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APRIL MURDOCK



*When*  
you're his  
*Crush*

SAGEBRUSH  
RANCH

# WHEN YOU'RE HIS CRUSH

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# SAGEBRUSH RANCH - BOOK 3

APRIL MURDOCK



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Cover design by Erin Dameron-Hill.

# WHEN YOU'RE HIS CRUSH

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# CHAPTER ONE

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“COME ON, ANDREW, YOU CAN DO BETTER THAN THAT.”

Andrew stopped, hunched over as he placed his hands on his knees to catch his breath. Luke darted past him, basketball in tow. His sneakers squeaked against the court linoleum at the local church as he hurried toward the hoop and lifted the ball into the air.

Luke landed with a soft thud and turned to face his friend. At least he seemed to struggle to catch his breath, too. Neither one of them were in their teenage prime anymore. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, brushing aside the brown hair that had fallen there. His grin stretched wide as he placed his hands on his hips and chuckled. “I thought you said you weren’t going to go easy on me.”

Andrew slowly straightened. He had been giving it his all, to be honest. But after his injury from his military service and all those rehabilitation sessions, he still hadn’t been able to get back to where he was when he’d left to serve his country. “I just thought you could use a little extra help,” he wheezed.

His friend laughed. “Next time I expect you to show up.”

They both knew why Andrew had struggled today, and his limp was only part of the problem. Thankfully Luke wasn’t the kind of guy who focused on what Andrew couldn’t do. And he was the only one. Even his parents seemed to give him the easiest jobs around the ranch. No one wanted to draw attention to the fact that he still wasn’t one hundred percent—especially since he might not ever get there again.



Andrew scooped up the basketball and threw it hard to his friend. “Again.”

Luke hesitated. It was the first time Andrew saw Luke’s true thoughts. No one thought Andrew was capable of pushing himself—not even his best friend.

“Let’s do this. You don’t want me to take it easy on you, and I’m gonna show you just how hard it is to play against me.”

He spun the ball in his hands, breaking the eye-contact that Andrew craved. “I think we’ve both had enough today, don’t you?”

“What? Are you scared I’ll win?”

Luke didn’t react to his taunt. He tossed the ball in his hands and Andrew lunged forward to snatch it out of the air before he could catch it.

Dribbling it, he charged toward the net on the other side of the court and jumped up to throw the ball into the net. Unfortunately, when he landed, pain shot through his bad leg and he crumpled to the floor.

“Andrew!” Luke hurried toward him, his sneakers squeaking with each step. “You okay?”

He waved his friend away, fury building within him. If he couldn’t even play a decent game of ball, then what was he good for? It had been over a year and he still couldn’t do what he used to. His hands tightened around his leg, putting pressure on the weak ligaments that betrayed him. “I’m fine,” he muttered.

Luke hovered beside him, not moving.

“Seriously, the reason this friendship works is because you don’t treat me different just because...” He scowled, letting his words float away like the angry cloud they were. “Can we just maintain our friendship the way we’ve been doing?”

“Sure, whatever you want.” Luke held out his hand and when Andrew glowered at his offering, Luke let out an exasperated sound. “Even before you were in the military, I would have helped you up if you fell. Don’t be so proud.”

Andrew glanced at the hand once more. Luke had a good point. He reached up and grasped his friend's hand and was pulled to his feet. Gingerly, he took stock of how his foot and ankle felt when he put pressure on it. The dull ache was still present and his therapist wasn't going to be happy about whatever damage he'd done.

But at least he was alive. That's what they all said.

Every last person he'd come in contact with held the same sentiment.

He could have died. If it weren't for the quick action of his sergeant, he would have been wiped from this planet.

Yes, he was grateful to be alive. But in moments like this, he allowed himself to be angry. It was what drove him to work harder. That anger was what pushed him to come as far as he had. What was determination without a little power behind it?

Luke clapped his hand on Andrew's shoulder and offered him a smile. "You know, I wanted to talk to you about something."

Andrew limped beside his friend as they left the court to sit on a couple of chairs. He reached for his water bottle, dismayed to find it empty. "Yeah? What's that?"

"Arielle."

Lifting his brows, Andrew glanced over to his friend. Luke's voice had taken on a softer quality when he'd uttered his girlfriend's name. The man was starstruck in the worst way. They'd only been dating for about four months. Based on the way he said her name, Andrew was wondering if the woman didn't possess the same talents of the siren she was named after.

Luke laughed and slugged Andrew in the shoulder playfully. "Don't look at me like that. I know what you're thinking."

"Do you? Because it sure sounds like you're about ready to propose to the girl."

He blinked and his smile spread wider.

Andrew straightened. "No. You're not. Please tell me you're thinking this through. You can't just marry a girl after knowing

her for a few months.”

Luke settled back in his seat and stared up at the tiled ceiling. He let out a sigh and shook his head. “I don’t know what to tell you. Arielle is... well, she’s amazing and I can’t believe she’s even willing to date me.”

A huff escaped Andrew’s lips. “Probably because you’re a tech mogul who makes a lot of money and is easy on the eyes.”

Luke shot him a grin.

“Because it’s definitely not your personality.”

His friend slugged him again. “I’ll have you know that I have a very nice personality. At least I smile once in a while, unlike you.”

Andrew’s jaw tightened. He was happy. Okay, he was content. He’d come to accept his lot in life and he chose not to spread his disappointment to others because there was no sense in it. Just because he wasn’t a smiling goon didn’t mean he didn’t have a nice personality.

Luke laughed again, settling back in his seat and lacing his fingers over his chest. “Seriously, though. Arielle and I have discussed the...possibility. I think we’re on the same page.” He let out a sigh and tilted his head so he could look in Andrew’s direction. “But is it the right decision?”

“Sounds to me like you’ve already made your decision,” Andrew muttered.

“I mean it. How do I know if this is the right path to take? I don’t want this to turn into something that I regret.”

Andrew stared hard at his friend. “Do you love her?”

“What kind of question is that?”

He shrugged. “As far as I’m concerned. It’s the only question that matters. If you love her, then you have your answer.”

“Love isn’t the most important thing, you know.” Luke peered up at the ceiling as if deep in thought. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s important. But there’s more to it than that. Think about all

the people who had arranged marriages. They stuck it out because they knew they were better off with each other than without. They didn't start out by loving each other. They might not have even been attracted to each other."

"Okay, so are you going to stick it out?" This conversation was ridiculous. In today's relationships, people either chose to be together or they didn't. They had options. Why spend all the money, time, and energy getting married only to split up a few years later?

"I'd like to think so. But it's not just my decision, you know?" He glanced at Andrew out of the corner of his eye. "My folks were together for nearly twenty years before they realized they wanted something different. They were in love. They say they still love each other to this day. So what's to stop Arielle from doing the same thing?"

That was a hard question, one Andrew didn't have an answer for. His own parents had stayed together through good and bad years. But he'd just figured it was love. What other reason could there be? "Maybe you're looking at this wrong."

"There's no other way of looking at it, Andrew. Nothing would stop her from asking for a divorce."

"Maybe there are varying degrees of love. Maybe your parents' love was more of a respect. And the love you share with Arielle runs deeper."

Luke straightened, his brows creasing as Andrew's words seemed to settle around them.

"All I can say is that you need to have faith. Treat her like the goddess she is. Be there for her even when it's hard. Make her see that a life without you would be unbearable." The quiet of the gym closed in around them. A few months ago, this amount of silence would have made it harder to breathe. His head would have started to pound and he would have itched to take off to get some fresh air.

But he'd come far in his recovery—a fact he was proud to admit. He was strong. He'd continue working to be better and he wouldn't stop until he got to where he knew he should be.

Luke flashed him a smile. “Thanks. That helps a lot.”

Andrew nodded. “Sure.”

“What about you?”

“What do you mean?” Andrew reached down and rubbed at his leg.

“Any romantic prospects?”

Andrew let out a sharp bark of laughter. “Absolutely not.”

His friend lifted a single brow as if asking why. Deep down, Andrew had the answer. He was half the man he used to be. His confidence was shaky at best and he knew that most women wouldn't give him a second look with the scars and the limp he now possessed. It'd take a special kind of woman to look past his physical and mental ailments to see him for what he could become again one day.

Andrew opened his mouth with the intention of brushing his friend off, but a door in the gym banged closed, drawing the attention of them both.

A familiar, tall, slender woman headed toward them, holding a drink carrier and a brown paper bag. Her long, wavy blonde hair flowed behind her, making her appear ethereal. She smiled brightly, making her green eyes seem even bigger. “I thought you said you were going to play some basketball.” Julia's gaze shifted from Andrew to her brother. “When you asked me to bring you something to snack on, I expected you to actually work for it.”

Luke got to his feet, lifting one arm to show off the sweat beneath it. “That doesn't look like we've worked hard enough? I don't mind sharing.”

She wrinkled her nose and jumped back. “You better be careful or this food is going to land on the floor and you're getting nothing.” She glanced at Andrew again. “How you doing?”

Andrew offered her a small smile. “I'm good. You?”

“Oh, you know, running errands for my brother so my day's been pretty dull.” She shifted, holding out the drink carrier

toward him. "Until now."

This was how it had always been between them. Julia was a flirt and a good one at that. She treated every guy she knew as if he walked on water. Many of them had their hearts broken because of it.

But not Andrew. He knew better than to feed his childhood crush and it wasn't just because she was his best friend's sister. Julia was a catch and untouchable. She looked like she belonged in the pages of a magazine rather than behind a desk. With one word, she could uplift anyone who was having a bad day.

She was so far out of his league that Andrew was just grateful to be her friend.

Julia turned to her brother and placed her free hand on her hip. "You were out pretty late last night. I almost locked you out."

Luke rolled his eyes. "Just because we're roommates doesn't mean you get to treat me like a child. Arielle and I were on a date. You know that."

"The fool thinks he's in love," Andrew murmured.

"Maybe something's in the water. Better be careful, or we're going to fall prey to it too." Without missing a beat, she changed the subject. "Dinner tonight at our place? You coming?"

Andrew glanced toward Luke who nodded. "It'll be great. Arielle will be there too, and you can get to know her better."

One quick glance at Julia confirmed she was waiting for his response, her expression hopeful. "Please? I hate being their third wheel. At least with you there, I'll have someone to talk to."

He could never tell Julia no. That was a flaw he'd had since he was a teen. "All right, I'll come."

She flashed a smile. "Great! See you tonight." Luke held out his arms for a hug and she made a face. "Pass."

"Rude," Luke muttered.

Andrew bit back a smile, his eyes following Julia as she hurried across the gym and disappeared out the door. “Yeah. Rude.”

## CHAPTER TWO

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JULIA STARED OUT AT THE SWEEPING LANDSCAPE OF HER childhood home. The property was one of the larger ones in the area, especially for it not being a working ranch. They didn't have any animals or a barn, but there had been plenty of space to run and play—something she and Luke did a lot of when they were younger.

One day, she could see herself raising a family here, too. The only problem with that was Luke would likely beat her to it. She had never seen her brother so infatuated with a woman before he met Arielle. Already, she could sense that the time would soon come where he'd ask her to marry him.

That was when Julia would be booted from this place and she'd have to find something new. A twinge of disappointment ripped through her chest and she turned back to the kitchen and the meal she was preparing.

It wasn't that she was scared to leave this place. She had a good job and a way to provide for herself. The root of her distress was based on the fact that her home was all she knew. Her overworked parents had barely been home when she was a kid. She and Luke had relied only on each other and the adventures that their home had provided.

She wasn't ready to lose any of that.

Julia pushed aside those thoughts. They were selfish at best and she wasn't about to take away the home her brother loved, either. The plan had been to let the first person married get the property and she'd just taken too long.



She dove into her meal prep for no other reason than to rid herself of her disappointment. She was stirring the gravy for the potatoes when his voice came right behind her.

“It looks pretty good, but I bet I could have done better.”

Julia whirled around, her whisk flinging bits of brown all over the counter, floor and Andrew’s shirt. “What on earth are you doing here?”

His eyes were on his shirt where the gravy had landed.

She gasped, placing the whisk on the counter before she hurried toward the sink and retrieved a rag. Julia glanced over her shoulder at Andrew, still expecting a response.

He gave her a wry smile, one that didn’t reach his eyes. He’d always been that guy who didn’t show his true feelings to anyone. She didn’t even know if he shared that sort of thing with his family. Andrew moved toward her as she shut off the sink. “You invited me to dinner, remember?”

“What?”

“You asked what I was doing here. I’m here for dinner.”

She reached out with the rag and dabbed at his shirt. “You could have knocked.”

“I did.”

Her eyes lifted to meet piercing blue ones. She’d always loved the color of his eyes but the way he tended to stare—at anything—unnerved her. Andrew was the kind of guy you just knew was judging you. She cleared her throat and brushed off that thought. “Well, then you should have rung the bell.”

“I did that, too.”

Julia’s hand stilled and she let out a laugh. “Yeah, right. You wanna know what I think? You just waltzed in here like you always do. I bet you were *planning* to scare me.”

Andrew made a soft sound that almost sounded like a chuckle but when she glanced up at him she didn’t find the slightest hint of humor in his eyes. He tilted his head, those beautiful

blues upending her stomach. “Why would I do something like that?”

Julia shoved the rag into his chest, letting him flounder with it as she sidestepped him. “Because you know I’m better at pranking you and you wanted to get the upper hand.” She picked up her whisk and stirred the gravy once more. “So it serves you right that you got covered in gravy. Next time don’t sneak up on me.”

“Noted.”

She shot a look over her shoulder, finding him leaning against the counter, staring at his shirt again. Letting out a sigh, Julia shut off the stove and jerked her chin toward the door. “You can borrow one of Luke’s shirts.”

He shook his head. “That’s not necessary. I’m—”

“Nonsense. I’m not going to have you looking like that at my dinner table.” She spun on her heel and headed down the hallway toward Luke’s room, relieved to hear Andrew following her. She told herself that she wasn’t going to let him look ridiculous at the dinner table for his own good, but in truth, she didn’t need her brother commenting on the fact that she’d never really grown out of the way she treated Andrew.

They entered Luke’s room and she grabbed a shirt from his closet before tossing it at Andrew. “Put that on and I’ll wash your shirt.”

Without preamble, he pulled the shirt over his head, revealing his muscled torso and several scars. They weren’t bright red and angry, but they still looked fresh enough to probably have occurred while he was serving his tour of duty.

Julia averted her eyes when she got caught staring. She held out her hand and he placed the shirt there. She kept her gaze trained on the wall, her thoughts returning to how her brother would react to this situation. “Can I ask you something?”

Andrew simply grunted as he worked to button up the shirt he’d just put on.

“Do you think our friendship is immature?” When he didn’t respond right away, she glanced up at him. Those eyes she

adored so much pinned her to her place, making it hard to move. She felt like she was being chastised by him. If she had to guess, she'd say that he wasn't thrilled about the way they reacted to each other. Clearing her throat, she tucked her fingers behind her ear even though there wasn't any hair out of place. "I mean, with the teasing and stuff. Do you think we should... stop?"

His dark brows lowered over his eyes and he turned his head down to the buttons. "I don't mind it."

"Really? Because you've never seemed to enjoy it." Immediately she regretted her statement. She couldn't think of a single guy who enjoyed being teased. Recovering quickly, she forced a small laugh. "Then again, I guess ours is a love-hate relationship."

Andrew's eyes cut to meet hers briefly. He didn't respond, though his lips twitched upward at the corners.

She held the shirt up. "I'm going to get this washed." As she brushed past him, he stopped her.

"You have something..." He pointed to her shirt.

When she looked down, she noticed a splotch of gravy but before she could do anything about it, he wiped his finger up and smeared the gravy on her cheek.

Julia gasped, jumping back, her eyes accusatory.

"How's that for immature?" Andrew said it with such a serious expression she didn't know whether to laugh or retaliate.

Blinking, she stood there with her mouth hanging open.

"Hey! Anyone home? I thought we were supposed to have dinner." Luke's voice traveled from somewhere in the house and Andrew backed away, his hands palm out to presumably keep her from coming at him.

Julia huffed. "How *dare* you."

This time he did chuckle and the barest hint of a smile touched his lips. "Two for two," he said before spinning around and hurrying from the room.

She stomped toward the bedroom door and hollered, “I *knew* you didn’t knock!”

Julia took a turn down the hallway and headed to her own room to change. She couldn’t decide if she wanted to laugh or get even.

Probably both.

Andrew definitely deserved it. Once she was dressed, she hurried to the laundry room and tossed the clothes into the washer. By the time she made it back to the kitchen, Luke was dipping his finger in the gravy. The second he saw her, he licked his finger clean and darted away from the pan.

“You better be grateful I wasn’t close enough to swat you with the wooden spoon. Otherwise, you’d be sporting a nasty red mark on your wrist about now,” she scolded him though her tone was light.

Andrew sat at the counter on a stool, not meeting her gaze. There was the barest hint of a smile beneath the surface, but she couldn’t be sure if it was due to what had occurred between them or if it was something Luke had said before she got in there.

“We’re having seasoned chicken, mashed potatoes, and salad. Luke, can you get out the drinks? Andrew you can put the salad and chicken on the table. When is Arielle going to be here?” Just as she asked, someone knocked on the door. Julia couldn’t help it, she glanced at Andrew and a look passed between them—one Luke didn’t seem to notice.

Her brother left the room. Andrew got up from his seat and headed for the fridge. “Is there anything specific you wanted for the drinks?”

She shrugged. “What do you like?”

“I’m a water guy.”

She turned, hiding her smile. When they were kids, water was a big part of how they tormented each other. Andrew had his share of squirt guns, and she wasn’t against getting out the big cups and filling them with ice water. “I hope you know, Luke

expects us to be on our best behavior while Arielle is here. I don't think he'd approve of a water fight at the table."

"Who said I planned on having a water fight?"

Julia faced him, her hand on her hip. She shot him a pointed look. "You know very well why I would make such an assumption."

He held up his hands again. "I'm not the one who is down in the count."

She rolled her eyes and exaggerated a sigh. "Just behave."

Luke and Arielle materialized. Arielle was on the shorter side, her head only coming to Luke's shoulder. Her strawberry blonde hair was cut to her jawline in a pretty bob and she had blue eyes just like Andrew, though not nearly as pretty.

She smiled wide, her eyes drifting from Julia to Andrew. "You must be Andrew. Luke talks about you all the time. I can't believe we haven't met yet."

Andrew had gotten the salad after grabbing the drinks from the fridge and held the bowl between himself and Arielle. "Yeah, me neither."

Arielle leaned into Luke, her eyes flitting up to meet his. "Based on what he's said, I know we'll get along great." She looked toward Julia. "What can I help you with?"

Julia's gaze shifted throughout the room from the table she'd already set to the food that Andrew was helping to put on the table. "I think we've got it covered."

Arielle nodded. "Well, next time I'll be here early so I can help." She nudged Luke. "This one made me late when he wouldn't leave on time so I could get ready."

The way she stared up at Luke with utter adoration threw Julia off just a little. She knew that her brother was in it deep, but she hadn't realized it went both ways. There was no way these two weren't soulmates based on the way they practically glowed in each other's presence.

A quiet jealousy sparked inside Julia, though unwarranted. She didn't need a relationship. She was successful in her career.

She knew who she was and where she wanted to be.

And yet, as she watched Arielle and Luke huddle together as they took their seats at the table, she couldn't help but wonder if something was missing from her life. Having someone she could call her own—having something like the love Luke and Arielle clearly shared—perhaps there was something to it.

## CHAPTER THREE

---

WITH DINNER WRAPPED UP, ANDREW SLIPPED FROM THE kitchen and toward his favorite part of Luke and Julia's place. When he'd wanted to escape the ranch chores growing up, he'd find himself at the Sweeney's residence.

His friends' parents were rarely home, opting to run the clothing store they owned that was about an hour away. This house was far quieter than his own, which was one of the reasons he loved it so much.

Andrew slipped into the study, finding the shelves upon shelves of books they owned. He'd read a few of them already, but some of the more intellectual ones seemed to be just for show. He pulled a book from the shelf, one he'd always thought he might read but never actually did.

Hemingway was one of those authors that a reader could gloat about finishing. But the thought of getting through one of his works seemed far less alluring than picking up a book by Stephen King.

Flipping through the pages of the book he held, Andrew wandered toward a large chair that had been upholstered in a high-end leather. He took a seat, letting one hand absently glide along the textured surface.

What was the point of owning all of this nice stuff when one couldn't enjoy it? Luke had often complained about how his parents had put priority on their business but never on their family. Andrew had seen a similar behavior with his father and

his oldest brother, though over the years they'd both settled down.

Gabby might have had something to do with that. She seemed to make Bo realize that there was more to life than to work oneself to death.

Andrew couldn't fault his brother for wanting to provide for his family. He'd thought he was going to be in the military for the rest of his life—until his team had been attacked.

Thrusting those darker thoughts aside, Andrew continued to flip through the book in his hand. But his thoughts didn't want to behave. Instead of turning to his military past, they shifted to Julia. Besides Luke, she was the one person he could actually stand to be around at the moment. Both of his brothers were in the throes of their new relationship statuses. And his younger siblings still didn't treat him like he could do much except sit on a horse and delegate.

He was worth more than that.

"Hemmingway, huh?"

Andrew jumped, glancing up at Julia who stood a few feet away. How had he not heard her come in? He was getting sloppy. There used to be a time when he could sense the change in the air when someone came close.

Her shoulder was propped up on the shelves beside her, and her eyes were trained on him like she expected him to do something else.

"I'm not gonna prank you again," he murmured. "You can stop looking so paranoid."

"Do I look paranoid?"

He returned his focus to the book in his hands. "Have you ever read it?"

She snorted. "A man and a fish? No thanks."

"It's a *whale*."

"Don't care. Reading is supposed to be about pleasure. I have more important things to do with my life than sit and struggle



through a book that won't give me that."

He peeked at her. That was an excellent point, one he'd have to tell the group he met with regularly. There were several vets who were struggling to find joy again. And as much as he hated to admit it, he was in the same boat, just not as severely. "What would *you* read then?"

Her eyes scanned the room before she pushed away from the shelves and headed to the opposite side from where he sat. "I guess I would read one of these."

Andrew got up and followed her. She pulled a book off the shelf, one with a muscular cowboy on the cover and handed it to him. He stared at the cover with disbelief before meeting her gaze. "You're joking."

"Nope. I got that one a few weeks ago. You're welcome to read it if you'd like."

He shoved the book back into her hands. "Yeah, I think I'll pass on this one."

She held it up, a smile touching her lips. "You sure? Because this book might just give you some tips on how to be a better cowboy, you know, since you had to shift gears a little."

If she'd made such a statement a few months ago, he might have taken offense. His future career path was a touchy subject, but one he was finally resigning himself to. "Maybe you should read it again so you can learn how to snag a guy like the one on that cover."

She snickered. "Guys like this one? They don't exist. That's why they call it a fantasy."

Andrew arched a brow, his eyes dipping to the book. "Really? You fantasize about being with someone like that?"

Julia flushed instantaneously. "No, of course not. What I meant was... that's what romance fiction is. It's just a way for readers to escape into a world where the men are rugged and are willing to fight for their women."

Once again, she seemed to have put her foot into her mouth. Her blush burned brighter and she looked away. "I don't think

you'd understand.”

“Actually—”

“There you guys are, we've been wondering where you wandered off to.” Luke entered the study, hand in hand with Arielle. She hovered beside him, leaning into him like her very life depended on it. Luke smiled broadly as he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “We have something important to tell you.”

Andrew glanced toward Julia, but her eyes were trained on her brother. She seemed reserved, her blush having dissipated. There was no other way to describe her and he found he wished he could.

Luke moistened his lips, excitement showing clearly on his face. “We're getting married.”

Julia stiffened, likely not the reaction her brother was expecting.

Andrew couldn't do anything but move forward and take Luke into a bearhug. “Congrats, man. I'm happy for you.”

Julia blinked, coming out of her trance. “Yeah, congratulations. I mean, it's a little fast, but you'll have time to figure things out. You probably don't even have a date in mind —”

“This weekend.”

She clamped her mouth shut and her eyes practically bugged from her head. “What?”

Luke flashed her a brief smile before turning his attention to Arielle. “We've actually been talking about this for the last couple of weeks. We know we want to be together and we don't want to wait another minute.”

“Well, you're going to have to. You can't just—”

Andrew grabbed Julia's hand, praying that action would be enough to slow her down a little. She needed to think before she said anything she might regret. Julia froze, looking down at where his hand held hers. Faster than a lightning strike, Andrew released her hand and gave a subtle shake of his head.

This was Luke's decision, and Julia needed to stay out of it. She was the younger sister and as such Luke wasn't likely to listen to her when it came to stuff like this anyway. Julia's eyes widened briefly as she darted her eyes to the happy couple then back to Andrew. He could wager a pretty good guess what she was trying to say.

Luke was moving too fast.

He had to agree, but it wasn't his choice either. Luke needed to make his own choices.

"This weekend?" Julia croaked. "Are you sure you want to—"

"We're sure. In fact, we already have everything planned. You two just need to pack a weekend bag."

Julia sputtered. "You're eloping this weekend and you want us to go with you?"

"Of course we do." Luke glanced toward his bride-to-be and back to his sister. "You guys mean the most to me."

"And what about Arielle? What about her family?"

Arielle grinned at her. "Most of my family is back East. They wouldn't be able to make it and I'm not sure they'd want to anyway. I'm happy just to get married to Luke with his sister and best friend there."

Julia faced Andrew but before she could say anything, he beat her to it. "I think it sounds fun. A little getaway. Where are we going?"

Luke wasn't even looking at him when he murmured, "That's a secret. All you need to know is that there will be a wedding. So bring a nice set of clothes."

"And a swimsuit," Arielle offered. "I think there's a pool."

Luke jerked his chin toward the door. "I need to pack a few things before we head out tomorrow. What do you think..."

Their voices trailed off and the second they were out of earshot, Julia spun to face Andrew. "You can't possibly think this is a good idea."

Andrew shrugged. “It doesn’t matter what I think. All that matters is that Luke is happy. Clearly Arielle does that for him. So let’s just get our things packed and get ready for a road trip.”



ANDREW GLANCED sideways at an irritated Julia. Luke was driving and he hadn’t released Arielle’s hand since they got on the road. They’d left Rocky Ridge a while back and he still didn’t know just where they were headed.

Julia stared out the window solemnly but must have felt his attention on her because she glanced at him over her shoulder. “What?” she whispered.

Shaking his head, he murmured, “Nothing.”

“Can you believe we’re actually doing this? It’s nuts.”

He looked toward the driver then back to Julia. “I think this is just one of those things where you’re going to have to accept you don’t know everything.”

She snorted. “I would never say I know everything.”

Andrew couldn’t help it. He let out a chuckle. “I seem to recall a little girl who thought she did in fact know everything.”

“I was *seven*,” she muttered.

“And now you’re twenty-seven. Doesn’t seem like you changed much.”

She gasped as she shot him a dirty look. “Are you suggesting that I’ve not matured past my adolescent years?”

“Are you two going to get along? Or do I need to leave one of you on the side of the road?”

Julia crossed her arms, staring daggers at Andrew. “It might not be such a bad idea if we left a little baggage behind.”

Andrew met Luke’s eyes through the rearview mirror. At least he had never found out about Andrew’s little crush, and he

probably had Julia to thank for that. Some days, it felt like all she had for him was utter disdain.

They pulled off the freeway and that's when Julia really started searching out her window. "I think you can tell us now. We're clearly almost there and we're not children going to some giant theme park."

Luke laughed. "You were never very good at being patient, were you?"

Julia let out a huff and slammed back against her seat, her arms folded. "Well, isn't that the pot calling the kettle black.

