

The background of the cover is a photograph of a white wicker chair. A light pink tulle fabric is draped over the chair's back and seat, forming a skirt. In the foreground, a small bouquet of flowers is attached to the chair, featuring a large yellow rose, a pink rose, and some baby's breath. To the right, a green leaf-wrapped object, possibly a gift or a decorative item, is visible. The overall scene is set outdoors with a blurred background of a beach and ocean.

The Runaway Bride's Vow

- a seabreeze wedding
chapel novel

Award-winning Author
JENNIFER FAYE

THE RUNAWAY BRIDE'S VOW

JENNIFER FAYE

LAZY DAZY PRESS

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

A grumpy contractor upends the wedding planner's life...

With hopes of gaining a promotion, Brooke Campbell is all smiles as she temporarily takes charge of the Perky Pink Wedding Company. She's not only overseeing plans for her boss's wedding, but also supervising the renovations of the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel. On her way to her first meeting with the contractor, she stops at her favorite coffee shop. A strikingly handsome firefighter and part-time contractor, Logan Montgomery, reaches for the same cup of coffee as her. When his touch startles her, the coffee spills, and his forbidding frown is aimed at her. Maybe some would assume it would be a meet-cute, much like a sweet, creamy, whipped coffee, but for these two their first meet is more like a pot of day-old coffee that not even a heap of sugar packets and a dose of creamer can help. Just wait until they find out they are working together... Oh my!

Seabreeze Wedding Chapel series:

Prequel - The Bride's Dream Wedding

Book 1 - The Bride's Pink Shoes

Book 2 - The Bride's Christmas Dress

Book 3 – The Runaway Bride's Vow

Book 4 – The Bride's Antique Ring

Contents

Prologue

1. Chapter One

2. Chapter Two

3. Chapter Three

4. Chapter Four

5. Chapter Five

6. Chapter Six

7. Chapter Seven

8. Chapter Eight

9. Chapter Nine

10. Chapter Ten

11. Chapter Eleven

12. Chapter Twelve

13. Chapter Thirteen

14. Chapter Fourteen

15. Chapter Fifteen
 16. Chapter Sixteen
 17. Chapter Seventeen
 18. Chapter Eighteen
 19. Chapter Nineteen
 20. Chapter Twenty
 21. Chapter Twenty-One
 22. Chapter Twenty-Two
 23. Chapter Twenty-Three
- Epilogue
- Afterword
- About Author

PROLOGUE

Monarch, Iowa

THE BIG DAY WAS here.

She was getting married.

Brooke Campbell's empty stomach took a nauseous lurch. Her hands had a slight tremor. Was this the way all brides felt on their wedding day?

She stood alone in the downstairs of the country church. Her tight-fitting gown felt as though it were strangling her. Actually, it wasn't even her gown. Not really.

It wasn't that the dress had been handed down from her mother to her either. It wasn't anything like that. The truth of the matter was the dress had come from her fiancé's cousin's friend. Her mother was thrilled when the dress fit Brooke.

It wasn't what Brooke wanted. Who wanted a used wedding gown? And though it was kind of beautiful, it wasn't designed for her body type, but Josh, her fiancé, was quick to remind her that they needed to be practical. It was imperative they

watched every penny they spent now that he'd been given a portion of his parents' property to farm.

Josh had big plans, including a barn-raising. In fact, the barn took precedence over their home. They were going to start their marriage in a borrowed mobile home until there were funds to build a place of their own.

Josh would make a good husband. He was reliable and hardworking. She knew when they exchanged their vows that would mean the part about until death us do part.

She also noticed how the spark between them had fizzled somewhere along the way. She wasn't quite sure when that had happened. She supposed it was natural when a couple had been together as long as they had been dating.

Her gaze caught her image in the floor-length mirror. Her white satin shoes poked out from beneath the gown. Even those weren't hers. They were borrowed from her sister. Tears burned the back of her eyes.

At least her undergarments were all her own. And they were new. A nervous laughter bubbled up from her chest.

The dress just didn't suit her. Not at all. Even with shapewear, the gown didn't flatter her. The neckline gaped because her chest wasn't big enough to fill out the dress.

Her older sister, Candace, usually referred to as Candi, entered the room and gave her a strange look. "Are you ready?"

The laughter died in her throat. Brooke glanced at her sister. “What do you think of me in this dress?”

“That again.” Candi brushed off her concern. “I thought you were okay with it. After all, the wedding is in a few minutes. It’s too late to change your mind now.”

She hated how her sister brushed off her concerns. Everyone had been doing that throughout the wedding-planning process. She didn’t need anything extravagant. Was it wrong that she wanted to feel special on her wedding day?

Doubts crept in from all corners of her mind. She recalled how she’d hesitated when he’d proposed. Who did that?

And when the wedding date had been picked for them by their families because it fit in between the harvest and planting seasons, she’d pushed aside that little voice in the back of her mind that told her this marriage wasn’t right for her. Now that voice was screaming at her to run out the door—to get away from this tiny town. She needed to figure out who she was before she pledged herself to someone else.

When her gaze moved to the door leading to the back of the church, her chest filled with a sense of dread. No bride should feel that way when they think of walking down the aisle to their groom.

It wasn’t too late. She could get it together and be the wife that Josh wanted—that he deserved. Her chest tightened, making it hard to breathe. Her stomach twisted into a painful knot. Her hands and feet felt ice cold. She had to get out of there. *I can’t breathe.*

“It’s time to go.” Candi’s voice drew her from her troubled thoughts. “Hey, are you okay? You’re so pale. Do you need to sit down?”

Brooke shook her head as she struggled to catch her breath. Her sister reached over and grabbed a bottle of water from a nearby table. She unscrewed the cap before holding it out to her. “Here. Take a drink.”

She didn’t want the drink, but she knew better than to argue with her older sister when she got that hard edge in her tone. Brooke sipped at the water a little and then some more. The coldness felt good against her tight throat.

She handed it back to her sister, feeling a bit better. “I think I’m having a case of nerves. Did... Did you feel that way on your wedding day?”

“Of course. It’s a big deal making a lifetime promise to someone. But once it was over, I was fine. It’ll be the same for you. Now let’s get you down the aisle.”

Her sister gave Brooke’s appearance a quick once-over, and then she handed over the bridal bouquet. They made their way upstairs. At the top of the steps, her father waited to escort her.

Candi signaled for the wedding march to begin. Brooke was glad to have her father to lean on as they made their way down the aisle.

When Josh saw her, he didn’t smile. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was as nervous as she was. She couldn’t blame him. Her head ached and her stomach churned.

Finally, they both stood before the minister, who instructed them to hold hands. They turned to each other. She noticed that Josh was slow to take her hands in his own. When their fingers laced together, his grasp was lax. She clenched his hand tighter. Still, it felt as though he was trying to pull away.

As the minister spoke, her gaze went to Josh. He averted his gaze so she wasn't able to see what he was thinking.

She turned her attention back to the minister as he said, "If anyone can show just cause why these two may not be lawfully joined together, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

The minister paused as though he were actually waiting for someone to show just cause. Her heart beat quickly as the silence seemed to stretch out. Josh tapped her hand. When she looked at him, it was as though he wanted to say something. Now wasn't the time. Still, his eyes widened as though whatever it was couldn't wait.

She leaned toward him and whispered, "Can't it wait?"

"No." His tone was firm.

Her gaze briefly went to the congregation. They were all staring at them. She swallowed hard.

Before she could figure out what to do, Josh pulled away. *What is he doing?*

Her gaze moved to the minister. She whispered, "Could we have a moment?" When surprise flashed in the older man's eyes, she added, "We'll be right back."

She grabbed Josh by the arm and led him to the little door off to the side of the pulpit that the choir used. She opened the door and stepped inside. There wasn't much room because there was only a small landing before the steps to the downstairs.

“We have to make this quick.” She stared at him. “Everyone out there is wondering what is going on.”

When he spoke, his voice was soft. “I can't do this.”

She strained to hear his words. “Can't do what?”

He lowered his gaze. “Marry you.”

His words were like a smack in the face. What was she supposed to say to that? Words utterly failed her.

“I'm sorry, Brooke. I didn't realize it until now. I... I just can't.”

And then something happened that she hadn't expected. She was able to take her first full breath since coming to the church. Her pulse was still racing, but each breath was easier.

His gaze caught hers. “You need to tell them.”

Surely she hadn't heard him correctly. “Wait. What? Why me?”

“I... I can't.”

Why was she not surprised? He made a point of avoiding stressful situations at all costs. Still, one of them had to say something and soon. When she turned and started toward the front of the church, he asked, “You're going to do it?”

“One of us has to.” She moved swiftly until she was standing in front of all of the family and friends. Alone. A sea of confused looks focused on her. “There isn’t going to be wedding.”

“What?” someone in the back called out. “We can’t hear you.”

“There isn’t going to be a wedding!”

A shocked murmur swept through the church.

She didn’t wait for the inevitable questions. She turned and left. Once downstairs, she grabbed her purse, gathered her skirt, and rushed out the back door. Lucky for her, everyone was still inside the church, trying to figure out what was going on. She ran across the asphalt. It wasn’t easy to do in heels, but that didn’t stop her.

One of the benefits of living in a small town was that her apartment was close by. She pulled to a stop outside and rushed up the steps. Once inside her apartment, she struggled with the zipper on the wedding dress. Instead of it slipping off and pooling at her feet, she had to fight to lower it past her curvy hips.

When at last she’d shed all of the wedding stuff, she put on some comfy jeans and a T-shirt. She knew she couldn’t just skip town without a word, so she took a moment to write her mother a note. It was brief but to the point:

Mom,

I'm sorry. Please believe me that calling off the wedding was the right thing to do.

Don't bother to look for me. I'm leaving town. I need some time alone to figure out my future.

I love you,

Brooke

She slipped off the diamond ring and left it with the note on the table. She threw her clothes, shoes, and necessary items in some bags and boxes. Before she rushed out the door, she grabbed a photo of her family that was held by a heart magnet to the front of her fridge. Just because she was leaving didn't mean she didn't love her family. She loved them very much. She just couldn't spend the rest of her life in this town.

Her hatchback car waited in the parking lot. She threw her things inside and then jumped into the driver's seat. She felt that if she slowed down, she'd never escape. And she just had to see what was outside of Iowa. She had a feeling her future was waiting for her—she just had to find it.

She stamped the gas pedal, accelerating over the twenty-five-mile-an-hour speed limit. She normally wasn't a rule breaker, but today she didn't care. As Monarch faded in her rearview mirror, her pulse slowed, and she let up on the accelerator. It was all going to work out; she just didn't know how exactly.

She stared at the passing highway signs and realized she'd automatically turned west. A little smile tugged at the corner of her lips. *California, here I come.*

CHAPTER ONE

One year later...San Francisco, California

TODAY SHE WAS THE boss.

Brooke Campbell smiled as she made her way along the sidewalk. Her boss had just stepped onto a plane that morning with her fiancé. They were headed for the east coast for the next couple of weeks to celebrate their engagement with her family. Clara had been estranged from them for quite some time, so this was a really big deal for them.

Brooke was happy for Clara, who was more than her boss. Since they'd been working together, they'd become good friends. Now, it left Brooke to oversee the office as well as the restoration of the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel. In fact, she had a meeting with the contractor this morning.

She lifted her face to the April sun, savoring the warmth of its rays upon her face. She loved this part of her job—getting out from behind her desk and enjoying the fresh air. She was never one to sit around for long. Maybe it stemmed from being raised on a farm, where sitting around hadn't been an option.

Now that she was an assistant planner at the Perky Pink Wedding Company, she did more administrative work than she'd like; however, the owner, Clara Harrington, had slowly been increasing Brooke's number of responsibilities.

Clara had recently hired a new person to work the reception desk. Brooke now occupied one of the available offices. It was still a small business but it was growing as word spread of each successful wedding.

Soon Brooke hoped to be promoted to a full-fledged wedding planner and be able to head out to various locations in San Francisco to meet with the wedding couples to plan their special day. That would be huge for her. She didn't want to do anything to mess up her upward trajectory at the Perky Pink Wedding Company.

First things first, she needed a cup of coffee from Lacy's Java 'N Tea. The pink and white umbrellas covering the two outside tables came into view. As she drew closer, she noticed a young couple at one of the tables. The young woman was blushing and smiling at the guy who was with her. Their fingers were entwined. Love was definitely in the air—at least for some people.

She had absolutely no interest in love or romance. After being stood up at the altar, so to speak, she'd written off men. Instead, she was focused on her career.

She looked past the couple to the two tall triple-ball topiaries with lush green foliage in large white pots, which sat on either side of the coffeehouse's plate-glass window. In the center, gold lettering spelled out *Lacy's Java 'N Tea*.

She moved to the white double doors with brass fixtures and pulled one open. Her nose was immediately greeted with the rich aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. She inhaled deeply. Mmm...

She stepped inside but couldn't go far. People were lined up to the door. Her gaze moved between the two lines. They were both equally long. The checkouts were on either side of the long counter. In the center was where you went to pick up your coffee.

While she waited, she pulled her phone from her purse to check her messages. As she suspected, while she'd driven from her apartment to the coffee shop, her boss had sent her messages.

Clara

Our plane is delayed. Did you follow up with the Wilson wedding about the dress?

I forgot to drop off the book of invitations for Melody McCall. Could you do it for me? Thx!

*Just wait until you meet the contractor. He's *fire emoji**

Brooke

I took care of the Wilson wedding yesterday.

I will drop off the invitations later today.

Brooke reread Clara's last message. Ever since her boss had reconnected with her ex-fiancé, who was now her future husband, Clara wanted everyone to be as happy as she was. It wasn't going to happen. Brooke had almost gotten married once...

She yanked her thoughts to a halt. She wasn't going to dwell on the past. She'd left all of that back in Iowa. It was over and finished. So, why did the memory still bother her?

She gave herself a mental shake as she responded to Clara's last message.

Brooke

I'll meet with him shortly. But looks don't matter.

Clara

Looks do matter. He's a total hottie.

Brooke

Thought you were taken.

Clara

*I totally am. Doesn't mean my eyes stopped working.
Maybe you should appreciate the scenery.*

Brooke

eye-roll emoji

Someone behind her cleared their throat. She glanced up to find the line to the counter had moved up a couple of spots. She stepped forward. Only two more people before it was her turn.

Clara

You didn't see him yet. You'll change your mind.

Brooke

No. I won't.

Clara

You will. Gotta go. We're finally boarding.

Brooke exhaled a relieved sigh as she dropped her phone into her purse. Clara just wouldn't give up. She was determined to find someone for her, even though it wasn't what Brooke wanted. Granted there had been plenty of time since her breakup with Josh to move on and start dating again. She honestly wasn't interested. Not now. Maybe someday...

"Welcome to Lacy's." A young woman with curly red hair didn't look up from the computer monitor as she spoke. "What can I get you?" When the woman finally raised her head, her gaze landed on Brooke, and a smile lit up her face. "Oh, hi, Brooke. Do you want your usual?"

Brooke nodded to Ellie, who had become a friend. "Sounds good. You're really busy this morning."

Ellie put in her order. "We are. They started a promotion this week. Buy one coffee, get one free. And it seems to be a hit. Would you like a second coffee?"

“Not today. Clara is out of town.”

“Maybe they’ll run the sale again when she gets back.” Ellie’s gaze moved to the long line. “I’d love to chat, but the line is past the door now.”

Brooke glanced back and was surprised to see the line streaming out onto the sidewalk. She turned back to Ellie. “Hope things slow down for you.”

“Thanks.”

Brooke moved toward the center counter, which sat over a lighted display case of baked goods. She tried not to look at the display, because she had yet to meet a baked good she didn’t love. But buying coffee and pastries really added up. Most of her paycheck went toward her rent for a seven-hundred-square-foot apartment. Living in the city wasn’t cheap.

There was an older woman already standing at the counter. The woman grabbed a to-go cup and turned for the door. When she moved, Brooke’s gaze landed on a tall, hulk of a man. He was well past six feet tall. She tilted her chin upward to take in his wavy brown hair.

He was reading something on his phone, so he didn’t notice her looking in his direction. It gave her a chance to take in his straight nose, chiseled jaw with a few days’ old scruff and squared chin. Not bad. Not bad at all. And those broad shoulders would be just perfect to lean on.

He raised his head. For the briefest of moments, their gazes connected. His eyes were dark and mesmerizing. Her stomach dipped. She could definitely lose herself in his eyes.

Realizing she was staring, she glanced away. Her cheeks burned. It felt as though a sunlamp had been turned on her face. What was wrong with her?

It wasn't like she went around ogling guys. But there was something special about this guy. In fact, she couldn't resist glancing up to take a second look at his broad shoulders and the gray T-shirt that clung to his bulging biceps. She swallowed hard. He was totally built.

When he glanced her way, she once more averted her gaze. Where was her coffee? Her foot lightly tapped the white-and-black tiled floor. She really needed to get going. She had things to do, and none of them had anything to do with ogling this stranger—no matter how attractive she might find him.

She reached for her phone. She might as well review the business emails while she waited. In all honesty, they didn't need her attention at that particular moment, but it would keep her attention from veering off to the handsome stranger.

Was he still looking at her? She wanted to know so badly. Just one quick glance would give her the answer, but she refused to give in to the temptation. No way. She wasn't getting caught staring at him again. It simply wasn't going to happen. She'd already embarrassed herself enough for one morning.

“Grande, black with cream and sugar.” The barista placed the cup on the counter.

Brooke dropped her phone back into her purse. She reached for the cup. As her fingers wrapped around the cup, she felt the warmth of someone touching her hand. Confused, she lifted her

gaze to find out whose hand was touching hers. Her gaze once more collided with those bottomless dark eyes.

She swallowed and then smiled at him. “Excuse me. You have my coffee.”

“I don’t think so. It’s you who has my coffee.” His deep voice was like a shot of espresso, a combination of bitterness and sweetness mixed to perfection.

She chose to ignore how much she enjoyed the sound of his voice as she continued to smile at him, hoping he’d do the same. There was no reason for them to be at odds.

Although, she wasn’t about to give up her coffee, not for him, not for anyone. She needed it so she could get moving. “I don’t think so. I placed my order before you.”

She wasn’t exactly certain of that, but she thought she’d stepped up to this counter before him. Hadn’t she?

She pulled on the cup, but he wouldn’t release his hold. The smile slipped from her lips as she continued to stare into his eyes. There was determination and frustration flickering in their dark depths. The man was certainly stubborn.

“Fine,” she said.

“Have it,” he said.

Their voices spoke over each other. At the same time, Brooke released her hold on the cup. This wasn’t worth fighting about.

Thud!

She glanced down to find the cup on the floor. The lid had come off, and the hot coffee was now all over the jeans and

work boots of Mr. Grumpy Pants.

A deep groan rumbled from his chest. It sent a cascade of goosebumps racing down her arms.

Oh no! Her gaze lifted to meet his. His face filled with color as his dark brows were drawn together into a formidable line. She didn't think it was possible, but his eyes were a shade darker now.

She could imagine how painful it must be to have steaming hot coffee spilled all over his legs. "Are you all right?" She fumbled around in her purse for her phone. "Should I call 9-1-1?"

"For what?" His words were clipped as he stared down at the mess.

"For you. The coffee... Did it burn you?"

"*Your* coffee didn't burn me."

Suddenly it was *her* coffee. Interesting. "I... I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I thought you had it."

"Obviously, I didn't." His voice was practically a growl.

She grabbed a fistful of paper napkins from the dispenser. She knelt down at the same time he did. Their heads bumped.

"Ow!" She pulled back. Boy was he hardheaded, literally and figuratively. She rubbed the tender spot. He didn't let on that they'd collided. It must not have hurt his hard head.

The coffee had splashed on her white shoes, too, but she ignored them. She didn't say a word as she reached out to help

clean up the spilled coffee that was all over the lower portion of his pant legs and boots, which looked to be new.

As she attempted to wipe his pant leg, he jerked back. “What are you doing?”

“I’m helping.”

“I don’t need your help.” His voice vibrated with agitation.

Her arm hesitated in midair. Then she changed tactics. She reached for the now-empty cup on the floor, and then used the napkins to sop up the spilled coffee.

The man was busy wiping the coffee from the top of his boots. A low rumbling emanated from him as he attempted to dry his faded jeans that now had a brown stain. Her gaze flickered to him. “Here.” She held out the extra napkins. “I’ll get you more.”

“Just go.” His voice was deep with a note of agitation.

At that moment one of the workers rolled over a mop and bucket. Brooke straightened. She wasn’t sure what else to do. She felt bad about the mess, but it wasn’t all her fault. He’d let go of the cup at the same time she did, but he didn’t appear willing to admit to his part in the accident.

When the man straightened, his gaze settled on her. His dark eyes acted like a shield—keeping outsiders at bay. It made her all the more curious about him. She wanted to learn the secrets he had lurking just beneath the surface. What had caused him to wear that frown like body armor?

The slap of the wet mop on the tile floor startled her back to reality. She gave herself a mental shake. What was wrong with her? Why in the world would she be interested in such a grouchy man, no matter how good-looking he was?

Seeing as there was nothing more for her to do there, she turned on her coffee-stained heels and left. She refused to dwell on that stubborn man.

It wasn't until she reached her car that she realized she'd walked out of the coffee shop without anything to drink. She sighed. There was absolutely no way she was going back. Not a chance.

She drove to the office, where their new receptionist, Heather Wise, was working at the front desk. They exchanged good mornings, and then Brooke made her way to the single-serve coffee machine and filled it with water. It definitely wouldn't be as good as Lacy's java, but it would do.

As she waited for her coffee to brew, her thoughts returned to the man with the deep voice. He was very easy on the eyes. Too bad he wasn't friendly. Not that any of it mattered. It was the first time she'd seen him there and most likely the last time too.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS SUPPOSED TO be a relaxing morning.

Logan Montgomery had been able to sleep in because his meeting wasn't until nine. He'd dropped his daughter off at preschool. Everything had been going smoothly until he'd stopped for coffee...

He inwardly groaned as his thoughts strayed to the annoying woman from the coffee shop. First, she tried to steal his coffee. And then she had the nerve to try to yank the cup from him and ended up spilling the coffee all over him. He hadn't let on to her, but the hot beverage really had hurt.

Sure, she might be good-looking—some might even consider her to be beautiful. And the way her long lashes framed her emerald green eyes was quite captivating. Not that he was interested or anything. As a single dad, his life was quite full without re-entering the dating scene. Not that he would ever entertain asking the woman from the coffeehouse out on a date. He could only imagine what a disaster that would be.

He pulled his pickup into the parking lot of the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel. He slowed down, giving himself a chance to take in the little chapel. He loved the spacious property.

There was a classic charm to the weathered building, but it could definitely use a fresh coat of white paint. As well as a new roof. He'd already reached out to some subcontractors to tackle those items.

The more he looked at the weathered building, the more he regretted agreeing to the accelerated timeline for the renovations. The owner wanted the entire building, both inside and out, to have a facelift in a matter of weeks. Eight weeks to be exact.

He'd been more focused on the bonus he'd been offered if he could complete the project by the end of May. It would mean he could pay his back bills and not have to work quite as much. He would be able to spend more quality time with his little girl, and that was everything.

So, if temporarily working every single day as he bounced between his firefighter duties and running his own contractor business for the next several weeks would make life better for his four-year-old daughter, Kaylie, as well as himself, then he would do it. He hoped that nothing unexpected came up during the renovation. Although, he'd been in this business long enough to know that the unexpected was to be expected with any job. Maybe if he was lucky the problems that did creep up wouldn't be big.

He got out of his truck. A gust of wind rushed past him. It was much windier out here on the coast.

He glanced around. Clara had mentioned that someone would be there to meet him and let him inside the building. There wasn't another vehicle in the lot. Hopefully, they hadn't forgotten about their meeting as he didn't have any keys to the building and he wanted to get started right away.

He might as well inspect the outside of the building—again. It'd been a while since he was here. And though he had made detailed notes, he wanted to refresh his memory.

He grabbed a pen and notebook as well as his coffee. With a push, the door of his truck creaked shut. In long strides, he approached the chapel.

The most stunning aspect of the chapel was its location. It stood at the top of a bluff that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. He could definitely understand the reason they wanted to fix up the place.

He walked slowly around the building. He noted all the things that had to be done. He would compare this list to the prior one to see what he'd overlooked. This job was too important not to get the details right.

And quite honestly, he loved the architecture of the chapel. It had a uniqueness all its own, with its wall of windows facing the ocean. Even the sides of the building had a large number of tall windows.

At one point, he stopped and set down his things in order to pull out his phone. He snapped some reference photos. The front doors were weathered. He imagined them sanded and repainted. Perhaps a bright, cheery red to draw the eye and say: *come inside*. He made a note to discuss the door's new color with Clara.

He glanced back at the parking lot. There was still no sign of the person he was supposed to meet. They were supposed to unlock the chapel and be Clara's eyes while she was out of town.

He pulled out his phone and dialed Clara's number. The line rang once before switching to voicemail. He disconnected the call.

Perhaps his contact had arrived before him. After all, the episode at the coffee shop had delayed him a bit. Maybe they'd unlocked the door for him and were planning to return later. He climbed the few steps to the doors. He reached for the brass handle.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

The woman's voice came from behind him. His hand lowered to his side as he turned around. An older woman with short curly white hair stood in the parking lot. With the aid of a cane, she shuffled her way toward him. A deep frown settled on her features.

He wondered where she'd come from. There was no other vehicle in the parking lot. Was it possible she'd walked to the chapel? That seemed to be the only reasonable explanation.

And yet that didn't seem right because her mobility appeared to be hampered.

She lifted her arm with a cell phone in it. "You're trespassing. I'm calling the police."

He had no idea who this woman was, but she was feisty. "I'm the contractor hired to work on the chapel."

The woman frowned at him. She cupped a hand by her ear. "I can't hear you."

He retraced his steps until he stood in front of the woman. He raised his voice. "I'm the contractor."

She frowned at him. "Where's Clara?"

"I believe she's out of town, but she arranged for someone to meet me here."

Just then there was a strong gust of wind. It blew hard off the ocean. Dirt was swept up in the air causing him to squint.

"Oh no! My scarf." A worried tone filled the woman's voice as she reached out for it. Her fingers clasped nothing but air.

He watched as a scarf in the shades of pink, purple and aqua get swept away with the wind. A quick glance at the anguish on the woman's face let him know what must be done. He took off after it. The wind whipped the material around like it was a kite. It rose high before dipping low. It kept getting away from him but he refused to give up.

When he was halfway across the large parking lot, the wind let up. The colorful material fluttered to the ground. He moved

quickly, hoping to snatch it up before the wind picked up again.

When his fingers clutched the soft scarf, a smile pulled at the corners of his lips. *Got it.*

He retraced his steps and came to a stop in front of the woman. He held the scarf out to her. “Here you go.”

Tears shimmered in the woman’s eyes. “Thank you so much. You don’t know how much this scarf means to me.”

“I’m glad I was here to help.”

She clutched the scarf to her chest. “This was the last gift my husband gave me before I lost him. He knew how much I loved bright colorful scarves.” Her warm gaze met his. “My name’s Mabel. Mabel Grace.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Logan Montgomery.”

She smiled at him. “Will you take good care of it? It’s been in my family for generations.”

His gaze moved from her to the chapel and back again. “Maybe you could tell me about its history.”

“I would love to.” Her eyes lit up. “I have some photos too.”

He loved learning about the older structures he worked on. It helped him understand the personality of the building.

Mabel told him that she would gather the information and let him know when she had it together. He noticed how animated she became as they continued to talk. He got the impression she was a bit lonely. So when she offered him some coffee, he

promised to do that at a future date—sometime when he wasn't in a rush.

When she walked away, he moved toward the chapel. He grasped the brass handle, and to his surprise, the latch gave way. He pushed the door wide open and took a step inside. Just one step. It was all he needed.

The sun was shining through the many windows surrounding the front of the small chapel. The morning rays reflected off the many surfaces, giving the interior a warm glow. If he were the romantic sort, it would take his breath away, but he wasn't that type. He was more matter of fact these days.

He heard the sound of a car outside. He didn't bother to investigate, because his attention was drawn to the inside of the chapel. The last time he'd been here, it had been overcast. The bright sunshine highlighted nooks and crannies he hadn't noticed before.

He couldn't stand around here all day, staring at the place. If he was going to get this project underway, he had to take some more measurements—starting right here in the foyer.

He stepped farther in the chapel, letting the door close behind him. He pulled his measuring tape from his tool belt and bent down. First, he measured the doorway and noted it. The doors looked to be in surprisingly good shape. They just needed sanding and a couple coats of paint.

Once he had those measurements, he turned to the side walls. They looked a little worn. He knelt down to examine the baseboards. There were a lots nicks and gouges. With their

intricate design, it would take a lot of time to replace all of them. Perhaps some patching would be a more economical choice.

Just then the door swung open. There was no time for him to move. The door hit him in the back and knocked him forward. His forehead thumped against the wall.

He groaned as he righted himself. He wasn't sure which hurt more: his back or his head. What was it with this morning? First, the incident at the coffee shop and now someone is whacking him with the door.

“Oh, no,” came a female voice. “I didn't know you were there.”

Logan had the sense he'd heard the voice before, but he couldn't place it. And with him still facing the wall, he hadn't caught a glimpse of her. Then a moment of clarity came to him. It sounded like the woman from the coffee shop. *Surely it's not her.*



Not again.

Brooke had been in such a hurry to catch up with the contractor that she'd rushed up the steps and burst through the door, not expecting anyone to be kneeling behind it. She felt awful.

“I'm so sorry,” she said. “Are you all right?”

The man continued to kneel there. His hand moved to his forehead. So much for making a good impression on the contractor. And the fact they had to work together for the next eight or so weeks meant she had to somehow smooth over this very unfortunate first meeting.

With his back to her, she noticed his thick dark hair was trimmed short. His neck was tanned, as though he spent a lot of time in the sun. Beneath the tight gray T-shirt, he had such broad shoulders they deserved a second glance.

“Do you always go barging through closed doors?” His surly tone drew her from admiring his physique.

Choosing to ignore his question, she said, “Can I help you stand?”

“I’ve got it.”

After he straightened, he turned to her. Their gazes collided, and it felt as though a bolt of shock ricocheted through her. Her heart lodged in her throat. It was the rude man from the coffee shop. *What is he doing here? Did he follow me? No. He was here first.*

As they continued to stare at each other, she wanted to vocalize her thoughts, but at that moment, her mouth refused to cooperate with her mind.

“It’s you.” His brows drew together into a formidable line.

She noticed how he once more ran his fingers over a red spot on his forehead. As though he noticed her staring at him, he lowered his hand. There was definitely a red spot there. *Oh no.*

Her instinct was to go to him and render aid, but the scowl on his face warned her off.

“What are you doing here?” His voice rumbled with agitation. “Did you follow me?”

The angry gleam in his eyes startled her out of her shock. “What?” *How dare he?* “Of course I didn’t.”

“Isn’t it enough that you dumped coffee all over me? Now you have to slam a door into my back.”

She noticed how he’d mentioned his back but said nothing about his head. She wondered why that was, but when her gaze met his perpetual frown, she had no intention of asking him.

