Instead, she said, "I know you think your niece is guiltless, but she really was giving it her all to make Elise Matthews' life difficult. For her sake, pretending that didn't happen won't help her. She needs guidance, now more than ever, because her friends have dumped her. You should know that."

Sheila stiffened. "My niece would never bully anybody."

Right, well, at least she'd tried. Viv said goodbye, then walked all the way up the main aisle for the last time and out the door, pulling off her elf cap and leaving it on the cashier counter on the way out.

Outside, leaning against the side of the building, Viv pressed a hand against her chest, where her heart was racing. She felt a little sick.

Maybe she was still figuring out who she was, and maybe she wasn't all the way there yet. But she was done running from conflict. She was done playing it safe.

Maybe Logan would have been proud of her just now.

Too bad she hadn't learned that skill before she lost him for good.

...

An hour later, Viv was sitting on the stoop at the back entrance of the old dance studio, popping open a can of cat food. The little tabby darted out of the weeds under the steps and bolted right over. As Viv sat and watched her eat, she noticed that the clumps of weeds had flower buds on them.

If she wasn't mistaken, they were daisies. Big, overgrown clumps of them maybe, but nevertheless, not weeds after all.

Hmmm. Daisy. That might be a nice name for a cat.

That felt like one positive sign from the universe as Viv glanced down at the cat carrier she'd hidden on the other side of the steps.

Viv was playing with the cat as she wound her tail around Viv's legs when Carol Drake, Blossom Glen realtor extraordinaire, pulled up in her big white SUV with a big pink blossom and the Blossom Glen Realty logo on the side.

Viv took a deep breath and prayed for courage.

One thing about losing the love of your life—it made you feel as if you had nothing left to lose.

"Hi, Viv," Carol said, stepping out of the vehicle. She was dressed in a wild floral-print dress with dangling earrings. Reaching in, she grabbed a purse large enough to inflict serious damage if used as a weapon and a couple of bright pink file folders. As she walked toward Viv, she assessed the situation. "I see you've got a little friend there."

"We've become pals since I've been working next door," Viv said. "I must admit an occasional can of tuna hasn't hurt." Viv scratched the little furball behind her ears. The cat gave a soft purr and headbutted her hand for more.

"She's a friendly little thing, isn't she?" Carol chuckled. "Are you a *she*? To me, you just look like one."

"She's a she," Viv confirmed.

Carol raised a perfect brow. "With a name?"

"What do you think of Daisy?" Was that good enough to suit

her big personality?

“How sweet.” Carol smiled and reached out her arm to pet the cat, then suddenly pulled back. “Oh. She hasn’t been to the vet yet, has she?”

Viv lifted the cat carrier next to her. “Her appointment’s at five. I haven’t seen any fleas, but you’re wise to be cautious.” But as for her, caution was to the wind. She never wanted to utter that cursed word again.

Was it probably not the smartest time to get a cat? Maybe. But it wasn’t every day that a cat picked you to be their human.

And Viv wasn’t about to miss out on that.

Carol waved a dismissive hand. “Ah, you’re a softie.”

Viv felt herself give a little smile. Strange, because she didn’t think she had any of those left in her. “I didn’t really have a choice. She sort of...picked me.”

All Viv had to do was say yes.

And today, she decided, she was going to commit. To something. Actually, to a couple of big somethings. But the first was to provide a home for her little friend.

Carol checked her watch. “Well then, we’d better do a quick tour. Unless you think you’ll lose the cat in the meantime?”

Viv had to chuckle. Probably the first time she’d laughed in quite a while. “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem,” she said as she followed Carol into the building. “This cat seems to pop out whenever I come by. But today, since I have a carrier for her, that might be an issue.”

“We’ll make the tour quick, then you’ll still have plenty of time to corral her for her appointment.”

“Great. Thanks.” Viv followed Carol into the bottom floor of the studio. It was light and bright, an artist’s paradise, with excellent Main Street frontage, a plus for any business. It had honey-colored wood floors that needed to be refinished and fancy crown moldings from another century. And an ornate tin ceiling that someone had painted white.

It was her dream studio. If she closed her eyes, she could see it as an art space. A gallery. With extra rooms in the back for an office and darkroom.

And...she couldn't afford it. Not now. Not *yet*.

If anything, life had taught her her limitations.

Logan, however, had encouraged her to dream big again.

So her new life was going to have to be a compromise of both. But this time, she vowed not to let fear limit her choices.

With that, she heard a plaintive meow through the screen door. As if Daisy agreed.

"Someone's calling your name," Carol said with a chuckle.

It did appear that way. "Carol, this is my dream space and I love it so much." She took a big breath. "But I'm not ready for it—yet." She didn't need perfection. She could be okay with something less perfect. While not forgetting to dream. "I was more interested in the little office on the second floor. Could we go see that one?"

"Of course. I brought the combination for the lock." As Carol walked her out of the studio and to the stairwell, Viv glanced outside. That silly cat was literally climbing into the carrier. No kidding.

It made her think that miracles really could happen.

Viv took a glance around the much smaller space, which had an open front room that faced Main Street, then an office not much bigger than her one at the Christmas store, and a bathroom. And, she noted, a sizable closet that she felt confident could double as a darkroom. Most of her work would be digital but she loved experimenting with real film. The light was good, and the best part was that the office had a pretty view overlooking some giant trees in the back of the building. It was...peaceful. A good space to work and create.

Carol was talking to her. "May I ask what you want this for? I mean, I know you take photographs, but..."

"I want to make photography accessible to anyone. I want to teach some classes and do some experimenting with my own

stuff. And in the meantime, I want to take photos of people... babies and high school kids and people getting married and people married fifty years. Someday maybe I'll have a gallery, but that isn't today." While her saved-up money would go a lot further here than in New York, she knew she'd need a rock-solid business plan before she could commit to such a nice space.

Good thing she also had that PR degree.

"Tourists like to buy art, too," Carol said. "And get their photos taken. And I'll just mention it, but did you know that city businesses can apply for art grants? Maybe you could get one, Viv. I mean, everyone's seen your work. You'd probably wow the art council if you gave a presentation."

