

The
RUNAWAY



JESS MASTORAKOS

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CONTENTS

Sign up for Jess's Sweet Romance Squad

1. Nate
2. Nikki
3. Nate
4. Nikki
5. Nate
6. Nikki
7. Nate
8. Nikki
9. Nate
10. Nikki
11. Nate
12. Nikki
13. Nate
14. Nikki
15. Nate
16. Nikki
17. Nate
18. Nikki
19. Nate
20. Nikki
21. Nate
22. Nikki
23. Nate
24. Nikki
25. Nate
26. Nikki
27. Nate
28. Nikki
29. Nate

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Jess Mastorakos](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Sign up for Jess's Sweet Romance Squad](#)

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NATE

Pulling up to the famed Hotel del Coronado in the sourest of sour moods, I couldn't help but grin when I saw Hattie and Brett standing in our arranged meeting spot. You'd think a smile wouldn't come easily to me after having been dumped a few hours ago, but I hadn't seen these two in months. Brett longer, because he'd been stationed in Okinawa for the last few years, and we never seemed to get our schedules linked up well enough to be in the same place at the same time.

"Thank you so much for doing this, Nate," Hattie said, pulling me into a warm hug the second I hopped out of my SUV at the curb.

"Anytime," I replied.

Sure, this favor for my mom's oldest friend was a huge pain in the butt after such a rough day, but it was what it was. Hattie lived in South Carolina—in the exact town I was about to drive to, thanks to my new military orders—and she needed me to load some fancy dresser into my Suburban and bring it along on my drive from California. She'd flown here with her husband for her niece's wedding, and apparently, the thing was special enough that she'd called me over on my moving day to get it home for her.

Backing out of her arms, I moved to give her son—one of *my* oldest friends—a backslapping hug. "Good to see you, bro. Been a long time."

"Too long," he said. "I wasn't even supposed to be here for this wedding, but I don't know ..."

He turned to look up at the

hotel and sighed. “Something told me I should be.”

“That *something* is called your conscience, sugar,” Hattie told her son. “You knew Nikki wanted you here for her special day. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Judging from Brett’s expression, I had a feeling there was more to it. But since he’d be coming along for the ride while I went to pick the dresser up from Nikki’s mom’s place, I figured I’d wait to ask him about it until we were safely away from his mother.

“Here’s the key to the house,” Hattie told me, handing me a single silver key.

“Thanks.”

“And try to hurry, boys. We don’t want Brett to miss the wedding.”

Brett refrained from rolling his eyes. *Barely*. “We’ll be quick, Mom.”

“See that you are. And thanks again!”

We watched as Hattie clipped back toward the entrance to the hotel, then we got into my SUV. When we pulled away, Brett’s eyes were tight as he stared straight ahead.

“What’s up? You look weird.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know, man. I guess I just have a bad feeling about this dude Nikki’s marrying.”

“Really? Why?”

“It’s probably nothing. I hardly know the guy. But I don’t like the way he talks about her online. His captions on their photos are all really braggy. It’s like she’s a piece of property or something. It’s weird.”

I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel and shrugged as we drove along. “Some dudes are like that. And some chicks are into it.”

“Yeah, but if you knew Nikki’s history ...”

I waited for him to continue, but when he didn't, I looked over and raised a brow. "What's her history?"

Nikki wasn't Hattie's niece by blood, but Hattie had this way about her where she became like family to a lot of people, even without a legit blood relation. She was practically an aunt to me, too, since she was so close to my mom and always had been. I'd grown up knowing Nikki was important to Hattie, but since she lived in California and I'd never actually met her, I didn't know much about her other than that she was a single mom.

Oh, yeah. And really freaking beautiful.

Just saying.

Brett rolled his neck, then opened and closed his mouth like he was trying to figure out what to say. "It's not really my story to tell. And it was a long time ago. Let's just say the guy she was married to before—Marigold's dad—was a creep. After everything she went through with him ... I'm surprised she'd want to be with a guy who was so possessive. It was *bad*."

I hated the idea of the woman who'd looked so carefree and happy in photos being hurt like that, but if she was marrying this new guy, there had to be something good about him. "Hmm. Well, like you said, you don't really know him. Maybe he just comes off that way online, and that's not how he is in real life."

"Maybe."

"Besides, Hattie's a tough nut."

"Understatement."

I grinned. "She knows this guy. If he wasn't good for Nikki, I'm sure she would've put a stop to it before their wedding day. Right?"

"Yeah, you're right. There's no way my mom would let this wedding happen if he were a bad guy. She's the queen of meddling."

I snorted in agreement. If she wanted to stop a wedding, she totally could. Especially since she was a pro at pushing people into them. Hattie was practically the town matchmaker back home, and she'd had a hand in the marriages of almost everyone I knew.

In the last couple of years, Hattie was somehow involved when my cousin, Paul, married his best friend, Shelby. Same thing when my other cousin, Aria, married our friend Will, which shocked the heck out of all of us because he'd grown up next door to my cousins, and none of us knew they had a thing for each other.

Hattie also helped our friends Layla and Lyndi—sisters who were part of Hattie's unofficial group of nieces and nephews—find love with a couple of other Marines stationed in South Carolina. And those were just the people in *my* circle. There were plenty of other couples in Bluffton who'd been shot by her Cupid's bow.

But now that I thought about it ... she'd never once tried to help my ex and me tie the knot. In fact, she'd made comments over the years that were blatantly *unsupportive* of us.

Interesting.

My inner thoughts were cut off as we pulled up to an absolute beast of a mansion in La Jolla. I stared at the white house and its massive windows and blew out a breath. “Wow. This is Nikki's mom's house?”

“Yep. Her family's loaded.”

“Clearly.”

“She and Marigold have lived here with her mom ever since ... well, for a while,” he hedged as we got out and headed for the front door. “The guy she's marrying has a ton of money too. They met at some country club or something.”

I let us into the house and felt my eyes widen as I took in the height of the ceilings and the long staircase that looked like something out of one of those *Housewives of Wherever* reality shows. “So, this is how the other half lives.”

My family wasn't poor or anything, but our house in Bluffton was tiny—or I guess *cozy*, if you heard my mom describe it. It was a three-bedroom rancher on a street with a ton of houses that looked just like it. And it was a far cry from this movie-set-lookin' mansion where Nikki'd grown up. Good thing her new almost-husband had money. Doubtful she'd want to downgrade after living like this. Who would?

“Let's find this thing and get back,” Brett said, moving through the expansive foyer toward the rear of the house. “She said it was in the dining room, between the kitchen and the sitting room.”

“Ah, the sitting room. Not to be confused with the drawing room?” I joked as I followed after him.

“Or the living room or the family room or the library,” he tossed over his shoulder with a low chuckle. “This must be it.”

I narrowed my eyes at the teal piece of furniture with two shallow drawers above a cabinet. Just like Hattie described, it had flowers painted along the side and golden handles. I wasn't much for interior design, but it really did look like it'd be a good addition to the flower shop she and her husband owned back in Bluffton.

I could see why she wanted it, even though this request to bring it with me had totally thrown me off my schedule for today. I'd planned to be at the first stop of my trip by now. Thankfully, Yuma, Arizona was only about two and a half hours away, so I'd still get to my buddy's house in plenty of time to rest up before the long day I had planned for tomorrow.

“You take that side,” Brett said as he gripped the other end of the dresser.

“Do you know why Hattie called this thing a *buffet* when she first told me about it?” I asked him as we lifted it and maneuvered through the huge house.

“Because fancy people use different words for furniture depending on which room they keep it in?”

I harrumphed. “Yeah, I guess it wouldn't make sense to keep a *dresser* in the dining room. But what's Hattie gonna

call it when she puts it in her flower shop?”

Brett chuckled but didn't reply.

We made it to the back of the Suburban and set it down, then I opened the trunk and leaned in to put down half of the third-row bench seat so we could slide it in. It was a snug fit between the seatback and the side of the SUV, but it worked. Most of my stuff was being driven across the country by the military-contracted moving company, so I didn't have much in here that I'd deemed important enough to take in my own vehicle. Luckily for Hattie.

I closed the liftgate, went to lock up the house, then jogged back over to ensure my buddy would make it to the wedding on time. He might not like the groom, but I knew he cared about the bride, and he wouldn't want to be late regardless of his mom's nagging about it.

“Hey, Nate, you sure you can't delay your trip a bit more so you can crash this wedding?”

I shook my head as we got back in the SUV. “Nah, man. I'd love to stay and hang with you, but I'm behind schedule as it is.”

“Do you *ever* do anything spontaneously?”

“Oh, right, because you're such a spontaneous guy? We're Marines. We live by schedules.”

He held up his hands. “I'm here, aren't I? Didn't plan to be, but that didn't stop me.”

“Yeah, well, you wouldn't be here if your command hadn't approved your leave request on such short notice. So don't act like you're free to do whatever you want whenever you want.”

Brett hung his head with a resigned laugh. “Fine. But hey, you're *already* on leave. So technically, you could stay longer if you wanted to.”

“I made plans to stay at a few friends' houses along the way, and I don't wanna change things up on them.” I didn't want to change things up on myself, either. There'd been

enough of that already today, and I was over it. Brett could poke fun all he wanted.

“All right, all right. But I seriously can’t wait until I’m stationed on the mainland again. Not much longer. I just gotta make it back from this deployment in one piece.”

Considering his job in the Marines—explosive ordnance disposal—his joke was a little rough. But we weren’t much better in the jokes department in my job field, so I didn’t have much room to talk.

I pulled away from the towering house and got back on the road. “You don’t like Okinawa?”

“No, it’s not that. I like it, I guess. I’m just ready to come back, that’s all. You know how it is. Once you’re used to moving every three years, you start to get antsy right before it happens.”

I got that for sure ... only for the last six months, it wasn’t just the urge to move on that had me excited about going from California to South Carolina. It was the fact that I thought I was moving back there so I could be with the woman I’d had an on-again, off-again relationship with for pretty much my entire adult life, only to get dumped by her on the day of my move. Over the phone, in fact.

“You wanna talk about it?” Brett asked.

I swallowed. “Wanna talk about what?”

“Whatever just made you look like you got punched in the gut.”

Nope.

If I talked about the fact that I’d requested orders to South Carolina to be with a woman who’d traded me in for another man, I’d come out sounding as pathetic on the outside as I felt on the inside. Besides, I wasn’t much for talking anyway. And he knew it.

Brett jabbed my bicep with his elbow. “Come on. It’s me.”

I shot him a look.

“Alright, have it your way, tough guy. Suffer in silence.”

It shouldn't have, but that stung a little. My ex had told me multiple times over the years that I was “emotionally unavailable.” Whatever that meant. But it was usually in the context of how little I opened up about my *feelings*, and it always resulted in a shouting match because when I did try to open up, she hated everything I said. I could never win.

But I wanted a fresh start, right? Maybe I should start ... here? *Ugh.*

Giving in, I shifted in my seat and let out a breath. “Chelsea dumped me this morning.”

“Again? Bro, you have *got* to stop beating a dead horse with that girl. Seriously, enough is enough.”

Shooting him a glare, I turned my focus back to the road. Okay, maybe talking about it was overrated.

Brett let out a long breath and shook his head. “Sorry. You okay?”

I shrugged.

“Look, I know everyone gives you crap for going back and forth with Chelsea all the time, but you know it's because we care, right? Everyone just wants you to be with someone who doesn't jerk you around so much.”

“Thanks.” I pulled my lips up a little on the corners when I looked at him, letting him know it was all good.

He was right about one thing: I needed to find someone who wouldn't jerk me around. In fact, I'd do everything I could to make sure the next woman I dated knew what she wanted before anything got serious between us. If she seemed flighty or wishy-washy in the slightest? Boom. *I'm out.*

NIKKI

For about the twentieth time, I told my reflection that everything would be fine. This wedding was a good thing. *Great*, even. Some might say perfect. And by the end of the night, I'd be Mrs. Nikki MacMillan, my daughter would finally have two parents instead of just one, and all would be well in our little corner of the world.

Smoothing my hands over the tulle that started at my hips and arced down toward the ground in a ridiculous bell shape that I hated, I sighed. If only I could have picked out my wedding gown myself. Then maybe I wouldn't feel so wrong about something I knew *had* to be the right decision. That was all it was. The dumb dress and this circus of a wedding. Not the man, not the life, and definitely not the end result.

“Mom?”

The sound of Marigold's voice had a smile springing to my lips without a second's pause. I turned to look at her as she slid into the bridal suite, and my heart stuttered at the sight of her. She wore a long silver bridesmaid's dress even though she was more like a junior bridesmaid if we were being technical about it. But since I'd somehow drifted from my girlfriends when Chet and I started dating, she was the perfect person to stand beside me today. And in that dress with her hair and makeup done by the stylists my mother had hired, she looked older than she ever had.

But even without being done up ... she wasn't a baby anymore. *Thirteen*. How had this happened?

My wistful gaze zeroed in on the nervous expression on her face, making my smile dip slightly. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“I just heard Chet on the phone with someone, and he looked pretty sus.”

Tilting my head, I tried to imagine why she’d be suspicious of him. Chet was usually so friendly and open. “How so?”

“I dunno. He sounded really angry, I guess. Huge tool vibes.”

I frowned. Angry? That wasn’t like him. “Oh. Well, I’m sure it was nothing. You know him.”

My daughter nodded, but I could tell she wasn’t convinced.

“When was this? Is he still on the phone?”

“Just now. He’s out there.” She jerked her chin toward the door, an uncharacteristically dark expression on her pretty face. “I asked him what he was doing over here because I knew you didn’t want him to see you before the wedding.”

“And then ...?”

“And then he was like the CEO of biting my freaking head off. He was *big mad*.”

My throat went dry, and long-buried fear for her swept through me. Then I shook my head and chuckled. Chet was nothing like Marigold’s father. He wasn’t abusive or mean or wicked. He was kind and funny and wouldn’t hurt a fly. If he was rude to Marigold, he surely hadn’t meant it and would probably feel terrible about it later.

“I’m sorry, Mari. He must be upset by whatever’s going on with work. I’m sure that’s all it is.” Even as I said the words, I hated how they sounded. I told myself long ago I’d never again make excuses for a man’s behavior. Was that what I’d just done?

No. I knew Chet. He wasn’t a monster like my first husband, so I wasn’t making excuses for him. I was standing

up for him because he deserved it.

Unless ...

Well, there was only one way to find out. Slowly, I went to the window and peeked out the heavy black curtain. Chet was in his suit—the same silver as Marigold’s dress—with his phone pressed to his ear and a murderous expression on his face.

I jerked back. I’d never seen him look so ferocious. Once in a while, he’d get stressed about work, but he’d never shown an ounce of temper. It was one of the things I liked most about him. Sure, we didn’t have big, passionate feelings for each other the way you might with someone who had a bit of a temper, but that was a *good* thing. I’d take a mild temperament over passion any day if it meant no fear. And now ... the sight of Chet’s generally friendly face pinched up with such rage sent ice flowing through my veins.

If only I could hear what he was saying.

Turning to Marigold, I held one finger to my lips to tell her to be quiet, wincing as I did so. I’d made the same motion to a much younger version of her the night we finally escaped her father.

But I couldn’t think about that now, so I brushed it off and turned back to the window, using all my strength to slide it up without making a sound or moving the drapes too much for him to notice. I just needed to hear ...

“I don’t care what the original deal was,” Chet said, his back to me now as he hissed into the phone, “plans have changed.”

Ah, yep. Must be a work thing.

“I’m taking Nikki somewhere you can’t find her. And as for your kid? Maybe there’s some boarding school I can ship her off to. Or she can stay here with my new mother-in-law. I’ll get that figured out as soon as the adoption paperwork is finalized.”

I fought the gasp that rose in my throat. Taking me somewhere? Boarding school? He can’t send my daughter

away.

And wait ... *Your* kid?

No. This wasn't possible. How could Chet be talking to Damon? He was in prison. I was sure of it. What kind of mother would I be if I didn't keep tabs on him to ensure I'd know if he'd somehow gotten himself an early release? I was the one who'd put him away ... If he was out ...

"What's changed," Chet snarled, tearing me from my thoughts, "is that I don't wanna play ball. I want what's mine, and once I marry her, Nikki *and* her money will be. And there's nothing you can do about it."

Having heard enough, I silently closed the window with shaky fingers and turned back to Marigold with a passive expression. Chet wasn't speaking too loudly, and since she was on the opposite end of the large bridal suite lounging on a loveseat, I hoped that meant she hadn't heard a word.

"Well?" she asked. She sat forward and put her hands on her knees, the very picture of a rebellious teen who didn't want to sit like a lady while wearing a formal dress. "What'd you hear?"

I licked my lips. Marigold didn't know much about her father, just that he was a bad man and was in prison, where he couldn't hurt us. She knew nothing of the horrors we'd faced together for the first two years of her life, and I planned to keep it that way for as long as I could. I didn't know if it was because she trusted me or for self-preservation, but she'd never pressed me for more info. Thank goodness.

Waving a hand, I fought to control my racing pulse. "It's some emergency at work. But that's no excuse for the way he talked to you, so I'm sorry again."

She slumped back on the couch with a sigh, blowing at a wayward curl that had fallen from her updo. "Whatever. No one's perfect, right?"

I gulped. She was right. *No one* was perfect, and that should have been my first clue that something wasn't right about Chet MacMillan. Ever since he'd come into our lives

two years ago and swept me off my feet with his charm and what appeared to be genuine kindness, I'd thought he *was* perfect. And now, as I stood in this horrible gown that he'd picked out himself because he said he wanted me to look like his *princess*, I felt like a total fool.

Chet was somehow in cahoots with my con man of an ex-husband, and even though it seemed like he was about to break whatever deal they'd made, it didn't sound like it was for the right reason. It wasn't like he'd proclaimed a change of heart because he'd fallen in love with his mark.

His *mark*.

The term hit me right in the chest. That was all I was to him, even though I thought we shared a real connection. Ours hadn't been a fairy-tale love story or anything, but it had been ... nice. Normal. Not abusive.

Wow. My bar's a lot lower than I thought.

Taking a steadying breath, I ran my hands over the bodice of my dress and willed myself to calm down. We didn't have much time. It might be my wedding day, but I wasn't married yet. I still had time to get us out of this. But how?

"Marigold?" I asked, joining her on the loveseat and taking her hands in mine. "Can you do me a huge favor?"

"Bet."

Despite the circumstances, I wanted to snort. I'd had my daughter when I was twenty, so even though I was younger than most of her friends' moms, it still took me a minute to get her slang sometimes. "Can you go get Aunt Hattie and tell her I need help with my dress?"

Marigold tilted her head and eyed the planet-sized skirt of the gown. "Need help not getting eaten by it?"

"Yeah, something like that. If Chet's still out there on the phone, give him his space. Just run and get Aunt Hattie."

She narrowed her eyes at me, but because she was my ride-or-die and I was hers, she nodded and got up, telling me she'd be right back. I didn't let out the breath I'd been holding

until the door closed behind her, then my next breath caught in my throat. I charged to the window as fast as this monstrosity of a dress would allow and peeked out.

There was no sign of Marigold, and Chet was still there with his back to me and the phone against his ear. Then he took it away and stabbed the screen—presumably to end the call—and I sprang back just before he turned around.

“Nikki?” he called through the door.

I jumped. Could I hide? *Not in this dress.*

But it didn’t matter, because he knocked once and then opened it without waiting for my response.

I braced myself for some of the anger I’d seen through the window, but as a winsome smile spread over his face, I made an effort to relax my own.

“You can’t be here,” I stammered, clearing my throat. “I mean, it’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding.”

He chuckled and closed the door behind him with a flick of his wrist. “I couldn’t help it. I had to see you. And if it’s bad luck, baby, it’s worth it. You look stunning.”

My heart pounded in my ears as he stalked closer. Well, *walked*, really. It only felt like stalking because I’d seen behind the mask and knew he was a con man, just like my ex. If I hadn’t overheard that phone call, I would have laughed right along with him and probably blushed at his compliments in that sweet tone.

Fool.

I forced a smile, hoping it reached my eyes. “I see. Well, thank you. But you should really go. We wouldn’t want anything to ruin this day, would we?”

“Nothing could. I have you. That’s all that matters.”

Ugh, really? Had he always talked like this? If so, had I liked it? Because right now, I had to force myself not to roll my eyes and ask him if he wanted a cracker with all that cheese.

Chet reached for me, and I froze. His hands bracketed my waist as he held me at arm's length, and while I'd never really felt a zing of heat from his touch before, now it felt like fire in a bad way. "Seriously, you're an absolute vision," he went on with his praise, his gaze raking over me. "How did I get so lucky?"

How indeed?

Chet bent his head to kiss me, and my heart seized, but then three soft knocks on the door caused me to nearly cry out with relief. He chuckled and went to it, grinning widely at Aunt Hattie and Marigold as they stood just outside. "Uh-oh. Busted."

You sure are.

"You shouldn't be in here!" Aunt Hattie admonished as she breezed by him. She flicked her hands, swatting him toward the door. "Scoot."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied easily, bowing like the perfect gentleman I used to think he was. Then he turned to me with a wink. "See you soon."

I nodded and tried for a smile. "See you."

When he was gone, Hattie looked me up and down with wide eyes. "Wow. That is some dress, sugar."

"You're telling me," I replied. Marigold wandered back to the loveseat she'd been lounging on earlier, but I couldn't ask for Aunt Hattie's help with her here. "Sweetheart?"

"Yeah?"

"So sorry, but can you do me one more favor? Bridesmaid duties."

"Sure."

"Great. Can you please go find our bouquets? They aren't here, and we'll need them when we head down the aisle."

Aunt Hattie—who was a florist and had been for about a million years—quirked a brow. "You're telling me they didn't bring them to you in here? I'll go—"

“No,” I said quickly, grabbing her hand before she could leave. “Marigold can handle it. Right, babe?”

My daughter nodded, grinning with pride that I’d given her a job and had faith in her ability to accomplish it. More and more lately, I felt her straining for independence now that she was a teenager. Well, here was her chance.

As soon as the door closed behind her, I tugged on Aunt Hattie’s hand and squeezed tightly. *Too* tightly, though, because she winced and let out a little gasp. “Sorry. Listen, we don’t have much time. I need you to help me.”

“Help you with what, Nikki? What’s wrong?”

“I need you to help me get out of here. Marigold and I need to leave before the ceremony begins, and Chet can’t find out.”

“Why not?”

Biting my lip, I prepared myself to explain what I’d heard. Aunt Hattie knew all about my past with Marigold’s father, and I knew she’d be as shocked as I was that Chet not only knew Damon but had nearly conned me into marrying him for some end goal that I still didn’t completely understand. But I wasn’t going to stick around to find out. I had to protect my daughter.

When I finished the rushed explanation of the events of the last few minutes, Aunt Hattie looked absolutely heartbroken. For me, but also for Marigold. And if I wasn’t mistaken, she also looked a little guilty.

“What is it?” I asked, the forlorn tilt to her eyes making my chest hurt.

“I don’t know how I missed this,” she said quietly. “I’m usually so ... well, I like to think I see people’s true colors better than most. But I had no idea.”

The laugh that bubbled through my lips was dark and full of self-pity. “I’ve been asking myself the same thing. Chet seemed perfect.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

Straightening, I closed my eyes. “Apparently not.”

Aunt Hattie paced away from me for a moment, and I focused on the quiet swishing of her floral dress. It was like a metronome, keeping me from losing my mind.

Swish. Swish. Swish.

Then she stopped, and with one final swish, she turned to face me, eyes round and bright. “Nikki, I have an idea. But you have to trust me and do exactly what I say.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

Aunt Hattie pulled out her phone and headed for the door. “Wait here. I’m going to make a call and find Marigold. Don’t move.”

And without another word, she was out the door and on her way. I don’t know how long I stood there, rooted in place, like her instruction not to move was literal instead of figurative. But without my trusty metronome, my mind ran through so many scenarios that I couldn’t figure out how to get my body to do anything other than keep me upright and breathing.

After what felt like both a year and no time at all, Aunt Hattie burst back in with Marigold in tow. “Come with me. Leave everything.”

I did as she stated without hesitation, filling my hands with tulle as I lifted my dress so I could scurry from the room.

“Mom?” Marigold asked as we followed Aunt Hattie in the opposite direction of the wedding. “What’s going on?”

“Mari, it’s been us against the world for a long time, right?”

She nodded but didn’t reply.

I hated the worried look in her eyes, so I smiled at her even though it felt like my heart was breaking. “And we love adventures, right?”

Another nod.

“Okay, well, right now, I need you to think of this as another adventure. I can’t explain it now, but I promise I will. Just trust me and don’t worry, okay?”

My sweet girl only nodded once again as we rushed along, not even breaking her stride.

And even though I didn’t have a mirror to say it to, I told myself for the twenty-*first* time that day that everything was going to be fine.

NATE

As I turned into the employee parking lot, Brett and I looked around for Hattie, a tense silence hanging in the air. When she'd called a few minutes ago, she instructed us to meet her here instead of the front of the hotel because she had something else she needed me to take to South Carolina.

Since the call had been on speaker, Brett chimed in to ask her what was going on, but she wouldn't give more details. She just rushed off the phone and told us she'd explain when we got here. There was an odd note of thinly veiled panic in her voice. We'd both heard it, and we were both worried.

"There," Brett said, pointing to the right.

I did a double take when I saw Hattie standing with a gorgeous brunette in an abnormally large wedding dress. Next to them, the young teen I assumed was Nikki's daughter, Marigold, kept looking over her shoulder like she was being hunted.

What in the world?

As I shifted into park, Brett hopped out and went straight to Nikki, grabbing her hands. "I was right, wasn't I? About Chet? What did he do?"

I held my breath as I walked around the hood of my SUV, waiting for her response, but then she shocked me by letting out a musical laugh. Her smile was so bright it mirrored the sun, and just like with the actual sun, I squinted against the glare.

“No, no,” she said breathlessly. “It’s not that. Chet’s ... fine. He didn’t do anything.”

“Then what are you doing out here?” Brett demanded, then turned to his mom. “What’s going on?”

Ignoring him, Hattie gave me a sweet smile. “I’m so sorry to have to ask you for another favor, Nate, but do you have room for Nikki and Marigold in there?”

I followed her gaze to my Suburban, none of this adding up. “Uh, room? I mean, yeah, there’s room, but—”

“Excellent. Get in, girls. Quickly.”

“Mom—” Brett started, but Nikki was already helping her daughter into the back seat and gathering up the biggest wedding dress I’d ever seen so she could cram herself in after her.

“Brett, can you please go back to the wedding and stall, so they have time to leave?” Hattie asked her son. That same out-of-place smile was still on her face, but the air of authority in her tone had him sighing and nodding in agreement. “You’re a peach. Thank you.”

Brett turned to me, hugging me briefly before patting my shoulder. “Call me.”

“I will.”

He took off in a jog toward the hotel, so I turned back to Hattie with my hands stretched wide. “What *is* this?”

“Nathan Bristol, I’ve known you since you were a blueberry-sized baby in your momma’s belly. You’ll get an explanation later, but right now, I’m asking you to take my niece and her daughter with you—*quickly*—and not to ask questions. In fact, don’t ask Nikki about anything *anytime* Marigold can hear you. Can you do that?”

A million questions that she didn’t want me to ask sang through my mind, but because I trusted this woman and knew there had to be a seriously good explanation for all of this, I straightened my shoulders. I was a Marine, after all. Following

orders without asking questions was second nature, and she knew it. “Yeah, I can do that.”

“Thank you, dear. I’ll call you once I have everything settled here.” She stepped forward to kiss my cheek, and I bent at the waist so she could reach. Then she let me see a little bit of the sadness she’d been hiding behind her smile before she turned away and followed her son.



Two hours later, I still didn’t know what was going on or why I’d loaded up a runaway bride and her teenager next to the piece of furniture I’d already agreed to travel with. Not only had this whole mess delayed me by several hours, but now I was about to show up at my buddy’s house in Yuma with two extra guests and no good explanation as to why they were with me.

And even though I kept reminding myself about the mysterious history Brett told me about, Nikki wasn’t acting like she was running from some dangerous predator. She was making cheery small talk with her daughter in the back seat, like I was nothing more than an Uber driver and this was a totally normal situation. I couldn’t wrap my brain around it. And the more I tried, the more frustrated I became.

I’d done as Hattie asked. I’d gotten them away from the hotel—*quickly*—and without asking questions. But if I had to listen to another minute of the nonsense they were talking about as if they weren’t dressed for a wedding they’d just run away from, I had a feeling I’d drive us all into a ditch.

“I’m getting gas,” I said in a clipped tone, taking the exit that’d shown up at just the right time.

“Oh, shoot,” Nikki said with a laugh. “I really have to use the restroom, but it’s probably not a good idea like this.”

I flicked her a look in my rearview mirror as she and her daughter giggled. The sheer volume of puffy white fabric surrounding her like a cocoon would have been a funny sight

under any other circumstance, but right now, it was straight-up unsettling.

“I can run in for snacks,” Marigold said. “I don’t look as nuts as you do. Just like I’m on my way to prom or something.”

Nikki cleared her throat. “I didn’t bring my purse, sweetie. We’ll have to figure it out when we make it to Yuma.”

Oh, perfect.

She’d escaped from her wedding with nothing but the absurdly large dress on her back, and she wanted me to believe it wasn’t because Brett was right about her groom being a bad guy?

Sure.

I’d get the story straight one way or another, but for now, the least I could do is give the kid some cash for snacks. Reaching into the back pocket of my jeans, I pulled out my wallet and used one hand to take out a twenty while I headed for the gas station. Then I held it over my shoulder. “Here.”

“Thanks,” Marigold replied as she plucked the bill from my fingers. “Want me to get you anything?”

“Red Bull. Two of ’em.”

As she and her mom discussed what other snacks to get—animatedly arguing over whether to get sweets, salty stuff, or both—I pulled up to the pump and hopped out. When Marigold went into the store, I opened the back door on Nikki’s side so I could talk to her while I filled up. “Nikki,” I said in a low tone as I hit the buttons on the machine, “you need to tell me what’s going on.”

Hattie didn’t want me asking questions when Marigold could hear me, but she wasn’t here right now. And I needed answers before I lost it. What exactly was I participating in? Her ditching a good dude or her running from a bad one?

Nikki eyed me carefully while I stood at the pump. Then she looked away, running her hands over her gown with a sigh.

“Were you and Marigold in danger?” I pressed.

She kept her gaze on her hands but didn't speak, just shook her head. Was she scared? Or wait, was she ashamed? Was she ashamed because she'd left some perfectly nice guy at the altar?

Clearing my throat, I took a step closer and kept my voice down. "So ... what? You just left him? Come on. There had to be a reason. You took off without even grabbing your purse. Or your phone, right?"

"Right."

I blinked at her profile while she continued to look at her lap. "You're really not gonna tell me more?"

Finally, she turned to me with a resigned smile. "Hattie said you'd help even if you didn't know what was going on. Is that true?"

Wishing it weren't, I nodded.

"Okay. Then if you don't mind, I'd like to hold you to that. But I will say that you're doing the right thing by helping us. Marrying Chet wasn't a good decision for me *or* my daughter. I did what I had to do."

Again, there was a smile on that gorgeous face of hers, and something about it twisted my gut like a mop in a bucket. If she wasn't in danger, she bailed on her wedding—and her groom—without looking back or giving him an explanation. It was so much like the flighty behavior of my ex that it actually made me feel sick.

After the way Chelsea had treated me like a yo-yo for so many years, I could totally see her doing something like this to me someday. It would be right up her alley to take off on our wedding day and later give me some dumb explanation ... something like she'd said today when she dumped me—*The heart wants what the heart wants*.

The pump clicked to signal that the tank was full, so I jerked the handle out and put it back in its cradle. Then I turned to Nikki. "We're spending the night at my friend's house in Yuma tonight. You and Marigold can take the guest room, and I'll crash on the couch."

“Thank you.”

“Since you don’t have other clothes, we can see if his wife can lend you guys something to wear to the store, so you don’t have to shop in ... that.” I flicked a hand at the gown, surprised when she laughed.

Earlier today, when Hattie asked me to meet her at the wedding for the *other* errand, I wondered if I might see the beautiful woman who’d always looked so happy in every picture I’d ever seen of her. I’d also wondered if she’d be as smiley in real life as she seemed to be. But given the current situation, her smiles made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Pretty as they were, they only seemed to hammer home that none of this was right. She had to be the coldest woman on the planet for smiling and laughing like this after ditching her fiancé.

“Thank you, Nate,” she said again. “I really appreciate it. And I know I don’t have any money on me right now, but I swear whatever you give us will be returned with interest as soon as I figure that part out.”

I pursed my lips. “Sounds good.”

It didn’t seem like there was much else to say, and I caught sight of Marigold coming back from the store. I gestured to indicate I was about to close her door, so she scooped up the mass of white fabric that’d spilled out when I’d opened it.

I closed her in and got back in my seat with what felt like fire in my veins. The same day I’d gotten dumped (again) by a woman who led me on (for years!) only to drop me like a hot potato every other time I turned around, I also found myself roped into helping another woman do the same thing to some other hapless chump.

Perfect.

NIKKI

The rest of the ride to Yuma was a lot quieter, thanks to Marigold's snack options and the cold shoulder we received from our reluctant rescuer. But I was glad for it. It'd been torturous to sit and chat like there was nothing wrong when in all actuality, *everything* was wrong, and all I wanted was to curl up in a ball and cry.

But showing that to my daughter wouldn't change anything. In fact, it would only make the feeling worse. Instead of being alone in replaying every conversation Chet and I had ever had, looking for signs of his treachery, Marigold would be doing it too. And she'd likely be a lot louder and more emotional about it. Not that I'd blame her. So, to avoid all of that, I'd done what I always do. I put on a happy face for my sweet girl and made the best of it. I wouldn't be me if I didn't.

As for Nate, well, I could have told him what was going on back at the gas station, but my brain was mush, and I was afraid we wouldn't have enough time before Marigold came back. I'd tell him as soon as I was sure we had the privacy to discuss it and not a moment before. The longer I could protect my daughter from finding out about Chet's plan to send her away and steal my money, the better. Not to mention his connection to her father, which I was still trying to wrap my head around. How did he know Damon? How had this started? And when?

"They live on base," Nate said, pointing to a tan sign. Marine Corps Air Station Yuma was just ahead on the right.

Pulling up to a large gate with men in uniforms standing guard, he rolled down his window and handed his ID to one of them, greeting him with a curt nod.

Whew. Was this family friend of Hattie's always so grumpy? Or was it because of the mess we'd dropped in his lap? Maybe it was a Marine thing. But Brett wasn't nearly as stoic as Nate, and he was a Marine. Neither was Brett's father, Thatcher. He was quiet, but generally very friendly. Then again, anyone would appear quiet next to Aunt Hattie, and Uncle Thatcher seemed just fine with letting his wife have the spotlight in social situations.

"Good to go, Staff Sergeant," the man said as he handed Nate's ID back.

Nate nodded again and pulled through the gate, wordlessly driving us through the dark streets of what looked like a city within a city. We passed perfectly manicured lawns, neighborhoods with matching tan duplexes and houses, a gas station, and a couple of playgrounds.

When we arrived at one of the single-family homes that looked exactly like all the others on the block, he turned the engine off and looked back at us. "Ready?"

I glanced at Marigold with an encouraging smile. "Ready?"

She shrugged in reply and started to exit the vehicle, so Nate got out and opened my door for me. His mouth was set into a grim line as he held out his hand to help me down. With a nervous smile, I placed my hand in his, not distracted enough by the effort of gathering my dress to miss the warmth that shot through my palm at his touch.

"Thanks," I said with a little laugh as my heels hit the pavement.

"Don't mention it," he replied.

He let go of my hand as soon as he was sure I was firmly on the ground, then flexed it. Once, twice. Almost like ... he was annoyed?

No, not quite annoyed. But close.

Interesting.

I watched in silence as he moved to the trunk to grab what I assumed was an overnight bag. The olive-green duffel looked military issued, and I wondered idly what he did in the military. Was he one of the Marines who fought on the front lines? A pilot? Someone with a desk job? I knew a little bit about military life, thanks to Brett, but not much. And this was definitely the first time I'd stepped foot on a military base, despite having grown up surrounded by them in Southern California.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” a male voice called out from the front door of the house as we approached. “When you said you were going to be late and had a couple of extra passengers, I didn't think you meant you kidnapped a princess bride.”

I cringed. Why had I thought it was endearing that Chet wanted me to look like his princess today, even though I hated this gown? How could it have seemed so cute before and so utterly gross now?

Not for the first time, my life felt like it was divided into two sections: before and after. Now that I knew Chet wasn't as perfect as I'd always assumed he was, it was like I saw everything from before that revelation in a whole new light.

“Yeah, sorry, man. They needed a lift to South Carolina, and it was kind of a spur-of-the-moment deal,” Nate said. He greeted the man with a quick hug, then turned to us. “This is my friend, Spencer Hawkins, aka Hawk. We were stationed in San Diego together once upon a time.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, sticking out his hand for me to shake. “And you can call me Spencer.”

I returned the gesture with a wide smile. “I'm Nikki, and this is my daughter, Marigold.”

“Come on in,” Spencer said with a wave of his hand. “We've got two little girls who are probably gonna freak out when they see your dresses. Sorry in advance if there's screaming.”

We followed him into the warmly lit house, and I only struggled a little trying to get through the door in the wide gown without tearing it. Sure enough, the second I made it over the threshold, two wide-eyed little girls came running in from the kitchen. And yes, there was screaming.

“Are you a real-life princess?” the older one asked. She looked to be about four and had beautiful blonde hair and the bluest eyes I’d ever seen.

I beamed down at her and shook my head. “No, I’m just playing dress-up. Do you like to play dress-up?”

“Yes! I love your dress!” she squealed, her hands clasped together so tightly it looked like she was using all her tiny might to keep from lunging forward and touching the full skirt.

The younger sister (who didn’t look to be that much younger—maybe only by a year or so) had no such restraint. She reached out with both hands and hugged the gown, then fluffed it with glee.

“Hey, no love for Uncle Nate?” Spencer asked his daughters.

The girls barely spared Nate a glance as they tossed their greetings over their shoulders, still enamored by my dress. At least *they* loved it.

Marigold watched all of this with a smile that was almost as big as the younger girls, and when she let out a little giggle, they turned to her and complimented her dress as well. She kneeled down and chatted excitedly with them while the three of us adults watched, and it was good to see her looking so carefree and happy. That was all I wanted.

If anything could push Marigold’s cares away, it was kids. She *loved* kids. So much so that she said she wanted to be a teacher someday. Over the last year, she’d started volunteering to babysit her friends’ younger siblings even though she didn’t need the money. She just enjoyed it. I loved that about her.

“Where’s Ellie?” Nate asked, drawing my attention back to the two men.

“She’s in the shower. She’ll be right out.” Spencer ruffled the older girl’s hair. “Sorry, they do have names. This one’s Emma and the little one is Ava. And the one on the way is a boy, *finally*.”

Nate chuckled, and I realized it was the first time I’d seen him smile all day. Or, well, technically ... ever.

“I still can’t believe you’re gonna have three kids,” Nate said with a pat on Spencer’s shoulder. “You don’t mess around.”

“Yeah, Ellie and I were both only children, so we wanted a big family.”

Nate grinned. “I’m happy for you, man. Congrats.”

“Thanks. You guys wanna come into the kitchen? We already ate, and I need to get these two hooligans in bed, but you can help yourselves to the leftovers. I’ll be back in however long it takes me to read ten princess books and sing too many Christmas songs, but I’ll tell Ellie to come out when she’s done.”

I fought the urge to sigh at how adorable it was that this tall, strapping Marine was about to sit on the floor and read books and sing to his daughters. I hadn’t had a man like that when Marigold was young. Or any man at all. I’d been the only one doing bedtime rituals night after night, and while I wouldn’t trade that for the horrible life we would have had if I’d stayed with her father, it stung that the man I thought I might share those things with wasn’t that man either.

“Cool, thanks,” Nate said, then he frowned. “Wait, Christmas songs? It’s only October.”

“These girls are obsessed with Christmas. They want ‘Jingle Bells’ all year long.”

The three of us said good night to the girls—which was a struggle because they obviously didn’t want to go to bed when they could be playing dress-up with us—then headed for the kitchen to eat.

“Those girls were hecka cute,” Marigold said as we dished up some spaghetti.

“They really were. How old are they, Nate?” I asked, ignoring the slight tilt of his brow at Marigold’s phrasing. It was a long road to Bluffton, so he’d better get used to it.

He looked up like he was trying to remember. “I think four and three. Or maybe Emma is five now.” He wrinkled his nose. “I’m a bad uncle, I guess.”

“So Spencer’s your brother?” Marigold asked. “Or is his wife your sister?”

“Nah, it’s just a thing. In the military we’re not always around actual family, so we make our own. I have a bunch of little nieces and nephews but no real siblings.”

“And we have Aunt Hattie,” I reminded Marigold, bumping her with my elbow.

“Yeah, what’s the deal with that, anyway?” Nate asked. “I don’t remember. She’s friends with your mom?”

The three of us took our plates to the kitchen table and sat down, and I couldn’t help the tightness in my chest as I saw the signs of life with two young girls in the house. There was glitter on the table, two baby dolls in toy high chairs in the corner, and someone’s pink headband on the table next to where I’d set my plate.

“Aunt Hattie’s mom was close with my grandma, actually. They grew up together in Bluffton, but then my grandparents moved to California. Our families never lost touch, though, and I guess my mom and Aunt Hattie did the thing you guys do. Brett calls my mom Aunt Sylvie.”

I shifted in my seat. Poor Brett. He’d tried to warn me multiple times that he had a bad feeling about my almost-husband, but I hadn’t listened. I was so convinced that Chet was the perfect man that I wouldn’t even entertain thoughts of him being anything other than that. I couldn’t believe how gullible I’d been.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Marigold asked, her forkful of spaghetti halfway to her lips.

Shoot. She must have seen something on my face. We were so close that we often joked we could read each other’s minds,

so that was why I'd been working so hard to stay upbeat ever since we'd left San Diego. If I wasn't careful, she'd see right through me.

"Nothing, baby," I reassured her, smiling again. "Eat up. It's been a long day."

Before I turned back to my own food, I glanced at Nate. He was watching me with the same amount of intensity as my daughter had been, and I couldn't help but squirm under his gaze.

What must he think of me? With all my playing it cool for Marigold and acting like running away from my wedding was no big deal, he must think I was the biggest ice queen.

We needed to talk. And soon.

The sound of shuffling feet caught my attention, and I looked up to find a beautiful—and *very* pregnant—woman coming into the kitchen in a pair of fuzzy pink slippers. She had her blonde hair up in a bun and wore a floral robe over black leggings and a tee.

Her baby bump looked way too big to allow the robe to close, and my heart squeezed thinking about how much I loved being pregnant with Marigold. Damon had still been on his best behavior then, and we were blissfully happy. Things hadn't gone downhill until after she was born, and once he reached the tipping point ... well, let's just say the slide happened *fast*.

"Nate," Ellie said, sighing like she was dead on her feet, "it's so good to see you."

"Hey, Ellie." Nate stood from the table and hugged her, then pointed down at her belly. "I hear this one's a boy?"

Ellie laughed and rubbed her belly. "Yes. Third time's the charm."

"Hawk would've been fine if this one was a girl too," he replied dryly. Then he turned to us, making introductions. "This is Nikki and her daughter, Marigold."

I started to stand, but Ellie waved me off and gingerly sat down with us. “It’s nice to meet you both. Spence told me we were having some extra company, but he didn’t say anything about a wedding. Something you’re not telling us?”

The question was directed at Nate, and he rolled his eyes. “Ha. If I was the groom, you guys would’ve gotten an invite.”

Ellie lifted her chin. “I hope we’d get more than that. If Emma and Ava aren’t your flower girls, they’ll probably torch the place.” We all laughed, but then Ellie’s eyes widened. “Shoot, wait. That sounds bad. I swear my kids wouldn’t light a church on fire.”

“Maybe a backyard wedding, though,” Nate said with a lift of one of his broad shoulders.

“Hush,” Ellie said, then she turned to me. “Anyway, Nikki, what do you do?”

“I’m a midwife,” I replied, feeling the first genuine smile of the night spread across my face. I loved what I did, and the subject was a happy change. “I started school when Marigold was three, so I’ve been doing it full-time for about two years now. It’s my dream job.”

“It takes that long to become a midwife?” Nate asked dubiously.

“Not always,” I replied. “You can do it in six, but I didn’t want to overdo it on my class schedule because I wanted to spend more time with Mari.” I sent my daughter a wink, and she smiled shyly.

Nate hummed. “Isn’t that how long it takes to become a doctor? Why’d you go the crunchy route?”

I shot him a mock scowl, totally used to the many myths and misconceptions that came along with the practice of midwifery. It was like people thought we were still running around toting herbs and incense, only allowed to catch babies at home. Or in a commune. “*Crunchy*, huh?”

“Yeah. Don’t midwives do home births and stuff like that?”

I snickered, but Marigold's mouth dropped open. "Okay, boomer."

Nate's brows shot up in horror, and he put his hand on his chest. "Ouch. I'm only thirty-three."

"I think what she's trying to say is that you're out-of-date on your knowledge, there, buddy," Ellie said, reaching over to pat his hand. "Midwives work in hospitals, and they're certified and went to nursing school. Master's degree, too, right?"

I dipped my chin. "Yep."

"Oh," Nate said, looking properly abashed. "My bad."

"How do you know so much about this?" Marigold asked our host.

"Well, besides the fact that I'm on my third kid and have had a midwife for all of them, my best friend, Olivia, is a labor and delivery nurse. I've picked stuff up." Ellie's brow lifted as she turned to me. "But hey, this is actually really handy. If I go into labor while you're here and it's as fast as everyone says it is for the third kid, at least I'll know I'm in good hands."

Nate's upper lip curled comically high as he stared at her round belly. "Uh ... is it supposed to happen that soon?"

"Not for another few years—sorry, *weeks*. Feels like years."

I laughed. Not only did I remember that feeling myself, but every pregnant woman I'd tended to had felt the exact same way in the final weeks. "Everyone's different. It could be fast though, so make sure you give yourself plenty of time to get to the hospital."

"Will do."

