

KATE WATSON

IT'S

*A Second Chance
Sweet Romantic Comedy*

ALWAYS
SOMING



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ALWAYS

SONNY

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*To all the perfectionists who think their worth comes from
their achievement.*

Your worth comes from you.

Period.

End of story.

AUTHOR'S NOTE AND CONTENT WARNING

While this may be a “kissing book,” it also deals with themes of perfectionism, anxiety, panic attacks, parental neglect and emotional abuse, health disorders (vasovagal syncope), and infertility. I’ve made every effort to treat these issues with care while maintaining the lightness that readers would expect from a romcom.

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CHAPTER ONE



PARKER

*M*y heels click fast and loud against the hardwood as I stride through the kitchen. I rummage through the tray where I keep my personal effects when I notice one of my best friends at our table.

Neither of us are morning people, so while I'm up because I have a client meeting, anxiety-induced insomnia, and an unhealthy commitment to yoga and "winning the morning"—which I loathe—I can't imagine why she is.

"Hey, what are you doing up?" I ask Ash, who's looking at her phone.

She pushes her phone away and plants her cheek on the table, staring at me with wide, watery eyes.

"Why am I such a disaster?" she asks quietly.

"What? Who texted you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"You are *not* a disaster. You're the brightest light in any room, and that light attracts noxious little bugs. Who texted

you?” I repeat. I know I’m being pushy, and she doesn’t deserve my ire, but I can’t let her self-flagellate for another second.

“My dad.”

“He’s not your dad. He’s Frank, and Frank sucks.”

“I know. And I forgot to take my melatonin last night, so I saw his text in the middle of the night and haven’t slept since.”

“I hate him.”

“Don’t hate him. But will you grab my pill while you’re up? The last thing I need is to forget that, too.”

Ash beating herself up for having ADHD and a crappy father makes me so angry, it burns the back of my eyes. I put a pod of her favorite tea into the Keurig, grab her pill, and jot down a quick note on a notepad. When the tea is done, I add a hint of honey, just the way Ash likes it. I bring all three over to her at the table—the tea, the medication, and the note.

“The next time you comment lovingly on something your mom and step-dad post on Facebook, change the audience so Frank can’t see it, okay? Or better yet, block the narcissistic scumbag, already.”

“How did you know that’s what happened?”

“Because I have a PhD in emotionally unavailable fathers, and yours is the reigning world champion.” I give my friend a quick hug. “He sucks, not you. You are perfect.”

“I’m not perfect.”

“You are to me. Gotta run.”

Ash is swallowing her medication as I exit the kitchen, and just as I reach the door, I hear her yell.

“‘Ash’s List of Awesome’?” She’s reading the note I left for her with reminders of a few quick reasons why she’s the literal, actual best. “You’re a kindness ninja, did you know that?”

“I think every other person who’s ever met me would disagree with you!” I call back. “Toodleezzz!”

Once I'm in my Volvo SUV, I speed as fast as I think I can get away with. My client meeting is in Columbia, less than an hour drive from the sleepy town of Sugar Maple where I now live. Ash may think I'm a kindness ninja, but those seven minutes I spent with her ate into my schedule.

I don't begrudge it.

But I should have cut my workout short.

Or dry-shampooed my hair.

I'm committed to this whole "win the morning" idea that I heard on a sports podcast a few months ago. The athlete being interviewed made a compelling case for why a solid morning routine made for a better life, and I thought I'd give it a try.

Also, I was a Level Nine gymnast at one time in my life, and I feel better exercising than not. So every day, I wake up at an unholy hour, make my bed, workout, shower, and then win the freaking day.

I'm *mostly* winning the day so far. My makeup is flawless, but my black, bone straight hair is so thick, I didn't have time to completely dry it. I've pulled it up into my usual high ponytail and hair-sprayed it to within an inch of its life, though, so the dampness shouldn't be too noticeable. Should it?

No. Of course not. My client won't notice.

She's hiring Jane & Co. because we're amazing at what we do, not because my hair is impeccable. Calm down. And because it's the only thing that ever seems to pull me out of my spiraling head, I turn on sports talk radio.

I know true crime podcasts and political talking heads are all the rage. I don't care. Sports talk is my thing, and I'm not ashamed of it (unless I'm talking to my parents).

Unfortunately, my guilty pleasure hasn't done much for me lately, because the hosts are still talking about the Super Bowl, which ended a week and a half ago. And all they can talk about is the fate of the star running back who injured his knee scoring the game-winning touchdown for the Carolina Waves.

Santino “Sonny” Luciano.

My eyes flit down to the dash to see the time. I keep waiting to hear Sonny’s voice, considering it’s Thursday at 7:30 a.m., and he’s always on *Jimmy and Bulldog* on Thursdays at 7:30.

Not today.

The host explains that Sonny had a conflict but that he’ll be back next week, same time, same place. “And we hope he’ll have news regarding his future in the NFL,” Jimmy says.

I swallow my disappointment.

Wait, no. I’m not disappointed. I’m *relieved* not to hear Sonny’s voice.

For years, I’ve been able to follow his career with only the slightest pang of nostalgia. My best friend married the quarterback of Sonny’s team a few months ago, though, and now we’re back in each other’s lives.

And he’s back in my head.

Constantly.

Of course, he’s in everyone’s head after the Super Bowl. Jimmy and Bulldog are obsessing over him to a degree that merits a restraining order. This isn’t his first big knee injury. He had one a couple years into his rookie contract, and it should have been career ending. Somehow, he came back stronger than ever.

You know how things just seem to work out for some people? Those people are jealous of Sonny.

The universe loves him. Everyone loves him. He’s the most charismatic, genuine, caring guy in any room, and people flock to him. Including the hosts of the country’s most popular radio program.

“It is no exaggeration to say that everything for the Carolina Waves depends on what they do next. Do they trade him now for another running back or do they gamble on Sonny rehabbing?” Jimmy asks.

“Trade him?” I yell at the radio. “The Waves wouldn’t have even made it to the Super Bowl without him, let alone have won the thing! They can’t trade him!”

Ugh.

Maybe I *should* turn off the radio. But the reality is, a vast knowledge of sports has served me more times than I can count. Men who’ve been reluctant to hire a “tiny little thing” change their tune when they hear me talk about interceptions and pass completion percentages. Quoting a beloved sports analyst to a good ol’ boy is like giving him a letter of recommendation from a friend.

So even though my mother would hate that I’m listening to something as “uncouth” as sports talk, I have no smudges on my conscience.

And what if you did? Would it be the worst thing? A voice says in my head. But the voice isn’t mine. It’s low and hypnotic, and it always used to send shivers down my spine. That voice could talk me into anything, whether it was a midnight game of Sardines with half of his apartment complex or skipping a class and missing an exam worth a third of my grade ...

I put a finger up to my earlobe and feel the bump from my second piercing. I haven’t worn an earring in there since shortly after I got the thing, but I like having the reminder of why I got it.

And then I turn up the volume.

“The real problem is that the Waves have *still* not released an update on Sonny’s injury beyond the canned statement right after the big game. What are we supposed to think about this, Bulldog?” Jimmy asks.

Jimmy is the main host—the professional radio personality who drives the show. Meanwhile, Bulldog—Buster “Bulldog” Jackson—is a former NFL player who played in the league for twelve years but who’s been doing radio since I was in diapers. He’s the lead color analyst for Total Sports Network, where he provides his experience as an ex player on live

broadcasts. Jimmy is the slicker of the two, but Bulldog is the heart of the show. Rumor has it he's retiring from TSN at the end of the year, and the sports world is abuzz with speculation over who will take his place.

"That's the real question, Jimmy," Bulldog says. "After almost two weeks, the coach has to have some idea about what's on the horizon for Sonny. If he has to have a second surgery, his career is over. He's one of the rare players in history who came back after the first surgery and didn't lose a step."

"You mean he gained one," I say, and Jimmy echoes me moments later. My navigation system chimes, and I look around, trying to find where my next turn is. Chicago, where my friends and I moved from, wasn't the easiest city to drive in, but at least you could see your turns. Driving around South Carolina is like driving around a forest. I can't see a street until I've passed it, and because I never trust that the GPS can see something I don't, more often than not, that means I miss my exit.

Like I do now.

Shoot.

I take the next exit and loop around, all while Jimmy and Bulldog wax on about how Sonny came back from his last surgery better than ever but how no one in history has had the same surgery twice and bounced back both times.

"The team hasn't updated fans one way or the other," Bulldog says in his low, gruff voice. "That tells me the injury isn't career ending. If you ask me, the Waves would be crazy not to keep him if he's healthy. But that doesn't mean Sonny's playing for the Waves next year."

I do a double take and stare at the radio. My GPS chimes, and I throw myself into my next turn without double-checking anything, and it turns out to be right. Good job, GPS.

But also ...

What?

Bulldog has no answers, and soon enough, there's an extended commercial break just as I'm turning into my appointment. I'm meeting with a new client to discuss a rebrand of her chiropractor business.

I park and instantly pull down my visor to inspect myself, looking for any flaws to my makeup. I grab a brush from my center console, smooth the few hairs out of place, and then hairspray it with the travel-sized spray I keep in my bag. My naturally arched eyebrows look good, but I run a finger over them, anyway. My mascara hasn't flaked, but the eyeliner around my hooded eyes has smudged a bit. I grab a Kleenex and carefully wipe it off before staring into my deep brown eyes.

What are you missing, Parker?

Lips, of course. Duh.

I debate between red lipstick and a rosy gloss. I think back to what my client was wearing when we had our initial zoom call. She had a nude lip, so I settle for gloss so as not to seem *too* made up.

You're an Emerson. How you carry yourself matters, my mother would say with a large helping of disapproval over my every flaw (real or perceived).

But she's not wrong.

At five feet tall, I can't afford to look weak, but I can't look aggressive, either. With my fondness for four-inch heels and my naturally dark features, the rest of my look has to be carefully balanced. Snow White can easily become Ice Queen.

I've heard both often enough. The first when someone initially sees me. The second shortly thereafter.

The truth is somewhere in between, but if someone is going to make a snap judgment, I'll take the Ice Queen every time. I've seen the movies. I've read the fairy tales. Heck, I've *lived* the fairy tales. People plot against Snow White. No one messes with the Ice Queen.

This is a client meeting with a professional, courteous woman. Retract the claws, kitty.

My client's office is in an upscale medical suite. She's clearly not doing poorly, but it's my firm's job to make sure she does a lot better.

Fortunately for her, we're really good at our jobs.

On the way into the building, I swipe my hands across the back of my navy pencil skirt and give myself a quick once over in the glass of the door.

My fitted ivory blouse is crisp. My small gold hoop earrings are even. My heels are amazing. As always.

Perfect.

Let's do this.

CHAPTER TWO



SONNY

“You have got to be the luckiest guy I’ve ever seen,” the orthopedic surgeon says. He’s looking over every X-ray and MRI I’ve had ... ever. “A hit like that should have caused a *second* torn ACL. The fact that you only have a grade two knee sprain is nothing short of a miracle.”

That’s what the team doctor said the night of the Super Bowl after the initial scans. It’s nothing but a minor sprain. But the team owner wanted a second opinion and sent me to his personal orthopedic surgeon here in Columbia, South Carolina, as if the doctor on his own staff isn’t good enough. This guy’s the best orthopedic surgeon in the South.

I wouldn’t have minded having a say in the doctor providing my treatment, but I get it. When you invest tens of millions into a guy, you get cautious.

“Let’s give you another week on crutches and keep the brace on for another three weeks. I want you icing that knee every four hours, and no strenuous activities. Do your rehab, but don’t push yourself, Sonny. You have physical therapy next door after this, right?” I nod. “Good. Take it seriously. The team needs you.”

“You got it, Doc,” I say.

“Glad to hear it,” he says, closing his laptop. “Now you remember what I said. Keep off that knee. I’m talking lots of rest and ice. That brace stays on. We can’t afford you messing things up for the team.”

He must be concerned to repeat himself like this when his instructions couldn’t have been clearer. It almost feels like he’s chastising me for something that’s never happened.

Is he a fan? Or is he speaking on behalf of his friend, the team owner? I smile more tightly than I’m used to doing. It feels unnatural. Smiling is my *thing*. I’m the face of an actual toothpaste brand thanks to this smile.

So why does it feel foreign right now?

He’s only looking out for you. Be grateful. Playing in the NFL is a dream job.

That’s right. I can’t control everything, but I can be grateful. I can find happiness in any situation, and I’m in a better situation than almost anyone. My smile relaxes into something real.

I get down from the chair more carefully than necessary. He gives me a nod of approval, and I shoot him finger guns.

“Doctor’s orders, am I right?”

He laughs and points back at me. “That’s what I like to hear!”

I grab my crutches, and he sees me back into the lobby, where my agent, Michael, is waiting. It’s not like him to make house calls, but I’m a major client, and he doesn’t mess around when it comes to making money for me. And off of me.

Michael’s attention is on his phone, but when the doctor clears his throat, his head flies up. “How’s my favorite star doing?”

He’s asking the doctor, not me.

“He’s going to be fine. Just make sure he stays off that knee, will you? We need him ready in time for training camp.”

“We got the same goals, Doc,” Michael says. He does that power move where he shakes the doctor’s hand and grips his shoulder at the same time. Michael’s suit is probably as expensive as an MRI machine, and he’s slicker than an oil spill, but he’s not a bad guy.

The doctor and Michael talk for a minute, and I notice a kid—maybe fifteen—sitting in the lobby with his mom. The office has a “No cell phones” policy, so the kid is reading a magazine while his mom fills out paperwork.

Well, he’s pretending to read a magazine. He’s actually listening to us, which I get. I’d have done the same thing at his age.

He has a cast on his leg and crutches propped on the chair next to him. He’s lean the way most teen boys are, and he’s probably taller than I am, so I assume he plays basketball. I let Michael and the doctor talk, and I sit next to the kid’s crutches.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey,” he says. His neck reddens, but he plays it cool.

“I’m Sonny,” I say. He sniffs in a “yeah, I know,” way. “What’s your name?”

“Carlos.”

“What are you in for, Carlos?”

“Strained Achilles.”

“Ouch. Do you need surgery?”

“I’m waiting to find out.”

“How are you feeling about it?”

Carlos lowers the magazine, but he doesn’t meet my eye. I think he’s probably intimidated, but that’ll change. I have one superpower, and as much as I love the game, it’s not football. It’s people.

His mom’s forehead is scrunched in concern as she makes her way to the reception desk with the paperwork. She glances back at us, and Carlos smiles at her.

When his mom is gone, though, he opens up. “I’m scared. What if I never play basketball again?”

“Yeah, I get that. What scares you about not playing basketball again?”

“I’m good, man. I’m really good. I’m a sophomore and already have college scouts talking to my mom. We can’t afford college otherwise. You know how expensive Club sports are. My mom works two jobs to pay for all the fees. If I don’t recover, all that money will be for nothing, and I *have* to go to college. I have to make it. I have to pay her back for everything.”

I nod. “That’s a lot of pressure, and I’m not going to sit here and tell you not to worry about money. But can I say something?”

Carlos meets my eye now.

“If you can’t play again, you’ll be okay. Yeah, your mom spent a lot of money getting you here, but you’ve learned skills playing basketball that have nothing to do with the sport. Those skills translate to a lot of other fields, and the fact that you’ve worked so hard to get so good tells me you have a lot of hustle. That’ll serve you anywhere. What do you like most in school?” His mom is coming back now.

“I kind of like biology.”

“Good. Work hard at it. Chase your dreams, sure, but don’t close yourself off so that basketball is your whole identity. You get me?”

Carlos nods. “Yeah, I get you.”

I hold my fist out to him and he bumps his fist into mine. “You’ll be okay, man.”

Beyond Carlos, his mom catches my eye and mouths, “*Thank you.*”

Michael walks over to us. “All right, champ, let’s go talk.”

I start standing and then pause, looking at Carlos. “I know cell phones aren’t allowed, but could I take a selfie with you?”

Carlos's dark eyes widen, and for a moment, they remind me of another pair of eyes, eyes I try not to think about. "You want a selfie with *me*?"

"Yeah. For when you're a famous biologist-slash-basketball player. Or electrician. Or for when you own two Chili's franchises. Whatever it is, one day, I want to be able to show people I knew you when."

Carlos laughs.

"And I want you to text me to tell me if you're getting surgery or not. Is that okay?"

"Uh, yeah, definitely."

"Is that okay with you?" I ask Carlos's mom. She nods.

We take the selfie, and Carlos looks—there's no better word for it—elated. I get his number and plug it into my phone. Michael's waiting as patiently as an elite New York sports agent can wait.

Carlos gets called back before Michael and I can leave. Because there's no one else in the waiting room, Michael sits back down and gestures for me to do the same.

"Sit, elevate that knee. We can't risk you not making a full recovery."

"It's a mild sprain. I'll make a full recovery," I reassure him.

"Love to hear it. Now listen, let's talk leverage. We've got it. Your injury is a nothing burger. You won the Waves their first Super Bowl ring in franchise history. We hold the cards. Let's play 'em."

"Okay," I say. I love playing for the Waves. It's only been a year, but this is the most at home I've felt on a team yet, and I'd like to keep it that way. I'm a military brat—my dad is a recently retired Army Chaplain—and I've never spent more than a couple years in one place.

Nowhere ever felt like home.

I studied at the University of Chicago for two years, and it's as long as I'd ever been anywhere. Yet in those two years, I thought I finally found my home, not in a place, but in a person. My ex, PJ.

Parker Jane.

I loved her more than anything. More than *everything*. I've never clicked with anyone the way I did with her. It was so much more than attraction, and it certainly wasn't compatibility, because we're about as opposite as they come.

But man, did we click. She was so frosty and her shell was so tough. Earning even a quirk of her lips was better than any Super Bowl. I made it my mission to earn those quirks on the regular.

I succeeded.

It ended as swiftly as it started, though. One day, we were making plans to go to my sister's wedding. The next day, she ended things so abruptly, it took me years to recover.

And it was all because of football. She thought I should transfer to the bigger school offering me a scholarship. I thought football was overrated and wanted to stay with her.

She didn't think she could be with someone who "couldn't take his future seriously," and broke up with me. All my efforts to convince her we should be together failed, so I transferred.

Now I'm the top running back in the league with a Super Bowl ring and a second knee injury.

To say I have complicated feelings about playing in the NFL is to put it mildly.

No, I can't think like that. I love the game.

I hear a snap. "Hey, earth to Luciano," Michael says, snapping at the space between us again. "You with me?"

Whoa. I was definitely not with him.

But I smile. "Always, Mikey, you know that."

“Good. Now you got ten minutes before your physical therapy, so let’s talk big picture. You won a Super bowl. What do you want now?”

I force myself into the present and say the first thing that comes to mind. “What about a podcast?”

“You can be a guest on any podcast in America.”

“What if I start one?” I ask. Michael takes a loud breath. “Or I could guest host for someone during their summer vacation. Buster already asked if I would.”

“Your bromance with ol’ Buster ‘Bulldog’ Jackson is a bigger deal in the sports world than Travis Kelce and whoever he’s dating,” he lies. “Maybe we should talk to Netflix about you two doing a football movie. Sonny and Bulldog.”

“That sounds like a movie about a kid and her talking pet.”

He waves his hand in the air. “I’m just work-shopping. Podcasts are great, but any kid with a laptop can start a podcast.”

“Including the Kelce brothers.”

Michael waves my comment away. “Think bigger. *Dream bigger.*”

What is wrong with me? I live for this type of conversation. Dream bigger? No one dreams bigger than me. I wanted to take a year off college to travel around the country. Backpack across Europe. Hike Machu Picchu. I would sky dive right now, if it weren’t expressly forbidden by my NFL contract.

I’m not even allowed to water ski.

Shoot, I’m not even allowed to *skateboard*.

And that’s okay. I don’t need to skateboard to be happy. I don’t need *anything* to be happy.

“Dream for me, Mikey. As long as I can keep my dignity, let’s do it.”

“By dignity, you mean keep your shirt on, right?”

I really grin this time. “You know me. Let’s take over the world.”

CHAPTER THREE



PARKER

The meeting goes as well as I could hope. I conference in the rest of the team, and after lots of questions and ideas, we gather enough information to move forward. Cecile is a dream client: she's comfortable admitting what she doesn't know, is open to new ideas, and trusts that we can help. And the fact that she offers to adjust my back for free when we're done makes me like her all the more.

"You are so tense," she says, putting her adjustor down and manipulating my back with her hands. Cecile looks like she could flip a tire with her bare hands, but she uses just the right amount of force on me. "Have you thought of stretching?"

"I do yoga every day."

Her hands stop on my back. "Every day?"

"Except Sundays," I say.

"Sweetheart, you ain't doin' yoga right."

I sniff a laugh.

"Let me massage some of the knots out."

I suppress a whimper. I love massages. They are the four-inch heels of self-care. That couldn't possibly make sense to anyone but me, but it's the truth. I would do almost anything for a good massage. And I'm still sore after my mostly sleepless night.

"I couldn't—" I start, hoping she'll argue.

"You can and you will, hon. I was a massage therapist for ten years before I went to chiropractor school. A massage is the least I can do for y'all helping put me on the map the way I know you will."

"No, the least you can do is pay us," I joke. "But I'll happily pay you for the massage."

"How about we take it out of my bill?"

"Perfect," I agree.

Her massage is a work of art. And because I don't have another meeting until this afternoon, I let her take as long as she's willing to. And I enjoy every minute.

Ready for a truth bomb? You can be hard on yourself and treat yourself at the same time. Trust me, I do both simultaneously on the regular.

When she finishes, I feel that unique kind of lightness to my body and heaviness in my head and face that only happens after a good massage. And Cecile's massage was excellent. I change back into my clothes. She doesn't have a mirror in the bathroom, so I run a finger under my eyes and lips and smooth my hair as best I can. The massage oil makes my blouse cling a bit awkwardly to my back and around my shoulders, which gives me pause. I don't have another option, though. I didn't bring a change of shirt, and I left my jacket in the car because winter in South Carolina is a joke.

It's only a few dozen yards through the building and to the parking lot. I didn't pass anyone on the way in, so chances are, I'll be fine going out. And it's not like the shirt is see-through now. It's just ... clinging. I flatten everything out and press my shirt down on my shoulders so that it's sticking to me in what looks like a normal way.

Just in case, though, I'll rush to the car. It'll be fine. I'll be fine.

I wash my hands and grab my bag and then step out to thank Cecile. Her satisfaction manifests in the lines of her face when she sees me. "Don't you look comfortable?"

"I am. I feel a million times better. Thank you." I stop just short of gushing. Gushing isn't my style. "The team and I will get you next steps by the end of the week, but please let me know if you need anything anytime."

"Will do," she says, seeing me out.

Cecile's office is on the second floor, so I take the stairs to lessen the chance of being seen. On the main floor, I stride through the lobby to get to my car as quickly as possible. Halfway through the lobby, I reach into my laptop bag to find my sunglasses, but they're not in their usual pocket. I look down and spot them buried beneath my hairspray and keys. With my face still down, I start putting on my sunglasses and —

Bam.

"Careful!" a man says as I bump into him leaving another office. I'm instantly off-kilter, teetering on my sky-high heels.

I spin to try not to fall on him, but he's on crutches and one of my feet gets tangled in a crutch, and the thing goes flying. I'm about to try a tuck and roll when a firm arm whips around my waist and catches me just before I hit the ground.

"Whoa, there," a voice says.

Not just any voice.

A voice that's low and hypnotic and sends shivers down my spine.

A voice that belongs firmly in my mind, and not here. Not now.

Because the universe hates me, the man I just crashed into, the man who managed to throw his crutches to the side, catch me, and *not* fall, the man I've thought and heard about over

and over again already this morning, is the one man I desperately do not want to see right now.

Sonny Freaking Luciano.

CHAPTER FOUR



PARKER

I am in Sonny's arms, and suddenly, my senses are gone.

No, that's not true, because I can feel how much more muscular he is now. And his scent hits me harder than our collision.

He smells like the "sea salt and cedar" deodorant I put in his stocking freshman year when we did our gift exchange before going home for Christmas. I hadn't told him I loved him yet—that would come weeks later in the middle of a snowing quad—but he said it to me then, when we exchanged gifts.

He put on the deodorant right away. It wasn't the only gift I gave him, but him instantly putting it on was his way of acknowledging my claim on him. That's not my interpretation, either.

"There," he said. "This is my signature smell now. Whenever anyone smells me, they'll know I'm property of Parker Jane Emerson and no one else."

I laughed as he pulled me into a tight hug. He smelled irresistible. “What about all the other guys who wear this brand? Do I own them, too?”

He squeezed me close like he was protecting me from hordes of men. “Nope. Nuh-uh. Not happening. You own me and no one else.”

And then he brought his mouth to my ear, and his lips grazed my lobe so softly, I could almost think I imagined it if not for the knee-weakening sensation. “And I own you.”

“Ha!” I laughed, even as I leaned my face against his because my bones were turning to jelly at the feeling of his lips against my ear. “Nice try.”

“Fine. I may not own you,” he said, backing up. His eyes jumped between mine. “But I love you.”

Time stopped. The snow falling outside my apartment window was suspended in midair. We’d only been dating a couple of months, and he was my first boyfriend. My own parents hadn’t said they loved me in ... I didn’t even know.

But the feeling in my heart was overwhelming and all encompassing and beyond anything I’d ever felt before for anyone or *from* anyone.

What could that be but love?

I couldn’t say it back, so I kissed him until I wasn’t on the verge of tears anymore, and all the while, I smelled sea salt and cedar ...

Does he really still wear that deodorant?

And am I really still in his arms?

Shoot! I’m still in his arms!

I wiggle to break free.

And I fall to the ground.

Years of gymnastics have taught me how to fall well, so I’m able to spin enough that I crash onto my butt instead of my face, but tile doesn’t feel as good as gym mats. Shocker.

“Ouch,” Sonny says in that voice he absolutely does not have a license to use. That thing is a weapon. “You okay?”

“Fine.”

I roll to my knees and scowl at the way Sonny smiles and holds his hand out to me. How dare he use that smile on me? He knows for a fact that his half smile turns me into a puddle of goo as surely as him kissing that spot right in between my eyebrows.

Not that he’s kissing anything.

Or that I’m remembering the feeling of his lips. At all.

I allow him to pull me to a stand, but only because these heels are no joke. When I’m up, he gives me one final tug until I bump against his chest.

I try to push away, but his gaze glues me to him as surely as his hands, which press just firmly enough into my hips to make me too weak to move.

Why does his touch still have so much power over me? Why does the hair on my arms and at the nape of my neck have to rise?

“Let go,” I snap.

“You sure? You seemed more than content to stay in my arms twenty seconds ago,” he says, not moving his hands. My chest rises and falls too rapidly, and my eyes flit from his lips to his impossibly bright aqua eyes. And then back to his lips. Which part into a full grin.

I glare and push away from him. My pencil skirt has ridden up to my mid-thighs, so I shift it down and steal a glance at Sonny.

He’s in a fitted charcoal hoodie that can’t hide his muscular frame. A black knee brace is strapped over his black joggers, causing a twinge of worry to my heart that I squash like a bug. He hasn’t been mine to worry about for almost seven years.

Seven years of watching his star rise higher and higher in college, elevating him to the first round of the draft, and now

to Super Bowl champion and future Hall of Famer. Seven years of knowing I did the right thing breaking up with him. Seven years where I didn't let myself reminisce or long or doubt, no matter how hard it was.

And look at him now.

Actually, don't look at him now. Those eyes are a tractor beam. Avert your gaze! Avert!

I pull my eyes from his in order to grab his crutches. When I hold them out to Sonny, he's balancing on one leg as comfortably as most people on two, but he doesn't reach for them right away. Instead, his eyes rove over my face.

"You look ... different, PJ," he says, using a nickname few people know. By a funny quirk of fate, my best friends and I all share a middle name—Jane—so we occasionally call each other by our initials. PJ, MJ, AJ, etc. But to Sonny, I've only ever been PJ or, when he's speaking for emphasis, Parker Jane.

I hate how much I still love it.

"You just saw me at the Super Bowl. And at Millie and Duke's wedding."

"You know what I mean."

"It's been seven years, Santino," I say, using his real name precisely because he *doesn't* like it. Also because his show of core and thigh strength is excessive. He has yet to put his foot down for balance. "I've grown up."

"I seem to remember you telling me that was *my* job. I hadn't realized you had any growing up left to do." Sonny says this casually, teasingly, yet for an instant, his light eyes turn almost icy against his naturally bronzed face. I let myself study him, let myself take in how the hint of baby face he had in college has vanished, leaving sharper features. He keeps his dark hair shorter than he used to, and he has a five o'clock shadow that he never had in college. He probably couldn't have even grown a beard back then, but boy can he now. He has grown up, all right.

So have I, regardless of his barb. "I was a dumb college kid once, too, remember," I say lightly. "I thought I'd take the

business world by storm. Get hired on as an exec in some big startup before I was thirty, cash out, and be made for life, opening me up to follow my passions for the next few decades.”

What’s that slow blink of his supposed to mean? “You’ve got time. Don’t count yourself out yet.”

“I’m happy where I am. Jane & Co. is growing and I’m proud of us. But I’m never working for anyone else again.”

“Good for you. You always were the boss, even before you had any employees,” he teases.

“Not hardly. I never had any control over *you*.”

“My transferring to Clemson would say otherwise.” For a moment, the lobby gets darker. A cloud must be passing over the sun. But it passes quickly. “But that’s all water under the bridge.”

No. He does not get to poke and poke like that and then just walk away.

“Water under the bridge,” I agree sweetly. I feign like I’m going to give him the crutches, but then I pull them back. He’s *still* standing on one foot. “It’s great to see you up on two feet. Mostly.” And even though I have absolutely no right to anything so private, I say, “You never did tell me the prognosis.”

He looks down at his knee. His thigh muscles are on full display through the joggers. I bet those same muscles are burning, holding that pose for so long. “Rehab.”

“No surgery?”

“Nope. Just a mild sprain.”

My relief is a full body thing, but I won’t let him see it. I exhale slowly, and my permanently tense muscles relax more than any massage could cause.

“How lucky for you! Everything’s always coming up Sonny,” I say too brightly. I must sound like an insane person, because Sonny looks at me and then bursts out laughing.

“Something’s different about you, Parker Jane. I like it.”

And my scowl’s back.

I hand him the crutches and start walking.

I walk the final ten steps to the door of the lobby and stop when I see my reflection in the glass.

I.

Look.

Awful.

My hair has a funky dent in it from the table headrest and the fact that it was still damp when I laid down. I have lines all over my cheeks and forehead, also from the table headrest. My eyes are puffy enough to look like I’ve been crying.

More good news! Smacking into Sonny and falling made my shirt bunch up and stick to the massage oil! So I even have a lovely gap between the buttons on my shirt that reveals MY BRA.

My freaking bra.

To recap, I’ve been talking to Sonny for five minutes with wrinkles, funky hair, puffy eyes, and a wide-open shirt-bra-gap.

If I wanted to remind the only guy I ever loved just how desirable I am, boy have I nailed it.

Sonny must notice me staring in shock at my reflection, because I see him working his way toward me in the glass. I want to rush out, but that may be the only thing I could do to make myself look even worse. Like a Mortification Fun Run!

“So this is what you meant when you said something was different about me?” I ask when he stops next to me. Somehow, it’s easier talking to him in the reflection than face to face.

He shrugs. “No, not really. I like your post-massage face as much as I ever did, though the heels are new. And the war paint,” he says.

War paint? Is he talking about my makeup?

“I look like a clown.”

“Clowns are funny.”

“Clowns are the stuff of nightmares.”

“Not mine,” he says.

“How do you always manage to be so nice when I’m such a—”

“Stop.”

He uses a tone I’ve never heard before. It’s firm, but not mean or aggressive. At six-foot-two and two-hundred-plus pounds of solid muscle, he’s a specimen. A gorgeous specimen. It aches looking at him like this. At *us*. Standing side by side and knowing that I’ve never felt anything for anyone that compares to what we had? It’s murder.

“You don’t have to make excuses for who you are. But neither do I.” He turns so that he’s facing me, not the glass.

I should turn toward him. It would be the polite thing to do. Instead, I fix my eyes on his reflection, not on the living, breathing, suddenly intimidating man beside me.

“You’re right.” While I scramble for anything else to say, Sonny takes the next steps for me.

“Come with me. Let’s go grab breakfast and catch up,” he says, his index finger grazing my hand from my wrist down to my pinky finger.

And my heart stops.

And I die standing up.

...

Still dead.

Then my heart races back to life. *YES YES YES!* It cries.

RUN RUN RUN! My head screams.

I stand there, staring at my reflection like I’m a ghost looking at my own body.

He's going to talk me into it. Getting lost in Sonny would be the easiest, most natural instinct I could succumb to. The light in him shines so bright, I can't help but fly toward it. I'm no better than Ash's stupid ex or stupid dad. I'm a bug.

Sonny always teased me that I was the boss. Because I "made" him study and because I set up a practice and training regimen for him that most coaches would have envied, Sonny acted like I had such control over him.

I don't think he had any clue how little control over myself I had with him in my life.

He tsks, and the sound startles me back out of my head and into the lobby.

"My ride is here. Looks like we'll have to take a rain check. I'll tell my family you said hi."

Sonny moves past me on his crutches and presses the automatic door opener with the bottom of his crutch. He's just stepping outside when my voice returns.

"Good luck with rehab, Sonny."

He spins around easily on one foot and flashes me with a blinding smile.

"Try not to think about me, PJ."

And then he climbs into the Black Escalade his brother, Gabe, is driving, and he winks at me as they drive off.

Dang it. I knew I should have called him Santino.

CHAPTER FIVE



SONNY

“Was that Parker?”

My brother slows in the parking lot, and I’m worried for a moment that he’s going to back up and say hi.

“Drive. Go, go!”

My head bumps against the headrest as my brother steps on it.

Gabe turns out into the street and then throws me a funny look. “What’s the story?”

“No story.”

“But that *was* Parker in the lobby, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Gabe laughs. “Ooh hoo hoo! That was definitely her. No one else can take the sun out of Sonny.”

“So it was Parker?” A voice says over the SUV’s Bluetooth speakers. My sister, Sienna. “I bet you fifty bucks they’re back together by summer.”

I groan. “You didn’t tell me Sienna was on speaker.”

“Why should that matter?” Sienna asks. She looks a bit like a young Ann Perkins from *Parks and Rec*, and if you don’t know the reference, I’m sorry for you. Sienna has a light voice that would make you think she’s all unicorns and gumdrops. And she can be. But we Lucianos are a tight knit group, and the idea that I’d leave her out of something is about the worst offense I could give her.

“No reason.” I grab the handle above the door and stare out the window at the Columbia traffic. Sienna and Gabe gossip about me as if I’m not here, but I zone out like I do before a game, getting into a place of mindfulness.

My knee hurts. It’s a dull pain, nothing like last time. But I don’t want *any* pain.

I don’t want any pain anywhere.

I close my eyes and bring my attention into my body, letting the sounds of my siblings’ chatter fade away. I take a deep, slow breath. Then another. I focus on how the oxygen rushes through my throat and down into my lungs, giving me life. I hold the breath in, feeling the tightness and tension of my body waiting to exhale. I hold it a pause longer. And then another. And then I exhale.

I repeat this twice.

I do a scan of my entire body in this state, starting with my feet, the feeling of the cotton socks, the tightness of my laces, how one shoe is looser than the other. I hadn’t realized before this. I focus on the vibration of the car on the soles of my feet, and as that movement travels up my body, I let my awareness go with it.

When my mind’s eye turns to my left knee, I notice the pulse in it. There’s throbbing pain in that rushing of blood, but also healing. I imagine tiny strains and tears being worked on by a body that is so miraculous, it heals itself. With that thought, the pain eases. I continue smoothly until I reach the center of my chest, where a new pang presents itself. A pair of dark, concerned eyes pop into my head unbidden.

Ah. Not a physical pain, but an emotional one.

Thank you for always taking care of me, I tell my heart. I continue my scan.

It only takes three minutes until I've reached the top of my head. It takes me longer than normal to soften my jaw and let the muscles in my forehead release, but I've done this meditation for years. I allow myself to take longer. I acknowledge the stress and strain and give appreciation to my body and mind for protecting and healing me all these years.

Then I open my eyes.

Sound and sights rush back into me. Gabe and Sienna's conversation continues. Traffic whizzes by. We're on a busy road, and I marvel at how effectively my meditation muffled such a noisy world. I marvel every time, in fact.

Thank you, I tell my brain. *You are so good at your job.*

I lean back, and a smile naturally spreads across my face.

"He's back," Gabe tells Sienna.

"Getting your mindfulness on?" Sienna teases.

"You should try it, See-See," I say, using the nickname I gave her when I was a toddler who couldn't say her name. "You should all try it. Then maybe y'all wouldn't be so stressed all the time."

"Hey, I've earned my stress." Sienna's voice rings over the speakers. She really has. At thirty, she's two years older than I am, but she got married right out of college. Parker was supposed to have been my date to her wedding, in fact, but she dumped me two weeks before, so I hit that event solo.

I cried during my toast and everything.

Good times.

Anyway, Sienna and her husband have been trying to get pregnant for five years. They're going to try IVF again next month, but it's a strain on her body. She doesn't react well to the hormones—not that *anyone* reacts well to being pumped full of hormones—but her body tries to do the opposite of what it should at every turn. Most women gain weight during fertility treatments, but Sienna's body sheds the little weight

she has, and she has to eat constantly to keep it on. That means she's nauseated from the hormones *and* the diet. But if she gets too lean, she can't get pregnant, a fact she learned the hard way on attempt number two last year.

She's been "bulking up" since then.

"You *have* earned that stress. But that doesn't mean you have to keep it on you at all times," I tell her. "Meditation helps."

"I think I preferred you sullen and pining," she says. But I can hear the smile in her voice.

"Nah, y'all love Mr. Sunshine."

Gabe scoffs. "Why do you say y'all, anyway? We're from Maryland, bro."

"*You're* from Maryland," I correct him. "I was born on an Army base in the UK."

"And I was born on a base in Italy, which makes me the most Italian of all you suckers," Sienna says.

"Gloating is a good look on you, sis. You should wear it more often," Gabe says.

"Excuse me? I look good in *everything*. It's part of being an international queen."

I laugh. All the moving we did for my dad's job meant that I became a bit of a parrot, unconsciously adopting whatever accent I was around. Since our family ended up in nearby Charlotte, North Carolina when I went to Clemson, people assume I'm from the South. I don't correct them unless I need to. People feel comfortable being around their own accent, and I'm a people person.

I interrupt my siblings one-upping one another about how attractive and well traveled they are. "Hey, what was Aunt Elaine's text about? Some change in the itinerary for Nonna's eightieth? Is one of the ports shut down or something?"

My dad's mom is the tough-as-nails grand matriarch of the Lucianos, and we've been planning this event for a year. My dad is the youngest of four, like me, and each of my aunts and

uncles also have kids and grandkids. As the youngest of the cousins, I'm the only one who isn't married (except for Cousin Daniel, who's a widower). And Sienna and I are the only childless ones of the group. Everyone knows about her fertility struggles, and she understandably gets a pass.

I do not.

Do you want to know how to say *disappointment* in Italian?

It starts with an S and ends with an -onny.

"Funny you should ask," Sienna answers. "The Mediterranean cruise is off."

"What do you mean, the cruise is off?" Gabe asks.

"Aunt Elaine called yesterday. Turns out we have to go somewhere within driving distance of Nonna's place in Virginia."

"Huh?" I ask. Nonna is a travel junky, and like so many octogenarians, cruises are her drug of choice.

"Yeah, so it turns out that Nonna got into a fight with an airline during her Christmas cruise that she didn't tell us about, and our travel guide called Aunt Elaine yesterday to say that Nonna isn't allowed to fly."

Gabe and I look at each other. "Nonna got banned from an airline? What happened?"

I point to a drive-thru and Gabe nods, turning in to Cook Out. We get in the long line and wait. And listen raptly.

The story is classic Nonna.

My grandmother and her sister, my Great Aunt Mary, were sitting in their row on the plane next to a man of a similar age. The man was cranky and looked out the window the whole time, making judgmental noises while Nonna and Great Aunt Mary talked. When they cracked open some homemade biscotti and offered him some, the man wailed about how he was allergic to nuts and were they trying to kill him. He called the attendant, and Nonna and her sister were asked to stow their biscotti for passenger safety. Nonna pointed out that the

airline had given out peanuts not a half hour earlier, and the man hadn't cried then, but they just asked her to stow the biscotti again.

As the flight progressed, the man had more and more complaints. My ninety-eight pound Nonna was taking up too much space. She was too loud for him to hear his movie through his headphones. Hours into the flight, he tapped her shoulder and told her he needed to use the restroom. But Nonna was in the middle of telling Great Aunt Mary a story and told the man to wait a second. He wasn't hearing that. He told her to stand, *now*, and she held up a finger to tell him to wait.

Yes, *that* finger.

The man started yelling and insisted that he needed to use the bathroom *now*, and she said that if it was so urgent, why hadn't he stood up before she started the story? He told her that, considering she hadn't shut up in over four hours, he'd been waiting for her to take a breath, and this was his first opportunity.

She threw her drink at him.

And that's when the flight attendant walked by.

"So she got in trouble with the airline?" I laugh. We're still three cars from ordering.

"Not just the airline."

"You don't mean ..."

"Let me finish," Sienna says.

When the flight attendant told Nonna to stop or they'd have a sky marshal restrain her, she didn't take it well. She told them that they were taking a man's side and it's always the woman who's the crazy one, but had anyone heard the whining on this guy? The woman in front of them held her hand up, and Nonna gave her a high five, but the motion was awkward and she ...

"She sort of elbowed the man in the face."

Laughter explodes from Gabe and me.

“That’s not all,” Sienna says, struggling not to laugh.

The man started yelling, grabbing his eye, saying she was trying to kill him, and the flight attendant asked the sky marshal to step in. He traded seats with Great Aunt Mary and sat between the two the rest of the flight. But as they disembarked, the sky marshal took them both into the aisle.

And Nonna tripped him.

“Was it an accident?” I ask, laughing so hard, tears are streaming down my face.

“Of course it wasn’t an accident,” Gabe says, his shoulders shaking from trying to control himself. “Have you met Nonna?”

Sienna’s breathy laugh fills the car. “You didn’t hear the rest!”

When the man fell, his head hit on the seat across the aisle, and he got knocked out.

Nonna was escorted off the plane in handcuffs.

And she was labeled a “threat to global aviation safety.”

My stomach hurts from laughing, and Gabe is similarly clutching his side as he slaps his steering wheel. When our car reaches the order window, Gabe and I are both breathless. The girl on the other side of the microphone sounds worried.

“Y’all okay in there?”

We wheeze hysterically, but no sound comes out.

“Oh my gosh, y’all, do I need to call 911? Someone run out to the car in the drive-thru!”

And that’s how a picture of me crying goes viral on social media later that day: laughing to the point of tears at my Nonna being put on the No Fly List.

CHAPTER SIX



SONNY

Later that day, I make some calls and pay for all of Carlos's medical bills. I also set up a college savings plan for him. No matter what happens with basketball, nothing should keep him from the college of his choice, and now, nothing will.

I have my assistant send an anonymous note to his mother. She'll know it was me, but she won't have proof, which means she hopefully won't take it to the media. While I have my assistant on the phone, I task her with finding a place to relocate Nonna's birthday party so it fits all of Nonna's requirements:

- Must be within driving distance
- Must be beautiful
- Must have excellent food
- Must have space for a million kids, grandkids, and great grandkids
- Must be available a week from Saturday

She finds a place within an hour.

It's closed for bookings the week we need, but my assistant says that I have some contacts that could help. When I see the name of the place, I can't help but laugh.

I call my good friend and quarterback, Duke Ogden. He answers on the second ring. "Hey, Sonny. How's the knee?"

"Rehabbing," I tell him. "Doc says I should be off crutches next week. How was the honeymoon?"

"There are no words," he says, sounding blissfully content. "I'm coming up to Columbia next week. Why don't I stop by and tell you about it?"

"Actually, I was thinking of coming to Sugar Maple tomorrow. You around?"

"Sure am. Swing by the house for lunch. Millie and Lottie will be glad to see you."

"Cool. See you then."

After we hang up, my chest constricts. I have no need to go by tomorrow. I could trust my assistant, tell my family, and book the place now.

But someone else lives in Sugar Maple. Someone I wouldn't be mad to bump into tomorrow. Someone who stirs up something buried deep in my soul every time I see her scowl.

Parker Jane.

I step out onto my back porch and gaze out at Lake Marion. I live an hour away from the stadium—twenty-seven minutes from Sugar Maple.

Twenty-seven minutes from Parker Jane.

What are the odds?

I bought this place right after signing my contract with the Waves because it's big enough for my family to stay when they come into town. My brothers thought I was crazy to buy something like this when the Waves only signed me for three years with an option to trade after one. It was an impulsive decision, as most of my decisions are, but after years of

navigating so many new situations with nothing but my gut, I've learned to trust it. When my realtor showed me the place for rent next door, I spotted this one for sale from the neighbor's dock and something clicked. The second I walked into the house, I knew I wanted it. But I didn't offer until the tour was over and my realtor checked the price. I could afford it fifty times over.

Yes, it was an impulsive decision, but it wasn't a stupid one.

Playing in the NFL means permanency will continue to elude me until I retire or get forced out. Even with a contract, the team can trade me almost at will. I'm one of the best in the league, but my knee surgery means I'm not someone you build a franchise around. My agent was more concerned about money than stability when he got me this contract.

All NFL rookies sign a four-year contract. I was a first round draft pick and signed with the Jacksonville Jaguars. My contract was huge. Four years, twenty million with another twelve million as a signing bonus. My contract allowed for a fifth year as a restricted free agent, but I injured my knee during my third year with the team and sat out for surgery and rehab. I defied all odds and came back stronger than ever in my fourth season, but every team in the league sees me as a risk now. As a restricted free agent, Jacksonville decided to let me go, and that's when the Waves swooped in with a monster three-year contract ... with a team option after the first year.

Long story short, they can get rid of me at any time.

While I enjoy the game, I hate the uncertainty and instability.

Listen, between football and endorsements, I'm Richie Rich. I'll never have to work another day in my life, and with this knee injury, I'm starting to feel that clock ticking. I knew how temporary a football career could be before I even got a paycheck to play the game. With every limp, I'm more aware of how soon it could all end.

Buying this house was out of the blue, no question. But the idea of setting down roots after so many years of only having

wings appealed to me.

Standing outside now, hearing the waves and the gulls, smelling that muddy, earthy smell, I let the memory of PJ wash over me. I really thought I'd moved past thoughts of her until last fall, when Duke met PJ and the Janes in his hometown, of all places. Suddenly, my quarterback—my friend—was spending time with my ex, which meant *I* was running into her again. Duke's daughter's birthday party, his wedding, the freaking Super Bowl ...

On top of that, the girl Duke married was one of *my* best friends. Millie is the only one of the Janes I've stayed in close contact with. I was so used to talking to Millie that she didn't feel like a connection to my ex anymore, and she was careful never to talk about her with me. Our friendship was independent of anyone else, and for that, I was grateful.

Seeing PJ changed everything. My friendship with Millie felt tarnished and awkward. I couldn't flirt with pretty women anymore. Couldn't date interesting women. Because compared to Parker Jane, no one is pretty enough or interesting enough.

Thinking of her now, I'm even happier I bought this place. I fell in love with PJ hard and fast, and she became home base for me. I have the best family in the world, and she quickly became an extension of them, but different. Maybe even better. I had big, huge plans for us that included words like forever.

Never did it cross my mind that she wasn't on board.

I was naive to think someone as put together and brilliant as her would settle with someone as flaky and impetuous as me. I'm not dumb, but I can't even read her playbook. I'm like a kid playing Pop Warner football trying to figure out Bill Belichick's game plans.

For my whole life, I've wondered where I belong. I was so sure PJ was it, but our break up was more than an end to a relationship. I felt like I was being evicted.

I like this house. It's so close to perfect.

But after having PJ in my arms again, something tells me nothing will ever feel like home except her.

* * *

The next day at Duke's, the rest of the Janes are nowhere in sight. Considering that Millie is one of my closest friends and that I met her and the others shortly after meeting PJ, I half suspected she'd invite them all over.

