

A superstar learns to live off-script,
guided by small-town love.

Yours, Always

AMBER FALLS

RACHAEL HEINAN
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Amber Falls

YOURS, ALWAYS

**RACHAEL HEINAN & KIMBERLY
METCALF**

Yours, Always

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Book one in the Amber Falls series

An action movie star needs a small-town love to remind him how to live life, off script.

Greyson Atwood, Hollywood movie star, and his best friend Prudence Hardwick have been dancing around their feelings for each other since high school.

Fresh off a Spirit Award win for Best Actor, and despite the awards buzz in the air, Greyson finds himself burned-out on the Hollywood vibe. He knows his hometown of Amber Falls, Massachusetts is the best place to rest and recover, and it doesn't help that his pent-up feelings for Prudence have simmered to the surface one too many times to ignore anymore.

Greyson decides he has no choice but to go to Prudence. As the town prepares for the annual Fall Festival, Greyson and Prudence finally have the time to navigate their deep bond of friendship that goes back to their childhood and find out if that bond is enough to build the rest of their lives on, together.

Dedication

Rachael

To Joe and Eva. You're the reason I do *any* of this.

To Kim. You're the reason I *did* any of this.

Kimberly

To Abigail. Be fearless.

To Rachael. Thank you for doing this with me.

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Chapter One

“I don’t need a date.” Greyson Atwood, Hollywood action star, walked across the kitchen of his Brentwood home, opening the refrigerator and gazing aimlessly inside. “I’ve gone to these things by myself before. This isn’t any different.”

“I’m sorry none of your little friends could make it, but this is very different. It’s the Verity Awards. If you win this you have a great chance to be nominated for a Passel Award,” Greyson’s agent, Nadia Kent, drawled in her southern accent, referencing their industry’s highest accolade. “You *have* to take someone, and you *have* to take someone people know. Samantha Crane is that girl. This movie shows you’re talented, you wouldn’t have been nominated for Lead Actor if you weren’t, but now you need momentum. People need to see past the muscles, the height and the hair gel.” She gestured vaguely in Greyson’s direction. “They need to follow you to the box office on your next movie, no matter what genre it is, so this is an opportunity for Samantha to broaden your audience. She is the ‘it’ girl right now.”

“‘It’ girls aren’t all they’re cracked up to be, Nadia.”

Nadia brushed off Greyson’s concern. “Listen. Ben Stone was the perfect role for you. It made you a household name.” She was referring to the title character in his popular four-film spy movie franchise. “If directors are thinking about *you* when they think about *her*, it’s a good thing. Besides, there’s a script floating around I think you two would be perfect for. Also, your contract with the studio is coming up for renewal and now is the time to jump on this.”

“Ah, so there’s the reason.” Greyson pondered the statement, keeping it close to his chest that he’d been offered a teaching position back home on the East Coast. After deciding on an apple, he closed the refrigerator and turned to Nadia. “Fine, send me her details and the color of her dress to coordinate, and I’ll pick her up at five on Sunday.”

“Please tell me you have a car and you’re not planning on taking that horrid Jeep?” Nadia asked.

Greyson rolled his eyes. “Nadia, how many times do I have to tell you—the ‘86 Jeep is practically a classic. Even the rust has character.” He let her process that statement for longer than he should have, until her eyes grew wide and her lower lip started quivering. “Yes! I already have a limo scheduled to be here at four thirty on Sunday.”

“Good boy, Greyson.” Nadia grabbed her purse off the counter, magically back to normal, as she flipped her shoulder-length raven hair.

That’ll teach me to have an agent who used to be an actress.

“Now go take a nap or something. You look terrible.” She breezed out through the front door on her stiletto heels, waving with a flick of her fingers.

Greyson took another bite of the apple and ducked his six-foot-three-inch frame so he could see himself in the entryway mirror. He assessed his movie star profile as he ran a hand through jet-black hair and squinted his eyes that were such a striking shade of jade, they would make the whole Shang Dynasty weep.

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall.” He quirked a smile that showed his one right-side dimple then brought his hand up to his chiseled jaw, his day-old scruff making a scratching sound. “I hope this wasn’t poisoned,” he muttered, eyeing the apple as he turned and made his way up the stairs. He didn’t think Nadia would resort to poisoning to keep him in California, but he was starting to second-guess her motives as of late—running him ragged up to the Verity Award nominations and wanting to keep him on a trajectory that was exhausting both physically and mentally. A much-needed nap sounded like a good idea, though. Pulling off his shirt, Greyson lay on his bed and stretched, pondering how Nadia had got the starlet of the moment to agree to attend functions with him. The promise of a night with the action hero? He wondered if he should feel more used.

As easy as it was to have a new girl almost every night, his thoughts went to his best friend, Prudence Hardwick—as they often did in situations like these—remembering what it was like to have her on his arm at big events. If he was being honest with himself, it wasn’t just for the glitz and glamor that he wanted her to share these moments with him. Sure, they had phone calls, video chats and texting, but that wasn’t the same as having her with him, in his home, in his life. *Ugh, in my bed.* He shook his head. They’d been friends since kindergarten, never as a couple, but lately his thoughts of her had been so carnal they made even him blush. He’d long ago locked away any desire for her, but something inside him was forcing that door back open and he was

tired of holding it shut. The pull that he'd always had toward her had become so strong lately that he couldn't stop imagining every aspect of his life with her. He needed to go home, back to Amber Falls, back to Prudence. *I need to see her.* He drifted off to sleep with Prudence on his mind.

* * * *

Greyson bolted upright, momentarily disoriented. He was breathing heavily, remnants of his dream pinging through his head. He looked down and groaned, evidence of his arousal showing through his boxers. "Fuck," Greyson muttered as he flopped back, moving a hand to his racing heart, as if to steady its beats. This had been happening too frequently lately, dreams of Prudence under him, over him...all over him, her wild red hair tumbling across his pillow. Waking up to the touch of her hands on his skin, as though she was real and not another dream. It was embarrassing, really. They'd never gone beyond one kiss—one heartbreakingly sweet kiss—but Greyson's mind filled in every blank imaginable, and his body reacted like some teenage boy who'd never been laid.

He thought of Georgia and why his mind was able to fill in the blanks. When Prudence had decided to move back to their hometown of Amber Falls, Massachusetts, from Atlanta, Georgia, she'd asked him to help drive the U-Haul. After a construction detour, and a wrong turn, they'd ended up heading toward the coast of North Carolina. They had decided it was destiny to head toward the coast, not caring that their trip would be extended by a day, both of them needing the extra time away from work. They'd found a bed and breakfast late at night and taken the only room available—with one bed. The night had been wonderful. With a balcony facing the ocean, they'd opened a bottle of wine and reminisced about their youth. They talked long into the night. He remembered falling asleep with her next to him and waking the next morning with her curves pressed against him. Her perfect body, as though it had been made to fit only him, and the final puzzle piece had fallen into place that morning that she was *it*. He'd known since junior high that he loved her, but this made it irrefutable. He *loved* her. She'd awoken, soft from sleep, and he could feel the smile radiating from her. Then reality had set in. He was driving her to Massachusetts and he was going back to L.A.

He shook himself out of his reverie. There was no time to lounge in bed the rest of the day and torture himself with thoughts of Prudence. His

assistant, Bradford, was going to be here with dinner shortly, and he needed to cool off. He'd barely made it out of the shower and into some clothes before Bradford called out, "Yooohoo, Mr. Atwood?"

"I'm here, Bradford. Come on into the kitchen."

Bradford hustled in, his boat shoes—sans socks, of course—making no sound on the tiles. He was juggling too many things, a stack of take-out boxes threatening to tip onto the floor at any second, destined to stain the pile of clothes thrown over his other arm on their way down. Greyson leapt off his stool and grabbed the food, deftly depositing the boxes on the kitchen island. *Hmm, these are surprisingly light.*

"You should've called me, Bradford. I'd have helped bring this stuff in." Greyson reached out to take the clothes as well.

"No, Mr. Atwood, that wouldn't do. I almost had it."

"I wish you'd call me Greyson." Greyson had hired—*stolen*—Bradford away from Wyatt Reed, another major action star a year ago, and, as Bradford had said then, "I did not call Mr. Reed 'Wyatt' and I will not call you 'Greyson'. Respectfully, of course, Mr. Atwood."

Greyson and Wyatt had started a sort of...rivalry...over the years. They were both an uncomfortable level of attractiveness—tall, dark and oh-so-handsome. Their movies were in the same genre, both action-packed, high-octane blockbusters. However, Wyatt had progressed over the years from an action star bad-boy to an indie-staring media darling. While Greyson still had a reputation as a womanizing wild child, Wyatt had turned into somewhat of a loner despite his megastar status. His personal life was kept personal, and his charity works, although immense, were not touted in the press. Wyatt had turned into what every movie star should aspire to be. That pissed Greyson off to no end. The press was so subjective, it focused on what it wanted, and what it wanted from Greyson was pure salaciousness.

Bradford sighed a long-suffering sigh and went to a cupboard to get some plates, ignoring the comment. "I grabbed salads. Figured you'd need to keep things light leading up to the awards ceremony." He stared pointedly at Greyson's midsection.

Greyson's hand went to his stomach. "These are washboard abs, sir."

"Mmmhmm..." Bradford murmured as he moved lettuce to his plate. "I'm just saying. Nadia had me bring over these tuxedo shirts for you to try on. I'm supposed to bring pants tomorrow and I'd hate for things not to button up."

Greyson involuntarily flexed his biceps. "What? She doesn't trust me to

get fitted for a tux like I told her I would?”

“I didn’t understand most of what she was talking about, something about your horrid Jeep and needing a nap, but yes. That’s exactly what she inferred.”

Greyson laughed as he filled his plate, deciding not to skimp on the dressing. “Hey, what do you know about Samantha Crane?”

“Not much. She’s guarded about her personal life. Nice enough from the talk around town, but she’s never lived in the real world. Silver spoon and all that.”

“Guarded about her personal life? Isn’t she in the gossip rags almost daily?”

“That’s not her personal life, that’s her *show-biz* life. What she thinks people want to see of her, to keep them interested. Her dad bought her way into the ‘it-girl’ title, and she’s trying to hold on to it. People are eating it up, though, and her box-office records prove it.”

Greyson was silent for a moment. He’d only worked with Bradford for a year, but he trusted his opinion, maybe even more than Nadia’s. “Do you think it’s a smart idea to work with her?”

Bradford answered without hesitating. “Yes. It’s good press.” He echoed Nadia’s words from earlier in the day. “The more people you can reach, like Samantha’s demographic, the more people will want to see whatever project you’re attached to.”

“Nadia wants me to take her to the Verity Awards ceremony on Sunday.”

“She’s her agent too, you know. Nadia’s quite the tactician, always three steps ahead.”

Greyson rolled his eyes upwards. Nadia’s insistence on taking Samantha to the awards show and reading her script suddenly made sense, although he couldn’t figure out why she didn’t just tell him she was agent to both of them. “That clever girl. It’s double bucks for Nadia if it goes through, she’s going for the hard sell.”

Bradford shrugged his shoulder. “If you have the opportunity to double your payday, you always take it.”

Greyson nodded. “Those are true words, Bradford. Why don’t you reach out to Samantha’s people and set up a lunch date before the awards on Sunday? Nothing too flashy—try to keep the press away.”

“That’s a good idea, Mr. Atwood, although I can’t guarantee anything about the press once the lunch is set up. I’ll reiterate to her people the

importance of having this lunch privately, but it'll be out of my hands after she knows.”

“Thanks, Bradford. Now, it sounds like I have a script to read”—he pushed away his salad—“and some clothes to try on.”

Chapter Two

Prudence was late. It wasn't a habit—having clients with tight deadlines had pretty much cured her of any tardy tendencies—but when it did happen it was usually in the most spectacular way, today being no different. She left her townhouse early enough to run a few errands before she was supposed to meet her best friend and journalist Annabelle Winters at Books and Beans, their favorite downtown coffee place, run by their friend Devlin Watkins.

Of all the days to get sidetracked by being a Good Samaritan, this was one of the worst, knowing that Annabelle was a day away from publishing the next bi-weekly issue of the Amber Falls Bee print edition, and she wouldn't have long to stay and visit. She could feel the perspiration starting to bead at her hairline as she sprinted the last few yards to the coffee shop, stopping to take a few calming breaths before pulling open the door.

“You won't believe it!” Prudence exclaimed, after spotting Annabelle at a table in the back, dodging other patrons and waving to Devlin, who was behind the counter, on her way there. She stopped at the table—one of the beads of sweat had started to trickle over her face. She grabbed a napkin that had come with Annabelle's already eaten muffin, and wiped her forehead. “Mrs. Crenshaw got stuck in a tree!”

Annabelle blew out a breath as she glanced up wide-eyed, “You mean her cat, Billy Bones, got stuck in the tree?”

“Nope, Mrs. Crenshaw. She went up to retrieve said cat and couldn't get back down,” Prudence explained.

“Don't tell me she talked you into going up to get her,” Annabelle stated as she stood to clear half of the table that was currently strewn with her laptop, notepads and other various journalistic items she had with her at all times when she was up against a deadline. Her sleek auburn hair was pulled up into a classic bun, and her slim frame was clad in a herringbone blazer and trousers. Four-inch booted heels almost brought her to Prudence's height.

“It wasn't that high up.” Prudence set her bag and a large leather briefcase on the floor as she shrugged and sat.

“You did not!”

“I wish I was that nimble. I called the Fire Department, but I couldn’t just leave her. What if she fell?”

Annabelle cocked her head. “I’d stick around to see the firemen in action, too.”

“Besides.” Prudence lowered her voice and surreptitiously looked around before she said in a whisper, “I think she would have put a curse on me if I’d left her by herself.”

Annabelle rolled her eyes. “Enough with this. She doesn’t know it was you that broke her window in the fifth grade. Just because she has a black cat and always carries her broom doesn’t make her a witch.”

Prudence raised her eyebrows and pointed a finger at Annabelle. “You’ll take that back when I tell her it was *you* who broke the window and you start to grow warts!”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Annabelle sat back in her chair, grabbing the saltshaker and tossing some over her left shoulder.

“See, you think it’s true, too.” Prudence caught sight of Devlin out of the corner of her eye, the proprietress gathering an empty mug from a nearby table.

“Devlin!” Prudence called, waving her over. “What do you think of Mrs. Crenshaw—a little witchy, right?”

Devlin wound her way over to them. She hadn’t been in Amber Falls for long—a Boston transplant who’d chosen Amber Falls to open her business—citing a revitalized downtown and its quaint, small-town atmosphere. Her vintage style and short, brunette pixie cut made her fit in perfectly. The three ladies had become fast friends, partially because of Prudence and Annabelle’s coffee habit, but mostly to Devlin’s inherent warm nature. She could make any customer feel like a friend, and the three of them were lucky they’d developed a true friendship.

“I haven’t been around here enough to say, but we’re definitely getting to the witching season.” Devlin pointed to the Halloween decor she’d already started setting up in her shop.

“That’s true.” Prudence loved the various jack-o-lanterns, witches with their cauldrons and spooky ghosts that had started popping up over the last week or so.

“I know it’s still well over a month until Halloween, but this is my favorite season, and I can’t help but get the pumpkins and witches out once the air

starts to get chilly.” Devlin’s face broke out into a big smile as she surveyed her shop with pride, then pointed to the intricate chalkboard menu. “The weather really does seem to get people in the mood for the fall drink flavors. They might not get a coffee all year, but as soon as the words ‘pumpkin spice’ show up they’re in here so fast. In fact, to celebrate my second Fall Festival, I’ve come up with some new flavors. Do you want to try a Caramel CinnaBun Latte or a Maple Hot Apple Cider?”

Prudence clapped her hands with excitement. “Oooh! Caramel CinnaBun Latte? I’ll have that, please.”

“Did you want anything else, Annabelle?” Devlin asked.

“I’ll take another black house blend, please,” Annabelle requested as Devlin cleared the table. “Have I ever mentioned how much I love that you decided to open your shop in Amber Falls, Devlin?”

“Almost every time you come in!”

“Well, I’ll say it again.” Annabelle laughed. “I can’t tell you enough. Oh, hey are we going to have a Verity Awards watch party Sunday night?”

“I like the awards shows well enough, but I’ve never been to a watch party. Although I do like that movie Greyson Atwood was in, I hope he wins.”

Annabelle looked thoughtful. “You know Greyson hasn’t been home since the first Ben Stone movie came out.”

Devlin glanced between the two of them, confused.

“Greyson is from Amber Falls,” Prudence explained. “We’ve been friends since kindergarten.”

Devlin’s eyes widened. “I had no clue! I love the Ben Stone movies. You guys have never mentioned him. You’d think the ‘Welcome to Amber Falls’ sign would have ‘Home of Greyson Atwood’ on it.”

Annabelle’s eyes twinkled with mirth. “That’s exactly what Greyson said, except being the famous Hollywood actor he is, he refused to accept anything other than top billing. He insisted to the city council that his name go above the city’s name. They refused, so he said he didn’t want his name on there at all.”

Prudence chuckled at the memory of that day and the city council meeting. Greyson had only been in town to help his newly retired parents pack for their move to Boca, and the city council had taken that opportunity to suggest the sign change. Annabelle had called Greyson a diva, then endearingly started calling him by other action stars’ names from that day forward, although they knew at the heart of it all Greyson just wanted to be able to

come home without any notoriety.

Annabelle continued, “He’d had one movie come out at the time and thought he was big stuff. Of course, since then his star has risen quickly, and other people have petitioned the city council to get his name on the signs, but so far they’ve refused to hear any other proposals.”

“Maybe they’ll hear a proposal whenever Greyson finally comes home,” Prudence wondered. “Gabe might be able to help with that.”

“Why Gabe?” Devlin questioned.

“They’re brothers,” Annabelle said.

Devlin held up her hand. “Wait a sec! Gabe is Greyson Atwood’s brother? I assumed his last name was Finnegan.”

Prudence nodded. “He doesn’t want anything to do with the spotlight,” she confided. “Although, I’ve been told he’s name-dropped Greyson’s name occasionally. Finnegan is their mother’s maiden name, which he thought was more fitting than Atwood to name his bar.”

Devlin’s gaze shuttered as Prudence talked about Gabe, and she shifted on her feet. The short silence was broken by the antique hanging doorbell as it made a cheerful chime, announcing the arrival of new customers. Their attention was drawn to the door as two young men came in. “Hold that thought. I’ll be back in a bit with your coffees.” Devlin stood and turned, her long green skirt twirling, as she greeted the new customers on her way to the counter.

Prudence was not sure if she’d imagined the tension in Devlin when they’d talked about Gabe. She shook her head, sure that she’d find out eventually from either Gabe or Devlin if there was any animosity and the reason for it.

“What project is the master interior designer working on today, Pru?” Annabelle asked, motioning to the portfolio Prudence had leaned against the wall behind them.

“This one’s pretty easy, just a bathroom remodel.” She brought her work to the table, flipping open her tile samples. “They’re going for classic marble.”

“You can’t go wrong with that.” Annabelle leaned back in her chair. She squinted her eyes as she took in Prudence’s appearance. “Man, it looks like you ran a marathon. All hot and bothered from seeing the firemen?”

Prudence blushed. “You’re starting to sound like your mother.” Annabelle was obviously offended by this statement. “But no. I ran the last block here because I knew you were on a tight deadline today and didn’t want to miss our coffee date.”

Annabelle's features softened, a smile crossing her face. *That's a rare occurrence as of late.*

"That's the Pru I know, always considerate of other people's time."

"We should probably invite The Moms if we're going to have a watch party." Devlin brought over two coffees, referencing Prudence and Annabelle's moms.

Prudence and Annabelle raised their coffee cups in a toast. "To The Moms!"

Prudence rolled her eyes and set her cup down. "Like Shirley and LuAnne would ever say no to a glass of white and swooning over Greyson for the evening."

Annabelle smirked. "That and telling you how cute of a couple you and Grey make."

Devlin pulled out a chair and sat. "You and Greyson Atwood? Tell me more."

Prudence felt her face flush once again. She didn't want to think about it. She'd put another padlock on that door. She had been thinking of Greyson more often lately, but she needed to keep that door closed. They were just friends—if she just kept reminding herself of that it would be true.

"There's nothing to tell. We're just friends. Besides, I'm dating Chuck," Prudence stated, mentioning her boyfriend Chuck Charleson Jr., as Annabelle snickered into her coffee. "Knock it off, Annabelle. There's nothing there."

"Yeah, there's nothing there like your feelings for Chuck, but we'll save that conversation for another time." Annabelle mercifully changed the subject. "Does six thirty work? I'll host if you ladies bring the snacks."

Chapter Three

True to his word, Bradford was able to get a lunch set up with Samantha. He said it was almost like her people had been anticipating his call and Greyson supposed they were. Since Nadia was the agent for both of them the lines of communication were probably opened long before Greyson had even heard her mention either the awards ceremony or the movie.

“Thanks so much for meeting me, Samantha.” Greyson pulled out the chair for her at Shay La Luna, Los Angeles’ newest sushi bar.

“Oh please, my friends call me Sam. This was a great idea.” She gracefully tucked herself into the chair. “It’ll be nice to get to know you before the awards show.”

“I agree.” Greyson smiled and opened his menu.

“If I’d known you were so desperate to meet me, I would’ve sent out my feelers long ago,” Samantha tittered and reached out a hand, pretending to claw Greyson.

Greyson laughed nervously and kept his eyes on the menu. “I’m not sure what I’ll get yet.” As oblivious as Samantha seemed, he didn’t think she would be offended if he got his meal to go, already sensing the direction of this lunch, and it was not going north.

He risked a glance over to Samantha who was engrossed in taking a selfie with her menu. He shrugged and took this as an opportunity to check out his surroundings. He liked the place. It was homey and cozy for L.A., a far cry from the trendy black and white hard edges of most places in the city. It was shrouded by tall bushes and a lattice fence that gave him the privacy he’d been hoping for while still being able to enjoy a meal outside. Glancing again toward Samantha, he took in her long blonde hair and tan complexion, and contemplated if it was the natural glow of the beach or a fake tan. He guessed the latter. It was almost too perfect—a bit orange if you asked him. She was thin, waifish and beautiful, but the city was filled with women just like her, with bottled hair and a bottled tan. Samantha was no Prudence, and he was thrilled to realize that this gentleman preferred redheads.

“Okay, I know what I want.” Samantha finally put away her phone. “You?”

“Yes, I know what I want,” he said and signaled to the waiter they were ready, gesturing to Samantha to order.

“I’ll have the grilled salmon salad, salmon on the side. Instead of house dressing”—Greyson rolled his eyes, wishing he could stealth call Prudence and set the phone on the table so she could hear this—“I would like a wedge of a lemon, on the side. No carrots. No arugula. I would like sparkling water, ice on the side.”

The waiter stood, quiet, waiting for her to continue, but she impatiently waved a hand toward Greyson. “Oh, of course. And for you, sir?”

“I’ll have the salmon and avocado roll, the tuna sashimi and whatever IPA is on tap.” Greyson handed back the menus.

The waiter looked relieved and nodded. “I’ll be back shortly.”

“So, tell me about you, Samantha,” Greyson inquired, ignoring her earlier comment about friends calling her ‘Sam’.

“Oh, there isn’t much to tell. I spend a few days a week doing hot yoga. I try to volunteer one day a week, usually at my hot yoga place. Then there are audition calls and weekly meetings with my agent, you know Nadia. I go to the spa as much as I can, it really relaxes me after my stressful days. I try to get a blowout at least twice a week, plus my nails break a lot, so I have to take care of those. I have to meet with my stylist all the time when any new collection comes out. If I don’t get the outfits first, someone else will...”

Yep, I should’ve had Prudence on speed dial for this one. His eyes widened as Samantha actually continued with her laundry list of things she did, and he assumed none of the things she did included doing the laundry. He sat there and listened, baffled by how someone could have so much to do, yet absolutely none of those things were of any importance.

Greyson chuckled when she finally took a breath. “You certainly keep busy. Where did you grow up?”

“Born and raised in L.A. My parents are Rand and Camille Sanders. Crane is my grandmother’s last name, so I took that as my stage name.”

The realization hit Greyson like a ton of bricks. This was Rand Sanders’ daughter, the studio executive that signed his paychecks. Another piece of the puzzle fell into place as to why Nadia was pushing Samantha at him so hard.

“How about you?” Samantha moved away from the subject of her parentage, obviously not wanting to discuss it. Maybe there was more

substance to her than he thought, taking a different surname so she didn't immediately have the name recognition of her father. It's possible she was trying to move up in the business based on her own talent, despite what Bradford had said to him the other day, of Rand Sanders buying her way to the top. Although Bradford only said her father, he didn't mention Rand by name. He decided not to push her on this subject, but she had to know her father essentially held Greyson's career in his hands, so he let it go.

"I grew up in Amber Falls, Massachusetts. It's a small town about two hours west of Boston, close to Amherst. That's where I went to college."

"Oh, I love getting to shoot in small towns. They're so quaint and the locals just love me. You have to tell me more."

"It's very picturesque."

"What's that?"

"Um... It means—you know what, it doesn't matter. It's a beautiful countryside. Rolling foothills, mills, creeks and covered bridges. Everyone knows everyone."

"It sounds lovely, I can't wait for you to show me around."

A little taken aback, Greyson brushed off the comment. He often got that same response of people wanting to see the town he'd described, to see if it was really as charming as it sounded. "It's a good place to decompress. In fact, the famous Fall Festival is just around the corner. Hay bale maze and hotdish cook-off included. It really is so beautiful in the fall. I'm hoping to get back home soon to see some family and friends."

"That will be so fun! I've never been through a hay bale maze. I can't wait for it. Anyway, I was talking to my dad about upcoming scripts the studio has lined up and there's a small-town comedy that would be perfect for us, set in a town just like yours." She paused in her speech while the waiter arrived, setting their food and drinks on the table. "I'll send you the script I was thinking of so you can review it, then I'll meet you in Amber Falls and we can start scouting out locations."

Greyson choked on his first bite. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Yeah, it'll be fun! We can start moving this project forward as soon as possible. Nadia said it was a great idea when I pitched that we should do a movie together. No time like the present, and you're in-between movies now, right?"

Greyson took a deep breath, thinking she had to be joking but she sounded dead serious. He needed to stop this runaway train right now. "I already

asked Nadia for a copy, so why don't we go through the official channels?"

Samantha appeared crestfallen that Greyson didn't seem as excited about the project as she clearly was. "That's okay, I guess."

Samantha lapsed into a petulant silence, pulling out her phone again to photograph her meal, herself with the meal and finally just herself. "Did you want to coordinate outfits for Sunday? My dress has been picked out since the last Versace runway. I guess you can wear a gold pocket square if you want." Samantha shrugged, without pausing to let him respond. "Or whatever."

"A gold pocket square sounds good. I'll just be wearing a standard tux, so that'll bring the outfits together."

Samantha smiled, clearly more relaxed, and they were able to finish their dinner without any more *Fatal Attraction* vibes.

When he noticed Samantha wasn't eating anything off her plate anymore, just pushing the wilted lettuce around with her fork, he took that as a sign the lunch was over. Downing the rest of his beer he stood. "I'll walk you to the valet," he said.

As they walked out of the front door, Greyson was blinded by camera flashes. He put his hand up to cover his eyes. "I don't understand how they knew we were here."

Samantha slid on a pair of Jackie Ohh sunglasses. "It's okay, I called them. All publicity is good publicity after all," she said coolly, sliding her free hand into the nook of Greyson's arm.

Giving a little wave to the photographers, Samantha propelled them through the crowd to the valet station, and Greyson opened the driver's door of her black Mercedes. He still had manners, even in the middle of a paparazzi ambush.

"See you Sunday, Grey." Samantha gave him a peck on the cheek.

The cameras are going to love this.

Greyson closed her door and walked to his Jeep behind Samantha's car. He kept his head down, hoping that the paparazzi wouldn't get a clear picture of him, and naively wished whatever they ran in their rags would be captioned 'Samantha Crane and Mystery Hunk'. He pulled out of the parking lot as fast as he could while keeping a hand over his face.

What the hell was Nadia doing? Did she really think that he and Samantha would work well together? They were nothing alike and this short lunch had proved that. Although he knew that co-stars didn't have to get along to make

a movie, he still didn't see what Nadia saw in this pairing, other than doubling her agent fee. Maybe that's all it was.

If anything, the lunch had made it more clear to him that he missed Prudence and Amber Falls. Too many things had been pointing him back to Prudence. She was the complete antithesis of Samantha, and having to spend one lunch with her was enough for him. He had already agreed to take her to the Verity Awards, and he wouldn't go back on his word, but that had to be it. Now he just had to convince Nadia that now was not the time for a new movie and not piss off both her and the studio in the process. Maybe Wyatt Reed was available.

Chapter Four

“Seriously, Mom?” Prudence grabbed a bag from her mom at Annabelle’s front door. “How much wine do you think we’ll need?”

Shirley Hardwick gave her daughter a knowing smile. She was tall like Prudence, but her frame a few sizes smaller. Her flame-red hair was artfully arranged into perfect spirals that jauntily bounced with each step. Prudence had never mastered the true art of the spiral, usually letting her mass of curls puff and frizz, not unlike Julia Roberts at her nineties best, but perhaps more like the Muppet, Beaker, at her worst.

“It’s Sunday and the store closes at nine, dear. You know how LuAnne will get if we run out after that.”

LuAnne Winters’ head immediately popped out of a door in the hallway. “I heard that, Shirley. And let’s not pretend we both won’t be upset if that happens.” She promptly disappeared back into the room.

LuAnne, Shirley and Janice Atwood had become friends when Prudence, Annabelle and Greyson had entered kindergarten and now were affectionately known collectively as ‘The Moms’. Then, Janice had moved to Boca Raton after Greyson’s dad retired. LuAnne and Shirley spent many melancholy months not sure what to do with themselves after she’d left. In Annabelle’s words, “their Beyoncé deserted them”, but they’d bounced back and were stronger than ever, enjoying getting in as much trouble as middle-aged moms could in a small town. The Sheriff knew them by name, a fact they delighted in.

“What’s she doing?” Shirley asked Annabelle, who was standing at the kitchen island, gesturing to the hallway with her head.

Annabelle rubbed at her temples in resignation. “She decided to get ‘red carpet’ ready. Gown and everything.”

Shirley gasped. “That little minx! She said she wasn’t going to get dressed up.” She deposited her bags on the counter and started down the hall hollering. “LuAnne, you’d better have something in there for me to wear!”

Prudence laughed as she started to take wine and champagne bottles out of

the bags. “I should’ve known LuAnne was up to something.”

“I miss Janice. She kept them sane.”

“Semi-sane.”

“Okay, yes. Semi-sane.” Annabelle uncorked a bottle of red, poured herself a glass then sat on the mid-century modern leather sofa in the living room. It was a large open concept space on the top floor of the newest condo built just off the downtown area. With clean lines and next to no clutter, her perfectly lived-in space reflected Annabelle perfectly. She sat back and propped her sock clad feet on her coffee table. “It’s almost seven, and Mom has been here all day. I deserve this,” she said then took a long sip.

“I’m not going to argue with that.” Prudence stopped, her head tilted, trying to catch the argument coming from the bedroom, then deciding it was probably best she didn’t. “In fact, I’m going to join you.”

“What should we drink to this time?” Annabelle wondered as Prudence sat next to her. “I have a bottle of tequila, how about we take a shot every time a mom asks about when we’re going to give them grandbabies?”

“Not marriage?”

Annabelle shot Prudence a sly look over the rim of her glass. “Considering we’re here because Greyson is going to be on TV, marriage will be the only thing on their minds. Specifically yours and Grey’s,” she clarified, as if that subject didn’t come up almost every time Greyson and Prudence’s names were brought up together.

Prudence grimaced. “You’re right. We’ll both be blitzed before the show even starts.”

Annabelle’s slyness hadn’t abated. “Is there anything you want to talk about while they’re still occupied?” she asked as a crash sounded from her bedroom and a muffled “we’re all right” drifted from the hall.

She fought a flush, reaching for a coffee table book on the elements of style to give her a moment to recover. Every time. Every damn time Greyson was brought up lately she got flushed and flustered. It was embarrassing, really. She was a grown woman who didn’t get crushes, let alone a crush on a man she’d known her whole life. She’d put those feelings behind her long ago but that didn’t stop her traitorous body from tingling to the tips of her toes when he was mentioned, a hyper-awareness that caught her off guard, sometimes leaving her short of breath.

“What would there be to talk about?” she questioned nonchalantly while flipping pages.

Annabelle took a deep breath to speak but was interrupted by the sound of clomping.

“Three-inch heels aren’t that much taller than two-inch heels, Shirley.” LuAnne glided effortlessly in her five-inch stilettos. “It’s one teensy inch.” LuAnne was a barely five-foot-tall, tiny spitfire of a woman. Always elegantly dressed and impeccably made up, much like her daughter, she oozed sophistication and class. Now, in a black gown fit for the Passel Awards, she was the image of a movie star. Shirley was not.

“The dress is too small, and these heels are too high. I’m going to change back into my clothes.”

“It’s not too small, you look great! At least wait so we can take some pictures.” LuAnne struck a pose. “Send some to Greyson, dear,” she said, addressing no one in particular. “Tell him Meryl Streep can eat her heart out.”

Annabelle rolled her eyes and said before she stood, “We’ll talk about this later, Pru.” Then aloud, to the room, “Who wants a drink?”

There was a brief knock on the door before Devlin breezed through. “I’m not late, am I?” She stopped dead at the sight of LuAnne and Shirley. “Wait, what are these celebrities doing in Amber Falls. You know the red carpet’s in L.A., right?” Devlin got along famously with The Moms. She’d only met Janice briefly when she moved to town but had spent a good amount of time with the remaining two moms and she charmed them every time.

LuAnne floated over to Devlin giving her a double-cheek kiss while Shirley smoothed her dress. “You think so?” Shirley asked. “It’s not too tight?”

Devlin walked over and adjusted the straps. “Not at all. It’s perfect.”

“Well, I suppose I can wear it for a bit longer.”

“Of course you can, dear,” LuAnne said, grabbing Shirley by the hand after taking Devlin’s grocery bag and leading her into the kitchen. “Let’s get these apps on, the red carpet is about to start.”

Annabelle, who was still standing with the wine at the kitchen island, pointed to the bottles. “White or red?”

“Woah, are we expecting more people?” Devlin wondered.

“Just us,” Prudence called from the couch. “Apparently, we’re going to need it all and anarchy will break out if we run out after the store closes. It’s not like we don’t know a bar owner.”

“One never knows where the night will take us after the show is over,”

Shirley said, sliding a pan into the oven.

“Wherever the night takes you after the show it *will* be in an Uber, Mother. Some people still work for a living.”

LuAnne and Shirley exchanged glances, their eyes getting dewy as they clasped hands. Prudence swore they practiced this. “Raising our children was the best job we could have ever had,” LuAnne said, despite the fact that they both had worked while raising said children.

Devlin covered her hand with her mouth to muffle a laugh while Shirley got on the guilt train where LuAnne left off. “We *are* getting up there in years. You giving us grandkids would be the biggest blessing we could have at our ages.”

Annabelle walked over to a cabinet and brought out a bottle of tequila, pouring out three shots. “I know babies wasn’t the bet,” she said, handing Devlin a glass and walking one over to Prudence, “but I can’t wait.”

“What bet?” Devlin asked after taking her shot.

“We’re going to take a shot every time The Moms mention marriage. It was originally babies.”

“Well, why don’t we do one we can all play?” LuAnne said while pouring herself and Shirley a shot. She took it like an expert while Shirley sipped hers. “It’s worse if you just sip it, dear. You’ve got to take it in one gulp.”

“I know!” Annabelle said, pointing at the TV screen where Wyatt Reed was talking with the interviewer, his date on his arm. “Let’s take a shot every time the camera pans to Wyatt Reed.”

A thoughtful silence filled the room. “I like it,” Devlin said. “I don’t think he’s nominated for anything, so we probably won’t have to drink too much. In fact, I’m close to my limit with this shot already, the shop does open at six a.m. tomorrow, you know.”

“You’re exempt, Devlin,” LuAnne said. “Anyone who works that early doesn’t need to tempt fate with drinking games.”

“Thanks, LuAnne. Do you know when Greyson is expected to be on?”

Prudence looked at her watch. “When I talked to him earlier, he said he’d be on later in the show since he’s nominated for Lead Actor. They wanted him to wait until toward the end to keep the viewers watching, but that could change.”

LuAnne nudged Shirley, and not covertly. “You talked to Grey today?” Shirley asked, the picture of innocence.

“Yep, he called me while he was getting ready. He’s nervous even though

he's..." She trailed off, seeing the large grins now covering The Mom's faces. "What?"

LuAnne sighed. "You and Greyson have always been the cutest couple."

"LuAnne, you know we're not a couple."

"Never?" Her eyes widened. "You're sure?"

"I think we have to have this talk a lot, LuAnne. Do you think you should ask your doctor about memory loss?"

Shirley raised a hand to lessen the admittedly soft blow of Prudence's joking words. "What she means is that you two always seemed to be more than friends." She turned to Devlin to explain, as though saying it to her rather than Prudence would get her point across more clearly. "You see, my Pru and Greyson have been as close as two people can be for years. I was surprised she didn't go to L.A. with him"—she slid a glance to Prudence—"and I thought that would be the end of my hopes and dreams, but they really seem to have an even stronger connection, now more than ever."

"Mom, really, that's enough." Prudence could feel her cheeks flame up as she also turned toward Devlin, who was sitting at rapt attention. "We're *friends*," she said, repeating words already spoken to her days earlier in the coffee shop. "Yes, good friends, but just friends."

"You would make the most beautiful babies—you have to admit that," LuAnne pointed out. "Beautiful, tall babies."

"Is that him?" Annabelle interrupted, pointing to the TV screen and a couple slightly out of focus in the background behind the interviewer and interviewee.

Prudence turned her head, her eyes focusing not on Greyson but on the woman who was holding on to his arm for dear life. *Huh*.

"Did he say anything about a date, Pru?" Shirley asked.

"He did not," Prudence casually responded, trying to sound neither surprised nor disappointed, but knowing both were coming through loud and clear in those three words. She watched as the woman detached herself from Greyson's arm, giving him a playful shove to the side while she stood to get her picture taken. She threw a becoming pout over her shoulder while the train of her dress, that took up at least ten feet of red-carpet real estate, was being photographed.

He'd had plenty of time to tell her he was bringing a date. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time he was at a premier or awards show with someone other than herself, Annabelle or his mom. A wave of nausea hit her,

and she swallowed hard, knowing this bodily reaction was over the top. He just hadn't told her. *What's the big deal.* She tried to convince herself, as though this deviation from his normal behavior was some sort of turning point she wasn't prepared to take. She gave a mental shake. "He just said that Janice couldn't make it."

Annabelle was obviously trying not to look at Prudence, perhaps sensing she needed a moment to compose herself with this out of character move from Greyson. She studied the screen as the camera now focused on the couple. "Holy shit, that's Samantha Crane!"

The room was a flurry as the rest of the guests clamored to the living room to watch the TV. Sure enough, the chyron at the bottom of the screen scrolled, 'Greyson Atwood—nominated for Lead Actor—and date, Samantha Crane.'

Date. Prudence's head swam while the rest of the ladies commented on what they were seeing. Grey would tell her if he was dating someone, right? Someone as famous as Samantha Crane? True, she didn't read gossip magazines, she'd learned that the hard way when Greyson had first moved to L.A. and lurid details of his first Hollywood fling had been printed for all to see, but she couldn't imagine no one telling her if they'd seen it.

"What do you think, Pru?" Devlin asked, breaking her out of her thoughts.

"I'm sorry, what?" she responded as LuAnne and Shirley exchanged a knowing glance she tried to ignore.

"I said he doesn't seem too happy to be with her. She keeps moving him aside so she can get solo pictures then pulling him back like she's hooked a fish or something."

"Yeah." Annabelle pointed to the TV in exasperation. "See! It's his big night, and she's acting like everyone is there for her." She folded her arms over her chest. "I never liked her anyway," she stated decisively.