"Thanks, Carol. I'll keep that in mind."

This wasn't her full-blown dream of one day being a photographer whose work was shown in galleries, but working with Robert Benjamin, and learning, and making new contacts would put her in a position to be able to work toward that. Plus she'd be able to take photos all day.

Which she loved.

She was excited.

And heartbroken. A confusing mix.

All that was missing was to share this with Logan. He'd been right—about a lot of things. But he'd also been untruthful—and that had hurt her a lot.

But even though her heart was broken, she could still go on.

She was figuring her life out. She was figuring herself out.

And she could still do some social media building for local businesses on the side if she needed to.

"I want to sign for the space," she said, breaking into a small smile. "Sound okay?"

Carol smiled. "I wish I could rent you the whole giant space, but that's okay for now. We're thrilled to have you as a business owner downtown. Congratulations. You just got

yourself a photography studio. I'll email you the paperwork.”

A business owner.

Cool. Now she just needed the business. She had a lot of work to do.

Carol stepped out the back door to take a phone call, leaving Viv alone for a few minutes. She walked across the big studio over to the Main Street window, one which she passed on the way to work every single day since she'd returned home. Outside, tourists walked and shopped and headed down to the Christmas store.

Standing there looking out, she was overcome with a sense of love for their little town. And pride that she would be able to make her way as one of its business owners. She would stay and continue to be a part of it all. That felt...right.

And she had finally gotten herself out of the Christmas shop.

The meows hit her loud and clear. This time, one after another in quick succession.

“Either she wants more tuna or a ride home,” Carol called through the back screen door.

Viv checked her watch. “Better go,” she said to the empty space, her words echoing off the walls. “I have a pet to get to the vet.”

...

Logan had an official word count of minus fifteen hundred for the day. Not only did he not write a single word, but he also deleted all of yesterday's words...by accident, which made it even worse.

His brain just wasn't functioning.

“I haven't seen you sleep this much since you were a teenager,” his mom said, walking into his bedroom and sitting on the edge of his bed. “Have you showered today?”

He shrugged. “You know what they say about adults who

move back into their childhood bedrooms.”

“What’s that?”

He was trying to distract her so she wouldn’t ask about Viv. “They regress about 0.5 years a day. Give me a few more days and I might even forget the alphabet.”

“Logan, you poor thing.” His mom patted him on the head. “Your jokes aren’t even funny. How about you take a shower and get some fresh air? Also, don’t forget you promised to sell books at the festival this evening starting at seven.”

He stifled a groan. He’d completely forgotten about the elephant-ears-slash-book-sale idea he’d agreed to long ago. The last thing he wanted to do was put on a smiley face and pretend his world was right side up. How could he have been so stupid to lay his heart on the line again and have the same woman trample it?

His mom wasn’t going away. She glanced at her watch. “It’s six now,” she said, not unkindly.

He hated seeing pity in his mom’s eyes. But maybe that’s what made him start talking. “This is exactly like twelve years ago, Mom. I went overboard with my feelings, and she pulled back. Told me she’s going to New York.”

His mom gave him a look.

“Okay, okay. She found out about the book.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you about that.”

“Viv is entitled to be angry about that,” he said straight up. “I withheld the truth from her. I was afraid it would scare her away.” And why wouldn’t it? He’d painted a character with a lot of bad traits. Exaggerated traits, but ones that Viv recognized. That was unforgivable.

“Maybe she wouldn’t be so desperate to leave if she thought she could trust you. Did you tell her you loved her?”

“I do love her, Mom. But to be honest, that message might have gotten lost among all the bad traits I gave that character.”

“You know something? I’m glad you’re miserable.” His

mother. All the drama. He waited for her to expound on that. “You know why? Because it means you *feel* something. I think you numbed yourself from all your emotions for the longest time because that was what you had to do with all the trouble between your dad and me.”

Viv had certainly got him feeling again. From the very first second he saw her in the Christmas store, the earth had moved under his feet. The same explosive chemistry had come roaring back. But he also knew what they had was far more than physical.

“She helped me reach out to Elise.” Basically, Viv made it easy to open his heart that had been closed off for so long. “And she’s got me interacting with fans. People email me and tell me they love my books. They comment on the photos I post. They give me their opinions and tell me what their favorite books are. It’s kind of...fun.”

“Do you see what you’re saying?”

He managed a small smile. “That I’m on my way to a social media addiction?”

“No. You’ve shown you’re not your dad.”

I’m not my dad.

Yeah, that would be right. Opening up a little to his fans hadn’t pulled him under. It had just allowed him to interact with people more. Which, for someone who sat and wrote all day, was kind of nice. “Viv brings out...the best in me.”

His mom crossed her arms and got a satisfied look on her face. “So tell her that.”

He’d accused Viv of pushing him away, but hadn’t he pushed her away himself by criticizing her, accusing her of being so worried about success? “I’m not sure if she’ll ever trust me again.” He sat on the edge of his bed, tenting his fingers together.

He thought about how Viv had opened him up. He thought about how his father was the opposite of open. And he knew he could do better. “I know what I have to do. I’m going to beg her forgiveness. And I’m going to pull out all the stops.”

He looked up at his mom, grateful for the wisdom. “I love you, Mom.”

“That’s my Logan.” She patted him on the knee. “Just make sure to shower first.”

...

Logan took a shower and got dressed. Just as he was about to leave, he saw Elise sitting on the deck reading.

“Hey,” he said, taking a seat on the end of a reclining lawn chair next to hers.

She lowered her sunglasses. “I see your hair has faded to a fine purply-black today.”

“Yeah.” He gave a slight chuckle. “Seventeen more washes and it might actually look brown again.”

“Thanks for all you did,” his sister said, her eyes warm with gratitude. It was a relief to see her relaxed instead of on edge with the stress and worry that had been a constant for so long. “It worked, you know. Because of you and Viv and Micah, Gretchen’s friends ditched her. And Lainey is actually kind of...nice.”

He nodded. “Glad to hear things are better.”