Andrew met Luke's eyes in the rearview mirror, not disappointed at all by the reaction he saw. He rolled his eyes then grinned.

"This wasn't just a last-minute thing, you know." Luke glanced over to his bride-to-be with adoration. "We've been talking about eloping for the last week and a half."

"Week and a half!?" Julia sputtered.

"Yup. We got our license and everything. We were just going to go do it but then Arielle said we couldn't leave you guys out of it. So here we are."

Julia's shock was almost too much and Andrew had to fight the urge to laugh. He looked out his window instead. While he didn't agree with what his best friend was doing, he wasn't about to step in the way of Luke finding his happiness. He'd do what he was good at—being the quiet support that his friends and family needed.

They came up on a large resort that looked more like a castle than a hotel. It was probably about four stories tall covered in windows and varying eaves. Rustic brick and with wood accents made this place look like it came right off the pages of a fairy tale. Andrew peered at the building with a sense of awe.

If Luke had to elope, this was definitely better than going to Vegas.

“You guys each have a hotel room for the whole stay. Arielle and I will stay with you tonight, then we have a cabin for the rest of the weekend.”

“I’ll go get us checked in. You grab the bags.” Arielle kissed his cheek then slipped from the car.

Luke turned around to face Andrew and Julia. “I wanted to thank you guys for coming along.” There was emotion in his voice Andrew hadn’t heard before. But his eyes were locked on his sister. “I don’t think I could have gone through with it without you.”

Julia opened her mouth and Andrew held his breath, expecting her to make some comment about not going through with this. But then she snapped her mouth shut and nodded.

Luke reached across to her and took her hand in his. “Thanks, sis.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

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JULIA STARED DOWN AT THE POOL FROM AN EXTERIOR BALCONY at the hotel. The view offered was decent and from where she stood seemed to be enough out of the way so other guests didn't cross her path. Just a few yards away were some stairs should she choose to head down to the pool itself.

She didn't like this whole situation, but there was something in the way Luke had said he needed her that made her realize something. There would be no stopping him from making mistakes. This might be one, but he'd have to learn from it and she'd just have to support him.

On the other hand, she had seen something in the way Luke looked at Arielle that resonated with her. They were so completely and utterly in love with each other. She knew for a fact she'd never felt that way about anyone.

Not a single person.

A sigh burst from her chest and she rested her folded arms on the railing. There were families and couples swimming this evening as twilight fell. Lights from the pool made the whole thing glow. Happy chatter and squeals filled the air.

A twinge of sadness enveloped her. The people below seemed to have everything they wanted. She wasn't so naïve to believe they weren't without their troubles, but at least they had each other.

She wanted that—more than she'd ever wanted something before.

A familiar figure wandered alongside the pool, heading toward the entrance of the gardens that spanned the backside of the property and completed the setup for the cabins. Andrew's slight limp made him easy to spot and he wasn't moving all that fast. She was only on the second floor, if she hurried, she'd be able to catch up with him.

Based on the way she felt right now, it would be better to go for a walk with Andrew than sit in her hotel room and veg out in front of the television.

She spun around and stumbled as she slipped her feet into her flipflops. By the time she got poolside, Andrew had retreated into the gardens. Thankfully he hadn't made it far and she was able to catch up to him.

Her breath came out in puffs, despite her attempt to even it out. He glanced at her, surprise flitting across his face but didn't stop walking.

"You're really fast for a guy with a limp."

She wasn't sure but she thought his expression hardened.

No, Andrew was fine. It was getting late and she was seeing things.

Andrew snorted. "You sound too winded for someone who's in the prime of her life."

"Touché." She focused on getting her breathing under control. "You're lucky you passed the pool before I got to you, otherwise you would have taken a swim for making a statement like that."

His lips twitched. "And you would have taken one with me."

"Yeah, right. You wouldn't have been fast enough."

"I don't know, with the proper motivation, you'd be surprised what I can do."

She snickered. This was the Andrew she loved spending time with. Everyone who knew both of them seemed to think Andrew was all business. And yes, he didn't have much variation in his expressions, but he was sharp and presented a challenge. Andrew could keep her on her toes. Most of the



other guys she knew walked on eggshells around her when it came to stuff like this. “You better watch your back. Because no one is safe when there’s a big hole in the ground filled with water.

“I will never understand your use of water as a weapon. Water dries.”

“Oh? Would you prefer I sneak up on you or paint you with gravy?”

He shrugged and she laughed again. The lull in their conversation stretched as her thoughts shifted to her brother.

“Can you believe what Luke is doing? Don’t you think they should slow it down a bit?”

Andrew shrugged again. “I’m not Luke.”

“*Clearly.*” She shook her head. “You’re actually *smart.*” They walked side by side for a few moments and then she glanced at Andrew out of the corner of her eye. “There is one thing that I’m a little jealous of.”

He didn’t respond. But that was the way things had always been. Andrew was quiet. The only time she could get a reaction out of him was when they were sparing.

“They seem genuinely happy.”

“Yeah, they do.”

More silence.

Julia retreated back into her thoughts, letting them drift as she took in the gardens. There were lights strung up on almost invisible wires, giving them the appearance of floating. Various shrubbery and flora had been planted with care lining the cobblestone path that was carved out before them.

In the dim lighting, the flowers seemed to take on a soft glow themselves. Her brother might be a little bit out of his mind, but he had good taste. This place couldn’t have been more perfect. Everything was lining up for him.

Julia groaned. “Why do I feel like everyone is moving on and I’m... just... *stuck?*”

He glanced at her again.

“I’ve never found anyone I feel so strongly for that I’d upend my entire life to get married on a whim.”

“I don’t think it’s a whim.”

She sighed. “Okay, so they’ve *been planning this for a couple weeks*. That doesn’t make it *not* a whim. I mean seriously, who does that? Would you ever get married after knowing the person for only a few months?”

Andrew didn’t answer right away. He shoved his hands in his pockets and his brows came together. “I think you’re looking at this wrong.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“They’ve known each other for longer than four months. They’ve been dating for four months, but their friendship spans a lot longer.”

She stopped then snatched his elbow to force him to face her. “They’ve known each other for longer? Why didn’t he tell me?”

Andrew cocked his head slightly, a hint of a smile touching his lips. Then again, it could be just her imagination. “I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t tell my sister every time I met someone new.”

“But he shares *everything* with me. And I share everything with him.”

“Really? Would you tell him if you started dating a complete stranger? What about one of his friends?”

She grimaced. Andrew had made an excellent point. Neither one of those options sounded all that great. She would have to ease into announcing that sort of thing. “Okay, you win. I don’t think Luke would be thrilled if I started dating someone he thought was a threat.”

“See? So just step back and let them have this. If it goes off the deep end, then we’ll be there for him when he comes up for air.” Andrew turned and started walking again, causing her to have to dart forward to catch up with him.

“How did you get to be so smart—in relationships, that is?”

Normally, he would have answered with a straight face, but this time he chuckled. “I’m not smart in relationships. I’ve had a crush on the same girl my entire life and I’ve never had the guts to tell her how I feel.”

Her eyes widened and she grabbed onto his arm again. “Andrew Reese. You can’t be serious. Does Luke know?”

He stared down at where she clutched his arm and that was when she realized her fingers were digging into the flesh of his skin hard enough to make white imprints. She tore her hand away and met his gaze only to be thrown off again. Andrew’s eyes were so serious, drilling into her like he was prepared to strike oil.

Julia’s stomach flipped on its side. She couldn’t control anything going on inside her. She glanced away, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “So? Have you told Luke who you like?”

Andrew shook his head.

“Well why not? Isn’t that what best friends are for?”

He rubbed the back of his neck and looked up at the sky. “Let’s just say it would go against the bro-code.”

She gasped. “You like one of his exes, don’t you? Which one? You can tell me.”

Bringing his focus back to her, he leveled her with a flat stare. “I’m not talking about this with you.” With that statement, he made a move to start walking but she jumped in his path.

“Whoever it is, I’m sure she’d be lucky to have you. You’re a catch.”

“I’m not talking about this, Julia,” he warned.

“Fine, we don’t have to talk about it... unless you change your mind.”

“I’m not going to change my mind,” he muttered, moving past her.

She fell into step beside him, clasping her hands behind her back as they walked toward the stairs. “So, Luke really did tell you when he met Arielle for the first time?”

Andrew grunted.

“I guess that makes me feel a little better.” She pressed her lips together tightly and gave him a side-eyed stare. “Am I terrible for making such a big stink about this?”

“I don’t think so.”

“They must really love each other.”

“That’s usually how it goes.”

Man, he was being infuriating. Was there a reason he was being so tight-lipped over this? Was he in love with Arielle? Or was there someone else?

“You know, I always thought I’d be the first one to get married out of the two of us. I thought for sure someone would sweep me off my feet and I’d fall so deeply in love that we’d get married right away and have lots of little babies. Now, I’m beginning to wonder if it will ever happen. Maybe something is wrong with me.”

Andrew stopped so suddenly, she had to turn around to face him. His brows had lowered and his jaw set in a hard line. Had she overstepped? Spilled too much personal information? She took an inadvertent step toward him so they were only a foot apart, an apology on her lips.

But then he took her hand in his and squeezed it a little harder than she expected. “There is *nothing* wrong with you, Julia.”

Her eyes locked with his and something about the way he was staring at her made her lean toward him like they were two magnets that had found their mates.

“Any guy out there would be out of his league when it comes to you.”

Her heart fluttered erratically for a moment as his soft words slithered into her ear and made their way through her body.

“Don’t you ever say that you aren’t worthy of finding love like Luke and Arielle.”

Chills ripped past her defenses. The way his blue eyes seemed to delve into her, it was like he had figured out the language of her soul.

But that was ridiculous, right? This was Andrew.

The boy her big brother had spent his childhood with. The boy who had teased her mercilessly and refused to allow her to join in their fun. This was the boy who put a ‘no girls allowed’ sign on the treehouse her father had built.

But this was also the man who had gone off and joined the military without looking back. He was serious and kept all his secrets guarded, only allowing a select few to catch a glimpse of who he really was.

Even Julia wasn’t one hundred percent sure she knew him all that well. She’d never considered him to be a romantic option.

Until now.

What was she thinking? This was all just her insecurities coming out to play.

Andrew wasn’t interested in her any more than she was interested in him. She was just dealing with the uncertainty of her future now that her brother had found his path which left her on her own for the first time in her life.

A pebble skittered across the walkway behind her and Andrew broke her trance by glancing toward it. She blinked, stepping back swiftly to put distance between them. Her face felt hot and uncomfortable when she placed the back of her hand against her cheek.

The intrusion was all thanks to a couple who appeared to have had a little too much to drink as they wandered past them. Their raucous laughter split the air in two, successfully destroying the tension that had tied her to Andrew in the moments leading up to their arrival.

When she glanced in Andrew’s direction, he was looking at his phone. “Luke wants my help with something.” His head lifted

and he gazed at her, but his eyes were once again guarded.  
“We should head back.”

She nodded, her throat tight. “It’s getting late anyway.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

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ANDREW STARED AT THE TEXT MESSAGE FROM MIA AND A sliver of guilt entered his chest. He'd forgotten to tell her that he wouldn't be at the meeting last night. The only one he'd notified was her brother, Carlos.

There wasn't any reason to feel guilty. She wasn't a vet, she merely attended the meetings he held because she wanted to support her brother. So why did he get the feeling that she was hurt by his lack of touching base?

Because she probably was. Mia had never hidden that she found him attractive. And while her attention gave his self-esteem a boost, he simply wasn't interested in her.

Now, as he watched the wedding start to take shape around him, he couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't giving her enough of a chance. Mia was attractive, though she didn't hold a candle to Julia.

She *did* have a thing for war heroes though, which seemed to turn him off more than anything else. And lately, she had her sights set on him.

"Who's Mia?" Luke's voice came right behind Andrew's ear, causing him to jump. Luke chuckled. "You've been holding out on me."

"No, I haven't," Andrew muttered.

"No, I think you *have*. You're messaging a girl who clearly missed you last night. Did we happen to kidnap you when you had a prior engagement?" Luke nudged him, the humor in his

eyes unmistakable. “I’m happy for you, bud! This means that we can start doing couples things.”

There would be no arguing with Luke on this one. The man was on cloud nine at this point and he wasn’t willing to listen to reason. The only thing Andrew could do was change the subject. “Last night you said you needed me to pick up some flowers for the ceremony. Where did you order them?”

“We didn’t.” Arielle materialized beside her husband-to-be. She made a face as she bumped against him and rested her cheek to his shoulder. “We thought far enough ahead to get the paperwork and the reservations, but we forgot the flowers. I just figured that the chapel onsite would have some.”

Luke shook his head, taking Arielle’s chin in his grasp. He pressed a tender kiss to her lips. “I told you, there’s a florist in the town square. It’s only about a fifteen-minute walk. Andrew said he’d check out what they had available.”

Arielle’s eyes flitted up to meet Andrew’s. “Really? You’d do that for us?”

Andrew nodded stiffly. That’s the sort of thing he was here for.

“And Julia said she’d go with you.”

He froze. After last night, Andrew had hoped he would be able to avoid Luke’s sister until the ceremony. If he had to deal with seeing her so soon, he didn’t know how things would go. All he could do was pray that she would pretend their little moment never happened.

“Ready?”

Speak of the devil.

Julia’s chipper voice came from behind, and it took everything in his power not to turn around to face her. He needed to keep his feelings in check. Last night he’d been tired and she’d said some things that had nearly broken him. How could someone as wonderful as Julia believe that she wasn’t worthy of love? The thought was laughable.

Until he’d seen the expression on her face and knew that she was being serious.



Luke reached for Arielle's hand. "Great. You two head off, we're going to our meeting with the pastor. See you in about an hour?"

"An hour? I thought you said it took fifteen minutes to walk there," Andrew shot back.

His friend slapped a twenty into his hand. "Get some lunch on us." With that, they turned around and wandered away.

Before he had a chance to pull out his wallet, Julia rounded him and snatched the money from his palm. "*Nice!* I could go for a big juicy burger right about now." She moved past him and started toward the road.

Andrew limped after her, his bumbling more pronounced in trying to catch up with her. When he came up beside her, they fell into a comfortable pace. The tension from the night before still hung thick in the air—and he hated it. How could he have been so careless as to let this side of him escape the prison he'd created for it?

"Seeing as they didn't order anything special, I think we need to focus on picking out a matching boutonniere and bouquet. That should be plenty. Let's not worry about decorations just yet." Julia rambled on. "I suppose we could pick up a wedding present while we're out. I mean, they *did* pay for all of this and they didn't even invite guests to give them presents."

"I don't think they're worried about presents," he muttered.

"Yeah, you're probably right. Luke's job gives him everything he needs and they're probably going to take the house." Her voice seemed to falter on that last bit, drawing Andrew's attention. Her features had tightened and her lips had thinned. She didn't seem very thrilled about that prospect.

"What makes you think they're going to take the house?"

She lifted a shoulder, her expression remaining stoic. "It's sorta been the plan all along. Whoever got married first gets to have the house. Then the roommate moves out."

Andrew reached out to touch her shoulder, causing her to stop and look at him. "But you love that house."

She let out a laugh that sounded sadder than anything else. “Yeah, I do. But we always knew this was a possibility. I wouldn’t want him going back on our deal if I found someone to marry first.”

“But he’s got the money to go anywhere. Do you really think he’d make you leave?”

She waved a dismissive hand and strode forward. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll be fine. I have a good job too. I’ll just miss the sunrises.” She peeked at him. “And the study. I don’t think I’ll find a place with nearly enough shelf space for all the books I’d want to put on them.”

A wry smile touched his lips. “You mean the ones that don’t bring pleasure but make you appear to be smarter than you are?”

She made a disgruntled sound. “I’m *smart*. In fact, I’d argue that the fact I know which books I should read and what ones I shouldn’t waste my time on makes me even smarter than the average person.”

“I don’t know...” He peeked at her. “I’d argue that those who aren’t willing to take a risk on a book just because they heard it was boring aren’t smart at all.”

Julia gasped as she stopped and faced him. “Take that back.”

“Nope. I don’t think I will,” he said lightly, trudging forward. “Books are like people. You can’t judge them before you actually flip the pages and see what’s beneath the cover.”

It took longer than he expected for her to catch up to him and when she did, her question threw him off more than he wanted to admit. “What if the book won’t allow the cover to be opened?”

He didn’t know how he knew, but she was talking about last night. He’d shown a side of himself he’d never given her a glimpse of before. Was she upset that he’d shown it to her? Or upset that he wasn’t willing to show her *more*?

Either way, she was going to continue being upset because he had no intention of telling her anything about the feelings he had for her no matter how hot they burned in his heart. He’d

been branded by said feelings, claimed by them. His sole purpose was to protect himself from anyone who might dig a little too deep and make them seem less important than they actually were.

Andrew clamped his mouth shut, working his jaw back and forth as he tried to come up with something they could discuss that wasn't how close he'd come to stealing a kiss from her the night before.

He had nothing.

The remainder of the walk to town felt far longer than it probably was—strictly because of the silence that had grown between them. When they reached the edge of town, Julia's countenance went from suspicious to elated.

“This has got to be the cutest little town I have ever seen.” She jumped up and pointed. “Look! There's even a wishing well in the middle of everything.” With that statement, she darted away.

Andrew shook his head, a smile on his lips. This was one of the many reasons he liked her. Julia was a bright spot in the world.

No, not just the world.

*His* world.

Andrew followed Julia from the fountain to the small shops on the main road. She flitted from one to the next like a little hummingbird, allowing him to forget just how awkward the last twenty-four hours had been. She didn't end up buying anything, but she did linger in a home goods store.

He stopped behind her as she admired a mirror that leaned up against the wall. The thing looked ancient. It was carved from wood and his reflection was somewhat distorted. There were chips and a few scratches in the wood. Maybe once upon a time it was decent, but now it was just a shell of what it used to be.

Just like him.

He peered at her through the glass until her gaze locked with his. “You can’t seriously be considering buying that, are you?”

She shrugged but didn’t say anything.

“I’m sure you could find something so much better in the city. This wouldn’t do you any good if you actually wanted to use it.”

“That’s the point,” Julia finally spoke.

He turned to stare at her but she didn’t face him.

Her voice was soft but firm. “When you look at this mirror, you see something that has stopped being useful—it’s no longer pristine or perfect. But when I look at it, I find something different. It’s a work of art, Andrew. Every little thing you might call a defect is what gives it character.” She traced the carving and a small smile spread across her lips. “It’s perfect to me.”

Julia caressed it once more then wandered toward the exit.

Andrew glanced at the mirror then back to Julia. “Well, aren’t you going to get it?”

She shot him a look over her shoulder. “And why on earth would I do something like that? In case you have forgotten, we walked here. I’m not about to go traipsing through town carrying a mirror that probably weighs half as much as I do.”

He snorted. “I doubt it weighs that much.”

Stopping, she faced him. “Oh yeah? That’s a solid kingwood. It’s easily one of the heaviest woods out there. I wouldn’t be surprised if that mirror is from France because that kind of wood was really popular for making fine furniture back in the early seventeen hundreds.” She dropped that bomb just before she strode out of the store, leaving him gaping after her.

When he finally came to his senses, he charged after her. “Where did you learn that?”

“Learn what?”

He gave her a pointed look. It wasn’t hard to see that she was fighting laughter. Or maybe it was just a smirk he saw beneath

the surface. Either way, she was amused at his surprise.

“I told you. I like to read.”

“And you’ve become an expert on wood now?”

She shrugged. “I like pretty pieces of furniture. That mirror happens to fall under the category of something I could see myself putting in my own house several years down the road.”

Once again, he found himself wondering why she wouldn’t buy the darn thing and have someone come pick it up or get it delivered. But then his thoughts shifted to what she’d said about the imperfections making it perfect and a small part of him wanted to believe she could see the same thing in him. He shifted his attention to her and had to jump forward in order to catch up with her.

It was too late to head back for the mirror at the pace Julia was walking. They needed to return to the resort anyway. Andrew fell into step beside her then his hand shot out and he blocked her before she could take the road they’d come to town on. “How about we take the scenic route?” He didn’t know what prompted him to recommend it. Or perhaps he didn’t *want* to know why he craved more one-on-one time with her. Regardless, once the words were spoken, there was no taking them back.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to squirm for long. Julia’s eyes drifted toward the greenbelt path just a few yards away. “Sure. Why not?” She turned on her heel and headed for the trail without another word.

## CHAPTER SIX

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JULIA'S MIND SEEMED TO CONTINUE BUZZING. SOMEHOW SHE knew that even if a week passed, it wouldn't stop the incessant thoughts from encroaching. There had to be something incredibly wrong with her if she was so willing to let herself be swept up by Andrew's words from last night. He had managed to find exactly what was bothering her and soothed all the rough edges of her soul.

Just because she felt seen didn't mean she had a crush on him. She was appreciative, that was all. With the additional time they spent together preparing for the wedding tonight, that became even more apparent. They were friends. Nothing more.

"It's too bad the hotel doesn't have horses."

She glanced over toward Andrew when he broke the silence. "Why's that?"

He gestured around them. They'd managed to find themselves wandering through a wooded area, no longer able to see the town. "Don't you think it's a missed opportunity? They could rent out the horses. Folks wouldn't have to walk."

Julia smirked at him, then rolled her eyes. "Just because you're good at riding and taking care of horses doesn't mean that other folks would be the same. There's a ton of liability with that sort of thing. And what if someone got lost?"

"That's just the thing. Horses have a great memory and sense of direction. If a rider got lost, the horse would take over."

“Yeah, because that’s what everyone wants. A self-driving horse.”

He laughed and she found herself joining in. “I don’t know why people haven’t marketed horses that way. It sounds so... high tech.”

Julia shook her head. “And I suppose you’d want to outfit all the horses with a GPS system? What happened to people just enjoying a ride for what it is? Everything is moving too fast. We need to all just slow down a little and enjoy life.” She glanced around them and frowned. “Except right now. We really should be going a little quicker. Shouldn’t we have made it back to the hotel by now?” She held out her hand. “Give me your phone so we can use the GPS.”

“I didn’t bring it.”

Her eyes widened. “You didn’t bring it?”

“What’s the problem? Didn’t you bring yours?”

“My charger didn’t work last night. That’s why I got a replacement today.”

His focus dipped to the bag in her hand. “You did?”

She groaned and her pulse accelerated. “Luke and Arielle are going to be worried. Worse, they might think we bailed on them. We have to get back.”

“And we will. Getting overworked about this isn’t going to help.”

Julia didn’t know what it was about his words. Perhaps it was the underlying tone. She could sense his irritation and that just set off a chain reaction within her. She pulled herself short as she whirled to face him. “You’re the one who said we should take this path. This is all your fault.”

He stiffened and his eyes darkened. “You agreed to come this way.”

Her eyes darted back the way they’d come. They’d walked far too long for her to believe she’d be able to backtrack and still make it to the hotel in time. The woods had only grown thicker as if the trail was just for tourists in town to wander the area

but not make it all the way to the hotel. She stomped over to a nearby tree and dropped her bag.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“I’m climbing this tree to see where we are. I don’t remember this path forking anywhere...” Then again, she’d been more than distracted. Between her brother’s impending nuptials and her uncertain future she had dropped the ball. She placed one foot on the tree and reached for the lowest branch.

Andrew’s hands wrapped around her waist and tugged her to solid ground before she climbed even five inches. “Absolutely not.”

She faced him, her hands on her hips. “We need to figure out where we are and how to get back. Neither one of us have our phones. Why aren’t you worried?”

“Because the resort has to be just up there.” He gestured vaguely.

Julia’s snort was so loud a bird burst from a nearby tree, causing both of them to jump slightly. She waved her hand in a similar motion that he had. “Over there somewhere, huh?”

Before she could continue, he swiped the bag from the ground and trudged onward. “Yeah,” he muttered. “It’s gotta be in that direction because there’s no other option.”

She scurried after him. “You’re only going to make this worse. The trail is gone. I don’t even see it anymore.”

“That doesn’t matter. I have an excellent sense of direction.”

“Yeah? Well if that were true, we wouldn’t be lost, would we? Geez, I knew this would happen. I should have just gone with my instincts and we should have taken the road we did before.”

Andrew’s pace quickened, making his limp more pronounced. Julia grasped onto his wrist and tugged on him, but he was like one of those immovable forces at this point.

“Come on, we need to just backtrack and go the way we came. It’s gonna be longer, but at least we won’t have to sleep in the woods without any shelter.”



He shot her a dark look. “I’m more than capable of taking care of us. Or do you forget that I’ve got specialized training?” He tore his arm away from her and continued trudging forward, leaving her standing there alone.

There was a moment when she considered heading back. Her gut told her that was the best option. But if she were honest with herself, she knew she wouldn’t make it very far. Her own sense of direction was absolutely terrible.

And Andrew wasn’t slowing down.

Julia let out an exaggerated groan and sprinted after him. “What happened to being a team?” she hollered at him, but he didn’t react. By the time she got beside him, he’d only slowed by a small margin. His features were hard—as if they had been carved in stone. She’d never seen him so angry before.

Well, if he was that mad, then he shouldn’t have gotten them lost. They were quickly losing daylight by this point and as far as safety was concerned, it would have been better to get back to town to use one of their phones.

She sent one more fleeting glance over her shoulder in the direction of town and her own fury finally reached a boiling point. “I can’t believe you. You’re just like every other guy I’ve met.”

Andrew stopped so suddenly that she nearly bumped into him. He turned on her, his face red. “What is that supposed to mean?” he snarled.

Julia’s determination wavered but only for a split second. She crossed her arms and leveled him with a glare that rivaled his own. “You’re stubborn. You won’t listen to reason. You think that just because you were in the military that you’re better than me. Clearly, you’re arguing with me just for the sake of arguing and for the life of me I can’t understand why.”

His expression remained unchanged, but the underlying tone of his voice seemed to be laced with something she’d never heard before. “Are you done?”

“What?”

“You want to tell me everything that’s wrong with me? That’s it?”

“Not *everything*,” her habit of lighthearted insults returned, “that would take too long.”

The humor in her voice was lost on him, made clear when his eyes darkened even further.

Weak. That was the only feeling that registered with her. From her heart to her knees to her toes, it was like the life had drained out of her. She’d never seen him like this before. The worst part was that she couldn’t figure out what had changed. They’d been getting along just fine until they’d gotten lost. And it *was* his choice to come this way. Pulling on the final thread of her own stubbornness, she scowled back. “What is your problem? Why are you being so... *disagreeable*?”

His dark gaze flickered with uncertainty. At least that was what it appeared. He broke eye contact as he muttered something under his breath.

“What?” Julia leaned in closer, the anger she felt simmering.

Andrew’s head snapped up. His whole body was rigid from the hard stare he laid on her to his clenched hands. “Do you know how hard it is to spend time with someone who keeps putting themselves down?”

She stilled. He wasn’t talking about her. He couldn’t be. Was Luke having second thoughts?

His hands raked through his hair and he spun away from her. The growl that escaped him sounded far more feral than anything they might interact with in these woods. Julia didn’t dare utter a word for fear of what he might say. Theirs was a strange friendship to be certain. But that didn’t mean she wanted to see it ruined. There were times when she wondered if she’d pushed him too far and this was one of those moments.

Andrew finally faced her, the animalistic look in his eyes causing her to take a sudden step back. He dropped his hands to his sides, though they curled once more. “You want to know what’s bothering me? I like you.”

Julia blinked. “I’m... sorry?”

“No, you don’t get it. I knew you wouldn’t.” He released a heavy breath and his features softened. “You’re so much more than you give yourself credit for. Can’t you see that?”

