



MARRIED  
TO THE

*Enemy*

*Bliss River Series*

USA TODAY BESTSELLER

LILI VALENTE

# MARRIED TO THE ENEMY

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*To my readers. Thank you!*

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MARRIED TO THE ENEMY

*Bliss River Book Two*

By Lili Valente

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*To protect my baby, I'll totally make out with the enemy...*

Yeah, he's *that* guy—my first love, Nash Geary, the heartbreaker I've spent a decade trying to forget. But now I'm back in Bliss River, facing an ugly custody battle with Mr. Bad Idea #2, and I'll do anything to keep my baby girl safe.

Go into debt for a fancy lawyer? Check.

Hire a private detective to get dirt on my ex? Check.

Marry my nemesis to prove I can provide my baby with a loving, two-parent home? Um...check?

One too many beers at the county fair and suddenly Nash and I are on our way to the courthouse to tie the knot. He'll get even after a rough break-up, I'll prove my daughter is better off with me and my pillar-of-the-community, police chief husband, and we'll end it amicably when I'm granted full custody—everybody wins.

But what happens when the lines between fantasy and reality begin to blur, Nash sweeps both me and my baby girl off our feet, and what started as pretend becomes the most important thing in my world?

**They say keep your friends close and your enemies closer...**

**So what am I supposed to do with the fake husband I'm pretty sure is the love of my life?**

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# CHAPTER ONE

ARIA

*Twelve years ago*

*S*lip through the woods on silent feet, my heartbeat louder than the cicadas buzzing and clicking in the trees.

It's almost too dark to see the trail, I don't have a flashlight, and being out of my cabin after lights out *and* on my way to meet a boy are both major camp handbook violations. If I'm caught, I'll be kicked out. My mom and dad are on the Arts Council board, but not even that will spare me the ultimate punishment.

The staff here are really intense about following the rules.

And staying in bed after lights out.

And not kissing boys.

Or girls.

They frown—hard—at all varieties of kissing and displays of affection.

I should turn around. I really, really should.

I don't want to be sent home. My friends are here, camp means another four weeks away from my bratty little sisters, Lark and Melody, and I'm having the time of my life sketching and painting and experimenting with new mediums during our five hours of daily art classes.

I love camp *Arts Under the Elms*. I love it like I love deep fried Twinkies at the fair and staying in my pajamas all weekend, and I wouldn't put my future here at risk for anything.

Anything except *him*.

Nash Geary.

Just thinking his name is enough to make my blood fizzy. He is by far the most delicious boy I've ever met—taller than the other boys at camp by at least five inches, built like a contestant of an ancient Olympiad, with moody green eyes a shade lighter than mine and a silky Georgia drawl I can feel whispering over my skin like warm summer rain.

He is flat out, no holds barred, drop dead drool-worthy.

Every girl at camp had her eye on him the first day, but by the time we walked through the dinner line to pick up our burgers and hot dogs, Nash had made it clear he only had eyes for me. Me, the girl with the messy hair and skinny legs.

Not that I'm a complete wallflower.

I've dated my fair share of boys—especially considering I'm not allowed to go on car dates until I'm sixteen—but I've never been with someone as close to a full-grown man as Nash. I mean, I'm no dog—my skin is pale, but clear, and my hair finally darkened to auburn after a decade of impersonating an orange construction cone—but no matter how much I eat, I stay scrawny. And, shame of all my shames, I barely fill out an A cup.

Meanwhile, Nash is six foot four, muscled all over, with hands big enough to wrap all the way around my waist, and an air about him that practically screams "I know my way around vaginas." I would bet my snow cone hut voucher tickets for the entire summer that he's gone all the way with at least one girl, maybe more.

At first, I sort of wondered what he saw in me, a girl who still looks like a twelve-year old if I make the mistake of forgetting to slip the padding into my two-piece swimsuit.

But then we started talking and things just...clicked.

Within a few hours, we were cracking jokes like old friends, making each other laugh so hard we snorted Coke out of our noses, all over a watercolor I wasn't even sad to lose because being with Nash was so much fun. By the third day, we were taking long walks during our free time after dinner—chatting about our lives back home and school and the bands we like and which paintings make our brains tingle. And by the fifth day we were stealing kisses behind the mess hall dumpsters before lights out.

And what kisses they were...

Just thinking about them makes my nerve endings hum and my feet move faster along the path, already anticipating the tingle inducing kiss waiting for me in the clearing where Nash is meeting me tonight.

Kissing Nash is heaven and hell all tangled up together, enough to make my soul light up with joy and my body ache with a hunger that's almost painful.

But...deliciously painful.

Until now, I've only really been into kissing. It's hard to get interested in much more in the back row of a movie theater or under the bleachers after school, and it's not like any of the guys I've locked lips with were all that great at it.

But now...

Now I want Nash's big hands to slide beneath my tee-shirt. I want to explore every inch of his skin with my fingertips, until I've memorized him so well I can sculpt him in ceramics class. And I want him to do the same. I want him to touch me wherever he wants, *do* whatever he wants, because I know anything I do with Nash will feel amazing, and so, so right.

It's only been three weeks, but I'm ready for him to be my first. I can feel how much he cares about me, and I've never been so completely gone on a guy. In my secret thoughts, I used to imagine growing up to have a string of gorgeous lovers, each one more dashing and dangerous than the last. But now a part of me wonders what it would be like to find "the one" the first time around.

To spend my life with only one man...

When the man in question is Nash, the possibility doesn't seem boring. Not in the slightest.

I shiver as I reach the edge of the clearing and a large shadow separates from the darkness. A beat later, Nash's voice rumbles through the trees, "Hey. There you are."

"Here I am." I grin, skipping the last few steps off the path and into his arms. He picks me up with a happy moan that vibrates through my bones, and then he kisses me, long and deep, until my breath is coming faster and that delicious hunger rises inside me again.

"I was beginning to think you'd changed your mind," he whispers against my mouth as his hands wander down to cup my bottom through my shorts.

An electric jolt surges through me in response.

God, he makes me crazy, so wonderfully, crazily crazy. "No," I say, clinging tighter to his shoulders. "I just had to wait until Molly fell asleep. She was reading in her bunk forever."

"I'm so glad you're here. I missed you, and I've been dying to be alone with you."

"Me, too," I breathe, threading my fingers into his soft brown hair. "So much."

We kiss for another long minute, or maybe a hundred minutes. All I know is that soon my head is spinning and my chest is aching and I feel like I'll die if I don't get more of him.

All of him.

I pull away, sucking in a ragged breath. "Did you bring something?"

"Something?" he echoes, his breath coming faster, too.

"Something...just in case."

"In case..."

“In case we want to do more than kiss,” I whisper, my nerve endings buzzing.

I can't tell if I'm nervous or excited or both, but I'll feel better once I know we're protected. I'm ready to be with Nash, but I'm not ready to be a mom. Not for a decade. Or more. Or maybe ever. There are so many adventures to be had and most of them don't pair well with caring for an infant.

“Yes ma'am,” Nash drawls in that silky voice of his. “I brought a blanket from the storage room. It's over here.” He takes my hand, drawing me deeper into the shadows.

As my eyes adjust, I make out the rectangular shape of a dark gray camp blanket spread out on the grass. Nash sits, guiding me down onto the blanket beside him and rolling me beneath him with a calm assurance that makes my blood pressure spike.

But when he moves to kiss me again, I put a finger to his lips.

“I didn't mean the blanket,” I say, amazed by my own gumption. But if I'm really ready to go all the way, I should be brave enough to talk about protection, too. And I am, a fact I prove when I add in a softer voice, “I meant a condom.”

Nash pauses for a long second before he exhales. “Um, yeah... I have something. In my wallet, but I didn't...”

“Didn't what?” I ask.

The hesitation in his voice would make me anxious as hell in any other situation, but it's impossible to feel anxious with Nash leaning protectively over me, his big hand running up and down my side.

“I didn't think you wanted to tonight. I thought you would want to wait.”

“Do *you* want to wait?”

“Heck, no,” he says, with a soft laugh. “You make me crazy and you're so beautiful.” He sighs, a sound filled with so much longing it makes me feel like the most desirable woman

on the planet. “I want you so much it’s probably sinful, Aria, but...it’s your first time.”

“Does that make you nervous?” I bite my lip. I know some guys avoid virgins like the plague, thinking we’re going to get too clingy or something lame I’ve never quite understood.

I might be a virgin, but I’ve watched sexy movies and read every racy romance novel I could get my hands on. I know what goes on between a man and a woman. Yes, I’m sure the feelings can get intense, but I’m not going to be rendered idiotic because my privates and a boy’s privates meet up for the first time.

I’m inexperienced, not naïve, and my brain is just as much a part of this decision as the rest of me.

“A little,” Nash confesses. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” I snuggle closer to him, wrapping my arms around his neck. Could he be any sweeter? Or perfect? Or sexy? God, he’s so sexy, it makes my blood feel like honey oozing through my veins. “All you ever do is make me feel amazing. This won’t be any different.”

“Are you sure?” he presses. “I don’t mind waiting. I...”

“What?” I let my fingers play through his spiky hair, wishing I could see his eyes.

“I really like you. A lot. I don’t want this to just be a camp thing, you know? I want to see you after. Be with you after. Like...an official couple.”

“Me, too,” I say, smiling so wide it makes my cheeks hurt.

Nash and I haven’t talked about anything long term, but I’ve had all my fingers and toes crossed this would happen. Sure, we go to different schools and live on opposite sides of town—me in a cookie cutter subdivision, Nash out in the country—but that doesn’t mean we can’t make a relationship work.

“I don’t have a lot of time during the week,” he says, a smile in his voice that makes me grin even harder. “I have

football most afternoons and help out with my brothers and sisters at night, but I could come to Bliss River every Sunday.”

“And I could come out and help you babysit when I don’t have art class after school,” I say, catching his excitement for our future. “I’ve got my permit and Dad said I could borrow the truck once I turn sixteen.”

“I’d like that,” he says, before adding in a voice that completely melts my heart, “I’d like as much of you as I can get.”

“How about all of me?” I ask, wondering if this is what love feels like. If it isn’t, then love must be some insanely serious stuff.

Because this...

This is...magic.

“I’m not scared.” I cup his cheek in my hand. “I care about you so much, and I know what I want.”

Nash’s breath hitches in a way that makes me feel beautiful and powerful and so drunk with needing him I vow to beg him to get naked with me, if that’s what it takes.

“On one condition,” he finally says. “We’re a couple. Exclusive. It’s official. You’re my girl.”

“Yes,” I whisper, suddenly feeling shy.

I’ve never had a boyfriend like this before, one who made it clear being a couple meant something to him, that this was a commitment more serious than most casual, high school connections.

Hearing Nash call me “his girl,” is intimate, possessive, and completely irresistible.

“And you’re my man,” I say.

His husky sound of approval sends a thrill rushing through me, giving me the courage to whisper, “Now, will you make love to me?”

He doesn’t say a word, but the next second he’s kissing me so hard and deep that, soon, his breath is my breath and I



swear I can feel his heartbeat echoing in my chest.

A beat later, his hand slides beneath my shirt, making every cell in my body zing. Not long after my shirt is off and he's kissing me in places no boy has ever kissed me before and it is...mind-blowing.

Life changing. More pure, sweet magic.

My head spins and my fingers fist in Nash's hair as he kisses and licks and, God, the things he does to me. The way it makes me feel. It's more incredible, more intoxicating than I've ever imagined.

Soon, his hand dips beneath the waistband of my gym shorts, down until he finds the place where I want him so badly. And then his fingers begin to move, building the tension inside of me until I'm panting, moaning, my every muscle going tense as he trails hot kisses down my neck. I'm so close, so desperately close that my eyes are squeezed tight.

So tight that I don't see the flashlights coming through the woods until it's too late.

Too late to cover up or run or do anything else to avoid being caught in a *very* compromising position.

## CHAPTER TWO

*A*fter scrambling back into our clothes in front of the camp directors—by far the most mortifying, scarring experience of my entire fifteen and three-quarters years on earth—we're taken to the office and forced to sit silently on opposite sides of the room to wait for our parents to arrive.

Nash's face is bright pink with embarrassment, but I'm sure I look way worse. A glance in the mirror near the door confirms that I'm flushed redder than a baboon's backside, but I know better than to ask to go to the bathroom to splash water on my flaming, redheaded face.

Phil and Bea, the co-directors, made it clear the only place Nash and I are going is home—immediately. We won't even have a chance to say goodbye to our friends.

Or each other, I'm afraid.

Every time our eyes meet, Nash telegraphs an apology my way. I try to telegraph, "It's okay, it's not your fault, we can't let this tear us apart," but I'd feel so much better if I had the chance to say all of that with actual words.

So he knows I don't blame him for anything.

And that I still desperately want to be his girl.

In what seems like forever and also no time at all, Nash's mom is at the office door, stepping through onto the faded brown carpet.

She isn't at all what I was expecting. She's tiny, for one thing—only coming up to the middle of Nash's chest—and wearing bleached blue jeans that haven't been fashionable in decades and a faded Bliss River Blues Fest tee shirt. Her thin brown hair is pulled into a ponytail and her face is so pale I can make out the pathways of her veins around her sunken eyes. She looks exhausted, the kind of tired you know runs deeper than the fact that she's been awakened in the middle of the night.

Nash mentioned that his mom and dad both have to work really hard, and often take on extra night shifts to pay for everything their family needs, but I didn't realize he meant this kind of hard. I didn't realize his parents were literally working themselves to the bone or how poor his family must be.

I suddenly feel terrible for all the things I take for granted. For my closet full of clothes and my weekly allowance and the car I suspect I'm getting on my sixteenth birthday.

I'm already deep in the guilt pit when Nash's mom shoots me a weary look that makes me feel very foolish and childish and small.

She listens to Bea's report of the incident without saying a word then asks, "Do I really have to take him home? I'm sure nothing like this will happen again. Nash really loves it here."

Bea's husband, Phil, a man close to my dad's age who's looked sick to his stomach since the moment he and Bea shined flashlights on our blanket, exchanges a loaded look with his wife.

Bea purses her lips, continuing to avoid eye contact with both Nash and myself as she says, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Geary, we have a very strict policy on being out of bunks after hours. Nash will absolutely have to leave, but..." She shakes her head. "Well, we'll have to wait to see what Aria's parents have to say before we can send him home. We may have to contact the police."

Mrs. Geary's brows pinch together. "The police? What? Why would—"

“Aria is a minor,” Bea cuts in. “Nash is not. I don’t want to start throwing around ugly words, but technically this is a very serious situation. Laws have been broken.”

“But Nash only turned eighteen last month,” Mrs. Geary says, her skin going even paler. “He’s still a boy.”

Phil sighs heavily, a sound that seems to pain him. “I hear you, ma’am, but she’s only fifteen. Hopefully we can work this out without anyone getting in more trouble than they’re in already, but if the Marches want to press charges, we—”

The rest of Phil’s sentence is cut off by a rampaging rhinoceros thundering into the room, smoke steaming from his ears.

It’s my dad, in full, protect-his-offspring, beast mode. His thinning blond hair is standing up in a crazy fuzz-halo around his head as he demands to know “what the hell is going on here!” His voice is so deep it makes the walls vibrate. Even dressed in suit pants and dress shoes paired with a *Bob and Sue’s Smokehouse* tee-shirt from before I was born, back when Mom and Dad opened the first of their chain of BBQ restaurants, he somehow manages to be terrifying, not ridiculous.

Daddy’s only five ten and on the slim side for a man with an abiding love of red meat, but he has the kind of personal energy that knocks larger men off their feet from half a football field away. He can be a lot on a normal day. When he’s mad, he’s flat out impossible.

This isn’t going to go well.

Not well at all.

The thought has barely passed through my head when Daddy’s gaze locks with Nash’s. My father’s eyes catch fire and his jaw unhinges, the better to fully unleash the power of his vengeful fury.

Words I’ve never heard emerge from his mouth stream into the room in a vicious river of ugliness, making my blood run cold. The things he’s saying are so awful that at first my brain refuses to process the information.

I sit, stunned and silent in my chair as my father accuses my boyfriend of being a “low life piece of shit,” among other, far worse things. Things that turn my breath leaden in my lungs, making it feel like I’m being crushed to death by my own shame.

But finally, when Dad points a finger at Nash’s chest, promising to prosecute him “to the full extent of the law,” my lips remember how to move.

“No, Dad! Stop,” I shout.

“I will not stop!” he thunders back in that awful voice that sounds nothing like the father I’ve known and loved for my entire life. It’s so jarring—and terrifying—that I burst into tears.

Big, sloppy, ugly-cry tears.

I try to pull myself together, but I can’t seem to stop, no matter how embarrassing it is to lose control in front of Nash and his mom and Phil and Bea—the directors have already seen me almost naked, for God’s sake, do they really have to see me wailing like a toddler on top of it?

The only good thing about falling to pieces is that it seems to pop Dad’s anger balloon. The next time I dare to lift my face from my hot, tear-soaked hands, he’s sitting on the couch beside me, patting my back. “There, there, baby,” he says in his normal voice, “It’s okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell like that.”

“Please, Dad,” I say, my voice thick. “Nash didn’t hurt me or make me do anything I didn’t want to do. Please, don’t call the police.”

“You’re only fifteen, Aria,” Dad says, what looks like fear in his pale eyes. “You don’t know what you want.”

“I do, too,” I insist, sitting up straighter. “And I know good people from bad people. You taught me that, Dad. And Nash is a good person. He’s so sweet and thoughtful and talented. He didn’t deserve any of those things you said about him.”

Daddy’s mouth tightens. “Well, that may be. If I ever see the boy again, I’ll apologize. After I tell him to stay at least

five miles away from my daughter for the rest of his perverted life.”

“He’s not a pervert,” I say, but my voice sounds weaker than it did. I glance around the room, shocked to realize my dad is right. Nash is gone. He’s gone, and he left without saying goodbye. “Where...”

“Nash and his mother went to get his things,” Bea says, pity furrowing her brow as she sits down in the chair across from me, the one Nash was sitting in only moments before. “As the older, supposedly wiser party, he should have known better than to do what he did. But since you’re only fifteen and have been with us for so many years...” Her lips curve in a small smile. “Well, we’re going to offer you the chance to stay, providing you promise not to break the rules again and spend your free period helping out in the cafeteria to make amends.”

“I...” I swallow the words rising in my throat. It’s not fair for me to get to stay while Nash is kicked out, but Bea isn’t going to change her mind. Even if she did, my dad wouldn’t let me stay at camp if Nash was still here. And if I insist on going home in solidarity with my boyfriend, I have no doubt I’ll be grounded from my phone and my laptop, ensuring I’ll have no way to reach out to apologize for my psycho father.

But if I stay here...

Camp is a cell free zone, but there are payphones in the rec room and Delilah has an emergency burner phone her mom made her smuggle in just in case she has an anxiety attack and needs to talk to family in the middle of the night. It doesn’t matter that I didn’t have the chance to get Nash’s cell number. Surely the Geary’s have a landline. They seem like grounded, landline kind of people, the sort who have a listed number a girl can track down if she Googles hard enough.

I’ll be able to talk to him if I stay.

That thought is the only solid thing in my mind as I nod and say, “Thank you. Yes, please, I’d like to stay. I’m sorry for breaking the rules.”

After a lecture about believing in myself that I can't see has anything to do with getting caught making out, my dad leaves and Bea escorts me back to my bunk, where I lie awake all night, waiting for the sun and a chance to call Nash.

I have to talk to him.

If I don't, I'm going to go crazy.

THE NEXT MORNING, I sneak online during Photoshop class and track down the Geary's phone number.

But for some reason, in the harsh light of day, I can't bring myself to dial the number. I'm so mortified by the things my dad said last night, and also a little...afraid.

What if Nash hates me now? What if he took one look at my rhino dad and decided he wants nothing to do with me? Surely, if he still cared, he would have at least said goodbye, even if he had to shout it over his shoulder as Phil shoved him out the door.

I worry myself sick about it all day and almost pass out in the shower I'm so stressed out. Finally, I decide to stick a pin in the problem. I'll call Nash when I get back home, where it will be safe to spend days crying my eyes out if things go wrong.

I can't lose it here in front of my friends. They would freak out. I'm the upbeat, confident one, not the girl who falls apart because a boy doesn't like her anymore.

Even if he is the best boy she's ever met.

FOUR WEEKS LATER, after our final show and the reception for the parents, I spend the entire drive home from camp pumping myself up to face my fears.

I'm going to call him.

And it's going to be okay.



Or at least it will be over, and I won't feel like a coward anymore.

I call the minute I get home, before I start my laundry or grab a taco from the plate my sister, Lark, made to celebrate my return. I listen to the phone ring, my heart in my throat, until an old-fashioned sounding answering machine picks up.

Who even has those anymore?

I'm so shocked—and stressed about what I could say that will be worthy of being recorded for potentially everyone in the Geary household to hear—that I drop the phone back into its cradle without saying a word.

It takes me the rest of the day—and four tacos—to come up with a solid, family-friendly message that will get my point across to Nash without upsetting his parents, if they happen to be the first ones to hear it.

I write it out on a notecard, reading it aloud to myself over and over again before I call the next day.

But when I hear Mrs. Geary's tired voice asking me to "leave my name and number," I chicken out again. And again and again—five times total in my first week home.

I can't seem to get anyone on the line, but maybe that's on purpose? Maybe Nash somehow knows that unfamiliar number is mine and is refusing to pick up the phone on principle?

I'm still stressing about it—and trying to psych myself up to leave my message when a miracle happens.

I'm downtown, shopping for a first-day-of-school outfit with my friends, when Nash materializes around a corner with two other boys. They're all eating corn dogs and laughing and he looks so gorgeous—and perfect and kind and familiar—that before I make a conscious decision to bolt, I'm dashing out of the store and hurrying to catch up with him.

"Nash, wait!" I call, holding my breath as he turns, praying he'll be happy to see me, too.

But when his eyes meet mine they go cold. Almost as cool as his voice. “Hey there, Princess.”

When I was growing up, I enjoyed playing princess as much as any other little girl, but the way Nash says the word makes me want to rush home and burn every crown and tiara.

He is obviously *not* happy to see me. But can I blame him? I should have left a damned message. But surely, if I explain how nervous I was, he’ll understand. If only he were alone instead of flanked by two jocks, who are staring at me like a zoo animal.

“Can we talk?” I squeak, sounding about ten years old. “Please?”

“No thanks,” Nash says still sounding like a stranger. “Wouldn’t want to piss off your daddy.”

“Please,” I beg, willing him to see how sorry I am for the way things went down. “I can explain. I—”

“I’m sure you could, but you didn’t,” he cuts in. “So why bother now?”

“Because I want to apologize. And maybe...be friends again?”

Nash sighs.

His friends smirk, knowing smirks that make me suspect I’m not the first girl to beg Nash for a few minutes of his time.

Suddenly, in that moment, I begin to doubt everything I thought was true. Maybe Nash isn’t nice, and I wasn’t special to him. Maybe everything that went down between us at camp was just what my dad shouted the night he barreled into the director’s office—a trick to get into an innocent girl’s pants.

And then he says, “Friends? Were we ever friends?” and my heart drops into my stomach, making me regret every bite of pizza I had for lunch.

But I’m not going to let him see how much he’s hurt me.

“I guess not,” I say, covering with a bitchy curl of my lip as my thoughts race, searching for a verbal dart to throw that

will wound him the way he's wounded me. Only one thing comes to mind. "Too bad. My parents always taught me it was good manners to be kind to the less fortunate."

It's a low blow and a shitty thing to say. I know that, but in the moment all I care about is giving Nash a taste of his own medicine.

His flinch as my dart flies through the chink in his armor is so simultaneously gratifying and shame-inducing it makes my pulse race and my cheeks flush hot.

But he recovers quickly, shrugging me off. "Whatever. Yeah, I'm poor, but at least I'm not a spoiled brat. Or a liar."

I want to tell him he's crazy, to insist that I never lied, that every sweet thing I said to him and about him was the absolute truth.

But I can't.

He's not who I thought he was, and I'm not the type to take abuse lying down. I'm a fighter, always have been, always will be. So I simply arch what I hope is an amused brow and mutter, "Whatever, loser," before spinning on my heel and walking back to join my friends.

So it begins.

And so it continues...

FOR THE NEXT THREE YEARS—WHILE I'm finishing high school, and Nash graduates and starts working construction with his uncle—the two of us exchange verbal grenades every time our paths cross.

Which, in a town the size of Bliss River, is way more often than I'd like.

By the time I move to Paris to study to be a pastry chef the summer after graduation, I can't remember feeling anything for Nash but contempt.

I've forgotten the way he knocked me off my feet when I was fifteen, and I refuse to admit, even to myself, that no one

has ever lit me up the way Nash Geary did one hot, summer night.

I forget I ever dreamed of a future with him...until the night something crazy forces me to remember.

## CHAPTER THREE

*Twelve Years Later*

“*M*s. Aria March?” The man at the door is dressed in a fitted white polo shirt and khakis. He’s reasonably attractive and familiar-looking in a bland sort of way, but I can’t remember meeting him before.

And the way he said my name wasn’t exactly friendly, more...determined.

Not an old friend, then. He must be one of the people Mom said would be stopping by about the house renovations, even though Mom just renovated three years ago and we seriously don’t need fresh carpet on the stairs or new finish on the kitchen cabinets.

“Yes? Can I help you?” I hitch Felicity higher on my hip, wishing I’d left the baby in the backyard with the rest of the family. My nearly one-year-old is way too keyed up to have patience for a chat about cabinet stains.

We’re in the thick of a family barbeque to celebrate my sister Lark’s engagement and Felicity’s been running Mason, Lark’s fiancé, ragged playing ball in the grass. I should have let them play, but I was afraid to disappear for more than a minute or two, even to use the bathroom. Felicity’s been so clingy lately. And whiny. And not inclined to tolerate me being out of arm’s reach without throwing a fit to end all fits.

She's just tired, I know, but so am I. We're both running on empty. Neither of us has slept through the night since Felicity was born, and eleven months is a long time to go without more than three hours of rest at a stretch.

I'm seriously starting to lose my mind a little. Sleep deprivation is a form of torture in some particularly brutal prisons. It can make a person's brain malfunction, a fact I prove by blinking in confusion when the man holds out an envelope and says, "You've been served, ma'am."

"Served?" I continue to blink, unable to make sense of the words. "What?"

"It's all there, ma'am," the man says, pressing the envelope into my free hand before backing down the walk, heading for a beige Volvo idling at the curb, poised for a quick getaway.

My forehead furrows. This has to be the weirdest special delivery in the history of special deliveries.

"What's all there? Hey wait!" I call after him, lowering my voice when Felicity begins to chant—

"No, no, no, no, no," at the top of her lungs.

Felicity knows three words: "No," "mama," and "deer." The last thanks to my father's twisted fascination with taking his only granddaughter down to the basement to view his vast collection of mounted deer heads.

Which Felicity loves. For some inexplicable reason.

"Oh, hush, it's okay," I whisper, kissing the baby's forehead half a dozen times, until Felicity's chant becomes a yawn and she leans in to put her cheek on my chest.

I smile, my heart overflowing the way it so often does when my little girl is in my arms. I might be sleep deprived, exhausted, overworked, strapped for cash, and a struggling single mom, but I have never been more in love with anything or anyone than this sweet monkey. Felicity is my world, and the major reason I still spend a good portion of every day smiling, despite the fact that my ex continues to refuse to send money for diapers or baby food, let alone come see his

daughter the way he promised to do when I left Nashville to move back in with my parents in Bliss River, Georgia.

But then, Liam is probably still busy. With Carrie, or Sherry, or Nanette, or whatever the heck his latest conquest's name is.

I've done my best to forget their names, *all* of their names, every girl Liam slept with in the three years we were together. I don't want to think about Liam rolling around in bed with other women while putting off our wedding again and again, until I ended up pregnant and giving birth to Felicity outside of marriage.

If my parents knew Liam and I were never officially hitched, their brains would literally explode. There would be pieces of traditionally-minded, middle-class couple all over the soon-to-be-freshly-stained cabinets.

The thought makes me shiver as I close the door against the August heat, and move back into the air-conditioned house to find a place to put Felicity down before opening the mysterious letter.

If my parents ever find out the truth, it will be a family tragedy. I will never hear the end of it, and by extension, neither will Felicity. My parents like to think they keep grown up talk in front of the grown-ups, but neither one of them can hold their tongue when things get heated, and I really don't want my daughter to grow up feeling like there's something "not good enough" about her birth—at least in the eyes of her grandparents. And so, I lied and told Mom and Dad that Liam and I eloped to get hitched in Vegas a year before we split.

It's just easier this way, and it isn't like anyone is going to fact check me with Liam. He hasn't been showing up for visitation and, even if he did, my family won't bother asking for his side of the story. My nearest and dearest have always hated my ex. I've known that since day one, even though Mom and Dad were civil and Lark and Melody did their best to hide their lack of enthusiasm for my Brit boyfriend.

Of course, in the end, my family was right. They apparently have better creep-dar than I do—though I'd wager



mine is a lot better now, after everything my lying, cheating, smarmy ex put me through.

Put me through...

He really does love to torture me.

The thought hits hard and my inner voice shouts—*Served*—in a panicked screech that echoes through my weary skull.

Oh no.

No, no, no. It can't be...

The suspicion creeps up my back like a spider wearing spurs, flooding my mouth with the sour taste of fear.

Arms trembling, I set Felicity down on the carpet near the couch, where she promptly pulls herself up to a standing position to track her way toward the bowl of pine cones on the end table that she enjoys tossing all over the carpet, and which my mother refuses to move to a higher, less precarious location. I'll have to grab the baby before launch, but this should at least give me time to rip open the envelope.

I tear into the letter, my heart beating in my stomach and my lungs aching in my chest. By the time I read through the first page, I'm so upset all I can do is squeak in panic and try not to hyperventilate as I move the pinecones in the nick of time and comfort my frustrated cone destroyer.

It takes a full five minutes—and the aid of a paper bag snatched from the kitchen cupboard for me, and a handful of Cheerios for Felicity—for both of us to regain control. When I can breathe without wheezing, I scoop her up with one shaking arm and the legal documents with the other hand, and hurry out to the backyard.

My Mom, Dad, Lark, and Mason are playing horseshoes, while Melody, my youngest sister, mans the grill, reworking old cheers from high school to fit horseshoes instead of basketball.

It's a warm, happy, family scene.

One I'm going to shatter like a baseball through a window.

“Daddy, I’m going to kill you,” I croak. “For real. Kill. Dead. Forever!”

My dad glances over, a frown bunching his eyebrows. He’s nearly bald at this point, but his eyebrows have gotten bushier with age, until they resemble fuzzy caterpillars set loose to roam his forehead. He’s turning into a cute old man, but right now I don’t find anything about him cute. Not his eyebrows, and certainly not his ridiculous behavior that has, no doubt, contributed to Liam thinking he has a shot in hell of pulling off his latest stunt.

His latest, panic-inducing stunt...

“Liam is suing me for custody of Felicity.” My voice trembles as I speak the horrific words aloud for the first time. “Full, legal and physical custody.”

“What!” Lark’s eyes go comically wide, but nothing is funny right now. Nothing. I don’t think I’ve ever been this scared, not even when Lark and I surprised a six-foot water moccasin in our baby pool when we were kids. “That’s insane!”

“Insane or not, he might have a chance.” I shoot Dad another pointed look as I wave the envelope in the air. “Seeing as my daughter and I are living with a man who has recently been *arrested* for disturbing the peace and *indecent exposure*.”

Daddy’s eyebrows un-bunch as he throws his head back and laughs.

Laughs.

Like this is some hysterical joke!

“This isn’t funny, Daddy!” I insist.

“It is funny. It’s also bull-dooky.” He chuckles again, before turning to hurl his last horseshoe. “That fool doesn’t have a chance.”

“He might! You were *arrested*, Dad! This is serious!” I fight the urge to stomp my foot, or cry.

I’m twenty-eight years old, a successful professional, and a mom. I’m not going to act like a toddler, and I refuse to cry. If

I start, I might never stop, and Felicity gets scared when I'm upset.

She's already chanting "No, no, no," again, simply from hearing me raise my voice.

"Here, let me take her." Melody appears at my side, ever the angel of mercy. "I'm done cooking and the ribs are resting on the grill. Felicity and I can go play with toys while y'all talk."

She's right. I shouldn't unleash all this in front of Felicity, even if she is too young to understand most of what we're saying.

Still, for a moment, I cling to my sweet girl, not wanting to let her go, some primal part of me determined to hold onto my child so tight that no one can ever take her away from me. But I force myself to relax, and hand the baby over to my sister. If Daddy keeps laughing this off, I'm going to lose it. A shouting match with my equally hot-headed father isn't off the table and, until it is, Felicity is better off with Aunt Melody.

"Let's see exactly what the papers say, honey, before we get upset." Mom crosses the lawn to pluck the envelope from my fingers and rests a gentle hand on my shoulder. "You're such a good mama. I'm sure everything is going to be fine."

Her words grant a brief reprieve from the terror galloping through my veins. But when she starts flipping through the documents, her pleasant, hopeful expression is replaced by a worried frown, and my fear comes rushing back. My mother isn't a worrier. She always looks on the sunny side. She sees the silver lining, not the cloud.

