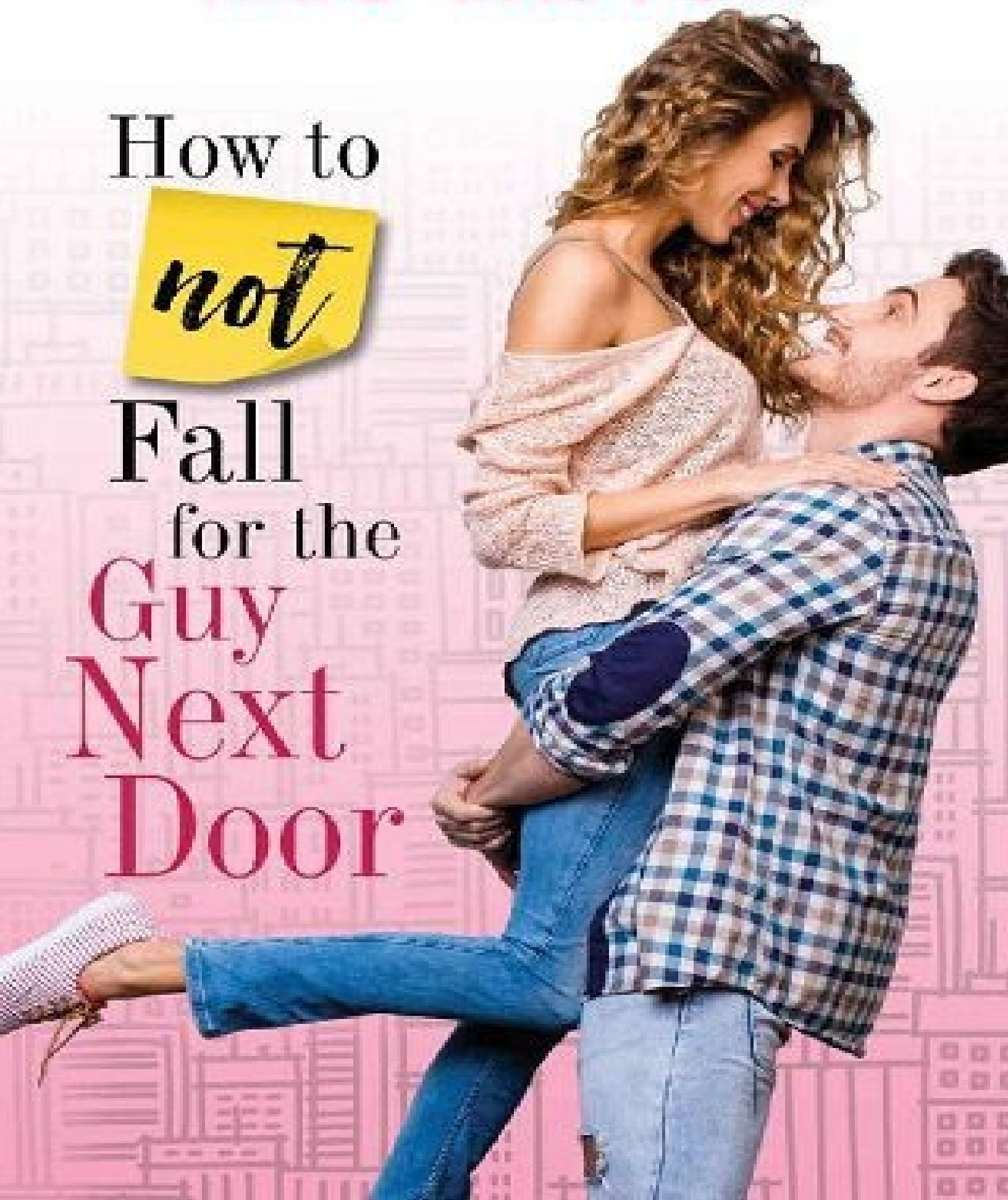


MEG EASTON

How to

*not*

Fall  
for the  
Guy  
Next  
Door



# HOW TO NOT FALL FOR THE GUY NEXT DOOR

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A SWEET AND HUMOROUS ROMANCE

MEG EASTON

How to *not*  
Fall for the  
Guy Next  
Door

MEG EASTON

*Book One in the How to Not Fall series*

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*For my sister Kristine*

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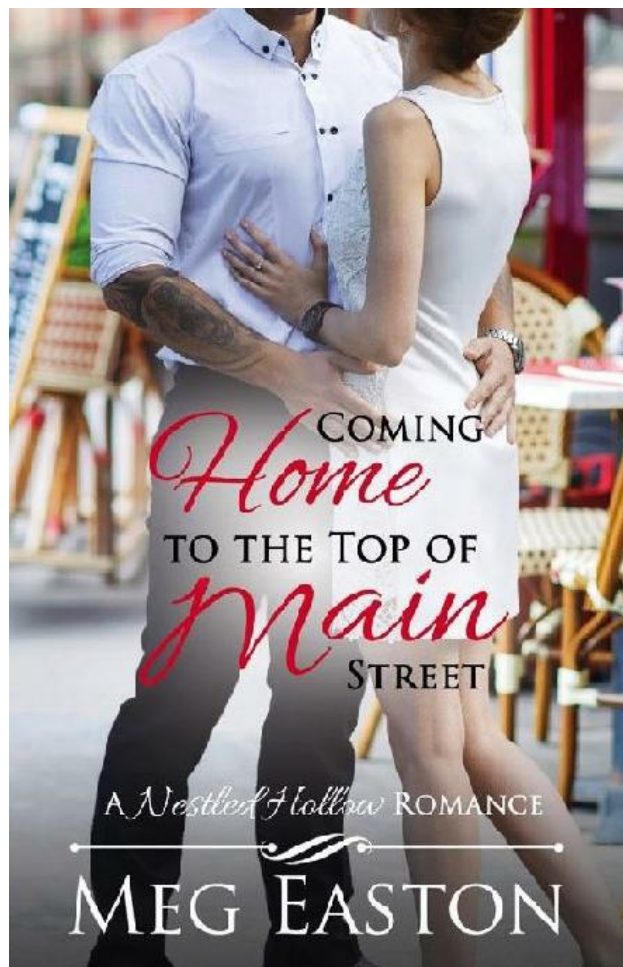
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## ADDISON

ADDISON TURNED into the parking lot of Gateway Groceries in Quicksand, Oregon and pulled into a parking spot. Then she called her sister. As soon as she heard her sister's concerned voice on the other end, Addison said, "I didn't die."

Chloe squealed. "So you're home, then?"

*Home.* It felt weird to call Quicksand "home." She had spent her summers from ages ten to thirteen here, but that hadn't made it "home" any more than playing Barbie Dreamhouse meant she was married to Ken. Amarillo was home. Quicksand had always been temporary. An exciting game of dress-up. She wondered how long it would take before calling this place home wouldn't seem weird.

"I'm in Quicksand, but not at the inn. The moving truck is forty-five minutes behind me, so I'm stopping at the grocery store." Her stomach had been growling almost as loudly as the radio was playing, so getting food was essential.

"Oh, I'm so glad you made it safely."

"I told you I could make it seventeen hundred miles across seven states on my own. See? You should leave the worrying to the older sister. I'm better at it anyway."

She grabbed her purse and stepped out of her car as her sister laughed. The air was fresh here, like she could smell the trees and the soil. Both of which were wet from a recent rainstorm. Even the air itself felt wet. She wasn't sure which was more plentiful—the trees with the moss-covered trunks or the blackberry bushes.

"Speaking of worrying, I still feel awful that I left a week before you move out of the freaking country. Do you need me to fly back to make sure you get off okay?" She shook out her legs before walking toward the

building. Spending twenty-seven hours in the car, six of them this morning, was really doing a number on her muscles.

“Nope. Dustin and I have everything under control. You stay there.” Each word was a punch. A hammer on a nail to hold her tether firmly in Quicksand. “I didn’t make your website and ads for you to miss your first clients.”

“You’re so bossy.”

She could hear Chloe’s grin through the phone. “I learned from the best. Now, go grab that fresh start by the horns and show it who’s boss!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“And then call me after the movers leave.”

“I will.”

Addison pushed the phone into her purse, took a deep breath, and walked through the automatic front doors of Gateway Grocery. Leaving the city she’d lived in her entire life, packing up everything she owned, and moving halfway across the country to a city where she knew exactly zero people was fine. She was fine. Everything would be fine.

Piece of cake.

As she wandered up and down the aisles, she realized she probably should’ve spent less time on the drive jamming out to the radio, playing the license plate game with herself, and trying to distract herself from thoughts of Matthew and her old job and her hometown and everything she was leaving behind, and more time coming up with a grocery list. She had no idea what kind of food was at the inn, if there was anything at all. For the past four years, her Aunt Helen hadn’t used the property as an inn—she lived there with her nurse like it was just a big house. And for the past three months since she passed away, no one had lived there at all.

So there could be things like spices, flour, sugar, coffee, and maybe even some food in the freezer. Or there could be nothing—she had no idea if anyone packed anything up at all. It was a mystery. And mysteries were fun, right? At least, that was what she was always trying to convince Matthew of. It would probably drive him nuts, all the not knowing. But things between them were over, so she was going to relish every mystery he would’ve hated.

It was probably best to forget shopping for staples and just get some fresh fruits and vegetables and maybe some soup she could easily warm up. With only a few things in her cart from her meandering trip through the store, she turned toward the produce aisle.

The deli faced the produce section, and as the older man behind the counter finished up with a customer, he turned his attention to her, studying her. Against his darker skin, his white eyebrows stood out, looking rather judgy as they came together over his curious eyes. At a population of ten thousand, Quicksand wasn't exactly small-town-ish enough for everyone to know everyone. So she must have that *I'm new here* look about her, and he was trying to figure out if she was visiting or staying.

He had pretty keen eyes, though. Maybe he was seeing deeply enough to notice that under the surface, she had a panicked *my life was recently planned out, perfect, and organized and is now a big mess of uncertainty and chaos* look about her.

She just gave him a smile and shifted her eyes to the case, hoping he would do the same. Her stomach rumbled again. It had been too many hours since she'd grabbed that muffin and orange juice from her hotel back in Spokane. Maybe she should forget the microwaveable soup and go up to the man and get some fried chicken or a burrito or some potato wedges. It wasn't really what her body was begging for, but she could at least eat it in the car on her way to the inn.

*After* she got produce. She turned away from the warm, fried foods and turned to the apples.

Before long, she had a cart full of enough fruits and vegetables of different colors that her Aunt Helen would've been proud. They said you shouldn't go grocery shopping when you were hungry. But maybe going when you were hungry after having just spent two and a half days in a car, eating nothing but junk food, was the absolute best time if you wanted a cart full of healthy stuff.

The fruit aisle had a few other shoppers in it, so she left her cart at the end of the aisle and started making her way down it. Blueberries! That's what her body needed. She picked up a few of the plastic cases, inspecting them closely to find the ones that were the freshest. Two containers looked perfect enough that her mouth was already watering. Anxious to finish her shopping trip soon so she could ravenously eat at least one of the containers, she spun around toward her cart, and both containers of blueberries smacked right into a man's firm chest.

Addison yelped and several nearby customers leapt back as the flimsy plastic containers burst open and blueberries flew out of them like soda from a shaken can, hitting the laminate floor with the softest pings, followed by the

only slightly louder sound of the two containers following them to the floor.

“Oh no. I am so sorry.” She quickly brushed at the bluish-purple spots that a few of the more aggressive blueberries left on the man’s light blue t-shirt, as if a few swipes of her fingers would make the stains disappear.

“It’s okay.” The man gently moved her frantic hands away from his shirt. Probably because he was a little uncomfortable with her hands all over his chest. “It’s not a big deal. Really. I never even liked this shirt.”

The man’s voice was deep and rumbly, like summer thunder on the beach. Face burning, she finally looked up to meet his eyes and blushed at seeing that his face was even nicer than his considerably nice chest. And his incredibly beautiful blue eyes—which were definitely looking like his shirt should get a medal for what they did for them—weren’t angry or irritated or frustrated. They seemed amused.

Amused was good. It wasn’t *good* good, but on a scale of one to thoroughly embarrassed at the grocery store, she’d take being the source of someone’s amusement over being the source of someone’s anger.

“Cleanup in produce,” sounded over the intercom and Addison looked over at the very unimpressed man in the deli, who now had one white eyebrow raised in an *I knew you’d be trouble* arc.

She forced herself to breathe. Then she cleared her throat and crouched down to pick up one of the fallen plastic containers, and then started putting blueberries back into it. The man crouched down, too, which put them in very close proximity, since they couldn’t exactly take a single step without squashing blueberries. It was several fast heartbeats before she stole another glance at him. She had been so distracted by the eyes before that she hadn’t noticed that beautifully strong jawline, or the way that, when relaxed and showing their natural state, the muscles of his face showed that they spent good portion of their time being happy.

And something about him looked familiar. She was about to ask him if they had met before, but then a gangly teenage boy came over to them with a broom and a dustpan and said that he’d finish cleaning up the mess. As she carefully tiptoed away from ground zero and to safety, she decided against asking him. She didn’t want to do anything else that might make her more memorable to anyone right now. And besides, she knew absolutely no one in this town, so she didn’t know him.

The man stepped to the edge of the fallen blueberries and reached across the strawberries and blackberries to grab her two more containers of

blueberries. As he handed them to her, he said, “It looks like we both survived the great blueberry explosion. Congratulations.”

“You, too.” She put them into her cart. “But I am sorry that we didn’t all make it. If you would like me to say any words at the funeral of your shirt, let me know.”

He chuckled. “Are you just visiting?”

“Just moving in.” In a panic, she glanced at her watch. She had completely forgotten that she didn’t have all the time in the world. “I’ve got to run. I’m supposed to meet the moving truck at the inn in ten minutes.”

This time, when he gave his amused expression, she noticed the smile that went with it. A smile that could melt the snow on Mount Hood. “I’ll see you around, then.”

“And next time,” she called out as she hurried toward the checkouts, “I promise not to be armed with blueberries.”

It wasn’t until she was back in her car and trying to somehow magically get to the inn more quickly—without speeding—that the embarrassment hit her again. She hadn’t even been in her new city for more than thirty minutes before making a fool of herself. It wasn’t exactly the stellar start she’d been hoping for.

But embarrassing or not, she smiled when she thought back on that last minute or two. Those last few comments she made could probably be considered flirting. She had actually flirted with a very cute man, and she was pretty proud of herself. She and Matthew had been together for more than two years, and they had been long past their days of flirting with each other. And since their breakup, she had been mourning the loss of the future she thought she’d have with him, and hadn’t exactly felt like flirting. She wasn’t even sure she had remembered how to flirt.

Today felt like progress. She kind of wished Matthew had witnessed it.

Not that she was likely to see the man she inadvertently attacked with blueberries again. She thought back to her neighborhood grocery store in Amarillo. She went there for years, and rarely bumped into people she knew. It was good that she probably wouldn’t see him again. It was a nice bit of practice, just to know that one day she’d eventually want a relationship again even if she didn’t want one now, but she was glad he’d stay a stranger. She’d prefer a first interaction to not involve ruining a man’s shirt and then accidentally putting her hands on his chest.

Her face flushed again at the memory, so she forced herself to only pay

attention to the road. She hadn't stayed the summer at the inn with her aunt since she was thirteen, but she'd been back for short visits enough times that she made the drive on autopilot while scarfing down a protein bar she'd grabbed at the checkout stand. Amarillo didn't have the same tree-lined streets that Quicksand had, and there was something nice about driving in an area where the trees weren't just along the streets, but seemed to crowd in everywhere, only willing to pull back a bit for the homes and businesses around.

Coming to this place as a kid seemed like a lifetime ago. So much so that during the two years they dated, she hadn't told Matthew about it once. It felt weird to be in a place he knew nothing about. She wondered how he was doing back in his scheduled, predictable life, when hers was in such new territory.

Amazingly, she arrived at the inn before the moving truck. She pulled into one of the eight spots in the small parking lot on the side, leaving the curving driveway in front of the inn open for the moving truck. After unlocking the door, she walked back out to the edge of the road and stood next to the Hidden Inn sign so she could flag down the truck. The sign that had caused her stomach to leap in excitement as a girl now made her heart palpitate and her muscles twitch. She hadn't been at the reading of Aunt Helen's will, and she'd been unable to even form words when she first found out her aunt wanted her to have Hidden Inn. She added the inability to stand on her own two feet to the speechlessness once she found out her aunt said it was because "Addison will know what to do with it."

Some of her favorite memories of childhood were of staying at the Inn, with her aunt treating her like she was an adult living in her own place, dreaming of the time when she'd be a strong, independent businesswoman in a power suit, living on her own.

She had *never* dreamed of one day running the inn. Not even for a teeny tiny second. Why her aunt thought she would know what to do with it was beyond her. Her parents were always absent when she was a kid, and they had moved to Florida when she and Chloe became adults. With their absence most of her life, Addison craved family. And running an inn where she always spent time with strangers didn't sound appealing in the least. It wasn't until Chloe had suggested that she run it as an apartment instead of as an inn that moving here had felt right.

But *was* it right? Could the girl who hadn't ever lived more than five

miles from the home where she grew up—and never more than two miles from her sister—make it in a new city by herself?

As she stood at the edge of the road, looking at the inn that she was now responsible for, she wasn't so sure. Yes, the building was paid for, but she'd done the math, and for utilities, property taxes, taking care of the grounds, repairs, and a million other little costs that came to her one night at three a.m., she would need roommates in at least three of the five other rooms in the inn. Where was she going to find three roommates in a city where she knew zero people?

The speed of her heart rate multiplied as she saw the moving truck in the distance, lumbering its way toward her.

Then she remembered reading in a book once that the only difference between nervousness and excitement was breathing. If you held your breath, your body assumed you were nervous. If you breathed through it, it assumed excitement.

So she breathed. And as the truck neared and she waved and it turned into the curved drive of the inn, the excitement built.

And then the truck ran over one of the shrubs lining the driveway, squashing it completely flat. The driver rolled down the window and called toward her, "Sorry 'bout that!"

Addison breathed. Only excitement here. Nothing else to see.

She directed the movers to the three rooms her furniture and boxes needed to go in—the kitchen that was filled with one big dining table and half a dozen breakfast tables, the gathering room that would be used as her family room, and her bedroom. The one Aunt Helen had saved for her every summer for four summers in a row, the one that still made her giddy as an adult every time she thought of it. Then she headed back outside to help bring in the boxes. She had made it exactly one step onto the wraparound porch before she froze, mid-step.

The man stood near the back of the moving truck wearing a dark gray shirt now, which was probably a smart choice if he was going to take a chance of being around her and a moving truck. And, surprisingly, his eyes looked even bluer than they had when he was wearing the blue shirt. Maybe it was just the Oregon sun working in his favor.

But what was he doing here? And how did he know that she was going to be here? The memory of smacking into him with the blueberries and sending them flying was admittedly a stronger memory than every little thing she

might have said in her flustered state, but she was pretty sure she hadn't given him an address or anything.

Her shock at seeing him must've lasted a fraction of a second too long, because that amused smile played on his face again. He walked up to the stairs and held out his hand, and she made herself remember how to use her legs again. She walked across the porch and down two steps, holding out her hand. He shook it and said, "Hi again. Neighbor."

*Neighbor?* Her eyes flashed to the left—at the fancy wrought iron gate in the middle of a hedgerow that led to a neighbor's house. And suddenly she realized why the guy had looked familiar.

No, no, no. She couldn't be next door neighbors with a guy she had just embarrassed herself in front of at the grocery store. To a guy she had instantly been so attracted to when she was still getting over her ex. Not to Ian Kendrick, a guy who she'd had her very first crush on as an eleven-year-old.

"You're looking good, Addi."

"Addison."

"What's it been? A dozen years?" He walked up the ramp of the moving truck, pausing to look back at what was surely a bewildered expression on her face.

"Thirteen. Did you recognize me at the grocery store?"

"Not until you said you had to meet the moving truck at the inn. Then I started piecing it together."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Ian stepped into the truck and emerged a moment later carrying one of her boxes, and shrugged. "I thought this would be more fun."

She glanced at the box he was holding. In the upper left hand corner, nicely printed on a label, were the words "Label collection." Maybe he hadn't looked at her label. She really didn't need the world to know that she collected labels. Or that half of the stuff filling the moving truck was empty organization containers of every size. She should just offer to take it from him before he noticed. She rushed down the stairs and toward the truck as he walked down the ramp with the box. Her foot caught on the rock border at the edge of the driveway and she lunged forward just as Ian stepped off the side of the ramp, knocking them into each other.

Which, honestly, wouldn't have been awful if he hadn't been holding the box. The pressure of both of them crushing into the cardboard box changed



its shape just enough to pry the bottom flaps away from the packing tape, and the bottom opened, dumping all of her labels of every size and shape, along with half a dozen different types of label makers, all over the driveway, just as the movers stepped out of the house.

The moment seemed to freeze as both Addison and Ian looked down at the contents of the box. Then he looked up and met her eyes. “Do you always crush random containers between you and nearby men, or is it just me?”

Maybe she should just get into her trusty Camry and head back to Amarillo right now.

## IAN

IAN HAD SPENT the last several hours in the shop in his backyard, doing all the saw cuts, sanding, and pre-building he could do on a massive built-in fireplace mantle, entertainment center, and bookshelves that would span an entire wall in the home he was contracted to do the woodwork in.

As he ran the piece across the belt sander, he looked out the window and smiled when he saw Addi and one of her roommates talking in her backyard. She crouched down and ran her fingers across the top of the cut grass, seeming confused as to how it was freshly mowed when she hadn't done it. Sometime soon he was going to have to tell her that he was still taking care of the inn's grounds, just like he had every summer growing up, and like he'd done the last year and a half since he'd bought his grandparents' home.

Ian hadn't actually recognized Addi when they'd had their rather explosive first meeting at the grocery store. It hadn't even clicked when she first mentioned needing to meet the moving truck at the inn.

It wasn't until she was at the registers that he placed where he'd last seen the adventurous gleam in her golden green eyes or the familiar blush on her cheeks. She had been pressing a flat rock into his palm that she had painted a scene on of the two of them jumping into Quicksand River, and saying that she would see him next summer. And then, while he'd been looking at the rock, she had darted forward and given him a kiss on the cheek. It had surprised him so much that he'd just stood there like an idiot who'd lost all ability to think or move.

And then she ran off to get into her Aunt Helen's car to head to the airport, and they pulled away. He had been fourteen, so she must've been thirteen. He had come back to spend the month of July with his grandparents the next summer, but she hadn't come all summer. Or any summer after that.

He wanted to ask her about that and to catch up on where life had taken

them in the past fifteen years. When his now ex, Zoe, had stomped on his heart four weeks ago by calling off their wedding, she had kind of stomped on his confidence, too, leaving him questioning everything. But because it was the right thing to do, Ian still went over to the inn every time he'd seen a moving truck pull up over the past couple of weeks and had helped each of her three roommates move in. Addi had pretty expertly avoided him every time, though.

He should probably go tell her that he had worked out caring for the yard with her aunt, because he knew it was likely she hadn't put it in writing anywhere. Yet, he hesitated. It was a busy season at work, so he had limited amounts of time when he actually could go take care of the inn's grounds when it was still light enough outside to see what he was doing. But since Addi was avoiding him, part of him wanted to see how long he could keep mowing at times when she was gone, just to make her keep guessing.

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BY THE TIME Ian got all the boards cut for the built-in, it was well past the time he usually stopped for lunch, and his stomach was growling louder than a table saw hitting a nail in a board. Since he had to spend the afternoon cutting and installing trim at one of his sites, he closed up the shop and headed toward the house. He smiled as the sounds of laughter from the ladies in his grandma's origami club reached him before he even got to the door. He was so glad she hadn't had to move away from her friends.

As soon as he stepped through the kitchen door, he heard a chorus of "Ian!" He smiled as all the ladies seated around the table said how good it was to see him, and that they were so glad he was here during their club.

"You all sure know how to make a guy feel like a rock star when he walks into a room."

"Honey," the white-haired Frances said, "if you ditched the flannel and donned a t-shirt and a leather jacket, you'd have adoring groupies following around wherever you went."

Brenda nodded. "Especially with that perfectly mussed hair."

The hair was more a product of the air displacement from the saws and sanders than actual styling, and he had to keep himself from reaching up and brushing some of the sawdust out of it. Instead, he washed his hands, then pulled open the fridge and started pulling out lunch meat, cheese, mayo, mustard, and lettuce.

"I like the flannel," his grandma's longtime friend, Carol, said. "It's what

attracted me to my dear Henry. I tell you, it was quite the trick to follow that boy around everywhere and make it seem like he was the one following me around for long enough to get him to propose. I would've followed him anywhere."

Ian chuckled as he pulled a hoagie bun out of the bag and sliced it open. The fact that Henry and Ian's grandpa allowed him into their conversations in the work shed when he was a kid spending his summers here was a big part of why he'd gone into carpentry. He liked to imagine the two of them hanging around a band saw in heaven, still telling stories about the good ole days.

"I agree about the flannel shirt," Meera said. "And with that face of yours, you could be in one of those sexy calendars filled with men in flannel." She turned back to the ladies around the table. "Don't you think he could be in a calendar, posing with that shirt on?"

He smiled at their antics while he spread the mayo on his sandwich, very pointedly trying not to glance the direction of the table but feeling every pair of eyes on him.

"Definitely," Frances said. "Especially if he posed with the sawdust still on him."

When the cheers went up around the table, Ian was sure his cheeks reddened.

"I call that 'man glitter,'" Meera said, and all the ladies laughed.

He shot his grandma a look, but she just shrugged, like she couldn't do anything about the conversation. She probably could have. But she told him every night what a "beautiful young man" he was, inside and out, and she seemed to get that he thought she was only saying it because she was seeing him through the lens of a loving grandma. Right now, she wore a look of triumph—one that told him she was loving not only having her opinion validated, but having it serve as proof to him that she was right.

Of course, they were all wearing grandma lenses, too. He knew all of these ladies from spending every summer here growing up, and all but one of them from their bi-weekly club meetings since he moved to Quicksand a year and a half ago. Brenda was the only one of his grandma's friends he hadn't known as an adult—she had moved in with her granddaughter in Phoenix around the time that Ian moved to Quicksand, to watch her great-grandkids while her daughter went through cancer treatment. He knew this was her first club meeting back.

“You’ve always been such an adorable boy,” Brenda said. “I’m surprised that no one has snatched you up yet.”

His grandma might not shut down a conversation about his looks, but she was always quick to shut down conversations about his love life—or lack of it—and for that he was eternally grateful. He just needed to keep stacking meats and cheeses on his sandwich while she did, then give a quick goodbye and head back out of the house, sandwich in hand.

“Do you know who would be perfect for him?” Brenda asked. “Emily Erickson. Don’t you think? I was excited to see that she still lives here, and she’s such an adorable girl. It’s hard to believe that she’s still available, too. And she could use a man as helpful and thoughtful as you. But you better act quickly, because I bet it won’t take long for someone to come along and sweep her off her feet.”

He could tell by the way Brenda’s voice changed for that last sentence that she was directing it at him instead of the group, so he glanced at the group of ladies as he put the top bun on his hoagie. Frances’s, Carol’s, and Meera’s eyes were all fixed on their scattered colored paper and the intricate pieces they were folding, but Brenda’s were on him. He really didn’t need the reminder that even though he’d been in love with Zoe, he hadn’t been a great catch for her in the end. Ian gathered up the meats and cheese and condiments and started putting them back in the fridge as quickly as possible, the familiar guilt already eating away at him.

“Have you met Lauren Pearson? She’s Linda’s granddaughter, and she’s delightful. Oh, and speaking of granddaughters, I have one moving to Quicksand in just over a month! Really, if you’ve had troubles meeting eligible women since you’ve been back, I’m sure that between the five of us, we could set you up with quite a few like that.” Brenda snapped her fingers.

Ian put his sandwich on a paper towel and quickly cleaned up the mess of crumbs he’d made. Then he wrapped the paper towel around the sandwich and held it in one hand so he could make a quick escape. He stopped by the table, though, and wrapped his hand around Brenda’s papery one and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you, truly, for thinking so highly of me and being willing to set me up on dates with people you respect. But I’m going to have to decline.”

“Oh! Are you not single?” He almost pulled his hand away, but she grabbed hold of his forearm and turned to the other ladies around the table. “I thought you were single. Is he not single?”

“I am,” Ian said, then set his sandwich on the table and patted the woman’s hand that still gripped his arm. “It’s not that. But thank you for being willing to set me up.”

Brenda let go of his arm and turned back to the table, so he grabbed his sandwich. “I don’t get it. Why would he not want to date if he’s single? It makes no sense.”

His grandma opened her mouth to answer. But before she could say anything, Meera said, “Because he got his heart ripped out ‘bout a month ago. Their wedding was supposed to be a couple weekends ago, and he’s still a bit broken.”

Ian froze where he stood.

“What?” Meera said. “It’s the truth, right?”

“It’s—” His grandma turned her gaze from Meera to him, her eyes clearly asking for forgiveness.

She was his grandma. He knew she told her friends everything—he couldn’t be upset at her in a million years just because Meera said his reason in such a succinct, yet blunt, fashion. She tended to say everything with facts and force.

“Thank you for explaining for me, Meera. Now if you’ll excuse me, ladies, I need to get back to work.”

As he was opening the kitchen door and escaping outside, he heard Carol say, “Don’t you just love how polite he is? If anyone deserves love, it’s that boy. If I had a grandson like him, I wouldn’t be in the predicament I’m in now with my house.”

Ian shook his head as he bit into his sandwich and walked toward his truck. Every once in a while, he wished he could put on a pair of grandma lenses and look at himself in the mirror and see the perfection they saw.

## ADDISON

ADDISON PULLED into a parking space at The Oregon Trail Drugstore, turned off the ignition, and slumped back in her seat. Rain had been drizzling on and off all day, and the lack of sunshine for days on end was getting her down. She wondered what Matthew was doing back in Amarillo and grabbed her phone to pull him up on social media.

Then she stopped herself. It wasn't what she wanted—he was in her head only because of habit, not because she really wanted to be thinking of him.