“I sort of feel sorry for Gretchen,” Elise said. “I mean, it must be awful to be left with nothing.”

“Elise, you are—” Special. Really special. “I just want you to know I’m lucky to be your brother.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re genuinely kind. You care about people.” After all she’d been through, she was worried about the person who’d made her miserable. “Maybe Gretchen will figure out why she needed to bully someone else to feel important.”

Elise smiled. “Let’s hope so. For her sake.”

After a pause, he added, “There’s one thing I wanted to ask you.” He rubbed his neck, feeling uncomfortable but knowing he had to say what was on his mind. “I know you feel close to

Viv, and you went to her with your problem. But I was wondering—why not me?”

She let the sunglasses fall over her eyes. “Well, you know, it was the writing contest.”

“I know you didn’t want to tell me about that. But, I mean, you were in trouble, and you wouldn’t tell me. In the end, you chose Viv.” He forced himself to ask the tough question. “Have I—have I been a bad brother?”

She sat up and took off the sunglasses. “Logan, I love you a lot. But to be honest, you’ve been kind of invisible.”

Ouch. That shattered him. “You mean because I haven’t been around much?”

She shrugged. “I mean, we talk on the phone, but we don’t say much.”

He heaved a sigh. Opening up was hard, but Viv had taught him it was the only way people knew you loved them. “You know a big reason why I came back was to get to know you better. I was thinking that being in the same town would give us an opportunity to hang out more. I—I want you to be able to come to me for anything. And I’m sorry if I haven’t been the greatest at communicating.

“I think—I think I let a lot of relationships go by the wayside because I didn’t invest in them. Maybe it had something to do with Mom and Dad and all that. But that’s not an excuse for me anymore. I’m telling you I’m investing now. I love you. And I’m so proud of you.”

Elise’s eyes filled with tears. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

Logan hugged his sister right back. Then he drew back and said, “So while we’re being honest, you didn’t tell me you were writing. Even though I’m a writer.”

“A writer who believes no one should choose writing as a career,” she said.

He heaved a sigh. “Well, that is what we grew up hearing.”

“But you chose it and you like it,” she said, not giving him a

pass.

“It’s a hard, roller-coaster life, Elise, and no guarantee of financial stability.” He sounded like he was a hundred. But he had to warn her of the risks. Didn’t he?

“But what if—what if it’s your dream?”

Logan wanted to clutch his chest and cry out, *Don’t abandon nursing school!* But he refrained.

He thought of Viv and her dreams and knew how hard it was for any artist to succeed.

But then he thought of his own dreams. His passion. What would he even do that gave him an inkling of the happiness he felt when he was creating a story? Had it been worth the risk for him? Yes. *Absolutely.*

Viv had believed in his writing when no one else did and encouraged him to keep going. What would have happened to him if she hadn’t?

“You know what? You’re right that no one can tell you what you love. Or what you should do with your life. I’m sorry you felt you had to hide your passion for writing. I’m sorry you couldn’t come to me about any of this. I—I want to be a better brother. I just love you so much. And I’m so proud of you. I’d like to read some of your stuff.”

She looked up at him, blushing a little. “It’s—it’s not so great. I mean—I’m just trying to learn...”

He kissed her on the head. “Let me be the judge of that.”

“I wrote half a novel,” she confessed. “Want to have a look sometime?”

Oh no. Not a novel at seventeen, just like he’d done. “Absolutely,” he said. “But are you sure you don’t want to go to nursing school?”

“Honestly?” she asked. “No.”

“All righty then,” he said, giving her a side hug. “Go for it. And did I say that I love you?” He checked his watch, surprised at the time. “I have to go sell books at the festival.

See you there?”

“I’ll be there with Micah.” As he got up to go, she smiled a mischievous little-sister smile that instantly made him realize that the happy and chill Elise she had once been was back in full force, “Logan...if you talk to Vivienne that way, she’ll probably forgive you. I know I did. And...I love you, too.”

Chapter 23

Viv walked into her mom's house and straight onto the back deck so she wouldn't miss the sunset, which was becoming a habit every night she could catch it. It was the golden hour, a photography term applied to the special light the hour or so before sunset, and she could think of nothing better to soothe her soul than to capture the beauty, camera in hand. Beauty always made her feel better, no matter how badly her heart ached.

She was a little shocked to find her mom sitting on the deck in one of the Adirondak chairs, drinking a glass of wine.

And...there was a firepit. Lit and crackling, with vibrant golds, oranges, and reds.

"You got a firepit?" was the first thing out of her mouth. What was even more surprising was that her mom was actually sitting down, chatting with Delores Teeter. She couldn't remember the last time her mom had had company over.

Her mom responded by pouring her a glass, too. "Have a seat," she said, handing it to her then gesturing to the empty chair.

Viv sank into the giant chair, placing the cat carrier between her legs.

"What's in that thing?" her mom asked, a little on edge.

"Just a little kitten," Viv said. "A very healthy six-month-old kitten. Who's just had her shots, haven't you, baby?"

Her mom bent over to see. Viv knew it wouldn't take much to win her over. She opened the lid and the kitten popped out, quick as a surprise package.

"Should you let her loose like that?" her mom asked.

Delores laughed. "She's been surviving under the back porch of the old dance studio. I think she picked Viv to be her mom."

Viv felt rather than saw her mom's eyeroll. "Haven't you got enough on your plate right now?"

"This cat literally jumped into the carrier to go to the vet, Mom. I'm not kidding."

"Hope she doesn't regret that decision." Her mom chuckled as she watched the cat prowl around the border of the wooden fence. "Raphie might eat her."

"Raphie's a kind old soul. You don't mind if I keep her, do you?"

Her mom lifted a brow. "Would you listen if I said no?"

"Um, it might be a little too late for that." Viv smiled. "I've already spent a hundred and fifty bucks."

Her mom lifted her glass. "Welcome to motherhood."

Delores chuckled and Viv clinked her glass with theirs. For a few minutes, they watched Raphie protectively stalk the kitty as she explored the fenced-in backyard, which was kind of sweet.

"Shouldn't you be closing the store?" Viv asked Delores.