And by suspected, I mean hoped.

After lunch, Duke runs to put his daughter down for quiet time, which gives me a chance to talk to Millie. We've moved from the dining room to a game room, complete with air hockey, ping pong, pool, and foosball tables. I put my crutches against the wall and hop over to the pool table, where Millie tosses me a pool cue. She racks the balls and lets me break.

"My family's looking to have a reunion at Sugar Maple Farms next week for Nonna's eightieth. The website says they're closed the week we need, but I'm wondering if Jane and her husband might be willing to make an exception."

"Jane has always adored you. If there's no conflict, I'm sure they'll do it," Millie says, calming my first concern. Now for the second.

"Can it handle four days of Luciano wildness?" I ask, sinking a solid red ball in a corner pocket. I sink another after but miss the third.

She walks around the table and eyes a ball. "Are you guys planning a repeat of Christmas sophomore year?"

I laugh, leaning against the air hockey table behind me. My knee aches dully, but I ignore it. "How do you remember that?"

"You flicked mashed potatoes at your brother, accidentally hitting your Nonna, so she squirted a turkey baster full of applesauce down the back of your pants during a literal all-ages food fight! How could I forget?" She aims and shoots. The cue ball knocks her striped ball right to the edge of a pocket, but it doesn't fall in. I hop around to aim my ball at the same pocket she was just shooting for.

“By being a better friend, that’s how. If you really loved me, you’d overlook every embarrassing moment and only focus on the ones that make me look cool.”

“If you don’t know how cool a food fight with your grandma makes you look, you need to have your head checked.” She smiles. “Most families would do anything for closeness like that, Sonny. You guys should be proud.”

Millie is the most validating person I’ve ever known. When she had a cancer scare several years ago, it was my turn to offer her support, and being there for her cemented our friendship long after PJ had already disappeared from my life.

“The grounds are great,” she says. “They’ve set up all of these tiny homes and permanent tents with real beds inside. It’s my kind of camping. I think their inaugural group was a church youth group, so if they could handle a bunch of hormonal teens, they can handle you guys. The caretaker and her husband are the best. They’ll probably get in on the food fight action with you.”

“We’re not having another food fight.”

“Only because you’re afraid of getting applesauced, right?”

“Kinda goes without saying, MJ.” I shudder remembering the feeling of cold applesauce between my butt cheeks. I got mashed potatoes on Nonna’s shoes, for heaven’s sake, but she escalated things quickly. My grandma has a wicked, vengeful sense of humor.

Millie asks about my family and I ask about hers. We talk about how her animal-assisted therapy practice has grown, how life as an insta-mom has been, and about how married life is treating her. She asks me about rehab and my house. We’re on our third game (winner takes all) by the time Duke returns.

“Hello, gorgeous.” Duke stands behind his wife and slips his arms around her. She angles her head back to kiss him, and I avert my eyes. That kiss is bordering on *get-a-room* territory. Also, I’m trying not to think about how I used to hug Parker that same way. She was never big on public affection, but

when it was just the two of us, she could be so tender. So soft. I've dated other women since her, but no one has come close to making me feel like I did when I was with her. I miss having what they have.

Not that I need anything to be happy.

Duke finally comes up for air. "So, catch me up."

"We were talking about getting applesauce in the crack," she says.

"MJ," I moan. Last time I tell anyone about my family.

Duke blinks. "As in ... butt crack?"

"Is there any other kind?" she asks innocently, still in his arms.

"Did Lottie squirt her applesauce down your pants?"

Millie shakes her head. "No. Just don't mess with Sonny's Nonna."

"Nonna? I have a concussion, don't I?" he asks me. "Am I dying? Should I go toward or away from the light?"

"You're fine," I say. I point two fingers at Millie to make sure she knows I've got my eyes on her. "It's a long story that involves a bit too much Luciano insider knowledge, knowledge that your wife *swore* she would not use against me," I say. "My family is hoping to book Sugar Maple Farms for our reunion next week. I was asking Millie if it could handle the full Luciano experience, and she assured me it could."

"I don't know." Duke squints in apparent thought. "I'm not sure the apple harvest was big enough for that many cracks."

I chuck a pool ball at him, and he catches it like a pro. "I hate you. If you two tell anyone that story, I will exact a fierce revenge."

Millie's eyes widen. "You don't mean ... *apple butter*?"

Duke chuckles. "Next time you tell this abomination of a story, you gotta say it was apple butter. Because of ... *butts*. Get it?"

“Wow, that’s clever,” I deadpan. “Did you think of that yourself?”

“I live with a four year-old, man. That joke killed.”

“I’m never going to live this down, am I?”

Millie squeezes my shoulder. “Could be worse. Parker could be here.”

Touché.

CHAPTER SEVEN



PARKER

I'm in my office at the Jane & Co. building in town when my phone buzzes. I finish typing and then grab my phone and look at the text.

It's from ...

It's from *my father*.

My heart starts hammering as I read it.

THOMAS EMERSON: I see the “McLadyPants” stock price has exceeded analysts’ expectations.

That’s it. That’s the text.

I blink and look around to see if I’m on a prank show. No cameras anywhere in sight.

I read my father’s text again. Is this real?

Last year, Jane & Co did a major rebrand of the underwear company, McLadyPants, and they went public this week. They’re already outperforming expectations. I’m not surprised, but I am excited. This success is another feather in our company’s cap, and frankly, we killed it.

Why is my dad texting me about it, though? Does he even know I worked on that account? We haven't said more than a handful of words to each other in the last year, and half of those words were, "Happy birthday," and "Merry Christmas."

He's not ... he's not *proud*, is he?

The room must be dusty, because my allergies are suddenly out of control. My nose and eyes are watering, and my throat aches, and I cannot succumb to any of those things.

I put down my phone and rub my temples. I didn't get enough sleep for this.

What do I say? Do I give it a thumbs up? Do I pretend I don't know and say how interesting that tidbit is? Maybe a simple, "I'm glad I could finally do something worth putting down your scalpel to acknowledge?"

That puts a lump in my throat.

I take a long drink of my Cheerwine. I refuse to let my emotions take control.

When we were dating, Sonny talked to his family constantly. The first time I overheard him talking to his parents on the phone was just before our third date. I heard voices outside my apartment door and opened it to find Sonny on the phone.

"Gotta go, guys," he said quickly, shooting me an almost nervous look. "She's here." He paused as the person on the other side of the call said something, and then he gave one of a hundred different smiles I would memorize over the next year and a half. This was a small, certain smile. "Love you, too."

I still remember that feeling of surprise hearing how he ended his call. "Who were you talking to?"

"My parents."

"Again? Didn't you talk to them yesterday?"

"We talk all the time. My brothers and sister, too. Don't you talk to your parents every week?"

"Yes, but not like *that*."

Sonny's head tipped to the side. "What do you mean? I wasn't rude."

"No, it was just so *casual*. And you just ... told your parents you love them."

"Of course. We say it every time we talk," he said with a confused laugh. And then he stopped and his expression changed to another one I would quickly recognize: pathos. "You guys don't say it, do you?"

My laugh was sharp and bitter, and I shook my head to try to erase it from the air. "That isn't the Emerson way."

"But they love you," he said confidently.

"I'll take your word for it."

We were standing in the open doorway to my apartment with students passing by and staring at us. Yet Sonny grabbed my hands like he didn't notice another soul. "If they don't love you, that doesn't mean something's wrong with you. It means something is wrong with *them*."

I tried to laugh it off. "You don't know me well enough to say that."

"Yes, I do." He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it. "They're wrong. If you don't see that, I look forward to smoking you on our midterm, you cute dummy."

I laughed then, because his comment was so perfectly executed. He always knew how to balance the heavy with the light.

And now, that job falls solely on my shoulders. I'm better than I used to be, but I still suck at it.

I squeeze my temples harder, trying to erase the memory.

Enough.

I drop my hands. It's time to put on my McLadyPants. My dad has texted me, and I need to respond.

But after years of wanting his attention and resigning myself to the knowledge that I would never earn it, I genuinely cannot imagine what the purpose of his text is. The eager little

girl in me is *crying* to respond, to ask him what he means, to plead with him to talk to her and to love her.

I can't let that little girl out again.

I can't go back to hoping and hurting.

I shoot off a text.

PARKER: Yes, I predict good things for them.

I put down my phone, type a dozen figures into the spreadsheet, pick up my phone, and check to see if he's responded. He hasn't.

I stare at my monitor. If I adjust my sight, I can see my reflection staring back at me.

Parker Jane Emerson, I think. You will not obsess over your Dad's text message. You will not compulsively check to see if he's responded. He will not respond, and you will not check.

There.

That's the end of it.

Soon, I walk over to the small conference room for a meeting. Jane and Ash join Millie, Lou, and me with takeout from the diner down the street. The town of Sugar Maple has a Southern Stars Hollow vibe that even an ice queen like me can appreciate. The diner isn't Luke's, but only because Scott Patterson doesn't work there, it's bigger, and you're allowed to be on your cell phone.

On second thought, the only thing they have in common is that they're both diners.

The food is top notch, though, and I've grown just the tiniest bit addicted to the Cheerwine, which they have on tap.

Last year, our CEO, Jane, took a job rebranding Sugar Maple Farms, one of the biggest farms in the country. She and the new owner fell in love, got married, and she's now blissfully happy with her husband, Tripp. Chicago wasn't home for any of the rest of us, and we can do our job

anywhere, so we relocated along with her. Millie met Duke shortly afterwards, and now they're married, too.

It used to be Jane, Millie, Ash, Lou, and me.

Now, we have additions. Jane + Tripp. Millie + Duke (+ Lottie, my favorite addition).

Tripp. Duke. Where did these guys get their names?

Parker + Sonny, a voice in my head taunts, but I shut that voice right up, because first off, Sonny is a totally normal nickname for Santino, and second, there is no *Parker + Sonny*.

Like everyone in my life, my inner voice heeds my warning and lets it go.

We tear into our food and discuss the different accounts and projects going on. We have a team of interns and a network of consultants who allow us to keep our overhead low and keep the Janes in Jane & Co. Millie is a licensed therapist, but she also works part time with us on consumer behavior. As our attorney, Lou works more on an “on demand” schedule. She has a Hannah Montana style secret identity—incognito YouTube sensation Lucy Jane—so in between her lawyering and travel, she also writes soulful music that leans a bit more folk than country, which she releases on her channel.

We go through updates and assignments, and by the end of the meeting, everyone has her piece of the puzzle. My piece is ...

Light. *Really* light.

Huh.

It doesn't mean there's nothing for me to do. I have enough client inquiries that I could have two new accounts by Wednesday. Or maybe, just maybe, instead of adding more work to my schedule—work that will absolutely come—I could use this time to get another massage. Go on a walk for fun. Get a full night's sleep instead of running through every account until midnight, missing my sleep window, and getting restless legs.

But knowing me, I'll use the time to think about Sonny ...

I'm about to ask Jane if I can take some of her load when she looks at something on her phone and sighs.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. Just something at the farm.”

“Tell me about it.”

Jane glances at Millie before looking at me. I shoot a look at Millie, who smiles pleasantly.

Weird.

“The new booking website has some bugs, and someone reserved the farm for a family reunion next week when that whole following week should have been blocked off because Anita and Booker will be out of town. I’d cancel, but we’re still so new to events that I’m worried it could have a negative impact on our reputation.”

“I could help,” I say. *Please let me help!*

“I don’t know. It’s a big ask.”

“It’s not an ask, I’m offering.”

Jane’s upbringing caused her to feel like she’s ultimately responsible for the fate of everyone around her. She takes on too much stress and too much work because she’s so afraid of making things harder for other people.

As someone who thrives on accomplishment, it’s wildly annoying.

“Let me do this.” I urge. “I have a light couple of weeks, and I’ll just move some stuff around. If Anita can help me plan it this week, I’ll stay in one of the cabins on the farm next week and make sure it goes off without a hitch.”

Jane chews the inside of her cheek. “I don’t know. You never get a break, Parker. Maybe you could use this—”

“I’ll go crazy if I take a break, and we both know it. It’s settled. I’m taking the reunion. I’ll call Anita.”

“Thanks,” she says, looking like an invisible burden has been lifted from her shoulders. “I can’t tell you how much this

will help.”

Seeing my friend’s relief sparks pride in my belly. I so rarely get to help people like this. My friends can wiggle past my walls, but most people don’t have a desire to even approach them, let alone try to scale them.

It’s one of the reasons I love events so much. People are contractually obligated to let me help them, and the joy on their faces when things work out well makes me feel like I’m more than just the emotionless robot I was always accused of being in high school. I don’t have the Sonny or the Ash gene. I can’t smile and infect everyone around me with happiness.

I genuinely believe the realest kind of accomplishment is to make people happy. I just don’t know how to do it other than through good work.

Hence why my work is always good.

* * *

For the next week, Anita and I plan and plan. She deals with the guests directly but lets me put together an absolutely killer itinerary. The family coming is huge and spans three generations. It’s for the grandmother’s eightieth birthday, and all of her kids, grandkids, and great grandkids are coming. The youngest is a six-month-old infant. We give that family the coziest cabin.

Anita told me the people coming are incredibly close. They want to do activities together, not just share a space. We set up pickleball and corn hole tournaments and a farm-wide scavenger hunt. Anita arranges to get hundreds of family pictures and craft supplies so that they can make their own picture books in the pavilion. We prep for egg races, t-shirt decorating, and dozens of minute-to-win-it activities. The meals will be catered from our events chef in the permanent camp kitchen, but we stock up on tons of extra goodies, including a hot chocolate bar and a s’mores bar.

The weather is supposed to get colder by next week thanks to some crazy polar vortex coming down from the northeast, but the tiny homes and cabins are all heated, the canvas tents

all have portable heaters, we have enough firewood for a pioneer homestead to last through the winter, and we even have backup generators.

On the morning of the reunion, I say goodbye to Anita and her husband and get ready for the family to check in at the main cabin, where the grandmother, her sister, and one daughter-in-law, whose husband passed last year, will stay. I over-prepared for the event, though, so I'm ready for the guests hours before they're set to arrive.

With nothing else to do, I text my friend, Millie, who occasionally does animal-assisted therapy at the barn here on the farm.

PARKER: You around the farm today?

MILLIE: I'll be there in about twenty minutes.

PARKER: Want to meet me in the cabin?

MILLIE: Why don't you meet me at the barn? I want to see the new goats before my first client.

PARKER: That sounds exciting.

MILLIE: ... and?

PARKER: What do you mean?

MILLIE: I'm waiting for you to add "not." Like, "That sounds exciting. Not."

PARKER: That goes without saying.

MILLIE: Whatever. You secretly love them.

PARKER: I really don't, but you tell yourself whatever you need to so you feel better about getting alpaca poop on your limited edition Golden Goose sneakers.

I'm fine with animals. I like that they're alive on this earth and everything. As long as they keep their stinky, shedding bodies at least two feet away from me at all times, we're good.

The farm is beautiful, in a *Sweet Home Alabama* way, and the walk is good for clearing my head. When I get to the

animal barn, I don't see Millie, but I do see the other therapist she works with, Linda.

Technically, she's kind of my therapist, too.

My friend Rusty is talking to the older woman, and when he hears me, his face flushes a deep red.

I wonder if she's technically kind of Rusty's therapist, too ...

"Oh, hey, Parker. Did you come to see the new goats?" Rusty unlocks the security gates to let me in.

"You know I didn't. Ew."

Linda laughs. She's probably in her mid-sixties with a short white-blonde bob and wrinkles from a lifetime of laughing. She's ultra-maternal, not that I have much experience with the concept.

But she has a way of getting me to open up and getting me to feel good about doing it, and for that, I will be eternally grateful.

As much as I like her, though, that boundary is always there. She's my therapist, not my friend, not a mother figure. She's great at her job, but if I weren't paying her, she wouldn't be in my life.

So I pay her.

"Hi Linda," I say.

"Parker," she says warmly. "How have you been?"

"Fine," I say. "I'm helping with a family reunion while Anita is out of town, so I thought I'd kill some time and catch up with Millie."

Rusty has opened the pens, and baby animals flock around us. I back up and dodge them. My shoes are too pretty for their hair.

But then Louis the llama (technically a llapaca—a llama-alpaca hybrid) comes over and stands by me and I relax a little. I love Louis, even if he'll be taller than me soon. He's as cool as a secret service agent and always matches my energy

in a way that calms me. He's also floofy, unimposing, and he doesn't shed, all of which endears him to me.

The goats, on the other hand, drive me nuts.

Rusty bends down to play with a goat, and Linda squats next to him.

"That was sweet of you to take on the extra work of a family reunion," Linda says to me.

"I'm happy to," I say. "I love events, so this will be a fun break."

"I can't imagine hosting people being a break," Rusty says. He's letting the baby goats jump all over him. There are new goats since I was last here, and they're even squattier and cuter than the "teenage" goats.

Rusty's an introvert, like I am, and by that I mean that he's a reserved introvert who seems to beat himself up if he says the wrong thing. He displays a quiet confidence in his work, like I try to, but our similarities end there. Rusty consults with Jane & Co. doing graphic design, and I've seen him in enough situations to know that he avoids conflict at all costs, even if he's right.

If I know I'm right, I dig in my heels and fight to the bitter end.

Unless I'm talking to my parents.

We're all paradoxes, okay? Don't pretend otherwise.

Three tiny goats come out of the barn. Two of them look like best friends already, walking and occasionally hopping awkwardly into the other, but the third is all by himself. His front legs are bent above the hooves, and he's hobbling out on the bent part. He looks almost like he's walking on his knees. Except, goats don't walk on their knees.

He's gray with black on his head and hooves, and he just keeps army crawling on his weak, wobbly legs.

The center of my chest grows hot. "What's wrong with that goat?" I ask Rusty.

“Triplet birth,” he says. “This guy was the runt. The other two goats took up so much space in the womb, he was too cramped for his tendons to grow as long and strong as they need to be.” Then to Linda, he says, “I’ll go fix that lock on the goat pen. Be right back.”

“Thanks, Rusty,” she says.

The little goat is still trying to make his way over on his bent hooves, and the heat in my chest spreads with a pang. I walk over to him and crouch down. The other goats bound around me, but I ignore them, only pushing them away when they try to snack on my clothes or hair.

The goat crawls up to me and climbs into my lap. My hand hovers over him. I’m going to need to wash after this, but he’s so pathetic. And cute. With a sigh, I pet his strangely soft and fluffy hair. I’m not a pet person by any stretch of the imagination. He makes an adorable bleating sound, though, and even with his farm stink, this isn’t the worst thing.

“What’ll happen to him?”

Linda kneels next to me and stretches the little goat’s front legs out one after the other. “They typically work through it naturally within a couple of weeks. We can cast his front legs if he can’t do it on his own.”

The mental image of this tiny goat wearing casts is almost too much for me to take.

“What’s his name?”

“He was only born yesterday. We haven’t named him yet,” Linda says. “Any ideas?”

Why would she ask me, of all people? I’m not a pet person, let alone a goat person. I’m more of a GOAT person. The idea makes me snort. “Sweetness.”

“*Sweetness?*” Linda asks.

“Yes, Sweetness, aka Walter Payton,” I say. “He was the greatest running back of all time.”

Linda’s brow furrows and then clears. “Ah, you’re naming a goat after a GOAT.”

My ears get hot. “It’s a stupid joke. I don’t know anything about naming an animal.”

“It’s *not* stupid,” Linda says. “It’s very clever. That is *exactly* how people name a pet.”

“Oh, he’s not a pet. Not mine, anyway.”

“Of course.” Linda nods. “You said this ‘Sweetness’ was a running back. Isn’t that the position Sonny plays?”

Stupid Parker!

I shrug, but Linda sees through me like I’m made of glass. “How have you been feeling since you ran into him last week?”

“Fine. I’m not thinking of him much.”

“Define much.”

I glare, and she smiles. “It’s not *incessant*. But yeah, I’m thinking of him still.”

“What are you thinking?”

“That I’m never going to find someone like him again. That I’ll never be as happy as I was with him.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I know I’ll never find someone like him,” I say.

“But you really think you’ll never be as happy?”

I frown. I was blissfully, madly, wildly happy with Sonny. My whole life to that point, I’d felt confined to a cell and shackled to the earth, but with Sonny, my chains were broken and I was flying free.

But going from no freedom to utter freedom was terrifying. I had no one to teach me how to go from one extreme to the other, and I was constantly afraid I was getting it wrong. The effort to be enough for him was a blip compared to the effort I had to make with my parents.

But it wasn’t nothing.

I didn’t deserve his love, but I felt it all the same. It was so novel, so totally unlike anything in my past experience. Sonny

was my first boyfriend, but I never even had real friends until college. My gymnastics teammates had felt more like rivals, but I was as friendly as I knew how to be with people in student government and on the debate team. Problem is, I was always too worried about grades to let myself get close to anyone, even if my mom hadn't discouraged me from forming friendships with those "wanton hussies."

Yes, she called the ambitious nerds I occasionally hung out with "wanton."

In college, the first person who ever simply pushed past my walls instead of letting me push her away was Jane. I met her in an introductory marketing class our freshman year, and she brought all of the Janes together on a group project. She had the sense that each of us would carry our own weight (we did). She thought it was kismet that we all had Jane in our name, and after the project was completed, she kept inviting us to do things. The others agreed right away, but I held back until she wore me down.

Many Clint Eastwood movies and a handstand-and-milkshake challenge later (which I won; don't ask), I had my first set of real friends.

I'm not exaggerating when I say they've changed my life.

I wouldn't have agreed to go out with Sonny without their squealing encouragement. I wouldn't have had the courage to keep dating him after freezing when he told me he loved me, and I wouldn't have been able to say it back to him several weeks later.

I never would have survived breaking up with him, either.

My friends and I have been through a lot together. We've fought and forgiven. We've gotten pimples and destroyed our moisture barriers trying to get rid of them and had to figure out how to restore moisture barriers together. We've laughed to the point of tears more times than I can count, even me.

"I don't know," I tell Linda, who's still waiting for my response. "I've been happy. But it's different. It wasn't just happiness we had. It was more than that."

“But it wasn’t perfect.”

“No.”

“Because *you* weren’t good enough, right?”

I wince.

“Let me ask you a question,” Linda says. “You don’t like animals, right?”

“Right.” Sweetness is nuzzling me, and I tolerate it with a roll of my eyes.

“Of all the adorable animals here, why would you let this one in?”

I swallow hard. “I know what you’re doing.”

“I’d be surprised if you didn’t,” she says with a smile. “You’ve told me you felt like you had to earn your parents’ love, and the fact that they’ve withheld it all these years proves you didn’t earn it. But you know that’s not how love works, don’t you?”

I nod. Academically, objectively, theoretically, sure.

Personally?

Not even close.

“So why was Sonny the exception? You *did* have his love.”

“He didn’t know the real me.”

“Aw. So you were faking it?”

I nod again.

“Parker, you’re smart, but no one can fake perfection for that long. You two were together for over a year and a half. He may not know everything about you, but he knows a lot more than you think.”

My throat is so thick, I feel like I’m choking. “He built up an idealized version of me in his head. He never saw the real me. He *couldn’t*.”

“If he couldn’t, then it’s more important than ever that you move past him. If he couldn’t see you, he didn’t deserve you.”

A fierce need to defend him rises in me. “You don’t understand. It wasn’t his fault. I couldn’t let him see me like that, either.”

“Okay,” Linda says, watching me pet Sweetness. I should stop, but it’s surprisingly calming. “Maybe you both did the best you could then. But you know how to do better now, so do it. In the meantime, give yourself some grace.”

I nod again, but my heart isn’t in it.

We’ve had a variety of this conversation before, and everything she says makes sense, like usual.

But there’s a difference between hearing something and feeling it.

I hear everything Linda’s saying. I even agree with her ... on paper.

I don’t believe her, though.

You can’t be on the receiving end of a lifetime of rejection from your parents and not come away with some baggage.

I own the full Louis Vuitton set.

Linda stands before I do, and when the other goats follow her like she’s their leader (and even with my cold, dead heart, I don’t blame them), Sweetness stays with me.

I don’t let this make my heart ache. I don’t let myself feel special. Sweetness has limb differences that make it hard for him to move.

That’s all.

Rusty comes back from the barn and looks at Sweetness and me. “Wow, someone’s bonding.”

“I’m not bonding,” I argue.

“Wasn’t talking about you,” Rusty says with a smile.

“Parker named him Sweetness,” Linda says. “After Walter Payton.”

“Good one.” Rusty chuckles. “Baby goats don’t like isolation. The other two bonded immediately, but they haven’t connected as much with Sweetness.”

Outrage surges in my chest. Why would they leave this adorable little goat out? Because he’s different? Because his body isn’t perfect? I hold him close until he reaches his head up and tries to nip the collar of my jacket.

I snicker quietly. “Okay, Sweetness, calm down.” I rise to my feet, and Louis the Llama waltzes over and puts his head down to smell the little goat. Sweetness bumps his head into Louis’s head, and Louis nuzzles him.

I do *not* tear up.

Rusty takes the goat from me, and he and Louis walk Sweetness over to Linda, and I absolutely do not need to sniff to keep my nose from running, because these are farm animals, and who cares?

Not me.

CHAPTER EIGHT



PARKER

The guests are due to arrive in thirty minutes, and I've officially triple checked everything. Twice. When I learned the grandmother's family immigrated to Virginia from Italy when she was little, I scoured the Internet for the types of snacks and candies most popular in Virginia when she was young, ordered everything I could find, and made a goody box for her. I also added them to the snack table I'll keep open in the pavilion between meals, just to let her numerous grandkids and great grandkids get to experience a little of her childhood. Hunting for popular Italian treats from that same timeframe was harder, but I found one—a chocolate called *Galatine*. I added it to her goody box, just in case it stirs up a memory.

And, because I was in a searching mood, I looked up what kinds of candies were popular in Paris in the '70s. My maternal grandfather was a diplomat, and my mom grew up in France. I found a chocolate that tickles my memory. My mother's parents died when I was young, but this candy looks like something I found in my mother's stocking when I sneaked downstairs early Christmas morning when I was little.

I ate three of them and left the wrappers, and my mother's anger was a sight to behold. Little Parker didn't care. Little Parker was bold as brass. Before she realized her parents were happy to ignore her for days when she acted out.

Being ignored by the people who feed and clothe you has a way of making you comply.

When I saw the candy online, I sent a box of it to my mother with a simple note: "Saw this and thought of you."

It has to be a coincidence that my mother calls at this moment, right? Of course, she insists we talk once a week, and because I dodge her calls as often as I do, that means she calls *a lot*.

I'm sitting at the kitchen table in the small main cabin where the reunion family—the Castagnos—will check in. Should I answer the phone? She's probably calling me because she got the candy, come to think of it. If I answer now, I have a built in excuse for hanging up if things go bad. If I don't answer now, whatever she has to say will only bubble and build in her mind until I finally *do* answer, and then I'll wish I didn't wait.

I answer.

"Parker," she says in a tone not even Season One Emily Gilmore could match.

"Hi, Mom."

"Are you getting sick? You sound awful," she says, and I can almost imagine her wiping the other side of the phone with disinfectant. "You need to stop staying up so late working on those silly little commercials."

My eyes close in exhaustion.

"I'm not sick, Mom. I woke up early to exercise."

"Hmm." It's all she can say, because it's a noble use of my time.

Emboldened, I add, "And we don't just make commercials, remember? We rebrand businesses. We help them identify and target the right customers, update their presence to stay

relevant and on top of trends, and so much more. Commercials are only a tiny piece of the puzzle.”

“You’ve always been such a bright girl,” she says, and I hold my breath. My mother’s like a jellyfish. She’ll say something that seems soft, and then when you put your guard down, she’ll sting you with her tentacles. “It’s too bad you wasted it on commercials when you could have done something useful, like medicine.”

There it is.

“I have vasovagal syncope. I blacked out dissecting a frog in high school. Remember? I’m pretty sure fainting disorders disqualify you from surgery.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” she says. “Plenty of doctors have overcome worse. You’ve always been a quitter.”

My teeth are going to crack. I don’t even know where to start. Does she really think a little more grit would help me overcome a medical condition? And to call me a *quitter*?

My parents had a profound influence on every second of my life, but it wasn’t their physical presence so much as the looming threat of their disapproval. My mom shifted me to the periphery while she practiced violin or sat on the board for a charity or oversaw changes in décor while I sat alone in my room doing homework. The driver took me to gymnastics because she couldn’t be bothered. At least we had family dinners ... when there wasn’t a charity or hospital event that preempted it. Or a debate or gymnastics tournament.

All right, we had family dinner together twice a week, and every time, my mother gave me the third degree in front of my father, as if she truly expected him to look away from his paper or medical journal to hear about an A or a difficult dismount.

Spoiler alert: he didn’t.

One lonely memory becomes a thousand lonely memories. My parents were always doing “more important things” when I wanted or needed them. When I was little, I had such a loud voice. I demanded attention.

Some parents believe in time-outs and sending kids to their rooms. Some believe in ignoring behaviors they don't like. I'm sure there are other parenting techniques out there, but I'm not familiar with them.

My parents punished me for behaviors they didn't like *and* ignored me until I didn't do them anymore.

I spent a lot of time in my room.

I could have gone the Lorelai Gilmore route and climbed out of the second-story bedroom of my ridiculously overwrought home, but I went the accomplishment route instead. If the only way to get their affection and attention was through excelling, then I would become the best at *everything*.

And then maybe they'd love me.

My mother is still going. "Why couldn't you have practiced the violin more? You had such promise."

When she isn't reminding me of how dramatic and demanding I was as a child, she loves telling me how promising I was. The implication is clear: I'm a living, breathing waste of potential.

"I was always doing gymnastics or studying. And I was still first chair in flute—"

"Flute." She says it like it's a different f-word.

I hate how stupid and small I feel talking to her. Rationally, I know I'm smart and accomplished. Objectively, I can see that I am exceptionally good at the things I work hard to master.

But it's not good enough.

Perfection wasn't the goal in my family, it was the baseline. The minimum expectation to be shown love.

And I'm a lot of things, but I'm not perfect. No matter how hard I try.

"I'm sorry to have disappointed you, Mom," I say, and I wish it were with fire in my gut instead of shame.

“I don’t know about *that*.” She sounds uncomfortable. “Here, your father wants to say hello.”

Panic zips through me like an electric shock “Dad? Why isn’t he at work?”

“He took the day off.”

“Dad did? *My* dad?”

“Yes, and he wants to talk to you. Why are you so surprised?”

Where do I begin? Fortunately, Jane comes through the front door of the cabin, smiling and ready to help me with the check-in process. I smile back.

“I’m sorry, Mom, but I have to go. I need to work.”

“But Parker, your father—”

“I’ll have to call him another time. Bye, Mom.”

“We love you!” she blurts just as I hang up the phone.

They love me?

I don’t remember the last time either of them said that.

Ever.

It doesn’t fill me with emotion as much as niggling discomfort. Why would she say that now? I frown at my phone and set it on the table.

“Hey there,” Jane says. “How are your parents?”

“Same as ever,” I say. “I’m a failure, have squandered all my talent, and I’ve embarrassed my family by watching *Gilmore Girls* again last night.”

Jane laughed. “You didn’t tell them you watched *Gilmore Girls*.”

“She could sense it,” I say.

Jane sits next to me at the table. “Isn’t it weird how parents can come across so differently to people who aren’t their actual child? When your parents took us all out to dinner

sophomore year, your mother *raved* about you when you went to the bathroom. Everything you touched turned to gold.”

“She had to save face. I’m a reflection of her.”

“I believe you,” Jane says, and I appreciate her belief more than I can express.

I also appreciate that she doesn’t try to one-up me. Because if “Bad Mom” were a competition, Jane’s mom would win the gold ... and steal the silver and bronze just because. My mom is hard. Her mom is the worst.

I’ve never talked a lot about how I was raised to my friends because on the surface my life looks perfect. Under the surface, on the other hand ...

But a year ago, Jane took a massive account—the Sugar Maple Farms rebrand—without telling any of us. Because we already had commitments to other jobs, the rest of us stayed behind while Jane flew out to start on the job. Although the biggest thing to come out of it for Jane was getting married to Tripp, something big came out of it for me, too.

I was furious when Jane took the account without telling us. Not just furious, but hurt. It felt like a direct rejection of my efforts and me. I’m the CFO, for heaven’s sake, and she took the job to try to save the company *I* was failing to save. I froze her out. For months, I only said the bare minimum to her.

Then one day, it all came out, and I unloaded.

And you know what? I felt a lot better. Being honest and vulnerable didn’t lead to more rejection. It brought Jane and me closer. Since then, I’ve opened up about my family mostly to Jane, but to the Janes at large, too. It was terrifying telling them about how my parents rejected me (after all, if my own parents rejected me, then what did they know that my friends didn’t know?). But instead of pushing them away, it’s bonded us. And my friends have opened up more, too.

A metric ton of therapy has also helped.

Jane and I review the itinerary, which she can’t stop raving over, and soon, it’s twelve o’clock, straight up. Time for check in. Jane and I sit and wait eagerly.

They don't show.

Thirty minutes later, they still aren't here.

I check my smart watch compulsively. Anita gave me the main contact's information—a granddaughter, Emma—and I text her to confirm.

She responds at 1:30 p.m.

EMMA: Just pulling into the farm! We had a pit stop at the diner in town, but we're almost there.

I show Jane the text, and she nods. Then she gives me a tight, nervous smile.

There must be a lot riding on this event. Apparently, some of the grandkids are wealthy and connected, so the word of mouth will probably matter. Thinking of the stakes being higher for Jane and Tripp doesn't add any bubbles to the ulcer in my stomach, though. It's already a gurgling, twisted mess. I want this to go off without a hitch. I want everything to be perfect for this family and for Jane and Tripp.

And for me.

It's important to me that I do the best I can in everything I do. Some of that is from my parents' expectations and the pressure they put on me to achieve, achieve, achieve. But part of it is who I am. I want to excel. I want to—

Wait, what did that say?

A glance at Jane's calendar railroads my thoughts. I'm not trying to eavesdrop or peek, but her calendar is up and inches from mine, and the name that's showing up on her phone is different than the papers Anita gave me.

Everything—and I mean *everything*—I've been given says, "Castagno Family Reunion for Nonna's 80th Birthday." In my head, I've been referring to the family as the Castagno family.

But I guess it never actually said Nonna *Castagno* ...

My pulse races like a runaway train, a train that threatens to burst out of my chest. "Jane, why does your calendar say—"

But I don't get a chance to call Jane on what her calendar says that NONE of my paperwork says, because the doors to the cabin burst open, and in come the first members of the family. A pretty brunette of around forty and her husband and three teen and tween kids, followed by two older women—the grandma and her sister, I'm sure.

"I'm Emma!" the pretty brunette says as she approaches Jane and me. "Emma Castagno, the oldest of the grandkids."

"By four minutes," one of her kids says. He's a teenager with floppy hair who looks like he thinks he's cool. "She and my uncle are twins, and they'll tell you all about it all week if you let them."

"Not the time, Noah," Emma says with a small shake of her head. She looks at Jane. "You must be Anita."

"No, I'm Jane. Anita hoped she'd be here to check you all in, but she and her husband wanted to get out early with that storm coming down. But this is Parker."

"Oh good!" Emma says to me. "Anita told me you'd be our main point of contact. Thank you guys so much for putting us up this week. We had a lot of last minute changes, so you opening your venue for us is something of a miracle." Emma turns around, waving to two elderly women. Both women are spry beyond their years. And the tiniest and oldest of the two looks familiar.

More than familiar.

No.

No.

This can't be happening.

More people start filing in. Another family and another and another. The cabin isn't meant to be a receiving area for this many people. And even though I knew how many people were in the group, having them all here at the same time is *so much more*.

And the kids. The kids add like three people each. That toddler terror is worth at least six.

That toddler terror ...

I recognize that toddler terror. From the Super Bowl Suite where I last saw him.

More people come in, and while Jane stands and greets them all, I stay seated. Shock has frozen me in place.

And now I know the faces all too well.

Gabe Luciano and his family walk in, and I debate running out the back door. His parents follow. Then his older brother, Anthony, enters with his family, minus Max, who ran ahead. Then it's Sienna and her husband. Everyone is hugging and laughing. Kids are running in, out, and all around. Teens are dispatched on babysitting duty, assigned to watch each of the younger cousins. Some grumble and roll their eyes while others jump to it. The grown-ups all take seats in the main room and around the kitchen table or even on the kitchen counters. No one seems bothered by the tight accommodations. They make it feel bigger than it is, like the cabin is coming to life and expanding along with their energy.

Jane greets them all warmly, making everyone feel comfortable and important by virtue of her even turning her stunning gaze on them.

And.

I.

Just.

Sit.

There.

I sit there until I hear the cabin door open and close one final time. I hear the sound of a limping footfall on the hardwood. I hear the one voice I most miss and want to avoid in the world.

“Jane!” Sonny says. He’s coming closer, but I keep my head down, obscured as I am by a layer of his chatting cousins. “The place looks awesome. Thanks again for putting us up this week. I hope it wasn’t too much trouble.”

Blood rushes back to my extremities, animating me.

She knew.

I shake off my stupor and hop to my feet, walking around the table to join Jane, who is hugging Sonny. He appears to be off his crutches. Jane is tall enough, especially with heels, that their height difference is only a couple of inches. Which means that Sonny doesn't see me until they separate.

Which means I get to surprise *him*.

“Hi Sonny,” I say with a big, syrupy smile. “We’re so glad to be hosting the Luciano reunion and Nonna’s birthday party.”

Sonny’s gaze drops half a foot, and he startles. “PJ? Why are you ... what are you ... Jane?” Sonny isn’t easily thrown, and there’s a chance I’m enjoying his stammering a bit too much.

Jane scrunches her perfect nose and gives the least apologetic shrug known to mankind. “Remember how I told you our caretaker would be out but that we had the best backup in the world? Parker’s our backup for events.”

Sonny looks heavenward. He licks his lips before stretching them into a slow, smile. “I’m embarrassed that I didn’t see this coming.” His eyes lock on mine and hold my gaze. “I can’t imagine anyone better for the job.”

“Thanks, Sonny,” I say brightly, as if I’m pleased with the compliment instead of wondering how on earth I’m going to survive four full days of the Lucianos.

I’ll have to fake it till I make it.

And by “make it,” I mean until they leave. There will be no “making it” of any kind.

Especially not with Sonny.

CHAPTER NINE



SONNY

P is here.
PJ is here.
PJ is *here*.

Parker Jane Emerson is here with my family for four days. She broke up with me unceremoniously all those years ago. Her reasoning was shoddy then, and I swear, I still feel that same energy pass between us anytime we're near. It's not a spark as much as a frisson, a psycho-physiological vibration that our bodies emit in each other's presence and no one else's.

I *felt* the energy coming off of her when I held her last week. Heck, I felt it when we *looked* at each other. And she almost said yes to my breakfast invite. I know she did. She looked like she was teetering on the edge of yes, and because I've matured, I didn't push her, even though I wanted to. Even though my cells were buzzing on a higher frequency just being in her presence. I know I have an effect on her, just like she's always had this effect on me.

Her presence is a stimulant to me. She's the human equivalent of an energy drink.

The frantic feeling in my chest has reached an uncomfortable pace, and I stop in my tracks, surrounded by my family. I need to breathe. I need to center myself. I don't like feeling this out of control, but I'm remembering all of a sudden that I used to feel like this around her all the time. It wasn't her fault or her responsibility. It was just a fact. I didn't know how to rein in the natural exuberance that became supernatural around her.

And she carried that sadness with her that I so badly wanted to fix ...

I never understood how she could be so fiery and competitive and hold that heavy insecurity at the same time. She tried to hide it, but it was like a throbbing wound.

It doesn't stick out like it used to. It's scarred over. But it's still there. And I still desperately wish I could take it away. I wish I could be the one to help her, heal her, make her happy.

I pause and push aside all the noise roaring in my head and excitement beating in my chest and instead focus on that almost psychic shiver I felt when PJ and I looked at each other.

It's wonderful. It can't help but be wonderful.

I take a deep, cleansing breath and focus on that feeling. I thank my heart for keeping me alive and energized and I let some of the frantic energy release into the atmosphere. Then I open my eyes. Old Sonny would have been bouncing off the walls to get PJ to smile a *real* smile, not that fake one she pasted on to get under my skin.

I've grown, though. I'm not the young dumb kid she knew back then. And I'm determined to show her.

The love of my life is here. And I'll do everything in my power to get her back.

CHAPTER TEN



PARKER

*S*pend the next hour and a half giving every family an itinerary, keys (where applicable), and a map of the grounds (plus a QR code to an interactive map for the tech savvy). The rote tasks keep me from flipping out that every person I ever wanted to meet is in the same place.

I met Sonny's siblings and parents enough times, but he told me countless stories about his Nonna and his cousins. His Uncle Bruno sent him jokes weekly that he was always sharing with me.

I've heard a story or seen a picture of almost everyone here.

I was supposed to meet them at Sienna's wedding, but our breakup kept that from happening.

I was so nervous at the idea of meeting everyone.

And now I've met them all, and nerves don't even begin to describe it.

I make sure everyone has my cell number, even though it's on the itinerary and I've put a second copy of the itinerary in each of the individual accommodations. But it's practical, not stalker-ish or weird, to be clear, and it's not like I took *their* numbers ...

My intestines twist.

I cannot mess this week up.

This reunion has to be *perfect*.

When Nonna tells Sonny's cousin, Emma, that she refuses to "play corn hole against those cheaters," anxiety ices my veins over. I'm seconds from changing the itinerary, but Emma tells me that Nonna's the biggest cheat of the family and Nonna's eyes twinkle, so I keep it on there.

Everyone spends the afternoon getting settled and walking around the expansive grounds. I talk to some of Sonny's aunts when Sonny's mom, Lisa, comes over. I immediately stand straighter.

She lights up when she sees me. I'm standing behind a table, but she comes around it, spreads her arms wide open, and pulls me into the biggest hug I've felt since ... the last time she hugged me, honestly.

Lisa Luciano doesn't merely hug. It's like she opens up part of her heart and fits you into it. She wraps you up so thoroughly, you can't help but feel better about yourself.

Even me.

Her hug does too many things to my chest and eyes and nose, and no matter how hard I try to smooth my expression, the feeling of her arms squeezing me so warmly is making the circuits inside my head short.

I want her to love me so much, it hurts.

"Parker, you dear woman, thank you for helping us on such short notice!" Lisa says in my ear. Then she pulls away and holds me at arm's length. "I know we just saw you a few weeks ago at the Super Bowl, but we barely got to talk that whole evening. And now you're here, and we'll get to actually

catch up. I can't wait to hear everything you and your company are doing! You are so accomplished."

We've gone from circuits shorting to a full system reset.

I do my best to smile, but it's like my cheeks don't know how when my eyes and nose are swelling like this. "Thank you, Mrs. Luciano. How does the itinerary look?"

"Oh, it's perfect. Everything you do is so thoughtful. But it's Lisa, remember?"

Lisa's sister-in-law grabs her attention, and Lisa gives me an apologetic smile.

"Here, let me text you my number," she says.

"You don't need to—"

"I want to, sweetie." She already has my number in her contacts from the itinerary, and she waits and watches as I pull my texts up.

"There it is!"

"Add me to your contacts."

"Um ..."

I freeze. I've forgotten how to talk, let alone where to press on the screen to add Lisa Luciano—hugger of huggers, the most maternal, nurturing, loving woman I've ever met—to my contacts.

She touches my screen and adds herself for me. "There you go. Now we can keep in touch! I'm sorry to run. Promise me we'll have time to really talk, okay?"

All I can do is nod.

And because he's like a shark and my emotion is the blood he smells in the water, Sonny approaches when his mom and aunts leave.

Talk about timing.

I'm feeling tender from the moment with his mother, so I don't have time to repair the cracks in my walls when he comes over. He's so tall and broad, and even though this cabin

isn't tiny, it doesn't have space for the two of us, especially not with his lips quirking up. Sonny's solar eclipse smiles are one thing. This small, almost uncertain one steals my breath.

"That was really nice of you to agree to help my family this week."

I want to spit out a sassy retort, because I feel too vulnerable and exposed, like a deer in an open field surrounded by hunters. But if he finds out I didn't know, then will he think I was actually as excited to see everyone as I pretended to be?

Was I really pretending?

"No problem, Santino," I say. Calling him by his given name is my only power move here, so I take it.

But it was the wrong move. Rather than bothering him, using his name is like a billboard announcing I'm as thrown as he is. The uncertainty on his face vanishes, replaced by a confidence every bit as alluring and far more familiar.

He owns me, and he knows it.

So what do I do? I smile until my cheeks hurt—which they do almost immediately—because this is not my natural state. Even when I'm happy, I'm not a smiley person. I'm a smirky person.

"I'm glad to hear it's not an inconvenience," Sonny says. "I hope you have fun."

"I think I'm supposed to say that to you."

"I always have fun," he says. "You know that."

"Oh, I remember."

"So you haven't been able to forget me."

"I didn't say that."

"Didn't you?"

Why does he smile at me like this is delightful banter instead of a casual, totally meaningless conversation between

two people who used to care about each other but definitely do not anymore?

And why do I hear Shakespeare in my head telling me the lady doth protest too much?

Shut up, Shakespeare.

I have to shut this whole chat down, because Sonny is relentless. He's like a missile that can get past any defense system, and what's worse is once he's past it, you find you *want* him there. You *want* him to destroy the perfectly ordered infrastructure you've so carefully erected. You can't wait for it to crumble.

Not *me*, mind you. One. One can't wait.

I don't want any such destruction. I like my tidy walled fortress, thank you very much.

Sonny raps his fingers on the table between us and just smiles that infuriating smile. I tighten up my walls and double check my defenses.

"I shouldn't keep you any longer," I say with the most saccharine smile the world has ever known. "Your family will be missing you."

"See you around, *Parker*."

"Bye, *Santino*."

He walks away, and I absolutely do not let my body shift in his direction like I'm a sunflower and he's the sun.

These metaphors are getting out of control.

I can't let myself follow.

When the last of the Luciano clan heads out of the cabin, I call Jane, who already left.

She doesn't answer.

In fairness, her calendar says she's in a meeting, but does that stop me from leaving a biting voicemail?

No, it does not.

“Jane Harrington Carville, you sneaky, conniving, meddling beast. You owe me. If I don’t come home in four days to a new pair of Jimmy Choos, I will set every animal on this farm loose in your house while you’re sleeping.”

I text the Janes.

PARKER: DID YOU ALL KNOW ABOUT THIS?

LOU: About what?

ASH: You mean Sonny, right? Of course I knew. He posted about it on his socials this morning. I texted him to see when I can come over. Are you saying you didn’t know?

PARKER: That’s exactly what I’m saying.

ASH: HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH

PARKER: I am not amused.

PARKER: Millie, Jane, I notice a lot of silence from you two.

MILLIE: *GIF of little kid whistling and trying to look innocent*

JANE: Sorry, in a meeting. Can I call you back?

PARKER: That’s not how the auto reply works, Jane!

MILLIE: It’s not like we’re trying to set you up.

PARKER: WAIT, ARE YOU TRYING TO SET US UP?

MILLIE: NO! I said we AREN’T trying to set you up!

PARKER: But you’d only say that if you were trying to make me think you *weren’t* trying to set us up!

MILLIE: What did you think we were doing?

PARKER: Trying to get me to run the Luciano family reunion for the press!

JANE: That’s exactly what we were trying to do.

LOU: I don’t buy it, PJ, and neither should you. They’re definitely trying to set y’all back up.

PARKER: See? Thank you, Lou. The rest of you are on blast.

ASH: What did I do?

PARKER: You didn't tell me.

ASH: Save the drama for Millie's llama.

LOU: GROOOOOAN.

PARKER: *gif of Mercutio* A plague on both your houses.

ASH: She's resorted to quoting Shakespeare, gang. Jane, Millie, apologize.

MILLIE: Sorry, PJ.

JANE: Sorry I didn't tell you.

PARKER: I reject your fake apology. I expect TWO pairs of Jimmy Choos.

* * *

By dinnertime, I lead the Luciano clan to the covered pavilion near the industrial kitchen. The weather up until this week has been in the low sixties, but now it's maybe fifty degrees, and it's only supposed to get colder. Anita warned everyone about the cold front, but it's clear that half of the great grandkids didn't take the warning seriously.