If she's worried, then this is as bad as I feared.

Maybe even worse.

"It's bad, isn't it?" I nibble on my thumbnail, an anxious habit I haven't indulged in years.

"It doesn't look good. Thanks to your father." Mom turns to glare at Dad. "They're calling you a sexual deviant, Bob!"

Daddy laughs again, like it's the funniest joke he's heard in years.

Mom props her hands on her hips, making the papers flap. "Stop it! They make it sound like Felicity isn't safe in our home. Why on earth did you think it was a good idea to go streaking down Main Street? What the hell were you and your ridiculous friends thinking?"

Oh, no. Mom dropped an "H bomb." My mother never curses, not even baby swears. She never says anything the least bit negative or derogatory if she can help it.

The fact that she's cussing mad at Daddy is another terrible sign.

Of course, Mom's had plenty of time to get worked up about Dad's "big night." Ever since the police report hit the local paper last week, she's been in deep mortification mode.

Daddy and his buddies from high school getting drunk at their reunion and streaking down Main Street to relive their glory days and being held in police lockup overnight, was bad enough. The entire town of Bliss River reading about it in the local paper was enough to make Mom take to her bed for the day, locking the door and refusing to let Daddy in, even when he came bearing her favorite ice-cream by way of apology.

"It was a reunion prank, Sue." He rolls his eyes, like *Mom* is the crazy one. "A joke, and everyone in town knows it. Just like they know I'm not a deviant or a danger to my granddaughter or anyone else."

"You were still arrested, Bob," Mom says, tears rising in her eyes. "And we don't know which judge will hear the case. If it's someone who doesn't know you, they might decide that your arrest, combined with all the things Liam's claiming he can give Felicity that Aria can't provide right now, is enough to grant him custody. Or at least shared custody."

"He hasn't seen Felicity since she was three months old!!" Lark shouts, pacing back and forth across the grass. "Or spent a dime to help Aria cover expenses. He doesn't deserve any custody. At all. Ever!"

“Let me call my friend, Chris. He’s a family lawyer in Atlanta,” Mason says, catching my eye as he puts a soothing hand on Lark’s shoulder, calming her almost instantly.

He can do that, with just a touch. They’re *that* in love, that intimately connected, body and soul.

If I weren’t so happy for my sister, I’d be jealous.

All right, maybe I am a little. Not of Mason, but jealous that Lark has someone who knows her inside out, loves her madly, and considers marrying her an honor and a privilege, not a fate to be avoided at all costs.

“It’s after hours,” Mason continues. “But I’m sure he’ll answer if I call his cell. Maybe he can give us some advice.”

I nod. “Thank you,” I say, grateful for Mason’s encouraging smile as he pulls out his phone.

He really is a good guy. I’m so glad he and Lark patched things up. If they hadn’t, I would have always felt guilty for the role I played in their second breakup. Liam has poisoned me in so many ways, but the worst is that I have such a hard time believing in love anymore, or trusting that any man is really who he claims to be.

But I trust Mason, and when he gets his friend on the line and hands me his cell, I take it gratefully, sending out a prayer that everything will be all right as I lift the phone to my ear.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Hi, Chris, this is Aria March. Thanks so much for taking time to chat.” I switch the phone to my other hand, wiping my sweaty palm on my jeans, my nerves humming with anxiety.

“Come on, let’s give her some privacy,” Lark whispers, taking Mom’s hand and leading her across the lawn.

With one last encouraging look, Mason follows them.

“Hey there, Aria,” Chris says, his voice raised to be heard over the sound of young children squealing with laughter in the near distance. “Excuse the background noise, my twins haven’t gone to sleep yet.”

“Oh, no worries,” I breathe. “I’m just so glad to have someone to talk to right away. This is so upsetting.”

“I completely get it, and I’m happy to give you an opinion as a friend of a friend, but I wouldn’t recommend taking any action based on my input until you talk to your own attorney,” he says. “This is just off the clock advice from a person with experience in family law.”

I assure him I understand where he’s coming from and then fill him in on the details of the suit. “He’s suing for full custody, claiming he’s more financially stable, since I’m living with my parents. He says he can provide Felicity with a home of her own, a room, a pool, a college fund, and everything else money can buy, as well as a traditional, nuclear family.”

My voice goes sour on the last sentence. I can't help it. Learning Liam is married is the rotten cherry on this shit sundae.

Apparently, Liam and Char said their "I dos" a month ago, and are now ready to settle down and raise a baby.

*My baby.*

The sheer gall is enough to make steam come out of my ears.

I take a breath and keep going, "Liam says he can offer Felicity a more wholesome environment in a single-family home, without a sexual deviant charged with indecent exposure living in the house." I sigh. "My dad was arrested for streaking down Main Street with his buddies. It's his first offense and really not a big deal, but it's going to look bad on paper."

Chris makes a considering sound. "Yeah, it won't look good. Anything else?"

Pulse picking up, I add, "There's some other stuff in there—questioning my mothering skills, claiming I'm attempting to alienate him from his daughter even though I've been eager to facilitate visitation—but nothing unusual. Or true. I can prove I've been taking good care of Felicity and that I've tried to reach out to him numerous times to set up a visit. He's the one who's refused to engage." I wipe my palm sweat on my jeans again. "So...what do you think?"

He clears his throat. "How long ago was your divorce final?"

I hesitate, glancing over my shoulder to ensure everyone is out of ear shot before I say in a softer voice, "Is this call confidential?"

"Of course," he says. "I wouldn't discuss your private business with Mason or anyone else."

I bite my lip as I pace closer to the fence. "Liam and I were never married," I confess. "But I haven't told my parents. They're old-fashioned and would lose their minds if they knew I wasn't Liam's wife when Felicity was born."



“Oh, but that’s great,” Chris says in an upbeat voice. “Your ex will have a much harder time establishing parental rights if you weren’t married.”

“But his name is on her birth certificate,” I say, wishing I hadn’t been so adamant that Liam claim Felicity as his. At the time, I’d thought it would help us feel more like a family. Now, I just want to kick myself for being a fool. “And we signed paperwork. We both acknowledged that he’s the father.”

Chris grunts. “Well, that will make things less complicated for him. Paternity is already established. That’s one less thing he’ll have to prove.” He sighs. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it sounds like he’s got a decent case. Not a *great* case, but, depending on the judge, there’s a chance he could get shared custody. And maybe even compel you to move back to Nashville since that’s where you were both living when Felicity was born.”

“But my work and family are here,” I say, panic spiking hard and fast. “I don’t have the money to move back, and even if I did, I couldn’t afford childcare in Nashville. The only way I can afford it here is that my mom helps out. A lot. And the older ladies from church will watch Felicity nearly for free when my mom’s busy.”

“I hear you, childcare costs are crazy these days,” he says, sympathetically, “But if you get primary physical custody, which I would think is likely, then the father will have to pay some amount of support to help with childcare. What’s he paying now?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head and pace faster. “He hasn’t paid anything since we left. Even when I begged him for help. I had to borrow money from my parents at first, before I started working full-time for my sister’s catering company.”

“All right, that will look bad for his case, but—” Chris’s voice is muffled for a moment before he comes back on the line. “Sorry, I’ve got to go in a second. It’s time for the twins’ bath, and that’s been a two-parent job these days.”

*Two parents.*

God, what would it be like to have another parent around? Someone to get up in the night with Felicity a few times a week so I can get a full night's sleep, someone to run buy more diapers while I put the baby down for a nap and grab a few minutes of peace on the front porch with a glass of tea and a good book? Someone to marvel with me at how fast our daughter is growing, to share in the milestones and the everyday miracles of raising her together?

My parents and sisters help with Felicity so much, but it's not the same as having a partner by my side.

It sounds like heaven, especially after the nightmare of learning Liam wants to take Felicity away from me. I would give anything for a stable marriage, to have a husband I can trust to keep our family safe, not launch an attack on my foundation when I'm at my most vulnerable.

"Well, thank you so much for your time," I say, fighting tears. "I really appreciate it."

"No problem, and if you need recommendations for someone to represent you, reach out any time. I know a few people in Bliss River who are affordable, but great at what they do."

"Thanks," I say, before rushing to add, "But could I ask you one more thing?"

"Of course."

"Is there anything I can do to make this go away? Some way I can prove I'm looking out for Felicity's best interests without a big legal battle or going to court?"

"You'll have to go to court, at least for the hearing, but..." Chris covers the phone again, murmuring he'll "be right there," before adding, "Moving into your own place with a separate bedroom for the baby would be a good start. That takes the wind out of two of your ex's arguments—that you're living with a bad influence and that your child doesn't have her own space. And from there you just take it day by day, trying to do what you can to level the playing field and ensure his objections seem unfounded to the judge."

“Okay,” I whisper, trying not to let my disappointment creep into my voice. “Thanks so much.”

I hang up and take a deep breath, steeling myself for the postmortem on the call as my family wanders back across the lawn.

“So? What did he say?” Mom asks, running a nervous hand over her perfectly smooth blond bob.

“He says Liam has a case.” I sigh as I hand over Mason’s phone. “Not a great case, but he has a chance of winning shared custody and could possibly force me to move back to Nashville to facilitate visitation.”

“What? But that’s crazy!” Lark says, her cheeks flushed with outrage.

“Not according to the law, I guess.” I press a finger to my right eyebrow, where a migraine is gathering like a storm cloud about to unleash its fury upon my skull. “Chris said it would help if I got my own place, but I can’t afford it right now.”

“Yes, you can,” Daddy says, his expression grim. I’m relieved he’s finally caught on to the fact that this isn’t funny, but sad to see the gloom in his eyes. “Your mother and I will cover the first and last month’s rent on a two-bedroom apartment. You can start looking today.”

“No, Daddy.” I shake my head. “Thank you so much for the offer, but I know you’re strapped for cash.” My parents just opened two new *Bob and Sue’s Smoke Shack* locations last month, and finances will be tight until the new restaurants aren’t in the red.

“It doesn’t matter,” Mom says. “We’ll find the money.”

“No, you won’t. I won’t accept that kind of help from you, so just forget it,” I say firmly. “I just need to calm down and think things through.”

“And we’ll help you.” Lark puts an arm around my shoulders and gives me a gentle squeeze. “Don’t worry, okay? There has to be a way to make this better. And we’ll figure it out.”

Aside from meeting Prince Charming, marrying him, and moving Felicity and I into his castle, I can't see a swift resolution to all the issues I'll need to address to level the playing field with my ex, but I know better than to think Prince Charming is a viable option.

I'm going to have to figure something else out. And fast.

But what?

"Let's have some food for thought," Lark says as Melody emerges from the house with Felicity in her arms. "And then head to the fair and try to get our minds off our troubles for a little while."

"I don't really feel like going to the fair anymore." I take Felicity from my sister and hug her a little too tight, making her squirm to be put down to play in the grass.

"But it will be fun," Lark insists, tossing Felicity the red ball she loves to chase around the yard like a puppy. "After how hard we've worked this summer, we all need to relax and have some fun."

"I don't know," I murmur, though, before Liam dropped his bomb, I'd been desperate for a night out.

Melody, Lark, and I have been busting our butts to make *Ever After Catering* the most coveted wedding and special event caterer in the greater Atlanta area. We've been booked solid every weekend this summer—and a ton of weekdays, too—and are now booking weddings through the fall. Next month, Lark is going to increase our base fee by five hundred dollars per reservation and has promised both Melody and I a raise.

I'll be able to afford my own place soon, but it might not be soon enough.

"And you know Nana will never forgive us if we don't come see her watermelon while it's wearing its blue ribbon," Melody says as she retrieves the ribs from the grill and arranges them on a giant serving plate. "She's prouder of that watermelon than her great-grandchild and all three of her toy poodles combined."

I smile, but it feels brittle on my face. “I think Nana will understand why I’m not up to a fair trip.”

“I think you should go,” my mom says, surprising me. “Don’t let Liam spoil your night. I’ll watch Felicity like we planned, and you can go have fun with your sisters and Mason. You might be surprised what comes to you while you’re out and about. Sometimes the answers to our problems are just waiting for us to relax and let them in.”

I seriously doubt there are answers waiting for me at the county fair, but after another round of cajoling over dinner, I agreed to head out with Lark, Melody, and Mason.

Mom’s right. I shouldn’t let Liam ruin anything else for me. If I do, then he wins, and I’m not about to let that happen.

Not tonight or any other night.

Not without one hell of a fight.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I haven't been in a fistfight in ten years, not since Dick Nance came to work on a construction site drunk off his ass, ran over my foot with his pickup truck, and then had the balls to tell me I should have moved out of the way before he plowed through our lunch break area in reverse.

Even with three broken toes, I'd had no trouble teaching him a lesson about taking responsibility for his actions. There had been two punches—Dick's sloppy jab at my chin, and my roundhouse that sent him to the ground, where he had the sense to stay until the foreman showed up to fire his ass.

I'm six foot four and, as my grandma likes to say, built like a brick shithouse. I work out six days a week, starting my day with cardio from six to six-thirty, weights for another hour, and then a lightning fast shower before I cruise into work at the station at eight.

One of the perks of making Captain last year is being able to set my own hours. No more night shifts for me.

Now I'm free to go out in the evenings, to enjoy everything Bliss River has to offer, to get involved in the community...and to run into my ex-girlfriend so often I would swear Rachael was stalking me if she hadn't made it clear she loathes seeing my face.

At the moment—standing in the fading light outside the entrance to the county fair—she looks like she's sucked a lemon dry.

She's doing her best to pretend she hasn't noticed me three people behind her and her "new man" in line, but she knows I'm here. Every self-conscious tug at her tee shirt and toss of her hair betrays her. But even if I couldn't read Rachael like a book—a poorly written one I should have put down way before I reached the shitty ending—Lee's constant fondling of her ass leaves no doubt he's aware he has an audience.

His favorite audience. Since I caught him in bed with Rachael—in *my* bed, which I have since sold, and which sheets I burned to ensure all the oily, used-car salesman germs were banished from my home—he's reveled in every opportunity to rub my face in his "big win."

As if dating a compulsive liar who sleeps around while her boyfriend is working a double shift is something to get excited about.

I want to tell the bastard I'm glad he helped show me her true colors, and that I wouldn't take back a woman who'd cheated on me for a lifetime of free bacon—the applewood smoked kind that's basically meat crack.

But I refuse to give him the satisfaction. I didn't lose my shit when I found him balls deep in the woman I'd trusted to be faithful to me, and I won't lash out now.

I will remain calm, cool, collected...

Or at least I'm going to try.

Because yeah, I am pissed. Pissed at Rachael for betraying me, pissed at Lee for enjoying being part of it so much, and pissed at myself for trusting someone I shouldn't.

Again.

Seems I would have learned my lesson by now. I put criminals behind bars for a living, but when it comes to women—redheads in particular—my "danger radar" is clearly fucked all to hell.

I can't believe I was seriously considering Rachael's "put a ring on it" ultimatum. I should have my head examined.



Making a mental note to glance at the list of counselors on the staff website, I shift my gaze away from the repulsive couple and pray to make it through the line without having to exchange words with either one of them.

Unfortunately for me, God must be busy elsewhere.

Ten feet from the ticket window, Lee turns, affecting surprise as his gaze catches mine. “Hey there, Geary, how the hell are you?” he says with an oily grin, showcasing his tiny, Chiclet-shaped teeth as he ushers the people in between us ahead of him in the line.

Why on earth he would think I’d want to stand next to the two of them is beyond me, but I am cool. Calm.

And I’m not going to strike a civilian, no matter how much I want to.

“Glad to see you out and about!” His brows furrow in a poor imitation of contrition. “Sorry again about the misunderstanding.”

In what universe is fucking another man’s girlfriend considered a misunderstanding? It’s not like he thought Rachael was someone else, and he knew we were in a serious relationship. He was banging her *in my house*, for Christ’s sake.

But I don’t say any of those things. I don’t say anything at all. I simply incline my head and shift my gaze to Rachael’s face, silently daring her to call Lee on his bullshit.

But her puckered lips only stretch into a tight smile. “Yeah, things like this are hard in a small town.”

I bite the inside of my lip hard enough to send pain flashing through my gums but it’s worth it. I don’t inform Rachael that I imagine being betrayed by someone you thought you loved is hard no matter what size town you’re living in. I just have to keep my mouth shut for another minute or two and we’ll be through the line.

“But you’ve been so cool about it,” Lee says, his eyes narrowing. “Makes a guy think.”

“Think what?” I shoot back before I can stop myself.

“Think that things ended up the way they should have.” He wraps an arm around Rachael’s waist, drawing her close as she makes a half-hearted attempt to push him away with her hand on his chest. “Rachael deserves a man who’s head over heels for her.”

That isn’t at all what she deserves, but I continue to hold my tongue.

Soon I’ll be inside, surrounded by family and ready to enjoy a night without any liars in it. My two oldest sisters and their five rowdy kids are always a good time, and who knows, maybe I’ll stay late after they leave. Maybe I’ll meet someone new tonight. Back before Rachael ripped my heart out with her claws and gnawed it to pieces, I was pretty good at picking up women.

Damn good, if I do say so myself.

“Stop, Lee,” Rachael murmurs as he presses a kiss to her cheek. “You’re embarrassing me.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, baby, Nash is happy for us,” Lee says with a smug glance my way. “Aren’t you, Nash?”

The urge to solve this with my fists rises inside of me again. If I hadn’t sworn an oath to protect and serve, I’m not sure I’d be able to control myself. I mean, seriously, how good would it feel to knock that leer off Lee Otter’s chubby face?

Very, very good.

He’s an even bigger asshole than he was in high school.

Back then, Lee had only one chin and was a decent football player, but not as good as I was. I was the quarterback and probably could have played college ball if I’d had any interest in getting my head smashed in for four more years. But I only played sports as an excuse to stay on campus after school instead of going straight home to help take care of my brothers and sisters.

I loved them all—still do—but there are *ten* of them for God’s sakes. That’s at least four too many for any reasonable

couple to unleash upon the earth and six too many for my parents to have any chance of taking care of on their own.

They leaned on me and my oldest sisters a lot when we were growing up. It was something we accepted and made the best of, chipping in to help the Geary clan get by, but that didn't mean we didn't crave time alone. Time to be individuals instead of one of the Geary horde.

Between three-thirty and five-thirty during football season, and every game night, I got to be just Nash, not Nash the surrogate parent or the short order cook or the referee for my younger brothers, who made it their mission in life to wrestle each other to the death as soon as Mom left for her evening shift at the candle factory. It was *my* time, and my oldest sister Raleigh stepped in to run herd over the tribe until I got home.

That's what meant the most to me—the space to be myself—not the game.

Lee had seen that and hated me for it. I can't count the times he whined that I should quit and give someone else a chance to lead the team if I didn't love football the way the rest of them did.

I ignored him. He didn't care about the rest of the team, he cared about himself, and even if I'd quit, he never would have been quarterback. He didn't have the strength, coordination, or focus. Not to mention the fact that he was the kind of whiny, passive aggressive shit no one wants to follow. But he hadn't been the sort to stab other people in the back.

Just goes to show not all of us improve with age...

“Or am I wrong?” Lee continues in a mocking tone that makes my teeth grind together. “I really hope I'm not. It would be so much better if we could all bury the hatchet. Since Rachael and I are engaged and all.”

My jaw drops. I can't help it. I'm too shocked to hide it, though I regret the loss of control instantly as triumph flickers behind Lee's dirt brown eyes.

But, hell, it's only been eight weeks since Rachael told me she needed a ring from *me* by the end of the year or she was

going to have to move on. Only six weeks since I caught her in bed with Lee.

*Six weeks!* I haven't had time to get the smell of her perfume out of the curtains. I still find her tiny pink-trimmed socks hiding under the washing machine in the laundry room. I still wake up expecting her to be lying next to me and feel that unwelcome pang of loneliness when I realize the other side of the bed is empty. Not a pang for Rachael, but a pang for someone, for that forever woman I'm beginning to doubt I'll find.

"Show him your ring, honey," Lee says, while I fight to arrange my features into something resembling disinterest.

But I'm not disinterested.

I'm ashamed of myself. I feel like a fucking fool. I should have seen through Rachael so much sooner. It shouldn't have taken a year to realize she cares more about landing a husband, *any* husband, than she did about me. I wasn't special. I was a mark who didn't pay out so she'd moved on to someone else. Even knowing Lee probably means nothing to her, either, isn't enough to banish the sour taste rising in my throat.

At the end of the day, Lee doesn't matter. Rachael's the one who conned me.

And Rachael's the one who can still make it hurt when she says, "Come on, Lee, he doesn't want to see my ring. Nash has no interest in rings, do you Nash?" She arches a cool brow as she meets my gaze, giving the dig a little extra *oomph*, making my stomach knot as anger rushes in to mix with the shame.

Anger and shame are a powerful combination. And a stupid, dangerous one. No one ever made a good decision inspired by that particular cocktail.

I should keep my mouth shut until I'm steady in my skin again.

Instead my lips part and crazy comes pouring out, "I wouldn't say so, no. But there aren't a lot of choices around here. I'm thinking I'll head into Atlanta next weekend to look for something special for my girl."

Now it's Rachael's turn to pick her jaw up off the ground. Watching her struggle to find words feels so damned good it takes a few seconds for the voice of reason to pierce the rush.

But when it does, it doesn't hold back, *Great work, jackass. What the hell have you done? Now you're going to look like an even bigger fool when Rachael finds out you don't even have a date for Friday night, let alone a fiancée.*

"Right, as if," Rachael sputters, almost as if she can read my thoughts. "I'll believe it when I see it. For a guy with so much muscle, you sure are afraid of other 'M' words."

She lets out a little laugh. Lee joins in, but he's looking a lot less smug after the reminder that the only reason he has a beautiful redhead on his arm is because I refused to put a ring on her finger first. He's deflating before my eyes, in fact.

I almost feel sorry for him. Sorry for this chode who banged my girlfriend in my bed.

I have to get away from them before I do something truly crazy like offer to start a Rachael Recovery Group with the douchebag.

Mercifully, we're finally at the front of the line. With a final round of tight grins and a promise to see me around, Lee hustles Rachael to the ticket window on the right while I head to the one on the left.

I take my sweet time deciding on which admission packet I'd like to purchase, wondering if Raleigh and Alexandria will care if I don't show up tonight, after all. My siblings and I rarely make plans that are set in stone. With a family as large as ours, it's impossible to accommodate everyone's schedules. We tend to keep things casual, letting each other know when and where we're going to be on a given night, with an understood open invitation to any Geary who wants to show up and join the fun. I've been looking forward to riding the rollercoaster with my nieces and nephews and spoiling them with all the pricey fair junk food we were too poor to afford as kids, but now...

Now I just want to go home, plop down in front of the T.V. with a beer or six, and wait for Saturday to begin.

Saturday is my favorite day of the week, a day to take my time with my workout, have a big breakfast afterward, then head out to the park to catch a pick-up game with my buddies or take my friend Mason's boat out on the lake when he doesn't have plans to use it.

I've enjoyed having a boat around this summer way more than I thought I would. If Mason decides to move out of his condo and into a place with ample parking, I'll have to save up to get one of my own. But until he does, I'll be logging as much time on the lake as I can. There's nothing like fishing to get your mind off of things you'd rather not think about.

Like ex-girlfriends getting married and lies about a fiancée who doesn't exist.

"Fuck me," I mutter as I shuffle through the gates with a fistful of tickets I'm not sure I'll use and move off to one side of the entrance.

I pull my phone from my pocket and dial Mason's number, mentally making a deal with myself. If he says I can use the boat tomorrow, then I'll go home, get a good night's rest, and plan to hit the lake as soon as I'm done with my work out tomorrow. If he's taking the boat out himself, I'll head into the fair and try to have fun with my family.

Better to drown my sorrows in cotton candy and niece and nephew giggles than a six pack, though the risk of running into Rachael and Lee again does cast a certain pall over option two.

Mason finally picks up after the fourth ring. "Hey, Nash, what's up?" he asks in a loud voice, shouting to be heard over something roaring in the background.

"Nothing much, just wondering if I can use the boat tomorrow."

"What?" Mason shouts. "Sorry, man, I can't hear you. We're at the fair, by the rollercoaster."

I laugh. "I'm right outside the entrance," I shout back. "I'll be over in a few and we can talk in person."

“Oh. Yeah. Great,” Mason says, but he doesn’t sound particularly pleased by the coincidence. “But Aria’s here, just so you know,” he adds, explaining the hesitation in his voice.

Mason doesn’t know all the dirty details—we weren’t close back when I got tangled up with the eldest March sister—but he gets that Aria and I have a past, and that we don’t care for each other. The disastrous BBQ he invited me to earlier this summer, back when he’d had no clue I knew Aria and thought setting me up with his girlfriend’s sister would help me get over Rachael, made that pretty damned clear. Aria and I barely made it through the meal without biting each other’s heads off.

She’s the original bad news redhead, the first girl to rip my heart out, still beating, from my chest and toss it to the ground like a peanut shell she’d already plucked clean.

“She’ll be getting off the ride soon,” Mason adds.

“Then I’ll be quick. See you in a second.” Ending the call, I make a beeline for the rollercoaster’s graceful skeleton at the far right of the fairgrounds.

By the time I reach the corn dog stand halfway down the line of thrill rides, I’m jogging, weaving my way through the slow-moving crowd.

I could really do without seeing Aria tonight.

She gets to me even more than Rachael.

But then, Rachael and I never talked the way Aria and I did. We didn’t connect on that soul-deep level that felt so real, so right. I never believed Rachael was “the one.” If I’d proposed to her, it would have been because I’d decided to compromise in the name of getting out of the dating rat race and finally settling down and starting a family.

With Aria, there was no compromising involved. I’d been head over heels for her. I’d thought she was the prettiest, funniest, most fascinating person I’d ever met, right up until she’d made it clear she was just slumming for the summer and I’d never been anything to her but a passing distraction.

Yep, definitely don't need a reminder of that. I'm already full-up on feeling like a fool tonight.

Thankfully, when I finally reach the small group of people waiting outside the exit to the rollercoaster, Mason is still alone.

"Hey there, good to see you, man." I jog the last few feet across the dusty ground, taking Mason's offered hand and clapping him warmly on the back.

Mason and I fell out of touch for a while, but he was one of my best friends back when we worked construction together in the summers after high school. When he came back to town a few months ago, we fell back into a close friendship without a hitch. Not even the fact that he's marrying Aria's sister can come between us, though I'm sure it will make the wedding party awkward.

To say I'm not looking forward to sharing best man and maid of honor duties with Aria March is an understatement.

"You, too," Mason says, squeezing my hand tight before letting go. "I'd invite you to join us, but..."

"No worries, I get it. Not all friend groups mix as well as we'd like."

"True." Mason casts a glance back at the coaster's exit, but none of the people streaming out look familiar. Looks like we're safe for a few more minutes. He turns back to me. "Usually I'd feel fine about heading off with you for a while and meeting up with them later, but Aria's had a pretty hard night. I feel like I should stick around for moral support."

My brows lift. "Oh, yeah? How so?" I ask, surprised to find I'm curious.

But then, why shouldn't I be curious? I'm a nice guy, but even nice guys enjoy tales of the suffering of evil ex-girlfriends from time to time.

"Her ex is suing for full legal and physical custody of the baby," Mason says with a sigh. "Even though he hasn't seen Felicity in months and refuses to send Aria a dime in child



support. He's such a complete sack of shit it seriously boggles the mind."

"Sounds like it," I say, meaning it.

Evil ex or not, just from the one night I spent in their company, it was clear Aria adores her baby girl and Felicity worships her mama. What her ex is doing is cruel, and absolutely not in his daughter's best interests.

Mason's scowl deepens. "Yeah, apparently, he got remarried and decided that means he's better for Felicity than her single mom, which is, of course, ridiculous." He glances over his shoulder again. "But don't say anything about it to anyone, okay? I probably shouldn't have mention it, but—"

"Don't worry about it. I would never share your family's private business," I assure him, happy to change the subject. I don't like feeling anything for Aria, especially not empathy or compassion. "So why aren't you riding? Afraid of heights?"

"I get motion sickness," Mason mumbles with a shrug.

"Wimp," I tease, making him laugh.

"Fuck off," he says. "I can still ride the carousel, man. I'm a total badass on the carousel."

I laugh. "I bet. I'll let you get to that. Just wanted to ask if you planned on taking the boat out tomorrow. If not, I thought I might go fishing."

"Can I get back to you later?" he asks. "Lark and I were planning a picnic on the island in the middle of Lake Elsie, but after what happened with Aria I don't know if she'll be up for it."

"What about Aria?" The light, feminine voice drifts through the air from the ramp behind Mason.

A beat later, I look up to see Aria March pushing through the exit gate ahead of her sisters, looking so gorgeous that every man near the exit turns to stare.

## CHAPTER SIX

Since they were girls, the younger March sisters have been the talk of Bliss River. With their wavy blond hair and big brown eyes that radiate sweetness, Lark and Melody are the kind of All-American beauties that belong on a plastic tub selling fresh-churned butter. Or on a 4H poster, encouraging kids to get involved in raising baby farm animals.

But even before I knew her personally, I always thought Aria was the most stunning of the three. Even when I hated her, her clever green eyes made my heart beat faster.

Tonight is no exception.

Even in a pair of cut off shorts and a green tank top, with her hair pulled into a ponytail, she manages to look elegant, poised, and a little too well-bred to be wandering around a backwoods Georgia town. The electric energy that hovers in the air around her is reminiscent of actors and rock stars and other people with too much charisma for their own good.

I wasn't surprised to hear she'd run off to Nashville with a record producer. I *was* surprised to learn the guy had replaced her with a younger model so quickly. Even back before she'd grown into her long legs or learned that self-assured way of holding herself, Aria wasn't the type of girl who was easy to forget.

After that summer at camp, I hadn't dated anyone for over a year. Some part of me hadn't been able to get over her, no matter how badly I'd wanted to.

“Did I hear my name?” she asks, stopping beside Mason, her sharp gaze shifting back and forth between us.

Mason’s expression is unreadable, as always—he has one hell of a poker face—but I’m betting I look guilty. I can’t help feeling like I shouldn’t be in possession of secret family information about Aria, not when there’s clearly no love lost between us.

“I was just telling Nash that Lark and I might cancel our boat trip tomorrow,” Mason says smoothly.

“No, you weren’t,” Aria says, her lips quirking up on one side. “You can fool most of the people most of the time, Mason Stewart, but you can’t fool me.” She hiccups, giggling as she points a finger at his face. “You were telling my tale of woe to my old friend, Nash, weren’t you?”

She’s drunk. Wasted.

She has to be, or she’d never call me an “old friend” let alone be amused that Mason’s been talking about her behind her back.

“Sorry.” Mason cringes as Lark widens her eyes at him. “I’m pissed off on your behalf, and Nash is a friend and it just...came out.”

“I swear, you boys are worse gossips than Nana’s friends at church,” Melody says, wrapping her arms around Aria’s waist in a show of solidarity.

“It’s okay.” Aria waves a hand unsteadily through the air. “Everyone will know soon enough. Stupid small town. Stupid talking.” She hiccups again. “I need more beer. Let us away to the beer tent, my ladies!”

Melody arches her brows pointedly at Lark.

“I think we should hold off on that for a little while,” Lark says casually. “Why don’t we head over to the agriculture building and check out Nana’s watermelon before it gets too late?”

Aria’s lips push into a pout. “No. Beer first. Then watermelon.”

“I don’t think you should, Ra,” Melody says. “I think you’ve had enough.”

“Well, I don’t,” Aria says as she detangles herself from Melody’s arms. “And I’m sure I can find someone around here to buy me a beer.” She turns, pinning me with a sleepy gaze that makes my heart skip a beat. “What about you, Nash? Would you buy me a beer?” She tips her head back to meet my gaze, her lips curving into a wide grin.

It’s a tipsy smile, but still bright enough to dazzle.

*Buy her a beer?*

Well...why not?

Why the hell not?

“Sure. I could use a beer.” I bob a reassuring nod at Mason and Aria’s sisters. “We’ll get a drink and meet y’all in the Ag building in a few.”

Lark’s forehead bunches. “Are you sure about this, you two?” Her troubled eyes shift my way “Nash?”

“Yes, mother, we’re sure.” Aria rolls her eyes and loops her arm through mine with an unexpected familiarity, while I try to ignore the way my pulse beats faster. “We’ll be fine. I’ll see you later. Goodbye, family. Love you lots.”

Without another word, she sets off toward the beer tent, towing me behind her with that surprising strength of hers. She’s deceptively fragile looking for a person with one of the strongest wills I’ve ever encountered.

Aria March is a woman a man underestimates at his peril.

Maybe that’s why, as I glance over my shoulder, I find both of her sisters casting their worried looks *my* way, not hers.

But their fears are unfounded. I can handle myself around Aria.

Right?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

God, this man...

Why does he have to be so damned fine from head to toe and everything in between?

Nash is even bigger than he used to be. Huge, in fact, with muscles popping out on top of his muscles and a powerful physical presence that makes people turn to stare—and then take a step back—as he walks by. They cleared a path for us as we charged into the beer tent, and we only had to wait a couple of minutes before the harried bartender hurried over to take our order.

Which is good.

I was starting to un- numb and that's not on my agenda tonight.