He was making it hard to feel bad for him when he was so unfriendly. “I’ve apologized. What else do you want from me?”

“Leave.” His tone was resolute. He turned his back to her and moved toward one of the benches.

Talk about a grumpy gus. He made the Grinch look downright hospitable. She couldn’t help but wonder what had happened in his life to make him so miserable. And then she recalled their coffee mishap. She refused to accept all of the blame for that accident. He’d let go of the cup at the same time as she did.

She had news for him. She wasn’t going anywhere. And she wasn’t going to speak to his back.

When he glanced back at her, she didn't think it was possible, but the frown lines on his face deepened. "Why are you still here?"

It pained her to admit it, but she knew there was no avoiding it. "I'm assuming you're Logan."

His dark brows rose. "How do you know my name?" A moment passed, and the surprise eased from his handsome face. "You saw it on the cup at the coffee shop, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't. But I am here to meet with a Logan. My name is Brooke." She went to hold out her hand to him, hesitated, and then lowered her arm.

"A meeting?"

"Yes. It appears we're going to be working together."

For a moment, he didn't say anything, as though she'd actually stunned him. In fact, his mouth moved, but no words came out. She struggled not to smile. She didn't want him to misconstrue her amusement as her being happy about spending time with him. Nothing could be further from the truth.

He shook his head. "I'm not working with you."

Clara was counting on Brooke to make this all work. If he was to quit, there would be no chance of getting the chapel renovated in time for Clara and Andrew's wedding.

Buzz-buzz.

The man held up a finger as he reached for his phone. He pressed it to his ear and walked to the other end of the chapel. “Wait. I can’t hear you.”

As he moved away, she couldn’t make out what he was saying, other than a couple of grunts. Not that she was trying to eavesdrop, but the chapel wasn’t that big, and his voice did echo.

She retrieved her phone from her purse and once more checked her email. To her surprise and relief, nothing new had come in since she’d last perused it. Clara had promised that work would be light until after her whirlwind wedding, and she’d been true to her word.

But it was more than just the wedding. This year Clara was not only planning to get married but also to break ground to build the Perky Pink Wedding World. It would be like a wedding village that would have little shops off to the side of the wedding chapel from dresses to wedding cakes and a few stops in between. It was going to be amazing.

The man ended his call and started for the exit.

He’s leaving? Now. They hadn’t even talked.

She rushed after him and came to a stop in front of him. “Where are you going?”

“I have to go.” His tone was terse.

She wasn’t about to let herself be intimidated by his bad mood. “Going where? We have to discuss the renovation.”

“Something came up.” He stepped around her and kept going with long, quick strides.

She pressed her hands into her sides. “When are you coming back?”

“Tomorrow.”

Slack-jawed she watched him walk out the door. Didn't he realize the short amount of time they had to fix up the chapel? Obviously not or he wouldn't be leaving before he even got started working. Clara made a mistake by hiring this guy. A big mistake. And now it was Brooke's problem.

CHAPTER THREE

“DADDY, PLAY WITH ME.”

Early the next morning Logan paused from where he was draping drop cloths over the benches in the wedding chapel. With his daughter in tow, they'd been up and out of the house by six-thirty. On a normal workday, he made a point of starting work at seven, allowing him to finish up early.

Lucky for him Mabel, who watched over the chapel, had noticed him pull into the parking lot. She'd made her way to his pickup.

From what he'd gleaned from his brief conversation with Mabel, she didn't have any children to hand the chapel down to. She'd gotten to know Clara when the chapel was rented for weddings. Over time, they'd grown close. And now Mabel had sold the chapel to Clara and her fiancé.

Mabel also told him that she'd spoken to Clara the prior evening and was asked to provide him with a spare key to the chapel. After Mabel was on her way, he proceeded to get

Kaylie settled in the chapel with her toys around her. He'd set to work scraping paint and figuring out what pieces of trim work would need to be replaced.

He paused to glance at his daughter, who was playing with her building blocks in the front of the chapel. He'd been keeping a close eye on her. "I can't I have work to do."

"Please." She pleaded with her eyes.

All he wanted to do in that moment was to make her happy. "What are you making?"

"A house. Wanna help?" She held a blue block out to him.

He really needed to work, but he couldn't deny his daughter a few minutes of his time. He took the block. "I'll help you get started. And you can finish it. Okay?"

She nodded her head as she picked out some more blocks.

"Are we building a big house or little one?"

"Big!"

How did he know that would be her answer? His daughter liked things big, from her pancakes to her stuffed animals.

He settled on the blanket next to her. They took turns adding blocks in the shape of a house. For just a minute, he set aside thoughts of his responsibilities and enjoyed this moment with his daughter.

She was so cute with her messy ponytail and mismatched clothes she'd picked out herself. When he'd suggested a different shirt, she'd insisted on wearing what she had on. Her

big brown eyes were so bright and observant. He was relieved that she was feeling better.

Yesterday Kaylie had gotten sick at preschool. With it being his week to have Kaylie and with his ex-wife being out of town, he had to pick her up. The preschool told him a virus was making the rounds. Lot of kids were sent home sick. The preschool policy was for her not to return for a few days.

When he got her home, Kaylie had curled up on the couch. With her favorite cartoons on the television, she fell asleep. She slept until late in the afternoon. When she woke up, she was feeling better and ate some dinner.

By this morning, Kaylie had no fever or stomach ache. In fact, she ate her pancakes in record time. It was then that he asked if she was up for going to work with him because he didn't have anyone to watch her. To his surprise, Kaylie readily agreed.

Any other time he would have stayed home with his daughter, but the success of this project would determine whether or not he retained ownership of his house—their home. After his divorce, they'd agreed to sell the house but when it came time to sign the papers, he couldn't do it. He'd put too much of himself into the remodel and couldn't part with it.

He took out a loan and bought out his ex-wife. It took every bit of savings he had and left him in deep debt, but it was worth it. He loved that house. But with some unexpected large expenses in the past couple of months he'd fallen behind on

his payments. This was his one and only chance to catch up before foreclosure.

He'd taken two weeks' vacation time from his job at the fire department in order to get a solid start on this big project. The chapel was to be restored in two months' time. Luckily, the generous budget would allow him to bring in sub-contractors to do a lot of the exterior work.

It would really help if that woman from yesterday would stay away. After all, he had a signed contract with Clara. The job was all spelled out. He didn't need a babysitter, especially one that was accident prone. He gently rubbed the tender spot on his forehead.

"Daddy?" Kaylie's voice drew him from his thoughts.

He focused on his daughter's beautiful face. "What?"

"Are you mad?"

"No, sweetie. I'm not mad." He attempted a smile.

"You look mad."

He did? Wait. He was smiling, wasn't he? He wondered what his daughter was seeing on his face for her to come to that conclusion. When she frowned at him, he let his face relax into his normal look.

She was probably detecting his thoughts about the annoying woman from the day before. What did she say her name was? He thought for a moment before it came to him. Brooke.

He was quite certain if that woman showed up today, some disaster would befall him. Maybe he should have considered bringing a hard hat with him...

With half of the toy house built, he got to his feet. "I have to get back to work."

"Okay."

The door creaked open. The breath stilled in his lungs. He turned. When he saw it was Henry Maxwell, his friend and business associate, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Henry was an older man. His wife had passed on, and they had no children. The man was a genius with sand paper and a paint brush. When his wife got sick, he'd slowed down to take care of her. And now that he was alone, he was back to work.

"Daddy, why are you huffing and puffing?" Kaylie's forehead scrunched up as she stared at him.

Huffing and puffing? He must have sighed at his relief that it wasn't Brooke who'd arrived. He thought of the damage the woman could unleash without even trying. Was it possible she wouldn't come back? He doubted he would be that lucky.



A new day.

A new beginning.

Things were going to work out today.

Brooke rolled down the window of her silver hatchback. Some day she dreamed of getting a convertible like her boss, who owned a pink one. Okay. So maybe she didn't want a pink car, even if it was part of the name of the company she worked for. She could only take so much pink. As an accent color, it was perfect. She had a pink pin she wore to work every day with the company logo.

She was partial to purple, but it wasn't that big of a deal. If she had to wear pink the rest of her life, she'd do it to keep this job. And that was saying a lot, but she loved her boss. Clara was so easy to work for—some of the bridezillas they dealt with could be a challenge, but luckily, they were few and far between. They were usually able to spot them at the preliminary meeting. Upon this sort of realization, their schedules would suddenly fill up. The truth of the matter was that most brides were a delight to work with; otherwise, she wouldn't want so desperately to keep her job.

Brooke smiled as she drove along. She loved being in California. It was so far away from Iowa with its acres and acres of corn fields, not to mention the heat, no make that its sweltering summer heat and its downright frigid winters.

She'd always longed to be near the water. Her family occasionally took vacations at the lake north of their place. There was something so relaxing about being there. She loved to swim and to go boating.

There was a part of her that had longed to be on the coast. She'd wanted to feel the sand between her toes and listed to

the lull of the water lapping against the shore.

Someday, if she were lucky, she would be able to buy a house that looked out over the ocean—to see it in the morning from her balcony and be able to walk out her door and down the beach. Okay, so maybe that was just a fantasy because there was no way she would be able to afford a beachfront home, but a girl had to have her dreams, right? Still, her grandmother had always told her that you couldn't strive for something that you couldn't dream of.

Her boss had just purchased the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel. It was going to be so amazing, just as soon as it had a few touchups. And the very first wedding was going to be her boss's wedding.

She guided her car southbound out of the city. The sun was shining, and it was going to be a gorgeous day. She turned up the radio to hear the country music over the rush of air coming in through the open windows.

She just had to keep the business on track and handle the renovation. That sounded doable, right? No big deal. Easy-peasy. Or rather it would be if it wasn't for the grumpy contractor who bailed on their meeting with no explanation.

After yesterday, she had real doubts about the man. Why in the world had Clara hired this guy? Sure, he was good-looking, but that wasn't going to get the work done. And it appeared his priority wasn't focused on the chapel. That had to change today, or she would be forced to recommend that Clara fire the man and hire a new contractor.

With that thought in mind, Brooke pressed harder on the accelerator. Her thoughts focused on Logan what's-his-name. He was either taking her coffee and then spilling it all over both of them, or he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She wondered if he would even show up today for work.

And if he didn't, firing him would be the easy part. It was finding someone else to take the job that would be the challenge. The waiting time for a contractor these days was months long.

Buzz-buzz.

She glanced down at the caller ID on the dash display. *Ugh!* It was Clara. What was she supposed to say to her? That she had the worst taste in contractors?

Hmm... Maybe not when it came to his looks because he was very good-looking. He'd be even better looking if he didn't always have that scowl on his face. Perhaps she'd keep that part to herself.

As her phone continued to ring over the car's speaker system, she realized she couldn't just ignore Clara's call. It would only make her friend anxious, and Clara was supposed to be back in Washington D.C., enjoying her vacation and focusing on her reconciliation with her family.

Brooke swallowed hard as she pressed the button on the steering wheel. "Hi. How are things going?"

"It's been great. Not to say there weren't some tense moments, especially with my father. But I think we're getting

past all of that now. My parents have even agreed to fly out to California for our wedding.”

“That’s great!” No, it wasn’t. Not if there wasn’t a renovated chapel for them to get married in. Brooke attempted to sound upbeat. “I’m so happy for you. I know you really want your father to walk you down the aisle.”

“I do. And he already agreed. It’s going to be the perfect wedding in the perfect chapel. So how are things going there?”

Terrible. “Really good. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Worry about?” Clara’s voice took on a worried tone. “Brooke, is something wrong?”

She inwardly groaned. What was wrong with her? What had possessed her to use that particular wording?

She pulled to a stop at a red light. “No. There’s nothing wrong. I would have called you if there was a problem.”

“Are you sure?” There was a hesitation in her voice.

“Of course.” She hoped her voice sounded authentic.

There was a strained pause. “Okay. I guess I’m just so happy that I’m worried something is going to come along to ruin everything.”

Now Brooke felt even worse about her clash with Logan—even if he was the most difficult man she’d ever met. Still, she couldn’t let her friend’s wedding plans crash and burn, especially after all Clara and Andrew had gone through to end

up together. This wedding was going to happen, even if she had to fix up the chapel on her own. Hysterical laughter bubbled up in the back of her throat at the thought of her wielding a hammer or saw.

“Are you laughing?” Clara asked.

Brooke swallowed hard as she gave herself a mental shake. “No.” Anxious to change the subject, she said, “I’m almost to the chapel. I’ll make sure everything is on track for the wedding.”

Clara and Andrew were supposed to get married a few years ago before Clara moved to California but something happened. Clara was vague on the details, as though it hurt too much to discuss. The wedding never happened.

Now Clara and Andrew say that they’ve wasted too much time apart and they wanted to be married as soon as possible. Clara thought it’d be romantic if they were the first couple to be married in the newly renovated chapel.

“Thank you,” Clara said. “You don’t know how much this means to me. You’re the best.”

The pressure to fix this mess weighed on her. “I’m not doing anything you haven’t done for brides time and time again.”

“I just want you to know how much I appreciate you. You’re a good friend. The best of friends.”

Brooke smiled as she recalled how Clara had asked her to be a bridesmaid. Their friendship had blossomed over the past

year. It felt good to have such a close friend. It also added pressure for her to keep everything on track in Clara's absence.

"I feel the exact same way. And your wedding is going to be perfect."

"Shh... Don't jinx things."

"I won't. I promise." Brooke slowed at an intersection. "I've almost reached the chapel parking lot, so I need to go." And make sure Logan doesn't run off before he does any work.

"Understood. Thanks for everything. Remember, if you need me, I'm just a phone call away."

"I won't forget."

They said their goodbyes, promising to talk soon. Brooke disconnected the call before wheeling into the parking lot of the chapel. She'd hoped to find a fleet of construction vehicles and a parade of tanned guys flexing their muscles as they carried lumber and equipment through the parking lot. Hey, a girl could dream, right?

But the only vehicle in the parking lot was a familiar white pickup. *So, he has returned.* She breathed easier. But why was his vehicle the only one in the parking lot?

She checked the time. It was a little after eight o'clock in the morning. She'd have thought they'd be hard at work by now. Was it possible the rest of the crew was out picking up supplies? Yes, that must be it.

She pulled to a stop in a nearby parking spot. When she got out, she noticed the signage on the side of the pickup: L.M.

Construction. She strode through the parking lot with purposeful steps. All the while she made a mental note that the asphalt was going to need a new top coat and the parking spaces needed painting. Because soon this chapel was going to be “the” place to get married. A San Francisco hot spot. They already had a list of clients inquiring about booking their wedding at the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel.

She climbed the steps to the double doors. The chapel wasn't huge, but what it lacked in size, it definitely made up for in charm. If she ever considered getting married, she wouldn't mind getting married here.

She pulled open the door and stepped inside. Her thoughts stumbled to a halt as she took in the benches covered with brown tarps. This was progress. Hope bloomed in her chest.

“Hello.” A little girl in pink pants and a bright green shirt stepped in front of her.

It took Brooke a moment to recover from the surprise of finding a child alone in the chapel. She knelt down. “Hi. Who are you?”

The girl pressed her hands to her sides, lifted her chin, and asked in all seriousness. “Who are you?”

Brooke hadn't expected that response from the little girl. “I... I'm Brooke.” Her gaze scanned the chapel before returning to the little girl with her brown hair pulled up into a messy ponytail that was slightly off center. “Where's your mommy or daddy?”

“Right here.” A deep male voice came from the side. Logan peered out from behind a stand at the front of the chapel. His thick eyebrows were drawn together in yet another frown.

“You know my daddy?” The little girl crossed her arms as she stared at Brooke.

“Um...” How did she put this gently? “We’ve met before.”

“Are you his girlfriend?”

Immediately, heat rushed from her chest and set her face aflame. “No!” Realizing that she’d been too assertive with her answer, she softly added, “Definitely not.”

“Do you want to be Daddy’s girlfriend?”

She turned a pleading look at Logan. For the first time since she’d met him, he wore a laughing smile. It smoothed out the frown lines on his face. Amusement danced in his eyes, making him look so handsome. This realization only intensified the heat in her cheeks.

After he took a moment to enjoy her obvious discomfort, he stepped forward. “Kaylie, this lady is here because we’re working together.”

Kaylie nodded her head. She looked at Brooke and held out her doll. “Want to play with me?”

Aw... Brooke really liked the little girl. How in the world did such a grump end up with such a cute kid? It must be the mother’s genes shining through.

Her gaze moved over the mess of benches, lumber, and tools scattered about. She was worried about Kaylie getting hurt. But it wasn't her place to say anything.

Logan turned to his daughter. "Sweetie, she can't play with you. We have some business to discuss, and then she has to leave. Why don't you go over there and play with your toys?" Once his daughter was out of earshot, he asked, "What do you want?"

"I'm here to discuss the renovations. We never got a chance yesterday."

"What's there to discuss? I went over all of the details with Clara, and she approved them." He made a motion to walk past her. "I have to get back to work."

He's dismissing me? No way. "Wait." She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin ever so slightly. "That's nice, but Clara isn't here, and I am." Her voice rose. "So, I'd like you to go over the details with me."

"You can't yell at my daddy!" The girl's face was creased with frown lines.

Heat returned to Brooke's cheeks, setting them ablaze. She'd forgotten about the little girl. She hadn't meant to upset her.

She approached the little girl and knelt down so they could speak eye to eye. "I wasn't yelling at your daddy. I just got a little excited."

"Excited?" The girl's eyes shone with confusion.

Brooke nodded. “My best friend’s wedding is supposed to be in this chapel, and I’m worried it won’t be ready in time for the wedding.”

“Why not?”

Brooke’s gaze moved past the girl to her father, who had his muscled arms crossed over his broad chest. He wore a forbidding frown. No words were needed to let her know that she needed to fix this asap.

She turned her attention back to Kaylie. It was time to change the subject. “That’s a pretty doll you have. What’s her name?”

Kaylie held up the doll with a pink dress and brown curls. “This is Penny.”

Brooke smiled at the girl. She reminded her so much of herself at that age. Her older sister never liked to play with dolls. So, Brooke had played with them on her own. Every time a memory of her sister crossed her mind, there was a pang in her heart.

She hadn’t been back to Iowa since she’d left. She’d wanted to go, but her mother would make one excuse or another for why it wasn’t the right time. And when she spoke to her sister, it was the same way. By the way they’d acted, it was like she was the one who had called off her wedding to Josh.

She gave herself a mental shake. She had to focus on the here and now. And right now, her priority was getting this chapel ready for a wedding.

She centered her attention on the little girl standing in front of her. “I used to have a doll that looked a lot like her.”

Kaylie’s smile broadened. “She’s my favorite.”

“Kaylie,” Logan’s voice softened, “go back and play. We need to talk.”

While Logan talked to his daughter, Brooke’s gaze took in the two of them as they interacted. It was obvious he loved his daughter. It was also obvious that the emotion went both ways. Maybe he wasn’t such a bad guy.

Realizing the direction of her errant thoughts, she jerked them to a halt. He may be a good father but it didn’t make him a good contractor. After all, this was the man who’d taken her coffee, then he’d left the jobsite without a clear explanation and can’t have a civilized conversation. Her stomach knotted up. Hiring this guy was a big mistake, but how was she supposed to tell Clara?

CHAPTER FOUR

SHE GOT UNDER HIS skin.

She was like an itch he couldn't quite scratch.

Even so, Logan couldn't help but be drawn once more by Brooke's green eyes. When she got worked up, they sparkled like gems. They were so full of expression she'd never be able to bluff at poker. Her nose was small and pert. Her rosy lips were lush and glossy.

"Was it necessary to bring your daughter to work today?" Brooke's disapproving tone drew him from his thoughts.

Her presence was the last thing he needed. The frown on her face only stoked his irritation. She shouldn't judge him. She knew nothing about him or his life. And... Maybe that was the problem.

He sighed and placed his hands on his waist. "As a matter of fact, it was necessary. She was sent home from preschool yesterday because she didn't feel well." When he saw Brooke's eyes light up with understanding, he continued.

“Even though she feels better today, she can’t go back to preschool for a few days and the babysitter is on vacation. I don’t make it a habit of bringing my daughter to work with me. And after not being able to work yesterday, I didn’t want to call off. There’s too much work to be done.”

The worry lines on Brooke’s face eased once he explained his situation. “It’s good to know this was a one-off instance. We’re on a tight schedule. When will your crew be showing up?”

“You’re looking at the crew.”

“What?” She blinked as she stared at him. “It’s just the two of you to do all of this work?”

Not wanting her to panic and call Clara to have him fired, he said, “I also have sub-contracted all of the exterior work.”

Before she could say more, her phone went off, playing “Little White Church.” She pulled the phone from her white and purple polka dotted purse. She held a finger up for him to wait a moment.

He didn’t have time for this. He checked on Kaylie and then went back to work. A few minutes passed. He paused and didn’t hear Brooke on the phone. He could only hope she’d left.

When he glanced around, he found Brooke sitting on one of the benches, typing on her phone. He went back to work. He regularly checked on Kaylie, who appeared to be enjoying herself. She’d gotten out her coloring book and crayons from

her backpack. She could spend a couple of hours coloring. Something told him she was going to be an artist when she grew up.

He wanted to glance over at the other side of the chapel to see if Brooke was still there, but he resisted the temptation. He didn't want her to think it mattered to him if she was there or not.

He continued to sand the trim work at the front of the chapel. When he glanced over at his daughter, he noticed Brooke was with her. He paused the sander to hear what they were saying.

“Do you like to color?” Brooke asked Kaylie.

His daughter nodded. She showed Brooke some of the pages in her coloring book. He noticed how his daughter sat up tall as Brooke praised her work, and Kaylie's mouth lifted into a big smile.

“Wanna color too?” Kaylie held out a red crayon.

Brooke accepted the crayon as she settled on the floor. She slipped off her high heels and didn't seem to mind that she was wearing nice dress clothes.

He continued to watch as the two of them discussed who should color what parts of the page. It was really hard to stay irritated with Brooke when she was able to make his daughter smile and laugh. Not feeling the need to interfere, he went back to work.

When he stopped at lunchtime, he couldn't believe Brooke was still there and didn't seem to have any interest in going

anywhere. And his daughter was all smiles instead of complaining that she wanted to go home.

He approached them. He centered his attention on his daughter. “What have you been up to?”

Kaylie beamed a bright smile. “We colored. Want to see?”

A quick glance in Brooke’s direction revealed she was smiling too. As he took in her beautiful face, the words got trapped in the back of his throat. Maybe she wasn’t so bad—especially now that she wasn’t spilling coffee on him or hitting him with doors.

“Daddy?”

He swallowed hard and focused back on his daughter. “Oh, wow.” He stared at the colored picture of a puppy and a tree. “That’s really pretty. You did a really good job.”

“Brooke helped.”

He didn’t want to speak to Brooke, but his daughter had this expectant look on her face, and she wasn’t about to move on to another subject until he acknowledged Brooke’s contribution. He looked at Brooke. “You did a really good job too.”

“I didn’t do much. It was mostly your daughter.”

Was that a bit of a blush on her cheeks? He didn’t think it was possible for her to look even more beautiful, but she did. The thought caught him off guard. He thought she was beautiful? He supposed it was true, but it didn’t mean anything. Lots of women were beautiful...maybe not as gorgeous as Brooke when she smiled and her eyes sparkled.

He cleared his throat. “Kaylie, clean up your stuff, and we’ll go get some lunch.” He gestured for Brooke to follow him down the aisle a ways. “Thank you for spending time with Kaylie. You kept her from getting bored.”

Brooke shrugged off his words. “I didn’t do much. She’s a lot of fun to be around. And you looked like you could use the help.”

Why did she have to take a friendly moment and ruin it by implying that he couldn’t get his work done? It wasn’t the first time he’d had to balance his responsibilities, nor would be it be the last.

“I want you to know this arrangement is only temporary.” He turned to walk away.

“It’s got to be tough to be a single parent.” Brooke’s voice had him pausing and turning back.

He shrugged, not sure what she was getting at.

“Well, you must be doing a good job because your daughter is very happy.”

Kaylie ran over to them. “I’m *hungary*.”

Logan smiled at his daughter’s mispronunciation. “Then let’s get going.”

Kaylie looked over at Brooke. “Coming?”

Brooke sent him a hesitant look.

He turned to Kaylie. “Sweetie, I’m sure Brooke has other things she has to do.”

The hopeful look fell from his daughter's face. She looked so disappointed. And it made him feel bad, but it was best that she not get attached to Brooke. She wouldn't be in their lives for long.

Brooke knelt down to speak to his daughter. "Go with your daddy. Maybe I'll see you later."

"Come. Pretty please." Kaylie's bottom lip stuck out. Then his daughter looked at him. "Tell her to come."

He didn't want to. Being around Brooke unnerved him. He had no idea what to say to the woman. His ex-wife, Margie, used to tell him he wasn't the most social person. He supposed she was right.

Still, with Kaylie sending him that pleading look, he felt his resistance caving. His gaze moved to Brooke's. "You're welcome to join us. We're just going up the road a bit to grab a sandwich."

Brooke hesitated. Her gaze moved between him and his daughter. "I don't know."

She's going to make an excuse and leave. *Oh good.* A sense of relief came over him. The added bonus was that Kaylie wouldn't be mad at him when Brooke left.

"Please." Kaylie pulled at Brooke's arm.

Brooke smiled at his daughter, causing a warm fuzzy feeling in his chest. He cleared his throat, willing the feeling to go away. Because this accident-prone woman was not going to get to him. He liked anyone who was nice to his little girl.

That was all. He didn't have to worry, because Brooke was about to leave.

“Okay,” Brooke said. “Let's go.”

Wait. What? Surely he hadn't heard correctly. She was supposed to make up some excuse and leave. But when he looked at the pleased smile on his daughter's face, it was the only confirmation he needed.

He had a total mix of emotions, knowing that Brooke was having lunch with them. He smothered a frustrated groan. What were they supposed to discuss over lunch? And then a thought came to him. He hadn't responded to Brooke's request to discuss the project, perhaps they could do that over lunch. Even though he'd already sorted it all out with the owner, he supposed it wouldn't hurt to discuss it with Brooke so she was onboard with the whole concept. With his goal for the lunch in mind, he escorted the ladies to his pickup, which he now wished he'd taken time to clean out.

CHAPTER FIVE

LUNCH HAD BEEN OKAY.

The food was delicious. The company was so-so.

The next morning, Brooke couldn't stop replaying the events of yesterday in her mind. Kaylie had been chatty and easy to be around. She certainly didn't get her friendly demeanor from her father.

In all fairness, it wasn't like Logan had asked her to lunch. He had actually talked to her about the project at the chapel. Their conversation was all business, but it was better than nothing.

She did notice how Kaylie had a way of getting past her father's grumpiness. When he interacted with her, there was a warmth and gentleness about him that was surprising. Too bad he didn't act that way when he was dealing with her.

Now that she'd seen a glimmer of how he could be, she longed to see more of that warm part of him. Not that she was interested in him. She just wanted him to be friendlier because

it would help their working relationship; she planned to oversee this project from the beginning until the end.

When Clara asked her to keep an eye on the renovations, Brooke knew she wanted to make some sort of contribution. She didn't want to just sit around, watching Logan and Henry work on the place. She wanted to do something extra special for Clara and Andrew. She just didn't know what that project might be. She would have to give it some more thought.

After yesterday's lunch, she'd been called away to deal with a problem at an upcoming wedding venue. A water pipe had burst, and the damage was beyond the timeframe they had before the ceremony. Luckily, they kept a list of backup sites available. And the first one she'd shown the bride had done the trick. Crisis averted.

Today, she had to stop at the office in the morning. She dressed in her usual business attire. She took a change of clothes to switch into before she headed over to the chapel at lunchtime. She didn't let on to Logan, but her clothes from yesterday had gotten a couple of stains that she wasn't sure she would be able to get out.

She moved swiftly through her morning routine. Of course, it helped that she'd been awake before her alarm. She told herself that being ahead of her normal schedule was due to her anxiousness to jump into her work now that she was in charge, and it had absolutely nothing to do with wanting to see Logan again.

She'd even skipped her morning stop at Lacy's coffee shop and instead opted to make coffee at the office. She had hopes of getting through the work at the office before lunch and being able to get to the chapel even earlier; however, that didn't happen.

Even though they were temporarily not taking on any new clients, they still had a full calendar of upcoming weddings. There were various problems to be dealt with. Sometimes it was just a matter of listening to the bride's concerns and assuring her that everything would work out. Other times it took some considerable effort to resolve the problem, such as the wrong wedding dress being delivered or the bridesmaids dresses being ordered in the wrong color.

It was after lunch by the time she made it to the chapel. She was pleased when she pulled into the parking lot to find a team of men on the roof, ripping off the shingles. A large dumpster sat next to the chapel, and the shingles were tossed inside.

Mabel Grace made her way toward Brooke. "They've been working since early this morning. What a racket."

Brooke shielded her eyes as she stared up at the roof. "But they're making good progress."

"Yes, they are. I can't wait to see the place when it's all done."

"Me too. It should look fantastic."

They talked for a couple of minutes, before they each went their own way. Brooke headed up the steps and into the chapel.

As soon as she got inside, she came to a stop. Where was Logan? Perhaps he'd been outside and she'd missed him.

This would give her a chance to assess the interior progress. She made her way down the aisle as so many brides had done. And suddenly Logan appeared from behind the stand in the front of the chapel. Her heart leaped into her throat.

She tripped. She reached out, catching herself on the end of the bench.

He rushed toward her. "Are you okay?"

Heat flamed in her cheeks. "Yes. I'm fine. You just startled me."

His eyes shone worry as he glanced down at the floor, as though searching for whatever it was that she'd tripped on. When he didn't spot anything, his face scrunched up in a frown.

"I think I tripped over my own two feet," she explained.

She followed him to the front of the chapel and found Kaylie curled up on an old comforter with her toys around her. She looked so calm and serene, nothing like the energetic little girl she'd met the day before.

Brooke lowered her voice. "I wanted to talk to you about the project."

"Don't worry. Everything will be back on track by the end of the weekend."

She shook her head. “It’s not that. I wanted to know if there was something small I could do. I would like to do something special for Clara and Andrew.”

His forehead scrunched up. Then he arched a brow. “Do you know anything about carpentry?”

She wanted to shock him and tell him that she knew all about it, but the truth was the only thing she knew was how to mend fences or barn stalls. This fine woodwork was far from anything she’d ever worked on. But her lack of experience wasn’t going to get her to back down from her idea.

She planted her hands on her hips and tilted her chin upward until their gazes met. “No. I don’t. But there has to be something I can do to contribute.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“That’s it. You’re just going to dismiss my request without even giving it any thought.”

He turned and stepped up behind the stand, where he’d been working when she’d first entered the chapel. If he thought he was going to blow her off, he had another think coming. She followed him.

She glanced at his current project and got an idea. “Maybe I could help with sanding.”

He turned to her. “And how do you sand?”

She frowned at him. How clueless did he think she was? “With sandpaper, of course.”

“No. What I mean is what motion do you use?”

Was this a trick question? She paused, trying to recall if her father ever told her anything about sanding. She couldn't remember any instructions or sage words of advice.

She raised her hand and imagined she would sand the same way she would wipe a window. Her hand moved in a circular motion.