What is it with teens and jackets? Are they embarrassed to be warm? Is *Watch Me Get Frostbite and Lose Some Digits* a new TikTok challenge?

Thankfully, commercial patio heaters dot the pavilion, making dinnertime more comfortable for those poor teens thirsty to prove to everyone that they're too cool for comfort.

The family was very specific about the menu. I watch them carefully during dinner to make sure that it's all to their liking. When I find out that Nonna spent the afternoon with the chef, I make a mental note to apologize to him. I never met Nonna while Sonny and I dated, but I saw pictures and heard enough stories about her to know that she's a pistol.

And now, I'm seeing that firsthand.

She holds court during dinner without saying more than a few words. She doesn't preside in a showy way, but it seems to spring up naturally. The family is seated among several long communal tables, with Nonna and Great Aunt Mary and

Nonna's daughter-in-law at the center table, surrounded by space heaters. Nonna is tiny. She's shorter than I am, even without my heels. Yet her presence is larger than life, almost mythical.

"Tell us the one about the dog poop!" a teen calls out. He's sitting with Sonny's cousin, Emma, so I assume he's her kid.

Nonna waves her hand. "You don't want to hear those old stories," Nonna says.

"Yes we do!" another great grandkid says. And then the great grandkids and even some of the grandkids start to pound on their tables. After five or ten seconds, Sonny's uncle, Bruno, hushes them.

"Okay, okay, here's how it went," he starts. "When I was young, we lived in a small neighborhood in Virginia. One of the neighbors had this show poodle he was so proud of, and he would let the poodle poop in everyone's yard in the neighborhood and never cleaned it up. It was a mean, miserable beast. The owner thought he was better than the rest of our working class neighborhood. One day, Mom asked the man to stop letting the dog poop on her lawn, and he swore up and down that he would."

"Spoiler alert," Sonny's dad says. "He didn't."

Everyone laughs.

"Mom crossed the street, knocked on his door, and told him to pick up the poop, or else. Instead of apologizing or making empty promises, he said that our house was an embarrassment since Dad died and that she should feel *honored* to have a prize poodle's poop in it. He said it would increase the value of her POS property."

People gasp, including me. I look at Nonna, and she's touching her bare ring finger, not looking at the rest of the family.

"Mom turned and walked back across the street with the man laughing at her the entire time. For the next week, Mom went to every neighbor on the street to pick up the dog's feces." Bruno eyes Nonna, who's shaking her head. "She kept

it in a baggy outside, adding to it until the *collection* was complete. Then, when the man went out of town for a dog show, she shoved every last piece of poop through the letterbox of the man's front door with a note. What did it say, Mom?"

Nonna smirks. "Hadn't realized this was so valuable. Thought you might want it back."

The whole pavilion roars with laughter, and I can't help chuckling with them.

"So hardcore," the teen named Noah says. "What happened after that, Nonna?"

Nonna shrugs. "He picked up after his dog."

More uproarious laughter follows.

I listen raptly to every tale, marveling at the matriarch of this huge, tight-knit family. At one point, I spot Sonny watching me from his table. I feel stupid, like I've been caught pretending to be one of them rather than the hired help, but he hobbles over to the hot chocolate bar, where I'm standing. He has on shorts, a hoodie, a beanie, and a pair of white sneakers.

But it's the brace around his knee I can't help noticing. When he gets to me, he grabs a cup and starts pouring from the spout of the industrial hot cocoa machine. He hands the first cup to me, and then pours his own.

"Nonna's pretty cool, isn't she?" he asks, stirring in hazelnut creamer.

"That's an understatement," I agree, putting in a splash of vanilla creamer before taking a sip. "She's so bold. I can't even imagine."

"Sure, you can," he says. "Parker Jane doesn't take trash from anyone." He means it as a compliment, but it's so far off the mark, it bounces off of me.

We turn around to face his family, but we're both angled slightly toward each other. I'm powerless to turn away, and my brain is angry about it.

My body isn't.

“You look happy,” I say. Then I scramble. “Right now, I mean. I haven’t been watching you, or anything,” I lie.

“Happiness is my thing.” He takes a slow sip, and his lips curve around the cup in a way that entrances me.

“Yeah, but something about all of this is different.”

He leans closer to me, but he looks out over his family instead of letting his gaze drill into me. “Yeah, it’s something else, isn’t it?”

I hold the hot chocolate closer to my body, shivering.

If he could only see himself now, the way he isn’t merely lighter but the way he almost floats with his family. He watches everyone so intently, but there’s no trace of judgment. I didn’t realize until I met his family during Christmas break our freshman year that such adoration was even possible. They all flew out together to spend the weekend in Chicago before going to Virginia to be with Nonna for the holiday.

They were warm and playful and funny and competitive and totally loyal to each other.

I assumed they were putting on a show. Even my parents could do that. But I saw them too many times in the year and a half after that. Every time I met them, they showed me their love was the rule, not the exception.

Seeing them all together now makes me realize it’s not just Sonny’s immediate family, it’s the whole Luciano crew.

Mothers watch their toddlers with exhausted yet indulgent gazes. Dads coo at babies like they can’t believe such perfection exists. Parents tease their teenage children. They talk and debate and laugh together.

Love is *everywhere*.

And Nonna looks over the pavilion with a look of satisfaction on her beautiful lined face.

And all I can think is ... *how?*

She’s so flinty. She’s hard and fiery, and I bet she could even be explosive if pushed.

How did she create all of this?

And if she could ... can I?

* * *

As dinner winds down, one of Sonny's nephews—Felix—jumps on his chair and knocks his plate to the ground, and I freeze.

Anthony and his wife, Amber, share a tired look, and Anthony exhales forcibly.

I break out into a cold sweat seeing Anthony's visible frustration.

I brace myself for a wave of cold fury. A memory flashes in my mind of a five-year-old Parker. My family was at a fancy party celebrating some achievement of my father's, and I was too hungry to keep waiting while they gave my father his award, so I stood on my chair and reached for the breadbasket. But I was so tiny and off kilter that I tipped forward and fell on my table setting, causing a clank loud enough to draw attention from everyone in the room. My father was on stage, but his eyes flashed to my mother's, and the next thing I knew, my mother was escorting me from the room.

She was all smiles and sweetness as we walked through the banquet hall.

Her smile dropped the moment we reached the hallway. "What is wrong with you? You're not a baby! You are five years old, and I expect you to act like it," she hissed. Then she marched me out into the cold. "You humiliated us."

When we got to the car, she didn't even put me in herself. She knocked on the window to alert the driver, and then she spun on her heel. I watched her walk back into the swanky building with a pit in my chest as I waited for the driver to open the door so I could climb into my booster seat.

I sat in the car with our driver for the rest of the evening.

I was five.

Just like Felix.

A hiccup of fear has me rushing over to the table while Anthony stands and pulls his son off the table.

“Felix, come on,” Anthony says, running a hand over his face. “You know we don’t climb on tables.”

Amber hops up to help, putting a hand on her husband’s shoulder. But I wave them away with a hand shaking so hard, it rattles my teeth.

“It’s okay,” I say. “I got this, guys. Please don’t worry for a second.”

My tone must be too urgent, because when I look up, Sonny’s sister-in-law is giving me a quizzical look. “Parker, we know it’s not a big deal. He’s only five. We’ll keep reminding him about table manners and have him help clean up the mess, but if we lost it every time he acted his age, well ...”

And then she laughs.

She laughs.

I nod, too choked to speak. Even if I could, I’m incapable of processing what she said.

He’s only five.

The words slam around my head, crashing into my mother’s words.

You are five years old, and I expect you to act like it.

“Here.” Sonny’s voice pulls me from the mental war of words happening in my brain. I give myself a shake and focus on the garbage pail that has appeared in front of me, dropping pieces of the broken plate in the trash. I’m shivering, but it can’t be from emotion. It has to be the cold.

It *has* to be.

“You didn’t need to do that,” I say too softly for the noisy pavilion. But he hears me anyway.

“I wanted to.”

I look up and my gaze is instantly locked to his. His aqua eyes are so intent, so knowing. Yet, he can't know what's going on in my head, not really. I never told him about my parents' expectations. A few stories here and there, a few remarks of disbelief when he would share nonsense like his dad encouraging him and his siblings to get dirty or his mom jumping on the trampoline with them.

So when I look away, why can I see him from the corner of my eye watching me while I watch them? He can't know how badly it's rocking my world to see Anthony and Amber patiently helping Felix clean the table, can he?

"I'll go grab a broom for the rest," I say, but Sonny smiles at someone past me. I turn to find his mom standing with a broom and dustpan.

Lisa starts sweeping the rest of the mess, and I reach for the broom.

"I'll take care of this," I say to Lisa, not wanting to meet Sonny's eye. "You guys should enjoy your night."

Lisa clasps my shaking hand, and the wideness of her eyes is too intuitive. I want to look away, but like her son, her bright eyes have too much power over me. "Sweetie, family helps. That's what we do." She looks at Sonny. "Get Felix more mac n cheese, and let's see if the kitchen has some plasticware for the kids. Parker, I'm sorry to be wasteful, but we can be a rowdy bunch." She smiles. She's not mad or embarrassed. She's *smiling*. "Do you mind if we kid-proof meals a bit?"

"Of course not," I say, kicking myself. "I should have thought of it earlier."

From behind me, Sonny puts his hand on my shoulder. Even through my coat, I can feel the heat from him. "No you shouldn't have. You don't have nieces and nephews, you're not a professional babysitter, and you don't throw reunions for a living. You had no reason to think about paper plates."

My mom's voice hisses over his. *What is wrong with you?*

I blink the memory away to see Lisa, Anthony, and Amber all nod. “He’s right, sweetie.” Lisa smiles at me. “Now why don’t you go wash your hands while we finish?”

“I really—”

“You really need to listen to the customer.” Lisa says this with such a teasing voice, and I want so badly to impress her. I nod and start for the kitchen.

With a quick glance behind me, I see Anthony talking to his son, brushing his hair in a “you rascal” kind of way ...

And then he kisses his head.

He’s only five.

“What’s going on in that busy head of yours?” Sonny asks, following me to the kitchen.

“They were so patient.”

“I’m pretty sure I saw steam coming from Anthony’s ears. Felix is cute, but he is a menace. Anthony’s lost about what to do.”

“*That* was Anthony lost?”

“Amber’s a good influence on him, but yeah. He’s working on his temper.”

A strangled laugh escapes me. Sonny’s trying to explain his brother’s frustration like it needs to be excused rather than praised.

“If that’s a temper, sign me up.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



SONNY

In the kitchen, Parker washes and dries her hands while I start rummaging through the metal cabinets. We find disposable plates and utensils. We take a few stacks of everything and start back for the pavilion.

“Thomas and Evelyn Emerson have tempers?” It’s bold of me to ask, at all, considering PJ so rarely talked about her parents. But the little she did say spoke volumes.

“Not tempers, per se, because they view emotion as coarse and vulgar. More like laser-focused icy rage.”

I stumble on a tree root, but I catch myself before I can fall. I wince in pain, but it’s not for my knee.

It’s for PJ.

“Are you hurt?” she asks quickly.

“My knee’s fine,” I say, even though it’s not quite true. “I was surprised. I’ve never heard you talk about your parents so openly.”

“You can blame the Janes for that. You’ve never seen so many emotional breakthroughs. It’s disgusting.”

My laugh comes out like a huff. “That sounds about right.” I think about how panicked she looked as she cleaned up after Felix. “You looked thrown back there with Felix. Were you ... are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “I’ll have to get back to you.”

I’m torn between wanting to push her to open up more and wanting to distract her from the pain she’s clearly experiencing. I don’t know what to say or do anymore.

“Okay,” I say.

And she looks at me with wide eyes.

“Okay?” she asks. She looks almost disbelieving.

“Yeah. If that’s okay?”

She laughs. “Yeah. That’s okay.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” she says.

“I don’t have a clue what’s going on right now.”

She laughs again but she doesn’t say anything else.

All we said was okay.

Why does it feel bigger than that?

I look around the dark woods. “I can’t believe you’re out here in the wilderness. Are you staying on site or back at your place?”

“No, I’m staying here.”

“Here? Parker Jane Emerson is camping?”

“Ha! Not even in a zombie apocalypse would I sleep in a tent on the ground. If it comes to life or death, I would rather die.”

“But how do you really feel?” I ask, and she laughs again.

Oh, I love making this woman laugh. I love knowing that even when she's carrying a burden around, *I* gave her relief from it. It's the most powerful addiction in the world.

"I'm staying in one of the cottages."

"That makes more sense."

We get back to the pavilion and put the plates and plasticware down. Anthony's kids, Felix and Max, have grabbed all the dirty utensils and are laying them end-to-end around the table. Anthony and Amber give each other an exhausted look, while my parents pat their backs and laugh.

"Man, you guys are cool," PJ says. "I've never seen so many happy people."

"It's hard not to be happy when you know you're loved," I say.

"I bet," she whispers, watching Felix and Max's utensil barrier grow.

I always knew her childhood was messed up. I knew from our third date when she was so thrown to find out my parents and I said we love each other. I felt sick even considering a world where that wasn't a constant.

I picked up on how rigid and inflexible her parents were fast, but seeing PJ's reaction tonight makes me think it's worse than I ever imagined.

"Oh, Thomas and Evelyn Emerson," I say, trying not to spit fire.

"Tell me how you really feel," she says sarcastically.

But I take her at her word. "Okay, I'm disgusted. I'm outraged on your behalf. You're an only child of parents who resented you for *being* a child. They robbed you of everything that matters most. You should have grown up knowing how special you are, knowing how brilliant and talented and kind you are. But you should have *especially* known you were loved. They should have told you they loved you so much and so often that you could have blown your house up and you

wouldn't have doubted their love for a *second*. I hate them for robbing you of that. I *hate* them."

"Whoa," she says, her eyes welling with tears. And it's like my words have sent cracks through her walls. I see different emotions peek through each of those cracks in almost imperceptible expressions across her face. The tug of her lips says embarrassment, but the lift of her brows says gratitude. I spot flattery or pride, maybe, in the softening around her eyes.

But then she slams her eyes closed, and each of those expressions gets ironed smooth. I lean back against the table with a noisy exhale.

"I've wanted to say that for a long time, sorry."

She folds her arms around herself. It's chilly out, but I'm too incensed to feel it.

"It's all right," she says.

"You're not mad at me for talking about your parents?"

Someone at Anthony's table tries to step over Felix and Max's "wall," and Felix throws a spoon at him. Anthony scoops Felix up, shaking his head.

Then he takes Felix into a corner of the pavilion and sits with him.

Parker stares at them in obvious disbelief.

"I don't know," she says. "I'll have to get back to you on that one, too."

"Parker Jane, you keep this up, and I'm going to think I don't know you at all anymore."

"Stop it," she bumps me with her hip playfully, and it's another thing I don't recognize. She *never* bumped me with her hip when we talked about her parents. Although, I guess I never really talked about them with her. When she brought them up, the heaviness was so oppressive, all I wanted to do was lighten it. I still want to lighten it. More than anything, I want to cast that burden away. Permanently.

"Some of us have grown," she continues.

“Thank you for noticing,” I say.

“Oh, right. Says the only adult who entered the kids’ hula hoop contest tonight.”

“But you specifically included ‘grandkids’ on your list, and I stopped hula hooping as soon as I beat Noah. Back in the day, I would’ve kept going for another five minutes just so everyone knew I could.”

“I could have beat you,” she says.

“But you didn’t.”

“Only because this isn’t *my* family reunion.”

“It could be.”

She rolls her eyes, but she’s not mad. “You are incorrigible.”

“You love it.”

We both lean toward each other, and I feel like fireworks are going off in my chest. It’s so frenzied, so wild, my breathing speeds up. There are no barriers to us getting back together. She broke up with me so she wouldn’t get in the way of me playing football. I play football.

Ergo, we can and should get back together. Tonight.

Now.

I can tell she’s feeling the same almost cosmic pull I am, but when one of the tables explodes in laughter, the distraction knocks us from each other’s orbit. PJ inhales loudly, punctuating the end of the moment.

“I should probably go get the game ready.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” I say. “I don’t think we’re doing the games.”

“What do you mean?” she asks, sounding almost alarmed. “Emma told me you guys would want to have a game night.”

“Oh, we do. But we’re not talking a chess tournament.”

“Come on. Do you honestly think I’d organize a chess tournament for a family reunion with a six-month-old

present?”

“That’s fair. But Emma should have warned you. There won’t be any Connect 4 or Settlers of Catan, either. That’s not the sort of ‘game night’ we do.”

Her gaze sharpens. “You have seventeen kids here, and a half dozen of them are under the age of ten. But you also have grownups who like to play hard. So I planned a life-size game of Hungry Hungry Hippos.”

“How does that work?”

“We rigged furniture dollies for someone to lie down on and hold a basket for catching balls—the hippo. A second person controls the hippo by holding their legs and pushing and pulling them to catch balls in their upturned basket. I’ve broken the family up into four teams and have different rounds to ensure it’s fair but competitive.”

She says this almost smugly, and she’s right to. “Wow. I’m impressed, PJ. That’s exactly the sort of thing my family would like.”

“See? So I need to get it set up.”

I grimace. “But it’s still not happening. Not tonight, at any rate.”

She looks like she’s praying for strength. “You just said your family would like it. Emma and Elaine both approved the itinerary. Why isn’t it happening?”

I run a hand over my short hair. “I don’t know what to tell you. It’s a killer idea. All your ideas are.”

“So what’s the problem? It’s me, right? I can’t possibly tap into the Luciano spirit?”

“No! It’s not that,” I say. I exhale loudly, and then I realize that my knee is throbbing. We’ve stood this whole time, and I’m supposed to be icing this thing every four hours and I haven’t done it once today. “Your Hungry Hungry Hippos idea is textbook us, but Sienna’s really competitive, and I made a crack earlier about a game of capture the flag we played a few years ago. So we’re organizing a rematch.”

“You told them to ignore my itinerary?”

“No, I mentioned capture the flag!”

Her mouth falls open. “You incepted them.”

“What?”

“Like the movie *Inception*. You put the idea in their head knowing they’d want to play because *you* want to play. You’re masterminding without lifting a finger.”

“I’ll lift *two* fingers when I capture their flag.”

She ignores the crack. She looks hurt, and that makes *me* hurt. “Sonny, why? Why can’t my plan be good enough?”

“It’s not that it’s not good enough! It’s . . .,” I gesture to my sister. “This is hard for Sienna.”

“So?”

I hold out my hands, wishing they could explain for me. “I want her to be happy.”

“And she can’t be happy playing Hungry Hungry Hippos?”

I glance at my sister, who’s animatedly scheming with her husband. She loves being with our family as much as anyone, but being here is a reminder of what they *don’t* have. All she wants is to be a mom. She and Chris were made to be parents. And her body won’t let her.

“I don’t get why you would do this,” PJ says.

It’s not like I can tell her about Sienna, can I? Yes, I want her back in my life, but she isn’t actually back in my life, and it was a break of her own making. “It doesn’t hurt anything for us to play Capture the Flag. It’s just a game.”

She folds her arms tightly in front of her chest. “I’ve heard that one before.”

“This again,” I whisper, but she can’t hear me over my raucous family.

The last semester of our sophomore year, I was walking PJ to class after lunch when I caught a Frisbee. I sort of turned

that into a whole disc golf league. Near the end of the semester, she started complaining about it, but that didn't stop her from missing or being late for class occasionally to play. Of course, I encouraged her more than not ...

"Listen," I say, wanting to give her *something*. "Maybe I shouldn't have brought up Capture the Flag, but I was trying to distract Sienna, and then Anthony and Cousin Eli overheard, and they started talking about how their team got robbed, and Sienna got so into the conversation that I wanted to keep it going. Then some of the teens heard, and they were too young to play last time, and now everyone wants in on it."

She looks past me to my family, and my gaze follows hers. Noah, Cousin Emma's kid, is mobilizing the teens, and the excitement is palpable. Even one of the younger kids, Harry, is watching with excitement. How can she not appreciate all of this joy?

"What about the kids?" she asks. "There's no way they can play."

My gaze moves from the excited teens to the sullen little kids. I scratch my neck. "Yeah. That's true."

"And what about their parents? They're going to have to pick and choose who puts kids to bed and who gets to play."

"They'd have to do that if we were staying up late to play cards," I point out.

"But this is happening *now*. You proposed a game that will take hours over one that could include everyone for a single hour *and* allow everyone to spend time together."

I look at Amber, who's wrangling Max while Anthony draws up plans with one of our cousins. "I didn't think about it like that."

"Exactly the problem," PJ says.

"That's not fair," I say, although now that I think of it, it does feel like I'm trading Sienna's happiness for some of the others. "I can't make *everyone* happy."

"It isn't your job to make other people happy, Sonny."

“I can try.”

She squeezes her temples. “You know what? I’m making this about me, and *that’s* not fair. This is your family. You should do whatever you want to do.”

I feel my eyebrows pull together before I can stop them. She isn’t making this about her. If anything, she’s making me wonder if I somehow made this night about *me*. Seeing Sienna in pain causes me so much pain, I feel sick to my stomach. I hate seeing my sister hurting. She might be older than me, but every protective instinct in my body flares to life when I see her upset.

And those same instincts are flaring to life seeing PJ upset now.

Sienna will understand if we push it back a couple of hours. Won’t she?

I don’t know how to make them both happy.

But I have to try.

CHAPTER TWELVE



PARKER

“Guys,” Sonny yells to his family. “Parker organized a life-sized Hungry Hungry Hippos game. It sounds awesome. Let’s do Capture the Flag later.”

A few faces look over, and Amber and Lauren both nod excitedly, but most of the family ignores me.

“You’re just afraid you’ll lose,” one of his cousins says.

“I think the Hungry Hungry Hippos game sounds fun!” his aunt says.

“No way,” Noah says, pointing his thumb down. A boy of about eight looks at Noah with star-eyes and does the same movement. Noah has such a magnetic Sonny vibe that it almost gives me déjà-vu.

And suddenly, people start disagreeing with each other. Husbands and wives are pointing to their children, little kids are tugging on their grandparents’ coat sleeves, siblings are arguing.

They’re arguing about whether to follow Sonny’s plan or mine.

A feeling of horror crawls up my throat.

“The game won’t be ready tonight,” I call out quickly. “But I’ll make sure it’s ready tomorrow if you want to try it!”

Sonny looks at me with wide eyes. “What are you doing?”

“They’re fighting! I can’t stand the thought of breaking your family to satisfy my stupid itinerary,” I say. The handful of people who were excited about my game shrug and turn back to the group.

Thank goodness.

“And I can’t stand the thought of you hurting over *my* stupid game. I know how hard you worked to make this week perfect. But you have to understand something: this week will be perfect no matter what. Because we’re together.”

Does he mean us? Or him and his family? Why does either possibility make my throat ache so badly?

“It’s not a big deal. It’s an itinerary.”

“It’s more than that,” he insists.

He keeps throwing me, keeps picking up on things in a way that’s new to me. He’s even talking about some of these things instead of making a joke to lighten the mood. Not that there’s not a time and place for that, but it was his default. The second I wouldn’t open up about something, he turned to joking and lightheartedness. It was nice because it let me off the hook.

But it also wasn’t enough. It would kill Sonny to find this out, but it made me feel like I needed to handle my emotions on his terms. Sometimes it wasn’t a problem. Sometimes it even helped to defer those big feelings so I could process them later.

Sometimes it led to me putting up a wall and shutting him out for days, because the emotions were coming whether I liked it or not, and I was terrified to let him see them.

It wasn’t healthy, is what I’m saying.

I have no idea what would be helpful or healthy now.

“Do whatever you want with the itinerary,” I say. “Use it. Toss it out. Whatever.”

Sonny nudges my shoulder playfully. “Come on. It’s not like we’re going to throw it out. We’ll just ... improve it a bit.”

“Excuse me?” I run my hand over my ponytail. “No. My ideas aren’t improved. My itinerary is *perfect*, even if you guys can’t see it.”

Sonny’s smile widens.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what? I’m smiling.”

“Why are you smiling?”

“Because we have a real Gift of the Magi thing going on.”

“What?”

“You know that old timey story about the man who sold his heirloom watch to buy a set of fancy combs for his wife and she cut and sold her gorgeous hair to buy a chain for his watch?”

“That’s stupid. Why would they do that?”

“Why would you tell my family not to play your game?”

“Why would you tell *your* family not to play *yours*?”

He holds out his hands. “Gift of the Magi.”

I groan.

“PJ, your itinerary is perfect. I’m not going to get in the way of it. I’ll follow it like it’s my job.”

“You?”

“Don’t act so surprised,” he says, his smile stretching far enough to show all of his teeth. “I follow a playbook for a living.”

A retort jumps to and dies on my tongue, because he’s not wrong. But there’s a difference between doing something for a paycheck and doing something because you thrive on it. You can’t thrive without order. The force of Sonny’s gravity was so

strong that he pulled me into his orbit once, but it was chaos. I couldn't focus, couldn't control myself, didn't know how to choose what I wanted without hurting him, or vice versa.

I look into Sonny's light blue-green eyes and brace myself. It would be so easy to let him pull me in. To let the magic of Sonny and the Lucianos sweep me away. But I would be Dorothy getting swept into Oz, reveling in sights and sounds that are fleeting. They don't belong to my world and I don't belong to theirs. Then, after the next four days are over, Oz would leave *me*. The whole kingdom would pack up and vanish, and I'd be left in a desolate world, unable to enjoy Oz and unable to ever truly return to Kansas.

At some point, Sonny's family flipped around tables, and the room is divided into two groups. Each group sits at their own "war room" table and steals furtive glances at the other group to make sure no one's listening. Sonny's siblings and cousins are drawing with crayons on the big kraft paper tablecloths I arranged to occupy the kids. Virtually every person at every table colored something or played hangman or some other game, thank you very much. But now, they're drawing up plans.

"How does the youngest grandson of a family this size have so much power?" I ask.

Sonny's smile is bittersweet. "You're never going to see me differently, are you?"

"Differently than what?"

"Than the guy who once intercepted a Frisbee on the quad and created a campus disc golf league on the spot."

"No. I won't."

He rubs the back of his head. "It was one time."

"It was a *hundred* times."

"No, it wasn't."

"Sonny."

"Fine. Maybe it was a hundred times. But why does it bother you so much? It didn't hurt anybody."

It hurt me! I want to yell.

But he doesn't know.

He doesn't know I was late for class and missed an exam that my hard-nosed professor wouldn't let me retake (man, I *hated* that professor). He doesn't know that every time we left lunch and he got distracted that last semester of our sophomore year, I ended up late for that stupid class or missed a quiz. He doesn't know about the C minus I got and how I lost my full-ride scholarship because of it. He doesn't know my parents flipped, took my car away, and threatened to cut me off entirely if I didn't "turn things around."

He has no clue that I didn't know how to tell him no. I was so hot or cold when we dated, so all or nothing. I would make these blanket plans and schedules, insisting that I needed to study at certain times, and I would stick to it perfectly.

Until he wheedled his way past my walls.

And I would *love* the freedom. I would *love* the games and the fun and the feeling of abandoning responsibility!

The piper always had to be paid, though. I'd get home after a late night and cram without a minute of sleep. I'd study for a class during another class, weighing which lectures and assignments were more important than others. I was that guy on YouTube spinning a dozen different plates, trying to keep them all up, and Sonny didn't know most of those plates were even there.

I didn't know how to set a boundary with him. All I knew was how to put up walls.

Sometimes I flirted with resenting him over it.

But mostly, I resented myself.

I was so stupid. What kind of lovesick idiot can't tell her boyfriend she needs to go to class? What kind of clown can't insist that her schedule is important to her?

The kind that was raised by Thomas and Evelyn Emerson. The kind that was shown every day that love had to be earned.

Back then, I was sure Sonny would break up with me the second he saw that I wasn't who he wanted me to be.

I can't blame him for not knowing.

But I also can't open myself back up to being that person again. I was only too happy to have his attention and concern and love. I was only too happy to be consumed by him.

"Maybe you both did the best you could then. But you know how to do better now, so do it. In the meantime, give yourself some grace." Linda's words from this morning come back to me.

Was that really only this morning?

I do know how to do better now. With two perennially disappointed exceptions, I can even establish a boundary without having a panic attack.

I don't want Sonny to be a third.

"You should go have fun with your family," I say. "That flag isn't going to capture itself."

He squeezes my elbow before limping toward his family. He settles at Sienna's table and calls out to his brothers, "You guys really want a repeat of the Summer of Pain?"

Anthony, Emma and her twin, Eli, and a few others whip around. "You wanna put some money on this?" Anthony asks. Anthony's wife groans.

"You must really hate money," Sienna says with a laugh. "Sonny and I are unbeatable."

"And Chris," Chris, Sienna's husband, adds.

"Right, babe." Sienna pecks his cheek.

"He's not putting money on this," Amber insists. The Lucianos start getting louder and louder, and Sonny's sisters-in-law roll their eyes harder and harder.

Amber comes over to join me.

"I'm sorry in advance for how your schedule will be tossed out." Am I imagining it, or does Amber sound weary?

A moment later, Gabe's wife, Lauren, joins us. Lauren puts her hands on her barely pregnant belly and sighs. "Here we go," she says to Amber.

"Don't I know it?" Amber says.

Curiosity grips me. I keep my voice as light as I can. "I'm guessing this isn't the first time there's been a change of plans at a family function?"

Amber's look is flatter than a pancake. "Come on, Parker. You dated Sonny for long enough to know the ropes."

I blink in surprise. I met Anthony and Amber a few times while Sonny and I were dating. They flew out to Chicago for his games sometimes, and by our sophomore year, Sonny arranged for me to sit with them. And I made sure the rest of the Janes sat with us, too, because I didn't want anyone to think we were so serious that I was sitting with his brother and sister-in-law.

I don't know why I figured Amber had forgotten, but her remembering makes my insides both warm and wiggly at the same time.

Lauren nods in agreement. She and Gabe started dating after we'd already broken up, but it appears the collective memory is strong. I don't know whether to be flattered or worried.

"I guess I didn't realize that it was a Luciano quirk so much as a Sonny quirk," I say.

"The rest of them do a better job of keeping a lid on it, but when they get together," Amber says, miming an explosion. "Boom."

"What's funny, though, is that Sonny isn't like this all the time," Lauren says.

I give Lauren a look, and she laughs.

"No, I'm serious. He's mellowed a lot since you knew him. But there are so many rules in the NFL and so many things he can't do that it seems like when he's with everybody, he's making up for lost time."

“Yeah, and it doesn’t help that Sienna’s last egg retrieval yielded a big fat nothing,” Amber says.

“What?” I ask, and then I throw a hand over my mouth. “Sorry, none of my business.”

Amber winces. “I probably shouldn’t have said anything. But you know how Sonny is. When it comes to Sienna, there’s nothing he won’t do to cheer her up.”

A split-second after she says this, Sonny jumps up, beats his chest, and yells, “Go team!”

The three of us snort in unison.

Sonny, Sienna, and their team all shout together, and Sienna’s smile is so radiant, so complete, it’s impossible not to feel a surge of affection for the brother who made that possible. I never knew about this protective streak Sonny has for his older sister—we weren’t around Sienna enough for me to ever notice it—but this entire scheme makes a lot more sense now.

And now I feel even worse for making my itinerary so important. I was worried about an hour of fun for everyone. He was worried about his sister’s entire well-being.

As the teams spring up, Amber sighs while Lauren wears an affectionate smile. “Have fun, Gaby!” she says, rhyming the nickname with baby.

Gabe’s handsome face lifts from the plans. “You’re not playing?”

“I’m four months pregnant and Layla already missed her nap today,” she says of her toddler on her father-in-law’s lap. “Besides, your last game of capture the flag lasted longer than a quidditch match. No, I’m not playing.”

Gabe looks like he’s being split in half, as his head drops back down to the game plans but his eyes stay on his wife. “Do you need help with Layla?”

A few of the cousins snort. “That was convincing,” one of them says.

Lauren blows him a kiss. “No, I got this. But have fun. Oh, and if you wake us when you come in, I’ll put icy hot in your boxers. Love you!”

Lauren winks at me as she collects her toddler.

“Anyone else needing their beauty rest?” Sienna yells.

“Suck rocks, See-See!” Lauren calls back.

The teen, Noah, jumps up onto the table like he’s Sonny Jr., and shouts, “Let the games begin!”

The Lucianos scatter, but Sonny stops by me, first. Our conversation lingers on his face in the form of a half smile where a full one should be. “You should play.”

The pull isn’t as strong as it used to be, but it’s still there. “That’s not my speed.”

“You never seemed to have a problem keeping up with me.”

“Oh, I could *destroy* you,” I say with a challenge in my voice I can’t keep out. “I’m an armored tank.”

The other corner of his mouth lifts as he looks me over. “You? No. You’re a Ferrari. A Lamborghini. You’re a precision race car.”

“I notice both of those are Italian.”

Sonny almost grins. “You have no idea how fast you can go because you’ve never let yourself push your own limits.”

“Playing capture the flag is hardly pushing my limits.”

“You know, you are allowed to have a good time here.”

“You know, you’re not the only one whose happiness comes from seeing other people happy.”

He grins so wide, my heart squeezes like he’s holding it in his hands. He’s so bright and brilliant, I almost need to squint to look at him.

“Sonny! Let’s go!” Gabe yells.

Sonny starts to back up, limping as he does. “I dare you.”

“What is this, third grade?”

“Chicken.”

I scoff. “Taunting isn’t going to convince me.”

He raises one eyebrow, and my resolve weakens slightly, because he’s using all sorts of looks on me that are designed to chip away at my defenses.

I wave him away. “Go. I have work to do.”

“Come.”

I laugh. “Go! I mean it!”

“Try not to dream about me, Parker.”

“Try not to fall out of a tree, Santino.”

With one more blinding smile, he turns and disappears out of the pavilion and into the dark night sky.

With the Lucianos gone, I’m in awe of the devastation they left in their wake. Not the mess—they cleaned up after themselves physically.

No, this devastation is emotional.

This entire night has made me feel like my walls are broken beyond repair. They feel more like the walls of Jericho, and Sonny and his family have been stomping around in circles all day.

I run a finger over my earlobe, feeling the second piercing there. I got the piercing right after I broke up with Sonny, at the start of the worst year of my life. I did it as an act of self-determination or control or maybe flat out rebellion. I didn’t even want it, but I knew how much my parents would hate it. I thought they might hate it even more than my C minus.

I assumed I would see them that summer, but they were too disgusted to have me in their presence. I retook that geology class the next semester, got an A, and fixed my GPA, and they consented to see me at Christmas. I wanted to go in with double piercings—maybe even an ear cuff or a fake nose ring—but I couldn’t. I couldn’t do any of it.

I got nervous and chickened out. I took the earring out and kept my hair loose around my shoulders.

“Your hair looks so much prettier down,” my mother said. “Now if you could only learn to smile along with it.”

The inside has closed, but the mark of the piercing remains. I can still feel a lump in my lobe, too, a permanent reminder that some things may scar over, but they never heal completely.

Kind of like Sonny and me.

I’d forgotten all of the reasons we didn’t work because the pain has healed over enough that it’s a memory more than a constant reminder. But if I poke and prod, I can feel the hole. The lump is impossible to ignore if I look for it.

But this isn’t only about Sonny. It’s his whole family. I need a strategy for how I’m going to survive every hour of every day. I need a plan so I’m not constantly disappointed that I spent sixty hours planning the perfect family reunion and Sonny’s family is going rogue.

If it were any other family, I could handle them going off script. Mostly.

But with this family?

Each adjustment will feel like a rejection that cuts to the core. I’m already consumed with a need for them to see me as someone worthy of planning a flipping party. This is only going to get worse.

I think about Sonny, how he was so torn between making Sienna happy and making me happy.

I think about Lauren and Amber and their kids. They all want to participate, too.

I think about Lisa and her pride in me. I think about Nonna’s steel spine and Felix’s wild spirit. I even think about that teen, Noah, and his young acolyte, Harry.

I want them *all* to have the family reunion of their dreams.

Why? Because this is the only time I'm ever going to get with the Luciano family, and the love these people have for each other is stronger and surer than the tide. I don't want anyone to have a second of sorrow or disappointment. I want this to be the event of a lifetime for them, a family reunion they think back on forever.

I want it to be perfect.

A plan starts to take shape in my mind, and the more I think about it, the more excited I get.

But to pull this off, I'm going to need some serious backup.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



SONNY

*I*m exhausted, cold, and my knee aches when Sienna and I finally capture the flag for our team.

But I wouldn't have it any other way.

For years, I've let football take its toll on my body, and I've shut down any sort of extracurricular activities that could put me in situations the league considers "risky." When I first protested at some of the restrictions in my contract, my agent said, "You owe it to the team. They're spending a lot of money on you, money they could spend elsewhere. You're just lucky to be here."

I focused on being grateful, and I buried my frustration.

Then right after I was traded to the Waves, my family announced they were taking a three-day white water rafting excursion to celebrate my Dad's retirement. Sienna had just had her first failed IVF, and the desire to help her take her mind off her disappointment was overwhelming.

The team refused to let me go.

“You signed a contract. You owe it to the fans to be here for them.”

They were smart to bring up the fans. I *love* my fans. If it were just for the team, I may have tried to get around it somehow. But the fans are the best part of the game. When a fan stops me in a restaurant or on the street, it makes my day. Even when they’re angry, I like to know *why* they’re angry. Is it really about losing a game? Or is it about how watching games with their dad was the only thing that ever really brought them together? Does their winning remind them of the happiest times of their childhood?

Of course, sometimes it’s about how much money they lost gambling.

My answer: stop gambling and buy your wife something nice. She deserves it for putting up with you.

But I smile when I say it and I pat their shoulder, and it diffuses everything.

At any rate, I missed the family trip. My family told me to meet up with them each night of their trip, but the idea of missing them all day, missing those memories, hurt. What good could I be to Sienna if *I* were resentful?

Besides, rich and resentful is not a good look. Gabe loves reminding me of that.

A few of the in-laws and nieces and nephews took off halfway through capture the flag to get to bed, but the rest of us follow trails of solar lights or strings of those white twinkle lights back to our tents or tiny houses. The family members with young kids are all staying in a row of cottages a hundred yards in the other direction, as is Parker.

I wonder which one is hers.

By the time I reach my chintzy canvas tent (complete with a full bed, dresser and chair), I’m dead on my feet. Staying up past midnight in the cold won’t help my rehab. Fortunately, Coach isn’t here to lecture me. And besides, I needed the outlet.

I need it even more with PJ here.

Parker. Jane.

That girl has *changed*. And seeing that tonight filled me with both hope and hurt, neither of which I know what to do with.

I thought our breakup was about nothing more than football, but when she hinted at that game—that stupid disc golf game—there was so much weight to her words, I can't shake the feeling there was more to our breakup than I thought.

From our first date, the only future I could envision was one that ended with us pulling a move from *The Notebook* (less the dementia) and dying in a nursing home together at, oh, 107.

Since our breakup, I've never seen a way back to that.

Except, we're here together, and I'm a little less dumb and she's a little more open, and I'm right back to us holding hands in our impractically small bed at 107.

But how?

I need to think about this disc golf thing, figure out what upset her so much. The spontaneity? The fact that I pushed her into it? She was late to that geology class she hated, but she said it was easy and she could ace it in her sleep. She disliked it almost immediately. After only a week, I could tell how much she dreaded it. When I asked her about it, she told me the professor weirded her out.

I'd heard stories of creepy professors hitting on girls before, so I showed up to the lecture hall that first week and sat in the last row. PJ wasn't in the front like she normally was in other classes. In fact, she sat only a few rows from the back. I'm lucky she didn't notice me. The professor was a short, nerdy, middle-aged man with a patronizing vibe, but there wasn't anything particularly weird about him.

There was something familiar, though.

When someone didn't know something, he would almost sneer and turn away, like the question was too stupid to answer. But when someone answered a question—PJ—he

looked at her over his glasses like he was pleasantly surprised, like she'd finally done something to deserve his notice.

I realized then who he reminded me of: her dad.

I met PJ's dad once, and it was one time too many.

The idea of PJ having to face someone who seemed to trigger her drove me insane. I told her to drop the class, but she said she couldn't get a W on her transcript. Her parents would flip.

I did everything I could to distract her from that class. I made sure lunch was the best part of her day so she would go in with a layer of protection, so to speak. And when she seemed to dread it a bit extra, I pushed her to skip class and play in that dumb disc golf league instead.

Did I push too hard? Or was it that my immaturity finally got to her?

I fall asleep with no answers.

* * *

The next morning I fit in a quick body weight workout, ice my knee, and am at the pavilion at eight a.m., when breakfast is due to start.

I can't wait to see PJ.

Part of that is because I can't stop thinking of her, but the other part is because she's not a morning person, and I always loved seeing that scowl of hers when we met for breakfast on campus before class. She's never cuter than when she's glaring at me with sleep in her eyes.

Which is why I'm both surprised and disappointed to see her bright-eyed and handing out new itineraries when I walk into the pavilion. I'm even more shocked to see her in so casual an outfit. She has a beanie on, but her high ponytail has been pulled through a small hole at the top. She's also wearing jeans, a gray Northwestern hoodie, and sneakers.

They're platform sneakers, but they're sneakers, all the same.

“Morning, Sonny,” she says with a fake, light grin on those big lips of hers.

Earning one of PJ’s smiles is better than any Super Bowl ring. This cheap facsimile, on the other hand, is like her throwing down a gauntlet.

Action, reaction.

I’m smiling before I can even stop myself.

“You look a little more prepared for a day in Luciano-land than you looked yesterday.”

Her smile stays firmly in place, but her dark eyes spark a challenge. And man, does that fire look good on her. “You know, I think I am.” She hands me a paper. “Here’s some info about what you can expect today. Let me know if you have any questions.”

I look down.

The front side says “Choose Your Own Adventure” and gives a list of activities on the farm and how long each will take, and she’s included everything from archery to zip line. She has crafts and games galore. Lunch and dinner now have a Grab-and-Go option for anyone looking to play through mealtime.

And to encourage maximum fun, she has a bingo card on the back with twenty-four unique activities. The middle “free play” square isn’t free play at all.

It says, “Learn something new about Nonna.”

And then there’s the incentive.

Whoever gets blackout bingo first wins a special trophy, and it’s one we’ll all fight to the death to win. The plaque reads “Ultimate Luciano” with the year.

Holy moly.

This is ingenious.

She’s added an element of spontaneity to her structure AND an element of control. No one’s going to want to do an activity that isn’t on the bingo card. And no one will ever

throw a family reunion again without this trophy being up for grabs.

She's started a tradition.

She's gamified being a Luciano.

"How did you do this?" I ask in awe.

And it's then that I see a mass of bouncing curls across from Nonna at her table. The woman's cinnamon brown hair has a streak of lavender, the same color as her glasses. "You brought in Ash? Cheater!"

Even though I haven't kept in touch with Ash like I have Millie, I consider her a friend. PJ couldn't have chosen someone better to show her how to be spontaneous. Ash is the only one of the Janes who didn't seem to think everything I did was harebrained. She always caught the vision. And sometimes expanded it.

So, yeah, Parker cheated.

"I didn't cheat." Is that offense I see in the wrinkling around her eyes? It couldn't be, right? She cheated! "I consulted."

"No, you brought in a ringer. A *master*."

"Yeah, well, I needed someone to show me how to keep up with you."

"You've never had a problem keeping up with me." I sound even flirtier than I intended, and I'm not mad about it when I see her neck flush.

"I meant the plural you. You guys. Y'all. The Lucianos." If it weren't for her flushing, I would drop the whole thing. But now I *know* this whole audible she's called means something. It does. And I want to make her squirm until she admits it, either to herself or to me.

"Why?" I ask.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why go through the trouble of recruiting Ash's help? You created a brand new itinerary, made up a bingo card, changed

meals, and special-ordered a custom trophy. All this effort for a last minute family reunion at a place where you don't even work. It must have taken you all night, and I know how much you value sleep. So I repeat: why?"

The pink in her neck spreads all the way to her cheeks, and she stills like a spooked rabbit.

Or maybe like a wolf hunting a rabbit.

"It's my job."

I step closer. Only the table separates us. "No, it's not. You're filling in."

"Yeah, but I'm filling in to help my best friend. The farm is new to events, so Jane and Tripp need the positive publicity."

"Like we're the type to one-star the place." I plant my hands on the table and lean closer. Her dark eyes drill into mine. "I don't buy it."

"Then it's a good thing I'm not selling anything." She leans closer to me, too. Close enough that I can see the tiny freckle on her top lip. I've kissed that freckle more times than I can count.

"Liar."

"Brat."

"Cheat."

She scowls, and all the breath expels from my lungs. *Shoot*. That scowl could launch a thousand ships. My smile stretches from ear to ear.

"What are you smiling at?" she demands. But our faces are still only inches apart. All I'd have to do to kiss her is tip forward. Her body language tells me she wouldn't stop me, either. Not in the least.

I want to close my eyes, want to lean in those last couple of inches, want our lips to meet and see what reaction they cause.

I want it all with her. I always have.

Her eyes start to flutter closed like she can't help herself

...

Because she *can't* help herself.

A memory hits me. We were in a private study room in the library freshman year, studying for finals. It was near the end of our first semester on campus and our first semester dating, and we were still in that “new love” stage, though neither of us had said it yet. We'd been at her apartment, but she made us go to the library because she said she couldn't trust me to focus when we were at her apartment.

But she really meant *her*, and we both knew it.

Anytime I did anything—tickle her hair absentmindedly while I read, bump my knee into hers, steal a glance—she pounced. She would practically jump on me and start kissing, and, as a red-blooded male, I gladly obliged.

Then, just as abruptly as she'd started, she'd throw herself away, sit back down, and glare at me.

“Stop!” she said more than once.

“What?” I laughed. “I'm not doing anything!”

“You're flirting.”

“I'm not flirting. I'm studying. I can stop touching you, if you need.”

“I need. Stop.”

“Yes ma'am.”

Ten minutes later, I leaned back in my chair and stretched, putting my arms back behind my head. I heard her drop her book and pen, and I barely managed to brace myself before she jumped into my lap. I laughed as she kissed my jaw. “What did I do now?”

“It's your lats. You can't just show them off like that.”

“I'm wearing a sweatshirt,” I said, smiling while she ran kisses from my chin up to my ear.

“Then it’s *you*. I can’t control myself when you’re around. You’re ... you’re like catnip.”

“I do love cats.”

“Why can’t I control myself when I’m with you?”

The question wasn’t flirty as much as ... worried.

She may have been worried, but I took it as a compliment. I loved how attracted to me she was. I loved how easily I could get her attention. And when she pushed back or tried to focus on something else, it became a game to see how long she could hold out.

I took advantage of that once.

Maybe I shouldn’t have. Is that what happened our last semester together when I’d get her to miss class?

Whatever happened *then*, the reality *now* is that I could steal a lot of kisses from this woman. I want to—oh, how I want to—but maybe I shouldn’t let myself.

Maybe *I* should show some self-control until Parker Jane is wholly, completely, utterly mine.

A light bulb flickers on in my head.

That’s it.

If I’m going to show her how perfect we are for each other, I can’t slip into the old push and pull. I have to show her I’m not the same guy. I have to show her I’m interested without being pushy.

She puts her finger to her ear and fiddles with her earlobe, and it’s then I see another thing about Parker that’s changed: she has a second piercing in her left ear. But there’s no earring there, even though she wears small gold hoops in her first holes.

She catches me looking at her earlobe, and she drops her hand abruptly.

Don’t push it, I warn myself. *If you want something different with her, then you have to be different.*

I'm not sure I know how to do that. But I know I can't do it at all if I'm focusing on her earlobes or her delicate hands or ... any part of her, really. I lift the itinerary and glance at it one more time. "This is smart, Parker. Thanks for caring so much about my family."

Her spine straightens, and she puts back on that false smile. "Thanks. I hope it works for all of you."

Was there an emphasis on *all*? "What do you mean?"

"Nothing you don't already know."

"Indulge me."

One of my cousins passes the table, and Parker grins as she hands her an itinerary. Where her scowl is distracting, this grin is unsettling.

"Some of your in-laws don't chase the party quite as hard as the rest of the Lucianos do," she says. "I hoped this would strike a good balance."

