

THE THIRD INSTALLMENT OF THE
BEST SELLING NOVEL, ANYONE
BUT HER

The background of the cover features two clear glass martini glasses. The glass in the foreground is filled with a clear liquid and has a single, vibrant pink rose with several water droplets on its petals, perched on the rim. A green stem with two leaves extends from the rose. The second glass is partially visible behind the first one. The entire scene is set against a dark, almost black background, which makes the white text and the colors of the rose and leaves stand out prominently.

A VERY
MILLER-COOPER
WEDDING

ERICA LEE

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Dedication

To all of my beta readers, writer friends, and everyone else who has helped me out along the way - I can't (and don't) thank you enough for all of your support. Thank you, thank you, thank you. This one's for you. Unless you hate it. Then the next one is.

Chapter 1

Charlie

“Jamie!” I skipped over to my brother and gave him a big hug, unable to contain my excitement over the news I had to share with him.

Jamie laughed and squeezed me tightly. “Wow. Not used to such a warm greeting.”

“We have big news, but we want to tell you and Ethan together.”

Jamie wiggled his eyebrows. “Is it about the wedding?” He rolled his eyes playfully and added, “About time.”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” Reagan gave my brother a hug then grabbed my hand, causing a chill to run down my spine even with the hot June sun beating down on us. *How does she still have this effect on me after all this time?*

“It looks like your boyfriend is making some new friends. Once he’s done, we’ll fill you both in.” I pointed a few feet away to where Jamie’s boyfriend, Ethan, was animatedly talking to a group of people. I laughed as I watched him swing his arms around dramatically as he spoke.

The guy was the perfect example of someone who absolutely did *not* peak in high school. He had gone from a shy band geek (*his* words) to the owner of his own business, an LGBTQIA+ advocate for the local community, and also the founder of Pittsgrove Pride—the town about fifteen minutes from where we all grew up and where he and Jamie now lived together.

“Ethan!” I squealed once we were close enough for him to hear. I skipped over and pulled him into my arms. “How is my favorite future brother-in-law?”

Ethan laughed as he squeezed me tightly up against him. “I don’t think you’re allowed to say that until your brother puts a ring on this finger.”

I waved my hand at him. “You got him to move back to Maryland. That was the hard part. Getting the ring should be child’s play now.”

“Speaking of which,” Reagan said as she stepped up beside me. “I’m still pissed at you for that. You stole my best friend from me.”

“After my sister stole my best friend from me,” Jamie said with a laugh.

I focused on the group, which appeared to be a family, standing in front of us. A slight pang of jealousy hit me square in the chest. No matter how much progress my parents made, they would never be the type of parents to come to Pride. My mom couldn’t even acknowledge the fact that that’s what we were doing today. I forced a smile onto my face. *No need to harp on that today.* “We’re being very rude right now,” I said as cheerfully as possible. “I’m Charlie. This is my brother, Jamie, and my fiancée, Reagan.”

“Fiancée? Congratulations!” one of the family members said.

“Thank you. We’ve been engaged forever though.” Reagan playfully rolled her eyes at me. “I was promised a *Very Miller Wedding* and still have yet to get it.”

I bit my lip to keep my smile from giving too much away.

Before I could say anything, my brother spoke up. “I think we’re all ready to see what antics happen at this wedding.” Jamie pointed his thumb at Reagan and me. “These two have quite the history.”

I gave Jamie a playful shove. The last thing I needed was to have complete strangers hear the embarrassing story about how my family found out I was gay. “A history they

don't need to hear about. I believe your boyfriend was trying to welcome them."

As Ethan talked to the family, I let my mind wander to all the fun we had ahead of us for the upcoming year. I was sure there would be a lot of stress too, but it would all be worth it when I was officially Mrs. Charlie Miller-Cooper. The thought of seeing Reagan in a wedding dress made my heart skip a beat every time.

"So, what's up?"

Jamie's voice brought me back to the present moment, and I realized while I was lost in my own thoughts, the family Ethan was talking to had walked away.

I looked at Reagan and she nodded, silently giving me permission to share our big news. "We have a venue!" I screamed.

"And a date!" Reagan added just as loudly.

I knew we sounded like giddy middle-school girls excited over one of us getting asked to dance by our crush, but I didn't care. Reagan and I had been together for three years, and I was more than ready to be her wife. I was ready the moment I met her, aside from the fact that I thought she was my brother's girlfriend. Waiting another whole year was going to suck, but that's how weddings worked these days. We had quickly learned most venues booked out at least a year ahead, which seemed crazy to me, but what could we do?

Ethan's eyes went wide and he threw his hands in the air dramatically. "So...? We need details, ladies! Details!"

Reagan gave me a look that told me she wanted to take over from here, and once I nodded in response, she gave them the details they were apparently so desperate for. "It's a golf resort about thirty minutes from where I grew up, and it's going to be on June 10th next year, so you just have to make sure you don't schedule Pride for that weekend. It's absolutely gorgeous." Reagan looked at me with all the love in the world, and it took my breath away. I still couldn't believe that *she*

looked at *me* like that. I hoped I would never get used to it. “I get to marry the most beautiful girl at the most beautiful place. It doesn’t even feel real.”

My brother shook his head, his nose scrunching up in disgust. “I’m going to let you two have this moment since you’re so excited, but ew. This lovey dovey stuff can stop in about...” He looked down at his watch. “Five minutes.”

Ethan slapped my brother’s hand and then waved his own at us. “Don’t listen to him. Give me all the lovey dovey shit. I love it.”

“Since my brother ruined the moment,” I looked from Ethan to Jamie and rolled my eyes, then stuck my tongue out at him, “that’s all you’re getting for now. But just know it’s going to be the party of the year, so you better be ready.”

“Plus, today isn’t about us,” Reagan added. “It’s all about you two, and this amazing Pride event.”

“Ah, ah.” Ethan wiggled his finger. “Today isn’t about us. Today is for all the gays, especially the small-town ones.”

“Unfortunately, these small-town gays are only here for the morning.” I pointed an accusatory finger at Reagan. “*This one* agreed to high tea with Mom and some of her friends.” Just the thought of it made my stomach hurt. That was the *last thing* I wanted to do today, and I honestly couldn’t believe that Reagan agreed to it. *Seriously, what was she thinking?*

Jamie laughed and clapped his hands together, clearly much too amused over my torture. “That’s amazing. I’m actually shocked Mom is letting Reagan around her friends.”

“Don’t be too surprised. We’ve already gotten a lecture about how we are strictly roommates at tea.”

Now Jamie stopped laughing and rolled his eyes. “As if everyone in our small town doesn’t realize that the two of us are flaming homosexuals.”

“I don’t know, Jamie. I mean, they did watch you makeout with your girlfriend after that 5k three years ago.” I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across my face because I knew the reminder of their kiss when they were fake dating would gross out both my brother and Reagan.

Jamie scrunched up his nose once again. “Ew, stop. Don’t remind me.”

“Also, we did *not* make out,” Reagan added, just as much disgust in her voice as was shown on Jamie’s face. “There is only one Miller whose tongue I’d like to have down my throat.”

I expected Jamie to become even more disgusted since he hated whenever Reagan made comments about us being together, but instead, he laughed. “It’s Nana, isn’t it?”

Ew. Now I’m going to throw up.

“Of course,” Reagan said back, laughing just as hard as Jamie.

I slapped her in the stomach, satisfied with the *oof* sound it elicited from her. “You’re gross.”

“What? I bet your nana would totally go for it. I think she’s made out with more women than me.”

Again, ew. While I loved that my nana was so accepting of other sexualities, that she had even had her own fun with women, it still didn’t mean I wanted to think about it. She was my *great grandma*, for God’s sake. “I can’t believe you talk to her about that.”

“Whatever. You’re just jealous that Nana is by far my favorite Miller.”

Ethan raised his hand. “Me too.”

My brother and I just rolled our eyes at each other. We knew where we stood. It was hard to compete with such a cool old lady, so I had learned not to try. In all honesty, I loved how well Reagan got along with my nana. Since she couldn’t have

that same relationship with my parents, I'm glad she had it with one adult in my family.

I pointed over toward the streets that were blocked off for Pride. "You ready to show us some fun? I should get it all in now since later I'm going to be tortured."

I had just finished zipping up my dress when there was a knock on my bedroom door. "You decent?" Reagan asked from the other side.

I rolled my eyes. I couldn't believe she actually got dressed in the bathroom, but she insisted she wanted to try to make a good impression on my parents. It meant a lot that she was still trying so hard after three years without a ton of progress, but getting dressed separately when we clearly see each other naked seemed like overkill. "Yes. Come in."

When Reagan walked through the door, my mouth went dry. I could feel my eyes widen as I ran them over her body. *God, she's hot. How is she so hot?* All of her efforts were about to go to waste, because I was ready to rip her clothes off, parents be damned. It wouldn't be the first time we had sex in their house, and I was sure it wouldn't be the last either. For all the effort Reagan put in, she also had no self-control.

"If you keep looking at me like that, I can't be held responsible for what I do." She licked her lips, and I could tell she was thinking the exact same thing I was.

I looked her up and down once again. The tight, knee-length red dress hugged her curves in all the right places. I was ready for her to do whatever she wanted to me. "Why don't you put your money where your mouth is?"

Reagan put her hand on my hip and pulled me closer to her, bringing her lips so close to my ear that her breath

caused goosebumps to spread across my skin. “Trust me, there are many places I’d like to put this mouth, but you’re just going to have to wait on that.”

Shit. Why did she have to do this to me? I groaned. “You don’t fight fair.”

“I’ll make it up to you.” Reagan pulled away and reached into the purse she was wearing, which was one she had to borrow from me since she didn’t actually own a purse.

My eyes went wide when I saw the small gummy she was holding. “You brought our edibles along?”

I looked around, convinced that my mom was going to show up out of nowhere and scold me for doing drugs. *What is it about this house that makes me act like I’m fifteen again?*

“Calm down,” Reagan said with a laugh. “We’ll just take a little bit. Just enough to take the edge off and make today bearable.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “It *is* high tea.”

Taking the edge off sounded like just what I needed, so I grabbed the gummy from her and popped it in my mouth.

A smirk spread across Reagan’s face as her eyes went wide. “I kind of thought we would split that one.”

“This is my mother we’re talking about. I’m going to need a lot to take the edge off.”

Reagan reached into the purse, pulled out another gummy, and popped it into her mouth. “Let’s do this.”

“Girls, are you ready?” my mom called from down the hall.

“So ready,” Reagan shouted before turning back to me and adding a whispered, “This is going to be fun.”

Fun or a complete and utter disaster, but let’s do this.

The gummy didn’t hit during the drive to high tea while I had to listen to my mother drone on and on about what we could and couldn’t say at lunch. Pretty much, if I only talked about my job and Reagan didn’t talk at all, she would

be completely satisfied. The gummy also didn't hit during the fifteen minutes that we had to wait for my mom's friends to arrive. But as soon as we said our hellos and we were sitting at the table with some of the most pretentious, judgmental women in Maryland, it hit. My eyes went wide as I focused on the lights across the room that had suddenly become a million times more interesting.

"Yours just hit, didn't it?" Reagan asked with a giggle, her hand landing right on my thigh and causing me to have thoughts that I *shouldn't* have at high tea with my mom. "Mine, too." She brought the hand that wasn't resting on my leg up to her mouth and covered it as she continued to laugh.

If my mom wasn't completely oblivious, Reagan would definitely give us away. It didn't matter though, since I was currently feeling too good to care.

I thought I might float out of my seat as I tried my best to focus on what my mom's friends were saying.

"So, Reagan," my mom's best friend, Cheryl, said before taking a sip of tea. "Sharon tells me you're Reagan's roommate."

"Yes, ma'am. We've been living together for over two years now. Nothing better than living with your best friend."

Reagan's shit-ass grin should have been completely obvious, but my mom appeared satisfied with her answer and Cheryl seemed none the wiser. The other two women at the table, however, shared a look and subtly raised their eyebrows at each other. *They've definitely heard the not-so-fake rumors.* The thought made me giggle. My mom was so naive to believe people in this small-ass town wouldn't find out about her gay kids. The only thing people cared about was the "trouble" current or past residents were getting into, and even though it was ridiculous at this point in time, many people in this shit town still considered being gay "*trouble.*"

"I think it's so nice when two young, successful women take on the world together. Men can wait, right?"

Cheryl asked, a genuine, warm smile spread across her face.

The other two women shared another look and my mom must have noticed this time because her face turned red and she cleared her throat before taking a big sip of the previously untouched water in front of her. “Definitely. Never a bad idea to get yourself established before settling down. Although, I can’t help but think that maybe Reagan sticks around Charlie so much because she’s holding out hope for Jamie.” She winked at Reagan, who was shaking beside me as she clearly tried to hold in her laugh. “And if my motherly instincts are correct, I think Jamie might be smitten as well.”

“Really?” The inflection of Reagan’s voice went up as if she was actually excited about this possibility, but I could also note the hints of sarcasm as well. “That’s amazing. There’s nothing I want more than to be a Miller someday.” Reagan squeezed my leg as she said those words.

There’s nothing I want more either, Reagan.

The two women shared yet another look. *Seriously, why is my mom friends with these people?* Then the one woman, Margaret, focused on Reagan and me. “It’s funny, because I could have sworn I saw you two girls wearing engagement rings.”

The look of panic returned to my mom’s face. She had become so used to ignoring the diamonds on our fingers, she hadn’t thought to ask me and Reagan to remove them. Not that I would have even if she did. I put up with a lot more than I should from my mom, but even I had my limits.

Reagan held her hand out in front of the group and wiggled her ring finger. “You mean this old thing? We actually went out to buy these rings together in representation of our marriage to the King. The diamond is there to remind us that our hearts, and bodies, belong to one man only, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

“Interesting.” Margaret furrowed her eyebrows as she stared at the other woman as if to silently ask if maybe the

rumors had been fake after all.

Meanwhile, Reagan's hand moved higher up my thigh, her whole body shaking as she clearly tried not to laugh. *Just when I thought I couldn't love this woman more.*

Between the high, the hand that continued to move closer to a destination where I desperately needed it, and the love in my heart over my fiancée being so fucking perfect, I couldn't take it anymore. I needed Reagan to touch me, and I needed it *now*. High tea and my mother be damned. This was much more important.

"I need to run to the restroom," I said as I stood from the table. I looked down at Reagan who hadn't yet caught on to what I was doing. "Do you think you could come with me? I might need some help with my dress." *Idiotic statement, but whatever.*

A wide grin spread across Reagan's face. "Of course, bestie. Women helping women. You know that's what I'm all about."

We both laughed hysterically as we quickly walked away from the table, out of the room, and back to the single-stall women's restroom. I locked the door behind me and laughed even harder as I leaned back against it. "So, your body belongs to Jesus only, huh?"

Reagan put her hands on my hips and pushed me even tighter up against the door, licking her lips as she stared at me as if she was ready to eat me up.

Please do.

"I said he's the only *man* my body belongs to. When it comes to women on the other hand..."

Her voice trailed off, and I used the opportunity to joke back. "It's free game?"

Reagan shook her head and licked her lips. "Only with you, baby."

Without saying another word, Reagan pushed my dress up and pulled down my underwear. *Shit. She's not wasting any time.* “No foreplay?” I asked, my voice squeaking at the end when she dropped to her knees and brought her tongue to my center. A spark started at my center and shot down to my toes and up to my head. *Holy shit, this feels good.*

Reagan stopped licking for a moment to smile up at me. “No time for that.” She winked then went back to work.

I put my hand in her hair and pushed her mouth closer to me. I needed this. God, I needed this so bad. And Reagan knew that. She always knew. Speaking of which... I moaned as two fingers plunged deep inside of me. Just when I thought I might fall over, Reagan put one of my legs over her shoulder and held me in place. As she continued to fuck me with her fingers, her tongue moved up to my clit and she sucked it into her mouth. Foreplay definitely wasn't needed because I was completely done for.

“Yes. Right there. Fuck me. Ah yes, babe. I'm almost there. I'm going to come.” I knew if anyone was standing outside of the bathroom, they could most likely hear me, but I didn't care. How could I care when this felt so damn good?

I moaned once more as the orgasm shot through me. Reagan stood to her feet and held me in place to keep me from sinking to the ground.

“I would return the favor, but—”

Reagan shook her head. “I got to go down on you in the bathroom at high tea with your mom in the other room. That was more than enough to get me off too, don't worry.”

I took a few deep breaths, still unable to breathe normally after what just happened. “We should probably wash up and get back out there, huh?”

All I wanted was to stay lost in this moment with Reagan, far away from the fake life my mother had created for me, but I knew we couldn't do that. I joined her at the sink where we washed our hands and fixed our hair. I was satisfied

when I took one last look. No one would ever know what happened in here.

When I pushed the door open, I found someone standing on the other side. But it wasn't just anyone. It was none other than Margaret. She lifted an eyebrow as a smirk spread across her face. "That tea goes right through you, doesn't it, ladies?"

Both Reagan and I nodded but didn't say a word as we pushed past her. "She totally knows what we were doing, doesn't she?" Reagan asked, a laugh escaping her throat that I could tell she didn't mean to let out.

Her laugh, and the ridiculousness of the whole situation, made me laugh as well. Before I knew it, I could barely control myself and was cackling as we walked back to the table. "She definitely knows."

"Do you care?" Reagan asked with another giggle.

My laughing only grew stronger. "Absolutely not."

"What's so funny?" my mom asked when we got back to the table.

I shook my head and tried my best to calm my laughter. "Just something Mrs. Brouse said when we came out of the bathroom."

"Oh yes, she can be very silly sometimes," my mom answered, completely oblivious as usual. *Thank God.*

We were able to keep it together throughout the rest of tea, but we laughed the whole way home.

"You girls are acting awfully strange," my mom said as we walked into the house. "I'm not sure what was so funny about my driving."

"Nothing. We're just in a really good mood," I answered quickly.

"Oh, yeah? And why is that?" my mom asked as she looked between me and Reagan, a confused smile on her face.

Since she asked and I was too high to care about her reaction, I took Reagan's hand and held it in the air as if I was presenting her. "I get to officially become Mrs. Miller-Cooper next year! We have a venue and a date for our wedding. We're getting married on June 10th of next year in a suburb of Philadelphia."

I watched the smile drop right off of my mom's face, and with that, my stomach dropped as well. I knew she wasn't going to be happy about it, but there was still a part of me that always held onto the littlest bit of hope. So much for the high covering up the disappointment.

When I dropped our hands back to our sides, Reagan continued to hold mine tightly and gave it a light squeeze. When I looked over at her, she gave me a warm, comforting smile, as if she knew exactly what I was feeling at that moment. And she probably did. Since the first time we met, Reagan and I were always on the same wavelength.

My mom stared at us for another few seconds before saying, "Oh," under her breath and walking away with a huff.

My eyes started to sting as I fought to hold back my tears. *Don't cry. She's not worth it.*

Like an answered prayer, my nana's voice cut through the air from down the hall. "Did I hear wedding news? Don't let that sourpuss get you down. I'm coming to celebrate." My nana walked into the hallway and pointed in the direction my mom had just walked. "I've about had it with that one's shit. I'd kick her out of here if it wasn't her house." She took a few more steps and grabbed my hand that wasn't holding Reagan's. "Now, tell me, did I hear you say that you have a wedding date?"

"You actually heard that?" I asked with a laugh. Normally, my nana couldn't hear anything.

My nana pointed to her ear. "Got some new hearing aids. They're amazing. Except when your mom speaks. I wish I could turn them down for that. God knows no one actually

wants to hear what that woman has to say.” She waved a hand in the air. “Enough about me though. When is this wedding? Next year?”

I quickly nodded my head up and down, the disappointment of my mom rapidly disappearing thanks to my nana’s interest. “Yep. June 10th. At the most beautiful resort. You’re going to love it.”

“My favorite little girl is getting married to my great granddaughter. How couldn’t I love it?”

I paused while I tried to figure out what my grandma was saying then burst into laughter. “Thanks a lot, Nana. Glad to know where I stand.”

“Eh, toughen up. You know you’re my second favorite after Reagan.”

When I looked over at Reagan to see what she had to say about all of this, she smiled and shrugged. “I told you me and Nana were besties. You can’t fight a friendship like ours.”

“Why would I even try?” I asked with another laugh. I was so happy that two of my favorite people in the whole world got along so well. It almost made me forget about the people in my life who fell short of my expectations since both of them exceeded them immensely.

“Your father is in the living room. I think he heard you when you walked in, but let’s go tell him officially.”

Just like that, the pit returned to my stomach. Family was supposed to be the group of people who were the happiest for you during these times, and I didn’t have that with my parents. My dad tried harder than my mom, but I had yet to see him get excited about anything involving my life with Reagan. “I don’t know, Nana. I don’t think I can handle another reaction like my mom’s. Not today.”

“Oh, hush. She’s an old hag. He won’t react like her. I’ll make sure of it.”

Since we didn't seem to have a choice, we followed my nana into the living room. When she went to stand beside the chair my dad was sitting in, Reagan and I took a seat on the couch.

Nana put a hand on my dad's shoulder, but the way she dug her fingers into his skin said she wasn't there to patronize him. "Richard, your daughter has something to tell you, and I swear to God if you don't act excited for her in the way you should, I'll get a belt and whoop your ass like you're five years old again. Don't think I won't. Maybe if your parents had done more of that, you wouldn't have this stick up your ass today." Nana sighed and rolled her eyes. "Anyway, go ahead and tell him, Charlie."

My throat was so dry, I didn't know if I'd be able to get the words out. *This isn't how it's supposed to be.* "Well, um, Reagan and I have an official wedding date."

"That's great, sweetheart." My dad smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes the way it did when he was truly happy. "Make sure you give me the date so I can get it down on the calendar. Like I said before, I wouldn't miss it for the world."

I shouldn't have to be reassured by my own father that he would be in attendance at my wedding, but it still caused a warm comfort to settle over my body. "Thanks, Daddy. That means a lot to me."

My dad stared at me for a long time, and for a moment, I thought he might start to cry. Instead, he cleared his throat and stood from his chair. "I have some work to get done, but thank you for telling me and letting me be part of this special day."

Before leaving the room, he walked to the couch and placed a kiss not only on my forehead but also on Reagan's. "I'm really happy for both of you."

Before he could fully stand back up from leaning down to kiss us, my nana walked over and slapped him across

the head. “You saved yourself from the belt, but do better next time, asshole.”

I burst into another fit of laughter because I couldn’t help it. It definitely wasn’t *all* because of the high. The way my nana still treated my dad like a child was hilarious. Who wouldn’t laugh at a grown man cowering away from an old, frail woman?

“I think that actually went really well,” Reagan said with no hint of sarcasm in her voice. “There were no tears, no yelling.”

Nana looked between me and Reagan as if she was trying to figure something out. “You’re kidding, right?”

Reagan shook her head. “No. I mean it. I think this was a step in the right direction.”

I squeezed Reagan’s hand in a silent thank you for being so understanding. “I agree with Reagan. It’s not big progress, but I think we are making *some* progress.” I shrugged. It wasn’t what I wanted, but it was something. “I’ll take what I can get.”

My nana studied the two of us once again. After a few seconds, her brows unfurrowed and a wide grin spread across her face. “I knew it. You two took something, didn’t you?” Before either of us could answer, she waved her hand in the air. “You don’t have to tell me. You do have to promise you’ll share whatever it is with me the next time though. I’m going to need something really strong to make it through this next year with those two assholes.”

My nana didn’t speak another word before walking out of the room and leaving Reagan and me in another fit of giggles. This next year definitely wasn’t going to be perfect, but I had no doubt it was going to be quite the adventure.

I can’t wait.

Chapter 2

Reagan

11 Months Until Wedding

As soon as I stepped out of the car, I breathed in the fresh ocean air. “Ocean City, Maryland,” I said as I stretched my hands over my head. “Always good to be back at the beach.”

Now that Charlie and I had a venue and a date, we had fully jumped into wedding planning mode. We had spent the past month discussing how big we wanted our bridal party to be and asking our bridesmaids and bridesmen. Since it was hard to decide who to include with all of the friends we had made throughout different stages in our lives, we decided to keep it small. I had asked Jamie to be my man of honor and my brother- and sister-in-law to be a bridesman and bridesmaid. Charlie asked her college roommate to be her maid of honor, her optometry school roommate to be a bridesmaid, and Ethan to be a bridesman.

We had two more people to ask, which was part of the reason for this trip. Well, that, and the fact that owning her own practice kept Charlie busy and we needed this time to relax together. A year ago, we came to Ocean City and met a not-so-separated-yet-separated couple who was going through a divorce. Even though within minutes of meeting them we both could have guessed they wouldn't end up going through with the divorce, we never would have predicted that a simple shot would have turned into them becoming two of our best friends. We texted almost every day and we had made the three-and-a-half-hour drive to see them twice over the past year, and they came to us once. It only seemed right to include them in our bridal party, and we figured what better place to ask them than where we first met.

“Charlie! Reagan! You’re here.”

When I turned toward the voice, I found our friend, Skylar, running toward us, her brown hair blowing in the wind as she ran. Her wife, Kennedy, whose hair was a lighter shade of brown, was walking a few steps behind her.

Skylar jumped into my arms, causing me to stumble a little as I caught her.

“Please be careful, hon,” Kennedy said as she joined us. She then cleared her throat as if she had said something wrong. “We don’t need you taking out Reagan on her first day of vacation.”