She waved a hand. "Oh, Sheila's got it handled." She glanced at her watch. "But I'd better get going. George will wonder what happened to me." Delores stood and set down her glass. "Thanks for the wine, Joanna."

"Thanks for the good company," Viv's mom said.

Delores turned to Viv. "I hired Gretchen. Sheila had her stacking—or, should I say, restacking—Santas when I left."

Viv's heart nearly stopped. "You hired Gretchen?" Also, great news that Viv wasn't the only one on the receiving end of Sheila-torture.

"Sheila asked me to and I agreed. And since you're leaving, it was perfect timing."

Viv's mouth dropped open. "Wait. Sheila *asked* you to?"

"She's not all bad." She flashed a wise smile. "Neither is Gretchen."

“I hope she does okay.” She knew that Gretchen had a lot to learn, but Viv couldn’t help but feel sorry for her.

“I think with some hard work and discipline, she just might come to appreciate people a little bit more. At least, that’s Sheila’s hope.”

“Sheila knows Gretchen wasn’t the angel she thought she was?” This was getting even more unbelievable.

“I think she probably always knew it.”

Hmmm. Well, that was interesting. “Delores, I have to ask you something. Why did you hire Sheila?”

“For the same reason I hired you,” she said matter-of-factly. “You both needed a job.”

“She’s made my life a living hell these past few months,” Viv confessed.

Delores chuckled. Chuckled! “I know. But you two finally worked it out, didn’t you? I knew you eventually would.” She put her arm around Viv, which made it hard for Viv to say that she thought Delores was taking the optimistic view. “We all change from who we are in high school, don’t we? Good thing, too.” Delores kissed her on the cheek. “But I’m glad you’re still the sweetheart you’ve always been.”

Delores was a kind soul. But Viv still wasn’t sure what to think of all that. She could say she thought better of Sheila than before, and maybe Sheila did of her, too, so that was something, right?

“So, why are you home tonight?” Viv asked her mom after Delores left.

“I wanted to sit with you,” she said. Her mom seemed pretty relaxed, so it seemed unlikely she and Marco had had a tiff, but Viv still wasn’t sure why she was here.

That sounded like something she’d say when she really meant she was here for an intervention.

“Because you’re worried that I’m in a precarious state?” She ran her hand through her hair. Had she brushed it?

Viv's distress over Logan hadn't really manifested in lack of self-care. Instead, she'd changed careers again, rented an office, and adopted a pet. What new and scary venture would be next?

"Actually, yes." She took a sip of wine. "But I know you'll find your way out eventually."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence?"

Her mom held out her glass so Viv would clink it a second time. "One hundred percent, sweetheart." She reached down and grabbed something on the ground and handed it over. Even in the fading light, Viv could see that it was fuchsia pink and sparkly.

She recognized it instantly as her teenage diary. "Where on earth did you find that?"

"I've been cleaning the attic. Getting rid of old things, like you girls encouraged me to do. I have a whole box of them for you. This one was on top. I cracked open the first page and saw that this was the one from your last summer before college."

"I don't want to read it," slipped out of her mouth. "I can't." Her voice cracked. Her heart sped up and her throat went bone dry. Because she knew exactly what it was full of.

Heartache. Torment. Sadness.

Sort of what she was going through right now.

She shut it and put it on the little table between the two chairs.

"Your choice," her mom said. "But if you read it, you might find that you've changed a lot. Or...not at all."

Well, that was certainly cryptic. "You read my diary?"

"Of course not." Her mom gave her that placid look moms always use when giving advice to their adult children. "But why keep one if it can't help you with your future?"

Did she believe her mom that she hadn't looked? She wasn't sure, but she had bigger fish to fry. Besides, that particular

diary, while filled with heartache and angst, didn't contain any juicy secrets about men in her life. At least she didn't think so.

Note to self: get that box out of her mom's reach ASAP.

Before them, the brilliant color show was beginning, so they sat together in silence for a while Viv's thoughts turned to more pressing matters.

She found herself spilling to her mom. "So you heard about the book?"

Her mom nodded carefully. "Miriam told me."

"I'm angry that Logan never told me about it." It was a relief to talk to her mom, and the words poured out. "The thing I hate the most about this whole thing is that his villain is my worst nightmare. She has every trait I hate the most in myself."

"Except she's a serial killer." Her mom's lips quirked up in a smile. "You're not, right?"

"Mother, this isn't funny."

"None of those are fatal characteristics, Vivienne."

"She's spoiled. Her parents use all their salary to fund her wardrobe and buy her designer clothes and concert tickets."

Her mom snorted. "You never owned a designer anything. And the only concerts you went to were the free ones in the town square. I'm not really getting the comparison."

Viv took a deep breath. It seemed like she had been holding this in forever. And she felt so ashamed to let it out. "You and Tessa and Juliet worked so hard to get me to Europe. I feel that I've let you all down in so many ways."

Her mother frowned. "What do you mean you've let us down?"

Viv tossed up her hands. How much more of this would she have to painfully spell out? "Me working in the Christmas store as an elf, failing at becoming an artist, wasting all that money, for starters."

"You mean your coming home for a while and being with

us? Doing endless shifts in a bread shop where you can't ever have a taste of anything? Babysitting for Tessa when she can't find anyone else, even if it means no days off for you? Vivienne, you're completely missing the point."

"Mom, Tessa never got to go to Europe like she'd dreamed. After Dad died, you two held down everything at the shop. You all sacrificed so that I could do something extravagant. I had a blown-up image of myself—it never even occurred to me that I could fail at photography. I was so filled with this special, talented vision of myself that I held at the expense of everyone else." She let out a sob. Because these guilty feelings were like weeds she couldn't get rid of no matter how hard she tried to keep them all down. "I saved some money. I want you to know I'm giving Tessa some. It's a start, anyway."

Her mom reached over and put her hand under her chin and tilted it upward. Viv tried to wipe the tears that had spilled down her cheeks. She ended up wiping her nose on her shirt sleeve. "Now you listen here, Vivienne Bernadette Montgomery."

That made her smile a little, even though it was the way her mom had always addressed her when she was about to scold her.