Ouch. If that's not veiled criticism, I don't know what is. Old Sonny would let that sting for hours and not talk about it. I pride myself on being a peacekeeper, but I don't want to leave things unsaid between us that need to be said. "Let's rewind to the whole 'chase the party' thing. That's how you think of us?"

Her head cocks to the side. "Is it wrong?"

"Who we are at a family reunion every two years isn't who we are in every other moment of our lives."

"Even you?"

"Even me," I say. She bites the inside of her lip, and it's new, so I don't know what it means. *Watch me*, I want to say. *Better yet, join me*, I want to coax. But is that what got us into trouble before?

She blows her lips out, and looks past me for an instant, but she doesn't agree or argue. "You should eat breakfast before the events start. It'd be a shame if you weren't crowned the *Ultimate Luciano*."

“I don’t need a trophy to prove what everyone knows.”

“HA!” Sienna says this from behind me, and I whip around to see my sister and her husband with glinting eyes. “You think you can beat me? Even without your bum knee, I’d own you.”

I shake my head and look back at PJ, who’s smirking after setting me up. “That job already belongs to someone else.”

I raise an eyebrow at the girl of my dreams, and I can practically see her body go up in flames. Proverbially, of course. It’s cold out.

I then head over to the buffet line with Sienna and Chris, but I steal a backwards glance at Parker and catch her blowing air slowly out of her pursed lips.

“You’re sure spending a lot of time talking to PJ. You going for it?” Sienna asks.

“Nope. I’m going to invite, not entice. Time to let her come to me instead.”

“Good luck,” Sienna says. We sit down, and she and Chris shovel food into their mouths like they’re in an eating competition. “I like Parker a lot. But be careful, baby bro. I don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

“Nothing can hurt me unless I let it.”

Chris laughs, and a bit of omelet flies out of his mouth. “That’s one of those things parents say to their kids to convince them not to beat up their brother for saying something mean. Things can hurt you. You can choose if you’ll let it *control* you, I guess. But when you love someone, you give them the power to hurt you. That’s part of the risk, but it’s also what makes the reward so great.”

“Ooh, cheers to that,” Sienna says, holding her fork out to her husband. He bumps it with his, and they share a look of naked adoration. These two have been through the furnace of affliction, and every time they have another failed pregnancy test, it somehow makes them stronger.

“You guys are disgusting,” I say. “You’re my heroes.”

Sienna smiles warmly. We eat quickly, and soon, Chris is taking our dishes to the cart.

“Are you—are you doing okay?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says. “Oh, you mean with being surrounded by babies when my body refuses to do what it should?”

“Yeah, that.”

“Mostly. I love being here, but I wish I had kids running around this place with their cousins. I want it to bad, it hurts.”

“Is it hard with Lauren being pregnant?”

She looks at our glowing sister-in-law. “Eh, not really. I wish I were pregnant, but it’s not like her being pregnant takes away my ability to, you know? It’s like ... pie. We’re not eating from the same tin. Every piece she gets is independent of the pieces I don’t. Her enjoying her pie has nothing to do with mine. Does that make sense?”

“Intellectually, yes. Emotionally, no. You’re a rock, See-See.”

“Yeah, I’m basically the best person you’ve ever known.”

“The humblest, too,” I say.

“Um, obviously. I am *amazing* at humility.”

Chris returns to the table, and he and Sienna review PJ’s new itinerary. They are perfect for each other, but no matter how remarkable their attitude is, this is still hard for them.

I want so badly for them to be happy.

As close as I am to my brothers, See-See and I have always been closer. Moving as much as we did was hard on all of us, but it was hardest on her. I had sports everywhere I went. The guys on the teams never seemed to resent having someone come in and dominate, and I was savvy enough to tone it down at first so I could fit in.

Sienna is brilliant, but she’s ultracompetitive. She couldn’t tamp down her natural dominance—and she shouldn’t have had to in order to make friends—but she also didn’t know how

to be humble or self-deprecating. It's another thing she shouldn't have had to do, but it would have helped her make friends faster. Instead, her dominance and her awareness of it bred resentment more than anything. It took longer for her to fit in everywhere we went, and just when things would get good for her, we'd move.

The one thing that always lifted her was, well, me. If she was having a bad day, I made it my mission to cheer her up. Sometimes it would be a pick-up game of basketball, other times it could be a chocolate chip cookie bake-off. She would reluctantly agree, but soon, she'd forget about whatever stupid thing one of the kids at the American school said as the competition took over.

And every time, that smile on her face was worth it.

Chris and Sienna watch Gabe feeding his toddler at the table next to us. Her giggles as the "choo choo train" reaches her mouth are as exquisitely painful as they are adorable.

Sienna looks like she's been stabbed.

"Well, it's been nice knowing you," I say, standing.

"Where are you off to so early?" she asks.

A few other people stand, and Sienna and Chris look at them and then at their itineraries.

"The games have begun," I say. "I'm going to win that trophy."

They jump up and race me to the first challenge.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



SONNY

“Welcome to axe throwing,” Ash says. She stands with a handsome guy named Rusty who looks like that dude Rachel Bilson’s always flirting with in that show where she moves from Manhattan to the South to go be a doctor. I only know the show because PJ could be Rachel Bilson’s hotter younger sister, so I may have watched a few episodes when I needed a PJ fix.

Okay, fine, I’m lying.

I binged every episode of *Hart of Dixie* the summer after my rookie year because I missed PJ so much. Zoe Hart and Wade Kinsella had enough sparks to power the state of New York.

The point is, the guy Ash is with looks like Wade Kinsella, but without the slightest hint of bad boy vibes.

Which means he’s probably doomed, because the Ash I knew had an unfortunate thing for irredeemable losers. I hope that’s changed.

“The rules of axe throwing can get pretty complicated, so let me tell you how this works.” Ash swings a small hatchet

and rests the handle on her shoulder. “You pick it up and throw it at that target.”

Everyone laughs.

“Any best practices we should know about?” Sienna asks. “One hand? Two?”

Rusty clears his throat. “If you want to try two hands, you can line your thumbs up like you’re golfing. You won’t want to grip it too hard or flick your wrist. Just bring your joined hands back and release right in front of your head, not too high or too low.” Ash rests her elbow on his shoulder and fakes a yawn. He peeks down at her with a slight smile. “If you want to try it one handed, hold your arm out straight, elbow in. It doesn’t require a lot of force. You’ll wanna release once your wrist is in line with your shoulder.”

“All right, party people!” Ash yells. “Let’s get lumberjacked!”

With dozens of hatchets and four targets, we’re able to cycle through everyone quickly. It’s exactly as straightforward as Ash said and as nuanced as Rusty said, at the same time. Sienna has some serious beginner’s luck and hits the second ring from bullseye on the first throw, but her next two throws suck. I hit a bullseye on my third throw, and I keep hitting the rings each time afterward.

I win.

I’m gloating over my family when PJ comes to check on us. She tucks her phone and stylus in her jeans pocket as she approaches. She talks to Ash and Rusty first, smirks about something, and then comes over. But instead of talking to me, she talks to Sienna, Lauren, and Amber. They talk animatedly for a minute, and then I hear Lauren say, “You should try!”

PJ holds up her hands. “I’m just the help.”

“Whatever,” Amber says. “Get in there. You don’t want to be on your deathbed at 104 regretting that you never threw an axe.”

“I’m not sure that’s on the list of deathbed regrets,” PJ says.

“*Not enjoying life* is on the list,” Sienna says. “Get in here. Show us what you got!”

“Let her be, guys,” I say, even though I’d love nothing better than for her to participate. At nineteen and twenty, I loved the challenge of trying to get her to crack. I loved her when it didn’t work just as much as when it did, but the rush I felt when she would play along was better than scoring any touchdown.

But if I’m going to be different this time—if I’m going to stop being so pushy and let her make her own choices—the last thing I need is for my family to do it by proxy.

I keep my eye on her for a moment too long. And then a moment longer. When her eye finds mine, I mouth, “You don’t have to.”

“Come on, PJ,” Sienna says. “Throw the freaking axe.”

I frown at my sister, and when PJ sees it, she looks confused. I rub my forehead, not knowing what in the world I should do. Should I pull my family aside and ask them to leave her alone? Should I—

Thunk.

I drop my hand.

PJ buffs her nails on her puffy coat while my family whoops and hollers.

She’s thrown a perfect bullseye.

Elation and frustration clash inside of me. I *love* when she participates, but she shouldn’t have to just because my family pushed her!

My sisters-in-law and two of my cousins swirl around PJ, folding her into their clique so quickly, I don’t get to say anything to her on the way to the next event. I’m excited—over the moon—until I see her grin and laugh like this is no big deal.

No.

What is she doing?

PJ doesn't grin and laugh and flick her hair in girl gangs. That's what made the Janes so different. They didn't expect that from her. I love my family. I love my in-laws, but they don't know who they're really dealing with. That isn't PJ.

They're pushing her. They're pulling a Sonny and taking advantage of her lack of self-control around us.

What in the world am I supposed to do?

Ash and Rusty stay to help the next group of Lucianos, and I sidle up to my old friend.

"Ashley Jane," I say, holding out my arms.

She gives me a hug, squeezing my shoulders appreciatively before we let go. "When did you get so ripped? I love it! Are your abs still certifiable tummy waffles?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Obviously. You know you're my white whale, Sonny."

"Keep dreaming, Ahab."

She chuckles.

Sophomore year, Ash started an "abs ranking page" for a class, and it went huge. She took pictures of abs, as you'd expect, but the best ones got photo-shopped onto plates, sometimes with pats of butter and syrup over them with the phrase "tummy waffles." Then it became "certifiable tummy waffles."

It was massive.

I never let her take a pic of my abs. I'm proud of what this body can do, but I'm not a gym bro who needs people ogling at me.

But for the record, my tummy waffles are *absolutely* certifiable. (Pun intended.)

Rusty straightens and leans closer to Ash. I'll have to pull him aside later and assure him I pose no threat, because the guy may look like the boy next door, but he also looks like he wants to break my thumbs for touching the woman he loves.

The effort to suppress all that would-be boyfriend energy must be killing him.

“The abs are a job hazard. Nothing more,” I tell her. “But when did your hair become the stuff of influencers’ dreams?” I tug on a curl that stops a couple of inches past her shoulders and pull. And keep pulling. “Holy moly, is this real?” Straightened, the hair is almost to her waist.

“I know. It’s crazy. Since I started the Curly Girl method, it’s like a Pantene commercial up in here.”

I laugh. “So how did PJ rope you into this? Don’t you have a job? When do you sleep?”

“Yuck. Sleep is for wolves of Wall Street. And farmers.” She hitches her thumb toward Rusty with a grimace, and Rusty wraps an arm around her neck, pulling her in for a ...

A noogie.

Rusty *noogies* Ash. She squeals and can’t see the torn look on his face, but boy, is it torn. I can’t read tells like Duke, but I’m pretty good at sensing emotions, and I’m willing to bet Rusty here feels like an idiot for that noogie, but a lucky one, because at least she’s in his arms.

If this guy is going to get out of the friend zone, he’s gotta up his game.

“For your information,” Ash says, holding one finger up and pausing for effect. Rusty’s arm is slung around her neck, and she’s resting her hands on his forearm companionably. “I didn’t have to get roped into anything. Parker asked for advice on the flow of activities, and I thought it sounded fun, so I asked if I could help.”

“Ash, come on. This setup has you written all over it.”

The corner of her mouth jumps knowingly. “Sorry to disappoint. This was all Parker.”

It’s exactly what I was hoping to hear, but after seeing her fold herself into the Luciano Ladies club, I don’t know up from down anymore. “So you’re here just out of boredom?”

“Think of it more as moral support.”

“And what does PJ need moral support for, pray tell?” She doesn’t answer, and I can’t read her stony expression. Dang it! “Don’t you have any other work you need to get done?”

“Rusty and I are working on a proposal for Jane & Co. to revitalize the town, so yeah, we’ll do some brainstorming while we’re here. But he *works* here, so this is a pretty efficient use of my time.”

More cousins are coming over from their last activity, and they’re getting restless to compete. “What’s she playing at?”

“Who?” Ash makes a show of blinking her big eyes innocently.

“Freaking Jane code,” I mutter.

Ash winks. “You know us better than anyone, Sonny.”

“I used to think so.”

“You still do. She’s not the same girl you knew, but she has the same heart. You’ll see.”

Rusty tugs on Ash, and she spins around so they can help the next group.

And I follow my family.

* * *

I catch up to them during archery. Somehow, in spite of being “the help,” my family has roped PJ into joining in with us. My parents are here, too, and they’re surrounding her along with the rest of them.

My parents have always been crazy about PJ. Unfortunately, they have the subtlety of a sledgehammer. The pressure to join in just keeps mounting, no matter how many times I slash my hand across the throat or beg them to give her a break.

“I’m sure PJ has more important things to do, seeing as she’s running this whole event,” I say.

Her eyebrows tug down when I say this. Why are her eyebrows tugging down? Does she want to join in or run? GAH!

“No, it’s okay,” she says. “I’ll check in with everyone at lunch.”

“There is no set lunch time, remember?” I tell her. I’m literally handing this girl out after out!

She pulls her shoulders back, standing up straighter and smiling bigger. “No problem. I’ll make the rounds after this.”

Mom squeezes PJ’s shoulder. “Hon, you don’t have to stay if you have other things you need to do. You’ve already gone above and beyond.”

“It’s okay.” PJ’s Cheshire grin slips into something faint but real. “I don’t mind.”

Mom holds her gaze and shoulder for a beat longer. “Thank you for doing all of this for us. It’s only been a day, and it’s already been wonderful. I still can’t believe you found those old candies.”

Candies?

PJ drops her face with a nod. “My pleasure, Mrs. Luciano.”

“It’s Lisa, hon.” Mom brings her other hand up so they’re both resting on Parker’s shoulders. The PJ I used to know would shake the affection off. She’d find some excuse to break away, because big emotions scare the living daylights out of her. She both loved and hated my parents being around, because they’re concerned and affectionate and give their love freely, and PJ’s parents didn’t give it at all.

PJ won’t meet Mom’s eye, but she keeps nodding. I’d bet dollars to donuts that she’s trying not to cry. And when Mom pulls her into a hug, I suspect Mom knows exactly what she’s doing.

I wonder if she knows what she’s doing *to me*.

“Are you crying?” Gabe says, punching my shoulder.

PJ pulls out of Mom’s embrace, no doubt spooked by my dumb brother, even if he was talking to me. She gives Mom a tight smile and then fixes back on that mask. That shiny, happy

mask that's beginning to make *me* feel like a storm cloud on a sunny day.

What is she doing? And *why*?

I look at Gabe. "Just thinking about how great that trophy is gonna look alongside all my other trophies," I say, wiping a fake tear from my eyes. "It's beautiful, man."

"I hate you."

"In the immortal words of Taylor Swift—"

"Don't."

"Haters gonna hate—"

"Stop it."

"—hate, hate—"

"You're embarrassing yourself."

"—hate, hate. I'm just gonna—"

"Your girlfriend is beating you at archery."

I stop. "What? We haven't even started yet." I spin toward the target.

"I notice you didn't deny that she's your girlfriend."

And I don't deny it. Because I'm too busy gaping at PJ. She didn't shoot a bullseye, but it was pretty dang close. And Sienna, Lauren, and Amber are all high fiving her.

"Was she always this good at everything?" Gabe asks.

"Yes. Everything."

"Is she a secret ninja? A spy, maybe?"

"No. She was a killer gymnast, though."

"How killer?"

"She could have competed for a division two school easily. Maybe even D1."

"Shoot. That's cool."

“It really is. I showed her my standing backflip to show off on our second date, and she one-upped me by doing a round off back handspring back tuck. It was ...” crazy hot is what it was. “It was about the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“She showed you up? I knew I liked her.”

I punch his shoulder.

Mom claps for Parker when she sinks the next two arrows right next to the first one. Holy moly, she’s good.

Everyone lines up to shoot. Like with the axe throwing, there are plenty of bows, arrows, and targets to go around. A few people hit the target, but it’s quickly clear that Parker made it look easy.

In fairness, so do I.

“Whoa!” my cousin, Daniel, says. “Are you moonlighting as Robin Hood?”

Daniel’s wife died shortly after giving birth to their son, Harry. Nine-year-old Harry is standing in the kid line with my nieces and oldest nephew, waiting to shoot. The equivalent of a camp counselor hovers over the kids to help them with the suction cup arrows while another plays with my youngest nephew, Max.

Suction cup arrows? Helpers for the kids?

Parker really did think of everything.

I admire my grouping. One arrow in the gold, two in the red ring just outside of it. “What can I say? I’m good at stuff.” I tell Daniel, tossing him the bow. “Did you see that, PJ?” I’m not sure what possesses me to taunt her, and I immediately want to take it back, because that’s who I’m *not* supposed to be!

She’s back in line, standing behind my dad. My mom is right behind her, talking PJ’s ear off. “Wow. Nice job!” she says brightly.

Brightly.

A cold wind blows, and a collective shiver sweeps over the family. All except for me. PJ's quirked eyebrow has me boiling inside.

Sienna laughs softly.

"Shake it off, Tay Tay." Gabe says in my ear.

Daniel shoots after me, and he sinks his arrows into the red and blue rings. Not quite as good as PJ or I did, but not bad at all. He gets back in line behind me and says, "What's the deal with Parker?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is she single?"

My boiling insides freeze over. I open my mouth to tell him no in the loudest and clearest of ways when I stop myself. I can't tell him no, mostly because I don't know the answer.

I can call dibs, though.

"She's my ex."

"I heard."

I turn back to look at Daniel. I've never thought of him as a romantic rival, but he's a good-looking guy. He looks like the pictures I've seen of our grandpa—tall, strong jaw, dark eyes. No dad bod in sight. He does well for himself, according to Nonna, who loves to brag about other grandkids when she's talking to you, just to keep you in your place. You should hear her talk about the twins. They were part of some massive tech start-up that got bought out, and they gave Nonna a house and car when their payday came in. To hear Nonna tell it, Emma and Eli's net worth makes mine look paltry. We all know she does it because she's proud of us, but we also know she doesn't mind trying to keep us humble.

If Nonna is to be believed, Daniel is a catch. And the dude better stay away from my girl.

"You would date my ex?"

"Why, do you have a problem with it?"

"Are you messing with me? Yes, I have a problem with it."

“But would *she*?”

I want to punch his face a bit, but I look at PJ, at her over the top cheer. My PJ would eat Daniel for breakfast. This isn't PJ, though. It's ... Parker. She's a total mystery.

Doubt grips me.

I take a long look at her as she cheers for Lauren. In her casual sweatshirt and jeans, bouncing on the soles of her platform sneakers and throwing her hands in the air like she would after I'd scored a touchdown, she looks so much like the girl I fell in love with.

But with that wide smile that doesn't touch her eyes, I barely recognize her.

“I have no idea.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



PARKER

I am spent.

I slept a total of zero seconds last night putting together this new itinerary, and then when I tried to take a catnap at five a.m. after I finished, my restless legs kicked in. Thank heavens for de-puffing facemasks, caffeine, and fake lashes, because nothing else could make me look as energized as I need to be today.

All I want is for Sonny and his family to be happy, and as much as I don't want to impose on his family time, being with them when they're so warm and welcoming is genuinely a dream come true.

If not for Sonny.

This morning, he seemed so happy to see me, but since then, it's like he hasn't wanted me encroaching on his territory. Every time his family asks me to stay, he practically pleads with them to stop.

Is this residual pain from our breakup? Or does he really not want me around anymore?

I love competing and playing with his family. I love competing and playing with *him*. Every once in a while, he'll taunt or tease me, and it's so exciting, I get almost dizzy. But then he stops himself, reels it back in, and seems like he's trying to push me to be anywhere but here.

All I can do is fake smile.

It's fake smile or freeze at the rejection, and I can't let his family see me freeze. Because when I freeze, panic attacks follow, and that's a Parker *no one* can handle.

We're at a ropes course, and never have I wanted to avoid something more than I want to avoid this.

I am deathly afraid of heights. I hate them. I don't care if it's ten feet or a hundred feet. If it's not solid ground, I want nothing to do with it.

But Sienna and Chris are so excited, and Amber is already ahead of me, and Lauren is cheering me on from where she's sitting with Sonny's mom, and everyone has seemed so impressed by everything I've done so far, and I don't want to let anyone down.

When I step into the harness, my whole body is shaking.

"You okay?" George, the ropes course instructor asks.

"Mild fear of heights," I say.

"You got this," Sienna says. "Ropes courses are insanely safe. Right, George?"

He nods. "Yup. And I have fifteen years of experience. You couldn't be safer," he says.

"See?"

I smile my fakest smile yet. And that's when Sonny climbs up the platform.

He looks like he's seething. I haven't seen him this angry in ... ever. "You can't do a ropes course on that knee," I tell him instantly.

"And you shouldn't be doing this at all."

“What?” Sienna asks. “Slow your roll, bro. She’s her own person. This isn’t about the trophy, is it?”

He gives Sienna a look that’s almost scathing. As scathing as he can get, anyway. “Of course it’s not about the trophy. It’s about the fact that everyone here keeps pushing Parker into doing things she doesn’t want to do.”

Parker?

Sonny *never* calls me Parker. I didn’t realize how much pain hearing my own name could cause me.

I thought we were getting to a comfortable place together. I thought we were getting along. Was he *lying*? Did he finally see what my parents have seen my whole life and decide he can’t stand to be around me?

Daniel puts his hand on Sonny’s shoulder. “Sonny, she’s a grown woman. She can advocate for herself.”

Sonny shrugs his cousin’s hand off. “She’s afraid of heights!” Sonny says pointedly.

“What better way to overcome them?”

“Through something safer! Through something she’s decided to do on her own!” Sonny comes right up to me and stares me down, and I feel so hurt that he doesn’t want me here that my smile freezes in place.

“You gotta get her out of this,” he tells George.

George looks up at me and I give him a wooden laugh.

“Stop it. It’ll be fine.”

“Why are you doing this?” Sonny whispers.

“Because I’ve changed. I’m not the girl you used to know.”

“Tell me about it. The Parker I knew would never put herself in jeopardy for other people’s approval.”

“That’s *exactly* what the Parker you knew did.” I whisper it so softly, I wonder if he heard me. But when he backs up like I’ve slapped him, I know he did. “George here is an expert.

We only hire the best. Now, if you'll excuse me, it's time to conquer my fear of heights.”

George hands me a helmet, and gets me hooked up so I'm ready to go. I'm shaking so hard, I feel like I'm going to throw up. Sonny is right. This may be safe, but I'm not doing this for me.

I'm doing this because I want to impress his family.

I'm doing this because if I turn back now, I'll never come back, and I don't want this to be the last time I ever see these people who already feel like family to *me*.

I'm doing this because I love them.

And I'm more afraid of them not loving me than I am of any height.

I reach my hands to the thick cable above me and step on to the wire.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



SONNY

*S*climb down the ladder and ignore Daniel's goofy, cheerful chatter as he tries to perk Parker up. He doesn't know that goofy and cheerful are the last thing she needs. She needs *competitive* and cheerful. She needs smack talk and distraction, not congratulations on each step she takes.

Better yet, she needs to get her butt off of that freaking ropes course.

Daniel's too used to talking to his son to be of any real use to Parker in this situation.

She loves a challenge. She always thought athletes were attracted to her because she's short, and she has this theory that tall men love short girls.

What she's missing is that athletes love competition, and Parker is the challenge of a lifetime. She wouldn't always do the same thing twice, but I could usually get her to try anything once.

Except a ropes course. Or a zip line. Or even a high diving board.

She doesn't *do* heights.

Except, she's doing them now.

Whoop-dee-doo, Daniel.

Don't hate me for being so bossy about her. I know she's a grown woman who can look after herself. I know she's smart enough and strong enough to not need a man to advocate for her.

I also know her need for familial approval is a force stronger than gravity.

Oh, and reaching and looking up could trigger her vagus nerve and make her faint.

No big deal, or anything.

But \$*&%^@!!

Mom sits next to me. A few of the little kids gather around me, but I ignore them to watch Parker.

"I don't think nannying is in your future," Mom says, grabbing something from my youngest nephew's mouth. Shoot. Max is sucking on a red Sharpie. And his big brother, Felix, is holding the cap, laughing.

Freaking Felix.

Max's mouth and face are an intense red that make him look like a mini horror show.

I hang my head. "Oh, sh ... eepadoodle."

"Sheepadoodle?" Mom laughs. "Watch your mouth there, mister."

"Want me to add cursing in front of children to my failures as an uncle? Amber's gonna kill me."

"Max will be fine. A little permanent marker never hurt anyone. Do you remember when your brothers spray-painted you silver on the base in Germany? Now *that* was scary."

"I forgot about that!" I say, chuckling. "You lost it. Grounded them for weeks, right?"

"As I should have! I thought it was lead paint!"

“Was Germany the house with that stray cat?”

“That’s the one.” Mom grabs a wipe and some baby oil from Lauren’s bag and uses it on Max’s face. The other kids laugh and squeal. Everyone’s cheeks are rosy from the cold front coming in, and I wonder how we’re going to deal when it hits freezing. All of the accommodations have heat, at least, but I don’t think we’ll have another impromptu game night.

Of course, there’s not a bingo square for it anyway ...

“You loved that cat,” Mom said. “Our neighbors had that big, friendly dog, and you never had time for it. It was always about that cat for you.”

I chuckle. “That’s true.”

“What was so special about it? It was meaner than a two-headed snake.”

I haven’t thought about the cat in years, but Mom isn’t wrong. It was a runty, scrappy, black alley cat with a big scar across one eye that was permanently puckered. And she *was* mean at first. She swiped at me more times than I could count. But one day, she climbed the tree outside my window, as she had so often, but Anthony and Gabe had broken the branch she always used to get down. The cat was stuck. I ran outside and climbed up to get her down. She scratched me, but I grabbed her anyway, hung from one arm, and got us both down safely. She darted away the second I touched down, and I didn’t see her for days. I thought she vanished.

But a week later, I was eating a Popsicle on the front steps of our house on the base, and the cat came right up to me. She jumped on my lap and I stroked her fur.

When she purred, I was a goner.

“I don’t know,” I tell Mom. “The dog was too easy.”

“So it was the challenge?”

I look up at Parker clutching the rope above her like the lifeline it is. She’s at a switching point, and her body language is screaming to get off while Daniel is talking to her. Giving her a pep talk, no doubt.

“No,” I say.

“Then *why*?”

I think about the way she purred on my lap like it was the first time in her life she’d ever been happy. “Because she was always so careful. It was like she was terrified of making a mistake, and the one time she got caught messing up, she lashed out because she was so afraid of what would happen.” I look at my arm, running a finger over the memory of scratches that have long since healed. “I wanted her to know she was safe to be loved.”

Mom pulls me in for a side hug. “You’ve always been so intuitive. The people in your life are lucky to have you.”

A sound from overhead interrupts us. Daniel is yelling to the ropes instructor. I look up and my heart stops.

Parker has passed out.

Her body is slumped, her hands dangling by her sides, her legs *off* the rope. The harness is holding her, but she needs blood to her brain, *now*.

I’m on my feet instantly, sprinting for the ladder up to the course. My knee shrieks in pain, but I don’t care. I *can’t* care. Daniel and George are already pulling her safely to the landing, but I push past everyone else and am on the landing when they unhook her and bring her down.

Anthony—my metabolic scientist brother—is on the course above us. “Make sure her feet are higher than her head so the blood rushes back in. I’ll be right down.”

“I’ll call Helen!” Mom yells. Helen, Uncle Bruno’s wife, is a pediatrician.

“I’ll call Victoria!” Sienna says. Cousin Victoria is an ER nurse.

The course instructor lays Parker’s head down and props her feet against the guardrail. I remove her helmet and put my hands on either side of her ice-cold face.

“Wake up, PJ,” I say urgently. She already has a Snow White look to her, but I’ve never seen her face so white. All

the color has drained out of it, and she looks so ashen, *I'm* struggling to breathe. I pat her cheek. "PJ. Please."

This can't be happening. She has to wake up.

"Parker," I urge, patting her cheek again. I shake her shoulders. "PJ, wake up! Wake up, baby!"

Her head tips to the side and her eyelids flutter, and the movement kick-starts my heart.

Tears rush to my eyes, spilling on her.

"What's going on?" she asks, discombobulated. "Is it raining? Why am I on the ground?"

"You passed out on the ropes course," Daniel says. I didn't even realize he was sitting on the opposite side of Parker. "Are you okay?"

She blinks several times and pushes herself up. Anthony has unhooked himself and is coming down the ladder to her. He's not a medical doctor, but he had to take a few classes with the MDs for his PhD, and he knows more about the human body than anyone.

He pushes Daniel out of the way and sits next to Parker. At the same time, Aunt Helen, Cousin Victoria, and Dad arrive in a golf cart. Aunt Helen runs half marathons, so even though she's in her early sixties, she beats my spry cousin up the ladder and is by Parker's side in no time.

I get out of their way and watch as my family hovers over Parker.

"I'm going to check your pulse and pupils, okay, sweetie?" Helen says. She crouches close in order to inspect Parker's already dark eyes.

"Have you eaten today?" Anthony asks.

"When was the last time you had water?" Victoria asks.

Parker's big eyes widen more and more as she tries to answer their questions. "Uh, yes, I've eaten and had plenty of water."

"Did you feel dizzy before you passed out?"

“Have you fainted before?”

“Uh, maybe. And yes.” She answers Victoria and then Helen. “I have vasovagal syncope. I can’t always tell when I’m going to faint.”

“Oof,” Helen says, putting the back of her hand on Parker’s forehead. “Let’s keep you down for a bit longer. The last thing you need is to get up just to drop again.”

They pepper her with more questions about her condition, and Parker starts to look more and more uncomfortable.

But I know it’s not discomfort.

She feels stupid.

I know her so well, and I’m not allowed to use any of that insider knowledge right now.

It is *killing* me.

“Guys, let’s lay off her a bit,” I say.

Parker looks like a wounded cat, ready to run. She keeps trying to smile, and I can *see* the strain of her trying to be positive, trying not to freak out. Her neck and ears are bright red.

This much attention after passing out would be a lot for anyone. But this much attention from *family* figures? From a doting aunt? From a concerned cousin? From a protective big brother? It doesn’t matter that they aren’t Parker’s actual family. This is more familial than anything she’s ever experienced.

So when she stands abruptly, I’m not surprised. When she says, “I’m sorry to be so much trouble. I’ll run to the kitchen and eat something,” I see it coming a mile away.

She ignores everyone’s inquiries and pushes past them wordlessly. But I grab her hand as she passes, and our eyes meet. Her normally sharp eyes are wide open. The smile she’s tried to keep on has almost slipped from her face, and the effort to keep it up seems Herculean.

This isn’t only fear. It’s ... shame.

It's *panic*.

My heart shreds watching her climb down the ladder with her chin quivering. I feel like I'm bleeding internally again to see her stride away. When she hops into one of the golf carts and drives off, I'm cracking in two, the part of me that wants to go after her and the part of me that remembers how adamant she was that I leave her alone anytime she had a bad conversation with her parents. She refused to let me see her cry. She would go into her bathroom and I wouldn't hear her make a sound. The first time it happened, I asked her what she needed and she yelled at me to go. The second time, I waited outside her door, and when she came out an hour later, she looked *wrecked*.

"What are you doing here?" She ran back into the bathroom and slammed the door.

"I needed to make sure you're okay!" I said, standing at the door, holding the handle.

"I told you to go! You can't see me like this!"

"PJ, do you think I care what you look like—"

"I don't care how I *look*! You can't *see* me like this!"

"I don't underst—"

"Go! Leave, now!"

"PJ!"

And then her voice cracked, something I'd never heard before. "Please, you don't understand. You of all people cannot see me like this. You have to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

So I left. In spite of every cell in my body screaming at me to stay, I left.

I watch her leave now with that same feeling of total futility.

This hurts almost as badly as her breaking up with me. Maybe worse, because that was about *my pain*. This is about

hers. I watched her heart break on her face, and I don't know how to help, and not knowing what to do is destroying me.

“What are you doing?” Sienna asks, shocked.

“I—”

“Go after her!” Lauren cries.

“You don't get it,” I argue.

“No, *you* don't get it,” Amber says. “She needs you.”

“She doesn't need me! She doesn't *want* me!”

“Are you kidding?” Sienna laughs in disbelief. “She just passed out, and she ran out of here like this is the greatest embarrassment of her life. That girl is *wounded*. She needs you!”

“She never let me comfort her when we were dating,” I say.

“Dude, you gotta go after her,” Daniel says.

“Shut up, Daniel! How dare you make a move on my girl?”

Daniel rolls his eyes. “Sonny. Your family asked me to talk to her in front of you. Like I'd really go after your girlfriend.”

“She isn't my girlfriend.”

“Not with that stupid attitude, she isn't,” Aunt Helen says.

“GO!” Sienna yells. “At the very least make sure she doesn't faint again!”

I'm at war with myself. I want to go after her more than anything, but I don't want to do it to gratify myself. I only want to go if it will help *her*.

I look around for anyone who can tell me the answer to the question burning in my chest.

And I see Ash.

She's standing next to my mom, who must have called her and asked her to come when Parker fainted. She has tears in

her eyes, and she's holding her hands out like she can't understand what I'm still doing here.

“Go, Sonny!” she says.

“GO!” Everyone yells, including my mom.

I go.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



PARKER

*I*m curled into a ball in the corner of my bathroom, wedged between the toilet and the tub.

Sobs wrack my body. My lungs ache. My throat feels like someone took a cheese grater to it.

All I wanted was for them to like me. To *love* me.

What must they think of me now?

Why am I so weak and stupid and afraid? What is wrong with me that my fear of heights is so intense that it caused my vagus nerve to over-stimulate? How pathetic can someone be?

I ruined everything.

I ruined their reunion.

I ruined their opinion of me.

I ruined any chance of somehow showing Sonny's family that I was worth their time.

He must *hate* me. I made his family reunion about me. I always make everything about me.

A knock sounds at the door, and my head whips up. It's not the door to my cabin, it's the door to my *bathroom*.

"Who is it?" Fear spikes my pulse.

"PJ—"

It's Sonny.

"No!" I do that hiccup, double-breathing thing that makes crying so much worse. "You cannot see me like this!"

"Fine, I won't," he says.

"But *I* will." Ash says through the door.

"I'm okay, Ash," I say, trying to push back my tears, trying to block out that moment of Sonny's family hovering around me and *worrying* about me and the pain of him not even wanting me around. "I just need a minute."

"No, I don't think so," Ash says. "I think you need a hug."

"I don't need a hug, Ash," I say.

"Do you need a song, then?" Lou says.

Lou is here?

"Or how about Louis the Llama?" Millie asks. "You know how cool he is in a crisis."

I put my head between my knees, not sure whether to laugh or cry.

"Or maybe you need to know that your friends will always love you, no matter what," Jane says.

"You don't have to be perfect to be loved," Sonny says.

And the sobbing resumes.

Even harder.

I'm crying so badly, I can't see anything through the blur of tears when my friends come in the door. The bathroom is too small for all of us, but that doesn't stop them from finding a place to sit, anyway. Ash gets into the bathtub. Lou hops up on the counter and crosses her legs. Jane drops down across from me, knee to knee, and Millie sits on the toilet seat.

And I cry.

And cry.

Jane pulls me into a hug, and I throw my arms around her. And then three other sets of arms wrap around me, and I'm not sure how it's even physically possible until I feel Millie shove into me and hear a squeal.

"Ow!" Millie says as Lou falls on top of her.

"Watch the head!" Ash says, as Millie's own head bumps into Ash's.

Jane and I start laughing, and soon, the others join and we're a giant mess of giggles and tears.

"Want to talk about what happened?" Millie asks. We're all cramped on top of each other—well, they're all on top of me, because I'm sitting with my back against the wall between the toilet and the bathtub.

"Not really."

"Did you have a panic attack?" she pushes.

"No, actually," I say. "Just a total breakdown."

"That's progress!" Millie says. "I'm so happy for you!"

I can't believe Sonny is listening to this. What must he think?

"You know no one thinks less of you for fainting, right?" Ash says.

"I think less of me," I say. "Who faints on a ropes course? It was so overdramatic. So attention seeking," I say, disgusted with myself.

"Ugh, good point. You are so brazen." Lou's twangy voice drips in sarcasm.

"Don't attention-shame her!" Ash says. "She found the perfect opportunity to have all eyes on her, and she took it spectacularly. Who can blame her?"

"If there's anything PJ is known for," Jane says, "It's the spotlight. She just craves it."

“Okay, I get it,” I say.

“Do you?” Sonny asks too seriously. He’s sitting against the wall just outside the bathroom. His whole left side is visible, and his braced, muscular leg bounces with a furious energy. He’s as close as he could be without being in the actual bathroom. “PJ, you passed out. Your body had a perfectly normal response to a stressful situation.”

“It’s not perfectly normal,” I say sharply. “It’s weak! Being afraid of heights is weak! I’m weak! And now your family knows—”

“And no one cares or thinks less of you for it!”

“Yes, they do! They’re all going to think I’m such a joke!” I curl my arms around my head, wishing I could shrink into the floor. “I can’t even handle something that a ten-year-old can do! I’m so stupid and pathetic and weak—”

“Stop it!” Jane snaps. “You are none of those things! Those are lies, and I won’t let anyone lie about my best friend!” Her voice is shaking. “You are smart and strong and brave.”

“I’m not brave. If I were brave, I wouldn’t have frozen.”

“Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn are all *perfectly* normal threat responses,” Millie insists.

“I should have fought.”

“What were you fighting against? Gravity?” Millie says. “One isn’t better than the other. It just *is*.”

“Fighting is better than freezing.”

“Are you talking about the ropes course or about something else?” Jane asks, and I’m glad my face is covered so no one can see how it contorts with regret and pain and humiliation.

I don’t answer. I can’t answer. An image pops into my head, a nightmarish vision of them all looking at each other, judging me, and it’s so powerful that my head flies up.

My friends are all looking at *me*. Not each other. No silent disgust like the looks that would pass between my parents. They're concerned.

They love me.

"I feel so stupid," I whisper.

"You shouldn't." Ash says.

"I can't stop myself. How do I just not feel something I feel?"

"Feel it all you want. We all feel lots of things that aren't true," Lou says. "I feel like cinnamon rolls are the answer to all of life's problems until I have a stomachache. But you gotta acknowledge the lie at the same time."

I smile and rest my head on my forearm. We're packed in so close, I should be claustrophobic, but I'm not. I feel like I'm wrapped in a blanket on a cold day.

"Sonny's family adores you," Ash says. "I've watched them with you. They're all clamoring to get you on their team."

"Yeah, because I'm good at everything."

Sonny's shoulder shakes in what I assume is a laugh.

My lungs are exhausted from all my crying, and I can't help but feel mortified that my friends saw me like this.

But they're here.

They cared enough to be here at all. I didn't scare them away or disgust them when they saw me at my worst. They haven't run just because I'm snotty and sobbing.

Not everyone is like my parents. Not everyone threatens to cut you off for not being perfect.

My friends are *here*. With me. Like Anthony holding Felix, putting up with him, loving him for his wildness, not in spite of it, they're here.

More importantly, Sonny is here.

Why is he here?

“I hate crying in front of people,” I say.

“And we hate crying alone,” Ash says.

“Speak for yourself,” Jane says. “I love crying alone. For months on end. When all my friends have abandoned me to rebrand a farm all by myself.”

“You will never let that go, will you?” I say with a wet chuckle. “We came eventually!”

“And if we’d been here,” Lou says, “would you and Tripp really have had the chance to fall in love?”

“Well, we *are* meddlers,” Millie says. “We could have made it happen.”

“No, you’re a meddler,” Jane says.

Millie gasps. She loves overdramatic gasping. “Need I remind you of how I started nannying for Duke in the first place?”

“Or how you didn’t tell me the ex I’ve never gotten over would be running my family’s reunion?” Sonny asks, wearing his feelings as comfortably as a pair of well-worn shoes.

The ex I’ve never gotten over.

What?

Then what has today been about?

“I’m a big picture gal,” Jane says. “I make no apologies.”

Millie makes a scoffing sound in her throat.

I breathe slowly, my raging emotions getting steadier and steadier. The air in the bathroom is warm from all our bodies, but it feels nice.

“Did I ever tell you guys about the time I broke my wrist falling from the uneven bars?” I shiver with emotion, keenly aware of the way Sonny’s injured leg tenses only a yard or two away.

Everyone pauses, waiting for me to continue. My friends have heard me self-disclose now and then, but Sonny hasn’t.

Ever.

I'm not happy with the way I was triggered by fainting and feeling like I ruined Sonny's family reunion. But I think about the growth I've made with Linda, how I get to choose every day who I'm becoming. Sonny said he's never gotten over me, and if that's the case, his behavior today isn't about him wanting me gone but about something else.

I want to believe him. I want to believe his family isn't the type to hate me because I blacked out and caused a small scene.

But my family is. And for the first time, I want him to know that. I need him to understand while he's open to *me* being open.

"I was ten and slipped trying to catch the bar below. I landed on my right wrist and broke it pretty badly."

"Ouch," Ash whispers.

"It was awful," I agree. "I cried out, and my coach and mom both came over. My coach called our team doctor over, but my mom pushed him aside. For a second, I thought she was actually going to take a look at my flopping, swelling wrist and hug me and tell me it would be okay. But ..." My mouth twists and I sniff. "But instead she told me I was an embarrassment and that if I couldn't stop myself from being so dramatic, I could at least learn how to cry gracefully."

Sonny's hand balls into a fist, and the sight makes tears spill down my face.

Again.

"What is wrong with them?" Lou asks, incensed. "How are you supposed to cry gracefully?"

"Like Jane," Ash says, pointing to our beautiful friend who has tears streaming down her face but somehow makes it look angelic.

We all laugh.

"Shut up," Jane says. "Stop cry-shaming me."

"Then cry like a *redhead*," Millie says. "You're supposed to get snotty and puffy and alarmingly red-faced. It releases

endorphins.”

Heads bump into my head from more places than should be physically possible. We’re like the Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, except instead of magical pants that fit us, my friends manage to find a space to bump their heads into mine in the most cramped bathroom since our sophomore apartment.

“Your mom was wrong to say that,” Millie says.

“You don’t have to be perfect to be loved,” Jane agrees.

“You stole my line,” Sonny says. “And PJ, your mom *sucks*.” His foot is shaking with a pent up energy that’s both old and new. It’s old in the sense that he was always vibrating, ready to burst into action at the slightest provocation. It’s new in the sense that he’s had plenty of provocation and has held the stored energy in.

Poor, patient Sonny. I can imagine the toll this inaction is taking on him. Affection and gratitude swell in my chest.

It’s not just my friends here. It’s not just my friends who’ve proved themselves.

It’s also Sonny.

“Get in h—“

He’s up and in the bathroom before I can even finish the words.

“Dude!

“Ouch!”

“Get off me!”

“Show me your abs!”

Janes go flying as Sonny pushes past them and picks me up off the floor, pulling me into a tight hug that makes me feel like I’ve just come out of hibernation after the coldest winter of my life.

He’s kept his eyes closed the whole time.

I let him hold me close, but I don't hug back. I can't. I sink into him, but I don't dare embrace him, because if I do, I'll never let go.

"You can open your eyes," I whisper, my cheek pressed against his.

"No, it's okay," he says. "I don't need to see *you* seeing *me* cry."

"Been there, done that." When we broke up.

He lets out a pained laugh. "Ouch. Too soon."

"It's been seven years."

"Exactly. You can laugh about it once I've recovered."

His words smash into the wall that guards my heart. A fracture spreads from the point of impact, rocking the entire thing.

The wall is getting dangerously close to crumbling.

He sets me back down, holding my head against his chest for longer than I should allow. I'm not sure when the Janes left, but I am sure that I've reached my emotional capacity for the afternoon.

I push back and crane my head to look up at him. "Thanks, Sonny. You really can open your eyes."

He keeps them sealed. "You said I couldn't see you like this."

"That Sonny couldn't," I say. "I think this one can."

His aqua eyes fly open. His gaze cuts through me, and his soft smile stitches me back up.

"You're beautiful."

"You're crazy."

"The two aren't mutually exclusive." He smooths a stray lock of hair. He opens his mouth to say more, but he stops. And then he hugs me again.

He keeps his arms wrapped around me, holding me like I'm precious.

And he just hugs me.

“Thanks for letting me be here,” he finally says. “I’ll see you again whenever *you’re* ready.”

I expect him to kiss my forehead—want it, even—but instead he lets go. And he leaves the cabin.

And all I can do is watch him go.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



PARKER

After Sonny leaves, I put on my second de-puffing eye mask of the day and fix my ponytail, which is messy from both the helmet and the affection. The eye mask and concealer hide the dark circles under my eyes, while a cheerful pink lipstick makes my smile look brighter than I could ever feel.

No, that's not quite true.

After a breakdown, I've always felt like I was hollowed out and exposed, a dying animal waiting for scavengers to pick me clean.

This time, I feel raw and vulnerable, but I don't feel empty.

In fact, I feel kind of full. And ... and glowy.

Huh.

The buzz of a text grabs my attention.

SONNY: The family just finished lunch. My bros are going back to put their kids down for naps, but then we're on to pickleball before meeting up with the others at cornhole.

PARKER: Rewind. “The family?” Isn’t that mob speak? Are you guys a mob? Wait, is Nonna the Don? Donna? Donna Nonna?!

SONNY: Snitches get stitches.

PARKER: Noted.

SONNY: *My* family (not *the* family) is a little eager to make sure you’re okay.

SONNY: Are you okay?

PARKER: I’m fine.

SONNY: Got it. Sorry to pester you about it.

PARKER: No, I mean that literally. I feel fine. Good, even. Is that weird?

SONNY: I always feel better after a good cry.

PARKER: Pfft. Your spirit is too indomitable. You’d probably “feel better” after a colonoscopy.

SONNY: Whoa there, tiger.

PARKER: ...I, on the other hand, feel better shoe shopping while I eat Cadbury Mini Eggs that I’ve hoarded in the freezer for the last year.

SONNY: You always did love your Mini Eggs.

Déjà vu rocks me for a second. I scroll past our current conversation and into the annals of our recorded history.

Yes, I kept his texts.

No, I don’t want to hear about it.

I scroll and scroll to the point of futility. Then I use the search function, and a moment later, I find the last time we talked about Mini Eggs.

SONNY: did u find ur gift yet

PARKER: I’ll find my gift when you find your grammar textbook.

SONNY: lol

PARKER: I'm too busy to respond. I found this huge stash of Mini Eggs in the freezer with a bow on them. What kind of sucker wraps their Mini Eggs up and hides them in the freezer? They're mine now!

SONNY: stop

SONNY: u know thats from me

PARKER: ;)

PARKER: I know. Thanks, Sunshine. That was sweet of you.

SONNY: dont let them make u feel small pj

PARKER: It's fine.

SONNY: its not fine

PARKER: Let it go. Nothing happened. It's fine.

SONNY: ok.

SONNY: love u

I swipe away the exchange. I don't remember what the Mini Eggs were for, but it was obviously something to do with my parents. They were the only people who ever made me feel small. Well, them and the loser bros at my last job.

As absurd as it sounds, what stands out to me most about this conversation isn't his thoughtfulness or my shutting him out.

It's his grammar.

Sonny always joked that he didn't have time to worry about things like capitalization or punctuation.

A quick glance at our current texts tells me that's yet another thing that has changed.

Why does my chest feel like something's blossoming inside?

Is that ... *hope*?

It is.

It's hope.

The whole time I drive the golf cart over to the cornhole field, I have to keep myself from veering off in the opposite direction. The lure of Sonny, especially after that hug ...

Whew.

I expect to see some of Sonny's cousins or siblings playing, but oddly, there isn't a cousin or grandchild in sight. Instead, I spot Nonna, Great Aunt Mary ... and Nonna's kids and their spouses ...

Including Sonny's parents.

Oh no. This is the Old Guard. The OG Lucianos. Every single one of them is here.

I break out into a sweat in spite of the cold.

So.

Many.

Parental.

Figures.

I'm about to bolt for Sonny and his siblings when Sonny's dad sees me and lights up like Times Square.

Oh, his dad. His dad is a teddy bear of a man who always acts so happy to see me. Is he going to bring up my fainting? He's so kind. Is he mortified for me?