Kennedy hugged Charlie, then she and Skylar switched spots and she gave me a hug as well.

“So, how has it been here?” I asked as we grabbed our bags and followed them up the driveway to Skylar’s family’s beach house.

“Here as in this house with my whole family or here as in the beach?” Skylar asked with a laugh. “Because those would be two *very different* answers.”

I hiked my bag up higher on my arm. “I thought you said things had gotten better with your parents after Kennedy told your mom off last year.”

Skylar sighed as she held the door open for us. “They’ve definitely gotten a lot better than before, but two weeks with my family will always be way too much, no matter what.”

“Fair enough,” Charlie answered with a laugh. “We spent a weekend at my parents’ house last month and even that was way too much for me.”

“How have things been going with them?” Skylar asked, a softness to her voice that showed she understood more than most people. Skylar’s parents might have been accepting of her being gay, but that didn’t mean she didn’t have her fair share of family issues.

“They’re going. Same old, I guess.” Charlie sighed. “Maybe for the next five days, we should forget about family and just focus on the four of us.”

A wide grin spread across Skylar’s face at this suggestion. “I love that idea. Let me show you to your room, and then we can head to the beach.”

We had planned to wait to ask Skylar and Kennedy to be our bridesmaids, but as we were getting situated in our room for the next few days and slipping into our bathing suits, we couldn’t contain our excitement anymore. We grabbed the bottle of vodka and two special shot glasses we had made for them that said, “Take a shot at being my bridesmaid?” Since our friendship started with a shot, we figured there was no better way to ask them.

When we got back downstairs, I shook the bottle of vodka. “Ready to get this party started?”

Instead of saying anything, Kennedy and Skylar stared at each other and seemed to have a silent conversation. *Strange. They’ve always been down to party at any time of day before.*

Kennedy winked at Skylar and squeezed her hand then looked back at us. “Let’s do it.”

I walked into the kitchen so I could open the bottle and pour the shots, but then remembered we had only brought the two glasses. *Probably should have thought that one through.* “We only have two glasses, but you two go first and then we’ll go.”

“No worries.” Skylar walked across the kitchen and stretched up toward one of the higher cabinets. “My family has some here.”

“I’ll get them, babe.” Without giving Skylar much choice, Kennedy jumped on the counter and pulled two shot glasses out of the cabinet.

I did my best to hide the words while I poured the shots then handed Charlie a plain shot glass and pushed the two glasses over toward Skylar and Kennedy.

Kennedy’s eyes went wide as soon as she looked down at the shot glass. “Wait, are you serious?”

Skylar gave Kennedy a questioning look. “Serious about what? What did I miss?”

Kennedy nodded toward Skylar’s shot that was still sitting on the table. “Look at your shot glass.”

When Skylar picked it up and read it, her eyes became watery. “Really? You want *us* to be in your wedding?” Her voice cracked as she asked the question.

“Of course. You two have become two of our best friends. It doesn’t seem right to do this without you,” Charlie explained.

“So, what’s the answer?” I asked with a laugh.

“Yes!” Kennedy screamed. “Hell yes. We would love to.”

Skylar wiped her eyes. I wasn’t used to her being this emotional. “There’s nothing we want more. Although, Kennedy might have to do all the heavy lifting these next few months on behalf of both of us.” She looked at Kennedy as if asking her a question once again. When Kennedy nodded, Skylar smiled at us, a sparkling smile that told me exactly what she was about to say. “I’m pregnant. I’m due on February fourth.”

Both Charlie and I screamed at the exact same time. Skylar and Kennedy hadn’t even told us they were trying, which made this a huge surprise. It was an amazing surprise though. I was so happy for them. After six years together and some big bumps in the road, they deserved this.

After we all exchanged hugs, I started to laugh. “I guess the shot glasses weren’t the best idea, huh?”

Skylar looked at hers again and smiled. “I think it’s perfect. Reminds me of the first night we met. And trust me, I’m sure this will get used once this baby is out of me.”

Kennedy took the shot glass from Skylar’s hand and quickly drank it down. “For now, it looks like I’m drinking for two.”

“Should we head to the beach?” Charlie asked. “It sounds like we have a lot to celebrate.”

Less than ten minutes later, we had our towels spread out and were all lying in the sun, with the exception of Skylar who was sitting under a large umbrella.

“So, I need more information about my future niece or nephew.” I wiggled around on my towel. I couldn’t stay still because I was still so excited about Kennedy and Skylar’s news. “Do you know what you’re having? Any name ideas yet?”

Skylar laughed at my enthusiasm. “We aren’t going to find out what we’re having. We want to be surprised. But if it’s a boy, we are naming him Ambler Dean Moore-Davis and if it’s a girl, it will be Blake Daisy Moore-Davis.”

“Aw, I love those names.” Charlie looked at me with puppy dog eyes and I knew exactly what was coming next. “When can we start having babies?”

I leaned over and gave her a kiss on the forehead. I adored my overzealous wife. “Let’s focus on this wedding and *then* we’ll worry about babies.”

“You know if we want a big family, we don’t have much time to waste, especially if we want to spread them out

like we talked about.”

“I know, babe. Don’t worry.”

“Big family?” Kennedy let out a low whistle. “How many are you two thinking?”

“At least three or four,” Charlie answered before I could. She laughed and shook her head. “I’m pretty sure we discussed how many kids we wanted on our first official date. Such a lesbian stereotype.”

Kennedy laughed with her. “I’m less surprised by that than I am about the fact that you agreed on that many. We already decided that we’re one and done. We’ll be very happy as a little family of three.”

“I completely understand that.” Which I did. Big families weren’t for everyone. Hell, I didn’t even know if it was something we could handle, but we were going to try. “We’re probably crazy for wanting a big family. I think deep down we kind of love the chaos.”

Charlie put her hand over her chest as if she was offended. “Us? Love chaos? Never. Our whole relationship has been nothing but rainbows and butterflies.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right,” I said, making sure my level of sarcasm matched Charlie’s. “Totally didn’t get caught with your hand down my pants or have my proposal ruined by your mom thinking the ring was for her.”

“Absolutely not. That’s something that you’d only see in a book or a movie.”

“You know how I have no question that you guys are going to last forever?” Skylar asked, a whimsical look in her eyes. The pregnancy glow really did wonders for her.

“How?” I had no question that Charlie was my forever. I knew it from the first moment I kissed her. But, I still wanted to know what someone on the outside saw.

“You’ve gone through so much together, but it’s only brought you closer. You laugh about the crazy, rather than

letting it tear you apart. That's the key to a lasting relationship." Skylar reached out and grabbed Kennedy's hand, and I swear I never saw more love in a person's eyes than when Skylar looked at Kennedy. "I forgot that for a while, but I'll never forget it again."

Kennedy watched her wife with just as much love in her own eyes. "And another piece of advice that you didn't ask for—dance every slow song together, even if there's no music. It's so easy to take each other and your time together for granted. Remind yourself every day what you love about the other person, even when it's hard."

Skylar giggled and switched her gaze from Kennedy to us. "Sorry. I think these baby hormones are somehow affecting both of us. Enough of the mushy shit. Let's have some fun."

"Speaking of fun..." I looked out at the ocean that was calling my name. "Anyone want to go in with me?"

Skylar shook her head. "I'm going to totally play the pregnancy card as an excuse, but the truth is, that water is just way too cold for me."

"I'll go with you, babe," Charlie said as she leaped up from her towel. "Race you to the water?"

Before I could comprehend what she was saying, she had already started to run. I quickly stood up and chased after her, catching up right before she hit the water. I picked her up and carried her in with me. "Looks like we both won."

Charlie leaned in and placed a quick kiss on my lips then stared at me with the same love I had just seen in Kennedy and Skylar's eyes. "We sure did."

I carried her further into the water and looked around us. Apparently, everyone thought the water was too cold because there were barely any people out where we were. "You know what this reminds me of?"

"What?"

“That time we had sex in the lake behind your house.”

I could tell when the realization of what I was hinting at hit Charlie because her pupils dilated. She cleared her throat and looked around. “That was a little different. We were naked *and alone.*”

“Being clothed and in public never stopped us before.”

I brought my hand down and teased my fingers along the side of her bathing suit.

“Reagan, we can’t.” Charlie’s voice was strained and she choked down a moan while she spoke.

“Really? Because your body and face seem to be telling a different story.”

Charlie looked around once again. “Okay, but if we’re doing this, I’m not the only one who’s having an orgasm.”

Without any further warning, Charlie’s hand was inside my bathing suit. I moved my hand inside of hers as well and got to work. Since this was my idea, there was no way I was going to come first. As I ran my fingers through Charlie’s folds, she started to moan, so I leaned in and kissed her to muffle the sound. As we kissed, Charlie moved her finger in and out of me. When I felt myself coming close to the edge, I took two fingers and did the same to her.

At the same time Charlie started to shake against me, I reached my climax as well. I bit my lip to keep myself from making a scene, and Charlie bit into my shoulder apparently to do the same, but that also served to make my orgasm even stronger. *So fucking hot.*

I brought my hand out of the water and pushed a stray piece of hair behind Charlie’s ear. “Have I mentioned how much I love you?”

“Hmm. Only once or twice.”

I placed a chaste kiss on her lips. “Well, I plan on telling you again and again every day for the rest of our lives.”

“Now that you completely wore me out, should we head back to land and soak up the sun?”

“Sounds great.” I picked Charlie up once again and carried her out of the water with me.

I carried her all the way over to Skylar and Kennedy then plopped her down on her towel.

“Things were getting pretty hot and heavy out there, huh?” Kennedy asked with a laugh.

Shit. They could see that? If they saw it, then who the hell else did? Would an angry parent be coming over here to yell at us soon? Or worse, a lifeguard kicking us out?

Skylar laughed with Kennedy. “Yeah. Don’t think being way out in the water kept the whole beach from seeing you two making out.”

Phew. I felt my body relax when I realized they didn’t actually know what happened out there. “We were just doing what you suggested—appreciating each other to the fullest.”

Kennedy smiled a satisfied smile. “Good. Never stop doing that.”

I don’t plan on it.

Chapter 3

Charlie

10 Months Until Wedding

“Let’s go, Charlie! We’re going to be late.”

I couldn’t believe it. Not only was my mom in our apartment, a place she hadn’t dared to visit these past two years, but she was also going with me to look at wedding dresses. My nana was here too, but the only thing surprising about that was the fact that she willingly did the drive up with my mom.

A few weeks prior when my mom asked if she could go wedding dress shopping with me, since she wouldn’t get to see me in the dress on the actual day, I reluctantly agreed. If she wasn’t willing to fully support me, I didn’t think she deserved to be part of this, but it was the nagging hope of things changing that made me say yes. I knew it would only lead to disappointment, but I couldn’t bring myself to say no.

“Mom, the shop is ten minutes down the road and my appointment isn’t for another thirty. We’re fine,” I reassured her as I made my way down the hallway from my room, putting on the earrings I had already picked out for my wedding day as I walked. “And remember the rules—I’m not going to pretend I’m marrying a man just to keep you from getting embarrassed.”

“I know.” My mom looked toward the ground, but I couldn’t tell if it was because she felt guilty or disgusted. “No need to talk about that now, though. Let’s just try to have a good day.”

Yeah. Let’s try. Easier said than done with this woman.

My nana wiggled over to me and put her hand on her purse. “Before we go, I want to give you something.”

She dug in her purse until she pulled out a thin piece of paper. When she handed it to me, I realized it was a check. The only problem was she hadn't written anything on it other than my name, and I had no idea what it was for. "Nana, this is blank."

"You think I don't realize that? I'm old, but I'm not senile yet." She pointed a finger at the check. "It's blank because I don't know how much to write it out for yet. I want to pay for your wedding. The whole thing."

Oh my God. What? I shook my head. "No, Nana, I can't let you do that. Reagan's parents already agreed to pay for half, and we're going to take care of the rest."

"And put yourself into debt before you even start your lives together? Phooey. Take the money. I don't need it. You do."

"Seriously. We're going to keep the wedding very simple. We won't go broke paying for it. Don't worry."

"You're only doing a simple wedding because you don't want to spend too much. I want to give you the wedding of your dreams. It's the least I could do after birthing a son who birthed a son who married the literal devil."

A gasp from across the room caught both of our attention. I looked over to find my mom with her hand on her chest and her face a ghostly white. "Olivia. How dare you say such a thing?"

My nana waved her hand as if she couldn't care less what my mom had to say, and I'm sure that was the case. "Oh, stop. Don't act like you've never heard me say that before, and certainly don't act like you'll never hear it again. The closer I come to death, the more honest I become. Get used to it." Instead of waiting for my mom to answer, Nana turned back to me. "Anyway, I want to do this for you, and I won't take no for an answer."

"Well, I can't accept it. It's too much. Weddings are so expensive."

“What if I said it was my dying wish?”

My mouth went dry and my heartbeat picked up. *What is she trying to tell me right now? Oh God, is she sick?* “Nana, are you...?” I couldn’t even say the words because it hurt too bad.

“I could be. We never know at my age, do we?”

I let out the breath I was holding. *Thank God.* This was just some game she was playing.

My nana squeezed my hand. “Listen, dear. I’m fine now, but we all need to face the truth. I’m not going to live forever. There’s no point in me saving up my money. Whatever is left once I croak is going to be dispersed throughout the family and the last thing I want is for much to go to your mom or Aunt Dina. I’d rather have it buried with me. Maybe I will.” She tapped the check I was still holding in my hand. “So, please accept this. You are marrying my favorite person in the world after all.”

I laughed through my tears because I couldn’t believe this was actually happening. Once she got past the initial shock, Reagan was going to be so excited. I knew my nana meant it when she said she wanted us to have the wedding of our dreams, so whatever we wanted, she would make it come true. Luckily, neither Reagan nor I were overly fancy so it still wasn’t going to end up being some \$100k+ wedding. “Thank you so much, Nana. You honestly don’t know how much this means to me.”

“Like I said,” my nana turned toward my mom and grimaced. “It’s the least I can do. Now, let’s go find you a dress. What do you say?”

“I think that sounds fantastic.”

Five dresses in and I had yet to try one that felt like *the one*. They were all nice, but I wanted one that felt right as soon as I put it on. Since I had no idea what I was looking for, I didn't know which would make me feel that way, but I knew once it was on me, I would just know.

It turned out six was my lucky number because when I was flipping through the long row of dresses and came across a beaded mermaid-style ivory dress with a low back, I knew it was the one for me. I didn't even have to try it on. It was mine. I pulled out the dress and showed it to the stylist. "This one."

The stylist's eyes lit up when she saw it. "I think that's perfect."

I went behind the curtains and started to pull it on but had to peek my head out a minute later when I realized there was no way I could do it alone. "Mom? Do you think you could help me?"

"Me?" My mom pointed to herself as if she was surprised I asked, which I guess made sense since I had avoided having any time alone with her since getting to the shop. The last thing I needed was for her to ruin this day for me.

"Please?"

My mom hopped up from her seat as if it was on fire. "Of course, sweetie."

Before I knew it, she was behind the curtain with me helping me into my dream dress.

"How does it look?" I asked as I ran my hands over the front of it. Since there were no mirrors in this area, I couldn't see for myself yet.

"Charlotte, it's...." My mom's voice cracked then trailed off.

"It's what?"

My mom stared at me with tears in her eyes. "It's you. This dress was made for you."

“You really think so?”

My mom nodded her head up and down. There was a look of sincerity in her eyes that I wasn't used to seeing in her. “I know so. Just wait until you see it. You're going to be in love.”

“I think I already am,” I said as I walked out from behind the curtains to the room filled with mirrors on all sides.

My own tears came when I looked at myself in the mirror. My mom was right. I was definitely in love with this dress. My mom, Nana, the stylist, and some others in the dress shop were all commenting on it, but I couldn't focus on any of that. There was only one person I wanted to share this moment with, and even though I couldn't *exactly* share it with her, I knew I had to in some way.

I held my hand out toward my mom. “Hey, Mom? Can you hand me my phone?”

My mom reached for her own phone instead of mine. “If you want a picture, I can just take it. You wouldn't want that on your phone anyway.”

I shook my head. “That's not why I want it. I want to call Reagan.”

“Reagan? Why?” My mom furrowed her eyebrows and scrunched up her nose. Once again, I was left to wonder if she was simply confused, or if she was disgusted by the mention of my future wife's name.

I shrugged my shoulders but couldn't wipe the smile from my face. Nothing could ruin this moment. Not even my mother. “I just want to talk to her.”

My mom sighed but still grabbed the phone and brought it over to me. The wide grin stayed on my face as I hit Reagan's name and listened to the phone ring. I wasn't sure if she would pick up since she was visiting her family this weekend, a fact that I certainly didn't blame her for with my mother coming to town.

After a few rings, Reagan picked up. “Hey, babe. Everything okay?”

“It’s more than okay. It’s wonderful. I just wanted to let you know I found my wedding dress. I know I can’t tell you anything else since we want to be surprised, but you’re going to love it.”

Reagan laughed. “Babe, you could wear a paper bag and I would love it because I love *you*, so I don’t doubt that.”

“Well, it’s not a paper bag, so I think you’re going to especially like it.”

“You know what I like?”

“What’s that?”

“How happy you sound right now. I can tell it’s the perfect dress because it made you so happy. That’s all I care about.”

As if the tears weren’t falling enough, now Reagan had to be the sweetest goddamn woman in the whole world. *How did I get so lucky?*

I watched myself in the mirror, smiling through my tears. “I love you so much, future Mrs. Miller-Cooper.”

“I love you too, future Mrs. Miller-Cooper. I hope you have the best day with your mom and Nana.” It sounded like the conversation was coming to an end when Reagan spoke again. “Oh yeah! I found my wedding outfit too. It’s not a dress though. Is that okay?”

“Of course it’s okay.” I lowered my voice so only Reagan could hear me. “I know you’ll look super sexy in whatever you wear, and I can’t wait to see it.”

“Can’t wait to see it or can’t wait to take it off?” Reagan asked just as quietly.

I giggled at the question, feeling so giddy I could barely handle it. “I think you know the answer to that.”

Reagan laughed again and it lit up the whole room even without her being in it. “We need to hang up now or I might say something I shouldn’t in front of my mom. Love you, babe.”

“Love you too, future wife.”

When I hung up the phone, I realized everyone was staring at me. The stylist smiled and shook her head. “I could only hear one side of that conversation, but I can already tell the two of you are perfect.” She turned away from me to focus on my mom. “You must be really happy. Not all parents are lucky enough to see their kids end up in a loving, mutually caring relationship. Trust me. I’ve seen it all.”

The only way my mom would be happy was if Reagan was a man, but I also knew she wouldn’t admit that. She wouldn’t allow herself to look like an asshole in front of someone who was clearly accepting of gay people. Instead of actually saying anything, my mom hummed in agreement. *Better than making a scene, I guess.*

It was my nana who spoke up. “I, for one, feel very blessed to have Reagan becoming part of this family, because you’re right. Reagan and Charlie really are perfect for each other. I couldn’t have asked for a better person for my Charlie girl. Reagan worships the ground she walks on, which is exactly what Charlie deserves. Not to mention, Reagan is a hoot. That girl has become one of my best friends. She’s family already.”

The stylist’s eyes lit up even more. “Well, I have to say it’s really refreshing to meet such an accepting family. Unfortunately, that’s still much too uncommon these days. I can’t imagine why. Ridiculous, if you ask me.”

My mom turned up her nose and crossed her arms over her chest defensively. “I’m sure they have their reasons. I mean, we all know what the Bible says about this sort of thing.”

With my mother's words and blatant homophobia, the stylist's smile dropped. She tried to force one when she looked back at me, but it was written all over her face. That pity I had gotten way too used to. I hated it. "It's the perfect dress, Charlie. Truly. Reagan will love you in it."

I would love to say the tension melted away and the rest of our time at the dress shop went well, but by the time we left, I practically ran out of there. You could cut the tension with a knife. The only thing that got me through was the thought of wearing that dress on my wedding day. I pictured Reagan's face as she watched me walk down the aisle, and in spite of how terrible my mom made me feel, I couldn't help but smile.

My nana paid for the dress, and I scheduled a time to come back for my first fitting, an event my mother wouldn't be attending. Thank God.

I ignored the stylist's pitying smile as we said our goodbyes and prayed that by the time I came back for my fitting, she would forget all about what happened today.

As soon as we were outside, my nana looped her arm with mine and pulled me close to her. "You go ahead and spend a lot of money on this wedding. I want to make sure there's nothing left for that asshole."

I laughed out loud because I knew my mom had heard that, and I didn't care. If she didn't want to be labeled as an asshole, she shouldn't act like one. I knew my parents' lack of acceptance would always hurt, but I had my nana's support and there honestly wasn't a better woman in this world than my nana. What more could I need?

Chapter 4

Reagan

9 Months Until Wedding

“I’m really starting to wonder why we came here. I hate stuff like this.”

I didn’t mean to whine, but bridal shows definitely weren’t my thing. I hated getting chased down by people who wanted to tell us why they had the best cake, alcohol, photography abilities, etc., etc., etc. As if that wasn’t bad enough, we also had to explain to the vendors that we weren’t best friends planning weddings together, but were, in fact, getting married to each other. It’s not that any of these vendors seemed to care that we were gay, but the assumed heteronormativity was a bit annoying. I knew if I mentioned that one more time though that Charlie would probably slap me, so I kept it to myself.

“I told you. It’s mostly because there’s a chance to win wedding stuff.”

“And why do we need to win stuff when Nana is paying for the whole wedding anyway?”

That comment did earn me a playful punch from Charlie. “We could win something that Nana can’t afford. No matter what that woman might think, she doesn’t have an endless supply of cash.”

“Yes. We could win an ice sculpture or light display. How exciting,” I said sarcastically.

“Ugh. You’re incorrigible. Next time, I’m bringing Jamie.”

“Please do. I’m sure he would love it.” More sarcasm. Jamie might hate this more than me. Ethan, on the other hand,

would *actually* love it. I smiled when I thought about him going around to every vendor and becoming best friends with all of them.

Charlie grabbed my arm and pulled me along. “Let’s go to the photographer section. They don’t seem to be as aggressive.”

As soon as we walked in the room, Charlie’s eyes landed on something at the other end. “No fucking way,” she said as she squeezed my arm so tightly, I thought she might leave a bruise. “Do you realize who that is?”

I looked in the direction she was staring, even though I was sure I would have no idea who it was. The only photographer I knew was Skylar, and she would have told us if she was working this event. “Tell me?”

“It’s Maggie Cahill. She’s an amazing photographer. I’ve followed her on social media for years. I followed her wife first because she runs a hilarious blog, but she started posting Maggie’s pictures on her blog and they’re gorgeous. She’s photographed some huge weddings.” A look of disappointment took over Charlie’s face as she averted her eyes away from Maggie. “I’m sure she’s booked up years in advance.”

I couldn’t stand to see her sad, so I forced her to look me in the eyes. “We’ll never know if we don’t ask, will we?”

Charlie shook her head back and forth. “I can’t talk to her. It’s like meeting a celebrity, like when you met Laurel Lake. I’m just going to freeze up and look like an idiot.”

“Then I’ll talk to her.”

“Really? You haven’t been willing to talk to anyone today.” The smallest smile returned to Charlie’s face, and it was enough to make me willing to do everything I hate just to see it.

“Of course. I still owe you for the whole Laurel Lake thing after all.”

I walked across the room toward the woman who appeared to be a few years older than us. Charlie walked behind me as if we were approaching a murderer rather than someone she idolized.

I waved a hand as we walked up to the empty booth. “Hey! My fiancée and I are big fans of your work.”

“Wow! Thank you.” Maggie looked between me and Charlie, who had thankfully now stepped up beside me. “Also, congratulations on the engagement.”

Someone who actually realizes we’re engaged.
Refreshing. “Thank you. It’s nice to come up to a booth where someone doesn’t automatically assume we’re just best friends.”

Maggie cringed. “Ah yeah. I definitely see that happen a lot. I’m guilty of the opposite. I’ve definitely asked best friends and even sisters when they were getting married.”

“The gay agenda, right?” I asked with a laugh. I liked Maggie already. I could see why Charlie was so starstruck.

Maggie raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Something like that.”

I scanned across some of the sample photos sitting on the table. “Your work really is beautiful. I take it you’re booked out pretty far ahead.”

Maggie cringed once again. “Depends on the time of the year, but for the summer months, I have some bookings for two years out.”

Of course. Even though she didn’t say anything, I could feel the disappointment radiating from Charlie’s direction. “Not surprised. I guess it’s safe to assume June 10th of next year is taken?”

“It’s not, but that’s only because I took off most of June to spend time with my family and friends. My schedule is all over the place since I don’t strictly do weddings.”

I was surprised, but happy, to hear Charlie's voice chime in. "That's completely understandable, given all the traveling your family does. Do you have somewhere specific you're traveling in June?"

Maggie smiled as she shook her head. "We don't have anything planned yet. Probably spending a lot of time with my family. I grew up outside of Philadelphia. My sister and best friend, who are conveniently married to each other, live right down the street from my parents, so I'm sure we'll stay with them for a while."

I knew *outside of Philadelphia* could literally be anywhere from the outskirts of the city to Central Pennsylvania, but it was still cool that this woman was a Pennsylvania native like me. "I grew up outside of Philadelphia too. In Woodhaven. Our wedding is in East Beniham. Not sure if you've heard of either of those."