I opened my mouth to ask Ellie what she did for a living but was interrupted when Nate gestured to the mountain of white tulle bunched around me. "Ellie, any chance these two can borrow some clothes to sleep in and then something to wear to the store tomorrow?"

"Sure."

“Thanks. We’ll hit the Exchange before we leave town so they can buy some stuff, and then we’ll bring yours back.”

“The Exchange?” Marigold asked. “As in Armani?”

Ellie and Nate exchanged a look. Then she smiled at my daughter. “No. There’s a store on base that’s kinda like a department store meets Target. The Exchange is what the military calls it because there are weird words for everything. Our grocery store is called the commissary.”

“Sweet.”

“But anyway,” Ellie said, looking at me now. “I’ll find you guys some PJs from my non-maternity stuff, and you’re welcome to shop my closet tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” I told her, hoping she could see in my eyes just how grateful I was. I couldn’t imagine what she thought of me, sitting here in this massive dress with no explanations given. But she was clearly just as ride-or-die as Nate, and I loved it.

We finished up the rest of our meal while chatting and getting to know Ellie and Spencer, who’d come back from getting the girls to bed not long after Ellie agreed to lend us some clothes.

They seemed like an amazing couple. You could practically feel their love radiating around the room whenever they looked at each other, and if it hadn’t been for how hard I was working to put on a show for Marigold, the sight of them probably would have brought me to tears.

Oddly enough, it wasn’t because I mourned some great loss of love between Chet and me. No, it was almost worse that that wasn’t the case. I should’ve been heartbroken that the man I’d been about to marry had turned out to be trash. I should’ve been shattered.

Instead, I felt stupid for not seeing him for who he truly was and ridiculously angry with myself for believing his lies. I’d almost married a man who wanted to send my daughter away and steal my money. Not to mention that nonsense about taking me somewhere where no one would find me.

Yuck.

“Oh, leave them,” Ellie said as I started to do the dishes after we’d finished. “I’ll get them later. Lemme get your PJs and show you the guest room.”

“Definitely not,” Spencer said with a snort. “I mean, you can go help them, but I’ll take care of these.”

“Thank you,” she replied with a sigh, hugging him around the waist as he bent to kiss the top of her head.

The moment was so sweet I had to look away, and when I did, my gaze snagged on Nate’s. He was watching me again, almost like he was trying to pluck the full story out of my brain through my eyeballs.

After being fooled by both of my exes, I wondered if I could trust my instincts about Nate. No matter how much he tried to hide it, behind his grumpy facade I spied a very kind man. We wouldn’t be standing in this kitchen otherwise.

NATE

I stood around and talked to Hawk while he did the dishes, then, after Nikki and Marigold were settled in the guest room and Ellie went to bed, we went out back for a couple of beers.

Yuma was hot as heck during the day—even in October—but at night, it got that desert chill I remembered from my time in Afghanistan. I took a sip of my beer and realized the similarities stopped there. No beers on deployment, unfortunately.

“So,” Hawk said, quirking a brow at me, “you gonna tell me what’s up with Julia Roberts in there?”

I frowned. “Julia Roberts?”

“*Runaway Bride?*” When I only stared blankly at him, he hung his head. “Right. I’m so used to princess cartoons and chick flicks, man. I can’t wait for Marvel and Star Wars to balance us out around here.”

“Too bad you probably have years of Mickey Mouse before that happens.”

“Expert on kids now that you’ve kidnapped one?”

I slid him a look. “I didn’t kidnap either of them.”

“Then what’s the deal?”

“Honestly? I’m pretty sure it’s not too complicated. I thought there was some big scary reason for her to run away

from her wedding, but I don't know. Maybe she just changed her mind and bailed out of embarrassment."

Hawk blew out a long breath. "I hope not."

"Imagine being her getaway driver." I sipped my beer and stared at their tiny yard, feeling a little sick over the idea that I'd helped this woman leave some poor guy at the altar without a word.

That wasn't the only thing that had me feeling a bit queasy. Nikki seemed like the exact kind of flighty woman I should avoid like the plague, and yet ... she was absolutely breathtaking, and I hadn't been able to stop sneaking glances at her all night. Which was so, *so* wrong. The dude she left was probably crushed, and I know this because if it were me? I definitely would've been. Maybe that was my type: pretty, but with a side of stomp-on-your-heart-without-blinking.

Fun.

"You sure that's all it is?" Hawk asked.

I wanted to think I was doing some noble deed, but I really didn't think it was like that. I lifted my hands. "She hasn't given me any reason to think otherwise."

"Hmm."

"The way she and her daughter acted on the way out here didn't suggest they were running from some psycho. They were so"—I shuddered—"giggly."

He snorted, then we sipped our beers in silence for a beat while he seemed to think it over.

Finally, he aimed the neck of his bottle toward me. "You know, I have this friend."

I gave him a look. One that suggested I didn't believe for a second he was about to tell me a story about anyone other than himself. That's how it went, right? "The friend" is always the person talking?

"I'm serious," he said with a laugh, picking up on the meaning behind my silence. "It's *not* me. I have a friend who started hanging out with this woman while she was on her

honeymoon in Hawaii—*alone*. The wedding didn't happen. He was into her, but he was also worried about what happened between her and the other guy. He didn't wanna go there if she was still hung up on him or whatever. He didn't have any reason to think it was a bad situation, though. Until he *did*."

I adjusted my position in the patio chair and scratched my head. "Okay."

"Okay, so ... maybe don't jump to conclusions. You never know what someone else is going through. And the way they acted on the drive over here? Man, lemme tell you. As a parent, when stuff is *really* wrong, the last thing I'd wanna do is let my girls in on it."

This had my attention. "You think she's acting all casual so Marigold isn't worried or something?"

"I don't know." He paused and picked at the label of his bottle before looking back at me. "I don't know anything about it. You might be totally right; maybe she changed her mind and bailed. But if you're wrong and there's some crazy reason she needed to get out of there without even stopping to change outta that dress, I bet she'd act however she needed to for her kid's sake. It's a parent thing, I guess."

Huh.

"Alright, yeah. That makes sense. And my buddy Brett is close with her family, and he said he didn't like the guy."

"There ya go. Maybe there's more to the story. But if you want her to tell you, you should probably act a little more like you're willing to hear it."

My brows snapped together. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. You've never been a smiley guy, but you look extra broody tonight, my friend. Somethin' else up? Besides the hitchhikers?"

My breakup with Chelsea earlier in the day seemed like it'd happened a year ago. I leaned back and blew air through my pursed lips. "Oh, yeah. I got dumped today."

"Ah. That explains it."

I sipped my beer.

“What was her name again?”

“Chelsea.”

He bobbed his head up and down. “You don’t need that kind of stress in your life. You’re already a Marine, for crying out loud. Find you a solid woman you can count on. Or just be single.”

Snorting, I shook my head. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking the same thing. About being single, I mean. I don’t think I’ll date anyone for a while, and when I do, yeah. She’s not gonna be anything like Chelsea.”

“Well, I hope you figure out what’s up with Buttercup, and I’m sorry about you and Chelsea.”

His words were sincere, but I pulled a face at the unfamiliar name and shook my head at him. “*Buttercup?*”

With a loud groan, Hawk sank into his chair. “I’m not even gonna tell you what movie that’s from. I’m just gonna sit here and die instead.”

“You do that,” I replied.



Later that night, I pushed into a seated position on the couch with an aggravated sigh. This wasn’t supposed to be how this trip would go. I was supposed to leave San Diego excited to be with Chelsea after all these years apart. And I planned to head out on my trip at exactly the right time, with no unexpected delays. And on top of all that, I should be fast asleep in the guest room since I had a long day of driving ahead of me.

But no. Instead, I was on the couch, tossing and turning because I couldn’t stop wondering about what Hawk and I had discussed.

“Oh, hey,” Nikki murmured as she came down the stairs. “I didn’t think you’d be up. I just came down for some water.”

I watched her slip into the living room wearing a set of Ellie's pajamas. They were nothing special. Just a black shirt and a pair of dark-green shorts. But after spending the evening with her while she was all done up for her wedding, seeing her looking so normal and comfy took away a bit of the weirdness of the situation. She didn't look like a runaway bride—the embodiment of this messed-up detour. She just looked like ... a woman.

And as annoying as it was to admit, she was still gorgeous.

"Can't sleep," I replied, scrubbing my hands over my face. "What time is it?"

"Me neither. It's a little after two."

I groaned and leaned back into the cushions. "Great."

"Were you planning to cover a lot of miles tomorrow? Or ... today, I guess?"

"I planned to drive for a solid eight hours. *And* head out early."

She bit her lip. "But now we have to wait until the commissary opens so Mari and I can shop, and you'll be dead tired."

"The Exchange," I corrected her gently. "The commissary is the grocery store."

"Oh, sorry." She let out a little laugh as she stepped further into the room, tucking her arms around her middle. "But hey, look on the bright side: Now you'll get to have breakfast with those adorable little girls and spend more time with your friends before we leave."

I studied her and that dang smile that always seemed so easy regardless of the circumstances, then nodded. "True. Though, I would have had more time with them before they went to bed if I'd gotten here earlier." I let the sentence hang there, suggesting it was pretty much the same thing.

She tucked her lips between her teeth like she felt bad, and the silence stretched as she fidgeted with her hands and shifted from foot to foot.

Shoot. I probably hadn't needed to reply to her optimistic comment with a barbed retort, and suddenly I felt pretty dang bad for doing it.

I blew out a breath, taking my eyes off the face that looked even better without ten pounds of wedding-day makeup, and stared at the ground. "Sorry. It's been a rough day—even before you guys hopped onto the trip. But I shouldn't take that out on you."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said in a soft tone, then came over and sat on the couch adjacent to mine. "Do you want to talk about it? I'm a great listener."

"Actually," I said as I reluctantly dragged my gaze to hers again, "it'd help if you were the one to do the talking."

Now it was Nikki's turn to hang her head. "You're right."

"Hold up." Standing, I gestured toward the kitchen. "I'll grab you that water first."

I needed some too. Though, if it weren't already so late—or early, depending on how you looked at it—and I didn't plan on road-tripping tomorrow, a beer would've been better. Or even something stronger. When I returned with two cups of water and handed one to her, I sat down and took a sip. Yeah, definitely not as helpful as a beer.

Nikki stared down at her cup for a minute before speaking, and when she did, she refused to meet my eyes. "I know you've been close with Aunt Hattie your whole life. And Brett too. Do you already know about my ex?"

"No. Well, no details. But Brett said it wasn't good."

She snorted darkly—the first bit of humor that wasn't bright and shiny that I'd seen from her thus far. "Well, I met him when I was sixteen, at a party I wasn't supposed to be at. It was pretty much the epitome of the rich girl and the boy from the wrong side of the tracks kinda story. And he was a few years older than me, which added to the excitement of the whole thing."

She paused and sighed, taking a sip of her water before continuing. I waited patiently, and something that felt a little

like dread swirled around in my gut.

“We dated on and off for a few years, and then when I was nineteen, he proposed. By twenty, I was married with a baby on the way.”

My brows shot up. I knew she had to have been pretty young when she had Marigold, but I couldn’t imagine having the responsibility of a kid when I wasn’t even old enough to drink legally. That must have been wild.

Her hand shook as she set her water on the table in front of her. “My parents were furious. My mom swore the whole thing caused my dad’s heart attack. He died right before Marigold was born.”

“Oh, man,” the words left my mouth in a burst of air, coming out like a whisper. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I mean, it’s okay *now*. It’s been a long time. But back then, it was devastating. Anyway, Damon—my ex—always had a temper. But he’d never turned it on me. Then he started working some new job that he was super sketchy about, and whenever things would go wrong, he’d get really scary.”

“Did he hit you?” I asked quietly, feeling like I already knew the answer though I hoped I’d be wrong.

“Thankfully not until after I had the baby. And it was just me. He never laid a hand on Marigold. I’m so grateful for that. He was very ... strategic about it. So it was easy to hide. Not that I really had anyone who’d notice at that point. But still, overall, I’d say it wasn’t as bad as it could have been.”

The fact that she answered that question in such a looking-on-the-bright-side kinda way had me shaking my head with a sigh. *Wasn’t as bad as it could have been?* Sure, yeah. Lots of bad things could fall into that category, including the idea of him being evil enough to hurt a baby. But still. How was it possible for her to show gratitude when the whole thing made me want to tear one of Ellie’s million throw pillows apart with my bare hands?

“I don’t want to go into all the details,” she went on, “but I found out he was a full-on criminal. Scamming old people,

stealing credit cards, the whole nine. He said he didn't care that my parents had cut me off financially after we were married, but in reality, he was *beyond* mad about it. My money was the main reason he'd married me, so when that wasn't an option, he turned to illegal ways of striking it rich. And since he frequently came home with thousands of dollars in cash and always bought us big-label stuff, he was apparently pretty good at it."

"And you weren't suspicious of that? You didn't know he was doing it illegally?"

"Not at first, no. He was smooth. And looking back, I can see that I was so under his thumb that I didn't *want* to know. I was used to the finer things in life." She paused then, looking a little sheepish. "He bought me a nice car, Marigold had top-of-the-line baby gear, and we wore the same brands I'd had in my closet back home. It sounds so horrible, but I kept telling myself it could be worse."

I stared at her in disbelief. "So, what, having all that fancy stuff—purchased illegally—was enough to keep you from leaving?"

My tone had been even, but she still winced. "It wasn't just the *stuff*. I didn't think I had any options. My parents had cut me off, I had a baby to take care of, and it's embarrassing to admit this now, but I pretty much did whatever he told me to do because he had such a hold over me."

I hardly knew this woman, but my fingers tingled with the urge to punch something. She looked so vulnerable in the dimly lit living room, and I could picture her all those years earlier being scared and young and thinking she had no choice. I didn't have much of a temper ... not in the way her ex apparently had, anyway. But she didn't know me well enough to know that, so I resolved not to express how much I wanted to pummel the guy.

"So," she went on with a shaky sigh, "when Marigold was two, I finally got the guts to tell Aunt Hattie what was going on. She helped me get him arrested for the illegal stuff he was mixed up in, and she also helped me file charges against him

for the abuse. My mom took me back into her house with open arms, and I've been raising Marigold there ever since. When I started dating Chet, I thought we'd finally get to have our happily ever after."

I scratched my jawline. Now that I thought about it, I remembered a time when my mom spoke of Hattie traveling to California way more than she normally did. I hadn't thought anything of it back then. But based on the timing, I'd bet it was to help Nikki.

"Was Chet abusive like your ex?" I asked, trying to circle us back to the runaway bride thing.

"Nope. He was amazing. The perfect gentleman. He was so sweet and kind and gentle. One of the biggest reasons I felt safe enough to marry him was because he was nothing like Damon. No sign of a temper at all, whether directed at me or not. And everyone loved him. Aunt Hattie, and the rest of my family, anyway. Not Brett, but I didn't listen to him."

Hmm. That didn't bode well for Hawk's suggestion that this was anything other than her changing her mind on a good guy, but I waited for her to go on before I jumped to conclusions. Well, more conclusions, anyway.

"Plus, Chet had a lot of money, so I didn't think he'd be after mine," she said with an eye roll. "Now I'm wondering if any of that was real or if it was just part of his con."

"Con?"

"Damon was a con man, and the day of the wedding, I overheard Chet talking to him on the phone. Which I still don't understand, by the way. I have no idea how he knows my ex or what the real story is, but I heard enough to know I needed to get Marigold out of there. He wanted to send her away. And there was something about taking me somewhere too, and he mentioned my family's money. I may not know the details, but I didn't want to stick around to find out."

"So you asked Aunt Hattie to get you guys out of there."

"And *she* asked *you* to help us."

I got up to pace, needing some way to channel the buzzing in my veins. “Why didn’t you tell me you were in danger when I asked?”

“I don’t necessarily know if I *am* in danger. Not physically, anyway. After what I’ve lived through with Damon ... it doesn’t seem like Chet’s plan was the same kind of scary. And not only that but I don’t want Marigold to find out about all of this yet.”

“Why not?”

“I need answers. The longer I can keep this to myself, the longer she can feel safe. I’ll tell her eventually, but right now, I don’t know. I’m acting on instinct, I guess.”

Again, Hawk’s words floated through my mind. He was right. You never really knew what people were going through, and clearly, that whole instinct to protect her child had fooled me into thinking there was nothing seriously wrong. I felt like a jerk.

“So,” Nikki said, standing and folding her hands together in front of her, “now that you know the whole story, do you feel better about helping us?”

I watched her for a long moment. Her shoulders were straight, and her chin was high. She gave off this sense of strength that was almost mesmerizing, and like a moth to a flame, I felt drawn to it. Drawn to her.

“Nate?”

“Sorry, yes,” I said, shaking off my wayward thoughts. “But I shouldn’t have had a problem with helping you in the first place.”

“I understand. You had this whole trip planned out, and we were a pretty big monkey wrench in your plans.”

Her smile was back again, and it made my stomach lurch with guilt. “Yeah. But still.”

Nikki bent to pick up her water cup and headed for the stairs. “We should get some sleep so we can stick as close to

your road trip plan as possible. I don't want to take advantage of your kindness." She took a step, then paused. "And Nate?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for listening. And for everything else."

I mumbled something in response, but I couldn't even tell you what it was. My mind was still processing everything she'd just told me. As she walked up the stairs and disappeared into the dark, I realized that knowing the truth of her situation wasn't going to make it any easier for me to sleep tonight.

NIKKI

“I ’m low-key obsessed with Emma and Ava,” Marigold confessed as we waited in Nate’s SUV while he chatted with his friends in the driveway. “Think they’d notice if we brought them with us?”

I tossed her a grin over my shoulder. “Probably.”

Unlike last night, I decided to sit up front so Nate wouldn’t feel like a chauffeur. And thanks to Ellie’s generosity with her pre-pregnancy wardrobe, I was wearing a pair of jeans and a plain white tee instead of the snow globe of a wedding dress. Which, by the way, Ellie had graciously offered to donate to a local thrift store for me.

Good riddance.

“Mom,” Marigold said, leaning forward and waiting until I turned back to meet her eyes. “Did you and Chet talk about having more kids?”

I swallowed, smiling before she saw something too dark in my expression. “We did. He said he was happy with it being just the three of us.”

Except now I understood he was happy with it being just the three of us because he planned to send Marigold away. The jerk.

“Huh. That’s cool, I guess. But do you want more kids?”

My heart cracked. Of course I did. I loved being a mom, and just like Spencer and Ellie, I’d always wanted a big family because I had also been an only child. But since I was still

sticking to my mission of keeping things light for my girl, I shook my head. “I’m happy with just you.”

“So ... are we ever gonna talk about why we bailed on Chet?”

We should. We needed to. But ugh, I really didn’t want to. Not yet anyway. Because I didn’t think there was a way to tell her about the issues with Chet without letting her in on what I went through with her dad.

Thankfully, Nate chose that exact moment to get in and slide behind the wheel. “Ready to shop?”

“Are *you*?” Marigold asked, making him snort.

“This isn’t gonna be an all-day thing, right?” he asked me. “I’d really like to get on the road before noon, at the latest.”

“We can make that work,” I assured him. “And um ... you’re sure you don’t mind buying everything, and I’ll pay you back when I get the bank thing figured out?”

He put the SUV in drive and sent me a quick look. I could tell he wished he could speak freely but was respecting my decision to keep this off Marigold’s mind for a while longer.

“Don’t mind at all,” he replied as he pulled away from the Hawkins’ house with one final wave to them. “We’ll figure it out. Besides, you can’t shop at the Exchange without a military ID, so I’d be the one buying everything either way.”

“Are we stopping at another friend’s house tonight or staying in a hotel this time?” Marigold asked.

“Hotel. I don’t know anyone in Las Cruces,” he replied.

“Mom, we should get souvenirs on the road.”

I turned to my daughter with a lifted brow. “Souvenirs?”

“Yeah. What’s a road trip without souvenirs?”

“Like what?” I asked with a short laugh.

“Shot glasses? They’re small.”

Nate shot me a look and I rolled my eyes at him before glancing back at Marigold. “Since neither of us is big on

tequila shots, probably not.”

“What about magnets?” she tried.

It was a good idea, so I nodded and made a noncommittal noise. But her simple suggestion only reminded me that we’d left our home in San Diego and were headed to stay at Aunt Hattie’s house, where the fridge in the kitchen wouldn’t even be ours to decorate with magnets.

I needed a plan. And a phone.

I hadn’t been able to talk to Aunt Hattie since I didn’t have mine, but I had to call her and see if there was more to her bright idea to send me across the country with Nate than just handling the immediate problem.

I also wanted to know what happened after we left. Had everyone freaked out? Well, of course they had. It wasn’t like Chet, my mom, or any of the other guests would have shrugged off the news that Marigold and I were gone.

But how bad were their reactions? And most importantly ... would Chet come after us? And if he did, was he dangerous, or would he simply try to convince me to come back with him in that sweet and too-convincing way of his?

We pulled into a parking spot at the Exchange, and Nate said he wanted to make a few phone calls and would meet us inside. I rushed Marigold through the store, not letting her get distracted by the lure of designer bags and high-end makeup that we’d apparently be able to buy tax-free. Now wasn’t the time to stock up on the finer things. We were here for necessities. Clothes for the week, shoes, toiletries, and anything else we’d need for a road trip.

When we passed an endcap filled from top to bottom with prepaid phones, I paused and bit my lip. I’d bought one of these after I’d left Damon because I hadn’t wanted him to call my old number from jail while I waited until I could get back on my mom’s phone plan. I couldn’t believe I was here again. How had I let this happen?

“Can I go look at headphones?” Marigold asked, making me jump.

“What? Why?”

She shrugged. “So I can listen to music on the drive.”

I gripped her arm. “Do you have your phone?”

“Um, right. No.”

She looked down at my hand on her arm and I released her, forcing out a chuckle. “Sorry, if you did, I was going to ask to borrow it so I can call Grandma.”

“Okay.”

I gestured to the prepaid phones. “I’ll grab one of these for myself, but you can go look at MP3 players if you want.” She started to go, but then I held up a finger. “Wait, the cheap ones. Nothing major.”

“Why not?”

I pointed to the full shopping cart. “Because Nate will have a hefty bill with all the necessities as it is. I don’t want to take advantage of him.”

She shrugged and walked away, but then the sound of Nate clearing his throat behind me made me jump once again.

His lips twitched. “Sorry. You don’t have to worry about that, you know.”

“Worry about what?” I asked, willing my pulse to slow.

“The money. I’ve got plenty.”

I swallowed, hating myself for wondering if he was lying. Though, why would he? Just because Chet had most likely lied about having money since he was so determined to get his hands on mine didn’t mean Nate would.

Then again, how much did active-duty Marines make? I knew it couldn’t be much, which was a shame, considering.

I waved a hand in Marigold’s direction, internally scolding myself for wondering about Nate’s money situation. It wasn’t my business. “Well, still. She can make do with a basic one until I can get her another iPhone.”

“You gonna get one of these?” he asked, darting his chin toward the endcap.

“Yeah. I need to call Aunt Hattie and see how everything went last night.”

“You could have called her from my phone.”

I put my hands on my hips and angled my shoulders forward, cringing slightly. “I know. I was being a chicken.”

“Well, uh, you can use mine whenever you want.”

I faced the phones and shrugged. “I should have my own. Just in case.” Choosing one, I dropped it into the cart. “Have you heard anything from her? Or Brett?”

He swallowed hard and looked away. “Yeah. Brett was one of the people I called before I came in. He said Chet took off without a word to anyone as soon as Hattie told him you were gone, and no one has heard from him since.”

I imagined the chaos of my mom and Hattie trying to pick up the pieces of the beautiful wedding I’d smashed to bits with my escape. Guilt snaked up my spine like a viper until I imagined Chet leaving the hotel. The most palpable emotion conjured up by that particular image was pure satisfaction.

Sorry, sucker.

Unfortunately, my quiet thrill that I’d gotten wise to his plans in time to escape was short-lived. Because right after I named that emotion, another one hit me like a freight train—fear.

Where had he gone when he’d taken off? Was it to tell Damon what happened, since he was somehow the architect of Chet’s entire scheme? And if so, did that mean he was out of prison?

“Will he come after you?” Nate asked, reading my thoughts and stepping close enough that I picked up on his deep, woodsy scent. Cedar and cinnamon, with a hint of clove.

Damon? If he was out ... surely, he would. But then I remembered that since Nate wasn’t actually inside my head, he

had no way of knowing I was thinking about Damon. He meant Chet. And the scary truth was I didn't know.

I met his gaze, my eyes watering up for the first time since all of this started. I hadn't gotten emotional while I was recounting my past for him last night, but that was because I was highly skilled at compartmentalizing.

I did it as a mom, burying every part of me that wasn't strong and capable enough to parent her. I did it for my patients, tucking any slivers of personal stress or weariness into a neat little box so I could focus on them. And I did it as a woman, locking away all my fear and trauma so I could go on with my life and hope that I could one day be *me* again.

But now, with Nate being the only person within hundreds of miles who knew why I'd run away from Chet, I felt myself beginning to crumble.

"Nikki." My name fell off his lips in a whisper. He lifted his hand, almost like he planned to reach out and touch me, but then he dropped it and straightened, his face completely composed yet carrying no small amount of reassurance. "He has no way of knowing where you are. He can't trace your phone, you're not accessing your bank accounts, and he has no idea I exist or that Hattie sent you with me to Bluffton."

And neither does Damon.

I nodded shakily and moved to the other side of the cart, pretending to look through the items even though they were merely blurry shapes and fuzzy colors.

But Nate was right. His logic was sound, and I couldn't afford to let my past turn the adventure I'd promised my daughter into some traumatic ordeal.

"You're right," I said after a minute, feeling bands of resolve wrapping around my chest and shoulders.

"And," he continued, bracing his hands on the other side of the cart as he leaned toward me again, "if he *does* figure it out and manages to catch up with us, I'll keep you safe. Both of you."

This made my eyes fly up to meet his again, a quiet gasp escaping from my parted lips. I tried to cover it up with a laugh, but it came out sounding as cracked and broken as I felt. “Thank you, but you don’t even know us. You don’t have to—”

“I do. Have to, I mean. I might not know you, but you’re important to someone who’s important to me. So if Chet—great name for a tool like him, by the way—wants to come around and make trouble, I’m not gonna let anything happen to either of you.”

“Mom,” Marigold said cheerily, coming up beside us so fast I jumped for the third freaking time in ten minutes. “Can I get these?”

I took the box she held, examining it with a furrowed brow. Despite the fact that I’d been about to ask Nate if I could use the web browser on his phone so I could see if Damon had been released from prison, I went into mom mode like a switch had been flipped. “Noise-canceling headphones? Why do you need fancy noise-canceling ones when you can get a cheap pair of earbuds for like ten bucks?”

She took back the box of large over-ear headphones and rolled her pretty green eyes. *My* eyes, thank goodness. “So your old people music doesn’t mess with mine.”

Just like the night before when she’d teasingly called him a boomer, Nate took grave offense. Jokingly, I suspected, but his horrified expression was pretty convincing. “Old people music? Seriously, kid, we’re not that old.”

“Well, I kinda *do* listen to old music,” I confessed, wrinkling my nose at him.

He slid his eyes my way. “Such as?”

“The Beatles, The Beach Boys, Led Zeppelin. Oh! And ABBA.”

Nate’s eyes widened.

“What?” I asked with a laugh. “You gonna call me old too?”

“Uh, no. I’m wrapping my brain around how you can like Led Zeppelin and ABBA at the same time. Also, I always thought the stuff they play in fifties diners was old music.”

Marigold cringed. “No, that’s like ... *ancient* music.”

Nate closed his eyes with a tiny shake of his head.

“So, can I get these or not?”

Without comment, Nate gestured for the headphones, and when Marigold handed them over, he tossed them into the cart with a flick of his wrist. “You need to grab a different MP3 player, though. The one you have there won’t connect to the headphones.” When she didn’t reply, just stared blankly at him, he tapped the box in her hand. “Doesn’t have Bluetooth.”

My teen frowned down at the basic music player. “Why *wouldn’t* it?”

Nate’s long sigh brought a burst of genuine laughter out of me, and I winked at Marigold. “Not everything does, babe. Go find another one and then let’s get going. We need to get on the road.”

When she was gone, Nate turned to me with wide eyes. “How do you deal with that all the time?”

“What?”

He looked in the direction she’d gone and shuddered. “She makes me feel so ... *uncool*.”

“Ah, but like me, you’re a millennial.”

He tilted his head, obviously not getting it.

“That means you *are* uncool.”

Nate crossed his arms over his broad chest and stared down at me with an expression I could only define as obstinate. “Again, I ask, how do you deal with that?”

I shrugged. “It’s simple. She may be a millennial-hating teen, but she’s *my* millennial-hating teen, and I love her. Besides, it makes me feel close to her to know I’m cheugy and embrace it.”

“*Cheugy*? I need a dictionary to hang out with you people.”

Holding up a finger, I pointed to the blue sign on the wall of the store that read Marine Corps Exchange. “Right back atcha, Marine.”

He smirked and checked his watch as Marigold joined us with another MP3 player in hand. “You two ready to hit the road? We’re burning daylight.”

Marigold looked at me, and I knew without even needing to hear the words that she was thinking he sounded like one of those stereotypical dads from the movies I grew up on.

But when I turned back to him, I couldn’t help but press my luck and ask for one more favor. My nerves were shot, and there was one thing I knew would calm them. “We’re ready to leave here ... but does Yuma have a craft store by any chance?”

Nate blinked at me. “A craft store?”

“Ooh, yesssss,” Marigold chimed in, reading me as well as I could read her.

With his eyes shifting between the two of us like he was trying to figure out how unhinged we actually were, Nate pulled his phone out of his pocket and tapped a few times. “Uh, looks like there’s Michaels and Hobby Lobby.”

“Hobby Lobby,” my daughter and I said at the same time. Then Marigold shrugged a shoulder. “It’s *cheugy*, but we love it.”

“There’s that word again,” he said dryly.

“It means ...” I paused, searching for the right way to explain it. I didn’t remember exactly how Marigold had described it to me, so I turned to her and waved my hand for her to help me out.

She shrugged again. “It’s a vibe.”

Nate’s finger rose in slow increments as he pointed it at my daughter, eyes on me and expression grim. “If she thinks that helps define it ...”

“You can’t *define* it,” she said with a laugh. “It’s like basic. But here’s the thing ...” He lifted a brow, waiting. “It’s *basic*, but it doesn’t have to be a hard pass. If my momma wants to love Hobby Lobby and Starbucks and pumpkin spice everything, and”—she broke off, looking down at the borrowed jeans I wore courtesy of a fellow millennial—“*skinny jeans*, it’s okay. But it’s still cheugy.”

As Marigold crossed her arms over her chest like she’d just delivered the Gettysburg Address, Nate stared at her with his lips pursed.

“Did all those extra words help clarify things?” I asked, putting my hands on the cart and turning it toward the front.

“Not even a little bit.”

NATE

Four hours later, we were finally deep in the foothills between Yuma and Tucson. After the Exchange, we'd made a quick stop at Hobby Lobby, then popped back over to Hawk and Ellie's place so the girls could return their borrowed clothes.

After that, I stopped at my buddy Chase's house to say a quick hello. If it weren't for my extra passengers, I would have done this yesterday. I was already off schedule, but since he'd been part of my friend group in Bluffton, and he and his wife, Zoe, who was also a Marine, were new to town, I didn't want to cruise through without seeing them.

Zoe's growing baby bump was a bit of a surprise though, since the last time I'd seen her, she was doing pull-ups at the gym with a better six-pack than most of my friends. It seemed like everyone I knew was getting married and having kids, and here I was, freshly dumped for the hundredth time, swearing off women for the foreseeable future.

Nope. Don't think like that. Getting married and having kids with Chelsea would not have fixed any of our problems. I needed to remember that.

And speaking of kids, once we got on the road, Marigold had immediately put her noise-canceling headphones to good use and was in the third row of the Suburban, burrowed under a blanket she'd picked up at Hobby Lobby. Which still didn't make sense. Why would a craft store sell blankets? Or

furniture? Or have about a million aisles of stuff to hang on your walls? What's crafty about any of that?

I hadn't thought Marigold would want to sit in the way back when it was only half of the bench seat thanks to Hattie's beloved new *buffet*, but Nikki had brushed it off, saying Marigold had always been fond of burrowing into cozy spaces. Which, of course, launched them into telling me all her favorite places to chill at home, including a vivid description of an egg-shaped chair that apparently had a door that slid down for total cocoon-like privacy.

Kids.

And next to me? Nikki sat with her long, tan legs crossed like a yogi, a mass of colorful balls filling her lap, wrapping cobalt-blue strands of yarn around a purple hook like an eighty-year-old trapped in the body of a supermodel. Never had I ever thought someone could manage to look hot while—What? Knitting a sweater?—yet here I was, thinking it anyway. This whole mess was *by far* the weirdest thing that had ever happened to me, and with each mile we traveled, the more disbelieving I became.

My eyes flicked to the clock on the dash, and I suppressed a groan. We weren't going to make it to Las Cruces until late, which didn't bode well for the amount of sleep I'd get tonight. *Again.*

Thankfully, I'd found out during one of the calls I'd made while Nikki and Marigold were shopping that our hotel in New Mexico had a room for them. So at least we wouldn't have to deal with the awkwardness of sharing a hotel room after sharing this car for the entire day. All I needed was a little peace and quiet, and then I was confident we could still leave early enough in the morning to make it to Fort Worth tomorrow night.

“Hey, so, tomorrow's gonna be a long day,” I said, glancing over at Nikki as she sang along to “Bad Moon Rising” by CCR. I had to admit, the woman had good taste in music. Other than the ABBA thing. “They're all supposed to

be long days, actually, since I don't mind and didn't plan to drag this trip out. You think that'll be an issue for you guys?"

"How long are we talkin'?" she asked.

"It's gonna be about five hours from Las Cruces to Midland—"

Nikki's hook stopped twirling through the yarn, and she gasped. "Midland? We're stopping there?"

"Just for lunch since it's about halfway to Fort Worth. If it were just me, I'd hit a drive-thru and keep it moving, but ..."

She wrinkled her nose and stared out at the rolling foothills. "Hmm."

"What?"

"Well, it's just that there's a replica of Stonehenge in Odessa."

I frowned. "Uh, you're kidding, right?"

"Nope."

"There's a replica of *Stonehenge* in West Texas? *The Stonehenge*?"

"Sure is," she replied sunnily, clearly misinterpreting my reaction as excitement that mirrored her own, when in fact, it was not. "Isn't that awesome? I've always wanted to see it."

Shifting in my seat, I took a chance at saying something potentially offensive, though I didn't mean for it to be. "Why not go to the real Stonehenge? Not like you don't have the money."

"Maybe I will someday. But just in case I never make it there, it'd be cool to see this one."

Her smile was so bright as she looked at me with all that blue and yellow and orange and green fluff in her lap, she reminded me less of an elderly woman and more like a giddy teenager. Not that her own teen was always giddy. Marigold had spent the last couple of hours so quiet and enthralled in her "young people music" that I'd almost forgotten she was there a couple of times.

I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck. Odessa was on the way to Midland, and it was tiny, so it probably wouldn't be too far off the route. But man. I really didn't want any more delays or detours on this trip. We should just keep rolling, stopping only when needed, and get these two to South Carolina as quickly as we can. And not just because I liked keeping to my schedules and a quick trip was what I'd planned. I also didn't want to risk her potentially dangerous ex catching up with us.

"I'm not sure if it's a good idea to stop and see a bunch of sights," I said quietly, flicking my gaze to Marigold in the rearview. She appeared to be sleeping with the noise-canceling headphones still securely fitted over her ears. "At least not until you find out more about what's up with your ex."

Nikki turned to check on Marigold herself, then put aside whatever she was making with all that colorful yarn and pulled out the burner phone she'd bought. "I'm gonna call Aunt Hattie since Marigold's sleeping. Looks like those headphones were a good idea after all."

I didn't want to eavesdrop on the conversation, but it was kind of hard not to, given the circumstances. Hattie must have taken a while to answer because I saw Nikki's shoulders slump out of the corner of my eye. Then she sat upright and whispered her aunt's name into the phone.

There was a long pause, and if I knew Hattie, I figured that meant she was taking the scenic route herself while she explained everything that'd happened after we left yesterday. Nikki made small noises of surprise and maybe even guilt every few seconds, and even though I shouldn't care, I found that I desperately wanted to know what was being said.

"Okay, thank you, Aunt Hattie," Nikki whispered, glancing toward Marigold again before she went on. "When are you flying home?" There was a pause, then Nikki rubbed her temples. "I see. Well, yeah, that makes sense."

For the rest of the call, she didn't say much other than to acknowledge whatever Hattie was telling her, and when she hung up, I hated how curious I was. "Well?"

“*Well*, it seems the conclusion I came to when I used your phone earlier was correct.” She gave me a pointed look, sliding her eyes toward Marigold instead of going into more detail.

But she didn’t need to. I’d known she’d spent the first hour of our trip combing through public records and news articles, looking for anything that would tell her if Damon had gotten out of prison. The eventual *conclusion* she spoke of was that he must still be locked up, and Hattie had apparently confirmed it. Good.

“Did she say anything about how the two things are related?” I asked, keeping my question equally vague.

“She couldn’t figure it out. Unfortunately.”

I grunted. “Must not be his real name.”

If Brett and Hattie and whoever else had come up empty while looking for a connection between Chet and Nikki’s first husband, that meant they were searching with the wrong name. Either that or they didn’t know each other. And even though the exact wording Nikki said he’d used wasn’t *too* detailed, she was one hundred percent sure Chet was talking to Damon. And inexplicably, I believed her.

My mind worked to formulate a plan, but I wouldn’t share it with her until I knew if it would pan out. The last thing I wanted to do was get her hopes up, only to come up empty-handed.

“What did she say when you asked her when she was flying home?” I asked, shifting subjects slightly.

“She said she wanted to stay and help my mom deal with all the drama. I have a few out-of-town relatives who are displeased—to put it mildly—and Aunt Hattie’s good at smoothing things over. Plus, she said she could help my mom gather our things from the house and make sure they get back to Bluffton with her and Thatcher. They only brought carry-ons to California, so they can each check two bags, and they’ll bring as much as they can. I’m supposed to text her a list of what I want her to grab.”

I winced, imagining how rough that would probably be for her and her daughter. And if their taste in road trip necessities was any indication, these two didn't travel lightly.

"Maybe you can get the rest of your stuff some other time," I said, not even sure why I felt the need.

"Thanks. I hope so. And speaking of getting the rest of our stuff," she pointed over her shoulder. "You're traveling pretty light for a guy who's moving cross-country. Nothing but Aunt Hattie's buffet back there."

"I'm used to traveling light."

"You don't say."

"The movers are delivering my stuff in a couple of weeks. Cross-country moves take forever, but I'm staying with my parents until I find my own place, so it's all going to storage at first anyway."

Her mouth dropped open. "You won't need anything other than what's in that duffel bag until you find your own place?"

"Shouldn't."

"Do you wear the same clothes all the time or something? Like Doug. You remember that show?"

I rubbed a hand over my mouth, annoyed by the smile that blasted onto my face without my permission. "Yep."

"I guess that makes sense," she mused. "You are a Marine, after all. Uniform five days a week and all that. Though, I'm not much better. I wear scrubs every day."

I wanted to ask her about her job—which was strange since I wasn't usually the curious type—but she interested me. I wanted to know more. Heaven help me, I wanted to hear her talk about herself and her life. But what would I ask? "Do you like delivering babies? Do you like working in a hospital? Do you like wearing scrubs?"

Nah. All the questions I could think of sounded boring and small talky, and I could more easily manage a team of firefighters putting out a flaming helicopter than make my way through small talk without stumbling. Besides, I'd already

inadvertently insulted her profession at dinner last night. Better to not say anything than risk putting my foot in it again.

Dropping the phone in her bag, Nikki picked up her hook and yarn. When she spoke again, it was with that lighter tone that still confused the heck out of me. “*Anyhoo*, you really don’t think we’ll have time for Stonehenge? I just want to take a quick walk-through. We don’t have to stay long.”

I shouldn’t say yes. I should tell her it wasn’t smart—and, more importantly, wasn’t part of my plan. But instead, I sighed. “We’ll see.” She shimmied in her seat as if I’d said yes, and I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “What are you doing, by the way?”

“Doing?”

“The yarn.”

“Oh,” she said on a chuckle. “It’s gonna be a blanket.”

“You’re knitting a blanket?”

She lowered her hands and angled her body so she could look at me fully. “First of all, Judgy McJudgerson, I hear that tone.”

“What tone?”

“The tone you use when you think I’m crazy,” she replied as if that should be obvious.

“Please. You’ve known me for five minutes. This is just my voice. No special tones.”

“Not true. You—like everyone else—have a wide range of tonality. It’s subtle, but it’s there. And I noticed you didn’t disagree that I was crazy, by the way.”

I grinned, not even trying to fight it that time. Maybe it was the way she’d tipped her nose up toward the roof in a superior way, or maybe it was the gorgeous smile that curved her lips when she did so. But either way, I couldn’t help the lightness that spread through me. “Wide range of tonality, huh?”

“Yep. The only difference is your base level is a bit grouchier than most.”

“Grouchy? I’m not grouchy.”

She laughed heartily at that, head thrown back and everything. “Sure, sure.”

“What was the second of all?”

“The what?”

I cut her a look, then turned my attention back to the road when I spotted the distracting amount of sparkle in her big green eyes. “The uh, second thing. You know, after the ‘First of all, Judgy McGrouch’ thing.”

“Ah, right. Second of all, I’m not knitting.”

I let my eyebrows do the talking and pointed at the hook and yarn in her delicate grasp.

“This is a crochet hook,” she said, holding it up. “I’m not knitting. I’m crocheting. Or, as my lovely daughter likes to call it, *hooking*.”

A choked laugh escaped me as I looked at Marigold sleeping in the third row. “Hooking? Seriously?”

“It’s a thing. A thing for yarnies, anyway.”

“Oh, no. You’re not bringing me down another rabbit hole of new vocab words. Not happening.”

She swatted my arm, and it was nearly impossible not to laugh. But I managed, shooting her a warning look and holding up my finger. “Hey, no roughing the driver.”

“Oh, was that football vocab? Do I detect a hobby of yours that has its own language? Hello, pot!”

“Fine, fine. I’m into football, and yeah, there are some words there that you wouldn’t know unless you were also into it.”

She hummed and tapped her chin, and the sound made my mouth go a little dry. “Like ... a flea flicker?”

Surprised by this woman once again, I shook my head. Most casual football fans didn't know that was the term for when the quarterback handed the ball to a running back only to have it flicked back to him. Especially not women—in my experience, anyway. The only women I'd ever known who watched football were only doing it because their men did. And since I didn't even want to know if that was where she'd picked up that little tidbit of trivia, I didn't ask.

“Exactly like that,” I said with a nod.

“Okay, so you're a Marine and a football fan. What else is there to know about my knight in a shining Chevy?”

Another lip twitch. How had I once wondered if Nikki was as smiley and cheerful in real life as she appeared in photos? I should have been more concerned about whether or not it was contagious.

“Oh,” she went on before I could reply, going back to her knitting—er, *hooking*, “I also know that you are extraordinarily fond of keeping to a tight schedule. Though, I suppose that comes with the Marine territory, too, huh?”

“S'pose so.”

“What do you do in the Marines? Like, what's your job? Is it dangerous like Brett's?”

I licked my bottom lip before I answered, wondering what she considered to be dangerous. Brett was an EOD Marine, so his whole job was to find and dispose of explosive materials. Compared to that, my job didn't seem nearly as dangerous. But I'd let her be the judge of that.

“MOS 7051,” I said, using the job specialty number instead of the obvious name for it just to mess with her. When she scowled playfully, I ignored the rush it gave me and went on. “Basically, crash fire rescue. Air Rescue and Firefighting. Affectionately known as ARFF.”

She giggled at the pronunciation of the acronym. “That's what Uncle Thatcher did in the Marines.”

“Yep. I got into it because of him.”

She smiled at that, but then her eyes widened, and she let out a low chuckle as she turned to stare out the window. The desert landscape was much flatter in this part of Arizona than it had been when we were still in the foothills, and she watched the sparsity with a blank expression.

“Figures,” she said quietly, almost to herself.

“Uh, what?”

She giggled. “It totally figures that you’re a freaking firefighter.”

I lowered my elbow to the armrest on my right, switching to driving with my left hand. “And why is that?”

She went back to her yarn and spoke as she worked it around the hook, not looking at me while she did. “Because. You swooped into this situation without blinking, getting us out of there without knowing the details. And then, once you knew the details, you offered to keep us safe without even knowing *us*. Yeah, yeah, loyalty to Aunt Hattie and all that. But still. You’re just ... *that guy*.”

I swallowed hard, but I couldn’t put a finger on what exactly had caused my throat to feel like one of her balls of yarn had gotten wedged in there. “That guy, huh?”

“Yep. That guy.”

She didn’t say anything else for a long time after that, so long that I started to wonder if I’d hit a pothole too hard and broken her. The woman had been a chatterbox this whole time, but something about her discovery that I was *that guy*—whatever that meant—had caused her to clam up so hard her teeth were probably sore.

But it was for the best, really. We had days of travel ahead of us, and if she didn’t stop it with all her jokes and smiles and that sparkling thing she did with her eyes, I had a feeling that whatever kinda guy she thought I was, I wasn’t gonna be the *same* guy when this was over.

NIKKI

“**W**hat do you mean you don’t have a reservation for me?”
Nate asked the teenage boy behind the counter with measured calm.

“It says you canceled it this morning,” the kid replied.

Nate’s brows drew together, and his lips parted in surprise. “Not only did I *not* cancel it this morning, but I booked a second room.”

Dustin—according to his name tag—shrugged. “I dunno, dude. Maybe when you booked the second room, they canceled the original res and forgot to make a new one.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why would they do that?”

“I dunno,” he said again.

Clearly, they let their most proficient workers take the graveyard shift around here. I looked over at Marigold as she stood beside me, looking oddly rested despite the fact that it was the middle of the night. But she’d spent most of the day napping and listening to music—other than when we stopped in Tucson for a quick bite *without* being allowed to check out the Mini Time Machine Museum of Miniatures—so I guessed that made sense.

“Fine,” Nate said with a sigh, “can you please put us in two rooms under a new reservation?”

