



Lynn Galli

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ONE

I was kicking myself. On this rare sunny spring day, I should have been out riding a bike or in a kayak on the lake or something that would take advantage of the sunshine before it disappeared again until after July 4th. Instead I was standing outside the agreed upon restaurant waiting for my time-challenged sister for brunch. I'd starved myself for breakfast and made no plans for lunch so that we could enjoy a nice brunch together, and she was already twenty-five minutes late. I'd eat the menu stand out front in a minute if she didn't show.

Something light pressed down on my foot, distracting me from scarfing down the inedible particle board. A voice called out, "Sorry, really, sorry. Pepper, get back here!"

I looked down to see a black and white ball of fur sniffing around my shoe. Reflex propelled me to a knee to pet the cute creature. Like other dogs, this black and white fluff snuggled eagerly into my hands. "Hey there, Pepper. You're a doll, aren't you?" I rubbed the dog's sides and looked up at Pepper's owner. "What a great dog. Welsh Corgi?"

The owner seemed delighted by my reaction. "Yeah, they both are." She indicated the other gold and white dog that was slowly making his or her way over to sniff me.

"Com'ere, you, what's your name?" I stretched my hand out to the other Corgi. Finally, a wet nose nudged my fingertips

before a body swung around for a rub.

“Cashew. They’re sisters. A friend was unprepared for their birth and signed me up for two.” Pretty blue eyes twinkled down at the dogs as the owner dropped to a knee beside us. She was tall. Even on a knee, I noticed how tall she was. Long, golden brown hair hung freely around an oval, symmetrical face. Dark blue eyes carried a mischievous look and a smile showed a ridge of teeth as they grazed her bottom lip. Muscular arms peeked out from a cap sleeve shirt and shorts highlighted perfectly fit legs. Striking was the best descriptor. Familiar, too, but my job put me in front of so many people every day that I always discounted that.

“Looks like you didn’t object too much.”

The woman smiled at the tease. “They’re great company. You must have dogs?”

“I wish. No, I’ve got a schedule that keeps me out of the house too often. I couldn’t do that to a dog.”

Honey brown hair swayed as she nodded in agreement. It was the exact color that people with my darker brown shade often paid stylists big bucks to create. “When I travel, I leave them with the same friend who gave them to me. I can’t think what it would be like to board them or take them with me.”

“I know what you’re saying,” I agreed. “My mom has as much anxiety about boarding her dog as the dog does about being boarded. If ever a dog needed doggy psychology, hers would be the one. Thankfully, she doesn’t go out of town much or I’d be the one needing therapy after having to dog sit.”

Laughter bubbled up from the woman’s chest. Not quite a giggle, the sound could entice a smile from even the most cold hearted. My head turned back to study her again, lingering longer this time. That laugh made my heart beat, and that hadn’t happened in a long while.

“We don’t want to keep you.” She looked almost as reluctant

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to leave as I was to let her go.

“Oh, you’re not.” I waved off her concern. “I’m waiting for my sister, but she’s late even by her less than rigid schedule. I’m starting to wonder if she’ll make it. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“A bit flaky, is she?” This time, her cobalt eyes twinkled at me.

“Not so much a flake as time doesn’t seem to be as important to her as it is to everyone else on the planet. I used to get angry about it. Now, I wait for a half hour. If she doesn’t show, I figure she’s not coming.”

“Sounds like my brother. He thinks a phone call to say he’s going to be late excuses it.” She rolled her eyes, and I felt a current run through me. Too few people understood just how important promptness was. “Your sister must have a flexible job?”

“Hardly. She works for a law firm. She says she’s never late there because she sets all the clocks in her house fifteen minutes fast. Yet she knows they’re fifteen minutes fast.” I shrugged, still not able to understand my sister’s logic any more now that I was explaining it to someone else. “What about you? What do you do?”

“I play basketball,” she said it simply, like that was a normal job that lots of people had.

Huh? Ahh, the University of Washington. “Oh, you mean for U-Dub? What year are you?” I could have sworn she looked older than that, but I’d been wrong about that kind of thing in the past.

A chuckle accompanied her reply. “Not for the U.”

Trying again, I asked, “Are you a coach then? What school?”

“No...I play.” She smiled unassumingly. “Professionally.”

Double huh? I tried to clarify, “Profess—like a semi-pro team or something?”

“No, I play for the Storm.” Her thumb jerked back over her shoulder, pointing at the saucer of the Space Needle that defined the Seattle cityscape.

I shifted my blank stare to the Space Needle. It stood a few hundred yards from Key Arena where the basketball team played. I'd been to many games, knew the players and their positions. She had to be—ahh, she's kidding. Laughing politely, I joked, "Yeah, I do, too. I was with the Sparks before that. Don't let my height fool you. I've got game."

Her eyes swept over my five-foot-three-inch frame. A delighted smile appeared as she relayed, "I bet you do."

Any minute she'd start laughing to prove she was kidding. When it didn't happen, I studied her anew. All of a sudden the familiarity kicked in, compelling me to stand swiftly in surprise.

"You're Quinn Lysander!" The Quinn Lysander. What the hell was I doing having a conversation with Quinn Lysander, captain of a professional sports team?

"That's me. And you are?"

"Oh, sorry, Willa Lacey. It's nice to meet you." I took her hand in greeting, hoping I sounded like I met professional athletes every day.

"Nice meeting you, too." Quinn kept our hands linked a little longer than mere politeness. "Have you been to many games?"

"Most of them. I'm a big fan. Clearly, a stupid fan who has trouble with her eyesight, but still, a big fan."

She laughed that laugh again, and my heart went through an entire gymnastic routine. A frickin' superstar, and I was just standing around Queen Anne Ave yakking away with her. Without the doubled-up ponytail and uniform, she was a little hard to recognize, especially since she was seventeen rows closer than she'd ever been. "You're funny, but don't feel bad, I'm not usually recognized." She didn't seem at all bothered by that fact. "What is it that you do?"

"Pretty much the same thing as you. Except while you're working, you entertain and inspire awe. I just try to make sure no one slips into a coma while I'm working." Her laugh urged me to

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continue. “Corporate leadership training, which is business speak for ‘keep our asses from being sued by teaching our managers how to manage.’”

“Impressive.” This was said with a raised brow, like she, a professional basketball player, was actually impressed by my mundane job.

“You know what they say. If you can’t do, teach or manage. If you can’t teach or manage, teach managers.” I got another wide smile and that glorious laugh again.

As if we’d known each other for years, she teased me, “I bet it’s enthralling.”

Lost in the comfort of our immediate camaraderie, I shook my head to stop myself from staring at this beautiful, athletic specimen any longer. “You probably want to get on with your walk.”

Quinn gave me a long look before suggesting, “You could join us? Unless you think your sister will actually make it?”

I didn’t hesitate before grabbing Pepper’s leash. It was that easy. A relaxed conversation and I had the chance to become acquainted with a woman that I’d been watching play basketball on television and in person since her junior year in college. Such a better way to take advantage of a sunny day.

TWO

Approaching the restaurant, I scanned the patio and spotted Quinn already seated, awaiting the start of our regular Thursday night dinner. Even after two months of dinners and other outings, catching sight of her still caused a blast of warmth in my system. It was hard to believe we'd become friends, even harder to believe that she seemed to crave the friendship as much as I did.

As soon as I entered the patio, Quinn looked up and smiled as brightly as the sunshine highlighting the golden streaks in her hair. Standing, she clasped my hand and guided me to the opposite chair. "Hi, Willa. Good day?" The standard greeting revealed her sunny disposition.

"Very, thanks. How was yours? Did practice go all right?"

"Great practice today. We're working on a new defensive zone, and the team's just about got it down."

Something over my shoulder must have caught her attention because she smiled and gave a shy wave toward the sidewalk. I didn't bother to turn around, knowing the passersby would be high school girls, probably in Lysander jerseys, no doubt aware that this was her favorite restaurant.

"You're amazing, you know that?" I tossed off casually, glancing down at the menu. Quinn handled her fans so admirably, always happy to say hello, sign autographs, and take photos. It didn't happen all the time, but the idea of being interrupted by

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strangers asking for something would be enough of an incentive for me to look for another job.

I felt a hand squeeze my arm in response to the compliment. This is new, I thought, looking up from the menu to see the smile now focused on me. The soft hand lingered a moment longer until the waitress approached their table.

Quinn looked up at the waitress and ordered, “Tostada salad and a super jumbo veggie burrito combo with rice only, no beans, please.”

I cringed, salad and a super tasteless burrito, more like. “I’ll have a chicken enchilada, no rice or beans. Thanks.”

“How do you live on so little food?” She asked once the waitress had left.

“You did notice that I’m close to a foot shorter than you, didn’t you? I certainly have. The neck strain is becoming unbearable,” I exaggerated the eight-inch difference in our heights.

“I hope not.” The reply came at a near whisper.

I cocked my head to stare at her, trying to determine her intent. She was so hard to read, a shared trait, and no doubt one of the reasons we got along so well. I opened my mouth to probe further but stopped when I noticed two tall women approaching the table. As Quinn’s teammates, they were highly recognizable to any fan. They, however, didn’t notice all the heads turning because they’d locked in on my dining companion.

“Quinn!” the taller of the two exclaimed.

Quinn’s eyes grew wide at the sound of the voice. She didn’t turn around immediately, not until she’d changed her expression from complete shock to inviting familiarity. “Hey, Iris! What’s up, Dawn? What are you guys doing here?”

“I can’t believe we caught up with you tonight.” Iris, the starting small forward, grasped Quinn’s shoulder with the hand that rarely missed a shot. “Dawny should be a paid tracker. I would have walked right by if she hadn’t spotted you.” She

lifted the hand up to her teammate for a high five as if they'd accomplished a set mission.

They turned their stare very noticeably to me. "Hi," they both said at once.

I shook their extended hands, saying hello to both. Their eyes sparkled with that just-committed-a-crime-and-want-to-tell-someone-about-it look. "Would you like to join us?"

Quinn jolted forward. "I'm sure you guys are on your way somewhere?"

Iris spoke for both of them, "No, we'd love to join you." Unoccupied chairs were yanked from nearby tables to accommodate our guests. We must have been quite the sight to see from the sidewalk. Quinn's teammates were well over six feet tall, Quinn at five-eleven and me at a staggering five-three. I expected the waitress to show up and offer me a booster seat at any moment.

"So, you're the mysterious friend Q's been hanging with?" This from Dawn.

I laughed and looked at my friend. "They call you Q? Like you're a rapper or something?"

The joke wasn't received with the easy smile I was used to. In fact, Quinn seemed nervous, but managed, "I have no say with the team."

"You love us, chica." Dawn looped an arm around her. "What's the story with you?" She shot her eyes back to me.

"Me? I'm secretly hoping that Q, here," I tapped a hand against the solid shoulder next to me, "will get me a tryout on the team. I figure I'll throw people off with my size. I just hope talent isn't a necessary requirement."

The twosome stared at me, not quite sure what to make of me. Not everyone got my sarcastic sense of humor. "Oh-kaay," Iris drew out, still making up her mind. "You've been hanging out a lot with our friend here."

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Continuing with the lighthearted tone, I replied, “That’s because I’m holding her loved ones hostage. I find it’s an effective way to make people spend time with me.”

Snapping out of her quiet mood, Quinn laughed along with her teammates. “Listen, guys, I swear I just saw you both a couple hours ago. I’m dead tired, and I’m sure Willa has something better to do than be grilled by you.”

“Hey, no problem. We just wanted to meet her, that’s all. You’ve been so secretive. We thought you might be having some torrid affair. You know us, we wanted to embarrass you if at all possible,” Dawn said.

“Very thoughtful,” I joked, catching what looked like a flush appear on my friend’s cheeks. “It was nice meeting you both.”

They stood, towering over me. “Same here. Too bad you weren’t scandalous. That woulda been really fun at practice.”

“Guess you’ll have to get used to disappointment.” I waited for them to retreat before I commented sarcastically, “They seem like a pain in the ass.”

Quinn laughed, a little more at ease once they’d left her line of sight. “They’re young. At practice it’s fun, but when we’re checking in at airports or hotels, I just want to disappear while they’re talking.”

“So, that’s it.” The earlier subdued mood made sense now. “I’ve got friends like that. You never know what’s going to come out of their mouths. It does keep you on your toes.”

Blue eyes studied me for a moment while the waitress appeared and served our food. “Yeah. Sorry if they embarrassed you.”

Tilting my head slightly, I looked directly at my tablemate. “They didn’t, really. They seem like fun.” I hesitated a moment then asked a question I normally wouldn’t think was any of my business. “Is everything okay? You get along with your team, right? I just assumed you did. You always look like you’re having

fun at the shoot around with them before games.”

“Sure, they’re great, but I’m not like them. On nights like tonight, it becomes very evident. They’re probably on their way out dancing or something. I might go shoot some pool with them every once in a while, but they’re out every night. I don’t remember ever doing that. Clubbing all night then jumping on a plane first thing to get to a game that night. It doesn’t make any sense. That’s what I mean about them being young.”

I could relate. As much traveling as I’d done with my coworkers, I never joined in their reindeer games after a long day with them.

Before I could agree, a voice called out from the sidewalk. “Willa?”

Without needing to turn around, I knew it belonged to my last boyfriend. I winced, not wanting to see or speak to this guy and certainly not in front of Quinn, but he’d already crossed into the patio area.

“Chip,” I spoke his name in what I hoped was the civil tone he was used to hearing. He had the impression that ours was a let’s-be-friends breakup whereas I knew better, having grown sick of feeling nothing in another meaningless relationship.

“Will, it’s been ages.” He bent down to kiss my cheek, and I felt myself flinch. “Yes. Well, this is my friend, Quinn Lysander. Quinn, this is Chip Taglio.”

She stood to shake Chip’s hand. I took note of his height, about four inches taller than Quinn. How hadn’t that annoyed me while we were dating? His classic Italian good looks probably had something to do with it. Some people put a lot into the whole tall, dark, and handsome routine. For me, he’d been there and interested, so I’d gone for it.

“I can’t stay long,” he was saying, not that anyone had asked him to stay. “I just wanted to say hello. It’s been at least two years, hasn’t it? I’ve tried calling a few times to see how you’re

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doing, but maybe you never got the messages?” I nodded in that noncommittal way where it started as a “yes” then bobbed into a “no.” “You’re happy, obviously. You must be seeing someone?” Forcing myself not to even glance at Quinn, I met his eyes. He didn’t need to know that I’d starting feeling like these dinners with Quinn were more than just two friends hanging out. She didn’t need to know that either. I was still in the middle of convincing myself it was nothing more than giddiness at finding a good friend.

Chip smirked his version of a sexy smile. The warm breeze on the patio mixed with the heat from my growing embarrassment. He squeezed his arm around my shoulders. “Still very private, I see. Whoever he is, he better know he’s damn lucky.” His voice held that annoying wistful quality that accompanied regret. Could the evening get any more uncomfortable?

“Good to see you, Chip.” I tried to pull out of his one-armed restraint.

“Uh, sure.” He seemed surprised by my dismissal. “We should go to dinner sometime soon, Wills. I’d like to catch up. See how things are going for you.”

“Nice seeing you.” The response satisfied me. Hopefully, it would be enough to rid Chip of the table.

He leaned down to kiss my cheek again and intentionally captured my mouth. I could feel myself flushing red, embarrassed that he’d show this kind of affection in public when we were no longer together and in front of a friend that he’d just met. “Bye, Wills,” he attempted an intimate voice. Glancing at Quinn, he gave a friendly wave then departed.

“Wills?” Quinn mocked good-naturedly.

Heat touched my cheeks, flushed again from the tease. “Oh, I don’t limit myself to just wills. No, I cover the whole spectrum of estate law.”

Her laugh eased my embarrassment. “So, Chip?”

“Salvatore, actually, but his family called him Chip, for chip off the old block, if you can believe it.” I knew I wasn’t giving a complete answer, but I wanted off the uncomfortable topic.

She nodded, trying to keep her curiosity from showing. The ensuing silence must have gotten the better of her because she asked outright, “Old boyfriend?” Something in her intrigued stare told me that she had a vested interest in the answer. It lasted for just a moment until genuine curiosity took over.

“Old mistake,” I replied, watching Chip step into a building two blocks away. When I realized how insulting my remark might sound, I turned back to clarify. Her look told me I didn’t need to explain.

“Have you ever had long hair?” The subject change caught me by surprise.

“No.” I took a sip from my coffee mug. “I’ve never been able to get it to grow out past my shoulders. People have been commenting on haircuts I’ve never gotten my whole life.”

Quinn’s hand lifted from the table and casually touched my hair. Delicate fingers weaved in along the curve of my ear. “Maybe it’s the curls. They have a mind of their own. Perhaps they don’t like being weighed down? You don’t color your hair, do you?”

“Please, would anyone really choose ‘plain brown’ as a hair color?” I laughed, a nervous reaction to being touched so tenderly. “You do realize we’re talking about hair, right? Have we really run out of things to chat about that we’re left with a subject that neither of us ever thinks twice about?”

Quinn laughed and pulled back her hand. “You’re right. It just struck me sitting out here in the sun how nicely your hair and eye color go together.”

Now I gave her a doubtful look. “Right, brown hair and brown eyes, really difficult to mismatch that combo. You, on the other hand: flaxen russet dye and implausibly blue contacts, I

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don't know who you think you're fooling."

At the obvious tease, Quinn's face cracked into a wide smile. She'd probably spent a lifetime hoping people would notice her athletic ability rather than her beauty first. I looked away, realizing that I'd allowed my mind to consider again how striking she was. I had to stop this. We were becoming good friends, and I was going to ruin it by letting my mind wander toward intimate thoughts. The poor woman had enough admirers at her games. She didn't need her friends drooling all over her, too.

"Well, we'd better get going." Pushing my chair back, I didn't give her the chance to disagree. I needed to distance myself otherwise I might do something inappropriate. And shocking, at least to me.

"Okay." She stood unenthusiastically. Money dropped onto the table before she could object. "Wait, I invited you. I'll pay."

"You paid last time, remember?" I gently pressed on her back to propel us from the table. As soon as I had us moving, I dropped my hand. Touching Quinn wasn't a good idea for someone whose thoughts kept returning to intimacy.

"Thank you for dinner," she said as we approached my car.

"My pleasure. Thanks for the company." And for the unfettered access to daydreams about something that could never be.

For a moment, Quinn stood very still. Then slowly she leaned in, her arms slipping around my back.

She's hugging me, I thought. When was the last time I'd been hugged? Nearly a year, when a friend had come into town for a visit. This hug didn't feel the same, especially when she pressed closer and a strong thumping drummed against my ear. The sound drew my arms up from my sides to squeeze her in return.

"That was my pleasure," she whispered and stood back from the hug. Briefly our eyes met then she was walking off to her car, calling out an airy goodnight.

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Therapy. That was what I'd need to help figure out what just happened. For now, the light touch of her body against my own and the breath on my ear as she said the word "pleasure" started an apprehensive pumping of my heart.

THREE

Quinn looked up, searching the stands. Section 101, Row 17 on the aisle. It wasn't always easy to spot from the court, but she made a point of looking up there every game and glancing occasionally whenever she was on the bench.

Willa Lacey had gotten under her skin. She'd had other non-basketball related friends in the few years she'd been on the team, but they'd always wanted to go places to be seen with her. They'd always wanted some piece of her. She'd known that from the start with most of them. Willa was different. Very different, and she didn't know what to do about that.

Spotting her, she lifted a hand to wave, trying for casual but feeling like a liar. Nothing about this friendship was casual to her. It was important. Crucial really, and she couldn't put her finger on why it felt so vital. She just knew that she had to maintain it. That losing it would crush her.

She'd never felt that way about any friendship. She'd probably lost more friends with all her relocations than most people had made in their lifetimes. She'd never been torn up about it. It was something else to deal with, a result of her out of the ordinary job. She figured when she was finally done with the basketball, done playing on one team in the summer, coaching in the winter, and playing for a European team in the spring, she'd finally be able to make some lasting friendships. Coaches didn't have the

groupies that pro ball players did. Assistant coaches especially. She could make friends that would want to be her friend for her, not for the chance that she might be spotted out in public.

But here she was, at least three to five years before she planned to retire, and she'd made that kind of friend. The kind that could make her rethink her plan and any golden opportunities thrown her way. That was a dangerous kind of friend. She had to be open to anything. Careers in basketball after the WNBA were fleeting. Having an anchor that could keep her from being able to accept what she needed to advance in her future was not a smart idea.

She knew this and had known it since she realized how fickle friendships were when she became semi-famous. Just take them at face value and move on when she had to leave for her career. She could tell herself this all she wanted, but with that quick smile and shy wave from the small figure up in the crowd, it was hard to convince herself that this friendship was the kind she'd always been warning herself against.

“Did I just pay twenty bucks for a bland beer and a hotdog that wouldn't satisfy a kid's appetite?” My best friend, Nykos, whined as he slumped into his seat. He'd never even liked basketball until I'd taken him to a game, and now, he went to almost all of them. When Nykos got hooked, only a 12-step program could pull him away.

I felt his thigh and arm brush against me as he settled his large frame into a seat that was built for people two-thirds his size. As long as I'd known him, he'd been overweight, lazy, and balding, even as a college student. Twelve years later, I'd stopped noticing his size and receding hairline. His loyalty, caring, and humor always overpowered. Now that we were trying to start a business together, I couldn't ignore the laziness anymore. Before

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the summer was over, I was going to get his ass in gear or shut down the effort.

Ignoring his attempt to get comfy in the too small seat, I focused on the court. The team was heading off to the locker room for the final pre-game meeting. Many of the players stopped to sign autographs for the fans leaning over the rail by the locker room. Some were talking to the usual fanatics behind the Storm bench. I watched as Quinn turned and looked up at my section. Heat bloomed on my cheeks when she waved at me. The memory of that hug drifted around me again as I raised a hand briefly in reply.

Nykos bumped harder against me, jarring loose the caressing feeling of Quinn's hug. "Did you just wave at Quinn Lysander?" His dark green eyes flashed in incredulity. The thinning tuft of black hair that clung defiantly to the crown of his head stood askew from the attempt at smoothing after he'd exerted himself walking up from our free parking space. When Nykos began to sweat, not even a 12-step program could make it cease.

No one knew about our friendship yet. I'd wanted to avoid the certain teasing I'd receive about stalking my favorite player. At least that's what I told myself. Really, it was much more than that. Something I wasn't ready to label yet.

"I kinda met her a few months ago. She's really nice." And beautiful and so out of my league, the uninvited thought slipped in. Not that I was looking in any league. I hadn't felt like dating in years, hadn't even felt like dating when I was dating. What made me think that dating out of my league in a completely different conference would go any better?

Nykos leaned back, his jersey pulled taut over his bulky torso. "I can't believe you didn't tell me you met her. Didn't you yammer on about driving past one of the players last year? You don't pick up the phone when you meet your idol?"

Pushing at his shoulder, I tried to shut him down. "Knock it

off. She's not my idol. She's just a great player." This was exactly why I hadn't told any of my friends. Well, that and this friendship felt private to me for some reason.

"How'd you meet? It must've been a pretty amazing meeting if she's waving at you all the way up here?" Nykos liked to give me a hard time about the fact that my seats were seventeen rows up, far worse than my priority number would allow but what I could afford on my less than impressive salary.

"We've sort of become friends."

"What?" The rest of his sure rant got interrupted by one of the regulars who sat in front of us. "You're friends with Quinn Lysander?" Debra, the one who came early to every game, asked in awe. Her girlfriend, Jenny, and their seatmates, Ruth and Jo, all twisted their bodies to stare up at me, waiting for a response.

Normally, I liked exchanging pregame banter with them, but tonight I wished they'd shown up late. Especially since Ruth was on her second beer already, and when Ruth got tipsy, everyone learned a little too much about her.

"We hang out occasionally," I admitted.

"Oh man, I'm so in love with her!" Ruth announced easily, like she did at least once a game for several of the players, or women she recognized from a lesbian bar, or nearly any woman in the crowd for that matter. Apparently, Ruth had a lot of love. "Hook me up with her, will ya?"

Despite being used to Ruth's constant declarations of love, I scoffed at her brashness, causing Jo to smack her friend's leather-clad shoulder. While Ruth was occasionally obnoxious, I had grown to like her fervor about basketball and all manner of things. Usually, I found her funny. Tonight, I was rethinking that. "I'm not her pimp." I'd meant it as a joke, but a swirl of what could only be jealousy swam through me, causing an involuntary shiver.

"Tell me where you hang out then, and I'll bag her myself."

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Ruth brushed a hand through her short black hair and blew on her fingertips.

“You are so arrogant,” Debra remarked. “C’mon, you’re buying this round. Let’s leave Will alone.” She pulled Ruth up with her and into the aisle. The J’s went with them, winking at me on their way out.

“Why didn’t you mention it to me?” Nykos asked, startling me. I’d almost forgotten he was there. When the foursome turned their attention on me, I became easily intimidated. Nykos looked honestly hurt, and he didn’t get hurt easily.

“I don’t know, Kos. I guess I thought you might think it was a little odd.” Not to mention how likely it was that the friendship would be over if Quinn every figured out how I was starting to feel.

He looked like he was deciding whether or not to press me further. We’d known each other since college and more than half of our communication happened without words now. “I can’t believe you actually know her. If she’s waving at you before a game, she must like you.”

I sighed, thankful that he let me off the hook. Usually he took every opportunity to give me a hard time. “She’s as nice as she is talented. You’d really like her. We’re a lot alike.”