"Parker! Good to see you up on your feet. Come on over and be my partner, will you? Lisa left me alone against these wolves."

"Those wolves are your mom and aunt," Lisa says at another cornhole board. "You okay, sweetie?"

"I'm all better. Thanks. And thanks, Helen," I say to Sonny's aunt, who's playing on another pair of boards with Lisa, Uncle Bruno, and Aunt Elaine.

She smiles, and that's it.

That's all the fuss they make out of it.

Well, that wasn't bad. That was ... that was actually nice.

Edward waves me over. He's standing next to Great Aunt Mary, and Nonna is by herself at another board opposite them.

I've never played cornhole before. The name is so weird, I thought it was a myth made up by Canadians or Midwestern frat boys.

But no, here it is. Slanted platforms with holes near the middle sit maybe twenty-five feet across from each other, and to the side of either platform stand the OG Lucianos. Throwing beanbags.

"Um," I pause.

I hate games where someone can be made to feel bad for losing. This isn't a group event like archery where you're not competing against any one person. Playing a game like this means there's a winner and a loser. It means my competition goes home devastated ... or I do.

A primal urge for acceptance rages against my fear that I'll disappoint Sonny's dad and he'll hate me.

He won't hate you. You know he won't.

But he won't like you more, either.

I want these people to like me beyond any grade or medal I've ever wanted, so I'll just have to win. I'm naturally good at this kind of thing. I can play *cornhole*.

You don't have to be perfect to be loved, Sonny's voice echoes in my head.

Maybe. But it can't hurt to try.

"You ready for an epic beanbag battle?" Sonny's dad asks. He's handsome and distinguished but also warm and approachable. Both of Sonny's parents are. They always have been.

"I'll be a terrible partner," I tell him, even though I should get the hang of it quickly. "I don't know how to play."

"No problem," he says. "I'll help you with strategy when we're near the end of the game, but for now, a beanbag on the board is worth one point. One in the hole is worth three, and

their points and our points cancel each other out. So just focus on getting the beanbag in the hole or on the board, if you can.” he says.

If I can? I hit a bullseye with an axe this morning. Throwing a beanbag on a board should be a piece of cake.

I stand on the other side of the board from Sonny’s dad—we’re on a team, after all—but Great Aunt Mary walks toward me and points to the board opposite us.

“Your partner plays across from you,” Aunt Mary says.

Nonna says, “It’s you and me, sis.”

Sis?

I know it’s cliché to compare a grandma to a Golden Girls character, but Nonna has real Sophia energy.

And Sophia is my patronus.

I could not want to impress this woman more than I do.

I stand on the other side of the board from her, and everyone tells me to go first. I throw the beanbag underhand and am shocked when it lands two feet shy of the board.

Nonna laughs, a sharp “heh heh” I could almost think I imagined. Then she throws the beanbag in a much higher arc than I did and it lands on the board with a loud *slap*.

“You’re up,” she says. I throw again. And miss again.

Nonna’s throw lands on the board.

I frown, watching her absurdly high arc. It looks ridiculous. Surely it would be easier to keep throwing lower, wouldn’t it? But her eye holds a challenge, almost like she thinks I can’t do it. Suddenly, my desire for approval faces its fiercest competition yet: my desire to never, ever be underestimated.

I heft the beanbag in my hand, draw my arm back, and then toss it in a high arc.

The beanbag lands on the board! Then it knocks Nonna’s into the hole.

I wince while Nonna cackles. “That wasn’t good, was it?”

“It was for me,” she says.

A sassy retort springs to my lips, but I smile. My cheeks and jaw ache from all this smiling. I don’t know how Sonny has done it all these years. How Ash has done it. How have humans walked around with these big, exhausting grins on their faces for eons and not gone extinct?

Nonna isn’t smiling, though. A small smirk plays at the corner of her lips, and it’s as familiar to me as my own. Smirking is natural. Easy. I don’t have to hide behind a smirk.

I don’t land another bag on the board before our turn is over and it switches to Aunt Mary and Edward. Nonna makes fun of her sister and her son in equal parts.

“Come on, Mary! Use that new hip of yours, will you?”

“Easy, Bianca,” Aunt Mary says to Nonna. “You don’t want to throw your back out from yelling.” Her bag lands on the board.

“Yes!” Nonna says. “Eddie, are you and Parker gonna squeal when we cook you for lunch?”

“Easy, Mom. Let’s not scare her off, okay?”

“She can take it, can’t you, sis?”

I roll my lips together and nod. “I can take it.”

“Good. That smile had me worried you were too nice to handle some healthy competition. I can’t abide all that *niceness*.”

I want to say something smart. Something with the tiniest bit of an edge. In the split second of debate, my adrenaline spikes. Blood rushes through my veins. My breath quickens. I heft the beanbag and let the words come out. “Get your popcorn ready, Nonna. I’m about to put on a show.”

Aunt Mary and Sonny’s dad explode with laughter.

Nonna looks me over. “Now that’s better.”

The heat in my ears crawls into my cheeks, but I'm cold enough that I doubt anyone can tell. "Let's play."

* * *

After approximately four thousand rounds, Nonna beats me.

Edward is good enough that we only lose by a couple points, but my ex-boyfriend's grandmother has beaten me at a sporting event. I officially suck at cornhole.

"Shake it off, sis," Nonna says as she takes my arm and drags me to a pair of Adirondack chairs. She pulls her coat around her more tightly, but she doesn't show any other signs of being cold. The couples who didn't play last time rotate in and start playing. Sonny's parents are on the same team this time. "No one's good at cornhole on their first try."

"Thanks, but I'm all right," I say, even though being so awful at anything makes my skin physically itch.

"You may not be devastated, but losing to an old lady never feels good."

I choke on a laugh. How is this woman real?

We sit and watch for a few minutes. I'm an introvert by nature, so I'm used to sitting in quiet and letting the extroverts around me fill the silence. Sonny's family has a lot of extroverts, but I can tell Nonna isn't one of them. When grandkids and great grandkids have asked her to regale them with tales of her spunk, one of her kids has acted as her mouthpiece.

Does she expect *me* to fill the silence? What do I say? I don't want to say something stupid just to say something. I've never understood the point of small talk, and I suck at it anyway.

But the truth is, I want to talk to Nonna. I want to know everything about her. I want to understand how she managed to raise four incredibly accomplished children as a young widow in an era that didn't offer women many opportunities. I want to know how she's created such a tight family culture where everyone loves and supports each other. I want to know

how she's been able to love so many people so freely and be loved by so many people without ... without ...

Scaring them off.

Pushing them away.

Freezing them out.

How has she managed to be vulnerable enough to let people in for eighty years when, by all accounts, she's been salt and vinegar just as long?

I've gone too long without saying anything. My mother would tell me what bad manners I have. All I want is to charm Nonna, and here I am, isolating her, instead.

But she doesn't seem to mind.

In fact, she's almost smiling.

So I sit with her.

We watch her children and their spouses play a game with no stakes, with no animosity. My insecurities slowly fade as I watch couples support and tease each other and siblings and in-laws talk smack to each other. I watch them laugh and I watch how they share their love so freely, all without saying "I love you." But they show it by engaging. By watching each other. By being together.

"What a legacy, Nonna."

Nonna puts her hand on mine and squeezes. "You're a good girl, sis."

She doesn't look me in the eye, and for that I'm grateful. I don't need anyone else to see me cry today.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



SONNY

During pickleball, I hobble away from my family to take a call from my agent. My knee is acting up after rushing to help Parker, but I have an ice pack wrapped around it.

“Michael, what’s up?” I say.

“How’s rehab?”

Alarm bells go off in my head at the urgency of his question. We both know I’m nothing more than a meal ticket for him, but he normally hides it better than this. What do I say? Do I lie and tell him my knee is rock solid? Or do I lie and tell him I’m worried?

Because here’s the truth: my knee hurts, but I’m *not* worried. I’ve always recovered from injuries faster than other people. My family is all like that. We’re genetic weirdos who don’t get sick often and who may break something, but we don’t stay broken for long. Yeah, I re-tweaked my knee sprinting after Parker, but it’s nothing. I’ll be fit as a fiddle by training camp. With my luck, I’ll retire from the NFL at forty after smashing half the records in the league.

“It’s fine.”

“Fine’s not good enough. Are you healthy?” Michael presses. He sounds more New York than ever.

I sigh and prop my leg up. Being a commodity gets old, but I know how blessed I am. “No one will know I even took a hit by training camp. What’s going on?”

“I have teams knocking down my door, and I need to know what I’m selling.”

Normally I would smile because I know he can hear it and I know he loves my confidence. But ... “What do you mean by other teams? I want to stay with the Waves.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s just for leverage. Any teams you don’t want to play for?”

The alarm bells have gone full siren. I thought the Waves were happy with me. I know I’m a risk, but I only have this injury because I caught the pass that gave us a *Super Bowl ring*. I sacrificed my body for that win! I’m missing out on activities with my family so I can play a game for people who want to keep me in a glass case until it’s time to take me out and smash me against the other pieces for their amusement.

I grit my teeth. “I’m happy where I am.”

“Oh, sure. Sure. But options never hurt,” Michael says.

“Mikey, no games. I want to stay with the Waves,” I repeat.

“You got it,” he says. “Now I’m gonna go and make you a very rich man.”

“I already am.”

“Then let’s make you richer.”

We hang up, and I lean back on the bench, more drained from this two-minute conversation than hours of training could ever do. I love football, and I *love* the fans. I love interacting with people and signing autographs, not because it makes *me* feel good, but because it makes *them* feel good. I love throwing kids game balls and signing jerseys for people. The

football world is one big community of people joining together for the love of a game. What could be purer than that?

If only there were no agents, no managers, no contracts, no trades. If I could stay in one place and play, I would, even if it made me less money. Michael can't understand that, no matter how many times I tell him.

I watch my family playing pickeball a few dozen yards away. Because I'm not allowed to play, I've been hanging out with my nieces and nephews and my cousins' kids. They're running around in the chill afternoon air with pink cheeks and noses. Gray clouds have crept across the sky all day, and they've finally overtaken the sun. But that doesn't stop anyone from having a good time.

Nothing does.

Being with family is the only thing I've ever wanted. And even when I've been away, just knowing that they're out there has been enough.

I'm worried it's not enough anymore.

An instinct comes over me, and I listen to it. I'm calling my friend before I can question why. He answers on the third ring.

"Sonny, my man. How you doing?" Buster "Bulldog" Jackson says.

"Hey, Buster. You just popped into my head so I thought I'd give you a call."

"I'm glad you did. We still on for tomorrow morning? Nothing came up with your schedule, did it?"

Bulldog's morning show is the biggest sports talk program in the country, but he's also become a friend and mentor over the years. I even filled in for him last summer for a few weeks while he and his family took an extended vacation, and it was as fun as winning any game. Because their show is Carolina-based and I played for Clemson, I've had a standing call with them every Thursday for years from the beginning of August to the end of February—from preseason to shortly after the Super Bowl.

It's huge. It's also my favorite part of the week.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world—except for the other week. Sorry again about that."

"No apologies necessary. Ratings took a hit when people realized there was no Sunshine, so I'll probably have to sell a car to pay for my kid's braces, but—"

"Ouch." I laugh. "Do you feel good lying like that? If you can't afford your kid's braces, maybe you should stop encrusting them with diamonds."

Buster laughs. He retired from the league in his early thirties. He was a fullback, and he had another few seasons in him, but he said he'd put off having kids for too long and he wanted to enjoy what was left of his youth. It was a shock to a lot of people. Fans, especially, took it hard. He was an institution in the South. Heck, in the league. But he got into broadcasting after a couple of years, and now, he's an even bigger institution. More importantly to him, he's been able to have a family—six kids!—and watch them grow.

"Between us, how's the knee feeling?"

"Off the record?" I ask.

"Always. You know that."

I do know that. Buster is good people. "It's a sprain. So minor, if it were anyone else, the world would have moved on by now."

"Glad to hear it. How are you feeling?"

"I'm doing all the right exercises, getting all the right injections," I say. But I keep going, even though he doesn't need to know any of this. "I probably should be more cautious, but I'm at a family reunion, and it's hard to care about being too careful with my knee when I want to keep up with everyone."

As if to punctuate the point, Sienna and Chris score on Anthony and Amber, and half of the family cheers loudly.

"I can hear," Buster says. Then he exhales. "You know, Sonny, there's more to life than football."

Why does my throat tighten to hear him say this? “That’s the truth,” I say.

“Next week, let’s have you in the studio instead of calling in,” he says. “I’ll take you to lunch after.”

“I’ll buy,” I say. “You gotta worry about those diamond-braces, after all.”

Buster barks that famous laugh that earned him his nickname. “Nah, I got money enough. I’m too old and too rich to care about chasing dollar signs.” He sighs, but it’s a sigh of contentment, not one of regret. “It’ll be good to see you in person,” he says.

“You too.”

I put my phone down and think about the two conversations—Michael versus Buster. Two ends of the football spectrum. And here I am, in the middle.

I hear a yelp and look up. Daniel’s kid, Harry, has dropped a paddle on his face and given himself a bloody nose. Except, Daniel isn’t around. Where is he? I head over to Harry.

“Hey, bud, you okay?” I ask. Harry’s eyes are watering, but he puts on a brave face. He’s at that in-between age where he wants to be a big kid but is also still young. Someone from the staff runs over as I’m telling him to lean forward and pinch the bridge of his nose.

She looks breathless, young, and starry-eyed. “I can help him, Mr. Luciano,” she says. She’s blushing, but she’s not gushing. I don’t mind fawning fans, but I appreciate that she knows now’s not the time.

“It’s okay. I’ll take him to his dad. Come here, pal,” I say, taking the tissues from the worker and holding Harry’s hand. Chris and Sienna ask if I need help, but I wave them off and take Harry in the golf cart to find Daniel.

If he’s talking to Parker, I may kill him.

And who in my family asked him to pretend he was interested in her? I’ll kill *them* while I’m at it.

“Keep leaning forward and pinching your nose, bud. We’ll find your dad.”

The grounds are huge, but I memorized the map Parker gave us on the first day. When you’ve lived in as many places as I have, you realize fast how important it is to know the lay of the land. I spot Lucianos everywhere—the pavilion for crafts, around the campfire, where Rusty is teaching the teens to whittle wood—but no Daniel. And poor Harry’s weeping silently into his cloth.

I call Daniel and he answers on the second ring. I fill him in on what happened.

“I had to take a call for work,” Daniel says, “so I’m just in my cabin. Can you drop him off with my mom and I’ll meet you there in a few?”

“Of course, man. See you soon.”

I tell Harry the plan, and he snuffles bravely.

“It’s okay to cry, bud.”

“I’m not crying, you are,” Harry says.

I laugh and put my arm around him while he sniffs into me.

At the cornhole grounds, I spot Uncle Bruno and Aunt Helen. They’re at the cornhole boards nearest us. She turns when she hears the cart and immediately rushes to Harry’s side. He folds into her, and the sight tugs at my heart.

“He dropped a paddle and gave himself a bloody nose,” I explain. “He’s been really brave. Daniel will be here in a sec.”

She nods, mouths a thanks, and says to Harry, “It’s okay, sweet boy. Grammy’s got you.”

I leave the cart in case they need to take Harry to get cleaned up, and I walk slowly past the games. My parents are near the end of the row of boards, and I’m heading over when I see Nonna sitting in a chair next to ...

A high black ponytail.

Parker's sitting with Nonna. Nonna's hand is on Parker's, squeezing, and they look as thick as thieves.

I shouldn't go over there and break them up.

And I won't.

I shouldn't eavesdrop.

But I will.

I quietly make my way toward them, stopping when I can hear them both clearly enough. If they notice me, I'm just far enough that they won't think I'm listening in, though I totally am.

And what I hear floors me.

CHAPTER TWENTY



SONNY

Nonna is telling PJ a story.

“Sure, it was hard, but what else was I going to do?” Nonna says to some question of PJ’s. “We were barely surviving on government help, and I knew if my brother got the loan for me, I’d at least have a shot.”

“So you opened a gym?”

“A women only gym. With childcare.”

“You were ahead of your time,” PJ says. She sounds so awestruck, I love her all the more. “It was obviously popular—I’ve heard enough this week to know.”

“You mean you heard my grandson talk about me when you two were dating?”

“I—”

Nonna cackles. “You’re fine, sis. You two are smart enough to figure it out.”

I can almost *hear* PJ's blush. "So about that gym ... " she says with a low, dark chuckle. "How long until it was smooth sailing? It took my company a couple of rough years until we were finally solvent."

"Same for me and Mary. But even once we were making money, it came with plenty of its own problems. Some men didn't like the idea of a women only gym."

"Shocker. What did they do?"

"Men would come by and ogle the women as they exercised, so we painted the insides of the windows to allow for privacy. The other business owners on our block made decisions without our input because we had too many ovaries and not enough—"

"I get the picture."

Nonna sounds so amused, so delighted to talk to PJ. She can open up, but it's rare. She has to be in the right mood.

And boy, is she in the right mood now.

"Speaking of which, we had a break in once during the middle of the day. Three men wore balaclavas—those hats that cover the whole face—and they ran in during an aerobics class. They turned around, bent over, and mooned the whole class before stealing some of the women's gym bags on their way out."

"WHAT?"

"I called the police, and the next day, Mary and I were standing at the precinct, looking at a lineup of men with face coverings."

"How were you supposed to identify them with face coverings?" PJ demands.

"That's what I asked. I told the policemen I never saw their faces, and they said it was a waste of time. They said some other things about Mary and me that aren't worth repeating. So I told them to have the men turn around and pull down their pants."

"You didn't."

“I did. The policemen pushed back, but I said, ‘Do you want a positive ID, or not? I never saw their faces, but I saw *more* than enough.’ So they told the men to turn around and drop their drawers.”

PJ’s laugh tinkles. “And?”

“I picked them out. One of them needed to get his hernia checked.”

Parker laughs again, and it makes me as giddy as breathing in helium. “Wow. You’re something else, Nonna. I can’t imagine.”

“You can imagine more than you think,” she says. “You’re a tough girl. I bet men haven’t always liked your success.”

“No, not so much. I worked for a huge accounting firm a few years ago—just before my friends and I started our own company—and I was great at it. The best in my department.”

“Good girl for knowing your own value.”

When PJ speaks again, she has a hint of pride in her voice. “I was hired on as an account executive, but my senior manager gave me more and more responsibilities. At first, I was flattered, and then, I realized I was doing his job. After a year, I interviewed for a promotion that I deserved and was the most qualified for. No question. I crushed the interview. And at the end, the senior manager patted me on the head and laughed with the other hiring officers about how adorable I was and how I was the assistant of his dreams.”

What? Outrage roils deep in my belly. Nonna curses in Italian.

“It gets better. After I left, one of them called me *snack-sized*. And they proceeded to talk about what a tasty snack I’d make until the next candidate walked in.”

“Oh, sis.” Nonna sighs with a familiar weariness I can’t relate to. I’m horrified and furious. I want to find those men and dismantle them.

“I got back at them. After the head-pat and sexist, sizeist comment, I contacted HR. Unfortunately for them, my old job

had a policy of recording all interviews. They were too stupid to pause the recording. I sued them for harassment and discrimination, and I won. I won a *huge* payout.”

“That’s more like it.”

“They wanted me to sign a non-disclosure and said I couldn’t talk about it publicly or work for a marketing firm for one year from the date of the agreement. My mother told me I should ‘shut up and take the money’ or else the ‘stain’ would follow me everywhere. What that really means is she didn’t want to talk about harassment in the country club with her rich friends’ husbands who probably have done the same thing to their employees more than once.”

“Your mother sounds like a scared woman.”

“You can say that again. All she cares about is how people view her, and me, by extension. My existence is a constant threat to her self-image.”

“I’m sorry, sis. No one wants to be a bad parent. Everyone has a driving force—”

“I know,” PJ interrupts, sounding almost apologetic.

“You didn’t let me finish,” Nonna says. “She may have had a driving force, but that’s not your problem. That’s hers. You can’t let someone treat you like that, not even your mother.”

PJ is quiet. I risk a look, and her mouth is pulled to the side, and she’s nodding, trying not to cry. “I know.”

“I hope so.” Nonna says. “So what did you do? Did you take the money?”

“No! I wrote a massive review of my experience on every recruiting site in the country, and started a marketing firm with my best friends.”

“And you forfeited the money.”

“Every zero. And it had a lot of zeroes.”

Nonna laughs and slaps her knee. “That’s a girl after my own heart. Good job, sis. You took the harder road, but it’s

working out for you.”

“I hope it does.”

“It will. You’re showing yourself your worth step by step. It’ll catch up to you soon enough.”

They go silent for a moment, and I worry the pride and awe bursting from me must have alerted them to my presence. But no, Nonna has given PJ a hug.

Nonna is hugging PJ.

PJ is hugging her back.

PJ saying she loved me was the best moment of my life, but this may be better.

“I thought we were talking about you?” PJ says with a sniff. “How did you switch it up on me?”

“Oh, give an old lady a break. I have two fake knees and got put on a No Fly List for fighting with a passenger.”

“What happened to the other guy?”

“He’s doing just fine. He called me a few days later, and we hashed it out. He’s not so bad.”

“He got you put on a No Fly List.”

“No one’s perfect.” Nonna is patting PJ’s hand again. “I’m proud of you, sis. You’ve been through a lot and you keep coming out stronger. You should give my grandson another chance.”

“Nonna—”

“Don’t worry so much about your parents. They’ve made *things* more important than people, and they’ll suffer the effects of that sooner or later. But you don’t have to keep suffering because of them. They’re the ones missing out on not putting you first. From the sounds of it, you’re not missing out on anything.”

She squeezes PJ’s arm, and I hold back my tears because I can’t stay away another minute. I make a loud shuffling sound and they both turn at the same time.

“There he is,” Nonna says. PJ looks so sweet and exposed, I want to hold her tight and kiss every pain better. “What were you thinking, letting this girl go?”

“She let *me* go,” I say. “I’m not as good a catch as you thought, Nonna.”

PJ closes her eyes tightly. “I should go.”

“Good thinking. Mary and I wanted to play that life-size Jenga set. I have half my blackout bingo done already!”

“Nonna, you’re more than the Ultimate Luciano,” I tell her.

“Wait until I’m holding that trophy,” she says. “Now you hold on a sec and we’ll come with you,” Nonna says, pushing herself to a stand. She’s wearing a puffy coat and gold sunglasses, and she looks like she could hit the mean streets of Boca Raton.

“I should check on the others—” PJ starts, but Nonna isn’t having any of it.

“Oh, what’s going to happen? You think someone’s going to faint on a ropes course, or something?”

“Nonna!” I groan. “That’s not nice.”

“Like she doesn’t know she fainted?”

“At least I can fly,” PJ says.

Nonna laughs wickedly.

She rounds up Mary, and soon, all of her adult children are following, along with PJ and me.

We fall in line together several feet behind the others.

“Nonna is my hero.”

“She’s taken you hostage. That’s the Stockholm Syndrome talking.”

PJ drives her elbow into my gut and then she looks down at my leg.

“You’re limping harder. What happened?”

“It’s nothing.”

“No, it’s worse. Is it the cold? Or—” she slams her eyes shut and winces. “You ran to help me.”

“Yup, and I’d do it again.”

“But your job—”

“Is a *job*.”

In my periphery, I see her head snap to the side. “Is everything okay?”

I sigh. “It’s all fine. I’m being ungrateful.”

“You? Not likely.”

“I am. I’m being ungrateful. I have everyone’s dream job, and it’s all thanks to you and the work you put in to my training freshman and sophomore year, and here I am complaining about being filthy rich?”

I’m disgusted with myself, disgusted with the resentment I feel even thinking about my job, disgusted that I can’t keep that resentment out of my voice when I’m trying to impress the woman I love.

“Sorry,” I say, wanting to erase the last thirty seconds from her mind. “I didn’t have a chance to meditate this morning, and I’m off my game.”

PJ shivers, and I want to put my arm around her, but I don’t want to make a misstep. “You know, I started meditating.”

“Really?”

“Yup. I started doing yoga and I end with a meditation every day. Part of my whole ‘winning the morning’ routine.”

“Winning the morning? That’s *my* thing. I talked about it on a podcast a few months back.”

“Oh, did you?” she asks so innocently, I know she knows.

Which means she listens to my interviews. Satisfaction fills me.

“Anyway,” she continues, “my chiropractor told me I must suck at it, because my muscles are tighter than a bongo drum.”

I laugh. “Maybe you’d be happier doing another exercise. Say, kickboxing.”

“Are you calling me aggressive?”

“Are you going to hurt me if I say yes?”

Nonna turns around and calls to us over her shoulder. “I have some old Tae Bo tapes you can borrow, sis.”

“How can you hear us?” I ask loudly.

“Hearing aids.”

PJ lifts her scarf around her face so no one can see her laugh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



PARKER

At dinner, everyone is comparing bingo cards. Sienna and Chris are in the lead, with Cool Teen Noah right behind them. The wind has picked up and is blowing icy gusts into the pavilion, but with a potentially unsafe number of space heaters in the pavilion, no one seems to mind. It's staggering how much this family can accomplish in one day.

Already tonight, they've done the Oreo face challenge, blown bubbles onto the top of a water bottle, and now they're trying to build houses with playing cards. That particular bingo space stipulates that they have to build a house *with* a small child, so the little kids are getting farmed out to cousins and aunts and uncles, placing a card here, knocking down a whole house there when the wind doesn't do it for them.

It's hilarious.

Lauren and Amber sneak away from their groups and head straight for me, laughing conspiratorially.

"Hey, everything okay?" I ask, not sure why they're coming toward me.

“Oh, we set the kids up to wait until the last possible minute, and then push the thing over.”

I snicker along with them, and we watch as it plays out exactly as Lauren and Amber set up.

Anthony and Gabe are on a team with Felix, Noah, and a few others. They’re acting all cocky because their house of cards is almost done. Sonny’s team has consistently been derailed by the wind, because they’re closest to the edge of the pavilion, and the various other teams have succumbed to acts of toddler terrors more than once. But now that Lauren and Amber mention it, Felix has been uncharacteristically easygoing the whole time.

Noah keeps throwing looks at Sonny and the other older cousins he clearly looks up to.

“Bruh, we’re gonna smoke you,” he yells to Sonny.

“Are you done yet?” Felix asks. They only have a handful of cards left to place, and Anthony, Gabe, and Noah are moving with surgical precision.

“We’re so close, bud,” Anthony says to Felix.

Then Felix looks at Amber, who holds out her hand in a “not yet” gesture.

The group sets up another card and another, and Felix watches and waits.

“Are you done yet?” Felix repeats.

“Just a few more cards, pal,” Anthony says.

Felix narrows his eyes and counts the cards in their hands. Noah puts up a card, and Felix says, “How many left?”

“Two more cards, little dude,” Noah says.

At this, Felix’s eyes brighten. He looks over at Amber, gives her a huge smile and thumbs up, and Amber nods and snickers with a vengeful glee.

“Wait for it ...” Amber says.

“Ladies and gentleman—” Noah starts.

But just as the last card is about to be set down, Felix screams, “AH-CHOO!” He throws his hands forward as if they’re part of his sneeze.

The cards go flying.

Laughter circles the pavilion like a wave in a sports arena.

Lauren and Amber are in hysterics, and it’s impossible not to join them. Sonny and Chris are in tears, as are several of the other cousins.

Sienna comes over and collapses into giggles with us.

“What did we do before you came along, Parker?” Amber asks, wiping her eyes.

Sienna pushes her. “Oh, stop. Like you weren’t having fun until this week?”

“Of course we’ve had fun. Parker has simply leveled the playing field. ”

Seeing Lauren and Amber laughing and cheering on their destructive toddlers warms me more than the space heaters. Sienna watches the kids longingly, and when she puts her hand on her flat, thin stomach, I have to turn away.

There are too many emotions. Too much joy and sorrow, and I can’t handle them all warring in my chest.

I can’t get this invested. I can’t care that Sonny’s sister looks longingly at her nieces and nephews. I can’t care that his sisters-in-law are making me feel like one of them. I can’t care that Nonna makes me feel like a future like this is somehow possible.

I can’t care that I want a life with Sonny more than ever.

Because as much as I want to be like Nonna and fit in with Sonny’s family, I’m not and I don’t. Not really.

I close my eyes and envision shoving all of these emotions into a box. And then I lock that box the heck up.

I turn back around, feeling collected. I put back on my professional smile as Daniel and Harry wave at me. I wish I knew someone I could set Daniel up with. He asked me about

Ash when we were getting ready for the ropes course, but she's off limits while Rusty's alive and breathing.

Heck, if I met him in another life, maybe I'd even be interested. But I met Sonny first.

Once you've seen the glory of the sun, no other light compares. Even if you'll go blind looking at it.

Ash comes over to hang out with me, and I feel a bit of the stiffness in my spine ease.

"You doing okay?"

"I think so."

"Are you and Sonny back together?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Max walks by and sticks his tongue out at me.

I stick my tongue back out at him.

He smiles.

"I've never seen you this happy," Ash says, moving past my silence. "Why are you holding back, PJ?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm scared. Everything seems so good between us, but what if, deep down, we're still the same messes we were then? What if we try and fail again?"

"I don't think you're afraid of that at all," Ash says. "I think you're afraid you *won't*."

"What does that mean?"

"Listen, I don't know anything about psychology, but I don't think you've ever been afraid of failure. When you fall, you get back up again. That's who you are." Ash's words are light, but her blue eyes are as earnest as I've ever seen them.

"That's crazy. Everyone is afraid of failing," I say, feeling weirdly defensive.

"Parker, come on," Ash says. "You were captain of the debate team, an elite gymnast, first chair in flute, blah blah

blah. I'm sorry, but your accomplishments are legit boring to me at this point. You graduated top in your class from one of the best business schools in the *world*. You have arrived! What could you possibly accomplish that would make your parents proud?"

I pause, and a tingling sensation spreads out from my chest to my limbs. I've never thought of it like that. "Nothing. Nothing I do will ever be good enough for them."

"Exactly! You're not actually afraid of failure because you already *see* yourself as a failure. Parker, you're afraid of success! You're afraid of succeeding and of those successes being meaningless to the people who matter most to you. And how could you feel otherwise with parents like yours? Your successes don't mean anything to them because *they're* the failures." Her words make my chin start to quiver. "But you don't need to worry about that with Sonny. It's been seven years, and he's never stopped thinking of you. The way he's watched you today is proof—still—that your successes mean *everything* to him. And what would you two succeeding mean to both of you?"

The rightness of Ash's words is like stepping beneath a waterfall. Truth showers over me, getting in my eyes and nose and under my skin. The possibility of Sonny and me succeeding makes my throat swell. "Everything." I laugh incredulously. "Ash, you're right. You're exactly right! How did I miss this? How did you figure this out?"

"It's the hair," she says with a small smile. Her curls bounce under her beanie. "It hides really massive brains."

* * *

As much as I want to find Sonny and talk to him, I let him have fun with his family while I hang back and process what Ash said.

At one point, Nonna gets up and walks from the table. She's not quite rushing, but when she's out of the pavilion, we hear her answer a phone call. She returns a few minutes later looking worried.

Great Aunt Mary asks her something, and she shrugs it off. My mind whirs with fears and possibilities, but just as quickly as I consider them, I reject them. No doctor would call this late in the evening. She's financially more than okay, thanks to her own business savvy and to the twins, who bought her a house she didn't need.

Whatever it is, I want her to be okay.

She deserves every happiness.

Sienna is playing with Gabe and Lauren's toddler. Her smile slips for a moment, and whatever pain she clearly has around fertility throbs like a sore thumb.

Yes, even with that sadness, she maintains a joy that emanates from her.

How does she do that?

How does Sonny's mom manage to look so thoughtful and so happy? How does Anthony seem at his wit's end with his tumultuous boys one minute and then pick them up and spin them in a circle the next?

How is a love like this real?

And what is wrong with my parents that they never wanted this?

When Lauren and Sienna bring up the idea of karaoke—which isn't on my bingo card but should have been—Ash calls Rusty to get a speaker. While they wait, a couple of the great grandkids pull out portable karaoke mics and sing *Let It Go* together. Rusty's back in a matter of minutes, and soon, some of the teens are up performing *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Harry runs up to the stage to hang out with his "cool" older cousins. And he takes off his jacket, because none of them are wearing them.

Because teens and jackets.

Eye roll.

Annoyance flickers in my brain as I think about how I should have put karaoke on the itinerary. If I'd been better

prepared, I'd have had amps and lights ready and a large screen for reading rather than someone's iPad.

But it's hard to beat myself up when the Lucianos don't seem to mind. It's hard to see myself as a failure when everyone is so happy.

They've gone off script, but this time, it's something everyone can participate in. It's early enough still that the youngest kids don't need to sleep yet, but it's late enough that it's almost dark, and it makes the cold evening almost cozy.

After each performance, someone yells to Nonna to ask her how it was. Nonna acts like Caesar, holding her thumb out after each performance. She pretends to be harsh, but a smile quivers in the lines around her wrinkled mouth, and it's ultimately thumbs up every time, even for the ones that don't deserve it.

Sonny's family makes no sense. Everyone is teasing. Uncle Bruno is even heckling! But no one is criticizing. Everyone who goes up seems to have a rock solid understanding that they have the full backing of the entire Luciano clan behind them.

This is how Alice must have felt when she tumbled into Wonderland, into a nonsensical world too fantastic to believe.

What could someone do with love like this behind them? It's no wonder that Sonny and so many of his cousins are so accomplished. Everyone has believed in them their whole lives.

Yet ... some of them aren't accomplished in the traditional sense. I heard one of the cousins talk about being laid off from his third job in two years. My parents would have disowned me. But these people just heard him out and offered whatever help he needed.

Like.

What?

My friends would do that, but friends are different. You self-select. You opt in. These people have been stuck with

each other for decades, no say in the matter, but they all act like they won the lottery.

And they're right.

My phone buzzes with a call, and I immediately regret checking it.

It's from my mother.

I send it to voicemail, and a moment later, I see the transcript of her message.

Parker, are you screening my calls? No matter. We're coming for a visit next week. I've emailed you the itinerary. We've booked the B&B at that farm you work on. Call me back.

Shock and offense fight for center stage in my thoughts.

Offense wins.

That farm I work on? Has she listened to a single word I've said about my job? Does she think I'm picking crops? And if I were, why would that be so bad? I want to scream. Why does she have to come out? What great faux pas have I committed now that she needs to come criticize me to my face instead of on the phone?

I look back down at the transcript, and I catch what I missed before. She said *we*.

My father's coming, too?

Apprehension twists my gut into knots as I stuff my phone back in my pocket. Sonny gets up and walks over, and it's like a flicker of light in the darkness. I can do nothing but marvel at how stunning he is. He's wearing a thick Waves hoodie and joggers, and he somehow manages to make limping drip with swagger.

But he's not cocky. Sonny's a lot of things, but he doesn't elevate himself over anyone. He's a man of the people.

A stupidly hot man.

And he was mine once.

I'm reminded of a thousand times I admired him walking, and the familiarity clashes in my brain with the newness now. I've seen him so much lately, but I haven't had the chance to study him, to memorize the new angles and curves of his face. I haven't had the chance to run my hand over the back of his short hair and feel the bristles against my skin. I haven't felt his five o'clock shadow against my cheek. He was always toned, but the broadness of his back and shoulders is a mystery to me.

And ... I'm staring. No, not just staring, I'm practically drooling.

I'm such an idiot.

I want him as badly as ever. More, even. I've been looking at myself as unlovable. I've seen myself, not as an adorable bouncing goat, but as the goat that was born without the right muscles working, the one the other goats shy away from.

I've tried to hide, tried to fake, but Linda was right: I haven't fooled him. And after listening to Ash, I wonder if I've fooled anyone.

Except myself.

"You look deep in thought," he says when he approaches. He leans against the table where Ash was moments ago, and he stands so close that if either of us takes a deep breath, our arms will touch.

I'm wearing a coat big enough to hibernate in, but I know to my core that every one of my nerves will still respond.

"I guess I am," I say.

He bumps his arm into mine, and I have to push aside my mental conversation with my imaginary therapist so I can hear what he's saying.

"I'm getting myself some hot chocolate," he says. "It's cold."

"You're wearing a hoodie like your absurd nephews."

"I run hot."

“You just said you’re cold.”

“Maybe I’m hoping you’ll warm me up.”

I chuckle now. “Why aren’t you wearing a coat? Does any part of you care about self-preservation?”

“It’s thirty-eight degrees. Until you’ve played a game at Lambeau Field in January, you don’t know cold.”

“My childhood in Rhode Island would say otherwise.”

He turns to me and plays with the faux-fur lined hood of my parka, putting it on my head and squashing my hair. Good thing I’m wearing one of those beanies with the cutout for a high ponytail, or I’d be annoyed.

“Yeah, but you’re all bundled up in Rhode Island.” He traces his finger from the top of the hood down to the bottom, letting his fingertip graze my forehead, cheek, and jaw the whole way down. The sensation sends a hot flush through my body that makes this parka even more unnecessary.

“And you’re wearing a cape in Lambeau Field.”

He arches his brows. “A cape? You make it sound like we’re cosplaying as nineteenth century English lords.”

“What do you call it, then?”

He boops my nose. “A *sideline* cape.”

“Because that’s so much better.” I rock forward slightly on my platform sneakers as he grabs the flaps of my coat right below my chin, and once again, his hands are brushing against my skin. He’s finding every reason he can to touch me, and I’m okay with it.

Up on the small stage, Anthony, Gabe, and Sienna are performing a Beastie Boys song. They’re as loud as thunder, but I can barely hear them over my hammering pulse and Sonny’s low, teasing voice.

“Of course it’s better. Sideline capes are awesome. They feel like you’re wearing a warm hug.”

“Okay, Olaf.”

“Easy, Elsa. I promise you can’t hang with my *Frozen* jokes.”

“Elsa? As if! I’m that big ice monster who drives them all away.”

“You wish. You’re the girl who’s shoved her feelings deep down behind an icy wall because you’re afraid of what will happen when you finally *let it go* and *show yourself*.”

“What are you doing? Are those quotes?”

He grits his teeth and laughs at my blank expression. “Okay, Ice Park, pretend all you want. I’ve heard you sing *Let it Go* before.”

“Only because it was on the radio—”

“Disney Radio, which you would have to cue up. Admit it. *Frozen* is your jam.”

“Never. Besides, if I’m Elsa, what does that make you? The little fire salamander?”

Sonny’s eyes go even wider and brighter. “You watched *Frozen 2*?”

“While I was babysitting for Duke and Millie. Not on my own,” I scramble to add. And although that’s true, I conveniently leave out the part about how the *Panic! At the Disco* version of *Into the Unknown* has a permanent place on my playlist.

“If I’m the fire salamander,” Sonny says, “we should see if I turn into a prince if you kiss me.”

“You’re mixing up your movies.”

“You’re avoiding my suggestion. No, sorry, invitation.”

My eyes drop to his lips as a fire roars to life inside me, melting my will into a puddle. I want to grab the ties dangling from his hoodie and pull him in for a kiss that stops time and causes stars to collide in distant galaxies. I want to crush our lips together until we don’t know where one person starts and the other stops.

I want him, body and soul.

So when I fold my arms instead of kissing him, it's perhaps the greatest show of self-restraint I've ever exhibited.

Because I am *terrified*.

What will happen if we succeed?

"You, sir, are ridiculous."

"You, missy, like it."

I can't deny it.

His siblings finish yelling at us to fight for our right to party, and when they sit down, Nonna yells out, "Sonny and Cher, you're up!"

I look around, trying to figure out who she means. I'm fairly certain I know everyone here by now. I guess it's possible someone's nickname is Cher. I'm a huge fan of the movie *Clueless*, though, so I definitely would remember if someone had said the name.

Sonny chuckles. "She's talking about us."

"Ooooooh. Yeah, no. Not happening."

"I don't keep you around to look pretty," Nonna yells from across the pavilion.

My eyes pop, and I smile because everyone's watching. But then I remember that Nonna can spot my fake smile a mile away, and I don't *need* to fake smile, and I don't know what facial expression to make, so I mutter. "Is she talking to me or to you?"

"You don't want to find out." He holds out a hand. "Looks like we're up."

"No! I can't do this. I'll look like an idiot." I protest, digging in the three-inch heels of my sneakers, even as his strong hand grabs mine.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to." His aqua eyes dance in the low lights.

"You know I'm not good in front of a crowd."

“I’ve seen you debate people in front of huge crowds, and you were outstanding.”

“That’s not the same.”

“Exactly. Those people wanted to see you fail. You *couldn’t* fail in front of us. Don’t you get it?”

My eyes sting. “I don’t want them to think less of me.”

“Who would think less of you for having fun?”

“You know the answer.”

“They were wrong. Why can’t you just accept that and live your life?”

“I’m not going to live forever!” Nonna yells. “Amuse me, dang it.”

I snort in spite of myself and rub my nose. Sonny has to pull me along, but I let him pull. I should yank my hand out of his, but then I remember the way he used to thread his strong, graceful fingers through mine. The way he used to trace my fingers like he was captivated by them.

I haven’t thought about that in years.

But I’m thinking about it now.

The pavilion may as well be a football field for how long it takes to get to the front. As soon as we’re on stage, I drop Sonny’s hand. But he must have felt how it was trembling, because he says, “Just breathe. Don’t look at anyone but me.”

“I’m mad at you.”

“Perfect! You can’t be angry and scared at the same time.” Sonny turns to his family and his smile goes from impish to *showtime!* “So, what are we singing?”

“I Got You, Babe!” Sonny’s parents, uncles, and aunts shout.

“Seriously?” Sonny asks. One of the cousins gives us both a karaoke microphone. “We could sing ‘The Beat Goes On.’ ‘A Cowboy’s Work is Never Done.’ ‘All I Ever Need is You.’”

Nonna shakes with laughter, and the sight of her wielding more power than a dictator inspires me.

“Wow,” I say sarcastically into the microphone. And suddenly all eyes are on me. Every matriarch and patriarch in Sonny’s life is in this room, and they’re lapping up the idea of me putting Sonny in his place.

Listen, I’m aware of the desperate longing I have for parental approval. Even if this is far, far outside of my wheelhouse, the swell in my chest at their approval is stronger than any discomfort I could ever feel.

But it’s not just their approval that emboldens me.

It’s their smiles.

That same feeling of love that I’ve seen them show to every member of this family is turned on me right now.

So when I keep teasing Sonny, it’s not as scary as it is ... exhilarating.

“You have an expansive knowledge of Sonny and Cher’s catalogue. Anything you’d like to share with the class?”

Sonny’s family laughs harder than the crack deserves.

And I eat it up.

“You don’t have much choice when your name is Sonny,” he says into his mic before addressing me, “Cher.”

“As if!” I say in my best Alicia Silverstone. I’m being so bold, I hardly recognize myself, but it’s worth it when all of the female cousins and a couple of the males laugh.

“*Clueless!* Best Austen adaptation ever,” Emma says.

“Ding ding ding!” I say, pointing at Emma.

Sonny eyes me. “Who are you and what have you done with Parker Emerson?”

I spin to say something sassy, but I’m not used to sneakers, and the movement isn’t as smooth as heels. I stumble and start falling toward Sonny in a repeat of last week. Like then, Sonny catches me, but this time, he has a surer footing and

twirls me into a low dip. My arms snake around his muscular neck, and my fingers brush his short hair.

I love his hair short. I've never felt it before, and this quick graze isn't nearly enough.

With our faces only an inch apart, our breath mingles. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were falling for me, PJ."

"Suck eggs, Santino."

This gets huge laughs, with Nonna in particular shouting up to the stage. "Atta girl!"

My cheeks warm. "Don't let me fall," I whisper.

His eyes gleam. "Never."

He pulls me back up, and the music starts.

And in spite of my powerful aversion to making a fool of myself, I let the lure of the Lucianos wash over me. With Sonny, I sing, "I Got You Babe."

And we absolutely crush it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



SONNY

Arctic wind howls around the pavilion, but it doesn't stop the grownups from staying up late. Even Amber and Lauren come back with Anthony and Gabe after they put their kids to sleep in the cabins. They have iPads set up as monitors so they can watch the kids sleep, and a few of the other families are asleep along that same row.

Some of the older kids grab lanterns and tell us they're going to star gaze.

"Through storm clouds?" I ask.

"Fine, we're going to look around," Noah says.

"Okay," my mom says. "But make sure you take flashlights and keep your phones on ring."

"And put your coats on," I tell them.

"Bruh. You're not wearing your coat," Noah says.

"Bruh," I say. "We're in the middle of a polar vortex. It's going to get down below freezing, and you're from Florida, not Alaska. And you'd better believe I'd wear it if I were

planning to walk around for longer than twenty seconds. Put on your coat.”

Noah rolls his eyes to the other teens, but they all put on their coats.

Turds.

I turn back to see Gabe and Lauren assessing me. “That was a very adult thing to do,” Gabe says.

I bristle. “I *am* an adult. I have health insurance and own a home.”

“But you left your coat back at your tent, didn’t you?” Gabe asks.

I grin. “That’s not the point.”

“Isn’t it?”

We brought the hot cocoa bar over to us, and I grab a straw, peel off the paper on one end, hold the straw up to my mouth, and spit the rest of the wrapper at Gabe.

As brothers do.

Mom pulls out a deck of cards, and soon, we’re into a rousing game of Crazy Eights. And just as soon, the subject is back on me. Again.

“So, you and Parker were on fire,” Anthony says.

“Yeah we were. I’ve never seen her do anything like that.”

Sienna shrugs. “She’s the best, Sonny. We’re a lot, and she doesn’t even have cousins. I can’t believe how well she’s handling all of us.”

“She told you about her family?”

Sienna looks at Amber and Lauren. “We talked. She’s a lot more open than she was when you two were dating.”

“She is, right?”

“You’ve both grown up,” Mom says. “Maybe it’s time to put aside you leaving her—”

“What? I didn’t leave her.”

Mom grabs my cold hand with her warm one. I really should have grabbed my coat before we came to the pavilion. Even with the space heaters, it's chilly.

"I don't mean you wanted to. You were in an impossible situation. No one blames you for choosing a future career, but —"

"Wait." I look at my family, at the concern and understanding on their faces. "All these years, have you thought I chose football over PJ? You know she broke up with me."

"Because she didn't want to keep you from your dreams," Sienna says. "It's noble."

"Why does everyone act like it was always the NFL or bust for me? You guys were in every country I was. The only way I could make friends fast was to join a team. *That* was what football meant. I didn't even think about playing professionally until PJ pushed me into it! I would rather have stayed with her than play a stupid sport that doesn't let me play pickleball with my siblings at a family reunion! I'm not even a person to the league, I'm a commodity, and I'm sick of it!"

"Whoa, I'm sorry, man," Anthony says, reaching across the table to slap my shoulder. "I didn't realize you felt that way."

"Me either. That sucks," Gabe says, taking his turn.

Mom pushes my brothers away and hugs me tightly. Man, she gives the best hugs. They're warm and firm, but soft and accepting. They're a million times better than a sideline cape.

"Why didn't you tell us about Parker?" she asks.

"I felt stupid. She acted like I was being flighty and impetuous because I was planning to stay with her. But she wouldn't believe me that I cared about her more than football."

"If you don't love the NFL, why are you still playing?" Dad asks.

I sigh. “I think deep down, I’ve been trying to prove to PJ that I’m the sort of guy who can commit to something.”

Sienna puts her gloved hand to her chest. “Sonny.”

I shrug, because Sienna looks like she wants to cry, and that’s the last thing I want for her. “It’s not a big deal. I’ll figure it out.”

“You don’t have to figure it out alone,” she says. “Talk to us.”

“I don’t need to talk about anything,” I insist. “I have the best life in the world.” My family trades glances. “Guys, seriously, I’m fine. We don’t need to talk about something so heavy. We should be having fun.”

“You’re allowed to feel this,” Sienna says.

“I know,” I say, getting more and more frustrated. “I’m not worried about *me*.”

My sister rocks back in her seat. “Then who *are* you worried about?”

“Never mind.”

“Sonny!” she says. “Is this about *me*? Are you worried about me feeling sad because you’re sad?”

I don’t answer.

Then my sister rushes around the table and pulls me into a hug every bit as good as one of my mom’s.

“You are the stupidest person I know,” she says with a watery laugh.

“I hate seeing you sad,” I admit, my throat swelling with emotion.