"I couldn't even tell you a movie she's been in." Shirley waved a hand to dismiss her. "But I can tell you whose pants I want to be—"

"Mom..." Prudence warned.

"Oh, goodness that tuxedo fits him well." LuAnne sighed. "The pants really are perfectly tailored and hug his tight little—"

"Mom!" Prudence and Annabelle exclaimed in unison, although Prudence did offer up silent thanks for the change of subject.

Prudence tried to show indifference as the night wore on. The amount of tequila she'd had was not helping. In her tipsy state she processed Greyson

with Samantha differently each time the camera showed them. Laughing, whispering to each other, her hand laying possessively on his thigh.

“They really are a handsome couple,” she commented, slightly slurring, at about the three-hour mark and the three-hundredth time they were shown. She was now in the acceptance stage.

“Handsome?” Devlin questioned. “I’m sorry, did you just call them ‘handsome’?”

“You know what I mean. They look good together.”

“She’s a little too nondescript for my tastes,” Shirley said. “She’s just like every other blonde actress out there. There are at least ten other women dressed the same. Same hair, same tan, same boobs.”

Annabelle squinted at the screen, her head slightly bobbing left and right. “Their boobs *are* the same!”

“And what about you, Annabelle. What ever happened to you and...Mark, no...Matt?” her mother asked seamlessly as though they had been discussing Annabelle’s love life this whole time.

“Mom. I told you. He liked to smell my feet.”

“Everyone has their eccentricities, dear.”

“Someone who builds miniature models of everything is eccentric. Someone who smells feet is borderline certifiable.”

“Well, everyone has something, and if you exclude everything you’ll never find the one. Your father—”

Prudence mercifully cut her off. “Hold on! Grey’s award is up next!”

Chapter Five

“And the winner of the Verity Award for Lead Actor in a motion picture, drama, is...Greyson Atwood!”

Greyson sat dumbfounded in his seat. Samantha tugged at his arm trying to get him to stand. *Well, shit.* Shaking his head and pulling himself up from his chair, he buttoned the jacket of his tailored tux—he did have to get it let out an inch after all. Samantha went in for the kiss, obviously expecting a public display of affection despite only having met him once for lunch and their limo ride over here. Since then, the entirety of their interactions had consisted of him being asked to stand to the side so they could get solo pictures of her.

Greyson dodged her pucker and instead she landed a very awkward cheek kiss. *Well, that’s going to be talked about tomorrow.* After he pulled away and started up to the stage, shaking hands and getting pats on the back along the way, he couldn’t help thinking, for the hundredth time, that he wished Prudence was there.

Standing on the stage, he peered into the crowd.

“Not bad for an action star,” he joked, holding the award up. Getting the laugh he’d hoped he would, he continued thanking all the requisite business insiders, conveniently leaving his date out, which would also be talked about. “Thanks to Prudence and Annabelle, and, of course, my brother, Gabe. Hi, Mom and Dad!” Surprisingly, tears formed in Greyson’s eyes, and he quickly turned to exit the stage, almost running over the show’s ambassador on the way.

His was one of the last awards of the night, so thankfully he didn’t have to sit with Samantha for long. Every time the camera panned over to them, she’d whisper nonsense in his ear then laugh, try to take his hand or rest her hand on his thigh—very high on his thigh. He tried to shake it off and focus on the fact that he’d just won a major award. He didn’t want to embarrass her any more after very publicly dodging her kiss. Thankfully, the closing music began, and the crew started running around the stage, a sure signal that the TV broadcast was over. Samantha stood, smiling as she pulled him up from

his seat for the second time that night.

“This is so great, Greyson! It’s just the publicity we need for our movie,” Samantha said, either oblivious to his rejection, or her need to be in the spotlight outweighed that embarrassment. Possibly both.

Greyson had been scanning the theater but drew his attention back to Samantha at those words. “Our movie? We haven’t agreed on anything, let alone read a script.”

“Oh, silly, it’s a figure of speech.”

“Is it?” Greyson asked, leading her to the exit.

“You know, *our* movie, *our* limo, *our* seats, *our* lives. I’m being literal.”

“I don’t think that means what you think it means, Samantha.”

She shook her head, climbing into the limo. “You know what I’m trying to say. We’ll have plenty of time after this to relax and go over the finer details. Once Nadia gets the final script to us, we can hole up together and go over it. Really make it a character study.”

Greyson tried to keep things from moving too fast—after all, they hadn’t agreed on anything and he didn’t know what he was going to do next. He thought of her comments at the restaurant, how she’d been so insistent that she come to Amber Falls to scout out locations.

“We’ll have to wait until we get specifics, and that can take a long time. There’s nothing to do, no places to see. We have to wait, I’ll let Nadia know when I’m ready.” Greyson hoped he was being clear enough.

Samantha waved her hand. “Oh, don’t worry about any of that. Leave it to me. In the meantime”—she leaned over and kissed Greyson lightly on the lips—“we can focus on more...fun activities.” She put her arms around Greyson’s neck and pulled him close.

He sat in shock until it registered to him that Samantha was trying to straddle his lap. “Listen, Samantha”—he reached up and pried her hands away from him, moving her back to the seat—“I don’t know how I can be more clear. *This* is not happening, *we* are not happening,” he said, gesturing between the two of them.

“But Nadia—” Samantha started.

“She has no bearing on any of my decisions regarding this. I’m going home alone tonight, but I will read the script when I get it because I said I would.”

Samantha stared at him for a long moment. “I didn’t want to wrinkle my dress anyways.”

She sat back and pulled her phone out, effectively dismissing him.

The rest of the night was a blur. Samantha was a knock-out in her vintage Versace Atelier dress, but he had no second thoughts about shutting her down earlier. Still, getting rid of her at the after-party wasn't easy, and he didn't have to guess anymore what Nadia had promised her in exchange for being his date that evening.

Greyson left the party earlier than usual, despite his win and the barrage of female attention. On the limo ride home, he wondered what had happened to that old Hollywood charm, when it had been more about the art you were creating, than the money you were making. He was seeing more and more directors that couldn't direct, and producers working skeleton crews to inflate their bottom line. 'It girls' had slowly become more looks over substance, and he'd stopped paying attention to who those girls were supposed to be. He'd asked one girl who her favorite Beatle was, and she'd responded "*Ew, gross, I do not like bugs.*"

After the limo had dropped him off, he slowly walked into his home, turning the kitchen lights on and setting his swag bags on the counter. As he cracked a Budweiser his phone rang, a smile crossed his face when he saw Prudence on the screen, swiping up to answer.

"Samantha Crane? Why didn't you tell me you were taking Samantha Crane?" Prudence's voice came through the phone with a deafening indifference.

"I swear I mentioned her to you, Pru," Greyson fibbed, knowing he'd done no such thing, still unsure why he felt he couldn't tell her.

"You did no such thing, Greyson Walter Atwood!" She waited expectantly. "We literally talked this morning, and you only said Janice couldn't come." She stopped, waiting for him to provide an explanation, but he had none to give. None, at least, that wouldn't betray his feelings. Silence seemed wrong, though. He saw the hurt in her eyes and he was on the verge of making up some lie to save face when she spoke again.

"Oh!" Prudence said, deftly pivoting the subject with the shake of her head, sensing he had no answer or, more aptly, that he wasn't going to answer. "What did you get in the swag bags? I need a new watch."

Greyson smiled slowly, recognizing the wine blush on her cheeks. "Prudence dear, have you been drinking?"

"Maybe a little, but that is beside the point."

"And not a 'congratulations for winning Best Actor'?"

“Well done there, Grey, but I knew you’d win.” With only a moment’s pause she asked, “Did you get any candles?”

Leave it to Prudence to not care about Greyson’s fame. The fact that he’d just won a coveted award made no difference to her. His childhood group of friends supported him in his choice of profession, but in no way let the fact that he was a Hollywood actor change the way they treated him. Except for the swag. “No candles this time, but I did get a cool vintage necklace.”

“Annabelle will love that.”

Greyson sat in his favorite worn-leather chair in the living room, setting his Budweiser on the end table, and sighed. “I almost cried on stage, Pru. I mean, like, bawled like an action star never should. There was no one there I cared about.”

“Greyson, I’m sorry none of us could make it, but we’ve been with you to almost all your red-carpet events. You were the one that wanted us to take a break from them after last time. You know, when Annabelle tripped over that lady’s dress.”

“That lady? You mean Dame Judi Dench. And I didn’t want you to take a break, you guys didn’t get invited back after tripping over that dress. That’s a red-carpet rule.”

“Okay, okay! I get it. But really, what was different this time?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because it’s always better when you’re on my arm.”

Prudence started to blush again, a slight flush rising in her cheeks. “You almost took out that poor girl ushering you trying to get off the stage.”

Greyson grimaced. “That’s one of a hundred things I’m sure will be on the gossip sites by morning.”

“I saw that attempted kiss.” Prudence managed to get out while laughing.

“It was so bad. She’s a nice enough person, but we’d just had lunch that one time—”

“I’m sorry,” Prudence interrupted. “Did I just hear you say you had lunch with Samantha Crane? And you didn’t think to tell me this, either? After not telling me you were taking her to the awards?”

Not good. They shared almost everything, and he once again had no valid excuse why he hadn’t told her about both things to do with Samantha Crane.

“I guess I assumed you saw the pictures the paparazzi took. And I haven’t had a chance to talk to you, we’ve played phone tag all week then things got so hectic the last few days except for this morning when I was so rushed. I’m not thinking about her when I’m talking to you. The time difference doesn’t

help and..." He trailed off, not knowing what else to say, knowing his excuses were flimsier than Saran Wrap over an airplane window.

"Why aren't you happier, then?" Prudence pressed, thankfully dropping the subject of Samantha Crane again. "This is what you've been working so hard for. Doing the grueling action films just waiting for the right director to notice you can actually act."

"I know, I know," Greyson muttered, standing up and pacing around the living room. "I honestly thought this would all be different and yet, after winning an award, I feel like a supreme tool that I don't." He stopped. "Nadia wants us to do a movie together. A comedy," he said, giving her the simplest explanation for them being at the awards show together.

"That's good, though, right?"

"I suppose. I should be excited about it. I should be excited about all of it."

"You're burned out, Grey. Take a break and come home. You can relax here and plan your next move from outside the fishbowl. Annabelle would love to see you, and Gabe's been fixing up your parents' home," Prudence said. "Pretty nicely if I might say, thanks to me, of course. My eye for design is pretty good. Gabe's talent for woodwork has come a long way, too."

"He's always been the handy one, but please...tell me he didn't use shiplap," Greyson pleaded as he walked up the stairs to his bedroom.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. "He may have used shiplap."

Greyson groaned. "None of those sliding barn doors?"

"There might be, like, one..." Prudence said, her voice rising at the end of the sentence, "...or two...?"

"There had better not be any—"

"There's all of it, Greyson! Everything you've seen on HGTV he's done," Prudence interrupted. "He's obsessed with that channel. It's the only thing he allows on in Finnegan's during the day. It drives everyone nuts."

"I need to come home just to put an end to this remodel. It's a colonial house, dammit, not a barn!" he exclaimed, settling on his bed. "And you, the most sought-after interior designer in Massachusetts, allows my brother to only use reclaimed barn material? Where's your vision?"

"People like what they like, Grey, and if they like shiplap, they like shiplap. You literally can't talk them out of it. Haven't you seen *Fixer Upper*? Just ask Chip. Joanna gets her shiplap. No. Matter. What."

Greyson became unfocused for a moment, staring at the phone screen.

Prudence had pulled her mane of hair back into a ponytail—something he'd seen her do a hundred times before, but now it was different. She smiled and it hit him. As if there could've been any other option. He needed Prudence. He needed her more than a friend, more than a phone and text buddy.

It was no longer good enough to lie in bed wishing she was there with him, or to go to an awards show or red carpet and compare every other woman there to her. Everything was as clear as his path he'd walked to the awards show stage that night. He wanted to see her smile, to smile at *him*, every day for the rest of his life. He snapped out of his moment of clarity when his call waiting beeped.

"That's Annabelle." Greyson shook his head to clear it. "I'd better answer so she gets the exclusive for the Bee Online edition tomorrow in time."

"Tell her 'hi' and not to forget coffee in the morning, deadline or no."

"I will," Greyson promised.

"Hey," Prudence said quietly. "Come home."

"I will, Pru." He focused on Prudence's face, noticing how stunning she was in this moment. "Listen, about Samantha."

"Grey, don't worry about it. It was just the tequila talking."

He took a long moment and studied her face. He knew her better than this, though. She was hurt, and he could tell, but he'd find a way to make it up to her, and there was no better way than going home.

Chapter Six

Annabelle slid into the seat across from Prudence at Books and Beans, pulling out her laptop. “How can The Moms low-key drink like they’re in their early twenties? I feel like death warmed over.”

“It was *your* idea to take a shot every time the camera panned to Wyatt Reed,” Prudence reminded her as she slid a cup of coffee in front of Annabelle, who was already typing away. “Hey! Did you get your interview with Greyson in on time?”

“Of course,” Annabelle said, fingers clicking on her computer keys. “I never miss a deadline.” She looked up, still typing. “And for the record, he did remind me of our coffee date this morning. He said he was on the phone with you when I called. It wasn’t my best interview but shockingly I was coherent enough to get through it.”

“I can always count on him to keep you on track.” She sat for a moment while Annabelle typed. “I can’t get over how terrible he sounded.” She chipped the nail polish off one of her fingers and thought about how much of their conversation to tell Annabelle. She knew that whatever was said would stay between them, especially when it came to Greyson. She broke out of her thoughts when she noticed the clicks had stopped on Annabelle’s keyboard and glanced up to see her level gaze, knowing there was something else to be said.

“I think he’s going to come home for a visit,” Prudence confided in Annabelle. “He doesn’t sound happy, even with all the praise he’s been getting. I think he’s burned out.” She noticed she’d chipped the remainder of the polish off her nail while she’d been thinking.

“He didn’t mention that, but it’s great to hear.” Annabelle’s face lit up, obviously trying to keep the mood light even though she could tell her friend was worried. “Did he say when?”

Prudence shook her head. “You called just as we were starting to talk about it.” She paused as Devlin walked over.

“Here you go ladies. Something to soak up any last remnants of alcohol.”

Devlin set two muffins on the table. “Let me know if you need anything else. I’ve got some scones to start for tomorrow’s breakfast menu.”

“Thank you!” Prudence and Annabelle said in unison.

Prudence took a sip of her coffee, closing her eyes and making a sound of delight. “This is one of the best cups of coffee I’ve ever had.”

Annabelle grimaced while sipping her black house blend. “I don’t know how you can drink that stuff. Black is the only way to go. Once you start adding in—”

Prudence cut her off with a wave of her hand. “I know, I know. You don’t get the full aroma from the beans, blah blah blah. If it were up to you, creamer would be a crime.”

“Well, us true coffee aficionados—”

“Snobs.” Prudence coughed the word loudly under her breath.

“Hey! I heard that.” Annabelle held her hand to her chest, feigning indignation.

“You were supposed to, my dear.”

Annabelle swatted Prudence across the table, letting out a bubble of laughter. “Back to Mr. Atwood. Did he really seem like he wanted to come home? It’s been ages since he’s been back.”

“I do think he was serious this time. He has a while before the Passel nominations are announced and no other projects in the works. Well, he did mention a script he needs to read, but I can’t imagine that would go into production before the Passel’s, if he’s nominated. I really can’t think of a better time for him to visit.” Prudence picked up her muffin and peeled off the paper wrapper.

“It would be the perfect time. With the Fall Festival coming up, he’d have no shortage of things to do. I’ve got plenty of projects for him.”

“Are you working on the parade float for the Bee again this year?”

“No, I thought I’d focus more on the hay bale maze. Really try to make it something special.” Annabelle reached over and pulled a piece from Prudence’s muffin. “I like the pistachio. I never think to order one.”

“That’s a great idea. The maze always seems to be forgotten. Throw a few bales together and hope a path leads to the exit.”

“I have a lot of ideas for it this year. Get people to stay out in the country for a while. Other than my usual newspaper duties it’s pretty much just that. Oh! By the way, Devlin agreed to do a hot apple cider stand. Are you working on anything in particular?”

“Chuck asked me to help with the car dealership’s float.” Prudence tried to hide the reluctance from her face. She obviously failed.

“Woah. That sure isn’t an ‘I’m happy to help my boyfriend’ look.”

Prudence blew out a breath and moved her coffee mug around on the table. “I mean, I’m happy to help, but Chuck doesn’t ever really seem to have a vision, and his dad has nothing *but* vision, so being the go-between can get exhausting.” She took another sip of her coffee, trying to come up with the right words to explain how she saw things between father and son. “Charles Senior is such a force of nature that anyone in his path seems to get bowled over. That’s not a bad thing, by any means. He usually ends up getting the best out of people because they want to try so hard when they’re around him. But”—she hesitated—“when you’re his son and have grown up in the shadow of this great man, it can get a little overwhelming, I think.”

Annabelle stole another piece of the pistachio muffin, popping it in her mouth. “How long have you and Chuck been going out now, a few months?” she asked, clearly trying to be casual.

Ah, there it is. She’d been wondering when Annabelle would bring this up again. “Almost a year, believe it or not.” Prudence swatted Annabelle’s hand as she tried to grab another piece of her muffin, then pushed the whole thing over. *It’s not like I need any more carbs.* Her jeans were getting a little tight as it was.

“I hadn’t realized it was that long. I guess you’ve seen a lot of interactions between the two of them to know a bit about their relationship.” Annabelle finished the rest of her coffee. “And speaking of relationships, what does Greyson think about your romance with Chuck?”

Prudence started studying the painting behind Annabelle’s head.

“Pru?”

It was a very unusual painting.

“Prudence.”

The way the artist gets the light to reflect off the—

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me, Prudence Marie Hardwick!” Annabelle exclaimed. She shook her head, her jaw dropping. “This is not possible!”

Prudence could feel sweat start to form on her face, sure that she’d turned a most unappealing shade of red. “Well—”

“There’s no ‘well’ about this Pru. You talk to Greyson *all of the time* and you’ve never thought to mention to him, ‘gee, maybe I should tell you I’m

dating our mutual friend, Chuck’?”

“But—”

“There are no ‘buts’ either. We’re talking about him coming home—at your insistence, mind you—and then, what? Blindsiding him? Making out with Chuck in front of him so he sees it, and you don’t actually have to tell him?”

“Okay!” Prudence exclaimed, holding her hand up then pressing her fingers to her temple. “I get it, but we don’t tell each other *everything*. He didn’t tell me about Samantha Crane.” She reached over with her other hand and snatched the rest of the muffin back from Annabelle. *Carbs be damned.*

Annabelle sat in silence, watching Prudence, clearly waiting for the real explanation.

“It never seemed like the right time.” Prudence finally broke the silence, picking up the wrapper, shredding it as she spoke. “I wasn’t trying to hide anything from him—” Annabelle opened her mouth to interrupt, but Prudence cut her off. “I wasn’t! Greyson and I are just friends. Yeah, we do share a lot, and I really did mean to tell him, but I was never sure where Chuck and I were going.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Sometimes I’m as surprised as you are that Chuck and I have been dating for almost a year.”

“When are you going to tell him.” Annabelle did *not* form this as a question.

“I don’t even know if he’s coming home, yet. It was a quick conversation late last night, it’s not like he’s already booked a flight.”

Annabelle reached for her phone, now vibrating and shimmying across the surface of the table. “Speak of the devil, that’s him texting me.” She slid her phone so Prudence could also see the screen as she typed.

Hey, Lois Lane, saw the article in the Bee Online, it’s great!

The hell are you doing up so early?

These abs don’t define themselves.

Prudence tapped her fingers on the table in an agitated staccato while Annabelle was typing. Annabelle had pulled the phone back and she could no longer see the screen. “What’s he saying? Ask him when he’ll be here.” She stopped tapping and held out her hand. “No, wait! Don’t ask him anything.”

Annabelle ignored Prudence and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like ‘abs, my ass’ and continued typing.

Now annoyed and tapping on the table again, Prudence tried for nonchalance. “What are you guys talking about?”

“Should I switch this over to our group thread?” Annabelle asked.

“No!” Prudence responded not wanting to look too eager for details.

“I’m going to ask him if he’s coming home.”

Prudence was silent for a moment as she started to chew on the nail she’d stripped of its polish earlier. “Okay. Besides, if you tell him to come home, too, he’ll have a harder time saying ‘no’.”

“Good point.” Annabelle nodded as she resumed typing.

“He’s already booked a ticket.” Annabelle paused as Prudence let out a surprised exclamation. “He’ll call you later with the specifics. You must’ve really gotten through to him last night, Pru,” she said, laying her phone on the table. “You *have* to tell him. There’ll be no avoiding Chuck when he’s here, and he needs to know sooner rather than later. And by the way, did he say *anything* about why he didn’t tell you about Samantha Crane?”

“It was so weird. He had nothing to say about it other than he was busy and was always thinking about something else when we spoke.”

“That sounds suspiciously like the excuse you just gave me for not telling him about Chuck.”

“Oh crap.” Prudence exhaled, looking like a balloon that had been let go before being tied closed. “You’re right. I promise to tell him before he gets here.”

Annabelle nodded in approval then glanced at her watch. “Oh crap! Gotta go!” She sprung out of her seat, quickly gathering her papers, and shoved them into her bag. “There’s a meeting today at the Bee. Apparently, there’ll be some staffing changes, and if anyone is getting axed, I really don’t want to be late for that.”

“They wouldn’t fire their star reporter, AB,” Prudence assured her, using her nickname, helping to stack papers on the table.

“Oh, I have absolutely no reason to believe it would be me, but I’d sure hate to miss it if it’s someone else.” Annabelle smiled a bit too ghoulishly, putting the last of the papers into her bag and backing toward the door, her usual mode of exiting, tossing some cash to Devlin at the counter. “Here you go, babe, coffee was perfect. Text me later, Pru. And tell Greyson today!”

Chapter Seven

Prudence waved a hand in dismissal then turned back to the table, glancing at her phone. She knew she should call Greyson. Knew that they had to have a conversation before he came home, but she couldn't quite bring herself to pick up the phone and didn't know why. Oh...she did know why...but she didn't want to admit it to herself after all these years. She'd always had a schoolgirl crush on Greyson but then again, so had every other girl—and some boys, too. He'd been the tall, good-looking popular athlete. She, the short, chubby nerd.

She'd never tried to pursue anything with Greyson as they headed into high school. He'd constantly seemed to be dating one cheerleader or another. But he'd always made time for her, though, going to movies together, eating at the corner burger joint after school or spending Saturday nights playing board games. Annabelle and Gabe were often a part of these get-togethers, sealing their bonds of friendship.

Prudence closed her eyes as she thought of that last night before Greyson had left to go out west. Charles Senior had given him an old beater car the last time he'd visited Amber Falls on a college break and told him to go get his dreams in Hollywood. He'd landed a role for a big action movie, faster than anyone thought he would, considering he hadn't auditioned in person at all. He'd kissed her. He'd told her that he loved her. Everything her little high school heart dreamed about happening had finally come true. And she let him go. After asking her if there was a reason for him to stay, she'd said “no”. That bittersweet moment flooded her memories as if it were yesterday.

It was late by the time the first yawn reached Prudence's lips, and she found herself sitting close enough to Greyson for their shoulders to touch.

“Are you ready to go home?” he asked, leaning into her.

Prudence turned to him. “Not quite yet.”

“You know, Pru, you're my best friend.”

“You're mine too, Greyson,” she said, her eyes searching his. “What

brought this on?” she questioned, knowing he wasn’t one to wear his emotions on his sleeve.

“I just needed to tell you that. We’re moving apart, and I want you to know, I’ll always be there for you,” he said, the desperation evident in his voice. “Day or night, I’ll answer your call. Every time.” He brushed a tendril of hair behind her ear. “I love you, Pru.”

Prudence’s breath caught. “Greyson, I—” Greyson put his hands gently on her cheeks and placed the softest kiss on her lips. “Oh, Grey,” she exhaled in a sigh.

Greyson dropped his hands, and Prudence’s cheeks heated as Chuck came up to them.

“You’re leaving this afternoon, right?” an oblivious Chuck asked Greyson.

“Yeah, I am. We start shooting in a week, so I’ve gotta get going, man,” Greyson answered him, his eyes finding Prudence’s in the dark, reaching his hand out to clasp hers. “Unless there is a reason to stay?” he questioned softly, so only Prudence could hear.

In that instant Prudence knew. She knew if she said “stay” he would. He’d do anything for her, that’s the way it had always been. But she knew this one chance at stardom meant everything to Greyson. This was his opportunity to truly shine. To share his light with others, to explore his passion and hone his craft. Just as she needed to go to Atlanta, he needed to go to L.A.

With a sad smile, she whispered, “No. No reason,” as she untwined their hands and let go.

She’d known at the time it was the right decision—knew now it had still been the right decision. They’d needed space from each other by then. Having been in such a constant state of separate togetherness for so long, she would have never known if her following him to Hollywood would’ve held Greyson back from his dream or if it would have led to bitterness or resentment. Possibly on both of their parts. She’d had her own dreams to pursue that were not connected to being Greyson Atwood’s partner. He’d been true to his word over the years, though, and had answered her calls, every time.

Prudence reached up and touched her lips, convinced she could still feel the soft pressure of Greyson’s, but at the same time still not believing it had ever really happened. The memory had faded into half-consciousness. A fever dream, for all she knew. In all their conversations, over all these years,

it had never been brought up again. Maybe his trip back to Amber Falls was to be the inevitable conclusion to that kiss and confession of love.

She shook her head, clearing out the cobwebs. His trip back home was nothing more than that of a man who needed a break. She was still small-town Prudence, and he was still Hollywood-movie-star Greyson. Their lives couldn't be any more different, not to mention the entire continent that separated them. And she was with Chuck. *Yes, Chuck.*

The ringtone of her phone fully broke Prudence out of the spell of past reminiscences. She glanced around the coffee shop, surprised at how long she'd been lost in thought. She spied the couple that had walked through the door earlier still drinking their brew and let out a sigh of relief that she hadn't been woolgathering for so long that Devlin had locked her in overnight. Prudence grabbed her ringing cell and contentment flowed through her at seeing Greyson's face on the screen. She took a sip of her cooling latte before swiping up to answer. "Greyson!"

"Pru! Long time, no talk."

Prudence smiled, thinking that no matter how famous Greyson was, he was still the dork who used to play eboard games with her. "It hasn't even been twelve hours, Grey."

"Yeah, well, it seemed like longer." He glanced off to the side of his phone, silently mouthing something that could have been the word 'no'. "I really thought about our conversation and decided to book a ticket to come home, Pru."

Prudence's heart lifted, even though she already knew this. "I'm so happy! This visit home is exactly what you need." Her eyes squinted as Greyson looked off to the side of his screen again, shaking his head this time. "Everything okay there? Did you call at a bad time?"

Greyson rolled his eyes as a woman came around to stand behind him. "Well, hi again, Prudence. I didn't even hear the phone ring." Nadia leaned over Greyson's shoulder. "I thought maybe you could talk some sense into him, but it appears I'm mistaken." Prudence could swear Nadia's drawl got more Southern every time she spoke with her. "So, the two of you had this planned out and there's just nothing I can do about it." She shook her head, her eyes watering. "Right in the middle of awards season, too. There's so much press he should be doing, not to mention Samantha Crane."

"Nadia, we talked about this. I'm not nominated for anything else, and I'm ready for a break." Greyson shook his head. "Sorry, Pru. I don't even know

how she gets in here.”

Nadia straightened and her eyes cleared. “I see there’s no reasoning with you.”

“It’s time to go,” Greyson said emphatically with a hint of exasperation.

“Hmm. We’ll see about that.” She pulled the script out of her purse and tossed it on his coffee table. “Take the script with you at least.” she turned and waved with a flick of her hand. “Prudence, dear, see that he gets some of that rest he claims he needs. And, Greyson—take a nap. You look terrible.”

Prudence laughed at Greyson’s expression as he followed behind Nadia and locked the door after her. “I swear, if she wasn’t the best agent in the business, I’d dump her so fast.”

“You’d be running back to her a day later and you know it.”

“Yes, I’m aware how true that is. This is the script she wants me to read that Samantha Crane is attached to, but I’m just ready to leave it all behind for a while, and I told her so. Honestly, I think she gave up a little too easily.”

“Why did you call me while she was there?”

“I pretended it was *you* calling *me*! I don’t think she would’ve left otherwise.” He returned to his seat and plopped down. “It felt so good to book that plane ticket. It only took me about one minute of thinking after I talked with you last night to decide.” He reached over to an end table and brought a bottle of water to his lips, taking a drink. “I suppose you knew that since you were with Annabelle earlier.”

“I did know, but it makes me happy to hear it directly from you.”

“No take backs, huh?”

“Absolutely no take backs. I can’t wait to see you in person, Grey. I’m glad we can talk over the phone, but I just can’t wait.” Prudence leaned closer to the phone. “Just so you know, Annabelle has a list of things for you to do for the Fall Festival. And by list, I mean she has a full itinerary.”

“Oh, man! There go my hopes of getting any rest.” His eyes took on a playful look. “Maybe you’ll have to kidnap me so we can get some time to hang out.”

Prudence started to get warm, her mind going to something more intimate than board games, her thoughts from earlier and the memory of their kiss rushing back. She reached for her drink, taking a gulp of her now ice-cold coffee.

“You okay, Pru?” Greyson asked, sounding concerned. “You’re looking a little warm.”

“I’m good. The coffee combined with a sweater and a hot coffee shop seems to have made me overheat.” She fanned herself trying to cool down, needing a change of subject, still disconcerted that memories from so long ago, memories she hadn’t thought of in a very long time, could affect her like this. “Annabelle said you were coming tomorrow?”

“Yep, there’s no reason to wait. You already saw Nadia, she’s desperate to keep me here. She’d have me doing press every day up until the Passel nominations are announced and then twice daily after that. I swear, if I didn’t know better, I’d think she had a spare key made for my house.”

“‘*Single White Agent*’. Now that would be a movie I’d see.”

“Exactly! If I don’t get out now, she’ll book me solid and I might never get to leave.”

“What time tomorrow? My day is free by noon after my client meetings, I’ll pick you up at the airport.”

“I’ve got it taken care of. I’ll call you when I’m in, and we’ll meet at Finnegan’s.” Greyson startled in his chair and glanced sharply over his shoulder at his front door. He sat back, relaxing again. “Just the mailman.”

“Man, you do need to get out of there. You know you’ve spent too much time in Hollywood when you see agents lurking in every dark corner.”

Greyson laughed. “You have no clue how true that is, Pru. No clue.” He stood and walked into his kitchen, throwing his water bottle into a blue recycling bin under the sink. “I’ve got a few loose ends to finish up here, then I’ll be free as a bird for whatever Amber Falls can throw at me.”

“I can’t believe you’ll be here tomorrow!”

“You’d better believe it, Pru. Bye.”

Prudence sighed in relief and stretched—she’d been sitting for too long and sweated more than she had in quite a while. She needed to go home and shower but still had items strewn on the floor, a reminder of the work she needed to finish and errands she had yet to run. *A shower would have to wait.* She bent to pick up her briefcase, her head almost hitting the table as she bolted upright. She’d forgotten to tell Greyson about Chuck. *Daaaaaamit.*

She supposed it wasn’t her fault she never thought of Chuck when talking to Greyson, but she didn’t want him walking into an uncomfortable situation when he got home, not knowing and being blindsided. Although blindsided didn’t seem like the right word. Her and Greyson were not, nor had they ever been, a couple. She didn’t owe him any explanation other than a friend-to-friend conversation about the current state of her love life. *Romantic life.*

No...dating life. She'd give him a quick run-down when she saw him tomorrow, short and sweet. She'd remember to do it then. Surely, she would.

Chapter Eight

As far as airports went, LAX was amazing. Every time Greyson flew into California the brightly colored obelisks and the LAX letters, reminiscent of the infamous Hollywood sign, welcomed him, beckoning him back to the land of milk and honey. It was always warm when he came back, even in the winter when celebrities would wear big puffer jackets at the chilly temperature of 50 degrees, trying to fool regular folks in subarctic North Dakota that they were just like them, rather than living in a paradise where you never had to scrape ice off your windshield. But Greyson had grown up in Massachusetts. Nor'easters and freezing temperatures were not unusual in the winter months, and to him 50 degrees was shorts and maybe a light jacket weather.

Flying out was an altogether different experience. The thrill of arriving at the airport ready for a new journey had never worn off for Greyson, even when it was the five a.m. red-eye he was taking today. The beginning of a trip held so many possibilities, and this one felt so much more significant. After his conversation with Prudence the night of the Verity Awards he knew it was time to go home. Home. Not the place where he'd lived for a good portion of his adulthood—he'd never really thought of California as home—but the place of his birth, where his brother still lived, where his friends were, where Prudence was—Amber Falls.

He didn't know when he'd first started connecting Prudence with home. Sure, she lived in Amber Falls, she'd grown up there just like him, but the two had somehow become synonymous over the last few years.

That's why this trip felt more meaningful to Greyson. The last week—spending time with Samantha Crane, winning the award—had forced Greyson to truly examine his feelings for Prudence. More than just wishing she was with him, more than wonderings and musings. He'd always thought of Prudence, but it had reached such a fever pitch that as of late he could no longer deny what he needed to do. He'd made up his mind the night he won the Verity Award and booked a ticket that night to go home. He wasn't just

going home—he was going to Prudence, and he had a plan. It wasn't fully formed, and he didn't know how he was going to execute it, but he'd envisioned the result enough times to know exactly how it was going to end... Okay, maybe it wasn't a plan, but that didn't change his mission for this trip. He was going to make Prudence his. A smile crossed his face as he stepped out of the Uber and grabbed his luggage. Yes, he was ready to go home.

Greyson pulled his Red Sox baseball cap a little lower on his head, a habit when he was out in public, to avoid being noticed. He wasn't so vain to assume he was the most popular actor out there, but just enough people recognized him to give his ego that little boost all actors internally craved. He hiked his carry-on higher up on his shoulder and turned his head slightly away as he passed a group of bored looking teenage girls. Sure enough, one squeal was all it took. He stopped and obligingly took a picture with the group before heading to stand in line at the TSA PreCheck. He never minded waiting, it's not as if his life were so much more important than those around him. *Probably less so.*

Greyson reached the front of the line and greeted Paul, the TSA agent he most regularly got. Paul, with his slicked back hair and crooked grin, was the kind of guy you didn't want to know what he did in his free time. Smarmy was the best word to describe him, his record obviously clean enough to get a government job, but just barely.

“Hi, Mr. Atwood, leaving again so soon?” Paul asked, sucking at something invisible stuck in his teeth.

“Yep, this time for a vacation.”

“It seems like you've earned it. I heard you won that award.” Paul handed him back his boarding pass.

“I did. It was pretty cool. Thanks, man.” Greyson tried to move past him but was stopped when Paul stuck his arm out.

“Hey”—Paul blocked his path—“can I get a quick autograph?” He pulled out a picture of Greyson from a manilla envelope that had been stashed in his podium. Greyson quirked an eyebrow, surprised he had the picture waiting there, but took the proffered pen and signed. “Thanks, this will get big bucks on eBay now that you're an award winner.” Paul shook Greyson's hand then quickly stuffed the picture back into the envelope and turned back, effectively dismissing him.

Greyson rolled his eyes and took out his pocket sanitizer, squirting his

hands as he walked away.

Greyson turned the corner from the checkpoint and started his trek to terminal five. He wanted to grab some gifts along the way and knew there wasn't anything quite like airport gifts. They were just the right amount of thoughtfulness and forgetfulness, the recipient almost guaranteed to not ask where you got the item, but knowing it had to come from the airport, picked up in a mad dash on your way in or out.

He spotted the familiar logo of *I Love L.A.* and cut across the corridor, heading straight to the small book section in the back. He scanned the titles, muttering under his breath, "Murder...romance. Ah, murder romance." He reached out and grabbed one he hadn't read off the shelf. He loved cozy mystery novels—one thing no one knew about him. Fixer-upper murders, flower shop murders, bakery murders, you name it, he'd read it. There was just something about finding romance in the middle of an active murder investigation that intrigued him. A grizzly homicide, but somehow explained with humor and next to no gore. He'd thought more than once that he'd jump at the chance to do a Hallmark movie based on any one of the novels he'd read. He swiped an *I Heart L.A.* shirt as he walked toward the register. He'd given Annabelle the exact same shirt every time he came home, a long running joke that had started with him forgetting he'd already gotten her one. Now, she expected it. He decided to throw in a thermometer fridge magnet, just to keep her guessing.

Greyson glanced at his watch and decided he had time to run to the Duty-Free Store to grab something for Prudence and Gabe, not seeing anything in here he wanted to get them. After a quick dash he strode into the store. Prudence was easy to shop for, it never mattered what he got her, she loved it all and was genuinely surprised he ever got her anything. He picked out a watch remembering her words from last night that she needed a new one. He eyed a bottle of Glenfiddich, deciding that it would be the perfect gift for Gabe.

After getting to his gate, miraculously there had been no gate change—so far—he settled into his favorite airport activity. People watching. He wasn't sure why, maybe being an actor and having to get into the character's headspace for every role made him good at imagining what was going through other people's minds. He spotted the harried mom, trying to corral multiple kids and their carry-ons while—and this was no fail—the dad stood clueless, zoning out, not noticing the pleading looks his wife was sending

him. There was the solo hippie, most often a guy, who hadn't showered in weeks or had two nickels to rub together. Then there were the groups—the sports teams headed to the next tournament, the bands trying to make it big and the church kids on their way to a mission or volunteering.

Greyson had some time to kill and pulled out his phone to call Prudence, knowing she'd be up but not working yet. She answered on the first ring. "Hey, Grey, what are your airport musings for me today?"

It had become a tradition for Greyson to ring her any time he had a long layover following an incident years ago when he'd called her after witnessing an actual arrest in the airport. He immediately felt any troubles in his mind fade away when he saw her smile on his screen. "The TSA guy asked me for my autograph."

"I never took you for the guy that carried around his own head shots for autographs."

"Seriously, Pru. He already had it there and he said he'd be able to make some money on eBay now that I was an award winner."

Prudence's hand went to her mouth as she tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle a laugh. "Oh, he did not!"

"I swear he did. I don't know how long he had that picture with him, but it's the same guy I see whenever I fly out."

"Now that's a classic LAX story if I've ever heard one. What book did you get for your flight?"

"How do you know I got a book? Maybe I have a big important script to read."

"Oh please, I know you get a book every time. Let me guess. A cozy murder mystery. Romance, I think." Greyson's eyes widened. "I knew it!"

"Sometimes I swear you can read my mind, Pru." He brought the screen closer to his face. "Don't you dare tell anyone. It will completely shatter my image as a big macho action star."

"Nothing could possibly shatter that image. In fact, the ladies would love you even more if they knew."

Greyson laughed at the truth of this. He flipped his camera so Prudence could see the people walking through the airport. "Lots of people here this early. They opened a new terminal so I'm seeing a lot of extra flight crew, too." They sat in silence for a moment. "You know, I think that's one thing I like to watch for. The flight attendants and the pilots. Walking around like they own the place." He paused. "I guess they probably do. Marching in their

polished loafers and four-inch heels, they always walk the same, whether they're in a hurry or not, parting the sea of travelers without having to utter a word."

"Wow, Grey, what's gotten you so poetic this morning?"

His response was interrupted by a tall, blonde flight attendant walking to their gate door. She stopped next to his seat, bending over to adjust the strap on her heel, leaning close to him. "Ever joined the mile high club?"

He could hear Prudence's muffled laughter on his phone. "Oh my God, Grey," and the beep as she hung up. The smiling flight attendant was oblivious to being overheard and winked as she walked away. *This is going to be an interesting flight.*

Greyson settled into his first-class seat and called Prudence again.

"Ever join the mile high club?" she asked in a husky low tone, trying to mimic the flight attendant. His groin tightened in awareness, immediately imagining every single thing he would do to Prudence on a plane if he had a chance.

