



Wanting

HIS GIRL

STELLA BANKS

WANTING HIS GIRL

A Hot Age Gap Instalove

STELLA BANKS

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Chapter One

JAKE

“MAN, THOSE DRINKS HIT THE SPOT,” CHASE SAYS, RUNNING A hand through his hair. “I know O’Malley’s is your competition, Jake. But they sure know how to mix a good drink.”

“Nothing but the second best for the soon-to-be-wed.” I chuckle as I clap him on the shoulder. “Next round’s on you when you’re a married man.”

“You hear that, Duke?” Wes, chimes in. “Jake’s planning on mooching off Chase’s marital bliss.”

Duke’s deep voice booms down the street. “I keep telling him that’s why he’s still single.”

It’s a warm Saturday night in August, and the four of us are walking down Main Street on our way back to my truck.

My brothers and I have just left the raucous happy hour at O’Malley’s, a rival bar in town. I don’t usually like to patronize my competition, but tonight is enough of a special occasion that I was willing to be the designated driver.

Chase is about to get married, and he’s so head over heels in love that he didn’t even want a bachelor party. So, the four of us decided to meet up with the other groomsmen for happy hour drinks at the oldest bar in town—one last hurrah before the wedding next month.

“Hey, don’t knock the single life,” I say, pushing my hands into the pockets of my jeans. “It’s got its perks.”

“Perks?” Wes raises an eyebrow, the one with the scar from when we were kids and he thought he could fly off the garage roof. “Like what? Being the eternal bachelor uncle?”

My smile fades a bit. “Something like that.”

“Jake’s not like the rest of us. He’s waiting for a miracle,” Duke says, elbowing me gently. “Someone who can keep up with his wild ways.”

I shake my head, grinning despite the familiar twist in my gut.

The last year has really been something out of an old romance flick for my brothers. One by one, they all found ‘the one.’

First, Chase fell in love with his physical therapist, Molly, after seeing her through a window. Then came Duke, who met his match in a way only Duke could—by falling in love with his boss’s daughter, Grace, while he was her bodyguard for the weekend. And just a few weeks ago, Wes finally admitted his feelings for Fiona, his sworn enemy since grade school.

Watching them all find their partners, it’s like watching dominos - each one falling right into place with someone special. Meanwhile, here I am, on my way to being the ‘eternal bachelor uncle.’

It’s not like I haven’t had chances. Being a retired pro baseball player has its advantages. But lately, all those flings and one-night stands feel hollow.

Especially when I think about... *her*.

“Miracles happen,” Chase says. “But if you don’t start looking soon, you’ll be flying solo at my wedding.”

“Chase is right,” Duke slings an arm around my shoulder as we dodge a couple strolling hand in hand. “It’s not a good look for the best man to show up dateless.”

“Maybe I like it that way,” I shoot back, the corner of my mouth ticking up. “And besides, I’m a small business owner. I have responsibilities.”

“Sure, sure, keep telling yourself that,” Wes adds with a smirk. “Who knows? Maybe one of those craft beers will finally sweep you off your feet.”

“Very funny,” I say, brushing off his comment with a chuckle, but inside, my thoughts drift to the woman who has already swept me off my feet.

Melanie Watts.

I met Melanie at Harold Parker’s retirement party two weeks ago.

And from the moment I saw her, I knew she was mine.

She’s unlike anyone I’ve met before. We sat down for dinner at Harold’s party, and she just went off, jumping from topic to topic at a mile a minute. It was like watching a live pinball game, her thoughts bouncing around with this energy and enthusiasm I couldn’t help but be captivated by. Melanie has this quirky charm about her that just makes you want to stay in her orbit, to keep listening and laughing.

Honestly, it’s a fucking breath of fresh air.

And when you mix that with all that energy with her gorgeous smile, and her pretty eyes and that blonde hair and those sexy curves...

Well, I was a goner from the word go.

I’ve dated plenty of women before. But none sparked that feeling, that knowing deep in my gut that she’s the one. It sounds like something out of a cheesy romance novel, but it’s true.

The only problem is that Melanie is younger than me. A lot younger. The age gap between us is like a stubborn pebble in my boot—I can’t shake it. She’s what, twenty-two? Fresh out of college with her whole life ahead of her.

And here I am, close to hitting the big four-oh.

As we turn the bend, the old park where our dad would bring us comes into view. It’s silent now, with unmoving swings and a deserted slide.

Wes pulls an old baseball from his suit jacket pocket. “What do you say, boys? How about a game of catch for old time’s sake?”

Duke lets out a laugh, shaking his head. “You still carry that thing around?”

Wes shrugs nonchalantly. “Dad always said it was good luck.”

“Yeah, he did,” Chase says as he nods in agreement.

Wes turns to me then, tossing the ball lightly in his hand. “You in, Jake?”

I give him a half-hearted grin. “Sure, why not? I have a few extra gloves in my truck.”

I take the worn baseball from him, feeling its familiar weight settle into my palm. It’s been a while since I’ve thrown one just for the hell of it, without fans cheering or the pressure of a game riding on my shoulders. I jog over to my truck and grab the extra mitts.

A second later, the four of us fan out across the grass. Wes takes his stance, and I wind up, letting the ball fly.

It’s a clean throw, the kind that comes from muscle memory, honed through years on the mound. We fall into an easy rhythm, the thwack of leather on leather a comforting sound, the sting on my hand a welcome sensation.

For a moment, I’m not a bar owner, not the odd man out among my hitched-up brothers, not a guy wrestling with thoughts of a girl who might just be too young for him. I’m just playing catch with my brothers like we’ve done a thousand times before. No complications, no concerns about age gaps or what-ifs—just the simple joy of the game.

“Nice arm, brother,” Duke calls out, lobbing the ball back to me. “You’ve still got it.”

“Yeah,” I say, grinning, feeling the tension ease off my shoulders. “Guess some things never change.”

I reel back, focusing on the sweet spot just above Wes’s glove. The ball cuts through the air, a perfect spiral—until it

doesn't.

Something's off.

It veers sharply to the left, like it's got a mind of its own, and before I can even shout a warning, there's a sickening crash of shattering glass. The ball smashes right through the windshield of a car parked in front of the print shop across the street.

As I look closer at the car's, a surge of dread floods my veins. I realize that it's not just any car.

It's *Melanie's* car.

A second later, the door to the print shop swings open.

Melanie steps out, her arms wrapped around a heavy looking box. She's in this floral number that clings in all the right places, hair pulled up in a way that shows off the delicate angle of her neck. The sight of her sends a jolt through me, a mix of raw want and admiration.

Damn, this girl is gorgeous.

As she walks toward her car, an audible gasp slips from her lips when she sees her windshield's new spiderwebbed decoration. "Oh my gosh! My car!"

Shit.

She sets the box down on the hood, her eyes widening as they take in the destruction. I can feel each jagged edge of that broken glass twisting in my gut.

Instantly, I'm jogging across the street toward her.

My brothers' footsteps fall behind me but it's like they're miles away. All I can see is the distress wrinkling Melanie's perfect forehead.

And all I can think about is how I'm the cause of it.

"Melanie," I call out. "I am so sorry about this."

Her eyes lift to mine, those deep blue pools reflecting a storm of emotions.

“Jake?” she says. For some reason, the way my name spills from her lips has my heart hammering against my ribs. “*You* smashed my windshield?”

“It was an accident, I swear. I was messing around with my brothers in the park, and the ball sort of got away from me.”

Melanie bites her bottom lip. “I see.”

I glance at the box on the hood, then back at her stricken face.

“Can I give you a ride?” I ask, the instinct to protect, to fix this for her, roaring to life inside me. “Looks like you’re on your way somewhere.”

She gives me a half-hearted smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Actually, I’m heading to an event at the Cooper Hills Fine Art Museum. I just started as their marketing coordinator and... well, I’m already late.”

“I’ll drive you,” I say quickly, desperate to erase that expression from her beautiful face. “My brothers will stay here and get your car towed to Boone Pierce’s autobody shop. I’ll pay for everything, I promise.”

Melanie looks up at me through dark lashes and whispers. “Okay.”