“But you’re assuming I actually like you.” Classic Nykos. Some of his best material came from discounting our friendship. It stemmed from a fear that he’d become too reliant on me as a friend, which made me smile all the more.

FOUR

Kiss her!

The order screamed so loudly in my head I had to look around to make sure no one had spoken it aloud. All I could see was a bustle of deplaning passengers jostling each other while they moved in a slow herd toward baggage claim. I'd been slaloming through these passengers, wasting time before my flight boarded. All movement stopped when I spotted Quinn emerging from the jet way. My step left to avoid a businessperson halted suddenly as the plea to kiss her activated paralysis. Not even the painful knock of his briefcase against my shin could make me move.

This crush of mine was getting ridiculous. And yes, I'd started to admit that it was a crush not just friendship. It was so unfair to Quinn. I'd hoped by now that these feelings would have subsided. The euphoria of a new friendship usually wore off within a month, but after four, I felt all the telltale signs of romantic feelings for someone.

Not knowing anything about Quinn's personal preferences seemed to egg these emotions on. As many women as men came on to her whenever we went out. She declined all the offers, but she never let on as to which gender she'd prefer. The foursome at the Storm games all thought Quinn was a lesbian, but they thought that about every woman.

I pressed back against a railing to fight the impulse to push

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through the passengers. I clenched my teeth, attempting to bite down on the need to be next to her. I'd never felt like this before. Sure, I'd felt affection for the men I'd dated, but feelings of desire were rare. And for Quinn, the desire was fierce.

Locking my hands behind me through the rail, I managed to keep from knocking people down. We hadn't made definite plans to meet up, just that I'd stop by the gate if I got to the airport early enough. Right now, those indefinite plans were the only thing saving me. Quinn could walk by with her teammates and never have to know that I was losing my mind, ready to cross boundaries that we'd set long ago.

The team walked briskly, but their shoulders hunched in fatigue. Another long road trip with five games, only two wins. The small gathering of fans helped to lighten their steps. Each player made time to sign autographs and pose for pictures.

As a clump, they progressed past my spot. I stared at Quinn, seeing her again for the first time. Long, chestnut brown hair harnessed into a single braid. Crisp, alert, blue eyes shining at her fans. Strong bone structure shaped her oval face. At least she had those fit arms and legs covered this morning in jeans and a sweatshirt. I'd nearly fainted when she showed up last time in a skirt and sleeveless shirt that screamed for me to run my fingers over her muscular arms. If she hadn't been wearing smoky grey eye shadow that electrified her ocean blue eyes, I would have stared at those incredible arms and sexy legs all night. I had to stop this. Quinn is a friend. Quinn is a friend. Quinn is just a friend. A mantra, that would solve it for sure.

Just then, Quinn twisted her head back as if someone had called out her name. Almost immediately, she locked eyes with me and hurried to finish signing a few more autographs before extricating herself from the group.

"You made it! I'm so glad to see you." Her voice overflowed with joy, and my heart soared at the sound. She pulled me into a

hug. The command to kiss her pounded away inside my head like a throbbing headache.

“Same here.” I kept my response clipped for fear that my crazy thoughts might subliminally make their way into my speech. I couldn’t manage anything else until she released me. “Long trip? I watched the New York game and listened in on the radio to the others. You played great, as always.”

The comment elicited a modest smile. “Thanks. When’s your flight?”

“In about an hour. I was just walking to my gate when I saw you coming down the hallway,” I lied. I’d been there for thirty minutes.

“What luck. I get to hang out with you till you board the plane.” Quinn turned us toward the gates with a hand on my back.

Reaching back, I found her arm and stopped us from advancing. Heat seared my fingertips and threatened to send the flush to my cheeks. I pulled her hand away as casually as I could manage without letting my friend know how certifiable I was. “That’s all right. You’ve got to be tired. Grab your bags with the rest of the team and go home. Rest a little before practice this afternoon.”

“But I haven’t seen you for almost two weeks, and you’re gone for four days. Even if it’s only an hour, I want to hear about what I’ve missed and what you’ll be doing for work in Baltimore.” Her eyes showed hurt, even if her face held a hopeful smile.

Tears threatened my perpetual calm, forcing me to blink harshly. Intense emotions accompanied Quinn’s everyday kindness, and I found it almost too much to bear. My mind issued commands to keep my hands from attacking this woman in the middle of the airport. “My colleague should be at the gate by now. He’s going to want to go over our dinner meeting tonight since we’re not sitting together on the plane. So, really, head home. We can catch up when I get back. Thursday night? You

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don't have a game, and I'll have recovered from my trip to the home office." I hoped my statement wouldn't appear as a blow off. Quinn needed the rest, and I needed to still these feelings I'd been having for months.

"Thursday night? It's a date," Quinn said casually. Words like that obviously didn't have the same effect on her. "I'll go grab my bags then if you're sure you won't let me keep you company?"

I felt longing slip into my glance, but I packed it back in and said with a light tone, "No. Enjoy your week, and I'll see you Thursday."

With that, she squeezed my arm and nodded her head goodbye. Scooping up her carryon with ease, she walked down the corridor toward baggage claim, her posture unencumbered by the dismissal. I wasn't as fortunate. My heart felt like a rodeo bull had been set loose inside it, wildly kicking, twisting, and flailing to buck the rider trying to control it.

FIVE

Idling in her car outside Willa's house, Quinn couldn't bring herself to turn off the engine. Moisture developed in the palm that still rested on the steering wheel. She reached for the glove box, releasing the lever. The drawer fell open, half the contents with it. A take-out napkin flapped precariously over the edge of the opening. She snatched it up before it drifted to the floor mat. Pens, maps, a flashlight and other assorted items drew her attention from her original purpose of wiping the nervous perspiration from her hand. The urge to organize her glove box consumed her as if she'd instantly developed obsessive-compulsive disorder. With reluctance she scooped up the whole lot, shoved it back into the compartment, and slammed the door shut with her other hand. Neighbors wandered by with dogs and peered in at her, making her realize that her car was still running. She turned off the engine, understanding that she couldn't delay this any longer.

Hanging out with Willa had grown more difficult by the outing. Not because she got on her nerves. Not because she was self-absorbed. And, not because Willa didn't care about her. The difficulty arose in the opposite of those reasons. Fun, thoughtful, smart, and genuine, just to name a few fitting adjectives. Problems cropped up on the rare occasions when Willa glanced at her unreserved. Then it was clear that Willa did care. That struck her the most.

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If they'd met under other circumstances, she'd be confident of Willa's sexuality. Instead, everything about their relationship defined friendship. In the months since, they'd become good friends, caring friends, but the frustration of not knowing if Willa would rebuff her advances compelled her to act. Knowing for certain if Willa was straight or gay, even if she wasn't interested, would erase the smothering tension she felt in her presence lately. Not knowing ate away at her like a virus.

Once she'd gotten to know Willa's sister, she'd tried talking to her, but Helen wasn't much help. A high school boyfriend came up in casual conversation, mentioned specifically to point out that Helen discovered more about Willa from other people than from own her sister. She also named Chip, whom Quinn met at the restaurant two months ago. Helen summed up her sister with one word: private. But that made her all the more appealing to Quinn.

That Helen mentioned only boyfriends wasn't encouraging, but Quinn had two boyfriends in high school and as a freshman herself. Perhaps Willa wasn't ready to come out yet. Still when those unguarded moments slipped, she could swear that Willa had feelings for her. Especially last week at the airport when Quinn had labeled tonight as a "date." A momentary spark lit up Willa's eyes only to be blinked back into polite interest.

Just then, the red door to Willa's house swung open. Helen and Willa's friend Zoë ambled down the front steps together. They ran a part-time gift basket company out of the spare room in Willa's house, so they were often present before many of Quinn's visits.

She sucked in a calming breath, wiped the remaining film of dampness from her palm, felt to make sure her face wasn't hot with color, and stepped out of the car.

"Hey, Quinn," Helen called out. "Will's inside. We've wrecked her house crafting all day and made her fold some of

the cards that we embossed when she got home. She hated every minute of it. I'm not sure she'll ever let us back in."

Quinn laughed. "She's in a great mood, huh?"

"Will? I don't think she's ever been in a good mood."

"Now, now," Zoë interjected. "There was that one time when she saw a guy get into a fender-bender while trying to cut into the line of cars he'd just passed up. I'm pretty sure there was a smile then." Most of Willa's friends loved giving her a hard time for feigning toughness.

"I forgot about that. She did actually smile," Helen confirmed in mock seriousness. "Anyway, hope you guys have fun tonight. Door's open. She's on the phone and might not hear you knock, so just head in."

Quinn waved goodbye as they piled into Zoë's car. The red door stood ajar, inviting her inside. Many times, she'd seen Helen or Zoë waltz through the front door without knocking like her house was a sit-com set or something. Quinn wasn't as comfortable with the action, but maybe Helen had given Willa a heads up as to her arrival.

Pushing through the door, Quinn heard her voice from the kitchen. "...need that product description for the business plan to start shopping it around to venture capitalists. We've been stuck for months. Just take that stuff from your brain, and throw it onto paper. We can't get anywhere without your part of this."

With her back turned, Willa didn't realize that she was being watched. Shoulders hunched and tight with frustration were the only flaws that Quinn could see. She liked that Willa was petite. Slender but not scrawny. She never felt like she was going to crush her on the rare occasions when they hugged. Dark brown hair in soft, wavy curls that bothered her friend because they made her hair look slightly different every day. Intense brown eyes that could be so expressive at times and so secretive at others. Lips shaped in a flattened M on top and full curve on

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the bottom beckoned every time she smiled. Others wouldn't consider her classically pretty, but Quinn found her both alluring and beautiful.

"You do realize you're the hang up on this, right?" Willa shifted into an exasperated tone, and Quinn guessed she was talking to her best friend. Over the last couple of months, she knew that Willa had been trying to finalize a business plan for their dream of developing software games. Nykos liked to procrastinate, which frustrated her immensely. Last week, Willa finally admitted that to her. She wasn't one for sharing her feelings and speaking negatively about any friends rated even lower. That she'd finally opened up to her was thrilling. Instinct told her that a relationship with someone who only opened up with one other person would be incredibly special.

It did bother her that she hadn't met Nykos yet. They should have crossed paths at some point, especially since Willa had met most of her friends and teammates. At the last game, Quinn had to keep from running up the aisle to meet Nykos. Not wanting to draw stares from the crowd, she decided she'd have to wait until Willa was ready for them to meet. One more thing she was waiting for with Willa.

"You know, Kos, we could ditch our jobs, be our own bosses, and work on something that we both love, but we can't get started without this product write-up from you." Willa tugged at one of the collars on the cotton shirt that hugged her torso. Quinn would willingly sit out a game to know if she wore those provocative shirts on purpose whenever they got together. Probably not, since the rest of her wardrobe also perfectly suited her smaller frame.

And don't start thinking about those fingers! Quinn commanded herself. Fingers that played the trumpet as a youth now pulled at Quinn's desire as easily as they plucked at the shirt collar.

Willa started talking again, bringing her thoughts back from

that nimble hand that had drifted down to the counter to reorganize the already ordered pile of notepaper gathered at the base of the phone. “My inbox will have an email from you tomorrow, right? With an attachment? Good. Saturday, we’ll go to dinner and discuss our next steps, okay? See you then.” Ending the phone call didn’t relax her shoulders any.

“Your sister said it was okay to let myself in,” Quinn spoke, startling her.

A deep thunk sounded as Willa’s hand flew to her chest in surprise. She blew out a long breath of air to regain her composure. When she turned to greet Quinn, her face held the most blissful smile. “Hey there,” she spoke softly.

Quinn drew in a sharp breath. That smile and tone told her more about Willa than four months of friendship had. Maybe she wouldn’t have to sit out a game. “Hi,” she replied, basking in the uninhibited smile.

Moving forward, she watched her friend’s expression go from extreme happiness to slight trepidation. She didn’t let it advance to absolute fear before wrapping her up in a hug. She’d only tried this a few times because she knew Willa wasn’t much of a hugger, but tonight she couldn’t resist.

“Everything all right?” Her friend asked in the sardonic tone she utilized as a defense mechanism.

“I’m just glad to see you.” Quinn spoke into the silky hair that she’d only gotten to touch the one time. Citrus wafted a fragrant trail to her nose. She delighted in the fact that Willa instantly returned the hug. For their first hug, it had taken a full minute before Willa finally raised her arms and awkwardly squeezed Quinn’s back.

“Right,” she continued in a lighthearted manner.

Quinn felt her start to pull away and suspected it had more to do with her wanting to be the first to stop the hug rather than not wanting to be hugged. She responded by tightening her grip and

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whispering, “And I know you’re happy to see me, too.” The arms squeezing her tightened in reply. Satisfied, she released her after a few more moments.

“What would you like to do tonight?” Willa directed her question toward the laundry room behind Quinn, a trait that used to bother her until she figured out that Willa couldn’t maintain eye contact whenever she was embarrassed or uncomfortable.

“I thought maybe I would cook for you.” She hadn’t planned on that. She wanted to take her out to dinner. She liked watching Willa in public. Her charisma worked like a magnet for friends and strangers alike. She also liked being with her in public, especially since it was getting more difficult to be with her in private.

“Oh!” Willa exclaimed, her eyes shot back to Quinn in surprise. “You don’t have to do that. I could take us to dinner, or we could grab some sandwiches then head over to the waterfront?”

Quinn walked over to open the refrigerator. “No, I’m going to cook for us.” She loved to cook and enjoyed even more cooking for others. Her eyes scanned the shelves for something to make. Grocery shopping was low on Willa’s priority list.

“You’re going to cook for me in my house? That doesn’t seem right. The stove hasn’t been used since Christmas when Helen’s blew up and we had to move the whole deal over here.”

“Did you help her cook?” Quinn turned after she’d pulled the items she needed to make dinner.

“Sure. I’m great with slicing, setting the table, and cleaning afterward. Plus, I can toast just about anything.” Her mischievous smile made Quinn very aware of the pounding pulse just under the surface of her skin.

“That seems fair,” she said offhandedly. Before Quinn thought better, she blurted out the one thing she’d been dying to say since realizing her feelings for Willa. “So, I’m gay.”

Willa’s head jerked into a double-take. Wide eyes accompanied

her attempt to speak, but her mouth closed without any sound escaping. She hadn't even been that shocked after their first hug.

"Sorry, I didn't really know a good segue for that, but I wanted to tell you. I've been wondering if...well, if we might have that in common?" She reached out and gripped Willa's arm. "Really, I don't want to make you uncomfortable. You've never asked me, and I guess my curiosity got the better of me with you."

Browneyes grew even larger. She waited for Willa's expression to tell her something more, anything more. Understanding, fear, attraction, hope, even disgust, but all she got was a blank look, completely unreadable. "Hey, forget it. I shouldn't have said anything." Quinn tried to fill the silence. "Why don't we do this another night?"

Willa shook her head slightly as if jerking herself out of paralysis. "No. That's okay. It's not a big deal. We're friends. I've been told that humans do speak to each other about their private lives."

Quinn knew that Willa's friends teased her about having a limited emotional capacity. Loyalty made her want to smack each one of them. Even with the more cursory topics they discussed, she recognized the depths of her friend's emotions. She just wished Willa would stop trying to hide them from her.

"I've never been comfortable talking about mine," she went on. "I gathered you were the same way? Or at least by the way your teammates speak to you. I figured they didn't know anything about your personal life."

Quinn let out a soft laugh. "Pretty much. My friends and family know, but it's easier to keep my teammates in the dark."

"I can understand that." Willa looked like she wanted to say something else, but she turned and walked into the kitchen. Absentmindedly, she started loading things back into the refrigerator. Background noise filled the stunned quiet of the room.

Finally

“I don’t want to force you to talk about anything you don’t want to talk about.” Quinn wanted to help her put the food back, but she figured getting too near Willa right now might make her more uncomfortable. “I hope that my being a lesbian doesn’t—”

“It doesn’t,” she cut her off forcefully. “Not at all.” Her eyes held Quinn’s for a moment before she returned to the task.

Quinn sighed in relief and sat back against the table. She’d always feared telling people whom she’d grown to care about. With the food back in the refrigerator, Quinn took her cue to leave. She’d made Willa suffer enough tonight. “I’ve made a mess. Inappropriate questions, unwelcome admissions, awkward silences. If I stay longer, perhaps I can make one of us pray for a quick death to end the evening.” She chuckled as she watched Willa shut the refrigerator, shoulders even more tense than when she’d first walked in. “Why don’t we call it an evening? We could try again when I get back from my last game on the road?”

Willa faced her, considering her suggestion. Brown eyes met blue. Quinn wished she could read her thoughts. Since that wasn’t going to happen, she stood up slowly from her perch.

Soft clacking in swift repetition sounded as Willa crossed the hardwood floor and pressed her back against the table. Surprise struck them both by the firm decision.

With Quinn perched, Willa stood almost eye level with her. Her mouth opened to say something, and Quinn waited for reassurance that everything was fine so they could head out to dinner. Cherry blossom scent filled the space between them. She’d grown to love that smell as it meant that her friend was nearby. The aroma made it difficult for her to think rationally, taunting her with Willa this close. She tried to catch Willa’s gaze, but those eyes studied her hair, her nose, her hands, anywhere else. A struggle took place inside Willa with her mouth losing the battle.

Quinn hated seeing her so frustrated. She watched her attempt

to speak twice more then decided to speak for her. “Really, it’s okay. Too much information to absorb for—” She stopped talking when Willa’s head moved forward slightly. She waited, heart now thundering. For a moment it looked like Willa was going to—no, that was hope talking. Besides, Willa had halted her movement, briefly closing her eyes. Again, she opened her mouth to talk, and Quinn waited, unable to move without brushing up against her.

There it was. Quinn recognized the move she’d just made, looking away and to the left at absolutely nothing. Whatever Willa was going to say, she’d just decided not to say it. Any second, she’d take her up on her offer to get together after her road trip. Other evenings had ended the same way, and Quinn prepared her heart for that abruptness again.

When Willa turned her head back, she didn’t stop the motion. Her face moved in precisely, lips finding Quinn’s without hesitation.

Her abdomen felt the effect before her mouth did. The press of soft lips ignited a tickle of fire inside her stomach. Perfection, that’s how she’d describe the kiss. Not too demanding or soft or searching or wanting.

Wow! She can really kiss. Quinn’s feelings probably helped with that assessment, but it didn’t hurt that Willa’s technique left her breathless.

Willa finished their kiss with a final feathery touch of lips, causing Quinn to gasp sharply. “Sorry...I’m sorry.” She stepped back at the sound. Her hands shot up in front of her face, waving in a defensive gesture as she turned away. “I don’t know why I thought I could do that to you.”

Quinn grabbed one of the waving hands, using it to twist her back around. “Perhaps because I’ve been hoping you would.”

Wide eyes met her revelation. “Why didn’t you...?”

“Ever do anything about it?” Quinn smiled softly. “Hence my bungled question earlier.”

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Willa sighed and looked away. “I think I’ve always known on some level that I’m gay or, at least, bisexual, but I’ve never done anything about it.”

Shock hit Quinn’s system. The abandoned insecurity of that kiss told her that she must have been with other women. She could barely form the question plaguing her mind. “I’m the first woman you’ve...”

“Ever kissed? Yes.” Willa looked unsure in her admission. “I probably shouldn’t have told you that.”

“You can tell me anything,” Quinn shared decisively. She didn’t want to say what she was thinking, but she knew she couldn’t just let it hang out there for another four months. “I’m a little overwhelmed. I hope you didn’t kiss me because I told you I was a lesbian, and you wanted to find out if—”

Two fingertips pressed to her mouth, stopping her words. “I’ve wanted to kiss you from the first moment you smiled at me.”

Quinn’s lips widened around the fingertips, spreading into that same smile.

SIX

Feeling wrung out, I leaned back in my chair and let the business plan slip from my fingers back to the table. Nykos sat across from me, long ago having thrown his feet up on the table. We'd run the gauntlet with three different venture capital firms and one of them wanted a funding meeting tomorrow. The money was ours for the taking. One more meeting, possibly two, and our dream of starting a software firm could be realized.

But all I could think about was that kiss, which was insane, really. In all my life, I'd never been a romantic or even remotely invested in a relationship. I was invested in starting my own business, had been for over a decade. Now that we were on the verge of doing just that, I should be reveling in the rush of that achievement. Instead I was focusing on a five-second kiss with a friend. I'd never had trouble with priorities before that kiss.

"Will?" Nykos tossed a pen at me. "Did I lose you again?"

"Huh?" I caught the pen on reflex, bringing my thoughts back to the present.

"I know shopping isn't your thing, but I killed my only dress shirt with that coffee spill the other day. I don't have a tie big enough to cover the mark."

"How about an ascot?" I offered, laughing at the thought of him in a snooty neck scarf.

"Now that's a look I could rock!"

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I snorted, grabbing for the printouts of the slides we'd use tomorrow. There weren't many red marks on them. Either he'd been too lazy to add comments or they really were the most polished we'd get before our last effort to get this start-up capital.

"What's with you today?"

I should have known I couldn't fool him. He must have noticed that I'd been preoccupied. I could distract him by springing up from the table and leading him to the mall to get a new shirt. Or I could tease him about his latest disaster date. I could do any number of things to sidetrack him because he was so easily distracted. But I didn't. "I kissed her."

After five full seconds, his feet dropped to the floor so he could push forward in interest. "Let's break this down. First, you kissed someone, which I didn't know you even knew how to do. Second, you're telling me you kissed someone, which you've never shared because you're more private than a hermit, and third, 'her'? You kissed a her? As in someone of the female persuasion?"

Maybe this had been a bad idea. Nykos wasn't exactly an Oprah watcher. The likelihood he'd become suddenly sensitive enough to help me sort through these feelings was slim. The only thing I could do was shrug in reply.

His smirk died a bit, knowing I wasn't in the mood for too much teasing. "Don't get all quiet now. By her, you mean...?"

I glanced away, wondering why I'd brought this up. Nykos and I didn't have international coffee drinking moments. I'd talked him through a couple of his breakups, but more as a confirmation of his actions rather than a cookie and ice cream wallow fest. He'd met a few guys I'd dated, but we didn't spend a lot of time going over relationship turmoil. This was definitely a bad idea.

"Please say it's some hot Hollywood actress that has an equally hot actress friend for me," he joked. When he failed to

get a rise out of me, he leaned back and crossed his arms, waiting me out. He wasn't very patient, though. "You're killing me here! You tell me you kissed a woman for the first time and you clam up? It was the first time, right? You haven't been holding back raunchy girl-on-girl stories from me our whole friendship, have you?"

I laughed, something he'd been making me do since I first stumbled across him in college. And by stumbled, I mean that literally. He'd been passed out one night in the dorm hallway during a lightning storm that he and several others took as a reason to celebrate. With the lights knocked out, I never saw the big lump and fell right over him. We'd been friends ever since.

"Who?" he persisted.

"Quinn," I admitted.

It looked like a million thoughts flittered through his surprised brain. "I guess you weren't kidding when you said you were friends." His tongue poked his cheek as he settled in for what he no doubt hoped would be a long and detailed discussion. "Please tell me she kissed you back. You didn't just slip and fall onto her face with puckered lips, did you?"

Another laugh snuck out. "She responded."

"By smacking your kissing face? Or did a large vat of pudding suddenly appear and you two fell into it for some wrestling with only bikinis on?"

I raised my eyebrows at his imagination. "There is something seriously wrong with you."

"Thank you," he accepted smugly. "Get on with it. You kissed her, she responded, which I'm guessing is your repressed way of saying that she kissed you back. Then what?"

"She left?" Obviously. Did he think that I'd kissed her and we immediately jumped into bed? Of course this was Nykos I was talking to. First kiss sex wasn't out of the norm for him.

"That's a question? You don't know if she left?" He couldn't

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seem to stop poking fun at me. “You didn’t lock her in your basement and now you’re coming to me for help in transporting her body out of state, are you?”

“Will you knock it off?”

“Then talk, you closed-lipped freak,” he ordered.

I shook my head, half glad I’d started this and half ready to kill him for not making it easy. “We were getting ready to have dinner, and I don’t know, I just had this urge to kiss her. I’d been having the same urge for a few weeks, but this was overwhelming. So I did it. I didn’t know I would. I just did.”

“And?”

“What?”

“Don’t make me ask.”

I really shouldn’t tell him, but I’d gone this far. “Comparatively? The best. By miles.”

He nodded, flashing a know-it-all smile. “Is she...?”

“Yep.”

“That makes it easy then.”

“For what, exactly?”

He threw a glare at me. “Whatever you want. Have you given that any thought? Because until now, I don’t think you have.” Before I could object, he qualified, “Personally, I mean. We’ve been working on what you want professionally for months now, but we both know you’ve been treading water personally ever since I met you.”

I’d never thought of it that way and certainly never thought my buddy would have noticed. Since his divorce, he’d been doing nothing but dating one woman after the other with no real purpose. I didn’t think he’d be able to focus on my lack of interest in relationships. “I don’t even know if it was anything more than a kiss. I could be turning this into a big deal all on my own.”

He scoffed. “You do know, and you’re not that carefree with your feelings. You wouldn’t have made a move without being

almost certain about her.”

It was rather eye-opening how well he seemed to know me. “She’s famous, at least around town. People notice her. I’d have to be nuts to want to be involved in that.”

“It’s not like you’ll be living on some reality show with cameras in your face the whole time. So she’s occasionally noticed when you guys are out. They’re looking at her, not you. Get over your abnormal witness protection fetish.”

