

THE DONOVANS SERIES

Save Me



NEW YORK TIMES BEST SELLING AUTHOR

SAMANTHA
CHASE

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Edits: Jillian Rivera

Praise for Samantha Chase

“If you can’t get enough of stories that get inside your heart and soul and stay there long after you’ve read the last page, then Samantha Chase is for you!”

-*NY Times & USA Today Bestselling Author **Melanie Shawn***

“A fun, flirty, sweet romance filled with romance and character growth and a perfect happily ever after.”

-*NY Times & USA Today Bestselling Author **Carly Phillips***

“Samantha Chase writes my kind of happily ever after!”

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“The openness between the lovers is refreshing, and their interactions are a balanced blend of sweet and spice. The planets may not have aligned, but the elements of this winning romance are definitely in sync.”

- ***Publishers Weekly, STARRED review***

“A true romantic delight, *A Sky Full of Stars* is one of the top gems of romance this year.”

- ***Night Owl Reviews, TOP PICK***

“Great writing, a winsome ensemble, and the perfect blend of heart and sass.”

- ***Publishers Weekly***

“Recommend Chase to fans of Susan Elizabeth Phillips. Well-written and uniquely appealing.”

- ***Booklist***

Chapter One

I wonder if fish get thirsty...

“So that’s how I found out I have a shellfish allergy,” Jarod Milner, the world’s most boring date, explained.

Ryleigh Donovan wished someone would come and save her from the worst date of her life, but apparently no one in her family could sense her extreme unease.

No matter how many times she tried to catch their attention.

Having dinner at her family pub was never her first choice when she went out with a guy, but tonight’s date was really more of an ambush.

Her mother had called and said they were having a problem with their computer and because Ryleigh was sort of a tech geek—or as she preferred to be called, a tech *goddess*—she agreed to come to the pub to check it out. As soon as she arrived, her mother immediately ushered her over to a booth and introduced her to Jarod the periodontist.

“I wasn’t too upset about it because I never liked fish,” he went on and Ryleigh swore she was going to go back into the office, upload a virus onto her parents’ computer, and then leave on a two-week road trip without her phone.

That would teach them.

Actually, it wouldn’t. It didn’t seem like anything would. She’d begged,

pleaded, and carried on about how she did not want to be set up with anyone—and especially didn't want any surprise dates—and yet, here she was.

“It's also why I never go out on a boat. I get seasick.”

I wonder if fish get seasick...

Seriously, she'd had her share of bad dates, but this one was going at the top of the list. The previous reigning champion was the time she went out with Leo, the accountant. He'd talked numbers all night and lectured her about her financial status and how far behind she was on her retirement fund. She was twenty-four at the time and told him she wasn't worried about retirement just yet. Then he got annoyed by her so-called snarkiness and walked out—sticking her with the bill.

Oh, how she'd practically kill to have Jarod walk out right now because of her snarkiness...

Although, it was hard to be snarky when she couldn't get a word in because he had done nothing but talk about himself all damn night.

Yeah, she was definitely putting a nasty virus on the office computer as soon as she was done here.

With a sigh, Ryleigh glanced around the pub hoping to catch someone's eye who would read her desperate need for help.

Uncle Ronan was busy chatting with Joe Denton, undoubtedly talking about the upcoming Super Bowl. Her brother Jamie was making drinks behind the bar while talking to some blonde who'd been coming in here more and more lately. He didn't look too happy, so there was zero chance of him even paying any attention to her. None of her other siblings had shown up to get something to eat, and her mother was suspiciously absent.

You better be guarding all your electronics, Mom. I'm gunning for them...

The door to the pub opened and in walked Ryker.

No last name—or maybe no first name—just...Ryker.

He hadn't spotted her and this was possibly the one and only time she

wished he would. Normally, it was like the man had a tracking device on her because he always seemed to find her in a crowd. It just figured that when she would finally accept his flirting and offer of a drink and he didn't even look at her.

I cannot catch a break!

“So, what about you, Ryleigh? When was the last time you went to the dentist?”

Ugh...kill me now.

“About six months ago,” she lied. “No cavities.” With a big smile, she showed off her teeth. “I’m an excellent brusher.”

He frowned and made some sort of disapproving sound. “Your gums look a little red and inflamed.” Moving in closer, he reached out to touch her face and she instantly pulled back.

“Yeah, um...we’re not going to do that,” she told him firmly. “Not here in the middle of the pub, and not anywhere.” Glancing around again, she waved Jodi, their server, over. “It was nice meeting you, Jarod, but...I need to go. Have a nice night.” Sliding out of the booth, she grabbed her purse and smiled stiffly at Jodi. “Have you seen...?”

“She’s in the kitchen,” Jodi whispered. “Hiding.” With a wink, she put the bill down on the table and blocked Jarod from going after her. “I’ll just take that when you’re ready.”

Ryleigh didn’t waste any time storming into the kitchen. “Mom! What in the world?”

Her mother, doing her best to look innocent, stood by the sink pretending to be washing dishes.

“The water’s not on and there isn’t even anything in the sink!” she snapped, slamming her purse down on the stainless steel workstation, causing the contents to fly out everywhere. Muttering a curse, she frantically scooped it all up before facing her mother. “How could you do that to me?”

“Do what?” Kate Donovan asked sweetly. “Fix you up with a very nice,

respectable man?”

“He just tried to put his hand in my mouth!”

Kate looked at her oddly. “Why would he do that?” Then she paused. “Oh...because he’s a dentist. It’s what they do.”

“He’s not a dentist. He’s a periodontist, and yes, there is a difference because he described it for over forty-five minutes! And I don’t care what he does for a living! You don’t put your fingers in someone’s mouth in the middle of a restaurant!”

“We’re really just a pub; we’re not very formal...”

“*Mom!*” she cried and stomped her foot. “That’s it! Enough! You need to stop with this! I don’t want you fixing me up with anyone! Ever!” Her voice grew louder with each word and yet her mother’s expression was completely serene. “I’m serious. If you ever do this to me again, I’ll...I’ll...I’ll mess up your computers!”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Ryleigh,” Kate said wearily. “Besides, we know a dozen people who could fix the computer.”

This was getting her nowhere.

Again.

If she was going to put a stop to this, she was going to have to do something drastic.

She just had no idea what that was just yet.

Picking up her purse, she glared at her mother. “This isn’t over. From now on, I’m not coming here when you call with some sort of emergency. You’re like the boy who cried wolf. I don’t trust you, and I’m never going to believe you again.”

A loud sigh was her mother’s only reaction.

“Why can’t you just leave me alone on this?”

“Because you have terrible taste in men and I’d like to see you settle down. You’re not getting any younger and I want grandchildren.”

“Need I remind you that Arianna and Will are planning their wedding and

I'm sure Liam and Tessa won't be too far behind? I don't see why I'm the only one you're fixated on."

Kate stepped in close and gave her a soft pat on the cheek. "Such a pretty girl. Why can't you find a man to go out with more than once?"

There were so many answers to that question, but the only one to come out was, "Because you keep fixing me up with jerks and weirdos! If you'd just leave me alone and let me date who I want, I guarantee you I'd go out on more than one date!"

It was amazing lightning didn't come down from the sky and zap her right there on the spot. She'd gone out with several men of her own choosing and none of them had resulted in second dates either.

Was she a little picky? Maybe. But she wanted a man who was intelligent, funny, good-looking...someone who understood her geeky side and didn't mock her for it.

And definitely someone who didn't stick their fingers in her mouth over dinner.

"Ryleigh," her mother began patiently. "You see this as me picking on you, but I'm your mother and I see how you push people away. You're too young to be this set in your ways. No one is perfect and maybe if you stopped trying so hard to show the world how much you know, you could let someone in."

On the surface, it sounded like the perfect thing a mother should say to her daughter.

But Kate Donovan was no ordinary mother.

"Maybe you could put the same effort into doing your hair and buying some decent clothes as you do into proving how smart you are and..."

And there it was.

Inwardly, Ryleigh sighed.

Liar.

No, inwardly, she raged.

Seriously, she really loved her mother; hell, she loved her whole family. But all Ryleigh truly wanted was for them to love her where she was at instead of focusing on where they thought she was lacking.

And maybe not so much *they*, but *she*.

“I’m leaving,” she said firmly. “And I think it would be best if we didn’t talk for a few days.” Purse in hand, she walked across the kitchen and slammed her palm against the swinging door on her way out. Luckily no one was on the other side of it because that would have ruined her glorious exit.

With a small huff, she didn’t make eye contact with anyone on her way across the crowded room. The only thing she did notice was that Jarod was gone.

Good riddance.

“Ry!” Jamie called out.

So close...

Her brother came jogging over and, for once, he wasn’t quite his jovial self. “You okay?”

“Yeah, why?” she murmured.

“You were looking pretty fierce when you came through the doorway and I just wanted to make sure you’re alright.”

That was kind of sweet.

“Just...just Mom stuff,” she told him. “Did you see how she ambushed me tonight?”

He nodded. “I did, but...I sort of had my own thing going on.”

“Then I guess I should be asking if you’re okay.”

With a shrug, he replied, “I guess. This is the first time I’ve ever had a breakup that just won’t end.”

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. “Yeah, it’s tough to be you,” she mumbled and fortunately, he grinned.

“So, what was wrong with the guy tonight?”

“The list is endless, but the highlight was when he tried to put his fingers

in my mouth to inspect my gums.”

“No!” And then the rat bastard laughed.

Hard.

“And you want to know what the worst part is?”

“You mean that wasn’t it?” Jamie asked with another laugh.

“That Mom still doesn’t think she did anything wrong! Why isn’t she bugging you about this breakup? Why isn’t she harping on Patrick to settle down? I mean...why is all her energy on me?”

He instantly took a step back. “I’m not touching this with a ten-foot pole. Look, I’m sorry she’s bugging you, but as long as she’s doing that, my life is easier, so...”

Leaning in, Ryleigh shoved him.

Hard.

“You suck.” And with that, she stormed away.

For once it would be nice if someone took her side. She was a good person who always stepped up to help her friends and her siblings, and this was the thanks she got. No one was willing to do the same for her.

It wasn’t fair and it wasn’t right and she was just so damn done with it all.

Shoving her way through the crowd, she practically sagged with relief when she got to the door.

And slammed her hand against that one too for one last glorious exit.

Not that anyone would notice.

* * *

Ryker noticed.

Hell, from the moment he first laid eyes on Ryleigh Donovan, he’d noticed everything about her—from her long auburn hair and green eyes to her defiant attitude and sensual curves.

She was trouble with a capital T and apparently, that just added to her

appeal.

For months, he'd been doing his best to get her to go out with him and she'd shot him down every time. Most guys would take the hint and move on, but Ryker had a feeling that her bravado was all an act.

Actually, he was pretty damn sure of it.

It had almost killed him when he walked through the door tonight and saw her sitting in the booth with that doofus who looked like every uptight loser he'd ever despised.

And yet...Ryleigh was out with him.

Because Ryker spent so much time at Donovan's Pub, he knew her mother was constantly trying to fix her daughter up with nice, upstanding guys.

Which totally left him out of the picture.

On the surface, Ryker was basically every mother's nightmare: tattoos, long hair, beard, and extremely rough around the edges. If that guy was Kate Donovan's idea of the perfect guy, then there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell of her ever considering him.

And that was a damn shame because he knew he'd treat Ryleigh better than any man alive. Hell, he'd treat her like a princess if given the chance.

He thought about the way she'd stormed out of the pub and wondered why he was still sitting here nursing a drink when he could potentially go after her and make sure she was alright.

Tossing a twenty down on the bar, he nodded to Ronan before making his way out the door. There was a chance that she was long gone, but he was hopeful.

Just like he was hopeful every time he tried to start a conversation with her.

He loved her snark and dry wit and he admired the way she didn't seem to tolerate anyone's bullshit.

Even his.

Out on the sidewalk, he glanced in both directions, raking a hand through his out-of-control hair. He was about to mutter a curse when someone beat him to it.

“Dammit! Dammit, dammit, *dammit!*”

A slow smile crept across his face as he made his way toward the parking lot. There, he found Ryleigh standing next to her sensible little Toyota, stomping her foot in frustration. Doing his best to appear casual, he slowly made his way over to her.

“Hey, beautiful,” he drawled. “Is everything okay?”

Her green eyes shot daggers at him. “No, everything is most definitely *not* okay,” she snapped. “I dropped my keys back in the kitchen and I am not going back in there!”

That...wasn't what he was expecting.

“Why not?”

With a groan, she fished around in her purse again before replying. “Because I had a fight with my mother and made a big stink about how I didn't even want to see or talk to her for a few days. If I go back in there, it completely nullifies my glorious exit. Dammit!”

“Glorious exit?” Leaning against her car, he studied her. “I don't think I've ever heard anyone describe leaving that way.”

“Trust me, in that moment, it was awesome. If I have to go back in to grab my keys, it will look like I did it on purpose and...” She groaned again before digging in her purse one more time.

Gently, Ryker took the bag from her hands. “It's not that big, Ryleigh. They're not in there. Do you have a spare set somewhere?”

Her shoulders sagged as she nodded. “At home, but...ugh...I hate that I did this! Now I'll have to call for an Uber to go home and back and...”

“You don't need to call for an Uber.”

“Uh, yeah, I do, because I certainly don't want to walk there and back. It's already dark out and it's a mile each way...”

“I’ll drive you.”

Her eyes went a little wide as her mouth moved with no words coming out.

He liked that he caught her off guard.

“It’s not a big deal. And, like you said, it’s only a mile away. What’s it gonna take? Ten minutes tops?”

“Ryker...”

“Do you want to go back inside and have everyone think you’re caving?” Honestly, he had no idea if that even applied to the situation, but he gave it a shot.

“Absolutely not!” she told him. “But...um...I don’t mind calling for a car.” Holding up her phone, she made a bit of a show of pulling up the app. “You don’t need to drive me anywhere, but...uh...thanks.”

With a careless shrug, he straightened. “No problem. I knew you’d be too embarrassed to accept my help, so...have a good night.” Turning, he started to walk away.

“Embarrassed? Why on earth would I be embarrassed?”

Ryker hid his smile as he turned to face her again. “You know...after being on a date with someone else earlier and then essentially sprinting from the table, I just figured you’d want to avoid anyone who witnessed that.”

Throwing her head back and exposing that neck that he’d love to lean in and press his mouth to, he fought the urge to stay where he was. Her little growl of frustration was kind of adorable, and when she straightened, she looked mildly pissed.

“He tried to put his fingers in my mouth! Trust me, it was in his best interest for me to get away from the table as fast as humanly possible.”

“Why would he put his fingers in your mouth? Was it like a third date or something?”

“Ew! No! And is there really a date rule for when it’s appropriate to put your fingers in someone’s mouth in the middle of a restaurant?”

If they were talking about the two of them, yes. But when it was her and some other random guy, absolutely not.

“I wouldn’t say *rule*...”

“Never mind,” she quickly interrupted before turning her back and looking at her phone.

Ryker wasn’t stupid; he knew she was going to be too stubborn to accept a free ride from him based on...whatever preconceived notion she had about him.

But he refused to accept that.

“Ryleigh, this is crazy. I’m right here and my car is literally five feet away. You can be home in fifteen minutes. Just let me do this for you.”

It was insane how nervous he was and he found himself holding his breath. He’d asked her out at least a dozen times and she’d always turned him down. But this wasn’t a date.

This was a chance for her to get to know him.

The way she looked at him told him she was considering it.

“I just...I don’t want you to read anything into this,” she began carefully. “I know you’ve asked me out before...”

“Pfft, please. I’m not dense. This isn’t a date. This is just me helping you out. I know that.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. “I don’t even know your name.”

“What are you talking about? You know my name.”

“No, I know *part* of your name. There’s got to be more to it than just Ryker.”

Shaking his head, he said, “Nope.”

“Seriously?” she deadpanned. “So that’s it. Just Ryker. No last name?”

“Maybe that is my last name,” he countered.

“And your first name?”

He grinned. “Just one name.”

“So...you’re *Ryker* Ryker?” she asked with one brow perfectly raised.

When she said it like that, it sounded ridiculous, but he was enjoying the banter. “No, just the one name. You know, like Adele, Cher, or Madonna.”

Her lips twitched. “Are you saying you’re like...an aging pop diva?”

I walked right into that one, didn’t I?

“Or like Bono, Sting, or Prince,” he corrected.

“Do you sing?” she asked.

“Um...what?”

Nodding, she once again asked, “Do you sing? I mean...the single name and the comparison to all these musicians, I’m assuming there’s a connection.”

Unable to help himself, Ryker laughed. “Ryleigh, I’m just offering to take you to pick up your keys so you can take your car and go home and save face with your family. Do you want my help or not?”

She eyed him warily. “Fine. I do. But I’m texting my sister and my best friend Ivy. If anything happens to me, they’re going to make sure bad things happen to you.”

“Consider me warned,” he told her before walking over to his truck.

“Um...maybe this isn’t a good idea.”

With a weary sigh, Ryker turned to face her. “Why now?”

“There’s no way I can get into that truck! It’s like...I’d need a ladder to climb in!”

Fine, the truck was a little on the high side. The Ford had been modified quite a bit, but...it was temporary. He was only driving it until he found something else.

“No ladder, Princess. There’s a step and I can help you up.” Walking up behind her, Ryker opened the door and held a hand out to her. The look she gave him told him she was not happy about it, but when she finally put her hand in his, he felt like they’d finally taken that first step into friendlier territory.

Only took six months, but...who’s counting?

It took every ounce of willpower he possessed not to put his hands on her ass to help her that last little bit. She smiled nervously at him once she was seated, and Ryker jogged around to the driver's side and climbed in.

“Okay, where to?”

Ryleigh didn't come out and give him the address; she simply started giving him directions. “Make a left out of the parking lot and go down to Elm and make a right.”

He did as she instructed.

“So...this fight with your mom. It was bad, huh?”

“To me it was.”

“You don't think it was to her?”

Shaking her head, she said, “Go down to Peachtree and make a left.”

He nodded.

“My mother likes to...instigate,” Ryleigh went on. “And when she pushes me to where I'm a ranting lunatic, she just smiles and looks at me like I'm crazy. It doesn't matter how many times I ask her nicely not to interfere in my life or set me up with strange guys, or ambush me like she did tonight, she doesn't listen. It's exhausting and...ugh. I'm just done.”

“Is she like this with all your siblings?”

She shook her head. “Nope. Just me.”

He found that a little hard to believe, but as he turned onto Peachtree, he waited her out.

“Go down about a mile and my apartment complex is on the right.”

“I didn't realize there were apartments back here.”

“It's a small building, only four units. None of them are particularly big. I have a two bedroom, but the second bedroom is tiny so I use it as an office.”

“Okay, I have to ask...why is your mom like this with only you?”

She sighed loudly. “I wish I knew,” she said sadly. “I really wish I knew. She was over-protective of Arianna, but still fixed her up with a couple of Jamie's friends. Liam joined the Marines a year after high school, so she

didn't have a chance to do anything to him. And when he came home, he got involved with Tessa so..."

He nodded.

"Patrick is like...I don't even know. It's like she's a little intimidated by him and so in awe of his business accomplishments that she doesn't want to bother him. She whines every once in a while about how she wishes he'd meet someone, but she never truly bugs him about it."

"And Jamie?"

"Jamie's just...Jamie," she said. "He's got a new girlfriend every week and she thinks he'll eventually find the right girl and settle down."

"I mean...I guess that makes sense," he reasoned, "but..."

"Tonight I told her that if she'd just leave me alone and let me date who I want to date, everything would be fine."

"So...date someone."

Turning her head, she glared at him. "Oh, gee, Ryker. That's brilliant. Why don't I just *date* someone?" Rolling her eyes, she straightened in her seat as they pulled up to her building.

And then instantly groaned.

"What? What's the matter?"

"If I don't have my car keys, I don't have my house keys!" she cried. "Dammit!"

He was beginning to see how that was her go-to reaction to things.

"Does your landlord live in the building?"

"No."

"Do you have a complicated lock on your door?"

She blinked at him like he was crazy.

Without waiting, Ryker climbed out of the truck and jumped up into the bed. His toolbox was back there, and he quickly rummaged around for what he needed before climbing over to help Ryleigh out.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

“We’re going to get into your apartment, get your keys, and take you back to get your car.”

“By breaking in? I don’t think so,” she said with a snort.

“Would you rather go back to the pub and see the smug look on your mother’s face?”

“No.” There was a definite huff of annoyance after that, but she held out her hand so he could help her down. “I can’t believe I’m going to let you pick my lock...”

There was a very dirty comeback on the tip of his tongue, but he held it in.

They walked up to the second floor and Ryleigh simply stepped aside and held her phone up like a flashlight for him. In less than a minute, he had the door open. As he straightened, he stared down at her. “Tomorrow, get a better lock.”

For a moment, he thought she was going to argue, but all she did was walk into the apartment and back out in less than a minute. “Thank you,” she murmured.

The drive back to the pub was primarily spent in silence because he couldn’t believe that she didn’t have more safety precautions in place in her home. Anyone could break in even if they didn’t have the know-how that he did.

As if reading his mind, Ryleigh blurted out, “I have a deadbolt that I use every night, so...it’s not like anyone can just get in.”

“You need something better in general,” he replied. “If you want, I can pick something up and install it tomorrow.” His voice was gruff and a little harsh, but he hated thinking of anything happening to her.

“No, but...thank you. I’ll pick something up myself.”

He pulled back into the pub parking lot and parked, but didn’t move to get out. Twisting in his seat, he figured this was his chance to say what he needed to say and hoped she wouldn’t laugh in his face.

“Here’s the thing, Ryleigh,” he began. “I like you. I think you’re pretty and have a wicked sense of humor and I’d like to take you out sometime. We’ve been doing this dance for several months and I don’t think you ever take me seriously, but I’m telling you right now that I *am* serious. I’d like the chance to take you out on a real date—not here at the pub—and I think you should give me a chance.”

There.

He'd said it.

She studied him for several long moments and for the life of him, he had no idea what was going through her mind. But if he had to venture a guess, he’d say that she was trying to come up with yet another way to turn him down, even though he’d saved her ass tonight.

The silence dragged on until he thought he’d go mad.

“Look, um...”

She held up a hand to stop him. “Okay,” she said confidently. “Let’s do it. I’ll go out with you.”

And Ryker was fairly certain his jaw hit the ground.

Chapter Two

Ryleigh wasn't sure she was doing the right thing—or the fair one. All she knew was that this was a way to potentially kill two birds with one stone. She'd go out with Ryker to get him off her back which will also provide to her mother that she can find a date on her own.

Hell, she'd even agree to go out with him more than once to prove her point even further!

Ugh...I think I just lost a little respect for myself...

“Really?” he asked warily. “Just like that and you're suddenly okay going out with me?”

Nodding, she said, “Yeah. Why? Having second thoughts?”

His dark eyes went almost comically wide. “What? *No!* No, that's not it at all. I just thought you'd argue it out with me a little more.”

“Do you *want* me to argue it out with you a little more?”

“No, I...I just thought...”

“It's okay, Ryker. Relax. It's not a big deal.”

But...it kind of was.

He'd been asking her out for months and, honestly, she'd had zero interest in him. He wasn't her type. He was big and kind of intimidating with the tattoos and the attitude, plus the hair.

The hair.

It was long on the top and short on the sides and back and sometimes he pulled it back into one of those man bun things and...just no. It was totally not her thing.

However, she also knew he wouldn't be her parents' thing either. So maybe she'd kill some time with him as a way of keeping her mother from throwing any other wayward single guys her way.

Looking up at Ryker, she saw how happy he looked and realized she couldn't lie to him or use him like this. That wasn't the kind of person she was even if she really wished it was.

Dammit.

Groaning, she twisted in her seat to face him. "Okay, I can't do this..."

And yeah, he almost completely deflated in front of her.

"I...I appreciate you helping me tonight and I only said yes to going out with you because...because..." Pausing, she sighed. "I thought it would be a way to get my mother off my back. I'd go out with you a few times to sort of get...you know...a reprieve. I'm sorry. I just...I'm not a good liar and I hate when people are dishonest and..."

"Wait, so...you don't want to go out with me?"

Ugh...it was one thing to joke with him without directly turning him down to his face, but this was super awkward.

"I'm sure you're a really nice guy, Ryker, but...I just don't think we're a good fit. Even if we went out on a single date, that's all it would be because...well...we're too different."

"Some people say that opposites attract," he countered.

"Yeah, I get that, but...I think we're *too* opposite. I'm sorry." And she genuinely was sorry because now that they had sat and had a normal conversation instead of his ridiculous and sometimes over-the-top flirting at the pub—and on the street or wherever else she happened to run into him—she realized he wasn't quite as bad as she'd thought.

Still not the kind of guy she'd date, but...

Ryker's dark eyes studied her and even with nothing more than the light from the parking lot, she could feel the intensity. Swallowing hard, Ryleigh reached for her purse. "So, um...I should go. Thank you again for helping me get my keys. I appreciate it."

When he didn't say anything, she figured she should just try to climb out of the monstrosity of a truck with as much grace as she could and prayed she wouldn't fall and hurt herself.

With a curt nod, she opened the door and quietly let out a long breath.

Here goes...

"Ryleigh, wait," he murmured gruffly, and before she knew it, he was out of the truck and standing in front of her with his hand held out.

And he's a gentleman too...

This time, when she placed her hand in his, she noticed just how large it was and how it pretty much engulfed hers. Then he reached up and gently put his other hand on her waist before lifting her and carefully placing her on her feet in front of him.

Ryker didn't immediately release her, and Ryleigh didn't move away.

"So, um..."

"I appreciate your honesty," Ryker said, taking her completely by surprise. "But here's the thing, I think going out with me is exactly what you need."

She fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"Just...hear me out," he went on. "You think we're opposites and no one will believe that we're dating, but...that can only help you."

This time she did step away and then crossed her arms. "Okay, this I've got to hear."

"You were just bitching about the kind of guys your mother has been setting you up with, right?"

She nodded.

"You show up with me and she'll see that she's had it all wrong. But if

you go out with me a few times, she's going to think it's going somewhere and wouldn't want to do anything to mess it up."

"Or..." Ryleigh interrupted. "She'll decide that this is inappropriate and double her efforts to find me a suitable guy." With a loud sigh, she went on. "Trust me when I say I know my mother better than you. I've tried everything and nothing has worked."

"I disagree," he said with a shrug. "You've tried *almost* everything. What have you got to lose? It's a couple of dates, Ryleigh. I get it. You're not into me." Another shrug. "Does it suck? Yeah. But I'm adult enough that I can handle it."

"Then what are you getting out of this? If you know this isn't going anywhere, then why do you even care?"

"I get to take the prettiest girl in town out." His voice was low and a little gruff, and she cursed the fact that he wasn't her type because...damn. No one had ever said anything like that to her before.

"I don't know..."

"Three dates," he suggested.

"Why three?"

"Because one date isn't going to be enough to even get anyone's attention. Two dates will generate some interest, and by the third date, people will start taking it seriously. It's all a matter of being seen by the right people without directly flaunting it under their noses."

"So...no dates at the pub?"

Shaking his head, he gave her a sly grin. "I go in there a couple of times a week and everyone knows I'm interested in you. I'll still go in, but I'll casually mention to Ronan that I'm taking you out. If I had to guess, he's kind of the family gossip."

That made her laugh. "Oh my God! Yes! He totally is!"

"That's what I figured. So, I stick to my routine and drop that bit of information and we take it from there."

“Okay, but...if that’s all it takes, why do we have to go out at all? Why can’t we just pretend that we went out?”

Bending slightly, Ryker leaned in until they were practically nose to nose. “We need to be seen to be believable, Ryleigh. I thought that was obvious.”

Right. It was.

Nodding, she tried to think of a reason why she should say no.

Unfortunately, Ryker completely had a point.

He had several points, actually.

Still, it didn’t feel right to be doing this knowing he still had feelings for her. Even if he said he was okay with it, it made her cringe.

“The only one at risk of getting hurt here is me,” he said, as if reading her mind. “And I’m okay with it.”

Shoulders sagging, she looked up at him. “Yeah, but...I’m not okay with being the one to hurt you. It’s just...it’s mean and selfish and...”

Straightening, Ryker ran both hands through his wild mane and let out a small snarl of frustration. “Did you enjoy going out with that guy tonight?”

“No, but...”

“Or how about the insurance salesman or the accountant?”

“How did you know...?”

“Do you want to have to spend the next few weeks avoiding the pub? Avoiding your family?”

“Well, no, but...”

“Then I don’t see what the problem is here,” he said with obvious frustration. “You say you’re fed up and how you hate dealing with this crap, and I’m offering to help you!”

“I get it and believe it or not, I appreciate it! But...it’s complicated, Ryker! I already told you I’m not comfortable putting you in a position where your feelings are going to get hurt!”

He stared down at her and she waited for him to argue with her.

But he didn’t.

She waited for him to plead his case again.

But he didn't.

"I should go," she forced herself to say, taking a step back. "Thanks again for the help with the keys and...and I promise to get a new lock for my apartment." When he still said nothing, she started to get a little annoyed. "So, um...yeah. Goodnight."

As soon as she turned away, he spoke.

"I think you enjoy the drama," he called after her.

Turning, she stood in wide-eyed confusion. "Excuse me?"

Nodding, he repeated. "The drama. I think you like it and that's why you're not really looking for a solution. It's like you're in a dysfunctional relationship with your family, but you're not really serious about being taken seriously." Then he shrugged. "My mistake for trying to help. Have a good night, Ryleigh. I'll see you around."

For a moment, she just stood there sputtering in disbelief. Ryker closed the passenger side door of the truck before he casually strolled around to the driver's side.

That's when she found her voice.

"I do *not* enjoy the drama," she argued, storming over to him.

With little more than a glance at her, he countered with, "You say that, and yet no matter what anyone suggests or even when you're presented with the perfect solution, you won't do it. That means you're either not as bothered by everything you've been bitching about or you just enjoy the drama. Personally, I didn't take you for a drama queen, but I guess I was wrong."

Drama queen? She seethed.

"I am *not* a drama queen, and I resent you even putting that out there. You don't know anything about me, Ryker, and I don't appreciate you acting like you do!"

"Prove me wrong, Princess," he challenged.

“I know what you’re doing,” Ryleigh replied with just a hint of snark. “You’re baiting me into accepting your help. Well, newsflash, your idea isn’t perfect. I’ll admit that there are some perks to it, but I’m trying to be a good person here. I kind of pride myself on not being a liar or leading guys on. It’s just not who I am. So if you think for one minute...”

“Ryleigh? What are you still doing here?” Kate Donovan called out as she stepped outside.

Crap.

Right then and there, all logical thought went flying out the window and she did something she never thought she’d do.

She launched herself at Ryker and kissed him.

* * *

Ryker wasn’t a fool. He knew exactly what Ryleigh was doing and why, and he was more than okay with it.

Then again, maybe he was a fool.

Wrapping his arms around her, he hauled her in close and immediately took control of the kiss. She felt tiny and almost fragile against him, and he had to remind himself not to get too carried away and scare her off.

For months he’d done everything except stand on his damn head to get her to give him a chance, and if playing her fake boyfriend for a little while opened the door for him, then who was he to complain?

The moment he’d first seen her when he arrived in Laurel Bay, it was like being struck by Cupid’s arrow.

As corny as that sounded, it was the truth.

She was feisty and beautiful and even though she turned him down every single time he even attempted to ask her out, he started to enjoy the challenge.

Every time he came to the pub, he did so hoping to run into her. She

didn't keep a regular schedule there so it was pretty much a crapshoot whether or not he'd see her. But when he did? He always found a reason to talk to her and flirt a bit. If she didn't completely ignore him, sometimes he'd even get to where he asked her out.

It never ended well.

He tried casual conversation, joking, flirting, and once, he'd even started singing, but to no avail. Honestly, he was giving up hope until this whole situation unfolded tonight. And now that he'd had a taste of her, he was more than willing to do whatever it took to prove to her he deserved to be more than a make-believe lover just to piss her family off and get them off her back.

But...he had to start somewhere.

"Ryleigh? What's going on? Who is...is that *Ryker*?" Kate asked in disbelief as she stepped closer and Ryker warred with whether or not they should keep kissing or maybe make her wait it out.

Ryleigh's hand raked through his hair, her nails gently scraping his scalp, and he had his answer.

More kissing.

He was willing to let her set the tone and let this little scene play out however she wanted. After all, it was her idea. So, rather than wasting more time thinking about it, he shut his mind off and let himself feel.

Warm skin, soft curves...they packed a powerful punch. He knew they were going to need to break apart eventually—although breathing was highly overrated at this point—and yet he was reluctant to let her go. If Kate Donovan hadn't been approaching, Ryker would have Ryleigh backed up against his truck so he could feel even more of her.

Then again, if Kate Donovan hadn't been approaching, Ryleigh wouldn't be kissing him, so...

"Ryleigh?" Kate said firmly, with more than a hint of annoyance.

Slowly, Ryleigh broke the kiss. Her eyes were still closed and she licked

her lips in a way that made him want to groan. Did she even realize how sexy she was? How desirable?

When she opened her eyes and looked up at him, he could see she was a little dazed and possibly a little confused.

But definitely turned on.

She leaned into him for a brief moment before turning and facing her mother.

And Kate did not look amused.

“Mom? What are you doing out here?”

“I was getting ready to go home and saw you standing here with someone and wanted to make sure you were alright.” She gave Ryker the stink eye. “You show up here for dinner with one man and then come out here and kiss another? Is it any wonder I worry?”

Ryker had to stifle a laugh because he was beginning to see why Ryleigh was so frustrated with her mother.

“I didn’t show up here for dinner with anyone. You lied and lured me here under false pretenses. I ran into Ryker out here and we were talking and then...” She shrugged. “Now if you’ll excuse us, we were going to grab some dessert.”

Kate’s eyes narrowed. “We have dessert in the pub. There’s apple crisp and cobbler and...”

“Thanks, Mrs. Donovan,” Ryker interjected sweetly. “But Ryleigh and I already have plans.” Boldly, he took Ryleigh’s hand in his. “Have a good night.”

With no other choice but to follow through, they walked around to the passenger side of the truck and he lifted her up into it.

And yeah, his hands lingered just a bit on her butt.

Once he had her settled, he casually strolled around to the driver’s side and gave Kate a jaunty little wave before climbing in.

“Holy. Crap,” Ryleigh said breathlessly, and he wasn’t sure if she was

referring to the kiss, her mother, the situation, or...all of it.

“So? Ice cream? The place down by the pier is usually pretty decent, right?”

The look she shot him spoke volumes.

“You’re thinking about ice cream right now?” she demanded. “What the hell?”

“We obviously have to go somewhere,” he reasoned. “If we sit here in the parking lot until she leaves, she’ll get suspicious.”

“Okay. Fine. Whatever. Ice cream,” she murmured.

They pulled out of the parking lot and Ryker knew he needed to say something to put her mind at ease because she was clearly freaking out.

“So, uh...do you prefer waffle cones or the wafer ones?”

This time when she looked at him, she burst out laughing.

Like a full-on belly laugh.

And it was the greatest sound he’d ever heard.

“What is wrong with you?” she asked around another fit of laughter.

At least she wasn’t yelling at him for grabbing her ass.

“I’m just trying to make the best of a weird situation,” he admitted. “So? What’s your cone preference?”

“Honestly? I’m more of a milkshake kind of girl.”

Glancing over at her, Ryker realized it was probably the first time she had willingly offered any information about herself.

Baby steps.

“I’m sure you can get that down on the pier, right?”

“Definitely. I’ve been going there my entire life and if either Mrs. Hawkins or her daughter Erin are working, they don’t even ask what I want. They just see me and make it.”

“Interesting. What’s your favorite flavor?”

“Strawberry.” Then she grinned. “Bet you were expecting me to say chocolate.”

“Nah. That’s too predictable, and you, sweet Ryleigh, are anything but.”

He couldn’t be certain, but he was pretty sure she was blushing, and he cursed the dim interior.

The drive was short and when he pulled into the parking lot by the pier, he suddenly felt a lot of pressure.

This was technically their first date.

Shit.

Within minutes, he had her out of the truck and they were walking along the sidewalk toward the ice cream parlor.

“Oh no!”

Ryker looked ahead and saw exactly what she was referring to. It was closed.

“I forgot that they’re closed on weeknights in the off-season,” she said sadly.

There was no way he was turning around and taking her back to her car just yet, so he had to think fast. “The Sand Bar down in Magnolia does some amazing desserts. We can try there?”

“Or we can just do the drive-thru at Dairy Queen.”

“Hell no,” he told her, taking her hand in his. “We need to be seen.”

“No one’s going to notice us down in Magnolia,” she argued lightly. “We need to stay local.”

That’s when inspiration hit.

“You really want us to be seen?”

“Um…”

“Then how about we hit the grocery store, grab all the makings of some spectacular milkshakes while walking up and down every aisle, and then go back to my place and make them?”

They were standing right under a streetlight and Ryker saw her pale.

Not a great sign.

“Y…your place?”

He nodded. “We’ll have dessert, spend an hour talking, and then I’ll bring you back to get your car. This way, just in case your mother is still casing the place and waiting for you to come back, we’ve actually been somewhere.” Then, because he knew she needed a tiny push, he added. “And you wouldn’t be lying.”

“Dammit.”

Smiling, he knew he had her.

“Come on. We’ll hit the store, grab some milk, ice cream, syrup, and lots of whipped cream,” he told her with a wink.

“Ryker...”

“The more outrageous, the more people will talk about it.”

“I hate that you’re right. I guess I didn’t really put that much thought into how this would all play out.”

They were back at the truck and he helped her in again before climbing in beside her.

“Back when my sister Arianna and her fiancé, Will, were secretly dating, we had to pretend I was the one dating him.”

“What?” He was backing out of the parking spot and that statement made him pause. “Why?”

“Will’s like ten years older than her and my mother was actually trying to fix him up with me,” she explained. “So we would make all these elaborate date plans in front of everyone, and then Will would take Arianna out with him. It was awesome.”

“It sounds ridiculous. Did your mother ever find out?”

She shrugged. “Eventually. I think that’s why she’s so emphatic about fixing me up with guys at the pub. This way she can witness for herself that I’m actually out on a date with them—whether I want to be or not.”

“Does that mean we’re going to have to make at least one date at the pub? You know, for show?”

“I really want to say no, but...I don’t want to get too far ahead of

ourselves. For all we know, her seeing us in the parking lot tonight will be enough for me to build on and we won't have to actually go out again."

Ugh...this girl...

Pulling the car over, he slammed it into park and twisted in his seat, facing her. "Can I ask you something?"

Wordlessly, she nodded, but he saw the wariness in her eyes.

"Have I done anything offensive tonight? Anything that was so off-putting that being in my company has you worried for your safety?"

"No...?"

"Okay then. I would appreciate it if every other sentence out of your mouth isn't about how much you *don't* want to go out with me. It's pissing me off." Raking a hand through his hair in frustration, he glared at her. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm the one helping you. The only one saving your ass. So maybe you could say thank you instead of trying to get rid of me every chance you get."

He didn't wait for a response and he didn't utter another word until they were out of the truck at the grocery store.

Once Ryleigh's feet were on the ground, he regarded her. "Are we doing this?"

For a moment, she didn't respond and he had to wonder if, by staying silent on the ride over, he'd given her time to reconsider everything.

"I have one request," she said, her gaze meeting his head-on.

"O-kay..."

"No over the top theatrics, no obvious scenes to draw attention, and lastly...no more ass grabbing." Then, crossing her arms, she awaited his response.

"Caught that, huh?" he said, giving her a boyish grin.

"Kind of hard not to," she replied. "You've got big hands and they linger."

His smile grew. "Can't blame a guy for trying." And, with a shrug, he

took her hand and led them toward the store. “Those strawberry milkshakes aren’t going to make themselves.

Chapter Three

It was well after midnight and Ryleigh couldn't sleep.

She came right home after Ryker dropped her off at the pub two hours ago, and her mind hadn't stopped racing since.

Part of her wanted to be mad at him for the butt grabbing, but she couldn't. Not after the way she had essentially thrown herself at him and kissed him like her life depended on it

And in that moment, it felt like it had.

She just wished she hadn't enjoyed it so much.

Leave it to Ryker to be a spectacular kisser.

Dammit.

Ugh...I need a new word.

It was too late to call her sister, but there was a good chance that Ivy was working the night shift.

Ryleigh: Hey! You up?

She wasn't holding out much hope, but even if there was the slightest chance that her best friend was awake and could talk, she had to take it.

Ivy: Yeah. At the station. Everything okay?

Ivy: Do I need to come get you?

Ivy: Was Ryker a jerk?

It took her a minute to remember that she texted both Ivy and Arianna earlier to let them know what was going on.

And how she never sent them an update.

“Crap.”

Ryleigh: Everything’s fine. Sort of. I’m home and can’t sleep.

Ivy: What’s going on?

Ryleigh: Ugh...where do I even begin?

Ivy: Uh-oh. That doesn’t sound good.

Ivy: Do we need to actually talk?

Ryleigh: Is that allowed? I don’t want to get you into trouble

Her best friend was a paramedic with the Laurel Bay Fire Department, and the last thing Ryleigh wanted to do was cause any problems for her. Ivy took her job seriously and shared how she sometimes even yelled at her fiancé Connor for calling when she was working a shift.

Ivy: Thankfully it’s a quiet night. Give me five minutes and I’ll give you a call

Ryleigh: Sounds good. Thanks.

While she waited, Ryleigh went and made herself a cup of tea and curled up on the sofa. She was just getting comfortable when the phone rang.

“Okay, sorry about that,” Ivy said. “I wanted to find somewhere to talk with a little privacy. So what’s going on?”

“I did something really stupid tonight,” she said miserably. “At least...I think it was stupid.”

“I’m guessing this has to do with Ryker.”

“Yup.”

“Give me the abbreviated version just in case we get a call. I’d hate to be mid-story and have to leave!”

That made her laugh, but she gave it her best shot. “Okay, Mom ambushed me with a date with a periodontist who tried to put his fingers in my mouth over dinner.”

“Ew!”

“I know! So then I went to the kitchen and fought with her and tossed my bag down on the table and everything spilled out,” she went on. “I didn’t realize my keys were missing until after I stormed out of the pub.”

“In glorious fashion,” Ivy stated.

“Obviously.” She paused. “Anyway, I was standing there freaking out when Ryker walked over and offered to drive me to my place to get my spare keys.”

“Which is when you texted me.”

“Exactly. Only...”

“How did you get into your apartment without your keys?”

“Apparently, Ryker knows how to pick locks.”

“Oh no,” Ivy said with a groan. “Like a criminal.”

“Yeah, like a criminal. Anyway, beggars can’t be choosers, so he picked the lock, I got my keys and we drove back to the pub where I propositioned him.”

“You propositioned a criminal? Why?”

“I was desperate, Ivy!” she cried. “You know he’s always asking me out and I got the idea that maybe I could go out with him a few times and it would be enough to get my mother off my back for a little while.”

“Sweetie, the only way to get your mother off your back is to run off and elope and immediately get pregnant. And even then, I think she’d still be looking for a replacement guy.”

Shaking her head, Ryleigh couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s crazy how well you know her.”

“You know I love her and she’s like a second mom to me, but...yeah. I could totally imagine her still not liking any guy you pick just because you were the one to pick him.”

“Then I totally went the wrong way with this whole Ryker thing, huh?”

“Well...I think you need to back up. You said you propositioned him. Then what happened?”

“Then I chickened out and then I kissed him.”

“You kissed him? Seriously? OH MY GOD, Ry!! Why didn’t you lead off with that?”

“You told me to give you the abbreviated version! And that’s what I’m trying to do, but you keep interrupting!”

“Okay, okay, you’re right,” Ivy said. “Go on.”

“Anyway, I changed my mind even though he was totally on board—pre-kiss and all—and then we were standing in the middle of the pub’s parking lot when my mother came out and...I panicked. That’s when I kissed him.”

“Ah. Gotcha. Let her catch you kissing a guy and draw all the conclusions. Good plan.”

“I feel like you’re being a little sarcastic...”

“What? No! I’m serious! I think it’s a good plan! Keep going.”

“So we kiss and it just seems to go on and on and on...”

“Ryker looks like he’d be a good kisser.”

“Believe me, he is,” she said with a sigh. “Anyway, by the time we came

up for air, my mother was standing right there and before I knew it, Ryker was telling her we had plans and was loading me back up into his truck.” She explained how tall the truck was and how he gave her an extra push with his hand on her butt.

Ivy snickered. “He looks like he has good hands too.”

“Oh my God! Aren’t you engaged?”

“I am, but I’m not dead,” she said with a giggle. “Besides, I am totally in love with Connor and everyone knows it. I’m just making a simple observation. Ryker’s the kind of guy that most women look at appreciatively.”

“Seriously? You think?”

“Oh, yeah! He practically screams bad boy, and you know most people look at him and draw their own conclusions based solely on the way he looks—the long hair, the tattoos, almost always in black...”

“I feel like someone needs to turn the hose on you.”

“Shut up! I’ll bet a lot of women here in town have looked at him and had a naughty thought or two.”

“You included?”

“I’m not going to answer that,” she said flatly. “Are you seriously telling me that in all the times he’s hit on you, you never even considered it?”

“Um...no?”

“What is wrong with you? Do you not have eyes? Because I don’t get it. You don’t want the guys your mom has been setting you up with—and some of them haven’t been half bad looking—and you’re not attracted to Ryker, so...what’s your deal then? What kind of guy are you looking for?”

Good question.

“I don’t know, Ivy. That’s the problem. I keep waiting for some sort of zip or zing or spark and...it hasn’t happened.”

“Well now I’m just disappointed.”

“Really? Why?”

“Because if someone as hot as Ryker doesn’t give you a zip or a zing, then this really sounds like a you problem.”

Sighing, she said, “That’s what I’m afraid of too.”

“Oh, Ry...talk to me. What’s going on? There’s got to be more to this.”

“You know I’ve never felt...confident around guys. It’s just not who I am. I wish I was like Arianna and could talk and flirt with ease.”

“Please, we should all have your sister’s confidence. I think she came out of the womb ready to take on the world and with the ability to completely charm the opposite sex.”

“I think both her and Jamie got that gene.” She sighed. “Actually, I think I’m the only Donovan missing it. Liam found someone and Patrick doesn’t seem to have any problems. It’s just me.”

“I don’t think it’s a gene thing. You’re smart and funny and...”

“If you say I have a great personality, I’m hanging up.”

“Why? What’s wrong with a great personality?”

“It means I’m not attractive and you know I already struggle with that too.”

“And again, I don’t know why. You are beautiful, Ryleigh. Everyone sees it but you.”

Earlier, Ryker had called her beautiful, but that was just him being flirty. He probably said that to every woman he hit on.

“I have mirrors, Ivy. I know what I look like,” she said miserably.

“Then get some new mirrors because believe me, you’re beautiful. You intimidate guys because you’re the total package. You’ve got looks and brains.”

Groaning, she threw her head back against the cushions. “They’re all just so boring! I swear, I haven’t been out with anyone interesting in like... forever.”

“Okay, who was the last interesting guy you dated?”

“Um...” She racked her brain and couldn’t readily think of anyone.

Ryker.

Yeah. That had been a shocker.

While they had shopped for milkshake supplies, he was sweet and funny and a little charming. When they got back to his place—which was a seriously impressive mid-century modern house just a block away from the beach—he was a complete gentleman. He made them each a shake while talking about nothing overly personal. He talked mostly about how he loved having an untraditional house—something non-beachy—so close to the coast. In her eyes, it made him a little quirky.

Like her.

It was possibly the most enjoyable “date” she had in years.

And it was painful to have to admit it.

So she wouldn’t.

At least, not out loud.

“This is a problem,” Ivy said, interrupting her thoughts. “You need to seriously think about what you want, Ry. Maybe if you knew and could articulate it, your mother would know what kind of guy to look for.”

“That’s just it! I don’t want her looking for anyone! It’s my life and I should be able to find a guy on my own! And...and...maybe I don’t even want one! I mean, there is nothing wrong with being single. Not everyone wants to be part of a couple and fall in love and get married and have babies and do all that happily ever after crap.”