Her throat closed up. This sounded a lot like what he’d been saying last night. The feelings his words caused both made her crave more while at the same time want to pull away from him—the latter making this all feel... wrong.

“You want to know why I’m always in a bad mood around you? That’s it. I’ve had feelings for you for longer than I can remember. You want to know the worst part? I can’t even act on it.” His voice softened and he lifted his hand as if he were going to touch her but he stopped himself. “I can’t have a crush on my best friend’s little sister.”

“Andrew,” she finally whispered.

His gaze intensified and this time he stepped close enough they were only inches apart. He brushed his thumb along her jawline, sending sparks of electricity skittering through her veins. “Any guy would be lucky to call you his, you have to know that. I know I would.” His voice cracked and his gaze dipped lower to her mouth.

She couldn’t move. It was like time itself had stopped, freezing her muscles, only allowing for her breathing and her heart to move at full power. If she were to speak or shift her weight, the magic would end.

Up until yesterday, Andrew had never come across her romantic radar. But knowing how he felt, she couldn’t deny just how much stronger those magnets seemed to pull on her.

Andrew shifted closer and as if by a force that wasn’t her own, her lips parted. She closed her eyes, waiting for him to take the kiss she’d willingly offer.

Something crashed through the branches from behind Andrew and landed about a yard from where they stood. Julia’s eyes flew wide and peered down at a red frisbee. She blinked wildly, barely registering that where Andrew once touched her now felt cold.

He swiped the frisbee from the ground just as a teenager pushed his way through some thick bushes. The young man stared at the two of them in surprise then gestured toward the toy. “Sorry about that...”

Andrew tossed the frisbee to the teenager then glanced over to Julia. “See? I knew we were close.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

---

WHAT HAD GOTTEN INTO HIM?

Andrew squeezed his eyes shut to ward off the embarrassment over confessing he liked Julia. At least he hadn't kissed her. That was two close calls now. Maybe he could convince her he was just trying to make a point.

Maybe she wouldn't even bring it up.

They trudged toward the chapel upon hearing it was about thirty minutes to six. The bride and groom to be would most assuredly be getting ready. Somehow the trail they'd followed had curved around to border the side of the resort and they'd been walking parallel to it for the last several minutes. If he'd just been smart enough to push through the bushes, he might have saved himself the hole he'd just dug for himself.

Dang it!

What if she told Luke? He hadn't even thought about that. She could spill what he'd told her to her brother just like she admitted she'd done all her life.

Andrew raked his fingernails down his face, not caring if he left a mark. What was wrong with him? He used to be so good at keeping this sort of thing to himself. Not even his support group knew the kinds of secrets he kept to himself.

Julia's quick and quiet steps followed behind him. Once upon a time she'd walk beside him or try to beat him and run ahead.

Not anymore.

She was probably trying to find the words to tell him that she wasn't interested but in a nice way. That was who Julia was.

She was the nice girl who wasn't willing to lead a guy on.

His scowl deepened even as they entered the chapel. But then Luke came barreling toward him clad in his tux and a smile that shined brighter than the sun itself. He clapped both hands on Andrew's shoulders and let out a laugh. "It's finally happening!" Luke's expression sobered as he peered closer at Andrew. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Andrew muttered.

Understanding flooded his features. "What happened. Did Julia—"

Andrew shrugged out from under Luke's hands and brushed past him. "It's not Julia. We got lost on the way back. I'm just tired and my leg hurts." People didn't bother to question him on that anymore. He could blame his sour mood on his injury without anyone asking for details.

Well, except Luke.

His friend's hand landed on Andrew's shoulder again, spinning him around. "Don't pull that with me. What's going on?"

Andrew sighed in an attempt to center himself. If he wanted this to go away, he'd have to pretend like it never happened. When he opened his eyes, he forced what he hoped was a natural smile. "I'm good. *Really*. It's been a long day."

"You're sure Julia didn't contribute to it?"

Of course Julia contributed to his attitude. She was the main catalyst in his life at the moment—heck, she probably always would be. Andrew shot his friend a flat look, then in the most bored voice he could muster, he said, "Julia is Julia. What can I say?"

That seemed to do the trick. Luke rolled his eyes as he shoved his hands into his pockets. "I will never understand why you enable her like that. It's been like this since we were all kids. Just because she does something doesn't mean you have to join in."

“On the contrary. I can’t let her win.” Andrew chuckled, surprised by how genuine it sounded. It was more than that though. Yes, Andrew couldn’t let Julia win when it came to their little war, but he also didn’t want the bickering and teasing to stop. Besides his support group, Julia was the one constant in his life. And like the support group, she didn’t treat him any differently.

His family might give him the easier tasks. His friends might tip-toe around certain subjects. But Julia told it like it was. Andrew glanced over to Luke, finding him staring. He stiffened and glanced over his shoulder as if expecting to find someone else. “What?”

Luke shook his head. “It’s nothing. I’m just glad you’re back in time. Look, I know I told you to bring something nice, but I rented you a suit after all. The resort has some for this sort of thing. It’s in the groom’s quarters.”

“There’s groom’s quarters?” Andrew laughed. “You’re kidding.”

Luke’s concern faded from his expression. “Like we said. We’ve been planning this for a while. This place was picked for several reasons and that was one of them. Go get dressed. Our turn starts soon.”

Andrew did as he was told and the ceremony was beautiful.

Or rather, the maid of honor was. Andrew didn’t really pay attention until it was his turn to give Luke the rings. Thankfully, Julia paid more attention to the wedding than she did to him, otherwise she would have found him staring far too much.

Luke threw his fist into the air and let out a deafening whoop.

Arielle only had eyes for him. It was nice to see his friend finding the kind of love he’d been searching for. They really *were* perfect together. He’d never seen someone so in love before in his whole life. Sometimes he wondered how things would turn out if he were to take that leap of faith and act on the feelings he had for Julia.

His gaze drifted toward her and at that very moment her eyes locked with his. The intensity behind her gaze was enough to knock him off balance. He sucked in a sharp breath but was unable to tear his focus from her until Luke stepped between them and gave his little sister a hug.

Julia turned her attention to the happy couple and Andrew stepped back. Why was this all happening right now—when he didn't have a chance to escape to his home and hide behind his work?

Luke hooked Andrew around the neck with one arm, Julia under the other. "Dinner's on us."

Andrew focused intently on not meeting Julia's gaze. It was her turn to watch him now. The things she could be thinking made his heart hammer and his palms go slick. All at once he was antsy and wanted nothing more than to take a ride through the thick brush from earlier today.

What he wouldn't give to feel the wind whip his hair and tug at his clothes. He'd even take getting scraped by low hanging branches if it meant he didn't have to deal with the mistakes of a few hours ago. Based on the current electricity in the air, he knew without a doubt that Julia wasn't going to let him live this down. She would corner him at some point and he already knew what he had to do.

Theirs was a friendship of lighthearted banter. Wouldn't it make sense for him to tease her and tell her it was all a big joke? He might have to deal with the repercussions if she got annoyed from it all, but at least he could hide behind the lies again.

Andrew slipped out from beneath his friend's arm and brushed at some nonexistent lint on his suit coat. "I'm game for dinner. Just let me return this."

"No time. Our reservation is in ten."

Of course it was. What else could he do but go along with Luke's plans? This was the man's big day and one he likely wouldn't get to repeat. "Well, then I guess it's time for dinner."



Thankfully, Andrew was able to ignore Julia's probing stare for the entirety of dinner as the couple chatted happily about what was next. Julia chimed in here and there, while Andrew observed from his seat in silence. It wasn't that he was broody. He'd always been the shy one—the guy who didn't wear his heart on his sleeve. The only people he felt comfortable with enough to share everything with were his brothers and Luke. Julia was close, but up until today, he'd kept his distance and for good reason.

He moved the food around his plate, picking at the remnants left behind until Luke and Arielle got to their feet. They stood close together, hands clasped tight. Luke set his gaze on Andrew, his smile wide. "Thanks for coming this weekend." He shifted his focus to his sister. "Both of you. We know we couldn't have done this without the two of you here."

Arielle nudged him and Luke chuckled.

"Okay, *I* couldn't have done this without the two of you here." He gave his new bride an adoring smile. "We're going to turn in early since we'll be on our way tomorrow. Meet you guys in the lobby at eleven?"

Andrew nodded and Julia murmured her assent. Without anything further, the newlyweds slipped away from the table, leaving Andrew with Julia.

Alone.

There was no way he wanted to be here with her—not until he could get his head wrapped around what he'd said and nearly done. He shot to his feet, murmuring, "I'm going to turn in, too—"

"Really?" Her voice was part surprise, part disappointment. "It's too early to call it a night. We haven't really gotten to have fun. This whole thing has been about Luke and Arielle."

"Yeah, because it's their wedding."

She stood, the frown on her face deepening. "Don't go to your room. That's boring."

"What would you have me do? It's really been a long day." It was a flimsy excuse. The two of them had identical

experiences today and if she wasn't tired then why would he be?

Julia's lower lip puckered out just a bit and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Please hang out for a little while? I don't want to be cooped up in my hotel room all by myself."

The request was tempting, but for all the wrong reasons. Andrew glanced around the restaurant, wishing there were some excuse he could make that would get her to back down.

Unfortunately, there was nothing. "Yeah, okay."

Her expression brightened immediately and together they left the restaurant, her arm looped through his as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

It wasn't.

They wandered through the lit courtyard behind the resort and off to the side of the pool. Julia didn't say anything right away and he nearly thought she'd give him what he'd hoped for.

But then she broke the silence. "About today—"

"Look, I know what you're going to say." Heat crawled up his neck. Andrew wasn't ready for this conversation. But he had no one to blame but himself. "It was a joke."

Julia stilled, though her arm was still looped within his.

"I wanted to see how you'd react." He paused for a second then glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Got you."

She frowned, her eyes searching the ground but there was nothing there. "No you weren't."

"How would you know?" he shot back.

Julia hurried to come in front of him, stopping him from walking along the path. "Because I know you. You wouldn't joke about something like that."

"Sure I would. You fight dirty, why wouldn't I do the same?"

She placed one hand on her hip. "Not about this."

He stared at her. The stubbornness in her eyes was all too clear. She might know him, but he knew her better. Julia wasn't going to stand down. Andrew threw up his hands. "Fine. But you know what? It was a mistake—one that I don't want to repeat. So can we just pretend it didn't happen?" Dang, he'd given in far too easy on this one. Since when could he not stand his ground? Geez. Maybe he needed additional training so he wouldn't just give in this easy.

The woman before him didn't look convinced. Her eyes narrowed and her mouth tightened into a firm line.

"I get that you're trying to make me talk this out. But guess what? I don't want to. Talking to you about this would be worse than getting waterboarded. I'm *not* interested, okay? Not in talking and most certainly not in *you*."

Her expression was still tight, but something was different about it. The dim lighting of the courtyard didn't offer much for him to read her, so when she dropped her hands, muttering, "Okay, fine." He wasn't expecting it.

She spun around swiftly and strode away, her heels clipping against the stone pathway. He watched her, unsure of how he was feeling. This was the right thing to do. Deep down, he knew it. Julia deserved better than him. She deserved someone who wasn't dealing with his own baggage on a daily basis. She deserved more than he could give.

So why did he feel like he just lost the one shot he might have had at happiness?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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THIS CAR RIDE WAS WORSE THAN THE ONE WHERE SHE'D BEEN forced to come along in the first place. Julia stared out the window at the passing landscape that flew by her window and wished she didn't have to spend the next several hours seated beside a guy she had thought actually liked her.

He'd flirted with her.

Or maybe that wasn't flirting. He'd said he wasn't interested so if he was telling the truth when he said that, then what in heaven's name were the other moments when he insisted that she was amazing and any guy would be lucky to have her?

What about Andrew? If he thought that guys would be lucky to have her, then wouldn't he fall into that category?

She heaved a sigh, one that ended up catching her brother's attention.

"What's going on with you, Julia?"

Glancing up, she found his gaze drilling into her through the reflection of the rear-view mirror. She waved her brother off and shook her head. "Nothing."

"Seven sighs isn't nothing."

"It's eight, actually."

Why couldn't they just mind their own business? She could breathe however she wanted to. And if Andrew wasn't bothered by it, then she was probably just fine.

"Okay, you sighed eight times. What's going on?"

“Like I said. It’s nothing.”

There was a strained silence for what felt like an entire mile—but in reality it was likely only a few yards. Her brother looked at her again through the reflection then shifted his focus to the road again. “Is this about the house?”

Julia perked up. She hadn’t been able to come up with an excuse to bring up this topic and here was Luke helping her out once again. “You caught me. I was thinking about the house and how I’m going to have to find a new place to live.”

Her brother glanced at his new bride then Arielle turned around in her seat. “I want you to know we don’t mind if you continue living at the house. As far as we’re concerned, it’s still your home.”

She shook her head. “I can’t do that. You guys are newlyweds. It wouldn’t be right to—”

“It’s *our* childhood home, Julia. It’s yours as much as it’s mine. If you were to have gotten married first, I’d hope you’d extend the same offer.”

Julia let out a snort. She couldn’t see her brother being willing to share a roof with a newlywed couple let alone one where his sister was involved. She shot a quick look out of the corner of her eye toward Andrew, not surprised in the least to find that he was staring out his window. He hadn’t moved since they got in the car either. She forced a smile when her brother sent another look in her direction. “Thanks for the offer, but if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll start looking just in case. Nothing set in stone, of course.”

“Of course.”

Still no comment or movement from Andrew, and she was getting really tired of all the quiet. She needed to break the tension somehow. While his words had hurt her the other night, she couldn’t hold onto them.

Andrew wasn’t interested in her. He didn’t owe her anything. There were several others out there in the world she could develop relationships with. He wasn’t the only one.

She set her gaze outside on the freeway, her keen eyes watching out for something specific. And when she saw it, she grinned.

Without warning, she slugged Andrew right below his shoulder as she hollered, “Slug bug!”

Every single person in the car jumped and Julia got some well-earned relief from the weight she’d been carrying. She didn’t need Andrew—not as a boyfriend anyway.

She just needed his friendship because whether she liked it or not, he gave her something to look forward to.

Who cared that he was one of the only guys she’d ever met who could make her feel all tinglingly and excited at the same time? Attraction like that wasn’t just supposed to be with one person. She’d find her special someone and it wouldn’t be some broody guy who didn’t know how to chill out.

Andrew shot her a dark look and she stuck her tongue out at him. His brows lifted but only by a fraction of an inch before he turned to stare out his window again.

She sat a little straighter in her seat as she watched for another car. It served him right for being so mean the other night. If she had access to water, she would have used that instead.

The next thirty minutes passed much like the first except one major difference.

No more slug bugs.

Julia placed her chin in her hand and stared out the window again. She could pull out her phone and play a game, but then she’d run the risk of getting sick to her stomach. Darn that motion sickness.

The car slowed and turned into the parking lot of a gas station. Arielle leaned across the arm rest and pressed a kiss to Luke’s lips. “I’m going to use the restroom and then get us some snacks.” She glanced toward Julia and Andrew. “Any requests?”

“Water,” Julia muttered, earning a disbelieving look from Andrew. She shot him another sly smile. “How about two?”

“She’ll have one,” Andrew juttled in.

“Three.” Julia lifted her chin and crossed her arms. “I’m really thirsty.” This was when she noticed her brother staring at her with an expression that mirrored Andrew’s.

“No.”

“No? Arielle asked what I wanted. I said water.”

“First of all, if you even think about drinking all that water, then you’re going to have to pee. I’m not making any more stops. So if you can’t figure out how to pee in a bottle, then you’re not getting that many bottles.”

She gasped, her eyes darting to Andrew only to find him fighting a smile. “Luke! You can’t say stuff like that!”

“What? It’s nothing I’m sure Andrew hasn’t heard before.”

Julia flushed hot. “And it’s none of your business how much water I want to drink.”

“It is when I know you plan on using the water in a way it wasn’t intended.”

“What are you talking about?”

Luke groaned, but before he answered her, he motioned for Arielle to head out the door. “Just get her one. She doesn’t need three.”

Arielle nodded, opening the door as she gave Julia a look of hesitation.

“Then at least make it a big one!” Julia hollered.

Luke shook his head. “One day, Julia. Can’t you behave for one day?”

She settled back in her seat, arms crossed. “I do behave. You just don’t like my way of doing it.”

He rolled his eyes, opening his door before climbing out to pump some gas.

Julia glanced toward Andrew and sighed again before facing her window and resting her elbow against the door. She refused to talk to the man if he wasn’t going to apologize to

her. That was the least he should do and he couldn't even do that.

She tapped her foot then her fingers. The ride wasn't even halfway done yet. Sitting back here with Andrew was practically torture.

"Sorry." His voice was so quiet she wasn't sure she heard him correctly.

"What?"

"I'm... sorry," Andrew muttered, though his back still faced her.

"You're *sorry*?" She snorted. "That's rich seeing as you blatantly told me last night that you were lying to my face all day."

"I wasn't."

She stilled.

This just had to be Andrew playing games with her again. What else could it be? He was trying to get her to admit something or do something so he could tease her again, she just knew it.

Andrew shot one more fleeting look out the window where Luke stood with his back pressed against the car while he waited for the gas to flow through the pump. Then he shot another look toward Julia. "You have no reason to believe me, but I needed to make sure you knew that I was sorry. I should have never done what I did."

"What exactly are you apologizing for?" she asked quietly.

"All of it."

"All of it?"

He sighed. "Yeah. All of it. I shouldn't have gotten close to you. I shouldn't have told you... certain things."

"Well, were they true?"

Andrew stared at her like she'd gone and sprouted two more arms. "What?"



“Sheesh, Andrew. You need to pick a side. Either you like me or you don’t. Honestly, I’m fine with either. I’m not even sure I would want to entertain anything with you so it would all work out if you *didn’t* like me.”

As hard as she tried, she couldn’t keep her voice from shaking. If she were one hundred percent honest with him, she would have to admit that she hadn’t gotten a lick of sleep last night due to just how betrayed she’d felt over his confession—not the confession of love but the confession of teasing her.

That was the part that didn’t sit well with her. Even more so, she didn’t like to be bested.

“You would... prefer that I don’t have feelings for you.”

The disappointment in his voice was enough to make her heart unravel just a little bit more. “So you do like me?” She shut her eyes briefly then opened them again with a soft smile. “I mean, as in more than just friends.”

Andrew fiddled with his fingers in his lap, choosing to stare at them rather than directly at her. “Yeah, actually. The worst part is that I don’t know how to conduct myself when I’m around you now. The cat has been let out of the bag and there is no putting it back. I wouldn’t even know where to begin to take back what I said.”

“Okay, so you *want* to take it back.” Even to her own ears, her words sounded hollow and strained.

Andrew groaned, raking his hands through his hair. “I don’t know how to handle any of this. I just want things to be easy again.”

She frowned. “Haven’t you said once that the easy way isn’t necessarily going to make you happy?”

His head whipped around so he could stare at her fully. “Yeah.”

“Well, then what would make you happy?” Even forty-eight hours ago, Julia would have laughed if someone told her she would consider going out with her brother’s best friend. More than that, she might slug them even if there were no cars around to use as an excuse.

Now, she didn't know what to think. Her head was calling her an idiot for even letting Andrew consider a relationship that was different from what they already had.

But her heart and her stomach were reminding her just how nice it had been to have someone like Andrew notice her—to have someone like him tell her how much he adored her. Not surprising, she wanted that more than she would have ever thought possible.

The gas pump clicked and they both looked toward her brother as he started to put the nozzle back in its holster.

Andrew glanced toward Julia. Time had officially run out.

The grains of sand in the invisible timer were slipping through her fingers.

“Go out with me.”

She let out a startled laugh. “What?”

“One date. That's all. No sarcasm, no pranks. Just a guy and a girl who want to get to know one other a little better.”

Luke tore the receipt from the machine. Andrew's expression was one of near absolute terror. He reached out toward her then seemed to think better of it and returned his hand to his lap.

Just before her brother opened the driver's side, Julia nodded. “Sure, okay.” She expected Andrew to touch her, to smile, or do anything really. But he didn't. He simply turned back toward the window and allowed her to get lost in her own thoughts.

What had she done?

## CHAPTER NINE

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IN HINDSIGHT, THE AVIARY AT THE OVERLOOK GRAND LODGE probably wasn't the best place to have a first date. It wasn't that the location wasn't great. On the contrary, the restaurant was exceptional. Andrew was even lucky to get a reservation.

Why did he get a reservation?

Andrew stared out his truck window as he pulled up to Julia's place. He should have gone with his gut and done something simple. He was a simple guy. He didn't need to take Julia to fancy restaurants to impress her. They knew each other when they were in their awkward stages.

His head bumped against the back rest of his seat. It felt like a storm was raging within him, a tsunami of 'what ifs' that he couldn't contain. What was he going to do if this date turned out poorly? He'd have to run away with his tail between his legs.

If he'd been thinking clearly, he would have admitted that he shouldn't even be on this date to begin with. There were other women. Mia, for instance. She would have been thrilled if he'd asked her out.

For some reason he couldn't help but feel like he didn't deserve to be here. Not picking Julia up for a date anyway.

Andrew let out a groan then shut off the engine and pushed the door open. If only it was so easy to walk up those steps and knock on the door. Sure, it sounded simple enough. But this was Julia and he was... well, he was Andrew—half the man he used to be.

Before he even got to the first step, the door flung open and Julia emerged. She wore a pretty white blouse with jeans that hugged her legs, showing off all of her curves. She flashed him a smile before turning around to lock the door. When she glanced over her shoulder, she froze. Her eyes swept over his dress shirt and slacks then she turned to face him fully.

“Andrew Reese, why are you dressed like that?”

He glanced down at the clothing he would have worn to any first date.

She wagged a finger at him. “I know you’re not all dressed up to take me someplace fancy, are you?”

The lump that had been growing in his throat expanded so much he couldn’t speak. Shoot. He *knew* he shouldn’t have made that reservation. He’d told himself as much when he’d gotten off the phone. Julia didn’t want to be wooed by some dumb cowboy. She wanted to have fun.

Dang it! What was he supposed to do now?

Her expression shifted and then she let out one of the loudest laughs he’d heard in a long time. “You didn’t.”

“I didn’t, what?” He rasped.

“Please tell me you didn’t plan a date where we have to dress up all fancy.”

He swallowed but his throat still refused to cooperate.

Julia came to the edge of the porch, tapping her cheek thoughtfully as she did so. “Then again, there was that one time when I had a date who took me dancing. Remember? He was from Billings and he took me to a ballroom style dance club. Boy that was a disaster.”

She was right. This was just *great*. He’d completely forgotten about that. Julia wasn’t into the fancy stuff. She liked to keep things casual, especially on the first date.

“We’re not doing anything fancy,” he croaked. Even he could hear the lie on his lips. There was no way she couldn’t sense it either. Just by looking at her he could see it in her face. She knew he’d messed up. And she was thrilled about it.

He was never going to live this down.

She held up a finger before he could utter a single word. “One sec. I’ll be right back.” With that, she hurried inside, leaving him out in the cool evening air, wishing the earth would just swallow him up right then and there.

It felt like forever before the door opened and Julia reemerged.

This time she’d gone a different route—a complete one-eighty.

Julia wore a bright pink dress made of chiffon and silk. The dress fit her torso like a glove, tapering down at the waist then flaring out. He remembered this dress. It was the one she wore to prom—the one she insisted on boycotting that year which was why the dress only came to her knees. She’d gone and cut the fabric off in a show of defiance.

Her laughter filled the air again as she strutted to the edge of the porch and spun for him. “I bet you would have thought this wasn’t going to fit.”

His shocked gaze drank her in, not because she was wearing an old prom dress, but because he’d never seen her so beautiful.

Yes, she’d worn this before. But back then his feelings had only just started to grow.

Now when he looked at her, he couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“Come on, stop staring at me like I’m being ridiculous.” She traipsed down the steps and reached for his hand. “This date is supposed to be fun, right? If you think I’m going to get dressed in some stuffy outfit, you’re sorely mistaken. So where are we going?” Her hand slipped from his to around the crook of his elbow as she gazed up at him. “Please tell me it’s somewhere I can make a scene.”

“Julia...” he warned.

“Relax. I won’t get us kicked out.” Her laughter was only capable of putting him slightly at ease. They made it to his truck and he opened the door. His elbow rested on the open door as he stared down at her. He offered her a small smile,

surprised at how the change of clothing had helped alleviate the stress he was under to perform well tonight.

“If you must know, we’re going to the Aviary.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re kidding.”

He shook his head slowly, waiting for her to make some snarky comment about him trying to impress her.

But she didn’t.

She smiled at him, eyes sparkling. “Sounds nice.”

Andrew didn’t know what to do with that. The Julia he knew would have jumped at the chance to tease him about his dating habits. He was no stranger to that side of her.

There was something different about this Julia.

The girl he knew was still there, but she wasn’t acting quite herself.

What did he know? He’d never been on a date with her. She might be behaving exactly the way she always did on her dates.

Andrew pushed the door shut and walked around the front of the truck, painfully aware of how pronounced his limp was in the dress shoes he wore. He should have just gone with something more comfortable.

This evening wasn’t going to get any better if he kept dwelling on the flaws he found so frustrating. It was time to push through and be grateful he got this chance in the first place.



ANDREW PULLED up in front of the building and a valet darted out toward the driver’s side. Andrew handed him the keys and the young man gave him a ticket in return. But then he stopped what he was doing to stare at Julia as she emerged in all her hot-pink glory.

He wasn’t the only one.

A place like this was more subdued and Julia had just turned it on its side. For all his effort to remain unseen anywhere he went, he sure wasn't thrilled about having all eyes on his date now. She was gorgeous, and he could appreciate that. But this attention was getting to him to the point he had to grasp her elbow and guide her inside as quickly as he could.

By the time they were seated at the table, most of the spectators had gotten their fill. Andrew avoided looking directly at her for the most part until she reached across the table and touched his hand with her fingertips. "I'm embarrassing you, aren't I?"

He looked over his menu at her, a smile tugging at his lips. "Embarrassment I can handle. It's the attention I find annoying."

"Why's that?"

He glanced around the restaurant and then back at her. How could he tell her he hated when people noticed his limp, and at the same time avoided him for it? He didn't want to be treated any differently and that was exactly what happened on a daily basis. Now was not the time for that conversation. Instead, he answered in the only way he could. "Maybe I don't want people looking at you the way I do."

She blinked, clearly not prepared for such a flirty statement. "And what way is that?"

Andrew put the menu down and leaned forward so he could lower his voice. "Complete adoration."

The coloring in her cheeks nearly matched her dress and she looked away. Good, she was getting uncomfortable too. Maybe now, she'd think twice before bringing up difficult conversation.

Julia's lashes fluttered as she shifted her focus to her own menu and changed the subject. "I can't believe you wanted to come here. This place is insane. Who would ever want to eat something with the word reduction in it. They're openly admitting that they're reducing what they're giving you." Her

eyes flitted up to meet his and she let out a nervous laugh.  
“Wanna split it?”

He peered at the page of her menu in search of what she’d just mentioned. Her finger poked the menu and she beamed at him.  
“What if you pick something and I pick something, and we share.”

He lifted a brow. “You want to *share*?”

“Sure. Then I get to try two things I might never have before. Don’t you like trying new things?”

Andrew studied her face. He had long since memorized every line, every crease, and every dimple she had to offer. If he was artistic, he no doubt could have recreated an image of her.

Shaking off that thought, he glanced once more at the menu. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” she demanded.

“Don’t you remember when we were kids? You wouldn’t share anything.”

She made a sound that was a mix between a laugh and a gasp.  
“I was a *child*. You can’t blame me for wanting to keep what was mine. And what about you? I seem to recall you didn’t want to share your notebook paper with me when we were in middle school.”