Dustin shook his head. “Sorry, bro. No dice. We’re booked.”

“You’re telling me that instead of adding a second room, they canceled the first one, and then both rooms were booked while we were on the way here?”

“Yep.”

Nate’s brows rose instead of pinched this time, and he slowly turned to me. “Wow.”

“Is there anywhere nearby you recommend?” I asked Dustin, sensing Nate might be at a loss for words at this point. Though, to be fair, I had a sneaking suspicion he wasn’t very good at finding words in general.

Dustin pursed his lips. “Not really, but you could probably Google it.”

I bit back a chuckle as Nate’s eyes flared in disbelief.

“Thank you,” I told the kid, not bothered at all by his attitude. We didn’t even know him, and we had no idea what could be going on in his mind. Maybe he had a bad home life or his dog had just died or something. “We’ll do that. Have a good night.”

With that, I wrapped an arm around Marigold and started to head for the door. When I sensed that Nate wasn’t following us, I turned back. “Coming?”

One of his elbows was propped on the ledge in front of Dustin’s computer, and he was watching me with that same wide-eyed disbelief he’d shown the night clerk.

“Seriously, Nate. It’s late. Let’s go find another place. No biggie.”

Again, another flare of his eyes, and this time it made me laugh. Which, of course, caused him to look even more surprised as he headed for us without a word to Dustin. “Are you always like this?”

“Always like what?” I asked as we made our way out of the hotel.

“So ... *nice*? Understanding?”

“Yes,” Marigold confirmed before I could.

“I don’t see the point in getting upset about things beyond our control,” I said with a shrug. “Even the best-laid plans get messed up once in a while, so we—”

“Pivot and make the best of it,” Marigold said in a singsong voice, like she’d heard me say it one too many times.

Nate still looked dumbstruck as he pulled out his phone, presumably to do as Dustin had so brilliantly suggested and search the web for another hotel. “Well, I’m not really a go-with-the-flow kinda guy.”

“You’re kidding,” I teased.

His gaze flicked up at me for an instant before he looked down at the phone again, but it was long enough that I detected the touch of humor there.

“I’m not seeing availability at any hotels that would be ...” He pursed his lips a bit.

“Be what?” my daughter asked.

“Suitable, I guess.”

“Why wouldn’t they be?”

He sighed, handing me the phone so I could see for myself. “Unless you want bed bugs, I think we might be out of luck in Las Cruces. The only ones with vacancies around here look pretty nasty.”

Marigold chuckled. “Who knew Las Cruces slays.”

Nate turned to me like a foreign exchange student waiting for a translation.

“That means *popular* in this context,” I supplied. He did a slow blink at me, so I decided to avoid another vocab lesson. “Maybe they’ve got something going on this weekend.”

I scrolled through his phone to see for myself, frowning down at the screen just like he had. In truth, I wasn’t a fan of bed bugs. I hadn’t stayed at a hotel with less than a four-point-five-star rating in my entire life. But if these less than desirable motels were our only options, I didn’t see what

choice we had. No doubt Nate figured we couldn't handle a gross motel for one night, but we could make do.

"Look on Airbnb," Marigold suggested.

I'd heard of the vacation rental site, but seeing as how my parents had been card-carrying Marriott members since before I was born, I usually chose one of their properties whenever we traveled.

"Lemme see," she said when I hesitated, holding out her hand for the phone. When I passed it over, she searched for a rental while Nate and I waited silently. Finally, she grinned. "Here's one."

Nate took the phone from her outstretched hand, then deeply scowled when he saw the listing. "You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all. It slaps," Marigold replied. "And the decor is like a *whole* mood."

"I'm letting that one go, but Marigold, it's a freaking shipping container," Nate grumbled, handing me the phone.

She giggled. "A *converted* shipping container."

I scrolled through the photos of the rental, my lips curving into a wide smile. "This actually looks really fun."

"Fun? You're both nuts. You want us to see if we can get a middle-of-the-night check-in at a *converted* shipping container in some weirdo's backyard? It's like something out of a horror movie."

"Or an adventure movie," I replied.

Marigold wagged her brows, undeterred by Nate's cynicism. "There's a pool in the weirdo's backyard too."

"Better for him to drown you in, my dear," our grumpy friend said in a mockingly menacing tone.

Marigold and I looked at each other before bursting into laughter. I patted his shoulder and leaned in. "I'm sorry, did you just make a joke?"

“Gimme the phone,” he said with a resigned sigh. “I’ll see if he’ll let us book it—if he’s even awake to see the email. And if not, we can either pick one of those roach motels or keep driving until we hit another town. You two can sleep in the car.”

While I waited for Nate to send the message to the owner, I readied myself to tell him we’d be fine in one of the seedy motels that had availability. I knew he hadn’t gotten much sleep last night, and while I somehow trusted that he wouldn’t offer to drive unless he felt awake enough to get us there safely, I didn’t want him to have to do that because he thought we were too prissy to lower our standards a bit. Or, well, a lot.

Seconds after he sent the message, Nate blew out a breath. “Oh, wow. He already replied. Must be up late.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“He said to come on over.”

Marigold squealed, and I tapped my fingers together in front of my face. “*Excellent.*”

“Eager to star in a horror flick, huh?” he asked, this time quirking his lips with the joke.

“Eager to show you that sometimes the best adventures happen when plans get messed up.”

His lips stayed in the same wry smile, but there was something in his eyes as he stared down at me that made my breath catch. It was almost like he was thinking a little too hard about what I’d said. Or like he was applying it to more than just the hotel situation.

The dark parking lot—and everything else, including the existence of my teen—faded away as I held his gaze and wished I were a mind reader. And not for the first time today. His broody silence in the car spoke volumes to me, and after what he’d said last night about his rough day, I knew he was working through something that had nothing to do with me or my drama. I wanted to know what it was and if I could help. It was the least I could do, given everything he’d done for us.

But then he licked his lips and looked away, and the spell was broken. “Come on. Let’s go get some sleep.”



The Airbnb host and his wife were so ridiculously friendly that Marigold and I decided there was no way they could be murderers. The converted shipping container in their backyard was also a lot less ominous in real life, as Nate had deduced from the photos in the listing. So, overall, I felt safe and excited as our hosts left us to return to the main house.

The backyard between their home and the container was lit with twinkle lights, and the reflection of the tiny bulbs made the pool look even more inviting. Too bad we hadn’t deemed swimsuits necessary for a road trip when we were shopping in Yuma. I would have loved to float on my back while I looked at the stars. The sky looked absolutely breathtaking since the property wasn’t in a very populated area—much to Nate’s chagrin—and I couldn’t imagine anything more peaceful.

“Considering a midnight swim?” Nate asked in a low, gravelly tone.

As was apparently my habit these days, I jumped at the sound of his voice so close behind me. I’d been staring out the window at the pool and sighed as I turned to face him. “Yep. But I don’t have a swimsuit.”

One side of his mouth lifted slightly. “Yeah, well. Probably for the best. We need to get some sleep so we can head out early, and the last thing I need is you two trying to convince me to delay us again with a pool party tomorrow.”

“You and your schedule.”

“I like schedules.”

I rolled my eyes and chuckled at his stating the *very* obvious.

“Do you need to use the bathroom or anything? I was gonna shower real quick.”

“Go for it,” I said. “I’ll change out here while you’re in there, then I’ll brush my teeth when you’re done. And I’m gonna shower in the morning.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he replied, grabbing his duffel bag and heading for the container’s single bathroom.

Unable to help myself, I cupped my hands around my mouth and whisper-shouted at his back. “You and your plans.”

He didn’t turn around, but I could’ve sworn his shoulders shook with silent laughter before he closed the bathroom door behind him.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I looked around our home for the night. Marigold was already in bed, having unsurprisingly chosen the twin-size loft bed instead of one of the two doubles below. Even if it hadn’t been a cozy nook, I had a sneaking suspicion she thought Nate and I were *too old* to climb up the steel ladder to sleep up there. Wouldn’t put that notion past her, the stinker.

I should be on my honeymoon right now. The thought had struck me so suddenly it took my breath away.

Our quiet vacation rental was decorated in a trendy, inviting way, but I should be in Hawaii, in the arms of my new husband. I should be feeling happy and carefree knowing my daughter was safe at home with her grandmother, and we had nothing but blue skies ahead.

Instead, Marigold and I had been barreling straight into a storm. I didn’t even want to think about where we’d be if it weren’t for Aunt Hattie’s quick thinking. Thanks to her, I felt safe because my daughter and I were traveling cross-country with a guy whose sense of duty and honor was probably on a level that neither of my exes could comprehend.

What did that say about me? What did it say that the two men I’d chosen to spend my life with were horrible people? That rather than choosing a man like Nate, who would undoubtedly throw himself off a cliff before he hurt his wife or child, I’d chosen literal *scoundrels* for life partners.

If I had better judgment, I could have ended up with a guy like Nate. He was attractive, but in a casual way, like he didn't try too hard. His brown hair was shaped into the classic haircut of a Marine, and it looked good with the hard angles of his handsome face. His broad shoulders and toned muscles suggested a physical strength that many women would love in a man. And his lips were full and looked sinfully soft, especially when they were resting in an amused curve that couldn't quite be described as a full-on smile.

But none of that was what drew me to him. He wasn't a bad boy like Damon, which the teenage version of me had been into. And he wasn't overtly kind or cheery like Chet, which had somehow fooled me into thinking he wasn't a bad man.

No, the draw with Nate was something else entirely. It was based on something I felt deep in my chest when he looked at me, and it was nowhere near as easy to name as the things I'd liked about my exes. Which, by itself, confused and worried and excited me all at the same time.

"Mom," Marigold whispered when I finished changing into my PJs, peeking out of her loft bed to look down at me.

"I thought you were asleep. You okay?"

"Are you gonna wait until we get to Aunt Hattie's house to tell me what's going on?"

I bit my lip. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On you. If you want me to tell you now, I will."

"But?"

Chuckling a little, I sighed. "But the longer you don't have all this drama on your mind, the better, right?"

"So, you're like ... protecting me? You don't think I'm a girlboss?"

"You are *totally* a girlboss, and I'm sure you can handle it. I just don't think you should have to."

Marigold was quiet for so long that if I couldn't see the silhouette of her raised head, I would have wondered if she'd fallen asleep. Finally, she shrugged. "I never shipped you guys anyway."

"You didn't?" I asked, grateful for another teen term I'd heard enough times to grasp.

But it didn't make sense. Marigold had never once indicated that she wasn't supportive of my relationship with Chet. In fact, she always seemed to like him. Why hadn't she "shipped" us?

"Nah. I mean, he was nice or whatever. But some of the stuff he said to you was a little cringe."

"I'm starting to agree with you there."

Marigold rolled onto her side and propped herself up on one elbow. "So, now what? I mean, I know we're going to Aunt Hattie's, but when are we going back to California?"

The idea of going back caused my skin to prickle with icy fear. I couldn't—or wouldn't—put myself or my daughter in another abusive situation. Until I learned more about Chet and his relationship with Damon, we needed to stay as far away as possible. There was no way I'd bring Marigold home until I knew what kind of man waited for us there.

"I'm still trying to figure that out. There are a few things I need to dig into before we make long-term plans. But like I said when we left the wedding, I don't want you to worry about this. Think of it like an adventure, okay?"

"What about school?"

I put a hand on my hip. "Well, thankfully you're on fall break this week. That buys us some time."

She nodded, then settled back onto her stomach without another word. When the bathroom door opened behind me, I grabbed my new toiletries and turned just in time to see Nate coming out. He wore a plain black tee with a pair of gray sweatpants, and his short hair was sticking up a little like he'd rubbed a towel over his wet head. My body's reaction to the sight of him with that cotton shirt clinging to his still-damp

skin clashed with everything else I'd just been worrying about, and it made me feel completely off-balance.

His face was relaxed until his eyes met mine, then his brow furrowed with concern as he stepped closer. "What's wrong?"

I gave him a small shake of my head as I headed toward the bathroom with my toiletries. "Everything," I replied, so low I thought he might not have even heard me.

But apparently, he did, because as soon as I was close enough, he put his hand on my shoulder and gave it the briefest of reassuring squeezes. Then he kept walking, and so did I.

Nate Bristol wasn't a man of many words, but that simple gesture communicated more than enough. For now, anyway.

NATE

We'd snagged a solid seven hours of sleep last night despite the hotel drama, and even checked out of the shipping container masquerading as a cottage without being murdered in our beds.

Okay, real talk: I knew the second I met the owners that there was no risk of that. But come on. Humans sleeping in a shipping container that sat in some dude's backyard in the New Mexico desert wasn't exactly a comforting idea, no matter how you swung it.

After Nikki and Marigold got ready and we said our goodbyes to our hosts, we grabbed a fast-food breakfast and hit the road. Marigold had elected to sit in the second row, apparently feeling chattier than she had yesterday. And chat she did. The mother-daughter bundle of sunshine hardly took a breath the entire drive from Las Cruces to Odessa.

When they weren't trying to get me to pull off the route to see this weird sight or that historical landmark, they were arguing about fashion trends and gossiping about celebrities. By the time we got to lunch, I was pretty sure I knew more about life as a teenage girl than I ever imagined I would.

"Excuse me," Nikki said with a laugh as Marigold took her tray to a booth on the other side of the nearly empty barbecue joint. "Why don't you want to sit with us?"

"My social battery is drained. Gotta recharge."

And with that, she pulled on her headphones and stared into the parking lot, chomping on a biscuit without a second

glance our way.

Nikki and I hovered in the aisle with our trays in hand, neither of us knowing what to make of the situation. I wrinkled my nose. “Social battery?”

She gave me a once-over. “You’re telling me you can’t relate?”

“Touché.”

“Is this weird? Should I tell her she has to sit with us?” she asked quietly, biting her lip as she watched her daughter take a sip of her Coke.

“Why would you?”

“I don’t know. Manners or something? My mom would’ve probably dragged me over by the ear—metaphorically speaking. It would only take one of her *looks*, and I’d get the picture.”

Too hungry to finish this conversation with a mountain of smoked meat calling my name, I set my tray on the table next to us and gestured for Nikki to do the same. She did, but she kept sneaking glances at Marigold as she sat down.

I slid in across from her. “I don’t think it’s a big deal if she wants to sit over there. Don’t teenagers like to have their space?”

She shook her head and dazzled me with that smile of hers. “Of course. Yeah. You’re right. I’m probably worrying about nothing. She doesn’t even know what’s going on, so it’s not like she’s upset or anything.”

“Even if she is, space will probably help.”

“True.” She picked up a white plastic fork and poked at her potato salad.

I wasn’t sure if it was a good sign that there were only two other diners in this hole-in-the-wall barbecue place, but the sweet and smoky aroma wafting up from my plate had my mouth watering. If it smelled this good, I hoped it would taste even better. And a quick glance across the dining room told

me Marigold seemed to be enjoying it. I'd already guessed she was a picky eater, so that had to mean something.

Just as I was about to take a bite of the chopped beef, Nikki moaned with delight. My fork hovered in the air in front of my wide-open mouth as my gaze flew up to her face. Her eyes were closed, her chin was lifted, and her lips were curved up with joy as she savored the bite with an other-worldly amount of happiness.

"This. Is. Amazing," she said when she finished chewing, complete with a chef's kiss. "Eat! What are you looking at?"

I popped the chopped beef in my mouth, and my taste buds were instantly assaulted with the perfect mixture of smoky and sweet. She watched me with those sparkly eyes of hers, and when I finished, she waved a hand as if wanting to hear my review.

"It's really good," I said with a short laugh.

"That's it?"

"I'm not much of a food critic."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Do you live to eat or eat to live?"

"Is there a difference?"

"Yes."

I scratched my head. "Eat to live, I guess."

"Color me shocked. Fine. Well, I'll enjoy it enough for the both of us," she announced, taking a bite of her baked beans and letting out another one of those moans that hit me right in the gut.

We ate in silence for a minute, both of us checking on Marigold once in a while. Her, because she was obviously still trying to figure out if she was okay over there by herself, and me because it felt like I should. Like she was an important package I was supposed to be delivering, and I didn't want her to disappear before I finished my route.

“Before we get back on the road,” Nikki started, then burst out laughing when I shot her a warning look. “Not another detour request. But I’d like to hang back a sec to call my mom, so Marigold won’t overhear. Would that be okay?”

“Sure. There’s a gas station across the street, and she probably needs more road trip snacks. I could go fill up and come back for you.” It wasn’t a bad suggestion, but as soon as I said it out loud, I changed my mind. “Er, actually, no. We’ll just wait in the car while you talk, then we’ll all hit the gas station together.”

She quirked a perfect brow while she finished chewing. “I’d be fine if you wanted to go with the first idea.”

I shrugged. She likely *would* be fine, but better to be safe than sorry. “We’ll go together.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“So, your mom ...” I paused and took a sip of my Coke. “Have you talked to her yet? Or only Hattie so far?”

“Just Aunt Hattie. I’m a little nervous about calling Mom.”

“Why?”

I remembered how she’d said her mom reacted to her previous marriage situation, but surely after they’d gotten close again in the years since, she wouldn’t react similarly, right?

Nikki slid her empty fork between her teeth and bit down, staring out the window for a sec before she responded. The move brought my attention to her full lips, so I looked down at my plate and used my own fork for its intended purpose.

“She’s a little cold,” she said in a small voice. “She’s great with Marigold, but I think I broke something between us that we might never fix when I married Damon. It’s not like she hasn’t been supportive all these years, but things never went back to normal for us. Though, her version of normal wasn’t too far off from the way she is now, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she’s kind of a cold woman in general. Not overly affectionate. I try to be the opposite with Marigold because it was something I missed growing up. I want to be closer to her than I was with my mom. I want her to be able to tell me stuff and know I’ll listen and love her no matter what she says or how she feels. My mom wasn’t a bad mom by any means, and I grew up not wanting for anything. But I want to be ... I don’t know ... better. Warmer.”

I’d been listening to her prattle on about nonsense with her daughter ever since we’d left Las Cruces, but hearing her speak so freely about stuff that mattered was mesmerizing. So much so that I almost forgot how hungry I was and how quickly I wanted to get this lunch over with so we could get back on the road.

“Listen to me,” she said with a nervous chuckle. “I sound like I’m talking to my therapist. Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I asked.” *And I like listening to you talk.*

“Well, still. You don’t care about all my family drama.”

I definitely didn’t understand why I *did* care, so I shrugged and pretended I didn’t. “Did you grow up in that house where I picked up Hattie’s dresser thing?”

“Sure did.”

“It’s impressive.”

“Yes, but it’s a little much for me, personally.”

This surprised me, and she saw it on my face.

“What?” she asked lightly. “You think that’s my style?”

“I don’t know what your style is. The first time I ever saw you, you were wearing a wedding dress as big as that house.”

The laugh that bubbled out of her was loud enough to make Marigold and the two other diners look over at us curiously. She stifled it and shot me a little glare. “I’ll have you know I hated that dress.”

“Why would you wear it if you hated it?”

All the humor in her eyes died away, and she tossed her hair over her shoulder. “Chet picked it out.”

I tipped my head to the side, studying her. She’d said it almost flippantly, but I could see the resentment hiding beneath the surface. “What kinda dress would you have picked out?”

If my question surprised her, I could promise it shocked me more.

“Well, something more understated, I guess.”

“To match your personality?” I teased, feeling an unbelievable rush when she laughed again.

“Ha-ha, Mr. Comedian. Maybe it’s because my personality doesn’t need an obnoxious wedding dress to shine.”

I couldn’t argue with that, so I took a bite of my biscuit instead.

“If I could pick out my own, I’d probably say something fitted and simple. No sparkles or beads or pearls. Just white satin. Aunt Hattie would do my flowers, of course. If I’d had a say, she would have for this wedding. I’d want the bouquet to be the focal point, and for that, I’d want simplicity too. Red roses, brilliant and classic. Romantic but in a timeless way. Chet picked out this big mix of pink flowers that probably would have made Hattie’s head explode if she’d seen them. Or maybe she did see them. I was too busy trying to escape the wedding to notice.”

Picturing her in her dream dress with her dream bouquet made me twitch, so I reminded myself about the rest of what she’d said. She’d been about to get married to a guy who hadn’t even let her pick out either of those things herself. The last thing this woman needed was for me to be into her, and the last thing I needed was to feel that way when I was actively trying to avoid dating. If I remembered that, I’d be better off.

“What’s your mom like?” she asked conversationally. “And your dad too. You’re staying with them when you get to

town, so is that something you're excited about or nervous about?"

"They're cool. They like to travel now that they're retired. My dad sold his business to a big investor, so they kinda coast through life now, doing all the stuff they never had time for when they were running their own business together."

"Fun. Though, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to retire. I'd get too restless."

"Really?" I asked, making sure she heard the sarcasm in my tone.

She rolled her pretty green eyes and ripped a piece of biscuit off, then pretended to throw it at me before popping it into her mouth.

Sitting here with her should have felt weird. I wasn't good at first dates—not that this was one—but normally, I'd be wondering what we should talk about next or if I was being too quiet. Instead, the conversations moved in and out without any awkward silences between bites of food. It was chill. Comfortable. Nerve-racking only because I wondered if I should put a stop to it somehow. Or if I could, even if I wanted to.

"Oh, wow. She's ready to pop," Nikki said in a conspiratorial whisper. She was looking over my shoulder, so I turned to see two women had walked in, one of them sporting a huge baby bump. When I turned back to Nikki, she smiled wistfully. "I love this stage, when you can tell they're gonna go into labor any day now. It's so exciting. I bet she's here to eat spicy food, hoping it'll jump-start the big show."

I frowned. "Uh, come again?"

"It's one of those harmless things women do when they're close to their due dates, or even overdue. In hopes of moving things along, they'll eat spicy food, take long walks, add evening primrose oil to the mix ... oh, and *you know*."

I didn't know, so I raised a brow to tell her so.

"*You know*, the thing that got them into the situation in the first place." She wagged her brows, and I nearly choked on air

when the dots connected. Whatever she saw in my expression made her cackle with delight, and she playfully kicked me under the table. “Oh, come on. It’s nothing to blush about.”

“I’m not blushing.”

“Tell that to your cheeks.”

I scowled at her and stuck a forkful of brisket in my mouth, letting the massive bite round out my non-blushing cheeks as I held her gaze while I chewed. This woman was too much for me. Or maybe not, because I oddly wanted more. She was something, though.

“Aha, see?” She tipped her chin toward the woman as they moved toward a table near Marigold.

I followed her gaze, but then noticed Marigold eyeing the bottle of hot sauce on the woman’s tray as she sat down. She waved a hand at Nikki to get her attention, then gestured with her hands like she was rubbing a non-existent baby bump of her own, miming the act of pouring hot sauce on her food. Then she grinned, and Nikki giggled beside me.

“Even Mari knows the tricks,” she said to me, then chuckled. “And no, not *all* of them.”

“Good.” I shuddered.

Having a teenage daughter would be torture, knowing it was up to you to protect her from learning about things she was too young to find out about. And then, when she was older, letting her move out and be on her own to find out about them. I’d always wanted kids, but teenagers? Skipping that part seemed like something I’d wish for as a parent, no doubt about it.

“Do you ever spot fire hazards when you’re not working?” Nikki asked, breaking me from my thoughts.

“What?”

“Fire hazards. I don’t know. I see pregnant women and can tell when they’re close to popping just by looking at them. I’ve even delivered a baby in a restaurant before. Hopefully I won’t have to do the same for this lady.” My eyes widened, and she

grinned. “I’m kidding. Sort of. Does your work leech into your regular life the same way?”

I took a sip of Coke and shook my head. “Not unless I’m on a flight line. I’m not well-versed in regular fire hazards if they don’t involve jet fuel or brake fluid. But my training did come in handy once when I was at the movies with a friend.”

“Ooh, tell me more. Did the theater catch on fire?”

“Nah, nothing like that. I just had to do CPR on the guy sitting a couple rows down.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did.”

Her eyes lit up, and she sat up straighter. “Did you notice he was having a problem and then leap over the seats to get to him? Did you save his life while the whole theater watched with bated breath?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the vivid picture she painted. “You watch all those dramatic firefighter shows, don’t you?”

“Maybe. Answer the question.”

“Fine,” I mumbled, looking at the ceiling. “Yes, I leaped over the rows between us. But only because it was faster than going around.”

“Oh, of course.” Her eyes danced with amusement. “Then what?”

“Then I did CPR, got the guy stable, and the paramedics showed up.”

“I bet that was even more exciting for everyone else than the movie you were there to see.”

I lifted a shoulder. “Maybe. But they still gave everyone free movie tickets since they’d had to turn on the lights and stop the movie while it was all going down.”

She stabbed the air between us with her fork, a cheesy potato dangling from the end of it. “See? What did I tell you? You’re *that* guy, Nate Bristol. You can’t help yourself.”

I rolled my eyes, but something in my chest felt warm and light. Yep. Not even twenty-four hours had passed since the first time she'd said that to me, and it was already clear she was doing exactly what I was worried she'd do. I didn't know what kind of guy I considered myself to be before I met her, but she was making me want to lean into this version she saw. And I had to admit, I kinda liked the feeling of it.

NIKKI

“Hey, Mom,” I said into the phone, closing my eyes against the bright Texas sun.

As promised, Nate waited in the Suburban with Marigold while I made the call. He was too paranoid that something could happen to me if he left me alone, and even though I wanted to assert some kind of strong, independent woman vibes and tell him I’d be fine, part of me was just as nervous as he was. Things were too uncertain right now for me to feel safe on my own. It wasn’t that I was weak, it was simply ... smart. Cautious.

“Hi, Nikki. How are you?” my mom asked, her tone a lot more even than I expected under the circumstances.

Though, who was I kidding? I’d just told Nate she was cold, so it wasn’t like I’d get the same frantic concern from her as I’d gotten when I called Aunt Hattie. If I had, I might have wondered if I’d called the wrong number.

“I’m great,” I replied sunnily. “Marigold told me to say hi for her. We’re making good time, and we’ll be at Aunt Hattie’s soon.”

It was probably silly, but I didn’t want to tell her anything too specific. Nate wasn’t the only paranoid one.

“Good to hear. I’m exhausted from cleaning up your mess, dear,” she said smoothly, and I could clearly picture her haughty stare in my mind’s eye. “That was quite the spectacle.”

I winced, then bit back an annoyed retort about her not acknowledging what I'd said about Marigold. My mother was usually more attentive to her than that, but right now, she was obviously only thinking about herself. "I'm sorry about the drama we caused. Aunt Hattie told me."

"Did she? Well. I suppose I'll save myself the trouble then."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Mom, Aunt Hattie told you what I overheard before the ceremony, right? So you understand why I did this, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Nikki. The last thing you or Marigold needs is to be swept up in whatever nonsense Chet arranged with that disgusting man who fathered her. It's just unfortunate that you didn't discover any of this *before* the day of your wedding. The things people are saying ..."

My eyes prickled with unshed tears at her words, and I sniffed. "I'm sure it'll blow over."

"Everything does."

The silence stretched for so long I had to check to see if I'd dropped the call. But no, she was simply ... not saying anything. No words of encouragement. No helpful advice. No promises that everything would be okay. It made me feel small and brought me right back to the days of her endless *I told you sos* after I finally got away from Damon. She'd welcomed me back and made an effort to forgive me, and things had improved enough since then that I'd almost forgotten how it felt to be chastened like this for something I hadn't felt like I'd had any control over.

"Nikki."

I looked up, surprised to find Nate leaning out his open window. I sucked in a breath and spoke into the phone. "Hang on, Mom." Then I stepped toward the Suburban and looked at Nate. "Yes?"

"Get in. Let's get going."

Something fluttered in my belly. His gruff tone suggested he was done waiting for me to talk on the phone. Not only

that, but there was a hard look in his eye and his jaw was taut. But as my shoulders sagged with relief thanks to being saved from this conversation, he nodded once.

It was small, but it was there.

He wasn't frustrated *with* me. He was frustrated *for* me. He'd seen something in my face or body language during this call that'd prompted him to intervene, and I couldn't be more grateful.

"Mom? I have to go."

She made a small noise at the back of her throat, clearly miffed over being dismissed before she was done making me feel like crap for something she should've been comforting me over. "Oh?"

"Yes. Nate's big on sticking to a tight schedule. He's ready to get back on the road."

"I see. Well, travel safely, dear. We'll make arrangements for your return after you're settled at your aunt's house."

"Thanks," I replied, though my stomach rolled at the thought of going back. But what else were we supposed to do? Stay in Bluffton with Aunt Hattie and Uncle Thatcher for the rest of our lives? We couldn't, could we?

Mom and I got off the phone with the standard *I love yous* and a promise to talk soon, but it was nothing like the way Marigold and I exchanged the same endings to our phone calls. Even if it was as simple as her calling me at lunch to see if she could go to a friend's house after school, there was more love in our goodbyes than there'd been between my mom and me just now. After everything I'd been through—this week, but also before—this was nothing but disappointing. My girl would never feel so dismissed by me. Not ever.

I got into the passenger seat and flicked a look over my shoulder at Marigold. She was reading a magazine she'd bought at one of our stops, and she looked up with a grin when she felt me staring at her. "Did you tell Grandma I said hi?"

"Sure did," I replied, conveniently leaving out my mother's lack of reply. "She's glad we're doing well."

Nate looked over at me, so I met his gaze with my smile still intact. He reached for the gear shift without looking away, like he was waiting for me to say more. Or maybe trying to say something himself. But then his lips turned up in a small smile, and he put the SUV in reverse.

NATE

“**W**hat did you decide about Stonehenge?” Marigold asked as we piled back into the SUV after our quick stop at the gas station.

The absolute hope in her voice, combined with knowing Nikki needed a win after what appeared to be a rough conversation with her mom, strangled the firm *no* I’d intended to give. But since we’d stopped in Odessa for food instead of heading on to Midland, maybe some part of me had already been planning to say yes.

With a long exhalation, I picked up my phone and searched for Stonehenge on my map app. Sure enough, it wasn’t far. When the location popped up on the screen of my dash, Marigold clapped her hands and Nikki fist-pumped the air in victory.

These two were something else. Not only had they convinced me to deviate from my plans yet again, but they actually had me strangely curious. Yep, no doubt about it, their cheerful energy was as infectious as a plague.

Not that they could tell how they affected me. Even if they weren’t so wrapped up in their own conversation, I wasn’t a smiley guy. Even Hawk had said so. But on the inside? They were getting to me. I could feel it.

When we arrived at the re-creation of the UK’s original Stonehenge, I was begrudgingly impressed. Nikki had told me the stones were a few feet shorter than the ancient ones, but the same size horizontally. According to a sign near the

entrance, the stones weighed about twenty thousand pounds and were made of limestone donated from a local quarry.

What possessed this town to replicate the landmark in England was beyond me, but since we were hardly loners in wanting to visit it, I guessed it wasn't a completely unwelcome addition to West Texas.

"What made you want to be a Marine?" Nikki asked as we walked side-by-side through the stones. Marigold was off on her own, but Nikki and I both kept as close an eye on her as on the attraction itself. "I know you said Uncle Thatcher influenced your decision to be a firefighter, but I mean joining the military in general."

"My cousin Paul and his best friend Will joined right out of high school, and even though I'm a few years older than them, I figured they had the right idea. I wasn't really doing much else at the time."

"What were you doing?"

I scratched the back of my neck and chuckled sheepishly. "I had a few odd jobs after graduation, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do. By the time the idea to join the military came up, I was bartending at Mickey's Pub. It's a—"

Nikki grabbed my arm and squeezed it, her eyes sparkling like mad. "I *love* Mickey's."

"You've been there?"

The sparkle dimmed momentarily, then she shook it off and let out a breathy laugh as she looked over at Marigold. "We went to Bluffton to visit Aunt Hattie and Uncle Thatcher last year. Um, Chet was with us too. We got some engagement photos taken by Lyndi—she's your friend, right?" She paused and waited for my nod, then smiled again. "She's great. She told us everyone was going to Mickey's for karaoke on Thursday night and invited us to join her. Marigold had so much fun."

"And Chet?" I couldn't help but ask.

"He did. Well, he seemed to, I guess. I'm starting to question every smile he ever gave me now. I don't even know

what was real and what was fake. It's freaking me out a little."

I glanced at Marigold again, looking back at Nikki when I was satisfied she was still safely wandering nearby. Close enough that I knew she was fine, but not close enough to overhear us, thanks to the noise of the wind and the people chatting in small groups around us.

Ever since Nikki told me the whole story and I'd promised to protect them, I'd felt a lot less like a Marine whose job it was to put out fires on a flight line and a lot more like an embassy guard.

"I'm actually kinda relieved to hear that," I said.

She looked up at me in surprise. "What?"

"If you weren't freaked out, it'd be weird."

"I see."

I sighed, not wanting her to get the wrong idea. "I know you're trying to put on a happy face for Marigold, but I've been wondering how you were *really* doing. If there's any way I can help, lemme know."

"You *are* helping," she said in a near-whisper. "A lot."

"Well, good." I shuffled my feet as we stood in front of one of the largest stones and stared up at it. "You should go to the real Stonehenge someday."

"Maybe. I have a lot of stuff on my bucket list."

I looked down at her and tucked my hands into the front pockets of my jeans. "Like what?"

"Oh, let's see. Have you ever watched *Downton Abbey*?" When my only response was a quirk of my brow, she giggled. "Of course not. Well, the giant house is actually a real place called Highclere Castle, and a real lord and lady live there currently. They open it for tours sometimes, so I'd love to go. Maybe I could see Stonehenge on the same trip."

"That would be cool."

As we meandered through the stones, Nikki went on with the other items on her bucket list. She wanted to ride a gondola

in Venice, go to the top of the Eiffel Tower, go zip-lining in Costa Rica, and stay in an overwater bungalow in the Maldives. Apparently, she'd read a book where two people fell in love while stranded on one of the many islets over there following a plane crash. Instead of being a deterrent, it inspired her to want to visit the island chain.

“Do you have a bucket list?” she asked, pushing my shoulder for rolling my eyes at her death-wish trip to the Maldives.

I shook my head. “Not really. I travel often enough with deployments and workups. And whenever I could take leave, I went back to Bluffton to see my—”

When I stopped mid-sentence, she tilted her head. “See your ... family?”

“Um, yeah. And friends.”

Her eyes danced with amusement. “And maybe your *girlfriend*?”

I looked away, scanning for Marigold again instead of answering her.

“Does she have anything to do with why your Saturday was so rough even before I came along?”

Swallowing, I managed a nod. I hadn't even remembered saying that to her until now, and here she was, perceptively attaching the offhand comment to its exact source. How had this smart and spirited woman been duped by Chet? She should have seen right through the guy.

“Are you and your girlfriend having trouble?” she asked. “Anything you want to vent about? I told you I was a good listener, so lay it on me.”

“Don't you think we should get back on the road? Marigold's probably bored.”

Nikki looked toward her daughter, then back at me with a rueful grin. “Does she look bored to you?”

Unfortunately, she did not. She actually looked peaceful. With a faint smile on her lips, she meandered through the

exhibit with the rest of the tourists, not seeming to be in any hurry to leave. I figured if she did want to leave, she'd probably be right next to us saying so. The kid didn't pull any punches, that was for sure. And neither did her mother.

"Okay, well, fine. So, right before Hattie called and asked me to pick up the dresser thing, Chelsea called from Bluffton and dumped me."

Nikki winced. "Oh, Nate. I'm so sorry. So she lives there?"

"Yeah. The only reason I requested to get stationed at the base in Beaufort was because she told me the long-distance thing wasn't gonna work anymore."

"I can see how it would be hard," she mused. "Were you together for a long time?"

"Off and on for like a decade."

Her eyes bulged. "Uh, wow."

"Yep."

"You must be pretty heartbroken, then."

I looked up at the clear blue sky and sighed heavily. "I probably should be."

When she didn't answer right away, I looked down at her again and felt my lips purse at the sight of her expression. It was oddly contemplative, though I wasn't sure what she could be thinking so hard about. Was it my stuff or her own? Was *she* heartbroken behind all these smiles, or was she simply wondering why I wasn't? If it was the latter, I wasn't sure if I had an answer.

"Penny for your thoughts?" It felt weird to ask for them, given how often she offered them freely.

"Oh, they probably wouldn't be worth that much."

I snorted. "Fine, don't tell me."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, and then her full lips puckered like she was trying hard to fight a smile. "I was thinking I know the feeling. I've already been married once, and I wasn't heartbroken when it was over. I was relieved to have escaped.

I didn't even mourn the end of the relationship because I'd already done that when it first changed."

Nodding, I rolled my shoulders a little at the reminder of what she'd gone through with her *first* horrible ex.

"And then with Chet, I feel so dumb for not realizing who I was about to marry that there's no room for being heartbroken over losing him. And it kind of makes me wonder if I ever loved him at all."

My steps faltered at that. "Why would you marry someone you didn't love?"

"Because I loved the idea of marrying a handsome man who had his own money. You know, or so I thought."

"Ah, so it was all about the money? No wonder you're not heartbroken," I teased, wrinkling my nose.

"No, jerk," she shot back with a laugh. "It was his temperament. The kindness in his tone. I'd been stupidly drawn to that alpha bad-boy vibe that Damon gave off, so next time I picked the sweetheart with no trace of a temper that could bite me in the butt later. I figured that even though it wasn't some big passionate love, I could be content with a nice, happy life. I'd take that over passion that turned into violence any day."

I wanted to tell her she'd been going about it all wrong, and that I had some opinions on the kinda guy she should look for instead of settling on one with no passion and even temperament. But I wasn't as good at putting my thoughts into words as she was, so I had no idea where to start.

It wasn't like I could tell her she should be looking for a guy like me, someone who might lack that bad-boy attitude but could literally kill a person if necessary in order to protect her. She probably wouldn't like the sound of that.

And it would no doubt be incredibly dumb to say that even with the ability to enact violence if needed, I was a nice guy where it counted. When it mattered. Grumpy? Fine. She could call me grumpy all she wanted. But us standing here at this

dang exhibit was proof I was nice deep down. If I weren't, I'd be in Fort Worth already, and she'd be ... who knew where.

Lastly, there was no way I'd find the right words to explain that having an even temperament had nothing to do with a lack of passion. I had an even temperament, but for some reason, every time I got within two feet of this woman, all I wanted to do was scoop her up and carry her to the nearest piece of furniture and kiss her until she understood that passion didn't have to be a bad thing.

"Anyway, enough about that," she said, waving it off like a fly and banishing my slightly caveman-ish thoughts along with it. "I just wanted to say I know the feeling of thinking you should be heartbroken about the end of a relationship even if you aren't."

"Gotcha."

"So, do you know why you aren't heartbroken about Chelsea?"

I shrugged. "Maybe because I was already expecting it since we've broken up so many times."

"Which means you're not really over for good, then."

A bitter laugh shot out of me before I could stop it. "Oh, no. We're over for good. I'm sick of her thinking she can break up with me whenever she wants and I'll always take her back."

Nikki bit her lip. "Sounds pretty toxic."

"Yeah. Big-time. And everyone told me to stop playing the yo-yo game with her because it wasn't worth it, but I didn't listen."

"Well, you remember I didn't listen to Brett when he warned me about the dumpster fire you saved me from, so it appears we have another thing in common."

I gave her a small smile and bumped her arm. "At least we both figured it out before it was too late."

"Nathan Bristol, did you just give me the gift of an optimistic sentiment?"

“Uh ... sure?”

“You did! I’m shocked.”

“Hey, I can be optimistic once in a while,” I defended myself.

She leaned back and assessed me. “*Can* you?”

Squaring up with her, I held her gaze and stepped closer. But it wasn’t even intentional. Not a single conscious thought made me do it. It was like my feet moved forward by some unknown force. Like I was nothing but a puppet on a string. “I dunno. Maybe you’re rubbing off on me.”

Just as I felt my puppet hand raising up to touch her cheek, Marigold bounced up to us, and we sprang apart. “Guys! Guess what I heard some tourists talking about!”

“No,” I said dryly, not even giving her a chance to suggest yet another stop on this out-of-control trip.

She’d already tried to get us to stay in Las Cruces for another night so we could have dinner in a haunted house where a few murders had gone down in the 1800s. I mean, seriously, she was excited about the idea of eating an overpriced meal in a tourist trap where our silverware would move on its own while we ate. The ghost of a homicidal woman messing with my steak knife was *not* my idea of a good time, no matter how much these two nutjobs craved adventure.

“Harsh! You haven’t even heard what it is,” Marigold whined, her bottom lip sticking out so far she could probably catch rain with it.

“Doesn’t matter. I took you to this knockoff Stonehenge thing, but now it’s time to get back on the road.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and smirked up at me, her teenage attitude in full view. “Fine. But did you confirm our hotel reservations for tonight, or are we gonna be looking for another wild Airbnb to crash at?”

“Mari,” Nikki said in a warning tone.

“I’m just asking!”

I chuckled. It was a fair point after last night's debacle. "We're not staying at a hotel tonight. I have friends in Fort Worth, so we'll be crashing with them. And yes, I warned them ahead of time that I'd have a couple of vagabonds with me."

"*Mean,*" Nikki chided.

We walked to the SUV and got in, and this time Marigold went back to her cozy spot in the third row and donned her headphones. At least the second leg of today's trip would be a lot quieter than the first.

Well, except for the playlist Nikki had made on my phone that was full of songs I happened to love. And the chunks of conversation between the two of us that I couldn't help but enjoy even though I told myself I shouldn't.

"This song," Nikki said, dropping her hook and yarn so she could turn it up. "I have goose bumps already."

Bad Company's "Ready for Love" poured through the speakers, and Nikki stuck her tongue out at Marigold when she protested. Even with noise-canceling headphones, she was clearly displeased. I reached out and adjusted the balance of the speakers, so the music was playing more up here than it was in the back rows.

"Thanks," Nikki mouthed before turning her face forward again and closing her eyes while she sang along with the old-school rock ballad.

The lyrics were kind of perfect, actually. We were both traveling down a rocky road, and we were for sure wondering where our lives were leading. And I dang sure wanted her to stay, annoying as it was to think about how little control I had over that feeling.

But as she lifted her hands and pretended her crochet hook was a drumstick, beating the air in time with the drummer when the chorus picked up, a shiver went up my spine. We might connect with some of this song, but neither of us was ready for love. Were we?

NIKKI

When we rang the doorbell at Nate's friend's house that night, the man who answered it immediately lit up with a smile the size of Texas. "Boy, you get uglier and uglier every time I see you," he teased Nate in a thick Southern drawl.

Nate's face split into one of his rare—and totally devastating—grins as he pulled his friend into a hug. "You're just saying that to make yourself feel better, old man."

"Oh, shots fired," he replied.

He didn't look like he was much older than us, but maybe he had good genes. Or maybe Nate was taking a page from Marigold's book since we were all old to her anyway.

"This is Nikki and her daughter, Marigold," Nate said as they broke the hug, then he patted his friend's back. "This is Brooks. We met on a deployment, and he knows Hawk and Ellie, so that's how we stayed friends."

Brooks smiled and hugged us both without seeming to give it a second thought. "It's nice to meet y'all. Come on in."

"Thanks," I said as we stepped into the one-story house. "Are you out of the military now?"

Nate hadn't needed to use his ID to get to their neighborhood like he had with the Hawkins family, so even though I'd been told his friend had been a warrant officer in the Marines when they'd met—not that I knew what that *meant*, of course—I didn't get why we wouldn't have needed to go on base if he was still active-duty.

“Nope. I’m government property for another few years,” he replied as he gestured toward the kitchen. “I’m stationed at the joint base just up the road a bit.”

“Oh, but you’re allowed to live off base?”

“Sure am. They own me in many ways, but they’ll still pay for the roof over my head whether I’m on base or off.”

A brunette—his wife, Cat, I presumed—stepped in from the back door right as we entered their country-chic kitchen. She was seriously stunning with her long brown curls hanging in waves past her shoulders, and she wore a bright floral sundress with white cowboy boots.

“Hey, y’all,” she said as she came forward, hugging Nate first and then doing the same to Marigold and me. “I’m Cat. It’s so nice to have you here.”

Nate had told me a little about these two on the drive over, including the story Brooks had told him about how his wife had once gotten into a car accident and hit her head so hard it wiped out a chunk of her memory.

When she woke up in the hospital, she thought Brooks was her ex-boyfriend, since they’d broken up briefly when they were eighteen, instead of recalling that they’d been happily married for years. They’d had to fall in love and heal old wounds all over again, and from the way Nate told the story, it sounded like it had taken a lot out of both of them.

I couldn’t imagine dealing with something like that, but I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a chunk of my own past I would love to forget. Though, perhaps that wasn’t entirely true. If my memory of being married to Damon was wiped out, I also wouldn’t remember carrying, giving birth, or mothering Marigold the first couple of years of her life. I wouldn’t want to forget a moment of that.

After we finished up with the introductions, we were ushered outside to their gorgeous backyard oasis. Twinkle lights just like the ones at our New Mexico rental hung about, which struck me as interesting because none of the large

homes in my La Jolla neighborhood back home had adorned their outdoor spaces with them.

They were cute, though. Like something out of a small-town romance movie or something, and they made me want to have a backyard of my own with the same feel. Maybe in Bluffton, in fact. Maybe we *could* settle there instead of just hiding out until the dust settled, regardless of what I discovered about Chet's connection to Damon.

Toward the right side of the yard was a brick extension of the patio where a firepit sat with comfortable seating forming a circle around it. The rest of the yard was green and clearly maintained with love. The brick walls of the property were almost entirely covered with trees and bushes, and the lush grass looked soft enough to lie down on for a nap. Currently, however, the couple's two children played fetch with their dog, laughing like loons.

The five of us sat around the not-yet-lit firepit, but there was another seating area on the porch we'd crossed on the way over here. It had a flat-screen TV mounted to the wall and a rustic silver cooler that was held up by wooden legs, so it was waist-high instead of sitting on the ground.

These people struck me as the type to host Super Bowl parties for the whole neighborhood. Or backyard barbecues on the Fourth of July. Or birthday celebrations for their kids with fifty people gathered in this open and inviting entertainment space.

As I sat listening to them catch up with a glass of sweet tea in my hand, I realized with a pang that this was the second time this week I'd met friends of Nate's that I wished were my own. I missed having friends. It'd been too long since I'd socialized with other women—other *moms*—and chatted about anything that wasn't related to catching babies.