"You went on a grand adventure, and you learned wonderful things. And one of the things you learned was that life is hard. Right?"

Viv nodded.

"Actually, you learned that long before, when your dad died and you were just fourteen. You know, that's what made it even more important for us to get you to Europe. You deserved a shot at your dreams. We were all heartbroken that your childhood got cut short. We didn't want you to suffer any more than you already had."

"Mom, I may be the youngest, but why should I be exempt? The opportunities I got were based on your sacrifice."

Her mom sighed heavily. "The opportunities you got were based on your talent. Haven't you ever heard that success

means trying, regardless of the outcome?”

“That’s fine, Mom, but I have to make a living.”

“You always were so good, Viv. You saw Tessa and I, both completely exhausted, and you saw Juliet struggling after your dad died, and you were determined to always be good. Not make any waves. You always wanted to please. But now, honey, it’s time to please yourself.”

More tears filled her eyes. Was that what she’d been doing? Comparing herself to her sisters and trying to prove herself instead of following her heart?

“Forget about the past already,” her mother said, tucking a curl behind her ear. “You were no more egocentric than any other eighteen-year-old on the planet. You had big dreams and you made us proud. We wanted you to take your chance—that ticket to Paris was a gift of love from your family.” She paused and gave Viv a little smile. “You know, you’d make me proud even if you worked in the Christmas store the rest of your life, if that’s what made you happy. You’ve got a kind soul, Viv. You really care about others. And that’s what makes a success in my book.” She took another sip of wine. “Also, Tessa’s never going to take your money.”

Viv thought about all these things. “Logan thought I rejected him because he was skinny and had no muscles.”

If Viv wasn’t mistaken, her mom was smiling. Smiling, in the face of her tragedy! “Is that right?”

“Mom, this isn’t funny. The villain he wrote is that kind of person. Someone who cares about appearances. About what everyone thinks. Logan has no idea that I never saw him like that. To me he was just...Logan.”

“I’m smiling because I know that’s not the case. I think I understand better what happened—you rejected him because you were leaving for college.”

Viv nodded carefully.

“Because I told you girls for years not to follow on a man’s coattails. To have your own dreams. To not get stuck in town.”

Viv sighed. “I understand the message. I was too immature to handle everything.”

Her mom clutched her hands, which were on her lap. “I’m sorry, Vivienne, if I drove that message home too hard. I had a lot of endless days filled with frustration after your dad died. He was the one who ran the business. I started working by his side right after we were married because he needed help—I sort of fell into it without thinking or planning much. He took care of the money end. I always seemed to be too busy with you kids or something—*anything* else—to learn. ‘Later’ was my favorite answer when he tried to show me numbers. But later came way too quick. And there were struggles. Big struggles.”

Viv knew how hard those times were. And how they’d almost lost the bread shop. “But you came through all that, Mom. We’re all so proud of you.”

Her mom shook her head sadly. “I’m sorry if I led you to believe living here was worse than death. I just wanted you to have the opportunity that I never had—to pursue your own dreams. To not have someone else decide your course for you. And honestly, not getting serious with Logan at that time... well, I think you both got to grow individually without distraction.” She made a V with her arms. “Like a split trunk of a beautiful tree. It needs to split in two to grow. And together it makes one complete tree.”

Okay, Viv got what she was saying, even if the tree analogy was a little over the top. “That’s beautiful, Mom. But we’re not exactly together.”

“So what’s holding you back?”

She shrugged. “I’ve been doing some things.”

Her mom nodded to the cat carrier. “Like rescuing animals?”

“And quitting my job.” She made the teeny-tiny sign with her thumb and index finger. “And renting a very small office space downtown. I’ve decided to take my New York money and open up a photography studio. Take some photos, give

some classes. And hopefully do some art.”

“Do some art?”

Viv nodded. “Logan encouraged me to submit my photos of people in town to a show, and the gallery owner accepted them and wants to feature me as an upcoming artist.”

Her mom suddenly teared up and clutched her chest. “Oh, Viv. That...that sounds just like you.”

“You know what else sounds like me?”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Logan. I love him, Mom. There’s no one else for me.”

“Then you should tell him.”

“That’s the plan.” She’d been thinking about that old book—well, was that really a dealbreaker? She’d sort of gotten over it.

Her mom squeezed her hand and gave her a loving look. “I love that plan.” She paused before adding, “I think I’m going to marry Marco.”

Not a shocker. “Oh, Mom. That’s wonderful.”

“I’ve been thinking that maybe it’s okay. That maybe it won’t take away from the fact that I loved your father so much. The day he died, a part of me died, too. But Marco...he makes me feel like I’m a whole person again. That’s kind of a miracle. And when you get a miracle, you shouldn’t make light of it, you know what I’m saying?”

Viv had to agree. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, Vivienne.” She reached over and gave Viv a giant mother hug, the kind that only your mother could give. A giant smile spread across her face. “And I have hope for you. You know why?” She nodded to the crackling fire. “The firepit.” They both watched the cheerfully crackling fire.

Confused, Viv looked from the firepit to her mom. “It’s really nice, but I don’t get it.”

“I didn’t buy it. It was just here, full of sticks. I just threw a

match on it.”

Viv’s vision blurred. Her mom didn’t buy it, but she knew exactly who did. Logan had told her at the cottage that if she’d stayed, he’d break it out. He’d been excited to share it with her.

She hoped it was a little message. And she hoped with all her heart that he’d take her back.

...

The elephant-ears bookselling strategy turned out to be genius. Everyone filed straight from securing their sugary treat to getting in line to buy Logan’s book, and it seemed that put everyone in the mood to buy. In two hours, he’d sold almost a hundred copies, his only concern being that people were so excited to dig into the book that they were flipping the pages with sugary hands.

But hey, as long as they did it post-sale, not his problem.

He had much bigger ones.

“Where’s the hot elf?” Mrs. Margolis from the beauty shop asked.

“Hey, Mrs. M.” On the outside, he laughed. On the inside, his heart was a tiny ball of dry, baked clay that cracked into more pieces when he thought of Viv. Which was at least half of every minute.