Glancing over at my brothers, I notice for the first time they’ve been standing off to the side, observing my entire interaction with Melanie. Their expressions are a mix of amusement and fascination, smug grins plastered across their faces.

“Wes,” I call out, turning back to them. “I need to take Melanie to her work event. Can you handle getting her car towed to Boone’s?”

Wes’s grin widens even more as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Yep, don’t worry about us, bro,” he retorts with a chuckle. “You go worry about your girl.”

I roll my eyes at his remark but can’t help the warmth that spreads through me at the thought of Melanie being ‘my girl’.

Shaking off the feeling, I stride back towards Melanie and guide her towards my truck parked nearby. She's all curves and softness as she settles into the passenger seat, a stark contrast to the hard lines and leather of my truck's interior. Then I climb in beside her and start the engine, the familiar rumble a comforting backdrop to the churn of thoughts in my head.

This is a hell of a way to get time with a woman.

For weeks, I've been wrestling with the idea that someone like Melanie could ever go for a guy like me, a retired athlete whose glory days are behind him.

But here she is, right next to me, looking every bit the part of a mountain man's dream, even if she doesn't know she's in that role yet.

Maybe, just maybe, this unexpected detour will give me the opening I need to show her that age is just a number and that what we have—or could have—is worth exploring.

And damn if I'm not ready to find out.

Chapter Two

MELANIE

“SORRY AGAIN ABOUT YOUR WINDSHIELD,” JAKE SAYS AS HE steers the truck out onto the main road.

“It’s okay,” I reply softly. “I know it was an accident.”

“Boone’s shop is closed on Sundays,” he continues. “But I’ll make sure he takes a look at it first thing Monday morning.”

“That sounds good.”

Jake glances at me warily. I can tell that he thinks I’m being short with him because I’m angry.

But in truth, I’m just biting back a squeal of excitement.

I’ve had a crush on Jake Andrews ever since he laughed at my lame joke about abstract art during Harold Parker’s retirement party two weeks ago.

I’m a huge baseball fan, and as soon as he sat down next to me, I recognized him instantly. Growing up in California meant rubbing shoulders with the stars was nothing new, but seeing Jake - so striking and even more handsome up close - left me awestruck.

We had a great time that night, but I haven’t seen him since. I’ve been secretly hoping to run into him again.

Of course, having my car windshield shattered by his rogue baseball isn’t exactly what I’d call ideal. Yet, there’s this tiny part of me that feels like this is fate’s way of stepping in.

Feeling the silence start to stretch awkwardly between us, I decide to fill it with conversation. “Do you and your brothers play in the park often?” I ask.

Jake’s shoulders relax at the sound of my voice. “Nah, not really. Today was a bit of a special occasion. We were out celebrating. My brother is getting married soon.”

“That’s so exciting!” I exclaim more loudly than I had planned. “I love weddings.”

Jake chuckles at my reaction. “I haven’t been to many if I’m being honest. Chase is the first of us brothers to get hitched. My other two aren’t far behind him, though.” His eyes flick over to me. “That’s part of the reason what led to your windshield getting smashed.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. They were teasing me about being single before we decided to toss the ball around.”

My heart flutters wildly inside my chest at this casual revelation that Jake is single. Is it just my imagination, or is he glancing at me to see my reaction?

No, that can’t be right.

Jake is seventeen years older than me. There’s no way he would be interested in someone like me.

“Tell me more about the gala at the museum,” Jake says casually, changing the subject. “I’ve seen the flyers around town.”

I light up at the chance to share something I’m passionate about. “It’s actually centered around this really cool exhibit that features celestial artwork. It was all inspired by ‘Starry Night’.”

Jake raises an eyebrow, a playful smirk crossing his face. “The Van Gogh painting?”

I feel my cheeks warm up, realizing how animated I just got. Blushing, I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Yep, the same one. Obviously, that painting isn’t at our exhibit, but we

do have some really cool ones that capture the same swirling, dreamy vibe of the night sky.”

He nods, eyes on the road, but the tilt of his head tells me he’s listening. “Sounds fancy. You must be excited.”

“More like terrified,” I confess with a half-laugh. “It’s my first major project since I started working there. I’ve been handling most of the setup and promotion stuff.”

“So you’re the woman in charge, huh? That’s impressive.” He glances over, and there’s a spark of... is it admiration?

“Don’t be impressed yet,” I tuck my hair behind my ear again, feeling a blush creep up my neck. “It’s a little more complicated than it sounds. There’s the layout, the guest list, the lighting... Oh, and don’t get me started on the hors d’oeuvres selection.”

“I’m sure you’ve got it under control,” he replies. Then he glances over and winks. “Besides, who wouldn’t want to see Melanie Watts work her magic?”

I laugh, this time with less self-consciousness. “If by magic you mean frantic last-minute adjustments and a lot of coffee, then sure.”

Jake chuckles, a deep sound that stirs something in my chest. “I’ve always admired people who can dive into their passions like that. It takes guts.”

I blink, surprised. It’s not often someone gives me credit for being passionate rather than just... weird.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve been called ‘too much’ or ‘the quirky twin’ or ‘Melanie with her head in the clouds.’ But here’s Jake, seeing the drive behind the eccentricities. And as I glance at him, I feel seen in a way that’s both thrilling and terrifying. I’ve held onto this crush like a secret charm, never imagining it could become something more.

Could it?

I turn slightly in my seat to face him. “Working at a museum isn’t nearly as brave as opening my own bar. Running

the Pitcher's Brew must be quite a change from playing baseball.”

“Eh, it's got its own kind of hustle,” he says with a shrug. “And honestly, it keeps me connected to the community, which I love. Plus, you can't beat the feeling of pouring a perfect beer.”

“Is that right?” My curiosity piques as I imagine Jake behind the bar, his broad shoulders flexing as he works the taps. “But do you ever miss the game? The thrill of the pitch, the cheer of the crowd?”

“Sometimes,” he admits, a distant look flickering across his eyes before his gaze returns to the road. “But injuries have a way of making decisions for you. I'm just grateful I found something else I'm passionate about.”

“Sounds like you've made a great life for yourself here.” I mean it, too. There's a resilience about Jake that's admirable. He's fashioned a new dream out of the remnants of an old one.

Is this normal? This easy back-and-forth between us? My heart dances a nervous samba in my chest as I ponder whether this is simply friendly banter or if there's a deeper connection simmering underneath.

But then, a familiar nagging thought creeps in.

What if I'm just a young girl with a crush, seeing signs where there are none? It's a gap that seems wider than the mountain ranges surrounding Cooper Hills, and for a moment, doubt clouds the hopeful shimmer of this new friendship—or whatever it is.

“What's on your mind, gorgeous?” Jake's voice pulls me back from the precipice of overthinking.

Did he just say I was gorgeous?

I decide to ignore his comment for now. “Oh, nothing,” I reply, flashing him what I hope is a convincing smile. “Just thinking about how much I have to learn from someone with your experience. You know, life stuff, business... beer.”

Jake grins. “Well, anytime you want a lesson in beerology, you know where to find me.”

“I just might take you up on that,” I laugh. “My twin sister is going to be so jealous when she finds out I got to pick your brain.

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “You’re a twin?”

I beam proudly. “Yep, identical. Most people can’t tell us apart. Even some people in our family.”

“Trust me, sweetheart,” He chuckles. “Twin or not, I’d recognize you anywhere.”

We arrive at the bustling Cooper Hills Museum of Fine Arts a short time later. The building is a beehive of activity, with throngs of people streaming into the sleek glass lobby. The centerpiece of the main exhibit, a mixed-media painting called ‘We Were Stars,’ is visible from the truck.

“Wow,” Jake says, his eyes riveted on the radiant canvas visible through the glass facade. “That’s amazing.”

“Isn’t it?” I smile as I follow his gaze to my favorite artwork in the exhibit. “I love paintings like this one.”

“Oh really?” Jake asks. “Why is that?”

“I’ve never been stargazing before. But I love seeing paintings about it. They always make it seem so magical.”

He grins as he glances over at me. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

We pull into a parking spot just outside the entrance, and I’m reaching for the door handle when my heart drops like a stone in water.