“Incorrect.” His response was clipped.

She didn't like the you-know-nothing look upon his face. “Fine. How do you sand?”

“First, I don't hand sand unless necessary.” His brows drew together. “Either way you sand in a straight line, and you move with the grain of the wood.”

“That sounds simple enough. I can help.”

He looked as though he wanted to roll his eyes. “I don't have time for this. I only have the rest of this week and next week to get a large chunk of the project done before I return to work.”

Wait. What? “This isn't your job?”

“It's my side job. I'm a full-time firefighter in the city.”

This wasn't good. How was he supposed to finish this big project if he was only doing it in his spare time? Her gaze moved to Kaylie. And when he wasn't being an attentive parent. This definitely wasn't good at all.

“Stop frowning. It will all get done on time.” He said it as though he could read her thoughts. “This isn't my first big job.

Relax.”

“Brooke!” Kaylie’s voice echoed throughout the chapel.
“You came back.”

A smile lifted the corners of Brooke’s mouth. “I told you I would.” She glanced over at Logan. “I’m not giving up. I will find something special to do around here. I just need to give it some more thought.”

Logan sighed. “If you’re done now, I need to get back to work.”

“Go ahead. Kaylie and I have plans.” Then as an afterthought, she said, “If that’s all right with you.”

He hesitated. Then he gave a quick nod of his head.

As she walked away, she wondered if it was possible for her to break through his gruff exterior. She’d witnessed his warm interaction with his daughter. She’d like to share just a little of that with him.



He had a lot to do.

The next day, Logan had packed a lunch so he wouldn’t have to leave the chapel. He wanted to get a lot done. *Today there will be no distractions.*

His daughter had slept over at his mother’s last night so he could get an early start on the day. And hopefully, Brooke wouldn’t be stopping in. She’d seemed rather frustrated when she left the day before because he didn’t have a task for her to

do. The truth of the matter was he didn't have time to teach her. He'd be lucky to get everything done on time—not that he'd ever admit that to Brooke.

It was still dark out when he arrived at the chapel. His first priority would be to replace some of the trim work that had been damaged beyond repair. Henry pulled in next to him.

When they both got out, Logan asked, “What are you doing here so early?”

“Oh, you know me. I don't sleep so good with my Mary gone. You mentioned you were getting an early start, so I decided to join you instead of watching the news. Besides, I have a lot of benches to sand and refinish. That's going to take me some time.”

Logan worried about the man working too hard, but since his divorce, Logan understood needing work to distract from the pain. So, he wasn't going to lecture the man. “Let's get to work.”

Logan enjoyed working with Henry. The man knew when to talk and when to be quiet. This was one of those days when Logan chose the quiet. He'd had too much talking in the last couple of days between his daughter and Brooke.

The morning was full of replacing the trim around the front of the chapel. It was the part of the building that had taken the brunt of the storms. Small leaks here and there had caused some damage. Luckily, the bones of the building were solid.

As the morning moved along and there was no sign of Brooke, Logan found himself unwinding. With Henry taking care of the benches and the guys working on the roof, they were going to make good progress in the first week. He told himself they would meet the deadline. Once this project was complete, he'd have the money to square everything with his mortgage. The thought had him working even harder.

He took an early lunch break since his day had started at 5:00 a.m. Fifteen minutes later, he was back at work. This job was so different from his firefighting. Working with wood was calming, whereas his firefighter duties could be an adrenaline rush as well as being intense. Between the two, he had the best of both worlds.

“It’s looking good.”

The all-too familiar voice interrupted his thoughts. He pounded in a finishing nail and then stood. He turned to find Brooke standing only five feet away.

He turned back to his work. He positioned another piece of trim and started to nail it into place.

“You can’t just ignore me. I’m not going anywhere.”

He blew out a deep sigh. He straightened once more. “What do you need?”

“I was wondering if you gave some more thought to letting me help.”

“No.” He reached for his water bottle and took a swig.

“No, you didn’t give it any thought? Or no, you don’t have anything I can do?”

“I have something you can do,” Henry spoke up.

Immediately, Brooke’s face lit up. She swung around to face Henry. “Hi. I’m Brooke.”

Henry smiled so rarely since his wife passed that Logan was hesitant to interrupt. Logan kept his mouth shut and instead stood there witnessing their exchange.

His friend stepped forward. “I’m Henry. So, how are you at painting?”

“Ah... If you want someone to paint a mural, you might want someone else.” She smiled at Henry. “But if it’s something much easier, I can give it a try.”

“Oh, this isn’t so hard.” He waved her over. “See this groove in the bench. It goes the whole way around the bench. It should have a line of gold paint in it. Do you think you could do that?”

Logan noticed how her eyes lit up. “You mean all you need me to do is paint in the groove?”

“Well, it’s a little more involved than that but I’m sure you can handle it.”

She paused as though considering the offer. “I can do that.”

“Then you’ve got yourself a job.”

Logan inwardly groaned. What was it with this woman? Every time he thought he was done with her, she came back.

And now thanks to his partner, she was going to be working with them for who knew how long.

CHAPTER SIX

IT HAD BEEN A long week.

Saturday night, Logan had just put Kaylie to bed. The next day, Margie would be home from her conference and pick up Kaylie for the week. He was going to miss having Kaylie around the house. That happened every other Sunday when her mother picked her up. And then he'd wait all week until he got to see his daughter's bright, shining smile again.

As a yawn snuck up on him, he was tempted to call it a night. But he wasn't afforded that luxury because he still had a load of laundry in the washer. He couldn't send Kaylie back with a load of dirty clothes. He didn't want Margie to think he couldn't multitask.

He'd just finished folding some towels when the doorbell rang. *Who in the world is it?* He wasn't expecting anyone. Maybe if he ignored them, they'd go away.

Ding-dong. Ding-dong.

He sighed. Then again, they seemed pretty insistent. And he didn't want the doorbell to wake Kaylie. Maybe it was something important. With a resigned sigh, he moved to the hallway. He flicked on the lights and went downstairs. He glanced out the side window to find his best friend and co-worker from the firehouse, Dylan Adler. They'd met in fire academy. They'd remained friends through the years, even when they were assigned to different houses, but they were now assigned to the same house.

Logan opened the door. "Hey, Dylan."

Dylan dodged around him and headed straight to the kitchen, just like he had done a million times before. "Why is it so dark in here? And why isn't the game on?"

It took Logan a moment to figure out what Dylan was talking about. Then it came to him. *The basketball game*. They'd made plans to kick back and watch it. He'd totally forgotten about it.

Logan came along behind him and flicked on the lights. "I totally forgot. It's been a *loong* day."

Dylan glanced around the kitchen and frowned. "I take it you forgot about the pizza too."

"Actually, I didn't. Kaylie and I had some for dinner. The leftovers should be on the top shelf."

Dylan opened the fridge and peered inside. "There it is." He grabbed the foil-wrapped food and headed for the island where he had a seat. "I'm starved."

Logan moved to the other side of the island and leaned against it. “Do you want to put it in the oven to heat up?”

“Nah. I like cold pizza.” As he unwrapped the food, he asked, “So what’s the matter with you?”

Logan’s thoughts immediately turned to Brooke, and just as quickly he dismissed them. He wasn’t going to talk about her. “Nothing is the matter with me.”

Dylan stared at him for a moment, as though he were studying him. “Then why did you forget about our plans?”

“I... I have a lot on my mind.” The image of Brooke once again flashed in his mind.

“I see. This stuff that you have on your mind, is it what has you in a bad mood?”

“I’m not in a bad mood.” The denial came out much too quickly. He rubbed the back of his neck where the muscles were tight and beginning to give him a headache. “I don’t know why you think something has to be wrong.”

Dylan’s brows rose. “Well, if this is your good mood, I’d hate to get on your bad side.”

Logan subdued a groan of frustration. He might as well tell him because he’d just continue to pester him until he found out what was weighing on his mind. “It’s just that I have this huge project restoring an old wedding chapel. There’s a lot of pressure to get it done on time, and there’s this pushy woman that insists on showing up at the worksite every day.”

Dylan shrugged. “Tell her to back off. After all, this isn’t your first project.”

“I’ve tried to get her to leave, but she insists she wants to do some special project.”

“What sort of special project?”

“She didn’t seem to know. When I refused to give her anything to do, Henry decided to let her help him. I don’t know why he did that. When she smiled at him, he just lit up like some Christmas tree.”

Dylan’s eyes widened. “So, this woman is beautiful.”

Logan regretted his words. He couldn’t deny her beauty. Quite honestly, she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, and when she smiled, it was like the sun had come out from behind the clouds.

But he wasn’t about to admit that to Dylan, who would make something of it. And yet he couldn’t bring himself to deny her good looks. He settled for a nonchalant shrug.

“You like her!”

“Shh... You’re going to wake Kaylie.”

Dylan whispered, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Logan spoke in a normal voice. “She had a long day at the chapel.”

Dylan’s brows rose. “You took her with you?”

Logan explained about how Kaylie hadn’t felt well at preschool and how they’d sent her home.

“Wait,” Dyland said. “Are you telling me you worked and watched Kaylie yourself?”

“Um...” This is the part that he’d wanted to avoid discussing. “Not exactly.”

Dylan’s gaze narrowed. “So, who watched her while you worked?”

“Someone.”

“Does this someone have a name?”

Logan hesitated. “Her name is Brooke.”

“Is Brooke a new babysitter?”

“She’s not a babysitter. She’s the woman who is overseeing the renovations at the chapel.”

Dylan’s eyes widened again. “Wait. This is the woman that got under your skin, isn’t it?” When Logan didn’t deny it, Dylan continued. “And you let a stranger watch Kaylie?”

“It’s not a big deal. They were right there where I could see them the whole time.” He recalled how Brooke had ignored her dressy clothes and sat on the floor near Kaylie. She’d shown a lot of patience as they colored together. Brooke was really good with Kaylie. “Kaylie immediately took to her.” He stopped himself. Why was he jumping to Brooke’s defense? It wasn’t like he knew her very well or anything. His thoughts rolled back to the events of the last few days. “She was good with Kaylie. She had her laughing. And she got Kaylie to eat all of her lunch.”

“You had lunch together too. Sounds like a date.” Dylan didn’t even bother to hide his smile.

“It wasn’t a date.” His response was quick and firm.

Dylan’s gaze poked at him. “Are you sure about that?”

“I’m not that out of it not to realize when I’ve asked a woman out.”

“Fine.” Dylan’s gaze narrowed as he stared at him. “But you like her... Don’t you?”

“No.” Again with the quick denial. He withheld a frustrated sigh.

Dylan smiled. “You do. And don’t deny it. You want to know how I know this?” He didn’t wait for Logan to tell him that he had no interest in his observation. “Because you started to smile when you talked about her hanging out with Kaylie.”

He did? *No*. Not possible. He gave it a little thought. Well... maybe. So much for him having a poker face. Ever since his run-in with Brooke at the coffee shop, he hadn’t been able to get her off his mind. He didn’t want to delve into the reason for his meandering thoughts.

“What does she look like?” Dylan paused as he grabbed another slice of pizza and stared expectantly at Logan.

“I don’t know.” Immediately, her beautiful image took shape in his mind. He could see her long brown hair with the strands of honey blond that shone in the sun, and her big green eyes he could get lost in. And then there was her pink glossy lips, which were plump and just perfect for kissing.

Whoa! He drew his thoughts up short. What was wrong with him? He wasn't ready to get involved with anyone. The couple of blind dates his well-meaning friends had set him up with had been complete and total disasters.

And then there was Brooke, who was accident-prone—at least whenever she was in his vicinity. Although to be fair, there hadn't been any incidents since the day they'd met.

"She's beautiful," Dylan stated as a matter of fact, pulling Logan from his meandering thoughts.

"How do you know?" Logan started to wonder if Dylan had a hand in him running into her. His gaze zeroed in on his best friend. "Was this some kind of set up or something?"

Dylan dropped the pizza onto the plate and held up his hands. "If it was, it wasn't me."

"Then how do you know she's beautiful?"

Dylan lowered his arms as he continued to smile. "Because it was written all over your face. Every time you think of her, you get this happy look on your face." Dylan's brow arched. "And it sounds to me like you need to ask her out."

Logan shook his head. "It wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

"Because..." He wasn't about to tell Dylan about his disastrous first and second meeting with Brooke. Nope. He wasn't going there.

Dylan's eyes widened. "You're afraid to ask her?"

“No. Besides, she might have a boyfriend.”

“Have you asked her?”

“Of course not. And before you say it, I’m not asking her.”

“But if she’s beautiful and gets along with Kaylie, what’s the problem?”

Logan mentally listed all of the reasons it wouldn’t work: she was too distracting, too irritating, too bossy, too everything. When he noticed Dylan studying him, he said the next thought that came to mind. “She’s too accident-prone.”

Dylan’s eyes widened. “Accident-prone. Hmm... How so?”

Seriously, he was going to make him recount actual instances? But the intent look on Dylan’s face said that was exactly what he expected. “Fine. If you must know, she dumped a cup of coffee all over me.”

Dylan was quiet for a moment, as though considering his words. “Let me get this straight. This beautiful woman just walked up to you and threw coffee all over you?”

“Of course not.” Logan rested his palms against the granite countertop. “We ran into each other at the coffee shop. We reached for the same cup of coffee at the same time.”

“I see. So you might have had a hand in spilling the coffee?”

He hated how Dylan had turned the situation around on him. “And then she assaulted me with the door.”

A smile pulled at the corners of Dylan’s lips as he started to laugh. “She did what?”

His jaw tightened. The more Dylan laughed, the tighter Logan's back teeth ground together.

The amusement continued to show in Dylan's eyes. "Logan, what happened? You have to tell me how she *assaulted* you."

Logan's irritation rose. "Don't you have to go home?"

"Nope. I've got all night. Or at least until you tell me what happened."

Logan inwardly groaned. The fastest way to get rid of him was just to tell him. "After she dumped hot coffee on me, I went to the chapel. I bent over to check the trim out when she came plowing through the door. She hit me in the back and sent me headlong into the wall."

Dylan let out a hearty laugh. Were those tears in his eyes?

Honestly, he didn't find any of it amusing. "Stop. It's not funny. The woman is not only accident-prone but also irritating. There's no way I'm dating her. I'd need to wear body armor to be safe."

It took Dylan a moment to calm his amusement. "I think I understand."

"At last. It took you long enough."

"Actually, what I understand is that you have it bad for this woman."

"I do not." His words were quick again.

"If you want to get her out of your system, you need to ask her out."

Logan glared at him. Didn't he hear him when he'd told him all the reasons that wouldn't be happening?

Dylan arched a brow but wisely didn't push the subject. He finished eating a slice of pizza while Logan mulled over his friend's observation. Was it possible he was drawn to Brooke? *No.*

Obviously, she was attractive. There was no denying that. And then there was the way she'd taken time with Kaylie the other day. His daughter had really liked her. But to ask Brooke out on a date was just too much. It would never ever work.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHE WAS WORRIED.

Early Monday morning, Brooke sat down in the kitchen of Bit of Cake Bakery. One of her best friends Selena Blakely owned the shop. She was an accomplished baker and did most of the baking for the Perky Pink Wedding Company events.

She glanced over at Selena as she turned off the mixer and added chocolate chips to the batter. She had been friends with Selena almost as long as Clara. In fact, she'd met Selena via her work, and they'd immediately clicked.

The bakery wasn't open at that hour of the morning. Brooke hadn't realized how quiet it could be until this moment. It was easy to get lost in her thoughts.

When Brooke needed someplace to hide from the world, she would come here. She found the kitchen of the bakery so relaxing. The delicious scents reminded her of home—of her mother's kitchen. The thought filled her with a sense of

homesickness. She shoved aside the thought of her family and home.

Brooke stirred her coffee as her worries circled in her mind, just like the dark brew in her cup. She was concerned about having the chapel renovated in time for Clara's wedding. Although, Henry was great. He was kind to her and willing to help her if she needed anything.

It was Logan who was the difficult one. Every now and then she would catch him glancing in her direction, but as soon as her gaze would meet his, he'd turn away. She'd hoped by now that they could be on friendly terms but it hadn't happened.

“What am I going to do? I'm so worried about getting the chapel done in time for the wedding.”

Selena dropped large scoops of chocolate chip cookie dough onto a baking sheet. “Have you talked to the guy in charge of the renovations?”

“I've tried.”

“Tried? What does that mean?”

“He doesn't like me.”

Selena stopped working. “What? Why not?”

Brooke shook her head. “It doesn't matter.”

“I don't believe you. It isn't every day you're in my kitchen at six thirty in the morning to talk about your work. Come to think of it, I don't think you've ever been here at this hour. So,

to my way of thinking, you have something, or should I say someone, on your mind.”

She sighed. Maybe she’d feel better if she told someone. Then maybe he wouldn’t take up so much of her thoughts.

She took a sip of the hot coffee. “I ran into him last week at Lacy’s.”

“You wouldn’t believe how many couples I know had their meet-cute at the coffee shop.”

“Selena, we’re not a couple.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Go ahead.” Selena finished filling the tray and then moved onto a second one.

“I was standing in line, minding my own business. I was in a hurry to get to the office because I had a meeting that morning with the contractor—little did I know that he was standing in the other line.” She failed to mention that she’d been checking out his handsome face. She remembered how his dark brows had led to the strong line of his jaw. And his brown eyes had seemed to hide a wealth of secrets—secrets that she longed to know.

“You like him?” Selena’s voice drew her from her thoughts.

“What?”

Selena smiled. “You were thinking about him and blushing. He must be hot.”

Brooke nodded. “He is, but his grumpiness is a complete turnoff.”

And so, she told Selena the rest of the story from the way he stole her coffee at the coffee shop to her accidental run-in at the chapel.

“Wow.” Selena started filling another tray with cookie dough. “You two had quite a start.”

“That’s an understatement. I just don’t know what Clara sees in this guy that would make her want to hire him.”

“You really should talk to Clara about him? Sounds like there’s a lot you don’t know.”

“True. But I’m not bringing him up to her.” She didn’t need Clara reading anything into her words about Logan like Selena had done. “And please don’t say anything. I don’t want anything to ruin her trip to visit her family. I know how important it is to her to mend things with her family.”

“I won’t. I promise.” Selena’s perfectly plucked brows drew together as though a thought came to her. “Still, Clara must have seen something good about this guy. Maybe you should give him another chance.”

Brooke sighed. “I have tried to make nice with him, but he just keeps putting up a wall.” And then she uttered something that really bothered her. “I don’t think he likes me. It’s more than the coffee thing. I think I rub him the wrong way. And I have no idea what to do about it.”

“That’s hard to imagine. You’re so kind and thoughtful. I don’t know of anyone who doesn’t like you.”

“Well, now you do,” Brooke said with a huff.

“Maybe he’s that way with everyone.”

She shook her head. “He isn’t that way with Henry or his daughter.” She paused as she recalled the way his eyes lit up when he looked at Kaylie or how his voice took on a friendly tone when he spoke to Henry. “He’s like a totally different person with them. When he’s around Kaylie, he even smiles once in a while.” She didn’t mention just how cute he was when his dimples were on full display. The memory made her stomach flutter.

“I see.” Selena placed the cookie sheets in the big oven. After she closed the door, she turned back to Brooke. “What you two need is a do-over.”

“A do-over of what?”

Selena moved to the coffeemaker and refilled her cup. “Your first meeting. You two got off on the wrong foot, and this would present you with a chance to fix things.”

“I don’t think me spilling coffee all over Logan again will fix anything.”

Selena let out a laugh as she added some creamer and sweetener to the coffee. “No. Not that part. But you could take him coffee today. You know, like some sort of peace offering.”

“I don’t know.” She drank some of her now-lukewarm coffee. “Why do I have to make the peace offering?”

“Because you’re the one that needs to get along with the contractor in order to get this project completed correctly and on time.” She leaned against the counter. “You need to win

him over with kindness. And maybe you shouldn't rush through any more closed doors."

She ignored Selena's last comment. "Win him over with kindness?" She rolled the thought around in her mind. "I don't know if it will work. You haven't met him yet."

"Come on. There isn't a guy alive who could resist your smile or when you turn on the charm."

Heat rushed to her cheeks. "I'm not that bad."

"Just trust me. Fight his grouchiness with kindness. He'll end up being putty in your hands."

When Brooke left the bakery, she took her friend's advice and headed to Lacy's Java 'N Tea. She glanced around to make sure Logan wasn't there. She really didn't want to have a repeat of their first encounter. When she realized he wasn't anywhere in sight, she breathed a sigh of relief.

It was easy to order for him since they both drank the same: grande, black with cream and sugar. She had to guess at what Henry would like and ended up ordering the same thing for him. After having coffee with Selena, Brooke didn't order anything for herself. With two to-go cups in a tray, she headed out the door.

As she drove to the chapel, she tried to think of what to say to him. Her stomach shivered with nerves. She wanted to get this right and create a friendly work atmosphere—one where communication and work would flow smoothly.

When she pulled into the parking lot, she was surprised to find herself the first one there. It would give her a chance to check her emails. She hadn't gotten through very many when Logan's pickup pulled into the lot.

She slipped her phone back into her purse and got out. While Logan got Kaylie out of her car seat, Brooke leaned back in her car and retrieved the coffees.

When he set Kaylie down, the little girl ran to Brooke. Her little arms wrapped around Brooke and squeezed.

"Hi, Kaylie." She wanted to hug her back, but she feared spilling the coffees. There was no way that was going to happen again.

"Hi!" Kaylie squealed with delight.

When Logan approached them, she held out the cup to him. "This is for you."

He arched a brow. "Why?"

Leave it to him to question a kind act. "Because I am being nice."

"Oh." He reached out and took it from her. "Uh. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Then she leaned down to wrap an arm around Kaylie.

When the little girl pulled away, she had a big smile on her face. The happiness glowing on her face warmed a spot in Brooke's chest. "I didn't know I'd get to see you today. What a nice surprise."

“I missed you.” Kaylie smiled at her.

“Are we going to play today?”

Kaylie turned to her father. “Can we?”

He shook his head. “Sorry. Your mother will be here shortly to take you to preschool.”

“But I wanna stay.” When Logan shook his head, Kaylie said, “Please.”

“You can’t miss school,” Logan said. “Besides, don’t you want to see your friends?”

Kaylie nodded. She turned back to Brooke. “I have to go.”

“It’s okay. We’ll play another time.”

Logan’s gaze met hers as he softly said, “My ex-wife was supposed to pick her up yesterday but her flight was cancelled. She couldn’t get another flight until last night.”

Brooke nodded in understanding. She latched onto the knowledge that he was no longer with Kaylie’s mother. Did that mean he was single? She ignored the bubble of hope that swelled in her chest.

Honk-honk.

A white compact pulled into the lot, and a woman with brunette hair cut in a bob waved to them. Brooke wasn’t sure what she should do, so she turned back to her car and grabbed her bag that held her purse and lunch. She learned to bring food with her since the guys didn’t like to take the time to go to lunch.

Who knew that painting gold trim could take so much time? But there was lots of blue tape to place around the areas she wanted to paint. Plus, she wanted to be careful and do it perfectly.

She paused and glanced over her shoulder. Logan was holding his coffee as he talked to Kaylie's mother. They seemed to be getting along. That was good.

As though he could sense her looking at him, he turned his head. His gaze met hers. He lifted his coffee cup ever so slightly and then wait... Was that an ever-so-slight smile on his face?

It all happened so quickly that she wasn't sure what she had seen. And then he turned his attention back to Kaylie and her mother. The moment was over, and she was left with questions. Had he smiled? Did her hot coffee offer hit the spot?

She turned to head inside the chapel with Henry's coffee in hand. She had to get started right away because she had wedding planner duties in the afternoon. But that wasn't what was on her mind. Instead, she was thinking about Logan. The coffee was a start, but she would have to step it up the next time if she wanted to show him that they could be friends. It would make their business relationship much easier.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FRIENDLIER.

It was how Brooke would describe her relationship with Logan. Selena's suggestion about getting him some hot coffee seemed to thaw his frosty exterior.

And though things were starting to improve, they still weren't friends. She wanted to change that. In order to do that, she decided to take the age-old advice of winning a man over via his stomach. The problem was that she wasn't a good cook.

It didn't stop her from planning a special lunch. With Kaylie at her mother's this week and Henry at a doctor's appointment, it was just them on Friday at lunch. And she had a surprise in store for Logan. She just hoped he liked it.

She'd spent the morning staining the benches just like Henry had shown her. It wasn't hard work. It just took a steady hand and lots of patience. Once upon a time, the benches had a gold trim but through the years it wore away. Once the benches

were all sanded—Henry was doing that part—and then stained, she would go back to add this finishing touch. And then the benches would be clear-coated.

But before their lunch break, she'd taken the effort of driving back into the city to get food for lunch for both herself and Logan. This would be kindness act number two. It wasn't until she was standing in line at the checkout that she asked herself why she had chosen this challenge to see through to the end.

She didn't have a good answer—at least none she was willing to acknowledge. She told herself it would improve their working relationship and that, in turn, would be good for this massive project. After all, she was hoping to use her oversight of the renovation as another example of why she should be given a promotion to wedding planner instead of continuing to be Clara's assistant.

Granted, when she'd started to work for Clara, she knew nothing about event planning. But Clara had been patient with her and mentored her. Now Brooke couldn't imagine doing anything else. There was just something so rewarding about seeing the bride's face light up on their special day, not to mention when they found the dress.

As she drove back to the chapel, she had the window down, letting the ocean breeze in. The radio was turned up, and she was singing as she pulled into the parking lot. She pulled to a stop next to Logan's pickup. At least he was still there.

She grabbed the big brown bag full of sandwiches, fruit cups, chips, and refreshments. She'd realized as she was

standing in line to order the food that she wasn't sure what he liked, so she bought more than she normally would have in hopes she had something he'd like to eat.

With an old blanket draped over her arm, she clutched the bag of food. In her other hand, she grabbed the tray of drinks. At last, she headed toward the chapel. Lucky for her the door was propped open. She heard some hammering at the front of the chapel.

"Time for an early lunch break," she called out.

Logan glanced over his shoulder from where he was replacing a couple of floorboards at the front of the chapel. "Are you talking to me?"

"I am." She held up the bag of food. "I've got more than enough to share."

He shook his head. "That's okay."

She struggled not to sigh in frustration. "Seriously. I've got too much for me to eat alone." Way too much. "After all, you do have to eat."

"I have a date today."

His words stopped her cold in her tracks. Had she heard him correctly. "A date?"

He nodded. "So I don't have much time."

An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. He hadn't mentioned anything about a girlfriend. Maybe that

partly explained why he'd been so distant. Why hadn't she thought of that?

Her warmed her face. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't know. I'll go."

She felt so foolish. She turned for the door. All she wanted to do was to get away.

"Brooke, wait."

She stopped but didn't turn around. She hesitated. The last thing she wanted to do was face him again, but if she didn't, he might suspect there was more to her lunch offer than wanting to be friends. She forced herself to turn but didn't speak.

"My date is with Mabel." As the pent-up breath rushed from her lungs, he continued. "She invited me over for some coffee and to tell me about the history of this place."

Brooke couldn't believe she'd let herself jump to the wrong conclusion. Although his wording could easily be interpreted that way. Had he done it intentionally? She wasn't about to ask him. "You need more than coffee for lunch."

"I have a bologna sandwich in the pickup."

"This is better." She hoped.

He arched a dark brow. "Did anyone ever tell you that you can be insistent?"

She shrugged. She didn't want him to know how much effort she'd put into this lunch.

“Okay. Let me finish this piece, then I’ll join you on one of the benches.” He turned back to his work.

“You want to eat in here?” She glanced around at all of the sawdust and dirt. Immediately, her nose curled up. “It’s too dirty.”

He glanced over at the area. “I suppose it is. We could eat out on the steps.”

“I have something better in mind. I’ll just wait for you.”

He hesitated and then straightened. He brushed his hands off on his jeans. “Fine. Let’s go.”

“I thought you wanted to finish what you were working on.”

“It can wait. You are obviously anxious to eat. What did you do? Skip breakfast?”

She started for the door. “Yes, but it’s no big deal.”

“Why?”

“Because I rarely eat breakfast. I prefer a large coffee to get me going in the morning. So, when lunch comes around I’m ravenous.”

“You wouldn’t be so ravenous if you would eat some breakfast.” He reached out to take the bag for her.

When she went to hand it to him, their fingers touched. A shiver raced up her arm and settled in her chest, making her heart pitter-patter. Her gaze met his and held a moment longer than necessary. She couldn’t help but be drawn in by his dark

eyes. Realizing she was staring, heat rushed up her neck. She glanced away.

As they made their way outside, he asked, “Where would you like to eat?”

Immediately, she said, “The beach.”

“Seriously?”

She nodded. “I’ve never had a picnic on the beach before.”

“I suppose being from the Midwest would explain that.”

“How do you know where I’m from?”

“You’ve got that Midwestern drawl going on.”

He was the first one to point this out to her. “I do?”

A slight smile pulled at the corners of his lips. “You do. Let me guess, you’re from Kansas.”

Her stomach dipped when she caught a glimpse of his dimples. “No. But close. My family has a farm in Iowa.”

“Do you have a big family?”

She couldn’t believe that for the first time, they were having a real conversation. It felt good. Really good. “There are my parents and my older sister. So not big at all.” She loved having an easy dialogue with him. They were actually talking like friends. “How about you?”

“There’s just me and my mother.”

“I’m sorry. It must have been rough losing your father.”

He shook his head. “He’s not dead.”

“Oh.” She had absolutely no idea what to say to that, so she said nothing.

They made their way down the steps to the beach. The sun was shining bright while a gentle breeze rushed past them. This stretch of beach was usually quiet with just a few people out walking.

She stopped and turned to him. “What about here?”

“It’s fine by me.”

She spread out the blanket and sat down. He sat across from her with the bag in the middle. She began pulling out the food and laying it on the blanket. As he stared down at the food, his forehead scrunched up.

Her gaze moved from him to the food and then back to him. “What’s wrong? Don’t you like it?”

He shook his head. “It’s not that. It’s just that there’s so much. Do you really expect just the two of us to eat all of it?”

The heat returned to her face. “I... I didn’t know what you like to eat, so I wanted to give you a choice.”

He smiled at her. A big smile that showed off his dimples and made his eyes twinkle. “No one has ever bought me such a large lunch. Thank you, but you shouldn’t have.”

Just seeing the smile on his face was reason enough. *Oh my!* When he smiled, and the frown lines disappeared, he was strikingly handsome.

Her heart beat faster. As the heat rushed to her cheeks, she glanced out at the ocean. “Do you think you’ll bring Kaylie to work with you again?”

He shrugged. “I don’t plan on it. It’s not exactly the place for an energetic four-year-old. Thank you for entertaining her last week. I really appreciate it.”

“No need to thank me. I really enjoyed spending time with her. She’s a fabulous little girl. You and your ex-wife have done a wonderful job with her.”

“I don’t know how much credit I can take. I just do the best I can.”

“You’re being modest. I’ve seen you two together, and you’re really good with her. She looks at you like you’ve hung the moon.”

This time it was he who got a splash of color on his cheeks. “Kaylie makes it easy to be her father.”