I'm going to stay gently drunk until I tumble into bed. I know I'll regret it when Felicity wakes me up in a few hours, but right now I don't care. I just need to hold the fear and dread at arm's length a little while longer.

"You realize your forearm is as big around as a fully-grown boa constrictor," I say, my voice slurring a bit.

Okay, so maybe I'm more than *gently* drunk. I'm fully intoxicated and clearly not in my right mind or I never would have suggested Nash and I go anywhere together. Ever.

I hate Nash Geary. Mostly. Except when he was being sweet to Felicity at the BBQ a while back. And when he looked at me with that pained, hopeful expression as he left

that night, almost as if he remembered, just for a second, that we hadn't always been enemies.

That we actually used to like each other a whole, whole lot...

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Nash asks, glancing down at his arm.

"Neither. Just an observation," I reply, squinting up into his face. Yep, it's still as stupidly handsome as it was the last time I looked. "Have you ever seen a boa constrictor? In real life?"

"Can't say I have," he drawls, taking a pull of his twenty-four-ounce draft.

I was a little worried when he ordered the extra-large—by law, we have to stay in the beer tent until we're finished with our drinks, and my sisters will freak out if I take too long to meet them at Nana's watermelon—but at this rate he'll be done with his drink long before I finish my twelve ounces.

"What about you?" he adds.

"Yes, I have." I nod, the motion making my head swim a little. "My ex has a pet boa constrictor. He kept it in the basement. Next to his guitar collection. If by some insane stretch of the imagination he gets custody of Felicity, I'm going to sneak in there and kill it."

"You should," Nash says, with an intensity that surprises me. "What kind of asshole has a boa constrictor and a baby in the same house?"

"A stupid asshole," I agree, bobbing my head again. "The stupidest asshole who was ever an asshole kind of asshole." I take another swig of beer, willing the alcohol to do its work. I can't think about Liam taking Felicity anymore tonight or I'm going to go crazy.

Maybe I already have.

That would explain why I'm suddenly so chummy with Nash.



He clears his throat. “Yeah, I heard. I’m so sorry you’re going through this. I can imagine how hard it must be.”

“Thanks.” I fight to swallow past the fist suddenly shoving up my throat.

Kindness from Nash is harder to take than sarcasm.

Kindness lowers my defenses.

It makes me remember things...

Stupid things like how good it felt to rest my cheek against his solid chest, feel his strong arms around me, hear his husky drawl telling me how much he cares in a way that made me believe it.

But that was all a lie. Nash proved that beyond a shadow of a doubt, and I would be a fool to forget it, even over a decade later.

“Whatever,” I say, banishing the dangerous thoughts with another drink. “It’s fine. I’ve got time before the hearing. I’ll figure something out.”

“I’m sure you will,” he says, but he’s watching me out of the corner of his eyes, concern still written clearly on his face.

“Seriously, Nash, I don’t need you to feel sorry for me,” I say, refusing to cry. I can’t lose control in front of him. It would be too mortifying. “I wish Mason had kept his mouth shut,” I mumble, though I’m not really mad at Mason.

I’m mad at myself for being such an emotional wreck. I should be used to this kind of thing from Liam by now. I should be stronger.

Nash grunts. “Well he didn’t so... Guess I owe you a confession.” Before I can assure him he doesn’t owe me anything, he takes a deep breath and says, “I broke up with someone recently, too. I ran into her a few minutes ago, and found out she’s already engaged to marry a loser I used to play football with in high school.”

I blink. “Wow. That sucks. I think mine is worse, but that really does suck.”

Nash sighs. “He’s the same guy she was cheating on me with. The one I found in my bed when I came home from work a little too early one afternoon.”

I wince around another swig of beer. “Ouch. I’m so sorry. Cheating is the worst. You’re definitely narrowing my lead in the pain Olympics.”

Nash’s lips curve in a wry smile. “Well hold on because I’m about to close the gap. Instead of walking away without saying anything like a sane person, I lied and told her I was engaged, too.”

My jaw drops. “What? So you just...made up a fake fiancée?”

“Yep.”

I giggle. “That’s nuts. I didn’t know you were nuts.”

“Neither did I,” he says with a laugh, his eyes rolling up to study the roof of the tent. “I don’t even have a girlfriend. I haven’t dated anyone since Rachael left, and I’m sure she knows it. It’s not like it’s easy to keep secrets in this town.”

I snort. “What? In this not-at-all gossipy cesspool? Yeah, if she doesn’t know you’re lying now, she will by tomorrow. Or maybe tonight, depending on who she runs into while waiting in line for corn dogs.”

“I know,” Nash says, color flushing his cheeks. “So yeah. I’m about to look like a bigger fool than I do already.” He glances down at his beer. “Too bad my friend, Sandra, moved away.”

“Why? Who’s that?” I ask, my buzz making me unapologetically nosy.

“She always hated Rachael. With a burning passion. I probably could have convinced her to get engaged for a while. Just to save my damned pride.”

I frown. “No way. You wouldn’t really do something like that?”

“Yeah, I would,” he says, with a shrug. “We almost got married a few years ago, actually. She has Crohn’s disease.

She was going through a really rough patch with her illness and couldn't afford her meds. Since neither of us had any romantic prospects on the horizon, we were going to get hitched so she could be on my insurance."

My lips purse and the lump reforms in my throat again. "Wow. That's...really sweet. Illegal, but very sweet."

He shrugs again, more uncomfortably this time. "But then she met someone amazing and she and her new girlfriend moved to Boulder. They're getting married this spring, and I don't have any other female friends as crazy as Sandra, so..."

My stomach knots, my heart lurches in my chest, and suddenly I feel stone-cold sober.

But I'm not sober.

If I were, I'd never have the guts to say, "I'll do it."

"What?" A line forms between Nash's eyebrows, an exclamation point that seems to emphasize the insanity of what I just said.

"I'll do it," I repeat, my pulse fluttering in my throat. I set my beer down as my arm begins to tremble. "Though I might need more than a fake engagement. My ex is saying he's a better parent because he's already married and has a house of his own without any perverts like my dad living in it."

"The report on your dad's arrest came across my desk last week," Nash says, a hard note creeping into his voice. "Can't say I was sad to see it."

I sigh. "I can imagine. He was awful to you. I'm sorry."

Nash nods. "It was a long time ago. And...not your fault."

Our eyes meet and hold, something passing between us that feels a little bit like forgiveness. I'm sure it's not—forgiveness doesn't come this easily in my experience—but the softening around Nash's eyes makes me brave enough to say, "So yeah...if we were married and living together, my ex wouldn't have a case, and your ex would never have to know that you were lying about being ready to commit to someone else."

Nash's lips lift on one side. "We're not seriously considering this are we?"

"I am," I say, folding my fingers into a single fist to keep my hands from shaking, only realizing after I've done it that it probably looks like I'm begging. But that's okay, I'll beg if that's what it takes. My pride won't keep me sane if Liam succeeds in taking Felicity away. "I know there's less in it for you, but I can pitch in around your place to make up for it. I can clean, do laundry, whatever. And then, a few months from now, or however long it takes for Liam to get tired of trying to sue me and move on, we can amicably divorce."

"Since when do we amicably do anything?" Nash asks, arching a brow. But he doesn't flat out say no, a fact I decide to take as a positive sign.

"Since tonight," I insist, forcing a smile. "Since we realized we can help each other out in a way no one else can. I'll get to keep full custody of my daughter, you'll get to rub your happiness in the face of this woman who betrayed you, everyone wins."

"What about your father?" he asks. "What's he going to think about you marrying the white trash he saved you from when you were fifteen?"

My throat goes tight. "He doesn't really think like that. He was upset and saying things he didn't mean."

"Oh, I think he meant every word," Nash says in a low, gravelly voice. "And I seriously doubt he's going to be in any rush to welcome me to the family. Especially if we run off and get hitched without asking his permission first. Which I don't intend to do, by the way. The only man's opinion who matters when it comes to my life or marriage is mine."

"Good," I breathe. "Because I'm no one's property to be given away. Not even my father's. When I walk down the aisle, I'll do it on my own two feet."

He steps closer, until his body heat warms my chest and the sexy smell of him makes my nerve endings hum with something more dangerous than anxiety. "That's...surprising."

“I’m full of surprises.” I swallow hard. I’m playing with fire. Moving into Nash’s place, where I’ll be exposed to his five-alarm sex vibe and delicious smell for even a few months could land me in serious, emotional distress.

This man gets under my skin like no one else, always has and always will.

“But are all the surprises good surprises?” he murmurs, his gaze dropping to my lips, making my heart thud even faster.

“I hope so,” I say. “But if they’re not, I’m an adult capable of changing my behavior. And so is my father. I’ll make him understand why we need to fake this marriage and get him on board. Considering it’s partly his fault my case is weak in the first place, I—”

“No,” Nash cuts in, bringing his face closer to mine as he adds in a soft, husky voice. “If we do this, no one knows we’re pretending but you. And me.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*M*y brows shoot up, anxiety and hope dancing beneath my skin.

He's talking terms, which means there's a chance this crazy, but potentially life-saving thing is actually going to happen.

"Okay." I nod, more than willing to work with him. "No one knows but us, not even my family."

"And when we're out in public, we act like this is real," he adds. "Like we're crazy about each other."

"Instead of just crazy," I quip, my heart skipping a beat when Nash grins in response.

"Right. Instead of just crazy."

Shit. That grin, that warm, playful grin I used to bask in on a daily basis, back when Nash and I were falling for each other. It would be enough to make a girl weak in the knees even if she hadn't had four beers.

Which I have.

My bones are wobbly even before he eases closer, his arm going around my waist, making my pulse spike.

"What are you doing?" I breathe, my heart racing as he draws me fully against him, until I'm in intimate contact with every muscled inch of the powerful, sexy-as-hell man he's become.

“Acting like this is the real deal,” he murmurs in his panty-melting voice, making my nipples tighten inside my bra.

“So we’re doing this?” I brace my hands on his chest. “Starting now?”

“Starting right now,” he says, and then he kisses me.

For a moment, I’m frozen by the shock of it, of feeling lips against mine for the first time in nearly a year. And not just any lips, but Nash Geary’s lips, the best lips I’ve encountered in my entire life.

I’ve tried to rewrite history, to convince myself he wasn’t all that special—I was simply young and too inexperienced to know good from great—but as our mouths begin to move, my tower of lies crumbles to the ground at Nash’s feet.

Because holy moly, this man can *kiss*.

His tongue strokes against mine, laying claim to my mouth as his big hand cups the back of my head, pulling me closer. With a moan, I twine my arms around his neck, melting into him as he kisses me senseless, our lips making sweet, easy love like we’ve done this a thousand times before.

Like we made out just this morning, not years ago.

My tongue remembers exactly how to dance with his, while my fingers find the spot at the back of his neck that makes his breath catch when I drag my nails across his skin. Within seconds, my heart is slamming against my ribs like an animal desperate to escape a cage, longing to get closer to the thing it craves.

Closer to Nash.

By the time he pulls away, I’m breathing hard, tingling all over, and aching in places I’d almost forgotten were there.

Liam and I stopped sleeping together around the sixth month of my pregnancy. I’d assume he was worried about the baby, but then I’d found out about the affair. Not long after, the last of my lust for my ex had faded away.

Even after Felicity was born, when we were still trying to make it work, I couldn’t bring myself to be vulnerable with



him. No matter how much I craved physical affection, sleeping with my ex didn't feel safe anymore.

Which means it's been over a year since I've been naked with anyone else in the room.

*Over a year.* The realization boggles my mind.

How could I have cut off that part of myself, so completely, for so long? At the moment—still pressed close to Nash, with my body purring and every beat of my heart begging for more—it's unfathomable.

And utterly terrifying.

There's no way I'm going to be able to live with Nash, day in and day out, while pretending to be in love with him when we're in public, without wanting a heck of a lot more than kisses for someone else's benefit. I already want more. I'm already imagining Nash guiding me back onto his bed, his comforting weight heavy on top of me as we take kissing to the next level, to those places we started to explore as kids, and beyond.

“That was...pretty incredible.” He watches me through hooded eyes, looking so damned fine it's almost impossible to keep from pulling him into another kiss.

But if I do, then he'll know.

He'll know that this part isn't an act for me. That I actually want him. Then the balance of power will tip in his direction, and he'll have the upper hand for however many months we end up pretending to be married.

And I'm sick of the man in my life having the upper hand, of waiting and hoping and praying he'll want me the same way I want him and being disappointed again and again. I'm tired of feeling like a weak, helpless fool. I can't live like that again.

I refuse to end up under another man's thumb, especially not Nash's. He broke my heart once, but there's not a chance in hell I'm letting him do it again.

So I say, “You were okay,” before brushing my hair from my face with what I hope is an easy sigh.

“Okay?” Nash’s eyes cool as he steps back.

“Yeah. Okay,” I say, grateful for the inches between us. “A little stiff, but I get it. You’re out of practice. We can work on it.”

He huffs. “Work on it?”

“Yeah, we want to make sure your ex buys the show, right?” I’m being mean, and a part of me regrets it, but the rest of me insists it’s what I have to do. I can’t show weakness, especially not straight out of the gate.

“There it is,” Nash says in a drawl so sweet it makes my teeth ache. “I was wondering when the bitch would come out. Glad you didn’t make me wait too long.”

Pain blossoms in my chest.

Where does he get off calling me a bitch? *He’s* the one who was a complete asshole when I tried to reach out to him years ago. He’s the one who made me feel like a fool for imagining he might be someone worth giving up my dreams of exotic places and mysterious men, for a boy who made me feel special and safe.

But I was never special to Nash. If I had been, it wouldn’t have been so easy for him to throw me away. Just like Liam threw me away, even after I’d bared my soul to him and loved him with every piece of my heart.

But all my love wasn’t enough.

*I* wasn’t enough.

So maybe I am a bitch. But I have reason to be. The world has taught me it’s safer to be a bitch, to keep my guard up and my heart under lock and key and never risk being torn apart from the inside ever again.

“You’re welcome.” I stare at his chest, refusing to let him see the hurt in my eyes. “So do you still want to do this? I wasn’t trying to be a bitch. I was just trying to keep it real. I think honesty is important in a relationship. Even a fake one.”

Nash is quiet for a long moment. I can feel his gaze boring into my forehead, but I refuse to look up. Finally, he breaks,

reaches for his beer, and takes a drink.

A very long, very intense drink.

When he sets the cup back down on the wooden bar, it's empty.

"Fine, we'll do it," he says, "and I'll keep it real, too."

"Good," I say, even as anxiety lifts the hair at the back of my neck. "I wouldn't expect anything less."

"Good," he echoes, holding out his hand. I take it, gripping his palm firmly as we shake on our Marriage of Insanity.

"I'll meet you at the courthouse tomorrow at ten thirty," he says, releasing my fingers. "That'll give us time to get the license and sign up for a slot with the Justice of the Peace. He marries people at noon on Saturdays."

I nod. "I'll wear white."

"I'll wear a suit and bring you flowers and do my best to make this work," he says, before adding in a low voice. "But the next time you look down your nose at me in public, you're getting a spanking."

Before I can respond, Nash spins on his heel and makes a beeline for the exit, leaving me alone with my still half full, now lukewarm beer.

Which is a good thing.

If he'd stayed, I might have felt compelled to pick another fight to hide how weirdly hot the idea of him turning me over his knee makes me and ruined everything.

If I want to maintain the upper hand I have to walk a careful line with Nash—friendly, but not too friendly.

*Or you could drop the power play bullshit and focus on the big picture. Keeping Felicity is all that matters, no matter what it takes to make that happen.*

The inner voice is right.

For Felicity, I can play nice with Nash Geary.

For that, I'd play nice with the devil himself.

## CHAPTER NINE

*F*or the first few minutes after I wake up, I'm certain last night was a dream.

Then I check my phone to see a text from Aria, reminding me I'll need my birth certificate and two forms of I.D. to get the marriage license, and my insane new reality whips into sharp focus. Last night actually happened, I really agreed to marry the girl who broke my heart, just to keep from looking like a fool in front of my most recent relationship mistake.

In the cold light of day, it makes about as much sense as cutting off my head to show my dick who's boss.

I mean, getting fake engaged is one thing, but why on earth had I agreed to escalate this to full-fledged marriage?

I certainly don't owe Aria any favors.

"It's for the baby," I mumble as I shuffle into the bathroom to start the shower, wincing at the dark circles under my eyes. "Think about the baby."

I've only met Felicity once, but she stole a piece of my heart that night at the March sisters' BBQ. With a family the size of mine, I've spent a *lot* of time around a *lot* of babies, and been smitten with my share, but I don't think I've ever met a kid as adorable as Felicity March.

Her name suits her perfectly. With her wild red curls, green eyes the same color as her mama's, and a smile so big and happy you can't help but smile along with her, she's a really special kid. She made my heart lighter that night—in spite of

the fact that I'd just been through a breakup and that her mother drives me crazy—and she's obviously Aria's world. The way Aria's face lit up with love every time she glanced at her daughter got to me. It got to me enough that for a while I'd almost forgotten what a raving B-word she can be.

“You're not going to call her a B-word again,” I tell my reflection as I reach for the shower door. “You were raised better than that.”

I've been talking to myself a lot since Rachael moved out. I'm going to have to stop that once Aria moves in, or she'll think I'm crazy.

*God.* Aria is moving in. With me. *This afternoon.*

Clearly, I'm already a confirmed nutcase.

By the time I've showered, shaved, and located my best suit at the back of the closet, I've nearly talked myself into texting Aria to call it off. But then I remind myself of my third reason for marrying the enemy, and go looking for my birth certificate and two forms of I.D.

I *need* to see the look on Bob March's face when he realizes Nash Geary, the white trash scum he got kicked out of art camp years ago, is married to his little princess. That a poor, pitiable Geary—the type who works at fast food restaurants instead of owning a small empire of them—is taking Bob's daughter and granddaughter home with him, and that tonight Aria will be sleeping in my bed.

She *will* be sleeping in my bed. I'm not giving up my bliss-inducing new mattress to couch it. Besides, it's a California King. We'll never have to touch. The two sides practically have their own time zones.

And if she has any objections to that, *she* can take the couch.

The second bedroom is full of workout equipment, and the third, smallest bedroom is for Felicity.

Which reminds me...

I grab my phone and hit my sister's contact button.

Raleigh answers in the middle of the first ring. “Where were you last night?” she demands by way of greeting. “I thought I saw you walking toward the rollercoaster, but then you disappeared.”

“Something unexpected came up,” I say, my mouth going dry as I remember I’ll have to lie to her. Aria and I made a deal to keep this just between us, and I didn’t ask for any exceptions, even for my closest sibling.

“Was it Rachael and Lee? I saw them making out by the cotton candy stand,” Raleigh says, the pity in her voice enough to shore up my resolve.

I’m sick of the people I love feeling sorry for me. Marrying a beautiful woman should help with that, even if she is the girl they all know I made a hobby out of hating in high school.

“No, it was something good. Great, actually,” I say, forcing an upbeat tone into my voice. “That’s why I’m calling. I was going to ask if I could swing by and pick up Jason’s old crib this morning.”

“Why?” Raleigh asks.

“You’re done with it, right?” I hedge, not ready to spill the beans. There’s still a chance Aria will back out at the last minute, and I don’t want to give Raleigh, or anyone else, another reason to pity me.

“Of course, I’m done with it,” Raleigh says. “I’m not Alex. I have no secret longing to have a brood the size of Mom’s. Two rowdy boys are plenty for me, thank you very much.”

“Great. I’ll swing by and grab it in a few minutes.”

“But I’m not home,” she protests. “We’re at soccer, and the game’s not over until—”

“That’s okay. I know where it is. I saw it in the garage a few weeks ago when Harry and I were putting the camping stuff away.”

“Okay, fine.” Raleigh huffs. “But you’re being weird. Don’t think that’s escaping my notice, because it isn’t.”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll explain everything tonight.” I smile, an unexpected flash of excitement zigzagging through my body. Aria living in my house is a reality I’m still not mentally prepared for, but Felicity asleep down the hall, snuggled in her crib, is another thing entirely.

I just turned thirty-one. I know it’s not “old” by anyone’s standards, but I always thought I’d be married with a family by now.

But the years—and the girlfriends—have come and gone and I’ve never felt moved to take the next step with a woman. Even in the early days with Rachael, when I’d been eager to spend as much time with her as possible, it still hadn’t felt one hundred percent right. That’s why I hedged when she issued her ultimatum.

I want to be married. I want a family and children of my own, but I don’t want to settle for anything less than the real deal. The dream.

I want what my parents had, the kind of love that keeps you going through the hard times and makes the good times all the sweeter. The kind that keeps the “happy accidents” coming because you just can’t keep your hands off of each other. (Mom swears none of us were accidents, but I have my suspicions, especially about Phoenix and Denver, my twin little brothers who came along twelve years after the sibling before them.)

And no, I don’t want *eleven* happy accidents, but three or four would be nice.

More than nice.

I already have good friends, hobbies I enjoy, and work I love. All that’s missing is the family, and I’m tired of waiting.

I’m also...lonely. I have more extended family than most, but I still come home to an empty house after work every day. My friends and family are too busy with their own lives and careers to make time for socializing during the week. There are times when I ache for the sound of another human voice. Or for a hug at the end of a long day.



The thought of opening the door to Felicity's laughter for the next few months is enough to keep a smile on my face the rest of the morning.

I smile as I fetch the crib and slide it into the back of my truck. I smile as I pop over to the flower shop on Main Street to grab a bouquet for Aria. I'm still smiling as I hustle through the humid air and up the courthouse steps, even though it's already pushing ninety and I'm wearing a suit.

I'm beginning to think my grin is unbreakable.

Then I push through the doors to the courthouse to see Aria standing by the windows, waiting for me in a shaft of morning light, and my smile falls clean away.

## CHAPTER TEN

*A*ria's hair is arranged in an elaborate pile on her head with wisps framing her face in a way that emphasizes her big eyes. She's wearing a short, sleeveless white dress, revealing constellations of shoulder freckles that are almost unbearably cute. Her legs are also bare, and her high-heel sandals make them look even longer, and sexier, than usual.

She's breathtaking, so beautiful it's almost painful to look at her.

I nearly tell her so, but at the last minute I remember who I'm talking to and toss out a casual, "You clean up nice."

She glances up from her phone, her focus flicking up and down my frame in a way that makes me feel the summer heat even though the courthouse air is cranking at full tilt. "Thanks. You too." She tucks her cell into her purse and exhales through pursed lips. "Are those for me?"

For a moment I have no idea what she's talking about—I'm still too distracted by how damned pretty she looks—but then I remember the flowers in my hand and hold them out.

"Yeah. Hope you like calla lilies. The woman at the shop said they were good wedding flowers."

"They're beautiful," she says, a smile flashing on her face for a moment before it vanishes again. "Thank you." She plucks at the cellophane wrapped around the flowers and lets out another shaky breath.

I shove my hands into the pockets of my pants. “Nervous?”

Her dark green eyes catch mine, making my tie feel too tight. “I just... I was up all night thinking,” she says, in a soft, troubled voice. “This isn’t just about you and me. Felicity is part of it, too, and I don’t want to do anything to hurt her.”

I fight the urge to get defensive.

This isn’t a personal attack; this is Aria being a good mother. She’s right to take Felicity’s needs into consideration.

“I understand,” I say. “But I think Felicity’s a sweet little girl. I would never do anything to hurt her.”

“Oh, I know, of course not,” Aria says in a rush, the certainty in her voice sending a rush of warmth through my chest. “I just... I mean... Even at the BBQ that night, when she’d just met you, she had so much fun playing with you and stealing the food off of your plate...” She bites her lip, looking so worried I have to fight the urge to pull her into my arms for a hug. “What if she gets attached? What happens when it’s time for us to end it and she doesn’t understand why you’re not around anymore?”

She has a point. One I haven’t really considered.

What will we do? I doubt there’s any standard protocol for how to handle an ongoing relationship with your fake-ex-wife’s baby, but I do know there’s always room in my life for another niece or nephew.

“Then I’ll be Uncle Nash,” I say with a shrug. “And I’ll see her whenever Mason comes over to my place. Maybe we can take her out on his boat together when she gets a little older. Things like that.”

Aria’s forehead wrinkles. “Really? You would do that?”

“I’d love to do that.” I smile. “As long as that’s okay with you.”

She hesitates, but after a moment, she nods. “That would be nice. And it’s very generous of you, to be open to caring for

her and putting her well-being first, before any lingering animosity between the two of us.”

I shift uncomfortably in my dress shoes, regretting the B-word I let fly in the beer tent even more than I did already. “I’m sorry about last night. I shouldn’t have started calling names. It won’t happen again.”

“No, it’s fine. I mean...I get it.” Aria fidgets with the cellophane again, before adding in a swift mumble, “I didn’t mean it, either. The stuff about your kiss. I was just caught off guard.”

“Sorry. I should have asked permission first.”

She waves a hand. “No, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. I’ll ask next time.”

“Seriously, it’s no big deal.” She rolls her eyes, but her lips curve at the edges. “God, this is weird right? And awkward as hell?”

I laugh. “A little.”

“Acting like we were in love sounded easier when I was drunk.”

I reach out, taking her hand. “Just pretend I’m someone else.”

“What?” Her eyes widen as I step in, closing the distance between us.

“Is this okay?”

“It’s fine,” she murmurs, tilting her head back to meet my gaze. “Who should I pretend you are?”

“I’m sure you have a fantasy guy. Right?” I wrap an arm around her waist, fighting to keep my body under control as her breasts brush against my chest. She’s the wrong woman, but I can’t deny that she feels very right pressed against me.

“A fantasy guy?” She arches a brow. “Like someone famous?”

“Or not. Just whoever you imagine you’re with when you’re in the mood to imagine those sorts of things.”

Aria’s cheeks flush. “Well, this conversation just took a racy turn.”

“Nothing wrong with playing pretend,” I drawl, refusing to let my own imagination get started. Because right now I wouldn’t be imagining anything about anyone except Aria.

Aria in this dress, and ...out of this dress.

“I’ll stick with reality for now, thanks.” A smile tugs at her lips. “Like I said, you’re easy on the eyes this morning.”

“Thank you, darlin’.”

“Don’t call me darlin’,” she says in a husky voice that makes my boxer briefs feel tighter than they did before.

“Doll face?”

She wrinkles her nose.

“Sugar britches?” I ask, feeling absurdly proud of myself when she laughs.

“Wow, you’re bad at that,” she teases, her eyes flashing into mine. “I’m going to call you Meaty, in honor of the muscle.”

“And I’ll call you Red.” I bend my head closer to hers, aching for another taste of her in a way that probably isn’t healthy, and certainly isn’t pretend.

“Red and Meaty,” she murmurs. “Sounds like the floor of a slaughter house.”

I grunt. “Then I guess I’ll have to stick with baby, baby,” I say, and then I kiss her, a long, slow kiss that makes my blood rush and my balls ache.

And then, suddenly, I’m hard, so hard I know she’s going to feel it if I don’t put some distance between us.

“Better?” I release her, stepping back fast.

Aria blinks up at me. “Better?”

“The kiss? Better than last night?”

Her gaze drops to the tile floor. “Oh. Yeah. I mean, last night was good, but that...”

“That?” I prompt, though I know I shouldn’t.

I’m not here to flirt with her, I’m here to *pretend* to be in love with her.

But the lines are already starting to blur. We haven’t even said our fake “I do’s” yet and I’m making stupid decisions. I should get out of here. Now. Before it’s too late. Before I need a lawyer to untangle me from this woman I know I can’t trust.

I’m working up the guts to do it when she lifts her eyes to meet mine and whispers, “Incredible,” and lines no longer seem so important.

We’ll figure out the lines as we go along. And if I need a lawyer, well, maybe a bought lesson will finally teach me not to date—or fake marry—redheads.

Redheads are trouble, I know this, but I’m smiling as I offer this one my hand. “Ready to fake it until we make it?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” She slips her slender palm into mine and I lead the way to the licensing department, unable to ignore how right it feels to have my enemy’s hand in mine.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



Thinking is bad.  
Dangerous.

Trouble.

I have to stop thinking or I'm not going to make it through the rest of this crazy day without losing my mind.

I refuse to think about the kiss in the courthouse lobby, or the kiss after the wedding ceremony, or the way Nash picked me up and spun me around until I was laughing like a giddy teenager, right in front of the Justice of the Peace and the other couples waiting to get married.

I won't think about the way he makes me feel, like I'm waking up from a long, sad sleep, or question the wisdom of how much I want to kiss him again. And I'm *certainly* not going to take a closer look at how desperate I am to drag him into a bedroom, slam the door, and ravish him until we're both aching with gratification and too exhausted to blink.

Lucky for me, we're almost to my parents' house. I'm certain Mom and Dad's reaction to my completely-out-of-the-blue marriage will banish every last sparkle of lust from my bloodstream.

I tap my fingertips on the armrest of Nash's truck, my rhythm growing progressively urgent as we pull onto the street where I grew up.

"Nervous again?" he asks.

“Terrified is a better word.” I let out a ragged sigh. “I’m pretty sure my mother is going to kill me.”

“Why’s that?”

“Mom loves weddings. Like *really* loves them.” I jog my knee up and down as the house comes into view. “She nearly had a heart attack when I told her I’d eloped the first time. Now that I’ve done it again...” My heart jumps into my throat and lodges there, making it hard to breathe.

*And what if she knew that both of your weddings were dirty, rotten lies, Aria? What then?* the inner voice demands.

“I’m not sure I can do this,” I squeak as Nash parks the truck at the curb. “What if she never speaks to me again?”

“Come on, now. It won’t be that bad.” His hand settles on my knee, sending another insidious sizzle of awareness flowing through me.

I can tell he’s trying to offer comfort, but his touch is so far from comforting, it isn’t even funny. His warm hand on my bare skin only makes my anxiety spike higher.

How am I going to do this?

How on earth am I going to get all touchy feely with Nash in public without letting the way he affects me bleed over into our relationship in private?

I’m not going to last a day at this rate. I’ll be begging him to touch me by bedtime, and well on my way to making a fool out of myself by tomorrow morning. And in the meantime, my mother will be devastated, Daddy will think I’m insane, and when it’s all over, the entire family will feel sorry for me.

Again.

The “Poor Aria” show will be renewed for another season, and the shame of being pitied by everyone I love will make the last vestiges of my pride curl up and die like a slug covered in salt.

I can’t do this.

This is a mistake, a terrible mistake.

“Breathe,” Nash says, his low, honeyed voice penetrating the panic haze. “You made a decision that’s in the best interest of your daughter. That’s what this is all about. And your parents are going to get that.”

I sip in a deeper breath, nodding.

He’s right. This is about Felicity. As long as I keep my focus on my daughter, everything is going to be all right.

“Now let’s go in there and convince your family we’re a happy, healthy couple who are going to provide your daughter with a wonderful home,” Nash says. “It might not be easy, but think about it this way: after today, fooling the rest of the town will be gravy.”

I glance his way, taking in his earnest expression and kind eyes, and something flutters behind my ribs. If I didn’t know better, I’d think I was with someone who really cares about me. But I’ve seen Nash go from sweet to nasty before. I know better than to let his comforting drawl and encouraging words convince me to drop my guard again.

I know better, but that isn’t always enough to keep my stupid heart in line.

*Your heart has nothing to do with it. Keep your heart closed up tight and your legs closed tighter and do what you need to do to keep your child from being forced to grow up with a full-time parent like Liam. Woman up, lady. Your daughter needs you.*

I sit up straighter. “All right, let’s do this.” I reach for the door handle. “We’ll be so damned sweet together we’ll give the entire family a toothache before we’re done.”

“That’s my girl,” Nash says, grinning as he slams out of the driver’s side and jogs around to open my door.

The words send another fluttery feeling whispering through my chest, but I ignore it.

I’m not his girl, I’m my own woman, and Felicity’s mother, and I’m prepared to do whatever it takes to defend my little family, even if it means lying like a dog to the rest of the people I love.

\* \* \*

AS IS SO OFTEN the case with the things we dread, the afternoon progresses with far less disaster than I'm anticipating.

After the initial moment of stunned shock in the wake of our big announcement—followed by tentative congratulations from Lark and Mason, giddy squeals of excitement from Melody, happy-ish tears from my mother, and a tight-lipped handshake for Nash from Dad—the afternoon is relatively... pleasant.

Either Nash and I are excellent actors, or my family is simply so eager for their black sheep to find her happily ever after that they're willing to swallow any story, no matter how ludicrous.

Though, I have to admit Nash and I are pretty convincing. When he confesses that he secretly had feelings for me all along, even when we were in the deepest, darkest days of our feud, he sounds so sincere, even *I* almost believe him.

By the time we finish grilling chicken for a late lunch, Mom is letting Nash help her set the table and complimenting him on making Captain so early in his career, Lark is giving me the thumbs-up sign behind Nash's back, and Mason has clapped Nash on the shoulder so often the man's probably going to have bruises. He's *that* excited to have Nash as a future brother-in-law.

And Felicity...

Well, Felicity made it clear how she felt about Nash the moment we walked in the door, taking to him with the same warmth and immediacy she did the first time. The only person who continues to look less-than-thrilled about our sudden marriage is my father.