Damon hadn't let me have friends, and now that I thought about it, neither had Chet. But he'd been much sneakier about it, I realized now. He'd always worded it like he wanted me all to himself, and with that deceptively sweet tone of his, I hadn't known it was a trap.

He'd ask me to see a movie with him instead of going out for drinks with my coworkers. Or he'd suggest we take Marigold to the beach instead of brunch with my neighbors. Little by little, the friend group I'd worked so hard to build after my divorce had slipped through my fingers. Chet's methods weren't like the direct orders Damon had given me, but they'd been just as effective. Just as isolating and manipulative.

Wow. The hits keep on coming.

"What's wrong?" Nate asked in a low tone, leaning over from the chair beside mine.

I gave him a curious look. "What do you mean?"

"You were frowning. I'm not used to it, I guess."

Cat was asking Marigold about school, and Brooks and his kids were tossing a ball to their dog, Bronco. Since they were all occupied, I took a deep breath and decided to be honest with Nate. "I was thinking about how lucky you are to have such good friends."

"And that made you frown?"

"It's been a long time since I've had friends like these."

His lips tugged down at the corners as he studied me. "Why's that? You're so ... friendly."

"I'm not sure I should take that as a compliment when paired with that tone, mister."

"Not another tone," he groaned, letting his head roll back. "Which tone is this? Not the one where I think you're crazy?"

"Nope, not that one. The one where you think I'm silly."

His eyes were laughing even though his mouth puckered a little. "You're not silly."

"I can be. It's fun." I lifted my shoulder. "You could probably use a little silliness in your life. You're so serious all the time."

When I punctuated my statement with a furrowed brow and deepened my voice in a poor imitation of his, he let out a

sharp laugh that had Cat, Brooks, and my daughter looking over at us curiously.

Nate cleared his throat and shifted away from me. “Well, anyway, once we get to Bluffton, you can start over. I’ll introduce you to the rest of my friends, and you can hang with us anytime you want.”

“I loved the ones I met at Mickey’s.”

“There ya go,” he said with a flick of his wrist.

“Do you go to karaoke night with your friends when you’re in town?”

“Yeah. It’s kind of a thing. But not during football season.”

I chuckled. “They don’t show the game at the bar? It had TVs.”

“They do,” he allowed. “But I don’t know ... Mickey’s isn’t a sports bar. There are TVs, but none of them are in the right spots, and they’re small. It’s more for checking the score. Besides, I wouldn’t want to watch the game with all that karaoke in the background. Sounds terrible.”

He let out a shudder, and I laughed. “Does Bluffton have a sports bar?”

“No, actually. It’d be cool if it did, but I’m fine watching it on my couch with a few friends. I’m not really a barhopping kinda guy.”

“Well, with only one bar in the town where you grew up, I guess that makes sense.”

“What about you? Did you do a lot of barhopping back in the day?”

As soon as the questions left his mouth, he must have done some quick math and realized I’d been in Damon’s clutches during my early years as a drinking-aged adult. Which, of course, meant that I wasn’t out partying. And after that, I was a slightly traumatized single mom.

His face morphed into one of apologetic mortification, and it was all I could do not to laugh. It was so cute. Innocent. He

really wasn't good with words, and I knew he was just trying to get through this conversation and hadn't meant to say anything offensive.

"It's fine," I said with an encouraging smile. I didn't need to voice the fact that I hadn't been into barhopping. He got it, and by the looks of it, he felt terrible for even asking.

Slowly, I reached out and put a hand on his arm, my eyes snagging there for a second as I marveled at how attractive a forearm could look. I'd heard of women liking men's shoulders or even their butts, but forearms? What a strange body part to get all hot and bothered about. It was all I could do not to run my hand over his tanned skin and let the fine dusting of hair tickle my palm.

And if I wasn't mistaken, that look in Nate's eyes when I looked up meant he could tell exactly how I was feeling. Either that, or he was similarly hot and bothered, but maybe for a different reason. My hand on his skin? The blush I knew was probably evident on my cheeks?

Brooks wandered back over and sat down near us, so I pulled my hand back and worked to cool myself off. But it wasn't easy since I still felt Nate's gaze on my profile for a moment longer than necessary before he started talking to his friends. Which, predictably, led me back down the much safer road of yearning for friends like these.

What would it be like to settle down in Bluffton and hang out with the people I'd met there on my last visit? And even though Nate had included himself in the invitation, I couldn't place any significance on it, despite the moment we'd just shared. He talked a good game about how he didn't want to get back together with his ex, but I wondered if some part of him still hoped they'd reconcile once he moved back.

The last thing I needed was to fall for this guy only to lose him to the woman he'd loved for the past decade. Breaking up over and over wasn't a hallmark of a stable relationship, but there had to be a reason they kept finding their way back to each other, right? What if the next time they did, it would be for good?

Oh, yeah, and not only that, but it wasn't exactly an ideal time for me to start a new relationship. No matter how hot Nate's forearms were. The ring Chet had given me was at the bottom of my brand-new suitcase, but that didn't mean it hadn't been firmly on my finger a few days ago.

"What? No way," Nate said, the surprise in his tone causing me to tune into the conversation I'd been ignoring. "I can't believe you'll be there at the same time as my buddy. Actually," he added, hooking a thumb at me, "Nikki knows him too. They're practically family."

"What's this?" I asked.

Nate jerked his chin toward Brooks. "He's gonna be on the same deployment as Brett. Different units, but still. Small world."

"After hearing a little about the connections between you and your Marine friends, it's starting to sound like you all belong to some secret cult or something."

Brooks laughed heartily. "Ah, shoot. You might be right. It does feel like a cult every now and again, but I'm happy as a clam to drink the Kool-Aid. My time in the Corps has been good for us so far. Well, except for the deployments. I almost got ripped from this green earth well before my time on that second one."

"Really?" I asked with a gasp. "What happened?"

"Our base was attacked in Afghanistan. Got a nasty shot to the side, and if it weren't for my buddy Mills, I woulda wound up dead as a doornail."

I winced, glad Cat and Marigold had gotten up to play with the kids, and my daughter hadn't heard him talk about his near-fatal wound in such a cavalier tone. Though, I shouldn't really be surprised. It wasn't like these guys were strangers to the dangers of their own jobs. Sliding my gaze to Nate, I wondered if he'd ever come close to dying. But at the same time, I also didn't want to know.

Maybe because he sensed my discomfort, Nate cleared his throat and shifted topics. "Hey, speaking of Brett, he's got a

friend out here who used to be in his unit but retired recently. Do you know a guy named Mason Wright?”

Brooks slapped his knee and guffawed. “Know him? Man. He lives right down the street. He comes over all the time.”

“You’re kidding.”

I looked between them with wide eyes. Just how small *was* this Marine Corps world?

“I swear it on my mamma’s cookin’,” Brooks pronounced. “You want me to tell him to swing by for a beer tonight?”

Nate shrugged. “I don’t know him. Brett told me about him when I showed him my list of where I planned to stop along the way and said he lived here.”

Brooks pulled out his phone and tapped it, likely texting this Mason Wright person. “Might as well ask him to join us. We’ve got plenty of food for the grill and more than enough cold ones to go around.”

Nate looked over at me with a small smile, then leaned close again. “You okay with that?”

“Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

He shrugged again and settled back in his chair, but his question made those butterflies take flight again. Sure, he could be grumpy whenever we tried to get him to deviate from his plans to see silly sights. And yes, he’d displayed a thinly veiled hint of a temper when the hotel situation got messy. But at the end of the day, Nate’s willingness to make sure my daughter and I felt safe and comfortable on this trip was impossible to miss.

And no matter how hard I tried to fight it, spending the last couple days sharing very small spaces with this handsome man made a few other things about him—and the way I *felt* about him—just as clear. But whether or not that was a good thing was yet to be seen.

NATE

“My kids are head over heels for Marigold,” Brooks said as he plopped down next to me and handed me a fresh beer.

The women had gone inside to feed the kids an early dinner, ensuring they’d be able to play while the adults ate, so Brooks and I hung out in the back while we waited for his friend Mason to show up.

I took a swig from the bottle and chuckled. “Nikki said she’s really into kids.”

“She doesn’t strike me as your average annoying teen. How’s the road trip been?”

“Fine. She’s not annoying.” What was annoying was that I should have thought she and her mother were *both* annoying—based on their sunny dispositions alone—but I didn’t.

“That’s good. Nikki’s pretty cute,” he said, his tone as casual as if he’d said that it looked like it might rain. I shot my gaze to his, and he snorted. “You don’t think so?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t noticed.”

“Liar.”

Shrugging, I stared at the fire.

“So, Hawk said you’re single again—”

“You guys gossip like a pair of chicks,” I muttered.

“Of course we do. We’re Marines.”

I rolled my eyes, and then my shoulders, but it didn't do anything to ease the tension there.

“Anyway, you gonna go for it? If so, I gotta say I'm proud of you. It's no secret you need a break from that other piece of work you've been seein' all this time.”

Did everyone need to have an opinion on my love life? Lately it felt like I couldn't see any of my friends without hearing something about my bad judgment with Chelsea or some helpful advice on what I should do next.

Though, usually, there wasn't much to talk about. During the various periods when Chelsea and I were broken up, she wasn't mentioned when I hung out with my friends. If we were doing fine, she was similarly absent from the conversation. That realization made me loosen up a little. I couldn't really blame them for talking about current events, could I?

“I don't think it'd be a good idea,” I said, looking over my shoulder at the house.

I could see Nikki through the window, laughing at something Cat had said. Good idea or not, that smile of hers had been haunting my dreams every night since I'd met the woman.

Turning back to Brooks, I caught his mischievous grin before he pulled his lips into a tight line to hide it. “What?”

“Nothin'. I didn't say anythin'.”

“Your face did.”

He shrugged. “I can't help what my face says any more than you can help how you feel about that woman, whether it's a good idea or not.”

The way his words echoed my own thoughts made me restless, so I put my beer down and stepped toward the fire, warming my hands.

“I'll drop it if you want me to,” Brooks went on, taking a drink from his own beer. “But lemme know if you decide to give it a shot. I'll be rootin' for ya.”

He didn't know much about Nikki's situation since he'd clearly gotten his news from Hawk, and I hadn't had time to fill him in after Nikki told me the story. Would that change his advice? If he knew what she was going through, would he caution me against pursuing her? The fact that I wondered it should have been answer enough.

"Hey, there he is," Brooks said, standing and heading toward the house.

I turned to find a tall dude with a longer version of the Marine high and tight striding across the porch. He hugged Brooks with a pat on his back, then turned to me. "Hey, man, I'm Mason."

"Nate," I replied, shaking his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"You too. Brooks said you know Brett Reid."

"Yeah, he's a family friend."

Mason nodded. "Right on. He's a good guy. I miss working with him."

"Why'd you get out of the Marine Corps?" I asked as we all took a seat by the fire.

Brooks let out a hearty laugh and patted Mason's shoulder. "Fool got himself blown up."

I looked at Mason with wide eyes, and the former EOD Marine nodded grimly. "It's true."

"No kidding?"

He lifted his pant leg, revealing a nasty scar—if you could even call it that, considering it was less like evidence of a single wound and more like the entire side of his leg had been mangled and then healed with a completely unnatural texture of bumps and ridges.

I winced, shaking my head. "Ouch."

"Yep. It looks like this all the way up my right side."

"Shoot, man. It looks a lot better now than it did in those pictures you showed me," Brooks said with a wrinkled nose.

“You’re just lucky the blast didn’t mess up that pretty face of yours.”

“Got my neck pretty good,” Mason replied, angling toward the fire and tugging on the collar of his T-shirt to reveal scars on his neck and collarbone. “But yeah, thankfully my face was saved.”

“I’m sure the chicks still dig the scars,” Brooks told him with an exaggerated wink, making us both laugh.

Mason shrugged. “I do okay. Speaking of, what’s the deal with Nikki? Is she single?”

“Nope,” Brooks said before I’d even managed to open my mouth. He tipped his bottle toward me. “Right, Nate?”

I gave him a blank look, but Mason held up his hands. “No harm meant, my man. I was just curious.”

“All good,” I managed.

Just then, the back door opened behind me, and I turned, smiling a little as the woman in question appeared. She wore a green shirt that she’d bought at the Exchange in Yuma, and the color of it made her eyes look even brighter and more green than normal.

Brooks’s answer to Mason was far from the truth. Nikki *was* single. I had no claim over her whatsoever. But as she joined us and jumped into our conversation like the social butterfly she was, I didn’t have an ounce of regret about not correcting the lie.

NIKKI

Like Nate and his Texan friend, Mason struck me as a really cool guy and was just as tall and strong as they were. Even though he was out of the Marine Corps now, he still wore his hair in a slightly longer version of their traditional haircut.

The three of them sat around talking about deployments and training and funny stuff that'd happened at work, and it was fascinating to see Nate's dry sense of humor making them laugh just as much as Brooks's boisterous one.

After the kids were fed and playing on their own, Cat and I joined in on the conversation as much as we could. I was glad Marigold was inside their gorgeous home with the kids. I'd gone in to check on them a few times, and I knew she was much happier sitting on the floor in their playroom than she would have been listening to the war stories of these three Marines.

When I excused myself for the third time and slipped inside the house to look in on them again, Cat joined me. We stood just outside the door of the playroom, watching them giggle and play with toys. Marigold would say we were "creepin' on her," but I didn't care. It made me smile to realize that she may be a teen, but she wasn't too old to prefer the company of Barbies and toy soldiers to the adults hanging out around the fire.

That would change soon enough if she was anything like me, and I hoped it didn't come before I was ready for it.

“Your daughter is amazing with them,” Cat said as we left the doorway of the playroom and headed for the kitchen.

I grinned and held up my hands. “She loves kids.”

“It shows,” Cat replied.

We sat down at a couple of barstools at her kitchen island instead of joining the guys out back. The brunette poured me another glass of sweet tea from the glass pitcher on the counter before doing the same for herself.

“So, my husband said you and Marigold were last-minute additions to this road trip. Is there a story there?”

Hesitating, I took a sip of my drink before answering. “Um, yes. I was supposed to be married the day Nate was leaving, and I found out right before the ceremony that Chet wasn’t the one for me. Nate’s close with my aunt, so she basically dropped us in his lap without giving him a chance to say no.”

“Oh, I bet he *loved* that.” Even though she’d laughed at the last part, it was clear she wanted to know more. Thankfully, she refrained from pressing me and raised her sweet tea in my direction. “Well, cheers to good timing then.”

I clinked my glass to hers. “I’ll say.”

“And um ... how are you and Nate getting along?”

If she thought I didn’t see the gleam in her eyes even though she kept her expression neutral, she was dead wrong.

I shrugged. “Well enough for a quick road trip.”

“Quick, huh? Driving across the country doesn’t seem very quick to me.”

She wasn’t wrong about that, but lead filled my belly just thinking about how Nate’s long driving days meant the trip was moving a lot faster than I wanted it to. Whenever we made it to Bluffton, reality would set in. A lot of decisions would need to be made, and I’d have to have that talk with Marigold I’d been putting off. I wasn’t ready.

“He’s keeping us to a tight schedule,” I told her, a wry smile forming on my lips. “Well, he’s *trying*, anyway.”

Cat laughed at this. “For your sake, I hope you and Marigold can convince him to loosen up a little and have some fun. Nate’s a great guy, but sometimes he can be too serious.”

“You don’t say,” I teased.

“You won’t find a better one though,” she went on, smiling fondly through the kitchen window, where we could see the three men sitting by the fire. “Brooks is choosy when it comes to friends. Nate’s one of the good ones, and you seem really sweet. I’m happy for you.”

“I’m not ... We’re not,” I stammered, feeling heat creep up the back of my neck. “He’s helping us get to my aunt’s house. That’s it.”

She smiled slyly. “Sure, that’s how it started. But I won’t be surprised if that’s not how it ends.”

I’d chosen the wrong moment to take a sip of sweet tea to cure my dry throat, and her words caused me to cover my lips before I spit it out. “I just told you we met on what was supposed to be my *wedding day*.”

“So? He got dumped the same day.” She shrugged, totally unfazed despite the look of horror I’d given her. “What? Brooks said Nate wasn’t that upset about getting dumped considering it’s Chelsea and they’ve done this song and dance so many times. And you don’t seem that upset about your ex, for reasons I won’t make you tell me since we only just met. All I’m sayin’ is if you both just got out of a bad relationship and you’re ready to move on, it’s no one’s business whether it happens fast or slow.”

“Well, um. Thank you? I think. But I don’t want to get in the middle of whatever’s going on with him and Chelsea. It seems like it could get messy since this is such a normal thing for them.”

She pursed her lips and pulled them to the side, nodding slightly. “I’d like to say they’re over for good, but I guess I

can't. But I will say that Nate's a straight shooter. So if *he* says they're over, you can trust him."

Ah, trust. That wasn't something I planned to dole out too freely after everything I'd been through. But I'd had a feeling I could trust Nate since the beginning, and I hated the idea that my instincts were broken or that I couldn't trust myself, either.

Deciding to switch gears, I took another sip of tea. "This is really good. I love Southern sweet tea. They don't make it like this in California."

"That's the truth. We lived there for a while when Brooks was stationed in San Diego, and I missed so much about living here. I'm glad we're back."

"You've lived here before?"

"We were both born and raised here. When these orders popped up as an option, I couldn't believe our luck. Now we're near his parents and his sister, Ivy—who's married to a former Marine, by the way. Another one of Brooks's friends. They'd be here tonight, but she's a teacher, and she goes to bed at like eight most weeknights."

"Oh, boy. Did you have a conversation like this with her, too? Singing his praises and telling her what a good guy he was?" I asked, making Cat laugh. Then I tucked my lips into a tight line to hide my wicked grin as Nate opened the back door and slipped inside.

"Not exactly," Cat mumbled in answer to my question. "It wasn't like that with Jake and Ivy. But I won't bore you with the details."

"Uh-oh," Nate said dryly as he looked between us. "What are you two talking about?"

I lifted my chin. "Just some girl talk, but I was about to tell Cat that I'd love to go to the Stockyards tomorrow."

"I'm sure you would."

Rolling my eyes, I pressed on. "Please, Nate? Just for breakfast or lunch before we head out."

“You’re already halfway to Bluffton,” Cat chimed in, shrugging one shoulder. “Maybe you don’t have to get there at such a breakneck pace. Stop and smell the roses a little.”

“Or the horse poop,” Nate deadpanned.

“Did you know he was such a comedian?” I asked Cat, grinning as I saw Nate shake his head out of the corner of my eye. I turned back to him with a pleading expression. “Seriously, it would be fun. You could use a little fun.”

“I have plenty of fun.”

Cat and I stared at him, unblinking.

“I do,” he insisted. “I’m gonna have tons of fun while I’m on leave for a couple of weeks before I check in with my new squadron. Once we get to Bluffton, that is.”

“All that means is you have no reason to rush,” I pointed out, not giving up.

A child’s voice calling for Cat interrupted Nate’s reply, and when she excused herself to see to her daughter, he leaned on the counter between us and held my gaze. “Aren’t you in a hurry to get there? Wouldn’t you feel better if you were at Hattie’s place so you can figure out your plan?”

I slumped in my seat, breaking eye contact so I could stare at my sweet tea instead. Nate didn’t appear to like that, however, because he came around the side of the counter and put a hand on the back of my barstool, turning me so I faced him.

“What’s with the sudden urge to stall?”

“Sudden? Come on, we’ve been trying to get you to take detours this whole time.”

He didn’t buy what I was selling, and his silence told me so.

With a deep breath, I gave in. “Honestly? Right now, no one knows where we are. When we get to Bluffton, I’ll have to face the reality of whatever we’re supposed to do next. And what all of this means. Don’t forget, I still haven’t solved the mystery of how Chet knows Damon.”

I left out all the harder-to-explain reasons that made me want to stall. Like the way I'd felt during that conversation with Cat. Or maybe the way that muscle in his forearm twitched as he adjusted his grip on my chair, making my spine tingle for no logical reason.

Yep. I wanted to stall because I'd miss him and his outrageously appealing forearms. That'd be fun to admit out loud.

Nate studied me for what felt like an hour before he finally nodded once. "We can stay in Fort Worth for another night. Might as well make a day out of it at the Stockyards tomorrow, and I'm sure Brooks and Cat won't mind."

I felt my face brighten like he'd flipped a light switch in my brain, and I leaped off the stool and hugged him tightly around the neck without a second thought. He stiffened, then his arms tentatively closed around my back.

"Thank you," I whispered into his firm shoulder, momentarily dizzy from that woodsy smell of him combined with the smoke from the fire.

Not to mention the feel of his strong arms around me. *Wow*. Hugging Chet had never felt like this, and the unfamiliarity of it made me lightheaded and off-balance.

Nate didn't reply—didn't even move—just kept holding me with stiff arms like he had no idea what to do with himself.

"Mom?" Marigold asked from the living room, causing me to push off Nate with a breathy laugh. But since I still wasn't steady on my feet, he'd had to snake out an arm to keep me from stumbling backward.

I shot him a grateful smile as he let go, turning to Marigold just as she entered the kitchen. "What's up, babe?"

Instead of answering, she looked between Nate and me with a distinctly questioning tilt of her head.

"Guess what we're doing tomorrow?" I asked brightly, hoping to distract her from whatever had her eyeing us like that.

“Driving?”

“Nope. Nate said we can stay in Fort Worth another night so we can do some fun touristy stuff.”

Marigold’s eyes widened as she looked at him, then she beamed. “No cap?”

I laughed and glanced at Nate, who predictably had no idea what the slang term meant. “She’s asking if we’re lying.”

“How is that asking if we’re lying?” he questioned, rubbing his temple.

“Because to *cap* means to lie,” I explained, proud of myself for remembering even though it made me even more uncool to sound so proud about it.

Nate looked less than amused as he turned back to my teen. “Well then, *no cap*, weirdo.”

“Sweet,” Marigold said, then held her hand out to me. “Mom, can I borrow your phone?”

I frowned. “Uh ... why?”

“I wanna call Kiki. She’s probably worried after the whole ... wedding thing.”

Closing my eyes, I cringed. Kiki was Marigold’s closest friend, and she and her family had been invited to the wedding. I’d trusted Aunt Hattie to handle things with my mom and the rest of my family, but I hadn’t given a second thought to much else on that front. Marigold was right. Her friend was probably going nuts not being able to get ahold of her since her phone had been left with mine in the bridal suite.

Pulling out the prepaid cell from the back pocket of my jeans, I gave it to her with a small smile. “Sure, of course. But don’t call anyone else, okay?”

Marigold quirked a brow at me, then shrugged and left with the phone.

When she was gone, I turned back to Nate with a sheepish smile. “Sorry about that.”

“What, the cap thing?”

“No,” I said with a shy laugh. “For the surprise hug before. I was excited.”

He shifted uneasily, a faint smile on his lips. “No worries. I’m gonna grab another beer and head back out. Wanna come?”

Nodding, I waited for him to get his beer then followed him out with my tea. This was good. A chance to relax and explore Fort Worth tomorrow meant one more day before I had to make a solid plan and rebuild my life for the second time. It exhausted me just thinking about it, and the longer I could have some peace before needing to get logistical, the better.

But as I sat beneath the twinkle lights and socialized with Nate and his friends, I couldn’t help but wonder if more time with *him* was the right thing to do. Judging by how good it felt to be held by him—if only for a minute—I had a feeling extending this trip in the name of peace could only lead to more trouble.

NATE

“**W**hat do you think?” Nikki asked, striking a silly pose in the bejeweled cowboy hat she’d just plopped on her head. “I’m a bona fide cowgirl in this, huh?”

“If you say so,” I replied, fighting the urge to grin. Man, she was cute.

Wait ... cute? Who am I?

Nikki beamed at me, her eyes flashing wickedly before she plucked a black Stetson off the shelf and held it between us. “Your turn.”

“No way.”

“Nate.”

“Nikki.”

Eyes narrowed, she thrust it forward. “I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Do you ever?”

Her lips turned up fractionally, but the wattage of the smile had dimmed considerably at that, causing me to wonder if I’d triggered something about her past that made her uncomfortable.

I wasn’t used to caring about such things with women. My dating experience was mostly limited to Chelsea, the only exceptions being the few women I’d dated during our too-frequent breaks over the years. But those relationships never made it past surface-level stuff, and Chelsea didn’t have

anything in her past that came close to what Nikki had dealt with. It was a little unsettling to think that simple lines thrown out as jokes could land sharper than intended, and I made a mental note to watch out for that from now on.

My thoughts caused a long enough pause that her shoulders slumped like she was giving up, so I snapped out of it and took the hat.

Just as I'd hoped, a real smile returned to her gorgeous face as I placed it on my head, and I sighed heavily while I studied my reflection in the mirror. I looked like a walking men's cologne ad. And not in a good way. Not to me, anyway.

Though, the hint of pink that colored Nikki's cheeks as she stood next to the mirror had me wondering if it *was* in a good way ... and I hated myself for how happy that made me. Not happy enough to wear it for longer than I had to, but enough that I was glad I'd done it.

"Satisfied?"

"Very. Now let me take a picture. You know, for posterity."

I shot her a warning look. "Don't you dare."

"Nate, we're at the Stockyards. In a hat shop. It's what you do here!"

"No photos. You got the hat on me, now have a good look so you can remember it, and then let's get outta here before you try to make me buy it."

She pouted. "You're not going to buy it?"

Another look from me.

Another pout from her.

"No. I'm not gonna buy it."

"*Fine.*" She rolled her eyes, then stepped back, looking me over carefully, like she really was committing the image to memory.

My body's reaction to the obvious appreciation in her gaze made me shift uncomfortably, tucking my hands into the front pockets of my jeans.

With a nod, she sighed. “Okay, done.”

“Do you have a thing for cowboys or something?”

“Nope. But apparently, I have a thing for annoying you, so this image of you looking *very* dashing and yet *very* annoyed is definitely being stored in my memory bank.”

My heart kicked. She may have admitted she enjoyed annoying me, but she’d also called me *dashing*. The only thing that annoyed me about that was how much I liked hearing her say it.

Taking off the hat and returning it to the shelf, I removed hers and did the same, then gestured to the door. “Come on. Let’s go find everyone else.”

She snickered and headed onto the bustling sidewalk, then pointed across the dirt road to another one of the many touristy shops. “Hey! They just went in there.”

I caught sight of the back of Brooks’s head as he entered the shop. He’d taken off work so he and his family could join the three of us on our Stockyards trip, and it’d been a decent day so far. I hadn’t planned to spend so much time with my friends here, but I was glad for it now that it was happening.

When I looked down to step off the curb, I saw that Nikki was headed right for a stray mound of horse poop left behind from one of the various parades they’d held today.

Reaching forward, I grabbed her elbow and steered her around the mess. “Told you there’d be horse poop.”

She let out a surprised gasp as she spun back to see what I’d spared her from, then threw her head back and laughed heartily. “Oh, my goodness. My freaking hero. Though, why am I surprised that you’ve saved me yet again? You’re *that* guy, remember?”

“Stop,” I said through a chuckle.

We continued walking across the street—with her paying a lot more attention to where she put her feet—and she eyed me curiously. “When everyone was sharing stories about dangerous situations they’d been involved in last night, I

noticed you didn't share. Does that mean you haven't really had anything like that happen?"

Swallowing, I shrugged. "I've seen some stuff. Put out some fires on the flight line that could have been devastating for the pilots and crew if we hadn't gotten it handled so quickly. But no, I've never been shot at like Brooks or blown up in a combat zone like Mason. Guys in my job field aren't usually exposed to that kind of stuff."

"So it's more like the danger of fighting fires in general, like a regular civilian firefighter?"

"For the most part, yeah. Though, a tank of jet fuel probably makes the situation a little more hazardous than the action I'd see at a regular house fire."

"Do you think you'll do what Uncle Thatcher did and be a civilian firefighter when you get out of the military?"

"That's what most of us do, so probably. I haven't really thought about it much."

She snorted. "Liar. From what I've seen of you these last few days, I bet you have a one-year, five-year, ten-year, and twenty-year plan. Maybe even longer."

I hung my head. She had me there. But unfortunately, all those plans had to do with Chelsea. Even though our entire relationship had always been one big roller coaster, I'd assumed we'd eventually chill out with all that and settle down together in Bluffton. I'd doubted she'd continue to break up with me over and over if we were married with kids.

But ever since she'd dumped me on Saturday, it had become clearer and clearer how stupid that made me. Marriage and kids didn't fix problems. If there were problems in a relationship, tying yourself down to each other would likely make them worse. Everybody knew that, right?

But there was no way I'd admit all that to Nikki. Though, strangely, I had a feeling she'd get it.

"You're right," I said carefully, "I've thought about it. But recent ... *changes* have made me rethink things, so I guess I'm still working out the new plan."

We'd long since reached the store where Brooks, his family, and Marigold were shopping, but instead of going in, we lingered outside. Should I suggest we go in and join them? As much as I liked being alone with Nikki, I felt something around the edge of my mind flashing a subtle warning.

"I'm not one for the kind of plans *you* like to make," she said, chuckling when I gave her a sardonic look, "but I have been thinking about how all of my 'recent changes' are going to affect my job."

"What's the deal with your job, anyway? Were they cool with you taking all this time off?"

I had to ask. I'd been wondering since the beginning if she'd been able to think logically enough to let her work know she'd skipped town or if she'd totally let that slip. Part of me didn't even want to know if she was irresponsible enough for that.

"Oh, that. Well, Chet had me take a leave of absence for a few months after the wedding. He'd said he wanted to be able to travel even after our honeymoon was over. Now I've put together that it was in preparation for his creepy plan to take me away somewhere. So, that's gross to think about."

Rage prickled up my spine, causing me to straighten. "Yeah. No kidding."

"But again, I got away before it happened, and now my work will still be there for me if I decide to go back. Bright side."

She flipped her hair over her shoulder with a wide smile and a lift of her chin, and the move only served to remind me once again how insane it was that she was able to spot that bright side so easily, even though her life was a total mess right now.

How did she do that? My life wasn't nearly as complicated as hers was, but I couldn't see a single bright side to the way Chelsea had led me around on a string, asked me to get stationed at Beaufort, and then dropped me the day of my move.

Unless ... no. Nikki wasn't my bright side. She couldn't be. She'd just said it herself. She still had a job waiting for her in California if she decided to go back, and I wasn't about to let myself think she wouldn't. If that wasn't the *murky-as-all-get-out* side instead of the bright side, I didn't know what was.

"Oh, and speaking of plans," she said, "Marigold and I were wondering about the rest of the trip. So far, you've only told us about our plans as we went along, but what does the rest of the trip look like now that you've adjusted it?"

I licked my suddenly dry lips and looked away. "Um, well ..."

When I took too long to answer, she dipped her head to catch my gaze and gave me a prompting wave of her hand.

Clearing my throat, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone, showing her the notes app I'd been using to keep track of my schedule. She leaned in to see it, and the sweet smell of the honey-and-vanilla lotion she'd tried on in one of the shops this morning scrambled my brain.

Shaking my head, I snapped out of it and showed her the reservation I had marked. "So, um, I planned only to make one more stop between here and Bluffton since we're really not that far away."

She looked up at me with wide eyes. "Uh, aren't we like *halfway*?"

"*Ish*. I wouldn't have minded the crazy-long days by myself."

"I see."

"But I didn't think you and Marigold would like that much, so I canceled that hotel and figured we'd spread it out a bit."

"Ah, thanks. You had me worried there for a second." She pulled back and held up her hands. "Sorry, you're doing us a big enough favor as it is. We would have been fine."

I tilted my head at her, wondering if that had been a reflexive thing. Did she think she needed to backpedal like that

or else I'd be mad? "I don't mind."

"Thanks," she said again, nodding at the notes app again. "So what did you decide to do instead? There's nothing there after that."

"I figured maybe we could talk about it together? Like, see what you guys wanted to do?"

Her mouth popped open. "Really?"

"I mean, yeah. Why not? It's your trip, too, now."

Folding her arms over her chest, she gave me a look that suggested she was trying to see if I was teasing her. "You're seriously going to loosen the reins a little and let us help with your plan?"

I held my hands out, gesturing to the setting at large. "We're here, aren't we?"

"We are." She bit her lip, the air between us feeling charged as she stared up at me. "And you're not worried about cutting into your leave by extending our drive time even more?"

I should be. I should want to get her and her daughter to Bluffton as soon as possible, so I could pick up the pieces of my own life while she did the same. But unfortunately, the idea of extending the road trip sent an unfamiliar buzz of excitement coursing through me. I liked plans and schedules and routines, but the draw of letting go of some of that in favor of letting Nikki weigh in on the rest of the agenda was too hard to ignore.

"No. I'm not worried about that," I replied, not voicing any of my ridiculous—and likely imprudent—reasoning. "Maybe we can look at the map and figure it out tonight?"

"Over dinner?" Cat asked, her sudden appearance causing Nikki to jump. Something I noticed she did fairly regularly, actually.

The idea of her having reason to be so jumpy caused a sharp twinge in my chest. As long as she was with me, she didn't need to worry about anything happening to her or

Marigold. She had to know I meant it when I said I'd keep them safe. But I hated knowing she was still at least a little bit scared under all the smiles and bright sides and jokes.

At the end of the day, it wasn't my job to be concerned for her like that. My only job was to get them safely to Bluffton and then leave her to figure out her life—and her potential plans to leave as soon as they were able—and that was it.

“What do you have in mind for dinner?” Nikki asked Cat, recovering from the jump scare with pink cheeks and a tense smile.

“I was thinking you two should eat at one of the steak houses here, and we'll take the kids home,” Cat informed us. “Marigold too, obviously. I'm sure she'd rather hang with my rug rats than sit there while you two book hotels and all that.”

Nikki shook her head. “Oh no, that's okay. Marigold probably wants to stay with me.”

“No she doesn't,” Marigold said as she joined us.

Nikki chuckled. “Oh, she doesn't, does she?”

“Nope. Brooks said they have all the streaming channels, so I figured I'd play with the kids until they went to bed, then binge-watch some true crime stuff.”

“You watch that garbage?” I asked her with a lift of my brow.

“Uh, duh. Murder and mayhem. Love it all.”

I widened my eyes at Nikki. “Isn't she a little young for that?”

“She's thirteen, not five,” Nikki retorted with a laugh. “Besides, I'd rather her watch stuff about crime solving than the trashy reality shows with all the people looking for love in mansions or on islands. She's *definitely* too young for that.”

“Not to mention completely uninterested. That's your generation's thing,” Marigold said as she waved a hand toward the three of us.

Cat gasped, her face twisting into one of mock horror. “Whoa, I feel attacked.”

“Get used to it,” I grumbled.

“We good to go?” Brooks asked as he strolled up behind Cat. He held both of his probably-too-big-to-be-carried kids in his massive arms, the three of them looming over us like a tree.

“Yep,” Cat replied sunnily. “Ready, Marigold?”

“Ready. Have fun, guys.”

I opened my mouth to object—noting I hadn’t been given any say in this whatsoever. It felt a little too much like the meddling I was used to witnessing with Hattie, especially after the talk I’d had with Brooks last night. But when I caught the hard look in his eye, I snapped my mouth shut.

And then, before I knew it, Brooks and Cat headed toward their car with their kids, Marigold bringing up the rear.

What just happened?

“So, I guess it’s just you and me then,” Nikki said, staring after them like she was as conflicted about this dinner as I was.

“Guess so.”

“Where should we eat?”

I looked up and down the street. “Pick a steak house, any steak house.”

Nikki chuckled and glanced around the crowded area, then jerked her chin toward one across the street and down a little way. “How about that one?”

I opened the Internet browser on my phone. “I’ll look it up and see what the reviews say.”

With a musical laugh, she tugged the phone from my hand and surprised the heck out of me by reaching around and slipping it into my back pocket. “Nope. Spontaneity is a good thing, grasshopper. Let’s try it.”

I cut her a look and held out my hand, gesturing for her to walk down the sidewalk so we could cross in front of the restaurant. She moved through the crowd ahead of me, but then when we got to the intersection, movement flashed in the corner of my eye. A literal horse and buggy whipped around the corner, clearly not expecting anyone to be about to cross into their path.

Without hesitation, I wrapped my arms around Nikki from behind, yanked her against my chest, and pulled her out of its path just in time to avoid being stomped by the hulking brown horse.

“Freaking *horses*,” I muttered against her ear, preparing to release her just as she turned her cheek to look up at me.

I froze, keeping her right where she was even as distant voices in my mind screamed that I should let her go. And then our eyes met, and for the briefest moment, I couldn’t even breathe.

But *she* could, and I knew this because she was so close I felt her breath on my lips. “Are you ever going to stop finding ways to save me, Nathan Bristol?”

My immediate thought was *no, not ever*.

But then the nonexistent walls of this crowded street started closing in on me as her gaze traveled down to my lips, so with an unsteady breath, I replied, “That depends. Are you ever gonna learn to watch where you’re going?”

NIKKI

Twenty minutes later, we were finally seated at a table at Risky's Steakhouse—aptly named, since so was this dinner. I was still reeling from being yanked into Nate's arms. Honestly, if someone's gonna drive a horse and carriage down a busy street, maybe it'd be best to watch where they were going.

Though, it could've been my fault. I thought I'd looked both ways before stepping into the crosswalk, but if I hadn't been so excited about the promise of dinner alone with Nate, maybe I would have registered the clomping of hooves before he'd had to save me once again.

Not that I was complaining, of course.

The server had just asked for our drink orders when Nate's phone began to ring. He pulled it out, frowned at the screen, then his eyes shot to mine with what looked like guilt swirling in their depths. "I'll be right back."

I nodded and watched him go, but something heavy dropped into my stomach. Was it Chelsea? Had she decided to flip the script on him yet again and ask him to get back together?

It was none of my business, of course, but the way he talked about her suggested that she probably wouldn't bother with any sort of romantic grand gesture to win him back. She'd dumped him via phone on his moving day, after all, so why not just ask for another chance in the same way?

I thanked the server when he returned with my Diet Coke and Nate's beer, then craned my neck to look for him. There was still no sign of him. If it was a friend or a family member checking in, you'd think he'd be quick about it and come back, considering he'd told me he was starving several times while we waited to be seated.

Ugh, why do I care?

It wasn't like we were together. This wasn't a date, and I shouldn't be eagerly awaiting his return like a puppy at the door. But for some dumb reason, that was exactly what I felt like. In just a few short days, Nate's calm and reassuring presence—yes, even when he was grumpy—had been my lifeline. I was in the middle of a huge storm, and he was the lighthouse, promising I'd reach land soon and that everything would be okay.

Even in my own head, I knew I sounded pathetic. And not only that, but how could I have such strong feelings for a man after only a few days on the road together? It was absurd. I hadn't had feelings like this for Chet, and I'd very nearly married the man after dating for two years. We won't even talk about the feelings I'd had for Damon—the result of a teen crush getting manipulated into a dark situation. Whatever I'd thought I felt when we were happy was just ... wrong.

It was strange, though, to think of it in those simple terms. What I'd felt for Damon had been wrong. What I'd felt for Chet had been ... tepid? Forced? Bland? Well, that was my negative spin on it now that I knew what I knew. But before that, I would have described it as *nice*.

And this feeling I had deep in my chest whenever Nate looked at me? It was the opposite of all those things.

Instead of wrong, it felt right.

Instead of tepid or bland, it burned through me like the sun.

Instead of forced, it was natural and easy.

The idea of describing the butterflies that took flight within me whenever he was around as *nice* was laughable. In fact, I

did laugh and then looked around at the diners at nearby tables with pursed lips because I felt like a loon. Judging from their expressions, they agreed.

Get ahold of yourself, Nikki.

Okay, fine. I had feelings for Nate. Feelings that I'd never had before. Feelings that I desperately wanted to explore. But if that was Chelsea on the phone, and she wanted to get back together with him, I would let him go. If that was the kind of tumultuous relationship he was drawn to—no matter how much he said he didn't want to go there anymore—I wouldn't get in the way of that. Nor did I want to involve myself in a messy love-triangle situation.

"Hey," Nate said as he approached the table, breaking me from my thoughts. But then his lips twitched when he looked at my expression, and I felt my cheeks warm. "Um, sorry about that."

"No worries," I replied as he took his seat. I nodded to his beer. "Our server brought that by while you were gone."

"Awesome." He took a swig, then frowned down at the menu in front of him.

It was just a hunch, and I couldn't be sure, but it didn't look like he was reading it as much as using it to stare at while he worked out whatever was on his mind. More specifically, whatever was said during that phone call.

Unable to fight my curiosity, I bumped his foot with mine under the table. "So, was that Chelsea on the phone?"

He looked up, then let out an actual laugh. "Uh, no. Guarantee she hasn't had time to get sick of this new guy yet. She'll need at least a few more days."

I could tell he was teasing, but it still felt like a rain cloud settling over me and my silly thoughts about how *right* my feelings were for him. How right could they be with the threat of Chelsea's inevitable return? Especially since I didn't know if he was serious about not being down for another round of games with her.

"I have a question, but it might be a little much."

“Ask it.”

I paused, fidgeting with the roll of silverware that was wrapped in a napkin on the table before me. “This new guy ... if she dumped you because of someone else, does that mean ... well— Sorry. I shouldn’t even ask.”

“Does that mean she cheated on me?” He pulled out the rest of the question I’d been too afraid to finish, and when I only responded by tugging my lips to the side, he sighed. “It probably does, though she didn’t spell it out. Not sure if she did anything that would be considered cheating, but I don’t need the details.”

My heart ached for him. How could she do that to a guy like Nate? Though, the idea of cheating—whether physically or emotionally—never made sense to me. If you don’t want to be with someone, just end it. You don’t need to wait for someone else to catch your eye to realize that, right? At least, not in my mind.

“Has this happened before?” I heard myself ask.

He looked away. “Yeah. It’s always somebody. Something.”

“Then why—”

“I don’t know,” he replied. His tone wasn’t quite sharp, but it had some bite. He must have realized it, because he straightened in his chair and shook his head. “I’m annoyed with myself, not you. I feel like an idiot.”

“I can relate.”

My statement hung in the air between us for a long moment. His jaw flexed and relaxed as he stared at me, then a small smile worked its way onto half of his gorgeously shaped lips. “You’re not an idiot.”

“Neither are you.”

Again, more loaded silence. Finally, he took a sip of his beer and shifted in his seat, the embodiment of needing to make our way out of this conversation. “Anyway, the phone

call was from a friend of Hawk's. He's stationed in Yuma and does cybersecurity for the Marines."

"Cybersecurity? Marines have computer nerds?"

He chuckled. "Of course they do."

Before I could question him on why that should be so obvious—because what did I know?—the server appeared at our table once again. "Have y'all had a chance to decide on an appetizer?"

I cringed and looked down at the menu. "Sorry, no, one sec." The server—Danny, according to his name tag—hung around while we looked. A few things stuck out to me, and with a slow smile, I looked up at Nate. "Feeling adventurous?"

He sucked in a breath then let it out as a quiet laugh. "Why?"

"Let's split a bunch of appetizers for our dinner."

His brows knit together, and he cocked his head. "Uh, why would we do that?"

"Because it's fun. We can have a little bit of everything. Like a smorgasbord of awesomeness."

"A *smorgasbord of awesomeness*?"

"It's actually not a bad idea," Danny interjected with a shrug. "We've got some great stuff on our apps menu, and people always have a hard time pickin' just one. You could go with the sampler, though, that's easy."

"*Boring*," I said in a singsong voice, making him laugh.

Nate wrinkled his nose at me. "What about the steak? It's a steak house."

"I'm sure we can split a steak too," I said, turning my big-as-Texas smile toward Danny. "Right? We can order one a la carte and have it come out with the appetizers, can't we?"

"Don't see why not," he replied.

Nate looked at me with a slow shake of his head, then put down his menu and waved a hand in a silent signal for me to

do all the ordering.

Dancing in my seat, I looked over the menu one more time while Danny pulled out a notebook from his back pocket. Maybe he hadn't planned on needing it for *one* appetizer, but he'd definitely need it for what I had in mind.

"Okay, we'll have the Hand Breaded Jalapeno Cheese Curds—just a half order, please. The Steakhouse Potato Skins, Fried Pickles, Broccoli Bites, Risky's Famous Pork Ribs, and ..." I trailed off, looking at Nate again. "Do you like shrimp?"

"No."

"Okay, scratch that idea. Let's do the Blazing Buffalo Chicken Tenders."

Danny studiously wrote on his notepad, then looked back at me. "And for your steak?"

"Well, it's gotta be the fillet," I said, glancing down at the steak menu. "We'll split the six-ounce, please. We'll already have plenty of food."

Nate let out a snort at that, and I shot him a glare as Danny took our menus and told us he'd be back in a few.

"That's a lot of food," Nate said as he lifted his beer again.

"It is. But we can take the leftovers home to Brooks and Cat. And also, we're not splitting this dinner."

"Uh, what? Isn't that the whole point?"

"Sorry, I meant the bill. It's my treat. As a thank you for this day off from driving and for extending the rest of it even though you'd planned on only one more night."

He rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. "Says the girl who has no access to her money at the moment."

His tone was gruff as ever, but the twinkle in his eye was hard to miss. He was right, I didn't have access to my money, and I wouldn't until I knew it was safe to do so.

"Oh, well, you'll front it, obviously," I said with an exaggerated flip of my hair. "But I'm paying you back for the

whole thing. I'll just put the receipt with the rest of them and we'll settle it all as soon as we can."

His chin dipped once in agreement.

"And ... is there a certain budget I should keep in mind for the future? You said you had 'plenty of money,' but that isn't very specific, and I don't want to overdo it when we're looking at hotels for the rest of the trip."

The corners of his eyes squished slightly, like he was trying to figure out how to answer that.

Darn. I shouldn't have asked. But he'd been so generous, and he'd reminded me on several occasions that it wasn't a problem, but it was still none of my business what his budget was. Would he think I'd overstepped? If he'd gotten his money in nefarious ways would he be mad I'd inquired about this? Doubtful. In fact, if he found out I'd even considered he'd do something illegal for money, he'd likely be madder about *that*.

"You remember how I said my dad sold his business?" he asked after a minute.

I nodded.

"Well, I was technically his partner, so I got half the money from the sale. And it was a big sale."