“Oh no,” I groan.

There, standing by the glass doors with his arms crossed, is Mr. Calloway, my boss. And the way his eyes narrow when he sees me tells me this isn’t going to be pleasant.

“Ms. Watts!” Mr. Calloway’s voice is stern, slicing through the crisp mountain air as we approach. “Where have you been? You’re almost thirty minutes late, and the attendees don’t have any programs!”

I open my mouth, but words fail me, stuck in my throat like dry bread. My stomach twists into knots, and all I can muster is a weak, “I’m sorry, Mr. Calloway. It won’t happen again.”

Mr. Calloway’s brows arch slightly, and I sense his resolve soften. Maybe it’s the sincerity in my tone or the fact that Jake is standing next to me. Whatever the reason, his next words are less biting.

“Very well. See that it doesn’t.” With that, he turns on his heel and strides back into the gallery.

“Geez, what a fucking asshole,” Jake grumbles. “It’s not like you were late on purpose.”

I roll my eyes. “He’ll get over it. Mr. Calloway is always in a bad mood. Anyway, thanks so much for giving me a ride.”

“Of course,” he replies with a casual shrug. “It’s the least I could do. Want me to swing by later and pick you up?”

I shake my head quickly, “No, that’s okay. My roommates are coming to the event. They should be able to drive me back.”

As I speak these words, a flicker of something akin to disappointment crosses Jake’s face.

“How about we exchange numbers?” he suggests. “I can text you an update on your car.”

I give Jake my number and he quickly types it into his phone. Then he steps closer, and before I can overthink it, he wraps an arm around my shoulder and pulls me into a hug. His scent—pine and a hint of leather—fills my senses, and I have to remind myself to breathe.

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” he murmurs, releasing me but holding my gaze for a second longer than necessary.

I swallow hard. “Goodnight, Jake.”

As I watch his truck roll away, I touch the spot on my shoulder where his hand had been.

There's a fluttering in my stomach, a mix of nerves and excitement—the kind you get before the first drop on a roller coaster.

I know I'm probably reading too much into a simple hug and an offer for a ride, but I can't help it. With Jake, it feels different—it feels like possibility.

Maybe it's wishful thinking, but I can't shake the sense that there's something more waiting for us just over the horizon.

Chapter Three

JAKE

THE SMELL OF GREASE HITS ME AS I STEP INTO BOONE Pierce's auto body shop.

Boone, a stocky guy with hands that have turned more wrenches than most have seen in their lifetimes, is already walking toward Melanie's busted-up ride.

"Morning, Jake," Boone calls out, his hands busy scrubbing off the grime on a worn-out rag. "You're up early."

It's a little bit after seven a.m. on Monday morning, and the sun is barely peeking out above the horizon. Since I work late at the bar most nights, I tend to be a late riser. But I promised Melanie I would make sure Boone took care of her car first thing in the morning.

My eyes scan over the car's damaged windshield. "So, how bad is it?"

Boone tosses the rag aside and walks around to the other side of the car.

"Eh, looks worse than it is. All we need to do is remove all this damaged glass here," He gestures to the spiderweb of cracks marring the car's front view. "Once that's done, we clean up the frame and seal the new windshield right in place. She'll be as good as new."

"Got it," I nod, trying to keep up with his rundown. Windshield replacement seems straightforward enough when Boone explains it, but my mind can't help but drift.

I can't get the image of Melanie from last night out of my mind.

She was a vision - sexy and sweet rolled into one like I've never seen before. I kept wanting to pull her into a corner and kiss the shit out of her. But it was her work event and I could tell she was already on thin ice with her asshole boss.

So I kept my hands to myself, while my mind wandered down paths less than innocent.

"Jake?" Boone's voice snaps me back to the present.

"Sorry, man, miles away," I say with a sheepish grin. "You were saying?"

"I was asking how you managed to crack a pretty girl's windshield?"

I chuckle, the sound echoing off the shop walls.

"I was playing baseball in the park with my brothers when a stray throw went straight through her windshield."

"Sounds like quite the meet-cute."

I snort. "More like a meet-disaster. Melanie took it in stride, though."

"Melanie, huh?" Boone smirks and leans against the counter, eyeing me with a knowing look. "She's Dean Watts' sister, right?"

"Yep, that's her."

I can't help the grin tugging at the corners of my mouth. It's been a long time since anyone's piqued my interest the way Melanie has, and frankly, I'm not sure what to do with this sudden twist in my usually quiet life.

"I thought the Walkers were hopeless romantics," Boone jests, his tone light but tinged with a hint of seriousness. "But at this rate, you and your brothers will all be hitched by Christmas."

Fit Mountain has an uncanny knack for fostering whirlwind romances. Just this past year alone, my three

brothers have each found their match and are now blissfully engaged.

“But I’m not so sure wedding bells are in my future,” I reply.

Boone raises a brow. “Why not?”

“There’s a pretty big age gap between us,” I sigh.

“Age is just a number, man. I’ve seen plenty of May-December things work out. Heck, my aunt and uncle had twenty years between them, and they were the happiest couple I knew.”

I nod slowly, knowing he means well. Boone’s always been the type to see things in black and white.

But I can’t help but wonder if I’m being selfish even considering it.

What could I offer Melanie? She’s got that fire in her eyes, the kind that speaks of dreams not yet chased.

“I just don’t want to hold her back.”

Boone slaps my shoulder and laughs. “You’re not some old geezer, Jake. You’re a fit, successful guy who retired early because he could. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” I say with a half-smirk.

“Besides,” he adds with a grin, “you never know until you try. Worst case, she says no and you move on. Best case, you both find something worth exploring.”

“Maybe,” I reply.

But I can feel the edges of my resolve softening.

“Alright,” I finally concede, a determined breath escaping me. “I’ll think about it.”

“Thinking’s good,” Boone says with a nod. “But doing’s better.”

He’s right. I’ve spent too long playing it safe, staying within the lines of my comfort zone. If there’s even a chance

that Melanie and I could have something real, I owe it to myself to find out.

“Okay,” I say, more to myself than to him. “I’ll do it. I’ll ask her out.”

“Thatta boy!” Boone exclaims, clapping me on the back with enthusiasm.

As I head out of the shop, I pull out my phone to text Melanie. The museum isn’t open yet, and I’m hoping her roommates haven’t taken her to work yet.

Morning gorgeous. Do you work today?

Her reply comes less than a minute later.

Yeah, I’m about to catch the bus soon. Why?

Forget about the bus, baby. Give me your address. I’m coming to pick you up.

AFTER I LEAVE BOONE’S, I head to Melanie’s apartment complex.

It’s a modern building with a touch of rustic charm, much like the town itself. She shares the place with a couple of roommates, but if things go according to plan tonight, that might not be for long.

As I pull up to the curb and switch off the engine, a wave of anticipation washes over me. I step out of the truck and head towards her front door. But before my knuckles can meet the wood, it swings open.

There she is - Melanie. Dressed in a fitted pencil skirt, black pumps and a blouse with a neckline that plunges just enough to tease without revealing too much. The outfit clings to her curves in all the right places, and for a moment, I feel my throat constrict as if someone had sucked all the air out of me.

Images start running rampant through my mind, and everything I see is unspeakable.

Melanie sprawled across a desk or bent over one. Her thighs spread wide or wrapped around me. My head between her legs or hovering just over her shoulder while I take her from behind.

I've never been much of an office guy, but hell, if seeing her like this doesn't make me consider using the one at my bar.

I clear my throat and force myself back into reality.

"Morning, baby. You look nice today."

Melanie beams at my words. Then she looks down at her outfit and gives this little twirl that has me grinning like an idiot.

Damn, this girl is adorable.

She looks up at my cheesy expression, and a blush creeps onto her cheeks, "Sorry, it's just a force of habit."

"Don't be. It was cute."

Then I reach for her hand and gently thread my fingers through hers.

It's a bit of a bold move on my part. But Melanie doesn't pull away. Instead, she just blushes again and lets me lead her down the pathway to my truck.

"Special occasion at the museum?" I ask, guiding her toward my truck.