So, I'm not really surprised when, after we've finished with lunch, Daddy appears in the door to my bedroom as I'm packing a few last-minute things to take to Nash's house

“Hey.” I smile what I hope is a blinged-out-bride sort of smile. “What’s up, Daddy? Is it okay if I take the gray sheet set? Mom said it was fine, but—”

“It’s okay if you don’t do this,” he says, getting right down to business, the way he always does. “You don’t have to marry that boy to keep Felicity with you. We can find another way.”

“He’s not a boy. He’s a man and he’s my husband.” I turn my attention back to the baby bag, shoving the last blanket into the top. I don’t like lying to my father, but I like breaking promises even less. I promised Nash I’d keep our deal between us, and that’s what I intend to do. Even when it hurts a little. “I know you didn’t care for Nash when we were kids, but we’re adults now.”

“I don’t like or dislike him. I don’t know the man, and neither do you,” Dad says, coming to sit on the edge of the bed. “You wouldn’t have rushed into marriage if you didn’t need to move out of this house, and you know it. And I know it. And...I know it’s my fault.”

I face him, pained by the defeated slump of his shoulders. “Daddy, that’s not true. It’s not your fault.”

“It is my fault. If I hadn’t pulled that stupid stunt, you and Felicity would still be safe here.” He studies the hands fisted in his lap for a moment before lifting his head. “But I’m trying to fix things, Aria. I hired a private investigator to follow Liam and see what kind of dirt he can dig up.”

“Oh, Dad, no.” I wince. I caused enough trouble snooping in Mason’s past a few months ago.

But clearly, I come by my suspicious streak honestly.

“He’s a rat, honey, and rats leave rat trails behind,” Dad insists. “We just need to find them. Once we have evidence that he’s bad for Felicity, everything will be fine. You can stay here, we’ll get this marriage annulled, and—”

“No, Dad,” I say, a little surprised to find that I don’t want to stay. I’m ready to start the next phase of my life.

No matter how generous and helpful Mom and Dad have been, I’m past ready to move out. Grown children aren’t meant

to live with their parents. It's unnatural and has a way of stirring up every adolescent hang-up I thought I'd left behind. Even living with Nash for a few months and dealing with all the insanity *that's* bound to cause is more appealing. And by the time Nash and I go our separate ways, I'll be able to afford an apartment of my own.

"I'm moving in with Nash," I repeat, gently, but firmly. "And Felicity is coming with me, and Nash and I are going to do our best to make our marriage work."

"But you don't love him," Dad says, standing to pace the carpet in front of the bed. "I can tell, even if the rest of those dummies down there can't."

I huff. "You just called your wife, children, and future son-in-law dummies. Real mature, Bob."

"Don't call me Bob." He scowls. "And I don't care about being mature, I care about keeping my daughter from making another mistake."

*Another mistake.*

His tone makes it sound like all I've done my entire life is flit from one bad choice to another, from the day I left home to the day I crawled back in disgrace years later. And yes, I have made my share of mistakes—I can admit that—but I've also had wonderful adventures.

I studied to be a pastry chef in Paris, backpacked through Germany, lived on a commune on a vineyard in the Italian countryside, and went to more rock concerts than a Rolling Stones groupie. I have more stories to tell after twenty-eight years than most people have after a lifetime.

I also have a daughter. A beautiful, magical little girl who, despite the fact that her father isn't the man I thought he was, isn't a mistake. Felicity is a treasure, and I could do worse for my child than moving in with a man who adores babies in general, and mine, in particular.

Like staying here and facing my father's disappointment, day after day.

“I love you, Daddy,” I say, swinging the baby bag over one shoulder and grabbing Felicity’s small overnight suitcase from the floor. “But this is my life and I make my own decisions, and this one is already made.”

He frowns. “All right. But don’t come crying to me when it falls apart. That man has never had your best interests at heart, Aria, not when you were a girl he was pushing to grow up way too fast, and not now.”

“He wasn’t pushing me to...” I trail off with a shake of my head.

This is pointless.

Once Dad has something stuck in his head, arguing with him is an exercise in futility. I’d just be wasting breath and the time I’ll need to get the crib Nash borrowed set up before Felicity’s bedtime.

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. “I won’t come crying to you. Goodnight, and thank you for trying to help. Hopefully, the next time we get together we can enjoy each other’s company without all the unsolicited advice.”

“Maybe,” he says, scowling. “If you leave that idiot you married at home.”

I bite my tongue. A part of me wants to defend Nash—he has many annoying qualities, but he’s far from an idiot—but I know when to cut my losses. My father is too stubborn for anything I say right now to make a bit of difference anyway.

Without another word, I walk out of the bedroom and down the stairs, kissing my mom and sisters goodbye before heading out the door.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



*Don't panic, don't panic*, I chant silently to myself as I follow Nash down the walk to his truck. He's holding Felicity, who's grinning at me over his shoulder, clearly thrilled to be going for a ride with her new friend.

"That went well." Nash beams at me across the back seat of the truck as he straps Felicity into her car seat, and I wedge the diaper bag and small suitcase onto the floor beneath her feet.

The truck bed is already full of my two large suitcases, a duffel bag full of Felicity's clothes, two toy chests, a few tote bags stuffed with sheets for the crib, baby towels, soap, and other toiletries, and the crib Nash picked up earlier in the day.

This "moving in together" situation is becoming more real with every passing moment, but so far Nash doesn't seem to be freaking out.

I wish I could say the same.

"You okay?" He winces as Felicity grabs a fistful of his hair and tugs at it with a squeal, but he doesn't pull the baby's hand away. He's like a giant Labrador retriever, patiently enduring Felicity's rough handling.

I should lie to him, pretend like the last ten minutes of the evening didn't happen and everything is fine, but when I open my mouth, the truth comes spilling out. "My dad came up to talk while I was packing."

Nash gently dislodges Felicity's fingers, exchanging his hair for her favorite toy hammer with a grunt. "I can imagine how that went."

I sigh. "He's going to have a lot of fun saying 'I told you so' when we break up in a few months."

Nash pauses, staring at me with an expression I can't quite decipher.

"What?" I finally ask.

"I know your dad isn't a fan, but I had a good time with your family and Skeeter today," he says before adding in a softer voice. "I had a good time with *you* today."

"I had a good time with you, too," I murmur, so flustered I can't work up the gumption to insist he stop calling Felicity by that ridiculous nickname.

Nash smiles again, that smile that makes his eyes crinkle and my stomach feel crowded with butterflies. "So, why not enjoy it? Nobody said we can't have fun pretending to be married."

"I...guess not," I say, the suspicious part of me warning that this is a trick and that trusting Nash is the stupidest kind of stupid.

He shrugs. "So, let's be friends, have a good time, and worry about the future when we get there."

I cock my head, studying him for a long moment as I work up the courage to ask, "So you don't hate me anymore?"

His smile fades, but the intensity in his eyes remains. "I was telling the truth today. I never hated you, Aria. Not even when I really wanted to."

The backs of my eyes go unexpectedly stinging as I whisper, "I never hated you, either."

His lips—his beautiful, sexy lips—curve in a kind smile. "Then it sounds like we're on the same page."

I nod, but as we load into the truck and Nash aims it back across town to his place, I can't help but wonder what page

that is exactly.

Are we friends now?

Friends who are pretending to be married to help each other out?

That seems like what Nash was saying, but the potential energy simmering in the air between us doesn't feel friendly. It feels alive with awareness and longing and dangerous possibilities.

My skin hums for the entire drive and is still humming an hour later after Nash and I have finished putting up the crib, filling the bureau in his spare room with Felicity's clothes, and setting up the baby's toy boxes.

The entire time, I'm keenly aware of every glance Nash casts my way, every time our hands accidentally brush. By seven thirty, when I finally escape to the bathroom to give Felicity a quick bath and get her changed into her sleeper, I'm a nervous wreck all over again.

Once Felicity is tucked in, it won't be long until it's time for Nash and I to go to bed, too, and so far, I've only seen *one* other bedroom, with *one* king-sized bed in it.

It's an inviting bedroom, large, but still cozy feeling, with coffee-colored walls and a burgundy bedspread with a gold fleur de les design that's masculine, but not in a boring way. The rest of the house bears warm touches as well—flowered curtains, decorative pillows on the big green couch, and a frilly potted plant in one corner by the window. Nash's place is cute all over, but it's the kitchen that grabbed my attention when we walked in, and the kitchen I return to when Felicity is tucked into her crib, chewing on her bunny's ear as she drifts off to sleep.

I wander through the living room into the combined, kitchen-and-dining space, getting a closer look at the artwork crowding the walls. The wooden slabs used as canvases are different colors, but all are faded and worn, making me think they were sourced from various old buildings. They're cool by

themselves, but it's the mixed media paintings that call me over for a second look.

Each piece features a different local animal—owl, deer, rabbit, hawk—but with the body parts made up of a mixture of oil paint and pieces of old machinery. There are cogs, wheels, engine parts, and other things you might find in a junkyard combined with paint in muted reds and blues. The effect is stunning on the old wood, and the animals alien, but playful at the same time.

They're unlike anything I've seen before, but still strangely familiar.

I'm inches away from a painting of an owl with mufflers for wings and bicycle spokes for eyes, trying to figure out how I might be familiar with the artist's work, when Nash rumbles from behind me, "Just pulled those out of the garage a few weeks ago. My ex hated them."

"Really? I love..." I turn, losing the ability to form words when I spot Nash dressed in nothing but a pair of black pajama pants resting low on his hips.

He said he was going to grab a shower while I bathed Felicity in the guest bath, but I hadn't expected him to change into something so...comfortable.

For him, anyway. The sight of his bare chest—that powerful, beautifully muscled, perfectly dusted-with-golden-hair chest—is making me feel a lot of things, but comfort sure as heck isn't one of them.

"Yeah, she said they gave her the creeps." Nash wanders over to the fridge, grabbing a beer from inside and lifting it into the air between us. "You want one?"

"No, thanks. But the, um...the paintings. I like them. A lot," I stammer as he twists the top off the beer and perches on a stool at the kitchen bar.

I glance up at the ceiling, then down at the floor, forcing my gaze to focus anywhere but on Nash's body. Anywhere but his perfectly rounded pectoral muscles and concave stomach and that six pack that, based on my brief examination, looks

closer to an eight-pack. The man is built like a professional athlete, with a body designed to perform.

I'm doing my best *not* to imagine his body "performing" in a bedroom setting when he says—"Thanks. I only started painting again a few years ago. I'm rusty."—and my jaw drops all over again.

"They're yours?" I blink as he nods. "Oh my god, Nash, they're stunning. I love them."

He shrugs, looking pleased and a little embarrassed. "They're all right, but I still have a long way to go. You know how it is, you only see the places where you didn't paint it the way it was in your head."

"I do, but I think they turned out beautifully. They're so provocative and compelling and..." My breath rushes out. "Seriously, amazing work. They almost make me want to pick up a brush again."

"You should. You're talented."

"Nah. Maybe, once, a long time ago," I say, waving my hand dismissively in the air. "But I haven't painted since high school. I messed around with clay and Paper Mache at this commune I lived in for a while in my early twenties, but nothing after that."

"Why not?"

I lift a shoulder. "I was busy with work and the baby. And then I wasn't making a lot of money, and art supplies are expensive."

"I hear you. That's part of the reason I quit for years. My sister and I were helping my parents build a new house. All my spare money went there for a long time."

Shame heats my cheeks. Here I am, still mooching off my parents, while Nash has already helped give his a better life. But I knew when I decided to train as a pastry chef that I probably wasn't going to make a ton of money right away—or maybe ever. That hadn't mattered to me at the time.

Honestly, it doesn't really matter to me now. I don't need to make a ton of money, just enough to support myself and my daughter.

Too bad that's so much harder to do than I expected.

Brushing my hair from my forehead I turn to stare into the lug nut eyes of the young doe in one of the smaller paintings. "So yeah, I was busy and...I don't know. It's like you said, I could never get the canvas to look the way it did in my head. It got frustrating after a while, so I gave up."

"You should try again. You might find it easier to stick with it now." Nash wanders over to stand behind me, so close I can feel his warmth on my back and smell his fresh-from-the-shower scent rising around me. "We give up on things too easily when we're kids."

I chew my bottom lip, unable to keep from thinking about other things the two of us gave up on when we were kids, or about that night in the woods when Nash made me feel so special, so beautiful.

Maybe he's right.

Maybe some things do deserve another shot.

Things like art and...

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I close my eyes and will myself to get a grip.

Nash isn't sending out signals. He's being nice, and that's what I should do—be nice, civil, not flirty or hopeful in stupid ways. Dwelling on things that happened in another life is never a good idea.

Though I can't help but wonder...

"So, there's only one bedroom?" I ask, not turning to look at him, fearing my crazy thoughts about second chances might be showing on my face.

He clears his throat. "I figured I could take the couch," he says, confirming that he's committed to a kind, respectful, *friendly* relationship.

Which is good. Boundaries are good. Friendship is good. Anything else is drama both Felicity and I can do without.

"That's sweet of you." I face him with a smile. "But I'll take the couch. I don't mind. This is your place, and I'm sure you'll be more comfortable in your own bed."

"No, you take the bed." He backs a step away. "I get up at the butt crack of dawn to lift most mornings, anyway, so you'll get more use out of it. And that way you'll be closer to Felicity if she wakes up in the night."

I sigh. "Oh, she'll wake up. No question of if, only *when*. Which reminds me, I should get a couple of bottles ready." I cross to the bag of groceries on the counter, locating the formula and clean bottles I brought from my parents' house.



“She’s still not sleeping through the night?” Nash asks, his eyebrows lifting as he watches me from across the counter.

“No, she’s still not sleeping through the night,” I say, rolling my eyes. “And I’ve tried everything they say to try. I’ve cut her naps shorter during the day and fed her more solid foods. I’ve tried letting her cry for ten minutes before I go in to feed her and then rocking her for fifteen minutes before she gets the bottle, but nothing works. She just cries and cries until she gets the milk and then goes right back to sleep.”

He shakes his head, his lips curving into a smile. “You haven’t tried the Mee-maw method.”

“The Mee-maw method?” I prop my hand on my hip. “Don’t tell me you saddled your mother with that one. That’s the worst grandma name there is.”

He laughs. “Yeah, it’s pretty bad, but my sisters’ kids started calling her that when they were little and it stuck. Too late to change it now.”

“Poor thing,” I say with a cluck of my tongue.

“Oh, she doesn’t mind. As long as she gets to spend time with her grandbabies, she doesn’t care what they call her. Point is, her sleep training method works. It takes a few nights for it to stick, but once it does, babies start sleeping through the night and don’t stop unless they’re sick or some idiot wakes them up.”

“Really?” I arch a skeptical brow.

“I can show you how it works.” Nash takes a pull on his beer. “We could even start tonight if you want.”

I cross my arms, hope flickering to life inside me, even as the voice of doom insists that my daughter is the worst sleeper ever and will probably flunk out of Mee-maw Sleep Training School. Still, I can’t help being curious. It feels like eons have passed since I last slept through the night. The thought of tucking Felicity in and going to bed and not having to get out of it again until the sun rises is...dizzying.

It would be like my birthday and Christmas and half a dozen orgasms all rolled into one.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” I say. “What’s Mee-maw’s secret? How does she work this dark magic?”

Nash grins. “Nothing magical about it. Just, when the baby cries, you go to the door of their room and say ‘hush now, hush,’ real soft until they get quiet. Then you say, ‘I love you, Skeeter, I love you so much, but it’s night-night time,’ and then you go back to bed for fifteen minutes. If she’s still crying after that, you go in and do the same thing.”

I blink. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“But what if she’s hungry?”

“Babies Skeeter’s age—”

“Felicity, please,” I cut in. “If Skeeter sticks as a nickname, I may have to kill you.”

Nash grins, a dimple popping grin that makes my blood feel fizzy again. “Fine, babies *Felicity’s* age don’t need to be fed in the night. If she stops getting her bottle after bedtime, she’ll adjust her eating during the day to make up for it.”

I wrinkle my nose. This still sounds wrong. “And I’m not supposed to pick her up? Or rock her, or anything?”

“Raleigh would rub my nephew Jason’s back or tummy every once and awhile,” Nash says, before adding in a confidential whisper, “But Mee-maw frowns on that. Shows weakness.”

“Dude, I’m weak,” I huff, propping my elbows on the counter and resting my chin in my hands, feeling defeated before I’ve even started. “There’s no way I’ll be able to resist picking her up. She’s so pathetic. I swear, she cries like someone is pulling out her toenails one by one.”

Nash laughs, but I shake my head.

“No, seriously. It’s like she’s being tortured.” I shudder. “She’s so loud. She’ll keep you up all night if I don’t grab her within the first few snuffles.”

He shrugs. “So, she keeps me up for a night or two. I don’t care.”

I frown. “But you have work on Monday.”

“You’ve had to work since she was born and you’ve managed,” he says, the admiration in his voice surprising me. “I’m at least half as tough as you are.”

“I’d say you’re probably a little tougher.” I shoot him a pointed look. “Just a hair or two.”

“Doubt it.” He rests his forearms on the counter and leans in, bringing his face closer to mine. “Mamas are tough, but I’m sure I’m better rested than you are. And have more experience with babies. Why don’t you let me back you up tonight? I’ll get up with you and rub your back while you rub Felicity’s, help you resist the urge to pick her up.”

Nash rubbing my back. The thought is way more exciting than something so innocent should be.

I clear my throat. “That’s a very sweet offer, but—”

“No buts,” he cuts in. “It’s okay to ask for help, you know. Or to accept it when it’s freely offered.”

“I really don’t want to put you out.”

“Put me out. It’ll make me feel useful. Men like to feel useful.”

“Not all men,” I mutter, thinking of Liam’s pinched expression every time I asked him to watch the baby so I could take a quick shower. Even that was an inconvenience to my ex, let alone helping feed or change the baby or, God forbid, get up with her in the night.

“Well, I’m not all men,” Nash says in a soft drawl that makes it feel like someone is brushing a feather down the hollow of my spine. “Come on, let me help out. What do you have to lose?”

I peer up at him through my lashes, but he seems sincere. Sincere and...hopeful that I’ll let him be part of my support system. “All right,” I say, feeling like I’m making another dangerous bargain, but unable to help myself. I know it isn’t

smart to lean on Nash, but I'm in desperate need of a full night's sleep.

And I'm so curious to know what it feels like to have an ally by my side for a long night of parenting, to see if it's as nice as I've always thought it would be.

"We'll try it," I add, "but only on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You let me help you with something while we're here, too. I don't like to take without giving."

He nods. "All right. Assuming I need help, I'll ask for it."

"But you probably shouldn't let me cook," I say, holding up a finger. "Except things that contain sugar."

"Don't tell me you don't know how to cook."

"I know how to cook," I say, adding in a mumble, "Foods that contain sugar."

He grins. "But you work for a catering business."

"I'm the pastry chef and baker. I paste and bake and put icing on things in a pretty way, I don't cook-cook."

"No home-cooked meals," he says, shaking his head with a sigh of mock disappointment. "What kind of fake wife are you?"

"The fake kind," I tease in a voice that's far too flirty for my own good.

But Nash doesn't seem to mind.

"But I can help you put on ten to fifteen pounds of cupcake and homemade cherry pie weight," I add. "If you're interested."

"I'm very interested." His gaze locks with mine, making me keenly aware of the less than one foot of space that separates us, and how nice it feels to be teasing instead of fighting.

It's only our first night, and already it's clear how easy it would be to get used to this. To get used to *him*.

I'm going to have to start going to bed when Felicity does and limiting my Nash exposure as much as possible, or I'm going to be in big trouble.

"Worrying again?" he murmurs.

"How can you tell?"

"Your eyes get cloudy and sad. Which is a shame. You have beautiful eyes, the prettiest I've ever seen."

I glance down at the counter, my cheeks heating. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Nash says before draining his beer with one final swallow and pushing away from the counter. "We should get some sleep so we'll be ready when Felicity is. I'll grab my toothbrush from the master and use the half bath for now."

"Okay," I say, sad that our grown-up time is ending so soon, though I know it's for the best. "Should I come wake you when Felicity gets up?"

"I'll wake up on my own," he says as he circles around me and heads toward the bedroom. "I'm a light sleeper."

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, doubting I'll be sleeping much at all, not with half-dressed Nash just a room away, waiting to get up and rub my back when Felicity starts crying.

I wonder if he meant that back rubbing thing literally...

"Guess I'll find out in a few hours," I whisper as I flick off the kitchen light and go to get ready for my first night's sleep as Mrs. Nash Geary.

I'm exhausted by the stress of the day and a restless night last night, but still, I lie awake for hours in Nash's enormous bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering if this is the stupidest thing I've ever done.

Or maybe...the smartest.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*I*t's all fun and games until a screaming banshee keeps you awake for several days straight.

By Tuesday morning I have dark circles under my eyes, by Wednesday I'm yawning through my morning staff meeting, and by Thursday I'm second-guessing the Mee-maw method, sleep-training in general, and every parenting instinct earned through years of helping take care of babies.

Felicity is not a normal infant.

She's as determined as a beagle after table scraps, filled with an unholy midnight hunger, and every bit as stubborn as her mother. By day, she's sweet-tempered and charming, but by night she's a hellion with an eardrum-piercing wail that I'm betting has every dead person within a ten-mile radius rolling over in their graves.

Aria wasn't kidding about her daughter's cry. It is blood-curdling, and back-rubbing does nothing to calm her down. In fact, it only seems to enrage her even more.

For the past five nights, Aria and I have spent the better part of the witching hours wincing and cringing as we stand guard by Felicity's crib, taking turns rubbing the baby's back as she wails and moans and cusses us in a baby-language all her own.

Raleigh—who is both thrilled and outraged that I not only eloped, but also refuse to bring my new wife over to meet the family until we have her daughter sleeping through the night—

said to give it seven full nights before throwing in the towel, but I'm on the verge of sending up the white flag of surrender.

Listening to Felicity cry until her tiny face turns purple with rage night after night is hard on my head, and even harder on my heart.

As for Aria...

Well, the poor woman is a wreck. Her skin looks bruised beneath her eyes, she's lost at least five pounds she couldn't afford to lose, and her hands shake as she bustles around the kitchen making coffee in the mornings.

Thankfully, she hasn't had much baking to do for the catering company this week—just a few dozen batches of cookies and muffins for business brunches in town—but I know she's worried about Sunday, when she'll have a five-tier cake to cover in iced cherry blossoms for a bridal shower. If her hands aren't steady by then, her work is going to suffer.

If she was my wife in more than name, I'd check her into a hotel and insist she let me handle sleep training solo for a night. But she isn't my wife, and Skeeter isn't my daughter, and I feel helpless to do anything to protect Aria from the soul-mangling experience of trying to get her baby to sleep through the night.

I can't spare her.

I can't even comfort her with the freedom I'd like.

I can't draw her into my arms and hold her, can't promise her we'll get through this together, and I certainly can't carry her into our bedroom and give her some pleasure to make up for the pain.

I think about that final, off-limits option way more often than I should, considering she's "just a friend."

This entire experience has me frustrated—in more ways than one—and feeling lonelier than I have in a long time. Aria's so close, but she might as well be a thousand miles away. She isn't mine to help or comfort.



And yes, I knew that going into this arrangement, but I never imagined it would be this hard to keep my distance, emotionally or physically.

“Just need to get some damned sleep,” I mutter to myself, chalking my crazy thoughts up to sleep deprivation.

Which is apparently my new normal since Felicity shows no sign of adapting to the Mee-maw method.

By the time I collapse onto the couch in an exhausted heap on Thursday night, I’ve decided to abandon the fight. When Skeeter starts crying, I’ll sneak in and give her a bottle, rock her for an hour, tell her half a dozen stories, whatever it takes to get her back to sleep without another battle of wills. The baby has been napping away her weariness during the day, but Aria and I are going to be too beaten down to function if this goes on for much longer.

Despite my keen awareness of Aria sleeping down the hall and my conflicted feelings about my fake wife, I’m too tired to dwell on anything for too long tonight. Within seconds of my head hitting the pillow, unconsciousness sucks me under and I sleep.

Deeply.

Dreamlessly.

A sleep so hard that, when a gentle shake on my arm wakes me the next morning, for a moment I have no idea where I am.

It takes me a beat to remember why Aria is in my house, and another to guess why she’s beaming at me like we just won the lottery.

It’s the sun. The sun is shining in through the window behind her, transforming her hair into a halo of red fire. It’s morning, and I can’t recall hearing Felicity cry a single time during the night.

“She did it?” I ask, rubbing the sleep from my eyes with a fist.

“She did it!” Aria confirms in an excited whisper. “She slept through the night. *I* slept through the night. Oh my God, Nash, I slept through the night!” she finishes with a giddy squeal that makes me laugh. “I’m so excited I can’t stand it.”

She throws her arms around my neck, and I pull her into a celebratory bear hug, crushing her against my bare chest. She squeezes me back, her breath hot against my neck as she continues to laugh, a hysterical giggle that’s completely contagious.

Soon we’re both laughing so hard we slide off the couch, Aria first and me tumbling after, landing on top of her with a rush of breath.

“Shit, are you okay?” I ask, my elbows pushing into the carpet on either side of her face.

Damn, she’s pretty this morning, in just a red camisole top and a pair of red-and-white-striped sleep shorts.

Who knew casual PJs could be so sexy?

I’ve seen her in sleep clothes before, of course, but it was dark and we were both too miserable tending to a screaming baby for me to pay much attention to the fact that she doesn’t wear anything under these flimsy little shirts.

Now, I can’t stop paying attention. Attention to the way her small, perfectly shaped breasts tip up toward me, her nipples pulled into points that strain against the thin fabric.

The sight summons an old memory to the surface of my mind, a memory of Aria naked in the moonlight, of kissing up her ribs, letting my lips trail along the soft underside of her breasts before taking her nipple in my mouth. I can still remember the way she moaned and tangled her fingers in my hair, calling my name like a prayer.

My body responds to the memory without my permission, my erection pressing against the front of my pajama pants, making me grateful that we fell in such a way that my hips are resting on the floor, instead of between Aria’s thighs. If she could feel me now, there would be no denying the way she affects me.

“Nash?” she asks in a husky voice that draws my attention back to her mouth.

“Yeah?”

“I said I was fine,” she says, her eyes narrowing. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m good,” I lie, fighting to regain control before I stand up, a part of me wishing I didn’t have to move an inch.

I like having Aria under me, her lips only a few inches from mine. I like it way too much.

I want to kiss her so badly, need claws at my insides. I want to claim her mouth the way I did in the beer tent that first night. I want to feel her moving beneath me, her back arching and her breasts pressed against my chest as her legs wrap around my waist.

I want it so much that I’m leaning closer—morning breath and our bargain be damned—when Felicity calls out, “Mama, Mama!” from her room and Aria flinches like she’s been caught shoplifting.

“I should go get her,” she says. “I want to make a big deal about what a good girl she is for staying in her bed all night.”

“Right. Good idea.” I shift onto my side, setting Aria free, waiting until she’s disappeared into Felicity’s room before I make a beeline for my closet to grab running clothes and talk myself down from the ridiculous state I’m in.

I was a hot second away from making a fool of myself and endangering our bargain before either of us get what we need from the arrangement. The hearing with Aria’s ex is still weeks away and we’ve been too beat to venture out in public where we might run into *my* ex, or at least encounter gossips willing to carry the news of our happy coupledness to Rachael’s ears. I can’t risk screwing this up, for Felicity’s sake if nothing else.

Aria and I agreed to be friends in private. The lovey-dovey stuff is for the benefit of others, when we’re out in public.

*Then you'd better find an excuse to get her out in public.*  
*Stat.*

The inner voice is right.

And brilliant.

A night out to celebrate Skeeter's first successful brush with sleep training and a chance to get close to Aria—it sounds like a little piece of heaven. I promised to bring Aria and Felicity over to Raleigh's house tomorrow to meet part of the family—easing Aria into the Geary experience a few sisters at a time—but there's nothing on the agenda for tonight.

Wheels turning, I head out of the bedroom.

I find Aria and Felicity in the kitchen, Skeeter balanced on her mama's hip as Aria warms up the baby's bottle in the microwave.

As soon as Felicity sees me she lets out a happy squeal, grinning her gap-toothed grin.

"You did it, Skeeter!" I reach for the baby, who comes to me with outstretched arms. I lift her high in the air and spin her around the kitchen, making her giggle. "You did it! You slept in your bed all night! What a big girl you are!"

"She *is* a big girl," Aria says, laughter in her voice. "I told her Mama was so proud."

"Me, too." I blow on Felicity's belly, while she laughs and kicks her legs. "So proud that I think we should celebrate," I add, holding Skeeter against my chest with one arm as I turn back to Aria.

"Celebrate how?" she asks, smiling as she twists the top on the bottle and gives it a good shake.

In her PJs, with her hair wild and not a drop of makeup on her face, she looks so young, closer to the girl she was when we first met, back when I looked across the camp, locked eyes with the redhead watching me from the other registration line, and had to go introduce myself. That very second.

There was just something about her.

There still is.

It's a dangerous thought, but it doesn't stop me from saying, "Dinner out tonight." The baby reaches for her milk and I guide her back into Aria's arms, staying close as I add. "On me. At *David's* downtown."

Aria's eyebrows lift, and her smile widens. "*David's*, huh? That's fancy."

"Fancy ladies deserve fancy food."

"Did you hear that, Felicity?" she asks, kissing the baby's head as Skeeter tips her bottle back and begins to drink. "Want to get pretty tonight and go out for a fancy dinner with Nash?"

"You'll be the prettiest girls there, even in your PJs."

Aria glances up, pleasure and uncertainty mixing in her expression. "That's a sweet thing to say."

"It's not sweet, just the truth," I say, fighting the urge to draw Aria and Felicity both in for a hug. This feels like a warm, family moment, but it isn't, not really, and it will be bad for all of us in the long run if we let the line between real and pretend blur too much.

But that doesn't mean we can't celebrate together tonight, that I can't take them out to dinner and sit a little too close to Aria while we order. That I can't put an arm around her and steal a kiss while we're lingering over coffee and dessert.

Just the thought of it is enough to make me unreasonably happy.

It must be the good night's sleep. It's clearly gone to my head.

But I know it isn't the sleep, it's the redhead smiling at me over her baby's head as I back toward the door, needing to put some space between us before I say something I shouldn't. "I'm going for a run. Be back in a little bit."

"Are you going to lift after?" Aria asks, having lived here long enough to get a feel for my schedule.

“Yeah, but only for thirty minutes or so.” I glance at the clock above the stove. “I won’t have time for a full circuit today. I’ve got to grab a shower and hit the road by seven forty-five.”

“Then I’ll have an egg and cheese bagel ready for you then,” she says as she crosses to the kitchen table, settling Felicity in her highchair. “You want your eggs scrambled or fried?”

I pause in the archway leading into the living room. “I thought you said you couldn’t cook.”

Aria casts an amused look over her shoulder as she adjusts the baby’s tray. “I can cook a thing or two. Eggs included. So, fried or scrambled?”

“Scrambled,” I say, oddly touched.

It’s just breakfast, I remind myself, not a grand gesture. But when I breeze through the kitchen an hour later on my way out the door and Aria hands me a foil-wrapped sandwich and a to-go mug of coffee, it feels like more.

It feels like affection and caring and...home in a way it never did when Rachael lived here. Or even when I lived here alone.

I’m beginning to suspect I’m in trouble—deep trouble—but I’m too high on that first good night’s sleep in days to care.

“Have a good day,” I say as I start down the front porch steps. “I’ll call as soon as I get a reservation and let you two know what time to be ready.”

Aria stops in the doorway, crossing her arms as she leans against the frame, one bare foot propped on top of the other, looking so comfortable it’s hard to believe we’ve been living together for less than a week.

“Okay, but call my cell not the home phone,” she says. “Mom’s coming to get Felicity in about an hour. I’ve got to help Lark and Melody prep food for the wedding tomorrow and the bridal shower on Sunday, so I won’t be home.”

Home. Her casual use of the word makes me wonder if she feels it too, the unexpected rightness of our crazy arrangement.

Maybe I'll ask her.

Tonight.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



*I*t's the wine. It has to be.  
The wine is to blame.

I had a glass of Cabernet before dinner and then another with my signature *David's* steak, and I'm a lightweight when it comes to wine.

That has to be it. The wine is the reason I'm warm all over, the reason my heart beats faster every time Nash leans over to whisper in my ear, the reason my stomach flutters when his fingers brush back and forth across my bare shoulders in an idle caress as we study the dessert menu.

Too much wine is why my chest feels so tight I can barely breathe as I watch Nash carry Felicity into the bathroom to change her diaper before we settle on a dessert choice.

It has nothing to do with the fact that Nash is grinning at my daughter like Felicity is a treasure he never expected to find, or that my daughter is laughing at Nash like he's funnier than peekaboo, *Sesame Street*, and the deer head jack-in-the-box Grandpa bought her for Christmas all put together.

Seeing my baby in the arms of a man who clearly cares so much for her is enough to break my heart in the best way. Nash has been nothing but kind and patient and just plain wonderful to Felicity since the night we moved in.

And with me...

Well, he's been wonderful to me, too.

He's so supportive and grounded and real. And sexy, of course, because Nash has always been sexy, but also because of the way he looks at me. He makes me feel more beautiful than I have in years, and a foolish part of me can't help wishing this was more than a game of pretend.