"Very funny, Pru. Would you believe it if I said that's the first time I've ever been propositioned by a flight attendant?"

"Not for a second. So, back to your book. Which one did you get?"

"I was serious when I said I had a script to read. The one with Samantha Crane." He set his phone on his lap as he bent over to his carry-on to grab the script Nadia had tossed on his table the prior day. "Damn, where are you?" he muttered to himself before remembering he'd left it at home on that very same table. "I guess I forgot it." He raised his voice, so Prudence could hear while he was still bent over. He glanced toward the aisle and noticed the familiar pair of heels the flight attendant from earlier was wearing. She leaned over, and he tried not to stare at the cleavage straining to get out of her button-down shirt. It was right there at eye level, though, directly over the phone and Prudence's face.

"Greyson Atwood, we meet again," the perky blonde said.

"I don't think we had a choice, did we?"

Perky shuddered and straightened back up. "I could've been in coach, but I bribed Amy to switch places." She nodded to a passenger passing through. "First class is light today. I should get a break later. You never answered my question about the mile high club, honey."

Greyson laughed. "I was curious about that name. A mile up and the flight has barely left the ground. What happens when we get to cruising altitude?"

She bent again and whispered in his ear. “Exactly.” Her eyes flicked to the phone on his lap then she walked away.

“Now those were some boobs,” Prudence remarked when he picked his phone back up. “The same one from earlier?”

“Yep, the same one.”

“So, you left your script at home and you...don’t have a cozy mystery novel to read. How *ever* are you going to pass your time on the flight, Grey?” Prudence joked.

He rolled his eyes. “Dodging the flight attendant at every turn, I can guarantee you that.” He looked up at the sound of the airplane door closing. “Time to go. I’ll see you before you know it, Prudence.”

“Bye, honey,” Prudence jested and ended the call.

* * * *

Greyson exited the flight at a jog, his face red, grateful to be the first to get off the plane. It had been five long hours of sexual airplane puns and flight innuendo. He’d heard enough about cockpits and thrusters to last a lifetime. It had gone from amusing to awkward pretty quickly, and he’d ended up having to emphatically tell the flight attendant he was in no way interested. He had a cozy mystery novel, after all, and this was the only time he ever seemed to get uninterrupted periods of time to read.

He slowed down at the baggage claim, having déjà vu when he heard the familiar announcement to check your tags, remembering a scene from the *Another Day to Die*, prequel to *The Day You Didn’t Want to Die*, where he’d had ninety minutes to find a bomb in the luggage before it blew up the airport. That movie had led to direct comparisons to Wyatt Reed, having a similar plot to the movie that made Wyatt a household name, *Velocity*.

“I’m nothing like Wyatt Reed,” he grumbled.

“Hey, it’s Wyatt!”

Greyson stiffened as he heard the voice behind him. He stared straight ahead, ignoring him, and hoping the guy—one of the unwashed hippy types—would get the hint.

“Hey, Wyatt!” the voice called again.

Greyson rolled his eyes before he turned around. They didn’t look alike, he was twenty years younger than Wyatt and he couldn’t understand why they were constantly being compared. Sure, they were both badass action stars that

had movies revolving around a similar plot...but that's it. And Bradford. He supposed they had him in common, but that was a complete coincidence.

"Not Wyatt, dude," Greyson said, and turned back to scan for his luggage.

"Oh, man, I'm so sorry. Almost created a mob thinking you were Wyatt Reed. It's not him, everyone!" the hippy shouted to no one in particular as he walked away.

Greyson ducked his chin closer to his chest and counted the time until he'd be back in Amber Falls, but he still had a puddle jumper to catch from Logan to North Hampton Airfield and that wouldn't take off for a few hours. His phone rang, and the charter company's number showed on the caller ID. *Speak of the devil.* "This is Greyson Atwood," he answered.

"Hello, Mr. Atwood, this is Mark from East Coast Charters. I know your plane isn't scheduled to take off for two hours, but the flight crew is ready, and I was wondering if you'd be available to leave shortly?"

"Your timing is perfect. I just landed a few minutes ago and I'm at baggage claim. I'll get my bags and head over."

"That's great. I'll have an agent waiting to escort you onto the tarmac when you get here. Thank you, Mr. Atwood."

He hung up the phone, a smile on his face. He was going to get to surprise Prudence by showing up in Amber Falls early.

Chapter Nine

Greyson's charter flight from Logan was thankfully uneventful. The crew was both professional and ready to go as soon as he'd gotten on the plane, and he'd been able to get to Amber Falls hours ahead of schedule. He'd already been to his childhood home, the house Gabe was currently living in and fixing up, and was now at Gabe's bar downtown, Finnegan's. Greyson stopped outside the window, surprised to see Prudence already inside sitting at the bar. *Same old Pru*. Fire-engine-red hair that never seemed to stay in place. Not slight by any means, she filled out a pair of jeans nicely. His breath hitched in his chest.

Although he'd made up his mind that Prudence was the one for him, he was still surprised by the ferocity of his emotions. He hadn't seen her in person for so long but he believed that even if his mind hadn't been made up to make Prudence his, he truly knew seeing her face to face would've left the outcome indisputable. He shook his head and walked to the door, pulling it open and hearing the familiar sounds of the bar.

Prudence turned at the sound and jumped up from her stool when she saw who it was. "Greyson!" she exclaimed, and ran over to greet him, throwing her arms around his neck and squeezing, almost knocking the gift bag in his hands onto the floor. "You were supposed to call!"

Greyson wrapped his free arm around her waist. "It's good to see you too," he joked, slightly lifting her off the floor then setting her back down and releasing his hold.

"Bro!" Gabe came around the bar. He reached his hand out for a shake then pulled Greyson into a hug, clapping him on the back. Gabe stood just a hair shorter than Greyson, his hair light to Greyson's dark. They both had the same strong jaw, however.

"My flight ended up being early," Greyson explained. "I dropped my bags at the house then walked over. I noticed Mrs. Crenshaw is still on patrol. She watched me from across the street the whole time. Come to think of it, she didn't seem surprised to see me here."

“You should be happy she didn’t call the police,” Gabe stated. “Pru dropped off tile samples late one night last summer while I was working, and Old Crenny called the cops reporting a prowler.”

Greyson laughed. “I remember hearing about that. To be fair, anything after six p.m. is considered to be the middle of the night to Old Lady Crenshaw.”

Prudence swatted him on the shoulder. “That’s not funny! You try explaining to the cops that you’re just dropping off tile samples at eleven p.m., to an empty house. The fact that I’d opened the door with a key was the only reason I wasn’t arrested.”

Greyson gestured to a table. “Let’s sit, I’m ready for a drink.” He led Prudence away while Gabe went behind the bar.

“Whiskey?” Gabe asked.

Greyson nodded his approval. “You know it.”

Prudence shuddered. “No thanks. I’d like to get through the rest of this day without falling on my face,” she said. “I’ll take another Coke, please and thank you.”

“After a red-eye flight I think I deserve it.” As Greyson pulled out the chair for Prudence, he noted that her hair was even more disheveled than it usually was. He reached over and gently pulled on a stray lock, liking the way the strand ran through his fingers. “Hey, what happened here?” he questioned.

Prudence’s reply was cut short as Annabelle came flying through the door, a cold wind swirling through the bar after her. She hurried over and slammed a newspaper onto the table. “You’ll never believe who bought the Amber Falls Bee,” she seethed, continuing before anyone could guess. “Locke Communications.”

Prudence took the paper and glanced at the article. “No shit?”

“Yes shit,” Annabelle said, pulling out a chair next to Greyson and giving him a short hug before sitting. “I’m glad you’re finally home, Grey.”

“Thanks, Annabelle.”

Gabe walked over with the drinks. “Hey, Annabelle. What’s the matter? You look pissed.”

“I am.” She grabbed Greyson’s whiskey from Gabe and downed it in one gulp while Greyson held up his hands to protest. Gabe took that as his cue to immediately go get another. She sat back in her chair, still breathing heavily from her oh-so-Annabelle entrance. Greyson and Prudence exchanged glances, knowing that once Annabelle got on a tangent, there was no stopping

her. Incidentally, that's what also made her such a good newspaper reporter.

Annabelle stabbed a finger to the newspaper on the table. "Locke Communications," she ground out. "Not only did they buy the Bee, but they canned Matt Smith and are sending in their own editor."

"Could that be a good thing?" Prudence asked. "Isn't the Bee in trouble financially?"

Annabelle shot Prudence a withering glance, as though she'd sprouted a second head. "Or am I missing something..." She glanced at Greyson to see if he looked enlightened. He did not.

"They. Are. Sending"—Annabelle stood and planted her hands on the table—"that bastard, Sebastian Locke." Staring at them as though understanding should dawn at any moment.

"That bastard," Prudence said with understanding.

"Oh, he sounds like a bastard." Gabe returned with another whiskey, setting it in front of Greyson.

"Did they fire Matt because of the harassment rumors you were telling me about?" Prudence questioned.

"That is completely beside the point." Annabelle sat and crossed her arms. "The point is that Sebastian Locke has never run a newspaper. In fact, this is the first one the company has ever purchased."

Gabe picked up the paper and started reading it. "It says here that everything Sebastian Locke touches turns to gold. What's the issue?"

Prudence and Annabelle stated in unison, "Atlanta."

Annabelle shook her head. "I don't know," she conceded, picking up the second whiskey Gabe had deposited in front of Greyson and took a sip.

"Could it be because he's a bastard?" Greyson offered helpfully with a wry smile, trying to defuse Annabelle's anger, ignoring his second stolen whiskey.

She laughed. "This is why we keep you around, 007."

"While you're all here, I brought some gifts." Greyson changed the subject and set the bag he'd brought in on the table.

"Oh Grey, I love it," Prudence said after Greyson handed her the watch, putting it on. "You remembered."

"I remember everything you tell me, Pru. And for you." He handed the T-shirt to Annabelle. "It's tradition. Plus, a little something."

Annabelle took the shirt and magnet. "Thanks! It's been so long since you've been home that my last shirt has finally worn out." She held up the

L.A. thermometer fridge magnet. “And this? Is it so I’ll always remember how cold Amber Falls is compared to Los Angeles?” She arced her arm through the air toward the front windows, where the fall wind was howling, and leaves were flying through the air. “Like I need a reminder.”

“Hey, that shining sun on the magnet will remind you the next time you get three feet of snow that you actively choose to stay here.” He handed Gabe the bottle of Glenfiddich Select Cask. “And this is for you.”

“This is definitely going into my private collection. Thanks, bro.”

“And I’m staying with you, so really, this gift is for me, too.”

Gabe held the bottle closer to him. “When I said private collection, I meant *private* collection, Greyson.”

“I see how it is,” Annabelle said, “withholding the good stuff.”

“Never for you, AB, you can always have my good stuff,” Gabe promised her with a wink.

“I can always count on you, Gabe.” Annabelle chuckled and stood. “I gotta go. Greyson, I’m going to go light on you and not fill every day with Fall Festival tasks, but I’m going to email an itinerary just the same.” She shot a questioning glance at Prudence, who gave her a small shake of her head. “Oh, Pru.” Disappointment showed in her eyes, knowing now Prudence still hadn’t told Greyson about Chuck. “Sorry I can’t stay. Good luck.”

Greyson looked back and forth. “Good luck with what?” he asked as Prudence’s eyes took on the wide-eyed stare of a panicked deer.

The door opened before Annabelle could reach it. “Hi, Chuck. Bye, Chuck.” Annabelle threw another sorry glance at Prudence over her shoulder.

Chuck entered the bar, holding the door for Annabelle as she breezed through it. “Hi, Annabelle. Bye, Annabelle,” he said, shaking his head and walking to the table Greyson and Prudence sat at. “She’s a whirling dervish, that one is. Hey! Greyson, nice to see you back in town. How’s it going, Gabe?” He dropped a kiss on Prudence’s head, sitting and throwing his arm across her shoulders.

Greyson’s head bobbed back and forth between Prudence and Chuck. His eyebrows drew together, and his stomach did a somersault that left him nauseous. He swallowed hard as the reality of what he was seeing hit him although he didn’t want to believe it. “You two?”

Chuck’s brow furrowed. “You didn’t know? We’ve been dating for like six months.”

Prudence turned to Chuck, obviously perplexed. “It’s been almost a year,

Chuck.”

“Really? Well, what do you know. It’s been almost a year, Greyson.”

Gabe started slowly walking backward, still cradling his bottle of whiskey.

“I’m just gonna...go...customers.”

Greyson looked around. “There’s no one else here, Gabe.”

“Um, I think I smell something burning...” Gabe ducked behind the bar.

“Still no one here, Gabe,” Greyson yelled after him, turning back to the table while shaking his head.

Prudence shifted in her seat, shrugging off Chuck’s arm in the process. “I really have been meaning to tell you, Grey.”

They lapsed into silence. The only sound in the bar now was Chip Gaines’ voice on the TV.

“So...” Chuck started, breaking into the awkward silence that ensued. “We’re shooting a commercial at the car lot tomorrow, Greyson. I know my dad would love to see you. Why don’t you come down? This little lady will be there too.” He reached over to tweak Prudence’s nose.

Prudence swatted Chuck’s hand away with a frown. “Yeah, Greyson, that would be fun. I have an early client meeting and can stop by and get you after?”

“As of now there’s nothing on my itinerary. Sure, I’ll come by.”

“That’s great!” Prudence said too brightly as another round of silence filled the room.

“How are your parents doing, Pru?” Greyson asked.

“They’re good. Not much is new since the last time we talked. Mom is going crazy with Dad at home all the time since he retired. You should stop by one day while you’re here, they keep telling me how much they want to see you.”

Greyson nodded, silence surrounding them again.

“Well...I have a full afternoon. I’m gonna head out.”

“I thought your afternoon was free, Pru?” Greyson pointed out.

“Oh, you know how it is as a business owner, the work never stops.” Prudence stood. “I’ll swing by in the morning, okay?”

“I’ll come with you, babe.” Chuck led her to the door, calling over his shoulder to the brothers as they left. “See you guys later.”

After the door closed, Greyson sat unmoving, stunned. This was certainly not how he envisioned his homecoming with Prudence. Her leaving on the arm of another guy? Another guy she had been dating for a year and had

failed to mention to him? *Fucking Chuck*? He stood and swung around to see Gabe pretending not to watch him from behind the bar. “What in the ever-living fuck was that?”

“That was Prudence leaving with Chuck. Are you telling me you really didn’t know?”

“I had no clue. She never said anything. And she’s never made an excuse to not hang out with me. I just got here.”

“Chuck didn’t seem to care that she’s never told you about him. They’ve been dating a while.”

“Yeah, I gathered that. Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?”

“What are we, a couple of gossiping teenagers? I thought you knew!”

“Obviously not.” Greyson sat at the bar, shoulders hunching. “Well, fuck.”

“I didn’t think it mattered to you, Grey,” Gabe said seriously. “I would’ve brought it up if I did.”

Greyson ran his hands through his hair. “I know you would have.”

“But you and Pru have never...” Gabe trailed off—the question implied.

“No, we haven’t.”

“Huh.”

They didn’t say anything for a few moments until Gabe sighed and brought out two tumblers from under the counter. “Fine. You can have some of my private collection.” He grabbed the bottle of Glenfiddich. “I’ll make an exception this one time.”

Chapter Ten

Greyson woke the next morning with a slight hangover and Prudence on his mind. While a hard cock in the morning was not unusual, he was still getting used to the fact that Prudence was the reason for it. As he lay there, he let his mind wander, thinking of when his feelings for Prudence had changed—if they'd changed at all. He might have met Prudence in kindergarten but he'd first noticed...stirrings for her in junior high, but it had been easier, then, to tuck them away. Partly because, well, it was *junior high*.

It did become slightly harder in high school, though. He may not have given into locker-room talk when his lacrosse teammates wanted to know if they were together, but he also hadn't discouraged it because Prudence had had no clue how hot she was, and he didn't want any of those guys dating her. They were constant companions, and even as their friends were pairing off, they stayed platonic. Having a high-school relationship was difficult because any girl he dated became jealous of Prudence, no matter his insistence that they were just good friends.

It didn't help that Prudence had had more curves than most girls in their class, and the cheerleaders he usually dated never understood why they were friends, as if that had ever mattered to him. He'd had one girlfriend insist that because of Prudence's weight, there was no way he should be seen with her—that it would damage his reputation. He was honestly dumbfounded anytime someone mentioned Prudence's weight. He only ever saw Prudence, but he only understood now that those comments were made out of jealousy. His feelings of protectiveness and almost possessiveness had started then. These had only grown in college.

She'd lost some of her plumpness the last year of high school and left for college a voluptuous bombshell, although she still didn't see herself that way. He'd always known she was a beautiful person inside and out, but he couldn't figure out why she couldn't see it. You would never meet anyone as kind and generous as she was. And that smile, fuck, that smile was his kryptonite. He was relieved in the first year of college that she'd started to

become more self-confident. Getting out of their small town she'd seen that there was a whole world that was less judgmental than small-town mean girls. But, with that confidence, he'd had to watch her start to go on...dates. The dude-bros, the scholarly types, the film majors and the musicians. She dated them all, and he knew she had fun.

He threw an arm over his eyes, squeezing them shut against his headache, thinking about yesterday at Finnegan's. He'd seen her with plenty of guys, but why had she not told him about Chuck? Why was this one relationship bothering him the most? *Because I've come home to proclaim my love to her. Obviously.* Prudence had always been so open with him about any serious relationship, and that made him question the reason behind her being so secretive about this one. Even though he hadn't been home to Amber Falls for quite some time, they did see each other often and talked regularly. She'd had plenty of time to say something...anything. The fact that she'd been dating Chuck this long and neither Prudence, Annabelle nor Gabe had so much as mentioned it to him? That seemed highly suspect.

He sighed, moving his arm from his eyes to below his comforter, stroking himself. Yes, the stress of his career was wearing him down. Yes, he had some hard decisions to make. He hadn't told Prudence yet, but he'd been offered a position at the local university teaching drama. It wouldn't start until the summer semester, where he'd be tasked to take over their Summer Stock performance, so he had some time to get everything lined up, but he knew that being with Prudence, to talk things out with her, weighing the pros and cons, would be easier with her at his side. And although he was sure he'd made his decision, he wanted to know that she was with him in this. Now he had to convince her to take a chance on him.

He knew he had to talk to Prudence this morning and she was going to be over sometime soon. His cock gave a jump—he was going to have to take care of this first. Throwing back the covers and shedding his black boxer briefs, he walked into the bathroom, one hand still moving on his length as he twisted the water on. Thinking about how lush she looked at the bar yesterday, he stroked up...about her perfect creamy complexion, he stroked down. Greyson stepped under the spray of the shower head and relaxed his arm against the tile in front of him, not bothering to close the shower door—he needed the release so bad. Tugging harder, he thought of her perfect pouty mouth wrapped around his cock, of her tight throat and how good she'd look draped over the side of his bed, how good her pussy would taste as he—

Greyson heard his bedroom door open, thinking it was Gabe he managed to choke out, "I'll be out in a minute!" He stroked harder and faster, desperate for release. His breathing grew harsh, and he was so focused on his climax, he didn't hear the quiet click of the bathroom door opening and, in a split second, saw a flash of red, and Prudence's face came into full view, her eyes wide, locking with his, just as he came so hard directly onto the shower tile. *Oh fuck.*

"Oh. My. God!" Prudence screeched as she twirled around and slammed the door behind her.

"Fuck, shit fuck," Greyson grumbled as he quickly rinsed himself before shutting the water off and stepping out, grabbing a towel and haphazardly wrapping it around his waist. "Prudence!"

He took a quick breath, he was winded from maybe his best jerk-off session ever, and swung the door open coming face to face with his friend. Her eyes were still wide as she stared at anything but him. He definitely didn't see her gaze move to his barely there towel. He felt his cock start to twitch back to life and bit back a groan—her face was the most tantalizing shade of pink. He wanted to kiss the warm skin of her neck and see if that same shade spread across her breasts as he... *Fuck!*

"Pru, I'm so sorry."

"No! Holy shit, Greyson, *I'm* sorry, I should've called or something. I wanted to talk after yesterday, make sure we were still okay, and I was going to be here anyway on the way to the commercial, so I brought coffee. Gabe said you were up here, and I...should *not* have opened your bathroom door."

"Listen, Pru—"

"Greyson," Prudence interrupted him, her eyes now bouncing from somewhere on his chest to the front of his towel, "would you mind maybe putting on some pants?"

With an inward groan, Greyson realized he was getting hard again. He stepped into the walk-in closet and pulled on boxers and jeans, trying to think of something, anything, to make this new boner go away. His mind flicked to Mrs. Crenshaw and her cat, and he immediately got soft. He walked out of his closet a minute later with a shirt in hand and said, "Let's get to the car lot."

Prudence nodded once and stepped out of his room. "I'll wait downstairs."

Chapter Eleven

The sun was bright on a beautiful fall day as Greyson and Prudence set out, coffees in hand. He waved cordially at Mrs. Crenshaw tending to her garden as they passed by, silently thanking her for unknowingly being a hard-on killer.

“How is it she’s always outside?” he asked, making small talk. Anything to avoid talking about what had just happened.

Prudence laughed awkwardly. “You know, I’ve seen her peeking through her shades plenty of times when I’ve come over to help Gabe with his designs. I guess she can spot gossip from anywhere. Not that there was anything to gossip about with me and Gabe. I’m sure that still miffs her to this day.”

They walked for a few blocks, both sipping their coffees, before Prudence broke the semi-strained silence. “I’m sorry I came in your bathroom this morning,” she finally said, turning pink at her choice of words. “*Into* your bathroom,” she corrected. “I’d just gotten done talking to Gabe downstairs and I wasn’t thinking when he sent me to get you. I heard the water, but thought it was the faucet and that you were shaving or brushing your teeth or something...” She waved her free hand in the air, as if it would whisk away the memory.

Greyson shrugged a shoulder. His embarrassment at Prudence catching him in the act had already started to fade. Right now, she didn’t know that it was her that led to one of the best one-handed orgasms of his life. In fact, he was almost glad it had happened. The perfect ‘O’ her mouth formed when she saw him was something he’d keep in his mind. Possibly for future... imaginings of her.

Prudence kept talking, a rambling habit she had when she was nervous. “It’s nothing that I haven’t seen before. I mean, I haven’t seen yours before. You know what I mean. I’m in my thirties, it’s nothing new. It’s nothing *I* haven’t done. Maybe not in the shower, but waking up like that, needing to take care of it...”

Greyson's mind stopped, and his mouth went dry as he imagined a still languid, tousled, Prudence pleasuring herself in the morning. He took a gulp of coffee and winced as it burned. He'd never be able to get that carnal image out of his head and as he pondered it for a moment longer, thought that he might never want to. In fact, he was certain that he wanted to play a part of this scene in the very near future. His mind drifted to Chuck. *Well, that's a bucket of cold water to my libido.* As they turned the corner, the car lot came into view. Greyson had so many questions about Prudence and Chuck. "You've had plenty of chances to tell me about Chuck, Pru. Why didn't you?" Greyson finally broached the subject.

"Oh, you know how it is. We've played phone tag, then things get hectic. And the time difference doesn't help of course..." She shot a sideways glance at Greyson.

Greyson laughed. "Oh touché, Pru. Touché. But really, how did you two get together?"

Prudence's steps slowed as they walked through the gates and into the lot. "You know last year when I bought my Flex? Chuck sold it to me, he asked me to dinner after and well, he stuck around." Prudence didn't tell the short story like some grand romance, but did all romances need to be grand? Greyson couldn't help but be taken aback by how simple it all sounded. Guy liked girl, guy asked girl out and girl said yes. His heart thumped an uneasy rhythm, knowing the girl in this scenario was Prudence. *His* girl, but he was not the guy. So, was that it? Should he have realized the full extent of his feelings and come home sooner?

As Greyson and Prudence stopped at the commercial set, Greyson pushed thoughts of romance aside and had to chuckle—it was like an over-the-top movie production. There were four trailers, one strobe light, three camera cranes, three boom mics and numerous other pieces of equipment they'd probably never use. And that was just what he could see.

"What's so funny?" Prudence glanced toward Greyson.

"This just seems a bit over the top." Greyson schooled his features, not wanting to act like the big star who was too far above local productions, thinking they were trying to impress him.

"Really? This is about how it has looked for the last couple they've shot. Charles Senior. spares no expense as you can see." She glanced around the set. "Well, maybe there's more." She amended. "Three extra trailers, they've never used camera cranes before...huh. I guess there is a lot more

equipment.”

Turning around to scan the rest of the set, Greyson exclaimed in shock, “Is that Simon Fredora?” He pointed to a man standing next to Charles Charleson Senior, the owner of the car lot. He was a little bit taller than Chuck, with shiny silver hair and thick, black framed glasses.

“Who?” Her too-adorable nose scrunched up. Everything about this woman was not just adorable, it was sexy. Perfect for him. *Me, not Chuck.* This couldn’t be how it ended for them—in his gut he knew he and Prudence were made for each other. He was not a homewrecker, but he had to figure out what Chuck’s long game was and if they were serious. He gave himself a mental shake.

“Simon Fredora, one of the most sought-after directors on the East Coast,” Greyson explained. “He’s known for shooting intense scenes that put you in the middle of all the action. I’m not surprised at the big production now. Simon knows how to get the job done.”

They approached a small group of people gathered around the newest model Ford Mustang. Greyson stood back, though, wanting to watch Prudence and Chuck, and maybe, although he’d never admit it, threw up a little in his mouth as he watched her kiss his cheek. Chuck smiled at her but there was something almost like...annoyance in his gaze? Now that was interesting. He couldn’t imagine a scenario in which he’d be annoyed at Prudence kissing him. She came back over to Greyson, leaving Chuck with the director, and he refocused on Simon as he gave the instructions for the scene.

“He’s in the middle of getting directions,” Prudence said quietly.

“And then you’re going to take a running leap over the car and slide across the hood.” Simon motioned the action he wanted the stunt guy to take. “Once you’re across, you stay down so Chuck can pop up in the next frame,” he added, knowing clean breaks like that made editing so much easier.

“Well, well, well, who do we have here?” Charles smiled broadly at Greyson, his gray eyes twinkling as he then walked over to the two newcomers from behind the camera. “Greyson Atwood is that you?” he asked, extending his hand.

“Hello, Mr. Charleson, how are you doing?” Greyson smiled, taking his hand and noting that even after his long absence, this man still didn’t look a day over forty-five, even with his solid mop of white hair and deep fake tan.

“No complaints here, my boy. Getting ready to retire soon, so no

complaints.”

“No shit, Greyson Atwood? What in the hell are you doing here?” Simon shouted from across the lot as he jogged over. Charles laughed, putting his arm around Greyson’s shoulder. This guy lived for these moments. Surprising everyone—and no one—that he knew just about everyone.

“Amber Falls is Greyson’s hometown,” Charles offered for him. Chuck joined the three of them, clearly having heard Simon’s boisterous exclamation.

“You have your very own action hero in town, and he’s not starring in this commercial? You’ve got Ben Stone *right here*.” Simon stared at Charles, clearly baffled.

Chuck must have quickly realized what was going to happen and spun his head to Simon. “He isn’t an employee of the car lot, and we always use employees to make the commercials seem more personal,” he said, trying to shut Simon down.

“What a splendid idea,” Charles agreed, ignoring the fact that Chuck had spoken. Greyson almost felt a pang of sympathy for him. Almost. “We’re paying Simon here an arm and leg and if you’d be willing to help out some old friends, it would be great for business. I’m sure we could work out a fair endorsement package, Greyson. And besides, the stuntman isn’t an employee.”

“Dad, that’s ludicrous! This is supposed to be my opportunity to show you I’m ready to take over after your retirement,” Chuck tried to appeal. “Besides, I’m sure Greyson has some ‘people’ he needs to talk to, he can’t just decide to endorse something on his own.”

“Chuck, you can still do just that. And what better way than showing me how adaptable you are.” Charles chided, making Chuck’s cheeks mottle an unfortunate shade of red.

“I’m always happy to help out my friends, but I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes—” Greyson started.

“Nonsense. You’ll do just the trick,” Charles dismissed, already walking away as if it were a done deal.

“This is brilliant! Do you want to do the whole scene or have Raymond, our stunt man, do the jump?” Simon asked in between shouting out camera location changes.

“Are you sure, Greyson?” Prudence checked, reaching over, and laying a hand soothingly on Chuck’s arm. “You’re just going to step into this like no

big deal? Don't you need to check with Nadia or something?"

Chuck vigorously nodded. "Yeah, I just said that, babe."

"Not for this." Greyson smiled, lacing his fingers together and stretching them over his head. "This is going to be fun. I haven't done anything like this in ages. I'll do the whole thing, Simon, no need for the stunt guy."

Chuck took on more of a calculated tone as he fully faced Greyson, "Greyson, while I appreciate you thinking of helping us out, this was really supposed to be about me. It's my opportunity to show my dad I'm ready to take on the car lot when he retires at the end of the year. And besides, I'd feel cheap, like I was using you."

"No worries there, buddy," Greyson said, a bit too gleefully, perhaps wanting to see him suffer a little. He relented after seeing the stricken look on Chuck's face. "Chuck, if you really don't want me to, I won't, but I meant what I said. I'm always happy to help my friends out, especially after your dad gave me that old car so I could drive across the country to L.A. I haven't forgotten that." He clapped Chuck on the back. "But, if this helps you sell a few more cars, brings some good publicity to the dealership and makes your dad more comfortable letting go with the books in a good spot, I'm sincere that I'd like to help out."

"He has a good point, Chuck." Prudence rubbed his arm. "I know how important taking over for your dad is, and if Greyson can help that transition be successful, I want that for you."

"And no endorsement needed. I'll deal with my agent," Greyson added.

Chuck seemed dejected, but he obviously had to know it was the right choice. It was Ben Stone, after all. "Thanks, man." He reached out to shake Greyson's hand. "Let's do this."

"I'll go grab some water." Prudence smiled at both of them and walked away.

Greyson couldn't help but notice they both watched her hips sway as she did. He felt odd standing there with Chuck, knowing that the love of his life was currently dating that other man. His plan when he'd flown back to win Prudence's heart hadn't included her being with someone else.

Greyson thought back to their college days, how he genuinely missed Chuck's carefree antics in his life. Chuck had been the kind of friend that never asked why, the one that could lighten the mood at any time and always had the perfect joke for the perfect moment. While he still considered them friends, it wasn't like they were making plans to hang out anytime soon. He

truly hoped after this all was over, that would change. That Chuck would once again be a trusted friend.

He realized the situation was not ideal, but it may be the only chance he got to speak to Chuck alone. He'd have to play this cool, calm. As it stood currently there was no need to raise an alarm. Just a guy-to-guy chat, friendly concern, right? *Right.*

"Chuck, how are you and Pru doing?" Greyson questioned, crossing his arms.

"What do you mean? We're great, having a good time."

Greyson's tone shifted. "Having a good time? She isn't a 'good time' kind of girl, Chuck, she's a forever kind of girl." *Yeah, reaaaal smooth there, Atwood.*

"That may be true, Greyson, but for right now, we're having fun. Maybe one day we'll make it to forever, though." Chuck smirked, glanced over at Prudence and ambled over to where Charles was standing.

So much for that conversation. Greyson grimaced as a small, squirrely looking girl with a headset came over to him.

"Hi Mr. Atwood. Pleasure to meet you. I'm Kendra, the AD on set today. We have a very small window of time to get this shoot done but I'm sure you can nail it in a few takes. Here are your lines." She handed him a single piece of paper. "Makeup and wardrobe are this way if you'll follow me." She held her arm forward, leading him toward one of the four trailers. Well, that was one mystery trailer solved.

Before entering, Greyson glanced over his shoulder, seeing Chuck whisper something in Prudence's ear, his hand resting comfortably at the small of her back. *Fuck!* Greyson's fists clenched as he went in and slammed the door shut behind him. His eyes adjusted to the bright vanity bulbs, and he saw two young-ish kids, clearly startled, in front of him.

"Oh. My. God," a tall, very thin guy squawked, clutching a clipboard tightly to his chest.

"Oh. My. God," a just as tall and just as thin girl parroted back, leaning against the vanity. "You're Greyson Atwood! I heard you were from Amber Falls, but I never thought I'd actually see you here!"

Greyson's head shifted back and forth between the two, red-headed, almost mirror images. "Aren't you a little young to be working on a commercial?" His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Oh no," the guy said solemnly, shaking his head. "We just started at the

university this semester. We're both majoring in drama, and Mr. Charleson, the senior, said we could do wardrobe"—he gestured at himself—"and hair and makeup"—he pointed to the girl—"in order to get a head start for when we do performances at Summer Stock. I'm Tom and this is Tina. We're twins."

Greyson slowly nodded, not surprised that even with something as important as his business's commercial, Charles still wanted to help out the youth that were going after their dreams, just like he had with Greyson all those years ago. "Okay, cool. Have you done this before or is this your first one?"

Tina started to get some color back in her face but was clearly still starstruck. "This is our third commercial, sir. I promise we know what we're doing." She glanced at her brother. "Kinda."

Tom discreetly elbowed Tina. "Yes, we know exactly what we're doing, sir," he assured. "If you'll step over here, I'll get you into a suit then over to Tina for hair and makeup."

"Pro-tip, guys?" Greyson inwardly laughed at their earnestness, hoping to not shatter their young confidence. "Hair and makeup first, then wardrobe. I'm all ears for any questions you might want to ask me. And please, call me Greyson."

Tina quickly turned around to the mirror, stage whispering to Tom out of the corner of her mouth who was still beside her. "Three commercials in and I *told* you it was hair and makeup first, Tom, every time."

"Are you dating Samantha Crane?" Tom spat out, then clamped a hand over his mouth, obviously disbelieving he'd asked the question. Tina whirled back around, one hand also plastered over her mouth, the two of them turning the same shade of horrified.

Greyson couldn't help it anymore, and he let out a loud laugh. Oh man, how he missed being around people that weren't jaded by the industry. These two kids were the reason he'd even considered taking the teaching position in the first place. Well, that and being with Prudence. But really, he wanted to teach young kids like this, impart the wisdom he'd had to fight to learn, so they didn't have to fight, just learn.

"No, we were never dating. We just went to an awards show together."

"I told you," Tina derided Tom, "they definitely didn't act like a couple. Couples don't kiss on the cheek like they did at the Verity Awards."

Tom shrugged. "They were pictured together at Shay La Luna, and I

thought it would be so wonderful to dress her. She has the perfect body for those glamorous Hollywood gowns. The Atelier was breathtaking.”

Greyson’s thoughts immediately went to Prudence, as they had constantly as of late. “I can think of better,” he stated, walking over to the makeup chair. “Now let’s get this show on the road.”

Chapter Twelve

Prudence stood at the craft services table, watching Chuck and Greyson. She could only imagine what they were talking about until she saw Chuck glance over at her with a smirk. She rolled her eyes, practically smelling their pissing contest. And it wasn't even a contest! She was with Chuck and she'd never been with Greyson, that was pretty definitive. Chuck walked away, and Greyson was led to a trailer, ending their discussion. *At least they didn't whip out their dicks and start measuring.* She grabbed a bottle of water, more curious than she supposed she should about what that outcome would be.

"Those two, I swear."

Prudence glanced behind her to see that Charles had stopped by the table. He always had a knack for being where you least expected him, because you could *swear* you just saw him somewhere else. That's what made him such a good car salesman, a charming personality combined with the ability to morph to whoever seemed to need him. *Qualities that Chuck lacks.* She immediately felt disloyal.

"They used to be pretty good friends in college, didn't they, Prudence?" He moved to stand beside her.

"We were all part of the same group of friends, yes." Prudence was cautious, not sure where the question was leading. She was dating his son, after all.

"That Greyson sure has made quite the name for himself. Local boy gets famous, that's what every small town hopes for. Puts the name on the map, makes it a little more recognizable. It's been good for our business, that's for sure." He hooked his thumbs through in his suspenders, rocking back on his heels. "That kind of fame can weigh on anyone, though, even his contemporaries, trying to be as good as the one they used to know. Finding your way in the world is a hard thing, especially when you might feel like you're living in someone else's shadow, not sure if you should follow them or carve your own path."

Prudence stayed silent, knowing that Charles was not done quite yet. In the

year that she'd gotten to know him, his musings were almost always followed by a very meaningful question, the point he was trying to get at.

"How are you and Chuck doing, my dear?" *Ah, there it is.*

Prudence schooled her face into a cool expression, but was certain he saw through her, as if he knew the thoughts she'd been having lately about Chuck. Or rather, Greyson.

"We're doing fine, Charles, thank you for asking. In fact, we're going bowling tonight."

"Bowling, you say? What a pleasant-sounding time."

Prudence thought she heard a slight undertone of sarcasm in his voice, and her eyes narrowed. It was a perfectly acceptable date.

"It's one of my favorite games."

"Oh, I'm sure of that, my dear." Charles glanced at his son. "I'm sure of that."

They stood quietly for a moment, watching Chuck talk to Simon Fredora.

"I think Chuck is trying to find his place in all of this." He pondered the scene in front of them. "Not the star but wanting to be involved somehow. It's an apt analogy, don't you think?"

Prudence slowly nodded. "He'll find his way, he always has. In fact, it seems like he might find his way over here right now."

Chuck glanced over at them, as if he knew they were talking about him. He said something to Simon and started walking over, dodging a running assistant on the way. "Hey guys, what's up?" he asked nonchalantly, acting like being removed from the starring role of the commercial and delegated to just a man about set didn't bother him.

Prudence could tell that he wasn't happy about it still, perhaps even embarrassed, even though having a Hollywood actor star in the commercial was a big coup. She'd wager anything that Charles knew this would be Chuck's reaction, too, and was still puzzled over why he'd so easily choose to demote his son and partner. She looked over to Charles to see what he'd say now that Greyson was no longer standing with them.

"Son, I want to apologize for being so quick to replace you." Charles clapped him on the back. "I know you had your heart set on being in this commercial, but I just couldn't pass up the opportunity to have Greyson in it."

"I get it, Dad. It's good for business."

"I'm sorry, too," Prudence soothed. "I should've been more emphatic

about you keeping your part.”

“Don’t worry, babe.” Chuck sighed, putting an arm around her shoulder. “It was easy to get caught up in it, and what’s done is done. The commercial is going to get shot today no matter who’s in the lead role. I just happened to lose out to an actual movie star.”

“You know, son”—Charles’ tone turned thoughtful, his hands going back to hold on to his suspenders—“you’ve always been pretty good at the television part of the business.” He rocked even slower back on his heels. “Why don’t you take this opportunity to work with Simon, see what knowledge you can gain from him. He might have some pointers on shooting commercials, or just how these things work in general.”

Chuck’s eyes lit up. “That’s a really good idea, Dad. I’d love to see if he does things differently than when we shoot our regular commercials.” He gave Prudence a kiss on her cheek. “Later, babe.” He ran back to where Simon was.

“Well, that does it for me.” Charles turned to go into the dealership. “I’m going to take a rest before the shoot starts. I’ll see you around.”

Prudence caught Charles’ gaze and swore she saw him wink at her before he turned to go. Yes, Chuck always seemed to find his own path, but who better to give him a nudge—or push—than his own dad. Maybe his future wasn’t meant to be taking over the car dealership. *That sly fox.* She smiled to herself as she found a chair and pulled out her phone to text Annabelle.

Do you remember you said you’d wonder what it would be like to see Greyson in action? Well, here’s your chance.

What?

Charles convinced Greyson to take over in the Charleson Ford commercial.

WHAT??

You’d better get down here, AB.

I can’t believe I’m going to say this but I can’t get away. His Superior Highness has me cleaning out the archive. I mean wtf.

Damn. I'll try to get a picture of him

Prudence settled in, waiting for the action to start.

* * * *

An hour later, Greyson stepped out of the makeup trailer in a slick tux and perfectly quaffed hair. If Annabelle saw him now, she'd never stop calling him James Bond. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw Prudence snap a picture.