A soft sigh was Ivy’s initial response. But then...

“You and I have known each other since kindergarten. I think that whole little speech is a defense mechanism and it makes me sad.”

“Why would I...?”

“You haven’t found the right guy for you and I get it, it sucks. No one’s saying you need to fall in love and get married and have babies right now...”

“That’s not what my mom’s saying.”

“But...I know you, Ryleigh. And I know that you do want those things.

You've always wanted those things. And I know that the right guy is out there. You just need to be patient."

She hated how tears stung her eyes and she was glad she was home alone so no one would witness them.

"Thanks, Ivy." Sighing, she felt no more at peace than she did before their call, but it was what it was.

"So, tell me how great of a kisser Ryker is," Ivy said to lighten the mood. And after a good laugh, she did.

* * *

"Ryker? You got a call on two. Someone looking to have you speak at an art school up in Boston," his assistant, Billie, said as she stood in his office doorway.

"When?"

"The fifth of next month."

He snorted in disbelief. "Did you tell them I'm booked out for the next year?"

She shrugged. "I figured I'd take a chance and ask. I realize you're booked, but not heavily. Besides, you mentioned how much you enjoy going up to the Northeast."

Normally he did, but after the way things went down with Ryleigh last night, he wasn't looking to add anything more to his schedule just yet.

"Send my regrets," he told her and watched as she walked away. Turning in his chair, Ryker looked at the drawing in front of him. It was something he was working on for a friend and he wanted it to be the absolute best it could be.

And so far, it wasn't.

Reaching out, he crumpled up the paper and tossed it in the trash before jumping to his feet to pace.

He was on edge today and he knew the exact reason why.

He just didn't know what to do about it.

Last night when he'd dropped Ryleigh off at her car, they'd exchanged numbers, but...that was it. There was no talk of seeing each other again, no plans, and no kiss.

And that last one was a damn shame because he had been seriously hoping for another chance to kiss her.

She'd knocked him on his ass last night and all he wanted to do was call or text and ask what she was doing tonight, but...he couldn't. One thing he learned about her was that she did not like to be rushed.

Unfortunately, that was the way Ryker approached everything. He went into every situation and faced it head-on and just kept pushing forward until he got what he wanted or whatever needed to be done. Taking his time with Ryleigh was going to be a huge test of his self-control.

Something he definitely wasn't known for.

Muttering a curse, he sat his ass back down and stared at the blank sheet of paper and began to draw again.

Normally he worked in black ink, but for this piece, he wanted something softer for the draft. There was an entire case of pencils next to him and he kept reaching for new ones and testing them out until he settled on the perfect grade.

Then his hand moved faster than it had in a long time as the sketch started to take shape. Shifting in his chair to get more comfortable, he barely stopped. Every line, every shape, breathed more life into his creation.

At some point, Billie came in and put a bottle of water on his desk but she didn't say a word. He finished it down in several long gulps and moved on to add some color to the picture. He could have waited for the second draft, but he had a feeling this was going to be one of those drawings that would be perfect in one. It didn't happen often, but there wasn't a doubt in his mind that it was happening now.

In the distance, he heard people talking, heard the phone ringing, but nothing distracted him from the task at hand. And when he finally tossed the last pencil aside, Ryker's hand was cramped and filthy and shaking from holding the pencils for so damn long. A quick glance at the clock showed that several hours had gone by and yet it felt like barely any time had passed.

"Hey, boss, I'm outta here," Billie said, pausing in the doorway. Her eyes immediately went to the drawing. "Holy shit! Who's that for? I thought you were working on the tattoo for Dax?"

Yeah. So did he.

Unsure of what to say, Ryker leaned back in his chair and said nothing.

His assistant, however, no longer seemed interested in leaving and stepped closer to look at the drawing. "She's beautiful. Seriously, who's she for?"

Me.

She stood there for several minutes before she sighed loudly. "Fine. Have your secrets. I'll see you Monday."

"Have a good weekend," he murmured, but his eyes never left the drawing.

Ryleigh.

He'd never felt the urge to draw her before and as much as he wanted to wonder why he did it today, he already knew.

Because she'd finally let him get close last night.

And not just with the kiss.

Last night he had finally gotten a glimpse of the real Ryleigh. She showed him vulnerability where she normally showed disdain and snark. Not that he didn't appreciate the honesty of those emotions, but it was nice to finally see another side of her.

When he brought her here to make milkshakes, Ryker had made sure to keep the conversation neutral. He didn't want to spook her or make her uncomfortable in any way. So they'd talked about his renovations on this

house.

His haven.

A year ago, Ryker could have picked anyplace in the world to live, and something had drawn him to the tiny town of Laurel Bay. Part of him felt that it was the universe leading him to Ryleigh, but...that remained to be seen. Still, he'd been driving through on his way down to Myrtle Beach and stopped to eat at Donovan's Pub, and the rest was history.

The mid-century modern house was a bit of an oddity in a coastal town, and it was exactly what attracted him. There was a connection there and he couldn't help but buy it and save it from any further neglect.

There were definitely a lot of similarities there that a therapist would have a field day with, for sure.

He'd spent months renovating the place and finally had it to a point where it felt like it was truly his. There was a stamp he'd put on it that almost made him feel like he'd been the only owner. The best part was how the lot next door was vacant. He'd purchased it and now had a little space between him and his neighbors. It wasn't that he disliked people; he just enjoyed his privacy. And with the large screened-in back porch with the built-in grill, he enjoyed being back there without any prying eyes.

Maybe he'd get to cook dinner for Ryleigh out there sometime.

Maybe.

Coming to his feet, Ryker swiped a hand over his face and knew he needed to do something, to think about something other than Ryleigh. He had another drawing he needed to work on; actually, he had about a dozen drawings to work on so he needed to get his head out of his ass and start working.

Walking out to the kitchen, he washed up and made himself a sandwich, which he ate standing at the kitchen island before grabbing a bottle of water and heading back to his studio. As soon as he sat down in his chair, he knew it wasn't going to happen today. There was no way to force it; either the

muse was there or it wasn't. Rather than fight it and frustrate himself, he knew he needed to get out for a little while.

And not go to the pub.

Although...it probably wasn't the worst idea. Ryleigh wouldn't be there because of the fight with her mother, and Kate was rarely there on Friday nights. He could go and have a drink, maybe gossip a little to Ronan and do his part for the cause.

I'm pathetic...

Yeah, that was becoming more and more apparent.

Still...it was all part of their big plan and he was going to do whatever he could to make sure she didn't change her mind or cut him loose.

Before he could second-guess himself, he was out the door and in his truck. When he pulled up to Donovan's, it was just as crowded as it always was. He parked down the street a bit and made his way through the crowd to the bar. Ronan nodded at him before coming over.

"The usual?"

Ryker nodded. He was a creature of habit. He enjoyed the same drink every time he came in and Ronan never asked questions.

"So, I hear you're dating my niece," Ronan said as he slid the glass over.

So much for not asking questions.

With a curt nod, he replied, "I am."

"Can't believe you wore her down," the older man said with amusement. "Of course, her mother just about pitched a fit last night. It was something to see."

"I'm sure." He took a sip of his drink and hoped Ronan would share a little more.

"I told her you were good people, but...obviously you've seen the way she is. Personally, I think she's too hard on Ryleigh, but...no one listens to me. I'm just the guy who walked away from his family, so..." With a shrug, he walked off to pour some more drinks.

Okay, that was both anticlimactic and informative...

Not that he knew what to make of it.

“Hey, Ry,” Jamie said with a grin as he walked over and poured a couple of drinks. “I heard you got in the middle of a fight between my mother and sister last night.”

All he did was nod.

“I’m impressed that you were brave enough to come back. Good on you.”

He shrugged.

“Can I give you a bit of advice?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t bring Ryleigh here on any dates. I think she needs to spend some time away from not only the pub, but the family.” He shook his head. “We all joke how as long as Mom’s picking on Ryleigh, she’s not picking on us, but...I know it’s not fair. So if you’re dating her, please show her it’s okay to not be here all the damn time.”

“Jamie! Order up!” someone called out.

“Gotta go!” Reaching over the bar, he shook Ryker’s hand. “Be good to her or you’ll have all of us on your ass.” And then, with his grin still in place, he walked away.

Interesting family.

And yet...he sort of respected Jamie a little more than he had in the past. The fact that he was looking out for his sister was a good thing. And it was also good how he owned up to the way everyone was allowing her to bear the brunt of their mother’s misplaced attention.

Yeah, that’s one way to describe it...

Finishing his drink, he threw a twenty down on the bar and got up to leave. He spotted a few familiar faces and nodded as he made his way toward the door. Outside, he considered what to do next because that killed all of fifteen minutes.

Twenty if he counted the drive over.

Pulling out his phone, he decided it was early enough to maybe do a few other things in town. Walking down the street and around the corner, he came to the other thing he purchased in Laurel Bay. It was another rehab job, only this one wasn't finished and he wasn't sure it ever would be.

Taking the keys from his pocket, Ryker let himself in and locked the door behind him.

The windows were covered in dark paper and so was the glass door so no one could see inside. He wasn't ready for anyone to see what he'd created, and even the construction crew he'd brought in had signed confidentiality agreements and weren't allowed to talk to anyone about the project.

Not that there was much to talk about.

Turning on the lights, Ryker slowly made his way around.

The paint was dry, all the fixtures and furniture were in place, and it had all been cleaned and disinfected until everything shined.

And he hadn't done more than walk through, much like he was doing now.

“What the hell am I waiting for?” It wasn't the first time he asked himself that question and it certainly wouldn't be the last, but...he still didn't have the answer.

Walking toward the back—to the room that was built and designed to his exact specifications—Ryker simply stood in the doorway and stared. His fingers twitched with the need to sit and touch it all. To test out all the equipment and actually create something with it. Only...he couldn't.

Eventually he was going to have to do something with the space—either open it up and use it or sell it and everything in it.

And right now, both options gave him the same feeling.

Nothing.

This had been his dream for so long and now that it was a reality, it wasn't quite what he was expecting.

“Maybe I do need to see a shrink,” he murmured, raking a hand through

his hair.

Something had to give.

Soon.

He was living in limbo and it was slowly killing him. Like he seriously felt like a little part of him was dying more and more each day and he couldn't allow that to happen.

Taking out his phone again, he almost willed it to ring or buzz or... anything.

He considered texting Ryleigh, but he swore that he'd give her more time. Besides, he wasn't in a particularly social mood right now. Perhaps coming here wasn't the right thing to do.

Walking back through the space, Ryker made his way to the front door and shut off the lights before letting himself out and locking up. Slowly, he strolled back around the block to his truck. It was beyond tempting to get behind the wheel and just take off with no destination in mind, to simply drive until he was tired and then stop for the night at some roadside hotel before getting up in the morning and doing it all again.

But he wouldn't.

He enjoyed sleeping in his own bed, under his own roof, even if he was alone.

Eventually, however, he was going to have to get his shit together and make some serious life decisions.

And it had to be soon.

Chapter Four

For the first time in her life, Ryleigh skipped a family Sunday dinner.

And the sky didn't fall.

Although her phone had nearly exploded with incoming texts from her siblings. They always had a group chat going and it didn't seem to matter that the four of them were all sitting together at their parents' house. Apparently they weren't talking about her out loud.

Arianna: Are you alright? Everyone's looking for you

**Patrick: Hey! Everything okay? Did something happen to your car?
Need me to pick you up?**

Liam: Hey, Ry! Was hoping to see you today! You feeling okay?

**Arianna: You never did text me back after you got in Ryker's car
Thursday night!**

Arianna: OMG! Are you safe? Should I call the police?

Patrick: I can shoot Ari with a tranquilizer dart if you'd like 😊

Liam: Who's Ryker?

Patrick: The big guy with tattoos that's always hitting on her

Patrick: Wait...

Patrick: You actually went out with him??

Liam: Ry, you need to reply like right now otherwise we're all coming looking for you!

Jamie: Leave her alone!

Jamie: Seriously, she's allowed to have a life!

Aww...her little doofus of a brother was sticking up for her! She'd have to hug him and thank him the next time she saw him.

Jamie: God knows she hasn't had one yet.

"Note to self, replace hug with punch," she murmured.
With a weary sigh, she knew she needed to respond.

Ryleigh: I'm here and I'm fine. Everyone can relax.

Ryleigh: I just didn't feel like dealing with Mom today.

Ryleigh: And she knew this. I specifically told her how I thought it would be best if we didn't see each other for a few days. I would think it was obvious that I wouldn't come to dinner.

Arianna: That's not how she described it

Patrick: Is anyone surprised that Mom blew something out of proportion?

Liam: But you're sure you're ok?

Liam: This guy didn't do anything to upset you, did he?

Rolling her eyes, she chuckled. Ever since Liam came home from the Marines, it was like he was always looking for a way to either defend her or do something big brotherish.

Ryleigh: He was a perfect gentleman

Ryleigh: And Ari, I'm sorry I didn't text you back

Arianna: As long as you're okay

Arianna: But call me later!

Ryleigh: I will. I promise

Jamie: BTW, your keys are in the lost and found behind the bar

Ryleigh: Thanks! I had forgotten about them

Jamie: I can drop them off to you if you want so you don't have to go to the pub

Ryleigh: Um...no, but thanks. I know Mom's schedule and I know when I can go in without seeing her

Arianna: Wow, you're really mad at her this time, huh?

Ryleigh: You have no idea

Jamie: Just so you know, you're not missing much here today.

Jamie: Mom made a big turkey dinner. Sort of like Thanksgiving.

Jamie: No big deal

Ryleigh: THAT'S MY FAVORITE MEAL!! WTH??

Jamie: Oh, yeah...

She wanted to throw her phone across the room as frustration threatened to overwhelm her. That was a total passive aggressive move on her mother's part and it just added to her anger toward her.

Ryleigh: Well, you guys enjoy dinner. I appreciate you checking on me

Ryleigh: And Ari, I'll talk to you later

Arianna: I feel bad! What are you going to do for dinner?

And because she wanted to be a little petty and hoped one of her siblings would blab, she quickly added,

Ryleigh: No worries! I'm going to dinner with Ryker

Ryleigh: Love you guys! Xoxo

After that, she muted the conversation. Then, because she had to, she grabbed one of her throw pillows, buried her face in it, and screamed.

It was incredibly cathartic.

Picking up her phone, she saw it was a little after four—the Donovans always ate early on Sundays—and she realized she was hungry.

And craving a turkey dinner.

“Dammit, Mom!”

In the kitchen, she rummaged through her refrigerator, but there wasn't anything she wanted to eat. Takeout was the only logical answer.

Or...

Her thoughts instantly went to Ryker.

And not just because of the big fat lie she just told her family.

This was the sort of thing they were supposed to be doing—going out together and being seen around town—but...she was still nervous about reaching out to him. What if he had second thoughts? What if he was reading more into this than it was? What if he was busy?

“Okay, I can sit here and make myself crazy or I can just do it,” she told herself as she walked back over to her phone.

As predicted, there were about fifteen missed texts in her sibling group chat. After a quick scroll, she realized none of them were really directed at her and had to laugh because they were all probably sitting in their parents' living room and texting each other rather than talking.

Then she pulled up Ryker's number and contemplated whether to call or text.

Her heart raced a little at the thought of hearing his voice and she had a feeling she'd turn into a babbling idiot if she called.

Texting it is.

Ryleigh: Hey! Are you busy?

Groaning, she wished she had thought this through before hitting send.

He didn't respond right away, so she went back to the kitchen and pulled out a bag of chips and began munching. Her hands were a little salty when he texted back and she had to take a minute to wash up.

Ryker: Hey! Not really doing much of anything. What's up?

Ugh...did she just come right out and ask him to dinner or just hint at it?

Ryleigh: I was just curious if you had dinner plans

And now she felt like she was going to throw up. Her hands were a little shaky, her heart felt like it was going to beat itself right out of her chest, and she was starting to sweat.

Ryker: What did you have in mind?

Images of him sitting in her kitchen as she cooked for them came to mind, but...that wasn't what this was about. It was about being seen and going out to places around Laurel Bay.

Ryleigh: I'm not sure. I skipped the typical Sunday dinner with the family and was trying to figure out what kind of takeout to get

"Oh my God! I did not just say that!" she whined miserably. That definitely sounded like she was inviting him over for an intimate dinner.

Ryker: I could bring over some Chinese or we can maybe go out and grab something up in Beaufort?

One of her favorite restaurants was up that way, but it was an expensive seafood place and there was no way she'd ask him to take her there.

Ryker: There's a great little place that does some awesome lobster if you're interested

Ryker: It's right on the water

Her eyes went a little wide.

Ryleigh: Um...sure! I could do some lobster

Ryker: Great! How about I pick you up in an hour?

She looked down at herself and groaned. Part of her whole defiance thing today included not showering or putting on a bra. Now that she knew where they were going, she was definitely going to have to put in some serious effort to get ready.

Ryleigh: Perfect! See you then!

Dropping the phone like it was on fire, Ryleigh ran into the bathroom and took a quick shower.

Well...not too quick.

Even though this wasn't a real date, she still felt the need to shave all the pertinent areas.

After that, it was moisturizing from head to toe.

Then her hair.

The bane of her existence.

It was long and wavy and most days she either let it dry naturally or put it up in a ponytail. Tonight was going to require the long task of drying and styling it.

“The things I do for lobster,” she muttered, and knew that was a big fat lie.

She was doing this because it was the first time in a long time that she had felt anticipation over a date.

Even a fake one.

The only real challenge was making it look like she hadn't put in a crazy amount of effort when, in fact, she was.

“Maybe this is why I don't date more.” Even as she said the words, she knew they weren't true. If she met someone who was intellectually stimulating and decent, Ryleigh knew she'd put in this kind of effort all the time. It just seemed like the harder she looked, the fewer men there were who interested her. In the end, they were either painfully dull or ridiculously immature.

And then there were a few who had crossed the line and sent dick pics of themselves.

She shuddered just thinking about those.

Ryker didn't strike her as the type to do anything immature. The few times he'd gone and done something goofy to get her attention, it was more sweet than juvenile. And never offensive.

No, she had a feeling if she let her guard down, he'd be someone very interesting to hang out with on a platonic level.

That's where she needed to keep him because...well...it just was. The kiss the other night had been impulsive and a little childish on her part. He'd been a good sport about it, but she couldn't let it happen again.

Um...why?

Hmm...

Studying her reflection, Ryleigh took a quick inventory and noted that her hair looked good, her makeup was seriously on point, and she didn't look like she was trying to impress anyone.

Walking to her bedroom, she warred between a little black dress and something more casual. Ryker never really said specifically which restaurant they were going to. There were a ton of seafood places in Beaufort, so really, they could be going to a bar for all she knew. And how embarrassing would it be if he showed up in jeans and a t-shirt and she was in a dress and stilettos?

"Okay, new dilemma. What to wear?" Groaning, she flipped through everything in her closet and decided the best way to go was a pair of black slacks and a sweater because it would work just about anywhere.

Oh, but her black skinny jeans were so soft and comfy and she had the perfect boots to go with them...

"Screw it. I'm doing it." Shimming into the jeans a minute later, she slid on a bra, and picked a deep purple sweater to wear. The black ankle boots and big silver hoop earrings completed the ensemble and as she looked at herself in the mirror, she was very pleased with the results.

No sooner had she stepped out of the bedroom than there was a knock on her door.

"And he's prompt. Very nice."

Smiling, she opened the door and instantly noticed the scowl on his face.

"Seriously, Ryleigh? You didn't change the lock?"

"It's nice to see you too, Ryker," she said through clenched teeth. "Won't you please come in?"

* * *

The minute the words were out of his mouth, Ryker knew his mistake, but he couldn't believe she wasn't taking her safety seriously. Now he didn't want

to leave for dinner; he wanted to run to the nearest home improvement store and buy her a new lock.

“If it makes you feel any better,” she said as she walked away from him and disappeared into another room before coming right back out, “I bought one. I just haven’t installed it yet.”

“Oh.” Taking it from her hands, he gave her a small grin. “Sorry.”

“I bought it the next day, but I had some work projects that I was behind schedule on that needed all of my attention.”

“Do you have a toolbox?”

Nodding, she walked away again and came back with it. And it wasn’t a small set of tools, it was everything a homeowner would need.

“This is impressive,” he told her.

“Like I said, I planned on taking care of it, but time sort of got away from me. And the toolbox was a gift from my dad. He came over the day I moved in and gave it to me and then spent an entire weekend walking me through basic home repairs. Other than electrical stuff, I can pretty much fix everything here.”

“Even more impressive,” he said as he moved over to the door and began removing the old lock.

She shrugged and sat on the arm of her sofa as he worked. “My father always wanted to make sure we could all take care of ourselves with the practical stuff. I know how to do basic car repairs, the household stuff, and he made me take like a dozen self-defense classes.” She laughed softly. “Basically, I can kick anyone’s ass if I have to.”

“And your sister?”

Nodding, she replied, “Oh, yeah. But Arianna’s got height on her side. I’m the runt of the family, so I think he was a little more worried about me than her.”

It was his turn to shrug. “It’s good that he made sure his daughters knew how to fend for themselves. I’m sure your brothers are all there if you need

them, but it's better if you can handle stuff on your own, right?"

Silently, she nodded.

"What about your mom? What tools did she equip you with?"

"My mom was born a generation too late," Ryleigh explained. "She's very traditional and I think that's why we butt heads so much. She made sure I knew how to cook and sew and balance a checkbook." Another little laugh came out as she shook her head. "It pisses me off because it's like she refuses to roll with the punches and understand that women aren't only here to be homemakers. She hated watching my sister go away to school and then take an internship on the other side of the country, but the fact that she's getting married practically makes her giddy."

"So your sister's going to settle down and be a homemaker?" he asked without looking at her. The old lock was out and the new one was being secured.

"Oh, definitely not. Arianna has a great job in radiology and has no plans to quit after she and Will get married. I'm sure once they have kids she'll feel the pressure to be a stay-at-home mom, but...that's for Ari to decide."

"Are you against the idea of being a homemaker or is it just because it's what your mom wants?"

"Um, excuse me, Dr. Freud," she murmured. "I didn't say I was against it. I just think she doesn't see that it's not all that there is for a woman in today's world. I could be anything I want and if I want to be a homemaker, then that's awesome too."

Straightening, Ryker put the old lock and hardware into the bag the new one had come in and handed it to her. "For what it's worth, I agree with you. Being a stay-at-home mom is a full-time job and just as important as any other. I think everyone should have the opportunity to pursue whatever career path fulfills them and no one should tell them what that should be. It's up to the individual." After a pause, he added, "And I think the same goes with being a stay-at-home dad. It should be whatever works for the couple."

“Wow...” she drawled. “Color me surprised.” Standing, Ryleigh walked over to the kitchen and picked up her purse. “You don’t strike me as the kind of guy who supports dads staying home with the kids.”

Part of him couldn’t believe they were talking about this, but considering she was the one keeping the conversation going, he figured it was a safe topic. “I guess it’s a good thing we’re going out tonight then. There’s a lot about me you don’t know.”

She picked up her jacket and Ryker instantly walked over and helped her put it on before opening the door for her. “Thank you.”

Together they walked out to the parking lot and she paused.

Ryker’s hand rested on the small of her back. “What’s the matter?”

“Where’s your truck?”

“Oh, um...I didn’t bring it tonight. I figured you might appreciate not having to be manhandled to get in and out of it.”

She looked up at him with those big green eyes and he saw a myriad of emotion there. “Really?”

Nodding, he motioned to the black, mid-sized SUV.

“I didn’t realize you had two cars,” she commented as Ryker opened the door for her.

“The pickup is more for just going around town. Every once in a while, it’s nice to have something that’s easier to maneuver in.”

With a nod, she sat and he moved around and climbed in on the driver’s side. “There’s a button here to warm the seat if you want.”

“I’m good, but thank you,” she said as she got comfortable.

“So you skipped the Sunday dinner,” he commented as they pulled out of the parking lot. “Is that a big thing?”

“Oh yeah. The Donovan Sunday dinner is usually mandatory.” Then she chuckled. “And my mother went and made my favorite meal, so I think that was a little like giving me the finger.”

“Or...she really thought you’d show up and she was extending the olive

branch.”

Muttering a curse, she looked over at him. “Oh man! I didn’t even think of that! *Crap!* Now I’m the bad guy in the argument!” Leaning her head back against the rest, she sighed miserably and he felt like he’d put his foot in his mouth.

“Ryleigh, don’t listen to me. What do I know?”

“You’re an intelligent man, Ryker, and you’re an impartial party. I can’t believe I didn’t even consider that she might do something like that. Her love language is food and...ugh. I’m the worst.”

Crap.

Way to go on making this a great date...

Yeah, snapping at her about the lock had been a bad move, and now this. He needed to get things back on track.

“Do you spend a lot of time up in Beaufort?” he asked, effectively changing the subject.

Ryleigh was staring out the window and he could tell she was distracted, but after a moment, she faced him. “Um...actually, not as much as I used to. I have several clients there who I do web design and maintenance for, and there’s an arts and crafts festival I love to come to in the fall.” She paused. “They do a lot of small festivals and they’re always interesting—sometimes it’s music, other times it’s arts, they do gourmet food trucks during the summer, and there’s a flower and garden festival at some point too. I’ve got a bit of a black thumb, so I tend to skip that one.”

That made him laugh. “Yeah, me too. I’m more than happy to hire someone to take care of my yard and I’m totally happy not having any plants in the house.”

“Same. It’s one of the reasons I don’t mind renting an apartment—no property to maintain.”

“But if property weren’t an issue, would you want to buy a place of your own?”

“Honestly? No. Not really. I’m just one person and my rent is reasonable and I don’t need more space.”

“I get that. Still, some people consider it a smart financial move,” he went on. “It’s an investment in your future and at least the money you spend each month is going toward ownership.”

“My brother Patrick is big into real estate. He owns a lot of places in Laurel Bay—both residential and commercial. He says the same thing, but...I don’t know...it’s just not a step I’m ready to take right now.”

“And I respect that. It’s important to know your limits and what you’re comfortable with.” He turned out onto the two-lane highway. “Patrick was the agent who sold me my house. He’s a nice guy and seems to know everything about Laurel Bay and the surrounding towns. The day I closed on the house, he and I had lunch afterwards and I swear there wasn’t a question he couldn’t answer.”

She nodded. “Yeah, Pat’s got a weird gift there. He’s found his niche and I think it was really important to him to do that.”

“Find his niche?”

Another nod. “Liam’s the oldest and he was like the perfect child. Never got in trouble, great student, star athlete...it was hard to be in his shadow. Once he enlisted, Patrick sort of dove into reinventing himself. I don’t understand where he got his love of real estate, but he’s certainly done a lot for this town. There were a lot of abandoned buildings and storefronts. He’s been a one-man revitalization team. In the last year, there have been at least a dozen new businesses brought in. It’s kind of fun walking around downtown now.”

All he could do was nod.

“There’s a new day spa that is absolutely amazing, an art gallery, a coffee shop, a florist, and a quilt shop. They’re all new. And then there’s this place around the corner from the pub that had all kinds of work done on it, but they blacked out the windows and no one knows what it’s going to be!” With a

small laugh that was part snort, she shook her head. “Like...why put in months of work on a place and then not put up any signs or even open? It’s crazy!”

“Definitely,” he murmured, even though he felt a little sick to his stomach.

He knew the exact place she was talking about.

Hell, he owned it.

“Maybe they ran out of money,” she reasoned. “I mean...it’s possible they ran into financing issues or even permit issues. All I know is that so many of us are dying of curiosity, and now we may never know.”

“What is one type of business you wish came to Laurel Bay?”

“Ooh...good question. Let me think...” She was quiet for a moment. “A bookstore and a bakery. Preferably in the same store.”

Smiling, he looked over at her. “Interesting idea. Have you talked to Patrick about it? Maybe he could actively search for someone to open one.”

“Oh, definitely not.”

“How come?”

“Um...he’s a little...shall we say...territorial. No, wait...private,” she corrected. “He rarely talks about his business and it’s a little weird.”

“That is a little weird. He didn’t strike me as that kind of guy—you know, private and all that—when I hung out with him.”

“Yeah, well...” Then she sighed. “Listen, would you mind if we didn’t talk about my family? I’m still a little twitchy about the whole dinner thing and if I’m going to relax, I’d rather not discuss them anymore.”

“Consider it done,” he assured her.

The rest of the drive they talked about the sights, and Ryleigh told him more about Beaufort, since he’d only been there a handful of times. By the time they arrived at the restaurant, he felt that things were going well. They overcame a lot of the awkwardness that had always been there and were perhaps transitioning into a whole new phase of their relationship.

Over dinner, he stayed away from any talk of her family, and, shockingly, she didn't ask anything personal of him.

And he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

He was genuinely interested in her life and loved hearing her responses to all his questions. Sure they'd touched on the basic getting-to-know-you stuff—favorite color, favorite food, and all that crap—but she made no attempt to get to know him other than superficially.

Normally that wouldn't bother him. As it was, his life was already too much of an open book.

One that Ryleigh clearly hadn't read and didn't seem overly interested in either.

Okay, yeah, it was a bad thing.

In the last few years, Ryker had started to resent all the prying into his personal life and pulled away from the limelight. But as he sat at a candlelit table with this beautiful woman, he knew if she asked, he'd tell her anything she wanted to know.

Only...she wouldn't ask, and he had no idea how to broach the subject without looking pathetic and needy.

Or braggy.

They dined on surf and turf, they drank some fantastic wine, and the dessert was a decadent salted caramel cheesecake. And after he paid the check and they were walking out to his car, he almost hated that the night was coming to an end. Glancing around, he noticed there wasn't any festival or even anything open around them.

“So, when are these festivals?”

“Most are year-round, but they tend to be on Friday and Saturday nights. I wish we did more stuff like that in Laurel Bay.” At the car, he helped her in before joining her. “Once a year we have a Spring Fling, which is probably the closest we get to any kind of festival. And then there's all the usual stuff like a Fourth of July parade, Christmas parade, blah, blah, blah...” She

sighed. "It's a bit boring, but...it's home."

"Ever consider moving anywhere else?"

"Not really. My sister used to practically obsess about living anywhere else but here, but now that she's with Will, she's more than happy to stay." Turning her head, she frowned. "You know, I don't think you've ever mentioned where you're from."

Finally! He thought. A personal question!

"I was born and raised up in New York. Long Island, actually. I lived there until about five years ago and then I sort of traveled around the country trying to find a place to call home."

"Wow! And you decided on Laurel Bay?" And yeah, there was more than a hint of disbelief in her tone. "Why? Out of every place in the country, what was the big appeal of here?"

How did he even describe it?

"I wanted a small town, the beach was a perk, and, more than anything, I wanted privacy. I was driving through on my way to Myrtle Beach and stopped to get something to eat and..." He shrugged. "That was it."

"And you didn't think to keep driving further down the coast? Magnolia Sound's the next town over and they have a lot more to offer than we do."

Another shrug. "Like I said, there was just something very appealing to the whole thing. Your uncle put me in touch with Patrick and...here we are."

"Clearly you must work remotely then. I mean...if you were able to have your pick of anyplace in the country, your job must be very flexible."

"You...could say that."

"I'll admit, I love being my own boss. Sometimes it's a little lonely working from home all by myself, but I'm very disciplined and I think I get a lot more done than I would in an office surrounded by a bunch of people. What about you? Do you miss being in an office?"

"My job never required that," he replied vaguely.

"Oh, well...that's cool."

They fell into companionable silence and, before he knew it, they were pulling up in front of her apartment. As soon as he shut the car off, Ryleigh twisted to face him.

“Thanks for being willing to go out on such short notice. When I was texting with my siblings earlier, I sort of mentioned us having plans—you know, putting it out there even more that we’re dating—and it was nice that you didn’t make a liar out of me.”

Okay, so she was still actively hung up on the whole fake relationship thing and he was still the only one genuinely invested.

Patience wasn’t his strong suit, but he’d make the exception for her.

“I know you pride yourself on honesty,” he said with a smile.

“It’s stupid, I know, but...being lied to is my biggest pet peeve. So I try not to do that to anyone.”

“That’s very admirable of you.”

She smiled and grabbed her purse from the floor. “So, um...should we schedule something for later this week? Something here in town where people might see us? Dinner again?”

Not quite the follow-up date scenario he was hoping for, but...he had agreed to this.

“Sure. Yeah. My schedule’s fairly wide open so you can just text me and let me know what you’re thinking.”

“Great!”

“Or...”

Her eyes went a little wide, as if she wasn’t expecting him to suggest anything. “Or...?”

“You know, we don’t have to just go out at night. Since we both work from home, we could meet up at the coffee shop for breakfast. Or if mornings aren’t your thing, there’s always lunch. Not at the pub because...well...because. But there are plenty of other places we can go to grab something to eat.”

“Oh...yeah. Definitely.” Only, she didn’t sound particularly enthused about any of those things.

What he wanted was to invite her to his place, but considering her plan was for more visibility, that wouldn’t fly.

Yet.

Eventually, he’d love to convince her he wasn’t such a bad guy to hang out with just for the sake of hanging out and not because of any plan or because she was trying to prove a point.

But for now, he’d take what he could get.

Chapter Five

“Did he kiss you goodnight?”

“He did not,” Ryleigh said miserably the next day while on the phone with Ivy.

“Ah...so you were hoping he'd at least try, huh?”

“I don't know...I guess I wouldn't have hated it.”

Liar. You would have loved it and you know it.

“So, when are you seeing him again?”

“We're having breakfast together on Wednesday at the coffee shop.”

“Hmm...how early?”

“We're meeting at ten. Why?”

“Just curious.”

“Oh no...”

“What?”

“You're going to come and spy on us, aren't you?”

“Well...”

“Ivy! Please don't!”

“I'm going to give you five reasons why it's important that I do,” Ivy replied casually.

Ryleigh's only response was a dramatic sigh.

“First, I'd like to see the way the two of you interact together and if

you're even believable as a couple.”

“O-kay...” That sort of made sense.

“Second, I want to make sure you're actually putting a bit of an effort into your appearance. All these years of working at home have made you super casual.”

“I know how to dress for a date,” she argued. “At least ones that I'm aware I'm going on.”

“Fair enough. Third, should anyone ask if I know about the two of you, I won't have to lie because I will have seen you for myself.”

“Good call. I know you hate lying as much as I do.”

“Exactly. Fourth, as your best friend, I'd like to be introduced to this guy.”

“Only because you think he's hot...”

“I can bring Connor with me if you'd like.”

“No...” she whined. “It's bad enough that you're going to show up.”

“And fifth,” Ivy went on, “I'm nosy and I just want to check it all out.”

“You really are nosy...”

“And I own it. But here's the thing, Ry: at some point, you're going to have to bring him around your family. You can pop up at places all over town like those little whack-a-mole things, but until your family sees the two of you interacting together, they're going to just assume this isn't going anywhere. So you need to figure out when that's all going to happen.”

“Hopefully it won't come to that. If I can just fake date him for a few weeks and then have a fake breakup, they'll give me time to get over my broken heart and then...you know...we can all move on.”

“Or...you'll be right back where you started. Ryleigh, come on, you're smarter than that. I get what you were thinking with this plan, but I don't think you're going to get the results you're hoping for. When it's all over, your mother is probably going to have a list of guys on standby, just waiting for their chance to go out with you.”

“So...what...I should marry Ryker to get everyone to leave me alone?” she asked with a snort.

Until...

“We could go to Vegas and...” Visions of herself and Ryker at some little chapel came to mind.

“No! Stop it! That’s totally *not* what I’m saying and what is wrong with you? Why don’t you just get your siblings to sit down with you and back you up while you politely and maturely tell your mother that her interfering has to stop? Other than Jamie, they’re all respectable and level-headed.”

“Did you know they’re going to leave him in charge of the pub while they take a month off to travel? Can you imagine that?”

“Please, he practically lives there as it is, so I don’t think it will be too big of a stretch, but focus!” Then she paused. “When is this vacation happening?”

“Not anytime soon,” she murmured. “Believe me, if it were that easy and I knew I’d get a month’s reprieve, I would just suck it up and lie low until they left. But no, I had to take matters into my own hands and do something drastic.” Groaning, she said, “What is wrong with me?”

“You’ve spent your whole life being the peacekeeper and the one who hates to make waves. And now, sadly, that’s come back to bite you in the ass.”

“Accurate.”

“So...the siblings backing you up?”

“We’ve all tried. After everything Ari and Will went through, I thought things would have calmed down. Instead, it just amped up the attention on me.”

“And you’re sure you don’t like this guy? I mean...I know he’s not like any of the guys you normally choose to go out with, but...from everything you’ve told me, he seems nice.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Actually, Ryker was probably nicer than any guy she'd ever gone out with.

And she didn't want to examine that too closely.

"I get that he looks a little rough around the edges, and he came on a bit strong the last few months," Ivy was saying. "But...you've been chasing after a certain kind of guy and that hasn't worked out well for you either."

Resting her head back against the sofa cushion, she wanted to argue, but she stayed quiet.

Ivy continued, "You're very structured and I know you like things a certain way, but...maybe this rut you're in needs to be broken. And...maybe Ryker's the guy to break it."

"Why does everyone think I need a man in my life?" she demanded lightly. "Where is it written that being single is a bad thing? I happen to like my life. I enjoy my job, I meet some interesting people, and having a love life is highly overrated!"

"O-kay..."

"Ryker's not the guy, okay?" Ryleigh snapped. "He's been hitting on me for months and I've gone out with him twice now. Don't you think if there was something there, I would have felt it by now?"

"Maybe..."

"I get that you're concerned about me and I love you for it, but...can you just be my friend and not take my mom's side on this whole thing? When the right man comes along, I'm gonna know it. And it's not going to be someone she ambushed me with or someone I practically have to pay to go out with me."

"You're paying Ryker to go out with you?"

"Ugh, no! Dammit, Ivy, you know what I'm saying!"

All her friend did was snicker.

"Okay, that's it. I'm hanging up. I've got things to do."

"Fine. I'll see you Wednesday morning at the coffee shop," Ivy said

cheerily, and before Ryleigh could respond, she said, “Bye!” and was gone.

“I hate when she gets the last word,” she muttered tossing her phone aside. It was barely lunchtime and she had some finishing touches to put on a website design for Flowers on the Bay, the local florist. She was feeling very pleased with what she had created and as soon as she did a few tweaks, she could stop and make herself a little something to eat.

Sitting back down in front of her computer, Ryleigh scrolled through the page and clicked on different options to test them and then decided on a few fun decorative touches, like using a tiny bouquet as the cursor.

“So cute...”

Next, she uploaded the last of the photos and placed the contact information at the bottom of the page before sending the link to her client for approval.

“And...done!” Smiling, she was about to get up when she saw a notification from her own website for someone looking for her design services.

Dear Ms. Donovan, I am opening a tattoo parlor and looking for a unique website design. I'd like to stay away from the typical and focus more on my portfolio rather than my name.

“Hmm...that’s either bold or incredibly risky,” she murmured before reading on.

I want something very clean and modern. I'd prefer to stay away from a lot of black and red. I'm not looking for something that can be found on any other artist's page, I want something that is distinctly mine.

“Um...yeah. I’m getting that, dude.”

It's probably best for me to state up front that I am very demanding and won't know exactly what I'm looking for until I see it. If that requires dozens of design pitches, I'm fine with that. Do you charge by the hour? The design? You've come highly recommended and I've been told that you're the best at what you do.

And I most definitely demand the best for my business.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely, R. Moretti

Frowning at the screen, Ryleigh read over the request form another three times before she forced herself to stand and walk away.

Or...pace.

“Tattoos? Really?” It wasn’t that she was opposed to them, but...she’d never worked with that kind of business before and now she was going to have to do a ton of research to see what other artists’ sites are like before responding to R. Moretti. “And whose first name is just an initial, huh?”

Not that it mattered.

Although...it would be nice to know if she was dealing with a Mr. R. Moretti or a Ms. R. Moretti.

“Guess I can Google that and find out for myself.” Typing the name in and adding “tattoo artist,” Ryleigh sat back and waited for the results.

No search results found.

“Huh...that’s new.” She searched Moretti tattoo, Moretti tattoo parlor, Moretti tattoo artist and still nothing came up. It was completely bizarre because even if there wasn’t an exact match, Google usually threw her a bone with at least some kind of result.

Closing the laptop, she decided it was a problem for after lunch. Right now, she was hungry and there was a turkey club with extra bacon on the menu. Granted, it wasn’t as good as the ones they made at the pub, but she could make it pretty darn close.

She put the brioche bread in the toaster and a couple of slices of pre-cooked bacon in the microwave before pulling out a bag of baked barbecue chips to have on the side. Once the toast was done, she added a slice of pepper jack cheese, piled on lots of turkey, and then the lettuce and tomato before adding the bacon and mayo. Standing back, she was definitely pleased with her creation.

Picking up the plate, she walked over to the kitchen island, sat down with her phone, and decided to scroll through the news. But before she could do that or even take a bit of her sandwich, the phone rang and she smiled when she saw Arianna's name come up. They had talked last night, but not for long. Apparently, Will was giving her a foot massage, and after being forced to listen to several sex noises, Ryleigh said a quick goodbye.

Grinning, she swiped the screen. "If Will's hands are anywhere near you, I'm hanging up immediately."

Laughing, her sister said, "You're safe. Sorry to traumatize you last night. I'm at work and on my lunch break. Any chance you're free to talk?"

"Funny you should ask, because I just sat down with a sandwich."

"So I had an idea and want you to promise me you'll think about it and not immediately shoot me down."

"Okay..."

"Will and I were talking last night and we'd love to go out on a double date with you and Ryker Friday night," Arianna quickly blurted out. "Nothing around here if you don't want to or we can go to Beaufort or someplace in Magnolia...nothing fancy, just a casual dinner. What do you think?"

"Um...I'll have to talk to Ryker, but...uh...I don't see why not?"

Except that you know me better than anyone and you'll totally be able to tell that this whole thing is a sham!

"Really? Just like that?" Ari asked in confusion. "You're not going to try to come up with an excuse or...tell me how much you hate double dates?"

"Normally I don't, but as long as Will promises not to touch you in a way that makes you make those...you know...noises, I think we can handle it."

"Yay! Oh, I'm so excited! So, where do you think we should go?"

* * *

Ryker had been up all night and he knew he looked like hammered shit, but he figured Ryleigh would cut him some slack. After all, it wasn't like this was a real date. It was just coffee.

His dark hair was in complete disarray, his beard was a little bushier than usual, his clothes were rumpled and...

Shit.

"I should have at least showered," he muttered to himself as he walked into the coffee shop and spotted her sitting in the far corner. The look on her face told him she didn't approve of his appearance, but...there wasn't anything he could do about it now. She already had two cups of coffee on the table and a couple of muffins, and he was beyond grateful.

"Hey," she said warily as he sat down. "Are you okay? You look like hell."

He took a long sip of the black coffee and almost wept with appreciation. "Yeah. Sorry. Long night."

"Oh." The pinched expression spoke volumes.

"Working," he clarified. "I was up all night working on an important project that's overdue and...I haven't even slept."

"You could have texted and let me know you were busy, Ryker. It wouldn't have been a big deal. Your job is important."

Maybe it was the lack of sleep, but that one little statement made him snap, "How would you even know? You've never asked what I do for a living."

Her green eyes went wide and her mouth gaped for a moment. "Um...I just thought...I mean...if you had to pull an all-nighter..." Then she paused and pushed her coffee aside before striking a defiant pose. "Fine. What do you do for a living?"

Part of him wasn't ready to answer just out of spite, so he took another sip of his coffee before reaching for a blueberry muffin and taking a bite. But if he thought she was going to argue with him or call him out on it, he was

wrong.

And that bothered him even more.

“Oh my goodness! Ryleigh! Hey!”

Turning his head, Ryker saw a cheery looking blonde walking over with her to-go cup of coffee.

And she clearly wasn't in any rush...to go.

Ugh...

“Ivy! Hey!” Ryleigh said as she got to her feet and hugged the woman. They turned to face him. “Ivy, this is my boyfriend, Ryker. Ryker, this is my best friend, Ivy.”

He gave her a curt nod and finished chewing his muffin. There was no way this was a coincidental meeting.

So maybe she either cared a little more than she was letting on or...

She was just looking for more witnesses to their sham relationship.

On any given day, Ryker considered himself to be a bit antisocial and someone who treasured his privacy. All this needing to be seen nonsense was starting to make his skin itch.

“Do you have time to join us for a minute?” Ryleigh asked, and even he could tell she was forcing the friendliness to her tone.

“If you don't mind...” Ivy pondered, looking directly at him.

He motioned to the empty chair and put his attention back on his breakfast.

“So, um...what are you two up to?” Ivy asked, possibly sensing the tension.

“Just a little breakfast date,” Ryleigh murmured. “Ryker worked all night and I was just telling him he should have just texted and canceled, but...”

“But I'm a man of my word,” he responded gruffly, meeting Ryleigh's gaze. “We had a date, and I wanted to see you. End of story.”

Ivy looked awkwardly between the two of them. She took a sip of her coffee before gently clearing her throat. “I'm just coming off an overnight

shift myself. I'm a paramedic. What do you do, Ryker?"

Without looking away from Ryleigh, he said, "I'm an artist."

"Oh! How fascinating!"

"That explains why your hands are filthy," Ryleigh said sweetly.

Shit. Most people who knew him didn't even question the ink and graphite on his skin. They all knew it came with the territory.

Well, those who knew what he did for a living.

"Do you sculpt or draw or...what do you prefer to work with?"

"I draw out everything first in pencil and then do the final version in ink," he explained, barely glancing in Ivy's direction. "Obviously it can get messy."

"I never could draw," Ivy went on, doing her best to keep the conversation going. "I'm more of a math and science girl. I draw a pretty good stick figure, but that's about it. Ryleigh's definitely artistic. No wonder the two of you were attracted to each other." Then she giggled. "I almost said drawn to each other, but I thought it sounded ridiculous!" Then she laughed again.

He caught Ryleigh rolling her eyes and winked at her.

They were definitely on the same page.

"I'd love to see some of your work," Ivy went on. "Do you have stuff in any galleries or do you do illustrations for books or magazines? I think artistic people are so fascinating and..."

Her cellphone rang and all Ryker could think was that they were literally saved by the bell. She seemed like a nice enough person, but he could also tell she was a someone who hated any kind of lull in a conversation.

As Ivy excused herself to take the call, he looked over at Ryleigh and saw her picking at her muffin. "Not hungry?"

Looking up at him, she shrugged. "I was, but this just all started to feel weird. I told Ivy that we were meeting here and so I knew she was going to show up," she admitted. "I just didn't expect her to talk so much or ask so

many questions, so...sorry.”

At least she was honest.

Nodding, he took a sip of his coffee. “I get it. As you’ve probably noticed, I’m not someone who’s overly chatty. Add that to the whole lack of sleep thing and I’m obviously not looking like a great guy.”

Reaching across the table, Ryleigh placed her hand on his forearm, mildly surprising him. “You really should have just texted me. It wouldn’t have been a big deal. There would have been other dates.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Which, um...brings me to another subject. Sort of,” she murmured, slowly pulling her hand away. “Are you busy Friday night?”

He was supposed to catch up with Dax about the tattoo design over a Zoom call, but...

“No. What’s up?”

She told him about her sister wanting to go out on a double date with them and he had to fight the urge to roll his eyes. As adults, it sounded like a ridiculous way to describe going out, but he kept his opinion to himself.

“Will’s a really cool guy—former Marine—and easy to get along with. Ari’s chatty like Ivy, but I can tell her to reel it in so she won’t be quite so... you know...”

“Annoying?”

Frowning, she said, “I was going to say inquisitive.”

Leaning forward, he grinned. “Liar. You were totally going to say annoying.”

“That’s not...”

“Just like I know you were annoyed by how much Ivy was talking. Your face is very expressive and it gives you away every time.”

“It does not...”

“Hey, you guys!” Ivy said as she walked back over. “I need to go. Sorry! Connor’s truck broke down and he’s waiting for the tow truck, so...”