"No, just trying out some new outfits," she explains, sliding into the passenger seat. "I have a big presentation next week and I'm trying to decide what to wear. I'm pitching an idea for our spring community event."

"That sounds cool. What sort of event?"

She turns to me with a sparkle in her eye. "I was thinking about having an exhibit of local artists. It feels important to highlight the talent in our community. Art has a way of bringing people together, know?"

Her words ignite a spark in me. I love her passion, her drive. As I start the truck, I can't help but steal a glance at her. She's looking out the window, but there's a warmth radiating from her that wasn't there before.

"That sounds like a good idea," I reply. "Local artists deserve recognition, too."

The smile Melanie gives me calms my nerves. Boone was right. Who cares about our age difference?

"Speaking of good things," I begin, feeling a surge of confidence. "How about dinner with me this Friday?"

She blushes. "Dinner sounds good. Where did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking we could go to the Chocolate Moose Café. And afterward, I have a little surprise for you."

"What should I wear?" Melanie asks, her voice tinged with a mixture of excitement and uncertainty.

I laugh, the sound more heartwarming than I intend. "Whatever you want, gorgeous. You look good in everything."

Another shy smile graces her lips as she nods. "Great, then it's a date."

We pull up to her job a few minutes later. Before she can escape the confines of the truck, I'm already on her side opening the door for her.

Then, as soon as she steps out, I lean down and capture her mouth in a deep kiss.

My tongue seeks entrance into her mouth while she tangles her fingers in my shirt fabric. When we break apart, she looks slightly stunned and breathless.

"See you Friday, baby," I whisper.

Chapter Four

MELANIE

“MELANIE, ARE YOU STILL ALIVE IN THERE?”

My roommate Willow’s voice is muffled through the bathroom door.

“Barely,” I call back, trying to tame a rebellious curl that insists on pointing due north.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m having a minor battle with my hair.”

Eliza’s voice chimes in. “Need reinforcements?”

I sigh. “Affirmative.”

The word escapes me just as the door swings open, revealing both Eliza and Willow, their grins infectious.

“Have no fear, the beauty calvary is here!” Willow declares, clapping her hands together.

It’s Friday night, and I’m in the bathroom getting ready for my date with Jake.

As I look at myself in the mirror, I can’t help but feel grateful for these two amazing friends who have been by my side through thick and thin. They’ve seen me at my worst and still love me unconditionally.

Willow rushes over to the makeup counter and starts rummaging through my products.

“Okay, we need to make you look like a total bombshell tonight,” she says with determination in her voice.

Eliza, meanwhile, steps into the small battlefield of eyeshadows and brushes scattered across the countertop. She picks up a bobby pin and expertly maneuvers it into my hair, securing the loose strands.

“Thanks, girlie.” I smile at her reflection in the mirror, her own dark curls framing her face like she’s some sort of undercover goddess posing as a grad student. “You always know how to make things work.”

“Willow has the magic touch with mascara, though.” Eliza winks at our other roommate, who is already unscrewing the tube, armed and ready.

“Prepare to be amazed,” Willow announces, her eyes twinkling with mischief as she stands on tiptoe to reach my lashes.

I look upwards, trusting Willow with my fragile lash dreams.

A few seconds later, she steps back, admiring her handiwork. “Perfect. Jake won’t know what hit him.”

“Hopefully, it’s Cupid’s arrow and not just shock at my overdone eyelashes,” I snort, finally allowing myself to meet my own gaze in the mirror.

Eliza whistles. “Melanie Watts, you’re going to knock his socks off.”

“Figuratively and literally,” Willow adds with a wink.

My heart swells with affection for my two best friends, and I pull both of them into a hug. “Thanks, guys.”

“Okay, enough sappy stuff.” Willow giggles as she claps her hands together. “We don’t want Melanie to be late for her very first date with a celebrity.”

I laugh. “Jake is just a guy.”

Willow snorts. “Sure, ‘just a guy’ who happens to have his own Wikipedia page.”

“Speaking of crushes...” I shoot back, darting a glance at Eliza, whose attention is suddenly very focused on the hem of

my dress. “How’s it going with Mister ‘I-Have-A-Permanent-Frown-Line-For-A-Mouth’ boss of yours?”

Eliza’s cheeks flush a deeper shade than her lipstick. “He’s not... I don’t... We’re not talking about me!”

Before we can delve any deeper into Eliza’s love life, or lack thereof, there’s a knock on the door. A flutter kicks up in my stomach, spreading its wings like a hummingbird caught in my ribs.

“Deep breaths,” I whisper to myself, then stride over to the door, trying to look as composed as possible. My hand hovers, hesitates, then twists the knob.

Jake stands on the threshold, the charming smile that I’ve come to know so well gracing his features. He looks incredible, dressed in a way that’s casual yet utterly deliberate like every piece he’s wearing was chosen with care.

“Evening, gorgeous,” Jake says as he leans in to kiss me on the cheek. “Ready to go?”

“Ready,” I echo, slipping my fingers into his outstretched hand.

As we turn to go, I catch the impish grins of Eliza and Willow from behind, their excited whispers fading into the background. This is it, the beginning of something new.

And I’m more than ready to dive in, headfirst.

“ARE WE THERE YET?” I giggle as I step forward cautiously through the darkness.

“Almost,” Jake replies. “Just keep your eyes closed.”

“Can I at least get a hint about where we’re going?”

He chuckles. “Just trust me, sweetheart. We’re almost there.”

Jake and I just finished dinner at the Chocolate Moose Cafe. Now, I’m walking through the grass with my hand, filled with anticipation for the surprise he’s promised.

To be honest, the dinner was great even without this surprised. I could have talked to Jake for hours, lost in the conversation that flowed.

Suddenly, I feel Jake's warm breath against my ear. "Open your eyes, baby."

I lift my lids to a sky extravagantly sprinkled with stars. We're standing on the roof of the Fit Mountain observatory, and it's as if we've been transported straight into the heart of the universe.

I gasp. "Oh my gosh! It's just like the painting!"

Jake grins and squeezes my hand. "At the gala, you said you had never been stargazing before. I thought, what better place to have dessert than under the stars?"

And then I see it, the dessert picnic laid out just a few feet away from where we stand.

A plush blanket is spread over the roof tiles with soft pillows scattered across it. A wicker basket sits open with champagne and chocolate-covered strawberries that glisten under the moonlight.

I turn to him, my heart overflowing with emotion. "It's perfect," I whisper. "Did you do all of this yourself?"

"Guilty as charged," he replies with a lopsided grin that somehow makes him even more handsome. "Wanted our first date to be as special as you are."

He leads me to the blanket, and we settle down amidst the cushions. As I lean back, I realize that Jake isn't just a retired baseball player or the owner of a local bar—he's a man who listens, who remembers, and who goes the distance to make me feel cherished.

Jake reaches into the basket, pulls out a bottle of chilled champagne, and pops the cork. He pours the bubbling drink into two glasses, handing me one with a smile. Then, he picks up a chocolate-covered strawberry and holds it out to me.

"So, is this your go-to move for first dates?" I tease as I take a bite. "The whole starry night dessert picnic?"

Jake leans in and murmurs, “No, baby. Just you.”

Then his lips find mine in a searing kiss.

I moan into his mouth, and he takes the opportunity to deepen the kiss. He threads his fingers through my hair while his mouth descends to my neck. I tilt my head to give him more access, lost in the sensation.

Every inch of skin he touches sparks with pleasure, and I can’t help but press myself even closer to him, seeking more.

His hand slides to my waist, then lower, resting just at the curve of my hip. Our kisses grow more urgent, more intense, as though we’re both starved for this connection, this crazy magnetic pull that’s been simmering between us all evening.

“Tell me to stop,” Jake growls against my skin as he finds a sensitive spot on my neck that makes my knees go weak.

“Never,” I whisper, my voice barely audible as Jake’s arms pull me closer.

Stopping is the last thing I want.

The air is thick with the scent of pine and something else—something wild and untamed. It’s probably just the mountain air, but right now, it feels like Jake, like us, giving in to something overpowering and raw. We’re in our own little bubble, wrapped up in each other, the rest of the world fading away to nothing.