“You’re making me feel all warm and fuzzy with this talk.”

He snorted loudly. “You couldn’t handle warm and fuzzy. Rational and real is all you understand. So here’s rational for you: in all the years you’ve been with men, have you ever once felt like you do now?”

No. Not even close, and he knew it. Apparently my poker face sucked when it came to Nykos.

“As for real. You’ve been friends for months. Then you kissed her and she kissed you back. The fact that she didn’t smack you afterward should tell you all you need to know. Stop trying to talk yourself out of it. Don’t let this chance get caught up in a lot of details.” He pushed back from the table and stood. “And I want to meet her. Soon.”

I couldn’t help but smile. He and Quinn would get along great. Not that I’d been worried about that.

He grabbed his keys. “Enough with the mushy talk. Let’s head out to get me a new shirt. I’m the beauty to your business savvy. I need to look the part while you’re wringing the money out of them tomorrow.”

I liked how certain he always sounded when doling out advice. It was almost enough to convince me he was right. I just had to stop thinking about it and go with my feelings for once in my life.

SEVEN

Just the sight of her drove me crazy. When Quinn's face rose over the roof of her car, mine split into a wide smile. The last time she'd been at the house, we'd kissed. Sometimes it still felt like a dream. I'd thought of little else during her road trip.

This wasn't a good time to be obsessing about a kiss with everything in our lives so up the air. Quinn's season was ending soon, and her off-season coaching plans weren't firm yet. Nykos and I would hear back from the venture capital firm by the end of the week. If we received funding, I'd be spending every waking moment trying to get this software business up and running while still maintaining my day job. I couldn't afford to quit until we had an income producing product.

Timing didn't scare me as much as acting on these feelings, though. They hung heavy in every room, suffocating me. We'd only kissed once, and I was completely lost.

A week later, Quinn was walking up the front steps with a beautiful smile. I opened the door before she reached it. She came through; not stopping until she'd pulled me into an intimate embrace. I felt her athletic body fit against mine. Strong thighs surrounded my left leg, hips caressed my midriff, breasts pressed in above mine, and her face tucked against my head. Elated laughter escaped my mouth before I could rein it in. I knew she could feel my heart crashing around inside me, but I only felt the

intensity of her body crushed against mine.

“Hi, Willa,” she greeted softly. Breath licked at my ear. My belly started to flop like a fish just out of water. I was glad that she was holding me so tightly or this new feeling of dizziness might cause me to collapse.

“Quinnie,” I whispered back.

She pulled back from the close hold to stare into my eyes. “Did you just call me Quinnie?”

A flush of heat started at the base of my neck and suffused my face within a second of the intense stare. I felt like I was broadcasting every thought. Mentally, I smacked myself and looked down. “Quinn. I meant to say Quinn.”

She tilted my chin up to make eye contact again. “No, I like Quinnie. I especially like how you say it.” Embarrassment forced my chin down again. She switched her hands to squeeze my shoulders as she bent slightly trying to reestablish eye contact. “Do you mind when people call you Will? Or do you only like Willa?”

“I’ve been called Will my whole life. Wills, I’m not as crazy about,” I tossed out casually. When it rang untrue in my ears, I abruptly turned and led her into the living room, suddenly aware of the sensations attacking me from every direction.

“I think Willa suits you better. It’s a beautiful name for a beautiful woman.” Desire flared in her eyes.

“You think I’m beautiful?” I couldn’t stop the incredulous question from being voiced. Plain, I could understand, but beautiful?

“Very beautiful,” she confirmed with a confident smile, reaching out to run her fingers through my hair.

“So...you like me?” I smiled shyly, very aware of her hand combing a path through my hair.

Her jaw popped open and rapid breathing pumped her chest up and down. She bent to kiss me hurriedly in response. Tentative

Finally

innocence, so apparent two weeks ago, was gone from this kiss. This kiss sent me a message that she was very interested and already invested in this relationship.

“Oh my,” I breathed out when the kiss broke. Lust, desire, and yearning combined to make me brave enough to want to try anything with this woman. “Is this a good idea?”

Taken aback, Quinn asked, “Do you mean because you may actually be straight? If that’s the case, I’m still willing to put my heart on the line.”

I raised a hand up to her cheek. She turned her head and kissed the center of my palm, pulling my breath from me. The wet imprint drew every bit of my attention. “No,” I denied her concern. It didn’t seem to sink in, so I brought one of her palms up to mimic her kiss. “No, I meant that in less than a month your season is over, and you’ll probably be hired back at Oklahoma. As soon as next week, Nykos and I might get our financing, which means I won’t have time to breathe let alone think about maintaining a long distance relationship.”

“I’ve been offered an assistant coaching position at the U. I was going to tell you at dinner.”

“Congratulations!” Things just became more real and more difficult. I gave her my best imitation of cheerful. As if the prospect of dealing with a full-time job and launching a new business venture wasn’t difficult enough, now the woman I was crazy about would be moving across the country for the next eight months. “The University of Oklahoma is very fortunate to have you.”

A slow smile appeared on her beautiful face. “At the University of Washington.”

A surprising shriek of joy leapt from my mouth. I threw my arms around her, more happy than I could ever remember being. My lips brushed the soft skin on her neck as I spoke. “I can’t believe it. This kinda luck just doesn’t happen to me.”

“Perhaps your luck is changing?” she asked seriously.

“I feel like my luck changed the moment I met you.”

She rubbed her hands along the length of my arms. “And how do you feel about pursuing a relationship with a woman? I don’t think I could handle it if we went much further and it turned out to be curiosity for you.”

I tilted my head and kissed the indentation at the base of her throat. A moan sounded as my lips worked along the line of her exposed clavicle. “I’m pursuing a relationship with you.” Retracing my path, I found my way toward the other shoulder.

She pushed me gently to get me to stop. In a grave voice, she told me, “Coming out isn’t a picnic. You’ll lose friends, you’ll disappoint your family, and you may have trouble at work.”

I didn’t need to give it any thought. “I don’t have friends that would be horrified by this. If they were, I wouldn’t want them as friends. As for my family, our private lives are private. Both my parents got remarried without telling us in advance. They don’t get the chance to be disappointed.” Worry creased her forehead. “Really, you’d have to know my family to understand that judging someone’s personal life just isn’t done. I’m not worried.”

Quinn caressed my face and planted a soft kiss on my cheek. “What about your job and your colleagues?”

“Please,” I said in an offhand manner. “I’m an independent, strong-willed female who doesn’t talk about her private life. I’d be more amazed if they thought I was straight.”

“Are you sure? It’s not too late to step away from this.” Something in her thoughtful tone wasn’t entirely convincing.

Lifting my gaze to look into those captivating blue eyes, I spoke clearly. “All I know for sure is that when I first met you, I felt my heart again. That hasn’t happened in a very long time. I was almost convinced I no longer had one.” I felt her hand slide down to my heart where the pounding grew more insistent. “You did that for me, angel. It’s way too late for me to step away from

Finally

this.”

“Angel?” Her eyes flared before her talented mouth found mine again. This time her lips worked mine open and her tongue slipped inside. For the first time, I felt the tenderness of an intimate kiss, not the smothering sensation I’d felt so often before.

Her fingers moved down and brushed along the swell of my breast. She broke the kiss to look into my eyes, searching for any sign of hesitation. I responded by raising my hands to the front of her shirt to unbutton it. I followed each newly exposed piece of skin with a soft kiss. There was no mistaking the moan this time. I continued to remove her shirt before tilting up to capture her lips again.

We stepped toward the bedroom. Our hands worked on buttons, zippers, and snaps to reveal the flesh beneath. Stripped, I tore myself away from her embrace to examine her long, muscular frame. “It’s like an artist sculpted your body,” I spoke the first words that formed.

Pert breasts stood at attention, aching to be touched. Her waist tucked in between slender hips, and the slope of her flat stomach led to an inviting strip of light brown hair. I wanted nothing more than to know this body, memorize its curves, feel its heat, touch its zones.

“You’re amazing,” she self-consciously accepted the compliment. “And so very lovely yourself.”

I couldn’t believe how free I felt. I’d always felt like I was being judged when I’d been intimate before. With Quinn, I didn’t feel rushed. I could bare myself fully and not worry about anything. The realization made my heart swell with an emotion I knew I couldn’t voice yet, but it made me bolder.

Reaching for her, we tumbled onto the bed together. No laughter, only tender smiles with lips that would try to kiss any part of flesh they could find. For the first time in my life, I allowed my hands to touch another woman. My fingers cupped

her breasts, drawing out to the nipples.

“Oh God, Willa, I’ve wanted this for so long,” she spoke into my neck where her lips had found my sensitive skin.

My hands moved down her torso to the insides of her thighs. I dragged my fingers along the delicate skin there. Slowly, I brought my hand to the velvety folds that marked her center. I settled myself onto her hip as my fingers worked a familiar motion. Her hips gyrated with me as I kissed my way down her chest to center on one breast. My tongue worked the underside before I paid attention to her nipple. She moaned again, her firm stomach clenching beneath me.

Quinn’s hands slid along my back to grasp my rear before she rolled us over. A thigh nudged down between my legs as she pressed up against me. One hand snaked under my back to wrap around my waist while the other began to roam all over, touching every part of me. I’d never in my life been made to feel so much at once. When I experienced the wet suctioning mouth on my nipple, my breathing became erratic. Slowly that mouth moved down to my very being. Quinn’s tongue found me first. Then her lips joined in. I cried out from the sheer pleasure and looked down to find blue eyes watching me.

“Please, Quinnie,” I breathed out, using my hands to hook under her shoulders and pull her up for a kiss. I had to have more of her. All of her. I rolled her over. “I’ve waited for this my whole life.”

My mouth dipped to meet the sweet wetness that had been so inviting for my fingers before. Hips bucked in response, obviously not expecting me to find my target so quickly. I tasted my lover, felt her softest, satiny skin, making her pant with ecstasy. When it was clear that she was very close, I rose up to lie on top of her. My fingers got back to work moments before hers reached for me again. The heat built rapidly between us, our bodies sliding against each other, fingers working frantically.

Finally

Quinn's excited shout was met by my climactic moan. We prolonged the pulsations, lingering in the rhythmic convulsions. My jerking head crashed down onto a shoulder, nipping the muscle there. Her fingers finally gave up, allowing me to descend from my peak. My own hand rested against her, the throbbing still evident against my fingers.

Strong arms moved up to clutch at me. Minutes passed before I realized the thumping against my chest was her heartbeat. My own matched the pace beat for beat, threatening to make me pass out from the years of under use. My lips traced up to her mouth where I was rewarded with another breathtaking kiss.

I smiled and surveyed those stunning eyes as the kiss broke. "I could stay like this forever," I admitted before I had time to edit my thoughts. For the first time, I didn't want to. Speaking a profound truth like this felt so right after what we'd just shared.

Those eyes showed equal parts pleasure and amazement. Soft lips found mine again. "I hope you mean that, Willa, because I feel like this is it for me."

"Oh, Quinnie," I whispered, my heart starting to rev back up to an excited state. "I've been slowly dying for years. I didn't know it, but I would go months without feeling anything at all, much less affection. Then I met you, and you brought back my heartbeat."

I wasn't sure what the future would hold for us, but I did know that I didn't ever want to feel empty inside again. Somehow I knew that Quinn would be integral to keeping that emptiness at bay, and I'd do everything I could to make sure that she remained in my life.

Objection

ONE

“You are the angriest person I’ve ever met. Seriously!”

I calmly flicked my eyes in the direction of my passenger as I steered the car into a visitor space at her condo complex. “Wasn’t it me who just bailed your ass out of jail?”

“You don’t have to be such a sourpuss about it. I mean, seriously.”

Because being woken up at 6:00 a.m. on a Saturday and ordered to the courthouse to pay \$5,000 bail for an idiot friend who can’t hold her liquor is something to be cheery about?

“Well?” Valerie’s eyes widened in persistence from behind her bouncy bangs. Impossibly bouncy bangs. I admit, I have bangs envy. Mine have a cowlick that force me to brush them back off my forehead. I would never achieve the trendy hair-in-the-eyes look that Val and her friends had. A toss of the head for me did absolutely nothing to change my moussed, collar length crop. Val and her friends spent their entire freshman year practicing the coquettish mane toss, and they used it to their advantage every chance they got. That was about the time I started hating them. Of course, that was about the time I’d first met them, too.

“I’m waiting,” she persisted, getting absolutely nothing from my glance. “Your apology? We’re friends. Friends do this kinda stuff for each other and don’t throw tantrums when they do. Seriously, Linds, we’re all getting a little sick of your

angry spells. It's why we didn't invite you out last night with us. Haven't you noticed we all don't get together as often? Seriously, you can't be that clueless."

Clueless enough to think that avoiding her clan for over a year would give her a big enough hint that I didn't want to hang out with them, yes. Instead, she somehow felt she was the one deciding whether or not we were spending quality time together.

"I like you, Lindsay, seriously, but it's getting harder to justify your behavior to our friends." Valerie's contact-enhanced green eyes blinked, holding back yet another of her emotional tides.

"No one asked you to," I said, stepping out of the car to get her moving.

"Seriously?" she huffed, following me. Her arms waved to go with her righteous attitude as she approached. The fumes from the alcohol that had seeped through her pores all night battled with the stench of the other elements from her night in a jail cell. The sudden movement of her arms flung the odor in all directions around her. "I've been sticking up for you for ages. I practically have to bribe our friends to invite you out sometimes. Seriously."

I stopped and waited. It took four steps before she finally noticed that I wasn't beside her and turned to face me. "Listen, Grey's Anatomy, I don't need you sticking up for me. I never asked you to do that. And if our other friends are so great, why the hell didn't they keep you from slapping that woman last night, or at the very least, follow you to the police station to bail you out? Why is it that I'm the only friend you ever call when you get into trouble like this?"

"That bitch had it coming. She had no right flirting with my man like that."

"So you hit her? And last I heard Aaron wasn't your man anymore."

She flinched, shooting a dagger of a glare at me. "He's mine. He just thinks he's on a break right now." Her fingers curled in the

Objection

air around the word “break,” making me want to reach out and snap them in half. She needed a spell in rehab for her addiction to air quotes.

“This is the third time you’ve hit someone in a bar, Val. The second time someone has pressed charges for it. And you think I’m the angry one?” I didn’t wait for her sure petulant reply. Women like Val could never accept blame for anything. “Where were Nancy and Maria when you were assaulting this woman? And where are they now?”

“Assaulting? Damn, Linds, you make it sound like I planned to hurt this woman. I slapped her, that’s all, and she deserved it.”

That’s all? Every time I got together with Valerie I found myself silently echoing the idiotic things she said. “Okay, technically, threatening to slap her was assault. Slapping her was battery. We had this discussion the last time I picked you up from jail.”

“So the bitch suffered a slight sting, big deal. What a baby. Grow a pair, I mean, seriously.”

“I know the concept of empathy is foreign to you, but imagine sitting in a bar, meeting a guy who starts flirting with you and, all of a sudden, some crazy bitch comes out of nowhere and slaps your face? Would you be fine with letting some stranger just get away without any punishment? I don’t think you get just how much trouble you’re in. This is your second offense. The first time the judge let you off with a suspended sentence. That’s not going to happen this time. Yoshi should have told you that.”

She made a “psshhft” sound with her lips and waved another hand through the air. “It’s impossible to understand anything that guy says. I mean, seriously, how long has he lived here? He can’t get rid of his accent by now?”

I sighed. I’d always known that she was self-absorbed and well, a little slow, but mean was new for her. “Yoshi’s the best public defender this town has. Be thankful he was assigned to

your case.” It was too much to ask that she be thankful that I had enough pull over at the PD’s office to get him assigned to her case.

“Feh! This will blow over. That bitch won’t follow through. At least not once we’ve all had a little chat with her.”

She couldn’t really be this stupid, could she? Threatening the woman she’s already hit?

“You could talk to her?” It wasn’t really a question. She meant it as an order, but she always thought raising her inflection at the end of an order complete with pouty lips made her too charming to resist. “It’s what you do for the mayor, right?”

My stony stare served as a reply. No way in hell I’d be going anywhere near someone who’s recently been battered to try to talk her into dropping the charges for an idiot friend of mine. “The mayor does not get drunk at a bar and slap any woman who talks to her husband.”

“She doesn’t have to. She’s got people who do that for her.”

“Valerie,” I kept calm, “I bailed you out. That’s the extent of my involvement in your mess.”

“Gaaawd! You make me sound like a career criminal.”

“You’ve been arrested four times.”

“But two were in high school. Those don’t count.” She recognized my disbelieving look. “I should have called Maria.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Well, duh, she met a guy. So did Nancy. You’re the only I knew who wouldn’t be sleeping with some guy this morning.” She giggled like this was some inside joke that I would never be able to understand. She actually liked that I was a lesbian since I’d never be any competition for her men, but she and the girls made sure I remembered I was a lesbian any time we went out to a bar together. Apparently my bangs envy wasn’t the only envy in the group. They wanted my golden blond hair color as well as my never needed a tanning booth skin tone. They didn’t like

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that trolling men looked at me as often as they glanced at them. “Maybe that’s why you’re always so angry. We need to get you laid. You know if you slept with guys, you’d have a lot more opportunities. It’s hard to find lezzies in this town. Seriously.”

Grabbing the keys from her hand, I unlocked her condo door and encouraged her inside. “Have the bail money in my hands by end of day. And stop sounding like you’re auditioning for some second rate television dramedy that hasn’t figured out that they’ve stolen eighty percent of their storylines from shows that aired over ten years ago.”

Her shocked mouth opened and closed without the ability to form words. I shut her front door before she found her voice again.

TWO

It was noon before I was disturbed again. I was supposed to be preparing for the mayor's next event. Instead I was pacing the nearly deserted corridors of city hall, bothered by a lot of things. My cell phone buzzed. Without looking at the display, I could guess who it was.

"How much this time?" the familiar baritone spoke into my ear.

I didn't bother to wonder how he'd found out already. "Five grand, and she's not getting out of this one, Thad."

Valerie's uncle took a moment before he replied. Despite being only a year older than Valerie, he took his family relationships seriously. He'd been Valerie's guardian angel ever since I'd met him. Often, I wondered why he bothered. She never seemed to appreciate it. "I'll transfer the money to your account today. Thanks for taking care of the bail process. Should I hire an attorney?"

"If you keep making it easy for her to forget these major mistakes, she's never going to stop making them," I reminded him as I always did whenever his niece did something really stupid.

"I know, I'm an enabler, but her mother's an idiot who neglected her for years. She's a messed up kid."

"She's a thirty-six-year-old woman, and everyone was

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neglected by their parents. Don't keep allowing her to be irresponsible."

He sighed, long and hard. After the last incident where Valerie somehow walked off with a \$10,000 bracelet she'd tried on, we'd had this discussion. I'd known him since the summer session of my first year at Arizona. He'd come in from UMass to enjoy a warm, dry summer. We hit it off immediately and had stayed in touch ever since. Now we lived in the same town, even if he spent most of his time on the road for his job. "What should I do?"

This wasn't his usual blow off tone. He was actually listening to me this time. Ever since he'd encouraged his niece to the University of Arizona where he knew I'd keep an eye on her, he'd always made excuses for her behavior. Now it looked like he was going to do something about it.

"Don't pay me back for starters. Valerie can come up with the money. Don't hire an attorney for her. She's got a great public attorney, but she might get jail time."

"Jail time? Jeez, Linds, I don't know."

"She hit a stranger in a bar, Thad. Hit her. She can call it a slap, but to the person on the receiving end, an open hand feels just as bad as a closed fist when she's doing nothing other than minding her own business. I haven't talked to Maria or Nancy yet, but I'm guessing that Valerie didn't give the woman a chance to walk away before her arm started swinging. That's not only irrational but dangerous. Imagine if she'd walked in and saw her on-again-off-again boyfriend having sex with some woman. She'd probably get a gun."

"No way, she's not violent."

I scoffed, flashes of Valerie's emotional ups and downs peppered my mind. "You may be used to having Valerie slap you when you make her mad, but strangers are not."

"Fine, I'll let her fend for herself."

"Very good." I heard the revolving doors at the main entrance

go into motion. I turned and watched the mayor walk inside. Her aide on her hip, heads down as they made their way to the office. “I have to go. Stay strong, Thad. If you can’t handle it, stop taking her calls.”

“Let’s hope this works.”

I snapped my phone shut before pocketing it. “Good afternoon, Mayor Kingston, hello, Tammy.”

“Hi, Lindsay, glad you’re here.” The mayor had a way of making it sound like I had a choice not to be here on a Saturday in an election year. “Where are we on those crime stats?”

That began the rest of my Saturday. Figuring out ways to make the bad things in town look positive. Spin and problem dealing, that was my job. Most days, I liked it.

“What did you say to him?”

The fierce accusation interrupted the bite I’d just taken of my lunch. I managed to swallow without choking and glanced up. The girls had found me at my usual lunch spot, and they looked spitting mad.

“You turned her uncle against her,” Nancy took up the fire torch.

“Her uncle has a mind of his own and is tired of Valerie acting like an irresponsible child.”

“You bitch!” Valerie swore loud enough to make the diners from nearby tables turn in worry.

I dropped some money onto the table and left my unfinished lunch to take this outside. Forty seconds passed before they figured out I’d wasn’t going to ask them to follow me.

Nancy came out of the restaurant first. Her long legs clomped like a show pony, taking larger than human strides. “You’re supposed to be our friend. Friends don’t hang each other out to

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dry and tattle to their uncles.”

“You left your friend in a jail cell overnight, ladies. You probably got her amped up enough in the bar to go attack some innocent woman. You’re the ones that should be questioning your loyalties.” I started back toward my office, hoping to deposit them at their cars in the parking lot on the way.

“You didn’t have to poison her uncle against her.”

“Thad realizes that Valerie can take care of herself.” I let that sink in, stopping at Valerie’s car. “You can, can’t you?”

She warred with several replies. She wanted her uncle’s help, but she didn’t want to admit that she was a hopeless spoiled brat, either. “Yes.”

That was the shortest answer she’d ever given me. “See?” I looked at her buddies, marveling again at their more skin than clothing attire on this somewhat chilly spring day. Ever since the abundance of tacky Jersey themed shows started airing on TV, their wardrobe had gotten skimpier. At least now they weren’t trying to dye their dark hair to my shade of blond anymore. One good thing had to come from those idiotic shows.

I turned back to Valerie. “Have you contacted your bank to make the transfer to my account yet or did you just want to give me a check?”

Confusion creased her brow. “What?”

“I paid the court \$5,000 this morning to get you out of jail. I’m not waiting months until your court date to have it refunded to me. You’ll need to come up with the money today.”

She sputtered a bit before whining, “But I don’t have that kind of money.”

She did, she just didn’t want to spend it on this. She was playing puppy dog eyes at me. She’d done this time and time again, thinking that I’d somehow fall for it like several of the stupid men whom she’d dated and dumped in the past.

“Then I can go get it back from the courts,” I told her. All

three sets of eyes lit up, like that was a viable solution. They really were this stupid. “If the courts don’t have your bail money, Val, you don’t have bail.”

“But...but...but,” she stammered not quite getting it.

“You’ll sit in county lockup until your court date. Your choice. Pay me for your bail, or I take it back.” I didn’t really know if I could take it back, but it was fun to threaten.

“That’s cold, Linds.”

“That’s reality, Maria. How would you like having \$5,000 of your money tied up for months unable to use it, all because of the stupidity of your friend?” She shrugged like she wouldn’t care, but she didn’t fool me. “Then you loan her the money to pay me back. She can owe you for the next couple months. How does that sound?”

Valerie turned to her with hopeful eyes. She honestly thought Maria would do this for her. The poor, naïve woman. She was about to find out just how far her best friends would stick their necks out for her. When Maria wouldn’t meet her eyes, Valerie deflated before me. “Fine. I think I have some money in emergency savings.”

She meant her wedding dress account. The only reason she hasn’t pulled the trigger on the dress she’s always wanted is because she’s gained fifty pounds over the past two years and wants to lose it to fit into the size eight dress. It didn’t seem to matter to her that she didn’t have a fiancé.

I glanced down at her purse. With a show of exasperation, she painstakingly pulled out her checkbook and slowly wrote out a check. The drama couldn’t have been better played out on a Mexican soap opera. When she handed it over, I actually had to rip it out of her grasp. “Good luck with this, Val. I hope it goes your way.”

“Wait, aren’t you going to—”

“I told you this morning I’m leaving this in your capable

Objection

hands.” With that I headed up the steps to city hall, hoping they wouldn’t bother to follow.

No such luck. I heard footsteps on my heel as I reached for my security card. I’d have to deal with more of this out here because I sure as hell wasn’t going to have them shadow me to my office. The last thing I needed in my office was a group of pissed off thirty-somethings who acted like they had rich husbands who’d pay to get them into or out of anything.

“Tell me I didn’t just witness a high class drug deal out front of the courthouse?” A smooth voice spoke just as I turned to face what I thought were my idiot friends.

The first thing I noticed was her gorgeous silk blouse. Just enough ruffle to be feminine without being piratey, it enhanced her length and feminine curves. Not wanting to be caught staring at one set of curves, I glanced up into a slightly familiar face, lots of interesting angles and soft ridges. Her piercing blue eyes grabbed my attention. Robin’s egg blue. A color that looked sharp enough to cut through glass. Nicely shaped eyes, too, just the right amount of slant for a tag of exotic. A cascade of pale champagne hair brushed the shoulders of the blouse I was going to spend valuable time shopping for. I’d seen her somewhere, but the fact that I couldn’t place her told me just how enchanting a vision she made.