“That notebook paper held some top-secret stuff,” he laughed.

“Oh yeah? Like what? Your secret crushes?”

“Maybe,” he shot back.

“Well in that case, it’s too bad you didn’t let me see it. You never know what might have transpired.” She picked up her menu to peruse it once more, her face completely blocked.

Had she just hinted that he might have had a chance with her if he’d just spoken up?

No. That couldn’t be. She’d been far too interested in other boys at the time. And he’d been too busy working the ranch to ever take a chance on her.



And yet he couldn't help but rake through his memories to try to find one instance when she had shown him even a degree of interest.

Julia placed her menu in front of her then rested her elbow on top of it as she placed her chin in her hand. "You know what? I'm glad we were able to spend so much time together as kids."

"You are?"

She nodded. "Of course. Because now I can sit across from my first date and not have to wonder about all the red flags he's keeping hidden. There are literally no secrets between us."

He stared at her, unmoving. There was a lot she didn't know about him now. His life had changed over the last several years. Since his military days, he'd lost a piece of himself that had changed him profoundly. On top of that, he had a separate life that not even his family was aware of.

The good men and women in his support group were the only ones who could understand that side of him. And it wasn't something he was ready to share with anyone else.

Not even Julia.

Andrew smiled, though it felt fake. He nodded. "Right." Before she could point out that he sounded upset again, he pointed at a steak on the menu. "You're welcome to get your chicken dish, but I'm getting beef and you can't stop me."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

## CHAPTER TEN

---

JULIA SAT WITH HER HANDS IN HER LAP.

This was bad.

It was really bad.

What she was feeling was so terrible she wasn't sure how she was going to fix it.

She glanced over toward Andrew, finding him focused on the road and grateful that he hadn't caught her staring for the hundredth time.

Drat! Why did this have to happen to her? Why did this date have to be so freaking good that she didn't want it to end?

And why did it have to be Andrew?

Andrew who was annoying and sweet and... absolutely perfect.

When Julia had gotten ready for this date, she hadn't thought anything would come of it. She was giving Andrew a chance to see that his feelings weren't real. He was infatuated, that was all.

But after the tense moments in the beginning, things sorta settled down a bit. They chatted about the most mundane things and yet she couldn't get enough.

His favorite vegetable was eggplant.

An eggplant, for goodness sake!

What cowboy in the middle of Montana liked eating eggplant?

And how did she not know that?

She fidgeted with her dress, tugging at the fabric with her hands as she shifted in her seat. They needed another date. That much was for certain. She wanted to see if this was a fluke or if it was real.

Parts of her wanted the answer to be both. Or neither.

She gave a sharp shake of her head. Crazy. That's what this was. Falling for her brother's best friend sure wasn't smart and yet it was happening at the speed of light.

The door beside her opened and she screeched, staring up at Mr. Perfect himself. When had they stopped? She could have sworn they had just left the restaurant. And now he was holding out his hand for what? So she would take it, obviously.

Oh, right.

Julia placed her clammy hand in his and allowed him to pull her from the truck. She expected him to release it on their way up to the house, but he didn't.

His fingers laced with hers and he traced the back of her hand with his thumb. Neither one of them spoke the whole way up to the door. Before she dug around for her keys, she turned to face him, needing to get some clarity.

"That was fun," she said breathlessly even though she hadn't been exerting anything.

"Yeah, I think so too."

She waited for him to continue, to ask her out again. That's what the guy was supposed to do.

*Unless he hated being on a date with you. Dumb Julia, you always come on too brash. You're too pushy. You really need to work on that.*

"Come over for dinner," she muttered.

His brows lifted. "Dinner?"

She swallowed hard. "Yeah. Let me make you some real food. No reductions."

At least the corners of his mouth found that bit entertaining. “You want me to come to dinner... here?” He glanced at the building behind her. “What about your brother?”

“What about him?”

He cocked his head slightly and moved in closer. Her breath caught in her chest but there was nowhere for her to escape as she pressed her back against the door. “I don’t think your brother would take too kindly to me dating his sister, do you?”

She shook her head. “No, but he’s been staying out late with Arielle since they got married. They don’t even come home for dinner most nights.” Without realizing why, she reached out and traced her finger along the pocket of his dress shirt. “I don’t know about you, but I want to see where this might go.” Her gaze jumped to meet his. “I hate living my life with regrets, Andrew. And if I didn’t tell you right now that I want more of... *this*... I would regret it until the day I died.” Her voice had dropped to a whisper and she couldn’t force herself to say anything else.

If Andrew were to decline her request right here right now, she didn’t think she’d be able to recover. It was a risk, asking him to agree to even one more date—let alone one where she offered to cook for him.

Her gaze dropped when he took too long to respond. It might have only been a few seconds, but it had felt like so much longer to her. This was stupid. She needed to stop being so forward all the time. For once, she should have just let the guy take the lead.

Something lightly touched the underside of her jaw and she focused once more on Andrew as he lifted her chin with his hooked finger. “I’d love to come over for dinner.”

Warmth and elation whipped through her faster than a tornado. The rush of relief was just as present.

He said yes.

There was only one reason he’d do such a thing.

He felt it too.



IT HAD BEEN a few days since Julia had seen Andrew. She still couldn't believe he hadn't kissed her yet. She'd practically thrown herself at him before he left her standing on her front porch. Her arms were around his neck and she'd given him the most coy smile she was capable of.

But then he'd retreated, making her feel like she wasn't worthy of such a display.

Julia had gone over it and over it again, berating herself for not being the one to make the official first move.

"Here's the jar of tomatoes from the cellar," Andrew placed a pint-sized mason jar on the counter and offered her a crooked grin. "I didn't even know you could do something like that."

"What?" she laughed. "Store tomatoes in jars?"

"No..." he drawled as he bumped his shoulder against hers. "I didn't know *you* could can stuff. My mom used to do applesauce when we were kids, but that was it."

She glanced up at him out of the corner of her eye, a smile tugging at her lips. "I think you'd be surprised that there are lots of things you don't know about me."

"Yeah?" he murmured next to her ear, causing a wave of goosebumps to lift on her arms. "How about you tell me more." Andrew moved behind her, his chin hovering just above her shoulder as he slipped his arms around her waist.

Her breath hitched and she closed her eyes briefly. She never thought her life could be like this. It was strange to feel this way about someone she'd known her whole life. Andrew knew her better than anyone except maybe her brother.

Julia leaned into him, the taco sauce forgotten. She exhaled a soft moan, feeling his warmth at the side of her neck. If he even grazed his lips against her, she'd come undone. "Andrew," she whispered, "what—"

Toward the front of the house, a door opened and Luke's voice filled the house. "Julia? You home?"

She jumped, gasping as she spun around to face Andrew. "You have you hide. I haven't told him about us yet," she hissed.

He swiveled, looking around the kitchen, "Where?"

There wasn't much in the way of hiding places. He could slip out the back door, but Luke might hear him. "The pantry."

Andrew didn't waste any time. He slipped into the pantry and shut the door until it was only open a crack. And that was when Luke arrived in the kitchen. He tossed his keys on the kitchen table and lifted his nose appreciatively.

"Tacos?" He glanced around the kitchen. "You having anyone over for dinner?"

She pursed her lips to the side and let her own gaze sweep through the kitchen. "Nope. Just me." As much as she hated the impulse, she couldn't stop herself from blurting, "You want to stay for dinner?"

Luke's gaze darted to the pan on the stove and he smacked his lips. "I'd love to, but I promised Arielle we would have dinner at her friend's house. She's actually waiting for me."

Julia let out a sigh of relief then sucked it back in, praying Luke didn't notice. "Well, what are you doing here then? I'd wager the food isn't going to keep all that long."

"They're cooking s'mores and they ran out of marshmallows. I told them we had some so I came to pick them up." He took a step toward the pantry, but she held up her hand. "Wait."

Luke froze. "What?"

Her eyes darted toward the door then back to Luke. "I... we don't have any."

He moved forward again. "Sure, we do. I saw them before we went to the resort."

Julia jumped in front of him. "Nope. I ate them."

"You... ate... them? *All* of them?"

She nodded. “Yes. Yes, I did.”

“Geez, Julia.”

A laugh bubbled from her chest. “I know. I was craving something sweet.”

He let out a sigh. “Guess I’m going to the store.” He swiped the keys off the table and glanced back toward her, a finger pointing. “You owe me a bag of marshmallows.”

Julia watched him until he disappeared and still didn’t move until the door shut. She exhaled and faced the pantry. “He’s gone.”

The door slowly opened and Andrew leaned against the jamb. “So, did you eat them with chocolate? Or was it more like a chipmunk.”

She gasped, throwing a rag from the nearby counter at him.

Andrew caught it midair and laughed. “Because I wouldn’t mind seeing the latter.”

“In your dreams,” she joined in with his laughter and headed for the stove. Before she reached it, Andrew snaked his arm around her waist and spun her toward him. He surveyed her face, his eyes delving into her and making her legs go numb.

Andrew lifted his hand, grazing her jawline with his thumb.

She let out a shuddering breath. “That was a close one.”

“Yeah,” he whispered.

“Maybe we should tell him.”

Andrew studied her face then slowly shook his head. “I’m not ready.”

“I can’t keep lying to him,” she murmured. “He’s going to find out.”

“I get it. I hate lying to him, too.” He smiled at her, his face dipping closer. “But let me ask you something. This whole thing between us... it’s so new. It’s exhilarating... and we don’t really know how it will go. What if we put off telling him? What could it hurt?”

“What could it hurt? If Luke—”

“Luke’s not going to find out if we’re careful. Let’s enjoy this.” Andrew pulled her against him.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, her heart fluttering like mad. There was something thrilling about keeping this secret just between them. The small worry that this could end badly was easily pushed to the back of her mind.

Andrew was right. She didn’t even know what this was. It might not be anything at all. But somewhere deep inside she wished he’d kissed her already. She wanted to know what that would be like and she didn’t want to wait.

Julia nodded but just as she was about to pull back, Andrew grasped her chin with his finger and thumb. He waited until she met his gaze then leaned closer and closer.

She held her breath. This was it, the moment that had been building since that first spark. If all the goosebumps and flutters were any indication of how the next few minutes would go, then she had a feeling she wouldn’t be able to catch her breath.

Julia closed her eyes and her lips parted.

Something behind her popped then sizzled. A pan lid rattled, dragging her focus from the moment. Her eyes flew open and she pulled away from Andrew, successfully destroying any connection they might have had. She’d left the taco meat on a setting that was too high, and now some of it was burning.

A curse slipped from her lips as she pulled the pan from the stove and glared at it with disdain.

“I think it still looks good.” Andrew’s voice was right behind her.

Julia spun to face him and poked him hard in the chest. “Then *you* eat it because it’s all your fault. I’m getting takeout.”

He chuckled, following her toward the door. “My fault? Why is it my fault?”

“You’re a distraction.”



Andrew's eyes danced with amusement. "I could say the same thing about you."

She bit back a smile and changed the subject. "What are you in the mood for?"

"Tacos."

Julia snorted. "I guess we're headed to Taco Bell, then."

"I'll get the keys."

"Why do you sound so excited? It's Taco Bell." She grimaced as she said the name of the fast food restaurant.

Andrew stopped, his keys in hand. He met her gaze and in all seriousness, he said, "Because I get to spend time with you."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---

ANDREW WHISTLED AS HE HEADED UP THE STEPS TO HIS HOME. The porch light was on, but the windows in the front of the house were dark. After tacos, he and Julia had lost track of time. He would have thought they'd get tired of talking, but that didn't happen. The more they chatted, the more he realized that Julia was—amazing.

When he was with her, he could almost forget all the stuff he had been through that changed his life for the worse. For the most part, he didn't even pay attention to the things he hated about himself.

He opened the door and slipped inside. Turning after locking up, he froze. The soft glow from the kitchen only meant one thing. Either one of his siblings was up or his parents were. Both options were bad—very bad.

Bo and Jack were married, so they wouldn't be here this late. Both his younger siblings had been on his case lately—mostly for his attitude. They seemed to think he had gotten worse since returning home from the military. But they couldn't be more wrong. He'd always been on the jaded side.

Lately Katrina had been the worst. She'd gotten so excited about Bo and Jack getting married that she'd made it her personal mission to get each and every one of her brothers hitched. It wasn't just Andrew, Daniel was also on her radar. If she were in the kitchen, she'd be able to tell immediately that something was different.

The problem was he couldn't get up to his room without passing the kitchen. So if she was in there, she'd say something.

Dang it.

If he had been younger—and if he didn't have a bum leg, he might have attempted to scale the outside of the house and sneak into his bedroom.

His gaze swept through the living room and settled on the couch. He could sleep there, but then when everyone got up in the morning, he'd have to explain himself. As exciting as it was to have a secret girlfriend, it was growing more and more inconvenient by the day.

Andrew gnawed on the inside of his cheek as he considered what he should do then ultimately figured the risk would be worth the reward if he could get past the kitchen unnoticed.

He slowly made his way across the wood floor as he crept toward the stairs that were right across the hall from the kitchen. One painstaking step at a time. He could do this.

“Andrew? Is that you?”

Double dang it.

At least it wasn't his sister.

His mother stopped where she stood near the kitchen island with a glass of water in her hand. His father leaned against the counter near her but glanced over his shoulder when she said his name.

“Yeah, mom. It's me.”

“Where have you been all night?”

Andrew sighed. Here it was. The third degree. “I thought you were done interrogating me after I graduated from high school.”

They exchanged glances, his mother more worried than his father. She placed her glass on the counter and took a few steps toward him. “Come get a drink and tell us about your day.”

His shoulders sank as he dragged his feet into the kitchen. “I had a good day, mom. Do we really have to do this?”

“Darn straight we do. You might be an adult but as long as you live under our roof, we get to know what’s going on with you.”

“Mom—” he groaned.

“Listen to your mother, son,” his father murmured.

Andrew pulled out a bar stool and collapsed onto it. “What?”

His mother gave him a pointed look, one eyebrow raising.

He straightened in his seat just a little. “I spent some time with friends. That’s all.”

Again, his mother gave him a look that clearly said she didn’t believe him. How did she know? There was no way she was spying on him. He spent most of his free time with Luke anyway. “What?” he demanded.

“Sweetheart...” His mother’s voice was soft, soothing, almost. But it didn’t offer him any reprieve from the feeling he had in his gut that she was going to say something he wasn’t going to like. That was how it had always been.

“Whatever it is, just say it.”

They glanced at one another once more. “It’s just that we’ve noticed something different about you.”

“Different how?” He glanced at the clock on the stove, wishing it was late enough he could demand that they let him off easy and send him to bed like they had when he was a teenager. Unfortunately, it was only ten. He’d come in much later as a teen and they all knew it.

“It’s hard to say.”

He threw his arms in the air. “If something is different, then it shouldn’t be hard to describe.”

“Andrew,” his father warned.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

His mother reached over the counter and placed a hand on his forearm. “Ever since you got discharged from the military, you’ve had a rough time settling back in. And now, out of nowhere it’s as if...” She nibbled on her lower lip. “It’s as if you’re going through another change.”

He straightened in his seat. “You think I’m changing. For the better? Or worse?”

“That’s what we’re worried about. We don’t know what’s happening and we want to make sure that everything is okay.”

Andrew pushed away from the counter, the stool dragging angrily across the floor. “I don’t need anyone to look out for me. I’m an adult. I served our country, for heaven’s sake. I—” He nearly admitted to the support group he ran for the vets who didn’t have anyone else to turn to, but he kept his mouth shut.

Based on how his folks were acting, they might blame this new change on that. There was no telling if they’d approve or not, so it was just better if he kept the whole thing to himself. “Whatever it is,” he sighed, “you don’t have to worry. I’m doing fine. I feel great.”

He watched his parents carefully, expecting them to look at each other like they had a moment ago. Their secret communication had been something he’d never been able to decipher. This time they didn’t do anything that made him feel targeted. Maybe he got through to them.

“Son, you’re not behaving like your usual self. That could be good. It could be bad. Perhaps you could fill us in on what’s been going on recently and we could give you any advice you might need.”

Well, there went his good mood. His family always had this way of ruining stuff for him. He’d long since gotten used to it, being the middle child. Rarely was any change good for him. “I know what you’re doing,” he muttered.

“And what’s that?” his mother asked quietly.

“I know you’re trying to get me to confess to something that isn’t a problem. Well, right now I don’t need any advice and

even if I did, no offense, but I don't think you'd be able to help me."

The pained look on his mother's face was nearly enough to push him over the edge and apologize again, but this time he remained strong. He wasn't going to let his parents bully him into telling the secret he wouldn't let Julia tell Luke. They were in this together until they figured out where they wanted this relationship to go.

Heck, he didn't even know if it *was* a relationship in the traditional sense. He didn't know if he wanted it to become one. And confessing to any of this would only make the whole thing that much more real.

Andrew's jaw tightened as he got to his feet. "I love you both and I appreciate what you've done for me and continue to do. I just... don't need you to hover so much."

His mother nodded, looking away as if to hide that pain he'd already seen.

His dad shifted where he stood then nodded as well. "Just be careful, son. When changes happen we never know where they might take us. You have a tendency to struggle with change. We don't want to see you hurt."

He frowned. What did that even mean—he didn't handle change well?

Sure he did. He'd handled joining the military just fine. He'd handled getting discharged due to injury. And he handled coming home.

Whatever they were trying to say was ridiculous. For being his parents and raising him, they didn't know anything about him.

Andrew glanced back at them once more before he climbed the stairs to his room. What on earth did he have to be careful about?

His thoughts continued to linger as he entered his room and shrugged out of his jacket. He tossed his phone to the bed and started getting undressed when it lit up and buzzed. Despite the lecture he'd gotten, a smile broke across his face. He could

use some late-night chatting with Julia. That'd be just the thing to get his mind back on track.

He picked up the phone, and the smile faded almost instantly.

MIA: Missed you at group again. Everything ok?

ANDREW STARED at the text then let out a groan. Dang it. He'd completely forgotten about the meeting tonight. He'd fully intended on going after dinner with Julia, but then everything shifted on its side when their dinner got ruined.

He raked a hand through his hair and sighed, dropping down on the side of the bed.

ANDREW: Something last minute came up.

MIA: I hope everything is ok!

ANDREW: Everything is fine. I'll be at the next one. Promise.

HE STARED AT HIS PHONE, waiting for the thought bubbles to populate the screen. They did, then they disappeared. More time passed and then they reappeared.

MIA: Great. Can't wait to see you.

ANDREW STARED AT THE MESSAGE, his stomach tying in knots. She was still very attached to him even though he'd made it clear that he wasn't interested in dating right now.

Except that wasn't true anymore. He was very interested in dating—it just wasn't her. He should probably make that part

clear and soon. Otherwise, if she found out about him and Julia, she'd be hurt.

On top of that, he'd have to deal with her brother.

Andrew leaned back on the bed, discarding the phone at his side as he stared at the ceiling. The same thing that had continued to cross his mind since his date with Julia flooded his thoughts again.

He didn't know if anything would come of tonight's date. This infatuation she had for him could fizzle out.

In fact, he was almost positive it would. A girl like Julia couldn't possibly want to continue seeing him. The proverbial baggage he carried around with him wasn't attractive. He was just that thing she couldn't have. Once the newness and interest faded, he'd be back right where he'd started.

And just like that he'd lost the shine from this evening's events. The excitement and thrill of being with Julia was dampened with the knowledge that she could very well push him away for a multitude of reasons.

He was her brother's best friend.

They knew too much about each other from their awkward years.

They bickered like there was no tomorrow.

And most of all, he wasn't whole. He would never get rid of the limp he had. The young man who had gone off to join the military would never return home. He was fine with it. He'd made his peace.

But that didn't mean that Julia would, nor that he'd ask her to.

Andrew sighed and rolled over, still fully clothed. For now, he would take what he could get even if that meant the end was already near.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

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JULIA COULDN'T HIDE THE GRIN SHE WORE. EVERYTHING WAS going great. She was on track to get a promotion at work. Every date she went on with Andrew was better than the last. If she had to complain about anything, it would be that deep down she felt he was holding back from her.

She didn't know how else to explain it, but it was as if he had some secrets of his own he was unwilling to share. They'd been secretly dating for only three weeks and normally she'd say that wasn't long enough for her to demand any information from him.

But this was different.

Andrew was a childhood friend. What reason did he have to be so reserved around her?

That first date, she'd caught a glimpse of him she had never expected to see. He'd shown a side of himself to her—a sweet and romantic side—that had every nerve ending in her body on fire.

And he still hadn't kissed her yet!

That was going to change tonight whether he liked it or not. She was going to corner that man and ask him why he was keeping his distance.

A little giggle erupted from her, causing some of her coworkers to glance in her direction. She ducked down in her cubical and set to work on her current project. If she was lucky, she'd get done early so she could go spend some extra time getting ready for their date this evening.

Her hand lingered on the mouse as she clicked it and dragged it across the screen. All she had to do was put together a marketing plan for the latest pharmaceutical client her company had signed and voila, she'd be out of there.

Two hours later, she pushed away from her chair. She hadn't finished the project as early as she wanted to, but at least she'd get out of there with just enough time to change out of her business wear and head over to meet Andrew.

She grabbed her purse from the desk and got to her feet, only to let out a small yelp as she jumped back from her boss who must have been hovering behind her.

Julia placed her hand on her chest. Her lashes fluttered as she blinked, probably a hundred times just to get control of her bearings.

Mr. Todd stood there, a small smile on his lips. "May I see you in my office?"

The clock on her computer before she'd turned it off said it was already five-fifteen. She had to leave the parking lot in the next five minutes if she had a prayer of being on time. She'd only been late once to a date and that had been years ago. It was the price she'd paid to get the job and she'd sacrificed a boyfriend who had a thing about punctuality.

Her teeth were set on edge as she dug around in her thoughts. Was Andrew the same way? She couldn't recall if he was a stickler for the same thing.

Mr. Todd cleared his throat and she blinked again.

"Of course. I'd love to," she spit through gritted teeth.

"Wonderful." He spun around and strode down the length of the cubicles in the bullpen. The handful of people who were still working glanced up as she passed but didn't pay her much attention beyond that. Her hand tightened around her purse strap, her heels clicking along the tile.

Five minutes, ten max. If that's all she needed to give him, then she could forego changing out of her dress and just tell Andrew that she had a last-minute meeting. Easy enough.

Mr. Todd gestured toward the open door to his office. “After you.”

Julia slipped past him then hovered near the door as he entered.

“Take a seat.”

Darn it! That meant this meeting was going to be longer than she had time for. “Oh, I’m happy to stand.”

The look he gave her made her change her mind faster than a jet on the tarmac. He took a seat at his desk and offered her that same smile. “I have good news for you.”



SHOOT. Shoot. Shoot. Shoot.

Julia darted through the lobby. She hopped on one foot then the other. It was six by the time she left Mr. Todd’s office and then another fifteen minutes after that where she had to speak with the members of her new team.

The offer was incredible. It was everything she’d ever wanted at this company. But she was supposed to be at Andrew’s fifteen minutes ago. They were going to go riding.

Dang it all!

Why did this have to happen today of all days? Why couldn’t Mr. Todd have called her into his office during the week instead of the weekend?

As thrilled as she was about the promotion, she couldn’t stop her stomach from rolling and churning. The battery on her phone had died about five minutes into the meeting but that wouldn’t have mattered anyway. She knew better than to pull it out during something so important.

Now she had no way of calling Andrew to tell him she was on her way or that she was running late.

A sinking feeling in her stomach had her pushing the gas pedal a little too hard and she had to constantly tell herself to slow

down or risk getting pulled over.

Her thumbs drummed on the steering wheel the whole way to Andrew's family's house. She didn't even bother heading home to change. They'd just have to find something else to do.

By the time she made it to his place, her hands were clammy, her heart was skipping all over the place. She couldn't decide whether to be upset or excited and all she wanted to do was relieve her stomach by emptying its contents in the bushes.

Julia dove from her car and sprinted up the steps to Andrew's home. She knocked on the door then turned around, half-expecting him to be out in the pasture somewhere. The only people she saw coming and going were a couple of stable hands.

Her foot tapped as she knocked again. Where was he? Sure, she was forty minutes late, but she couldn't see him leaving this early when he knew she was coming to his place.

She lifted her hand once more, but the door swung inward and she nearly lost her balance and fell inside.

Andrew stood in the doorway, his face a mask of disappointment and irritation. Try as she might, Julia couldn't get her heart to slow, nor her breathing. She smiled, but more to try to hide the anxiety she had over being late than seeing him. "Hey," she murmured.

He glanced over his shoulder then stepped out of the house so he could shut the door. "Where have you been?" he growled.

She stiffened. "I beg your pardon?"

Andrew took her elbow, guiding her down the steps and toward her car. "You heard me."

"I'm sorry I'm so late—"

"I don't care that you're late. You had me worried sick. Did you speak to your brother at least?"

"What? Why would I do that?"

Andrew dragged his hand down his face then yanked his phone from his pocket and shoved it at her. "You call him right

now.”

“No!” She shoved the phone right back. “Then he’s going to find out about us,” she hissed.

“Well, if you don’t call him, I will.”

Her eyes widened. “What’s going on?”

“You are an hour late.”

She crossed her arms. “I am forty minutes late.”

He let out a mirthless laugh. “You want to squabble over twenty minutes? Fine. Let me tell you what I was doing for the last forty minutes.” He muttered an expletive under his breath. “For the last forty minutes, I’ve been worried sick that you were lying dead in a ditch somewhere. That’s what I’ve been doing.” He stepped closer to her, much closer than he had in public when they’d been together. His eyes flashed with anger. “You better have a good reason.”

Julia’s walls shot up and she pushed him back with two fingers. “I was working, Andrew. My phone died. Stuff like that happens.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’re never late. To *anything*.”

“Yeah? Well, today I got that promotion I’ve been working my tail off for,” she snapped at him. “Every hour I put into that company has finally paid off.” She should be celebrating right now—throwing her arms around his neck while he spun her in a circle. Instead, they were arguing over a measly forty minutes.

But when she got a better look at him, her heart stuttered. The lines in his face were drawn and his skin had taken on a paler color.

“You got a promotion,” he said without feeling.

“Yeah,” she whispered.

They stood there, staring at each other for what felt like an eternity. She shifted so she could lean against her car. Crossing her arms, she looked away. “I’m sorry I didn’t call.”

“Your phone was dead.”

“Yeah.”

Andrew moved beside her, leaning against her car as well.  
“Congratulations.”

She peeked at him. “Thanks.”

More silence as the tension started to dissipate. He reached up and pried her hand free so he could hold it. She stared down at where he ran his thumb across her knuckles and her body reacted in kind. “You okay?” she whispered.

“Yeah.”

“Andrew,” she said, pointedly this time. “I can tell when something is up.”

He shot a look toward her.

“You might as well tell me. I’m going to find out anyway.”

A pent-up sigh escaped his lips. “Today was rough.”

“Okay...” she drawled. “Is it because I was late?”

He glanced at her once again. “Partly.”

“Partly? What else happened?” She didn’t expect him to tell her. That was just how he was. Andrew kept his problems close to his heart. He rarely complained to her, anyway. Occasionally she’d overhear a phone conversation between him and her brother. So that was why she was so thrown off when he did finally speak.

“Why are you here?”

She snickered, though it was more reactionary than anything else. “Because we had a date planned.”

“No, why are you here. With *me*?”

She turned to face him that time, not willing to believe what he seemed to be implying.

He looked away, his jaw hard. “You have this amazing job with a high paying salary where you’re making more money than I’d ever make in a lifetime. You’re gorgeous...” he snuck a look at her then but quickly shifted his focus to their hands.