“Do you get along with her mother?” It wasn’t until the words had passed her lips that she realized her thoughts had translated into spoken words. She inwardly groaned.

Logan was quiet, as though he hadn’t heard her. Could she be that lucky? Most likely he was refusing to answer her nosey question, and she couldn’t blame him. It was just that she was so curious about him. The more she learned about him, the more she wanted to know.

“We didn’t right after the divorce, but it has been a couple of years since then. We’ve each moved on. She has a new

boyfriend.”

“And what about you? Do you have a girlfriend?”

He shook his head. “I’m not ready for that. As for Margie, I wouldn’t call us friends, but we’re friendly for our daughter’s sake.”

“It’s great that you’re able to put aside your differences and make your daughter a priority.”

Silence settled between them. It wasn’t a strained silence like before. This was a comfortable pause in a friendly conversation. She wanted to ask more about his life, but she knew she’d pushed her luck as far as it would go.

As the quiet stretched on between them, she asked, “Is your food good?”

He turned his head until his gaze met hers. “Why are you trying so hard to be nice to me?”

Heat immediately flared in her cheeks. “I... I don’t know what you mean.”

“You know, with helping to watch Kaylie and now sharing this nice lunch. Why go to all the bother? I haven’t exactly been friendly.”

Most people would have just said thank you but not Logan. She had no idea what he expected her to say. And so she decided to tell him the truth. “Because I need us to work together so you can finish this project on time.”

His gaze narrowed. “But you don’t own the chapel, do you?” When she shook her head, he asked, “Then why is it so important to you?”

“My boss and her fiancé bought the chapel from Mabel. I’m hoping to impress Clara so that she’ll promote me.”

“And what would this promotion look like?”

It appeared it was his turn to ask her a nosey question. She was surprised to find that she didn’t mind answering him—not after he’d opened up to her. “I want to be able to plan weddings on my own from the beginning to the end. Right now, I’m an assistant planner. Clara hired me and gave me a chance as soon as I moved here. She didn’t have to do that, but she’s really kind and enjoys helping others. By me overseeing this project while she’s out of town, it’s also a way for me to pay her back.”

He nodded in understanding. “What made you decide to move to San Francisco? It’s a long way from Iowa.”

“It was a spur-of-the-moment decision.” Again, the words slipped out before she could stop them.

“You moved a thousand miles from home on the spur of the moment?” There was a note of incredulousness in his voice.

She couldn’t blame him. It didn’t sound good the way she’d stated it. “Okay. It wasn’t quite the spur of the moment. I always dreamed of living near the ocean. When I was a kid, my friends would have posters of famous people hung on their walls while I had prints of beaches.”

“So this was a planned trip.”

She shook her head. What was the point in trying to hide it? It wasn't like she was ashamed of being dumped at the altar. Okay, maybe she was to some extent. In the end, she'd decided that Josh had done her a favor because she never could have spent the rest of her life with someone she didn't love with all of her heart. She hoped someday her family would accept it.

Her stomach shivered with nerves as she thought of revealing her past to him. What would he think of her? Could it be any worse than what he thought of her after their first meeting?

Probably not. It would most likely just confirm his worst suspicions. She inwardly groaned.

“It surely can't be that bad.” Logan's voice drew her from her thoughts.

She glanced at him to find him staring at her with a puzzled look on his face, as though he were trying to read her thoughts. “You wouldn't even be able to guess what triggered my sudden move.”

“Let's see.” His lips pursed, and his forehead scrunched up as he gave it some thought. “You had a fight with your boyfriend.”

She shook her head. “Close but not right.”

He arched a brow. “How close was I?”

“I left on my wedding day.”

His brows rose high on his forehead. “You mean you ended things before the wedding and just happened to leave town on what would have been your wedding day?”

She shook her head. *Ugh!* It didn’t matter how she phrased it, this was going to sound bad. What was he going to think of her being dumped at the altar? That it was her fault? That there was something wrong with her?

In the past year, she’d tried to bury her past by not talking about it and pretending it never happened. Having to admit it out loud would drive home the fact that she couldn’t keep outrunning her past. She needed to fix things with her family. But something like that couldn’t be done over the phone—especially since her father wouldn’t even talk to her. If they were this embarrassed of her, and she was the one who got dumped, what would they have done if she’d been the one to call off the wedding?

She shoved aside the troublesome thought. It wasn’t like she wanted to leave San Francisco right now, because she was in charge of things until Clara returned.

“Brooke, what is it?” He studied her.

It felt as though his observant eyes could see straight through her—see all of her secrets. She glanced away and swallowed hard. “It ended at the church when we were standing in front of the minister.”

“Wait. Are you saying you’re a runaway bride?”

Those words coming from his lips made it all sound so much worse than it had in her mind. She told herself it was fine that he knew about her past. She wasn't ashamed of it. But she wasn't proud of it either.

The heat pulsed up her neck and set her cheeks ablaze. "I... I never thought of it that way."

The silence dragged on between them. She had no idea what he was thinking about her. She told herself it shouldn't matter. All she needed him to do was his job and finish the chapel on time.

"I'm sorry." His voice was so soft the words were nearly carried away in the breeze.

She questioned whether she'd heard those words at all. When she chanced a glance at him, he was looking at her with pity. The breath caught in her throat.

She swallowed hard. "Why are you sorry?"

He shrugged. "It couldn't have been an easy decision for you."

Really? She was caught off guard by his words—by his sympathy, but she had to correct him. "You don't understand. It wasn't me that called off the wedding."

"Oh."

She shrugged. "Even though it was the worst timing, it was for the best."

"You didn't love him?"

“Not like I should have if I was going to give up all of my dreams to spend the rest of my life with him.”

Logan nodded. “It’s good the wedding was called off. Otherwise, you might have ended up divorced like me.”

“I can’t even imagine how painful that must be.” When she got married, she wanted it to last forever. “Josh, my ex, knew all along what he wanted—a farm of his own, a devoted wife, and a couple of kids.”

“And you didn’t want that?”

“My life had been planned out for me practically from the time we started dating in high school. It was assumed that I would marry a farmer just like the other women in my family.”

“And you wanted something different?”

“I’d always dreamed of trying a different life—one near the ocean. My mother would tell me it was fine to daydream when I was young, but there came a time when I had to grow up and face reality. Josh was my reality, she told me. He was a good guy—at least I thought so at the time.”

“So, if he hadn’t called off the wedding, would you have gone through with it?”

She lifted a shoulder and let it fall. “I guess I would have. It’s what was expected, and even though I’d had some pretty cold feet, I didn’t have an alternate plan for my life.”

“Are you happy now?”

She nodded and smiled. “Very much so. I love working with Clara. I’ve learned so much about the wedding business.”

“Is this the future you wanted?”

She hesitated. Was this it? Did she have everything she wanted? She still had the feeling there was something missing, but she couldn’t put her finger on what it might be.

Not wanting to sound like someone who was unsure about everything, she said, “Yes. I love my job. I hope to keep it for a long time. And that’s why we need to make sure to get the renovations done on time.”

He wadded up his napkin and tossed it into the bag. “Then I better get going. Mabel is expecting me and then I need to get back to work.”

Oh no. She hadn’t meant to rush off. “Don’t go. Not yet.” Feeling flustered, she reached for the bag of food and peered inside. “There’s some more to eat. You didn’t eat your fruit cup.”

He shook his head. “Thank you but I’m full. I really appreciate all of this. It was so much better than my bologna sandwich.” He glanced down at the blanket. “Can I help you clean up?”

There wasn’t much to do. “I’ve got it.”

Before Brooke could say more, his phone rang. He withdrew it from his pocket and checked the caller ID. “It’s one of my suppliers. I really need to get this.” He got to his feet. “Thanks again for lunch.”

And then he walked away with the phone pressed to his ear. Lunch might have ended sooner than she'd hoped for, but it had been a successful lunch. There had been no bickering or disagreements. In fact, it had been a really good lunch.

They'd talked like friends. A smile pulled at her lips. He wasn't so bad when he let down his guard. Maybe they'd do lunch again—really soon.

CHAPTER NINE

HE WAS DRAWN TO her.

For the next few days, Logan couldn't get the conversation with Brooke off his mind. He'd been caught off guard by her surprise, but even more so by the way she'd opened up to him.

She was no longer the annoying woman who had dumped coffee on him or hit him with the door. Instead, Brooke was the woman who had befriended his daughter, not because she had to but because she wanted to. Even though he'd held her at a distance, she was still friendly. Finally, she won him over with that lunch on the beach.

He was relieved when their second week of working together came to an end. Brooke had to go back to the office full-time, and he was back working at the firehouse. He thought for sure the distance would clear his mind. After all, he wasn't ready to jump back into the dating game.

Wednesday afternoon, Logan was working at the chapel. He had to stay focused because his time was now limited between

his shifts at the firehouse and it was his week to have Kaylie.
If only there were more hours in a day.

His gaze strayed to the door. He hadn't seen Brooke since Sunday. Three days ago. And he had no idea when he'd see her again.

It was for the best. He reached in the toolbox for some nails. A sound behind him had him glancing over his shoulder. It was only Henry moving a newly cut piece of wood for the bench.

Only one bench had needed to have some wood replaced. Considering this place was well over a hundred years old and the benches were the originals, he was impressed with the longevity of everything in the chapel.

He approached Henry to help rebuild the bench. Logan had even taken time to carve out the line around the edge of bench—the line that Brooke would add gold paint. That was if she decided to return...

“What’s wrong?” Henry’s voice drew Logan from his thoughts.

“Uh... What?”

Henry’s forehead scrunched up. “What’s going on with you today?”

“What are you talking about?” He looked around but forgot what he’d been doing.

“You were supposed to grab some nails, but instead you picked up the screws. It’s like your mind is somewhere else.”

He glanced down at his hand. He returned the screws and grabbed the nails. There was absolutely no way he was telling Henry that he'd been thinking about Brooke. Just then he heard a car pull into the lot. A smile pulled at the corners of his lips.

“So that’s it,” Henry said. “You’re missing her, aren’t you?”

Logan pretended like he hadn’t heard him. He thought of making an excuse to head out to his pickup, but he couldn’t think of a reason. And he knew Henry was watching him like a hawk.

Instead, Logan grabbed the nails and carefully attached the new board to the bench legs. He wasn’t about to let on to Brooke that he was anxious to see her, but he couldn’t resist glancing toward the open doors.

When he heard footsteps, he paused. He wondered what she’d be wearing that day: one of her frilly outfits that flattered her curves or jeans and a T-shirt with her long hair pulled up into a ponytail. He hoped for jeans because it might mean she would be sticking around.

Bright sunshine streamed in through the doorway into the darkened entryway. He continued to stare. Where was she?

Henry elbowed him. “Go see her. I’ve got this.”

Logan considered ignoring his suggestion, but the desire to see Brooke again won out. “I’ll be right back.”

He set down his hammer and headed for the door. He reasoned that she was probably checking out the exterior. The

roof had been replaced, and now the crew was working on the siding. Some of it had to be replaced, most especially on the sea side, with the rest getting a couple coats of bright white paint.

Just as he reached the doorway, Brooke stepped into sight. His mouth opened to greet her when he realized it wasn't Brooke. He wordlessly pressed his lips together.

"Hi." Clara smiled at him. "Things are really coming along well."

Disappointment assailed him. The depth of his emotional response caught him off guard. Was he that anxious to see Brooke? He didn't have time to consider his answer because Clara was giving him an expectant look.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, they are. We're right on track."

He moved to the doorway and peered outside, hoping to see Brooke. There was no sight of her anywhere. Disappointment assailed him again.

He was starting to realize that both Henry and Dylan might be right. He was more interested in Brooke than he wanted to admit. Maybe what he needed to do was go out with her. He highly doubted they'd be compatible. One date and he'd get her out of his system.

The only problem was he didn't have her number. He would have thought after more than two weeks, he would have gotten it, but he hadn't.

"What's wrong?" Clara asked.

He glanced over at her. “Wrong?”

“Yes, you have a frown on your face.” Clara’s eyes lit up.
“Were you hoping I was Brooke?”

“Uh...” What was he supposed to say to that? His instinct was to deny it, but that wouldn’t help him with his goal.
“Maybe. You wouldn’t be willing to give me her number, would you?”

Clara’s smile broadened. “I thought you’d never ask.” She reached for her phone and moved her fingers over the screen.
“I sent it to you. I’m sure she’ll be happy to hear from you.”

He wanted to ask if she was serious, but he didn’t have the nerve. She might have just been polite. “I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t hurry. I just want to look around.”

He stepped into the parking lot. He wasn’t exactly sure what he was going to say. After all, for all he knew she could be seeing someone. He should have asked her when they’d had their picnic lunch, but he’d been so nervous that he’d totally forgotten.

He placed the call before he talked himself out of it. The phone rang once before he heard Brooke’s sweet voice on the other end.

“Hi.” He swallowed hard. “It’s Logan.”

“Oh, hi.”

In that moment his mind drew a total blank. His mouth grew dry, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. All the

while his heart was pounding against his ribs. He wasn't sure what to say.

“Did Clara make it over there?” Brooke's cheerful voice reminded him of her sunny smiles.

“Um... Yes. She just got here.”

“I see. Did you have a question for me?” It was like she read his mind.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” He hesitated.

After a moment of silence, she said, “What is it?”

“I was wondering if you'd want to have dinner on Friday evening?”

There was a distinct pause. “Dinner? Sure.”

And then he had an attack of nerves. “Kaylie will be excited to see you again. I have her this week. Will that be a problem?” He'd gone from not knowing what to say to rambling. “I could see if my mother could take her.”

“It's no problem. Where should we meet?”

They worked out the details. After he disconnected the call, he hung his head. A family dinner wasn't what he'd had in mind. And yet he'd panicked when it came to asking her out on a real, one-on-one date.

He didn't know why he'd had such a reaction. She was far from the first woman he'd asked out. And yet there was something about this invitation that was different than the rest

—something that gave him a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach—not a bad feeling but one he wasn't used to.

At least now he'd get to see her again. It was going to be a long forty-eight plus hours until their date. Just wait until he told Kaylie; she'd be so excited.



Tonight was their date.

Friday evening, Brooke had changed her clothes multiple times. There was now a pile of discarded clothes heaped on her bed. With them dining at his house, she knew she should wear something casual, but she didn't want him to think she didn't take his invitation seriously.

She tried jeans and shorts, T-shirts and blouses. None of the outfits seemed right. At last, she settled for a light-blue cotton skirt that stopped a few inches above her knees. She paired it with a white ruffled sleeveless blouse. On her feet she chose a pair of yellow and blue flowered canvas tennis shoes. It was a cute outfit without being too serious.

She had to use GPS to find his house because it was outside of the city. When she pulled up in front of it, she was impressed. Then again he was a part-time contractor. It seemed reasonable that he would have a nice house. It was a two-story gray Victorian with white trim.

She parked in front and made her way up the steps to the double doors with big frosted windows. She'd no sooner

pressed the doorbell than there were rapid footsteps, and then the door swung open.

Kaylie stood there with a thousand-watt smile. “You’re here.”

Brooke returned her smile. “And you’re here. Looks like it’s going to be a party.”

Kaylie’s face scrunched up in confusion. “We’re having a party?”

“Uh, no. It’s just a saying.” When she noticed that Kaylie was still confused, she said, “Never mind.” When she lifted her gaze, she saw Logan standing a few feet back.

His hair was still damp from a shower. His face was clean-shaven. He wore a pair of dark jeans and a dark gray T-shirt. Her pulse picked up its pace. He looked good. Real good.

She swallowed hard as her gaze met his. “Hi.”

They stared into each other’s eyes a moment too long. He glanced away. “Come in.”

Kaylie backed up so Brooke could get through the doorway. She didn’t know what she expected to find when she stepped into his house. It certainly wasn’t the gorgeous wood floors, the decorated entryway, or the wrought iron rail with a wood handle on the staircase. It was a scene out of a glossy magazine.

When her gaze met his again, she said, “Your house is beautiful.”

His face lit up with a smile. “Thanks.”

She lifted her head to take in the high ceiling. It must have been at least ten or twelve feet high. There was a crystal chandelier hanging over her head. It was a splendid mix of old-world charm and modern glam.

To her right was the spacious living room. The walls were painted a pale gray with white trim. The furniture was a charcoal gray and appeared to be picked for comfort more than style, but to her it all looked very stylish with just the right number of knick-knacks and wall hangings.

“Did you do all this yourself?” If so, she was in awe of all his talents.

“Most of it.”

Meaning he didn’t do it all by himself. She wondered if the help he failed to mention was someone like Henry or was it his ex-wife? He didn’t offer any other information, so she was left to ponder the thought.

Kaylie grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the kitchen. And since the house was open concept, the living room flowed into the kitchen.

“Come on.” Kaylie pulled harder on Brooke’s arm. “We can play games.”

“Games?” Brooke’s gaze moved to Logan.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said. “I told her she could pick out her favorite game for us to play.”

“Yeah.” Kaylie was all smiles. “Let’s play.”

“Not so fast, young lady,” Logan said in an easy-going tone. “We have to eat.”

Kaylie got a serious look on her face. “I’m not *hungary*.”

Logan gave his daughter a serious look. “You have to eat and then we’ll play.”

With a long sigh, Kaylie said, “Okay.”

The kitchen was jaw-dropping beautiful. Brooke struggled to keep her mouth from hanging open. The counters were done in a white granite or quartz with some gray veining through it. The hardware was all brushed nickel. The cabinets were gray, and the backsplash was white subway tile. It all worked so well together.

There was no detail skipped over in this kitchen, including the long island with seating for six. *Six?* She counted again. *Wow.* There were double ovens and even a pot filler over the stove. She felt as though she’d stepped into an episode of a home renovation show.

“If I ever have my own kitchen, this is what I envision.” Her gaze met his and her heart pitter-pattered. “It’s even nicer than the home makeover shows my mother watches on television.”

Logan’s chest puffed up ever so slightly. “I’d love to take all of the credit but Margie...my ex-wife...she helped with it. We were going to sell it when we got divorced. Margie didn’t want the place. She said she wanted to start fresh in a new place, closer to her work.”

“And what about you?” Was he clinging to the past? The troublesome thought weighed on her.

“At first, I agreed to the sale. But in the end, I found I couldn’t part with the place. I took out a loan and bought out her half of the house.”

She nodded in understanding.

On the other side of the kitchen were French doors that led to what looked to be a family room with a big couch, a recliner, and a huge flat-screen television.

Logan moved to the oven and pulled out trays of food. The aroma of tomatoes and oregano floated through the room. Brooke’s stomach rumbled its approval. As he arranged it on the counter, Brooke asked, “Is all of this for us?”

He nodded. “I didn’t know what you’d want to eat.”

A smile pulled at her lips. “So you got a little of everything?” When he nodded, she said, “I wonder where you got that idea.”

He sent her a sheepish smile that melted her heart.

Dinner consisted of lasagna, pasta alfredo, pizza, and salad. They barely put a dent in all of the food, but Logan assured her it wouldn’t go to waste. He would make single serve portions and freeze them.

Afterward, they played Kaylie’s favorite board game. With her dad’s help, Kaylie won two of the three times they played. Afterward, they curled up in the family room to watch an animated movie. Kaylie sat on one side of her dad while

Brooke sat on the other side of Logan. It was cozy, but Brooke couldn't relax. Her stomach was a ball of nerves being so near him. She wondered what he was thinking.

Sometime during the movie, Kaylie fell asleep, and Logan pulled the blanket from the back of the couch to cover her up. The evening had flown by, and Brooke's cheeks were sore from smiling so much. Logan was so much fun to be around when he let down his guard. She hoped he'd do that more often.

At last Brooke grudgingly decided it was time to go. They left Kaylie asleep on the couch as Logan walked her to the door.

When she slipped on her jacket, he said, "I feel like I should be driving you home or something."

"But then what would we do with my car that's sitting in front of your house?"

"You do have a point."

"Thank you for a lovely evening. I really enjoyed it." And she hated that it was over.

"And I enjoyed having you here."

"Goodnight." She turned to the door.

"Wait." When she turned back, he said, "I had a really good time tonight."

"Me too." She felt as though Logan had finally let down the wall between them, and she'd gotten to see the real man and

father. “Thank you for having me.”

His gaze met and held hers. “I wish it could have been just the two of us.”

She shook her head. “It was perfect this way. I truly enjoyed myself. You have an amazing daughter.”

His eyes lit up with pride. “She is really special.”

For the first time that evening, there was an awkward pause. All the while she wondered if he was going to kiss her. She’d found herself waiting all evening, but the moment never came. And now the date was almost over.

His gaze searched hers. “I enjoyed this evening so much that I was wondering if you wanted to do it again. Not with Kaylie this time—just, uh, you and me. Would you be interested?”

She didn’t even have to think it over. Her heart leaped for joy. He was into her too. “Yes. I’d like that.”

“How about tomorrow night?”

Boy, he didn’t waste any time. The smile on her face broadened. “It’s a date.”

“I’ll message you tomorrow with the details.” He sighed as he stared into her eyes. “So, I guess this is good night.”

“I guess so.” The way he stared deeply into her eyes made her heart pitter-patter.

She wanted to kiss him, but she didn’t want to be too forward. But it was the end of the date, and the evening had gone so much better than she’d ever imagined. And even

though Kaylie had been a part of their date, it hadn't bothered her at all. In fact, it probably helped because all of Kaylie's chatter filled in the places where there would have been awkward pauses as happened all too often on first dates.

Her gaze strayed to his lips. If she were to lift up on her tiptoes and lean forward... Before she chickened out, she acted on her thoughts. She didn't have to lean much because Logan was there to meet her halfway.

Her eyes fluttered shut as his arms wrapped around her, pulling her close. His kiss was warm and gentle. And if she wasn't mistaken, it held a promise of more kisses to come. Her stomach dipped at the thought of having a repeat of this sweet and awesome moment.

There was something different about this—about this man. For the first time since she'd been dumped at the altar, she could imagine herself in a romantic entanglement.

Logan's arms wrapped around her waist and drew her closer. As their kiss deepened, the world drifted away and it was just the two of them. She could stay right there in his arms forever.

“Daddy...” Kaylie's sleep-filled voice drifted from the living room.

The magical moment was over. When Brooke pulled back, she gazed into Logan's eyes and found he'd been moved by the kiss too. This thing between them was real. A smile pulled at her lips. And it was only the beginning.

CHAPTER TEN

ONE DATE TURNED INTO two dates.

Two dates turned into them spending all their free time together.

In the past two months, Logan couldn't believe things had gone so quickly between him and Brooke. One moment, she was spilling coffee on him, and now he just couldn't imagine his life without her in it.

It was like he had been a shadow of himself after his divorce. He'd been going through the motions but not truly experiencing the world around him. And he didn't even know it.

It wasn't until Brooke stumbled into his life that he woke up. The gray clouds parted, and the sunshine of her smile rained down on him.

This wasn't just a passing fling. He could see Brooke in his future. Kaylie loved her, too, which just made it all the better.

He was so certain about them he was already thinking about long-term plans.

Of course, he hadn't said any of this to Brooke. She'd opened up to him about her past engagement. He couldn't help but think Josh was a fool for letting Brooke slip through his fingers. Logan didn't intend to make the same mistake.

In turn, he'd told her how his marriage had slowly fallen apart with him working long hours and Margie going back to teaching at the local college after Kaylie's birth. Neither of them had cheated on each other. They'd simply grown apart.

He'd wanted to fix things. Margie didn't. She'd filed for divorce and surprised him with the papers. He'd known their marriage was in trouble, but the finality of it shook him to his core. The family he'd based his world on had ended. It had left him with his walls up around himself.

Brooke was the one to tear those walls down, brick by brick. He found himself pausing from the final work on the chapel and smiling as he thought of her. She was the best.

"What are you doing?" Brooke's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Um... What?"

She sent him a strange look. "You were just standing there with a goofy smile on your face."

"I was not." Was he?

"Yes, you were." She smiled and shook her head. "You should be paying attention to what you're doing."

“I am.”

She arched a brow at him. She stepped back into the aisle and stared at the lectern. “Something seems off. Are you sure that’s centered?”

Logan glanced at it. “Of course, I am.”

“I don’t know. I think the lectern is off to the right too far.”

“I don’t think so.” He noticed the closer they got to the finish line the more particular she had gotten. “I measured it.”

“Come here.” She gestured for him to come to her. “You need to see what I see.”

He straightened and went to stand next to her. She glanced over at him with an expectant look on her gorgeous face. “Tell me that you see it too.”

He sighed. “Let me measure it *again*.” He reached for his tape measure, but it wasn’t in his toolbelt. “It must be out in the pickup. I’ll get it.”

“No. You stay here,” she said. “I’ll go get it. Where is it?”

“Look in the center console.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.” She lifted up on her tiptoes and pressed a quick kiss to his lips.

His heart thump-thumped. Even though they’d been dating for more than two months now, every time she kissed him, it held the excitement of being the first time. He wanted to ask her if she was as crazy about him as he was about her, but every time he went to start a serious conversation, she would

distract him. It was like she was purposely avoiding talking about her feelings. Was it possible she didn't feel the same way about him?

That didn't seem right to him. Her sweet kisses had become prevalent and always ended with a smile. There was something else going on. He could only imagine that it had something to do with her being dumped at the altar.

He couldn't imagine a guy doing that to her or the hurt and embarrassment she'd felt. He would never do something like that to her. Not ever.

When she pulled back, she smiled up at him. Happiness shone in her eyes. It eased his worries. A smile like that couldn't be faked. It was a good sign. A very good sign.



The chapel was almost done.

It just needed a few finishing touches.

Brooke was thrilled with how it had all turned out. In addition, Clara was really happy with Brooke's work at the office while she was out of town. She'd even suggested giving Brooke a small wedding to plan from beginning to end. It wasn't the promotion Brooke had wanted, but she knew it was a test and if she passed it, she'd be on to bigger responsibilities.

She remembered her father saying that you couldn't skip steps or things wouldn't turn out correctly. The memory

caused a pang of hurt in her heart. Why wouldn't he talk to her on the phone? Every time she asked her mother or sister, they both made excuses about him being busy.

Lately, she'd started calling her mother more often. She was anxious to repair the rift that had happened when she'd abruptly left town. And she was excited for her family to meet Logan.

She'd already mentioned Logan to her mother. When she'd first brought up his name, the conversation was a bit stilted. Her mother was hesitant to get excited about this relationship. Her advice was for Brooke not to rush into anything.

She knew her mother was still thinking about Brooke's disastrous engagement. Her mother just didn't understand that this time things were different—Logan was different—she was different.

Once her parents met Logan, they would understand. Logan was kind and thoughtful. He might be a bit gruff on the surface at times, but she'd learned how to get around his grouchiness to find his sweet center.

She thought about how far they'd come since their coffee debacle. They talked every day. Sometimes in person, which she preferred, and other times on the phone. They talked for hours about their pasts and about their dreams for the future. She'd never talked so easily with anyone. It was like she could confide all of her secrets and know they'd be safe with him.

As she walked out of the chapel, her feet didn't feel as though they touched the ground. She couldn't stop smiling.

She wasn't sure where this thing between them was headed. She was still not ready to dive into a serious commitment after her disastrous relationship back in Iowa.

Besides, there was no need to rush things. This time around she planned to take her time and make sure it was right for both of them before she was ready to walk down the aisle. Not that they'd ever discussed getting married. She let out a nervous laugh at the thought. Talk about rushing things along.

She moved to the pickup and was relieved to find it unlocked because she hadn't thought to ask for his keys. She opened the door wide open and began searching for the tape measure.

She was surprised by how clean the inside was for a work truck. She found the tape measure in the center console just like he'd told her. In order to reach it, she had to lean across the seat to grasp it.

When she lifted her head, she glanced out the windshield. The clear blue sky was marred by something dark and gray. She paused. It took her a second to realize what she was seeing.

Her chest clenched. It was smoke. She gasped. It was coming from Mabel Grace's house.

Oh, no! No! No! No!

Her mind immediately went into panic mode. A million frantic thoughts collided in her mind. She stood there for a moment, making sure this was real.

Then pulling herself together, she ran for the chapel. Logan was the only person inside because Henry had already moved on to their next project.

She was moving so fast she tripped going up the steps to the front door. She reached out. Her hand caught hold of the black railing. She quickly caught her balance. She kept going. Her hand grasped the brass handle and yanked the door open.

“Logan!” She yelled his name as loud as she could.

Immediately, he swung around to face her. Worry reflected in his eyes. “What’s the matter?”

“Hurry.” Her hands trembled. Her breathing came in rapid, short gasps. “Fire.” Her thoughts jumbled together. She struggled for her words to make sense. “There... There’s a fire.”

Logan ran to her. “Where?” When she didn’t immediately answer because her breath was coming in short puffs, he grabbed her shoulders and stared into her eyes. “Take a deep breath and let it out.”

She did as he said, all the while staring into his calming eyes. “Over at Mabel’s house.”

As he ran outside, he called out, “Is she in there?”

Brooke was hot on his heels. “I... I don’t know. I haven’t seen her since this morning.”

“Call 9-1-1. Tell them it’s a structure fire, fully engulfed, with a potential victim inside.” And then he took off, running toward the fire.

“You can’t go in there.” It wasn’t until the words crossed her lips that she realized he could indeed go in there. He was a trained firefighter with years of experience. He knew what he was doing. Although he didn’t have any of his protective gear or any backup.

Call 9-1-1 echoed in her mind. Her hands trembled as she reached for her phone in her back pocket. *Please let Mabel be all right.*

She pressed the numbers. As she waited for someone to come on the line, she started toward the fire. “Hurry. Please, hurry.”

The operator came on the line. “Nine one one. What’s your emergency?”

All of Logan’s words slipped from her mind. “You have to hurry! There’s a fire.”

In a calm voice, the woman asked, “What’s your name?”

“You don’t understand.” Brooke’s words were rushed. “There are people in the house.”

“Ma’am...”

“Logan...” Brooke kept talking in a nervous rush of words. “He went in to find Mabel.” Tears pricked the back of her eyes. “And the smoke, it’s getting worse.”

“I promise to get help to you as quickly as possible. I just need information to get you that help.”

Brooke's heart raced as her hands trembled. She couldn't take her eyes off the flames. The fire crackled as it ripped through the structure. The acidic scent of smoke hung heavy in the air.

The calm operator's voice helped her focus on the questions. She did her best to answer them. The fire department was dispatched. She hoped they'd arrive in time to help Logan and Mabel.

Please, hurry. Please, let them be okay. She didn't see any sign of either of them.

Panic threatened to engulf her once more. She couldn't just stand around doing nothing. "I have to go help them."

"No." The operator's voice was firm. "Stay outside. Help is on the way."

She lowered the phone; all the while her gaze searched for a sighting of either of them. "Logan!"

She didn't care what the voice on the line said, she had to help Logan and Mabel. She stuffed the phone in her pocket as she rushed toward the house. The closer she got, the more intense the heat became.

An explosion knocked her back. The front windows blew out. Glass rained down on the ground.

A bone-chilling fear coursed through her. Even in the heat of the blaze, she rubbed her arms as goosebumps cascaded down them. *This can't be happening.*

Her cheeks burned as the fire escalated. She couldn't take her gaze off the monstrous sight. There was a wall of smoke where the windows had once been. How was anyone supposed to survive that? Tears streamed unchecked down her cheeks.