What she really wanted to do right now was curl up on the couch with a mug of hot chocolate and an episode of Organize My Space. Or even better, haul her tired bones up the stairs, pretend she didn't know it was barely six p.m., and collapse into bed and sleep until morning. And not just tomorrow morning. Thursday of next week sounded nice. With the dark clouds overhead, she could probably convince herself it was night.

But as nice as that plan sounded, she had another life goal, and that was to not stink. Since she used the last of her deodorant this morning, a drugstore visit it was. She sat up straight, put her shoulders back, pulled down the visor, and slid the cover so she could see the mirror. Her hair and makeup looked as bedraggled as she felt, so she removed her ponytail band, ran her fingers through her curls, then pulled her hair back into a ponytail and put the band back on. It didn't help much, but it was something.

She ran her hands over her face, hoping to make it feel more awake, and then she smiled the biggest, happiest smile she could make and held it until she felt it.

Then she forced herself to say, out loud, good things that had happened to her in the past week. The list could only contain good things, no buts allowed, and couldn't include anything she should've done but hadn't.

“I went from having zero roommates to having three. Me. The girl who

knew no one found three people who wanted to move into the inn with me. Girl, you are so phenomenally impressive that you even impress yourself.” And, amazingly enough, all four of them had really clicked.

She chuckled at herself, and then continued. “You are going to have your third weekly roommate dinner tonight, *and* it isn’t your turn to cook.” Hallelujah on that one. With as busy as her last week had been, if she had been in charge of the meal tonight, the four of them probably would’ve had to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

“You finished your first client home organization jobs of your brand-spankin’ new business and survived.” Even though one of them wanted four rooms organized, including their jewelry-making supplies. Organizing the thousands of beads ranked right up there with finding roommates.

“Okay, one more.” She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, thinking, and then a big smile spread across her face. “And you successfully managed to avoid Ian Kendrick for a full four weeks.” She had made a fool of herself the last time she’d seen him when she was eleven, and the first two times she’d seen him at twenty-six. The amount of potential embarrassment she’d saved herself by avoiding him over twenty-eight days was probably astronomical.

“Nice work,” she said out loud, and she felt it. Between the smiling at herself and listing awesome things that had happened, it was the “Give me energy, quick!” trick that worked for her every single time.

She even managed to have a spring in her step as she swung her purse over her shoulder and headed into the drugstore, and it was only partially because the drizzle had turned to actual rain and probably made her curls even crazier. But she found her favorite brand of deodorant, which she hadn’t been sure she’d find in Quicksand at all, and tossed it into her basket. Life was good. She didn’t really need to buy anything else, but those bins at the back of the store were calling her. Maybe she’d find something fun that she could give to each of her new roommates.

There were other people in the store, browsing, and she managed to not pay attention to any of them. But, even though she could barely see someone at the edge of her periphery, her eyes still went to one of her fellow shoppers at the far side of the store. The guy’s back was to her, and as she looked at the thick, dark hair with the perfect amount of wave that made you want to run your fingers through it, she whispered, “Please don’t be Ian. Please don’t be Ian.”



And then the man must've found what he was looking for, because he turned and started walking toward the back of the store. It was definitely Ian. And from what she could tell, the big bins in the back aisle of the store had drawn his attention, too. Addison glanced around frantically, looking for an escape route. None of the aisles were high enough to hide her. If she darted down one and crouched down to look at something and he miraculously didn't happen to walk down that same aisle to go to the registers, he would see her from the registers.

So she did the only thing she could do—she crouched down where she stood, with one of the giant bins between him and her. Maybe he didn't see her. Hopefully. All she had to do was wait for him to finish looking at whatever had drawn his attention, cross her fingers, toes, and anything else crossable, and hope that he didn't decide to wander to the bin of fuzzy socks that she hid behind. She glanced down the aisle that she was completely exposed to, and saw the young man behind the register, watching her with one eyebrow raised. She gave him a pained smile that probably looked more like a grimace. Holding her breath so she could hear better, she strained her ears to catch any footsteps nearing over the sound of Kelly Clarkson's *Catch My Breath* coming from the speakers. Ironic.

No footsteps. Only the sound of nothing holding Kelly back. She wished something would hold Ian back.

Addison spent the summers here when she was ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen. Ian didn't spend the full summer visiting his grandparents, like she did, but he did spend all of July there. So four full months together over four years, spending a good chunk of their days playing together. It had given her plenty of opportunities to embarrass herself around him. And every time when she wanted to run and hide under a rock somewhere, he would just continually put himself right in front of her until she had to look at him, and within moments, they would both be laughing.

She crossed her fingers with more force. If he had seen her, he wasn't the kind of guy who would quietly exit the store, leaving her with dignity. Running off to hide from embarrassment was one thing when you were ten. It was something else entirely when you were a grown woman.

Why did he have to be so good looking now? As ridiculous as it was, she knew that if he was completely unattractive, she wouldn't be hiding right now.

Hiding was stupid. She didn't get embarrassed this easily, and she pretty

much never dealt with embarrassment by hiding. It was like the girl from her childhood had taken over when she had seen Ian walking down that aisle. She and Ian were neighbors, after all. It wasn't like she could just avoid him forever. The awkwardness between them would eventually go away. Maybe she should just stand up with her keys in her hand, like she had dropped them and was picking them up, and then face him like the adult that she was.

Or maybe she could've done that when she first crouched here, but not when she'd been hiding for a full two minutes. Nope. At some point, she had committed to this winner of a plan.

Was that a noise? A footstep? She held her breath again and strained her ears. Nothing but Kelly Clarkson.

Two loud crashes sounded, followed immediately by hundreds of smaller crashes, and the shock of it made her shoot up from her hiding spot, whipping toward the source of the noise in alarm.

Ian stood next to an endcap of five shelves of Secret deodorant, the top two shelves now lying precariously on the third shelf, and the floor around him was now a sea of baby blue deodorant, a few of them still skittering to their final resting spots.

He met her eyes, glanced at the floor, and then glanced at the employees and other customers all being pulled toward the train wreck at his feet. Then he looked at the shelves, like they had somehow betrayed him, and said, "So much for leaning here, looking all nonchalant, waiting for you to finally stand up."

He met her eyes again, and there was something about the shocked and sheepish expression on his face that was so adorable she actually burst out with an uncontrolled laugh. And then she quickly tried to stifle it. If their roles had been reversed and she was in the middle of a sea of Va Va Vanilla-scented Secret, she wouldn't want to be laughed at. But oh how sweet it was to finally have the roles reversed.

Ian chuckled. Then he put his fists on his hips like he was looking down at a puppy that had just torn his favorite novel to shreds and said, "You're not living up to your name. Thanks a bunch, Secret."

Then he looked at her, those blue eyes sparkling. For a moment, he glanced toward the registers and his confidence seemed to falter, which was so unlike the Ian she remembered. Then he met her eyes again. "It's great to see you again, Addi. What do you say we get together for coffee some time and reminisce?"

Back when they were kids, he'd always called her Addi. Never Addison. Hearing him say the name she'd only ever been called by him instantly took her back to their childhood and the rush of feelings of independence, excitement, and adventure. Reminiscing with the only person who had lived it with her actually sounded quite nice.

It wasn't a date.

It was two long-ago friends chatting about the past. That she could do.

## ADDISON

ADDISON RACED from her car to the inn, holding her bag over her head to keep from getting too wet, and then shook it off after she got under the cover of the wraparound porch and went inside. From the giant lobby where guests used to check in—a space that she hadn't quite figured out what to do with yet—she heard voices coming from the right. So she went into the kitchen and dining area where her aunt used to serve breakfast to the guests. All three of her roommates—Bex, Peyton, and Timini—were gathered around the island, snacking on veggies and hummus.

“Addison,” Peyton said, running forward to greet her, her light brown ponytail bouncing. “I’m so glad you made it!”

“But you’re late,” Bex said with a hand on her hip, somehow looking both relaxed and fierce. Fierce, but not angry. More like she was just stating a fact.

Timini swished her hand like she was brushing away Addison’s lateness. “Fifteen minutes isn’t even late enough to be called ‘late.’” Then she brushed off an errant piece of thread from her shirt.

“I am sorry, though,” Addison said as they all sat down at the table and Peyton went to the oven to get dinner out. “I got distracted by the fuzzy socks at the drugstore, and then I got waylaid by trying to hide from Ian.”

“Hiding? Now, listen up, Adds,” Bex said, putting both hands on the table, like she was about to push herself back out of her seat but didn’t. Instead, it just made her look intense. It was amazing how intimidating the woman could look for as slight as her figure was. “That man is way too fine to be hiding from. Who cares if you embarrassed yourself in front of him once or twice?”

“It wasn’t just at the grocery store. When I was thirteen and came here to stay with my aunt, I experienced my first crush ever—and it was on Ian.”

“See?” Timini said, turning to Bex and Peyton. “I told you there was crushing going on.”

Addison shook her head and just continued her story so they’d get it. “We had spent a lot of time at Quicksand River that summer—and I had found a great rock on the shore. It was five or six inches wide and very flat, so I painted a picture on it of the two of us holding hands and jumping into the river. I daydreamed for hours about how I was going to give it to him, and how he was going to keep it by his pillow every night and think about me.

“And, okay, maybe I psyched myself out about it a bit too much. So when it came time to say goodbye, nerves got the best of me and I just said, ‘Here!’ and shoved it into his hands. Then, instead of waiting for him to be touched by my thoughtful gift and reach for my hand and tell how he could never forget me and that he would always treasure it, just like I had planned, I panicked and kissed him on the cheek.”

Bex hooted. “And what did he do?”

Addison shrugged. “I don’t know. I saw the shocked look on his face for about half a second, then I turned and ran. I hopped into my aunt’s car, we drove to the airport, and I didn’t see him again until four weeks ago at the grocery store. And that,”—she said, spreading her arms like she was presenting an artifact for all to see—“was the beginning of the awkward phase of our relationship. Thirteen years later, and it’s still going strong.”

“You know,” Bex said as she leaned forward and grabbed a roll that looked freshly baked from a basket on the table, “if you see him enough, it’ll dilute your percentage of embarrassing moments with him.”

“I mean, you’d *hope* it would,” Timini said, a teasing gleam in her eye. “Unless your percentage is unnaturally high to begin with.”

“No one’s is *that* high,” Peyton said as she nestled a pan of Mushroom Florentine pasta in between the rolls and a dish of asparagus.

“Or,” Addison said, dragging out the word, “I could see him, hide behind a bin of fuzzy socks like I’m five, and he could accidentally send crashing to the ground and spilling across the back of The Oregon Trail Drugstore hundreds of sticks of deodorant, just when he was trying to catch me in the embarrassing moment.”

The laughter that burst out of all three women just made Addison’s heart do a happy dance all over again, just thinking of the incident.

Bex shook her head. “That is one effective way of lowering the percentage, girl. So are you going to stop hiding from him?”

Addison nodded as she dished herself up some pasta. “Yeah. I am now officially fine with us being neighbors who were friends once upon a time.”

“Nothing more?” Peyton asked, a look on her face like she was a kid asking for a cookie, but knowing the answer was going to be no.

“Nothing more. We all made a pact not to fall in love that night we all decided to be roommates, remember?”

Peyton froze in the middle of dishing up her pasta. “Only because we were all coming off bad breakups. But oh my lands, we aren’t actually sticking to that pact, are we?”

“I am,” Timini said as she grabbed the dish of asparagus. “But Bex isn’t.”

“The pact is to not fall in love,” Bex said. “And I’m as dedicated to it now as I was then. I can date all I want without falling in love.”

Addison stabbed a bite of the pasta dish, getting pasta, mushroom, and spinach all together in one bite, and put it in her mouth. It was so creamy without being heavy, the flavors all perfectly combining. “Oh my, Peyton. No wonder you’re so successful at your business!”

“Truth,” Bex said. “I would hire you to be my personal chef any day, Pey.”

Peyton seemed both annoyed at the name Bex had been calling her since the day she moved in and pleased at the compliments. “How about your business, Addison? You’ve been pretty busy this past week!”

Addison swallowed the bite she was relishing. “I am already booked out for the next few weeks! I tell you, my sister is a genius at websites and branding and marketing.” It was a relief, really. She hadn’t ever really pictured herself running her own business, and hadn’t been able to understand why people would really want to turn down a steady paycheck from a good employer. Starting the business took almost as big of a leap of faith as moving across the country by herself did. She still couldn’t believe that Chloe managed to talk her into chasing a dream so big and so uncertain, especially when she wasn’t going to be in the country to help her run it.

“Speaking of branding,” Timini said, pointing her fork at each of them, “who decided to brand themselves as the Post-it Queen?”

Addison chuckled. She had run into more than a few in the past five days.

Bex pointed her fork at Timini, with a bite of Florentine already on it. “We only have these dinners once a week. Sticky notes are a good way to communicate issues in between. Like to let someone know it’s annoying when people leave stacks of fabric and sewing machines on the tables in

here.”

“This room has half a dozen small tables. We only need this big one to eat on.”

Maybe Addison should’ve weighed in on the conversation, since they were working out things that pertained to all of them, but she just heard the faint sound of the text tone she had set for only one person—her ex. She wished she would’ve put her phone on the check-in counter in the lobby, like she had her purse and bag from the drugstore. But since it was right here in her pocket and she therefore knew the text came in, she couldn’t *not* read it. It was the first time he had texted since they broke up six weeks ago.

So she pulled the phone out of her pocket and stared at it, not being able to process the words.

“Addison!” Peyton and Bex both yelled her name at the same time, and as she looked up, she realized that they must’ve said her name several times. She didn’t know what look was on her face right then, but she didn’t know how to explain it other than to just tell the truth.

“My ex, Matthew, just texted.”

“Oh, no,” Bex said, shaking her head.

Timini leaned forward. “Does he text often?”

“What did he say?” Peyton asked.

Addison shook her head. “He doesn’t. Not since we broke up.” She looked back down at the text, her thumbs hovering over the keyboard. “He said he heard that I moved here, and asked how I’m liking it. How should I respond?”

All three women shouted that she shouldn’t and just as she looked back up, a question on her face, Bex leaned forward and yanked the phone out of her hands.

“Don’t do it!” Peyton yelled. “It’s a trap.”

Addison looked at where Bex was setting her phone down on the table, screen side down, and then looked at each woman’s face, confused. “How is saying something like ‘I’m doing great. Thank you for asking’ a trap?”

“Because, honey,” Bex said, “then you’ll start thinking about him again.”

Peyton nodded. “And wondering how he’s doing.”

“Before you know it,” Timini said, throwing her arms up in the air, “you’re wondering if you made a mistake and if you should try to work things out.”

“I’m not going to—”

“Do you know what she needs?” Bex asked. “A rebound guy.”

“Definitely,” Timini said, and then turned to Addison. “Our neighbor would be perfect for it. You’re clearly attracted to him.”

“No.” She figured they got that her response was about him being the perfect rebound, because she *was* clearly attracted to him. She hadn’t realized they had noticed, but it wasn’t like she could deny it. Ian was also sweet and fun and so totally, absolutely not what she needed right now. Even if the thought of dating him caused a happy fluttering in her stomach and spontaneous daydreams of what it would be like to be wrapped in his arms.

Yeah. Rebound dating him was the worst idea ever.

“You should!” Peyton said. “Maybe just choose some random guy. Did you know that rebound relationships are actually healthy?”

Addison rolled her eyes.

“No, it’s true!” Peyton ticked off the items on her fingers as she said them. “They help you to move on and recover faster, they improve self-esteem and well-being, and they combat loneliness.”

Bex put her hand on Addison’s phone. “And they prevent unhealthy reunions with exes.”

“Plus,” Timini said, “they help you figure out what kind of guy complements you. Super helpful.”

Addison stabbed a mushroom with her fork. “You all forgot to mention that rebound dating can keep you from properly dealing with the breakup. That’s why rebound relationships almost never work out.” And Matthew still crossed her mind much too much for her to believe she was ready for a new relationship.

All three women opened their mouths, like they were going to say something to counter it, so she headed them off with a hand like a stop sign held by a very insistent crossing guard. “Rebound relationships tend to be short. My interactions with Ian have been awkward and embarrassing enough—do you really think it’s a good idea to get into a short relationship with a guy who is our next door neighbor, who I’ll still have to see practically every day?”

Thoughts of dating Ian were just as exciting now as they were at age eleven. Not that it was any more possible now than it was then—sure, she was old enough to date now, but dating took a desire to date from both people. Just the thoughts of how awful it would be to have a quick relationship with Ian, and then to bump into him everywhere, made the



tingling at the back of her neck and the tightening in her chest even stronger than when she kissed his cheek and ran off after putting the painted stone in his hand as a kid.

“You’re right,” Peyton said. “Not our neighbor then. How about some random guy?”

Addison cocked her head to the side, trying to figure out why Peyton was being weird. “What aren’t you saying?”

“I just think she should fall for anyone else. Just not Ian.”

“Why?” Timini asked. “We already know she’s attracted to him.”

Peyton set her fork down and let out huff of a breath. “Okay. I’ll say this and then nothing more, because I don’t even know enough to tell anything more. At the restaurant I used to work at, one of my coworkers was roommates with this girl Zoe, and Zoe dated Ian. They were pretty serious. I think they might have even been talking about getting married. I saw my friend at the gym a couple of weeks ago and asked how her roommate was doing, and she said they just broke up. Anyway, it sounds like he took the breakup pretty much a thousand times harder than you are taking your breakup with Matthew, and I am pretty sure that two people both having rebound relationships with each other isn’t the best idea ever. Especially when one of them probably isn’t even close to being ready.”

“Oh,” Addison said.

That explained why he seemed skittish earlier. She already didn’t think that rebound dating was a good idea for her at all. And now she definitely didn’t think it sounded like a good idea for Ian. Add in the fact that being neighbors would make everything worse, and it was obvious that dating, or any form of crushing, flirting, daydreaming about, or falling in love would be the worst idea ever.

“Well,” she said, “I guess that settles it, so let’s make this official. My entire goal while living in Quicksand is to *not* fall for the guy next door.”

## IAN

THE DEAFENING SOUND of Ian's portable air tank shut off, and he used his finish nailer to put the last couple of nails into this part of the built-in. He ran his hand along the section, feeling to make sure it was as smooth as it looked.

Someone whistled behind him, and he turned to see his friend and general contractor, Garrett, walking into the room. "She's a beaut!"

Ian brushed a bit of sawdust off a shelf. "Wait until it's finished."

Garrett stepped closer. "I feel bad that it's always me and not you who gets to hear the praise about your craftsmanship from the homeowners."

"Well, you do have to take all the blame for anything that goes wrong."

"Every time you're available to do the woodwork in a house I'm building, I figure it's the universe's way of trying to counter the complaints. I owe you one, buddy. Oh, hey, Ellie just finished reading her first book by herself last night. We made a big deal about it, and asked what she wanted to do to celebrate, and she said she wanted to get a pedicure at a real salon. So, of course, Emmie wants to as well, and because Ellie is Ellie, she said having her little sister there would make it more special."

"Isn't Emmie three?"

Garrett chuckled. "Yeah, so she'll probably sit on the chair for a full sixty seconds before getting down. I hope the person painting hers is fast. Anyway, so Paige is taking them, which leaves me free tonight. I was thinking of getting the guys together to go axe throwing. Are you in?"

Ian shook his head as he rooted around in his bag for his putty knife and the wood filler. "No can do. I've got Junior Woodworkers tonight."

"Oh, that's right. Instead of hanging out with a bunch of adult men destroying a block of wood, you'll be hanging out with a bunch of seven to nine-year-olds, destroying a block of wood."

Ian laughed out loud. “We’ve definitely destroyed some good wood along the way. You’d be impressed at how good they’re getting, though.”

“You know, one of these days you might want to get a junior woodworker of your own.”

He was surprised when it wasn’t Zoe who came to mind immediately at a comment like that, like usual—it was Addi. Maybe he shouldn’t have been surprised. Addi was taking up more and more headspace all the time, and he really needed to stop thinking about her. It wasn’t like he could face that kind of pain again anytime soon, if ever. The damage that Zoe’s words inflicted when she broke off their wedding weren’t the kind of thing that just went away or got better. They made him question everything about himself. “It’s not in the cards for me, and you know it.”

Garrett held up his hands. “All’s I’m saying is you’ve got, what, four single women living in the inn next to you now? And regardless of what Zoe said or what you tell yourself, you’re a good man, Ian.”

“I’m not interested.” It was mostly the truth. He wasn’t interested in going through what he had with Zoe ever again, and the best way to do that was to stay away from all relationships in the future. With his elbows resting on his crouched knees, a putty knife in one hand, he let out a breath. “It looks like my wood filler isn’t here. I’ll have to run into town to get some.” He stood up, and tossed the putty knife back into his bag.

“You mean this wood filler?” Garrett nudged the jar of it with his foot.

Ian stared down at the container. How did that get there? And why hadn’t he seen it? But more importantly, why did it disappoint him to realize it was here?

He shook his head as it dawned on him that he was hoping to see Addi when he was in town. Like she would just appear nearby when he thought of her, like a well-timed ad on social media just when he thought of an item. He obviously needed to step up his not-thinking-about-her efforts.

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A LOT of the kids in Junior Woodworkers were also in Cub Scouts, and since they had their pinewood derby coming up, they spent the hour in his shop working on their cars instead of building stools, like they had been. Normally, their projects were all about learning how to build furniture correctly and using the tools properly—all the things his grandpa had taught him—so this time, it was fun to see their more creative sides come out in their car designs.

Once the last kid was picked up by the final parent to arrive, Ian blew most of the sawdust off him with the air hose, then closed up his shop and headed into his house through the kitchen door. His grandma loved to cook, and although she didn't cook every night, she usually did on Junior Woodworkers days, knowing he'd be coming in late. And sure enough, she had beef stew in the crock pot and it smelled great. Usually, she was in the room when he came in. He kicked off his shoes and headed down the hall at the back of the kitchen toward the family room.

As he neared the family room, he heard voices and headed closer to go say hi, but paused when he heard Addi's voice. He was a little surprised she was in his house, based on how much she'd been avoiding him. And having her in his house wasn't exactly the best way to move forward with his not-thinking-about-her plan.

He took a few steps closer, trying to hear what they were talking about so he could guess if this would be a quick thing or not. If it was going to be quick, maybe he would slip back outside and clean his shop for a minute.

As he got closer, he could make out his grandma's words. "...told me how easy it was to move your things into the inn, because of how organized you are. I want to be like that. And, as you can tell from all of this, I've got a long way to go."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Fifty-four years. Since I was eight months pregnant with Ian's dad. I thought I'd have to move when my dear Sheldon passed just over a year ago, because this place is just too much for me to care for on my own. But Ian was so sweet. He barely hesitated before packing up his stuff in Salem and buying this house and moving in so I could stay. He's such a good boy. I wish my friend Carol had such a nice grandson to buy her home so she could stay. Anyway, a year ago, I started to go through everything to get organized, and all it taught me was that it's too big of a job to handle on my own. So when Ian told me that you help people get organized for a living and I looked you up online..."

Their voices faded as he walked back toward the kitchen. It was sweet his grandma was saying good things about him. It wasn't so sweet that he was standing there eavesdropping. He couldn't tell how long they would be—his grandma might be asking for advice, and that could take a while. He should probably head back outside to his shop.

But then he heard his grandma more clearly, so she must've been close to

the family room's doorway. "But this isn't all of it—I need to show you my office and bedroom."

Oh no. His bedroom door was open, and he knew for a fact that he hadn't made his bed this morning. He wasn't sure, but he could possibly have a dirty shirt or two on his floor. His room wasn't too messy, but not something someone like Addi would call "organized." When they were kids, it wasn't weird at all to have her in his room. He and his brothers shared the room he lived in now when they visited each summer, and it was where they kept the Legos. But now that they were adults and didn't know each other as well as they once had, it felt strange just having her in his house. And it would feel even stranger to have her seeing his things. And if his grandma was showing Addi her office, she would walk right past his room.

He couldn't go toward the family room and get to his bedroom hall that way, since that's the direction they were. So he raced into the living room and headed into the hall from that direction. He came at it a little too fast and banged his arm, from shoulder down to elbow, into the doorframe, making a loud thud. But he managed to get his door pulled shut just before his grandma and Addi rounded the corner.

"Oh my goodness," his grandma said, looking around, "what was that bang?"

He shrugged and then wrapped an arm around his grandma's shoulders, giving her a hug. Then he turned to Addi. "Hello, Addi. I wasn't expecting to see you here. How are you?"

Once upon a time, he was good at talking to girls. Somewhere along the way, probably after ending things with Zoe, he must've forgotten how. Seriously, "I wasn't expecting to see you here" was the best he could do?

"Oh, hi, Ian. Your grandma didn't think you'd be back so soon."

He glanced at his grandma and caught the hint of a smile before she hid it. He always came in at the same time on Junior Woodworkers days.

"Addison is every bit as amazing as you said she was."

Addi ducked her head, but he thought he saw a bit of a blush before she did. To tell the truth, he was feeling a little warm around the ears, too. He told his grandma that she organized people's homes for a living, and based on what he saw when he was helping her roommates move in, she was very good at it. At the time, he hadn't thought his grandma would actually tell Addi and make it sound like he talked about her nonstop. That was only partway true.

“I asked her if she could come over and see what she could do for me and all the stuff I’ve collected over the years so when I die, all that work won’t be left to family. Now don’t worry, I don’t plan on dying anytime soon. But I tell you what—this girl here is in high demand. Probably because everyone figured out how good she is. I thought I wouldn’t have a chance swaying her to help me, but she says she’s going to stop by in the evenings and on weekends, just to help an old woman out.”

Then his grandma winked at him, and she wasn’t entirely subtle about it.

“Your grandma was pretty hard to say no to when we were kids,” Addi said, then shrugged, “and she’s just as hard to say no to now. And of course I’m happy to help a neighbor out.” Her golden brown hair was pulled into a loose bun, and with the mass of curls she had, it was beautiful. He especially liked how a few curls had escaped and fell next to her slender neck. A lot about her had changed over the years. Not those mischievous hazel eyes he remembered so well from his childhood, though.

His grandma beamed at her. “Isn’t she the best?”

He realized he was staring at her. He cleared his throat and said, “So, you’re going to be here a lot after work, huh?”

She eyed him, and he couldn’t read the expression on her face. Was she happy about that? Sad? Wary? He wasn’t even sure what expression was on his own face. Part of him was smiling just thinking about how she wouldn’t be able to easily duck out or hide when he was around. The much bigger part of him was terrified to have someone he was attracted to—and thinking about way too much to be healthy—be so close.

“Just two or three times a week.”

Okay, then. Two or three times a week, he needed to silence the part of him that wanted to see her, and give the terrified part free rein to find reasons why he suddenly had to be away from home.

## ADDISON

ADDISON MISSED CHLOE. She was used to talking to her sister daily and texting dozens of times a day. When she walked through the door of the inn and dropped her purse and keys on the reservation counter, she looked at the clock on her phone. It had been an incredibly long day organizing a shoe and jewelry hoarder's bedroom all the way over in Lake Oswego, and she was beat. But she did the math, and it was after 3 a.m. in Paris, so a phone call was out of the question.

So instead, she sent a text. *Call me when you're free to talk business strategy?* Her business had started out with a bang, mostly because of Chloe's genius, but her openings a month and more out weren't being filled as quickly as she liked, and it was making her a bit nervous. She hesitated for a moment, phone still in hand, and then sent a second text. *And maybe chat a bit about my neighbor.*

There. She sent it. Chloe would grill her about it, but she'd also let her talk through things without too much judgment. It's not that she *wanted* to be thinking about Ian. But her subconscious didn't seem to get that memo, so she found her mind wandering to him without her permission.

She looked toward the stairs, thinking about how much she needed to crash on her bed and watch a show until she got some energy back. But her body was turned toward the kitchen, and she was mentally going through what food was in the fridge and how much effort it would take to put something in her grumbling stomach.

Her stomach growled even louder, just thinking about her options. Food it was. Maybe that would replenish her energy. She headed into the kitchen and found Bex at her laptop, with the smile on her face that said she was likely either editing one of her YouTube videos or replying to comments from her fans. She glanced at Addison, but kept working, so Addison went to the

fridge. Yes! Peyton had made enchiladas and put an “Anyone can eat” sticky note on the top.

She was just putting a plate with two enchiladas on it into the microwave when Bex must’ve finished what she was working on and shut her laptop. “So...I saw our neighbor today.”

“Yeah?” She tried to make the word sound uninterested. She might have succeeded.

“He had just walked out of his shed and was brushing sawdust off that strong chest and arms.”

She turned around to face her roomie. “Bex.”

“I’m just saying that maybe you should reconsider dating him.”

“You’re still pushing that? Even after hearing that he’s just coming off a hard breakup?”

“You moved in, what, five weeks ago? And his relationship ended some time before then. Maybe he’s in need of a little rebound dating, too.”

Addison leaned against the counter behind her, chuckling at Bex’s tenacity. “Even if you took all the problems of rebound dating for both of us out of the mix, it’s not like choosing to date someone is all my choice. It takes two people.”

“And?”

“And,” Addison let out a frustrated breath, “I’ve never been one to have guys lining up at my door. I’ve had plenty of crushes before—guys I really would’ve liked to date—but that doesn’t mean they feel the same way.” More than she’d like to admit, it was probably a big chunk of the reason why she stayed with Matthew for as long as she did. The whole time, a part of her knew that if they broke up, she might go a very long time before dating someone new, whether she liked it or not.

Bex looked at her like she was confused or Addison was crazy. Bex had probably never experienced being interested in dating someone but not having him feel the same. “But you’re gorgeous.”

Addison shook her head, and then ran her curls through her fingers, looking at them as she did. “I know the long curls attract men. Enough that we really start chatting and texting and getting to know each other. And then, before we ever get to the ‘We should go out sometime,’ they’re coming to me for dating advice. I’m the friend, never the girlfriend. Even if I did want to date Ian, *which I don’t*—I just got out of a two year relationship, after all—that wouldn’t mean that the choice is all up to me. And I can tell that he’s just



not interested in going out with me.”

Before Bex could respond, they both stood up straighter at the sound of lawnmower starting up, cocking their heads toward the sound.

“Is that in our yard?”

Instead of answering, Addison raced back out into the front lobby and then into the family room, Bex right on her heels as they ran around the couches and chairs in the large room. At first, they couldn’t see any sign of the lawnmower in their back yard. Then, just a few seconds later, they saw it appear from behind some shrubs that hid the maintenance shed, being pushed by none other than their neighbor, Ian.