“Well, get used to it. Because even if I do become a mother, I’m still going to be sad sometimes. Who knows? I could finally get my miracle baby and still get postpartum depression!”

“Then I’ll come over and nanny for you,” I say.

“And I’ll let you. But I’m not a troubled fifteen-year-old anymore, Sunshine. You don’t have to fight my battles for me.”

“But I can *try*.”

And now my parents are chuckling like I’m as obstinate as Felix. “Sonny, you’ve always been such a fixer.” Mom says. “But not everything *needs* fixing. Sometimes it’s enough just to know your problems are seen.”

My conversation with PJ from the bathroom comes into my head.

“You said I couldn’t see you like this.”

“That Sonny couldn’t,” she told me. *“I think this one can.”*

So *that’s* what she meant.

It wasn’t that she didn’t want me to see her when she was having a panic attack.

It’s that she didn’t think I was capable of it.

She thought I would try to fix her. But she never needed someone to fix her. She needed someone to see her broken pieces and love her anyway.

I start crying. In a really manly way, but boy, are the tears coming.

“I’ve never stopped loving her. I know it’s been a long time, and I don’t think I even realized that until I saw her again a few months ago. But the second I saw her again, I was done. I canceled with the woman I was supposed to go out with the next night, and everything. Since the first time I heard her speak in class, she’s been it for me.”

Sienna’s eyes water. “So do you finally admit that you *do* need something else to be happy? That your mantra is wrong?”

I rub my misty eyes. “It’s not about being happy. It’s about being ...”

“Whole,” my dad says.

“Whole,” I agree.

“Then you should tell her that,” Mom says.

“I have.”

“Then keep telling her,” Sienna says.

“But I don’t want to push her! She always said she couldn’t control herself around me, and I can’t take advantage of that.”

“Is that why you were acting so bizarre when we invited her to do stuff with us today?” Amber asks.

“Yes! I can’t be the one to push her into a lifetime with me!”

“Then don’t, dingus!” Sienna says. “Respect whatever boundary she needs to put up, but she can’t move forward without good information. You’re trying to let her figure out how much you’ve grown, but maybe she needs you to tell her flat out that you’re not going anywhere. I know you, Sonny. You’ll never forgive yourself if you let a second of that woman’s life pass by without her knowing that you love her.”

I drop my head, because she’s exactly right. “Why are you like this?”

“You mean brilliant and amazing? Because hope springs eternal, baby bro,” Sienna says. She lifts my face and squeezes my cheeks a bit too hard. “I take pills and hormone shots and eat special diets, all in the hopes of having a baby I may never get to have. Caring this much hurts. Wanting a baby is like crawling into the Octagon every night against a much tougher opponent. But it’s not like I can just stop wanting it. And I don’t *want* to stop wanting it. I don’t want to stop going after what I want most, even if it keeps hurting for a long time. I want to be a mom. I want Chris to be a dad. Maybe my body will stop betraying me. Maybe we’ll get a surrogate. Maybe we’ll try to adopt or foster. I don’t care how it happens; I care *that* it happens. And I know I have an army of people who’ll help me every step of the way. Not everyone is lucky enough to say that.”

I take her hand from my face as tears roll down her cheeks.

“I don’t want to get my heart broken again,” I admit. My mom puts her arm around my waist. My dad stands behind me with his hands on my shoulders.

“I know the feeling,” Sienna says, as Chris wraps his arms around her from behind. “But we have to take a shot. And we can’t be afraid of the sadness that awaits us for trying.”

Footsteps from outside the pavilion thunder toward us, and we all turn to see the teens running toward us.

“We can’t find Harry,” Noah says, breathless.

“What?” We all stand.

“We’re playing Sardines, you know the reverse hide and seek game?” We nod. “Harry wanted to play—”

“He’s nine! He should be asleep!” I say.

“He saw us running past the tent and he snuck out and wanted to play, so we let him,” Noah says. Some of the other teens at least have the good sense to look sheepish about this. “Anyway, he wanted to be the hider, and now no one can find him.”

“And it’s getting cold,” one of the other teens says, her breath puffing out in clouds.

My dad turns me around. “Go wake Parker and have her get some of the staff looking around. They know the place better than we do. We’ll wake the family.”

We all break.

I rush to PJ’s cabin as quickly as I can. I pull my hood over my head, trying to retain more warmth. It’s intensely cold out, and the frigid wind only intensifies it. The cold is making my knee even stiffer, and a familiar stab of resentment hits me. If not for my job, I would have full range of motion right now. If I hadn’t sacrificed my body for a catch no one else could make, I’d be able to run faster than anyone to find my little cousin.

I’m at the cabin—a sign reads “Orange Dreamsicle”—before my thoughts can get any darker.

I knock at the cabin door. I wait for twenty seconds. Thirty. I knock again, louder this time. I would worry about waking the other cabins, but we need all hands on deck. Besides, the wind is so loud, I doubt they can hear me. Maybe PJ can't even. I round the tiny building and walk past a large set of windows that I assume would belong to the main room. I keep walking until I see a smaller window, one not high enough to belong to a bathroom window. I rap my fist on it.

“PJ!” I yell. “Parker!”

A few moments later, PJ opens the blinds and looks out. Her hair—

My heart squeezes. Her hair is loose around her shoulders. It's *down*.

In all the time we dated, she never wore it loose. It was always—and I mean always—in a high ponytail, a low ponytail, or a braid. I used to tease her about how her hair had power to control men's hearts and she only kept it up to limit its power.

I could almost believe her hair created this polar vortex. The storm in my head and heart seeing her like this is more powerful than any weather anomaly.

PJ cracks the window just enough to talk through. “What are you doing?”

“Harry's missing.”

“What?” PJ closes the blinds. I walk back to the front of the cabin, and a moment later, Parker has thrown open the door. The lights are off, so I can't see what the place looks like. The warmth inside makes me shiver.

“I'm throwing on some extra clothes. Do you need anything?”

“You don't have anything that would fit me.” A minute later, she comes out layered to the hilt and is even wearing boots.

“Sonny,” she frowns as she jams gloves on her hands, “your clothes aren't thick enough for this weather.”

“It’s all I’ve got. Let’s go.”

“At least let’s stop at your tent—”

“There’s no time! I’ll be fine, he won’t,” I insist.

She reluctantly closes the door, and soon, we’re past the cabins and tents and are looking in the woods. We’re both on the phone with workers and family members, respectively, and calling Harry’s name every few steps. We see other lanterns and phone lights, and we faintly hear other voices, but no Harry. The shrill, icy wind picks up, rushing in our ears and blocking almost any sound. Even talking on the phone is difficult. Also, miraculous.

“How do we have cell service in this?” I ask through chattering teeth.

“Tripp couldn’t get a hold of Jane when he thought she was leaving him, so he spent a fortune getting some military grade WiFi that covers every inch of the farm.”

“I’ll thank him later.”

“Rusty’s putting up a few heavy duty tents around the site in case Harry wanders toward one. But everyone else is looking. We’ll find him.”

After twenty minutes, our voices are getting hoarse from calling Harry’s name. It’s so cold that I’ve lost feeling in my toes, and my fingers are stiff and tingling with pain.

Man, the NFL will not be happy if I get frostbite and lose some digits.

The thought makes me laugh.

PJ looks at me funny. “Are you okay?”

“Just thinking about how frostbite is expressly forbidden in my contract,” I say.

She keeps her eyes on me for a beat longer but then returns to searching the woods.

“I think we’re getting close to the reservoir,” she says. “It’s about a half mile south of the homestead area.”

“Is there any chance he went to Tripp’s house?”

She shakes her head. “They’ve checked. Tripp is lending out farm trucks and UTVs so everyone can search. Would he have gone to the reservoir?”

“If he thought it would make him look cool to his cousins, maybe,” I say, feeling sick. “What was Noah thinking, taking kids out in this storm for a dumb game?” PJ doesn’t answer, and her silence is an answer of its own. “He wanted to impress us, didn’t he?”

Her mouth pulls into a grimace.

“Not us. Me.” My sickness is a full body flu. “This is my fault. He was trying to recreate what he saw as the *Luciano magic*, and now, Harry’s stuck in this storm.” Fear closes my throat.

“It’s not your fault. Noah is sixteen. His frontal lobe is a decade from being fully formed. Even if you guys had played canasta all last night instead of capture the flag, he still would have wanted to do something dumb.”

Her words should soothe me, but they can’t penetrate the layer of fear coating me. “Harry’s a kid. This can’t happen.” I shiver so hard, my jaw hurts.

PJ grabs my hand and laces her gloved fingers through it. There’s enough warmth that my hand feels like it’s burning at her touch. “*Nothing* is going to happen to him. Tripp and Rusty know every inch of the farm. They know every hiding spot. They’ll find him. But we need to get you out of this storm, Sonny. You’re *freezing*.”

“I’m fine,” I insist for what feels like the hundredth time.

This place is huge, what with us taking a serpentine route through the forest to try to cover as much ground as possible and shouting until our throats are raw. It was already a dark night, but here in the woods, the darkness is oppressive. It pushes down on us, encroaching on our lights. It quiets the worst of the wind, but it also dampens our cries.

It starts snowing hard, icy flakes that pelt and melt.

Pelt and melt.

That's funny.

What's not funny is how much it hurts to shiver. I'm almost convulsing, and my jaw aches as my teeth smash into each other. I can barely pry my mouth open to yell his name anymore. His name.

Whose name?

"Who are we looking for, again?" I yell over the wind.

PJ stops and whirls on me. She holds her phone up to my face and her massive eyes widen. "Sonny, you're blue!"

"Huh?" I ask. My mind tries to ask more questions but my mouth won't let them come out.

"You're hypothermic! We have to warm you up, now!"

The shivering stops, and I shake my head. "No, we have to look for Daniel."

"HARRY!"

"I'm Sonny!" I laugh.

Why am I laughing?

PJ is on her phone yelling at someone to drop her a pin, and the next thing I know, she's looking at a red dot on a weird picture of land on her phone, and there's no pin anywhere.

Pin.

That's a weird word.

She pulls my hand, and I stumble heavily. What is wrong with my leg?

"My knee hurts," I say, but I say the word wrong, because it has a k in it and I forgot to say the k. "K-nee. K-nee?" A sound like a choked cry comes from Parker's throat. "Don't cry, baby!" I tell her. "I love you! I've always loved you!"

She puts her arm around my waist, and I put my arm around her shoulders, and I laugh as she tries to take some of the burden of my weight. But I also want to cry.

“All I’ve wanted since the day we met is to share your burdens, and now you’re sharing mine,” I blubber. I shouldn’t be saying this. It’s so weird!

Weird.

That’s a weird word.

“I need to make another call,” she yells. “We’re almost to the tent, okay? It’s thirty yards away!”

“I can catch a thirty yard pass in my sleep,” I say. She holds the phone up to her ear, but she must accidentally press speaker with her cheek, because I can hear it, too.

“Hello, Parker.”

“Dad!” she cries. “I need your help.”

“Is that Parker?” her mom says in the background. “Let me talk to her.”

“No, I don’t have time for you to tell me all the ways I’ve failed you both! I need your help, Dad!”

“Well, I don’t know—”

“Don’t you dare shut me out! Don’t you dare tell me some kid needs surgery tomorrow and she’s more important than my ‘feelings’!” she screams. “Sonny is hypothermic and I need to save him, and if you don’t help me, I will never talk to you again!”

“Uh—” he stammers, and I want to laugh, because he’s not such a hotshot now, is he? But also, I’m hypothermic?

“Did she say she’s with *Sonny*?” her mom asks.

“NOT NOW, MOM! Dad, help me!”

“Where are you?”

“In the middle of the stupid polar vortex that came down from the Northeast! He’s wet. We were out looking for his cousin who got lost, and the storm turned on us. We’re twenty yards from a tent, and there’s a sleeping bag and water, but nothing else.”

“What are his symptoms?”

“His face is blue. He was shivering badly but now he’s stopped. He’s a bit loopy and unsteady on his feet.”

“But he’s talking?”

“That I am, sir,” I joke, because I’m hilarious.

“Kind of,” PJ says.

“That’s a good sign. It’s mild to moderate, not severe. If you can get him into the tent and get skin-to-skin contact as soon as possible, he should be fine. It will take a couple of hours for his body to return to temperature though, so stay vigilant.”

“Thanks,” she says. “I have to go!”

“I have cancer,” her dad blurts.

No, he can’t have said that. I’m hearing things. I’m hypothermic, after all.

“I’m sorry. I gotta go.”

PJ hangs up, and any front she was putting up of having it together vanishes. She starts sobbing a few feet from the tent.

Feet? “Why can’t I feel my feet?”

“Get in!” she cries, opening the flap to a small, thick canvas tent. Her beautiful face is scrunched up in a way I’ve never seen before. She’s so tiny and breakable, and I’m the one breaking her. Or is it her dad?

I stop outside the tent and look at her. “I’m sorry about your dad.”

“I can’t care about that right now. I care about you.”

“Then why did you break my heart? I love you so much.”

“I love you, too,” she says, tears spilling down her face. “I’ll tell you all about it when you get in the tent, okay? Please, please get in, Sonny.”

I nod and duck to get in, but I fall hard to the ground.

I’m never this clumsy.

And it's the fall more than anything that makes me realize something is terribly wrong.

"PJ, I don't feel good."

She fastens the tent flap as fast as she can. She's weeping. For someone who hates letting people see her cry, she is a beautiful crier. She doesn't have any makeup on, and as she rips off her beanie, I see her hair down, and I'm struck with how tiny and fierce and vulnerable she is.

"I know. I'm so sorry. But I need you to take off your clothes, okay?"

"What?"

The tent is barely tall enough for her to stand in, so she crouches and starts peeling off my clothes. "You have hypothermia, remember?" She tosses off my wet hoodie and then my sneakers. She's more careful with my knee brace and then my pants.

"I always imagined this being a lot more exciting."

A strangled laugh escapes her. "Get in the sleeping bag."

I can tell it's not as bitter in the tent as it was outside, but the skin that has sensation left feels like it's being stabbed with tiny icicles. I do my best to shuffle into the sleeping bag while she tears her clothes off down to her sports bra and ...

"Are those granny undies?"

"Blanche Knows Best." She says with a strained smile. She pulls her socks off. "Now stop looking."

"I don't have my fac-you-lit-ees. Faclitees?"

"Faculties."

"Your undies are sort of cute. Bigger than I imagined, but they're cute."

"I'll be sure to tell McLadyPants you approve."

She starts to slide into the sleeping bag when the air gets so heavy, I have to fight to keep my eyes open.

"This has to be the biggest disappointment of my life."

“I’m going to save you, Sonny,” she whispers, her lips against my ear, her body wrapped protectively around mine. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“That’s not what I mean.” I sigh.

“Tell me.”

Her nose presses into my cheek, and I have just enough sensation in my face to feel how cold her nose is, too. My thoughts are slipping away from me. But I hold on to the last thing I can think of. “You’re finally lying next to me, and I can barely feel a thing.”

“Sonny,” she cries again, and I want to comfort her, but everything goes dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



PARKER

I don't know how long we've been huddled together when my phone buzzes, but it has to be forty-five minutes or an hour, at least. Long enough that I've cried every last tear out of my body. Long enough to notice the change in his breathing from ragged to steady. And his pulse has picked up.

It was scary low.

It's less scary now. The sleeping bag feels a bit warmer, too, and I can almost breathe easily.

Figuratively speaking, of course. I never breathe easily.

I'm pressed against Sonny's side, my arms and legs around him as much as they can be. His arms were wrapped around me before he fell asleep, so I've had to wiggle around them. It's a mummy bag that we definitely could not fit in if I weren't attached to him like a koala. I pulled the head cover as close around Sonny's head as I could, which doesn't leave me much room.

I couldn't care less.

My phone buzzes, and I'm glad I had the foresight to keep our phones so close. I shoot my hand out and bring it back as fast as I can, because as worried as I am about Sonny, I have to know if there's any news about Harry, too.

Or maybe it's my mom texting about my dad *having cancer*.

It's not my mom. When three texts appear from Sienna, relief settles over me like a blanket of fresh snow.

SIENNA: WE FOUND HARRY!

SIENNA: He was in the hot tub! He said he got tired playing with the older cousins and decided to take a break. He was sitting in his underwear staring at the stars, happy as a clam when we found him. So naturally we all want to kill him. Where are you guys?

PARKER: We're in a tent near the reservoir. Sonny was too cold to keep going. He's hypothermic, but I think he's warming up. We'll wait it out here and then come back when the weather calms down.

SIENNA: What?! Is he okay? We'll be right there!

PARKER: No, we can't risk exposing Sonny, and we can't risk anyone else getting caught in this storm!

PARKER: My dad's a doctor and walked me through what to do. He'll be fine, but I have to keep him warm. We can't leave.

SIENNA: Are you sure he'll be okay? Parker, you **HAVE** to take care of him.

I know we're talking about his physical safety, but I can't help but read her urging on another level.

PARKER: I promise I'll take care of him.

SIENNA: Okay. Keep me posted and stay safe.

PARKER: I will. You guys stay safe, too.

SIENNA: <3

I put the phone down and slump against Sonny.

Harry's okay.

Sonny's warming up.

It's all going to be fine.

My thoughts whiz in my brain. *You can't say that! He could have frostbite! He could lose a toe! He was right that the team could cut him for an injury like that!*

Oh, and your dad has cancer.

No. I can't think about that. He doesn't get to drop that information on me when I'm begging him for life-saving advice.

How selfish can one man be?

I forcibly shove thoughts about my dad out of my head. He gets zero space in my head right now. Harry's safe, so my focus can turn fully to Sonny.

I should have forced him to get his coat. Why didn't I? Old Parker would have snapped and pointed, and he'd have put that coat on, thank you very much.

So why didn't I?

We really have changed.

That's it.

We've both changed. And we're so busy trying to prove how much we've changed that it's making us stupid. Not everything we did before was wrong simply because it happened back then. So much about us was good. Great, even.

"I'm sorry I'm so stupid," I whisper against his shoulder. "Please be okay."

"I'm okay," he mutters. "And you're not stupid."

"What? Sonny!" I squeeze him so tight, I hear the breath rush out of him. "Sorry! Can you feel your toes and fingers?"

His fingers wiggle against my back, and I feel the sleeping bag shift as he wiggles his toes.

"Yeah." He yawns. "I can feel them. No frostbite. Although maybe you should touch the rest of me and I'll tell you if there are any dead spots."

I pinch him, and he flinches. “Ow!”

“Not a dead spot,” I say. “Oh, and they found Harry. He’s safe and fine. I’ll tell you about his hot tub escapades tomorrow.”

“There’s a hot tub?”

“That’s what you got from the story?”

“I have the hottest girl alive pressed up against me in a sleeping bag built for one, I’m cold, and my brains aren’t working right yet. Forgive me if the idea of getting you into a hot tub warms me up a bit extra. You should be happy about that.”

I laugh and duck my face into his armpit. Where he has armpit hair. “Ew! Hair!”

“You know, I could say the same thing. Your hair is everywhere.”

I shift so I can put my head on his shoulder. My breath puffs against his neck before bouncing back at me. “And that’s why I always wear it up. It’s driving you crazy, isn’t it?”

“My nose is itching.”

“Told you. I bet you’re regretting all those years of you pestering me to leave it down.”

“Years? I asked two, maybe three times. And it was curiosity. If I’d had frosted tips in high school, are you saying you wouldn’t have wanted to see that?”

“I would never want to see frosted tips on anyone.”

He shakes with laughter.

“Did you have frosted tips, Sonny?”

“You’ll never know.”

“Shoot, now I’m dying to see you with frosted tips.”

“SEE?”

He reaches up to scratch his nose, but frigid air rushes in, and Sonny shudders. He shoves his arm back into the sleeping bag, and I try to tighten it around him. He’s not cold to the

touch anymore, but my dad said it could take a couple of hours for him to return to temperature. The tent is noticeably more comfortable than being out in the blizzard, but it's still subarctic in here. This polar vortex is no joke.

I don't feel the same surge of fear at his shudder now that he's talking, but I'd be lying if I said worry didn't hang over my head like my own personal storm cloud.

I sigh and hold him close.

"I don't think you squeezing me is warming me up the way you think it is."

"Sorry."

"But if you wanted to make out—"

I squeeze him tight enough to make his breath expel.

He doesn't say anything for a long while, and it's just us and the dim lantern and the screaming gales outside of the tent.

Then his lips press against the top of my head. "You know, you make a surprisingly good space heater."

"Ha! My greatest accomplishment."

"It's certainly one of them," he says. "You are a source of immense hotness, and I'm soaking it all in."

I'm glad he can't see my very indulgent smile. "Are you saying I'm hot?"

"Painfully hot. Smoking hot. Scorching hot. Nothing I haven't told you a million times before," he says. And then he makes a sound like he's spitting. "But we gotta do something about your hair."

"I know. It's insane. If it weren't so much warmer down, I'd put it up already."

"Why have long hair if you don't wear it down, though? I've never understood why you don't just cut it."

"Are you insane? I love my hair. It's my best feature. Ariana Grande wishes she looked as good as I do in a high

ponytail.”

Sonny’s sigh is full of contentment.

“What?”

“I love when you go full PJ. You are salty enough to de-ice every road in this state.”

“Oh, hush. Now that I know you’re safe, maybe we should stop talking and go to sleep.”

“Oh, no. We’re not sleeping until we’ve talked some things out.”

My stomach flips. “Like what? What do we need to talk out?”

“Why did you have to smile that fake smile today?”

“Why didn’t you want me to get involved in the activities?”

“Because I was trying to make sure you chose them on your own! I was scared you wouldn’t feel like you could disagree because I don’t think you always felt safe doing that with me before.”

“Yeah, well *I* was worried you didn’t want me around and I felt stupid and didn’t know how to make your family like me when you didn’t seem to.”

“Did you want to be involved?”

“I loved it,” I admit. “Ropes course aside.”

“That’s a given.”

“Did you want me there?”

“Yes, dummy! I want you to want to be with my family! I want you to wonder how you fit in with everyone! I want you and Sienna to be the most competitive people on the field together, and I want you and Lauren and Amber forming an awesome sisters-in-law clique where you plot to take the rest of us down.” His body is getting tenser, and his heart rate is speeding up. I can *feel* the pulse in his neck racing against my cheek.

“You’re getting a little ahead of yourself.”

He squeezes his hands and takes a deep, calming breath. “You’re right. But I’m not sorry about telling you how I feel. PJ, I’ve changed, and the way I feel for you has changed.”

Wait.

The way he feels for me has changed? Then what is all this talk about? Is he prepping me to break my heart?

“Hey, stop backing away,” he says. “I’m not done.”

His arms are already draped across my waist, but it’s been about life and death. The way his arm rocks me even closer to him (how is that even possible?) is *not* about life and death.

“PJ, I need to say some things, and I need you to tamp down your natural instinct to shut the world out and assume there’s something wrong with you. There’s *nothing* wrong with you. You are a remarkable, strong, sexy brat, and I love all of that about you.”

“Brat?”

“Shut up and listen,” he says with a growl that thaws my cold heart. “I messed up when we were dating. I didn’t know how to tolerate seeing you in pain. I treated you like you needed to be fixed, and my solution was to distract you because that’s what worked with my sister when we were kids. It was the wrong solution. I was so insanely in love with you that I didn’t want you to feel a moment of unhappiness, but that wasn’t fair. You’re allowed to be sad. You’re allowed to panic and be angry and not want to throw an axe. I can love you when you’re down just as well as when you’re up.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to keep the tears from dripping down my face and onto his shoulder and chest, and he continues. “I want this to be the first family reunion you come to with us, not the last. I want you. If seven years apart has taught me anything, it’s that I’ll never stop wanting you in my life.”

“How can you be so certain? You hardly know me anymore.”

“I don’t know if you started drinking coffee or if you’ve become a marathon runner. I don’t know if you still binge watch *Gilmore Girls* when you’re having a bad day. But I know you’re even more thoughtful and kind than ever.”

My throat is so thick with emotion, I can’t swallow it down. “Me?”

“You’ve taken time to get to know what every person here needed, and you accommodated it. You changed our schedule to make sure in-laws and toddlers felt every bit as included as the rest of us. You found treats from Nonna’s childhood and my dad and his siblings’ childhood and arranged for special gift baskets to be put in each of their rooms. You’ve shown my family so much love already that they’re furious with me for ever having let you let me go.”

I don’t know what to say. The ice around my heart has melted completely, and now I’m feeling warm and my chest is bubbling and my brain is telling me I’m being stupid but I don’t know what part of me to listen to. I duck my head down further into Sonny’s chest, and the action pushes hair into my face.

UGH.

My hair!

It’s in my face, and if Sonny thought that little itch on his nose was bad, he hasn’t felt *this*. It’s everywhere.

I should say something. I should respond to Sonny bearing his soul—beautifully, I might add—but this itch is out of control. How am I supposed to live like this?

“Hey, are you okay?” he asks. “Say something, please.”

“It’s not you,” I say, irritation bubbling in my chest. “It’s this stupid hair! It’s itching my face, but I don’t want to move and let the cold in while you’re still not back to temperature!”

“Here.” He starts moving his arm, but I pin it with my elbow.

“Don’t! It’s just hair. I won’t let you get cold again.”

His laugh comes out in a quiet breath. “Then I guess you’ll have to live with the itch forever.”

“Actually ...”

A brilliant idea has formed in my mind.

I start to inch upwards, pushing off Sonny to get my face higher toward his face.

“Bend your head toward me,” I say.

He does, and I shove my face into the whiskers on his chin and rub.

“Oh my gosh,” I say, rubbing my cheek all over the short stubble. I *love* stubble. This is simultaneously the sexiest and most satisfying feeling imaginable. “Mmm.”

“Are you purring?”

“Meow,” I say, rubbing the spot over and over again.

Sonny’s arm is still around me, his forearm running up my side and back, his hand splayed between my shoulder blades. His other hand grips my arm that’s wrapped around him.

Ah.

Now that the worst of the itch has been scratched, I realize my whole face is itchy. I press my forehead, eyebrows, cheeks, nose, and chin into his face, letting his whiskers relieve every vexing tickle and irritation.

“This is amazing,” I say, rubbing my nose on his chin. “It’s as good as a massage.”

I feel him smile against my face. “I like post-massage Parker.”

“Shut up,” I say, scratching my forehead until I’m satisfied. I sigh and lay my head on his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Which is it? Shut up or thank you?”

“Both.”

“That’s my PJ, all right.”

I smile.

And suddenly, it hits me.

We are sharing a sleeping bag. My body is wrapped around his strong thighs, his chiseled arm, his beautifully sculpted chest ...

He's exquisite.

As exquisite as the torture of being in a sleeping bag with him after he could have died and after I cried in front of him multiple times today and after I told my parents—

“I told my parents off,” I say.

“Huh?”

“I told my parents off. And evidently my dad has cancer.”

“I thought I imagined that. I thought I imagined that whole thing.”

“No,” I say, getting angry. “He actually thought that me begging him for help was the right time to blurt out that he has cancer. Who does that?”

My disgust at his behavior overpowers any sadness or fear I feel at him having cancer. Another realization hits me, too.

“This is why he texted me. This is why my mom said they love me for the first time maybe ever. This is why they're flying out. They're facing their own mortality and finally have the sense to regret what atrocious parents they've been all these years.”

“I'm sorry, PJ” Sonny says, holding me.

My mind whirs. I'm an internal processor, and while some people can talk and talk and figure things out, I file information away and hope that, one day, I'll have developed the skills I need to open the spreadsheet and sort the data.

I think I've finally leveled up.

“Anthony and Amber said that Felix is ‘only five.’ He's a terror, and they *expect that from him*. Harry ran away and hid in a hot tub, and I guarantee the only consequence that came from this is a mini lecture and a massive hug. Noah is so busy

trying to impress everyone, and his parents sit back and let him try to figure himself out. You guys are unreal.”

“PJ—”

“No, you know what? I don’t know if you guys are unreal. I honestly have no clue. Your family is like a dream to me, but maybe mine is actually a nightmare to everyone else. I’m so tired of thinking that there’s something wrong with me. What did I do that was so wrong? Who flips out at a little girl for being hungry at a three-hour awards ceremony? Who tells their kid to go to the bathroom to have a panic attack so she doesn’t disturb a dinner party? Who threatens to cut their daughter off because she got a C—”

“When did *you* get a C?”

I grimace. I hadn’t meant to tell him this, at least not yet. I drop my voice low, but the shame I’ve felt for so many years lacks the same weight it used to. “A C minus, actually. In geology.”

Sonny’s chest deflates as the weight of what I said hits him. “The class you had after lunch the last semester of our sophomore year. The class I always tried to get you to skip.”

“I lost my scholarship. They downgraded it from full to half.”

The memory gnaws at me like an ulcer. My mother’s gasp when I told her was as violent as a broken glass, her dreams for me shattering with just as much finality. She couldn’t stop talking about how embarrassing it was for them. They were friends with the president of the University of Chicago. How were they supposed to look him in the eye after this?

“My dad wouldn’t even talk to me. He had an important surgery the next day and he didn’t want to be ‘too distracted to operate.’ They told me they were putting a hold on my bank account and taking my car back. They also told me I wouldn’t be allowed to travel that summer—”

“Like to Sienna’s wedding,” he says quietly. “It’s my fault. I knew there was something off about the class to you, so I

followed you and saw the way the professor seemed like your dad.”

“So you tried to make me happy by creating a campus disc golf league,” I fill in. “That was sweet of you.” I mean it, too. It was the wrong move, but it was done with the right motivation.

“It wasn’t sweet, it was selfish! *I* couldn’t handle you being upset, and I only made things worse. I love making people happy, especially you and my family, but it’s also ... gratifying. There’s a part of it that makes *me* feel special. I look at people I’ve helped and think ‘*I did that.*’ But that’s not what it should be about. It should be about *them*. I should have been thinking how I could have supported you rather than manipulating you into the outcome I thought was best for you. And I’m sorry I didn’t realize that until now. When you told me I couldn’t *see* you when you were having a panic attack in the bathroom, I think you meant *I* couldn’t see you. I wasn’t capable of it, and you didn’t want to burst my bubble. Am I right?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

Sonny’s crying, and his tears make my eyes leak. “Can you —” his voice trembles. “Do you think you’ll ever be able to forgive me?”

“Of course I can! Of course I do!” I tip his face toward mine. “You’re the best person I’ve ever known, Sonny. But you have to know that even if you’d done everything right, even if I’d earned an A plus in that class, I still would have pushed you away.”

“Why?”

I try to think of how to say it.

“I was an excellent gymnast. I’m not talking Simone Biles, but I was good enough for almost any college team. Except for uneven bars. It made my parents *crazy*. They’d spent all that money and all those years putting me in the most competitive program in the Northeast, and I could not overcome my fear of falling. I was a failure to them. Do you know what happened

to me when I didn't win a medal in a tournament? They didn't talk to me for the rest of the night. Can you imagine what that was like for me? My dad cared more about the patient he was cutting into the next day than me. My mom cared more about what trophies I won than the daughter hyperventilating in the corner of the bathroom."

"I wish I'd known."

"I couldn't stand to tell you," I admit. "If my own parents found me that unlovable, what would *you* think? I couldn't handle the thought of you realizing what a worthless train wreck I was and leaving me, too. I spent so much time trying to fit into their mold and no matter how good I was, I was never good enough for them."

"And then I tried to force you into *my* mold. I'm so sorry."

His understanding makes me cry again.

Sonny kisses my head over and over, and I close my eyes and let him. The feeling of his lips, of his arms around me, of our bodies entwined ... it soothes me. There's nothing sexual about it. It's soul-deep.

"I can't imagine what that was like for you. My parents weren't perfect, but my mom always apologized for getting angry with us. Yours made you feel bad for *their* mistakes. That's inexcusable."

"It is," I say, thinking of the way Felix, Harry, and Noah have been treated in their imperfections.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize how much pressure I put on you to fit my perception of you."

"I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to tell you."

"I'm sorry I didn't see you."

"I'm sorry I was too scared to do long distance."

"I'm sorry I transferred."

"I'm sorry I went Ice Queen."

"You were never an Ice Queen. You were cool as ice. And I like ice."

I stop, letting every swirling thought and every word from his lips settle. “Sonny, let’s stop apologizing for the past. Little Parker and Little Sonny did the best they could. And look who they became.”

“You mean sexier? That’s what you mean, right?”

“What else?”

Sonny tilts my head up and kisses my nose, his lips brushing the tiny hairs and sending a wave of tingles up my forehead and down the back of my head and spine. “I’m glad we’re here now.”

Then he rests his head back down and breathes in and out slowly. I match my breath to his, and it’s so slow, it almost puts me to sleep.

“Me too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



SONNY

P has been asleep in my arms for at least an hour. Maybe two.

I haven't slept a wink.

Because *she's in my arms*. We are tangled up together in a sleeping bag very much made for one, and she's drooling on my shoulder and her hair is down and her face is bare and she's so gorgeous, I could stare at her all night, if the lantern weren't almost dead.

I'm recovering from hypothermia, yet this night has been the best in as long as I can remember. PJ opened up. She talked about her feelings. She helped me realize I was even stupider than I ever knew, and she forgave me for it.

She forgave me.

I didn't know I could love her more than I already did, but understanding her better, *seeing* her has only strengthened my feelings.

I am so far in love, I can never come back.

She told off her parents *for me*.

She saved my life!

It's all coming up Sonny.

But as elated as I am, there's a weight to the emotion. The things she's told me haven't been easy or light. She was more isolated by her parents than I ever could have imagined. She grew up thinking that her parents' love, like their approval, had to be earned and she wasn't good enough to deserve it.

They.

Were.

Wrong.

The worst part—the part that cuts deepest—is that she thought I could ever feel the same way.

I want to dismiss it as her own insecurities, but thinking about it from her perspective, I can't. I was too young, too immature, and too unaware to realize what I was doing. But I wish I could steal a time turner and go back and knock some sense into my younger self. I wish I'd known the beauty in give and take over action and reaction.

There's a knot in my stomach as painful as any knee injury, but with a jagged edge of regret to it that could cut me from the inside out if I let it.

I don't want to let it.

PJ's right. We have to stop apologizing for our past. We have to stop dwelling on mistakes and what ifs. I can't change how either of us acted then. I can only focus on the here and now.

We are here, now.

And by all accounts, we're both happy about it.

I don't know what's going to happen between PJ and me, but I know one thing to the depths of my soul:

I am going to prove to PJ that my love isn't conditional.

And I'm never going to stop.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



PARKER

I wake up to find myself alone in the sleeping bag.
The sun is up, which tells me that it's a real morning hour, but how long has Sonny been gone? And is he okay? It's freezing outside!

I look at my phone, about to send out the Bat Signal, when I see that it's 7:29 a.m. On a Thursday ...

I pull up my radio app.

When the broadcast starts, I'm just in time to hear Bulldog introduce their next guest. And at the same time that their guest says hello, I hear Sonny just outside the tent.

My pulse spikes and a sob bubbles in my chest.

He's still here.

He only got out of bed because he had to. He saw me at my lowest, my most pathetic. He saw me with no makeup, my hair wild. He saw me crying and snotty ...

And he's still here.

Of course he's still here. Where else would he go? He has no clothes, he doesn't know the farm, it's sub-freezing, and this is his only shelter. Don't flatter yourself.

Oh, shut up, I tell myself.

Shoot, fighting with myself has made me miss something. They're talking about pets. Bulldog just got a cat, and now Sonny is teasing him for not getting a dog when that's in his "literal, actual name."

"You know it doesn't say Bulldog on my birth certificate, right man?" Bulldog says.

"Well, it sure doesn't say Catman," Sonny says.

The hosts laugh. "What do you have against cats, Sonny?"

"Are you kidding me?" Sonny's voice crackles with energy. He's so witty, so dazzlingly funny and charismatic, even if I hated him, I couldn't stop listening to him.

I don't hate him.

Not even close.

"Let me tell you something about cats. You know how people say, 'I can't even?' They learned that from cats. Cats don't take crap from anybody. Cats will jump on your face in the middle of the night and then vanish just to make sure you know they own you, not the other way around. Cats get mad at you for being on your *own* lawn. Cats will look you straight in the eye, knock your coffee off the table, and then jump in your lap to make you pick between saving your rug or a cuddle. And they know you'll choose the cuddle." Jimmy, Bulldog, and their producers are in hysterics. This is the time for Sonny to kick it up a notch. His ability to read energy is even more supernatural than his ability to make a play on the field. "You want to know about cats? Cats are that guy at the party who'll double dip a chip right in front of your face and dare you to do something about it. Cats are that guy playing Candy Crush with the sound on during a movie but who snaps at you for whispering to your friend. Cats will stand still in the middle of the airport moving walkway just so you can't pass, no matter how late you are for your flight."

“So—” Bulldog is wheezing with laughter. He can hardly get the words out. “So I guess this is your way of telling us you’re a dog person?”

“What? No way, brother. I’m a cat man, through and through.”

The hosts absolutely howl with laughter.

“I went over to my brother’s house when he wasn’t there. I’d never met his dog, and you know what that dog did the second I saw it? *It rolled over*. Are you kidding me? I could have been an intruder, and it’s showing me its belly? Come on. Have some self-respect, there, killer.” Even I laugh at this. “But with cats, sure, they’ll make you work for it, but once a cat loves you, you know you earned that.” Sonny pauses, and when he speaks again, his voice isn’t as slapstick-y. “Cats will mess with you, not because they don’t love you, but because they need to know that you love them. Unconditionally. They’ll test and test you, and yeah, you gotta prove yourself a little, but it’s worth it.”

“That doesn’t sound worth it,” Jimmy laughs.

“Of course it doesn’t to you. You’re a dog man. You want someone to go, I don’t know, duck hunting with. You want something that shows you its belly.”

Jimmy laughs. “You’re not doing a good job of selling dogs or cats here, Sonny.”

Sonny’s voice is wry, but it’s not his usual show-time voice. This one is more intimate. “That’s okay, Jimmy. I’m not the ASPCA. I don’t need to sell anyone anything. All I know is that cats are cool as ice,” he says. “And let me tell you something: I like ice.”

I feel like I’ve stepped into an open flame.

Because he’s talking about me.

I am cool as ice, dang it.

And Sonny just might melt me.

* * *

Sonny comes back in the tent ten minutes later.

I laugh.

I was planning to pretend to be asleep, but he was catlike—HA!—as he entered, and I didn't have time to put my phone down or get settled back into the mummy bag, which is as hot as a sauna after all night with Sonny.

“Looking good, Santino,” I say.

His clothes were too wet to put on, so he's wearing *mine*. He's wearing my parka backwards, meaning he stuck his arms through the armholes, but with the back of the coat at his front. The sleeves barely pass his elbows. He also has my wool beanie on his head, my sweatshirt wrapped around his waist to cover his butt, and the leggings I wore beneath my joggers are pulled up to his knees. Super stretch, indeed.

Don't judge me for taking a picture.

“You'd better not show that to another living soul,” he says.

I look at him innocently while my fingers absolutely send the pic to the Janes. Duke will see it shortly after, but he knows better than to send it to the team.

Probably.

A whoosh issues from my phone, and his bright eyes widen. “You didn't!”

“Hey, at least it's not your abs, right?”

He hangs his head, laughing. “You are terrifying, did you know that?”

“Lil ol' me?”

He kicks off his shoes and strips back down to his boxer briefs.

“Dude!” I say. “Ash was right about your tummy waffles!”

“Oh, I know. They're the stuff of women's dreams,” he teases, pushing me to the side and slipping into the sleeping

bag. He's cold again, but it's nothing compared to last night. "Warm me up."

My pleasure.

We settle back into the same position, him lying on his back and me snuggled firmly against him. His breathing slows almost as soon as we're together, and so does mine.

I lie there and listen to him breathe, feeling the rise and fall of his chest against mine. His breath stirs my hair and puffs against my neck and cheek, and I close my eyes and breathe slowly in. So slowly, so deeply.

It's silent outside the tent. It's the type of quiet that absorbs sound, the type where snow blankets the ground and dampens everything, giving the world a stillness that no other phenomenon can provide.

I inhale without thinking about it, letting the rise and fall of my chest match Sonny's.

And then something happens. Something I can't remember happening in ... ever. Something I forgot my body was even capable of doing.

As I inhale, the knot in my chest—that permanent tight spot that pinches my lungs—releases. Air rushes into parts of my lungs I thought were permanently closed off. I feel like I've been standing ten feet from the top of a mountain, unable to see the vista, and now I've finally reached the pinnacle and can see everything. Absolutely everything.

And it is glorious.

Is this how breathing is supposed to feel? So heady and sustaining? I could cry at how good it feels. It's intoxicating. I breathe again, and again, I reach that same sensation of my lungs being totally, blissfully, perfectly full.

A tear falls down my cheek.

I inhale again as more tears fall.

"Did you like what I said to Buster and Jimmy?"

Of course he feels the tears pooling against his shoulder, under my cheek. I would normally dash them away, but instead, I raise my head and put my arms on his chest so I can take him all in.

“How did you know I was listening?”

“Apart from hearing the echo of my own voice through the tent?” he asks. I pinch his waist, and he squeals. “Millie told me you never miss a week.”

“So much for Jane code.”

“She’s one of my best friends, too, you know.”

“I know.”

“I know words of affirmation aren’t your love language, but I don’t know how to serve people like you do, so I’m just gonna be me for a minute and *not* apologize for it. Okay?”

“Um—”

“PJ, you are remarkable. You’re so smart, it’s almost intimidating, but you don’t make people feel dumb for not knowing something. And when you don’t know something, you ask. I don’t know how hard that is for you to do, considering how afraid you’ve always been of not measuring up, but you do it anyway. That takes maturity. Do you know how rare that is? You have the prettiest smile, but your scowl steals my breath.”

“My *scowl*? That isn’t the compliment you think it is.”

“I’m not trying to butter your biscuit. I’m telling you how it is. I love you when you’re cloudy, sunny, and stormy. I love you when your hair’s a mess and when it’s pulled up high and tight. I love seeing you talk to my Nonna, and I love that you’re the sort of person who would consider trying a ropes course because you want my family to love you. But for the record, that was stupid. Don’t you dare do it again.”

“It wasn’t that stupid. It was totally safe and exposure therapy is a recommended treatment for anxiety.”

“Not when it involves a ropes course and a hyper-responsive vagus nerve that could get pinched by having to

reach like that.”

“Point taken.”

“How did you do gymnastics, anyway?”

“It didn’t start until I was fourteen, and I was in killer shape. My body was so used to that kind of exertion that it didn’t trigger anything. If I were still practicing on the bars every day, this probably wouldn’t have done anything except make me want to pee my pants,” I say.

“I shouldn’t have told you what to do.”

“I get why you did it. And you were probably right.”

“Probably?”

“Okay, completely. It wasn’t my smartest choice. And I *hated* it. How do people do that for fun?”

“You do spreadsheets for fun.”

“Don’t knock spreadsheets.”

He shifts his arms so they’re around my waist instead of my upper back, and goosebumps erupt on my skin. “I meant what I said. You can test me all you want, but I’m going to prove it to you.”

All this deep breathing has me absolutely dizzy. “Prove what?”

“That my love isn’t going anywhere.” He yawns. “So buckle up, PJ.”

On the outside I smile. But on the inside, I’m squealing.

I’ve kept my heart in a box for so long. I had to protect it from the pain of my parents’ criticisms and disinterest and then the devastation of breaking up with Sonny. I’ve guarded this organ for a long time, because it’s soft and fleshy and easily harmed, no matter how much I pretend otherwise. But putting it in that box hasn’t kept me from criticism and heartache. It’s frozen my heartache in time.

I dropped a lot of truth bombs on Sonny last night, and he didn’t run. Quite the opposite. He’s here with me, in this

sleeping bag built for one, breathing so slowly, I'm getting sleepy just thinking about it.

He's here and, according to him, he loves me.

He still loves me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



SONNY

We can't leave the comfort of our tent—or sleeping bag—until Ash and Sienna bring us clothes.

They have not brought us clothes.

So instead of braving the elements in our underwear and shoes, we stay in the sleeping bag and talk. Rusty included an emergency kit in the pack with protein bars, water, and mints, so we feast on those. (The mints are especially handy with all this close contact.)

And we talk.

PJ talks so much, I didn't know she had this many words inside of her. She tells me things about growing up that change how I see her and understand her. I interject so much, though, that she has to tell me to stop.

“Santino, I get it. You hate that I had to clean up my own throw up in the middle of the night, but if you keep interrupting to get angry with every story from my past, I'm going to stop talking.”

I shut up. I wish I were one of those guys who didn't have to be explicitly told how to act by the woman he loves, but I'm not. Even now, when I'm trying to be thoughtful and sensitive, I get so impassioned, it takes all my energy to stop myself.

We talk for so long, it's like we're making up for lost time. Not only trying to catch each other up on what we missed for the last seven years, but also trying to tell each other everything we were too afraid to tell each other back then.

She thinks she's every bit the Fort Knox she was when we were together, but she's capable of opening up in a way she never was then. Getting her to talk or relent isn't a challenge like it was then—a challenge I loved a bit too much. But it takes finesse and focus and active listening that I wasn't capable of back then, either.

We've grown.

More importantly, we've grown *together*.

I love hearing her talk, and I'm glad our focus is in the right place, but we've covered a lot of ground since last night. We've confronted some demons and I've confessed that I'm still madly in love with her and she's not mad about it.

So I sort of want to skip the chatty chat already and get physical.

Except that getting physical while being locked in a sleeping bag is probably not the wisest choice.

It would be awesome, though.

Dang it, if it wouldn't be awesome.

The effort to not kiss her is probably going to be the death of me.

At some point, we shifted in the sleeping bag so we're facing each other. I'm tracing infinity symbols into her cheek and her hair is unbound and wild. I glide my finger down her jaw and neck and into her hair. I press my fingertips into her scalp, lightly massaging it, and she groans.

My girl's always been a sucker for a good massage.

She bites her lower lip, and the rest of the tent vanishes from my periphery. I have blinders on to everything else in the world except for PJ's mouth. She must sense this, because she rolls her lips together, further mesmerizing me with every twitch.

Her breathing speeds up, and my heart explodes. My pulse is a runaway train, picking up speed and ready to smash through my chest. When she brushes her hand against the back of my head and makes a small yummy sound, I'm done for.

"I'm obsessed with your short hair," she says in a husky voice, and I'm going insane with the need to kiss her. With our faces so close, I can taste the mint from the emergency kit on her breath, and I'm almost drunk on it.

"I'm trying really, really hard to respect your boundaries," I say. "But all I want is to kiss you until we melt into the core of the earth."

Her pupils dilate until her dark eyes are almost black, and she presses my head closer until—

"Knock knock!" Sienna says.

"Mother of PEARL," PJ hisses.

"Sometimes I really hate my family," I groan. I'm filled with a furious disappointment. I want to smite my sister off the face of the friggin' earth.

"Are you two decent?" Ash says.

PJ drops her head to my arm and rolls it against my chest. I tip her chin back up and put my forehead against hers, our noses touching. "Should we pretend we're not home?"

"They'll only think we're dead and come to inspect us quicker," she says.

"You know we can hear you, right?" Sienna says. "This is a canvas tent. It's not remotely soundproof."

"Yeah, we can actually hear your hearts beating as one," Ash says. "We know you're in there."

"I hate you both," I say.

“He doesn’t mean that,” PJ says. “But I might,” she whispers against my neck.

“Guys, we can still hear you,” Sienna says. “Are you coming out or are we coming in?”

I ball my fist against PJ’s back and groan in frustration. “We’re not through here, right?”

Her breath catches. They’re right: it really *is* that quiet out. “We are very much not through here.”

My mouth spreads in a smile as wide as the Grand Canyon. I roll onto my back and pull PJ snug against my side, not that we have space for much else.

“You can come in. We’re decent,” PJ says.

“Ish,” I add.

She pinches my side and I grab her hand and keep smiling.

Seconds later, Ash and Sienna have the flap opened and are crouched outside. There’s barely room for two people in here. I’m glad they don’t try to make it four.

Sienna has a satisfied smirk on her face, whereas Ash is practically bouncing.

“What happened to your clothes?” Sienna asks innocently.

“Hypothermia,” I say. “Safety first.”

“Uh huh,” Sienna says.