She rushed forward once more. She had to find a way to help them. She climbed onto the porch. The heat was so intense it was hard to breathe.

She reached for the doorknob, grasping it. Searing pain shot through her fingertips. She yanked her hand away. A fresh wave of tears pricked her eyes. The excruciating pain spread through her palm and raced up her arm.

Another smaller explosion pushed her back into the yard. Tears of frustration and fear for their lives overtook her, and she sank down to her knees. Sobs racked her body. She'd never felt such intense anguish.

In the background, sirens wailed, but they were too late. There was no saving this home...

It had all happened so quickly. One moment they were having a good time in the chapel. They were so close to having the project completed in time for the wedding. And then in the next moment, Logan was rushing into a fire. And now...now she feared for his life and Mabel's. *Please, let them be okay.*

She realized she'd never vocalized how much she cared about him. The abundance of her emotions scared her. What if he didn't feel the same way?

She just didn't think she could go through another rejection. Even though calling off the wedding had been the right decision in the end, it didn't mean the way Josh had gone about it by waiting until they were at the altar with all of their family and friends around them hadn't hurt her deeply.

And maybe she'd let her mother's words of caution about her new relationship with Logan feed into her fears. It kept her from confessing her true feelings. It also didn't help that their relationship was moving quickly. And yet she knew if she waited a year that she would still feel the same way about Logan.

I love him.

The admission scared her to her very core. She'd never cared about someone with such intensity. Staring at the raging fire made her prioritize things. In the end, love won out over fear. If only she had another chance, she would tell him how she felt.

"Logan!" she cried out, but her voice got lost in the crackling and hissing of the fire. "Logan..." Her chest ached. "Please, come back to me."

She didn't know how long she knelt there, staring into the smoke and flames, hoping and praying both Logan and Mabel would make it out alive. Her mind told her it wasn't going to happen. Her heart stubbornly refused to give up hope.

A hand gently touched on her shoulder. She nearly jumped out of her skin. She'd been so focused on the fire that she hadn't noticed the firefighter approach her.

His alert gaze swept over her. “Are you hurt?”

She pointed to the house. “Help them.”

The firefighter followed her arm pointed to the house. “Were you the only one inside?”

Fear clogged her throat. Tears rushed to her eyes. When words failed her, she shook her head.

The firefighter spoke into his mic. “There are people inside.” He looked back at her. “How many?”

“T-Two.”

He relayed the information on his radio. There were other voices speaking on the mic. It crackled, but she couldn’t grasp what they were saying.

The next thing she knew firefighters with masks covering their faces and oxygen tanks on their backs rushed toward the house. Her heart swelled with hope. Logan and Mabel just had to be all right.

The firefighter next to her, helped her to her feet. As he walked her away from the house, she fought him. She wasn’t leaving without Logan and Mabel. This was her fault. She shouldn’t have let Logan run inside. She should have immediately called 9-1-1 instead of going to him for help. He’d felt obligated to rush into the house without his equipment and without his fellow firefighters by his side.

Another firefighter rushed over to her as the original guy went back to barking out orders.

The young man looked at her with concern in his eyes. “Are you injured?”

When she didn’t answer, he started to examine her. In that moment nothing mattered but them finding Logan and Mabel.

When he reached for her hand, she winced. “You are hurt.”

She glanced down at her hand. It was bright red and some of the skin was beginning to blister. It was only then she noticed the pain. Why hadn’t she felt it before? Was it shock? It didn’t matter. Her gaze strayed back to the house.

“We need to get you to the medics. They’ll take care of you.” He turned and began walking.

She didn’t move.

“Come on,” he called out to her.

“I... I can’t. Not until they’re found.”

He retraced his steps. “The guys are working on it. Let’s get your hand treated. That burn is pretty bad.” Someone yelled out to him. “I’m coming.” The young guy turned a concerned look in her direction. “I’ve got to go. You really need to have that hand treated.” He gestured to someone to come to her aid.

She ignored it all.

And then he was gone. She didn’t know where he was headed as she immediately turned her attention back to the fire. She refused to give up on Logan and Mabel. They were going to be all right. After all, he was a firefighter. He knew what to do.

Firefighters rushed about. Hose lines were laid. The flames and smoke continued. Her heart continued to ache. Water blasted on the roof, dousing the flames. And still there was no sign of Logan or Mabel. *Please, be okay.*

A movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She glanced over to see someone carrying a person over their shoulder. The breath caught in her lungs. She looked closer. The person wasn't wearing a helmet or uniform and they were covered in soot.

Medics and firefighters rushed to the person. They helped lower the victim to a gurney. As though the person could sense she was staring at them, they looked in her direction.

In that moment their gazes connected. It was Logan. She was certain of it.

And then her gaze moved to the figure on the gurney. Mabel! She wasn't moving. Brooke's chest tightened. Her friend just had to be okay.

Her heart raced as she ran to Logan. Before she could wrap her arms around him, he started coughing. He bent over, bracing his hands on his knees.

After a moment, he straightened. Her gaze searched his. "How's Mabel?"

"I..." He had another coughing spell. "I don't know. She was unconscious when I found her."

They both moved closer to where the paramedics were working on Mabel. The woman's eyes were open now. That

definitely had to be a good sign.

After they loaded Mabel into the back of an ambulance, Brooke turned to Logan. He reached out to Brooke. When his hand touched hers, she winced and yanked it away.

He turned her hand over and saw the angry red burn. “You’re hurt.”

“It doesn’t matter.” At least it didn’t in that moment. She wrapped her arms around him. “Thank you for saving Mabel. You have no idea how worried I was about you.”

She held him tightly. She didn’t ever want to let him go. She’d never come that close to losing anyone she loved. And now it was time for her to keep her promise to herself.

She grudgingly pulled back. Her gaze met his. She wondered if he could see in her eyes how she felt about him.

“Logan, I have something I need to tell you.”

“I have something I need to—” His words cut off into a string of coughs.

A medic arrived at their side. “We need to get you on oxygen.”

Logan nodded as he struggled with his coughing. Once it subsided, he said, “You need to look at her hand. She’s burned.”

“Both of you need to come with me. Now.” The young man led them over to another ambulance.

She was worried about Logan. His cough didn't sound good. Before they could hook him up to oxygen, Logan made a big deal out of her injury. It was nothing in comparison to his smoke inhalation.

In the end, they both got treatment and were transported to the hospital. Brooke messaged her boss to let her know what had happened. Clara and Selena both met them at the emergency room with worried looks on their faces.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT WAS A CLOSE call. Too close.

Logan had spent the night in the hospital under observation. He didn't regret his actions. He was relieved that he'd acted fast enough to save Mabel.

There had been a moment in the fire when he thought he wasn't going to get to see his little girl grow up or Brooke's bright, shining smile again. In that moment, he'd realized just how much Brooke had come to mean to him—to mean to his daughter.

He loved Brooke.

He hadn't wanted to. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't put his heart on the line again after his divorce. He'd put up walls to protect himself.

And along had come Brooke with her brilliant smile and amazing kindness. She'd broken through every wall he'd put up. She reached his heart and brought him back to life out of his zombie-like existence.

Now he couldn't imagine his life without her in it. He just hoped she felt the same way. He was still worried about vocalizing the depth of his emotions for her. What if he scared her away? What if she didn't feel the same way? It didn't matter. He couldn't put this off any longer.

He'd attempted to tell Brooke how much he cared about her at the fire scene, but his problems breathing had prevented that. And since then there had been medical staff and co-workers in and out of his hospital room. When they were finally alone, he was so exhausted that he didn't even remember falling asleep.

The next day, he was released from the hospital. The first place he went was to Mabel's hospital room. He was relieved to see she was doing well. A number of known health issues had contributed to her passing out while cooking chicken, which had started the fire. She would be in the hospital for a few more days until doctors were certain she was stabilized.

Clara had been by the woman's side since she'd been brought in. She promised Mabel she would help her find an assisted living apartment. Mabel wasn't sure she liked the idea, but without having her house to return to, she was willing to give Clara's idea a try.

Brooke and Selena picked him up, since Brooke's hand was injured and she couldn't drive for the time being. On the way back to his place, they'd taken a detour to the site of the fire. He'd wanted to get his pickup and see if the chapel had sustained any damage. He didn't think that would be the case

as there was a reasonable amount of distance between the two structures. But he'd been in the firefighting business long enough to know that all it took was one gust of wind and a burning cinder to spread a fire. And there was plenty of wind on the coastline.

Selena dropped them off in the parking lot. She hesitated to leave them, but she had to get back to the bakery. They both assured her they'd be fine.

They moved to the edge of the parking lot and stared at the yellow tape around the debris from the fire. Brooke slipped her uninjured hand into his and gave it a squeeze. He took comfort in her touch.

The house was completely gone. There was nothing to be done with it but to clear the site and build again. He understood it was so much more than a structure that victims lose. It was all of the family photos and heirlooms.

His childhood home had burned when he was nine years old. It had been devastating for his whole family. The firefighters were so kind to them and collected necessities for them. It was then that he'd decided to become a firefighter.

He knew starting over wouldn't be easy for Mabel, but luckily she would have a chance to make a new life for herself. Brooke and her friends had rallied around the woman, promising to be there for her and do whatever they could to help her.

"I just can't believe it," Brooke said.

This time he squeezed her hand. “It could be worse.”

She nodded her head. “I know. I just can’t even imagine what Mabel is going through after losing absolutely everything she owned. The photos of her husband...”

He released Brooke’s hand so he could wrap his arm around her shoulders and draw her close. When her head came to rest on his shoulder, he said, “But luckily, she has a great group of friends watching out for her.”

“Yes, she does. After you drop me off, I’m going to go shopping to get her some new clothes.”

He glanced down at her bandaged hand. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

She shrugged. “It’s the least I can do.”

“I’ll go with you.”

She arched a brow. “Don’t you need to rest?”

He shook his head. “I did enough of that in the hospital. And I’ve been given some time off. So, I have all day to help you.”

“Aw... You’re sweet.” As she gazed up at him, a smile lifted her lips.

He didn’t know until that moment just how much he needed her to smile. She hadn’t done it since before the fire. The warmth radiated from her face and filled his heart.

It reminded him that he still needed to talk to her. “Let’s go for a walk.”

She gazed at him with a concerned look. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

His throat was still a bit sore and he had a little cough, but other than that he felt fine. “I’m good.”

They made their way to the steps behind the chapel that led down to the beach. For a little bit, they walked along the sand in silence. The water lapped against the shoreline as a gentle breeze blew. It wasn’t hot out, nor was it cold. With the clear blue sky and the sunshine, it was perfect, but not as perfect as the beautiful woman standing next to him.

He stopped and turned to her. “I’m sorry I scared you yesterday.”

She gazed up at him. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I called out to you when I saw the fire. I don’t know what I would have done if something had happened to you.”

“I’ll be honest, there was a moment there when I didn’t think I’d see you again.”

Tears shimmered in her eyes. “I had the same fear, and I realized that I still have so much to tell you.”

“I have something I want to tell you too.” He gazed deep into her eyes. “I love you, Brooke.”

A tear splashed onto her cheek. He couldn’t tell if that was a good or bad thing. He prayed it was good.

She held his gaze. “I... I was so afraid I’d never get to tell you that I love you too.”

He reached out and caressed her cheek as he stared into the warmth emanating from her emerald green eyes. His gaze dipped to her lips. She wasn't wearing any gloss today. In fact, she wasn't wearing any makeup. She didn't need it. Her natural beauty was even more captivating. And her lips were rosy all on their own. They beckoned to him to kiss her.

He dipped his head and claimed her lips. He'd dreamed of this moment for a long time. At last, she knew how he felt about her and it felt so good to know she loved him too.

His arms wrapped around her waist, drawing her closer. Her hands landed on his chest and slid up over his shoulders until they wrapped around behind his neck. She pulled him down to her until her soft lips pressed to his.

As the ocean breeze rushed past them, it felt as though the whole world had faded away. In that moment, it was just the two of them clinging to each other. It was a kiss that he would never forget. In that moment, he knew anything was possible if they were together.

“Bark! Bark!”

Much too quickly the moment was over. Brooke pulled back just as a man and his chocolate lab strode past. The man smiled and waved. They returned the gesture.

“We should probably get going. Don't you think?” Brooke asked.

“I see how it is. You're bored of my kisses already.” He sent her a teasing smile.

“Not even close.” She lifted up on her tiptoes and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “I just need to run that errand for Mabel, and then there will be plenty of time for more of this.” Her lips barely touched his.

He groaned. “You’re a tease.”

“But you love me.” She froze, and the smile slipped from her face.

“Stop looking so worried. I told you I love you, and I mean it. You surely didn’t think I was going to change my mind, did you?”

Her cheeks pinkened. “And I love you too.”

She took his hand, and they retraced their steps back to the chapel. In a peaceful silence, they made their way back to the parking lot where his pickup was waiting for them. When he opened the door for her, she paused and turned to him. “Will you go to the wedding with me this weekend?”

He didn’t know why her invitation surprised him. After all, they’d just proclaimed their love for one another. It’d been a while since he’d been a part of a couple. Perhaps he was a bit rusty at being in a relationship.

He gazed into her eyes, noticing her anticipation. “I’d love to be your plus one.”

Her lips lifted at the corners. “Oh, you’re more than that. You’re my date.”

He smiled at her. “So, it would seem.”

The smile slipped from her face again. “If you don’t want to go with me, you can just say so.”

Wait. How had she gotten that out of what he’d said? He gave himself a mental shake, hoping it would help him make sense of the sudden turn in their conversation. Then, he realized she might be just as nervous about this new status in their relationship.

He reached out and cupped her shoulders, hoping to gain her full attention. “I meant it when I said I love you. And I would very much like to be your plus one or your date or whatever title you want to put on our relationship because I want to be wherever you are. Now would you stop worrying?”

She nodded.

And then for good measure, he leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. It was tempting to linger, but it would have to wait until later. They had errands to run.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE BIG DAY HAD arrived.

Clara and Andrew were at last going to say, “I do.”

Brooke was so excited for her friend. She knew the couple had gone through so much to make it to their wedding day. There was absolutely nothing that was going to ruin it. It was exactly what she’d told Clara at least five times since yesterday.

She’d never seen Clara so nervous. It wasn’t that she was questioning her plans to marry Andrew. It was more that she was worried some act of God would impede their walk down the aisle.

As the bridal party stood in the small room at the back of the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel, Brooke watched as Clara paced. She was already dressed in a white figure-fitting lace and tulle gown. The lace straps hugged her tanned shoulders and showed off the sweetheart neckline. In the back, the V-line opening left her back bare. And there was a small train of lace.

It was a dress to die for. Brooke wished she had the figure to pull off such a dress, but she was more on the short side and lacked the hour-glass figure.

Brooke leaned over to Clara. “You look beautiful.”

Clara’s gaze met hers. “Thank you. You do too.”

“Don’t worry. You’ve got this.”

As the music started to play, Clara’s eyes widened. “My flowers! Where are they? We forgot them.”

Selena stepped up to the bride with the stunning peony arrangement in hand. “Here you go.”

Clara sighed. “Thank you.” She took the bouquet. “I guess I’m a little nervous.”

The room went up in laughter. Talk about your understatement. But the one thing Clara was not unsure about was pledging her future to Andrew. It gave Brooke hope that someday she would be that certain on her wedding day.

Her thoughts drifted to Logan. She loved him. She loved him so much. It was something she’d never felt before. She wondered if theirs would be a love story that endured the years. She hoped so.

“It’s time,” Selena said. “Everyone line up.”

All six of them stood in the order they’d been put in at rehearsal the night before. The door opened, and one by one they walked down the aisle.

Brooke made her way down the aisle in a blushing pink full-length gown. The chiffon dress had shoulder straps, a plunging neckline and a V-line back. Instead of it being form-fitting, the skirt was loose and free-flowing. It was like it had been made just for her.

Her gaze met Logan's as he sat at the end of a bench in his dark suit sans the tie. He wasn't a tie-guy, or so he said. It didn't matter to her. He looked just as sexy with the top buttons of his white dress shirt undone. Her heart pitter-pattered every time she looked at him.

As she passed by him, she turned her attention to the chapel. The wood work was all refinished and gleamed in the sunlight streaming in through the large windows, which provided a breathtaking view of the ocean. And the gold trim on the benches was the perfect touch.

After Brooke and her friends took their places at the front of the chapel, the vows were said, rings were exchanged, and the finishing touch was the groom kissing the bride and then dipping her, which gained the applause and whistles of the guests. They really and truly got their happily-ever-after.

The reception was held at a splashy hotel in Union Square. While the ceremony had been small and private, the reception was just the opposite. Both Clara and Andrew had invited not only their family and friends but also business associates. It was a long list.

And yet as Brooke stood in the ballroom with the lights dimmed and candles shimmering on every table, it gave the

illusion of a cozy affair. The bride and groom had their first dance, and then it was time for the bridal party to join them. Since everyone in the party had a date for the evening, it was decided they would dance with the guy or gal who had brought them.

Brooke held her hand out to Logan. “Shall we?”

He placed his hand in hers. “We shall.”

When he gazed into her eyes, he made her feel like she was the only woman in the world. Her heart pitter-pattered so quickly it made her short of breath.

On the dance floor, he held her in his arms, and to her surprise he was light on his feet. She was quite impressed that this big guy could be so agile. It made her all the more curious about his ability to dance without stepping on her toes.

With her one hand in his and her other hand on his shoulder, she looked up at him. “You’re an excellent dancer.”

He smiled. “You like my moves, huh?”

She couldn’t deny it. “Yes. How did you learn to dance?”

“Would you believe me if I told you it was all natural?” When she shook her head, he was quiet for a moment. She worried that she’d ventured into sensitive territory—maybe it had something to do with his ex-wife. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

He shook his head. “It’s fine. But... You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

Now she was quite intrigued. “I promise. Now out with it.”

“My mother taught me for the sixth-grade dance. I had a crush on a girl in my class. Her name was Peggy Johnson. She had long red hair that she wore in braids. I honestly don’t think she even knew I existed, but I was determined to ask her to dance.”

Brooke was awed by his story. She tried to picture him as a little boy. He would have been so cute. “So did you dance with her?”

“Well, it took me most of the dance to work up the courage to ask her. By the time I made my way over to her, I got out a *hi* before she walked onto the dance floor with the most popular boy in our class.”

“Oh no. I’m so sorry. Did you try again?”

He shook his head. “It was the last dance of the night.”

“She doesn’t know that she missed the best dance of her life.”

The smile returned to his face. He spun her around in a circle before drawing her back to him. He dipped her, and when she straightened, he was there to meet her with a kiss.

Her heart swooned. She would never get tired of kissing him. Each time felt like the first time.



He wasn’t into weddings.

In fact, he made a point of avoiding them at all costs.

So it came as a surprise when Logan found himself enjoying the wedding. He had a feeling it had a lot to do with his date rather than the event. In fact, he found himself smiling for much of the evening.

In the past, he'd have made an excuse to leave as soon as the dinner was over, but this evening the thought of leaving hadn't even crossed his mind. Well...that wasn't exactly true. He was looking forward to escorting Brooke home so they could have a little alone time. All evening, she'd been distracted with her bridesmaid duties.

Speaking of which, now was one of those times. She was pushing him over to stand with a group of guys to try to catch the garter. It was a silly tradition and nothing he wanted to take part in, but Brooke was insistent. And when she pouted, he'd caved.

So he stood at the back of the crowd. No way was he going to catch the garter. He glanced over at Brooke, who gestured for him to move up in the crowd, but he shook his head. It wasn't going to happen. This was as good as it got.

He was so far back in the crowd of bachelors that he couldn't see the groom take the garter from the bride's leg, but he could tell what was happening just by the oohs and aahs of the crowd.

“Okay, guys. Are you ready?” the groom asked.

“Yes,” shouted everyone but Logan.

“Here it goes.”

The next thing Logan knew, something hit him in the forehead. Then the object landed in his hand. It was the garter. *Seriously?*

He inwardly sighed. How did that happen? He hadn't even been trying to catch the thing. The guys around him slapped him on the back as they made their way back to their seats.

Now he had to wonder who he was supposed to put the garter on. Probably a total stranger. He didn't like the idea at all. The only woman he wanted to put the garter on was Brooke.

As he moved back to the table, he caught sight of Brooke moving with all of the single ladies onto the dance floor to line up for the bridal bouquet. She wasn't hesitant at all. In fact, she was in the second row.

He wondered what that meant. Was she anxious to get married? That couldn't be the case, could it?

Suddenly, the image of Brooke in a wedding dress, pledging her heart and life to another man filled his mind. The look of love reflected in her green eyes made the breath catch in his lungs. He wanted to be the man she said her wedding vows to. He wanted to have her by his side for the rest of their lives.

As quickly as the thought came to him, he dismissed it. It wasn't like they'd been together that long. Still, he'd dated Margie for three years before he'd proposed to her and look how that had turned out.

But he didn't feel the need to wait with Brooke. There was this unmistakable feeling inside of him that they belonged together now and forever.

The thought of him asking Brooke to marry him shook him to his core.

Right after his divorce, he'd sworn he was never getting married again—never letting himself be that vulnerable again. Had he really healed enough to see a future with someone—well, not just anyone but with Brooke?

Yes.

Again he was shook by the certainty of his answer. Everyone that knew him also knew when he made his mind up about something, he didn't need any further time to mull it over. It was time for action.

He gave himself a mental shake. It was this wedding. It was getting to him. He just needed to relax and hopefully get Brooke out of there sooner rather than later.

He focused back on the bridal bouquet toss just in time to see the flowers land in Brooke's outstretched hands. *Wow!* Was this some sort of sign?

A cheer went up in the crowd. He received pats on the back as he was ushered to the center of the dance floor where a chair was provided for Brooke to sit on.

As she sat down, she glanced at him. Her cheeks had a rosy hue as she lifted the skirt of her dress so he could place the garter on her leg. He couldn't blame her for being nervous.

About a hundred or so people crowded around them, egging them on.

He knelt down in front of Brooke. He imagined that instead of a garter, he was holding a ring. The vision was so clear that the image stayed with him long after the garter was on her leg and the reception was over.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

W ONDERFUL COMPANY. CHECK.

Stimulating conversation. Check.

Full attention. Check.

The evening had been perfectly perfect in every way.

Brooke enjoyed how they'd spent the day with Kaylie as they visited a nearby park and afterward played board games before her mother picked Kaylie up. And then Logan had taken Brooke to dinner. He'd been engaging throughout the meal. She wasn't sure what the food tasted like, because she'd been so caught up in their conversation about his upcoming renovation contract.

And now as they headed home, she couldn't stop smiling. She leaned her head back in Logan's pickup as her fingers laced with his. The sun hung low in the sky, splashing it with warm oranges, pinks, and purples. It was like someone had taken a paintbrush and painted it.

This was their three-month anniversary since their coffee debacle. She wondered if Logan remembered. She thought about mentioning it, but she wasn't sure it was a good idea. What if he didn't look back on their first meeting as fondly as she did? And she didn't want to do anything to ruin this special evening.

Country music played on the pickup's radio, something he had turned on for her because country wasn't exactly his thing. She had a feeling it was growing on him because he didn't grouch about it nearly as much as he used to.

When he turned in the opposite direction of her apartment, she was confused. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see. We're almost there."

She glanced over at him and caught the slightest of smiles pulling at the corners of his kissable lips. He was up to something. She was certain of it. She just didn't know what he had planned.

It wasn't like Logan to be sneaky. In fact, he usually liked to run things past her in advance just to make sure she was on board with his plan. Tonight, he was being sneaky. Interesting.

The truck slowed before pulling into a parking spot near Lacy's Java 'N Tea.

She sent him a puzzled look. "You drove out of your way to get coffee?"

He shrugged. "What can I say? They have the best coffee in San Francisco."

She couldn't argue with his logic. "Yes, they do."

She wondered if this was Logan's way of letting her know that he'd remembered their anniversary. Her heart fluttered in her chest. She'd never been with a man who was so thoughtful. How had she gotten so lucky?

She didn't know it was possible to fall so completely and absolutely in love with someone so quickly. And yet in some ways it felt as though they'd been together for a long time.

She released her seatbelt and met him on the sidewalk. Immediately, their hands touched. Their fingers intertwined. By now, it was natural to hold his hand. Her fingers tightened around his hand as her thumb stroked the back of his hand. The connection sent an arch of awareness zinging through her.

She paused and looked up at him. "Thank you for a lovely evening."

"It's not over yet." He started to walk toward the coffee shop, and she fell in step beside him.

He opened the door for her and let her enter first. He was such a gentleman. She loved it. She loved him! The acknowledgment didn't scare her any longer. She knew her heart was safe with him.

At that hour of the evening, there weren't many people in the coffee shop. A few were sitting at the tables, working on their laptops. Some were scrolling on their phones. And another couple was off in the corner with a coffee cup in front of each of them as they gazed deeply into each other's eyes. They

were in their own little world as they spoke softly to each other. Love floated through the air.

Ellie stood behind the counter with a friendly smile. “Hey, I don’t normally see you in here at this late hour.”

Brooke nodded toward Logan. “Someone had a craving for your coffee.”

“And I don’t hear you complaining,” Logan said.

“That’s true. This place has the best brew.”

“What can I get you?” Ellie asked.

Brooke was tempted to go for one of their dessert coffees, but instead she ordered the same thing she’d ordered the morning she’d met Logan. Hopefully, this time they wouldn’t end up wearing it.

She noticed that he’d ordered the same thing as her, just like the day of their first meet. Brooke smiled as she pulled out her credit card to pay, but Logan had already handed over some cash. After he got the change and deposited it into the tip jar, they moved to the center counter where you picked up your coffee.

She turned to him. “Hey, I was going to pay. It was my turn.”

“It was?” He feigned an innocent expression. “You can get it the next time.”

“That’s what you said the last time.”

“Oh. Well, then I’ll have to figure out another way for you to pay me back.” His gaze dipped to her lips and lingered before

his gaze met hers once more. “What do you think?”

She smiled and shook her head. “You are such a flirt.”

“Only with you.”

“Make sure it stays that way.”

He arched a brow. “Are you giving me orders?”

These fun verbal exchanges were not unfamiliar to them.
“Do I need to?”

He shook his head. “Definitely not. If you hadn’t noticed, I only want to flirt with you.”

She smiled as she leaned in to him and gave him a hug. “I feel the exact same way.”

“Grande, black with cream and sugar.” The young barista held out a cup.

Both she and Logan reached for it at the same time. It was as though the past was repeating itself. Her heart pitter-pattered. His hand covered hers as she lowered the cup.

She tilted her chin upward in order to stare into his brown eyes. “Excuse me. You have my coffee.”

She waited with bated breath, wondering what he would say. He continued to stare into her eyes. Did he remember the first words that he’d ever spoken to her?

“It’s you who has my coffee.” This time his deep voice wasn’t like a shot of espresso, but rather it was like whipped latte, all frothy and sweet.

A warmth filled her heart and radiated outward. She knew what this sensation was, it was love, a deep, abiding love.

“Logan, I—”

He held up a finger pausing the words in her mouth. “Just a second.”

He turned to the counter where there was another coffee and something else. He reached for a cupcake. The track lighting caught the coarse sugar crystals that were sprinkled over the snow-white frosting. It was beautiful.

Wait. The coffee shop didn’t sell cupcakes. They had croissants, brownies, donuts, but no cupcakes. Brooke wouldn’t have missed something that important. Because she loved cupcakes.

And there was something else special about this cupcake. The way it sparkled reminded her of Bit of Cake Bakery’s diamond cupcakes. Wait. This was one of Selena’s cupcakes. But how? And why was it here?

The faster the thoughts came to her, the quicker her heart beat. Her questioning gaze moved to Logan. He was smiling, and it lit up his eyes. He was up to something.

He held the cupcake out to her. “This is for you.”

“But I don’t understand. Did you buy this here?”

He ignored her question. “Isn’t it pretty?”

She took a closer look at the cupcake. And then she saw it. Right there on top was a platinum band with a round-cut

diamond. It sparkled more brilliantly than all of the sugar crystals combined.

Her heart lodged in her throat as her gaze moved between him and the ring. Was this really happening? Or was this some sort of amazing dream?

Her hands trembled ever so slightly as the realization that he was about to propose to her took hold. He gently took the cupcake from her hands. He plucked the ring from the pile of sugar crystals. And then he dropped to one knee.

A hush fell over the coffeehouse. The only sound she could hear was the pounding of her heart echoing in her ears.

In that moment, the world shrank until it was just the two of them. Silently, she stood there, thankful that her legs were still holding her upright.

Logan held the ring out to her as he stared up at her. “Brooke, I had no idea when you took my coffee and dumped it all over the both of us that you would change my world so completely.”

A smile pulled at her lips as she remembered that very special day. It had changed her life too. All for the best.

“You opened my eyes to how love could be comforting and accepting. It’s touched me the way you’ve become such a good friend to my daughter. She thinks the sun rises and sets around you. And so do I.

“You’ve become my best friend. The person I want to see each morning and the first person I want to turn to when

something good or bad happens. I love you. I can't imagine my life without you in it. Will you do me the greatest honor of becoming my wife?"

Tears of joy blurred her vision before spilling onto her cheeks. Her heart was overflowing with love for this most amazing man kneeling before her. She didn't have a moment of hesitation. She immediately knew her answer.

She nodded. "Yes. Yes, I'll marry you."

A cheer went up in the coffeehouse, followed by applause. For a moment there, she'd forgotten they were in public.

He straightened. His arms wrapped around her waist, drawing her to him. He stared deeply into her eyes. "I love you."

"I love you too."

His head lowered just as she lifted up on her tiptoes. They met somewhere in the middle, and their lips touched. Her hands slid up over his broad shoulders and wrapped around his neck.

This was the most amazing moment. And quite honestly, she knew things between them were moving quickly, but she'd had absolutely no idea he was going to propose tonight. He'd caught her totally off guard in the most delicious way.

When he pulled back, he placed the ring on her finger. And to her utter surprise, it fit. "How did you know what size ring I wear?"

A lopsided smile pulled at his kissable lips. “Remember that day last week when you were playing dress up with Kaylie?” When she nodded, he said, “You tried on one of her plastic rings and were surprised it fit.”

“I remember that. Wait. You used the toy ring to size my engagement ring?”

He nodded. “It wasn’t exactly conventional, but I took it to the jeweler, and they were able to size it.”

She was duly impressed. “I’ll never underestimate you.”

“Make sure you don’t. You never know when I’ll surprise you.”

“Congratulations, you guys.” Selena rushed out from behind the counter. “This is so exciting. Wait until everyone hears the news.” Selena hugged her, and then she hugged Logan. “So, when’s the big day?”

“Uh... I don’t know.” Brooke’s mind hadn’t even gotten past, *Wow, he proposed to me.*

“Soon.” Logan had spoken at the same time as her. “I hope.”

He wanted to get married soon? *How soon?* She of all people knew how much time went into planning a wedding. She didn’t even know what sort of wedding she wanted. The thought of having a beach wedding popped into her mind. Sand beneath her feet, the sun on her face, and the man she loved standing next to her sounded perfect. But she wasn’t ready to vocalize her thoughts. She wanted more time to mull it over.