Maggie's eyes went comically wide and her mouth dropped open. "No way. You're kidding, right?"

I shook my head, confused why this was such big news to her. "Nope. Definitely not a joke."

"East Beniham is where I grew up. It's where my family lives." Maggie reached onto the table and handed me one of the cards. "You said June 10th, right? Give me a call next week. I think we can work something out."

"Really?" Charlie didn't try to mask the excitement in her voice and it filled me up with pride, even though I didn't actually do anything to make this happen, aside from growing up in the right area.

"Of course. I can also talk to my family and see what vendors are in the area. That way, you're not paying some astronomical travel fee to have someone you meet here."

"That would be wonderful, especially since it means we can leave here." I laughed in hopes that Maggie wasn't offended that this place wasn't my scene.

Luckily, Maggie laughed along with me. “I don’t blame you. I hate these things. Some vendors can be such vultures. My wife, on the other hand, loves them. She’s out walking around, pretending she’s planning a wedding to see if she can score any gifts.”

“That’s the whole reason I wanted to come,” Charlie added with a laugh. “I never dreamed I’d meet you here.”

“Looks like it was meant to be.”

As promised, when we called Maggie a few days after the bridal show, she already had a list compiled of the best vendors in and around East Beniham. She also had a breakdown of pricing for different packages she offered. She was either underselling herself or gave us some sort of discount, because the prices were within a range we could easily pay even without the help of Nana.

We decided on the package and signed the agreement that same day. The list of possible vendors was longer than expected, so we decided to take a trip to visit my family and check out some of them. Since our venue took care of food and alcohol, we only had to worry about cake, the DJ, flowers, and a videographer if we decided we wanted that.

We had the DJs narrowed down to two and had scheduled meetings with both of them. After only a few minutes with the first one, we knew we had found the right fit for us. Since Nana insisted on being involved in everything, even when she couldn’t physically be there, we FaceTimed with her to get the final approval.

“Let me see this guy,” she said as soon as she answered the phone.

“It’s not a guy,” I explained. “It’s a female DJ.” Not only was she a female, but she was also gay, which made the

decision to go with her very simple.

“Even better. Let me talk to her.”

Charlie turned her phone, so her nana could talk to Chess, the DJ. “Hello, Nana! I’ve heard a lot about you,” Chess said as soon as the phone was on her. It was nice that she was a good sport.

“You’re cute. How old are you?”

“Don’t get any ideas, Nana,” I joked.

Even though I couldn’t see her, I knew Nana was rolling her eyes at me. “Don’t listen to my future great granddaughter. I was only asking because you look so young.”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“And how do you feel about drag queens, dear?”

Drag queens? What the hell is she getting at?

“I love them,” Chess answered enthusiastically, appearing not to be thrown off by the strange question.

“Good. I hadn’t told the girls yet, but I hired two to perform at the reception. Would you be okay with working with them?”

“Okay with it?” Chess laughed. “I’d love it.”

“Perfect. You’re hired. Let’s stick it to all those assholes in the red states. Give my girls your price, and I’ll write the check.”

Before anything else could be said, Nana hung up the phone.

“You two weren’t lying,” Chess said with another laugh. “She’s great.”

Charlie laughed along with her. “She’s something. That’s for sure.”

We worked out the rest of the details then called the other DJ to cancel our appointment, which I was excited about since it gave us more time to try out desserts.

The first bakery we walked into smelled amazing, and I was almost immediately sure it was the one we would go with.

“How can I help you, ladies?” the woman near the front asked, a large smile on her face. It was the type of smile that immediately made you feel at home, like the smile of a loving mother.

I smiled as I took in the sight of cakes, donuts, and everything in between. “We’re interested in possibly getting our wedding cake made here. Our wedding is in town here next June.”

“Wow. A double wedding? How nice. What are you? Sisters? Best friends?”

I searched for any hint of sarcasm on the woman’s face. My heart dropped when I didn’t find it. *Might as well give her the benefit of the doubt. It’s an honest mistake.*

I grabbed Charlie’s hand and held it in the air. “Nope. Fiancés.”

Just like that, the woman’s face dropped. Any trace of a smile was gone, and it was replaced by a literal scowl. “Did you say June? I believe I’m all booked up at that time. Couldn’t possibly fit in another cake.”

“What about donuts?” I pointed to the sign indicating that only one week’s notice was needed for a large order of donuts.

Almost immediately, a bead of sweat formed on the woman’s eyebrow. She looked from me to the sign and back to me again. “I just don’t think we’d be the best fit for you.”

My body heated up as my blood started to boil, but I refused to let this woman get the best of me. I put on my best fake smile and spoke through gritted teeth. “But you don’t even know anything about us yet. Don’t you want to get to know us better before making that decision?”

“I’ve done this enough.” The woman ran her eyes across both Charlie and me. “I know when a couple isn’t a good fit.”

“So, this has nothing to do with us being a gay couple?”

I felt Charlie stiffen up beside me, clearly uncomfortable with the direction this was headed. There was no way I was going to let this woman get away with hiding her homophobia.

“What it comes down to is that we have different values.”

“Oh yeah?” I stood a little taller. “I value family. I value this woman beside me and our future children. Do you not value that?”

The woman cleared her throat and pulled on her apron. “I do value all of that, but I also value God.”

“And who’s to say we don’t?”

Before the woman could say anything else, there was a tug at my arm. “Let’s just get out of here.” Charlie looked from me to the woman. “Is it okay if I use your restroom before we leave? I’m really sorry about wasting your time, but I promise once I’m done, we’ll be out of your way.”

A small smile returned to the woman’s face. “Thank you for understanding. It’s in the back.”

By the time we made it to the bathroom, I was fuming. I followed Charlie inside so I could tell her how I felt about her letting the homophobe win. Before I had a chance, I was pushed up against the row of sinks.

I didn’t even have a moment to question what was happening because Charlie immediately put one hand down my pants and the other up my shirt. “You didn’t think I actually let that woman win, did you? I’m going to fuck you right here in her bakery’s bathroom.”

I leaned my head back and moaned. “This is so much better than trashing her online.”

“I know, right?” Charlie moved her fingers hard and fast. “Gotta make this quick. I’m sure she wouldn’t hesitate to call the cops if she caught us.”

“Yeah, I don’t see her being quite as understanding as Nana.” I started to laugh, but it was cut off when Charlie’s thumb landed on my clit.

“You like that, huh?” she whispered.

“Ah.” Words were impossible at the moment, so I wasn’t even going to try.

As Charlie moved her fingers inside of me, she brought the other hand to my breast and squeezed it hard. She switched between squeezing and playing with my nipple. Anytime she played with my nipple, the thumb of her other hand moved to my clit. She then squeezed my boob as she moved her fingers inside of me. She went back and forth like this until I couldn’t take it anymore and came in her hand.

I struggled to catch my breath as she stood beside me and washed her hands. Once she was done, she smiled over at me and winked. “Much better than a bad review.”

I followed Charlie out of the bathroom, still in shock over what had just happened. When we made it back out to the front, Charlie waved to the baker nonchalantly. “Thank you so much. Have a wonderful day.” We were almost at the door when she turned back around. “Oh yeah, by the way, it might be a good idea if you clean that bathroom.”

She winked at the woman just like she had done to me in the bathroom then grabbed my hand and ran out the door. We both laughed hysterically as we ran as fast as we could down the sidewalk and away from her business.

Once we were far enough away, we stopped to catch our breath. “I can’t believe you just did that,” I said between gasps.

“I can’t believe *you* didn’t think of it.” Charlie squeezed my hand. “Now, what do you say we find someone to make us a big gay rainbow cake?”

“With unicorns?” I asked, only somewhat joking.

“Always with unicorns.”

Chapter 5

Charlie

8 Months Until Wedding

“You’re seriously getting a rainbow wedding cake?” my brother asked with a laugh.

“Sure are,” Reagan answered proudly.

I shook my head. “One side is going to be rainbow. The rest will be the classic white color.”

“But instead of little people on the top, we’re putting two unicorns there.” Reagan bounced up and down beside me.

A month ago, after having the homophobic woman tell us she wouldn’t make our cake, the next bakery we went to just happened to be owned by the world’s cutest gay man. *Sorry, Jamie.* We told him the story of the other bakery to which he rolled his eyes, since he had seen it all before from that woman. When we somewhat jokingly brought up a rainbow wedding cake, he loved the idea, so we settled on half traditional white and half rainbow. Reagan then asked about a unicorn topper, and the baker told us he knew someone who could make it for us.

Jamie snorted. “You are not.”

“Oh, we are,” I reassured him. “Getting them specially made and everything.”

“I personally think it’s a wonderful idea,” Ethan said, taking my brother’s hand as he spoke. “Maybe someday we’ll get to have a rainbow wedding cake.” Ethan looked at his hand and sighed. “We’ll see.”

I gave my brother a knowing smile. Ethan had no idea, but in another month, his wish would be coming true. We had a trip to Disney World planned with my brother, Ethan, and

oddly enough, Mary Beth and her girlfriend, who had become two of Ethan and Jamie's best friends. Jamie planned on proposing right in front of Cinderella Castle. I found the idea a bit cheesy and cliché, but he was excited about it, and that's all that mattered. After everything the two of us went through (and were still going through) with our parents, all I wanted was for my brother to be happy.

Speaking of cheesy, I shouldn't have been surprised to find that, in honor of our trip, my brother and Ethan decided to dress up as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck for the LGBTQIA+ Halloween Party Ethan's cafe was holding. Reagan and I, on the other hand, were dressed up as Ghost Face and Sydney Prescott from the *Scream* franchise. Because of Reagan's dark hair, she was Sydney Prescott, while I was stuck in a surprisingly warm Ghost Face costume. But with the way Reagan's eyes lit up when she asked me if this was the costume we could do, there was no way I could say no.

I looked around the café that was quickly filling up with people dressed in all sorts of costumes. "Are Mary Beth and Jackie coming?"

The fact that this little friend group now included the girl my brother used to date who also happened to be my fuck buddy for years was crazy to me, but honestly, nothing about our lives surprised me anymore at this point.

Ethan shook his head. "They are visiting Jackie's hometown this weekend."

"Does Jackie's family know they're dating?" Reagan asked before I had the chance.

"They do." Jamie nodded as he bounced around like a giddy child. "You have to act surprised when she tells you next month, but Mary Beth is planning to come out to her parents soon as well. It's part of the reason for their trip this weekend. They want to ask Jackie's parents if they can stay with them for a bit if the worst happens and Mary Beth's parents get so mad that they fire both her and Jackie from their jobs on the farm."

The thought made my stomach drop. Even though we hadn't always seen eye to eye, I still cared about Mary Beth immensely. I didn't want her to go through anything like my brother and I had to endure, especially since she didn't have a sibling to fall back on for support. "Do you think they'll do that?"

Jamie shrugged. "Ethan and I have visited the farm a few times, and while we've never come out and said we were dating, we also never tried to hide it so it's pretty obvious. Even with that knowledge, her parents have been nothing but cordial toward us. You never know though. People get weird when it's their own child."

Ethan sighed as he looked around the café. "It's true. I've met way too many people throughout the years who had parents they thought would be accepting since they have gay friends, only to have them turn on their own children. It's so messed up." A scowl crossed Ethan's face for just a second before his wide smile took over again. "Enough of the sad stuff though. Tonight is all about us gays doing what we do best—partying like it's 1999."

"Hell yeah. Should we get some drinks?"

Ethan had worked hard to obtain a *Special Occasion's Permit* so he could sell alcohol at the café for this event. He even hired three bartenders to work the event. After all of the wedding planning, I was more than ready to let loose and have a few drinks.

Ethan pointed to the counter, which now also doubled as a bar. "I can't, since I'm technically working, but you should definitely go for it."

Reagan and I took full advantage of the faux bar and within an hour, we were both feeling the effects of the alcohol.

"Do you know how much I love you?" Reagan asked as she danced up against me.

"How much?" I asked, leaning my head back on her shoulder and enjoying the view as I stared up at the love of my

life.

“I love you more than Nana loves her daytime soaps.”

I gasped as though this was crazy. “No way. That much?”

“Times a million.”

“I love *you* times a trillion, Reagan.” It was so cheesy, but I was too drunk to care.

“Do you wanna get out of here?” Reagan whispered in my ear. “If we leave now, we’ll have a few hours alone at your brother and Ethan’s house before they get back.”

“And what did you want to do with the place to ourselves?”

Reagan kissed my neck. “I had a few ideas.”

“This is definitely *not* what I thought you meant,” I said as Reagan pulled the first *Scream* movie up on my brother’s TV.

Reagan furrowed her eyebrows as if she was truly confused. “What did you think I meant?”

“Something with a little less blood and a little more touching.”

Reagan’s eyes went wide when the realization hit her. “Shit, babe, I’m too drunk for that. I’m sorry.” She pointed at the TV. “I thought we’d do something romantic instead.”

“Watching people get slaughtered is romantic to you?”

“Not quite.” Reagan sat on the couch and pulled me down beside her. “You know what is romantic, though?”

I laughed because I had no clue. “Actually, no.”

“The way you snuggle in close to me when you’re scared, so I have to wrap you tightly in my arms.”

I must have been even more drunk than I realized because that actually did sound really romantic to me at this moment. I thought about changing into pajamas, but as soon as Reagan wrapped her arm around me, the last thing I wanted to do was leave the warmth of her body.

Instead, I snuggled in even closer and watched as the character I was currently dressed up as tried to kill the character that she was dressed up as. *Romance at its finest.*

About halfway through the movie, I felt myself starting to drift off and rather than fight it, I laid my head on Reagan’s lap and shut my eyes. She ran a hand through my hair as I drifted off to sleep, and I realized that simple moments like these were the ones Skylar and Kennedy were talking about. These were the moments we took for granted because they seemed so mundane, but really, this was everything to me. *Okay... maybe this is pretty romantic.*

I shot up at the sound of my phone ringing and looked around the room until I could finally get my bearings. *Where am I?* I took in the light blue walls and white furniture. *Oh yeah. Jamie’s house. Did we really sleep on the couch all night?*

As soon as I stretched my neck to the side, it cracked. *Yep. It appears we did.*

I searched for where the ringing was coming from and found my phone across the room, hidden underneath my Ghost Face mask. When I pulled it out, I realized I had five missed calls and three voicemails.

All of the calls were from my parents’ house, which was extremely confusing until I remembered we were

supposed to be getting breakfast with my nana. *Shit. Why would we agree to get breakfast the day after going out?*

I went into my voicemail and clicked on the first one. “Hey. I know it’s only seven, but I’m starving, so I was wondering when you were coming to get me.”

Seven? Really, Nana?

“Charlie, I gave you a whole hour before leaving another message, but what’s an old woman to do? I need my breakfast. I also need to get out of this house. Your mom is already on my last nerve, and I can’t be held responsible for what I do to her.”

The last message was from just a few minutes earlier, 9:47 a.m. to be exact. “I tried to call Reagan a few times, thinking she would pick up since you won’t, but the two of you must be really hungover. I might just go ahead and eat. I could die if I don’t, you know? Anyway, call me back.”

I immediately hit the button to redial my parents’ house. Unfortunately, instead of my nana picking up, it was my mom. “Miller residence.”

“Hey, Mom, can I talk to Nana, please?”

“Oh, Charlotte, thank God. I was getting worried.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not even ten. I was sleeping.”

“Nana thought you would be here hours ago.”

“Nana is crazy if she thought there was any chance of us going to breakfast before nine a.m. on a Sunday.”

“I’ll have you know that your father and I have already been to church this morning. Maybe you should start going.”

I rolled my eyes once again. It was much too early for a lecture from my mom. “Reagan and I actually have a church that we go to by us.” *Not every week by any means, but we’ve been there.*

“Oh.” My mom paused as if she didn’t know what to say. “I’m surprised to hear that.”

“Why? Because I’m such a heathen?”

“Don’t talk like that, Charlotte. You know that’s not how I see you.” *Isn’t it?* “I just figured you didn’t like spending time with people who have different views than you. Isn’t that why you never come home anymore?”

I could have let my mom know that the church by us was open and accepting of the LGBTQ community and that the reason I don’t visit is because I feel like I have to go back into the closet every time I enter that house, but I wasn’t in the mood to fight. “Could you just put Nana on the phone, please?”

Instead of saying anything, my mom just sighed. A minute later, my nana picked up the phone. “Charlie, thank God. I was about ready to eat my arm off. When are you two coming?”

I looked over at Reagan, who was snoring on the couch. “Can we have lunch instead?”

My nana moaned. “Fine. I’ll have some toast. But if you pick me up any later than twelve, you’re dead to me. And I understand death. Practically all my friends are.”

Why is this woman so cryptic? “No later than noon. I promise.”

As soon as I was off the phone, I walked back to the couch and gently shook Reagan. “Baby, it’s time to wake up.”

Reagan startled awake and jumped up from the couch. “Shit. Nana. What time is it?”

I rubbed her arm to calm her down. “It’s almost ten. But don’t worry. I already talked to her. We’re getting lunch instead.”

Reagan blew out a long breath as a look of relief washed over her face. “Good, good.”

“Are you really that worried about upsetting her?”
There was a tug at my heart. It was so sweet how much Reagan cared about my nana.

Reagan scoffed. “Of course I am. She’s one of the only Millers who likes me. I need to stay on her good side.”

I wrapped my arms around Reagan and pulled her tight up against me, basking in the feeling of safety it always gave me just to be close to her. “First of all, even though they would probably rather not, my parents actually really like you. It’s impossible not to. Second of all, you’d have to do a whole lot worse than missing one breakfast to get on Nana’s bad side.”

“But once you’re there...” Reagan let out a low whistle. “I do not envy your mom. I’d be afraid to go to sleep at night with how much Nana hates her.”

“It’s not like she doesn’t deserve it.”

“Oh no, she completely deserves it. Honestly, we could all take a lesson from Nana.”

I pulled back so I could get a good look at Reagan. This was the closest she had ever come to making a comment about my relationship with my mom. She was very respectful about allowing me to choose how much I wanted to have her in my life, even though I was sure she must have a strong opinion about it. “What do you mean? Do you think I’m too easy on my mom?”

Reagan pursed her lips and furrowed her eyebrows, studying my face before speaking. “Don’t make me answer that, Charlie. Your relationship with your mom is your business, not mine. I stand behind whatever decisions you make, and no matter what happens, I’ll always support you. If that means shutting my mouth and putting a smile on my face, I will. If it means doing whatever it takes to get your mom to shut her mouth, I’ll do that as well.”

“You didn’t answer my question, though.” I was sure I knew the answer, but for some reason, I wanted to hear it from

her.

“It’s a loaded question.”

“I promise I won’t get mad.” I hugged Reagan even tighter up against me. “Please.”

Reagan let out a long sigh before speaking. “I see how much your mom’s actions hurt you, and because you’re my number one, all I care about is your happiness. So, honestly, no, I don’t think she deserves the time you give to her. You’re better than Jamie who still has dinner with them every Sunday, even though your parents haven’t even seen the house he shares with Ethan that is only fifteen minutes from them, but I don’t think your mom deserves any of your time. Hell, I don’t think your dad does either until he can fully accept you for who you are instead of in spite of who you are. Anyway, I’m always going to be defensive over you, but, in the end, I support any decision you make.”

“They’re my parents,” I said softly, as if I had to justify it to Reagan.

Reagan gave me a kiss on my forehead. “I know, babe. That’s why I don’t say anything. I can’t even begin to imagine how hard this is for you. I want to be able to, but unfortunately, no matter how hard I try, I’ll never be able to fully comprehend how it feels.”

“I’m glad you’re not able to.” Just because my parents sucked didn’t mean I wanted Reagan’s to suck. I was thankful for the support system we had with them.

“Since you brought it up, there is one thing I wanted to talk to you about since I know we’re going to start trying for kids not long after the wedding.”

“What’s that?”

“Your parents aren’t allowed to be around our children if they are going to say anything negative or refuse to acknowledge the fact that both of us are their moms. I’m a grown adult. I can handle it. I’m not subjecting my children to that blatant homophobia at such a young age.”

It was comforting how defensive Reagan was over our children, who weren't even a blip on the radar yet. She was going to be such a good mom. I hoped I could be half the mom I knew she would be. "Of course. I couldn't agree more."

"Perfect." Reagan gave my head another kiss. "Now, enough sad talk. Let's get ready so we can have lunch with my favorite Miller."

Even though we got to my parents' house twenty minutes before twelve, my nana was already sitting on the front porch waiting for us.

"About time," she said as she crawled into the front seat that Reagan had left open for her. "I was starting to think you weren't coming."

I smiled at Reagan in the rearview mirror. "I told you we'd be here by noon. We're early."

"Technically, you're late since we originally planned on breakfast." Nana's shaky hands slowly pulled her seatbelt across her body and latched it. "It's fine though. Now I can get a drink. Let's go to Applebee's. I like their wine."

The statement was so ridiculous I had to hold back a laugh, but I wasn't going to keep the woman from getting her *fancy* Applebee's wine, so I didn't say a word.

As soon as we were sitting, a white Zinfandel in front of all of us at Nana's insistence, we began talking to her in more detail about all of our wedding vendors. Since she was paying, she deserved to know exactly what she was paying for.

"Are all your vendors gay?" Nana asked before chugging her whole glass of wine.

I hadn't really thought about it, but we really did end up with vendors who were mostly part of the LGBTQ

community. Funny how that happened without us even trying. “Our florist isn’t.”

Reagan scrunched up her nose at me. “Really? I was getting definite gay vibes.”

I shook my head. “She told me she’s an ally. That’s not something you say if you’re gay.”

“Hmm.” Reagan stared down at her wine as if she was deep in thought. “She’s going to come out in the next few years. I’m calling it.”

I laughed at her overconfidence. “Okay. Just because you’re super gay doesn’t mean you can magically make it come true for everyone else.”

Reagan leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest, a cocky smile adorning her face. “Fine. Don’t believe me. I’ve been right about this before though.” I rolled my eyes. The girl predicted that one of my college friends was gay before she actually came out and now she suddenly thought she was gaydar superwoman. “Okay, babe, whatever you say.”

“Enough wedding talk for now.” Nana leaned onto the table as if she was about to tell us a secret. “Tell me more about this trip you’re going on next month. Your brother has been very hush hush about it. He’s proposing, isn’t he?”

“I’m not sure. I guess we’ll have to see.” I hated to lie to my nana, but I also knew the whole reason Jamie didn’t tell her was because she was terrible at keeping her mouth shut. She would most likely accidentally let it slip out right in front of Ethan or at the very least act so strange around him that he would figure it out on his own.

“We’ll have to see, my ass. You kids know damn well what’s happening. You just don’t want to tell me. Let’s just hope I live long enough to hear about it.”

“You better.” Reagan threw a fry in the direction of Nana. “I’m not having this wedding without you.”

“Don’t you worry. I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Even if you have to take me in an urn, I’ll be there.”

I reached over and grabbed my nana’s hand. “That’s dark, but also very sweet.”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t start crying on me.”

She might have been joking, but I really did have to fight back the tears. My situation wasn’t perfect, but that didn’t keep it from being wonderful in its own weird way.

Chapter 6

Reagan

7 Months Until Wedding

I reached across the aisle of the plane to put my hand on Jamie's knee that was bouncing erratically. "You need to stop that or Ethan is going to realize something is up."

Instead of looking at me, Jamie focused on the bathroom. "If you keep talking about it, he's going to realize something's up."

Good Lord, Jamie. "This is the first time I've said something. He's not going to hear me from all the way back here."

It took a few more seconds, but eventually Jamie moved his eyes from the bathroom to focus on me. "I'm just really nervous, okay?"

I patted his knee. "I get that, trust me. Do you remember how anxious I was about asking your sister?"

"Yeah." Jamie rolled his eyes. "And we all saw how that turned out."

"Exactly." I slapped his leg partially as a form of encouragement and partly as a punishment for that comment. "I'm marrying the love of my life in seven months. I'd say it turned out pretty well."

Jamie moved his eyes from me to the bathroom and back to me then lowered his voice. "But what if he says no?"

I cackled because it was so ridiculous. "Are you kidding me? That guy's been dropping hints about a ring since your second date. Unless an alien takes over his body, there's no way he's going to say no."

“You’re right.” Jamie nodded slowly. “Do you think he’s going to find my proposal stupid?”

“I’m going to level with you because you’re my best friend. This proposal idea is cheesy, ridiculous, and straight out of a Disney movie. If I was into your kind and you asked me this way, I would laugh in your face. With that being said, Ethan is going to eat it up. He will be a puddle of mush by the time you’re done asking him.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

I leaned back in my seat as soon as I saw the bathroom door start to open.

Charlie leaned her head on my shoulder and giggled. “You’re so mean.”

“Is it not true?”

“Oh, it’s very true. I couldn’t agree more. I’d take our mess of a proposal any day.”

“You two are ridiculous,” a voice whispered from behind us. “This is going to be adorable.”

I turned around and looked from Mary Beth to Jackie. “Are you taking notes? It sounds like your woman is going to need a showy proposal.”

Mary Beth laid her head on Jackie’s shoulder the same way Charlie had hers on mine. “Not true. I’d marry this girl even if she asked me with a Cracker Jack ring.”

“Okay, Taylor Swift.” I laughed at my own joke as I turned back around in my seat.

“You know they aren’t going to let you hear the end of it when you’re a blubbering fool at our wedding, right?” Charlie whispered in my ear.