Ryleigh stood and hugged her and Ryker stood because...well...he just felt like he should.

“It was nice to meet you, Ryker. And I guess I’ll talk to you later, Ry,” she said before giving her a hug. “Bye!”

They both sat back down and Ryker took another long sip of his coffee before stating, “And now you’re relieved that she’s gone so you can enjoy the rest of your muffin.”

Across the table, she let out a small huff of annoyance. “Cut that out,” she hissed. “You don’t know everything!”

All he did was shrug.

“If I’m relieved, it’s only because now you can go home and get some sleep.”

If he thought that was true, it would be sweet. But as she just pointed out, he didn’t know everything. “What time Friday?”

“What?”

“Friday,” he repeated. “Dinner with your sister. What time?”

“Oh, um...seven. I think. We didn’t really confirm anything because I wanted to talk to you first.” Pausing, she studied him. “You sure you’re okay with it? We never talked about going out with any of my siblings. Although, out of the four of them, Ari’s the best one to go anywhere with.”

“It’s fine. Whatever you need from me, I told you I’d do.”

The pinched expression was back and as much as he wanted to keep teasing and bantering with her, he was exhausted and couldn’t hold back the yawn. “Sorry.”

She was instantly on her feet. “No, I’m the one who’s sorry. You should be sleeping right now, so...let’s go.” Clearing the table, she threw away the rest of her muffin and coffee before facing him. He chose to take his coffee with him and popped the last of his muffin in his mouth.

Outside, he finished chewing and pulled his sunglasses out of his pocket and slid them on. It was far too bright out right now and he couldn’t wait to

get home and crawl into bed.

“Text me the information once you confirm everything with Arianna,” he said around another yawn.

“I will, and...thanks again. Really. I hate that you came out like this and...” Pausing, her eyes went wide. “Oh, crap.”

Glancing around, he said, “What...?” And before he could utter another word, Ryleigh’s hand was wrapped around his shoulders and she was pressed up against him. Then it was a definite case of déjà vu because she was kissing him.

And he was more than willing to be kissing her back.

His arm banded around her as he eagerly took control of the kiss. She smelled amazing—like fresh linens and sunshine—and he could taste the blueberry and coffee on her tongue. His heart hammered a little because he was afraid she was going to pull back and tell him he was laying it on a bit thick for the sidewalk on a Wednesday morning.

But she didn’t.

If anything, she pressed closer and he was beginning to realize that she enjoyed kissing him.

Either that or she was an exhibitionist and that would suck.

Slowly, he tampered down on his need and went from devouring her to small sips of her lips and nearly groaned when she let out a deep, throaty hum of disappointment. When they pulled back slightly, Ryleigh blinked up at him, licking her lips.

He loved when she did that.

Gently, she cleared her throat. “My uncle was walking into the bank across the street and...well...I just thought...”

Reaching up, his hand caressed her cheek. “I figured as much.” And maybe because he was near delirious from sleep deprivation, he added, “Someday, you’re going to kiss me because you want to and not because you’re being rebellious toward your family.”

And then, because she was stunned speechless, he leaned in and gave her another quick kiss.

“Text me and I guess I’ll see you Friday.”

Turning, he walked away and wasn’t sure if he’d given her something to think about or a reason to break things off.

Maybe after a couple hours of sleep he’d be able to figure it out, but for now, he needed to focus on simply getting home.

In his truck, he finished the last of the coffee and tossed the cup on the seat beside him. A quick glance back toward the coffee shop, he saw that Ryleigh was still standing there watching him.

Good.

He knew she was thinking about his words, but he seriously hoped she was thinking about his kiss.

He knew he was going to be doing exactly that as he crawled into bed back at home.

And he’d probably dream a bit about it too.

Chapter Six

“Ugh! Why is my body so stupid?”

Ryker was due to pick her up in fifteen minutes, and Ryleigh had been through almost a dozen outfits already. They were meeting Arianna and Will at The Sand Bar in Magnolia Sound at seven, and every piece of clothing she put on made her feel like a troll.

“Little black dress? Trying too hard. Favorite skinny jeans? Too snug. New V-neck sweater that looked great when I tried it on? Suddenly gives me a thick waist! *Gah!* What in the world?”

Standing in the middle of her walk-in closet, she seriously debated calling her sister and canceling. The only thing stopping her was the fact that Ari would definitely drive right over and see right through any excuse Ryleigh gave.

“This shouldn’t be so hard...”

But it was.

Normally she was fine with who she was and what she looked like. Every once in a while, however, old insecurities came out. She might be the older sister, but Arianna was everything Ryleigh wasn’t.

Namely tall, blonde, and beautiful.

It wasn’t her fault that all the pretty girl genes went to her baby sister, but sometimes when they went out places together, Ryleigh felt more than a little

inferior.

And it sucked.

“Okay, The Sand Bar is extremely casual, so I need to stop being ridiculous and just...put clothes on. I’m not going to grow six inches and lose twenty pounds in the next ten minutes, so I might as well resign myself to the fact that no one’s going to be looking at me anyway. They’ll all be looking at her.”

And...now I’m depressed...

With a little more force than necessary, she grabbed a pair of faded jeans and slipped them on. Next, a navy-blue ribbed cardigan top. It was a little low cut and showed just a hint of the lacy cup of her bra, but...she wasn’t going to obsess over it because there wasn’t time. Sliding on a pair of ankle boots, she studied her reflection and immediately wanted to change, but off in the distance, she heard Ryker’s knock.

“Dammit...”

With a small huff, she ran out of the bedroom and to the front door to let him in. “Hey,” she said breathlessly, without really looking at him. Turning, she went to grab her purse and phone and keys. “I hope you weren’t knocking for long. I was just finishing up and was completely distracted.” Then she looked up and felt an unfamiliar flutter in her belly. “Um...”

“Why were you distracted?” he asked casually. Tonight, he had on a pair of dark jeans and even darker boots, along with a charcoal-colored sweater that she realized matched his eyes.

His hair was in its usual disarray, but it totally worked on him and he smelled beyond delicious.

Like...so delicious that she wanted to walk over and rub herself all over him while inhaling deeply.

“Ryleigh?”

“What?”

“Why were you distracted?”

Realizing that she had just been mutely staring, she fluttered around to make sure she had everything. “Oh, um...it was nothing,” she murmured. “Just...stupid stuff.”

“Yeah, that’s not really an explanation.”

There was something about Ryker that made her blurt out things that she never would share with anyone, and this was one of those times.

“It’s just...” She let out a long breath. “Every once in a while, I get a little weird about hanging out with my sister. Particularly...in public.”

One dark brow arched in response. “You’re going to need to elaborate.”

“She doesn’t do anything weird, so you can relax,” she clarified. “It’s my own issue and not a big deal. Really.” Forcing a smile, she looked up at him. “Ready?”

Shaking his head, Ryker crossed his arms. “Not until you tell me what’s really going on.”

Most men would be more than happy to let something like this go, but not Ryker, she thought miserably.

“Okay, fine. My sister intimidates me and it’s fine when we’re hanging out just the two of us at home or if we’re with the whole family for dinner and stuff, but when we go out places together, I feel...inferior.”

His eyes went wide. “Ryleigh, that’s crazy! Why would you even think that?”

“Oh, please...Arianna’s tall, blonde, and beautiful. And then there’s me.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Um...everything? I’m short, not blonde, and not beautiful.”

“I respectfully disagree.”

Normally she’d snort or say something snarky, but there was a...ferocity in his tone that told her he was being completely honest.

And it was a bit of a turn on.

“So...yeah. It’s something that comes at me every now and again, and I can’t really control it. Tonight was one of those nights, but...I’m fine. I

swear,” she assured him. “We really need to go or we’ll be late.”

With a curt nod, Ryker walked to the door and held it open for her and then stood back as she locked it. He was quiet all the way to the car—the nice SUV again—and it wasn’t until they were on the road that she knew she had to speak.

“Please don’t make this weird, okay? I mean, we all have insecurities and obviously you’re being forced to have a front-row seat to mine lately.” When he still didn’t respond, she quickly added, “I never should have said anything.”

When Ryker reached over and took her hand in his, she nearly jumped.

“Personally, I don’t think you have any reason to feel inferior, but you’re allowed to feel how you feel,” he told her. “Just know that not everyone thinks blondes are more beautiful, and plenty of guys prefer a woman who’s a little more on the petite side. If you ask me, your sister should be intimidated by you.”

“She works in the medical field,” she argued lightly.

“And you’re brilliantly creative,” he immediately countered. “It’s not a competition, Ryleigh. Obviously, you know your sister better than I do, but I bet if you talked to her about this, she’d admit to feeling intimidated by you.”

The snort was out before she could stop it.

“Ryleigh, come on...”

“We’ll pick up this conversation after dinner and then you’ll see why you’re wrong,” she told him. “For now, can we talk about something else? Did you finish the piece you were working on? The one you stayed up all night for?”

“I did and had a meeting earlier with the client and got his approval, so... it’s all good.” He gave her hand a small squeeze and she realized she liked that too. His hand was large and slightly callused and she wondered what it would feel like if he touched her in other places.

And she’d be lying if she said she hadn’t thought about that more than

once since this entire charade started.

Tonight, however, things felt a little...different. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but there was definitely a little more tension in the air.

Someday, you're going to kiss me because you want to and not because you're being rebellious toward your family.

Okay, maybe it was that.

That phrase had been playing over and over in her head for two days, and she didn't think he was totally wrong.

But she wasn't going to prove him right anytime soon either.

Looking down at their hands led her to looking at his forearms—which were exposed because of his pushed-up sleeves. He had a lot of tattoos and it reminded her of the email she got earlier in the week.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What can you tell me about tattoos?”

Glancing over at her, he grinned. “Why? Thinking about getting one?”

The bark of laughter was out before she could stop it. “Um...no. I got an inquiry from a tattoo artist who's looking for me to design a website for them and...I don't know...I guess I never thought about that sort of thing before. Most of my stuff has been a little more on the...you know...cheerier side.”

“You don't think tattoos can be cheery?”

“Ryker, come on. Be serious. I get that some people choose cartoon characters or something fun, but I think the majority are a little more on the darker side—skulls and dragons and whatnot.”

“So, what are they looking for?”

“They don't want something typical,” she explained. “And honestly, I have no idea what that even means. I've spent almost an entire day looking at other artists' websites and they're all different. Now I'm a little confused and not feeling particularly confident.”

“You're going to turn them down?”

Shrugging, she shook her head. “I haven’t hit that point yet, but I guess I was curious about the whole culture. I figured since you clearly have tattoos and you’re an artist, you might have some insight into this.”

Nodding, he squeezed her hand again. “Tell you what? Why don’t you work up some ideas and then I can look at them before you present them to your client. How does that sound?”

Relief washed over her. “Oh my goodness! That would be great. Thank you!”

“My pleasure,” he said gruffly, and it made her feel a bit...tingly.

A few minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot for The Sand Bar and it was a little crowded. Looking around, she didn’t spot Will or Arianna’s cars and figured they’d simply park and go and grab a table. Ryker agreed and within minutes, they were walking hand-in-hand toward the entrance. The line to get in was out the door, so they took their place and waited. Ryleigh shivered in the cool night air and Ryker reached over and pulled her in close.

This is nice...

Turning, she faced him and smiled. “Thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

Yeah, he said it again and she had a feeling he knew exactly what those words did to her. She was about to make some lame comment about the line when she spotted her sister walking toward them from the far side of the parking lot.

“They’re here,” she whispered, and instinctively reached up to kiss him.

Ryker’s hand clamped hard around her wrist, stopping her from raking her hand up into his hair. Leaning down, his expression was more than a little fierce. “I’m getting a little tired of this dog and pony show,” he all but growled lowly. “I’ve spent enough time around your family that I can say with great certainty that they don’t immediately start making out with their significant others whenever another one of you comes around.”

Ryleigh knew her eyes were wide, but other than being mildly shocked by his words, she found she was more annoyed because this meant she wouldn't get to kiss him.

Someday, you're going to kiss me because you want to and not because you're being rebellious toward your family.

Maybe she was going to prove him right after all.

And sooner than either of them thought.

Just...not right now.

"Ryleigh!" Arianna called out as she got closer and waved. Within no time, introductions were made and they all huddled together as they made their way to the hostess stand to get a table. "I guess I didn't even think about how busy they'd be on a Friday night. Sorry!"

"It would be the same no matter where we went," Ryleigh told her. "Besides, you know the wait's never long and if it is, we can always grab some drinks at the bar to kill some time."

The hostess told them it would be fifteen minutes.

"Come on," Ryker said, leading her through the crowd of waiting people. "Drinks sound good, and it will get us inside faster."

Everyone agreed.

Ryker and Will stepped in close to order drinks and Ryleigh realized she'd never shared with him what her usual was and wondered if she should go and tell him. But her sister held her back.

"Oh my goodness," Ari whispered loudly to be heard over the noise in the bar. "Ryker is totally hot and the way he looks at you is just...wow! How did you manage to keep turning him down for so long?"

Good question...

"You know me," she said in that self-deprecating way of hers. "I kept telling myself that he wasn't my type and that I didn't want to give him a chance. Turns out he wore me down."

"I'm glad he did," Ari said with a bright smile. "The two of you were

giving off enough heat out there that we almost didn't need to come inside!"

"What?" she cried. "No!"

But all her sister did was nod and before she could comment, the guys were walking toward them. Will handed Ari a glass of white wine and Ryker handed her a cosmopolitan. Looking up at him, she was fairly certain her jaw was on the floor.

His arm banded around her, and his lips gently pressed against her ear as he whispered, "I pay attention to everything."

And that one little statement sent shivers of delight down her spine.

"Here's to an amazing night!" Arianna said, raising her glass, and Ryleigh couldn't agree more.

* * *

"And then Ryleigh stood up on the bar and yelled at everyone!" Arianna was saying as their dinner dishes were being cleared. "I swear to you, in that moment, it just confirmed what a badass my sister can be." Her smile was radiant as she spoke, and Ryker noticed the look of utter awe and gratitude on her face.

"I'd had way too much to drink," Ryleigh protested lightly. "I mean...you know how loud our family gets and sometimes it's intimidating. I'm the runt of the group and no one really listens unless I make a spectacle of myself."

Well, that explained why she grabbed him in the parking lot that first night.

"That's not true at all," Arianna countered. "I know it feels that way, but we all look to you to be the voice of reason, so if you have to get up and yell at us, we know something's up."

Beside him, Ryleigh laughed. "Oh, please! I am *not* the voice of reason in the family. That's Liam's place."

"It was until he enlisted in the Marines," her sister told her with a smug

look. “After that, Patrick became completely driven to take on the small world of Laurel Bay, Jamie takes nothing seriously, and I was a brat. Face it, you’re the one we all looked to.”

Ryker turned and glanced down at Ryleigh’s wide-eyed expression. He knew this was how the dynamic would be between the two sisters. Even though he didn’t know any of the Donovan family well—with the exception of Ronan, and that was only because he was always the one tending the bar—Ryker was a people watcher. He observed everything going on around him and saw enough of the way Ryleigh interacted with her family to know that they all admired her. And from everything she’d shared with him about her relationship with her sister, it would almost be impossible for Arianna not to admire her.

“So, is anyone up for dessert?” their server asked when she walked back over.

“Will and I are going to split the skillet cookie sundae,” Arianna replied. “And a decaf coffee for me.”

“Make that two,” Will chimed in.

Ryker glanced at the menu and saw they had an alternate version with a brownie. “What do you say, Ryleigh? Want to split the brownie one?”

“Ooh...absolutely,” she told him with an impish grin as she pressed herself as close to him as she could get. “You know I can never turn down a brownie.”

He did now.

“And I’ll take a decaf coffee too,” he told the server. “Ry?” Because he noticed she’d had a couple of drinks and maybe that’s why she was suddenly okay with rubbing against him. After his comment earlier when she’d tried to kiss him, she’d been keeping a respectable distance without being obvious about it.

“Make it an even four,” she said, and once the server was gone, she quietly announced that she was heading to the ladies’ room.

“I’ll go with you!” Arianna said with just a little too much enthusiasm.

As soon as they were gone, both he and Will chuckled. “That was subtle, huh?”

Will nodded. “I’m surprised Ari waited this long before doing something like this. I figured after each course she’d be dragging Ryleigh off to gossip.”

He laughed again before finishing his drink. “I hope I’ve passed inspection.”

This time Will laughed. “I’ve said that many times in my life. And not always while in the service.” He finished his own drink before looking over at Ryker. “Seriously though, the Donovans are...well...they’re a bit overwhelming.”

All Ryker did was nod because he figured he was about to get a quick lesson on what to do to make things easier with Ryleigh’s family.

“They’re wildly overprotective of both Ari and Ryleigh. I mean...shit, you wouldn’t believe the crazy hoops I had to jump through because of it. They all knew me as Liam’s best friend and liked me and yet they all hated the mere thought of me going out with Arianna.”

“And yet they approved of you going out with Ryleigh,” he stated, and almost grinned at Will’s stunned reaction.

“She told you about that, huh?”

He nodded.

“Yeah, well...it was like being steamrolled,” he explained. “Their mother is...very opinionated and she’s overly passionate about her daughters finding appropriate men to date and marry.” He paused for a moment. “But the thing is, no one talks about why. It’s an outdated ideology and yet she won’t let it go. Besides the whole interfering aspect, it was all about Ryleigh being the older sister.” He shook his head. “You have no idea how much it frustrated Ari at the time.” Then he grinned. “Still does.”

“But they eventually warmed to the idea since the two of you are engaged now. What changed?”

“We owe a lot of that to Ryleigh and the dramatics she mentioned earlier. She was the one who fought for us—probably more than we openly fought for ourselves.”

Interesting. So she can stand up for other people—her siblings—and be taken seriously, but not for herself. WTF?

“Okay, I’ve got to ask because I have a feeling they’ll be back soon,” Ryker began. “Why is their mother so hard on Ryleigh specifically? Like...I get that she’s the last single daughter, but...it just seems like she goes out of her way to do things she *knows* upsets Ryleigh. Why?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. No one does. And when you try talking to Kate about it, she gets defensive and claims we’re being disrespectful. When Ryleigh didn’t come for dinner on Sunday, they all tried talking to her about it, but she wouldn’t be swayed.”

“Damn.”

Nodding, Will said, “I’m sure since we’ve hung out tonight, Arianna will get a call tomorrow from their mother. It’s exhausting.”

“That’s one way of describing it,” he murmured.

“Okay, now there’s something *I*’ve got to ask,” Will threw out there. “We were given strict instructions not to talk to you like this was an interrogation and you have no idea how hard that was for my girl.” He laughed. “But...I’m just curious what you do for a living.”

“I’m a tattoo artist,” he told him because it was nice that someone took an interest.

“Seriously? That’s awesome! Where do you work out of? Do you have your own place?”

“I’m in between places right now,” he said vaguely. “I ended up here in Laurel Bay six months ago, sort of by chance, and I’m still figuring things out.”

Will’s eyes went a little wide and Ryker knew exactly what he was thinking: How are you even living if you haven’t worked in six months?

A question he undoubtedly would have voiced if Ryleigh and Arianna hadn't returned to the table.

"I was hoping dessert would be here waiting for us when we got back," Ryleigh said with a pout as she slid into the booth beside him.

Closely beside him.

Her hand rested on his upper thigh as she smiled. "I guess we weren't gone as long as I thought we were."

"I told you we didn't need to rush," Arianna said in a loud whisper before she started to giggle. Then she looked at Ryker. "I had a lot of questions I wanted answers to but my sister is being frustratingly tight-lipped about the two of you."

His lips twitched. "Is that right?"

"We're private people," Ryleigh said. "Right, babe?"

Babe? That was new.

"Absolutely, baby girl," he teased before placing a kiss on the tip of her nose.

"Mmm...baby girl. I like that," she murmured as she maneuvered herself until their lips were practically touching. "Say it again."

"I will," he promised huskily. "Later."

She hummed again before twisting beside him and resting her head on his arm.

"Are the two of you going to come to dinner on Sunday?" Ari asked as she mimicked their pose with Will.

"Absolutely not," Ryleigh firmly stated. "And boo on you for bringing up a sore subject when we've been having a good time." Reaching over, she picked up her napkin and threw it at her.

"You're right, you're right, sorry."

Dessert was served and most of the conversation centered on food after that.

"Hey, Ry, remember those Oreo brownies you made last month?"

She nodded. "Oh, yeah. They went fast."

"Wait...Ryleigh made them?" Will asked in confusion before looking at Ari. "You said you made them?"

"Uh-oh..."

"Dude, seriously?" Ryleigh said with a laugh. "You still haven't told him you can't cook?"

"I'm learning," Arianna argued. "Just...not that fast."

"So...wait...you've cooked for me though," Will went on. "The shepherd's pie, the beef stew, the homemade rolls, lasagna..."

"Actually, I made all of that," Ryleigh said around a mouthful of brownie and ice cream. "Ari's a terrible cook."

"I'm not that terrible," she whined. "I can make some stuff, just not...you know...full meals."

"What does that even mean?" Will asked, but Ryker tuned out. Taking the spoon from Ryleigh's hand, he opted to feed her the next bite.

"So...you totally threw your sister under the bus."

She nodded and licked the spoon. "That's what she gets for bringing up our mother when I'm all relaxed."

That made him laugh because she had zero guilt about the whole thing. "Fair enough. And all the cooking?"

"Oh, I'm a total badass at cooking. There are several specials at the pub that only I can make, and honestly, cooking is something I love to do. I find it very relaxing. And baking. But I don't go as wild with that. Only the basics."

"And what are the basics?"

"Cookies, brownies, the occasional cake or pie. Nothing fancy. I hate decorating. Too time-consuming."

He fed her another spoonful of their sundae before taking a bite for himself.

"What about you?" she asked.

"What about me?"

“Do you cook?”

He nodded. “Absolutely.”

“What’s your specialty?”

“Anything Italian. I make a killer sauce, know how to make my own pasta, and my chicken parm has been known to make grown men weep because it’s so delicious.”

With a soft gasp, she took the spoon and helped herself to another bite. “Then that’s what I want you to make for me.”

“Name the time, baby girl, and it’s yours,” he said gruffly, taking the spoon back.

Ryleigh leaned in close and whispered in his ear, “Tomorrow night. Just the two of us. I’ll bring the wine. And dessert.” Then she giggled softly. “And maybe an overnight bag.”

He went hard in an instant. Did she realize what she was saying? What she was *definitely* implying?

Swallowing hard, he pulled back and scanned her face and saw that she didn’t look like she was joking or tipsy. If anything, she looked very serious and determined.

And he had no idea what to do with that.

Unaware of all the thoughts racing through his mind—most involving her being naked in every room in his house—Ryleigh settled beside him and took another bite of their dessert. “How’s the chocolate chip cookie?” she asked Arianna.

“Super gooey,” she replied. “And we’re not sharing!”

“That’s fine, because we’re not sharing either!” Both sisters broke into a fit of giggles while Ryker and Will exchanged glances that said it was clearly time to go.

It took another thirty minutes to finish their coffees and desserts, and out in the parking lot, Ryker shook Will’s hand and reluctantly accepted a very tight hug from Arianna before he and Ryleigh made their way to his car. She

was quiet as they pulled out and headed to back to her place.

“I lied,” she said a few minutes later.

“About...?”

“Tomorrow,” she said, her eyes looking straight ahead at the road.

“Oh.” And yeah. He was wildly disappointed to hear that because it was all he’d been able to think about since she whispered it in his ear.

Shit.

They drove in silence for several miles before she spoke again. “I had a fantastic time tonight, Ryker. It meant a lot to me that you were willing to go out with Will and Ari like that and...”

“You don’t have to explain yourself, Ryleigh,” he said softly. His hand twitched with the need to reach out and reassure her, but...he fought the urge. If he touched her right now, it would be too hard to deal with her rejection.

“No, I really do,” she told him.

“I’m telling you,” he interrupted before she could say anything else, “we’re good. You’d had a little too much to drink and were being flirty to make things look the way you wanted in front of your sister. I get it. It’s fine.”

Beside him, she sighed loudly. “Can you please just shut up and let me say what I need to say?”

“Sure,” he said tightly, gripping the wheel hard enough to snap it in two.

With a small huff, she went on. “It wasn’t that I lied, not really. I just...I don’t want to wait for tomorrow night.”

For a moment, Ryker was a little confused. “We just ate, Ryleigh. And I don’t think I have all the ingredients to cook a full Italian dinner right now.”

There was a tiny little growl that he was certain she thought sounded fierce, but it came out sounding kind of cute. “Not the *dinner*, Ryker! The rest of it! Spending the night! *Sheesh!*”

This time, he didn’t even try hiding his grin. “You want to spend the night with me.”

She nodded, still not looking at him. “Yes.”

Slowly, he pulled over to the side of the road right in front of the “Welcome to Laurel Bay” sign. Throwing the car in park, he twisted in his seat to face her. “Then you’re going to have to look at me and tell me exactly what you want so I can be sure we’re on the same page.”

Mimicking his move, Ryleigh faced him and gave him a defiant glare. “Fine. I want to spend the night with you tonight. I thought that was obvious.”

“Like I said, I needed to be sure we were on the same page,” he told her before reaching out and cupping her face and kissing her. It was deep and wet and full of promise for the night to come. He wished they weren’t in his car on the side of the road because he wanted to keep kissing her until she was breathless and panting his name, wanted to kiss her until they were both naked and sweaty in a tangle of limbs. He wanted to kiss and touch every inch of her and then do it all over again.

“Ryker?” she said breathlessly against his lips.

“Hmm?”

“Why aren’t we moving?” She gently bit his bottom lip before raking her hands into his hair and giving a slight tug. “Take us home.”

Damn, that was a sexy command.

“Your place or mine?”

“Yours.”

As much as he hated moving away from her, he now had great incentive for doing it.

Reaching for one of her hands, he held it tightly against his thigh as he put the car in gear and sped off into the night.

Chapter Seven

Never in her entire life had Ryleigh said anything so bold or felt so empowered and yet a little reckless.

Basically, she was a nervous wreck and oddly excited about it.

His hand felt big and warm, his thigh hard and hot.

And if they didn't get to his house soon, she was pretty sure she was going to combust.

Closing her eyes, she thought of all the things she wanted to do with him and then immediately stopped that train of thought because suddenly felt very overwhelmed. Ryker was so completely different from every man she'd ever slept with, and she was beginning to fear he was out of her league. Maybe she should have just jumped him while they were on the side of the road because all this drive was accomplishing was making her second-guess herself.

Dammit.

If Ryker suspected that she was starting to freak out, he chose to say nothing. And just when she was about to vocalize how much she was freaking out, they pulled up to his house. She let out a long breath as the car came to a stop and then waited as he got out and walked around to the passenger side to help her out.

And was instantly pressed up against the vehicle as Ryker kissed her.

And man could Ryker kiss.

It wasn't slow and seductive; it was all wild and untamed and blatantly sexual. She instinctively moved closer and slid her hands slowly up over his chest and shoulders before combing through his glorious hair. It was crazy how much she wanted to touch him, but...the logical part of her needed to drop one last truth bomb.

"Ryker," she murmured against his lips and almost whined when he pulled back. His breathing was ragged and there was just raw need written all over his face.

Do I really need to say anything?

Unfortunately, she did.

"I just...there's one more thing," she began nervously.

One strong hand reached up and caressed her jaw, making her knees go a little weak.

"Um...it's obvious that I want you and...you want me..."

"But...?" he prompted lowly.

"But...I don't want this to change anything," she blurted out. "You and I...what we're doing..."

"Got it," he said, taking her by the hand and leading her to the house.

"No, Ryker, wait!" she said, tugging him to a stop. When he faced her in the moonlight, Ryleigh almost forgot everything she was going to say.

Almost.

"It's important to me that you not get the wrong idea." As soon as the words were out, she realized how ridiculous they sounded.

Ryker stepped in close. "No wrong ideas here, Ryleigh. I want you and you want me and we're going to go inside and do whatever you want, baby girl. All. Night. Long."

The moan was out before she could stop it. "Yes, please."

In the blink of an eye, the door was open and he was leading her inside and didn't stop except to lock the door and toss his keys on the entryway table. Only a handful of lights were on throughout the house, but it didn't

matter. She knew where they were going and what they were going to do, and she couldn't wait.

There was a tiny part of her that felt like a total ass for making that statement out in the driveway. If any guy had said something like that to her, she would have told them to go fuck themselves and wished them a good life.

Ugh...I've become a douchebag...

And in typical Ryker fashion, he just rolled with it.

They turned down a long hallway and she knew the door at the end would be to his bedroom. Sure enough, they stepped inside and she could only stop and stare. It was massive and incredibly masculine. The bed dominated the space and Ryker released her hand and slowly walked backwards toward it, his eyes never leaving hers. The sweater was up and over his head in a flash before getting tossed on the floor and there were even more tattoos on his chest.

And they were sexier than she thought they'd be.

Wow...am I suddenly into tatted men?

Well, obviously she was into *this* tatted man.

Without a word, Ryker held out his hand to her and Ryleigh simply dropped her purse on the floor and walked over to him, wondering if she should whip her sweater off too.

As if reading her mind, he said, "Let me."

Then those gloriously large, warm hands rested on her waist for just a moment before sliding up under her top. The moment his hands touched her skin, she felt a jolt of awareness go through her, causing her to sway slightly. He didn't rush and she really wished he would because the anticipation was making her twitchy. When the sweater was gone and on the floor with his, Ryker just looked at her until she started to squirm. His name came out as a soft plea, but he just continued to look.

"So pretty," he said, his voice deep and all rumbly. "You have no idea how many times I've thought of you being right here like this."

This was usually the time she'd say something snarky to lighten the mood, but...she kind of liked where this was going.

Both hands came up and cupped her breasts and she was glad she'd gone with something lacy rather than something practical. This wasn't even remotely how she envisioned the night ending and normally hated when things didn't go as planned, but she was suddenly seeing the appeal.

"Tell me what you want, baby girl," he murmured as his hands gently kneaded her breasts. "Anything and it's yours."

Humming softly, she looked him in the eye. "Everything you've been thinking of," she said boldly. "I want to do everything you've thought about."

His smile was a little wicked. "Careful. You have no idea the way my mind works or just how dirty it can be."

Closing the distance between them, Ryleigh gave him a wicked smile of her own. "There isn't a doubt in my mind how dirty it can be, and that's fine because I know you would never do anything to hurt me. I trust you, Ryker."

And that was like hitting the launch button.

His lips claimed hers again in a searing kiss as his hands made quick work of removing her bra. As soon as it was gone, Ryleigh pressed up against him and reveled in the skin-on-skin contact. She awkwardly kicked her boots off as Ryker moved on to help get her jeans off. As much as she wanted to do the same to him, she had a feeling she'd be all thumbs right now. He broke the kiss long enough to peel the denim down her legs, kneeling in front of her.

Why is that so damn sexy? She wondered.

Once he straightened, he scooped her up in his arms and strode over to the bed. Gently, he placed her down before he stripped down to his dark boxer briefs. When he straightened and stared down at her, Ryleigh actually felt herself tremble. She'd never let herself be this...exposed before. There she was lying in the middle of his bed in nothing but a pair of panties and Ryker was staring down at her like he was ravenous and she was the feast.

She'd read romance novels where women felt themselves get all quivery and she always thought it was nonsense.

Now she knew better.

Leaning forward, Ryker placed one knee on the bed and slowly—purposely—lowered himself onto the bed, covering her body with his. They both let out a sigh of appreciation at the same time when they were touching from head to toe.

“Tell me you want this, Ryleigh,” he whispered. “Tell me you want me.”

Her arms slowly wound around him. “I want you, Ryker. So much it scares me.”

Placing a soft kiss on the tip of her nose before resting his forehead against hers, he replied, “You have no idea how long I've dreamed of you saying those words to me.”

Shame filled her as she realized how Ryker was willing to accept her rules because he had feelings for her, and she felt horrible that she was messing with his emotions like this.

“Whatever you're thinking, stop,” he told her, interrupting her thoughts. “Don't think about anything else except for you and me and how good this feels.” Then he kissed her and kept on kissing her until she felt herself simply melting beneath him. It was all tongues and teeth and wet and wild and it was impossible to think of anything except the two of them and what they were doing.

And what they were doing felt fantastic and she knew she was going to want to do it again and again all night long.

* * *

“This room is amazing.”

Beside her, Ryker pulled her in close with a low chuckle. “You want to talk about home décor after what we just did?”

Curling into him, Ryleigh placed a kiss on his chest. It was somewhere around three a.m. and as much as she knew she should sleep, it seemed more important to lie in his arms and talk. “Well, we’ve been talking about what we just did the entire time we were doing it, so I figured we’d mix things up a bit.”

That made him laugh again. “There’s that sass that’s been missing all night.”

Pulling back, she looked at him. “Missing?”

“Yeah. Since the day we met, you’ve responded to most things I say to you with either snark, sass, or sarcasm. Since we started this whole fake dating thing, you’ve reeled it in a bit and I’ve missed it.”

“Aww...”

“I think that was sarcastic sympathy.”

“And I think you have a weird obsession with words that begin with the letter S.”

“What can I say? You’re sexy, sacred, sage, scintillating, sharp, spirited, sensual, stimulating...”

Unable to help herself, she laughed. Hard. “Oh my goodness! Stop!” Her hand roamed over his chest. “You’re being ridiculous!”

“Every one of those words describes you. Particularly the stimulating part.” Rolling her onto her back, he kissed her. “And sexy. Definitely the sexy.” Another kiss. “And spectacularly stunning. Especially when you’re naked and in my bed.”

“Ryker...” she panted as his hands began to wander. It didn’t seem possible to be aroused again, and yet...the more he touched her, the more she wanted his touch. One night of making love with this man and she was suddenly insatiable and addicted to sex.

And right now, that didn’t seem like such a bad thing.

His movements were slow and languid and so perfect. Ryleigh enjoyed this side of him just as much as the wild and animalistic side he’d shown

earlier. There was so much she was discovering about him and all of it was appealing. She wanted to ask him what his tattoos meant. She wanted to talk about his design choices for this room.

But more than anything, she wanted to tell him to keep doing what he was doing.

In typical Ryker fashion, however, he could read her mind and did just that.

* * *

Most days, Ryker was an early riser. It was one of the reasons he'd designed this room to have a wall of windows and glass doors that led out to the yard—he loved all the natural light that came in each morning. But this morning, all he wanted to do was stay in bed and enjoy having Ryleigh pressed up against him and in his arms.

The only problem with that scenario was that he was alone.

Sitting up, he raked a hand through his hair and looked around in confusion. There was no way she'd sneak out without saying goodbye. That didn't seem like something she'd do.

Only...it did.

Muttering a curse, he kicked the blankets off and stood and scooped his jeans up off the floor and slid them on. He was tired and more than a little annoyed that she would do something like this after the night they'd had.

It had been perfect; everything he had known it could be between them and to think that she could just get up and leave without a damn word just...it burned.

And hurt.

He was storming across the room when he tripped over something.

Ryleigh's purse.

"Okay, so she didn't leave," he murmured, and it was crazy how hard

relief hit him. “Ryleigh?” he called out as he walked down the hall toward the kitchen. When he spotted her, his heart kicked hard in his chest. She was wearing one of his t-shirts and putting a couple of mugs of coffee onto a tray.

“Sorry,” she said softly. “I was hoping to be back in bed before you woke up. It’s early and I’m used to being up and just thought I’d make us some coffee. I thought about making breakfast, but I wasn’t sure if you were a breakfast kind of guy. Most days I just have coffee and maybe a banana or something. Plus, I didn’t want to go rummaging through your fridge and pantry. That just seemed like a bit of an invasion of privacy. Although, I already broke that rule when I grabbed your t-shirt from one of your drawers, and, technically, I guess scrambling up a couple of eggs isn’t that big of a crime, right?” She laughed nervously. “I went in the fridge to grab some milk for my coffee, and I saw that you had half-and-half and figured maybe that was your preference, so I put that in yours. I hope it’s okay. If not, we can totally switch. I’m not fussy about that sort of thing. I also don’t understand all those fancy Starbucks drinks, but I know I’m in the minority there, and...”

“Ryleigh?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re rambling,” he said with mild amusement. Walking over, he kissed her soundly before taking her hand and leading her back to the bedroom.

“But...the coffee...”

“We’ll make fresh cups later. Like you said, it’s early, but neither of us need to be anywhere, right?” And that’s when something occurred to him. “Unless...you want to go home?” Facing her, he hoped he didn’t look too disappointed. “If you have something to do or you just would rather go, you can just say so. It’s okay. I guess I should have asked you that at some point last night, but...I don’t know, the last thing on my mind was you leaving and...”

“Ryker?”

“Hmm?”

“Now you’re rambling,” she teased before getting up on her toes and kissing him. “I think we’re both delirious from lack of sleep.”

“Agreed.” Taking her hand again, he led her back to the bed where they both stripped before sliding under the blankets. She instantly moved into his arms and it was hard to say who fell asleep first because he barely remembered his head hitting the pillow.

The next time he opened his eyes, it was after nine and it still felt like he needed another couple of hours of sleep. Beside him, Ryleigh was stretching and the blanket moved just enough to uncover her breasts.

And now I’m wide awake...

Slowly, he rolled over and moved over her and captured one nipple in his mouth and gently sucked. Her slight hiss of breath followed by a moan of pure pleasure told him she was awake too. She let out a sexy little hum as her legs wrapped around him and he knew he could easily get used to waking up this way.

He teased one nipple and then the other before lifting his head and kissing her. “Good morning, baby girl.”

In very un-Ryleigh-like fashion, she blushed. “Good morning.”

“I’d ask if you slept well, but I think we both know the answer to that already,” he said silkily.

“What is sleep?” she said with a sweet grin. “I think all we did was nap.”

“That’s not a bad thing, is it?” Lowering his head, he nuzzled her neck and began kissing his way lower.

“Definitely not a bad thing, but...oh, that’s really sensitive...uh...”

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked thickly, even as he kept moving and kissing a slow path down her body.

“No,” she whispered. “Don’t stop...ever...”

Those were possibly the greatest words she’d ever spoken to him.

* * *

“It’s too late in the day now.”

“It’s not that late.”

“Ryleigh, trust me. A good sauce needs to be started first thing in the morning and slow-cooked all day.”

“So we’ll have a late dinner.”

“And then it rests overnight and you have it the next day,” he finished.

“Oh my God...you cannot be this uptight over some sauce.”

Shrugging, he sipped his coffee and enjoyed the simplicity of sitting at his kitchen table with her and having a late breakfast.

“What if...we still go shopping and get the sauce started and let it finish cooking tomorrow? I think it would make an awesome Sunday dinner,” she suggested.

“You plan on still wanting to be here tomorrow night?” he asked lightly, knowing damn well he was asking for trouble by poking at her like this.

“If there’s homemade chicken parm involved, then yes,” she said with a sweet grin, but her tone was her usual snarky self.

“Isn’t Sunday the day you normally have dinner with your family?” And this was definitely asking for trouble.

Ryleigh frowned at him. “If you don’t want me to hang around, Ryker, just say so. You don’t have to go reminding me about my family and all that crap.” Finishing her coffee, she stood and turned to walk away, but he was faster. Reaching out, he grasped her wrist and watched in fascination as her eyes flashed with fury.

“I’ve been trying to get you here for the last six months, Ryleigh. The last thing I’m looking to do is make you leave,” he explained. “However, I am just trying to be considerate about the fact that you have a life too. I know we’re just playing around here and you want this to all be for show, but it’s hard to make any kind of point when you’re avoiding your family.” Standing,

he gave her a gentle tug until she was in his arms. “What if...we both went to dinner tomorrow? You know, test the waters and see what happens?”

Her eyes were no longer shooting daggers at him, but she certainly looked apprehensive. “It’s a little soon...”

“Not really. It’s been two weeks and it’s not like I’m a stranger. Both your parents know me, and so do most of your siblings. The only one I haven’t met is your oldest brother.” He shrugged. “Might as well get that over with and then we can see if you’re just wasting your time with me.”

Now her expression softened. “Ryker...I never said I was wasting time.”

“No, but you also made it abundantly clear that even though we were sleeping together that it didn’t change anything. This is casual and I accept that. I’m not going to push you for more. This is all part of your plan. Your rules.”

And she was back to frowning. God, she was so expressive and he could watch her face all damn day.

“When you put it like that...”

“When I speak the truth?” he reminded her. “Just last night you said...”

“I know what I said, Ryker!” she cried, pulling out of his embrace. “This is all just a lot to deal with, okay? I mean...last night we were just supposed to go and hang out with my sister, then we end up in bed together, and now you want to go to dinner at my parents’ house!”

And he pulled her right back in and gently hugged her.

“Can’t we just deal with one thing at a time?” she mumbled against his chest.

It was a stalling tactic at best, but it also meant he could potentially have her all to himself for a little while longer without her family interfering.

“Whatever you want,” he said soothingly. “Whatever you want us to do, then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was still muffled against his chest and it sounded adorable.

“Of course, if I had to take my pick of what we focused on, I’m totally voting for sex,” he said casually. “Because last night and this morning were outstanding.”

Slowly, Ryleigh lifted her head. “Outstanding, huh? Nothing with an S?”

“Stupendous, satisfying, sensual, spirited, scintillating, sumptuous...”

Giggling, she swatted at him playfully. “Okay, okay...I get it. You’re good with words.”

“I’m even better with my hands,” he said with a wink.

“Ugh...I hate agreeing and adding to your colossal ego, but...yeah. Your hands are pretty spectacular.”

“Now look at who’s using S words...”

Closing the distance between them, Ryleigh rubbed up against him with that sexy little hum he loved so much. “How about we go back inside and do a little more of the best S word?”

He liked where this was going. “Sex?”

Going up on her toes, she placed a soft kiss on his lips. “Sleep.”

Ryker knew she was kidding and hauled her up into his arms and over his shoulder and smiled at her shriek of laughter. Just for fun, he smacked her ass as he strode back to the bedroom.

Next to the bed, he tossed her down onto the mattress before shucking his jeans and crawling over her. She was wearing his t-shirt again and it didn’t take much to peel it off of her. “We can sleep,” he murmured, placing a kiss between her breasts. “Or...we can...” Another kiss. “Not sleep.”

“Mmm...decisions, decisions,” she quietly pondered. “I think I’d like to try this...not sleeping option.”

Pushing up, Ryker stared down into her beautiful face. Her auburn hair was fanned out on the pillow, her makeup was worn off, and she still took his breath away. “I promise you’ll enjoy it.”

“And then we’ll make something yummy for dinner, right?”

Unable to help it, he laughed. “Food and sex. Is that what this weekend is

about to you?”

Reaching up, she played with his hair. “Um...maybe?”

“I love it when you’re honest,” he said with a sexy grin. “And I promise to give you everything you want, beautiful girl. This weekend is all about you.”

“Ooh...you better be careful. You may spoil me so much that I won’t want the weekend to end.”

That’s what I’m counting on...

But rather than say those words out loud, he kept them to himself.

Something he was getting good at, even though he hated it.

Still, he’d rather stay quiet and have Ryleigh here with him like this than state his own opinions and possibly ruin everything.

For now, he’d play along with this charade because he had to.

And hopefully the longer they played, the more she’d come to realize he was playing for keeps.

Chapter Eight

The loud pounding on her door Tuesday afternoon caused Ryleigh to scream and spill her tea all over herself.

“Son of a bitch,” she hissed, grabbing a towel on her way to the door. Yanking it open, she stared mutely at the sight of her brother.

“This has gone on long enough!” Jamie snapped as he shoved past her and walked into her apartment.

“Hey, why don’t you come in?” she asked sarcastically. Closing the door, she continued to try to dry herself off. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to put a stop to this ridiculous nonsense between you and Mom. And do you want to know why?”

“Um...because you’re a huge suck-up?” she mocked, tossing the towel onto the kitchen table. “I’ll be right back.” In her bedroom, she quickly changed into a different pair of yoga pants and a t-shirt before walking back out to the living room where Jamie was pacing. “Okay, seriously. What’s going on?”

He looked a little wild-eyed when he faced her. “She’s making everyone crazy, Ry!”

“Mom always makes everyone crazy! You’ve just never noticed it because when I was around, she focused all that craziness on me.” Walking into the kitchen, she grabbed herself a bottle of water and offered one to him.

“No, thanks.” Sighing loudly, he dropped his hands to his side. “Fine, I’m finally seeing just how much of her attention went on you and honestly, Ry, I don’t know what to do about it. I had two servers quit, Uncle Ronan’s threatening to go on sabbatical, and Dad’s gone fishing four times in the last week. *Four* times!”

“Uh...yeah, I’m not sure what that last part has to do with anything.”

“Even he needs to get away from her!” he said loudly. “I’m telling you; you need to come to the pub and work this out.”

The bark of laughter was out before she could stop it. “Oh, sure! After you made it sound so appealing, yeah, I’ll just stroll right into the lion’s den so everyone else can be happy!” With a snort, Ryleigh walked over and sat on the couch. “Try again.”

“It will be different this time. I promise!”

That just made her laugh again. “Jamie, you’re delusional. Ari told me all about what happened last weekend.” She paused. “And this past weekend, the one before. The one with the turkey dinner.” Another snort. “I can’t believe she made my favorite meal like that.”

“What did Ari tell you?”

“That you all tried reasoning with Mom and she pretty much yelled at all of you and told you to mind your own business!”

Scrubbing a hand along the back of his neck, he nodded. “Yeah, okay. That day she was still very pissy. But this Sunday was totally different.”

“Somehow I doubt that, but...go on.”

“She was a little more reasonable and I heard Dad telling her she needed to apologize to you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Really?” she asked sarcastically. “And did anyone else witness this, or were you the only one?”

“I’m sure the others heard it.” But there was very little confidence behind his words and normally Jamie was confident about everything.

Without breaking eye contact, Ryleigh got up and walked across the room

and picked up her phone and typed out a quick text to their siblings.

Ryleigh: Did anyone overhear a conversation between Mom and Dad Sunday?

Arianna: You'll have to be more specific. There was a lot of talking

Patrick: There was an argument about Dad going fishing again, but we all know what that's about

Arianna: She carried on like she thought he was having an affair!

Arianna: Is that the conversation you're asking about Ry?

Liam: I missed the fishing conversation but I did hear her telling him his corned beef was dry. Lol!

Patrick: Oh, yeah...

Arianna: It definitely wasn't his best

Liam: What's this all about Ry?

Ryleigh: Jamie claims he overheard Dad telling Mom she needs to apologize to me and I'm calling bullshit

Patrick: Um...

Liam: I didn't hear that

Arianna: Yeah, sorry. I didn't hear that

Jamie: You guys suck!

“Seriously, Ryleigh?” Jamie said. “You had to drag everyone else into this? Don't you trust me?”

The phone kept pinging with more texts, but neither were responding.

All she did was hold up her phone before adding, “Obviously not and with good reason! Jeez, Jamie! Are you that selfish that you have to throw me under the bus? Aren't I entitled to a little happiness and some time where I'm not constantly being picked on or ambushed into horrible dates? I think I earned this break and you're just going to have to suck it up and deal with it.”

Both hands raked through his hair in frustration. “You don't get it!”

“Yes, I do!” she countered loudly. “You're the one not getting it! It's not my place to make everyone else's lives easier at the expense of my own happiness! And if you disagree, then you're no better than she is!”

“This morning, she brought in Fallon Murphy to work on something on the computer! *Fallon!* I mean...*why?*” And then he was pacing again.

Fallon was her brother's childhood nemesis, and his sudden spiral was all starting to make sense. Sitting back down, she commented, “Really? I didn't know Fallon was back in town. I thought she was still away at school.”

His first response was a snort of derision. “Yes, perfect little Fallon is just a few months away from getting her doctorate or something in early childhood development.” Shaking his head, he looked at her. “So why bring her in to look at the computer? What the hell does she even know about that stuff?”

“Wait...on this one, I kind of have to agree with you. The last time Mom and I talked, she bragged about how she knew dozens of people who could help with the computer. And in all the time I've been helping with it, not once did Fallon's name ever come up.”