“I’ll grab these,” Ash says, taking our wet clothes and shoes and stuffing them into a large tote. Then she drops a bag for PJ and Sienna drops one for me. “Here. Sonny, why don’t you get out of the sleeping bag and get dressed first so Parker can have some privacy.”

“We’re a little past that, don’t you think?” I ask.

“No,” Ash says. “Up and out.”

Sienna ducks out, but Ash stays crouched.

“Uh, okay,” I say. “Can *I* have some privacy?” Ash just waits expectantly. “Holy moly, Ash, is this all a ploy for you to see my tummy waffles?”

Parker cackles while Sienna pokes her head back down. “I don’t think I’m okay with people talking about or looking at my brother’s tummy waffles, whatever they are. What are they?”

Ash narrows her eyes like a super villain who’s just been foiled. “They’re abs, and I have reason to suspect that your brother’s abs are the best there ever were.”

“You should look to your boy Rusty,” Sienna tells her.

“Rusty? Why?”

“Girl, are you serious? The dude is *stacked*.”

“Huh?”

“Yoked,” I say.

“Jacked,” PJ adds.

“Ripped,” Sienna says.

“I don’t know why you’re saying those words. What does any of that mean?”

Parker groans. “You ran an abs page, Ash. How do you still not know gym speak?”

“I also eat a lot of sausage, too, but I don’t know how it’s made. Speak English.”

“He works out,” I say. “I bet his abs could hang with mine.”

Ash tilts her head. “Rusty? My Rusty?” She blinks a few times. “I mean, yeah, his arms are pretty big. And he can lift a crazy amount. But I never thought of him as being like ...”

“Stacked?” I say. “Yoked?”

“That stuff.”

“He is. I don’t think you see him clearly.”

I like the little I know of Rusty, but this is the best I can do without playing his cards for him. “Either way, you gotta leave the tent. These are not the tummy waffles you’re looking for.”

“Did you seriously reject me with a Star Wars reference?” Ash asks, holding a hand to her chest. “That hurts, Sonny. You know I’m a Star Trek girl at heart.”

I hitch my thumb toward the flap. “Get on the get.”

She sticks her tongue out but leaves.

“I guess this is my stop,” I tell PJ.

“I guess so.”

“To be continued?”

“Hey guys,” Sienna says from outside the tent. “I don’t mean to be a buzzkill, but this really isn’t the time for a DTR.”

“What ’s a DTR?” I ask.

“Define the relationship,” Sienna says. “Get moving. We need to go help cute farm animals.”

PJ sits up. “What happened?”

“I’m not sure. Something to do with the storm hitting the barn.”

PJ doesn’t wait for me to get out. “Close your eyes,” she says.

I do.

Twenty seconds later, she tells me to open them, and I find her wearing jeans and a hoodie and stuffing her feet into socks. I spin out of the bag and start pulling on my pants.

Her eyebrow jerks up as she looks at me appreciatively. “You need a warning label on those things.”

“What?” I ask, although I have a pretty good idea.

“Ash, they are *certifiable* tummy waffles.”

“Four pats of butter?” Ash asks as I shake my head.

“Is four the most? Whatever the most is, add one,” PJ says. Ash whimpers.

“You two are objectifying me.”

“No, *I’m* objectifying you,” PJ says, staring at my abs. I don’t actually need to flex them to make them pop, but I do anyway. “Ash *wishes* she were objectifying you.”

“My eyes are up here, PJ.”

Her smile is wolfish. She grabs my sweatshirt, and I hold my hands out expectantly. But instead of tossing it to me, she tucks it under her arm, picks up her phone, and points it at me. “Say waffles.”

“PJ!”

I hear the click and chuckle beneath my breath. “Will you at least give me my sweatshirt, or do I have to pretend I’m in a Matthew McConaughey romcom all day?”

She hands it to me with a smirk that makes my heart flip.

I don’t make a comment about her hair still being down or about the fact that she’s not wearing makeup or the fact that the soles of her hiking boots are a normal height instead of platforms. But I file it all away in my brain to pull out later. Without her platform shoes, she’s over a foot shorter than I am. It’s easy to forget because her presence is so much larger than life. This is PJ stripped beyond the physical. This is her ready to face the day without her armor. I know she doesn’t have a say in the matter, but she’s distracted or busy enough not to look like it’s eating away at her, either.

We put on our coats and step outside, and PJ’s eyes go wide.

“Wow.”

The earth is blanketed in thick, white snow. Our feet sink into the powder. I saw it earlier on my call to Jimmy and Bulldog. The worst of the storm already passed, but there must be six or eight inches on the ground, and it coats the woods behind us like a blanket. Tree limbs are heavy with white. It’s both cloudy and intensely bright, and the look on PJ’s face tells me it’s also absolutely magical to her.

Which makes it even more magical to me.

Sienna and Ash are about fifteen feet away on four-wheelers. I want to grab PJ's hand on our quick walk, but being out of the tent, out of the sleeping bag, and in front of the people we're closest to has me second-guessing myself. How am I supposed to act?

"Is your knee worse after last night?" she asks.

"It's just stiff from the cold," I say. "Don't worry about it." She frowns, and I grab her hand and tug her to face me. "I'm allowed to care about you without it being a flaw in either of us. I won't apologize for choosing you over a job ... or a few extra days of rehab." I smooth her hair behind her ears and then adjust her beanie. "Okay?"

She squints at the word "job," but she doesn't press it.

"Okay," she says.

Okay. She may as well have said "I do" for the effect this has on my heart.

My smile stretches so far, so fast, it almost hurts. "Okay."

And now she's smiling to match. And it's snowing, and we've just spent half a day in a sleeping bag pressed together like a sandwich with absolutely no funny business, and now all I can think about is how her hair is still down, stuffed under a beanie, and her dark eyes and deep red lips are so intense against the brilliant white snow, and she's leaning forward on her tip toes ...

"A-hem," Sienna says. Ash smacks her shoulder. "What?" Sienna asks. "I'm his big sister. It's in my job description to ruin romantic moments. Sorry, Parker."

I see the embarrassment on PJ's face, so I pull her against my chest. "I will pay you back, sis. I'm going to creep into your tent tonight and put Nair all over your head and watch you wake up bald."

"I would look amazing bald," she says.

"Fine, then I'll do it to Chris."

"No! I'm sorry, okay? Do not touch his hair. I'll let you two snog your faces off next time. In fact, here, you two take

my quad.”

PJ slips out from beneath my arms and hops on the quad. I gingerly get on behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist while Ash takes a picture of us with a goofy grin. PJ tenses, and I want to tell Ash to knock it off, to stop spooking her. But if I want us to build something that can last, I have to deal with the discomfort of *her* discomfort.

Ash and Sienna stick their helmets on and take off.

A moment later, we follow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



PARKER

We stop at the animal barn, a big dark red building that Tripp had built for Millie’s animal-assisted therapy. I know for a fact it was built with a ton of extra security precautions to create a safe place for the children that Millie and the other therapist treat.

They could never have anticipated a massive tree limb falling onto the barn. The weight of the ice coating the top limb proved too heavy for the stormy conditions, and it snapped sometime in the early morning and crashed into the roof.

Rusty is overseeing the animals’ care, but instead of farm workers helping, it’s Sonny’s family. When they heard about the barn, they all offered to help. And considering the farm workers were busy with the numerous other emergencies that came up last night, Tripp and Jane relented.

“You guys are on vacation,” I say to Sonny’s family. “There’s plenty we still can do today over at the reunion grounds.”

“That’s sweet of you to worry about us,” Sonny’s mom says. She pulls me in for a side hug that’s somehow both casual and motherly. *System failure. Multiple systems.* “But there’s nothing we’d rather do,” she continues. “Especially when cute baby farm animals are involved.”

I look at Sonny, who makes a “you got this” gesture, as if he can read my “what do I do” face.

Which he probably can.

I don’t give her my fake smile from yesterday but rather a small half smile, one that feels natural enough. “Thanks. I know it will mean a lot to everyone here.”

Sonny’s family quickly gets to work. As Rusty leads animals out, Lucianos follow his instructions, herding them into livestock trailers. The farm doesn’t have that many animals, as they’re only for petting zoos and therapy, so the work is done soon. But I keep an eye on the animals as they come out. The last one is Louis.

Where’s Sweetness?

“Rusty,” I call. “Where is he?”

“Where’s who?” Ash asks.

“Sweetness. He’s one of the newborn goats, but his legs ... he can’t walk.”

The furrow of Rusty’s brow tells me he’s almost as worried as I am. “When the limb fell, it knocked one of the boards at the back of the barn loose. He may have gotten away.”

Panic squeezes my heart like a vice. If he got out, he would have frozen last night. “No, he couldn’t have!”

Anthony is trying to load Louis into the trailer, but the llapaca ducks out and trots back over to us. He rushes right past me and then past Rusty. Rusty gives me a quick look, and then the two of us take off after him.

The inside of the barn looks even worse than the outside. The limb broke through the roof, and it crashed into the loft and part of the ladder. Two of the pens had the door torn clean

off, and, as Rusty said, all the commotion from the roof knocked a board at the back of the barn loose. It's just big enough for a baby goat to squeeze through.

But Louis isn't running for the back of the barn. He stops just below the loft and makes a crying sound. Then another. I hold my breath. Then a little bleat calls out.

Sweetness!

Tears spring to my eyes, and I dart for the ladder, but a strong hand holds me back. I turn, expecting Sonny, but it's Rusty. Sonny is a step behind him. He and half his family are standing in the barn, naked concern on their faces.

"You can't climb that," Rusty says. I want to argue, but he's pointing up to where the limb fell. It slammed into the ladder, knocking it loose. How Sweetness managed to climb it at all is a mystery.

"I can't leave him," I say. "He's too little, and he can't help himself."

"We'll get another ladder," Rusty says, but one look in the barn tells me there's no way a ladder would fit in all this chaos. It could take hours to clear this out, and by then, the loft could collapse or something could happen to Sweetness.

"We can't wait. I'm small enough that if you guys hold the ladder, it won't fall."

"I can't let you do that," Rusty says. "It's too dangerous. We'll find another way."

"No, it has to be done now!" I say. "Someone has to help him!"

I look around the barn, my eyes lighting on every hazard, every awful way that Sweetness could get hurt.

And that's when I see it.

My mind jumps from one obstacle to the next. A quick glance shows me where everything is anchored.

"Is the barn going to hold?" I ask Rusty.

“The whole frame is made from oil well pipe. That part will hold,” Rusty says. “But—”

“I’m going to get him.”

Sonny grabs my hand. “PJ, there has to be another way.”

I look into his intense aqua eyes, willing him to understand. “There isn’t. Can you trust me?”

My question refers to what’s about to happen in this barn, but I see the way it hits him. I *see* the way his forehead wrinkles, the way his eyes narrow. I see the residual pain from a time when he absolutely *did* trust me and I betrayed that trust. I didn’t mean it as a sweeping metaphor for our relationship, but he takes it that way.

“I want to.”

“Then *do*. Trust me. I promise I know what I’m doing.”

His short nod is all the permission I need. I don’t even wait for Rusty to say yes.

I kick off my boots and socks, because I can’t do what I need to otherwise. I sweep my hand in some of the dirt on the ground. It’s not chalk, but it’ll have to do.

Then I take three strides toward the llama pen. Straw digs into my feet, but I barely notice. I plant my hands on the wooden railing, and jump. I swing one leg up and plant my foot, then I bring the other foot up and come to a stand. It’s not much different from a balance beam, and I’m a beast on a balance beam.

I’m steady as I walk across the thin wood plank until I reach a vertical pipe that separates one pen from the other. I hold on to the pipe and step around it easily. Then I keep walking across the beam until I’m close enough to the loft.

Sweetness’s bleats spur me on, filling me with urgency, but I have to tune out the fears pushing at the edges of my mind. I think of Sonny’s arm around me this morning, of breathing in sync with him. I hold on to that feeling of my lungs being blissfully, utterly full.

A long metal pipe runs directly above each of the pens. It connects all the way across the barn and is anchored to the vertical pipes that separate each pen. The pipe is just within my grasp, and the loft is only a few feet above and back from the metal bar. I stand on my toes and reach both hands to the bar overhead.

This is almost like uneven bars.

Unfortunately, I am *not* a beast on uneven bars. I'm a scared little girl worried my parents are watching, worried that I'll fall, or worse, faint.

Sonny's family can't see me shaking.

I grab the pole, do a quick pike, and swing up into a kip.

"Holy crap. Is she an Olympian, or something?"

"Junior Olympian," Sonny says. "Isn't it hot?"

"Not helping," I say between gritted teeth. I lean forward with the bar at my hips so that my body is almost parallel to the ground. Then I swing my legs forward as far as possible, almost folding my body in half before I swing my legs back and quickly squat down onto the bar.

Momentum is everything, so even though I'm acutely aware that falling from this height could put me in a full body cast, I move off it immediately and lunge the distance straight into the loft.

Unfortunately, the pipe doesn't have the same bounce as a beam.

And I short it.

Most of me makes it onto the loft, but I smash into the edge, and one leg hangs down painfully.

Below me, Lucianos make concerned squeals and exclamations.

Adrenaline rips through my veins, and the rush of fear makes my vision darken and the sound around me fade.

No.

I cannot faint! Not here! Not now!

I'm panting with fear. Sweetness's bleating is getting quieter as my hearing gets fuzzier and fuzzier.

My vision narrows like I'm entering a tunnel.

I'm so dizzy.

"PJ, you can do this!" Sonny's yell cuts through the fog, spurring me forward.

With every ounce of strength left in me, I swing my other leg up and roll fully into the loft. My pulse explodes, my breathing comes in fast, short bursts, and my vision flickers as everything goes quiet.

I have to stay conscious.

I'm already lying down, but I tense the muscles in my hands, arms, feet, and legs, trying to send blood back to my head to keep from blacking out. It isn't foolproof, but if my mother had known anything could help me avoid fainting, she never would have given me a moment of peace. It was a quiet act of rebellion.

I *will* it to work now.

Please.

And it does!

As my vision grows lighter and the fog in my head clears, I promise myself a lot more acts of rebellion in the future. If my parents and I have a future together at all.

My whole life, they've treated me like I was a faulty showpiece they reluctantly put on display and removed when anyone saw the cracks in my façade.

They were wrong.

I'm not broken.

I'm not unlovable.

I'm Parker freaking Jane, and I am *awesome*.

"Are you okay?" Sonny calls.

“Great,” I answer. I slowly sit up, and Sweetness bleats and instantly moves toward me. He manages to get his hooves under him once or twice before his legs buckle and he’s crawling on the bent joint again. It’s tall enough for me to stand, but with the massive limb having crashed into the loft floor, I want to keep my weight spread out. Plus, I don’t want to risk passing out for real. I crawl carefully to Sweetness and scoop him up, holding him close.

He bleats and frantically bumps his face into mine over and over while I squeeze him.

“I got you,” I whisper, feeling his soft, fluffy coat against my cheek. His little heart is beating so rapidly, I can feel it at his ribs, just behind his elbows. “It’s okay, buddy. I got you.”

This adorable little goof is far from perfect, yet as he puts his face against mine, I can’t help thinking that it’s his imperfections that make him so endearing, so special, so imperfectly perfect.

The lesson isn’t lost on me.

“Everything okay?” Sonny asks.

“Yes! I got him!”

“I’m coming up,” Sonny says, but his family protests.

“You’re way too big to stand on that wall. You’ll bust it.”

“Or you’ll bust your knee.”

“Will I?” Sonny asks.

“Bust your knee?” Rusty asks.

“The wall.”

After a pause, Rusty says, “Let’s use a barrel to be safe.”

After a minute or two and a lot of grunting, I hear Sonny say, “Spot me.”

“If you rip one in my face, I’ll end you,” Gabe says.

Everyone groans.

“Not the time for fart jokes, sweetie,” Lauren says.

“*Never* the time for *toot* jokes,” Sonny’s mom says, both agreeing and correcting.

A gust of wind outside makes the tree shake, and that makes the loft creak, and suddenly, all the laughter vanishes.

The loft is holding now, but we’re pushing our luck. Part of the roof and wall are exposed, letting even more cold into the already chilly barn. Sweetness isn’t even a few weeks old. He needs his mother and some warmth ASAP.

I scoot on my butt across the floor until I get to the edge of the loft. The guys have moved two rain barrels up against the wall I walked across. They’re only about three-feet high, but they’re tall enough. Sonny has a foot planted on each, and his brothers are standing next to him on the ground, ready to catch him if he falls.

“Why don’t we just stack hay bales?” Noah asks.

“Because our bales aren’t square; they’re round,” Rusty says.

“What? Why would you have round hay bales?”

“Because they’re more moisture resistant,” Rusty says.

“Huh? How does that work?”

“Noah, cork it,” Emma says.

“Yeah, not really the time for an agricultural lesson,” Sonny grumbles. He looks up at me, both nervous and trusting. We’re only a few feet apart. It’s amazing what an extra fourteen inches of height can do for a person, to say nothing of his arm span.

“What do you want to do?” Sonny asks.

“I’m going to lie on my stomach and reach Sweetness down. Can you grab him?” Sonny nods and reaches out.

I spin and roll onto my stomach and give Sweetness a kiss on his scruffy head.

“Steady, buddy,” I whisper. “We got you. You’re gonna be okay.”

Hanging my chest over the edge, I engage my core and I reach the shivering, squirming goat down to Sonny.

He steps onto the wall just long enough to take Sweetness. Then he gets back down to the barrels and hands him down to Rusty.

And I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Think I can grab you, too?” Sonny asks.

“Uh, no. I’m pretty sure falling off a barrel isn’t allowed by the NFL.”

“Funny. What do you want to do?”

“I’m going down the same way I came up. Can you give me space?”

Sonny uses his brothers’ shoulders to hop down to the ground, giving me a wide berth.

The metal beam is so close. It’s only as far as skipping the last step on a staircase. The difference is that when you skip that last step on a staircase, the worst thing that happens is you fall to the landing.

If I miss this step, I end up in a full body cast or possibly dead.

No big deal.

My pulse is only speeding up to a dangerous level, and all.

“Hey, I’m right here,” Sonny says, his low voice calm and steady. I close my eyes and inhale slowly, deeply. I remember the feel of Sonny’s heartbeat against my lips when I pressed them to the side of his neck last night. I think of breathing in the same air he was breathing and of lying with him this morning, my body curled against his. I channel the feeling of his arm around me, of our chests rising and falling in unison.

I breathe in and out, in and out, and just like this morning, that feeling of my lungs being totally, blissfully full comes over me.

I got this.

I get into a squat position and then fall forward to the bar, catching myself easily with both hands. Then I hold on to the bar and am about to let myself down in a reverse pull-up when the look of awe on Sonny's face inspires me.

This isn't so high.

Not when Sonny will catch me if I fall.

I loop one leg around the bar, instead, and let myself fall backward until I'm hanging upside down from my leg. Sonny steps back on to the barrel, and Anthony and Gabe each steady him so he can catch me and bring me down.

Our faces are only inches apart.

"I want to Spiderman kiss you so badly."

I can't help laughing. I don't know if anyone else heard him, but from the titters of his family, I'm guessing more than a few of them are winking and nudging about the same thing.

"Come on, Peter Parker," Sienna says with a laugh. "Kiss the boy!"

"Oh, man, best nickname ever. Go, Spidey!" Chris says.

Sienna hits his chest with the back of her hand. "Peter Parker *is* the nickname."

"What? No way. It's gotta be Spidey."

Sonny and I are still looking into each other's eyes. But then, because the Spiderman kiss is scorching hot, and I'm all hopped up on adrenaline and self-worth, my eyes jump to his mouth.

I can't kiss him. Not here in front of his family. Not when there's still so much left to discuss. Kissing him would be a sign that we are *us*. It shouldn't be a spur of the moment funny-ha-ha kind of thing. It should be a commitment. A kiss would say I'm on board and I'll be here until this train reaches the end of the line.

That's it, I'm kissing him.

I swing backward slightly so that I can swing forward, and when I do, Sonny puts his hands to the side of my face. He

draws in close, and my heart skips excitedly. Before his lips can touch mine, though, he moves his head an inch to the side, so his lips graze my cheek all the way to my ear.

Holy hotness, Batman. Spiderman. Whomever.

“Tonight. Hot tub. We are figuring this out. And then I’m going to kiss you so good and so hard, the Spiderman kiss will look like child’s play.”

Before I can go up in flames, Sonny puts one arm around my back and stretches one up my leg and around my hamstring, and I release from the bar. He pulls me close as easily as I pulled Sweetness, and he cradles me just as carefully.

If a lot more possessively.

A lot.

And I love it.

I’m panting—we’re both panting—and it has nothing to do with exertion. Not a single freaking thing.

It is tension. Excitement. Anticipation.

Tonight cannot come soon enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



SONNY

*P*J and I are inseparable all day, and it's the best day I've had in seven years.

We help Jane and her husband all morning with everything they'll allow us to do. We get the animals settled in temporary pens in the farm's famous white barn and then return to the animal barn to clean up whatever we can. We all take quads, UTVs, and farm trucks around the farm to clean what we can and report back any damage we can't fix. We have snowball fights and make snow angels and snowmen.

By mid-afternoon, Jane insists that we've saved them days of work and she sends us back to the reunion grounds.

We're famished. The power has been restored, and we blast the patio heaters in the pavilion, where we all gather.

PJ makes some calls and finds out the kitchen staff and chef are dealing with frozen pipes and damage at their own homes, so they aren't able to come. She looks like she's bracing herself when she tells my family.

"I'm really sorry, but we don't have our chef. We have all the supplies for dinner, and the food was kept safe thanks to

the cold. I can reach out to the diner in town, but I'm sorry. I wanted today to be perfect—”

“Perfect is overrated,” my dad says in his strong, reassuring voice. His cheeks and nose are flushed after an entire day working in the cold, but he looks exhilarated. “The storm didn't ruin anything. In fact, I'd say that today was my favorite day yet.”

“Bianca,” Great Aunt Mary says to Nonna, “what is it you always said about you and Antonio? Something about how your imperfections made you perfect for each other?” Aunt Mary asks.

“If she said that,” my mom says, “she stole it from *Good Will Hunting*.”

This earns a laugh. Nonna waves her hand dismissively. “I never said that.”

“What did you say?” I ask her.

Nonna looks at the empty space on her left ring finger. “If you try to be perfect, you'll fail on your own. If you try to be whole, you just might succeed together.”

“And occasionally fail together,” Dad says.

“That, too,” Great Aunt Mary says with a laugh.

I look at PJ to find her looking back at me. My grandparents had such a short time together before my grandpa died. But Nonna has managed to keep our family strong for decades because of the love they had for each other. For the first time in my life, though, I wonder what that's been like for her. Instead of marveling at her strength, I have a tiny sense of what it must be like for her to know that she was whole once and that she isn't anymore. She hasn't been whole in a long time.

Happiness, like perfection, is overrated. Fun and parties and games aren't everything.

Happiness isn't wholeness.

I've never needed anything to be happy, but I need PJ to be whole.

“Today’s been amazing already,” Sienna says. “Without the storm, we never could have helped those animals, and that was one of the coolest experiences ever.”

“And I’ve never even seen snow!” Harry says.

“Yeah, or a hot tub,” Daniel says, pulling his son into a headlock.

“And I finally got to see you whip out a full gymnastics routine,” I tell PJ. Her eyebrows sharpen but a smile plays at the corner of her mouth.

Nonna pushes to a stand, tapping her sister on the shoulder. “Mary and I have cooked for more people than this, haven’t we?”

Great Aunt Mary nods, and the two older women head straight for the industrial kitchen, along with half an army of aunts, uncles, cousins, and even a great grandkid or two. Nonna looks eager to be in her domain, but dinner is still hours away, so PJ and I raid the fridge and pantry and bring out every snack and leftover sack lunch available. Everyone who isn’t cooking sits in the pavilion eating food and designing T-shirts and family crests with puff paints.

“I’m sorry this ruined your itinerary. The blackout bingo really was ingenious,” I tell her as I doodle PJ hanging upside down from a bar ... in a Spiderman costume.

I draw me standing next to her, because yes, I’m going there.

Yes, PJ blushes furiously to see that moment immortalized.

Yes, every member of my family comments on it.

And no, I don’t mind my love for her being a family affair.

“Why are you so good at art?” she asks. “How did I not know this about you?”

“A year and a half isn’t that long together,” I tell her. Especially not compared to forever.

“Why are you smiling about that?” I’ve never seen PJ draw before, so I have no sense of whether or not she’s a good

artist. But she's doing concentric circles in alternating yellow, orange, and red in the upper left side of the white shirt, and the effect is cool.

"Because that means there's so much more to learn. More layers to peel back."

"Yuck. Don't give me some cheesy onion analogy," she says. "I maxed out on business sayings in grad school."

"I'll put a pin in it," I tease. My agent has used that one before.

"We'll have to table this discussion for later."

"Let's put this one in the parking lot."

"On the shelf."

"Synergy."

"Dynamism."

I smile. "There's no one-upping 'dynamism.'"

"There's really not."

PJ finishes her circles and starts making lines out from the ball. No, it's not a ball, and those aren't lines. They're rays.

She's drawn the sun.

Well, well, well.

Ash comes over and inspects both of our work. "You two aren't even trying to hide it anymore, and I super-duper approve."

PJ narrows her eyes to points. "Zip it."

Whew. For as hard as it was to keep myself from kissing her this morning, the glare on this girl is going to do me in. She is always gorgeous. Her smile is beautiful when she unleashes it, but it's the looks that make her *her* that are the real showstoppers.

The pout on her generous lips when she focuses.

The lift of her sharp eyebrows when she's challenged.

The narrowing of her big almond eyes when she's upset.

The cut of her cheekbones when she purses her lips.

All of it.

She thinks she schools her features so well, but the micro-expressions that play on her face are as detailed as a symphony. Simple frustration creates a concerto of quivers and contractions that I could spend my whole life studying. Every tiny movement tells a story. Each minuscule quirk hints at a well of deep emotion that could never run dry.

She is breathtaking.

So when she says something sassy back to Ash and Ash responds by grabbing a puff paint and writing on PJ's shirt, I revel in her playful outrage, in her grabbing puff paints and squirting them on Ash, on—

What the—?

“Did you just squirt *me*?” I ask, looking down at my team coat. The teal wave in the middle of my chest has a golden glob all over it.

PJ's eyes widen to saucers. “I got carried away.”

But then she squirts more.

“What?” I throw my hands in the air. “Puff paint doesn't wash off clothes!”

“Shoot, then I guess it's a good thing you're so rich and get team merchandise for free.” She rolls her eyes.

“That was the fakest apology I've ever heard.”

“I wasn't apologizing.”

Ash holds her hand out to PJ, and PJ gives her the golden puff paint.

“Stand, please,” Ash says.

“Why, so you can further destroy my clothes?”

“I thought you were always up for anything.” Ash says.

“I've grown.”

Ash leans across the table and pats my cheek. “Good for you. Now stand like a big boy.”

My family is all here in the pavilion, and half of them are watching and snickering. With a shake of my head, I stand and watch as Ash makes golden puff paint waffles on my coat that somehow also look like chiseled abs.

PJ jumps up and, with a lighter color, draws a cube of butter on top of the waffle. And then three more.

Ash snickers, runs around the table, grabs my side to “steady herself” and starts writing.

Certified.

“You’ve finally seen my tummy waffles,” I tell her. “Satisfied?”

“Not until I get a glimpse of the real thing, and you know it.”

“Come on, Sonny,” PJ says, “give the people what they want.”

“My family doesn’t want to see this.”

“We’re not your family,” Ash says.

“I’m not showing you my abs.”

“Because you’ve let yourself go?”

“You are shameless.”

“I like what I like, and I like hot dudes’ abs, all right?”

“I’m hot, am I?”

“You’ve been on the cover of GQ twice. The entire world thinks you’re hot,” Ash says. “Stop looking for compliments and *show me those tummy waffles!*”

I unzip my coat and carefully set it down without disturbing the paint. Then I extend my right arm across my body and grab the bottom of my sweatshirt, and Ash’s mouth and eyes open comically wide.

“It’s finally about to happen!” Ash fans herself.

I pull the sweatshirt up a few inches, watching the excitement on her face turn to glee. I shoot a quick look at PJ, who's staring with Ash's same intensity, except she's also biting her lip like she did earlier.

Stick a fork in me, I'm done. PJ biting her lip is my new favorite look. I lift it another fraction of an inch and take in the sight of PJ looking like she's trying not to bite her knuckle.

And then I stop.

“Psych.”

A primal scream issues from Ash. “Why would you do this to me?”

Parker Jane, on the other hand, crosses her arms and bites the inside of her cheek.

“Ah, to heck with it,” she says. She grabs a cup of hot cocoa and throws it at my sweatshirt. I jump back as steaming liquid seeps through my sweatshirt, undershirt, and all the way to my chest.

The room erupts in laughter and applause, because naturally, my whole family has watched the display and finds the idea of me stripping in public hilarious.

“Better take that thing off,” PJ says. “You know how dangerous wet clothes are in cold temperatures. Wouldn't want you to get hypothermia.”

I smile and shake my head, knowing that I'll do anything for this absurdly feisty woman.

“If you take a picture of this, Ash, I will make it my mission to destroy you.”

Ash rises slowly and swipes an X across her heart, smearing a blob of puff paint over her own coat.

I put both hands across my body, grab the bottom of my hoodie pull it carefully over my head ... to reveal an only slightly less cocoa-stained long-sleeved thermal shirt.

“Sonny, if you're messing with me.”

“Patience, young grasshopper,” PJ says with a smirk that could stop traffic.

I pull the thermal over my head and Ash gasps and covers her mouth. “I’m going to faint.”

PJ elbows her friend. “Too soon.”

Ash climbs up on the table to touch them when PJ slaps her hand away. “No touching.”

“But—but—tummy waffles! They’re right there, and they’re edible.”

“You guys are freaking us out,” Sienna says from two tables away. “They’re not that special.”

“You only say that because you’ve never run an abs page.”

Lauren, Amber, and a few of my cousins light up. “Wait, *you* ran Tummy Waffles? My friends were obsessed with that!” Lauren says.

And suddenly, half of the women in the room run over to surround Ash, peppering her with questions and laughing fiendishly.

Fiendishly.

PJ tosses me one of the yet unmarked t-shirts so I can throw it over my head, but not before she grabs a napkin and wipes the cocoa from my chest.

If I weren’t already covered in goosebumps, I would be now. She dabs slowly, methodically, and every press is like that first touch of an ice cube, both burning and freezing at the same time. It’s too much sensation for the body to process at once. There’s not a speck of moisture left, but she just keeps pressing.

“I think you got it all,” I say in a low voice.

“Better to be safe than sorry,” she says. She’s not meeting my eyes, and I get the sense that my torso has her transfixed.

Thank you, body, for doing a job I never intended you to do but one I appreciate more than ever.

“Are we meeting in the hot tub tonight?” I ask.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



PARKER

When dinner winds down, the family shenanigans wind up. The kids all want to play life-size Hungry Hungry Hippos, so I arrange for one of the workers to bring everything out. I ask Ash to keep an eye on the family for me.

“My pleasure. Have fun with Sonny,” she says.

Beyond the obvious, I’m excited for the hot tub for therapeutic reasons. My back and arms are sore from the axe and archery and constant activity, and all the manual labor today has only added to it. At my little cottage, I change into my workout gear: high waisted yoga shorts and a longline sports bra that hits just above my bellybutton, giving a sporty tankini effect that shows how toned my shoulders are and makes my waist look tiny. My phone rings as I’m throwing on a pair of joggers. It’s my parents.

Again.

Uncertainty stops me in my tracks. My dad has cancer. This is the kind of thing I should talk to him about.

But our relationship is toxic, and it took seeing Sonny's crazy, amazing family for me to realize that the way my parents treat me is *their* fault, not mine.

I don't want to open the door to more self-doubt. I can't let them in, not right now.

And honestly?

I'm mad.

I stab the green answer button.

"Mom, don't say anything."

"Excuse me?"

"No! I mean it." My voice shakes with emotion. "You've required me to be seen and not heard my entire life, and now it's your turn to listen. For as long as I can remember, you two have treated me like a shameful inconvenience. How dare you wait until Dad is diagnosed with cancer to decide that I'm worthy of your attention? I don't know if you finally feel guilty for how you've treated me or if you've realized how empty your lives are, but I will *not* be a tool to soothe your conscience or fill some hollow spot in your heart."

"Parker! I—"

"You don't get to talk," I say sharply. My nose and eyes burn, but I'm not ashamed. Not anymore. "You act like I'm unlovable because I'm not perfect, but the truth is that you're *unloving*. I'm incredible! And I won't let you neglect and abuse me for another second. Don't come here next week. Text me Dad's actual prognosis, do some soul searching, and I'll call you if and when *I'm* ready."

Click.

Tears of righteous indignation pool in my eyes as I put my phone down. I look in the bathroom mirror and study the expression.

It's one I've never seen before.

The set of my jaw is determined. The glint of my eyes is confident. The smile at the corner of my lips brims with ...

Self-esteem.

Self-worth.

Self-love.

“Look what you did!” I whisper to myself. “You saw yourself! You stood up for yourself!” My reflection grins back at me, and the sight makes tears spill down my cheek. “Also, your hair looks freaking amazing.”

It really does.

* * *

The storm has mostly passed, but a chilly wind nips at me as I park the golf cart near the hot tub. Trees flank three of the hot tub’s sides, meaning I don’t feel exposed as I strip out of my sweats and get into the steaming Jacuzzi.

It’s so hot, it hurts. Goosebumps erupt over my skin, as if my body thinks I’m stepping into ice. I ease down into the water with a deep sigh. Leaning my head back on the edge, I stare up at the stars.

The night sky is brilliant. Have the stars always been this bright here? Have I really not looked at the sky once since we moved from Chicago? I mustn’t have. I’m sure I would remember the shock of a million points of light against such an inky black canvas.

The air is crisp, and I fill my lungs with slow, deep breaths. Ever since this morning, I’ve felt the relief that comes with breathing that I’ve always heard coaches and yoga instructors talk about.

Honestly, I kind of thought they were making it up. Not anymore. With each inhale and exhale, my stress releases. The need to impress Sonny’s family yesterday was as intense as any compulsion I can recall. But today, things felt different. Everyone bonding together to help the farm was part of it, but more than anything, it was Sonny.

It’s always Sonny.

His warmth.

His goodness.

His love of life.

His love for *me*.

His ability to see my light in a way no one else can, and now, he can appreciate the dark, too.

For the first time in my life, I have a roadmap that shows me where I want to be. I want to be like Nonna. The woman is a force of nature, and like the strongest powers on earth, she demands respect.

Yet, it's so much more than that. Her family doesn't fear her. They admire her. She's made of titanium, but her grandkids and great grandkids adore her for that metal, not in spite of it. She's managed to surround herself with people who love her while staying tough and rough around the edges. She doesn't coddle them or have to be a gooey, squishy marshmallow to show them affection. I didn't know it was possible to build something so beautiful with such a stiff spine, yet here she is.

I want to be her when I grow up.

And you know what?

I can.

I can hang with Sonny's family, too. Yesterday, I pushed myself to do more than I should have, but I had fun. I wanted to hang out with them. I wanted to participate in the activities and kick everyone's butts (cornhole aside).

With my self-doubt and self-loathing shoved into a corner, it's easy to see that I fit with them. They *like* me.

I *love* them.

When I hear a golf cart and a voice nearing the hot tub, my stomach flutters. But it's not my typical nervous stomach. It's not the churning and gnawing I'm so used to. It's light and fluttery and makes my heart feel like it's floating in my chest. It's foreign and fantastic.

I'm excited to see Sonny.

I want to continue our conversation. I want to know where we go from here. I want that freaking kiss. Which is why it's so strange that, as Sonny approaches, I panic.

He's on the phone, and he doesn't sound upbeat about it. He sounds like he's defending himself.

From what?

I peek over the hot tub, but he's looking carefully at the ground as he limps forward. My golf cart is on the opposite side of the hot tub from his, too, so he probably doesn't realize I'm here. I feel like I'm eavesdropping, even though I'm not.

GAH!

"I know, Coach. I'll keep rehabbing while I'm on vacation and will be in for the doc to evaluate me next week." He stops. "You know me. I'm superhuman," he says in a forced voice. "I'll be in tip top shape when you see me next week." He pauses. "Yup." Another pause. "You got it."

A moment later, he lets out a deep, heavy sigh I've never heard before. It's too personal, too open, too *frustrated* for a conversation with his coach. That can only mean the call is over and it didn't go well.

And he's approaching.

He's going to know I heard!

So I do the only thing I can think of: I stick my head fully in the water.

How stupid can you be?! I scream to myself.

My eyes are sealed tightly, but the heat makes it feel like they're boiling inside my head. The molten liquid burns my ears and cheeks. What was I thinking? This is like that one time I tried cold immersion therapy at Millie and Duke's until I realized I don't hate myself *that* much.

In a word: torture.

What's the plan, genius? Are you going to stay under until he leaves? He's getting into the hot tub to meet you, in case

you forgot. He's going to wait longer than your eighty second lung capacity can handle.

Man, my brain is really sarcastic.

But it's not wrong.

I have no clue where Sonny is. I can't tell if the water has shifted, so maybe he's waiting outside for me. Or maybe he forgot to wear shorts so he went back to find them and ... maybe the lack of oxygen has gone to my head.

Do not go up, my brain warns.

But it's hot! And there are brain eating amoebas in these things! I'm going to die!

Yeah, of mortification! DO NOT GO UP!

I listen to my brain for as long as I can. I hold my breath and hold it and hold it until my head is spinning.

Then I burst out of the water and gasp in air.

And Sonny shrieks. "AAAHHHH!"

He's in the hot tub with me. Well, he *was* getting in the hot tub with me. He just threw himself out and fell onto the wooden platform.

"Sonny!" I stride through the heavy water to the side of the Jacuzzi he dove from. He's clutching his chest when I peer over the edge. "Are you okay?"

"PJ? I thought you were an alligator! My life flashed in front of my eyes!" His chest heaves like he ran the forty in two seconds. "What in the name of Jim Brown were you doing hiding beneath the water?"

"Jim Brown? Not Walter Payton?"

He shakes his head at me, still trying to catch his breath. "You think ol' Sweetness is a better running back than the toughest RB in the league?" He's still breathless, but a victorious smile plays across his lips. "You named your goat after him, didn't you?"

"So?"

“So,” he says climbing into the hot tub, “I think it’s interesting that you named a farm animal after the *nicest* guy and not the toughest. And it’s someone who just so happens to play *my* position. You basically named your goat Santino. You know that, right?”

“He’s not *my* goat.” I fold my arms.

“You faced your fear of heights to save him. He’s yours.”

And so am I, his smile tells me.

I bite my lip and let my eyes rove over him.

Those abs.

That chest.

It would be easy to look at him and focus on nothing but hotness. I’ve caught every glimpse of him the media has shown for the last seven years. He’s always been worthy of a sculpture.

But it’s hard to see all of that definition and see him favoring his knee at the same time. These muscles aren’t for vanity. He has never wanted people to ogle him. For every “Hottest Guy in the NFL” post out there, there’s a quieter post about some good that he did. Carrying extra jerseys with him to give to fans. Going to foster homes or a children’s hospital without a cameraman. Giving someone on the street every bill in his wallet without making a single person aware of it. Or even just stopping and talking to fans in a restaurant and making sure he gives everyone his time. He’s the Keanu Reeves of the NFL.

There’s a reason he’s the most popular athlete in football. People watch him because he’s good at his job, but they love him because he’s good.

Period.

Sonny spreads kindness like it’s his passion, not his job. Every muscle on his body represents his commitment to a job that allows him to reach as many people as possible. Every movement and line is a work of art, but it’s not art for art’s sake. It’s art for the sake of function.

He cannot do his job without this art.

The roar of the jets obscures my view once he's submersed, and I'm almost glad of it. Being attractive is nice (beyond nice), but it isn't an accomplishment. What Sonny does *with* his body is an accomplishment.

Sonny and I could have been so good together back in the day, but we could be great together now.

"Are you still thinking about my tummy waffles?" he asks.

"No. Well, kind of," I snort. I move toward him until I'm sitting on one of his knees. He puts his hand against my cheek, and I lean into it. "But I was thinking more about how I'm done looking for excuses for us not to work. I'm done trying to be perfect." I stare into his bright eyes and speak from my heart. "I want to be whole."

CHAPTER THIRTY



SONNY

She said what I think she said, right?
She's giving me a *come hither* look, and as much as I want to hither my butt off, I wait.

"Tell me what you mean."

I don't remember all of last night, especially before I went unconscious. But I could have sworn I heard her say she loved me, and as much as I'm trying to be more mature, I've been ultra-clear about my feelings on this subject, and I want clarity in return.

So I lean back, putting an arm on the hot tub wall and one on her thigh, a little above her knee. Her skin is as smooth as glass.

"You are so full of yourself."

"You were ogling me like I'm a pair of Louboutin heels. It's hard not to feel good about myself after that."

She splashes hot water in my face, making my grin even bigger. "Hey, my heart is on my sleeve."

“You’re shirtless.”

“You noticed.” She’s fighting a smile, and dang it, if that doesn’t make me want to wind her up. But this is the instinct that got me into trouble with her seven years ago, isn’t it?

No, not quite. It wasn’t the instinct that was the problem, it was the timing.

“I’ve told you how I feel, and you’re telling me you want to be whole. That’s a pretty loaded term after what Nonna said earlier. So indulge me.”

She doesn’t meet my eye, instead bringing her hand up to the back of my head and running her hand over my short hair. She’s fixated on it, and I’m *not* letting myself get fixated on the feeling of her hand caressing me.

Parker Jane is sitting on my lap.

And caressing me.

The universe really does love me.

“Before I say anything, you have to know my wounds are always going to be there. I’ll have scars, and I’ll be ... imperfect at trying to be whole.”

“Scars fade over time,” I say. Her sleek dark hair is up in a high ponytail, and the ponytail is dripping hot water down her face since her little plunge. A single lock at the base of her neck has pulled out from the elastic. I twirl it around my finger, letting my hand graze PJ’s neck and back. Her almond eyes grow heavier, as if the effort to keep focusing on me is so great when all she wants is to succumb to my touch. “It’s possible to heal from injuries and get stronger, though.”

“Only if you’re superhuman,” she whispers.

I smile wide, still twirling that hair. “You followed the story about me?”

She rolls her face fully into my neck, almost like she’s embarrassed. Her breath against my skin speeds up my pulse. “I’ve followed *every* story about you. I’ve watched every interview, listened to every podcast and radio show. I follow you on social media under a fake name.”

I could float into space. “You love me.”

She puts a finger over my lips. “Oh, shush.”

“No, it’s okay,” I tease. And then I put my fingers to her chin and open it for her. “I love you, Sonny,” I say in a high voice, pretending to be PJ, “and I never stopped loving you, and losing you was the hardest thing that’s ever happened to me, and even now, I miss you so much it hurts.”

I’m being over the top, but she doesn’t deny it.

Not a single word.

Wait, am I right? I knew she still cared about me—a lot—but is what I said right?

My voice trembles. “PJ, if you don’t deny it, we both know exactly what happens next.”

Silence.

“You’re not denying it.”

“Because it’s true,” she whispers.

And with that, she lifts her head and pulls my face to hers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



PARKER

Our mouths fuse together, and the effect is electrifying. His lips are familiar and new all at once, and the combination makes me heady with a need to explore.

I'm a cartographer mapping out the changes to this land following an earthquake, and my instruments are my lips and my hands roving over his body.

I'm fascinated by everything I find.

His short hair drives me crazy.

His taste—hot cocoa with a splash of hazelnut. I don't know when he started using flavored creamers, but I send a silent thank you to Past Sonny, because Present Sonny is delicious.

His shoulders and back are broader and stronger than ever.

The stubble on his chin makes me want to scratch every itch.

And then there are all the parts I remember: tenderness, a playful passion, unwavering devotion.

How did I ever let this man go?

He puts his hand at the back of my hair, but it's not enough. I bite his lower lip so he doesn't go anywhere, drop my hands from his body, and pull my hair from its tie. Then Sonny plunges his hand into my hair, deepening the kiss.

We started intense and we *stay* intense. There's no waxing and waning, no crescendo and decrescendo. We are making up for lost time, saying everything with our lips that we haven't said with our words yet. But we aren't out of control. We aren't lost in passion, and I get the feeling we're both making a concerted effort to show the intentionality of every brush of a hand or graze of our lips.

We communicate the pain of longing and the joy of being back together. With one hand in my hair, he drops the other to my hip and clutches, anchoring me to him.

As if I'm going anywhere.

I'm never letting him out of my sight again.

I wrap my arms around his neck, trying to eliminate any space that could remain between us. We are fire and ice, and when we melt, I want it to be together.

I don't know how much time passes, but eventually, this most epic of makeout sessions eases. It's like we've said everything we needed to say, and now it's time for fun and games. Our lips tug, taste, and tease. How can a kiss be so playful and emotional at once? I want to laugh and cry, squeal and sob.

And like lightning, it strikes me what Nonna meant. I'm feeling emotions together I could never feel on my own.

Light and dark. Fire and ice. Joy and pain. Yin and yang.

In this colossal, chaotic universe, we are a single point of convergence.

Together, we are whole.

A soft sigh escapes me.

I don't know how long we've kissed for, but the moon is in a different place, the jets have stopped and my muscles are no longer sore.

Sonny bumps his head against mine. “We are on fire.”

“We *are* in a hot tub.”

“Enough, Parkypants. You know what I mean.”

“Parkypants?”

“‘Parker’ is an acceptable synonym for smart, so yes. Parkypants. Prove me wrong.”

I make a show of puckering my lips. “Nah, I’m done fighting,” I say and plant my lips on the tip of his nose.

“I hope not,” Sonny says, bumping my face back and moving his lips where his nose was. “If we never fight, how will we make up?”

I smile and peck his nose again.

Am I a nose person? How is his nose this attractive? The cartilage is so symmetrical and the feeling is so satisfying against my lips that I kiss it again.

“Uh, you’re making out with my nose. I’m not sure I’m okay with this.”

My head rocks back and I laugh at the sky. The sound is too loud without the jets, and I reach past Sonny to press the button. A moment later, the Jacuzzi roars back to life.

“I love you,” Sonny says.

“Good,” I say smugly. “Because you’re stuck with me now, sucker.”

He doesn’t laugh. Instead, he drapes his arms around my waist. Then he presses his lips softly against my temple and then to my ear and down my jaw. When he speaks, his voice is as dark and velvety as the night sky. “I know you love me, too.”

The sensation of his mouth on my skin is more than I can handle. I lean back against the wall of the hot tub, too tired to filter my emotions, too tired to keep the smile off my face. The jets swirl around us, and bubbles pop between our faces. The low lights from the hot tub make his bright eyes positively magnetic.

“I do. I love you. I want to be with you,” I say.

The smile that explodes across his face makes me feel like I’m weightless. One of the jets shoots into my back, as if trying to push me off course, but I hold my ground. Steam rises around us, and I feel like I’m going to float away with it. Hope and love swell in me, lifting me—

Wait, something is *literally* lifting me.

With alarm, I look down. An air bubble is rapidly growing in my fitted yoga shorts.

“Is that an air bubble in your pocket, or ... ?”

I snort and push Sonny’s shoulder. “Oh, shush.” It looks like a balloon is blowing up in my bottoms. I try to push the bubble out, but it just moves to my butt. I laugh into the night air, where the trees swallow the sound. Sonny looks like he wants to return to what we were doing before the jets so rudely interrupted us, but all the jets seem to have zeroed in on me.

I shift around another jet to see if I can sit without turning my outfit into a life preserver. Big mistake. Now the jet forces air into my sports bra as well as my shorts. The air pocket in my bra grows bigger and bigger, creating a massive uni-boob that swells up close to my neck.

An amused smirk plays on Sonny’s face. “You really *have* changed.”

“Ha ha.” I say, thrusting my chest out comically. “Worst boob job ever.” I poke at it, and a stream of air bubbles releases like my bra just passed gas. We both snicker like little kids. It’s so late that it’s possible this isn’t quite as funny as I think it is.

No, that’s not true. This is friggin’ hilarious.