But he had to show up for his town, and he would.

All the proceeds of his books were going to the new library. Yep, his little town had big plans to expand internet access for everyone and bring in a lot more resources, something he was thrilled to support.

“Your hair looks very nice this evening,” he said.

“And yours looks a bit purple still,” she answered. Looking around, she asked, “Where’s your cute publicist? The one who was eating the elephant ear with you? I’d put a ring on that.”

That must be the tenth person so far today who’d mentioned

Viv. And speaking of Viv, where was she? Not helping her family in the food truck. Not wandering around listening to the live music or checking out the paintings entered in the little art show. And not in his line.

How many times had he thought he'd caught sight of her out of the corner of his eye?

"I just love your stories," someone in front of him said. He jerked up his head from where he was grabbing a few more books from a box under the table.

It was Lainey. "Hi there," he said. No posse. Just her.

"I've read every single book of yours, Mr. Matthews. And I listened to the FictionFest interview. And I'm so glad you're on Insta now."

"Well, thanks, Lainey. Are thrillers your favorite books to read?" He found himself wondering how he could be a force for good. She'd managed to break away from her so-called friends, but would that last? Viv would have wanted him to connect with his readers. And use his influence when he could. And frankly, just talking with people wasn't awful. About reading, books, photos he'd posted or...anything. It was fun and interesting.

"Listen," she said very quietly, leaning in. "I—I don't hang around with Gretchen anymore. I told Elise that I was sorry for what we did."

"That was brave," he said. "But even braver to leave bad influences behind." He wrote something inside her book. ***Be a force for good in the world. Peace, Logan.***

He wasn't sure that was a profound message. But it was sincere. He just wished he could do more.

She was smiling and thanking him and gushing more about his books. "Someday, I want to be a writer," she said. "I want to do books for kids."

"That's great." Then he had the perfect idea. "I'm thinking of starting a little writing group at the high school. If you have any questions about writing, maybe I can help. What to take in college, groups to join, options like becoming an editor, stuff

like that.”

“That’s great but—I’m a senior, remember?”

“Well, in that case, get with Elise and we’ll meet for coffee and chat. I’ll help any way I can.” But he really did want to talk to someone at the high school about starting that group.

“Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

Lainey walked away, and Logan bent his head under his table to restock his book supply. “Take that, Mrs. Pratt,” the next person in line said. “For all the wannabe writers whose souls you crushed in high school English class.”

Viv.

Logan’s heart stuttered. He glanced up, almost forgetting to breathe. She was there, directly in front of him, in a pink hoodie that said *Don’t Be Afraid to Bloom—Blossom Glen, IN Blossom Festival* and a white ball cap pulled low on her head.

“Hi,” he managed.

“Hi,” she returned.

He could do better. And so he did. “God, I missed you. I’m so glad you’re here. I—”

“Hey, is she the hot elf?” someone asked.

Oh. Now he got the reason for the ball cap.

She shoved a bubble-gum pink journal with gold glitter sparkles into his hands.

“You want me to sign this?”

She rolled her eyes. “Do people often ask you to sign sparkly pink journals?”

“No, but someone once asked me to sign her boob.”

“I almost want to ask you if you actually did that, but I won’t. The answer is I don’t want you to *sign* it. I want you to *read* it.”

He glanced up at the twenty people behind her in line, all of whom appeared to be staring at them. “Now?”

“Well, just one page.” She opened the journal to reveal a bookmark holding a place.

At that point, he didn’t care how many people were in line. All he knew was that she wasn’t in New York. She was here, and she was trying to tell him something.

He had a lot to tell her, too.

The pages before him were filled with feminine handwriting with lots of curly script. He was getting the vibe that this was a diary. And the entry she wanted him to read was dated August sixth of the year they both left for college.

His heart began a slow, dull thud. Someone in the line said, “Hey, can we speed it up?”

“I just need a minute, folks,” he called out, glancing quickly at the line. “Thanks for your patience.”

“Take your time, sweetie,” someone yelled. “Getting your love life in order is important.”

And then he read:

Dear Diary,

The day after the thing with Logan, I panicked and signed up to help move kids into the dorm, and so here I am, two hours away from home. But it feels like I’m a solar system away from Logan.

What a stupid idea.

What a horrible way to end the summer. And a friendship. The most important friendship of my life.

I’m supposed to be meeting friends and going to parties, but I can barely get through the day. I keep running to the bathroom and crying. I’ve been sobbing into my pillow at night so Robin can’t hear me.

Thank God she’s here. Because she heard me trying not to cry and I told her everything. She listened to me and helped me. And she’s the only one who really knows what happened.

College was supposed to be the start of my life.

But it feels like the end.

Robin told me to call him, text him. And every hour I do, but he won't answer.

I am sick. My stomach hurts. My head hurts. I don't care about anything. And I want to go home.

Logan is kind and wonderful and cute and he gets me, every bit of me. We can talk for hours about nothing. And I care about him so, so much. I can't bear to lose him.

I made a terrible mistake.

I should have kissed him back.

I don't want anyone else to kiss him. Ever. I want to be the only one to kiss him.

How will I ever live without him?

...

Logan read her diary and sat down, still examining the pages. Viv thought he appeared a little shaky.

When he leveled his gaze on her, she saw that the words had teared him up.

Her heart began to thud heavily. She had to take the risk this time. She had to tell him everything. "I always loved you," she said. "Even then. I needed you to see it now."

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice cracking, "for being bullheaded. For cutting off our friendship. It was the stupidest thing I've ever done."

There, he'd done it. Now she was crying.

"And I'm sorry for the book," he continued, "and for not telling you."

"I don't care so much about the book anymore. I'm over it." She waved a hand in dismissal. "You were right. I used it to push you away to feel better about leaving."

"Viv," he said gently, placing a hand on her arm. His touch felt so good, and in that moment, she knew that the past was

finally behind them. She'd do whatever it took to make sure it stayed there.

"Take the job if you want," he said, still holding on. His eyes were gentle and filled her with hope. "Go and see if you like New York. I can relocate there so we can be together because I can work from anywhere. We can make it work."