“Ian’s been the one mowing?” Bex asked.

Addison shook her head. Maybe she should’ve guessed—it was Ian and his brothers who took care of the yard when they were here for the summers as kids. But who would’ve guessed he still would be doing it now?

“You should go talk to him. Your car is parked on the side by his house, so he has to know you’re home. It would be rude if you saw it was him and didn’t thank him. I mean, *I* could thank him, but I don’t own the building, so it wouldn’t carry as much weight coming from me. I think it has to be you.”

Addison took a deep breath. “You’re right. It’s the neighborly thing to do.”

She stopped by the downstairs bathroom to make sure her hair wasn’t too crazy, and then headed out the back door. Ian had just turned so his back was to her, mowing down the length of the backyard. So she just waited. Not so she could watch him—it would just simply be rude to come up to him with his back turned when he couldn’t hear her coming.

Seeing him mow now was nothing like seeing him push the mower when he was a twelve or fourteen-year-old. The last thirteen years had definitely treated him well. Especially in his shoulders and the top of his back, where his muscles were showing very clearly through the fabric of his t-shirt. He didn’t know she was watching, though, so she started feeling like a stalker and instead walked out to meet him.

She was still a good fifteen feet away when he reached the end of the grass and turned the mower, so he was facing her again. He shut it off as soon as he saw her. He glanced at the part of the lawn he’d already cut, and then scratched the back of his neck. “Looks like I’m busted.”

Addison laughed as she took the last few steps to him. “Have you been mowing all this time? Why didn’t you tell me?”

He lifted one of those strong shoulders in a shrug. “Everyone loves a mystery. Besides, I’ve never stayed next door and not taken care of this yard, so it felt wrong not to.”

“Did my aunt line up payment with you before she died? Do I owe you lawn mowing back fees?”

“She used to pay us when we were kids. But my brothers and I did a lot of yard care for others when we were home in Salem, and my dad’s rule was that we had to mow at least one yard a week for someone who needed it and not charge them. When I moved back here more than a year ago, the inn became my one yard a week.”

That was so sweet. And to still be doing it now, when he was no longer mowing lawns as a kid for money. Maybe that was why his eyes looked so kind. Because he just genuinely was. She realized that she was looking into those eyes a little too deeply and shook herself out of her stupor. “I feel like I should do something to repay you. I’m not much of a baker, but I’m pretty good at buying baked goods. Maybe I could get a pie, or cupcakes, or...Ice cream! Not that ice cream is a baked good.”

“How about coffee?”

He was smiling that adorable amused smile, and it suddenly made her forget what they were talking about. “You want me to *bake* you coffee? Oh! We had plans to go get coffee and catch up. Right.”

“Tomorrow right after work?”

Addison nodded. “Tomorrow it is.”

As she walked back to the inn, knowing he was watching her, she was hyper-aware of how she was walking, and suddenly couldn’t remember how to walk normally. But it was definitely not whatever she was doing right now. She couldn’t even talk to him like a normal person. What was wrong with her?

It was probably his eyes.

Yeah, definitely those eyes that threw her off. The eyes that were the same blue as the sky she painted on that rock back when she’d first forgotten how to talk around him. All she had to do was avoid the eyes, and she’d be just fine.

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AFTER SHE GOT the enchiladas that she’d nearly forgotten about out of the microwave, she headed up to her room and sat down at her desk with her laptop. She took a bite of the dish that made her, once again, so grateful

that Peyton was a roommate, booted it up, and opened Google in a browser and started typing.

### *How to stay away from a rebound relationship*

There were links to several articles about how to tell if you were in a rebound relationship, but she had to scroll through a lot to get to one that showed how to keep from getting into one. Of course, there wasn't an article titled "How to keep from falling a little more for your neighbor every time you see him."

So she just reminded herself: *Rebound dating = bad*. Bad for her, bad for him. Even if Ian's eyes were kind and beautiful. Even if his jaw line was pretty near perfect. Even if he looked incredible mowing the lawn, or covered in sawdust, trying to surreptitiously close his bedroom door before she could see inside. Even if he did things like buy a house so he could help his grandma, or mowed people's lawns just to be nice, or volunteered to teach kids woodworking skills. None of that mattered, because *Rebound dating = bad*.

Maybe she should write it in giant letters on her arm with a marker so she couldn't forget.

She was only partway through reading the article when she grabbed a notebook and started taking notes of things she needed to remember that would help her keep herself from being attracted to Ian. She started by writing in all caps across the top of the page *HOW TO NOT FALL FOR THE GUY NEXT DOOR*.

—*If you want to date someone just to make your ex jealous, you're not ready to date.*

—*If you hope your ex will call and let you know he's doing okay, you're not ready to date.*

—*If you think of your ex constantly, you're not ready to date.*

—*If you struggle to delete photos of your ex, you're not ready to date.*

—*If you have a hard time deleting your ex's phone number, you're not ready to date.*

—*If you still have feelings about your ex, you're not ready to date.*

—*If you're still looking at your ex's social media, you're not ready to date.*

—*If you feel pulled to rush a new relationship because of a sense of urgency, you're not ready to date.*

And then she added one more that the article hadn't mentioned that was

important for her to remember, too.

—*If your neighbor experiences any of the above, then he's not ready to date, either.*

She looked over what she had written. Matthew lived seventeen hundred miles away, so it wasn't like he would ever see if she dated anyone else. So she was pretty safe with that first one. She still thought of Matthew too much and often wondered how he was doing, but she'd been fairly good at the other things. Mostly. More than Matthew, she should probably be more concerned about how much she was thinking of Ian.

She was making progress on all the items, though, and that was what mattered. It was a good list of things to keep in mind. If she ever felt herself doing any of those things, she'd know she wasn't ready to move on. And just like writing *I won't run in the halls* one hundred times when she broke the rule in fourth grade, writing *you're not ready to date* so many times had actually helped.

Actually, two of the things didn't need to be on the list at all. She opened her phone, went to the photos app, and deleted the entire folder containing pictures of Matthew and her together. Then she went into her contacts and deleted his. It felt good! Healthy. Wise. Powerful.

Grinning widely, she crossed both items off her list with as much glee as her high school English Lit teacher marked up her Hamlet essay with.

Not that she was aiming to cross all the items off the list. She was in Quicksand for a fresh start, and that meant re-figuring what she wanted out of life without a boyfriend affecting the plan.

No, this wasn't a list of things to accomplish so she could move on to something new. This was a list to help keep herself from falling for Ian.

## IAN

IAN SAT on a bench at the trailhead park, smiling as Addi pulled into the parking lot slowly. Then she looked down, probably at her phone. Then she turned to look at the road she'd just turned off before her eyes met his and she smiled and pulled into a parking spot. He hoped she was up for the trail. Sitting down across from each other in a coffee shop where all they could do was stare at each other's eyes while they talked seemed too intimate. Not like old friends catching up. He reminded himself, once again, that this was all it was. He stood as she opened her door and stepped out of her car.

"It's a good thing you're sitting where I could see you—I thought I got the address wrong. This isn't exactly a coffee shop."

She had come straight from work and was wearing dark jeans that were fitted and made her legs look incredible. She had on a flowy light purple blouse, which was a little dressy for a walk in the woods, but at least she was wearing flats. If he had planned to spend the day organizing someone's house, he'd probably show up wearing a t-shirt, jeans, and athletic shoes. He had guessed Addi would be dressed similarly, so he hadn't anticipated that changing up the date a bit would be an issue.

"No, but since we've had a few rain-free days, I thought a walk along Chipper Creek Trail might be more fun than a stuffy coffee shop. Plus," he turned to grab the two cups of coffee he had already picked up from Doug's Donuts and held one out to her, "I've got coffee."

Addi looked at the cup for a long moment before she took it. "I was supposed to pay for coffee, remember?"

"But then I changed up what we are doing without warning you or giving you a chance to dress for it. Let's consider us even."

"We're even, then," she said, and bumped her cup into his. Then her gaze went over his shoulder to the opening to the trail. "I haven't even thought

about this place in so long. I used to love coming here as a kid.”

“If you’d rather not in those shoes—”

“No, I’m good.” Then she started walking toward the trailhead purposely, like she was afraid he’d change his mind.

He had lived in Oregon for his whole life, so this scenery was nothing new. But Addi had only spent four summers here half her lifetime ago, and he imagined it was a bit different than living in Amarillo. So he tried to see the thick forest filled with green things growing at all different heights through her eyes. It was beautiful as always, but he hadn’t really paid attention to exactly how green things were until he pictured Amarillo. Even the tree trunks were green here, with all the moss growing on them.

The trail wasn’t crowded, but there were people ahead of them on the trail and a few people passed them every few minutes. But mostly, they could just hear the sound of their feet on the crushed gravel trail as he asked her about how work was going and she asked him the same.

He was dying to ask her about what happened thirteen years ago, though, so as soon as the conversation moved past enough pleasantries to be polite, he said, “That last summer you were here, you said you’d see me the next summer, but you never came back.”

*Smooth, Ian. Could you be any more blunt?*

“It wasn’t my fault, I swear. My little sister, Chloe, never came with me to Aunt Helen’s, because she was into fashion marketing from pretty much the day she was born, so she always went to Fashion Designer Camp, and the year I was thirteen and she was eleven, she came home from camp with a portfolio of her work. My parents decided it was time I stopped spending my summers playing and started spending them developing skills. I went on a bunch of week-long camps every summer until I was sixteen and had a job. So,” she said, ticking each one off on her fingers, “I went to soccer camp, young explorers camp, drama camp, young novelists camp, leadership camp, space camp—you name the camp, I probably did it.”

For years, he had wondered if his reaction to her gift and kiss on the cheek were the reason why she never came back. He didn’t realize it still bothered him so much until the weight was gone. “No Organizer’s Anonymous Camp?”

She laughed as they walked onto one of the five bridges that crossed the meandering creek, and he soaked in the sound. “No, surprisingly, based on the variety of ones I went to. Because even though it probably didn’t exist, I

didn't have every second of my future planned out at age fourteen enough to know I even wanted that. I still don't let Chloe forget how she ruined my summers by her unnaturally young career planning."

She stopped to lean over the rail and look at the water, so he did, too. "Remember when we were kids and your grandma taught us how to make origami boats out of waxed paper, and we'd drop them off at one bridge, and then race down the trail and try to beat them to the next bridge?"

He laughed at the memory. "And the boats always won, except at the very end of summer when there wasn't much water flowing. And then, half the time, they got stuck along the way."

She turned to him. "Let's go down by the creek." Her smile lit up her face and made him smile. It had when they were kids, too, but somewhere along the way, her smile had become beautiful. Mesmerizing.

They walked to the end of the bridge, threw their coffee cups in a garbage can at the bridge's edge, and made their way down to the water. He should've known—water always drew Addi to it. That's why they had spent so many of their summer days either here by Chipper Creek or in their favorite cove at Quicksand River.

He was glad to know that she didn't stop coming to spend her summers with her aunt because of him. But he was still curious about that kiss her last summer there. He stepped up next to her and they both watched a squirrel race to the water's edge, then scurry back, then to the creek again, each time getting closer and closer to them. "So, you know that painted stone you gave me? I still have it."

Addi's attention flew right to him, a shocked look on her face. "You kept it?"

"I was hoping to one day ask you about it again." Her eyes searched his, and he was working up the courage—and trying to come up with the wording—to ask if she had kissed him because she had liked him, or if it was just a friendly goodbye, but every sentence he thought of sounded awful. It wasn't like he needed to know so that he could sleep better at night or anything. Well, okay, that knowledge probably would've helped him sleep better back when he was fourteen. But he hadn't thought about it for years before seeing her again in Gateway Groceries.

Maybe just letting it go again was the best thing. But he felt like he owed it to the fourteen-year-old from his past to just spit the question out no matter how awful it sounded, so he wouldn't have to wonder.

He was just opening his mouth to ask when a dog's barking got rapidly closer, along with shouts from the dog's owner. Both he and Addi turned just in time to see a large dog racing toward them—or, more likely, the squirrel that had been very near them—with his leash bouncing as it hit the rocks and tufts of weeds behind him, his owner chasing after him. Neither of them had time to react before the dog plowed into Addi, knocking her backward.

He grabbed her arm as she fell, and between the efforts of both of them, she managed to stay upright, even though she had taken a giant step into the creek to stop her fall. The dog went off in the direction of the squirrel just as quickly as he had come, leaving both of them breathing heavy from the adrenaline of it all.

“You okay?”

She nodded, and he pulled her toward him as she stepped toward the shore. As soon as she lifted the foot that had been deepest in the water, though, the rushing creek grabbed hold of her shoe that, as a slip-on, had only about two inches of shoe holding it to the top of her foot, and sent it downstream.

“No!” Addi said, lurching for it.

“I've got it,” Ian shouted, racing after the shoe. Within moments, though, it went under the bridge. It was too low to duck under, so he raced around the structure that suddenly seemed overly massive for the size of the creek, and then dashed alongside the river. The shoe was ahead of him by a couple hundred feet. He leapt over rocks and tree stumps and fallen branches as he ran after it. But no matter how fast he went, it kept getting further and further away.

Finally, he realized what a lost cause it was, and how his chasing it down the river had left a woman balancing on one foot upstream. He jogged back to the bridge and found Addi making her way back up to the trail, doing a mix of hopping and touching just the ball of her foot down on the most rock-free parts of the ground. He raced to her side and she put an arm around his back to steady herself.

“I'm so sorry, Addi. I swear it took your shoe downstream even faster than it took our boats.” He glanced down at the foot that still wore a shoe. “They looked new, too.”

“Today was my first time wearing them.”

He cringed.

“But they've been killing my feet all day. They aren't nearly as



comfortable as the website made them look.”

“Your feet have been aching all day in those shoes, and yet you still agreed to walk the trail?”

She shrugged. “It’s no different from wearing heels on a date.” Her eyes went wide, seemingly shocked at what she’d just said. “Not that this is a date! I didn’t mean that. I just meant...Friends. Catching up. This is a friends catching up...get-together.”

“I missed you, Addi.” He had forgotten how much being around her ratcheted his happiness level up a few notches. Or how much he loved the blush that lit up her face.

They both looked up at the trail. Sure, down here by the water, there were rocky places as much as dirt and patches of grassy weeds. But the trail itself was crushed gravel—the kind you definitely didn’t want to walk on barefooted.

She was right. They were just old friends catching up. This wasn’t a date. But still, he had been feeling an attraction to Addi pulling him the entire time. He knew how much what he was about to do would take him to very dangerous territory, but he asked anyway. “Well, I guess there’s only one solution: I’ll have to carry you back.”

“What? No. That’s like half a mile, Ian. You can’t do that. Your arms will want to fall off by the time you carry me that far.”

“You have that little faith in my muscles?” She checked out his muscles, and she blushed again. He had to admit, it made him feel pretty great. “All right, then. Ready?”

She nodded, and he picked her up, an arm around her back and one under her knees. She wrapped an arm around his neck to hold on. With her in his arms, her arm around him, her face so close to his, all his reminders to himself that they were nothing more than old friends flew away faster than her shoe going down the river.

Right now was the point when he should very emphatically remind himself that he never wanted to date again, and even if he miraculously did, it was too soon, so he should keep a wide distance. But that voice just as quickly faded away in the breeze. Apparently, too big a part of him wanted to just let himself be in the moment for a moment.

And that was all it was. A moment. Nothing serious. Just old friends.

“Do you know what else I kept?” He was so close to her, all he had to do was whisper.

She barely shook her head no, like nothing more was needed while they were in such close proximity.

“Those cheesy rhymes you used to write whenever we got on each other’s nerves and you wanted to lead me to where you were hiding so we could make up.”

“Oh my goodness. You didn’t.”

“I so did. Every last one.”

Her ears turned pink and she looked out at the woods for a moment before she met his eyes again. “Seriously. Tell me you didn’t.”

“They were pretty catchy rhymes. Let me think—I think I still have my favorite one from when you were ten or eleven memorized.” He gazed up at the sky. It had been a long time since he’d thought of it, but he still had the preamble to the constitution in his brain from memorizing it in eighth grade, so surely he had that rhyme, too, because he had cared a lot more about memorizing it than he had the preamble.

He cleared his throat. “You said my Lego door was dumb, which made me mad!”

“Stop it.”

“You told me sorry, but I wasn’t done being sad.”

“Ian.”

“I am now, so go where I stuck my gum on that tree stump. Walk fifteen steps until you come to the grass clump.”

She was laughing now.

“Then go left and run forty big, giant paces. Turn around and you’ll see where my hiding place is.”

The pink was all across her cheeks now, and he could feel her laughing against his chest. “I cannot believe you remember that. That was the time I sat in my hiding place for thirty minutes and you never came.”

“Only because someone never said which direction to walk the fifteen steps, and I chose the wrong direction because that entire field was covered in grass clumps. And then Mrs. Walters got mad at me for running twenty-two of the forty big, giant paces through her garden.”

She laughed again, and the sound felt like home out here. Like birds singing in the trees.

“I took a poetry class in college. I think my professor would tell you that my skill in writing poetry hasn’t improved since I was a kid.”

“Suddenly, I want nothing more than to read your poetry written as an

adult.” No, that was wrong. There was something he did want more. A smile spread across his face at the thought that he was much more likely to get an answer with her in his arms than he was in the path of a dog on a mission. “But first, a question.” A genuine smile crossed his face as he watched her expression. “When you left your aunt’s to head back to the airport that last summer and you kissed me, was that a new way of saying goodbye that you were trying out, or did you like me?”

Addi laughed and looked up at the sky, shaking her head. He wasn’t sure she would answer, until she met his eyes again. “I had a crush on you, okay? It was my first one ever, and I obviously wasn’t very good at it. The painted stone was so that you’d think of me often while I was in another state.”

He smiled doubly—for the fourteen-year-old him and the twenty-seven-year-old him—as he looked at the path ahead. “Well, I have to say that your plan worked.”

## ADDISON

ADDISON HAD BEEN HELPING Ian's grandmother to organize her origami supplies in their family room for a grand total of about eight minutes when Ian got home from work. Based on the feigned surprise on the woman's face at him being home and Ian's confusion at her surprise, Addison had the distinct impression that the woman was playing matchmaker. It was too bad she didn't have Addison come over early enough that she could've told the woman about her recent breakup and how she wasn't ready for anything new yet.

And especially not with a guy who not only was recovering from his own breakup, but who was her next door neighbor.

Two weeks ago, as Ian had carried her, minus one shoe, back to her car, something had changed. Maybe it was from having their faces so close together that they could feel each other's breaths as they talked. Or maybe it was from how perfect it felt to be held by Ian. Or to have her arm around his shoulders, holding tight.

Or the fact that he would offer to carry her in the first place. He could've just been a support, walking next to her as she hopped her way back to her car. Or he could've just left her at the side of the river while he drove to go get another shoe from her apartment. But he didn't—he *carried* her.

But maybe the change she was sure they both felt two weeks ago was simply a product of proximity. Like when two magnets got close enough to each other, they stuck together. But it wasn't like they searched each other out from across the room when they weren't. They didn't feel the pull whenever they weren't close. It was nothing but proximity.

Because if it had been something more than proximity, it would've pulled him to her more before now. Because during the last two weeks, he'd been avoiding her as expertly as she had been avoiding him before the big

deodorant debacle in the drugstore. They had accidentally run into each other, as neighbors do, several times. But each time, his small talk had seemed forced, like she was a long-winded neighbor with a differing political opinion or never-ending stories about her cats, and he was trying to get away to avoid hearing it.

Whether they had been acting like magnets for that half mile a couple of weeks ago or not, it wasn't like that between she and Ian now, which was a relief. She wasn't ready for a relationship. She didn't know how long ago he and his fiancée had broken up, but it was obvious that he wasn't looking for a relationship, either. Especially because she had been helping at his house several times over the past few weeks, and each time he'd suddenly had things he needed to do while she was there.

He underestimated his grandma's ability to get him to help with this project, though.

Addison had brought several storage pieces that worked together to organize all Shirley's colored paper squares and rectangles and all of her origami books. The biggest issue with organizing her hobby was what to do with all the unique origami creations she'd made that were currently living in cardboard boxes stacked on top of each other.

"Ian?" Shirley called out. "Can you come here for a minute?" When Ian walked into the family room at the back of the house, she said, "Addison has come up with a plan to show off my origami pieces, and since it'll change the look of the room, I want to know what you think about it."

"Grandma, you know I'll be okay with it. This is your home, too. You can display your things how you'd like."

"And it's also your home. So zip it and listen to Addison's plan."

Addison hid a smile and told Ian about how she had suggested that they hang each of the paper creations from the ceiling using fishing line so it wouldn't be seen. "We'll do it at all different heights just in front of this blank wall, so it'll be an art installation—a masterpiece that people can spend a while looking at."

"I love it."

"Wonderful!" Shirley clapped her hands together. "Because we're going to need help installing it. You're free tonight, right?"

Addison looked at her in alarm. She definitely hadn't said anything about needing help. Ian's expression was every bit as alarmed as Addison's was.

"What?" Shirley said, trying to look innocent. "We *do* need help. Getting

on a ladder without someone supporting it isn't wise, and these arms aren't as supportive as they once were."

So, as Shirley was laying out each of her creations along the floor, adjusting which ones were where, and changing up the heights on all of them until she liked the way it looked on the floor, Addison and Ian sat on the floor, cutting lengths of fishing line and tying them to each of the pieces. Actually, it didn't feel that different from when they were kids, sitting side-by-side, making Lego villages. It was fun. She imagined doing the same thing with Matthew. Unplanned. And on a Thursday night. She nearly laughed out loud. If she had gotten him to do a crazy project like this, there was no way she would've gotten him to sit on the floor to do it.

And there she was, accidentally thinking about her ex. Obviously, she should squash any feelings she had toward Ian right now before her heart thought it could get invested any more than it was.

Except Ian was so sweet to his grandma, and he was so patient. Every time he talked to her, while sitting on the floor, tying fishing line to a folded piece of paper with his big hands that somehow didn't hinder his ability, it just made him that much more attractive. It made those eyes of his look more beautiful. Those eyes were going to be her undoing.

*Seriously, Addison. Squash those feelings!*

It took a while, but they eventually got the line tied to all four dozen origami pieces, and got the ladder out to start attaching them to the ceiling. While Shirley was chatting about how the summers weren't the same when she stopped coming to Hidden Inn, and how sad it was for Ian especially that first summer when she wasn't there, Addison put the ladder in place to hang the first couple. Ian dutifully held on to the side of the ladder, just like his grandma requested, even though it was probably plenty safe without him doing it.

As she stepped onto the ladder, she was acutely aware of how close they were to each other. So was her stomach, which filled with butterflies. She and Ian weren't holding each other like they had at Chipper Creek, yet she swore the butterflies were flapping even stronger—like maybe they just drank caffeine instead of nectar.

And just like when he was a kid, Ian's emotions were right there in plain sight, for everyone to see. He was feeling something, too. Just like he was on Chipper Creek Trail.

When she got the first fishing line attached with a cute little origami frog

hanging from it, Ian handed her the second one so she wouldn't have to get off the ladder to get it. And when she grabbed it from him, their hands brushed, and it sent a thrill across her skin. It was like Shirley had picked up those magnets from opposite sides of the room and put them next to each other again.

She so needed to get some distance from this man!

Especially because after she moved the ladder to the next spot—and the next four spots after that—Ian conveniently turned to say something to his grandma every time she was climbing the ladder and their faces would've been so close. And when he handed her the fishing line for the next one, he held it in a way that she could grab it without touching his hand. He clearly didn't want their magnetic selves to be so close, either.

Or, what was probably more likely, he just wasn't interested in experiencing any kind of mutual thrills with her.

When they had finished hanging the colorful creations about two-thirds of the way across the long wall, she heard the faint sound of her sister's ring tone, so she quickly pulled out her phone to see if it was really her.

Still looking at the phone, her eyebrows creased, she said, "This is my sister, and it's the middle of the night there. Do you mind if I take this?"

"You go right ahead," Shirley said.

Addison answered as she was walking through the kitchen to the back door. "Chloe! Is everything okay?"

"Everything's so good!"

"Isn't it after two in Paris?"

"Yep. Dustin and I went to the most amazing fashion show and after party. I got to meet so many of my idols, too. When we got home, Dustin crashed in about four seconds flat, but I'm still too wired to sleep, so I thought I'd call."

"I love that you are getting all these opportunities! Even if it does mean that you're not in my same city. Or state. Or country."

"Yeah, that's definitely been the worst part. So how are things going with you? Have you seen Ian much since you went on that not-a-date coffee walk with him through the woods?"

Addison glanced back toward the house, almost like she was checking to make sure he couldn't hear from where he was, which was ridiculous. "I'm at his house right now, actually. Just helping his grandma."

"Interesting. Also, I still think you lost your shoe in the creek on purpose."

If you'll admit it, I'll admit it was brilliant."

"It wasn't on purpose—they were really cute shoes, even. Uncomfortable as could be, but super cute. And brand new. Also, I'm not brilliant, or I wouldn't be over here at his house, reminiscing about the creek with every glance or accidental touch. Especially when I know it's going nowhere."

"No. Don't you be talking like that's the most that's ever going to happen between you two. He was your first crush, and it took fate to bring you together again. It's practically meant to happen."

"Chloe, he doesn't want it to. He's making it very clear that whatever we shared on that walk was a fluke. He's not interested. And neither am I. We are both still in rebound territory, remember? I'm not ready."

Chloe let out a long sigh, like she didn't really agree with Addison, but was humoring her. "How will you know when you are ready?"

"The websites I saw said it usually takes a good three months before dating again wouldn't be a rebound. Matthew and I broke up nine weeks ago. After dating for *two years*. So I've got a month to go. By the time I'm ready, Ian will have forgotten all about our walk in the woods."

"Okay."

"Chloe," Addison said cautiously, "why were you smiling when you said 'Okay'? Tell me."

Her sister chuckled quietly. "I just can't wait to see if fate agrees with your timeline."



## IAN

IAN WALKED into the bowling alley later than he had planned and looked around for the guys. He wished he'd been free on axe-throwing night—he enjoyed it more than bowling. But he also liked seeing the guys.

Garrett stood up and waved, and he waved back, and then he stopped at the counter to pay and get shoes. When he headed over to the lane the guys were already at, he saw Garrett's wife Paige, Blake's girlfriend, and a woman with Reece that Ian hadn't seen before. When he got to the bench, Garrett sat down next to him.

"Is the Williamson house still giving you troubles? I was beginning to think you wouldn't make it."

"It's been putting up a good fight, and I didn't want to leave before I finished the trim. Was it date night tonight?"

"Yeah, sorry about that. It wasn't going to be. Paige's mom asked if she could take the kids tonight, so I didn't want to come without her. I didn't know that Blake was bringing Rachel, and the woman with Reece is someone he met here. Maybe I should've texted you."

"No, it's fine." And it was. But he also knew that if Garrett had texted, he likely wouldn't have shown up. He'd dated Zoe for long enough that he'd grown used to constantly having a date for things. He still wasn't used to being the only dateless one in a group.

Since there were seven of them, they'd gotten both of the lanes that shared the seating area, and the other two guys and their dates were already playing in their lane, which left Garrett, Paige, and Ian in their lane. Paige finished putting their names on the screen, and the three of them started bowling.

Work today had been frustrating, trying to get everything perfect in some areas with some really unusual and intricate areas, and it was good to relax

with the guys. They were a fun group, even if he often felt the pain of being alone. They were quick to laugh and joke around and Addi would probably love hanging out with them.

Where had that thought come from? He needed to get her out of his head better than he'd been doing.

On the third frame, he got a strike, and high-fived everyone as he walked back to the bench and sat next to Paige while Garrett got up to bowl his frame.

“So, what’s new, Ian?” Paige asked.

“Not much. How is everything with you?” He assumed the question was basic small talk, until she turned on the bench to see him better.

“No, I meant for real, what is new? There’s just something about you that’s... different.”

His first thought was Addi. Which was stupid, because it wasn’t like he was around her that much.

“I got a haircut last week.”

Paige raised an eyebrow and her lips quirked up in a smile. “Yeah. Haircut. I’m sure that’s it.” Then she gave her husband a double high-five as he walked back after getting nine pins down and waited for his ball to come back up through the chute.

The waiting got to be ridiculously long, though, so Garrett’s eyebrows came together and he looked toward the shoe rental counter. “I think my ball got stuck. I’m going to go let them know.”

Paige turned back to him. “Are you dating anyone?”

Ian scratched the back of his neck, looking away, embarrassed. Paige knew his whole sorry story—he and Zoe had double-dated with Garrett and Paige through the whole thing, so she got to see everything practically first hand. Him falling hopelessly in love. His proposal. The wedding plans. The invitations going out. Zoe breaking up with him just two weeks before the *I do*’s.

The fact that Paige could see something different in him—enough to suspect he had feelings for someone new—felt like she could see how foolish he was being. That he was just setting himself up for another fall that they were going to be a witness to. He really had to get Addi out of his mind. Zoe was a good person. If she found him unworthy of marrying, it was probably a good idea to stay far away from any future relationships.

He turned as Garrett came walking over, the Lewis & Clark Lanes

employee at his side. As they passed by, Garrett looked at Paige and motioned to the back of the furthest lane and said, “We’re going to go behind and get it!” with as much excitement as a ten-year-old about to go on his first rollercoaster.

He thought that Paige was going to press him for more information, but instead, she changed the subject. “Do you remember when Emmie was born, and I was trying to figure out life with a baby who cried nonstop and a toddler who destroyed the house nonstop?”

Ian chuckled. “I remember that when Garrett would come to a site, he had new stories daily of things like finding the milk in the pantry or the cereal in the fridge.”

Paige laughed, too. “I swear I couldn’t even have told you what six plus three was for that first couple of months. And with the amount of sleep I got with a baby like Emmie, my maternity leave was over way too soon.”

“I bet.”

“So one day, I’m at the hospital, working a twelve hour shift, and I went into a patient’s room to do all the discharge teaching. I told him he needed to be on a liquid diet for the next week, what doctor to follow up with, what medications to take—all of it. The guy was just so happy the whole time, which is my favorite thing to see when I’m discharging a patient. Thirty minutes after I sent the man on his way, I found out that I had gone into the wrong patient’s room!”