Somehow, Jake’s voice gets even deeper as he growls into my ear again. “This is your last chance, Melanie. Tell me to stop now.”

“And what if I don’t?” My breath hitches at the thought of what comes next.

“Then I’m going to stick my head between your legs and make this hot little pussy cream all over my face while you stare up at the stars.”

Oh my gosh.

A gush of moisture floods my panties at his words, and I hear a moan slip out of me as I squirm in his arms.

“Fuck, you like that idea, don’t you?” Jake growls as yanks up my dress. “My wild girl wants me to make her come out here where anybody can see.”

Jake gently positions himself between my legs. His strong hands spread my lower lips apart, and I gasp as the cool night air meets my pussy.

Then, his tongue flicks across my clit, sending a bolt of pleasure through me that makes me arch my back and grip the blanket beneath us.

As the sensation continues to build, Jake slides a finger inside me. He encounters some resistance and immediately stops.

“Are you a virgin, Melanie?” he asks in a low voice.

I nod sheepishly in response. “I’m sorry.”

Another deep growl rumbles from his chest. “Don’t be sorry, baby. I love it. I would never judge you if I wasn’t your first,” he assures me, his voice thick with desire. “But I’m glad that I am.”

He returns to pleasuring me - his finger sliding in and out while his tongue works magic on my clit.

The sensations become too much to bear, and before long, I’m screaming out into the open sky just as Jake said I would - lost in a world of ecstasy under a canopy of stars.

Chapter Five

JAKE

I DRIVE US BACK TO MY CABIN, BARRELING DOWN THE ROAD like a man possessed.

I knew that getting a taste of Melanie would be mind-blowing, but I had no idea it would hit me this hard. It took every ounce of self-control not to pop her sweet cherry right there in the observatory.

But there was no way in hell I was fucking my girl for the first time anywhere other than in my own bed.

As soon as we crossed the threshold of my cabin, I threw her over my shoulder and made a beeline for my room.

Now Melanie Watts is naked and spread out on my bed like an offering.

And the sight of her like this has me reeling.

Her blonde hair is a wild halo on the white pillow, her skin is flushed with desire, and her thighs are spread wide for me, revealing everything to my hungry gaze.

It's an intimate view that has my heart pounding in my chest and desire pooling low in my gut.

"Look at my girl," I rasp out, my gaze raking over her exposed body. "So fucking perfect."

Melanie looks up at me, and the shy expression on her face nearly kills me. "Y-you really think so?" She asks.

I lean down, my lips trailing along the column of her neck.

“Of course I think so, baby,” I say against her skin, feeling her shiver under my touch. Every curve, every freckle—it’s like she was crafted just for me to worship. “And I can’t wait to make you mine.”

Her fingers dig into my back, urging me on, and I can’t hold back a grin. So innocent-looking, my Melanie, but I know better. I know the fire that burns in her, matching my own.

“Tell me how much you want it,” I growl, teasing her with my words now, loving the flush that blooms across her cheeks.

“Jake, please,” she whimpers. “I want it so much.”

And it’s music to my ears.

I’m all for taking my time, savoring the moment, but right now, I want to give her everything she’s asking for and more.

“You’ve been such a good girl for me tonight,” I murmur, watching as Melanie’s expression flickers with desire. “Fucking my fingers. Riding my face. I can’t wait to hear all the sounds you make when you take my cock.”

Melanie moans at my words as I hover over her.

“Tell me I can fuck you bare, baby,” I growl as I nip at her earlobe. “I don’t want anything between us tonight. I just want to watch my come drip out of that tight little pussy.”

“Yes, please,” Melanie whimpers back.

I fist my thick cock and position myself at her entrance. “It’s going to sting a bit at first, baby,” I warn her gently, my voice thick with desire. “But I promise you, it’ll be incredible afterward.”

Melanie gazes up at me with eyes heavy-lidded and filled with trust. She murmurs a soft ‘okay,’ and a wave of possessiveness surges through my veins.

The realization that she’s giving herself to me in such an intimate way is not lost on me. It’s a gift of trust and vulnerability that fuels my passion for her even more.

Slowly, I push into Melanie’s welcoming warmth inch by painstaking inch until I’m fully sheathed to the hilt. Then I

pause, allowing her time to adjust to my size. Her initial wince of discomfort soon gives way to a look of hazy lust as she adapts to the intrusion.

“I need you to move,” she commands breathlessly.

With a growl of approval, I respond in kind. “Your wish is my command, baby.”

The heat of our bodies merges, and the slick sound of skin meeting skin fills the room.

I’m pounding into Melanie, each thrust deeper than the last, fueling the fire that’s been building between us since the moment we met. Her breath hitches, her body tightening around me in the way that tells me she’s close.

Our bodies move in unison, the bed creaking beneath us as we shift positions. I hook her leg over my shoulder, diving deeper into her.

“Jake,” she gasps, and it’s all the encouragement I need. She clings to me, nails digging into my shoulders, urging me on, desperate for release.

“Come for me, Melanie,” I command, my voice rough with need. The intensity in her eyes tells me she’s right there with me, on the edge, ready to plunge into the abyss.

And then she shatters, her entire body quaking as pleasure consumes her. Feeling her come apart under me, because of me, sends me over the edge.

A guttural groan rips from my throat as I join her, our orgasms colliding in a blinding rush of sensation that leaves me reeling.

After the tremors fade, I collapse beside her, both of us panting, sweat cooling on our skin.

The warmth of Melanie’s skin seeps into mine as we lie entwined. I trace a line down her spine, feeling her shiver against me.

“That was...” Words fail me for a moment—a rarity. “Incredible doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

Melanie turns in my arms, her gaze locking onto mine. “It was amazing, Jake. You’re amazing.”

Her voice is soft, yet there’s an intensity behind her words that tells me this isn’t just post-sex bliss talking.

I prop myself up on an elbow and look down at her, really look at her. There’s vulnerability in my chest that’s new and unnerving. But with Melanie, everything feels different. Riskier. More rewarding.

“Melanie,” I start. “I’ve been around the block more times than I care to admit. But with you... it’s like I’m seeing everything for the first time again. It scares the hell out of me, but I can’t help wanting more.”

Her hand comes up to cradle my jaw, thumb brushing over stubble. “I feel it too. This connection between us—it’s intense and terrifying, but I don’t want to run from it. I want to explore it. With you.”

She’s laying her heart bare before me, and it does something wild to my own. I bend down, capturing her lips in a kiss that’s meant to convey all the words I can’t seem to string together. When we part, I have to clear the tightness from my throat.

“Baby, you’ve got me feeling things I didn’t know were still in me. I want this—you and me, whatever this is—to be real.”

“Me too, Jake. So much,” she whispers, her eyes shining with unshed tears that reflect her sincerity.

I pull her closer, until there’s no space left between us, until I can feel the steady beat of her heart against mine. As our breaths mingle, a sense of rightness settles deep within my bones.

It takes a moment—hell, maybe more than a moment—before I can move.

But when I do, it’s with a tenderness that belies my rugged exterior. I push myself up and pad to the bathroom to grab a washcloth.

Running it under warm water, I wring out the excess and return to Melanie. She watches me with those big, trusting eyes that see more of me than anyone ever has.

I clean her up first, gentle touches wiping away the evidence of our passion. Then it's my turn, and I take care of myself quickly.

“Better?” I ask, tossing the cloth into the hamper and sliding back under the sheets with her.

“Much,” she murmurs, her smile sleepy but satisfied.

I pull her close, her head resting on my chest. This is where she belongs, right here with me. And as we drift on the edges of sleep, I know one thing for certain—I'm a goner for this woman. Melanie Watts has become my heart's true north, and I'm not letting go.

Chapter Six

MELANIE

One Week Later

I'M PRACTICALLY VIBRATING WITH NERVES AS I STEP INTO THE grand hall of the Cooper Hills Fine Art Museum, my proposal clutched like a lifeline in my hands.

I've rehearsed this pitch to my bedroom walls more times than I can count. But now that I'm facing the prospect of sharing my vision with someone else, I can feel the words bubbling up inside me, eager and chaotic.

Drawing in a deep breath, I push open the heavy oak door leading into my boss's office.