“She paid with a check? For drugs? In front of a courthouse?” Her eyes shifted to the folded check I’d slipped into the back pocket of my slacks. They lingered there on my rear for a good three seconds before returning with a glint to mine.

The glint pulled a smile from my lips. Most of the time I didn’t like being checked out, but with this beauty, I didn’t really mind. “It’s actually city hall. The courthouse is a block behind the building.”

A grin broke through her effort to hold onto a stern face. “Well then, I guess that makes it all right.”

I had to laugh at that. I wished I could remember where I'd seen her before. She was definitely someone worth getting to know. "Kind of you to let it pass, officer." My eyes questioned hers to see if I'd guessed right.

"Worse," she let me know.

"Ugh, an attorney?"

Now she laughed before trying again for intimidating. "Once upon a time."

She'd given up being an attorney? Hmmm, interesting. Then it hit me where I'd seen her before. "Judge Brooks, of course."

"Of course?" Her eyes twinkled now, trying to keep our teasing going, but I could see wariness was not far behind.

"I couldn't place you without the robe, Judge. Normally I never forget a face." Especially one as sculpted as hers. I had the feeling she'd looked sophisticated even as a tween. "I'm Linds—"

"Lindsay St. James, yes, we met on my first day." Her expression told me she hadn't just remembered our meeting a few months ago but relished it. "You're the one who makes the mayor look so good, and I'm not talking about her makeup and hair."

Her bluntness caused me to blink rapidly, unable to come up with an immediate reply. She watched my reaction for a moment before taking the card out of my hand to swipe through the security lock. Pulling open the door, she waited for me to go through first. When that didn't happen, she slipped the card back into my hand and stepped past me inside.

"I accuse you of conducting a drug deal and you're pure wit, but give you a compliment and you go mute?" That grin came over her face again as she began walking toward the back entrance that would take her to the courthouse in the most direct and air-conditioned route. Over her shoulder, she declared, "I'm going to like getting to know you, Ms. St. James."

Objection

I stared open mouthed at the sexy slink in her step. So, the newest superior court judge had a little sass. That sure would liven things up around here.

THREE

The mayor's aide wore that all too familiar guilty-but-damn-glad-I-don't-have-to-fix-it look on her face when she greeted me mid-morning on Monday. I closed my eyes, counted to three—that's as high as I can get without saying "screw it" and vaulting over my desk to choke whoever's bothering me—and turned my focus on Tammy.

"What did she do now?"

"Aww, Linds, don't say that." Tammy liked to try to butter me up before shoving me into the fire. As a mother of three grown children, Tammy was resourceful in getting people to do what she needed. She was one of the best political wranglers in the business.

Noticing that she'd closed the door on the way in, I waited her out. She usually left it open for a quick escape after dropping whatever bomb she held in her hand.

"She was talking about racially motivated firings at the labor rally today," she started, obviously hoping I'd fill in the rest.

"It was a labor rally. I'd say that was a good move." My eyes squeezed to slits trying to figure out what could have happened.

"She might have singled out one of our corporate backers by name."

I coughed or laughed or cough-laughed, unable to hold in my surprise. This mayor had said some stupid things in the past, but

Objection

this was a doosey. “Might have? Is there a chance this speech took place only in your imagination?” Her glum eyes flicked away for a moment, dashing my hopes that this was some kind of joke. “Do you two just sit around on the weekend and dream up ways to make my job more challenging?”

“You can fix it, right?” She pressed up onto her tiptoes, anxious for my agreement.

“Fix the mayor insulting an important corporate backer by rallying against their questionable labor practices?” I didn’t know why I was taking it out on the messenger, but sometimes I was convinced Tammy needed to focus her wrangling skills from getting in and out of the right spots to keeping a handle on the mayor’s error prone ways. “Yes, I can fix it. Do not let her take another podium until I’ve figured out how, though.”

“You’re awesome, Linds. She’ll be thrilled to hear it.”

Not relieved, thrilled. Typical. What else did I expect when I worked for a politician who had diarrhea of the mouth? If only I’d dropped out of that first Poli Sci course in college. I could be boring myself to death in a cubicle running numbers instead of trying to figure out how to get my boss out of a coffin deep hole without a rope.

“Your friend is an idiot,” Yoshi Nakamura, the city’s best public defender and one of my good friends, declared as he sauntered into my office moments after Tammy’s escape and dropped into a chair. The familiar move had started three years ago when he’d left a posh law firm for the public defender’s small cubicle with a twenty-five year old scratched desk and questionable chair that would fail whenever he tilted back more than ten degrees. He’d often bring his case load over and work at the extra table I had in my office. Since our work habits were similar, I never minded.

“So is my boss,” I said under my breath, but the wide grin on his round face told me he’d heard.

“Don’t tell me...”

“Yep, another mouth drool today.”

“She must really hate you.”

“Probably more than I know,” I joked back. “What’s this about my friend?”

“Oh, that Valerie—thanks for requesting I get assigned to that fiasco by the way—has been handed a gift from the ADA and won’t take it.” The gel in his normally polished black hair failed him with his repeated head shaking. The side part that could be used as a straight edge kept flopping back and forth as he blew out his frustration. “And she keeps asking me to talk s-l-o-w, she d-o-e-s-n-t un-der-s-t-a-n-d me.”

“Oh my god,” I blew out, matching his frustration. It was one thing to be stupid, quite another to be racist and a xenophobe. Yoshi had moved onto my dorm floor during our second semester at college. At the time, he didn’t know much English. Now, his native Japanese accent was barely detectable anymore. “What can I say? She’s definitely an idiot. Was she arraigned today?”

“Just finished up. The ADA cornered me on the way out, offering one year suspended with completion of an anger management course. Can you guess how she reacted?”

“With anger?” I didn’t even need to guess. I knew how she’d react to someone telling her she had an anger problem. She loved accusing me of my short temper with her, but push it back and she’d go ballistic.

“Got it in one.” He tapped a finger to his nose. “Should I call Thad to see if he can reason with her or do you want to tackle this yourself?”

I leaned back in my chair, contemplating the choices. A sense of serenity settled over me as I realized I didn’t need to be involved. “Neither. She’s a big girl. If she wants to be a moron, let her.”

His brown eyes bugged out at me. “Really? Is Thad on board

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with this? You're really not going to get her out of this?"

"I honestly couldn't care less anymore. Did the ADA say how bad it was?" I hadn't bothered to ask Valerie since she kept insisting it was nothing more than a sting.

"The woman has a bruise, so I'd say she landed a good one."

I let another long breath escape. "Can you even imagine? Chatting with some guy and someone comes over and slaps you? She had to be wondering if she'd stumbled into a reality show somehow."

"Yeah, I'm not looking forward to having this go to trial. There is no defense I can put up."

Nodding my head, I knew he'd have his work cut out for him. "She might come to her senses before the trial date. When is it?"

"Eight weeks. That new judge who keeps catching all the crap cases got it. If I didn't have a ton of clients to defend in front of her, I'd feel bad for her."

My eyebrows shot up at the mention of Judge Brooks. She'd tracked in and out of my mind all weekend. I was hoping to bump into her again soon. Maybe I'd have to make up a reason. "What's the gossip on her?"

His eyes pinged back to mine and a teasing twinkle formed. "I was wondering when you'd get around to noticing her." His hours made it so that living vicariously through his friends was the only viable relationship he could maintain. Mine weren't a lot better, but at least I'd had a date in the past three years.

Folding my arms, I pushed back against my chair. Classic and very telling defensive posture, but I didn't care. "I ran into her on Saturday. I didn't even recognize her. That's all."

"Oh, that's all. You can't fool me, Linds. You don't gossip, and you don't ask about someone unless it directly relates to your job, orrrr," he dragged out, "you're interested in her personally."

"I'm just asking. She seemed to know who I was. I didn't want to be caught off guard again."

“Uh-huh,” he placated. Annoying little bastard. “We’ve got eight to one odds she’s gay.”

I let a snort escape. “You guys actually place wagers on stupid crap like that?”

“We place wagers on whether the boss will sneak a cigarette before or after the morning meeting. Of course we’re keeping book on something as big as the possibility of a lesbian judge who could completely upend the tone of the court.”

“There are conservative lesbians, you know.”

“She doesn’t look conservative to me.”

No, she didn’t, nor did she sound conservatively minded, either. Crap, now he’s got me thinking about her sexuality, which shouldn’t be something I have time to think about. The lingering glance at the check in my back pocket on Saturday should tell me everything I need to know about her sexuality, but it was possible she really was just looking at the check.

“Stop thinking about how not conservative she is. I know you.”

“You know me well enough to know I hate when people say they know me.”

“Yep,” he smirked, rising out of his seat. “Let’s grab lunch and go dangle you in front of the courthouse.”

“You really need to get cable.”

“Waste of money. I get all the entertainment I need out of my single, clueless friends.”

Like he was much better. “Really not liking you, right now.”

“Wait till I scribble your number on each of the pleadings I’ve got to deliver to Her Honor’s inbox today.”

I snaked my arm around his neck and put him in a slight choke hold. “You will not or I’ll volunteer you to help every one of my idiot friends whenever they do something really idiotic.”

FOUR

Her voice didn't surprise me this time. I was sitting outside the courthouse waiting on Yoshi for another of our quick lunch breaks when the alluring judge spoke from behind me.

"You're on courthouse grounds now, Ms. St. James. Don't let me catch you moonlighting out here."

"Don't need to. Business is so much more crisp over at the children's park."

Her blue eyes studied every inch of my face. "Why do I have the feeling you could lie well enough to fool even yourself?"

My mouth nudged open. "I should be insulted, I think." That I was amused made me a little warped. Maybe a lot warped.

"But the fact that you're not makes you all the more fascinating."

"Are you always this bold, Judge?"

"Call me Suzanne and I just might tell you."

I smiled at the tease. Suzanne. Nice name. I could imagine saying it softly, gently, coaxingly, in a whisper, and as a shout. Suzanne. Suzie. Sue. I hoped I'd get the opportunity to use every version of it. "Not on courthouse grounds, Judge."

She tilted her head in acknowledgement. A flicker of gratitude popped into her expression. I wondered if her reluctance to accept formality was why she was being stuck with all the crap cases. "Is that your way of telling me you'd like to see me off

courthouse grounds?”

She'd done it again. I found myself speechless with someone so direct. In my business, directness was fleeting. I didn't know how to react.

“You know there's a pool about you?” I thought I'd try to elicit the same reaction from her.

“In the PD's office? Yes, my spies have delighted in telling me all about it. Do they have one on you?” Her eyes twinkled with a bit of cockiness. So much for speechless.

“No need,” I told her lightly. “They all know I'm gay.”

She looked me up and down, raising her eyebrows. “And now, so do I.”

Hel-lo, Judge.

Before I could come up with something that didn't sound mildly smarmy, she continued, “What say we find an opportunity to call me by my first name? Friday night, maybe?”

My head was nodding before I agreed verbally. We set a time and place to meet up and, when Yoshi approached, said our goodbyes.

“Don't say it,” I warned my friend when his knowing grin lingered on the departing judge.

“I can't tell you that I saw this coming from a mile away?”

“Didn't I just tell you not to say it?”

“It,” he shot back. “Oh, and while we're grabbing lunch, can we talk about how your friends are idiots again?”

“You're my friend.”

“Shut up.” His grin grew wider, and I couldn't help joining him.

The restaurant seemed tranquil on the outside, but when I stepped through the door, an explosion of activity surrounded

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me. A true Greek taverna complete with people singing, dancing on tables, breaking plates, and tossing napkins. The sight stopped me cold in the doorway.

“Good choice, right?” That luscious voice spoke right into my ear.

I started forward, turning to spot my sneaky date. Blue eyes glinted in mischief as she watched my startled reaction. Swept up on the sides, her hairstyle gave her the appearance of being both casual and dressy. With the wide smile, she looked even more beautiful in this setting than in the few times I caught her commanding a corridor in the courthouse.

“I’ve never been here.”

“I can tell,” she teased. “I thought if you turned out to be a dud as a dinner date, I’d at least have some other entertainment.” Her hand waved to indicate the very active dining room.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Who would toss out a teasing insult thirty seconds into a first date? “You are something.”

“Thanks.” She joined my laughter, making me feel instantly at ease with her. The spark in her beautiful eyes that said she liked my own attempt at casual dressy helped with the comfort level, too.

We were seated at a corner table, away from much of the activity, but still on the periphery. The look she exchanged with the hostess told me that she’d arranged for this table. I liked that she’d teased about the possibility of a bad date but planned on having a good one.

Suzanne made suggestions on what to eat when I told her the only Greek food I’d ever had was a gyro at a street fair. Surprisingly, having her take charge was relaxing. I found myself enjoying the date all the more now that I didn’t have to worry about making sure every little thing went all right. It helped that the more I got to know her, the sexier she became, and she’d started out pretty damn sexy.

“What would I have to do to get you up dancing with the rest of these fine diners?” she asked with that mischievous grin I was going to set as a daily goal to see.

“Table dancing is saved for second dates.”

“Is that your way of asking me out again?” One eyebrow quirked. “You like to beat around the bush, don’t you?”

“I work for politicians.”

“Say no more.”

She made conversation so easy. Laid back yet constantly aware, it was hard to imagine her sitting as a judge. Impossible to imagine her fitting in with the court’s current panel of conservatives. I’d have to sneak into her courtroom soon to see her in action.

As for our dinner, it had been the best date I’d had in years. I didn’t feel like she was posing questions to tick off boxes on some list or weed me out. It was just an easy exchange, lots of kidding, lots of positive observation, and lots of fun.

“That drug deal, want to tell me more about that line of work?”

Back to the kidding, I see. I opened my mouth to spill the story when my brain stepped in and stopped me. Yoshi had said that she would be hearing that case. I probably couldn’t tell her about it. Not that it would be against the law, but it could become a compromising position for her if we became closer. Probably best not to mention it.

Having seen my expression go from open to closed in the space of a heartbeat, she misinterpreted my response. “That was a joke. Sometimes I take it too far.”

“No, it’s okay,” I reassured her. “Let’s just say my friend paid me back for money I loaned her. I’d make a whole lot more dealing drugs, I’m sure.”

She studied me for a moment, noting my now relaxed posture and expression. I knew right then how she’d become a judge.

Objection

She could tell when someone was lying to her. Lots of people say they can do that, but very few actually can. She could. It was written on her face and why she was so direct. I found it all very refreshing. “I’ve seen enough in my courtrooms to know that you’re right about the money.”

“And the possibility of shooting someone is always a bonus,” I quipped back.

“Indeed.” She leaned back, taking her coffee cup with her. Her eyes flicked away toward the loud group in the center of the restaurant. “I don’t think I’ve ever had that much fun at a family dinner, have you?”

“I don’t think anyone’s had that much fun at a family dinner.” Not without a lot of alcohol.

Her head nodded as a grin took over her face. “About that second date,” she started, signaling for the check, “how about something a little more lively next time?”

I chuckled, making a show of turning around to take in all the boisterous activity. “Lively sounds good. As first dates go, this one? Pretty boring.”

“Playing with fire, my dear.” She pointed a long finger that I wished would make contact just to feel her touch. “Never challenge me.”

“I think I might quite like challenging you.”

She signed the credit card receipt, shooting a quick amused glance at me. Rising from the table, she said, “You’re going to live to regret that.”

I followed her outside. “Promises, promises.”

FIVE

Inordinately tall, the district attorney stood a forehead taller than even the lankiest guy in the room. When he stormed through the mayor's office doors, every head turned to watch his progress. He liked making an entrance. He did it everywhere he went. Yoshi was terrified of him, as were most of the PD's office and almost all of his own employees.

He swerved his way through the cubes, coming straight for my office. "You, she's going to need you. Let's go." Then he turned and headed in the direction of the mayor's office.

Apparently summoned, I got up, mostly out of curiosity. He'd at least made an effort at my name this time instead of what he usually called me: "Hey" or "Mayor's It Girl." I found it endearing enough to want to follow his instruction.

The office heads were now staring at me. Nearly everyone flashed a different gesture of committing suicide as I made my way through the cubes. No one in the office liked dealing with him, but as the best friend of the mayor's husband, we were used to seeing him around here a lot.

I made it to the outer doors of the mayor's private office area. He pushed through without knocking. Louisa, her personal admin and the keeper of the door, looked like she was going to pull out every strand of her eyebrows one by one.

I waved a reassuring hand at her as I followed him inside. As

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soon as he cleared the door, he was barking at the mayor to get off the phone. Tammy looked up, appalled at his order but smart enough not to cross this guy.

“Doug,” the mayor greeted the moment she cut her phone call short. “What brings you by? It must be something important.”

He ignored her sarcasm. “Your office has a problem, which means you have a problem, which means she,” he hooked a thumb over his shoulder, “has a problem.”

I realized his thumb hook was pointing at me, but I twisted a look over my shoulder just to make sure.

“What’s the problem?” Mayor Kingston asked while making herself comfortable in her chair, obviously hoping Doug would do the same.

“Someone in your office is bribing judges to get city officials and dignitaries out of trouble before any cases can be made.”

“Allegedly,” I supplied, taking a guest chair and looking him into the other one.

“Oh, they’re doing it.”

“Until you prove it in court, it’s slander to state otherwise.”

He cut an intimidating look at me, thinking I’d cower in his presence like so many others. “Listen, Lainie, we’re not kidding around here. Someone in this office is guilty of bribing a judge.”

“I’m not kidding around either, Dean—”

“Doug,” his lackey immediately inserted, surprising himself with his fervor. The guy had been completely lost in the wake of Doug’s tsunami when he entered the office.

I stood and held my hand out. “Lindsay St. James, I don’t think we’ve met.”

His eyes popped wide at my confidence in front of his boss. He flicked a glance at the man, clearly confused by my name. In the end, he automatically shook it.

“We don’t have time for introductions,” his boss shrugged off.

"It might be a good idea, though, Doug, seeing as you still don't know Lindsay's name," the mayor inserted.

Tammy slapped a hand to her mouth and turned away. Watching her try to keep her laughter in almost drew an audible laugh from me.

"Oh, I know her name," he replied as if the idea of knowing the name of such a lowly person was beneath him. "I'm just not a fan of spin doctors, Jennifer."

"You might have an easier time on election day if you were, Doug. Now, what's this about a bribe?" Mayor Kingston hoped to move him along.

"We have reason to suspect," he stressed the last word, shooting a glare at me, "that someone in your office is bribing judges. Four traffic incidents, one DUI, two possession charges, and five disorderly conduct charges have mysteriously been dismissed by the courts over the past ten months." Apparently he expected us to gasp and start scurrying around to seek out this perpetrator because the glare this time was expectant.

"Why do you believe it originates in this office? I asked.

"Every one of the charges was lodged against members of city hall or close friends."

Damn. I exchanged a look of dread with the mayor. We so didn't need this. "May we see the case files?"

He snapped his fingers and the lackey jumped in place. Two inches off the ground jumped. It would have been funny if the DA's accusations weren't potentially damaging to this office. After touching ground again, the lackey started forward and stretched the files out to his boss. I snagged them first.

Flipping through the folders, I saw many familiar and important people in the city government. This wasn't good. "The DUI looks questionable. He blew .01 over and admitted to drinking while waiting for the cops after the accident to calm his nerves."

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The DA scoffed loudly. "They all say that. Anyone who's ever watched a lawyer show on TV knows to say that."

"Which is why so many DUIs are bumped if they show up with a good lawyer," I retorted. It wouldn't mean that he'd escape the mayor's wrath, but his case dismissal was legit.

"The others are solid," Doug assured the mayor.

Reading on, I saw he was right. Every one of them had their cases dismissed based on judicial subjectivity. This looked bad. I glanced up at the mayor and gave her a single nod of my head. We've been working together for nine years. She knew what I meant.

"What do you propose, Doug?" she asked.

"We set up a sting operation. Of course my office will run it, but we've got to find out who is doing this and shut it down."

"How would we do that? You don't know who's doing this."

"We approach a judge," I supplied, reading his mind.

He looked equally put out that I'd stolen his thunder and impressed that I was smart enough to think like he did. "Yes. The new one. It's the only way we can know for sure the judge isn't already compromised."

The new one. Suzanne. He was talking about Suzanne. I wasn't crazy about the idea all around. Involving Suzanne didn't suddenly make it better.

"You," he started, but a scolding look from the mayor made him try again. "Lindsay, you know her. We want you with us when we approach her."

Taken aback by his observation and order, I stalled. "I'm not with the DA's office."

"No, you're with the mayor's office where this is happening. She may be reluctant to help us. If we're successful we might bring down several of her colleagues. That's not a good position to be in. You're her friend," he smirked at the word, telling me he suspected we were more than just friends. "She'll be more open

to it with you talking to her.”

“No.” I wouldn’t use my friendship with her to put her at risk.

“Lindsay.”

Nobody missed the slight warning the mayor’s tone implied, but I wasn’t going to let Suzanne’s reputation be harmed with a shoddily run sting op. “We’re not waiting around indefinitely until someone in the office gets into trouble again and prompts this bribery.”

Tammy lifted a brow. The mayor smiled. “She’s right.”

He raised his palms and shrugged his shoulders. “It wasn’t until this last case that we noticed a pattern. What are we supposed to do?”

His tone basically said, “Hey, good luck with finding a solution. You guys are screwed. Mine is the only option.”

What he forgot is that I was a professional solution finder. “I know a case we can use as a target.”

He looked startled for a moment as if the idea of using a specific case as bait never occurred to him. After a moment, he tried to hide it. “There aren’t any suitable cases.”

“Three of these bribes happened for so-called important friends of people in city hall. I have a friend who is facing assault and battery charges. We can use her case as bait.”

“You have a friend who assaulted someone?” Tammy blurted.

“I have an idiot friend who gets drunk on Friday nights and thinks she can physically stop someone from flirting with her boyfriend.”

“A catfight in a bar?” Doug clarified.

“A scuffle is more like it. From what I understand she told the woman to back off and when the woman didn’t understand the need to back off, she landed a slap before her boyfriend pulled her back.”

The mayor seemed shocked. For nine years I’d been cleaning

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up her messes. It never ceased to amaze me that she didn't realize other people had some messiness in their own lives. I could have made the excuse that Valerie and I weren't close or technically real friends, but neither the mayor nor the DA needed to know this.

"What's the status of her case?" Doug asked his lackey who was already on the phone back to the DA's office.

He covered the mouthpiece. "Plea has been offered and rejected. Felicia was going to try again before pre-trial motions next week."

Doug nodded, considering. "What makes you think this case will work?"

"I'm important to the mayor. Helping me means helping her. The one trend that brought you in here is that all these cases had some tie to the mayor's office. It's likely that this person already knows about Valerie's case." When they gave me a questioning look, I continued, "She was pretty boisterous in our café a few weeks ago when I told her I couldn't and wouldn't help her out of this mess."

The DA let a laugh escape. "She already asked you to help her?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "She's a bit of a princess. Can't seem to handle much on her own. Usually her uncle helps her out, but when he's not around, she comes to me."

"Might work," he admitted reluctantly. "Can you get her to cooperate? She'll need to take the plea. It can't go to trial if we're using her as bait."

A million objections went through my mind. I'd be doing exactly what I said I wouldn't do for her, but letting this bribery continue from the office that I was tasked with making look pristine overrode my wish to teach Valerie a lesson. "Yes."

He waited for me to elaborate. When I didn't, he asked, "You're sure?"

“Yes.” He didn’t need to know the amount of manipulation I’d have to go through to get Valerie to agree.

“Fine. You’ll work with Sam here on prepping your friend. We’ll approach the judge tomorrow.” With that he got up and turned to leave.

“You’re welcome, Doug,” the mayor called out sweetly as he crossed through the doorway.

He deigned to glance back and give her a parting wave. Sam snatched my business card out of my hand and ran after his boss. Poor guy. Having to work with that temper every single day.

“What did we just get ourselves into?” the mayor asked.

I shut the door behind them. “We have to keep this to ourselves. We don’t know who is behind this and can’t trust anyone. If all goes as planned, we’ll have it solved soon.”

Like usual both the mayor and Tammy nodded their heads, trusting me to make things right. Too bad this wasn’t going to have a good end, no matter how it turned out.

SIX

There was a distinct absence of twinkling in her beautiful blues on this visit. They looked like they might have when I first arrived in her chambers, but the twinkle fizzled out as soon as the DA and Sam followed me inside. I couldn't blame her. As objective as she was supposed to be as a judge, the DA made everyone react to one extreme.

"Two questions," she said when he'd relayed the sting plan to her. "What makes you think this person will come to me with a bribe? And what happens to my colleagues if your plan works?"

Both valid questions, but it was the second one that was most concerning. She knew the answer, we all did, but clearly she wanted the DA to say it out loud. She'd be an integral part of her colleagues' demise if this bribe happened how we were planning. Four judges were allegedly involved. One had retired, making way for Suzanne to fill his spot. The other three were still active. As a new judge, she'd already had a hard enough time feeling part of the club. Bringing down three of her colleagues wouldn't make her more popular.

"You know what happens, Judge," Doug told her.

"Spell it out for me."

As superior as Doug acted around everyone, I was shocked to see him so respectful. One thing could be said about him: he definitely loves the law. "If you can get him or her to admit that

he's had cases kicked by other judges, they'll be brought up on charges. There's no way around that."

She turned her stare to me. Emotions swirled in that one glance. I knew this would tear her up, but she knew she'd have to do it. "And the extent of your involvement?"