“You sent the wrong guy home?”

Paige nodded. “He had been so happy because he thought that meant he didn’t have to do the MRI he was dreading. All the information I had given him—diet, doctor, medication, everything—was wrong.”

She shook her head at the memory, and they both chuckled.

“It was funny, sure, and we all had a laugh, including the patient I accidentally sent home and the one I was supposed to discharge. But as I went home that night, I just kept thinking, what if it had been a patient who needed a lifesaving medication before we managed to get them back in? Or one of a million things that could’ve been just as devastating? The list of ways that could’ve gone so wrong kept piling up in my head, keeping me awake all night long.

“The truth was, my sleep-deprived brain very well could have caused a major catastrophe. The thought sickened me. The next morning, I called my supervisor and let her know that I needed a longer leave, and I didn’t go back

for another five weeks.”

“I never knew that was the reason why you decided to stay home longer. I figured it was because of Emmie.”

“That’s because I felt very damaged and that I didn’t deserve to be a nurse. I was embarrassed and I asked Garrett not to say anything to anyone.”

“I’m sorry.”

She looked over Ian’s shoulder and smiled, so he turned to see Garrett come out from the door leading behind the pin deck, holding his bowling ball over his head like it was a trophy and he had just won the Super Bowl.

Then she met Ian’s eyes again. “Do you think I should’ve quit after that? That it was a mistake too big to ever be a nurse again?”

“No!” Was she thinking about quitting? That felt so wrong. Being a nurse was so much of who Paige was. “You’re amazing at what you do. Garrett tells me all the time about how much your patients and the entire hospital staff love you. It would be a tragedy if you let that one choice define your entire career and made you quit.”

She met his eyes for a long moment, and then said, “Right. Just like it would be a tragedy if you let one relationship define the rest of your life and keep you from developing a meaningful relationship with someone else.”

Then she stood up to go congratulate her husband on his successful bowling ball retrieval, leaving Ian on the bench, feeling like he just got hit with a semi-truck of truth that he wasn’t sure he was ready to accept.



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## ADDISON

ADDISON HAD JUST FINISHED a four hour walk-in pantry job at a client's house and headed back to the inn. The massive jobs were the most satisfying, but the quick ones here and there were fun and gave her the boost she needed to tackle the big things.

And she had a massively big thing starting tomorrow. A client in a mansion in Lake Oswego wanted her to organize both the husband's and wife's office spaces, a craft room, four bedroom closets, a toy room, and a family room, and she had planned to spend a full eight days at their house. She had already met with the client to assess and make a list of all the organization products they would need to accomplish the monumental task. She had ordered them from her favorite supplier, but the shipment had been delayed and she had worried it wouldn't arrive in time.

But she had gotten a text that all the boxes had been delivered to the inn just before she left the client's house. She couldn't wait to open them and get everything organized to start on the house tomorrow morning. Not only was organizing the supplies one of her favorite parts, but getting everything ready before starting was essential to the job going as smoothly as a job that big could go. She even grabbed lunch at a drive-through in Gresham so she could get started on it the moment she walked in her front door. With as much stuff as she ordered, it would probably take every table in the dining room to get it all figured out.

She saw Ian's truck in his driveway even before she'd even come around the bend in the road enough to see the inn's sign, and she smiled, even more happiness building up in her chest. Sure, the truck meant that he was home, which meant he was close to her home, but it wasn't like she was going to see him. So she really just smiled over simply seeing his truck. Ridiculous. She shook her head as she turned off the road and onto the inn's long driveway.

The fact that she had a hard time finding a parking space in her own eight-car parking lot was her first clue that a lot was going on at the inn. Still, though, she wasn't quite prepared for the chaos she found when she opened the front door.

All the boxes of supplies—all twenty-eight of them—were stacked in the lobby. Two little kids dressed like monkeys, who looked like they were probably three or four, were pounding their plastic dinosaurs on the terrain of the multi-level box tower. She had no idea who the kids were, so she just waved and said hi. The loudest sounds were coming from the family room, so she walked to the left and poked her head in the double-wide doorway.

Bex must be filming her Sterling Sisters segment, because all four of her sisters were seated in a semi-circle, each one talking before the previous one quite finished. All of her sisters' kids who weren't old enough to go to school yet were running around the room, laughing and squealing and screaming, like they were trying to prove that their moms and aunts could stay cool under chaos.

Interestingly enough, that didn't even explain who the kids playing dinosaur on her boxes were. Movement from the other side of the lobby in the doorway to the kitchen and dining area at the right caught her attention, so she left the chaos of the family room, stepped over all the boxes and little kids dressed as monkeys in the lobby, and headed to, hopefully, a more serene kitchen.

The room was so full of people and things that it took a moment to make sense of what she was even seeing. Every single table in the room was filled with something, and three kids and half a dozen adults were all moving nonstop at the end of the room opposite the kitchen. From the kitchen, Peyton waved and flashed her bright smile, and shouted out, "I can't stop stirring, but come over."

Bewildered, Addison headed back to the kitchen end of the room. Peyton held the arm out that wasn't currently whisking some kind of sauce on the stove and gave her a hug. "A little crazy in here, huh? I am making a week's worth of meals for a family of six, because tomorrow morning, the mom is going into the hospital to have a baby—child number five, if you can believe it. And if anyone needs a week's worth of meals already prepared, it's them, for sure."

A week's worth of food for six people. With the kinds of meals that Peyton made, it made sense that every burner on the stove had a pot on it, and

every bit of counter space was taken up with food, cutting boards, and bowls of things in progress. The big table that they ate on was filled with different-sized food containers, all with their lids neatly next to them, all of them labeled, some of them filled.

“And Timini?”

“Oh, remember that client who was doing the extravagant production of The Wizard of Oz for preschoolers? They wanted a photo shoot of the kids wearing the costumes. And, of course, there are a ton of last-minute alterations to make. She’s even had to sew an emergency lion’s tail. She’s so fast, it’s unbelievable. Anyway, that’s why her sewing machines and fabric is everywhere. That woman in the yellow shirt is the client, and the one in navy is the photographer. Obviously, I mean she is the one with the camera. The other three are moms of the kiddos.”

Timini was trying to get four kids and a dog—Dorothy, Tin Man, Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion, and Toto, who were all in the same shot—looking perfect, while the photographer and the client were trying to pose them, and the moms were trying to get them to stay doing what they were supposed to be doing and not be distracted by the dog yapping like crazy. She definitely had her hands full. With as introverted as Timini was, when this was all over, she was going to crash like a toddler on the car ride home from a playground after having been hopped up on sugar, sunshine, and friends for too long.

“What about you?” Peyton asked as she moved the sauce off the burner and started cutting some vegetables. “What’s on your schedule for the rest of the day?”

Addison glanced the direction of the lobby, then raced forward and caught Dorothy’s basket that one of the kids from the photo shoot had thrown, saving the container of mashed potatoes on the table that it was heading for. She tossed it back to Timini, who seemed to notice her for the first time and called out, “Thank you!”

Then she turned back to Peyton. “I need to open all those boxes in the lobby and get everything organized. Some pieces will need to be put together, and then they all need to be organized by which day I’ll need them.”

Peyton grimaced. “At least the lobby’s still available.”

Addison nodded. There was a free room upstairs where she planned to put them, but it wasn’t big enough to open and assemble all twenty-eight boxes of supplies and still have room to organize. So really, the lobby was her only



option.

When she got back to the lobby, the two monkeys were climbing on the boxes like, well, monkeys, and the boxes probably weren't strong enough to hold them. So she convinced them that empty boxes were more fun for their dinosaurs, and gave them the cardboard boxes as she opened them. And she was right—the cardboard boxes were more fun. Fun enough that the half dozen she'd given over to the kids had drawn the half dozen kids from Bex's family and the other four kids from the photo shoot.

And, apparently, the lobby was also the "staging area" for the photo shoot, so they were soon joined by the moms of the photo shoot kids and a whole lot of noise. Everyone was trying to direct kids and adults alike, even though none of them could really tell what anyone was saying. And the louder they got, the louder Bex and her sisters in the other room seemed to get to be heard over the din.

The lobby was so full that Addison didn't even have space to open another box. She was worried if she started carrying things upstairs that all the chaos would follow her, so she just did her best to step over kids and boxes so she could get to all the items she had opened and move them to the top of the check-in counter, all to the tune of kids shouting and making dinosaur, monkey, lion, scarecrow, and tin man sounds, adults directing, and cardboard boxes shuffling. Then she stacked the unopened boxes in a tall, even stack, so they wouldn't resemble a mountain terrain or steps, hopefully making them less enticing to climb on.

She crossed her fingers that all the supplies in the boxes would be safe, and then she took the first opening in the crowd to escape down the hallway to the back door and went outside.

As soon as the door closed behind her, most of the noise disappeared, and she collapsed against the stone wall of the inn, feeling like she just escaped from a stampede at the zoo. Maybe finding the bulk of her roommates at a Creative Women Entrepreneurs seminar hadn't been the best idea ever.

She glanced across the beautifully mowed grass to the always open gate separating the inn's yard from Ian's, and she suddenly wanted nothing more than to go through that gate and see if he was in his shop. From what she'd noticed, he was gone to sites a good four days a week, and the weekdays that he was home, he was usually working in his shop.

But no. That was a very bad idea. She wasn't ready for a relationship, so she needed to keep her distance and focus on something else. Like the weeds

in the flower beds that needed pulling, or the blackberry bushes that were encroaching along the back fence.

Because somewhere along the way, she'd realized that she wasn't ready to open herself to a new relationship for more reasons than just worrying it would be a rebound date. She was also not ready for the probable rejection. For letting a guy know that she liked him, only to be turned away. She had experienced it way too many times in the ten years she'd been dating, and it was painful every time.

It struck her then that the reason she ultimately broke up with Matthew was for the same reason. He hadn't rejected dating her or even becoming an item. His rejection was more subtle, so she hadn't recognized it. But he had rejected her every time she wanted to do anything that would progress their relationship into something less casual. Or do something outside of their usual takeout Tuesdays and Saturday afternoon hike or bike ride followed by a movie. He rejected her wanting to build a life with him. Or spending more time together, talking about life goals together, or even just talking more.

Then, while eating Tuesday takeout one day, instead of talking about what they were going to do Saturday like they always did, she had said she needed to buy a new coffee table, and asked if he wanted to go shopping with her on Thursday. A *Thursday*, of all days. Apparently, either coffee tables or Thursdays were Matthew's kryptonite, and he said they were going too fast, that he wasn't ready, and that he didn't know when he ever would be. After just over two years of dating, seeing her a third time in a single week to shop for a coffee table was moving things too quickly.

So in the end, it was the constant rejection that made her break things off with him. And now, standing in her backyard, she realized she wasn't ready to face that again. Weeds and blackberry bushes were definitely the better option. She marched right over to some nearby weeds and yanked them out just to prove her point. The goal right now was to figure out what she wanted in life and if moving to Quicksand and starting her own business was the right thing to do.

But as she pulled more and more weeds, she kept seeing Ian's shop out of the corner of her eye, and she started to wonder what it looked like inside.

And, okay, maybe what he looked like as he worked inside.

He was probably wearing a t-shirt, and those muscles she saw when he was mowing were probably straining his t-shirt as he worked.

And with as much care as he seemed to put into everything she had

witnessed him do, he was probably making beautiful things that were practically works of art made of wood. And his eyes were probably there, looking amused, and waiting to draw her in and make her forget how to form sentences.

Before she even realized what was happening, she was through the gate separating their yards and halfway to his shed. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to stop in and see him. After all, she hadn't been stalking Matthew on social media, hadn't thought of what he might think of her dating again, and hadn't hoped he'd send her a text, letting her know how he was doing. So she was good. No rebound issues at all.

She heard sounds of a saw for a moment before it shut off, so she raised her hand to knock on the door, imagining the moment of him opening it, a smile spread across that beautiful face, and her heart practically floated.

Then she pictured what his face would look like if he didn't want to see her, and her heart felt like fragile glass that was plummeting toward the ground, about to shatter, and she changed her mind. This really was a very bad idea. She turned around without knocking and headed straight for the gate and an escape back into her own yard.



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## IAN

IAN HAD JUST SHUT off his band saw and was brushing the sawdust off a beautiful piece of oak when he thought he heard something. A quiet knock? Just footsteps? He didn't think so. Maybe his subconscious picked up on a shadow or something, because he suddenly felt like someone was at his shop door. It was probably nothing, but he went to the door anyway.

When he opened it, he saw Addi walking away, and she was almost to the gate to her yard. "Addi!" She turned around, and from the blush on her cheeks, he guessed that maybe she had been at his door, but had left without knocking. "Want to come in?"

She glanced toward her house before looking back his direction. So she was clearly still hesitating. But she had walked all the way to his shed, so at least part of her wanted to come in. And a big part of him really wanted her to. He pushed the door open all the way so if that part won out, she'd have a clear path.

She shook her head and chuckled as she walked toward him. "You, Ian, must have supersonic hearing. I swear I hadn't made a sound coming up to your door."

He shrugged. "What can I say? It's my superpower." It wasn't his superpower. Especially because all the noise from the saw he had just been running was still making his ears ring. But claiming that was better than claiming what might've actually happened—that he was so in tune with her that he could practically sense her nearness.

"Welcome to my shop," he said as he motioned to it all. Addi walked slowly around the space, looking at everything as she went, her eyes seeming to fall on each thing without missing any. He was suddenly dying to know what thoughts were going through her head.

"It's different than your grandpa's shop. More... airy."

Ian nodded. “I had to tear it down and rebuild before I could move all my equipment here—it wasn’t up to code anymore. That wall back there, though, is finished with all the wood from his shop, and everything hanging on it is from my grandpa.” It was the best part of the space. His grandpa had taught him so much every summer that the man deserved an entire wall as a shrine. By the way Addi smiled while taking in all the details, she agreed.

She asked for a tour, so he showed her everything. He figured she was just asking to be polite, but when she asked more questions about everything, he started telling her about the name of every saw, sander, and machine.

“I never knew you were interested in this kind of stuff.”

She lifted a shoulder in a shrug, and it made him notice just how great her shoulders were.

“Back in Amarillo, I designed storage solutions, and I worked with manufacturing pretty closely. We mostly made our pieces out of plastics—the kinds of things you’d find at Target or Bed, Bath and Beyond, so it was basically nothing at all like what you do here. It’s just interesting to see the difference between that and what you use for woodworking.” She ran her fingers along the piece of wood he’d cut moments before she showed up at his door. “Your finished product is a million times prettier. What are you making with this?”

She jumped up to sit on the counter at the end of his shop. He figured it meant she really wanted to hear, so he talked about the fireplace he was designing for a remodel, and told about the parts he assembled in his shop and the parts he did during installation at the client’s home.

And she listened the whole time. He tried to think of the last time he’d had a captive audience like this, and he couldn’t come up with one. His grandma would listen, of course, but she already knew pretty much everything there was to know about carpentry from Ian’s grandpa, so he never got to talk to her about it like this. Zoe definitely hadn’t ever wanted to know anything about his job. Ever. She wanted him to have a good job with steady pay—she didn’t want to have to hear about it. That was stuff he should chat about with his “carpentry friends.” Having Addi listen was new. Nice.

“Play Rapid Fire with me.”

That was a game he hadn’t played since that summer when he was twelve. He cocked his head to the side. “You offering anything?”

Addison looked up, like she was trying to think of anything she could offer, but then shook her head.

“Awesome. Double Rapid Fire it is.” He was hoping that she didn’t have anything to offer in payment for a one-sided game, because he really wanted to hear her answers, too. He sat on the worktable across from Addi, an aisle separating them.

“One, two, three,” Addi said, as they bounced their fists on their thighs, then she made scissors with her hand and he made paper. She was less predictable than she was as a kid. “Yes!” she said. “Okay, last serious relationship—how long ago, and how serious?”

“Wow, Addi. Just like when you were a kid, you jump into the hard questions.”

“Sorry. I just—” She looked away, shaking her head. “You can use a skip.”

“No, it’s okay.” He didn’t exactly want to talk about it, but he also wanted her to know. “Lasted just over a year, ended two weeks before you moved in. It was pretty serious. I thought it would end in marriage.” He held back his own flinch saying it, and was surprised that Addi’s face didn’t hold disgust at hearing it. In fact, all he could see was curiosity, like something had just clicked into place, and something else he couldn’t quite place. Not pity. Understanding, maybe?

“Two years for me, also ended two weeks before I moved in, went nowhere.”

Interesting. They both had relationships end at virtually the same time. Maybe that was where the understanding came from. But now he was the curious one. He expected her to ask a follow-up question—since she’d won the round, she could ask first. She must’ve seen his reluctance to talk about it, because she didn’t ask.

Unless she didn’t want to open him to asking a follow-up to hers. Fair enough.

She won the next rock, paper, scissors battle, too, and asked, “On a scale of one to ten, how much do you love your job?”

“Eight.” The point of the game was to answer fast, without giving yourself a chance to think. His answer kind of surprised him.

“Eight,” she answered for herself as well. Then said, “Huh. With as much as you light up when talking about it, I would’ve guessed a nine or ten.”

She won the next round. He needed to switch up his rock, paper, scissors strategy. “If you could give up one aspect of your job, what would it be?”

“Trim.”

“Bead collections.”

He finally won a round, and asked, “Part of your job you like the best?”

“Finding creative solutions to problems that seem impossible to solve.”

“Building things.”

Then, he won again, and asked, “What would make your job a ten?”

“Owning my own organization design business.”

He was dying to ask her about it, but he had to answer first. That was the rule. “Owning my own custom cabinet shop.”

Her eyebrows shot up and her mouth opened like she was about to ask him something, but since he asked the question, he got to ask a follow-up question first. Also the rules. “I want to hear more about this design business.”

“I love helping people to organize the spaces in their homes. I really do. There are just so many times that I think of a storage solution that would be perfect—if it actually existed. If I still worked at my old job, I would’ve made a mockup and really pushed for it in our production meetings. Back then, though, I wasn’t in people’s homes so much, organizing their spaces, so I didn’t have the practical design knowledge I’ve gotten from being in the field. I’d love to combine both. And with my own shop, I would have that kind of freedom.”

Everything about her came alive as she was talking about it. Happiness and excitement filled her expressions and her tone of voice. Her sense of adventure had been what first made him want to be friends with her when he was eleven—he loved that she hadn’t lost that. He wanted to have those adventures with her again. He wanted all of those big dreams of hers to come true.

“I want to hear about your custom cabinets, because Ian, that’s perfect! I can totally picture you doing that. Would you run it out of this shop?”

He shook his head. “It’s too small. About all I can make here is one built-in at a time. I would need a shop big enough for several sets of cabinets being built at the same time, as well as some employees. So it’ll take some time, but all the decisions I make as a subcontractor are aiming me toward that goal.”

He hadn’t shared that dream with anyone. It felt great to say it out loud, and to have someone hear it. Especially someone who seemed so interested and seemed to believe that he could do it. He hadn’t guessed how great that would feel. Like a helium balloon in his chest.



“If you start doing custom storage cabinets for parts of the home other than kitchens—like mud rooms, storage areas, laundry rooms, things like that—let me know. I have several clients who I bet would love to have you build them some.”

No words came out of Ian’s mouth. He just sat, looking at Addi. He hadn’t had a ton of experience with serious relationships other than Zoe, and with her, support only went one way. She never would’ve offered to give his name to potential clients. He had thought he and Zoe had a pretty perfect relationship. But the more time he spent around Addi, the more he realized that maybe he had been idealizing his and Zoe’s love, and that maybe it hadn’t been all he’d thought it was.

He realized he was just staring when Addi shifted her gaze to the floor. He leaned forward from his perch on the work table. “Thank you.” He hoped his words came out as heartfelt as he meant them.

She met his eyes, a look in hers that he hadn’t seen before. He didn’t know what it was, exactly—all he knew was that he wanted to reach out and touch that earnest, beautiful face. Then he looked at her lips, and he realized how badly he wanted to pull her close and kiss those lips.

There was a good three feet of aisle separating them, but when she leaned forward, he knew she must be feeling it, too.

When she leaned forward, she pushed down on the end of a board whose end went just past the counter, flipping it up and sending it and the container of one inch long wooden dowels that rested on it flying. The board clattered to the ground and the dowels scattered to the floor, rolling everywhere.

They both jumped off their seats on the work surfaces pretty quickly, and Addi’s hands flew to her mouth. Then she mumbled, “Oh my goodness. This is blueberries all over again.”

He chuckled “Nah. Nothing like blueberries. Which is good, because I like this shirt.”

Her eyes flew to his chest, and his pecs may have involuntarily flexed, which was closely followed by her face reddening and his breaking into a grin. She grabbed the empty container from where it had rolled right next to his drill press, and he took it from her and set it on the counter next to him. “It’s okay, Addi. Not a big deal.”

She grabbed the container back and bent down to pick up the dowels. “There isn’t a surly man in deli to call for clean up on the front aisle, so it’s the least I can do.”

He smiled and crouched down next to her, picking up the little round pieces of wood that had somehow spread themselves everywhere. As they worked side-by-side, their knees, arms, and sometimes hands brushing each other, all he wanted to do was turn toward her, cradle her face in his hands, and kiss her until they both forgot about the spilled dowels.

Addi looked over at him with her face so open and beautiful, and he nearly did just that. But then her eyes shifted to how far the mess had spread behind him, and he looked, too. As much as he wanted to kiss her, the mess told him he couldn't. It was like the universe was trying to give him a physical representation of the mess he'd make of things with Addi if he did, and he liked her way too much to do that to her.



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## ADDISON

ADDISON HEADED home from a half-day job in Gresham, wishing she had another job to take the other half of the day. It was still scary to have her own business and to know that she wasn't going to be having a paycheck magically appear from a company anymore, so gaps in her schedule made her nervous. She had another half day unscheduled next week, and two the week after that. Sure, she might get more clients in time to fill them, but she couldn't guarantee it.

As soon as Addison opened the front door, Bex came running from the dining room, phone in hand, looking like she was simultaneously going to hold her arms up in a V while running a victory lap and pull at her hair in desperation. "Adds! I'm so glad you're home! I was literally just pressing on your contact to call you. Are you off for the day?" When Addison nodded, she said, "Oh good. I need a giant favor from you, and I promise I will let you cash in on that favor at any moment of any day."

The sounds of kids eating and laughing and arguing and telling jokes all at the same time came from the kitchen, and it was all Addison could do to keep her attention on Bex and not walk in there to see what was up.

"Remember how I've been dying to get an interview with Steve Stonebreaker for my channel for months? I just got a call from his publicist, and he is in Portland and has an opening. Today! But there's no school today and I told my sister I would watch her kids and so they're here and I can't take them with me and Adds, you *have* to help me. I can't pass up this chance."

"You want me to watch your sister's kids?"

"Yes. Thank you. Seriously, I owe you big time. Peyton is doing that big catering thing until late tonight, and Timini isn't back from visiting her parents until tomorrow. I already cleared it with my sister, and she's good to

have you watch them instead.”

“Bex, I don’t know how to take care of kids! I have one sister who is two years younger than me, so it’s been forever since she was a kid, and I have zero nieces and nephews. I wouldn’t even know what to do!”

Bex brushed away her comment with her hand as she went to the check-in counter and started filling her oversized bag with things she kept in the drawer, placing her video equipment on top. “It’s seriously not hard. There’s only four of them, and they’re good kids. It’ll be a piece of cake. It’s an hour drive there and an hour back, and probably an hour for the interview, so I’ll be gone three hours, tops. Just take them to the park or something. My sister traded me vehicles, and I can trade you, so you’ll have her Yukon with the car seats for the younger ones. She keeps it stocked with wipes and a first aid kit and everything else you could possibly need.”

Panic was rising up in Addison more and more by the second.

Bex dropped a set of keys on the counter and said, “These are for the Yukon,” and then grabbed Addison’s keys right from her hand. Bex gave her a hug and a quick “You’re the best!” and then poked her head into the dining area and said, “Addison is going to watch you all until I get back. She’s awesome and I know you all will be angels for her.” Then she raced out the door.

A moment later, she poked her head back in. “Oh, and watch out for Drew. He has even less Stranger Danger than the rest of them.” Then she was gone again.

Shock kept Addison from moving a single inch from the spot where she stood for a good thirty seconds. Until she heard shouting over whose carrot stick someone just took a bite out of was whose, and she rushed into the dining area to hopefully quell what was going on. Four kids sat at the dining table and two of them were having a tug-o-war over a carrot stick. The other two were using their carrot sticks for a mini sword fight. All four put down their carrot sticks and acted like they hadn’t just been doing anything wrong with them and smiled at her.

“Hi,” she said, and gave a little wave. “I’m Addison, and I guess we are going to hang out today.”

The oldest kid shrugged, then picked up his sandwich and took a bite. The two youngest went back to sword-fighting, and the other girl just grinned at her. So Addison took a seat facing the girl.

“Do you mind introducing me to everyone?”

“No problem.” The girl pointed to her brother. “That’s Ash. He’s eight, but just barely. He’s the oldest, so he thinks he’s the smartest. I’m Beth. I’m six, and the one that’s actually the smartest.” She flinched when Ash’s carrot stick hit her in the arm, but kept going like nothing had happened. “That’s Chelle. She’s five, and the one sticking the carrot up his nose is Drew. He’s four.” She reached out and yanked the carrot stick out of her youngest sibling’s nose. “If you forget, you can just call us A, B, C, and D,” she said as she pointed to each of them in order.

“Clever.” She tried to not let the shock of being in charge of four kids who were all basically a year apart show on her face.

“But it’s like secret cleverness,” Beth said, leaning in and cupping her hand at the side of her mouth, conspiratorially, “because our actual names—Dasher, Elizabeth, Michelle, and Andrew—aren’t alphabetical at all. Only our nicknames are.”

“Extra clever.”

The younger two switched from sword-fighting and nose-sticking their carrots to throwing them, and it only took about one-fourth of a second for the older two to join in. “Okay,” Addison said, standing up, “it looks like maybe you’re done with lunch. Want to go to the park?”

They all gave their yeses in the form of fist pumping, jumping up and down, ear-splitting shouting of words she couldn’t even make out, and, in Chelle’s case, dancing.

“Let’s, um, get lunch cleaned up, and then we’ll head out.”

They threw all their garbage away like the trash can was a basketball hoop and they were in a slam dunk competition. They were all wearing shoes, and looked like they were probably ready to go. Thankfully, it occurred to her to ask if anyone needed to go to the bathroom before they left.

Still, it took them a full fifteen minutes to all get outside to the Yukon and hop in. And then back in. And then back out. Like they were playing a game of whack-a-mole where one of them kept popping up outside of the vehicle every time she got another one in.

Finally, all four were buckled in to their correct seats and all doors were closed. As she went around to the driver’s side of the vehicle, she stopped at the back and leaned against the vehicle just to catch her breath.

“Looks like you’re having a party over there.”

At the sound of Ian’s voice, her attention flew to where his truck was parked at the end of his driveway, just twenty feet away. It had been a week

and a half since they had come so close to kissing, and she still thought about it daily and longed for a moment like it to return. But right now, she longed for some help even more.

“Ian! Please tell me you have absolutely nothing going on in your life for the next little bit and have just been hoping someone would come along and ask you to spend an afternoon at the park.”

He smiled that amused smile he seemed to have reserved just for her that was getting way too much use. “Where’d you get all the kids?”

“They’re Bex’s nephews and nieces, and she begged me to watch them for the afternoon. Do you have any experience with kids?”

“Sure—all my brothers have kids, and I love hanging out with them.”

“Ian, please, you’ve got to help me. I don’t know if I can survive this on my own.”

She jolted in surprise as something hit the window just behind her, and she looked to see that an all-out stuffed animal war was going on in the back seats. She hadn’t even seen that there were stuffed animals in the vehicle. But Ian was walking toward her, either out of morbid curiosity or because he was willing to help. Hopefully it was the latter.

“Bex says it’ll be a piece of cake, and that they’re angels.”

“Clearly she’s right.”

“Of course, if you gave thirty kindergartners unlimited snow cones and cotton candy and then put them in a room together and asked Bex to play a game with them, she’d emerge an hour later saying it was a piece of cake, that they were angels, and offer to do it again soon.”

Ian glanced toward his shop.

“Do you have a lot of work that has to get done today?”

He looked at his shop for a long moment, and then turned back to her. “Nothing I can’t get done later tonight.”

“So you’ll come with me?”

He nodded, and she had to stop herself from throwing her arms around him to show her overflowing, can’t contain it, have to show it, gratitude. Then she stopped fighting it and gave him a quick hug anyway, then ran around to her side of the Yukon before she could decide if it was a bad idea. And before the little ninjas inside the vehicle found a way to escape and she had to start the process of getting them buckled in again.

Once they got to the biggest park in town and all the kids ran squealing in excitement toward it, Addison breathed out a huge sigh of relief that she was

no longer having to keep them contained. The relief didn't last long. It wasn't long before she'd used a handful of wipes and half a dozen squirts of hand sanitizer, two bandages from the first aid kit, an extra pair of socks from the bag in the car, made three trips with kids to the bathroom, caught Drew trying to escape four times, and asked the kids not to show her any snails, snakes, beetles, squirrels, or slugs they found. And better yet, not to pick them up at all.

The kids were all together, huddling under one of the platforms leading up to the slides, talking with some other kids they had made friends with since they'd been there. It was the first time they were all within sight at the same time and no one needed to go to the bathroom. Addison collapsed on a bench next to Ian.

"Thank you again for coming. Seriously—I don't know how I could've gotten through this without you."

"You say it as though we've already gotten through this, but I'm pretty sure they're having a war council as we speak."

"As long as they let me sit here next to you for thirty seconds right at this moment, I'm okay to let that be a problem for future me."

From where they'd both flopped down on the bench, their hands were right next to each other, their fingers bumping. Ian moved his pinky finger, running it along the edge of her hand. She closed her eyes and let herself feel every single thrill of goose bumps that went all the way up her arm and to her heart. Maybe he really was feeling the same things she was.

Ever since he had told her how recent his breakup had been and how serious it had been, she had tried not to push him. Fear had stopped her plenty, too. But she was falling for him—more so every single time she saw him.