This eased quite a bit of my fears in the money department, I'm sad to admit, but then I frowned. "I thought you said you didn't really have a career plan when the idea to join the Marines came along."

"I didn't. But I knew I didn't want to run my dad's company for the rest of my life, and despite how offended he was about that at the time, we're good now."

Sitting back in my chair, I looked at him in a whole new light. This man could have opted to work with his dad, but instead he found his own way. Even when he didn't know *what* to do, he hadn't settled for something he knew he didn't want. He sure knew his own mind.

But considering his past with Chelsea, how well did he know his heart?

“Wow. Well, good for you.” I sipped my water, then laughed. “Wow, talk about a tangent. I’m famous for those, sorry. Tell me about that phone call with the cyber guy. Why’d he call?”

Nate’s posture changed immediately, going from relaxed and—dare I say it—*content*, to guarded with a touch of that guilt I’d seen when he first stepped away. “Right. So, after we talked about Chet and Damon knowing each other somehow, I reached out to Huck.”

“Huck is the cyber guy?”

“Yeah. I met him at a barbecue at Hawk’s one time when I visited from California.”

I held up a hand. “Wait, wait, wait. You want me to keep a story straight about a guy named Huck that you met at a guy named Hawk’s house? What is with these names?”

“Well, you know Hawk is short for Hawkins, but I don’t know what’s up with Huck’s name. Actually, I think it’s his real first name.”

“His mom named him Huck?” I asked, taking a sip of my soda.

“Apparently.”

“Interesting.”

“That’s not the only interesting thing about him.”

I wagged my brows. “Oh yeah? What else?”

“He’s married to an honest-to-goodness *princess*. I’m sure you can imagine how Hawk’s daughters feel about her.”

“Oh, for sure. And you’re not kidding? She’s really a princess?”

“Yep. But that wasn’t what he called about.” He looked pointedly at me, and I laughed, knowing he was teasing me for taking us on another tangent.

“My bad, go on.”

He shifted, a dark expression replacing the mirth in his eyes. “Since he’s in cyber, I figured he’d be the best guy to ask to do a little digging into how Chet and Damon know each other. I hope you don’t mind. I realize now that I’m telling you about it that I probably overstepped.”

Ah, so that was why he’d looked guilty. Well, that was actually really ... sweet. “Thank you. You didn’t overstep because I’m losing my mind not knowing. What did he find out?”

“He found out Chet’s real name is just as lame as his fake one. Brock Copeland.”

“Brock Copeland?” I repeated, the name feeling gross on my tongue, considering it belonged to the *stranger* I’d almost married.

“Yep. And that’s not all. Turns out, Brock Copeland was Damon’s cellmate.”

My whole body went so cold I could’ve sworn I’d been plucked right out of Texas and dropped onto an arctic tundra. I shivered, rubbing my upper arms with my hands.

“Brock was in for fraud and assorted financial crimes, but he also had some other nasty stuff on his record, including assault with a deadly weapon and aggravated assault. I assume that’s how he wound up with Damon.”

I hadn’t thought it was possible to feel colder, but I did. Nate’s words—and his frigid tone—caused a visible shudder to course through me. Deep lines of concern instantly replaced the marble-like hardness of his face.

Reaching forward, he easily extracted my hand from its death grip on my opposite arm and held it snugly in his. He rubbed his thumb along the back while he gave it a gentle squeeze, and my body began to thaw thanks to his reassuring touch.

“You okay?” he asked after a minute.

I nodded meekly, staring down at our joined hands, but I found that for once, I had no idea what to say.

“Nikki, look at me,” he said in a low tone, waiting until I did to go on. Even with his limited experience with me, he knew I wasn’t one to be at a loss for words. When I looked up, his eyes were somehow both fierce and kind. “I already told you once. I’m not gonna let anything happen to you *or* Marigold. You’re safe with me.”

Another nod, but this time with an added smile. Not a big one, but I did my best.

“And you don’t have to do that.”

“What?” I asked.

“Grin and bear it. Marigold’s not here, and I know you’re scared. You don’t have to pretend you aren’t. But you do need to trust me when I say I’ll protect you from this guy. Nothing will happen to you or your daughter. Not on my watch.”

I knew he’d just told me not to pretend since Marigold wasn’t here to warrant it, but the fact that I did trust him, and his words soothed enough of me to want to smile for real, had me taking the chance to tease him. I wasn’t lying earlier when I’d said I had a thing for annoying him.

I narrowed my eyes and leaned forward. “You sure you’re a firefighter in the Marines and not a cop? Or a security guard? You’re giving off mad Kevin Costner in *The Bodyguard* vibes right now.”

Nate rewarded me with a chuckle and let go of my hand, leaning back in his chair. The adorable smile on his lips was all well and good, but I wasn’t pleased he’d let go of my hand. *Dang it.* Maybe I should have held onto that feeling that made him want to comfort me a little longer.

But no. That would be just as fake as the smiles I put on in front of Marigold. Because no matter how scary it was to think about, Chet—or *Brock*, apparently—was a violent psycho who’d spent enough time locked in a cell with Damon to formulate a plan about me. I should have been terrified, but Nate’s words and demeanor really had erased most of the fear swirling within me.

“Here we go, folks.” Danny and an extra helper approached the table with two black trays full of food.

My mouth watered as the servers placed the plates between us in such a way that we could easily share them, and I grinned when I saw the fillet had already been split in half for us, cooked individually instead of us needing to cut into it after the fact.

When the finishing touches were large empty plates before each of us and fresh drinks, we thanked them both and turned our attention to the meal. The food was amazing, and the mixture of flavors and the variety of textures was as satisfying as I’d hoped it would be. But a few minutes in, I needed to circle back to our previous conversation.

“Okay, so, did your friend Huck know anything about whatever deal they made?”

Nate finished chewing the bite of buffalo chicken he’d just taken and shook his head. “No. It wasn’t like they’d left a paper trail detailing their arrangement. But there were records of regular phone calls between them during the years you dated Chet—er, Brock. Whatever. And as far as Huck could tell, they haven’t talked since the day of the wedding.”

I hummed, trying to figure it all out in my head as I continued eating the absolutely fantastic fillet in front of me. Okay, so they were cellmates. Damon has another three years left on his sentence, so clearly, he’d planned to have Brock put his share of my money aside for him when he got out. But what else? He only wanted the money and not us ... I hoped. The alternative was too scary to even think about.

Nate lifted the small basket of cheese curds and held it out to me. “Fried cheese for your thoughts?”

I chuckled and took one, popping it into my mouth. Then I explained what I’d been wondering about while he nodded with a pensive expression.

“Well, we don’t have to solve the whole puzzle tonight,” he said when I was finished. “At least we have a starting point,

and we know we're dealing with someone who's dangerous, so we should watch our backs more carefully from now on."

I frowned down at the small pile of fried pickles on my plate. I shouldn't have let Marigold call her friend. Not without warning her not to share anything about our plans, anyway. Hopefully, that wouldn't come back to bite me.

Likely seeing the discomfort on my face, Nate held up a hand. "Not that there's any way he'd find us. I asked Huck about that when we talked just now. Since Brock wouldn't know you were with me unless someone told him, he's likely only watching your accounts for clues and wouldn't have any reason to look into me. I wasn't a guest at the wedding and don't have a connection to your family in any way he'd know about."

"You're right."

"Everything will be fine, Nikki. I promise."

And even though I shouldn't, since my history with trusting men left quite a bit to be desired, I found that I believed him.

NATE

I'd been worried to tell Nikki that I'd asked Huck for help without checking with her first, but I hadn't wanted to get her hopes up, and there was the potential that he might come up empty. The truth was, I hated the thought of letting her down.

Then he'd come through like a champ, and that, coupled with how truly grateful and relieved Nikki had looked when I'd told her had me buzzing in my seat for the rest of dinner.

Well, at least for as long as we chatted about how good the food was or what we wanted to do for the rest of the trip. During the talk about her exes' evil plan, the fear in her eyes nearly brought me to my knees. How had I come to care about her so much in such a short time?

It was wild. No doubt. But it felt right. And it made a heck of a lot more sense for me to have feelings for Nikki than to allow myself to be jerked around by a woman like Chelsea for the rest of my life, didn't it?

"That was really fun," Nikki said when we pulled up in front of Brooks's house at the end of the night. "I'm glad we did that."

"Me too."

The walk from the SUV to the house was painfully quiet, and my hand itched with the urge to reach for hers. If this were a date, I would've done it without hesitation. But it wasn't, right? It'd felt like one more than once while we talked and laughed over enough plates of food to fill the whole table.

Especially since I'd still been remembering the feel of her pressed up against me when I'd saved her from getting trampled by that horse.

But did she feel the same way?

No.

She couldn't, could she?

There was no way she could have feelings for me so soon after her world had been turned upside down by the guy she'd apparently loved enough to marry. Right?

Though, she admitted to not loving him as she should have. She'd told me she should have been more upset to have lost him. We'd bonded over our lack of heartbreak. And those simple facts sent hope stirring in my chest as we reached the front porch.

"I don't have any cheese curds to pay you for your thoughts, but I do have a bag full of other leftovers if you're interested, Nikki said as she held up our doggie bag."

I chuckled and put a hand on my stomach. "Ah, please. Don't offer me more food. I'm stuffed."

"Fine. But I still want to know what you're thinking."

The porch light was on, and under the soft glow, she looked more beautiful than normal. Which, for her, was saying a lot. What was the harm in taking a chance to see if she felt the connection between us as strongly as I did? Worst case, she rejected me. It would sting, sure. But it wouldn't be the end of the world. And knowing Nikki, she wouldn't be cruel about it.

Taking a deep breath, I decided to take my shot. "I was thinking about you."

"What about me?" she asked, turning to face me with the bag of food in both hands in front of her.

Well, that wouldn't do. Because now that I'd decided to make my move, an end of the maybe-date doorstep kiss was all I could think about.

Reaching for the bag, I took it from her hands and set it down on a nearby rocking chair. “I was thinking about how beautiful you look tonight, and that parts of that dinner kinda felt like a date to me.”

She sucked in a breath. “Really?”

“Yep.”

The silence hung as we stared at each other, and even in the dim light, I could see a hint of color on her smooth cheeks.

“It felt that way to me too,” she finally admitted.

I wasn’t one for big romantic speeches, but maybe that was okay. Sometimes actions spoke louder than words. Slowly, I lifted my hand to her flushed cheek, tracing my thumb along her satiny skin before brushing her hair behind her ear. Then I let my hand trail down to the back of her neck, and I used the pads of my fingers to gently urge her closer.

She stepped forward willingly, raising her chin and looking right at my lips in that telltale sign of wanting to feel them on hers. But my heart pounded in my chest, and something had me moving at a snail’s pace as I brought my forehead down to hers.

I wanted to kiss her so badly it almost hurt, but she needed to close the remaining inch between our lips. She needed to be the one to make this happen, or I knew I’d beat myself up about it tomorrow.

Her eyes crinkled around the edges as a small smile worked its way out, and just when I felt her angle her head up to kiss me, a flash of headlights stole her attention.

She pulled away, and I bit back a curse as we turned toward the street. I fully expected the car to keep driving past the house. Then we could pick up right where we left off, and I wouldn’t wait for her to move in this time. She’d shown me she was about to, and that was all the permission I needed to pull her into my arms and finally taste her lips.

But then, to my utter confusion, a dark car pulled up right behind my SUV and came to a stop.

“Who’s that?” Nikki whispered, taking what looked like an involuntary step back.

I positioned myself in front of her, my entire body on high alert after what I’d learned about Chet/Brock tonight. If he’d somehow caught up with us, I was ready. If he had any intention of getting his hands on the woman behind me, he’d need to go through me first. And he’d fail. There was no doubt about it.

But then there was no mistaking the blonde-haired woman exiting the back seat of the car.

Chelsea.

My mouth dropped open as she gave me a hesitant smile before pulling a small suitcase out of the car and lowering it to the sidewalk. Then she waved at the driver—an Uber, I guessed—before heading right toward us while he pulled away.

“No way,” I breathed, still with my back to Nikki.

She peered around me. “Is that—? Do you know her?”

“It’s Chelsea,” I replied in a low whisper.

“I’m gonna go inside.”

This broke me out of my stupor, even though the rolling of Chelsea’s suitcase echoed louder as she came up the driveway. I spun to face Nikki and shook my head. “No, it’s okay. You don’t have to—”

“I want to.” Her words were firm, and I didn’t miss the sadness in her eyes as she grabbed the bag of food and left me on the porch without another word.

“Nate?” Chelsea’s voice felt loud in the silence around us as she approached the porch steps.

I turned to face her, my face hardening to stone as I did so.

“Hi,” she said with a little laugh.

The sound was like nails on a chalkboard, and I winced. *What is she doing here? How did she know where to find me?*

She huffed out a breath. “Um, aren’t you going to say anything?”

“I don’t know what to say,” I replied, hoping she heard the ice in my voice.

“How about a simple, ‘Hey, Chels, it’s good to see you.’”

I snorted.

She rolled her eyes.

“How about, what are you doing here, and how did you know where I was?” I managed.

“Your mom told me.”

My brows shot up. “My *mom*?”

“Yes. She said you decided to stay another night at your friend’s house in Fort Worth.”

I’d been updating my mom on our road trip progress since I’d be crashing at her house when I got to Bluffton, but why would she tell Chelsea about my plans? She knew about the situation with Nikki thanks to her friendship with Hattie, and she knew the whole thing was dicey. *What was she thinking?*

At my continued silence, Chelsea sighed and lugged her bag onto the porch so she could stand in front of me. “I ran into her at the grocery store and asked about you, and she mentioned you were doing well and were having so much fun with your friends that you decided to stay another night.”

“Okay.”

“And since you emailed me your itinerary weeks ago, I had the address.”

Narrowing my eyes at her, I crossed my arms over my chest. “So, what, you flew out here to say hello?”

“No. I flew out here to tell you how sorry I am about breaking up with you on your moving day.”

“Seems like a phone call would have sufficed.”

She shuffled her feet and looked down at her hands. “Well, I also wanted to tell you I’m not with that other guy anymore.”

“Already?”

“Um, yes,” she admitted. “I realized right away that I was making a huge mistake. He wasn’t you. No one ever is.”

I fought the urge to snort. “Uh-huh.”

“So, I figured I’d come out here and drive back with you. We can use the rest of the road trip as a chance to reconnect.”

Dots connected in my mind, and I was relieved that even though my mom had told her I’d decided to stay in Fort Worth another night, she hadn’t told her anything about Nikki and Marigold. If she had, I doubted Chelsea would have come up with this deranged plan.

“Well, I’m sorry to have to say this, but you wasted a trip.”

Tears filled her blue eyes. “It’s too late, isn’t it?”

I wanted to feel bad for her, and in a way, I did. But I was also beside myself over how presumptuous this was, though really, I only had myself to blame. “Too late? Chelsea, give me a break.”

“Nate, please.” She stepped closer, took my hands in hers, and gave them a hard squeeze. “I know I made a mistake. And I know it’s not the first time, but I’m really sorry, okay? Please. Let’s start over.”

It was the same thing she said every time. Somehow, she thought we could start over as if she hadn’t stomped on my heart, and because I was a total chump, I always agreed.

But not this time. I was done. I would have told her that if she’d called me. Or even waited until I got to Bluffton. Of course I felt bad that she’d come all the way out here and would have to leave the way she came, but there was nothing I could do about that now.

Pulling my hands from hers, I jammed them into my pockets and stood up straighter. “I’m sorry too. But this has to stop. You’re not going to keep breaking up with me and then expect me to come crawling back whenever you snap your fingers.”

Hurt flashed in her eyes for a brief second, but it was replaced with indignation almost immediately. “Who was that woman you were standing with when I pulled up?”

Anger flared, but I held it in check. “It doesn’t matter who she is. She has nothing to do with what I’m saying right now.”

“Sure she doesn’t.”

“Chelsea, I promise you, I knew five seconds after you dumped me that it was the last time. I’m not going down this road with you again. It has nothing to do with the woman you saw,” I said, intentionally leaving out Nikki’s name for the sake of everything we were dealing with. Call me paranoid, but Chelsea’s sudden appearance had me on edge.

“So, what are you saying? That I came all the way out here for nothing? You’re not gonna let me ride back to Bluffton with you and try to fix things?”

“There’s nothing to fix. We should have ended this years ago. It’s toxic.”

She shook her head. “No, it isn’t. Can’t you see that we’re meant to be? Every time something tears us apart, we always find our way back to each other.”

“No, Chels,” I said gently. If I knew Nikki wouldn’t have been cruel in her rejection of me, I shouldn’t be cruel while letting Chelsea down. “We’re not meant to be because if we were, it wouldn’t be so hard all the time. Can’t you feel that too?”

Another head shake, this time scattering tears like raindrops. “No. I don’t feel that. What I feel is that you’re too *unfeeling* to forgive me for my mistakes. It’s not fair.”

I paced away from her, rubbing my hand over the back of my neck. Just like every other time, she had to bring up my deficiency in the feelings department. I didn’t lack feelings. I might not be the best at expressing them, but I had them. And if history taught me anything, it was that this conversation would go nowhere fast. I had no idea how to make her understand that we were over. For real this time.

“Nate?” she asked.

Her suddenly bitter tone caused me to face her curiously. “Yeah?”

“I don’t care who this Texas *bimbo* is that you’ve apparently decided to have a fling with while you’re in town,” she seethed, no trace of the earlier pleas in her expression. “I get how easy it is to fall for someone new since we’re always apart. It’s hard to resist. But if you don’t take me back right now and let me come on this road trip so we can work things out, we’re over for *good*. I won’t give you another chance to be with me if you don’t fix this right now. So you’d better think real hard about whatever you say next.”

She punctuated her last statement with a warning glare. I’d done a good job with my attempts at being kind about this whole thing, but hearing her call Nikki a “Texas bimbo” under the assumption that I’d met her while I was here and was having a *fling* with her had my hackles up once again.

This was the Chelsea I was used to. She had a temper like no other woman I’d been with, and even though she could be sweet as candy when she wanted to be, these roller-coaster breakup situations always featured some kind of rant from her. It was the very definition of toxic.

An angry laugh burst through my lips before I could stop it. “Do you promise?”

“What?”

I stepped back and leaned against the wall of the porch, hands in my pockets, cool as a cucumber. I sensed victory, and I couldn’t wait to get it over with. “Do you promise that if I don’t let you come on this road trip with me, we’ll be over for good? Because that’s what I want. I can’t—no, I *won’t*—do this with you again. So if you’ll promise it’ll end here, that’s music to my ears.”

Her mouth dropped open even as fury showed in her gaze. “You can’t be serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

“You’re making a mistake, Nate.”

“I don’t think I am.”

She pulled out her phone, holding it like a weapon. “I’m gonna call an Uber.”

Pursing my lips, I stared blankly at her. I could tell she was toying with me, but I had no intentions of doing what she wanted me to do. There was no way I’d go back on my word about our status as a couple, and I’d been honest that it had nothing to do with Nikki. It was a decision for me.

Seeing that she’d lost—but not looking in the least bit wounded or sad about it—Chelsea stabbed the screen of her phone a few times, then reached for her suitcase. “Fine. Have it your way. I’m going back to the airport to see if I can get another flight out. And if not, I’ll catch the first one in the morning and treat myself to room service tonight. I deserve it.”

It was highly unlikely there’d be another flight to South Carolina tonight, but she’d made her bed with this plan, and now she had to sleep in it. And I wasn’t the least bit sorry after the way she’d morphed from apologetic to vindictive in no time flat. It was the perfect reminder that the last thing Chelsea and I were was *meant to be*.

Since I was a gentleman, I waited on the curb with her in silence until her Uber arrived. Then I helped her with her bag—ignoring the angry glares she shot my way the entire time. Right before she got in, she exacted one last parting shot about how sorry I’d be about letting the best thing that’d ever happened to me slip through my fingers.

Doubtful.

When she was gone, I turned back toward the house with a sigh. Chelsea was far from the best thing that’d ever happened to me. In fact, I had a feeling that person was inside, worried that our almost-kiss was a huge mistake. But it wasn’t. And as I clipped up the porch steps and went inside, I intended to tell her so, then see if she was willing to pick up where we left off.

NIKKI

I heard the back door creak open behind me, but I didn't turn toward the sound. This was it. Nate had returned from his reunion with Chelsea. He was probably about to tell me how sorry he was that I was right about them getting back together—because honestly, of course they would. They'd been doing this for like a decade, so why would a woman he'd just met cause him to break the cycle?

Then, he'd likely tell me I'd need to figure out a new way to get myself and my daughter to Bluffton. Well, either that or he'd tell me Chelsea would be joining us. There was more than enough room in the Suburban, thanks to how little he'd brought with him on his move. I could sit in the back with Marigold, and then I'd get to spend the next few days forced to watch him and his probably-toxic-though-apparently-hard-to-refuse-girlfriend hold hands and share lovey-dovey gazes.

Bleh.

The thought of it made me want to throw up every bit of that amazing dinner we'd had tonight. The dinner he'd said had felt like a date. Not that it mattered now. Chelsea was back, and despite his insistence that he was done with her for good, they had history. I'd be a fool to think he'd cast her aside for me. And I didn't know much about love and relationships, given my own history, but I knew one thing for sure: I'd never be any man's fool again.

"Hey," he said as he sat in the chair beside mine. I hadn't lit the propane firepit when I'd sat down under the twinkle

lights, so he reached forward to do it himself before leaning back in the chair and watching the flames come to life.

“Hi,” I replied shyly, unable to look at him. Keeping my eyes on the fire was much safer.

It was silly, really. I barely knew this man. But ever since the moment he’d stoically agreed to bring my daughter and me on his cross-country road trip without any explanation, he’d been a source of hope for me. It was my own fault for letting that turn into more than it was—safe passage out of a bad situation.

For a long moment, we sat in silence. Nate wasn’t like me, always ready to pop open my mouth and allow whatever I was thinking to fall out. I’d learned during our long drives that he liked to take a minute before speaking when it was more than simple chitchat, and I was fine with letting him figure out the best way to tell me about him and Chelsea. It delayed the inevitable, of course, but it’d be wrong of me to grab him by the shoulders and make him spit it out.

Despite knowing what was coming, sitting with him was peaceful, and I wanted to savor it. It was the same seating arrangement as last night when we’d been chatting with his friends. I’d felt those dang butterflies go wild every time he’d looked at me, amusement dancing in his eyes along with the fire. The appeal of Nate’s smiles throughout the conversation had unnerved me, even though his lips had rarely done more than turn up in a sort of half-smile that didn’t even show his teeth. But it was the *way* he’d smiled at me ... like we shared some kind of secret.

At that point, we hadn’t even experienced the crackle of the charged moment between us after he saved me from the horse. I could have sworn we’d been about to kiss.

We also hadn’t yet gone on that almost-date at Risky’s. He’d made my stomach lurch with moments of rare full-bodied laughter and simple compliments on my parenting that he probably didn’t realize were so impactful.

And we definitely had yet to stand together on the porch when, unlike the horse thing, I knew for certain that we’d been

about to kiss. Intentionally, excitedly, and, without a doubt, *passionately*.

But the more I thought about those things, the more sitting here with him in the same setting when I'd had all that hope beginning to bloom in my chest just made me sad. It was like a balloon had burst—and not gradually, either. Not a slow deflating sensation, but more like it'd been stabbed with a dagger, exploding with an earsplitting pop.

“Chelsea’s gone,” he said finally.

I felt him shift to look at me, though I kept my eyes on the fire. But ... *shoot*. His simple statement had that balloon blowing right back up again. “She is?”

“Nikki.”

Reluctantly, I slid my gaze to his. “Yes?”

“It’s over. She came out here hoping to make the rest of the drive with me so we could work things out, but I told her I was done. She’s gone.”

My mind spun with a million follow-up questions, so I grabbed the first ones I could latch onto. “How did she even know where you were? Have you guys been talking? Sorry, that’s none of my business,” I added quickly, “but does she know about what’s going on with me? I don’t think I’d be comfortable with that if so, and—”

He was out of his seat before I could blink, but then I did blink—*rapidly*—when he knelt in front of my chair and took my hands in his. “It’s a long story. But I swear, I haven’t been talking to her, and she knows nothing about you.”

“Okay,” I managed shakily.

“And it *is* your business,” he went on, rubbing his thumbs over the back of my hands as he held my gaze. “It’s your business because I wouldn’t have told you tonight felt like a date if I still had feelings for her.”

I nodded, seeing the truth in his eyes.

“I also wouldn’t have tried to kiss you,” he said quietly.

Another nod, and I realized he'd drifted so close I could feel his breath on my lips.

"And I want to try again. You're the only one I have feelings for, and I don't play games like that. I never will."

I licked my lips, then tucked them in, as if that would somehow stop them from aching to feel his. "So ... you're not going to get back to Bluffton and decide to work things out with her?"

"No, I'm not gonna do that." His mouth twitched into a sheepish smile. "I'm a little more concerned you'll get to Bluffton and decide to leave. I have orders to the base in Beaufort, so I won't be able to go with you."

"But you'd want to?"

He sat back on his heels and hung his head, his shoulders rising and falling with a deep, unsteady breath before he looked back at me. "Yeah. It kind of freaks me out to admit how much I'd want to. But I can't."

"I don't want to go back to California. And not only because of you. I want to start over somewhere new. Near Aunt Hattie and those friends you promised to share with me."

"Okay, good. But I mean, it's more than just Hattie and my friends, right? You'd want to stay because of *me* too?"

"Are we crazy?" I asked breathlessly. It wasn't much of an answer since it was another question, but I hoped he'd understand.

Nate leaned forward again and cupped my face, drawing me closer. "I think so, yeah. But I'm okay with it if you are."

"I am."

"Good."

As if that was all the conversation he could bear before finishing what we'd started on the porch, he finally brought his lips to mine. And then it was like our positions—me seated and him kneeling before my chair—weren't offering him enough access. He pulled me to my feet and crushed me against him, all without breaking the kiss.

And I felt that kiss *everywhere*. I felt it in my brain, which was completely muddled, consumed by the feeling of the warm satin of his lips moving over my own. I felt it in my heart, which was beating so hard and fast I thought it might burst. And I felt it in my stomach, which clenched and rolled, as a level of familiarity that was completely mind-blowing for a first kiss flowed throughout the rest of my body.

It was like we'd done this a million times. We moved our mouths in such glorious synchronicity that it practically felt rehearsed, like a dance we'd performed night after night without a single misstep or moment of hesitation. I clutched the front of his shirt, and one of his hands stayed rooted to my jawline while the other ran over my back, leaving trails of fire in its wake.

Kissing the con man I'd almost married had *never* felt like this. But I wouldn't think of him now. Or my first ex. Just like I didn't want Nate to think of Chelsea or anyone else he'd ever kissed, I focused all my attention on the man who so tenderly claimed my mouth with his.

And it was tender—alarmingly so—despite the heat that warmed my cheeks and the sudden urgency behind the kiss as he adjusted his hold on me and took it deeper.

How did he manage to kiss me in a way that was both deliciously passionate and reassuringly gentle? It was a good thing it was a mystery I didn't care to solve. That would require brain cells I was pretty sure were now fried beyond repair.

Much too soon for my liking, Nate pulled back and rested his forehead on my shoulder. His ragged breaths on my chest gave me goose bumps from head to toe, and I shivered.

“Why'd you stop?” I asked into his neck, unable to keep the disappointment from seeping into my tone.

He let out a stilted laugh and pulled back to meet my eyes, humor and heat filling his. “Because I had to.”

“Again, why?”

“Because it’s late, and we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

I frowned. “Going back to the plan of long driving days and only one more stop before Bluffton?”

“No,” he replied, wrapping both arms around my waist to fit me tighter against him. Then he kissed me again. It was fleeting but no less powerful than the longer one before it. “But if I’m gonna let you and Marigold steer us to a bunch of tourist traps along the way, I’m gonna need to get some sleep tonight.”

I grinned up at him, pleased that he was willing to let us insert some fun into the boring schedule he’d had planned before. “But isn’t kissing worth losing a little sleep?”

“Trust me, the longer I stand out here kissing you, the harder it’s gonna be to fall asleep later.”

I lifted onto my toes to plant a chaste kiss on his cheek, giving in. “Fine. We can go to sleep. But on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“That you don’t make me wait too long for more.”

Just as I’d intended, my flirtatious tone and suggestive comment had him closing his eyes as if he were in pain before tipping his face toward the sky. “You’re killing me.”

“I know,” I quipped.

Then I pulled free from his grasp and turned toward the house, intending to prance away in all my flirty glory. But then, all at once, the warmth that had flooded my body moments before pooled at my feet and disappeared. I stopped short.

“Nikki?” he asked from behind me.

Slowly, I turned around and pursed my lips. “One more thing.”

“Anything.”

“We need to keep this between us.”

He tilted his head in a silent question.

“I don’t want Marigold to know about ... us. *This*. Not yet. She’ll be confused.” Again, my words were met with more silence from Nate, even though I saw something like sadness flash in his serious gaze. Unsettled, I stepped forward and took his hands, needing to reassure him. “It’s not because I’m ashamed of this or anything bad like that. It’s only that she’s not aware of all the horrible stuff we know about Chet—er, *Brock*—so she’ll wonder how it’s possible for me to be with you so soon after leaving him.”

He didn’t say it, but I could tell by his expression that even though he was well aware of the circumstances, he had the same concern. “I understand.”

“We’ve already established that it’s crazy. But it’s also real, okay? It’s complicated, I know, but I *want* this. I want to be with you. It’s not too soon because it’s nothing like what I felt for him. Which probably sounds bad considering the marriage thing, but—”

My rambling was halted by a fervent press of his lips to mine. Then he leaned back, nodding grimly. “I want this too. Let’s not worry about the rest. Yet. And if you don’t want to tell Marigold about us until she hears the truth about Brock, that’s fine.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, get your butt inside, and I’ll put out this fire.”

I flashed him another grin, backing up toward the house. “Which one?” And then I spun around, and the sound of his responding chuckle faded into the night as I went.



The next morning, we planned to have a quick breakfast with Cat and the kids before we left. Brooks hadn’t taken off work again since he’d called out the day before, so Nate had woken up early to say goodbye to him before he took off.

I'd just gotten up when he came back inside, and since no one else seemed to be awake yet, he pulled me into the kitchen to give me the kind of electrifying kiss that made my morning cup of coffee feel a bit unnecessary.

Signs of life upstairs made us jump apart, however, and I cursed myself for having asked him to keep things quiet. But no, regardless of how addicting his kisses were, it would be best not to confuse Marigold with the news of ... whatever this was. We still hadn't completely defined "whatever this was," and I had a feeling it would be at least a few hundred miles before we'd be alone enough to do that.

"Thank you again," I called to Cat and her kids a little while later, jumping into the passenger seat with a wave.

Marigold lingered behind, hugging the little ones while crouching on her heels in front of them.

"Too bad I don't have any other friends with kids between here and Bluffton," Nate said from the driver's seat. "I bet she's bummed we're staying at hotels the rest of the way."

I heard him, I swear I did. And I was touched that he cared about what made my daughter happy. That he'd noticed how she was never happier than when she was able to interact with kids.

But at the same, Nate had his hand resting on the top of my seat, and his fingers drew featherlight circles on the back of my neck. If Cat or Marigold happened to look our way, it would probably only look like he was holding the headrest in that hot, casual guy move that wouldn't mean a thing.

Oh, but it did. It meant a lot. It meant that I was sitting here wishing we were anywhere but here, anywhere where we could be alone, so I could grab him by the face and kiss him silly. Nate had a knack for saying a lot without words, and what he communicated right now made me downright weak in the knees.

"Okay, let's hit it," Marigold said as she strolled toward us.

I gave Cat one last wave through my open window, and then we were off. "I'm gonna miss them," I said as we cruised

by the houses on their street.

“Me too,” Marigold called from the back. “How long till lunch?”

“You just ate breakfast,” Nate said, flicking her a disbelieving glance in the rearview.

“You’re one to talk, Mr. Three Squares,” she shot back with a sardonic smile.

She had him with that one. Nate insisted on eating three square meals a day, usually healthy ones (if we didn’t overrule him), and he rarely indulged in the road trip snacks that kept Marigold and me from having much of an appetite when he was ready for lunch.

It all made sense, though, considering what I now knew hid under his simple tees. Rock-hard abs with ridges and valleys that were easily distinguishable while running my fingers over the thin cotton that covered them.

“You wanna tell her, or should I?” Nate asked in a low tone, jerking his chin toward the back of the SUV.

I balked. “What? I thought we agreed—”

He slid me a look and pulled his lips to the center as if to fight a smile. “You wanna tell her *where we’re going*?”

“Ah. Right.” I let out a short laugh and shook it off, and when I turned to talk to Marigold, he shot me a quick wink. Oh, but I was a sucker for winks. “Mari, I called Aunt Hattie this morning to update her, and she’s super jealous of where we’re staying tonight.”

“Where are we staying?”

“The Steel Magnolia House.”

Marigold gasped, and Nate cleared his throat. “You’ve seen that movie? Your mom said it was an old one.”

“I like *some* old things,” she said with a shrug. “Like you guys, for example.”

“Hilarious,” he deadpanned.

Marigold giggled. “Besides, I love Julia Roberts.”

“Wasn’t she the *Runaway Bride* lady?” Nate asked.

Marigold quirked a brow, and I turned toward him, sure that my expression was a carbon copy of my daughter’s. “Why do you know that?”

He held up one hand while he navigated onto the highway with the other. “Not because I’ve seen it, I swear.”

Considering that I, myself, was a runaway bride, his answer felt a little strange. But no, that was silly.

Not everything’s about you, Nikki.

Looking back at Marigold, I gave her a bright smile. “The B&B is only four hours from here. Nate said we can have lunch at their café, hang out there for the afternoon, then spend the night and leave in the morning. That way, we actually get to enjoy it.”

Marigold made a sound like she was impressed. “Thanks, Nate. What’s with the sudden urge to chill out on the tight schedule?”

He shrugged, shooting me a sweet smile as he answered her. “Eh. It’s your road trip too.”

“Gucci.”

The smile dropped from his face, and he gave me a dark look. “No.”

“Oh, yes. That one’s like *cool*. Or *good*.”

He didn’t reply, just adjusted his grip on the steering wheel and rubbed his chin.

Snickering, Marigold slipped on her headphones, which reminded me we still had lots of good stuff on the massive playlist I’d made on his phone. I plucked it out of the cupholder and wiggled it. “Mind if I put on our music?”

“Go for it.”

I plugged it in, then hit play on the music app that automatically appeared on the lock screen. “Carry on My

Wayward Son” by Kansas was first up, which must have been one of Nate’s faves. He didn’t explicitly say it, but I could tell based on how quickly he turned up the volume and the way he tapped the steering wheel with his thumbs as it played.

For the next hour, I worked on my blanket while we jammed out. When a song came on that we’d already heard on the last leg of our trip, I frowned down at the phone. “Dang it. It’s shuffling through all of them. We’re gonna have some repeats.”

“It’s fine. They’re all great songs. You did good.”

“It’s all from your music library,” I pointed out.

He chuckled. “Exactly.”

I didn’t bother responding to that, just went back to my hooking. But a few minutes later, Bad Company’s “Ready for Love” began to play, and I grinned like a schoolgirl.

When it’d come on last time, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about Nate, the connection between us, and the road we were traveling together. It wasn’t like we’d admitted to having feelings for each other or anything, but there’d been sparks. No doubt about it. And now that we were together(ish), and I felt myself falling for him more and more with each passing mile, the song hit me even harder than it had the first time.

Nate shifted in his seat and glanced over his shoulder at Marigold. I followed his gaze and saw that she was tucked deep into the third row, her eyes closed and her headphones on.

With the song filling the space between us, Nate’s eyes darkened a little as he reached over and took my hand. My pulse leaped as he laced our fingers together before bringing our joined hands up to his mouth and kissed the back of mine. I thought he’d let go and release my hand, but he let his lips linger there for a long minute.

And I didn’t mind in the least.

His warm lips stayed pressed against my skin, and his eyes were on the road ... but *yep*. The man could say paragraphs

without even opening his mouth, and he had me hanging on every unspoken word.

NATE

“Thank you for this,” Nikki said, cuddling closer against my side.

I let my head fall back on the soft leather cushion of the couch and sighed. “You’re welcome. I’m shocked to say it, but this was fun.”

“You’re shocked? What?” She sat up, pushing my chest with a giggle. “Are you telling me that watching *Steel Magnolias* in the Steel Magnolia House with a runaway bride and her teenage daughter isn’t your usual idea of fun?”

“Not at all.” I chuckled, picturing them wearing bright-green face masks with their hair in rollers while we watched the movie.

Nikki’s rollers had given her a headache, so she’d removed them halfway through and put her hair in a messy bun. But as far as I knew, Marigold was still wearing hers. Right after the movie ended, she’d gone to sleep in the Pepto Bismol-colored room that Julia Roberts’s character had slept in, and my ears were still ringing from her high-pitched squeal of delight when she’d first seen it.

“Did you like the movie?” Nikki asked, settling against me again with her head on my shoulder.

“I think so. It was funny, but then it got dark. Like, *really* dark. And yet, it somehow stayed funny.” I tilted my head, trying to figure out if that made any sense. I wasn’t any better at reviewing movies than I was at critiquing food.

Nikki must've understood though, because she sighed contentedly. "Cathartic, isn't?"

"What?"

"Being able to laugh about silly nonsense and also process grief and pain at the same time."

I let her words sink in for a minute and thought back to how much of a giggle-fest most of that movie was. When we weren't laughing at Ouiser's zingers, Nikki and Marigold simply smiled with misty looks in their eyes. It was as if they thought watching the movie while sitting in the room where a lot of it was filmed was the coolest thing ever, and they couldn't help but smile.

Then, when it took a turn for the depressing, neither one of them were shy about letting their tears flow. I probably would have attempted to comfort them if I wasn't so busy trying not to cry myself. Because, *dang it*, those Southern women with their impossibly strong friendship and hilarious take on life had totally sucked me in. But maybe it was okay that I hadn't tried to comfort them. Maybe they needed a good cry. That was a thing, right?

I rubbed my hand up and down Nikki's arm and rested my cheek against the top of her head. "Is that why women like chick flicks?" I asked in a low voice. "So you can process your emotions or whatever?"

"Maybe. Did you do some emotional processing, Mr. Bristol?"

I snickered. "Oh, tons."

"I'm sure. Well," she said, reaching for the remote on the coffee table in front of us. "How 'bout we watch a mindless disaster movie next? Or an action flick? Maybe we can reset whatever this movie did to your usually so controlled emotions."

I rolled my eyes as she scrolled through the options on the streaming channel. "Oh, there ya go. *Speed*. Nothing resets emotions like Keanu trying to save a bunch of people on an out-of-control city bus."

Nikki sat up again and blinked at me. “Seriously? That movie is an emotional whirlwind! When he’s under the bus and it’s leaking gas and everyone’s all worried about him? You’re telling me you’re not freaking out right along with them? Or when they kiss on that floor thingy after it slides all over the road and they only wound up with a few scratches? My *heart*, Nate. My heart.”

I threw my head back and laughed at how animatedly she’d moved her hands while she spoke, then I pointed at her. “Something tells me there isn’t a hit movie out there that doesn’t mess with *your* heart.”

“Why do you think they’re hit movies? They *hit* you in the feels.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But I might be a little harder to rattle.”

“Okay, let’s test that theory. You were pretty tough during *Steel Magnolias*, but I bet I know one that made you cry.”

“Which one?”

“*Terminator 2*, when Arnold sacrifices himself.”

I internally winced, but held her gaze. “Meh.”

She grinned. “Liar. But here’s another one. *Top Gun*, when Goose dies.”

Another inward wince, but I managed a not-very-convincing shrug.

At this, Nikki crossed her arms over her chest and sat up straighter. “Fine. I’m gonna pull out the big guns.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes. You’re can’t play it cool with this one.”

“Lay it on me.”

She leaned closer—so close I could smell the ice cream she’d eaten during the movie and idly wondered if I’d be able to taste it on her lips—then a wicked smile slid over that perfect mouth of hers. “*The Lion King*, when Mufasa dies.”

I groaned out loud, everything I'd been thinking about kissing and ice cream immediately chased away by childhood trauma. I mean, *seriously*. That is a horrifyingly sad thing to do in a kid's movie. How my entire generation wasn't messed up from that, I didn't know. Then again, maybe we were.

"That's just mean," I said in a tortured whisper, my hand on my chest. I sucked in an overly dramatic breath and made my lip quiver as if I were about to cry.

"Direct hit. I know." She wagged her brows, then grabbed my face between her hands and tugged me into a kiss.

I eagerly sat forward, my hands instantly going around her back and holding her close. We were the only guests at the bed and breakfast tonight, and with Marigold upstairs in the way-too-pink room and the owners sleeping wherever they slept, I realized this was the first real semblance of privacy we'd had since last night's amazing first kiss.

Savoring the feel of her in my arms, I ran my hands over her back, enjoying the smooth cotton of her floral pajamas under my calloused palms. Her grip on my face loosened as we continued kissing, and her fingers wandered to the base of my neck, making goose bumps spread over my shoulders.

But before I could get lost in the sweetness of her lips—and yes, the ice cream flavor I'd been pondering earlier—she let go and settled back onto the couch with the remote pointed at the TV again. "You know what you need to watch, since I know you won't read it?"

"What?" I asked, rubbing a hand over my neck where her hands had just been, trying to dispense the heat that flooded my veins. I resumed my previous posture and slumped next to her, putting my feet up and my arm around her shoulders.

"*Pride and Prejudice*," she replied. "Ooh, even better, maybe they have *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*."

I blinked rapidly as she used the remote to search for it. "Wait, what?"

"Well, it's the classic Jane Austen adaptation, but with a zombie plot woven in. So it's an action movie, but it'll still

have the reason I want you to watch it.”

“Which is ...?”

She found what she was looking for and played it, then tucked her legs up next to her on the couch and cuddled against me. As the opening credits rolled, she looked up and narrowed her eyes a little, a faint smile tugging on the corners of her mouth. “Which is ... Mr. Darcy.”

“You want me to watch it for Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes, because I’ve decided that you’re *my* Mr. Darcy. It’s a thing.”

I quirked a brow at her, having absolutely no idea what she was talking about or why her eyes danced with mischief. But I did know I liked it, so who cared what it meant?

Except that, as usual, Nikki didn’t need me to ask questions in order for her to give some answers. “Wanna know why I think you’re like Mr. Darcy?”

“Tell me.”

“Because Elizabeth Bennet—she’s the heroine and probably one of the most famous heroines of all time—”

“More famous than Rose from *Titanic*?”

She snorted. “Um, yes. Anyway, Elizabeth hated Mr. Darcy at first because she thought he was prideful and arrogant.”

This suddenly didn’t bode well for me, so I pulled back a little and made a face at her.

She giggled and poked my side. “I didn’t hate you, and I never thought that. Keep listening. She misunderstood him. She thought he felt one way about her—because of his actions and words, or lack of words, really—but he actually, and I quote, ‘ardently’ loved her. It’s a whole mess, but he does eventually figure out how to express that to her, and they get to know each other better.”

Sliding my gaze to the TV, I pursed my lips. “Uh-huh.”

“I think you’re like my own brooding, quiet, grumpy Mr. Darcy. And I misjudged you at first for that, and you misjudged me. Right?”

I met her gaze, nodding once.

“Exactly. This will be a good movie for both of us. I definitely need the reminder not to judge a book by its cover.”

She said the last part in a lower tone, and I knew she wasn’t just talking about judging me for being grumpy, or me judging her for being sunshiney after leaving her fiancé at the altar. So, instead of trying to find the right reply, I pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head before resting my cheek on it again so I could watch the movie.



If it weren’t for Nikki and Marigold, I would’ve done the final thirteen or so hours to Bluffton in one shot. But since I’d promised we’d slow things down and have some fun, we’d started the day with a hearty Southern breakfast in the dining room at the Steel Magnolia House and were veering off course to stop at a BBQ festival in Butler, Alabama.

I’d eaten plenty of good barbecue growing up in South Carolina, but my passengers were new to it, and the taste they’d had in Texas had given them a serious appetite for the good stuff.

It’d been smooth sailing with minimal stops all day—thanks to our big breakfast. But when we were a few miles outside of Butler, the classic rock ballad blasting from the speakers abruptly cut off, enveloping the SUV in total silence. I looked at Nikki, and she looked at me, then we both glanced at Marigold.

“What happened?” she whined, leaning forward with her hands on the backs of our seats.

She’d been sitting in the middle row this morning, and had actually been warming up to our “old people” playlist. Enjoying it, even. Possibly because she’d also enjoyed an

eighties movie the night before, so maybe she was feeling retro. But as I pressed various buttons on my dash to figure out why my radio had powered down for seemingly no reason, I was fighting a laugh at how Marigold looked more disappointed than we were that REO Speedwagon's "Keep on Loving You" had stopped.

A flash of red caught my eye near the speedometer, and I frowned. Was that the battery light? There was no way. But as it continued to flicker, I instantly knew what the problem was. "Oh, *great*."

"What is it?" Nikki gathered her blanket project and tucked it into the Hobby Lobby bag at her feet. "What's wrong?"

"It's the alternator. I think it's going out."

"The alter-what?" Marigold asked.

"The alternator. It turns mechanical energy into electric energy, and newer cars have systems in place to turn off nonessential electrical things when the alternator is malfunctioning."

"Like the radio," Nikki mumbled.

"Yeah. And I just saw my battery light flash, which is another sign."

Marigold pointed to the dash. "The battery light is literally shaped like a battery. Doesn't that mean it's the battery, not the alter-whatever?"

"If it was the battery, the radio would still work. It operates at a way lower voltage."

"That doesn't even make sense," she pressed. "If the—"

Nikki turned in her seat and faced her daughter. "Mari, sorry. Let's figure out if this is an emergency situation first, then talk about the rest after. Okay?"

She slumped back, and then I caught sight of her grabbing her headphones and heading for the third row in my rearview mirror.

I looked back at Nikki and nodded at the phone in her lap. “Can you see how far we are from an auto shop? We need to have this looked at before we’re stranded in the middle of nowhere.”

“On it.” She did as I asked, then started the turn-by-turn directions on her phone so she could tell me where to go. “How big of a deal is this?”

I shrugged. “Hopefully not a big one. We’re not far from town, so maybe we can make it there before the alternator quits on us.”