First, she wanted to tell her family she was engaged. She hoped they would be excited for her, but she didn't have any idea how they would take the news. Things were still wonky with them. Maybe this was the key to repairing what was broken. She hoped.

She leaned over to Logan and said softly, "I'll be right back."

He nodded.

She rushed outside and retrieved her phone from her purse. She pulled up her mother's number and pressed the phone to her ear. The phone rang once, twice, three times. She was starting to worry that her mother wasn't going to pick up.

"Hello." The familiar voice came through the phone. "Brooke, is that you?"

"Yes, Mom. It's me."

"Why are you calling at this hour?" Her mother knew her routine was to call early in the day. "Is something wrong?"

"No, Mom. Something is very right. I'm getting married."

There was a distinct pause. "You're marrying Logan? We haven't even met him yet."

Brooke felt bad about not introducing Logan and Kaylie to her family, but it wasn't that easy when your family lived more than a thousand miles away. "Mom, you have to understand that it's not easy when you live so far away."

“Brooke, I’m not the one that lives far away. You’re the one that abandoned your family and moved to California.” There was a hard edge to her mother’s words mingled with tones of sadness.

“I’m sorry, Mom. But I promise you’ll meet him very soon.”

“I would like that. So would your father and sister.”

She glanced through the big glass window of the coffee shop. Her gaze met Logan’s. She could tell he was wondering whom she was speaking to. She would tell him later. “I have to go. Some people are waiting for me.”

“Okay. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Mom. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She disconnected the call. Perhaps calling her mother had been a mistake. Her joy had been doused with a layer of guilt. Someday soon she had to make things right with her family—before the wedding. She wanted to start her married life on a good note.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TIME HAD COME to share the news...

The next day Logan called his best friend, Dylan, and asked him to meet up at the coffeehouse while Brooke called her friends. They were all getting together at one o'clock for the big announcement. Last night, Brooke had asked Selena to keep their engagement a secret until they had a chance to tell their group of friends.

Next Logan went to pick up Kaylie from Margie's place. His ex had agreed to let him have their daughter for the day as long as she was back in time for dinner. They had plans with Margie's boyfriend.

While Kaylie gathered a few of her things, he told Margie about their engagement and she offered him a quick congratulations. It wasn't exactly filled with warmth, but he'd take what she'd offered.

In the pickup, he told Kaylie the news. There was a bit of explaining that had to be done for a four-year-old to

understand. Once she learned that Brooke was going to be a permanent part of their lives, she was excited.

He couldn't believe how well things were turning out. It was like ever since Brooke had stepped into his life, she'd rolled back the clouds that seemed to follow him everywhere and let the sun shine bright. He couldn't remember ever being happier.

As far as he was concerned, they couldn't get married soon enough. He was serious. He couldn't think of any reason they should wait.

He swung by Brooke's apartment to pick her up. As she sat next to him, she admired her ring. He was so relieved she liked it. When he'd been in the jewelry store, he had no idea what he was looking for. Perhaps he should have paid more attention to the type of jewelry she wore, but there'd been no time for that.

In the end, the sales woman had helped him narrow down the rings to just a few. Then he'd spent another half hour hemming and hawing over them, trying to decide which of them Brooke would want to wear. In the end, he appeared to have made the right decision.

From the backseat of his pickup, Kaylie asked numerous questions—why this and why that. Brooke displayed an abundance of patience as she tried to answer all of his daughter's questions. He couldn't help but think Brooke was relieved when they arrived at the coffee shop and Kaylie became distracted with questions about what she could get to drink. His daughter never lacked for questions. She was

constantly asking why this or why that. Some say it's a sign of intelligence; if that were the case, his little girl was going to be a genius.

As they made their way to the entrance, Kaylie was in the middle with both Brooke and himself holding her hands. He heard Kaylie ask, "Will you be my mommy?"

Brooke stopped walking and knelt down in front of Kaylie. "You already have a mommy, but I will be your friend. Would you like that?"

Kaylie nodded her head.

He loved the way Brooke was so good with his daughter. She really cared about Kaylie and her feelings. He honestly never thought he'd find someone who would fit into his life so well. All it took was one spilled coffee, and everything had changed for all three of them.

Once inside Lacy's, he immediately spotted their group of friends. They were gathered around a couple of tables in the corner. Clara was the first one to spot them and waved them over.

He glanced at Brooke. "Are you ready for this?"

She smiled and nodded. "I am."

They made their way over to the table, and everyone said hi to Kaylie, who was all smiles at the attention. Then the eyes turned to them.

"Why did you need to see us?" Dylan asked.

Logan glanced at Brooke to see if she wanted to be the one to tell them. She gave a slight nod at him to go ahead. She didn't have to twist his arm. He was anxious to tell anyone and everyone the most exciting news.

“We're getting married.”

His words were met with big smiles and a chorus of congratulations as Brooke held up her left hand, showing off her diamond ring. There were handshakes, hugs, and a few tears of joy. Together, they retold the story of the proposal because their friends wanted every little detail.

When they finished reliving that special moment, Brooke got a serious expression on her face. “I just have one big regret.”

His heart clenched in his chest. He hoped she didn't have any second thoughts about agreeing to marry him. He wanted to ask her what she meant, but the words clogged the back of his throat.

“What's that?” Selena asked.

“That I didn't get to eat the diamond cupcake.” Brooke smiled as a huge sigh of relief rolled over the crowd. “I don't even know what happened to the cupcake. Everything became a blur after he'd proposed.”

“If that's all you're worried about,” Selena said, “I'll bake you a whole batch.”

Brooke's eyes lit up. “I'm going to hold you to that offer.”

“I'd like to offer my services,” Clara said, “to plan the big day.” After they'd both thanked her, Clara asked, “Do you

have a date in mind?"

"As soon as possible," he said. When people raised an eyebrow, he sighed. "It's not what you're thinking. I'm just excited to marry this beautiful woman." He glanced over at Brooke, who hadn't said anything. "What do you think?"

"I... I don't know. I hadn't really given it any thought yet."

When he glanced over at Clara, he saw she was busy on her phone. He didn't see where it was going to take a lot of planning. He'd marry Brooke at city hall if she'd agree. But he assumed she would want something more special.

Clara lifted her head. "I've had a cancellation. You could get married in a month. But I totally understand if that's rushing things."

"I don't know," Brooke said. "That's so soon. And there's so much to do."

His gaze met Brooke's. "We can make it work if we want it bad enough, right?"

Brooke was silent for a moment before she nodded.

"I'd marry you tomorrow, if you'd agree. But I know that you'll want to do something special. What do you think? Does next month work for you?"

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She'd agreed.

Brooke had looked deep into his eyes and saw the honest excitement he had for their wedding. How could she put a pin in the plans? Would he understand her need to wait a little?

And then there was the part when he said: *We can make it work, if we want it bad enough*. If she was to say that she wanted more time—maybe even a lot more time, would he take that to mean she didn't want to marry him bad enough? Would he think she didn't love him with her whole heart? Because nothing could be farther from the truth.

She had been touched by Logan's excitement over their pending nuptials. It wasn't what she'd envisioned, but she'd waited more than a year to marry Josh and look how that had turned out. Obviously waiting didn't guarantee a happy ending.

And now Kaylie was excited about being the flower girl. How could she tell them no—that she wanted to wait? And what was her reason for waiting? She didn't have an answer. Without a plausible reason to delay the wedding, she worried that Logan might think she was unsure about their relationship. She choked down the hesitancy to rush things along and pasted on a smile.

The next day, she stood in Wedding Dreams Boutique owned by Liza Howard. There were so many dresses to choose from. This time she wouldn't get a hand-me-down dress. The thought made her smile. This time she could get a dress that was new and fit her figure.

Even though Selena and Clara were there with her, it felt like someone was missing. Was it Kaylie, who was in preschool? *No*. And then she realized it was her mother and sister who were missing. The thought dampened her excitement.

She'd called her mother and sister the day before to tell them about the wedding. Both of them were reserved. She told herself it was just the shock of such a quick wedding. She couldn't blame them. She was the bride and it surprised her.

To her greatest disappointment, they wouldn't be able to make it to the wedding. They each had excuses of why they couldn't make the trip, but all Brooke heard was that they didn't think she'd go through with this wedding either. The thought weighed on her.

"Brooke?" Liza frowned at her. "Did you hear me?"

She hadn't heard a word. "Sorry. What did you say?"

Liza smiled. "It's okay. I know you have a lot on your mind with the wedding so soon. I was telling you that I don't have your size in any of the dresses that you selected. And I won't have time to order them. As you know it can take anywhere from four to six months to order a dress."

"Oh." She did know that, but with the disappointment over her family's absence from the wedding, she hadn't thought much about the dress. "What do you have in my size?"

Liza searched through her inventory and came up with three dresses. One was a form-fitting dress. One was a sea of ruffles. And the last was a ballgown style.

None of them were what she wanted. She automatically rejected the mermaid-style dress. That left the ruffles or the ballgown. She tried both of them on.

The ballgown had lace sleeves. The ruffled one had spaghetti straps. She went back and forth, comparing each of their features. In the end, she settled for the ruffled dress. It wasn't as fluffy as the ballgown.

Logan picked her up from the boutique. "How did it go?"

"Good." She forced a smile. "I found a dress."

She thought about telling him about her hesitation to rush the wedding. After all, most people didn't get married that quickly after their engagement. He'd understand, wouldn't he?

She glanced over at him, considering how she should word this. Should she mention her family? She hesitated to do that. He hadn't even met her family yet, and she didn't want him to have ill-feelings toward them from the start.

She considered mentioning the dress, but would he understand? After all, it was a beautiful gown. It just wasn't one that she would have picked out for herself. Maybe she was just being too picky. It was only one day and then they'd have the rest of their lives together.

"That's great!" He smiled. "Everything is falling into place. I found a suit to wear. You just have to let me know what color tie you want me to wear."

She nodded. "I'll do that."

“I figured you would want to pick out a special color. And I don’t know anything about that stuff.”

She told herself not to let the dress get her down. After all, the day was all about the two of them making a promise of forever. It didn’t matter what they wore—even if it were jeans and T-shirts.

It was all going to work out. She refused to ruin his excitement. Other brides could only hope to have their groom this excited about their wedding. She was very blessed to have him in her life. And she did love him with all of her heart.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

IT WAS TIME TO say, “I do.”

Brooke’s heart raced...but not in a good way. More in a panicked, am-I-doing-the-right-thing way.

She stood in her apartment and looked at the utter emptiness of it all. She’d sold most of her furniture via the internet—all except one chair and her bed. She’d even sold her dishes. Everything was to be sold or donated because none of it would be needed to move into Logan’s house. He had everything they would need, and her things would be redundant. The thought weighed heavy on her.

There were just a few smaller boxes of personal items and clothes. Logan had offered to pick them up for her, but she’d told him she’d take care of them. There was plenty of room in her car for the items she was taking with her to her new life.

She knew this should be the happiest day of her life. She should be smiling and anxious to go to the chapel and get married.

Yet she felt like a bundle of nerves. Talk about a case of cold feet. This wasn't the first time she'd experienced icy extremities. But the last time, she'd known deep in her heart that Josh wasn't the man for her. She'd tried to convince herself that if she just tried harder that things would work out for them, but she knew now that they wouldn't have turned out well. Josh dumping her at the altar had actually been a favor of sorts.

This time around, she was certain Logan was the man she loved. There was no doubt there. But the thought of walking down the aisle had her hesitating. Maybe it was the speed with which everything was arranged. There was also the fact that her family wasn't there.

Still, her new life was here in California with Logan and Kaylie. And it was about to officially begin in less than two hours. At that time, she would walk down the aisle to Logan, who would be waiting for her. But she just couldn't help but feel as though she'd skipped over something, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. She mentally went through the list: shoes, dress, underwear, makeup, tiara. Yep, she had it all.

"The last box is in your car." Selena's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Now we need to get going. We don't want you to be late for your own wedding. This is so exciting. You and Logan make such a cute couple."

Brooke forced a smile to her face. Inside, her stomach took a nauseous lurch. She'd been telling herself it was just nerves,

but now that her apartment was empty, she knew she was feeling something more.

“You are excited, aren’t you?” Selena’s gaze searched hers.

Brooke nodded, not trusting her voice.

Selena paused and studied her. “Hey, I know that giving up your apartment is hard. But just think, soon you’ll be in your very own house.”

A lightbulb went off in her mind. Logan’s house wouldn’t be her house. She’d had no part in picking it out. Logan and his ex-wife had picked it out. The paint colors, the furniture, not even the dishes had her input.

She’d mentioned to him about selling it and getting another house, but he’d been resistant to the idea. He’d said that he didn’t want to buy another place and have to fix it up. He’d already lived through renovations and once was enough. When he’d asked if she didn’t like the house, she’d told him the truth—she loved it. It was perfect. But she couldn’t help but think there was nothing of her in the place.

Her head hurt, and her stomach grew more nauseous. This wasn’t right. And yet she loved Logan with all of her heart. Plus, she loved sweet little Kaylie. She didn’t know it was possible to love so much.

And yet everything inside of her was telling her that going to the chapel was the wrong thing to do. Her heart and her mind were at war with each other.

She swallowed hard, trying to keep the nausea at bay. “You should head over to the chapel.”

Selena sent her a worried look. “What about you?”

“I won’t be long. I just want to do one more check of the apartment and make sure I didn’t forget anything.”

“But we already searched every closet and drawer.”

“I know. I guess I just want a moment to say goodbye to this place.”

“Oh.” Selena arched a brow. “Okay. But don’t take too long. You don’t want to be late for your own wedding.”

“I’ll be right behind you.”

Selena grabbed her purse from the kitchen counter. “I could wait in the parking lot for you.”

“Thanks. But I need someone at the chapel to make sure everything is running smoothly.”

“I’m sure Clara is on top of everything.”

“It’s a lot for her to handle on her own without an assistant.”

Selena nodded. “I understand. I’ll go give her a hand.” She moved to the door before turning back. “Is there anything you need before I go?”

Brooke did her best to smile and hoped it looked genuine. “You’ve already been a big help. I just have to drop my key with the building manager, and I’m out of here.”

“And on to your new life. I’m so happy for you. Okay, I’m going.”

After Selena was gone, Brooke let out an unsteady breath. She looked at the time on her fitness watch. She would be saying *I do* in less than two hours. Her heart began to pound. Her palms grew clammy. As the coffee sloshed back and forth in her stomach, she swallowed repeatedly.

She just needed to sit down. If she rested for a moment and gathered her thoughts, her nerves would calm down. She sat in the only chair in the apartment. The pain in her head intensified. She had to get it together. How was she supposed to get through the ceremony when she felt so miserable?

She leaned back in the chair. She closed her eyes, willing her head to quit throbbing and her stomach to stop churning. In the next moment, she ran to the bathroom where she lost the little bit that was in her stomach.

Afterward, she rinsed out her mouth before splashing cold water on her face. The coldness against her heated skin felt so good. She threw more water on her face. At last, she felt as though she could take a full breath.

When she lifted her head and stared into the mirror, she realized her grave error. Her foundation dripped from her chin. Her eyeliner smeared, and she now had racoon eyes. She groaned. She'd just ruined her makeup—the makeup she'd had professionally applied for the wedding. How was she supposed to fix this? She didn't even know where to find her makeup. It was in one of the boxes stashed in her car.

Tears welled up in her eyes before rolling onto her cheeks. What did it matter now? Her makeup was ruined. She was a

mess. How was she to get married like this?

A little voice in the back of her mind said she could fix this. She swiped at the tears as she rushed to the door. On the way, she grabbed her purse from the kitchen counter.

It wasn't too late. She could still be the wife that Logan wanted—that he deserved. As the thought rolled around in her mind, she realized it wasn't the first time she'd had that thought. She'd also had it before she'd almost married Josh. She stopped walking as the gravity of the moment struck her.

When she'd left Iowa, she'd promised herself that she wouldn't change herself to please someone else. She'd promised to be true to herself. It was the only way a relationship would work in the long haul.

Was that what she was doing by marrying Logan today? He hadn't asked her to change her job or switch up her wardrobe.

Still, she hadn't had any say in where they'd live, if she could keep her furniture, or even when their wedding would be. She did speak up but there were always reasons that her suggestion wouldn't work. Instead of standing her ground, she'd gone along with it...because she wanted Logan to be happy.

Somewhere along the way, she'd become unhappy. And she hadn't realized how unhappy until this moment.

She was going through the motions and putting on the smile of a happy bride. But deep inside, she wasn't happy. This was not how she wanted her wedding to be, but she knew more

than anyone that no wedding and no marriage was ever perfect. Compromises had to be made.

She rushed out of the apartment building and climbed into her car. She started the engine and shoved it into gear. After she was out on the road, she felt as though she couldn't catch her breath. She lowered the windows. The air rushed into the car and eased her breathing.

She just needed a short drive—just enough to clear her head.

And then she'd make her way to the chapel.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT WAS ALMOST TIME to say *I do*.

Logan paced back and forth in one of the little rooms at the back of the chapel. He glanced at his watch. It was almost time for the ceremony. He was so happy that everything had worked out.

Was it warm in here? Was the air conditioner still working? He tugged at his silver tie and undid the button on the collar. It was a little better.

His thoughts turned to Brooke. He hoped her room wasn't too warm for her. He didn't know what it was like to wear a dress, but he didn't want her to be overcome with heat on their special day.

She was probably calm, cool, and totally had everything together. She'd been so calm and easygoing since he'd proposed to her. He needed to take notes from her.

Brooke was exactly what he and Kaylie needed. She brought such happiness to their lives, and she wasn't a complainer. He knew that everything about this wedding wasn't what she

wanted—like not having her family here. He felt really bad about it—so bad that he intended to surprise her with a detour to Iowa on their honeymoon to meet her family.

The door flung open, and Dylan rushed in. “Hey, man, are you ready for this?”

“Uh, yeah.” He felt calmer now. Maybe thinking of Brooke, he’d channeled some of her composure.

Dylan stepped up to him. “Do I detect a note of hesitation? Because it’s not too late to hustle you out of here.”

“Say what?” Logan frowned at his best friend. “I’m not going anywhere. I have the most beautiful woman in the world to marry. Let’s get down that aisle.”

“Whoa. Not so fast there. You can’t go out there looking like that.”

“Like what?”

“You don’t have your shirt buttoned and your tie fixed.”

“Oh.” Logan reached for his tie. “It’s so warm in here.”

Dylan sent him a puzzled look. “It’s not warm.”

“It’s not?” He struggled with his tie.

“Stop. Let me give you a hand.” Dylan moved forward. “Button your collar.”

Logan did as told. And then he waited while Dylan straightened his tie. He moved toward the door. It was time to wait at the end of the aisle for his bride. He headed for the door.

“Hey. Where are you going?”

Logan stopped and turned. He felt like this was a trick question. “To get married.”

“Don’t you need this?” Dylan held up his suit jacket. “Oh, yeah. Thanks.”

Dylan sent him a big smile. “It’s okay. That’s what you’ve got me for. And after this afternoon, you will become Brooke’s responsibility.”

Normally, he’d have taken exception to that comment, but not today. He liked the thought that he would have her to lean on, and she could lean on him. They were a great team.

Once again, he started for the door, but before he reached for the door handle, he hesitated. He turned back to Dylan. “Is there anything else I’ve forgotten?”

Dylan grinned at him. “No. Nothing at all.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am.”

“What about the ring?”

Dylan held up his hand with Logan’s grandmother’s antique wedding band. It was a family heirloom he wanted her to have. He just wished his grandmother was here to see them get married.

“You’re good to go.” Dylan’s voice had a note of confidence.

Together, they made their way to the front of the church. All the while Logan’s pulse accelerated. He would be fine once he saw Brooke. When she was standing up here next to him, he would focus solely on her. He loved her so much.

At precisely one o'clock the pianist began to play the wedding march. This was the moment. A door at the back of the chapel opened, but it wasn't his bride who walked down the aisle. Instead, it was Clara, their wedding planner.

Her gaze didn't meet his as she made her way to the front of the chapel. What was going on? It was supposed to be Selena who walked down the aisle and then Brooke. It was how they'd rehearsed it the night before.

The closer Clara got, he was able to see the worried lines on her face. She glanced toward the pianist and signaled for her to stop. A hushed silence fell over the chapel.

"What's going on?" He stepped toward her. "Where's Brooke?" His mind whirled with all of the different scenarios that could keep her from their wedding. A most worrisome thought had his heart clench. "Is she ill?"

Clara lowered her voice as she leaned in close. "I don't know. She's not here. And she's not answering her phone."

"Something happened to her. I have to find her." He didn't think; he just acted as he rushed out of the chapel amongst a bunch of gasps.

As he started down the steps outside, he heard Clara in the background telling everyone that there would be a slight delay. He hoped she was right. Brooke just had to be okay. He couldn't imagine what he'd do if something had happened to her.

He jumped into his pickup and fired it up. She could be hurt and need him. As he drove out of the parking lot, he wasn't sure which way to go.

“Think,” he ordered himself, as though it would silence the whirl of worries and allow him to focus. “Where was she this morning?” he muttered to himself.

A moment passed as he struggled to recall their last conversation. Suddenly, it came to him. She had been closing her apartment and turning in the key.

He knew where he was going. On the way, he tried calling her. It went straight to voicemail. “Brooke, where are you? What happened? Call me.”

He drove to her apartment. All the while, he scanned the sides of the road in case she’d had a flat tire or accident. There was no sign of her.

Once he reached her apartment building, he looked around for her car. It wasn’t anywhere in sight. He rushed into the building and went straight to her door.

He knocked. “Brooke? Brooke, are you in there?”

He tried the handle. It easily turned. He pushed open the door and stepped inside. He was struck by the emptiness of the place. He knew she’d been working on selling her furniture, but he hadn’t stopped by since she’d emptied the place. They’d been spending the bulk of their time at his place.

He walked through each room, just to be sure she hadn’t passed out or something. There wasn’t a sign of her. Where was she?

“Who’s in here?” a male voice called out.

Logan stepped out of the empty bedroom and entered the living room. “Who are you?”

“The building manager.” He arched a brow as he took in Logan’s wedding clothes. “Who are you?”

“I’m supposed to marry the woman that lives here, um, lived here. Do you know where Brooke is?”

The man hesitated.

“This is important.” He didn’t have time to play games. “Do you know?” When the man reluctantly shook his head, Logan asked, “Have you seen her today?”

“No. When I saw the door open, I thought you were her. I need her key. I want to start showing the apartment next week.”

Ding.

Logan pulled his phone out of his pocket. He hoped it was a message letting him know Brooke was waiting for him at the chapel.

Brooke

I’m sorry. I can’t do this. Not like this.

He read the message again and again. He didn’t understand. What did she mean by *not like this*?

This was bridal jitters like he'd had right before he'd walked down the aisle. They just needed to see each other and talk through the nerves. Yes, that was it. They'd talk, and then the wedding would proceed as planned.

Logan

Where are you? I'll come to you.

There was a pause. It went on and on. He started to wonder if she would respond.

Brooke

You can't.

Logan

Why not?

Brooke

I left.

Logan

Come back. We can talk.

Brooke

I'm sorry. I can't go through with the wedding.

He reread her words. A painful crack formed in his heart. Each time he read the words, the crack grew and the ache worsened.

His finger hovered motionless over his phone. She left. He knew her past. He knew she had previously been a runaway bride; he just never thought she would do that again—do that to him. Didn't she know how much he loved her?

It was over. It was all over.

He shoved the phone back into his pocket as he stormed toward the door. He had to get out of there. He had to go home and get out of these clothes. He didn't know what he would do after that. It appeared it didn't matter. Kaylie was with his

mother, who was to drop her off with Margie for the next two weeks.

“Hey! Wait,” the building manager called out to him. “What about my key? Is she going to drop it off?”

Logan paused in the doorway. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything.”

The man continued to call out questions, but Logan ignored them as he rushed down the steps, anxious to get outside. He’d no sooner stepped out onto the sidewalk when his phone rang yet again.

He wanted to ignore it. He didn’t want to speak to anyone. Right now, his heart felt as though it had shattered into a million pieces. But there was this part of him that was hoping it was Brooke, and she was calling to apologize—she’d had a freak-out moment but that she still loved him.

He pulled his phone from his pocket to find it was Clara. He realized in that moment there was still a chapel full of people waiting for them.

He pressed the phone to his ear. “Clara, tell everyone to go home.”

“Did you find her?”

“No.” He hesitated. He didn’t want to admit that Brooke had run off, but Clara would find out sooner or later since she was Brooke’s boss. “She left.”

“Left? As in left San Francisco?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe this. Where’s she going?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say. I have to go.” He disconnected the phone as Clara kept asking questions that he had absolutely no answers to.

All he knew was that Brooke never truly loved him, or she wouldn’t have skipped out on their wedding day. He supposed he should be grateful they hadn’t gotten married before she had this revelation, but all he felt was a raw, jagged pain where his heart was supposed to be.

He jumped into his pickup and fired up the engine. As he stamped the accelerator, he was filled with a tsunami of emotions that threatened to drown him. There was a part of him that wanted to fix this mess. And there was another part of him that never wanted to see Brooke ever again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*H*OME SWEET HOME ...

Brooke hoped that was still the case as she drove eastward. Her wedding debacle more than a year ago had put a strain on her relationship with her whole family—something she'd never anticipated when her wedding with Josh had blown up in her face. Currently, she couldn't fix things with Logan, but it was time to fix things with her family. In fact, it was well past time to heal old wounds.

As she'd made her way through Nevada on her way eastward, she'd stopped for the night. Before she called it a night, she'd called Selena and Clara. The conversations were brief and stilted. Finally, she phoned her building manager to tell him she was keeping her apartment after all. She didn't have it in her to explain her actions. She knew she'd have to do some explaining eventually, but she wasn't ready to do it yet.

After three long days of driving, she pulled to a stop in her parents' driveway. She shifted into Park as she stared up at the

familiar farmhouse. Maybe it was because she'd been away for the past year, and it gave her a new perspective, but she noticed how the white paint was peeling, and the red paint on the shutters had now faded to a pinkish shade.

She turned her attention to the back door. When she was a kid, she would run in and out of that doorway. The screen door would swing shut behind her with a solid whack-whack.

Back in those days, she didn't have any worries. The days were long—*oh my, how the days seemed to stretch out*—unlike these days when the time flew right past her in the blink of an eye.

Speaking of time, she couldn't continue to sit here in the hot August sunshine. As soon as she opened the door, she was smacked in the face with the stifling heat and oppressive humidity. Not so long ago, she'd been used to this sort of weather, but now that she lived in San Francisco, she'd gotten used to a much milder climate.

She drew in a deep breath of hot air. Maybe not her best decision. It was time to get this over with. She knew the initial moments would be the worst, and then she hoped things would start to feel normal again.

She made her way across the driveway, all the while the gravel crunched beneath her feet. She paused at the edge of the concrete sidewalk and stared down at the two sets of little hand prints—hers and her sister's. That moment felt like a lifetime ago.

She continued up the walk. She climbed the wooden steps, crossed the deck, and paused in front of the back door. What did she do now?

She hadn't told them she was coming home. What would her mother's reaction be? Was it possible she wouldn't be happy to see her? The thought had her stomach churning. It wasn't too late to turn around and leave.

She didn't move. This was a decisive moment in her life. If she ever wanted to be able to move forward, she had to take a few steps back. And this was the place where her life had first fallen apart.

Her heart raced, echoing in her ears. In all her life, she'd never been this nervous about coming home—not even when she was sixteen and two hours past her curfew.

She refused to walk away. She'd sacrificed too much and come too far to leave now. So, did she knock? Or did she walk in the door just like she'd done most of her life?

Maybe knocking would be best. She clenched her hand and lifted her arm. About to knock, her mother swung the door open. Her face was thinner, and the lines bracketing her eyes and mouth were deeper. Other than that her mother was her same wonderful self.

Her mother's eyes widened. "Were you going to knock?"

"Um." She lowered her arm as heat rushed to her cheeks. "Well... You didn't know I was coming."

Her mother pushed open the back door. “Get in here.” Her mother enveloped her in a hug. Brooke didn’t know how much she needed it until that moment. When they parted, her mother said, “I’ll get us some lemonade.”

The thought of an ice-cold drink appealed to her. And so she followed her mother into the kitchen, which was still painted a sunflower yellow with green and white buffalo check curtains framing the tall windows.

In the center of the kitchen was a large farmhouse table with three chairs on one side, a bench on the other side, and a chair on either end. This was where everyone caught up on each other’s day. It was where many fights had started, and fights had been settled.

After cleaning up from working in the fields, her father would sit at the head of the table. Her mother would sit at the other end. Brooke would sit on one side, and Candi would be on the other side. Back in the day, the extra seats hadn’t sat empty. Both her and her sister would always have friends at the house who would inevitably stay for dinner. She missed those days.

Of course, her parents had always planned to fill the table with more of their own children, but that hadn’t been in the plans for them. After she was born, her mother had complications that ended with a hysterectomy, but it didn’t stop her mother from being a loving and attentive parent.

Her mother filled two glasses with ice and poured the undoubtedly fresh-squeezed lemonade. *Yummo!* It’d been far

too long since she'd tasted it.

Her mother turned around and frowned. "What are you still standing there for? Sit down."

Brooke took a seat next to her mother's chair. It was so strange being back there. It was a mix of a warm homecoming and a sense of no longer belonging. It was quite confusing.

Her mother slid the glass across the table to her. "Aren't you supposed to be on your honeymoon?"

Brooke had been trying not to think about it because every time she did, she ended up in tears. She glanced at her mother, who was giving her a pointed stare. There was no avoiding the subject now.

"Yes." Her answer was soft as she fought back a wave of emotion.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I needed to see you. And I knew if I called, you'd tell me not to come."

Her mother's eyes filled with emotion. Was it sympathy? Or regret? "I'm so sorry. This shouldn't have gone on for so long. It's just your father was getting all sorts of grief from Josh's father down at the grain mill. It's been such a mess. But things are better now. And I'm so happy to see you. You don't know how much I missed you." She glanced toward the door. "Where's Logan? You didn't leave him in the car, did you?"

Brooke shook her head. "He's not with me."

“Not with you?” Her mother’s forehead scrunched up, and her lips pursed as though she wanted to say something but didn’t know what the words should be.

Brooke swallowed hard, hoping when she spoke her voice didn’t betray her raging emotions. “We...um, didn’t get married.”

Her mother’s voice rose. “You didn’t? But why not?” When Brooke failed to answer, her mother asked, “Brooke, you didn’t run away from your wedding again, did you?”

“It’s not the same.” Her denial came out much too quickly.

“Oh, Brooke.” Her mother reached out, placing her hand over Brooke’s and squeezed. “Why do you keep doing this?”

Tears stung the backs of Brooke’s eyes. She blinked repeatedly. “You don’t understand. I really do love Logan.”

“Then why did you leave?”

“Because you weren’t there.” She stared at her mother. “Because it was too rushed. Because it didn’t feel like my wedding.”

“I’m so sorry, sweetie.”

The tenderness of her mother’s voice tipped her emotions, and tears spilled onto Brooke’s cheeks. “I... I’ve made a mess of everything.”

“Does Logan know you’re here?”

“No. I... I don’t know what to say to him.”