"Ms. St. James knows the defendant that we plan to use as bait."

Shocked that Doug not only addressed me by name but that he actually knew my last one, I paused before adding, "She'll be taking a plea to resolve her legal issues."

Suzanne's eyes rested a little longer on mine. Having been caught staring at them on each of our five prior dates, I felt like squirming now. She was trying to figure out if I was being coerced by Doug's office. I held a steady gaze to let her know the truth.

"Once she dangles the carrot, we think it will be a week tops before whoever is behind these bribes approaches you. We'll need you to be more visible over the next week. Eat lunch on the grounds every day, come early and stay late. Avoid just staying in your chambers while on the courthouse grounds."

Shifting in her seat, Suzanne turned her stare on him. "And how do you propose I get any work done? I've got more cases assigned to me than anyone else on this court, certainly more than you."

Doug paled slightly and shot a glance at me for help. I crossed my arms, leaned back a little, and clamped my mouth shut. Suzanne would not believe a word I said in his defense, and I knew her well enough to know that she was just pushing his limits. One of the many things I so liked about her. She didn't take any guff in her courtroom or from the people she knew, and Doug was trying to make this sound a lot simpler than it would be.

"I realize that, Your Honor, but this has to be stopped. If you can sacrifice for a week, I promise you, this will be over."

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“Big promise there, Counselor.”

I hid a smile, loving how much she was making him sweat. He'd probably drop five pounds before we left her chambers.

“I don't see any other way of shutting this down.”

A long pause before she finally relinquished her torture. “Neither do I.”

Relief had Doug and Sam sagging in their seats. Suzanne shot me a quick and private grin. I'd learned to live for those looks in our time together. Dating her had become the single most enjoyable thing I'd done in my entire life, despite the one big problem, of course. She still hadn't kissed me, but more importantly, hadn't made love with me. If I weren't having so much fun with her, I'd be chewing my nails to the nubs.

“Our investigators will come over with a wire setup,” Doug told her.

I cut him off. “No, no way. She's not wearing a wire.” Not only because she'd have to wear it any time she was out in public, but because wires weren't the best way to capture a confession.

“It has to be on tape, Lindsay,” he lectured me.

“Video would be better, Doug,” I lectured right back.

“We're just supposed to have someone tail the judge day and night with a camera because you think having it on video would be better?”

“No,” I made sure he was listening before I continued. “You don't need the approach on tape. You just need the bribe. Not to mention that many of Her Honor's conversations are privileged. You can't just put a wire on her and delete the stuff that doesn't relate.”

“So what do you suggest?” He once again thought his way was the only way. When would he learn that options were my specialty?

“She'll most likely be approached on courthouse grounds since this will be a first time attempt. Anything else would be

creepy for most women. When she's approached, she shuts down any further talk until they're right back here in chambers. It won't be seen as unusual that a judge would want absolute privacy when exploring something illegal." I caught both Sam and Suzanne nodding their agreement.

"So we wire this room? As you said, most of her confidential conversations with attorneys will take place here. We're back to the same problem."

"See that laptop over there?" I pointed at the computer Suzanne had sitting on the credenza behind her. "It has a web cam that no one will know is recording unless she tells them. She brings the guy back here, positions the laptop behind her under the guise of shutting it off, and sets it up to record. You get one conversation on tape. There won't be any room for denial when it's all over."

Now it was Doug who pushed back in his chair and folded his arms, regarding me. "I can see why the mayor finds you so valuable."

"Are we done for now?" My part of this with Suzanne was over. Let them figure out the rest on their own.

He nodded at me then rose to shake Suzanne's hand before leaving without another word. Sam looked a little lost as to what to do but eventually clued in to follow his boss.

Suzanne sat back down and regarded me with a smile. "You got dragged into this to smooth it over with me? I have to say as sucking up goes, they chose the right person to help achieve that."

"Are you saying I suck up to you?" I tossed back, already eager to start up our usual banter. Conversing with her had become a favorite hobby of mine.

"You're a huge suck up. Don't think I didn't know exactly what you were doing when we went to the zoo last weekend. You know I love animals."

Objection

I gave a sinister laugh and twirled a fake mustache. “Yes, I do.”

“Would I be right in assuming this has something to do with the drug deal I witnessed?”

Laughing outright, I admitted, “Yep. She’ll be the case we dangle for this guy.”

Suzanne let the amusement fade. “Is she a concern for you?”

Her worry was genuine. We’d only known each other for six weeks but already she’d become a good friend and, if anything sexual ever happened between us, a wonderful girlfriend. “She’s the niece of a friend of mine. We’re somewhere between acquaintance and friend. More like obligation. She did something stupid; I bailed her out. I wasn’t going to help her this time, but now, it seems I have to.”

Her hand covered mine. I wanted to cling to it to make the contact more intimate. “You don’t have to get involved. We can wait this person out.”

“It’s better this way, actually. She needed to take the plea agreement, but she was being stubborn. This will force her hand.”

Suzanne studied me for a long moment. She lifted my hand in hers and kissed my knuckles. A shiver ran through my body. She’d hugged me, kissed my cheek, and kissed my hand. I couldn’t wait for her to really kiss me. So far I’d been letting her drive this relationship. It was such a nice change for me and made everything more enjoyable. Not knowing what to expect because I wasn’t in charge was like being surprised over and over again. But if she didn’t kiss me soon, I was going to attack her. My restraint thus far had been commendable, if I do say so myself.

“Okay, then. I trust you to know when enough is enough.”

Why that sounded like double-entendre didn’t surprise this recently lust-ridden problem solver at all.

SEVEN

Valerie's apartment was decorated in a Crate&Barrel meets sorority house chic. Mismatched furniture styles purchased over the years had been shoved together because she didn't know how to de-clutter the living/dining room space.

Despite calling ahead, she looked surprised to see me on her doorstep. After letting me in, I spotted Nancy and Maria already sitting on the couch. Valerie always assumed she'd need backup for any request of mine.

"Hey," Nancy greeted when I took a seat in a high back chair that looked nothing like the modern squared off seat next to it.

"Hi, Linds," Maria added. She'd always been the most congenial of the three.

"Hi there, I didn't know you'd be here."

"We're heading out to—"

Nancy's elbow cut off whatever else Maria was going to say. Truly juvenile.

"We wanted to talk to you," Valerie started, taking the low slung loveseat across from me.

She knew I was here to talk to her about her court appearance. I didn't want to get off track, but staying silent with this trio always proved the prudent choice.

"We're getting tired of you always dissing us, Linds. We invite you places and you always have some lame excuse. You

Objection

look down on us every chance you get.”

I managed to keep from laughing and choked out, “Is this an intervention?”

“Seriously, Linds,” Valerie started. “We’re your friends, and we don’t like how you’ve been treating us.”

“Val,” I tried for calm. “We’ve grown apart over the years. You all have your interests, and I have mine. I haven’t meant to be rude, but I don’t think we have much fun when we all hang out together. Am I right?” I looked over at Nancy and Maria. One shrugged while the other gave a confirmation nod. “Let’s not pretend we’re back in college and running into each other on campus. Friendship takes work, but we don’t seem to have any common interests anymore. It’s your uncle that ties us together.”

“You’re, like, dumping us?” Valerie questioned. Her indignant attitude was comical.

“You’re the ones confronting me and asking me to change.”

“You’re the one who changed,” Valerie accused.

I laughed, probably not the smartest idea since I needed to talk her into the sting operation, but she was such a child sometimes. “I’ve always been like this, Val. You guys just chose to see what you wanted.”

“That’s it? You’re done with us?” Her eyes started tearing up. Honest to God. I thought about asking Maria to grab a tissue, but that would just prolong the performance.

“I’m still your uncle’s friend. I’m sure we’ll run into each other frequently, but I’m releasing you of your obligation to try to include me in things. It’s not fun for any of us.”

Nancy and Maria stole a glance at each other before looking for Valerie’s reaction. They wouldn’t do anything without her say so first.

“Fine, ditch us. See if we care.”

Ah, the elementary playground approach to blowing someone off. How refreshing. “I actually came here for a reason.”

“What? You need a favor from us now that we’re no longer friends?”

For a brief moment, I wondered if she were too old for a time-out. We could use that ugly wingback in the corner as the naughty chair. Then again, thirty-six minutes would be torture for all of us, so I guess I answered my own question about her being too old for it. “We should talk in private. It involves your court case.”

Valerie looked surprised before blowing it off. “Oh, that’s handled.”

The ready way she offered that up had me worried. “You took the plea?” I was certain that Yoshi would have told me about that.

“No, I found another way.”

A creepy feeling came over me. “Tell me you didn’t threaten the victim?”

“Victim?” Nancy guffawed.

I shot her a silencing glance. On second thought, it was a good idea to discuss this in front of them all. Valerie would tell them anyway. This way I could impress upon them the importance of confidentiality.

“Nope,” Valerie tossed off with a mysterious smile. “You don’t need to be concerned with me anymore.”

“But I am. If you didn’t take the plea or threaten the victim, there’s not much else you could do to get rid of the case.”

“I said, drop it, Linds. Seriously.”

With little choice, I pressed ahead. “I have a better solution.”

“You’re helping her now?” Nancy accused.

“Yes. I am going to help, and in turn, Valerie will be assisting both the DA and the mayor.” That wiped the smirks off their faces. “Someone has been bribing judges in cases involving people from city hall or their friends. We want to use Valerie’s case as bait to attract this person so we can bust him or her.”

All three of their mouths nudged open, eyes wide. “How did you—”

Objection

Nancy's elbow stopped Maria again. It was enough to make me realize exactly what was going on. "Tell me you didn't pay someone to bribe your judge?"

Valerie stood abruptly. "I haven't paid him a cent."

"Yet," Maria muttered.

"Seriously?" Valerie shot at her.

"Yeah, seriously," Maria shot back.

Apparently that was an entire conversation because they both turned back to me. "This was your way of handling the case? You turned a simple assault with maybe six months max into bribery of a court official that could lead to ten years? Just how stupid are you?"

"Screw you, Linds," Valerie spat at me. "You wouldn't help. You twisted Uncle Thad's mind against me. I did the only thing I could." She looked at her two best friends for support.

Before they could launch equally asinine reasoning at me, I stopped them. "This is what's going to happen. You're going to accept the plea bargain offered to you—"

"No way!" she barked.

"You will accept the plea or face charges of attempted bribery in addition to assault. With the plea, your record is expunged if you enter anger management therapy. You will do that eagerly, Valerie, or I swear, you'll do nothing but sit inside a jail cell for the next seven years."

"It's your word against ours," she huffed.

"It's your lie against my recording, idiot." I held up my currently recording cell phone. They didn't need to know it wouldn't be admissible in court.

"Seriously?" Nancy asked.

How these three actually functioned in their jobs with such a limited vocabulary was beyond me. "You'll take the plea. We'll provide you with the money to pay off the man who is offering to help you. Who is it, by the way?"

“Like I’m going to tell you,” Valerie objected.

I shook my head at her ignorance. “Valerie, you’re no longer on the hook for just a simple assault. Work with the DA’s office and everything will stay off your record.”

“I’m not going to anger management class!” she yelled, further proving her need for it.

“You are. Face your situation head on for once. Be an adult. You have two choices: seven to ten in jail or eight weeks in anger management.” I looked to her friends to convince her.

“Think you have to do it, Val, seriously,” Nancy told her, knowing full well how her friend’s temper could get away from her.

“Yep,” Maria agreed. “You’ll be like a spy. I say go for it.”

Not really, but at least Maria was presenting something appealing to her.

“Everything goes away?” Valerie looked at me.

“Once you’ve completed the class, everything goes away.”

“And I’d be like some operative for the DA’s office?” Her eyes sparkled with delusional visions.

“You’d be asked to contact the person to accept help on your case. Get him to tell you again how he can make it go away and hand over the money.”

Valerie paced from her seat to her kitchen and back. She was smart enough to know she had no other choice, but she liked presenting the image that she was in control. “Fine, I’ll help.”

I could have made a sarcastic remark, but she was stubborn enough to go to jail if I pushed her one step too far. “Good. The mayor and the DA will be happy to hear that.” Even if I’d already told them she’d agree.

EIGHT

Light glinted off the glass sculpture and reflected against the long, thorny cactus. Leave it to Suzanne to find yet another creative way to spend a date. Prior to meeting her, I'd only been to restaurants, movies, or sporting events on dates. Going to a museum, a roller rink, flying a kite at the park, she seemed to have a million ideas. Tonight, we were walking through the botanical gardens that I'd wanted to visit since moving here. I looked from the glass sculpture to my date in wonder.

She gave me a beautiful smile, clearly happy that I was finding marvel in the various forms of cacti the gardens had to offer. Reaching out, she grabbed my hand to tug me to the next area. Holding hands and hugging was still all we were doing and as frustrating as that was, I loved the feel of her hand in mine. She was the only person I'd dated that didn't insist on lacing fingers when holding hands. It always cut off circulation in my fingers when I did that.

"How many times have you been here?" I asked as she led me to a private spot with another beautiful view.

"I bring all my dates here. Don't think you're so special."

That jealousy didn't even enter my mind at her tease told me how perfect she was for me. "Oh, I'd never."

"Got to keep you from getting a big head, you know."

"Wouldn't want that."

She tilted toward me, coming close enough that I could feel her breath on my face. I wanted to kiss her, but I was still holding out for her to kiss me. I could admit to some deliciousness in the wait. Like we were part of a soap opera storyline in the early eighties when the writers really knew how to drag out a couple getting together.

“Not when I want so many other things.” Her voice dropped an octave, packing the sentence with enough innuendo to drop me to my knees.

Ugphhfhg! Not exactly eloquent, but it’s been seven weeks of not getting any from the hot lady I was dating. Can you blame me for drooling at any hint of innuendo with her?

I nearly toppled forward as she leaned back, so intent on grabbing every morsel of what she had to say. She pretended not to notice that she’d completely gotten to me. For that reason alone, I’d want to jump her.

Her hand slipped into mine again as we continued our tour. Thoughts raced as I tried to enjoy our surroundings. Allowing her to make the first move was probably going to be the death of me.

For weeks I’d been getting to know her without letting anything physical get in the way. I knew where she’d grown up, her role in her family, the names of her college roommates, the best day of her life, and many other wonderful tidbits about this fascinating woman. She knew all of the same about me. For the first time, not jumping into bed on the second or third date allowed me to really know whether or not I liked the person I was dating. And I definitely liked this woman. Especially her creativity and wit. Dates were never ordinary with her.

“I was thinking I might let you plan our next date,” she told me as we made our way back to her car after seeing every inch of the gardens. My feet were aching, but it had been worth it.

“Let me? And what if I wasn’t planning on having another date?”

Objection

She whipped around and grasped my face in her hands. “You want another date.”

“Cocky much?”

“Cocky a lot when it comes to you.” She stole a kiss on my cheek before dropping her hands.

“Aren’t you ever going to kiss me?” I blurted like a girl on her first date.

She stared for a long moment before a grin turned the corners of her mouth upwards. “Oh yes.”

I waited. This was the moment I’d been waiting for since she said goodbye to me at the Greek restaurant. I’d expected her to kiss me goodnight then, but the warm hug was almost as nice. She wasn’t going to hug me now. No ma’am. I was finally going to be kissed but good. My toes would curl. The earth would move. Fireworks would go off. This was going to be a k-i-s-s if I had anything to do with it.

A full minute passed with nothing but the sight of her piercing eyes tantalizing me. No movement of her head, no promising words, no yanking of me toward her. She just stared, letting her words sink in.

“Like now?” I finally crumbled, practically begging her to kiss me. I’d never begged anyone to kiss me before. I was the kisser in my relationships. Former dates never knew when the first kiss would happen. I’d turned that privilege over to her when I found out how much I liked her running the show at the Greek restaurant. I’d promised myself to wait her out.

“Like soon,” she told me.

My mouth popped open. I knew she wanted to kiss me. Her glances were filled with longing at the end of every date. I’d caught her staring at my mouth more than once. She definitely wanted to kiss me. I just couldn’t figure out what the hold up was. “If you’re waiting for my permission, you have it.”

A soft laugh touched my face. “I’d be a lousy date if I had to

ask for permission.”

“It’s the polite thing to do,” I retorted, perplexed by her lack of advantage taking. Those lips of hers were taunting me with words when they should be torturing me with kisses.

“Politeness has no business being part of a good kiss.”

How true. But dammit she was frustrating. Yummy lips should be on mine right now. “Suzanne.” I couldn’t decide if I should agree with her or order her to kiss me.

“I like hearing you say my name. It’s so much better than Judge.”

“I’ll be calling you nothing but Judge if you don’t start with the kissing right quick.” I meant that as a threat of torture not an ultimatum.

“I’ll be making you call my name over and over soon enough.”

I yanked her toward me, grasping both shoulders in my hands. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kiss you right now.”

She smiled, a slow widening of her beautiful non-kissing lips. The tiny dimple over her right lip appeared. “Because you want to be kissed senseless by me. And you’re not going to ruin that want.”

All kidding aside, I should storm away out of sheer pride, but she was so right. For the first time in my life, I wanted to feel what it was like to be kissed senseless by someone. Not that I’d never had great kisses before, but for a first kiss, the one that would set the tone of the relationship, the one I’d remember even if the relationship broke apart, for this first kiss, I wanted her to kiss me. Thoroughly, wantonly, fervently and with abandon. I needed that and after the lousy attempts at relationships I’d had, I think I deserved it.

“Don’t you want to start the senseless kissing now, though?”

“Very much,” she admitted, looking away for a moment. “But I won’t.”

“Why?”

Objection

She measured me with a paralyzing stare. “Because I won’t stop at a kiss, Lindsay. When I kiss you, clothing will come off. From the moment I first teased you, I knew I could never stop at a kiss. So I’m not starting with a kiss until I’m certain that sex with you won’t be just sex.”

Thankfully she hadn’t kissed me or my mind would have processed that as, “Blah, blah, kiss, blah, kiss, blah, blah, kiss, sex, blah, sex.” My body hated that she was right, but her sweet words soothed my now panting lust.

“Got you with that one, didn’t I, darling?”

“Get in the car, smooth talker. You’re just lucky I’m not some hormone-crazed college student.”

She slid into the driver’s seat next to me and turned a sly grin my way. “We’ll definitely be exploring that role one night.”

Gulping after losing my breath, I asked, “Soon?”

“Very soon,” she promised and started the car.

NINE

The sting took place late Friday morning. City hall started buzzing the moment the police walked out of their corner of the building and into ours. Two officers strode up to Bobby Winchester, the mayor's assistant marketing director, and placed him under arrest. The whole episode lasted thirty seconds, but people in the office talked about it for the rest of the day.

I spent my afternoon trying to figure out a good way of spinning the debacle to make the mayor look good. The joint conference with the mayor and DA turned into a battle of egos for the ages. They convinced people to overlook the fact that our office had been compromised by one greedy idiot. They even managed to push aside the judges' wrongdoings in prior cases. The focus was placed on the sting operation and how well it had played out. There was a reason the mayor paid me so well.

"Your friend is still an idiot." Yoshi appeared at the end of the day and plopped into his usual chair. "I'm glad she spared me having to come up with a defense, but she's still a moron for not having taken the plea in the first place."

"Couldn't agree more," I told him.

"Did she really manage to pull off her part of this whole thing?"

"Apparently." I clicked through the last of the emails for the day. I wanted to get home and get a good night's sleep. Suzanne

Objection

had another adventure planned for tomorrow, and I wanted to be able to fully enjoy it.

“You weren’t there?”

“Nope. I explained what she’d be doing and left her to deal with Sam.”

“Sam,” Yoshi laughed. “He’ll end up with a promotion out of this. Doug better watch out for his job.”

I looked up to focus on him. “Wouldn’t that be a bonus?”

“All from your idiot friend. You must be so proud.”

I laughed with him. “You’ll be happy to know I’ve been released from the bonds of her friendship.”

“Not because of this?” He looked concerned.

“No, she finally figured out we have nothing in common, and the only reason she was still thinking of me as a friend was out of obligation.”

“Great day for you all around.” His hands patted together in a barely audible golf clap. “How’s it going with the judge?”

I shook my head. “The judge has a name, and she’s none of your business.”

“You’ll share. You want to share with me.”

“Hold your breath for that.” I shut down my laptop and started gathering up my briefcase.

“Cruel lady. What have you got going for the weekend? Want to come over for dinner at my parents on Sunday?”

I looked up, feeling my mouth begin to water. “You even have to ask? Your mom should open a sushi restaurant.”

“But then she’d hate cooking for us.”

“Good point. No restaurant for Mama Nakamura.”

We walked out through the now vacant office together. The mayor had stopped by on the way out. A big thumbs up for my part in the whole scheme. I knew she’d be riding a high for a while. It didn’t seem to matter to her that one of her staff had been arrested in front of everyone. The mayor had selective amnesia.

It helped in politics, but it could wear on you as an employee in charge of making that amnesia work to her benefit.

A quiet relaxing dinner, maybe paint a bit, and turn in early. Suzanne would be over first thing. Something that would involve a bathing suit. I was looking forward to the day and seeing her in that suit.

The doorbell rang when I was halfway through finishing my latest painting. Looking down at my comfy cotton pants and U of A t-shirt, I wasn't dressed to answer the door. It didn't stop whoever it was from ringing the doorbell again, though.

My breath caught when I saw Suzanne on the porch. In jeans and a U of Penn t-shirt, she'd never looked sexier.

"You look pretty hot." Her eyes roamed my body, flaring when they reached mine.

"Hello to you, too," I greeted, gesturing her inside. "Out for a walk?"

She looked around my living room, taking particular note of my deep and very comfy couch. It was always my first stop after getting home. "Nice place."

As many times as I'd offered to have her come inside before or after a date, I tried not to be shocked that she'd just waltzed inside this time. "Thanks."

She swiveled all the way back to me. "Good day today."

"So I heard. I'd congratulate you, but I imagine the repercussions on the bench won't be easy to deal with."

She nodded then stepped toward me. "It was hard watching what happened. I spent part of the day reviewing their recent cases. They were good jurists."

"Greed can be powerful."

"I'm just glad that the cases I reviewed can't be overturned. At least they did their jobs right for the most part."

"Can I make you something to eat?" I could see the day had taken a lot out of her. I'd seen the video of her meeting

Objection

with Bobby. She led the guy right up to the guillotine, asking questions that got him to admit to paying off all four judges without entrapping him. She'd be a master undercover officer at any police department.

"No thanks." She flashed a brief smile. "I really just wanted to see you."

"And you couldn't wait till tomorrow?" I teased, trying not to let her see how tickled that made me.

"Didn't want to." She moved toward me with a determined fire in her eyes.

This was it. She was going to kiss me and according to her, make love with me. It didn't seem to matter that I was wearing my laundry day wardrobe or that I didn't have any makeup on anymore or that I'd brushed most of the mousse out of my hair. This sexy lady with her yummy lips, swept back hair, and casual clothes was finally going to kiss me. The long awaited episode of my very own soap opera was finally going to air.

Her hand reached out, fingers sliding around to cup my neck and bring me against her. I noticed so many things at once. She smelled like jasmine. Heat came off her in waves. The pulse in her throat sped up. Her pupils dilated and pink tinged her cheeks. It helped to concentrate on these things when my heart threatened to make a leap for it, my balance seemed to leave me behind, and my focus was stolen by her lips.

"This is going to be good," she whispered before leaning down and taking my mouth.

Pulling softly at first, teasing me with the promise of more, her mouth opened to caress mine. A slow dance of lips before a fleeting touch of tongue had my mind spinning. I wasn't thinking about moving my head one way or my lips another. I wasn't thinking about how good this felt or what our next move would be. I wasn't thinking period. I was feeling. She'd really done it. Kissed me senseless. Damn, it felt good.

Lynn Galli

When she finished, and I was under no illusion that I was doing the kissing this first time, she pulled back to stare into my eyes. “That was worth the wait, Lindsay.”

“You said it, Suzanne.”

Her head tipped once toward the hallway on the other side of the living room. “You have too many clothes on.”

“Speak for yourself.”

She laughed, pulling me in for a quick kiss. “This is going to be fun.”

I couldn’t have agreed more. Grabbing her hand, I led her to the bedroom where the only thing that could top our first kiss awaited us. Yes, indeed, this was going to be fun.

Epilogues

M's Epilogue

“Have you decided on anything, ma’am?” the tentative salesperson asked.

I probably should have been friendlier when I came in or when she asked me what I was looking for or if I wanted to try them on. Briony always warned me that I could come across as intimidating. Deceptively intimidating, she’d told me once. The deceptive part, she said, was due to my short stature.

“No one expects a shrimp to be intimidating,” she’d said as I’d pinned her onto her back on my bed. I’d made her pay for that comment. She’d called me other names that night, too. Two hours of not letting her use her hands while I could do anything to her gave her plenty of time to come up with other names. But I knew she liked being taller than me. I never gave it much thought, but I was glad it made her so happy.

“Perhaps I could tell you a little about each?” the saleswoman persisted.

“No,” I replied then thought of Briony and added, “Thank you.”

“Nothing catches your eye then?”

“I,” I started, but the words tumbling around in my brain couldn’t seem to make it out. Why did I always get like this? Talking in front of my classes, that was a breeze, but having a conversation with a stranger made it so I couldn’t form enough

words to make a sentence. “If I could...” What? What was I trying to say to this poor woman who just wanted to do her job? Well, and make a commission. She didn’t wake up this morning and think, Gee I hope I get to the store and have to help the most socially inept person I’ve ever met in my life.