"It's just the wine," I remind myself as Nash emerges from the bathroom with a freshly changed Felicity in his arms.

I do my best to ignore the electricity that leaps between us as our eyes meet across the crowded restaurant.

In gray dress pants and a black button-down that emphasizes his dark eyelashes, Nash looks even more amazing than usual. The man has lashes like a baby llama, long and sooty and curled the slightest bit at the tips. They're gorgeous. *He's* gorgeous. There isn't a woman in the restaurant who hasn't cast an appreciative glance Nash's way while her date's attention was elsewhere.

Not that Nash has noticed.

He seems only to have eyes for us. For Felicity and for me, the pretend family he treats with more care than my ex ever did.

"So how did it go?" I ask as he settles Felicity into her highchair and moves her toys back within reach. She's been amazingly good so far, gumming on pieces of our food and playing with her toys like she dines at fancy restaurants every night of the week.

"Dirty to clean in thirty seconds flat." Nash eases into his seat beside me, casually resting his arm on the back of my chair. "Haven't lost my touch," he adds with a grin before leaning over and pressing a kiss to my bare shoulder that makes me shiver.

Shiver, and my nipples tighten with awareness of the man so very, very close to me.

Silently, I thank God for padded bras and curse my incorrigible libido.

Nash is just too good at pretending. He's made tonight feel so real, like we're really in love, really a family. If I didn't

know better, I'd almost believe it myself.

“What are you thinking?” Nash drawls in a husky voice that makes things low in my belly twist.

“I was...” I blink, fighting to keep the way he affects me from showing on my face. “I was thinking that you have eyelashes like a baby llama.”

Nash smiles so hard his dimple pops.

Adorable dimple. I want to kiss it. A lot.

A whole lot.

“No, I meant about dessert,” he says, glancing at the small, rectangular menu in front of us. “Chocolate cake and ice cream, or the three sorbets?”

I clear my throat, but I can't seem to pull my eyes away from his face. “I don't care. I'm easy.”

“Is that right?” He arches a teasing brow.

“Ha, very funny,” I say, slapping him playfully on the chest.

Rock hard chest. I want to kiss it, too.

“I'm easy when it comes to choosing dessert, pervert,” I add, smiling when Nash chuckles beneath his breath before turning to the waiter who has appeared by the table.

“We'll have the flourless chocolate cake,” he says, “and an extra cup of vanilla ice cream for the baby.”

The waiter departs with a nod, and Nash turns back to me.

“So, I have lashes like a llama and arms like a boa constrictor,” he says. “I didn't realize I was so...animalistic.”

I arch a dubious brow. “You're the biggest man in this room by at least fifty or sixty pounds of pure muscle.” He leans closer and I reach for my ice water, hoping it will help cool me down. “That's pretty animalistic in my book.”

Nash watches me drink, his eyes lingering on my lips. “I look at it differently.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“I think of the muscle as a deterrent to other people who might be inclined to indulge *their* animalistic sides.”

I gaze deep into his eyes, those steady green eyes that haven't given off a single spark of anger or irritation in days, not even when enduring hours of Felicity screaming her lungs out in the middle of the night. Nash is a giant for sure, but he's gentle through and through.

“Is that why you started working out so much?” I ask. “Someone's animalistic side?”

“You could say that.” Nash glances over at Felicity, the edges of his mouth lifting as he watches her babble to the sugar packets while gnawing on her toy hammer. “My grandpa had a drinking problem, ever since my mom was a kid. I think that's why she married my dad so young; she wanted out of Grandpa's house.” His smile fades. “Gramps would come by our place when I was little, asking Mom for money. Sometimes, if he didn't get it, he'd get violent.”

“I'm so sorry,” I murmur.

He turns back to me, an intensity in his gaze that makes it impossible to look away. “I was five the first time I saw him hit her. Dad was at work and Gramps hit my mom so hard she fell down. Then, when my sister, Raleigh, tried to go to her, he picked her up and threw her across the yard.”

My breath rushes out. “Bastard.”

Nash inclines his head in agreement. “That's when I decided that someday I was going to be big and strong enough to stop all the bad guys.”

“But some bad guys have guns,” I remind him, the worry that's been plaguing me all week rising to the surface again. Around Tuesday morning, the fact that Nash deals with criminals every day for a living hit my brain full force, and I've been troubled by it ever since.

“They do,” he admits. “But you'd be surprised how much size can intimidate a man, even one with a gun in his hand. And being in shape makes me feel more...in control.” He

shrugs. “I don’t know. Lifting has become such a habit now. I probably couldn’t stop if I tried.”

“And the women of Bliss River would be very upset if you did,” I say, with a smile.

Nash laughs beneath his breath before he leans in to whisper near my ear, “There’s only one woman in Bliss River who has my attention right now.” A beat later his lips brush lightly across mine, sending currents of awareness flowing from my mouth to every inch of my body, until I’m glowing.

Burning...

By the time he pulls away, I can barely remember how to breathe, let alone whip up a witty comeback. Thankfully, the waiter arrives with dessert a second later, granting me a reprieve, and a chance to pull myself together.

*Pretend, it’s just pretend*, I silently remind my buzzing cells.

But as Nash and I laugh over the mess Felicity is making of her cup of ice cream and I fight him for the last bite of our shared dessert, I’m struck all over again by how real it feels.

Even when dinner ends and we step out onto the sidewalk outside the restaurant—strapping Felicity into her stroller to take a walk past the busy restaurants and shops of Main Street—I can feel the warm glow that surrounded us at dinner still hovering in the air, making it seem okay to twine my arm through Nash’s as he pushes the stroller down the street.

I’m enjoying the excuse to be close to him so much that I don’t realize why Nash is stopping dead in the middle of the sidewalk until a strangled sound gurgles from the air in front of us. I look up to see Rachael Wertz standing a few feet away, wearing a gaudy tube dress a shade of fuchsia any self-respecting redhead should have the sense to stay away from and a stunned expression.

Her wide mouth hangs open and her big blue eyes are the size of silver dollars, but it’s the way her gaze flicks between Nash and me with increasing speed that gives me my first clue that Rachael Wertz is *the* Rachael, Nash’s Rachael.

*Not anymore*, I think, anticipation rising inside of me.

Oh yeah, this revenge is going to be sweet.

Even sweeter than I expected.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The thick, balding man beside Rachael waves a hand our way. “Hey there, Geary, imagine running into you again so soon. Small towns gonna stay small, ammi right?” he says while Rachael tugs at his arm, clearly wanting to make a run for it.

But her man ignores her, and I smile wider.

No easy out for the spider this time.

Rachael Wertz has been on my shit list since elementary school, when she broke my crayons in half because she was angry that I had more colors in my box than she did. In junior high she spread a rumor that I was a lesbian that backfired when our teacher, who was the sweetest woman ever, and not about to tolerate people being bullied for their gender or sexual orientation, sent her to the principal’s office.

We ran in different circles in high school, but that didn’t stop Rachael from telling everyone who would listen that I was a slut who had a dozen STDs, all because the guy she liked asked me to the Homecoming dance first, I said no, and she was pissed off about being his second choice.

Rachael is a nasty piece of work.

Always has been and probably always will be. And I’m going to enjoy the next few moments very, *very* much.

“Rachael, how are you?” I coo as I twine my arm tighter through Nash’s. “I haven’t seen you in so long.” I shift my attention to Rachael’s fiancé, not waiting for her to make the



introductions before stretching out my left hand, making sure the ring on my finger catches the light from the shop windows. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Aria, Nash’s wife.”

Rachael lets out another strangled gurgle and I fight the urge to pump a fist in the air and yell, “In your face!” I’m not sixteen, for God’s sake, but my inner sixteen-year-old is probably enjoying this way too much.

“Lee Otter. Rachael and I are engaged,” Lee says, stepping in to give my hand a quick shake. His gaze flicks to Nash with raised brows. “Congrats on the wedding bells, man. You two are a ridiculously good-looking couple.”

Nash shoots him a hard grin. “Thanks. But this one’s got a lot more going for her than looks.” He wraps his arm around my waist. “I’m a lucky man.”

“And I’m a lucky girl,” I echo, tipping my head back to cast an adoring look his way.

The gleam in his eyes leaves no doubt he’s pleased with my performance.

And enjoying this as much as I am.

“And this is our daughter, Felicity,” he says, hugging me closer as he nods toward the stroller.

“Your daughter?” Rachael croaks.

Lee brings his hand to her back, but she stiffens and steps away, clearly not in the mood to take comfort in her fiancé’s touch.

“Nash is the best stepfather ever.” I rest my cheek on his chest, grateful that Felicity is asleep in her stroller and not listening in. She probably wouldn’t understand what “stepfather” means anyway, but I don’t want to confuse her.

“It’s easy with a kid like Skeeter,” Nash says, the affection in his voice so sincere it makes my chest ache. “Sweet and funny, just like her mama. A man can’t help but fall in love with either one of them.”

I glance up at him again, my heart skipping a beat. If I didn’t know better, I’d believe he means every word. I’d think

that he thinks I'm sweet and funny, and that maybe...

Just maybe...

For a moment, the world and everyone in it, disappears, and it's just Nash and me, looking deep into each other's eyes, wondering what's real and what's pretend, and if it even really matters when being together feels so right.

At least, that's what I'm wondering until Rachael says, "Divorced and remarried already, with a baby so young? That must have been so hard on you, Aria."

Leave it to Wertz to lift her leg and pee all over a beautiful moment.

I smile in the face of her false concern. "I'm back with Nash, where I belong. As long as that's true, nothing else seems all that hard."

"Aria and I met when she was fifteen," Nash says. "We were young, but even back then a part of me knew there'd never be another woman for me. She was the one." His arm tightens around my waist. "I'm just so glad we found our way back to each other before I settled for something less than the real thing."

Nash's drawl is as honeyed as always, but the barb comes through loud and clear. And there's no doubt Rachael feels the sting.

I swear I actually see steam drifting from her ears as she snatches Lee by the arm and snaps, "Well, you two certainly deserve each other. Don't you? I swear to God..."

Lee calls out, "Nice meeting you," over his shoulder as Rachael drags him away, but I don't wave goodbye.

I'm too busy squeezing Nash's arm, trying not to laugh.

I wait until we've turned Felicity's stroller around and started back toward the truck before I whisper, "Rachael Wertz? Seriously? What were you thinking, Nash? She's a snake."

"I didn't realize you two knew each other," he says, chuckling.

“Oh yeah, we know each other. I have no idea what I did to get on her bad side, but she’s had it in for me since elementary school and was willing to sink to whatever depths necessary to cause me pain and suffering.” I shudder. “What did you ever see in that witch?”

“She wasn’t a witch when we started dating,” he says. “I didn’t see that side of her until we’d been living together for a while. Then it took a few weeks to realize the ‘new’ Rachael was the *real* Rachael and the sweet stuff had been an act.”

“Ugh.” I stick my tongue out. Living with Rachael is the stuff nightmares are made of. “Thank God you got away from her before it was too late. You deserve so much better.”

Nash stops at the corner, waiting for the crosswalk sign to change. I feel his attention on my face and look up, meeting his warm gaze.

“Thank you,” he says in a voice that makes my insides turn to mush all over again. “For saying that. And for putting on such a good show back there.”

I shrug, feeling shy all of a sudden. “There’s no need to thank me. It’s true. You’re a good man. And I truly appreciate everything you’ve done to help me and Felicity. How kind and patient you’ve been and...everything else.”

Nash reaches down, brushing a stray hair from my face with a gentleness that’s almost enough to break a girl’s heart. “Why did we spend so much time hating each other?” he murmurs, making me wonder...

Making me hope...

I swallow hard, my heart waging silent war with my head.

My head insists I should blow him off with a joke or a lie, whatever it takes to protect myself, but my heart...

My heart is of a very different opinion.

Despite my painful history with Nash, despite my disastrous relationship with Liam, my heart wants to believe in love.

It wants to believe in Nash Geary.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*P*ulse racing and my stomach tying itself in knots I summon the courage to tell the truth. “I don’t know. I cared about you. A lot. I’d never felt like that about anyone before. But when we ran into each other in town it seemed like you couldn’t stand the sight of me. So, I figured it was best to pretend I felt the same way.”

Nash frowns as we start across the street, dividing his attention between maneuvering the stroller and my face. “I hadn’t heard from you since the night everything happened, Aria. I assumed you’d decided to see things from your dad’s point of view. And that hurt. A lot.”

“No, of course not,” I insist. “I told him you were wonderful. I told him everything that happened was completely consensual and that I cared about you so much.”

His forehead furrows as he asks in a softer voice, “So why didn’t you call?”

“I tried to call you half a dozen times after I got home. But the answering machine always picked up and I was too nervous to leave a message. I know I should have called or emailed or something while I was still at camp, but I...”

I bring a hand to the back of my neck, rubbing at the stress knot forming there. “I was a dumb kid. I kept putting it off, thinking it would be better if I waited until I was home so we could arrange to meet in person, but...I think I was just scared.”

“Of me?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then of what?” He stops in front of a brightly lit store window displaying rows and rows of bowls in a dozen different colors.

I stare at the rainbow as I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do,” he insists, gently, but firmly.

I sigh, letting my arm fall to my side as I meet his gaze. His confused gaze. Confused, but hopeful, too.

And why would he be hopeful?

Unless...

“I think I...” I trail off, the possibility that Nash might feel the same way I do making my throat so tight it’s hard to get the words out. I take a deep breath and try again. “I was afraid of feeling so much for someone. I had all these dreams of big adventures and faraway places and you...”

“What?” Nash prompts, cupping my face in his hand, the feel of his fingers sliding along my jaw making me shiver.

“It was only a few weeks, when we were kids,” I whisper, fear rising inside of me again. “You’ll think I’m crazy.”

“I already think you’re crazy,” he says. A smile flickers at the edges of his lips, but it vanishes almost immediately. “But maybe I’m crazy, too. You ever think about that?”

He brings his other hand to my face, holding me captive with a gentle intensity that takes my breath away. “Say it, Aria. Please.”

My tongue slips out to wet my lips. “You made me think about what it would be like to have a different kind of adventure. I was starting to feel...” I glance down at his chest to steady myself before meeting his searching gaze again. “I thought we might be something special. The real deal, and that you might be it, you know. The One.” I finish with a shaky laugh, fighting the urge to make a joke.

Yes, it’s scary to put all that out in the open, and I’ve made myself an easy target if Nash is in the mood to take a shot

while my guard is down. But I can't keep running away from the things I feel when I'm with him. Besides, the words are already out. I can't take them back, and I don't want to.

I want a second chance, a *real* second chance.

With Nash.

He's silent for what feels like forever, his attention shifting from my eyes to my lips and back again, making my pulse race with anxiety until finally he says, "Aria?"

That's it. Just my name.

"Yes?" I ask.

"I have a crazy idea."

The huskiness in his voice sends another shiver racing across my skin. "What kind of crazy?" I whisper, my breath coming in shallow gulps as Nash's mouth moves closer to mine.

If I didn't know better, I'd think he was about to—

Oh my god, he *is*. He's going to kiss me. For real. Our first honest kiss since we were kids.

"The kind of crazy where we give this a real shot," he says, so close that his chocolate-scented breath warms my lips, making them tingle.

"You and me?" I ask, refusing to acknowledge the giddy surge of excitement building inside of me until I'm certain.

"You and me. And Skeeter, too. I meant what I said. I love her, and...I could love you, too," he says, his thumb caressing my cheek. "If you'll let me."

My breath rushes out fast, so fast it makes the world spin.

"Too much?" he asks, watching me with careful eyes.

I shake my head. "No. Not too much. Not even a little bit and..."

"And?" he says, so close now that less than an inch of space remains between our lips.

“I could love you, too,” I whisper as he closes the distance between us.

My eyes slide shut with a sigh as his lips slant across mine. I wrap my arms around his neck and melt into him, kissing him with all the hope blooming in my heart, moaning in approval as he pulls me into his arms, crushing me against his chest as his tongue slips between my lips.

The kiss is a far cry from the teasing kisses at dinner, a far cry even from the kiss at the fair. This kiss is pure need, pure hunger. It’s all of me, and all of him, with no walls between us and nothing left to hide.

This kiss...is on fire.

Desire rushes through me like flames jumping from one cell to another and before I know it I’m clawing at the thick muscles of his ass through his pants, pulling him closer to where I ache for him, to where I—

A high-pitched squeal of laughter pierces the air, and Nash and I flinch apart with twin sounds of surprise.

I turn to see Felicity awake in her stroller, laughing her head off, kicking her legs and pumping her fists as she giggles up at us.

“Apparently she thinks kissing is pretty funny.” Laughing, Nash bends to pick up the stuffed skunk Felicity’s knocked out of the stroller, pressing it back into her eager arms before he stands.

I meet his gaze, my heart skipping a beat when I see the happiness and hope I’m feeling reflected in his eyes.

“Do you think we’ve scarred her for life?” I ask, fighting the urge to pull his lips back to mine.

We’ve already made a spectacle of ourselves. Thank goodness Felicity seems to be the only one who caught us in the act.

“Nah,” he says with a crooked grin. “But I’m sure we’ll get around to it. Even good parents screw up every once and a while. No matter how hard they try not to.”



My breath catches and a sliver of fear cuts through the haze of desire, clearing my head.

Parents.

Nash and I raising Felicity together.

Am I ready to think about that?

Giving a romantic relationship a chance is one thing, thinking about making a *forever family* together is something else entirely.

I was so determined to have forever with Liam and look how that turned out. All it did was lead to years of fighting and crying and suffering over something that should have been dead and buried a long time ago. I can't let myself lose my head that way again, not over anyone, even a guy like Nash.

Yes, he's been amazing to both Felicity and me so far, but he has a bad side, too. Hell, his bad side was the only side I saw for years after the camp disaster. And sure, we were just kids, but can I really—

“Don't go down the rabbit hole,” he says, cutting into my thoughts as he takes my hand and gives my fingers a squeeze. “And don't be afraid. We'll just take each day as it comes.”

I frown up at him. “How did you know what I was thinking?”

“I'm getting pretty good at reading you, Red,” Nash murmurs. “And so we're clear, I meant what I said back there. I'm so glad you came back into my life before I settled for something less than the real thing.” He pauses, searching my face. “I've never felt this kind of connection with anyone else.”

“Me, either,” I murmur.

“So why not go for it?” he asks, excitement flickering in his eyes. “We're already married. Why not see if we can make this marriage something we're both excited to wake up to every morning?”

I exhale. “Well, a few reasons off the top of my head. One, we barely know each other anymore. Two—”

“Not true. You know me. And I know you. Even better, I know exactly what you want in a man.”

Brows lifting, I cross my arms over my chest. “Oh yeah? Enlighten me, Geary.”

“You want a man who will love Felicity like she’s his own. I already do,” he says, banishing the comeback on the tip of my tongue. He is so good with her. A dream come true, really. “You want a man who will respect you and keep his promises, and that’s the only kind of man I ever want to be.” He steps closer, making my nerve endings hum all over again. “And you want someone who will love you so much it’s almost sinful, a man who will worship you, make you feel like a goddess every damned day.”

I swallow. “I don’t want to be worshiped,” I protest, though maybe a part of me does. The part that still dreams of romance and happily ever after. The part that wants to love my man the same way, with every piece of my mind, body, and soul.

“Yes, you do,” Nash says without missing a beat. “Because that’s the way a man loves a woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with. Anything less than worship isn’t going to last fifty years and through thousands of dirty diapers.”

“There won’t be thousands,” I say, tackling the least terrifying thing he just said. “I think I can have Felicity potty-trained before she’s two.”

Nash nods. “That’s fine. But what if we decide to have eight or ten more?”

My eyes fly open so wide the sockets immediately start to ache and Nash laughs so hard he sets Felicity to giggling again, too.

“Not funny,” I say, slapping his chest with the back of one hand.

“I was just kidding,” he says, his teeth still flashing. “Been there, grew up in that nuthouse. That much madness isn’t for me. Two or three kids would be plenty.”

“Good to know,” I say, my brow furrowing. “But the number wasn’t the only thing freaking me out, Nash.”

His smile fades a watt or two. “Yeah? What else is freaking you out, Red?”

“I don’t know. All of it?” I flop my arms at my sides. “None of it? The fact that it doesn’t sound as crazy as it should. I mean, it really *is* crazy. We’ve barely been back together a week and we haven’t *really* been together, we’ve been pretending to—” I break off with a sigh as Felicity lets out a squawk of annoyance and tosses her skunk at my legs.

“I agree, Skeeter,” Nash says. “Mama’s thinking too hard.”

“Maybe I am,” I fetch the toy and hand it back to Felicity before standing and rubbing two fingers into the knot forming at my temple. “I’m not sure my brain is up to this much excitement after two glasses of wine.”

“Then let’s head home.” Nash reaches for the stroller handles “We’ll get you a glass of water, put Felicity to bed, and let things sit for a while.”

“Sleep on it?” I ask, following him toward the truck, as he pushes Felicity in front of him.

“Maybe. Though I can think of a couple things that might be more fun than sleeping.” The look he shoots me over his shoulder would be enough to make my panties damp if they weren’t already. “What about you?”

“Maybe one or two things,” I murmur in a dangerous voice.

A part of me whispers that we shouldn’t rush into anything too fast, but the part that’s been dying for Nash Geary to touch me again since the moment he stopped twelve years ago insists we’ve waited long enough. I’m dying to be alone with him. Nothing but him, me, and a door we can lock to make sure we’re not disturbed until we’ve done all the things I’ve been dreaming about since the night he swept back into my life.

Nash stops by the truck and turns to fix me with his full attention, making my heart race as he presses a kiss to my

forehead before whispering against my skin, “I’ve been dying to touch you, Aria. I want to kiss you everywhere.”

“Everywhere?” I echo, blood going fizzy in my veins.

“Everywhere. I want to taste every inch of you. Think that can be arranged?”

“Yes,” I whisper, fighting a wave of desire so intense it makes my head spin. “I think that can be arranged.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Until tonight, I've enjoyed being a part of Felicity's bedtime rituals: listening to the happy sounds from the bathroom as Aria gives the baby her bath, inhaling the scent of lavender as she crawls into the living room in a fresh sleeper, the warm, heavy feel of a little one in my lap as Felicity snuggles close while Aria reads her picture books on the couch beside us.

It reminds me of bedtimes around my house when I was a kid, except a thousand times less chaotic.

One baby, instead of three or four under the age of five, means more time to savor each smile, to relish the sweet moments, to appreciate the milestones that can fly by way too fast when you don't have the luxury of paying close attention.

Felicity is already so different from the baby I met at the BBQ weeks ago. She'll be walking before we know it and speaking her mind with a bigger vocabulary than "mama," "no," and "deer," not long after. She's a sweet, funny kid, the kind it's impossible not to lose your heart to.

But tonight, she's also a child I can't wait to tuck into her crib.

*I need to be alone with her mama.*

I swear bath time lasts a hundred years and the pre-bed stories drag on for a full-blown eternity. An eternity in which it's impossible to concentrate on anything but Aria sitting so close that her thigh presses against mine, so close I can count

the freckles on her arms, and imagine all the new freckles I'll discover once I get her out of that sexy green dress.

I can't wait to have her all to myself, to show her there's nothing to be afraid of when it comes to the two of us. We're going to be a perfect fit. She was made for me and I was made for her. I knew it the first time I laid eyes on her. From day one, being happy with Aria was easy. It's fighting her, resenting her, clinging to old misunderstandings that's been hard.

I don't want to cling to those things anymore.

The only thing I want to hold on to is her, for as long as she'll let me.

This is what falling in love is supposed to feel like. An irresistible force, a tidal wave that pulls you under, spins you around, and turns your entire world upside down in the best way. I don't care that there are toys all over my living room floor and a highchair blocking the sliding glass door out to the deck. I don't care that I've gone without sleep for most of the nights since Aria moved in or that I know we'll have more sleepless nights ahead as we deal with baby teeth, little kid sniffles, nightmares, and all the things that wake parents in the night.

I'm ready for it. All of it.

I can't wait.

As long as I get to do all those things with her.

"She's asleep," Aria whispers as she steps out of the baby's room into the hallway, closing the door softly behind her.

I lean back against the wall, studying her troubled face. "Having second thoughts?"

She shakes her head. "No." She bites her lip, laughing beneath her breath as her gaze falls to the carpet. "Just a little nervous. It's been a while for me."

"Been a while for me, too."

She rolls her eyes. "Um, no I mean it's *really* been a while, Nash. Like, in some cultures, I'm considered a virgin again by

now.”

I grin. “Are there cultures like that?”

“I don’t know,” she says with a shrug. “Probably not, but there should be. After going so long without anyone seeing you naked it starts to feel kind of scary again, you know?” She exhales with a wave of her hand. “Never mind. Don’t answer that. You’re too pretty to worry about what you look like naked, and I’m sure you’ve never gone over a year without sex.”

My brows shoot up.

*Over a year.*

That means she hasn’t slept with anyone since Felicity was born, apparently not even her ex.

No wonder she’s nervous. I’ve heard my sisters talk about their post-baby body woes enough to know it’s something that bothers a lot of women. But my sisters have husbands who love them, who insist they’re still beautiful, stretch marks and all.

I can imagine how hard it must have been for Aria, to have her marriage fall apart while she was recovering from childbirth and no one there to remind her that she’s still every bit as beautiful as she was before she had a baby.

Tonight, I vow to make her feel that way, to make her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. It should be easy enough. In my eyes, she always has been.

I take her hand. “There’s no reason to be nervous. I’ve got you.”

Her features soften. “Yeah, you do. Hopefully you won’t come to regret that a few months down the line.”

“Why would I regret it?”

She lifts a shoulder and lets it fall, her throat working as she says, “My ex... cheated. A lot. I started to wonder if maybe there was something wrong with me. In the bedroom. Or out of the bedroom. I don’t know. Maybe both.”



“There is nothing wrong with you,” I say, the pain in her eyes hitting me like a karate chop to the throat.

My jaw clenches.

I already hated her ex for the way he’s treated Felicity, but now...

“You said I deserved better than Rachael,” I say. “Well, you sure as hell deserved better than that douchebag. There’s nothing wrong with you. He’s just a selfish, shitty excuse for a husband and a father.”

“That’s sweet of you to say,” she whispers, but I hear the doubt lingering beneath the words.

I cup her face in my hands, leaning down until my eyes are level with hers. “Aria March, you are beautiful, inside and out. You are a wonderful mother and a good friend and I’ve had more fun sleep training a fussy baby with you than I have on any date in the past five years.”

Her lips twitch. “You must have been on a lot of bad dates.”

“So many,” I tease, loving the sound of her soft laughter. “And in addition to your other excellent qualities, you’re an amazing kisser. You have nothing to worry about in the bedroom.”

Her tongue slips out to dampen her lips. “You can’t know that for sure. I could be super bad at all the other stuff.”

“I doubt it, but if you are...” I drop my hands to her waist, drawing her against me. “Then I’ll be your sex tutor.”

Her eyes flash. “Yeah? You’d do that for me?”

“I would,” I say, dipping my head closer to hers.

She lifts her chin. “Nash?”

“Yes?” I ask, brushing my lips against hers.

“I’m pretty sure I don’t need a sex tutor.”

“I’m pretty sure you don’t either.” I kiss her again, soft and light, relishing the feel of her breath warm on my lips.

“I’m also pretty sure I’m going to die if we’re not naked and in your bed in five minutes.”

“Less than two,” I promise, sweeping her into my arms and sprinting for the bedroom so fast it makes her laugh.

“You’re crazy,” she says as I set her down just inside the door, locking it tight behind us before pulling her against me.

“Crazy for you,” I say, kissing her hard.

She moans and her lips part, her tongue mating hungrily with mine as we back toward the bed. “Fewer clothes,” she murmurs against my mouth, tugging my button-down from the waist of my jeans.

“Yes ma’am.” I make quick work of my shirt and jeans before helping her pull her dress over her head, revealing a strapless black bra and tiny bikini panties that make me want to fall to my knees in gratitude for lingerie and this woman and how insanely sexy she looks right now.

So, I do, kneeling and taking her hips in my hands as I lean in, kissing a trail across the soft skin just above her panties.

She threads her fingers into my hair. “How could I have forgotten this?”

“Forgotten what?” I run a finger beneath the elastic, already dying to taste her, to get my mouth between her legs and make her lose control on my tongue.

“That your mouth is magic,” she whispers.

“I haven’t even started with the magic yet, Red.” Cupping her bottom in my hands I lift her onto the bed and lengthen myself on top of her, struck instantly by how right it feels to have Aria under me. And then she spreads her legs, wrapping them around my waist and pulling me tight against her. I feel the heat of her against my aching cock, making it hard to think of anything but getting inside her.

But first I have a promise to keep.

I reach behind her, popping the clasp on her strapless bra.

Her breath rushes out against my lips. “Pretty handy with those fingers.”

“I’m even handier with my tongue,” I promise, kissing her again, hard and deep, as I cup her breast in my hand, brushing my thumb back and forth across her nipple until her hips rock against my cock.

“I want you so much,” she says, rubbing my erection through my boxer briefs, making the blood rush faster in my ears. “I’m on the pill. We don’t need a condom.”

“Good to know.” I kiss my way down her throat, relishing the soft, needy sounds she makes as I continue to play with her nipples, rolling first one and then the other between my fingers and thumb. “I’ll keep that in mind. When we’re ready.”

“I’m ready. So ready.”

“Not even close. There’s still so much of you left to kiss.” I pause above her breast, letting my breath warm her nipple before I drag my tongue across the tight tip, making her gasp as I lick and suckle and bite until she squirms beneath me, her breath coming faster.

“Please,” she says, her fingernails digging into my shoulders. “Nash please, I need you inside me.”

“I’m going to give you everything you need, baby, I promise.” Fingers curling over the top of her panties, I drag them down her legs and toss them to the floor. “Spread your legs,” I say, shifting lower. “I haven’t kissed you everywhere yet.”

Her thighs tremble beneath my hands. “You don’t have to, I—”

“I want to, so much,” I say, inhaling the sweet, salty scent of her as I urge her legs wider, until every slick inch of her is bare to me.

She’s beautiful here, too, so fucking gorgeous I can’t wait to explore her, to taste her, to show her how her body drives me out of my damned mind with wanting her

Tilting my head, I kiss her pussy the way I kissed her lips, deep and hungry, my tongue swirling against her clit until she arches into my mouth, grinding against my face.

“Oh, God, Nash, yes. Oh my God...”

“Yes, baby,” I moan as she comes, sending more salty heat rushing over my tongue, destroying the last of my control.

I surge over her and her arms wrap tight around me, pulling me close as I guide my cock between her legs and push inside. She cries out, a primal sound of satisfaction I echo as I glide all the way in, until every inch of me is gripped in her tight, wet heat.

“God, Aria,” I breathe. “You feel so good. So perfect.”

And she does.

Being naked with a woman has never felt so natural. So right.

“Don’t stop,” she begs, clinging to my shoulders. “Please, Nash, don’t stop.”

“Never,” I promise as I shift my hips, pulling back before driving slowly back inside, establishing a slow, sensual rhythm that she matches as she lifts to meet me at the end of each thrust.

She feels like heaven.

I never want to leave her body, never want to stop, never want to look away from the eyes holding mine, showing me everything she’s feeling, leaving no doubt that she’s loving this every bit as much as I am.

I had no idea sex could be like this, so close and connected, but hot as hell at the same time. I’ve always had one or the other, never both, and I can’t help wishing we’d had better luck that night when we were kids, and that I’d only know this.

Only known her.

“Oh yes, yes,” Aria cries out, her body clenching tight around me, sending me tumbling over the edge a second later.

I groan as I thrust inside her one last time, losing myself in her sweetness, my entire being vibrating with a satisfaction so profound that, for several minutes after, I lie breathless on top of her, waiting for my body and soul to come back together again.

When they do, I start to pull away, to reach for my discarded tee-shirt to clean us up, but Aria wraps her legs around me, holding me prisoner.

“Not yet.” She traces lazy patterns on my back with her warm fingertips. “I don’t want you to leave yet.”

I relax, but stay propped up on my arms, smiling down at her. “Your cheeks are bright red.”

She giggles. “Hazard of being a redhead. Crying and coming, both of them make me pink all over.”

“I like you pink all over,” I say. “And I love being inside you.”

She bites her lip “Me, too. That was...all the good things.” She wraps her arms around me, lifting her head to press a kiss to my chest.

“It was,” I agree, kissing her neck. “If we’re that good at it our first time, think how amazing we’ll be in a year or two.”

She sighs. “We’ll be ready to join the Sex Olympics.”

“The multi-orgasmic division,” I murmur, nipping at the place where her neck meets her shoulder.

“Yes, please,” she says with a giggle. “Though honestly I get excited if I get one. I’ve never gotten there that fast before. Especially with someone new.”

I pull back to meet her eyes. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she says, adding in a softer voice. “That was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

“Me, too,” I confess. “I had no idea it could be like that. So intense, but...easy at the same time.”

“Natural,” she says, echoing my thoughts from earlier. “Like we were born to make each other feel good.”

“Agreed. It was exactly like that.”