"Excellent!" Simon called as Greyson approached. He walked over to Greyson with a clipboard in his hand. "Comfortable with the lines, Greyson?"

"Yes, I like the fact that you decided to play off of Ben Stone and the spy angle, it's perfect."

"I have the licensing form from Lithica Studios, if you could sign it now." Simon handed over the clipboard for Greyson to sign. Greyson was somewhat surprised that Simon had gotten everything done so quickly. *A little too quickly.* "All right, that's out of the way. I think we'll have you do the voice-over first, then the car scene." The same AD who had led him to hair and makeup walked him over to the audio trailer. first, then the car scene." The same AD who had led him to hair and makeup walked him over to the audio trailer.

"Here you go," Kendra said, opening the door. "Come on over to the monitors when you're done."

"Thanks, Kendra, will do," Greyson walked through the trailer door and his eyes widened when he saw Tom and Tina standing by the audio equipment. "You guys again?" he asked, surprised. "I mean, not that I mind, but you're really pulling double duty here."

Tom answered eagerly. "We're more than happy Mr. Charleson, the senior, is letting us do this as well, sir."

Tina nodded alongside Tom, the pair moving just like Raggedy Ann and Andy bobbleheads. "Yes, Simon brought his audio team with him, but when Mr. Charleson, the senior, knew you were playing the part he insisted that Tom and I do the audio as originally planned. We just found out!" He gestured for Greyson to sit in the chair between the two.

"So I'm guessing you know how to do this as well?" Greyson was

skeptical but sat in the chair offered to him.

“For sure.” Tom brought a small microphone on the end of a cord over to Greyson. “We’re also stagehands, AV techs, you name it, we do it.” His face turned red as he kept reaching his hands toward then pulling back from Greyson’s chest area. “I think I need to run this up your shirt, sir.”

Greyson chuckled at Tom’s attempts. “Pro-tip? Voice-overs don’t use the standard Lavalier I set-up, the microphone clipped to a shirt. You would use something like a condenser microphone. That’s more sensitive to an individual voice—perfect for voice overs.”

Tom whirled around. “Tina!” he squeaked loudly. “I told you this was the wrong one!”

“No, Tom, you did not,” Tina stated. “You told me to grab this exact mic.”

Tom slowly turned back around, his face still red. “My apologies, sir. I’ll grab the correct microphone right away. It won’t take more than a moment.” He walked to the other end of the trailer and started to root through the equipment.

“Not that one.” Tina pointed out, most helpfully, extending her finger to the pile of equipment. “That one, Tom. No. No. No. Do you see where I’m pointing? That’s the one. There you go.” She looked at Greyson sheepishly. “There’s not a whole lot of voice-over in the theater,” she said, helping Tom connect the microphone to the computer. “That should do it. Okay, we’re ready when you are.”

Just as Greyson was about to speak, the trailer door opened and Kendra poked her head in and held a thick envelope. “There’s a delivery for you, Mr. Atwood. I don’t know how anyone knew you were here, but a car just dropped this off.”

Tina gave Tom a nudge. “Well, go get it, Tom.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’m being tracked.” Greyson stopped and thought of Nadia. “In fact, I’m pretty confident I am,” he said as Tom handed him the envelope.

“What do you think it is, Mr. Atwood?” Tom whispered—his voice reverent as if he’d just handed Greyson unredacted top-secret papers.

“Let’s see what was so important, guys.” He glanced at the script he pulled out. “Speaking of Samantha Crane, this is the script my agent wanted me to read. I forgot it on my entry table. The script shows up *and* Simon already has the Lithica licensing on hand? Not only am I sure I’m being tracked, but this is also proof she has a key to my house.” Greyson flipped through the

pages ignoring the sticky notes already plastered inside. “Well, let’s see if this is any good.”

“How can you tell so quickly?” Tina asked.

“It’s all in the monologue. Any script worth anything has a great monologue for the lead actors. It’s my favorite part of the script, the meat and bones of it. You can tell, in that monologue alone, if the rest is any good. It captures the heart of the story, the message the screenwriter wants to get across.” He stopped speaking while he read the penultimate scene. He re-read it, having almost memorized it the second time through using a technique his acting coach had taught him in college.

“Well?” Tom and Tina asked after a few minutes of silence.

“Well. It’s not bad, but it’s not great. It depends on the lead actress, and I’m not sure Samantha Crane can pull this off.” He shut the script and set it on the table. “But that opinion does not leave this room, you got it?”

Tom and Tina nodded dutifully.

“All right, let’s get this voice-over done.”

Greyson took a deep breath then cleared his throat and spoke in his Ben Stone voice. “There is no one I trust more to get me out of a tight spot than Charleson Ford. Every good spy needs a great getaway car, and you won’t find a better deal than at Charleson Ford.”

Tom clapped his hands after stopping the recording. “Oh, Mr. Atwood, that was perfect!”

“I thought it went well,” Greyson said. “Let’s hear it back.”

Tina pushed a few buttons and the voice-over played. Greyson nodded. “I think that’s it. First time in my career that I did something right on the first take, and you were here for that. It was a pleasure working with you both, thank you. Maybe we’ll work together in the future on another project.” He looked between the two. “Maybe sooner than I think? Do you two also operate the cameras?” Tom and Tina giggled. Greyson’s eyes widened. “Tell me you’re not operating the cameras.”

“Oh no, sir,” they said in unison.

“Well, I wouldn’t have minded if you were.” Greyson reached out and shook both of their hands. “Thank you again, it’s been an experience I’ll never forget.” Greyson gave a salute as he left the trailer. He glanced around and saw Simon still sitting at the monitors. Before heading over, he made a detour to where Prudence was sitting, finger swiping at her phone.

“Fancy a shag?” His voice was husky and breath warm against her ear,

imitating Ben Stone's gravelly baritone.

Prudence gasped. "You scared the living daylights out of me, Greyson!"

"I'd hope the thought of a shag with me wouldn't scare you," he said, pretending to be heartbroken, before smiling and giving her a wink. Prudence started to turn red. *That's more like it.* He walked over to Simon.

"How did the voice-over go?" Simon asked.

"One take was all I needed."

"I figured you'd nail it." Simon gestured over to where the car was parked with a green screen behind it. "Did you want to do a few test runs before we roll?"

Greyson glanced over to where Prudence was sitting, now watching with rapt attention, Chuck standing at her side. "No, I think I'll do this in one take, too."

Simon raised his eyes but didn't argue. "All right, it's go time."

Simon sat and put on a headset. He waited until Greyson got to his mark then yelled, "And, action!"

Greyson sprinted to the car, throwing a look behind him where he knew the explosion would be on the green screen. Running harder, he put his hands on the hood of the car to vault over. Immediately he knew something was wrong. In the split second it took him to slide across the hood he knew he was going too fast, there was no way he'd be able to get his feet under him when he got to the other side in order to land upright. And he didn't.

He heard Prudence scream as he hit the ground. His head hit the mat on the other side, and he saw stars. *What the fuck? Did they triple wax that damn hood?* Greyson kept rolling, finally coming to a stop when he slammed his head, again, this time on the base of a camera. The last thing he heard before everything went black was Simon Fredora shouting, "We can take that out in editing!"

Chapter Thirteen

Prudence tapped her foot on the floor impatiently. It seemed like they'd been waiting for hours, although she knew it hadn't even been forty-five minutes. Gabe reached over and laid his hand on hers to steady it, before setting his magazine on the table in front of them.

Being in the clinic was disorienting. The Amber Falls Clinic was a large, renovated Victorian home near the center of town. Dr. Simmons had practiced in a nearby town before moving to Amber Falls and setting up his clinic last year. Instead of building, he'd purchased this old Victorian house and remodeled it so it could hold both the clinic and his home. The waiting room was decorated more like a parlor, and Prudence expected a maid to walk in with tea service at any moment.

"We got him here fast enough, Pru. Everything will be fine. If there's one person whose head can withstand being smacked into that camera, it's Greyson," Gabe said, trying to ease Prudence's mind.

"I can't stop picturing him on the ground not moving." Tears started forming in her eyes, and she grabbed a tissue from her purse.

"He was awake when he got here and there was no blood that I could see. He'll be fine." Gabe reached for his coffee cup, the slight tremor in his hand the only thing giving away that he was worried. "Annie asked for tonight off months ago, and I'm working her closing shift. I hate to even ask, but I don't suppose you have anything going on later. I think that someone will have to stay with him, at least for one night."

"Don't even worry about it. Chuck and I were going out tonight, but I'll cancel that." Prudence's phone started buzzing. "That's actually him. I'm going to take this. Grab me if the nurse comes out." She stood and walked to the door.

Stepping outside onto the screened in wrap-around porch she started pacing with nervous energy and answered the call. "Hey, Chuck."

"That guy is a professional. You'll be happy to hear we got the shot in one take."

Prudence stopped short. "What?" she asked incredulously.

"Simon showed us the footage and said he can work with it to make the commercial. Thank God he did the voice-over first."

"Chuck, our friend was hurt, possibly seriously, and all you care about is that damned commercial?"

"I was gonna ask how he was." There was a long silence on the other end. "How is he?" Chuck finally asked.

"We haven't heard anything yet. Greyson was awake by the time we got here, though. So that's good news."

"I really was going to ask, you know. Everyone here wanted to know, too."

Prudence sighed, feeling on edge. "It's not every day you see a friend lying unconscious on the ground. I thought you'd be more worried."

"You and Gabe are there, he's in good hands. What time are you going to be done?"

"I don't know, we haven't talked to the doctor yet. We'll know more soon, I hope."

"Okay, well, I have some steaks in the fridge, I was going to bring them over tonight to grill, I'm thinking about six?"

"Oh, Chuck, I won't be home. Gabe has to work at the bar, and we're sure someone is going to have to stay with Greyson to wake him overnight to make sure he's okay. He wanted to know if I could stay, and I said yes."

"Why would you say yes? Can't Annabelle or someone else stay?"

"Annabelle?" she questioned. "Why would I have to ask Annabelle when I'm free?"

"You don't have to be free. There's gotta be someone else that can stay with him."

"There's me. I'm going to stay with him."

"Gabe owns the bar. Why does he get stuck working the closing shift?" Chuck's voice was starting to get shrill.

"What's going on, Chuck? Why are you making this into such a big deal?"

"It's not a big deal. My girlfriend is just staying the night with Greyson Atwood. No other guy would possibly see that as a big deal either, I suppose."

"Oh my God, Chuck, are you being serious right now? We've both known Greyson since the dawn of time, and you're choosing now to have an issue with our friendship?"

"But, babe, what am I gonna do with these steaks for dinner?" Chuck said

in a voice that could only be described as a whine.

“Chuck, you’re a grown man, you can figure it out.” Gabe opened the door and motioned her to come back in. “Gotta go.” Prudence hung up the phone without saying goodbye, wishing she had an old-school handset that she could slam down. That must have been a satisfying era to have fights over the phone in.

“You can follow me,” a nurse motioned as Prudence re-entered the building, leading them to a room off the long hallway.

Prudence rushed forward to Greyson after entering the room, raising a hand to his head but not quite touching him. Tears formed again in her eyes, spilling over this time when she took his hand.

The doctor stood aside, watching, then turned. “You must be Gabe?” he asked the man still in the doorway.

“Yes, I’m Greyson’s brother.”

Dr. Simmons turned back to Prudence. “And your wife?” He looked pointedly between the two.

Prudence could feel her face immediately flame up. “We’re just friends, Doctor.”

“Ah,” Dr. Simmons said wisely. “Well, good news. I don’t see any indication of anything other than a concussion. If I thought there was any bleeding I’d send him to Amherst for a scan, but his pupils are the same size and dilating correctly, and he’s awake and alert. He’s going to have that bump for several days, but there’s also no external bleeding, so it didn’t break the skin, which is a good sign.”

“Thank God.” Prudence breathed.

“That’s great news, thanks, Doctor.” Gabe sat in the chair next to Greyson’s bed. “I had a concussion in college and I was told not to sleep for twenty-four hours. Is that still the same?”

Dr. Simmons smiled. “Concussion protocol has changed since then. He’ll be able to sleep, however in the first two hours he’ll need to be woken up every fifteen minutes. For the two hours after, wake him every thirty minutes, then just once an hour after that until he’s awake for the morning.”

“I’ll be staying with him,” Prudence offered, squeezing Greyson’s hand before letting go.

Dr. Simmons reached out to Greyson and shook his hand. “I think you’ll be in good hands, Mr. Atwood.” He winked then turned to leave the room, stopping to talk with the nurse.

After he'd left, Gabe stood and sighed. "You had us worried there, Greyson."

"I'm okay, guys. I've been doing my own stunts for years. It's not the first time I've hit my head." He pondered for a moment. "But I think this is the only time I've ever lost consciousness. That was a little scary."

Prudence reached over and moved a lock of Greyson's hair off his forehead, and he winced when she inadvertently touched the lump on his head.

She turned to the nurse. "Is there anything we can give him for the pain?"

The nurse nodded. "Tylenol is the best thing for him, alternating hot and cold on his other bruises will help, too. Other than that, you're free to go, Mr. Atwood. Take your time. Dr. Simmons would like to see you in a few weeks for a follow-up."

Greyson glanced at Prudence. "I'm not sure I'll be here that long, but I'll call and set an appointment if I am."

"I'll call Nadia if you give me her number," Prudence offered after the nurse left.

"Oh, she already knows," Greyson said.

"What?" Gabe and Prudence asked in unison. "How on earth would she know?" Prudence added.

"That lady has her ways. I've been trying to figure them out for years. You know that script she wants me to read that Samantha Crane is attached to? I forgot it in California, and it somehow showed up at the commercial set today, delivered by a courier in a black unmarked sedan. And Simon had the Lithica licensing way sooner than he should have. It's like Nadia knew the commercial would happen, too."

"I know you play the spy in movies, Grey, but it's really Nadia that has all the moves. Or you're just paranoid." Gabe started to gather Greyson's belongings. "Let's get you home before you get more crazy ideas."

"Do you need help walking?" Prudence offered.

"That's okay." Greyson groaned as he sat. He touched his right shoulder, rotating it around. "Maybe a little. I hit that ground hard."

"I've got you, bro."

"I'm going to go and let you get dressed." Prudence backed toward the door. "I've got to get some things from my house, then I'll meet you over there."

Greyson caught Prudence's eye before she left. "Thanks, Pru, this really

means a lot.”

Chapter Fourteen

Prudence sat in her car in front of the clinic, her hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles turned white. *He's fine. The doctor said he'd be fine.* But her thoughts were echoing the words she'd spoken to Gabe earlier that afternoon in the waiting room. When she'd seen Greyson unconscious on the ground her world had stopped spinning. She'd gotten this strange tunnel vision, as if she were trying to watch the scene through the eye of a needle, her eyes squinting, not understanding what was happening. This had only lasted for a split second before she'd screamed and ran to Greyson's prone body.

When she'd gotten to him, and thrown herself on the ground, she'd reached over to check his pulse. She'd known that he'd just hit his head, but she still held her breath until she could feel the faint steady beat. By then people from all over the set were around him, gently guiding her away, telling her the paramedics were on their way. Chuck had put his arm around her, and she'd heard him say the name, Gabe. Prudence realized she hadn't let Gabe know what happened, so she pulled out her phone and called him — the ambulance arriving shortly after. They hadn't let her ride in the back like she'd insisted, so she followed them the short distance to the clinic.

Gabe had met her there, anxiously bouncing on the balls of his feet as they brought Greyson out on a stretcher. He was awake, one paramedic telling them he'd woken up shortly after they'd started moving. Greyson had smiled, or tried to, wincing in pain at the bright sunlight, before cracking a joke about cracking his head. They'd sat in the waiting room, then, until the nurse called them back.

Prudence shook her head and held back tears as she buckled her seatbelt. "Annabelle!" she exclaimed, needing to talk to her friend, realizing she hadn't told her yet what happened. She set her phone to the car speaker and called Annabelle as she drove home.

"Hey, Pru, how'd the commercial go?" Prudence tried to speak, but her words choked off as she finally let herself cry. "Pru? What's going on? Are

you being kidnapped? Yell ‘rutabaga’ if you are.”

Prudence couldn’t help but laugh at that, her short burst of tears already done. “Greyson had an accident on the commercial set, AB. He’s fine, just a concussion.” Her words coming out still tinged with emotions. *He’s fine.*

“Oh shit, what happened?”

“I don’t really know. He told the director he’d do his own stunts, but when he went to slide off the hood of the car—”

“Because of course he would,” Annabelle interrupted, Prudence could hear the eye roll in her voice.

“—it was like there was oil or something all over it. He couldn’t stop and hit his head twice after he rolled off.”

“Dang. Did he go to Dr. Simmons, or did they take him to Amherst?”

“Dr. Simmons. There was no evidence of anything other than a concussion, so he decided he didn’t need to go to Amherst”—she collected herself before continuing—“I was so scared, though. He hit pretty hard, then he was unconscious for at least a few minutes until the ambulance could get there.”

“That would be scary for anyone to see, Pru.”

Prudence sighed and turned onto her street. “I’m going to stay with him tonight while Gabe is at work but Greyson needs to be woken up regularly to check and make sure he’s okay. I’m just heading home to get some things for the night.”

“You’re an angel to help, Pru. Are we still on for lunch tomorrow? It’s okay if not, you’ll be tired.”

“Yeah, let’s still do lunch. I just pulled in. I’m going to get my stuff and head back over there.”

“Okay, call me if you need anything tonight—and I mean anything.”

Prudence quickly gathered some clothes and work items before driving the short distance to Gabe’s. She pulled up to the curb outside his house just as he was helping Greyson from the car. She got out and opened the back door, giving Gabe a quick and hefted her work bag over her shoulder. She took out a large box with various material samples from the back seat—it was going to be a long night but at least she’d get some work done on the Stephenson proposal that was due next week.

As Prudence walked through the living room to the kitchen, she could hear muffled conversation float down from upstairs. “This is all so unnecessary, you know,” Greyson grumbled.

“It’s completely necessary, Grey. You know Nadia would kill me if I let anything happen to her star.”

Their voices faded as she walked around the kitchen island to lay her sample box on the beautiful oak table. Prudence ran her fingers over the gleaming surface, loving the fact that Gabe hadn’t sanded out every imperfection. She really needed to think of a way to get Gabe to pursue carpentry as more than a hobby.

Jumping and placing a hand on her chest, Prudence startled when Alexa started repeating back a series of alarms being set both upstairs and down at the correct intervals to wake Greyson up. *Clever Gabe*. She noted that the first wake-up time was already in a half an hour from now. After filling a glass with cold water, she realized how parched her throat was and how long it had been since breakfast. She chuckled as she set her empty glass on the counter.

“What’s so funny?” Gabe asked as he entered the kitchen.

“All of this,” she responded. “Greyson comes home to relax and leave Hollywood behind only to get injured while acting in a commercial for a friend as a favor. It’s like something out of a movie.”

“Yeah, I suppose it is, but that’s what makes Greyson such a good actor, his flair for the dramatic. Do you remember, lord it was my sophomore year, so you guys would’ve been juniors, and Greyson copied off of you during creative writing? You both were going to get failing grades, but he argued that since it was creative writing anything he wrote, even if it was copied, was creative? The teacher was so amused, she said him trying to get off on a technicality was the most creative thing she’d heard all year.”

“I’d forgotten about that! I was so mad. I didn’t even know he’d copied me.” Prudence laughed, remembering.

“You know,” Gabe continued, “I thought for sure that would be when you guys ended up together.”

“How exactly would the scenario of Greyson cheating off me for a good grade result in us being a couple?”

“You were ready to go down with him. You weren’t going to turn him in and were willing to share the blame.”

“Gabe, you are such a hopeless romantic. How are you still single?”

Gabe smiled and answered how he always did when she asked that question, “I’m waiting for you to come to your senses and see that I’m the better Atwood brother for you, Pru.”

“I take it back, Gabe. You’re not a hopeless romantic—you’re just hopeless.” Prudence knew that Gabe had had a small crush on her when he was younger, but it had dissipated as quickly as it started after his first serious high-school girlfriend and now it was their joke. “What’s Grey doing upstairs?”

“Well, he *was* pouting, but now he’s taking a shower. He’s got a pretty bad bruise on his side. Said he just wanted to get into bed after, that you’d see enough of him tonight, and he didn’t want you to be sick of him too soon.”

Prudence’s mind started wandering when Gabe mentioned Greyson in the shower, thinking back to that morning. Was it only that morning? It seemed like an eternity had passed.

“Earth to Pru?” Gabe waved a hand. “Where did you go? You look flushed and you’re not answering me.”

“Sorry, Gabe, I’m tired already. You’ll need to show me how to work this contraption you call a coffee pot if I’m going to make it through the night checking on him.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make a pot right now. If you want to eat something, there is leftover chicken primavera from Wood Fire in the fridge.”

“My hero!” She moved to the fridge and began getting the food ready to reheat.

“I see you brought some work with you. Are those my flooring samples?”

“These are for a new project proposal I have next week, but I can leave them if you’d like. Still thinking about updating the basement?”

“Yeah, I’d like to start on it this spring, but I’d be ready to do it any time after Halloween. I’ve decided it’s the perfect space for a bar and game room.”

“I think you’re right about that. You’ve got plenty of bedrooms upstairs, you could use the extra living space, I’ll leave a few for you to think about.”

“Thanks, Pru.” Gabe hit the start button on the coffee machine then slung his cross-body bag over his shoulder and headed for the back door. “The Tylenol is on the bedside table—he had some earlier—and water bottles in the fridge. I’ve gotta head out. I’ll be home around three thirty. Greyson has the only other finished room upstairs, I haven’t furnished the other two since the remodel, we’ll have to go shopping sometime to pick things out. Go ahead and crash on my bed, and I’ll check in when I get home.”

Prudence nodded along to all Gabe’s instructions before waving him away. “I’ll see you later. Will you lock the door on your way out?”

“Will do,” Gabe called as he left the kitchen. A few moments later she

heard the door click.

This is going to be a long night. It was only seven p.m., but the doctor had said Greyson might be sleepier than usual that first night. He didn't even say goodnight, so she knew he was feeling bad. Sitting at the table with both her meal and laptop she started on her work.

The first fifteen minutes passed quickly, and she said, "Alexa, stop," to quiet the alarm and soundlessly ascended the stairs.

Greyson was sleeping so peacefully, she felt bad waking him. *Might as well get used to it.* Prudence reached out and gently shook his shoulder. "Greyson. Greyson, you have to wake up."

"Hmm, Pru, beautiful girl. What are you doing here?" Greyson asked sleepily, reaching out and grabbing her hand.

Prudence blushed. "Greyson, you need to wake up and answer a couple of questions."

"I am awake, Pru."

"What day is it?"

"Wednesday, if it's before midnight. Thursday if it's after."

"What's your full name?"

"Greyson Walter Atwood."

"All right, go back to sleep now."

Prudence repeated the process until she was to the point of only needing to wake him up once per hour, each time asking Greyson different questions to ensure he was okay.

She packed her items and put them by the front door, turning off the coffee pot and the lights downstairs before she went to Greyson's room with her overnight bag. Stopping by his closet and closing the door a bit, she turned on the light. *Crap.* She hadn't packed pajamas. She rooted around in the closet and found an old T-shirt, quickly slipping out of her clothing to put it on. It was a little short, skimming the tops of her thighs, but it would do in a pinch. She folded her clothes, turned off the light and stood at the door. Watching Greyson, he looked more relaxed than she had seen him during waking hours in years.

Prudence walked over to the bed, "Greyson." She placed a hand on his shoulder, sliding it down his arm. "Greyson, wake up."

Greyson rolled over. He reached his hand out and touched her now bare thigh. "Beautiful girl, don't leave me this time."

“I’m not going anywhere, Grey. I can wake you up every hour after this now, so I’ll be going to sleep in Gabe’s bed.”

“No, please stay, I always sleep better when you’re with me.” Greyson moved over, making room.

“Grey, we haven’t shared a room since college, and we haven’t shared a bed since North Carolina. You have no clue that you’d sleep better with me.” Still, instead of leaving, she hesitated. It really was nothing new, they’d often shared small spaces—camping in high school, movie dates throughout college, sleepovers in general. But it had been a long time since college and there was something different about this request. A yawn broke through her thoughts, and she realized how tired she was. Sleep was needed, so rather than argue she slid in next to him.

“That’s better. My dreams are clear when I’m with you.” He reached out to put an arm on her, but she scooted a few inches away, confused.

“What do you mean, Grey?”

“Do you know there are days that you’re the only thing that keeps my world spinning? There hasn’t been a day that has gone by that I haven’t thought of you. Thought of what it would be like to come home to you, to kiss you, to hold you, to make love to you. Whenever I wanted, that you were there, and I could call you mine. There is absolutely nothing I wouldn’t do for you. Tell me what I need to do to call you mine.”

“Oh, Greyson.” Prudence breathed. He gripped her hip, pulling her closer to him, and this time she didn’t resist.

“Prudence, my beautiful girl.”

Greyson slowly lowered his mouth to hers. The soft pressure of his lips on hers was pure bliss. He moved his hand from her hip to her backside, pulling her straight against him. She gasped at the contact, at the intimate intrusion of him pushed against her, the short T-shirt doing nothing to cover her. She instinctively parted for him and threw one leg over his hip as Greyson’s tongue plunged into her mouth, sweet bliss giving way to intense passion. She’d had no clue how much she’d wanted him until this very moment.

As she tilted her hips closer to him, she felt him pull away. Greyson stopped, kissing her once more on the lips, then on the forehead. He tucked her close to him and murmured, “That’s better,” before promptly falling asleep.

Prudence lay in stunned silence for a long while. *What just happened?* She listened to his even breathing, in and out. In and out. *Did we just kiss?* The

most panty-wetting kiss of her life, and Greyson was lying next to her, concussed and sleeping. As sleep eventually overtook Prudence, she thought she should extract herself from Greyson's embrace, but it felt so good. So right. She'd think about it in the morning.

The next few times Prudence woke Greyson up nothing unusual happened. He answered her questions and fell asleep, unconcerned, if he noticed at all, that she was in bed with him. When Gabe came home, he said he'd do the last few checks, six a.m. being the final one, then he was going to sleep as long as he could, having been awake for almost twenty-four hours. He didn't bat an eye at finding Prudence in Greyson's bed rather than his, though. Prudence slept through Gabe's questions but was conscious of snuggling back into Greyson's arms when he lay back down in bed each time.

Greyson had the most wonderful dreams. Prudence had been soft and willing in his arms. She fit against him perfectly, just as he'd envisioned a hundred times. He lay there with his eyes closed, basking in the feeling that he was satisfied beyond reason, more so than he should be from just a dream. *I can even smell her.* Then, the bed moved, and awareness rushed back to him. He remembered last night, Prudence coming into his bed. Prudence kissing him with wild abandon. Prudence rubbing herself against his erection. Greyson's eyes popped open, and he tried to sit, only to have a lightning bolt pierce his skull, his eyes slamming back shut.

"Greyson!" Prudence exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

Oh shit. It was real. It had been real. What did I do? He put his hand to his head, covering his eyes and blocking out the light. "Can you shut the shades, Pru? My head is killing me." Did he really spout off that speech from the movie script yesterday?

He felt her bounce out of bed and dared a peek. He groaned. He didn't imagine it. She was in his favorite T-shirt, the hem barely covering her ass. *Holy shit, that was a nice ass.*

"I'll grab you some water for the Tylenol, I'll be right back," Prudence said, interpreting his groan as pain.

Oh, Greyson was in pain, all right. His cock was more swollen than it had ever been. Prudence had spent the night with him, in his bed, in nothing more than a T-shirt. He had to get her out of here, she couldn't see what state he was in. His mind was racing. Last night shouldn't have happened. *Not like this.* She was with Chuck, and he was not that kind of guy. Well, he was that

kind of guy, he *had* been that kind of guy, but didn't want to be that guy with Prudence. He was so embarrassed he let it get to that point last night, hell, he thought it had been a dream. He had to do this right, to get this right, and that meant starting over. She couldn't know he remembered last night. He would pretend nothing happened.

"Here you go, Grey," Prudence said, leaning over him and handing him two Tylenol, putting the cup of water to his lips. Greyson could see her breasts swaying under the T-shirt, unbound and free. He sputtered on the water. *God, I hope I'm making the right choice.*

"Oh!" Prudence yelled, setting the cup on the table. She pulled the wet shirt away from her breasts. "Crap! I'm going to get dressed." She felt embarrassed as she walked into his closet where her change of clothes was. The T-shirt had felt short last night in the dark, but it was positively scandalous this morning. "I had to borrow a shirt." She raised her voice to be heard through the closet doors. "I forgot my pajamas when I packed my overnight bag."

When she came back out, Greyson was sitting, looking at his phone. "I've got at least a thousand missed calls and texts. Word does spread fast." He set his phone down. "Thank you for staying last night, Pru. You must be exhausted."

"Last night was certainly memorable." Prudence smiled, shyness washing over her.

Greyson smiled back, apparently unconcerned, still scrolling through his phone. "It was all a blur to me. I hope you were able to sleep okay, that I didn't toss and turn too much."

Prudence stood there. He wasn't saying anything about last night? She shifted awkwardly on her feet, not knowing what to say. If he didn't remember, should she say something? He'd just had a concussion and possibly didn't know what he was doing. *There's no way he really wanted me, even with that grand speech.* Old insecurities bubbled to the surface. She was just Prudence. *No.* Prudence slammed that door in her mind shut. She was an amazing woman. No man was ever going to make her doubt that. Not even Greyson Atwood. Especially not Greyson Atwood.

"I've got to go. Try to rest, Grey." She turned and sauntered out, her hips swaying as she did.

Chapter Fifteen

By that afternoon, Prudence's mind was racing. After her afternoon and subsequent night with Greyson, her world seemed to be spinning on an axis that was far too tilted. All throughout the morning, while she was trying to finish her proposal for a high-profile kitchen remodel, she battled the feelings of euphoria quickly followed by nausea, and vice versa. More than once she buried her head in her hands while groaning out loud, and it certainly wasn't due to the fact that this particular couple had polar opposite tastes she was supposed to appease. Her warring mind was running at full speed as she decided to break early and walk to the diner to meet Annabelle for their weekly lunch rather than driving.

This is Greyson! She set out, finally letting the details from the night before permeate her brain now that her work was no longer a suitable distraction. *He's a huge Hollywood actor that not only has been my friend for over thirty years, but has had such a varied personal life that, due to his fame, I've been privy to reading and hearing about for almost as long.* Even above Annabelle, despite the distance and years away from each other, he was the one person she reached out to when she needed help, a conversation, a pick-me-up or a confidence booster. The one constant in her life, besides her immediate family, had been Greyson. He was like a worry stone, who she longed for when she needed something comforting to touch, in the figurative sense of course, until last night.

When she'd decided to break away from her steady job and start her own business, Greyson had been the first person she called to talk it over with. Even though he was in the middle of filming *The Night You Didn't Want to Die*, sequel to *The Day You Didn't Want to Die*, he'd had enough Hollywood clout by then to break for as long as he needed to talk with her before she came to the foregone conclusion that it was time to be a small business owner.

How did her feelings go from one of platonic comfortableness to attracted botheredness? *Oh yes, I've always found him attractive.* It was impossible not

to notice as they had got older how he'd topped out at a comfortable six-foot-three-inches, or how well he'd started to fill out that tall frame as the trappings of adolescence wore off. What had changed, though? Was it one look, one incidental graze of skin? Her face grew warm as she flushed all the way from her roots to her toes, her skin prickling in gooseflesh as she thought about the kiss last night. She had never gotten wet before while thinking of Greyson. *That does not sound like a worry stone.*

She took a deep breath to brace herself as she pulled open the door to The Olde Town Eatery, their usual lunch locale, knowing Annabelle would already be there. One look and she'd know.

"Hi, Pru," Annabelle said distractedly as she glanced up from her laptop on the table. "I'm just going to—" The frantic key clacks stopped abruptly as Annabelle did a double take after seeing Prudence's face. "Woah." She slammed the laptop lid closed. "Something happened. Tell me everything." She knew.

Prudence grimaced as she pulled out the diner chair and sat with a defeated sigh. "What gave me away?" she questioned her friend.

"You look like a cross between a satisfied hummingbird and a..." Annabelle scanned her up and down. "...scared hummingbird?" she finished with a questioning shrug. "And this has nothing to do with Mrs. Crenshaw's cat this time." She tented her fingers and raised her eyebrows, slowly sitting back in her chair when Prudence failed to explain, well, anything.

As moments stretched on, Annabelle's leveling gaze caused Prudence's face to slowly heat until she was sure it was the same red as her hair, before she finally burst out, "I made out with Greyson last night." She covered her face with her hands. "It was so hot, and I can't stop thinking about it," she said, her voice muffled through her fingers. "Like, I'm still melting on the inside when I think about it, hot."

Annabelle gave a low chuckle. "Well, it's about damn time, Pru."

Prudence pulled her hands away from her face. "What?"

"You guys are meant to be. A couple. Friends to lovers to soulmates."

Prudence sat shaking her head, frowning. "What am I missing? We are *friends*. We've always been just friends—"

"Yeah," Annabelle interrupted, "friends who want to bang each other's brains out."

Prudence felt her face heat to yet another alarming shade of red as the waiter arrived at their table just in time to overhear this last statement. Not

giving any indication other than a slight uptick of his lip that he'd heard Annabelle's words, the waiter plowed on with reciting the daily special.

"We'll take two of those and two glasses of red wine," Annabelle decided, noting the waiter's name. "Thanks, Jason." She handed him the menus before he walked away. "He must be new."

"Hold on, sister. This is all strange for me. And it's only *noon*. I can't have a glass of wine."

"Really? I think having a make-out sesh with your 'good buddy'—Prudence rolled her eyes at Annabelle's use of air quotes—"then having to explain it to me is reason enough to have a glass." Annabelle paused. "I see the way you look at Greyson. You might not have acknowledged it to yourself yet, but you definitely have feelings for him."

"Feelings of friendship!"

"Why are you fighting this?" Annabelle asked. "I know an HEA when I see one, and you two are destined for a great HEA."

"Yes, I know, I know, you're a novelist masquerading as a journalist." They fell into silence. "But," Prudence said softly, "this is not how I envisioned my happily ever after."

Annabelle laughed. "Most people's happily ever after would include being with someone who wanted to bang their brains out."

Prudence closed her eyes and tipped her face to the ceiling in embarrassment as Jason came back with the glasses of wine just in time to hear Annabelle's last statement. Again.

She blew out her breath at Jason's hasty exit. "You can't possibly forget that Greyson's personal life has been anything but. We all know the details of almost every starlet he's dated since he'd been in L.A. Like, intimate details."

"Yes, but who does he call to share his life with?" Annabelle leaned forward. "You. You're the one he always goes to, the one that he always comes back to when those relationships inevitably fail. And vice versa, I believe. How long can you two actually go without talking to each other?" she questioned, the look on Prudence's face was probably answer enough. She shrugged, leaning back and taking a sip of wine. "You two have been orbiting each other since you hit puberty, just waiting for the time to come when you can finally collide."

"You forget, that kind of collision can knock someone so off course they can never find their way back."

"Well"—Annabelle laughed—"it's still pretty apparent that you want to

bang each other's brains out. Your own big bang can still happen, and it will be extraordinary."

Prudence shifted lower in her seat as she noticed Jason standing next to their table. Because of course he was.

"Jason," Annabelle chided, "you're making quite a habit of this."

He deposited their entrees, but grinned as he walked away, much to Prudence's eternal chagrin.

They briefly sat in silence as they ate before Prudence spoke. "Chuck is taking me bowling tonight. I have to tell him."

"Oh, poor Chuck, he never stood a chance."

"That's not fair. I could have never imagined this happening. Chuck and I have been together long enough that we're both comfortable with how things are. There's no reason he should've thought that an old friend could come between us," Prudence said even as she remembered their conversation at the clinic. "And there *is* nothing between us! It was *one* kiss that won't be repeated."

Annabelle gave Prudence a smirk. "Kisses that are as hot as you're saying yours were are always repeated." She pointed with her fork for emphasis. "Always. You can't cool that kind flame, you just have to keep adding fuel to the fire. There's too much history with Greyson not to see where this takes you."

"I have a history with Chuck. I have a *present* with Chuck."

"Your present with Chuck is stale and you know it. You've only been together a year and you go bowling for your date? Really?"

"There is nothing wrong with bowling."

"There's *everything* wrong with bowling. That's one step away from Bar Bingo Saturday's."

"I like bingo," Prudence groused under her breath, then groaned. "Listen to me! I like bowling and bingo. How well would that go over in L.A.? 'Hey, Wyatt Reed, would you like to go bowling with us? Bingo on Saturday? You'd be delighted? Of course you would!'"

"You're thinking about moving to L.A. with Greyson?" Annabelle raised her eyebrows. "That's a big step."

"There are no steps. No steps are being taken. My feet are firmly in place."

"This is the way I see it." Annabelle held up one hand and started counting with her fingers. "One, you and Greyson have been moving toward this moment since college. Two, you've built a solid friendship that I think can

withstand a lot. Three, he's going to be here through the Fall Festival, but he won't stay here in Amber Falls forever. Four, which means you have some time to see where this goes. And five, if it's not quite what you thought, you'll have some time apart." She nodded, clearly pleased with her logic.

"I'm glad you have this all figured out!" Prudence exclaimed.

"Thank you, I try," Annabelle said, semi-sarcastically. "By the way, you never told me how Greyson's reacting to all of this? Is he taking the fact that he had a hot make-out session with his lifelong best friend as badly as you are?"

"Worse," Prudence mumbled, closing her eyes briefly. "He doesn't even remember."

Annabelle's fork clattered to her plate, and she blinked her eyes rapidly. "What?"

"You know. Concussion. Brain injury. He doesn't remember the speech, or the kiss or the cuddling."

"Wow, you should've led with that."

"Sorry." Prudence reacted angrily. "I have a lot on my mind. By the way, how is your love life going, if I may ask?" She threw back at Annabelle, most uncharacteristically.

"That's not fair, Pru. I think you know that." Thunderclouds appeared over Annabelle's head and the temperature in the room rose at least ten degrees. "I've had enough on my plate with the issues at the newspaper over the last year, trying to keep things afloat, and now I have to deal with that bastard Sebastian Locke on a daily basis."

Prudence reached out and grabbed Annabelle's hand, squeezing. "Oh, Annabelle, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean that."

Annabelle squeezed back, sighing. "I know, Pru." She let go suddenly, shooting to her feet. "Oh shit! What time is it?" She looked at her watch. "I said I'd be back already with coffee that his lordship humbly requested I pick up before our big meeting with the Locke Publishing Board of Directors that starts in ten minutes. Like I'm his secretary or something." She downed the rest of her wine. "I gotta go!"

Prudence stood as well. "I'll pay the bill, then get the coffee and bring it to the Bee. At least you won't be late to the meeting. I'll sneak it in, he won't even know I'm there. What do you want?"

"The usual for me. Some sort of soy, non-fat concoction for the duke. I'll text it to you in a minute." Annabelle hugged Prudence before walking to the

door. "I owe you."

Prudence sat after Annabelle had left and reached for her wallet. Jason came back over to the table carrying the bill and she held out cash. "Jason," she said gravely, "I have included a large tip under the stipulation that you *never* talk about what you overheard at this table today." She pulled back the money as he reached for it. "Are we understood?"

"Yes, ma'am." He reached out and took the money. "I sincerely hope you come again," he said as he turned to walk away, with a wink and a smile. "Repeatedly."

Still feeling the pink on her cheeks, she pushed out of the diner and stepped quickly across the street to Books and Beans. Prudence smiled as she walked to the counter, seeing Devlin hard at work. "Hi, Dev."

"Hey, Prudence," Devlin responded, turning around, her bohemian skirt swirling. "What can I get for you?"

Prudence's phone buzzed with a message from Annabelle. *Perfect timing.*

The count would like a blond, soy, pumpkin spice, no whip, no cinnamon, extra hot latte. Go figure he's into blondes!

Prudence laughed and read the order back to Devlin. "A black house blend for Annabelle and I'll have a vanilla latte, please."