“And then?”

“And then, if they can fix it while we’re at the festival, we can still stay in Birmingham tonight and go to that breakfast place you wanted to hit in the morning.”

“And if they can’t fix it?”

Pulling my lips into a grim line, I slid her a look. “Then, I guess you’ll get your wish for another adventure in the form of messed-up plans.”

Her responding grin was so bright it almost hurt, and it was all I could do not to grab her hand and kiss it. I’d rather kiss her lips, obviously, but that’d just be dangerous since I was currently driving. And not only driving, but simultaneously willing the alternator to hang on until we made it to a mechanic so I wouldn’t have to get it towed there.

She steepled her fingers in front of her face and tapped her fingertips together. “Can’t wait to see what happens.”

NIKKI

“I ’m so hungry,” Marigold whimpered as she slumped on the bench outside the auto shop.

I patted her knee. “Hang in there, kid. When Nate comes out, hopefully we’ll have some good news and can go enjoy the festival while they fix the alternator.”

“If the alternator is even the problem.”

I shot her a wry smile and bumped her leg with mine. “Chill, bruh.”

This made her snort-laugh, and I grinned, grateful she was still in the dark about Chet. Joking around with her and pretending my ex wasn’t a psycho con man was way more fun than having to reassure her that she was safe from him. There’d be plenty of time for that when we reached Aunt Hattie’s house, where she’d be a lot more likely to believe it, and when I’d hopefully have more info that would make it true.

“Bad news,” Nate said as he pushed out of the glass door to the shop. “I was right, it’s the alternator.” He paused and shot Marigold a mock-glare, which she returned with a playful chuckle. “But the problem is,” he went on, “they don’t have a replacement. They ordered it from the next town over, but since the day’s half over and they’ve got other cars to work on, ours won’t be ready until tomorrow.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Well, shoot. Looks like we need to find a place to stay in Butler tonight.”

Marigold sat forward. “Can I find another funky Airbnb?”

Glancing at Nate, I laughed when I found him mouthing something at the wooden awning over our heads. Then I handed Marigold my phone. “Have at it, girlfriend.”

“Yes.”

She swiped the phone and danced in her seat as she navigated to the website, and Nate meandered over to the wooden railing before us and leaned against it.

I met his gaze, and the amusement I found there made my heart dance in my chest the same way Marigold had done on this bench. But then that amusement drifted toward a distinctly smoldering edge the longer our eyes held, and I found myself needing to look away before I lunged at the man.

I swear, keeping the situation with Brock under wraps was about a million times easier than playing it cool around this very hot man. And it wasn't only the way he looked—though, obviously, I was attracted to him physically. It was the undeniable chemistry we had, and the way being near him made me feel like I'd known him my whole life instead of less than a week. It was like we belonged together and had spent thirty-three years wandering around trying to find each other.

Wow. That's absurd. Right?

Maybe not. It'd be absurd to pretend I didn't feel this way about him, and my surety that he felt the same way made it even sweeter. I saw it in his eyes when he looked at me on our drive to Butler. I heard it in his voice when he spoke to me, and I felt it coming off him in waves as we sat in comfortable silence, side by side.

Well, not silence. Surrounded by awesome music or when Marigold and I chatted about this or that while Nate acted like an entirely comfortable audience to our two-woman show. He just *fit*. We fit. And I loved it. In fact, I was fairly certain that if we kept this up, I'd grow to love *him*.

“Anything?” he asked after Marigold had scrolled for a few minutes.

She scowled and shook her head. “Nope.”

“Maybe we’ll have to stay in a regular hotel,” I said, leaning in so I could look over her shoulder at the phone.

“*Boring*,” she replied, handing me the phone.

“Isn’t it kind of a teenager thing for you to think everything is boring?” Nate asked.

“Isn’t it kind of an old people thing for you to think teenagers think everything is boring?” she returned with a wide smile.

His lips quirked, and he jammed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and hung his head.

Turning my attention to the phone instead of continuing to watch him and my daughter act so stinking adorable, I searched for “boring” hotels. “There are no Marriott properties, unfortunately, but there is a cute boutique hotel downtown that might be more eclectic for Mari and still normal enough for you, Nate.”

“Sounds like a winner. Wanna call and book two rooms while I grab us an Uber to the festival?”

Feeling a rush from the teamwork vibe, I nodded enthusiastically and tapped on the number to do my part. A little while later, we’d safely arrived at Butler Fest with two rooms under Nate’s name waiting for us when we were finished.

The crisp, fall air was filled with the rich, languid, and sweet scent of cooked barbecue. Even though I’d already sampled my fair share of sauce-covered ribs, blackened chicken, and pork butt—which had been my favorite—the scent still made my mouth water. I looked around at the vendor stalls that lined the crowded aisles. People meandered through, shopping and eating and having a good time. I loved that we didn’t have to rush now that we weren’t planning on driving to Birmingham tonight, and we had Nate’s faulty alternator to thank for it.

“That was so fun,” Marigold said as she ran up to the pole I was leaning on while I waited for her to get off the carnival ride.

I chuckled. It was a wonder she could ride these things after eating as much as she had, but that was kids for you.

“Can I go again?” she asked, fingers linked under her chin.

“Sure.”

“Where’s Nate?”

“Bathroom.”

“Cool. Bye.”

She skipped back to the line without so much as a glance over her shoulder and my lips stretched up into a smile. I loved that girl so much it never failed to amaze me. There was nothing I wouldn’t do for her, and I hoped she’d understand that all the deception on my part was so she could feel this free and relaxed. The burden of worrying about Chet—*Brock, dang it*—was heavy on my mind, but it didn’t need to be on hers. And if I were fully honest with myself, I’d say it helped lighten my own load to see her having fun. I wasn’t ready to lose that.

“Hi.”

Nate’s greeting from behind me made my smile grow even wider, even as my pulse skyrocketed thanks to how deliciously close he’d spoken near my ear. I reached back and sought out his hand, holding it behind my back so Marigold wouldn’t see if she happened to look over here.

“So, question,” he said lightly, his grip on my hand tightening a little as he stayed behind me.

“Yes?”

“Are we ... officially together?”

I let out a quiet laugh and peeked over my shoulder at him. “I’d like that. Would you?”

“Yes.”

Something in his eyes had me worrying my lip. “But?”

“But ... I don’t know if it’s a good idea to keep it between us.”

I looked toward the line again and waved with my free hand when I caught her eye. “Why not?”

“Because your kid is sharp as a tack.”

I snorted in agreement. “She is.”

“She’s gonna figure it out, and when she does, she’s not gonna be happy we didn’t tell her.”

It made sense, and I agreed to some extent, but my protective instincts pushed all logical thought away. “I don’t have a ton of experience with dating, considering I didn’t date anyone between Damon and Chet, but I had a few single mom friends during that time. They always waited to introduce guys to their kids until they knew it was serious.”

At this, he let go of my hand and stepped forward so we were shoulder to shoulder. Or, well, shoulder to bicep since he was quite a bit taller than me. He crossed his arms over his broad chest and kept his eyes on the ride, both of us watching Marigold get on with the next round of riders.

“Is that because they didn’t want to keep having to explain why things didn’t work out with the guys they dated?” he asked.

I nodded, but since he was still looking at the ride, he didn’t see it. “Yes. So when I first met Chet—ugh, I keep wanting to correct myself, but I think it’s better if I just call him that.” I straightened from the pole I’d been leaning against and waved off the tangent. “Anyway, when I first met him, it was easy not to introduce him to Mari because she was at school, and we could go to lunch or whatever without it being an issue. Then, when I was sure he was a good guy—*whoops*—and we were more serious, I told her I’d been seeing him for a few weeks and finally felt like it was time to introduce them. She didn’t think anything of it.”

I felt him shift beside me as he thought about what I said. Then, when he spoke, it was with a gentle tone. “I feel like that’s a little different. Nothing in her life was a mess at the time, right?”

“Right ...?”

“So, why would she think anything of it?” He let the question hang, then blew out a breath. “I guess what I’m saying is, since I already know her and we’ve been sharing small spaces and are constantly together, it feels weird to lie to her. It might blow up in our faces.”

He was right. I felt it in my bones, but I stubbornly hung onto the fear of losing the comforting lightness we’d been enjoying. I shook my head and bumped him with my shoulder. “Hey, it’s not for long. We just need more info so we can honestly promise her that everything’s going to be fine, then we’ll tell her.”

“But everything *is* going to be fine, because I’m not going to let anything happen to either of you.”

His words were so certain, so heartfelt, I couldn’t bear to continue the conversation without looking at his sweet face. I turned, gazing up at him. “Thank you for that. I trust you, and I believe you when you say that. But if we told Marigold the truth about her father, the guy who was almost her stepfather, and that I’m now dating you, I don’t think she’d be in the right headspace to set all the made-for-TV drama aside and feel secure. But since I’ve decided to stay in Bluffton—and not just because of you, but because I think it would be best for my daughter and myself—we’ll have plenty of time to talk to her when we get there.”

His lips folded in until they disappeared, and he looked over my head. “Fine. But I have one more question.”

“What?”

He looked down at me again, trapping me with those gorgeous eyes of his. “Are you sure it’s because of all that, and it’s not because you’re unsure this is going to last? I can’t even believe I’m asking you that considering how long I’ve known you, but after everything with Chelsea ...” He trailed off and shook his head abruptly, as if to shake out some thoughts he wasn’t comfortable with. He took deep breath. “I guess I just don’t want to go down this road with you if it’s like a one-foot-in, one-foot-out kinda deal.”

I opened my mouth to answer him, but movement caught my eye from the direction of the ride, and I looked over to find Marigold heading our way. “Hold that thought,” I said to Nate, then turned to my daughter with a bright smile. “How was it?”

NATE

“Great,” Marigold replied as she skidded to a halt in front of us, showering a spray of loose dirt all over our feet. “Oops, sorry. One more time?”

Nikki snickered, barely having time to say yes before her daughter was off again. Then she turned back to me and pressed a quick kiss to my cheek while Marigold’s back was still turned.

Then she stepped back and put her hands on her hips, widening her stance in some kind of Wonder Woman pose. “My feet are both firmly planted right here. I promise. This is purely because I don’t think it’s time to rain on Marigold’s life parade.”

I chuckled at the picture she made as she stood like that, realizing there was no need to rush this. Just because I felt myself falling headfirst for this woman at a speed that shouldn’t be possible didn’t mean we needed to shout it from the rooftops or anything. I’d wanted some assurance from her that she wasn’t feeling flighty about us because I didn’t want a sequel to the Chelsea saga, and I’d gotten it. And now that she was staying in Bluffton, she was right. We’d have time for the rest.

Nodding, I turned back toward the ride and decided to lighten things up. “Fine. But your feet better be ready to move from this spot when the Suburban’s fixed. I like you too much to leave you in Butler.”

She tapped her chin. “Hmm. I don’t know, I might be happy here. The pork butt is divine.”

Laughing, I shot her a wink. “You really do live to eat, huh?”

“I sure do. You should try it sometime.”

“I have a feeling I will since you’re already changing everything else about me.”

She swatted my arm. “I am not.”

“You are.” I turned her toward me and pointed at myself. “Look at my face. Do you see these cracks?”

“No, what cracks?” she asked with a bubble of laughter.

“The cracks from smiling too much. My face isn’t used to it. You’re gonna make me look eighty, and then I’ll look as old as Marigold thinks I am.”

“I bet you’re gonna age like fine wine. Men always do.”

She rolled her eyes as if that was a huge injustice, and my mind conjured up images of her as she grew older, and it clicked into place like the rest of my short or long-term goals and plans always did. Get the girl. Date the girl. Marry the girl. Grow old with the girl. A to-do list shaped up and hung in my mind like it was taped to the fridge, and I grinned at how dumb that sounded, even to me.

“What are you smiling about right now?” she asked dreamily.

“I was making a plan.”

She huffed. “Now *that’s* something I’m proud to have changed about you. Look around. Look how awesome this festival is. If you’d stuck with your original plan, we wouldn’t even be here right now.”

I acknowledged that with a few quick bobs of my head, then shrugged. “Yeah, but trust me, the plan I’m thinking about is a good one. You wouldn’t wanna change it if you knew what it was.”

“Oh really? Now I’m intrigued. Tell me.”

I wrinkled my nose, then turned back to the ride where Marigold was boarding for the hundredth time today. “Nah. I think I’ll make you wait and see.”



That night, after the girls were safely in their room—that connected to mine because I still wanted them close, just in case—I pulled out my phone and called Paul. I slumped onto the king bed in my room and laid back while it rang.

“Hey, man,” my cousin greeted me. “How’s the trip going?”

I’d texted with him quite a bit along the way, and he knew most of what was going on, including the fact that Nikki and I had kissed in Texas. But he didn’t know we were officially together since that had only just happened, and like the teenage girl I was turning into thanks to some kind of osmosis, I wanted to tell him.

“It’s great. We’re in Butler, Alabama.”

“I thought you were staying in Birmingham tonight.”

I sat up with a sigh and quickly recounted the events of the day for him, chuckling afterward. “I know, it’s a mess.”

“Yeah, well, at least it means more time spent with your new girl.”

“Who is now officially my girl, as of today.”

He laughed again. “Nice work. So, wow, now you’re gonna be a stepdad to a teenager.”

“Hey, easy there. We’re dating, not engaged. It’s only been a few days.”

Though, it wasn’t like I hadn’t asked for reassurance from Nikki that she wanted this to be serious between us. I’d even formed an honest-to-goodness plan in my mind to take this from dating to marriage to growing old together. But in time, not today.

“True,” Paul allowed. “But you’re not gonna tell me you don’t want it to end up that way, right? Otherwise, I highly doubt you would have started something with her after all that stuff with Chelsea.”

I smirked. The guy knew me well.

“The whole point of dating at our age is to eventually get to the growing-old-together part anyway, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“So, there you go. No one goes into a new relationship thinking it’s not gonna last. Well, they shouldn’t, anyway. If you’re going into this thinking it will, that’s pretty normal, man.”

“Cool.” I hadn’t known I needed to hear that, but my shoulders relaxed, and I felt a little lighter. Nikki might be used to jumping into new adventures, but I wasn’t. So hearing this stuff from someone I trusted was good for me. “How are things over there?”

“Done gossiping already? Lame.”

I chuckled. “Shut up.”

“Things are good. And actually, I have some news.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Looks like you’re not the only one who’s about to be a dad.”

I started to say something about how that wasn’t exactly the case with me since Marigold would need to get to know me a lot better before I tried to step into some kind of fatherly role with her, but then his words landed, and I shut my mouth with a snap.

“Did I lose you?” Paul asked.

“No, sorry. What did you say?”

“I’m gonna be a dad, Nate.”

My mind whirled. My cousin and his wife were best friends for years before they finally ended up together, and a

huge cause of the delay was the fact that she had a genetic heart condition, and she had a ton of feelings about not wanting to cross that friendship line with Paul because of it.

I didn't know all the details, but I did know her heart condition continued to play a part in everything they did, including the fact that he'd recently requested to transfer out of the military and into a government contractor role so they could stay in Bluffton and be near her doctors.

But even bigger than that, they'd been struggling with wanting to have children but not knowing the best way to go about it. Shelby couldn't carry the baby herself because it was too risky, so they'd been exploring other options since right after they were married. And now he was saying he was about to become a dad?

"That's amazing, Paul," I said when I finally found my voice. "I'm stoked for you."

"Thanks. We are too."

"What's the deal with it? Is Shelby ... is she pregnant?" I wasn't sure if it was right to ask since it was a sensitive subject, but the idea of her being at risk of heart failure made my stomach knot for him. I couldn't imagine being excited for the baby and scared for your wife at the same time.

"No, she's not. You want the nitty gritty?"

"Sure. Lay it on me."

"We decided to use my sperm along with eggs from an anonymous donor so we wouldn't risk the baby having Shelby's condition. And since Shelby can't carry the baby, we found a surrogate."

I stood and paced the room, my poor face dealing with another one of those giant smiles it'd been tortured with so much lately. "That's great. Wow."

"Yeah, it feels like a seriously good happy ending for us. I almost can't believe it."

"You guys deserve it, for sure. So, when is the baby coming?"

He laughed a little. “Well, that’s the thing. Soon. She’s already pretty close to her due date.”

This caused my feet to halt in place and I balked. “Seriously?”

“Yep.”

“And you’re just now telling me?”

“We haven’t really told anyone. Shelby wanted to keep it hush-hush until closer to the due date. But she said it was fine to tell people now, so here I am.”

Man, what was with the women in my life wanting to keep things under wraps for random amounts of time? I shook my head, clearing away the unnecessary train of thought. Not the same thing.

“Well, congratulations, Paul. And tell Shelby for me.”

“Tell her yourself, she’s right here.”

Before I had a chance to blink, Shelby’s voice filled the line. “You ready to be an uncle, Nate? Well, sort of. But Uncle Nate sounds better than Cousin Nate, don’t you think?”

I chuckled. “Yeah. And I’m definitely ready. Congratulations.”

“Thank you. I’m so happy we’ll be here to raise the baby near family. Did you hear that Will’s doing the same thing Paul’s doing so he and Aria don’t have to leave?”

I shook my head, then realized she couldn’t see me. “No, I didn’t hear that. That’s great. I thought you all would have to leave right when I got there, so I’m glad to hear you’ll still be around.”

“We’re all really happy too. It’s so cool that we’ll all be together again. Growing up together and now getting to raise our kids together. I know I’m not the pregnant one, so I don’t have an excuse for being so emotional about it, but I’m just so happy.”

“You’re allowed to be happy,” I said. “And listen, if you guys need anything when I get there, call me.”

“You got it. Okay, I’ll give you back to Paul now.”

We said our goodbyes, then my cousin was back. “She’s so funny. She’s determined to make Beau and Zac figure out a way to stay here too so the whole group can be together, but they’ve still got some time left on their contracts so at least we’ll have that long.”

I pictured the group of Marines waiting for me out there and couldn’t help another stupid grin. I’d promised Nikki she could join our friend group if she decided to stay in Bluffton, and now that we were dating and she planned to stay, I couldn’t wait for us to hang with them as a couple. It would have sucked to be the only single guy in the group. Not badly enough for me to get back with Chelsea in order to remedy that, of course, but still.

Paul and I chatted for another few minutes about the baby, then I told him I’d text him when we were on the road again and hung up. Just as I was about to put my phone down so I could go shower, I got a text from Nikki, asking me who I was talking to.

Me: How did you know I was on the phone?

Nikki: These walls are paper thin.

Me: It was my cousin Paul. He and his wife are having a baby.

I sat down on the bed and leaned against the headboard, staring down at the text I’d just sent. I wasn’t sure if I needed to spell out the details over text, but it wasn’t really necessary. Regardless of the method, the basic fact was true. My cousin and his best-friend-turned-wife were finally about to get the baby they’d been wishing for.

Nikki: That’s amazing! Tomorrow you need to tell me everything so I know all about my new friends in Bluffton.

Me: You got it. Now leave me alone and go to sleep. We’ve got a long day tomorrow.

She sent back a gif of someone saluting in a very sarcastic way, making me laugh.

Me: Stop it. I'm supposed to be grumpy, remember?

Once again, instead of replying with words, she sent back a gif. This time it was a brunette with curls around her face wearing an old-fashioned dress. She blushed and smiled at someone, her lashes fluttering before the gif started over again.

Me: Who is that?

Nikki: Elizabeth Bennet, but not the zombie movie one. Here's her Mr. Darcy.

A second after she sent the text, she followed it up with one of a dude wearing a white scarf-like thing around his neck and insanely bushy sideburns. The caption under the gif read, "I have not that talent which some possess of conversing easily with strangers."

I snorted.

Me: Is that supposed to be me? Please tell me I'm hotter than that dude.

Nikki: You are, but I will say women around the world are obsessed with this version of Mr. Darcy.

Me: Are you?

Nikki: *shrug* I prefer my version.

And with that, I sent her one final message—a gif of my own, of someone shouting "Go to sleep!" in a hilariously angry way—and tossed my phone. This woman was going to be the death of me.

NIKKI

“I can’t believe we’re actually here. This is sending me,” Marigold marveled, spinning in a slow circle in the middle of the quaint square in Covington, Georgia. “I feel like I’m in the show.”

The show in reference had been over for years, but the town of Covington still proudly welcomed fans of *The Vampire Diaries*, and several companies ran tours that brought fans to filming locations throughout the town. The restaurant in the square that was so often featured in the show, The Mystic Grill, even had a basement with memorabilia for sale, plus there was a shop across the street with more TVD merch.

“And this show that they filmed here is a vampire love story? Like *Twilight*?” Nate asked her with his lips pursed and arms crossed as he surveyed the picturesque setting.

Marigold scoffed. “The vampires in this show don’t sparkle—*periodt*.”

He cut me a look, and I read it so clearly it was like the words were scrawled across his forehead. *Now teenagers just add extra letters to existing words and give them a new definition?* The answer was yes, they did. For emphasis, duh.

But as he held me captive with that expression, I started to understand it was about more than the absurdity of her generation’s slang. He wasn’t impressed with Marigold’s choice of fictional entertainment. Though this thing between us was super new, images of us sharing the weight of

parenting responsibilities flashed through my mind when he looked at me like that.

I could see it so clearly. Us, in the future, having an equal say in the shows we allowed Marigold to watch or the music we allowed her to listen to. The people she talked to online, the friends she spent her time with. I knew I was a great mom, but it wasn't always easy to monitor every bit of media she consumed when I had a full-time job as a midwife, and she spent so much time in her room now that she was fully embracing her teenageryness.

Doing it alone had been a challenge, and even after I'd started dating He Who Has Two Names, we'd never slipped into a partnership vibe with my daughter. Looking back, he was kind to her but largely uninterested in what she did or where she went.

Nate wouldn't be like that. I was sure of it.

"I'm gonna go grab a coffee at the shop over there," Nate said, jerking his chin toward the row of businesses to our right. "What do you guys want?"

"I'll have an iced chai, please," I told him with a grateful smile. "With—"

"Three pumps of vanilla and two Splendas. I know."

Glaring at him, I resisted the urge to kiss that smirk right off his mouth. He could tease me for my sweet drink preference all he wanted, but the fact that he remembered my order after only seeing me get it twice was mighty dang *sweet* of him.

"I'm good," Marigold said sourly, breaking the moment.

There was something about her tone that had Nate shooting me a questioning look, so I pulled my lips to the side and gave him a small shrug before he walked away. It wasn't the first time Marigold had responded to him without her usual bubbly exuberance, and Nate and I had both noticed the change.

It'd started this morning after breakfast. Since Marigold had wanted to veer north to Covington, we'd left Butler

yesterday and headed to Birmingham, as we'd originally planned before the alternator went out. We stayed at a bed-and-breakfast that was not unlike the Steel Magnolia House, and we'd spent our time there relaxing in one of the many hammocks that dotted the wraparound porch of the Victorian home.

Marigold was fine when we'd first arrived and had lightly teased Nate about staying in a room they called The Love Shack. She'd screamed with glee when she saw the pink-and-gray room for the two of us—dubbed the Yin & Yang room, featuring a queen-sized bed for me and a pink daybed for her. But by this morning, there was something very different about her. Or, more specifically, how she spoke to Nate.

When he was safely out of earshot, I stepped closer to my daughter and bumped her shoulder with mine. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m great. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“That’s what I’m wondering. You seem a little ... colder with Nate lately. He drove pretty far off route to bring you to this town so you could see where your favorite show was filmed, and you don’t seem very grateful.”

“I’m grateful.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Well, maybe you can work on showing it a little more? Nate’s been taking us to all these fun places for the last few days, but the closer we get to Bluffton, the less you seem to like him. Is there a reason?”

“Maybe you think that because you’re so focused on how much *you* like him.” She lifted her chin defiantly at this, and a weight settled over my shoulders with a heavy thud.

It was time. I had to tell her.

“We should sit down and talk.”

“It’s fine. I’m not pressed. I get it. You left Chet because of Nate. I’ve already figured it out.”

My head snapped back as if she’d slapped me. “What?”

“He grew up around Aunt Hattie, so I figure you guys must’ve met before this, and then Nate swooped us up because he couldn’t bear the thought of you marrying someone else. It makes sense, I guess.”

“Yeah, maybe if we were in a dramatic vampire show with a love-triangle twist.”

“Are you saying that’s not what happened?”

“Yes, because that’s not even close to what happened.”

“Okay, so you expect me to believe that you were ready to marry Chet—like, legit in your dress, all dripped out—and then started dating Nate the next day, and you guys didn’t even know each other before?”

I held up my hands, taking an involuntary step back. “Whoa, we need to back up. First of all, I didn’t start dating Nate the day after the wedding. We only just started talking about having feelings for each other when we were in Fort Worth.”

“Ah, so,” she counted on her fingers, “what, three or four days later? Not much better.”

Seething, I shook my head a few times to clear it, but I knew I only had myself to blame for this. *Of course* that was how she saw it. I’d kept her in the dark about so much for so long that she had no other choice but to jump to her own conclusions.

“There are some things you should know that might help you understand what’s going on between Nate and me. Can we sit and talk, please?”

Marigold huffed dramatically and trudged over to a nearby bench under a tree. “Go.”

Clearing my throat rather than scolding her for her tone, I began at the beginning. “So, first of all, I know we haven’t talked much about your biological father.”

“Oh, we’re takin’ this *way* back.”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Well, you said he was a bad guy. I didn’t wanna know more.”

“If you still don’t, that’s fine. I’d rather not have to tell you because it would be a lot for you to wrap your head around. But it’s relevant to the situation we’re in now, so all I’ll say is that he’s still in prison, and at one point, Chet was his cellmate.”

Marigold’s eyes bulged. “What? How is that possible? You were gonna marry a guy who shared a cell with my bio dad?”

“No. I was going to marry a guy who was using a fake name and pretending to be someone he wasn’t. That phone call you heard him on before the wedding was my first clue that something wasn’t right, and once I realized he somehow knew your dad and that he wasn’t marrying me for the right reasons, Aunt Hattie helped us get away.”

“So he wasn’t talking like that because of something at work like you said. You lied.”

“I did.” It was ugly, but it was the truth.

“Lemme guess, you did it to protect me.”

“I did,” I said again. “And even though I felt justified at the time, and I’d still do anything to protect you from the horrible things in this world, I’m sorry if you’re hurt by that.”

She snorted but didn’t reply.

“Marigold,” I pleaded, taking her hands. “I didn’t think it would be good for you to worry about anything until I knew what the heck was going on myself. I thought we could have this fun adventure while I figured it all out, and you wouldn’t have to travel across the country burdened by all of this. You have to believe me. I didn’t want you to be scared.”

“Well, I was ‘burdened’ by the fact that my mom was simping over some other dude right after she bailed on her fiancé for like ... no reason.”

“I told you there was a good reason but that I didn’t want you to worry about it.”

“Bruh.”

Sighing, I let go of her hands so I could rub my temples. “I get it. I made a mess of this. But I was freaking out, and I didn’t want you to freak out too. I did what I thought I had to do.”

“But I’m not a little kid anymore. You can’t just glow things up and think I won’t notice. And you definitely can’t stan the dude we’re sharing a car with without me noticing—and it’s high-key annoying that you thought I wouldn’t.”

“I— Well. Hmm.” Thanks to context, I got the gist of what she was saying, but a lot of the individual words tripped me up.

“You think I couldn’t see you guys holding hands? And the way you look at each other. Don’t get me started on how you stayed up late texting someone in Butler *and* Birmingham with a fat grin on your face. Who else would it have been? Chet?” She trailed off and snorted again. “I’m not blind.”

Thoroughly ashamed, I looked down at my lap as my cheeks flooded with warmth. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. Whatever.”

“It’s not fine,” I replied, raising my gaze to hers. “I want to fix this. I realize I handled this poorly, and I don’t want everything Chet took from us to include my relationship with you.”

“Okay, well, Chet didn’t tell you to lie to me, so take the L.”

Ouch.

That one hurt, but she had me. “You’re right.”

We sat in silence for what felt like forever before she sighed and shrugged. “Anyway, you said you wanted to figure things out before you told me anything. Does that mean you figured them out?”

“Yes. And I can tell you as much as I know, or I can just say that Chet is a bad guy, and I’m—*we’re*—going to do everything we can to make sure you’re safe.”

“*We’re* ... as in Nate. Who is like, what, your boyfriend now?”

I blushed. “Yeah, I guess so. We’re together, and we want to see where it goes. We’re both surprised that we have such strong feelings for each other after such a short time, but we’re excited to explore it once we get back to Bluffton.”

“But what are you guys gonna do when we go home to California?”

“Um, well, I was hoping you’d be okay with staying in Bluffton. It wouldn’t be the first time the two of us have had to start over thanks to ... well, unfortunate situations with men. You have no idea how hard it is for me to say that out loud, but listen, we’re a team. You and me against the world, right? It’ll be fun.”

“Seriously?”

I brightened, excited over her lack of an immediate refusal. “Yes! We can start over. I’ll get a new job at a local hospital or maybe even a midwifery practice that specializes in natural births. And I’ve already looked up the schools—Nate’s friend Layla is a teacher at Bluffton High School, so you’ll have a friendly face when you move up next year. And, oh my goodness, some of the neighborhoods are adorable. There are historic houses and beautiful trees with Spanish moss. Remember the ones we took photos in front of last year? I swear, that town seems like it would be an amazing place for you to grow up.”

She blinked at me, her lips parted slightly, and her head moved back and forth in a slow shake.

“It ... um, sounds perfect, right?”

“This ain’t it, chief.” Now it was my turn to blink at my daughter and shake my head before she continued. “I have friends in California, Mom. I have a *life* there. You can’t expect me to be chill with moving to the opposite side of the country just because you and Nate want to ‘explore your feelings’ or whatever. What happens when it doesn’t work

out? Are we gonna move somewhere else and start over *again*? Dude, that's so lame!"

I inhaled sharply, shocked to my core. "Marigold. Easy with the attitude. Let's try to talk about this—"

"What? Like adults? *Now* you want me to act like an adult when you've been treating me like a toddler this whole time? When you're trying to move me away from my friends and family because of some *guy*?"

"No! I was going to say let's talk about this respectfully, and—"

"I'm done talking about this. It's obvious you're just gonna do whatever you want, no matter what I say. So whatever. Move me. Lie to me. I'll survive."

Before I could even come up with a response to her rant, she took off. I stood to go after her, then paused when I saw her heading for a bench on the other side of the grassy town square. She threw herself onto it and put her back to me, yanking her headphones from around her neck and pulling them over her ears.

I slowly lowered myself onto the bench. She needed a minute. I needed a minute. I'd failed her miserably for days now—or longer, I guessed—so the least I could do was collect myself before I tried to approach her again.

Something caught my eye, and I looked up to see Nate approaching with three beverages balanced between his large hands. He'd gotten Marigold her favorite drink. Even though she'd sullenly told him she didn't want one, he'd thought to get it for her anyway, just in case.

Something cracked in my chest, and it was all I could do to keep my face from showing it as he grew nearer.

But Nate was too perceptive for that. He eyed me warily as he sat down, handing me my drink before putting my daughter's on the bench next to him. "I take it you told her everything?"

"Yep."

“Is she okay?”

“No.”

Sighing, his gaze traveled across the lawn to Marigold. He took a sip of his iced coffee—black, no sugar.

I’d teased him about how perfect that was for him when we’d briefly stopped for coffee during the drive from New Mexico to Fort Worth. He’d replied that I should thank him for saving all the sweet drinks for weirdos like me. Opposites really do attract. It’s just too bad it can’t always last.

“Nate,” I started, angling my body toward him. He peered over at me and waited, but making eye contact with him only served to make my words stick in my throat. “I ... well, we—”

He swallowed and nodded before he looked away, almost like he knew what I was going to say.

“Marigold doesn’t want to move to Bluffton. She wants to go home to California. She has friends and family there, and it’s not fair for me to make her leave her home if she doesn’t want to.”

Another nod, followed by a sip of his drink.

But no words.

No more eye contact.

“I feel terrible for lying to her this whole time,” I explained, narrowing my eyes a little when his lips twitched at that. “Hey, not only about us. I still stand by what I said about single moms hiding boyfriends until they were sure they’d stick around.”

I hadn’t worded it quite like that at the festival, and he didn’t appear to enjoy the bluntness of the statement now. His shoulders went back, and he rolled his neck like he was working out a few kinks.

“Anyway, we’ll stay in Bluffton until I can make sure it’s safe for us to go home.” I paused, waiting to see if he’d speak. When he just stared straight ahead at the bustling town square, I sighed. “I really like you, Nate. I can’t believe how much I like you after such a short time. But I need to focus on what

my daughter needs from me right now, and she needs me to let her have her normal life again as soon as I can. It's not fair to make her start over somewhere new because of another one of my mistakes."

He flinched, then smoothed his features so quickly I wasn't sure if I'd even seen it. "I understand."

I reached out, touching his strong forearm with what I hoped was a comforting gesture. Unfortunately, the feel of the hard muscles clenching beneath my palm told me it had the opposite effect.

"You know you're not the mistake I'm talking about, right?"

He slid his gaze over to me and half his mouth tipped up ever-so-slightly. "Okay."

"Okay? That's it? Please, I know you're not a man of many words, but I'm kind of losing it over here, and I would really love to know what's going on in that head of yours."

His tight-lipped smile spread to both sides of his mouth now, but it was impossibly sad. Especially when paired with the look in his eyes. The whole picture was like a knife in my chest, stealing my breath with an impossible force.

"I'm sorry I don't have more words for you, Nikki," he said quietly, looking away again before turning back to me. "But I'm not gonna try to convince you to stay if you don't want to or ask you to put whatever this is between us before your daughter's needs. And I'm *absolutely* not gonna suggest we try the long-distance thing. So I don't really know what else I can tell you other than I understand, and it's okay."

All those words should have helped. His tone was soothing, and I could tell he meant every bit of it from a place of acceptance and understanding. But instead, that whole speech left me feeling even emptier than his earlier silence.

And it was all my own doing.

"We're only about four hours from Bluffton," he said, patting his thigh before standing. Marigold was on her way over to us, and he looked in her direction briefly before

turning back to me. “Let’s get you guys to Hattie’s flower shop so we can get her house key, then I’ll drop you off there before I head home.”

“Wait,” Marigold said, her reappearance making me light up with hope, “we’re already leaving?”

“You want to stay longer?” I asked.

“Well, yeah. We haven’t even done anything yet.”

I looked at Nate, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “What do you want to do?”

She shrugged, looking around the square. “Eat at the Mystic. Buy a T-shirt. Nothing major. I’d say let’s do a tour, but ...”

The fact that Nate would foot the bill for all of that probably added insult to injury, and my stomach rolled. But because Nate was so very Nate, he didn’t let on that it fazed him. “Whatever you want.”

Marigold looked between us, then her eyes wandered to the bench, and she caught sight of the pink drink he’d ordered for her. The corners of her mouth lifted the tiniest bit, and she picked up the drink and took a sip. “Thanks for this.”

“You’re welcome.”

NATE

Marigold knew we were over. I could see it all over her face when she looked at me as she walked up from that bench, and I could also see the guilt behind her eyes that she worked incredibly hard to hide. But I didn't blame her. She was just a kid. A kid in an insane situation that had nothing to do with her, and she probably felt like she had no sense of control over her own life.

I could identify with that. I felt the same way. But this whole thing was so much worse than anything I'd gone through with Chelsea. The reason I'd had no control over those breakups was because I was at the mercy of a wishy-washy woman's whims. This time, none of this rested on a whim. It was complicated and messy and way too powerful than the time we'd known each other should warrant. But it was real, and I got it. It sucked, and I was gutted, but I got it.

"Where to first, Mari?" Nikki asked in a tone that was edged with both hope and fear.

"Since we have these, let's shop." She gestured with her drink and gave me a tight-lipped smile.

I nodded in agreement, then followed after the two of them as they made their way across the street to one of the small shops that lined the left side of the square. We bought vampire-related stuff for Marigold, hopped on a quick tour of the town, then ate an admittedly delicious lunch at the Mystic Grill.

And all the while, the three of us made absolutely zero effort to chitchat. The girls didn't have their usual string of nonsensical conversations, and Nikki and I had completely lost our ability to look at each other for more than a second before looking away. I could tell Marigold was happy about her vampire show experience, but for me? The whole thing was pretty dang awful.

That said, it was nowhere near as bad as the rest of the ride to Bluffton. After she ended things, there were no more jokes about music, and there was no sign of those sparkling eyes that sent fire through my veins. And now that we'd dispensed with all that secret handholding, Nikki was able to finish her blanket much faster than she otherwise would have. The sudden distance between us was so palpable I could actually feel it tightening around my lungs like a humid Southern day.

By the time we made it to Hattie and Thatcher's flower shop, I was beyond ready to get these two and that precious dresser that started it all out of my SUV and out of my life.

What had I been thinking? On what planet was it a good idea to let this ball of sunshine and her sweet-and-sour teen get under my skin? After everything I'd been through with Chelsea, you'd think I would have been a little more careful about who I decided to fall for next.

Because yeah. My feelings for Nikki felt exactly like falling. Falling off a mountain only to be smashed by a bunch of rocks at the bottom. One minute I'd been ready to cruise across the country with a new outlook on life, a chance to see some great friends along the way, and nothing but carefree, unattached bliss in my future.

And then the next? I found myself falling for the absolute worst possible kind of woman. The kind with unresolved issues that pretty much guaranteed she'd be a flight risk ... no matter how she felt about me. Which was actually worse than what happened with Chelsea.

It made sense she couldn't stay though. She had a kid whose needs came before her own, and I obviously didn't blame her for that. But I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up

about her staying in Bluffton only to move again when I got a new set of orders—which, hey, we hadn't even talked about, so that would have been a bummer too.

Taking a page out of Nikki's book, I unwittingly found the bright side. Maybe it was a good thing we'd ended things now instead of in three years when I got new orders. No doubt, I'd have fallen harder for her—for both of them, thanks to Paul calling me a stepdad, causing me to hope to one day be one. Thinking about that only made the pit in my stomach grow even deeper. Yeah, ending things now was much better.

“Oh, you're here!” Hattie's voice rang out from the back door of the shop the second we hopped out of the SUV. She trotted across the lot with her arms spread wide, pulling Nikki and Marigold into a group hug. “Girls, oh my girls. I'm so sorry you've had to go through all of this.”

On the way here from Georgia, Nikki had called Hattie to let her know the cat was out of the bag about Brock. Which was good, because if Marigold had been forced to endure more adults acting like everything was fine when it wasn't, I was pretty sure her head would've exploded.

“Why don't you girls go inside and say hi to Uncle Thatcher?” Hattie said, tilting her head toward the shop. “He's anxious to see you but was on the phone when you pulled up.”

They headed that way—without a backward glance at me—and I stared after them against my will.

Man, how had I let that bubbly, joyful, sunshiney personality of hers pull me in like a magnet even though it should've repelled me?

No idea. But I had, and look where it got me. I'd thought I was an idiot before, but now? No question.

When they were gone, Hattie turned to me with a sad smile. “Nathan.”

I should hug her. Say hi. Something. But I couldn't, so I opened the hatch and started to slide her precious dresser out of my SUV.

She huffed loudly, so I paused my efforts and begrudgingly faced her. “Hey, Hattie.”

“Hey, yourself.” She stepped in and hugged me, then pulled back to look at my face.

Her searching gaze made my skin crawl. I knew how magical and mystical her love-sniffing powers were, and the last thing I needed was for her to make this thing between Nikki and me her latest project. So far, I’d missed out on being a target of her meddling, and I didn’t want to start now.

“I’ll bring the dresser into the shop while you grab your house key,” I told her, noticing she hadn’t brought it outside with her. “Then I’ll drop Nikki and Marigold off at your place before I head home.”

Hattie waved a hand with a light chuckle. “Oh, I left the key under the mat. Did I forget to tell you?”

“Yes.” My jaw clenched so hard I swore I heard something crack.

“It doesn’t matter, though. You would’ve had to come here for this delivery either way, right?”

I sighed. “Yeah. But I would have dropped them off before coming here if I’d known the key was already there.”

“A few more minutes in each other’s company shouldn’t kill you after driving across the whole country together.” She tilted her head with an innocent smile, but I knew better. “How was the drive, anyway?”

“You were updated multiple times a day.”

“I sure was. But not on the romance, just the overall adventure.”

I gave her a blank look.

She raised her brows in challenge.

I pursed my lips.

She rolled her eyes. “Nathan Bristol, I’m not gonna stand out here and have a staring contest with you all day. Tell me the scoop.”

“There’s no scoop.”

“There’d better be a scoop. Don’t tell me all my efforts were wasted.”

“All your—” I broke off, spinning away from her and linking my hands together behind my neck.

“What? Did you think I couldn’t come up with a better way to get Nikki and Marigold away from Chet other than sending them across the country with you? Come on, Nathan.”

Still pacing, I refused to look at her.

“I’d hoped to introduce the two of you for years, but you were conveniently busy or away with the Marines whenever I could make it happen. This—fixing you up—was always the plan. When she met Chet, I let go of the idea because I thought she was happy, but I was wrong. So, so wrong. I still can’t believe it.” She let out a little sigh and shook her head, hands on her hips. “You wouldn’t expect me to give up on plan A when I saw an opening to bring it back to life, would you?”

My mind spun as her words bounced around the inside of my skull. She’d been planning on introducing us? Was that why she’d always made sure to show me photos of Nikki throughout the years, as if I cared how her random not-even-really-her-niece was doing?

And now that I’d thought about it, there were several times while I was stationed in California that she’d tried to get me to meet up with her while she was in town visiting Nikki and Marigold, but as she’d said, I’d either been busy with work or not even there.

This was too much. I felt like I’d been manipulated. Like a pawn on her weird matchmaking chessboard, I’d let her move me right where she wanted me with this road trip thing. But as gross as I felt about that, Hattie had a one hundred percent success rate when it came to fixing people up—ask most of the married people in this town. That knowledge had an entirely unwelcome flash of hope surging through me. If Hattie had us in her sights, then maybe ...

No.

It was too late. I wasn't getting on another roller coaster. I wouldn't be anyone's yo-yo again, no matter who was pulling the string.

"Well, I'm sorry to say you've got your first failure on your hands," I told her, unable to fight the sarcastic set of my lips. "You tried, we tried, but it's already over."

"But—"

"No, buts." Without giving her a chance to reply, I moved toward the trunk and hefted the *buffet* into my arms. It was a lot harder to lift without Brett's help, but as Hattie said in the beginning, I could manage it without him. "Show me where you want this."

Hattie made a disappointed clicking sound with her mouth, but seeing the way the heavy dresser made beads of sweat pop up on my forehead caused her to bustle ahead of me through the back door of her shop. I set it down—with Thatcher's help—in the spot she pointed to, then shook his hand and thanked him for the assist.

"Glad you made it safely, Nate," Thatcher said, smiling at me in a way that told me he knew all about his wife's plans and pitied the fool.

As did I.

"Thanks," I told him, then turned to Nikki and Marigold. "You ready?"

At their nods, I spun on my heel and left them standing there, heading back to the parking lot while Hattie prattled on about whatever was in the fridge at home.

The sooner I dropped them off, the sooner I could forget them.

NIKKI

“Well, thank you,” I said, stooping to lift the key from under the mat.

“You’re welcome.” Nate’s reply was formal and stiff. Much more like the tone he’d used at the beginning of our journey, when we were strangers and he had no idea what kind of mess he’d stepped into.

I shot Marigold a meaningful look. She was leaning against the rail of Aunt Hattie’s porch with an expression that managed to look bored and sarcastic at the same time. We hadn’t spoken much since our fight in the park—despite eating lunch and exploring Covington before we’d hit the road again. But since she was every bit as observant as she said she was, I knew she could tell I’d ended things with Nate. I’d done it for her, and she *knew* it. It wouldn’t fix everything between us, but it was a start.

When she caught my eye, she softened slightly. It seemed she’d read my mind, as usual. Then she turned to Nate, pulling her lips into a hint of a smile. “Thanks, Nate.”

He gave her a nod, his mouth mirroring hers. “I’m glad I could help.”

“Oh,” I said, swallowing past the lump in my throat so he wouldn’t hear my inner turmoil, “and as soon as I get my money situation figured out, I’ll find a way to send you the money I owe you.”

Pain flashed in his eyes for less than a second before he flicked it away and nodded grimly. “Thanks.”

I had no idea what to say. This was it for us. The charge in the air between us was still as palpable as ever, and yet we were over.

Could he feel it too? Was his heart pounding like mine? Did his skin tingle with the urge to reach for me, as if he could sense how much I wanted him to?

Nate gave me one last fleeting look before backing down the steps. “Take care, ladies.”

And then he turned, leaving us on the porch as if he couldn’t bear to stand there for another minute. As if he worried that if he lingered, I’d invite him in for some sweet tea before he went to his parents’ house. As if dragging this goodbye out by one more second would kill him like it was killing me.

I watched him get in the SUV that we’d spent so many hours in together during the last week with tears clouding my vision. I should stop him. I should run down these steps and tell him I couldn’t imagine my life without him in it. But that was ridiculous. I’d known him for a week. Who falls in love in a week?

I did.

The truth burned the edges of my heart to a blackened crisp. It didn’t matter. Whether it was crazy to feel this way about him or not, my daughter didn’t want to stay in Bluffton. She didn’t want to be uprooted due to another man in my life. And I couldn’t blame her.

I wouldn’t blame her.

From this moment on, even though it felt like Nate was driving away with my heart and soul still buckled into his passenger seat, I resolved to put my daughter’s feelings before mine. Her very existence felt like having a piece of my heart walking around outside my body—just as I’d heard many other mothers describe in my line of work. I could deal with having another piece of it removed and in someone else’s care. Couldn’t I?

“Can we go in?” Marigold asked quietly. “I’m tired.”

“Yes, baby,” I replied, feeling a hard shell close over my gaping chest.

On the inside, I was a mess. But on the outside, I wouldn’t show it. And I wouldn’t be able to feel it, either, with that shell firmly in place. Life would be good as long as I never tried to crack open that barrier.

With a stronger smile for my daughter, I slipped Aunt Hattie’s key into the lock and turned it, then pushed open the door so Marigold and I could pass through with our suitcases. We’d done fine with our purchases from the Exchange, but I was excited to find the suitcases Hattie and Thatcher had brought back from California with some of our own belongings inside. A few comforts from home would be good for both of us.