“I know! Whenever you haven’t been available in the past, we’ve called a couple of local guys, or sometimes Patrick sends Marissa down to look at it. This is the first time she’s brought in Fallon.” He shuddered. “I’m telling you, Ry, she’s out of control and something’s got to give here.”

“Sorry, J. This is one time where I’m not willing to throw myself on the grenade. I did it for Will and Ari and I always try to defuse tense situations, but...Mom totally crossed a line and I’m not going to budge on this.”

He glared at her for so long that she almost started to squirm.

Almost.

Her little brother didn’t intimidate her. Patrick and Liam? Definitely. But never Jamie. He was essentially like a big puppy most of the time, so this whole situation was a little out of character for him.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Maybe,” he grumbled.

“Did you say anything to her about her behavior? About the servers quitting? About Dad’s sudden need to go fishing? About Uncle Ronan wanting to get away? About Fallon?”

“Um...”

Now she got to her feet again. “So...you thought it was okay to come here and try to con me into doing your dirty work for you when you’re not willing to do any of it yourself? Seriously? What is wrong with you?” Walking over, she slapped him upside the head. “Use your brain for once!”

“Ow! That’s what I thought I was doing!” he argued. “Two birds, one stone!”

“No! No birds, no stone, just one incredibly selfish jerk! I can’t believe you!” Groaning, she went and sat back down. “I’m so glad Ryker and I didn’t go for dinner on Sunday. It’s obvious she’s still not willing to play nice.”

Jamie’s gaze narrowed slightly. “Oh, yeah...thanks for that little reminder.”

Uh-oh...

“What reminder?”

“That you’re dating a guy who is clearly out of work,” he said calmly. “You turned down accountants and dentists and IT guys...”

“I didn’t want to date any of those guys...” Then something else hit her. “And Ryker’s not out of work. Why would you even think that?”

“Rumor has it...”

“Screw the rumors! What does any of this have to do with Ryker?”

“Let’s just say...if Mom thinks that Ryker’s the reason you’re staying away—like he’s the one refusing to let you come around—that would totally suck, wouldn’t it?”

Okay, now the gloves were off.

Slowly and deliberately, Ryleigh got to her feet. She knew exactly how to move, how to look, and the tone of voice to use to put the fear of God into her little brother. “Are you threatening me?” she asked with a deadly calm she didn’t feel. Her mouth was dry, her stomach was in knots, and she was starting to sweat. “Are you that spineless and selfish that you would dare come into *my* home and start throwing threats around to get your way?” She advanced on him and almost laughed when he started to back away.

“Um...”

“Listen here, you little punk,” she snapped, giving him a hard shove. “You leave Ryker out of this because I’ll tell you what—I’m smarter than you and I can drag this out with Mom for as long as it takes. I’ll be sure to send Fallon around and I’ll even offer to go fishing with Dad so it will add fuel to the fire.” Another shove. “Do *not* mess with me, little brother. You are out of your league.”

“Ry, come on! You can obviously tell how desperate I am! I don’t know how to handle this sort of thing!”

“Welcome to my world! And Ari’s! We’ve been dealing with this stuff our whole lives! You’ve had to deal with it for two weeks and you’re crying already? Man up!”

“Pfft...you can’t man up to Mom and you know it!” He growled with frustration. “Just...tell me what I’m supposed to do!”

“I just did!”

“Specifics, Ryleigh! You can’t just throw out phrases like ‘man up!’ You’ve clearly been dealing with this shit longer than I have, so please! Help me!”

“Why should I? You were only thinking of yourself, Jamie. Maybe that’s what I should do and see how you like it.”

For a moment, they were at a standstill.

“You won’t do that. Not really,” he said after letting out a shaky breath. “You know what this feels like and...and...maybe now I’m realizing it’s not so funny. I’m sorry. All the times you bitched about things and I made light of it, well...now I sort of know how you felt.”

“You’ll never know because none of this has been directed at you,” she reasoned, softening slightly. “It’s making for an uncomfortable atmosphere, but none of it has anything to do with you.”

“Bringing Fallon in sort of felt like a direct jab at me.”

“Oh, please. Mom adores the entire Murphy family. They’re best friends. I’m sure there was a completely logical reason for her calling Fallon in to help.”

He didn’t look even remotely convinced.

“Here’s the thing, Jamie, this isn’t about us joining forces and making things better. Obviously, you all tried doing it for me and it didn’t work. How many times did I have to make a spectacle of myself when Ari and Will first started dating?” She shrugged. “Confronting Mom isn’t the solution for you. Talking to Dad is. I know she likes to think she wears the pants in the family, but we all know Dad’s the only one she listens to.”

“Only sometimes.”

“Yeah, well...maybe this is one of those times,” she said. “There’s only one way to find out.” Before she could say anything else, there was another

knock on the door. “Ugh...I swear, if this is Ari, Liam, or Patrick, I’ll scream.”

Yanking the door open, she smiled when she found Ryker standing there.

“Hey,” he said shyly, holding up a bakery box. “I thought you might have time for an afternoon coffee break. I bought brownies. Is this a good time?”

Tugging him through the door with a small laugh, she said, “You have no idea.”

He paused when he spotted Jamie and the two of them shook hands and gave each other curt nods without saying a word.

Ugh...men...

Looking at her, Ryker asked, “Am I interrupting something?”

“Yes,” Jamie said, as Ryleigh said, “No.”

“The two of you might want to get your stories straight,” he said before walking over to the kitchen and putting the brownies on a plate.

“Ooh...brownies,” Jamie said as he came closer, and Ryleigh instantly stepped in front of him, blocking his path.

“Nuh-uh. You’ve got other things to do and I’m not feeling too kindly toward you right now so I’m definitely not sharing.”

“Seriously? I thought we were good!”

“No, not even a little bit,” she told him firmly. “You need to go and straighten your shit out, and if you ever come at me like this again, I will make you pay.”

“Feels like you already are...”

“Don’t be such a baby. Just go and talk to Dad.”

“Fine. But if things get worse...”

Moving in close, she met his gaze head on. “If things get worse, it’s not on me. Remember that.”

All he did was glare before looking over at Ryker. “Good to see you, man.” And with one last look at Ryleigh, he let himself out.

The sigh was out before she could stop it and then strong arms wrapped

around her as she did something she hadn't done in a long time.

Cried.

* * *

It wasn't like Ryker to do anything on a whim, but this afternoon, he wanted to see Ryleigh and surprise her.

Now he was glad he did.

Smoothing a hand up and down her back while she cried, he was at a complete loss at what to do or say. Clearly she and Jamie had been fighting and if he had to guess, it had something to do with their mother.

On the surface, Kate Donovan was a completely delightful woman—always smiling, always friendly to everyone. But seeing firsthand what she was doing to Ryleigh was more than he was willing to stand.

“Hey,” he said softly, leading her over to the sofa. “Talk to me.”

It took a solid minute for her to compose herself before she relayed the reason behind her brother's visit, and Ryker wished he had known because he would have punched the bastard in the face. She was trembling in his arms and it was killing him.

“Damn, Ryleigh. I'm sorry. What can I do?”

Sniffling, she looked up at him. “Did you get the brownies with the frosting or without?”

His lips twitched. “I got two of each.”

“Can I have one with frosting?”

“You can have anything you want,” he told her, placing a kiss on the tip of her nose. Standing, he walked to the kitchen and grabbed the plate. “Do you want coffee or maybe just some milk?”

“Milk, please.”

When he looked over at her, her head was thrown back against the cushions and her eyes were closed. Part of him wanted to get in the car and

confront Kate and put an end to this once and for all and then beat the crap out of her brother.

Neither of those were viable options right now.

With two glasses of milk and a plate of brownies, he made his way back over to the sofa and placed everything on her coffee table. She straightened and reached for a brownie and smiled with utter gratitude.

“You have no idea how much you saved me,” she told him solemnly. “I hate arguing with my siblings, but this was the first time I was so angry that I wanted to get violent.”

Yeah...he got that.

“I think it was completely justified.”

They ate in companionable silence for a minute before she spoke again. “Any chance we can make a big Italian feast at your place for Saturday night and invite Will, Ari, Liam, Tessa, and Patrick?”

“Not Jamie?”

“Definitely not Jamie,” she said, and then a slow smile crossed her face. “Or...we invite Jamie *and* Fallon Murphy!”

“Who’s Fallon Murphy?”

“His childhood nemesis. His worst nightmare.” Her smile grew. “It would be the best kind of payback!”

“As fun as that sounds, I can’t do it this weekend,” he said, taking her hand in his. He was going up to Virginia Beach for a tattoo convention. He was scheduled to speak and had a full schedule of clients he was going to be working on. He considered asking Ryleigh to go with him, but he wouldn’t get to spend any time with her while she was there. Plus...he still couldn’t tell how she felt about the whole tattoo culture.

Then maybe you should open that dialogue...

Yeah.

That.

“Oh? Big plans?” she asked with a sassy grin.

“Actually, I’m heading out of town on Thursday and won’t be back until Monday. I probably should have mentioned it sooner, but...”

“Ryker, it’s okay. Really. You don’t have to run your schedule by me. This is...I mean...you know we’re just...”

“Fake. Casual. Yeah, I know,” he murmured before taking a massive bite of his brownie. He waited for her to ask where he was going or what he was doing—and he could totally tell she wanted to—but she was too stubborn to say anything.

So he was going to put it out there and see how she reacted.

“It’s a tattoo convention,” he blurted out as soon as he finished chewing. “It’s been on my calendar forever and it’s the first one I’ve been to in years so it’s kind of a big deal for me to go. We never talked about it and...”

“Really? Like a big convention?” she asked, her eyes lighting up.

“Um...yeah...”

“Is it open to the public or is it sold out?”

“I think there are still tickets available,” he replied. “Why? Do you really want to go?”

“Remember the client I told you about? The one who wants me to do his website?”

He nodded.

“Well...I think this could be great research! Oh, what an awesome coincidence! Can I go with you?”

Shit. It all seemed like a good idea, but...

“I have a full schedule, Ryleigh. I won’t be able to walk around with you. I’m one of the speakers and...”

“Oh! That’s amazing! Because you’re an artist, right?”

“Partly...”

“I have to admit that I’d love to go and check it out, but I don’t know if I’d feel comfortable walking around by myself.” Pausing, she took another bite of her brownie. “Will there be any more anytime soon? Someplace local,

perhaps?”

“They tend to take place in bigger cities,” he told her. “Last I checked, there aren’t any close to Laurel Bay.”

She snickered. “You got that right.” Then gave him the most adorable pout. “Well, shoot. I wish I’d known sooner. I could have asked Ivy to go with me.”

This was the perfect opportunity to talk to her about what he did for a living, and he got comfortable and was about to speak when she did.

“Can I get your opinion of the mocks I’ve done for this guy’s website?”

“Um...what?”

Nodding, she stood. “Come into the office and check it out. I only sent him my auto-generated response, but I’ve been doing some research on other sites and I’d love to get your input.” When he didn’t immediately respond, she added, “Please?”

“I don’t know anything about websites, Ryleigh,” he said, slowly coming to his feet.

“You don’t need to, but you’re an artist and clearly into tattoos. I think that makes you totally qualified to offer an opinion. Plus, you did volunteer, remember?”

Actually, he hadn’t.

Taking his hand, she led him down the hall to her home office and as soon as Ryker stepped through the door, he felt like he learned more about her than he had through any conversation they’d shared.

One wall was floor-to-ceiling bookcases. Some shelves were filled with books—and as he stepped closer, he found most were romances. Other shelves had Funko Pop figures from what he guessed were favorite shows and movies—all still in their boxes. He smiled at all the framed photos. There were tons of her with her family and several of her and Ivy. She was smiling and laughing in all of them and he was beginning to see how for all the months he’d been essentially chasing after her, she’d never looked as happy

and relaxed as she did in these photos.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw her leaning against the doorframe and saw that she did now.

They'd turned a corner and he wondered if she was aware of it.

The bottom shelves were lined with vinyls, and he crouched down to look at her collection.

"Some of those belonged to my father," she told him. "I grew up listening to a lot of them and when he and my mom were doing some redecorating, she wanted him to get rid of them." Laughing softly, she added, "I couldn't let that happen. I've got a record player out in the living room and every once in a while, I like to put one of these on. Particularly when I'm cooking."

"What about when you're working? Do you need total silence or do you prefer something playing in the background?"

"Depends on my mood."

Straightening, Ryker turned to face her again. "What about with this site you're working on? Music or no music?"

"So far? No music." Then she shrugged. "But once I get a little further into it and know the direction I'm going in, I'll probably relax a bit and enjoy having music or my sound machine playing in the background."

"Favorite sound on the machine?"

"Either rain or the ocean." She smiled at him, pushing away from the wall and slowly walking toward him. "Can I let you in on a little secret?"

Swallowing hard, he nodded.

"It's always been a bit of a fantasy of mine to make love on the beach in the rain." Her tone was soft and sultry and, as one small hand smoothed up over his chest, he wished he had the ability to change the weather. "I know it's weird, but..."

His hand covered hers, holding it over his heart. "Not weird. I get it."

"I'm not sure how practical it is, but maybe even staying at a hotel on the beach and making love with the doors to the balcony open while it rained.

That's probably the closest I'll ever get to that."

"You never know," he said gruffly, and silently vowed to find a way to make that fantasy come true for her.

A soft sigh was her only response before she pulled back and gently cleared her throat. "So, um...the website..." Turning, she sat down at her desk and played around with the mouse and touched the screen and then another one.

"Multiple screens?" he asked before noting there were three of them.

"It helps to see some designs side by side like this. So far, I have three concepts that I'm working on and it just makes more sense to see them like this."

He had to agree.

There wasn't another chair in the office, so he stood behind her, crossed his arms, and studied the designs.

The first one was very simple—black and white and classic. Normally that didn't appeal to him, but the way she placed graphics gave it more of a personality without being so in your face.

"The client wants to focus on the portfolio, so on this first one, this would either be a simple slide show, or I can make it look like an actual scrapbook with pages that flip," she explained.

"You can do that?"

Looking over her shoulder at him, she grinned. "Of course I can. I'm actually really good at what I do, Ryker."

"There wasn't a doubt in my mind, baby girl. I just never thought of anything like that."

She blushed and turned back, pointing to the second monitor. "This one I'm not sure I love."

"How come?"

"The background—even though it's muted—should really be more personalized. I threw in this generic picture frame around the whole site and

the picture of the pen and ink.” She shrugged. “I don’t know enough about the client to do something better, and I think I was just throwing stuff at the wall to see what would stick.”

“That makes sense,” he told her. “Even so, considering you don’t have a lot to work with, you put together something appealing.”

“I don’t know…”

Looking at the third one, Ryker instantly felt drawn to it. “Tell me about the third one.”

“All they told me was that they didn’t want something typical or that you can see on any other tattoo artist’s site. So the homepage has these glass doors and you can see behind it into what I thought a lobby or waiting area would look like. I’d put the logo on the doors—these are obviously just generic—and you click on them to enter.” She moved the mouse and made the screen come to life. “And then…”

Leaning forward, Ryker rested his hands on the back of her chair and watched in wonder as the visitor goes into a lobby where there are three doors behind an ornately detailed reception desk.

“Three doors?”

She nodded. “Could be more depending on the specific needs, but the first door will be for the artist owner.” She clicked on the door and there was a room with a large frame that matched the front desk and there was a generic picture in it. “If there are more artists on staff, we can either put them in a separate room or put them all in here. Either way, when you click on the picture, you’ll get their bio and their top three designs.”

“Why only top three?”

“Because I’m sure a tattoo artist’s portfolio is kind of vast. We want potential clients to click through the site and see everything. If you keep them locked on this one page, then what’s the point?”

“Interesting,” he murmured. “What’s behind the second door?”

“Second door will be client testimonials either set in the same kind of

frames or maybe something a little simpler.”

“Okay...and last door?”

“Last door is where all the portfolios will go—either framed like that restaurant in New York City—Sardi’s? I think? Or I can set up the room so there are pedestals for each artist with a book people can click on to see their work.” Sighing, she leaned back in the chair and tilted her head back to look at him. “And it’s okay if you hate all of them.”

Reaching out, Ryker spun her chair around until she was facing him and braced his hands on the armrest. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what? The websites? It’s my job.”

Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, he leveled her with a glare. “Not that. I mean, why do you put yourself down like that? Why would I hate any of them?”

With a small shrug, she averted her gaze. “I don’t know. I guess...I guess because compared to someone as artistic as you are, this is all kind of boring.”

Ryker immediately reached out and tucked a finger under her chin. “Let’s get one thing straight. There is nothing boring about you. Nothing. You are the most exciting woman I’ve ever met.”

“Ryker...”

“I’m serious,” he firmly interrupted. “And you want to know what bothers me the most about this entire conversation?”

She shook her head.

“Not once have you ever asked to look at my work,” he said, and wanted to kick himself. He’d been putting off this discussion out of fear of pushing her away and he had gone and done it anyway. “For all you know, I’m a shitty artist. You’ve never seen even one thing I’ve created.”

“Ryker, I...”

“It’s okay, Ryleigh. I get it. This is part of you keeping some distance between us,” he said as he pushed away from the chair. Muttering a curse, he

walked back over to her wall of bookcases. “I’m a private person and I don’t offer any information about myself and after coming into your office, I see you’re the same way.”

Behind him, he heard her stand. “I grew up in this town. Everyone already knows everything about me. Or they think they do,” she amended. “The older I got, the more my hobbies and interests changed, the more I enjoyed keeping them to myself because...”

“Because it’s exhausting when everyone knows your business.” Turning his head, he looked at her and saw the sad smile on her face.

And understanding.

“I was curious about you, Ryker. Even more so after we started this whole fake relationship thing.”

Now was definitely not the time for him to open that can of worms...

“But...it’s like I said earlier, I can only deal with so much. I’m not looking for a serious relationship,” she admitted. “I like my life the way it is. When the time is right, I’ll know it. Being ambushed into dating men I have no interest in or having to fake a relationship is all just...I don’t know...I just want to live my life my way!”

Sadly, he understood exactly where she was coming from and it was almost comical how much they had in common without her realizing it. But if he aired his life story right now, she’d think he was doing it to make her change her mind about him.

Them.

Shit.

Walking over to her, he gently tugged her into his arms and kissed her. Her small gasp of surprise lasted merely a second before she wrapped herself around him. He loved when she did that. Over and over he kissed her and Ryleigh gave as good as she was getting.

“Any chance you have time for an extended break?” he asked between kisses.

“For more of this, I can take off the rest of the day,” she panted, nipping at his jaw as her hands palmed the front of his jeans.

In a flash, Ryker scooped her up in his arms and carried her out of the office and down the hall to her bedroom. He’d never been in there before and maybe later he’d give a damn about what it looked like, but all he wanted right now was to get Ryleigh naked on the sheets.

She was clearly on the same page because as soon as he set her down, she whipped her shirt up and over her head before reaching out and unbuttoning his jeans.

Ryker cupped her face and forced her to look at him. “I love it when you’re impatient,” he said with a growl.

“And I love it when your hands are on me.” Her voice was breathless and sexy as hell.

“Then brace yourself, because you’re about to be wildly in love,” he promised as he reached out and quickly rid her of the rest of her clothes.

If only she knew how much of a double entendre that promise was.

Chapter Nine

“Ugh...I’m so bored,” Ryleigh whined to her sister Saturday morning. “Let’s do something today.”

“Aww...is Ryker not around to entertain you?” Arianna teased.

“No.” And dammit, she wasn’t going to say she missed him or that she was disappointed because it wasn’t like she expected him to spend all his free time with her. Plus...none of this was real and she never had a problem finding something to do on the weekends before he became her fake boyfriend. “And this isn’t about Ryker. This is about me just being bored. All my laundry is done, I finished a bunch of work projects and emailed a proposal to a potential client, and I just thought maybe you’d want to hang out.”

“Normally I’d say yes, but...”

“But...?”

“But I’m meeting Tessa for lunch at the pub,” she blurted out. “And before you ask about us going somewhere else to eat, Tessa requested it because she wants to talk to Mom about some school fundraiser. I’m sorry, Ry!”

The sigh was a given, but she hated that she was missing out on things because of this stupid argument.

Just...not enough that she was willing to take the first step.

Not yet.

“It’s okay. Really. I should have reached out earlier in the week when I knew Ryker was going to be out of town.”

“Oh? Where is he?”

“Some tattoo convention up in Virginia Beach.”

“That makes sense,” Ari said.

Something in her sister’s tone sounded like she knew something Ryleigh didn’t. “What do you mean by that?”

“What? What did I say?”

“Just like...I don’t know,” she said as she realized she wasn’t making any sense.

“All I meant was that with him being a tattoo artist, it’s no wonder he’s at a convention,” Arianna reasoned. “Ooh! Do you think he’s actually doing tattoos while he’s there or is he just scoping things out? I have no idea how these things go or if that’s even a thing, but who knows, right?”

“Wait...*what?*”

Her sister laughed. “What is happening right now? Why are you acting all weird?”

“I’m not...I’m not acting weird,” she argued. “You’re acting weird!”

“Okay, clearly you are missing your man because you’re a little delirious. Why didn’t you just go with him?”

“He said he was going to be busy the whole time and he was doing a speaking thing,” she explained. “He never mentioned...you know...tattooing anyone.”

Or tattooing at all, the bastard.

Not that it mattered and suddenly things started to make sense, but...why wouldn’t he just tell her what he did for a living? Why keep it such a secret?

“I have to admit, Ry. When you first said you were dating Ryker, I thought for sure it was just to piss mom off. Then when Will told me Ryker’s a tattoo artist, I figured that just upped the ante for antagonizing her. But after

watching the two of you together at dinner last weekend, it was so obvious that the two of you are crazy about each other.” She sighed dreamily. “He’s so different from every other guy you’ve ever dated—like ever—and maybe that’s what you needed. Someone different.”

Ryleigh felt like she was going to be sick. So many thoughts were swirling in her head and listening to her sister wax poetic about the wonders of love just wasn’t going to help.

“Listen, Ari, I need to go. Tell Tessa I said hey and let’s try to get together one night next week—maybe the three of us for dinner one night?”

“I love that! I’ll see what her schedule’s like.”

“Yeah, um...great...”

“Are you sure you’re okay? You sound funny.”

“I’m fine. Really. I just...I think I’m going to go and surprise Ryker.”

“Yay! I love that! Oh, Ry, he’s so good for you! This makes me so happy!”

And before she could get too carried away, Ryleigh quickly cut her off and hung up. Tossing her phone aside, she stormed into her office and quickly did a Google search on tattoo artists with the name Ryker.

Groaning, she wanted to smack herself in the head. “How do I seriously not know his last name? What is wrong with me?” Then she remembered that first night—the one when he’d given her a ride to her apartment.

“I don’t even know your name.”

“What are you talking about? You know my name.”

“No, I know part of your name. There’s got to be more to it than just Ryker.”

Shaking his head, he said, “Nope.”

“Seriously?” she deadpanned. “So that’s it. Just Ryker. No last name?”

“Maybe that is my last name,” he countered.

“And your first name?”

He grinned. “Just one name.”

“So...you’re Ryker Ryker?” she asked with one brow perfectly raised.

“No, just the one name. You know, like Adele, Cher or Madonna.”

“Are you saying you’re like...an aging pop diva?”

“Or like Bono, Sting, or Prince,” he corrected.

The entire conversation had bordered on ridiculous and yet he’d never answered her question.

At least not truthfully.

The bastard.

The next thing that came to mind was the mystery client looking for a tattoo website design. Bristling with anger, Ryleigh swore that if it turned out that they were one in the same, she was going to strangle him. She’d be furious not just because of the whole secretive aspect, but because she completely let her guard down with him and showed him her work in progress—something she never did—and now she felt like a complete fool.

“Do not make me have to strangle you, Ryker,” she whispered, staring at the screen and feeling more than a little nervous about what she was going to find out. It was possible he was just a regular, run-of-the-mill tattoo artist and it would be no big deal. Maybe he was just a guy looking for a change of scenery and, for some reason, chose to move to the smallest town on the Carolina coast.

Of course, he could be some kind of sketchy dude with a criminal past and currently hiding out in Laurel Bay, hoping no one would find him.

“Okay, note to self, no more late-night Netflix documentaries on serial killers...”

She scrolled down a bit and found a Ryker Masella and sure enough, when she clicked on it, there was Ryker’s face staring back at her.

The bio was long and the more she read, the wider her eyes got, and the more she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

Ryker Masella, age 32, born in Brooklyn, New York.

Five-time winner of American Tattoo Master, three-time winner of Tattoo

Brilliance UK, three-time winner of Tattoo Internationale, and four-time winner of Global Tattoo.

Masella is known internationally for his versatile skill and artistic ability. His face was synonymous with all-things tattoo arts from 2016 to 2021. After winning the top prize for the fourth time at Global Tattoo, Masella announced his retirement from competitions and was quoted as saying he was going to put his attention on opening a studio of his own. Since that time, he's done numerous guest appearances at conferences and conventions and there is speculation of a book deal showcasing his work.

In 2022, however, Masella stopped taking interviews and has made only sporadic appearances at the top shows. He's scheduled to be in Virginia Beach for the Tattoo Expo and this reporter already has an appointment scheduled to get some new ink.

Ryleigh let out a long breath as she slowly leaned back in her chair. Raking a hand through her long hair, she had no idea how to process this information.

He had been right the other day when he called her out for not bothering to learn anything personal about him. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time, but now it suddenly seemed huge.

Enormous, really.

And as much as she knew she could wait to see him until Monday night when he got home, she didn't want to wait that long. Another quick search told her where the convention was and she was able to purchase a ticket. Then, just to play it safe, she booked a hotel room. If Ryker wasn't happy to see her there, she was going to need a place to stay.

Once that was booked, she calmly got up and made herself some lunch and ate while she packed. Next, she took a shower and casually went through her closet looking for something to wear. There wasn't a real rush because it was only one in the afternoon and the convention was open until eleven tonight. The drive would take a little under four hours and if Ryker was as

wildly popular as that article claimed he was, she wouldn't get to see or talk to him until close to closing time anyway.

"But I'm still going early to scope it all out and learn what I can," she murmured as she pulled out a pair of black jeans and a black and silver sweater. "Could I be more of a cliché?" Still, she embraced the look and slid on a pair of high leather boots and big silver hoop earrings. Her hair was loose and wavy, and by the time she had everything together, she almost didn't recognize herself.

I'm embracing my inner biker chick...

No...this wasn't about bikers...but she had no idea what they called women who loved getting tattoos.

"I suppose I'll find that out as well. This will be both interesting and educational. Yay, me!"

Still, she killed some time wiping down kitchen countertops and fluffing pillows, but as soon as three o'clock hit, she hefted her weekender bag over her shoulder and walked down to her car.

Road trips weren't normally her thing, but she was a woman on a mission. It didn't matter that this relationship with Ryker was a casual fling; she was a little hurt that he held such an important part of his life back. After he'd held her while she cried the other day and pretty much shared all her misery with him, she thought he would have given her just a tiny glimpse into who he was.

Or at least his last name, for crying out loud.

There was a list of questions running through her head and she hoped she wasn't making a colossal mistake by going to the convention. If Ryker got pissed by her showing up and ended things, she'd feel...well...

How would I feel?

Suddenly, that wasn't such an easy question to answer.

The logical part of her wanted to say it wouldn't be a big deal. Their relationship wasn't serious and it would mean she could go and play the

heartbroken girl at the pub and maybe that would ease the tension between her and her mother for a little while.

Liar.

Or...she'd be mildly disappointed because Ryker was a cool guy to hang out with and the sex was off-the-charts fantastic.

“So, okay...I'd miss the sex.”

Liar.

Well, not a total liar on that one, because she really would miss the sex. No man had ever made her feel as good as Ryker had and she was seriously considering not getting into any kind of deep conversation with him tonight and just maybe surprising him in his room and...

“Oh, crap,” she muttered. She'd been going on and on and on about how what they had wasn't real and she wasn't looking for a relationship and there was no reason for Ryker to keep up the pretense all the way up in Virginia Beach—especially when he didn't know she was going to be there. For all she knew, she was going to show up and find him with another woman!

And the knot of dread in the pit of her stomach hit so hard that she almost had to pull over.

“Okay, okay...one thing at a time. I can't possibly get mad at him for playing by my own stupid rules. Stupid, stupid, *stupid* rules! Gah!”

The reality was, if things went south and he got pissed at her for showing up and ended things...she'd be devastated—just like if she showed up and found him with another woman.

It was beyond tempting to simply turn the car around and go home and feign ignorance. It was bliss, after all. But, she wasn't a quitter and she didn't shy away from challenges.

Unless they involved her family, in which case, all bets were off.

But right now, this challenge seemed too important to ignore.

So, hitting the button on her favorite playlist, Ryleigh Donovan made her way to her first ever tattoo convention.

* * *

His shoulders ached, his hands were cramped, and his head was pounding.

It was both a touch of heaven and hell.

The noise level in the convention center was insane and the crowd around his booth was almost suffocating. There'd been a reason he took a year off from this and now he wished he'd waited and taken another before making a "comeback."

Ugh...

"Ry, you want me to grab you something to drink?" Billie asked. "Marc's here and we were going to get something for us, so..."

"Just water," he told her. "And make sure it's cold or get me a cup of ice, please."

"You got it." She started to walk away and then paused. "Two more hours to go."

Nodding, he thanked her, his eyes never leaving his client's back and the massive dragon he was filling in. If they weren't at a convention, he'd want to do this in two sessions, but because of the strict timeline, it was all getting done today. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that he could get it done and it was going to look awesome; he was just itching to get up and move around.

And sleep.

Sleep would be great right about now.

All day, Billie had made sure he had plenty to eat and drink and got his bathroom breaks, but damn, he was exhausted. From the moment the convention center doors opened the previous day, he'd been going nonstop. He'd spoken on a panel yesterday and answered what felt like a thousand questions, and then he'd jumped right into working on his first client. Fortunately, he'd been able to get two in yesterday because what they wanted was on a much smaller scale than today's guy. It had been a long time since he'd pulled an eighteen-hour day where he worked like this and it made him

realize just how much he missed the energy of working one-on-one like this.

Maybe this was the kick in the ass he needed to go back to Laurel Bay and pull the trigger on the parlor.

Maybe.

He worked some green into the dragon and did his best to focus on the tattoo and not on how tired he was. At some point, Billie put an icy bottle of water in front of him and he paused long enough to drink most of it down in one shot.

And instantly cursed the brain freeze it gave him.

“Hey, I know you,” he heard Billie saying some time later. “You’re the girl from the drawing.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah, yeah...Ryker did a drawing of you! Damn! He was spot on!”

For some reason, that made him look up, and he froze.

Ryleigh.

She was here.

In the middle of his world, in the midst of all this chaos, and...she was staring at him defiantly.

She looked stunning all dressed in black—sexy and sassy and definitely out of her comfort zone.

He nodded to Billie to indicate that Ryleigh could come into the booth, but once she did, neither said a word. She could obviously tell he was busy, and Ryker was more determined than ever to finish this dragon.

And now he had the perfect motivation to get it done.

Ryleigh stepped further into the booth and Billie immediately got her a stool to sit on and offered her something to drink.

“If there’s any water...”

“Be right back!”

As if knowing that he couldn’t look at her or be distracted, she sat primly on the stool and watched him work. Ryker was used to people doing that and

it didn't bother him.

But having Ryleigh watch him made him nervous for the first time in possibly ten years. That was when he competed for the first time, and he had no idea there would be so many people hovering around him. Over the years, he'd gotten used to it but right now this all just felt...huge.

Huge and intimidating.

Swallowing hard, he forced himself to tune it all out, to clear his mind of all the sights and sounds and smells around him and simply focus on the art.

When he finally finished, he straightened in his chair and then bent back as far as he could go—until the stretch was more pleasure than pain—before he came to his feet. “You’re all good, Nick,” he said. “Let me help you to your feet.” After doing that, Ryker grabbed the full-length mirror he had in the back of the booth and held it up so the guy could see the finished product.

“Holy shit, Ryker,” Nick said with awe. “This is fucking amazing! So much more than I thought it would be.”

Ryker was used to the praise, but it still pleased him to no end to see the look of pure satisfaction on a client’s face. “Glad you like it, man. Billie’s gonna come and get it covered up for you and give you a list of instructions you need to follow to a T.” Pausing, he gave Nick a stern look. “To a T, no joke. If you have any concerns once it’s all healed over, you’ve got my card and don’t hesitate to reach out, okay?”

“Thanks, Ryker. You’re a legend!”

Ryker shook his hand before stepping aside so Billie could come over and finish things up. After another full body stretch, he turned and finally faced Ryleigh.

“So...” he began.

She came to her feet and stared up at him. “So...”

“I wasn’t expecting to see you here,” Ryker forced himself to say, unsure of what she was thinking right now.

“Up until late this morning, I had no intention of coming here. But then I

talked to my sister, who mentioned you being a tattoo artist, and I figured I'd come and check it out." She crossed her arms and cocked her hip. "You know, since you never thought to mention what you do for a living. Or your last name—Ryker Masella!"

And then she turned and stormed away.

With a nervous glance at Billie, he said, "So, uh...I'm gonna go."

Her smile was practically giddy. "Yeah, you better go after her because there have been tons of guys hanging around checking her out."

"They were watching me work."

"Yeah, no," she said with another wide grin. "Most eyes were on your girl, so you really should quit chit-chatting with me and go after her."

Sure enough, when he looked up the aisle, there were three guys walking with her, and she didn't look like she was hating it.

"Oh, hell no," he muttered as he grabbed his satchel. "Secure everything for me, Bill."

"I'm on it!"

As Ryker strode up the aisle, he noticed people stepping out of his way and most got a little wide-eyed as they recognized him, but he wasn't looking to stop and talk to anyone. There was only one person he wanted to talk to and he had a feeling she was going to make him work for it.

Picking up his pace, he caught up with her—and her three admirers—and boldly stepped in front of her, effectively blocking her path. Her green eyes blazed fire, but he wasn't afraid to stand here and argue with her in front of an audience.

"So you just showed up here to yell my name at me and then leave?" he asked, crossing his arms. A quick glare at the trio with her and they all scattered.

"Wow. Impressive," Ryleigh said, her voice dripping sarcasm. "You come here, talk, tattoo, and then scare people off. I'm surprised they didn't bow at your feet first."

“Ryleigh...”

“What the hell, Ryker?” she hissed, looking around nervously because clearly she wasn’t as into putting on a show. “You’ve been lying to me!”

“That’s not how I see it,” he countered. “You never asked what I did! Hell, you never showed any interest in me or my life until it suited your purpose! All those times I hit on you at the pub and you looked at me like I was something you scraped off your damn shoe. You turned me down with snark and disdain every chance you got. And the funny thing is, I’m used to it. I’m used to people looking at my ink and thinking less of me because of it. You knew nothing about my background, my upbringing, nothing, and yet you passed judgment on me based on how I look. Why the hell would I willingly give you more ammunition against me?”

Okay, now a lot of people were crowding around and he saw several phones up taking video. Muttering a curse, he took her hand and dragged her away from the spectators.

“Where are we going?” she demanded.

“Anywhere that isn’t here.” He had a room here at the hotel and knew it was the only logical place for them to go.

Fortunately, there wasn’t a line at the elevators and neither of them said a word the entire ride up to the top floor.

That’s when Ryleigh’s sharp tongue was back. “VIP level. Why am I not surprised? I guess when you’re a freaking global champion tattoo artist, you get to stay in the Presidential Suite.”

“It’s even got a balcony overlooking the beach,” he snapped back.

Yeah, they were heading for one hell of a fight and part of him couldn’t wait. He’d been keeping a lot of his feelings—and himself—quiet for her sake. And had it gotten him anywhere except into her bed?

No.

A no-strings fling or affair or whatever you wanted to call it was something he’d never had a problem with before, but it wasn’t what he

wanted with Ryleigh. It was never what he wanted with Ryleigh.

But apparently, it was all he was going to get from her.

Fucking A.

As soon as they were in his suite, he turned to her before she could say a word.

“If you’re looking for an apology, I’m not offering one,” he stated firmly. “You said this was fake! You said nothing we were doing was real, so you’ve got a whole lot of nerve coming here and saying any damn thing to me! So if this is it—if you drove four freaking hours here so you can tell me off and tell me this charade is over—then do it.”

The defiant stance was back. “I could’ve done it down on the show floor, but your adoring fans probably would have chased me out of there.”

Ryker’s head slowly fell back as he mentally counted to ten. When he faced her again, he saw a little crack in the tough girl attitude. She looked... disappointed. Sad.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” he said, his voice raw. “I’ve played by your rules and it’s not enough. Well, you know what, I’m done playing. It’s all too much so...just tell me off and go because I’m too damn exhausted for this.” Turning away from her, he walked over to the sofa and collapsed on it. Every inch of his body hurt, his head was pounding, and this so wasn’t the way he wanted to end a successful day. Closing his eyes, he slumped back against the cushions and waited for Ryleigh to tell him off.

And waited.

And waited.

“It hurt my feelings that you kept who you really are from me,” she said quietly, and even without opening his eyes, Ryker knew she was standing in front of him. “I realize I behaved horribly since we’ve met, but you have to know that your tattoos had nothing to do with it.”

Now he opened his eyes and looked at her.

“I saw you as this super confident guy with cocky swagger, and at first I

thought you were just messing with me.” She shrugged. “I get the nerdy guys hitting on me—the IT guys, the accountants. You know, the kind of guys my mother’s been trying to fix me up with.” Sighing, she looked down at him helplessly. “You walked in looking like a rock star and you overwhelmed me. I felt like a complete idiot every time you asked me out. It was like I couldn’t form a normal thought because I was so nervous and...I lashed out. By now you should know that’s my go-to reaction. With everything. That’s how we ended up in this relationship.”

Damn.

It didn’t matter how many times she reminded him of it, it still felt like a kick in the gut each time.

“I can’t help how I feel, Ryker, and I know I’ve been sending you a lot of mixed signals. The thing is, I like you. A lot,” she quickly added. “The times that we’ve hung out together have been some of the best times I’ve had in... well...I don’t even know how long. It bothered me that you’ve seen me at my freaking lowest and you’ve seen just about every aspect of my life and yet... you kept so much of who you are to yourself simply because I didn’t ask.”

That’s when he knew she had a point. He’d been petty because he was hurt and...

Shit.

Coming to his feet, his heart ached at the sadness on her face. “It hurt my feelings that you never seemed to ask anything about me. Like I was just a guy you were going to parade around town to annoy your family simply because of the way I looked.”

“Ryker, I...”

He held up a hand to stop her. “It’s okay, Ryleigh. I get it. Based on the men your mother’s been trotting out for you, it’s obvious why you chose me to piss her off.” Reaching out, he took one of her hands in his. “I shouldn’t have just blindly agreed to all of this, and I think we need to be more honest with each other if we’re going to keep up this farce or whatever it is we’re

calling this.”

Nodding, she said, “I agree.” She paused and gave him a shy smile. “Um...confession time.”

“O-kay...”

“I think what you do is really cool. Amazing, really. I’ve been down on the convention floor since about seven, and your name was mentioned everywhere.” Biting her bottom lip, she squeezed his hand. “I’d really like to see more of your work. Just seeing what you did with that dragon on that guy’s back was...well...it was incredible. That wasn’t just an ink drawing or a caricature of a dragon, it looked like the real thing—like it was coming right off his back.”

“My portfolio is down at my booth,” he told her. “We can go back downstairs and...”

“No,” she said, closing the distance between them. “You know, I’m not sure if the same rules apply in a casual or make-believe relationship, but I kind of feel like this was our first fight.”

He eyed her warily because he had no idea what she was talking about.

“And in real relationships, when there’s a fight, it’s usually followed by makeup sex.” She bit her lip again, and Ryker almost groaned. “So I was wondering if maybe we could look at your portfolio tomorrow and perhaps engage in some really hot and sweaty makeup sex right now.”

This girl...

Reaching up, he cupped her face and kissed her.

Hard.

Devoured her, really.

And as usual, they were on the same page. Ryleigh leaped up and wrapped her legs around him as he cupped her ass.

So good...

Striding into the bedroom, he placed her down on the mattress, but didn’t do anything about her clothes just yet. First, he walked over to the sliding

glass doors that led to the balcony and opened them. He stood there for a moment until she realized what he was doing.

“Is that the sound of the waves?”

He nodded before walking back over to her.

Grinning up at him, she said, “I’ve never stayed in a VIP suite before.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’ve never seen you dressed all in black like this before.”

Crawling over her, he said, “Please tell me the lingerie is black too.”

Her smile grew. “I guess you’ll just have to undress me and find out.”

“If I tear this off of you—which I’m severely tempted to do—you won’t have anything to wear.” Frowning, he looked around. “Did you bring anything with you or were you really just going to yell at me and turn around and go back to Laurel Bay?”

“I booked a room here at the hotel, but there was a problem with the reservation and so they’re holding my bag down at bell services. I didn’t want to walk around the convention with it and I had no idea how this was all going to go, so...”

“Ryleigh?”

“Hmm?”

“Is it okay if I tear this sweater off you? I’m going to ruin it and I swear I’ll buy you a new one, but...” His hand flexed in preparation.

“This would be a lot sexier if you didn’t ask permission, but...”

Leaning in close until they were practically nose to nose, he growled, “I’ll always ask for your consent, baby girl. Always.”

She was breathless at his words and, with a quick nod, he knew their bantering was over.

Reaching out, he tugged and sent buttons flying everywhere. Her breasts were spilling out of the black lace cups and he suddenly found his second wind.

Chapter Ten

It was almost dinner time on Monday when Ryleigh walked through her front door. She'd stayed for the rest of the convention and was in complete awe of everything she'd seen and learned.

And not just about the tattoo arts.

After their bout of makeup sex, they'd talked for hours and Ryker confessed that he'd ended up in Laurel Bay because he was looking for a place where he could go back to his roots and sort of blend into the landscape. He'd won so many awards and had done years of endorsement deals, and all he wanted was a little anonymity. The celebrity lifestyle wasn't for him and she couldn't say that she blamed him.

Tomorrow he was taking her to see some project he'd been working on. It was super-secret and anyone who knew about it had signed an NDA so...it was obviously a big deal.

And her curiosity was killing her.

He'd asked her to go to dinner with him tonight, but she saw how tired he was and knew what he needed most was a night to sleep in his own bed without having to set an alarm for the next day. They'd talked about takeout and she promised she'd pick something up on the way over in an hour, but she had no idea what she was in the mood for.

Which was a total lie.

What she really wanted was either a big, fat bacon cheeseburger and fries or her father's shepherd's pie. It was too late for her to make the pie on her own, but she knew it was the special at the pub on Monday nights.

Maybe it was time to go in and test the waters.

“Ugh...do I really want to ruin my good mood? My good life?”

Honestly, she knew she was going to have to test the waters eventually, so why not make it tonight? If things got out of hand, she'd simply leave and pick up a pizza on her way to Ryker's. No big deal.

With her mind made up, Ryleigh went into her bedroom and changed into a pair of yoga pants and a hoodie before re-packing her weekender bag to take with her to Ryker's house. Thirty minutes later, she was out the door and giving herself a mental pep-talk to not let anything anyone says make her feel bad about herself or put a damper on her evening.

The parking lot wasn't particularly crowded, but she knew it wouldn't be. It was still relatively early and the dinner crowd didn't really get into full-swing until after seven. As soon as she was out of her car, she started seriously second-guessing herself.

There wasn't anything wrong with pizza. It was a perfectly fine option for a lazy night in. She could even run into the grocery store and grab more ice cream for them to have for dessert and...

“Hey, Ry,” Jamie said hesitantly as he walked across the parking lot toward her. “I thought I saw you standing out here.” He looked around—probably hoping for witnesses in case she decided to kick his ass—and then smiled nervously at her.

“I was in the mood for shepherd's pie,” she told him defensively. “I told Ryker I'd pick up some takeout and I know it's Monday, so...”

He nodded. “Yeah, yeah...we just pulled a fresh batch out of the oven. Come on in and I'll make you a couple of plates to go.”

“Thanks.” Together, they quietly walked into the pub and Jamie went ahead of her and right to the kitchen.

“Ryleigh!” Uncle Ronan called out before coming around the bar to give her a hug. “Oh, I’ve missed you, sweet girl! Missed your smiling face.” He hugged her tight before pulling back and smiling. “I’m damned proud of you.”

She knew her eyes were slightly bugging out. “Why?”

“You stood up for yourself and put a stop to Kate’s meddling ways,” he said as if it were obvious.

“Yeah, well...I’m sure if given the chance, she’d start up all over again.”

Wrapping an arm around her, he led her back over to the bar. “I wouldn’t be so sure. You might not know this, but your siblings have your back.”

“Um...what?”

Nodding, he poured a beer from the tap and handed it to Billy Raven, the owner of the print shop around the corner. “Ari and Tessa were in here the other day to talk to Kate about some fundraiser and it turned into a big hullabaloo!” He shook his head. “Your sister pitched a fit and stormed out, and then poor Tessa had the difficult task of being left behind.”

“Oh my goodness! What happened?”

“I can’t believe Arianna hasn’t called you!”

“I was out of town for the weekend, so she probably didn’t want to disturb me.” That sounded logical, right?

“Ah...you went away with Ryker, huh?”

Ryleigh felt her cheeks heat as she nodded.

“Good for you. He’s a good one, that Ryker. Sure, he’s a little rough around the edges, but he’s got a good heart.”

“How can you know that, Uncle Ro? I mean...I didn’t think you knew him that well.”

He chuckled softly. “Ryleigh, that man’s been coming in here several nights a week for months, and he sits here at the bar and talks to me when he’s not mooning over you.”

She rolled her eyes. “He wasn’t mooning...”

“Believe me, he was.” Turning away, he poured a few more drinks before coming back to her. “He asked all kinds of questions about you and every time I encouraged him to ask you out, you shot him down!” He laughed again. “Luckily he’s persistent.” With a wink, he added, “He’s much better for you than any of those pushovers Kate picked out for you.”

“So what happened that made Ari stop talking to Mom? What exactly happened?”

“It’s not just Arianna, Tessa put her foot down too before she left, then Liam was upset because Tessa was upset...” With a weary sigh, he leaned on the bar. “No one showed up for dinner Sunday. No one.”

“No!”

Nodding, he said, “It’s true! Your father has no sympathy for any of it and told Kate she had no one to blame but herself.” He shrugged. “Of course, poor Jamie has to deal with her here and it’s been tense.”

“Yeah, I have zero sympathy for him,” she muttered, but her uncle only laughed.

“I heard about what he did, so I’m sure you’re not feeling too kindly toward him. But...don’t be too hard on him. He’s been bearing the brunt of Kate’s mood. We lost two good servers last week, but I think they’re coming back.”

“Really?”

“Your father talked to them and your mother promised to apologize, so...”

“Great. So she can apologize to everyone else but me,” she said miserably, but was saved from saying more when Jamie walked over with a huge takeout bag.

“Here you go, Ry.”

Laughing, she asked, “Did you put the entire pie in there?”

Chuckling, he shook his head. “No, but there are two portions of it, plus an order of corn fritters, and an order of fries because I know how much you

love them and how...” He glanced around. “And how she-who-must-not-be-named always gave you grief when you ate them.”

Aww...

Leaning over, she hugged you. “You may have just redeemed yourself a little.”

He hugged her back. “I hate to say it, but...you should go. Mom just ran to the store and she’ll be back any minute. Save yourself.”

And that was the clincher. Pulling him in for another hug, Ryleigh kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

Uncle Ronan came out from behind the bar and hugged her too. “Tell Ryker we said hello and maybe the two of you can come in together sometime. I miss chatting with him.”

“I’ll let him know,” she said as she picked up the bag with their dinner. “And thanks, you guys. For everything.”

She had a little extra pep in her step as she walked back out to the car and breathed a sigh of relief when she didn’t run into anyone.

The smell of the food was making her mouth water, and when she pulled out of the parking lot, she was sorely tempted to reach into the bag and dig into the fries. They were definitely her weakness and the thought of having an entire order of them to herself was almost worth pulling over and making Ryker wait.

“No...” she whined and was saved from temptation when her phone rang. Her sister’s name showed up on the screen on her dashboard, making her smile. “Hey, Ari!”