"Sure thing! That will be fifteen-twenty-six."

Prudence handed her a twenty. "No change."

"Hey, thanks, I appreciate it."

"Annabelle told me you're going to have a cider stand at the hay bale maze next week." Prudence leaned over the counter, trying to covertly smell the plate of blueberry scones.

Devlin smiled and poured out the black coffee. "I am! I'm excited to be a part of the Fall Festival."

"We're lucky to have you, I hope you know that?" Prudence said sincerely, once again glad that their friend group had expanded to include Devlin. "And don't forget ladies' night on Saturday. Annabelle is getting the wine."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything." Devlin handed Prudence the drink carrier and put a scone in a bag. "On the house, friend. I'll see you later, Pru."

"You know me so well." Prudence grabbed the coffee and scone off the counter. She headed the few blocks to the Bee, mentally crossing her fingers that she could slip in and out unnoticed by Sebastian.

Prudence backed up to push open the door of the editor's office when she reached it but stopped at the sound of raised voices, leaving the door slightly ajar. She turned her head toward a large mirror on the wall and saw the reflection of Sebastian as he stood from his desk and Annabelle looking ready for a fight. *Oh, shit.*

"What the fuck is on my front page, Winters?" Sebastian shouted, slamming a copy of the Amber Falls Bee on his desk.

Annabelle narrowed her eyes, stood slowly and seethed, "The Fall Festival, Mr. Locke."

"It's not for another week, why is it on my front page *now*?"

"Let's skip the part where I tell you that you should be approving each copy before it prints, shall we?" Annabelle took a step forward. "You live in Amber Falls, and the Fall Festival is the biggest thing to happen each year. It's bigger than Christmas, it's bigger than the fourth of July, and every step leading up to it is on the front page. Every pumpkin spice concoction, every new cookie recipe, every float design rumor. Every detail, every year—"

Sebastian curled his lip and all but snarled, interrupting Annabelle. "Everything is a damn celebration. It's enough that we have a monthly two page spread on baby births."

Annabelle continued, undeterred by Sebastian's interjection, moving forward so she was leaning over the desk "—you will have weeks of Winter Wonderland, days of the Summer Solstice and everyone will be chomping at the bit for details of the Spring Fling after months of bitter cold."

Sebastian blinked rapidly, his eyes darting from Annabelle's eyes to her lips and back again. "No, I refuse."

"You won't refuse. If you refuse, the Bee loses readers. You don't want the Bee to lose readers."

"I can't justify putting this on the front page over press that's actually newsworthy!"

"What are you not understanding here, Mr. Locke? You're not in Atlanta anymore, you're in small town America. This is what people here want to see, they want to know that the Fall Festival is starting. They want to know that Bubba Johnson was arrested for doing doughnuts in the 7-Eleven parking lot. They want to know every time Mrs. Crenshaw's cat ends up in a tree and to see pictures of the handsome firemen who rescued it." She stopped to take a breath, moving backward, appearing slightly surprised that they were now only scant inches from each other. "You want to know why? They're lucky

enough to not live in a major city, where murder and crime is all that's newsworthy. If you took a second to think about that, you might just know how lucky you are to live here, too."

Sebastian turned to the window, throwing his hands in the air. Then, Annabelle caught Prudence's reflection in the mirror, her eyes widening, seeing the coffees in her hand. Annabelle slowly backed toward the door, her hands reaching behind her. Prudence transferred the coffee to Annabelle's outstretched hands and backed out of view hearing Sebastian mutter, "Maybe I do know."

Turning back toward Annabelle, obviously surprised to see the coffees in her hand, Sebastian asked, "Where the hell did those come from?"

Annabelle smirked. "Ask and you shall receive, sir."

Sebastian slowly raised his gaze to meet Annabelle's. "Say that again."

Annabelle's smirk faltered. "Ask and you shall receive, sir." Her voice turned slightly demure.

"Get out of my office." Sebastian turned back to his desk.

Annabelle exited the office, almost running into Prudence.

"I owe you one," Annabelle winked.

Chapter Sixteen

Greyson paced the floor of his bedroom. What was he going to do? He'd finally kissed Prudence like he'd always wanted to. It had been so good that he'd been instantly aroused, wanting nothing more than to take her right there. It had been an epic battle of wills not to push her panties aside and take her, make her his in every sense.

His initial plan to just win Prudence over seemed so easy now, but that was before he had Chuck to deal with. If she hadn't been with Chuck, last night would've been so different. Even now, just thinking about it, he wanted her. But Chuck. He had to tell Prudence how he felt and give her a choice. *Chuck or me. And what, Greyson? What if she doesn't want you?* His mind was whirling inside his head. *Then I'll be happy for my best friend, I'll go back to L.A., shoot my next film, and try to find my own happiness.* He shook his head and ran his hands through his hair. *Be realistic, Greyson, she is your bliss.*

Greyson, shower and dressed. He knew he should be in bed, but he was much better, just tired, even though he'd slept through the morning and most of the afternoon. As far as on-set injuries went, he'd had worse. Popping a few Tylenols and downing them with water, he put on his watch, grabbed his phone off his bedside table, his wallet and keys off the dresser from his closet then headed over to Finnegan's to talk with Gabe.

The walk to downtown gave Greyson a chance to appreciate being home. He missed this more than he had realized. Being able to walk to where he needed to go, the lush trees, actually being able to see the changing of the seasons. Seeing his brother, his friends. It was time to make a change.

Acting was fun but it was not where his heart was anymore. It was here in this place with these people. With Prudence. He didn't think he could come home and not be with Prudence, to watch her with another man, but he needed to do something. He could talk a big game about being okay with going back to L.A. and resuming his life, but he knew he'd be miserable. A swing and a miss, close but no cigar, back to the drawing board and whatever other idioms fit.

Greyson approached his brother's bar and his thoughts of himself vanished as he looked at what Gabe had created. He was so damn proud of Gabe, the business he had started, the pursuit of his passion, the man he'd become. He didn't tell his brother that often enough.

Gabe was behind the bar, leaning against it, watching Chip and Joanna quibble over shiplap. A wise woman had told him that Joanna always got her shiplap. Someone should fill Chip in. To be fair, though, it fit the house well. Gabe had used it as the ceiling and an accent wall in the renovated kitchen. Greyson had been skeptical about the farmhouse aesthetic in a colonial, but it truly had been a farmhouse once upon a time, and anything was better than the old 1980s decor.

It was late for lunch but there were still a few patrons scattered throughout the pub. Greyson slid onto the bar stool nearest to him and knocked on the shiny wood top three times, once again admiring Gabe's handiwork, knowing he'd built the bar top.

Gabe turned his head and smiled. "Hey man, what are you doing here? The doctor's orders were for rest."

"Yeah well, I'm good, and you know, as soon as someone tells you to do something you want to do the exact opposite."

"Are you sure it's not wanting to get away from the smell of Prudence on your pillow?" Gabe asked with a wide Cheshire-cat grin.

"Can it, Gabe."

"Oh, come on, Grey. I'll admit I was surprised to see you two so cozy this morning."

Greyson shook his head, still not believing it had really happened. "You and me both."

"I feel like there are some things to unpack here. Let me get us some beers and a couple of sandwiches."

Gabe went back to the kitchen, and Greyson found himself entranced again by Chip and Joanna. He let his mind wander, thinking about the house he'd seen on Gabe's block that was for sale and what renovations might be needed. Was he ready to buy a house in Amber Falls? He'd all but accepted the teaching position, but that was before he'd known about Prudence and Chuck.

Gabe came back to the bar and set a plate in front of Greyson—a Philly cheesesteak and fries. He inhaled the onion and peppery goodness. It smelled amazing.

“Good Lord, Gabe, who do you have cooking back there?”

“Oh, man, Leo is a primo cook, right? I think I get half my business from people coming in off the street from smelling his food alone.”

Greyson dug in, his mouth watering as he realized he hadn’t eaten a full meal since he’d gone out with Gabe at Wood Fire after everyone else had ditched him the night he arrived.

“This is amazing, like authentic Philly.”

“I know, I lucked out finding this guy,” Gabe said, having already finished half of his own sandwich.

“So, what are your plans for this place?”

“I’d like to expand, make a true restaurant area, add some outdoor seating. The gastropub has been successful, but I think adding an eatery element would take it to the next level. Like I said, Leo is so great, people wander in just because of the food. I’d love to have a family friendly space.”

Greyson nodded in agreement. “Whatever you do next will be great.”

“The building next door will be for sale in the next few months. It would be perfect to have a restaurant in.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Maybe you could find some investors? Have them try Leo’s food and they’ll be in. I know I am.”

Gabe was clearly surprised at Greyson’s words. “Really? You’d want to invest in a place you’d almost never see?”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you about that.” Greyson turned to Gabe. “I’ve been presented with an opportunity to move home and take on the drama department at the university.”

“No shit, Grey, that’s awesome! Are you going to do it?”

“I want to. When I started really contemplating the opportunity, I started forming a plan in my mind and it pretty much revolved around me telling Pru how I feel.”

“And I take it you did that last night?”

“No, man, I fucked that up so bad. She woke me up last night and she was this...this...vision in my T-shirt. It was like my dreams had become reality, or maybe like I was still in a dream. I had no words, none of my own thoughts could be formed into words. The only thing I could think to tell her was the monologue from the script that Nadia had sent.”

“No.”

“On top of that, she’s with Chuck. I had no business telling her anything, let alone holding her and kissing her the way I did.”

“Oh no.”

“Yeah, and to make it worse, I acted like I didn’t remember it this morning. I didn’t know what to do and I acted like nothing happened.”

“This just keeps getting more stupid.” Gabe looked properly mortified.

“You should’ve seen her face, Gabe. Like I had totally gutted her.”

“She didn’t say anything?”

“Not a word.”

“Well.” Gabe thought for a second before he said, “I’m offended for her, Grey. You owe her more than that, she deserves so much better. What are you going to do?”

“I’ll see her Monday at the maze. If I don’t talk to her about it before, I will for sure talk with her then.”

Gabe sat in silence, his expression one of anger. “You damn well better, Grey. Why the hell would you pretend it never happened?”

“I don’t know! I panicked. I couldn’t think straight, I just had a concussion and my head hurt and I wasn’t thinking straight, and her thighs were totally bare...” Their silence filled the bar. Greyson knew what he’d done was terrible, but he couldn’t stand Gabe being mad at him, so he did what he always did. Changed the subject. “Do you know anything about the house for sale on your street?” he asked, as much to break the silence as to really ask him about the house.

“Yeah, it’s pretty run-down. From what I heard the couple had lived there for like fifty years but didn’t have enough money for the upkeep lately, so it just went into disrepair.”

“I think I’m going to buy it.”

“Oh wow, really?”

“Yeah, but I wanted to know if you could come and take a look at it with me. See how bad it really is.”

“I think you’re an idiot for what you did to Pru, but yes, I will.”

Before Greyson could answer, the whirlwind that was Annabelle dashed into the bar. “Hi, boys.”

“What’s shaking?” Gabe smiled at Annabelle.

“Hey, AB.” Greyson was distracted, fiddling with his fries, his mind already back to Prudence.

“I need some of that private collection for girl’s night, please.” Annabelle gave Gabe her biggest puppy-dog eyes.

“You know you’re always welcome to it.” Gabe nodded toward the back

room.

“The hell?” Greyson pulled himself back from his thoughts of Prudence. “I have to practically beg, and you just offer it to her?”

“She’s far more attractive than you and who can resist those eyes?”

“And,” Annabelle interjected, “I’m not the one going around kissing girls while concussed.”

Greyson’s eyes widened. He wasn’t surprised Prudence had told Annabelle what had happened, but he *was* surprised that Annabelle would call him on it so quickly, and confidently.

“Annabelle, I was wrong, but I’m going to fix it,” Greyson promised.

“Leave it to me, John McClane, you just follow your provided schedule, and everything will fall into place.” Annabelle kissed Gabe on the cheek. “Thanks, Gabe.” She turned on her heels to go into the stock room.

“Wait...” Greyson started. Annabelle turned around. “John McClane?”

“*Die Hard* is a romance movie. He did it all for the girl.”

Annabelle spun again and headed toward the backroom.

Gabe chuckled. “She has you there, bro. But are you really going to rely on one of Annabelle’s plots for this?”

“Gabe, can you think of a time in our decades long friendship, and all of the plots and schemes Annabelle has cooked up, where one has failed?”

“I took four bottles. Bye, boys.”

“Have fun and be responsible,” Gabe called.

“Always.” And Annabelle was out of the door.

“Not one. Point taken,” Gabe admitted.

Greyson started in on the rest of his sandwich. He needed to trust his friend, that the right time and place would present itself. If push came to shove, he’d see Prudence at the maze on Monday and would be damn sure that he told her exactly how he felt.

Chapter Seventeen

Prudence sat on her front porch that evening waiting for Chuck to pick her up for their bowling date. She thought about her conversation at lunch yesterday with Annabelle and her insistence that bowling as a date night was something to be frowned upon. She supposed that, after a year of dating, it was only normal to get into a comfortable routine. She was happy with the direction her and Chuck's relationship was heading...right? Wasn't that most people's relationship goals—to be with someone long enough that a comfortable routine formed?

She scuffed the toe of her shoe on the ground and sighed. Maybe she did want more. But was it with Greyson? Greyson would upend her life. She'd have to move—to do what? Live by herself in L.A. while he was God knows where doing God knows what with God knows whom? She shook her head. No, she trusted him. The gossip rags always got that part wrong. Greyson was loyal to a fault and had never cheated on a girl as far back as she remembered him dating. She wouldn't expect anything different with her. Even though there wasn't a 'her'.

Then there was what had happened with Greyson after his concussion. As much as she'd thought about it, gone over the details in her head, she couldn't bring herself to feel any regret over it. There was guilt, sure, but no regret. She couldn't change the fact that she felt alive, like her nerve endings were on fire, when she let her mind wander back to that night. Despite Annabelle's belief that Greyson was her soulmate, Prudence was cautious, hesitant in thinking it would be a good idea to jump into something with Greyson.

Didn't Chuck deserve better? She shook her head. No, she couldn't—wouldn't—base any of her decisions on what she thought someone else deserved. Plus, the only thing she'd heard from Greyson since that night were a few texts on how he was doing. There was no acknowledgment that he remembered anything about the most perfect kiss of her life.

Chuck squealed into her driveway in the newest Ford model he was selling

at the dealership. He bounded out of the car and up her porch steps with the kind of enthusiasm reserved only for car salesmen.

“Hey, babe,” Chuck greeted Prudence along with a peck on the cheek.

She gritted her teeth at the pet name she’d never liked. Prudence had told Chuck more than once that the term ‘babe’ was not an endearment to her—rather it made her think of a talking pig. It didn’t matter to Chuck. He just told her she was cuter than a talking pig and continued on.

“You ready?”

“I’m always ready to bowl.” Prudence swung her purse as she walked to Chuck’s car.

“I thought we could do something else tonight. Maybe dinner and a movie?”

“Really?” Prudence stopped, her hand on the door. “We always bowl on Friday.”

“Well, tonight we dine, babe,” Chuck said, coming around to the passenger side to open her door.

“Thank you.” Prudence slid into her seat, deposited her purse on the floor and clicked her seatbelt, waiting for Chuck to get into the car. “Can we cool it on ‘babe’, though?” she asked. “You know I prefer not to be called that.”

“Hey,” Chuck whined, causing Prudence’s left eye to twitch, “I’m trying to be romantic here. Dinner and a movie!”

“Yes, I know.” Prudence sat for a moment in silence while Chuck pulled out of her driveway. She thought that dinner and a movie were probably the least effort someone could make, but she just said, “I appreciate the effort.”

“I hope so. I may not be a great action star, but I can pull off some stunts of my own.”

Prudence’s heart started to pound with a dreadful rhythm. “I’m sorry... I’m...not sure what you mean by that?” He couldn’t possibly know what had happened between her and Greyson. Couldn’t possibly. Not that anything happened. Really. Nothing much had happened.

Chuck laughed and pulled into the restaurant parking lot. The most cookie cutter Americana place in town and just around the corner from her house.

“You know—Greyson. Comes flying back to town, all Hollywooded out, expecting everyone to bow to him like they did in college.”

“I don’t think that’s what he expects at all, Chuck, and you know that.” Prudence let his words sink in. “Wait, you’re only doing this because Greyson’s back? You wouldn’t have wanted to have a romantic date night

otherwise?” She unbuckled her seatbelt and turned to him. “We’re only here because I stayed with him after his concussion,” she stated, shaking her head in disbelief, pushing down the guilt trying to rise.

“I mean, partly?” Chuck was oddly seeming to question his own judgment. “I mean, no. I really wanted to do this. Why are you getting so mad? We’re at a nice place to eat and are going to see the new Samantha Crane movie after.”

Prudence cringed at that, considering Greyson had just gone to the awards ceremony with her. Did Chuck know this and was getting in a slight dig at her? No, he wasn’t that clever, unfortunately. *Maybe I’m not giving him enough credit.* It could be entirely possible that he just needed this little push to liven up their love life a bit. She noted that they were the only people in the parking lot that she could see. *Let’s spice it up a bit*—prove to herself that it was Chuck she wanted and the incident with Greyson was just a fluke, coincidences brought on by close proximity after a prolonged absence. *Let’s see if Chuck can set my nerves on fire.*

She leaned over and pulled him closer by his tie. “I’m not mad, Chuck. In fact I’m pretty damn hot right now.” Prudence turned Chuck’s head toward her and kissed him.

“Holy, shit, Pru!” Chuck stammered.

“We’ve never had car sex before. What’s the car dealer version of the mile high club?”

“The mile long club?” He laughed, reaching over to her.

Prudence leaned in and continued kissing Chuck. She was *definitely* not thinking about why she was so worked up. For sure there were no thoughts in her mind about Greyson, how she had watched him in the shower with his hard cock in his hand, stroking harder and harder until he came with a groan. She now moaned at the imagery in her mind, remembering his soft lips, how she had felt his erection, hard against her in bed. Chuck, rightly so, believed this was all for him.

Prudence stopped and pulled away. She knew this was a bad idea. No matter how she tried to keep what happened with Greyson out of her mind and focus on Chuck, she realized she hadn’t been able to focus on Chuck long before Greyson came back into town. All of her insistence with Annabelle yesterday afternoon at the diner now seemed like deflective reasoning.

“What’s wrong, babe?”

Prudence shook her head, not knowing what to say.

Chuck sighed, his hands gripping the steering wheel. “You know you’re a great girl, Pru.”

Prudence turned her head sharply toward Chuck. “What?”

“I just—” Chuck stopped, obviously trying to gather his thoughts. “There should...there should be more.”

“I don’t understand.” Prudence’s brow furrowed, even though she knew where this was headed.

Chuck slammed a hand on the wheel. “More, Pru! More than Friday bowling. More than just having fun.” He ran his hands through his hair. “Greyson and I talked the day of the commercial.”

Prudence’s heart started racing. “About what?”

“Nothing in particular at first, just guy talk, but it became clear pretty quickly that he’s not a fan of us seeing each other. He has this notion that we’re just having fun and it’s nothing serious.” Chuck stared ahead for a long moment, Prudence letting the silence settle over the car, not wanting to be the one to say what had to be said next. Chuck reached over and took her hand. “I may have led him to believe that, but...I think he’s right.”

Prudence immediately felt as though a fog had lifted. The fog that she’d been in since the night of Greyson’s concussion. She gripped Chuck’s hand.

“You’re more than someone to just have fun with, Pru. You’re someone’s ‘forever girl’, just not mine. You and Greyson have always been the ultimate couple, even though you’ve never actually been a couple. That’s how meant to be you are for each other. You’re already a better couple than you and I have ever been. Could ever be.”

“It hasn’t been all bad.” Prudence laughed, feeling lighter than she had in years. “My bowling game has never been better.”

The look of relief from Chuck was almost palpable. He squeezed her hand and let go. “I’ll drive you home.”

“That’s okay.” Prudence reached for the door handle and opened the door, sliding out. “You took me to the closest restaurant from my house. I can walk the block home. I think I need to be alone right now.”

Chuck was deep down a good guy, and they indeed had had fun. He’d find his forever girl, someday.

“Okay, babe.”

Prudence slammed the door and leaned to the open window. “No more ‘babe’, Chuck.” She turned to head home, the balls of her feet barely touching the ground as she almost skipped, her scrambled thoughts over the

last forty-eight hours finally falling into place. Maybe she and Greyson were on the same page, and it wasn't just the concussion that had prompted them to act on their long-simmering feelings. There was still a lot to unpack, but with Chuck no longer in the picture, things were starting to progress more than they'd ever let them since they'd come into adulthood.

Sighing, she unlocked her door, glad her Ben and Jerry's was stocked. Thankfully tomorrow was girls' night. She knew Annabelle and Devlin would want as many details as possible and would be ready to hear them over a glass of wine. Then, she had to figure out how to make Greyson remember.

Chapter Eighteen

“It’s done,” Prudence stated, sinking into Annabelle’s couch next to Devlin.

“Oh, thank God, Pru,” Annabelle said and handed Prudence a glass of red wine. “I honestly wasn’t sure if you would.”

“Wait, you broke up with Chuck?” Devlin asked.

“*He* broke up with *me*,” Prudence clarified.

“Oh wow,” Annabelle said. “I’d have loved to have been a fly on that wall.”

“Technically”—Prudence felt like she should have a pair of glasses on to push up her nose—“it would’ve been a car window, if you must know.”

Devlin snorted into her glass, quickly covering her mouth with her hand. “He broke up with you in the car?”

Annabelle let out a guffaw. “Oh dang, you didn’t even make it to bowling?”

“Nope. It was so terrible. He took me to that little Americana place by my house. It was so close I walked home after.” Prudence thought about going light on the details of what happened leading to the break-up—Chuck was a decent guy, and she didn’t really want anyone to know what happened—but this was ladies’ night, after all...

“I thought—” Prudence tried to think of how to describe the pre-break-up make-out session so it was less embarrassing to Chuck. “Okay, this doesn’t go anywhere but between us, right?”

Both Devlin and Annabelle raised their hands in a promise.

“Well, I thought I’d try to see if we still had a spark, anything that would make sense for me to stay with Chuck.” She felt oddly reluctant to talk about it, though she and Annabelle had shared many details of their private lives with each other. Maybe it was because Devlin was there. She was such a new addition to their friend group, she hadn’t really felt her out for how comfortable she was with...sensitive topics, but now was as good a time as any.

“So, we’re in the parking lot of the restaurant, and I decide to start fooling around. I’m fully prepared to give some car head—”

“Prudence!” Annabelle mock gasped.

“Oh please. I’d have gone through with it, I guess I’ve been going through with it for the past year, but it just wasn’t right. And, of course, I couldn’t stop thinking about what happened with Greyson...” She thought back to the parking lot yesterday, her thoughts broken into by Devlin.

“Wait, what? What happened with Greyson?”

Prudence turned pink, her thoughts moving from the parking lot to Greyson’s house. Well, if there was such a thing as oversharing it was about to happen now.

“Oh, Devlin,” Prudence said. Annabelle was sitting and shaking with laughter. “I just don’t know. Greyson and I have been friends for our whole lives, then suddenly this trip seems different. The morning of the commercial I caught him, uh, shall we say pleasuring himself in the shower.”

Devlin’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. Prudence sighed. She knew *that* image would pop into Devlin’s mind at the absolute worst moment.

“And...and...um”—Devlin stuttered—“you just happened to be in his bathroom? Seems coincidental.”

Prudence giggled, downing her glass of wine, not even having to hold her hand out as Annabelle refilled it. “It’s not like I just came in from the street and walked into his bathroom, Devlin! Gabe was in the kitchen, and he said Greyson was upstairs, so I went up there.” She paused to think, putting her hand to her chin in the exaggerated fashion of someone who was quickly getting tipsy. “I guess I didn’t have to go *into* the bathroom.” She giggled again. “I don’t know why I did.”

“You know exactly why you did it.” Annabelle finished off the first bottle of wine and stood. “I’m going to grab another bottle.”

“There’s more?” asked Devlin. “These don’t seem like coincidences to me, Prudence.”

Prudence pondered Devlin’s words. What was a coincidence anyway? Seemingly unconnected things happening at the same time to make it appear to be connected. But the incidents that happened weren’t as unconnected as she may have previously thought. She knew that she and Greyson had danced around each other for quite a while, distance making it easier to put off any discussion or any acknowledgment of what they felt. Perhaps she was

pushing the issue on this trip. He'd been away for so long, and she didn't know when he'd be coming back. Her subconscious was making the decision for her.

"I don't know, Devlin. I heard the water running. Maybe he was brushing his teeth. Maybe I was curious?"

"Damn right you were," Annabelle hollered from the kitchen. "Tell her what happened after his concussion."

"Can I finish my story, please?" Prudence yelled back, getting the sound of a cork popping as her only reply. "Anyway, after his concussion I was there to wake him up when it was needed, to make sure that everything went okay, being a good friend, but he woke up in the middle of the night and, well, we made out."

To Devlin's credit, she seemed unphased by Prudence's words. "So let me get this straight. In the course of twenty-four hours, less than twenty-four hours really, you caught Greyson masturbating, he gets a head injury while starring in a commercial for your boyfriend's business, you proceed to make out with him after this head injury, only to then break up with your boyfriend."

"I don't think his concussion had anything—"

"Oh yes it did," Annabelle called in a sing-song voice from the kitchen.

"How long does it take to get a bottle of wine?" Prudence said, her sentence going from a bellow to an even tone as Annabelle appeared back in the room.

"Snacks," Annabelle stated, as if that should've been completely obvious. "We're going to need snacks."

"Oh, thank you." Devlin reached for a slice of cheese and cracker. "So how does his concussion tie into the two of you fooling around?"

"He doesn't remember it," Prudence mumbled, pretending to be engrossed in the science of choosing the right cheese-to-cracker ratio.

"I'm sorry, what?"

Prudence let out a whoosh of air. "He doesn't remember it, has no recollection. He doesn't remember the speech or the kissing or the—" She stopped, wanting to hold a few details back for herself.

"Or the what?" Devlin questioned.

"Anything," Prudence admitted. "He doesn't remember anything."

"You've broken up with Chuck now, though, should there be an issue at all?" Understanding dawned on Devlin's face. "Unless...you're not in love

with Chuck, are you?”

“No! I don’t think I was ever in love with Chuck. There just wasn’t any romance between us.”

“You knew Chuck didn’t have a romantic bone in his body when you got together,” Annabelle said. “In fact, now that I think of it, you probably liked that about him. You knew things wouldn’t get too messy, so when the break-up eventually happened it would be no muss, no fuss. Which is exactly how it happened.”

“A journalist and a psychiatrist, who knew?” Devlin laughed while shaking her head.

“You’re obviously right. I knew whatever we had would be casual and ending it would be easy. What I didn’t know was that Greyson would be involved at all in the reason we ended it.” Annabelle’s eyebrows rose almost into her hairline at Prudence’s last statement. “I didn’t!”

“All right, I believe that. So, what are we going to do about Greyson?”

“He doesn’t remember anything. We’ve already gone over this.” Prudence huffed.

“Well, now you have to make him remember.” Annabelle closed her eyes in thought. “The hay bale maze!” she exclaimed, popping her eyes back open.

Devlin jumped in surprise. Prudence looked intrigued. “Tell me more.”

“So, the volunteers will get to the maze about an hour before it opens to make sure everything is ready.” Annabelle was plotting. “If we can keep them distracted, even for just a little bit, you and Greyson can go into the maze and at least get a chance to talk.”

“I like it. You can distract them by saying you want to...interview the volunteers for the Bee.”

“Why the maze?” Devlin asked. “You could just go talk to him tonight.”

Annabelle shook her head. “Even though this is Greyson’s hometown and people for the most part leave him alone now, there are still eyes everywhere.”

“Mrs. Crenshaw,” Prudence interjected, both girls nodding.

“They’re both going to be at the maze tomorrow, so why not give them a little privacy for their discussion. I’ll already be interviewing the landowner and taking pictures of the pumpkin patch, so it’s not a big stretch that I’d want to interview the volunteers as well.” Annabelle nodded decisively, seeing the plan take form in her mind. “While they get ready, I’ll send you and Greyson into the maze, to, oh I don’t know, make sure all the paths lead

to the exit?”

“Yes! You can say a volunteer got stuck in there, and you want them to double-check the paths.” Devlin clapped her hands, getting into the scheming mood. “Before the interviews send them over to my apple cider stand, and I can keep them busy with a cup of cider or coffee while you get the trap set up.”

“Then I’ll block the exit so when the paths do converge you’ll be together.” Annabelle smiled, obviously pleased with their plan. “I love it. Nothing can go wrong.”

“Famous last words.” Devlin laughed.

“Sounds like a good plan to me.” Prudence’s eyes gleamed as she turned to Annabelle. “Now. Let’s talk about something else, please. How are things going with our friend Sebastian?”

Annabelle gave her a side eye. “Whatever do you mean?”

“Yes!” Devlin exclaimed, leaning forward. “What *do* you mean?”

“Considering what happened in Atlanta—” Prudence started.

Devlin raised her hand. “I need to know what happened in Atlanta.”

Annabelle rolled her eyes. “Nothing happened in Atlanta.”

“Everything happened in Atlanta.” Prudence pointed out.

“Fine,” Annabelle bit out. “Long story short, I met Sebastian in Atlanta. A friend did me a favor and got me a meeting with Locke Publishing. I pitched an idea, he did not like the idea and let me know in no uncertain terms.”

A silence filled the room for the first time since Prudence got there. She wasn’t sure why Annabelle didn’t want to go into any more details, considering how she’d just opened up about Chuck and Greyson.

Devlin broke the silence with a snort. “With an ass like that, I wouldn’t get any work done.”

Prudence laughed. “I knew there was a reason I liked you, Devlin.” Her attention went back to Annabelle. “Now tell me what’s really going on.”

“Obviously, Pru, he’s fucking gorgeous.” Annabelle was acting like she was bored with this conversation, her tone turning dry as tinder. “Every time I look at him, I have to change my panties. If I had my way, every day would be a fuck fest. And we would fuck on every available surface. I bet he has those plant hooks in his office so he can string up a sex swing on a moment’s notice.”

“Oh my God!” Devlin covered her face with her hands and fell off the couch, laughing.

Prudence knew Annabelle too well. She settled back into the couch with her wine—Annabelle was just getting started.

“You know all those mirrors in his office? I bet he asked for them specifically so he could see his specimen of a body from all angles while he fucked. And don’t be fooled by the display cases filled with all those so-called treasures he collected from his travels. Sex toys. I guarantee you, they all are. Why do you think he kept that old publisher’s desk, when his decor is clearly postmodern? So he can get head during the day with no one being the wiser. It’s all I can do to not think about his head between my thighs, arching against his mouth on that desk. His couch is leather. Again, another clash, it’s for easy clean-up. Don’t get me started on the wet bar—”

Prudence interrupted, “I just wanted to know how he was as a boss,” she said with a completely straight face.

Annabelle took a sip of her wine. “Oh. Well.” She cocked her head. “He’s fine.”

Devlin howled on the floor, clutching her side.

“Don’t think you’re going to get out of this, Devlin,” Prudence threatened. “Ladies’ night is all about the oversharing. We love a good overshare.”

“I just moved here. I don’t have anything to share.”

“You’ve been here over a year, that isn’t an excuse, and you know it,” Annabelle said, throwing a pillow onto the floor for Devlin.

Prudence thought back to the coffee shop earlier that week. She remembered Devlin’s face when she mentioned Gabe—something had crossed her features. If she hadn’t been staring right at Devlin when it had happened she would’ve missed it. As it was, she’d caught the shadow of emotion. It was time to figure out why.

“You know, Gabe is single,” Prudence said casually.

The same flicker crossed Devlin’s face. She hid it quickly but darted a glance to Prudence like she knew she was caught. It was still a long moment before she spoke, the words coming out softly.

“Gabe and I have met before.”

Both Annabelle’s and Prudence’s jaws comically dropped at the same time.

“We may have had a one-night stand before I left Boston.”

“What?” Annabelle screeched.

“You didn’t think to tell us in the year you’ve been here?” Prudence exclaimed.

Devlin sighed. “It’s because I knew you’d overreact exactly like this.”

“I don’t think this is an overreaction, lady,” Prudence said.

“Maybe a slight one.” Devlin pulled herself to a cross-legged position on the floor. “There’s not a lot to tell, really. I didn’t even know his name.”

“Definitely a one-night stand. That’s why you didn’t know he was Greyson’s brother?” Annabelle asked.

“Something like that. It was right before I left Boston, I met him at a bar, and he spent the night. It was one night, no strings attached, just a good time.”

“That must’ve been when he went to that Craft Brewers Conference,” Prudence stated, thinking back to the last time she knew Gabe went to Boston.

“That’s the last time I remember him going to Boston,” Annabelle echoed Prudence’s thoughts. “So, how was it?” She wiggled her eyebrows in a suggestive manner.

“It was good,” Devlin offered.

“Good? Yikes, I’d always thought Gabe would be better than ‘good,’” Annabelle said.

“Thought about it a lot, have you?” Prudence asked.

“No more than any other red-blooded female would. You haven’t?” Annabelle questioned back.

“Oh God no. He’s like my brother!”

“You would’ve said that about Greyson, once upon a time.”

“No, he was never like a brother. And we’re not talking about me anymore.”

“You’re right, we’re not.” They both turned back to Devlin. “Have you guys talked since you moved here?” Annabelle continued without waiting for Devlin to answer. “You have one night of okay sex then you move to his hometown. That would seem strange to any guy. What did you say when you saw each other here?”

“To be fair,” Devlin said, “I didn’t know he lived here, I assumed he lived in Boston. It was serendipitous that I ended up in Amber Falls. It was the only small town I found with decent property for my business, and trust me, I searched. I’d already made the decision to move from Boston before I met Gabe, and when I found Amber Falls it seemed so”—she sought the right word—“safe. And the rest is history.”

“So, what did he say when he saw you?” she asked the question again of

Devlin, noticing she hadn't answered Annabelle.

Devlin seemed embarrassed. "I ran into him one day, we talked and decided what happened between us was in the past and it would be easiest if we just moved on from it."

"I can't wait to see the look on his face when we ask him about it," Annabelle said. "Come to think of it, you're never in the same place at the same time. Are you avoiding him?"

"Oh, please, you guys, don't say anything," Devlin pleaded, coming to her knees. "Amber Falls is my fresh start. I don't want, or need, anything from my life in Boston to be a part of my life in Amber Falls."

Prudence shot a quick glance at Annabelle who imperceptibly shook her head. There was more to Devlin's story, but clearly she wasn't ready to share. Not tonight.

"You have our word, Devlin." Prudence reached out to take one of Devlin's hands on an impulse. Devlin squeezed it hard, then let go, shaking her head, as if clearing away memories that weren't welcome.

"Thanks, guys. Hey—are you working on the Bee float tomorrow?"

Annabelle nodded. "Yep, I wasn't going to, but the Marquis wants everyone there to help. You wanna come?"

"I wish I could, but I've got the shop to myself. Come on by and I'll donate coffees, though. I think you'll need all the caffeine you can get. But now," she said with a devilish grin, "I want to hear more about these sex swings Sebastian has."

Chapter Nineteen

Prudence needed the coffee Devlin had offered last night, and she needed it badly. Makeup-free and rubbing her eyes, she pulled open the door of Books and Beans. Devlin was currently alone in the shop, bright eyed and smiling. It was almost like Devlin hadn't touched a drop of alcohol last night.

"How do you not have a hangover, Devlin?" Prudence complained, holding her head to ward off the loud bell chiming above the door. It was a cheerful chime one day and a head piercing ping the next.

"Oh, I'm hung over," Devlin confided. "But as part of owning a coffee shop I'm not allowed to be anything but awake and cheerful." She smiled extra wide for emphasis. "Coffee shop creed."

"I don't remember the last time I drank so much wine." Prudence slumped onto a stool, propping her chin in her hand.

"You also probably don't remember the last time you made out with a movie star who then forgot he made out with you."

"Oh, God." Prudence groaned. "Why did you have to remind me?"

Devlin reached over and patted Prudence's shoulder across the counter. "It's not likely you're ever going to forget, my dear," she said, with sympathy.

"No, I won't." She sat in silence for a moment then straightened. "And tomorrow, I'll make damn sure he remembers everything." She thought better of sitting so fast and put her head into her hands with a moan. "But first I have to get through making this damned float today."

Devlin pulled out a bottle of aspirin from under the counter and offered it to Prudence. "Here you go. This plus caffeine will make everything better. Another tenant of the coffee shop creed."

"Thanks, Dev. I'll have that delicious CinnaBun Latte. Everyone else can get black."

Devlin laughed. "That's the spirit. How many?"

Prudence counted on her fingers. "Annabelle, Sebastian, Marcie, Pete and Mary. Five black should do it."

“Black for Sebastian, too? Are you sure?”

“I’m in no mood to find out what that man wants to drink. Annabelle likes it black, so that’s what everyone else gets. You can throw in some cream and sugar if you’re feeling especially generous.”

“No Greyson today, huh?”

“Not today. The doctor was pretty clear that he needed to rest for at least seventy-two hours.”

Devlin started pouring the coffees. “What a bummer, he finally comes home, then has to rest for three days after getting concussed. Have you talked to him at all since...the incident?”

“We may have texted last night.” Prudence avoided Devlin’s stare.

Devlin stopped. “Last night,” she stated.

“Um, yes. Or maybe it was early this morning.”

“Oh, you didn’t, Pru.”

“It was completely innocent.” Devlin shot her a look. “I swear!”

“What exactly did you talk about, young lady?”

“Well... It was really dorky. I told him that I was going to help with the Bee’s float tomorrow, if he thought he could break out and come help.”

“Okay, that’s not too bad,” Devlin said slowly.

“Umm...then I started making puns.”

“What kind of puns?” Devlin asked. “What kind of puns, Prudence?” she repeated more forcefully when Prudence didn’t answer.

“Okay, it wasn’t innocent. I made sex puns...terrible parade-related sex puns. Sex-related parade puns?”

“You didn’t!”

“I guess I did.”

“Prudence, you are so not the sex puns type of girl. What came over you?”

“Greyson almost came over me, that’s what happened! It’s like I don’t understand anything anymore. I don’t know why I did it.”

“Let me see your phone.” Devlin reached for Prudence’s phone on the counter.

“Absolutely not, Devlin.” Prudence pulled it out of reach, then thought better of it and handed it to her. “Fine. Tell me if it’s as bad as I think it is.”

Devlin took Prudence’s phone and started scrolling. “Oh no. Oh no. That’s terrible! Okay, that one’s funny. Oh, that one is not good.”

Prudence grabbed the phone back from Devlin’s hand. “I should’ve left my phone with Annabelle!” She wailed. “All he said was...” She looked at her

phone. “Ah yes, tonight must be ladies’ night. Goodnight, Pru’. With a winky face. What does a winky face mean? We’re not in high school, I don’t understand adult winky faces!”

“He was probably embarrassed, Pru. Especially if he doesn’t remember... the incident. There were a few doozies in there. Cut him some slack.”

Prudence took a deep breath, setting her phone on the counter. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right.” She nodded. “Thank you, Devlin.”

Devlin handed Prudence the coffee carrier. “Don’t beat yourself up. You’ll see him tomorrow and everything will fall right into place.”

* * * *

“Oh shit,” Prudence said to herself as she walked into the Amber Falls Bee parking lot. She’d gotten a later start than expected and everybody else was already there working on the float. Everybody else, including Greyson. *Damn.* He wasn’t supposed to be here today, her invitation notwithstanding. *I’m supposed to have one more day to get my shit together before I see him at the maze.* She squared her shoulders and marched straight ahead, determined not to be embarrassed by either making out with him or sending him sexy text messages, whether he remembered or not.

Greyson turned as she approached. “Hey, Pru.” His grin was devilish. “How are you feeling today?”

“You know exactly how I’m feeling, Greyson.”