And what the hell was I thinking? Driving two hours into Washington so I wouldn’t have to worry about anyone I know seeing me make an ass out of myself. Not to mention the asinine idea floating in my head that made me drive this far from my home on a rare day off from work. I had papers to grade, a mid-term to write, and two businesses to look in on.

But I was here, looking at these beautiful creations, thinking...I don’t know what. That somehow, my life, which had been such a mess until a year ago, could be normal or as close to normal as someone like me could ever get. And these things, if I could just pick one, would make that possible.

As much as I’d noticed little differences in myself around Briony when I first met her, it wasn’t until she’d called me beautiful that it hit me. She might actually like me; she might actually think of me as something other than a freak of nature. Until I recognized how hard my heart beat in her presence, I’d only ever felt the warmth of usefulness to Lucille and the respect of my students. That had always been enough. I’d never cared that my colleagues thought I was odd because I wouldn’t socialize with them. I didn’t care that many of them, my boss included, were afraid of me. Nor did I care that I only had one real friend. None of that mattered. I worked hard. I loved my work. I helped Lucille whenever she needed. I listened to Hank and let him know that he was important. Life was the best I’d ever known, even if I was only a shell of a human. Until I met Briony and she teased me about my name. Until she treated me like I was normal. Until she thought of me as beautiful and I felt my heart beat for the first time in my life.

That was why I was here. Why I'd driven 126 miles on a Saturday morning. Why I'd stopped pacing along the sidewalk and pushed through the door. Why I'd accepted the help of the salesperson.

"Just browsing or are you getting close to making a commitment with your boyfriend and wanted to get a head start on ring shopping?"

My eyes flipped up from the array of engagement rings to the salesperson's face. Terrific. Should I explain that the ring wasn't for me? Should I share that I wanted to propose to my girlfriend? Should I tell her anything at all? I wished Briony was here. She'd know what to do. She could talk to anyone, anywhere, anytime. I rarely had to say anything to strangers when she was around. But she couldn't be here because this would be a surprise. I wanted it to be a surprise, if I could do it.

With one last glance at the rings, I said, "Thank you for your help. They're lovely, but I'm just looking." I nodded once and turned toward the exit. Maybe I'd try another store next week or next month.

After only two steps toward the door, it opened and I heard a familiar voice. "I almost didn't come in."

Looking up from the ground, I took in the sight of the voice's owner. Willa, my only friend, until I met Briony, that is. Even more terrific. I'd driven 126 miles to a jewelry shop that specialized in engagement and wedding rings specifically to avoid running into anyone I knew, much less the one friend I'd had before Briony opened my world. Truly, what were the odds of that happening?

As if reading my mind, Willa offered, "My plane got diverted to National along with several other flights, so the airport is out of rentals. I was on my way to the place up the street and saw you heading out without a purchase. Didn't find one you liked?"

My eyes darted to the door. I knew it was five steps away, thirty-eight steps to my car, 126 miles home, seventeen steps to

Blessed Twice

the building's staircase and sixty-two steps up to my apartment. Two hours and fifteen minutes tops. I could start walking now, taking those steps back to safety, back to only a semblance of a normal life, but a hell of a lot better than I'd ever imagined for myself. Fuller than I'd ever dreamed possible. And I could do it without a word to Willa. She'd never hold it against me. She'd call me next week to hang out, even if I walked out without saying anything to her now. But I wasn't that person anymore. I had learned that over the last year. Briony's faith had changed me.

Still I didn't know what to say to my friend. She knew why I was here. With a quick flick of her eyes through the window, she'd guessed instantly. No judgment, no condescension, and best of all, no warning that I had no right to be thinking about this.

"Would you give us a moment, please?" she asked the salesperson who'd started packing away the tray. The woman smiled, obviously thrilled to be dealing with a normal human who understood the subtleties of interaction among the species. "M?" Willa stepped closer to me, nowhere near the limits of my expanded personal bubble, but still closer than I let anyone other than Briony and Caleb get to me. "I came inside because I thought you might be considering not going through with this. I wanted to give you a few extra moments to rethink that if you needed them."

I felt pressure build behind my eyes. I knew tears would start to well if I didn't gain control. I looked behind her, counting the steps again. I did need those extra moments. I did. I came here for a reason. I owed it to the woman who'd saved my life by showing me what life was really like. I nodded once, not bothering to reestablish eye contact.

She came a little closer. "You're thinking you have no right to be here."

Yes.

“The question’s not on your part,” she guessed.

Exactly.

“You think she might stop, maybe not in five years or ten years, but sometime, she’ll stop.”

God, yes.

“Because no one could ever love you for the rest of your life.”

I bit back a groan. How did she know this? We didn’t have these kinds of conversations. Willa, in particular, never had these kinds of conversations. It was why we were friends.

“I was like a robot before I met Quinn,” she admitted softly. “No feelings at all. I wasn’t looking for a relationship. My job didn’t pay me much, and if I started my business, it would be three years before I’d make a dime. What the hell could I offer? When we met, she was a pro basketball player. She’s beautiful, fans adored her, she’s funny and clever. She honestly had her pick of anyone she came across. I certainly didn’t look like any of the gorgeous women who threw themselves at her. All I kept asking myself was, what did she see in me?”

You’re generous, even without the money you now have and offer freely; you’re generous with your time and attention. You’re smart, gentle, respectful, nonjudgmental. You’re kind. You’re a good friend. I wished my brain would allow these words to come out of my mouth. How could she not see these things?

“Then I realized that I loved the person I became when I was with her,” she continued. “Loved, not just liked. Quinn did that for me. And I no longer feared that she might not stay as long as I could. I’d risk everything for one more day with her.”

An involuntary breath left my lungs. “Yes,” I heard myself whisper. I loved how Briony made me feel about everything, including myself. How one touch or one look or one smile from her would temper my nerves. She brought me calm, something I hadn’t known since I was nine years old. And when she was

Blessed Twice

near, I never had to be on alert. She made me feel like life wasn't something I had to struggle through. It was something to enjoy.

"I'm going to do something that will scare the crap out of you, my friend. Get ready," she warned.

Please don't touch me! I screamed inside my head but remained where I was, resigned to accept the unwelcome touch if it came. This is Willa. She won't hurt you. The thought calmed my elevating heart rate.

She reached past me and pulled one of the mirrors over. "Look in the mirror for a sec."

I shook my head, not just because I avoided mirrors in general, but because the only person I felt comfortable watching me look in a mirror was Briony.

"Please? I want you to see something about yourself." She waited for me to relent. "Good. Now, I'm going to say one thing, and I want you to keep looking...Briony."

I felt the smile start in my heart before it bloomed outward, reaching my face. I knew Willa wasn't calling out to her because I would have known if Briony was nearby. At first, it was her lovely scent—mountain crisp air with a hint of evergreen and roaring white water—that helped me identify Briony's nearness. Now I could feel her presence, even in a crowded room.

"See?" She watched me look at my reflection. "Just her name brings out that beautiful smile. You're in the right place, M." She walked around me to examine the tray of rings, mercifully letting me stop looking at myself. "I wanted to give you a little encouragement, but I'll let you shop on your own." She started for the door.

"Did you...How did you choose...?" My brain went into super speed mode again, and I couldn't piece all the words into the right order.

She looked away, studying something on the street before turning back. "Didn't have to. Quinn beat me to it." She laughed

at my best stunned face. “Briony might do the same, so you better make a decision.”

“No.” Briony wouldn’t. She’d wait for me. Like with every first in our relationship. Our first touch, our first kiss, our first hug, our first time making love. She’d wait for me because she would never, ever rush me. She seemed content to wait for me for everything, but I didn’t want that for her anymore. She loved me, and I loved her, even if I was too much of a freak to tell her. I’d never loved anyone like that. Never. I’d known unconditional love for the first nine years of my life from Kathryn. Then nothing. Not until last year when I met Briony Gatewood, the love of my life. The woman who made a real life possible for me.

“All right.” Willa held up her hands.

I could tell she didn’t believe me. She didn’t know Briony well, though. She thought that because Briony often spoke her mind that she’d ask me first, but I knew that wouldn’t happen. As surely as I knew that, if I managed to propose, Briony would be okay with not having a ceremony. That she’d agree the best step for us would be to buy a house together rather than me moving into hers. It would make things easier to combine our lives and introduce Caleb into a new living situation. She’d want our house to be an original, one we could restore to its 19th century splendor. She would insist on that because she knew I loved period architecture but would never insist on it. She would do the insisting for me. Everything else she’d leave up to my comfort level. God, I loved her.

I’d worried that conducting our class together again this past summer and practically living together while Caleb was away at camp might smother me. Instead, I loved waking up with her, starting our day together, and really loved walking through the door after work and hearing her call out a sweet greeting, obviously thrilled that I was back for the night.

I loved how the little things that I considered selfish on my

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part, she considered romantic gestures. All summer, I'd bring her coffee in bed to coax her into sharing breakfast with me before I ran off to my first class. She thought it was sweet when really I just wanted to spend time with her before I had to get to work an hour earlier than she did. Or how much she adored when I'd heat up a towel in the dryer while she was taking a bath after a long day, just so I had the excuse to dry her off when she was done. Best of all were the simple moments like movie nights when I could run my fingers through her hair or caress her neck any time I wanted. No, being together every day hadn't been a hardship at all.

The clincher, though, the reason I was here on this Saturday morning happened last weekend. I'd been terrified that if Briony ever saw my potential for violence that she'd leave me. I'd probably leave me. But she'd watched me incapacitate an inebriated man who'd grabbed at her outside a restaurant last weekend. She'd watched how quickly and efficiently I'd pulled his arms off her shoulders and swung him around to brace his arm in such a painful way that he'd dropped to his knees. I'd threatened him in a low voice that I no longer recognized. Instead of being horrified, she'd placed her hand on my shoulder and spoke soothing words until I let him go. Her arms came around me, whispers of thanks and assurances of love filled the air around us. She hadn't been afraid of me or thought of me as a freak. She hadn't wanted to end things because I could become a person she didn't recognize. She still loved me. So, here I was, taking a chance at forever because, even though she didn't know everything about me, she loved everything about me. I felt that instinctively. As much as I loved everything about her, and I couldn't manage my life without her anymore.

"Traditional is nice." Willa brought me back from my musings. She was glancing down at the rings.

"Not right, though," I joined her. It was probably why I

couldn't decide. Then it hit me. "Yellow sapphire, to compliment her eyes."

"Very nice." She stared at me a little longer, knowing the limitations of my comfort level. "If I leave you to it, can I catch a ride home with you? I promise no more of this crazy talk out of me."

"Sure," I agreed, relieved that she understood that I had to do this alone. I tossed her my keys and pointed toward where I'd parked the car. She took her leave without another word. Willa had always been the perfect friend for me.

I turned back to the salesperson. "May I see your yellow sapphire stones, please?"

"Of course," she seemed pleased by my transformation. She took away the traditional diamond rings and resurfaced with six loose sapphires and seven rings with similar type stones.

I saw it instantly. The right one. But I inspected each, saving it for last. Yes, perfect. A thin, platinum band for her long, delicate finger. Two carats, nothing too garish because Briony wouldn't like that. Roundish, but I was sure the cut had a proper name. I could picture it on Briony's finger. Picture it there for decades to come. She'd be happy with a simple wedding band. I knew that because of the pictures I'd seen. She'd worn a gold one before. I wanted something different. I wanted her to have everything that she couldn't have before when she'd married so young. Something singularly beautiful. She deserved beauty everywhere because she brought so much of it with her.

"That's the one. If it's not a size six, I'll need it resized." I handed the ring over to the salesperson. I couldn't wait to wear whichever matching band Briony picked, to make it clear to everyone that I was the most fortunate person in the world because I finally belonged with and to someone as amazing as Briony. "How many letters can be on the inscription?"

The saleswoman looked at me strangely. She didn't understand

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why I would have what she thought was my own engagement ring inscribed, but it wasn't up to me to make her understand. "Depends on the font, but usually forty or so."

Like with the steps, I knew already how many letters I wanted. I just needed to know the limit. "Here's what I'd like inscribed." I handed over the piece of paper.

I love you, Briony. Always, Mabel.

A breath escaped before she looked back at me. I could tell she thought it was unoriginal, but only because she didn't know me. I would finally say it. Briony had waited more than a year, seemingly content to have me tell her in other ways. But when I proposed, I planned to say the words I hadn't said since I was nine. I'd tell her I loved her, then because the words were so hard for me, she'd at least have them with her always.

"I'll pick it up next weekend." I handed over my credit card.

This encounter would probably be one of those that the saleswoman would recount for people in the future. Freakiest, but fastest high priced sale she'd ever made. I didn't like that she'd remember me. Almost enough to make me go to a different store, but I didn't think I could go through it again.

As soon as I had the ring in hand, I'd go about planning how to ask my love if she'd share her life with me. It would have to be special, something as unique and spectacular as Briony. Something that would make her feel as amazing as she always made me feel.

* * *

Red tinged the horizon as the sun began a slow decent. I was stretched out on a chaise lounge on the balcony of our suite overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Virginia Beach, it was my first time here, and for a short weekend trip, absolutely perfect. I felt the calm of the color wash over me as I settled into my chair.

“Everything all right, M?” Briony said from the chair beside me. “You had fun today, didn’t you?”

I tilted to look into the golden brown eyes of the woman I loved. The calm I felt just looking at her overpowered any serenity I could get from a lovely sunset. We’d spent the day sea kayaking, something she loved doing, something I’d never tried. It was fun, but I knew I’d feel the burn of the unused muscles on Monday when we returned to work. “I believe I’ve told you that I always have fun when I’m with you, Bri.”

A beautiful smile erupted on her face. I loved that I could put that smile there, that I was the cause of such happiness for her. It was a new sensation for me and I craved it. “Same here, honey. I’m so glad you suggested this getaway. It’s just what I needed.”

With four classes this semester, I’d known that her schedule was starting to bring her down. I didn’t like seeing her so overworked. I planned to pamper her for the next two months until she could get a more manageable schedule in January.

“You’ve been kinda quiet all day. Anything you want to share with me?”

I loved that she knew me so well. That she knew I was holding onto something, but that I might not want to spill it yet or ever. She always allowed me this luxury. It was one of the reasons I knew she was perfect for me. Yet her question sparked a thumping heartbeat and extended breathing. I’d suggested this weekend away for a reason. This was the moment. Romantic, spectacular, and with Briony, as always, breathtaking. I just had to open my mouth.

“Are you over-thinking last night, honey?” she asked.

Heat touched my face. Last night. I’d asked her for something neither of us thought I’d ask for, but I needed her to know that I trusted her completely. She’d never suggested I couldn’t trust her, but I knew with someone as insightful as Briony that she might harbor that slight doubt in the back of her mind. She’d forgive it,

and had been for a year, but I didn't want that for her anymore.

"Last night was..." I searched for the perfect words to describe how safe and loved she'd made me feel when we finally defeated what had always been my nightmare.

Fear surfaced in her eyes. I could tell she was aching to say something, but she would let me talk. She was brave enough to listen to me tell her that I'd hated it and didn't want that ever again. That what I'd asked for now reminded me of the horror I'd gone through, but this time she'd been in the starring role.

I reached out to stroke her soft cheek and down to her throat. I loved her neck, loved burying my face there, brushing my lips against it, taking her skin lightly between my teeth, running my tongue over the spot that never failed to bring out that husky moan. I lived for that sound. "You were wonderful. It was exactly what I wanted, what I knew you'd do for me."

Her breath of relief brushed across my cheek as she popped off her lounge and slipped onto mine. "You were wonderful, too."

"You weren't shocked?" I asked, just a hint of humor because I already knew her answer.

"I saw those scarves and just about passed out, beautiful." She snuggled in closer to me. "I didn't think you'd ever want that, but I'm so glad you asked. I've loved when you've tried it with me. It makes me feel almost liberated."

The exact opposite of what I thought bondage would be. The exact opposite of my own experiences as a child when I was held down. It was why I'd asked for it. Until last night, I still felt there was one obstacle left in the sharing of our bodies. We didn't need to strive for something uncommon when it came to lovemaking, but she hadn't lied when she'd told me that she was open to almost anything. I loved being adventurous with her, but when it came to bondage or limiting movement, that particular activity had always been one-sided with us. She'd let me restrain her, but I hadn't let her reciprocate, not that she'd ever asked. The act

calls for complete trust, and she'd given it to me. So, last night, I decided it was time to give it to her. "I'm glad you didn't pass out, sweet. We wouldn't have had as much fun."

"If it wasn't last night, what's got you so quiet today?" She shifted to swing her legs over my lap. The feel of her in my arms, with her wrapped around me, it was the closest I could get to heaven.

"I was thinking about the first sunset we shared together. Do you remember?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Yes, do you?" That teasing tone made me smile. I wasn't the one who brought up sentimental topics.

"You were on a date—"

"Which you rescued me from."

"You cajoled me into an entire day together." I squeezed her tighter against me.

"Don't start with me." The tone was firm, but the smile gave away her mischief. "You wanted to go. You could have said you were busy."

"I wasn't. I saw you with that woman, and my quiet Saturday turned into a quest to spend more time with you."

"You never told me that."

"I'm full of surprises."

"Don't I know it?" Her eyebrows fluttered, making the heat return to my cheeks.

"We spent the day together and you picked a restaurant where we could watch the sunset from the patio."

"It was beautiful. Not as beautiful as you, but still pretty beautiful."

I made sure to lock eyes with her. "Nothing's as beautiful as you, Briony."

"Sometimes you floor me, you know?"

"Now you know how I always feel around you."

She sucked in a breath as moisture prickled her eyes. Quickly,

she leaned in and kissed me, her soft lips pressing then pulling on my own. I loved kissing her. She was the only person I've ever kissed and somehow I lucked into an expert. "What's got you all nostalgic?" Her hand pressed over my heart, and I knew she could feel my elevated heart rate.

"When I'm uncomfortable I count." That just slipped out. I hadn't meant to say that. I'd never told anyone. Not even a therapist. I could tell by her startled expression that she didn't expect me to say that. It wasn't the answer to her question, but she wouldn't go back to that now that she had this.

"You count?" she prompted, tightening her arms around me.

"I didn't mean...I, that wasn't what—"

"Honey? Tell me, please?"

"It's a habit. It allows me to concentrate on something else when things are happening that I don't like or make me uncomfortable."

She nodded encouragingly but there was a fleeting look of pain that skittered across her face. "Do you still count?"

"I know how many steps from my office to my classrooms, from my apartment to my car, from the street to the park. I know how many seconds it takes to get through a line at the supermarket, to pick up my dry cleaning, to have a conversation with the dean or for an average office visit with my students. If I've done it, I know how long or how much of whatever it is that I'm doing. I count almost everything and with everyone."

"Does it bother you?"

"Sometimes."

"Can you stop it?"

"Most times, yes. If it's really nerve wracking, then no. It took 9,932 seconds from the moment we stepped through Willa's door last Sunday night until we left."

Her eyebrows rose. "You're still nervous there?"

"Yes, but I like being there with you. I'm starting to like it

better than making you go alone. I'm glad you only go once a month, though."

"I like it, too. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"That's just it." I took a breath. "I count with everyone. It never mattered how comfortable I was with them." I tightened my grip on her and looked directly at her beautiful golden eyes. "Until I met you. I didn't notice it at first because it was such a habit, but then I realized that even when you pressed me on things or asked me questions that no one else had asked I didn't count. You're the only person that makes me so comfortable I don't use that protective habit. If you're near, I need only look at you and I stop counting."

"Oh, Mabel, I'm so happy to hear you say that. I'm glad I can do that for you. You're my comfort, too, you know?"

"You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Briony. I know we've only known each other for a year and a half, but I've never felt so comfortable with anyone before."

"Me, too." Her fingers came up to stroke my cheek.

"I missed you so much when you were in Vermont and I was in Chicago. I don't want to have to miss you like that again."

"Me, neither, honey. I should have changed my plans so I could at least see you for a few days in Chicago."

"Next year, we'll have to plan something else."

Her smile split her face as it always did whenever I brought up the future. It's why I knew she'd be open to my question. "Next year?"

"Yes." I leaned in and kissed her this time. I loved her taste, her smell, the feel of her wrapped around me. "I miss you when you leave my place at the end of a date or when I leave yours before Caleb wakes up."

"I've told you that if we have an honest conversation with Caleb, we could change that. You could spend the whole night. He knows that sex is between people who love each other. He

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knows how we feel about each other.”

That was one of my favorite things about her. She knew I loved her without my having to say anything. She said it for me, sometimes in passing, sometimes teasing, sometimes when she wanted me to know just how much she loved me, but I’d promised myself. “And you know how I feel about you?”

She blinked once but smiled serenely. “Yes, you show me every time I see you. Every time you look at me or touch me, I know.”

“And that’s enough?”

A small frown appeared. “Of course, M, have I given you the impression that it isn’t? I love you, and I feel your love when I look in your gorgeous brown eyes that tell me almost everything that you’re thinking.”

Smiling, I teased, “What am I thinking right now?”

“That you like having me practically sitting on top of you, that you thought I looked sexy paddling through the water today, that you can see the four grey hairs on my head but won’t say anything about them, oh, and you can’t live without me.”

I laughed. There was so much I loved about this woman, but her wit ranked almost as high as her kindness. I also loved that she had a dark edge to that wit. It clashed so well with her compassion. “I love having you in my lap. You always look sexy to me. You’re delusional about the grey hair, but when you finally get it, you’ll look just as gorgeous as you do know. And no, I can’t live without you, but more importantly, I don’t want to live without you.”

Her smile faded a bit as she registered my serious tone. Her hand pressed against my chest to take in how hard my heart was beating right now. She looked like she wanted to say something, but I wanted to get this out.

“This past year has been the best of my life. I feel like I must have gone through everything that happened to me when I was

younger so that when I met you, when you gave me your love, I'd feel like I deserved it. You make me feel like nothing will ever hurt again. Like I belong, finally, and I'm so proud that you've chosen me." I brushed away one of the tears that had dropped onto her cheek. "I love you, Briony. Will you honor me as my wife?"

"Oh, God, M!" She breathed out, a small sound leaving her throat. "I love you so much."

I waited for more, but her face was now buried in my neck and small tremors ran through her body. I stroked her back, helping to soothe her. "Bri?" I asked when I felt her take a cleansing breath and push herself back. "Is that a—"

"Yes! Yes, M, I want nothing more than for us to be married."

"Thank you." I didn't have time to think about how stupid that sounded before her lips landed on mine, kissing with such abandon that I forgot everything else I wanted to say. She'd always had that effect on me.

"I'm so happy you asked. I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold off before the hints about a permanent future with you became anything but subtle." She grinned, a sheepish look making her all the more lovable.

"I've been thinking about it for a while now, but we'll have to talk to Caleb. I know some people don't think their kids should have a say, but I don't want to force myself into Caleb's life."

She laughed, a soft rhythm of sound that caressed me. "He wanted to ask you to marry us last Christmas."

"What?" I couldn't hide my shock.

"Kids are like that. He knew how much I loved you and he'd just told you that he loved you. He wanted you to live with us right then. He's going to be thrilled about this."

I let out a breath of relief. "That's wonderful." I reached down under my chair and pulled out the hidden ring box. "I got this for you, but if you don't like it, we can get one you like."

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She stared wide-eyed at me before looking at the box. “You bought me a ring?”

“I wanted to give you a ring. Is that all right? If you’d rather not, we can just get wedding bands. I thought you could pick those out for us.” I lifted the lid on the box so she could see the ring.

“It’s beautiful, honey. I love it. I love you.”

“I had it inscribed.”

She carefully pulled it free and read the inscription. Tears sprang in her eyes again as she looked back at me. “I love you, too, Mabel. Always.”

As with everything about her, those words told me that I’d never want for anything else ever again because of her.

Jessie's Epilogue

When the doorbell rang, I was in the middle of showing my buddy, Caleb, how to throw a discus in my backyard. We'd been working through the ten events of the decathlon for three days, ever since my beautiful spouse opened her big mouth. A mouth I loved, but still, it got a little big every once in a while.

"That'll be Mom," Caleb said, half with disappointment, half with excitement.

The tone made me smile. I'd enjoyed our time together, too. "Should be."

"But we're not done," he protested even as he was tilting around me to see if Lauren had answered the door yet.

"We'll pick up the next time you visit, CeeGy. You're a natural at this stuff."

He beamed and hustled to help me put away the discus and shot put in the storage shed where I still kept a javelin and hurdle from my training days. Then we raced each other to the patio door. I couldn't resist reaching down to sling him over my shoulder. He giggled uncontrollably and grasped my waist as if afraid I'd drop him.

"Oh boy, here comes trouble," Briony muttered with a huge smile on her face. Her arm was wrapped around her partner's waist as they waited with Lauren for us to reach the front room.

I set her still laughing boy on the ground, and he immediately

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rushed into his mom's arms. "Hi Mom, missed ya."

"Not as much as I missed you." Her grin was as big as his. "Even with red hair." She ran a hand across his spiking hair, and I burst into laughter. "Your doing, Jess?" She pierced me with a teasing glare.

Before I could answer, Caleb spoke up. "Jessie says red hair is hot."

"It's the wash out kind," Lauren assured her even as we laughed at Caleb's declaration. She'd been fretting about it since we got back from the drug store and spiked his hair yesterday. She reached out and slid her hand into mine for a reassuring squeeze.

"I think we should make it permanent," his stepmom, M, kidded with him.

He grinned. "It looks cool, though, doesn't it?"