Mr. Calloway is sitting at a mahogany desk in front of a large window, revealing a breathtaking mountain view. A sense of anticipation prickles along my skin, mingling with a touch of unease.

"Good morning, Mr. Calloway," I greet him brightly, striving to infuse my voice with an assurance that belies my nerves. I smooth my skirt, trying to embody the poise that these ancient sculptures wear so effortlessly.

He looks up from his desk, rimless glasses perched low on his nose.

"Good Morning, Ms. Watts," he replies as he gestures for me to take a seat. "I skimmed over your proposal, but I would like to hear more. Tell me more about your idea."

I take a deep breath, closing my eyes for a moment to center myself. This is it, the chance I've been waiting for.

“Imagine this space,” I begin, gesturing expansively, “transformed into a tapestry of local talent, a community art event that celebrates the vibrant culture of Cooper Hills.”

As I speak, I infuse every word with the hope brimming in my chest.

I paint him a picture of families strolling through the museum, children marveling at canvases bursting with color, sculptors molding dreams from clay, and photographers capturing the soul of our town.

“Art is the pulse of society, Mr. Calloway,” I finish, my heart thumping audibly in the quiet office. “And this event could be the jolt that brings it to life for everyone to feel.”

I look at him expectantly, silently pleading with him to catch a glimpse of the world as I see it: boundless and bright, a canvas waiting for us to leave our mark.

But instead, there just a long silence, the kind that makes your skin crawl with anxiety. I clutch the edges of my proposal, the paper crinkling slightly under the pressure.

My heart drops as Mr. Calloway leans back in his leather chair, his fingers steepled beneath a sharp, scrutinizing gaze.

“Melanie,” he says finally, his voice cool and detached, “while your enthusiasm is commendable, I’m afraid we can’t proceed with this idea.”

I blink, feeling the sting of rejection before I even understand the reasoning. “I... I don’t understand. The community would love it.”

“Perhaps.” He waves a dismissive hand. “But our patrons expect a certain caliber of art here. An event like you’re proposing might dilute the museum’s reputation for high-art exhibitions. We cater to a more... discerning audience.”

My stomach knots, and my cheeks burn hot with the effort of holding back tears.

I want to protest, to argue that art is for everyone, not just those with deep pockets or an art degree. But the words get stuck somewhere between my brain and my lips.

“Thank you for your time, Melanie.” His tone implies the meeting is over. I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. I gather my things, feeling smaller with every step I take out of his office.

The door clicks shut behind me, and I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

It's like walking through a fog as I make my way out of the museum, the echoes of my heels on the marble floor sounding too loud in my ears.

THE BELL above the door chimes as I walk into the Pitcher's Brew later that day.

It's been only a week since Jake and I started dating, but already his bar feels like my second home.

There's something comforting about the laid-back chatter from locals toasting to everyday victories that make me feel like I belong. Every time I step into this place after a long day at work, it's as if I am shedding an uncomfortable skin - trading pretentious sophistication for authenticity.

I shuffle toward my usual spot at the bar, the weight of disappointment making each step feel like wading through molasses. But then I see Jake standing behind the counter with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his hands working deftly to pour a draft beer.

“Hey, gorgeous. How did your pitch go?” He places the beer down for a waiting customer and turns to give me his full attention. Then he frowns. “Not well, I'm guessing?”

“Is it that obvious?” I attempt a laugh, sliding onto a barstool. It comes out sounding like a creaky hinge.

“Want to talk about it?” he offers. His eyes are a clear, honest blue, the kind that don't just look at you—they see you. And right now, they're seeing straight through to the heart of me.

“It's just...” I start, but the words tangle up somewhere between my brain and my lips.

Jake's frown deepens as he continues to study my face.

I'm not sure what he reads there—a weary soul, perhaps, or maybe just smeared mascara. But either way, his concern is almost palpable.

“You don't have to tell me about it if you're not ready yet,” Jake says gently, sensing my struggle. “But if you want to vent, I'm here.” Then he grins. “But in the meantime, how about I get you the usual?”

And just like that, a tiny pinprick of light pierces the gloom of my mood.

“Please,” I say, grateful for the normalcy of our routine.

He reaches for the bottle of my favorite cherry cider. It's sweet, a little tart, and doesn't pack enough punch to leave me reeling—which is exactly what I need right now.

I rest my elbows on the bar and let out a long sigh, watching as Jake uncaps the bottle with a practiced flick of his wrist. Then he sits it down on the bar, and the confession tumbles out of me.

“It was like hitting a brick wall, Jake. Mr. Calloway didn't even try to understand the potential of the event. He shot it down before I could even finish.”

“Sorry to hear that, baby,” Jake says sympathetically. “But for what it's worth, I think your idea sounds incredible.”

I blink back the sting of tears. “I just believed it could be something special, you know? Something that would showcase the talent we have right here in Cooper Hills.”

“Melanie, your passion is... it's something else.” He leans back, his fingers drumming on the table as if they're itching to take action. “You've got this fire for art and community, and it's damn inspiring.”

And in his thoughtful silence, I catch a glimpse of wheels turning, of plans forming.

I sniff, breaking the moment, “Anyway, it's back to the drawing board, I guess.” I force a smile, but it falters under the weight of thwarted dreams.

“Maybe not,” Jake says slowly, a hint of something promising in his tone. “How about we host the event here?”

“Really?” My voice pitches high, my heart hammering a little faster. I lean forward, elbows on the table, afraid to hope too much. “You’d do that?”

“Absolutely,” Jake says with a nod. He gestures around the bar to the rustic wooden walls. “This place has seen its fair share of gatherings. Why not an art expo? We’ve got the space, the vibe... heck, we even have the perfect lighting for showcasing some amazing pieces.”

I blink, taking in his earnest expression and the way his hands spread wide as if already picturing the art breathing life into the room.

“Jake, that’s—I mean, Friday nights are big for you, right? Are you sure?”

“Of course, I’m sure, baby.” He leans back, the decision made. “I’d do anything to make you smile.”

“You’re such a good boyfriend,” I laugh. “You always know how to cheer me up.”

As I say the words, Jake’s heated gaze suddenly rakes over me. “I think I might know something that could cheer you up even more,” he murmurs.

He calls over to one of his employees standing at the other end of the bar.

“Hey, Kevin? Keep an eye on things for me. I’ll be back in a bit.”

A little thrill runs through me as Jake takes my hand and leads me quickly down a back hallway of the bar. We end up in a small office tucked away from the hustle and bustle. The door clicks shut behind us, followed by the distinct sound of a lock turning.

Then Jake spins and slams his lips against mine.

His body is a wall of heat and muscle as his lips move hungrily against mine, his hands roaming over my body and shedding my clothes with ease.

“Ever since I saw you in this tight little skirt, I’ve wanted to fuck you while you were wearing it,” he growls into my ear.

My voice comes out like a squeak as he plucks at one of my nipples. “Really?”

“Really,” Jake pants back. “Now bend over, baby. Show me that pretty little hole.”

In an instant, I find myself bent over the tiny desk in Jake’s office on my tiptoes. He hikes up my skirt and explores me roughly with his fingers before yanking off his belt.

“I’m going to take you rough now, baby,” Jake says huskily. “Is that okay with you?”

With a breathy sigh, I respond, “Yes, do whatever you want. I’m yours.”

“Damn right, you are.”

Jake’s hand wraps around the back of my neck, his fingers burying themselves into my hair as he holds me down on the desk. He uses his other hand to guide his cock to my entrance, filling me completely in one brutal thrust. He sets a punishing pace, stretching me wide as I arch my back to meet him thrust for thrust.

“Goddamn, look at you,” Jake groans, his hips slamming into mine harder. “Such a good fucking girl. Taking this cock. Love the way this pussy feels, baby.”

The desk shakes under us as he continues to pound into me, bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

“Jake, please, it feels so good,” I pant. “Please, I need more.”

And that’s when I feel his thumb press its way slowly into my back entrance.

In an instant, I’m overwhelmed by a feeling of fullness that I’ve never experienced before, a deep moan spilling from my lips at the sensation.

“I love all the sounds you make when I fuck you,” Jake’s voice rumbles. “Now let go for me, baby. Get us both off.”