“I guess I do.” Greyson tweaked the large sunglasses perched on Prudence’s nose. “It seems like you had a good time last night with the girls.”

Prudence couldn’t help but grin. “Any time I get to spend time with Annabelle and Devlin is always a good time. Especially when there’s copious amounts of wine involved.”

Greyson laughed. “I figured there was wine. I’m surprised Annabelle didn’t take your phone away from you.”

“To be fair, I don’t think she knew that I’d be texting you at all last night. I hope you deleted all those.”

“Of course, I deleted the thread...but not before I took some screenshots. That’s prime blackmail right there.”

Prudence swatted him on the arm before turning to the group working on the float. “You guys are farther along than I thought you’d be. What time were you here today?”

“I just got here. I couldn’t be cooped up anymore in that house, head trauma or no. I’m good, my bruising doesn’t hurt as bad, and I don’t have a headache anymore.”

Prudence reached out and inspected his head where the lump was. “I’d have stopped over today to see how you were, but I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad you’re here, too. Annabelle and Sebastian have been going at it for quite some time.” He motioned over toward where they were standing, almost nose to nose, both clearly upset about something. “I wish they’d just fuck and get it over with.”

Prudence gasped. “I can’t believe you just said that! You haven’t met him yet.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Well, something sure needs to give. Here let me take those.” He grabbed the coffees from Prudence. “Let’s take these over as a peace offering, see if we can split those two apart.” Greyson handed three of the coffees out to the other Bee employees, all of them starstruck that Greyson Atwood was there and giving them coffee.

As they started over to where Annabelle and Sebastian were standing, Prudence realized how happy she truly was that Greyson was here. Even though it had only been two days since she’d seen him, the two days seemed so much longer. They rounded the corner of the flatbed the large bee was sitting on and walked right into an argument between Annabelle and Sebastian.

“We don’t need the flatbed,” Sebastian insisted. “We can fit this in the back of my truck and then we don’t have to worry about hauling this thing all over town.”

“What do you mean hauling it all over? It’s a float for a parade,” Annabelle said. “You’re *supposed* to haul it around. And it’s *supposed* to be on a flatbed. Putting this bee in the back of your truck will look ridiculous, and it’ll seem like we have no money.”

“We don’t have any money, Winters, and you know that. Renting a flatbed is not what we should be spending anything on.”

“The Bee isn’t going to go under by spending a few hundred dollars on this. Besides, it would never fit in your truck. It just wouldn’t.”

“You want to bet?” Sebastian asked. “I’ll go get it right now and I’ll prove to you that it *will* fit.”

Annabelle rolled her eyes. “We don’t have time to waste on you leaving right now. We have one day to get this done, and we’re just going to keep

going and it *will* stay on the flatbed.”

Sebastian threw his hands up. “Fine, you can keep your flatbed, but I’d like the float to accurately represent the new colors of the newspaper. Blue and silver.”

Annabelle turned deathly quiet, then her voice rose at an alarming pitch. “Blue and silver? You want it to be blue and silver? It’s a damn bee, sir, not some high school mascot.”

Greyson turned wide-eyed to Prudence. He slowly set the coffees down and jerked his head to the side indicating they should leave. Prudence nodded as he grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

“Marcie told me that it’s been like this all morning,” Greyson explained. “Anything Sebastian recommends Annabelle shoots down and anything Annabelle suggests Sebastian will have no part of it. It’s bad.”

“Honestly, I was afraid this would happen.” She sighed. “Let’s let them fight it out.” She looked at the Bee employees that had wandered over to where they sat. “You guys might as well head home. It’s almost done and I think they’ll be a while.”

Prudence turned her head as a man in a dark suit approached. He was an older gentleman, nondescript truth be told, but it was the cut of the suit that made him stand out. It was impeccable. She nudged Greyson and bobbed her head in the new man’s direction. “Check out that guy. He looks like he should be in a corner office in New York.”

Greyson’s mouth dropped open, and he stood so fast his chair tipped over. Prudence rose and placed her hand on his forearm. “Grey, are you okay?”

“Not even a little,” Greyson bit out and he stepped forward, intercepting the man who had walked over to them. “What are you doing here, Rand?”

The man smiled broadly and reached out to shake Greyson’s hand. “I heard you took a spill. I flew out to make sure our leading man was okay.”

Greyson stood stock still. To most people Greyson appeared perfectly amiable, but Prudence knew, by the tap of his finger on his thigh, that he was agitated. She also noted the lack of introduction, irritation blooming on Greyson’s behalf that this man would cause him to forget social niceties.

Rand continued. “According to your quaint little paper I’m just in time for some fall activities. Listen Greyson, we need to speak, can we meet for a drink this evening?” Prudence shifted as his eyes slid to her, uncomfortable with the scrutiny. He looked away then, his actions clearly dismissing her as anyone of importance. “Let’s meet this evening. Somewhere less public?”

“I don’t think so, Rand. I’m on vacation.”

Rand’s demeanor change was so swift Prudence couldn’t help but take a step back.

“Nadia has informed me you have yet to sign your new contract, nor have you indicated that you want to commit to this new film with Samantha. If it’s not done by the end of the week you’re out.”

Greyson shot a quick look to Prudence before guiding Rand away. Not far enough, though, as she could still hear their conversation. She felt a twinge of guilt for continuing to listen.

“Out? Out of what exactly?” Greyson was saying. “Being tooled around like a show pony and forced into movies I have no desire to make? With actors I have no desire to work with?” Prudence had not heard him sound so bitter. Burned-out, sure, but not bitter.

“Careful, Atwood,” Rand warned, his voice lowering.

Prudence couldn’t hear the rest of their conversation and saw Rand glance at his watch before he pivoted on his heels and stalked off.

Greyson ran a hand through his hair and collected himself before walking back to her.

“What was that about?” she questioned.

“I really don’t want to talk about it Pru. Annabelle is on her way over.”

Prudence frowned, trying to not be hurt Greyson wasn’t confiding in her, but it really wasn’t the right time or place. She turned to see Sebastian walking toward his car and Annabelle coming toward them.

“How are you doing, Grey?” Annabelle pulled him into a hug.

“Honestly, I’m better than I thought I’d be.”

“I’m going to have to talk to that director and get the footage of your wipeout,” Annabelle said, true to form, not letting Greyson off the hook. “That’s going to come in handy someday.”

Greyson laughed. “I already texted him and I had him burn anything past what he could use in the commercial. Figuratively burn, and by burn I mean hard delete.”

Prudence broke in. “What’s going on with you and Sebastian? Things were looking intense there.”

Annabelle shook head and blew out a rush of angry air. “I don’t get that guy. He just wants to change everything, like nothing that we have works for him. He wants the float to be blue and silver, no matter how stupid I told him

that was because a bee is black and yellow, he just doesn't care. He wants what he wants."

"What are you supposed to do with all the supplies you already have?" Prudence asked.

"I have no clue, but he gave me a card to go buy everything blue and silver that I can." Her eyes lit up. "I think we're going to take this and go out to a nice lunch. He'll be surprised when he comes back and sees that everything is still black and yellow."

Prudence laughed. "He's going to be so pissed."

Annabelle smiled. "That's exactly my point. Come on, let's get this thing finished. I need some of that coffee."

Greyson grabbed a handful of supplies. "I'm going to start running the streamers over here." He walked to the back of the flatbed and started unraveling black and yellow streamers.

Annabelle lowered her voice and nodded toward Greyson. "He wasn't supposed to be here today, was he?"

"No, he wasn't," Prudence said. "When I got here, he said he was going stir crazy."

"Did he say anything about, well, anything?"

"Nope. Absolutely nothing."

"What are you going to do?" Annabelle asked.

"I don't think there's any reason that we need to change our plan for tomorrow. It's too public here even if I wanted to say something. Let's just have some fun, hang out, see what we can do to piss off Sebastian, then go have a very expensive lunch. I think we deserve it."

Annabelle laughed. "We deserve that and so much more for having to deal with him."

Chapter Twenty

The day had come for the hay bale maze, the official start to the Fall Festival. A large swath of land to the south of the city was prepared each year with upwards of one hundred bales donated by local farmers. Prudence loved this day the most. It was the one activity during the Fall Festival that got Amber Falls residents out of the center and into the country. And what beautiful country it was. The air was crisp and clean, where a lungful never seemed like enough—it was ripe with the smell of cool sunshine. Stepping out of her car Prudence stopped and took a deep breath. It was a very different smell, she thought, than the warm sunshine she associated with the Summer Solstice Festival. While leaves swirled around the streets and sidewalks in town, they danced with complete abandon through the woods and across the farmlands out here. Sound seemed to travel better in the cold, with no leaves to hold on tightly to the secrets that whispered through the air. The echo of the brooks and rivers that flowed under the covered bridges traveled as a symphony across the countryside.

Despite the warmth of the sun there was still a chill in the air. Prudence pulled her scarf more tightly to her chin and walked over to the small volunteer group gathered near the maze entrance. She thought back to her conversation with Annabelle and Devlin during ladies' night, crossing her fingers that the plan they'd hatched would go off without a hitch.

"Hey, AB, you ready?"

"I was born ready." Annabelle winked before turning to address the volunteers. "Okay, guys, I'm going to get interviews with all of you before we open the maze later. Just line up over by Devlin at the cider stand and grab a cup while I get ready." She pointed over to Devlin who was waving at them from across the lawn.

"Is Greyson here yet?" Prudence asked, craning her neck to see around the volunteers and decorations.

Annabelle glanced around. "He was here just before you pulled in. Dammit, I don't see him anywhere." She spun back to Prudence. "Okay,

slight change of plan, we don't have long." She grabbed Prudence's hand and pulled her toward the maze. "Let's go block the exit, then I'll send him in as soon as I find him. I'll give the signal once he's in."

"What, are you going to caw like a crow?"

"No, silly, I'm going to hoot like an owl."

Prudence laughed, needing to get her nervous energy out. "And how, exactly, are you going to hoot like an owl and not be seen as completely loony by everyone around you, AB?"

Annabelle slowed, reaching the exit to the maze, and looked at Prudence full on. "Prudence, you have no clue how many times I've been able to work into a conversation the mating habits and sounds of the male gray eastern screech owl. It's really been a lifesaver," Annabelle deadpanned then nodded once with determination. "Well, now I'm serious, an owl hoot it is."

"All right, I'll wait for the hoot." Prudence wiped her eyes from laughing. "Thanks, AB."

The mirth Prudence felt started to fade away and her heart beat faster, as they walked into the maze.

"Winters! What the fuck are you doing?"

Annabelle's face registered surprise at seeing Sebastian. "I'm the journalist writing this story, Mr. Locke, and you know that. What are you doing here? Did you follow me?"

"Came to check out my ace reporter," he mocked. "I saw you head into the maze when you should be conducting interviews. You're not volunteering today, so what are you doing?"

Prudence watched them. She knew Greyson would be here soon and they had work to do but leaned against the side of the stacked hay bales, waiting it out. *Heck, I'm getting a show two days in a row. I wish I had popcorn.*

"How would you know what else I'm doing here today? I've volunteered for this maze plenty of times. I usually take this week off, but you insisted on"—she held her hands inches from his face, making air quotes—"all hands on deck'. And that's not an answer, Mr. Locke. You despise small-town antics, you're not a micromanager, and I don't think you would willingly dirty those thousand-dollar loafers." She gestured to his perfectly polished footwear.

"Hey, guys," Prudence interrupted, "as much as I enjoy your bickering, Annabelle and I have work to do."

"Sorry, Pru," Annabelle apologized. She gave a dirty look to Sebastian

before trying to move the bales with Prudence. “Dammit, I thought we could move these ourselves.”

Sebastian snickered behind them. “Why aren’t you interviewing the owner of the property?” he asked pointedly.

“You try that one, AB and I’ll work this one into the space,” Prudence suggested, pointing.

“Mr. Locke.” Annabelle struggled to move another bale, grunting with exasperation. “I’ve interviewed the owner and have taken multiple photos of the pumpkin patch already.” She turned around, planting her derriere on the hay bale trying to push it back with her legs. “I’m going to be conducting interviews with the other volunteers before the maze opens.”

“While that sounds moderately productive, it doesn’t tell me what you’re doing right now,” Sebastian stated, obviously bewildered at what he was witnessing.

Annabelle attempted to pull a bale into the correct position. Rolling her eyes, she said, “What does it look like we’re doing? We’re trying to block the exit, making it a dead-end on the other side, thus leaving the parties currently inside unable to escape.”

Sebastian shook his head, his brow furrowing in obvious confusion, now visibly irritated. “But, *why?*”

“I am trying to save love!” Annabelle exclaimed. “Please, just help me, Sebastian.”

Sebastian appeared taken aback by Annabelle’s words, Prudence sure was, and he stood there for a moment. “Okay then, let’s save love.” He unbuttoned his suit coat and slid it off his broad shoulders, tossing it onto a nearby bale. He rolled his shirt sleeves and easily pushed the bale that Annabelle had struggled with into place. Turning back, he hefted another bale on top while both ladies stood, watching this masculine display. He added the third and final bale to the stack, blocking the exit.

Annabelle shook her head slightly as if she were coming out of a daze. “Now was that so hard?” she asked. To Prudence, “You good to go, Pru?”

“I’ve got it from here.”

“I’ll see you later.” Annabelle turned and walked away, gesturing for Sebastian to follow her.

Now it was wait time.

She leaned against the bales, breathing in their fresh scent. *Is this really happening? Am I really going to tell Greyson I’ve been in love with him since*

high school? It seemed almost an impossibility that they'd finally come to this point. However, after Greyson hadn't remembered what happened between them the night of his concussion, drastic times called for drastic measures. She pushed away from the bale, starting to pace through the small path, deciding to pump herself up like she would before a big pitch.

No more talking herself out of it, like she had all through college. Most of the insecurities she carried with her then were gone. She had grown to fully love herself, to embrace what uniquely made her, well, her. She might just be a small-town businesswoman—*no, I am a business woman. Period.* A business owner, mind you, and a successful one at that. More successful than some Hollywood starlets, she'd wager. She ran her hands down her waist. She might be a size sixteen, but she owned her curves. *Average my ass, and I have a nice ass.*

Prudence kept pacing, starting to get impatient. She couldn't lose her nerve now. *I am the one that knows Greyson, I know who he is under the fame. Does Samantha Crane know he likes to unwind with cozy mystery novels? Does she know how often he visits the children's hospitals without the press involved? Does she know how hard he'd taken the death of his grandfather?*

She could remember that forlorn time when nothing seemed to make him happy. That she'd rejoice if she could just put a smile on his face, and she'd tried so hard to make him smile. To try to get him to make *himself* happy. He'd finally come out of that dark period, a stronger man but a more cautious man. He took less risks, emotionally, with a string of relationships with beautiful, yet...intellectually challenged women. She'd been there for it all. Now? She was ready for it to be her time. She'd brave more than the awards and red carpets if that's what it meant to finally be with Greyson.

The fact that he didn't remember the night of his concussion wasn't going to stop her. Yeah, she was a little abashed, she wanted to think that no one could forget the things they'd done that night but was willing to put herself out there. If it had happened at all, that must mean something, right? If he had no feelings for her, he wouldn't have made that beautiful speech. That alone made her realize he must have thought a lot about what he wanted, and even if he couldn't remember it...well, it was going to be her job to make him remember. Her skin raised in goosebumps thinking of what that would entail. If a few days ago was any indication, it should be amazing.

She heard Annabelle hoot, followed a minute later by Greyson's shout, "Pru? Where are you?"

“I’m over here!” Her heartbeat skittered. *Get it together, Hardwick.*

“It sounds like there’s an owl around here.” Greyson turned the corner. “I always thought they were nocturnal?”

“Maybe it has insomnia? Day-somnia? I guess that just because they’re nocturnal doesn’t mean that they’re never awake during the day. There are lots of things that happen nocturnally...” Prudence was rambling. *Damn, I’m more nervous than I thought I’d be.*

“I guess.” Greyson laughed. “Did Annabelle send you in here to double-check the maze paths? She said one of the volunteers got stuck.” He put a hand on the small of her back and guided her around a corner. “She said I’ve gotten off easy because of my concussion, but it was time to start pulling my weight. I saw her original list. I didn’t think she was serious about giving me so many things to do.”

“You know you can’t be in Amber Falls and not be involved in the Fall Festival,” Prudence said matter-of-factly. They walked through the maze in silence, side by side, until Prudence leaned her shoulder into his, playfully. “You’ve been away for too long if you’ve forgotten that already.”

Greyson turned his head. “It was too long,” he said, “but after my grandpa died and my parents left, it just didn’t feel the same. I can’t explain it.” He shook his head and continued walking, as though trying to outrun his memories. Something in the air had changed. The mood was no longer congenial and ambling. They were ready.

Prudence hurried to catch up. “You don’t have to explain it, Grey. I was there, remember? Maybe not physically, but as much as I could. You had Gabe and the house. You had all your friends.” She reached out to grab his hand when he didn’t slow. “You had me.”

Greyson spun, pulling his hand away. “No, I didn’t,” he ground out, surprised by his anger. This was not how he’d expected things to go, how affected he was by her relationship with Chuck. “I’ve never had you, Pru.” He looked around, choosing another path. “You’ve always been out of reach to me. You’ve been on this pedestal for so long—”

“What?” Prudence interrupted, shaking her head. “What are you talking about? I never wanted to be on a pedestal, I never asked to be put there. You know me better than that.”

Greyson continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “I was a mess and would’ve just dragged you into it. For what? To close your business here and come be

my savior? By then so much time had passed it seemed like it was impossible. But now? You have Chuck.” He turned his back to her, needing to gather his thoughts. He’d had a plan when he came back to Amber Falls, to win Prudence, or at least try, but he hadn’t planned on another man being in the picture, especially one he knew. His voice cracked. “Why would you choose Chuck?”

“You just said it, Greyson, you weren’t here. After your parents moved, visits stopped altogether.” Prudence reached out her hand to Greyson’s back, as if to ease the tension that had built in his shoulders, but dropped it back to her side. “You were never here, Grey. You left”—Greyson turned to interrupt, but Prudence held up a hand—“and I’m not ever going to fault you for that, we both had to follow our own paths, but please don’t tell me that I didn’t have every right to try to have a happy life. It’s not like you haven’t had your share of women. Trust me, I’ve had the unique experience of hearing about all of them from both you and the tabloids. Case in point, Samantha Crane.”

Greyson snorted and walked past Prudence, straight into the dead-end. “That’s not the same, they didn’t mean anything to me. She doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“It’s not? You’ve moved from one woman to another with no indication that you’d ever wanted them for anything more than publicity or a hook-up. And I’m supposed to gather from that that you’ve been carrying around this torch for me since college?”

“Dammit, there really is no way out of this maze.”

“Greyson, you can’t run. We have to finish this conversation.”

“I don’t want to run!” Greyson hollered. “I came back for you, Pru. I had this all planned out, I’d come home, tell you how I felt, and you’d come running into my arms.” He sighed, staring at the ground. “You’re with Chuck and I’m leaving soon. That seems like a definitive end.”

“Chuck and I are over,” Prudence whispered, her eyes never leaving Greyson. His head popped up, and he immediately winced. Prudence bolted off the hay bale and rushed over, reaching her hand to his head, laying her palm on his cheek. “It still hurts?” she questioned, her voice barely registering, running her hand through his hair, their bodies swaying toward each other.

“Just a little, if I move too quickly.” He leaned his head into her hand. It felt so right, finally having someplace to rest.

“It’s only been a few days. I’d expect you might have some soreness to go

with the memory loss.” Prudence’s face reddened with those words.

“This isn’t how I wanted anything to go. I should’ve done this so differently, especially after what happened after my concussion.”

Prudence’s hand dropped from his head, and she looked at him like he’d just admitted he thought the earth was flat. “Excuse me?”

“Prudence. I remember everything.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Prudence's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What did you just say?"

Greyson slowly backed away. "I remember everything?"

Prudence's jaw dropped. "What the hell?" She reached out and punched his shoulder, hard, not believing what he'd just said. "You let me believe the next morning you didn't remember anything you said!" She punched him again. "Or did!"

"Because the night of my concussion I finally had you, Pru. In my bed. To myself. I never wanted to fully admit it, but you have no clue how many nights I've lain in bed in L.A. dreaming of that exact scenario. Without the head trauma, obviously." Greyson rubbed his shoulder where he'd been punched twice. "I came home, wanting to pour my heart out to you, but you were with Chuck and I'm *not* a homewrecker. I had this dumb idea that I'd pretend it didn't happen. What was I supposed to do?"

"I don't know, maybe acknowledge what we did, then fight for me? After what you said to me, you led me to believe that we might finally be more than just friends." Prudence took a step back. "Then you didn't remember, and I tried not to be mortified about it."

Greyson reached out and clasped her hand. "You're right, I was an ass," he said plainly, shrugging his shoulders. "I admit that I chickened out. I felt like I needed to re-group, figure out what to do. It was easier to pretend I didn't remember than it was to tell you everything then. I didn't expect to be in that position so soon, especially after knowing about you and Chuck. I should've woken up the next morning and fought for you. I should've told you that I wasn't going to leave Amber Falls without making you mine, and I didn't care what Chuck was going to do about it."

"Damn right you should have." Prudence squeezed his hand, her anger starting to fall away, amazed at how easy it was to forgive Greyson. "Believe it or not, Annabelle helped set this up so I could come here and remind you what happened. I was ready to fight for you, too, Grey."

"This is exactly the kind of convoluted plan Annabelle would hatch." He

grabbed her other hand, pulling her gently toward him. “You should’ve just come back over. We would’ve had a more private make up.”

Prudence shook her head at that. “Mrs. Crenshaw. Everyone would know. It had to be here.” She stopped for a moment then said quietly, “I think I’ve been wanting this since at least high school. I never let myself even imagine it until college, though, and by then we were on such different paths.”

“High school? I think it was junior high for me.”

“Seriously?”

“It was that first dance in seventh grade.”

“You’re joking! I wore that purple dress... I felt like Barney, the dinosaur.”

“You’ve always been perfect to me, Pru. Purple is still my favorite color.”

Greyson closed the distance between them, he reached his arms around her waist, his lips finding hers. Prudence groaned and opened her mouth for him, and he slid his tongue against hers. They slowly backed up until they were against a maze wall, Greyson’s hands drifting to settle on her bottom, pulling her close. It was perfect.

“Oh, God, you taste like pumpkin spice,” he murmured, breaking the kiss, and trailing his lips down her neck.

Prudence slowly rubbed against Greyson’s rapidly growing erection, desperately wanting to touch every inch of him. Just as she captured his lips again, she heard the voice of the lead volunteer officially opening the maze for the Fall Festival.

“Wait!” She pulled away and ran to the bales that she and Annabelle had used to block the exit. “Help me move these out of the way.”

To his credit, Greyson didn’t question her until after they’d unblocked the path.

“So, this was all to keep me in the maze until you had your way with me?”

“Well, I was hoping I’d have had a bit more time to fully explore with you, but I’ll take what I can get.”

Greyson pulled her into a small alcove, covering her mouth with a searing kiss, holding her hard against him. He let go, breathing heavily. “Just wait until I get you alone later, Prudence. I plan to fully explore every inch of you.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the maze exit. “Actually, they can figure everything else out, Pru. My guess is that Annabelle planned for you to be gone the rest of the day. I don’t think I can wait. I don’t want to wait, not after all this time.”

Once in the parking lot, Greyson trapped Prudence against her car door, not caring if anyone could see them. He reached behind her and pulled the door open without breaking their kiss. “I’ll drive.”

Prudence playfully nipped his bottom lip. “Like hell you will.” She pushed him away and swatted his ass. “Get in the car.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” He sprinted around and got into the passenger side. “How far away is town?” he asked, buckling his seatbelt.

“Ten minutes, maybe.”

“That’s too long, pull over.”

“Greyson, we’ve waited this long. I’m not going to have a quickie in the car.”

He groaned. “Just because it’s in a car doesn’t make it a quickie.”

The ten minutes passed at a snail’s pace, and Greyson wasn’t sure how he made it. Soon enough Prudence got to her townhome and slammed the car into park. They’d already divested themselves of their outerwear in the car and had barely got through the front door when Greyson ripped off his shirt and brought Prudence to him. The mere *feel* of her hands on his chest was pure ecstasy, he couldn’t imagine what they’d feel like on his cock. He untied her wrap-around dress, letting the fabric fall apart, skimming his hands over her shoulders to her back to unhook her bra. He slowly slid both off her body, leaving her almost bare to him. He had imagined what her breasts looked like so many times, but it all fell short of the perfection of her.

He lifted his hands, cupping her breasts, slowly squeezing. “Amazing, Pru.” He breathed over one nipple before taking it into his mouth. Prudence gasped, and his shaft gave an answering jump. Her hands, threaded in his hair, guided him to her other breast, and he was more than happy to comply. The noises Prudence made were nothing short of the most erotic things he’d ever heard. He couldn’t wait until he claimed her. What noises would she make then?

Greyson cupped her mound with one hand as Prudence ground against him, seemingly desperate for more friction. He broke his kiss on her breast and knelt on the floor, removing her panties as he went. Prudence’s back sagged against the front door—*have we really not gone any farther?* He licked his way up her slit, flicking his tongue over her clit. Prudence moaned and grappled at his shoulders.

“I can’t wait, Grey.”

“I have so much exploring to do, Pru,” he said, nonetheless standing to unbutton his pants and kicking them to the side.

“Later,” Prudence grasped him, stroking. “You can do that all later. I need you now.”

It didn’t matter, the speed or quickness of their first joining. If Greyson had his way, and he was *sure* he would, there would be tens of thousands of days and nights just like this. Desperate for each other each and every time, sometimes going fast and sometimes taking it slow. *Oh, we will take it slow—so slow she will scream for release—but not now. Not today.* Today he would give Prudence what she wanted.

Greyson smiled. “Your wish is my command. He bent to take a condom from his wallet and made quick work of opening and rolling it on. He straightened her up, her back still against the door, and teased her entrance with his head. “You want me here?” he asked wickedly, pulling slightly back so her hips had to follow him.

“Yes!” Her nails scratched his back, spurring him on, and he pushed into her in one powerful motion. “Oh my God, Grey.”

Greyson felt the tension already, ready to spill into her. “Come for me, Pru,” he whispered hotly into her ear. “I need to see you come.” He snaked one hand between them, his thumb circling her nub as he pushed into her over and over. “Come for me, Pru,” he said again, “I can’t wait.”

Prudence let out a loud wail as she convulsed around him, her body tight like a bow.

Greyson grabbed her ass and lifted—his cock still buried inside her. Her legs reflexively wrapped around his waist as he spun and laid her on the couch, his body covering hers. He lifted one of her legs and thrust, the change in position allowing him to enter her even deeper. He stilled once he was buried to the hilt and smoothed Prudence’s hair away from her face. “What took us so long?” he wondered.

“I didn’t take long, I’m already done,” she joked.

“Oh, are you?” He started to move in her, enjoying seeing her expression turn from teasing to lust. He rocked against her, the new noises she was making letting him know her passion was rising once again. In and out, in and out he set an unyielding rhythm.

She had both legs wrapped around him now. “There, right there.” She gripped him like a vise while she took what she needed at last.

Greyson had never felt anything like this. He’d never felt this sense of

completion, of satisfaction, as he spilled himself into her until he was completely spent. It was as though his soul joined hers at that moment. She had taken both his body and soul.

“Please tell me you have no plans for today?” Greyson pleaded, touching his forehead to hers, their heavy breaths intermingling.

“I had booked the whole day for the maze, but I think I’m going to be busy.”

“You are going to be busy, Pru,” Greyson confirmed. “You’re going to be busy for the rest of the day.”

* * * *

If there was ever a day Greyson would say was his most perfect day ever, it would be today. Not because he and Prudence had finally had sex, but because he and Prudence were together. They weren’t just friends, they weren’t tiptoeing around each other, but they were well and truly together.

He watched a sleeping Prudence, amazed by how perfect she was. Everything he’d imagined, everything he’d dreamed didn’t compare to the reality of Prudence. She stirred in his arms, smiling in her sleep, and he pulled her closer. They were both spent. It was early evening already, and they’d made love most of the day. Sometimes fast, sometimes slow, each time mind-blowing.

Prudence stretched against his body, yawning then moved as close as she could, until she was nearly on top of him. *Damn*. He was getting hard again already. He shook his head incredulously.

“Hey,” she whispered, her voice still husky from sleep.

Greyson kissed her head. “Hey to you.” Then made a sound of protest as she got out of bed. “Where are you going?”

“I’ve got to use the ladies’ room, Grey, then we’ve got to eat something or we’ll both pass out.” Prudence walked to the bathroom, completely naked, and he loved it.

“You’d better put some clothes on, then, otherwise I can’t be held responsible for my actions.”

“Go order something, Greyson!” Prudence called out. “Get yourself decent, and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“Already bossing me around, I see.”

“You love it and you know it. Let’s get Chinese.”

Greyson smiled. "As you wish."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Prudence woke the next morning very sore and completely satisfied. After eating their Chinese takeout, Prudence and Greyson had christened her kitchen table, knocking take-out containers onto the floor in their rush. She felt a pang of remorse at that—Chinese leftovers were her favorite.

Just thinking about yesterday and last night, her body tightened, and wetness once again pooled at her center. She shifted on the bed, slowly stretching. Muscles she hadn't felt in a very long time were making themselves known, the delicious burn of vigorous lovemaking not deterring her from being aroused. After everything they'd already done, she was ready for more.

She watched a sleeping Greyson and still couldn't believe it. He was there, in her bed, with her. She reached over and trailed a finger down his cheek, the stubble of his beard was rough to her touch. She continued her descent, running her fingers over his lips, his chin, his chest. He smiled but kept his eyes closed. She toyed with the hair that led down to where she wanted to touch.

He twitched.

"You're not ticklish, are you, Greyson?" she asked, stroking him under the blanket.

"I'm not so much ticklish as I am impatient." He threw the covers off his legs and showed his impressive erection jutting forward. "I find myself very impatient."

"I can't believe that after last night we're both still so ready." She straddled him, rubbing herself along his length, teasing him with her wetness. She grabbed a condom from the nightstand and rolled it on, stroking him as she went.

"I will always be ready for you, Prudence," he said, closing his eyes in obvious pleasure.

Prudence lifted herself and slowly took him into her. She groaned, with both ecstasy and pain. She hadn't been this sore in a long time, perhaps ever,

but that wouldn't stop her. It would never stop her with Greyson. Being with him was the most amazing thing that had ever happened to her. Every inch of her skin that touched Greyson's burned, a delicious heat that she sought out. His hands were calloused, more so than she'd thought a movie star's would be, and the feel of them lightly brushing her back made her shiver, causing her to pulse over him, taking him even deeper. He grabbed her ass to urge her on, but she resisted the pace he was trying to set. She wanted every movement to be deliberate, every thrust to *just* hit the spot she wanted. Needed.

She moved, setting her own languid pace, her hands on his chest, leaning forward to kiss him. Greyson took her tongue into his mouth, mimicking what her body was doing with his. He pulled away and tried anew to spur her into a vigorous speed and grinned when she restrained him once again.

"You want it slow?" He gently flexed his hips, barely moving them.

Prudence exhaled. "Slow?" She leaned forward, sliding her breasts up his chest, almost letting him slip out before moving back down. "I want this to never end." And she didn't. She moved with such focus, every part of her being centered on where they were joined, her mind repeating one word. *Mine*. She let her orgasm build, almost peaking then easing off until Greyson was ready. *Together*. Only after she felt Greyson climax did she let herself go.

"I don't think I ever want to leave this house." Greyson's words echoed hers from before.

"I don't think we ever should." Prudence smiled into his chest. It felt so right to doze off after making love to Greyson. Something she couldn't imagine doing a day ago was now her reality. Her breathing steadied, matching his own until she bolted upright. "Tater tot casserole!" she exclaimed as she moved off him to the side of the bed.

"I'd prefer you call out my name, or a nice 'oh God' would do, but I guess if this is your preference I'll take it," Greyson lounged with one arm above his head, a bemused smile on his face.

"No, Greyson, it's Tater Tot Tuesday. The Fall Festival? The Blue-Ribbon contest is during lunch this afternoon. The winner gets a trophy and I've still got to make my casserole."

"I'll buy you a hundred trophies if you stay in bed with me all day. Most Beautiful Redhead, Most Delectable Derriere, World's Best Kisser, ohh, Best Blow Job."

“As tempting as it is, Greyson”—she shivered as he trailed a finger over her breast—“this is about the glory. Mrs. Crenshaw has won the Blue Ribbon five years running and I’m determined that I’ll unthrone her.” Prudence stood then kissed him. “I’m going to take a shower, want to join me? You can finish on me instead of the shower wall this time.”

An hour, and a heavenly amount of shower sex later, Greyson and Prudence were in her kitchen going through the cabinets to pull out ingredients for the hotdish.

“Do you know why they call it a casserole?” Greyson asked as he pulled out a bag of tater tots from the freezer. “I like hotdish much better. I like to think that fifties housewives tempted their husbands with their hot dishes.”

Prudence made her shoulders shimmy. “I’ve got some tater tots for you,” she said as provocatively as she could while giggling.

“Mmmm.” Greyson pretended to ponder. “I’ll raise you one big package of beef.”

Prudence leaned against the counter wiping tears from her eyes as she laughed. “No more puns,” she pleaded.

Greyson’s eyebrows rose. “You mean, after your ladies’ night pun rampage you’re finally done?”

“I was hoping you’d let that go.”

“You think I’d let ‘You should see my big flatbed’ or ‘I’m throwing out candy at the parade and I hope I get my tootsie rolled’ go? No way in hell, Pru.”

Prudence held up her hand. “I had way too much wine that night! Plus, I was still hurting that you didn’t remember our making out. I guess sexual puns were my way of blowing off steam.”

Greyson put his arms around Prudence. “I’ve got something you can blow.”

Prudence shoved at his shoulder. “After we make the casserole, we can talk about it.”

“Okay, okay.” Greyson let go of Prudence and grabbed the cookbook. “Where do we start?”

“Let’s brown the hamburger first.” Prudence set a pan on the stove. “Really, this casserole is so easy, I don’t know what Mrs. Crenshaw does to win every year. What else do you think she puts in it?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes! I want to win.”

“I like this side of you, Pru.”

“You can have any side of me you want after we’re done. Now, crank the heat and brown that beef.”

“You’re determined to make this hard on me, aren’t you?”

“Are you sure that’s the term you want to use, Grey?” Prudence ran her hand over his backside, getting excited again knowing she could touch Greyson like this whenever she wanted. Not only touch him, but see his reaction, the arousal, the pleasure on his face when she did.

“Oh yes, that’s definitely the term I want to use. What’s next, Pru?”

“Cream the mushroom soup and the milk together. Yeah, just like that.”

Greyson mixed the soup and milk, dipping a finger in to taste. “Now what, Pru?”

Prudence shifted, her eyes unfocused as she watched Greyson suck on his finger. “Um.”

“The meat is done. What now, Pru?” Greyson asked again.

“Just mix it all together,” she said in a rush.

Greyson put the rest of the ingredients into the casserole dish then came to stand behind her. “Here’s my wooden spoon.” He wrapped his hand around hers, mixing together.

“Then we put the tater tots on top.” Prudence wriggled her backside into him as they lined up the tots. She turned to him, her back to the counter. “I think that’s it.”

“You have soup on your face, Prudence.” He leaned forward and licked the speck off her skin.

“It’s got to go in the oven now, Grey.”

“Yes, I’m sure it does.”

“We’ve got thirty minutes until this is done, maybe forty-five.” Prudence turned out of his embrace to put the pan into the oven. “Any ideas on what we should do while we wait? I’ve got a puzzle I’ve been meaning to start.”

“I can think of something much better.” Greyson set the timer then lifted Prudence onto the counter.

Prudence opened her legs for Greyson, her mouth finding his. “Who knew making a tater tot hotdish would be so, well, hot.” She unbuttoned Greyson’s pants, pushing them down.

Greyson lifted Prudence high enough to pull her pajama bottoms off, rocking against her. She reached for his cock rubbing a finger over the head, spreading the bead of moisture then tugging him closer.

“Not yet, Pru.” Greyson pulled away and he spread her legs wider as he knelt on the floor. “I didn’t get to finish what I started yesterday.” He hooked her legs over his shoulders and blew a cool stream of air on her damp curls then took a finger and parted her folds.

“Oh, yes, Grey.” Prudence bucked forward, his tongue mimicking what his finger had just done. He slowly licked her, one finger entering her, moving in and out as he circled her clit. Prudence tugged on Greyson’s hair, pulling him closer to her. “Yes, that’s the spot.”

She braced her hand on the countertop and rode his mouth, bucking her hips. Prudence came with a loud moan. As she lost herself in her orgasm, she flailed one arm out knocking over the utensil holder on the counter while she spasmed, silverware clattering onto the floor. She leaned her head against the cupboard, her body tightening one last time before relaxing, releasing her hand’s death grip of Greyson’s hair.

Greyson stood—the vision of him rising after going down on her set her desire ablaze once again. She fumbled around for a condom, knocking off the remaining utensils that were teetering on the edge of the counter, and rolled it over Greyson’s cock, keeping her legs wide as he slid into her. She was still pulsing from her orgasm, a deep throbbing pulse that pulled him in as far as he could go, squeezing around him. She made a low noise in the back of her throat, her eyes screwed shut, the intensity almost too much for her to bear.

“Open your eyes, Prudence. Watch me.”

“Yes, Grey.” She grabbed the nape of his neck and pulled him toward her for a kiss, tasting herself on his lips. “Yes.”

Greyson set a furious rhythm, his gaze not leaving hers. Prudence reached her hand to where they were joined, her hand brushing over his shaft while she stimulated herself. She felt herself tighten even more, if that was possible, and she convulsed around him, jerking her hips upwards, and he doubled his movements, pounding into her, his own release knocking the breath from her lungs. She was still breathing hard, the intensity of her second orgasm in as many minutes taking her off guard, when the kitchen timer beeped.

Greyson looked into Prudence’s eyes. “I don’t care who wins, this has been a Blue-Ribbon Tuesday.”

* * * *

“I can’t believe she won again!” Prudence exclaimed, pointing to a

beaming Mrs. Crenshaw, holding her trophy as Annabelle took her picture for the Bee.

“Are you going to try to figure out what her secret ingredient is?” Greyson put a comforting arm around Prudence. “I could charm it out of her, I’m sure.”

“Even your charm has its limits, Grey. Anyway, it would end up being something like soy sauce, or Worcestershire sauce. Gross.”

“We’ll try again next year. At least we’ll have fun making it,” he said, kissing her.

Prudence felt surprise at this statement but didn’t get a chance to ask him about it as Annabelle walked over to them. “Get a room, you two,” she teased.

Greyson pulled back from Prudence, smiling at Annabelle. “Did you get any trade secrets from Mrs. Crenshaw?”

“Nope, she’s as tight-lipped as always about her recipe. I don’t think she’ll ever spill, although she did tell me she has a special case for all her trophies.”

“I’m going to grab some coffee. Did you guys want any?” Greyson asked.

“No thanks, I’m good.” Annabelle shook her head.

“I’ll just have some water, please.” Prudence squeezed his hand before he walked away.

Annabelle and Prudence stood in silence for a moment, watching Greyson weave his way across the crowded community center.

“Wow, so that’s it, huh?” Annabelle wondered. “You guys finally got it together?”

“Oh, AB, we got it together so many times, you have no idea.”

“I figured that when I didn’t hear from you last night, something was going down.”

“An apt choice of words, Annabelle.”

“Tell me more,” Annabelle whispered conspiratorially.

Prudence scanned the room and saw that Greyson had been stopped and was talking to someone. “We barely made it through the front door the first time.”

“The first time?” Annabelle wondered with glee.

“Then we didn’t make it out of my room the rest of the day.” Prudence could feel herself glowing. “I never knew it could be like that. So perfect and...well, perfect.”

Annabelle grinned. “I knew it. When you two finally got together, I knew

it would be magic,” she said, watching Greyson walk back over to their group. “Hey, Terminator, I hear congratulations are in order.”