I scoffed. “Who says I’m going to be a blubbering fool?” *Okay. I totally am.*

Charlie laughed. “Aside from everyone?”

I playfully nudged her in the side. “Whatever.”

Our first night at Disney was spent relaxing so we could get up early the next day to go to the park. Since Jamie didn't want to spend his whole vacation obsessing over his proposal, he decided to do it as soon as we got to the park on the first day. It was a wonder Ethan didn't catch on to what was happening with how strange Jamie was acting, and the fact that he disappeared for almost a half hour to “go to the bathroom.”

Jamie had reached out to the staff ahead of time and met up with a member before we entered the park, so all we had to do was walk to the castle and wait for the magic to start. Literally. It was Disney after all. As planned, once we were standing in front of the castle, Jamie handed me his phone and asked me to take a picture. I started recording a video while acting like I was setting up a picture. As I did this, Minnie Mouse walked up and handed Ethan a rose. Ethan laughed as he accepted it, still unaware that anything out of the ordinary was happening. When Mickey Mouse came up next and handed him another rose, the understanding seemed to hit. A few seconds later, Goofy joined the group and handed Jamie the ring box. I was too overwhelmed with emotion to take in what he was actually saying, but a moment after opening the box, Jamie was down on one knee, asking Ethan to marry him. It was so beautiful I could barely take it.

“Oh, yeah, you're totally *not* going to be a blubbering mess at our wedding,” Charlie whispered in my ear.

That's when I realized there were tears running down my cheeks. So much for this proposal being cheesy. It was absolutely perfect.

We let Ethan and Jamie have their moment then all ran over to offer them congratulatory hugs. I picked Jamie up and spun him around in my arms. “I’m so fucking happy for you, man.”

“I’m happy for myself,” Jamie said through a mixture of tears and laughter.

When I put Jamie back down, he looked over at Mary Beth and Jackie. “Four down, two to go.”

“I think I should worry about coming out to my parents before I start looking at rings.” Mary Beth laughed it off, but I could tell she was already nervous over the thought of telling them.

Later that night, as we ate dinner at Be Our Guest, we discussed how Mary Beth would come out to her parents.

“You could use Charlie’s method and have them catch you with your hand down her pants,” Jamie joked.

Charlie balled up her napkin and threw it at Jamie. “You really need a new joke. It’s getting old.”

Ethan covered his mouth to try to mask his giggle. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think that will ever get old.”

Mary Beth put her hand up. “As much as I love that story, I don’t want to live it.”

“You kind of did live it, remember? When you—”

Mary Beth slapped Jamie before he could finish what he was about to say. “No need to talk about my mistakes of the past.”

Charlie put her hand over her chest in mock offense. “Excuse me, are you calling me a mistake?”

Mary Beth tried to keep a straight face as she glared at Charlie, but after a few seconds, she cracked a smile. “Focus. Okay?”

Since it seemed no one else was going to take this seriously, I put that responsibility on myself. I did kind of owe

Mary Beth since I sort of stole her girl (at least, in her mind). “The first thing you need to consider is whether or not you want Jackie to be there when you tell them. There’s definitely pros and cons to both options.”

Jackie took Mary Beth’s hand then kissed her temple. “Whatever you need from me, I’ll do. I just want to support you.”

“You also need to decide whether you want to tell your parents together or one at a time.”

I nodded in response to Ethan’s suggestion. “That’s true. I told my mom first, and then the two of us told my dad together.”

Mary Beth put her head in her hands and groaned. “This is all too much. Maybe I’ll stay in the closet forever.”

“No,” everyone else at the table said in unison as if it was scripted.

“Fine. I need more time to think about it though. Let’s not ruin this perfect celebration of Jamie and Ethan’s engagement by talking about this.”

Charlie looked around the room and smiled. “It is really romantic here, isn’t it?” She pointed to the center of the room that was set up to look like the ballroom from *Beauty and the Beast*. “This is super lame of me to admit, but when I was little, I used to dress up as Belle and pretend I was dancing in the ballroom. I actually had a stuffed Beast that I would dance around the room with.”

As Charlie stared at the chandelier in the middle of the room with enchanted wonder in her eyes, an idea popped into my head. I jumped up from my seat and held my hand out toward her. “I hope maybe you’ll think I’m a little step up from a stuffed Beast. Can I have this dance?”

Charlie looked around the room then back at me. “But there’s no music.”

“We don’t need music.” I pulled Charlie up onto her feet and brought her close to me.

“People are staring,” Charlie whispered before laying her head on my shoulder.

“Let them stare. As far as I’m concerned, it’s just you and me in here.”

At first, I thought I was imagining it when I heard the Beauty and the Beast theme song start to play, but then I realized Jamie was playing it from his phone. A moment later, Ethan stood to his feet and put a hand out to Jamie, who eagerly accepted it. Mary Beth and Jackie watched the four of us dancing for just a moment before sharing a look then standing up and joining us.

Before I knew it, almost every couple in the restaurant was up dancing together. I didn’t care about anyone else though. The only thing that mattered to me was the woman in my arms.

Charlie tilted her head and kissed my neck. “Are you free tomorrow?”

I laughed at her silly question. “We’re on vacation. I’m kind of free all week.”

“I mean free to do something just the two of us. You know I love these weirdos, but I thought it would be nice to have some alone time while we were here.”

“There’s nothing I’d rather do.”

Charlie let out what sounded like a breath of relief. “That’s good, because I kind of already have our day planned out for tomorrow.”

A giddy excitement shot through my body, as if I was a kid being told I still had one more surprise Christmas present to open. “Oh yeah? What are we doing?”

“You’ll see.”

I bounced up and down at the same time as I swayed to the music. “Can I get a hint?”

Charlie laughed and kissed my neck once again. “You’re just going to have to wait until tomorrow.”

Tomorrow suddenly seemed much too far away.

“Now can you tell me where we’re going?” I asked as Charlie led me to the lake located behind our resort.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

When we came to an area lined with boats, Charlie pointed to one of them. “That’s all ours for the next hour and a half.”

My heart warmed at the gesture. “We’re going on a boat? That’s just like what we did—”

“On our first date. I know. That’s why I wanted to do it again.”

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s do this.”

I dropped Charlie’s hand and ran over to the boat, not even waiting for her before getting onto it. Once she was on, I pointed to the steering wheel. “You being captain for the day?”

Charlie tossed her hair behind her shoulder. “Always.”

She drove until we reached a spot in the water away from most of the other boats. “I thought this was a good spot for our picnic,” she said as she picked up a basket I hadn’t even realized was sitting there.

“You planned this all out, didn’t you? It really is just like our first date.”

Charlie laid out a blanket then put two sandwiches and two bags of chips on top of it and motioned for me to sit down. She sat down beside me and rested her arm behind my back

and her head on my shoulder. “Do you remember what we talked about on our first date?”

I had to rack my brain because I was sure there were multiple things we talked about. When I realized what she was most likely referring to, I chuckled. “How many kids we wanted to have. Great first date topic. We’re such a stereotype.”

“*Technically*, we didn’t actually say we wanted to have those children together.”

“We might not have said it, but I knew. When I said I wanted to have four kids, I already had no question I wanted them to be with you.”

Charlie rubbed her hand up and down my leg, a gesture that still made my whole body hum. “I love you and all of our future children so much. Promise me something?”

“Anything.” I would walk to the ends of the earth for this girl so no matter what she said, I knew my answer would be yes.

“Once we’re done having kids, I want our first trip as a whole family to be Disney World.”

“Deal. In that case, though, we definitely need to have four so there’s an even number for rides.”

I had no idea what was so funny about what I said, but Charlie threw her head back in laughter. “You literally haven’t changed in the last three years. That’s the same thing you said on our first date.”

“You remember that? Half the time you forget what you needed on your phone by the time you unlock it.”

“I remember everything about falling in love with you.”

“You were falling in love with me on our first date?” I already knew her answer since it was the same as mine, but I loved to hear it anyway.

“I think I already was in love with you, but you already knew that, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” I leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I was already in love with you, too. You know what else I’m in love with? The fact that we are spending Thanksgiving *alone* next week. I don’t think I feel like dealing with either of our families.”

“Yeah, we better enjoy it since Christmas is going to be a complete shit show.”

I cringed at the thought. I honestly didn’t know what we were thinking when we invited both families, who had yet to meet, to spend Christmas at our apartment. I had no idea how our small-ass apartment that barely had enough space for us was going to hold my parents, Charlie’s parents, Nana, Jamie, Ethan, my brother, his wife, and their one-year-old daughter, but that’s what we had agreed upon. “Don’t remind me.”

“We really are masochists, aren’t we?”

“We must be. It’s the only logical explanation.”

“Do you think your parents will like mine?” Charlie asked quietly.

“Absolutely not.” *No sense in lying.* “They won’t be mean, though. Don’t worry. Unless your mom says something super homophobic. Then I doubt my mom will keep her mouth shut.”

Charlie visibly cringed. “This is going to be a disaster, isn’t it?”

“A complete disaster.”

Chapter 7

Charlie

6 Months Until Wedding

“Merry Christmas Eve,” my mother’s voice sang from the other side of our door.

Great. Of course my parents would be the first to arrive. “Coming,” I yelled, trying my best to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

As soon as I opened the door, my mother looked me up and down, judgment glinting in her eyes. “That’s what you’re wearing? I know you’re not leaving the house, but really, dear, you’re the host. You could make yourself look like more of a lady for your guests.”

I looked down at my skinny jeans and green sweater. “These days, this *is* dressing up, Mother.”

My mom gasped and put her hand on her chest, as if I had just said something truly repulsive. “You don’t wear this type of thing around your patients, do you? Charlotte, you are a young professional.”

I didn’t try to hide my eye roll from my mom. “No, Mom. I mean, when I’m not working.”

“Thank goodness for that.”

“When I am working, I mostly wear business casual pantsuits.” I smirked because, while this was very professional, I knew my mom would have an issue with a female wearing a suit.

My mom shook her head. “Now you’re just trying to give me a heart attack.”

Probably aware that a fight was about to break out, my dad stepped in between us and pulled me into his arms. “It’s

great to see you, sweetie. It's been too long. Is Reagan home?"

"Right here," Reagan said as she entered the room.

My dad closed the space between them and gave her a stiff hug. "Always nice to see you, Reagan."

"Think you could make that a little more believable?" Nana asked as she waddled up behind me.

She pushed my dad out of the way and gave Reagan the type of tight hug she deserved to be getting from my family. After hugging Reagan, Nana gave me one as well.

Instead of joining in the hugs, my mom stayed rooted in place, only turning slightly to point toward the door. "Your brother should be here in just a few minutes. He didn't leave long after us. I'm not sure why he didn't want to just ride with us though, given that we were all going to the same place."

My nana shook her head. "Probably has something to do with the fact that you're acting like he's coming alone when he's actually coming with his *fiancé*."

My mom cringed at the word. As soon as we flew in from Disney, instead of going right home, we went to Maryland so we could be there when Jamie told my parents about the engagement. We did it over a family dinner, and while it wasn't as awkward as my engagement, it certainly wasn't warm. My parents didn't say much of anything, which is a step up for them. Not that they could get any words in, since Nana spent the whole dinner bragging about how she *knew* this was coming.

After dinner, Jamie, Ethan, Reagan, and I went to Ethan's parents' house for dessert. That's when the actual celebration began. Ethan's parents remind me so much of Reagan's in the way that they support him. Speaking of Reagan's family, a knock on the door followed by Reagan's mom walking right in saved us all from this awkward conversation.

I walked right up to her and gave her a big hug. "Mrs. Cooper! It's so good to see you."

She squeezed me back extra tightly, most likely because she knew how hard it was on me whenever my parents were around. “How many times have I told you? You’re family. Mrs. Cooper is too formal. Call me Theresa or even Mom.” Even though I knew she meant it, I could also sense some spite in the way she said *mom*. She was definitely trying to get under my mother’s skin, and I had to admit, I didn’t hate it.

Mr. Cooper also gave me a hug before shaking hands with both of my parents. The door didn’t even close before Jamie and Ethan were walking through it. Since we spent plenty of time with the Coopers, even Ethan knew them well, so we all immediately jumped into conversation. Since my nana was able to insert herself into anything, my parents were left to be the outsiders. *Serves them right.*

Another few minutes later, Reagan’s brother walked in carrying his daughter with his wife following close behind with a diaper bag over one shoulder and a pack ‘n’ play over the other. I saw my mom giving them a side eye, and I had no question it was because she was annoyed that the *man* was carrying the child while the *woman* carried the heavy load. *Welcome to this century, Mother.*

After all of the introductions were made, we directed everyone into our kitchen, which also served as our dining room. Since this was such a long trip for everyone, they were staying for Christmas Eve and most of Christmas Day (except my parents who were staying until the day after... yay), which meant Reagan and I had to figure out a few meals to serve.

We had decided we would make Christmas Eve more relaxed since everyone had been traveling all day, so we ordered wings and pizza, which we had waiting in the kitchen. My mother set her judgmental eyes on the take-out container but luckily had enough sense not to comment.

Everyone else was ecstatic about the pizza and complimented us multiple times for getting something that everyone enjoyed rather than trying to do anything fancy.

After dinner, we all sat in the family room and talked, and it went surprisingly well. The men talked about sports. The women talked about children. It was nice but much too heteronormative for my liking. Even Nana was on her best behavior. By the time everyone was getting tired, I was ready for the night to be over. I was glad everyone got along, but something about the interaction didn't feel real to me.

When it was time for bed, Nana went to our room, my parents to the guest room, and Jamie and Ethan took the pull-out couch. Since Reagan's family understood boundaries, they stayed at a hotel nearby.

Reagan and I set up a blow-up mattress downstairs in my practice so we could actually have some privacy. "That went well," Reagan said as we laid down. There was something to her tone that didn't match her words.

"You don't sound so sure of that."

"I don't know. I can't explain it. The conversations all just felt very...."

"Safe," I finished for Reagan. "It's like everyone was trying to avoid drama by not bringing up the elephant in the room?"

"And what elephant would that be?" Reagan asked, her words soaked in sarcasm.

"Take your pick. The fact that our parents are meeting for the first time even though we've been together three years, our impending wedding that my mother refuses to attend, the polar opposite beliefs our families hold about being gay." I sighed in frustration. "I'm sorry my parents make everything so awkward. I shouldn't have invited them."

"Shh." Reagan pulled me close and placed kisses along my neck and jaw. "I'm glad we invited them. It's good to get everyone together. Tomorrow, you and I will direct the conversation. If your parents have an issue with the topic, they can deal with it. This is our house."

It was hot how protective Reagan was over me. I could hear the conviction in her voice as she spoke and that, along with the way she was kissing me, had me extremely turned on.

“I don’t want to talk about this right now,” I said softly.

“No worries. What do you want to talk about?”

I rolled over on top of Reagan, pinning her below me. “I don’t want to talk at all.”

Reagan’s eyes were wide and she swallowed hard. She clearly hadn’t expected this. “Suddenly, I don’t want to talk either.”

I leaned in and kissed her as if it was the first time ever. As crazy as it was, after three years together, it still felt that way. I still craved more with each touch of our lips. My whole body still lit up at the first touch of Reagan’s tongue against mine. The deeper our kiss became, the more desperate I was to touch her and be touched in return.

I was about to move my hand down into Reagan’s pants, when I remembered something. I broke our kiss and rested my hands on the mattress to steady myself. “Do you want one of your Christmas presents early?”

Reagan laughed. “Unless you’re dressing in sexy Santa lingerie again, I’d rather not stop what we were just doing.”

My body heated up thinking about that Christmas two years ago and how good the sex was. Not that it isn’t always good, but that time was special. Since my family was far enough away not to hear us this time, I knew with the Christmas present I was talking about, this time would beat that one. “It’s not lingerie, but it *is* something I think will make this moment even better.”

Reagan licked her lips. “Okay, you convinced me. Go get it.”

Luckily, I had Reagan's gifts stored in my office, so I didn't have to go back upstairs to get it. I reluctantly separated my body from hers and stood up then went back to my office and got the little box that was sitting on top of all her other presents.

Reagan smirked when I handed her the gift. "I hope this is what I'm thinking it is."

I honestly wasn't sure what she was thinking since this definitely wasn't something she had asked for, but it would make sense if she was able to put the pieces together. "Open it and you'll see."

Reagan's eyes went wide when she opened the gift and turned it over in her hands. "I knew it would be a sex toy, but I wasn't expecting it to be this fancy." She pointed to the little circular hole near the top. "What's this for?"

"That's for ultimate clitoral stimulation." I hit the button to turn it on and put Reagan's finger over it. "According to all the reviews, it's amazing."

"I don't doubt that." Reagan was practically drooling as she stared down at the vibrating toy. "Can we try it?"

"Obviously." I rolled my eyes playfully. "That's why I had you open it." I pulled off her pants and underwear and took the toy from her hands. "The best part is, since we're down here, we can be as loud as we want."

Reagan lifted an eyebrow. "Are you sure about that? When you have exceptionally loud patients, I can hear everything they say to you."

I was sure she must be exaggerating, so I rolled my eyes again. "That's only because you're listening for it. Everyone is sleeping. The sound isn't going to travel enough to wake them up. That's crazy." I let the toy vibrate against her thigh. "From what I read online, it's impossible not to scream when using this thing. Should we test out that theory?"

I put the opening of the toy over Reagan's clit and slowly turned up the speed, satisfied when Reagan threw back

her head and let out a loud moan.

“Shit. Fuck. Holy motherfucking shit. I’m... Ah... I’m not going to last long.” Reagan thrashed up and down, causing the air mattress to also thump against the hard floor. “This thing is... Ah... fuck.”

I held the toy with one hand and moved the other one inside of Reagan’s bra. I played with her nipple while I allowed the toy to do its work down below. Reagan screamed out in pleasure multiple times before she came much more quickly than she usually does.

She kept her eyes closed while she caught her breath, but when she opened them back up, a huge grin spread across her face. “You have to try this thing. It’s fucking fantastic.”

“So I heard.” I lifted an eyebrow and smirked at her as a feeling of pride took over. Who knew the Christmas present I had bought on a whim after seeing it advertised online would be such a hit?

“Well,” Reagan looked me up and down. “What are you waiting for? Take your clothes off.”

Unlike Reagan, who was still wearing a shirt, I removed all of my clothes as directed. Reagan motioned for me to lay down, then immediately brought the toy to my clit. *And fucking mother of God, she wasn’t kidding.*

“Fuuuuuck,” I screamed, dragging out the word as the rate of the vibrations against my clit increased. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

I normally didn’t swear during sex. Hell, after training myself not to make a sound when I was in my parents’ house, I was normally pretty quiet during sex. But there was no hope while using this piece of precious silicone.

I was so turned on that all I could focus on was how horny I was and how much more I wanted. I reached down to where Reagan’s hand was holding the toy and pushed it out of the way, so I could hold it myself.

“Was I not doing it right?” Reagan asked, sounding genuinely concerned that she had done something wrong.

“That’s not it at all.” *I just want something else.* “I want to feel this on my clit while I eat you out.”

“You mean...?”

I nodded my head. “I want you to ride my face while I get myself off with this.”

“Shit. I want that, too.”

Reagan wasted no time positioning herself right above my face, and while I let the toy pleasure me, I did the same with my tongue to Reagan. My tongue was all over Reagan’s center and I could tell she was enjoying it by the way her body was bouncing up and down on top of me. Between that and the way my body was flailing around, it was a wonder we didn’t pop the air mattress. With the sounds it made as it bounced against the floor, it certainly sounded like it might. If someone were to walk into my practice right now, they’d probably think I was either being robbed or that there was a hurricane inside. I didn’t care though, especially since no one was coming in.

When I found myself getting even closer to the edge, I pushed my tongue harder so Reagan and I could come at the same time. A minute later, I screamed out against Reagan’s center while she screamed into the open room.

“Merry Christmas to me,” Reagan said as she fell onto the mattress beside me.

“Merry Christmas to both of us.” Because, holy hell, that present was just as much for me as it was for her.

Reagan leaned in and gave me a kiss then showed me her phone that read 12:03 a.m. “What a perfect start to the perfect Christmas.”

I cringed. “Please don’t jinx it. We both know there’s no way a holiday with both of our families will be perfect.”

“We’ll see.”

I guess we will...

When we walked into our apartment the next day, Ethan was sitting up on the pull-out with his arms crossed over his chest. There was a smirk on his face that made me nervous. “You two had a fun night, huh?” He shook his head. “You’re not very good at keeping your private life private, huh?”

Shit. My eyes searched the room for Jamie, but I didn’t see him at first. Ethan must have caught on to what I was doing because his smile grew even bigger. “Yes, your brother heard, too. I think he’s currently in the bathroom trying to wash the sound from his ears.”

At that moment, Jamie walked back into the room, his nose scrunched up into a look of disgust. “No use. I think I just need new ones altogether. You two are disgusting. You know that, right?”

Reagan walked up beside me and put an arm over my shoulder. “Hey, I can’t help it that your sister is so damn hot and does this thing with her tongue where—”

I slapped Reagan in the stomach. “Shut up. My parents are in the next room.”

Jamie laughed. “And you’re lucky they’re both such sound sleepers or today would be very awkward.”

“Told you the walls were thin,” Reagan whispered as she dropped her arm. She slapped my ass before walking away toward the bathroom.

I went to the kitchen so I could start lunch while she was getting ready and then she could take over once she was done. We had taken clothes out of our room the night before, which was good since it seemed everyone else in the house was still asleep.

The whole time I was preparing the food and getting myself dressed and ready, I didn't run into my parents at all. My dad eventually came out and grabbed one of the donuts we had picked up for breakfast, but he said Mom had just woken up. I found it strange she slept in so late since she was normally up way before me. *She must be taking advantage of not being responsible for Christmas preparations this year.*

She still wasn't out of the guest room when Reagan's family arrived. A few minutes after all of us said our hellos, my mom finally came out.

She smiled widely as she waved to everyone. "Sorry. It took me forever to fall asleep last night so I overslept this morning." She focused her attention on me. "I didn't realize you had a TV in your practice. What's the point of that?"

What the hell is she talking about? "I don't have a TV down there."

"Oh. Did you take one down from up here? You couldn't go one night without it?"

"No." I had no idea what she was trying to get at. Was she somehow going to blame me for the fact that she couldn't sleep?

"You must have had something down there. I heard a bunch of thumping and screaming. Sounded like a scary movie."

"I..." I could feel my face turning red as I looked around at everyone in the room.

Jamie had a hand over his face while he snickered. Ethan looked like he was suffering from secondhand embarrassment. Reagan's parents and brother all looked like they had just seen a ghost while her sister-in-law smiled knowingly. As if that wasn't all bad enough, I watched the realization hit my father's face. He became more red than a tomato and his jaw clenched so tightly, I thought he might break a tooth.

“I don’t understand why you’re acting so strange about this.” My mother laughed as her eyes moved around the room, seemingly oblivious to the look on everyone’s faces. “Sure, I don’t think you should be watching a movie so loudly that it keeps your family up, but you probably didn’t realize we could hear it from up here. Really though, Charlotte, what was it? Between the women screaming and loud banging, it sounded awful. I can’t even begin to imagine what that weird buzzing sound was that I kept hearing.”

Nana choked out a laugh at the same time my dad clenched his jaw even harder. He looked at my mom with furrowed eyebrows and fire in his wide eyes. “Drop it, Sharon.”

“What?” My mom threw her hands in the air and laughed. “I just asked a simple question. If they weren’t watching a movie, I can’t imagine what was going on down there. It sounded like someone was getting murdered with all the screaming. Unless they were moving furniture and yelling at each other, I can’t imagine—”

“Oh for God’s sake, Sharon, they were having sex,” Nana interrupted. She pointed around the room. “It’s not that hard to figure out. Everyone else has.”

If this wasn’t so embarrassing, I probably would have laughed. Maybe I would in the future, but for now, my whole body was on edge. My palms were sweaty, my heart was racing, I was so hot it was as if I was trapped in a sauna. And I was frozen in place with no idea what to say. Reagan must have felt the same way because she had remained completely silent throughout this whole exchange.

The room was so quiet, you could have heard a pin drop, which made it sound extra loud when Reagan’s dad clapped his hands together. “Donuts, anyone?” he said with a forced smile.

Everyone quickly agreed and a conversation started about donuts as if they were the greatest thing to ever exist.

Not that it's not the case, but it was clear we were all looking for anything other than the current awkwardness to talk about.

As we walked into the kitchen to grab donuts, my phone vibrated with a text from Mary Beth. ***I told my parents! My dad was pretty quiet and I think he's still processing everything, but my mom was surprisingly okay with it. She said she already figured it out. I hope everything is going well in your neck of the woods!***

At least someone's holiday is going well. I put the phone back in my pocket when I felt a hand land on my shoulder. I looked over to see Jamie with a shit-eating grin on his face. "What a start to the day, huh? Merry Christmas, sis."

Yep. Merry fucking Christmas.

Chapter 8

Reagan

5 Months Until Wedding

It was one week until Charlie's birthday, and I had to make it special. Not only was she turning thirty, but after what happened on Christmas, her parents had yet to speak to her. Luckily, they had kept their cool for the rest of the day, and no one brought up what happened, but they left earlier than planned and had avoided all of Charlie's calls since. She claimed it didn't bother her. We had even laughed together over how ridiculous the whole situation was. I could tell she was hurt by their lack of communication though, and I worried how it would affect her if they chose to continue the silent treatment over her birthday.