"Ham," his mother accused. She looked at me as I pulled Lauren closer and wrapped both arms around her. "I can't thank you both enough for stepping in like that." Her usual sitter had gotten called away only a day after they'd gone out of town for a few days.

"It was our pleasure," I assured her. Briony didn't like to ask for help. She'd never asked before.

"We loved having him here, really. He's always welcome." Lauren smiled warmly trying to convey her sincerity. This type of consideration for her friends was just one of the many things I loved about her.

"Did you thank Jessie and Lauren for keeping you alive these past four days?" Briony prompted.

"Not for that," Caleb giggled again and swung around to face me. "Thanks for picking me up Thursday after school and letting me stay and bringing me everywhere with you." He squished me into a hug before turning to Lauren. "And thanks for teaching me how to play chess and how to make sopapillas. I had a lot of fun."

"You're welcome, Caleb. We loved having you here."

“Thanks again, you guys. I honestly don’t know what we would have done if you hadn’t stepped up like that.” Briony hugged me first before turning to Lauren.

“Bye!” Caleb called out, darting out the door in front of his parents.

“Whew!” I blew out a breath as I dragged myself back to the living room and dropped onto the couch.

“Oh, you don’t fool me, toughie.” My beautiful partner sashayed toward me with a grin on her face. “You loved every minute of having that kid here.”

I bit back a grin. I had loved it. Started me thinking, too, but I got all distracted as soon as Lauren slid first one knee onto the couch beside my thigh then the other to straddle me. Her devious grin kicked my heart rate into overdrive.

“You loved it so much you’re thinking about something, aren’t you, darling?”

God, she knew me so well. I’d always thought having a lover who knew me so well would annoy me. But Lauren got to me on every level, crashed through every defense I’d ever set up, and never let me get away with a damn thing. “Well, I don’t know, shug. What do you think about what I’m thinking about?”

She gripped the front of my shirt and shook it slightly. “Do you really want us to have a baby, Jess?”

“That wasn’t exactly what I was thinking,” I replied. “But if you want to have a baby, L, I’ll do anything for you.”

She leaned down and kissed me with those lips that knew exactly how to drive me crazy whether they were touching me or not. “God, I love you. Tell me what you were thinking before I respond to that.”

“I was thinking more like adoption or fostering,” I stopped, checking her expression. “Of an older kid.”

She beamed widely. “Like say 11 or 12?”

“Like say that, exactly,” I kissed her again just because I

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could. “Would that be something you could handle, Laur?”

“Honey, I’m happy with anything you want. I love our life right now. I’ve loved it for the past three years, and I’ll love it for as long as we live, with or without kids. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and watching you with Caleb these past couple of days has been so amazing. You’d make a great mom.”

I sucked in a breath. “Thanks, Lauren. So would you. He absolutely adores you. But I don’t know how great I’d be with just any kid. I’m actually surprised Briony called us.”

“I’m not.” Lauren snuggled in closer, her breath tickling my neck.

“I was probably the last on her list. Well, we might have beat out Des and Skye.”

Lauren tilted her head back to look at me. “Not even close. We, or I should say, you, were her first choice. You have to know that?”

“No, she must have called Caroline first, then Isabel. Hell, that’s who I’d call.”

“Darling, she doesn’t trust just anyone, and she’d never trust her child with anyone that she doesn’t think of as a close friend. She called you to take care of her baby. You should be proud of that.”

I smiled in spite of myself. I kinda hoped that Briony had called us first. “She asked us, Blue. You’re the anchor here. Without you, I wouldn’t trust me with holding a baby much less taking care of a kid for four days.”

She cuffed my shoulder. “Stop that. You are very trustworthy, very reliable, very maternal.”

“You’d make a great mom, too. Maybe in a few years, we could think about the whole fostering thing. What do you think?”

“I think I married the wisest, most gorgeous woman in the world.”

“You can’t marry yourself, Laur.”

“Oh, be quite, sexy.” Her lips pulled at the part of my neck that always shut me up so I could enjoy the sensation. “Now tell me where you’re taking me for our second anniversary.”

My lips spread wide. I could feel a twinkle form in my eyes. I’d been planning this trip without her learning a thing for over two months now. She was getting impatient, despite loving the guessing game we’d been playing. “It’s a surprise.”

“You’ll tell me.” Her fingers flexed against my stomach trying to tickle me. “You want to tell me.”

“You’ll ruin the surprise.”

“I don’t care. Tell me. You’re torturing me, Jess.”

I laughed at her excitement. “Fine, if you don’t want to be surprised.”

She leaned in and kissed me quickly, bouncing on my lap. “This is going to be good. I can feel it.”

“You did pretty well yourself last year. I have a lot to live up to.” We now traded off planning our vacations. It took away a lot of pressure and added excitement in not knowing every little detail of the plan.

She raised a hand and blew on her fingernails then rubbed them against her chest. “It was pretty fantastic, wasn’t it?”

“So good that I had to pull out all the stops this year. You sure you don’t want to keep guessing?”

“I’ve been guessing for weeks now, darling. Tell me.”

“Well, we’re not going alone.”

“What?” She jerked upright, surprised.

“Are you going to keep interrupting me?”

“I’ll tickle you to death if you don’t start talking, missy.”

I laughed with her this time. “We had such a good time on our pre-honeymoon, I thought maybe we could repeat that.”

Her eyes popped wide and she sucked in a deep breath. “My parents are coming with us?”

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“For the first part, just like last time. Is that okay?” I asked of the unexpected trip we’d taken just after getting together.

Her caressing mouth told me the answer with enthusiasm. “I love you so much. I can’t believe you’d think of this. Do they know?”

“We’ve been plotting for two months now. We thought Dublin for a few days before we head over to where your extended family lives. They’ll stay in that bed and breakfast they liked for a couple of weeks while we get on a plane for the rest of our trip.”

“Back to Bilbao?” Her turquoise eyes sparkled, getting darker with excitement.

“Nope,” I replied almost smugly. “You’ll never guess.”

“Don’t make me.”

“What would be your ideal?”

“We had my ideal last year. St. Barts, you in a bikini for two weeks, Gracious me, that was heaven.”

“You can’t resist this body, can you?” I fluttered my eyebrows. “You looked damn good in a bikini yourself, Blue.”

“Stop trying to distract me, and get on with it.”

“Okay, neither of us will be in a bikini this year, unless you want to have a private showing back in our hotel room.” I paused hoping she’d offer, but she gripped my shirt harder, urging me to continue. “Fine, fine, if your ideal is a beach, water activities, and bikinis, this won’t be near that. Sorry, shug. I really thought this would be perfect. Looks like I fell short.”

“Jess!” Frustration marked her tone, but I knew she loved this as much as I did. “Where are we going?”

“I thought I knew you well enough to guess what your ideal vacation would be, given that we’d already had Ireland and Spain at first, Australia for our official honeymoon, then St. Barts last year. I figured I’d crank it up a notch, but damn, if we peaked last year, I’m screwed.”

“I will never speak to you again if you don’t tell me right

now!”

It was fun getting her wound up so tight. “I thought you might like to see Italy. Florence, Venice, Rome, and a few places in between?”

“Oh, Italy! Absolutely perfect. Austy’s told me so much about it. I’ve been dying to go.”

I bit my lip, bursting to tell her. “Yeah? Your best friend kindled your appetite for the old country, did she?”

“You know she did, and she’s only been twice.”

“She mentioned that. She also mentioned that if you don’t stick to the larger cities, you’ll need a little Italian to get by. How’s your Italian, Blue?”

“Since Aust moved away, it’s gotten really rusty. We should pick up a conversational book before we leave.”

“We could, or we could just take Austy at her word.” Her brow furrowed and my smile widened. “She said we’d need a little Italian. I thought, hey, I know a little Italian, and she just happens to be my partner’s best friend. So, while I was asking her all about where to visit in Italy, I told her to get a couple of weeks off and come with us.”

“What?! You didn’t, Jess? Oh, that’s, oh, did she say yes?” Lauren was practically vibrating in my lap. “She did, didn’t she? Austy and Elise are coming with us? Oh, Jess, I was wrong. This is my ideal, thank you, thank you.” She squeezed me so hard I had trouble breathing.

“Anything for you, Blue, and I miss her, too. Plus, Elise is awesome. We’ll have such a good time together. They can head back to Ireland with us to pick up your parents and travel back together. It’ll be fun, right?”

“Perfect. I love you so much. You need to kiss me now,” she demanded. I felt my heart expand. I loved when she got all demanding. “Kiss me like you did the first time you ever kissed me.”

Imagining Reality

I smiled up at her, remembering that first time, remembering how she'd straddled my lap just like she was right now, and when our lips met, I knew then. I knew that she was it. She'd be my undoing. My close friend, my college mate, my buddy. One taste of her and I was done. She had me, completely and forever, like I'd never even allowed myself to think I could be had. "You kissed me. You keep forgetting that."

"Don't start with me, young lady." She loved emphasizing our two-year age difference. "I was innocently telling you about how I never wanted to date again and you attacked me."

"I did not. You artfully seduced me from the wine, to the sympathetic ear, to the play on my senses. You drew me out, and I didn't have a hope of resisting you. You kissed me."

"Delude yourself all you want, darling, but I wasn't as tipsy as you. I remember everything." The way her voice dipped had tingles shooting up my spine.

"How'd you end up in my lap then, huh? How'd that happen if you weren't trying to seduce me," I shot back.

"You reached for me, and well, you just looked so sexy. I knew you were going to kiss me, so I had to get the upper hand."

"Oh, you've had the upper hand the entire time we've been together, and you know it."

"I know," she smiled, trying for smug, and I loved it because she didn't mean a word of it. I meant it, but she thought she was teasing.

"You do know it. You could tell me that I had to go stay with Des and Skye for a week and I'd do it. I wouldn't even question it. If it made you happy, I'd do it." I watched my words light up her eyes. "Anything for my brave one." I slid my fingers onto her engagement ring, which I'd had inscribed to remind her of when she'd first told me that she was in love with me.

"I can't believe how romantic you are sometimes."

"Never before you, Laur." I gripped her hand. "Speaking of

which, I wanted to get you something to remind you of one of the happiest days of my life.” I leaned over and reached into the side table, pulling out a flat jewelry box.

Her eyes widened. “What did you do? And how did you keep that hidden?”

“You never look in the obvious places, my dear. Open it.”

Her long fingers cradled the box and nudged open the lid. A wide smile came across her face as she looked at the flat disc of two rose gold circles surrounding one of platinum. A matching piece to her wedding ring. Mine was the opposite, platinum surrounding rose gold. She fingered the nickel sized disc, then flipped it over, obviously surprised to see that I’d had it inscribed.

“Oh, Jessie, you remembered,” she whispered, reading the inscription: For showing me how to be.

“Of course I remember.” I took the necklace from her fingers and fastened it around her neck. The disc rested dead center of her sternum, the rose gold chain and surrounding circles of the pendant looked lovely against the freckles on her skin.

“I love you. Did I happen to say that already? I don’t like repeating myself, you know.”

“I’d listen to that all day.” I brushed my lips against her neck.

“Jessamine,” she whispered with a hint of longing and that irresistible demanding tone that she only used in the most non-annoying way.

“Hmm?” I tracked my lips down her neck.

“Don’t make me ask,” she warned, regaining her senses.

“Oh? You need something?” I teased, reaching up to cup her breasts as further distraction.

“Jess!”

I chuckled, low and throaty, loving that I’d gotten her to the point of wanting to throw me down and have her way with me or throttle me. I leaned back to make sure I could see those beautiful turquoise eyes. “I love you, Lauren. I love everything about you,

Imagining Reality

everything. I love your skin, your freckles, your eyes, your nose, your breasts, your long legs, your hair, your lips, your perfect rear end, your flat little tummy, the soft skin on your inner thighs. Did I mention your fingers and hands and what they do to me and for me? Or your laugh? I love your laugh. My day gets better every time I hear it. I love every bit of you. Or do you want to hear how much I love how smart you are, how you kick ass in court, how you make everyone happy around you, how good you are to your friends, what a great boss you are, how you spend so much time making sure that I get whatever I want. How I look forward to you waking up in the morning, stretching exactly like your cat before your turn to cuddle against me for a few minutes, not letting either of us move no matter how much of a hurry we might be in? Was that what you wanted to hear? That I have no idea how I didn't jump you the second I met you or how I managed to keep my hands off your sexy self for eleven years before I finally came to my senses and saw how perfect you are? That I can't imagine a life without you? That I don't want to think about missing even one night without falling asleep with you?"

Tears formed in her eyes, making my chest fill with so much love. "You are so amazing, Jessie, and mine, you know." She always thought of this as a tease, but I loved the sound of it.

"I am yours, Lauren. Completely, and I love it. I love how that makes me feel. I love that I belong with you and to you, and I love when you tell me I'm yours."

"Good," she said simply. "I love you, and I've got to have you, right now. It's been four days because who knew you'd be a prude with a kid in the house?" she teased, fingering the flush that formed on my cheeks. "We'll have to work on that if we decide to adopt one of our own. Now stop making me want to cry and tell you how much I love you. We're making love, and I'm not going to make it all the way to the bedroom."

"No need. No kids, remember?" I fluttered my eyebrows,

Lynn Galli

encouraging her. “Take me right here. I love when you get all aggressive, Blue. Make me yours again.”

Austy's Epilogue

The sound of a key shoving into one of the deadbolts nearly had me shrieking with excitement. Hastily, I dropped the last of the trimmed flower stems into the vase. Before Elise could unlock the second deadbolt, I was twisting it and throwing the door open, so excited to see her again.

"Austine," she breathed out, her expression the match of mine.

My heart slowed like time was stopping as I took in the sight of my spouse arriving home from a three-week investigative trip. "Cara mia," I whispered and stepped into her arms. "I missed you so much."

"Me, too, sweetheart. I didn't think this trip would ever end." She tightened her grip on me. The beat of her heart pounded against my sternum, lulling me into a now familiar state of rapture.

"I don't want to let go of you, but we have to get you inside." I pulled back slightly only to have her lean forward and capture my lips in a kiss that had me forgetting where we were and what year it was, for that matter.

"I love the way you kiss," she murmured against my lips when she broke the lip lock.

I couldn't stop the smile. After four years together, she shouldn't still be complimenting me on my kisses. It was one of

the millions of things I loved so much about her. "I love that sexy smile, cara. Come inside and tell me how your trip went."

She pulled me with her to the couch. "I'm glad to be home."

I took my favorite place in the V of her legs and leaned my side against her. "Tell me how it went. You caught the pedophile on Wednesday. Did you need to hang around to wrap up paperwork?"

Her green eyes searched mine, a smile playing at her lips. "I was called in for an interview."

I squinted as if looking for more information with that bit of news. She hadn't mentioned this on any of our nightly phone calls. "They needed help with another interrogation?"

"No, they were interviewing me for a new position."

I shifted more to look directly at her. "What kind of position?"

"Cyber crimes, a new division specifically targeting child predators."

"Elise, that's perfect for you." I felt relief pour over me. "I know you've been a little restless, spending so much time investigating and testifying on computer crimes."

"I enjoy being able to work with you, sweetheart," she hastily added. Her arms squeezed me tighter.

"I know that, but you're so good at stopping those sickos. You took this job so that Scott would have a stable environment to finish high school, but he's in college now. You need to focus on what makes you happy."

"I love you, Austy. You're so good to me."

"I'm crazy about you, Elise, more in love every day." I closed the space between us to kiss her tempting lips. Nothing equaled the feel of her soft mouth sliding against mine. Stopping the kiss short before we got carried away, I asked excitedly, "Tell me about the job. Did it just come about?"

"My AD mentioned it a couple months ago, but I didn't think it was anything other than a way for him to keep my interest.

Wasted Heart

You know he loves dangling things that we all wish would come about.” She rolled her eyes. Both of us thought her AD would benefit from a month-long management seminar.

“But now they’re a go?” I crossed my fingers and waved them in front of her face. “Is it all that you’d hoped?”

She broke into a wide smile, eyes following my crossed fingers. “And more.”

When nothing else came, I growled, “Do I have to kiss it out of you?”

“Please do.” Her laughter was catching. “Special Agent in Charge.”

I blinked. “What?”

“The position, Special Agent in Charge of the new division.”

My breath left me in an excited huff. “That’s a promotion! Elise?!”

“Yep.”

“Oh, cara, that’s wonderful. I’m so proud of you. They want you, right? You got the job?”

“If I accept, then it’s mine, yes.”

“If? This is what you want, isn’t it? You should have been in charge of the Seattle field office years ago. Now you won’t have to deal with all the general field agents. You can just focus on what you do best. You’re saying yes, right?”

“I told them I had to talk to you first.”

My heart did a little two-step. I dug being part of a couple. I never thought it would make me feel so full. “That’s so sweet, but you know you don’t need to talk to me about career moves. Do what makes you happy.”

“No one could have a better partner than I have.” She leaned her forehead against mine.

“Other than me, you mean.” My comment sparked another private smile.

“I do need to talk to you, though.” She pulled back and took

a deep breath. “The position isn’t in Seattle, and I won’t move without you.”

I felt my mouth pop open. I’d just moved, well, nearly five years ago, but it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my adult life. Moving sucked. I was such a creature of habit. I was finally settled in my home and my job. I didn’t want to think about another move.

“I know that some marriages can make it without the partners living together, but I don’t want that for us.” Her fingers gripped my face, pulling my attention away from the dread I was feeling. “Do you?”

“God, no. We’re married. We stay together.” My panic breathing exercises kicked into gear. I hadn’t used them in years. It helped to clear my mind, letting me focus on the worried eyes looking at me. I loved her. Everything was clear. “We stay together. This is a huge opportunity for you, not to mention how much safer the country will be with you in charge of this thing. I can work for any prosecutor if there isn’t a U.S. Attorney’s office nearby.”

“You’d do that? You’re on target to be made chief in a year. You could really give up your career path here to...”

“Be with you? Yes, Elise, yes. You are the most important thing in my life. If you can be happier and feel less frustrated in another position, I don’t care if it’s in Antarctica. I’ll follow you anywhere.”

“Really?” Her green eyes shimmered. “Oh, Austy, I feel the same way about you. It’s why I told them I had to talk to you. If you wanted to stay here, I’d stay and it wouldn’t be a hardship at all. You know I love Seattle. This has been my home for over fifteen years. I have great friends here, and I adore this loft.”

“But this job, it’s what you’ve been hoping for,” I reasoned. “You’ll miss it here, but if the job is what you want, we’ll make a good life together wherever you need to be.”

Wasted Heart

“So, it’s a yes?”

Mentally I tallied all that was on my docket at work. “I’ll need a month to clear off my current caseload. I can’t leave them hanging, so you may have to go ahead of me. And we’ll have to take a look at our finances to see how long we can manage until I get another job.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “I hope that I would be this understanding if you needed to move, sweetheart.”

“You would,” I decided for her. If I had to move, if it would make me happy, Elise would pack all of our things for me. She wouldn’t hesitate.

“There’s more.” Her playful smile returned. “They want me to train part-time, too.”

“You’ll be in charge, so of course you’ll have to train your agents.”

“I guess I should have said that they want me to teach the new recruits.” Elise’s eyes twinkled, something secretive floating through. “They want to add this investigative method to the course load for incoming agents at the Academy.”

“Elise, that’s wonderful. You’ll be so good at that, and that’s more than just a promotion, isn’t it? The higher ups are taking notice of you, aren’t they?”

She tucked her head against her chest, a blush reaching up to her cheeks. Usually I was the blushing spouse in this marriage. “Maybe, but I was thrilled they asked me. I can handpick any new recruit for special taskforces.”

“I’m so happy for you. You deserve this.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.” Her smile widened, but she didn’t say anything else. Over the years, I’d gotten to know this particular smile. She had something else to say, but she’d wait for me to either figure it out or torture her until I got it out of her.

I was just about to start the torture when her words settled over me. “Wait a minute! The FBI Academy is in Quantico,

which is in..."

"Virginia," she finished for me, her smile splitting her face wide. "And according to Jessie, it's only ninety minutes from Charlottesville."

"Elise?!" I shrieked, unable to stop the surprised reaction. "Virginia! I, you, I—we could move to Virginia?"

"If it's a yes, we can move to Virginia. And the best part is I only have to be at Quantico for two weeks out of every training class, so I've got a choice of field offices in Richmond, Washington DC, or at Quantico. That gives you a choice of U.S. Attorney's offices or the Department of Justice or even your old job in Charlottesville if we can find a place in between to cut down on the commute."

So many thoughts floated through my head as I contemplated each option. "This is..."

"Good?"

"Amazing. I've loved it here, you know that."

"But you miss Virginia." She didn't need to read my mind to know how true her statement was. "You miss your friends, Lauren especially. Sometimes I think I hurt more than either of you every time you have to say goodbye to each other. It's never been enough time, even when we spend our vacations together. You miss her constantly, and I know she misses you."

My eyes welled. "I can't believe you get the job of your dreams and I get my friends back." I reached for her and found myself enveloped in her arms, both of us shaking with happy tears. If I could have picked a more perfect life than the one I was living already, it would be to be closer to the friends I left behind when I made this move. I'd accomplished everything I wanted when I moved out here, but now there was only one reason for me to stay in Seattle. Elise. If she didn't need to stay anymore, then Virginia, here we come.

Elise fumbled behind her, but I wasn't paying attention. I just

Wasted Heart

loved being in her arms, feeling her breath on my neck and heart pounding against me. Two beeps sounded as she shifted slightly. “It’s ringing.” Her hand held out the phone to me.

I furrowed my brow, but took the receiver automatically. The ring stopped as a familiar voice came on the line. “Hello?”

“Lauren?!” I practically screamed.

“Young’un?”

“Ciao, Amica.” A sense of calm floated all around me. I smiled at Elise, thrilled that she knew me so well. “You’ll never guess why I’m calling.”

“You miss me so much that you’ve decided to move back to Charlottesville and go into practice with me?”

I started laughing at her usual guess. She said something like this every time we got together. I leaned in to kiss Elise quickly, loving that this time I could give Lauren the answer she wanted to hear. “Moving, yes, but we’ll have to talk about the practice.”

Silence came from her end. It wasn’t the reaction I thought I’d receive. “Say that again,” her hesitant voice didn’t sound like her.

“Elise got a promotion and has to be near Quantico.” Again, nothing but silence from Lauren’s end. “She can work from Richmond, DC, or Quantico.”

“Virginia?” she asked softly.

“Virginia. Probably not Charlottesville, but not far.”

I heard the tears start then. Lauren was the most effusive member of my friends. She seemed to feel things deeper than anyone else. I could only swallow roughly. The emotion choked my voice too much. Elise smiled sympathetically and reached for the phone.

“Hi, Lauren,” Elise spoke into the phone, a huge smile on her face. “You’re welcome, but it’s a great benefit for me, too. I get a dream job and the happiest spouse in the world, it seems.”

I reached for the phone again. “It’s me. Can you believe it?”

"I've missed you so much. I love Elise for getting this opportunity. I can't wait to have you back."

"Thanks, Amica. Elise and I still need to talk about logistics, and I've got to look into transfers or other opportunities."

"I guess it's too much to hope for that you'll come be my law partner?"

My heart twisted at her hopeful tone. "You know what I do best, L. You know where I feel useful. Putting criminals away defines me." I paused to give her time to remember that about me. "If nothing is open in the U.S. Attorney's offices in Richmond or Alexandria, then I'll look at the Commonwealth Attorney's offices, maybe back in Charlottesville."

"Wherever Aust, just closer so I can see you every week. Everyone's going to be so happy, Young'un."

"I guess I'll see you soon enough," I told her joyfully. "Maybe you can become my realtor?"

"Love to. See you then, and thank Elise again."

"Bye, L." I pressed the off button and blasted my partner with a huge smile. "That was the best phone call I've had in ages. I love you for thinking of this."

"What makes you happy makes me happy, sweetheart."

What more could I ask for in the perfect spouse? Better than any fantasy I could have dreamed up.

Raven's Epilogue

My stomach started fluttering the moment I reached through the open car window to key in the access code. Every time I came through this gate, it made me think of the first time I visited my partner here. She'd shown me her beautiful home; then we'd driven around for the afternoon in her even more beautiful car. Now I was in my own amazing classic, a gift from her, crunching down the gravel driveway, anxious to see her again after her business trip.

My black Thunderbird slid to a stop in the circular drive. I glanced over at the house where we'd spent a lot of our time together and smiled when the door immediately popped open. Michael, her father and the new resident of this house, ambled out to greet me.

"She's going to be so surprised." His smile was bigger than mine as he slipped his arms around me and pressed me against him. "You two are always trying to surprise each other. Why couldn't I luck into a wife like you? If I weren't so happy for Jos, I'd be awfully jealous."

"All you had to do was say something, Michael." I tilted my head up to wiggle my eyebrows at him. "My mom knows a ton of single women that would be perfect for you."

"Don't you start, too, Rave. I have enough meddling with my other daughter-in-law."

I smiled, squeezing him harder before stepping back. “Phoebe and I think it’s a waste that a fine man like you is still available.”

“Stop it, young lady, and go surprise my daughter. She’s going to be thrilled to see you this early in the day.”

He hustled me around the side of the house onto the pathway to the office. When I stepped inside, I was almost run down by Zina, my partner’s employee, as she whisked from her office toward Joslyn’s.

She stopped dead in her tracks, a wide grin splitting her face. “Thank heavens, you’re here. She’s been nonstop since she got off the plane. Apparently she thinks if she works our fingers to the bone, she won’t have to work all weekend. Make her stop, please!”