“Hey, yourself! Do you have time to talk? I’ve got some crazy gossip that I’ve been dying to share with you, but I didn’t want to bug you during your weekend away with Ryker.”

“And I really appreciate that. I’m actually on my way to his place now, so I don’t have a whole lot of time. Can you give me the condensed version?”

Her sister sighed loudly. “I don’t know if that’s possible.”

“What about that dinner we were talking about? Why don’t you come over tomorrow night and I’ll make dinner for us?”

“And Tessa?”

“Of course! Hell, bring Liam and Will if you want!”

“Will Ryker be there?” she teased.

“I think he’s seen more than enough Donovan craziness. No need to traumatize him even more.”

“Fine, then we’ll make it a girls’ night.”

“Perfect! Now quick! Give me at least a few details!”

“We were just going there to discuss the fundraiser. I have nothing to do with it, but I’m trying to get to know Tessa and it seemed like the perfect way for us to hang out without Liam hovering.”

“And he really does hover.”

“I know, right? So...anyway, we’re eating lunch and Mom’s sitting with us and everything was fine. Like there was no reason for the conversation to veer in the direction of your fight, but it did. And when I defended you—I literally told her she needed to stop fixing you up with guys because she clearly doesn’t even know you judging by the guys she keeps picking—and she just like...exploded! She told me I was ungrateful and she never should have given her blessing to me and Will! It was crazy!”

“Holy crap! And what about Tessa?”

“Once I stormed out—and I felt bad about leaving Tessa there—Mom sort of was like, ‘You agree with me, don’t you?’ and poor Tessa told her the truth. She didn’t.”

“And then what happened?”

“Mom pulled her support from the fundraiser.”

“*NO!*”

“True story. I’m telling you, Ry, it was insane.”

“Sounds like it.”

“So naturally, Liam was pissed and he called Pat, who totally sided with

him, and then they both bullied Jamie into joining the cause. So...no Sunday dinner.”

“I was actually just at the pub and Uncle Ronan told me about it.”

Unfortunately, she was pulling into Ryker’s driveway and needed to hang up.

“Listen, I just pulled up to Ryker’s and I want to hear more about this tomorrow over dinner. Will you call Tessa?”

“Definitely. How does 6:30 sound?”

“Perfect! See you then!”

“Love you!”

“Love you too!”

With a sigh of her own, Ryleigh grabbed their dinner and almost sagged with relief when she spotted Ryker standing in the doorway. He was becoming more and more important to her—a calming influence, a friend, and lover.

So why isn’t this real?

He gave her a sexy grin as he stepped outside and took the bag from her before kissing her senseless. “I’m sure there’s a story about how we’re having pub food tonight, and I can’t wait to hear it.” Taking her hand, he led her into the house.

And she knew she was going to have to answer her own question eventually, because no matter how much she tried to tell herself this was all a ruse, things were starting to feel way too real.

* * *

“How long has it been this way?”

“A little over a month.”

“And you don’t think it’s weird?”

Shrugging, Ryker looked around and couldn’t quite put his finger on the

emotion he was feeling.

“Ryker, you have to realize that this is crazy. You have this beautiful top-of-the-line parlor all set up and ready to go. Why haven’t you opened?”

After their weekend at the convention, it felt so good to talk to Ryleigh about this part of his life. Everyone who knew him had a certain level of fan mentality and just wanted to praise him and stroke his ego. But with Ryleigh, he loved how they were talking as peers—as friends. She didn’t know enough about the “famous” side of his life and she just knew him as a man.

They’d spent last night eating a fantastic dinner and then curled up on the couch and binge-watched a bunch of episodes of *House of the Dragon*. This morning they’d both been a little lazy and stayed in bed making love before Ryker decided it was time to show Ryleigh his shop.

“Several reasons,” he replied after a moment. “This was always something I wanted to do—have a place of my own—but maybe I rushed into this and I’m making a mistake.”

“You mean because you picked a teeny tiny town to open up a place with your big celebrity name?”

He knew she was teasing—sort of—but it definitely relaxed him a bit.

“That may have a little something to do with it,” he admitted. Walking around, he touched the chairs and ran his hand along the marble countertop of the reception desk. “I’ve been traveling for years, Ryleigh. I was so burned-out and desperately wanted a place to call home that maybe this was more of an impulse.” He let out a derisive laugh. “I don’t even have a name for it.”

“How did you get a business license without a name?”

“I’m the business,” he told her. “I developed an LLC a long time ago in my name, but I don’t want to put my name on the sign.”

“O-kay...”

The walls were still bare and even though he could technically open the doors and start doing business, there were still several things missing.

“You saw what it was like over the weekend. Once I put my name out

there and my location, I'm going to have clients." And before she could make a snarky comment, he added, "That's not ego; that's a fact."

"I know," she said sweetly, but he knew what she was thinking.

"This is my art, my life...there's never been anything else that I've wanted to do. I'm just not sure I want to keep living my life in a fishbowl, you know?"

"Believe it or not, I do. You don't have to be famous to feel that way. Growing up in a small town presents a lot of the same problems. The difference is, for you at least, you can control who's coming in and watching. You can do it by appointment only so you don't get the gawkers just showing up to stare if you don't want to."

Raking a hand through his hair, he continued to walk around. "But is that the right thing to do? I mean...what if I open up and no one shows up or calls or anything because I've got all these rules in place? What if everyone thinks I'm a dick because I don't embrace the circus atmosphere anymore? Like I'm not looking for this to be some sort of tourist attraction."

"I get that," she told him, walking over and taking one hand in hers. "If you're not ready, then you're not ready. Only you can decide that though, Ryker. The place looks great and the demand for your work seems like guaranteed business. The town would probably love it if you opened because you'd be generating income for all the local businesses."

"All of them?" he mocked.

"Okay, maybe not all of them, but certainly a lot of them," she corrected with a roll of her eyes. "You know what I'm saying, Ryker. Don't be a jerk."

"I'm not." He tugged her close and wrapped his arms around her waist. "I thought once I had the place and it was all set up that I'd feel excited about it, but...I don't."

"Then maybe we need to sit and talk more about that. Why don't we go for a walk or even a drive, or perhaps just go back to your place and focus on this for a bit?" She glanced around. "I realize you haven't personalized

anything here and maybe that's all that's missing. You've picked top-of-the-line equipment and furniture, but you haven't put your stamp on it. Could that be part of the problem?"

"Maybe. I've never done this before. All the places I worked out of were someone else's and it was their stuff on the walls and all the designs were done by their team." Sighing, Ryker took a step back and turned to slowly walk around again. "I always hated the clutter and the chaos on the walls. It was like they wanted to showcase as much as they possibly could so whoever walked in could see it all. But to me, it was overwhelming."

"That's the vibe I got while doing my research on the websites. There was just so much that was right there in your face that it didn't make me want to stay and look through anything."

Pivoting, he grinned at her. "Exactly! I want the enthusiast who's serious about their ink, the person who wants something original. Then when I hear myself say it, I sound like a snob!" Muttering a curse, he began to pace.

Ryleigh was at his side a moment later, taking him by the hand, and leading him to the door. "This is not the environment for you to be making the decisions right now."

"I kind of think it is," he countered, pulling away and walking back toward the desk. "I keep avoiding coming here and I'm still no closer to figuring shit out."

"Okay, then let me try another approach. What does your team have to say?"

She'd met Billie and her boyfriend Marc, along with a few of his close friends at the convention. "Everyone thinks I need to open the place up, that I'll never know how I feel unless I actually do this."

She nodded.

"They have a point, but...what if I open and hate it?"

"What if you open and love it?"

"Dammit, Ryleigh...come on. Don't throw that logic at me," he said with

a huff of annoyance.

“You can’t have it both ways!” she said with a mirthless laugh. “I think part of the problem is that you’ve been drifting for too long and lost a bit of your...I don’t know...edge, enthusiasm, or something. Ryker, anyone who’s ever seen your work knows how crazy talented you are. Maybe this particular place isn’t going to make you millions of dollars, but it could be the first step to building something bigger the next time. If that’s the sort of thing you’re looking for.”

“I haven’t really thought that far ahead.”

She let out a long breath and studied him. “What about your family? Have you talked to any of them? I know we haven’t really touched on that subject before—mainly because my crazy family seems to always take center stage—but is there anyone you can talk to about this?”

“Yeah, um...that,” he began nervously, scrubbing a hand along the back of his neck. “I kind of come from a line of famous artists.”

“*What?!*” she cried. “Seriously?”

“Both my father and grandfather were very well known in the tattoo arts world,” he explained. “I simply followed in their footsteps.”

“But...how? There was no mention of them in the bio I read on you or anywhere else. How is that possible?”

“I took my mother’s last name when I started tattooing on my own. I didn’t want the comparisons.” Pausing, he knew he had to get it all out there. “I didn’t always look like this. I used to have a lot less facial hair and kept my hair much shorter.” Then he paused again and waited for her reaction.

“Wow. You changed your name and appearance to avoid being compared to two men who were hugely successful? Seems a bit drastic.” Then she gave him a small smile. “You think if I cut my hair and changed my last name that my mom would back off?”

Unable to help himself, he laughed as he walked over and pulled her back into his arms. “Okay, enough of this for right now. It’s a lot to think about.”

“But like you just said, avoiding it isn’t helping, Ryker. Maybe everyone else is willing to let you keep drifting, but I can’t. I can tell how much this is weighing on you.”

As much as he wanted to appreciate her honesty, something else hit him. “So, um...does the way I look—the hair, the tats—does that have a lot to do with why you chose me to be your fake boyfriend?”

“Ryker...” she whined. “Seriously? Stop trying to deflect. We’re talking about you.”

“Yeah, I know, but...if I looked like...well...the way I used to look, would you have gone out with me when I first asked? Would you have seen me as the kind of guy to get back at your mom with?”

She glared at him. “You know, whenever you say it like that, you make me feel stupid. I had my reasons...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...I get it. Answer the question. If I were a little more clean-cut, would you have gone out with me when I first asked you?”

“There’s no way I can answer that and you know it. I greatly doubt a shave and a haircut would have done anything to reduce your confidence and swagger, so I can only say that you still would have intimidated me.”

That wasn’t what he was expecting at all.

“And as for choosing you because of how you look now?” She shook her head. “At the risk of sounding like a total bitch, it was a matter of timing. You were right there and...”

“That’s what I thought,” he murmured, but it still stung.

Again.

So maybe stop talking about it, jackass...

“You know what? Let’s go for a walk,” he said after a long moment. “Maybe walking around the town and looking closer at the local businesses will inspire me.”

The smile Ryleigh gave him practically lit up the room. “That sounds like an awesome plan.”

Together, they walked out and Ryker told himself that nothing had really changed—not with his feelings on the business and not with the two of them—but...maybe it had. All this time he'd been so focused on himself and what the parlor looked like and what other people were going to think, but there was one thing he hadn't admitted to anyone.

Even himself.

Until right this moment.

"I'm afraid to fail," he said quietly once he locked the door. Hanging his head, he couldn't bear to face Ryleigh and see her reaction. "Everything has come naturally to me—the art, the competitions, all of it. But this? This is 100% on me and...it terrifies me."

His hands shook, his voice trembled, and it was the most brutally honest admission he'd ever made in his entire life.

Beside him, Ryleigh reached out and gently touched his jaw. Her expression was sympathetic and fierce. "Thank you," she whispered.

Ryker stared at her as if she were crazy. "For what?"

"For trusting me enough to share that with me. I know that wasn't easy." Leaning in, she placed a soft kiss on his cheek before taking his hand and slowly leading him away from the shop. Hooking her arm with his, they began a leisurely stroll down the sidewalk. "Here's the thing," she began, "I kind of love the fact that for all your confidence and cocky swagger, that the real you is a decent guy. The fact that you're not looking at this as a guaranteed success makes you human like the rest of us."

"As much as I'm glad that makes you feel better, it doesn't do a whole lot for me."

"I know, but...we're just now getting to what's really going on. This wasn't going to be a quick fix. Obviously, this is some deep-seated anxiety you're dealing with."

"I don't have anxiety..."

"Oh, really? And what would you call it?"

As much as he wanted to argue, he knew she was right.

“Fine. Anxiety.” Glancing across the street, he saw the sign for Alloro. “Remind me again what that place is?”

“A day spa. Everyone raves about it. I’m not sure what the name means, but it sounds like allure, so...”

“It means Laurel in Italian,” he told her, liking the fact that there was a little something different here.

“Ooh...I like that! I wish some of the other businesses were creative with their names rather than things like Dave’s Electronics or Pete’s Printing. Ugh...” Then she laughed. “Which is why you can’t put your name on the sign when you open your place. Just...no.”

“Aren’t you forgetting your own family business? Donovan’s Pub?”

“I have no control over that. The place has been in our family for four generations. What’s done is done.”

“And your business name? Designs by Ryleigh?”

She shrugged. “I panicked! And besides, I work out of my apartment. It’s not like I’m hanging up a sign on Main Street or anything.”

“Fair point.” They were almost to the end of the block and what he really wanted was to go back to his house and show her a few more things.

And not all of them were related to his new business.

“Thank you for this,” he said a few minutes later.

“For what?”

“For listening. Most of the people I’ve talked to just tell me what they think I want to hear. You’ve made me think and...I appreciate that.”

Smiling up at him, she said, “Glad I could help.”

They turned to head back to his truck. “Are you hungry?”

“I wouldn’t say no to a little something to eat.”

“Then how about we go back to my place and I whip us up some lunch and then we crawl back into bed until dinnertime?” He said it in such a way that she knew exactly what he was getting at and he loved the way she got a

little breathless at his words.

“Counterproposal...”

“O-kay...”

“We go through the burger drive-thru, eat in the car on the way home, and immediately crawl back into bed.”

Squeezing her hand, he started to jog back to the truck with her trailing behind him. “Sweetheart, you’re on!”

Chapter Eleven

That night over dinner with her sister and Tessa, Ryleigh laughed so hard she practically peed.

“Okay, okay, okay!” she said between fits of laughter. “No more! As it is, we will never be able to look at Liam the same way again!”

“Oh my goodness!” Ari said as she tried to catch her breath. “It’s true! There is no way I can look my brother in the eye knowing that he...”

“It was just a dance!” Tessa said before cracking up again.

“A naked dance while holding your little teacup dog!” Ryleigh reminded her as she wiped tears of mirth away. “We are going to have to have girls’ night at least once a week! This is awesome!”

“Now you guys have to share something!” Tessa said, pouring herself a second glass of wine. “That was the deal!”

“Well, actually, it was supposed to be something embarrassing *we’ve* done,” Arianna reminded her. “You totally threw Liam under the bus with that story.”

“And it was awesome!” Ryleigh told her.

“Come on, you guys...”

“If we’re going to make it something embarrassing the guys have done, then I’d have to say...I love daring Will to role-play,” Arianna said in a comically loud whisper. “Most of the time I get him to do it when I need

something specific done. He played a construction worker when I moved into my first apartment and needed stuff hung. But he's played at being a cop, a masseuse...and I make sure he's always shirtless. It's awesome!"

"That's more adorable than embarrassing," Tessa murmured.

"Ugh...fine," Ari whined. "Will and I totally had sex in Liam's apartment when we were secretly dating."

"Dude, everybody knows that," Ryleigh told her before taking a sip of her wine. "Try again."

Pouting, her sister took another minute to think. "Okay, but nobody better ever repeat this to Will..."

"Right, because I want Liam knowing that I told his sisters about his sexy, naked kitchen dance," Tessa mumbled.

"Yeah, okay," Ari agreed. "You know Will and I have always had this ongoing truth or dare thing and I dared him to sing."

"Boo..." Ryleigh called out. "What's so bad about that?"

"He had to sing 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody' by Whitney Houston."

"Oh...okay. Still not terrible though."

"Naked," she added.

"Oh my God!" Tessa said with a bark of laughter. "That's right up there with Liam! I love it!"

"Now it's your turn, Ry!" Ari said giddily. "Give us something really juicy about Ryker!" She was practically bouncing in her seat.

"I hate to disappoint you, but this whole relationship is too new for there to be anything embarrassing yet."

And that wasn't a lie.

If anything, everything they did was just either laid back and fun or super sexy and intense. She hadn't caught him doing anything weird, nor had she encouraged him to.

"Really? Nothing?" Tessa asked. "Not even a striptease or something?"

"Nope. Any time Ryker takes off his clothes, it's fast. Like super-fast

sometimes.” She shrugged and felt herself blush. “Like he can’t wait to get naked with me and it’s sexy as hell.”

“Well that’s disappointing,” Arianna said with a sigh. “Not disappointing that he’s sexy and all that, but I guess I was hoping there was a bit of a marshmallow under that tattooed exterior.”

“Does he have any tattoos on his butt?” Tessa asked before breaking out in a fit of giggles.

“No,” Ryleigh said, laughing with her. “His arms, a few on his chest, and a couple on his back.”

“I still can’t believe you’re dating a guy like that,” her sister said. “Like, I know he’s a great guy, but he’s just so different from anyone you’ve ever been with.”

She shrugged. “It’s not all about the looks.”

As soon as the words were out, she thought about Ryker’s earlier confession.

I didn’t always look like this. I used to have a lot less facial hair and kept my hair much shorter.

When they had gotten back to his place, Ryleigh considered asking to see a picture of him from when he was younger, but she realized it didn’t matter. She loved the way he looked right now. It was hard to say if this was who he really was or if he was really the clean-cut version of himself. Either way, it wouldn’t matter to her. She knew the man he was underneath. It had never been about tattoos or hair; it truly had been his confidence that made her react the way she did for so long. And now that she knew him, she wanted to kick herself for waiting so long to go out with him.

“Look...she’s got that goofy look on her face,” Tessa said in a mock whisper. “Do you think she’s thinking about his tattoos?”

“Nah, I bet she’s thinking about him tearing his clothes off to get to her,” Ari replied.

Ryleigh was about to tell them they were both right when there was a

knock at the door. “Neither of you invited the guys, did you?”

“Nope!”

“Not me!”

No one ever stopped by unannounced. Well, other than Jamie last week and she seriously hoped he wasn’t here to do it again. Pulling open the door, she stood there in shock.

“*Mom?* What are you doing here?”

Kate Donovan stood in front of her looking meek and uncertain, and rather than respond right away, she held out a foil-covered plate to Ryleigh. “I made this tonight and wanted to bring it to you.”

“Oh, um...” She glanced over her shoulder and saw her sister and Tessa staring in wide-eyed fascination.

“It’s okay, Ryleigh,” her mother said softly. “I don’t expect you to invite me in. I just...like I said, I made that tonight and I know it’s one of your favorite meals and it made me think of you.”

Unable to resist, she peeked under the foil. “You made another Thanksgiving dinner?”

Nodding, Kate said, “I actually made one a few weeks ago. It was going to be my way of apologizing, but...you didn’t come to dinner.”

Dammit. Ryker was right.

“Mom, I...” Swallowing hard, she smiled. “Would you like to come in? We’re having a girls’ night.”

Kate’s eyes lit up. “Really? You sure the girls won’t mind?”

Arianna appeared next to her. “Of course we don’t mind, Mom. I think it’s about time we did something like this.”

No one spoke as Kate came in and sat down at the table with them. They had already finished their dinner and were working on a tray of assorted cookies, and Ryleigh wasn’t sure what to say to make things less awkward.

Unfortunately, the silence was getting to her and she knew she had to speak. “Listen, Mom, I...”

“No, I need to say something to you, Ryleigh,” her mother interrupted nervously. “I was wrong. I didn’t see what I was doing as being bad or negative or how it might embarrass you. In my mind, I was being a good mother.”

When she looked up and saw the look of utter shock on all three faces, she clarified her reasoning.

“You see...I grew up with overprotective parents. They always picked who I was allowed to date. I got lucky with your father, but that was after a long line of boys I never would have dated in a hundred years.” She laughed softly. “I thought that’s the way it was supposed to be.”

“Maybe back when you were growing up, Mom, but you had to realize that things change,” Ryleigh said gently.

“Your father and I have very similar thoughts on how we raised you kids. He was very overprotective of you girls, and so I thought I needed to be too. We didn’t worry about your brothers as much because...well...”

“Because you’re not living in this century,” Arianna chimed in. “Mom, come on. Your generation wasn’t as closed minded as you and Dad have been. That was Grandma and Grandpa’s generation. It’s like you’re stuck in some sort of time warp.”

Looking down at her hands that were folded in her lap, Kate nodded. Then she looked up at Ryleigh. “Your independence scared me. From the time you were a little girl, you always wanted to do things your way. You didn’t like to listen to anything I said or how I said to do it. And it bothered me because it always worked out for you. The older you got, the more I started to envy you.”

“*What?!*” both she and Ari demanded.

“You might not believe this, but...I never regretted marrying your father, even though he was a boy my parents picked for me. But I never had the guts to question why they did things the way that they did or why they thought the way that they thought. It was just the way things were done.” She sighed.

“The older you got, Ryleigh, I feared that your independence would lead to you being alone. So I got more and more aggressive hoping to prompt you to take more of an interest in finding a nice guy and settling down.”

“Did it ever occur to you to talk to me?” she asked. “I kept telling you over and over how much I hated what you were doing to me and yet you never thought to stop and just have a conversation with me?”

“I realize now that I was hyper-critical of you, but I thought I was doing it out of love.”

“I didn’t see it that way,” Ryleigh told her. “You kept chipping away at my self-esteem until I wasn’t comfortable in my own skin.”

Kate nodded solemnly. “I know that now, and I’m so very sorry.”

For several moments, no one said a word until the silence got to her again.

“I don’t know where we go from here, Mom. You really hurt me and humiliated me. It got to where I didn’t want to even leave the apartment because I never knew who you were going to ambush me with.”

Another nod.

“I wish...” She sighed. “I just wish that you had at least tried to see things from my perspective,” Ryleigh went on. “That you would have put the emphasis on getting to know me and asking what I wanted to make me happy rather than thinking that it was all about finding someone to marry me. I mean...what if I don’t want to get married?”

The shocked look on her mother’s face was almost comical, but now wasn’t the time to laugh.

“Maybe instead of focusing on a wedding that I might not want, you should have been happy to invest in my education. Maybe instead of telling me how to attract a man, you should have been encouraging me to love myself. Because really, how can I possibly love anyone if I don’t even like who I am?”

“Oh, Ryleigh...”

“I needed confidence, not criticism! I needed to know how to take care of myself instead of being treated like I needed to just stay close to home until some guy chose me!”

“You’re right,” Kate said firmly. “You are absolutely right. Your father and I did you a great disservice—mostly me. While Arianna fought her way to go away to school, we didn’t listen when you tried to do the same. I don’t know how to make up for that. I’m not sure if there is anything I can do.”

They all fell quiet again until her sister spoke up.

“You could promise to never fix her up with anyone again and be happy that she’s in a healthy relationship with Ryker...”

There was a moment when Ryleigh was certain her mother was going to argue, but she didn’t.

“I promise. No more fix-ups.”

“Seriously? Just like that?” Ryleigh asked in disbelief.

“Ry! Shut up! You’re winning here!” Ari hissed.

“I’ll admit that Ryker isn’t...anything like the men I was trying to fix you up with,” her mother said stiffly. “But...if you’re happy, then...I’m happy.” Then she paused. “And I have to say, you’ve never looked this happy. You’re positively radiant, so...that’s all that matters.”

“Yay!” Ari cried as she came around the table and hugged them both. “Now we need to toast to this! Let me grab Mom a glass!”

Within minutes, they each had a glass in their hands and Arianna was the one to make the toast.

“To family. We make each other crazy in the best and worst ways, but I think this was an amazing first step to mending a lot of hurt feelings. I love you all and here’s to everyone getting back together.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Ryleigh said, smiling at her mother.

After taking a sip of her wine, Kate looked at her with a serene smile. “You are the most amazing woman I know, and I love you very much. I’m proud of all of your achievements and moving forward, I promise to make

sure you know how much you are loved and valued.”

Tears stung Ryleigh’s eyes. “Thanks, Mom.”

“So, what are we making for dinner on Sunday to celebrate?” Ari asked.

* * *

Ryker knew he would be sleeping alone that night even before Ryleigh texted to let him know that girls’ night had gotten a little wild. He didn’t want her to rush through her time with her sister, and he didn’t want to show up and put a damper on things. Besides, he had more than enough on his mind and the time alone was really the best thing for him.

Wandering aimlessly around the house, he eventually ended up in his studio and looked around at all the works in progress. Some were for clients, some were for his own amusement and creative outlet, and some were just random stuff he started when he was bored. As he looked around the room, one thing became abundantly clear.

Finish something...

It was easy at the convention. He had a set amount of time with a client and had to finish the art, no matter what. Working with clients was like that. But once you took him out of that setting, he was floundering and surrounded with half-assed drawings, unfinished sketches, and an unopened business.

Shit.

Raking both hands through his hair, Ryker let out a long breath and tried to fight off the anxiety—because yes, that’s what it was—that hit him when he thought about opening the parlor. He knew the tattoo community would have a field day with him if it failed. After all, how pathetic would it be if the guy who won all the awards couldn’t handle having a shop of his own? Of course, some would argue the location and put the blame on that, and they probably wouldn’t be wrong. However, the thought of opening a place in a big city was beyond unappealing.

“So where the hell does that leave me?”

Finish something...

The shop was just one part of the puzzle. There was the art staring him in the face. None of it was a high priority, but he should finish it. Finding a name for the shop if he opened it was something else to be considered, but he had no idea where to even begin with that. But the biggest piece of the puzzle was Ryleigh.

Finish something...

Yeah, he was done playing the fake boyfriend. They hadn't been around anyone she knew and he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing; all he knew was that he couldn't keep going like this with her. It might have only been a handful of weeks, but he knew how he felt.

He was in love with her.

Hell, he'd been in love with her even before this whole stupid plan of hers. He had to stop being afraid of rocking the boat and say what needed to be said. If he spooked her, then...he'd find a way to un-spook her. If she wanted to bail, he'd convince her to give him a chance. Either way, failure wasn't an option.

Finish something...

And that was the exact attitude he should have with the shop.

Failure wasn't an option.

He was a world-famous artist. He'd been holding his own in the tattoo world for over ten years. His waiting list for people looking to have him do their ink or have him come and speak at conferences was two years long. Wouldn't it just make sense to have a place for people to come so he could start crossing them off the damn list and get the work done?

“What the hell am I waiting for?”

He'd been waiting for someone to kick him in the ass and give him the final push he needed.

He'd needed Ryleigh.

She'd turned his world upside down and showed him it's okay to be who he was and to take a chance. And starting right now, he was going to put his plan in motion.

Looking around the studio, he walked over to his drafting table and looked at the castle drawing he'd been working on. It seemed like the right one to sit down with and, as he got comfortable and pulled out his pencils, he got to work.

Tomorrow, he'd sit down with Billie and put his business team on a conference call and see what needed to happen to get the shop up and functioning. Then, he was going to make a big Italian dinner for Ryleigh and lay it all out for her—about the business and their relationship.

Failure wasn't an option and anxiety was suddenly replaced with excitement.

Ryker Masella was coming out of his self-imposed sabbatical and ready to take on the world.

Starting with Ryleigh Donovan.

* * *

“Oh my God! What smells so good?” Ryleigh said as she walked in the door and kissed him.

“I told you I was making dinner.”

“I know, but you didn't say you were making anything that could possibly smell this delicious!” She walked ahead of him to the kitchen and, without even asking, she went right to the stove and took the lid off the pot of sauce. “Holy crap.” Then, glancing over her shoulder, she looked at him in confusion. “If you even dare try to tell me we have to wait until tomorrow to eat this, I may have to strangle you.”

Joining her, Ryker took the lid from her hands and placed it on the counter before grabbing a spoon from the drawer. “For you, baby girl, I am

making an exception.” Dipping the spoon in the sauce, he gently blew on it before offering it to her to taste.

Her eyes closed and she hummed deeply before looking up at him. “I don’t think you need to make anything else with that. Just the sauce and some bread to dunk in it and that can be dinner. Seriously.” Taking the spoon from him, she took another taste and made that sound again. “Is there no end to your talents?”

“Not that I can tell,” he teased as he took the spoon out of her hand and replaced the lid on the pot. “Let me get you some wine and then I have some things to show you.” Walking over to the island, he poured them each a glass.

“Sexy things?” she asked, accepting the glass from him.

“No,” he replied before taking a sip. “I’ve actually been busy with a couple of things today and I wanted to share them with you.”

She instantly sobered. “Oh, okay. Now I’m curious.”

Stepping around the island, he took her hand and led her to a part of the house he’d never shown her before. Opening the door off of the living room, he stepped aside and motioned for her to go ahead of him.

Gasping softly, Ryleigh looked over at him. “Your studio?”

“Yup.” Joining her, he took her hand again. “I have an office space over through that doorway and Billie has a smaller one through the door on the other side. This is the common area, but it’s primarily where I sketch things out for clients for myself when I’ve got an idea in my head.” He led her over to the drafting table. “This castle is for a client I’m meeting with next week.”

“I know I watched you work at the convention and yet it still boggles my mind how crazy talented you are. Like...I’m looking at this drawing, but it feels three dimensional and I know it’s going to look that way when you put it on your client.” Looking over at him, her expression was full of wonder. “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone as artistic as you.”

Again, he was used to the praise, but coming from Ryleigh, it just meant more.

“Billie mentioned something to you that first night you were at the convention and with everything that happened afterwards, I don’t think you even remembered her saying it, but...I wanted you to see this.” He led her into his office and turned on the light, motioning to the easel in the corner.

“Ryker,” she whispered, slowly walking toward it. “It’s me.”

All he could do was nod.

Standing in front of it, her hand over her heart, she looked like she was going to cry.

“Ryleigh, I...please don’t be upset,” he urged, moving to her side and taking the wine glass from her hand. Carefully, he put it on the nearest supply table, along with his own, before facing her again. “I did this a few weeks ago and...and I was thinking about you. It’s like that sometimes. Something comes to mind and won’t leave until I sketch it out.”

Looking up at him, he saw the unshed tears. “You made me look beautiful.” Her words were barely audible, but packed a powerful punch.

“You *are* beautiful,” he said gruffly, caressing her cheek. His gaze lingered on her face, taking in the slight flush in her cheeks, the glossy pink of her lips, and those green eyes that were far more stunning than all the emeralds in the world. “This is what I see when I look at you, because this is who you are.”

She sighed his name, her cheek resting in his hand. “I don’t even know what to say, Ryker. No one’s ever done anything like this for me before.” Letting out a low laugh, she added, “Hell, no one’s ever told me I’m beautiful. Only you.”

“I am many things, Ryleigh, but I’m not a liar.” His other hand came up to frame her face. “That leads me to something else that I need to tell you.”

“O-kay...”

Suddenly, he felt nervous and unsure of himself.

Was this the right time? Was he prepared for the chance she might reject him?

But as he studied her face, he knew this couldn't be put off any longer. Even if she told him she didn't feel the same way, at least he'd be done living in limbo.

"Ryleigh...it's never been a secret how I've felt about you. From the moment I saw you, I knew you were someone I wanted to meet." Swallowing hard, he continued. "When you kissed me that night in the parking lot, I couldn't believe my good luck. Then I wanted to curse it because you weren't coming to me because you truly wanted me. I was just a means to an end."

"Ryker, I..."

"Please," he interrupted. "I need to say this."

Wordlessly, she nodded.

"I went along with your plan because I wanted to spend time with you. I wanted to get to know you and give you a chance to get to know me." He caressed her cheek again. "And you're so much more than I ever imagined. But..." He paused briefly. "But I don't want to pretend anymore. And to be honest, I don't think either of us has been pretending much lately. Everything I've said and done is because I care about you. A lot. And I think if you were being honest with me, you'd tell me you feel more for me than just a guy playing a part."

She blinked up at him as he held his breath and waited for her to say something.

"I don't...I don't know what you're saying, Ryker," she murmured.

"Yes, you do," he countered. "You know exactly what I'm saying. You're far too brilliant to play dumb with me like that."

"I'm not sure what to say," she blurted out, stepping away from him. "Part of the reason this has been going so well is that there's no pressure, no expectations. What if we go from goofing around to being a real couple and...and...things don't work out?"

"You don't think I worry about that too? Hell, I've been wanting to have this talk with you for a while now and I've been too damn scared because I

thought you'd just tell me goodbye!" he shouted. "I can't keep going on with that kind of pressure, Ryleigh! I already changed who I am once to deal with a difficult part of my life. I don't want to do that with you. I want you to give us a chance. Give *me* a chance."

With a shaky breath, she paced a bit before walking over and picking up her wine. After downing half of it, she met his gaze head on.

"You know that now the stakes are real, right? Like...if we hang out with my family and they disapprove, it could make things awkward with us."

He nodded. "I'm aware."

She had already told him about the big breakthrough with her mother last night, and even though everything seemed to be settled, he knew they still had more to overcome.

Plus, he wasn't an idiot. He'd seen every guy Kate Donovan had brought out for her daughter, and Ryker didn't resemble any of them. He knew most parents looked at him like he was their worst nightmare, but he also knew he'd do anything for Ryleigh—especially to make her life easier and cause less stress with her family.

Well...he would once he was certain of what she was saying to him.

"So then...you agree? We're done playing? This thing between us is 100% real?" he prompted and almost sagged with relief when she nodded.

Taking the glass from her hand, he put it back down before hauling her in close and kissing her.

And he swore it was better and sweeter than any kiss they'd ever shared.

Chapter Twelve

For some reason, Ryleigh kept expecting things to be different, but...they weren't.

She was waiting for her feelings for Ryker to change, but...they didn't.

But more than anything, she was prepared for people to suddenly come out and voice their disapproval, but...everything was quiet.

It was almost boring how normal her life had suddenly become.

Well...not boring. It could never be boring with Ryker. He was moving forward with opening the tattoo parlor and it was fascinating to watch him change gears from this laid-back and totally chill guy to this completely driven, hyper-focused businessman.

It was totally hot.

After they decided to make things official, he had made her a fantastic dinner of chicken parm with spaghetti and it was quite possibly the best thing she'd ever put in her mouth. He hadn't been lying when he said how good it was and as much as she loved cooking and knew she was good at it, that one meal almost put her to shame.

After they finished eating, she had told him about being invited to dinner with her family on Sunday, but that never happened. Her father fell and broke his hip, which sent the entire Donovan family into a tizzy; for two weeks, everything was borderline out of control.

Her mother was stressed and spent most of her time at her father's side tending to him now that he was home. Jamie was running the pub along with Uncle Ronan, and Ryleigh was doing a lot of the cooking to help. The servers who had quit a few weeks ago both came back, but Jamie was also interviewing for more help because with both their parents not being able to work, they definitely needed more hands on deck.

Sadly, she and Jamie were the only ones available. Arianna, Liam, and Patrick all had full-time jobs they couldn't take time away from, and honestly, none of them knew anything about working the pub beyond doing some grunt work. Patrick came in a few times and helped behind the bar or ran to the bank if they needed it, and Liam came in a couple of nights to help clean the place up. Arianna, however, well...they all agreed that it was safer for her not to help. She had a tendency to drop trays of dishes and break them, she couldn't cook, and her drinks were always way too strong, so... they only really needed her for moral support.

Still, the extra time at the pub meant less time with Ryker, but he was busy putting some finishing touches on the business. He'd hung a lot of artwork and was testing all the equipment and moving things from his house to the parlor, but he still hadn't decided on a name and he still hadn't set up a website.

That bothered her more than it should have because she couldn't believe he hadn't asked her about it.

Maybe it was a tattoo artist thing because she'd reached out to R. Moretti about the site she'd been working on for him and never got a response, so... maybe these tattoo guys were either too picky or they had a hard time making decisions.

But Ryker not asking her to do his website still burned.

Jamie walked into the pub kitchen and looked like he was ready to drop.

"You know you're allowed to sit and relax, right?" she told him.

"I knew this was coming," he told her. "They were going to go on that

cruise in a few months, but there was going to be time to ease into this whole taking over thing. I had no idea it would hit like this and suck all the life out of me.”

“I wish I could help more, but I’ve got clients who are waiting on website stuff. I think you’re going to need to hire a full-time cook. Or maybe ask Bobby if he wants the hours.”

“Dad’s not going to be out that long.”

“Jamie, even if he comes back in a few weeks, he can’t put in the hours he was before. Rehab can take anywhere from six to nine months! Talk to Bobby and if he’s not interested, put an ad out and let’s jump on this before it overwhelms us both.”

He nodded, but she could tell he wasn’t happy about it.

She was about to say more when her phone dinged with an incoming text. Jamie’s phone chimed as well, so she knew it was the family chat.

Arianna: Family dinner Sunday and we’re all chipping in!

Smiling, Ryleigh looked over at her brother. “See if you can get coverage so you can be there.”

Ryleigh: I’m in! What are we thinking? Potluck or do we have a specific meal in mind?

Arianna: I was just thinking takeout

Liam: That’s because you can’t cook

Patrick: Hey, don’t even go there. I can’t cook either so takeout sounds fantastic to me

Liam: Whatever you decide, Tessa and I will bring dessert

Jamie: Should we just bring food from the pub? That might be easier

Ryleigh picked up an oven mitt and threw it at him. “What’s wrong with you? Don’t add more work to our already full schedules. If they want to order pizza, then don’t ruin it!”

“You’re right, you’re right. I wasn’t thinking.”

Jamie: Never mind. Takeout sounds good.

Arianna: Fine but nothing lame like pizza. You know how much Mom and Dad like to sit down to a nice dinner on Sundays

Patrick: Still can’t cook

Patrick: Can we just get it catered from somewhere? You know, order some sort of whole dinner that arrives hot?

Arianna: I suppose, but I’m not sure where to order something like that from. Mom just made a whole turkey dinner not that long ago so I don’t want to do that again

Ryleigh: What about one of those spiral ham places?

Ryleigh: I think there’s one in Moorehead City. We can order the ham and some sides from them and then fill in the rest ourselves

Arianna: Ooh...I like that! I can make a salad

Liam: Safe choice

Arianna: Shut up! You're not making anything. Tessa is

Liam: We count as one

Arianna: Moving on!

Patrick: So if Ari's bringing the salad and Liam's bringing dessert and the rest is being catered, does that mean I'm off the hook?

Ryleigh: Absolutely not! Why don't you pick up wine and drinks, Jamie can bring some appetizers from the pub

Jamie picked the oven mitt back up and threw it at her this time. "Hey! You just said not to add work to our already full schedules!"

"Appetizers are easy. Most of them can be put together really quick and then reheated at the house. Easy peasy."

Liam: I want the corn fritters!

Patrick: Taco bites!

Arianna: And some crab dip!

Ryleigh: Why don't I make a charcuterie board? I think then we should have more than enough food

Arianna: Sounds good

Arianna: Can you place the order for the dinner, Ry?

Ryleigh: Yeah, sure. No problem.

Arianna: Oh, and Ry? One more thing

Ryleigh: What?

Arianna: Are you bringing Ryker?

She didn't even have to think about it.

Ryleigh: Of course!

Arianna: YAY!! I'm so excited for him to hang out with all of us!

Ryleigh: Everyone better behave! Ryker doesn't scare easily, but try not to push it

Liam: Would we do that?

Patrick: Jeez, it's like you don't even trust us

Jamie: That dude is scary. Don't mess with him

Liam: ??? I feel like there's a story there

Ryleigh: Yes. One for another time.

Ryleigh: See you all on Sunday!

Ryleigh: Oh, and Ari?

Arianna: Yes?

Ryleigh: You're in charge of telling Mom you made all these plans without consulting her first. Love you!! 😊

“Nice,” Jamie said with a small laugh. “She dropped the bulk of the work on you and then you totally turned it around so she basically had the hard part. You’re kind of an evil genius.”

Grinning, Ryleigh put her phone down. “Remember that.” Going back to the stove, she stirred the pot of chili and then walked over to the oven to check on the quiches she put in there earlier. “I think it was very sweet of Ari to think of something like this and even though Mom is going to balk a little at a catered dinner, it just makes the most sense right now. Otherwise, all the cooking was going to fall on me.”

“The bulk of everything still fell on you,” he reminded her. “You’re just not physically cooking. And those charcuterie boards are time-consuming.”

She shrugged. “Ryker and I have done a few of them and I’m sure if I asked, he’d help me put one together for Sunday.”

Leaning against the large stainless steel prep table, her brother studied her.

“What?” she asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“This is the first time in a really long time that you’re bringing someone home. I think the last guy you brought to a family dinner had to be like...”

“Scott Evans. My senior prom date,” she finished for him. “After that, I was busy with college and working, and Mom was putting pressure on me to find a nice guy and settle down. Most of the men I got serious with, I never brought around.”

“Wow. No wonder she was pressuring you. She thought you never

dated.”

That made her completely stop what she was doing. “Really?”

He nodded and then began walking around and wiping down the work stations. “Oh, yeah. She used to talk about it all the time—how you worked too hard and she wished you would put your books down and go out and have some fun.”

“Ugh...why couldn’t she just talk to me like a normal person then instead of attacking?” she said with frustration, even though her brother wasn’t going to have any answers.

“Ry, don’t you remember the way Gram was with her? She used to critique everything Mom did! Clearly it’s genetics. And if you decide to have kids, I’m sure you’ll do your fair share of criticizing.”

“Nuh-uh. No way. Once you grow up like that, you don’t want to do that to your kids.”

“Mom did,” he replied.

Eyes wide, she looked at him. “Oh God. What if it really is like that? What if you can’t help it?” Her hands flew to her stomach as she felt like she was going to be sick. “What if...what if...”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Jamie said calmly as he came over and hugged her. “It’s okay, Ry. No one ever pointed it out to Mom when we were kids, so she probably never even realized she was doing it. But you’ve put it out there and you’ll make the conscious decision not to be like that. You’re much stronger than Mom ever was.”

Pulling back, she stared at him. “You really think so? I mean...she does everything! She handles so much and raised five kids!”

Chuckling softly, he squeezed her shoulder before stepping back. “Ry, a lot of what Mom did when we were growing up was because she had to. She had five kids; there was no way for her to just sit back and chill. Dad was here running the pub and we all spent most of our time here too. I think some of that was just survival mode. But you? You are smart and courageous and

you go after what you want. Sure you back down from time to time, but nothing's ever stopped you from getting what you want."

At first she wanted to argue, but immediately realized he was right. Her parents hadn't wanted her to go away to college, so she'd stayed local and got her degree and had her own business, so...that worked out.

"Sometimes I wish I would have gotten to go away like Ari did; you know, just to meet other people," she admitted.

"And yet she still came back to Laurel Bay because this is where her heart is."

"Well...Will moving here certainly was a deciding factor."

"Ryleigh..." he whined.

"No, no, I get it. I get what you're saying, and...thank you." Walking over, she kissed him on the cheek. "I need to finish up here because I want to run over to the shop and see how Ryker's doing."

"Any word on a name?"

She shook her head. "Obviously he can't open until he has one, but it's just not there yet."

"He'll get there." Turning, he was wiping down the last surface when Uncle Ronan called his name. "Duty calls." Tossing the cloth into the laundry bin, he grinned at her. "I guess I'll see you and Ryker on Sunday."

"Sounds good!" And as soon as he was out of the kitchen, Ryleigh whipped up a quick pot of chowder for the dinner shift, along with some pasta salad, and prepped several trays of dinner rolls. Once everything was done, she handed it all off to Bobby, grabbed her purse, and was on her way.

* * *

"Tattoo Zone?"

"No."

"Laurel Bay Tattoo?"

“No.”

“Bayside Tats?”

Ryker didn’t even try to disguise the eye roll. “Is anyone even trying to think of a good name?” he asked.

Both Marc and Billie shrugged and his buddy Dax—who was in on the meeting via Zoom—simply smirked. “Dude, it’s your business, and you’ve given us literally zero direction. What do you expect?”

Sadly, Dax was right. “I don’t know. You three know me better than anyone and I just figured you’d put a little of that knowledge into your suggestions.”

At that moment, Ryleigh walked in like a breath of fresh air. Ryker smiled at her and stood to greet her, while everyone else called out a greeting.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “Am I interrupting?”

Taking her hand, he led her back over to his desk and tugged her down into his lap. He knew she felt a little self-conscious, but he firmly placed a hand on her hip to hold her in place. “We’re talking business names and making no progress.”

“He’s being difficult,” Billie said with a small huff.

“Okay, what’s been rejected?” she asked.

“We’d be here all day if we went over that list,” Dax said with amusement. “And it’s nice to finally meet you, Ryleigh. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Same,” she said with a smile. “So...we’re getting nowhere, huh?”

Everyone groaned.

She gently cleared her throat. “Um...if I might offer a small suggestion?”

“Please,” he prompted.

“As I was walking over here, I was looking at all the business signs—you know, like you and I did a few weeks ago.”

He nodded.

“But my gaze kept going to Alloro because it’s so different,” she went on.

“It’s classy and it makes you stop and wonder about what the business is. The lettering on the sign is elegant and...I don’t know...the point basically is that it generates interest.”

“O-kay...”

“Plus, it’s Italian.” Then she looked right at him. “And you are Italian.”

“So you think I should give it an Italian name?”

“You’ve mentioned more than once how you want something different.” She picked up the notepad on his desk with a bunch of names written and crossed off. “None of these are doing it for you because they sound just like every other tattoo place that you can find in every city across the country.”

Another nod.

“I’m just saying...be creative. You might translate some of these into Italian, so it just has a different ring to it.” Then she shrugged and waited for someone to say something and when they didn’t, she added, “It was just a thought.”

But...he kind of liked it.

Actually, he liked it a lot.

It made sense and yet...it had the potential to change everything they’d accomplished with the overall design.

His heart started to hammer hard in his chest and he felt a level of excitement for this project that he hadn’t felt at all the entire time.

He was inspired.

“Um...” He carefully maneuvered them in his chair before Ryleigh simply stood up and moved behind him.

Scanning his desk, he found a sketch pad and immediately began drawing. He felt everyone’s eyes on him, but he didn’t care. He knew they were curious, but they’d have to wait.

“Billie? Get Ryleigh something to drink,” he murmured.

“I’m fine, Billie,” she whispered. “But thanks.”

Ryker had no idea how much time passed, but no one disturbed him, nor

did they move or speak. Eventually, he tore the sheet off, turned and ran it through the scanner, and sent it off to his designer. When he faced everyone, all he did was let out a long breath before briefly explaining, "I'm going to wait and see what Jimmy says and then we'll discuss."

He read the disappointment on their faces, but he didn't believe in letting anyone in on his plans until he knew they could move forward with them.

Standing, he said, "I think that's all we're going to get done today. I appreciate you all helping and I'll be in touch." Reaching for Ryleigh's hand, he winked. "Do you have work you need to get to?"

"Sadly, yes. I have some new clients that need designs from scratch, another client would like me to refresh their website, and then some graphic design stuff and logos...you know...the usual."

He laughed softly as they walked out of his office and then out of the shop. "But it all doesn't have to be done today, does it?"

"No, but some of it does. I'm seriously behind since I've been spending so much time helping at the pub," she said wearily. "I know I don't have to, but...it's something I've always done. Just not this much time."

"Extenuating circumstance," he said, gently squeezing her hand. "How's your dad?"

The sigh she let out spoke of just how exhausted and sad she was and Ryker cursed himself for wasting her time watching him vaguely sketch when she needed his attention more.

"He's doing okay," she told him. "But this isn't going to be a quick recovery. I told Jamie that he's going to need to hire a full-time cook because I can't keep up this pace and neither can he. The truth is that Mom and Dad could be out of the picture at the pub for a while and we have to make sure everything keeps running smoothly. That's not going to happen if we're both trying to juggle too much ourselves."

"Smart. And what did he say?"

"He reluctantly agreed, but this isn't the way he envisioned taking over.

It's a lot to deal with." She went quiet for a moment before looking up at him. "We're all going over on Sunday for dinner. We're going to have it catered—at least part of it—but we thought it would cheer Dad up if we went back to our normal routine. I'd love it if you came with me."