Yes, she believed they could.

He was telling her he'd meet her halfway.

That he wanted to be with her.

That they were a *we*.

She nodded. It was all she could do.

Then he stood up and pulled her close and looked lovingly into her eyes. "I made a terrible mistake once. Of not telling you how I felt. But I'm telling you now, I'll do anything you need so we can be together. I'm sorry about the stupid book, and I'm sorry for not telling you. You're my person, Viv. I love you."

"I'm sorry, too," she whispered. Clutching his arms, she said, "Turns out, I'm staying here. I rented a little office to set up a photography studio. It'll be mostly basic stuff—for now. But—my photographs—the ones you told me to send somewhere—they got accepted into a show. Like, a prestigious one. I'm going to try to make it work again, Logan. I think I can get enough income from bread-and-butter events to fund my other stuff and see if I can make it a go."

He lifted a brow in mock seriousness. "Does this mean I'm losing my publicist?"

"But gaining a girlfriend. If you want one."

"More than a girlfriend, Viv." He took her into his arms. "You're my soulmate. You took my heart out of deep freeze and made me feel things again. Because of you, I feel more connected to my family, to everybody." He gave a wry smile. "Not to mention my readers, who keep DMing me about you, mostly. But they're also buying my books because I can show them my personality now. And...and I think I can handle it."

I'm not my dad."

A crowd had gathered around—mostly comprised, she realized, of everyone she loved. Her mom and Tessa had come out of the food truck, wiping their hands on red-striped aprons that said Bonjour Breads! Leo was there, and Marco, and Juliet and Jack and Robin. Leo stood off to the side holding Rosie, who was sucking on a piece of elephant ear. Gram, surprisingly, wasn't working at all—instead, she was standing with Mr. Templeman, holding a giant ball of cotton candy and smiling brightly. Looked like she'd finally taken the risk too.

Also, some people in the crowd were filming. But at least this time Viv was relieved she didn't have an elf costume on.

Logan held on to her hands. "I promise I won't ever take out my anger by fictionalizing you or anyone we love ever again."

"Deal."

He nodded and then walked around his book table and came back with a paper bag. Reaching into it, he tossed a bunch of blossoms into the air. They fluttered down in all their pink splendor, surrounding them with the familiar sweet scent of their town.

"Sprinkle blossoms on your head..." Logan said.

"Take the girl you love to bed?" she replied in a singsong voice.

He put his hand on her arm. "Nope."

Before her frown could last too long, he dumped the rest of the bag over their heads. "*I'll love you forever, he said,*" and then he kissed her.

Really kissed her, slow and deep, making her knees buckle, and the entire festival seemed to spin around them.

The crowd cheered. Cameras clicked, of course, but they were both too busy to care.

Viv's eyes blurred with tears. She was struck that she was standing in the middle of the park, smelling the blossoms mixed with the scent of fried dough, listening to the laughter and the buzzing of the crowd around them. In her hometown

that she loved.

He broke off the kiss and smiled. “*He waited for her answer with dread.*”

“*I love you back, she said instead.*”

He laughed, a wonderful, resonant laugh. “*If you’ll have me, one day we’ll be wed.*”

She stopped talking in rhyme, her heart skipping a beat. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Technically, we just started dating. But I’m sure I will.” He glanced around them at the sizable crowd that had gathered. “Except not with a hundred people watching.”

“He’s going to marry the hot elf,” someone shouted.

“It’s about time,” someone who sounded a lot like Gram yelled.

“We’re just dating,” she called back.

“For now,” he added.

“You’re a goofball,” she said.

“I’m your goofball,” he said right back.

He bent his head to kiss her as the crowd cheered, apparently not upset at all at the delay.

“I love you, Logan,” she said, touching her lips to his.

And this time, she didn’t turn her cheek.

Epilogue

Six months later

“Did you receive the book proof?” the voice on the phone asked as Logan pulled into the field with his truck. He hopped out into the brisk October air and took a moment to appreciate the blazing parade of scarlets and yellows surrounding him on the sunny, clear day. The barn sat in the distance, the same one Elise used as a dressing room for her spring photo shoot.

Logan picked up a manila envelope from the front seat. “It arrived today, Maya,” he said to his longtime editor. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t stop your original publisher from doing a reprint and announcing that Matthew Logan is really Logan Matthews.”

“It’s okay. I think I can handle it.”

As he got out of the truck and began walking across the field, he heard the anxious sound of Maya’s pen tapping on her desk. “Logan, I have something to tell you.”

Something else? He couldn’t wait to get the issue of his first book behind him once and for all. “Okay, I’m listening.”

Maya cleared her throat. “We just learned that you’ve sold a hundred thousand copies of *Night of Terror*. It’s quite an accomplishment. Your father would be so proud.”

Wait. A hundred thousand copies of his first *real* book? That was great news!

“That’s amazing. But I’m not so sure about my dad being proud. He never wanted me to be in this business.”

She fell silent. Then she cleared her throat. “I have one other teeny-tiny thing to tell you. Are you sitting down?”

No, he was in the middle of a fricking field. “Maya, you’re scaring me. Just tell me already.”

“Your father wanted me to wait until you hit a big

publishing milestone before telling you this.”

Logan’s gut clenched. He halted in the tall grass. “Wait—my father?”

“Logan, he’s the one who read your first book and gave it to me eight years ago. He saw your promise, your talent. But he also swore me to silence.”

Logan looked up at the fall sky, so blue and clear it could bring a person to tears. His dad had done that?

He understood why he didn’t tell him. If Logan had known what he’d done, he would have always doubted his talent. Thought he’d had a hand up.

His dad had believed he could do it.

The awful, dreaded book that had created such trouble had actually caused some good.

“Your father was proud of you, Logan,” Maya said. “But he didn’t want you to know it until you’d succeeded.”

“You kept this secret for eight years? I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“Well, I agreed with him enough to take you on myself. And you know I love you like a son.”

“You’re as hard on me as a parent is, too,” he grumbled.