The house was dark and quiet when we stepped inside, so I flicked the switch by the door. But when I turned toward the living room, I gasped and covered my hand with my mouth.

Chet sat in one of Aunt Hattie’s floral armchairs, a glass of amber liquid in his hand and one loafer-clad foot crossed leisurely over the opposite knee.

“What—? How did you get in here?” I asked, instinctively guiding my shocked-silent teen behind me with one hand.

His lips curled into a cruel smile. “The key under the mat, of course.”

“But how did you know it would be there?”

He shrugged, pausing to take a sip of whatever he’d helped himself to from Aunt Hattie’s liquor cabinet. “First rule of breaking and entering: check for a hide-a-key. But I assure you, I would have gotten in either way.”

I gulped for air as the walls of the house began to close in on me. How far away was Nate? Too far to actually flag down if we were to run outside, thanks to how long I’d stared at the empty street before Marigold had spoken up. And my phone was in my purse. I had enough experience to know that the second I reached for it, I’d have no time to place the call before being thwarted.

Sure, the man seated before me appeared to be the same calm and nonviolent man I'd been about to marry. But the deadly look in his eye told me he had the potential to *become* violent, and for my daughter's sake, I wouldn't do anything to provoke him.

"Marigold," I said evenly, keeping my eyes on my would-be husband, "will you please go upstairs so *Chet* and I can talk?"

He didn't move, but I could see by the minute lift of his brows that he'd caught my emphasis on his name. I should be more careful. The less he knew about what I knew, the better. At least while Marigold was still in the room.

"I don't want to leave you," my daughter whispered against my back.

I wouldn't risk facing her, so I just reached back and found her hand, giving it a quick squeeze before tugging her toward the stairs. I continued to shield her with my body until we reached them, and then I gave her a quick nudge. "Please, sweetheart. We need to talk about grown-up stuff."

If she bristled at the term, I didn't notice. I was too relieved by the sound of her combat boots echoing on the wooden stairs as she made her way up. When her footsteps faded into the guest room, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"How was your road trip to Bluffton?" he asked casually, swirling the liquor in his glass like this wasn't a horribly sick situation.

"It was great, thanks."

What did he know? How had he learned we'd taken a road trip? Was he aware of who'd brought us here?

In addition to all those questions and more, a checklist of escape plans flashed through my mind. But I batted away every single one of them. There was no reason for this situation to escalate. Aunt Hattie and Uncle Thatcher would be home from work eventually, so if I could keep him talking—keep him relaxed and sitting in that chair without a care in the

world—then maybe I wouldn't need to see the violent side of him I'd only recently discovered existed. If there was one skill I'd acquired after years in Damon's clutches, it was de-escalation.

"Chet," I started, then trailed off as the lie of his name tasted bitter on my tongue.

"Yes, dear?"

"Why are you here?"

He smiled and lifted a hand as if it should be obvious. "To bring you home. I understand why you'd have cold feet, and I'm not mad. Clearly, you needed some time and space. I've allowed it. But now it's time for you to come home and marry me as planned."

He'd allowed it?

My belly swirled with a mixture of fear and desperation. But no. He was all talk. He hadn't *allowed* me to have time and space. There was no way for him to have tracked me down on my road trip. Nate and I had made sure of it. Though, I still wasn't clear on how he'd known we'd driven here or when we'd arrive. We could have flown. We could have been here all week. Had *he* been here all week, waiting for us?

"How did you know we drove here?" I asked, leaning my back against the wall near the stairs because I couldn't trust my legs to keep me upright.

"Because I have access to all your accounts, including your email. There was no evidence of a flight."

"Aunt Hattie could have booked it."

"She could have. But since I flew out here the day after the wedding and have been watching this house and her flower shop—among other things—I could only assume you decided to drive here. It was simply a matter of waiting for you to arrive. I am curious, however. Did she rent you a car?"

"How did you know I would come here?" I asked, carefully evading his question.

He smirked. "Where else would you go?"

I licked my lips. He had a point. I didn't have anywhere else to go because he'd isolated me from anyone other than my mother and Aunt Hattie. With only two places to look for me, it must have been painfully easy for him to find me.

Why hadn't I thought of this outcome? Of course if he were to come looking for me, it would be here. If I hadn't been so preoccupied with my budding relationship and then eventual heartbreak, I would have asked Nate to take us somewhere else. Anywhere but this house, *alone*. Marigold's presence upstairs was my sole motivation to make sure we both came out of this unharmed.

"So, what's your plan, then?" I asked, mindful to keep any trace of the malice I felt out of my voice. "After going to such extremes to get away, you don't expect that we'll pack up and leave with you as if none of that happened, do you?"

He sipped his drink, looking entirely unconcerned. "That's exactly what you're going to do."

"Why would I?"

"Because you and I had an agreement."

"Agreement? What kind of agreement?"

His eyes shone with condescension now, and he dipped his chin as if speaking to a child. "An agreement to marry, Nikki."

I fought the snort that wanted to push through and just barely won. "You make it sound like a business deal. You proposed, I accepted, and then I found out there was more to you than I knew, and I decided to get myself and my daughter out of there."

This caught his interest. Did he really think it was nothing more than cold feet? He didn't suspect that the jig was up? How stupid did he think I was? Or better yet, how stupidly had I behaved in the past to give him the impression I was so utterly witless?

"And what, pray tell, have you found out that was so alarming?"

I eyed him carefully. He'd set down his drink, lowered his crossed foot to the floor, and was now leaning forward with his elbows on his thighs. He looked so predatory. The set of his shoulders was reminiscent of a jungle cat ready to pounce, and my chest seized with panic.

And yet, I lifted my chin, determined to talk this out without making him mad. "I heard you on the phone with Damon."

He didn't react. Didn't even blink.

"I heard you say something about a deal being off," I went on, "or that you were changing the deal. You wanted to send Marigold away to boarding school and planned to take me somewhere that no one could find me."

If he regretted having such a conversation right outside my bridal suite, he didn't show it. "I see."

"I wasn't going to let you send Marigold away."

"I understand."

This brought me up short. Him using the same words Nate had in such a different situation had my ears ringing. "You understand?"

"I do. I see now that I made a miscalculation with you. I assumed you were more ... malleable."

My jaw fell open, but no words came out.

"Don't look so surprised. We had a perfect relationship from the beginning. I could tell you loved it, if not me. You loved the idea of the future we'd have together. You were so agreeable and eager and ..." He paused to let his eyes wander over my body in a way that made me wish I could step backward and melt into the wall behind me. "And sweet," he finished. "But I see now that there are limits to what you will do for me, and I'm willing to negotiate."

"Negotiate?"

"Yes. As planned, we'll marry. I'll have full control over your family's wealth and assets. You'll sign everything you're entitled to over to me immediately, without condition. In

exchange, I won't send Marigold away. We can resume our peaceful relationship as it was before. You'll still have your salary from your own career, don't forget, so that will serve as an allowance of sorts."

I couldn't help the bitter laugh that bubbled up from my chest. "Why would I agree to any of that?"

I wasn't sure what I'd expected him to do in response, but the charming grin that showed off a set of boyish dimples wasn't it. Nor had I expected him to slowly rise from his chair and walk toward me with his hands in the pockets of his slacks like he was taking a casual stroll on a sunny day rather than approaching his prey.

Despite his largely unthreatening movements, I stiffened. As he continued to move closer, I held my breath. When he grew so near that *if* I breathed, my chest would surely brush his, my mind went blank as the fear set in.

But then, I didn't have a choice. Air escaped my lungs in a fast *whoosh* when his hand came up and gently rested on the side of my neck. His touch may have been tender, but the positioning of his fingers was clear. I swallowed, feeling the warning pressure of his thumb against my throat with the movement.

"Since you know I'm acquainted with your ex-husband, you must also know that I've heard all about his treatment of you."

I met his gaze, but fear kept me silent.

"I am not your ex-husband. I have no interest in harming you, Nikki. Or your daughter. I have no interest in asserting physical dominance over either of you. It's not my style with women, and I don't find that sort of thing in the least bit ... *energizing*. As he did."

I shut my eyes against the flood of memories his words brought on. Parts of my heart that had long ago hardened behind a layer of scar tissue throbbed at the reminder of the pain I'd felt at the hands of my first love. A silent tear slipped

down my cheek, and I internally cursed myself for showing him signs of my inner struggle.

“Shh,” Chet soothed against my ear. “You have nothing to fear from me in that regard.” He pulled his face back so he could look me in the eyes before continuing. “However, while I would take no pleasure in it, I *am* capable of much worse than you know. Much worse than your ex, in fact. And if you comply, I have no reason to show you that side of myself. Are we clear?”

I managed a nod, alarm coursing through me when I heard the faint sound of creaking floorboards overhead. I needed to distract him before he noticed it too. Whatever Marigold was doing—whether it was listening or planning something or even just pacing in the guest room—I didn’t want this man’s attention on *her* at all. Only on me.

“I have a question,” I said, forcing out a light tone and the bravest smile I could manage.

Releasing my neck, he trailed his hand over my collarbone and then down from my shoulder to my hand. He picked it up and kissed the back, causing bile to rise in my throat.

“I may have an answer, my sweet,” he said as he let go of my hand and tucked his back into his pockets like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“What was the original plan with Damon?”

At this, he rolled his eyes and strolled away from me. I was instantly gratified. This was good. It was all working out. I’d be as agreeable as possible in order to stall him, and then as soon as Aunt Hattie and Uncle Thatcher got home, this situation would have to be resolved. What was he going to do? Kill us all?

Dread swirled in my belly as his quiet threats from a moment ago slipped back into my mind. What *more* was he capable of? Did I really want to test him to find out?

“The original plan,” he said conversationally, totally unaware of all that was on my mind, “was that I’d date you—*check*—then marry you.” He turned and lifted a brow at me

then, almost as if to remind me that part was *not* checked. “Then, I’d have you sign some papers that you would obviously not be able to make sense of, but you’d trust me enough to sign. I’d be in full possession of your family’s fortune, and from there, it was a simple matter of transferring half of it to an offshore account for Damon to have when he gets released, and I’d divorce you and keep my half. Everybody wins. Well, except for you, of course.”

My mind raced with questions, but one took first place. “Did Damon plan to come after us when he got out? To ... um, hurt us? Take revenge for putting him away?”

Chet snorted. “Hardly. No, you’ll be relieved to hear he’d long since let go of any feelings toward you one way or the other. It was odd, really. He didn’t seem to care at all about what happened to either of you as long as the two of us got ahold of your money.”

“That’s all he wanted in the first place,” I said quietly, more to myself than to him.

“It would appear so.”

I frowned. “So, then, what changed? Why didn’t you want to go through with that plan? Why did you tell him the deal was off? You both could have gotten everything you wanted and none of this would have happened.”

And considering the fear I felt now and the heartbreak of falling for and then losing Nate, I realized that would have been my preferred outcome. If he hadn’t changed his plans, we would have gotten married that day. However long later, I would have been divorced and missing my family’s fortune, but I’d still have my job, my daughter, and my heart—fully intact. And we wouldn’t have even needed to fear Damon’s revenge, apparently.

This was *so* much worse. Regret over trusting this man filled me from my head to my toes, and it took every ounce of strength I had left not to crumple to the floor.

“Because I’ve decided that I care a lot more about you—as a *woman*—than Damon did. The day we were supposed to be

married brought that into focus. There I was, about to get a buttload of money and the satisfaction of a long con gone right, but I found myself wanting more. Wanting *you*.”

My cheeks flushed, and it wasn't in a good way.

I couldn't meet his eyes as he continued, still strolling around the room, so casual it made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. “All that time we spent together while dating showed me that you'd be the perfect woman to spend my life with. Can't you see it? It's like a path to retirement for me. Your family's money is more than sufficient. We can spend the rest of our days enjoying it, enjoying each other. I wasn't ready to give it all up just because of the scheme I'd worked out with Damon. I didn't want him to have half of the money I'd worked so hard to earn, and I didn't want to divorce you. I want it all.”

With my heart pounding in my ears, I fought for the strength to keep my voice steady. “You said you were willing to negotiate.”

He cocked his head. “We've *already* negotiated. You keep your daughter. The rest is mine.”

“Yes. Correct. But would you be willing to settle for keeping only my money? I'll marry you, sign everything over to you, and then you ride off into the sunset and we'll go our separate ways.”

He chuckled. “Have you been listening? I don't *only* want your money anymore. I want *you*.”

“Those are my terms,” I insisted, proud of myself for appearing stronger than I felt. “You can have my millions, but you can't have me. My daughter and I can live in poverty for all I care, but I don't want her to live with us in that kind of ... loveless situation.”

“Loveless situation? Nikki, you're missing the point. This isn't about whether or not there's *love* between us. You're mine.”

My phone rang in my purse, and I flinched as the trilling of the prepaid phone's default ring filled the air around us. Chet's

brow lifted. “Don’t even think about it.”

Only four people had that number. Aunt Hattie, Nate, my mother, and Brett. Obviously, my mother and Brett would be of no use to me, but if Aunt Hattie or Nate were calling and became worried because I didn’t answer, maybe they’d come here to make sure I was okay.

Hope sprang in my chest, but then it was quickly doused as I realized how silly that was. No one would think I was in danger. This wasn’t a movie. They’d probably just assume I was in the shower or busy upstairs and hadn’t heard my phone.

And if it was Nate ... *shoot*. Thanks to our breakup, he’d probably assume I was ignoring him on purpose.

Shortly after the ringing stopped, I risked speaking. “Maybe it was Aunt Hattie.”

“Maybe it was.”

I cleared my throat. “You know, they’ll be home from work soon. My aunt and uncle, I mean.”

He checked his watch. It was the one I’d bought him for his birthday a few months ago, and I fought the urge to gag at the sight of it. “So they should be. I’m looking forward to one of Hattie’s homecooked meals.”

I stared blankly at him.

“What? This is done, Nikki. Think about what you’ve been through. Do you really want to subject yourself or anyone else you care about to more of that?”

Shaking my head, I sighed. No, I didn’t want that. And I didn’t want to test him to see if he’d make good on his threats.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” he said, stepping closer and smiling sweetly as if we were a happy couple and this was a friendly negotiation. I flinched again when he reached for me, but he didn’t seem to notice. He just smoothed back a strand of my hair and neatly tucked it behind my ear. “When your aunt and uncle get home, you’re going to tell them you made a mistake. How much do they know?”

Everything.

“Not much,” I lied, though I wasn’t even sure why.

“Good. Then you’re going to tell them you had a simple case of wedding-day jitters but that we’ve worked it out, and you’re ready to be my wife. Then we’ll have a nice dinner and spend a few days in Bluffton with them if you like—at that quaint B&B we stayed at last time. Stargaze something?”

“Starlight Manor,” I supplied weakly.

“Yes, that’s the one. We’ll stay a few days and can even get married there. They do weddings at the property, and I bet the stunner who plans them would be happy to have our business. Aria, right? She’s a sweetheart.”

The way his eyes gleamed had my stomach clenching painfully. He’d hung out with Nate’s cousin and the rest of his friends when we’d come for our engagement photos, but I had no idea he’d paid enough attention to remember their names and where they worked. Though, I also hadn’t known he was in constant calculation mode for our entire relationship, so there was that.

“Then,” he continued, “we’ll head back to California so we can settle the money situation. As long as you behave, all will be well. You’ve seen how sweet I can be. Have I shown you anything other than kindness? Comply, and that won’t change.”

I met his gaze then, fury coursing through me. He’d backed me into a corner, and he knew it.

So, fine. I’d play nice.

I’d marry him, give him my money, and do whatever I could to keep things peaceful while I plotted out a long con of my own. He might have won this battle, but the war was just beginning. There was no way I’d spend the rest of my life in this disgusting man’s clutches. I’d save myself—and my daughter—if it was the last thing I did. *Again.*

“Now, are we in agreement?” he purred.

With a tentative smile that I knew appeared to be as convincing as I wanted it to be, I nodded. “We are.”

NATE

“That’s it?” Paul asked, blinking at me with the expression of a guy who wasn’t sure who—or *what*—he was looking at.

Not understanding which part of my story didn’t make sense to him, I stared back at my cousin with a solid shrug. “That’s it.”

Paul took his eyes off me long enough to share glances with our friends. After I’d dropped Nikki and Marigold at Hattie’s place, I’d messaged Paul, Will, Zac, and Beau in our group chat and told them Nikki and I were over. I’d originally planned to introduce them to her and her daughter tonight and had invited my friends’ wives along too. But instead, I wound up asking them to come over without their wives for some much-needed guy time.

They’d shown up for me without hesitation. These guys had formed a tight-knit friend group over the last few years, and one thing they had in common was Hattie’s involvement in their love lives. It was strange to think that it was only yesterday that I was imagining joining their ranks in that regard. And now, as I sat in my childhood home with my fellow Marines, it was as the only single guy.

“Hang on,” Will said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees from his spot on the couch across from me. “So, you’re saying you went through this road trip escape plan, finally kicked Chelsea to the curb for good, started dating

Nikki, and then didn't even put up a fight when she tried to break it off with you?"

I snorted. "First of all, she didn't *try* to break it off with me. She very clearly stated it was over. For reasons I genuinely get, by the way." I shrugged when they looked at me in disbelief, shaking my head as I went on. "And second, why would I put up a fight? I'm so sick of fighting, you guys. Seriously. I'm done."

Judging by their expressions, I had them there. Every single one of them had voiced their concern over the open ticket I held to the hot mess express with Chelsea as the conductor. They saw how hard I had to fight for that pathetic excuse for a relationship.

Zac blew out a breath and shook his head. "I mean, for what it's worth, I get where she's coming from." When all eyes swung to him, he laughed quietly and hooked a thumb toward his chest. "Uh, guys. I'm the one who ended things with the woman I loved because I thought I was doing what was best for my kid, remember?"

Everyone nodded and murmured things about how dumb he'd been, which just made him laugh again.

"I know, I know," he allowed. "Mistakes were made. So I'm saying I get what she's trying to do. She thinks she can't make her kid happy and do the same for herself at the same time. It's a lot. But parents are people too. We don't always get it right."

I waved him off. "Nah, man. It's more than that. You did what you did because you thought you were protecting your kid. Nikki's trying to treat her kid like, well, less of a kid. Listening to her about going back to California makes sense after the way she'd been lying to her all week for the sake of protecting her. I don't blame her at all. I'm annoyed at myself for getting mixed up in it. I should have just driven them here and kept things professional. Or whatever. Strangers on a road trip. It shouldn't have gotten personal."

Paul bumped Will's arm with his elbow. "You ever heard him say so many words at one time?"

Will shook his head. “Nah.”

Their joke only reminded me of Nikki, so instead of making some kind of sarcastic remark, I looked down at my hands and sighed.

“Dude, you look *rough*,” Paul said with a hint of pity in his expression, even though his words floated out on a short laugh.

I cut him a look. “I bet.”

Leaning back against the cushions, I realized Beau hadn’t spoken up this entire time. I didn’t know him *too* well, but in the handful of times I’d visited Bluffton since he’d come into the fold, he’d always seemed to consider himself an expert when it came to women. Dating in general, really, because until he got with his wife, Lyndi, he owned a small business where he got paid to be a fake wedding date.

I would’ve asked him why he hadn’t offered up some words of wisdom, but what did it matter? I hadn’t invited these guys here for their advice on how to fix things. I’d done it because the idea of hanging out at my parents’ house alone—thanks to a last-minute deal on a Caribbean cruise that they’d jumped on—sounded terrible. Though, being alone wouldn’t have been nearly as bad as hanging out with my friends *and* their wives without Nikki.

“Look,” I said, rubbing my hands over my thighs like I could somehow wipe away the tension from my body, “let’s just drop this. You asked what happened, so I told you. Let’s go to Mickey’s or something.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them. Even freaking Mickey’s reminded me of her. I’d been looking forward to taking her and Marigold there for karaoke on Thursday.

Ugh, I’m pathetic.

Paul shook his head. “I’ve known you my whole life, and I’ve never seen you look so messed up over a girl. Not even Chelsea. You were always mad or whatever, but not ...” he trailed off and shuddered, “*sad*.”

The others mumbled their agreement. Except for Beau. He simply continued to stare straight ahead, and something irked me about it. I held out my arm, waving it slowly to catch his attention. “Earth to Beau. What’s up with you?”

Beau jerked his head as if ripped from a dream. “What? Sorry.”

Paul and Will immediately forgot about me and diverted their attention to our dark-haired friend. Zac, who was Beau’s brother-in-law since they were married to a pair of objectively hot sisters, pursed his lips to hide a grin. Whatever was up with Beau, I could tell he already knew.

“You *do* seem a little weird tonight, man,” Paul commented, leaning back as if to get a better look at him. “What’s going on?”

“Uh, well ... Lyndi’s pregnant.”

No one reacted at first, and then all at once, everyone stood and crowded around the guy. We offered our congratulations and handshakes and back-slapping hugs, and it was good. The best distraction I could have hoped for. Beau and Lyndi’s news—which had come only days after we all learned about Paul and Shelby’s news—allowed me to forget all about my own stuff. But since Beau was apparently still shell-shocked that he was going to be a dad, the surrounding conversation didn’t last long.

“Alright, well, I’ve had about enough of this,” Will said, standing again and stretching his arms over his head. “No more moping. Let’s go to Mickey’s and celebrate both of these new dads over here. And if you insist on being a wuss and not fighting for your girl, I’ll be a good friend and buy you a beer. Even though I think you’re making a huge mistake.”

“You’d be surprised what can be fixed with a conversation,” Paul added.

I rolled my eyes. “What would that even look like? You say it like I’d be able to make some big speech and tell her how I feel—which by the way, is probably way too much

considering how little we actually know each other—and everything will magically be fixed.”

“Meh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Beau said, apparently having located his voice. “I’ve gone on more than a few road trips with women to take them to out-of-town weddings, and you can learn a lot about someone while trapped in the car with them. Even for a short time. It’s not that weird that you have strong feelings for her.”

I wasn’t convinced. It sounded logical, but still.

“Also, Lyndi was reading a road-trip romance book last week,” he added, pointing a finger at me. “That tells you something right there.”

“What, that this kinda thing only happens in fictional stories?” I asked dryly.

“Or maybe that it happens more often than you think,” he fired back.

Zac cleared his throat. “Why not just call her and tell her you’re not giving up on her? It took me a couple of years, but eventually, I realized I’d made a mistake and apologized to Layla for pushing her away, and we worked it out. It’d be better than leaving it like this.”

I got his point, but his words still caused a sharp pain in my chest. I hated the idea of telling her I’d be here whenever she decided she wanted to be with me. It sounded way too much like what I’d gone through with Chelsea. But at the end of the day, some part of me had always known it was wrong to let that woman pick me up and put me down over and over again. We weren’t meant to be.

But Nikki? If she came back to me, whether it was right this second or five years from now, I couldn’t imagine I’d be anything but happy about it. It was a gut feeling. It was crazy—as we’d both already admitted—but the connection between us was deeper and stronger than anything I had words for, and no matter how much I didn’t want to be jerked around, I couldn’t stand the thought of losing her for good.

“Are you gonna call her or not?” Will asked, hands on his hips. “Because if not, let’s go. I’m getting antsy.”

I managed to chuckle at that. Will had never been one to sit still. Not since we were kids.

“It’s worth a shot,” Paul said with a shrug.

Risking a glance at each of them, I sucked in a deep breath. I still had no idea what to say, but I knew I had to try. Besides, Nikki seemed to get me even when I didn’t have a lot to say. Maybe it wouldn’t take much to let her know I cared. Or that I was here. And that I always would be.

“Okay. I’ll call.”

They all cheered—mockingly, of course—as I left the room with my phone and stepped onto my parents’ wide front porch. I paced the wooden planks while the call connected, noticing the squeaks of a loose board or two I’d nail down for them when I got a sec.

The phone rang and rang, and when she didn’t pick up, I narrowed my eyes toward the street. Why wouldn’t she answer? In the hours since we’d broken up, we’d had lunch and gone on a vampire sightseeing tour. And it wasn’t like we’d left things in a bad way when I’d dropped them off, either. We’d been courteous and polite. A little cold, yeah, but definitely not hostile. There was no reason for her to dodge my calls. For all she knew, she’d left something in my SUV, and I was calling to get it back to her.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up in warning. Was something wrong? No. She was probably just busy settling in. Or maybe in the shower—not that I needed that particular image in my mind. Either way, I was sure she was fine. But as I turned to head into the house to report back to my friends that my mission had failed, I hesitated.

If something were wrong and I dismissed this feeling in my gut, I’d never forgive myself. And her ex might not have been able to find her while she was on the road with me, but there was no doubt in my mind he’d be able to find her *here* if he wanted to. My eyes widened as the realization washed over

me. What if he'd shown up at Hattie's house after I left? And why hadn't I thought about that possibility sooner?

Decision made, I called Hattie's landline. No answer.

Next bet, Hattie's cell. If Nikki was avoiding my calls, at least Hattie would be able to tell me if she was okay. That was all I cared about.

"Nate? What's up, honey?" Hattie answered after the second ring.

"Hey, are you still at the shop?"

"Sure am," she replied with an amused laugh. "Need some flowers for someone special, my dear?"

I bit back a groan. "Have you talked to Nikki? Or Marigold?"

She hesitated, sputtering a little when she finally spoke. "Not— Not since you were at the shop. I called her to check in, but she didn't answer. Why?"

"She's not answering for me either, and I called her burner phone and your landline."

Silence.

"Hattie?"

"Nathan, do you think she's in trouble? Chet was always sweet to her, but—"

"Stay there. I'll head to your house and find out." Without waiting for her to reply, I hung up and stuck my head into the house. "Guys, we gotta go. Hurry."

Typical for a group of Marines who'd have their brother's back without pause, they immediately jumped up and followed me to the Suburban.

"What's going on?" Paul asked as he buckled in beside me.

"I think her ex might have caught up with her at Hattie's," I replied, taking care not to speed through the residential streets even though my foot twitched with the need to slam the peddle all the way down.

Will reached up from the back seat and patted my shoulder. “Yeah, well, if he did, he’ll have us to deal with.”

I let his words smooth some of the edges of my fear for Nikki and Marigold. As long as he hadn’t already hurt them ...

A new wave of terror spread through me at the thought, but I shoved it away. *No*. They were fine. As long as we made it in time, there was no doubt in my mind that five Marines showing up to protect them would prevent him from doing so.

Internally, I tried to organize my out-of-control worries into something of a plan. Our group could handle whatever threat Brock Copeland posed. All of us were over six feet tall, with the gym time required of us as Marines. Not to mention the mixed martial arts training we’d all received.

But if I could help it, I didn’t want this to come down to fighting. Not after everything Nikki had been through with Damon. I promised her I’d keep her safe, and I would keep that promise no matter what. But hopefully she wouldn’t have to witness anything traumatizing in the process.

Within seconds of parking a few houses down from Hattie’s place, we hopped out and silently made our way to the house. I raised a hand and motioned for Zac and Beau to go around back, just in case. They nodded in understanding and veered right as Paul, Will, and I crept up the porch steps and stayed low.

Thankfully, none of the wooden floorboards on Hattie’s porch let out the same loud squeak as the ones I’d vowed to fix on my parents’ porch. Not wanting to waste time, I didn’t stop to listen for voices inside. And though maybe I should have, I also didn’t stop to wonder if it’d be weird to walk in unannounced while Nikki and Marigold were simply sitting on the couch, watching TV and ignoring my calls.

Trying the doorknob, I let out a breath as it easily rotated in my palm. Then the three of us stepped inside, and I braced myself for whatever I might find.

“Nate!” Nikki’s eyes widened from where she stood with her back against the wall. A man—who I assumed was the one

she'd been about to marry—loomed over her with one hand braced on the wall over her head.

I took another step, conscious that Paul and Will flanked me on either side. Zac and Beau were in the backyard, and even though the back door was probably locked, I was glad they were there in case this punk decided to tuck tail and run out that way.

“Nikki,” I said, keeping my gaze locked on what I could see of her even as the dude started to turn in my direction, “are you hurt?”

She shook her head, but then my partial view of her was completely blocked as Brock faced me with a wide smile. Sure, Nikki's incessant smiles had bugged me when I knew she was dealing with something rough that she was trying to hide. But this guy's fake smile? It sickened me.

“I don't believe we've met,” he said, stepping forward and extending his hand. “I'm Chet, Nikki's future husband. And you are?”

I stared down at the hand for a second before standing taller and fixing him with a hard glare. “I'm Nate. Where's Marigold?”

“Upstairs,” Nikki said quietly from behind the man still blocking my view of her.

My fingers itched to shove him out of the way and go to her, but if we could resolve this calmly, it would be best for everyone.

Brock's eyes sparkled with thinly veiled contempt. Then, as if he'd just noticed them, he nodded at Paul and Will. “Oh, hey, guys. Good to see you again.”

I didn't need to look over my shoulders to know they weren't returning his friendly expression. Taking a step forward, I held out my hand in an open-faced invitation for him to see himself out. “It's time for you to go.”

He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. He looked impatient but not scared or intimidated in the least. Though, what did I expect from a con man? He was likely a master at hiding his

real emotions, and he probably thought he could talk his way in and out of anything.

Well, today, he'd learn he couldn't.

"Look, Nate," he said, slipping his hands into his pockets with a sympathetic smile. "Nikki was understandably nervous about getting married after everything she's been through. I'm sure, as her friends, you were all very concerned about her putting herself out there again. I get it. Trust me, I do. Her ex was a bad man. It makes me sick to think about what he put her through. But there's no need for you to worry about me. I've never been anything but kind to her and my future stepdaughter. Now, what do you say we all sit down and have some drinks while we wait for Aunt Hattie and Uncle Thatcher to get home from work? We're all friends here. Right, guys?"

Again, I pictured the stony expressions Paul and Will were probably wearing. They might have hung out with this tool when he'd visited Bluffton with Nikki and Marigold for the engagement photos, but they weren't *his* friends. They were mine. And none of us were gonna let him pretend this situation was anything other than messed up beyond belief.

"Nikki and I were just discussing our wedding at Starlight Manor," Brock went on, leering at Nikki over his shoulder in a way that made me want to abandon my plans not to get violent in front of her. Then he turned to Will and pointed a taunting finger in his direction. "Your wife runs the place, right? Aria? How's she doing? I have to say, she looks amazing in red. Well done, sir."

I felt Will move forward, so I shot my arm out to stop him. What did Brock mean by that? She looked amazing in red? When?

"He's been here all week," Nikki said quietly.

Okay, wow. He'd been watching her family and friends for any sign of her while we'd been on the road.

Brock sent a warning look in her direction, which she caught before diverting her eyes. Her shoulders slumped in defeat, or maybe resignation.

Pushing down the nerves that'd taken root in my gut, I squared up with Brock. "Look, I don't know what's going on here, but—"

He chuckled and held out his hand for Nikki to take. "What's going on is Nikki and I are going to get married, and she's going to tell you that she left me on our original wedding day thanks to a small case of cold feet. But we've talked it out, and she's finally ready to be mine. Right, dear?"

My blood boiled as Nikki stared at his outstretched hand. Her hesitation unnerved me. Would she take it? Was this what she wanted?

The silent, crestfallen woman standing against the wall wasn't the Nikki I knew. That magnificent woman was strong. Vibrant. Sure of herself and what she wanted. Willing to do whatever she had to for the people she loved.

If she wouldn't stand up to this guy while the three of us were right here to protect her, did that mean she didn't want to? And if so ... did that mean she looked so miserable because I'd walked in on some kind of reunion between them?

Then she finally moved. But instead of reaching for Brock's hand, she reached up and slowly tucked her hair behind her ear. The entire room went out of focus as I zeroed in on her face. The top of her cheekbone—which had been concealed by her hair up until now—was marred by a bloody gash the size of a quarter.

Paul and Will must have noticed it too, because they didn't even try to stop me when I lunged forward and punched Brock right in the face. A sharp pain lanced through my hand as blood spurted out of his nose in thick streams. He collapsed with a hard thud, and the sight of Nikki's terrified expression as she dashed up the stairs was enough to keep me from following her jerk of an ex to the floor and doing even worse to him.

Brock held his nose as the dark-red fluid spilled through his fingers, yelling and cursing at me while he writhed in pain.

But I simply stood over him, shaking my head with my lips pulled into a grim line. “You should have left when I told you to.”

NIKKI

The second I made it to the top of the stairs, I ran right into Marigold. She was crying, and sobs racked her body as I held her tightly against my chest and whispered in her ear. “It’s okay, baby. It’s okay. It’s over.”

“Mom, that was—” Another choked sob cut off her words, and she burrowed deeper into my chest. “He *hit* you.”

“I know. I know.”

“Nikki?” Nate didn’t even wait for me to reply before his footsteps thundered against the wooden steps as he took them two at a time to reach us.

When he got within reach, I pulled him close, and he wrapped his strong arms around the two of us, holding us while Marigold cried against my chest. I stared up at him through unshed tears of my own. He kept one hand around my daughter’s shoulders, but his other hand came up and tenderly cupped the side of my face. I felt his thumb graze just below the spot where the back of Chet’s hand had connected with my face, and I winced.

He didn’t say anything. As usual, he wasn’t much for words. But his eyes told me everything. Apologies for more things than he had reason to be sorry for. Promises that we’d talk more later ... when we weren’t holding Marigold between us. And above all, love. So much love flowed through this look he gave me that it reverberated inside me with a force that was as oddly calming as it was startling.

I responded in kind, silently nodding to show him I understood. When he urged me closer to press one fierce and fleeting kiss to my forehead, I only had time to swallow half of the sob that burst through my lips. Nate rubbed my back with one hand while he gently patted Marigold's shoulder with the other. I'm not sure how long we stood like that—maybe a minute, maybe longer—but each second further calmed my racing heart.

The sound of a throat clearing from the bottom of the stairs broke the moment, however, and Nate and I looked down to find Beau peering up at us from the ground floor. I hadn't seen him down there with Nate and the two others. Where had he come from?

“You guys okay?” Beau asked.

Nate looked at me, and I nodded again, then I peeked down at Marigold. “How about you, Mari? Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She pulled herself out of our arms and then wrapped her own around her middle.

“They're fine,” Nate said, holding out his hand for us to go downstairs ahead of him.

“Glad to hear it. We need to talk about what to do with this guy,” Beau said as he hooked a thumb over his shoulder.

As I went down the stairs, I saw that Zac—who I also hadn't realized was here—stood next to my ex as he sat in a kitchen chair with his hands secured behind his back.

Nate let out a little chuckle. “Nice to have a cop in the group.”

Relief flooded me at that. I'd been worried about Chet being able to lie his way out of trouble, but not if we had a cop in our corner.

“I come in handy sometimes,” Zac replied with a half-smile as we joined the loose circle of Marines that surrounded my ex. “But I don't have jurisdiction unless we're on base. So we need to call the local PD.”

That blissful swell of relief drained as quickly as it'd appeared. I'd forgotten he was a military police officer. That wouldn't help here in Bluffton.

"The only problem is," Paul said, crossing his arms over his chest, "we're not really sure what to tell them since this jerk seems determined to say we broke in and attacked him and his fiancée."

"Because you did," Chet muttered, then flinched away as Will took a quick step toward him.

"And he seems to think you'll play along with that story," Zac added.

"Just show them this. It'll hit different," Marigold said, coming up from behind me and handing her phone to Zac.

"Marigold, where did you get your phone?" I asked.

"From the suitcase Aunt Hattie brought from California. It was dead at first—obvi. But then I used my portable charger and got the whole thing on video."

She winced as if the memory of what she'd witnessed caused her pain, and my cheekbone throbbed in response. I couldn't believe she'd seen all of that. But how? I thought she'd been in the guest room while Chet and I were talking.

I looked up, my eyes catching on part of the upper level that had a banister with a view of the downstairs. If she'd stood there, she'd have had a perfect view of where Chet backed me up against the wall while he'd threatened me. Also ... when he'd struck me.

I'd done a decent job in keeping things from escalating. We'd been talking, I'd agreed to his demands, and I'd even told him my engagement ring was in my bag and I was willing to put it back on.

But then my phone rang again, and something in my eyes must have given me away. He must have seen something there. The desperation I'd felt, or maybe the yearning for Nate or Aunt Hattie or Uncle Thatcher to show up and interrupt this madness. Without thinking, I'd lurched toward the phone, but

I'd barely had time to take a step before he backhanded me so hard that I'd seen stars.

And the ridiculously expensive watch I'd given him for his birthday? Yeah, the poorly aimed blow meant I'd probably have a scar on my cheek thanks to that shiny little hunk of irony.

Nate's arm came around my waist before I could think to wish for it, and he pressed his lips to the top of my head in an unspoken show of support.

"Hang on," Will said with a grunt in my daughter's direction, "you're telling me you charged up your phone and took a video instead of calling the cops?"

Marigold shrugged. "I didn't think it was a good idea to call them unless we had some kind of evidence."

"What are you, a little officer in training?" Zac asked with a short laugh.

"I watch a lot of true crime."

Nate managed something of a smile when he looked down at me, and I returned the look with narrowed eyes. *Take that, Mr. Judgerton.*

Marigold let out a shaky breath and it brought my attention back to her. "But then he hit her. I didn't think he was gonna do that. So yeah, big yikes ... I should have called for help."

Everyone was quiet as Marigold's words hung in the air, and I opened my arms for her to step into. Even though I'd moved forward to embrace her, Nate kept his hand on my back, rubbing it in soothing swirls that gave me strength and relaxed me at the same time.

And it wasn't just Nate who had that effect on me. Each and every one of his friends contributed to the sense of calm that began to replace my earlier fear. Especially Will. I was pretty sure his death glares were the only thing keeping Chet quiet, and I couldn't be more grateful to have him silenced after everything he'd said in the last hour or so.

Zac, who'd been scrolling through the video, nodded and gestured at Marigold with the phone. "This is good. It doesn't even matter what they're saying, you can clearly see him hit her in the video. I'll call the BPD now, and we'll get this guy back in prison where he belongs."

"Let's take him outside to wait for the cops," Beau suggested. "That way you guys can have a minute to chill out."

Zac nodded in agreement, his gaze homing in on the side of my face that still throbbed and tingled. "You'll need to meet us out there when they come, though. They'll need statements from all of us. Do you want me to call in an ambo too? Are you hurt anywhere else?"

I shook my head, hiding my wince as it made my face throb harder. "I'm fine but thank you."

"Thanks, guys," Nate said, still not leaving my side long enough to participate in the flurry of movement that ensued.

Zac pulled out his phone to call the police, still holding Marigold's craftily collected evidence. Will and Paul each took one of Chet's tightly bound arms and lifted him out of the chair, hauling him to his feet and out the door that Beau held open for them. Then they all relocated to the porch to wait for the police, and Beau shut the door behind him with a final nod.

Nate looked down at Marigold and bumped her arm. "That was quick thinking with the video. But you should have called for help first."

"I didn't think it would get like that." She bit her lip. "I just thought we'd need proof of all the he-said-she-said stuff. It was all gravy while he was explaining everything like the villain at the end of a cheesy mystery movie."

Nate and I both chuckled at that, but the tightness around his eyes made my stomach clench.

I stepped forward and took Marigold's hands. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes."

“Good. I’m proud of you.” I flicked Nate a glance, then turned back to my daughter. “Um, do you think you could go sit on the couch for a minute? I want to talk to Nate before the police get here.”

She looked between us, her cheeks pink and her nose wrinkled. “Why, so you can fix all the stuff I messed up and get back together?”

My heart squeezed at the guilt in her eyes, and when I looked up at Nate, I could tell he had a similar reaction. Neither of us wanted this breakup. That much was obvious. But it was also obvious that he cared about my daughter and didn’t want her to feel guilty over it any more than I did.

Before I could think of a response, he flashed her a lopsided smile. “Would that be okay with you?”

“If you guys got back together?” she asked.

He nodded once.

“It’d be more than okay,” she replied quietly. Then she faced me with a worried frown. “I’m sorry for all that stuff I said in Georgia, Mom.”

I patted her cheek. “I’m sorry too.”

“And ...” she hesitated, then met Nate’s eyes. “I’m sorry to you too. It’s my fault you guys broke up.”

His smile dipped and he shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal. “Eh, you have a right to your feelings. But if it helps, I was already planning on trying to fix things before all this happened.”

She brightened a little at that, but then her shoulders drooped again. “If I hadn’t broken you guys up, you would have been here with us when we came inside. Then Mom wouldn’t have gotten hurt.”

He straightened. “Whoa, whoa. He was in here when you came inside? Waiting for you?”

We nodded, and a pained expression flashed across Nate’s face before he dispelled it with a quick shake of his head. He bent at the waist, so he was at eye level with Marigold, forcing

her to meet his gaze. “Hey, don’t you dare feel guilty about any of this. None of it is your fault. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine.”

“Why yours?” Marigold asked, echoing my own thoughts.

“Because it doesn’t matter if your mom and I were together or not, I promised I’d keep you both safe. I should have come in and made sure everything was fine before I left. And even if it was, I should have stayed here until Hattie and Thatcher got home. None of this is on you. It’s on me. Got it?”

Marigold pursed her lips, then gave him a dim smile. Instead of replying out loud, she darted forward and wrapped her arms around his waist, causing him to step backward to keep from losing his balance.

His eyes darted to mine as his arms hung loosely at his sides for a second. Then he snapped out of it and returned her hug. And if I’d thought my heart couldn’t go through the wringer another time today, watching them hug caused it to squeeze painfully once again.

“Thanks for helping us,” she said softly as she pulled away. “Again.”

He rubbed his hand over his mouth and jaw. “Anytime.”

When she was safely on the couch, and I was sure Nate’s friends wouldn’t let Chet anywhere near her, I grabbed his hand and tugged him around the dining room table and into Aunt Hattie’s kitchen. The second we were safely out of Marigold’s line of sight, I pulled him toward me and crushed my mouth to his.

I hadn’t planned to do that, of course. I’d intended to thank him for coming to our rescue—*again*, as Marigold had so astutely pointed out. Not only that, but I’d wanted to make sure he was okay since I figured that punch must have hurt his hand given how hard Chet had gone down.

But the second we were alone together, I lost track of everything, and all I could think about was being in his arms, feeling his lips on mine, and doing what Marigold had suggested—fix what was broken between us.

Unfortunately, the kiss didn't last long. I'd barely settled my arms around his neck, or gotten a chance to revel in the feel of him holding me, before he moved his hands to my hips and slowly guided us apart.

"Wait," he said, continuing to steer me until my back hit the counter.

He didn't let go of me though. If anything, the pressure of his fingers on my hips only increased as he lowered his forehead to my shoulder. Just like the first night we kissed, each one of his rapid breaths on my chest made my pulse jump.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I ... we need to talk."

Something inside me cracked open, and I had a sneaking suspicion it was all that love I'd stashed inside the shell in my chest.

But despite that, I had to laugh. "*You want to talk?* Since when?"

"Hush," he whispered, not lifting his head. But then he did lift it, and when his gaze found the spot where the back of Chet's hand had struck me, his breath hitched, and his eyes tightened as if he were in pain. He brought his hand up from my hip and brushed my hair back. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

"It's not your fault. I don't care about any of that stuff you said to Marigold. It wasn't your responsibility to check the house or stay here with us until my aunt and uncle got home. Neither one of us could've known he'd be waiting inside."

"I should've known. I should've made sure."

"Nate. Please. I'm asking you not to let this guilt be your main focus right now. It's not helpful. Do you know how many times I've asked myself questions like 'why didn't I do this' or 'why didn't I think of that'? Too many to count. But years of therapy taught me it doesn't change anything. It only kept me from focusing on the good. I'm still working on it myself, so let's try to work on it together."

As usual, he listened intently while I rambled. But his lips stayed grim and serious throughout. Normally, they'd at least be twitching up with amusement by the time I ran out of breath. I'd give anything to see his eyes sparkle with warmth and laughter.

"What would help you let go of the guilt and be my happy-go-lucky Nate again?" I asked wryly.

Thankfully, my teasing words had the desired effect, and his whole face lit up with a grin as he let out a rough laugh. "Your happy-go-lucky Nate, huh? I don't think anyone's ever called me that before."

"With me, you are."

"You're right. I might not always be the best at showing it, but it's true. I've never been happier than I have been this week. And that's because of you. And Marigold, weirdly."

"Weirdly?" I asked with a laugh.

"Yeah. I never thought her calling me old and picking on my music would grow on me."

"Teenagers are strange creatures."

He sighed. "They really are."

"So, are you good then?" I asked, gently shaking him by the shoulders.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Are *we* good? I thought it was crazy that I fell in love with you in only a week's time, but now I think it might be crazier for me to pretend I didn't."

My heart jumped into my throat, and I blinked at him, unable to believe my ears. "Wait. You love me?"

His shoulders sagged, and he looked at his feet for a second before meeting my eyes again. Then he shrugged. "I do. A lot."

I snorted. "Don't look so happy about it."

Tucking me against him, he kissed my forehead before responding. “We’ve already established that I’m happy even when I don’t look happy. I might just be in shock, that’s all. Do you love me?”

“Yes, Nate. I love you. A lot.”

“Good.”

He slid his mouth over mine again, and as I wrapped my arms around his neck, I concentrated on erasing everything that’d happened earlier this evening with each brush of Nate’s kiss.

“Hang on,” he said against my lips, pulling back once again. “One more thing.”

I scowled at him. “Now?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t help it. I gotta know the plan.”

I let my head fall back with a giggle. “What plan?”

“Us. What’s the plan? We’re together, Marigold’s cool with it, Brock’s going away for good, all gravy. To quote your teen. But are you still leaving? Because you know I can’t—”

I didn’t know when this role reversal happened between us, but it was my turn to quiet his rambling with another kiss. Then I pulled back and caught his eyes, making sure there was no doubt in his mind about whether my smile was real or fake. “Nathan Bristol, we’re together. And since Marigold gave us her blessing, that means we’re not leaving. She’s not dumb. She knew that was what she was agreeing to by telling you she’s cool with this.”

“And will she be cool with moving again in three years? And then again three years after that?” he asked warily, his expression telling me this was something he’d been wondering about for longer than just this conversation.

I, however, hadn’t even thought about it. Which was silly since I knew full well, thanks to Brett’s career, that Marines moved around every three years or so, depending on the circumstances.