“I keep thinking that you’re going to grow tired of me and...” he worked his jaw.

Then everything clicked. “You thought I ghosted you.”

Andrew didn’t meet her gaze.

“That’s it, isn’t it? You thought I didn’t show up to our date because I think I’m better than you?” Julia had to work to keep her voice calm when what she really wanted was to slap some sense into this man. “Well, that’s stupid.”

This time he did look up at her, his gaze dark. “No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

He pulled his hand free. “I should have known you wouldn’t understand. The person I was before I joined the military isn’t the person I am today. And honestly, I can’t figure out what my role is supposed to be now that I’m back. I’m not a cowboy. I’m not a soldier. I’m not—”

She placed her hands on either side of his face. “You’re Andrew.”

His eyes found hers, so full of raw emotion it nearly broke her heart.

“You’re my brother’s best friend. You’re a son. You’re a brother. And you’re the guy I’m falling in love with.” Her heart pounded so loud that she was sure he could hear every single beat. Her mouth was bone dry and she wasn’t sure she could utter another word even if she wanted to.

There. She’d said it.

Now, she just had to pray that he felt the same.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

THIS WASN'T HAPPENING. ANDREW HAD TO HAVE FALLEN asleep on the couch. He was dreaming. That had to be it because never in a million years could Julia confess to any of this in his front yard.

The screen door banged shut and Julia jumped backward. Her eyes flew toward the house and Andrew cursed whoever it was that felt the need to interrupt this moment. He glanced over his shoulder to find Daniel standing at the edge of the steps.

His younger brother's gaze darted from Julia to Andrew and back again. He appeared confused at best as he pointed toward his car and headed down the steps. "I'm headed to town. You need anything?"

Julia shifted beside Andrew, putting additional inches between them. Great. The mood was destroyed yet again. Why couldn't he catch a single break?

Andrew shook his head.

Daniel set his focus on Julia. "Everything all right?"

Before she could answer, Andrew cut in. "Of course she's all right. Why would you ask such a stupid question."

"*Andrew.*" She chastised.

Daniel didn't seem fazed in the slightest. In fact, he folded his arms and puffed out his chest like he was expecting Andrew's attitude. "Because I heard you talking to someone on the phone about her. Luke probably." He tilted his head to look



around Andrew. “I think your brother is looking for you. You might want to call him.”

“Thanks, Daniel,” she murmured. “I’ll do that as soon as I can.”

His eyes seemed to scrutinize her. There was no way he’d missed the way Julia had been speaking to Andrew. And right now, he was probably putting all the pieces together. Andrew had to stop this before it grew out of hand.

He stepped forward, further blocking Daniel’s view of Julia. “She was just coming by to tell me the good news. She got a promotion at work. She’s been working hard on it all year and we talked a lot about it when we went on a trip with Luke and Arielle.” He glanced back at Julia, but she didn’t meet his gaze. When he returned his attention to his brother, Daniel’s scrutiny had shifted to something more akin to understanding.

“Congrats, Julia. I’m sure you earned it.” He gave them a nod then climbed into his car and drove away.

Andrew watched him with veiled interest until his vehicle was far enough away he wouldn’t be able to see what happened next.

The second he was gone, he whirled to face Julia. She glanced at him just before he grabbed her hand and darted toward the barn. His stride was long, determined. His limp was a minor inconvenience when there was a greater issue at stake. They needed to find someplace secluded if he had a shot at fixing what went wrong.

Rather than head inside the barn, he darted around the side then to the back. Once out of sight from his home, he stopped suddenly and scooped Julia into his arms. She let out a yelp and her hands flung around his neck. “Andrew! What are you doing?”

The second they were behind the barn, out of sight from anyone who might be hanging around, he dropped her to her feet. Julia stood on wobbly legs. She leaned against the barn, her hands resting against the wood as she lifted a still surprised gaze up to meet his.

Andrew's palms slammed against the barn on either side of her head, the desire that pulsed in his stomach urging him forward. "Say it again," he rasped.

"Say what again," she whispered. Her skin was now flushed, her eyes bright.

"Tell me you love me."

"Andrew—"

He squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head away. "Tell me you love me," he repeated. "I have to hear it."

"I love you."

Those words were a catalyst. Instantly, that desire erupted into a flame that burned hotter than anything he'd experienced in his life up until that moment. He pushed one hand around the back of her neck, cradling her head as his lips crushed hers.

Julia ignited beneath his touch, coming to life in a way that only a rare flower could. She clung to him, breathing new life into his dark soul and filling him with light. Her lips roved beneath his, deepening their kiss as if this was the last moment either of them might share with the other.

Nothing in this life was ever meant to be this satisfying. The passion they shared could only be described as wicked, and yet at the same time it felt so right. He'd waited his whole life for a moment like this one—to share his heart with Julia in ways he could only dream of.

How easy it was to push aside all those insecurities in light of her confession. Perhaps there was something to be said about falling in love with someone who might know him better than he knew himself.

Their kiss lasted far longer than it probably should have—one minute bleeding into the next until Andrew had to come up for air. He pulled back, but brought his hand to rest against the barn above her shoulder once again.

Andrew ducked his head, his breaths labored but matching the pace with the angel who stood between him and the

immovable structure that represented his past and his future all at once.

When he lifted his eyes to meet hers, he found her staring at him in a way he had always wanted. There was something in the way she looked at him that made him feel seen. She knew him down to his core.

It was in that very moment he knew he needed to do something to show her how much she meant to him. But what could he do? He didn't have a single idea.

Great.

That meant only one thing.

He'd have to ask his mother.

Julia let out a soft laugh, finally breaking the silence beyond their heavy breathing. She brought her fingers up to her lips and flushed furiously.

Andrew snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her close to him, crushing her against him as he gave her a hug. "I love you too," he murmured.

Her hands swept up his back, fingers digging into his shoulders as if he were life itself. Being here with her, like this in this moment, he finally felt whole.



"WHERE'S MOM?"

Bo glanced over his shoulder from where he was saddling his horse then mumbled an off-handed, "I don't know. Have you checked her office?"

"Of course I have."

"What do you need her for?"

"None of your business."

A soft laugh filtered through the air from the stall where Bo's horse was. Andrew stiffened and craned his neck so he could

see who was laughing at him.

Gabrielle.

Of course it was her.

She poked her head up. “Sounds like Andrew might need some help with a girl.”

He stiffened. Had she seen something? Heard something? No one was supposed to know.

Gabrielle flicked her hand at him. “Oh, stop worrying. We all know about her.”

Andrew shot a concerned look at Bo. The only one who had seen something was Daniel. If his younger brother spilled everything to his family, it was only a matter of time before Luke would get wind of it and then Andrew would have a whole other issue to deal with.

He yanked his hat from his head and bumped it against his leg. He’d need to get out ahead of this one if he didn’t want Luke coming at him with fists swinging.

Gabrielle moved out of the stall then leaned against a nearby pole. “I think it’s sweet. Who would have thought you’d fall for your friend’s sister.” She glanced toward her husband. “Don’t you think it’s sweet?”

Bo shot Andrew another bored look. “I’m just surprised Carlos is on board with this. Out of anyone, he seems like the kind of guy who wouldn’t let you get near his sister.”

Carlos?

As in Mia’s brother?

Andrew opened his mouth to set things straight then closed it just as fast. If he cleared this up, then they’d want to know who the girl was. That would lead to Luke finding out. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked away. “Yeah. He’s a good guy.”

Gabrielle’s smile widened. “So you *are* needing help with Mia?” She clapped her hands together and shot an excited look in Bo’s direction.

Andrew didn't respond right away. If he played this right, then he could get the information he needed without alerting anyone to what was really going on. "Yeah. I wanted to take her on a special date."

Gabrielle gasped. "You're not propos—"

His head shot up and he glared at her. "No. Of course not! It's just a date."

She looked positively deflated. "Oh."

Bo finally seemed to be enjoying the conversation. He chuckled as he cinched the saddle one last time. "You might as well give up with this one. Andrew isn't going to settle down. He's just interested in having fun." He turned, placing his wrist on his hip. "You should take her on a hot air balloon ride."

"What? No he shouldn't! That's ridiculous. Girls don't want stuff that's over the top. They want to be wooed." She stepped forward. "Go for a ride. Have a picnic under the stars. Do something where you can focus on just the two of you. Let the world fall away."

"A hot air balloon literally makes that happen," Bo cut in.

Gabrielle glared at him. "No. Hot. Air. Balloons." Next, she set her stern gaze on Andrew. "You hear me?"

He held up both hands. "Fine. No hot air balloons."

Her smile returned. "Good. Then I think you have your answer."

Andrew glanced from Gabrielle to Bo who only shrugged. "I guess I do."



HE GAZED down at Julia as she lay sprawled on the picnic blanket staring up at the sky. Her eyes glinted from the soft glow of the moon and when she glanced in his direction, she let out a soft laugh. "You better stop staring at me like that or I'm going to start thinking you're obsessed."

“Maybe I am.”

Her smile faded, but she didn't appear upset. Instead, she patted the blanket beside her. “You didn't have to clean up the picnic all by yourself.”

“Yes, I did.” He dropped down beside her and scooted closer.

She snuggled closer to him, letting her head rest against his shoulder. “Well, you're sweet. And this was a really good idea.”

He chuckled. “You'd never guess what my other idea was.”

“Hmm.”

“A hot air balloon ride.”

Julia shot up and stared down at him. “What?” Her tone was accusatory and it threw him off a little.

“Yeah... it was the first thing that came to mind.” Andrew let out a nervous chuckle.

She gaped at him. “I could be flying in the sky right now?”

“Well, no... you can't fly in the dark.”

Julia whacked him with the ends of her fingers. “How dare you.”

He lifted himself up on his elbows. “Really? You would like that?”

“*Yeah*, I'd like it,” she teased. “What's more romantic than taking an air balloon ride?”

Andrew's stomach dropped. “I can't believe I listened to her,” he muttered. He should have known better than to listen to Gabrielle. Julia was different. She shared tastes with no one. If Gabrielle thought something was dumb, there was no guarantee how Julia would feel.

“What?”

He glanced at her then shook his head. “Nothing.” He pulled her close again, this time lifting his arm around so she could rest on it as she snuggled closer. He pressed a kiss to her

temple. “I guess I’ll have to take you on a hot air balloon ride then.”

“Yes, you will.” Her hand rested on his chest. “But for now, this is perfect.” She molded against him, her soft form fitting like a puzzle piece. She exhaled softly, contentedly, a sound that caused his whole body to react. His nerves frayed and the hairs on the back of his neck raised but in a more pleasant way than before. The beating of his heart accelerated and his pulse reverberated like a raging ocean in his ears.

He released a breath through pursed lips in an attempt to quell the physical sensations of being close to her. “Yes it is.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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JULIA COLLAPSED ONTO THE COUCH BESIDE ANDREW, RESTING her head against his shoulder. She balanced the bowl of popcorn on her lap and took a moment to allow herself to enjoy this moment.

Over the last few weeks, things had only continued to heat up, which was difficult when she still lived with her brother.

Most of the time, they'd meet somewhere else so they didn't have to worry about Luke catching them in the throes of this relationship. But occasionally, Andrew would sneak into her place and they'd watch a movie with all the lights off.

Luke was upstairs with Arielle. They'd turned in early, which meant only one thing and it wasn't because they were tired.

The silly grin Julia wore on her face had been a constant addition to the way she looked since that first kiss. Who knew that someone so annoying as Andrew could turn into someone she wanted to simply spend her time with?

She craned her neck around to gaze up at him. She loved everything about him. The set of his jaw, the way he could still make her laugh. And just because they were dating didn't stop him from playing along with her when she wanted to have water fights.

His brows creased and he turned his attention to her. Heaven help her, she loved that funny little look he gave her too. "What?" he murmured.

Julia snuggled against him as if she were a small critter burrowing into his body. "Nothing."



He rested his head against the top of hers. For a moment she allowed herself to enjoy the simplicity of this moment, then she got an idea. Julia jumped up, nearly taking his jaw with her.

Andrew stared at her with wide, concerned eyes. “What’s wrong?” he demanded.

She held out her hand. “I have an idea.”

He stared at her offering for a few moments then his eyes narrowed. “I’m not sure I want to.”

Tossing her head back, she let out a laugh. “It’s not a *bad* thing.” Then she clapped her hand over her mouth and looked toward the stairs, remembering they weren’t alone. She moved toward him, straddling his lap as she placed her hands on his shoulders. “I think we need to get out of here.”

He cocked a brow at her. “Meaning...”

“I think we need to spend more time at your place.” She wagged her brows up and down. “How about you and I go for a ride?”

Andrew didn’t respond right away. He seemed to be considering all the implications of such a request.

“What? You don’t want to go for a ride? See the stars?” She traced her finger along his chest, teasing him. “Recreate that date?”

Andrew’s hands had found her waist and his fingers dug into her as he held onto her. “That wasn’t my favorite moment with you.”

She pouted. “Why not?”

“Because it wasn’t the first time you told me you loved me.”

A smile replaced her pout.

“And it wasn’t where we had our first kiss.”

Her smile widened further. “I like those moments too.”

“So how about we recreate those instead?”

“You can kiss me anywhere, Andrew. No one is stopping you.”

Just as she'd expected, he took her statement at her word. Taking her chin in his grasp, he tugged her toward him, capturing her lips with his and refusing to give her any room for escape. Warm, soft, and tantalizing, his kiss had a way of making her feel like she was in the clouds. Who needed a hot air balloon when she had Andrew?

Julia wrapped her arms around his neck deepening their kiss and allowing herself to get lost in a fairy tale. Because that was what this was—a bonafide fairy tale. She could be herself when she was around him. There was no hiding her quirky need to compete or throw herself into her work.

Andrew let her just be.

Heat seared deep within her, swirling and raging like a forest fire. The warmth spread to every extremity and filled her with a passion she'd only read about in her books. Julia tilted her head back to catch her breath, not surprised at all that Andrew turned his kisses to her neck. His lips and teeth nipped at her tender flesh and a moan escaped her lips.

They needed to get out of there before they couldn't take back what was close to happening. Hating how much it hurt to pull away from him, she got to her feet. This time she grasped his hand in hers and tugged him to his feet. "I think we need to get some fresh air, what do you think?"

"That might be a good idea," he murmured.

She grabbed the remote and clicked off the television and together they slipped out into the night.



JULIA WOVE her fingers between Andrew's as they wandered down one of the several trails on his family's property. She held the reins of her horse in her other hand as she leaned into the man beside her.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out did nothing to settle her insides. This was what she'd been waiting for her whole life.

To be with someone like this, not needing to speak but just being... content.

“Tell me about yourself,” she murmured.

He shifted and she could feel his gaze on her. “What?”

“You know. Tell me something I don’t know about you.” She could have sworn he stiffened beside her. But that was ridiculous. He didn’t have anything to hide from her. She twisted her face around to gaze at him. “I want to know more about you.”

“You already know a lot about me.”

“No, I don’t. I don’t know what it was like to serve in the military. I don’t know what you’ve been doing since you’ve been back.” She shrugged. “Tell me everything.”

He worked his jaw, his gaze set on the trail once again. This wasn’t something he was comfortable with for whatever reason and suddenly she felt a deep-seated fear that there *was* something he didn’t want her to know.

“Andrew,” she stopped walking and faced him, “is there something you don’t want to tell me?”

He shot her a sharp look. “No. Of course not.”

“Then why, all of a sudden, are you acting like you have something to hide?”

Andrew pressed his lips into a thin line. “There are several things that I don’t tell you. I don’t tell Luke or my family either.”

She stilled. What sorts of things would Andrew want to hide from the people who loved him? Julia couldn’t think of one thing that would be worth keeping from those he lived with—unless it was really bad.

Her heart thundered a little harder. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

He didn’t look at her, his focus once again on the trail and staying there. His horse bobbed its head and pawed at the ground having been pulled to a stop.

Julia racked her brain for anything that would make sense but all she could come up with was that he was seeing someone else or that there was so much pain and trauma from when he was deployed that he didn't feel safe sharing.

She swallowed hard, freeing her hand from his so she could place it against his cheek. "I love you."

His hand covered hers. "I know."

"And if you don't want to tell me, then..." She took a deep breath and then released it slowly. "Then I won't force you."

This time he did meet her gaze. A flood of emotions crossed his features and then he nodded. "Thank you."

She waited, hoping that he'd trust her enough to tell all. Something told her that this would bring them closer, that it would solidify what they had. But that was silly, wasn't it? They were already close. They'd been friends and now they were more. What else could she want from him?

Andrew pulled her hand from his cheek and held it tight within his own. "I run a support group."

Her brows shot up. "What?"

He cleared his throat but didn't look away. "Yeah, I... uh... after I got out of rehab, I realized that there was a lot more I needed to do to heal from my experiences. Only, there wasn't a group out here. The closest one is in Billings. There are several small towns around us that have vets or other people who need support and I wanted to make sure they got the help they wanted." His gaze drilled into hers, unnerving her.

She couldn't explain why it was that she felt uncomfortable under his stare. His confession wasn't anything like she'd thought. He was helping people. The times when he'd been busy. The moments she'd seen him check his phone and tell her it was just a friend—she'd taken his word for it without question. But this was so much more than he'd let on.

"I knew you wouldn't understand," he muttered.

Her gaze cut to meet his. "You're right. I don't understand. I don't think I ever will. You're a hero, Andrew."

He went still. She couldn't even tell if he was breathing at this point.

Julia moved closer to him, her hand once again returning to his face as if she could convince him with a single touch. "What you're doing, it's so..."

"Obsessive?"

"What?"

"Like I can't let go..." he mumbled.

"No. That's not what I was going to say." She shook her head vehemently. "I was going to say it's selfless."

Once again, he appeared surprised.

She smiled at him. "You have always been this unreadable person who never shared the darkness that must still reside within you. Everyone else sees that side of you and they assume that you're just this brooding, depressed, obnoxious \_\_\_"

"I get it," he interrupted.

She bit back a smile. "Right. Well, that's not what I see. Ever since we were kids, you've always been kind to me. You played with me, you endured every water fight and snarky comment I threw at you."

"So you don't think it's dumb?"

Julia laughed. "Of course I don't. I think it's amazing and honestly, it suits you. Though, there is one thing I can't figure out."

"What's that?"

"When do you have the time? You work the ranch during the day and spend time with me in the evenings. When do you hold your meetings?"

His chagrined expression said it all.

"Andrew!" she chastised.

"I've got someone covering for me."

She shook her head. "You shouldn't prioritize me over that."

Andrew slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her against him with a soft growl. “I will always put you first. That’s just how it’s going to be and you better get used to it.”

Julia laughed. “Fair enough. But just so you know, I have a new project starting at work. It’s part of the reason I got promoted. I might not have as much free time to see you.”

He pressed his forehead against hers. “We’ve got this.”

“Yeah, I think we do.”

Andrew brushed his lips to hers, letting them linger before he pulled back. Then they resumed their walk.

The longer they walked, the peace that had filled her dissipated. If he’d kept this secret from her, was it possible that he’d kept additional secrets from her? Was he so worried about what she might find out that he wasn’t willing to share his whole self with her?

She pushed the thoughts away. They were happy and it wasn’t worth the trouble to dig into something that probably wasn’t even a problem. Even as she told herself all of this, her stomach twisted uncomfortably.

Everything would be fine. Like he said. They would work it out. They’d come too far to give up now. There would always be obstacles in relationships. If she prepared for them now, then they wouldn’t catch her off guard.

And they’d live happily ever after.



JULIA DUG her fingers into her hair as she glowered at her computer. This client was a headache and a half.

More like a migraine.

Everything she’d sent over to them to preview, they’d sent back with complaints. These were the kinds of people who *said* they knew what they wanted but they really didn’t. It was ridiculous. Why couldn’t they just accept that she knew what

she was talking about when she created content for their marketing plan?

She let out a growl just as her boss entered the room and tossed a folder two inches thick on her desk.

“You have another new client.”

Julia shot straight up in her seat. “I’m dealing with our A lister client. I can’t take on anyone else until we know what we’re doing with them.”

“Britt can’t take on this one either and Ben quit.” Mr. Todd flashed her a smile. “This is why we pay you the big bucks. I’d suggest staying late to go over their information. They’re coming in for a preliminary meeting bright and early tomorrow.”

She glanced at the clock and stifled another groan. She was already fifteen minutes late to meet up with Andrew. This was the third time in two weeks that she’d had to postpone and based on the size of that folder, she’d have to cancel completely.

Mr. Todd still stood in front of her. He stared at her with that look she’d grown to hate. The promotion she’d earned was supposed to change her life for the better, not steal her life completely.

Julia forced a smile as she glanced once more to her boss. “On it.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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ANDREW PICKED UP HIS PHONE FOR THE TENTH TIME AS HE SAT at the steak restaurant in town. Julia said she'd be about fifteen minutes late but the restaurant had said they would hold the table for him as long as he ordered an appetizer.

Well, now it had been twenty and he'd eaten all of the chips and salsa they'd brought him. At this rate, he'd finish dinner before she showed up. He tapped his finger on the table with impatience.

For someone who valued being punctual so much, his girlfriend had been destroying her pristine record over the last couple of weeks. As their relationship continued to heat up, he'd really started to consider telling Luke.

Of course he couldn't tell his friend without first discussing it with Julia. He wasn't sure how she'd take it and that was one of the big reasons for their date tonight.

He was tired of hiding in the shadows. It was time to let everyone know that they were a couple and they were in love.

Andrew picked up his phone right as another text came through.

JULIA: Sorry honey, have to cancel. Big project.

HE STARED AT THE MESSAGE, numb. That was the only way to describe how he felt in this exact moment. Julia had never



cancelled on him before. She'd been late. She'd ranted about how much of a slave driver her boss was and how she wished she would have known just how bad it was before she got the promotion.

To which he'd told her to quit.

That would solve all their problems. She could get a job somewhere they actually appreciated her work ethic *and* her need for a social life. Sure, she'd lose some money, but it would be worth it—because of their relationship.

His advice had only caused an argument. Julia refused to leave the career she'd spent so long working on. She'd put in too many hours and climbed the ladder too high for her to just abandon it now. She made it clear that walking away wasn't an option.

Andrew tossed his phone on the table and sat back with a huff. Tonight was ruined because Julia wasn't able to prioritize where she put her time. Her career wasn't *everything* and he would know. Hadn't he had to leave a career he thought he'd have until he wanted to retire? It wasn't so bad. Except he did miss his former life sometimes. Deep down he knew this was a selfish place for him to be, but he couldn't get out of this mindset at the moment.

Sure, sometimes he felt like he was floating in a world where he didn't know his place, but that happened less often when he was with Julia. She'd helped him start to heal without even meaning to.

The ranch still didn't feel like the right fit. It didn't matter how many hours he put into helping his brothers and his father, nor did it matter how much time he sat in the saddle.

He wasn't the cowboy he'd been when he was younger, before his military service, which was probably another reason he felt so out of place. He wished that part was different and hoped that one day it would be. He couldn't help but compare his job situation to Julia's even though they were vastly different.

And he realized that not everything had to be perfect all the time. But when it came to a relationship, he wanted to at least

be able to count on her. He gave himself a mental shake to rid him of the negative thoughts. Julia did have a right to be happy in her job. He just wanted to be the priority for her.

As he glared at his phone, there was some shuffling in front of him. He lifted his gaze to find Mia standing on the other side of the table. She gave him a small wave. “Hey, Andrew. What’re you doing here?” She glanced around then back to him. “Are you eating alone?”

“No actually, but—”

She pulled out the chair and sat down across from him. A frown marred her pretty face and she swept her brown hair behind her ears. “You weren’t stood up, were you?”

Andrew’s eyes swept the room. He’d been here with Julia before, but when they were in public places, they made sure to appear like they were just casually spending time with each other. The only people who thought he might be dating someone was his family. If any of them arrived at the restaurant at this very moment, their suspicions would be confirmed due to who sat across from him. He cleared his throat, his nerves getting the better of him. If he didn’t leave, then this could end badly.

He made a move to stand but Mia’s hand shot out and took his. “Don’t go. I’ll have dinner with you.”

His heart twisted. He couldn’t lead her on. Over the last several months, she’d made it very clear she was interested in him and he... just wasn’t into her.

Mia must have read the hesitation that was all over his face. She flushed and removed her hand from his. “As friends, of course. We’ll go Dutch.”

Despite knowing that this was going to be a big mistake, Andrew shook his head. “I won’t let you do that.” He had more than enough money and he’d been raised right. He could pay even if this wasn’t a date in the traditional sense. “It’s fine. Friends,” he reaffirmed.

Her smile returned. “Good friends.” She picked up the menu and glanced over it, but her eyes found his several times. “You

haven't been to our meetings as often lately. Something going on?"

Andrew fidgeted under her gaze then shifted his attention to something else. He wished he could just get up and leave but he'd committed to spending this meal with her. He wasn't the kind of guy to go back on that. He wasn't the kind of guy to get caught in a compromising situation, either, but here he was.

It was hard enough to keep his relationship a secret when he had been so happy to revel in it. But now that things felt like they were crumbling, he wasn't sure what excuses he could give that wouldn't earn him a lecture. He'd preached that the group he led was for support in getting back into the world and finding happiness even when the chips were down.

Well, it certainly felt like his were running out.

"Andrew," she murmured again, causing him to meet her eyes. "Is everything okay? You don't look like yourself."

"What does that even mean? I'm always moody. My trademark is being grumpy."

She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing. "No, this is different. You're always *quiet*—thoughtful and considerate. Right now, you look like you've been hit by a bus."

He didn't know how to react to that statement. This woman who he'd dismissed had been watching him and paying attention so much that she could tell the differences between his moods even when they were all basically the same?

Could Julia do that too?

What was he thinking? He couldn't compare the two women to each other. That wasn't right. Mia was an *acquaintance*, a friend if he was pushing it. On top of that, her brother was his friend, someone he was helping work through his own demons. So it wasn't any wonder why sitting across from her like this felt... wrong.

But so did being stood up by the love of his life, though he was being a little over dramatic about that. She hadn't really stood him up since she'd let him know she couldn't make it.

Canceling wasn't standing him up. But the doubts continued to creep into his thoughts and they were spiraling out of control. He needed to find his center again.

"Can I ask you a question?" her voice, though soft, pulled him from his dismal thoughts.

Andrew nodded curtly, then he turned his gaze to his glass as he turned it and let the light glint off the rim.

"Is this about a girl?"

His eyes cut to meet hers so suddenly there was no denying it.

"I see." Mia settled back in her seat. She averted her gaze as if this news hurt her a great deal more than he would have imagined possible. She flushed then forced a smile. "I figured. It was the only reasonable explanation for why you've been absent so much."

He wanted to apologize. It felt like the only right thing to do. At the same time, he knew doing so wouldn't make her feel better. And he didn't have to answer to her. They weren't dating. He opened his mouth, still not knowing what he was going to say when the waitress returned to their table.

She grinned widely. "Looks like she came—"

"Oh, this isn't—" he started but Mia interrupted them both.

"Yep. I'm here. We're ready to order now." Mia glanced at Andrew for just a moment but didn't give him any opportunity to correct her. As soon as the waitress left to put in their order, she offered him a chagrined smile. "Just because she didn't come doesn't mean you shouldn't be able to have a nice dinner with someone who appreciates you."

The confusion continued to surround him. She made a good point. He hadn't told her that he was interested romantically in her. He hadn't said this was a date. She knew he was involved with someone else. What would the harm be in sharing one meal between friends?