I reach down between my legs to rub my clit as he fucks me.

“That’s it baby, rub that pretty pearl,” he pants as I get closer to my climax. “Don’t be shy. Take what you want and get us both off. “

A second later, my climax hits me like a freight train and we both go spiraling over the edge.

Chapter Seven

JAKE

“I CAN’T BELIEVE YOU INVITED MELANIE’S BOSS TO THE PARTY without telling her,” Wes says. “That’s a bold move, even for you.”

I lean back against the polished bar, arms crossed over my chest. “Yeah, well, sometimes you have to swing big if you want to hit a home run.”

Wes just shakes his head.

He’s never been one for baseball metaphors. I don’t blame him, though. Not everyone can spot an opportunity from left field.

It’s Saturday afternoon, the day of Melanie’s art expo event at Pitcher’s Brew.

My brothers and I are putting up the final touches, hanging paintings, and arranging sculptures while Melanie gets ready in her apartment. I want my girl to be feeling her best for her big day, and I know she likes to take her time getting ready.

As I look around the bar, I let the grin fully stretch across my face, feeling how right this moment is.

Inviting Melanie’s boss was a strategic move, one that could change things for her in a big way. My girl’s got fire and her ideas are awesome.

She just needs the right audience to see it.

“Her boss needs to see what she’s capable of, and there’s no better way to show him than this,” I tell Wes. “Trust me. This gala is going to be the perfect pitch for her proposal.”

“I don’t know, man,” Chase’s eyebrows are hitched high as he sets a framed landscape on an easel. “Mel’s boss showing up could spook her.”

“Could fire her up too,” Duke chimes in, his arms full of abstract sculptures. “Bold moves are game-changers.”

Wes groans. “Would you two stop with the baseball metaphors already?”

But he’s grinning now, the infectious kind that says he’s on board, skepticism be damned.

I adjust a painting of a mountain vista, the brush strokes bold and confident – much like the move I’ve just played. My gut twists slightly at Chase’s words. What if Melanie does freak out? No, that’s not her style. She’s got grit, that one, and she thrives when challenged.

If anyone can appreciate the unexpected, it’s Melanie.

And deep down, I know this is the kind of grand gesture that’ll show her exactly how much faith I’ve got in her vision.

THE DOORS SWING OPEN, and the buzz of conversation swells like a wave crashing into The Pitcher’s Brew. Lights gleam off polished wood and colorful canvases. I stand back, arms folded across my chest, and let the sights and sounds wash over me.

“Look at this turnout,” Dean, Melanie’s brother, says with a low whistle, nudging me in the ribs. “You’ve hit it out of the park, man.”

“Team effort,” I correct him, but I can’t help the grin that tugs at my lips. The place is teeming with life—locals mixed with out-of-towners, all here because of what we’ve created.

They move from piece to piece, heads tilting, eyes wide, some reaching for the complimentary wine as they go. Every nod, every appreciative murmur, feels like a pat on the back. This town needed something fresh, and together, Melanie and I served it up.

But then, through the throng of art enthusiasts, I catch sight of him—Melanie’s boss, Mr. Calloway, his silver hair unmistakable even in the crowd.

He’s flanked by a couple of folks who look equally out of place in their fancy attire, their gazes skeptical as they scan the room.

My stomach tightens, a coil of nerves that wasn’t there a second ago.

This guy’s opinion matters, not just to the success of tonight, but to Melanie’s future. She’s got ideas big enough to fill any museum, and I’ve seen the work she’s put into them.

I watch as he pauses before a large oil painting, its strokes bold and vibrant, a representation of Cooper Hills’ rugged beauty. There’s a hush around him, a circle of space as people give him room to contemplate.

“Come on,” I urge silently, willing him to crack a smile, to nod, to show a sign that he gets it—that he sees the heart and soul poured into every frame hanging on these walls.

The community has come alive tonight, united by the power of art, and if he can’t see the value in that, then he’s missing the point entirely.

I rub a hand over my jaw, feeling the slight rasp of stubble under my fingers.

It’s out of my hands now, and I hate that. But looking around at the mingling crowd, I know we’ve accomplished something great here, no matter what the verdict is. We’ve brought people together, and that’s worth more than any single approval.

Still, as I watch him, I can’t shake the hope that he’ll see what Melanie and I have seen from the start—that art is more than just a pretty picture; it’s a heartbeat, a memory, a piece of someone’s soul laid bare. And maybe, just maybe, he’ll see why Melanie belongs at the helm of such a vision, leading the charge with her passion and her drive.

“Amazing night, Jake,” Daphne, Melanie’s sister, says, breaking into my thoughts with a gentle touch on my arm.

“Melanie must be thrilled.”

I nod, glancing over to where Melanie stands, her expression a mix of pride and nervous anticipation. “She deserves all the credit,” I say, and mean it. Because without her, none of this would be possible. Her spirit is in every detail, her energy infusing the air itself.

“Here’s hoping he sees it too,” I mutter, mostly to myself, as Melanie’s boss turns away from the painting, his face unreadable.

I spot Melanie across the room, her eyes wide as saucers at the sight of her boss. With a steady stride, I cut through the throng of art lovers, dodging a waiter with a tray of champagne flutes. Her back is ramrod straight, a sure sign she’s on edge.

“Hey,” I murmur, coming up beside her. My hand finds the small of her back—a touch meant to ground her. “You okay?”

She nods, but I see the tension in her jaw. “Didn’t expect to see him here,” she whispers.

“Trust me,” I say, and there’s a promise in my voice. I lock eyes with her, willing her to believe. “It will all work out.”

Melanie takes a deep breath, squares her shoulders, and together we approach her boss. He’s peering at a canvas, his head tilted. We make our way through the crowd, and it parts for us, like they sense something pivotal is about to happen.

“Mr. Calloway,” Melanie greets, her voice steady now. “Thanks so much for coming.”

“Melanie,” he says her name without turning. “This is quite the event you’ve put together.”

“Thank you. Jake here has been instrumental in all of this.” She gestures to me, and I nod at her boss, my face betraying none of the anxiety gnawing at my gut.

“Is that so?” Calloway turns, finally, and looks at me with newfound interest. “Very impressive.”

We walk, side by side, and I keep a protective stance near Melanie, ready to intercept any curveballs. The boss shakes

hands, exchanges pleasantries, and with each step, the atmosphere seems to buoy him up. He's not just being polite; he's genuinely interested, taking in the local artwork, the vibrant energy of the place.

And then it happens—the moment that feels like a home run in the bottom of the ninth.

“Melanie,” Calloway begins, his tone softer, warmer than the brisk cadences of our previous encounters. “I’ll admit, when you first brought your proposal to me, I didn’t give it the consideration it deserved.” He pauses, and I see him offer a hand in a gesture that’s both conciliatory and respectful. “But seeing all this tonight... well, I was wrong. This is impressive.”

She takes his hand, and her smile lights up the room. “Thank you, Mr. Calloway. It means so much to hear you say that.”

The patrons around us are none the wiser to the significance of this exchange, but to Melanie—and to me—it’s everything.

I watch as Calloway nods, his eyes scanning the room filled with artwork and lively chatter, the community coming together in a way that’s never happened before here at Pitcher’s Brew.

“Success like this deserves recognition,” he continues. “And I’d like to make sure it gets just that.”

Melanie’s shoulders relax, and I can tell she’s soaking in the words she’s worked so hard to hear. There’s a vibrancy to her, an energy that seems to spill over and touch everyone in her vicinity, including me.

As Calloway excuses himself, promising to speak more later, I can’t help but let out a slow breath. The kind of exhalation that comes when you’ve been holding onto something tight, afraid to let go, and finally, the tension breaks.

I’m standing near the edge of the room, a half-empty glass of beer in my hand, watching the crowd, but really only seeing

her.

Melanie's laughing now, talking to Dean and Daphne, who've come to support their sister, and there's a pang in my chest—a mix of pride and something deeper, something like awe.

Like love.

It hits me then, that tonight isn't just about the art on these walls or the buzz in the room. It's about Melanie, about her vision and her passion. And it's about us—how this project has tangled our lives together in ways I never would have imagined.