She was in the middle of imagining what it would be like if he ran those fingertips of his all the way up her arm when she heard breathing right next to her ear on the side opposite of Ian, and her eyes flew open. "I know you said no bugs, snakes, or... I can't remember what else," Chelle said, "but this isn't any of those. Check out the frog I found!" She plopped the big-bellied thing down on Addison's arm, and it let out a big *Crooooook!* before jumping away, right as Addison screamed.

Chelle grimaced. "No frogs, either?"

"Pretty please?" Addison begged.

"Check," Chelle said, drawing an invisible checkmark in the air with her



finger. “No more frogs.” She was halfway back to the slide when she turned back. “Tadpoles aren’t frogs, right? Because I think there’s a pond back there.”

“I think we better say no to tadpoles and no to going to the pond,” Ian said.

Chelle wrote another invisible check, then turned to the others under the platform and shouted, “The tadpole plan is out, guys!”

Addison buried her face in her hands and mumbled. “How much more time do we have?”

“Until Bex’s three hours are up? Um, it looks like about fifteen minutes.”

That was worth taking her hands off her face for. “Oh, thank heavens. That means we can head back now, right?”

Ian smiled the sweetest smile at her, and then he reached out and gave her hand a squeeze before standing up. His hand had only been on hers for a second, but it sent such a jolt of electricity through her that she thought she just might be able to handle the monumental task of getting all four kids back in the vehicle.

She couldn’t help but check him out as he brought all of the kids together for a huddle and pulled her into it, talking to them like he was the quarterback telling the team what the next play was. Then he rallied them to grab any shoes that somehow fell off, water bottles that had been tossed aside, and anything else they left, and headed back to the Yukon. He was so cute with them that she could’ve watched all day. And, remarkably, they all listened and headed to the vehicle.

Getting them in was another story. She had never seen so much opening doors, running around to the other side, closing doors, opening again, and running around again, all the kids, all in different directions. If it was a choreographed show on Broadway, she still would’ve been impressed.

Ash and Beth were giggling on the other side of the SUV from her. She almost went around to ask them to get in, but Drew took off running at full speed toward the playground. No sooner had Ian run after him than Chelle took off the direction of the pond, so Addison chased her down. By the time they got them both back to the vehicle, she wanted to kiss Ash and Beth. They were both in their seats, seatbelts on, actually looking like angels.

And they even stayed there while she and Ian got Chelle and Drew buckled in. She let out a huge breath as she got into the driver’s seat and started the Yukon.

Ian motioned to the clock in the console. “With as long as that took, Bex will probably beat us back to the inn.”

“Music to my ears,” she whispered as she pulled out of their parking space.

A few minutes into their drive, Addison realized that this was the quietest they had been since the moment Bex left her with them. Enough that they could even hear the radio—she hadn’t even realized on the drive there that it had been turned on. All she could hear was whispers and giggles.

Ian must’ve noticed at the same time, because he said, “You all sure are being quiet.”

There was more giggling, and definitely more whispering and “Shh”s coming from them.

At a stop sign, Addison glanced over at Ian. “Maybe we just wore them out?”

Ian turned and looked at the kids, then turned back and mumbled only loud enough for her to hear, “Or this is the calm before the storm, and they are about to carry out those plans they made in their council of war earlier.”

She looked back at him in alarm. “No. It can’t be that.”

Ian looked out the window, squinting at something in the distance, not meeting her eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure it’s fine.” He reached over and gave her knee a gentle squeeze, which wasn’t quite the comforting gesture he was probably meaning it to be. Especially when he added, in a voice she didn’t believe at all, “We’ve got nothing to worry about.”



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## IAN

THE KIDS in the back seat of the vehicle stayed to whispers the whole ride home. That part was nice. It was the giggling that worried Ian. He actually loved when his nieces and nephews giggled about some secret plans they had. He had a feeling they weren't giggling because they drew a smiley face in the inside bottom of his plastic cup of punch at a family party, and before long he'd notice it. Or because they hid their plastic insect toys like Easter eggs throughout the house.

Addi pulled into the circular drive in front of the inn. Unfortunately, her car—that Bex was driving—wasn't parked in the lot. As all the kids unbuckled their seat belts and got out, Addi turned to him. “Thank you again for helping. Is there anything in your shop I can do that will help you make up the lost time? I could come over as soon as Bex gets here.”

He glanced out his window. Instead of the kids running off in all directions and having to be herded back into the house like he had expected, they were all in a cluster at the back of the vehicle. “I don't think you better say goodbye to me yet. We might want to hold off on all plans until Bex is here.”

She must've caught some concern either in his voice or his expression, because she looked back at the pack of kids at the back of the vehicle, worry and wariness all over her face. When they got out of the SUV and went around to the kids, they were lined up with their backs against the vehicle, hands behind them, grinning like they had never been more proud of themselves.

“Look what we brought back with us,” Beth said, and all four of the kids motioned like they were Vanna White at a boy standing in the middle of their group. He was one of the kids who had been gathered with them under the platform by the slides at the park.

Addi's gasp was audible, and her hands flew to her mouth.

"His name is Jaxon," Drew said. "We made friends and he wanted to come over and play."

"So we planned everything," Chelle said, throwing her arms wide. "Aren't we the best at planning? You guys didn't even know we did it!"

"And we even got the timing perfect," Ash said, puffing his chest out. "Drew and Chelle took off running so you'd chase them, which gave us all the time we needed to get Jaxon hidden under the blanket in the back."

"And I stayed quiet the whole time!" Jaxon said.

These kids were young, and they pulled it off like pros. They probably had a bright future ahead of them in acting, as strategists, or as bank robbers.

Addi started pacing in a small circle. "Oh my goodness. I just kidnapped a kid. His mom is probably running around frantic, searching for him, and the police are going to come and they're going to arrest me and I'm going to jail for kidnapping."

"It's going to be okay," he said as he took a step toward her.

"No it's not. We have a kidnapped kid right here! What do we do? Take him back to the park and say sorry? What if they're already out searching?"

Ian pulled out his phone and dialed 911. As he was waiting for them to answer, he said, "Let's see what the police want us to do." Then, because she seemed panicked, he wrapped an arm around her shoulder. She turned into him, and he hugged her to his chest as well as he could while holding the phone to his ear.

"Nine one one. What's your emergency?"

"We want to report an accidental kidnapping. We were babysitting some kids and took them to the park. As we were packing up to leave, they very expertly snuck a new friend into the vehicle when we weren't looking."

"Can you describe the child for me?"

"Um, yeah. He looks like he's about five."

"I'm six!"

"Correction—he's six, and his name is Jaxon. He's got brown hair and a green shirt."

"Which park was he abducted from?"

He flinched at the use of the word "abducted."

"Pioneer. Listen, I swear this was an accident."

"Pioneer Park. It sounds like another operator has his very alarmed mother on the line right now."

“Do you want us to drive him back there?” All the kids were racing around to the back yard and Addi was chasing after them, so he followed.

“No. We have officers on their way to you right now.”

“Perfect. Thank you.” He hung up, grateful that they didn’t have to try and get all five kids back into the vehicle, and helped Addi get them back to the front yard. That way, when the police came, they wouldn’t have to explain how they just lost the kid they had kidnapped *and* the ones they were babysitting.

The first officer must’ve been close by, because he was there in minutes. Before long, there were four police cars, all with their lights on, pulled in from both sides of the circular driveway, surrounding the Yukon. He didn’t even know that Quicksand had that many police officers on duty at once. Right behind them, the local news station, who must’ve been listening to the police scanners, pulled in and started filming.

The officers split up, one asking him questions, one asking Addi, one asking Jaxon, and one asking the kids they were babysitting, probably seeing if their stories were matching up. While Ian’s officer was taking notes on what Ian said, he could hear Addison talking to her officer.

“No—we didn’t kidnap the other kids, too! They’re the nieces and nephews of my roommate Bex Sterling. She was supposed to watch them today, but then had an interview in Portland, and let me just call her. She can confirm.”

As soon as the guy interviewing him—a man who was in his thirties but balding and had his hair shaved close—started asking more questions, he couldn’t focus on Addi any longer. Until she grabbed hold of his arm and he turned to see a horrified expression on her face, her phone still up to her ear.

“Bex is still in Portland. She’s not finished, so she’s probably still an hour and a half from being home.”

Ian wrapped his arms around her like she had just gotten in a car accident and was going into shock. “We’ll make it.”

Luckily, Jaxon’s mom came speeding into the driveway not long after, skidding to a stop behind the police cars, and got out and ran to Jaxon. He eventually managed to wiggle out of her smothering hugs long enough to introduce her to his new friends, and asked if they could play again tomorrow.

If nothing else, Jaxon’s story to his mom assured the police officers and the reporter that the events of the day were unintentional by all adult parties

involved, and whatever excitement they thought they were going to be a part of wasn't exactly national news-worthy, and they left.

The entire afternoon had given him a lot of time to see how Addi handled everything. Her nerves were frayed and she was stressed and exhausted, but she never took it out on the kids. He was impressed.

He was even more impressed at her bravery in suggesting they go in the house and make cookies. Which, of course, made a huge mess and left two adults and three kids with shirts covered in flour and one with melted chocolate chips all around his mouth and cheeks. But they were quiet for a solid five minutes while they were scarfing down their confections.

Nearly five hours after she left, Bex burst into the house with apologies and professions of undying gratitude and excitement at her incredible day. She had barely set her bags down when the kids' mom, Bex's sister, came through the door. The kids came out of the family room, where they had been playing chase, all calm and full of smiles, looking like they had been angels the entire time.

While Bex was giving hugs to her nieces and nephews and saying goodbye, Addi grabbed his hand and pulled him into the family room. Tired as he was, the feel of her hand in his sent heat to his chest, and he knew he would've followed her anywhere.

Luckily, where she led him was to a couch, and he gladly collapsed into it next to her.

"Did you ever think five hours could be so exhausting?"

He laughed and shook his head. "If you would've asked me this morning what kinds of things were more tiring than taking care of kids for five hours, I could've easily listed a dozen. Now, though, I can't think of a single one."

Bex came into the room, holding a bag and a drink holder with two drinks. "I know that I still owe you both, big time, for watching the kids for me, and I will pay you back. But," she dragged the word out as she put the items on the table, "for now, this is an apology for taking longer than I thought. And for that whole thing with the police."

Addi leaned forward and peeked into one of the bags, and then her face lit up. "You brought us Dragon's Chopstick?"

Bex nodded, smiling. "And now, I'm going to leave you two in utter peace and quiet while I go upstairs. And leave you alone. With no one else home. Just the two of you."

Addi raised an annoyed eyebrow at Bex, and Bex held up her hands.

“Okay, okay, I get it. No one said that ‘overdoing it’ isn’t my middle name.”

As the sound of Bex climbing the stairs, Addi just looked at the bags of food. “Are you ever so tired that you wish you could teleport yourself into bed? Well, right now, I wish I could teleport this food into my belly. I’m starving, but I think I’m even too tired to eat.”

“I don’t think I could ever be too tired to eat food from the Dragon’s Chopstick. Lean back.” He gave her a little nudge backward, and she let herself sink into the back rest of the couch. Then he pulled all the items out of the bag and opened each of the boxes. “Do you like sesame chicken?”

She nodded, so he picked a good-looking chunk of chicken with the chopsticks and brought it to her waiting mouth. She closed her eyes as she chewed it, and he just smiled at her, loving the way her eyes crinkled at the sides, the way her smooth skin looked almost golden in the light of the early evening sun, making her cheekbones look so touchably soft. And the way that her curls shone as they framed her face. Even after a day of stress and exhaustion, she was beautiful. How had he ever thought he could keep from being attracted to her?

With her eyes still closed, she opened her mouth again, so he fed her another piece of chicken. Then she smiled before opening her eyes and looking at him. “I think you just saved my life by feeding me those two bites.”

“So that’s twice I’ve saved you today.”

“You’ll be getting your medal of honor in the mail any day now.”

“No ceremony?” He took a bite of beef and broccoli, grateful for some meat when all he’d eaten since breakfast was cookies.

“You’ve got to save me three times for that.”

“Duly noted.”

After a few minutes of silence, where all their focus was on eating as a way to overcome their starvation and exhaustion, he said, “Do you want kids someday? Or did today make you forever change your mind?”

“I think today would be effective birth control for anyone. But yeah. I do.”

“Good. Because you’re good at it.”

She gave him a look that he wanted to search for hours, trying to figure out all it meant. He only got a moment, though. It was enough to know that she appreciated the compliment.

“How about you?”



He had always wanted kids, and jumped at any chance he got to hang out with his nieces and nephews. But as crazy as today was, it had gotten him thinking about how much he wanted kids of his own. After the way things ended with Zoe, not only had he not allowed himself to think about it being a possibility, but the whole experience had left him questioning whether he'd ever be good enough.

All day long, though, as he and Addi had cared for Ash, Beth, Chelle, and Drew, he hadn't been able to stop imagining what a life might be like with Addi. And kids of his own. Even through the craziness of it all, he realized how much he loved being with her. How much she was helping him to heal. How much he hadn't wanted to be anywhere other than by her side.

He knew the thoughts were dangerous, and he would likely pay later for the hope they'd raised that would be dashed, but right now, he didn't care. He just wanted to live with the hope.

"I do, too."

Their eyes met and for a long moment, neither of them broke eye contact. They just studied each other, and he would've given anything to know what she was thinking. She was the one to finally break the connection. She grabbed the box of Kung Pao Chicken, and while she was picking up a piece with her chopsticks, said, "Thank you, again, for helping me through a rather memorable day."

He set down the box of beef and broccoli he was holding. "What do you say that for our second date, we do something every bit as memorable?"

She swallowed the bite she was eating a little too quickly and nearly choked. "*Second* date?"

"Obviously, today was the first date."

She raised an eyebrow in challenge.

"I very distinctly remember me, looking all manly as I pulled lumber out of the bed of my truck, and you asking me out on a date to the park. In fact, I also remember begging being involved."

"Well, then," Addi paused to take a sip of her soda, "I think it's only fair for there to be begging involved when it comes to the asking of a second date."

He held up one finger with one hand and grabbed his soda with his other hand. He took a long drink, then cleared his throat and got down on both knees on the carpet between the couch and the coffee table and brought his hands together. "Addison Sparks, I would like to *beg* you to go on a date with

me. Preferably one that doesn't involve the police or possible kidnapping charges."

"And no parks, frogs, snails, snakes, or insects?"

"We'll even take tadpoles out of the running. What do you say?"

Addison bit her lip, looking up at the ceiling, like she was trying to decide. All he could focus on was her lips. Then she met his eyes and said, "If it can be a spontaneous date. Not planned in advance."

He cocked his head to the side. "Interesting request. Deal."

He stood and held out his hand to shake on it, and when she put her hand in his to shake, she instead tugged, pulling herself off the couch and to a standing position just inches in front of him. She was close enough that he could feel her breath on his neck. He wasn't sure he was breathing at all.

As the sun was setting, throwing brilliant colors behind the woods just out from the giant bay windows in front of them, she held his eyes and he studied hers. He got the distinct impression that a decision was being made. He desperately hoped that whatever it was, it would keep her standing this close to him. She reached out and placed a hand on his chest, right over his heart, and his pulse raced, electricity buzzing through him at her touch.

Then she slowly, nervously, carefully, like she was testing whatever decision she had made, slid her hand up to his shoulder, her fingertips barely skimming the skin at the edge of his collar, sending chills up the back of his neck. He kept his eyes on hers, trying to guess exactly what she was thinking, but when her eyes flicked to his lips, he couldn't help his gaze falling to hers.

Her eyes locked on his once again, and then she rose up on her toes and pressed her lips into his. It surprised him. But at the same time, it felt inevitable—like everything since that first moment in the grocery store had been leading up to this. Maybe from the first moment when she was nine and he was eleven and he saw her through the gate between his grandparents' backyard and her aunt's inn's grounds.

He wrapped his arms around her, placing one on the small of her back and the other in the middle of her upper back, reveling in how it felt to hold her as her lips moved against his. After Zoe called off their wedding, he hadn't imagined ever being interested in a relationship again. But everything with Addi just felt *right*. She brought her other arm up, wrapping both of them around his neck, holding him just as close as he was holding her. His heart raced, beating a rapid cadence against his chest, his fingers tingling, his head light.

When she broke the kiss to take a few deep breaths of air, he took a long, slow breath to ground his senses, and then placed three gentle kisses in a trail from her temple down to the spot just under her earlobe, enjoying the short quick breath she exhaled.

“Wow,” he said. “I am *really* glad that Bex didn’t insist on having dinner with us.”



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## ADDISON

ADDISON HAD HELPED a lot of people organize their clothes closets. Some were big walk-in closets, some had taken over closets in other rooms in the house, and someone had even turned a spare bedroom into a closet. With every one, she usually found one item that each person hoarded. She had helped people who had massive collections of shoes, sweaters, shirts, dresses, pants, humorous t-shirts, scarves, and even someone with a huge collections of every kind of socks imaginable.

But this woman hoarded bras. *Bras*. Bras were Addison's least favorite item of clothing to shop for—even worse than jeans. Why would someone pick that item of clothing to overbuy on? Apparently this thirty-one-year-old advertising exec never bought a shirt without buying a bra to match. She said it made her feel secretly well organized. Like it gave her super powers.

As Addison was putting bra after bra on four hanging organizers that each held a dozen, her mind was able to think of nothing all morning except the kiss last night. For five hours straight, she'd seen how he reacted to what was often a stressful situation. And every time he helped calm things when they got out of control, paused to help one of the kids, came up with a fun game for them, calmed her when things were crazy, or comforted her when things were hard, she fell a little more for him, forgetting any reservations she had about dating someone new.

And then, at dinner, she fell even harder. She had worried it might've been because of how exhausted she was and the fact that she had fallen pretty hard into that couch, but even in the light of a new day, she felt all of the butterflies constantly in her stomach and the tingles that would race up her spine at every thought of him.

She hadn't exactly had the best experience when it came to guys feeling the same way about her that she felt about him, and last night, she'd been

afraid. All through dinner, she kept hoping that he would give a very obvious sign that he was feeling even a bit of what she was feeling. She didn't think she would get it, but then he asked her out.

And then she gathered up every single bit of courage she could find and convinced herself that she was brave enough to be the one to go in for their first kiss.

It wasn't that she never kissed guys. It was that she had probably kissed quite a bit fewer than anyone else who lived at the inn. Probably fewer than most twenty-six-year-olds everywhere. But she knew enough to know what to expect.

And that expectation was exactly why she was so blown away by kissing Ian. She hadn't even imagined that kissing could be that incredible. Just remembering how his hands had felt on her back, his breath on her cheek, the faint smell of wood he still had from working in the shop that morning, the softness of his lips against hers, those kisses by her ear, all while she was pressed against his chest, was causing goose bumps to cover her arms.

"Addison."

The voice of Jessie, her client, was insistent enough that Addison realized she had gotten a little too far into her own head. She looked up at the woman, whose cleaning and organizing outfit of choice was a baggy pair of sweats and a t-shirt that said "The Office" on it. It was a very different look than the pantsuit and heels she'd worn at their first meeting. Jessie had her hand on a tote that was sitting on the bed, but Addison couldn't guess what the woman had been trying to talk to her about.

"Yes?"

"You are somewhere else today, aren't you?" A smile spread slowly across the woman's face and then it turned into a gasp. "It's because of a guy, isn't it? All morning, you've had *I'm currently daydreaming about someone face.*"

Based on how hot her ears suddenly were, Addison was sure that face was now covered in a deep pink blush.

Jessie sat down cross-legged on the closet floor next to Addison. "Tell me about him."

Addison finished hanging up the bra she was holding and let out a long, slow breath before turning to Jessie. "He's a guy I kissed last night. Which was probably a big mistake, because he's my next door neighbor."

"I guess that depends. On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the

kiss?”

Addison looked down at the floor of the closet, smiling. “Ten. A ten so solid and far up there that I hadn’t even known ten was that high before.”

Jessie squealed like they were teenagers. “Then it’s not a mistake, regardless of how it ends.”

“Maybe. All I know is I’ve got to get my mind off him. Like right now. What’s that tote you’ve got on the bed?”

Jessie stood up and grabbed the tote from the bed and then sat back down, placing it between them. “I was wondering if you have any ideas for how to organize my swimsuits. I went through them last night, and narrowed it down to thirty.”

Addison’s eyebrows shot up. “Swimsuits are the only thing I can think of that’s worse to shop for than bras. How are they what you collect? Do you have a trophy somewhere in here awarded for leveling up shopping skill to the top? Maybe a medal, a ninja belt?”

Jessie laughed a tinkling little laugh, and Addison took the moment to force herself back into her actual job until this organization project was finished, and away from that amazing kiss.

## UNTITLED

She had finished Jessie's closet organization by noon, and as she headed back to Quicksand, her brain was so jumbled from the mess of thoughts constantly swirling inside that she decided she really needed to talk things out. Not with her roommates, though, because she already knew what they would say. She needed her sister. So she pulled over to the side of the road and sent her a quick text.

*Hey, Sis! I really want to talk to you about Ian.*

Chloe's response came quickly.

*And I really want to listen to you talk about Ian.*

*I also kind of really want you to meet him first. How would you feel if I invited him to join in on our birthday call?*

*Oh my gosh. This is huge. YES PLEASE.*

*And then tomorrow, I better get a phone call where you talk about him. You sound too excited. DON'T EMBARRASS ME CHLOE.*

*I wouldn't dream of it.*

*And Chloe, guess what?*

*You're smitten?*

*Not the point. The point is, there's a good chance Ian will say yes.*

*Even though I just thought of it, and will be giving him almost no notice.*

*Just like he said yes to babysitting with me yesterday, with no notice.*

*And even though it's not Tuesday or Saturday!*

*This is dream come true material for you right now, isn't it?*

*It's not that I need a guy to be spontaneous all the time. Or even most of the time. I just need to know that he can be.*

*I can't wait to meet him!*

*Chloe, I need to hear that you won't embarrass me.*

*Aww! Dustin is lighting a birthday brownie for me. Gotta go! See you in 30*



*minutes!*

Addison wasn't sure if Dustin really was bringing her a brownie, or if that was just Chloe's way of getting out of making the promise. And that didn't help her nerves when it came to texting Ian. Sure they'd kissed, but she still didn't *really* know how he felt about her. So she straightened her shoulders, slid the mirror on the visor open and said out loud, "You can be brave. You were brave last night, and look what it got you." And of course, just thinking about it again made her smile.

Before she knew it, she was in a text message to him, typing *Do you have a lunch break today? If so, are you free? I am having a video chat with my sister at 1:00, and I'd love to have you meet her.*

She sent the text, and then realized she probably should've included an apology. And, the unsure feelings rearing their heads again, she figured she should also give him an easy way out of it. So she added, *I know it's the midday on a weekday and you're at work—she's nine hours ahead so we had to plan it while she's awake. But there will be other times when you can meet her.*

She pulled the gearshift into drive, deciding that she was too nervous to wait around for an answer that might very well be no. But he responded before she could even take her foot off the brake.

*I will be there with bells on.*

Her heart flew somewhere around the vicinity of the top of her car the entire ride home. She hoped she'd have a couple of minutes to get into her house, set up her laptop, maybe run a brush through her hair and put on some lip gloss, but as soon as she pulled into a parking spot, Ian walked over from his house. He must've either been working in his shed or come home from a job for lunch.

Gosh, she loved that stride. So calm and confident without being cocky. The wind was even blowing just the slightest amount—enough to ruffle the slight wave in his hair. All she needed was a video camera and the ability to watch it in slow motion, and she'd have her eyes glued to the screen for hours.

She shook herself as she realized that was exactly what she'd done—she'd frozen mid-step, staring at him. She was trying to think what she should've been doing other than mimicking a statue, but then he said, "Hi," as he neared and her brain stopped working.

"Hi," she said back, and took in those kind eyes that were smiling at her

and tried not to imagine what it would be like if he walked right up to her, put his arms on her back, and dropped her into a dip, kissing her right in the driveway.

No drop kiss, but he did step up close to her and tuck a curl behind her ear, and then run his fingertips down her neck, across her shoulder, and down her arm to her fingertips, sending thrills throughout her body and really not helping her ability to form words. She didn't want to lose the ability to walk without falling, too, so she avoided looking into his eyes. In fact, turning and walking toward the door sounded like the safest course of action. So she did, pulling her keys out of her purse.

"I know you wanted our second date to be spontaneous, but I thought I was going to be the one doing the asking this time."

She glanced at him. "This isn't a date."

"I don't know. You asked me over to meet your family. That sounds pretty date-ish."

She pointed at him with her keys before putting them into the lock. "Not my family—just my sister. It's so when we talk about you, she'll have a better picture in her mind."

He looked like he was trying to hold back a smile, but wasn't very successful at it. "Then I fully support this non-date."

She opened the door to a lobby that was filled full of balloons and a big sign that read *Happy birthday, Addison!* She ran her hands over her face.

"It's your birthday?"

She turned toward the beautiful man next to her. "Um, yeah."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

She walked to the check-in counter, where there was a cupcake waiting with a candle in it, and a piece of paper that said *Happy 27<sup>th</sup>!* in fancy handwriting—probably Peyton's doing—and *Remember that we're having a roommate dinner at 7:00 to celebrate!* below it.

"I don't know—it's awkward. How do you even bring that up? After our kiss last night, was I just supposed to say, 'Oh, by the way, my birthday is tomorrow?'" She grabbed her laptop off the counter and started walking up the stairs, Ian at her side.

"That might not have been the most elegant way to bring it up, but it would've been effective."

"Oh, but see, my roommates were both elegant and effective. So it was best just leaving it in their very capable hands."

He raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

She had thought of setting up her laptop in the family room, but she didn't want any of her roommates walking in during the call. That was the thing about living in an inn full of creative women who ran their own one-person businesses—the hours were strange, sometimes ridiculously long, and it wouldn't be entirely unusual for any or all of them to walk in at one p.m. on a Thursday.

If it was just her and Chloe on the call, she would've just set up in her room, but with Ian coming, that felt much too intimate. So she led him to the store room instead. It was a bedroom that could be used for another roommate, but instead, it held all of her storage supplies for clients she'd be meeting with in the next two weeks on one side, some of Timini's sewing equipment on the other, and a bed pushed up against the wall that she and Timini both used more like a couch or a flat spot when they were working in here.

Once her laptop was booted, she went into the video chat and got it situated on a container she was going to use for wrapping paper storage for a client. Chloe's call rang in about three seconds later, and when her face came on the screen, she was nothing but exuberant smiles. Addison introduced Chloe and Ian, and Chloe's husband Dustin poked his head in to say hello before leaving them to their call.

“Happy birthday, Addison!”

“Happy birthday, Chloe!”

“Wait,” Ian said. “It's both your birthdays?”

“You didn't tell him?”

Addison turned to Ian. “This was just my inelegant way of telling you.” His hand was next to hers, and she had to ignore the fact that their shoulders were brushing together or she wouldn't be able to think. “Except for the year Chloe was born and was in the hospital for my second birthday, we've spent every one of our shared birthdays together. This year it's just digital instead of in person.”

“So you're two years apart in age, yet both of your birthdays are on the exact same day?”

They both nodded.

“Wow. Your parents must've...”

Addison laughed when his comment trailed off. “I know what you're thinking—I got there too when I was a kid. The very day I found out how

babies were made, I Googled exactly how many days it took from conception to birth, did the math, and discovered what I was one hundred percent convinced was the day of the year we were both conceived.”

“And from that year forward,” Chloe said, “you couldn’t convince Addison to stay home that night for anything.”

“Come on. Do we have to tell him this story? It’s embarrassing.”

“Yes, because you didn’t tell him it was my birthday. So for the first couple of years, Addison would call our grandparents to see if we could sleep over. When we got a little older, we planned things with friends until curfew. I, of course, being the little sister, didn’t understand what was going on.”

“Because I, the big sister, was looking to shield you from the horror.”

Chloe shot Addison a look, then turned to Ian. “All she told me was that we couldn’t be home because that was the night of the year that our parents made babies, and you never knew when there would be another one. When I asked how they made babies, she just said ‘It’s gross and trust me: you don’t want to be there for it.’

“She wouldn’t tell me anything more, so the grossest thing that I didn’t want to be home for came to mind, and it was cleaning cat puke from the carpet. So for three years—” she shot Addison a glare “—*three years*, I believed that’s how babies were made.”

Ian laughed so heartily the sound practically bounced off the walls.

“Okay, for the record,” Addison said, her ears getting hot, “I didn’t know that’s what she had assumed until much later. She had believed it so fully, too, because not long after, we got together with some family friends. My dad was out at the grill, my mom was stirring something on the stove, Chloe and I were playing with their son Max, and our cat coughed up a hairball. Max’s parents offered to clean up the mess.”

“And then,” Chloe interrupted, “when Max came to school on Monday, for show-and-tell, he announced that his mom was pregnant and he was getting a little brother.”

“Well, obviously you believed it. Max practically handed you proof of your theory.”

“See?” Chloe said to Addison, but motioning to Ian, thrilled she was getting vindication all these years later for her misinterpretation of the facts.

Ian was being so funny and charming and sweet, and Addison could barely keep her eyes off him. She could tell from how Chloe was reacting to him that she genuinely liked him and would totally support her being

“smitten” over Ian. And who wouldn’t? He was pretty great. It still felt so unreal that he was interested in her.

“How did you find out you were wrong?”

“Fifth grade,” Chloe said, “during a basketball game at recess, Bobby Carson said he walked in on his parents naked and making babies, and said his eyeballs were scorched. I just stared at him, confused, and then asked, ‘Why were your parents getting cat puke out of the carpet without their clothes on?’ Do you have any idea what it’s like to be a fifth grader and have eight kids in a basketball game find out that you thought babies were made by cleaning up hair balls together?”

Ian laughed, and Addison wanted to reach out and touch the smile lines at the edges of his eyes. Then he turned to her and said, “See? This is why, even if it’s in-elegant, you should go for the effective way of telling someone something, instead of letting them figure it out on their own.”

She smacked him in the arm. “You just wait until that request comes back around to bite you.”

His smile was big and beautiful. And then he picked up her hand and placed the sweetest kiss on the back of it and mumbled, “I look forward to it.”

Embarrassing story after embarrassing story, the call finally ended and Addison thoroughly regretted having given Chloe the opportunity to tell so many. Ian had definitely found them entertaining, but there was no way he was going to want to go out with her again after this. Maybe she should’ve called Chloe to ask about inviting Ian to the video chat instead of texting her, and made her promise on a stack of Bibles that she wouldn’t tell stories about their childhood.