ANDREW POUNDED on Julia's front door. Then he paced across the wood porch. She had to be home by now. After his dinner with Mia, there was no way she wouldn't have gotten off work. Mia was a talker and his short dinner had gone on for nearly two hours.

He lifted his fist to knock again when the door swung inward and Julia jumped out like a feral cat. "What do you think you're doing? Luke and Arielle are here!"

Shoot. He'd forgotten all about that.

But there were bigger issues at play right now. If there was one thing Mia had said that resonated with him, it was that he needed to tell her where he stood. "I think you're working too much."

Her head reared back. "What?"

"It feels like you're prioritizing your job more than me."

She let out a startled laugh. "It's my job, Andrew. Sometimes work will go long. It has to balance out, but sometimes my job will have to come first. I'm never going to let it always come before you, though."

He shook his head, trying to come up with the words to tell her why it hurt so much to have her cancel their plans. But all that came out was, "It's just a job. There's a reason why they say you need to prioritize what's important."

"It *is* important, Andrew. It's *important* to me."

His jaw tightened. That wasn't how he wanted this to go, but he couldn't find the words to explain all the self-doubt he was experiencing.

Julia crossed her arms. She glanced out into the darkness then swung her gaze back to meet his. "There's also a reason why people say you need to find something you're good at. You need to find yourself—love yourself—before you can love someone else." The last part of her statement was barely above a whisper.

What was she saying?

Was she implying that she didn't love him? Or perhaps she thought he couldn't love her.

His stomach churned. It wouldn't be hard to believe that Julia was only entertaining his infatuation with her. Their relationship was thrilling to a degree that exceeded everything else. And perhaps it had run its course.

He wasn't ready for it to be over. That much he knew. And continuing this conversation on her front porch only added to the risk of being found out.

Julia reached outward toward him, but her fingertips didn't graze his arm. Instead, she curled her fingers into a fist and pressed her lips tightly into a thin line. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to make it to dinner. I really did want to be with you. And I'm kind of hungry so I definitely would have liked to have had dinner." She chuckled at her attempt to lighten the mood but her joke fell flat for Andrew.

"Me too," he muttered.

"Can we talk about this later?"

"Yeah. Maybe that would be for the best." He turned on his heel and galloped down the stairs. When he reached the bottom, he heard her voice once more.

"I love you."

It was too quiet, so quiet he wasn't sure he'd heard her correctly. It would be a mistake to tell her he loved her too if she hadn't said it. He'd only be opening himself to more heartache. Instead, he nodded then climbed into his truck. He knew this was the wrong thing to do, but it was his only option in that moment. He wasn't in a place to get back and ask her to repeat what she'd said. He needed to get alone and get this worked out in his head alone.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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JULIA LET OUT A SHARP BREATH THROUGH PURSED LIPS AS SHE collapsed against the countertop of the kitchen. She rested her elbows on the granite and dug her hands into her hair. She'd only been home ten minutes when Andrew had shown up—ten minutes to try to figure out what she was going to do to make it up to Andrew for missing a date. She felt terrible about it and had truly wanted to be with him instead of working. But it hadn't been meant to be that night.

But he'd come so unexpectedly.

She'd never seen someone so upset before. Even with all of Andrew's brooding, he was more upset than she'd ever witnessed.

Hot emotion burned at the back of her eyes, making the country style kitchen go blurry. She sucked in deep, unsteady breaths as if doing so would prevent her from completely losing it. But she was wrong.

Tears streamed down her cheeks before she had a chance to stop the dam from breaking. They spilled like the first drops of a heavy storm onto the countertop.

“Julia? What's wrong?”

Her head snapped up and she stared at her brother standing in the kitchen doorway. His brows were pulled together so tightly that the lines in his forehead became cavernous. Luke strode forward, and without a word of warning, he pulled her into a tight hug.

That was all it took for her to completely lose control. Julia leaned into her older brother, her body wracked with sobs until she lost track of time. By the time her tears ran out, she wasn't sure she could release her brother.

Embarrassed, she withdrew. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry. What happened? I heard someone knocking but then it stopped. Did something happen out there?" His voice was tight, bordering on angry. "Who was it? I'll kill 'em if you're hurt."

"It's fine, Luke. I'm fine. You head back to bed. I'm sure Arielle is missing you." She forced a smile, realizing just how close she was getting to confessing the one thing she wasn't ready to.

Luke shook his head vehemently. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what happened." He crossed his arms and planted his feet firmly. If she hadn't been so upset over her argument with Andrew, she might have laughed.

"Really. I'm okay. It's just been a long day." It was a weak excuse. She knew it and so did he. That was probably why he was being so stubborn.

"Julia," he warned. "You might as well tell me because if you don't then I'm going to head out there and do some detective work."

Bombarded by exasperation, Julia threw her hands into the air. "Fine. I'm upset because I just got in a fight with, um, my... boyfriend." She grimaced the second the word left her lips. Luke didn't know about Andrew, but he also didn't know that she was seeing anyone.

Thankfully, he didn't make a big deal about the latter. However, that relief was short-lived when she noticed he hadn't made a big deal because he was angry. When he got angry, he'd stew for a few minutes and then it would fizzle away or the fury would grow. Julia didn't like what she saw.

Luke's eyes burned. His jaw was set like it had been formed with fast setting cement. The worst part was that he was



waiting for her to continue. He wanted all the details and she could see that plain as day.

“Like I said. There’s nothing we can do about it, so it doesn’t matter.”

“You’re wrong,” he muttered.

She laughed, but the sound was garbled and came out more like a moan. “No, I’m not. He’s just a guy and we disagreed on a few things. Some dumb stuff. It’s not like we’re broken up.” At least she didn’t think they were. They’d simply come up to a roadblock. As soon as Julia was able to find a way around it, then everything would go back to normal.

Her biggest worry was that Andrew wouldn’t back down from asking her to quit her job. And if that was the only way to fix this, then she’d have the hardest decision to make in her life. It didn’t seem fair.

“Julia, are you listening to me?”

She jumped and gazed at him. “What?”

He sighed. “You know you can tell me anything right? I’ll always have your back. I’m on your team.”

So much, she wished he was telling the truth. But there was a reason why they called it the bro-code. Julia swallowed hard and avoided looking directly at her brother. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

Luke snorted. “I guarantee I will have your back. But you’ll never know until you tell me what’s going on.”

The temptation to lay it all out for her brother and get his advice was harder to deal with than her addiction to chocolate. Maybe she could tell Luke what had happened without admitting that the person of interest was Luke’s best friend.

“You know how I got that promotion at work?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, it’s a lot more work than I was expecting.” She peeked at him then down at her hands.

“Are you saying you wish you didn’t take it?”

Her head snapped up and she shook it firmly. “Of course not. I love my job. It’s exactly where I want to be.”

“But you’re crying.”

“I’m crying because I’m seeing someone.”

Luke scratched his jaw. His brows furrowed and his eyes glassed over. She could tell he wasn’t willing to guess what was wrong now. At least his reaction made her smile.

“And before you ask, it’s not the guy that’s the problem. Well, not really.” Then again, maybe it was. Julia blew out a heavy breath. “He doesn’t like that I’m working long hours.”

“Well tough,” Luke muttered. “He needs to grow up.”

“It’s not the long hours exactly. It’s that I canceled on our date tonight. And it’s not the first time work has messed something up.”

Luke held up his hands. “Okay, so you’re seeing someone—someone you haven’t bothered to tell me or Arielle about—someone I didn’t even realize you had time to see. And this guy is upset that you’re earning a living.”

The way he made it sound, Andrew was definitely the one in the wrong. So why did she still feel like the bad guy?

“I don’t think you understand. I bailed on him, Luke. How would you feel if Arielle bailed on you when you were dating?”

Luke lifted a shoulder. “Honestly? I was so in love with her I didn’t care if she could only pencil me in for two minutes every night before bed. Relationships are hard and they’re never going to get easier. There will be times when you think you’ve finally hit your stride and then... wham! You’re left lying in a ditch with the wind knocked out of you.”

Julia snorted. “I’ve seen the way you guys are together. I don’t think you’ve ever had a fight in your life.”

“Don’t presume to know what happens behind closed doors. Arielle and I have had our issues.” His chuckle was dry and weighed down from his memories. “Boy, did we have our issues.”

“If you had so many problems, why did you get married? Wouldn’t it be easier to just find someone else?”

Luke studied her then leaned against the countertop. He rested his forearms there and shifted his legs out behind him. “Like I said. All relationships are hard. Even the one between a guy and his sister.” He winked at her. “Everyone is going to come with baggage and quirks. But the big thing you have to remember is that whoever you fall in love with—whoever is worth all the work and stress—they’re the ones you need to stick it out for.” He pursed his lips together.

The quiet of the kitchen seemed to be louder than normal. She could hear the hum of the refrigerator and the quiet clicks of the air conditioner as it kicked on. Julia let his words settle, allowing them to burrow into her mind as she considered what Andrew was to her.

“You gonna tell me who he is?”

She jumped. Her heart fluttered and adrenaline rushed through her veins. She still wasn’t sure how Luke would behave. Her liking one of his friends had never been an issue. She’d always viewed them as her own friends and guys she could play around with. Her brother hadn’t ever told her what he’d do or how he’d feel if she were to develop a crush on one either.

Julia cleared her throat, but still couldn’t find the words. She couldn’t tell him. Doing so would only put Andrew on the defensive if Luke decided he wasn’t happy about their relationship. Not only that, but after her crying and Luke picking her side, there was no way he’d be okay with it.

“That’s a no, I’m guessing.” Luke sighed and straightened. “Whoever it is, just know he doesn’t deserve you.”

She nearly choked as she sucked in sharply. “You don’t know that.”

“Sure, I do. You’re amazing, Jules. You’re smart, fun, and even though it’s weird to say it, you’re pretty. Any guy would be lucky to have you and if they can’t see that they’re in the wrong here, then they shouldn’t be surprised when you drop them.”

“I’m not going to drop him,” she murmured. “I care about him too much.”

“But do you love him?”

There were a million ways she could answer that. She could insist that she *did* love him. She’d told Andrew several times since they started dating. And she believed she loved him like a friend would. But the kind of love her brother talked about?

“I don’t know anymore,” she murmured. After their argument she felt like she’d been shoved out on a tightrope with nothing below to catch her if she fell. She wasn’t certain Andrew loved her either. Right now, the only thing she knew for certain was that she didn’t want to lose him. Not this way.

“If you don’t know, then maybe you need to do some soul searching. Take a break. Think about what you want.”

Julia hated that idea. More distance would only exacerbate the issue. Andrew was upset because she wasn’t spending enough time with him. Putting their relationship on hold would be a death sentence. She shook her head sharply. “No. I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“You know the old saying that distance makes the heart grow stronger?”

She huffed. “I’m not going to do it, Luke.”

“Well, when Arielle and I met, I knew right away she was the one for me. I wanted to snatch her up and steal her away so no one would ever figure out what they were missing out on. But she wasn’t ready. We were friends for a long time as I pined after her, hoping for the day when she would be willing to be official. It took several months but one night I finally got up the courage to just... kiss her.” Luke’s eyes took on a far-off quality. “It was the best kiss of my life.”

“Let me guess, you guys got engaged and then surprised us with the elopement.”

“Nope.”

She stared at her brother in disbelief. “You didn’t?”

“Nope,” he repeated. “She still wasn’t sure. So, I told her I wasn’t going to be able to wait around much longer and she knew where to find me. I didn’t call or see her for a whole week. And when I say it was *torture* you know I mean it.”

Julia couldn’t believe what she was hearing. All of this happened right beneath her nose. She couldn’t remember her brother being moody or upset at all during the time he was with Arielle.

“On an especially hard day, I nearly broke. I was going to see her and tell her if we couldn’t be together, I’d take whatever I could get no matter how much pain it caused.”

“What happened?”

“She came to me,” he said simply.

“Yeah, because I was out of my mind missing him.”

Julia and Luke jumped and turned toward the kitchen doorway. Arielle stood there, her eyes full of emotion. “One week was all it took for me to realize that Luke was the part of my life that made me the most happy and I would risk anything just to keep him in it. I was terrified it might not work out, but in the end it did.”

Luke held out his hand toward his wife and she moved into the room.

“Sorry for eavesdropping,” Arielle murmured.

“It’s not a big deal.” Julia gazed at her brother and his wife, marveling at how in love they still were. They hadn’t exactly gone through fire for each other, but they found a truth they couldn’t deny and that brought them closer. “I’m glad you’re part of the family.”

Arielle smiled and Luke kissed her on the cheek.

“I’m going up to bed. It’s been a long day. See you guys in the morning.” Julia moved past them, unable to keep herself from dwelling on the argument she had with Andrew. He seemed far more upset about not seeing her than she was. What if she

didn't love him in the same way? Was their relationship doomed?

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

---

ANDREW'S WHOLE BODY SEEMED TO BE BUZZING WITH nervous energy. His argument with Julia coupled with his dinner with Mia had put him at odds with himself. To say it fairly, he was filled with guilt. He shouldn't have had dinner with Mia. He shouldn't be at odds with Julia. It was as if he didn't feel like he fit into his own skin. Every inch of him crawled with the battling notions that he wasn't good enough for Julia and yet she wasn't treating him like he felt he should be treated.

None of it felt right. They were almost in different worlds right now.

That was why he needed to do something to expend some of this nervous energy. He needed to clear his head. When he was in the military, he'd go to the gym and take out his aggression on the punching bag that hung in the middle of the room.

There were no punching bags for him to hit right now. He couldn't drive to a gym when it was several miles away.

He *could* call Carlos and see if there was any interest in a meeting, but chances were high Mia would be there and he didn't need to air his relationship problems in front of her—especially with the way she had inserted herself into his personal life this evening.

The only thing left that might help was to go for a ride. He'd let the wind whip at his face, feel his energy flow into his horse and just let it run wild.

Andrew grabbed onto the railing of his front porch and lunged over the side, landing in the dirt with a thud. Pain ricocheted up his leg, reminding him he wasn't who he used to be. He rubbed the spot on his leg where the pain emanated from, then lurched forward toward the barn.

Just when he was about to get inside, lights flashed behind him. He turned in time to see light flood the darkened grass and dirt, dancing and darting along the bushes and trees. He held up his hand to shade his eyes. It was too dark to see who was coming. Andrew didn't want to allow himself to hope that it was Julia, but it was too late.

His heart thundered and already an apology was on his lips. He couldn't imagine any reason for her to come other than to get closure. She'd wanted time to think. Perhaps she'd figured out how to settle this.

Andrew's stomach bottomed out. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his pants. What if she'd come to tell him she wanted to break up?

And just like that he regretted going to her home and knocking on her door. He couldn't even blame her for breaking it off. She had every right to tell him he was being a jerk.

The vehicle came to a stop and the door immediately opened before the engine shut off. The lurking shadow headed toward him.

Not Julia.

"Andrew! Good, you're still up." Luke's voice could have scared off a grizzly with how angry it sounded.

Andrew shrank back. His friend had overheard his argument with Julia. That was the only explanation for Luke's appearance. He looked about as mad as a hornet and his movements matched the angry creature.

Luke pounced around, pacing back and forth. "You wanna know what Julia just told me?"

He didn't dare speak. Right now, Luke was mad, but it didn't seem to be directed at Andrew. If he played dumb long enough, he could avoid experiencing Luke's wrath.



“She told me she got in a fight with her boyfriend.”

Andrew’s brows lifted. She told him that?

“I know! I didn’t even realize she was dating someone. Did you?” Luke continued his buzzing movements as Andrew shook his head.

It wasn’t hard to figure out that Luke had heard something that made him out to be the bad guy which only put Andrew on the defense. Thankfully, his fists remained at his sides. He still had to be careful around Luke. Otherwise, he might risk losing a lot more than the girl he was crazy about.

“Turns out this guy must believe he’s some magical being or something.”

“What?” Andrew blurted.

“Yeah. He’s telling her that she’s not spending enough time with him.” Luke spit out the words with venom. “Can you believe that? This guy wants her to push aside her career dreams to be with him. What kind of guy does something like that?”

“Are you sure that’s what she meant?” Andrew’s voice hardened. That wasn’t what he’d told Julia. He’d wanted to spend more time with her, yes, but he didn’t want her to walk away from her dreams.

Unless that was exactly what he wanted. Hadn’t he said she should get a job elsewhere so she could have a social life?

“Oh, I’m sure. Julia said this guy feels like he’s being neglected or something. I don’t get it. When you’re in a relationship you have a certain amount of give and take. What guy doesn’t understand that? Don’t most of us need a little time to ourselves, too?” His voice rose a few decibels.

His whole body felt wound tight, ready to spring to his own defense until Luke’s next statement stopped him in his tracks.

“He made her *cry*, Andrew. Like, *really* cry. I’ve never seen Julia cry over anyone. She’s the strongest person I’ve ever seen.” Luke stopped and faced Andrew, his hands balled into fists and his chest heaving. “I couldn’t talk to Arielle about

this because she'd just tell me to let Julia handle it. But I figured you'd understand. You have a little sister. What would you do if you found out some guy was pushing Katrina around?"

"I don't know, man. Maybe Arielle has a point."

Luke shot Andrew a sharp look. "What?"

Andrew crossed his arms, everything telling him to stick up for himself. "What if you were spending a ton of time with Arielle and then suddenly she was cancelling her dates on you, too."

Luke shook his head. "Wouldn't happen. I want Arielle to be happy—in my presence or out of it. I know that if she had to work long hours, she'd be even more excited to see me."

Shoot. That was a good answer. Even Julia's brother was a better man than he was.

"I just wish I knew who it was so I could track him down and give him a piece of my mind. He isn't entitled to anything. Julia has a life. She gets to spend it any way she'd like and if she can't spend every waking moment with the guy, then he just needs to accept it."

Everything he said made sense, inside Andrew could see the logic of it. But there was one thing Luke didn't understand. He wasn't in love with Julia. He hadn't pined for her for years only to feel like she was slipping through his fingertips.

"Andrew? You listening to me?"

He glanced up at Luke. "Yeah, I'm listening."

"So, do you know him? Have you seen anything? Has Julia mentioned anyone?"

This was when he should confess. The fury mingling with turmoil that Luke was exhibiting was enough to make that clear. But it wouldn't hurt just Andrew if he told Luke. It'd hurt Julia, too.

"We need to figure out who it is and put this guy in his place. I'm not against my sister dating, but I am definitely against her dating a controlling jerk. Are you with me?"

Andrew shifted uncomfortably. He hadn't *thought* he'd been a jerk. All he wanted was for her to be consistent. That wasn't such a bad thing, right? His confidence wavered. Rubbing his upper arm, he forced himself to meet Lucas's eyes. "We should talk about something."

"And then I'm going to tell him that he might as well stay far, far away from—wait, what did you say?"

"I need to tell you something." He couldn't believe he was actually going to do this. He should stop, but something prevented him from doing so.

Luke's eyes narrowed. He took a step toward Andrew. "Wait a minute. You said something earlier. How did you know she bailed on her date?" It took mere seconds for Luke to catch on but when he did, his face changed from red to nearly purple. One step, two steps closer.

Andrew held up his hands, warding Luke off. "It's not what you think."

"Really? You're *not* dating my sister?" He raked a hand through his hair and shook his head. "What happened to that Mia chick? You know what? Nevermind. It doesn't matter. I can't believe you'd go behind my back like this."

"Okay, so what? I'm dating your sister. But I'm not the bad guy."

Luke snorted. "Yeah? Then who is? Because based on the way Julia was crying about how you were treating her, I'd say your case doesn't look good." He shook his finger in front of Andrew's face. "I can't believe you would go behind my back like that. You know I don't want any of my friends dating my sister."

Andrew's own irritation morphed into a hot, seething fury. "Yeah? Well it sounds like the pot is calling the kettle black."

Shock and hurt filtered across Luke's face. "*What?*"

"You're sitting here getting angry about me being *controlling* when you're doing the exact same thing."

“Do you even hear yourself? I’m not *controlling* anything.” Luke was directly in front of Andrew now, nearly nose to nose.

“Yes, you are. You’re trying to tell Julia who she can and can’t date.”

“That has nothing to do with what you did,” Luke gritted out. “I don’t want my friends dating my sister because I know every bad thing about them. None of them are good enough for her.”

His words struck harder than Andrew wanted to admit. It took everything in his power to refrain from taking a swing at his friend. Luke didn’t want him dating Julia because he didn’t think Andrew was good enough. It was one thing for Andrew to think that about himself, it was something else entirely to hear it from his best friend.

“Well, if I’m not good enough for Julia, maybe you should take a good long look in the mirror. Based on what I know about Arielle, she could do better.” The second he uttered it, he wished he could take it back.

Luke’s expression faltered then hardened. He pulled back his fist and swung it forward. Thankfully, Andrew’s reflexes were still intact. He stepped backward, Luke’s hand only pushing the air in its way.

If only Luke had clued in that Andrew wasn’t going to take his threat sitting down. A few more steps backward, and Andrew backed up against the barn. Luke took one more swing and this time when Andrew avoided his fist, it landed on the wood exterior.

Luke grunted then shook out his hand, clarity flooding his countenance. His eyes remained dark, his jaw hardened. “Don’t you dare speak to her again.”

“You can’t control us, Luke. If she wants to see me—”

“I mean it, Andrew. And if I know her like I think I do, she’s not gonna want to see you after what you said tonight anyway. Only a narcissist would tell the person they care about that they can’t be happy.”

Narcissist? Andrew wasn't a narcissist.

Luke's expression softened only slightly. "I can't believe you would tell her that the one thing she worked the hardest to achieve wasn't worth it. You made her second guess herself. I've never seen her so upset and I'll never forgive you for your part in that." He stormed back to his car without looking back.

As soon as the lights disappeared, Andrew sagged against the barn. He wasn't the type to just take this sort of confrontation lying down. But at the moment he was between a rock and a hard place. Luke had made several good points.

But he cared about Julia.

He didn't want to envision a life without her.

So, what was he supposed to do?

Fight for Julia despite the threat Luke presented?

Or walk away because she was better off without him?

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, JULIA STARED UP AT THE CEILING of her bedroom. Her head pounded from the lack of sleep from the night before. The tears didn't help much either.

On top of the emotional distress and exhaustion she felt, she berated herself for showing just how upset she'd been—over a guy no less.

Her brother probably thought she was being ridiculous. She'd never shown that side of herself to him. Granted, she'd never been this invested in a relationship either. Most of the guys she dated couldn't keep up with her wit or sarcasm.

But Andrew could. He was a pro. And he never made her feel bad for running circles around him.

Julia groaned as she turned onto her side and pulled a pillow into her chest. She hugged it tight, but it didn't help her feel any better over what she was dealing with. After the long day at her job yesterday, she didn't even think she could go into work today.

Relationships weren't supposed to upend a person's life. They were supposed to be the cherry on top. So why did she feel so sick to her stomach?

"Julia? Are you awake?" Arielle's muffled voice came through the closed door.

She closed her eyes, not moving a muscle. She'd heard the tense voices last night. It had been unclear what Luke and Arielle had discussed, but it sure sounded like Luke was the one who was more upset.

“I wanted to check on you and ask if you needed anything. Luke went to get breakfast.”

Julia rolled over to face the door. Luke had never been the type to go get breakfast. He was as frugal as one could be—hence his small wedding where he didn’t have to pay per plate for all the guests who knew him growing up. Julia sat up then was immediately bombarded with a pounding she wasn’t prepared for.

She winced and pressed her palm to her temple. Once she could get the throbbing under control, she gingerly got to her feet and opened the door. Arielle blinked a few times, unable to hide her reaction to what had to be extreme puffiness. Julia sighed, giving Arielle a flat look. “Luke went to get breakfast?”

Arielle nodded. “He said he’d get us some cinnamon rolls from Sweet Everything Bakery. And he said not to let you leave without having one.” She offered a wan smile. “I think he wanted to talk a little more about what happened last night, but I told him he should drop it.”

Julia made a face. “You guys didn’t get into an argument about me, did you?” She’d hate to be the source of any contention for the newlyweds.

Her sister-in-law shook her head. “What? Of course not. Luke went to—” Arielle cleared her throat and crossed her arms. “He just wanted to talk to you before you went to work.”

“Well, I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

Arielle stiffened.

“I mean, I don’t think I’m going to work today. I’m going to take a sick day and try to figure out what I’m going to do next. If Luke wants to talk, I’m not going anywhere.”

She seemed to hesitate. Was there something Arielle knew that Julia didn’t?

Before Julia could ask, the front door downstairs slammed shut. It was a little harder than usual, but based on Luke’s temper from last night, Julia shouldn’t have been surprised. She offered Arielle a reassuring smile. “I’ll go talk with him.

You mind holding back a bit? I think there's something just the two of us should discuss." She'd gone over it in her head all night long.

Her secret. The one thing Luke didn't know. It was probably time for him to find out so she didn't have to worry anymore. Andrew would just have to understand.

Arielle nodded then reached out and gave Julia a hug. When she pulled back, she tipped her head as she smiled softly. "I've always been envious of the relationship you have with your brother. I didn't get that as an only child. I think it might have been nice to have someone who cared about me as much as you two care for each other."

Julia chuckled, but even to her it sounded forced. "You wouldn't say that if you had to grow up with a brother who wanted to boss you around all the time. But yeah, I'm pretty lucky. There's no one like Luke."

She slipped past Arielle and headed down the stairs. Drawers slammed, stainless steel cutlery clattered together, and Luke's feet made plenty of noise to add to the fray. He was still in a mood.

Julia crept closer and stopped in the doorway. She leaned against it, hoping her nonchalant demeanor would make it clear she wasn't going to argue with him. "I don't know what's got you so upset, but you should probably chill out before your wife decides to divorce you and take half of this place for herself."

Luke didn't face her. He hung his head as he grasped onto the counter in front of him. "I know."

"Really? Because it sure seems like you don't care if you scare her off."

"No, Julia. I *know*. Andrew told me."

Her legs turned to rubber and she had to cling to the door jamb for support. Yes, she'd come down here to confess everything, but now that she knew the source of his frustration, she wasn't sure she was ready to come up against it.



Why did Andrew tell him? Did he call? Did they bump into each other? Her thoughts raced, wondering what Andrew's endgame had been. This could only mean one thing. It was over. If Andrew was willing to burn bridges with her brother and not tell her about it, then he wasn't willing to fight with her by his side.

Stomach churning, Julia clutched the molding behind her and stared at the ceiling. "What did he say?" she wheezed.

"He told me I was a hypocrite," Luke muttered.

"A... what?"

"A hypocrite." Luke spun around and glowered at her. "But that's not the worst of it. I can't believe I didn't see it."

She forced herself to look at him. It was the least she could do. Even all the way across the room, she could feel his feeling of betrayal coming off him in waves.

"You tell me everything. It's always been us against the world."

"Yeah, well you didn't exactly tell me about Arielle, did you?" Mentioning that secret had been a mistake. Even from here, she could tell she gutted him.

Luke scowled, shifting his focus to the floor. "You're right."

Julia didn't want to be right. She wanted this to be over so she could move forward and figure out what to do next.

"I wish you would have felt secure enough to tell me. He was my *best friend*, Jules."

*Was?* "What happened, Luke?"

He was staring at his hand, turning it over. His fingers stretched outward then receded into a fist then again and again. That was when she noticed it. His knuckles were red and purple.

Julia darted across the room. "Is that... blood?" Her angry gaze cut to Luke. "What. Did. You. *Do?*" she demanded, taking his hand in hers. This was definitely blood. Based on how bad it looked, there was no way Andrew wasn't hurting.

Luke yanked his hand away from her and shook it out. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t worry about it? You got in a fight, Luke. What else am I supposed to do?”

“I assure you the barn is in better shape than my hand.”