She brushes my hair from my forehead. “So, we should probably do our best not to fuck this up, huh? At least not until we’ve had sex a few thousand more times?”

“At least. I’m telling you, staying married for real just makes sense logistically.” I shoot for a joking tone, but I’m holding my breath as I wait for her response.

I want this—want *her*—for real.

“I think you’re right,” she says, making my chest ache with relief.

“So, we’re going to give it a shot?”

She nods. “What’s the worst thing that can happen? We get divorced, and we were planning to do that anyway, so...”

I frown. “That’s a pessimistic way of looking at our future, March.”

“I just like to keep my feet on the ground, Geary.”

“I can think of way better places for your feet.”

She arches a brow. “Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah. Like...behind my head for example.” I reach down, cupping the back of her thigh, urging her leg higher.

Her eyes widen. “I don’t know if I’m this flexible.”

“Oh, I think you are,” I say, bringing her ankle to rest on my shoulder, my cock thickening inside her as I reach for her other thigh. “I believe in you, Aria March. But I need you to believe in me, too.”

“I believe in you,” she whispers, wiggling her hips as I lift her other leg, making my body even happier to see her, to feel her, to know she’s mine for the foreseeable future. “This position is way more comfortable than it looks in sexy videos.”

I arch a brow. “You like sexy videos?”

“I watch them every once and a while, but I like the real thing,” she says, her lashes fluttering as I pull out and glide

slowly back inside her, giving her time to adjust to the angle.  
“And I *love* this. So much.”

“Me, too,” I echo. “I don’t ever want to stop.”

“Then don’t,” she says. “Don’t ever stop.”

I try my best, I really do, but eventually I lose control and spiral out all over again. But after a shower and a cup of ice water, I’m ready for round three and so is she.

We make up for lost time deep into the night until we finally pass out sometime around one in the morning, sated, spent, and perfectly tangled in each other’s arms.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



*One Week Later*

“**S**eriously. I hate both of you!” Melody slaps a hand onto the prep table with an outraged huff.

I straighten, blinking in surprise as I shift my gaze from the nearly-finished cake in front of me to my sister’s outraged face. “What? Why? What did we do?”

“You haven’t stopped smiling for *days*,” Melody says. “You’ve even been humming. You *never* hum. And Lark is so blissed out she’s practically floating through the kitchen. It’s disgusting.” Melody flops back down on her stool and grumpily resumes folding homemade ravioli for the baked pasta dish the bride selected as her vegetarian option.

So much smarter than feeding the poor vegetarians a salad and thinking that will be enough to keep them going through the rest of the reception.

Vegetarians need protein, too.

“You’re only twenty-two, you’ll meet someone special soon,” Lark says, laughing as she slides a pan of chicken breasts into the oven. “Cheer up. Green isn’t your color, Mels.”

“I’m not jealous,” Melody protests. “Both of you are so in love it’s just a little...sickening to be around for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a stretch, that’s all.”

I set my icing tube down by the cake and circle around the table to give Melody's shoulders a squeeze. "Hey, I know how you feel. I was right where you are just a few weeks ago. I know it can be hard to be around lovesick people when you're feeling lonely. I promise I'll try to be less sickening."

Melody sighs. "No. Don't. Be grossly happy. You deserve it." She squeezes my hand. "I guess the meeting with your lawyer went well? Sorry I forgot to ask first thing."

"No worries," I say. "And yeah, it did go well. She's got a lot of experience and thinks our case is solid. We may still end up going to court if Liam won't settle after the hearing, but Nash and I are cautiously optimistic. What about you?" I ask, not wanting to dwell on things I can't control. Like my ex and his unpredictable behavior. "Why so glum? I thought you had a hot date last night."

Melody heaves another tragic sigh. "Yeah, right. Hot as day old oatmeal. And about as much fun to spend time with."

"I told you to stop letting Nana set you up with boys from church." I drag a stool next to Melody's and pitch in with the ravioli, folding the pasta around the cheese filling before crimping the edges. "Boys from church are evil."

"Boys from church are not evil," Lark protests as she drifts from one end of the kitchen to the next, blissfully attending to the items on her list.

Melody's right, Lark is floating these days. I'm so happy to see *her* so happy. After years of dating her fair share of day-old oatmeal guys, she deserves every second of her happily-ever-after.

"No, they *are* evil," Melody says. "At least this one was. He made me split the check down the middle, even though I only had an entrée, and he had an entrée, an appetizer, a salad, and *three* glasses of wine. Then he tried to sneak a hand up my dress before we'd even kissed." She shudders. "So gross and the opposite of romantic."

"You should let me set you up with the new nurse at Mason's practice," Lark says. "He's only a year older than you

and totally adorable.”

“But what if it doesn’t work out?” Melody nibbles her lip. “Wouldn’t that be weird for him at work?”

Lark pauses with a dollop of sour cream halfway to the bowl in front of her, cocking her head thoughtfully to one side. “Well...maybe. And he has red hair, and you have that thing about redheads.”

“What?!” I twist to shoot an outraged look Melody’s way. “And what exactly do you have against redheads, may I ask?”

Melody’s hands lift into the air in surrender. “Not you! Boy redheads.”

“What’s wrong with boy redheads?”

“I just don’t think they’re attractive in *that* way,” she says with a shrug.

“What if my next child is a boy with red hair?” I demand, not about to let her off the hook that easily. “Are you saying he deserves to be shunned by women because of a little ginger in his bloodline?”

Melody’s jaw drops, while Lark stops stirring pea salad and turns wide eyes my way.

“What?” I ask, not understanding the strained silence. “I was just teasing. Mostly...”

“No, you weren’t,” Melody says, a smile spreading slowly across her face. “You’re already thinking about more babies! With Nash! Oh my gosh, you’ll have the cutest babies!”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t stop grinning and a warm, gooey, blissed-out feeling practically oozes from my pores.

The past seven days have been the best week of my entire life, bar none, including the time I spent in Paris. Nash and I are falling so hard and fast it would be terrifying if it didn’t feel so wonderfully, perfectly right. He’s the lover of my sexiest dreams, a friend I can be myself with, and the kind of father I’ve always wanted for Felicity.

He's so great with her it makes me tear up sometimes. Normally, I'd hate being caught off guard by rogue emotions, but it doesn't bother me now. It feels okay to tear up with Nash, especially when they're tears of gratitude.

"So, when is this happening?" Melody demands. "You're not pregnant *now*, are you?"

"God, no. Relax," I say with a laugh. "I just got Felicity sleeping through the night. I need rest, woman. We're not even thinking about babies..." I shrug, but I can't resist adding. "Not until next summer anyway."

"Next summer!" Lark claps her hands. "That's so perfect! Mason and I are going to start trying then, too! We could have cousins the same age!"

I make calming motions with both hands, encouraging them to settle the heck down. "But nothing's a go, yet. Nash and I are going to wait and see where we are in a year and make the decision then."

I return to folding ravioli, hoping that will be the end of the conversation.

I probably shouldn't have mentioned something so private in front of Lark and Melody. Yes, Nash and I talked about having another child, but we were naked in bed at the time—a state of being that has occurred an impressive number of times over the past few days, considering we both have full-time jobs and there's a baby in the house.

You can't always trust that naked conversations are reasonable conversations. I should have kept the baby dreams to myself a little longer, but the words just slipped out.

I'm so happy I forget that I have anything to hide.

But, of course, I do.

Nash and I are still hiding the initial reasons for our sudden marriage from our families and everyone else.

Living a lie can make things awkward sometimes. Like when we went to his sister's house for dinner last Saturday. I

could see how much Nash hated deceiving Raleigh and Alexandria.

We ended up having a great time—his sisters are warm, welcoming people who tell hysterical stories about their giant family—but when the night was over and we were back home, we both felt weird about it. We agreed we don't want to keep this secret forever. So we talked it over and decided to tell our families the truth on our first anniversary. We figured that will be enough time to prove our marriage is going to stick, and by then there's a chance we'll have other, more exciting news to share that will distract everyone from our teeny tiny lie.

If all goes well, we're hoping to start trying for a baby in May.

A baby. With Nash.

The thought turns me on *way* more than it probably should. But creativity is sexy. All kinds of creativity—painting and baking and making love and making babies and building a family with your favorite person in the world.

“You're humming again,” Melody mutters with a mock glare my way.

“Sorry.” I wince, but I'm still grinning.

“It's all right.” She stands, wiping her hands on her apron. “I'm going to step outside and get some fresh air, see if the waiters are here yet. Hum until your heart's content.”

“Take your phone,” Lark calls as Melody starts for the door. “Get a few shots of the venue for the website. It's pretty out there today.”

“Got it.” Melody snags her phone from the edge of the prep table. “See you two lovebirds in a bit.”

I wait until the heavy door closes behind her before I ask Lark, “You think she's okay? She's usually so optimistic. Almost obnoxiously so.”

“She's fine,” Lark says. “She's just going through a hard time right now. I don't imagine it's easy for her. A few months

ago, she had a steady boyfriend and you and I were the ones who were in the relationship dumps.”

I sigh “True. Kind of blows your mind, doesn’t it? How quickly things can change?”

“Totally,” Lark agrees, putting the first tray of baked ravioli in the oven, “and they’ll change for Melody, too. I’m sure of it. Things change quickly in your early twenties.” She turns, snapping her fingers. “Which reminds me, did Nash give you his brother’s phone number?”

I frown. “No, was he supposed to?”

“No, I just thought you might have it. I forgot to get it on the paperwork.” She waves a hand. “But it’s no big deal. I’ll get it from him when he clocks in today.”

After some gentle pestering on my part, Lark graciously agreed to hire Nash’s younger brother, Nick, for some part-time work. The black sheep of the Geary family, Nick recently moved back to Bliss River from Atlanta, after being kicked out of his apartment for infractions I’m still not entirely clear on. After a long day at work, Nash hadn’t seemed to want to talk about it, and I’m easily distracted when he would rather kiss than talk.

I did manage to find out that Nick has food service experience, however, and that he’s looking for part-time work until he can find a tattoo parlor willing to rent him a chair.

His parents are horrified by his choice of careers and most of his life choices in general. As the black sheep of *my* family, I already feel for the guy, even though we haven’t met yet. And I’m excited for a chance to help Nash. His happiness is swiftly becoming my happiness, and the man himself so much a part of me that I can’t wait to get home to him every day.

He’s my home, his arms, his eyes, his voice telling me how much he’s missed me.

I’ve never felt this way before, not even in the throes of my obsession with Liam. That’s what it was with my ex. Obsession, not love. I can see that now.

Love isn't painful or misery-inducing. Love doesn't make you feel desperate or unworthy. Love lifts you up and makes you freer, happier, and better than you were before. With Nash, I feel like the best version of myself. The way he loves me just makes my soul shine a little brighter.

I sigh again. "Isn't love the best thing ever?"

Lark laughs and tosses a wilted piece of lettuce at my face that hits me on the shoulder. "Now you're even grossing *me* out."

"I am not! You're way grosser than I am!" I toss the leaf back at her and follow it with a strawberry, laughing as it sails down the front of her shirt. "Ha! Direct hit! Serves you right. You and Mason are the grossest couple I know. Googly eyes for days."

"Oh yeah? Well at least I don't hump his leg when I kiss him goodbye," she says, throwing more lettuce with one hand while she fishes the strawberry from her bra with the other.

"I do not!" I dodge the lettuce and toss another strawberry, laughing as it follows the first down her shirt. "I am unstoppable!"

"Oh, I'm going to stop you, just wait," she says, jogging around the table.

I vault off my stool to avoid a crushed berry to the face and Lark and I spend the next few minutes in a deep food fight, until we're both laughing too hard to aim and agree to call a truce before we make an unholy mess.

Because love does that, too.

It makes you laugh and smile and spread rays of happiness around you like sunshine. "People should always be in love," I say, accepting the cup of coffee Lark's made, topped off with extra cream, just the way I like it.

"Agreed," she says with a sigh. "Agreed."

## CHAPTER TWENTY



## MELODY

I'm about to head back into the kitchen when I hear Lark and Aria giggling inside and decide I just can't take it anymore.

I spin on my heel and flee my sisters, shedding my apron as I go and tossing it on an empty serving cart by the door. I'll get it on my way back inside. Right now, I need to feel the wind blowing through my chiffon skirt. I need fresh air after being stuck in a hot kitchen all afternoon.

"With Happy and Happier, the love zombies," I grumble beneath my breath, and immediately feel guilty about it.

This isn't like me.

I love my sisters and I love love. The fact that my sisters have both found the love they deserve should be wonderfully, inspirationally romantic. I should be twirling through the kitchen, high on happiness right along with them.

But I'm not.

I'm sour and cranky and don't even know why.

Yes, I've been on a roll with the bad dates, lately. Yes, I've been feeling lonely and sad and like something important is missing from my life, but that's no excuse for being a buzz-killing grump.

I'm better than this, and from now on I'm going to act like it.

I vow to apologize to Aria and Lark when I get back to the kitchen, and immediately my heart rests easier in my chest. I

pick up my pace, a spring coming into my step as I head up to the large Sunset Ranch staff parking lot.

Lark hired two extra waiters for the wedding today—a gala affair with nearly five hundred guests—which takes some of the stress off the three of us. I won't have to serve so I'll be able to focus on food prep and then helping Aria bring out the desserts after the final course.

All *twelve* of them. This bride's mother has a sweet tooth and the cash to afford a decadent spread. The dessert table is going to be a showstopper, and Aria promised to make extra dark-chocolate-covered strawberries so we can gorge on them when the wedding is over.

That's what I'll focus on today. Sugar trumps boys and Aria's desserts never disappoint.

Dreaming of berries covered in chilled chocolate brings a smile to my face as I join the group of regulars gathered in the shade of the Ever After van. Natalie, Mitch, Manny, George, and Sadie-Lynn are already suited up and a woman with dark brown skin and super cute braids, who I'm guessing is one of our temporary hires, is tying on her apron.

But there's no sign of any other newbies around, though I'm not sure exactly who I'm looking for.

Lark interviewed applicants yesterday, while I was in Atlanta taking a French Sauces class before heading out on my disastrous date with Chad, the cheapskate. I only know we're expecting one new guy and one new girl.

I greet Braids—Lucinda—and tell her to reach out if she has any questions at all, then scope out a good place to take pictures. The staff parking lot is on a hill above the venue with a great view of the garden and faux Greek ruins. Aria thinks the fake, crumbling pillars look cheesy in the middle of the Georgia countryside, but I think they're lovely.

But then, I'm easy when it comes to lovely. I enjoy pretty things too much to care if they're classy or locale appropriate.

I take a dozen or so shots of the venue, then snap a few of Mitch making hideous faces that I'm sure Felicity will find

hysterical the next time we're flipping through my phone together. Then I check my email and post an update on social media with the appropriate wedding-catering-friendly hashtags, but fifteen minutes later, there's still no sign of the other new hire.

"Maybe I should run home and grab my uniform," I say, nibbling my lip as I cast another worried glance at the time on my phone.

"It's cool, the six of us can handle it." Mitch puts an arm around my shoulders, treating me to a whiff of his onion-y pit.

"No, I can suit up and help out. I don't want y'all to be slammed, and it's Lucinda's first day." I fight the urge to wrinkle my nose and discreetly begin to breathe through my mouth. I can't believe I ever thought Mitch was cute. Even for a minute. His body odor is seriously out of control.

I make a mental note to convince Lark to have a talk with Mitch about his deodorant choices. I know he's a hard-core, save the planet, don't put poison on your body or in the earth kind of guy, and I love him for it, but surely something can be done. There has to be deodorant on the market that's friendly to Mother Earth *and* other peoples' noses.

I'm about to head inside to tell Lark I need to run home to grab my server uniform, when a mechanical roar rumbles through the air from the bottom of the hill. The ungodly noise has all seven of us turning in unison to watch a decrepit MG Midget in desperate need of a muffler rattle up the hill.

It stop-starts its way to the parking area, sputtering and coughing and threatening to die several times before finally shuddering to a stop beside Lucinda's VW bug. A moment later, a boy with dark brown hair spiked up all over his head like an angry hedgehog emerges from the driver's side and starts toward us.

The sun catches him from behind, accentuating his wide shoulders, narrow hips, and long legs. I'm instantly struck by how cute he is.

No, not cute...dangerously good looking, with full lips a girl can't help but stare at and enough swagger for five Mick Jagers.

"Oh my, who is *that* luscious little dumpling?" Manny asks beneath his breath.

"I'm assuming he's the new guy." I frown.

New guy is admittedly easy on the eyes, but he's fifteen minutes late and the cocky expression on his face practically oozes defiance. He's the poster child for Does Not Play Well With Others and a far cry from Lark's usual, grounded, easy-going hires.

What in the world was she thinking with this guy?

"Hey." New guy jerks his chin at us by way of greeting. "Nick."

"You're late, Nick," I say, sliding out from under Mitch's arm.

Nick shrugs, his eyes skimming over me to take in the rest of the staff. "Looks like we're all still standing around to me."

My frown digs deeper into my forehead. "We're still standing around because we were waiting for *you*."

"Oh, well..." He grins, and something about his smile makes me feel like a cat that's been stroked the wrong way. "I'm sure we'll still have plenty of time to wait on rich people today. Don't stress, Blondie."

"Dude, Melody is, like, our boss," Mitch says in a whisper that's ridiculous considering I'm standing right next to him. "Or, like, the sister of our boss, which is almost like our boss."

Nick's eyes return to me, flicking up and down with a bit more interest, his attention arousing a strange mixture of nerves and awareness that only serves to irritate me even further.

I'm attractive, but I'm not the type of girl boys like this pay attention to. I'm wholesome and sweet looking, the girl most likely to be mistaken for a kindergarten teacher. Bad boys are as repelled by me as they are infatuated by tattoos, of

which this guy has *several* if the ink peeking from beneath the sleeves of his white tee-shirt are anything to judge by.

“So, you’re the one who married Nash,” he says with a huff, his eyebrows arching in surprise. “Never took him for a cradle robber, but...whatever works for you two.”

“That’s my *other* sister,” I say through gritted teeth. “And I’m twenty-two. That’s hardly fresh out of my cradle.”

“Sorry again, my mistake, Blondie,” he says with a mocking smile that makes me see red.

Crimson red, the color of blood, with bombs shaped like Nick’s smug, spiky head exploding inside of it.

“You’re fired,” I snap, the words out of my mouth before I realize I plan to say them.

Before I remember that I don’t *technically* have the power to hire or fire anyone. Lark owns the business. But Lark was my sister long before she was my boss, and she would never tolerate a jerk talking to me like a dumb, fluffy, baby bunny.

“What?” Nick’s green eyes lose the crinkle at their edges, but his smile remains firmly in place.

“I said, you’re fired,” I repeat, standing up straighter. “So, you can leave. Now.”

“I thought you needed the help,” he says, still *smiling*.

*Argh!* Why is he still smiling? It makes me want to punch him right in his shiny, white teeth, an urge that’s so unfamiliar it makes my head spin, and my words breathy when I say, “Please. Leave. We won’t be needing your help today.”

*Or any other day, if I have anything to say about it, I think.*

“All right. Fine with me.” Nick shrugs, and his grin finally fades a watt or two. “Tell Lark I’m sorry I was late. I had car trouble. And tell your other sister I’ll see her at dinner later this week. Hopefully we’ll hit it off better than we did, huh? Since I guess she’s family now.”

I cross my arms, keeping my frown firmly in place as Nick strides back to his car, looking like the hero of an angsty teen

movie in his black jeans, tight white tee, and carefully mussed hair. I'm so angry with him, for reasons that continue to elude me, that Nick is in his car, pulling down the hill before I realize the full significance of what I've done.

I've fired Aria's brother-in-law.

Who is maybe, sort of *my* brother-in-law, too?

"Is he my brother-in-law if he's Aria's?" I squeak, turning back to the rest of the staff, panic rising inside of me.

Natalie shrugs. "I don't know, but firing him doesn't seem like a good move, considering how often you'll probably end up running into each other."

I bite my lip, my stomach clenching tight.

Mitch shrugs. "Whatever. He was a douche, anyway."

"I don't know," Natalie says, casting an uncertain look my way. "Maybe you were a little hard on him, Mel."

"For sure. That wasn't like you. You're the sweet one, sugar," Manny agrees with affection that makes his words even harder to take.

Was I too hard on Nick?

I *have* been in a terrible mood all day. Did I allow that to spill over onto some unsuspecting stranger?

If so, it would be bad under normal circumstances, but with Nick being Aria's family, it's flat out awful.

"Can I have your keys, Manny?" I ask, holding out a hand. "If I leave right now, maybe I can catch him."

"Here, take mine." Lucinda offers the keys to the bug.

"Thank you so much," I say, making a run for her car, my heart slamming against my ribs, praying I'll get to Nick in time to make this better.

A few minutes later, I'm down the hill, closing in on the MG as it sputters to a halt at the stop sign marking the turn back to the main road, and dies.

“Thank God,” I breathe, my chest loosening as I watch Nick get out and kick the tire. I’m going to be able to fix this, and everything will be fine.

As I pull in behind him, Nick glances up, the surprise in his eyes hardening into an unreadable expression when I swing out of the car.

“I’m sorry,” I say, closing the distance between us, determined to undo my mistake. “I was being a jerk. I didn’t realize you were Aria’s brother-in-law.”

He shrugs, but his expression doesn’t change. “That’s all right.”

“No, it’s not all right,” I say. “I’m not usually like that. I’m just...having a bad day. But that isn’t your fault and I’m really sorry. Can you forgive me?”

Nick holds my gaze and, after a beat, his face softens.

Shockingly, he looks even hotter *without* the attitude.

“Me, too. A bad month, actually.” He shoves his hands in his pockets. “Sorry I was an asshole.” He grins, but this time it doesn’t make me want to punch him in the teeth.

It makes me want to smile back.

So, I do, beaming up at him like a flower getting her first dose of sunlight as Nick says, “Since you’re not my boss anymore, is it okay to say you’ve got a really pretty smile?”

Oh boy.

This is trouble.

Big trouble, and all the more reason to get him back as an employee—and off limits as a potential flirting partner—immediately. There are other reasons I’ve always secretly been glad I repulse bad boys, namely that they intimidate the heck out of me.

I would have no idea what to do with a guy like Nick if I captured his attention, so best not to try.

“I was actually hoping you’d agree to come back and work the event,” I say. “And maybe we can...start over?”

“So, I’m un-fired?”

“You’re un-fired.”

“Then forget what I said about the smile,” he says with a wink.

“I’d rather not,” I hear myself say, surprising myself for the second time in less than fifteen minutes. There’s something about this guy that brings out the unexpected in me, which is also dangerous.

I don’t like unexpected things. Especially when they’re coming out of my own mouth.

Nick shifts closer, sending the soap, gasoline, and smoky campfire scent of him wafting my way. “What would your boyfriend think about that?” he asks in a husky voice that makes the hair at the back of my neck prickle.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” I murmur, sounding drunk even though I haven’t touched anything harder than a wine cooler in months.

“Strange.” He cocks his head, considering me through narrowed eyes.

“What’s strange about it?”

“Girls like you always have boyfriends.”

“How do you know what kind of girl I am?” I ask, standing my ground when he moves even closer, until only a few inches separate us and I can feel the warmth of his body against mine. “We met ten minutes ago.”

“You’re a sweet, loyal, do-gooder type,” Nick says, his grin never wavering. “You never miss church on Sundays, make time to visit all your elderly relatives and listen to boring stories you’ve heard a million times, and you wouldn’t say shit if you had a mouth full of it. At least not in front of strangers. You’re fun, but not too fun, and always in bed before midnight. You work hard, strive for excellence, and have high standards. Sometimes, it pisses you off when others don’t, but at the end of the day you try to be kind above all else. And that’s why you followed me to hire me back.”



I frown, displeased by the accuracy of his description.

Am I *that* boring and easy to read?

“Sounds like you’ve got me all figured out,” I huff.

He makes a noncommittal humming noise. “Maybe. But there’s one thing I can’t pin down.”

“What’s that?” I ask, watching breathlessly as his lips move closer to mine

“Why you’re flirting with me,” he murmurs. “And why you’re going to let me kiss you.”

*So, he thinks he’s going to kiss me, does he?* the rogue voice in my head muses.

A beat later, before I’ve made any rational decision to make a move, I’m cupping Nick’s handsome face in my hands and pushing up on tiptoe to press my lips to his.

Our mouths meet with an intensity that sends a surge of delight rolling across my skin. Lips give way to tongues and before I can rethink the wisdom of pouncing a bad boy, Nick’s fingers are digging into my hips and I’m clinging to his shoulders as he presses me up against his car.

He kisses me like I’ve always wanted to be kissed, like he can’t get enough of my mouth, like he’s starving and I’m the only item on the menu.

No, like there are lots of other things on the menu, but I’m the only one he wants. I am the sole focus of his lips, his hands, his...

Oh wow. His hands are trouble. Especially the one cupping my breast through my tee shirt. I’ve only gone to second base with one guy and that certainly didn’t happen in broad daylight by the side of the road.

I need to rein in my crazy before I cause a scandal. If any of my mother’s friends see me like this, I’ll never hear the end of it.

“Wait!” I shout against his lips, making him flinch and step back.

Taking advantage of the space between us, I scoot around him and head for the bug. “Sorry. I have to go,” I say, ridiculously flustered. I feel like an idiot—running from a kiss like it’s a poisonous snake—but I don’t know what else to do.

This isn’t like me. Nick was right. I’m a do-gooder. And when it comes to rounding the sex bases, I’m an excellent infielder. I don’t make the first move, I don’t kiss strange boys in public, and I don’t take boob touching lightly. Boob touching is a big deal for me, unlike for guys like Nick who probably touch a new boob every other night.

Also, I hate the word “boob” and need to stop using it, even in my brain, immediately.

“Gotta get to work,” I say with a thumbs-up so dorky I want to cringe, but I don’t. I reach for the door, fumbling with the handle while Nick watches me, a crooked smile on his face. “See you up there?”

“See you up there,” he says, “and Melody?”

“Yes?” I say, my face so hot it feels like it’s about to catch fire.

“No hard feelings, okay?” A dimple pops in his cheek. “I like do-gooders.”

*Sure, you do*, I think. That’s why he’s looking at me like a cute little kid, instead of a girl he wants to keep making out with. He might like do-gooders, but they don’t make his blood rush, don’t make him want to kiss like it’s the end of the world and there are only a few minutes left before the asteroid hits.

I’ve never kissed anyone the way I just kissed Nick. I honestly hadn’t thought I would want to.

Sweet, loving, romantic kisses have been my thing for as long as I’ve been kissing.

But now...

That’s what really scares me. Not that I was acting out of character, but the fact that I liked it so much.

So. Very. Much.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

*Two days later...*

*I* should have known the bomb was going to drop at some point.

The past nine days with Nash have been heaven. It almost makes sense that I find myself in hell Sunday evening.

After all, there is no light without darkness, no rose without thorns, and apparently, no marriage without an in-law determined to make their son or daughter's new spouse suffer.

From the moment Nash and I step into the elder Gearys' home Sunday afternoon, Joy Geary makes her disapproval of this match abundantly clear. To me, at least. Nash seems determined to ignore his mother's cool reception. When I pull him aside to voice my fears that his mom hates me like rabies, he laughs me off, saying his mom's been sick and is probably still under the weather and making a joke about not knowing you could get rabies only in the ass.

"Besides, she wouldn't hate you like any kind of rabies," he adds, leaning down to kiss my forehead. "Mom doesn't have strong feelings about rabies one way or another."

"Everyone hates rabies," I insist.

"But everyone in my family is going to love you."

"If you say so," I mumble, moving into Nash's arms and resting my cheek on his chest. But not even a full-strength

Nash hug—which is quickly becoming one of my favorite things in the world—can banish my anxiety.

All through dinner, I swear I catch Joy glaring at me out of the corners of my eyes, only to turn my head and find her watery green gaze fixed politely on Nash or his sisters.

After dinner, I excuse myself and head out to the backyard with the other moms to watch the kids play. Felicity is younger than the Geary grandchildren and the two kids still living at home, but I'm sure she'll find someone to play with. If not, I'll crawl around in the grass with her myself. Anything to escape the tension in the house.

“Has the tribe driven you crazy yet?” Raleigh stands beside me on the grass, watching as her two sons run toward the trampoline at the rear of the large yard.

I smile. “Nope. I love the tribe.”

And I do. Nash's brothers and sisters and their broods all seem to be sweet, fun-loving people. Even Nash's little brother, Nick, who—according to the gossip I heard from Natalie—had a bad attitude when he first showed up for work this past week, has gone out of his way to be welcoming tonight.

It's only Joy who has me on pins and needles.

*Joy.* If Nash's grandmother had known what a sour face her daughter would have as an older woman, she might have reconsidered her choice of baby names.

“Well, you don't have to, you know,” Raleigh says, surprising me.

I look over to find her watching me with a shrewd, but kind, expression.

“It's you and Nash that matter,” she continues. “I like you, and if you enjoy the craziness that comes along with a family the size of ours, then that's awesome. But if you don't...that's fine, too.”

“I'm not sure I understand,” I say carefully, glancing back to check on Felicity, who is still crawling around by the swing

set, pulling up handfuls of grass and throwing it into the air.

“I’ve never seen my brother this happy,” Raleigh says, sending a surge of warmth rushing through my chest. “You’re good for him, and he seems to be good for you, and that’s all that matters. You didn’t marry our family, you married *him*, you know?”

“Thanks. I appreciate that, but you guys are lovely.”

“Not always,” Raleigh grumbles.

Her tone sets off alarm bells, but before I can figure out a way to discreetly ask if there’s something I should be worried about, or at the very least prepared for, Raleigh’s youngest son falls off the trampoline, sending her running to kiss the bruises.

Afterwards, I can’t find an easy way back into that conversation, so I do my best to forget my misgivings and enjoy the evening.

It isn’t until an hour later, when I emerge from the bathroom and run straight into Joy that I wonder if Raleigh was trying to subtly warn me of an impending ambush.

“Hi,” I say, forcing a smile. “Thank you so much for the invitation tonight, Joy. Dinner was amazing.”

She nods, but doesn’t smile, or move out of the middle of the hall to let me by. “Thank you,” she says, her voice a dusty pillow dropped on the floor. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“And Felicity loved it, too. I’ve never seen her eat that much pasta.”

“She’s a sweet little girl,” Joy says in a tone that would have been more fitting to announcing Felicity has been diagnosed with some tragic disease. “I’ve got nothing against that child, I want you to know that.”

“Okay,” I say, a horrible sinking feeling dragging at my stomach. Still, I dare to hope I’ll emerge from this interaction unscathed until she says—

“But using Nash to fix what’s wrong with your life isn’t right.”

Her words connect like poisonous darts, making me flinch.

“I know you’re in a custody battle with the baby’s father,” she continues, “and you’re struggling as a single mom, but that’s not my son’s problem.”

I swallow, resisting the urge to cry or to tell Joy where she can stick her opinion. This is Nash’s mother, and we both love Nash. Surely, we can find a way to be civil if we can’t be friends.

“I’m not using, Nash,” I begin in a controlled voice, but Joy jumps in before I can finish.

“I heard he paid for your lawyer.”

I nod. “He did, but—”

“And you’re living in his house, and he’s paying for everything for a child who isn’t his.” She sighs, shaking her head as if this is the worst thing that could possibly happen to her son. “He deserves better.”

“That’s a hurtful thing to say.” My throat feels like it’s closing up, but I take a breath and keep going. “I love Nash, and I’m going to do everything I can to make him happy.”

“Until it gets too hard, or a better offer comes along.” Joy’s lips press tightly together. “I remember you, Aria. I remember the way you and your daddy looked at my boy like he was trash back when you were kids.”

“My dad was out of line, but I never looked at Nash like that,” I say, tears welling in my eyes. “And I love your son. If you love him as much as you say you do, then I think we should try to get along.” I sniff, doing my best to regain control, not wanting to break down in front of someone who clearly loathes me. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to check on Felicity.”

I step forward, brushing past Joy, exhaling in relief when she doesn’t attempt to stop me or continue the conversation.

But on my way through the kitchen to the back door, I catch a glimpse of a tall shadow standing in the doorway. I glance over, locking eyes with Nash’s younger brother, Nick.

The guilty expression on his face makes it clear he heard every word of my conversation with his mom, but I don't care.

I'll repeat myself in front of the entire family if I have to. I don't care what they think. I know I'm good for Nash, and that I make him happy. The love I feel for him is real, the kind that will hold up through all the hard times, both mine and his.

Yes, I'm leaning on him now, but when he needs to lean on me, I'll be there with bells on.

Still, it's no fun to hear someone say they think you're a loser and a user. I keep a brave face on until we leave the Gearys', but by the time we get home and put Felicity to bed, I'm feeling more down than I have in a long time.

"What's wrong?" Nash settles into the chair across from mine at the kitchen table, under the watchful eyes of his mechanical animals and the portrait of Felicity I painted last week during her naptime.

I hadn't wanted to display it—it turned out better than I thought it would, but I know I can do a better one with practice—but Nash loved it so much I let him pound a nail and hang it up.

I study the painting now, remembering the way he smiled at me when he first saw it, how proud he'd been, how amazing, and loved, that pride had made me feel.

The memory gives me the courage to ask, "You don't think I'm using you, do you?"