Addison walked Ian to the front door and opened it for him. He stood paused in the doorway, then turned back to face her. “Do you want to go on a date with me?”

“Yes.” Wow. Did he really just ask? Those stories hadn’t scared him away?

“Right now.”

“What? No. You can’t miss work today because of me. You already took the whole afternoon off yesterday to help me babysit.”

“And I’m going to be scrambling to make up for lost time later, but it’s your birthday. And we’ve got five hours until you need to be back for your roommate dinner.” He reached a hand forward and grasped her hand, tugging

her toward him. “Go on a date with me. Then today will be our actual second date, and it’ll be spontaneous.”

Their hands were touching, and his captivating blue eyes were pulling her to him like they were, once again, magnets. She wasn’t sure she could’ve mustered a no any easier than she could’ve walked away from a sale on office supplies.



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## IAN

IAN HELD Addi's door as she climbed into his truck. "Where are we going on this date?"

He closed her door and went and got in his side. "I don't know. You wanted spontaneous, so I figured that we would decide as we go." He tapped his lips, thinking. "It is beautiful outside. We could go for a walk through town, or maybe even go check out the viewpoint?" He hoped he had said it in a way that made his preference of the viewpoint just slightly known—enough to sway her to that choice, but not enough to make it feel like it wasn't her choice.

"Ooo! Let's do the viewpoint. I haven't been there since I was about ten."

A smile spread across his face as he pulled into the parking lot of a hair salon and then backed out and drove the other direction.

"You've been here, what? Five or six weeks? How is it that you haven't been to the viewpoint?"

"I guess I forgot about it. Do you go there often?"

"Not too often. Mostly when I need to think, or if I want to feel... centered."

The viewpoint was only a couple of minutes away, but he enjoyed every moment of the drive with Addison sharing the front seat with him. He wanted to reach out and hold her hand, but even though they had kissed last night, the action still somehow felt big. But from the corner of his eye, he saw the pinky on her hand twitch toward him. Like she wanted to reach out, but was waiting for him.

So he reached out, putting his hand in hers, and she responded immediately by curling her fingers around his. The smile on his face was likely going to be there for a long time today.

He pulled into the parking lot at the viewpoint. Only one other vehicle



was there—the one he had expected. After he opened Addi’s door, they walked over to the guardrail at the edge of the parking lot and looked out across the valley filled with trees. There were only a few clouds in the sky, casting giant shadows across the valley while the parts that the sun shone lit up the area in brilliant greens and gold. Quicksand River meandered through the valley, which was perfectly framed in the distance by the ridge of the Devil’s Backbone and the brilliant white of Mount Hood.

“I forgot how beautiful it is here,” Addi breathed.

He stepped up next to her, marveling at the valley. They moved to the telescopes to see everything closer, and while she looked, he glanced up the road. Caden should be here any minute.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been here on such a clear day,” Addi said. “Check it out—you can see the sun glinting off the river clear out there.”

As he looked in the telescope, he heard the sound of wheels on gravel behind him. It was all he could do to keep looking in the telescope until he heard a woman say, “Excuse me.”

He turned to see Caden and his girlfriend, Melinda, both with one foot on the flat base of electric stand-up scooters, a hand on the handlebar, helmets tucked under their other arms.

“We rented these scooters at the little station on Settler’s Boulevard. We were about to put them in the back of our truck to return them, but they’re paid for until five. Are you two interested in taking them?”

“You’re okay trusting a couple of strangers to get them back in time?” Ian asked.

The grin on Caden’s face was going to give him away. “You two look trustworthy.”

Ian turned to Addi and raised an eyebrow. “What do you think?”

“Sounds fun!”

*Perfect.* Caden and Melinda drove off, so Ian locked his truck, and the two of them put on the helmets and headed down the road on the scooters, the wind blowing in their faces as they rode. He kept glancing over at Addi to see if she was having fun or hating it, and the look of bliss on her face told him he had made a good choice.

When they reached the end of the road and stopped at the stop sign, he said, “What do you think? Should we head toward town?”

She nodded and turned right. He glanced over each time they came to a road where they had a choice of which way to turn, and could mostly tell

which way she was thinking about choosing before she did it, so he only made the choice when hers would've taken them away from where he was aiming.

They were getting closer to the middle of town when he spotted the small food truck up ahead. "Do you want to stop in the shade by that truck so we can decide where to go next?"

Addi nodded and headed toward it.

When they pulled to a stop, he took off his helmet. "What did you think of the scooters?"

"This was the funnest thing I've done in so long! I think I'm going to have to get one of these for myself sometime."

He had hoped that would be her reaction.

The guy at the food truck poked his head out of the window. "Hey. The lunch rush is done, so I'm packing up. I have enough fresh lemonade for about two cups full that I'd hate to throw out. You two interested?"

"Wow, thanks," Ian said. "We would love some."

After the man gave them their drinks and they thanked him profusely, they sat down at the picnic table in front of the truck.

"Does this kind of luck always follow you around?" Addi asked. "Because it doesn't for me, so I figure it must be you."

He shook his head. "I think it must just be the two of us together."

When they finished and got back on their scooters, he cocked his ear in the general direction of the high school. "Do you hear music?"

Addi cocked her head too, concentrating. "I don't know."

"I swear I hear it. Want to find its source?"

The grin on her face said she was up for the adventure, which didn't surprise him, so they headed off on their scooters, him mostly choosing which direction they took until they were actually close enough to hear, then he let Addi lead them the rest of the way to the high school. The entire band class had their chairs, music stands, and instruments on the lawn just outside of the band room.

"Do they always practice outside?" Addi asked from where they'd pulled to a stop at the edge of the parking lot by the grass.

Ian shrugged. "Want to stay and listen for a bit?" He motioned to where a woman was sitting with her two little kids on a blanket, watching them practice. "It looks like it's okay to."

Addi nodded, so they stood with one foot on their scooters, watching.

Less than a minute later, the woman came up to them, her toddler in her arms, the preschooler standing next to her. “Can you two do me a huge favor? My husband is the band director, and we want to see the practice. But my son needs to use the restroom, and I don’t want to pack up all our stuff to take him. Will you just sit on my blanket until I get back so it won’t blow away?”

“We’d be happy to,” Addi said, and the two of them sat on the blanket, legs outstretched, leaning back on their arms as the band played a concert for two.

When they finished playing the song they’d been practicing when they first arrived, they started playing Ed Sheeran’s *Perfect*—a song that he had heard playing in Addi’s room when he was helping Timini move in, so he knew she liked it. And he was right. She snuggled in closer to him and whispered, “I love this song.”

They played a variety of songs, and each time, the band teacher said something like “Let’s do the song we’ve been practicing for halftime,” or “Let’s do our concert number.” Then, after they’d listened for about fifteen minutes, he said, “Let’s practice the one we do for birthdays.”

Addi’s eyes flashed to his, a look of wonder on her face.

As they played the first few notes, Ian murmured in her ear, “It looks like the universe wants you to have a great birthday.”

She turned and murmured back, “I think the universe is doing a pretty amazing job of it.” Her breath was warm and soft against his neck, and between her breath and her words, heat spread through his chest.

Right after the last few notes of the happy birthday song, the mom and kids came around the corner, so he and Addi stood up. With his back to Addi, he mouthed “Perfect timing” to the mom and gave her a thumbs up.

He and Addi meandered on the scooters through a lot of streets that neither of them had been on before, just talking about random things. He found out that she liked baby goats, things organized alphabetically, and cheesecake, but really didn’t like her mom’s meatloaf or pens that wrote in black ink. Her favorite thing to do to relax was watching home organization shows, she was terrified of needles, and she got the cutest dimples on her cheeks when she was thinking of something that made her happy.

The more time he spent around Addi, the more he realized how truly good a relationship could be. For so long, he’d been hurt that Zoe had called off their engagement and canceled their whole future together. As he and

Addi rode scooters and chatted, he finally realized that, although Zoe could've handled things differently, she hadn't been mean or malicious or hurtful. Calling off their wedding had been the right thing to do. By ending things, Zoe had opened the possibility for Ian to have a life with Addi. And imagining what that might be like was a million times more incredible than what he'd ever imagined with Zoe. His whole soul was filled with a forgiveness toward Zoe that he hadn't guessed he'd been lacking until that moment.

Just before five, they headed back toward Settler's Boulevard and returned the scooters to the kiosk.

"How are we going to get back to your truck now? Maybe we should've just ridden back to the viewpoint and brought them back in your truck."

Ian shrugged. "It's your birthday and we're together, so I'm sure the universe will have our backs on that, too. Want to go for a walk down Settler's?"

They chatted more as they walked past shops and restaurants, enjoying the rare cloud-free day. As they walked past the front of a café, a man inside knocked urgently on the bay window of the restaurant. When they turned to look, he held up one finger asking them to wait, and then raced around the other tables in the café to the door. Holding it open, he said, "We just ate and they've cleaned up the plates, and they were about to bring us dessert. My wife just went into labor, though, so we have to leave. Do you two want to come in and have the dessert? It's already paid for."

Addison looked blown away at how this date was turning out, and Ian was thrilled. They thanked the couple, wished them all the best with the delivery, and sat down in their seats.

"What are the chances of this happening, especially after everything else magical this day!"

Ian just shrugged.

The waitress came over, holding a dish with a molten lava chocolate cake, the chocolate filling spilling out, two scoops of vanilla ice cream, and a candle sticking up out of the ice cream, three other employees behind her. "What's your name, honey?"

Addi just looked confused. "What's going on?"

"The couple who were here before had ordered this dessert with a side of birthday wishes, so I need your name for when we sing happy birthday."

"Okay," she said, eyeing Ian, who did his best to look perfectly innocent

and just as surprised by what was going on. “Addison.”

The four employees sang their restaurant’s version of “Happy Birthday,” and guests at a few other tables joined in. After the waitress put the dessert on the table, said, “I hope you have a wonderful birthday,” and walked away, Addi went back to eyeing him as she picked up her fork and got a bite of the cake. He scooped up a bite, too, making sure to get some ice cream with it, and she continued to eye him as they both chewed.

“Did you set this up?”

“I’m pretty sure the couple who just left did that.” He put another bite in his mouth.

“Ian. You still do that eyebrow thing you did as a kid whenever you weren’t telling the whole truth. Confess. You knew that today was my birthday before today, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” he said slowly, “but not until last night.”

“Bex?”

He nodded. “Moments after I left the inn last night, Bex knocked on my kitchen door. When I opened it, she said, ‘Remember how I said I owe you for watching my sister’s kids today? I’m going to start paying you back by letting you know that Addison’s birthday is tomorrow, since I know she didn’t tell you.’” He gave her a look, reminding her how he felt about the fact that she hadn’t told him. “Then I just made a few calls today.”

“So you knew the couple who was here before us?”

“Yep. He’s a buddy of mine who does plumbing at a lot of the same sites as me.”

“His wife didn’t just go into labor?”

He shook his head. “She still has two or three weeks. I bribed them with the meal they ate before we got here if they would set up this.” He pointed at the dessert with his fork, and then loaded up another bite.

As he chewed, he could see her working through the date, analyzing each thing, her expressions going between confusion and realization. “And the couple who gave us the scooters?”

“My friend Caden and his girlfriend Melinda. I paid for the scooters. They took them for a ride along Ridge Street and planned it so they could be at the viewpoint by two-thirty.”

She shook her head in disbelief, but also in amazement. Like she was impressed. “You set up the lemonade too, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “I stopped by this morning on my way to a job, bought them,

and talked the guy into playing along, which he was way more excited about doing than you would've guessed."

"Don't tell me you set up the band, too."

He just smiled and took another bite. "This really is delicious. You better eat some more before I accidentally eat it all."

"How?"

"My grandma is friends with the band director's grandma. She asked them to practice outside, and his wife wanted to join in as a way to get the blanket there and ready for us."

"And you planned all of this today?"

"Nah. Some of it was last night."

"All this for me?"

He wanted to reach out and smooth the disbelief from her face.

"Just so I could have the perfect 'spontaneous' date?"

"*And* so you could have a great birthday."

"Tan, I..." She trailed off, pressing a knuckle right below her bottom eyelashes. "I think that's the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me."

He wasn't sure if he should've told her the details and ruined the spontaneous, universe-having-her-back magic. He really hadn't planned to. But based on the way she gazed into his eyes with those beautiful ones of hers with the perfect amount of gold rimming the green, he knew he'd chosen correctly. She seemed even more touched by the fact that so much effort had gone into it. Plus, she still got to witness the magic as they went along. It made the hours of work lost planning everything today totally worth it.

"So, what was your plan for how to get us back to your truck?"

In a move that he couldn't have planned the timing on more perfectly, a man burst into the restaurant and said, "Anyone need an Uber? I was supposed to pick someone up, but then they said never mind. I can take you anywhere in Quicksand that you need to go—it's already paid for."

And then, to his surprise, Addi leaned across the table separating them, grabbed his collar, pulled him in closer, and kissed him on the lips.



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## ADDISON

ADDISON DIDN'T STEP through her front doorway—she floated through it. As soon as the door closed, she sunk against the wall, breathing out the biggest happy sigh of her life. All three roommates ran into the room.

“How has your birthday been?” Timini asked.

“I thought you were only working until lunchtime,” Bex said, trying and failing to look innocent. “I’m surprised to see you just getting home.”

“You all need acting classes. Bex, Ian already spilled the beans about you sneaking over to tell him it’s my birthday.”

Timini grinned. “So how was the date? I saw you two on scooters.”

“It was so amazing,” Addison breathed. “Best date of my life.”

“Oh my lands, Addison! That’s so exciting!” Peyton was clapping her hands together and practically jumping with happiness. “Isn’t that so exciting? It’s what we’ve all been hoping for! And to have it on your birthday is just perfect.”

“Come,” Bex said, herding them toward the kitchen, “talk around the table. Food’s getting cold.”

As soon as Addison went through the doorway, the oddest scents hit her. She sniffed, trying to figure out what they could have possibly made for dinner, and failed. She wasn’t even sure if she thought it was good or not.

“My plan,” Timini said, motioning to the messy kitchen, “was to make chicken scampi. I found a recipe and thought I could do it. I had the timing worked out on each part of it, too. But really, that just meant that every single part burned at exactly the same time.”

“But the timing was flawless,” Bex said as they all sat down at the table.

“Then Bex helped me to clear out the smoke and get everything thrown out so we wouldn’t keep smelling it. And then we—okay, mostly Bex—threw together chicken fajitas out of practically no ingredients at all.”



“And I brought cake!” Peyton said.

“This is perfect,” Addison said. “Absolutely perfect. I hadn’t brought up my birthday because it made me sad that it was going to be my first one without my sister. But you all made it wonderful.”

“Well,” Bex said and cleared her throat, “I don’t think it was just us that made it wonderful.”

Addison felt her cheeks warming just thinking about the date. “Okay, Ian helped quite a bit, too.”

“Aww, now see?” Timini said as she grabbed the dish of tortillas. “I want a guy who will make me blush like that.”

“Me, too,” Peyton said.

Bex grabbed a couple of tortillas when they came to her. “And me.”

When Bex handed the dish to Peyton, Peyton said, “I don’t think you can get to the blushing stage by only going on a string of first dates.”

Bex picked up a cherry tomato and tossed it at her. “Or by not noticing what’s right in front of your eyes.”

Peyton just looked confused, which made Addison laugh out loud. Someday, the girl might figure out that she liked her best friend. At the rate she was going, though, it might be a while.

Timini added cheese, lettuce, and sour cream to her fajitas like she was making a work of art. “Obviously none of us have a love life worth chatting about, so tell us more about yours. We need to live a little vicariously.”

“Even though you, Addison Sparks,” Bex said as she piled the peppers and onions high on her fajita, “are going against our No Falling in Love pact.”

“I never said I was falling in love.”

Peyton laughed in a way that was very close to a snort, and she covered her mouth with both hands in shock that she made the undignified sound.

“No, really,” Addison protested. “I have just fallen in like.”

“Yes,” Peyton said. “Like. A very strong, can’t-stop-thinking-about-him, thinks everything he does is perfect, notices how beautiful he is, *like*.”

Addison nodded. “Exactly. Besides, I’m not so sure this relationship is going to go very far, so no sense letting myself fall in love.” She didn’t believe her own words, but somehow she needed to convince herself of them.

“What?” Timini said. “How can you be so unsure about it? I saw how you two were together today and I’m not unsure about it at all.”

“Oh, I’m sure about what happened today. It was magical. Like *I’m your*

*fairy godmother and I'm here with a wand* magical. It's the future I'm unsure of."

"I don't get you one bit," Bex said.

"I'm just..." How could she even explain? Well, probably like Ian said—inelegant but effective. Just saying it. "I'm just not the girl who gets the guy. I actually had a guy say to me once 'You're not the kind of girl guys like to date—you're the kind they like to marry.'"

"He did not," Bex said.

"I swear to you he did."

Peyton looked around the table, eyebrows drawn together. "What does that even mean?"

Addison shrugged as she wrapped her tortilla up tight enough to pick up. "I don't know. That I wear mom jeans? That I'm responsible but not fun? Who knows? But it explains why the only guy I did manage to ever keep was someone who didn't want a real relationship—just one of convenience. Kind of like how you're grateful for your microwave when you need it, and you really like it, but you don't want to have to think about it when you're not standing there holding a plate of cold chicken casserole."

She shrugged and took a bite of her fajita, which was actually pretty good, despite the strange smell—apparently of burned chicken scampi—still hanging around the kitchen. Talking about Matthew hadn't hurt, which surprised and pleased her. And as long as she didn't think about Ian and that she would probably lose him before long, she was just fine.

"I think you're wrong," Timini said. "I mean, I don't know about your past, but I know you pretty well in your present. And I've seen you and Ian and the looks you give each other, and I think you're wrong about him."

Addison swallowed her bite. "The point is, guys like Ian don't fall for girls like me. He's amazing! So, so, so incredibly amazing. He really could have his pick of anyone. If he's even ready to get serious with anyone yet. One of the reasons I was going to stay away from him was because he wasn't recovered from his broken engagement yet. And then, I don't know, life just kept pushing us together and I went and fell for him when I was trying not to."

That was the biggest part. The more time they spent together, the more Addison was convinced that Ian was her happily ever after. She hoped she hadn't destroyed her chances with him just because it was happening before he was ready.

“So when things go wrong and I’m a blubbering mess because I let my heart get in danger, just know that I’m coming to the three people who tried to talk me into it in the first place.”

“And we’ll be here for you,” Bex said. “We’ll wrap our arms around you and tell you that you’re pretty and that everything’s going to be okay.”

“And we’ll feed you cake!” Peyton said, getting out of her seat and grabbing the layered cake off the counter behind her.

“So what I’m hearing is,” Addison said, “that I can fall as fully for Ian as I would like, because when I fall, I have a soft spot to land.”

“Exactly that,” Timini said.

Addison took another bite and thought about how easy it would be to do exactly that. Or maybe she didn’t need to fall fully for him. Maybe she was already there.



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## IAN

IAN PULLED INTO HIS DRIVEWAY, turned off the lights on his truck, and got out. He didn't ever want to be the one holding things up at any home, so he decided he was going to stay as long as it took to finish everything on the Koermer house. Even if it meant staying this late. He dragged himself into the house through the kitchen door and kicked off his boots.

“Grandma?”

“In my office, sweetie!”

Ian opened the fridge and found the lasagna that his grandma had texted to say she had saved for him. He was so hungry that he probably could've eaten everything that was left in the pan. Instead, he got out a large piece and put it in the microwave. As it warmed up, he went to find his grandma.

He heard voices as soon as he turned the corner into the hallway, and when he went into the office, he was rewarded with smiles from his two favorite people. Addi and his grandma were sitting across the desk from each other, going through piles of papers. After such an incredibly long day, he couldn't believe how great it felt to come home and see Addi's face smiling up at him.

“Hi, sweetie. Did you see the lasagna?”

He nodded. “It's in the microwave warming. Addi, have you eaten?”

She smiled as he pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her waist. “I ate with your grandma before we got started.”

Ian glanced at his grandma, then at the recycle bin next to her. “Are you sure you want to throw that paper on top away?”

As his grandma turned to look at what paper she had tossed into it last, Ian pulled Addi closer and kissed her on the lips, savoring their warm softness. Then he nudged the curls away from her ear and whispered “It's so good to see you.”

She let out a breathy giggle as his words tickled her ear, then snuggled in a little closer, even though he was probably covered in sawdust, so he left a few kisses on her neck while he was there.

“Why would I need to keep a receipt for having our lawn aerated from eight years ago? Oh. That was just to get me to look away. You know, I can leave the room if you want privacy.”

Ian laughed and let his arms fall from Addi’s back so she could sit back down. “No need, Grandma. I’m going to go get some of your lasagna.”

He couldn’t stand being in the same house as Addi and not being in the same room as her, so he took his food into the office and ate while chatting with them. When he was finished, he announced he was going to go get in the shower and didn’t miss the blush that crossed Addi’s cheeks and decided that was his favorite color.

“We’re working on the closet next,” his grandma said, “and there’s a couple of boxes in there with your name on them.”

“There are?” He vaguely remembered having a few boxes he didn’t unpack when he moved in after Grandpa died, probably because he didn’t know what to do with the stuff, but he hadn’t thought about them again since probably that first week.

“Yep, and if you don’t go through them and get your stuff organized, Addison and I are going to.”

There was a teasing gleam in his grandma’s eyes, but that didn’t necessarily mean that she was joking. “Wait, really?”

She nodded. “So you might want to get to them.”

He looked toward his room, then back to them, holding his hands out, like he was trying to get them to pause. “Just—just leave them there. I’ll take a quick shower and be right back.”

He raced into his room, shut the door, then into his bathroom and shut that door, too. Hopefully his showering was quick enough. He only dropped the shampoo once and hit an elbow into the shower wall twice, fully aware that the office was on the other side of the wall from his shower. It probably wasn’t more than ten minutes after he left that he was back in the room, wearing a clean t-shirt and jeans. Had it just been him and his grandma working on the project, he probably would’ve just worn gym shorts, but with Addi here, he still wanted to look good.

They both smiled when he entered the room in a way that told him they had been talking about him. He hoped it was good. The closet had quite a few

boxes in it, so he started pulling them out, organizing them based on what was written on them, and found three that were his. He had no memory of what was in the boxes, so he wanted to make sure he was the first to look at them.

As he went through the box, he remembered why he hadn't unpacked these in the first place. They were just full of stuff that was fun and memorable, but not that he needed to use. He wasn't even sure what to do with it all. As he pulled out some artwork from when he was in elementary school, he chuckled. Maybe he should've taken his grandma's offer of having her and Addi go through it.

Although, it was kind of cool reliving all the memories while chatting with Addi and his grandma. Eventually, he started making a pile of things that could probably go into some kind of a scrapbook or something, and a pile of objects that he wanted to keep, but didn't want sitting out somewhere. He even had a minuscule pile of things he did want to put out or use right now—a pile that currently held two things.

When he got to the end of the second box, he pulled the third one to him. As soon as he cut the packing tape on the third one, he knew exactly what it was. It was a box of random things he had packed half full at his apartment in Salem and never unpacked. It had been sitting, opened, in the closet in his room, so he started tossing in mementos from when he and Zoe were dating and engaged. Wrist bands from concerts, playbills, museum fliers, and even a restaurant receipt from their first date. When Zoe had ended things, the box was too much to face, so he'd sealed it up and put it on the floor of the office until he decided what to do with it. His grandma must've moved it to the closet.

Zoe broke up with him two and a half months ago. It had been long enough that he could handle dealing with this stuff now. He started tossing mementos in the "throw out" box, and after getting rid of quite a few things, he came across his wedding invitation. It sat there, on top of everything in the box, staring at him. They had all gone out to their guests before Zoe called it off. In fact, they'd already gotten the RSVPs back, the seating chart worked out, and presents had started arriving.

All of the questions that he'd been asking himself when she first ended things returned. Was he just not a good enough person? Or was he so obtuse that he hadn't realized their issues himself? That night, Zoe had brought up that neither of them enjoyed each other's friends and hobbies. It had

definitely been an annoyance, but he hadn't thought it was a deal breaker. It must have shown on his face, because then she'd brought out the big guns.

"When you asked me to marry you," she had said, "I thought I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. Now I know that I don't. It wasn't anything specific you did—it was just... a little of everything, I guess."

He wished it had been something specific. Then he would know. Since it wasn't, he had to assume it was everything. He had been happy enough in their relationship, and at the time, he'd figured that was enough and he'd accepted it. He hadn't realized that Zoe wasn't going to be happy. That her expectations, dreams, and vision for their future wasn't going to be met.

Sometimes he worried that he just wasn't husband material. Other times, he really felt like that wasn't true—he recognized it as simply doubts creeping in, and he forced them to go away. But when he did, it left the nagging feeling that if that wasn't the reason, then it was simply that he and Zoe weren't a good match, and he hadn't noticed. It meant that his judgment hadn't been solid.

He and Zoe had worked together to undo all the wedding preparations—to cancel everything, return everything, send back the gifts, get out of the contract for the apartment they had leased and were days from moving into—and it was mentally tough. If his judgment had been solid, he would've realized their issues before it became so difficult to break off.

He couldn't take on the weight of anything else in the box that might be related to the wedding that never happened. He shifted a big stack of papers and cards to see if anything else was in it that he might need to go through, and saw the edge of a rock. Lifting everything above it so he could more easily get to it, he reached into the box and pulled out the flat stone, smiling.

The scene that Addi had painted was exactly like he remembered it. He ran his finger across the trees by the shore, and the way the river curved outward in their favorite spot, making the water calmer, and the perfect spot to jump in. Not that it was deep—most of the time, it only went halfway to their knees. Even though the little Ian and the little Addi were only painted about an inch high in the scene, she still managed to get big smiles on their faces as they held hands and jumped in.

"You really did keep it," Addi breathed.

He glanced up to see her looking his direction, gazing at the stone. What if things went wrong with Addi? Could he handle the pain of going through with her what he'd gone through with Zoe? With Addi, he was happy in their



relationship. More than happy—he was thrilled. If things went wrong with the two of them, he'd have so much further to fall than he had with Zoe.

He put the stone back in the box and stood up. “Listen, I’ve got to go. I’m sorry to run out on you two, but I have to...” What? He didn’t even know, so he couldn’t finish his sentence. He just had to go somewhere and think.

After giving Addi a quick kiss on the forehead, he grabbed his keys and shoes, and headed out to his truck for a long drive.



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## ADDISON

“I NEED NEWS ABOUT YOUR MAN.”

That was how Chloe answered the phone when Addison called her on her way to the grocery store Saturday morning.

“What if you won’t like the news?”

“No, Addison! No bad news. There can’t be bad news. You two are too adorable together. What happened?”

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. Maybe something.”

“Oh. That explains everything.”

“It does?” Chloe had so much more experience with dating and guys and understanding what was going on.

“No! That was sarcasm. Don’t they have sarcasm in Oregon? Explain.”

“You know how I was so worried about Ian being a rebound guy? I realized that rebounding for me isn’t so much about not having had enough time to get past feelings for my ex, because Matthew and I never really had super strong feelings for each other. I think we both held onto the relationship for so long because of other reasons. What I really crave right now from that relationship is the security of knowing right where I stood with him.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re thinking of going back to Matthew.”

“No. I want a relationship where the amount of love we feel for each other is at a ten. With Matthew, it never got over a three. But it was a solid three, and I really miss that it was so solid. Sometimes when I’m with Ian, he is so sweet and it feels like we are connecting so well, and I know he really likes me. And then other times, he just...isn’t, and I’m unsure about everything. Like last night. I was helping his grandma in her office and he came home from work, and you should’ve seen his face, Chloe. It just lit up when he saw me. Like I was his entire world. Seriously, I wish I would’ve had it videoed, so I could just watch it over and over.”

Chloe happy sighed.

“And then we were all working on organizing the office and just chatting about random things and he got really quiet. I looked over to see what was up, and he was holding the stone I painted for him. Remember that?”

“Oh, I remember. I swear you talked about it for a year straight.”

“There was just something different about him while he was holding it. Heavy. Sad. Anxious. Regretful. I don’t know—it’s hard to explain. Then he just got up, said goodbye, and left.”

“Huh.” The line was quiet for a few moments, and then Chloe asked, “Did his grandma say anything?”

Addison pulled into a parking spot and turned off her car, then picked up her phone when bluetooth switched it over from the car’s speakers. “She did. She said that maybe it wasn’t the rock that made him all morose—maybe it was what was under the rock. It was a wedding invitation. *His* wedding invitation.”

“Get out.”

She very nearly opened her door at her sister’s command, then rolled her eyes at herself and stayed put. *She* was the older sister, after all.

“He didn’t get married, though, right?”

“No. I knew his last relationship had been serious. He said he thought it would end in marriage. I just didn’t know he meant *that* serious, or that he thought it would end in marriage because they had actually planned the wedding. Shirley said their wedding was supposed to happen the same weekend I moved here.” She let out a deep breath. “Remember all the research I did to make sure that Ian wouldn’t be a rebound guy?”

“Yeah.”

“I think I probably worried about that more than I needed to. What I should’ve been worrying about was becoming the rebound girl.”

“Oh.”

“So what do I do? The same thing I’ve been doing? Back off and give him space? Buy myself a spinning wheel and prepare for a life of solitude?”

“Communication is the number one thing. Go out with him again soon and bring it up.”

“I can do that.” She paused for a moment. “Thanks, Chloe, for dating a million guys before finding Dustin so you can answer my questions. Even if half a million of them were ones I had hoped would ask me out.”

“What are sisters for?”

After hanging up the phone, Addison sent a text to Ian, not allowing herself to stop and over-analyze before she did.

*Are you free tonight?*

It took long enough for his response that she almost grabbed her list and went into the grocery store. Finally, though, his answer came in.

*No.*

*I have to install all the cabinets in a home today, and it's huge.*

*We are starting at noon, and I won't be done until at least 8.*

She nearly just sent a frowny-faced emoji back and prepared to spend more of the weekend feeling unsettled, but then she decided that she wasn't going to quit so easily.

*You still have to eat, right?*

*How about I bring dinner to the site? And then I can help as needed.*

*But what if you came and all I wanted to do was kiss you all night long? I'd never finish installing the cabinets.*

She kept re-reading the text, her heart doing a little jump every single time. Then she typed in her response.