“The barn... the *barn*? What were you thinking? Why did you punch a stupid building?” Her voice rose and she grabbed his hand again. “Come here. I’m cleaning this up.”

He resisted her initially, then shuffled toward the sink where she pulled him.

“I can’t believe you punched a barn. And I thought I was impulsive.”

“In my defense, I wasn’t aiming for it.”

Her movements stilled and all it took was one glance in her brother’s direction to know exactly what he’d been trying to hit. “I can’t believe you,” she seethed. “He’s your best friend.”

“Not anymore.”

Julia faced him so suddenly he flinched. “What? You think I’m going to take a swing at you like you did to my boyfriend?”

“Maybe. It’s what I would do.”

They glowered at one another for a moment and then she let out a heavy sigh and shook her head. “You’re an idiot.” She pushed his hand under the running water then dropped down to grab the rubbing alcohol under the sink.

“Don’t you think I know that?” he hissed. “I was so wrapped up in my own stuff I didn’t see any of this.”

“It’s not your job to keep tabs on me,” she muttered.

“But it *is* my job to keep you safe.”

Julia rolled her eyes. “That ended a long time ago. I can handle myself.”

“Clearly,” his sarcasm wasn’t lost on her.

“I’m serious. Just because I’ve been... sad... lately doesn’t mean I’m incapable of figuring it out. I just... have to decide what I want the most.”

Luke placed his hand on hers, stilling her movements. “It’s not an issue of picking one over the other. You can still have it all. You have to know that.”

“Maybe you’re wrong.”

He shook his head. “I’m not wrong. It’s like I said, there are sacrifices you might need to make but they’re not forever. You won’t be working crazy hours the rest of your life. And if Andrew is the one for you... he’ll figure out that what makes you happy is important too.”

She refused to look her brother in the eye. What he was saying made sense.

Too much sense.

“I *do* think I love him.”

“I know,” her brother whispered.

Julia released a shuddering breath. “I didn’t think it was possible to fall in love with someone I’d grown up with. I thought that knowing everything about him would turn me off from him somehow.” Finally, she glanced at her brother. “As unlikely as it seems, knowing who he was before he grew up—before he served in the military—before all of it—it makes me love him more. I can’t stop thinking about him. When I’m at work, it’s all I can do to stay focused on my job.”

“Sounds like you know what you want.”

“That’s just it, though. I don’t have any idea.”

Luke’s confusion was only a small percentage of what she’d been feeling since she got off work yesterday. At least she knew she wasn’t alone.

“What if I choose him and I’m wrong? What if it doesn’t work out and I lose everything I’ve worked my whole life to achieve? I can’t just walk away from my career right now and expect to get it back if I change my mind. There’s a reason

why people focus on their careers over a family and vice versa. What if I choose... wrong?"

Once again, she felt utterly sick to her stomach. She'd jumped into this relationship. At the time it was exciting and new. Every day presented itself as a fun experience she hadn't had before.

But that was bound to wear off.

Right?

She sighed again. "What do I do?"

"I can't tell you that." He stared off at a spot on the wall as if looking at her straight on was too difficult.

"Why not?" Julia groaned. "You seemed to want to give me all kinds of advice last night before you went to pulverize my boyfriend."

"That was before I knew it was Andrew," Luke muttered.

"You really hate him that much?"

Luke glanced at her out of the corner of his eye then returned his focus to that wall. "I'm not really *mad*."

"Could have fooled me."

He rolled his eyes. "Andrew knew I didn't want any of my friends dating you. He knew it and he didn't care."

"I think you might be wrong about that," she said quietly. "We both were worried what you'd do when you found out."

"That doesn't mean you cared what I felt. That just means you didn't want to get caught."

She shoved him playfully. "You know there's more to it than that."

"I'm not so sure I do."

"Whatever," she murmured.

"As I was saying, I'm not mad. I'm just—"

"Disappointed?"

“Sure. Let’s go with that.” He took a deep breath then let it out. “You’re going to have to fly solo on this one, Jules. I can’t help you decide. But if you want to be with Andrew, I won’t stand in your way... I’m just not ready to let him know that yet.”

Julia shoved him again. “You’re terrible.”

“And he broke the bro code. He deserves to sweat it out a little.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

---

ANDREW'S WILLPOWER WAS WANING. HE COULD FEEL HIS control slipping. It was time that he admitted to himself and everyone who looked up to him that even he could make mistakes.

He stared out at the dozen vets who sat in the circle of his small meeting and yet he couldn't bring himself to ask for their help. He was supposed to be the strong one. That was what this was about.

Carlos sat directly to his right, scribbling down a few notes before they got started. The hum of chatter filled the small gathering hall of the church building.

How long had it been since he'd sat in one of these meetings? He'd only managed to make it to a handful since he'd started dating dating Julia.

Now he wasn't sure where he stood with her. He could only assume Luke cornered her and told her the same thing he'd told Andrew. They were off limits to each other.

"You ready?"

Andrew glanced over to Carlos, finding him looking far more concerned than he should have. "Not really."

"You don't have to lead this one if you don't want to."

The smile on Andrews lips was more than forced. It felt feral, almost—as if he were showing his teeth to ward off anyone who might try to approach. So, Andrew gathered his courage

and nodded firmly. “Thanks for the offer, but I think I’m good.”

Andrew stood. He gazed around at the men and women he’d helped throughout the last year. These were his people. This had been his mission for several months. And the only ones who knew about it were Julia and her brother.

Not even Luke was aware of the details regarding how he knew Carlos. He just thought the guy was another friend. A twinge of grief entered his heart, making it difficult to breathe. The door to the cultural hall opened and the one person he had hoped he wouldn’t see entered.

Mia leaned against the door as it closed to muffle the noise it would make when it clicked shut. She smiled broadly at him then slipped across the hardwood floor toward the group. There was only one seat empty, and it was on Andrew’s other side.

Already he had a feeling this wouldn’t turn out great, but it was time to take control of his life again—even if that meant it would be a life without Julia.

“I’m glad you’re all here.” He let his focus sweep through the group and he smiled at each and every one of them. “This support group is meant to be a safe haven and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t exactly that for me.”

He could feel Mia’s eyes on him. They drilled into his back, creating a strange kind of uncomfortable warmth there.

“I’m sorry I’ve been absent the last few meetings. But I promise you that I’ll do better. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that we all need to make sure we stick with what works.” He swallowed the emotion that built in his throat. “And this group works.”

Murmurs from the group surrounded him like a bear hug. These people knew what it was like to feel alone—to wonder if anyone would understand why it was so hard to get back to the daily grind. Andrew couldn’t believe he’d let so much time pass before coming back here.

He dove into the struggles he was having. His insecurities with the girl he loved. He could see Mia fidgeting in her seat, though he didn't look directly at her. This wasn't her story, it was his and he was determined to tell it.

Then he talked about how he didn't feel he fit in anywhere—not in town, not with his friends, and not at his job which was ironic because he worked with his family. “The hardest part about going through hell and back is trying to keep those you love safe from the demons you carry. And you have to do this while still coping and moving past them for your own wellbeing. That's why this group is so important. You're my family, too.”

That last statement made his voice break. He'd spoken what was in his heart and he didn't have more to add. Andrew nodded toward Carlos as he took his seat. It was time for his friend to take over so he could settle his nerves and try to figure out why he was so dang emotional.

Mia placed her hand on his shoulder and he jumped. He looked up and saw exactly what he didn't want to see. The look in her eyes said she was more attached to him than before. Andrew shrugged her hand away and scooted his chair away. The move away from her didn't do any good with how close the chairs were. He jumped to his feet, startling a few people before he headed toward the door that would take him to the restrooms.

Time to clear his head before he went back. Too many issues needed to be resolved. And it was time for him to grow up and finally take care of them like he knew he should.



ANDREW SHOOK Carlos's hand then glanced around. Mia had managed to slip out unnoticed as soon as the meeting was over. He really needed to speak to her before her crush on him escalated further.

Unless it was too late for that.



“Glad to see you’re back,” Carlos took a sip of his punch. “We were getting worried there for a bit.”

“*Worried?* What do you have to be worried about?” Andrew attempted to keep his voice light but even he could tell he failed miserably.

Carlos gave him that look—the one Andrew hated. His lips curled into a grin, but it did nothing to ease the frustration Andrew felt. “You were the one who insisted that we keep an eye on the folks in our group. The rules apply to you, too. We’re grounded when we attend these meetings regularly.”

“I’m fine,” Andrew looked away as he muttered the phrase that had started to sound strange even to his own ears.

“No, you’re not.”

Andrew’s gaze cut to Carlos once again. “Fine, I’m not.” Out of everyone Andrew could make this confession to, Carlos hadn’t been the one he would have predicted.

“You want to talk about it?” At least Carlos wasn’t staring at him. He’d let his focus shift to the group of people visiting after the meeting. “Didn’t you say that I could come ride a horse any time I felt like it? I’ve never been to your place. What do you say?”

“You want to come to the ranch?”

“Sure. Sounds like fun.”



A FEW DAYS LATER, Andrew stood outside the barn holding the reins of two horses. Carlos was about ten minutes late. It was entirely possible he’d forgotten about their plans, they’d been fairly loose, anyway. Andrew should have called to confirm the timing.

He was just about to head inside the barn and put the horses back in their stalls when a car pulled up. For a moment, Andrew thought everything would go well. He could talk to Carlos about his insecurities and come up with a game plan to

apologize to Julia. But then everything came crashing down around him.

It wasn't Carlos who climbed out of the car.

It was Mia.

No. This wasn't happening. He was imagining things. Surely Carlos would have messaged him to let him know of any change of plans.

As much as Andrew wanted to move, to head toward her and tell her to get back in her car, he couldn't. He was a nice guy who didn't like confrontation outside of the military. He watched her approach with that smile on her face and the only thing he could think of was that Mia was one of the only people in his life right now who saw him as someone worth spending time with. Maybe there was some self-pity indulgence mixed in there, but he wasn't able to push acceptance away.

Mia hurried over toward him just as bubbly as ever. She pointed to one of the horses behind him. "Do I get to have the brown one?"

"Where's Carlos?"

She frowned. "Oh. Carlos said he's really sorry he couldn't come. He got called into work last minute, but he said it would be okay if I came."

"I didn't get a call from him."

"No, because he lost his phone yesterday." She thumbed over her shoulder toward the car. "Um, I suppose if you want, I can leave and you can meet up with Carlos—"

"It's fine," he blurted. "These horses could use the exercise." Andrew held out the reins toward Mia. "You've ridden a horse before, right?"

She shot him a chagrined expression. "Actually, I haven't. It's not hard, is it?"

His logical brain was screaming that he shouldn't do this. He actually didn't really want to spend any time with Mia. But maybe this would be a good distraction to get his mind off

Julia. What better way than to teach a horse novice a little more about all things equestrian. Andrew guided her around the side of the horse. “Put your right foot there. Steady yourself with the saddle horn, then hoist yourself up and put your left foot into the stirrup.”

It took a good three attempts before she made it into the saddle. But once she was there, she beamed at him. “You’re a good teacher.”

He chuckled. “Getting into the saddle isn’t actually that difficult. But guiding him will be. You’re going to want to be very aware of everything from the way his ears lie to the way he walks. There are little tells everywhere that’ll help you predict what’s going to happen next.”

This time Mia seemed a little less confident.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be beside you the whole way.”

Their ride was more about horses than his own internal feelings, but Andrew didn’t mind. It was just as he’d expected. He was able to keep his thoughts focused on teaching someone to guide a horse and not the chaos in his life.

Once he got past the initial discomfort of being around Mia, it was easier. She was actually a lot smarter than he’d realized. Even with all the meetings she’d attended, he hadn’t realized she’d gone to college in the city. She was currently working remotely for a medical coding insurance certificate or something like that.

But the best part about their ride was that she didn’t make him feel like he wasn’t worthy of her attention. He couldn’t put his finger on why exactly, and it was even easier to push down the feeling that something was off with that realization.

Was it possible Julia wasn’t right for him? He’d always needed to prove himself to her. He wanted her to look up to him more than anything else. But with each passing day he was more and more uncertain that they were going to work out.

Maybe what he needed was someone he felt like an equal to.

“You seem happier today.” Mia’s voice broke into his thoughts.

He glanced at her. “Happier than when?”

“When we had dinner.”

“Yeah, well that was for a specific reason.”

Mia looked away, making it difficult to read her. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

She shifted uncomfortably in her saddle and looked away. “I’d hoped that you’d admit it was the company.”

He gave her a funny look, one she missed because she still wasn’t looking at him directly. “The company was the same both times.”

Her strained laugh danced between them like an unsure bumble bee. “Right. I guess what I’m trying to say is that two people stood you up and I was able to fill in for both.”

She was right. Once again, Mia had proven that she could be counted on. Andrew stared at her, though she kept her gaze trained on the trail before them. He could be honest. He could tell her that he knew about her crush and he wasn’t interested. He probably should have.

But he didn’t. He mulled it all over in a few quick seconds and knew being honest with Mia would lift a heavy burden from his shoulders. He knew that even if Julia wasn’t in the picture, Mia couldn’t take her place. Yet he let the moment pass.

Instead, he just offered her a smile when she glanced toward him.

“We should probably head back, don’t you think?” she murmured.

“Yeah. That’s probably a good idea.” He needed to get his head on straight and fight for what he wanted.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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JULIA DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHAT PROMPTED HER TO SHOW UP AT Sagebrush Ranch when she did. She had plenty of work to do at home and a visit would delay all the chores that wouldn't do themselves. Luke had made her feel guilty and like she deserved so much more at the very same time.

The conflicting emotions were making her sick to her stomach and all she could think about was how Andrew would know what to do.

Hopefully he'd be able to say the perfect thing and she'd be able to make her decision.

But those hopes were quickly shattered, flung to the floor like a glass vase that had no right being in her hands in the first place. Julia didn't even get the chance to exit her car when Andrew emerged from the trail riding a horse beside someone else.

Her hand froze on the car door handle as she peered through the front window, unable to pinpoint where she'd seen the woman before. She looked familiar, but that was all,

Julia's heart leapt into her throat. Their argument hadn't seemed big enough to break them up, had it? Was there something she'd missed in their back and forth? Had Andrew actually made a decision without hearing from her?

The couple rode into the barn and the second they disappeared from view, Julia started her engine. She peeled out of there, paying no heed to the gravel that likely flew in all directions. All she knew was that she needed to get out of there before

Andrew saw her. Luke had mentioned something about telling Andrew to stay away. Was that what prompted him to cozy up to another woman? How could Julia be so stupid to ignore the fact that Andrew was a catch? Of course he was. Any woman would count herself lucky to have his attention.

Her stomach roiled and she tightened her grip on the steering wheel as tears slipped down her cheeks. This wasn't fair. She was supposed to come to the ranch and tell Andrew how she felt so they could come to a compromise. That was how adults were supposed to handle situations like this.

Finding him with another woman crushed her soul. She felt like such an idiot. The overwhelming despair and humiliation quickly turned to fury. How dare he just walk away when they hadn't decided on anything? What if she'd decided to quit her job and she'd come to tell him he was right? Wouldn't that have been something worth waiting for?

But no! He'd gone and given his time to someone else.

Julia stormed into the house, slamming every single door she could get her hands on. By the time she made it to the kitchen, she was breathing heavy and pacing. Every so often another tear would escape from her eye and drag itself down her cheek and she'd swipe at it with agitation.

There was a part of her that wanted to drive back to Andrew's ranch and give him a piece of her mind. She wanted him to see the pain on her face, hear the sorrow in her voice before she demanded for him to explain exactly what he'd been doing with that other woman.

But deep down, she knew she couldn't. She'd get within a foot of the man she knew she loved and she'd lose her nerve. She'd probably throw herself on his mercy and tell him that she wanted to be with him more than she wanted to keep her promotion.

Julia gripped the countertop and squeezed her eyes shut, having finally expelled all of the energy that had come with the adrenaline rush.

"Julia? You okay?"

She jumped and spun to find Luke and Arielle watching her. Of course this would happen. Why didn't she think about them being home when she'd come tearing through the house like a Tasmanian devil?

The temptation to nod and shoo them off was so strong, but she didn't have the strength to do even that. She was lost at sea, unable to find any kind of safe harbor.

Her shoulders sagged and she hurried across the room. Much to her brother's surprise, she threw her arms around him and buried her face into his shirt. "I'm not okay. Nothing's okay."

Luke shifted. She couldn't tell what he was doing, but immediately after, Arielle whispered something to him and walked away. He pulled back from her, his features tight. "Don't tell me it's Andrew."

More tears spilled onto her cheeks.

"What did he do this time?" There was an edge to her brother's voice. "Do I have to go over there and—"

"No! Don't you dare."

"Okay, then, but what'd he do?"

Julia wiped at her face as she moved away from her brother and toward the kitchen table. "It's not him, it's me."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Luke followed her, taking a seat beside her. "Relationships take two people, Julia. You're not the only one at fault if it doesn't work out."

She shook her head. "I knew you wouldn't get it purely based on the last time we had this conversation. You think that Andrew should support me in whatever I want to do."

"Of course I do! That's what it means to be in a relationship." Now he sounded more exasperated than anything else. When she peeked at him, he was scowling. "Andrew should know better than to make those kinds of demands of you especially if you guys are just starting out."

Julia threw her hands into the air. "So it would be better for us to get deeper into our relationship before I insist that I can't spend as much time with him as he needs?"

Luke groaned, shaking his head. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“No, I don’t. From the way you’re describing things, you think Andrew just needs to gladly accept anything I’m willing to give him. How is that a compromise?”

He didn’t say anything.

“Exactly. I might love my job, but I have to figure out a way to make things work with Andrew if I want to keep him in my life. It’s all about prioritization. Do I think I should have to make all the sacrifices? No. But he shouldn’t either. We needed to come to a consensus. But you know what? It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he murmured.

“I saw him with someone else.”

Luke shot up out of his chair. “What? You saw him kiss someone else?”

“Is that what I *said*?” Her voice rose a pitch, already hating the way it felt to think of Andrew kissing someone new. “Geez, Luke. Please keep up. I said that he was with someone else. A woman. I didn’t see anyone kissing.”

Her brother’s demeanor softened. “Saw him... how?”

“He was going for a ride with her,” she whispered. “That’s all I saw.”

“Who was it?”

“I didn’t stick around to find out.”

“Julia, just because you saw him with someone doesn’t mean it was romantic. It could be someone from his group... or a friend.”

“Like I said. It doesn’t matter. I’m not going to get my hopes up. If he wants to see other people, then—”

“Julia,” he said so firmly she was forced to meet his gaze.

“What?”

“Do you want to be with Andrew?”



“Of course I do. What kind of question is that?” Her irritation was quickly returning. “I want to get married and have a bunch of little cowboys riding horses and wrangling cattle. I see myself with him forever. All I think about when I look toward my future is a life with Andrew.” She blushed. This wasn’t the kind of conversation she should be having with her older brother. It would have been so much easier if Luke had been an older sister instead.

“If that’s how you feel, then you have some important decisions to make. But first, you have to follow your heart. Sounds like you might even be considering changing your career path.”

She stared at a spot on the kitchen table, the wood grains blurring into one another. That was exactly what she was considering. “Do you think I’m selling out?”

“Selling out, how?”

“Changing something important about myself for a boy.”

Luke snorted. “After the lecture you just gave me? Not a chance.”

Julia peeked at him. “Really?”

He slipped his arm around her shoulders. “Really, really. You’re not losing even a piece of yourself if you decide to change your career path in search of something different. If it makes you happy, then do it.”

“I don’t want to lose him.”

“That’s just because he puts up with your dumb pranks.”

For the first time in a few days, she smiled. “He’s pretty great at that.”

Luke shrugged. “Meh.”

She shoved his shoulder. “You gonna make up? I don’t know if I can marry a guy you hate.”

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t like the idea of my best friend marrying my sister at all.” Then he turned serious. “But if he

makes you happy, then I guess I can't complain too much. I just wish he would have found someone else."

Julia slugged him, laughter mixed with a gasp bubbling up from her chest. "Don't even joke about that." They sat there in silence for a few moments then she nudged him. "You think he's a good guy, though, right?"

"The best," Luke affirmed. "You two are made for each other."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I think so, too." A quiet kind of peacefulness filled the room. All that energy she'd expended while moving through the grief she'd experienced seemed silly now, but she still had to fight against the fear that she was too late. "You really think he was with a friend? I didn't know who it was, but I've seen her around before. I feel like I would have known if she was his friend."

"Maybe it was Mia."

"Who's Mia?"

"Mhmm. She's the sister of one of the guys in Luke's group. Kinda obsessed with Andrew though. Actually, we thought they were secretly dating before I found out about you. I wouldn't be surprised if she hangs out with him sometimes."

"I don't think I've ever heard him talk about Mia."

"Probably not. Andrew doesn't share much about his group with anyone. I wasn't even sure he'd told you about it." Luke made a face. "It's a good thing you already knew. Otherwise, Andrew might come at me for spilling his secrets."

"Don't you find it weird that he keeps that sort of thing a secret?" she mused.

"Nah. It's Andrew. He's the kind of guy who doesn't do good deeds for the recognition. He does it because it's the right thing to do."

She sighed. "That's a good point. I hope you're right."

"About the recognition?"

"No," she nudged him playfully, "about him being with his friend. I don't know if I could survive the broken heart that

would come with him choosing someone else.”

“You’ll be fine. Just take some time to gather your thoughts and it’ll all work out.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

ONCE MIA HAD LEFT, ANDREW KNEW HE HAD A LOT TO DO IN order to make things right not only with Julia but with Luke as well. He'd destroyed the trust of them both through his selfishness. Luke needed an apology and a promise that Andrew would love Julia and take care of her for the rest of his life.

Julia deserved more. He needed to figure out the perfect gift he could give her. He knew he wanted to be with her for the rest of his life. But he didn't know if she wanted the same. She had her life all mapped out—a fact that had fed his insecurities to a great extent.

So what could he do to show her that he loved her not in spite of that side of her but because of it? He'd been such a jerk. Not supporting her. Whining about her job—the job she happened to love. He had so much to make up for.

He sat on the top steps of his childhood home, looking out at everything his family had been blessed with. He admired his older brothers for finding their way so quickly. Bo knew he wanted to run the ranch from the very moment he learned to walk. Jack had found his heart and home again after the loss of his wife and with his new life with Emily. Even Daniel had found a true passion in his coffee shop in town.

What did Andrew have?

He didn't have the strength and speed to help with the harder chores on the ranch, but he couldn't take a desk job either. Action and adventure had been bred into him since he was a

child. It was one of the reasons he'd chosen the military. And now that he was back here, what else was there?

"Hey big brother." Katrina plopped down beside him. His baby sister always had a knack for interrupting when he was trying to figure something out.

Andrew ignored her, racking his brain for anything he could focus on that would make Julia see he was making the right changes. Yes, he still had his group sessions, but there had to be more. He needed to fill his day with something of value rather than wait around for his friends and family to spend time with him. He'd been working on and off doing odd jobs on the ranch, but there had to be more.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Thinking," he muttered.

"Oh." She settled back, resting her hands behind her. "I would have thought you would be out on one of your dates."

He stiffened then swung his gaze toward her. "What dates? What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. When you sneak off to be with Julia or that other girl."

"What other girl? And how did you know about Julia?"

She gave him a pointed look. "Come on, Andrew. I wasn't born yesterday. And people talk. You've been seen around town with both of them. Seems most people still think you're just friends with Julia. But I don't buy it."

"Why's that?" he muttered.

"Because," she said simply. "You're happier lately."

He stared at her. How would she know if he was happier? Was he so transparent? Andrew faced forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "Okay, so what if I'm dating Julia."

She grimaced. "What does Luke think about that?"

Andrew scowled. "He's not thrilled."

Katrina laughed. "Go figure."

“Why do you say that?” All at once his defenses shot up. “I’m a good guy. He should be glad someone like me is involved with his sister.”

“It’s not that. Think about it. You don’t have a job—”

“I work at the ranch—”

“The ranch doesn’t count. That’s doing odd jobs for our parents and let’s face it. Out of everyone who doesn’t want to be here, you’re the one at the top of the list.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

She nudged him. “It’s not a *bad* thing.”

“Except it’s why you think Luke forbade me to spend time with Julia.”

“He forbade you?” she laughed. “Well, then you better come up with a reason you should be allowed to date her. And before you go and tell me that Luke isn’t in charge of that, hear me out. You don’t have a plan for your future. Let’s say you ask Julia to marry you. Then what? How will you provide for her and your family? Yes, you’re getting disability from the military, but what if that changes? What if you need more? You need a plan so you can show him you’re going to be able to take care of her for the rest of your lives.”

“I’m not an idiot, Katrina. What do you think I’m trying to do?”

She studied him. “You’re trying to decide on a career path.”

“Yeah,” he muttered. “Is it any wonder I’m suddenly under a great deal more pressure?”

“What about working with horses? You do love them.”

“I do love horses, but I’ve likely missed the opportunity to get all the education and degrees to be a veterinarian.” He looked sideways at his sister like she was a bit unbalanced.

“Oh, I don’t mean that. There are more opportunities than being a doctor, I think.” She cut her eyes over to him and quickly looked away.

“Okay, what’s on your mind. Sounds like you’ve given this some thought.” Andrew turned to face her and tilted his head waiting on a response.

“Maybe you could become an equine physical therapist.” She said it so simply, with such a matter-of-fact tone, it was like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“But I don’t have any kind of experience with that sort of thing. And it probably requires a degree. Maybe more than one. I don’t have that kind of time at this late stage.”

Katrina shrugged. “It’s not too late for you to go back to school. You already have college credit and you could do an accelerated program. I looked into it.”

“Well thanks, Katrina. But it’s not that simple.”

“But you had to go through physical therapy for your leg. You understand all that. Sure, you’d be treating horses rather than people, but how much different is it really? Four legs instead of two.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that.”

She laughed, and he found himself smiling with her. “I know *that*,” she drawled. “But you have to start the journey to something. And I just feel like this would be right for you.”

“It would be interesting. I’ll think about it. Promise.” Andrew smiled at his sister and started to get up. She put a hand on his arm and stopped him.

“So don’t forget that you told Luke you’re ready to be the man that he *thinks* Julia deserves. You owe a plan like this to yourself but to Julia, too.”

It wouldn’t be that easy. In fact, it would be really hard. But the idea had merit. He couldn’t deny that the thought of going into a career where he could help animals like he’d been helped seemed to call to him. This was the idea he’d been waiting for. It was exactly what he needed.

Andrew pulled his sister into a tight hug, much to her surprise. “Thanks!”

He got up and hurried inside even as she called after him, “You’re welcome!”

His parents were in the office looking over some paperwork when he burst into the room. Both jumped from his entrance but that didn’t slow him down. “I need to talk to you guys about something.”

“Sure, what do you need?” His mother put her folder down then shot a concerned look toward his father.

“I had an idea—actually, it was Katrina. I want to go back to school.”

Again, they exchanged looks, but this time it was closer to surprise than anything else.

“I think it would benefit our ranch to have an equine physical therapist on staff.”

“An equine physical therapist?” his father questioned.

Andrew nodded. “If I got certified, then not only would our horses get the care and treatment they need, but I could provide services to others in town. I don’t know where the closest therapist is, but I bet there isn’t one in Rocky Ridge or any of the surrounding cities.”

“You’re probably right on that.” His mother smiled. “Are you sure? That would be quite a big commitment to get the education and then certification.”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’ve been trying to come up with something that makes me feel useful again. This would do that. And I’d love to be part of saving horses.”

“Sweetheart—” His mom started.

“Don’t start, Mom. I know you think I’m fine just the way things are, but I need to find my purpose in my own way. I have GI Bill education money available, so the tuition part should be paid for.”