Greyson pulled Prudence close to him. “I’ve been gone for two minutes, and you’ve told her everything?”

Prudence blushed. “Well, not everything. Just the highlights.”

Greyson scoffed. “Just the highlights? I’d like to think the whole night was a highlight.”

Annabelle held up a hand. “Tell me no more. I’m just so happy for you two, I knew you’d make it in the end.”

“I can’t believe it took so long, but I’m really happy where we’re at now.” Greyson turned serious. “Thanks for helping, AB. I know what you did at the maze. It seems foolish to think about it now, but we needed that little push.”

“You guys are my best friends and you’ve been destined for each other since I could remember. I’m happy that I could play a part in your love story, truly I am.” She shook her head, clearly flustered that her emotions showed. Then her eyes narrowed, and she asked in a lowered voice, “Greyson, is that Greer Connelly from *Person* magazine?”

Greyson slowly started to scan the room, and Prudence could tell by the expression on his face that he was concerned. “Don’t react, but there are a lot of celebrity reporters here.”

“No reaction from me. I’ve gotta go anyway.” Annabelle turned to the door. “Need to get this article ready for the Bee tomorrow. The prince regent decided we’re going to have a print edition every day of the Fall Festival.”

“Wow, that’s actually surprising. I didn’t think he cared about any of this.” Prudence waved her hand around the room.

“Oh, he doesn’t. All he sees are dollar signs and the print editions this week are selling out. I’ll see you guys downtown tomorrow for the wine tasting.” Annabelle left, rambling on about the unfairness of her additional workload on her way out.

“What do you think about those two?” Greyson mused.

“Two people have never disliked each other so much, that’s for sure.” A woman walked through the crowd and Prudence noticed her just in time to see the raven-haired woman slip out of the community center’s front door. “Is that Nadia?” She pointed to the door, even as she found it hard to believe Greyson’s agent would be in Amber Falls.

Greyson glanced around. “I don’t think so? Honestly, I don’t think she’s left L.A. since she transplanted.” He scanned the crowd. “I feel like I’m

seeing legit paparazzi here but I can't tell for sure, no one is going crazy like they do in L.A.—Greer Conolly, paparazzi *and* Nadia? That just can't be right. Not in Amber Falls." He surveilled the room for another moment longer before asking, "You wanna go grab dinner? Get out of this fishbowl?" Greyson tugged on her hand.

"If by dinner you mean dinner, then yes, please."

"I really mean dinner." He pretended to think it over. "You, however, will be my dessert."

Prudence narrowed her eyes at Greyson.

"Okay, we can get takeout and eat at home."

Home? Prudence pondered the word. She liked the sound of that.

"Takeout sounds good."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dinner had been a disaster. And by disaster—Prudence heard her stomach give a loud growl—she meant she was still hungry. Everything else had been wonderful. A flush ran over her body when she thought of the wicked things she and Greyson had done yesterday. She felt alive, more so than she had in ages. Running a small business was no easy task, and she felt as though she'd been on autopilot for quite some time. Even having a yearlong—almost a yearlong—relationship hadn't fulfilled her like she supposed it should have, like she assumed it would have. It wasn't Chuck's fault—she'd never fully invested in being a 'them'.

Thinking back on it now, she could see the warning signs had been blaring so loud she should be deaf. She was certain, now, that they'd both been with each other just to have someone to be with. They'd never said the 'I love yous' or even the 'I like yous'. It had been a year of tepid romance and going through the motions.

She was picking food containers off her floor—again—the next morning when Greyson sauntered into the kitchen. Jeans slung low on his hips and shirtless, he looked like a Greek god wearing J. Crew.

"Morning, Pru." Greyson bent to help with the clean-up. "You made quite the mess last night," he said casually, his eyes glinting.

"I made a mess?"

"From what I remember"—Greyson ran his hand lovingly over the polished wood—"it was you on the kitchen table. And by the way, I've become very fond of your kitchen table."

"Your brother made it," Prudence informed him.

"Beautiful craftsmanship, I'll give him that."

"You forget, Grey, I wasn't the only one on that table."

"You were the only one thrashing about in ecstasy, as I recall."

Prudence grinned, dumping the containers into the trash. "And I'll give you that." She pulled Greyson up and ran her hands over his chest. "It was amazing."

He leaned in for a quick kiss before trailing his mouth down the side of her neck, wrapping his arms around her waist.

She gave him a gentle shove and pulled out of his arms. “Now you have to go.”

Greyson’s eyes widened. “You tease.” He reached for her again.

Prudence moved, her backside hitting the table. “I have so much work to do, Grey! I’ll never get this proposal done on time and I have so many more to start.”

Greyson lifted her onto the table, hiking her skirt high and settling between her legs. “That’s why you have employees, Pru. Delegate. Don’t leave me like this,” he pleaded and moved against her.

Prudence threw her head back, allowing him access to her neck again. “Five minutes, and that’s all.”

“Challenge accepted.”

* * * *

Prudence lay on the kitchen table with Greyson, spent. “Seven minutes, Grey. I thought you could do better,” Prudence joked, still on top of him.

“You were running this show, Pru. I was just along for the ride.” Greyson moved his hands over her thighs, then helped her off the table.

“I’ll allow the extra two minutes. It was worth it.” Prudence adjusted her skirt back to her knees, smoothing the fabric into place. “But really, I have to get to the office.”

“Hmmm, office you say?”

“Greyson Atwood, you’re to stay away from my office today.”

“But, I haven’t seen it yet, Pru.”

“You will, I promise you will, but just not today.”

Greyson lounged against the countertop, crossing his bare feet at the ankles. “What’s on the docket for the Fall Festival? Annabelle promised me an itinerary, but she hasn’t sent anything.”

“I’d like to think that she knows neither of us has time for her tasks anymore, much more important things to do, you know.”

“It’s better she doesn’t send anything than send a list that doesn’t even get done. So what is tonight?”

“Wine Wednesday,” Prudence said, grabbing the coffee pot and filling a travel mug.

“I like the sound of this.” Greyson moved to the fridge and grabbed a large bottle of pumpkin spice creamer, handing it to Prudence. “Tell me more.”

“It’s new this year. The downtown bars and restaurants are having wine tastings to get people in the door. It was Gabe’s idea, actually.”

“That’s genius, free publicity. Good job, bro.”

“You can tell him when we go to Finnegan’s on one of our stops tonight.”

“Actually”—Greyson grabbed an *A Good Day to Die*—the fourth movie in his Ben Stone spy series—promotional mug, and poured himself a cup of coffee—“I’ll see him this afternoon. He volunteered to help make the haunted house, so we’ve got a long day of woodworking ahead of us. It needs to be done by tomorrow.”

“Oh, a looooong day of woodworking, hm?” Prudence said suggestively. “Oh God, forget I said that. It’ll be great for you two to get some quality time together.”

“I was also thinking...” Greyson looked nervous.

Prudence moved next to him, one arm around his waist, giving him a side squeeze and laying her head on his shoulder. “What is it, Grey?”

“I was going to ask if I should move my things over here for the rest of my trip.” Her eyebrows rose with surprise, and he continued in a rush. “I don’t want to presume anything since it’s only been a few days. I know this is your house and I don’t want to intrude, but I want to spend every second I can with you, not having to go back and forth between houses.”

“I agree, Grey.” Prudence laid her hand on his arm. “That’s a great idea.”

“Oh good.” His face broke out into a large grin. “I was actually kind of worried you’d say no.”

“Grey, I haven’t said ‘no’ to anything you’ve asked of me. I’m not going to start now.”

“Well, you did say no to—”

“Every woman says no to that—at least at first.”

“Anyway.” He led her to the door. “You go to work, and I’ll head over to Gabe’s to grab my things and help with the haunted house. I’ll see you when you get home?”

There’s that word again—home. She felt a pang of sadness that his time here would be coming to an end soon, and Greyson would go back to his own life on the other coast but she shook that thought away as quickly as it came. She had to focus on the here and the now. Greyson was with her *now* and that had to be good enough. They’d figure the rest out later.

“I should be home around five. How about we have dinner before the wine tasting? Tony’s Pizzeria just opened. We can start the night off there with some food.”

“I’ll be ready.” Greyson pulled her in for a scorching kiss before gently turning her toward the door. Prudence’s face heated, and she was breathing hard.

“Not fair, Grey!”

He gave her a slight swat on her ass as he led her out then shut the screen door behind her, smiling a devious smile. “You’ll have to wait until tonight, Pru.”

* * * *

After Greyson had showered and changed, he headed over to the haunted house build site, stopping to get coffee from Books and Beans along the way. Prudence had talked a lot about Devlin, it seemed like she’d become part of Prudence and Annabelle’s close circle after moving here, and he knew why after talking with her while waiting for his coffee.

“Hey, Gabe.” Greyson held up the coffee as he entered the work site. “I brought sustenance.”

“This is great coffee,” Gabe said after taking a few sips. “Where did you get it?”

“Books and Beans. It’s almost right next door to Finnegan’s.”

Gabe turned his head away, setting down the cup and grabbing a hammer. “I’ve always got a pot on at the bar, I don’t get to coffee shops a lot.”

“You should stop in. The owner seems like your type.”

“How about you focus on you?”

“Just saying, she seems like a great kid.”

“I’ve lost you when you start going all Humphrey Bogart on me.”

“The greatest actor of our time.”

“I won’t argue with that, but can we talk while we build?” Gabe pointed to a box of nails.

Despite those words they worked in silence for a while until Greyson broke through the sound of pounding. “I’m going to move in with Prudence for the rest of my trip.”

“I figured it had gone well since I haven’t heard from you since you stopped by Finnegan’s. I’m really happy to hear things are moving in the

right direction for you two.”

“It’s going better than I could’ve ever thought.”

“What did she say when you told her about the teaching position at the university?”

Greyson kept hammering, not breaking his rhythm. “I haven’t said anything yet.”

“Serious? You’ve been back for a while and haven’t left her side in at least two days.”

Greyson stopped at that and turned to grin at his brother. “We’ve had other, more important things to do. By the way, you build sturdy tables.” Gabe grimaced and waved his hammer at Greyson to move on. “But I’m going to tell her tonight at dinner.”

“I wish you all the luck, Grey. You and Pru are meant to be.”

“I’ve been convinced of that since I was fifteen. Now it’s time to seal the deal.”

“You’d better. I can’t imagine a better sister-in-law.” He looked at Greyson. “Now what’s this shit about Samantha Crane?”

Greyson shuddered. “So fucking weird, bro. Nadia wants us to do a movie together so we had lunch *once*, and she seriously started talking about coming to Amber Falls with me. Not to mention how handsy she was at the awards show and after in the limo. She acted like she expected something from me. I never led her on, in fact I told her plainly that I was going on vacation, and we’d talk when I got back.”

“Damn. That’s some devious behavior, even for Hollywood.”

“I think I hurt Pru by not telling her about Samantha, but it was all just business to me. But get this, Pru thought she saw Nadia at Tater Tot Tuesday.”

“Did you see her, too?”

“It was too quick to know for sure. I can’t imagine why she’d be in Amber Falls. There was a reporter from *Person* magazine here and possible paparazzi, but those could be coincidences. My contract is coming due, and she’s pulling out all the stops to get me to sign right away. I can’t imagine her not only coming here, but coming here and not telling me. With the teaching position and now my relationship with Pru, I want to put all that on hold.”

Gabe nodded. “No reason to jump into it, you’ve earned this break. But have you at least told Prudence what you just told me? If you think she was hurt you’d better clear the whole Samantha situation up.”

Greyson shook his head. “We sort of talked about it the night I won the award, but we haven’t since.”

Gabe pondered Greyson’s statement. “You need to have that conversation with her. Get back to work, now we really are acting like a couple of gossiping teenagers. This has to be finished by the time you leave today so the other volunteers can paint and decorate it tomorrow.”

* * * *

Prudence left the office early that afternoon. After texting Greyson to see when he’d be done with Gabe, she figured she’d have time for a quick call to Annabelle. She thought her fashion sense was spot on, but she was jittery for some reason and wanted a second opinion, and Annabelle was great at giving opinions. She wasn’t sure why she was so unsure of herself now, after all, she and Greyson had done almost everything imaginable to each other over the last few days.

Maybe it was because this was a proper date. A ‘let’s sit and just talk, no ripping each other’s clothes off’ date. She knew the clothes ripping would come later, but in the meantime, they had to fill an entire night with conversation. When had she become so nervous to talk to Greyson? That was all their decades long relationship had consisted of until now—talking. It was what they were good at.

She glanced at her phone as it started to buzz, answering when she saw Annabelle’s face on the screen. “Hey, AB.”

“Woah, why do you look so nervous?”

Prudence swore. “Does it really show?”

“Yeah, like you’re about to turn in a drug test after a night in Amsterdam.”

“I don’t know, I have butterflies in my stomach all of a sudden. If I knew he was just coming over to have wild sex, I’d be less nervous.”

“He’s not the first guy you’ve dated, Pru.”

“Yes, but he’s the first *Greyson* I’ve dated.”

“That makes absolutely no sense.”

Prudence thought for a moment. “I’ve dated guys before, but I’ve never cared how things ended, not with any of them. With Greyson, everything matters. It’s like our conversations have to all mean something, like every one has to be moving us forward to a certain place. He’ll be gone soon, then what? We have to talk about the future, and I don’t want to think about not

being with him.”

“You have to get out of your head, lady. That’s a talk you need to have with Greyson, but you two have come this far, just be yourselves with each other.”

“But what do we talk about?”

“Do what you’ve done your whole lives. There’s no need to change it.” Annabelle pointed to the closet behind Prudence. “Now, what are you going to wear?”

“I don’t know!” Prudence wailed, throwing open her closet. “I’m second guessing everything.”

“Okay, let’s start with the basics. Underwear. Make it something sexy.”

“I don’t have anything sexy.”

“Bullshit, Pru. Every woman has a sexy set of underwear that makes her feel amazing.”

Prudence opened a drawer, moving her phone so Annabelle could see its contents. “This is what I have.”

“Oh my God, Pru, are those all high-waisted cotton—” She massaged her temple. “How are we friends?” she muttered, shaking her head. “Not even a thong or bikini cut? At least tell me you have more than plain white.”

“I like what I like, AB, and I like plain cotton underwear.” Prudence’s face turned to panic. “What the hell kind of underwear do you wear for a movie star?”

“None. None of those at least. You’re going commando.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly, everyone will know.”

“No one will know. In fact, I don’t wear underwear most days.”

“Oh, I did *not* need to know that.”

“I’m just saying, no one will know, and Greyson will love it.”

Prudence slammed the drawer shut. “Fine. No underwear, but what about the rest?”

“Hmmm. I’ve always liked that rust-orange babydoll dress. Throw on a pair of knee-high boots and it’ll be killer, Pru. Like, he won’t be able to keep his hands off you.”

“Thankfully, he already can’t.” Prudence pulled out the dress Annabelle had mentioned. “Isn’t it a little short to have no underwear on?”

“Nothing is ever too short to have no underwear on, especially when you’re going on a hot date. Trust me, Greyson will love it. And speaking of Greyson loving it...is everything really going that well?”

Prudence blushed. “It’s going so well. I can’t believe we waited this long. It’s like we’re combustible. He just has to look at me and I’m ready to come.”

“You guys were always like that together, that’s why none of his girlfriends ever liked you. They could see it, too, even if you guys were blind to it. But really, the sex should be the hard part after being just friends for so long, and you’ve proven that you’re apparently very well suited in that department. So that just leaves you with the friendship. The foundation is already there, so be yourself. You guys are perfect together just like you are.”

Prudence teared up, reaching for a tissue to wipe away the moisture. “Those are exactly the words I needed to hear right now, AB.” She smiled. “I knew there was a reason I kept you around.”

“Sister, you couldn’t get rid of me even if you tried.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Prudence said, grabbing a pair of black boots from her closet.

“No, I think you should go with the brown ones,” Annabelle offered.

Prudence compared the dress with both boots, checking the color combination. “You’re totally right, the brown suede is better. Will you be downtown?”

“Wouldn’t miss it, Pru—free wine? Plus, His Royal Majesty has me covering the event, I get to finally drink on the job.”

“Finally? I know you have a bottle of whiskey in your bottom desk drawer, AB.”

“An *emergency* bottle that’s for *emergencies* only. And I’ve had a lot of emergencies since Sebastian came to town.” Annabelle paused. “And it’s an emergency every time he talks to me.”

Prudence laughed. “How do you get any work done? Oh! What did he say when he came back to the float decorating on Sunday? I forgot to ask you about it.”

“I was the only one left by the time he decided to grace me with his presence. I thought he was going to explode when I handed him back his card and the lunch receipt, but I left pretty quickly. Other than seeing him at the maze on Monday I’ve kept a wide berth.” She looked at her watch. “Gotta go! You get ready and knock his socks off tonight.”

“I’ll do my best,” Prudence said before hanging up.

She walked to her mirror, moving back and forth, the hemline of the dress swaying. It *was* damn short, but now that thought made her excited. It would be easy access for Greyson *if* she could keep her hands off him long enough

to make it through the night.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Prudence was dressed and ready for dinner by the time Greyson returned home that evening, but it was all she could do to not throw him on the ground right there in the living room and have her way with him. He'd sauntered through the door, so effortlessly masculine, his tight white T-shirt plastered to his body.

He threw his bags on the ground and pulled Prudence to him, giving her a hungry, open-mouthed kiss. "I've missed you, Pru."

Prudence pushed him away after seriously considering skipping going out altogether. "You really need to take a shower," she said, then pulled him back to her.

"Are you kidding me, Pru? No panties?" he asked, moments later, as his hand delved under the hem of her dress.

She swatted his hand away. "Shower, now. I don't want to be late."

"I have to think about you going around all night with nothing under that dress?"

Maybe Annabelle was right. A sense of power washed over her. She smiled slyly. "You have to think about it all night, Grey. All. Night. Long."

He groaned as he walked up the stairs. "You're going to be the death of me, Pru."

* * * *

Finally, they made it to the pizzeria. Greyson had tried, to no avail, to get Prudence to come into the shower with him, but she'd resisted. Luckily, they snagged the last outdoor table—the place was packed. On their way in, a staff member had handed them each a sampling glass of their house red. Sipping it now, Prudence started to relax.

"I don't think I've ever seen downtown so busy," Prudence mused, able to see down the street from their table. "Even Books and Beans has a steady line going in, and Devlin doesn't serve alcohol."

“She’s giving away free samples of her new fall flavors.” Greyson continued when Prudence cocked her head. “I grabbed coffee there on the way to help Gabe today. You’ve talked about her so much I thought it would be nice to see her in person. We got some time to talk since it was right after the morning rush. You’re right, she’s so nice, I can tell why you guys became friends.”

Prudence couldn’t help but smile at Greyson’s description of Devlin. “I’m glad you finally met her. The town is lucky to have her business, but really, it’s Annabelle and I that hit the jackpot. It’s not easy making close friends in adulthood. She fit in with us right away, like we were waiting for her or something. It’s hard to explain.”

“Gabe didn’t seem too interested when I mentioned her, considering they’re practically next door to each other. There’s no way he could have missed seeing her.”

Prudence had a few minutes to gather her thoughts while they placed their order. As tempted as she was to share with Greyson, she kept her girls’ night promise not to tell Devlin’s story.

“I heard rumors that the art gallery between their stores is going to be vacant within the next few months. They’ve both talked about expanding, and I hope it doesn’t get too awkward if they both try to go for it. I don’t want to get stuck in the middle of anything. Like I said, making friends can be hard enough as it is.”

“You’re right about that. Try adding in being a famous actor, and I never know if someone just wants to be friends because of my fame. Maybe I should put on a disguise and join a dart club or something.”

Prudence laughed. “Oh, it must be so hard, being a super-rich, super-attractive movie star,” she said sarcastically. “How do you ever cope?”

“Hey! Just because I’m extremely handsome doesn’t make things easier on me.”

“I know, I was just joking.” Prudence reached over to take his hand. “It does have to be hard living in the spotlight.” She didn’t want to bring it up, but now was as good of a time as any. “When do you go back to California?”

Greyson drank the rest of his wine in one gulp before taking Prudence’s other hand. “Pru, I have to tell you something.”

Prudence broke out in a cold sweat, going rigid, and she clutched Greyson’s hand with a powerful force.

“Hey, relax.” Greyson shook her hands to loosen her back up. He let go

and smoothed one lock of red hair behind her ear, smiling. “That wasn’t very well done of me.” He took a deep breath, slowly releasing it. *I should be taking my own advice. Why am I suddenly so edgy?*

“What is it, Grey?”

“I’ve been offered a job at the local university, teaching their drama program,” he said in a rush, glad that he’d finally told her. “That was one of the reasons I came home.” He clenched her hands, holding on for dear life, knowing that her reaction would be everything to him. Her face lit, like the brightest sun on the longest summer’s day, and he let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.

“Oh, Grey! I can’t believe it, are you going to take it?”

“I had to come home first, to see if we could be more than just friends. I don’t think I would have otherwise. I couldn’t live in the same town as you and not be with you.”

Prudence leaned over the table to kiss him, not caring that the other diners were openly staring at them.

She pulled back just as their food arrived and dug in. She was still famished from last night’s ruined dinner after all.

“Did you accept?”

“Not yet, but it seems like it’s a pretty done deal. I have another month or so to decide. They’d want me to start this summer, help with the summer stock, then jump into teaching next fall.” He started thinking about the house for sale on the same street as Gabe and how quickly the purchase could go through. *I haven’t even apologized for the Samantha crap but I’m thinking about where we’re going to raise our children?* He had to slow down. But this didn’t seem like the right time. Looking at Prudence’s bright, beautiful smile and how genuinely happy she was for him and this opportunity, he didn’t want to spoil the mood with talk of Samantha Crane, in fact he would rather just forget about her all together.

“Grey, I don’t know what to say, I’m so excited though.” She paused. “Wait, will you stop acting? Be one of those super famous types who retire in their prime like that blonde who was in everything a decade ago?”

Greyson sat silent for a moment. “She retired?”

“Yeah, she did. For a while at least. She’s back now.”

“Huh. Well, retirement might be a good word for it. I suppose I could keep my ears open to see if anything special comes along, and we’d both have to agree that it’s the right time before I’d accept anything.”

“I don’t want to hold you back. Nothing good can come from that.”

“I just found my way back to you, Pru. I’m in no hurry to leave again. Besides, taking the teaching position is full time. By agreeing to it, I’m committing to be here, in Amber Falls, for the two semesters and Summer Stock. I’m fully ready to accept that.”

“What will Nadia say?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t want to end anything in case the roll of a lifetime comes my way, but I’ll have to tell her soon. Just not yet, not until the teaching contract is signed. She has ways of getting what she wants, and I need to get what I want, first, before this becomes *Misery*.”

“Wait, so who was that guy at the Bee?”

“Rand Sanders. Head of Lithica Studios, better known as the guy who signs my paychecks.”

“Oh no, he did not seem happy.”

“He doesn’t care about me. He’s worried about losing his franchise. Lithica Studios wasn’t even on the radar until they produced the first Ben Stone movie. I’m not worried about him or them. Once I started thinking about teaching, I started losing interest in the business entirely.”

“When did you get the offer?” Prudence asked.

“It was the weirdest coincidence.” He speared his salad with a fork and swallowed before answering. “I’d just been nominated for the Verity Award and the Passel buzz was starting. Nadia was on my case about publicity and momentum, and you’d been dropping hints about wanting me to come home.”

“Was I?” Prudence asked angelically. “I don’t remember it that way.”

Greyson laughed as Prudence reached over to pluck a cherry tomato off his side salad. He didn’t even try to stop her. “I was reading the online edition of the Bee when a classified ad for the university popped up. I clicked on it on a whim, and it happened to be for a teaching position in their drama department.”

“So, you called them?”

“I didn’t even realize I was doing it until someone answered on the other end. We talked for an hour, and he pretty much offered me the job right then.”

“What? That was like three months ago.”

“I didn’t really think much about it until closer to the Verity Awards. I’d left it open ended, but he must have heard something in my voice, maybe my

longing to come home before I even knew I wanted to. He said he wouldn't fill the position until January and to keep in touch." Greyson shrugged his shoulders. "My heart has known for so long, but my head was still catching up. Then, I had to be sure. So, after the Verity Awards, I decided to come home and see if we could be a couple."

"I'm glad we figured that one out quickly." Prudence grinned. "Have you called the university to let them know you're taking the position?"

"I emailed the dean that I would be in town and wanted to talk in person next week. I still don't know why he was willing to wait this long just to see if I'd take it or not."

"You know you're a movie star, right? Imagine the coup they'd have pulled getting Greyson Atwood to teach at the university."

"I guess. You know I don't think of myself like that, right? I'm just some kid who got a lucky break."

"You're the most down to earth person I know, Grey." She thought for a moment. "Did you really mean it, that you came home just to see if we'd make it?"

He shook his head. "No, it was more than that. I'd made up my mind that I wasn't going to take a 'no' from you. I was going to come home, and you'd be mine."

Prudence flushed at those words. *Mine*. She loved the determination she heard in his voice. "I've always been yours, Grey. Always."

* * * *

Greyson held Prudence's hand as they ambled around Main Street. They'd stopped at a good number of bars and were generally enjoying each other's company, not forcing anything, no awkwardness of a first date. Just like at the pizzeria, people were not hiding their stares and Greyson couldn't have cared less. He was with the woman he loved—yes loved—and didn't care who saw them. He'd never paid attention to it, he was always open and affectionate with his closest friends, never caring that his movie star persona would render most people starstruck.

He was used to it and it had gotten easier each time he came home. The worst being after the first Ben Stone movie had been released. It was the sleeper hit of the summer, not making a big splash on opening weekend, but picking up steam as schools had let out and people were searching for the

loud, boisterous type of personality in film that Ben Stone was.

Nadia had him doing press junkets wherever anyone would take him as the movie gained in popularity. It had been his first taste of getting burned out, so he'd finally told Nadia no—he was sure he was the first to ever do so—and had retreated to Amber Falls to re-group.

He'd taken refuge with Prudence, then, not even able to stay at his childhood home since the press knew that was where his parents lived.

It *was* different this time, though, he could sense it in the air. People were staring, but they'd now heard enough about the hometown boy who'd made it big. They'd seen his films, read about his personal life in the gossip magazines. They were staring, but their curiosity had been sated.

It was this Amber Falls that he had pictured coming home to. The quiet, sanguine place where life moved a little slower and people nodded at him in recognition, but largely left him alone. It didn't make any sense that Nadia would be here, Prudence must've been mistaken. He watched Prudence, who was walking beside him, a contented smile on her face. Yes, this was the Amber Falls worth coming home to.

He gently tugged her hand over to a corner ice cream shop with a take-out window facing the sidewalk. "I've had enough wine for now, let's get some ice cream."

"That's a great idea."

They ordered, continuing down the street with their cones, doing some window shopping until they reached a secluded bench. They sat, Greyson put his arm around her, and she laid her head on his shoulder.

"This is like a fairy tale," Prudence said after a while, "and you're my Prince Charming." Greyson started to respond, but she cut him off. "I shouldn't have said that. Your ego is big enough as it is!" she teased.

"I'm not ever above you stroking my ego, Prudence, my dear," he whispered in her ear, making every hair on her body lift and she gave an involuntary shiver. "Are you cold, Pru?" Greyson asked, running a hand over her thigh. "I can make you very warm." He slowly fiddled with the short hem of her dress, inching his fingers up until they brushed intimately against her.

She gave a small jerk of her hips, and put her hand over his, moving them ever so higher. "I don't think anyone can see us here."

It was late and full-on dark. They were in the farthest corner of the town square, where foot traffic was almost non-existent now that Wine Wednesday had concluded.

“No one can see us, Pru.” Greyson flexed his hand, slipping his finger into her folds. “So, this is Prudence with no undergarments on.” He found her clit and circled it hard. “I like it.”

She came in seconds, her cry muffled by his mouth. Prudence moved her hips again, then stilled his hand. “I need you inside me, Grey. But not here, at home.”

He nodded and helped her up, taking off his jacket and throwing it over her shoulders. “I’m glad you live so close.” He moved his hand to tickle the nape of her neck. It was taking an eternity to get back. He was ready to haul her against her door again as soon as they got there, but, after telling her the news of him moving home to Amber Falls, he felt a different kind of energy quickening his blood. A possessive kind of energy.

They stumbled through the door, and Greyson picked Prudence up and carried to her room. He laid her gently on the bed, removing first her boots then his clothes. He couldn’t wait, there was an urgency in him that wasn’t to be denied, not for another second, and after rolling on a condom he entered her with one long push. He stilled inside her, not moving, knowing he had to be heavy on her, but reveling in her heartbeat, their chests pressed together. He shifted, lifting himself up on his elbows, balancing so he could look in her eyes. He’d never felt so perfect, even with the pleasurable last few days. He finally felt complete.

“I love you, Prudence Hardwick.” Inch by inch he stroked in and out of her. So slowly. “I love you more than I could have ever imagined. You are my love. You are my home.” Prudence wrapped her legs around him, tears forming in her eyes. “Don’t cry, Pru,” he said, gently.

She tightened her legs and urged him on. “I’ve loved you for years. I’m so glad you’re mine.”

He let it build then crescendo before releasing himself into her. It seemed like he couldn’t stop, then she was coming again, milking out every ounce of his soul in the process.

Afterwards, lying there in her arms, Greyson looked at Prudence. There were no more words.

He was home.

Chapter Twenty-Five

They had gone downtown again during Thankful Thursday, the day to shop locally and give a boost to the downtown businesses. Greyson embarrassed Prudence worse than she ever had been when he came out of a ladies clothing boutique holding a package that was very clearly lingerie. She was talking to Dr. Simmons at the time, and he only winked at Greyson and said, “Ah. You’re looking better, Mr. Atwood. Just as I thought. I expect to see you next week for a follow-up.” They shook hands, grinning that knowing grin at each other.

Greyson’s purchase didn’t go to waste, nor did it stay on Prudence very long.

It was Friday before he knew it and the Fall Festival was almost over. Today was Funny Frights Friday, with a street dance in the town square and the cheesy haunted house, the town’s early homage to the ultimate autumn day—Halloween.

Prudence had taken Greyson’s advice and delegated some of her work to her employees. Taking a much-needed personal day, excited for a three-day weekend, they were lounging in her bed late Friday morning when Greyson’s phone buzzed.

“It’s Nadia.”

“You’d better answer. If you don’t, she’ll show up here, then there’d really be hell to pay.”

“You’re right. Plus, I wouldn’t put it past her to already have a key to your house, too.”

Prudence’s eyes widened. “She wouldn’t.”

“I think she would.” Greyson laughed before throwing on a shirt and swiping to answer. “Hey, Nadia, how’s it—?”

“You’ve lost Bradford,” Nadia interrupted without a hello.

“What?”

“Bradford, your personal assistant? The personal assistant that you haven’t bothered returning texts or phone calls to since you left?”

“Yes, I know who he is, but I’ve been busy, Nadia. I told you this was going to be a vacation. No work.”

“Well, he’s gone back to Wyatt. He said something about professionalism and handsomeness. I’m assuming that by mentioning those he was talking about Wyatt.”

“That’s my loss, I’m really sad to see him go.” Greyson *was* sorry about it but knowing now that he’d made the decision to stay in Amber Falls, he was happy that Bradford would be all right. Even if it was with Wyatt.

“You should’ve thought about that while you were ignoring him all week.” Her eyes squinted at the screen. “Whose shoulder is that?” Greyson looked grudgingly at Prudence then turned his phone fast enough that she had to scramble to pull the sheet higher. “Prudence. I should’ve known.”

Prudence gave a half-hearted wave. “Hi, Nadia.”

“Greyson, did you read the script I sent?” She’d already dismissed Prudence.

“Do you mean you tracked me down and delivered it to a place you should’ve had no clue I’d be at?”

Nadia just quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Yes, I got it. It’s okay, but I don’t want to talk about it now.”

“It’s more than okay, Greyson, it’ll make you a multi-genre lead. You need this.”

Nadia sat quietly. More quietly than Greyson had ever seen her. There was a glint in her eyes, a calculating glint that he was quite frankly scared of, but he still refused to be bowed by her. “I set up a meeting with Goldberg the day after tomorrow. He’s doing a Ben Stone meets Indiana Jones type movie that you’d be perfect for. I need you to be in the meeting.”

“You’re joking right? There’s no way in hell I’m leaving for L.A.”

“You have to, you need bigger roles and this one would be perfect,” she said as Greyson just stared at the screen. “I’ll try to get a video conference then. You’re free tomorrow.”

“How would you know if I’m free tomorrow?” He brought the phone closer to his face. “Where are you? Is that Tony’s Pizzeria? Are you in Amber Falls?” He moved the phone away as Prudence scrambled to see the screen. “You know what, Nadia, this is enough.” He didn’t give her a chance to respond. “You have a key to my house, you’ve been tracking me and you sent reporters to my hometown. Hell, you’re obviously *in* my hometown, and now you’re setting up meetings knowing full well I wouldn’t be there.”

“This wouldn’t be happening if you hadn’t had the concussion. The commercial was supposed to be a three-day shoot that would’ve kept you away from Prudence.”

“Who are you to think that you have any right to control any aspect of my life?”

“Who am I? I’m your agent.”

“Not anymore.”

Silence hung in the air. “Fine. We’ll talk later.”

“No, Nadia, we won’t talk later. I’m done and you’re fired.”

“I’m only looking out for your best interest. That’s my job.”

“Your job is to represent me on the projects I want to pursue, not force me into projects I don’t want.”

“You can’t fire me,” Nadia sputtered.

“I just did. Best of luck, Nadia.” He ended the call.

“I knew she didn’t like me, but I was not expecting that. I’m sorry about Bradford, though. I know how much you liked him.”

Greyson set his phone on the nightstand and tore his shirt off, gently laying Prudence back on the bed. “Bradford and Nadia are the last people in the world I want to think about right now. There’s only one person I care to make happy.”

“Wait!” Prudence moved away from him. “I’ve got to eat something before we do anything else.”

“I’m prepared to eat something right now, if you’d just stay still.”

“That’s so terrible, Grey.” She laughed and firmly tucked the sheet around her. “Don’t you have a personal chef you can bring with you? Someone who can cook me a meal whenever I want?”

“Exactly how rich do you think I am, Prudence?” Greyson questioned, all the while trying to remove the sheet.

“Umm.” Prudence was quickly starting to lose the battle of the sheets to Greyson. “I’ve never thought about it. Pretty rich, I guess? Personal chef rich?”

He stopped for a second. “Well, I *am* that rich. Now, will you take that blasted sheet off?”

Prudence giggled as she slightly loosened her hold. “So, what you’re telling me is that when you move in there’s a possibility of getting a personal chef.”

“Prudence, dear, you can have anything you want,” he said as she finally

relinquished her hold on the sheet, and he settled himself between her legs. “I’ll give you *everything* you want.”

* * * *

The warm streak in Massachusetts continued on, lending an extra celebratory mood to the street dance. Prudence and Greyson had spent a languid afternoon in bed before finally getting ready for the last night of the Fall Festival. The parade would be the next morning, still, but the Friday night street dance always felt so magical, under the twinkling lights as dusk started to settle in early. They decided on some quick appetizers with Gabe and Annabelle at Finnegan’s before they headed to Devlin’s vendor stand at the street fair for dessert.

“I never thought I’d say this,” Annabelle said, grabbing the last mozzarella stick. “It’s kinda weird to see you two acting all lovey-dovey together.”

“AB, how dare you.” Prudence pretended to be outraged. “After all we had to go through to get here?”

“Oh, Pru, you know what I mean. I knew you two would get together but seeing it in reality is way different.”

They’d filled Annabelle in on Greyson’s plan earlier in the evening to move home and start teaching drama at the university. She’d been overjoyed at the thought.

“I can’t help it.” Greyson leaned over and kissed Prudence’s cheek. “I’ve wasted enough of my life not being with Prudence, I have a lot of lost time to make up for.”

“You *are* practically middle-aged, Grey,” Gabe pointed out, stacking the empty appetizer plates.

“What does that make you, then, Gabe?” Greyson asked.

“A year younger than you, bro,” Gabe said with a roguish smile. “Always.”

The table broke into laughter and Prudence looked around, wondering at her good fortune to not only have such a good group of friends, but to be with the love of her life, finally. The only person missing was Devlin. “Are you guys coming to Devlin’s stand later? She’s doing desserts tonight as well as coffee.”

Gabe stood, gathering the plates. “I can’t. I’m going to stay here and work on some end of the month bookkeeping.”

“Gabe, it’s a Friday night,” Greyson stated, bewildered.

“Don’t worry, I’ll try to find you later, but I’ve gotta work out a few numbers, see if I can make an offer on that place next door.”

Greyson and Prudence shared a quick glance. “Shoot me a text if you can make it,” Greyson said as Gabe walked off, before turning to Annabelle. “You?”

Annabelle shook her head also. “His Majestical Dukedom wants me to take pictures both tonight and tomorrow morning at the parade. He canned the freelance photographer from Amherst, said that I could do the job just as well and save him that fee. Apparently, I’m to have no fun.” She sighed. “I’ll head home after since I want to get to the parade early and photograph the set-up, too.”

“Well, that’s a bummer,” Prudence said.

“Pru, I think you and Logan Legend can handle the evening by yourselves.”

“Logan Legend?” Greyson asked.

“You’ve been downgraded to B-list, my friend, now that you’re taking a teaching position. Sorry.”

“B-List? *Branded for Doom* is an underrated classic, so I’m going to choose to take that as a compliment,” Greyson said smugly.

“You can take it however you want.” Annabelle stood and started walking to the door. “I don’t make the rules, I just play by them. Later.”

“*Branded for Doom*?” Prudence asked. “Really?”

“Let me guess, you’ve never seen it,” Greyson stated, getting his confirmation when Prudence shook her head. “Then it’s on, we’re going to watch it this weekend.”

“I guess I have some work I could do—”

“Nope, you have to pay attention. This one’s a real thinker.”

“You can’t possibly be serious.”

“I’m very serious. As serious as I am about my desserts. You ready to go?”

Prudence stood, pretending to hesitate. “I don’t know, Grey, I’m finding out there’s still so much about you I don’t know. I mean, Logan Legend?”

Greyson laughed as he took her hand, and they started out to the street fair. “You couldn’t be a teenage boy in the nineties and not love Logan Legend.”

“I guess you’re right,” Prudence agreed as they stood in line at Devlin’s stand. “That’s like me not liking slap bracelets or scrunchies.”

“Gabe always liked a girl in a scrunchie,” Greyson disclosed as they

moved to the counter.

“Hey, guys! You two are so cute together.”

“Thanks, Dev.” Prudence put her arm around Greyson’s waist. “We were just talking about Logan Legend and scrunchies, believe it or not.”

Devlin waved them closer. “I have a confession. I still have all my scrunchies. I’ve kept them since I was a kid, even after I cut my hair.”

“I told you,” Prudence exclaimed. “They’re a classic.”

“What would you guys like? Coffee and dessert?”

“I’m going to skip the coffee tonight and just have a cupcake.”

“Although that wounds me to my mortal soul, I’ll allow you to skip the coffee. You, Greyson?”

“I don’t want to wound anyone’s soul, so I’ll have a small black and a cupcake.”

Devlin held her hand to her chest. “Oh, this one’s a keeper, Pru.”

“I know how lucky I am.” Prudence took their cupcakes. “Will we see you at the parade tomorrow?”

“Yep! I’ll be there after the breakfast rush. I finally was able to hire an extra person to help around the shop.”

“Hey, good for you, I’m glad things are going so well.” Greyson’s tone was genuine.

“You and me, both. I’m getting ready to put an offer in on the shop next door.” Devlin grinned, clearly oblivious to the look Greyson shot Prudence as she waved goodbye.

Prudence and Greyson wandered around the street fair playing carnival games and eating fried food. “I know I didn’t want coffee,” Prudence explained later, while they were sitting at a picnic bench, “but I could use something to drink. Did you want anything from the lemonade stand?”

“That sounds great. I still can’t believe it’s so warm.”