"No." He scowls as he reaches for my hand, warming my cold fingers between his palms. "Why would you say that? Why would you even think it?"

I shrug, staring at our joined hands, not ready to meet his eyes. "I don't know. I don't make much money, and babies are so expensive and the lawyer's retainer was so much more than I thought it would be."

"I don't care. It's just money." He squeezes my hand. "I'm doing well, Red. You don't have to work at all if you don't want to."



I wince, his words hurting for some reason. “I do. I want to work. I don’t need someone to take care of me, Nash. I can take care of myself. That’s not what this is about.”

“Well, I do need someone like that,” he says, gripping my fingers tight when I try to pull away. “I need *you* to take care of me, and you’re doing a damned fine job of it. I have never been this happy, Aria. I’m just trying to return the favor.”

My lips tremble and my throat goes tight. “Are you sure? You don’t feel like you’re stuck with me, or trapped or—”

“Baby, what’s wrong?” He reaches across the table, taking my face in his big hands with a tenderness that makes me want to cry even more. “Why are you stressing about this all of a sudden?”

I start to tell him the truth, but stop myself at the last moment.

Nash loves his mother. Most boys love their mothers, but Nash *really* loves Joy. She’s a hero to him, the way she carried their family through all those hard times, sometimes all on her own when his dad had to leave town for work. I don’t want to be the one to pull her off that pedestal.

And a tiny part of me is afraid that he might not believe me, that he’ll brush me off the way he did earlier tonight, refusing to see anything but the best in his mom. And I’m not sure I can handle that. Right now, it feels like Nash is completely on my side, and I don’t want to do anything to drive a wedge between us, so I lie.

“I heard some women talking at the wedding the other day,” I say. “One of their sons was marrying a single mom and they weren’t happy about it.”

“Well, I couldn’t be happier.” He presses a gentle kiss to my lips. “Come on, let’s get ready for bed. I’ll run you a bath and you can soak the sad out.”

“That sounds nice.” I force a smile, determined to put the miserable parts of the night behind me.

“And how about a back rub after?” he asks. “I’ve been wanting to show off my masseuse skills. I heard someone was

on their feet all weekend cooking things containing sugar and could probably use a rub down.”

“Oh, I can always use a rub down,” I say, with a smile that isn’t the least bit forced. “Especially when you’re the one doing the rubbing.”

With a soft laugh, Nash takes my hand and leads me to our bedroom, and I promise myself that we’re done with this. I’m not going to let Joy negatively impact even one night of my marriage. I waited too long for a love like what Nash and I have to waste a single moment of it.

Happiness is too precious to waste, especially when I know all too well how quickly trouble can rear its ugly head.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I'm up and out of the house for my Monday morning run by five fifteen, slipping silently out of bed without waking Aria and changing into my running clothes in the front bathroom.

Something about last night is still bugging me, and running is my best shot at sorting it out. I always do my best thinking about mile three.

Today, however, I plod through mile three and am well into mile four before the gears start to turn. And then my head insists on mulling over what's on deck at work, skimming over the preliminary details of several cases I need to research before my ten o'clock staff meeting.

My brain has nothing to offer on the topic of my wife, or what happened to make her start doubting our relationship in such a serious way.

Her breakdown coincided with the visit to Mom and Dad's, but, as far as I could tell, her first family dinner went off without a hitch. Raleigh and Mom avoided their usual clash of wills, and Nick and Dad didn't start fighting about Nick's state of only part-time employment—a small miracle considering Dad thinks anyone over the age of eighteen who isn't working a full-time job is shirking their duty to society and probably a criminal of some sort.

Aria and my brothers and sisters got along great, and the nieces and nephews were sweet with Felicity, taking time out from their rough, big kid games to play ball with the baby.

I honestly can't imagine what could have set Aria off.

Surely the fact that Mom is quiet around strangers wasn't enough to sow seeds of doubt.

But Aria did make that rabies comment...

Maybe I just need to reassure her that Mom is always reserved with new people, and that it's absolutely nothing personal.

I decide to do that as soon as I get home and finish the rest of my run in relative mental silence, tracking my way back down the gravel road to the chat dump and into my subdivision as the sun crests the horizon.

I arrive just in time to see Bob March charging up the steps to my house with a fat manila folder in his hand.

"Shit," I curse. Quality time with Bob March is the last thing I need first thing in the morning. This is going to throw off my work out for the third time in the past week. Living with Aria and Felicity is proving great for the soul, but not so great for my fitness routine.

I slow to a jog, catching my breath in preparation for greeting my jackass of a father-in-law—who *absolutely* hates me like ass rabies, no doubt about it—when the door opens and Aria's hand appears. A second later, she's pulled her father inside and shut the door.

Huh.

Weird.

He hadn't even knocked yet. It was like she was expecting him.

My jog becomes a walk.

Why would Aria ask her father to come over at six fifteen in the morning?

Better question, why hadn't she told me Bob was coming over?

Unless...

I would usually still be on my run right now, if I hadn't left early.

"Nope, don't do it," I say aloud, not wanting to start down this path. I trust Aria. She's done nothing to earn a sharp eye from my suspicious side.

*Until now.*

The voice in my head is one part cop instinct, one part leftover hurt from the way things ended with Rachael. The cop part smells something fishy and wants to investigate; the hurt part doesn't want to end up playing the fool again, this time with a woman I love so much I'm not sure I would survive her betrayal.

The two parts together are too strong to resist.

Instead of heading in through the front door, I circle around the garage into the backyard, thankful Aria and I decided to wait a few months before getting a dog for Felicity. There's no animal barking, alerting people in the house to my presence.

*Alerting your wife to your presence. Your wife, who you're spying on like she's a criminal all because she what? She wants to talk to her dad without you around, listening in?*

It's the decent part of my gut speaking up now, and it's almost enough to make me turn around and head back to the front door. It would have been, I think, if Aria's voice hadn't drifted through the open kitchen window a beat later.

"You're kidding, Daddy," she says with obvious relief. "Oh, thank God. I take back what I said. You can call me at six o'clock in the morning anytime. I can't believe this. It's a miracle."

Aria hadn't known Bob was coming over.

The realization makes me feel better and worse. Better because she didn't plan this, worse because I'm still here crouched by the house spying like a psycho.

"It's no miracle." Bob sounds pleased with himself, as usual. "It's karma. I told you that rats leave trails, and Liam's

didn't prove very hard to find."

"So, what's next?" Aria asks. "Do we send these over to him, or to his lawyer? Or what?"

"We'll take the folder to your lawyer as soon as her office opens, and have her send it over, so it's official. I wouldn't be surprised if Liam drops his suit by close of business today. After that, we'll put pressure on him to sign papers giving you sole physical and legal custody of Felicity from here on out."

"Oh my god, that would be..." Aria's breath rushes out. "That would be the best thing ever. Thank you, Daddy. Thank you so much."

Her voice is muffled for a moment. I imagine Aria is probably hugging her dad, and I'm glad. I'm grateful to him for being a good father to her, even if he is a shit to me. And I'm grateful to him for keeping Felicity with us where she belongs.

"You and Felicity back home with us is all the thanks I need," he says, souring my good will. "Now you're free to be done with this joke marriage and get on with your life."

My jaw clenches, my teeth grinding together as I wait for Aria's response.

This is it, the moment that proves if what we have is real, or if she was using me all along.

"Daddy, I can't," she says, not sounding nearly as sure of that as I would like.

"You can, and you will." A hard note creeps into Bob's voice as he adds, "Especially if you want me to keep your secret from your mother. The detective I hired said you and Liam were never legally married, Aria Beth. There's no record of that elopement you talked about ever taking place."

My brows shoot up.

She and Liam weren't married?

Why didn't she tell me that? I actually love the idea of being Aria's first—and only—husband, but I don't like being lied to.

It reminds me too much of Rachael and all the other people I should never have trusted.

“Listen, Daddy,” Aria begins, but Bob cuts her off before she can finish.

“You lied to your parents about something as sacred as a marriage. Do you have any idea how that would tear your mother apart?”

Aria sighs. “I felt like I had to, Dad. I wasn’t trying to—”

“You wanted to avoid the embarrassment of telling your parents you’d decided to have a baby out of wedlock,” Bob says. “You were raised better than that, Aria. When I think of all the times I—”

“It wasn’t a decision, Dad,” she says, raising her voice to be heard over her father’s rant. “Liam didn’t want to get married. What was I supposed to do?”

“So, you thought you could trap him into marriage with a baby, is that it?”

“Of course not! God, that’s terrible, Daddy, I would never do something like that,” Aria says, making me proud of her for standing up to the old wretch. “I wasn’t trying to trap, Liam. We didn’t even mean to get pregnant, it just happened. Sometimes babies just happen.”

Bob’s grunt makes it clear what he thinks of that. “Which is exactly why we need to get you away from Nash Geary before it ‘just happens’ again and we’re related by blood to that bunch of trailer trash.”

I almost lose it right then, I almost stand up and shout through the window for Bob to get his ass out of my house and never set foot on my property again, when Aria says—

“You know what you sound like when you talk that way, Dad?” Her words vibrate with anger. “You sound like a nasty, narrow-minded, old bigot. You sound like all the people who make this world a terrible, unfair, shitty place to live.”

“Aria Beth, don’t you—”



“And it breaks my heart,” she says, her voice trembling, “because I *know* you’re better than that. I know you’re a kind, loving man who is a wonderful father to me and a wonderful grandfather to my baby. But when you act like this... I don’t know who this person is, but I don’t agree with him. And I don’t like him, and I don’t want him hanging around, looking down on the people I love.”

I swallow hard, shame tightening the muscles around my neck. I shouldn’t be spying on Aria. I should have trusted her without needing to sneak around and eavesdrop.

“And that’s why I lied about being married to Liam,” she continues with a sniff that makes me think she’s either crying or trying hard not to. “I didn’t want you looking down on my baby just because I wasn’t married when she was born. There is nothing wrong with Felicity, and there’s nothing wrong with the Geary family, either.”

“I know there’s nothing wrong with Felicity,” Bob says. “Don’t cry, sweetheart, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Well you did, Dad. You more than upset me. You made me afraid of what’s going to happen to my family.”

“What do you mean?” Bob asks carefully, sounding as if he’s beginning to realize what a pile he’s stepped in.

“I’m not going to divorce Nash. He’s my husband and I love him,” Aria says, sending another guilt dart cutting straight into my heart. “He’s a good man, and he’s done nothing to deserve the way you look down on him and his family.”

“Nothing?” Bob shouts. “Taking advantage of a fifteen-year-old girl isn’t nothing, it’s—”

“That was over a decade ago, Dad,” Aria shouts back. “It’s time to get the hell over it.”

“I will not get the hell over it! I’m your father. And if you’d been able to see the way you looked standing next to that boy that night...” His breath rushes out. “You were still a baby, sugar. You looked like you were twelve years old, and he was a full-grown man.”

“Dad, please. Nash was only three years older,” Aria says, obviously close to losing her patience. “It doesn’t matter what \_\_\_”

“It damned well does matter!” Bob is so loud I’m not surprised when, a moment later, Felicity begins to cry out from her bedroom, calling for Mama in a worried voice.

“What the hell was he doing, wanting to sleep with a girl who still looked like a child?” Bob rages on, ignoring Aria’s request that he lower his voice before he scares the baby. “He was a child molester. That’s the only thing I can think of.”

“Daddy!” Aria scolds, the shock and outrage mixing in her tone mirroring the revulsion rising in my chest.

I stand, heading for the back door, no longer caring if Aria or Bob see me coming.

“And for all we know he still is,” Bob says, clearly on a roll and not intending to stop anytime soon. “And I don’t want my baby granddaughter growing up in a house with a man—”

“Get out.” My voice rumbles like thunder through the kitchen, low and ominous, vibrating the paintings on the wall.

I close the door carefully behind me, barely resisting the urge to slam it with the full force of my arm.

I can’t start slamming things. If I do, I have a feeling it won’t be long before I’m slamming a fist into Bob March’s face.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Get. Out.” I point a finger at the front door. “Now.”

“Nash, wait.” Aria’s eyes go wide as she positions herself between us. “He didn’t mean that. He’s angry and he always says stupid shit when he’s angry.”

“Don’t tell me what I do and don’t mean.” Bob tries to circle around her, but she grabs his arm and holds on tight, her expression growing progressively frantic as Felicity starts wailing in the other room.

“I’m going to go get the baby,” I say, speaking directly to Aria, refusing to look Bob in his red face. “When I get back, I need him out of the house. For both of our sakes.”

Aria nods too fast. I hate seeing her so upset, but I can’t comfort her now. All I can do is remove myself from the situation before I pop Bob March in his mean little mouth.

I hurry down the hall to Felicity’s room, ignoring Bob’s shouted order not to touch his granddaughter and open the door just as the baby’s tears hit the crescendo point. As soon as Felicity sees me, she sucks in a breath and reaches out, the relief on her face making me feel like a hero as I cross the room to scoop her into my arms.

This is who I want to be, this little girl’s hero, not a suspicious jerk who spies on my wife.

“It’s okay,” I say, swaying back and forth as Felicity wraps her pudgy arms around my neck and buries her face in my

sweat-stained running shirt, not seeming to mind the stink. “Being left in your bed is the worst, huh, Skeeter?”

Felicity snuffles in what sounds like agreement, her sobs already beginning to subside as I rub her back in slow circles.

“I’m sorry,” I say, relieved to hear the front door close and Bob and Aria’s voices move outside. “Mama and I were distracted by a mean guy, but he should be gone soon, and then we can go get your milk.”

“Mik?” Felicity pulls her head from my chest, but keeps her hands fisted in my shirt, as if to make sure I can’t get away. “Mik?”

“Milk.” I grin, realizing Felicity’s added a new word to her repertoire.

“Mik,” she repeats again with a grin.

I laugh. “That’s right. You’re the smartest girl I know.” I give her a squeeze and kiss her pudgy cheek.

Felicity leans in, granting me one of her slobbery, open-mouthed versions of a kiss on my chin in return, breaking my heart in the process. I would never hurt this little girl. I would never hurt any child, and the fact that Bob March dared to say...

That he would even think that I’m the kind of man...

I can’t finish the thought. It’s too repulsive and depraved to let it swim around in my head even for a second.

I take a deep breath, forcing my rage away as I carry Felicity to the changing table for a fresh diaper.

“All right, let’s go get that milk,” I say when we’re done, scooping her back into my arms. “I bet it’s safe out there now.”

I start down the hall and am nearly to the living room when I hear a car start out in the driveway. A second later, Aria slams back inside, making no effort to be gentle with the door closing.

“That man is impossible,” she says through gritted teeth, forcing a tight smile when she sees Felicity. “Good morning, sugar, did you sleep well?”

Felicity holds up a hand and lets forth a stream of babble that sounds so much like conversation, Aria and I both laugh.

“Is that right?” Aria asks, shaking her head. “Well, I’m so sorry about that. We won’t keep you waiting next time.”

“No, we won’t.” Our eyes meet over Felicity’s head, and a silent apology passes between us. But I know we still have to talk later. I have more to apologize for.

“Well, let’s see if milk can still make everything better.” Aria starts toward the kitchen, but stops when Felicity shouts —

“Mik! Mik!”

Aria spins, joy lighting her eyes. “What’s this? A new word?”

“New word,” I confirm. “I told Skeeter she’s the smartest baby ever.”

“Well, she obviously gets it from me.” Aria rolls her eyes. “You won’t believe what my ex has been up to. I mean, I knew he was stupid, but you’re not going to believe—”

“I was listening,” I say as I follow her into the kitchen, needing to get the guilty load off my chest.

“What do you mean?” She opens the refrigerator door, reaching for the milk.

“I was coming back from my run and saw you pull your dad into the house and...” I shift my gaze to Felicity, who is patting my cheek, still babbling in a softer voice, as if encouraging me to man up and get it over with. “I had no idea why he’d be here so early, so I went around to the back window and...listened in.”

“You were spying on me?” Aria asks.

I glance back to see her hands braced on the kitchen counter, the bottle and milk in front of her forgotten.

“I was,” I say, knowing better than to make excuses. “I’m not proud of it, but... I did it. And I’m sorry. I swear to you I’ll never do anything like that again. You deserve my trust, and I mean to give it to you. If you’ll still take it.”

Aria frowns, biting her lip for a long moment before slowly returning to her task. “Okay,” she says, pouring the milk into the bottle and popping it into the microwave. “Thank you for being honest with me.”

“Speaking of honesty,” I say. “I know I’m in no place to talk right now, but I wish you’d told me that you and Liam were never married. I wouldn’t have thought any less of you or Skeeter, I hope you know that.”

Aria shakes the bottle and hands it to Skeeter, who is clearly past ready to have her milk. She pops the bottle in her mouth, leans back in my arms, and goes to work, leaving us to our grown-up talk.

“I know that,” Aria says. “I honestly didn’t even think about it, Nash. I’m so used to lying about it, and... Well, I guess I just knew you wouldn’t care.” She shrugs. “It didn’t seem like something I needed to bring up. Our marriage is the only one that’s been on my mind.”

I take a deeper breath, bracing myself for what has to come next. “I love you, Aria.”

Her gaze softens even as she crosses her arms over her chest. “I love you, too, and I love hearing that. So much. But I don’t like the ‘but’ I’m hearing in there.”

“Me, either. But I’m done with your father,” I say. “I don’t want to be in the same room with him ever again. And I can’t say I’m thrilled to think of Skeeter growing up around a man who thinks people are trash if they don’t have a lot of money or reproduce too frequently for his tastes.”

Aria sighs and rubs at the side of her neck. “But he’s not really like that, Nash. I swear he’s not. He says all that stuff, but he doesn’t mean it. He’d give the shirt off his back to a stranger if they needed it. He’s a good man.”

“He accused me of being a child molester, Aria.” Saying the words out loud is enough to make me want to smash a fist through something all over again. “Do you have any idea how deeply that offends me?”

“I know, it’s horrible. Awful,” she says, her brows pinching together. “But like I said, he doesn’t mean those things, he just—”

“Yes, he does,” I insist, not about to let him off the hook. “The man hates me, and after this morning, I can say without hesitation that the feeling is completely mutual. I’m done with him. If you want to have your sisters or your mother over to our house, that’s fine. Any time. But your father isn’t welcome, and I won’t be joining you and Felicity for BBQs or anything else at Bob’s house.”

Aria’s frown deepens. “Please, Nash. Let’s just get through the rest of this mess with Liam and make sure Felicity is safe, and then we can sort this out with my dad.”

“There’s nothing to sort out.”

“Nash, please,” she begs, a note of desperation entering her voice. “I don’t want to spend our entire lives avoiding my father. He’s my father. Surely, we can find a way to be civil and get by in a normal, dysfunctional sort of way.”

“What if my mother had accused you of being a child molester?” I press, digging my heels in. I try not to be stubborn about stupid things anymore, but this isn’t stupid. Bob went too far to make this better with a handshake and an apology. “How would you feel about making nice with her after something like that?”

“Well, she didn’t call me a child molester, but your mom did accuse me of being a gold digger last night. After she said her son deserved better than a user like me.” Aria shakes her head. “Or maybe before, I forget which insults went where, but I still plan on going back to her place any time you want me there. I’m not going to let one nasty woman ruin—”

“My mother said that?” I ask, stunned. Mom wasn’t warm last night, but she hadn’t seemed aggressive toward Aria,



either. “Are you sure you didn’t misunderstand her?”

“Those were her exact words, Nash,” she says in a voice that dares me to challenge her. “That I was using you to help pay for things for my baby until someone better came along. And that you deserved better than a user like me.”

I shake my head, but not because I don’t think Aria’s telling the truth. I can’t believe my mother had the nerve to go behind my back and meddle in my life like that. I’m thirty-one, for God’s sakes.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I ask. “Why did you lie and say you overheard some woman talking at a wedding instead of telling me that my mother—”

“I was trying to keep the peace,” she says, her breath rushing out. “I know how much you love your mom, and I didn’t want it to come down to some kind of ‘her or me’ situation. And I guess...” She sighs. “I guess I was worried I wouldn’t be the one you’d choose.”

She crosses her arms again, making her breasts swell above the lacy edge of her red pajama top.

She certainly doesn’t look like a child now. To me she never did. That first day at camp, in that crazy dress, with her hair hanging wild to her waist, she’d been the sexiest thing I’d ever seen. But Bob March is never going to understand that I didn’t see Aria the same way a father would, or realize that, for all my size, I’d only been a kid back then, too.

And I can talk to Mom and make it clear she isn’t allowed to speak to my wife that way, but if Mom dislikes Aria that much, I know it will take time—lots of it—for her to warm up to the idea of us together.

If she ever does.

I inherited my ability to hold a grudge from Mom’s side of the family, no doubt about that.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” Aria asks softly.

“I don’t know what to say.” I look down at Felicity, my heart twisting at the thought of losing her or her mama.

They're already such a big part of my life. The best part.

"But you believe me?" she whispers, her voice breaking.

"Of course, I believe you, baby," I hurry to assure her, not wanting to be responsible for more tears this morning. "I'm sorry. I just got tangled up in my head for a minute."

Aria's shoulders slump and her breath rushes out as she nods, making it clear how worried she'd been that I would turn on her. I cross the kitchen, pulling her against my chest with my free arm. In my other, Skeeter coos around her bottle, seeming to approve of the family hug.

The sound is another knife slipped between my ribs.

"I'm on your side." I kiss the top of Aria's wild morning hair, my chest tight. "Mom had no right to talk to you that way. I'll make it clear she's not allowed to do anything like that again if she wants me to keep coming around, but..."

"But what?" Aria tenses in my arms, as if she can sense where my thoughts are headed.

I sigh. "I don't know how to change this. Any of it. Your dad is always going to hate me, and it sounds like my mom isn't too keen on you, either." I clench my jaw, hating what I'm about to say, but knowing there's no avoiding it. "If we stay together, we'll have to deal with the reality that we may never have the kind of easy, extended family dynamic we used to have ever again."

Aria blinks up at me, but she doesn't say a word.

"I know how much you depend on your family," I continue "How much you love them and how much fun you have together. I wouldn't want to feel like I was driving a wedge between you and the people who mean the most to you. Marriage should add to the number of people you can count on, not subtract from them."

"But I love you," she says. "More than anything in the world, except Felicity. I know it's only been a couple of weeks, but..." She trails off, biting her lip as her eyes begin to fill. "But if you don't feel the same way..."

“Hell, yes, I feel the same way,” I say, my voice rough with emotion as my arm tightens around her waist. “You’re all I think about. If I could spend every moment of every day with you and Skeeter, I would. I’ve never been as happy as I’ve been the past two weeks. Never. Not even when I was a kid. But we need to decide—”

“What’s to decide?” She cups my cheek, rubbing her thumb across the stubble I’ve yet to shave away. “Love like this doesn’t come along every day. We’d be stupid to let my dad or your mom or anyone else take this away from us. Or Felicity. She loves you as much as I do, and I can’t imagine a better stepfather exists on the planet.”

Felicity gurgles something unintelligible, but positive sounding around her bottle, almost as if she understands what we’re talking about. What’s at stake. I smile, but it doesn’t last long.

“I don’t want to lose either of you,” I say, “But I think we both need some time to think.”

“About what?”

I try to hold onto her, but she slips out of my arms.

“What part of ‘stupid to let them take this away from us’ needs further analysis?” Her eyes flash, and for a moment all I can think about is how pretty she is when she’s angry, and how much I wish I could spend the day naked with her in our bed, showing her just how much I need her in my life.

But that’s part of the problem.

It’s getting harder and harder to think straight around this woman. The harder I fall, the more it seems like nothing outside our relationship really matters. But I was raised to value family over self. Loyalty to my family and sacrifices made by the few for the good of the many are practically scripture to me. I gave up so much as a kid to help out with my brothers and sisters, but I wouldn’t go back and do anything differently, even if I could.

I treasure the tight, loving bonds I have with almost all of my siblings. My family is a source of chaos and upheaval, but

it's also sacred to me, and such a big piece of my heart that I don't how much I'll have left if part of it is cut away. I can't imagine skipping out on gatherings at my parents' house, never seeing Felicity run and play with her cousins, never seeing my mom hold her new grandson or granddaughter for the first time.

But if Mom refuses to accept Aria, I won't be bringing our future babies over to visit Mee-maw Geary. I don't work that way. I'm not going to let my family treat my wife like an interloper or an outsider.

Aria's voice breaks into my thoughts. "Nash? Did you hear me?"

"I hear you, I did..." I shake my head, but it doesn't do much to clear my mind. "It's a big decision, Aria. A lot to lose, for both of us. I just think we should take some time apart to think about how this situation could affect our future. And Felicity's. And any other children we might have, who will be innocent and deserving of a big, loving family. It's not just you and me, as much as a part of me wishes it were."

"I know." She reaches out, taking Felicity's now empty bottle as the baby twists in my arms, ready for her morning crawl to the toy basket in the living room.

I set her down, for some reason feeling more vulnerable without her snuggled against my chest. I cross my arms and glance over at Aria. She's leaning against the counter, the bottle drooping from one hand, looking so defeated it's all I can do to keep from going to her.

Instead, I stand my ground. We both need time to think, and delaying will only make the process more painful.

"I'll go pack a suitcase," I say. "I'll stay with Raleigh for a while."

"No, we'll go back to my parents' house." Aria sets the bottle on the counter with a soft *thunk*. "It's safe for us to stay with them now."

"Are you sure? Do you really think your ex is going to drop his suit?"

She nods, but doesn't meet my eyes, keeping her gaze locked on the kitchen tile. "My dad hired a private investigator to follow Liam. He got pictures of Liam and his new wife and a few other people naked in the hot tub behind my old house. There was some partner-swapping and cocaine passed around. The guy got pictures of all of it, as well as some dirt on Liam's wife. Apparently, she was arrested for working the front desk at a brothel in the U.K. a few years ago."

"Wow." My brows lift. "That's some heavy stuff. Thank God Felicity wasn't there when shit like that was going down."

She nods "Yeah. I think even Liam will realize it's enough to ruin his case. Dad's taking the pictures and other stuff over to Betty's office in a few hours. Hopefully we'll have an answer from Liam's lawyer by the end of today."

"But you don't know anything for sure yet," I say, checking the clock over the stove, knowing I need to jump in the shower if I want to get to work on time. "So, let me go. I'll stay with Raleigh this week, and you and Felicity can stay here. No sense in moving her again until we know for sure what we're planning to do next."

"All right." Aria finally looks up at me, the sadness in her eyes enough to make my heart skip a beat.

Only the knowledge of how much misery could be waiting for us just around the corner, when our families implode, keeps me from pulling her into my arms and kissing the sadness away.

Kisses can't fix everything. No matter how much we wish they could.

"When will we see you?" she asks.

"Let's meet up after I get off work on Friday. I'll come here, and we can talk."

"Okay. We have an event Friday afternoon, but I'm free Friday night. I'll leave Felicity with my mom so we can have some privacy."

“Sounds good,” I say, though it doesn’t really. A day ago, a night alone with Aria would have been enough to keep a spring in my step all week, but now...

Friday could be the night we end it all, the night we decide that the love we’ve found can’t make up for everything we stand to lose.

“All right,” I say, my voice thick. “I’ll see you then.”

I bolt from the room, suddenly feeling like a prisoner in my own house. I need to get out, to get some distance from everything that happened this morning. Ten minutes later, I have a small suitcase packed and am heading for the door.

“Didn’t you forget something?” Aria’s on the floor in the living room, playing blocks with Felicity as I stop to grab my wallet and keys from the entry table.

“I’ll shower at the station,” I say, reaching for the door. “Might as well get going.”

“Okay,” Aria says softly. “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye,” I echo as I step out into the summer heat, hating how final the word sounds as it hangs in the air.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I spend most of Monday—my one day off this week—trying not to burst into tears in front of Felicity. I succeed, mostly, until bedtime, when Felicity crawls out into the living room after her bath, looking for Nash, and gets fussy when she can't find him.

Nash has become a part of our bedtime ritual, and Felicity doesn't like her rituals disrupted.

I don't either.

By the time she plops down in the middle of the living room and bursts into tears, I'm already sniffing. I try to comfort her as best I can, but even after three books and a long rock in the chair by her crib, she still isn't completely calm. She fusses as I lay her in her crib and hurls her bunny to the end of the mattress instead of settling down to chew an ear the way she usually would.

My daughter is clearly displeased with the way things are proceeding at present.

"Join the club, sweetie," I whisper as I turn out the light and start down the hall to the big, lonely bed in Nash's room.

It might truly be Nash's room again soon, if he decides Felicity and I aren't worth the sacrifices he'll have to make to keep us in his life.

*That's not what he's worried about, and you know it.*

I sigh and grab my toothbrush, so exhausted from crying I figure I might as well go to bed early.



The inner voice is right. I know why Nash is worried and he's right to be concerned. We're both very close with our families. The thought of being estranged from my dad for more than a few days is enough to fill me with dread. And panic. Each member of my family is a part of me, a limb I could probably live without, but I don't want to.

The loss of any one of the Marchs—Mom, Dad, Lark, or Melody—would haunt me for the rest of my life.

And Nash is just as close, if not closer, with his clan. And what about Felicity and the other kids Nash and I have been dreaming about? What if their relationships with their extended family suffer because a few key players aren't thrilled by our marriage?

I have so many wonderful memories of summer parties and winter holidays and long Saturday play sessions with my cousins, Emily and Elsbeth, my Aunt Tina's daughters. They were like sisters to Melody, Lark, and me when we were growing up. I was devastated when their dad took a job at a software company in California when I was in middle school. Seeing them only two or three times a year wasn't enough. They were family, a part of me, members of my tribe I would do anything to protect.

What if Felicity never knows what that's like? All because I picked the wrong man twice?

"No," I mumble around a mouthful of toothpaste before spitting emphatically into the sink.

Nash *isn't* the wrong man.

The idea is ridiculous. He could never be wrong. He's all right. He's everything I've ever wanted in a partner, and more wonderful with Felicity than I imagined a man could be with a child who isn't his by blood. Nash is the real deal, one in a million. I don't need a week to know I want to be with him, no matter what hardships or sacrifices are involved.

"You are *not* going to lose him," I promise my reflection, bolstered by the steadiness in my voice. "You are going to quit

crying like a big baby, get a good night's sleep, and get up tomorrow morning prepared to make this work.”

Pep talk complete, I change into my pajamas and head for bed, where I sleep and dream of a little boy with Nash's hair and my eyes. The dream is so real that I wake up even more determined.

Maybe I'm crazy, but it feels like there are more souls on the line than just mine and Felicity's. There's that baby boy, too, and any other children who might be waiting to join our family.

Because we *are* a family.

Newly formed, yes, but every bit as important and real as our families of origin. We are worth fighting for, and I, for one, am ready to do battle.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A few hours before the corporate meeting we're catering on Tuesday evening, I stop by Dad's office in the back of the new *Bob and Sue's Smokehouse* location.

Betty, my lawyer, called this morning with the news that Liam has dropped his suit and agreed to sign papers granting me full, legal and physical custody of Felicity—provided he be allowed supervised visitation when (or if) he chooses to be part of his daughter's life.

Thanks to the private investigator Dad hired, my ex had no choice but to capitulate and do what's best for Felicity.

I'm so grateful.

I want to tell Dad thank you again in person, but I also have another important discussion to get out of the way.

"So, you know there's another reason I stopped by," I say when I've finished giving him the good news.

"I do." Leaning back in his desk chair, he lets out a long sigh. "I'm sorry for what I said to your husband. I shouldn't have let my anger do the talking or confused the present with the past. I didn't like the way you looked standing next to him when you were kids, but...you're not kids anymore."

"No, we're not. And that's really good to hear, Daddy."

"I don't want to lose you," he says in a softer voice. "And after talking with your mother last night... Well, it's obvious

that what you have with Geary is special. And important to you and Felicity.”

“It is, I really love him.” Glancing at the clock above his desk, I rise from my chair. “I should go. Set up is going to take at least thirty minutes tonight.”

Dad runs a hand through what’s left of his graying blond hair and stands to walk me to the door. “All right, just know that your mom and I love you and all we want is for you to have a good life. I trust you to know what’s best. If Nash makes you happy and he continues to treat you and Felicity well, you won’t hear another peep from me. And I’ll apologize to him, too. I promise.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I say. “That means a lot to me.”

It does, and not just because he’s willing to apologize to Nash. It’s nice to hear that he trusts my judgement on this. I spent a lot of time playing the fool, fighting to make things with Liam work long after it was clear we were a match made in hell, but I’m not fooling myself now.

I’m seeing things more clearly than I have in a long time, and I don’t see any good that will come from Nash and I going our separate ways.

I just have to hope he feels the same way.

I HEAD TO THE VENUE, trying not to dwell on the possibility that I might still lose my husband, no matter how sincerely my dad apologizes, but it’s never far from my thoughts. I’ve put off talking to Lark and Melody about what happened yesterday—I prefer to keep my troubles to myself whenever possible—but it doesn’t take them long to sense that something isn’t right.

No matter how hard I’m trying to stay upbeat on the job, my sisters know me too well.

“You’re not sparkling,” Melody observes sadly as we lay out the spread for the dinner buffet. “Did I kill your giddy love

glow? I didn't mean to. I was just in a terrible mood the other day."