This time his father smiled. “I like how you’re thinking.” He tilted his head, studying Andrew to the point where Andrew squirmed beneath his gaze. “Would this change in attitude have anything to do with a certain young woman?”



Andrew rolled his eyes. “I’m not dating Mia. I know she stopped by, but—”

“Julia, dear.”

He snapped his mouth shut and turned his attention to his mother. “What about Julia?”

“You can’t possibly think your mother doesn’t pay attention to how you spend your time, son. We can’t hide anything from her.” His dad got to his feet. “We’ve been aware of your relationship with Julia for a while now. And honestly, it’s about time.”

Andrew’s eyes bounced from his father to his mother. “You *knew*?”

She shrugged.

“And you didn’t say anything?”

“Well, your brothers thought you were dating someone but they didn’t know if it was this Mia you mentioned or someone else. Katrina figured it out, though. It’s hard to keep much a secret these days when you live in a town as small as Rocky Ridge.”

“Apparently,” Andrew muttered.

“Either way, I think it’s a lovely idea. If you’d like to go back to school, we obviously think it’s a great idea. It’s nice to see you have passion in your eyes again.”

“Thank you?” Andrew bit back a smile but failed at hiding his pleasure. “I’ll hunt around for the best program and get enrolled then let you know. But right now, I have to run an errand.”

His heart pounded wildly. Bouncing from one person to the next was wreaking havoc with his vitals. There was one more person he had to see before he could call Julia and tell her he needed to see her.

But this next visit wasn’t going to be nearly as easy.



ANDREW FIDGETED in front of the Sweet Everything shop. He still couldn't believe that Luke had been so willing to meet him here. If he had to guess, Luke would have wanted something less public in case he wanted to take another swing at him.

Hopefully, that wasn't on Luke's mind anymore.

After checking his watch for what felt like the hundredth time, Andrew saw Luke's familiar figure turn the corner down the street and head toward him. He passed Daniel's coffee shop. Then crossed the street diagonally. His eyes locked with Andrew's and not for the first time, Andrew wished he was anywhere but in this exact moment.

Luke slowed, choosing to stay a comfortable distance from Andrew. His arms crossed and his face looked like it was carved out of stone. "What did you want?"

Andrew gestured toward a bench that sat out front of the sweets shop. "Wanna sit?"

"I'm good."

He nodded. "Yeah, okay." Where to begin? Apologies? Confessions? "I love Julia."

Luke lifted a single brow. "Coulda fooled me."

"I know. I should have treated her better."

"Yeah, you should have." Luke's shoulders sagged and his expression softened. "You should have told me, man."

"I know that too."

"So why didn't you?"

Andrew let out a dry chuckle. "Because I was scared that you would beat me up."

One side of Luke's mouth quirked upward. "I guess that makes sense."

Blowing out a breath through pursed lips, Andrew dug deep for the courage to say what he came here to say. “I want you to know that I intend on asking Julia to marry me. I’m not asking for your permission, but I didn’t want to blindside you either.”

Luke’s amusement faltered. “Andrew—”

He held up his hand in an attempt to give himself a bit more courage. “I know I don’t deserve her. I don’t think I ever will. But I want to try. I’m going to take some courses and learn how to become a horse therapist. And I’m not going to ask Julia to change anything about her career. I’m going to support her the way I should have in the beginning.” He took a deep breath and released it once more. “There. That’s all I wanted to tell you.”

“That’s *all*?”

Andrew flinched. “Oh, and... I’m sorry. For everything.”

Luke studied him, his gaze hard and discerning. For a while there, it felt like he wasn’t going to say a single thing, and at the same time Andrew fully expected Luke to throw a few punches for good measure. Then he shoved his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “Okay.”

“*Okay*?”

“Yeah. Julia’s been miserable without you. And honestly, if any of my friends had to fall in love with her, I’m glad it was you.”

Andrew laughed. He hadn’t meant to, but it came out anyway. “Really?”

Luke offered a small smile. “Of course. You’re my best friend. And maybe one day, we’ll be brothers. I don’t think I could ask for anyone better.” He held out his hand and Andrew took it. They pulled themselves in for a brief hug, clapping each other on the back before they stepped back again. Then Luke held up a finger. “But if you ever hurt my sister... well, let’s say this time I won’t miss.”

“Deal.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

---

JULIA SPENT MOST OF SATURDAY MORNING TRYING TO BUILD UP the nerve to call her boss. Her fingernails had been chewed down to nubs as she paced back and forth in her living room—a living room that would soon no longer belong to her.

Dang it! Too much was going off the rails. She needed something to finally go right.

Why couldn't she just call her boss? She wasn't ready to step down, but she wanted to give him a heads-up that things might be changing and even that seemed too hard. As much as she needed to do it, she couldn't—and that fact made her sick to her stomach.

After the big speech she gave her brother, she couldn't even get the courage to make a small change in her life. Calling Mr. Todd had such a finality to it. What if she was wrong? Andrew might have been spending time with that other woman because he was interested in her.

This was the problem with leaving early. She should have confronted him when she was there. That would have been the smart thing to do—or she should have just messaged him after her talk with Luke.

The more she thought about seeing Andrew the more anxious she became. She needed to just rip off the Band-Aid and call him. Everything would be better when she finally laid it all out.

“You call him yet?”

Julia shot a glance toward her brother. There was no telling how long he'd been watching her. For all she knew, he'd shown up and watched with utter amusement as she unraveled.

"Who? Andrew or my boss?"

"You know who."

"Well, it wouldn't matter which one you were talking about because the answer is the same for both."

"Julia," he sighed. "Why are you putting yourself through this? Just call him."

"But what if I'm wrong?"

"You're not."

"You don't *know* that!" she shot back. "We've practically avoided each other for a week." Had it really only been that long? It felt like it had been forever.

Luke gave her that look she hated so much. It was the one that said he knew what he was talking about and he thought she was being an idiot.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you think I should be making better choices. It's the same look you gave me when I got into that water fight at Jack's wedding."

He rolled his eyes. "To be fair, no one should be getting into any kind of water fight at a wedding."

"They didn't care. And Andrew was doing it too."

"Yeah? Well maybe that's your sign."

She huffed. "You're not making any sense."

"Think about it, Julia. Andrew has put up with your antics since we were kids. I can't believe I didn't see it sooner. He's always had a thing for you. You'd have to be crazy not to see that."

A shiver rippled through her body. Once again, Luke had made a point she'd been too distracted to see.

“Andrew loves you. He wants to be with you for the long haul. Give him the benefit of the doubt and just accept it. Then pick up your dang phone and call him because if you don’t, then I will.”

She bit the inside of her cheek if only to keep herself from grinning. “Fine. I’ll call him.”

Luke stared at her, arms crossed.

“Fine I’ll call him, *now*,” she muttered, reaching for her phone. “You don’t have to be such a tool about it.” Julia pulled open Andrew’s contact information. Right as she hit the call icon, someone knocked on the front door.

For a brief moment, she considered hanging up to answer it, but Luke stopped her. “Don’t you even think about it. I’ll get the door, you make sure you talk to Andrew.”

The phone rang through until the voicemail picked up. She nibbled on her fingernail and her pacing resumed. This was it. He’d see he missed a call so she might as well leave a message. Why hadn’t she just shot him a text message? Now she was going to be put on the spot.

Luke would call this karma for procrastinating so long.

The beep rang in her ear and she froze for a solid five seconds then she lurched into action. “Hey. It’s me—um, Julia. Of course you know it’s me,” she muttered, her face flushing hot. “I wanted to talk to you. After we last spoke... well, I thought about it a lot and I think we should figure this out—together.” She shut her eyes tight and let out a breath. “Sorry, I’m just really nervous. But I can’t hang up without telling you how much I miss you. I hate the way things have been this week... and I... I want us to be together no matter what.” She sighed again. “I love you, Andrew.”

“I love you, too.”

She gasped, spinning around to find Andrew standing in the hallway. The pattering of her heart kicked into high gear, leaving her light-headed. She wanted to run to him, but feared if she did, she’d lose all control of her limbs and end up in a pile on the floor.

“Andrew,” she whispered. “What are you doing here?”

He stepped across the living room threshold. “I had to see you.”

Man, it felt good to hear his voice again, to see him and smell him. Her whole body seemed to vibrate from the overwhelming stimulus that was simply Andrew. “I wanted to see you, too.” Her voice broke in a thousand places, making her sound more like a mouse than a woman.

Andrew took her hand in his and stared down at it. “I’m such a fool for the way I acted.”

“I know.”

He glanced up at her, a wry smile touching his lips. “Ouch. You can’t at least give me a little something to ease what I know I have to say?”

Slowly, she shook her head. “This week has been pure torture. I’m going to make you work for it.” That wasn’t to say she wouldn’t tell him her plans to step down at work. But for the moment, she wanted to just revel in the romantic gesture that had been brought to her front door.

Taking her other hand in his, he squeezed as if he feared she’d fly away from him. She could relate to that sense of desperation—she’d been there.

“Why is this so hard?” he murmured with a sad-sounding laugh. “I went over everything I wanted to tell you in my head, again and again.” His eyes locked on hers. “And yet I feel like I’m going to blow it.”

Julia inched forward, closing the distance between them. She continued to hold tightly to his hands but stood on her toes and pressed her lips to his. Soft, gentle, like a butterfly landing on a flower, she kissed him. Her skin practically buzzed, electrified by something so sweet and yet so undeniably passionate. “Whatever you’re going to say,” she whispered, “I want you to know I love you. I would do anything for you... even if that means walking away from my job.” There. She’d said it and now she held her breath, waiting for him to respond.

Andrew stared at her for far too long. Then he blinked and shook his head. “No.”

“*No?*”

“I can’t ask you to walk away from something that you’ve wanted for most of your life. I’m not going to be the one who comes between you and your dream. If your job makes you happy, then you have to stay.”

Emotion rose in her throat, stealing any strength she might have had to tell him how much it meant for him to say that to her. It also made it difficult to assure him that if her job came between them once, it might happen again. Before she could say as much he continued.

“You were right.” Andrew squeezed her hands a little tighter. “I need to find something that makes me happy—something that brings me as much joy as your job does. We’re better together when we each have purpose.”

“I didn’t—”

You might not have said it in as many words, but I understand now. Relationships work when both parties know who they are and what they want in life. Then they can share those passions with the person they want to be with for the rest of their lives.”

Then he smiled and that single change of expression lit up his whole face. He’d smiled at her before, but they’d usually been small—glimmers of the man he’d been before he joined the military.

Julia blinked, then tugged one hand free so that she could place it against his face. “You found something.”

Andrew placed his hand against hers, his eyes shining. “You’re going to think I’ve been so blind.”

She snickered, but held back a comment that simply wasn’t the right time to say.

“Ever since I got back, I’ve felt like there was this piece of me missing. I blamed it on everything else—my leg, no longer having a job, being stuck in a town I thought was too small...”



He leaned into her hand and sighed. "...thinking that a girl like you could never love a guy like me."

"That's ridiculous."

"It wasn't to me. Julia, you were my dream girl. Any time I thought about my future, all I could see was a version of you." He tore his eyes away from her and let out a nervous chuckle. "But I also couldn't see past my own stubbornness to realize that I needed more than someone to be my partner in life. I needed to find my purpose."

"And are you going to tell me? Or am I going to have to drag it out of you?"

He dropped his hand from the one that still held his cheek and slipped it around her waist to pull her against him. Immediately inundated by his body heat, Julia sucked in a surprised gasp as her body reacted carnally. Andrew pressed his forehead against hers. "I'm going back to school."

Her mind already cloudy as her thoughts seemed to have gone rogue, she couldn't fight the confusion that flooded every free synapse in her brain. "You're going to be a teacher?"

Andrew chuckled. "No, I'm going back to college to learn how to be a therapist for horses. I want to learn how to help them heal and work through injuries."

"That's a thing?"

He laughed again.

"I mean, it's really rather perfect for you."

"Isn't it? Can you believe Katrina is the one who brought it up?"

"Your sister?"

He nodded. "I guess we both have siblings who want to look out for us."

She grinned. "I guess you're right."

"There's just a few things we need to figure out from here." He'd leaned closer, his lips right beside her ear. Each word he

spoke with that husky voice of his set off a fresh round of goosebumps.

“What’s that?” she rasped.

“With you working and my new course schedule, we’re going to have to work even harder to make sure we spend as much time as we can together.”

“I think you’re right.” She already felt lightheaded and his warm breath continued to pull and tug on her frayed nerves.

“Because I don’t think I can spend a single week without seeing you at least five times.”

“I’m sure we can work something out. Heck, how about we schedule five minutes every morning before—”

He shook his head, pulling back so she could see his eyes. “Not acceptable. Five minutes isn’t even long enough for a decent kiss.”

“Oh? Are you sure? I’d wager I could do some damage in five minutes.”

“Sweetheart, you’ve been doing damage since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

A thrill shot through her and with those words, she came undone. Julia wrapped her arms around the back of his neck and pulled him in for a breath-stealing, leg-numbing, heart-thundering kiss.

This was the side of Andrew she couldn’t get enough of—it was the side of him that for all she knew, he’d never shared with anyone else.

This Andrew was hers and hers alone—and she’d do everything in her power to keep it that way.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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THE SQUARE SHAPED DIAMOND WAS ABSOLUTELY PERFECT. THE jeweler in Billings had certified it himself. Set simply, it was surrounded by a couple smaller stones on either side. Andrew stared at the ring, hating the way it trembled in his shaking hand.

Logically, he knew that Julia would say yes. They'd talked about wanting kids and getting married when they were ready.

Had it only been a few months since he'd finally found his place?

Yes.

But with everything going so smoothly, it only felt right to take the next steps. There was something inside him that screamed at him to lock Julia down before she changed her mind and found someone better suited for her.

That was his insecurities talking again. He really needed to nip those thoughts in the bud. Andrew flipped the ring box closed and curled his whole hand around it tightly. He was ready. That's what he had to keep telling himself.

His parents had pulled him aside at the end of his first semester back in college and told him what he assumed they'd told each of his older brothers. There were five acres set aside for each of them. The lots were to be used however they saw fit, but his parents had hoped that their children would choose to stay put and build their future together on family land.

It wasn't difficult to make the decision. That land would be where he raised his children—with Julia by his side. He just

had to ask her to marry him and put everything in motion. He shoved his shaking hand into his pocket and moved to the window of his bedroom. Surrounded by a queen bed, dresser, and cedar chest, this place hadn't quite felt the same since returning from his tour of duty. He was ready to build something of his own.

Outside, the sky was changing colors. Once a vibrant clear blue, it was quickly turning bright shades of yellow, orange, and some lavender. The sunset tonight promised to be an epic one, and the perfect backdrop to his proposal.

He only wished Julia hadn't called a few minutes ago to tell him she was going to be a little late.

Relax. That's all he had to do. She'd get here before the sunset. She had to.

But if she didn't get here in the next ten minutes, they'd have to take his truck to the site instead of the horses he already had saddled and waiting.

He'd even hired Lindsey Duncan, the local event planner, to decorate the location where he would build their future home. She was a real character, bubbly and energetic, and she took pictures of everything. He thought she might be the perfect choice when they were ready to plan their wedding.

Andrew checked his watch again, frustration brewing. This was something they'd discussed. Sometimes one of them or both wouldn't be able to make their plans work. If Julia missed the sunset, then he'd just have to do their date beneath the stars. It would still be perfect.

Flexibility.

He took in a deep breath and released it, closing his eyes to get centered. When he opened them, he saw Julia's familiar car bumping along the gravel road toward the house. His heart leaped in his chest, ricocheting against everything like a glorified bouncy ball.

They'd be able to take the horses after all.

Andrew all but launched himself from the house toward the car and yanked on the car door before she even shut off the

engine. She grinned at him through the glass, refusing to unlock the door.

Andrew pointed like an ape at the tab-looking lock. “Open the door, Julia.”

She blinked and placed a hand to her ear.

“I mean it. We’re going to be late.”

Once again, she played her games and he threw his arms into the air. “Fine. I’ll go by myself.” He got two steps before she opened the door.

“Fine. You’re such a spoil sport. Why don’t you let me have any fun?”

Andrew faced her, arms folded. “Because sometimes you have to be patient for the real fun to begin.”

Her brows lifted and that shine of excitement flooded her expression. “*Real* fun, huh?”

He closed the distance between them and took her hand in his. “The most fun you will have ever had.”

“Does this include water?”

“It might.”

She tugged backward, toward her car. “Then maybe I should change my clothes.”

Andrew shook his head, his grasp on her remaining firm. “You forfeited that plan when you refused to unlock the door. Come on. The horses are ready.”

“We’re going riding? *Oooh*. You’re pulling out *all* the stops,” she teased.

“You have *no* idea.” He tugged on her hand once more and pulled her into him. Then she smiled and everything just felt... right. With Julia he was whole.

It didn’t matter if he had a limp or if he wasn’t as athletic as he once was. That wasn’t what made him who he was. He paused long enough to lay one more kiss on her lips before they hurried toward the waiting horses.

Once they were on their horses and riding down the trail, Julia settled into her typical date night chatter.

“Today was crazy. I was working on this project and it was almost done. Like, all I had to do was literally dot the T’s and cross the I’s—”

“That does sound crazy,” he chuckled.

“It’s not funny. There was a lot that went into this project.” Her voice was so serious that he couldn’t help the funny look he threw her way. She frowned. “What?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“What?” she repeated.

“Dot the T’s...?”

Her eyes widened and she groaned. “See? That’s the kind of day I was having. I’m so mixed up and jumbled. Anyway, it was all ready to go and Mr. Todd tells me to scrap it.” She gave him a look that could only be interpreted as her needing him to come to bat for her.

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Right? I mean, what was the point of the last few weeks if they’re just going to throw all that work out the window?” She huffed. “At least they still have to pay me. I’m telling you, even though I love my job, sometimes it feels like I’m just a hamster running in a wheel.”

“Maybe you should do something else.”

“We’ve been through this, Andrew. I’m not quitting.”

“No, I mean, what if you started your own company? Not today... or tomorrow. But what if you took what you know and love and build something you can be proud of.”

Her brows drew together and she went quiet. He couldn’t tell if he’d offended her with his statement and at this point he didn’t want to risk her getting upset before he asked her to be his for the rest of their lives.

Finally, she glanced at him. “Do you really think I could do it?”

Andrew stiffened. “Of course I do. I wouldn’t have suggested it if I didn’t. You’re... Julia, you’re the smartest person I know. If anyone could start a company and make it thrive, it’s you.”

A hint of a smile crossed her features. “I love you.”

“I know,” he said simply, causing an eyeroll from Julia.

“So this date tonight. I take it we’re going somewhere to see the sunset. You think we’ll get back okay in the dark? Will it be safe?”

“Pfft. You’re with me. You’re always safe.”

“Someone is getting a big head,” she laughed. “Seems to me they might need to be put in their place a little...” Her voice trailed off as they reached their destination.

Set out before them was an oversized blanket surrounded by candles. Beyond that row of candles there were several others that likely appeared random, but they weren’t to Andrew.

Julia’s eyes swept toward Andrew, wide and shining. “Andrew...” she whispered. “What—”

He slipped from the saddle and took the few steps toward her. He held out his hand for her to take and helped her down. Julia’s feet landed in the grass and her arms came up around his neck. The question was still clear in her eyes. He smiled down at her. “I want to ask you something.”

She gasped.

Before he said another word, he laced his fingers with hers and tugged her toward the setup. “My parents have given each of their children five acres of land. We get to decide what we want to do with them, but obviously they’d hoped we’d decide to build our home here and grow the Reese family even bigger.” He gestured toward the blanket, candles, and general area he’d set up.

“Andrew—”

“I know you loved your family home and you’re going to miss it. But I also know you wouldn’t want to take it away from Luke and Arielle. So, now I’m offering you mine.”

She sucked in sharply and he squeezed her hand.

“Here is where the living room could be. And over that way, there will be a hallway toward the master suite.” He lifted his brows a few times, loving the sound of her soft laugh. “Here will be the stairs to the kids’ rooms. And we’re going to have a lot of them.”

“Kids or rooms?”

“Both.”

Julia leaned into him and he rested his cheek against the top of her head. “This is my favorite part. Right here,” he pointed to the blanket, “will be the library.”

“Library?”

Andrew shrugged. “Den. Whatever. Either way, the walls will be lined with all the shelves you could want. And we’d fill them with as many handsome cowboy books as they could hold.”

She laughed again, facing him. “I don’t need a handsome cowboy book when I’ve got the real thing.” Julia stood on her toes and kissed him. “Yes, I’ll—”

He jumped back. “There’s one more thing I have to tell you before you say anything.”

“Andrew,” she sighed, but he didn’t let her continue.

Instead, he grabbed her hand again, and wove through the candles that littered the ground. Where they stood, there were no candles. But they got a clear shot of the sunset.

“This is beautiful,” she whispered. “I could see us out here every night watching the sun set.”

“But there’s more.”

“Andrew, you’ve already promised me so much. I don’t think I could handle anything else.”

“A pool.”

She blinked a few times. “What?”



“Come on, Julia. You can’t tell me that with all the water fights we’ve had over the years that you’ll deny me the chance to throw you into a pool.” Even in the dim lighting, he could tell she struggled to contain her smile. “I fully intend on getting you back for every ruined suit, every soaked pair of shoes, and every—”

Julia threw her arms around him, her mouth capturing his. He held onto her like his very life depended on it—and it very likely might.

He knew better than to believe that any part of his life was a coincidence. There were forces that pulled him toward Julia even when he thought he didn’t have a shot with her. She’d always seen him for his potential and not for his weaknesses. He’d spend the rest of his life proving that she made the right choice even if it killed him.

“Yes,” she whispered against his neck. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“But I didn’t ask—”

She shoved him playfully. “Well now you don’t have a choice. I’m going to be your wife, Mr. Andrew Reese and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

“I think I can live with that.”

“You better. Because this whole forever water fight thing? It’s gonna be *fun*.”

## EPILOGUE

JULIA SMILED AT JENNIFER AS SHE TOOK THE TRAY OF lemonades from the kitchen table. “These look delicious.” Little lemon slices floated among the ice cubes and condensation already dripped down the sides of the glasses.

“Thanks for taking it out, hun.”

“Of course.” Julia turned as she reached the exit and backed into the door to push it open. Laughter filled the air as she headed down the porch steps to the tables that had been set up beneath the canopies.

Andrew’s whole family, including his sister, was invited for the Memorial Day barbeque they had every year. This time, Luke and Arielle were included which made for a big group. So far, they were still waiting on Bo and Gabby.

Julia put the tray of drinks on the table and flashed a smile at her fiancé. Andrew pulled out a chair beside him and she settled close. The chatter was loud and chaotic and exactly the kind she loved. Being part of this big family was something she’d looked forward to and already it felt more like home than she could have hoped for.

“Where’s Daniel?” Andrew asked.

Julia glanced around the table. Sure enough, Andrew’s younger brother was missing too.

Jack rolled his eyes. “The last text message I got from him said he had an emergency at the coffee shop. I’m sure he’ll be here soon though, he won’t want to miss out on the burgers.”

“What kind of emergency?” Julia glanced at Andrew. “I can’t imagine anything would be so bad that he’d have to drop everything to go there.”

“Whatever it is, sounds like it’s the end of the world.” Jack showed his phone screen and chuckled. “He’s not going to be on time and he’s demanding I don’t take the last burger like I did last time. Well too bad. You snooze, you lose.”

Emily nudged him. “Be nice. He’s just trying to keep his dream afloat.”

“Hey guys! Sorry we’re late! We had to pick up my cousin from the airport and it was a madhouse. Then we had to stop in town to pick up some keys.”

Several heads turned toward the newcomer, finding Gabby with Bo and another young lady in tow. The woman was tall—twiglike almost. Her blonde hair was cut in a fashionable bob and not a single hair was out of place. She sported a pair of glasses, but they didn’t detract at all from the bright blue eyes behind them.

Immediately, Julia shrank down beside Andrew. This was the kind of woman who intimidated her all through high school.

Andrew’s arm draped around her shoulders and gave her arm a squeeze. When she looked up at him, she found him smiling down at her. Then he kissed her temple and her nerves dissipated.

“This is Megan. She’s on my mom’s side of the family and she’s from New York but she’s moving here permanently.”

Megan smiled, but it wasn’t big enough to show her teeth. She seemed just as uptight as the blazer and suit pants suggested. She lifted her chin and offered a small wave.

Gabby nudged Megan with a laugh. “Since when are you so shy?”

“Not shy,” she assured Gabby. “Simply wishing you would have told me this wasn’t going to be formal at all.”

Her cousin laughed. “I’ve never seen you wear anything but suits and dresses. I don’t think you even own a pair of jeans.”

“Well, I would have bought some if I’d known.”

Jennifer materialized carrying a plate of burgers. “Don’t you worry a second. You come as you are and we’ll love you no matter what.” She winked at Julia.

Yep, this was the kind of family that Julia was proud to be a part of. Even if this Megan looked like she’d walked right off a New York runway, if Gabby loved her, then she was sure they’d get along.

Gabby pulled out a chair beside Bo who’d already taken a seat and a burger. She gestured toward the seat on her other side. “Megan is the one who bought that vacant storefront across from Mountain Top Java.”

“Oh? You’re going to be neighbors with Daniel,” Jennifer smiled warmly at her. “What are you going to put in there?”

Gabby jumped in before Megan could respond, her excitement like a firework. “She’s going to open a franchise of that bookstore in Billings!”

Megan chuckled. “She’s right. It’s going to have books and coffee, and tea.”

Everyone at the table besides Gabby, Bo, and Megan seemed to pause what they were doing to look up at Megan. Julia’s gaze swept through the group, noting the way Bo seemed to avoid looking directly at any of his family members.

“What?” Gabby insisted. She laughed again. “This is amazing. We need a bookstore in town.” She glanced toward her husband. “You said they’d be excited.”

“Bo,” Jennifer murmured, “have you told Daniel?”

He shifted in his seat. “Why would I tell Daniel?”

Andrew laughed. “Oh, this is going to be good.”

“What’s going on?” Julia whispered.

Before he could answer, the back door to the house swung outward and then banged against the house, causing everyone to jump. Daniel hurried down the steps and flung a crumpled-up piece of paper onto the table. “Have you guys seen this?”

Everyone stared at the paper then lifted their eyes toward Daniel. His face was bright red and Julia could imagine steam rising off of his shoulders.

He pointed angrily at the paper. “Well? Open it.”

When no one moved, he snatched the paper. “That shop across the street. The movers are currently filling it up with all the stuff they’re going to sell.”

Still, no one moved. Not even Julia could force herself to look at Megan to see how she was handling the situation.

Daniel huffed, straightening the paper against his chest so everyone could get a clear view. “Coffee and tea! That’s what they’re selling. Right across the street. Can you believe it? The nerve of those people! Who in their right mind leases a space across from the competition? They must be psychotic!”

“Actually, if you look at that flyer, it says it’s going to be a bookstore.” Megan’s firm voice broke the stunned silence, drawing everyone’s attention including Daniel.

His anger dissolved into a mask of nothingness. “I’m so sorry.” He flushed and glanced around the table. “I don’t think we’ve met. You must be one of Gabrielle’s friends. I’m Daniel, who are you?”

Gabby opened her mouth, but Megan beat her to it this time. She rose to her feet and crossed her arms. “I’m the psychotic business owner who decided to open a bookstore across the street from the competition. It’s a pleasure, I’m sure.”



FIND out what happens when Daniel and Megan clash publicly and privately as they both fight to become the favorite coffee shop in Rocky Ridge. But when tragedy strikes, one of them will sacrifice it all for the other.

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