"Really? Are you sure now's the right time?" Although he had no idea why he would even ask such a thing, considering they were really in a good place with each other. The last few weeks were the best of his life. They were spending time together like they always did—although maybe a little more—and there wasn't this giant weight hanging over him about how he didn't know if it was all going to end. They hadn't talked about their feelings—at least not on a deeper level other than how much they enjoyed spending time together—but he knew where he stood.

And hopefully, someday soon, Ryleigh would tell him she felt the same way.

"I'll admit that it might be weird since Dad's not feeling great and I'm sure my mother is going to be twitchy because we're bringing food rather than her making it, but maybe that's not a bad thing?" Her laugh was low and a little awkward. "I mean, they all know we're dating and my mother assured me she's done picking on me and that she'd behave herself, but..." Another sigh. "I just wish there were a way to know that she meant it. Like...like a crystal ball that would tell me it was all going to be okay and everything would be perfect and no one was going to say or do anything that would tick me off or offend you...or..."

"Hey," he said softly, stopping them in the middle of the sidewalk. "If me being there is going to add more stress to you, then I don't have to go. We'll get there eventually, Ryleigh, but I don't want it to be like this. You already have enough on your plate without worrying about me."

"That's just it, Ryker. I don't know if there will ever come a time when I don't freak out about it because I can only base my feelings on the way things have gone in the past. We have to get over this hurdle but...I wish there were

instructions so that it would just go so smoothly that I'll look back and laugh because I had nothing to worry about."

Yeah, he wished that for her too.

He wished he could give her the confidence she had in every other aspect of her life and put it all in the way she dealt with her family.

"Ryleigh, I'm serious. Just...tell me what I need to do to help you relax about this."

"You can help me make a charcuterie board."

He burst out laughing. "Are you serious? That's it?"

Luckily, she laughed with him. "Everything else is out of my control! I wish I could just go there like everyone else and not worry about anything, but...this truce between me and my mother is still new, so...I'm going to overthink everything. That doesn't mean you have to."

He had a feeling he'd be doing that anyway, just based on what he'd learned in the last month.

They arrived at the pub and her car and he kissed her. "Are you sure you need to work?"

"Mmm..." she hummed, pressing up against him. "It is kind of late in the day..."

"Your place or mine?"

"Yours," she replied quickly. "You have the bigger bed."

He kissed her again. "Then let's go. I can get my truck later or tomorrow..."

Fortunately, she didn't argue. She simply tossed him her keys and walked around to the passenger side and climbed in.

The drive was short, but Ryleigh took the opportunity to tease him in the sexiest of ways. Her top was more of a fitted cardigan and she unbuttoned it all the way, exposing the red lace bra she had on underneath. She slid her sunglasses off and placed them on the console.

"You don't need to tempt me," he told her. "I'm already going to have

you as soon as we get to the house.”

Beside him, she let out a throaty little purr. “I know, but...I just thought I’d give you a little preview.” She licked her lips as she reached over and ran her hand over the front of his jeans. “Just like you’re giving me a little preview too.”

Her hand felt good over his growing erection, but there was too much denim in the way. “Ryleigh...” he growled.

“And just so you know...my panties match my bra,” she whispered huskily. “And it’s a thong.”

Ryker knew the grin he gave her was downright wolfish. “You did all that when you were just going to go home and work?”

She shrugged, causing the sweater to slip slightly off of her shoulder. “I had other plans for when I showed up at the shop, but you were busy.”

“Had I known, I would have thrown all of them out. I love the idea of the two of us christening the place.”

“Oh, we will. Eventually.”

“Fuck yeah...”

Her hand continued to move over him as her lace covered breasts rubbed against his arm. “You’re killing me, beautiful,” he murmured. “I’m about ready to pull over and do a little touching of my own.”

“Ooh...that would be very naughty.” Her voice was a husky whisper, and he was getting harder by the second. “I promise it will be worth the wait.” She gave him a not-so-gentle squeeze and he cursed even as she gave him an impish giggle.

“Just you wait,” he told her. “Two can play at this game and I know how impatient you can be.” Hell, he loved teasing her and bringing her to the brink over and over and over before finally giving her what she wanted. Maybe she was playfully retaliating right now, but he knew as soon as they got home, he wouldn’t be able to wait. He was going to have her—probably even before they made it to his bed.

Pulling into the driveway, he slammed the brakes, and barely had the car turned off before he was climbing out. As soon as they got out of the car, Ryleigh came around and kissed him—it was wet and deep and so full of promise that he lifted her until her legs wrapped around his waist. “Soon, baby girl,” he murmured against her lips. “Soon.”

“Not soon enough.”

Ryker pressed her up against the side of the car and ground himself against her until she was crying out his name. There was plenty of privacy out here—the property was heavily wooded—but there was no way he would compromise her that way.

At least not without getting her consent first.

Just...not today.

He strode to the front door and barely got them through it. With Ryleigh’s back against the entryway wall, he kissed her with unleashed passion. How was it that this woman could bring him to this point time and time again? Ryker knew he’d never grow tired of this—of her—and feeling the way she moved against him and the way she kissed him with equal abandon just amped everything up.

The bed was too far, but the wall wasn’t going to do it either. Heading to the living room, he tossed her down on the sofa before whipping his t-shirt up and over his head as he kicked off his boots. Staring down at her, Ryleigh’s arms were up over her head, her sweater wide open, exposing all the flimsy red lace. She was breathless and beautiful, and he was going to touch and taste every inch of her.

His jeans slid off, as did his briefs, before he reached for her.

The sneakers she wore crashed somewhere behind him after he threw them aside. Then he peeled her jeans down her legs, taking her socks with them. They joined the growing pile of garments on the floor.

Pulling back, he stared down at the erotic picture she created. Scraps of red lace and all smooth skin against the black leather of his sofa. She looked

like a pin-up model from the fifties and he'd love to draw her like this and have her inked on his skin.

He'd never allow that to happen though because someone else would have to do the work and no man was ever going to see his girl looking like this but him.

"You're looking very fierce, Ryker," she whispered. "Possessive. Primal."

Moving down, his body covered hers. "I'm feeling all those things and more. But mostly possessive because..." Slowly, one hand caressed her from her ankle up to her breast. "Mine," he added with a growl of pure satisfaction.

Ryleigh nodded. "I'm yours," she told him, reaching up and taking a fistful of his hair in her hand and tugging. "All yours. Take me."

"With pleasure."

And he did. Over and over and over.

Chapter Thirteen

She'd changed her outfit three times.

She'd adjusted her hairstyle four.

But the charcuterie board she got right on the first shot.

Actually, Ryker got it right before he had to run some errands. Normally she would have asked where he was going or why he suddenly had to go somewhere on a Sunday when he knew they needed to be to her parents' house in just a little while, but he knew how important this was to her and she knew he wouldn't let her down.

Walking around her apartment, she slid her phone into her purse and went looking for her sunglasses. "Where did I...?" But then she remembered taking them off the other day in the car when she was trying to seduce Ryker.

And she had definitely succeeded in that task and the results had been glorious. Even just thinking about the way he had looked at her and touched her when they had gotten to his house was enough to make her blush.

Smiling, it already made her think about what she wanted to do to him later as a thank you for coming to dinner with her—not that required it, but... this was a huge deal to her. As Jamie reminded her the other day, it had been years since she'd brought a guy to dinner and she knew she was making Ryker a little crazy with all of her worrying and freaking out, so...yeah... she'd seduce him later and this time, he'd have to deal with being on the

receiving end for a little while.

She couldn't wait.

With a little shiver of delight, Ryleigh forced herself to focus on the here and now. They would take Ryker's car to dinner, and really, all she needed to do was wait for him to get back. Still, she was a little too nervous to simply sit, so she went down to her car to get her sunglasses just to have something to do.

The weather was a little cool, but not cold enough to warrant wearing a coat, and as she walked down to the parking lot, she simply enjoyed the feel of the sun on her face. Working from home meant she didn't go outside nearly as much as she should, so when she had a reason to go out, she soaked up the sun and fresh air as much as possible.

At the car, she unlocked in and bent over to reach in and grab her glasses. Only...they weren't on the console where she thought she'd put them.

"Great, they must have slid onto the floor," she muttered.

Somewhere in the distance, she heard a car door shut and heard kids laughing as she blindly reached around, hoping to find the sunglasses.

Reaching over the console toward the passenger side, she stretched and finally felt them. "*Aha!*" Picking them up, she slowly maneuvered herself to back out of the car.

"Now there is a damn fine view," someone said right before a hand landed on her ass.

Every self-defense move she'd ever learned came to mind, and without really thinking about it, she reared back and elbowed the creep in the gut before turning and kicking him in the same spot, watching as he stumbled back before falling on his ass.

"How dare you?" she cried, cursing the fact that she didn't have her phone to call the cops. The guy was curled up a bit in the fetal position and she wished Ryker were here right now to kick his ass. "What gives you the right to put your hands on me?"

“You didn’t seem to mind when I had my hands all over you this morning,” he wheezed before rolling over to sit up. Then he looked up at her. “What the hell, Ryleigh?”

For a moment, all she could do was stare because she didn’t recognize this guy.

And then the realization hit her. “*Ryker?!*”

What is happening right now?

Recoiling a bit, she took in his appearance and how...wrong it was.

Gone was the beard and the longish hair. Now it was cropped stylishly short and he was clean-shaven. And where Ryker tended to wear black or all dark colors, now he had on a pair of khakis and an ivory cable-knit sweater. Taking another step back as he stood, she could only watch in horror.

“What did you do?” she asked in disbelief. “What...I mean...why...?” Waving her hands in front of him, she struggled to find the right words.

Nervously, he brushed the dirt off of him from his fall on the pavement before meeting her wary gaze. “Um...I thought I’d clean up a bit to meet your family,” he began hesitantly. “Believe it or not, this is how I normally looked before...well...before.”

“Oh my God...” she murmured. “I think I’m gonna be sick.” Slamming her car door, she turned and raced up to her apartment and made a beeline for the bathroom. Ryker caught up to her a moment later as she was doubled over and trying to catch her breath.

“Jeez, Ryleigh,” he said, keeping a safe distance. “I didn’t think the slight change would make you physically ill. What the hell is going on?”

That made her straighten. “I’ll tell you what’s going on! This!” she yelled, motioning to his entire body. “Why would you choose to do this now? Today? Like I’m not freaking out enough and you have to go and transform into...*gah!* I don’t even know what to call you right now!”

“How about Ryker?” he said sarcastically. “It’s still me. Just a cleaned-up version. I thought this would be better for meeting your family!”

“You’ve already *met* my family!” she countered hotly. “They all know you as the guy you were when you left here this morning! Although this version of you is brand freaking new, so maybe you really are meeting them!”

“Ryleigh...”

“No!” she said, holding out a hand to keep him from moving closer. “Dammit, Ryker!” Shoving past him, she stormed toward the kitchen and then had no idea what to do with herself.

“I thought this would make you happy!” he snapped. “All you’ve been saying is how you want everything to go smoothly! And knowing what I know about the way things have been between you and your mother, we both know I’m not the kind of guy she’d choose for you. At least...not the way I looked up until a few hours ago.”

Groaning, she looked at him like he was insane. “And I hated all those guys! You know that! God knows I’ve said it like a thousand times! Why would you think changing your appearance to suit her view of what kind of guy she thinks I like would be a good thing?”

“Um...”

“If you think I didn’t go out with you before because of the way you looked, I can guarantee that I definitely wouldn’t have gone out with this guy.” Then she realized how utterly awful she was being and hung her head. “Ryker...I’m sorry. That was...”

“Bitchy?” he finished for her, and yeah, he was pissed.

With a defeated look, she shook her head. “Do you remember when I told you about why I never accepted your offers to go out?”

He nodded.

“Your confidence scared me, not your looks. And the man I’ve been with, the man who I am crazy about, doesn’t look like...well...this,” she said sadly. “I really like the man you are, Ryker. The long hair, the beard, the tattoos...all of it.”

“Ryleigh, you and I both know that you only chose me that night because of how I look.”

“No, I told you it was because of proximity. I mean...yeah, I knew it would freak my mother out, but there was also a tiny part of me that was finally allowing myself to go after what I wanted. You.”

He didn't look convinced.

“You told me how you changed the way you looked so you could make a name for yourself. You changed your name. And for what? No matter how you looked or what name anyone called you, you were still this insanely gifted artist! No one could take that away from you.”

“That's not the point...”

“It really kind of is. How we look is only a small fraction of who we are and if people can't see beyond that...”

Dammit.

Collapsing into the nearest chair, she burst into tears. Ryker was instantly crouched at her side. “What's happening? What's going on?” One strong hand rubbed her back. “Are you going to be sick? Do I need to call someone?”

“I am the worst!” she cried. “I'm standing here yelling at you for doing something that was so completely selfless and then spouting on and on about how it's not about appearances while I'm blatantly standing here judging you on your appearance!” And then she was crying again—great big full-body sobbing.

“Ryleigh, hey...” he began softly, carefully wrapping his arms around her. “I get what you're saying. You were trying to tell me I didn't need to do all of this.”

She nodded even as she continued to cry.

“It's not always about outward appearances,” he went on. “I may have gone a little overboard, but...how many times did you change your outfit today?”

She held up three fingers.

“I think this is something we both need to work on,” he said, trying to wipe away some of the tears that just kept coming.

“I loved the way you looked, Ryker. All of it. This is just all...it’s new. But you’re still you, and I hate how I’ve just been so horrible to you.”

“Horrible? Baby girl, never,” he assured her.

With a snort, she glared at him. “Oh, please. I used you; I made you feel like you couldn’t come to dinner looking like yourself. If that’s not horrible, I don’t know what is.”

Cupping her face, he tried again to wipe away her tears. “You want to know something funny?”

“No.”

“Too bad,” he teased. “I didn’t mind being used. It finally gave us a chance. That’s all I ever wanted was for you to give me a chance. So if some silly fight between you and your mother made that happen, then I’m not sorry about it.” Leaning in, he placed a gentle kiss on the tip of her nose. “Now tell me what to do to make this better because...I can’t grow my hair out in the next twenty minutes.”

Sniffling, she looked at him and gave him a watery smile. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Are you comfortable in those clothes?”

Laughing, Ryker shook his head. “Hell no. These pants feel weird.”

“Then let me fix my makeup and we’ll stop by your house so you can change.” Then she reached up and caressed his jaw. “Hmm...maybe this isn’t so bad. Although... I do like you a little scruffy.”

“Give me a few days and I promise I can make that happen,” he told her, taking her hand and kissing her palm.

Then she raked her free hand through his shortened hair. “Not as much to grab on to,” she commented.

“You’re not trying hard enough,” he countered with a wink.

With a gasp, she pulled back. “Ryker, what about the business?”

“Um...what about it?”

“You have another convention coming up! You can’t go looking all...you know...normal, can you? I mean, I didn’t see any artists who looked so...”

“So...?”

“Neat and clean and preppy,” she said, giggling softly.

“Preppy? Seriously?”

“You look like you should be having lunch at the yacht club right now.”

He was instantly on his feet and pulling Ryleigh to hers. “Oh, good Lord...Go fix your makeup so we can swing by my house so I can change!”

* * *

“This must be what animals in the zoo feel like,” he muttered an hour later as every member of the Donovan family mutely stared at him.

Ryleigh stepped farther into the room and clapped her hands loudly, as if to get everyone’s attention. “Okay, that’s enough! Ryker shaved and got a haircut. It’s not a big deal,” she said loudly.

Ryker stood back in awe when everyone seemed to relax at the same time.

And then they were all talking at once.

“I can’t believe you kids bought dinner!” Kate said with obvious delight.

“We didn’t want you to have to cook...”

“How are you feeling, Dad?”

“Did you remember the fritters?”

“I forgot to bring the salad dressing!”

“You had one job!”

“Tessa made that caramel apple cake you liked so much...”

“I also made cookies and brought ice cream too!”

“Mom? Where’s the corkscrew?”

“Ew...what kind of wine is this?”

“Like you know good wine. Last night I caught you drinking an Alaskan Merlot...”

“I ordered it by mistake!”

“Why are you ordering the wrong wine? Does Ronan know?”

“So then I told the therapist that he’s not going to do those exercises...”

“Did you get the invoice for the lumber delivery straightened out?”

All he could do was stand back and blink, but Ryleigh took the charcuterie board from his hands and kissed him on the cheek. “Go mingle. They won’t bite.”

Big words from the woman who’d been avoiding these people for almost a month, he thought.

Even though most of the time he considered himself to be a bit anti-social, he also knew how to behave and interact with other people. This shouldn’t be a big deal, but after the whole faux pas with the haircut, he was suddenly afraid to say the wrong thing.

Ugh...why is this so damn hard?

He was saved from having to join a conversation when Liam Donovan walked over and formally introduced himself. “I’ve heard all about you and I’ve seen you around town,” he said, “but no one’s ever introduced us.”

They shook hands, and Ryker turned to accept a glass of wine from Ryleigh as she walked by. “Yeah, so...you’re building the fishing resort, right?”

“I am,” Liam agreed. “Well, Will and I started a company and we’re building it. Do you fish?”

“Not since I was a kid. I used to go with my grandfather, but once he passed away, no one else ever wanted to go.”

“Well, if ever you want to try it again, let me know. Even without the resort, we all tend to go once in a while.”

“Go where?” Patrick asked as he joined them and shook Ryker’s hand.

“Fishing,” Liam told him.

Nodding, Patrick looked at Ryker. “If you want to go, make sure it’s just us guys. Arianna is crazy competitive and Ryleigh’s not far behind her. And they are both lousy winners.”

The image made him laugh. “I can see that.”

They both studied him and he kind of had a feeling he knew what was coming. “Okay, just go ahead and say what you need to say or ask what you need to ask. I can tell you’ve both got something on your mind.”

The brothers looked at each other before putting their focus back on him.

Liam went first. “Fine. Standard older brother question: Is this serious?”

Ryker nodded. “It is. I’ve been trying to get your sister to go out with me for months. I saw her and I just...I knew,” he said with a shrug.

“How’d you get her to change her mind?” Patrick asked.

Awkward.

Did he tell them the truth or...

Before he could answer, Ryleigh was back at his side, hooking her arm with his. “I kissed him in the parking lot of the pub to piss Mom off. Then he drove me home when I forgot my keys inside the pub after arguing with Mom, and...” She smiled up at him. “We’ve been together ever since.”

“Yikes, Ry. Even I knew Ryker was into you for a while. I can’t believe you’d mess with him like that,” Patrick said with more than a hint of disapproval. “What the hell?”

“I know Mom was making you crazy,” Liam commented, “but...jeez.”

He fought a smile when he saw her roll her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, yeah...I’m the bad guy,” she mocked. And before her brothers could say anything else, Ryker chimed in.

“Honestly, it was my idea. I mean...who wouldn’t want to help a beautiful girl in distress?” This time he did smile down at her. “And I’d do it again and again and again.”

“Aww...you are the sweetest,” she cooed up at him.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Patrick said. “No need to get all...you know...ga-ga with each other. This is a family dinner, you know.”

“Oh, don’t be such a baby,” Ryleigh told him. “And who knows? Maybe now that I’m happily involved, Mom can put her focus on someone else.”

Patrick’s eyes went wide. “Nuh-uh. Not me. She wouldn’t. Besides, I’ll bet it’s Jamie. He’s the one that needs the most help. I mean...think about it. He’s a serial dater, you know that’s got to make Mom crazy.”

“Dude, relax,” Liam said, patting him on the shoulder. “She’s just messing with you.”

“Yeah, well...it’s not funny. With Ry and Ari both in relationships, it is only a matter of time before Mom sets her sights on me and Jamie and I’m not looking forward to it.”

“Not looking forward to what?” Jamie asked as he walked over and Patrick shared the conversation. His eyes went wide for a moment, and then he seemed to collect himself. “Okay, no one needs to go there right now. I think Mom’s learned her lesson so...everything’s cool. No one bring it up, and everything will be okay.”

“What’s okay?” Arianna asked as she and Will walked over.

Now it was Jamie’s turn to share the whole conversation. “And if she starts sniffing around, Patrick and I are going to need one of you three to either set a wedding date or get engaged or have a baby. Preferably the baby because then she’s the baby’s problem.”

They all laughed at that.

“What’s so funny?” Kate asked as she walked over. “You’re all huddled over here like you’re sharing secrets.” Then she gasped and looked directly at Ryleigh. “Are you and Ryker getting engaged?”

“What?!” she cried. “No! Why would you even ask that? We’ve only been together a little more than a month! Why don’t you ask Liam if he’s going to propose to Tessa, huh?”

Kate turned to her oldest child. “Are you? Did you? Oh...oh...are we going to start planning a second wedding?”

“Wait...who else is getting married?” Jamie asked.

Arianna smacked him on the back of the head. “I am, you doofus.” She waved her engagement ring in his face. “Remember?”

“You’re just engaged. You haven’t set a date yet,” he corrected.

That’s when Kate turned to Arianna and Will. “Did you set a date? Is that why you’re all whispering over here? Were you going to surprise your father and I over dinner?”

“Oh God...” Ari whined. “No one’s set a date, Liam hasn’t proposed, Ryker hasn’t proposed, and Jamie never will propose because no woman would put up with him.” She smiled broadly. “That’s why we were all laughing.”

Nodding, Kate glanced at all of them. “That makes sense.” Then she put her arm around Jamie. “It doesn’t mean no one will ever love you,” she told him. “It just means that maybe you should pay a little more attention to the things you do and say.”

“Wait...what?” he asked.

“I’ll bet Mom knows a couple of nice girls she could fix you up with,” Liam said with a straight face, while the rest of the family seemed to struggle not to laugh.

“Oh! I do!” Kate said excitedly. “One of the nurses who comes to do physical therapy on your father is very sweet. I’ll bet you’d really hit it off with her. Maybe I should call and see if she can stop by today so you can meet her?”

“Mom!” Jamie snapped before glaring at his siblings. “Not cool. All of you...not cool.” Then he stormed off toward the kitchen. When he was out of earshot, Kate smiled at all of them.

“Now that was fun.” And with a wink, she motioned them all toward the dining room. “Come, we’ve got a ton of food in there. Ari, I have plenty of

salad dressings in the kitchen that you can grab.”

And just like that, a dozen different conversations started up again.

It wasn't until everyone was seated around the large dining room table that the conversation turned to him.

“So Ryker,” Shane Donovan began from the head of the table. “Have you settled on a name for the business? Everyone's been speculating. I think Ronan's got a pool going on what you end up with.”

That made him chuckle because it sounded exactly like the kind of thing Ronan would do. “I think I'll have it finalized this week, but I don't want to jinx it. Several things will have to fall into place for it to happen.”

He looked over and saw the confusion on Ryleigh's face, and he reached for her hand and gave it a slight squeeze.

“Actually, your daughter was a big help with it. She got me to be creative, so...”

“Did she also get you to cut your hair?” Kate asked with a knowing smile.

“No, ma'am,” he said firmly. “That was all on me. I thought it would be a thoughtful gesture so that maybe you wouldn't be so hard on Ryleigh when we came for dinner.”

You could have heard a pin drop in that moment.

Kate's eyes went wide for just a second before they narrowed at him. “Why would a haircut do that?”

Clearing his throat and straightening slightly in his seat, he kept his gaze directed at her. “I've seen all the men you've tried fixing her up with, and I thought if I looked like one of them, maybe you'd be willing to accept me as the man in Ryleigh's life and not be secretly plotting to find her someone else.”

She arched a brow at him. “I'm sure Ryleigh's already explained to you how I promised to stop doing that.”

Ryker kept his expression neutral. “She told me, but I'm not sure I believe it. It seems like you gave in too easily. Plus, you hadn't spent any

time with the two of us as a couple, so I was trying to stack the deck in our favor.”

“Interesting,” she slowly replied. “You’ve only been dating my daughter for such a short time and yet you think you know this family so well?”

“Not the whole family, just you,” he clarified.

“Ryker,” Ryleigh whispered from beside him, but he simply gave her hand another squeeze.

“What I know is that I watched Ryleigh spend far too much time crying and doubting herself. I’ve held her while she wondered what was wrong with her and why you treated her the way you did.” He leaned forward slightly. “I sat and held her while we talked things through. And I did it to help her see just how amazing she is. I didn’t mind doing it because she deserved to have someone on her side. But I didn’t do the one thing that I should have.”

“Oh?” Kate asked. “And what was that?”

“I should have come here weeks ago and put a stop to it. Just like I should have gone to the pub and kicked Jamie’s ass the day he came over and made her cry.”

“Hey!” Jamie hissed. “Dude, what the hell?”

Ryker spared him a look. “You and I both know what you did and why, and maybe Ryleigh’s forgiven you—because she’s got a bigger heart than anyone I’ve ever known—but I don’t. You hurt your sister and it’s going to take me a while before I can trust you.”

“Now just a minute,” Jamie argued.

“Stop!” Shane snapped, his word directed at his youngest son. “Let him finish.” Then he nodded at Ryker.

With his attention back on Kate, he went on. “I should have put a stop to this a long time ago. I should have gone to the pub and sat you down and made you listen. I love your daughter more than any of these guys you keep digging up for her. None of them are good enough for her. Hell, I don’t think I’m good enough for her. But I can promise you this—no one is going to

encourage her and support her and lift her up the way that I will. And as her mother, that should be your biggest priority—finding a man who sees your daughter’s worth and will cherish it.” He leaned back in his chair. “I foolishly thought if I didn’t look quite so rough around the edges that you’d like me, but now I realize I don’t need that. The only opinion that matters to me is Ryleigh’s.”

He looked over at her, expecting to see gratitude or a smile or maybe even love, but what he saw was absolute horror.

“Ryleigh, I...”

Pulling her hand from his, she stood and stormed out of the room.

Shit.

He got up to go after her when Kate called his name.

“I have to go after her,” he said as he began to walk away.

“She’ll be fine. She’s out on the back deck,” Kate said. “Arianna, go check on your sister.”

Ryker froze, but wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do.

Then Kate gave him a serene smile. “You want to know something funny, Ryker?”

“Right now? Not particularly.”

There were a few snickers at that and he heard someone whisper, “It’s like a train wreck, but I can’t look away!” but kept his attention on the family matriarch.

“Let me tell you something, Mr. Big Shot, I have liked you all along. I watched the way you gently pursued Ryleigh and how you respected her by not pushing too hard. But you know what else I noticed?”

He shook his head.

“That she actually enjoyed the game of cat and mouse. When she thought no one was watching, I was. I saw the way she watched you. You intrigued her and she didn’t know what to do about it.”

“But...”

“If I had encouraged her to talk to you, do you know what would have happened?” she asked. “She never would have gone out with you. Ever.” She shrugged. “So I kept quiet and kept finding men I knew she’d hate.”

“*Why?!*”

“Ryker, think. I didn’t want to endorse you because I knew Ryleigh would reject you just on principle. So by *not* giving my blessing or encouraging her to go out with you, I knew she’d eventually give you a chance.”

Dumbfounded, he could only stare at her. Then he looked over at Shane, who nodded with a serene smile of his own. “She speaks the truth,” he said. “Although...to be fair, Ronan was the one you can thank for it. He watches everyone too and genuinely thinks the world of you. When he noticed my Kate getting ready to intervene, he stopped her and made her see reason.” Pausing, he took his wife’s hand in his and kissed it. “That’s not always an easy task. Her heart is always in the right place; it’s her mouth that gets her into trouble.”

“Shane!” she cried in mock offense, but then leaned in and kissed him.

“Um...should I go after her now?” he asked, feeling a little dizzy from all the ways this day had thrown him for a loop.

“One more thing,” Shane said before Ryker could turn away. “Ryleigh’s stubborn, but you probably know that. And...she holds a grudge. So if she’s mad at you, just give her time. She’ll come around.”

He nodded. “I will.”

“You love her? Truly?” he asked, and again, you could have heard a pin drop.

“I do. Truly.” It occurred to him he hadn’t said those words to Ryleigh yet, and he’d already said it multiple times in front of her family. It wasn’t his smartest move, but hopefully a forgivable one.

“Then go talk to her,” her father said. “Just know that we’re all going to eat because all this food is getting cold.”

With a curt nod, he stormed from the room and went to hopefully smooth things over with Ryleigh and not make things worse than he already had.

Chapter Fourteen

Ryleigh turned at the sound of the sliding glass doors opening and was surprised to see her sister walking out.

“I can tell by the scrunchy look on your face that you were expecting Ryker.”

“Of course I was expecting Ryker!” she cried.

“Yeah, well...Mom’s dropping some truth bombs in there and I’m kind of bummed that I’m missing that.”

“Then why are you out here?”

“Because I’m worried about you!”

Ryleigh simply stared at her.

“Fine. Mom said to come out here, but I would have done it on my own if the discussion wasn’t so damn juicy!” She laughed. “I have to admit, the highlights of most family disagreements are when you get tipsy and put us all in our places, but I think Ryker’s cool and calm in-your-face approach is my new favorite thing.”

“Would you shut up? Ari, in case you haven’t noticed, I ran out of there because of your new favorite thing!”

“Yeah, okay, I noticed that. But...um...why?”

“Because it was all just...it was like the damn haircut! He just does these things without thinking of me or how I’ll react!”

“Or...maybe all he’s *done* is think of you and he was trying to defuse a situation,” she countered. “Maybe seeing you get upset all the damn time is hard on him and he hates seeing that? Maybe in his own misguided way, he was making sure that nothing like what’s been going on in this last month happens again.” Stepping in close, she gave Ryleigh a small poke in the shoulder. “And maybe you should be grateful to have a man who cares about you enough to go to such extremes.”

“It wasn’t an extreme. I’m sure Will...”

“Will never confronted anyone,” Ari reminded her. “We lost an entire year together because he refused to confront Liam and then when he showed up here, he didn’t want to rock the boat to such an extreme that he let Mom fix him up with you! Or did you forget about that? I mean...I *wish* Will had been as bold as Ryker just was! Do you have any idea how lucky you are?”

She was beginning to see that...

“He’s just so much!” she blurted out. “He overwhelms me! He’s *always* overwhelmed me! The haircut thing I could deal with, but him poking the bear like that with Mom? Jeez, Ari...and then he goes and gushes about me in front of everyone! I didn’t know what to do! No one’s ever gushed over me. Ever!”

“Some people would see that as a very sweet or romantic thing...”

“And then...the icing on the cake...announcing to everyone that he loves me! Not once has he ever said those words to me and then he just casually throws it out there while he’s putting Mom in her place! I mean...did he even *mean* to say it or was he just trying to make a point and it seemed like the thing to say or did it just slip out?”

“Ryleigh...”

“I don’t know how to handle someone like Ryker. Everything is intense and exciting and it makes me feel nervous and jittery and out of control all the time!”

“And I know how you love to be in control,” Arianna murmured.

“It’s not a bad thing.”

“No, but it’s not a good thing either. Not when you’re trying so damn hard to be in control that you end up missing out on life. Believe it or not, those nerves and jitters and out-of-control feelings are part of being in love. Actually, those are some of the *best* parts of being in love.”

“I never said...”

“You didn’t, I know, but...maybe you are. Don’t be afraid to feel it, Ry. Embrace it. You’ve never been as happy as you’ve been in this last month and I’ve loved seeing you like this. I get that you’re upset with Ryker for sort of going off-script today, but...cut him some slack. He’s had to sit back and watch a lot of crap unfold and he’s finally getting his chance to show that he’s a stand-up guy. And you need to let him.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, please. We’re a loud and boisterous group. If you don’t speak up, someone will speak for you and then it’s usually wrong. Look at how we all mess with Jamie. He gets flustered and he’s easy to pick on. We do it out of love, but he sort of rolls with the punches even though he hates it. And you used to do the same thing. If Ryker’s going to be part of the family—and I’m not saying that to pressure you—but if he is, then he needs to kind of assert himself early on.”

“Dammit, I hate that you’re making sense. I really wanted to stay mad for a little longer.”

“Well...you can be mad that he told the whole family he loved you without telling you first, but...maybe make that a conversation for later when you’re alone. For the rest of the day, we really need to focus on Dad and make sure he’s feeling okay.”

Muttering a curse, she shook her head. “I didn’t even think about that. I got so wrapped up in all this Ryker drama that...”

“I think we all did. So...”

The sliding glass doors opened again and they both turned to see Ryker

standing there.

“Okay,” Ari whispered before kissing her on the cheek. “I’m going back inside and I hope to see the two of you in there in a little bit.” With a smile, she walked away and gave Ryker a small shove out the door before she closed them.

“Hey,” he said quietly, but he did not try to get closer to her.

“Hey.” Sighing loudly, she contemplated her words. Her sister was right, and she couldn’t be mad at him for doing something she’d only dreamed of doing and saying all the things she wished for years someone would say in her defense.

And that’s when she knew exactly what to say.

“Thank you.”

Ryker’s dark eyes went wide. “For...?”

“For everything you did in there. I’ll admit that I wasn’t prepared for it and I reacted badly, but the truth is...you saved me—all those weeks ago and again in the dining room.”

Boldly, she took a step toward him.

“It was a little shocking to listen to you in there,” she went on. “All this time you’ve kind of been this quiet, mild-mannered guy and then you just went and calmly but firmly put my mom in her place.”

Another step.

“And some of the things you said were...unexpected.”

The look on his face told her he knew exactly what she was trying to say.

“I never hid my feelings from you, Ryleigh,” he admitted lowly. “This was never a game for me—never make-believe. I knew long before you kissed me that I was in love with you.”

The shaky breath she let out was all she could manage at his admission.

With a lopsided grin, Ryker took a step closer. “I know right now your brain is asking a ton of questions like how could I possibly be in love with you when I didn’t really know you?” He shrugged. “I spent so much time at

the pub just so I could be near you. I talked to Ronan, I talked to your mother, your father, your brother...I thought I wasn't overly obvious about it, but...I just found out that clearly everyone knew. Especially your uncle."

"Uncle Ronan's big on people watching and observing everything," she said with a nervous laugh.

"Yeah, well...I like to think I'm good at people watching and observing too, along with being an excellent judge of character. I was already in deep when you kissed me and this last month just proved that I was right."

Now he closed the distance between them, cupping her face in his large hands.

"You're everything to me." His voice was so gruff and raw and full of emotion that it was hypnotic. "There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. You walked out before I said that to everyone, but...I wanted to say these things weeks ago to your family. I wanted to go to the pub and put everyone in their place for hurting you."

Sighing softly, she pressed closer. "I don't know how I would have felt about that. For all my bitching and whining, I'm clearly not good at confrontation." Then she remembered her sister's words. "Unless I've had a couple of drinks. Then, apparently, I'm more than willing to put everyone in their place."

Smiling, Ryker rested his forehead against hers. "That's why I didn't do it. I knew it would upset you and, being that everyone else did that, I didn't want to be one more person adding to your stress." He paused before adding, "But then I went and added to it today."

"As you can probably tell, I do tend to react without thinking..."

"Hence our first kiss."

All she could do was groan.

"Okay, but this is something we can work on together, because...I meant what I said, Ryleigh. I love you. I'm all in with you in this relationship." His thumbs caressed her cheeks. "There is no pressure here for you to tell me

how you feel or for us to jump on that crazy train of rushing things. This is just me telling you how I feel, and I'm willing to wait until you catch up."

Swallowing hard, she pulled back slightly. "But...what if I don't?"

She watched as his expression saddened slightly. "I'm still in. Any time that I can have with you is better than not having any. I'll take what I can get."

How was it possible for this man to be hers?

"Then it's a good thing I'm in love with you and want to spend..."

Ryker never let her finish. His arms banded tightly around her as he kissed her as if his life depended on it. Going up on her toes, Ryleigh mimicked his pose and got as close to him as she possibly could. It was all tongues and teeth and a little awkward and she wished they were back at her place or his rather than on her parents' back deck.

She abruptly ended the kiss and breathlessly looked up at him. "Do you think anyone would care if we left?"

He nuzzled her neck. "As much as I love the way you think, we're here for your dad and I'm pretty sure it would be rude for us to just leave."

Groaning, she nipped at his jaw. "But...this..."

Now it was his turn to pull back and stare down at her. "Anticipation, baby girl. Think of how amazing it will be when we get home later."

And there wasn't a doubt in her mind that it would be.

* * *

The drive back to his house later was relatively quiet.

Quieter than he thought it would be.

And he was okay with it because it gave him a little time to go over everything that had happened.

The rest of the day with the Donovans was actually a lot of fun. Ryker already knew that he liked them—well, most of them—but getting the time to

hang out with them away from the pub was very enlightening.

He already felt like he knew Will and Arianna fairly well. After having dinner with them a few weeks ago, Ryker already knew he liked them. Arianna was bubbly and outgoing, whereas Will was a little more reserved and happy to let her do the bulk of the talking. They were getting ready to move into Liam's old house. Apparently, it was right next door to Tessa's and he was moving in with her and sold the house to his sister and her fiancé. There was a lot of talk about renovations and logistics, and most of the time, Ryker simply smiled and nodded.

Liam and Tessa were interesting and while he found them to be a bit of an odd pairing at first, the more he observed them, the more he saw just how good they were together. Liam was very serious and seemed to just quietly observe everything—until he had an opinion on it. But Tessa was always smiling and had nothing but encouraging words for everyone on every subject. Right now, they were considering whether they were going to stay in her house or move or build a house. Everyone chimed in to tell them to stay put at least until the fishing resort was open and they both seemed to agree.

Then there was Jamie.

As much as Ryker still wanted to be pissed at him, the guy was just charmingly clueless and it was hard not to like him. He was stepping up and handling the pub for his parents and, other than making Ryleigh cry, he seemed like he genuinely cared about his family. The general consensus was that he was a serial dater who didn't take relationships seriously and he was enjoying living his life on his terms with no entanglements.

More power to you, bro...

Patrick was a little more of a mystery. Even though Ryker dealt with him before with real estate, he didn't really show too much of himself. He was loud and opinionated like the rest of the Donovans, but he couldn't gauge anything beyond that. Basically, he was a nice enough guy, but...just a little cool and distant and definitely different from the rest of the family.

Reaching over, he took one of Ryleigh's hands in his.

Yeah, the rest of the family was great, but he got the best one.

"What are you thinking about over there?" he asked, hoping it was something sexy like they discussed earlier out on the deck.

She didn't answer right away.

"Um...Ryleigh? Everything okay?"

"I have something I need to ask you and...I swore I was going to wait, but I can't."

That didn't sound good or sexy...

They were almost at his house and with a nod, he said, "Okay. What's up?"

She must have noticed where they were too because she just said, "We'll talk when we get to your place. It can wait."

And it was sounding less and less sexy by the minute.

Silently, he pulled into the driveway and didn't say a word until they were both in the house. Tossing his keys on the entryway table, he walked toward the kitchen. "Do you want something to drink? A glass of wine, maybe?"

Behind him, she laughed softly. "Maybe. We all know how I can get very chatty and truthful after a few drinks."

Glancing at her over his shoulder, he could only stare for a moment. "That's not what I was suggesting."

"I know, I know...that was me making a bad joke to try to ease the tension."

"Does the tension need to be eased?" he carefully asked.

"Why won't you hire me to design your website?" she loudly blurted out with no warning. "You've seen my work and we both know I can handle it!" Then she paused. "Okay, so I know the other mystery tattoo client never responded to any of my mock ups, but that doesn't mean I can't do a site for you, Ryker! If you just tell me what you're looking for, I can do it! And to be

honest, I'm more than a little hurt that you haven't talked to me about this."

She looked adorably put out by the whole thing, and he knew he needed to proceed with caution.

So, he pulled out his phone and typed something out and let her simmer for just another minute or two.

"Are you seriously sending out a text right now while we're in the middle of this discussion? Are you kidding me?" she snapped.

Sliding his phone back into his pocket, Ryker leaned against his island, arms crossed, and looked at her. "Sorry, it was something I had forgotten to do and you just reminded me of it."

Her eyes went wide. "Ryker! You can't just do shit like that! You... you...start drawing in the middle of conversations and ignore everyone! You...you...text someone when I'm telling you how I feel! All those things are wrong and insulting! And I'm not going to stand for it!"

There was the sassy girl he had fallen in love with—spitting fire and getting all worked up over something.

She was about to feel utterly ridiculous and he was looking forward to her having to grovel. That would hopefully lead back to the sexy time he had been looking forward to all afternoon.

"So...the tattoo guy never got back to you?" he asked casually.

"No, he didn't," she replied tightly.

"Hmm...that seems a little rude."

"Really? *That* seems rude? Not you ignoring my question?"

He shrugged. "Have you checked your emails today?"

"What? No!" She growled with frustration. "Can you please focus? I'm trying to tell you..."

"I know, I know...you're mad. I think you should just check your emails. Please."

Reaching into her purse, she eyed him warily. "Fine, but once I pointlessly check my email, you better have a good explanation. I know

you're just stalling so..."

Ryker watched in amusement as she pulled out her phone, swiped the screen, tapped a few things, and...

Bingo.

"What..." Pausing, Ryleigh looked up at him. "I don't get it. Do you know this guy? Did you tell him to finally respond to me?"

"No."

Frowning, she looked down at her phone again. "Then I don't understand. How did you know this email was waiting for me? I just watched you send out a text. You had to have prompted him to respond."

"Actually, *you* prompted him to respond."

With a huff of annoyance, she stared at him. "How much did you have to drink today? You're not making any sense."

"I had one glass of wine and you know it." Pushing lightly off of the island, he slowly walked toward her. "I'm R. Moretti."

Ryleigh's mouth opened and closed but she didn't say a word.

"Moretti is my father's last name. Remember when I told you I changed it so no one would think I was trying to ride his coattails?"

She nodded.

"I didn't ask you to do the website back before we started fake dating because I figured you'd think I was using it to get closer to you. Then we became intimate and I thought it would be awkward if I outright told you I was the guy who sent you that inquiry." He sighed. "But ultimately, I didn't say anything because I had no idea where this was going with us. One minute I thought we were heading in the right direction and the next you were reminding me how this wasn't real."

"So...wait..." She shook her head. "Now I'm even more confused. I did a Google search for R. Moretti tattoo artist. Nothing came up. If your father was a famous artist like you, why didn't that show up anywhere?"

"He never used his real name professionally," he replied.

“Then that makes even less sense, Ryker!” Another little huff was out as she moved away from him. “If no one knew your father’s last name, why change yours?”

“Back when dad was at the top of his game, the internet wasn’t really that big of a thing. He used a pseudonym just because he thought it sounded cooler. Years later, when I started doing my thing, I was a little paranoid about being compared to him and I went to extremes.” Grinning, he added, “Sort of like someone kissing someone else in a parking lot and asking him to be her fake boyfriend.”

The quick glare told him he’d made his point.

“Come,” he said, holding out his hand to her. “I need to show you something.”

Luckily, she didn’t hesitate putting her hand in his as he led them back to his studio and office area. Opening the door, he let her go in first before motioning to the easel in the corner. It was facing away from them, so she couldn’t tell what exactly was on it. Then he stood back and waited for her reaction.

“What is this? Did you have a sign made?” she asked before turning to see it from the front. Her soft gasp and slow smile were the perfect reaction. “Tatuaggio Amore?” Looking over at him, her smile grew. “You took my advice and went with Italian!”

Nodding, he walked over to stand beside her. “Tatuaggio Amore—it means Tattoo Love in Italian. Your suggestion was the last piece of the puzzle. I couldn’t figure out why I wasn’t connecting to the shop or why I wasn’t more excited about it. But then you mentioned the Italian angle and it was like everything fell into place.”

Taking her hand again, he then led her into his office and pointed to the poster board he had up on the wall.

“Are you re-doing the entire space?” she asked incredulously. “Ryker... that’s insane! It will take months to get that done!”

“Not when you know the right people,” he assured her. “I have a cousin who does a lot of faux finishing. He’s coming in this week with his crew to get started. We’re not moving walls or changing anything with the layout; this will all be cosmetic. Then I’m going to switch out the furniture in the waiting area and the lounge. After that, I’ll decide if we need to rip out cabinets or change anything else, but I think with these alterations, we should be ready to open. And, of course, having an actual name for the business helps.”

“I love it, Ryker! I seriously do!” Hugging him tightly, she placed a soft kiss on his jaw.

Then he felt her stiffen and knew they weren’t out of the woods yet.

“I can’t believe you kept all of this from me!” she said a moment later. “Why?”

“Ryleigh, I’m used to it just being me. I know I have Billie and Marc and Dax, but.... everything was on me. It’s my name on the business, my skills and creativity were where it all fell. It’s one thing to run ideas past them to gauge their reactions, but they’ve been in my life forever. You and I are still new and I wasn’t sure if you’d get it—the vision and what I was trying to create.”

“Even if I didn’t get it, I would still love to hear about it! You didn’t know what it was like to have a crazy meddling family, but you still listened to me. You didn’t know anything about web design, but you still looked at what I created.” Shaking her head, she glared at him. “And just so you know, we’re going to circle back to that point because I never show a client my work while it’s in the rough stage and you made me do that!”

“Ryleigh, I...”

“Not important right now. Your email said you picked which design you wanted for your site.”

“It did.”

“And?” she asked excitedly.

Ryker sat down behind his desk and booted up his laptop and the 32-inch desktop screen. He preferred using a larger screen for looking at designs, and right now he knew it would help them both to look at the links she'd sent him.

When he went to pull her into his lap, Ryleigh playfully slapped his hand away. "I'll go grab a chair. Hang tight."

He kept two of them in the office so all she had to do was drag it around to his side, and as soon as she was seated, he pulled up the design he wanted to her do for him.

"Ooh! You picked the one that looks like an actual shop! Yay! I was hoping that was the one!"

"The day you showed it to me, I knew it was the one. But I'd really love it if we can make it look like the actual shop."

"Not a problem. We can either do it in an illustrated version or use an actual photograph and work from there."

"Would I be a complete nightmare if I wanted to see both?" he asked cautiously.

"Not at all. I'd actually prefer it if you did so I know we got it right. Once your cousin is done with the painting and finishes, we'll get Marissa in there to take the pictures."

"Marissa?"

Nodding, she said, "Patrick's assistant. She does all the photos of his properties and she's amazing at it."

"Huh." Brand new information.

"Trust me, she'll do a great job, and if you don't like the pictures, we can try somebody else. Unless you already have a photographer that you work with?"

"Billie takes client pictures for my portfolio, but that's a bit different. I'm perfectly fine letting Marissa do them if you think she's available."

"I'll reach out to her this week to make sure."

They spent an hour walking through the site and making notes on what he wanted to see, and he loved hearing Ryleigh's ideas and the way she explained things to him. Ryker knew the things he did were intricate and that only a small percentage of the population could do what he did, but listening to her talk about all that was involved in creating this kind of site made his head spin.

When he couldn't take anymore, he simply reached out and turned the screen off.

"Hey! We weren't done!"

Then he maneuvered them until she was in his lap. "For now, we are. There are much more important things that we need to discuss." The entire time he spoke, his hand smoothed over her hip before squeezing her ass. "There was some talk earlier about sexier things we were going to do when we got home. And so far, there has been nothing sexy going on."

"Aww...poor baby." Reaching up, she gently patted his cheek. "Tell me what I can do to make it all better."

"Sweetheart, I thought you'd never ask," he growled, lifting her up and sitting her on his desk.

"Ryker, what are you...?"

Standing, he swept everything off his desk in one move—computer screens, laptop, pads, pencils... Ryleigh let out a small screech, but when he looked at her, she was breathless and giving him the sexiest smile he'd ever seen.

"I've thought about this far too many times to let the opportunity slip away," he said, looming over her. "Every time I sit at this desk from now on, I want to think of you sitting here naked."

Her smile turned playful. "But I'm not naked."

His hand smoothed a path from her knee, up her inner thigh, up to her breast before cupping her jaw. "You will be. Soon."

After that, it was hard to say who was more frantic and who was clumsier

because it became a race to get undressed and things were flying in every direction—and a lot of it hit him in the face.

“Sorry,” she murmured, reaching for him and bringing him in for another searing kiss. When her hands went to his hair, she whined and he knew he wouldn’t be cutting his hair again for a long time.

It was his turn to apologize then. “It will grow back. I swear.”

Over and over they kissed, they touched, they said incredibly dirty things to each other and he loved this side of her—loved knowing that he brought this out in her. The sassy, snarky woman he first met had no problem telling him exactly what she wanted from him.