Luckily, Jamie and Ethan were coming to us to celebrate so we at least didn't have to worry about having an awkward run-in with her parents on her special day. Still, I needed the perfect gift, and I knew exactly what that was. A puppy. Because, obviously, when you lived in a small apartment and had a wedding to plan, what better to add into the mix than an untrained little bundle of poop and piss? *Whatever.* It didn't matter if this dog made my life harder because I knew Charlie would love it. Now, I just needed to find one.

I walked into the shelter with absolutely no idea what I was looking for, but I knew which dog was the one as soon as I laid eyes on him. He was a tan and white furball with weirdly skinny legs. According to the sign on his cage, he was a fifteen-pound Pomeranian and American Eskimo mix and was estimated to be between two and three years old. *Perfect. Fully grown. Most likely potty trained.*

“That little guy has been here for a year,” a voice said from behind me. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought about taking him home with me.”

I turned toward the man standing behind me. “Really? But he’s so perfect.”

The man laughed. “He’s a good boy, but he’s far from perfect. He has bad anxiety, which causes him to be aggressive toward other animals. He also has separation anxiety, so he tends to chew things he shouldn’t when people leave him alone.” He opened the cage and petted the dog, who didn’t *appear* the slightest bit aggressive. “I can’t say I blame him though. The poor guy has been returned to our shelter three different times. It makes me hesitant to let anyone adopt him. I don’t want him to get his heart broken again.”

“I’ll take him.” Everything this guy told me only made me want him more. He just needed some love.

The man laughed again. “Did you listen to anything I just said?”

“Heard it all loud and clear. I promise you I won’t return him. I still talk to my soon-to-be mother-in-law after dealing with her shit for three years, and trust me, if you knew her, the fact that I still talk to her would be enough to convince you I don’t give up on anyone.”

“Okay, you win. I believe you. Can I show you what I mean about him being aggressive though? I know it’s hard to believe it when he looks so innocent.”

“Go for it.”

The guy put a leash on the dog and walked him down the hallway toward the other animals. Of course, all the other dogs started to bark, but the sweet little dog on a leash growled and twirled in circles while he tried to bite the legs of the guy who was walking him.

The man pointed to him. “This is what he does. You have to watch your legs while you walk him or he might bite you.”

“Now he really reminds me of my mother-in-law,” I joked. “Does he have a name?”

“He’s had a bunch of names, but I call him Patch.”

I pointed to his fur. “Because of the darker patches?”

“Nope. Because he’s like those Sour Patch Kid commercials. Sour, then sweet.”

We walked back to Patch’s cage, which was far from the others for reasons that were very obvious to me now. I bent down in front of him and rubbed his belly while he kissed my face. “I’ll take him. Is it okay if I take care of all the paperwork and such today, then pick him up early on Saturday? He’s a gift for my fiancée. I want to get him and bring him home before she wakes up.”

“You sure she’ll still want to be with you after you give her this mutt?” he asked with a laugh.

“Trust me, with everything we’ve been through, if she hasn’t left yet, she’s never going to.”

“Say no more. Let’s get started on that paperwork.”

When Jamie and Ethan arrived at our house on Friday night, they already knew my plan for the next day. They had strict instructions to tell Charlie I was picking up breakfast if she woke up before I got back. Jamie joked for the millionth time that he couldn’t wait to see what I got him, since I had gotten his sister (whom I didn’t know nearly as long as him) a dog. I laughed at his joke as if it was still funny then left the house.

It took no time at all to pick up Patch since I already did all the paperwork, so soon I was making the half-hour drive back to our apartment. Patch slept soundly the whole drive, as if we were old friends and he was completely

comfortable with me. Before we got out of the car, I put the big bow I had bought for him on top of his head. I figured he would fight me on it, but instead, he let it sit there without another thought.

I carried him up the stairs to the entrance of our apartment so I didn't have to worry about him on a leash. Before we went in, I texted Jamie to see if Charlie was awake, and luckily she wasn't. *This is going exactly as I wanted it to.*

Once we were inside, I kept him in my arms as I tiptoed to our bedroom. As soon as I walked through the door to the bedroom, I put Patch down and motioned for him to follow me. Much to my surprise, he actually did. I patted the bed to tell him to jump up on it, but instead he just stared at me, head tilted to the side as if he was confused. I picked him up again and placed him on the bed. As I had hoped he would do, he walked right over to Charlie and started licking her face.

Charlie squeezed her eyes shut even tighter and rolled on her side so she was facing away from Patch. "Not now, Reagan, I'm tired."

I giggled at the fact that she actually thought it was me licking her then took off my shoes and crawled into bed. I picked up Patch, who seemed to be confused about why he wasn't getting attention, and scooted back up the bed toward Charlie.

I rubbed small circles along her back. "Hey, Charlie? Wake up, sweetie. I have a surprise for you."

Charlie rolled back over and slowly opened her eyes. As soon as her eyes landed on Patch, they shot open the rest of the way until they were comically wide. "Wh-what?"

"Happy Birthday, sweetie."

Patch licked Charlie's face once again and this time, she giggled. "This—no—really?"

"This is Patch, and he'd like you to be his new mommy."

Suddenly wide awake, Charlie sat up and pulled Patch into her arms, squeezing him so tightly I actually worried she might hurt him. “I love him so much.” Her eyes landed on me. “You said we couldn’t get a dog until we moved into a bigger place.”

I shrugged. “I changed my mind. I knew how much you wanted one, so I figured what better time to get one than for your thirtieth birthday?”

“Yes, what better time than when we’re five months away from our wedding.” Charlie giggled. “You’re such an idiot, and I’m so thankful for that.”

“So, you like him?”

“I already told you I love him. He’s perfect.”

“Apparently, he’s not, but we’ll worry about that later.”

Instead of questioning what I meant, Charlie placed Patch beside her and rubbed his belly. Patch closed his eyes and stuck out his tongue.

These two were made for each other. “It’s a good thing I’m not a jealous fiancée, because I think you love him more than me already.”

“That’s not true,” Charlie answered without looking up at me. “I love you both the same.”

“Three minutes after meeting him and we’re already tied for your affection? I think I’m being replaced.”

Charlie finally looked at me and patted the spot on the other side of Patch, motioning for me to lie down. “Not at all.” She reached across Patch and took my hand, so both of ours were resting on his belly. “Our little family.”

My heart warmed as I watched the two of them. *My perfectly imperfect family.* “So, it’s a good birthday present?”

Charlie leaned across Patch to place a quick kiss on my lips. “It’s the best birthday present ever. Thank you so

much, baby.”

“Anything for you, babe.” I meant it. I would go to the ends of the earth for this woman.

Our moment was interrupted by a knock on the bedroom door. “Can we come in?” Jamie asked from the other side.

“Are you all decent?” Ethan added.

“Depends how you define decent. Does it count if Charlie’s legs are—?”

My words were cut off by Charlie putting her hand over my mouth. “Don’t listen to her. Nothing is happening. You guys can come in.”

The door opened and Jamie and Ethan came running in, neither of them hesitating before jumping onto the bed with us. I was pushed to the side as they both cuddled with Patch, oohing and ahing about how cute he was.

“Right?” Charlie said as she stared down at him with all the love in the world. It took her another minute before she actually moved her eyes away from Patch and over to Jamie. “Happy birthday.”

“Oh yeah. That is today, huh? This little cutie almost made me forget.”

Ethan chuckled. “Which is saying a lot since it’s all I’ve heard about for the past three months.”

Jamie playfully slapped Ethan’s arm. “Oh, stop, you know that’s not true. I’ve also discussed our future wedding and laughed about Christmas multiple times.”

Charlie cringed and her body stiffened. “Please don’t talk about Christmas.” She reached over to the nightstand and grabbed her phone, and I knew exactly what she was checking for. “Oh my God, Mom FaceTimed me.”

She looked at me, her eyes silently asking me what she should do. I pointed at her phone. “Call her back if you

want to. It's up to you."

"I... I think I want to."

The way she said it made me think she actually thought I would get annoyed at her for wanting to speak to her own mother. I didn't agree with how her parents handled almost any situation, but they were still her parents. Whatever made Charlie happy on her birthday was exactly what I wanted. "Then do it."

She took a deep breath then hit a button on her phone. There were two rings before her mom's voice filled the room. "Happy Birthday, Charlotte! Oh my goodness, what is that?"

Charlie held Patch in front of the phone screen. "This is Patch. He's my birthday present from Reagan."

I waited for her mom to make some sort of negative comment, but instead she giggled and said, "Hello, Patch. Aren't you just the cutest little thing in the whole world?"

I watched as Charlie visibly relaxed. "Right? That's what I said. He's so perfect."

"He really is," her mom answered. "Any plans for today? Thirty... this is a big one."

Charlie turned her phone toward Jamie. "Just celebrating with this guy."

"James! I didn't realize you were traveling to New York this weekend. Happy birthday! Aw, my two babies. I can't believe it's been thirty years since I held you in my arms for the first time. It feels like just yesterday."

And I can't believe you're acting like an actual caring human right now.

Jamie and Charlie talked to their mom, and then their dad, for a few more minutes before finally hanging up. Once they were off, Jamie looked over at me. "So, what are you making us for breakfast?"

I scoffed. "Who says I'm making you breakfast?"

“Um, the fact that it’s my thirtieth says so, duh.”

“Fine.” I stood from the bed then motioned toward Ethan. “Come on. Let’s go see what we can cook up for the birthday king and queen.”

Thirty minutes later, we had a whole birthday feast prepared and we were all sitting around the kitchen table. Patch was laying right on Charlie’s lap, sleeping soundly as she ate.

After a few minutes, I told them I had to go to the bathroom but actually went back to the bedroom to grab Jamie’s birthday present. I brought out the large bag and sat it down on the table right in front of him. “Happy birthday, Bestie.”

“For me? You shouldn’t have.”

“Oh yeah? Perfect. I’ll take it back.”

Jamie grabbed the present and placed it on his lap. “Absolutely not.”

He pulled out the presents one by one, becoming more and more excited with each one. A rainbow bow tie. A T-Shirt about *the gay agenda*. A vinyl copy of Taylor Swift’s *Midnights* album. Tickets to her Eras tour, which he literally squealed when he saw, hugging them to his chest as if they were a person. Once he recovered from the shock of getting the tickets, he pulled out the last present, which was a scrapbook I made for him.

“So, I know this is so nineties, but I couldn’t resist.”

Jamie smiled as he flipped through each page, which started with pictures of us in college and led all the way up to just this past Christmas. Included with the pictures were tickets from concerts and shows we attended together, the key that I had stolen to the apartment we lived in together for all those years, and a bunch of other random things.

We laughed as we studied each page, but when Jamie got to the end, he looked at me with tears in his eyes. “Reagan,

this is perfect.” He looked across the table at Charlie and stuck out his tongue. “So much better than a dog.”

“The dog isn’t her only gift. Later, I’m also going to spread her—”

“Stop!” Jamie and Charlie said in unison.

I shrugged. “What? I was about to say that I’m going to spread her favorite mayonnaise on bread and make her a sandwich. Not sure what *you two* would have been thinking of.”

Jamie threw a piece of bacon at me. “You’re disgusting.”

I smiled and popped the piece of bacon that had landed on my shirt into my mouth. “Thank you. I try.”

We spent the rest of the day doing whatever Charlie and Jamie wanted, which mostly involved playing board games that they got way too competitive over. We went out for a nice dinner then all passed out on the couch in a food coma while we tried to watch a movie.

When it was time for bed, I carried Charlie in my arms, who in turn carried Patch in hers. Within seconds of laying them down, both of them started to snore. I smiled as I lay down beside them and gave each of them a kiss.

My perfect little family. I sighed contentedly as I drifted off to sleep as well.

Chapter 9

Charlie

4 Months Until Wedding

I groaned when I looked at my phone and saw that it was my mom calling me. Ever since she had reached out on my birthday, she'd been calling me almost every day. I don't know if she felt guilty about ignoring me for a month after Christmas or what, but I didn't dare ask. If my mother ever mentioned what happened on Christmas, it would be way too soon. I was more than happy just forgetting about that embarrassment, even if Jamie did love to bring it up *all the time*.

"Hello?" I tried my best to make my voice sound chipper.

"Charlotte, your nana told me you have a tasting coming up in two weeks. I was just wondering if I could come along. I'd love to be part of it."

Why? It's not like you're coming to the wedding.

Our venue allowed us to have six people at the tasting and so far, it was just us and Reagan's parents who were going, but my mom wasn't on the top of my list to invite.

"Why do you want to come, Mom? Did you change your mind about attending the wedding?" I normally avoided this topic, but it needed to be stated. After what happened when we went dress shopping, I didn't want my mom involved in anything wedding-related unless she had a complete change of heart.

The other end of the phone was silent for a minute, and I actually was starting to think my mom hung up when she finally answered me. "You know I can't do that, Charlotte. I

love you, and I respect Reagan, but I can't support something unnatural."

"There's nothing unnatural about two people who are in love getting married."

My mom sighed. "I've been very understanding of you and Reagan living together and even starting a life with one another, but I don't see why you need to partake in a religious institution that was intended for a man and woman."

"Because my whole life I dreamed of my wedding day, and I found the person I want to spend my life with." My voice cracked as I tried to hold back tears. "I deserve to have my dream wedding."

"You know, I've dreamed of your wedding my whole life, too. It breaks my heart that I can't be part of it."

"No one said you couldn't. You chose that."

"Charlotte, I didn't call to fight. I just wanted to be part of this."

I took a deep breath and blew it out. This wasn't going to go over well, but enough was enough. I had come a long way since meeting Reagan, but I still let my mom walk all over me, and that needed to stop. "No."

My mom laughed as if I had just told a joke. "Excuse me?"

"I said no. Until you're ready to support me completely, which means attending the biggest event of my life so far, I don't want you involved in anything wedding-related."

Silence. The deafening silence was a killer. Seconds passed like hours before my mom finally spoke. "So, that's it? After thirty years, you're cutting me out of your life?"

That's really what she took from what I said? "I never said I was cutting you out of my life. I just said that I can't have your negativity affecting what should be one of the happiest days of my life."

More silence. “Well, I’m sorry you feel that way. I guess there’s nothing else for me to say. Goodbye.” She hung up without another word.

The phone fell from my hands as I began to weep. My emotions overtook me and soon I fell to the ground as well. *Why did this hurt so bad? Why did I still let her do this to me?* My heart thumped against my chest so hard that every beat was like a stab. Tears and snot gathered on my face faster than I could wipe them away. Soon, there was something else on my face as well. A warm tongue. *Patch.*

I pulled him into my lap and hugged him as I continued to cry. Over the past month, I had learned we had to walk him when we were sure no other animals were outside unless we wanted our legs bitten and that leaving him alone (even for a few minutes) would result in a ruined pair of shoes or carpet. None of that outweighed how sweet and loving he was though. I could already feel my heart being pieced back together after only a few seconds of holding him close. With my emotions running rampant, the thought of how much I loved him made me cry even harder.

I was crying so hard I didn’t hear the door open. I didn’t know Reagan was in the same room as me until she was crouched beside me, holding me in her arms as I clung to Patch. “What’s wrong? Baby, what happened? Is Nana okay?”

Of course with how I was acting Reagan would think something terrible happened. I felt stupid. I shouldn’t be crying this hard. I shouldn’t be so upset. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I sat up and wiped my eyes. “Nana is fine. It’s really dumb. I shouldn’t be this upset.”

Reagan rubbed my back as Patch licked my hand. *What did I do to deserve these two?*

“Nothing that has you this upset could be dumb.”

I laughed through my tears. “You say that now.” I took the next minute to get control of my emotions then told Reagan the whole story.

Reagan kissed my temple while she continued to rub my back. “First of all, you have every right to be upset. This has been an ongoing battle with your mom since we got together. With that being said, I want you to know that I’m so proud of you. I know that wasn’t easy to do, but I think it was for the best. I’m sorry if it doesn’t feel that way now.”

I shook my head and leaned into her more. “No, you’re right. It had to be done. It’s hard now, but it will make everything easier moving forward. I’m not sure what I expected to happen. It’s not like she was going to suddenly change her mind and decide to come to the wedding.”

“It’s okay to hope for the best in people. It’s one of the things I love most about you.”

I wiped my eyes once again. No matter how much I tried, the tears wouldn’t stop. “I don’t love it very much right now. It keeps leading to disappointment.”

“You had hope that we could make this work even when I didn’t. If it wasn’t for that hope, we wouldn’t be together.”

I snorted. It was sweet of her to try, but we both knew that wasn’t true. “We’re together because Jamie tricked you into coming home when I was at your apartment.”

Reagan hugged me tighter. “We’re together because we never weren’t going to be. I tried to be hardheaded about it, but I knew from the start that you were my soulmate.”

It was crazy how a few words from Reagan could change my whole attitude. No matter what happened with my parents, in four months, I would be marrying the love of my life and that’s what really mattered.

Two weeks passed before I heard anything from my parents. The call came through from my dad while Reagan and

I were driving back to her hometown to visit her parents and do the tasting at our venue.

A lump formed in my throat as soon as his name popped up on my phone. “It’s my dad.” I could barely get the words out because my mouth was so dry.

Reagan squeezed my hand. “It’s up to you whether or not you answer. I don’t blame you either way.”

I took a deep breath and blew it out. “Might as well answer. It’d probably make me more anxious to wonder what he wanted.” I took another deep breath before picking up. “Hello?”

“Charlie, it’s Dad.”

Obviously. “Hey, Dad, what’s up?” I tried to keep my voice level, but the shakiness was obvious.

“Your mother’s heart is broken.”

I waited for him to say more, but it seemed that was all I was getting. “I’m sorry to hear that, but there’s not much I can do.”

“You can’t be a little bit understanding? Your mother... she has... a history and it affects her.”

A history? What the hell? “I don’t even know what that means. What are you talking about?”

“I just... I need you to be understanding. Show her some grace.”

I scoffed. “You’re telling *me* to be understanding? I’ve been waiting for Mom to understand me for three years.”

“I...” My dad sighed and his voice softened. “I know. I’m sorry. None of this has been easy for us. I thought I was making some progress with your mom, but this has set us back. She really wanted to be part of your tasting this weekend, but it’s clearly too late for that. Could you at least tell her she can come to your bridal shower?”

“She can come to my bridal shower *if* she also comes to the wedding. She doesn’t get to pick and choose when to somewhat support me. I’m not backing down on this. I hate it, but this is how it has to be.”

“I understand.”

“You do?” *Color me shocked.*

“I do. I’m just trying to keep the peace as much as possible. Your mom already thinks I betrayed her since I’m attending your wedding.”

“And that hasn’t changed? You still are, right?” I hated how weak I sounded. I felt like a little girl begging for her dad’s attention.

“Of course.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I’ll talk to you later, sweetie.” There was a pause and then my dad spoke again. “And Charlie?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m really going to try to convince your mom to go to the wedding. No promises, but I’ll try my best.”

“Thanks, Dad. That means a lot.”

When I hung up the phone, a few tears fell from my eyes. *God, why am I so emotional lately?*

“Everything okay?” Reagan asked.

“I think so. That actually went better than I expected.”

“Good. I’m glad.” She pointed to the back of the car. “Your boy was worried.”

I turned around to find Patch fast asleep without a care in the world. “Oh yeah, I can tell.” I tossed my dad’s words around in my head. “My dad did say something weird.”

“Oh yeah? What?”

“He said my mom has a *history*, and that’s why she feels the way she does, and I need to be understanding.”

“A history? What does that mean?”

“That’s what I’m wondering.”

“Maybe your mom got her heart broken by a woman.”

I snorted. “I’m going to guess that’s probably not it.”

“Something with family? She doesn’t talk to them, right?”

I shook my head. Maybe she was onto something there. “Both of her parents have passed away. She has a sister but doesn’t talk to her. I’ve never even met her.”

“Maybe she’s gay.”

Reagan laughed, but it kind of made sense. I mean, it didn’t, because her sister being gay shouldn’t make her homophobic, but it’s my mom. Nothing surprised me anymore. “Not like we’ll ever find out. My dad is the only one aside from my mom who actually knows what happened and neither of them are going to tell us.”

Reagan shrugged. “Do you know her name? You could always try to find her. She probably has Facebook.”

“I know her first name and my mom’s maiden name, but if she’s married, it could be different now.”

Reagan moved her eyes to my phone. “Worth a try. That is, if you want to know. Contrary to popular belief, knowledge is not always power.”

“I’ll think about it. I don’t want to make any rash decisions.” I had gone my whole life without giving much thought to my estranged aunt. It was just a known fact that my mom had a sister she didn’t talk to. We were always told not to question it, so I didn’t. I really had to consider whether it was worth questioning now. It might have nothing to do with the *history* my dad was referring to. I might not like what I find. But what if I did?

A week after my father brought up my mom's history, I was still thinking about my estranged aunt. In fact, I had thought about her every day of the week so far. It's strange how you can go years without thinking about someone and one thing brings them to the forefront of your mind. After much deliberation, I decided to reach out to Jamie first and see what his thoughts were on the situation.

"Hey, Charlie! To what do I owe the pleasure? It's normally your wife who's calling me."

"Do you remember Aunt Patty?"

"Mom's sister? We met her? Because, no, I don't remember that at all."

"No, we never met her. I just meant, do you remember hearing her mentioned?"

"Barely. It was mostly in a negative sense or whispered between Mom and Dad when they didn't think we were listening. Why?"

"Dad made some weird comment last weekend alluding to the fact that Mom has such an issue with us being gay because of something from her past. It made me wonder if it had anything to do with Aunt Patty."

Jamie was quiet for a moment as if he was contemplating this. "It could. Although, I'm not sure what her relationship with her sister has to do with us, unless... wait, do you think Aunt Patty's gay?"

"That's what I'm wondering. It's a big assumption, but maybe."

"We have to find out." Jamie sounded giddy with excitement, like he just found out his crush might be gay, rather than an aunt he didn't know.

“That answers my question. I was calling to see what you thought I should do, and if you wanted to know anything if I was able to find it out.”

“Hell yeah I want to know if I have a cool gay aunt.”

I rolled my eyes at my brother’s enthusiasm. “She’s Mom and Dad’s age. Even if she’s gay, I doubt she’s that cool.”

“We’ll see, won’t we?”

“Maybe. I’m going to search for her on Facebook and see if I find anything.”

“Dope. Tell me what you find out.”

As soon as I hung up, I got my computer and sat it in front of me on our coffee table then called Patch over to sit on my lap for emotional support. Patch sniffed and licked my hand then laid down.

I turned on the computer, pulled up Facebook, and typed in *Patty Rice*. I scrolled through page after page with no luck. It’s not like I’d know who she was right away, but I could easily eliminate who she *wasn’t*. When that didn’t work, I tried *Patty Rice Maryland*. I had no idea where she lived now, but my mom always lived in Maryland, which meant at one point, her sister did too.

When no new pages came up with that information, I almost gave up. It was useless. I didn’t even really know who I was looking for. How the hell did I expect to find her?

Then it hit me. It was doubtful that Patty was actually her full name. I didn’t know if it would make a difference, but I typed in *Patricia Rice* instead. Before I hit the search button, I had another idea. I deleted a few letters until I just had *Patricia R* in the search bar. Unfortunately, that brought up way too many results, so I added *Maryland* again.

This time, fewer pages came up. *Good. I can handle this.* After scrolling past everyone who had no chance of being my aunt, I came across a profile for Patricia R Meese. I had no

idea what made me click on the profile that had a picture of the Baltimore Ravens logo, but I did anyway. The profile didn't have much that was public, but after scrolling, I finally came to an old profile picture that was actually of the owner of the account (or so I assumed). My jaw dropped as soon as my eyes landed on the photo. There was no denying this woman was my mom's sister. They looked so much alike that they could have been twins. It was almost hard to believe this woman was actually five years older than my mom (a random fact I somehow remembered).

I stared at the profile for a long time wondering what I should do next. Because the profile was so private, the only things I could gather from it were the fact that the owner of the account was born in Maryland and now lived in Vermont but was apparently still a big fan of the Ravens. That certainly didn't tell me anything about why she and my mom had a falling out.

Now that I had a little more information, I went to Google and searched *Patricia Meese - Vermont*. I scrolled until I found the information for someone with that name who fit the age and location. When I clicked onto the page, which again didn't tell me much, the relatives listed were *Franchesca Meese (60)*, *Dewey Meese (37)*, *Fantasia Meese (33)*, *Gladys Rice (deceased)*, *Martin Rice (deceased)*, and *Sharon Miller (55)*.

Holy shit. I didn't want to assume anything, but Franchesca Meese sure sounded like a female's name and the age *would* point to a spouse. Could it really be? *Does my mom have a gay sister, daughter, and son? And she still chooses to be a huge bigot?*

There was only one way to find out. Well, honestly, there were probably a few ways. The most logical would probably be to reach out to my aunt, see if she responds, and get her side of the story. But then there was a side of me that knew even if she didn't deserve it, my loyalty was with the woman who raised me. I should give her the chance to actually tell me the truth of what happened before I ask a woman I've

never met. *Will she actually tell me though?* That had yet to be seen.

Since I couldn't stand wondering, I dialed my mom. She hadn't talked to me since I told her she wasn't invited to the tasting, but I was still going to try. Surprisingly, she picked up after only two rings.

"Charlotte? Is everything okay?"