Her drama mixed with amused ire got us all laughing. No sooner had our laughter started then the workaholic appeared at her office door, surprise and elation battling her usual work-mode expression.

“Raven,” she whispered and rushed into my arms. “You’re supposed to be at work still.”

“Surprise!” I clutched her to me. Relief washed over me at the feel of her close again.

“I don’t even care that you’ve ruined the surprise I had planned back at home. It’s so good to see you.” She leaned back and pressed her lips to mine.

I couldn’t hold in the moan at the start of her kiss. I’d missed her, always missed her so much when she was out of town pulling businesses back from the brink of disaster. Her mouth caressed mine with the same care as if it were our first kiss. She never denied me this pleasure after we’d been separated for any length of time, nor did she mind when I couldn’t stop touching her for a few hours just to make sure she was really standing in front of me. Joslyn wasn’t the touchy-feely type with anyone but me. In fact, she reserved so much of herself just for me. I’d never felt as

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special to anyone as she always made me feel.

"I always love this part," I heard Michael mutter behind me.

"It'd be sickening if I didn't know how in love they were." Zina's sarcastic reply made us break apart with a laugh.

I glanced over at the two onlookers who'd become part of my family over the past few years. Michael, because he was my father-in-law and Zina because she was a crucial part of Joslyn's business. Without her, Joslyn would probably be gone four out of every four weeks, instead of one or two out of every four. That was bad enough, but I knew what I'd signed on for when I fell in love with this oh-so-rare woman. "I was just telling Michael outside that Mom knows several available women. Perhaps, we should start looking for available men for you, Zina? Hmm, maybe one of my unattached cousins?"

"No!" both Joslyn and Zina screeched, prompting a belly laugh from me. They both had issues with some of my cousins, not that I could blame them.

"I'll drop it for now, Z, but know that I'm keeping my eyes open."

"Have at it, sister. Someone deserves my beautiful black self." She squeezed my arm. "Take her away, please! Let me do my work."

"Our work," Jos grumbled, but the sharp glance dissipated when I swung back around to look at her. She still had a private smile just for me. I never grew tired of looking at it.

"Aren't you forgetting something, best girl?" Michael prompted.

"Oh, uh." She glanced back at her office for a second then looked guiltily at me. "It's probably just temporary."

"What?" Curiosity compelled me to follow her into her office. What I saw there made me stop in the doorway. "What's that?"

Jos bent to a knee and reached out a tentative hand to what looked like a young Welsh corgi, tan and white, but definitely

a mutt with floppier ears and longer legs than the breed usually had. "Now, lovely," she began as I started inching backward. I didn't get too far since I melted every time she called me that and because Michael had blocked my escape. "Zina and I found her limping on the side of the road on our way back from the airport."

My hand was already up. "Oh, no. No, you don't."

But my beautiful partner wasn't listening. "She didn't have a tag, so we took her to the vet, and no ID chip either. We're posting flyers, right, Zina?"

"Already done," her coconspirator added.

"Someone will call." My dog whispering spouse blinked her stunning grey eyes at me in the most endearing fashion. "She's too cute and well behaved not to be someone's dog."

"And if no one calls?" I posed, already knowing the answer. My hardly innocent, so far away from being angelic, but still irresistible partner smiled tentatively. The question of permission so prominent in her eyes. "We've already got five dogs, sweetheart. We'll probably have to get a special license to keep another."

"Not until eight. I looked it up."

If she wasn't someone who rarely showed emotions except in my presence and around animals, dogs in particular, I'd want to shake her silly. I sighed, already knowing I'd lost this fight. When she stood and hugged me gratefully, I couldn't help but smile. We had ten acres of land, two horses, and five other dogs. What would one more hurt?

"I love you," she whispered.

"You better," I warned playfully, reaching down to pet what would surely become the newest addition to our family. "Come on, you're done for the day. I want some time alone with you before we head to Elise's party tonight. Load up the pup."

"She's staying with Dad for the weekend. She needs some medication and can't walk too much on her hind leg. I don't want her trying to get used to the others when we won't be there

tonight.”

I glanced back at Michael, nodding my thanks. It was probably a good idea the dog stay segregated until we knew if she'd be claimed by an owner. “Sounds good. Now say goodbye and you're not bringing any work home with you this weekend.”

She grinned, flashing the smile that always made me weak. “Bye, Dad, thanks for taking care of Machi this weekend.”

“Not a problem,” he assured.

I turned back to face Joslyn, disbelief slackening my expression. “You did not name her Machiavelli.”

That grin flared again and I felt the shock of it all the way through my system. “You can name her something else, lovely, but I knew she'd be the one to help me move you off the no more animals stand you had.”

“You're both evil little things.”

“But you love me and you'll love her,” she stated then turned and tapped Zina on the shoulder. “See you Monday morning.”

“Bye, boss. Have a great weekend. See ya, Rave.”

I said my goodbyes to them as I herded Joslyn out the door in front of me. Sometimes it was difficult to pull her away from work, but the best thing that ever happened in our relationship was when she'd moved into my—our house but left her office at her old property. That made it difficult for her to work weekends or evenings because she couldn't just stride across the driveway and be in her office.

My hand reached for hers and I was immediately rewarded with her fingers lacing through mine. Her head tilted to look at me as soon as our hands connected, a furtive smile playing on her lips. God, those smiles, she could take my breath with any of them.

As we cleared Michael's house, my car came into view. “Ah, your T-bird, shoulda known you'd take every chance you could before winter officially sets in to drive this thing.”

“I was in the Vette yesterday, sweetheart.”

“My Vette,” she joked, shooting a mock glare at me.

“Our Vette, my love. I’ve got papers to prove it.” I referred to her insistence that we put both names on everything we owned as soon as we went through our commitment ceremony. She’d also taken care of every other detail like living trusts, health care proxies, life insurance and everything else that goes with a legal joining of two lives. Sometimes it was so wonderful having an all too practical spouse.

We slipped into the car and I got us headed back out onto the road to our house about ten minutes away. I was looking forward to the few hours we’d have together before we needed to fight through Friday night traffic on the bridge to attend Elise’s going away party.

As we drove, I’d glance over at Joslyn as she asked me about my day. The early December sunshine highlighted the lighter streaks in her thick, wavy hair, making it appear more blond than brown today. Like her hazel eyes, her honey brown hair shifted shades depending on sun exposure. She still took my breath away with her beauty, but it was her kindness and consideration that held me captive. Like today, she was in the middle of a three-week onsite consulting project, but she’d broken it up to fly back for Elise’s party. She usually spent every moment of out of town consulting jobs completing her contract, evenings and weekends included. But she’d decided to take this weekend off and come home for the party. She liked my friend Elise, but I knew she’d flown home so that I wouldn’t have to attend this party alone.

Stepping out of the car in front of our house, we barely made it a step before her dogs burst through the doggie door off the back room and bombarded us. Could I really handle another one of these mutts? Yes, absolutely, especially when I saw how elated they made Joslyn.

After wrangling them into submission, we got everyone

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moving toward the front door. I spotted two boxes on the wide wraparound porch of our house. This was only one of the features I loved so much about our two-year-old home. Michael was so talented as a house designer and my brother-in-law, Marco, could work wonders with timber beams. Finally, my once disjointed property now had a house, detached garage, connecting carport, and barn that looked harmonious and stunning enough to be featured in *Architectural Digest*.

“Are you expecting a delivery?” I asked of the packages.

The dogs were circling her legs as she stepped up beside me on the porch. She reached down and grabbed the biggest box, swinging a secretive look up at me. Her eyebrows fluttered as she opened the door and went inside. I grabbed the other box and followed her.

“Don’t open it yet,” she warned while sliding hers onto the console table and reaching for mine. “Stay here a sec.” She disappeared into the family room at the end of the hallway leaving me feeling like I was missing something but enjoying the sway of her hips as she moved. Damn, she was sexy. I shook my head before I was tempted to ignore her instruction and decided to be productive, too. Heading back outside, I went to get her suitcase from the car. By the time I came back, she called out, “Okay, come on back.”

I strode down the hallway with the dogs in tow and stopped as I reached the wide open space of our living room. Candles were lit around the room, an open bottle of wine stood next to two filled goblets, and soft music was playing in the background. The smaller box sat open on the coffee table. “What’s all this?”

“I told you that you’d ruined the surprise I had for you by showing up at the office. I’d hoped to get you some flowers before I got home then arrange some candles in the bedroom where those new massage oils would come into play.” She pointed to the smaller box. “I wanted to make sure you got to relax a bit

before the party tonight.”

“Oh, sweetheart, this is so thoughtful of you. How’d you know I needed this?”

“I know you, lovely. Now, sit, relax, have a glass of wine, and I’m going to grab your next surprise.”

“What brought all this on?” I called out to her as she disappeared back toward the front door. The dogs’ toenails clicked on the hardwood floors as they followed her on her quest. Usually the two little ones stayed with me and the others would follow her everywhere, but even they were too curious to see what she was up to.

“Open it,” I heard from behind me as she reentered the room carrying the larger box.

“What did you do this time?” I wanted to be perturbed with her annoying yet amazing habit of bringing back gifts from her trips. Most of the time it was little things because she knew I liked little things best.

“Got you a little something while I was away.”

“Doesn’t look too little to me.”

“Little enough. Stop stalling.” She dropped onto the couch next to me, pointing at the box she’d placed in my lap.

My fingers worked at the tape and ripped a strip free opening one flap. I tugged on the other until it gave way and peered inside. Oh, God, this woman! I was looking at my dream saddle, the one I’d had my eye on for years ever since I got my first horse. How did she always do this to me. “Joslyn!” I managed in an excited whisper.

“It’s the one, right?” She looked a little worried that I hadn’t immediately reached in to bring it out.

“I can’t believe you did this. I thought we agreed no more presents?” I tried to sound stern, but oh, how I wanted this saddle.

She shook her head, a blissful smile gracing her delectable mouth. Reaching a hand out, she tucked some of my hair behind

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the ear closest to her. She liked running her fingers through my hair. I liked it, too, but mostly I liked that she never knew she would like something so simple. So much of the wonder of our relationship together was of her discovering how intimacy between two people could come in almost any form. She was a newcomer to serious relationships, and I relished showing her how much closer we grew with each new discovery.

Fingering the rim of my now exposed ear, she ignored my stern tone and responded brightly, “You might have said something about that, lovely, but since you’ve actually made me stick to my promise of no birthday presents until your birthday rolls around again in two years, I’m taking some gift-giving liberties. Plus, I like your current saddle better than mine, so now you get the one you always wanted, and I get the same.”

I laughed at her logical reasoning. That logic was what first attracted me to her. There’s nothing like watching a woman who wasn’t used to emotional outbursts struggle with the ever tilting sway of feelings that comes with being in love. On the rare occasions when we disagreed or even argued, I almost always gave in because she looked so lost not knowing how to deal with all the feelings that bombarded her during those charged times. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“It is the right one, isn’t it? You’ve been showing it to me every time we stop off at the tack store.”

“It’s the right one, Jos, thank you. I love it.” I leaned forward over the box and captured her lips, pouring all of my gratitude into this kiss.

“Good,” she breathed roughly when our kiss left us both trembling.

“You’re not buttering me up for something, are you?” I pulled the saddle out of the box, running my fingers over the supple leather. I got distracted by the intricate stitching for a moment. Then a thought hit me. “You’ve got another dog

hiding somewhere, maybe two? Are we now a licensed kennel, sweetheart?"

"Not another dog," she insisted with a laugh, but the fact that the denial came immediately got my dander up. I wiggled my fingers back toward my palm, my own version of insistence.

"I knew you'd be a little sad tonight. I wanted to do something special for you."

"Thank you for flying back for the party."

"Of course, I didn't want to miss the chance to say goodbye to them. I know how much you'll miss them, Elise especially."

I nodded, feeling tears start to sting my eyes. I was thrilled for Elise's promotion but I didn't want her to leave. She'd been a constant in my life since grad school, and while we didn't see each other every week, we caught up at least twice a month and called each other all the time. "Wish you didn't have to go back to Houston on Monday, but I'm so glad you're home for the weekend. What time does your plane leave? Early enough for me to drive you to the airport before I have to get to work?"

"I'm sending Zina back."

"What?" I choked on the surprised breath that leapt from my lungs.

She moved the saddle onto the floor and scooted closer to me, lifting her lower legs to flip over my thigh and knee and tucking them between mine. I fell into her as soon as her arms came around me. "I knew this would be a really tough week for you, lovely. I didn't want to compound that by leaving for another two weeks."

The tears that had threatened before started to fall. I could feel myself start to tremble as Joslyn rocked me slowly. "You're staying?"

"I'm staying. In fact," she started then leaned back to wipe my cheeks, "I wanted to talk to you about a change I was thinking about making."

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“What kind of change?” I gripped her hands to hold on to something. She had a way of going from point A to point Z and working out all the details of something before bringing whatever it was she was planning to me. I wasn’t sure I was up for any changes right now, not with my closest friend outside my family leaving for good tomorrow.

“I’ve been thinking about hiring two more people for the business.”

I tilted my head, not quite sure how this would change things other than more business for her. “Sounds like a good idea. You could always use more help.”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking, but really, it’s so I can focus on the analysis and presentation end of the job rather than the time consuming data gathering that I’ve been doing from the start.”

Now my head tilted back the other way. This couldn’t mean what I thought it meant. No, that was wishful thinking, unrealistic wishful thinking.

She interrupted my fantastical musings. “I thought an office manager to take all the administrative tasks away from Zina so she could be my senior consultant and hire someone else to train in Zina’s position. That way, I’d only have to travel for client meetings and the final presentations to the board or CEO. Zina and the new person could do all the onsite data gathering for me. What do you think?”

“Jos?” I couldn’t manage anything more through my surprise. This was exactly what I’d been thinking and hoping and wishing.

“Do you think you could handle me being around a lot more? I’d probably only be gone for a few days each month instead of what we’ve been used to for the past couple of years.”

“You wouldn’t be gone as much?” This was so out of left field I could hardly comprehend what she was saying. I hadn’t allowed myself to hope that she would ever adjust her schedule

more than what she'd already done by seeking out more clients in western Washington instead of taking on all consulting jobs that interested her from around the country. I'd been happy with her centralized marketing effort, but this was beyond even my most unattainable hopes.

"I was never wild about traveling so much, but since being with you, I really don't like it." She cradled my still trembling face in her hands. "I understand if this is too overwhelming. You married me knowing you wouldn't have to have me underfoot all the time. If it's not okay with you, we'll keep everything the way it is. I can always find clients to visit."

"Sweetheart? You'd be home all the time?" I knew she could discern the excitement in my voice.

Her tentative look turned into a full fledged smile. "I'd be home almost all the time. What do you think? I hate being away from you, and now that I've got a beautiful baby niece and nephew, I don't want to miss out on being able to go over to Marco's and squeeze their cheeks whenever the impulse strikes." The grey of her eyes darkened to a smoky shade, my favorite color. "So, do you think you'd get sick of me underfoot all the time?"

Since I couldn't form any words, I closed the distance to slant my mouth against hers, kissing passionately, hoping that would be enough of an answer. How much she traveled always worried me about our relationship, but we'd managed to make it work for three years. With that point of contention out of the way, I was certain with all my heart that we'd make it for fifty more.

Willa's Epilogue

It didn't matter that we were already into the college basketball season or that I'd just seen every single one of these women over the past week. Sunday night dinner was a necessity this week. We could continue our dinner hiatus until the season was over starting next week. Tonight was a must. It would be a surprise for almost everyone here. And not just because I was the one cooking.

"Honey, are you sure you don't want me to do the grilling?" Quinn had one foot on the patio and one inside the house. She looked more beautiful tonight than when we'd first met, even with the touch of concern in her eyes.

"I've got this, angel."

She rubbed her thumb under the fingers of one hand, glancing at me scraping the grill in prep and back toward the kitchen where she was doing the rest of the cooking. I'd grilled for us many times, but I'd never tried feeding more than four people at once. She was justified in being worried.

"You don't have time to grill, cook, and entertain. I can handle this." I can, I think. No, I can, almost completely certain.

The front doorbell rang a full half hour before anyone was supposed to arrive. Since moving to Virginia and meeting this clan of ours, I'd had to get used to a lot of things. Usually it was something minor like playing referee for the little jabs some

of them took at each other or being the sounding board for the sometimes constant whining a few of them could do about their spouses. I'd put up with it because I really did like each one of them for different reasons. I liked some of them more than others, but I was never really choosy when it came to friends. If they'd bless me with their friendship, who was I to shut it down for insignificant reasons? Showing up mega early to a dinner I was hosting, though, never failed to irk me.

"That better not be Des," Quinn muttered. She never minded the early arrivals as much as I did unless it was Des. Away from our home, Des was a good friend to have if a bit, or a lot, obnoxious. In our home, dealing with Des longer than necessary could wear on both of us.

Quinn turned toward the door then swiveled back and hurried up to me. I recognized the look in her eyes and waited for her kiss. Just the press of her lips on any part of me could settle me down. No matter what I'd been feeling before, her kisses always equalized me. This one didn't disappoint. Soft but insistent, she kept it PG rated so we both wouldn't be in agony for the rest of the night. Kisses like these reminded me over and over how lucky I was to have taken that first chance with her and never given up when life threw us both some difficulties.

She pulled back and ran her fingers down my cheek. "My God, Willa, what you do to me."

"It's that look, Quinnie. Gets me every time." I tilted my head toward the door. "Better let her in or she'll get more obnoxious."

Quinn laughed and headed inside. If it was Des, she'd load her up with busy work to keep her out of our hands. Turning back to the grill, I gave it one last scrape and inspected the layout. Pam, check, spatula, check, meat thermometer, check. I was all set for the grilling to begin.

"Looks good," a quiet voice said from right beside me.

I nearly jumped out of my shoes, turning to see that M had

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materialized on our patio without a sound. I had grown very good at not being noticeable whenever people came up to Quinn in public, but I was convinced M had a cloaking device. Over the past couple of years, she'd become the best friend I had in the group, but her stealthiness had caused many heart stopping moments. "Jeez," I managed when I caught my breath.

"Hi," she smiled knowing full well she'd scared me.

I glanced over her shoulder to catch Quinn's giggle from the doorway before she turned back inside. What surprised me more than M being on our patio was that I didn't see her partner, Briony, anywhere. "If you think coming early means you get to leave as soon as everyone shows up, think again, sister."

M flicked her brown eyes up to mine for a moment before looking away. "I figured you could use help and wouldn't ask."

Little know-it-all punk, not that an inch difference in our heights made her that little, but she did know a lot about a lot, and she was so damn right about this. "So you came over by yourself to a house that will soon be swamped with living human things?"

Panic entered her expression before her shoulders relaxed and she laughed. Since falling in love with Briony, she'd become so much more at ease. Quinn and Jessie had never understood how we got along so well because the M they saw barely said four words in a row. Now with Briony's confidence, M showed a little more of herself to everyone, and they no longer wondered.

"You kinda suck at cooking, Will." Her snarky side was pretty much reserved for me and Briony. I couldn't wait for the day she'd let it loose on the rest of our mob.

"Barbequing is not cooking," I protested. "Plus I have a meat thermometer."

She pinned me with a long stare. "You think a thermometer will keep you from burning the hell out of a steak?"

She was right, dammit, the little smart-ass. I'd bought extra in preparation for the all too likely disaster. I flicked my eyes into the

kitchen and she took the hint, bolting inside to get the marinating steaks. With her help, we could knock this out. I felt grateful and proud to have a friend that would step in to help, especially on this of all dinners. I'd had to let her in on the surprise because I knew she'd need the time to prepare. She'd wanted to decline, but she almost never did with me.

Soon enough, the clan started showing up in pairs. When Quinn and I first relocated to Virginia, the group only had two couples: Des and Skye and Caroline and Sam. Kayin and Isabel were just beginning to date, but Jessie, Lauren, Austy, and later, Briony, were all single, some of them happily so. Now everyone was partnered up, most ecstatically so.

"Hey, guys," Jessie greeted when she stepped out onto the patio. "Are we eating out here tonight?"

We laughed, our breaths showing in the cold November air. "I haven't set the table yet, Jess."

"Lauren's on it. Is my buddy coming tonight, M?"

She looked at me first before remembering I wasn't Briony, who would have answered for her. "Not tonight. We thought it would be too much for Olivia to take. They're having a pizza and movie night with the sitter."

Jess and I shared a proud look, wanting very much to talk to M about their new eleven-year-old foster daughter. Neither of us asked, though. We'd have to wait for Briony if we wanted a full account. When I'd first learned that they were getting a foster child, I'd been surprised, but then I started thinking back to all that M had left unsaid about her upbringing and deduced that she might have been a product of the foster system herself. If I were the type to pry, I'd ask her outright, but it made perfect sense that, as an adult, she'd want to provide a safe haven for another child. If I had any patience, I might be inspired to do the same.

"Anytime they want to scrape gum off the machines and fold towels at the gym, they're welcome," Jessie offered.

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“Screw child labor laws, right, Jess?” I joked.

“No worries, I know a good lawyer.”

“I leave you alone for a second and you already need a lawyer?” Lauren asked as she stepped outside with a blissful smile for her partner. They were constantly showing each other affection. As a non-PDA advocate, I’d normally be nauseated by their lovey-dovey ways, but something about these two friends who’d taken years to figure out their love for each other made these little displays heartwarming even to me.

“I’ll always need a lawyer,” Jessie promised.

Lauren laughed and turned her attention to me. “Is there something going on that I don’t know about? You normally postpone these dinners until after Quinn’s season is over.”

“She’s got home games this week, and I felt like seeing everyone,” I said coyly. Keeping secrets in this group was tough, but I’d managed this one somehow.

“You?” Jessie asked, disbelief dripping from her annoyingly gorgeous face. “Shouldn’t we be worried that you’ll go crazy and bite everyone’s head off before you slink back to your cave for the winter?”

My retort was cut off by several of the friends poking their heads outside to say hello. Quinn ordered everyone back inside to keep the cold out and give us some peace. Amazingly, they complied. Briony lingered a little longer with an update on their kids’ plans with the sitter, but the cold air and our cooking focus pushed her back inside soon enough.

“Tell us you did most of the grilling, M,” Caroline insisted when we brought in the finished product. “Willa burns water.”

“I’m surrounded by comic geniuses.” I rolled my eyes, but it turned to a quick smile when I caught Quinn’s gaze. Everyone was taking their usual seats at the table. A nice warm buzz of chatting filled the room. I had to admit, when everyone behaved themselves, there was no better feeling than being surrounded by

friends.

The doorbell rang again. It was too noisy for anyone to notice, but I winked at Quinn and headed toward the door.

"Welcome home," I greeted my visitors on the doorstep. Stepping back, I brought them inside and marched them into the dining room.

"What the—"

"Oh my—"

"Are you kidding me?"

"Austine!" Lauren's surprised shriek stopped everyone else's reaction to having our usually absent friends, Austy and Elise, standing in the room. She jumped up from her seat and enveloped her best friend in a fierce hug. "You said you wouldn't be here for another two weeks, you liar!"

"Don't hog the hugging, L," Isabel ordered and grabbed Austy as soon as Lauren let go.

Greetings went round in the usual boisterous manner. Elise had grown used to it, and now that her job was the reason Austy was moving back, she'd instantly become just as important.

I reintroduced M and Briony to Austy and Elise. They'd met briefly on a couple of Austy's visits, but I was glad I'd insisted they come tonight. As the newest additions to our group, they'd need to feel included when we welcomed back a member who'd left before they joined in. I was once in their position, and it took a long time before I felt comfortable around everyone. Austy had made the integration easy for me, and I knew she'd do the same for them.

"How are you here?" Kayin asked Austy.

"I settled my last case early, and we sold the loft sooner than expected." Austy flipped her eyes to me, the new owner of the loft, before looking back at the group. The clan had been worried she'd be stuck in Seattle for another six months trying to sell her place before they could buy in Richmond. As soon as I heard she

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was moving back, I made the offer on her loft since my sister and I already owned the rest of the units in the building. That it helped bring Austy back to Virginia earlier was an added bonus.

“You’re really moving back?” Sam asked.

“We’re already moved back,” Elise told them. “Or as close as a fifty minute drive is to being back anyway.”

“I can’t believe you kept this from me,” Lauren accused Austy. “I was going to be waiting at your house to help you move in. It was going to be a whole day!”

“Movers,” Austy told her. “Plus, Will thought it would be fun to surprise you.”

“Willa!” Lauren turned her charming ire at me.

“Surprise,” I said mildly. Elise hid a grin, almost as relieved as Austy had been that she wouldn’t have to deal with the entire group when moving into their new house. As helpful as Lauren would be, it would have been hard to keep everyone else away.

“Do you start work tomorrow?” Lauren asked her.

“I’ve got two more weeks of freedom.”

“Good, we can get you settled before you’re overloaded at this U.S. Attorney’s office,” Lauren said.

More questions about logistics and plans went around the group. I settled back and watched the change in the group dynamic. We’d missed Austy these past five years. Things hadn’t been quite the same. Now that everyone was back together and we’d acquired two more cherished friends, our not so little group who’d become our adopted family was finally complete.

I glanced at Quinn, catching her eye. She smiled at me, and it felt like a window opened in my heart. Lightness and warmth seeped in as I took in the happiness in our home. When we’d first gotten together all those years ago, I hadn’t let myself think too far ahead. Now, I didn’t need to wonder where life would take us. With Quinn by my side and these wonderful women to support us, we could handle anything.