“It really is the perfect end to the Fall Festival. I’ll be right back.”

Greyson leaned over to kiss her. “I’ll be right here.”

As Prudence stood in line at the lemonade stand, she felt a prickle at the back of her neck. She turned around to see what was bothering her and froze in place as she saw Greyson, standing, another woman’s arms around his neck. The other woman was none other than movie starlet Samantha Crane.

Prudence wasn’t the jealous type—she never had been. It was a wasted emotion if there ever was one, at least she used to think so until it hit her square in the chest. Seeing Greyson that close to Samantha Crane after their

last few days together stung. She tried to shake herself out of it, but she couldn't help sensing there was something Greyson hadn't told her.

Against her better judgment, she got out of line and skirted around the back of the vendor trucks, keeping out of sight. When she was finally close enough to hear them, her heart stopped. Samantha's arms were still around Greyson's neck and snippets of her words reached Prudence, through the blaring music of the street dance.

"...you're the only thing that keeps my world spinning...thought of what it would be like to come home to you, to kiss you, to hold you, to make love to you...absolutely nothing I wouldn't do for you...what I need to do to call you mine." Samantha Crane leaned in and kissed Greyson. Prudence's vision blurred, tunneling into near blackness.

The speech. The grand speech Greyson had given her the night of his concussion was currently being repeated back to him by Samantha Crane. *What the fuck is going on?* Prudence turned and stumbled away, her arms in front of her, trying to catch herself as she fell to the ground, knees scraping on the concrete, tripped by a wire. She looked behind her to see Greyson's eyes widen and saw him mouth her name. Horrified, she pulled herself up and kept running.

It has all been all a lie. Why the fuck would he want to be with small-town Prudence when he had a movie star waiting in California for him? She needed to get away, run away from the image of Samantha Crane kissing Greyson. Dodging dancers and revelers alike, Prudence spotted Annabelle taking pictures at the haunted house. She ran to her, the sound of witch's laughter followed her, a mocking sound, sure that they were ridiculing her for ever thinking she'd be good enough for Greyson Atwood.

"Prudence, what's wrong?" Annabelle exclaimed. Prudence could feel the panicked desperation on her face.

"Greyson," Prudence gasped, out of breath. "I need to be gone from here, now."

Annabelle didn't even ask any questions. "Go to Devlin's. No one else knows where she lives, and he *will* come for you." Prudence spotted Greyson far off in the crowd, searching. "Go! I'll call her and let her know you're coming."

Prudence turned and ran to the street, only slowing after she'd turned the corner. It was only a few blocks to Books and Beans, and Devlin lived in the loft above her shop. She pressed the buzzer and the door clicked

immediately. She pulled it open to see Devlin at the top of the stairs. “Oh, Pru, what happened?”

Prudence burst into tears.

* * * *

Annabelle came into Devlin’s loft, looking like she needed vengeance, and she clearly needed it badly. She held a large, bound ream of paper. “I found this,” she slammed it on the coffee table, making both Devlin and Prudence jump. “I went to your place, Pru, to grab some things and I found this.” She stabbed her finger toward the offending paper. “It’s a script.”

“Yes, Nadia sent him a script to read while he was here”—her breath caught—“for a movie he’s supposed to do with Samantha Crane.” She picked it up and started to page through it. “A small-town romance?” she asked. Yellow sticky notes were plastered to the pages. ‘*Scout locations then bring Sam in*’, ‘*Is Samantha okay with nudity?*’, ‘*Steamy sex scene, how much to show*’. She turned a page and her breath stopped completely as she read the all-caps note: ‘*PRACTICE MONOLOGUE*’. It was the speech. The same speech he’d so lovingly given her the night of his concussion...the same speech she’d heard Samantha Crane utter to him just as lovingly before kissing him.

Then, Devlin was pounding on her back. “Breathe, Pru, you need to breathe.”

Prudence let out a gasping breath, trying to suck in lungfuls of air, even as she was getting lightheaded. *I’m going to pass out*. Scooting lower on the couch, she lay her head on Devlin’s lap.

“What kind of game is he playing with me?” Prudence questioned, after catching her breath. “Was it research, pretending to want to be with me so he could immerse himself in the role?” She knew how wrong it sounded even as she said it, but the proof was right there on Devlin’s table.

A still standing Annabelle took a seat in a chair next to the couch, her own anger deflating, shaking her head. “Script or not, this doesn’t make any sense, Prudence. None of it does. I’ve seen the way Greyson is with you. If that was faking it, he’s the best damn actor that’s ever lived.”

“I just saw him yesterday,” Devlin added. “He completely lit up when I asked about you.”

Annabelle picked up her buzzing phone. “He’s calling. Again.”

Prudence thought. She thought of how wrong this all felt—of the last five days of pure happiness. Of how she'd never felt so complete. She thought until her head was pounding and her mind couldn't form anything remotely coherent anymore. She looked around at her two friends, who sat there in silence while she processed. "I need a night. Just give me a night."

Devlin and Annabelle exchanged a quick nod. "Done." Annabelle pushed ignore on her phone once more.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Prudence awoke early Saturday morning when Annabelle's alarm went off. They'd slept on the pull-out couch in Devlin's loft, a bar sticking into her back the whole night. She was miserable and only had herself to blame. Her face was red and puffy from crying when she looked in the bathroom mirror, taking a rag and running it under cold water. She sat on the toilet seat and laid the rag over her eyes, not wanting to go back into the other room. Not wanting them to tell her she'd made a big mistake.

It was so clear to her now. Greyson had come home to research his next big role, living the part that she'd seen written in the pages of that damn manuscript. The actor, going back to his small town to win his old flame. He'd told her the script Nadia had sent was a comedy but the one she'd read was pure romance. And who better to play his romantic lead than his current fling, Samantha Crane. She'd seen the pictures of them in L.A., the red carpet was undeniable. Plus, he didn't tell her about their lunch. If there was nothing going on between them, why hadn't he told her? She couldn't help herself from questioning if there was more.

She pulled the rag off and splashed freezing water on her face, staring at her reflection, replaying it all for the millionth time. She was sure Greyson had gotten caught up in the role he was playing and why not have some action on the side? It could be more research, see exactly how the small-town girl really reacts. In the back recesses of her heart, she felt that he hadn't been faking the whole thing, but the proof was right there, in black and white.

She huffed out a breath, squared her shoulders and walked back into the living room. Annabelle and Devlin were sitting at the kitchen table with mugs of coffee in their hands. A third one was in front of an empty chair, so she sat in it. It was all false bravado, though. She didn't want to face them.

Annabelle made the decision for her when she reached over and tilted Prudence's chin up. "You have to talk to him, Pru. He's sick with worry that you didn't come home last night."

"Home? He's at my house? Where does he get the nerve to think he should

stay at my place, that double-crossing ass—”

“Hey.” Annabelle’s voice rose, cutting her off. “When have you ever known Greyson to do anything like this, to hurt anyone? He’s the best guy we know, other than Gabe, and I think you really need to hear him out.”

Prudence glanced at Devlin who nodded her agreement with Annabelle. Well. This was not how she’d expected the conversation to go. Where were the girl-power, down with men, life-affirming talks? “You guys have already discussed this?”

“I’m sorry, Pru. I agree with Annabelle,” Devlin said, but with a small smile perhaps to take away the sting of the words.

Prudence looked back and forth between the two of them, then buried her head in her hands. “But she repeated to him the exact words he said to me the night of his concussion. Words that came from that script!” Her eyes widened. “It’s exactly what the gossip magazines say. That he has multiple women all pining after him, stringing them along. I always defended him when people said they couldn’t believe he was really like that. I defended him and said he’d never do any of the things written about him, that they had it all wrong. But maybe I was wrong. People change with distance. Maybe a weekend here and there isn’t enough.” She stopped, out of breath from her ranting.

Annabelle appeared shocked. “You’ve always been Greyson’s biggest champion, the one who would defend him to anyone who said anything negative about him.”

“He went too far this time.”

“This time? I can see how he is with you and that isn’t an act.

“It’s *all* an act, that script is proof!”

“I wish I’d never brought over that damned script last night,” Annabelle groused.

“You gave me exactly what I needed to think about this clearly.”

Annabelle casually pulled out her cell phone while Prudence was occupied at the counter getting another cup of coffee, tapped her screen while muttering, “It’s time for my jaded ass to save love, once again.”

“What did you say, AB?”

“Pru.” Annabelle locked her screen and set her phone on the table. “The parade starts in an hour, and I need to get there soon. Devlin has to go to her shop and help out before the parade.” Devlin, who had been silent for most of this exchange, nodded in agreement. “Why don’t you come with me while I

take pictures,” she stated.

Prudence moaned. “Do I have to?”

Annabelle stood and said one word that left no room for arguments. “Yes.”

* * * *

Greyson sat in Prudence’s bed, alone. He could smell her, as if she were here with him. He tapped at his phone screen for the hundredth time, having not received anything from Prudence, whose phone had been turned off since last night, and only one text message from Annabelle late last night that read,

Chin up. I’ll see what I can do.

It was the only reason he’d slept at all. He flashed back to last night, his surprise at seeing Samantha Crane in Amber Falls.

“Samantha, what are you doing here?” he asked, glancing over to see Prudence still in line for lemonade.

“I’m here for you, silly.”

“What do you mean? I’m here on vacation.”

“I came with Nadia. She said we could scout out locations together, really get into our roles as lovers, immerse ourselves in the script. I think it’s a perfect idea.” Samantha threw her arms around his neck and started reciting the monologue from the script.

Greyson knew he needed to get her off him, knew he needed to find Pru, but he was frozen, he couldn’t move. Samantha kissing him was like a bucket of cold water. Then he heard the gasp. He turned his head and saw Prudence there, a look on her face that cut him to the bone. She’d tripped and was on the ground. He called her name and she stood to run. He tried to go, but Samantha wouldn’t let him.

He threw her arms off him, with more force than he’d ever used in his life. She’d tried to grab him again and he blocked her arms. “Listen to me, Samantha,” he seethed. “We are nothing. We have never been anything. We had lunch once, and Nadia wanted me to take you to an award show, for publicity only. I fired Nadia already and I never want to see you again, and if you’ve ruined my relationship with the woman I love, you will regret it. Go find Nadia, wherever she’s skulked off to, and get the fuck out of Amber

Falls.”

He turned and left a sputtering Samantha, running to where he'd last seen Prudence, but Prudence was nowhere to be found.

It was like a bad dream he was living over and over in his head. He'd come to Prudence's house, their home, but it was dark. He'd called and texted, but her phone was off. The next stop was Annabelle's, dark also. Then he'd finally gotten Annabelle's text and gone back to Prudence's, hoping she'd come home. Knowing she wouldn't.

Was her opinion so low of him that she'd think he was stringing her along while he had another girl in California? He swore she knew him well enough to know the real him, not the person that was portrayed in the gossip magazines.

His phone buzzed and he practically fell off the bed leaping for it. Annabelle!

You're on, Delta Force. Meet us at the parade. 10am.

Greyson's heart started pounding, more nervous than he'd ever been. He had an hour to figure out what to do, and dammit, he was going to win Prudence back.

* * * *

Prudence followed Annabelle around like a lost puppy. She'd never fully appreciated the word melancholy until today. Unhappiness wafted off her. Annabelle walked through the crowd at a brisk pace, stopping only to snap quick pictures of the parade floats, the participants and the growing crowd. It had cooled significantly overnight, a cold front sweeping through, and she shivered, feeling the chill in the air. An apt analogy if she'd ever heard one.

The parade had now started, and Annabelle and Prudence were walking, slowing occasionally to watch the floats as they passed. Annabelle stopped cold when the Amber Falls Bee float started to go by. "Are you fucking kidding me with this?" she yelled, one mom turning to give her a look and gently move her child away. Annabelle lowered her voice. "Can you believe that bastard?" She pointed to Sebastian Locke, wearing jeans and an Amber Falls Bee T-shirt, standing in the bed of his truck waving to the crowd and

throwing out candy. The truck had replaced the flatbed and a blue and silver Bee sat on a pedestal, the same color lettering on a banner hanging over the side of the truck, advertising the weekly and monthly rates of the newspaper. “When did he get time to make an entirely different float? And why is he smiling? He hates this stuff. He tells me repeatedly how much he hates this stuff.”

Prudence hid a smile, her mood lifting slightly. “I think he’s enjoying himself.”

“Ha! That’s what he wants you to believe, before he pounces and rips out your entrails, still looking perfect in those tight jeans.”

Then, Sebastian saw Annabelle and if it was possible his smile got even wider as he gestured to both the truck and the bee. The float was now directly in front of them. He took a piece of candy and expertly pinged it at her, hitting her square in the forehead.

She glared daggers at him, raising one hand to flip him off while raising the other and snapping a picture of him. Their eye contact broke, and the float moved on.

Annabelle grabbed her hand and pulled her along. As she dodged yet another child with a candy bag, her thoughts returned to Greyson. She knew that none of this felt right, both what she saw and her reaction to it. Why hadn’t she stayed, why was her first instinct to turn and run? She told Greyson in the maze—was it only five days ago?—that she was prepared to fight for him, to fight for them, then she’d turned and ran at the first predicament they found themselves in. Sure, the predicament was him kissing another woman, and the other woman just happened to be a fellow movie star—the tall, thin and impossibly perfect Samantha Crane.

Her fight or flight had kicked in, and why the hell fight didn’t win out, she still couldn’t understand. If anything, she should’ve decked Samantha Crane in her perfect little face. Prudence smiled for the first time since yesterday, but it faded away as she ran through what she saw once more in her head. She started to think that *maybe* she’d overreacted, kissing notwithstanding. The more she played back in her head what she saw, the more she thought there could have been an angry expression on his face. Maybe. An expression that didn’t say he was happy to see Samantha. Had he tried to remove Samantha’s arms as she’d clung on for dear life when she kissed him? Had he jerked back, anger on his face when she wouldn’t let go? Maybe. Maybe?

Oh, God. I’m such a fool. She saw Annabelle watching her intensely, then

she snapped her picture.

“Go get him, Pru,” she said, jerking her head to her right where Gabe and Greyson were standing on the sidewalk across the street a few blocks away.

Prudence turned, Greyson was scowling at something Gabe was saying and shaking his head. She yelled his name, then started running. Of course, the high-school marching band was standing still, playing *Tequila*, drowning out her yelling. Nonetheless, she continued to yell, running into the street when she was across from him. She knew when Greyson saw her. His scowl disappeared, and he started running toward her, meeting her in the middle of the street, in the middle of the still playing marching band, its members moving to the music.

He picked her up, in front of everyone and hugged her, swinging her around in a circle. He hugged her like he was never going to let go. Then she was back on the ground, his hands were on her face, kissing her, pulling her close to him. The crowd was starting to take notice and were cheering on from the side lines, and the band finished with a flourish, shouting “Tequila!”

Prudence was surprised to still find herself in the street, in the parade, the band now playing *Eye of the Tiger* and marching on around them. Greyson grabbed her and pulled her to the sidewalk, waving to the still cheering crowd, the consummate showman. He brought her around to the seating area behind Finnegan’s and led her to a bench, sitting with her next to him.

They sat for a long moment until Prudence broke the silence. “I have so many things I want to say, but first...why did you do it, Grey? Why would you use lines from a script to tell me how you felt?”

“I just had a concussion, Pru. I couldn’t think straight, then when you got into bed with me those were the only words I could think of at that moment to explain my emotions.” He shook his head. “I should’ve told you later they were from a script, but the last thing I ever wanted to do is make you doubt how I feel about you. Everything that happened after that, I’ve meant every single word. Just because I was an idiot and quoted from that damn script doesn’t make what I said any less true.”

“And Samantha Crane? That was all just...” She waited for an explanation.

“I honestly have no clue. That girl is her own special brand of crazy, I swear.” Prudence raised an eyebrow. “I swear!” Greyson repeated. “I actually talked to Gabe about needing to tell you about this.”

“You talked to Gabe about it, but not me?”

“It never seemed like the right time. I didn’t want to spoil what we’d just

started.”

Prudence’s anger deflated as she thought about not telling him about Chuck. “It seems like we both had a lot to tell each other.”

“I wish you were there when Samantha and I had lunch. I thought of you the whole time, how you’d be on the floor laughing at the ridiculous things she was saying. Then she started hinting that she’d come to Amber Falls after I told her I was leaving town for a while. I didn’t take her seriously, but I wish I had. I had no clue she’d show up here. In fact, I know Nadia was in on it, Samantha confirmed they came here together.”

“Really?”

Greyson nodded. “After Nadia called the other day, I’m certain it was her you saw on Tuesday. She represents Samantha, too. A movie deal with both of us would’ve been a big payday for her.”

“Double bucks,” Prudence said.

“Double bucks,” Greyson confirmed.

They lapsed into silence again until Prudence spoke. “I can’t fault her, though.”

“Nadia or Samantha?” Greyson asked.

“Both, I suppose.” She paused before continuing. “Nadia is one of the best in the business and she hasn’t gotten where she is by standing by and letting deals come to her. She’s fought her way to the top and wants to stay there. It was conniving of her to try to come between us.”

“And Samantha?”

“I take it back. *She* can go fuck herself.”

“Even though her father runs Lithica Studios?” He didn’t even wait for an answer. “You know what? She can go fuck herself. In fact, Hollywood can go fuck itself. I’m ready to retire, accept the teaching job and move back home, full-time.”

“You mean it? Like, that’s your final answer?”

He ran his fingers over her cheeks, smoothing her brows with his thumbs, as if he was memorizing her face by touch. “I thought I lost you. I thought you were gone forever,” he said quietly. “I’m never going to feel like that again. I love you, Prudence Hardwick. I’m yours, always.”

Prudence’s heart soared. “I love you so much, Grey. I’m sorry I didn’t stay when I saw you, I’m sorry that I ran, after telling you in the maze that I was ready to fight for you, fight for us.” She laid a hand on his cheek. “I promise I’ll never run again, no matter how hard things might get. And we need to

promise each other that no matter what, we say what's on our minds, no more waiting for the right time."

"I'm going to hold you to that promise."

Epilogue

New Year's Eve, two months later

The warm fall weather had stretched into early winter. That, combined with below normal snowfall, meant that Prudence's friends, and the citizens of Amber Falls, had been able to enjoy the Thanksgiving and Christmas Holidays more than usual with a plethora of outdoor events including the Grand Tree Lighting and Christmas Caroling. Prudence hoped the good weather would continue into the Winter Wonderland celebrations that usually took place a week after New Year's, however the tides were turning. The weather was getting chillier, and the local news station was forecasting the first nor'easter of the year, expected within the next few weeks.

Greyson and Prudence left their house late New Year's Eve after a private celebration and were headed to Gabe's bar to finish off the night with their friends. Prudence's mind was still on the weather, hoping the snow would miss them during the Winter Wonderland, when she noticed Greyson was navigating them toward his brother's neighborhood, rather than his bar. Greyson stopped at a house a few streets up on Gabe's same block. Though the night was late, it was a full moon which cast a particular light, the kind of light only seen in the dead of winter. It shone over the landscape, reflecting off the snow almost like it was still daylight out.

"What are we doing here, Grey?" Prudence looked around, confused. "I thought we were going to Finnegan's."

"I wanted to show you something first." Greyson got out of the car and hustled around to open Prudence's door. "I have some thoughts I'd like to share with you."

"You know I'll have to charge you double for my consulting fee, it being a holiday and all," Prudence joked as she swung her legs out and took his proffered hand, letting him lead her through an iron gate and up the walkway of a run-down estate. The large colonial had a massive yard, lined by a tall hedge with neglected rose bushes lining the path to the front door. The house

itself was in shambles, its columns cracked and weathered, the roof a bit sunk in above the door, the brick of the façade long past the point of needing attention.

Greyson stepped behind Prudence and placed his gloved hands on her shoulders. She gave a slight shiver—it was cold with a light snow falling quietly around them.

“Just picture it, Pru.” He slowly moved her shoulders, guiding her to the places he wanted her to see as he spoke. “What it could be once it’s gotten some much-needed TLC. With the brick and iron work restored, maybe add a nice front porch with a couple of rocking chairs, or a bench swing. Can you see it? Me and you sitting here on quiet evenings watching our kids play in the yard?”

Prudence gasped at his mention of children. They’d talked about having kids while they were huddled in front of the fireplace on Christmas Eve, but nothing bordering on serious. It was only in the most abstract of terms, really, so hearing him mention kids, outside, on this cold December night in front of a large house that could hold a baseball team’s worth if they wanted, startled her more than she thought it should. “You want us to live here?” was the only question she could think to ask. She felt his hands leave her shoulders and turned around to see Greyson down on one knee, a little blue box in his hand. “Oh. Ohhh. OH!”

Greyson smiled, his heart-stopping smile, the one he kept just for her. “Prudence, you’re it for me. I’m not here to see how things go or what we can make of this, I’m here because you are mine, you always have been, even when we were young, or apart, or growing our lives. I may not have understood my feelings until middle school, but I knew you were it for me the moment you walked into Mrs. Lydel’s kindergarten class. I went home and told my mom that I’d met the girl I was going to marry. Prudence Marie Hardwick, please make me the luckiest man alive and tell me you’ll be my wife.”

Prudence couldn’t help it, her mittened hands were at her mouth, her eyes watering. “Yes, Greyson, yes, I will marry you, a thousand times over, yes.” Greyson opened the box to reveal an antique ring. She felt the tears forming anew as he took her hand, removed her mitten and slid the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly.

Greyson stood, embracing his soon-to-be wife, and thought it couldn’t

happen soon enough. He had half a mind to take her to the courthouse today and might have if they weren't closed. He'd waited too long, and after being home with her, sharing her space, her bed, her life, he almost felt that they'd lost too much time. But everything happened the way it should in the end. As his mom would say, trust the timing of his life.

"Come on," Greyson said, "let's go inside before we head to Finnegan's."

"You're going to break in? On New Year's Eve?"

Greyson smiled at that. How fun it would be for her to think he was breaking in. But, no. He was too excited to lead her to believe that and held out a key. "You don't need to break into a house you already own."

Prudence stood there, speechless for the second time that night, and the permanent grin on Greyson's face that had been there since she'd said 'yes' turned into a full-on laugh. He liked rendering Prudence speechless.

"I don't understand. Or maybe I do...you bought this house?"

His smile faltered, for just a split second, until Prudence threw herself at him and he had to stop both of them from toppling into the snow.

"You bought me a house!" She was kissing him, then.

"I know you love your townhome, but I couldn't pass this up. There were multiple offers and I had to move quickly." Greyson peered into her face, hoping it was truly joy he saw there.

"The townhouse is great, but..." She turned to look at the house again. "This is perfect."

Greyson let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and moved to stand next to Prudence, fresh eyes seeing its ramshackle state.

"I know it's a lot of work, but I had Gabe come with me before I put in the offer. He's taught me a lot about carpentry, and now that he's done with his house, he said he'd help with the repairs. He knows an electrician and a contractor, and he thinks we can have it done and ready to move in before Summer Stock starts. Plus, I happen to know a great interior designer who I'm sure I can get to lend me her services for free."

"For free, huh? I don't know anyone who works for free." She grabbed his hand and pulled him close to her. "I think we might be able to work out a deal, though."

"Let's start by getting you warm. I already have the electricity, water and gas turned on, so the house is nice and toasty." He tugged her up the walk. "Let's see if we can start on that deal now."

* * * *

Greyson and Prudence entered Finnegan's close to midnight. They'd taken a leisurely tour of the house. Prudence couldn't believe she was engaged and couldn't wait to tell her friends their good news.

Greyson slid the coat from her shoulders and snuck a kiss to her neck. "I love you, Pru. Don't wander too far. Be sure I'm the one getting that kiss at midnight." He winked and turned to hang their coats.

"I love you too, Greyson."

The Gatsby-themed night was perfect. Finnegan's was filled with flapper gals and dapper gents, a true black-tie affair. Prudence's gold beaded dress fell just past her knees as she shimmied through the crowd to where she'd spotted Annabelle and Devlin at the bar.

"Excuse me, ladies." Prudence reached her newly ringed hand into the space between the girls and pretended to take Annabelle's drink.

"Hey, get your own—the hell?" Annabelle said. "What the fuck is that?"

"Oh, this?" Prudence raised her hand, admiring the beautiful ring again, smiling widely. "Greyson proposed tonight."

"Oh my God, Pru. Congratulations!" Devlin hugged her.

"About damn time." Annabelle threw her arms around the two already hugging friends. "Give us the details, this is Page Six stuff!"

"Of course, Greyson wants only you to do the write up, AB."

"Associated Press, here I come. Eat that, Your-Royal-Pain-in-my-Ass."

"Speaking of, did Sebastian grace us with this presence tonight?" Prudence wondered as she raised her hand to get the bartender's attention, her ring sparkling in the light. "Three champagnes please."

"Oh yes." Annabelle jerked her head to the far side of the bar then finished her whiskey in one gulp. "He's here, and he brought a date."

Devlin and Prudence exchanged a quick glance. "Why does that matter?" Devlin asked in her sweetest, most nonchalant voice.

"It doesn't matter," Annabelle ground out and glared at them, conspicuously silent while they grabbed their drinks. "What? It doesn't."

"Methinks you doth protest too much, AB." Prudence steered them toward the private table their friends were gathered at.

"If by 'doth protesting' you mean I don't care what that abhorrent man does, then you're right." Annabelle rolled her eyes as they neared the table. "And speak of the devil himself."

“I hear congratulations are in order.” Sebastian stood and placed a light kiss on Prudence’s cheek.

Much to Annabelle’s obvious chagrin, Sebastian had quickly become integrated into their little group. According to what Greyson told Prudence, Sebastian had challenged Gabe to a dart game one night at Finnegan’s shortly after the Fall Festival had ended. Not knowing Gabe was a dart master, Sebastian was beaten so badly he joked about needing to have a weekly dart league so he could practice. Thus was born the Thursday night Finnegan’s Gentlemen’s Ye Olde Dart League, named late one night after quite a few drinks.

Chuck had joined as well, and Prudence was surprised at how he’d handled the change in their relationship and how welcoming he’d ended up being of Greyson coming back home. It certainly didn’t hurt that he’d started seeing Kinsley, a local Eye-Witness news reporter, and it seemed to be pretty serious. It was all very domestic and rather cozy. She looked around at her friend group. Prudence couldn’t have been more excited to see what the next year brought to their little town. She had a feeling that things were only changing for the better.

Chuck and Kinsley stood and came around the table to give their congratulations. “Greyson was right, Pru,” Chuck said, pulling Kinsley closer to him. “Everyone has their forever girl, and I’m glad he found his in you.”

Prudence’s smile deepened. She was as surprised as anyone when Chuck had decided he didn’t want to take over Charleson Ford and instead taken a job at Eye-Witness news. He’d further surprised everyone by asking out Kinsley his first day there. They’d been together ever since.

“Thank you, Chuck.” Prudence reached over to squeeze Kinsley’s hand. “I’m so glad you’re both here.” She waved as they moved over to a smaller table, just the two of them.

Prudence noticed Annabelle was still fuming about Sebastian, glaring furtive daggers at him. “Hey, AB, have you found your ice sculpture artist for the Bee? Winter Wonderland is just around the corner,” she teased, trying to antagonize Annabelle.

“Winter Wonderland? You guys actually do this for every season? I thought Winters was kidding. I’d hoped I was off the hook after not having a grand lighting of the Christmas Tree.”

“Do you not see all the memos I put on your desk?” Annabelle was just at a simmer now.

Sebastian smirked. "Not if I can help it."

"Memo received or not," Greyson interrupted, having become just as adept as Prudence at defusing arguments between Annabelle and Sebastian, "we take the passing of the seasons very seriously here. Plus, there was a grand lighting of the Christmas tree in the town square, you just weren't there."

"That begs the question, if a tree is lit without Sebastian Locke present, was it ever really lit at all?" Annabelle asked, all sarcasm.

Sebastian rolled his eyes, ignoring Annabelle's comment. "What's next then, a meatloaf cook-off?"

"No," Annabelle said seriously. "It's a chili cook-off."

"Oh dear God." Sebastian's eyes widened in horror.

Prudence noticed midnight was nearing and slipped an arm around Greyson, gently guiding him away from the argument at their table. It hadn't escaped her notice that the dates Sebastian and Annabelle had come with were busy at the bar, obviously flirting with each other, but decided they were oblivious to anything else right now. And besides, she was ready to just think about her and Greyson for the rest of the night.

"I think we should ring this one in on the dance floor," she murmured, a slow ballad humming in the background.

"That's a great idea," Greyson said, kissing Prudence's forehead. Letting Greyson lead her to the dance floor, her hand in his, it all felt so right. He twirled her around, grinning as she laced her arms around his neck.

"We are so lucky, you know?"

"Hmm, that we are." Greyson pulled her closer.

She felt his cheek against hers as they turned in slow circles. She gazed around the bar at her friends as the countdown began.

"Ten! Nine!"

She could see Annabelle shooting daggers at Sebastian, as he leaned in to speak closer to his date's ear trying to be heard over the crowd counting, sliding his arm around her shoulder.

"Eight! Seven!"

Prudence smirked. Sebastian looked just as Annabelle flipped him off. She turned back to her date, was his name Jeffery or James? He slid his arm around her waist.

"Six! Five!"

Gabe was hustling, helping the bartenders behind the bar. Prudence could only imagine this was one of his busiest nights. The weather was so

temperate, it seemed as though everyone was out tonight. Devlin was approaching the bar. *They'll be so cute together.*

“Four! Three!”

Prudence looked at Greyson, grateful they were able to give each other a chance. She knew their love would only continue to grow.

“Two! One!”

Prudence's eyes filled with tears of happiness. “I love you so much Greyson, I can't wait to start our lives together.”

“I can't wait to call you Mrs. Atwood, my love.” Greyson leaned down and kissed her passionately. *What a way to start the year.*

Happy New Year!

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The Shellenberg Brothers: The Role A.B. Wilson

Excerpt

“Cut! Again, from the top!” Michael Burch’s exasperated demand echoed through the hot, humid Savannah night. Again. In that very specific *tone* that always led to threats of firing, alligator tears and requests for cold compresses. We weren’t going anywhere until his perfectionist, directorial ass was damn well satisfied. It could be hours.

We’d been on set since five in the morning and it was going on midnight. Cast and crew alike looked like they’d been ridden hard and put away wet. To be fair, we should have known it was going to be a rough one when he’d demanded that we “*seize the day and chase the light*” as we assembled before sunrise, clutching our coffee cups like zombies.

I glanced around and found everyone staring at me. Humidity-induced split-end halos around everyone’s head and sweat stains for days. *Alina, save us. You’re our only hope*, they silently implored.

They weren’t wrong. In addition to being one of the underpaid, overworked assistant producers for *Southern Gods*, Michael had decided that I was his ‘official’ muse of the season and thus responsible for inspiring him. All because I’d given him a small handful of ideas that had played well with the network folks and he’d decided that having a muse meant he was a legitimate artist. It was truly ludicrous, but as one of maybe two people Michael listened to these days, I was probably the only person within a hundred miles who could come close to putting out tonight’s dumpster fire.

The last few weeks on location in Georgia had been brutal with the unrelenting July heat and an unfortunate, possibly sexcapades-based injury that had sidelined our lead actor. With him out, I’d scrambled, shuffled and sweet-talked the senior producers to rush a much-anticipated guest star to the set two weeks early. The crowning jewel for the season—German actor

Markus Shellenberg, total A-lister and critics' darling.

Getting Markus onboard in the first place had been an absolute genius move by Michael. The show was floundering and there were rumors running rampant that the network execs had us on the chopping block. We were hoping that this superstar guest appearance would keep us limping along for another season.

Accompanied by the sighs of relief and muttered prayers for sanity and hope from my fellow crew members, I approached Michael, rubbing my gritty eyes. "Michael, boss man, we've got to call it. The level of overtime we're handing out is going to get us in heaps of trouble with the network, there is zero moonlight for us to work with, and I think we're all hallucinating."

He laughed as he laser-stared us all down. "Lazy asses," he said semi-affectionately. "Fine. I hate overtime and you're all useless anyways. We'll pick it back up in a few hours."

Muted cheers followed. Everyone started to disperse to break down the set before heading to the trailers, rentals and hotel for showers and much-needed sleep.

As the last person filed out, Michael turned to me with a stern look in his eye and a twitching vein in his forehead. "You were right this time, but don't ever undercut my authority again. We are way fucking behind here, and Markus is showing up tomorrow. Do you have the updated shooting schedule ready for me?"

Inured to his rapid mood swings at this point, I responded, "You've got it, boss. Dropped it to your phone. Do you want me to forward it to the rest of the cast once you've approved it?"

"No, I've got it. Jesus. Go get some sleep. You look like death."

"Thanks," I muttered. "See you in a few hours. Five o'clock again?"

"Seize the light, Alina. We're gonna seize it by the fucking balls, twist 'em, and make that light our bitch." He flounced off and I was left shaking my head trying to dislodge the disturbing visual that I knew would be bouncing around my brain like a ping pong ball, keeping me awake.

After another hour tidying up, I checked out Markus' soon-to-be trailer to make sure it was set up correctly. It looked like his extensive rider had been fulfilled—one of the assistants had even managed to track down the weird German muesli and kefir—and I quickly buzzed security to make sure that protocols were adapted for Markus' arrival. They confirmed and I considered

passing out for the four hours until the morning's call on the micro-suede couch in the fancy-schmancy trailer. *Maybe for a second. God, I'm so fucking tired.*

I slumped down and began to work out the knots in my neck with my thumbs. The last two years had been a brutal effort to climb the ladder in a completely new field and build a life in Los Angeles, a city that was equally beguiling and terrifying for this girl from the Windy City. It hadn't been easy, but I'd clawed my way up from minimum-wage production assistant to assistant producer on *Southern Gods* in record time thanks to a previous connection to Michael.

After next season, for which he'd offered me an assistant director credit in lieu of my current title and muse status, I hoped I could finally cut ties with Michael and get out on my own. I wanted to focus on horror and action films—not genres that women were typically known for—and that A.D. credit would catapult me above my competition for jobs. It was rare to achieve it in as little time as I had, but I'd worked my ass off and refused to feel guilty about maxing out my connections to support my efforts.

Ping! A text from my best friend, Candace, a makeup artist on the show, pulled me completely away from the half-assed neck massage that had almost put me under.

Hey girl, you coming home soon? Wanna warn you that Ethan and Rory are here tonight. Put your earplugs in. ;)

Jealousy, amusement and exhaustion warred within me when I read her message. I loved my roommate and her completely open poly life, but the last thing I wanted to hear that night was anyone having sex. It stood to reason that if I was on a two-year hiatus from dating, everyone else should be too.

Me: Ugh, fine. Don't they each have large personal suites for y'all to play in?

Candace: Yeah, but our place has better ambiance. Ya kno, nevermind. We'll go to their place. Sorry for bugging you.

Me: All good. Finishing up with Markus's trailer. Home soon.

Candace: Oooh. Maybe leave him a naked picture to welcome him? You need to get laid, like yesterday.

Me: Hiatus, remember? Men are untrustworthy assholes, relationships are

for the weak. You know it, otherwise you'd be locked down with your two himbos.

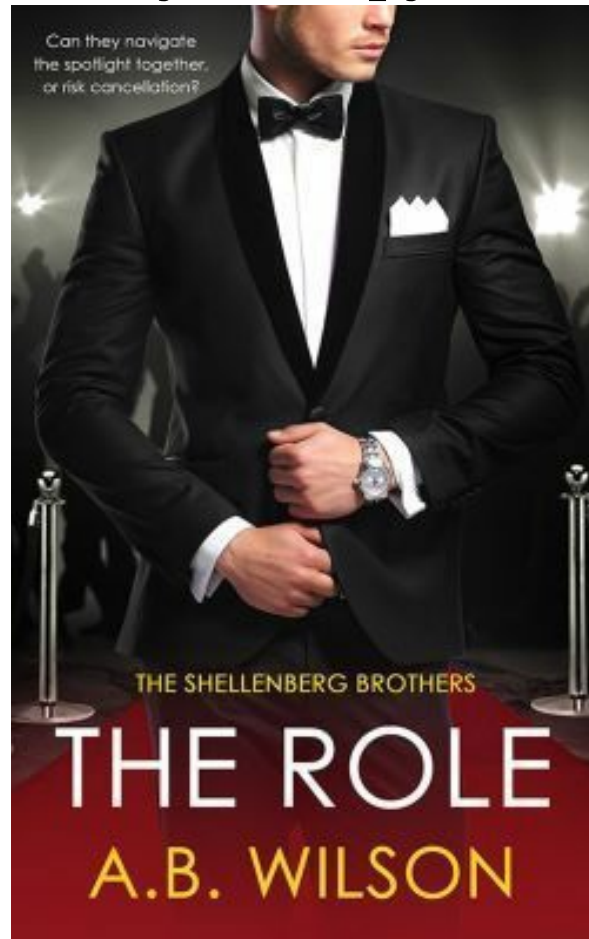
Candace: Giiiiirrrrrllll...watch it. Me and my himbos can still come to our place. Haha. Get some sleep, see ya in the morning – ily!

After sending her an eyeroll emoji, I pocketed my phone, stood up and stretched until my joints popped and eyes watered. My shirt rode up and I tugged it down self-consciously, not that anyone was around to see the muffin tops that had formed as I ate my way through the heavenly culinary scene in Savannah. I needed to figure out a way to get out for a hike or some climbing on my upcoming morning off, and whipped out my phone again and made a voice memo for one of my eternally updating list-making apps.

With a sigh that could have moved mountains, I reminded myself that everything was going to be fine, that these hiccups and delays, the minor catastrophes of the last week, were about to be resolved. Hopefully. Along with everyone else on set, I had been infected by a weird sense of excitement the minute we'd received confirmation that our guest star was on his way. Markus Shellenberg was a massive deal in the industry and I would have been a total liar if I said I hadn't at least considered his droolworthy characteristics. I mean, he'd alternated between an outright win and a much-contested second place for *People* magazine's Hottest Man in the World for the last five years running—and we all knew those alternating runners-up were just to be nice to the rest of the masculine universe.

I shook my head to dislodge the Shellenberg-induced cobwebs and finally made my way out of the door and into the night. So this was where my life stood—masquerading as a muse to get a step up on the ladder, battling stress pudge and the ever-changing whims of a certified artiste, and an exciting new colleague who was the hall pass for pretty much anyone and everyone attracted to men. *Woof.*

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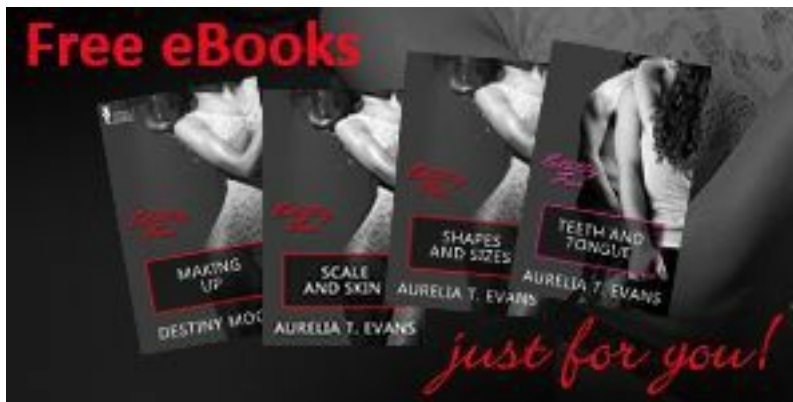


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Rachael's love of books started at a young age. Her love of romance novels started in university when she couldn't stand to read another textbook and picked up her first pure romance.

Rachael co-authors with Kimberly Metcalf. They met in the corporate world and their friendship flowed seamlessly into the real world.

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Kimberly is an avid reader who managed to convince her best friend they could put their stories on paper. She is so excited to share them with you.

Based in North Dakota, USA, when not writing she can be found spending time with her family, cooking, or curled up in her favorite armchair with a book.

Rachael and Kimberly loves to hear from readers. You can find their contact information, website details and author profile page at <https://www.totallybound.com>