“That’s how you learned. Your dad knew why you wrote the book. In fact, he said that a writer isn’t a writer until they have their heart broken. He saw how you put the emotion on the page. He saw your promise.”

He saw Logan’s promise? He was okay with him being a writer?

“Before you get too carried away, be sure to check your email,” Maya said. “I’m sending you editorial notes. You’ve got a lot of work to do on your current book, buddy.”

He hung up and laughed and shook his head in disbelief. His dad had been proud of him. Of this awful, twisted catastrophe of a book that nearly made him lose the love of his life.

Just then, he looked across the field. There was a woman in a flowy skirt waving.

And he had a lot to tell her.

Viv had set up her tripod to catch the slanting late afternoon rays.

Logan said he wanted a better author photo for his upcoming book. And she'd known just where to do it.

The field that had been so green in the spring was now full of waving golden wheat. He sprinted the last fifty feet to Viv, swooping her up and spinning her around. She looked like sunshine. Radiant, her curly hair blowing in the breeze like her skirt.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, unable to control his smile.

"You look—happy. What's up?"

He handed her the envelope. "Open it."

"Is this the book? Logan, no. I'm okay with the reprint. I really don't want to see it again."

He took hold of her hands. "Please. I need you to open it."

She sighed and reluctantly ripped the envelope open and pulled out the book. It had a much nicer cover and an impressive quote by a famous author.

"Nice," she said, and tried to hand it back to him.

He held up his hands, hoping with all his heart that after today, he'd never have to deal with this stupid book again. "Not so fast. Read the front page."

She gave him a wary glance, not sure what he was up to. He ended up opening it to the dedication page and placing it in her hands, where she read the words he'd written:

For Vivienne, the love of my life.

Because of you, I'm a writer.

I wrote this book long ago when you refused to kiss me back.

I poured out my broken heart on these pages as only

thriller writers can do—by making you a serial killer. Someone who would get their just deserts—on paper, anyway.

The only thing you were really guilty of was not being ready to love me.

I was certain my poor broken heart would never mend.

Little did I know that a dozen years later, we would both find our way back home—and to each other.

I love you.

She looked up, her eyes filled with tears. Which made him very relieved.

“You were my first crush, sweetheart. And you’re the love of my life.” He got down on one knee. “Marry me.”

She looked up from the book, her mouth dropping open. “Wait. Did you—are you...”

“I figured if this book had to be out in the world, I at least wanted to have the last word.”

“Yes,” she said simply. “I will.”

Yes.

As she threw herself into his arms and kissed him, the book dropped to the ground.

As he kissed her soundly back, wrapping his arms around her and drawing her close, he felt like he was the luckiest man on earth.

“Party in the barn!” someone yelled. It was Leo. Others appeared by his side, waving and whooping.

“Who’s all here?” Viv asked, startled.

“Everyone we love,” he answered.

He kissed her again, took up her hand, and headed to the barn. And he might have just left that old book in the dust.



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Acknowledgments

I believe that the truth in books should be subtle and require thought and not hit readers smack on the head. But bullying is a problem that is tormenting our young people, magnified times a thousand by social media. I hope that this tiny representation of it will stir some thought on behalf of its victims and bring it into conversation so that we can take extra effort to teach our children to be kind. And also remind ourselves that the things that make us all different make us interesting!

Thanks to the entire Entangled team for helping me bring this series to readers, and as always, a huge thank you to my agent, Jill Marsal.

The greatest thank you is to you, dear readers, for following along with the adventures of the citizens of Blossom Glen. I love writing about love and the complexities of families, and I love hearing from you!

Miranda Liasson, September, 2023

<https://mirandaliasson.com>

About the Author

[Miranda Liasson](#) is a bestselling author whose heartwarming and humorous romances have won numerous accolades and have been praised by *Entertainment Weekly* for the way she “deals with so much of what makes life hard...without ever losing the warmth and heart that characterize her writing.” She believes we can handle whatever life throws at us just a little bit better with a laugh. A proud native of Northeast Ohio, she and her husband live in a neighborhood of old homes that serve as inspiration for her books.

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High-society Annabella Mason is expected to marry the perfect guy to save her dad's company. Instead, she ends up at a bar, chatting up a handsome stranger. Several tequila shots later, this not-perfect guy is her husband. Oops. Ian Jackson has no interest in playing the marriage game again. But when he tries to get this accident annulled, the judge orders them to live together for 30 days first. Can they survive each other that long?

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a Majestic Maine novel by [Ginny Baird](#)

Charlotte Delaney is officially throwing in the towel on the bet that she made with her sisters. It's up to her to save their parents' café with a marriage of convenience to her family's rival. Aidan Strong has exactly zero intentions of marrying one of the Delaney sisters—even Charlotte, his first crush. But Charlotte is challenging Aidan to a new wager. And the prize? His billion-dollar coffee empire. Now the tiny seaside town of Majestic is about to witness the ultimate game of hearts...and winner takes all.

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a novel by [Julie Hammerle](#)

Bryce Barrett is temporarily hiding out in a teeny Midwest town, away from her ruined marriage and professional demise. But when she bumps into her ex, she does the only reasonable thing a woman can do: panics and pretends the cute security guard on the scene is her new boyfriend. Free-spirited nomad Jake Warner knew returning to his hometown was a bad idea. But when a complete stranger enlists him as her fake boyfriend, Jake inexplicably goes along with it. Now these two mismatched misfits are temporary allies against a town filled with happy, normal people. Fake dating keeps everyone off their back while they plot their respective escapes. But nothing botches a plan more than unexpected chemistry...

[THE BACHELOR CONTRACT](#)

a novel by [Victoria James](#)

New mom May Peterson can't believe she's back in her hometown. She has eight weeks to fix up, and sell, her childhood home. But in the warm, tightly-knit community of Maple Hill, it's impossible to avoid anyone—especially the cute “boy next door.” When they were kids, Austin Merrick only ever saw May as his sister's best friend. Now she's back with an adorable baby that quickly wraps him around her little finger. They're working together to fix up her old home, and sparks of attraction are making it almost impossible to keep to their no-romance rules.