And Ryker was more than willing to give it to her.

“I need you,” she panted. “Now. Please.”

His body was more than ready, but he forced himself to take a step back and admire how beautiful and sexy she looked. Not that long ago, he thought the image of her sprawled out on his sofa in scraps of red lace was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. But this? Ryleigh Donovan, naked and breathless on his desk, just took the top spot. His mouth watered with the need to taste her; his hands twitched with the need to touch her.

“Ryker Moretti,” she said huskily. “Take me right here on this desk. I like knowing you’ll always remember this moment.”

And damn if hearing her calling him by his real name wasn’t like hitting the launch button.

* * *

It was late and they had finally made it to his bed.

After their romp in his office, Ryleigh had insisted on cleaning the place up and then got upset over him breaking the expensive computer equipment. It didn’t bother him. It was all easily replaceable. There would have been no recreating that moment, so he was willing to take the loss.

He'd given her a t-shirt of his to wear and he'd slid back into his jeans before going into the kitchen and pouring them each a glass of wine. They'd gone and sat out on the back porch in front of the small fire pit table he had and talked about everything and nothing. They were both more relaxed than he ever remembered them being, and he knew they were finally where they were supposed to be.

They'd made love by firelight and it was slower and sweeter and a lot less frantic than the way they were in his office and it was equally arousing. He knew he'd never grow tired of this. She'd opened up a whole new world to him he never thought he'd have, one that he convinced himself that he didn't want.

He'd never been happier to be wrong.

But now, in bed, he had one last thing to confess to her.

"Hey," he said softly. "Are you still awake?"

"Mmm...that depends."

Chuckling, he asked, "On?"

"For sex? No. I'm asleep. Anything else, I think I can hold my eyes open for a little longer."

Kissing her forehead, he laughed again. "That's my girl." Pulling her closer, he said, "Thank you."

"I feel like we do this a lot," she said sleepily. "We say thank you when the other one has no idea why."

"Would you like to know why?"

Yawning, she nodded.

"You completely changed my life and gave me back something I thought I had lost," he admitted softly. "When I stepped away from competing and working full-time at somebody else's parlor, I started to just wander. I had no idea what I wanted to do or where I wanted to do it. The future was just a blank canvas, but not in a good way." He kissed her forehead again. "And then I met you and everything changed. I suddenly had a goal. First, it was

simply to get you to agree to go out with me, but then you awakened a creative side of me I'd been ignoring for far too long. I no longer have anxiety about what I'm doing or what I should be doing because you've helped me work through all of that and everything is so clear now."

Twisting in his arms, she smiled up at him before yawning loudly again. "Sorry."

"I love you so much, Ryleigh. And I'm really glad I was the guy in the parking lot that night."

She hummed sweetly, and he knew she was almost asleep. "Me too." She kissed his shoulder. "Love you."

And yeah, those were the greatest words to end the day with.

Chapter Fifteen

It took two months to get everything in place, but Ryker was finally opening the doors to his very own tattoo parlor.

The last several weeks had been exhausting. There had been so much to do and she wanted to be there to support him in all of it, but she had to admit that she was glad this day was finally here so she could settle back into her own normal working routine. As it was, getting Ryker's site up and running took longer than usual because he was a perfectionist. And whenever she told him that, he reminded her of how he'd told her that in his initial inquiry email.

And man, he was not kidding.

Now, as she looked around at the newly-decorated space, she could say that it all looked amazing, even though it was wall-to-wall people and verging on claustrophobic.

But Ryleigh wouldn't change a thing.

Across the room, Ryker was doing an interview with the local news crews and once he was done with them, he had several more lined up with the biggest tattoo bloggers and influencers in the world. They'd all shown up for the big grand opening of Tatuaggio Amore. Billie had outdone herself with the guest list and invites and it was incredibly exciting to be standing in the midst of this, cheering on the man she loved. With a happy sigh, she picked

up her champagne and took a sip.

“That’s a good sound,” her mother said as she came to stand beside her. “And a beautiful face. Happiness looks good on you, Ryleigh.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks, Mom.” Glancing around, everything just felt right. “This is amazing, isn’t it?”

“It definitely is,” Kate agreed. “I love how he gave the walls that rustic look. If I didn’t know we were in little Laurel Bay, I’d swear we were somewhere in Italy.”

“His cousin is incredibly talented. I wasn’t sure how this was all going to turn out, but it’s gorgeous.”

“There’s a lot of talent in that family. I met Ryker’s parents a few minutes ago and, of course, asked to see some of his work. You know, just to be polite, not nosy.”

“Naturally.”

“And while I can see why he was a big deal back in the day, Ryker is ten times the artist he was.”

Ryleigh knew she had absolutely nothing to do with that, and yet she couldn’t help but beam with pride. “Promise me you’ll tell him that once all this hoopla dies down. I bet he’d get a kick out of it since no one knows they’re father and son.”

Beside her, Kate giggled. “I love being in on the secret!”

“And I just love seeing him look so comfortable in his element,” she said, her eyes firmly on Ryker. As if sensing her gaze, he glanced over and winked, causing her heart to flutter a little.

“Everyone’s still coming to the pub afterwards, right?” her mother asked. “We put up the signs that we’re closed for a private event.”

It hadn’t been part of the original plan for the grand opening, but somehow her mother had gotten herself involved and offered the pub. Ryker hadn’t seemed to mind and mentioned how it was a great way to keep all the guests in Laurel Bay for a bit longer. Actually, Parker Bishop—the owner of

Alloro—even made gift bags for the VIP guests with discounts on spa services. So maybe it wasn't such a bad idea.

Arianna and Will made their way through the crowd toward them. “Wow! What a turnout! This is amazing!”

“I want to say thanks, but I don't feel like I had anything to do with it,” Ryleigh told her with a laugh.

“Oh, please. Ryker told us all about the work you've put into this place and it's amazing,” her sister said before turning to Will. “We should totally take notes for the resort! I know your main cabin isn't that big, but we could still set up stuff like Ryker did in here and then do a tent outside with tables and chairs and food!”

“Why not have it at the pub?” Kate asked.

“Ma, please,” Ari said. “The pub isn't close to the fishing resort. The whole point of a grand opening reception is for people to actually see and explore all of it. If we tell them to leave and go to the pub...”

“Ryker's place is around the corner. You don't hear him complaining,” Kate said with a small pout.

Arianna shot Ryleigh a look, and she knew she needed to smooth things over.

“I think it would be awesome to *cater* their grand opening,” she suggested. “And with all the fishing brochures and packages, you can put promo stuff for the pub. Maybe some coupons or something?”

Her mother's eyes lit up. “Oh, Ryleigh! That's brilliant!” She kissed her cheek. “Where's Liam? Maybe we can all sit down and talk about it right now.”

“Um...”

“Uh...” Looking around, Ryleigh couldn't find her brother. He and Tessa had been here earlier, but maybe they were in one of the artist's rooms.

“Actually,” Will said, “Liam and Tessa left a little while ago.”

“Oh. Kind of rude. Why didn't they stop and say goodbye?” Ryleigh

asked him.

Will looked wildly uncomfortable and she had a feeling he was going to be forced to share something he wasn't supposed to.

"He, uh...he sort of had plans for him and Tessa tonight. Big plans. But he didn't want to miss out on at least stopping by and..."

"Liam's proposing tonight!" Arianna loudly whispered and then they all looked to Kate to gauge her reaction.

"Believe it or not, I already knew," she said primly before taking a sip of her champagne.

"How...why did he tell you?" Ryleigh asked and almost cringed at how insulting that sounded.

And the look her mother gave her told her she took it that way too.

"Not all of my children keep secrets," she said in a haughty tone.

"No, seriously," Arianna interrupted. "Why would Liam tell you before any of us?"

"You knew," Kate reminded her.

"Only because Will has a big mouth and can't keep a secret!"

"Hey! That was supposed to stay between the two of us! You're the one with the big mouth."

She smiled up at him. "But you love me anyway."

"That I do," he said before kissing her.

"Anyway..." Ryleigh huffed.

"I have your great-grandmother's engagement ring," Kate explained. "It's gorgeous and I always told Liam that he could have it some day when he was ready to propose if he wanted it. He came to the house last week and asked if he could see it, and we all agreed that it would be perfect for Tessa."

"You *all* agreed? Who's all?"

"Me, your father, and Ronan," she told them.

"If you knew he was going to propose, why were you looking for him?" Ari asked.

“I didn’t realize the time. I thought they would leave when we moved everyone over to the pub.” She shrugged. “I guess he’s impatient.”

“Good for them,” Ryleigh said, glancing over at Ryker again. It was too soon to even think about things like proposals and getting married, but there wasn’t a doubt in her mind that she wanted that with him.

Now definitely wasn’t the time, though. Between the opening of the parlor and all the speaking engagements and conventions he was going to do appearances at in the next nine months, she knew life was going to be a little hectic. And yet...if he asked her to marry him today, she’d do it.

And there was no way she was sharing that information with anyone.

Especially her sister, apparently was quite the blabbermouth.

Speaking of...

Arianna came around to stand next to her. “Ryker looks really happy.”

Nodding, she agreed. “He should. This was a big accomplishment for him.”

“I think you have a lot to do with it too. I mean...he’s been doing the whole tattooing thing for a long time, so part of this is just second nature. But the look of total peace and contentment on his face? That’s all you.”

Ryleigh felt herself blush.

“And you look the same, so I just think it’s awesome.”

“Oh!” Kate cried out. “Look! Fallon’s here! Fallon! Over here!”

Turning her head slightly, Arianna whispered in her ear, “Um...not that I don’t love Fallon, but...why is she here? Did you invite her?”

“I didn’t. This wasn’t supposed to be a Donovan family thing.” Moving over to her mother, Ryleigh then whispered, “Mom, what is Fallon doing here? She wasn’t on the list.”

Her mother frowned at her. “Please, Fallon is like family to us and I already got the okay from both Ryker and Billie. She was only going to be in town for the weekend and heard all about Ryker finally opening the parlor and she wanted to see. What’s the big deal?”

“Normally, I’d say nothing. But Jamie’s walking around and I don’t want a scene!”

“No one's going to make a scene,” her mother assured her, but as soon as Fallon walked over and hugged them all, Jamie stormed through the crowd and he did not look happy.

“Uh-oh...”

“Wasn’t there a guest list in place?” he asked. “Does Ryker have security so party crashers can be escorted out?”

Fallon gave him a sweet smile. “Are *you* looking to be escorted out? Because I’m on the list.”

“The Dean’s List,” Kate chimed in. “We’re all so proud of you, Fallon! Just a few more months until graduation, right?”

She nodded. “It can’t get here fast enough! I’ve been putting out resumes all over the country and I can’t wait to figure out where I’m going. It’s kind of exciting.” Then she looked over at Ryleigh. “But who cares about all that, right?”

“I know I don’t,” Jamie murmured, but no one was paying attention.

“This place is amazing! It’s so much more...elegant than I imagined it would be!” she went on.

“It went through several revisions, but this one is truly the best,” Ryleigh told her.

“I’d love to congratulate Ryker, but it looks like he’s busy and I’ve got a flight to catch. I really just wanted the chance to stop in and sneak a peek. Please tell him it’s gorgeous and I may have to get my very first tattoo soon!” she said with a laugh.

Eyes wide, Ryleigh laughed with her. “I’ll be sure to tell him all of that!” Then she hugged her. “Have a safe flight and be sure to keep us posted on where you’re going to be settling after graduation.”

“I will and thanks!” Turning, Fallon hugged them all again before simply stopping and smirking at Jamie. “Have a nice life.”

“Yeah, you too. Be sure to send a postcard from someplace far, far away.”

“With pleasure,” she replied and then placed a loud, smacking kiss on his cheek before walking away.

“Oh my God,” Arianna whispered in her ear again. “Look! He’s blushing! Oh my God! He’s blushing!”

“Would you shut up?” she said, smacking her away. “It’s loud in here, but not that loud. He’ll hear you.”

Looking directly at the two of them, Jamie made a face before walking away.

“Where did I go wrong with that one?” Kate sighed. “The rest of you are all polite, but that one? He makes me crazy.”

“Mom, come on. Jamie’s the friendliest guy in town. He just doesn’t like Fallon. It’s not a big deal.”

“He should still be respectful.”

Before Ryleigh could comment, Ryker came over and took a sip of her champagne and motioned for her to follow.

“What’s going on?” He led her through the crowd and to his office, where he shut the door. “Ryker, you can’t just...”

As was becoming his signature move, he silenced her with a kiss. It was hot and intense and over way too soon.

“I needed to get away for a minute because I’ve been answering the same questions for two hours and I thought the perfect way to relax was to get you alone and kiss you.”

Which he did again.

The next time they broke apart, he grinned at her. “Are you having a good time?”

Wrapping her arms around his waist, she nodded. “I am. I’ve been listening to all the comments. Everyone is raving about the décor—and you,” she added. “I think you’re a hit without using even a drop of ink.”

“That all changes tomorrow morning. I’ve got three clients scheduled. I probably should have waited to open until Monday. You know, have the big party today, take a day to breathe, and then get started.”

“Ryker, we talked about this. The clients tomorrow are two consultations and one that’s going to require multiple visits. You’re going to be fine.”

“I’m going to be away from you all day.”

“Yeah, but you’ll be with me all night,” she reminded him.

“When are you moving in with me?” he murmured, nuzzling her neck.

“The moving truck is coming next Saturday. Stop being such a baby.” But secretly, she loved how impatient he was about it.

“Just promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“That you’ll never stop loving me.”

Whenever he said things like that, she completely melted. “Never. You’re stuck with me.”

He shook his head. “Not stuck. Never stuck. I just want you to be happy, Ryleigh. Our lives have gotten so crazy in the last two months and...”

Placing a finger over his lips, she silenced his words. “We’ve been over this too. I’m not going anywhere, and I am deliriously happy. Now let’s go grab some fresh champagne, and finish up your interviews so we can go eat. I’m starving!”

“There’s food here...”

“Not Donovan food. The menu waiting for us over there is going to be killer, so hopefully that will motivate you to get things wrapped up.”

“It’s not the food that motivates me,” he told her. “It’s you. If my girl wants to eat, then I’m going to do everything I can to make that happen.”

Giggling, she hugged him. “Stop! You’re spoiling me!”

“That’s okay, because you deserve to be spoiled all day, every day.”

This man...

* * *

Exhausted, Ryker collapsed in the bed sometime after midnight as he waited for Ryleigh to crawl in next to him. It had been such a long day, but it went so much better than he ever imagined that he felt like he could finally relax. Everything after this was going to be a breeze. Billie had been fielding calls for weeks now and his schedule was full for almost six months. He was definitely going to hire a few other artists—and he was already scouting for them—but nothing had been finalized yet.

Who knew that he'd find settling in a tiny coastal town far more satisfying than having a huge parlor in Vegas or L.A. or New York City? This was where he was meant to be and as Ryleigh strolled into the room wearing nothing but a tank top and a pair of tiny panties, that just reaffirmed it.

“Hey, sleepy man,” she said softly as she walked around the bed. “I thought for sure you'd be asleep already.”

“And miss seeing you prance around like that? Never.”

She giggled as she got under the blankets and snuggled up beside him. “You had no idea what I was going to be prancing around in or if there'd be prancing at all, so...”

“Let's just say I was hopeful,” he teased.

“Seriously, you should be asleep. It's late and you have a big day tomorrow.”

“Today was the big day; tomorrow's just a regular one. I'm used to the routine.”

“Yeah, but...tomorrow's the first time you're doing consults and working on someone in a place that's all yours, so...it's kind of a big deal.” She kissed his chest. “You're kind of a big deal.”

Reaching up, his hand anchored into her hair. “How big of a deal?” he asked gruffly.

“Fishing for compliments?”

“Always.”

Slipping over him, Ryleigh straddled him before whipping the tank top off, leaving him breathless.

“You’re a *very* big deal, Ryker Masella Moretti,” she told him. “And I love you.”

“Show me, baby girl,” he urged, and let her take the lead because that’s when she was the most glorious.

She was his every fantasy, his every dream come true, and hearing her say she loved him while she was moving so erotically over him made this the best damn day ever.

* * *

The next morning, Ryker was up early, but he let Ryleigh sleep in. Yesterday had been a lot and he never had a true moment to himself, so this seemed like the perfect time to just enjoy the quiet and have some time to think.

And there was a lot to think about.

Most of it had to do with the woman who was sound asleep in his bed.

Shuffling into the kitchen, he made himself a cup of coffee. Taking that first scalding sip, he hummed appreciatively. Mug in hand, he decided to sit out on the screened-in porch. It was chilly out, but it felt a little invigorating.

Plus, it was going to help wake him up that much faster. And with the way his mind was already racing, he needed his body to catch up.

Liam had pulled him aside last night to apologize for leaving early, but he was going to propose to Tessa and that had gotten Ryker thinking.

He wanted to ask Ryleigh to marry him, but...he wasn’t sure if now was the right time. His schedule was full for the upcoming months and there was a part of it he hadn’t really broached with her.

He wanted her to travel with him.

More than once she had told him she could work from anywhere and he understood that. But a lot of his speaking engagements and conventions were multi-day events where he'd be busy most of the time.

But that didn't mean he didn't want her with him.

And that kind of thinking made him feel like he was being completely selfish.

Then he remembered something else Ryleigh had told him that made him think that maybe he wasn't quite so bad. She hadn't gone away to college and felt envious that Arianna had and how she'd gotten the opportunity to travel a bit.

So he wanted to do this for her—to take her all over the country so she could explore and do some sight-seeing. Not every convention was in a big popular travel destination, but he had a feeling she'd enjoy it no matter what.

And one of them was Las Vegas and the thought of taking in Sin City with her had been on his mind far more than he thought it would. Maybe he'd be a cheesy cliché and propose to her there and ask her to marry him in one of the chapels off the strip.

He instantly pushed that thought aside because things were solid with him and the Donovan family. If he pulled a stunt like that and they eloped? He would undoubtedly be public enemy number one for the rest of his life.

Damn.

Well, he didn't have to marry her there, but he could propose. It was three months away and that would be plenty of time for him to plan the most memorable trip for them.

The coming year was gearing up to be a wild ride and there was no one else he wanted sitting beside him and experiencing it all with him.

On the flip side, however, there was no way that he wanted this relationship to solely be about him. No matter how much he thought it could be exciting for her—to travel with him since she'd never had the opportunity to—it was still all about him and his career, his business.

And...we're back to feeling selfish.

Taking another slow sip of his coffee, he leaned back in the chair and tried to focus on the day ahead instead of obsessing over travel.

Only...today was exactly like he had told Ryleigh last night. It was a no-brainer. There was nothing to think about.

Groaning, he closed his eyes. "Now what do I do?"

"Well, for starters, you should get your ass back in the bed because it's freezing out here."

Turning, he saw Ryleigh standing in the doorway, wrapped in his robe. "I promise to keep you warm right here," he told her, holding out a hand. "I'll even share my coffee."

Slowly, she padded over and hissed when her bare feet hit the cool concrete. "There better be milk and sugar in it," she mumbled, settling into his lap.

"There is. Here."

She took a tentative sip and then hummed. "Mmm...so good." Handing the mug back to him, she rested her head on his shoulder. "Why are you up so early?"

"Lot on my mind."

"Worried about today?"

"No, just...other things."

"It's too early to be vague, Ryker. Out with it."

With no real choice, he blurted out everything he'd been thinking about, and she didn't say a word the whole time.

"So...basically, you want me to travel with you, and that makes you selfish."

He nodded. "Yes."

"Um...o-kay...but...you're wrong."

"Ryleigh...just like it's too early to be vague, it's too early to argue. This is how I feel and...that's that."

Twisting in his lap, she gave him that look that said she didn't care and she was going to argue anyway.

And like an idiot, he kind of loved that look.

"I love that you want me to travel with you, and I'm kind of excited about it. I love seeing how you work and learning more about your whole industry. Plus, it would be a great networking opportunity for me!"

"Oh, well...I didn't really think of that."

"And," she went on, "I don't have to go on every trip. There may be times when it's not the right time for me to go or if my schedule's too hectic. We don't have to have it all figured out right now. We can sit down with the calendar and go from there." Leaning in, she kissed his cheek. "Okay?"

He nodded again. "Okay."

Reaching up, her hand raked through his hair. "I really love the way this grew out." She gave it a playful tug. "It's very sexy."

"I told you it would grow back." It was taking a little longer than he thought it would, but it was finally at a stage where she could do exactly what she was doing right now.

And he loved it.

Then she stroked his beard. "This too. So sexy..."

"I'm glad you think so." There was a time when he would have sworn those two things worked against him, but apparently he was very, very wrong.

"So...what time do you need to leave? Do we have time to..."

Carefully, he put his coffee mug down on the small table next to him and rose with Ryleigh in his arms. "I've said it at least a dozen times, baby girl. Anything for you."

And just like hearing her say, "I love you" right before he fell asleep was the best way to end the day, making sure his girl was satisfied was the best way to start it.

Epilogue

Three months later...

“It feels warm in here. Is it warm in here? Because maybe...maybe we can put a fan on or something?”

“We can do that.”

“Oh. Okay. Good.” Ryleigh paused for a moment and watched as Ryker moved around the booth. She was sitting on the client chair and trying to remember how to breathe. They were in Las Vegas and the convention was kicking off in the morning. They’d flown in four days early so they could do some sight-seeing and see a couple of shows and so far, she had loved every minute of it.

But right now, she felt like her entire world was tilting.

And regretted eating that entire order of cheese fries.

Ryker pulled a small fan out of one of his crates and turned the air on her. “Better?”

“Uh...yeah. Sure.” Glancing around, she asked, “Is there water? Or maybe any cans of soda? Ginger ale?”

Chuckling, he opened the mini fridge and pulled out both a bottle of water and a small bottle of ginger ale.

Huh...the man thinks of everything.

Dammit.

“Is this even allowed?” she wondered out loud. “I mean...the convention

doesn't start until tomorrow. Has the health department finished their inspection?" Looking around, she tried to see what other artists were doing in their booths. "Should Billie be here?"

Sitting down on his stool, Ryker rolled over to her, placing his hands on her knees. "If you don't want to do this, then you don't have to," he reminded her for the tenth time. "If you remember correctly, you asked to do this. I would never pressure you into anything you don't want to do."

Nodding, she forced herself to relax. "I know, I know! I can't believe I'm freaking out like this. It didn't seem like such a big deal. Arianna was fine when you did hers last month."

"Everyone's different. Don't compare yourself to your sister or anyone else. If you're not comfortable doing this, then I'm not doing it. No big deal." Taking her hand, he kissed it before rolling away.

And just like that, he was back to organizing his stuff.

"But..."

Ryker glanced at her over his shoulder, one dark brow arched.

"Can you...can you show me the design you came up with? You said it was going to be a surprise, but do I still get to see it?"

Shrugging, he went back to what he was doing. "It was just a butterfly, Ryleigh. Nothing major."

"Okay, but I'd still love to see it. You know I love all your artwork and maybe if I see it, it will change my mind."

This time, he turned to face her. Amusement was written all over his face as he leaned against one of the large crates. His arms were crossed in that laid back pose that was a little cocky and she shouldn't be thinking anything even remotely sexy right now, but...she was.

"Please," she said with a small pout.

Rolling his eyes, he walked over to another crate. "Fine."

"Yay!"

He muttered something under his breath, but Ryleigh didn't let it bother

her. Swinging her legs over the side of the chair, she reached for the ginger ale and opened it. After taking a sip, she looked up to see Ryker walking over with one of his large sketchpads in his hand.

“Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!” She wasn’t lying. Maybe seeing it would convince her to be brave, but she didn’t want to commit just yet. Her sister had told her it hurt like hell to get the tattoo, but every time she thought she couldn’t take the pain, Ryker moved on to another spot. And afterwards, she was fine.

Stopping in front of her, he looked...uncertain.

Nervous.

Almost a little pale.

“Ryker, come on. It’s just a butterfly. You said so yourself. I’m sure I’m going to love it.”

“I actually drew four of them and they’re all on their own page, so...take your time and don’t be afraid to tell me if they’re not what you’re looking for.”

He was so serious. Was he like this with all his clients?

“Babe, you’re freaking me out.” Holding out her hand, she asked, “Can I look?”

“Um...why don’t you just sit there and...uh...I’ll flip the pages, okay?”

Seemed weird, but maybe this was legit how he did things.

She took another sip of her soda before putting the bottle down. “Okay! Lay them on me!”

The first butterfly was purple and so delicate and beautiful.

“That is gorgeous, Ryker,” she whispered in awe. “And I love the color.”

“The purple butterfly represents things that cannot be described in words. They are mysterious, magical, and beautiful,” he explained to her. Then he flipped the page.

“Ooh...red...that one looks very cool.”

And then he explained, “The red butterfly is connected to lust and desire.

It represents the need for romance and passion in your life.” Grinning at her, he added, “Plus, red looks incredibly hot on you.”

“I’m not gonna lie; I’m loving this and you’re making the decision really hard.” Then she winked. “That’s what she said, right?”

Chuckling, Ryker shook his head. “Are you ready for the next one?”

“Please!”

Flipping the page, he revealed an orange butterfly. “The orange butterfly stands for passion, lust, and intentional emotion.”

“Interesting…”

And then he flipped to the final page, revealing a pink butterfly.

“I don’t know if pink is really…”

But he didn’t let her finish. “The pink butterfly symbolizes a strong desire to be loved and to give love in return.”

O-kay...

“So? What did you think?”

She thought this was all a little bizarre, but definitely didn’t want to hurt his feelings by saying that out loud.

“They were all beautiful and I loved learning what each of the colors symbolized. It’s kind of cool how you know all that.”

“There’s actually one final tattoo that I designed, but...I wasn’t sure if I should show it to you.”

“What? Seriously?” She was practically bouncing in her seat. “Now you have to show me!”

Turning the sketch pad back toward himself, he seemed to need a minute.

“Ryker?”

“I’m not someone who always says the right thing or even the kind of guy who knows what to say at all. I express myself through my art and that’s always been enough. But with you, I want to say all the right things and not use anything as a crutch.” He let out a long breath. “But tonight, I desperately needed it and I hope you don’t think less of me for it.”

“Ryker, come on. I would never do that. And I love all the things you say! The art is just a perk.”

“Just...remember that you said that.”

Turning the sketchpad over, he revealed one final butterfly. It was white with a very intricate design on it that the others didn't have. Leaning in a bit, she tried to make out what it all was.

Is that...? Are those...?

Looking up, she met his somber gaze and whispered his name.

The wings of the butterfly were adorned with two rings on each side.

Wedding rings interlocked together.

“The white butterfly symbolizes change, rebirth, and hope.” Swallowing hard, he added, “All the things to come into our future if you marry me.” Placing the sketchpad down, Ryker got on one knee and held a ring out to her. “Ryleigh Donovan, I love you. Sometimes, there are no words to describe just how much. All the colors represented in the sketches told the story of how I look at you—at us. There isn't anything I want more than to marry you and spend every day of our lives together.”

“Oh my goodness...Ryker, I...yes! Yes!”

He jumped up and hauled her into his arms and kissed her before sliding the ring onto her finger.

“I love you so much,” she told him. “Even though now I'm really mad at you.”

His eyes went comically wide. “Mad? Why?”

“Because now I want all the damn butterflies on me! If I could barely get through the thought of one without hyperventilating, how the hell am I supposed to get through five?”

Laughing, he pulled her in close and kissed her again. “I'll tell you what—let's wait until we get home and we'll go to the shop after hours and do them one at a time. I'll design something that incorporates all of them and then we'll find the perfect spot on your body for them.” Then he grinned.

“Although that’s going to be hard to decide because every inch of you is so damn spectacular.”

Her cheeks heated and she knew that someday she’d get used to how he complimented her and always made her feel beautiful. But for now, she still couldn’t help but blush and giggle.

Picking up the sketchpad, Ryker maneuvered them out of the booth before securing everything and locking it up. “Come on. Let’s go back up to our room, maybe order some ice cream sundaes, and celebrate.”

“Ooh...good plan. Good plan.” But as they started to walk out of the convention center, she knew there was something she was going to have to do. “While you’re calling for room service, you know I’m going to have to text everyone and share the news.”

“Naturally. I can’t even believe you’ve waited this long,” he mocked lightly.

“Dude, it’s been five minutes!”

“Which is a record in the Donovan family, I’m sure.”

They laughed all the way up to their room, and as Ryker walked over and began placing their dessert order, Ryleigh sat down on the bed with her phone.

Ryleigh: Big news from Vegas!

Arianna: If you eloped, I’ll kill you!

Ryleigh: Wow...that escalated quickly

Liam: Is this an emergency?

Liam: You know it’s well after one here, right?

Ryleigh: Oops!

Patrick: Stop being such an old man, Liam

Patrick: What’s the news, Ry? Did you win big at the slots?

Ryleigh: LOL! No, I’m actually down \$200

Patrick: Well that sucks

Ryleigh: I know, right?

Arianna: FOCUS DAMMIT! Some of us are half asleep

Liam: Some of us were completely asleep

Ryleigh: Then why are you even chatting? Go back to sleep!

Liam: Now I want to know what the news is

Jamie: Is this some kind of dramatic build up?

Jamie: Because it's hard to get the context in a message

Laughing, she rolled her eyes and realized just how much she loved these people.

Quickly, she took a picture of her hand with her princess cut diamond engagement ring on it and sent it to them.

Ryleigh: I SAID YES!

Arianna: OMG! It's gorgeous! Congratulations!

Liam: Congratulations!

Patrick: Congratulations!

Jamie: Congratulations! Tell Ryker good job on the ring!

She chatted with them for a few more minutes before promising they'd get all the details when they got back from Vegas. When she put her phone down, she spotted Ryker watching her from across the room looking very pleased with himself.

"Everyone said congratulations and that my ring is beautiful."

"You really like it?"

Standing, she walked over and wrapped her arms around him. "It's the most beautiful ring in the entire world. I love it and I love you."

"Love you more, baby girl."

There was a knock on the door, and while Ryker went to answer it, Ryleigh kicked off her shoes and went into the bathroom to strip out of her clothes and put on her nightie. The thought of ice cream sundaes in bed seemed like the perfect celebration.

When she stepped out, she found the room lit only by candlelight and a small table set up with not only their sundaes, but champagne and chocolate-

covered strawberries.

Tears stung her eyes as she joined him at the table. “I was wrong.”

“Um...what?”

“I was just thinking about how ice cream in bed was going to be the perfect celebration, but I was wrong. This is all just so...so incredible. Thank you.” Kissing him softly, she stroked his cheek. “Thank you for loving me, Ryker. And thank you for making this the most amazing trip ever.”

“Sweetheart, we have only just begun...”

There was a whole lot of promise there, and she couldn't wait to see what was next for them.

Who will be the next Donovan to fall in
love?

Find out in

Charm Me

One

Most days, being Jamie Donovan was pretty damn awesome.

But today, it was fan-freaking-tastic.

Walking into his family's pub, he took a moment to simply admire it in a way he never had before. For the next month, he was the one in charge. His parents left early this morning for a month-plus trip with their best friends, the Murphys. First, they were driving across the country—something they were dragging out for two weeks—and then they were embarking on a ten-day cruise to Alaska. The plan was for them to drive home afterwards, and when all was said and done, they'd be gone six weeks.

“And now I'm the boss,” he said proudly, even though no one was in yet to hear it.

Except...

“Well, boss,” his uncle Ronan said as he walked out of the kitchen, “the produce delivery is here early and they're missing a few items.”

Jamie was prepared for this and wasn't even bothered about the missing items. He was up for the challenge, and nothing was going to bring him down today.

Famous last words.

Two hours later, he was ready to pull his hair out.

Well...not really. He had really great hair and there was no way he would

do anything to harm his appearance.

But he was frustrated.

The missing produce wasn't an issue; he had simply asked his uncle to run to the grocery store to get what they needed. No, it was everything that happened after that—an internet outage in town meant they couldn't process credit card payments and he couldn't finish doing the online banking he had been in the middle of. And while all that had been incredibly frustrating, it was the text he was currently reading that was going to push him over the edge.

Jenn: We need to talk Jamie. You've put this off too long and you're going to be sorry

Jenn: You need to call me back today

Jenn: Now preferably

Groaning, he sat down at the desk in the pub's office. He was the king of the amicable breakup. It was a record he'd kept since he started dating in the seventh grade. Jamie had a rule about always ending things on good terms. That mindset—and his charming personality—had kept him from ever having a bad breakup.

Until this one.

This was the breakup that just wouldn't end.

It had been six months and Jenn Randall kept popping back into his life like a bad penny. It didn't matter how many times he told her it was over or that she deserved someone better or how much he praised her for being too good for him, she had been almost relentless in her pursuit of trying to get back together with him.

Only...

Now that he thought about it, she never said that she wanted to get back together, just that she wanted to see him.

Practically demanded it.

The weird part was how she never said why it was so important and when

he told her he couldn't or that he didn't think it was a good idea, she backed off. Today was the first time there was a veiled threat.

Maybe he should have just agreed to meet up with her when she first asked months ago. Hindsight and all that. Now it was just awkward and he wished she'd move on.

Still, he stared down at his phone and knew he had to at least say something. But he was afraid that even a simple response would lead to more drama, so he took the coward's way out and put his phone on the desk and went out to see how the lunch crowd was doing.

Within an hour, the internet was back up and running, the produce distributor came back with the missing items, and right now, there was a line of customers out the door waiting for a table.

"Yeah, I got this," he murmured as he walked around helping out wherever he could—bussing tables, delivering food, filling drink orders behind the bar, and flirting with the cute brunette who was waiting for a lunch order that had been called in.

"So...you own this place?" she asked with a coy smile.

"I do," he replied smoothly. Technically, the Donovan family owned the pub and considering he was a Donovan, some would say he wasn't lying. "I don't think I've seen you in here before." She was petite and curvy, with big blue eyes—which right now were blatantly checking him out.

"I'm in town visiting a friend," she told him.

"Lucky friend," he replied smoothly. "I'm Jamie."

Her smile grew a little. "I'm Mandy."

"Nice to meet you, Mandy. How long are you in town for?"

"I'm only going to be here for a few days, but my friend raved about the food here. After all her bragging about it, I knew I needed to try it. So I'm going to surprise her with the burgers."

"You're a very good friend, and I'm sure you're going to love the food." He moved a little closer. "I'll tell you what, I'll throw in dessert on the house."

Would you prefer the apple pie or the peanut butter brownies?”

“Ooo...you are speaking my language,” she practically purred. “I’m going to go with the brownies. Please.”

“You got it,” he said, giving her his most sincere smile. With any luck, he’d have her number before she left and perhaps plans to see her later tonight.

Within a matter of minutes, he was handing Mandy her lunch order, and she was handing him a slip of paper with her phone number. “Call me later and I’ll stop by when you’re done for the night,” she said with a sexy grin.

“Well now...I hope your friend won’t be too upset with me taking you out when you’re here visiting her.”

She waved him off. “She’ll be fine. She always goes to bed early so it won’t be an issue.” Then, with a flirty wave, she walked away, and Jamie watched the soft sway of her hips as she went.

A light smack on the back of his head broke him out of his reverie. “Ow! What the...?”

“Can you seriously not get through one lunch rush without making a date with one of our customers?” his uncle asked with amusement. “Instead of giving away free desserts, maybe focus on making enough money to prove to your parents that all the improvements you insisted on for the pub were worth it.”

“Hey,” he said with an easy grin, “don’t worry. A couple of free brownies aren’t going to hurt anyone. Trust me.”

“Jamie...”

“I do this sort of thing when my folks are here too.”

“That’s not the point,” Ronan said with mild disapproval. “Just...try to put your focus on the business and not your bedroom, okay?”

Part of him wanted to be annoyed, but everyone knew he was a shameless flirt and pretty much accepted it. Hell, he enjoyed it! That wasn’t going to change because his parents were on vacation. And while he appreciated his

uncle's concern, it wasn't necessary.

“Come on...you know most of the time it's just a little harmless flirting...”

“Oh, God. Is he bragging again?”

Jamie turned and saw his brother Patrick standing behind him. “Of course I'm bragging,” he said with a laugh. “I mean...I'm awesome. Why wouldn't I brag?”

Rolling his eyes, Patrick stepped around him and shook Ronan's hand. “I'm sorry that you have to deal with him while mom and dad are away.”

Their uncle let out a hearty laugh. “Patty, I've been dealing with your little brother on a daily basis for years. I don't think your parents being here makes things any better.”

“Hey! What's that supposed to mean?” he demanded.

“It means you're a pain in the ass no matter what,” Patrick told him. “And as much as I'd love to sit here and list all the ways that applies, I need to bring lunch back to the office. Can I get a BLT on the hearty whole grain for me with fries and a Greek salad with grilled salmon for Marissa?”

With a nod, Jamie wrote it down and brought it back to the kitchen for their cook to work on. When he walked back out to the bar, his brother still had a stupid grin on his face. “What now?”

“Dude, paranoid much?”

“Please, you're looking at me like I'm some sort of dufus, so...”

“You have to admit, most of the time, that's what you act like,” Patrick reasoned. “I just hope you don't burn this place to the ground before mom and dad get back.”

“Wow. Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he murmured.

“Jamie, look...most of the time, you walk around here schmoozing with the customers—particularly the female ones—and you don't seem to take anything seriously. This pub is everything to mom and dad. I'm just...concerned. Hell, we're all concerned! You need to buckle down and maybe

focus a little less on your social life. I'm sure you can handle maybe dating only three women at a time for the next six weeks." Winking, he reached for a handful of pretzels that were in a basket on the bar.

"So obviously you were talking to Uncle Ronan..."

"Believe me, we all know how you are, but this is the first time mom and dad have taken any time off for themselves. This is a big deal and no one wants them to be freaked out or worrying while they're gone. Just maybe... be a little more conscientious while they're gone."

"I'm totally conscientious, Patrick. I know how to run every aspect of this business and you know dad went over everything a dozen times with me before he agreed to this trip. Mom was going to go no matter what," he added with a small laugh. "But dad wouldn't have gone if he didn't think I could handle it. So you all need to just relax and unclench. I've got this."

"We'll see..."

The thing was, Jamie was used to people underestimating him. He was the laid-back Donovan, the happy-go-lucky Donovan, the charming Donovan. He rarely took anything seriously and so to the casual observer, having him running the pub was an accident waiting to happen. But he was going to prove them all wrong. He was not only going to run the pub, but he was going to run it more efficiently than ever. His parents had their way of doing things and that was all fine and well, but Jamie had been waiting for the right time to implement some small changes that were going to yield them some nice profits.

"Order up, Jamie!" Bobby called out and Jamie excused himself to go and serve it.

He worked the room and stopped at a few tables to chat with some of the regulars, and he was in his element. He loved hearing what was going on in people's lives and joking around with them. Both his brothers were far too serious and not exactly the types who could be called sociable. Jamie was a people person, and he had a knack for putting people at ease and making sure

they left the pub with a smile.

It's also the way he looked at his dating life. He always made sure the women walked away with a smile.

And that had been true until Jenn.

Jenn.

Ugh...

He was going to have to deal with her eventually. Especially if her little threat of “you’ll be sorry” actually came into play.

What the hell would he have to be sorry for? They broke up six months ago, for Pete’s sake!

That reminded him, his phone was still in the office, and he really should have it on him in case anyone—other than Jenn—was trying to reach him. His family all knew to call the pub, but...you never knew. And if he was going to play the part of the responsible manager of a successful pub and eating establishment, he should be accessible at all times.

Bobby called out to him again, and this time he knew it was Patrick’s order. Walking back to the kitchen, he said a quick thanks and bagged up the food. His brother was still sitting at the bar chatting with their uncle, and there wasn’t a doubt in his mind that they were talking about him.

Pfft...let them talk. I’ve got this.

Handing the bag to Patrick, he was about to make a snarky comment about how qualified he was for this job when Sadie—one of their servers—walked over looking nervous.

“Jamie,” she said in a hushed tone. “The people at table four want to know if we can cater a luncheon for them on Thursday.”

“Of course!” he replied. It was a no-brainer.

“It’s for a hundred people,” she explained. “It’s short notice and I know your mom usually requires at least two weeks’ advanced notice...”

“Hang on. Let me talk to Bobby and see what he thinks we can handle and then I’ll go talk to your party, okay?”

She nodded. “Thanks, Jamie.”

Smiling smugly at his brother and uncle, he said, “If we can make this work, think of how thrilled mom and dad will be. It looks like maybe I *do* know what I’m doing.”

And with a confident smile, he went back to the kitchen and talked things through with Bobby. Then he made some calls to see about bringing in extra kitchen staff to help. Once that was all squared away, he walked out to table four with his tablet and worked through all the details. Before he knew it, they were paying him a deposit and making arrangements for the food to be picked up at eleven on Thursday. Feeling confident and more than a little proud of himself for making this work, Jamie thanked them and wished them a great day before heading back toward the office.

Yeah. He totally had everything under control and it was possibly the best freaking day ever.

“I am the best,” he told himself before closing the office door and mentally high-fiving himself.

* * *

“You’re fired.”

For a moment, Fallon Murphy was certain she was hearing things. “Excuse me?”

“I’m sorry, Fallon, but there have been some complaints and we’re terminating your employment effective immediately.”

This cannot be happening...

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” she began with a nervous laugh. “Complaints?”

Angela Silver, the head of human services, gave her a slightly sympathetic smile. “You missed several deadlines to apply for those grants we needed, the proposal you submitted last week for a new curriculum wasn’t

very well researched, and...you're not really connecting with the rest of the team. I'm sorry."

She let out a shaky breath because she was both shocked and...not.

This was the second job she was being let go from in the last four months.

Ugh...I am the worst...

It was pointless to argue because Angela was familiar with reasons Fallon was released from her previous position. Instead, she forced herself to smile as she stood.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out and I appreciate you taking a chance on me," she said, hating the slight tremble in her voice. Holding out her hand, she added, "I'll just go and clear out my office."

Angela stood and shook her hand. "Fallon, you're a smart and wonderful person. You just need to get better at being part of a team. Reaching out to your co-workers and asking questions isn't a sign of weakness. I think if you can remember that, you'll be more successful with your next endeavor."

"Thanks." With a curt nod, she willed herself not to cry as she left the office.

Walking down the hall, no one made eye contact with her and that told her that pretty much everyone knew she was being let go.

And no one cared.

She might have only been with the regional education service center for six weeks, but Fallon truly believed things were going well. Sure, she'd missed the deadlines for a couple of grants, but...there had been others she was preparing applications for to make up for it. Most people got a bit of a learning curve in their new jobs and somehow she had managed to blow hers.

Twice.

It didn't take long for her to clear out her office; she never brought much in to truly make it her own. There were just a couple of framed photos on her desk, along with a wilting plant, her mug, laptop, and daily planner journal.

I'm pathetic...

Making the office a more personalized space had been on her agenda, but everything was fine the way it was, so she never made it a priority.

“And good thing I didn’t, otherwise this would be even more depressing than it already is,” she mumbled and she put her stuff in her satchel and picked up her plant.

Again, as she walked down the hall toward the exit, no one made eye contact with her.

No one wished her well.

No one cared.

This was starting to become a pattern, and she knew exactly what she needed to snap herself out of this funk before she spiraled.

In her car, she quickly took out her phone and placed it in its cup holder and dialed her mother’s number.

“Fallon! Hey, Sweetie! How are you?” her mother said cheerily.

“Um...not great,” she said miserably, her voice catching on the last word as the first tear fell.

“Oh, no! What’s going on?”

There were other people talking in the background, and that’s when she noticed that it sounded like her mother was in a car. “Mom? Where are you? Are you driving?”

Laughing softly, Caroline Murphy shushed the people around her. “I’m not driving, but I’m in the car with your father and the Donovans. We’re on day three of our trip across the country! We had the best time yesterday in Atlanta! So much fun!”

Fallon gently cleared her throat.

“Oh, right. You sound upset,” her mother quickly said, changing gears. “What happened?”

“I got fired. Again,” she said miserably, and she heard all four of them gasp.

“Oh, no! Oh, Fallon, sweetheart, I’m so sorry! What are you going to

do?”

“I honestly don’t know. It just happened.” Pausing for a moment to compose herself, she knew what she wanted to do, but now that wasn’t going to happen either. “I forgot about your trip and I was going to see about coming home to visit. But now...”

“Nonsense,” her mother quickly interrupted. “Your father and I might not be there, but I think going home for a little while is the best thing for you.”

“Why? No one’s there.”

“Maybe not at the house, but you still have a lot of friends in Laurel Bay, and your sisters are only an hour or two away. You can always reach out and maybe go stay with one of them if you don’t want to be alone.”

That didn’t sound appealing. Both of her sisters were married and had very successful careers in their fields. Her oldest sister, Margaret, worked in hospitality management, and her middle sister, Shannon, was a dental hygienist. Fallon was the only one who furthered her education and kept chasing after higher degrees because she felt it was important to learn everything she could about early childhood development.

Which was a big fat lie.

As the youngest, she had always felt the need to prove that she was just as smart as her sisters. Now all she had to show for it was a degree and diploma hanging on her wall—or...sitting in a box on her backseat—and no job.

“I don’t know...”

“Just know that you are always welcome to stay at the house, Fallon. You know the door is always open for you. Well...it’s locked right now and we got a new smart lock for the front door, so I’ll have to send you the code...”

“Mom...”

Caroline paused for a moment. “Look at the bright side.”

The snort was out before she could stop it. “Bright side? What bright side?”

“You didn’t enjoy living in Missouri. You kept saying how much you

missed home.”

“I know, but...”

“And before that, you didn’t really enjoy living in Texas.”

“Yeah, but that was only because...”

“You can’t keep moving from state to state every other month, Fallon,” her mother gently chided. “It’s not practical and it’s got to be costing you a fortune in moving expenses and fees for breaking your rental agreements on these apartments. Maybe this is a sign that you should move back home and look for positions there.”

It wasn’t the worst idea, but she hated returning home looking like a loser.

A broke loser at that.

“Hi, Fallon! It’s Kate,” Mrs. Donovan said, as if Fallon wouldn’t be able to tell who was speaking. “I know your sisters aren’t there, but you know all of my kids are close by if you need anything. Don’t hesitate to reach out to any of them.”

She had grown up with the Donovans and all the kids were close in age. Both Arianna and Ryleigh Donovan were good friends, and she always enjoyed seeing them when she went home to visit. On one of her last trips home, she had seen Ryleigh’s fiancé’s new tattoo parlor and it had been amazing. But as much as she like them all—well, most of them—they all had their shit together and currently she most certainly did not.

Still, if she had to sit and wallow in self-pity anywhere, the comfort of her childhood home would be preferable.

“Thanks, Kate. I’ll keep that in mind.” She paused. “Listen, I should go. I’ve got a lot to do and think about, but I hope you all have a fabulous trip. Where are you off to today?”

“Today we’re going to stop in Birmingham and hopefully make it to Memphis tonight. We’re going to spend a day or two there before moving on,” her mother said. “But I want you to promise me something.”

No doubt it was going to be something like promising to not let this get her down or to focus on the positive...something uplifting.

“Sure, Mom.”

“If you go to our place, make sure you pay attention to the alarm—setting it and turning it off. Otherwise it will send alerts to our phone and make us nervous.”

“Um...”

“I’ll text you all the info on the codes if you need it. I hate sending it over a text or email because you never know who’s tapping into our personal information.” She sighed. “We left the information with Ronan. If you decide to go home, why don’t you stop by the pub first and talk to him? He’ll give you everything you’ll need and no one will be listening in and stealing our identities.”

Good lord...

“Mom, I don’t think...”

“I’m not taking any chances, Fallon. You never know how these things happen, so the less I put those numbers and words out into the universe, the safer I’ll feel.”

Now it was her turn to sigh. “Um...yeah. Great. I’ll swing by the pub. I’m guessing Ronan will be there full-time running the place, huh?”

“It’s Kate again, Fallon! Hi!” Kate called out. “Actually, Jamie’s running the place for us while we’re gone. We’re all a little nervous about it, but Shane says it’s time to give him a chance. I’m not sure I’m as confident in that, but...here we are.”