The bubbles in my shorts and top are enormous. Sonny twists me so that the jet is fully against my back, and the uni-boob expands all the way up to my chin. With every push and prod, I laugh harder and harder. If I don’t actively steady myself, the bubbles push me up so that I’m completely floating. I let go, and my bubble front-butt zips me up to the surface. I’m laughing too hard to care how stupid I must look.

Sonny stands over me with eyes like a kid on Christmas morning.

Look at that face. So eager and hopeful. “Do you want to push it?”

“Can I? Pretty please?”

I scoot back to a jet, refilling. “If you must.”

“I must.” He pushes my air-butt, and a huge bubble shoots through the water and bursts at the surface. Sonny adds a loud farting sound with every poke.

“You are such a child,” I laugh.

“You’re the one who keeps going back for more!”

“Because it’s hilarious! You try.” I stand and push his expansive chest, lining him up with a jet. Sonny puts his hands on my wrist, pinning me in place, as he wiggles to find the right placement. He’s so tall that our faces are level. I stand in between his knees, my wrists caught in his hands, and the happiness of the moment hits me. It’s so much more than smiling until my cheeks hurt or laughing until my sides ache. This is fullness inside my chest—beyond my inflatable bra.

Like me, he doesn’t have a swimsuit but rather workout clothes on. When the lining of his shorts begins to inflate, his glee is contagious. He pulls me down to sit on his lap, and the explosion of bubbles splashes us both in the face.

I stay there, glued to his side, while we laugh and poke each other’s air pockets until the timer turns the jets off again. I don’t remember laughing this hard ever. There’s something so freeing about it. I couldn’t stop myself if I wanted to.

After the last bubble hits the surface and the last giggle escapes my lips, Sonny puts his cheek against mine.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispers.

“I’ve missed you, too.”

“So we’re doing this, right?”

“We’re doing this,” I say, not letting myself focus on the regret and pain of our last goodbye. I made the only choice I

knew how to make at the time.

I know how to make different choices now.

“I never stopped loving you, Sonny. You’re it for me. It’s always been you.”

He buries his head against my neck and shoulder. I expect him to say something, but he just hugs me, and I hug him, and even though I can’t feel his heartbeat, I have no doubt our hearts are beating as one.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



SONNY

There's a feeling of nostalgia as we drive PJ's golf cart around the grounds the next day. We pass the horseshoe pit and the pickleball courts, the tetherball and the glampgrounds. We're supposed to check out at one p.m., but Rusty comes over with Jane and her linebacker of a husband to tell us to stay as long as we want.

I haven't had much chance to talk to Tripp or Rusty yet, so this is our first time really talking.

PJ and Jane watch us like eager moms setting up their first play date.

"So you're the one that got away, huh?" Tripp asks.

"Not exactly," I say. "More like I was shoved away."

As if proving my point, PJ pushes my arm.

"I'm not talking about Parker, I'm talking about Ash. Your abs are her white whale."

There's no mistaking Rusty's bristling. "Steady, pal," I laugh, clutching Rusty's shoulder. "I was never a threat. And my abs *were* her white whale." I look at the love of my life, at

the sly, unapologetic arch of her brow. “A certain someone gave Ash and my entire family an eyeful.”

“And it was grotesque,” Sienna yells out in passing. “Don’t do that to us again, PJ.”

“No promises,” PJ yells back.

Be still my heart. She’s making threats to my siblings.

“Ash is relentless,” Tripp says. “The first time we met, she tried to bite me.”

Rusty sounds like he’s choking. I get the sense that Tripp isn’t as observant of Rusty’s emotions as ... everyone else in the world.

“You okay, man?” Tripp slaps a hand on Rusty’s back, and the dude almost falls forward.

“Yep. I’m fine,” Rusty says.

“Good.” Tripp says. “Safe travels, Sonny. Looking forward to seeing you around.”

Jane gives me a quick hug, and then she and Tripp head out. Rusty starts to follow when I grab him.

“Hey, thanks for everything this week. We really appreciate it.”

Rusty nods. “No problem. Just doin’ my job.”

“Nah, you went above and beyond. You’re a good man, Rusty.”

Am I imagining it, or does Rusty’s gaze darken? He nods and follows his friend and mine, and I’m left wondering what I said that upset him.

“Did I lay it on too thick?” I ask.

PJ leans against me. We haven’t gone full PDA in front of my family yet, but she’s not shying away, either. “No, Rusty’s a hard guy to read. I think he bottles a lot of stuff up.”

“Huh.” I say, looking at PJ. “Sounds like someone I know.”

“Yeah, except I’m not madly in love with Ash.”

I chuckle and put my hands on her hips. “Does she have any clue?”

“He’s not a useless, feckless tool, so I doubt she’s capable of seeing him as a romantic possibility.”

“She has the worst taste in men. Unlike someone I know,” I tease.

“Who, Jane?”

“PJ—”

“Oh, you mean Millie?”

“Parker Jane—”

She eyes me possessively. “My taste isn’t bad, either.”

“Come here,” I say, bending down and kissing her right below her ear.

“Put a ring on it first!” Nonna yells, and PJ squeaks nervously, swats me, and backs away.

And I follow.

After everyone has packed and our bags are in Nonna’s lodge, we all meet in the pavilion for one last time. The mood is almost glum. We live for these reunions. All of us. Noah is teaching Harry how to play solitaire, Felix and Max are under the table tying Chris’s shoelaces together. My parents are laughing with my aunts and uncles. And Nonna is looking wistfully at us all.

“Does she seem happy?” PJ asks, looking at Nonna.

“I think she’s probably anticipating the goodbye,” I say.

“I don’t know. See the way she’s feeling her ring finger? I think she’s lonely.”

I put my arm around PJ, pulling her close. “It’s hard being without the person who makes you whole.”

Aunt Elaine and Cousin Emma wave at PJ, who joins them on the side of the small stage where Nonna and Great Aunt Mary are seated. The storm derailed PJ’s blackout bingo, but

the winner will still get the trophy, which Ash managed to pick up in Columbia this morning.

Aunt Elaine shares her heartfelt gratitude that we could all be together to celebrate Nonna's eightieth birthday. She pulls up a slideshow of Nonna that Emma created, and we all watch the highlights reel of Nonna's life, from her earliest years to marrying Nonni and having kids to her opening up her Slendorama gym. We see her as a mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. We see pictures of her and Great Aunt Mary on trips and cruises around the world.

"Not that we'll get to take anymore of those, thanks to that rotten man," Mary says.

"Oh, stop," Nonna says as the slideshow continues. "It's water under the bridge."

"A bridge we'll never get to see since he got you put on the No Fly List," Mary grumbles.

"Forgive and forget, Mary."

"Forgive? What have you done with my sister? I want to plant a fake bomb in his bag—"

"Not funny, Aunt Mary," my dad says. "We don't plant fake bombs."

PJ catches my eye and we both duck our heads to laugh.

When the slideshow ends, we all applaud. My dad and his siblings get up and each give a toast to Nonna while PJ brings the birthday cake in.

She has mini cupcakes with the wrappers already peeled off for the kids, because her thoughtfulness knows no bounds.

"Mom, why don't you say a few words?" my dad urges.

Nonna frowns, and I think she's about to decline when she nods instead. She walks over to where my dad is standing, and he puts his arm around her tiny shoulders.

"Thank you for coming," she says simply. She sounds more emotional than I've heard her since her second son's

funeral. “I’m not a woman of many words. You all know that about me.”

“But the words you say are the best, Nonna!” Noah says.

She shushes our cheers, a troubled look on her face.

“I haven’t been honest with you all. I love and miss your grandfather every day. Mary is a good sister, but she has her own children and grandchildren who keep her occupied. The truth is, I’m lonely. I want companionship, and I’ve found someone who makes me happy.”

Several people gasp.

Nonna looks past the family to someone outside the pavilion that everyone just now noticed. “Bob, could you come here?”

I hear gasps as a fit, serious looking older man starts walking toward us with his cane.

Mary gasps and turns on Nonna. “What are you doing? Why did you invite *him*?”

“Because I love him,” Nonna says.

“Who is he?” Dad asks.

“He’s the reason we can’t go on a cruise or across the Atlantic ever again!” Mary says. She points a crooked finger at him like she’s cursing him with a plague. “He’s the man from the plane!”

“And he’s the man I want to marry,” Nonna says.

Everyone flips. There are shouts and people jumping to their feet. My dad and his siblings surround Nonna, demanding an explanation. PJ rushes over to me.

“What is going on?”

“I think Bob just broke my family,” I say, only half kidding.

Mary runs right over to Bob and starts chewing him out. Bob takes his hat off and holds it to his heart, taking in every word.

The great grandkids watch raptly.

“This is better than anything on YouTube,” Felix says.

Then Amber storms over and says, “What have you been watching on YouTube?”

And all heck keeps breaking loose.

PJ and I gape at each other.

My aunts and uncles pepper Nonna with questions, while my parents try to keep Mary from attacking Bob. Nonna’s hand covers her mouth, and tears run down her lined face.

I’ve never seen Nonna look so small.

She’s always been larger than life, with the strength to carry the burdens of our huge, crazy family.

Now she looks like a little, lonely, heartbroken woman whose one attempt at love in fifty years has destroyed the bedrock she built her whole legacy on.

“Look at her,” PJ whispers. “I have to do something.”

Before I can answer, she gives my hand a squeeze and springs into action. She runs through the melee, jumps onto the stage, and pushes past my aunts and uncles.

I hobble quickly behind her.

“Mom, be reasonable,” Bruno is saying. “He put you on the No Fly List, for Pete’s sake! What is this jerk even doing here?”

But PJ gets between them. “He’s here because she invited him. Nonna doesn’t tell her own stories, so you all seem to be in the habit of being her voice. I think it’s time for everyone to shut up and give it back.”

Bruno rocks back on his heels, but he isn’t fazed. “Okay then. Mom, what’s going on?”

Mary’s still chewing out Bob, though, so I take a few steps toward her and put my arm on her slight shoulders. “Aunt Mary, let’s hear them out. The worst that happens is we get another good story out of it, right?”

Mary's eyes tighten at the corners. "Fine. He has two minutes to convince me not to put my foot where the sun doesn't shine."

Bob takes the opportunity to get away from Mary. He instantly joins Nonna at her side. He takes her knotted hand in his, and that simple movement makes Nonna stand up taller. When they share a tight smile, I know she knows exactly what she's doing.

My eyes find PJ, who's looking directly at me.

I will never get tired of looking at her looking at me. PJ's smile is so sweet and salty, my mouth waters. We walk over to each other and I drape my arm around her. She puts her arm around my waist, and I kiss her temple.

Nonna looks like she's battling a final moment of uncertainty. She looks at her hand in Bob's and then, of everyone she could look at for support or motivation or anything, she looks at PJ and me.

She puts her hand to her mouth and whistles loud enough to split ears.

Silence.

"All right, listen up," Nonna says. "This is Bob. We got into a fight and I knocked him out."

"Accidentally," Bob adds.

"Eh," Nonna says, not correcting him but not agreeing, either. "Point is, he saw me at my lowest point and he forgave me for it. If he can put up with that, you can put up with him."

"But he was insufferable!" Mary said, and Mom and Sienna step in front of Mary like they're security on a Jerry Springer special. "He complained and whined for hours! He *tattled* on you to security!"

Bob adjusts his collar.

"He did," Nonna says. "I saw him at his lowest, too. If I can forgive him, I hope you will."

Mary isn't having any of it. "How did this even happen?"

“That would be me,” Bob says. “When I came to in the airport, I couldn’t stop thinking about Bianca. I’d never had a woman tell me off like that. I’m not used to people telling me about my mistakes. For weeks afterward, I wished I’d acted differently. I wanted a second chance with that firecracker of a woman.” He kisses Nonna’s hand, and she smirks like a queen. “So I got her number from the police report—”

PJ laughs into her fist.

“—and I called her and asked her out. We only live a few miles from each other.”

“Are you trying to use her for her money?”

“He’s a retired four star general,” Nonna says. “He doesn’t need my money *or* my grandkids’ money,” she says, winking at the twins.

Rude.

“Ouch,” PJ says under her breath. “You didn’t even get a *wink*. Your family is hard to impress.”

“But easy to love.”

“Cheesy.”

“You love it.”

“It doesn’t make it not cheesy.”

“Besides,” Bob says, “We’re signing a pre-nup.”

The adults all nod appreciatively.

My phone buzzes in the middle of the Q&A. I pull it out and see Michael’s name. I send it to voicemail. He calls again. And then again a third time. Frustrated, I pull my phone out and see a text from him.

MICHAEL: CALL ME. 911.

“Who’s Michael?” PJ asks.

“My agent. He’s been trying to renegotiate my contract.” I try to keep my voice light, but PJ’s brow bunches. “I gotta take this.”

I limp away, feeling weaker, emptier without PJ.

Once I'm out of the pavilion, I answer.

"Mikey, what's up?"

"Sonny, my man, I am about to make you very rich."

I pinch my temples. *Be grateful.* "I already am, remember?"

"Richer. You're getting traded to Seattle."

"WHAT?"

"I know, isn't it great?" Mikey says, showing a total inability to read me. "They want you for three years with a trade option after one, but the salary is insane."

"Mike, I said I wanted to *stay*."

"I know. I did what I could, but the Waves were skittish about your knee."

"My knee? I got this injury winning them a freaking Super Bowl they could never have won without me!"

I feel a delicate hand on my shoulder, and I whip around to see PJ. That same concern tugs her brows together.

"What's up?" she whispers.

I mute the phone while Mikey gives me a fake "you won that championship for *you*," pep talk.

"It's nothing. I'll tell you about it later."

"It doesn't seem like nothing."

I swallow the acid bubbling from my stomach. "Let me finish this and we'll go back." I try to smile, but it's so fake, it hurts.

"Sonny, whatever it is, we can handle it," she says. "Tell me."

I slump. "I'm getting traded to Seattle."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



PARKER

*I*ve been sucker punched. The pain in my gut is worse than a hundred ulcers. “Why would the Waves trade you?”

Sonny gestures to his knee. He looks bitter and exhausted, two emotions I’ve never seen on his face.

“You gotta be grateful,” Sonny’s agent says, still on mute. Sonny puts him on speaker but turns the volume down enough that no one else will hear him. “You get to play your dream job. You have hundreds of millions of fans, and you have the paycheck that goes with it. So you gotta play in Seattle for a few years? It’s a great town. You’ll love it.”

Sonny sighs while his agent keeps going. “He’s right. I should be happy I get to keep playing.”

We’re near an outdoor picnic table, and Sonny leans against it. I put my hand to his cheek. “You don’t have to be happy all the time.”

“Famous people don’t get to complain about the jobs that make them famous,” he says.

“Who wrote that rule?”

“Social media? You know what I’m saying. This is the ultimate first world problem here. I’ve seen too much of the world not to be grateful for a job that provides everything I could ever want.”

I put my hands on his shoulders. “I’m coming with you.”

“I can’t let you do that.”

“What?” I laugh in disbelief. “You don’t have a say in this. I love you, Sonny. I’m not losing you again.”

“You won’t lose me, but I can’t let you come with me. The Janes are too important. None of you would be who you are today without each other. You five *need* each other. You’re sisters. I can’t come in between you.”

“Sisters move away all the time. And the NFL isn’t forever. How long is the contract?”

“Three years, with an option to trade me after the first. Again.” He sounds so bitter, I have to wonder if this is about more than the trade.

“Great. We’ll be back in no time. Three years is nothing,” I insist.

“It’s not nothing. It’s huge. Do you know how many times I’ve moved after a year or eighteen months? How many friendships I’ve made and said goodbye to? I’ve lost entire lifetimes more times than I can count. I’m so tired of this. The second we’re back together—”

“Hey, we are *still* back together. You’re not breaking up with me over this. I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t know ...”

“I do,” I say. “We don’t have to have everything figured out right this second.”

He pauses. “You’re right.”

“And if you hate it, you can always quit and I’ll be your sugar momma,” I say. I mean it as a joke, but Sonny studies me.

“I can’t quit.”

He’s taking this more seriously than I expected, and that makes me take it more seriously than I expected, too. “Why not?”

“Because I need to pay the bills. I need to have a job.”

A job. He’s not saying the NFL is his dream job, that he’d miss playing the game. He’s not saying that he lives and dies football like Duke does.

It’s a job.

When he told me all those years ago that he didn’t care about football, he was serious. And I pushed him away and into a career he didn’t care about. He just happened to be supernaturally talented with a great work ethic.

“Your bills are paid,” I tell him. “You don’t *have* to do anything.”

“But ... wouldn’t you ... wouldn’t it seem like ... ”

“Like you’ve accomplished everything you could ever want and now it’s time to move on? Yeah, I guess it would.”

The most vulnerable softness appears on his face. “You wouldn’t think less of me?”

I grab his face and kiss him with every bit of feeling in me. I put my heart and soul into my lips, communicating my meaning more effectively than any pep talk could.

Sonny’s arms snake around me, pulling me tight, pressing me so firmly against his chest, I feel like he’s trying to put a piece of me in his heart. Or at least, that’s how I feel.

“Do you understand?” I ask softly, my lips feeling swollen.

“You wouldn’t think less of me,” he says, smiling and kissing me again. “And I should stop being stupid.”

I kiss him back. “Exactly.”

Mikey is blabbering on still, and Sonny unmutes the phone and says, “I’ll get back to you.”

And then he hangs up.

“Now where were we?” he asks.

I tell him exactly where we were without saying a single word.

* * *

After a few quick kisses, we return to the pavilion where things have settled down and most of the cake and cupcakes have already been eaten.

Maybe those kisses weren't as quick as I thought.

Nonna and Bob are sitting together, and Bob looks like he's on his best behavior. Although, the guy is a retired general. He probably sleeps with his spine that straight.

Sonny's dad sees us and waves us in. He and his siblings are standing near their mother on the stage.

“Mom,” Elaine says, “you already have an impressive resume, but you've managed to create a family that knows how to fight *and* make up. That's no small thing.”

“Treat her right, Bob,” Uncle Bruno says. “We're scarier than any military on earth.”

“Noted,” Bob says.

Now it's Sonny's dad's turn. “We know some of you have flights to catch or long drives ahead of you, so thank you for staying as long as you could. We miss you. There is never enough time together,” he says, his voice cracking. My eyes water like I'm cutting an onion. “Before we leave, though, we have to give out the award.”

Edward grins at Ash, who brings the grand trophy up. And it's then that I notice my friends are here. Why? Lou, Millie, and Jane wave at me from the back and I give them a confused wave back. I guess some of the staff are still out from the storm. Maybe they're helping with cleanup.

“This trophy is part of a new tradition, and I think I speak for everyone here when I say it's one we'll all look forward to fighting for at our next family reunion.”

Everyone claps and whistles.

“Hear hear!” Sienna shouts, raising her water bottle in my direction.

“And you should know that Nonna, Aunt Mary, and your parents,” Edward says, gesturing to his siblings and their spouses, “took this very seriously. Being crowned ‘Ultimate Luciano’ is no small thing. Fortunately, our decision couldn’t have been easier.”

He holds the trophy out in Sonny’s direction, and a grin breaks across my face as I look at the man who radiates light and goodness and perfectly embodies his wild and wonderful family.

“You are the Ultimate Luciano,” Edward says. “Congratulations, Parker!”

I gasp.

Sonny whoops and picks me up like a sack of potatoes.

“That’s my girl!” he yells, taking me for a spin around the room. Sonny’s family jumps to their feet and cheers wildly. The Janes are all laughing and giggling in the back, except for Ash, who is screaming louder than anyone. I tuck my face into Sonny’s back, but he laughingly sets me down on the stage next to the OG Lucianos, who are all beaming.

Lisa pulls me into the tightest, most loving hug a mother could give. I fold into her, and suddenly, Sonny’s dad, siblings, and their spouses are all getting in on it.

“That’s *our* girl,” Lisa says, correcting her son. “We love her, too, you know.”

My ears and face are on fire, and I don’t know what to say.

No, that’s not true. I know exactly what to say, even if I feel on the spot saying it.

“Thank you. I love you guys, too.”

Nonna chuckles behind me. “See you all back here in two months for the wedding,” she says. “Can you make that happen, sis?”

I look at Jane, who laughs and nods.

I smile at Nonna. My patronus. My hero. “We’ll be ready for you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



SONNY

After the last cousin leaves, my family is in the sitting room of Nonna's lodge. PJ has all the keys, and all of her friends have come back and are sitting together around the couches and on the floor. Everyone lives close enough to drive back tonight, anyway, and so my brothers decided to keep their kids up late so they'll fall asleep on the drive home.

"Where did you disappear to when everyone was saying goodbye?" Mom asks.

PJ sits beside me on the couch, and although she tries to sit properly, I tug her into my side.

She doesn't fight.

Man, having her next to me feels good. I should be answering my mom, but all I can think about is how right it feels to have her head against my chest and how good her hair smells. It's like ginger and citrus, spicy yet sweet. A little like PJ.

"Sonny?" Mom repeats.

“Oh, sorry, I was obsessing over my girlfriend’s smell,” I say. Mostly because I want to say out loud that PJ is my girlfriend, even if the word is woefully inadequate.

PJ slaps my chest, and that only makes my grin bigger.

The Janes all trade looks, and PJ snaps. “That’s enough out of the peanut gallery.”

Lauren and Amber laugh.

“Sonny,” Sienna says. “What the crap were you on the phone about?”

“My agent called earlier and told me I’ve been traded to Seattle.”

My family gasps and groans.

“And I’m coming with him,” PJ says.

“No, you’re not,” I insist.

Everyone is dumbfounded. “You already let her go once, you idiot,” Anthony says.

“I was the idiot,” PJ corrects. “I pushed him away, and I won’t make that mistake again.”

“You didn’t push me away. You did the only thing you could do. I don’t blame you for that. But you’re not leaving your friends.”

“Sonny, it’s not like we’ll stop being friends,” Ash says.

PJ sits up and eyes me like she’s gearing up for a fight. “Thank you, Ash. And congrats on the maturity, Sunshine, but I’m coming with you. Where you go, I go.”

The happiness that was planted in my chest yesterday has already taken root and sprouted. A smile blooms on my face. “Will you shut that pretty mouth so I can tell you what the rest of my calls were about?”

Sauciest. Eyebrow raise. Ever.

“Pray tell,” she says.

“I really like her,” Sienna says in a stage whisper to Chris.

“Me too,” he stage-whispers back.

I slash my hands through the air. “Can y’all shut up, please? Sorry, Mom. You’re good.”

Mom gives me a look but everyone else keeps quiet.

“I was talking to Buster Jackson.”

“Bulldog?” Gabe asks. “I love that guy.”

“Me too,” I say. “I called him for advice, and instead, he gave me a solution. He’s supposed to retire from TSN next year, but they’ve had a hard time finding a replacement. He wants me to interview for his job.”

PJ throws her arms around me. “Sonny!” she says, and that word communicates volumes. Excitement, pride, hope.

Love.

Meanwhile, my siblings look confused.

“What do you mean?” Anthony asks.

“I’ve loved playing football, but it demands too much without giving enough back.”

“You’re insanely rich.” Gabe points out.

“Not compared to the twins,” PJ mutters. I cover her mouth with my hand. She smirks as she tugs it down and intertwines our fingers.

“Money isn’t everything,” I say. “And it’s time for me to pursue a better dream.”

“He means PJ,” Chris whispers.

Sienna squeezes his cheeks and kisses him on the mouth. “Keep up, Chrissy Poo. He’s talking about retiring and taking a broadcasting job.”

“WHAT?” Anthony and Gabe say in unison. “Already?” Anthony asks.

“Why not?”

“Because of the money!” Gabe says. “And the endorsements and fame!”

“Lauren,” Dad says to Gabe’s wife. “Can you control him?”

Lauren nods, patting Gabe’s shoulder. “Babe, it’s not like you’re living in a Dickens novel. Calm down.”

“I don’t think you know how much lead color commentators make,” Millie says, her eyes glistening with happiness. “Aren’t Aikman and Romo getting eighteen mil a year?”

“Look at you, talking football like a legit NFL wife,” Jane says.

“She’s not an NFL wife. Duke’s a therapy husband,” Ash says.

“So,” PJ starts, “what does this mean?”

“It means we have a *lot* more time to figure things out between us,” I say, my heart skipping at the way her chest is rising and falling faster and faster. Seeing her get excited is making it very hard for me to share this moment with my family.

“I like that,” she says breathlessly, and her breathlessness about destroys my willpower.

“I, uh, think it’s time we get going,” Amber says.

“Us too,” Lauren agrees.

“Same,” Sienna says.

Each of the women in the room—including my mom—give us a quick hug and promise to talk later. PJ looks embarrassed, but no one is bothered.

And soon, we’re alone.

Our mouths find each other the second the door closes. I scoop PJ into my lap and kiss her until we are a mess of love and emotion. Her flushed cheeks are so alluring, I go in for more.

I don’t know how much later it is when we come up for air, but it’s pitch black outside when we do.

PJ looks dizzy. Seeing that dreamy look on her face is like setting a dry field ablaze. I've never stopped loving this woman, and the idea that she feels the same way is intoxicating.

"So this is really happening. *We* are really happening."

"I'm all in," I say. "I know we need to figure out how to be a couple again, but I'm willing to put the work to make this last forever."

"So am I." She sounds so happy, I could break into song. She leans her face into my neck and kisses me tenderly right below the ear. "You are my sunshine."

"Groan," I say.

"You love cheese."

"No, I love salt. You love cheese."

"Cheese contains salt."

"You're talking to an Italian. Mozzarella and ricotta don't have salt."

"Oh, stop it. You're Italian, you're not a culinary artist."

"You have no idea how I've spent the offseason! I could have gone to cooking school."

"Did you?"

"No, but I watched every season of *Iron Chef* and *Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives*."

"I'm not saying you're wrong, but I'm going to need to see your bona fides."

"Are you asking me to cook for you?"

"Obviously. I hate cooking."

"Tomorrow night, then." I say and kiss her mouth shut.

"Okay," she says, her lips against mine.

Growing up, I thought I'd never find a place where I belonged. I acted like a nomad and a wanderer because it was safer not to care than it was to care and be ripped from a place

I loved again. But from the minute I laid eyes on Parker Jane, I knew what home felt like. Having to say goodbye after so many goodbyes in my life felt like enough to break me. I managed to survive and even thrive, but until I saw her again, I never realized how empty I had become.

Nonna was right. You can be happy alone, but you can't be complete. Or at least I can't. Holding PJ now is like finding all the missing pieces of my heart and putting them back together. Except, like with my knee injury years ago, my heart is stronger than ever. It could beat forever.

And it will.

For her.

With her.

I am home.

EPILOGUE

TWO MONTHS LATER



PARKER

This day is too important to leave to anyone else, so for what feels like the five hundredth time since I moved to Sugar Maple, South Carolina, I'm running point on a wedding at the farm.

"Aren't you Bob's best man?" Ash asks Sonny, who's been with me as I set everything in motion.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll go in just a sec," he says. "PJ looks too hot in this dress."

And I really do.

In true Nonna fashion, she did the unexpected and decided to have a maid of honor and for Bob to have a best man.

Except, they chose Sonny and me. She said we were the inspiration she needed to call him during the middle of the reunion and say yes.

So *that's* what her call was about.

Nonna had the good taste to choose an A-line one-shoulder floor length dress in a gorgeous champagne color. I look freaking amazing.

Sonny looks me over, and the greedy glint in his eyes sends a flush from my ears down to my toes. I pull him in for a long, hot kiss, and then push him away. “Go!” I say. But then I bring him back and wipe the wine-colored lipstick from around his mouth. And I bite my lip, wanting more.

“I will never get tired of you looking at me like that,” Sonny says in a soft, intense voice.

“Are you guys going to have your wedding here at the farm, too?” Ash asks.

“I haven’t asked her yet,” Sonny says.

“You’re not doing a surprise double-wedding, then?” Lou says.

“Uh, no.” I say firmly. “I’ve run enough weddings at this place. You remember our old intern, Juliet? Her fiancé owns like five islands. We’re having a destination wedding where I don’t have to do a single thing.”

My friends all nod patronizingly.

“What?”

“*You’re* not going to do a thing? You’re not just type A, you’re type A plus. With extra credit,” Ash says.

“Not anymore,” I say.

My friends smirk at something beyond me, and I turn to see Sonny shaking his head. He stops abruptly. “Totally, Parkypants.”

“I will hunt you down.”

Sonny grins. “Worth it. Parkypoo.”

Millie comes over, which means I’m about to take my place. “Hey,” she says to Sonny, “congrats on the contract with TSN!”

Sonny announced his retirement and signed the contract this week. He’s broken the hearts of millions of fans but made millions more. He’ll fly around the country for games once a week during football season, but his schedule is otherwise open enough that he’s also going to start a podcast.

He's tentatively calling it Family>Football, and he plans to interview athletes and talk about the family culture and traditions that have kept them strong in spite of their busy careers ... or the way the lack of that has impacted them. He wants to look at families across generations, not just parents with their kids. How do athletes interact with their siblings, cousins, grandparents? How do those relationships influence them?

Wherever did he get that idea?

Speaking of family, my dad's cancer was stage one prostate cancer—as easy as it comes. He won't even need surgery right away, but apparently finding out he wasn't “a god” threw him for a loop.

We're not in a great place yet, and I'm not sure if we ever will be. As much as I want to forgive them, they have a lot of work to do if they're going to be part of my future. I'm done carrying the weight of our relationship.

When it's time for the wedding to start, my friends take over.

“Go get ‘em, Tiger,” Sonny says with a kiss.

“See you on the other side,” I say. Nerves flutter in my stomach, but I'm not nervous for Nonna and Bob. I'm nervous because of the conversation Nonna and I had when she called me last week.

“You want me to be your maid of honor? Are you sure?” I asked.

“I wouldn't ask if I weren't sure.”

Good point.

“I'd be honored.”

“You're a good girl, sis. But now that you've agreed, it comes with a stipulation.”

I almost regretted saying yes. Nonna isn't to be trifled with. Then she told me the stipulation.

“I was worried it was going to be something hard,” I told her, even as the idea spread warmth through my veins and out to my extremities.

“It’ll be harder in the moment than you think. But you can do it.”

I can. Can’t I?

As the reality of what she asked approaches, my stomach starts clenching. It’s not ulcer pain but that butterfly feeling I’ve felt almost nonstop since having Sonny back in my life.

And that feeling is only going to intensify until I deliver on my promise to Nonna.

It’s show time.

* * *

Nonna and Bob are husband and wife.

Aunt Mary isn’t happy about it, but everyone else is having a great time. The reception feels like the family reunion all over again. Except this time, I’ve had a couple of months of therapy and a challenge from Nonna impelling me forward.

I ding my glass to give a toast.

All eyes are on me.

So many parental figures look expectantly at me.

And I love every one of them.

“I struggle to tell people how much I love them,” I say. “So it feels appropriate that Nonna, of all people, told me exactly what I need to say up here. I wrote it out and sent it to her for approval.”

“Which I gave,” Nonna says. “Now get talking.”

Titters of laughter meet her words.

“I’ve always had to find ways to do things for people to show my love for them. After Sonny told me he loved me for the first time, it took me weeks to say it back.”

“Months,” Sonny corrects from his seat next to me.

“Maybe,” I concede. “But every day, I dropped him off his favorite Boba tea and hoped he knew what I was trying to tell him.”

Sonny kisses my hand.

“I don’t want there to be any question of how I feel now. I know you’re all invested in Sonny’s happiness.”

“And yours!” Sienna calls.

“And mine.” I look around at the faces of so many people who love me. My friends and their husbands. Sonny’s siblings and parents, who look at me with smiles so similar to Sonny’s, I fall in love with all of them a little more. I look at his cousins, aunts and uncles, and all the young kids (who would just as soon I stop talking), and I love them for it.

Last, I look at Sonny, and the pavilion brightens. He is the sunshine of *my* life. The light in the darkness. He’s pulled me out of the abyss and his love has helped me realize that healing is possible and that wholeness trumps perfection every day of the week.

“Nonna, I’m happy for you. You’ve taught me a lot about how to be me and how to build a loving legacy *as* me. I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to be like you. You’re my hero. You gave me a special gift recently, one I have with me tonight. However, the greatest gift you’ve given me is your grandson.”

Nonna smiles.

I step back from the table with my hand in my pocket. Then I drop to my knee in front of Sonny’s chair, and take his hand.

I don’t have a way of amplifying my voice, but I don’t need one. What I have to say is for him alone. Which means, of course, that everyone has rushed over to surround us. After the initial gasps, approximately eight thousand Lucianos hopped up and ran around the table. My friends have elbowed through to the front of the crowd.

I’m never one for speeches, but grand gestures are my love language. “Our love story may not be the most conventional,

but I'm grateful for every step because it brought us here. I have a very important question to ask you."

His aqua eyes are dancing. "I'm ready."

"Santino Luciano, will you do me the honor of ... coming with me?"

He laughs but takes my hand.

We stand up and I guide him hand in hand outside. After a half dozen steps, we enter a makeshift walkway, complete with hanging lanterns and a (fake) snowy white path. And there's an adorable bleating goat who isn't a baby anymore and who can walk on his legs, all by himself.

"Is that Sweetness? In a bowtie? On a leash?"

"Yes, yes, and yes," I say, taking Sweetness's leash. He hops excitedly and leads us along.

I arranged for a long wall of white panels to line one side of the walkway, with projectors opposite them playing highlights from the annals of our history. College football games, videos that neither of us ever deleted from our phones. Slideshows of old—and new—photos together, as well as some I got from Sonny's family and my friends. Photos of him in an NFL locker room or on the field. Pictures of me from events or with my friends.

And every step leads us closer to a canvas tent at the end of the walkway.

Sonny's limp is almost completely gone, but as we walk this path together, I find I'm glad not to have to worry about his injury or the impact it will have on his career. His excitement for his own future is better than any championship.

As we reach the end of our history tour, Sonny notices the tent.

"Is that *our* tent?" he asks.

"Step inside and see for yourself," I say. I may not have a huge grin on my face, but I can *feel* the smile in my eyes. My

cheeks tighten and the corners of my eyes crinkle. It's like putting the feelings of my heart on full display.

Our families have followed us, and I leave Sweetness with Sienna. Sonny and I enter the small tent perfect for the two of us, and we're finally alone.

I've recreated what our tent looked like from that night months ago to the best of my recollection, and Sonny laughs to see it.

As grateful as I am for our loved ones to be here, I'm glad to have privacy. I adore them for wanting to be part of this moment, but it belongs to us.

We drop to our knees, because the tent isn't big enough for Sonny to stand in. "Can I ask you another question?"

"Please do."

I pull out the box burning a hole in my pocket and open it. It's Sonny's grandpa's ring. "Will you marry me?"

Sonny laughs. "You are such a thunder stealer."

"Huh?"

"I was planning to propose to you tonight."

I can't help but feel smug. "Were you?"

"Yes! My family has a flash mob ready for you! We were going to dance to 'I Got You, Babe.' Nonna even had a part."

"Nonna's the one who told me to propose to you tonight with your grandfather's ring!"

"Yeah, well she told me if *I* didn't propose to you tonight, she would regret her wedding day forever."

I laugh so hard, I fall forward, bumping my head into his chest. "How many meddlers can one pavilion hold?"

"All of them. All of the meddlers." He sits back on his heels but leans forward so our faces are closer in height. "Yes, by the way. I'll marry the heck out of you. Gimme that ring."

"Are you sure?"

“PJ, I am not above giving you a noogie. Give me that ring. Now.”

I slide it on his finger, and he squeezes me tightly. “I can’t wait another second to make you my wife.”

“You’re going to have to. I’m not doing a double wedding. I want sun, sand, and sleep.”

“I can think of another few things to add to that list,” Sonny says, kissing my neck.

“You guys know we can hear you, right?” Sienna asks through the tent. “This thing is not remotely soundproof.”

I groan in mortification, and Sonny wraps me close to his chest, kissing the top of my head.

“Come on,” Sonny says. “If we’re not giving them a double wedding tonight, the least we can do is give them a double proposal.”

“I’ll allow it, but just know that if you ever have servers sing happy birthday to me in a restaurant, we’re done.”

“No we’re not.”

Dang it. “Fine. But I’ll be mad.”

“Noted. Now let’s go.”

We come out holding hands, and then we throw our arms up in the air. Sonny wraps me in his arms and everyone whistles and whoops as we kiss.

Then we return to the pavilion where his family does their flash mob dance. And my meddling friends dance along to every single step.

I sit in a chair and watch as everyone dances and spins and holds up signs asking me to marry Sonny, and when he drops to his knees in front of me, wearing his grandfather’s ring and holding a ring out to me, I answer the same question he answered only a few minutes ago.

“Yes.”

All of our loved ones cheer, and then I spot Great Aunt Mary walking over to the cake table. Nonna and Bob are only a few feet away when Mary digs her hand into the cake.

The next thing I know, she's thrown a huge chunk in Bob's face. And eyes light up around the whole pavilion.

Sonny picks me up over his shoulder and sprints out of the pavilion and toward our tent. The last thing we hear before we hide away to celebrate is someone yelling.

“FOOD FIGHT!”

*Want an exclusive bonus scene at Parker's bachelorette party?
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And read on for a BONUS EPILOGUE featuring Ash and Rusty!

BONUS EPILOGUE

ASH

The food fight has been cleared enough for dancing and Sonny and Parker are back. Parker has a huge diamond engagement ring on her finger and is glowing from within.

I'm sitting with Lou, who couldn't be less interested in dancing or talking. She has her notebook out and is writing feverishly. When the muse hits, I know to give her space to write.

My favorite song starts, though, and I'm in the mood to shimmy. So I kick off my shoes, run to a table, and grab Rusty. He's talking to Sonny's cousin, Daniel.

"Dance with me," I say. I don't ask, because this is Rusty, and he always goes along with my schemes.

"I'm not dancing to this," Rusty says.

"It's *Groove is in the Heart!* It's my *jam!*"

"Then get some peanut butter, because this ain't for me."

I laugh and tug on his arm. "That was good. Now come!"

Rusty sighs, but it's playful. "As you wish." He nods goodbye to Sonny's cousin.

But when we reach the dance floor, instead of doing something dumb like the floss, he grabs my hand and pulls me in like it's a slow dance.

"What are you doing?"

“You asked me to dance. I don’t ... twerk, or whatever. I dance like a man.”

I throw my head back and laugh. Rusty’s reserved, so it’s easy for people to miss how sharp and funny he is. But he is so freaking funny. “All right, James Bond.”

He gives a small shake of his head, and a bit of his dark blond hair falls in front of his face, just above his brows. I smooth it back up. His eyes tighten.

“Did I pull a hair?”

“I beg your pardon?” He fixes his hazel eyes on me. He’s the lucky kind of blond who has dark eyebrows and unbelievably long, dark eyelashes.

“You winced when I tucked your hair back up. Did I pull a hair?”

“Uh, no,” he says, but he still looks oddly pained.

I look around the room. “Well, you look hot tonight. Too bad Sonny doesn’t have any single cousins for you.”

He coughs like he’s being strangled. “I’d rather dance with you.”

“If this is all a ruse to give me another noogie, I’m walking,” I say, dropping my hand from around his neck and pretending to walk off. But my right hand is still in his grasp, and he pulls me back toward him. Like a man.

I bump against his chest, and for a second, his intense gaze steals my breath.

He really does look hot.

No, that’s creepy. Rusty gives me *noogies*. He friend-zoned himself before I even could, which is saying something, considering I work faster than the Flash when it comes to friend-zoning nice guys.

I wonder what it’s like to be the Flash? Does he *see* in super speed? Like, is it agony for him to watch the world go on at its normal speed? He has to metabolize like fifty thousand calories a day, right? Does his heart beat faster?

I chuckle to myself and my bizarre thoughts.

ADHD is *my* superpower.

Also my kryptonite.

I lay my head on Rusty's shoulder and can feel his heart beat against my chest. It's pretty fast, especially for how slow we're dancing.

Also, his pecs are rock hard. I wonder if his abs are really as tight as Sonny said.

"Ash," he says. I have my head on his shoulder. His voice is low and slow as molasses, and it's one of the things I like most about him. I love audiobooks, because they let me do two (or three or five) things at once, and Rusty could narrate a grocery list and it would be hot. His accent is like a warm hug.

Hi, I'm Ashley, and I like warm hugs.

"Ash?" Rusty says.

Oh yeah. He was trying to get my attention. "Mm-hmm?"

"Why are you pinchin' my abs?"

I pull my head off his shoulders and my hand away from his side. "Sorry! Sonny mentioned something about you being ... yoked? I don't know. I guess my hands were curious if your abs were as tight as he suggested."

"You talked to Sonny about my *abs*?"

"I know. You're fit, and all, but he's pretty sure your abs are the hottest thing since toast."

Rusty normally has the warmest hazel eyes in the world, but they flash hotter for a split second. "He's not wrong."

I lean back, my arms still around his neck. "What are you saying?"

"I'm sayin' he's not wrong. Ask the guys."

I laugh. "You want me to go ask Duke and Tripp if you have nice abs?"

His hands shift on my back. "If you really want to know the answer. Do you?"

The smile on my face falls a bit. Is he serious? Obviously I want to know the answer. I debate yelling at his friends over the music, but my brain reminds me that this is a wedding. So I pull Rusty along the dance floor to where Duke and Millie are dancing with Lottie.

“Hey, Duke,” I say. “Does Rusty have nice abs?”

“They’re insane,” Millie answers for him.

This earns her a look from her husband.

“What?” she asks. “I work out with you guys all the time. This isn’t about you. It’s about him, and your boy keeps it tight.”

“Okay. This was fun,” Duke says.

“Thanks Duke,” Rusty says. “Thanks Millie.”

Millie winks at him. Why is she winking at him?

“Satisfied?” he asks. He puts *his* hands on *my* waist now as we move away from our friends. Millie, Jane, and Parker all workout pretty religiously. I do squats while I brush my teeth sometimes. My body is fine, but it’s not like theirs. I’m lean but soft, and suddenly, I wonder if Rusty minds.

Not that it matters if he minds.

“Uh, what was the question?”

“Do you believe them?” he asks. Why does he care what I think? He’s reached best friend tier. And yes, that’s different than brother tier, which is why the idea of his abs is interesting, not disturbing.

“Sure. Why not?”

“You don’t believe them.”

“It’s just so weird to think! We sit together and do ad campaigns and debate which actor was the best Batman.”

“I’ve worked on a farm since I was twelve.”

“Yeah. Okay,” I say.

“Let’s see what Tripp thinks.”

Rusty weaves us through the dance floor to where Tripp and Jane are dancing. Parker and Sonny are close by.

“Hey Tripp,” I say. “How are Rusty’s abs.”

“Glorious,” Tripp deadpans.

“Be real.”

“Uh, sure. There are eight of ‘em and they allow him to do more pull-ups than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

“I don’t care about pull-ups. I care about abs.”

“You have to have abs to do pull-ups.”

“So what you’re saying is they’re legit?”

“They’re legit.”

Sonny overhears us and pulls Parker over. “Told you,” he says to me.

Then he gives Rusty a nod.

What in the ever-loving crap is going on here?

“Is this an intervention?” I ask. “You guys know I’m not *actually* that obsessed with abs, right?”

Jane smiles and shakes her head, Parker arches an eyebrow at me, and then they all go back to dancing.

I repeat: what in the ever-loving crap is going on here?

“I think our friends just want you to see what’s right in front of your face,” Rusty says.

I look around. “I don’t get it.”

“It’ll come.”

The song ends, and Rusty excuses himself.

I leave the dance floor to join Lou, who’s still sitting and writing in her own world. My eyes light on the last few lines she wrote.

Seeing what the eye can’t see

Dreaming what the mind can’t dream

Feeling what the heart can't feel

It all leads back to you.

“Those are pretty,” I tell her, kicking my feet up.

“They’re terrible. But I gotta get the sand in the sandbox if I’m going to build a castle. Freewriting helps me create.”

“I get it,” I say. I can sometimes work for hours just to get a flash of inspiration in five minutes than makes everything I’ve just done obsolete. “I just had the craziest experience. Rusty was telling me how nice his abs are, and he had me get confirmation from his friends. Isn’t that bizarre?”

“Girl, I bet they’re nice. He is so ripped.”

“What is with all of you obsessing over Rusty? Yeah, he’s tight, and all, and he’s got that wholesome handsomeness that Hallmark movies love.”

“But ...?”

“But nothing, I guess. I just don’t see why everyone’s talking about it en masse like this.”

“Hon, Rusty doesn’t look like a Hallmark movie actor. He looks like Wilson Bethel, and if that doesn’t tell you everything you need to know, I don’t know what will.”

I can grant her that point. But he’s so *nice*. He’s Wilson Bethel as Wilson Bethel, not as Wade Kinsella, and the difference matters. “Okay.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ash. You’ll either see it or you won’t.”

“Is this seriously about his abs? Fine, I believe you guys that his are the One True Abs, okay? This is getting weird.”

A smile flitters over Lou’s ethereal face, and she resumes writing. Her long, light blonde hair falls in between me and her notebook, and she just scribbles away.

I glance up to see Rusty talking to Tripp, Duke, and Sonny, and I feel a stab of longing for what my friends have. I’ve only had one serious boyfriend in my life. I met him at my old job,

and we dated for the longest year of my life, even if I couldn't see it at the time.

He was a gaslighting, narcissistic jerk who always made me feel defective. He acted like I was so lucky to have him put up with me.

Our breakup was the best thing that could have happened, but it destroyed my self esteem for longer than I care to admit.

And even now, I can't help but look at my friends and think that the biggest difference between them and me is that they're so smart and put together while I'm so scattered and ... weird. I still talk about an abs page I ran for a single semester eight years ago. Yeah, it got me the A, but are a dude's abs actually that important to me?

No.

Seriously, they're not.

Talking about them is ... easy. Women from all walks of life like abs, so it's easier for me to talk to people, to fit in ...

Oh my gosh, did I just think that out loud?

I hate that I'm thinking about this. My friends accept me and love me completely. They've never made me feel *other* or *odd*.

But that can't make me stop feeling it around everyone else.

Except Rusty.

I wonder why that is. Why does he, of all people, make me forget my self-doubt? Is it because I don't feel the need to compare myself? Because the things I second-guess the most are the things he seems to like about me?

Or is it because he's just so *good* and it's impossible not to feel good about myself with him?

And therein lies the problem. I wish I could fall for a guy like Rusty, someone kindhearted, caring, and, yeah, hot.

But I don't have to win a guy like Rusty over, and that's the problem.

I like jerks.

I hate this about myself, but it doesn't make it less true. I want to win them over, because if I can win a jerk over, then I *must* be normal and likable and not the pity case I always worry I am to my step-dad, because heaven knows my own dad couldn't care less about me.

I am such a mess.

If I could choose to change my heart and fall in love with anyone in the world, it would be with someone good. Someone who cares about other people. Someone who makes me feel safe and comfortable. Someone who views my quirks as brilliance instead of something to scrub from my personality.

Someone like Rusty.

If only I could choose.

If only I could fake it till I make it.

Too bad you can't fake the heart.

Excited to see how Rusty gets out of the friend zone? Pre-order Ash and Rusty's fake dating, best friends to lovers sweet romcom, [Don't Go Faking My Heart!](#)

And if you're interested in how the Janes got their start, check out Jane and Tripp's sizzling enemies-to-lovers banter in [Strawberry Fields for Never.](#)

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Kiddos: Being your mom is the best part of my life. SMOOCHES!

As always, to my loving, merciful, enabling God, thank You.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kate Watson is a Top 50 Amazon Bestselling author of cheeky closed door romantic comedies. Originally from Canada, she attended college in the States and holds a BA in Philosophy from Brigham Young University. A lover of travel, speaking in accents, and experiencing new cultures, she has also lived in Israel, Brazil, the American South, and she now calls Arizona home.

She started writing at six years old and sold her first book, “The Heart People,” for \$0.25 to her parents. It received rave reviews. Since then, she’s written many books, including *Single All the Way*, a Top 50 Amazon Bestseller. She writes stories full of heart, humor, and happily-ever-afters.

She is currently living her own happily-ever-after with her super cute husband and their four wild and wonderful kids. She runs on caffeine, swoons, and Jesus.



ALSO BY KATE WATSON

Sweet as Sugar Maple Series:

[Strawberry Fields for Never](#)

[Baby Llama Drama](#)

[It's Always Sonny](#)

Christmas:

[Single All the Way](#)