“Tell him what you told me. It’s a good start.”

She swiped at her cheeks. “He probably doesn’t want to hear from me. Not after the way I bailed on the wedding.”

“You won’t know until you try and call him.”

“Maybe I’ll do that later.” She feared Logan would hang up on her before she had a chance to explain her actions. Not that she would blame him. “Right now, I need to go see Dad. Do you think he’ll speak to me?”

“I think your father has realized you made the right decision. After he had to deal with Josh’s father, who turned your father’s business away at the grain mill, he realized that wasn’t the sort of family he wanted his daughter to marry into.” Her mother got to her feet. “You call Logan, and I’ll go out to the barn to find your father.”

Brooke sighed and nodded. She knew she’d put this off longer than she should have, but once she hit the Nevada state line, she knew it didn’t matter how much she loved Logan. There would be no fixing this. She just needed him to understand her reason for calling off the wedding.

Her mouth suddenly felt dry. She took a drink of the homemade lemonade. It tasted just as good as it had when she was a little girl and would come in from riding her horse. Oh, how she missed those days when her biggest worry was getting sunburned from spending too much time outside.

Realizing she was procrastinating again, she got up and moved to the back porch. She pulled out her phone and found she only had one bar of reception. She moved about the porch until she found a spot where she received two bars.

She noticed the tremble in her hand as she ran her finger over the face of her phone. She pressed it to her ear. The phone didn't even ring but rather went straight to voicemail.

“It's Logan.” The warmth of his deep voice washed over her, leaving her with a deep, longing to feel his arms around her. “Leave a message and I'll get back to you.”

She ended the call without leaving a message. Maybe she should have told him what she had to say in a message, but she'd hesitated.

She paced back and forth. She paused and stared at the barn. There was no sign of her parents. She was left to wonder what her mother was saying to her father. Or more importantly, what her father was saying to her mother.

Brooke sat down and stared at her phone. She considered trying to call Logan again but decided against it. Instead, she pulled up her email and began to write to him.

Logan, most importantly I'm so sorry...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HE WAS BACK AT work.

Logan mopped the floor of the common room at the firehouse. Technically, it wasn't his duty, but he was taking on as many duties as he could find to keep himself busy. Any time he stopped working, his thoughts would inevitably stray to Brooke.

He'd noticed that while he'd been speaking to the chief that Brooke had called. He'd also noticed that she hadn't left him a voicemail. She probably realized there was nothing she could say to make things better.

For the life of him, he never in a million years would have guessed she'd leave him at the altar. He'd foolishly believed their relationship was unbreakable—that she would never leave him—like his ex had done. The thought weighed heavy on him.

The pain from Brooke leaving was more excruciating than when his marriage had fallen apart. How could that be? It

wasn't like they'd been together for years. They didn't share a child.

And yet somehow, she'd burrowed deep into his heart, filling in the cracks and making it whole again. At least it had been whole. Now it was shattered beyond repair.

Dylan walked up to him. "Now you're cleaning? What's next?"

Logan finished swiping the mop over the floor and plunging it back in the bucket before turning to Dylan. "Maybe you should do more around here, and I wouldn't have to pick up the slack."

Dylan's brow arched. "A bit testy today."

"Just trying to get things done," he muttered.

Logan rolled the bucket out of the common room. He sensed Dylan hot on his heels. Logan resisted groaning in frustration. Why wouldn't Dylan just leave him be?

Finally, Logan stopped and turned to him. "What do you want?"

Dylan's eyes widened as he held up his hands innocently. "I'm just concerned about you."

"Well, don't be. I'm fine." He turned around and gave the bucket a hard shove. It rolled straight into their lieutenant. The water sloshed over the edge and splashed onto the lieutenant's shoes.

The lieutenant scowled at him. "Watch it, Montgomery."

“Sorry, Lieutenant.”

The lieutenant looked as though he wanted to say more but hesitated. After a moment, he said, “Clean up this mess. We don’t want anyone falling.”

“Yes, sir.” After the lieutenant moved on, Logan turned to Dylan. Before he could say anything, his phone dinged. He didn’t get many messages. Concerned it might be something to do with Kaylie, he pulled it from his pocket.

The breath stilled in his lungs when he saw it was an email from Brooke. He told himself he shouldn’t care what she had to say, and yet there was a part of him that needed to know—needed to understand why she’d left him.

Before he could convince himself that this was a bad idea, he pressed the button. The email opened on the screen.

“Is everything okay?” Dylan asked.

“I don’t know. It’s a note from Brooke.”

“How about I take care of the mop water? And you read the note.”

Logan wasn’t even sure he answered before he walked away. He couldn’t imagine what Brooke had to say, so he waited until he was out of the firehouse and on the driveway before he looked at his phone again.

Logan, most importantly, I’m so sorry.

Words can’t even explain my regret that things ended like this. It isn’t what I want. You have to believe me.

I just wasn't ready to get married. I tried to tell you, but you were so convincing on why there was no need to wait. I wanted to believe you—I tried to go along with what everyone wanted. Maybe I should have gone through with it, and then I wouldn't be missing you so much.

Everything felt as though it was all planned out from the date of the wedding falling on a cancellation of the chapel to the wedding dress being one of three the boutique had in stock because there wasn't enough time to order one.

I tried to fit into other people's expectations before, and it hadn't worked out. I don't know why I thought this time would be any different. I guess it's because I love you so much that I wanted to believe it would all work out.

And now that I'm back at my parents' farm, I realize that I just couldn't get married without them. I've spoken with my mother and things were awkward at first, but we both said things we've been holding back. I still have to speak to my father and sister. I have a feeling those conversations won't be easy, but I hope to make things right again. If I ever do get married, I really need them there with me because I love them—even if they don't agree with me about what makes for a happy future.

I also regret leaving without saying goodbye to Kaylie. Will you tell her how sorry I am and that I miss her. She's a very special little girl. You are so lucky to be her father. Give her a hug for me.

I wish I was there to give you a hug too. I'm sure you wouldn't want that now, and I can't blame you.

I love you,

B

His vision blurred. He swiped at his eyes and blinked. He didn't want to believe her. How was any of this his fault? Even after she hadn't shown up, he'd chased after her, certain only something beyond her control would keep her from their wedding. He'd been such a fool.

He told himself she was only saying this stuff to make herself feel better. For starters, no one who loved someone just took off on the day of their wedding. She should have... What could she have done to make the news that she wasn't ready to get married any better? He didn't have any answers.

“What did she say?”

The sound of Dylan's voice startled Logan from his thoughts. “Nothing.”

“Come on. She had to say something.”

He knew Dylan wasn't going to give up until he told him something. And Logan needed someone to reassure him that he hadn't pressured Brooke into the wedding.

“She said the wedding had been too quick.”

“Well, she does have a point. After all, you were going to get married a month after you proposed.”

Logan scowled at him. “But she could have said no.”

“Did you ask her if she wanted to get married then?”

Logan searched his memory and came up with a blank. Had he asked her? Surely he must have, but he also remembered how excited he’d been about marrying her. When he made up his mind about something, he was ready to do it right then. He didn’t have a lot of patience.

“Logan?” Dylan prodded him.

“Okay. Maybe there’s a chance I might have rushed things along, but it was only because I knew she was the right person for me. Boy, was I wrong about that.”

“And how does she feel about you?”

Logan hesitated as he replayed the words of her note in his mind. “She said she still cares about me.”

“Cares as in friends? Or did she use the L-word?”

Logan sighed. “Fine. She used the L-word. But how am I supposed to believe her when she ran out on me?”

“I don’t know. That’s something you’re going to have to figure out on your own. But if you still love her, you might want to hear her out.”

“I don’t know.” Some things couldn’t be repaired.

elle

Dinnertime.

Brooke swallowed hard when her mother called her for dinner like she'd done a million times in the past. Only this time Brooke's stomach shivered with nerves.

She hadn't been this nervous about showing up for dinner since she'd gotten her nose pierced when she was sixteen. Her father had been very vocal about his displeasure with it. But all of her friends were getting piercings and tattoos. She'd just wanted to fit in.

Her mother had played the peacemaker, and her father had learned to live with it. But he didn't have to cope with it for long, less than a year. It was a phase for her and had passed quickly.

Today, the stakes were much higher. She had a feeling if they couldn't repair their relationship today that they'd never be able to do it.

After her long drive, she'd showered and put on fresh jean shorts and a T-shirt. She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and fixed her bangs. For the first time in a year, she didn't put on makeup. She didn't feel the need here on the farm.

She headed downstairs. She turned the corner and spotted her father. His back was toward her as he stood at the kitchen sink, washing his hands. Her pulse raced as her palms grew damp.

He was wearing a pair of faded jeans and a blue T-shirt. She noticed there was a lot of gray in his hair, far more than the last time she'd seen him. She couldn't help but wonder if she'd contributed to those gray hairs.

This meeting could go one of two ways. She prayed it would go smoothly. She really had missed her family more than she had realized.

She walked down the hallway to the kitchen. When her father turned off the water, she said, “Hi, Dad.”

He halted, as though her voice had caught him off guard. Without turning around, he reached for the hand towel to dry his hands.

As the silence stretched on, her mother sent her a nervous smile. “I hope you’re hungry.”

The truth was that she didn’t have room in her stomach for food because of the sensation of butterflies fluttering around. When she opened her mouth, she ended up saying, “I’m starved. It smells good.”

Her mother’s smile broadened. “Good. I made green beans, potatoes, and ham. I know it’s one of your favorite meals.” Her words were rushed. “With salad and cornbread.”

So Brooke wasn’t the only one nervous about this reunion. “I can’t wait.”

“Have a seat. I just have to serve up the food.” Her mother picked up a large serving bowl and began to ladle the beans, potatoes, ham and broth into the dish.

Brooke turned her attention back to her father, who appeared to be taking a really long time drying his hands. It was okay. She’d waited more than a year for this moment; she could wait a little longer. And so she stood there until he turned around.

After folding the towel and returning it to the holder, he turned. His face was devoid of expression. She really tried to read in his eyes what he was thinking, but it was like there was a wall up between them.

She was unnerved by his reserve. Her father wasn't one to hold his emotions at bay. "Your mother says you didn't get married."

She shook her head. "It wasn't the right time."

"Something wrong with the guy?"

Once more she shook her head. "It wasn't like that. Logan is a really good guy. He's the best."

Her father arched a bushy brow. "You sing his praises, but you didn't marry him?"

"It was just too fast. And..."

He crossed his arms as he leaned back against the counter. His gaze was laser-focused on her. "And what?"

"Why don't we sit down?" Her mother placed the food on the table.

Brooke didn't move, and neither did her father. She needed to get this out there. "I know what it's like to get dumped at the altar—"

"What?" Her father's brows scrunched together.

She looked at her mother and then her father. "You know... When Josh dumped me at the wedding."

Her mother stepped forward. “That’s not what he said. He told us that you ended things.”

She inwardly groaned. Of course, he wouldn’t take responsibility for his actions. Why had she thought him dumping her would be any different? After all, his parents had always catered to him. Nothing had ever been his fault.

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. “I might have left town, but I wasn’t the one to end things. I was angry and upset about it for a long time, but now I’m grateful that Josh had the courage to do what I couldn’t bring myself to do. We wouldn’t have been happy together—not in the long run.”

Her father raked his fingers through his hair. “Josh’s father made my life difficult for the longest time. I lost money on my business because his father blamed you for breaking his son’s heart and embarrassing him in front of the town. The man refused to do business with me. And now you’re telling me it was all a lie?”

She nodded. “I’m telling you the truth. Maybe I should have talked about it before, but I had no idea that Josh had lied to everyone.”

For a moment, silence settled over all of them as each came to terms with this new knowledge. She hoped it would help ease the tension.

“And this time,” her father said, “why didn’t you get married? Was it Logan’s choice?”

She shook her head. “It was mine. I... I didn’t want to get married without my family there.”

There was a flicker of emotion in her father’s eyes. He lowered his arms and then stepped around the table until he stood in front of her.

His gaze met hers. “I’ve missed you.”

Immediately, her gaze blurred with happy tears. “I missed you too.”

He enveloped her in his strong arms. She wrapped her arms around his barrel-like chest as she rested her head on him. She had missed his bear hugs more than she realized.

When she pulled back, she swiped at her cheeks. It was a good thing she’d skipped the makeup or else it would be streaked down her face.

“How about we eat before the food gets cold?” Her mother dried her eyes.

Both she and her father took a seat at the table. The tension had evaporated. As they filled their plates with Brooke’s favorite meal, they started to talk. And for the moment, her pain was temporarily pushed to the back of her mind.

The subjects they discussed weren’t anything special. They didn’t have to be. It was just so good to talk to her parents without any discourse.

Her father told her about the latest happenings on the farm. Her mother filled her in on the town gossip. And Brooke told

them about her new friends and her job at the Perky Pink Wedding Company.

There was laughter, there were tears, and there was peace. It was the best dinner she'd ever had. And when she finally made her way to her room that night, she couldn't stop smiling.

The first thing she wanted to do was to tell Logan about the dinner. She reached for her phone. Her finger lingered over the screen, but then she hesitated. The smile slipped from her face.

She couldn't call him. The familiar pain in her heart thudded. She doubted Logan even wanted to speak to her. Tears pricked the back of her eyes.

He hadn't responded to her email. A little voice in the back of her mind said he might not have even checked his email. The other voice in her head said that he probably deleted the email without reading it.

Still, it didn't hurt to keep writing to him. She just hoped something she said would touch him—to help him forgive her. Was it even possible?

She had to believe it was. And so she began writing, telling him everything she'd learned from her parents about her ex and his lies.

Tonight my mother made a special dinner and although it started off with an awkward sort of standoff, it turned into a nice dinner where conversation flowed easily. I wish you could

have been there. My parents would love you—just not as much as I love you.

I'm so sorry for how I handled things. You have no idea how much I regret not being honest with myself and talking to you. I should have let you know that I needed more time—that I needed a voice in where we lived.

You were so excited that I couldn't bring myself to tell you that living in the house where you started a family with your ex didn't work for me. Instead, I stuffed my reservations down deep inside and ignored them until they all came gushing out at the worst time. It was a total meltdown. I hope someday you'll be able to forgive me.

xox

B

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WHY DID SHE KEEP writing to him?

And why did he keep reading her messages?

Logan read Brooke's note again and again. What was he supposed to do with this email? If it was paper, he'd ball it up and toss it into the garbage.

Instead, all he could do was stab at his phone until the email disappeared from the screen. He inwardly groaned. She didn't pointedly accuse him of anything, but he still felt as though she saw him as having a part in their wedding debacle. And he didn't. Nope. Not at all.

It wasn't his fault she didn't say anything about the wedding date or the house. There was plenty of time for her to speak up. It wasn't like he planned the wedding all on his own. He hadn't rushed things along. It just worked out that way.

This wasn't all on him. She was the one who took off.

It was his day off from the fire department. He really wished it was a work day because he'd have things to do to take his

mind off Brooke's words. And he didn't have Kaylie, because she'd just left with her mother to visit an amusement park for a couple of days.

All of that left him climbing the walls. Was it his fault the wedding didn't happen? No. He was the one who had been waiting at the altar. She was the one who had left. And yet there was something in her emails that chewed at him.

He was going to drive himself nuts if he stayed at home parsing her words. He needed someone to assure him he had nothing to do with Brooke's cold feet. His first thought was to go see Dylan, but then he recalled his friend had gone on a road trip.

There was his mother, but she was working until that evening. And then his thoughts turned to Clara. She knew both him and Brooke. Clara had been involved with every aspect of the wedding plans. She would be able to give him the perspective he needed.

He headed out the door and jumped into his pickup. He headed for the offices of the Perky Pink Wedding Company. It wasn't until he'd pulled into a parking spot out front that he realized he should have called before driving all of that way. With Clara being a wedding planner, it was quite possible she wouldn't be in the office.

Still, he was there so he might as well see if she was available. He got out and took long strides toward the office. When he tried the door and it opened, he breathed easier.

A young woman looked up from the front desk. A big smile covered her face, and unlike Brooke's smiles, it didn't fill him with warmth. He'd never seen this woman before and he was in no mood to smile.

"Hello. Can I help you?" the young woman asked.

"I'm here to see Clara."

"Do you have an appointment?" When he shook his head, the woman checked something on her computer. "I'm afraid she has meetings all morning. Could you come back later this afternoon?"

He shook his head. "That will be too late."

The young woman's brows rose as her eyes filled with unspoken questions. He preferred not to elaborate on his comment.

She pursed her lips as she stared at the computer monitor. Then she picked up the phone and pressed a button. Softly she said, "There's a gentleman here to see you. I told him you were booked this morning, but it seems important." There was a pause, and then the young woman looked at him. "What's your name?"

"Logan." And then realizing that Clara might deal with other Logans he added, "Montgomery."

The woman repeated it into the phone. When she hung up, she turned to him but before she could get a word out, Clara's office door opened. She stepped out. "Logan, please come in."

He glanced at the young woman. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome.” She flashed him another bright smile.

Once inside Clara’s office, he shut the door. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

“It’s not a problem. I have a few minutes before my next appointment.” She moved behind her desk and sat down. “What can I help you with?”

“Have you heard from Brooke?”

Clara nodded. “She called me. She apologized and said she would be back for work next week, as planned. Have you heard from her?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “She’s been emailing me.”

Clara’s brows rose. “Really?”

He nodded. “She tried explaining why she left.”

“I see.” Clara pursed her lips together, as though to contain her questions.

“She said the wedding was too soon for her. Did she say anything about this to you?”

Clara hesitated. “She did ask if there were any openings in the calendar for late in the year or early next year but I told her we were booked for the next year.”

So, she had tried to delay the wedding. He wasn’t sure what to do with this new information. “Why didn’t she say something to me?”

Clara leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk. “I only know one thing and that’s she loves you a lot, and she wanted

to make you happy.”

“But, I didn’t say we had to get married right away.” When Clara arched a brow, he asked, “What? I didn’t.”

“You might not have insisted on it, but you were quick to jump on the date and insist you two could make it work if you both wanted it enough.”

“I did?” The question was more rhetorical than anything else. He rubbed the back of his neck again as he searched his memory.

It took him a moment to summon the recollection. And then it hit him like a sledgehammer. He had said those words. He had persuaded her into a quick wedding.

He groaned. “I did say it. But I didn’t mean it had to be then or never. I was just excited. I never thought I’d want to get married again.” He got to his feet and paced. “Do you really think she believed if she didn’t marry me then—that if she said she wanted to delay the ceremony—that I would call off our engagement?”

Clara shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know.”

Of course, she didn’t. The only person who could answer any of these questions was on a farm somewhere in Iowa—far, far away.

Clara’s phone buzzed. “I’m sorry. It’s time for my next appointment.”

“Of course. Thank you for seeing me. I appreciate it.”

She got to her feet. “I’m sorry this is so hard. I hope you two find your way back to each other.”

“I don’t know.” It was the honest truth. He still cared about Brooke, but he didn’t know if he could trust her ever again.

“Just give it some time. I’ve seen a lot of couples come through that door, and you two were made for each other.”

He thanked her for listening and made his exit. All the while, he replayed their conversation and the fact he might have played a part in Brooke’s skipping out on their wedding.



There was so much to catch up on.

Brooke had spent the morning helping her mother can green beans. She still kept the root cellar well-stocked just like Brooke’s grandmother had done. While they worked, they talked.

Her mother filled her in on who married who and who had passed away. It was amazing how much had happened in their small town over the past year.

Later in the afternoon, Brooke changed her clothes and headed into town. It was time she saw her sister. This reunion would likely be even more tense than having to face her father.

She had a complicated relationship with her sister. Candi was older than her and always thought she knew what was best for Brooke. And of course she often rejected her sister’s ideas

—sometimes just because her sister had come up with the idea.

In fact, it was her sister who first set her up with Josh back in high school. Brooke had resisted the idea but finally gave in and went on a double date with her sister and her sister's now-husband. It was one of the few times she realized Candi hadn't had such a bad idea.

Her sister was now a teller at the only bank in town. And according to her mother, Candi was done with work at four o'clock. In her eagerness to see her sister again, Brooke arrived in town fifteen minutes early.

She parked at the end of Main Street and decided to stroll to the other side of the small town. This would give her a chance to take in the changes that had happened since she'd left. She didn't want any of it to change. She loved her hometown, even if she no longer lived there.

As she made her way past one block, she was relieved to find everything as she recalled it. Some of the locals had done a double-take when they saw her. Some waved. Others pretended like they hadn't seen her. Truly nothing had changed. It was still the same gossipy town it had always been. And she had just given them lots to talk about.

She paused in front of the chocolate shop and inhaled deeply. Mmm... This place definitely hadn't changed. She gazed in the storefront window at the delicious display of gift boxes of chocolates. She was tempted to go inside and buy some, but

she figured by the time she made it back to her car, it would all melt in this stifling heat.

With the greatest regret, she turned. Her head was down as she was about to check the time on her phone when she ran into someone. Embarrassment warmed her cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

“Brooke?”

The all-too familiar male voice had her jerking her head upward. Her gaze met sky-blue eyes. Josh.

She smothered a groan. He was the last person she wanted to run into, but on second thought, maybe this was a good thing. By the time she headed back to California she would have cleared the air with everyone.

“Hello, Josh.” Honestly, she didn’t know what to say to him. She could accuse him of turning the tables on her and letting the town think she was the one who walked out on him at the altar. She hesitated.

“I... I didn’t know you were back in town.”

“I just arrived yesterday.” Talk about your awkward moments. She knew she could take this conversation one of two ways—dredging up the past or making a fresh start. She chose the latter. “How are you doing?”

“Good. In fact, I just got engaged again. You wouldn’t know her. She’s new to town.”

“I’m happy for you.” She was surprised to find that she truly meant it.

“Thanks. And how are you? Didn’t I hear that you’re getting married too?”

She glanced down at the diamond ring that still adorned her finger. She really didn’t want to get into the mess she’d made of her relationship with Logan, so she said, “Yes. He’s a great guy.”

“Looks like it all worked out for both of us.” Twin lines formed between his brows. “I need to apologize to you.”

She decided to play dumb. “About what?”

“First, for calling off the wedding at the last possible moment. I... I thought I could go through with it but realized it wouldn’t be fair to either of us. And second because I let everyone assume you called off the wedding.”

She wanted to point out that his lack of omission had been hard on her family. She really wanted to lay into him and tell him that it was cowardly. But then she realized she couldn’t accuse him of taking the easy way out of an awkward situation when she’d done something similar.

“It’s all in the past.” As the words crossed her lips, it surprised even her. “Let’s just leave it there.”

He blinked. “Are you serious?” When she nodded, he said, “I thought for sure you’d be yelling at me.”

She shrugged. “I’ve done a lot of growing this past year. I still have a lot to learn, but I don’t think holding onto past grudges helps anyone.”

For the first time since she'd run into him, Josh smiled. It was one of those smiles that made his eyes twinkle and used to make her stomach dip. This time it did nothing for her but make her think of Logan and how much she missed him and his smiles.

“Well, I should be going,” Brooke said. “I’m hoping to catch up with my sister when she gets off work.”

He nodded in understanding. “It was good seeing you. Congrats on the wedding.”

His well-intended words poked at the hole in her heart. She struggled not to let the pain show on her face. “Thank you. Congrats to you too.”

She couldn't walk away fast enough. It wasn't Josh who bothered her. In fact, their reunion had been much easier than she'd ever imagined it would be. At last, she had finally completely, and totally closed that chapter of her life.

The part that bothered her was putting on a show that her life was perfect when it was anything but perfect. Her pride had refused to allow her to let on that she'd made the biggest mistake of her life. The weight of what she'd done by walking away from Logan settled on her shoulders. Was there any way she could ever repair her relationship with Logan?

No.

The ominous answer echoed in her mind. She thought of the letters she'd been writing him. She still hadn't heard one word from him. Right there was her answer.

CHAPTER TWENTY

WAS SHE FOOLING HERSELF?

Did she really think some emails would convince Logan to give her another chance?

Brooke was in such deep thought about her situation with Logan that she nearly walked past the bank. If it hadn't been for someone exiting the bank and causing Brooke to pause, she might very well still be walking with no particular destination in mind.

“Brooke?” Mrs. Walters gazed over the black rims of her glasses. “It is you. What are you doing here?”

The question sounded too much like an accusation. Brooke stifled a sigh. Mrs. Walters was the town's biggest gossip. She decided to ignore the woman's pointed question. “Good afternoon.”

When she tried to go around the short woman, Mrs. Walters said, “You don't want to go in there. They're closing for the day.”

Brooke stepped back. There was no getting around the woman, who refused to move. “If you’ll excuse me. I’m here to see my sister.”

“Oh, dear, Candace already left for the day.” Mrs. Walters gave her a strange look. “I thought you would have known that.”

Refusing to let this busybody read more into the situation than was there, she said, “I ran into someone and we talked.” Not a lie. “And now I’m late. Thank you for letting me know.”

Not waiting for the woman to say anything else, Brooke turned on her heel and started toward her car. She said a few hellos on the way. No one held her up, and in no time she reached her car—her very hot car. She started it, put down the windows and blasted the air conditioner. Thankfully, it cooled down quickly as she headed out of town to her sister’s place.

Candi lived on a large farm that her husband ran. Row after row of corn stood tall and proud. It was a good year for the farmers, which meant it was a good year for her family. She was happy for them. And happy she figured out that this life wasn’t for her. Nothing against it, it just wasn’t her.

She drove up to the large white farmhouse with blue shutters and a wraparound porch. In the background stood a large white barn with the doors wide open. People didn’t worry about crime around these parts. Besides, what were they going to steal in the barn? A rake? Or a shovel?

She made her way to the front door, which was open. She knocked on the screen door.

“Coming!” A minute later, her sister stepped up to the door. She didn’t smile, but she didn’t frown. “I was wondering when I’d see you.” She pushed open the door. “Come in.” Her sister turned away before she could hug her. “We can talk in the kitchen.”

Okay. So this was going to be just as awkward as she’d imagined. Brooke quietly followed her sister to the back of the house, where there was a large bright kitchen. The walls were painted a pale yellow, and the windows were trimmed with white ruffled curtains. It was cheery.

Her sister gestured to the table that sat off in the corner. “Have a seat. I’ll get us some coffee.”

Brooke swallowed hard. “It’s good to see you.”

Candi filled the coffeemaker with water. “How long are you in town for? Or are you moving back?”

Brooke gave a firm shake of her head. “I still have my job in California. And I really enjoy it.”

“You’re still planning weddings?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m an assistant planner at the Perky Pink Wedding Company. I’ve learned so much being there.”

“Except how to have a successful wedding of your own.” The jab was swift and hit its mark.

“Hey, Candi, that’s not fair.”

Her sister turned to her with emotion glinting in her eyes. “You have to admit that you’re becoming a bit of a

professional runaway bride.”

Brooke got to her feet. “I thought we could talk, but it appears that isn’t possible.”

When she turned to retrace her footsteps to the front door, her sister said, “Wait.” An awkward pause ensued. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just this situation hasn’t been easy. And you took off, so you didn’t have to deal with any of the fallout.”

Brooke turned around to see the pain reflected in her sister’s eyes. “I’m sorry what happened with the wedding affected you and your husband.”

“He’s Josh’s best friend. He was furious when you left Josh at the altar.”

“But I didn’t.”

Her sister blinked, but the confusion still showed in her eyes. “Yes, you did. I was there. Remember?”

“But I didn’t call off the wedding.”

Her sister’s forehead scrunched up. “Yes, you did.”

Brooke shook her head. “It was Josh. He called things off. I thought Mom would have told you.”

“What? Mom knew all of this time?”

Brooke shook her head. “I told her last night. I just thought she would have mentioned it to you. Maybe she was giving me a chance to do it.”

“I didn’t talk to her last night. I’m so confused. Anyway, back to the wedding. You’re the one that told everyone the wedding was off, and then you skipped town without a word to anyone, not even your family.”

“I told the guests because Josh refused to do it. I just never imagined he would tell everyone that I had dumped him.”

Her sister’s gaze searched hers. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Brooke sighed. “Do you really think I’d lie about something like this?”

Candi’s mouth gaped, but no words came. She blinked a couple of times, as though she were trying to compute this information. As though needing time to make sense of what she’d just been told, she turned and got them two cups of coffee.

She placed Brooke’s cup on the table. “Sit down. Please.”

Brooke decided to give this reunion another try. She sat down and stared at the steaming cup of coffee. She didn’t want to tell her sister that the temperature outside was much too hot for her to have coffee. So she’d just let it sit and cool off.

“So Mom and Dad know all of this? About Josh being the one that called off the wedding?”

“They do now. When I first left town, I didn’t want to talk about it. As time passed, it just seemed like it didn’t matter who called it off. The effect was just the same.”

“Don’t you understand it would have helped me to know the truth. All of this time Neal has been grouching that it was my

sister that broke his best friend's heart, and if I hadn't insisted on setting you two up that it never would have happened."

"I'm sorry you went through that. I never thought Josh would let everyone believe a lie."

"Especially his father. Did Mom tell you how horrible Mr. Simms has been to Dad? He even refused to process Dad's grain. He had to haul it to another town. I didn't know people could be so mean and petty."

"It's what happens sometimes when you live in a small town. People take sides."

Her sister's gaze met hers. She reached across the table, placing her hand on Brooke's. "I'm sorry I believed his lies."

"It's okay. It's in the past." She truly wanted to believe that, but she knew some people, like Mrs. Walters, would have long memories.

Candi's gaze searched hers. "Can we be sisters again?"

"We were always sisters, but I would like if we could stay in touch. I really missed talking to my big sister."

Tears shimmered in Candi's eyes. "I missed my little sister too."

They talked until it was time for dinner. Brooke was emotionally exhausted by then and decided to skip seeing her brother-in-law, who still didn't know the truth about what had happened between her and Josh.

Brooke drove around for a while, taking in the sights. She'd truly missed Monarch. She promised herself she wouldn't stay away for so long the next time.

When she arrived at her parents' house, dinner was over. Her mother had made up a plate of meatloaf and mashed potatoes for her. Brooke didn't have much of an appetite. Still, she knew her mother would fuss if she didn't eat something. She warmed the food in the microwave and then took it to her room.

She pulled out her phone and wasn't surprised there still wasn't any word from Logan. The ache in her heart grew until it felt like it was going to suffocate her. It was over. Tears rushed to her eyes. She had to come to terms with that fact.

Maybe she'd write to him one more time. What would it hurt? If he didn't want to hear from her, he could just press delete without reading it.

It has been an exhausting day. It's not even eight o'clock, and I'm ready to call it a day. It's a good exhausted, though. I've done some stuff that was long overdue.

I went to visit my sister. On my way, I ran into Josh. I thought about telling him what a jerk he'd been to me, but realized that it was all in the past. And the anger I'd had for him had faded away. Instead, we had a brief but cordial conversation. He's engaged again, and he appears to be happy. He'd heard that I was engaged, and I happen to be still wearing your ring, which I will return to you as soon as I get

back to San Francisco. For now, it's safe and reminds me of what would have been if I'd have handled things differently. Anyway, he wished me well, and we went our separate ways.