Wow, you do care. Interesting. "I'm okay. I have to ask you about something though, and I don't think you're going to be too happy about it."

My mom let out a long sigh. "Might as well just say it. I'm used to being disappointed at this point."

And she's back. "When I talked to Dad a few weeks ago, he said I need to be understanding because *your past* is part of what keeps you from being able to accept me and Jamie."

"Oh, that's what he said, huh? Then what's his excuse? Both *he* and I have trouble accepting it because it's not natural. It is not what God intended. Still, I have let Reagan into our home and formed a relationship with her because I love you. That should be enough for you. I honestly don't know why your father was talking to you about me anyway."

There was so much to unpack there, but I found myself stuck on the fact that she actually believed she had formed any sort of relationship with Reagan. She tolerated her, at best. But, I needed to move past that and focus on the point of this conversation. "Mom, please tell me what he meant. Does it have something to do with Aunt Patty?" *Might as well just come out and say it.* "Is Aunt Patty gay?"

My mom scoffed. "Aunt Patty destroyed my family."

"How?"

My mom was silent for a long time and I figured that was the end. She wasn't going to give me anything. After what

felt like forever, she finally spoke again, her words were hushed as if she was telling a secret. “When my sister decided to live a life that was inconsistent with the teachings of the Bible, my parents were not happy about it. Yet, they did not remove her from their life like most parents at that time would have. She did that on her own. She chose pleasurable temptations over her family and left town, never looking back. It killed my mother. Literally. She had a heart attack and died six months later. My dad was brokenhearted without her and drank himself to death within a year. I was nineteen at the time. If it wasn’t for your father, I wouldn’t have made it through either.”

I tried to read between the lines of her story, but it was hard since she was clearly keeping a lot out. “So, Aunt Patty never reached back out to you? Even after both of your parents were gone?”

“She tried. She was at the services for each of them, of course, pretending that she actually cared. She attempted to salvage our relationship with calls here and there over the next few years. But it was too late. She had already destroyed everything.”

“Maybe she felt like she had to leave. Like she had no other choice. If your parents didn’t accept her, maybe it was too hard to be around them.” *I can certainly understand that.*

My mother scoffed once again. “I knew you would take her side. That’s why I never shared the story with you.”

“But you’re blaming her for something your parents brought on themselves.”

“Listen, Charlotte, I’m not going to fight with you about this. If you’re so worried about your aunt, find her and reach out. You probably never will since she has a completely new life, but if you do, don’t be surprised if she refuses to talk to you.”

“I think I actually *did* find her. On Facebook. At least, I’m pretty sure it’s her. Would you really be okay with me

reaching out to her?”

Doubtful, but I might as well ask.

“You’re a grown woman, Charlotte. You can do what you want. Plus, no matter what you might choose to believe, I’m not a monster. If this is somehow going to make you happy, then do it.”

“What would make me happy is my mom completely accepting me for who I am, but if reaching out to Aunt Patty will help me understand a little better, then I’m going to.”

“I’m trying my best, Charlotte.”

I could have sworn my mom’s voice cracked as if she was crying, but I refused to let it get to me. She had hurt me way too many times without remorse. I wouldn’t let myself feel guilty for living my truth. “I’m going to go. I love you, Mom.”

“Love you, too.”

Now that I had my mom’s fake blessing, the only question was whether I actually *wanted* the answers I was searching for.

Chapter 10

Reagan

3 Months Until Wedding

I smiled as I wrote the name and address on the last envelope of our wedding invitations. I now understood why people hired someone to do this. It had taken me forever. We were already sending them out later than we should be because Charlie was trying to decide who she was going to invite from her family. In the end, she decided to send invitations to all of them, knowing most of them would choose not to come anyway. *Whatever. Their loss. Maybe they'll at least send money.* I laughed at myself. There was no way in hell the relatives who refused to come would give us anything. *Whatever. We don't need their homophobic gifts.*

Since Charlie was working, I grabbed Patch's leash so I could take him to the post office with me to finally mail the invitations. I could have put him in his crate, but I always felt bad doing that, so normally I just took him in the car with me anytime I went anywhere.

All I needed to do was put it on and grab the invites off the coffee table, and I could finally have this part of the planning process complete. *Check it off the list. Thank God.* Before I had the chance to do any of this, a text came through from Charlie.

I did it. I messaged my aunt. I don't know what came over me, but I couldn't handle it anymore.

This was huge. Every single night, Charlie typed out a message on Facebook, and every night, she ended up deleting it. I couldn't believe she actually went through with it this time. *Are you okay?*

I think so. I don't know. My lunch break is over, so I need to see my next patient, but I'm shaking. Idk what I was thinking doing it in the middle of my work day. I think I'm going to throw up.

I didn't even bother to send a text back. Without another thought, I ran out the door, down the stairs, and into the back entrance of Charlie's practice. I headed right for her office and opened the door without knocking.

Charlie's eyes went wide when she looked up from her phone at me. "Reagan? What are you doing down here?"

I shrugged. "You were upset, so I figured you needed this." I reached out and pulled her into my arms, holding her tight up against me.

"How do you always know exactly what I need?" Charlie whispered against my chest.

I kissed her forehead and gave her an extra tight squeeze. "Because I love you."

"I love you, too." Charlie pulled away from the hug, but left her hands resting on my arms. "Thank you. That really did help. I don't know why I let myself get so worked up over it."

"Because it's a big deal. You're allowed to have big feelings."

"Right now, I have a fully booked schedule of patients to see." Charlie squeezed my arms then let go. "Thank you so much for coming down here. I need to get back to work though."

"Of course." I leaned in to give her one more kiss then left.

As I ascended back up the steps to our apartment, I thought about what I could do for Charlie after work. Maybe I'd make her favorite meal. Let her snuggle on the couch with Patch while I cooked it.

Patch. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I took the stairs two at a time as I rushed to get back into the apartment. I prayed he didn't eat anything. *Please let the couch be okay.*

A chewed-up couch would have been preferable to what I walked into though. A torn-apart comforter, shit in every room of the apartment, every single pair of underwear destroyed... all of this would have been better than the thousand little pieces of paper I found scattered around the living room. Little pieces of envelopes and invitations to be exact. I ran to the table. Every single one was torn to shreds. All of my hard work was now nothing but the latest victim of my dog's separation anxiety.

Patch looked up at me with those wide puppy dog eyes that told me he knew exactly what he had done. I wanted to be mad, but those eyes... they got me every time. Plus, getting angry wasn't going to fix the problem. I had to figure out how to resolve this as quickly as possible. I also had to figure out how the hell I was going to tell Charlie what happened.

"No invitations?" Charlie looked over at me and wiggled her eyebrows. "Does that mean you got them sent out?"

Of course that would be the *first* thing she noticed when she came in from work. After thinking about it all afternoon, I decided the best thing to do would be to lie. Normally, I wouldn't even consider lying to Charlie, but she didn't need any extra stress in her life. I could figure this out on my own, take care of it, and she'd never need to know.

The problem was I didn't think about what a bad liar I am. "Oh. The invitations?" I cleared my throat. "Yeah, they're good."

Charlie furrowed her eyebrows and scrunched up her nose, which would have been extremely adorable if it didn't mean she was on to me. "Okay. Spill."

"Spill what?"

Charlie looked around the room as if she was searching for something. "What happened to our invitations?" She pointed a finger at me. "And don't try to lie and say nothing. It's not going to work. I can see right through you."

I took Charlie's hand and walked over to the couch then pulled her down onto it with me. "So, I might have hit a bit of a snag with the invitations, but don't worry. I'm going to take care of it."

"What kind of snag?"

Okay, there's clearly no way I'm getting out of telling her. Great. "That cute little dog that I got you for your birthday may or may not have... um... shredded all of them."

"*What?*" Charlie jumped up from the couch and put her hands on her head. "They're gone? All of them?"

"Not completely gone. The pieces are in the trash can."

I waited for Charlie to say something, but instead she laughed. When I thought she was going to stop laughing, she laughed even harder. *Oh God, she's completely losing it.*

Her body shook as her laughter got stronger. "Sorry. It's just... I... of course this would happen. Why am I even surprised?"

Definitely losing it. "So you're not mad?"

"Mad? No. Freaking out? Absolutely." She stopped laughing and reached down to take my hand. "But would it really be our wedding if something like this *didn't* happen? It's so fitting, it's ridiculous. You couldn't write this shit."

"You know it's my fault, right?" If I'm going to be honest, I might as well be *completely* honest. "After you texted

me this afternoon, I was so worried that I forgot to crate Patch. That's when he destroyed the invitations."

"So, really, what you're saying is that it's *also* my fault?" There was nothing accusatory to her voice, just playfulness.

Still, I shook my head. I didn't want this weighing on her conscience at all. "No. You didn't tell me to come down, and you *certainly* didn't tell me to leave our anxious ball of fluff unattended."

"Well, no matter what, I think the important question is what we do now."

I nodded my head up and down. "I've been thinking about that and..." *Come up with something, you idiot.* "I have no fucking idea."

Charlie laughed. "Well, that's a start."

Think. Think. "What about a Facebook invite? Saves money on stamps. We can text anyone who doesn't use Facebook. We already planned on having them RSVP on our website anyway. The invites are just a formality."

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "You want to make a Facebook event for *our wedding*?"

Hearing it out of someone else's mouth did make it sound pretty fucking stupid. "You're right. I—"

Charlie held up her hand to cut me off. "I love it."

"You do?"

"Yes. It's so ridiculous that it works. *Our dog ate our wedding invites, so here you go.*"

I love this woman so much. "Saves time and money," I said with a shrug.

"See! This is why I love you." She pointed toward her computer. "Might as well get started."

Charlie picked up the computer and sat back down on the couch, placing the computer on her lap. I went to the kitchen to get the Chinese takeout I had picked up for us (not exactly her favorite home-cooked meal, but I tried my best) and when I came back in the room, Charlie's body was so stiff it was as if she had been frozen in place.

“Charlie? What's wrong, sweetie?”

She opened and closed her mouth a few times before words actually came out. “I... I have a message. On Facebook.”

I quickly laid down the food and sat down beside her, immediately reaching for her hand. “What's it say?”

Charlie shook her head. “I haven't looked at it yet. I'm scared.” She looked over at me with pleading eyes. “Could you read it first?”

“Are you sure?”

“Please.”

I took the computer off of her lap and moved it onto mine then opened the message, which was from Patricia R Meese just as Charlie had suspected.

Charlie,

Wow. I'm not sure what to say. I never expected to get a message from you. I searched out your mom years ago and was able to figure out that she had two children. I never thought you would actually reach out to me though. I assumed you either didn't know about me or hated me. I'm not the greatest with Facebook messaging, so if you want to talk more, I'd love it if you called me (number below). Even if you're not comfortable with that, I want you to know how much your message meant to me. I know we're nothing more than strangers, but you're still my niece, and I've thought about you a lot.

I look forward to (hopefully) hearing from you.

Love,

Aunt Patty

I set the computer down on my lap and focused my attention back on Charlie. “It’s really sweet. You should read it.”

I picked the computer back up and passed it over to her shaky hands then waited patiently while she read. “Wow.” Charlie brought a hand to her mouth. “That is really sweet.”

“Yeah, hard to believe she’s related to your mom, right?” I laughed so Charlie knew I was joking... kind of. It *was* true. “Did you tell her that you’re gay?”

Charlie now laughed too. “Oh, yes. I said ‘hello aunt I’ve never met, I think you might be gay, and guess what? I am too.’ No. I just told her I had been wondering about her and would love to hear from her if she was willing. I can’t believe she got back to me so quickly.”

I pointed to the phone. “You should call her.”

“Now? Isn’t that really needy?”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s your aunt, not some woman you just went on a first date with.”

Charlie slowly nodded. “You’re right. Will you sit here with me while I call? I’ll put it on speakerphone so you can hear. That way if I’m not sure what to say, you can help me.”

I took Charlie’s hand and squeezed it. “Anything you need from me, babe.”

“Okay.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then blew it out. “Let’s do this.”

The phone rang five times and I was starting to think we were going to get her voicemail when a female voice picked up. “Hello? Patricia speaking.”

“P— um... Aunt Patty? This is Charlie, your niece.”

“Charlie. Wow.” There was a chuckle on the other end. “I never actually thought I’d hear your voice. Thank you so much for calling. How are you?”

Charlie looked at me as if she already had no idea what to say, and I squeezed her hand once again and mouthed, “I’m good.”

“Good.” Charlie cleared her throat. “Um... I’m good. How... how are you?”

“I’m wonderful. Thank you for asking.” A long silence stretched between them before Charlie’s aunt finally spoke again. “Don’t get me wrong, as I’ve already said, I’m very happy you reached out, but is there a specific reason you did?”

The panic in Charlie’s eyes worsened, but when I pulled her closer to me, she took another deep breath and I could feel her body relax against mine. “I just... things haven’t been the greatest with my mom the past three years, and I thought maybe if I understood more about her past, I could understand her. I’m not really sure. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize. I just think this is probably something you should talk to your mom about.”

“I tried. She won’t tell me anything. At least, nothing substantial. Our relationship has been very strained these past few years, because... well, I’m gay... and she found out. And it hasn’t been easy. She and my dad don’t agree with it.”

Another long stretch of silence. “I’m so sorry to hear that. You two do talk a little bit though?”

“We do. If it was up to my mom, we’d probably talk even more than we do, but it’s hard to have a relationship with someone who doesn’t acknowledge the biggest part of my life.”

“I can certainly understand that.” Charlie’s aunt sighed.

I motioned for Charlie to ask the question I knew she was dying to know the answer to.

Charlie nodded in response to my silent gesture. “Um... does that mean... sorry to assume... but... are you gay?”

The woman on the other end of the phone laughed. “Your mom really didn’t share anything with you, did she? Yes, I’m gay. I’ve been married to my wife since it became legal in Vermont in 2009. We have two children—Dewey and Fantasia.”

I wiggled my eyebrows at Charlie. Everything she had suspected was turning out to be true.

“I also have three grandchildren, with one more on the way. My daughter is expecting her first in June.”

Okay, so we didn’t guess that part.

“That’s amazing. Congratulations.” Charlie took another deep breath. “So, my mom told me if I wanted to find out more about what happened, I should ask you. Are you okay sharing it?”

“It’s not easy, but you’re my niece, and I can tell it’s important to you, so yes. I hate to speak ill of the deceased, but our parents were terrible people. They were emotionally abusive and manipulative. Honestly, I’m sure your mom doesn’t even realize that. It took years of therapy for me to wrap my head around that because they always *seemed* like good parents. That is, until I realized I was gay. I was so scared because I had spent my life hearing how wrong it was, but I’m sure you understand that. I told them when I was twenty-two and had just moved back in with them after

finishing college. They were all over me about finding a husband and moving out, so I felt like I needed to finally tell them the truth. When I did, they told me they loved me and supported me, and I actually thought they meant it, but the next day our pastor was at the house starting gay conversion therapy with me. I don't want to go into details, but it was awful. I still have nightmares about it. I dealt with it for a year in the hopes that maybe once they realized it wasn't making a difference, they would come around. They didn't though. They only became more frustrated. They didn't disown me or throw me out, but they might as well have because it was like living with strangers. I had your mom, and we got along well at that point, but she didn't know the real me. My mom and dad made me keep it a secret. When I realized there was no other choice, I left. I felt bad leaving your mom, so I tried reaching out to explain everything to her a month later, but it was too late. My parents had gotten inside her head. They had filled it with all these terrible ideas about how my sexuality had ruined our family."

Hearing her story brought tears to my eyes. I knew how lucky I was to have such a supportive family but things like this really put it into perspective. I had no idea how people like Charlie's aunt, or Charlie for that matter, dealt with this.

When I looked over at Charlie, she was crying too.

"Wow. I'm so sorry," Charlie said quietly. "That's awful."

"It's okay. I wish it could have been different, but I'm so happy with my life now that it makes all the struggles worthwhile. I hope you find that, too."

Charlie smiled over at me, the love she had for me shining from her eyes. "I already have. I'm getting married to the most amazing woman in three months."

"That's so wonderful! I can't tell you how happy I am for you. And just for the record—I don't blame your mom for what happened. She was unfortunately a victim of her own

circumstances. I just pray she can find a way to break the cycle and fully accept you the way she should.”

“This actually explains a lot, so thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. But just so you know—just because someone was hurt in the past and manipulated to believe certain things were true doesn’t make it your responsibility to fix them. You need to look out for yourself first and foremost. There are reasons your mom is the way she is, but that’s no reason to allow yourself to get hurt.”

“That makes sense. Thank you.”

“Of course. Now, tell me more about this wonderful fiancée of yours.”

Now that Charlie was more comfortable, I left the room so she could talk to her aunt alone. She kept the phone on speaker, so I caught most of the conversation, which went from me to Jamie (and the fact that he is *also* gay) to Aunt Patty’s wife, children, and grandchildren. In the end, I heard Charlie tell her that they are all invited to the wedding if they would like to come, but no pressure since it was such late notice. Her aunt told her they would love to be there, and as long as there wasn’t anything else going on, they would make sure it happened.

Once they hung up, I went back out into the living room and sat down beside Charlie. “That sounded like it went well.”

“So much better than expected. She told me to have Jamie give her a call if he was willing.”

“I heard,” I said with a wink. “I also heard that she might be in attendance at our wedding.”

“Yeah, I hope that’s okay. I guess I should have asked you first.”

“It’s more than okay.” I chuckled and picked the forgotten computer up off the coffee table. “We’ll send her a

Facebook invite with everyone else.”

Charlie threw her head back in laughter, and it was the most beautiful sight in the whole world. “Let’s do it.”

Chapter 11

Charlie

2 Months Until Wedding

I had talked to my aunt a few more times since we first spoke but had yet to mention it to my mom, who I had spoken to even less than my aunt in that time. I knew I had to have the conversation eventually, but not today. Today, my focus was on the bridal shower, which would be spent with all of those closest to us, who actually supported our relationship.

The bridal shower was taking place at Reagan's parents' house, since her mom had volunteered to be the one to organize it. Two of my bridesmaids weren't coming, since they both lived across the country, and I told them I'd prefer to have them at the bachelorette party next month instead, but my Aunt Sarah and her daughter Kim had come all the way from Florida and Nana had traveled up with Jamie. Those were also the only family members that I knew were coming to the wedding (aside from Aunt Sarah's husband, Mike, and son, David) since no one else had RSVP'd yet.

Jamie groaned beside me. "Remind me again why I'm here making mini sandwiches when I *should* be anywhere else doing *anything* else." He was one of the only guys at the bridal shower, a fact that he wasn't too happy about at the moment.

I put a hand on Jamie's arm. "Because you're my brother and you love me more than anything else in the world?" I pointed to Reagan who was across the room, shooting the shit with Nana, as usual. "Also, because you're the other bride's man of honor, and she would probably kill you if you didn't show up to this."

"Ah, yes, that's right."

“Just think.” I pointed between Jamie and Reagan. “If you had it your way, this could have been your wedding you were preparing for.”

Jamie cringed and threw a piece of cucumber at me. “Ew, don’t remind me. That was a bad time in my life. We don’t talk about that, remember?”

“You’re right. We don’t.” I hugged my brother, because I was so thankful for the relationship I shared with him now. We were honestly on the path to becoming like my mom and aunt before that fateful family reunion saved us. Just another thing my beautiful soon-to-be wife had done for me.

I looked over at Reagan at the exact same time she looked at me and she winked before going back to her conversation with my nana. I really was the luckiest woman in the whole world.

“Charlie, can you come here?”

I looked toward the voice and saw my Aunt Sarah motioning for me. “Hey, what’s up?” I asked as I joined her and Kim.

She pulled me into her arms and kissed my forehead. “I just wanted to say hello before things got too crazy here. I know you’ll be busy, so I wanted to make sure I got the chance to talk to you.”

“Thank you. And thanks again for coming here. It means so much that you would travel all the way here from Florida.”

Aunt Sarah waved her hand as if it was no big deal. “It’s a good excuse for Kim and I to spend some quality time together. We’re going to spend a few days in Philly after this. We even talked about possibly taking a train up to New York for the day.”

“Let me know if you do. I’d love to meet up with you guys and show you around.”

Aunt Sarah put an arm over my shoulder and pulled me close. “That’s why you’re my favorite niece. Speaking of which, I’m glad we could be here for you, kiddo.”

Her unspoken words were loud and clear to me. She was happy they could support me when my own parents wouldn’t. I talked to Aunt Sarah and Kim for a few more minutes before I was pulled away by Jamie to participate in cliché bridal shower games.

After those games, Kennedy and Skylar did one where they broke people into teams and had them make a dress out of toilet paper. It was much funnier than I expected and in the end, Nana’s design that Jamie was forced to wear was chosen as the winner.

We had everyone bring unwrapped presents so we at least didn’t have to deal with the awkwardness of making a spectacle of ourselves unwrapping them. *Thank you, Kennedy and Skylar, for suggesting that.*

By the time Reagan and I had thanked everyone for coming and said our final goodbyes, I was exhausted. I threw myself onto her parents’ couch and yawned.

Mrs. Cooper sat down beside me and patted my knee. “I feel the same way. These things are great, but exhausting. Just trying to talk to everyone is tiring.”

“It really is.” I put my hand in front of my mouth to mask another yawn.

Mrs. Cooper stared at me for a moment before speaking. “How have you been, sweetie? I don’t want to overstep, but I know things haven’t been the easiest on you with how your parents are.”

I shrugged. This was the last thing I wanted to talk about after a long day, but Mrs. Cooper meant well, so I wasn’t going to blow her off. “I’m doing well. Reagan has been great and having your family’s support is very helpful. I couldn’t ask to marry into a better family, that’s for sure.”

“I know people say this sort of thing all the time, but you truly are like a daughter to me, and we all feel very lucky to have you joining our family.”

“That means so much to me. Seriously.”

Before Mrs. Cooper could say anything else, our conversation was interrupted by the sound of my phone ringing. I was surprised when I pulled it out of my pocket to find that it was my mom calling me. I contemplated not picking up, but then thought better of it.

I gave Mrs. Cooper an apologetic look as I stood from the couch. “It’s my mom calling. I better take it.”

“Of course, sweetheart. I’ll be here if you need anything.”

I waited until I was out of the room to answer the phone. “Hello?”

“I take it that things went well with your aunt.”

No *hello*. No *How are you?* Straight to the point. By the tone of my mom’s voice, I could clearly tell she was talking about Aunt Patty, and she didn’t sound happy about it.

“What do you mean?”

“I got your Facebook wedding invitation. Really, Charlotte, Facebook? That’s tacky.”

She’s really going to judge the invitation to the event she refuses to attend? “Yes. Did you read the description? Patch ate our actual invitations and rather than waste money and time making more, we decided to use Facebook.”

My mom sighed. “That’s beside the point anyway. I saw *your aunt* was on the invite list.”

“Yes, all of my aunts, uncles, and cousins are invited, even the ones who will most likely choose not to come.”

“Even the ones who haven’t been in your life at all?”

Okay, so we're going there. I refused to cower to her this time. "That wasn't exactly her choice."

My mom scoffed. "Is that what she told you? *She left us.*"

"After your parents gave her no other choice. She told me she tried to reach out to you multiple times. Was that a lie?"

"Well, no, but you weren't there. You'll never know what that time was like for me."

"You're right. I won't. But she's family, Mom. She has two kids. *You* have another niece and nephew."

"I do not. I have no connection to anything bred from *that type* of relationship."

Bile rose in my throat and I felt like I could throw up. *That type of relationship* was the type of relationship I was in. "What about my future kids?"

"I'm not sure what that has to do with anything. This isn't about you."

Seriously? I was so angry it felt like the room was spinning around me. "You didn't answer my question. When I have kids, are you even going to consider them your grandkids?"

"Well, I guess that depends. Are you having them or is Reagan?"

If fire really came out of someone's ears when they were angry, it would have flown out of mine at that moment. My whole body heated up as if that's really what was happening. I couldn't remember a time in my life when I had been this mad. "That doesn't fucking matter, Mom."

"You listen to me, young lady—"

"No. You listen to me for once. You're my mom, and the last thing I want is to cut you out of my life, but I swear to God, if you're not able to acknowledge my relationship by the

time I have kids, it won't matter whether you consider them your grandkids, because you will *not* be part of their lives. Or mine, for that matter. The cycle ends with me. I'm not subjecting my kids to that type of hatred."

"Charlotte, this is nonsense. You don't even have any kids."

"But someday sooner rather than later I will, and I need to start making decisions with them in mind."

"I need to go."

"That's it? You have nothing to say."

"I'm not sure what you want me to say. Have a good night."

I dropped to the floor once again and cried. For a time that was supposed to be one of the happiest times of my life, I sure was crying a lot. Just as always, Patch found me and immediately started licking my face. *Thank God we have to take this dog everywhere we go.*

A minute later, someone knelt down beside me and rubbed my back. I figured it was Reagan until I heard the voice. "Get it out, sweetie. Let it all out."

Mrs. Cooper.

If I wasn't such a mix of anger and sadness, I probably would have been embarrassed to be such a mess in front of her, but instead I leaned into her and continued to cry. I let her hold me the way a mother would hold her daughter, because that's what I needed right now. I needed a mom who cared. I needed a mom who supported and loved me no matter what. It didn't matter that she wasn't biologically related to me. It didn't matter that she wasn't the woman who raised me. Right now, she was everything I needed, and I was so thankful to have her there.