*Then we'll have to turn it into a game. We install one cabinet, we get one  
kiss.*

*I like when you're in charge of the games.*

She smiled, grabbed her list, and got out of the car. She could make exactly two dishes well, and one of them was chicken piccata. She already had the list of things to buy because she was making it for her roommate dinner turn later this week, so she would just get double.

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ADDISON PULLED up to the house that Ian had texted her the address to. It was a newer neighborhood with three houses under construction next to each other, and he wasn't kidding when he said it was huge.

Ian must've sensed her pulling up to the house, because he came out fast enough that he reached her before she even got the passenger door open. He gave her a big smile and a small kiss, then said, "That one didn't count—the game hasn't started yet."

But to her lips that were still tingling from the brief touch of his, it definitely counted.

"You cooked dinner? For me?" He picked up the dish with the hot pad, then pulled up the foil and breathed in deeply, a look of bliss on his face.

"Now don't get all excited. This and enchiladas is the extent of what I can

cook.”

Addison grabbed the basket and a blanket and followed Ian into the house. A couple of other guys were working on different things in the house, but Ian shooed them away when their noses brought them straight to the food, and he led them into what she guessed was a guest bedroom. Carpet hadn't been laid yet, so she spread the blanket on the plywood floor. Ian put the pasta dish on the blanket, and she got everything else out of the basket and spread it out.

He seemed to love the food, and gave her compliment after compliment. Enough that she didn't even want to bring up his engagement, but she knew that if she didn't plow ahead with her questions, she might chicken out.

“So, you were engaged and nearly married, huh?” Wow. When she'd thought through this part of the night in her head, it came out so much less blunt.

Ian ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck. “Um, yeah. I should've told you already. It was just...”

“Awkward?”

“Yeah. I meant to tell you when we had our catch-up coffee date, but before I got a chance, I was carrying you in my arms and it seemed weird to say, ‘Oh, and by the way, I was engaged, but my fiancée broke it off right before the wedding.’”

“That might not have been the most elegant way to bring it up, but it would've been effective.” She was pretty sure she quoted his words pretty close to exactly.

Ian's laugh was loud and booming, bouncing off the smooth surfaces of the empty room. He scratched his cheek. “In all fairness, you did warn me that I might not like it when my request came back around to bite me, so I shouldn't be surprised.”

“And? Tell me about it.”

He started off telling her what she already heard from his grandma. Then he told a little about their relationship. It didn't sound bad, but it didn't sound great, either. It had been a little like hers and Matthew's relationship—they weren't in each other's lives enough in all the important ways. But her relationship with Matthew had been stalled and practically unmoving for years, so it hadn't been too big of a deal for her to hop off that train. Ian's relationship with Zoe had plowed forward like a freight train and when she pulled the brakes, the train jumped the tracks, injuring everyone. It sounded

awful. And, based off the way that Ian became more sullen and weighed down as he told it, it really was awful.

“Wow. I really brought down the mood of the room, didn’t I?”

“Luckily,” Addison said, “I brought apple cobbler. It’s guaranteed to bring it up seven notches.”

“You made apple cobbler?”

She held the container back as he grabbed for it. “No, I bought it. I can make *two* things, remember? No getting your expectations higher.”

He was still leaned forward from trying to grab it, his face inches from hers, so she kissed him. He smiled into the kiss and said, “That one didn’t count, either.”

Gosh, she wanted things with him to work out. She could already picture the marital bliss and happy little children running around with Ian’s dark wavy hair.

They cleaned up and started working on the cabinets. Ian and an assistant—a kid who used to be one of his Junior Woodworkers, apparently—had hung all the higher cabinets before she got there, which was good, because those were the more difficult ones, and she didn’t have a clue what she was doing.

If she had ended the date right after dinner, she probably would’ve walked away feeling relatively confident about their relationship. As the night went on, though, she wasn’t sure at all. There were times when they laughed as they worked, and he very enthusiastically kissed her after each cabinet was finished. And then there were times when he seemed to be thinking too much, and it was like he was avoiding her as much as one could while maneuvering a cabinet into place. And any attempts to find out how he was feeling didn’t go over well.

But it was obvious that something was wrong—he still couldn’t manage to keep his emotions hidden well. They had finished with the kitchen, two of the bathrooms, and one of the washrooms when she said, “You seem to be doing a lot of thinking tonight.”

“I am sorry I have been so distracted.”

He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her in close. She put her arms around his neck, and soaked in how right it felt to be so near him. Everything about this was right. He leaned in close to her ear, his breath tickling her neck. “Coming here tonight to help me was an incredible thing to do. Thank you.”

Her mouth was right by his ear, too, so she breathed, “You forgot to mention dinner.”

She felt his smile right next to her ear, and he pulled back enough that he could meet her eyes. “So was bringing me a delicious meal. And giving me kisses like they were fuel to keep going.”

She dropped her hands to his chest. “So what you’re saying is, I saved you twice today.”

He chuckled and smiled that amused smile that had first pulled her in at Gateway Groceries so many weeks ago. He dropped one hand to her hip and brushed a curl away from her cheek. “In the who-saves-whom category, it looks like we’re tied. It’s anyone’s guess who’s going to be getting that Medal of Honor in the mail.”

He went and got the picnic basket and blanket and carried them out to her car, his hand in hers. Which was good, because he had turned the power of those beautiful blue eyes on her, and she wasn’t sure she could be trusted to walk or talk on her own.

At her car, he gave her the sweetest kiss that made her think that maybe everything would work out between them just fine.





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## ADDISON

“I AM SO glad you could help me today,” Peyton said as Addison chopped the last cooked chicken in the tray.

“I’m glad I had the day off. This has been fun.” And it *was* fun. It had been a nice change of pace from her usual, and Peyton seemed so grateful. It was nice to just mindlessly chop food.

“It has.” Peyton smiled her perfect smile with her hair that even looked pretty when she was spending the day in the kitchen. Then she removed the empty tray and put a full one in its spot.

“*More* chicken?”

“This is why I’m a personal chef and not a caterer. With catering, there’s so much monotony. Seriously, thank you, Addison. It’s a client I cook for all the time who’s having a big luncheon, but still. I don’t know what I was thinking when I took this job. I couldn’t do it without you.”

Addison got lost in the rhythm of her chopping while Peyton mixed the rest of the ingredients for the chicken salad in a giant bowl. “How are things going with Ian?”

“I don’t know. And I hate not knowing. Sometimes I think I know, and other times, I’m positive I don’t. All I do know is that he’s everything I ever wanted but hadn’t known that I wanted yet. I’ve fallen pretty hard for him.”

Peyton smiled dreamily.

“But let’s talk about something else. I’ve already analyzed everything more than an IRS agent analyzes a suspicious tax claim, and I’ve got brain exhaustion from it.”

Peyton washed her hands then went to where her phone rested on the counter and touched the screen. Then she smiled at it—the kind of smile that Addison had seen her use only with one person.

“Was that a text from Max?”

She nodded. "He's a funny friend."

Addison shook her head, wondering if the girl would ever refer to him as something other than a friend.

Timini finally came back into the room, hugging a kid-sized dress form, taking small steps so she wouldn't hit into it too much as she walked. She set it down with a huge exhale, and then started adjusting its size.

"Okay, we'll switch to a new subject, then," Peyton said as she pulled another tray of croissants out of the oven. "How's work?"

"I kind of imagined that most of my days would be spent blissfully organizing people's homes. There is so much more to running a business that I am learning as I go. I'm a little stressed out by how many blank spots I have in my schedule, since they're what's paying the bills."

The truth was, she was a lot stressed out by that. She wasn't great at marketing or advertising because she'd never had to deal with those sides of the business before. It all came so naturally to Chloe and it made her wish they lived so close again. With her help, she would have her schedule filled for sure.

"I think you should just not worry about it," Timini said. "Clients will come in when they come in. Stressing about it won't change anything."

Bex dragged herself into the room wearing baggy sweats and a baggy t-shirt, her hair pulled into a messy bun, no makeup on, and flopped into a chair at the table. "Guys, I'm sick. And I have episodes to film. Make me better. Please? I'm begging here."

"I'm pretty sure there's a sticky note somewhere that says it's against the rules to be sick." Timini just kept adjusting the mannequin, like she hadn't just directed the jab at Bex, and Addison had to hold in a laugh.

"Get your germs away from the food!" Peyton screeched, making shooing motions. "Go sit on one of those tables."

Bex just looked at the other tables like she didn't have the energy to get up and move. "Can't. They're too messy."

"Really, they are," Addison said. "Can we get a little more organized everywhere?" She didn't mean to direct the comment at Timini, but she was, by far, the one contributing the bulk of the chaos at the inn.

"If you organize," Timini said calmly, holding pins in her mouth, as she put a half-finished bodice on the form, inside out, "then creativity flies right out the window. Same goes with rules." She shot a glare at Bex.

"While we're discussing issues," Peyton said as she added the chopped

chicken to her mixture, “can we talk about adjusting the temperature? It’s always freezing in here!”

“Are you kidding?” Bex said, looking like Peyton’s comment put some life back in her. “It’s always a furnace in here. Especially when you cook.”

Peyton looked to Addison and Timini for support, but Addison didn’t say anything—she thought the temperature was fine. “Okay, then, maybe we can talk about keeping the volume down a bit while we’re all trying to work.”

Bex sat up straighter. “Is this about when my sisters and their kids come over? Because loud is how you know they enjoy being around each other.”

“Maybe we just need to change things up a bit,” Timini said as she glanced around. “Rearrange the rooms down here. Maybe all we need is an infusion of change to refresh everyone.”

“No!” Peyton begged. “Change doesn’t rejuvenate. It stresses people out.”

This whole conversation was stressing Addison out. Normally, she loved when they were all together, whether they were working out issues or not. Her parents had never been around much and she and Chloe hadn’t always had the same schedules, so she felt like she never really got much of a family growing up. All her roommates in a room together made the place feel like a home.

But her nerves were too frayed from her worries that things with Ian weren’t right and her fears about work. She ducked out of the room and took a few deep, calming breaths once she got to the lobby, very much missing her teeny apartment that she had all to herself back in Amarillo.

Then she held her breath and cocked her ear when she heard gurgling and popping sounds, almost like knocking. And then a loud hissing. It wasn’t the first time she’d heard the knocking, but never the hissing, never this loud, and never when she could tell where the sounds were coming from. Walking carefully so she could hear the noise better, she went down the hall toward the back door and stopped right in front of the utility closet. Yep, the hissing was definitely coming from there.

More than a little wary, she reached for the doorknob just as a gush of hot water soaked her shoes. She tore the door open to see water pouring from a valve about two-thirds of the way up the water heater. Gallons of water gushed out of it, filling the little room and spilling out into the hallway.

She must’ve screamed, because all three of her roommates were suddenly by her, frozen in shock, gasping at what they were seeing.

“We need something to catch the water!” She raced into the bathroom just down the hallway from it and dumped the hand towels out of a decorative bowl and ran back to the water heater. Bex, Peyton, and Timini came running up the hallway, their footsteps splashing in the water, carrying bowls from the kitchen.

Bowl after bowl, one of them would catch the water until their container was full, and then the next person would catch the water while they ran it to the bathroom sink.

Finally, she shook her head. “We aren’t getting to the end of it. More water must be filling it still.” There was a hose connected to the top of it, so she searched for some kind of valve to turn it off, but couldn’t see anything.

“We need to shut off power to it, too,” Bex said, crowding in the small room, searching for the power while Addison searched for the water valve and Peyton held a bowl, with the water all around them and everything going wrong.

The power was easier to find than the valve, but they eventually managed to get both shut off and the last of the water dumped into the sink. The long hallway and the lobby were still covered in so much water, though. The adrenaline of stopping the water took all the energy Bex had, so she headed upstairs to bemoan her sickness alone, and Timini, Peyton, and Addison scooped the water off the tile floor with dust pans. Eventually, they got the water amount down enough that they just had to use towels, wringing them into a bucket constantly.

When they finally finished, Timini and Peyton headed up the stairs to their rooms to put on dry clothes, but Addison just stayed downstairs. Exhausted and dreading how much a new water heater was going to cost—not to mention what a pain it would be to shower and wash dishes until it was replaced—she sat down on the second stair and let her head fall into her hands.

Her phone, which she’d forgotten she’d had in her pocket, rang. She really hoped it was a miracle worker calling to solve all of her problems. “Hello?”

“Hi, Addison.”

It took her a minute to place the voice. “Matthew?” She pulled the phone away from her ear long enough to look at the number to verify. She’d forgotten that deleting him from her contacts would mean that she wouldn’t see his name if he ever called. Sure enough, though, it was the 806 area code.

She wondered if whoever wrote that website article thought ahead to the perils of accidentally answering a call from your ex because you deleted his contact information.

The roommate dinner when Bex, Peyton, and Timini all warned her about the dangers of chatting with him and the damage it could do immediately came to mind, too. And then there was her list of what not to do, as well—and right there on it was *Hoping your ex would call and let you know he's doing okay*. She hadn't been hoping he would call, which she was pretty proud of, but it never occurred to her that he might be the one to fail at that item on the list.

"It's good to hear your voice. I just wanted to see how you are doing."

Addison sighed. "Today isn't really the best time to ask that question. How are you?"

"Good. What's happening today that's got you down?"

She shrugged. "Let's just say I'm having second thoughts about my job, I'm unsure about too many things, and right now, a teeny apartment with a landlord who would swoop in and fix any problem for me sounds heavenly. Plus, it has rained for twelve hours straight here. You know—the kinds of things that make you question whether moving somewhere new was a mistake."

"Well, I did see a *now leasing* sign in front of your old apartment building."

She laughed. It was obvious that he was trying to lift her spirits, and it actually worked. Partly because it made her think—just for a second—about moving back, which made her realize that, awful day or not, she really didn't want to.

"Thank you, Matthew. I guess I needed that. What's new with you? Are you dating anyone?"

He chuckled. "Actually, yeah. My Tuesdays and Saturdays got a little lonely."

"That's wonderful, Matthew. Everything is going well?"

"It really is."

Thinking back to how stagnant their relationship was made her wonder how she ever thought they should stay together for as long as they did. But it surprised her how happy she was for him that he found someone new. It was a little reminder that there was someone for everyone.

"So, listen," he said. "I am flying to Portland tomorrow for business, and

I still have a box of your things. I was wondering if I could drop it by.”

“Oh, sure. Yeah, that’d be great. I’ll text you my address.”

“And I’ll let you get back to your crisis and re-evaluation of your life choices.”

Addison chuckled, and Matthew did, too. “You sound good, Matthew. I’m glad.”

“You do, too. I’ll drop that by tomorrow night.”

After Addison hung up and texted him her address, she slid her phone back into her pocket. Who said communicating with your ex was a bad idea? Talking to Matthew and finding out that he was doing well and had moved on felt like closure. Like it marked the end of her rebound period. Like that part of her life was done and wrapped up all clean and neat with a bow on top.

Now she just needed to figure out how to deal with the mess that her current life was.





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## IAN

IAN GLANCED up at the clock on the wall of his shop. The parents of his junior woodworkers were going to be showing up any minute, and they still hadn't finished cleaning up. And somehow, as they were working most of the hour on sanding their step stools, the kids managed to get covered from head to toe in sawdust. Probably because instead of being one hundred percent focused on the kids like he needed to be, his mind kept wandering to Addi. The parents of these kids weren't even going to want them to get in their vehicles being as dusty as they were.

Luckily, he had turned on the air compressor before they arrived. "Okay, wood workers—get your project in your cubby, then put on your safety goggles and dust mask and come line up just outside the door."

Nothing got them cleaned up more quickly than needing to be blown off with the air hose. When the first kid raced out of the shop to get into line, the boy waved at his mom who had already arrived and was waiting at the edge of the grass. Then Ian pressed the button on the nozzle and blew the concentrated air on the kid as he turned around in a circle, the bulk of the sawdust scattering to the wind. Then the kid leaned forward so Ian could blow it in his hair, and then held out one foot at a time to get the air blown on his shoes.

The eight-year-old took off his dust mask and goggles and wiped away the dust behind them that hadn't been blown off. Then he held his arms straight out and grinned at his mom. "How do I look?" Leaving with hair that appeared like he'd been in a tornado seemed to be the kid's favorite part of the day. He said goodbye, thanked the kid's mom, and then started blowing off the next junior woodworker in line.

By the time he got to the last kid, half had left with parents already and the other half were chasing each other around his backyard. Jella was one of

the most talkative of his junior woodworkers, and the one with the longest hair. As he was blowing the sawdust off her and she was turning in a circle, she said, “It took my mom thirty-two minutes to brush all the snarls out of my hair after last time.”

He immediately turned off the air. “I’m glad you told me before I blew this on your hair then.”

“No, do it! Make it as crazy as you can. I’m trying to set a new record.”

Ian glanced toward the driveway, hoping her mom or grandma was there and would tell him if they preferred he skipped that part, but didn’t see either of them. “How about we work on setting a record the other direction? We’ll try to get all the sawdust out and only need five minutes of brushing.”

Jella shrugged, so he carefully blew the air from the top of the seven-year-old’s head, trying to keep it blowing her hair straight down. But at the last second and too quickly for him to react, Jella shook her head around, making the air blow her hair crazily anyway.

He turned off the air hose, and the girl, still grinning from the messy hair, said, “You know that girl Zoe who you were going to marry that was sometimes waiting for you after Junior Woodworkers? I saw her.”

“Yeah?” He started coiling the air hose.

Jella nodded. “At Cascade Mini Golf. She was with some guy and they were all loving on each other and kissing pretty much the whole time. I just wanted to march right up to her with my hands on my hips like this and say, ‘You shouldn’t be here as a pair like you don’t even care. You should be home crying for a month straight because of how mean you were to Ian!’ And I would have done it, too, but my grandma and my mom told me I couldn’t.”

Ian couldn’t help glancing across the hedgerow to Addi’s home. “It’s okay that Zoe is dating someone else, Jella. We aren’t together anymore.”

“That’s what my mom said. But it just doesn’t seem right that she’s so happy.” The girl glanced at the other kids. “Oh—Priya is having trouble catching Ajay. I better go help her.”

As the kids raced around his backyard, squealing and laughing, the familiar hurt from their breakup settled in on him. He glanced toward Addi’s place. What was he doing? He’d known he wasn’t ready to start dating again. And then Addi came back into his life, and just because she was so fun and interesting and captivating and everything he had ever hoped for, it was like he had suddenly forgotten that.

More parents showed up to collect their kids, so he herded the remaining handful to the front yard. Jella's mom was the last to arrive, and he apologized about the state of her hair as best as he could while the girl was demanding that her mom take a picture of the masterpiece.

As soon as they finally drove away, he pulled out his phone and pulled up Zoe on social media, needing to see who this new guy was that Jella had seen her with. Sure enough, there were several pictures posted with Zoe's smiling face, a man's arm—Dylan Brady, the tag said—wrapped around her.

He felt a rush of an emotion that he couldn't quite name. "Jealousy" was the only word that came to mind, yet that wasn't quite right. He wasn't jealous of Dylan. He didn't want to be the one with his arm around Zoe. He was actually happy she had found someone.

So what was it then?

He glanced at Hidden Inn. He wanted Addi to be happy and fully in love, too. He wanted her to be happy and fully in love *with him*. He wanted to be the one who brought a smile to her face whenever he saw her, just like she brought a smile to his. He wanted the best of everything for her.

But what if she wasn't always happy and things between them ended badly? Maybe if he didn't see her all the time, he wouldn't feel like he had already fallen for her so deeply.

He glanced back down at Zoe's posts. What he really wanted to do was to post a picture of him with Addi, and hope that Zoe saw it. It was a childish thought, and he felt ashamed for even having it. But then it hit him that the emotion he'd been experiencing felt like jealousy because he was jealous of Zoe. In the few pictures she posted, she looked like she had moved on just fine and was having no second thoughts about her new relationship.

Yet he was having second thoughts about his.

He loved every single second he spent with Addi and wanted her in his life more and more. Right now, he wanted to walk over to the inn, wrap his arms around her, kiss her senseless, and then hear about how things went with today's client and what her future plans were. He wanted to talk with her for hours with her in his arms. Yet he was still having doubts. How did Zoe look so confident? He closed out of the app and shoved his phone back into his pocket. This was making him crazy and not helping at all, so he obviously just needed to stay away. To help distract himself, he walked to the mailbox and got today's mail.

Before he even looked down at the mail, movement at Hidden Inn caught

his eye and he glanced over. A car had just pulled into the circle drive in the front, and a man got out. He was pretty good looking, and Ian assumed he was there for Bex. She seemed to date a lot, and it usually wasn't the same person.

He walked his fingers along the top of envelope, glancing at what had come as he made his way back to his house, when he glanced over again and saw that Addi answered the door, not Bex. He couldn't see the guy's face, but he could see Addi's, and it was all recognition and smiles. The man handed her some kind of gift box and they hugged and he kissed her cheek. And then she invited him inside.

The only explanation he could think of was that it must be her ex from Amarillo. But here in Quicksand? Why? And why did she look so happy to see him?

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AS IAN CLEANED up from work and ate dinner, his mind went in circles, examining the tension that weighed down his shoulders. Before Addi moved back into the inn, his doubts and fears were probably in the high range. It had been a rough time.

Then Addi moved in. And then he got to know her. And then he really started to fall for her. And somewhere along the way, the unease and uncertainty had just kind of floated away, almost making him forget about it. And when he did consciously think about it, it wasn't enough to cause any kind of action on his part. He was too busy falling completely for Addi to pay it any attention.

Over the past week, though, his fears had kicked into high gear. Especially since he had fallen for Addi so much more deeply than he had ever fallen for Zoe. He had thought he was ready to open up his heart to her, but now he wasn't so sure.

He had been wandering around his house hoping for peace or direction, but all he got when he wandered back into the kitchen was the little green and yellow origami frog his grandma had folded and put on the table with a note in its mouth reminding him that she was gone to the Paperworks Folding Fest conference and wouldn't be home until late.

And wandering around his house aimlessly wasn't helping.

He glanced out the window. There was probably a good thirty minutes before it was dark—it might be enough time to mow the inn's backyard. The noise and the work might get his mind off things. He put on his work gloves

headed out his backyard and to the gate in the hedgerow leading to her yard.

He had only made it five feet onto her lawn when she walked out the back door, a bag of trash in her hand. Their eyes met and she gave him a small smile, tossed the garbage into the can, and then walked toward him.

She glanced at his gloves. “A little late for mowing, isn’t it?”

He shrugged. “It’s been one of those days.”

“Yeah, it has.” She leaned against the metal archway that held the fence between their yards, looking exhausted or sad or upset—he wasn’t sure which.

He immediately left the mower behind, stepping closer to her. “Is everything okay?” He wanted to reach out and comfort her. To wrap her up in his arms. But the worry weighing so heavy on his shoulders stopped him. Instead, he leaned against the other side of the archway, facing her.

Addi rubbed her fingers on her temples before dropping them to her sides. “Today and yesterday have just been the kind of days that have made me question every decision I’ve made in the past couple of months.”

His heart seemed to suddenly weigh more, sinking down in his chest. Was that why her ex had stopped by? Because she was rethinking her decision to break up with him? He was already dreading the answer, but he still asked, “Like what?”

She looked up at the darkening sky. “Not getting another corporate job, starting my own business, leaving home, moving across the country, living at the inn instead of selling it—pretty much everything.”

Her eyes searched his, and he tried to guess what it was she was looking for, but alarm bells were going off too loudly in his head at the words “pretty much everything.” She was unsure about every single thing that brought her here—that brought her into his life. He swallowed down the lump in his throat. “Does that include your decision to date me, too?”

She studied his eyes, biting her lip. “Sometimes.”

His mind kept going back to every negative thought about himself he’d had when Zoe first broke things off with him. Is that the direction things were heading with Addi? He didn’t know if he was strong enough for that.

But if they waited longer and he fell even more in love with her, he definitely wouldn’t be strong enough if things ended.

“Listen, Addi. I...” He looked at the ground, letting out a long breath before he met her eyes again. “I can’t do this anymore.” He couldn’t believe that the words actually came out of his mouth.

Addi stood up straight, her eyebrows creasing together. “You want to break up?”

No. He didn’t want to break up at all. He wanted to hear why she was questioning her job and her move and see if he could help, and to hold her and comfort her if he couldn’t. He wanted to cheer each other on as they reached for their dreams. He wanted to marry her and have a bunch of kids with her that were hopefully less wild than Bex’s nieces and nephews. Or more wild. He would take that, too, if he and Addi could do it together. He wanted to be with her always.

But he knew how hard it was to get over Zoe. If he and Addi got to that same point and they broke up—the thought of how infinitely worse that would be sent panic coursing through him.

So he nodded.

She didn’t say anything. Tears started to pool in her eyes, and he wanted to reach out with a knuckle and wipe them away. He wanted to make everything better. But then she just turned and walked toward the inn, so he walked through the archway toward his house, then closed the gate separating their yards.



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## ADDISON

ADDISON SHUFFLED into the kitchen where her roommates were all still chatting after washing the dinner dishes in the sink, using water they'd had to heat up on the stove. "Remember when you guys said that you'd be my soft place to fall? I need a soft place."

Peyton looked from Addison to the direction of the backyard and to Addison again, her eyebrows drawn close together. "Just from taking out the garbage?" Then, realization seemed to dawn on her, and her hands flew to her mouth. "No. No, no, no. Oh my lands, you two didn't just break up, did you?" She raced forward and wrapped Addison in a hug. "What happened?"

"I don't know. He just said he couldn't do it anymore."

Timini and Bex joined the hug, and she held the three of them tight for a long moment.

"No more of an explanation than that?" Timini asked.

She shook her head.

"And you didn't demand one?" Bex asked.

"Oh my goodness," Peyton said, looking around frantically. "I told you that if you ever broke up, I would provide cake, and I have no cake!"

"It's okay," Bex said, walking over to the freezer. "I'm pretty sure I have fudge pops in here. Yep! A full box." She set it on the island counter that they all had gravitated toward and tore the box open. She even pulled one out for Addison, took off the wrapper, and put the stick in her hand.

Addison was pretty sure she didn't want a fudge pop, but she licked it anyway. "My list said not to rush a new relationship and I swear I didn't. I actually kept myself away from him when I really wanted to see him just to slow it down. It's only been ten weeks that I've known him again, so it just kind of went fast without me even helping it along. So that makes this my second breakup in less than three months. See? I told you rebound dating was



bad!”

Timini shook her head. “Ian wasn’t a rebound, and you know it.”

Addison let out a huge sigh. “I know I know it. That’s what makes it so awful.” She licked her fudge pop. “When I first broke up with Matthew, I mourned the loss of our future. Or, well, at least our future Tuesdays and Saturdays. But also, I kind of mourned the loss of that certainty of knowing what the future held, because I no longer knew what my life was going to be like.”

She set her fudge pop down on its wrapper. She really didn’t want to have to keep licking it, and if she didn’t, it was going to melt all over her hand.

“But with Ian, nothing was so certain, and I didn’t know what the future held. The only thing I knew was that I was going to wake up, and he was going to be amazing and I was going to be more in love with him. That was the constant thing I could count on.”

She knew that the shock of the sudden breakup wasn’t over, and when it was, that was when she was going to feel the full depth of what she’d lost. She could feel the weight of it hanging around the periphery, like an actor waiting for his turn to take the stage.

Bex tossed the remainder of her own fudge pop in the garbage can, and then put an arm around Addison. “Come. Let’s go into the family room. We’ll all squish in on the big couch and either watch music videos of sad breakup songs on YouTube or an action flick on Netflix where the love interest dies. Your choice.”

Addison nodded and let them lead her into the family room. She would watch and soak in their support and strength as long as she could until the grief and loss wouldn’t wait any longer for its turn on stage, then she’d flee to the solitude of her bedroom.



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## IAN

IAN WAS INSTALLING the trim around a doorframe in another new house that Garrett was the general contractor on when Garrett came to check on everything. As soon as he saw Ian's face, Garrett jerked back in surprise. Ian just grabbed the board he'd already cut for the right side of the door and lined it up with one hand, finish nailer in the other.

"Bad night?" Garrett was trying to act nonchalant, like he hadn't just noticed how awful Ian looked.

"You could say that."

"Have trouble sleeping?"

"Yep."

"Drank a Mountain Dew after eight p.m. again, huh?"

He didn't say anything—he just kept nailing.

"Oh. *Oh*. Addison broke up with you, huh? I'm so sorry, man."

"I broke up with her." He grabbed the step stool and the piece for the top of the door and started lining it up.

"*You*. The guy who is so in love with a woman that he actually started singing on the job. *Broke up with her*. Dude, that makes no sense whatsoever."

Ian just kept working and didn't answer.

"It was fear, wasn't it? Ian, you can't let that stop you. It's not right."

"Of course it's going to stop me. That's fear's entire purpose."

Garrett was quiet for a few minutes while Ian grabbed the three pieces of trim he'd cut for the next doorframe and gave the air hose a shake to untangle it as he pulled it to the next doorway.

"And how did Addison react?"

He laid the pieces of trim on the floor and grabbed the first one, positioning it against the door frame. "She didn't say a word—she just

walked away. I think that meant she agreed that it was time.”

“There are a lot of reasons why she might have walked away. Don’t assume you know her reason.” He paused for a moment, and then asked, “So, do you think you did the right thing?”

With his hand holding up the piece of trim against the frame, Ian closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. “Right before I broke up with her? Yeah. Now? I don’t know. All I know is, I feel awful.”

“Okay, tell me this. How did you feel right after you and Zoe broke up?”

How *did* he feel? He tried to look back at those first couple of days with the lens of time that he now had. “Like the future I had planned was taken away from me, I guess.” He positioned the finish nailer and pulled the trigger, the tool making a *pshhhht* sound as it sunk the nail.

Garrett nodded. “And how do you feel after breaking things off with Addison?”

“Like I’d held the most valuable treasure imaginable in my hands, and I just let go. Not only did I lose it, but left it damaged.”

Garrett stayed quiet as Ian shot the rest of the finish nails into the piece of trim. Then he said, “That might be a clue as to whether or not you did the wrong thing last night.” He thumped Ian twice on the shoulder, and then left him alone to his thoughts.