“O-kay...”

“But you know Ronan’s only five minutes away, so if you get to the pub and he’s not there, anyone can reach him for you.”

“Just make sure he meets you in person,” her mother chimed in, “and doesn’t just give you the information over the phone! Promise me you’ll only get the codes from him if you’re face to face!”

“Mom, why are you freaking out so much over this? I’m sure everything is going to be fine and...”

“Fallon? This is your father.”

She hung her head and inwardly groaned.

“Hi, Dad...”

“Can you just please do what your mother is asking? Can’t you tell how nervous she is about being gone for such a long time? Is it too much to ask that you respect our wishes?”

“It’s not, and I solemnly swear that I will only talk to Ronan when no one else is around, okay?”

“Thank you,” they all said in unison.”

“I’ll let you all go. Drive safe and keep in touch, okay?”

“Take care of yourself, sweetheart,” her mother said before hanging up.

With nothing left to do, Fallon was about to pull out of her parking spot when Angela came up and knocked on her window.

Rolling it down, Fallon looked up in confusion. Had they changed their mind? Were they giving her another chance?

“Hey, Angela,” she began warily. “Is everything okay?”

“I know this is awkward, but...I need your badge back.”

So...no second chance.

Ugh.

Reaching into her satchel, she took the badge out and quietly handed it over.

“Thanks, Fallon. And good luck.”

She barely managed a small smile before Angela turned and walked away.

This time when she went to pull out of her spot, no one was stopping her, and she forced herself to stay calm until she got home.

Then she was going to scream into her pillow and cry before eating a pint of Rocky Road ice cream. Who cares if it was only 10:30 in the morning?

The only one whose opinion mattered right now was her own.

“And I am one hundred percent okay with ice cream for brunch,” she murmured.

As she continued to drive, she thought about her options and knew some of the things her mother said were correct. First, she couldn’t keep moving from state to state, but...she also didn’t want to stay in Missouri. Going back to Laurel Bay made the most sense.

“So I guess now I need to break it to yet another landlord that I’m leaving.”

And then she had to deal with the very real possibility that she was a fraud and knowing that everyone back in Laurel Bay was going to know it too.

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**Want to know a little more about
Ryleigh's BFF Ivy?**

Check out her short story in

Rescue Me

One

Laurel Bay's annual Spring Fling block party was known for the three F's: food, fun, and festivities. But this year they were going to have to add a fourth F.

Fighting.

Ivy Davis sat on the front steps of Donovan's Pub and shook her head. "I expect this sort of thing on St. Patrick's Day, but not during the Fling."

Beside her, her best friend, Ryleigh Donovan, said, "This is why we can't have nice things."

In front of them was a massive brawl with about a dozen people hurling insults and throwing punches. There was no way of knowing what specifically started it, but it wouldn't be long before the onlookers were going to end up getting drawn into the melee.

Ivy got on her tiptoes and tried to see if any cops were coming their way to try to break it up, but so far, all she saw were people just like her and Ryleigh helplessly watching. "Should we call the cops?"

Looking over her shoulder toward the pub, Ryleigh said, "I'm sure my dad already did."

Ivy followed her friend's gaze. "If all the wild arm gestures are anything to go by, then yeah. He's on the phone with them now." Turning back to the crowd, she heard glass break and said a silent prayer that someone was

coming to break this up before anybody got hurt.

“You know what sucks about this?”

“The list is endless.”

“First, there’s a good chance you’re going to get called into work,” Ryleigh told her. “You know someone’s going to get hurt, and you’re gonna go and help out until the squad gets here...”

“Well, I am a paramedic...”

“I know, and it’s awesome, but I would hate for you to get dragged into this mess on the first night of your vacation.”

It had been a long time since Ivy had taken any time off and she desperately needed a break. Unfortunately, her friend was right. If anyone got hurt here tonight, she was going to jump in and do what she could until an ambulance arrived.

“This sort of thing is going to ruin a great tradition,” Ryleigh went on with a weary sigh. “You just know if the city even plans another Spring Fling, there are going to be so many rules and restrictions put in place that it won’t even resemble how awesome it’s been for like...ever.” She paused. “All because of these jerks.”

“You know two of your brothers are part of those jerks, right?”

“Figures.” They both fell into silence for a moment. “I expect it from Patrick and Jamie. They’re both ridiculously easy to get riled up. I just hate how they sucked Connor into it.”

For a second, Ivy was certain she misunderstood. But just to be sure...

“Connor? As in...”

“Connor Easton.” Turning, she gave Ivy a weak smile. “Sorry. I guess I should have mentioned that earlier, huh?”

Connor Easton was Ivy’s first boyfriend, first love, first...everything. He was a year older than her and they had dated through her last three years of high school. She’d had a crush on him long before that, but it wasn’t until they were both in high school that Connor had suddenly noticed her. They

always said they would start planning their future once she had graduated. Ivy had been confident he would propose to her as soon as she tossed her cap in the air.

But...he didn't.

A week after graduation, her entire world got turned upside down. She thought they were going to finally talk about their plans now that they were both done with school. Only...Connor had plans that didn't include her.

Granted, enlisting in the Marines was an honorable thing to do and she was proud of him for it. But when he showed up at her house that last day and told her they were through and he didn't want any distractions moving forward, he had pretty much destroyed her. He'd walked away as if he didn't have a care in the world and it left her feeling as if the last three years had all been a lie.

"Ivy? Are you okay?"

"What? Oh, um...yeah. Sure." She shrugged even as she scanned the crowd with new eyes. Connor was in there somewhere and...

"I really did mean to tell you he was home, but I didn't want to ruin our day. This is our tradition—hanging out at the Fling and eating our way around the block." Grasping Ivy's shoulders, she gave her a slight shake. "Just yell at me and tell me I'm a terrible friend and get it over with."

Frowning, Ivy knew she could say that and probably should, but...dammit, she was too concerned about what she was going to do when she saw Connor again after almost seven years. Before she could even give it some serious thought, a shot rang out and people took off running in all directions.

Ivy and Ryleigh jumped to their feet in a panic.

"Holy crap! Do you think...?"

It was total chaos for several moments before they spotted Patrick and Jamie Donovan.

But no sign of Connor.

“You two idiots!” Ryleigh cried. “What the hell was that all about?”

Ivy wasn't interested in why the fight happened. No doubt it was over something stupid. The only thing she was concerned with was catching a glimpse of the boy who had once been her entire world.

Not a boy anymore, she reminded herself. Connor was a man now.

And it was ridiculous how much she wanted to see him.

The brothers were laughing, and for some reason, it made Ivy snap.

“Where is Connor?” she yelled, and all joking immediately stopped.

“Uh...”

“He was right beside me a minute ago,” Jamie said as he turned to look around. “Oh, shit!” He took off running and Ivy followed.

Across the street was a small park, and it took her less than a minute to realize someone was lying on the ground.

Connor.

Her heart kicked hard in her chest as she stopped at his side and instantly dropped to her knees beside him to assess his injuries. There was blood all over the right side of his face and she forced herself to go into paramedic mode. “Ry? Call 9-1-1!”

“I'm on it!”

She checked his pulse and looked for outward signs of where the blood was coming from.

“Connor?” she asked. “Connor, can you hear me?”

He groaned.

Ivy gently felt around his head and noticed the bleeding was coming from a gash above his right eye. There was a lump on the back of his head and she wondered if it happened when he fell. Other than that, there didn't seem to be other wounds.

“Connor,” she said firmly, hoping to get him to open his eyes so she could look at them and see if his pupils were dilated. In the meantime, she took in his appearance as she checked his pulse. His sandy-brown hair was

cropped much shorter than she'd ever seen it and his body was all broad and muscled. The boy she remembered was gone, and yeah...he was a grown man now. "Can you tell me what happened?"

After another groan that sounded more like a growl, he slowly opened his eyes.

"Oh, shit," he moaned as he opened his crystal blue eyes. "Am I dead?"

Ivy was too stunned for a moment to answer, but Jamie chimed in. "No way, dude. Why would you think you were dead?"

"Because my head feels like it's about to explode and I'm looking at an angel," he said.

Jamie laughed. "Not an angel, dummy. It's just Ivy."

She wanted to kick him for putting it like that, but...maybe later.

There wasn't time to say anything because the ambulance arrived and the paramedics ran toward them. Ivy stepped aside and gave his stats to Devin Lawson, her supervisor.

"Thanks, Ivy," he said as he examined Connor. "We've got it from here."

"Um...sure," she murmured, but then she caught the look of utter panic on Connor's face and was immediately back at his side. He reached for her hand and held it so tightly that she wanted to grimace. "Do you want me to go with you?"

He nodded.

"Okay, then." Looking up at Devin, she said, "Prepare for an extra passenger."

Two

Ivy was sitting up front with the driver while Connor had to answer dozens of questions from the big paramedic who was treating him.

“You look familiar,” Connor commented.

“Devin Lawson,” he replied with a grin. “You and I played football together in high school. Welcome home, man. I heard you just got back.”

“Yeah.” With a mirthless laugh, he said, “Not the greatest reception.”

Nodding, Devin agreed. “I hear ya.” Pausing, he checked the wound on Connor’s head. “The good news is this gash should just need some stitches. It’s not too deep. The bump on the back of your head is probably going to give you a bitch of a headache for a few days. They’ll want to do X-rays for it, though.”

“I figured.”

The drive to the hospital was short, and Connor was aware of Ivy following behind them and staying just off to the side while he was admitted. Within minutes he was in a triage room, and after a nurse confirmed all of his information, she left, and it was finally just the two of them.

She looked hesitant and scared and just as beautiful as he remembered. This wasn’t how he imagined seeing her again would be.

Hell, he wasn’t even sure if he ever would see her again. Especially not after his last deployment...

“You should sit,” he told her, and it was crazy how gravelly his voice sounded. “We could be here a while.”

Pulling a chair closer to the bed, she sat. “Head injuries usually take top priority. I’m sure someone will be back here any minute to whisk you off for a CT scan. Then, depending on what they find, they’ll determine whether they need to admit you or if it’s safe for you to go home.” She paused. “Are you staying with your folks?”

“No, uh...they’re currently at their place down in Florida and don’t know I’m home.” Looking back, Connor knew it had seemed like a good idea at the time—not telling them he was coming home, but now he wasn’t so sure. “I’m staying with Jamie until they get back.”

Her big green eyes went wide. “Oh.” Then she paused. “Then I guess we should call Jamie?”

“Why? He already knows I’m here.”

“Well, yeah, but...he’ll need to come and get you at some point. I just thought...”

Unable to help himself, Connor reached out and took one of her hands in his. “Hey,” he said softly. “It’s okay. Once we know something, I’ll call him. For all we know, he and Patrick and Ryleigh followed us here and are out in the waiting room.”

Glancing over her shoulder, she said, “Maybe...”

He knew she was itching to go out there and see for herself, but he wasn’t willing to let her go yet. When he gently squeezed her hand, she faced him. “Ivy...I...”

“Okay, Mr. Easton!” an overly cheery nurse said as she walked in. “Time to take you for some pictures!” She moved around the room and made sure he was secure in the bed before releasing the brakes on it. Then she turned to Ivy. “I promise to have him back to you just as quick as we can!”

He repeated her name, but she took a step back and gave him a weak smile. “I’m going to give Ryleigh a call and let her know what’s going on.”

“You’re going to be here when I get back though, right?”

She nodded, but the nurse had them on the move and all he could do was settle in for the ride.

* * *

A little over an hour later, he was back with Ivy and being prepped for stitches.

So not the way I envisioned this night going...

He still had a ton of questions he wanted to ask Ivy, but she was chatting with the physician and nurse who were working on him as if they were old friends. It was ridiculous to feel like an outsider—especially in this situation—and yet...he did.

Closing his eyes, Connor forced himself to relax. Getting stitches wasn’t anything new, but right now, his anxiety was starting to get the better of him and he just wanted everyone to leave so he could have five minutes alone with Ivy.

“I thought you were off this week, Ivy,” the physician said casually as he began stitching Connor’s head.

“Yeah, wasn’t this supposed to be the start of your long-awaited vacation?” the nurse added.

Even with his eyes closed, he knew Ivy was probably blushing.

“Um...yeah,” she said quietly. “But are we ever really off the clock?” Then she laughed, but he knew it was from nerves. “I wasn’t going out of town or anything. It was just a staycation.”

“I can’t believe you turned down going on a cruise,” her nurse friend commented. “I love those things. All-you-can-eat buffets, tropical locations, and you know there are always a ton of hot guys on board. If someone invited me to go...”

“It’s not really my thing,” Ivy told her. “What I wanted most was to just

be able to sleep in and relax and have nothing to do. I've got books I want to read, some recipes I want to try, and zero responsibilities. It's going to be glorious."

"And over way too soon. Mark my words."

It took another ten minutes for them to be done. "Just relax for a little while, Mr. Easton. I'll be back in once we have the results from your CT scan."

"Thanks, Doc," Connor said and didn't let out an easy breath until he and Ivy were alone again. Then he didn't hesitate before trying to get some answers. "So you're a nurse now?"

Pulling up her chair again, Ivy sat and fidgeted slightly with her hair. "A paramedic, actually."

"Really? Wow! Good for you!" Then he paused. "I thought you were going to go to school for nursing."

"That's how it started, but then I had the opportunity to work with some paramedics over in Magnolia Sound and I sort of got hooked. Apparently I do well in high-stress situations." With a small laugh, she shrugged. "I do love it, but I was starting to feel a little burned out lately and opted to take some time off."

"And didn't want to go on a cruise." He smiled at her. "You never did like being on the water." That was something he definitely remembered. They'd gone out on a friend's boat one time to go fishing, and she'd gotten so sick, they'd never gone again.

"And I still don't." Smiling back at him, he watched as she started to relax.

She wore her blonde hair shorter than she used to, but her face was still as perfect as ever. He wanted to tell her that but didn't think she'd appreciate it.

At least not yet.

"So, are you home on leave?"

"No. I'm done. I was discharged a few days ago." He didn't want to talk

about why. She would find out soon enough.

All Ivy did was nod and Connor had to wonder if maybe this wasn't such a great idea. Perhaps he should have just had Jamie come with him because the awkward pauses were...well, awkward. In his mind, he envisioned him and Ivy talking easily like they always did. There had never been a lull in conversation or a time when one of them didn't have something to say. But right now, it felt like neither of them had anything to discuss.

Forcing himself to sit up slightly, he frowned when Ivy immediately jumped to her feet to help him. She placed some pillows behind him since the bed wasn't controlled by a remote. "I can adjust this from back here if you want to sit up more," she suggested, and he had no choice but to nod.

"Thanks."

As soon as she was seated again, Connor figured he had literally nothing to lose by simply saying what was on his mind.

"I didn't tell anyone other than Jamie that I was coming home because there were things I needed to do," he began as he studied his hands instead of her. If he looked at her now, he might not get through this. "I knew if I told my folks or reached out to any friends or family, people would want to see me and make demands on my time and...I wasn't ready for that yet." Pausing, he let out a long breath.

"Connor, you don't owe me..."

He didn't let her finish.

"There's something you should know. Something I never told anyone." He paused again because this was the moment where an already shitty situation could get even worse. "I never planned on enlisting in the military, Ivy. My plans were the ones you and I made together. We were going to go to the same college and..." His words died off, but he forced himself to look at her. "I came home one day and my parents sat me down and told me they had lost everything—their savings, their retirement, my college fund..."

"How...I mean, I don't understand."

Join the club...

“Their financial advisor took off with everything. He wiped out the accounts of dozens of clients and disappeared,” he explained. “They weren’t even sure how they were going to live and provide for their kids, let alone put one of them through college. I needed to do something to ease some of their burdens, so...”

“So you joined the Marines,” she finished for him.

Nodding, he murmured, “Exactly.”

“Why didn’t you explain any of this to me?”

“At the time, I was honoring their wishes. They were mortified and freaking out and...it was awful. I hated leaving them, but I hated leaving you more.” He wanted to reach for her hand but didn’t because she was sitting stiffly with her arms folded. “You have to know that I was ashamed too. Once they got their lives back together, I told myself I’d write to you to explain, but...I got deployed. And when I got back, it felt like so much time had passed and I didn’t want to disrupt your life.”

He was about to say more when Ivy stood and walked out.

Three

Ivy stormed out the front doors of the hospital as her heart beat madly in her chest.

Seven years ago, Connor Easton had turned her world upside down, and here he was doing it again. It was one thing to hate him for being a selfish jerk, but how could she continue to hate him when he'd done something so utterly selfless to help his family?

He could have told me...

She paced along the sidewalk with every kind of pent-up frustration. People walked by and looked at her like she was crazy, but she didn't care. Hell, maybe she was crazy because the longer she paced, the more she realized it wouldn't have changed anything even if he had told her the truth all those years ago.

Other than her heart being broken due to rejection, it would have been broken because he was gone.

Tomato-tomahto...

So, where did that leave her now? Did this really change anything? The past was the past, and maybe Connor was just here to finally clear his conscience and then he was going to move on.

"Probably should have asked before storming out," she mumbled. Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and when she looked at the screen, she saw a

text from Ryleigh.

Ryleigh: Hey! Any updates?

Ivy: Still waiting on CT results but he seems fine

Ryleigh: Whew! You doing okay?

Ugh...am I?

It was too complicated to get into in a text message, so she did the only thing she could.

She lied.

Ivy: I'm fine. We're just chatting and waiting for the doctor to come back in

Ryleigh: I'm glad you're there with him. Let me know when he gets the results. Jamie didn't want to bother him and I told him I'd keep him informed

Ivy: Will do

It would have been easy to stay outside and stew on Connor's revelation, but she didn't believe in running away from her problems. Plus, she truly was concerned about his health. So she'd go back inside and wait for the results with him and—no doubt—finish talking about the past so they could move on.

There was a part of her that knew it wouldn't entirely be possible. She'd dated a lot of guys over the years, but none of them ever made her feel the way Connor had. And if she were truly honest with herself, she'd admit that

just the sight of him tonight brought all those feelings back.

She'd moved on because she didn't have a choice.

But maybe she had one now...

Feeling a little more in control of her emotions, Ivy walked back into the hospital and back to his triage room, where she found him lying in bed with his eyes closed. Her first instinct was to go over, hold his hand, and rake her hand through his hair to comfort him. Unfortunately, she wasn't sure that was the right thing to do. Instead, she went and sat back down in the chair she had vacated only minutes ago.

"I wasn't sure you would come back," he said quietly, his eyes still closed.

"I wasn't sure either," she admitted. Letting out a long breath, she figured she'd say what was on her mind and then they could finally move on. "Connor, you pretty much destroyed me when you left."

He nodded. "I know."

"And it took me a long time to get over it. To get over you. It was the hardest thing I've ever done, and while I understand why you did it, it doesn't change anything. I'm sorry you felt like you didn't have any options or that you didn't think you could share with me what you were going through, but...I appreciate you finally telling me the truth. I think that's the closure I needed, so...thank you."

Now he did open his eyes and he looked furious.

"You think I did this for closure?"

"Um..."

Slowly, he pushed himself up until he was sitting up straight. "This wasn't about closure, Ivy. I wanted to come back and see you to make things right."

"O-kay...but that would mean..."

"Look," he interrupted. "I know I have no right to ask anything of you. It's been a lot of years and there are obviously a lot of hurt feelings, but...I

want a chance to make it up to you.”

“Connor...”

But he wasn't through. “If things hadn't happened the way they did, you and I both know we'd be married now and have a family of our own.”

It was true, but it didn't make it any easier to hear him say the words out loud.

“I want another chance, Ivy,” he said firmly. “I know I don't have any right to ask and I have no idea what is even going on in your life right now, but I want you to know that I'd really like to make things up to you. To make things right.”

Holy. Crap.

Swallowing hard, Ivy tried to figure out how to even respond to him.

Did she want another chance? Could she possibly go there with him again? She'd barely survived him walking away once; there was no way she'd be able to do that again.

On top of that, she had a good life right now—a good job and...and...

Yeah, I've got nothing...

Basically she had a job she loved, her family and her friends, but she wasn't living. It was something she had planned on thinking about during her staycation. A couple of weeks to just sort of relax and look at her life and see what she wanted to do from here.

You and I both know we'd be married now and have a family of our own...

It had always been what she wanted more than anything—to be a nurse and to be Connor Easton's wife. And for the two of them to have babies. Oh, how she longed to have a baby of her own. A few of her friends had gotten married and were starting their families, and Ivy had figured she'd get her baby fix by being the fun aunt.

But what Connor was offering was everything she'd thought she lost.

Or wouldn't have.

He was watching her with a serious gaze and no doubt trying to figure out what she was thinking.

“I...I don’t know what to say.” She forced the words out to buy herself some time. “That’s a lot to ask after all this time. I’m not sure I can give you an answer just yet.”

He sighed as he lay back against the pillows. “It’s okay, Ivy. I’ll wait. Hell, I’ll wait as long as it takes.”

“Connor...you have to know...”

The door opened as the doctor who had stitched him up came walking in. “Good news, Mr. Easton. Your scans are clear.”

“Oh, um...”

“You have a mild concussion, so you’ll need to rest and take it easy for the next several days. And if you continue to experience any pressure in your head, headache, confusion, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, slurred speech, amnesia, or fatigue, then you need to come back and see us, okay?”

He nodded.

“I’ll get your discharge papers ready and the nurse will be in with them shortly. Take care of yourself.”

Ivy pulled out her phone and was about to text Ryleigh when Connor spoke.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m letting Ryleigh know what’s going on, and...you know...we’ll need rides,” she explained. “We’ll need to let Jamie know that he needs to keep an eye on you and not let you sleep for too long. I’ll go over the instructions with him to make sure he understands.”

Connor reached out to stop her. “Can you just hold off on that for a minute?”

“Uh...sure.”

Shifting on the bed, Connor sat up again and carefully swung his legs over the side.

“You probably shouldn’t be doing that yet...”

But he wasn’t listening. Ivy moved in close in case he didn’t fully have his balance. Head injuries were tricky and the last thing he needed was to fall again.

Once he was steady on his feet, he took several steps away from her and she noticed he was limping. “Did you hurt your leg in the fight?”

“No.” After he was on the other side of the room, he turned and faced her. “There’s one more thing I need you to know.” He paused. “Something you need to see.” Another pause. “I’m not showing you this for sympathy. This is just because you deserve honesty.”

It didn’t take a genius to see where this was going.

He’d been in the military. He’d been deployed. He was discharged sooner than he should have been.

“Connor...”

Slowly, he reached down and raised the pant leg on his left side. His gaze never left hers. “Helicopter crash. I blew out my knee and I’ve got burns up my entire leg to my hip,” he said as if she couldn’t see them. “This happened three months ago. I’m going to have to have another surgery or two, and I’ll probably have a limp for the rest of my life, but...I’m alive.” He shook his head. “Not everyone on that flight is.”

“Oh, Connor...” She fought the urge to go over and hug him, but knew he didn’t want her to feel pity.

She was angry at how he was stupid enough to get in the middle of a neighborhood brawl when he was in this condition.

Something she’d bring up at another time.

“I know this may sound forward, but...” he said, interrupting her thoughts.

She knew what he was going to ask.

She just knew it.

But she said yes anyway.

Four

I didn't survive three deployments to be taken down by a stupid street fight in my hometown.

He hated how weak he felt and how out of breath he was by the time they got to Ivy's second-story apartment, but he would gladly climb another ten flights of stairs if it meant being alone with her.

It was after one in the morning, and he knew he wouldn't mind a couple of hours of sleep, but considering he was the one to ask to go home with her, Connor figured he owed it to her to at least stay awake.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Ivy asked once he sat down on the couch. "Or something to eat?"

"I'm good." He paused and looked around at her place. It was a pretty-decent-sized two-bedroom apartment, but what he noticed more than anything was how she had put her personal stamp on the place. She had always favored more of a beachy decor, but there were tons of framed pictures of her friends and family scattered around, as well as a bookcase filled with a crazy number of books. Ivy always loved to read and she preferred paperbacks to e-books. And if there was a hardcover edition, she'd take that over everything.

She sat down at the other end of the sofa and yawned. "Sorry. Long day."
And that's when he realized he should have called Jamie and let him take

him home. It was late, both he and Ivy were tired, and nothing was going to get settled tonight. It was purely selfish of him to even ask her to let him go home with her.

“Yeah, I uh...I probably should have just let Jamie come and get me. Sorry.”

But she shook her head. “I know it’s not late for him, and I’m sure everyone’s still hanging out at the Spring Fling—or at least having drinks at Donovan’s. Which means he shouldn’t be driving anyway. Although...I could have taken you to his place.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“I still could,” she offered around another yawn.

“Ivy, I can tell you’re exhausted, and to be honest, I am too. If you don’t mind me crashing on your couch, we can talk more in the morning.”

“That sounds good.”

She rose and walked out of the room and Connor couldn’t help but feel disappointed. He had hoped she’d at least think about the sleeping arrangements before agreeing so quickly to him sleeping on the couch. It was a decent size and he knew he’d be fine, but knowing Ivy was sleeping in the next room was going to guarantee that he wasn’t going to get much sleep tonight.

Well...that and the concussion...

When she walked back into the room a few minutes later, she had a couple of pillows and a blanket in her hands but she didn’t put them down.

If anything, she was hugging them tightly against her.

“Uh...Ivy?”

“Hmm?”

Connor started to rise to take them from her, but her words stopped him.

“I’m being ridiculous, right? I mean...you’re injured. I’m going to have to wake you up a few times during the night to make sure you’re okay.”

“Um...”

“We’re not strangers,” she went on, more to herself than anything, “and it’s silly to pretend we are. Obviously nothing’s going to happen because you have a concussion and stitches and...”

Yeah, no need to let her keep going and hammering the point home on how he wasn’t able to do all the things he’d really like to be doing with her...

He walked over to her and took the blanket from her hands. “Even if I wasn’t all banged up, there is no way I’d even suggest doing more than sleeping tonight. It’s been a long time and...” He shrugged. “I just wouldn’t ask that of you.”

“Oh.”

Was it his imagination or did she sound disappointed?

Or was it wishful thinking on his part?

Probably wishful thinking.

“So...?”

“Right.” Shaking her head as if to clear it, Ivy led the way down the hall to her bedroom. And just like the rest of her home, the space was exactly how he imagined it would be—a queen-sized bed with all-white bedding, light furniture, and a crystal chandelier. It was very feminine, and if it were any other woman, Connor knew he’d feel awkward as hell even walking into the room. But this was Ivy and he was just happy to be there.

She excused herself and went into the bathroom and he took the opportunity to strip down to his boxers so she wouldn’t have to see all his scars and slid into bed.

And then paused.

Did she sleep on the right side? The left? The middle?

“Well...shit.” Deciding the safest bet was to sit in the middle and let her tell him which side to move to. There was a TV mounted on the wall in front of the bed and he wondered what she currently liked to watch. Looking over at her nightstand, he saw a stack of books and was about to reach over to see what she was reading when she walked back in.

And that's when he seriously cursed the fact that he was injured because...damn.

She wasn't wearing anything particularly sexy. If anything, it was rather plain. But the blue cotton hit her mid-thigh and had thin little straps, and all Connor could think of was peeling them off her shoulders and...

"I usually sleep on the right side," she said, interrupting his thoughts. Connor moved over as Ivy slid beneath the sheets beside him. She gave him a nervous smile. "I'm going to try to wake you up a few times to make sure nothing's gotten worse with your head."

"I'm sure I'm fine."

"This isn't up for discussion. Head injuries are serious, Connor."

He knew that, so he didn't even try to argue.

"Try to get some sleep while you can," she said as she reached over and turned out the light.

And that's when things got awkward.

He could feel the heat coming off of her body, smell her perfume, hear her breathe...it was like sensory overload and he wasn't sure what to do about it. Ideally, he would have been on the right side of the bed so he could lie on his right side and face away from her. The left side of his body was still a mess and it was painful to lie on it. If he turned onto his side and faced her...

"Connor?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, how come?"

"You're just being very still. Are you in pain?"

As much as he hated to bring it up, he knew he wouldn't get any sleep if he didn't.

"With my injuries on my left side, I tend to sleep on my right side. But I felt if I turned on my side and faced you that it might be weird and make you

uncomfortable.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense.” She went quiet for a moment. “Do you want to switch sides?”

What he wanted was to haul her into his arms and not have this be so difficult.

“No,” he said. “If you’re okay with me facing you, then...”

She laughed softly. “It’s fine, Connor. Go to sleep.”

Carefully, he rolled onto his side and finally let himself relax. He was almost asleep when he felt Ivy move closer.

Connor held his breath and waited to see what she would do next, and before he knew it, she was practically pressed up against him from head to toe. He whispered her name and felt her warm breath on his neck. He slowly maneuvered so his arms went around her, and she hummed sleepily.

For years he’d slept alone—sometimes on a lumpy cot, sometimes on the ground, and sometimes in places that were too dangerous for him to truly rest. But this right here? This was the most perfect thing to happen to him since leaving Laurel Bay. No one would ever know how much he longed to come home and have his old life back. So maybe for tonight he could pretend; pretend the last seven years never happened, that this was his and Ivy’s bed, and this was the life they had planned.

And then, for the first time in far too long, Connor relaxed and fell into a deep sleep.

Five

“Connor? Connor, you need to wake up and tell me what day it is?” Ivy whispered a few hours later. But as much as she wanted him to wake up, she was kind of relieved he was still asleep and maybe didn’t know how she had practically wrapped herself around him in her sleep.

Like a damn boa constrictor.

“Connor? Come on, what day is it?”

His arms slowly wound around her and pulled her in close. “What do I get if I answer correctly?”

She had to fight the urge to laugh. “You’ll get to go back to sleep.”

“Mmm...not good enough.”

And because she was half asleep and a little delirious herself, she decided to play along. “What do you want?”

“That’s a loaded question,” he said gruffly.

He was all warm skin and hard muscles, and Ivy had a feeling she’d give him whatever he wanted. “Tell me,” she quietly prompted.

“A kiss. Just one kiss.”

It wasn’t the worst idea, she thought.

Licking her lips, she nodded. “Okay. One kiss. What day is it?”

Connor pulled her even closer and she could feel every inch of him.

Every. Hard. Inch.

“Saturday,” he growled as he slowly rolled her beneath him and covered her lips with his.

Ivy didn’t even have to think about it; she simply wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back. It was the kind of kiss that started slow and sweet but then just went deeper and deeper until it became almost carnal.

One leg came up and wrapped around his hip and then the other, and she didn’t even care how needy she was being. This was Connor; being with him like this was as natural as breathing to her. It didn’t matter how many years had passed; everything about this moment was comfortable and familiar and sexy as hell.

Raking her hands up into his hair, she wanted to tug on it, but it was too short. So her nails scraped along his scalp until he hissed in pain and pulled back.

Dammit.

Too late she remembered the bump on his head and now the moment was gone.

“Connor, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I…”

He rolled off of her and slowly pulled her into his arms just as they had been a few moments ago. “Shh… it’s okay,” he said sleepily. “Go to sleep.”

And so she did.

* * *

They repeated that same scenario two more times—minus scratching his injured head—before finally getting up in the morning. Ivy worried about it possibly being weird now that the sun was up, but… it wasn’t.

They worked together to make breakfast, and while they ate, he told her all about his time in the military. Her heart ached when he told her about his deployments and the accident on his final one that left him scarred.

“Do you know when you’ll have to have more surgeries?” she asked.

“I told the doctors I wanted to come home and just take some time where I wasn’t in rehab. After a while, it was starting to mess with my head and I felt myself slipping into a depression. I knew coming home would help get me back on track.”

“Then why didn’t you tell your family?”

Reaching across the table, he took her hand in his. “I told you, seeing you was my top priority.” His thumb gently caressed her wrist. “It was important for me to talk to you, and then—depending on how that went—I’d be able to figure everything else out.”

She laughed nervously. “That’s a lot of pressure on me.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.” He paused. “The way I ended things with us was my biggest regret. Every time I got deployed, I prayed I’d get to come home so I could make things right.” Then he shook his head. “I should have prayed to come home in better shape.”

“Connor…”

He waved her off. “I don’t want to go there. I want to hear about you,” he said as he smiled. “Tell me what it’s like to be a paramedic.”

Slowly, she pulled her hand from his and rose to get herself a second cup of coffee. “I’ll be honest. I never realized how busy our little town was until I started training. Now I feel like we are a bit of a hotbed of accidents and injuries!” Looking at the kitchen table, she frowned. “Why don’t we go sit on the couch? It’s much more comfortable.”

Connor agreed, but they sat down at opposite ends. Ivy told him about college and the courses she took and all the training she went through both in Laurel Bay and a short stint over in Magnolia Sound. Before she knew it, it was lunchtime.

“I had planned on shopping for groceries today,” she told him, “so I don’t have a lot here. But we could just order something to be delivered if you’d like.”

“Whatever works for you,” he said, but when Ivy stood to get her phone,

he stopped her. “Listen, I don’t want to be presumptuous here. I know last night there were extenuating circumstances and that’s the only reason why you agreed to let me come home with you.”

She wasn’t sure exactly how to respond, so she waited him out.

“But...I’d really like a shower and clean clothes, and if it’s okay with you, I’d like to ask Jamie to bring my stuff over.”

“Oh, um...”

He moved a little closer. “I hadn’t even unpacked at his place. It’s just a couple of pieces of luggage and maybe...you know...I could stay here with you instead.”

It was crazy how much she wanted to say yes, and rather than overthink it, she simply went with her heart and nodded. “I’d like that.”

Leaning in, he kissed her softly before pulling back and smiling. “Okay, you order lunch and I’ll call Jamie and let’s see where the rest of the day takes us.”

An hour later, they were sitting around her kitchen table with Jamie, Patrick, and Ryleigh Donovan—who not only brought Connor’s luggage over but lunch too. Ivy wanted to be disappointed that their friends were horning in on what was supposed to be a time for her and Connor to get reacquainted, but they were all laughing and having such a good time that it was hard to be mad.

“What about Liam?” Connor asked. “He’s still got another couple of years to go, right? I know he enlisted the year before me, but...”

“He’s been pretty tight-lipped about it. We thought he was going to re-up, but he hasn’t mentioned it lately,” Ryleigh said. “I think he’s coming home for a short stay in the fall, but...who knows if it will really happen.”

“What’s the occasion? Or is it just a scheduled leave before he deploys?”

“Arianna’s college graduation,” Patrick replied. “Well...graduation party. She’ll graduate in May, but she’s got an internship in San Francisco for the summer.”

“Mom and Dad really wanted to have a party for her right after the ceremony, but Ari was pretty adamant about wanting Liam home to celebrate with us,” Ryleigh explained.

“Personally, I think we’ll end up having a small party in May and the big one when Liam’s home, so...more excuses to celebrate,” Jamie said with a big grin. “So, what are you two up to for the rest of the day?” Then he winked and nudged Connor. “Bet you’re wishing we’d all leave, huh?”

Connor chuckled as he shook his head. “It’s good to see you still haven’t grown up.”

“Dude, growing up is highly overrated.”

“Don’t waste your time, Con,” Patrick chimed in. “We’ve all been waiting for him to grow up. It’s just not happening.”

They all laughed, and Ivy looked over at Ryleigh and read the question in her eyes. With a slight nod toward the bedrooms, she stood. “You guys keep talking about all the ways Jamie needs to grow up. Ryleigh and I are going to have a little chat of our own in the other room.”

Connor grinned at her. “I’m not even going to pretend I don’t know you’re talking about me.”

Ryleigh patted him on the shoulder. “Awesome. Thanks.”

Once they were alone in Ivy’s guest room—which doubled as her home office—Ryleigh shut the door and gave her a knowing grin. “So...you took him home and now he’s staying with you.” Her smile grew. “You two move fast!”

“Okay, okay...I know it looks like that, but...”

“Ivy, come on! He asked Jamie to bring all his luggage here! It’s pretty much everything he owns, and it’s all sitting in the corner of your living room!”

Sighing, she sat down on the bed. “Is it wrong that I’m okay with this? I mean...shouldn’t I be pushing him away a little or at least making him work for it a little bit?”

Sitting beside her, Ryleigh sighed. “If the two of you had met up at the Fling last night in a normal way, I think you would have. But it was wild and dramatic and...haven’t the two of you been apart long enough?”

While Ivy knew she had a point, it still felt weird how...it didn’t feel weird.

“Is this the right thing, though?” she quietly asked. “He left me and I was devastated and...”

“Did the two of you talk about it?”

Nodding, she said, “We did, and I know it was a hard decision for him to make back then, but...does that mean it’s okay to just pick up where we left off?”

For a moment, Ryleigh didn’t say anything. But when she did, she didn’t hold back. “Ivy, you and I have been friends since the third grade, so I think I know you pretty well. You, my friend, have been miserable ever since Connor left. You date, but no one has ever made you forget about him.” She squeezed Ivy’s hand. “I know you’ve slept with other guys, but...it’s like you felt guilty about it. Obviously you never got over him, and you’ve been given a second chance. Don’t question it and don’t make it more complicated than it has to be. Just...let yourself be happy.”

“It just sounds too easy...”

“That’s because it is.” Standing, Ryleigh walked to the door. “Now I’m going to go and drag my brothers out of here, and I don’t want to hear from you for a week. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

Unable to help herself, she laughed.

“Now go get your man!”

Six

As much as Connor enjoyed spending time reconnecting with his friends, it was Ivy he wanted to be with.

Alone.

He wished they could crawl back into bed to finish what they started multiple times the night before, but right now, he knew it wasn't possible. His head was pounding and the rest of him felt like hammered shit, so...

Definitely no sexy time.

Yet.

As if reading his mind, Ivy walked over with a bottle of ibuprofen and a bottle of water. "You looked like you were in pain."

All he could do was nod. There were so many things he wanted them to talk about, but...not right now. He swallowed a couple of pills and drank down half the bottle of water before he relaxed against the sofa cushions with a sigh. She was right there beside him, and just having her close helped him relax.

"How about this," she began quietly. "We just sit and maybe watch a movie or something with the sound on low."

"That sounds good."

There was no discussion about what to watch. Ivy simply put something on for background noise. As much as it pained him, Connor felt his eyes

getting heavy and knew he would fall asleep.

And he did.

The next time he opened his eyes, the apartment was a little darker and he knew several hours must have passed. They were both more reclined on the couch and Ivy was curled up against him, snoring softly.

It was the most content he'd been in years.

Seven, to be exact.

There wasn't a doubt in his mind that this was what he wanted. Ivy. The future they should have started years ago. And while he realized it wasn't going to be as easy as simply saying he wanted a second chance, Connor knew he'd do whatever it took to prove to her he was in this for the long haul.

Shifting slightly, he aligned their bodies and softly kissed her lips in an attempt to wake her up. She instantly responded, and before he knew it, they were a tangle of arms and legs and Ivy was beneath him. His body was screaming for release—to strip them both bare and claim her again and again and again.

Unfortunately, the ibuprofen had worn off and his head was back to pounding. He mentally cursed as he slowly broke the kiss.

“You are beyond tempting,” he said, placing one last kiss on her lips. “But...” Rolling off of her, Connor sat up and carefully raked a hand through his hair.

Without a word, Ivy handed him the pain relievers and the water. “I can't believe we fell asleep.” She stood and stretched. “I feel like all we've done is sleep, wake up, eat, go back to sleep, and now...” Glancing over at him, she laughed softly. “It's almost dinnertime.”

Yeah, only sleeping and eating probably isn't the best way to work through our past...

Ivy walked to the kitchen and he heard her sigh loudly. He slowly got to his feet and followed. “What's up?”

“Still didn't buy groceries.”

Connor rested his hands on her shoulders. “Tell you what, let’s get some Chinese food and then we can really sit and talk about...well...everything. Then tomorrow we’ll go shopping together.”

“That works.”

After that, they settled into their own little world of domestic bliss. There was no other way for him to describe it. Dinner arrived and they sat and talked for hours about everything that happened after he left. Ivy cried, and Connor held her and cried with her. There wasn’t anything he could do to change the past, but he was damn sure going to do everything he could to make their future everything they had once dreamed it would be.

Hell, he’d make it better.

When they went to bed that night, Ivy kept up the routine of waking him up every couple of hours, but he was beginning to suspect she was enjoying their reward system of kissing each other senseless.

And so was he.

The following day they went out and grocery shopped, and he learned that Ivy loved to cook, still had a serious sweet tooth, and was a bit obsessive about the quality of her produce. They ran into mutual friends and spent so much time talking with people that it took almost three hours to get back home.

Home.

Connor really liked the sound of that.

They made sandwiches for lunch and talked about their families. Ivy had two younger sisters who were both currently in college. He told her about how both his younger brother and sister were doing the same.

“So things got better for your folks after...?” she asked without really looking at him.

He nodded. “It took years. I sent money home, my dad took on a second job, and my mom took on every kind of job she could. She was a virtual assistant before it was really a thing. At one point, she had four different

clients and I still don't know how she kept track of it all, but...she was the real hero in all of this."

"She was always amazing."

"That she is. Anyway, about three years ago, the financial guy was found and prosecuted. And while they didn't get all their money back, they did get about half of it. But over the years, they simply rebuilt." He shrugged. "They bought a vacation place down in Florida with my aunt and uncle, and that's where they are now."

"When will they be back?"

"In two weeks."

"Are you going to wait until then to surprise them?"

He chuckled. "That was the plan, but we saw so many people in town today, I'm not sure they'll all keep my secret."

"That's true. One of the curses of living in a small town. Everyone knows your business."

When they finished eating, something occurred to him. "I didn't have a headache today."

"That's a good sign," she confirmed with a smile. "The lump on the back of your head is practically gone. I noticed it this morning."

Yeah, she had been incredibly gentle every time she touched his head after that first night, but now he was hoping it meant they wouldn't have to be quite so cautious.

But he opted to keep that thought to himself until they went to bed later.

Outside, the sky turned dark and gray, and it wasn't until the first rumble of thunder that either of them realized the weather had changed. He remembered how much Ivy used to love a good storm. She used to say it was the perfect weather for snuggling under the blankets and watching a good movie.

Or making love.

At the flash of lightning, she turned and faced him, and Connor instantly

knew she was thinking the same thing as they moved toward one another.

They were barely touching, but when Ivy looked up at him, he saw it all in her eyes. “Connor, I...”

“Yeah,” he growled. “Me too.”

In the next instant, he hauled her into his arms. The kiss was instantly untamed and borderline frantic. His need for her was more intense than he’d ever felt before—maybe it was because it had been so long since he’d had sex, or maybe it was because it was Ivy...

It was Ivy.

It was always Ivy.

They may have been young when he left—barely even adults—but that hadn’t changed anything. He knew he loved her then, just like he knew he loved her now. Getting to know her now that they were older only made him love her more.

“Connor,” she panted breathlessly. “The bedroom...please...”

There was no need for her to ask him twice.

Lifting her up into his arms, he strode down the hall to her room and placed her on the bed. He stripped out of his shirt as he kicked off his shoes and watched as Ivy pulled her own shirt up and over her head before tossing it to the floor. They were both naked in the blink of an eye, and as much as he would have preferred to slowly peel the clothes from her body, there would be time for that later.

They had an entire lifetime ahead of them.

Covering her body with his, Connor smiled down at her. “You are so beautiful, Ivy. I’ve missed you.”

Her eyes shone bright with tears as she nodded. “I’ve missed you too.”

Slowly she wrapped herself around him, pulling him close, and he knew they were done talking for now. Right now, he wanted to touch all her smooth, silky skin. Then he was going to taste every inch of her.

And he was going to love her forever.

Seven

For the rest of the week, they stayed in their own little world.

Sort of.

Their friends did give them a few days to themselves, but then the invitations to go out to eat or go for drinks at Donovan's Pub started coming in, and as much as Ivy wanted to keep them in their bubble a little longer, it was a good thing for them to go out too.

This was going to be their lives.

Together.

It was super-fast and a little crazy, but...she'd been in love with Connor for far too long to waste any more time. He was back and he was hers.

And she'd never been happier.

Ivy had one more week off from work and she planned to spend every minute of it with Connor. For his part, he was happy to take another week before he really needed to get serious about finding a job and then deciding on when to have his next surgery. She hated it for him, but was relieved that she'd get to be there for him this time.

It was Sunday night and they had opted to go out to dinner, just the two of them. Ivy had agonized over what to wear since it had been ages since she'd gone out on a formal date. Connor looked incredibly handsome in his charcoal-gray suit, and she was glad she'd gone with the strapless burgundy

dress. They totally complemented each other.

The steakhouse he took her to was one of her favorites. It was someplace they used to joke about when they were younger because they never could afford to go. So being able to go there for dinner together was kind of a big deal.

They had made reservations and were seated almost immediately. There was a small candle in the middle of the table and the whole atmosphere was very romantic. Connor ordered their wine, and once it was served, he raised his glass.

“This is something I used to dream of,” he began somberly. “A fancy date night with my favorite girl. There were times when I thought it would never happen, and I hate how it took seven years for it to come to fruition.”

“Me too. But I’m glad we’re here.”

“Here’s to us and our future.” He touched his glass to hers and it made her smile before taking a sip.

They ordered their meals and sat in companionable silence for a moment before Connor reached across the table for her hand. “I have something for you.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. “Before everything happened back then, I had bought you something for your graduation that I never got to give you.”

There was no way he could have possibly held on to a gift for all this time, could he?

She watched him pull something out of his suit jacket pocket with his free hand.

A ring box.

“If you remember, I worked for Coleman Construction over in Magnolia that last year and then washed dishes at Donovan’s at night.”

“You worked a lot,” she said quietly.

“At the time, I was working toward something.” He placed the small box

down on the table between them and opened it. It was a simple gold band with a tiny solitaire diamond in the middle. “And for all those hours, I still couldn’t afford much.” He paused. “Ivy, this ring doesn’t mean now what it meant then. Back then, this was all I had to offer. It was meant to symbolize how much I loved you and wanted to marry you.”

Now she was mildly confused.

“And...now?” she nervously asked.

“Now it’s a promise for something more,” he told her. “I know it’s too soon to ask you to marry me—even though we both know I’m going to. We need a little more time and I’m okay with that. But this ring is a promise to you that I will be asking.” He gave her a boyish grin as he released her hand and took the ring from the box. “And I hope you’ll say yes when the time is right.”

Tears stung her eyes as she nodded. “Is it wrong that I want to say yes right now? That it doesn’t matter how soon it is?”

“Ivy...this ring is...it’s...”

“Perfect,” she finished for him. “It’s perfect and all I could ever want. You’re all I ever wanted. I don’t need another ring, Connor. That’s not what it’s about.”

He slid the ring on her finger and sighed. “I know it’s not, but you deserve something better. Something more.” He squeezed her hand. “I want to give you the world because that’s how much you mean to me.”

“I can’t believe you held on to this all these years...”

He shrugged. “It was all I had left of us and it was small enough that I could keep it with me always.” Pausing, he leaned in and kissed her hand. “I never forgot you. Forgot us. Thank you for rescuing me that night in the park and for giving me a second chance.”

Ivy felt the tears rolling down her cheeks. “We rescued each other. I felt lost and unsure of what I really wanted to do with my life, and then there you were. I love you, Connor. Always.”

“I love you too.”

The meal was great, the conversation flowed, but more than anything, it was the perfect night because it was the first big step toward their future.

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A Touch of Heaven

Moonlight in Winter Park

Waiting for Midnight

Mistletoe Between Friends

Snowflake Inn

His for the Holidays

Wildest Dreams (currently unavailable)

Going My Way (currently unavailable)

Going to Be Yours (currently unavailable)

About Samantha Chase

Samantha Chase is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller of contemporary romance that's hotter than sweet, sweeter than hot. She released her debut novel in 2011 and currently has more than eighty titles under her belt – including *THE CHRISTMAS COTTAGE* which was a Hallmark Christmas movie in 2017! She's a Disney enthusiast who still happily listens to 80's rock. When she's not working on a new story, she spends her time reading romances, playing way too many games of Solitaire on Facebook, wearing a tiara while playing with her sassy pug Maylene...oh, and spending time with her husband of 32 years and their two sons in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

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