The sense of accomplishment sitting heavy in my chest isn't just because the gala is a hit; it's because Melanie's idea, her dream, has been lifted up for all to see, acknowledged and appreciated. And to think, I played a part in that, in helping her get there, it makes every bead of sweat worth it.

I watch her move through the crowd, a force of nature in her own right, and I know—this is a significant milestone. Not just in the life of my bar, not just for the town, but for us. For Melanie and me. Whatever happens from here, we've shared something indelible, a victory neither of us will forget.

Chapter Eight

MELANIE

I WEAVE THROUGH THE CROWD, MY HEART SWELLING WITH pride.

It's a hit, an absolute hit—the art expo is bursting with life, color, and creativity, just like I always knew it would be.

As I sidestep a couple lost in each other's eyes, I remember the conversation from earlier that still plays on a loop in my head.

Mr. Calloway, his usually stoic face animated with genuine enthusiasm, commending me on the concept. “Innovative,” he had called it. “Groundbreaking for our small town.” His words echo in my mind, bolstering my confidence.

I never thought that fresh out of college, I'd be creating waves in Cooper Hills. But here I am, sipping bubbly carbonation that tickles my tongue less than the fizzy elation bubbling inside me.

A laugh bubbles up from my throat as I spot Eliza and Willow navigating through the throng of art enthusiasts.

“Oh my gosh, *Melanie!*” Eliza calls out, her voice cutting through the hum of conversations and jazzy music that fills the air. She wraps me in one of her signature bear hugs, nearly lifting me off my feet.

“Girl, look at this place!” Willow chimes in, her eyes sparkling like the sequins on her boho-chic dress. “You've turned the bar into a masterpiece.”

Their excitement sends a wave of pride cascading through my veins.

These two have seen me through late-night cram sessions and caffeine-fueled finals. They've been my cheerleaders since day one in Cooper Hills. To have them here, sharing in this slice of victory, it's like the cherry on top of an already perfect night.

"Thanks, guys," I manage to say, my heart swelling in my chest. "I couldn't have pulled it off without your pep talks and emergency chocolate supplies."

Eliza leans in, her voice a conspiratorial whisper over the clinking glasses and laughter. "You know, I've never seen Jake agree to change anything in this bar since he hung up his baseball cleats. He's definitely in love with you."

My breath catches at her words, the sounds of the expo fading into a distant buzz as her suggestion seeps into my thoughts.

Could Jake really be in love with me?

I gently shake my head, a blush creeping up my cheeks at the notion. Jake Andrews, Cooper Hills' most sought-after bachelor, with his rugged allure and infectious grin, in love with me?

He's the kind of man who could inspire local folklore, and I'm... well, I'm just Melanie Watts, fresh from university and still trying to find my footing in this town.

"Eliza," I reply with a chuckle, "Jake and I have only been together for a few weeks." But even as they escape my lips, they feel like an attempt to convince myself more than Eliza.

My relationship with Jake has been nothing short of incredible so far.

He's supportive and knows how to make me laugh until tears stream down my face. Not to mention our chemistry is off the charts.

There have been moments when I've caught him looking at me with such intensity that it felt like he was on the verge of

saying those three little words.

But could he really be falling for me this quickly?

Eliza smirks knowingly at me before pointing out what everyone in town already knows: “Melanie, this is Fit Mountain - people here fall head over heels all the time.”

I can’t help but let out a nervous laugh. She might be right. After all, things do seem to move fast around here. A quiet part of me whispers that maybe she isn’t wrong about Jake either.

“Maybe you’re right,” I murmur, barely audible, my gaze drifting across the room to where Jake is laughing with a group of guests. But I’m no longer just watching my secret crush turned new boyfriend. I’m seeing the man who might just hold my heart in his calloused hands.

“Girl, I know I’m right,” Eliza says, nudging me playfully.

And for the first time tonight, I think she might just be onto something.

THE LAST OF the guests have finally trickled out of the Pitcher’s Brew, their laughter still echoing through the air as Jake locks the doors behind us.

“Come on, let’s head up,” Jake says, motioning towards the stairs that lead to his apartment above the bar. Normally, we would head back to his cabin in the woods, but we’re both so exhausted that neither of us feels like making the drive.

Jake’s apartment door swings open, revealing the cozy interior. The living room is a mix of rustic charm and sports memorabilia. A worn-out leather couch faces a large flat-screen TV. Baseball trophies and framed photos line the wooden shelves.

“Baby, you really outdid yourself tonight,” Jake says as he sets a box down on the counter and walks over to me. “This whole thing was amazing.”

I beam up at him as he pulls me into a hug. “It was amazing,” I agree. “Seeing the whole town there...it felt

magical.”

“Magic,” he repeats, a soft chuckle escaping him. “That’s exactly what it was. And it was all you, Melanie.”

His praise washes over me, and I’m caught in the current, letting it pull me towards something I can’t quite name. It’s not just pride swelling within me—it’s this fluttery sensation that dances up from the pit of my stomach and makes my fingers tingle with the urge to reach out and touch him.

I want to bask in this moment forever, to live in the space between his words where everything seems possible.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Jake,” I manage to reply, keeping my voice light despite the intensity of my emotions. “It takes two to make magic happen, right?”

Jake doesn’t respond right away. Instead, he guides me towards the couch, our hands entwined. With a gentle tug, he pulls me down into his lap. Then he murmurs in my ear, “I have something I want to tell you, baby.” His voice is low and soft as he continues, “I’ve been searching for the right words all night.”

My voice is barely above a whisper, every nerve-ending alert. “Words for what?”

He shifts me in his lap so that I’m facing him, taking my small hands in his larger ones. “Baby, I feel like I’ve known you for years, not just weeks. And tonight, watching you with everyone... I realized something.” His thumb strokes the back of my hand, sending shivers up my arm.

My breath catches as I wait for his next words.

“I love you so much, Melanie. There’s no way around it. I’ve fallen for you, hard and fast.”

The world stops. I blink rapidly, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. Emotions crash over me—shock, joy, love—they blend into a heady cocktail that leaves me dizzy. I search his face, looking for any sign of hesitation, but there’s only raw honesty.

“Jake...” The word is a sigh, a release. “I love you too. I didn’t expect this, but here we are, and I can’t imagine being anywhere else.”

Our gazes lock, and in his eyes, I see the reflection of everything I’m feeling. It’s real. It’s us. And it’s just the beginning.

Jake grins at me. “I’m glad to hear that you love me, baby. Because I have a crazy idea and I need you to hear me out.”

“Okay,” I say, my curiosity piqued as I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

He takes a deep breath before he continues. “Move in with me. Tonight.”

The words hang in the air, bold and unexpected. My mind races. Move in? Tonight?

“Jake, that’s— that’s huge.” I stand up, trying to match his gaze, looking for the familiar twinkle of humor, but he’s dead serious.

“I know it’s sudden. But when something feels this right, why wait?” He crosses the room in two long strides and takes my hands again.

A wave of shock hits me first, freezing me in place. But then warmth begins to spread through my chest. I think about the art expo at The Pitcher’s Brew, the way we worked seamlessly together, the strength of his arms when he hugged me after the last guest left.

“Jake, I...” My voice trails off as I search inwardly.

There’s no blueprint for this, no guidebook on the speed of falling in love or the timing for monumental decisions. Yet, as I stand there, looking at the man who’s stolen my heart, everything clicks into place. It’s not just about sharing an address or a key; it’s about sharing a life.

“Okay,” I finally whisper, a smile breaking across my face. “Let’s do it. Let’s start this adventure together.”

His grin mirrors mine, lighting up the room, and in that instant, I know. This isn’t just a fleeting thrill—it’s the real

deal. And as wild as it is, it feels absolutely, perfectly right.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stella Banks is a romance writer who loves nothing more than crafting a good happily ever after.

As a mother of three, she can often be found typing feverishly at her laptop while sipping on Prosecco (yep, that's multitasking at its finest!). She's passionate about writing stories that make her readers smile and creating romantic worlds filled with love.

When she isn't writing, Stella can be found admiring sunsets and plotting her next masterpiece.

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