Patting his shoulder, I pushed him back so I could lead him into the living room, then I pulled him to a stop in front of my daughter. “Mari.”

She looked up at us with a raised brow. “Uh, yeah?”

“Nate’s a Marine.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So, he has to move every three years.”

She nodded slowly, putting the pieces together on her own. If she was fine with us getting back together, then she’d need to be fine if we *stayed* together, and that might mean moving again, even if she made friends here that she didn’t want to leave. It was a lot to ask of anyone, but I wouldn’t miss the opportunity to ask her this time.

Nate shifted next to me, obviously trying to figure out if the conversation was going well or terribly wrong. But I knew my kid. She was processing. She knew she was being given a choice and that we’d respect her answer, and that mattered to her.

“If Nate’s the GOAT, we gotta go where the GOAT goes,” she said simply.

Well, simply as far as I was concerned. Nate probably didn’t get it. But when I turned to him to explain, I was surprised to find him with his chest lifted, smiling down at her with what I could only describe as pride.

He pointed to himself with his brows lifted. “I’m the GOAT now, huh?”

“Seems like it,” she replied with a shrug.

“Hey,” Zac called from the front door. “You guys ready to come out? We’ve all given our statements, so it’s your turn.”

Marigold stood and walked past us, apparently eager to get it over with. But I grabbed Nate’s arm before he could escape. “Wait, you know what GOAT means?”

He winked. “I learned that one from football. Tom Brady?”

I laughed, trailing after him as he headed for the door. Of course he'd get that one. Every football fan knew Tom Brady was the GOAT, and even though teens today used the term much more liberally, it seemed Nate liked that my teen had given him the honor of *greatest of all time*.

And I had to admit, I liked it too.

NATE

My face instantly split into a grin when I walked into Bluffton Blooms two weeks later. The small bouquets I'd ordered for Nikki and Marigold were already sitting on the counter, and Hattie stood behind them looking like a proud peacock.

"Right on time, as usual," she said with a wag of her finger.

"When have you ever known me to be late for anything?" I replied. The smell of fresh flowers filled my nose as I made my way toward her, and I nodded approvingly toward the piece of furniture that had changed my life in the best way. "That thing looks like it was made for this shop."

"Sure does. Thanks again for delivering it."

I placed my hands on the counter and pursed my lips. "Hattie, I don't think I've thanked *you* for your part in all this. I know you didn't think the wedding was gonna fall apart when you asked me to move that dresser, but having me drive Nikki and Marigold when you could have just rented them a car ... I was mad when you first told me, but now I can't thank you enough."

Hattie's eyes sparkled as she crossed her arms over her chest. "No need to thank me, Nathan. It was my pleasure. The circumstances were less than ideal, obviously, but I'm so happy for the way things worked out. It makes me happy to see you and the girls so happy. I couldn't have asked for a better outcome."

My chest burned as she spoke, and I hung my head. We were *very* happy. All three of us. In the last two weeks since that awful confrontation with Brock, we'd started completely new lives, individually and separately. I checked in with my new squadron in Beaufort, Marigold started school, and Nikki found a job at a midwifery clinic.

And together, we'd also begun creating routines that made every day exciting to me. We spent weekends exploring their new town, had fun at karaoke night at Miceys, and Nikki had even joined in on the book club and girls' night festivities with her new friends. You know, the ones I'd so graciously shared with her.

They were still staying with Hattie, so I went there for dinner almost every night after work. On the nights I didn't, we either ate out or ate with my friends. They'd even gotten to know my extended family better, thanks to a couple of dinners with my aunt, uncle, cousins, and their spouses.

And soon, they'd be able to come over to the three-bedroom house I'd rented. It was right down the street from Hattie's, and I'd seen the sign advertising it as a rental when I walked back to my SUV that first eventful night. Nikki had called it a sign from the universe, and she hadn't much appreciated my grumbling reply that it was only a sign from a realtor.

Truthfully, I agreed with her. Maybe it was something like fate. I didn't need all that space for only myself, but since I already knew deep in my bones that Nikki and Marigold were permanent fixtures in my life, it'd made sense for me to rent a bigger place. Room for us to have as a family. A family I never saw coming, but one that Hattie had been hoping for all along. I was more than grateful she'd gone back to plan A, as she'd so bluntly admitted to doing.

"How much for the flowers?" I asked, clearing my throat.

She chuckled and gave me the total, so I handed over my card and she tendered the sale. "This was very sweet of you. I'm sure they'll be thrilled."

“Yeah, well, it’s not because I’m sweet. I just figured you’d be more likely to keep making my favorite dinners if I supported your business.”

Hattie rolled her eyes and sent me on my way with a wave of her hand. “See you tonight, dear.”

I replied with a nod and made my way outside with the flowers. Just as I knew she would, Nikki had changed me from that grumpy guy she first met into the kinda guy who bought flowers to celebrate things that probably weren’t even that big of a deal.

Nikki’s bouquet was a congratulatory one for delivering her first South Carolina baby this week, and Marigold’s was pretty much just to celebrate surviving her first week at a new school. This had been a rough time for her, and if I was already planning to get flowers for her mom, it made sense to get Marigold some while I was at it. So, yeah, maybe I wasn’t so grumpy these days, but I was still practical.

When I climbed the front steps at Hattie’s house, Marigold was on the porch with her headphones on—finally able to use them with her own phone instead of that MP3 player now that Brock was safely behind bars. She slipped them off her ears as she saw me approach, then she closed her eyes and pulled her lips into a tight line, shaking her head like she was disappointed.

“What?” I asked with a smirk.

“Just sayin’, one bouquet would’ve been plenty. My mom’s already obsessed with you.”

Understanding washed over me, and I let out a low laugh. “You think they’re both for your mom?”

She quirked a brow. “Aren’t they?”

“Nope.”

“Then ...?”

“One’s for you.”

Marigold sat up straighter and stared at me. “Me? Why?”

“Just wanted to say congrats on surviving your first week of school, that’s all. But if you don’t want them, I don’t mind making your mom doubly obsessed with me.” I shrugged, heading for the door.

“Wait, no!” She jumped up from her chair.

Turning back to her, I gave her a small smile and held out one of the small bouquets. “Oh, you want one?”

“Yes.” She stepped forward, taking the bouquet and giving it a shy sniff before letting out a quiet laugh that seemed to be directed at herself. “Sorry. Thank you. That’s really ... nice.”

I didn’t miss the sincerity in her voice or expression, and it wasn’t lost on me that she’d struggled to find a word that wasn’t beyond my comprehension just now. Over the last few weeks with Marigold, I’d learned a lot about how to navigate conversations with her—and gained a whole new vocabulary along the way. But her use of the word *nice* appeared to be intentional, and it warmed me.

I dipped my chin. “You’re welcome. Is your mom inside?”

“No, she had to run out to check on a patient. She thinks she’s in labor, but Mom thinks it’s a false alarm, so she said she’d be back soon.”

“Oh, wow,” I said, frowning down at the other bouquet. “These were supposed to be to congratulate her on delivering her first baby here, but now it might be two in the same week. I might need that second bouquet after all.”

Marigold gave me a bewildered smile. “You know, GOAT, you’re turning into a bit of a sap these days.”

“Blame your mother.”

“I do.”

Snickering, I pointed to the chairs. “Mind if I sit out here and wait with you?”

I didn’t feel like going to my parents’ house and then coming right back if Nikki wouldn’t be long. Plus, I wanted to check in with Marigold about how she was doing. The depth of my feelings for Nikki over such a short time had been

surprising, for sure, but not as surprising as how easily her daughter had fit into that. They were a package deal, and I cared about both of them more than I ever thought possible.

“Sure.” She put her flowers on the table between the two chairs and resumed her seat, so I put Nikki’s down and took the other seat.

“So,” I began, scratching my head. “How are you doing?”

She shot me a sardonic look. “Peachy, thanks. How are *you* doing?”

I shot her a matching expression instead of replying, knowing her well enough to know it would land.

“*Fine*,” she drawled. “I’m okay. It’s weird. This school is ... different. The people are nice, though. Heaps more accepting of the new kid than everyone at my old school would’ve been.”

“That’s good.” I paused, not wanting to press my luck or expect too much from her.

I wanted to check in about the personal life stuff too, not just school. The events of the past few weeks were a lot for Nikki to process, and we’d had plenty of late-night conversations where she’d spilled her guts about how she was feeling and talked through it all. It was great because it meant I didn’t need to worry about her putting on a fake happy face when she was internally freaking out, but if Nikki had that much to say, Marigold probably had a lot going on in that brain of hers too.

“Look, I’m not even sure how to ask this or if you want to talk to me about it, but how are you doing now that you know more about your biological father? And after everything that happened with Brock—er, Chet, I guess—are you doing okay with all that?”

She stared down at the flowers on the table between us but didn’t seem like she planned to reply.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” I went on. “If you’re good, cool. If you’re not, and you wanna

talk about it, I'm here. I can't promise I'll do a great job on the advice front, but I'll listen."

A faint smile tugged on her lips as she looked up at me. "You sound like a TV dad or something."

My shoulders lifted on their own accord, and I gave her a questioning look, not sure if that was a compliment.

Marigold sighed. "It's a good thing. Bet."

"Er, thanks."

"Look, it sucks to find out that I came from such a bad guy. Or like, was born into such a dark situation for my mom. But I don't remember anything about my bio dad, so when she told me more about him last week, it was like listening to a story about someone else's life. Except, I hate that my mom went through that."

I swallowed hard. "Me too."

"I can tell." She looked out at the lawn, then sighed heavily. "I don't wanna talk about the stuff with Chet. My mom signed me up for counseling, remember?"

Chuckling, I nodded. "Right. Yeah, better to talk to a professional than me anyway."

"Yeah ... but thanks." She looked away, and then over at me again with narrowed eyes. "It's kinda wild how different you are, though."

"Different?"

"Different from Chet. And my bio dad, I guess."

I let my brows wander toward my hairline. That wasn't saying much.

She blew out a breath, sensing she needed to elaborate. "After Chet and my mom got engaged, I knew that meant he was gonna be my stepdad. But I wasn't shocked that he planned to send me away. He barely talked to me the whole time they were together, and you've been with my mom for ... what? A few weeks? And here you are, acting like more of a dad than I've ever had. Gotta say, it's pretty legit."

Something in my chest tightened, and I looked down. “I have no idea how to be a dad. Especially not to a teenager.” I met her eyes again and hoped she’d hear the truth in my next words. “But I need you to know I’m not trying to *act* like a dad by asking how you’re doing.”

“I get it, GOAT,” she said, smiling when I snorted at her new nickname for me. “And for what it’s worth, I’m fully shipping this.”

“*Shipping* this?”

She rolled her eyes with a laugh. “You and my mom. Us being a family. I’m here for it.”

Happiness swelled in my chest. “Good.”

“So, when are you gonna pop the question?”

“Uh ...” I sat back, then forward again, totally caught off guard.

“What? You’re not gonna propose?”

My eyes snapped to hers. “I am.”

“Cool ... so, when?”

“Whenever she’s ready. I know I am, but I figured it was too soon for her.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, good call. My mom *never* jumps headfirst into a new adventure.”

I frowned. “You think she’s ready for that?”

“Duh.”

“Are you?”

She leaned back in her chair. “Sure. I’ll get my own room at your house, right? I’m sick of sharing a room with my mom. I want my space. And my egg chair. Think we can get the rest of our stuff from California soon?”

I let out a burst of laughter, shaking my head. “You’re just like your mom.”

“I know.”

Rubbing my hands over my thighs, my mind swirled and nerves prickled up my spine. If Marigold didn't think it was too soon—and surely she'd tell me if she did—that meant it was time for a plan. “You wanna help me come up with an engagement surprise for her? You know, since you're *shipping this?*”

She wrinkled her nose. “Don't.”

I chuckled. “Will you help me or not?”

“On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“When you guys get married, you have to let her pick out her own dress.”

My gut twisted at the reminder of what that jerk had put Nikki through, but this wasn't the time to dwell on that. Happier days were ahead. I waved my hand with a short laugh. “No worries there. She can pick out whatever she wants. She can even tell *me* what to wear.”

“Oh, that's easy.”

I tilted my head at her in question.

“Dress blues,” she supplied. “Aunt Hattie showed her a picture of you in your blues after you left last night. She basically died. Like full-on fell over and died.”

Knowing she was exaggerating didn't stop the pride that shot through me. I forced myself not to show it, though, lest she unleash her tenth eye roll in ten minutes. Instead, I simply nodded in acknowledgement. “Dress blues, it is.”

“Sick. Now, what's the plan?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but then Nikki pulled up in front of the house in Thatcher's truck. He and Hattie had been carpooling to work so Nikki could use it until she got her car out here—along with the rest of their stuff, including the infamous cocoon-like egg chair, apparently.

My heart instantly kicked with anticipation, so I picked up Nikki's flowers and stood, intending to meet her on the steps.

Then I pointed at Marigold. “To be continued.”

NIKKI

“Oh, that must be Shelby!” Aria, cried. She jumped up from the couch to answer the knock at her quaint cottage’s front door. “I can’t wait to meet Melissa.”

Girls’ night with my new friends in Bluffton was in full swing. I already loved hanging out with Lyndi, Layla, and Aria, but I had a special place in my heart for Shelby. Not only was she Nate’s cousin-in-law, but she’d somehow convinced my never-danced-a-day-in-her-life daughter to sign up for lessons at the studio where she worked.

I got up to greet her and her new friend who was also her surrogate. But as eager as I was to meet Melissa, I was also eager to ask how Marigold was doing in class. But when Shelby and Melissa entered Aria’s cottage, I stopped short.

The woman was petite and very pretty, but the giant baby belly she sported drew my full attention. I knew she was close to her due date, but she was carrying *way* low, and I wouldn’t be surprised if she only lasted another day or so in her present condition.

“Guys, this is Melissa,” Shelby said, beaming at the woman. “And this,” she went on, placing her hand on Melissa’s round belly, “is the baby girl who will soon be joining the Bristol family.”

The women around me all cheered and bounced over to them, hugging them both. I did the same, of course, but I was also watching Melissa closely as she chatted with my new friends.

She didn't show any *obvious* signs of labor, so this was purely a Spidey senses situation on my part. I hadn't been a midwife for twenty years like the two older women I worked with at the clinic, but even they admitted that I seemed to have a natural gift for being able to spot an impending delivery from a mile away.

"Sorry again for how tight-lipped Paul and I were about our journey to become parents," Shelby said as I casually invited Melissa to have a seat in a floral-printed armchair, "but now that Melissa is so close to her due date, we wanted you all to meet her. We're planning to stay friends forever, so it just makes sense!"

Melissa nodded, rubbing her belly. "It's true. Shelby and I have become insanely close, and I really wanted to meet the friends she's always talking about. I hope you don't mind me crashing your girls' night."

"Of course not! We're so happy to meet you!" Aria insisted, taking a seat.

As the rest of the women chatted, I moved to Aria and Will's kitchen to grab Melissa some water. I didn't know if she would actually go into full-on labor right here in this living room, but something in my gut told me she might.

"How far along are you again?" I asked as I handed her the glass.

"Thirty-nine weeks."

She accepted the water with a nod of thanks and took a sip, and I settled onto the couch, grateful that the spot closest to her chair was available to me. I wanted to ask her more questions so I could get a better feel for how familiar she might be with signs of labor, but I also didn't want to overstep. Or freak anyone out.

So instead, I bit my tongue and decided to keep my eye on her while still enjoying our girls' night, as planned. But if she didn't go into labor in the middle of it, I'd certainly tell her to make sure her hospital bag was in her car. There was no doubt in my mind it would happen soon.

The conversation stuck with Shelby and Paul's big news for another few minutes, but then it shifted to the fact that Lyndi was also expecting, and the women who already had kids naturally started offering advice to the new moms.

Aria couldn't help but pull out her phone to show off some photos of the daughter she shared with Will, which of course caused Layla to do the same with her baby boy and his older brother.

"Sorry, lemme give you a quick rundown of who everyone is," Shelby said to Melissa with an embarrassed laugh. "This is Aria, who is Paul's sister that you've heard so much about. Then we have Layla, who is married to Paul's friend Zac, and they have a baby boy named Andrew and an older son named Grayson. And this is Lyndi, who is Layla's sister, and she's married to our friend Beau. I grew up with all these ladies, so I'm super happy that we're going to be together for awhile now that Paul and Will have arranged to stay in South Carolina. I'm still working on getting Layla and Lyndi's husbands to do the same thing, though. We can't break up the band."

The sisters shared a look, and Lyndi sighed dramatically. "I wish it were that easy, but now that Beau's a drill instructor, he's pretty obsessed with the Marine Corps."

"I'm told that will fade," Layla said, patting her sister's knee. "I can't stand the idea of our kids not growing up near each other, so we'll figure something out."

I busied myself with snacks to keep from offering up the sunny, look-at-the-bright-side comment that'd snapped into my mind. It wasn't my place to remind them how lucky they were to have such a strong support system, no matter where it was located.

Man, I really needed to tackle some of this friendship baggage with my therapist next week. Both of my exes were out of our lives, but the remaining effect of them isolating me in the past was clearly still an issue I needed to work through.

Finally, Shelby gestured to me. "And last but not least, this is Nikki, who is our second-newest addition to the group now

that you're here."

Melissa grinned at me. "Ah, a fellow newcomer. I was afraid I'd be the only one who didn't grow up with these ladies."

"Oh, she didn't grow up with us, but she's still practically family since she's dating Aria and Paul's cousin, Nate," Shelby said.

"Which will make her official family when they get married," Aria added with a wink at me.

I grinned. Despite everything that'd happened lately, I absolutely couldn't wait for that day. It might seem fast to anyone else, but I was up for it. No adventure had ever felt so right. And besides, I'd been with Chet for two years before our wedding day and look what a mess that had turned out to be. Deep down in my soul, I knew Nate was a good man and that he loved me like no one else ever had. I didn't need more time with him to believe that.

"I feel like I need a family tree to understand all the connections in this group," Melissa mused.

"We should make one," Shelby agreed with mock-solemnity. "Oh, and Nikki has a daughter named Marigold, who's thirteen."

"I can show you pictures, too, but she's a lot less squishy and adorable than all the babies in this group. Well, she'll always be adorable to me, but she hates me for it."

Melissa laughed, and Shelby waved a hand. "She's adorable for a teenager, for sure. She's one of my students at the studio, and she's also the sweetest thing. Especially with the younger kids. She volunteers to help me wrangle them during the toddler classes and it's so cute."

My smile stretched wider hearing that Marigold was saving all her sass for me, just as I always hoped. That was the thing with teens. She could be bratty at times, but as long as she saved it for me—the one who knew her heart and let her feel her feelings—and other people got her sweet side, I considered that a win.

“Oh, goodness. Thirteen! You don’t look old enough to have a thirteen-year-old!” Melissa exclaimed, wincing slightly before rubbing her lower back.

I chuckled, even though my hawklike eyes had totally caught the move no one else seemed to pick up on. “I get that a lot. I was twenty when I had her, though.”

When Shelby changed the subject to my connection to Aunt Hattie—who’d been the one to set Melissa up with Shelby and Paul, proving her matchmaking skills weren’t exclusively in the marriage department—the conversation naturally shifted to Aunt Hattie’s son, Brett.

“Isn’t he deploying soon?” Lyndi asked, taking a sip of her own water.

I nodded. “Yes, early next year. I can’t believe it’s already the end of November, though. Aunt Hattie is super worried about it.”

“Really?” Aria asked. “You’d think she’d be used to him deploying by now.”

“She is, but with his job being so dangerous, I think she’s always worried about him.”

The others nodded, and Layla shook her head with a wry smile. “Did your aunt tell you her plan to set Brett up with Anabelle?”

I internally groaned. Bluffton Blooms had been passed down to Aunt Hattie from her parents, and it was always her dream for one of her children to run it someday. Unfortunately, her only child had joined the military and had no interest in running a flower shop. Enter Anabelle—the shop’s new, absolutely breathtaking manager.

“Yes, she told me all about her evil plan,” I teased. “That woman is a menace. Not that I’m complaining, considering how I wound up with Nate.”

The rest of the women muttered in agreement, since the menace in question had a hand in their happily ever afters too.

“I wanna know the evil plan,” Melissa said, rubbing her back yet again. “Hattie set me up with my husband, so I know how magical she is.”

We all laughed at that, and Aria took on the task of explaining. “Last year, one of our other friends—Zoe, who has sadly moved to Yuma—suggested to Aunt Hattie that if she really wanted her flower shop to stay in the family, she should find Brett’s perfect match and make *her* the manager.”

Melissa whistled. “Wow. That’s diabolical. I love it.”

“Anabelle apparently fit the bill,” Shelby said. “Ms. Hattie’s been training her as the manager and dropping hints about Brett as much as she can.”

“Well, I’ve gone in there a couple of times while Anabelle was working, and she’s super nice,” Lyndi said with a shrug. “I guess we’ll see what Brett thinks of her next time he visits.”

“Knowing Hattie’s track record, they’ll be married pretty soon after. Hopefully, they’ll do it here. It’s been a minute since I’ve gotten to do a friend or family wedding,” Aria, our resident wedding planner, said. “But hey, at least we’ll have yours to look forward to when the time comes, Nikki.”

The cottage she lived in—and where we all happened to be gathered this evening—sat tucked in the tree line of the property her family owned. The gorgeous wedding venue *slash* bed-and-breakfast, Starlight Manor, was apparently a popular locale, and I could see why.

Her words had me imagining marrying Nate here, and I blushed. He’d told me not to linger too long at girls’ night because he had something planned for me, and maybe it was silly, but I hoped it had something to do with all this wedding talk.

He didn’t know I’d seen him do it, but when I’d taken my ring off my right hand to wash dishes at Aunt Hattie’s last week, I’d caught him slyly slipping it onto his pointer finger as if to get an idea of the size. *Men*.

The rest of our girls’ night went by in a flash of laughter, chips and dip, and me watching Melissa work through some

progressively worsening back pain. I asked her several times if she might be going into labor—explaining that I was a midwife and was concerned that she was—but she waved me off and said she had three kids of her own and this wasn't it.

I believed her, of course, but I was also keeping an eye on the clock. She seemed to rub her back or flinch slightly at regular intervals of about eight to ten minutes. And still, every time I suggested she go in to get checked out, she assured me she was fine.

“Even if it is labor,” she said after what appeared to be a bout of significantly more intense back pain, “it's probably super early. My other labors took days. I'd like to labor at home for as long as I can before heading to the hospital.”

I pursed my lips. “Every delivery is different. I think you should prepare yourself for this baby to come sooner than the others, too, since it's your fourth pregnancy, isn't it?”

“Yes,” she said with a sigh, looking at Shelby with a wrinkle of her tiny nose. “I guess you should call Paul and let him know it might be soon.” She swung her gaze back to me. “Back pain like this has never happened with my other babies, but you think it's a labor symptom?”

“Oh, for sure. It's called back labor, and you've had pain every eight to ten minutes or so.” I checked the clock again. “In fact, since we're about twenty minutes from the hospital, I think you should tell Paul to meet you there. You don't want to delay this too long and risk having the baby on the side of the road.”

Everyone gasped, and Shelby immediately dashed from the room to call Paul. Melissa looked at me and shook her head. “It's been consistent all day, but I figured it was because I was on my feet a lot. You really think labor's that close?”

“Do you have a high pain tolerance?” I asked.

“Definitely. I didn't use an epidural with my others, and this doesn't feel like ‘emergency’ pain.”

“Okay, well, better safe than sorry, right? I kind of have a knack for this whole baby-day thing, and I feel like you're

closer than you think.” I shot her a wink, hoping to put her at ease.

Melissa nodded, looking a little disbelieving still, but at least she wasn't brushing me off anymore.

But sure enough, just as we were all getting up to say our goodbyes so Shelby could take Melissa to the hospital, her water broke all over Aria's living room floor. Shocking everyone but me, of course.

“No way!” Melissa screamed, clutching her sides and looking up at me with wild eyes. “It can't be. I haven't felt all the normal tightening and ... why is this so different?” She spoke the last words through her teeth since the baby's head had likely dropped lower thanks to the cushion of the water disappearing.

“Like I said, every delivery is different,” I repeated easily, keeping my voice low and soothing. “I'll be right back. I have supplies in my uncle's truck.”

On my way out the door, I heard Shelby tell Melissa that I worked at the local midwifery clinic and had attended plenty of home births, so she would be just fine. I hoped I wouldn't have to deliver the baby here, if we could help it, but I needed to check her before I made that call. Especially now that I knew she'd been having back labor all day and hadn't realized it.

I called Nate on my way back into the cottage, and he answered on the first ring. “Hey, you on your way back from girls' night?”

“Not exactly.”

“Uh ... okay. What's up?”

I stepped into the living room and took one look at Melissa's face as the other women huddled around her. “I'm not sure how long I'll be, but I think I might be about to deliver a baby at Aria's place.”

“What? No way!”

“Yes way. I'll call you in a bit. Love you!”

And with that, I hung up on the guy who may or may not have been planning to propose to me tonight. And less than one *very intense* hour later, I wrapped a perfectly healthy baby girl in a clean white towel.

NATE

“I still can’t believe it,” Paul said, shaking his head in wonder as we sat on the porch at Aria and Will’s. “I’m a dad.”

“Yes, you are,” Will replied, patting him on the back.

Lyndi and Layla had gone home right after the baby was born, and Shelby, Aria, and Nikki were inside with Melissa.

“I thought I was the one who was gonna make this night one for the books,” I said with a chuckle. “But nope. Unexpected baby delivery in Aria’s living room takes the cake, hands down.”

“Sorry to steal your thunder, man,” Paul replied with a grin, knowing all about my plans for tonight.

“You should be sorry. That rug your friend just ruined took Aria like three hours to pick out. Now I’m gonna have to go through that torture again while she decides on a new one,” Will retorted, but his tone didn’t hold any malice.

“I’ll pay for a new one. Though, she should just replace it with the same one,” Paul said dryly.

Will blinked at him. “Have you met your sister?”

“Fair.”

“I’m only messing with you, anyway. Forget the rug. I couldn’t be happier for you both,” Will said. “And you and Shelby are welcome to crash here since Melissa’s staying the night.”

Being that a certified nurse midwife had attended this unplanned home birth and given them full examinations, they hadn't needed to go to the hospital afterward. I'd driven over as soon as I found out what was going on, and Nikki explained she'd be staying late to make sure they were both okay.

Now that I thought about it, Nikki always said that when plans get ruined, all we could do was pivot and make the best of it. Maybe that meant this ring didn't have to keep burning a hole in my pocket after all.

I eyed the serene landscape between the cottage and Starlight Manor. "Hey guys, do you think it would be weird to take Nikki on a walk over there and propose tonight?"

They exchanged a look, and Will frowned. "Why would it be weird? Because she was just elbow deep in baby-delivering?"

Paul winced. "Bro."

"She was," Will insisted with a laugh.

"Yes," I replied. "That's why it might be weird. Is it weird?"

Paul shrugged. "I'm sure this night isn't as mind-blowing to her as it is to us. It's her job. If it feels right, I say go for it."

Nodding, I remained silent while the two of them went on talking about the baby—Hadlee Jane Bristol—and the events of the night. I cared about what they were saying, of course, but now that I had a new plan in mind, I also couldn't stop running through what I wanted to say to Nikki as if it was a monologue in a play I was about to perform or something. Not that you'd ever catch me on stage. But it felt like I needed to rehearse my lines or I'd forget everything I wanted to say to her.

A few minutes later, Nikki came outside and shut the door gently behind her. "Everyone's settled and happy in there, so I think it's safe for me to take off. But they know I'm only a call away if anyone needs me. Obviously, call 911 if it's an emergency, but I promise, they're both going to be just fine."

Paul stood and hugged her. “Thanks for coming to the rescue.”

She shook her head. “Ha, don’t act like I’m returning the favor you did for me. This was a perfectly natural and safe home birth. It couldn’t have been smoother. If I hadn’t been here, I’m sure Shelby could’ve caught the baby.”

We all balked at that, and she chuckled.

After we said our goodbyes to Paul and Will, I held her hand as we walked down the porch steps. When we made it to the gravel area where my Suburban was parked next to Thatcher’s truck, I turned her into my arms. “Are you tired, Wonder Woman?”

“Yes,” she admitted, though her eyes were bright with laughter.

I nodded and gave her a brief kiss. “Okay. I’ll follow you back to Hattie’s before heading home.”

I started to pull away, but she held me securely against her. “Wait, wait. Why did you ask?”

“Well, I thought about asking if you’d wanna take a walk down by the lake with me.” I nodded over her shoulder, and she followed my gaze to the peacefully still water surrounded by a pebbled path.

The walkway was dotted with old-fashioned streetlamps, and the whole thing looked like something out of a painting or a romantic movie. Marigold and I had planned for me to propose on the front porch of my new house—that would soon become *our* new house, pending her acceptance—but it felt right to do it here for reasons I couldn’t explain.

“I’d love to take a walk,” she replied, taking my hand and allowing me to lead her over to the small lake.

All the things I wanted to say to her swirled through my mind as we made our way over to it, but they felt elusive and hard to make sense of. Who knew I’d be this nervous? I wasn’t nervous to propose, just nervous that I’d mess it up.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

I smirked and shook my head, warmth spreading through me. “I’m working on it.”

She pulled me to a stop next to the lake and looked up at me curiously. But she didn’t say anything to rush me, just patiently waited for me to get my mind right. It almost made it worse, though, because it reminded me that she knew me well enough to know that I didn’t simply pour my heart out or blurt out my thoughts as easily as other people could. And that made me want to make this proposal even better, because she deserved it.

Sighing, I looked toward the sky, surprised at how many stars we could see despite being in a populated town and not in the middle of nowhere like that night in New Mexico. That experience was wild in a lot of ways, but when she’d stood at the window of that converted shipping container, staring into the night with a small smile, I’d been floored by how beautiful she was.

At the time, I knew so little about her, but two things were abundantly clear. The first was that she wasn’t a flighty woman who’d ditched a good guy at the altar. And that was key since I’d been so worried about that before she told me what was up with the runaway bride situation.

The second was that her words from the hotel’s parking lot about ruined plans and adventures weighed heavily on my mind. And it was recalling those words that finally gave me enough power over my jumbled thoughts to complete my mission and propose to her.

“Do you remember what you told me outside the hotel in Las Cruces?” I asked, taking her hands and holding them gingerly between us.

“Hmm.” She lifted her chin and pursed her lips. “I think that was the night I explained what Mari meant when she used the word *slays*.”

“Hilarious. Yes, I got a vocab lesson, but you also told me that the best adventures happen when plans get messed up.”

A wide grin lit up her whole face and she nodded. “Ah, yes. I remember now. And I also remember you looking at me a little bit strangely after I said it too.”

“Probably because I was *supposed* to be sleeping in one of those four-point-five-star hotel rooms, and *instead* I was standing in the parking lot with the most gorgeous woman I’d ever seen,” I replied with a shake of my head. “It was the definition of messed-up plans gone right, and that made me wonder if what you said applied to more than just the hotel thing, but the trip in general.”

“I see. And did you come to any conclusions about that?”

“Yes.” I took a deep breath. “Everything that happened that day—getting dumped, the dresser delay, you and Marigold hopping into my SUV—I thought it was all part of a big cosmic joke. But then it turned out to be the road trip I didn’t know I needed and the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The best adventure. And I never want it to end.”

Before waiting for her to reply, I dug the ring box out of my pocket and opened it as I got down on one knee. I held it between us, momentarily losing my ability to voice my thoughts. She was staring down at me with so much happiness in her eyes that it actually stole my breath, too, not just my words.

Then she giggled. “Nate?”

I shook my head to clear it and laughed with her. “Sorry. Um, I’m gonna keep this part simple.”

“Good idea, because I want to get to the answering part.”

“Oh yeah? You wanna skip the question then?” I teased.

“No. Ask me. I’ll be patient. I promise.”

I narrowed my eyes and held my tongue for a beat, just to mess with her. When her face squished up like she was physically trying to contain herself, I finally gave in. “Nikki, will you marry me?”

“Yes!”

Rising to stand, I wrapped my arms around her waist and lifted her off her feet, then brought my mouth to hers. My lips might not be that great at forming movie-worthy romantic speeches, but I could make up for it by kissing her like my life depended on it.

And so, I poured every word I hadn't said into the way I moved my mouth over hers. I hoped she could feel how much I loved her. How I'd die before I let anything happen to her—or her kid—and how I'd spend the rest of my life letting her mess up my plans to her heart's content, just as long as she kept being my best adventure.

EPILOGUE

Choosing a wedding date that fell between Christmas and New Year's might not have been my most brilliant idea. It wasn't that I wanted to rush down the aisle, necessarily, though that was part of it. I was ready for Marigold, Nate, and I to start our new lives together—under one roof and as a family.

So that was the reason I'd given Nate.

But the *real* reason I'd chosen this date was because I knew how much it would mean to Nate to have Brett be his best man. He was leaving on deployment in January, though, so I knew we needed to act fast, and my amazing husband-to-be hadn't seemed to mind.

I'd learned, thanks to my mess-up with Marigold, that secrets were a bad thing. But surprises? They were just plain fun. And it would also be fitting for Nate to be reminded that marriage with me was going to be an adventure at every turn.

Yes, getting ready for a wedding on short notice wasn't ideal. And yes, getting ready for a wedding in the midst of small-town holiday fever was also rather difficult. But as Brett stood in my bridal suite, ready to be the one to step outside and surprise Nate during what was supposed to be the groom's first look at the bride, I had no regrets.

"Will you be wearing a wedding dress every time I see you from now on?" Brett asked, waving a hand toward my gown with a teasing twinkle in his eye.

I looked down at the formfitting satin dress, running my fingers over the simple ruched bodice that clung to my hips before flaring out at mid-thigh. It was exactly the kind of dress I'd always imagined having, and I grinned as happy memories from the day I'd bought it flashed through my mind.

The weekend after Nate proposed, Marigold and I had gone straight to the cute bridal shop near Bluffton Blooms. Shelby was busy with sweet Hadlee, but Aria, Layla, and Lyndi had joined in on the fun—along with Aunt Hattie, of course, because I wouldn't have it any other way.

We'd asked the owners to show us everything available to buy off the rack since I doubted I'd have time for alterations. I'd tried each one on, and of the six they'd given me, I'd saved this one for last. It was my favorite of the bunch, and every dress I tried on that wasn't right or didn't quite fit had me praying even harder that this one would. And luckily for me, it had. Like it was made to fit my body.

"No, Brett," I finally replied, sighing dreamily. "This is the last time I'll ever wear a wedding dress. I promise."

"It'd better be, young lady," Aunt Hattie said as she slipped into Starlight Manor's bridal suite. "I've outdone myself with your flowers, and I won't be able to top it next time."

"There won't *be* a next time," I insisted through my teeth, making Brett and his meddlesome mother laugh.

"Are you two ready for the big surprise?" Aunt Hattie asked, looking between us with her hands clasped in front of her chest.

I nodded, and when Brett did the same, Aunt Hattie did a little shimmy. "Here's what we're going to do. Lyndi is telling Nate how to pose, and she's taking some solo shots of him outside the suite."

The image of yet another one of my grooms standing outside my bridal suite minutes before the ceremony should have made me feel icky. Instead, since I felt totally safe and

secure about the man I was about to marry, all I felt was glee. Pure, giddy, obnoxiously overwhelming glee.

“When it’s time for ‘the bride’ to come out,” Aunt Hattie went on, using air quotes, “Brett will step outside and walk up behind Nate while Lyndi takes pictures. Everyone is out there to watch, and I’ve told them they’d better not give anything away, or they’ll have me to deal with.”

Brett and I both shuddered at the thought of being on Aunt Hattie’s bad side, then he shrugged. “Sounds easy enough.”

He hadn’t known this would be part of the big surprise for Nate, but thankfully, he was a good sport. When it came to shenanigans, Nate, Paul, Will, and Brett had a long-standing tradition of pulling pranks on each other and their families.

As it stood, Nate didn’t suspect a thing. I was sure of it. Since Brett had just taken leave a couple of months ago for my *other* wedding, Nate had totally understood when Hattie’d told him he couldn’t attend this one. Little did he know we’d moved mountains to make it happen.

“Oh, it gets better,” Aunt Hattie told her son with a wink.

“Better?”

I pursed my lips to keep from laughing as Aunt Hattie explained that Brett would not only walk up behind Nate, but he’d also stand close enough to put his hand on Nate’s shoulder or hold his hand. Lyndi would tell him to pose as if she were talking to me, all while Nate faced the camera, completely unaware of what was going on behind him.

“Just do whatever Lyndi tells you to do,” Aunt Hattie finished.

Brett held up one of his large hands, then stepped over to me and lifted one of mine, comparing the two. “You really think he’s not gonna know whose hand he’s holding?”

Aunt Hattie rolled her eyes and let out an exasperated breath. “Brett, don’t be difficult. Nate’s out there with his mind firmly on his bride. He’ll be so wrapped up in the anticipation of seeing Nikki that it won’t even occur to him that it might be someone else.”

“If you say so.”

I chuckled as Brett squeezed my hand before dropping it to my side. “Thanks for doing this. Nate’s gonna love it. Well, once he gets over the shock that you’re not me, obviously.”

“I’m just glad they let me use my pre-deployment leave to come out here. It was touch-and-go there for a minute.”

Aunt Hattie backed toward the door with her arms making a giant X in front of her. “Oh, no you don’t! No deployment talk on wedding day!”

Brett zipped his lips. “Sorry.”

“Lemme go see if Lyndi’s ready for you yet. Wait for my signal.”

When the door closed behind her, Brett turned back to me and tugged on the collar of his dress blues. “I still think he’s gonna know I’m not you.”

“Hush.”

I turned toward the mirror, giving myself a final once-over. Even though Brett would be taking my place for the beginning of this first-look photo shoot, I still planned to follow him out there so I could watch the whole thing go down. And then, once they hugged and Brett got out of the way, Lyndi planned to set it all up again so I could step out and give Nate the real first look.

“So ...” Brett fiddled with the belt of his uniform, clearing his throat.

“So?”

“Have you met this Anabelle person my mom hired to run the flower shop?”

I spun in a slow circle to face him. “Have *you* met her?”

He shook his head.

“I see. What’s your mom said?”

“Not much, but enough that I’m a little suspicious.”

Unwilling to put myself in the middle of a matchmaking scheme, I picked up my lipstick and turned back to the mirror so I could touch it up. “Why suspicious?”

“Because she’s my mother.”

Continuing to play dumb, I capped the lipstick and put it back on the white marble vanity. “Uh-huh.”

“And she’s had plenty of employees over the years, but this is the first one she’s brought up in practically every conversation I’ve had with her since the day Anabelle was hired.”

“Okay ...?”

He frowned and shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I was hoping you could shed some light on it. Is she trying to set us up?”

Thankfully, Aunt Hattie’s return to the bridal suite saved me from answering that question. But that didn’t stop Brett from pointing at me on his way out the door, shooting me a look that suggested this conversation wasn’t over. I snickered as I followed him and his mother out of the room, then hung back and hid behind a trellis so I could watch him sneak up on my groom.

Our friends and a few family members stood in a loose circle behind Lyndi, where she was clicking away with her fancy-lensed Canon while she instructed Nate not to look behind him. I held my breath as Brett approached, wondering if he was right and if Nate really would be able to tell that it wasn’t me.

“Perfect,” Lyndi said, her voice slightly muffled by the camera in front of her face. She pulled it back and beamed at the two Marines, one whose shoulders shook as he tried not to laugh, the other who stood ramrod straight, so still he almost looked like a statue. “Oh, Nikki, you look beautiful. Ah-ah, Nate, no looking. Let’s get one with your hand lightly resting on his shoulder, Nikki. That’s great. Use a featherlight and delicate touch. Oh, good, *very* bridal.”

The crowd behind her chuckled as they watched the scene—including my mother, who'd flown in from California despite making annoying comments about how she hoped I wouldn't run away from this one. If these people didn't get themselves under control soon, Nate would surely know something was up.

The kids were a wildcard. Brooks and Cat were distracting their two littles, but Emma and Ava Hawkins were clearly disappointed that it wasn't me in another wedding dress, and appeared very confused about Brett continuously being called "Nikki." Spencer and Ellie were doing what they could to placate our lovely little flower girls, but the scene was risky for sure.

And yet, my own kid made me the most nervous. Marigold's hand covered her mouth as she tried to hold in her snickers, and my mother had already poked her in the side more than once to get her to chill out.

I waved my hand to get her attention, and when she met my gaze, I shot her the *mommiest* "mom look" I could muster.

"*Stop it!*" I mouthed, then had to fight a snicker of my own as her eyes widened. She nodded, dropped her hand, and sobered her face.

"Alright, Nikki, why don't you reach down and take Nate's hand? Nice and soft, don't grip it too tightly," Lyndi directed.

She was clearly enjoying this scheme, and our family and friends were nearly in tears over it. Hopefully, they appeared like happy tears to Nate, rather than you're-gonna-be-so-mad tears, or we were going to get busted before the big reveal.

After a few more seconds of this torture for all involved, Lyndi gave the subtle signal that meant she was about to put us out of our misery. "Nate, I need you to close your eyes. Good. Love the smile."

Oh, how I wished I could see Nate's face right now. I wanted desperately to see what Lyndi saw. I could picture him standing there with his eyes closed, imagining it was me in my gown right next to him. Were his lips tipped up in that tiny,

secretive smile that had been holding me captive since our first few days together? Or was it one of his rare, totally mesmerizing grins? Thank goodness I'd only have to wait long enough for Lyndi to send us our wedding photos to find out.

While Nate had his eyes closed, Brett took the opportunity to hold up bunny ears behind his friend's head, followed by putting his hands under his own chin and silently stepping to the side so he could bat his eyelashes at Nate's profile. Of course, this caused the crowd of onlookers to double over in fits of silent laughter.

Good thing Nate's eyes are closed.

"Now, Nate," Lyndi instructed, "keep your eyes shut, but I want you to turn to your left. Good. Now hold out your palms, and Nikki, you're going to *gently* take his hands."

Brett did as she'd said, making a show out of how lightly he was grasping his friend's outstretched hands.

"Excellent." Lyndi signaled to her assistant, who'd also been photographing the scene from different angles, and they both moved so they could get each of the men's faces. "Now, Nate, this is the moment we've all been waiting for. You ready?"

"So ready," Nate said, the warm and gravelly tone of his deep voice hitting me straight in the belly.

"Okay. Nate, open your eyes and see your bride!" Lyndi called.

Nate took a deep breath, while the rest of us were probably holding ours, then fluttered his eyes open. When Brett's chest full of military ribbons were the only thing he could see in the spot where my face should have been, Nate's brows instantly snapped into a frown.

His eyes darted upward. "What?" Nate asked, shaking his head before laughing wildly.

Everyone watching instantly brought the noise level from library whispers to Super Bowl Sunday cheering and shouting. I laughed right along with them but hung back behind the trellis so I wouldn't ruin my own big moment.

Brett pulled Nate into a bear hug. “Sorry, man, they made me do this.”

“Sure they did. I bet you put up a serious fight about it, too.”

They did the back-slapping-man-hug thing for a few more seconds, then Nate pulled back and gripped Brett’s shoulders with a face of absolute terror. “Whoa, whoa.” He turned toward the crowd, letting his hands fall to his sides. “Guys. Seriously. Tell me the truth. Did she run away again?”

A chorus of incredulous laughter followed that shockingly bad joke. Half the crowd threw their hands up in disbelief, and the rest shook their heads like they couldn’t believe he’d actually asked that.

A choked laugh burst through my lips, and suddenly I didn’t care about waiting for Brett to step away or resetting the scene for my own reveal. I charged out from behind my hiding place with a mock scowl and stomped over to my groom. “Really, Nate?”

“What? Can you blame me?” he asked, his arms stretched wide and a huge grin on his face.

“Yes, you jerk.”

Then, before I had a chance to notice that Brett had slipped away and the camerawomen had circled closer, Nate’s hands went to his chest. He looked me up and down with his eyes on fire, his grin falling as he swallowed hard and reached for me. He tugged me against him, and as if he couldn’t wait another second to do it, he reached up and cupped my face so he could kiss me hard on the mouth.

Another cheer rang out from around us, and when he pulled back a second later, he shot me the kind of wink that never failed to make my knees weak. “I was only kidding. I knew you had to be around here somewhere.”

Shutters continued to click from all sides, and I beamed up at him. “Oh yeah? How did you know?”

“Because if I’m here, who would be your getaway driver?”

“Good point.”

“Plus,” he said, finally looking away from me so he could tip his chin toward Marigold, “your sidekick is still here.”

“Also true,” I allowed. “But you forgot the most important thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’d never have a reason to run away from you.”

His eyes crinkled around the edges even though his lips barely twitched, then he leaned his forehead against mine. We stood that way for a moment, eyes closed, enjoying the feeling of being here together, surrounded by our family and friends. Unlike my last wedding day, I had no desire to tell myself that everything was going to be okay.

I already knew.

Dimly, from somewhere in the background, I heard Lyndi mumbling something about this pose being “first-look gold.” I could make out the voices of Nate’s Marine friends greeting Brett, congratulating him on his well-played prank. And I registered the sweet sounds of Marigold’s giggles as she stood with my new girlfriends, making my heart swell to two times its size.

And even though I couldn’t be sure I wasn’t imagining it, I caught Aunt Hattie’s proud voice saying, “See, Thatcher? I told you I’d get them together eventually.”

“You always do, my love,” he replied. “You always do.”



I hope you’ve enjoyed Nate and Nikki’s story, as well as the entire Brides of Beaufort series! Stay updated on news about the next series in this world by joining my newsletter at www.jessmastorakos.com

Bonus

Did you know Hattie and Thatcher's love story is exclusively available for free via Prolific Works? [Click here](#) to check it out, along with 90+ sweet and swoony romance reads! You'll have the option of signing up for my newsletter here too, where you can stay up on new releases and bonus content.



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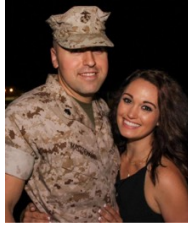
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jess Mastorakos writes clean military romance books that feature heroes with heart and the strong women they love. She is a proud Marine wife and mama of four. She loves her coffee in a glitter tumbler and planning with an erasable pen.



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