Seeing my sister again was the hardest of all the reunions. She was pretty upset with me. It seems her husband didn't take my "dumping" his best friend well and he blamed her for setting us up in the first place. I felt really bad for her. I told her the truth, that it was Josh who had dumped me at the altar. She couldn't believe I hadn't told people before now.

Here I thought it was best just to keep it all to myself. I'm learning that I need to use my words more and to express my emotions through my words. If I had done that—if I had told you that I would like us to find a new house of our very own and more time to prepare for the wedding—then maybe things would have worked out differently. I don't know.

This is the most painful lesson I've ever had to learn. So, if you're reading this email, I hope you know that I'm trying hard to be a better person—to learn from my mistakes. If you give me another chance, I will do better. I will speak up and not just try to make you happy while sacrificing my own feelings.

Before I go, I want to ask about Kaylie. How is she doing? She must be so confused about the wedding not happening. For that I'm so sorry. I never ever wanted to hurt her. She is the sweetest little girl.

This ended up being longer than I'd intended. So, I am going to go now. I hope you have a good evening. Please know that

I'm thinking about you.

xox

B

Now that she'd let out her emotions, she found that her appetite had returned. The food was now only room temperature, but it was good enough for her. She turned on the television in her room and found an old series that she'd watched when she was a kid.

She downed the delicious meal quickly and then changed into her pajamas and climbed into bed. With the television playing, she quickly dozed off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ANOTHER YAWN ESCAPED HIS lips.

A couple of days later, Logan was on his way home after his shift at the firehouse. It had been an unusually quiet night and still he hadn't gotten much sleep. His thoughts had kept him awake late into the night.

In the darkest hours, he'd used his phone to read Brooke's emails over and over again until his battery threatened to die. He told himself to let her go, but there was something holding him back. He hadn't been himself since Brooke had left. It was as though he'd lost a piece of himself the day she drove away.

His brain told him to block her number. His heart said he should ask her to come home. If he were to do the latter, he had no clue what would come after that. So, he did exactly what he'd been doing since she left on their wedding day—nothing.

Before he headed home, he'd messaged Margie to see if he could stop by. She'd agreed. His excuse for the impromptu visit was that Kaylie had forgotten her favorite stuffed animal. In truth, he just needed to see his little girl and give her a hug.

When Margie opened the door, she gave him a strange look.
“Are you feeling all right?”

He nodded. “I’m fine.”

Margie stepped back so he could enter her modern-style home with lots of tall windows and beautiful finishes. As he passed by her, she asked, “Have you gotten any sleep lately?”

“Do I look that bad?”

“No. You look worse.”

Just then Kaylie ran into the room. With a big smile, she jumped into his arms. He lifted her up and gave her a big hug. “I missed you, kiddo.”

“I missed you too.” Kaylie leaned back to look at him. “I miss Brooke too. Can we go see her?”

He stifled a sigh. “We can’t.”

“Because you’re mad at her?”

He shook his head. He was no longer mad. If anything he was confused. As his daughter continued to stare expectantly at him, he knew he had to give her a satisfactory answer, or she’d never let the subject go. “Brooke isn’t home.”

“Where is she? At work?”

“No. She went to visit her family.”

“Where do they live?”

“In Iowa.”

“Iowa? Where’s that?”

“A long ways away.”

“Oh.” The sadness showed in his daughter’s eyes. “Is she coming back?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“Can we see her then?”

“We’ll see.” Remembering her teddy bear, he held it out to her. “Buster really missed you.”

Kaylie snatched the bear from his hand and gave the stuffed animal a big hug. “I missed him too.” When he put Kaylie down, she said, “I have to put him to bed. I’ll be back.” She ran out of the room.

Margie held up the coffee pot. “Do you want some?”

“Yeah. That would be great.”

She poured it into a large travel mug and handed it to him. “Just bring it back next time.”

“Thanks.”

She studied him. “You’re still in love with her, aren’t you?”

A denial teetered on the tip of his tongue, but he knew it was a lie. And all of the denials and lies of omissions were what got them to this point. So, he settled for the truth. “Yeah. I guess I am.”

Margie hitched a hip and leaned against the counter. “Why did she leave?”

To his surprise, he opened up to her, and she seemed genuinely interested. They’d come a long way since their days

of bickering. He gave Margie the brief rundown of what had happened to his almost-wedding. He even told her about the emails Brooke had been sending him—the words that left him confused about what he should do next. All the while he was thinking how strange it was he was opening up to his ex-wife.

“You should go after her,” Margie stated as a matter of fact.

“What?” Surely he hadn’t heard her correctly. “Why would I do that?”

“Because it’s not too late to fix things. Just don’t rush her this time around. I don’t know too many women that would want to be rushed like that.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know.”

She arched a brow. “I can’t believe I’m saying this but don’t mess this up. She’s good for you. And no matter what she’s done, you still love her.”

“I don’t think we can get past this.”

“It won’t be easy, but then again nothing worth having ever is. Just give it time and stop rushing things.”

“You really think that will make a difference?”

“It’s what she told you, isn’t it?” When he nodded, Margie said, “And one other thing, sell the house. You should have sold it when we split. No woman wants to live in the house where the ex-wife lived. Sell it and start fresh.”

That was a sticking point for him. “But I worked so hard on the place to renovate it from top to bottom. I love that house.”

“And you will love another house. With all the work you’ve done, it will bring you top dollar. Look at it from her point of view, you have a house full of memories—memories connected to our marriage. She wants a house that will be filled with yours and her memories.”

He took a moment to take it all in. “When did you become so smart?”

“I don’t know about that. I’m trying to get it right just like you. However, I’ve been dating Rick for a few months so maybe I’m onto something here.”

He took a sip of coffee, letting the hot liquid slide down over his dry throat. “You know I really like it when you and I can talk like friends.”

“Don’t get too used to it. I’m sure you’ll do something to annoy me in the near future.” She sent him a teasing smile.

He smiled and shook his head. It was nice to be friendly exes. He hoped it would last.

“Now call her. Tell her you want her back.”

As he drove home, he came to a decision. He still loved Brooke. He wasn’t ready to give up on them. He didn’t know what the future held for the two of them, but he loved her enough to find out.

The ride home was filled with one bombshell realization after the next, including that his ex was right about something. If he wanted a new start with Brooke, he was going to have to meet her halfway.

That night, certain in his actions, he reached for his phone. It was time to respond to Brooke's messages. His finger hovered over the call button, but then he clicked on the messages. He started typing...



“Cock-a-doodle-doo.”

Brooke awoke with the rising of the sun. For the slightest moment, she felt like a teenager again. She had the whole world ahead of her. In a heartbeat it came back to her that her whole life had changed, and this was no longer her home. It was but it wasn't. It was confusing.

She yawned and stretched. She reached for her phone. She pressed a button but nothing happened. She tried again but it was dead.

And then she realized after talking to her mother and sister late into the evening, she'd forgotten to put her phone on the charger. She would charge it while she grabbed her shower. Hopefully, by then she'd be able to check her messages.

She knew she needed to head back to California either today or tomorrow. It was a very long two- or three-day drive. It depended on how anxious she was to get there.

The upstairs was quiet, and there was no wait for the only bathroom on the floor because her parents were already up and had set about their morning chores. When you lived on a farm, there was no sleeping in.

It reminded Brooke that it was time to get back to her life. She hated the thought that her life would now be minus Logan and Kaylie. She missed them both so much.

After a quick shower and pulling her hair back into a ponytail, she headed down the hallway to her room. She moved to her phone, and this time when she pressed the button, her phone lit up.

There were no voicemails or emails, but there was a text. It was probably from Selena. When she clicked on it, she read:

Logan

Come home. We can talk.

Her heart stuttered.

Her mind raced.

He wrote back. A smile bloomed on her face.

She read it again and again, as though by reading it repeatedly, she could glean the meaning behind his words. If only it worked that way.

However, his message was a start.

She told herself that if it was bad, why would he want to talk? He could simply go his way, and she'd go hers. But maybe he

wanted her to pay him for all of the wedding expenses since she was the one who bailed on the ceremony. The more she thought of it, the more she worried that was what he wanted to talk about.

The thought of waiting filled her with anxiety. She went to call him but hesitated. As much as she didn't want to wait for their conversation, she needed to see him in person. Maybe when they were face to face, he would remember how good they were together, and there was a teeny-tiny chance they could sort this out.

The only way to know was for her to return to San Francisco. She glanced around at her childhood room, which was still just the way she'd left it. As much as she hated to leave after reconnecting with her family, it was time to go home, *erm...* to her other home.

She reached for her phone. It was charged enough for her to send a message to Logan.

I'll see you in a couple of days.

She needed to tell her parents that she'd made up her mind about leaving today. She knew her mother wouldn't be happy, but Brooke wanted to get back before Logan changed his mind about them talking.

She rushed downstairs and found her mother in the kitchen. "Good morning."

Her mother smiled at her. “I thought maybe you’d sleep in after being up late last night.”

“I think it was your rooster that woke me up. I’m no longer used to him crowing in the morning.” She paused as she figured out how to tell her mother about leaving. The best way to do it was short and to the point. “Mom, I’ve decided to head back to California today.”

“I was really hoping you would change your mind and stay longer.” Her mother poured her some coffee.

“I know. I’m sorry. I just need to go back and clean up the mess I made of things with Logan.”

“I understand. It’s just that I’ll miss you when you’re gone.”

“I’ll miss you too.” Brooke moved to her mother and gave her a hug. When she pulled back, she took a seat at the table. “I promise to come back much sooner this time.”

“It’d be great if you could bring Logan with you.” There was a hopeful gleam in her mother’s eyes.

“Mom...”

“Okay. I just can’t help hoping it works out for you two. From everything you’ve said, he sounds like a great guy.”

Brooke decided to tell her mother about the message she’d received from Logan. She also told her not to get her hopes up. It was probably something to do with settling things for the wedding.

“Don’t give up hope,” her mother said. “Love will find a way.”

Wanting to change the subject, Brooke said, “Mom, why don’t you come visit me in San Francisco? I think you’ll really like it there.”

“I would like that, but I’ll have to talk to your father. With the farm to run, it’s not easy to get away, but we’ll figure something out.”

Her mother fixed waffles for her. They were delicious. She loved how the nooks and crannies held in the melted butter and maple syrup. It reminded her of her youth. She was going to miss the breakfasts and having her mother spoil her.

Brooke was anxious to get on the road, but she also didn’t want to run out the door. So after she finished eating, she lingered at the table. They talked about this and that. It was so nice to have things back to normal.

Knowing she couldn’t put it off any longer, she headed upstairs. She made her bed, packed her clothes, and double-checked the bathroom to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything. With her bag in hand, she headed downstairs. As soon as her mother spotted her, a frown formed on her face.

But what surprised Brooke was that her mother wasn’t alone. Her father was there and her sister. They’d all come to tell her goodbye. Tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision. She was really going to miss them all.

There were lingering hugs and promises to stay in contact. And then they walked her out to the car. Her father asked if she’d checked the oil and fluids lately. She assured him that she had the car serviced regularly just like he’d taught her.

With one more round of hugs and tears, she was on her way westbound. She hoped her family would come visit her in San Francisco because she truly saw her future there. The only part she was unsure about was whether Logan would be a part of the future. Her heart filled with hope while her mind warned her to be careful so she didn't get hurt again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

S HE WAS COMING HOME...

Just like he'd asked.

Logan's gut knotted up with the thought of seeing Brooke again. He noticed her emails had stopped coming, and it worried him. What if she came to her senses and decided he came with too many strings? What if she realized she'd made the right decision by not marrying him?

He halted his worrisome thoughts. He needed to make preparations, just in case she hadn't changed her mind about loving him. This time around he needed to do things differently. If she gave him a second chance, he promised himself he wouldn't screw things up.

"What has you so quiet?" Dylan's voice drew him from his thoughts.

He glanced over at Dylan, who was sitting at his kitchen island. He hadn't said anything about Brooke coming home to anyone. He didn't know why he'd been keeping it to himself.

Maybe because he didn't need any further advice. He'd made his mind up about what he was going to do.

As Dylan continued to look at him expectantly, Logan decided to tell him. "Brooke is coming home."

"That's great!" Then he got a serious look on his face. "It is a good thing, isn't it?"

Logan hesitated. "I don't know. What if she changed her mind about us?"

"But she wrote you those emails."

Logan nodded. "And now she's stopped writing them."

"Oh, is that all? She's traveling. She can't write and drive at the same time."

"Yeah. I know." Still he couldn't help but notice that there were no quick notes when she took breaks or in the evening.

"So, what are you going to do when she gets here?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess we'll meet up and talk."

Dylan's eyes widened. "That's all you've got planned? Meeting up and talking? You do want her back, don't you?"

Logan nodded. It was the one thing he was certain about.

"Then, buddy, you need to step up your game and show her that you still love her. What is it they call it?" Dylan stopped to think for a moment. He snapped his fingers. "I remember now. You need to do a grand gesture."

That sounded so overwhelming. "What am I supposed to do? Buy her more jewelry?"

Dylan shook his head. “You already gave her the grandest gesture with the diamond ring. It’s got to be something different—something to let her know just how much she means to you.”

Logan frowned. “You know that’s not very helpful.”

“Think about what she said to you in those emails. I’m sure you’ll come up with something fitting.” He downed the last of his coffee. “Now that I’ve imparted my wisdom, I’m off. I have to get my haircut before our shift tomorrow. And you have some grand gesturing to do.”

After Dylan left, Logan pulled up Brooke’s emails and started reading. It didn’t take him long to know exactly what he had to do. It wouldn’t be easy. In fact, it would be quite hard for him, but he supposed that was what would make it a grand gesture. And so, he set his plan in motion.



Home at last.

It had taken three long days of driving, but Brooke was finally back in her empty apartment. It had been too late to contact Logan. And as excited as she was to see him again, she knew nothing good would come of the conversation if she was exhausted.

But when she’d gone to sleep, she’d dreamed of Logan. They were happy and married on their honeymoon. When she began to wake up—when she was in that happy spot lost somewhere between dreamworld and reality—a smile pulled at her lips.

She yawned and stretched. Was her dream too much to hope for? Maybe. She wouldn't know until she saw Logan.

She reached for her phone. There was no word from him. And she hadn't emailed him since before she left Iowa. She had been a ball of nerves. She didn't want to write anything that would upset him and ruin this chance for them.

Her stomach shivered with nerves as her fingers moved over the screen. She hesitated before messaging him. Where should they meet? Her place? Probably not a good idea since she had next to no furniture. And she didn't want to meet at his house since that was part of the problem between them.

It took her a moment, but then she realized the perfect place for them to meet up. If things went well, it would be the perfect setting. And if things didn't go well, it would be easy for them to go their separate ways.

Brooke

I'm back. When do you want to meet up?

She stared at her phone for a moment. There was no response. She realized it might be a while until he got back to her. For all she knew, he might be on shift at the firehouse. If that were the case, it might be a long time until he was able to respond.

She set aside her phone and got out of bed. She still had a couple of days until she had to return to work. She had no idea what she was going to do to keep herself busy. Sure there were a million things that needed to be done, but she didn't feel like doing any of them.

Before she could get a shower or even have some coffee, she had to unload the boxes from her car. She just hoped some towels were in those boxes.

It took a while to carry five boxes up to her apartment. She couldn't remember what she'd packed. To her utter regret, she hadn't marked the boxes. So she just started ripping them open until she found a box full of bathroom supplies. Thankfully, she'd kept her new towels.

She checked her phone, but there still wasn't a response from Logan. She sighed as she headed to the shower. It felt good to be home. It would feel even better once she had some furniture around her.

By the time she was showered, her hair styled, and her makeup on, there was a response from Logan.

Logan

On my way for coffee. Want me to get you something?

He was being thoughtful. That had to be a good sign. Right?

Brooke

Are you going to Lacy's?

Logan

Yes.

Brooke

I'll meet you there. Leaving now.

Logan

See you soon.

She grabbed her purse and keys as she headed out the door. It didn't take her long to reach the coffeehouse. With it being Friday morning, she was surprised to find a parking spot. Of course, the space was empty because another car had parked over the line, not leaving much space for another vehicle. She jockeyed back and forth until she squeezed her car into the spot.

She rushed up the walk. When she lifted her head, she saw Logan standing in front of the coffeehouse. Her heart thundered in her chest. A hesitant smile pulled at her lips as she continued toward him. When he didn't return her smile, she subdued it.

Nervous energy pulsed through her veins. Her instinct was to rush up to him and throw her arms around him, but she knew that was totally out of line, considering the circumstances. He wasn't giving off any warm and fuzzy vibes. In fact, he reminded her of the standoffish way he was the very first time they'd met.

She stopped a reasonable distance from him and clasped her hands in front of her. Her fingertips brushed over the diamond ring. It was time for her to return it. Her heart sank at the thought.

Before she lost her courage, she slipped the ring from her finger. Tears stung the backs of her eyes. She blinked them away. She reached for his hand. She pressed the ring into his palm and closed his fingers over it.

There she'd done it, and she felt as though the chasm between them had widened even further, if that was even possible. Still, it was the right thing to do. Now her finger felt bare, and the pain in her heart felt raw.

Refusing to let this be where things ended for them, she tilted her chin upward until their gazes met. *Oh my! He's so handsome.* And she had missed him so much. If she had any doubts about what she wanted for the future, they were gone now.

Her heart pounded so loudly it echoed in her ears. She couldn't remember ever being this nervous. She could only think of one thing to say—the most important thing.

“I'm sorry,” they said in unison.

She was caught off guard by his words. “You are?” When he nodded, she said, “But why? You didn't do anything wrong. It was all on me. I made a mess of everything.”

Some people hustled past them, bumping into her. She stumbled into Logan, who reached out, drawing her into his arms. His touch caused her heart to pitter-patter. When she looked up at him, he stared deep into her eyes.

She desperately wanted to lift up on her tiptoes and press her lips to his, but she used all her willpower to resist the temptation. They weren't there yet. And she didn't know if they would ever get to that place. Him being sorry was one thing—wanting to give them another chance was a different story.

She stepped back out of his arms. She swallowed hard. “Want to get some coffee?”

He nodded before stepping to the side and pulling open the door for her. She loved that he did little things like open the door for her and getting her chair for her. They were little things, but they meant a lot.

She had so many things she wanted to ask him, but as they stood in line for coffee, she realized the moment wasn't the right one for such an important conversation. She had to wait just a little longer.

Instead she asked, “How’s Kaylie? Did you tell her that I missed her?”

“She’s good. She’s anxious to start school in the fall. And yes, I gave her your message. She misses you too and is anxious to see you.”

It teetered on the tip of her tongue to ask if this meant she could see her, but she resisted. She wasn’t ready for what he might say. Because if he said it wouldn’t be possible, she would know that her hopes for their future were over, and it was time to move on. The only problem was that she couldn’t see her future without him in it.

They both ordered their usual coffee: grande, black with cream and sugar. Brooke made her way over to an isolated table. He followed her.

She sat with her back to the window. When he sat across from her, she said, “I really am sorry that I handled everything so badly. I never meant to hurt you or Kaylie or any of our friends.”

His gaze searched hers. “Why didn’t you talk to me before you ran?”

She shrugged as she searched for the right words. “I had what I guess you would call a panic attack. I wasn’t thinking clearly. By the time I calmed down, I was almost at the state line.”

He was quiet for a moment. “What about before that? Before the wedding?”

“I wanted to talk to you but...” Her gaze lowered. “You were so excited about the wedding. You seemed so anxious to have it

so quickly. And honestly, it was so flattering. I never had someone so excited about their relationship with me. And after being dumped at the altar, I guess I just let myself get swept up in the excitement.”

“But when it came time to make it all official, you couldn’t go through with it.” He leaned back in his chair.

She leaned forward. “Yes. But it’s not what you’re thinking. It didn’t have anything to do with how much I love you. That never changed. I just had a lot of baggage that I hadn’t dealt with from my past. And I really needed to do that before we said I do.”

“You’re talking about your family.”

She nodded. “I really need them to be a part of my wedding and my life.”

“From the sounds of your emails, things went well with your family.”

Tears pricked the backs of her eyes as she thought of the way she’d been able to mend things with her parents and sister. “It really did. I’m grateful for the time I got to spend with them, but I’m sorry it happened the way it did. I should have gone back sooner. I shouldn’t have put it off for so long.”

He took a drink of his coffee before his gaze rose to meet hers. “Are you moving back to Iowa permanently?”

She wasn’t sure how he’d jumped to that conclusion. “No. My life is here.” She stopped herself before she said she wanted to stay right here with him. “I have no intention of moving away.”

It was time to get the hard part out in the open. “Why did you want to see me?”

“I’m not good at writing like you. I thought if we met in person, we could figure out where we stood.”

Hope bloomed in her chest. A smile threatened to pull at her lips, but she resisted the urge. It was too soon for any of that. “You aren’t mad at me?”

“I was at first, but everyone around me helped me to see things through your eyes.” He paused. Then he reached across the table. His hand covered hers, making her heart pitter-patter. “I’m sorry I rushed you. I was just excited for us to start our life together. Will you forgive me?”

“Oh, yes. Yes, I will.” She turned her hand over, wrapping her fingers around his. While staring deep into his eyes, she said, “I vow to speak up when something is important to me.”

“And I vow to listen to you—not just listen but to truly hear you.”

Her vision blurred with happy tears. She blinked, and the tears splashed onto her cheeks as she smiled at him. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He gave her hands a quick squeeze. “Let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“Do you trust me?”

She didn’t hesitate when she nodded. “Always.”

“Come on.” He let go of her hand in order to get to his feet. He turned back to her and held out his hand. “It’s a surprise.”

She placed her hand in his as he helped her to her feet. She had no idea what he had in mind, but she was curious to find out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

S HE LOVED HIM.

Logan couldn't stop smiling. This was all going to work out. He just had to show her that he really had heard what she'd said in her emails. With their coffees in hand, they made their way outside.

They paused on the sidewalk. He glanced at her. "Do you mind if we take my pickup?"

When she shook her head, he guided her down the block a little ways. He opened the door for her and was so tempted to kiss her, but he resisted. There was something he wanted to do first—show her how serious he was about her—about them.

Once they got on the road, he reached out and took her hand in his just like they'd always done in the past. He noticed she was quieter than normal, so he made a point of starting the conversation by asking about her visit with her family.

As she talked about her parents and the farm, she became more animated. She told him about the rooster that would

wake her up every morning at the crack of dawn. He wasn't so sure how he'd feel about waking up to the crow of a rooster.

"I can't wait for you to meet my family." She was quiet for a moment, and then hesitantly, she asked, "Will you go to Iowa with me?"

They'd had this conversation before and he'd agreed, but it hadn't been a specific plan. He decided that needed to change. "Since I didn't take my vacation time, how about we go for Labor Day weekend?"

As he pulled to a stop at a red light, her head turned to him. Her eyes were rounded, and her mouth gaped. He couldn't help but smile. It appeared the idea appealed to her.

"I would love it."

"Do you think you could get the time off?"

"I... I don't know, but I'll talk to Clara as soon as I can." The smile on her beautiful face lit up her eyes, making them sparkle like diamonds.

The rest of the ride they talked about their upcoming trip and what they could do while in Iowa. She had so many things she wanted to show him. He never thought he'd be excited about visiting the Midwest, but Brooke's enthusiasm was contagious.

When he pulled to a stop, she stopped talking and looked around. "What are we doing at your place? Is Kaylie here?"

He shook his head. "She's at preschool. You can see her later."

He got out of the pickup. When he reached her side, she was already out and staring at the new sign in his yard. Her gaze moved from it to him and back again.

“I don’t understand.” Her eyes shone with confusion. “You’re selling your house?”

He nodded. “I am. Remember how I vowed to hear you?” When she nodded, he said, “I heard what you said in your emails. I need to let go of the past so that we can build a future together.”

“But what about all of the work you put into this house? I can’t ask you to sell it.”

“You aren’t asking me. I’m offering. But I need to be clear with you that even though I did all of the paperwork, the house isn’t officially on the market. I wanted to wait until we talked before I gave the final go ahead.”

“What do you want me to say?”

He pulled the diamond ring from his pocket and dropped to one knee. “Brooke, I love you. You’ve had me under your spell since the first day when we both spilled the coffee.”

Her eyes lit up. “You finally admit your part in it?”

He smiled. “I do.”

“Hey, you’re jumping too far ahead. Aren’t we supposed to get engaged before you say those words.”

His smile broadened. “Are you going to let me get on with it?”

She quietly nodded.

“Now where was I?” It took him a moment to remember his well-rehearsed words. “With every day that has passed, I’ve fallen more in love with you. I can’t imagine my future without you in it.” He raised the ring to her. “I’ve asked you before, and I might have gotten ahead of myself. Now I would like to ask you again to marry me, and this time we will plan every step together. I won’t rush you. I promise. Will you marry me?”

Tears spilled onto her cheeks as a smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Yes. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He took her hand and slid the ring onto her finger, where it would stay for a very long time. And then he straightened and pulled her into his arms.

He gazed down at her. “I love you. And I will wait for you.”

“I love you too. And I won’t make you wait forever. I promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that promise.” And then he lowered his head and claimed her lips with his own. This time they would get it right.

EPILOGUE

A year and a half later, Christmas Eve, San Francisco, California

THIS WAS THE MOMENT she'd been waiting for.

And she didn't want it to end.

Brooke looked into the full-length mirror at her wedding gown. It was a traditional full-length gown. The white satin skirt was trimmed with a deep holiday red satin ribbon. And the sleeveless, fitted bodice was also trimmed with the same red satin. Both the bodice and skirt were handsewn with crystals that caught the light and made them sparkle.

It had taken months for the dress to be ordered and delivered. Logan said it didn't matter. The only thing he wanted was this day to be extra special for her. And he had totally kept his word.

He'd waited more than a year for this wedding, meeting her family and letting Brooke plan to her heart's content. And then a compromise was reached so that her whole family could attend. Being farmers, that meant it had to be between the

harvest and planting season. And so both she and Logan, together, chose Christmas Eve.

She couldn't think of a better way to usher in her favorite holiday than to marry the man of her dreams and to be surrounded by her family and friends. Of course, she did have to compromise on the location. Instead of having a beach wedding, they'd decorated the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel with garland, poinsettias, and candles. It was festive and yet cozy.

Selena entered the room at the back of the chapel. "Are you ready?"

Brooke smiled brightly. "Most definitely." When she noticed Selena's face creased with worry lines, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." The answer came much too quickly. "And how are you?"

Brooke smiled again. "Deliriously happy. Everything is right this time."

"Are you ready to walk down the aisle?"

Brooke nodded. "I am. I really am."

"You sound so confident. Are you trying to tell me you aren't just a little bit nervous about your big moment?"

"Not even a little bit." It was the honest truth. Logan had given her the time she needed to plan for the future and for them to pick out a new home.

In the end, they were moving closer to Logan's ex-wife. They actually got along with Margie. Of course, it helped that Margie had found her own Prince Charming and was planning her own wedding. But by living within five minutes of her, it made Kaylie's life so much easier. And made it possible for Logan to see his daughter as often as he liked.

The new house had room to grow their family. Plus, it was near a park where Kaylie and any future children could play. They made sure to leave themselves room for plenty of possibilities.

Just then the door swung open, and in rushed Kaylie all dressed up. "I'm here."

Brooke glanced around for Logan. She wasn't worried about him seeing her before the wedding. She didn't believe in superstitions. Everything was going to work out for them. They'd worked too hard on their relationship and their plans for a little thing like him seeing her in her wedding dress to mess things up.

Margie poked her head in the doorway. "It's just me."

"Come in," Brooke said.

Margie stepped into the room just as Selena sent Brooke a surprised look. "Sorry, we're a little bit late. Someone kept ripping out her ribbons, and I had to keep redoing her curls. But I think she's good to go now." Margie gave Brooke's dress a quick glance. "You look beautiful. Logan is going to be speechless when he sees you."

“Thank you.” Feeling obligated, Brooke said, “Why don’t you stay for the ceremony?”

Margie shook her head. “Thank you. But Logan and I decided that it would be too weird to see us marry other people. Logan’s mom is still taking Kaylie home after the reception, right?” When Brooke nodded her head, Margie produced an overnight bag. “I packed a few things for her.”

“Thank you. I hate to admit it, but Logan and I totally forgot to do that.”

“I thought that might be the case.” She placed the bag by the door. “Well, I should be going. Rick is waiting out in the car.” Margie leaned over and hugged her daughter before she left.

Brooke looked at Kaylie, who looked totally adorable. “You look so beautiful in your dress. And your hair is amazing.”

A big smile filled the little girl’s face. “I love your dress. I want one like it.”

Brooke let out a little laugh. “You will someday, *far* in the future.”

The wedding march started to play. This was the big moment. Brooke was about to marry her best friend and the love of her life, and she had zero reservations. Absolutely none at all.

Suddenly, the music stopped.

The breath caught in Brooke’s lungs. What in the world? She waited, but it didn’t start again.

She turned to Selena. “What’s going on?”

Worry reflected in her friend’s eyes. “I don’t know. I’ll check.”

Selena rushed out of the room. It gave Brooke time to fret. Maybe their pianist got sick. She hoped not. She paced back and forth as Clara and her other friends did their best to reassure her that everything was going to be all right.

It seemed like forever until Selena returned. Her face was drawn as she quietly faced her.

“Say something,” Brooke insisted. “What’s going on?”

“I have to tell you something.”

Brooke’s heart sank. “What is it?”

“It’s Dylan. He’s not here.”

“Not here?” He was the best man—Logan’s best friend—he had to be here. “Why not? Did something happen to him?”

“Well...”

“Selena just say it.”

“We’ve lost not only the best man but also your wedding ring.”

Take a peek into Brooke and Logan’s future! Sign-up for my newsletter and receive a Bonus Epilogue. Get your bonus epilogue [HERE](#) or visit my website at JenniferFaye.com

Then return to the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel for the next story in this entertaining series... THE BRIDE'S ANTIQUE RING. Join bridesmaid Selena Blakely and best man, Dylan Adler, as they get caught up in an epic search for a missing wedding band. It's a journey that will change both of their lives... And in the process, they might find a forever love.

AFTERWORD

Thanks so much for reading Brooke and Logans story. I hope their journey made your heart smile. If you did enjoy the book, please consider...

- Help spreading the word about The Runaway Bride's Vow by writing a review.
- Subscribe to my newsletter in order to receive information about my next release as well as find out about giveaways and special sales.
- You can like my author page on Facebook or follow me on Twitter.

I hope you'll come back to the Seabreeze Wedding Chapel and read more about this group of friends.

Coming next is Selena & Dylan's story in The Bride's Antique Ring.

Thanks again for your support! It is HUGELY appreciated.

Happy reading,

Jennifer

ABOUT AUTHOR

Award-winning author, Jennifer Faye pens fun, heartwarming contemporary romances. With more than a million books sold, she is internationally published with books translated into more than a dozen languages and her work has been optioned for film. She is a two-time winner of the RT Book Reviews Reviewers' Choice Award, the CataRomance Reviewers' Choice Award, named a TOP PICK author, and been nominated for numerous other awards.

Now living her dream, she resides with her very patient husband and two spoiled cats. When she's not plotting out her next romance, you can find her curled up with a mug of tea and a book. You can learn more about Jennifer at www.JenniferFaye.com

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