"I'm so tired of trying to make her understand. I'm so sick of working so hard for her love. I can't do it anymore. I just can't do it."

“I know, sweetie, I know.” Mrs. Cooper rocked me back and forth in her arms, and it was surprisingly soothing. “Hey, I have an idea. What do you say you and I have a mother-daughter day tomorrow? Just the two of us?”

“Really?” I pulled back and wiped my eyes so I could focus on Mrs. Cooper. “I’d love that. I want to ask Reagan if she’s okay with it though.”

“I think it’s a great idea.” I didn’t even realize Reagan was in the room until I heard her voice. A moment later, she was bent down beside me. “I’ll do something with my friends. You two have fun.”

“I thought we’d start our day off by going out to breakfast,” Mrs. Cooper said once we were in the car the next morning.

“That sounds great. Whatever you want.”

She reached over and squeezed my knee. “Absolutely not. Today is all about you.”

My heart warmed at the gesture. I couldn’t remember the last time an older adult had done something this sweet for me. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

We went to a diner that Mrs. Cooper said was the best in town and talked nonstop while we ate the greatest eggs and bacon I’ve ever had in my entire life.

“So, what should we do next?” Mrs. Cooper asked once we were done.

I thought about saying we could do whatever she wanted, but I knew she wouldn’t accept that answer, so I thought long and hard about what I really wanted to do. “How ‘bout manicures?” That was one thing I could never get Reagan to do with me and I could definitely use one.

Mrs. Cooper's face lit up. "See, this is why you're my favorite daughter. I've begged Reagan to get manicures with me in the past, and she always refuses."

I laughed. "Glad to know I'm not the only one she turns down."

"I know the perfect place to go. I just have one condition." Mrs. Cooper stuck one finger in the air. "We do pedicures as well."

"Even better."

After picking out our colors, we were directed over to the pedicure area first. I always loved pedicures since it was a foot massage as well. I leaned back and shut my eyes, enjoying the feeling of being pampered.

"Nice break from all the hustle and bustle, huh?" Mrs. Cooper asked.

I nodded but didn't open my eyes. "This is exactly what I needed."

"I'm sure. Wedding planning isn't easy. Are you ready for it to be over yet?"

"The planning and preparation part, yes. The actual wedding, no. I wish the day could last forever."

"I hate to say this, but the day is going to fly by. You could blink and miss the whole thing."

I sighed. It was hard to believe that something you work so endlessly to plan could be over in the blink of an eye. "That's what I keep hearing."

"My motherly advice is to soak in every moment. Take notice of each smell, sound, and sight. Cherish every butterfly that flutters through your stomach. Can I tell you one other thing?"

"Of course." It had been years since my mom had offered me actual useful advice. I wanted to hear anything and everything that Mrs. Cooper had to say.

“Contrary to popular belief, your wedding isn’t the best day of your life. Don’t get me wrong, it’s wonderful, but it’s a celebration of what’s to come. And what’s to come is so much better than you could even imagine. This is just the beginning. The best days of your life are yet to come.”

It was so refreshing to hear that. Everyone seemed to think once you hit thirty, your life could only go downhill because you were out of your prime. I never quite believed that though. I didn’t understand what could be better than waking up on Christmas morning to a bunch of kids jumping into bed and shouting about how Santa had come.

“Reagan tells me the two of you want a big family,” Mrs. Miller said as if she had read my mind.

“God willing.”

“That’s wonderful. My son has decided he’s happy with one, so I’m excited you two are going to give me a bunch more grandbabies.” She looked over at me and winked. “No pressure, of course.”

When she said that sort of thing, I knew she meant it. Mrs. Cooper was always so laid back. She took life as it came at her and never appeared to get stressed out. It was no wonder she had raised the most amazing daughter in the world. Suddenly, I felt the urge to tell her just that.

“I hope I can be half the mom that you are. Reagan is... God, I don’t even know how to put it into words. She’s the most amazing person I’ve ever met. She’s passionate, kind, loving, but at the same time, she’s also hilarious and fun. There’s never a dull moment with her.”

“Trust me, I know that. You should have been around her growing up. She was such a spunky little thing. Definitely kept me on my toes. I’m glad she hasn’t changed at all.”

“I’m glad, too.”

“I take it she still refuses to shop?”

I laughed. "I can force her to, but she drags her feet the whole time."

"Should we do that next? There's a very nice mall not too far from here."

"I would love that."

After our pedicures and manicures were complete, we headed to the mall. It was crazy to go shopping with a Cooper who didn't groan every time I asked if we could go to another store. Mrs. Cooper and I went from store to store, taking our sweet time in every single one. We finally had to stop ourselves when we had more bags than either of us could carry. We stopped in the food court to eat a late lunch before we headed out.

"Anything else you'd like to do?" Mrs. Cooper asked once we were back in the car.

I thought long and hard since I knew she actually meant it. Anything I wanted, she was willing to give me just to put a smile on my face. I really was the luckiest woman in the world to be marrying into this family. "Ice cream?" Such a childish thing to suggest, but I didn't care.

"Perfect! Although, I think my husband and Reagan would be disappointed if they missed out on that. Do you mind asking them to come?"

Of course I didn't mind. Even though it was a wonderful day with her mom, I missed Reagan. Once I agreed, I called Reagan while Mrs. Cooper called her husband. As predicted, they both quickly agreed.

By the time we got to the ice cream shop, they were waiting outside. Reagan wrapped me in a big hug and kissed my forehead. "So, did you have a good day?"

I leaned into her, basking in how safe I felt in her arms. "The best."

Reagan laughed. "Should I be jealous?"

"Only a little," I joked. "I missed you though."

“I missed you, too.” Reagan pulled back and smiled at me with sparkling eyes that I wanted to get lost in forever. “Do you know what today is? Exactly two months until our wedding.”

Two months until I made vows to spend the rest of my life with the most amazing woman in the world. *I can't wait.*

Chapter 12

Reagan

1 Month Until Wedding

“Let’s do shots!” I shouted inside the apartment we were renting in West Hollywood for the next few days.

I never wanted to be one of those people who had an elaborate bachelorette party, but when Charlie’s nana insisted we let her pay to fly our friends and us to LA for a long weekend of debauchery (her words), how could I say no? It wasn’t like we planned something crazy then expected everyone else to pay for it. It was perfect, and I was planning on taking full advantage of the next four days.

The friends celebrating with us were Jamie, Ethan, Skylar, Kennedy, Charlie’s maid of honor and college roommate, Talon, her optometry school roommate, Maya, and my best friend from high school, Zara. Every single person, aside from Talon, was either gay or bisexual, so West Hollywood, the gay capital of the world, in my opinion, was the perfect place to get a little crazy.

“To the gayest weekend of my life,” Talon said as she lifted a shot glass in the air.

Charlie lifted one as well. “And to hoping our wedding is an even gayer weekend for you.”

“Cheers,” I added.

Everyone else grabbed a glass and toasted to that as well.

“So, what’s the plan for this weekend?” Kennedy asked after finishing her shot.

I pointed around the room at all the alcohol. “Get super drunk and have the time of our lives.”

Skylar poured another shot and took it without waiting for anyone else. “I can get down with that. This is my first time really drinking since Blake was born. It’s been way too long.”

Kennedy took the empty shot glass out of Skylar’s hands. “Which is probably a good reason to slow down. It’s been over a year.”

After drinking a little more, we went to our respective rooms and got ready to go out. I had picked out a white jumpsuit with lace on top. It wasn’t anything like what I would normally wear, but I figured Charlie deserved to see me dress up for once. Charlie, on the other hand, was wearing a short, tight white dress that had my mouth watering.

Shit. Forget the bar. Let’s stay in tonight. I wrapped my arms around her from behind and pulled her tight up against me. “You look hot as hell,” I whispered in her ear.

Charlie turned around in my arms, and her jaw dropped and eyes widened when she saw me. “Shit. I look hot as hell? Look at you. You’re going to burn the bar down.”

I moved my hands down to her ass and squeezed. “Then maybe we shouldn’t go to the bar.”

Charlie looked me up and down one more time, licking her lips as she did, but then pulled away from me. “Listen, there’s nothing I’d rather do right now than fuck the hell out of you, but our friends are here to celebrate us. We can’t stay in this room all night.”

“But after the bar? Once everyone’s asleep? Then will you fuck the hell out of me? Because *that* sounds pretty damn great.”

I was sweating just thinking about it. I could barely stand it. How was I going to wait hours to finally get my hands on this sexy woman?

Charlie lifted an eyebrow. “If you play your cards right, maybe I will.”

It was so nice to see Charlie smiling so much. After the fight with her mom a month ago, she hadn't heard from her at all. She had talked to her dad a little and to no one's surprise, her mom still wasn't planning on coming to the wedding. If anything, their fight had made the chances of that happening even lower.

A loud knock on the door caused me to jump in the air.

"What the hell is taking so long in there?" Jamie asked. "I swear to God if you guys are having sex right now, I'm going to kill you."

"We'll be right out," I shouted back. I smirked when a thought came into my head. "I just have to get my fingers out of your sister."

"I hate you so much." Charlie pushed me away and shook her head. "She's lying," she shouted to her brother. "There is absolutely no sex happening here." She jabbed a finger into my chest and lowered her voice. "There won't be any happening later either if you don't behave yourself."

I put both hands in the air and backed away from her. "Consider me behaved."

"Also, I know it's going to be tempting, but try not to be all over me all night. Zara doesn't know anyone. I don't want her to feel left out."

Taking Charlie's advice, I stuck close to Zara as the group walked to the bar. "So, what's new in your life? Any women for you or your sister? How's Kiera?"

Zara laughed. "Why do you always ask about Kiera? We went on one date."

I shrugged. For a long time, this girl named Kiera was the only person Zara ever talked about, so I figured there was more between them than she let on. "I'm just wondering."

"Kiera is married and has a baby boy on the way. I went to her wedding, *remember?*"

“Yeah, yeah. Who did she marry again?”

Zara laughed once again. “How do you not remember this? She married the girl my sister was dating. We went on a double date with them and a few months later, they got together. I knew from that very first date that they would end up married someday. They really are perfect for each other. She’s truly just my friend, and I couldn’t be happier for her.”

“Okay, so Kiera is not happening. Any other women in your life?”

Zara sighed. “Not right now. Both Parker sisters are very single. I’ve been helping Iris with getting *The Book Club* up and running, so that’s been fun.”

The Book Club was a bookstore by day and “club” by night that Zara’s sister, Iris, had opened up. I was so excited to finally see it when we were in town for the wedding. “That’s amazing. How are your parents doing?”

“They’re both doing well. How are yours?”

“They’re great. They are watching our dog this weekend, which is probably going to go horribly, but hey, what can you do? Did I tell you what happened on Christmas?”

When Zara shook her head, I recounted the whole story of Charlie’s mom unknowingly telling all of our other family members that we had very loud sex the night before. Now that it was months later, we were able to laugh about it, but, damn, that was embarrassing.

Zara covered her mouth and giggled. “No. That did not really happen, did it?”

“Of course it did. Always an experience when the Miller family is involved.”

“And how are things going with Charlie and her parents?”

I looked over at Charlie, who was walking between Skylar and Kennedy and had her arms around both of them.

She smiled as if she didn't have a care in the world, which was all I ever wanted for her.

“Her parents suck. Her dad isn't as bad as her mom, but he still isn't winning any Dad of the Year awards. He is coming to the wedding at least, so that's a positive.”

“I take it her mom isn't?”

I shook my head. “So far, that's a no. We did learn something fun recently though. It turns out Charlie has a gay aunt.”

Zara's eyes went comically wide. “Really?”

“Yeah, her mom's estranged sister. She's actually coming to the wedding with her wife, son, and daughter-in-law. Her daughter, Charlie's cousin, isn't coming because she will be almost ready to pop at that time.”

“Has Charlie met them yet?”

I shook my head once again. “They will meet for the first time at the wedding.”

“That's actually pretty cool.”

I stopped in front of the bar we were going to for the night, The Abby. “Here we are. Trying to get laid tonight? As you know, I make an excellent wingwoman.”

Zara tapped her chin as if she was contemplating this. “How 'bout we just see where the night takes us?”

It turned out that where the night took us was Wasted Town. By the time we left the bar, none of us could walk straight. It was a wonder we found our way back to the apartment. As soon as we were back, I insisted everyone grab a bottle of water and go to bed so we could go just as strong tomorrow. Little did they know, I also wanted them all out of the way so I could have sex with my soon-to-be wife.

“Have I told you how hot you look?” I asked Charlie as I pulled off her dress.

Charlie laughed. “Only about five thousand times.”

“Let’s make it five thousand and one.” I dropped to my knees and kissed her stomach. “You look sexy as hell. Seriously, how am I marrying the hottest woman in the whole world?”

Charlie held me up against her as I continued to pepper kisses down her stomach and across her thighs. “You’re not. I am.”

I pulled down Charlie’s thong and placed a kiss right on her center. “It looks like we’ll have to agree to disagree on this one.”

I licked through Charlie’s folds then moved two fingers inside of her as I swirled my tongue around her clit. I wasn’t wasting any time. I had waited all night. I wanted her to come as quickly as possible. Luckily, Charlie must have been desperate for this too because it didn’t take long before she was shaking against my face. Just a few seconds later, she came.

“My turn.” Charlie pulled me back up on my feet. “Get undressed while I get myself ready.”

“Get yourself ready?” My eyes went wide when I realized what she was hinting at. “You brought it?”

Charlie smirked. “Obviously.”

I got myself undressed as quickly as possible, but by the time I was done, Charlie already had the harness and dildo on. I licked my lips. *So fucking sexy.*

Charlie pushed me onto the bed then crawled on top of me. “Let’s see how much foreplay we need.” Charlie moved her hand between my legs and lifted her eyebrow as she smirked. “Not much.”

Yes, I was already *very* wet. “I want you inside of me,” I said, my voice strained from how turned on I was.

Charlie ran her fingers across my center. “Patience, dear.”

“Please.” I didn’t care that I was begging. It was actually pretty hot to beg. Plus, I knew where I needed her and I needed her there now.

Charlie leaned down and brought one of my nipples into her mouth while she continued to work her fingers down below. I pushed up against her, desperate to get any form of release.

“Fine,” Charlie said with a laugh. “You win.”

She touched me once more then used my pleasure to lubricate the dildo. *Shit. Just when I thought this couldn’t get any sexier.*

After it was nice and lubricated, she slowly pushed the dildo inside of me. The deeper it went, the better it felt. She moved it in and out a few more times before she picked up the pace. After that, every single thrust was harder and faster. It only took a few more thrusts for the orgasm to hit and I screamed as it shot through me. I was sure everyone in the house had heard it, but I didn’t care.

Charlie slipped off me and removed the strap-on then laid down beside me, both of our chests moving up and down rapidly as we struggled to catch our breath.

I rolled onto my side so I could face Charlie. “Do you think it’s true what they say? That sex is even better when you’re married?”

“I’m not sure how that could be true. Can it really get any better than this?”

“I don’t know, but I’m excited to find out.”

“Me too.” Charlie pulled me close, so my head was now resting on her chest. “There is so much I’m excited for. I know we’ve been together for three years and a wedding is just a formality, but I really feel like this is the beginning of so much for us.”

“It is. Kids. Family vacations. New holiday traditions. There’s so much to look forward to.” Just talking about it

made me giddy. I wanted time to speed up and slow down all at once. I wanted everything I was dreaming of, but I also didn't want to miss a single moment along the way.

“I can't believe I get to marry you in a month. It hasn't felt real until now. Actually, it still doesn't feel completely real. It's like it's all too good to be true.”

“How many things do you think will go wrong on our wedding day?”

“Given our track record, I can't even imagine. Although, without my mother there, that number might go way down.”

I hugged Charlie, because even though she was joking around, I knew how hard it was for her to talk about this. “You know I'm going to make sure this is the best day of your life, right?”

“Best day so far.” Charlie leaned down and kissed my head. “Your mom made a really good point when we had our girls' day. The wedding will be great, but everything that follows will be even better.”

“She's a smart woman.”

“She really is. And you take after her.”

“One month,” I said out loud, still unable to really believe it.

“One month,” Charlie repeated.

I can't fucking wait.

Chapter 13

Charlie

One Week Until Wedding

My knee bounced up and down while Reagan drove us and a car full of wedding supplies to her parents' house. I couldn't believe it was actually here. One week until our wedding. One week of last-minute preparations. Thank God we had Reagan's parents to help us.

Patch looked up at me from my lap, clearly annoyed that I couldn't stay still. Unfortunately, with the car so full, he had no choice but to sit on my lap. He would have to learn to deal with all of my nervous energy. There certainly was going to be a lot of it this next week.

"Could you please stop bouncing?" Reagan asked. "You're rocking the whole car."

Okay, so maybe Patch wasn't the only one who was annoyed.

"Sorry. There's just so much to do this next week and so much that could go wrong. What if I try to put on my dress on our wedding day and it doesn't fit? What if it rips?"

Reagan reached across the center console and took my hand in hers. "You've had a bunch of fittings. The dress isn't going to suddenly not fit. And if it rips, we'll just duct tape it."

I glared at Reagan, who was chuckling at her own joke. "Not funny."

"It'd make a good story."

"We don't need any more *good stories*. I just want the next week to go smoothly. And the day of, for that matter."

"Everyone says something will always go wrong on the wedding day. It's like a rite of passage or something."

I didn't want to think about that. I didn't think I could handle things not going exactly as planned, even if I was used to that by now. "Maybe that won't be the case for us. I mean, God really does owe us a break for once."

"That's true. Maybe we'll be the one in a million couple who has absolutely nothing go wrong."

Three days later, that theory proved untrue. "What do you mean your suit doesn't fit?" I asked Jamie, hoping it was some sick joke.

"I mean, I can get it on, don't worry. It's just when I button it, that poor little button is holding on for dear life against my stomach."

I put my hand on my head. "I don't understand how this happened."

"Oh, I do. I put on some happy weight."

"Happy weight?" *What the hell is he talking about?*

"Yeah, you know. I'm so happy about being engaged to my best friend that I may have celebrated a bit too hard and put on a few pounds. Happy weight."

Even though I was still freaking out, I couldn't help but smile at his description. "Well, I'm happy you're happy. Now do some crunches."

It took Reagan twenty-four hours to convince me it wasn't a big deal if Jamie's suit was a little bit too small. I calmed down just in time to get a phone call from our florist.

"I hate to ask this, but you don't happen to have someone who could help me with the flower delivery, do you? My assistant has COVID, so she obviously can't help me. I'm so sorry. I promise this really isn't like me."

I massaged my temples to try to stop the stress headache I could feel coming on. "Don't worry about it. I'll think of someone. Just tell me when and where you need them and I'll make sure they are there."

“Thank you so much. I’ll text you the details. Again, I’m very sorry.”

“No worries.” Except, yes, worries. Many worries. As soon as I hung up the phone, I ran through a list of people I could ask to help with this. The problem was they would all be busy with other things.

As I racked my brain, my phone rang with a call from my DJ. *Great. What now?* “Hello?”

“Hey! I was just calling to see how everything is going.”

“Just great,” I answered sarcastically, my jaw clenched so hard I could barely get the words out.

“Is there anything I can do to make your life easier?”

“Help our florist deliver the flowers on Saturday?” I forced a laugh so Chess would realize I was kidding.

“Scarlett St. James is your florist, right?”

“Yeah, but—”

“I’ll do it. I know where she’s located. It’s not far from the venue at all. I’ll just make sure I get there early and have all my equipment set up, then I’ll go help her with the flowers.”

“Really? Wow. That’s above and beyond what we’re paying for. You really don’t have to.”

“It’s my pleasure, trust me. Don’t give it another thought.”

As soon as I hung up the phone, I blew out a breath. One less thing to worry about. I got a whole minute of solitude before my phone rang once again.

Dad. Awesome.

“Hey, Dad, what’s up?”

“Hey, sweetie, not much. How are you?”

“I’m good. How are you?”

Can we please get to the point? I couldn't stand the way my heart was practically beating out of my chest as I waited to hear what he actually called for.

"I'm good. Excited to see you soon." He cleared his throat. "Speaking of which, I tried to convince your mom again, but it didn't go well. I'm really sorry, sweetie. She's not going to be there."

Even though I knew this was coming the whole time, hearing it stated with so much finality made my heart hurt. "Thanks for trying. We have a meal and a spot at your table for her just in case she changes her mind last minute."

"That was sweet of you."

Or pathetic. "Yeah." It's the only word I could get out because if I said anything else, I knew I would start to cry.

"It's still okay if I come up on Friday, right?" my dad asked. "So I can be at your rehearsal dinner?"

It was a stupid question, but it still made me feel a little better knowing I'd definitely have him there. "Of course. Everything starts at five. Rehearsal followed by dinner. See you then."

I didn't realize just how much it meant to me to have my dad there until he arrived at the rehearsal two days later. He was clean-shaven for the occasion and appeared surprisingly relaxed for a man who had claimed he didn't agree with what we were doing. When we practiced walking down the aisle together, I was pretty sure I caught him crying, which was the last thing I expected to see. He even mingled with everyone at the rehearsal dinner, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to him. Maybe my mom had more control over him than I realized.

When the dinner was coming to an end, he wrapped me in a tight hug. “What time do you need me tomorrow?”

“The ceremony doesn’t start until 5:00, but the photographer wants to get pictures of you seeing me in my dress for the first time around 3:30. I’ll have her reach out and let you know where to meet us. Just make sure you’re dressed and ready to go at that time.”

“Sounds good.” He took a deep breath and I thought he might start to cry again. Instead, he leaned in and kissed me on the forehead. “Goodnight, sweetie. I can’t wait for tomorrow. I mean it.” He squeezed my arm and walked away, leaving *me* the one with tears falling from my eyes.

“Everything okay?” Reagan asked as she walked up beside me.

I wiped my eyes. “Great, actually. These are happy tears, I promise. I’m just really emotional right now.”

“I understand.” Reagan laughed. “My dad asked to smoke a cigar with me tonight, and I cried. What is wrong with us?”

I turned toward her and put my hands on her arms, loving the goosebumps that covered her skin from that one simple touch. “I think we are just very in love.”

“Are we really? I had no idea.” Reagan tilted her head to the side, her lopsided grin the cutest sight in the world. “Are you sure we can’t sleep together tonight? I’m going to miss you.”

I shook my head. “Absolutely not. It’s bad luck, and you know we don’t need *any* of that.”

“Fine.” Reagan pushed her bottom lip out in a pout. “Can I at least get one more kiss?”

When I leaned in and kissed her, I saw fireworks as if it was the first time all over again. I didn’t want it to end, but I had made the rule that we needed to spend the night apart, and one of us needed to stay strong.

I said goodnight and walked away before I was tempted to change my mind. A few seconds later, a text came through to my phone. *The next time you kiss me, it will be as my wife <3*

Wow. For the first time since getting to our venue, everything felt *very* real. I skipped the rest of the way to my hotel room, giddy with excitement to become Mrs. Charlie Miller-Cooper the next day.

I yawned as I read the schedule for the day. I had been so excited the night before, I barely slept. Now, I could barely keep my eyes open.

“Soon the adrenaline will hit and you’ll forget you’re tired,” Kennedy said as she handed me a mimosa.

I closed my eyes as I enjoyed a big sip of the drink. “Do you still remember much about your wedding?”

Kennedy nodded. “I remember it like it was yesterday. I could never forget how beautiful Skylar looked or how my breath caught in my throat when we did our first look.” Kennedy wiped her eyes that now had a few stray tears. “Look at me getting all emotional on *your* big day. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize.” I rubbed Kennedy’s arm. “Reagan’s mom said it only gets better from here. Do you agree?”

Kennedy laughed through her tears. “I might be the wrong person to ask that to. If you remember correctly, Skylar and I were separated when you met us.”

“Yeah and still acting like you were madly in love.” I bumped my hip against hers.

Kennedy got a wistful look in her eyes as she stared out the window of the hotel room. “I’m not going to lie, some

days, you completely forget why this was such a happy time for you. Life stops making sense and when that happens, your relationship doesn't make as much sense either. It's easy to get caught inside your own head and not see what's right in front of you. Because of that, there was a good period of time where things got worse instead of better after our wedding, but you have to remember that life is a series of ups and downs. There's going to be amazing times and there's going to be terrible times. That's just the way it is. But after the last two years of falling in love with my wife all over again, trying to get pregnant, watching her carry our beautiful daughter, and now watching her be the greatest mom in the whole world, I can tell you that Mrs. Cooper was exactly right. It just keeps getting better."

Great. Now I was crying too. *Might as well get used to it since it will be happening a lot today.* "That's beautiful. I'm really happy everything worked out for you and Skylar. I can't imagine you two not being together."

"I unfortunately can since I went through it, but I'm just happy it's never going to happen again." Kennedy put an arm around my shoulder. "Do me a favor. If you and Reagan start fighting a lot, instead of threatening to divorce her, call me. I'll talk you through it until you calm down."

"Deal."

"Charlie?" Our wedding planner peeked her head in the door. "It's time to get your hair and makeup done."

After hair and makeup, everything else was a complete blur. Before I knew it, I was standing in front of a full-length mirror in my hotel room, and Maggie was circling around me taking pictures. She looked down at her smartwatch when it beeped, then let her camera fall to her side. "That was your dad. He's waiting outside for his first look pictures. There's a really cool-looking door out the back that I have him waiting by. I'm going to go out in front of you, then yell for you to come out when I'm all set up. I'll snap pictures as you come out the door and your dad sees you for the first time."