"No, it's not you," I say, forcing a smile.

"Then what is it?" Melody presses. "You seem super down all of a sudden. Is Felicity okay?"

"She's fine." I hesitate, but decide I might as well tell them the truth. If Nash and I end up breaking up, they'll find out soon enough anyway. "Nash and I are going through something, but hopefully it will be okay."

"But you two are perfect for each other," Lark says, her brow furrowing. "What could possibly have happened?"

"Daddy happened," I say, triggering a moan of sympathetic understanding from my sisters. "And Nash's mom hasn't been on her best behavior, either. But like I said, I'm hoping we can work things out."

"I hope so, too," Lark says. "Because I'm already planning a special treat for you and Nash at my wedding."

"No, Lark," I say. "That's your day. And Mason's day. We don't want to intrude."

"Oh, please." Lark waves a hand in the air. "You won't be intruding. The more love to celebrate, the better. And maybe Melody will have a special someone by then, too. At the very least, I can aim the bouquet in your direction, Mels."

"No, thanks," Melody says with a nervous laugh. "I think I should stay single for a while. Probably safer that way."

Lark and I both turn away from the buffet table to shoot her pointed looks. "What does that mean?" I ask.

"Nothing. I just... I'm enjoying being alone," she says, suddenly very intent upon arranging bread rolls in a basket just so. "I need time to myself to sort out some things. About myself."

"Okay..." Lark arches an eyebrow my way, but I shrug.

Melody certainly seems happier than she did the other day. Maybe some solo time is what she needs right now.

Time to yourself can be valuable stuff, though personally, I've had enough alone time.

BY WEDNESDAY NIGHT I'm so lonesome for Nash that my chest feels bruised in the center. By Thursday, it's all I can do to keep from calling his cell and hanging up, just to hear the sound of his voice.

Instead, I call my mother.

I've been listening to the latest family gossip for nearly an hour when Mom lets it slip that Nash swung by their place to see Daddy earlier.

"He did? What happened?" I jump up to pace the kitchen floor, making Felicity, who's lingering over supper in her highchair, bleat in surprise.

"What did Daddy say?" I ask, shooting her a comforting smile. "What did Nash say?"

"I don't know. Bob just said they came to an understanding."

"An understanding!" I screech. "That could mean anything, Mom. That could mean they've come to an understanding that they will hate each other until the end of time. It could mean they've come to an understanding that—"

I'm interrupted by the sound of a doorbell.

I freeze.

I'm not expecting anyone, and who would show up at six-thirty at night except...

"Mom, I have to go," I say, my heart pounding faster as I head for the door. "I think Nash is here. Call you soon."

I hang up, dropping my cell on the entry table as I rush for the front door, throwing it open to find...Joy Geary on the front stoop.

My hope curdles faster than milk left out overnight.

“Oh, hi.” I lift an awkward hand in greeting. “Nash isn’t here right now, but I—”

“I know he’s not,” Joy cuts in. “He was at my house earlier. He asked me to stop by. Is this a good time?” She glances over my shoulder into the house.

“Um, sure. Of course.” I step back, motioning her in. “Felicity’s just finishing up her supper. Can I get you hot tea or something?”

“Yes, please,” Joy says in an almost pleasant voice. “Nash has some lemon tea I like.”

“Great.” I bustle into the kitchen to put the kettle on, while Joy settles herself into the chair next to Felicity’s. My girl greets our new arrival with a happy squeal and Joy smiles perhaps the first, truly joy-filled smile I’ve ever seen on the woman’s face.

Instantly, Nash’s mother becomes a hundred times more approachable.

“Nash has your smile,” I say, the words spilling out before I have a chance to second guess them.

Joy shifts her attention my way, her smile fading only the slightest bit. “He does. He also has my stubborn streak. That’s why I told him he had to go talk to your father, even though he didn’t want to. It’s not good enough just to get *my* head on straight,” she says, with a wink in Felicity’s direction that makes the baby giggle.

I pause, too shocked to say anything for a moment.

Was that a joke? Did Joy the joyless actually make a joke at her own expense?

“My daughter called me yesterday,” Joy continues, her gaze still fixed on Felicity, taking a piece of peach the baby offers to share with a graciousness that makes my heart feel lighter. “Apparently my son is a miserable wreck without you.”

And lighter still...



“I know that’s at least partly my fault, and I’m sorry,” Joy says. “Mamas always think they know best, but...sometimes we’re wrong. I’m sorry I said those things to you the other night.”

“It’s all right,” I murmur more than willing to forgive and forget.

“No, it isn’t,” she insists. “I was scared Nash was going to get hurt, but I was the one who ended up hurting him. I should have taken the time to watch the two of you together before I jumped to conclusions. If I had, I would have seen that he’s so deep in love nothing I can say will change his mind about it anyway.”

“I love him, too.” I pour tea for both of us and bring the mugs to the table. “I promise you I do.” I pull out a chair across from hers. “And I promise I’ll do everything in my power to make him happy. I realize that our marriage was sudden and we haven’t been together very long, but I *know* Nash and I are going to last.”

Joy glances down, studying the steam rising from her cup, the intimacy of the conversation seeming to make her a little nervous. “I married my husband six weeks after we met. I was only sixteen, and my mama swore I’d be back home in a month, but Pete and I will have been married for thirty-two years this December. Sometimes, you just know.”

I smile. “Yeah, you do.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes, sipping our tea while Felicity devours all of her peach-cube dessert, and I ponder the best way to welcome Nash home tomorrow.

Within minutes, I have an idea.

“Joy, what’s Nash’s favorite kind of cake?”

“Red velvet with cream cheese icing,” she says fondly. “He’s had that same cake for every birthday since he was eight years old.”

Red velvet with cream cheese icing. I can work with that.

And if I start tonight...

By the time Joy and I finish our tea, I have an idea of what I'd like to do. By the time I walk her to the door, I'm mentally checking through my list of ingredients, and by the time Felicity's ready for bed, the batter is ready to go into the oven.

I stay up half the night baking, but I'm still up and out of bed early the next morning to do some last-minute shopping, determined to give Nash a welcome home he'll never forget.

I can't wait to see him again.

Even better, I can't wait to hear him promise he's home to stay.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

*F*riday is the longest workday of my entire career.

By the time three o'clock rolls around I'm checking the clock every five minutes, so anxious to be home I can't sit still for more than a few seconds at a time.

Mom said her visit with Aria went well, and I feel good about the conversation I had with Bob—we agreed to be mutually respectful, even if we might never be great friends—but I haven't talked to Aria all week.

I have no idea what she's thinking.

Maybe the time apart made her realize that she jumped into this relationship too soon. She might want to take a step back. She might have decided I'm an asshole for leaving and that she and Felicity are better off without me.

I certainly *feel* like an asshole. All our time out accomplished was to make it abundantly clear I'm more hooked on Aria March than exercise and late-night ice cream combined.

The thought of living the rest of my life without her is soul crushing.

I've almost called her cell a hundred times, but I forced myself to stay away from the phone. She might still be thinking, and I should have the self-discipline to give her space to do that—especially considering *I'm* the one who thought we needed time apart.

“Stupid asshole,” I mutter.

“What’s that?” Kelly, one of the new IT staff, pushes through the glass door to my office. “Did you call for me, Captain?”

“No, sorry,” I say. “Just...talking to myself. Any updates from your department?”

“Yes. All good news. We’re making excellent progress,” Kelly says. “The new system should be up and running by next week.”

“Good.” I glance at the clock over Kelly’s shoulder.

Still another hour and a half to go.

*Damn it.*

“Anything else?” I ask, my irritation with the clock audible in my voice.

“Yes, um... Well, everyone outside wants you to go home early,” Kelly says, pulling my focus back to her flushed face. “They say you’re being a huge grouch, and you should just start the weekend now.”

“And they sent you in to deliver the message?” I scan the room full of desks outside my office, but not a single staff member or officer dares to meet my narrowed gaze.

Everyone seems to be working especially hard this afternoon, in fact.

“They said you wouldn’t yell at me because I’m new.” Kelly’s pitch rises slightly as she adds, “They were right, weren’t they? I’m not in trouble?”

“You’re not in trouble,” I assure her, scooting my chair back. “But tell them I’ll be back Monday morning, and—grouchy or not—I’ll be staying the entire day. And if I find out anyone else left early today, heads will roll, got that?”

“Yes, sir.” Kelly practically trips over her own feet in her haste to leave my office. “Have a good weekend, sir.”

I don’t reply. I can’t make any predictions about the “goodness” of my weekend. Or of my life.

The only way either is going to be tolerable is if Aria says yes.

Yes, she'll stay.

Yes, she'll forgive me.

Yes, she'll be mine. For keeps.

She's working an event until four today and won't be back at the house until four-thirty, so I kill time by swinging into the flower shop. I plan to pick up the same flowers I bought her for the wedding, but the store is out of calla lilies. The prettiest flowers left are the roses, but red roses seem cheesy and impersonal for some reason. I almost go with the white, but they remind me of my grandmother's funeral.

So, in the end I grab a dozen of the yellow and head for the house.

I'm still early, but that'll give me time to get the roses in a vase, get out of my holster, and clean up a little before Aria gets back.

I pull into the driveway and jog up the front steps, so sure the house will be empty that I don't bother knocking or ringing the doorbell. When the door slams shut behind me and Aria screams, I'm so startled I almost drop the roses and reach for my gun.

"Nash?" Aria cries out.

"Yeah, it's me," I say, my heart still racing.

"Oh my god, you scared me!" she calls from the kitchen with a nervous laugh. "We finished up early, but I didn't expect you for a half hour!"

"Sorry," I say, moving through the living room. "I didn't think you'd be back until..."

I round the corner into the kitchen and my words die in my mouth, shriveling up and floating away, leaving me with no clue what I'd been planning to say.

It's impossible to hold onto the capacity for speech with Aria looking like *that*.

“You like?” she asks with a grin as she props one hand on her hip, emphasizing her curves.

Her barely covered curves.

I nod, my eyes flicking up and down, from her wild hair loose around her shoulders, to the white corset cradling her breasts, to the lace panties and garters holding up stockings that stretch down her long legs before disappearing into red stiletto heels.

Red heels on Red.

I don't think I've ever seen anything sexier.

“I was going for wedding night take two, but I couldn't find my white shoes,” she says, lifting one leg and twirling an ankle.

The heel circles in the air; my mouth goes dry.

“I'm all about the red,” I say.

“I heard that about you.” She turns, treating me to a view of her lace-covered bottom that makes the air in the house suddenly feel too warm.

“That's why I made red velvet cake. I still need to ice a few flowers, but...” She glances back at me with an expectant look.

It takes me a second to realize she's pointing to something on the counter by the stove, and another, longer second, to force my eyes away from my insanely sexy wife.

When I do, my jaw drops.

“Is that...” I trail off, shaking my head in disbelief as I circle around the counter. “Did you *make* that?”

“Of course, I made it,” she says, as if whipping up a three-tier wedding cake covered in paisley iced swirls with pearl centers is something she does every afternoon. “You think I'd let someone else make my wedding cake?”

I stop. “You made us a wedding cake?”

“We never had a wedding cake. We never had a wedding night, either. Now that we’ve decided to stay married, I figured we should have both, right?”

My relief is so intense my knees buckle. I brace myself on the counter with one hand, taking deeper breaths, shocked by the depth of my gratitude, and so grateful I close my eyes and send out a quick prayer.

A prayer of thanks for this second chance.

This life. This woman.

“We *have* decided to stay married,” she adds, a tremor in her voice. “Haven’t we?”

“God, yes, we have.” I drop the flowers on the counter and reach for her, dragging her against me, hugging her so tight her breath rushes out. “Yes, yes, yes,” I whisper into the crook of her neck as she wraps her arms around me and holds me just as tight.

“You had me worried for a second.”

“I was so relieved I thought I was going to pass out,” I say, laughing as I kiss the top of her head. “I’m so sorry, Aria. I never should have left. It was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Very stupid,” she agrees, kissing my neck, making me shiver.

“But it did convince me of one thing.” I pull back far enough to catch her gaze. “Without you, I’m no good to anyone. I don’t care what we have to go through to be together. I’m all in.”

“I heard you talked to my dad,” she says. “Thank you for that. I know he isn’t easy.”

“He isn’t,” I agree. “But we had a good talk, and we’re going to play nice from now on. You’re too important to both of us to do anything else.”

“I’m a lucky woman,” she says, her eyes glittering with emotion.



“No, I’m the lucky one. I love you so much, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life proving it.” Without another word, I sweep her into my arms and start for the bedroom.

“Wait!” she says. “I want to feed you cake! Wedding cake before wedding night. There’s an order to these things.”

“I’m not hungry for cake.” I kick open the door to the bedroom, crossing to the bed in three steps. “You’re the only thing I want in my mouth right now, Red.”

“Maybe cake *can* wait,” she says.

I lay her on the bed, watching her unhook the front of that sexy-as-hell corset, baring her breasts as I make quick work of my uniform.

I need her so damned much. I need her in my arms, her skin hot against mine. I need to feel her legs wrapped around my hips, her fingers digging into my shoulders as I slide inside her.

She bites her lip, holding my gaze as I work open my belt. “I’ve missed you so much. Let’s never sleep apart again.”

“Never again,” I promise, shoving my pants to the floor and stepping out of them as I join her on the bed. We come together with twin sounds of relief, her lips tasting every bit as sweet as I remember. “You’re way better than cake.”

“You haven’t tasted it yet,” she says as I roll on top of her.

“I don’t need to. Even if it’s the best red velvet on earth, you’re still better.” I kiss her again, murmuring against her lips, “The best.”

“And don’t you forget it,” she says as she reaches between us, stroking my cock through my boxer shorts. “I’m so happy I get to keep being your wife.”

“And I’m honored to be your husband.” I capture her hands and draw them over her head, pinning her wrists to the mattress. I don’t want to be distracted for this part, I want her to know what she means to me. “Aria March, I promise to love you and honor you and live up to every other vow I made the morning we were married. There’s nothing pretend about this

for me anymore. You are the realest, most important part of my life, and you always will be.”

She smiles, even as her eyes begin to shine. “I promise all of those things, too. For now, and always.” She sniffs. “Now will you please take my panties off? I think I might love you even a little bit more if I’m not wearing panties.”

I kiss her, smiling against her lips as I curl my fingers over the top of the white lace, all too happy to oblige.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

*H*is kiss, God, his *kiss*.

Nash kisses are the best kisses. They set my heart on fire and make me ache with the most exquisite pleasure-pain I've ever known.

Pleasure, because everything Nash does to me makes me feel oh-so-good, pain because close never seems close enough. Even with his skin hot against mine and my fingers tangled in his hair and his mouth everywhere I've been dying for him to kiss me, I still want more.

I still want him closer.

I want to breathe his breath, to feel our hearts beat in perfect rhythm.

Most of all, I want him inside me—always.

“Let's have sex all the time,” I whisper as he pulls my panties down, tossing them to the floor before returning to my open arms.

“I was going to suggest that, but I worried you'd think I was crazy.” He kisses me hard, groaning as his fingers slip between my thighs.

“No, you're not crazy.” My head falls back as he pushes a finger inside me, stroking in and out, making me squirm and lift into his touch. “You're a genius.”

“People might judge us,” he warns, flicking his tongue across my nipple. “But I don't care.”

“Me, either.” My breath shudders out. “All I care about is you. Inside me. Right now.”

“I want you ready,” he rumbles, kissing my other breast.

“I’m so ready.” I spread my legs wider and circle my hips, taking his fingers deeper into where I’m so hot and wet. “Past ready. I’ve been dreaming about this all week, please, I—”

He cuts me off with a kiss that makes my head spin and my heart squeeze in my chest, a kiss that turns the world upside down, making me so dizzy with wanting him that I don’t remember him taking off his boxers. I only know that suddenly he’s hot and hard against my thigh and I’m wrapping my legs around his hips to welcome him in.

“Yes,” I whisper against his lips as he pushes inside me, his cock filling me inch by glorious inch.

My lashes flutter as I wrap my legs around his waist. “Yes, this,” I moan as he glides deeper, until he reaches the end of me and his hip bones kiss my hip bones and the base of his cock nudges against my clit and he is finally close enough.

Perfectly close.

“This is where you belong,” I say, as we begin to move, coming together with a grace and ease that leaves no doubt we were made for each other.

“Forever,” he promises as our gazes catch and hold.

And soon the world fades away, until there’s nothing but the two of us, together and close and perfect. So perfect and sweet. Sweeter and sweeter, our bodies straining harder, faster, until we fall apart and put each other back together again.

Hours later—after we’ve christened the shower, eaten cake off of each other’s fingers, and then decided eating cake off other body parts would be even more fun—I lie on the living room carpet with my head on Nash’s chest, too exhausted to move anything but the lazy fingers I trace through his dusting of chest hair. “I’m glad you don’t shave your chest,” I murmur.

“Why would I do that?”

“Most body builders do.”

“I’m not a body builder,” he says. “I’m a fitness enthusiast.”

“Is that right, Meaty?” I smile, my cheek still on his chest.

“That’s right, Red.” He cups my bottom through my sleep shorts. “I’m also an Aria enthusiast.”

I giggle. “No way. We can’t bang again. You’ll break my privates.”

“Wouldn’t want to do that,” he says seriously. “I really like your privates. A lot.”

“I could tell,” I say, still grinning. I reach down between his legs, beneath the waist of his pajama pants, wrapping my fingers around his already semi-hard cock. “I like yours, too. I will call him Mr. Magic and I will love him and pet him and give him kisses.”

“Kisses?” Nash asks in a voice so hopeful and eager I can’t help but laugh.

I push up on one arm, arching a dubious brow. “Seriously? You think Mr. Magic can handle kisses right now? Hasn’t he had enough?”

“When it comes to you,” he says, kissing my forehead, “there’s no such thing as enough.”

And that’s how we end up christening the couch.

And it is wonderful.

Almost as wonderful as this man.

Keep reading for a sneak peek of

Virgin Seeks Bad Boy

Melody and Nick’s story!

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## SNEAK PEEK

Please enjoy this sneak peek of  
VIRGIN SEEKS BAD BOY

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*Melody March*

Being a grown-up is *waaaay* harder than my parents made it look when I was a kid. I'm about to turn twenty-three, the same age my mom was when she had my eldest sister, and I'm not even close to having the whole adulting thing—or myself—sorted out.

But there are a few things I know for sure:

1. I'm not the kind of girl who drinks three margaritas in less than two hours.

2. I don't stay out past eleven, or wear dresses that emphasize my already far-too-abundant chest, or delete texts from my ex-boyfriend without bothering to respond.

3. I don't wear eyeliner and lipstick at the same time, or dance when there's no music playing, or take off my shoes to wade in the fountain at the quiet end of downtown, ignoring posted signs that clearly state—No Wading Please.

The fact that at the present moment I'm guilty of all of the above would be enough to make my head spin even without the tequila pumping through my bloodstream.

I don't know what's come over me lately.



*Oh, yes, you do*, the inner voice slurs. *It's him, the jerkiest jerk who was ever a jerk. It's all his fault.*

The inner voice is so right.

This is all *his* fault. *Him*, Nick Geary, the bad boy who kissed me senseless against his car a month ago, awakening the sleeping sex beast inside me, only to treat me like a sweet baby sister ever since. Before Nick and I locked lips, I had no idea I could feel *hungry* for someone's kisses.

Sure, I liked kissing, but I didn't *hunger* for it. Hunger was for food—cheese, avocado toast, and extra dessert, in particular.

I was a fool. A naïve, ridiculous fool, twirling innocently through the world with no idea that she would soon be starved to death for another taste of Nick Geary's lips.

That's what it feels like...starving.

I would literally give up cheese for an entire year for a chance to make out with Nick again, but he's decided to be a huge, hairy, kiss-withholding jerk.

Okay, he's not a jerk.

He's mostly nice, but even his niceness is awful, a sucker punch to the ego every time I try, and fail, to pique his interest.

And I *have* tried to pique it, boy have I, but no amount of flirting or cookie baking or cute dress wearing in his vicinity has caught his eye. He seems to like hanging out with me—he's always underfoot in the kitchen at work, stealing a taste of my dish-in-progress, teasing my sisters, and laughing at my jokes—but his feelings seem purely platonic.

Ugh. Platonic.

It's enough to sour even my usually cheery disposition.

I kick a leg in frustration, sending fountain water spraying onto the sidewalk, inches from where my best friend, Kitty, is still standing.

“Hey! Watch it.”

“Sorry!” I say, laughing as she points an accusing finger at my chest. “I thought you were in already! Get in!”

“I will not.” Kitty, one of my oldest besties, shakes her head, sending her long brown ponytail swishing back and forth. “It’s against the rules. And I might drown.”

I glance down and back up at her with an arched brow. “In less than two feet of water?”

“Maybe.” She hiccups and grins. “I’m pretty tipsy.”

Kitty only had two margaritas, but her cheeks are flushed and her blue eyes glassy. But then, Kitty weighs about forty pounds less than I do. I’m a curvy girl, a state of being that’s not likely to change anytime soon. I love to cook and to eat what I cook—and what my sisters and co-workers at Ever After Catering cook—way too much to ever fit into a size two.

Cooking is more than a job, it’s one of my passions, and for a long time, it was enough. All I needed was my family and my lucky apron, and I was a happy camper.

But now...

“Do you think I need to lose weight?” I ask, staring down at myself, shocked again by how enormous my breasts look from this angle. Really, the universe could have pulled back on the boobs a little. Small woodland creatures could get lost in that cleavage and never be found.

Good thing I stay out of the woods most of the time.

“Oh, shut up,” Kitty says with a snort. “Quit being crazy. You’re gorgeous. Every guy in the restaurant was staring at you when we walked out.”

“Really?” I wrinkle my nose. I hadn’t noticed, but I also haven’t been paying much attention to the male population lately.

I’ve only been interested in Nick’s attention.

Or lack thereof.

“Totally.” Kitty reaches back, tightening her ponytail with a firm yank. “I was invisible. As usual.”

A hard-core tomboy who owns her own auto repair shop, Kitty hates girly things with a passion I reserve for loving cheese, and I rarely see her out of jeans and a tee-shirt.

Tonight is no exception.

But Kitty makes dark wash jeans and a tight black tee look edgy and cool. She has a tough, lean, sexy thing going on that makes it hard for me to understand why, aside from myself, Kitty is the only other girl from our high school graduating class not coupled up, engaged, or already married.

Hard to understand, but still, I'm grateful not to be the only odd girl out. Since my eighteenth birthday, I've been a member of ten wedding parties and was just asked to join our friend Dinah's bridesmaid crew last week. At this rate, I'll have a dozen bridesmaid dresses collecting dust in my parents' garage before my birthday in October.

A collection of bridesmaid dresses, but not even a hint that a wedding of my own might be in the near future. The past few months, my dating life has been dismal. Even before I started crushing on Nick. Every allegedly sweet boy my matchmaking nana set me up with proved to be more annoying, self-centered, and uninspiring than the last.

It's enough to make a girl want to give up on the opposite sex altogether...if there wasn't an irresistible bad boy in tight black jeans strutting around under her nose every day at work.

Geez...the strutting! It would be laughable if he didn't look so darned good doing it.

"If I ever want to get laid again, I guess I need a makeover or something," Kitty says, pressing her hands to her flushed cheeks with a groan. "But I hate makeup soooo much."

"You don't need it! You're pretty the way you are, mama."

"Right." Kitty rolls her eyes.

"You are!" I insist. "If I liked girls, I'd be all up in your business. I think you're smokin' hot."

"And I think you're drunk and falling out of the top of your dress." Kitty snorts and points at my chest.

I glance down again, blinking in surprise to discover even more unruly boob-age spilling out of the V-neck of my purple dress. I chose this dress for this exact effect, but it's still a little shocking to see so much of myself on display.

Shocking and a little exciting...

It isn't just feeling starved for another taste of Bad Boy that's been different lately. I've felt restless, experimental, tempted to push the limits and bend the rules in a way I never have before.

A part of my brain insists it's just a risqué dress and not a big deal, but another part wonders what the heck is happening and how far this will go before I revert to my old self?

"Tug that thing up and get out of there," Kitty presses. "Let's go have coffee and donuts. Sober up. I shouldn't drive right now."

"Me either," I say, my stomach rumbling at the mention of donuts. I could definitely go for a fresh glazed or two.

I wade to the edge of the fountain, enjoying the way the cool water swishes between my toes. My high-heeled sandals were killing me. I can't wait for the late September heat to fade so I can pull out my comfy boots with the wool lining and slip back into cozy fall sweaters and, hopefully, a less tumultuous state of mind.

Maybe it's just the lingering summery weather that's made me...hotter than usual.

I step out onto the sidewalk and slip my damp feet into my sandals with a resigned sigh, wishing bare feet were socially acceptable. "Where to?" I ask, propping my hands on my hips. "*Donut Time Diner* or *Dippin Donuts*?"

"*Donut Time*. Obviously," Kitty says. "Having to dip my donut in coffee to make it soft enough to chew is sacrilege."

"Agreed," I say, looping my arm through hers as we wander down the street toward the older part of downtown Bliss River.

At eleven thirty on a Thursday night, the downtown area is quiet. The click of my heels on the pavement and the muffled music pulsing from behind the thick metal door of The Horse and Rider at the end of Main Street are the only sounds.

The Horse and Rider is the only place—aside from Bliss River’s many churches—where a person can regularly catch live music in our sleepy little town. The bar also has a reputation for attracting a rough crowd after ten o’clock. I’ve been old enough to get into a bar for nearly two years now, but I’ve never even thought about going to the honky-tonk, even though I’ve been a huge fan of live music since my sister, Aria, took me to my first all-ages show in Atlanta when I was sixteen.

But I’m a “nice girl,” and nice girls don’t go to places like The Horse and Rider.

Nice girls volunteer at the retirement home, go to church at least once a week, head to bed before midnight, and watch their language in polite company. I try not to cuss, but when I really need to drop an “f-bomb,” I make darned sure it doesn’t happen in front of my parents, Nana, or anyone who might report back to the above.

And that’s all good. I’ve always liked being a “nice girl.” It’s a way of life that’s come relatively easily for me.

But for some reason, the throbbing beat pulsing from behind the honky-tonk’s door calls to me tonight in a way it hasn’t before.

I want to know what’s going on in there. I want to check out the size of the dance floor, taste the allegedly awful draft beer, and feel the music pulsing through my bones.

I’m about to ask Kitty if she wants to duck into the bar for a look around before we head to the diner—just to check it out for future dancing possibilities— when Kitty stops dead in her tracks on the sidewalk and squeezes my arm tight enough to make me squeak in surprise.

“Melody, is that who I think it is?” she hisses beneath her breath.

“Who?” I look around, but there’s no one else on the sidewalk on either side of the street. “Where?” I ask again in my normal voice.

“Hush! There, in the tattoo shop,” Kitty whispers. “The red sign. Big. Glowing. Says Tattoo in all caps.”

My eyes widen as I home in on the neon sign affixed to the brick edifice above the store to our right. The shop was a crafting supply store for about a year but has languished empty since Craft Happy went out of business. The Main Street area is a hopping place, but this end of downtown is older and more faded than the refurbished buildings closer to the square. The landlord of this store always seems to have a problem retaining renters. Every business that opens ends up closing within a year or less.

Sadly, I doubt the newest tenants will do much better. They’ll be lucky to last until Christmas.

“A tattoo shop.” I arch a brow, laughter in my voice. “In downtown Bliss River? What were they thinking?”

“Maybe he was thinking he’s tired of working as a part-time cater-waiter. That’s Nick, right?” Kitty points a discreet, but jabby, finger toward the shop window.

I follow the direction of the jab. There, on a rolling stool, tattoo gun in hand in the brightly lit shop, is none other than Nick Geary.

As always, his dark brown hair is carefully spiked, sprouting wildly around his head, but instead of a tray of champagne flutes, his magnetic green eyes are focused on the beefy forearm of a bald man in a Harley Davidson tee shirt.

The moment I lay eyes on him, my tequila-numbed synapses snap and flicker. I remember Nick said he used to work in a tattoo parlor in Atlanta, but I had no idea he was planning to open a shop in Bliss River.

Did he mention that?

Surely he didn’t, or I would have remembered.

For better or worse, I tend to remember every word that spills from Nick's smirky, sexy mouth.

Silently, I wish this shop a long, happy life. Nick is even more handsome with that look of complete concentration on his face.

I watch, mesmerized, as he deftly guides the buzzing needle across the man's skin with an assurance that makes it clear he's achieved mastery of his craft. The muscles in his arms flex deliciously as he works, drawing attention to the tattoos trailing from beneath the sleeves of his tee-shirt, making my breath come faster even before Kitty says—

“We should go in and say hi.”

I gulp and freeze, anxiety dumping into my bloodstream.

Am I ready to face off with Nick right now? I never used to be nervous around boys, even boys I thought were cute, but that was B.N.G.—Before Nick Geary. Before he made me tongue tied. Before he remained unfazed by my gifts of mouth-orgasm-inducing cookies. Before he made it clear my flirting game isn't nearly as solid as I'd assumed before he proved immune to it.

I only dated a handful of boys during high school, culinary school, and the years since, but my affection was always returned. My crushes always crushed back.

Until now.

Now I'm off kilter, off my game, and anything but smooth. Every time I run into Nick outside of work, when I'm prepared for an encounter with the object of my unrequited affection, I feel like I'm stuck in an anxiety dream, the one where it's opening night of the school play, and I don't have a single line memorized.

“Okay, but what do I say?” I ask, biting my lip.

Kitty shrugs. “Um...hi? What's up? When did you open the shop? Why don't you want to have wild, passionate sex with me? Or I could ask for you.”

I squeeze Kitty's arm. "If you say that, I will kill you. Dead. Or at the very least carve out your tongue and keep it in my pocket."

"Gross." Kitty giggles. "You never would have said something like that before. Seriously, woman, this crush is affecting you in strange and mysterious ways."

"I'm sorry," I say, feeling terrible. "Are you mad?"

"Of course not. Don't be silly." She rolls her eyes. "I like the wilder Melody. She's more fun to go drinking with, but you need to face your fear." She tugs me toward the door. "Come on, let's go in. I'll say I'm thinking about getting a tattoo. I want to meet this boy who's too dumb to see how awesome you are and make sure he sees you in this insanely hot dress."

I grin. "You're the best friend ever."

"True," she says, before adding in a whisper, "Just let me do the talking and act surprised to see Mr. Hottie."

I suck in a breath and nod, keeping my gaze fixed on the wild, tattoo-inspired art tacked to the walls as we step inside the shop, setting off a tinkling bell that's barely audible over the punk music pumping through the speakers.

Still, Nick seems to have heard the jingle.

"Be with you in just a second," he calls over his shoulder, shouting to be heard over the buzzing of the tattoo gun. "Feel free to look through the books."

"Cool, thanks," Kitty answers, winking at me before stepping up to the wooden counter where several binders filled with laminated pages of tattoo designs sit next to a thicker binder with "Nick's Original Work" written in permanent marker on the cover.

With a quick glance at Nick to make sure he hasn't seen me, I reach for the last binder and flip it open. Inside is page after page of gorgeously drawn and executed tattoos. Aria mentioned that her new husband, Nash, the town Captain of Police and Nick's oldest brother, is a talented artist.



It must run in the family, because Nick's work is breathtaking.

He's done a wide variety of tattoos—everything from a cute little unicorn with a rainbow mane to a giant, scary-looking robot that covered a man's entire back—but he seems to specialize in animals.

The feathers on his birds are extraordinary and the muscles on his tigers and panthers ripple with life, even in a still picture. But it's the phoenix on the last page that really catches my attention. Nick used vibrant colors to capture every exotic detail of the mythical creature—turquoise for the scaled patches of skin, lush purples and greens for the feathers, and an orange so bright it looks like he dipped his needle in liquid sunshine for the flames. The expression on the phoenix's face is equally captivating, somehow managing to be both pained and hopeful, at the same time.

It touches things inside me that I never imagined a tattoo could. It's truly a beautiful work of art, and suddenly I wonder why I've always thought tattoos were tacky.

Nick's work certainly isn't.

“Melody?”

Nick's voice pierces my thoughts, making me aware that the buzzing of the tattoo gun has stopped.

I glance up, meeting his bright green eyes, doing my best not to shiver as a current of electricity leaps between us.

Oh wow...

Something's...different.

He's not looking at me like a baby sister tonight.

He looks startled, but also a little...hungry.

I understand that hungry feeling...

And I'm suddenly very glad I decided to wear a scandalous dress.

Very, very glad indeed.

Virgin Seeks Bad Boy  
is Available to Order Now!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of over forty novels, *USA Today* Bestseller Lili Valente writes everything from steamy suspense to laugh-out-loud romantic comedies. A die-hard romantic and optimist at heart, she can't resist a story where love wins big. Because love should always win.

When she's not writing, Lili enjoys adventuring with her two sons, climbing on rocks, swimming too far from shore, and asking "why" an incorrigible number of times per day. A former yoga teacher, actor, and dancer, she is also very bendy and good at pretending innocence when caught investigating off-limits places.

You can currently find Lili in the mid-South, valiantly trying to resist the lure of all the places left to explore.

Find Lili at [www.lilivalente.com](http://www.lilivalente.com)



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