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## ADDISON

“IAN AND I BROKE UP.”

Chloe gasped on the other end of the line. Addison was pulled over on the side of the road, heading to work—the first time she had ever wished that she didn’t have her day filled—when she knew she couldn’t make it through the day without talking to her sister.

“Oh, no. I am so sorry. How are you?”

Addison shook her head and looked out at the cars passing by her on the highway. “I feel like my heart had finally found what it had been searching for all along, and then it was torn away.”

“When did this happen? And why?”

“Last night, and I don’t know. He didn’t say and I didn’t ask. It was hard enough hearing that he didn’t want to date any more—I didn’t think I could handle hearing the why.”

“Fear can be pretty powerful.”

“Do you really think that was his reason?”

“Addison, I saw how much the man adores you. There’s no way he broke up because of you.”

Addison’s exhale of relief came out as a sob, and she had to force her emotions down so it wouldn’t ruin her makeup or make her look terrible before she stepped into this client’s home.

“What are you going to do about it?”

“What can I do? A relationship takes two people, and if one of them doesn’t want it to continue, then there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Chloe was silent for a long moment before she spoke again. “Okay, from what I’ve seen, this is how you normally handle relationships. Correct me if I’m wrong with any of it. You meet a guy who you start to like. You flirt a bit, and as you get to know each other and if you still like him, you *hope* he’ll

ask you out. And then if you like dating him, you *hope* the relationship will progress. If you don't like him, you *hope* he'll break it off. If you do like him and he breaks it off, you *hope* he'll figure things out and want to get back together. If things continue to go wonderfully, you *hope* he'll propose. You *hope* the guy will be on the same page and make the choices you would make, and feel bad when he doesn't. Does that sound about right?"

"Pretty much. I guess I'm pretty good at hoping."

"Hope is a really important thing, Addison. But it's only half of the equation. The other half is action. To make dreams come true, you have to have both. Have you ever asked a guy out? Been the first one to kiss? Been the first to say how you feel about him? Tried to work things out after a breakup if you wanted to still be together?"

Chloe already knew the answer to most of those, so Addison didn't need to answer. But she did whisper, "I kissed Ian first."

Chloe squealed. "Yes! I knew he was special! Do you love him?"

Addison nodded, even though she knew that Chloe couldn't see her. "I think I started falling in love with him the first day I saw him, and I've fallen a bit more in love with him every single day since then. I imagine I'll keep falling more in love with him every day for the rest of my life."

Chloe let out a sigh that sounded like a whimper. "That's so beautiful." She sighed again. "Okay, Addison, listen. You moved to Quicksand for a fresh start, right? You were determined to grab that fresh start by the horns and show it who was boss, right?"

"Right."

"You didn't say that with nearly enough conviction, Addison."

So she didn't hold back. She took in a deep breath and shouted, "Right!" Who cared if she just yelled so loud that the dog barking in the distance was probably in response to her shout?

Chloe's smile was evident in her voice. "So, what are you going to do about it? When you kissed him first, you proved to yourself that you can be the one to take action. You know what you want. Are you willing to fight for it?"

Addison took a long, deep breath that filled her with determination and bravery. Then, in a voice that Chloe could never accuse her of not having enough conviction, she said, "Yes. I think I am."





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## IAN

IAN WENT straight from finishing the trim on the Olson's home to working in his workshop, hoping that the sound of the saws and sanders would drown out any thoughts. Eventually, though, his stomach was what drew him back to his house.

He walked in the back door to find his grandma and Carol sitting at the kitchen table, eating apple cobbler and ice cream. He leaned down and gave his grandma a one-armed hug.

"I didn't make dinner, but there's still macaroni and cheese in the fridge. And, of course, still warm cobbler for dessert. Carol and I were just trying to brainstorm options for her home."

"And offering commiseration."

"The place must feel pretty big with Henry gone," Ian said, putting some casserole on a plate and covering it.

"Yeah. A little too big. I'm not sure how long I'll be able to keep up with the place."

He put the plate in the microwave and started it. "Do you need some help?"

Carol smiled, and looked like she was going to get out of her seat and come over and squeeze his cheeks between her hands, like she did when he was little. "You're a gem, Ian. But I need more help than you can give."

He had planned to make small talk with the two older women just until his food finished warming and then escape into his room to eat it and then shower, but his grandma said, "Sit." So he sat.

"Now, Shirley told me that you and Addison are no longer dating, but she says you haven't told her much about the why. She's your grandma and since I've practically been your adoptive grandma since you were a toddler, it's time you spill it."

Ian knew that the combined power of Carol and his grandma was impossible to resist when they wanted information. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It was just a bad idea to start dating her in the first place.”

His grandma and Carol shared a look that made him want to bolt for the microwave—that just dinged to let him know his food was ready anyway—and make an escape for his room, but his grandma sensed it and put a wrinkled hand on his arm. “Stay. Please.”

“You love her.”

He glanced at Carol. It hadn’t been a question—she’d said it like she was stating a fact. So he nodded confirmation.

“So much more than you ever loved Zoe. Or anyone before her.”

She was so certain of her words that it made Ian flinch in surprise. He had talked to his grandma about Addison and she probably told Carol, but he’d never talked about Addi specifically.

“Oh, don’t be surprised that I know. You wore your emotions on your sleeve when you were little and you still do now. It’s clear as day how you feel about Addison.”

He glanced at his grandma, and she added, “It’s true.”

Apparently he didn’t have a future in playing poker.

“She’s just amazing, Carol. She’s so talented and smart and supportive. And so much fun to be around. And she cares about people and has such big dreams, and is brave enough to go after them. I love being with her.”

His grandma gave a single nod. “And she loves you.” She said it like it was a fact, not a guess.

“You think so?”

“She’s almost as easy to read as you are. We’ve talked quite a bit while she’s been helping me organize, and I watch how she reacts whenever I bring up the subject of you.”

The thought caused an aching in his chest that made him long to be near her. But if she did love him now, that didn’t mean she always would, and that was the biggest problem. “She said she was questioning every decision she had made that brought her here. Even dating me.”

“Ian.” He turned to his grandma at her soft voice. “In every relationship, you’ll each question things at some point. Asking yourself those questions and figuring out what the answers are is how you figure out if the other person is right for you. It’s part of the whole process, and doesn’t mean that the relationship is doomed to end.”

“And,” Carol said, pointing a crooked finger at him, “if you are going to break things off at the first sign of trouble, then you’re denying her the freedom to have any emotions that aren’t positive. She deserves to be able feel whatever feelings she has without worrying that it will mean you’ll end the relationship.”

It felt like a punch to the gut that left his head swimming in a fog. Is that what he had done?

“You don’t need to be afraid.” His grandma’s voice was quiet, yet powerful and certain. “Just trust her. Trust that as she asks herself those questions, she’ll find the answers.” She reached out and tapped him on the chest, right over his heart. “I can tell that all the love you’ve got for her in here is bursting full. Trust that, not your fears.”

”She’s right.” Carol’s statement was just as matter-of-fact as her stating that Ian loved Addi. “You trust those fears of yours, and you’re going to miss out on the kind of relationship that me and Henry or your grandma and grandpa had. Trust your love instead.”

He leaned back in his chair, letting the force of their words sink into him. After a few moments, he said, “Thanks, Grandma and Carol. I really needed to hear that.”

“Do you know what else I’ve been hearing?” his grandma said. “The microwave beeping to let you know your mac and cheese is done.”

He chuckled, then got up and gave both of them a hug before getting his dinner out of the microwave.



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## ADDISON

ADDISON PACED BACK and forth on the grassy shore of Quicksand River, right next to the cove where she and Ian used to play as children. She shook her hands out and glanced back at the shortcut trail they had used. By the time she'd gotten off work, she had wanted to go straight to Ian's house or workshop or job site—wherever he was—and tell him how she felt.

Instead, she decided she wanted to tell him here. In their favorite place. And at some point today, she'd gotten the brilliant idea to ask him to come by writing him a cheesy rhyme to lead him to her, just like she had so many years ago. It wasn't hard to mimic the style of her twelve-year-old self as a twenty-six-year-old—something Professor Rosati wouldn't be surprised by.

Now, though, as she waited for Ian to come—and hoped it wouldn't be like that time she'd forgotten to mention the direction he should run, or worse, that he didn't want to come at all—she wondered if it was a terrible idea.

She ran over the poem in her head again. Apparently they were easy to memorize after all. She went through it once, wondering if she should've changed any of the wording. She went through it again, wondering if she gave good directions. And she went through it another time, imagining what he must've been thinking as he read it.

*You said we shouldn't see each other anymore.  
Which is hard, since you're my neighbor next door.  
But even more impossible is trying to not love you.  
Which I can't do, so I hope you'll follow each clue.  
Go where we were given the "unplanned" scooter rides.  
Jog 400 feet south to where the road divides.*

*To the left that leads to our old animal trail.  
At each fork, choose the one more traveled and you'll prevail.  
Soon, you'll end up at the place I painted on that rock.  
And then maybe we can have a little talk.*

SHE SHOULDN'T HAVE ENDED it with saying they should talk. Nobody liked to hear that. It sounded ominous and bad. Why didn't she think to change that before having Peyton deliver it to Ian? She hoped he wouldn't think it was bad, or maybe he wouldn't want to come.

She pulled out her phone again to check the time. Peyton should've dropped off her rhyme at his house twenty-five minutes ago. If she'd have gotten a note like that, she would've checked her hair and makeup, maybe even changed clothes. So five minutes there. The drive was about ten minutes to the quasi-trailhead. And then it was at least a fifteen minute walk to where she was—if he didn't take the actual trail, which was two miles down from the viewpoint. With all its meandering, it would take much longer.

And that was assuming he was home when Peyton dropped off the note. And that he *wanted* to come talk to her.

She paced some more.

And some more.

Maybe her directions were bad. Maybe she should've chosen a location they had actually been to as adults, like along Chipper Creek trail where she lost her shoe. Or the park where they'd watched Bex's nieces and nephews. Or the high school or restaurant or viewpoint or lemonade stand.

Or maybe she should've just knocked on his front door.

Finally, she decided maybe it wasn't bad directions at all—maybe he just wasn't coming. She was just bending down to pick up her bag when she heard the sounds of footsteps through the undergrowth and she spun around.

Ian was emerging from a non-existent path in the trees that wasn't their animal trail shortcut or the main trail. He wore dark jeans and a light blue t-shirt that was so similar to the one he had been wearing when she'd first seen him in the grocery store, a plaid shirt over it like a jacket. His hair was perfectly tousled and the sun shone down on him in the clearing and he had that amused smile on his face that she loved so much.

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I might have, uh, made some wrong choices on a couple of those forks in the path. It's been a while."

Addison smiled. "You have a little..." She motioned with her hand on the

top of her hair, and he reached up and pulled out a twig that decided to hitchhike during one of those wrong choices.

He dropped a backpack she hadn't noticed he'd been wearing to the ground and stepped a few feet closer to her. It was strange, seeing this very grown up, very beautiful man in the same space they had spent so much time in as kids so long ago. Except for some minor changes, the place looked largely the same as it had.

It was the opposite for them, though. They were the ones who had grown and changed over the past thirteen years. That crush she'd had on Ian when she was thirteen had been a little sapling. Something she thought had withered and died from lack of water over the years, but had really just been waiting for its time to grow into something more beautiful.

Or, at least she hoped it still had a chance to continue to grow. He looked like he had things he wanted to say just as much as she did, but they were both standing awkwardly on the bank of a river, eight feet apart, not talking.

Addison looked down at the bend in the river, where the water lapped against the small rocks and dirt as it lazily turned back to join the slightly faster moving water, then she met Ian's eyes. "That night, when you said you didn't think we should see each other anymore"—Ian flinched, but she pressed forward anyway—"I wanted to say how I really felt. But I was afraid to do it because I wasn't sure you felt the same, so I walked away. Kind of like I did when I was thirteen and I gave you that painted stone. Except this time I didn't run, so obviously I'm making progress."

Ian chuckled quietly.

She shook out her nervous hands again and then wiped them on her hips. Maybe she hadn't made so much progress after all. She forced herself to take a few slow breaths to calm her nerves. "But I'm ready now. I'm ready to tell you exactly how I feel."

Maybe she shouldn't have spent so much time writing the rhyme and then worrying about his reaction to it, and spent more time figuring out how she was going to tell him everything that was in her heart.

"You were a big part of everything magical in my summers as a kid, and you're an essential part of everything magical about my life now. I love the way you look out for others, the way you look out for me, the way you make me laugh. I love the way you care, and even the way you smell. Which sounds weird, I know, but you smell really great. And that smile! That one right there. I really love that smile.

“I love the way you get me, and how you’ll drop anything to help someone in need. Plus, you have really great eyes. Have I mentioned your eyes? Sometimes they make me forget how to think, which sounds like a bad thing, but it’s anything but. I just...I love your whole heart, Ian. I love you. I want to be with you.

“Anyway, I just wanted you to know that I fought off some pretty impressive fear demons, which probably gave me some impressive muscles. And I guess I’m giving up some pretty big insecurities, too.”

She figured it was probably time to quit rambling, so she stopped talking and just made eye contact with him. Even though she was feeling pretty vulnerable after revealing so much and really just wanted to look back down at the river. “I know you had a pretty serious relationship not too long ago, and maybe we started dating too soon. Maybe you need some more time, and I’m happy to give it to you. Because I don’t want to be your rebound, Ian. I want to be your forever.”

Ian met her eyes for a long moment, and then in three strides, he was right in front of her, cupping her face in his hands, like she was the most precious thing in the world and he wanted to protect her. She looked into those blue eyes, made even more vibrant by the early evening sun. Then, without a word, he leaned forward and his lips met hers with such an intensity that she found herself fisting his shirt at his chest, holding him close.

Then his kiss slowed, and it felt like he was pouring his whole heart into the kiss, just like she had poured out her heart in words. She slipped her hands up and entwined them behind his neck. She tried to return his kiss with all the words she hadn’t managed to get out.

He broke the kiss and smiled, leaning his forehead against hers, breathing fast.

“So,” she breathed, “Does that mean you want to start dating again?”





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## IAN

IAN LAUGHED, happiness from Addi's words filling every single cell in his body. "I never wanted to stop dating. I was just battling my own fear demons." He held up an arm and flexed it, just like she had. "Since you gave up some insecurities, I will give up my fears about the future."

"Oh yeah?"

"I was apparently holding onto them so tightly that it's amazing I didn't choke them to death."

"Fears are pretty resilient creatures."

He looked at the water in their little cove that they'd played in so much as kids, and then he looked back at Addi. It was a hot day and she was wearing shorts, which made her legs look incredible. But more importantly, they weren't pants. Her shoes were lace-up canvas ones that looked like they could handle getting wet and would have a much better chance of staying on her feet than the one's she'd worn when they'd gone to Chipper Creek. He wore jeans himself—he'd only been thinking about how many branches and tall weeds encroached on the animal trail they'd used as a shortcut so long ago and not about the water.

"What do you say we recreate the scene you painted on that stone?"

"You want to jump in?"

"For old time's sake." Addi looked excited by the idea, so he bent down and started rolling up his pant legs.

They went to the spot at the edge of the higher ground before it dropped off to the river's edge a foot and a half below, right by the big cedar tree. He wrapped his hand in Addi's, and she looked at him with a grin so wide and so brilliant that he couldn't help but feel the same. Then, holding hands, just like in her painting, they jumped into the river, laughing as they landed in the water.

He wrapped his arms around her waist, and she put her arms around his neck as the water swirled around their calves, the gurgling rushing sounds of the river as it moved faster downstream just beyond their cove.

“I remember the water being deeper,” Addi said.

“I remember being worried I was going to step in quicksand and be trapped and you’d have to save me.”

Addi chuckled. “Me, too. I don’t remember it being this cold.”

“I don’t remember being this in love with you.”

Her gaze turned from the river to him and she smiled. “Is this you, admitting that when you were fourteen and I was thirteen, you were kind of in love with me?”

He tried to hold back a smile, but wasn’t very successful. “If how much I thought about you over the years was any indication, I would probably have to admit that I was.”

“You thought of me?”

“Every single summer since then, especially when July rolled around. Every family barbecue. Every time I visited my grandma. Every time I saw any directions written down, even if they didn’t rhyme. And every time I saw Legos, or flat stones, or a picture of a shallow river, or an empty field, or the Hideaway Inn.”

She studied him for a long moment. “And now?”

“Since the day you moved in, I don’t think I’ve gone a whole five minutes without thinking of you.”

“And if that’s any indication—”

“Then it’s a guarantee, Addison Sparks, that I am hopelessly, completely, more entirely in love with you than I thought it was possible to be. You are perfect exactly how you are, and being with you makes me perfectly happy.”

She kissed him on the lips, but she was smiling so much it only lasted half a heartbeat. But she stayed close enough to him to kiss for several long moments, both of them grinning like it was time for Fourth of July fireworks.

“Let’s get dried off,” he said, reaching for her hand again and leading her to the shore and up the step the water had carved out. He grabbed his backpack from where he dropped it and pulled out a blanket, spreading it on the grassy clearing. “I didn’t have time to make a meal, obviously, but,” he said, dragging out the word as he reached into his bag, “I brought blueberries. I figured going with what started this in the first place would be an appropriate start to us dating again.”

“You didn’t,” she said, playfully pushing his shoulder.

He pulled back. “Careful. I like this shirt.”

Addi laughed a beautiful laugh that came from her belly and seemed to fill his whole soul.

They both sat down next to each other on the blanket, their shoulders touching, their legs outstretched. Addi leaned in close enough that he could feel the breath from her whispers. “Also in honor of new beginnings and embarrassing moments, I’d like to mention that today, I decided to wear Secret’s Va Va Vanilla deodorant. What do you think of that?”

He chuckled softly. “I think,” he said, looking deeply into her hazel eyes with the rim of sunshiney gold, “that I fall more and more in love with you every single day.”

## EPILOGUE: BEX

Bex set down one of Ian's moving boxes in Addison's room. As she was heading back toward the stairs, she opened her phone and held it up with the video camera turned so it was aimed at her, and pushed the *Record* button. "Hello, Bexlandians! As promised, today I'm bringing you the very first video in my *Hidden Inn Roomies* segment! I decided to start with the events of today—"

Timini poked her head into the frame and cut her off by saying, "—because she wanted to catch us in all our t-shirt and sweat pants-wearing, ponytail-sporting, box-toting glory."

Bex switched the camera so she could get a good shot of Timini. "And it is glorious. This is my roommate, Timini. You can call her Tim." Timini waved at the camera, and then Bex turned the camera to Peyton as she walked up the stairs. "And this is Peyton. But you can call her Pey."

Peyton came in close to the camera and said, "No, you can't."

Laughing, Bex whispered to her viewers, "You totally can—it'll just make her twitchy like that. But no, the real reason we are starting this today is that we are getting a new roommate! Our other roommate is Addison, and she is getting married *tomorrow*."

All three of them squealed.

"As you can see, we are more than a little excited about it. Ian's a great guy and they are so freaking adorable together. We are moving most of his stuff in today because they are leaving for their honeymoon straight from their reception, and this way, when they come back from their honeymoon, they'll have a place to come home to. Peyton, what do you think about getting a new roommate?"

"I'll admit that at first I thought it was a little weird. It's always been just the four of us—no guys. Ian has always been our next door neighbor, not our

roommate. But then Timini pointed that, hello, this is an *inn*! For decades, people—mostly couples, even—have been staying here, and they didn't know each other at all. It really is different here than just a regular apartment. And Ian's great, so now I'm just excited. For this and the wedding."

"So am I," Bex said. "They only wanted a small wedding with just family and a few friends—and they specifically said no video. So sorry, Bexlandians! You won't get to see the wedding itself. But here's a sneak peak of me in my bridesmaid dress." She would add the picture Timini took of her wearing her dress when she edited the video. "Isn't it fabulous? It's why Adds is my new favorite person ever. I will show you a few pics of the wedding itself in my segment next week."

Addison walked from wherever she'd been at the back of the house into the lobby and opened the front door, so Bex, Timini, and Peyton all went down the stairs to join her. They had probably spent way too much time slacking at the top of the stairs anyway. They joined Addison on the big wrap-around porch, leaving the front door open, like it had been most of the day.

"And this is my roommate, Addison. If you couldn't tell by the glow, she's the bride-to-be."

Addison smiled, waved, and said, "Hi" to the camera. Then her eyes immediately went back to the start of the hedgerow that separated the inn from Ian's house. A few seconds later, Ian and a guy Bex hadn't seen before came into view, hefting a heavy-looking dresser.

Bex turned the camera to Addison just in time to catch her happy sigh. "I can't believe I get to marry that man tomorrow."

"Girl," Bex said, "you are so joyfully smitten it's practically bursting out of you. I wish I could bottle it and give some to all of my viewers."

"He's just so..." Addison motioned to where her future husband carried the dresser down the curved drive in front of the inn, headed toward them, the weight of the dresser showing off his impressive back muscles. "Perfect."

Bex chuckled quietly. Addison was so clearly blissfully, completely in love, there was no way her viewers were going to miss it. They were going to be eating this up. Especially because Ian was putting off the exact same vibes, and that man's emotions showed on his face as clear as day. She made sure to get a good long shot of him hefting that dresser.

Bex had been making sure to show Addison and Ian and capturing how they felt about each other that she had practically missed the guy who was

helping Ian with the dresser. “Hello, Mister Hot Stuff.” She zoomed in on the guy, who was also displaying some incredible upper body strength, along with a jawline so strong she wanted to put her hands on his face. The hair was pretty great, too.

“So, who’s the tall drink of cool water on a hot day? Please tell me he’s single. And that he has an easygoing personality and a soft spot for YouTubers and puppies and large, noisy families.”

“Don’t you already have a date for the wedding?” Peyton asked.

Bex kept the camera on the guy as they came up the front walk. “Yeah, and he’s all those things. But we’ve already gone out a few times, and I can tell you he isn’t forever material.”

Timini bumped her shoulder into Bex’s. “Which makes him exactly your type.”

Bex laughed as she filmed the two men hefting the dresser up the stairs and through the door.

“Roman Powell. He’s Ian’s friend from college,” Addison said. “He’s in town for the wedding.”

The guys set the dresser down in the lobby, and Addison immediately wrapped her arms around Ian’s neck and told him how impressive it was that he hauled something that heavy over from his house. Then they kissed, even with the camera aimed right at them.

“See what I’m talking about?” Bex said to her viewers. “Aren’t they just the sweetest couple you’ve ever seen? I may have to put up some sticky notes about PDA free zones, though.”

“I would think you could come up with a more organized way of making house rules than posting sticky notes everywhere,” Roman Powell said.

Bex flipped the phone’s setting to aim the camera back at herself. “Oh. So the *wrong* type of guy, then.” She rolled her eyes, knowing that her viewers were probably rolling theirs right along with her, then she turned off the camera and slid the phone into her pocket.

“After Roman and I get this dresser upstairs,” Ian said as he brushed his knuckles back and forth along Addison’s jaw line, “I’m going to head back over to my house and help get some of Carol’s things moved into my room. That way, when her grandson comes next week, they’ll just have to switch out my bed for hers.”

Addison smiled. “Is your grandma excited?”

Ian shook his head, chuckling. “They’re like twelve-year-olds going to

sleep-away camp for the first time. There has been actual squealing and jumping up and down.” Then he turned to Bex, Peyton, and Timini. “You’ll check in on them every day while we’re on our honeymoon?”

“Of course!” Bex loved Ian’s grandma. She had only met Carol a few times, but she seemed like a pretty awesome lady.

Ian nodded a thank you to them and turned back to Addison. “Then I’ll get showered and meet you at the dinner tonight.”

Once the guys got the dresser up the stairs and headed back to Ian’s house, Bex gathered Addison, Peyton, and Timini into a circle in the lobby. “This is it. The last night that it’s just the four of us.”

“Can you believe it? I get to marry Ian tomorrow! I thought this day would never get here.”

“I can’t believe it either,” Timini said. “Especially since you were so strongly for Bex’s ‘No falling in love’ pact at the beginning.”

“I didn’t think you’d be the first to break it,” Peyton said.

“And I don’t think I’ll be the last.” Addison smiled.

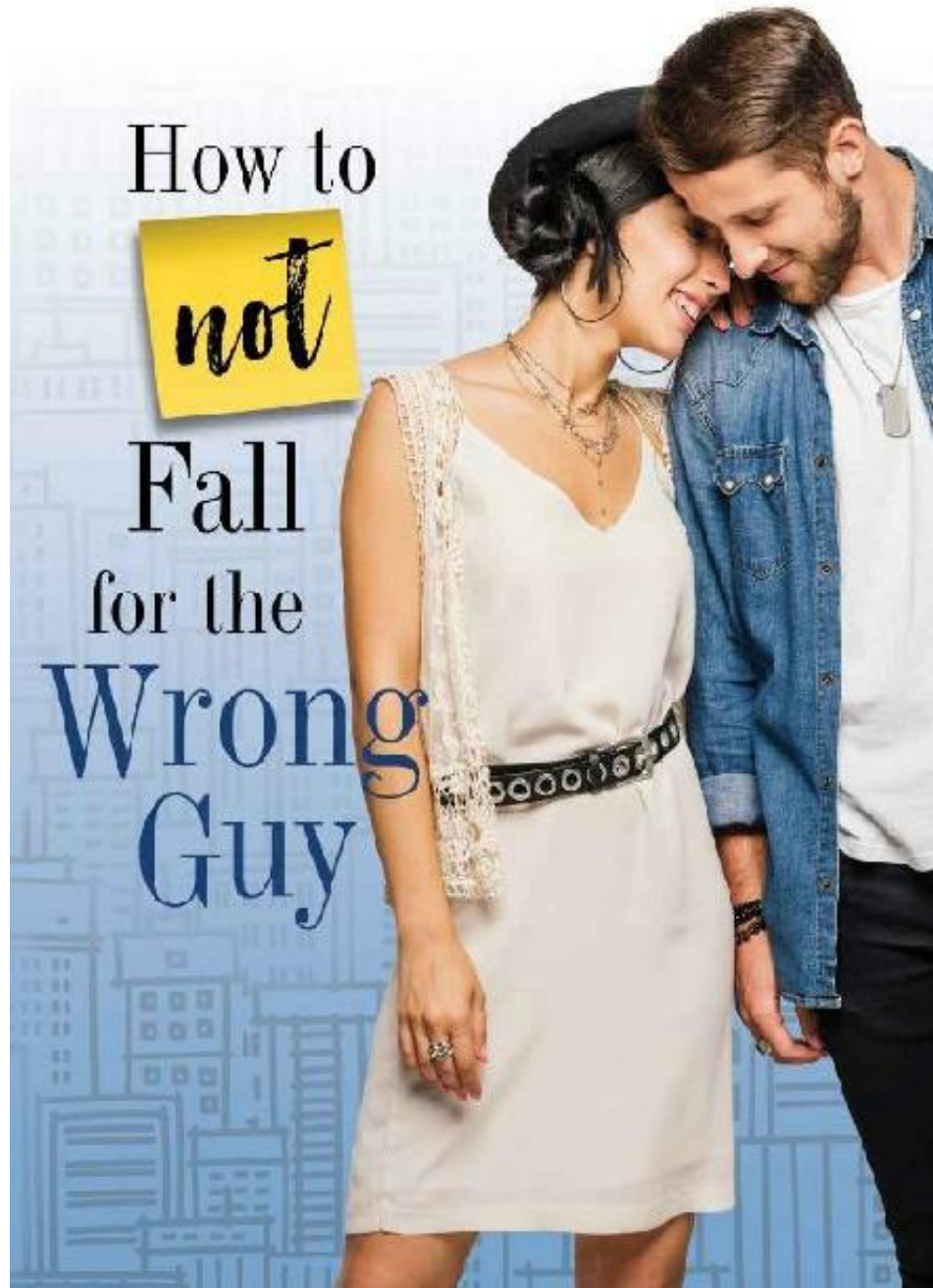
When Addison met Bex’s eyes with a whole lot of implicating aimed her direction, Bex held up her hands. “Don’t look at me! I am definitely not going to break the pact.”

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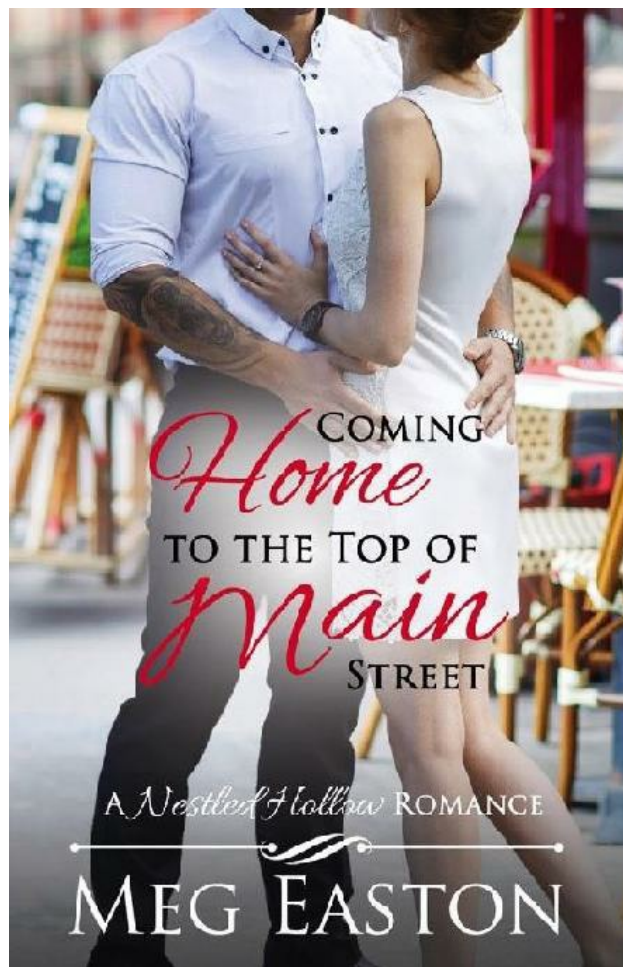


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## ABOUT MEG EASTON



Meg Easton writes contemporary sweet and clean romance. She lives at the foot of a mountain with her name on it (or at least one letter of her name) in Utah. She loves gardening, bike riding, baking, swimming before the sun rises, and spending time with her husband and three kids.

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