I nodded, feeling more nervous than I should about this. The past few days, my dad had been great, but since he wasn't the biggest fan of my marriage, I had no idea what kind of mood he would be in today. We took the elevator downstairs, and I followed Maggie until we got to the door she told me about. I waited on the inside as instructed. Minutes felt like hours as I waited for her to call me outside. When she finally did, I took a deep breath before pushing the door open.

Right outside the door, my dad was standing in his black tailored suit. As soon as his eyes met mine, he broke into tears. He took my hand and spun me around as he took in my outfit. I laughed as he did because I truly felt like a princess getting ready to go to the ball. He pulled me into a tight hug and held me closely for a long time. I melted into his arms. For the first time in so long, I felt like his little girl again, and I wanted to enjoy this moment.

After pulling away, he wiped his eyes with the handkerchief that was inside his jacket. "You look stunning, sweetie."

I ran my hands over the front of the dress. "This old thing?"

"The dress is beautiful, but that's not what I'm talking about. You're glowing right now. I don't think I've ever seen you so happy."

"I don't know that I've ever been this happy before."

"Good. You deserve it." He took my hands in his and more tears fell from his eyes. "I want you to know that I'm over the moon for you."

"Really?"

"Really."

Tears streamed down my face as if someone had just opened the floodgates. I didn't want to mess up my makeup, but there was no stopping them. I wrapped my arms around my dad's shoulders the same way I did as a little girl. "Thanks, Daddy. You'll never know how much that means to me."

“All right, enough of that.” My dad’s eyes were red-rimmed from all the crying. “I need to let you go so you can get that makeup fixed up and finish getting ready. It’s almost time to marry the love of your life.”

Marry the love of my life... hell yes.

Chapter 14

Reagan

The Wedding

“You ready?” my dad asked as he looped his arm through mine.

Butterflies fluttered through my stomach. I was minutes away from promising my life to my favorite person. “I’ve been ready for this moment ever since I pulled into that driveway as Jamie’s fake girlfriend and saw Charlie for the very first time.”

My dad chuckled. “It’s been quite the ride for you two, hasn’t it?”

My smile grew as the butterflies got even more intense. “And it’s just getting started.”

“It sure is.”

As soon as the music started, the wedding planner directed us to start walking. I stared down the long aisle at my best friend and man of honor. I could honestly say if it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be here today. Thank God for fake boyfriends with hot sisters.

Once we reached the end of the aisle, my dad gave me a hug then sat down beside my mom. Lying by my mom’s feet was the cutest ring bearer ever, Patch.

When the music changed, I moved my eyes from Patch to the other end of the aisle, and I just about passed out. There she was, the love of my life, in a tight white dress covered with intricate beading, half of her hair held up in a gorgeous clip. There she was, walking toward me. Walking down to meet me so we could begin the rest of our life together.

Okay, I can't handle this. I turned toward Jamie since he was in charge of keeping tissues for me but found him using them on his own eyes as he watched his sister. I couldn't even be mad since it was such a sweet moment.

I looked back at Charlie, who was almost close enough to touch now, and it took everything in me not to close the space between us myself. Luckily, it wasn't too much longer before she was standing beside me. Her dad gave her a hug just as mine had then turned toward me. He took my hand in his like he was going to shake it but pulled me in for a hug instead.

"Take care of her," he whispered in my ear.

"I will."

He patted my back before pulling away. "I know you will."

Once he was sitting down, the ceremony began. Even though I tried to take it all in, it went by in a flash. Vows were made, rings were exchanged, and before I knew it, we were being pronounced wives.

When the officiant said, "You may now kiss the bride," I was more than ready.

I dipped Charlie in my arms and kissed her long and hard, not caring about anyone else in the room. I was so enthralled with the kiss, I didn't let whatever commotion was going on around us distract me. I was pretty sure someone was yelling, but I didn't care. Nothing was going to interrupt this moment.

Or so I thought, until Charlie jumped away from me as if something had scared her. When I looked down, I realized exactly what that something was. Patch was standing in front of us, jumping up and down and pawing at Charlie's dress. Charlie must have noticed him at the same time I did because we both started to laugh and bent down together to pet him.

When Charlie stood up and scooped him into her arms, I followed suit and scooped *her* into my arms, then

carried my wife and son down the aisle together. I couldn't think of a more perfect way to share our first walk as an official family.

Once the rest of the bridal party walked down the aisle, we handed Patch off to our wedding planner to take back to our suite (where we had a crate for him so he wouldn't destroy the room). Next, it was time for pictures. We started with family pictures then moved on to wedding party pictures, followed by pictures of just the two of us.

Once all of the pictures were complete, there were still twenty minutes left in the cocktail hour. Instead of joining the guests, we went back to our suite. We took Patch out of his crate, and the three of us sat on the bed together. During the ceremony, we did the standard vows, not because we didn't want it to be more personal, but because we wanted that part to stay just between us. I pulled the note I had been saving for this moment out of my pocket, and Charlie got hers out of the nightstand beside the bed.

I wiggled my note. "Do you want to go first or should I?"

"I'll go. If I listen to yours first, I'll probably be crying too hard to read mine."

"And you don't think the same goes for me?" I asked with a laugh.

Charlie shrugged. "You shouldn't have let me choose if you were worried about that."

"I didn't think of it until you brought it up." Now I had no question I would be a wailing idiot the whole time I tried to read my note.

Charlie unfolded the piece of paper she was holding and cleared her throat. "Reagan, from the moment I saw you, I knew I had to make you mine. It didn't even matter that I thought you were my brother's girlfriend, because you were magnetic. Those first few weeks together, I felt things I never had before. My heart was full for the first time ever. Then, as

you know since you were there, a whole lot of shit happened. We've had to climb so many mountains together, but through it all, you've been right beside me, holding my hand. I truly never believed there was someone like you in this world until you were mine. You support me through absolutely everything. Even when things are hard, you never cease to put a smile on my face. You make me laugh even when nothing is funny. I still have to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming, because the life we've created together doesn't feel real. *You* don't seem real. I don't only love you, I also love the person I've become *because* of you. Before I met you, I was literally hiding one of the biggest parts of me. Now I'm confident and proud of who I am. You didn't change me. You helped me become the person I always wanted to be. I'll never be able to thank you enough for that, but I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying. I promise to love you with everything inside of me until the end of time." She looked up from the note with tears in her eyes. "I love you so much, Reagan."

I tried to wipe her eyes, but I was so overcome with emotions from the beautiful words she said that my hands were shaky and my eyes were blurred from my own tears. We both laughed as we leaned in for a kiss. The taste of her lips mixed with the saltiness of our happy tears was an experience I wanted to savor forever. I almost forgot I still had my note to read. *Shit. This isn't going to go well.*

I forced myself to pull away then looked down at the note in my shaky hands. I had to clear away my tears so I could actually read what it said. "Charlie, it's safe to say there is never a dull moment in our life together. It's crazy to think this all started because your brother asked me to be his fake girlfriend. Now we're married. As I'm writing this, it doesn't seem real, but by the time I'm reading this to you, I'll be your wife." I looked up from the paper and laughed through my tears. "Just for the record, it still doesn't feel real." I looked back down, but all the words were blurring together, and I couldn't figure out where I left off. I tossed the paper to the

side and grabbed Charlie's hand. "Fuck it. I'll paraphrase. You said you couldn't stay away from me when we first met because I was magnetic. That's only half true, because you were magnetic, too. Once we got close, the attraction between us couldn't be fought. We were destined to be together forever. I've watched you grow so much these past few years, and I can't put into words how damn proud I am of you. You're the strongest, smartest person I know, and I learn something new from you every day. I know choosing me and being with me hasn't made your life the easiest, but I'm so thankful you chose me anyway. I promise to always be your rock. I promise to protect you and our future family for the rest of my days. I love you, Charlie."

"I really wish this dress wasn't so hard to get on and off."

"Wh—oh shit." I wished that too. I really wished that was the case, but with only a few minutes until we had to do our entrance into the reception, there was no way we could make it happen. "Rain check?"

Charlie scoffed. "Obviously. Once this reception is over, I'm going to spend the whole night proving to you that the theory about married sex being better is one hundred percent correct."

I know I wasn't supposed to wish for this night to end, but my whole body was on edge, and all I wanted was for Charlie to touch me. "I can't wait."

Charlie stared at me for a minute, unblinking, then ran her eyes down the length of my body. She bit her lip when our eyes met once again. "On second thought, maybe *you* don't have to wait. How long did it take you to get that suit on?"

My light-blue suit with one hook holding the jacket together over a white silk crop top definitely wasn't as in-depth an outfit as a dress with buttons up the back. "Approximately two minutes. Four if you count the time it took to put my shoes on and tie them."

“In that case, shoes stay on.” In a move that already had my hips bucking up off the bed, Charlie ran her hand over the front of my pants. “These, on the other hand, need to be moved out of the way.”

I quickly unbuttoned my pants and slid them down my legs along with my underwear, until they were below my knees. I could feel my heart beating throughout my whole body. My pulse picking up with every inch closer Charlie got to where I needed her.

She situated herself between my legs then looked up at me with a cocky smirk. “Funny, I didn’t realize this was on the menu tonight.”

“It’s not what you ordered?”

Charlie shook her head and pushed my legs further apart. “It’s better than what I ordered.”

And just like that, her head was between my legs, and she was eating me out as if I was her first meal in a month. Her tongue darted so quickly from one spot to another, I felt it everywhere, all at once. When she added her fingers to the mix, there was no use trying to hold on. I was done for. I relaxed and let the orgasm shoot right through me. Stars flashed in front of my eyes like the finale of a fireworks show.

Once I finally came down from the high of one of the world’s greatest orgasms, I chuckled. “Holy shit. People weren’t lying.”

“Really?”

“Charlie, I literally saw stars. It was like—”

My sentence was interrupted by a series of loud bangs on our suite door. When we didn’t say anything, the knocking got louder. “What are you two doing in there? Introductions were supposed to start five minutes ago.”

I hopped out of bed quicker than I ever have and immediately pulled my pants up. “Shit.”

“Shit’s right,” Charlie whispered before shouting.
“Sorry. We’ll be right there.”

Jamie breathed a sigh of relief when we came out the door. “Thank God. I was getting worried you two ditched your own wedding.”

“Nope, we were just reading our personal vows to each other, and Charlie got a little *tongue tied*.”

Jamie didn’t crack a smile or grit his teeth as he nodded in response to me, so I figured he must not have caught on to the innuendo. Thank God, because Charlie would have killed me if he did.

As we waited for the elevator, Jamie turned to Charlie and studied her face. He pointed to the spot beside his mouth. “Charlie, you have a little something right there.” He leaned the tiniest bit closer and squinted his eyes. “What the hell is th—?” A look of disgust took over his face. “Aw, come on. Seriously?”

“It’s not what you think,” Charlie said at the exact same time as I said, “It’s exactly what you think.”

Oops. I looked between the Miller twins with a proud smile on my face until the wind was knocked out of me by the slapping of my stomach by Charlie’s hand.

Fire burned in Charlie’s eyes as she glared at me to silently warn me I better shut the hell up.

I clapped my hands together. “Anyway....”

Jamie glared at me the same way Charlie just had then rolled his eyes. “Yeah, anyway, you two need to line up behind the bridal party then walk in once your names are called. Think you can handle that?”

“Hell yeah, let’s get this party started.”

Although, I think we already did.

Chapter 15

Charlie

Reception

I couldn't believe we were late to our reception because I couldn't control myself, but who could blame me? Reagan looked so damn hot in that suit. It was so light blue, it almost looked white, and it fit her perfectly. Her hair fell down in loose curls against her back, and her eyes shined brighter than I've ever seen them before. There was no way I could resist her.

And, aside from Jamie, no one had any clue what happened, so we were fine. Reagan and I stood side by side as we listened to our parents and the bridal party get introduced. Our DJ's voice was nasally and between every few spoken words, she sneezed.

"I apologize," she said before it was time for our introduction. "I promise I'm not sick. My allergies are acting up today. Please bear with me." She turned toward Reagan and me and pointed in our direction. "Now, the moment you've all been waiting for. I present for the first time as wives, Mrs. and Mrs. Miller-Cooper!"

Reagan looked over at me and winked. "Should we give the people what they want?"

I squeezed her hand. I truly couldn't remember a time in my life that I'd ever been happier. "Let's do this."

When "For the Girls" by Haley Kiyoko started to play, we danced in together. Cheers erupted when Reagan twirled me around then dipped me for a kiss. Since we wanted to get to the main celebrations as quickly as possible, we immediately shared our first slow dance then cut the cake. After this was the father-daughter dance.

When the music started, Reagan took her dad's hand and I took mine. As we swayed back and forth, I laid my head against his chest. I know it shouldn't have ever been a question, but I was so thankful to have him there.

"I want you to know how happy I am to be here," my dad said as if reading my mind. "I know I haven't always been the most supportive of your relationship, but after witnessing everything today, my heart has changed. The love between you and Reagan is unmatched. I was right about one thing though. This love *is* different. You two don't love each other because it's normal and expected. You love each other in spite of the judgments. You've chosen to spend your lives together even though being in this type of relationship can sometimes make your lives harder instead of easier. And that's all because of how much you love each other. Love doesn't get stronger than that."

For what had to be the millionth time today, I cried. I buried my face in my dad's chest and let out all of the emotions that had been building these past few years. I cried over everything that had brought us to this moment.

I cried until I felt a hand on my back and my brother's voice asking if he could cut in.

My dad gave me a kiss on the forehead then stepped away so Jamie could take his place. Jamie and I danced silently for a few seconds before he spoke. "You and Reagan are my best friends. Seeing you two so happy today... well... It's perfect. I'm really sorry about those years I let us drift apart."

I shook my head. "It wasn't just you. We were both guilty. I'm just really happy about how things are now."

"Me, too. Now, you take care of my best friend, okay? She acts tough, but she's a big softie."

"Oh, I know." I turned and looked at Reagan. Strong, yet soft. Fierce, yet sweet. *My wife*.

When the slow song morphed into a fast one, Reagan gave her dad a kiss then walked toward me and Jamie. Instead of coming over to me, she threw a hand on Jamie's shoulder. "Let's dance, bro."

"We are officially family now, aren't we? It's about time." Jamie put an arm around Reagan and the two of them walked away from me.

"Yeah. Who would've thought all it would take to make that happen was me marrying your sister. We should have thought of this years ago." Reagan looked over her shoulder and winked at me.

I was distracted watching my two favorite people dance terribly when there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned to find my mom's sister standing behind me.

She pushed a piece of graying hair behind her ear. "It's great to finally meet you. That was a beautiful ceremony. The love between the two of you is truly palpable." She pointed toward Jamie and Reagan. "And it looks like she gets along with your family. That's good."

I waved a hand at them. "That right there is its own twisted story, but, yeah, she does get along pretty well with most of my family." I tried not to cry when I thought about the person missing from the room. I refused to let her ruin this day.

My aunt squeezed my arm. "Don't give up. She could still come around."

I almost pointed out that she hadn't come around to my aunt after forty years, but I didn't want to be negative.

The sound of sneezing getting louder and closer broke up our conversation.

"Are you okay?" I asked the DJ once she was standing beside me.

"Yes." Sneeze. "Promise." Sneeze. "I'm just very allergic to flowers."

“Why would you volunteer to help the florist?”

“Honestly?” Chess looked around her as if she wanted to make sure no one was close. “I’ve been looking for an excuse to talk to her for years.”

Okay, this had just gotten a lot more interesting. “Is she gay?”

“Queer.” Another sneeze. “She came out last month, but I had a feeling it was the case way before that.”

Great. Reagan was right a few months ago. Now she was going to be really cocky about her gaydar.

“Anyway,” Chess motioned across the room. “I came over to tell you it’s time for toasts.”

Reagan stepped up beside me and put an arm around my waist. “There’s been a bit of a change. We’re actually only doing one toast. A certain someone asked to give one and we figured she would cover everything pretty well.”

Nana walked over and held out her hand. “Give me that mic. It’s my big moment.”

Once Reagan and I were sitting at our table, Nana started her speech. “I met Reagan four years ago as my great grandson’s girlfriend. The way I found out she wasn’t his girlfriend is a story I’ve been told I’m not allowed to tell here. To me, it didn’t matter which one she was with, because either way, she felt like family from the beginning. In addition to the obvious reasons, though, she and Charlie really are the better match. I would even go as far as saying that they’re perfect for each other. You can see the love between them within minutes of being in their presence. It’s the type of love they write songs and fairytales about, and I don’t care what those right-wing assholes say, because it’s the purest form of love I’ve ever seen. That’s all I’ve ever dreamed of for my little Charlie girl. I’ve been in love with that girl from the moment I met her in the hospital the day she was born. I waited years and years for her to find the person to complete her, and for a while, I really thought I would die before she did. Then Reagan came

crashing into our lives, and it made sense why it took so long. They met each other at the perfect time in their lives, even if it wasn't under the most perfect circumstances. When they got together, I didn't only get a new person in my life, I also got my little Charlie girl back. That little girl who used to be so carefree and full of life had been lost somewhere along the way, and Reagan helped to find her." Nana looked over at us and raised her glass. "I love you both so much." She moved her eyes around the room. "Now, let's drink, because if I know anything about these two, it's that they want all of you to be nice and drunk tonight. Cheers."

A resounding sound of cheers were heard around the room. We quickly ate so we could get the real party started, and then we danced, drank, and celebrated with all of the people who loved and supported us.

At the end of the night, Reagan and I fell into bed in a complete haze. Even though we were both exhausted, we spent the night making love to each other until we fell asleep just as the sun was coming up.

I wasn't sure how long we were sleeping when there was a knock on our hotel room door. I groggily made my way over to see who was bothering us so early. When I opened the door, I rubbed my eyes because I figured I must be seeing things. Standing there outside of our hotel room was none other than my mother.

"Mom? What are you doing here?" I stepped to the side so she could come in.

"I've..." My mom looked all around the room, making eye contact with everything but me. "Been here since yesterday."

"*Here?*" I had to grab onto a chair nearby because I almost lost my balance from the shock. "At my wedding venue?"

"Yes." She pushed her hair away from her face.

Anger built up inside of me. This woman drove from Maryland to Pennsylvania just to what? Sit in a hotel room all day feet from where everyone else was celebrating my big event? “And you still didn’t come? You were here, but you chose not to support me? Not to celebrate my love?”

“I almost came. I wanted to. I really did.”

The lost look on her face softened my anger. Not having her there was hard, but it didn’t make my day any less amazing. I still got to celebrate my marriage to my soulmate surrounded by more love and support than I knew what to do with. I wasn’t the one who missed out. She was. I stood up taller and looked her straight in the eyes, something she had yet to be able to do. “But you didn’t come, and you’ll have to live with that for the rest of your life.”

My mom looked down toward her feet. “You’re right. I will.” When she looked back up at me, there were tears in her eyes. “I still don’t understand any of this. Two women aren’t supposed to be together. It’s not natural. It’s not what God intended. One man, one woman. That’s the way the world is supposed to go. That’s the way things were supposed to be for this family. But I love you, Charlie. You’re my baby girl, and I still love you more than anything in the world. I cried all day yesterday since I couldn’t be there. It’s all I ever dreamed about.”

I forced her to look at me and made sure not to waiver. She needed to hear this. “You could have been there though, Mom. You chose not to be.”

“I know.” She nodded her head slowly as if she was carefully constructing the words she wanted to say next. “I thought a lot about what you said, about how I can’t be in your kids’ lives if I can’t acknowledge your relationship. I don’t want that to happen. I don’t want to miss anything else because I don’t understand. I can’t pretend I ever will, but I’ll try my best, and if nothing else, I’ll respect the fact that you two are now life partners and will someday both be parents to

my grandbabies. I know it's not perfect, but that's the best I can promise right now, okay?"

Her words shocked me. Never in my wildest dreams did I expect my mom to say any of that. Tears fell from my eyes, and I had no idea if they were tears of joy from the hope of what was to come or tears of sorrow for everything we had missed out on. "That's all I've ever asked for, Mom."

Reagan walked out of our bedroom, and after taking one look at my face, she rushed across the room and put a protective arm around me. "Everything okay out here?" Her eyes were laser-focused on my mom as she asked the question, as if she was silently threatening her not to try anything.

Damn, she's so fucking sexy when she's acting as my guard dog. If my mom wasn't standing there, I would have ripped those clothes right off of her, because I was so turned on right now. Instead, I put an arm around her as well and gently squeezed her side. "Everything is okay. My mom was just apologizing for the fact that she wasn't there yesterday."

Even though she hadn't actually apologized, I knew she wasn't going to fight me on that. She focused her attention on Reagan and nodded. "Charlie is right. I should have been there. I'm sorry."

Reagan's face scrunched up, as if she was so shocked she didn't know what to say. "Wow, um... thank you?"

"I'm gonna try harder." For a moment, my mom looked down at our bodies close together, and I caught a scowl crossing her face. She quickly recovered with a forced smile. She shook her head when she noticed me staring at her. "I'm not going to be perfect, but I'll try."

Reagan nodded, and I felt her body relax a bit. "We both really appreciate that. Truly."

We both stood in silence as if no one had any idea what to say. I sure as hell didn't. I could have invited her to have a seat. I could have pretended to be okay with the fact that she missed the biggest day of my life thus far. Instead, I

gave her a kind smile and pulled Reagan closer to me. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d like some private time with my wife.”

I could tell my mom had a lot she wanted to say in response, but she kept her mouth shut and nodded instead. “Of course. I’m just glad we could have this talk.” She turned around and was almost out the door when I had another thought.

“Hey, Mom? I’m pretty sure Aunt Patty is still here. If you want to try harder, maybe that’s where you should start.”

My mom nodded but didn’t turn around. “I’ll think about it.”

Then, she was out the door as if she had never been there in the first place.

The room was silent until Reagan started to laugh. “Sorry to be blunt, but what the *fuck* just happened.”

I shrugged. “I wish I could tell you. Apparently, grandbabies are a big bargaining chip. She doesn’t want to miss out on being part of their lives.”

“Speaking of babies...” Reagan stood in front of me and wrapped her arms around my waist. “When are we going to start making them?”

I raised an eyebrow in response to the tone of her voice. “Why are you saying that as if we make them the same way straight couples do?”

“I’m not sure. I was trying to be sexy and it kind of fell flat.”

I wrapped my arms around her as well. “Just for the record, you don’t have to try to be sexy.” I moved my hands down to her ass and squeezed. “How about this—let me spend today making love to my super sexy wife, then tomorrow we’ll start talking about making babies?”

“Sounds perfect, especially the wife part.” Reagan picked me up and carried me toward the bedroom of our suite. “I love you, Charlie Miller-Cooper.”

“I love you too, Reagan Miller-Cooper.”

Epilogue

Reagan

“Do you think there’s any chance the pregnancy test wasn’t right?” Charlie asked as we drove to the fertility clinic.

“You mean all five that you took?”

Charlie rolled her eyes at me. “It’s possible to get a false positive.”

“Five times?”

“It was technically six, but who’s counting?”

I laughed and took her hand. “There was also the blood test that already confirmed it. This ultrasound is just to make sure everything looks okay before we switch from the fertility clinic to the OBGYN.”

“It’s not going to feel real until this is done though.”

“You’re lucky we had to use a fertility clinic then. Most people don’t get their first ultrasound for eight weeks.”

“I would literally die.”

I laughed once again. “I don’t doubt that.”

Charlie and I waited three months after our wedding to start trying. Between preliminary testing and failed attempts, it took Charlie another nine months to actually get pregnant through reciprocal IVF. It wasn’t cheap, but Charlie had insisted she wanted to carry *my* baby and thankfully, Nana had paid for a big chunk of it.

Now, we were going to see that little blob for the very first time. Thank God we had decided to implant two embryos this time instead of one to increase the chance of pregnancy.

After waiting at the clinic for a few minutes, we were called back to the ultrasound room. There was a screen, but I

had absolutely no idea what we were looking at. As far as I knew, any of the blobs on the screen could have been a baby.

“Interesting,” the doctor said as he stared at the screen. “Very interesting.”

“Mind sharing?” I asked with a strained laugh.

Charlie’s eyes darted around the screen as if she knew what she was looking for. “You can’t find the baby?”

“No, that’s not it.” He rubbed his beard, clearly trying to figure out how to say whatever it was he was seeing. “I’m actually finding *three* babies.”

“Three?” I put my hand on the table to steady myself. *This is a joke. Just a joke.* “That’s not possible. We only implanted two embryos.”

“Multiple children can come from one embryo. Most likely, two are from one and the third is from the other.”

I swallowed hard. *Not a joke.* “Now what?”

The doctor patted Charlie’s shoulder. “Now, we make sure this one is followed closely so those little ones can come out nice and healthy.”

Both Charlie and I were silent as we left the clinic. Neither of us said anything as I began the drive home to the apartment that was much too small for three babies. *Shit.*

The silence was broken when Charlie broke into laughter. “Three kids. There’s three fucking kids inside of me. What are the chances?”

It didn’t make any sense, yet somehow also made perfect sense. “With us, honestly, pretty fucking high.”

Charlie burst into another fit of laughter and this time, I joined her. Just like everything else that had been thrown at us, we would get through this.

I just needed a few more arms... *Shit.*